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MIDEM Study

POLARIZATION IN EUROPE

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TEN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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CONTENTS

	KEY FINDINGS	4
	INTRODUCTION	10
1.	POLARIZATION IN EUROPE	
1.1	OVERVIEW: AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION IN EUROPE	20
1.2	WHICH ISSUES ARE ASSOCIATED WITH THE STRONGEST AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION?	26
1.3	AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION AND SALIENCE	30
1.4	AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION AND THE SUBJECTIVE PERCEPTION OF DIVISION	34
2.	POLARIZATION BY ISSUES	
2.1	IMMIGRATION	40
2.2	THE WAR IN UKRAINE	46
2.3	PANDEMIC	52
2.4	CLIMATE CHANGE	58
2.5	SOCIAL WELFARE BENEFITS	64
2.6	GENDER EQUALITY	70
2.7	POLICY TOWARD SEXUAL MINORITIES	76
	REFERENCES	82
	LIST OF FIGURES	86
	ANNEX	88
	AUTHORS	90



KEY FINDINGS

Which issues are most polarizing?

The issues of “climate change” and “immigration” show the highest levels of affective polarization: A particularly high level of affective polarization can be observed for the issues of “climate change” and “immigration.” Respondents here show the strongest average tendency to judge people holding opinions similar to their own with a very “warm and positive” feeling, while expressing very “cool and negative” sentiments toward opposing views. In contrast, levels of affective polarization are lowest for the issues of “gender equality” and “social benefits and their financing.”

Which countries show the greatest degree of polarization?

Respondents in Italy and Greece are the most polarized, while those in Netherlands and Czechia are the least polarized: In sum, across all the issues examined, Italy exhibits Europe’s highest level of affective polarization, well ahead of Greece and Hungary, the countries with the next-highest levels. In contrast, respondents from the Netherlands and Czechia are the least polarized.

Which groups of people are particularly strongly polarized?

Older people, people with a high level of educational attainment as well as those with high incomes and residents of large cities show the greatest amount of polarization: Across all issue areas examined, people in the oldest age group are significantly more affectively polarized than younger people. People with either high levels or low levels of educational attainment are more polarized than people with intermediate attainment levels. Respondents in high-income groups also express stronger disapproval of people with differing views than do respondents with low incomes. Residents of large cities are significantly more polarized than people who live in rural areas.

People on the political left are more polarized than those on the right, and affective polarization is strongest among supporters of left and environmental parties:

People who describe themselves as being on the left of the political spectrum are on average significantly more polarized than people who locate themselves on the right. Moreover, across Europe, voters supporting left to far-left or green and environmental parties appear to be significantly more polarized than supporters of other parties. By contrast, nonvoters and supporters of Christian Democratic or conservative parties show the least amount of aversion toward people with opinions differing from their own.

People with progressive positions are more polarized than conservatives:

A high level of affective polarization is often found among individuals who take very clear positions on individual issues. On average, those who hold comparatively progressive positions aimed at political change tend to evaluate people holding similar positions very positively, while expressing very negative feelings toward those who have different opinions. By contrast, people who hold comparatively conservative views or who locate themselves in the political center are less polarized.

Affective polarization not a proxy for salience: Those who consider a specific issue area to be particularly important often show little sympathy for people with differing opinions. However, people who attribute little importance to an issue also show similar levels of polarization.

Which issues do respondents expect to divide society the most?

“Immigration,” “Pandemics such as COVID-19” and “social benefits” are seen as the issues that most divide society:

Regardless of the actual polarizing effect, respondents across Europe indicated that “immigration” was the issue most likely to create a “division of society.” Second place in this regard was shared by “pandemics such as COVID-19” and “social benefits and their financing.” In contrast, the issue of “gender equality in society” is considered to be less divisive. The greatest differences between the perceived potential for divisiveness and the actual extent of polarization were seen with regard to the “social benefits” and “climate change” issues. The “social benefits” issue is perceived as being highly divisive, but in fact produces comparatively low levels of polarization. The issue of “climate change” produces strong levels of measured polarization, yet respondents do not identify a strong risk of a “division of society” here.

Immigration

Strongest potential for societal division, highest levels of affective polarization, strong preference for restrictive migration policies across Europe

- On the issue of “immigration,” a clear majority of respondents across Europe are in favor of restricting “immigration opportunities for foreigners.” This majority is particularly large in Czechia, Sweden and the Netherlands. In Spain, on the other hand, a comparatively large share is in favor of easing immigration.

- The issue of “immigration” also features the highest level of affective polarization across Europe, sharing this top position with “climate change.” The degree of aversion shown toward people with different opinions on the issue is highest in Italy and lowest in Poland.
- Throughout Europe, respondents also regard the issue of “immigration” as carrying the greatest potential for societal division.
- People who position themselves on the right side of the political spectrum show more affective polarization on the issue of “immigration” than do those on the left. Supporters of political parties on the right or far-right are most polarized on the issue, while supporters of Christian Democratic and conservative parties are least polarized here.

The war in Ukraine

The degree of willingness to support Ukraine varies widely in Europe, with high levels of polarization in Czechia and Hungary

- On the issue of the war in Ukraine, two opinion camps of roughly equal strengths are evident across Europe. One is in favor of limiting support to Ukraine so as to avoid negative economic consequences, while the other wants to maintain this support despite negative economic consequences. The lowest levels of support for Ukraine are seen in Czechia, Hungary and Greece.
- Czechia has the highest level of affective polarization on the issue of the war in Ukraine, while Spain, France and the Netherlands have the lowest levels.
- People who lean toward right to far-right, liberal, or green and environmental parties display particularly negative attitudes toward people who do not share their opinions on the issue of “the war in Ukraine.”
- Those who advocate limiting support for Ukraine are particularly likely to think the issue of “the war in Ukraine” is creating a “division in society.”

Pandemic control

High level of perceived potential for societal division, comparatively low levels of affective polarization, majority in Europe views encroachments on individual freedom skeptically

- On the issue of “pandemics like COVID-19,” a relative majority in Europe is fundamentally skeptical of “encroachments on individual freedom.” This opposition is strongest in Greece, Hungary and France. Respondents in Sweden, on the other hand, are most willing to accept restrictions on individual freedom for the purposes of combating pandemics.
- Italy and Greece display the highest levels of affective polarization on the issue of “pandemics like COVID-19,” while the Netherlands and Spain show the lowest.
- Respondents throughout Europe see the issue of “pandemics such as COVID-19” as being highly societally divisive as compared to other topics. However, the actual level of affective polarization measured for the issue turns out to be comparatively low.

Climate change

High level of affective polarization, majority supports expanding climate protection measures

- On the issue of “climate change,” a majority across Europe tends toward the view that policies intended to combat climate change “still do not go far enough.” Respondents from Italy, Spain and Greece in particular are in favor of further climate protection measures.
- The view that existing policies intended to combat climate change “already go much too far” is most prevalent in the Netherlands, Sweden and Czechia.
- The issue of “climate change” also features the highest level of affective polarization across Europe, sharing this top position with “immigration.” People in Italy and Spain are most polarized on the issue, while those in Czechia are the least polarized.
- People who locate themselves on the left side of the political spectrum, along with those who support left, far-left, green or environmental parties, tend to judge people who share their opinions on this issue most positively, while regarding people who hold differing views very negatively.
- Despite the high level of polarization on the issue of “climate change,” respondents see comparatively little danger of a “division of society” here.

Social benefits and their financing

High level of perceived potential for societal division, low level of affective polarization, majority in favor of less taxes and contributions even if social welfare benefits are reduced

- On the issue of “social benefits and their financing,” a relative majority across Europe supports “less taxes and contributions, even if that means fewer social welfare benefits.” Respondents in Poland and France show the most support for a reduction in taxes and contributions. In Spain and Sweden, the demand for a further expansion of the welfare state is most widespread.
- Compared with other topics, the issue of “social benefits” shows the lowest overall level of affective polarization. Nevertheless, respondents throughout Europe regard the issue as contributing strongly to societal division. The actual level of affective polarization on the issue is highest in Italy and Poland, and lowest in the Netherlands.
- Respondents from high-income groups are more strongly polarized on the issue of “social benefits” than are those with low incomes. Individuals who favor more social welfare benefits tend to be more polarized than those who prefer less taxes.
- Supporters of social democratic, left to far-left, and right to far-right parties all display above-average levels of polarization on the issue of “social benefits.”

Gender equality in society

Majority in favor of additional measures, high levels of polarization in southern Europe

- On the issue of “gender equality in society,” a majority of people across Europe believe that the gender equality measures implemented to date “still do not go far enough.” A particularly large share of respondents in southern European countries are in favor of more gender equality measures.
- Levels of affective polarization for the issue of “gender equality” are among Europe’s lowest, with respondents showing less polarization only for the issue of “social benefits.” Respondents also regard the issue as producing comparatively little societal division. Measured levels of affective polarization on the issue are highest in Italy, Spain and Greece, and lowest in Czechia.
- Women are more strongly polarized than men when it comes to the issue of “gender equality.” People who describe themselves as on the left of the political spectrum, or who lean toward left, far-left or environmental parties, are the most polarized on the issue.

Policy toward sexual minorities

Average level of polarization, strong rejection of antidiscrimination measures in the Visegrád states

- On the issue of “policy toward sexual minorities,” a majority in Europe is in favor of additional policies to combat discrimination. However, the degree of opposition to such measures in Poland, Hungary and Czechia is above the overall sample average.
- The greatest amount of polarization on the issue of “policy toward sexual minorities” is found in Italy, Greece and Spain. Respondents in Czechia and France display the least amount of negative feeling toward people holding views differing from their own. Supporters of social democratic, left to far-left, and green and environmental parties show the highest levels of affective polarization on the issue of “policy toward sexual minorities.”

ABOUT THE STUDY

Background

Throughout European democracies, there are signs that opinions, world-views and political positions are drawing increasingly apart. Similarly, observers argue that citizens are becoming increasingly hostile to people who hold views different from their own. These phenomena, usually regarded as aspects of “polarization,” have implications for democracy and its ability to balance divergent interests, and regulate conflicts. As current and past experience shows, a high level of polarization within a society can tear at the fabric of social cohesion and endanger democratic stability.

Research Questions

How widespread is polarization in Europe? In which countries do we see the greatest hostility toward people with differing opinions being demonstrated? In which social groups and with regard to which issues do we observe the strongest increase in affective polarization? Despite the growing awareness of such issues among researchers and policy-makers, this question remains largely unanswered, as existing studies have often neglected the significant role played by emotions and the broader constructions of identity that extend beyond party affiliations.

Objectives

The study aims to provide insights into the magnitude of polarization found in individual European societies and to examine this phenomenon in cross-national comparison. To achieve this, it takes a new approach to measuring polarization by combining methods designed to measure position with those designed to measure affect and, additionally, determines salience and subjective perceptions of division. The concept of affective polarization, which refers to the affinity or aversion expressed between groups defined not along party lines but by issues exclusively, stands at the center of the study. The study’s findings are intended to initiate a debate on the consequences of polarization for European democracies and the European Union.

Methodology

The study is based on a survey conducted in collaboration with YouGov in the fall of 2022 in 10 member states of the European Union (Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden). Around 20,000 people answered questions relating to a total of seven different issue areas, including migration, the war in Ukraine, pandemics such as COVID-19, climate change, social security, gender equality and policy toward sexual minorities. With the help of a novel measurement procedure, the survey recorded both the respondents’ own positions and their feelings toward other people respectively with similar beliefs or different points of view. The differences in the evaluations of these two distinct opinion groups were then used to calculate a measure expressing the emotional distance toward those with different political viewpoints. Thus, affective polarization is understood here as the degree to which people with opposing opinions are rejected or condemned.



INTRODUCTION

USE OF THE TERM "POLARIZATION" IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

The term "polarization" originates from within the natural sciences. Substances are polarized when a displacement of charges results in the formation of electric or magnetic poles. One way to observe this effect, for example, is to watch iron filings under the influence of such forces shift from their original chaotic positionings and align themselves to one of the two poles. If light waves become polarized, their propagation follows only very specific, mutually delimited vectors of oscillation. All other photons that do not fit into the order thus defined are eliminated.

In political and social contexts, the term polarization is typically used differently, despite certain metaphorical parallels to these natural phenomena. Colloquially, the concept can be employed here to describe either the characteristic of a single individual or the internal state of groups such as legislatures, parties or a society. The primary point of reference here is the attitude toward certain facts or political issues. Individuals are considered polarized if they lean toward certain extreme positions or extremist world views. A group, on the other hand, is said to be "polarized" when many of its members identify with extreme positions of this nature – that is, when opinions, attitudes and beliefs within the group's membership show very significant divergence. In the most extreme case, a group can consist of two or more opposing camps with strongly differing positions and few people left in the theoretically possible "center."

IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

The concept of polarization is also used in this sense in social sciences. Here, it has gained considerable popularity especially in recent years, driven by discussions of social crisis as well as with the rise of right-wing populist parties and actors (Schulze et al. 2020; Jungkunz 2021; Roose 2021). Empirical research on the topic has focused on analyzing the distribution of positions. These are considered to be polarized when views, mentalities and attitudes tend to cluster at the edges of the opinion spectrum.¹ In addition, a distinction is made with regard to the groups being evaluated: for example, between a polarization of political elites and a polarization of society, or – in the political-science context – between a polarization of political parties and a polarization of their constituencies (Roose/Steinhilper 2022). Against this

¹ A polarized distribution of opinions of this kind is also called *cognitive polarization* or *issue polarization*. When represented visually in histogram form, its appearance can be compared to the two humps of a camel, as compared to the silhouette of a "dromedary's back" seen with a normal distribution (Mau 2022; Roose/Steinhilper 2022).

backdrop, the diagnosis of growing polarization, along with an associated division of society that is either imminent or already well advanced, is today ubiquitous. However, the empirical findings available on this subject turn out to be rather varied and inconsistent. Some studies have, in fact, found evidence of increasing ideological polarization and warn (Dalton 2021) of an imminent or already profound division within society. Others consider such conclusions to be unfounded and regard the thesis of a “polarized society” to be a self-fulfilling prophecy (Adams et al. 2011; Kaube/Kieserling 2022; Mau 2022; Munzert/Bauer 2013; Lux et al. 2022).

From the perspective of democratic theory, this ideological polarization does not represent a problem in itself, and can even be understood as a desirable form of social differentiation. Especially in a free, democratic and pluralistic society, a diversity of opinions, views and positions is not in principle a source of concern. Rather, a certain amount of pluralized and polarized opinions is understood as being a necessary precondition of a liberal order, and the tolerance for dissenting views can even be numbered among the sociomoral foundations of a modern democracy. However, a critical point is that diverging distributions of opinion are often accompanied by forms of group and camp formation that are typically associated with conflict. For example, if a differentiated spectrum of opinions is divided into two groups with diametrically opposed perspectives, worldviews or beliefs, this can lead to the emergence of a friend-foe mindset – especially if an individual associates a particular view with their personal identity. People who do not share this view then easily become seen as a threat, and are accordingly met with skepticism, defensiveness and exclusion. Because such strong positions are often linked to the consolidation of identity, belonging and solidarity, a group in which different extreme positions have solidified into camps risks falling into a dynamic of social disintegration – even to the point of splitting into several individual groups, which can prove to be particularly problematic in the political arena. Strong affective polarization within a society often has a negative impact on the quality of democracy and can facilitate unrest and violence. Historical experience – for example with the Weimar Republic – has also shown that a democracy in which large societal subgroups align themselves with very strongly divergent positions, even to the point of segregating themselves into hostile political camps, will experience instability over the long term.

IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION IN DEMOCRATIC THEORY

WHAT IS AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION?

The concept of affective polarization comes into play at the point where opinions undergo differentiation on the one hand, and where social divisions and political conflicts start to emerge on the other. Whereas “ideological polarization” refers to the degree of divergence in opinions, attitudes, and beliefs within a particular group, as reflected in their positions, affective polarization refers specifically to the shift from conflicts based on positions to those based on identity. What is measured is not the divergence of the different opinions, but the way they are handled within a subjective social context. What is of interest is not the positions themselves – or even their deeper causes and motivations – but rather the attitude, guided by emotions, passions and “affects,” toward the people who represent a specific position. Accordingly, a person is said to be strongly affectively polarized when she forms very positive perceptions toward one particular group and very negative perceptions toward another (Iyengar et al. 2012; Druckman/Levendusky 2019).²

THE IDEA OF AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

² The reasoning behind this point is rooted in the traditional method applied for measuring social distance. (Bogardus 1947).

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

The concept of affective polarization originated in the American research community, and has largely been used in the context of analyzing political parties. In the U.S. case, for example, researchers have shown how an increasingly tight link between political opinion and collective identity makes processes of political compromise more difficult. As bipartisan forms of cooperation between Republicans and Democrats become increasingly difficult in politics, each party's supporters are growing increasingly inimical toward each other in everyday life (Druckman/Levendusky 2019; Mason 2018; Mason 2015). In recent years, the concept of affective polarization has also been applied to multiparty systems, and has been studied in European democracies (Reiljan 2020; Wagner 2021). However, processes of political polarization are also taking place beyond party lines. The crises of recent years in particular have shown that large groups within a democratic society can also grow apart as a result of disagreements about specific factual matters and, in the process, create new lines of conflict. This expansion of the view of issue-based forms of affective polarization is currently gaining popularity in the political science research community (Hobolt et al. 2021; RAPID-COVID 2021). However, there is as yet a lack of empirical data that would allow these affective polarization effects to be directly measured for specific issues, particularly when comparing individual countries.

RESEARCH DESIGN

SURVEY IN TEN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

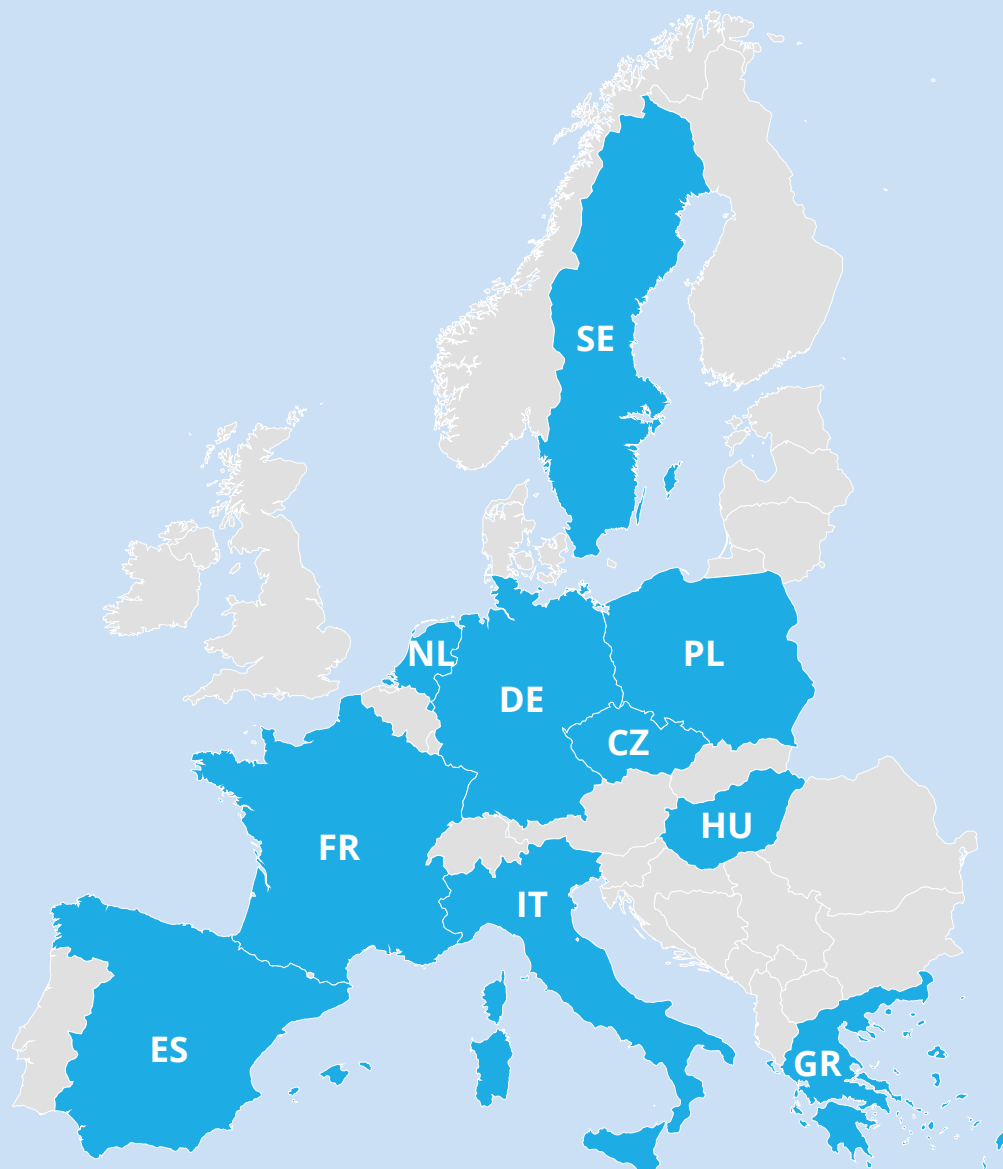
The present study takes off from this point. Its goal is to break new ground in measuring affective polarization beyond party boundaries, thereby determining the magnitude of affective polarization in Europe and analyzing it in a comparative perspective. By introducing and operationalizing the concept of issue-based affective polarization as affinity or aversion between groups defined exclusively with reference to issues, the study makes a crucial contribution to expanding the state of research. Based on an original collection of survey data in 10 European countries, it presents new insights into the magnitude and distribution of affective polarization. For this purpose, a total of 20,449 people were surveyed in the fall of 2022, distributed across the following countries (Fig. 1.1):

The countries were selected with the goal of producing an overall group of respondents that reflected the EU's socio-spatial and political-cultural diversity, while also representing a significant majority – ultimately just under 80 percent – of its population.

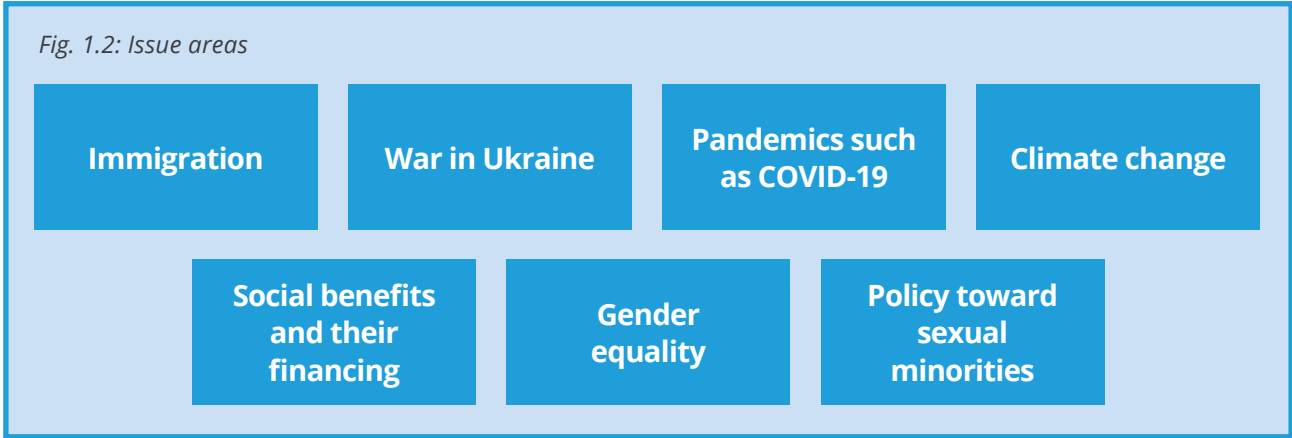
ISSUES

The study focuses on a total of seven issues that have been at the center of controversial public discussions in recent years, and which have also been the subject of election campaigns, protests and political initiatives throughout Europe. Each of these issues has been associated with unusually great pressure to act and solve problems, with these circumstances in some cases described as a "crisis." Specifically, the issues relate to migration, the war in Ukraine, pandemics such as COVID-19, climate change, social benefits and their financing, gender equality and policy toward sexual minorities (Figure 1.2).

Fig. 1.1: Countries surveyed



- Czechia (n = 2,101),
- France (n = 2,117),
- Germany (n = 2,091),
- Greece (n = 1,587),
- Hungary (n = 2,069),
- Italy (n = 2,123),
- Netherlands (n = 2,095),
- Poland (n = 2,055),
- Spain (n = 2,105) and
- Sweden (n = 2,106).



INFO BOX – Source of data

The empirical basis for the results presented here is a survey conducted by MIDEM in cooperation with YouGov Germany in 10 European Union countries. Between Sept. 16 and Oct. 12, 2022³ a total of 20,449 people aged 18 and over were surveyed. Data were collected in Czechia (n = 2,101), France (n = 2,117), Germany (n = 2,091), Greece (n = 1,587), Hungary (n = 2,069), Italy (n = 2,123), Netherlands (n = 2,095), Poland (n = 2,055), Spain (n = 2,105) and Sweden (n = 2,106). The countries were selected with the goal of producing an overall group of respondents that reflected the EU's socio-spatial and political-cultural diversity, while also representing a significant majority – ultimately just under 80 percent – of its population. The sampling was based on (regional) online access panels. To account for the distribution of population characteristics in the individual countries, quotas were established based on age, gender, region and education level. A subsequent weighting process was used to compensate for additional distributional differences between the sample and the populations in each country. The results are representative of the population aged 18 and older. In the survey, participants were given a standardized questionnaire that in part used established items from previous surveys (GLES 2021; European Social Survey 2020). Individual questions were adapted to fit country-specific contexts, and the survey as a whole additionally included newly developed items.

3 With the exception of France, where the survey was conducted between Nov. 4 – 15, 2022.

THE MEASUREMENT OF POLARIZATION

Our questionnaire used three different levels to measure polarization:

1. The respondent's own position regarding a specific issue,
2. The respondent's evaluation of groups of people respectively taking two different extreme positions on the issue, and
3. An assessment of the issue's salience, and the subjectively felt potential for societal division.

To determine the extent of polarization, two diametrically opposed reference statements were first selected for each issue area. These positions were intended to bracket the spectrum of discussion of each issue as effectively as possible. They had to be statements that could genuinely be understood as opposites, as they would otherwise represent only a portion of the possible spectrum of opinion. Moreover, it was important that the statements focus on the practical implementation of policies. The intention here was to set a distinctly political interpretive framework to address respondents in their role as citizens and avoid eliciting, for example, purely abstract value judgments. In the end, nearly all of the reference statements ultimately chosen and used in the survey were based on established items previously used in other surveys.

1. Identifying opinions and their distributions

The procedure for determining the level of polarization involved a total of several steps that were repeated for each of the issue areas covered. The first step was to ask for the respondent's personal opinion on the issue. For this purpose, they were presented with an 11-point scale, in each case with the two opposing positions located at the end points. On the topic of immigration, for example, respondents were able to locate their personal position between "0 – *Immigration opportunities for foreigners should be eased*" and "10 – *Immigration opportunities for foreigners should be restricted.*" For each issue, this allowed us to determine what proportion of the respondents aligned themselves with one or the other position. It further allowed us to determine the share of people tending to extreme positions, as well as the share locating themselves in the middle, without a preference for either of the two sides. In each case, the resulting distributions can be found in the chapters addressing each specific issue, visualized in Fig. 2.a. These distributions provide information about the frequency of different positionings within each issue area.

2. Evaluation of antagonistic opinion groups

In a second step, we sought to determine the strength of affective polarization. This must be clearly distinguished from the mere distribution of positions, as it is based less on the level of facts and more on the social dimension – that is, the perception and classification of other people with either similar or divergent views. In the present study, respondents were here asked to locate their feelings toward advocates of each reference statement on a so-called feeling thermometer, ranging from "*-5 cool and negative*" to "*+5 warm and positive.*"⁴ This instrument is widely recognized in the field of social science research and has been consistently utilized to measure affective polarization for several years (Iyengar et al. 2012; Druckman/

THREE STEPS OF MEASURING POLARIZATION

FIRST STEP

SECOND STEP

⁴ The phrase "warm and positive" is uncommon in most languages, which is why the choice of words varies slightly in translations.

Levendusky 2019; RAPID-COVID 2021).⁵ For example, on the topic of immigration, respondents were asked to rate their affinity toward two groups of people: those who believe “*Immigration opportunities for foreigners should be eased*” and those who would like to “*restrict*” such opportunities. The answers to these two questions allow the distance between the two values to be calculated for each respondent.⁶

In principle, it can be assumed that persons with similar views tend to be perceived positively, while persons with differing views tend to be perceived negatively. If this is the case, we can speak of affective polarization. The more the ratings given to these two groups of people differ from each other, the more pronounced is this polarization. If one group is given a maximum positive rating (+5), while the other is given a maximum negative rating (-5), the difference reaches its highest possible value of 10. On the other hand, if both groups of people are rated equally well or poorly, there is no affective polarization (difference = 0).

INFO BOX – Forms of representation of affective polarization

Three different measures are used to describe the level of affective polarization within a group:

Average values

Average values represent the average distance between the two numerical values given by an individual when evaluating two opinion groups on a specific issue. With regard to a group, the average values represent the average level of affective polarization that a person from that group exhibits.

Percentage of those who are maximally polarized

Maximally polarized individuals are those for whom the difference in the ratings given for the two opinion groups is the greatest possible distance of 10. For individual groups, the percentage of such persons within the total population is usually indicated. On the topic of immigration, for example, 17 percent of all 20,449 respondents were deemed to be “maximally polarized” (see Fig. 2.1c).

Group of strongly polarized people

A global polarization index was calculated in order to represent the magnitude of affective polarization across all seven topics. Given that very few people record a distance of 10 on all seven topics simultaneously, describing the share of those who are maximally polarized is not particularly relevant here. We therefore identify a group of “strongly polarized” individuals that is based on a breakdown of scores by quintile. “Strongly polarized” respondents are those whose global index scores for affective polarization lie in the top fifth of the entire sample.

In reference to a specific group, the different forms of representation applied may well lead to different conclusions. In Czechia, for example, the average values of affective polarization on the topic of immigration are higher than in Hungary. However, Hungary shows a higher percentage of maximally polarized people with regard to this issue than does Czechia.

⁵ The so-called feeling thermometer was first used as an instrument in the American National Election Study (ANES) in 1964.

⁶ In this context, the direction of the response (positive or negative) is irrelevant, as we are only concerned with the magnitude of the difference.

3. Salience and the subjectively felt potential for societal division

Beyond asking respondents to position themselves with respect to each issue area, and asking them to evaluate opinion groups, the study's measurement of affective polarization included two additional questions. The first was used to determine the salience of each issue area. Specifically, respondents were asked: "How important are the following issues to you personally?" with response options ranging between "0 – Not at all important" and "10 – Very important." Second, we were also interested in respondents' subjective assessments of possible conflict potential. To this end, participants were again asked whether, for each of the seven issue areas, they saw a "division of society" in their own country (possible answers ranged on a scale from "0 – No division at all" to "10 – Very strong division"). Finally, by using the evaluations obtained in this way, it was possible to identify any differences between the presumed and actual degree of polarization.

THIRD STEP

OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

The present study consists of two chapters. In the first, we initially present the results of a broader index of polarization that indicates the overall level of affective polarization across all of the issue areas studied (section 1.1). The degree of polarization within individual issue areas (section 1.2) and the influence of salience (section 1.3) are also examined in more detail. In chapter 2, seven subsequent sections address the individual issue areas one by one, discussing the polarization dynamics at work in each. These are as follows: "Immigration" (section 2.1), "the war in Ukraine" (section 2.2), "pandemics such as COVID-19" (section 2.3), "climate change" (section 2.4), "social benefits and their financing" (section 2.5), "gender equality in society" (section 2.6), and "policy toward sexual minorities" (section 2.7). Section 1.4 then contrasts the insights gained regarding the actual extent of political polarization within specific issue areas in Europe with respondents' subjective assessments of each topic's potential to generate political conflict and social division.





POLARIZATION IN EUROPE

1.1

OVERVIEW: AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION IN EUROPE

INDEX OF AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

How strong is affective polarization in Europe overall? In which countries is it particularly strong? Which groups of people can be seen as especially polarized? To answer these questions, we first calculated a global index of affective polarization by integrating the scores for each of the issue areas being examined. Across the entire sample, the average value of this polarization index is 29.4. However, to gain more meaningful insights, we compared different subgroups broken down by country, as well as sociodemographic and political characteristics (Fig. 1.1a).¹

Index of affective polarization - Calculation

For each issue area, each respondent was asked to identify how positive or negative they felt toward each of two groups holding opposing extreme positions. These self-reported feelings were quantified using the “feeling thermometer” scale, ranging from -5 to +5. The distance (ranging from 0 to 10) between these two self-reported evaluations represents the affective polarization score for that issue. The scores for all seven issue areas were then added together to produce an aggregated index value. This accordingly allows for values between 0 and 70. If a person has a value of 0 here, she has consistently given identical ratings to the two opposing opinion groups in each of the seven issue areas. This was true for 5 percent of the 20,449 respondents. With a value of 70, on the other hand, a person exhibits the maximum level of affective polarization across all seven issues. This was the case for just 1 percent of the 20,449 respondents. As a group, we describe respondents whose aggregate index value lies in the top quintile of the entire sample as being particularly strongly polarized (see Info box: Forms of representation of affective polarization).

¹ By itself, the average polarization value is insufficient for a meaningful analysis of the overall level of affective polarization in Europe. Instead, it is the relative group comparisons rather than absolute polarization values that provide insights into the possible distributional structures within the data set.

Affective polarization by country

In the comparison between individual countries, Italy stands out for its particularly strong affective polarization. With an average index value of 34.9, it is the country with the highest level of affective polarization in Europe. Moreover, a total of 28 percent of all respondents there fall into the “strongly polarized” category.² Greece follows in second place, with an average index value of 31.6. Hungary, Germany and Spain have comparable average index values above 29, with the share of strongly polarized individuals at 21 percent in Germany, 20 percent in Greece, and 19 percent in Hungary and Spain. In contrast, respondents from the Netherlands show the lowest average level of affective polarization (average index value 27.0) – followed by their counterparts in Czechia and France. The proportion of strongly polarized individuals is also lowest in these countries, with respective shares of 12 percent, 14 percent and 16 percent.

**ITALY AND GREECE MOST
POLARIZED**

Affective polarization by sociodemographic characteristics

A look at *sociodemographic characteristics* allows us to observe significant differences between *age groups*. For example, average levels of affective polarization are significantly higher in individuals 55 years and older than in younger cohorts. Among this older cohort, 22 percent can be considered “strongly polarized.” However, respondents with high levels of *educational attainment* (average index value 30.1) are also significantly more affectively polarized than those with intermediate-level educational attainment (average value 28.7). Compared to this latter group, persons with low levels of educational attainment also show a greater aversion to opinions different than their own (average index value 29.9). With regard to *gross household income*, the highest-income group shows the greatest amount of affective polarization (average index value 30.5), although the proportion of “strongly polarized” persons here, at 18 percent, is lower than in the two comparison groups (both 19 percent).

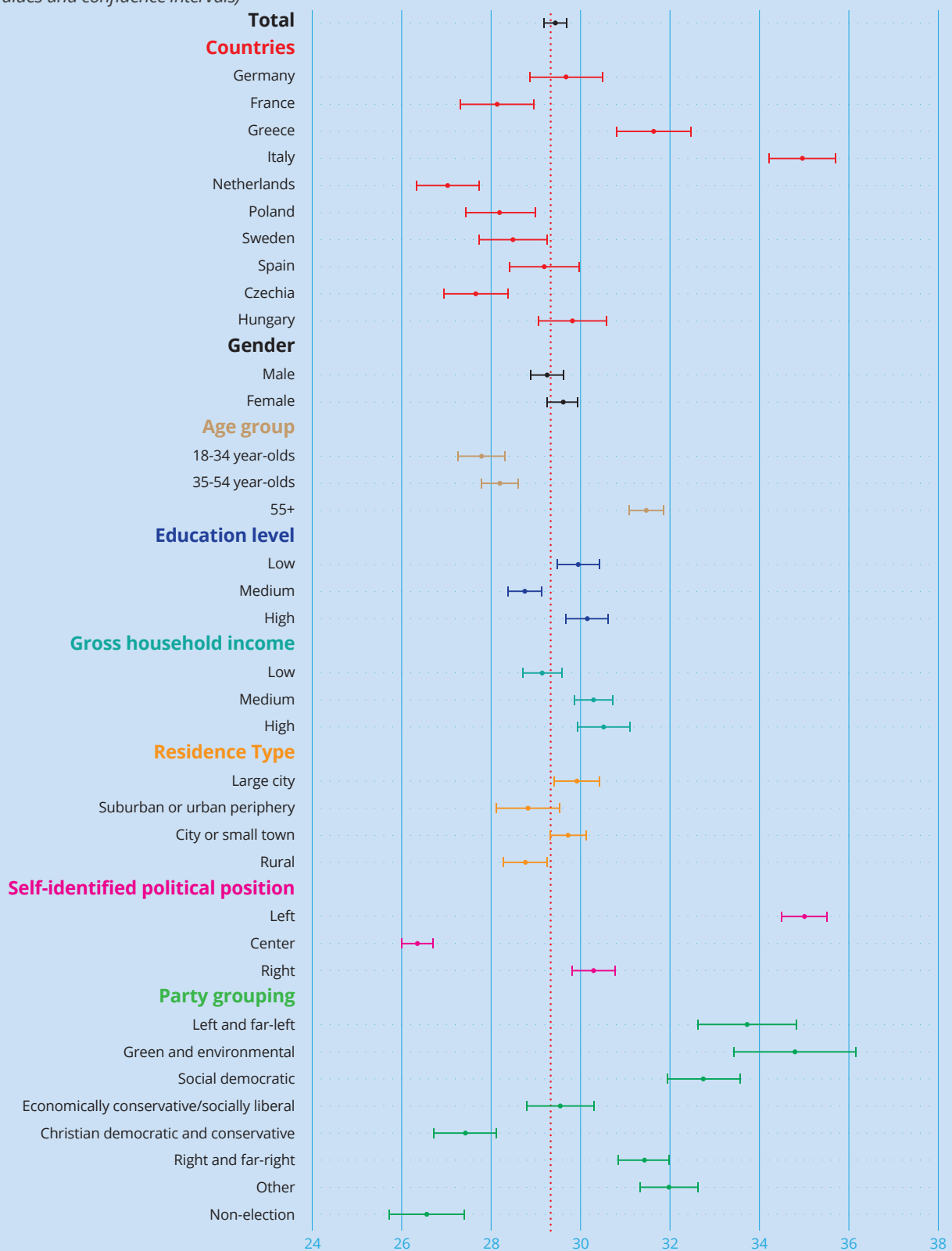
**HIGHER POLARIZATION AMONG
OLDER AND HIGHLY EDUCATED
PEOPLE**

Residence type, meaning the type of community in which respondents live, also makes a difference. For example, the highest level of affective polarization is found in large cities. Individuals living in a “large city” (average index value 29.9) or in a “city or small town” (average value 29.7) show significantly higher affective polarization scores than do individuals from rural areas (average value 28.8). Respondents living in a “suburb or outskirts of a large city” are more similar to residents of rural areas (Fig. 1.1a).

**RESIDENTS OF LARGE CITIES
ARE MOST POLARIZED**

² This analysis is based on a segmentation into quintiles. “Strongly polarized” respondents are those whose global affective polarization index values are in the top fifth of the entire sample. See Info box: Forms of representation of affective polarization.

Fig. 1.1a: Affective polarization index by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics (average index values and confidence intervals)



Note: Dots indicate the average group values on the polarization index with associated 95% confidence intervals, within different segments of the European population. The higher the value, the stronger the affective polarization.

To calculate affective polarization index values, respondents were asked to express their feelings toward two groups of people with opposing positions as a numerical evaluation. This was done for each of the seven issues. The distances between these two evaluations were calculated for each issue, and in a final step, the seven distance figures were added together. The index can thus take values between 0 and 70. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region ($n = 20,449$, except for gross household income and party groupings, where $n =$ at least 16,569. Missing values = "don't know"/no answer).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Affective polarization and political orientation

Finally, a look at respondents' political characteristics yields further insights. Here, as an initial observation, all three groups produced by the *left-right self-assessment* differ significantly from one another. The highest levels of affective polarization by far are found among people who position themselves as being on the left of the political spectrum (average index value 35.0). Within this group of people, 28 percent can be considered "strongly polarized." The comparable figure is 19 percent (average index value 30.3) among those who see themselves as being on the right of the political spectrum, and only 14 percent (average value 26.3) among those who see themselves as being in the political center. Although it can be assumed that perceptions of the terms "left" and "right" vary between individual European countries, the groups of people who see themselves as being on the left side of the spectrum exhibit a higher average index value in nearly all the countries studied. The only clear exception to this is Germany. Here, the average index value is slightly higher among those on the "right" side of the spectrum, but the difference is not significant. In Czechia, by contrast, the two groups have identical average index values.

**LEFTISTS MORE
POLARIZED THAN RIGHTISTS**

Comparable trends can also be identified with regard to *voting intention*. Voters supporting "left to far-left" (average index value 33.7) or "green and environmental" parties (average value 34.8) are significantly more affectively polarized than supporters of other parties across Europe. Among these groups of party supporters, a respective 29 percent and 27 percent can be considered "strongly polarized." In turn, the constituents of "right to far-right" parties (average index value 31.4) are more affectively polarized than the supporters of "liberal" and "Christian Democratic or conservative" parties. Nonvoters show the lowest levels of affective polarization (average index value 26.5) (Fig. 1.1a).

**MOST POLARIZED:
SUPPORTERS OF LEFT-WING
AND GREEN PARTIES**

INFO BOX – What do high affective polarization index values mean?

How should high affective polarization index values be interpreted? What do they express, and what real-world consequences do they have? The first thing to note is that those who are strongly affectively polarized with respect to a particular issue evaluate the groups of people defined by the two opposing reference statements very differently. In the vast majority of cases, this means people express positive feelings toward the group that shares the opinion they tend toward themselves. Persons with different opinions, by contrast, are evaluated negatively. This means that a high level of affective polarization can also be interpreted as a negative attitude toward people holding an opinion that differs from one's own.

In the absence of further information, it is difficult to assess the factors that may produce such an orientation. For example, this response behavior could be strongly influenced by current societal discourses, the tenor of media reporting and the objects of projection thereby generated. A high affective polarization score could also reflect a high level of political interest and a pronounced desire to shape policy – that is, the desire to change existing conditions and to implement one's own ideas. This is often associated with a sense of personal potency, or the belief that one can control and shape social and political life in all its individual aspects.

On the psychological level, however, creating clear lines of demarcation with respect to people with different opinions also indicates a certain strength of opinion and political self-confidence. This is often fueled by a faith in the correctness of one's own worldview, and an inclination to defend and assert it against other positions. In fact, it can also be seen in Fig. 1.1a that a high level of affective polarization appears to coincide significantly more often with progressive-oriented positions aimed at realizing political change. By contrast, people who do not take a clear position on specific issues, who place themselves in the political center and who identify themselves as nonvoters are on average significantly less willing to evaluate certain positions very positively and others very negatively.

Finally, however, a high affective polarization score also indicates that one's personal opinion is emotionally charged and associated with processes of identity formation, social association and dissociation, and related dynamics of differentiation from an out-group (Tajfel 1982; Tajfel/ Turner 1979). A high level of affective polarization can therefore also indicate certain ideological rigidities, a lack of understanding with regard to differing opinions and a lack of tolerance for ambiguities that cannot be resolved. Especially when one's own convictions are justified with the help of absolute formulas such as "nature," "reason" or "rationality," and are therefore even regarded as "indisputable," "simply reasonable" and thus "without any alternative," there is often little understanding shown for people with differing views.

An attitude of this kind runs the risk of impeding processes of democratic negotiation and obscuring the need for compromise. In the political science debate, strong affective polarization is therefore generally regarded as a negative factor that threatens social cohesion and jeopardizes the foundations of liberal democracies (Harteveld et al. 2023; Iyengar et al. 2019; Orhan 2022).

1.2

WHICH ISSUES ARE ASSOCIATED WITH THE STRONGEST AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION?

**"CLIMATE CHANGE" AND
"IMMIGRATION" ACCOUNT
FOR HIGHEST AFFECTIVE
POLARIZATION**

A particularly high level of affective polarization is evident for the issues of "climate change" and "immigration." and In these cases, respondents show the strongest average tendency to judge their own opinions with a feeling that is "warm and positive," while feeling very "cool and negative" toward opposing views. The share of people exhibiting the highest possible degree of polarization is also largest here, at 17 percent. In contrast, the lowest affective polarization scores can be observed for the issues of "gender equality in society" and "social benefits and their financing" (Fig. 1.2a).

**PROponents OF MEASURES
AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE MORE
POLARIZED THAN OPPONENTS**

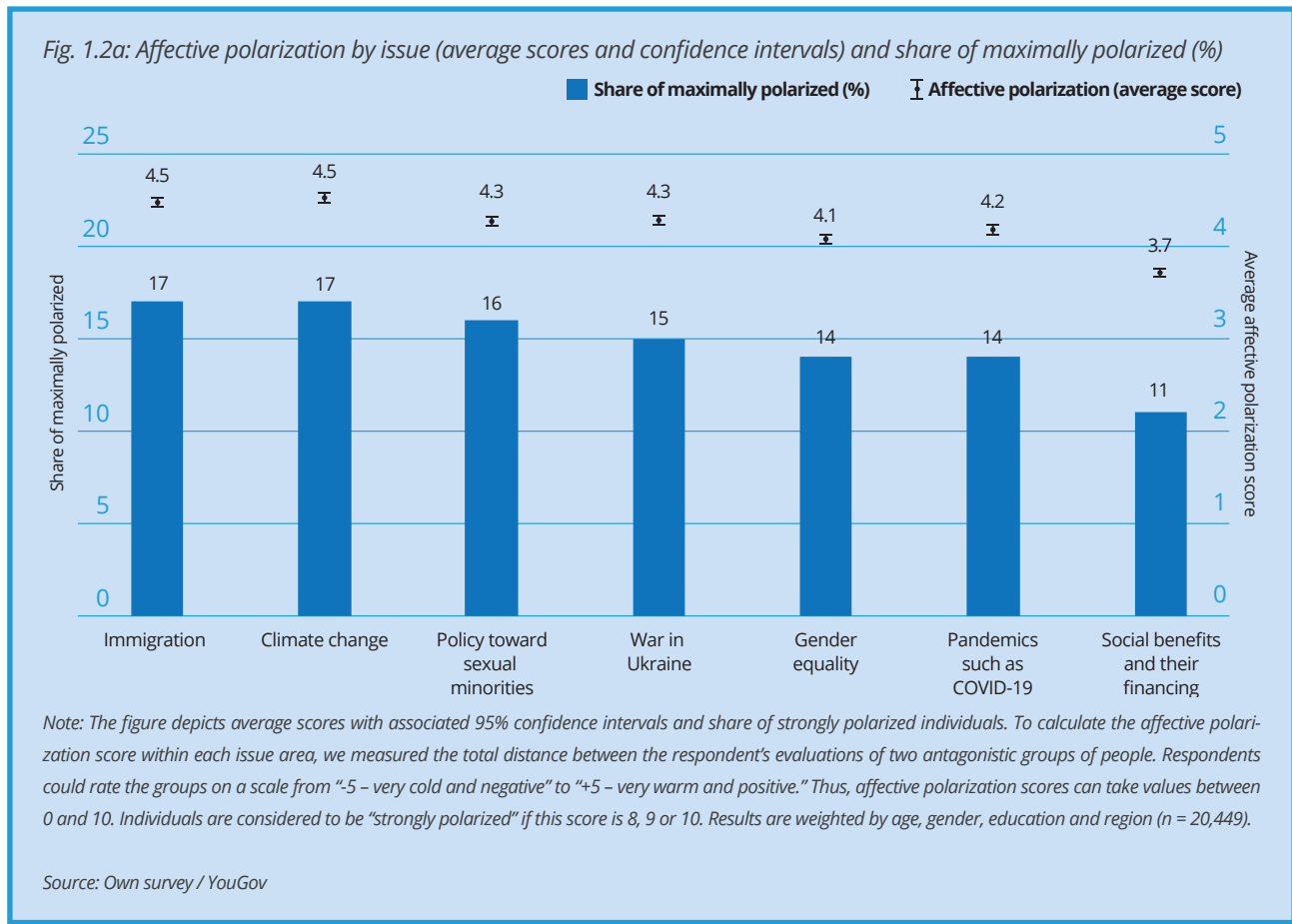
A question arises here regarding the distribution of individual positions. Within each of the individual issue areas, which opinion groups¹ are responsible for the affective polarization scores being measured? As Fig. 1.2b shows, this relationship varies considerably in some cases. For example, on the issue of "climate change," those individuals who think that the policies targeting climate change "are far from sufficient" are significantly more affectively polarized than others (average score 5.5). They have a significantly more negative attitude toward people who hold the opposing opinion than is true the other way around (average score 4.2). A similar imbalance with regard to the degree of polarization of the two individual groups can be seen in the issues "gender equality in society" and "policy toward sexual minorities" (Fig. 1.2b). By contrast, the two antagonistic opinion groups prove to be almost equally polarized on the issues of "immigration," "the war in Ukraine," "pandemics such as COVID-19" and "social benefits."

OPINION GROUPS VARY IN SIZE

However, there are also some significant differences in the size of the two opinion groups within these issue areas. For example, 50 percent of all respondents across Europe are in favor of restricting "immigration opportunities for foreigners," while only 25 percent tend to the opposite position (Fig. 2.1a). On the topic of "climate change," 59 percent tend toward the opinion that policies "still do not go far enough," while only 20 percent express the opposite view (Fig. 2.4a). Likewise, a relative majority

¹ To articulate their own position on an issue, respondents were asked to position themselves between two opposing statements on an 11-point scale. The opinion groups are formed by considering together all individuals who incline toward one or the other statement – that is, to one or the other pole of the scale. For the issue of "immigration," for example, these groups are accordingly composed as follows: "Ease immigration" (self-positioning in the range from 0 to 4), "restrict immigration" (self-positioning in the range from 6 to 10), and "positioning exactly in the center" (self-positioning at 5).

1.2 WHICH ISSUES ARE ASSOCIATED WITH THE STRONGEST AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION?

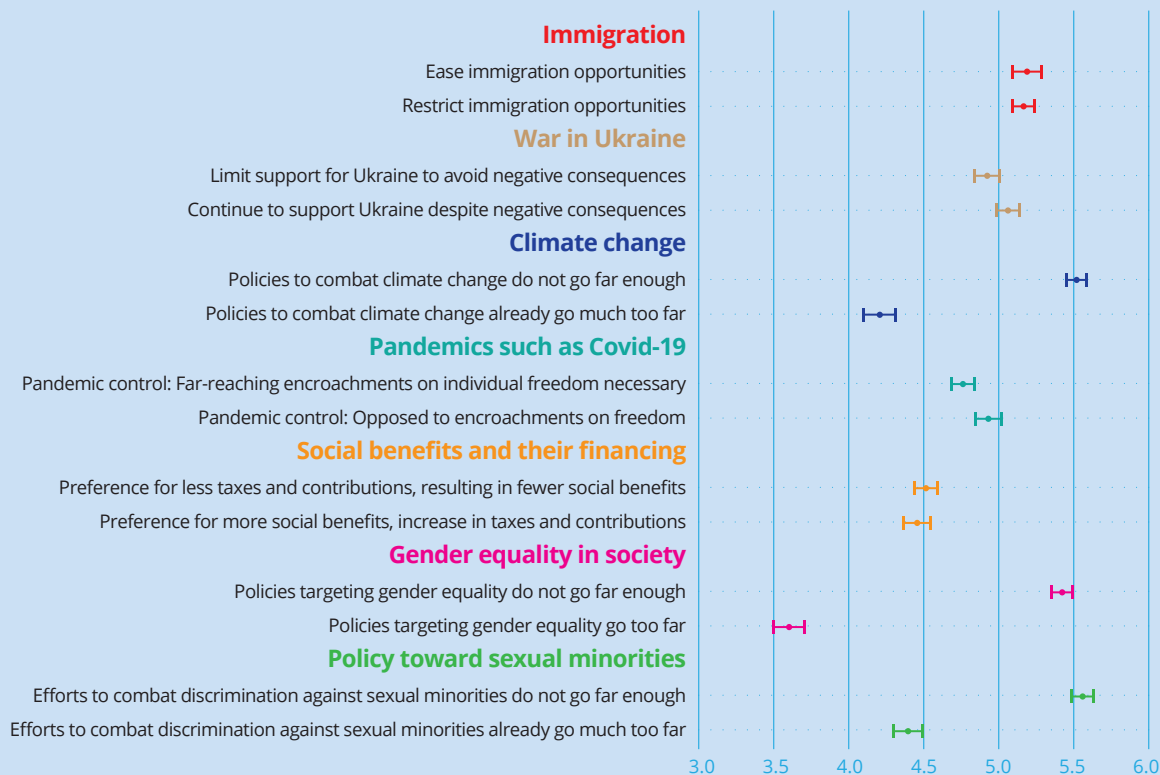


of 45 percent support the idea of "less taxes and contributions, even if that means fewer social welfare benefits." Just 28 percent tended to the opposite opinion (Fig. 2.5a). For the issue of "the war in Ukraine," the two opinion groups are roughly equal in size at a respective 39 percent and 40 percent (Fig. 2.2a).

If these size relationships are included in the depiction of affective polarization scores, we obtain the visualization shown in Fig. 1.2c. Accordingly, in the case of "immigration" – despite the same average polarization scores for both camps – almost three-quarters of the maximally polarized group consists of those who advocate restricting "immigration opportunities for foreigners." For the issue of "climate change," on the other hand, it is mainly the proponents of additional measures who rate the opposing opinion particularly negatively. A similar dominance by a single opinion camp is also found for "gender equality." Here, 80 percent of the maximally polarized respondents felt that the equality measures implemented to date are not sufficient. On the topic of "the war in Ukraine," on the other hand, the ratio between the two opinion camps is fairly balanced even among the most polarized individuals (Fig. 1.2c).

**IMMIGRATION:
AMONG MAXIMALLY POLARIZED,
LARGE MAJORITY FAVORS LIMITING
IMMIGRATION OPPORTUNITIES**

Fig. 1.2b: Affective polarization according to self-positioning within an issue area (average scores and confidence intervals)

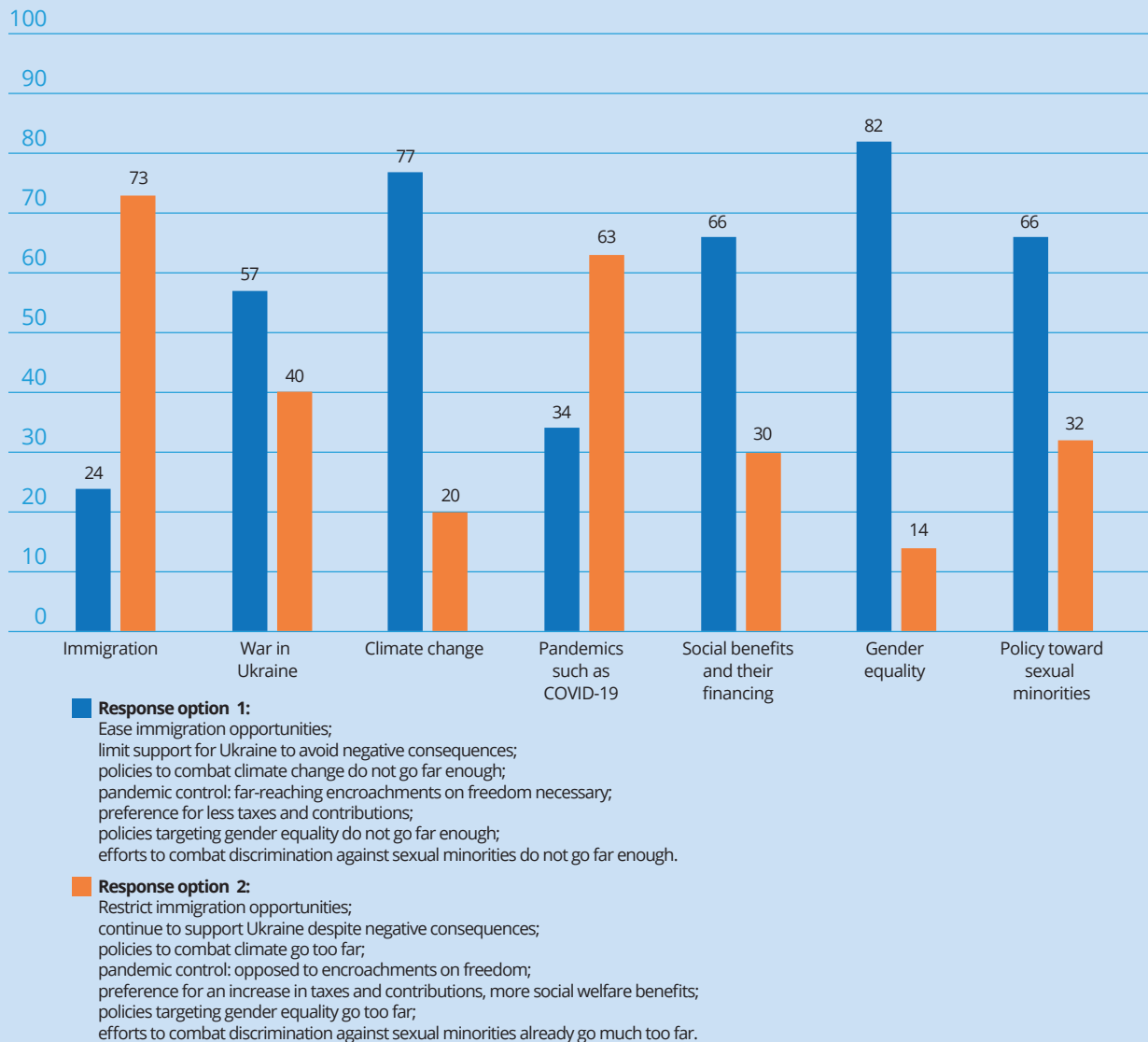


Note: The figure depicts average scores with associated 95% confidence intervals. The average scores indicate the degree of affective polarization within each issue area, and are grouped according to the respondents' own positions on the issue. Thus, all persons who indicated a preference for one or the other statement (respectively combining response options 0-4 and 6-10) were grouped together. The group of those who positioned themselves exactly in the center is not plotted. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

1.2 WHICH ISSUES ARE ASSOCIATED WITH THE STRONGEST AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION?

Fig. 1.2c: Percentage of those within each opinion group who are the most strongly polarized, by issue area (%)



Note: For each issue area, the figure depicts the share of respondents within the group of maximally affectively polarized individuals that support each opposing position. The opinion groups represented by the bars in the figure are defined based on respondents' personal positions on each issue. Thus, all individuals who indicated a preference of any strength for the same statement were grouped together (respectively combining response options 0-4 and 6-10). For each issue, the group of those who positioned themselves exactly in the center is not plotted. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

1.3

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION AND SALIENCE

IS THERE A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION AND SALIENCE?

"GENDER EQUALITY" AND "SOCIAL BENEFITS" PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT ISSUES, AHEAD OF "IMMIGRATION"

NO LINEAR RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION AND SALIENCE

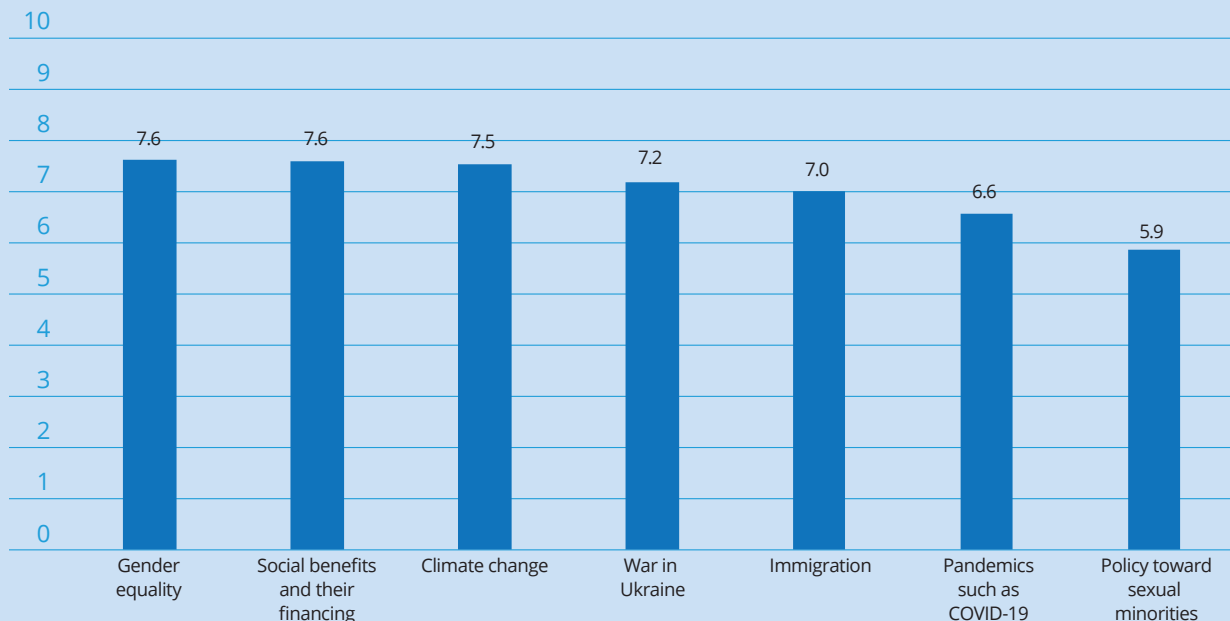
As the findings presented thus far have shown, individual regional, sociodemographic and political subgroups exhibit affective polarization scores that at times differ substantially. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that the salience of an issue – that is, the importance subjectively attributed to it compared to other topics – plays a major role. But what general relevance was attributed to the individual issues addressed in our survey?

Although "immigration" and "climate change" show the strongest affective polarization scores, neither issue is ascribed the greatest relevance. In comparison to other issues, "immigration" is even ranked in the lower middle of the pack in terms of importance (Fig. 1.3a).¹ Rather, "gender equality in society," "social benefits and their financing" and "climate change" are considered to be particularly relevant, while "pandemics" and "policy toward sexual minorities" are the least relevant. In this regard, the time of the survey itself must be taken into account. For example, by the fall of 2022, COVID-19 containment measures had already been rolled back in many places. The discussion about the war in Ukraine, on the other hand, had increasingly shifted away from the actual acts of war to its economic and social consequences. The overall pattern depicted in Fig. 1.3a in essence also holds true in each of the individual countries included in the study. Minor deviations are observable in only a few individual cases, for example in Sweden, where "immigration" was described as the third-most-important topic, and in Poland, where "the war in Ukraine" has a comparatively high salience.

But how are salience and affective polarization related? The general thesis in this area is that higher polarization effects are always to be expected when a given issue is perceived as being particularly relevant. On the other hand, if a person rates an issue as "*not at all important*," then on average a lower polarization effect would also be assumed. However, an analysis of the data shows that there is not a linear relationship between affective polarization scores and salience for any of the issue areas included in the survey. If both measures are plotted against each other, the result is instead the V-shaped image depicted in Fig. 1.3b and 1.3c. That is, both those who attribute very high importance to a particular issue and those who consider that issue to be "*not at all important*" are on average more affectively polarized than the overall sample average.

¹ The fact that the respondents tended to regard all issue areas as "important" offers a measure of support for the choice of these specific topics (Fig. 1.3a).

Fig. 1.3a: Salience of various issue areas in Europe (average scores)



Note: The figures depicted here are average scores. Question: "How important are the following issues to you personally?" Respondents were asked to position themselves between "0 – Not at all important" and "10 – Very important." Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

This pattern can be observed across all seven issue areas studied, and to a certain extent suggests two different motivations underlying respondents' negative evaluations of people with views that deviate from their own. The members of one group seem to be strongly polarized because the issue is particularly important to them. Members of the other group, on the other hand, appear to be similarly polarized because they are not really interested in the issue, and the public attention it nonetheless receives may seem inappropriate to them. A deeper look will be of benefit here, especially into the composition of the outermost groups shown in Figs. 1.3b and 1.3c (salience scores = 0 and 10). What specific positions are held by each of these strongly polarized groups at the edges of the salience scale?

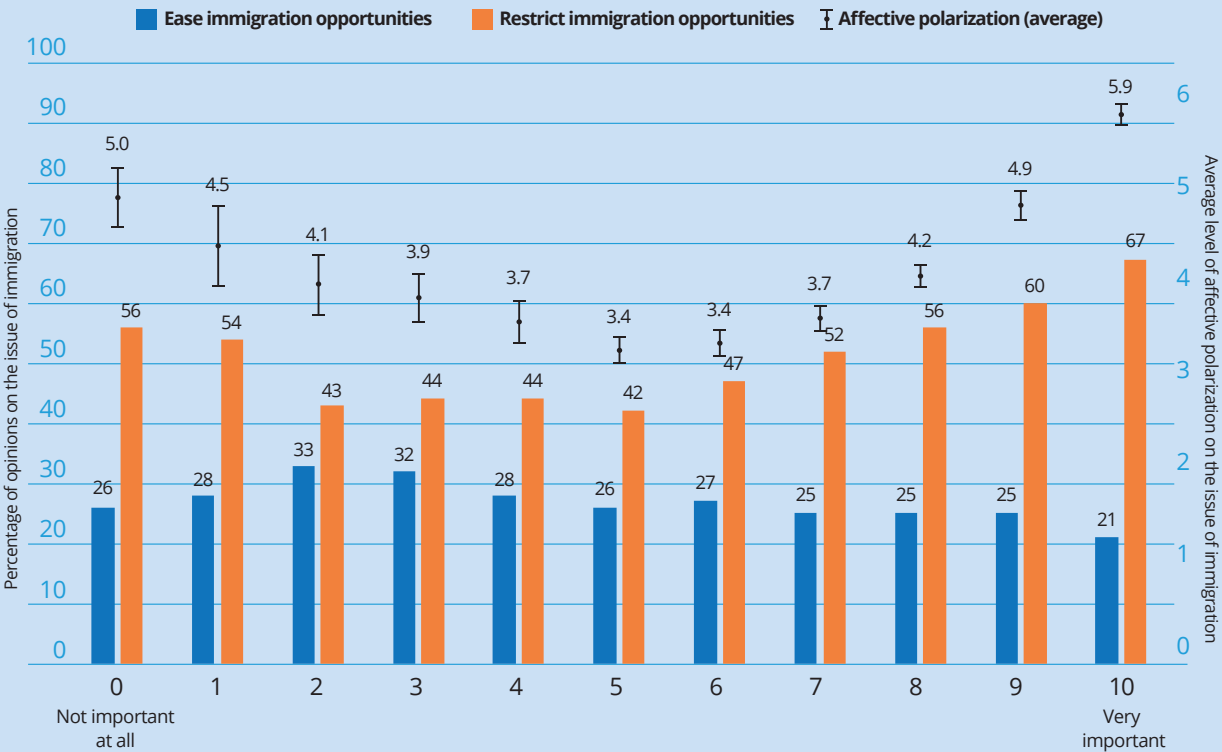
PEOPLE WHO REGARD AN ISSUE AS "VERY IMPORTANT" OR "NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT" TEND TO BE STRONGLY POLARIZED

A breakdown of the position distributions across all seven issue areas reveals two different patterns here. Examples drawn from the issues areas of "immigration" and "climate change" are shown in bar-chart form in Figs. 1.3b and 1.3c. The first possibility can be observed with the issue of "immigration," for example (Fig. 1.3b). Here, the majority relationships between the two different positions are stable across all "salience groups." In this specific case, individuals who advocate restricting "immigration possibilities for foreigners" are clearly in the majority (self-positioning in the 6-10 range according to Fig. 2.1a). This can certainly be seen among those who attribute very little importance to the topic of "immigration" (salience = 0). However, at 56 percent, this majority share is significantly lower than the comparable majority among those who consider the topic of "immigration" to be "very important" (there, we see a majority of 67 percent). A similar distributional structure can be observed for the issue of "social benefits."²

PEOPLE CRITICAL TOWARDS IMMIGRATION CONSTITUTE A MAJORITY IN ALL SALIENCE GROUPS

² Here, across all salience groups, individuals who argue for "less taxes and contributions even if that means fewer social welfare benefits" are in the majority (self-positioning in the 0-4 range as seen in Fig. 2.5a).

Fig. 1.3b: Affective polarization on the issue of immigration by salience (average scores and confidence intervals), with associated shares of opinion groups (%)



Note: X-axis: Salience of the "immigration" issue. Survey question: "How important are the following issues to you personally?" Respondents were asked to position themselves between "0 – Not at all important" and "10 – Very important."

Y-axis left: Share of respondents in each salience subgroup with different opinions on the issue of "immigration." Survey question: "There are different opinions on the issue of 'immigration.' 'Where would you place your personal opinion here?' Answers could be positioned between "0 – Immigration opportunities for foreigners should be eased" and "10 – Immigration opportunities for foreigners should be restricted." Shown here: Share of respondents with answers in the 0-4 range (blue bars), share of respondents with answers in the 6-10 range (orange bars).

Y-axis right: Average affective polarization with associated 95% confidence intervals for the issue of "immigration" (in points).

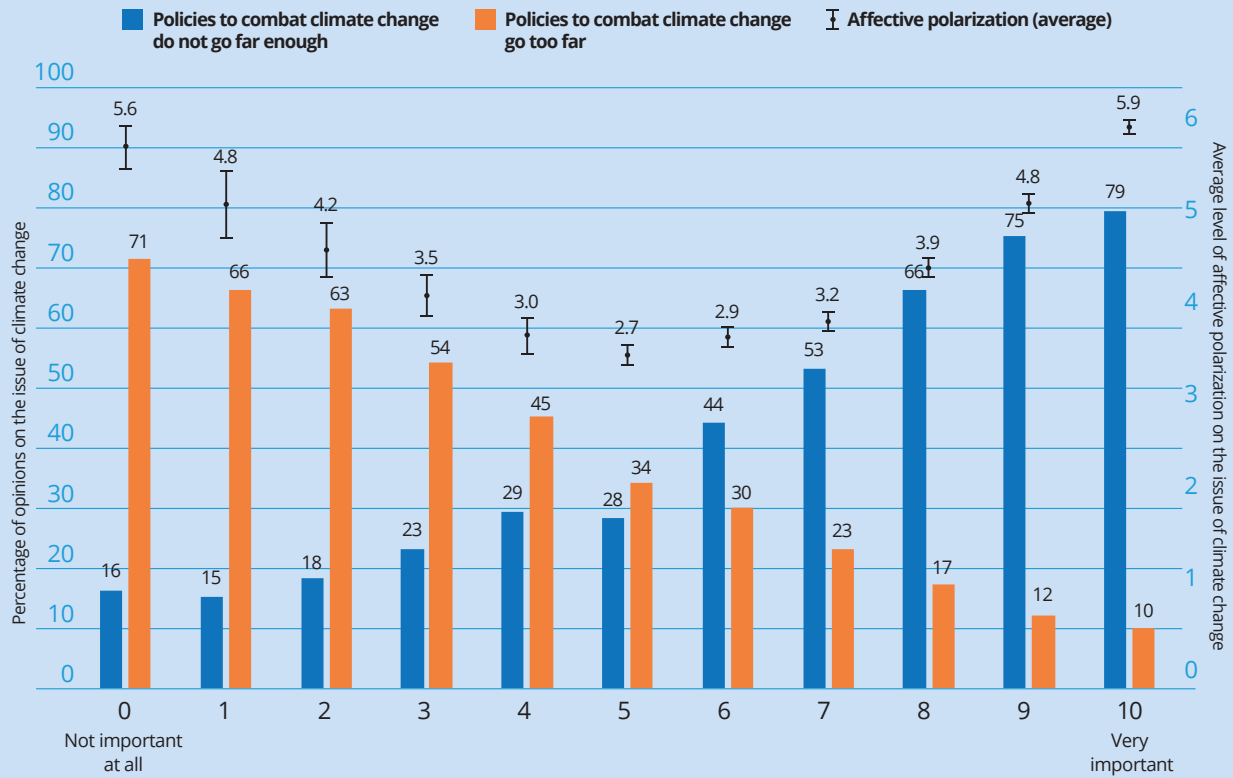
Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

**CLIMATE CHANGE:
CLEAR OPINION DIFFERENCES
BETWEEN SALIENCY GROUPS**

For the issue of "climate change," by contrast, we see a completely different distribution pattern (Fig. 1.3c). Among those who consider the issue to be particularly important (salience = 10), individuals who believe policies to combat climate change "still do not go far enough" dominate with a share of 79 percent. On the opposing side (salience = 0, among people who say the issue of climate change is "not at all important"), the contrary position is held by 71 percent. Thus, among those who consider the issue of climate change to be "not at all important," those who are skeptical toward policies clearly dominate, and among those who attribute very substantial importance to the issue, those who support more policies are in the majority. Though presumably for different reasons, both groups turn out to be strongly affectively polarized – that is, they display particularly negative feelings toward persons with differing opinions. A comparable distribution of opinion depending on salience is also evident within the issue areas of "the war in Ukraine," "pandemics such as COVID-19," "gender equality" and "policy toward sexual minorities."

Fig. 1.3c: Affective polarization on the issue of climate change by salience (average scores and confidence intervals), with associated shares of opinion groups (%)



Note: X-axis: Salience. Survey question: "How important are the following issues to you personally?" Respondents were asked to position themselves between "0 – Not at all important" and "10 – Very important."

Y-axis left: Share of respondents in each salience subgroup with different opinions on the issue of "climate change." Survey question: "There are different opinions on the issue of combating climate change. Where would you place your personal opinion here?" Answers could be positioned between "0 – Political measures to combat climate change **do not go far enough**" and "10 – Political measures to combat climate change already **go much too far**." Shown here: Share of respondents with answers in the 0-4 range (blue bars), share of respondents with answers in the 6-10 range (orange bars).

Y-axis right: Average affective polarization with associated 95% confidence intervals for the issue of "climate change" (in points).

Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

1.4

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION AND THE SUBJECTIVE PERCEPTION OF DIVISION

**“IMMIGRATION,” “PANDEMICS”
AND “SOCIAL BENEFITS” SEEN AS
MOST SOCIALLY DIVISIVE ISSUES**

In addition to the relevance attributed to a topic, its perceived potential for conflict could also play a role in determining possible polarization effects. It is particularly interesting to see whether the polarization values actually measured coincide with subjective perception, and whether the topics where a “division of society” is suspected also show a high degree of affective polarization. In our survey, respondents were thus asked to evaluate each problem area in terms of whether they observed a “division of society” in their respective countries. Possible answers ranged on a scale from “0 – No division at all” to “10 – Very strong division.”

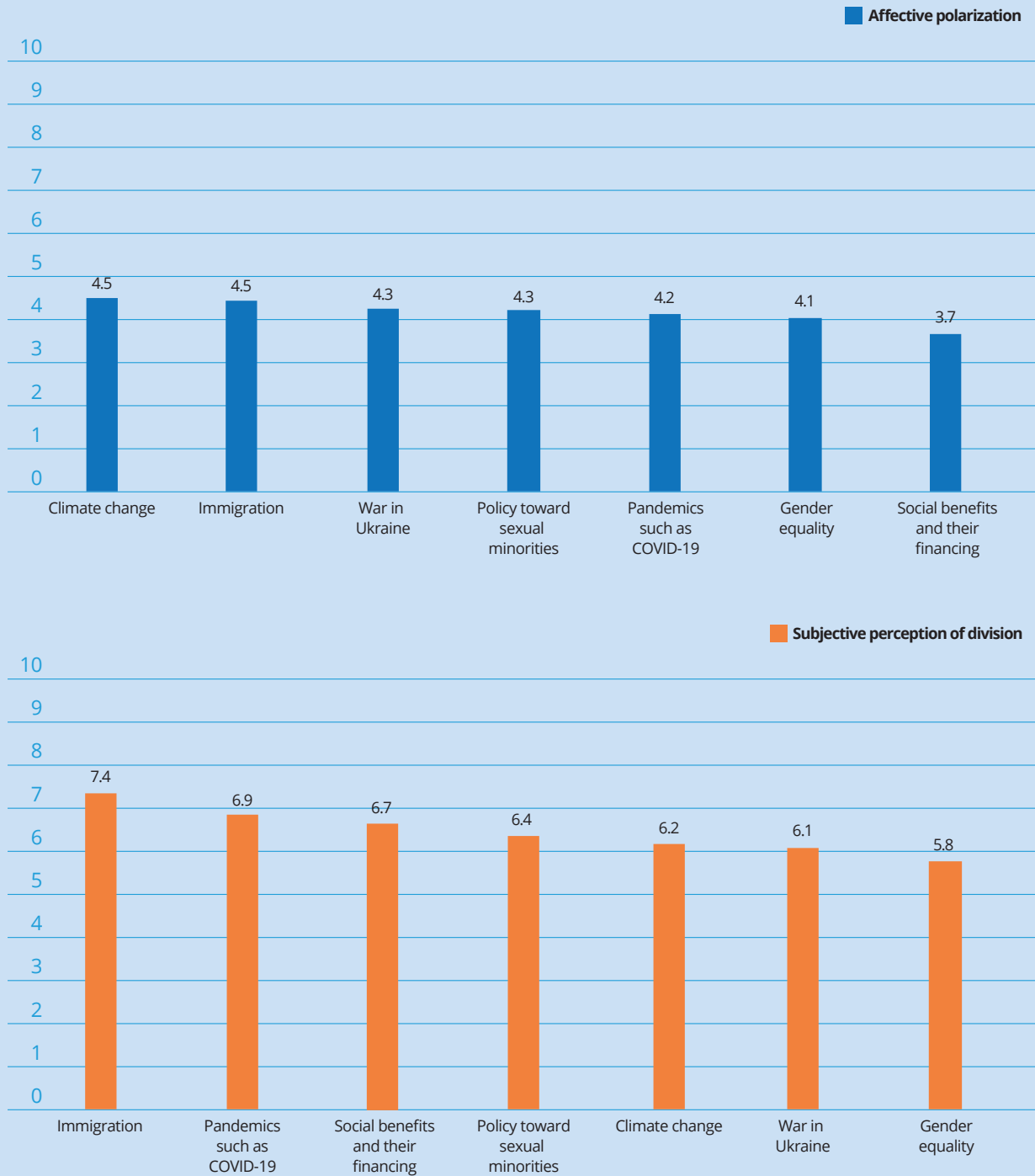
The findings indicate that the issue of “immigration” is the one where a “division of society” is most commonly perceived in Europe. This is closely followed by the topics of “pandemics such as Covid-19” and “social benefits and their financing.” In contrast, the least potential for division is associated with the topics of “gender equality in society” and “war in Ukraine” (Fig. 1.4a).

As Fig. 1.4a shows, respondents’ perception does not align with the actual measured polarization. The greatest disparity between subjective conflict potential and actual polarization is seen in the issues of “social benefits and their financing” and ‘climate change’. While the topic of “social benefits” appears to be far less polarizing than subjectively perceived, for “climate change,” the opposite is true. Despite only being ranked in the lower middle range in subjective perception, the measured emotional impact of the topic is apparently enormous –regardless of whether combating climate change is considered “very important” or “not important at all” (Fig. 1.4a).

**OPPONENTS OF PROVIDING
FURTHER SUPPORT TO UKRAINE
SEE A “DIVISION OF SOCIETY”**

The data reveals – in some cases significant – differences between individual opinion groups. This is especially true for the topic “war in Ukraine.” Individuals who believe that their country “*should limit its support for Ukraine in order to avoid negative consequences [...] (such as rising energy and living costs)*” tend to be significantly more inclined to see more “division in society” on this topic (average score 6.7) than the opposing group (average score 5.6). The evaluation of topics by the respective opinion groups also varied for “pandemic,” “climate change,” “gender equality” and “policy toward sexual minorities.” In contrast, no significant differences are found for “immigration” and “social benefits and their financing” (Fig. 1.4b).

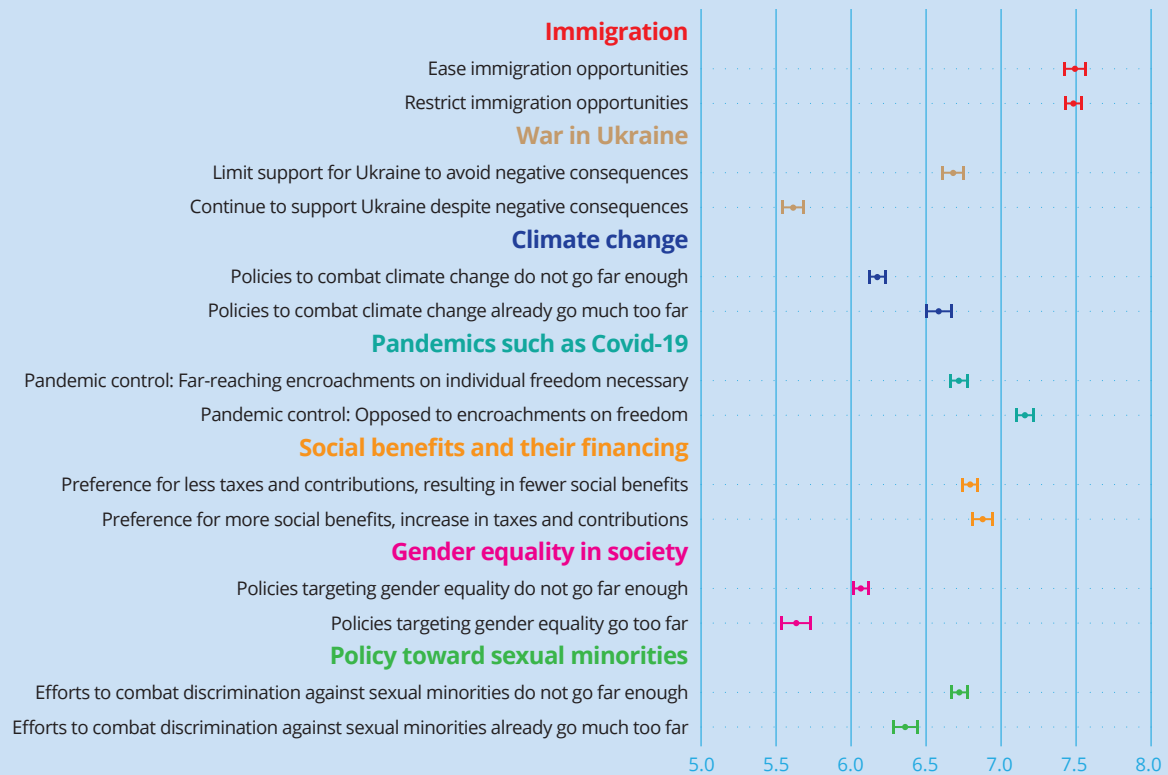
Fig. 1.4a: Measured affective polarization and subjective perception of division by topic (average values of responses)



Note: The figures depicted here are average scores. Measured affective polarization and the subjective perception of division by topic. Survey question for subjective perception of division: "For which of the political issues addressed do you see a division in society? Please rate your answer on a scale from 0 (no division at all) to 10 (very strong division)." The results are weighted by age, gender, education, and region (n = at least 18,328 per item).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. 1.4b: Subjective perception of division on a topic, by self-identified position in the respective issue area (average scores and confidence intervals)



Note: Figure depicts average scores with associated 95% confidence intervals. Survey question: "For which of the political issues addressed do you see a division in society? Please rate your answer on a scale from 0 (no division at all) to 10 (very strong division)."

Results are grouped according to the respondents' self-identified position in each topic area. Thus, all persons who indicated a preference for one or the other statement (respectively combining response options 0-4 and 6-10) were grouped together. The group of those who positioned themselves exactly in the center is not plotted. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 18,328 per item).

Source: Own survey / YouGov





POLARIZATION BY ISSUES

2.1

IMMIGRATION

Migration has been an extremely salient and controversial issue in Europe at least since the so-called refugee crisis that began in 2015. To this day, deep divisions are evident between those who favor more liberal policy approaches and those who call for stricter controls and more restrictive policies toward immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees (Hutter/Kriesi 2022; Grande et al. 2019; MIDEM 2018). The debate often focuses on issues such as cultural identity, economic impacts and national security. While some argue that immigration promotes diversity and tolerance, facilitates innovation, and compensates for labor shortages, others contend that it produces effects such as growing social competition, rising crime rates and an erosion of shared values. The conflicts accompanying such differences of opinion seem to be having a direct impact on social cohesion, political stability and the future of the European Union. For example, the rise of far-right and right-wing populist movements in a number of European countries has been fueled to a considerable extent by anti-migrant sentiments. Tensions over migration have also strained relations between EU member states in recent years. Nonetheless, the extent to which the issue of migration has also been associated with affective polarization has been unclear (van der Brug/Harteveld 2021).

Distribution of positions on the issue of immigration

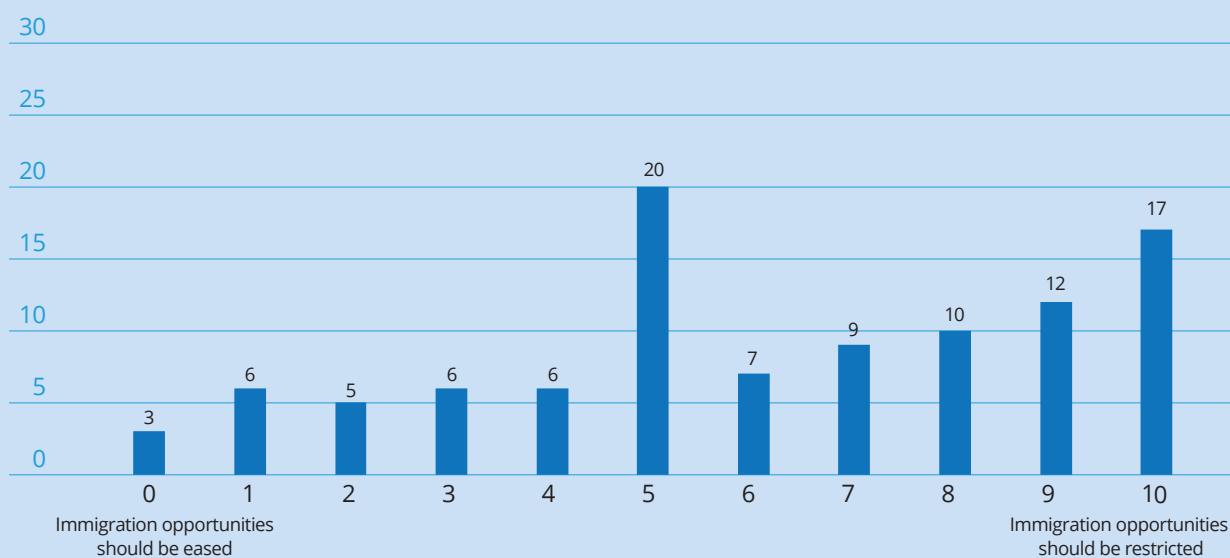
EASE OR RESTRICT IMMIGRATION?

To address this question, the present study approached the issue of immigration with a question that contrasted possible liberal and more restrictive policy options. Respondents were asked to identify their personal position on an 11-point scale ranging between “0 – Immigration opportunities for foreigners should be eased” and “10 – Immigration opportunities for foreigners should be restricted.”

RESTRICTIVE ATTITUDES PREDOMINATE IN EUROPE

As Fig. 2.1a shows, the distribution of responses obtained suggests a policy preference in Europe in which a majority of the population inclines toward limiting immigration. Overall, 55 percent of respondents across Europe were more or less adamantly in favor of restricting “immigration opportunities for foreigners.” Only 25 percent were of the opposite view. Indeed, a share nearly this large – around 17 percent – demonstrated the strongest possible preference for a restrictive migration policy by selecting a 10 on the scale. Once again, about 20 percent of the respondents indicated they

Fig. 2.1a: Attitudes on the issue of immigration policy (%)



Note: Survey question: "There are different opinions on the issue of immigration. Where would you place your personal opinion here?" Respondents were asked to position themselves between "0 – Immigration opportunities for foreigners should be eased" and "10 – Immigration opportunities for foreigners should be restricted." Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).¹

Source: Own survey / YouGov

had no particular preference, positioning themselves exactly in the middle.² A comparison between the individual countries shows here that in all EU member states surveyed – with the exception of Spain – a clear majority of respondents advocate restricting immigration. This majority is particularly large in Czechia, Sweden and the Netherlands, where around two-thirds of respondents are more or less clearly in favor of restricting immigration.

LARGE MAJORITIES IN CZECHIA, SWEDEN AND THE NETHERLANDS IN FAVOR OF RESTRICTIONS

Affective polarization on the issue of immigration

To capture the extent of affective polarization on the issue of immigration, respondents were asked to describe their feelings toward two groups of people after completing their own self-positioning. The first group to be evaluated was "people who think that immigration opportunities for foreigners should be eased." The second group was those who think such opportunities should be restricted. The more these two evaluations differ from each other, the more a respondent can be considered to be polarized in affective terms. A respondent who provides a very positive evaluation to one group and a very negative evaluation to the other, where the difference between these point-based ratings takes the largest possible value of 10, can be considered "maximally polarized."

EVALUATION OF OPPOSING OPINION GROUPS

The response distributions for respondents' evaluations of the two groups are depicted in Fig. 2.1b. An initial pattern appears that corresponds in essence with the distribution of positions. A majority expresses rather "cool and negative" attitudes toward people who think "immigration opportuni-

17% MAXIMALLY POLARIZED

¹ When respondents were asked to identify their own positions, the distribution of responses revealed a pattern that is evident across all issue areas examined: The response frequency for the 1 option on the scale is often significantly higher than for 0. Since this pattern is not observed on the opposite side of the scale (with the 9 and 10 options), we assume that a distortion effect caused by respondents' interaction with the measuring instrument (the "slider") is at work. Presumably, some respondents indicated 1 when they actually meant to select 0.

² These relatively high scores for the middle option appeared across all issue areas surveyed. The fact that a high proportion of respondents frequently chose the middle answer category corresponds to a typical response behavior that appears in many surveys.

ties for foreigners should be eased,” whereas about half of all respondents provide rather “warm and positive” evaluations to those who would prefer to restrict “immigration opportunities for foreigners” (Fig. 2.1b). These results can be arranged according to the magnitude of the calculated distances between respondents’ evaluations of the two groups (people who support either “easing” or “restricting” immigration opportunities). This shows that a total of 17 percent of respondents in the entire sample are maximally affectively polarized on this issue. By contrast, one-quarter of all respondents showed no affective polarization – meaning they provided identical ratings to both groups (Fig. 2.1 c).

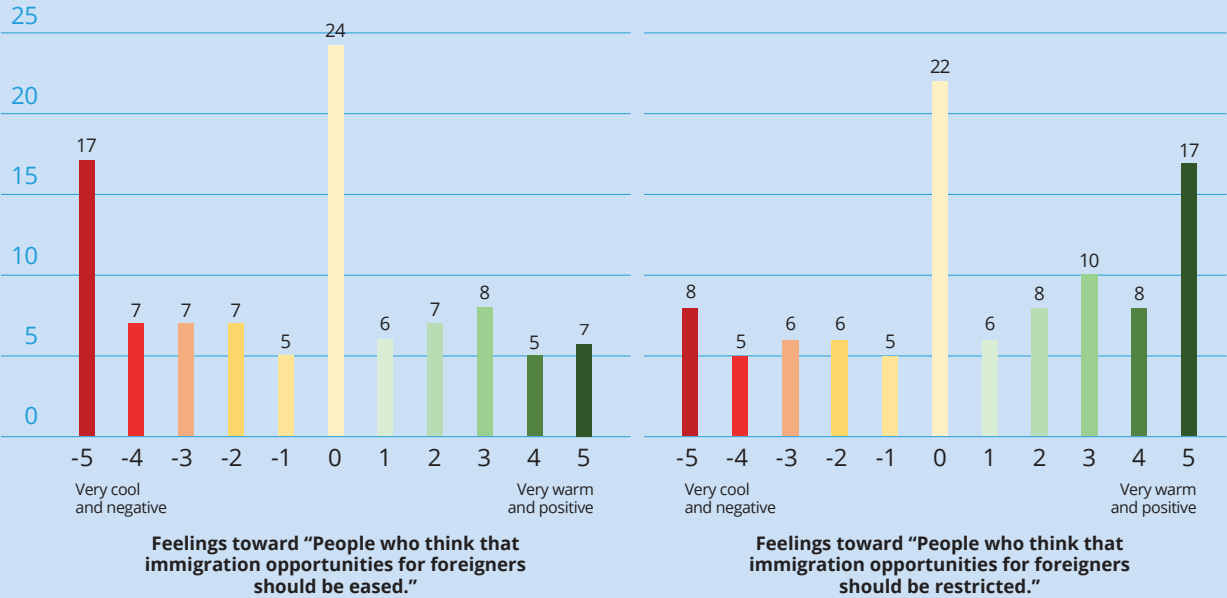
ENTRENCHED OPINIONS ON
"IMMIGRATION" ASSOCIATED WITH
HIGHER LEVELS OF POLARIZATION

Those who themselves take a clear position on immigration policy are significantly more likely to fall into the group of the maximally polarized. This is true on either side of the opinion spectrum. Thus, more than half of all respondents who would like either to “restrict” or “ease” immigration opportunities for foreigners, and who additionally hold a very strong opinion on the issue – locating themselves at either pole of the scale – show the maximum level of affective polarization. In this regard, the share is slightly higher among those who are in favor of easing immigration. A total of 56 percent of this group is maximally affectively polarized, compared to 53 percent of the opposing group.

SUPPORTERS OF EASING
IMMIGRATION MORE POLARIZED
THAN ADVOCATES OF
RESTRICTING IMMIGRATION

The average affective polarization scores shown in Fig. 2.1d accordingly generate a V shape, though with consistently higher levels seen within the groups of people who are in favor of making immigration easier (left-hand side) than among the comparable groups of people who are in favor of restricting immigration opportunities (right-hand side). By contrast, among those who position themselves exactly in the center of the scale, and thus do not indicate a preference either for easing or restricting immigration, only 2 percent are maximally polarized. At just 1.7, the average affective polarization score is lowest in this group.

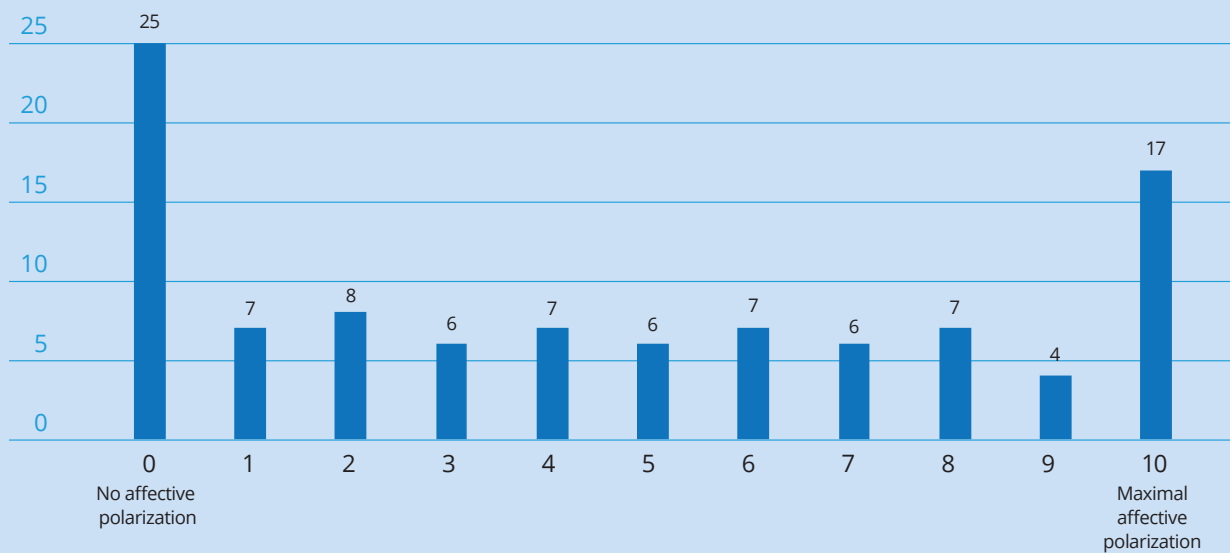
Fig. 2.1b: Attitudes toward groups of people with different opinions on the issue of immigration (%)



Note: Distribution of responses to the survey question: “When you think of other people in [country] with their different opinions on the issue of immigration, how do you feel about each of the following groups of people?” Respondents were asked to position themselves between “-5 – Very cool and negative” and “+5 – Very warm and positive” with respect to each group. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

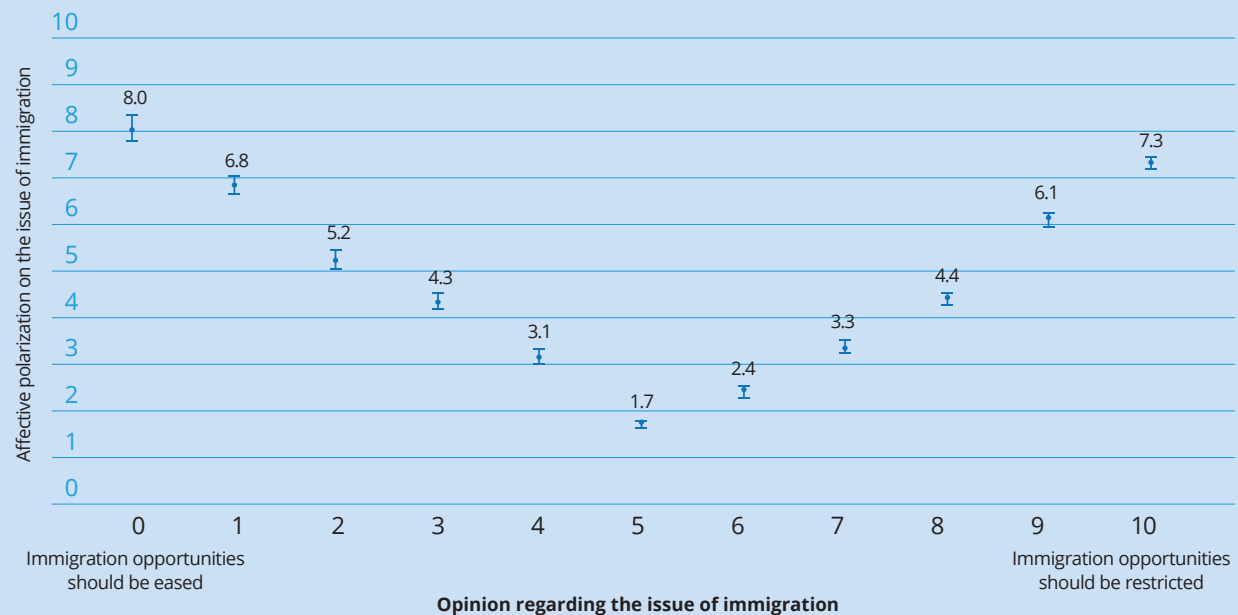
Fig. 2.1c: Distribution of distances (affective polarization) on the issue of immigration (%)



Note: Based on the evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People who think that immigration opportunities for foreigners **should be eased**" and "People who think that immigration opportunities for foreigners **should be restricted**." Respondents could rate their feelings toward each group of people on an 11-point scale ranging from "-5 – Very cool and negative" to "+5 – Very favorable and positive." The resulting figure, ranging from "0 – No affective polarization" to "10 – Maximum affective polarization," derives from the difference between the numerically expressed feelings toward the two groups of persons. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. 2.1d: Average level of affective polarization according to self-positioning on the issue of immigration (average scores and confidence intervals)



Note: Y-axis: Affective polarization on the issue of immigration based on evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People who think that immigration opportunities for foreigners **should be eased**" and "People who think that immigration opportunities for foreigners **should be restricted**." The figure depicts the average distance (with associated 95% confidence intervals) between respondents' evaluations of these two groups.

X-axis: Self-identified position on the issue of immigration. Survey question: "There are different opinions on the subject of immigration. Where would you place your personal opinion here?" Respondents were asked to position themselves between "0 – Immigration opportunities for foreigners **should be eased**" and "10 – Immigration opportunities for foreigners **should be restricted**." Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

**ITALY MOST AND
POLAND LEAST POLARIZED**

Affective polarization on the issue of immigration by subgroup

But how great is affective polarization on the issue of immigration within individual segments of the sample? A breakdown by country shows that Italy in particular (average score 5.1) displays high levels of affective polarization, with high scores also evident in Czechia (average 4.8), France, Greece and Hungary (average 4.7). By contrast, these values are below the European average in Poland (average score 3.5) and Spain (average 4.0) (Fig. 2.1e). The scores for Germany correspond to the overall European average. Here, 17 percent of citizens show maximal levels of affective polarization on the issue of immigration – that is, they express a strong affinity for people with one of the two opposing positions, and a strong aversion to people with the contrary view.

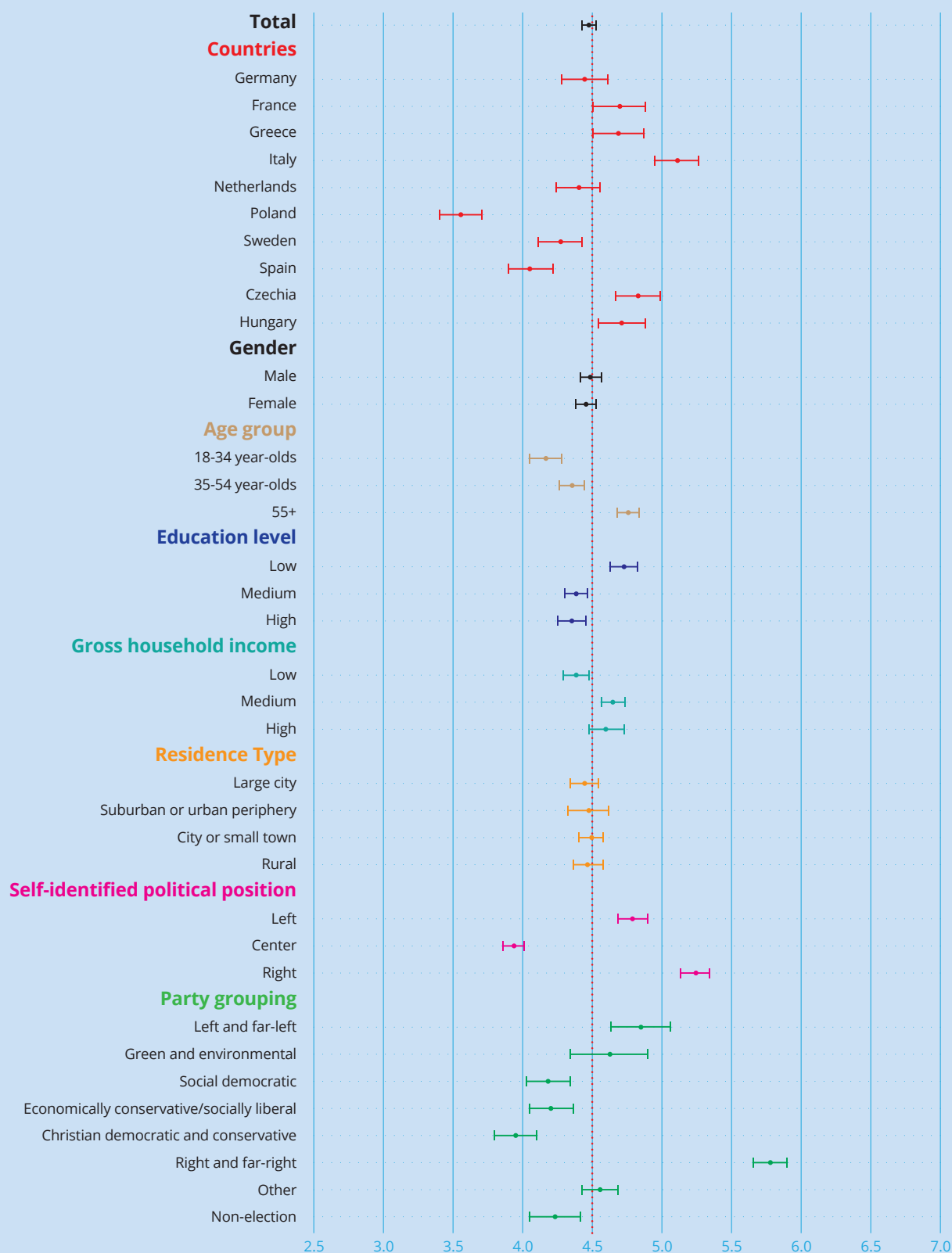
**OLDER PEOPLE AND THOSE WITH
LOW LEVELS OF EDUCATIONAL
ATTAINMENT MORE POLARIZED**

An examination of respondents by gender reveals no significant difference. However, when broken down by age, a clear trend can be seen: The older the respondents, the higher the average affective polarization scores. While only 14 percent of 18- to 34-year-olds are maximally polarized, this share is 18 percent among those over 55. When respondents are classified by formal education levels, the trend is reversed. The average degree of affective polarization is higher in the group with the lowest levels of formal education (average score 4.7) than in the group with high levels of formal education (average 4.3). Similarly, individuals with low incomes also show lower levels of affective polarization than do members of the other two groups.

**PEOPLE ON THE RIGHT MORE
POLARIZED THAN THOSE
ON THE LEFT**

However, significant differences emerge with regard to respondents' self-positioning on the left or right of the political spectrum. Whereas 20 percent of respondents on the political "right" show maximal levels of affective polarization on the issue of immigration, only 15 percent of those on the "left" are polarized to an equal extent. Among the group of those who see themselves as being politically in the center, just 14 percent are maximally polarized. This pattern is also evident with respect to voting intentions. Here, respondents who say they vote for "right to far-right" parties show the greatest amount of affective polarization. In this group, nearly one in three (31 percent) is maximally polarized – that is, they express very positive feelings toward people who oppose immigration, and very negative feelings toward the group that favors immigration (Fig. 2.1e).

Fig. 2.1e: Average level of affective polarization on the issue of immigration, by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics (average scores and confidence intervals)



Note: Affective polarization (average scores with associated 95% confidence intervals) on the issue of immigration based on evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People who think that immigration opportunities for foreigners should be eased" and "People who think that immigration opportunities for foreigners should be restricted." Grouped by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449, except for gross household income and party groupings, where n = at least 16,569; missing values = "don't know"/no answer).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

2.2

THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Russia's attack on Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, shook the European security architecture. Many countries have responded politically, supplying military equipment to Ukraine and investing in their own armed forces. While most European governments sided resolutely with Ukraine at the beginning of the war, the focus of discussion soon expanded to include the economic consequences of these actions. In order to break free from dependence on Russian oil and gas, the member states of the EU had to make sometimes painful decisions – decisions that did not always meet with understanding on the part of the broader population. For example, the field period for this study coincided with a time of speculation about possible blackouts, homes left cold during winter months, and empty gas stations. At this point, citizens were beginning to ask tougher questions about the trade-offs between support for Ukraine and the potential consequences for their own countries. As a number of demonstrations in European capitals signaled, certain portions of the population appeared at that time unwilling to bear the possible costs (MIDEM 2022).

Distribution of positions on the issue of war in Ukraine

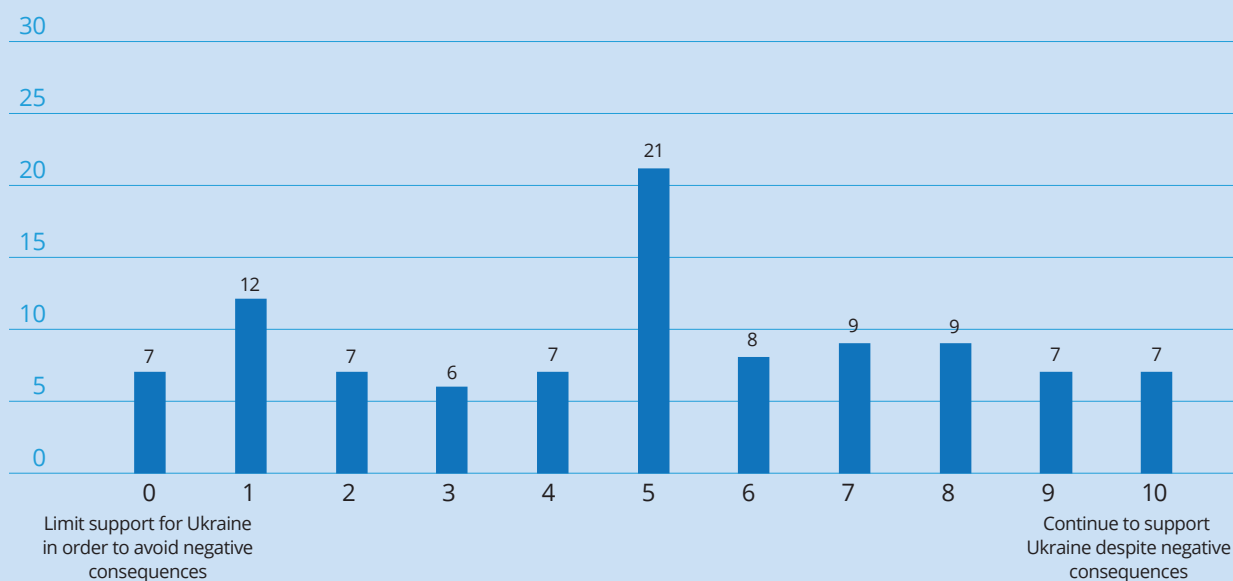
CONTINUE OR LIMIT SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE?

To get to the heart of the European debates, and to reflect as much variance in response behavior as possible, it was necessary to ask specifically about the limits of support for Ukraine, while also linking this willingness to provide support directly to its possible costs. Respondents were therefore asked to position themselves on an 11-point scale between the following statements: *"0 – [Country] should limit its support for Ukraine in order to avoid negative consequences for our own population (such as rising energy and living costs)"* and *"10 – [Country] should support Ukraine even if this is associated with negative consequences for our own population (such as rising energy and living costs)."*

LOWEST LEVELS OF SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE IN CZECHIA, HUNGARY AND GREECE

As Fig. 2.2a shows, the results represented a very broad range of opinions. Comparatively few respondents selected either of the two extreme positions of 0 or 10 on the 11-point scale. However, the groups supporting one or the other statement are overall closely balanced, with respective shares of 39 percent and 40 percent. Nevertheless, there are some significant differences in the individual subgroups. In Sweden, for example, a particularly large majority of 61 percent is in favor of sustained support for Ukraine, a position that in large part corresponds to the country's security-policy interests. In contrast, Czechia, Hungary and Greece show the least willingness to continue supporting Ukraine to the same extent as previously, due to rising associated

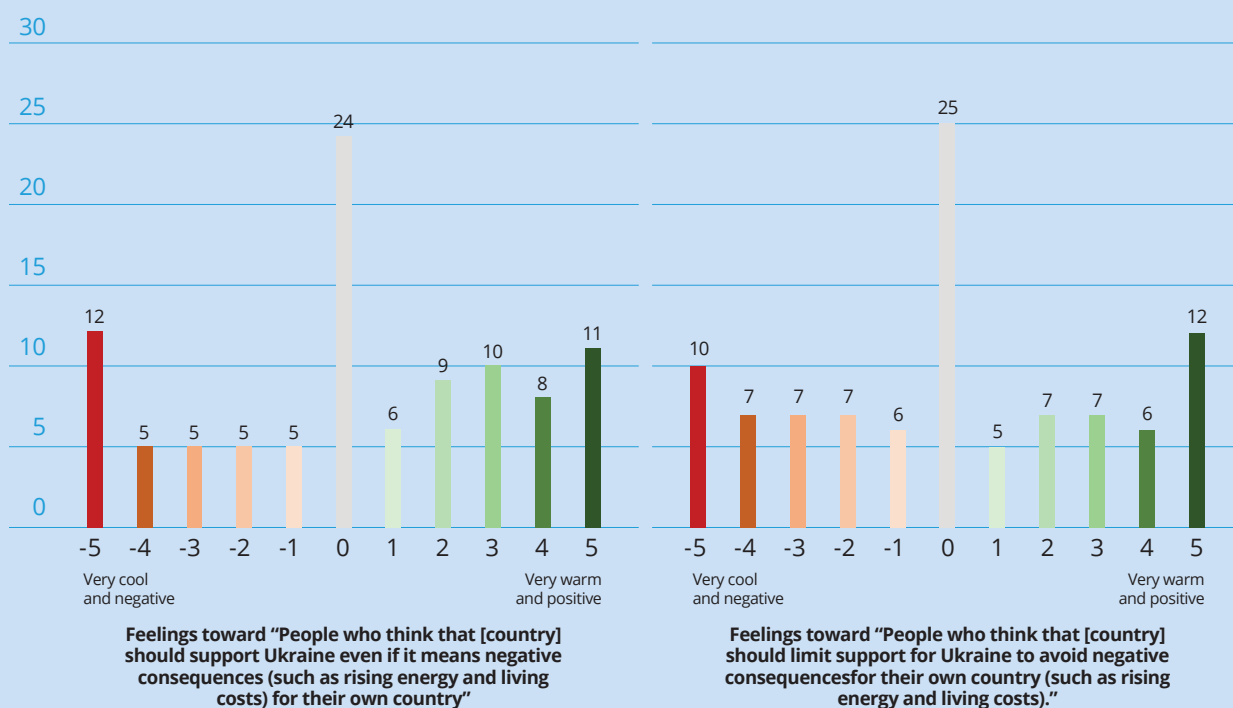
Fig. 2.2a: Attitudes on the issue of the war in Ukraine (%)



Note: Survey question: "There are different opinions on the issue of the war in Ukraine. Where would you place your personal opinion here? "0 – [Country] should limit its support for Ukraine in order to avoid negative consequences for our own population (such as rising energy and living costs)" and "10 – [Country] should support Ukraine even if this is associated with negative consequences for our own population (such as rising energy and living costs)." Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. 2.2b: Attitudes toward groups of people with different opinions on the issue of the war in Ukraine (%)



Note: Distribution of responses to the survey question: "When you think of other people in [country] with their different opinions on the issue of the war in Ukraine, how do you feel about each of the following groups of people?" Respondents were asked to position themselves between "-5 – Very cool and negative" and "+5 – Very warm and positive" with respect to each group. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

economic costs. In each case, a clear majority of 54 percent (Czechia), 51 percent (Hungary) or 50 percent (Greece) were in favor of giving priority to preventing negative economic consequences. Respondents in Spain, Poland and the Netherlands expressed the opposite opinion. In these countries, those in favor of continued support for Ukraine outnumbered supporters of the opposing position by 10 to 20 percentage points.

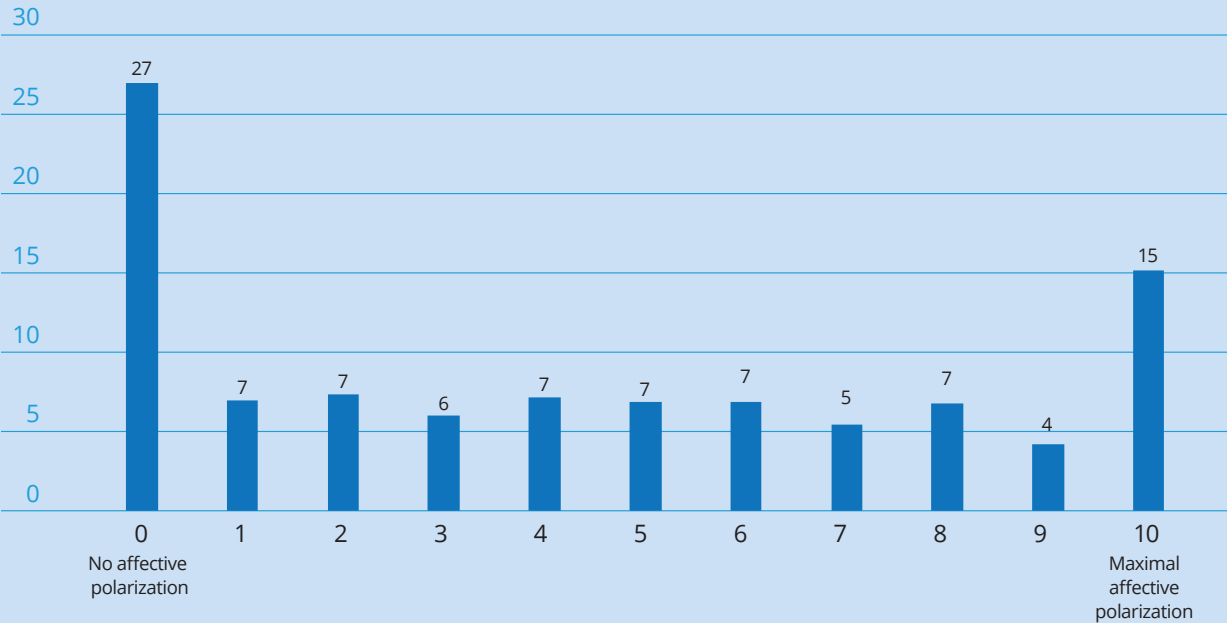
Affective polarization on the issue of the war in Ukraine

EVALUATION OF OPPOSING
OPINION GROUPS

To measure affective polarization, respondents were again asked to indicate their feelings toward two reference groups defined by strong opinions on the war in Ukraine, using a scale ranging from “-5 – Very cool and negative” to “+5 – Very warm and positive.” The two groups were described as follows: “People who think that [country] should support Ukraine even if this is associated with negative consequences for our own country’s population (such as rising energy and living costs)” and “People who think [country] should limit its support for Ukraine in order to avoid negative consequences for our own country’s population (such as rising energy and living costs).” The distribution of answers is depicted in Fig. 2.2b. This shows that people who declare their unreserved support for Ukraine are viewed positively by 44 percent of all respondents and negatively by 22 percent – with more than half of this latter group giving a rating of -5. Toward individuals who lean toward limiting support for Ukraine, we see a balanced ratio of 37 percent positive ratings and an equal share of negative ratings. The distances between these paired evaluations primarily reflect the high share of middle-of-the-scale or neutral ratings. More than a quarter of all respondents are not at all affectively polarized within this issue area (Fig. 2.2c). By contrast, 15 percent have a score of 10.

15% MAXIMALLY POLARIZED

Fig. 2.2c: Distribution of distances (affective polarization) on the issue of the war in Ukraine (%)



Note: Based on the evaluations of the following two groups of people: “People who think that [country] should **support** Ukraine even if it means negative consequences for their own country (such as rising energy and living costs).” and “People who think that [country] should **limit support** for Ukraine to avoid negative consequences for their own country (such as rising energy and living costs).” Respondents could rate their feelings toward each of the groups of people on an eleven-point scale ranging from “-5 - very cool and negative” to “+5 - very warm and positive.” The resulting figure, ranging from “0 – No affective polarization” to “10 – Maximum affective polarization,” represents the distance between the respondent’s numerically expressed feelings toward the two groups of persons. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

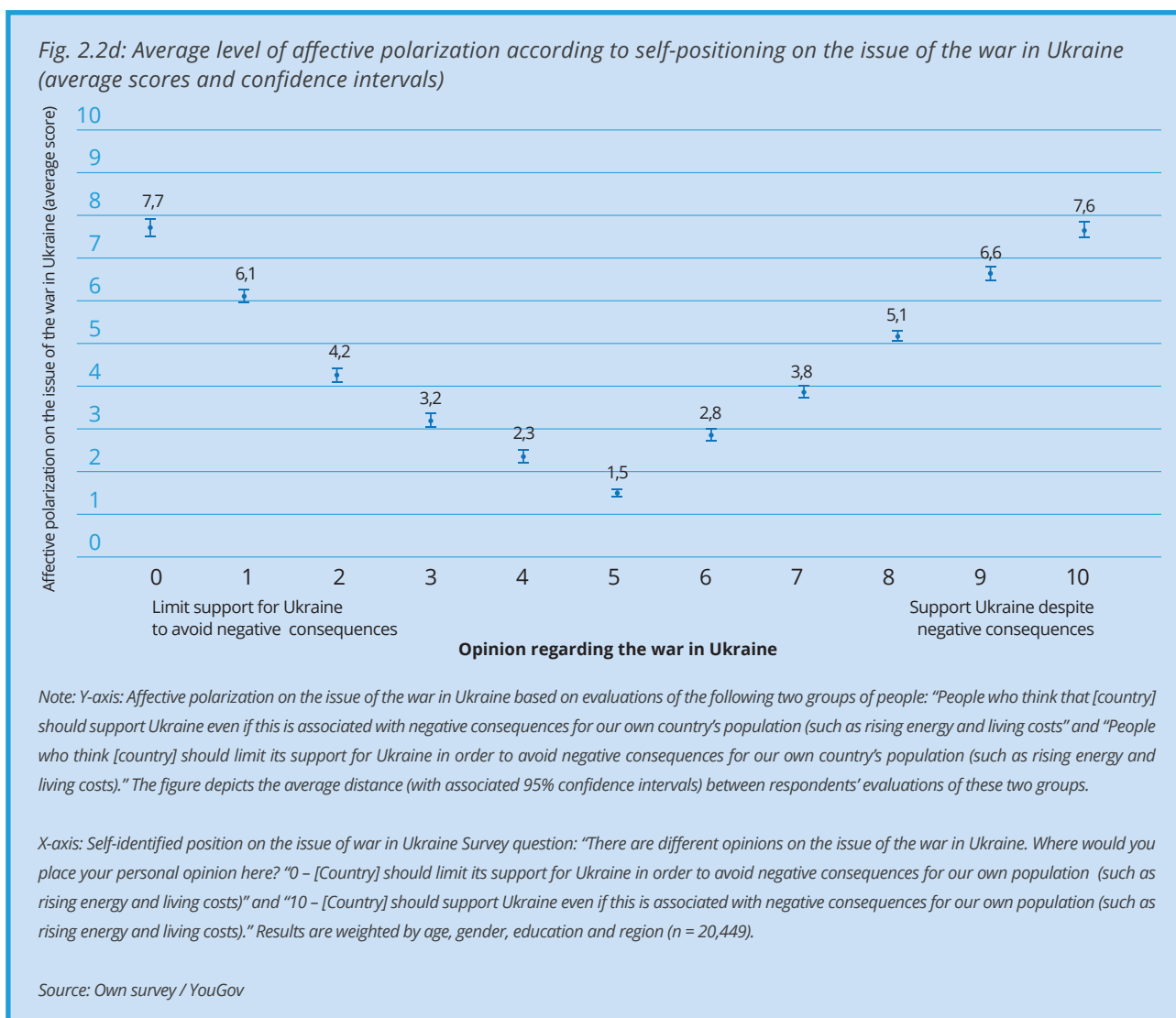


Fig. 2.2d depicts the average affective polarization scores for all 10 possible response groups produced by respondents' self-positioning on the issue of war in Ukraine. This shows that on both sides of the scale, individuals with extreme positions (self-positioning at 0 or 10) display the highest levels of affective polarization. On the whole, people in the camp of Ukraine supporters tend to evaluate similar thinkers more positively than they rate representatives of the opposing opinion negatively. Except for the extreme positions, the average group scores here are in most cases significantly higher than the equivalent figures in the camp of those who would prefer to limit support for Ukraine (Fig. 2.2d).

Affective polarization on the issue of war in Ukraine by subgroup

The highest levels of affective polarization by far are found in Czechia (Fig. 2.2e). With a share of 23 percent, almost one-quarter of respondents here show the maximum difference in their evaluations of the two reference groups. This result is not surprising, insofar as many Czechs are very critical of their own government and its policies in support of Ukraine, as witnessed by large demonstrations in Prague in October and November 2022 (Tait 2022; MIDEM 2022). In addition, Italy also has a 20 percent share of maximally polarized citizens, along with an average affective polarization score of 4.8 on the issue of "the war in Ukraine." This is followed by Hungary (average score 4.5), Poland (average 4.4) and Germany (average 4.3), all of which also

PEOPLE ADVOCATING FURTHER SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE MORE POLARIZED THAN THOSE WHO WANT TO LIMIT SUPPORT

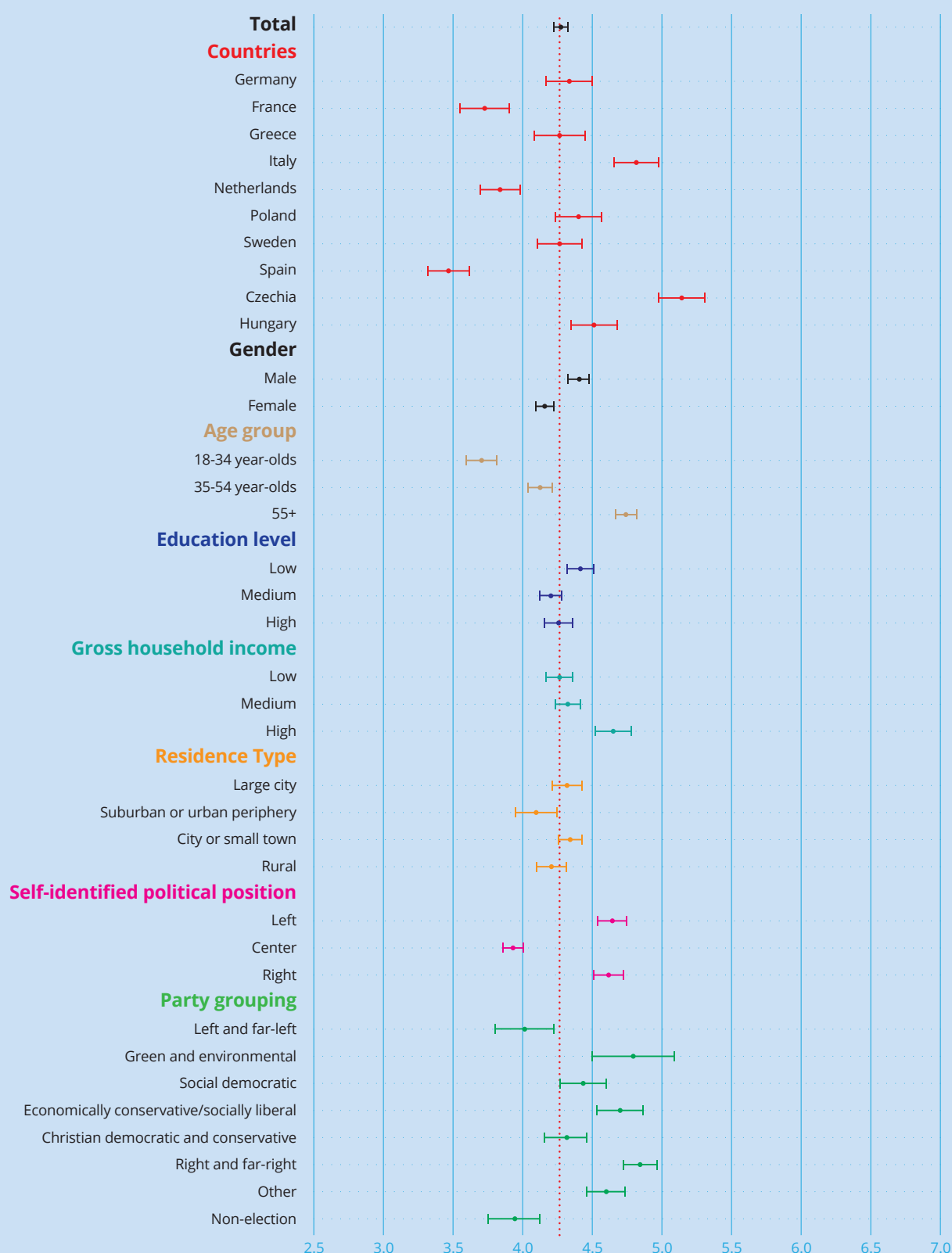
CZECHIA MOST POLARIZED

OLDER PEOPLE SHOW HIGHER POLARIZATION LEVELS

have above-average polarization scores. By contrast, the countries in which the issue has the least polarizing effect are Spain (average score 3.5), France (average 3.7) and the Netherlands (average 3.8).

An examination by respondents' sociodemographic characteristics reveals additional differences. For example, average levels of affective polarization are lowest in the youngest age group (18-34 years), but highest in the 55+ age group (Fig. 2.2e). Significant differences can also be observed between the various levels of educational attainment and with regard to self-positioning on the left or right of the political spectrum. Income and residence type, by contrast, have no influence. Finally, the party comparison also shows that the issue of the war in Ukraine tends to produce affective polarization in politically right-leaning circles. At around 22 percent, the proportion of maximally affectively polarized respondents is by far the largest among voters supporting "right to far-right" parties, followed by voters supporting "liberal" parties and those who do not vote (both 16 percent). The other parties have shares of 13 percent and 14 percent. With regard to the average extent of polarization on the issue, "green and environmental" parties again make a conspicuous showing as well. Their average affective polarization score is as high as that of the extreme right. However, the position in favor of unreserved support for Ukraine clearly dominates here.

Fig. 2.2e: Average level of affective polarization on the issue of the war in Ukraine, by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics (average scores and confidence intervals)



Note: Affective polarization (average scores with associated 95% confidence intervals) based on evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People who think that [country] should support Ukraine even if this is associated with negative consequences for our own country's Ukraine in order to avoid negative consequences for our own country's population (such as rising energy and living costs)." The data is grouped by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449, except for gross household income and party groupings, where n = at least 16,569; missing values = "don't know"/no answer).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

2.3

PANDEMIC

The past three years have been indelibly shaped by the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. To contain the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 pathogen, governments across Europe were forced to implement unprecedented measures ranging from mask requirements in buses, trains and public facilities to closures of schools, stores and restaurants, and even curfews and lockdowns. Many of these measures were associated with very significant negative side effects such as the destruction of economic livelihoods, an increase in the incidence of mental illnesses and the impairment of children's educational opportunities. The pandemic has thus tested not only European health systems, but also public confidence in democratic governments' crisis-management abilities and even the resilience of democracy itself. Given the natural tensions between the need to protect the population and the desire to preserve individual freedoms, measures such as school closures, vaccination requirements and lockdowns raised fundamental questions with regard to legality and proportionality. In many places, the associated potential for conflict was exploited by populists, protests and conspiracy narratives (Altıparmak et al. 2021; Brieger et al. 2022; Eberl et al. 2021; Engler et al. 2021; Vorländer et al. 2021).

Position distribution on the issue of pandemics such as COVID-19

ACCEPT OR OPPOSE
RESTRICTIONS ON PERSONAL
FREEDOMS IN ORDER TO
PROTECT HEALTH?

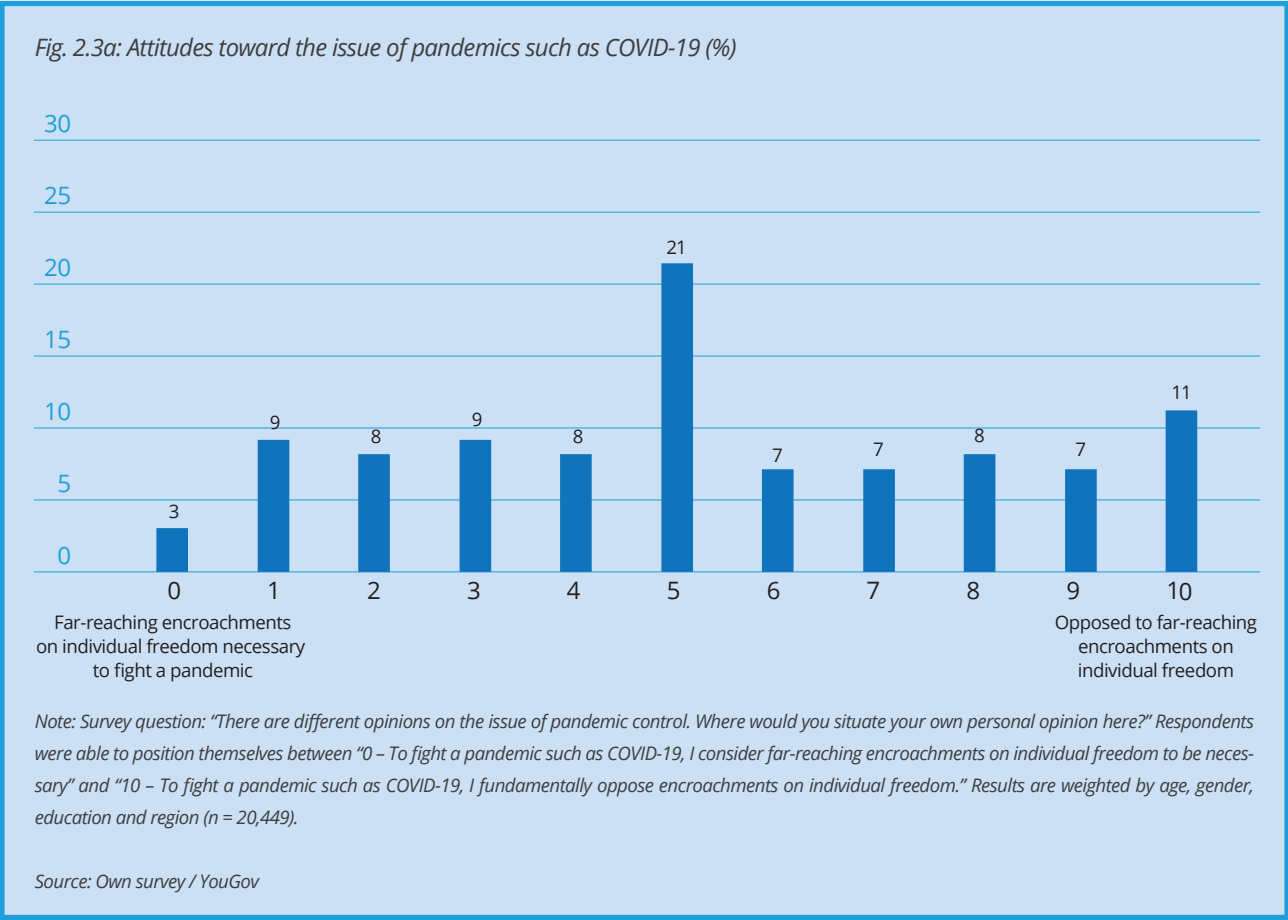
RELATIVE MAJORITY OPPOSES
ENCROACHMENTS ON PERSONAL
FREEDOM

The current study addresses this fundamental conflict between the protection of health and civil liberties through its "COVID-19" issue area. Respondents were asked to situate their personal opinion on an 11-point scale between the following two extreme positions: "0 – To fight a pandemic like COVID-19, I consider far-reaching encroachments on individual freedom to be necessary" and "10 – To fight a pandemic like COVID-19, I fundamentally oppose encroachments on individual freedom." The distribution of the responses thereby received indicates that throughout Europe, a relative majority of 40 percent tends toward the latter view (Fig. 2.3a). Fully 11 percent of the respondents even selected the most extreme option of 10 on the scale, vehemently rejecting "encroachments on individual freedom" for the purposes of combating a pandemic. However, 37 percent held the opposite view, considering such restrictions to be necessary in the event of a pandemic. Once again, about 20 percent of the respondents indicated that they had no particular preference, positioning themselves exactly in the middle.

A look at the distribution of responses within individual countries shows that respondents from Greece, Hungary and France appear particularly

skeptical toward state encroachments on personal freedoms (average response scores in the range of 5.8 to 5.9). By contrast, citizens in Sweden show the clearest willingness across Europe to accept restrictions on individual freedom in order to protect the health of the population (average response score: 4.4). This could indicate that there is a higher level of trust in state institutions in Sweden than in other countries. Alternatively, however, this result could be related to Sweden’s coronavirus policy, which has been considered to be particularly liberal, or even interpreted as an indication of a desire for more restrictive measures. Beyond this, it appears that people who feel they belong on the “left” side of the political spectrum are more willing to accept restrictions on personal freedom intended to protect public health – even deeming them necessary in some cases – than people who position themselves on the political “right.” This pattern is also reflected in the segmentation by party grouping. On average, those who lean toward “social democratic” or “green-environmental” parties are most likely to accept “far-reaching encroachments on individual freedom” in order to “fight a pandemic like COVID-19,” while those who incline toward “right or extreme right” parties are least likely to do so.

PEOPLE ON POLITICAL LEFT
ACCEPT RESTRICTIONS ON
PERSONAL FREEDOM

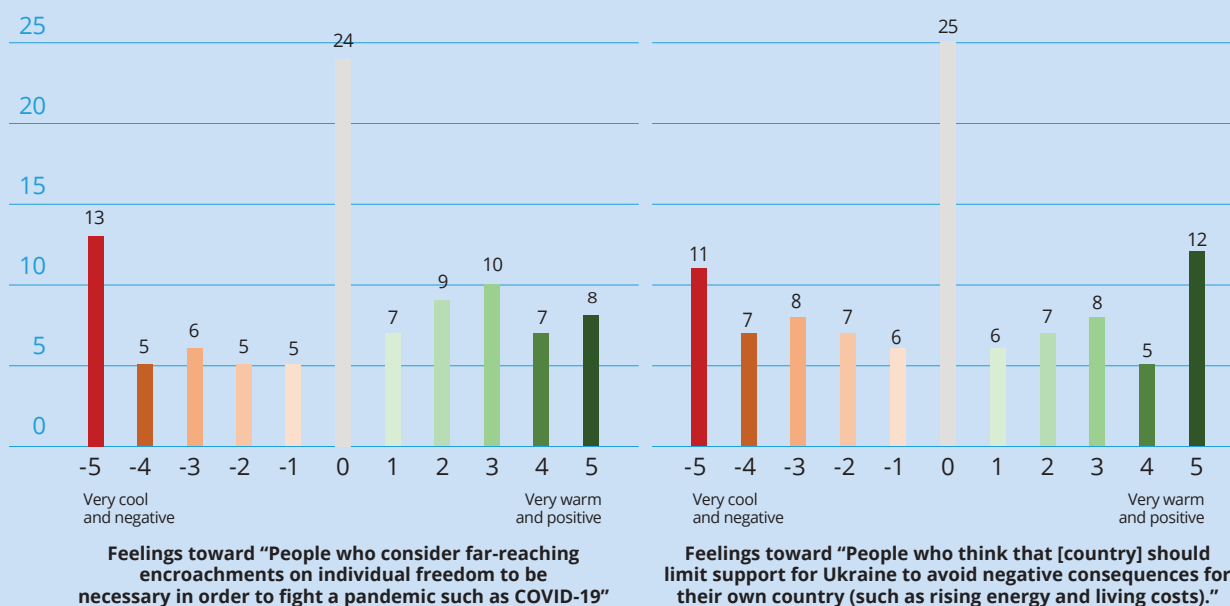


Affective polarization on the issue of pandemics such as COVID-19

Finally, in order to measure the extent of affective polarization on the issue of “pandemics like COVID-19,” respondents were asked to rate two groups of people: individuals who believe “far-reaching encroachments on individual liberty” are necessary to “combat a pandemic such as COVID-19,” and another group of people who oppose such interventions in principle. The greater the difference between the ratings given to these two groups, the more a respondent can be deemed affectively polarized. If this difference reaches the value of 10, the person is considered to be “maximally

EVALUATION OF
OPPOSING OPINION GROUPS

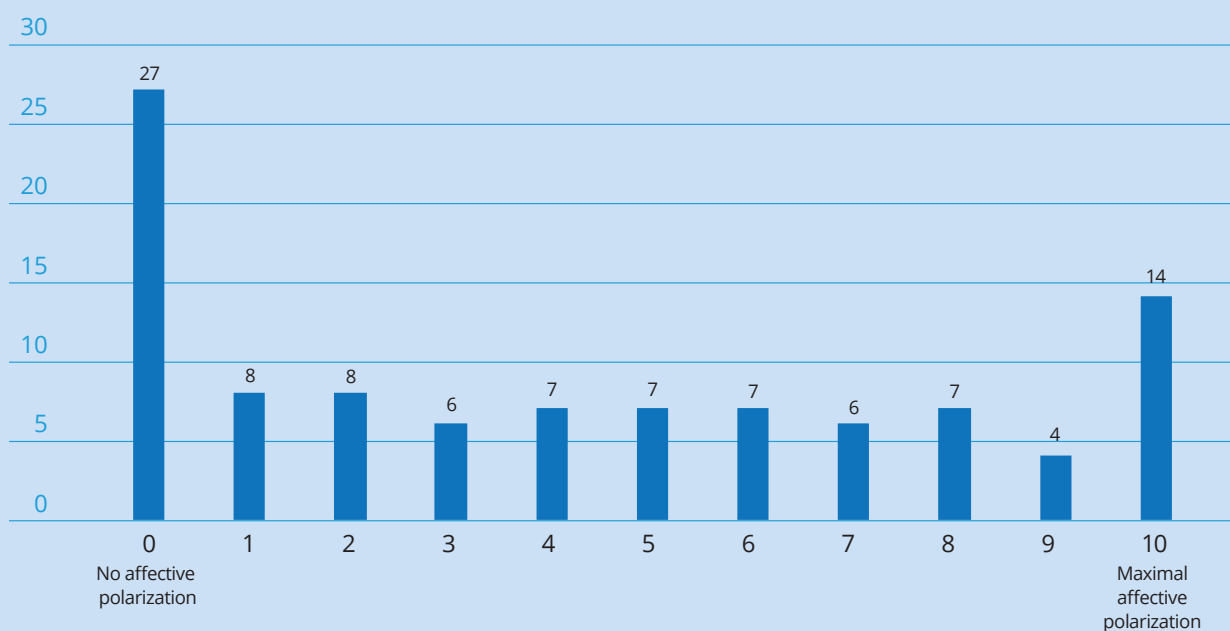
Fig. 2.3b: Attitudes toward groups of people with different opinions on the issue of pandemics such as COVID-19 (%)



Note: Distribution of responses to the survey question: "When you think of other people in [country] with their different opinions on the issue of pandemics such as COVID-19, how do you feel about each of the following groups of people?" Respondents were asked to position themselves between "-5 – Very cool and negative" and "+5 – Very warm and positive" with respect to each group. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

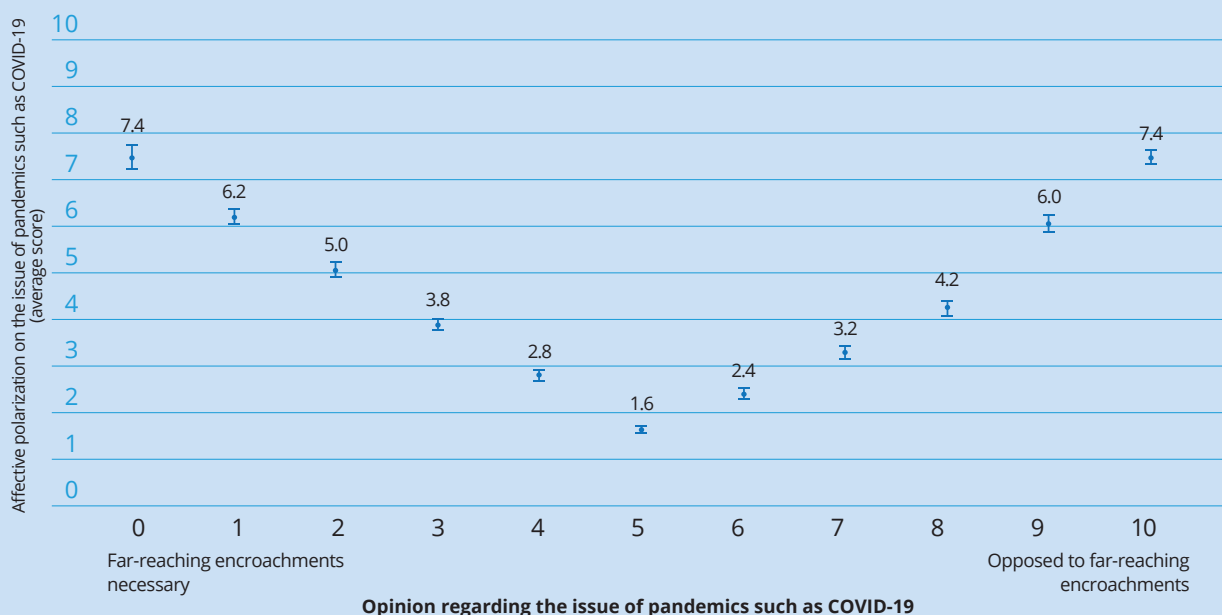
Fig. 2.3c: Distribution of distances (affective polarization) on the issue of pandemics such as COVID-19 (%)



Note: Based on the evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People who consider far-reaching encroachments on individual freedom to be necessary to fight a pandemic such as COVID-19," and "people who fundamentally oppose encroachments on individual freedom in fighting a pandemic such as COVID-19." Respondents could rate their feelings toward each of the groups of people on an 11-point scale ranging from "-5 – Very cool and negative" to "+5 – Very warm and positive." The resulting figure, ranging from "0 – No affective polarization" to "10 – Maximum affective polarization," represents the distance between the numerically expressed feelings toward the two groups of persons. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. 2.3d: Average level of affective polarization according to self-positioning on the issue of pandemics such as COVID-19 (average scores and confidence intervals)



Note: Y-axis: Affective polarization on the issue of pandemics such as COVID-19 based on evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People who consider far-reaching encroachments on individual freedom to be necessary to fight a pandemic such as COVID-19," and "people who fundamentally oppose encroachments on individual freedom in fighting a pandemic such as COVID-19." The figure depicts the average distance (with associated 95% confidence intervals) between respondents' evaluations of these two groups.

X-axis: Self-identified position on the issue of pandemics such as COVID-19. Survey question: "There are different opinions on the issue pandemics such as COVID-19. Where would you situate your own personal opinion here?" Respondents were able to position themselves between "0 – To fight a pandemic such as COVID-19, I consider far-reaching encroachments on individual freedom to be necessary" and "10 – To fight a pandemic such as COVID-19, I fundamentally oppose encroachments on individual freedom." Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

polarized." The response distributions for respondents' evaluations of the two groups are depicted in Fig. 2.3b. A total of 34 percent of respondents expressed "cool and negative" attitudes toward individuals who believe "far-reaching encroachments on individual freedom to be necessary" in order to combat a pandemic such as COVID-19, while 41 percent expressed "warm and positive" attitudes. In contrast, individuals who "fundamentally oppose encroachments on individual freedom" to combat a pandemic such as COVID-19 received "cool and negative" ratings from 39 percent of respondents and "warm and positive" ratings from 38 percent. After calculating the differences in respondents' evaluations of the two opinion groups, we see that a total of 14 percent of all respondents show the maximum level of affective polarization on the "pandemic" issue. By contrast, 27 percent showed no affective polarization whatsoever – that is, they gave both groups identical ratings (Fig. 2.3c).

Respondents who locate their personal position on the issue at the highest or lowest end of the scale display significantly higher average levels of affective polarization than their more moderate peers (Fig. 2.3d). More than half of all respondents who either consider far-reaching encroachments on freedom to be necessary for health protection, or who fundamentally oppose them, and who also hold a very strong opinion on the issue (positioning at 0 or 10 as seen in Fig. 2.3a), are maximally affectively polarized. The average affective polarization score is 7.4 at each of these two edges of the opinion spectrum. However, average polarization scores in the camp

**OPPOSITION TO RESTRICTIONS
STRONGEST IN GREECE,
HUNGARY AND FRANCE**

14% MAXIMALLY POLARIZED

**STRONG OPINIONS ASSOCIATED
WITH HIGHER POLARIZATION
LEVELS**

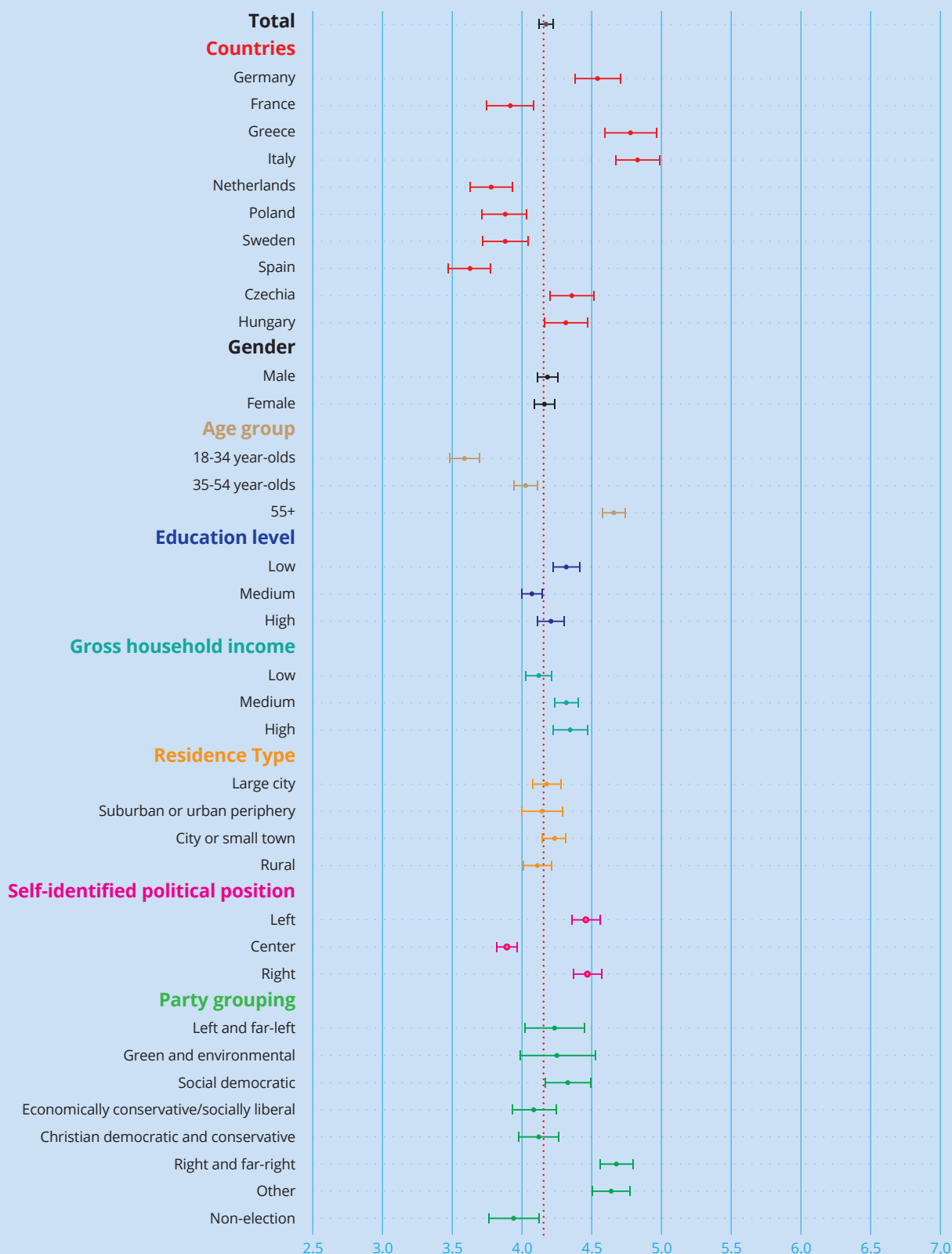
that accepts restrictions on personal freedoms are somewhat higher overall (Fig. 2.3d). By contrast, the level of affective polarization is lowest, with an average score of just 1.6, among individuals who position themselves exactly in the middle, and who thus do not indicate any preference regarding pandemic-related restrictions on freedom.

Affective polarization on the issue of pandemics such as COVID-19 by subgroup

**ITALY AND GREECE MOST
POLARIZED NETHERLANDS AND
SPAIN LEAST POLARIZED**

A segmentation by country reveals a particularly high level of affective polarization in Italy (17% maximally polarized, average score 4.8) and Greece (18% maximally polarized, average score 4.8). The Netherlands and Spain bring up the rear, each with 10 percent of their respondents showing the maximum level of polarization, and average polarization scores of 3.6 and 3.8 respectively. A look at respondents' age also shows a clear trend; the older a person, the more likely they are to be affectively polarized on the "pandemic" issue. In addition, both those who locate themselves on the "left" side of the political spectrum and those who position themselves on the "right," or even favor "right to far-right" political parties, show a higher average level of affective polarization than the sample as a whole (Fig. 2.3e).

Fig. 2.3e: Average level of affective polarization on the issue of pandemics such as COVID-19, by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics (average scores and confidence intervals)



Note: Affective polarization (average scores with associated 95% confidence intervals) based on evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People who consider far-reaching encroachments on individual freedom to be necessary to fight a pandemic such as COVID-19," and "people who fundamentally oppose encroachments on individual freedom in fighting a pandemic such as COVID-19." The data is grouped by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449, except for gross household income and party groupings, where n = at least 16,569; missing values = "don't know"/no answer).

Source: Own survey/YouGov

2.4

CLIMATE CHANGE

In 2018, Greta Thunberg captured global attention as she demonstrated week after week in front of the Swedish parliament for more comprehensive climate protection efforts. Her actions inspired the birth of the global Fridays for Future movement, which calls on politicians to comply with the climate goals outlined in the Paris Agreement. Despite such efforts, many people still do not view human-made climate change to be an urgent problem. In fact, a significant number of people see the issue as a product of scaremongering at the hands of special interests (Guber 2013; Otteni/Weisskircher 2022a; Otteni/Weisskircher 2022b). The conflicts rooted in this diversity of opinions have had a profound impact on global and European frameworks for cooperation. Often, questions about the effects of measures to mitigate climate change and the role of the research community and politics in shaping environmental and energy policies are at the core of such conflicts. Additionally, the question of how to fairly distribute the costs associated with such policies within a society and across generations are also contentious.

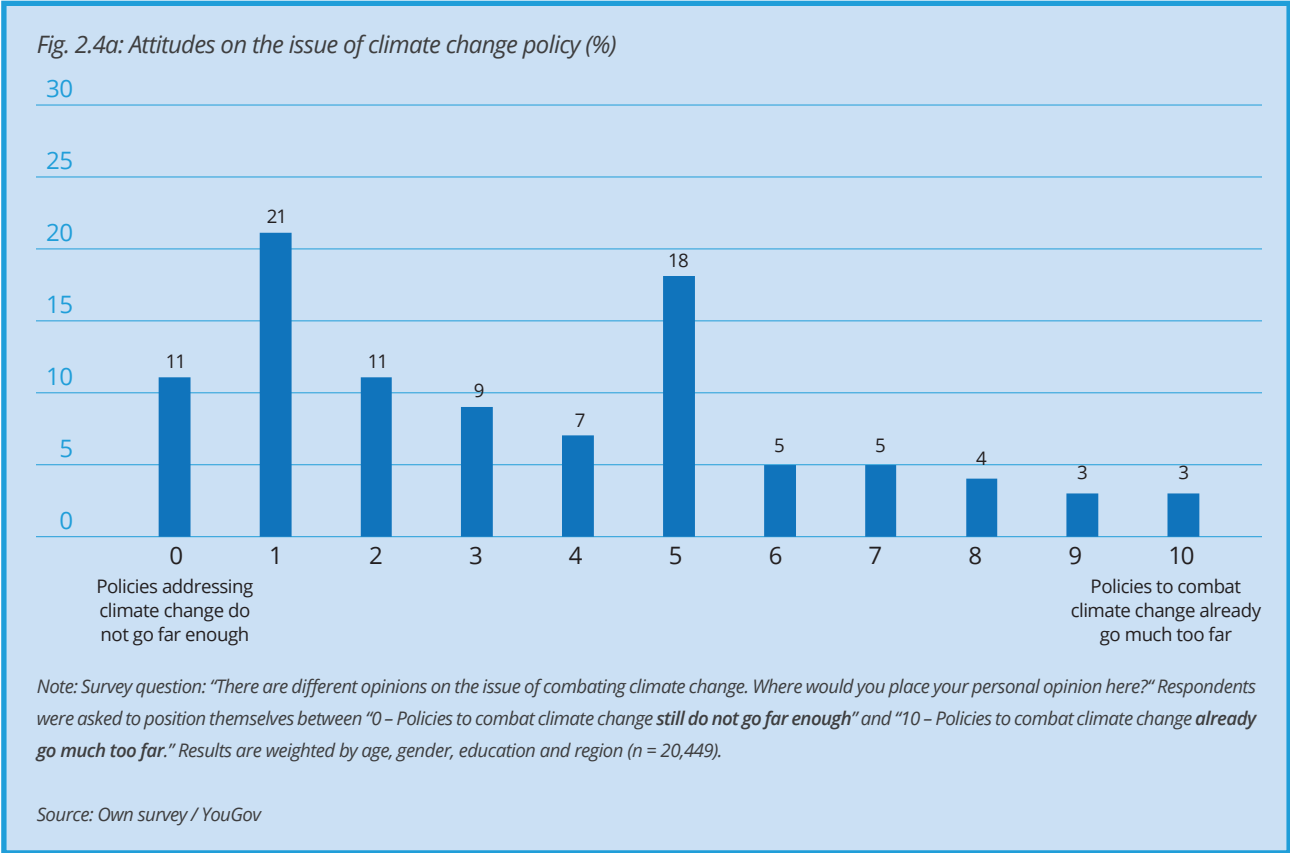
Distribution of positions on the issue of climate change

MORE OR LESS MEASURES TO COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE

Against this background, the survey presented here focused also on evaluations of government action. The underlying assumption was that the discussion about the correct consequences, necessary changes and meaningful measures associated with concrete distributional issues, rather than a realization or denial of human-made climate change, is what marks the area with the most conflict potential regarding the topic of climate change. Respondents were therefore asked to rank their position on an eleven-point scale between “0 - Policies to combat climate change still do not go far enough” and “10 - Political measures to combat climate change already go much too far”

MAJORITY SUPPORTS EXPANSION OF MEASURES TO COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE

The distribution of responses depicted in Fig. 2.4a suggest that most respondents would like to see measures addressing climate change be expanded. Overall, 59 percent of respondents across Europe were more inclined to the view that policies aimed at combating climate change “still do not go far enough,” while only 20 percent expressed the opposite view. Almost one-third of respondents expressed their strongest agreement with this statement (response categories 0 + 1). One-fifth of respondents, on the other hand, showed no clear preference (response category 5). A comparison of different regions shows that respondents from the southern European countries, particularly Italy, Spain, Hungary and Greece, are in favor of



more political measures to combat climate change. This could be due to the fact that the consequences of climate change, such as heat waves, droughts and forest fires, have been most strongly felt in these countries, while the measures taken by national governments have been seen as too hesitant. On the other hand, respondents from the Netherlands, Czechia and Sweden generally feel that political measures have already gone too far.

SOUTHERN EUROPEANS
HIGHER SUPPORT FOR CLIMATE
PROTECTION MEASURES

Affective polarization for the issue of climate change

To measure the degree of affective polarization on the issue of climate change, respondents were asked to evaluate two groups of people: those who believe that policies aimed at fighting climate change “do not go far enough” and those who think they “already go much too far.” The greater the distance between the assessments given for each group, the stronger the affective polarization. In cases where a person rates one group very positively and the other very negatively, the difference between the values could reach a maximum value of “10,” indicating that the respondent was “maximally polarized.”

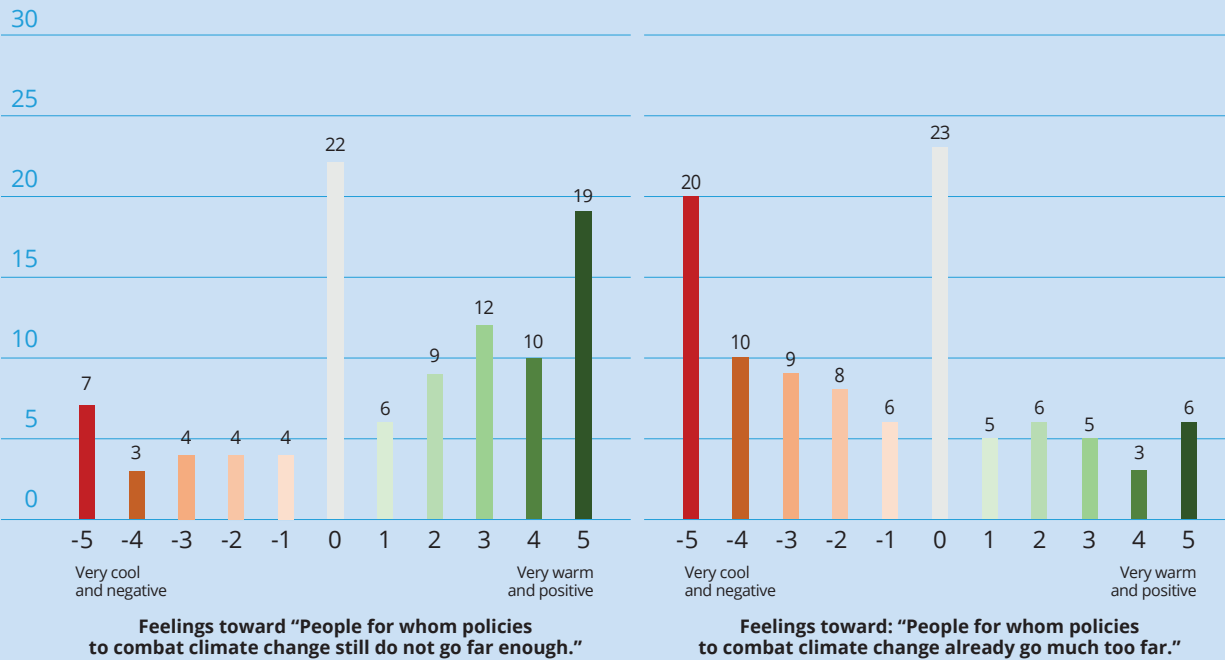
EVALUATION OF OPPOSING
OPINION GROUPS

The response distributions for respondents’ evaluations of the two groups are depicted in Fig. 2.4b. Here, we see that most respondents tend to feel positively toward people who believe that policies to combat climate change “sill do not go far enough.” Conversely, those who tend toward the opposite view are seen in a negative light by more than half of all respondents. By calculating the distance between evaluations given for both groups, a value for affective polarization between 0 and 10 can be determined for each respondent. The figures show that while 17 percent of the entire sample are maximally polarized on the topic of climate change, only 25 percent show no affective polarization, having given the same score for both groups (Fig. 2.4c).

17% MAXIMALLY POLARIZED

Especially those respondents with strong opinions on climate change tend to exhibit high levels of affective polarization (Fig. 2.4d). However, the two opposing camps differ in their average strength of affective polarization. More than half (53 percent) of those who believe that policies to combat

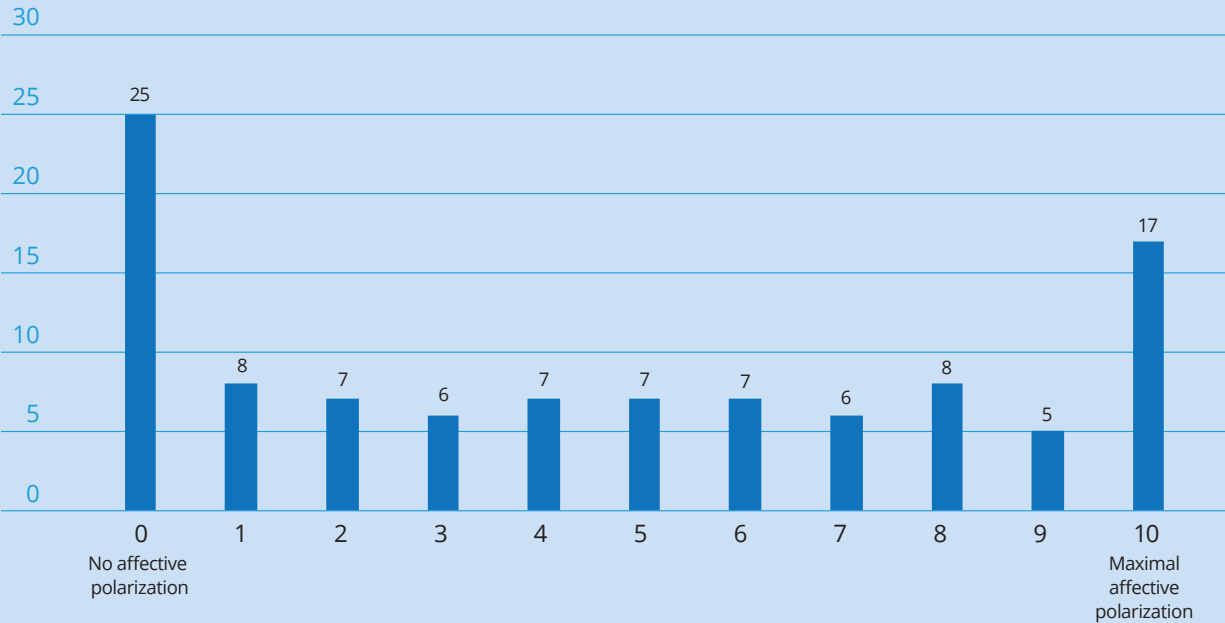
Fig. 2.4b: Attitudes toward groups of people with different opinions on the issue of climate change (%)



Note: Survey question: "When you think of other people in [country] with their different opinions on the issue of climate change, how do you feel about each of the following groups of people?" Respondents were asked to position themselves between "-5 – Very cool and negative" and "+5 – Very warm and positive" with respect to each group. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

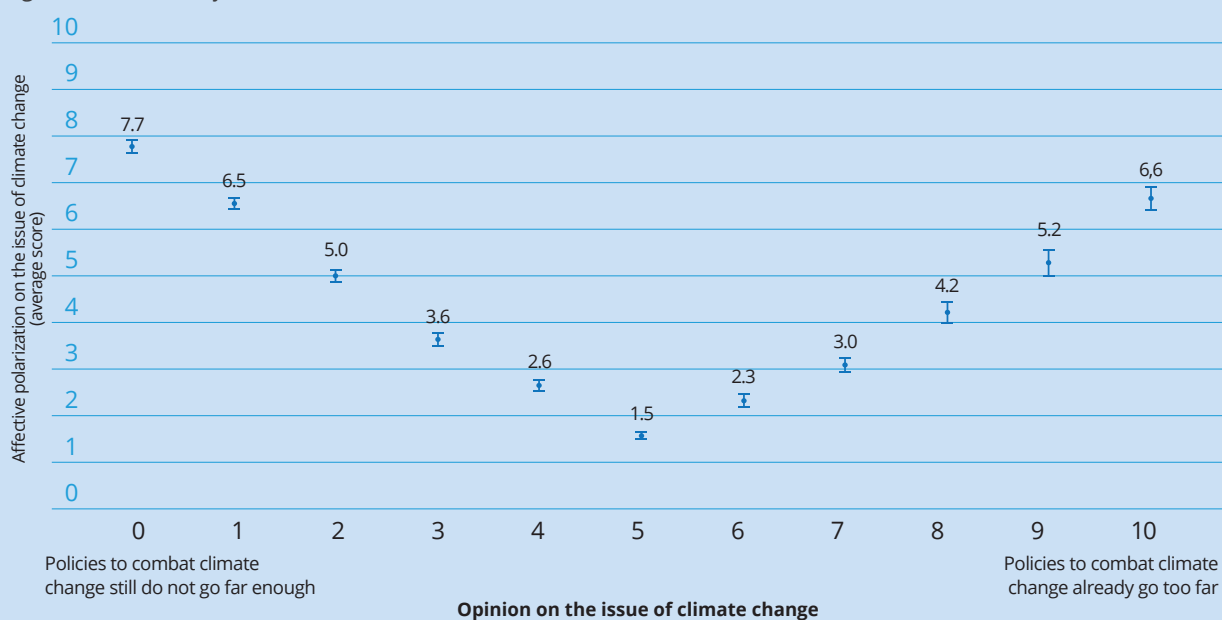
Fig. 2.4c: Distribution of distances (affective polarization) on the issue of climate change (%)



Note: Based on the evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People for whom policies to combat climate change **still do not go far enough**" and "People for whom policies to combat climate change **already go much too far**." Respondents could rate their feelings toward each of the groups of people on an eleven-point scale ranging from "-5 – very cool and negative" to "+5 – very warm and positive." The resulting figure, ranging from "0 – No affective polarization" to "10 – Maximum affective polarization," represents the distance between the respondent's numerically expressed feelings toward the two groups of persons. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. 2.4d: Average level of affective polarization according to self-positioning on the issue of climate change (average scores and confidence intervals)



Note: Y-axis: Affective polarization on the issue of climate change based on evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People for whom policies to address climate change still do not go far enough" and "People for whom policies to address climate change already go much too far." The figure depicts the average distance (with associated 95% confidence intervals) between respondents' evaluations of these two groups.

X-axis: Self-identified position on climate change. Survey question: "There are different opinions on the issue of combating climate change. Where would you place your personal opinion here?" Respondents were asked to position themselves between "0 – Policies to combat climate change still do not go far enough" and "10 – Policies to combat climate change already go much too far." Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

climate change are still insufficient (Fig. 2.4.a; self-position score = 0) show a maximum distance of 10 in their evaluations of different opinion groups. The average affective polarization score for this group is 7.7. Among those who think that policies aimed at addressing climate change "already go much too far," 48 percent express a maximum emotional distance of 10, and their average score for affective polarization is only 6.6. The average values of affective polarization shown in Fig. 2.4d, arranged in the form of a V, are consistently higher among those who advocate expanding policies to combat climate change (left side) than among comparable groups who tend toward the opposite view (right side). Only three percent of those who position themselves in the middle, showing no clear preference regarding a reduction or expansion of climate protection measures, are maximally polarized. At just 1.5, the average affective polarization score is lowest in this group.

Affective polarization for the issue of climate change by subgroup

A closer look at individual regional, sociodemographic and political subgroups shows Italy standing out clearly, with a 28 percent share of maximally affectively polarized individuals and an average affective polarization score of 5.8 (Fig. 2.4e). Spain (average score 5.1) as well as Hungary and Greece (average score of 4.9 in each) also show strong affective polarization on the issue of climate change. However, Czechia and the Netherlands show the lowest levels of affective polarization on this issue (average scores of 3.5 and 4.0, respectively).

SUPPORTERS OF ADDITIONAL CLIMATE MEASURES MORE POLARIZED THAN THOSE WHO OPPOSE THEM

ITALY MOST, CZECHIA LEAST POLARIZED

A closer analysis of the specific distributions of positions reveals further differences between the countries. For instance, in Greece, individuals who feel that policies addressing climate change “already go much too far” (as shown in the range of 6-10 in Fig. 2.4a) contribute more to the relatively high average affective polarization score than in Italy. These individuals account for 15 percent of the maximally affectively polarized in Greece and only 4 percent in Italy. The contribution of “climate policy skeptics” to overall affective polarization on the topic of climate change is even greater in Germany (33% of the maximally polarized), Sweden (35%) and Czechia (37%). In the Netherlands, their share is as high as 47 percent. Here, it seems that two camps of roughly equal strength are jutting up against each other on the issue of climate change, with both sides triggering very negative emotions in the other. By contrast, in Italy, 92 percent of the maximally affectively polarized are “climate policy supporters” and only 5 percent are “climate policy skeptics.”¹

**RESPONDENTS WITH EITHER HIGH
OR LOW EDUCATION LEVEL
MORE POLARIZED**

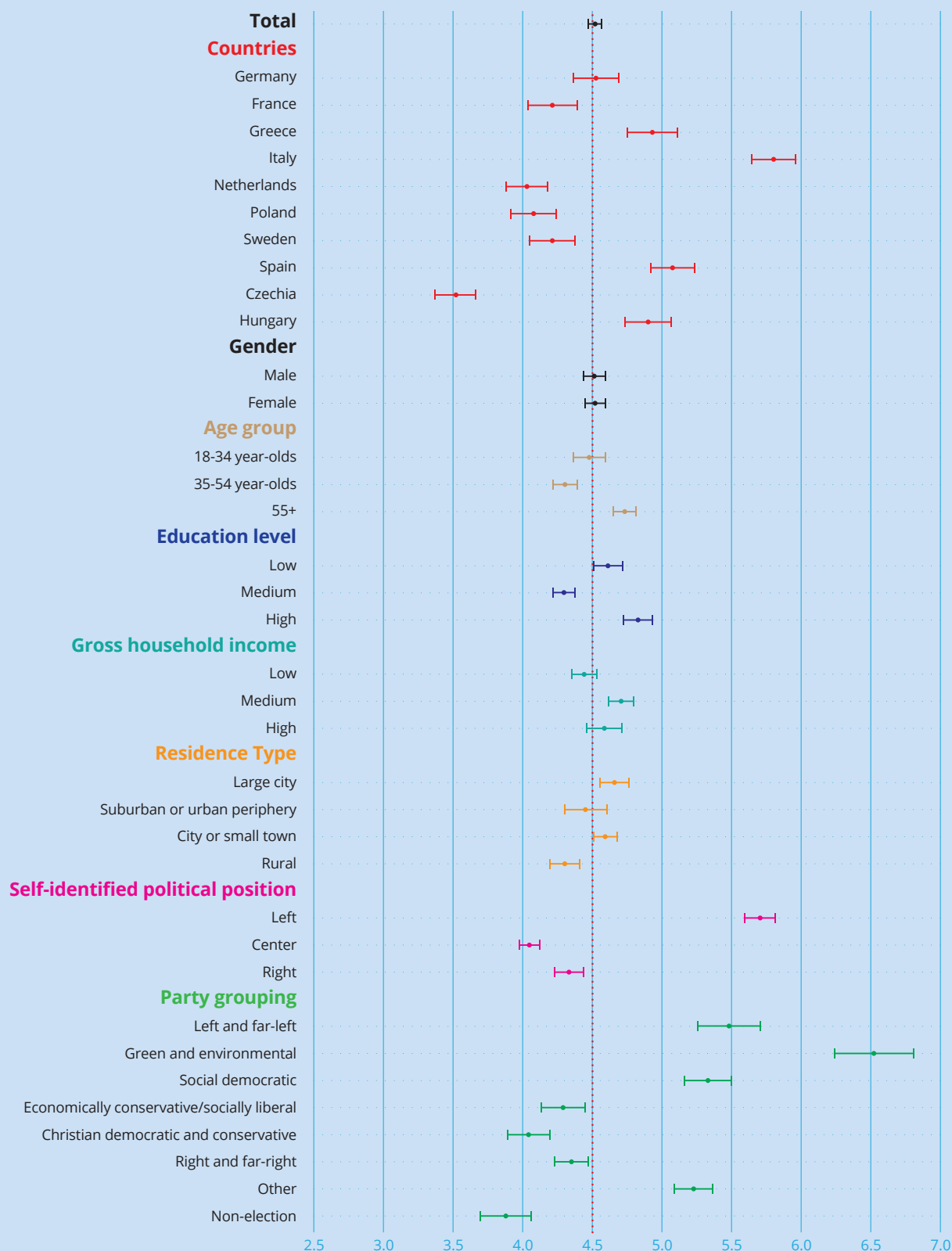
Notably, respondents’ formal education level does not appear to have a linear effect on the degree of polarization regarding climate change. Both those with a higher and those with a lower level of formal education attainment show a somewhat higher percentage of maximally polarized (18% and 19%, respectively) than those with a medium level of education (15%). We see highly salient differences between political subgroups on this point. Those who position themselves toward the left end of the spectrum are more likely to be affectively polarized, with an average score of 5.7 and 25 percent of them being maximally polarized. The share of maximally polarized individuals is considerably lower among those in the political center (14% maximally polarized, average score 4.0) and among the right (15% maximally polarized, average score 4.3). How the “left” and “right” groups position themselves on various topics is also noteworthy. For instance, among those who self-identify to the right, a relative majority of 39 percent believe that measures to combat climate change “do not go far enough.” In comparison, 31 percent consider them too far-reaching, and 30 percent are undecided. Conversely, among those who self-identify to the left, 73 percent believe that measures to combat climate change “do not go far enough,” while only 8 percent think they are “too far-reaching.”

**SUPPORTERS OF GREEN PARTIES
SHOW ABOVE-AVERAGE
POLARIZATION**

We also see differences in voting intentions: On average, those who plan to vote for a green or environmental party in the next election exhibit stronger affective polarization. This group has a 31 percent share of maximally polarized individuals and an average score of 6.5. Those who vote for “left to far-left” and “social democratic” parties also exhibit, on average, higher polarization (with average scores of 5.5 and 5.3, respectively). In contrast, respondents who lean towards conservative, Christian Democratic, or liberal parties are, on average, less polarized (with shares of maximally polarized individuals at 12% and 13%, respectively).

¹ Already with regard to the distribution of positions found in the population, the Netherlands clearly deviates from the European average when it comes to the topic of climate change. Some 37 percent of respondents in the country feel that policies designed to combat climate change “already go much too far” (across Europe as a whole: 23%). For 44 percent of the Dutch, these measures “still do not go far enough” (across Europe as a whole: 60%).

Fig. 2.4e: Average level of affective polarization on the issue of climate change, by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics (average scores and confidence intervals)



Note: Affective polarization (average scores with associated 95% confidence intervals) based on evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People for whom policies to address climate change **still do not go far enough**" and "People for whom policies to address climate change **already go much too far**." The data is grouped by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449, except for gross household income and party groupings, where n = at least 16,569; missing values = "don't know"/no answer).

Source: Own survey / YouGov



SOCIAL WELFARE BENEFITS

Public debates often focus on the economic burden that rising rents, inflation rates, and the threat of a recession place on populations. While still recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, European economies face new economic challenges and uncertainties due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The increasing costs of commodities, energy and living expenses affect everyone, but certain sectors in society are hit harder than others. These recent developments have partially reversed progress made across the EU in fighting poverty and exclusion, and significantly more acute problems associated with social inequality have resulted (Eurostat 2022; Eurofound 2023). Social security systems are vital to alleviate the impact of these developments, but financing such systems through taxes and contributions can lead to conflict in a society that must balance the need for expanded social benefits with the need for higher taxes.

Distribution of positions on the issue of social benefits and their financing

**MORE SOCIAL WELFARE BENEFITS
DESPITE HIGHER TAXES,
OR LOWER TAXES AND FEWER
BENEFITS**

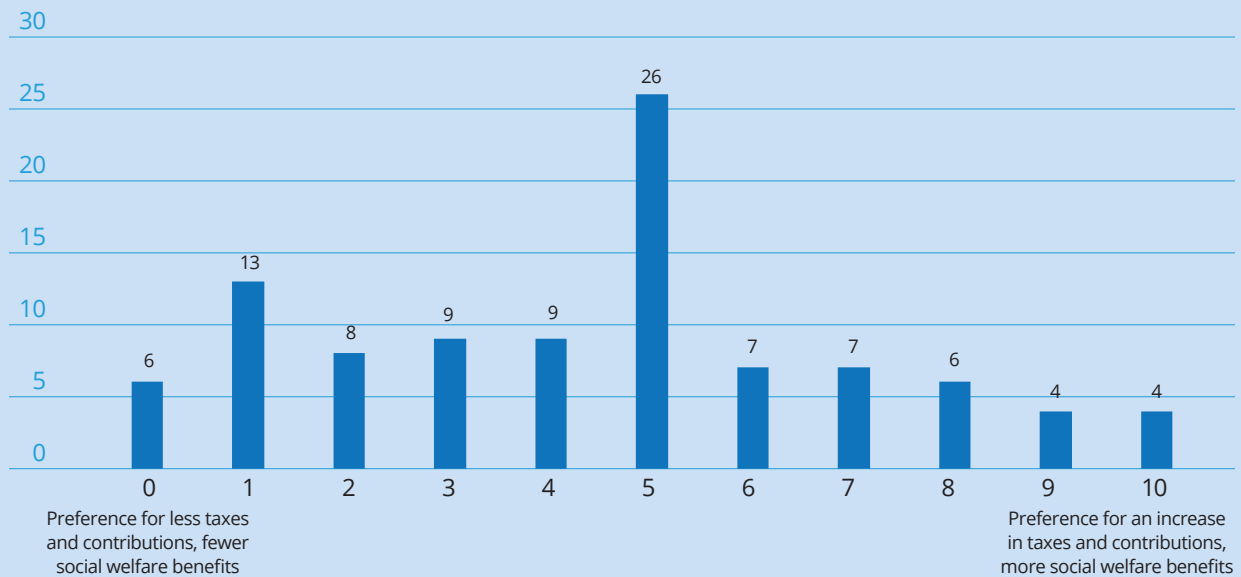
**RELATIVE MAJORITY IN FAVOR
OF LOWERING TAXES, EVEN IF IT
MEANS FEWER SOCIAL WELFARE
BENEFITS**

This fundamental dilemma underlies various debates on the topic of the "welfare state" and its benefits. To address the tension between expanding social welfare benefits and the potential increase in tax burdens such measures involve, respondents were asked to identify their position on an eleven-point scale ranging between¹ "0 – I am in favor of less taxes and contributions, even if that means fewer social welfare benefits" and "10 – I am in favor of more social welfare benefits, even if that means an increase in taxes and contributions."

As Fig. 2.5a shows, the distribution of the responses received suggests a political preference in Europe that mostly favors limiting taxes and contributions while restricting social benefits. Overall, a relative majority of 45 percent of respondents favored this option, while 28 percent tended toward the opposite view. Once again, about 25 percent of the respondents indicated they had no particular preference, positioning themselves exactly in the middle. The average score of all responses was 4.4. Interestingly, there were significant differences in the results between the surveyed countries. For instance, the proportion of people who supported "more so-

¹ The question formulated is based on an established item that has already been used in other studies. (GLES 2021; Roose 2021).

Fig. 2.5a: Attitudes on the issue of social benefits and their financing (%)



Note: Survey question: "There are different opinions on the issue of social benefits and their financing. Where would you place your personal opinion here?" Respondents were asked to position themselves between "0 – I am in favor of less taxes and contributions, even if that means fewer social welfare benefits" and "10 – I am in favor of more social welfare benefits, even if that means an increase in taxes and contributions. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

cial welfare benefits" even though this involves "an increase in taxes and contributions" was highest in Spain and Sweden, with average scores of 5.1 and 5.0, respectively. In contrast, respondents from Poland, France, Czechia, and Italy leaned towards "less taxes and contributions, even if that means fewer social welfare benefits," with average scores of 3.7, 4.0, 4.1, and 4.2, respectively. It is worth noting that there were two clear political subgroups. The supporters of left-wing, green and social democratic parties were more likely to favor "more social welfare benefits," whereas conservatives, economic liberals, and those on the right were more inclined to advocate for "less taxes and contributions," with average scores ranging from 5.7-5.9 and 3.8-4.1, respectively.

SPAIN AND SWEDEN MOST IN FAVOR OF EXPANDING THE WELFARE STATE, POLAND LEAST SO

Affective polarization on the issue of social benefits and their financing

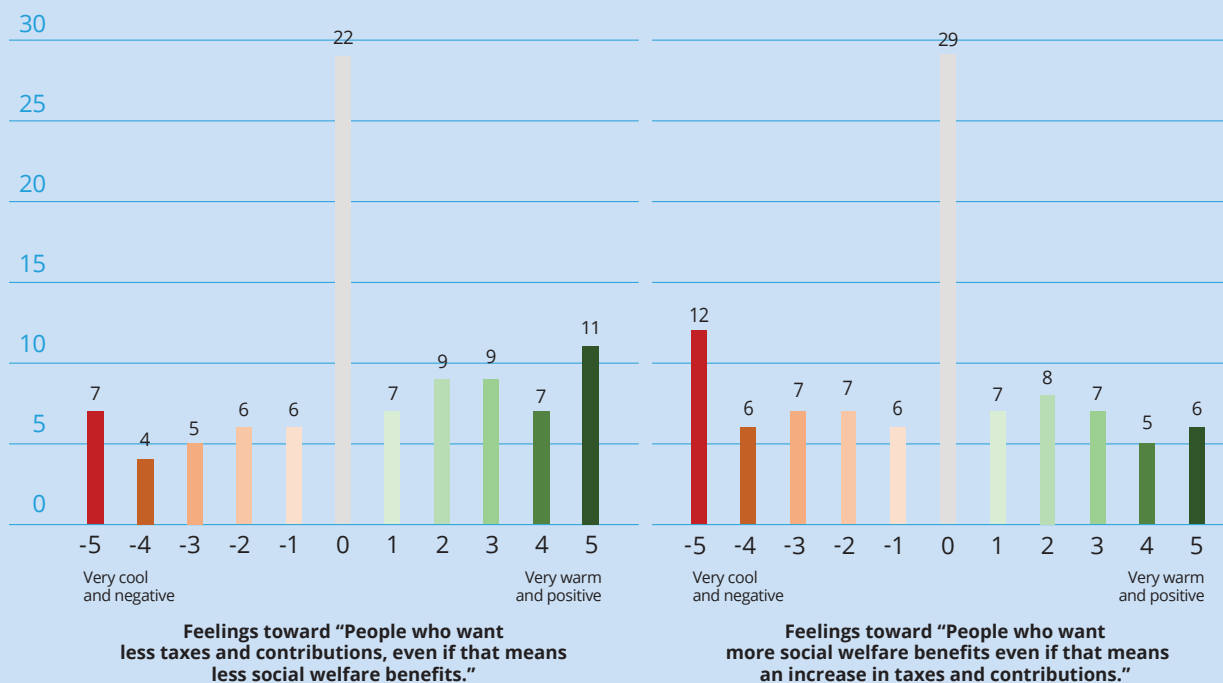
Calculating affective polarization on this issue involves evaluating those groups of people who hold the identified positions on social benefits and their financing. The greater the difference between the two evaluations given, the more a respondent can be considered affectively polarized. A difference of "10" indicates maximal polarization. The response distributions determined in this way are shown in Fig. 2.5b. A small relative majority appears to express "cool and negative" feelings toward those who support "more social welfare benefits," while about 46 percent express "warm and positive" feelings toward those associated with the opposing view. If these results are sorted by the magnitude of the distances between the evaluations of the two groups, eleven percent of all respondents in the sample can be classified as maximally affected. By contrast, almost one-third of respondents show no affective polarization, as they rated both groups the same (Fig. 2.5 c).

EVALUATION OF OPPOSING OPINION GROUPS

11% MAXIMALLY POLARIZED

The distribution of average affective polarization scores on the issue of "social benefits and their financing," which are derived from respondents' self-identified position, also resembles a parabola: Those groups express-

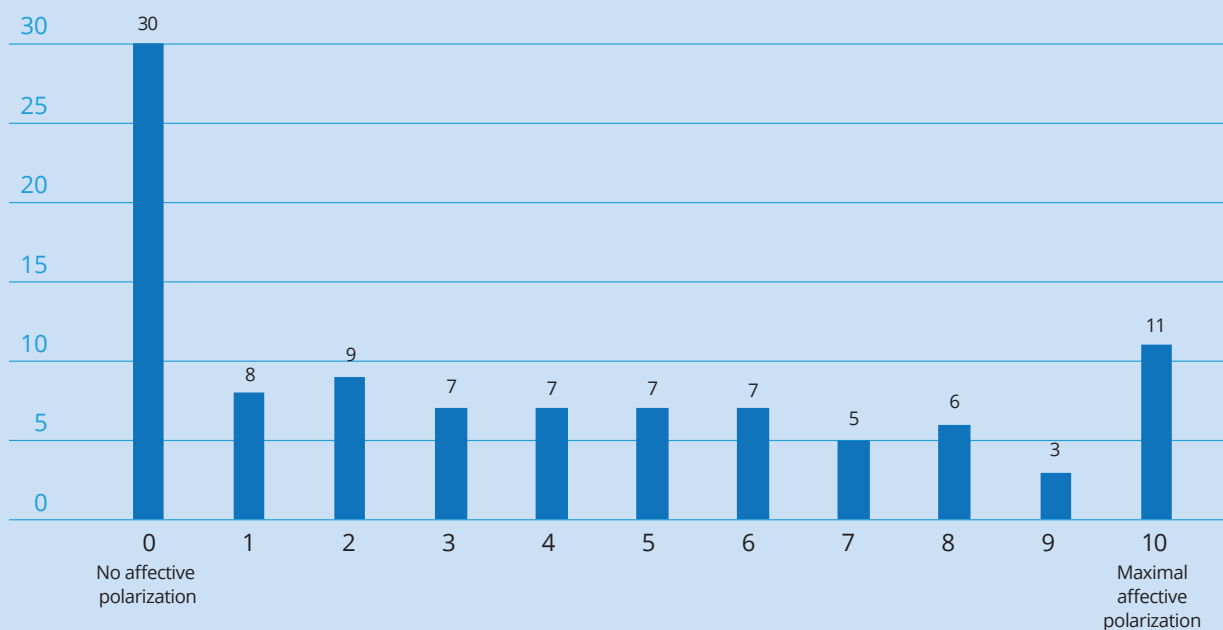
Fig. 2.5b: Attitudes toward groups of people with different opinions on the issue of social benefits and their financing (%)



Note: Survey question: "When you think of other people in [country] with their different opinions on the issue of social benefits and their financing, how do you feel about each of the following groups of people?" Respondents were asked to position themselves between "-5 – Very cool and negative" and "+5 – Very warm and positive" with respect to each group. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

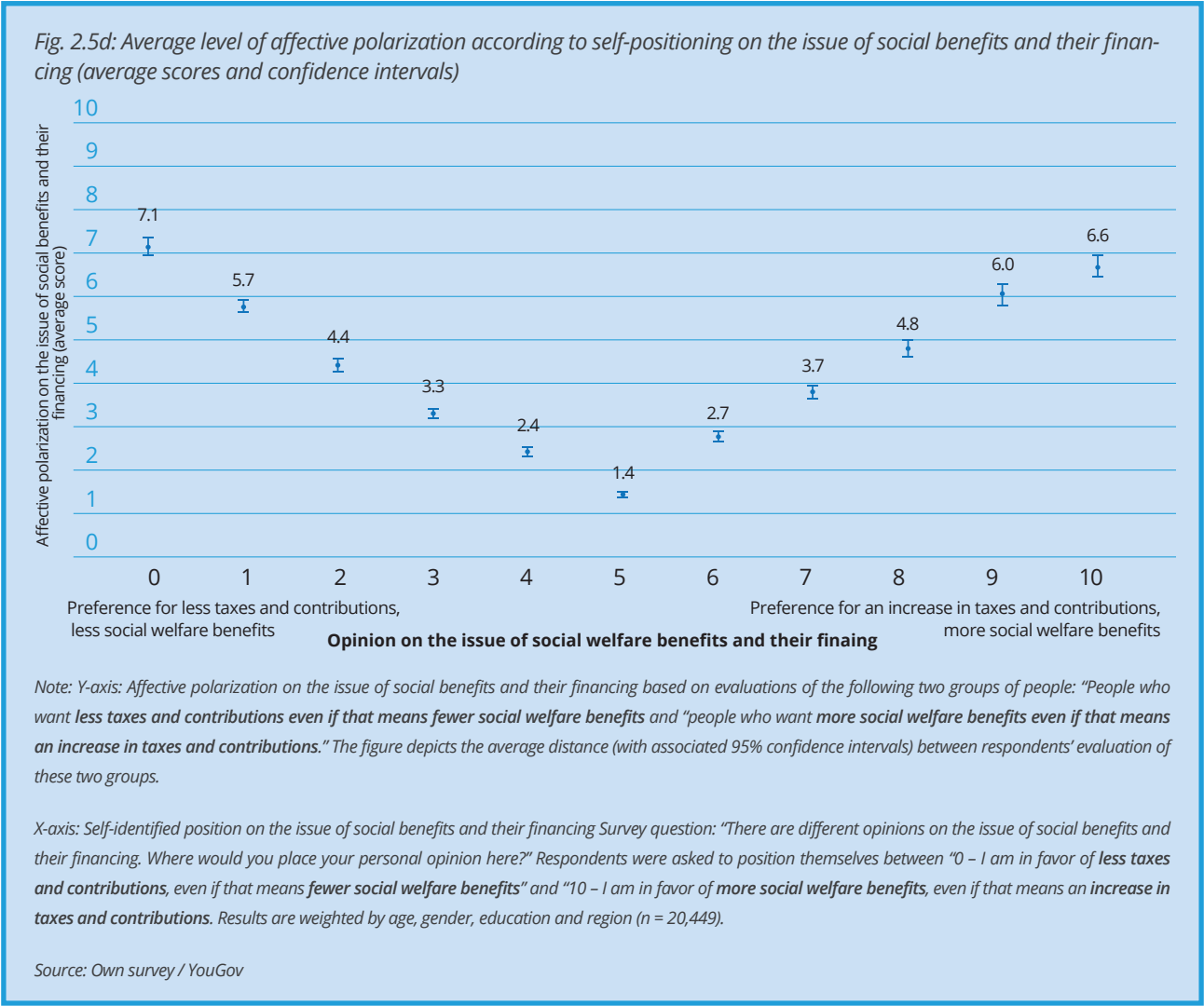
Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. 2.5c: Distribution of distances (affective polarization) on the issue of social benefits and their financing (%)



Note: Based on the evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People who want less taxes and contributions, even if that means less social welfare benefits" and "People who want more social welfare benefits even if that means an increase in taxes and contributions." Respondents could rate their feelings toward each of the groups of people on an eleven-point scale ranging from "-5 - very cool and negative" to "+5 - very warm and positive." The resulting figure, ranging from "0 - No affective polarization" to "10 - Maximum affective polarization," represents the distance between the respondent's numerically expressed feelings toward the two groups of persons. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov



ing a clear position show a higher degree of affective polarization than those who position themselves more cautiously or directly in the middle (Fig. 2.5d). Overall, those who advocate for “more social welfare benefits” tend to have higher polarization values than those on the opposite side of this issue. However, for individuals who position themselves at the ends of the opinion spectrum (position 0 or 10 according to Fig. 2.5a), this relationship is reversed: People who are very clearly in favor of “less taxes and contributions” (average 7.1) are, on average, more affectively polarized than those who emphatically support “more social welfare benefits” (average score 6.6, cf. Fig. 2.5d).

PEOPLE WHO FAVOR MORE SOCIAL WELFARE BENEFITS TEND TO BE MORE POLARIZED THAN THOSE WHO PREFER LOWER TAXES

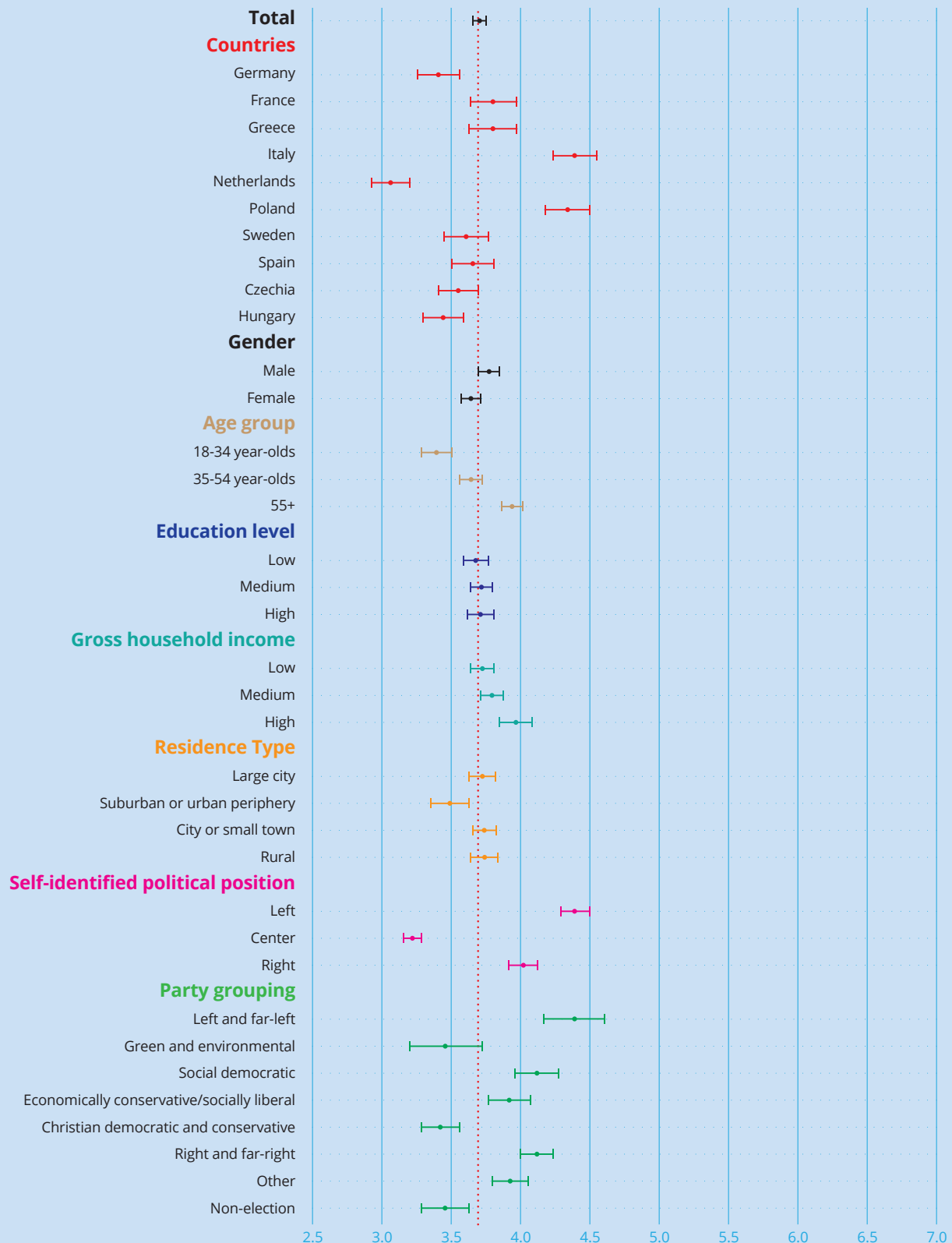
Affective polarization on the issue of social benefits and their financing by subgroup

Fig. 2.5e provides a breakdown of the average affective polarization scores for the topic of “social benefits and their financing” by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics. Comparing the ten countries under review reveals significant differences: Italy (average score 4.4 with 15% maximally polarized) and Poland (average score 4.3 with 17% maximally polarized) exhibit the highest levels of affective polarization. Conversely, the Netherlands have the lowest scores, with six percent of respondents being maximally polarized and an affective polarization score of 3.1 on the topic of social benefits.

ITALY AND POLAND MOST POLARIZED

If we look at sociodemographic characteristics, we see that older respondents tend to show a stronger affective polarization than younger ones. Respondents with higher gross incomes also appear to be more polarized. Political subgroups on both the left and right sides of the opinion spectrum display above-average polarization scores. Particularly those who vote for left-wing or social democratic parties and traditionally support greater social redistribution mechanisms exhibit high affective polarization on the topic of social benefits (average scores of 4.4 and 4.1, respectively) – as do supporters of right-wing and far-right as well as economically conservative parties (average scores of 4.1 and 3.9, respectively). However, the latter two groups generally call for “less taxes and contributions, even if that means fewer social welfare benefits.” In contrast, those who support green and environmental as well as Christian democratic and conservative parties are least averse to those on the other end of the opinion spectrum regarding social benefits (Fig. 2.5e).

Fig. 2.5e: Average level of affective polarization on the issue of social benefits and their financing, by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics (average scores and confidence intervals)



Note: Affective polarization (average scores with associated 95% confidence intervals) based on evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People who want less taxes and contributions even if that means fewer social welfare benefits" and "people who want more social welfare benefits even if that means an increase in taxes and contributions." The data is grouped by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449, except for gross household income and party groupings, where n = at least 16,569; missing values = "don't know"/no answer).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

2.6

GENDER EQUALITY

In March 2018, over five million people in Spain participated in a “feminist strike” to demand more policies aimed at combating violence against women, discrimination and unequal pay. Later that year, the right-wing populist party VOX gained attention by entering the Andalusian regional parliament, despite their denial of gender inequality and rejection of many feminist goals (Anduiza/Rico 2022; Cabezas 2022). However, gender equality continues to be a controversial issue not only in Spain, but also in other European countries. Discussions on the issue often revolve around the question of whether and to what extent government regulations are necessary. While some argue that fixed quotas are necessary to improve the representation of women in certain areas, others view such requirements as disproportionate interventions with principles of freedom and equality (Fernández/Valiente 2021).

Distribution of positions on the issue of gender equality

MORE OR FEWER GENDER EQUALITY MEASURES

The present study addresses the topic of gender equality in society through a question focused on the need for state interventions. Respondents were asked to indicate their personal stance on an eleven-point scale that ranged from “0 – Policies addressing gender equality still do not go far enough” to “10 – Policies addressing gender equality already go much too far.”

MAJORITY IN EUROPE IN FAVOR OF EXPANDING GENDER EQUALITY MEASURES

As Fig. 2.6a shows, the distribution of responses suggests a political preference in Europe that predominantly favors an expansion of policies targeting gender equality. Overall, 51 percent of European respondents expressed strong or moderate support for the idea that gender equality measures are insufficient, while only 20 percent held the opposite view. Another 20 percent of respondents did not express a clear preference and selected the middle option. In terms of regional comparison, respondents from the Mediterranean countries (Italy, Spain and Greece) were more open to an expansion of policies aimed at gender equality. In contrast, Czechia and Hungary, as well as Sweden, generally held opposing views. It is important to note that the variation in the number of policies targeting gender equality implemented in different countries may have an impact on respondents’ views on the need for further expansion.

Affective polarization on the issue of gender equality

To measure the level of affective polarization on the issue of gender equality, respondents were asked to describe their feelings toward two groups of

people after identifying their own position. One group consisted of “people who believe that policies addressing gender equality in society do not go far enough,” while the other group comprised “people who believe that policies addressing gender equality already go much too far.” The greater the difference between the evaluations of these two groups, the more polarized the respondents were considered to be in affective terms. Respondents who rated both groups so differently that the difference reached the maximum value of “10” were considered “maximally polarized.”

The response distributions for respondents’ evaluations of the two groups are depicted in Fig. 2.6b. The initial pattern observed is closely related to the overall distribution of positions: 52 percent of respondents displayed a rather “cool and negative” attitude towards people who believed that policies targeting gender equality had gone too far. In contrast, 53 percent of respondents gave positive evaluations to people who believe that measures do not go far enough. Upon calculating the distance between the two evaluations, it was found that almost one-third of respondents did not display affective polarization on the topic (distance of 0). Only 14 percent of respondents are maximally polarized (Fig. 2.6c).

A look at the positions represented in each case shows strong levels of polarization at both ends of the scale (Fig. 2.6d). Among those who believe that “policies addressing gender equality do not go far enough” (position 0, Fig. 2.6a), 58 percent showed strong polarization. Conversely, only 40 percent of those who believe that the measures have gone too far are strongly polarized. Therefore, those who support further policies for gender equality display stronger positive emotions toward those who share their views, and they harbor strong aversions toward those with opposing views. In fact, the difference in the level of polarization between the two groups is greater than for any other topic surveyed. This is also evident in a comparison of averages: the group that wants more policies for gender equality and posi-

EVALUATION OF
OPPOSING OPINIONS

14% MAXIMALLY POLARIZED

PROPONENTS OF MORE
GENDER EQUALITY MEASURES
MORE POLARIZED

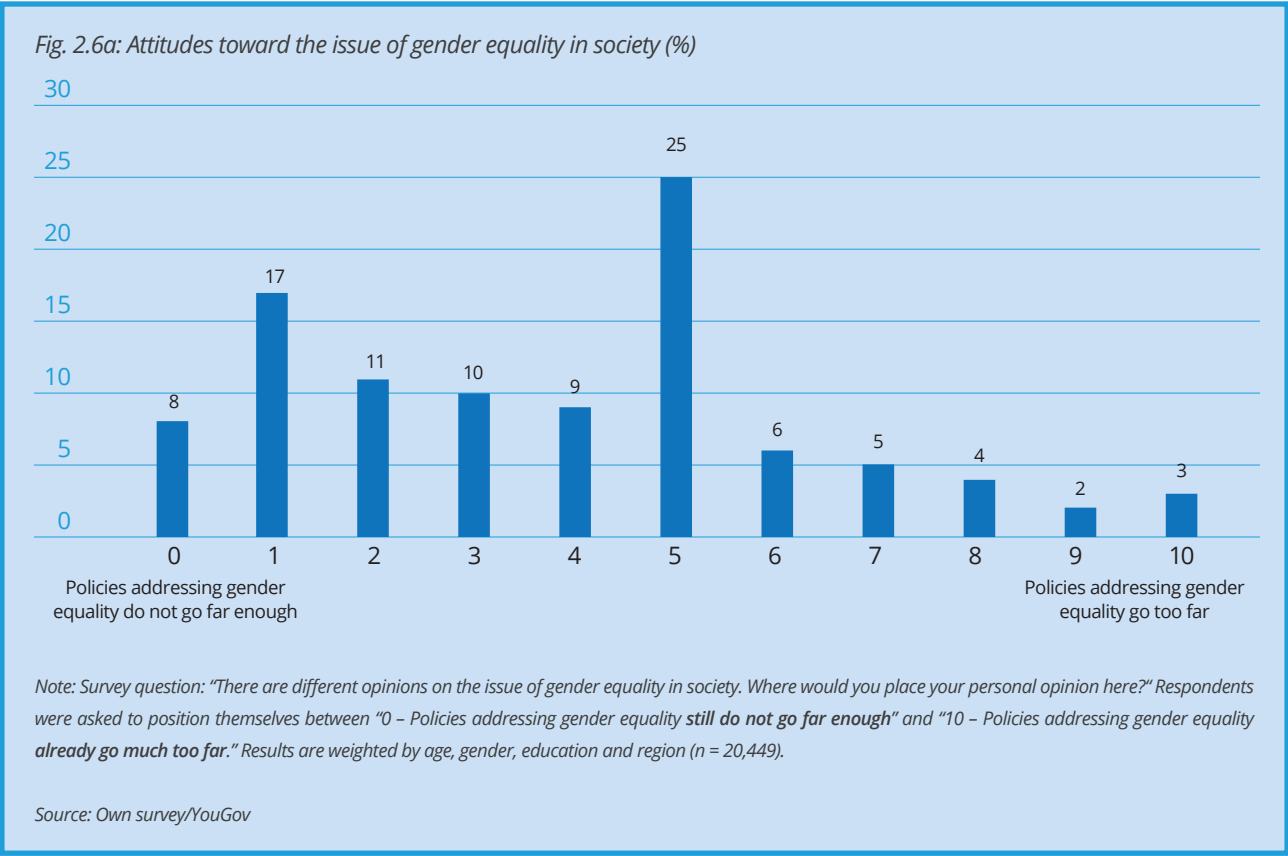
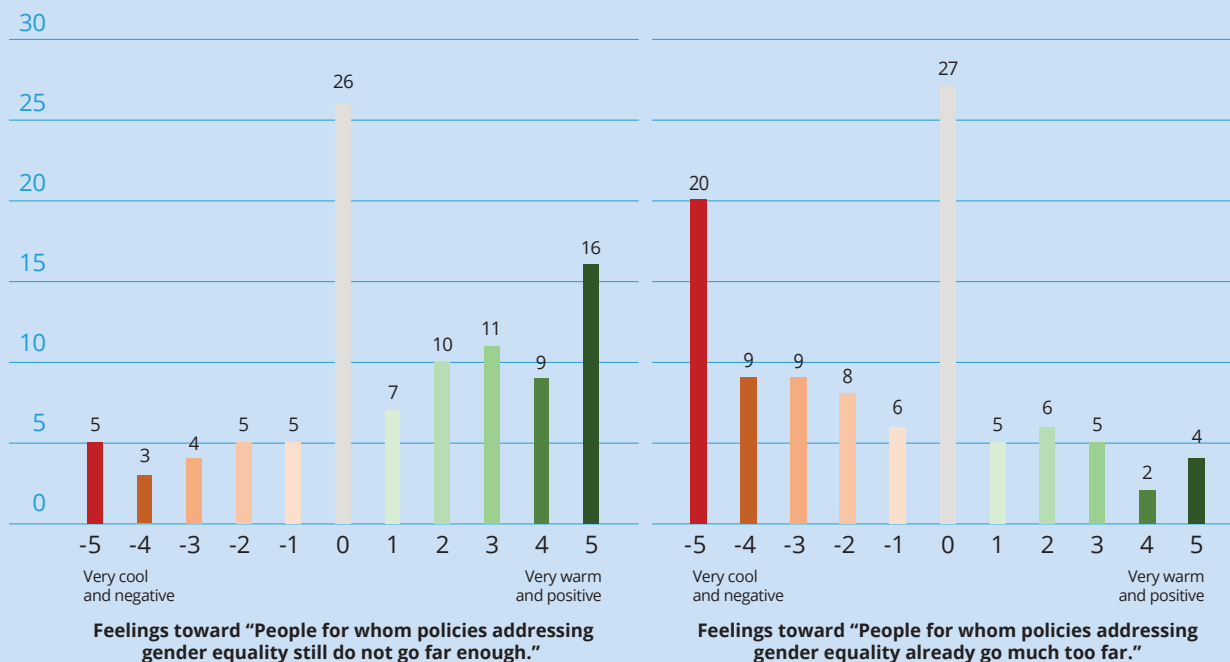


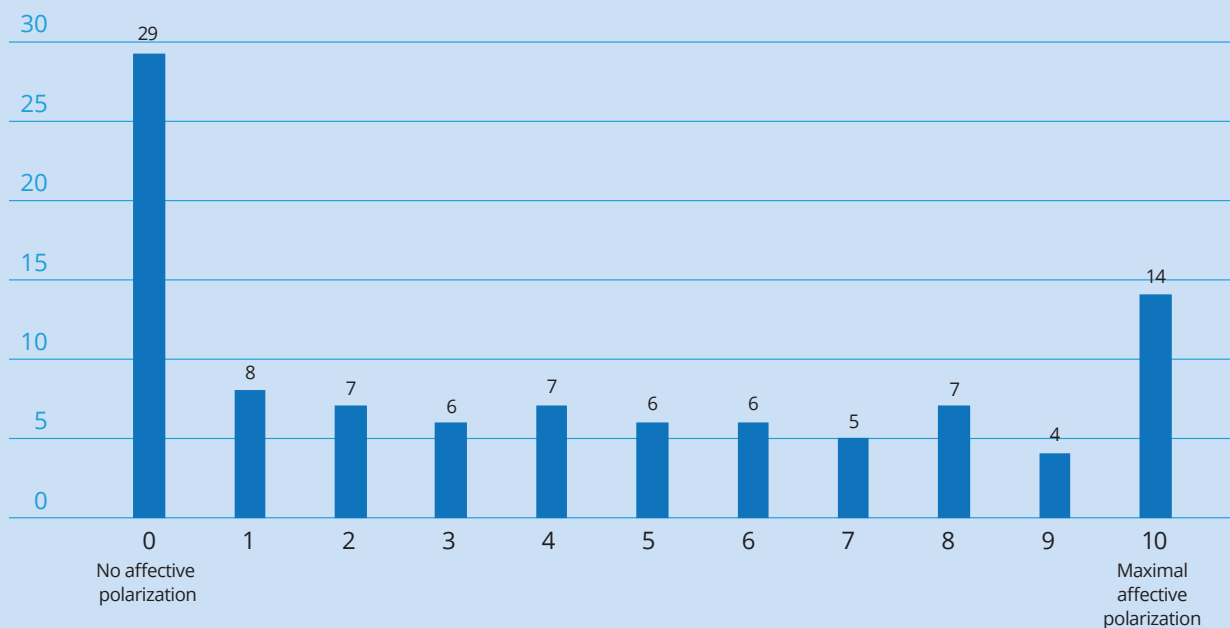
Fig. 2.6b: Attitudes toward groups of people with different opinions on the issue of gender equality (%)



Note: Survey question: "When you think of other people in [country] with their different opinions on the issue of gender equality, how do you feel about each of the following groups of people?" Respondents were asked to position themselves between "-5 – Very cool and negative" and "+5 – Very warm and positive" with respect to each group. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

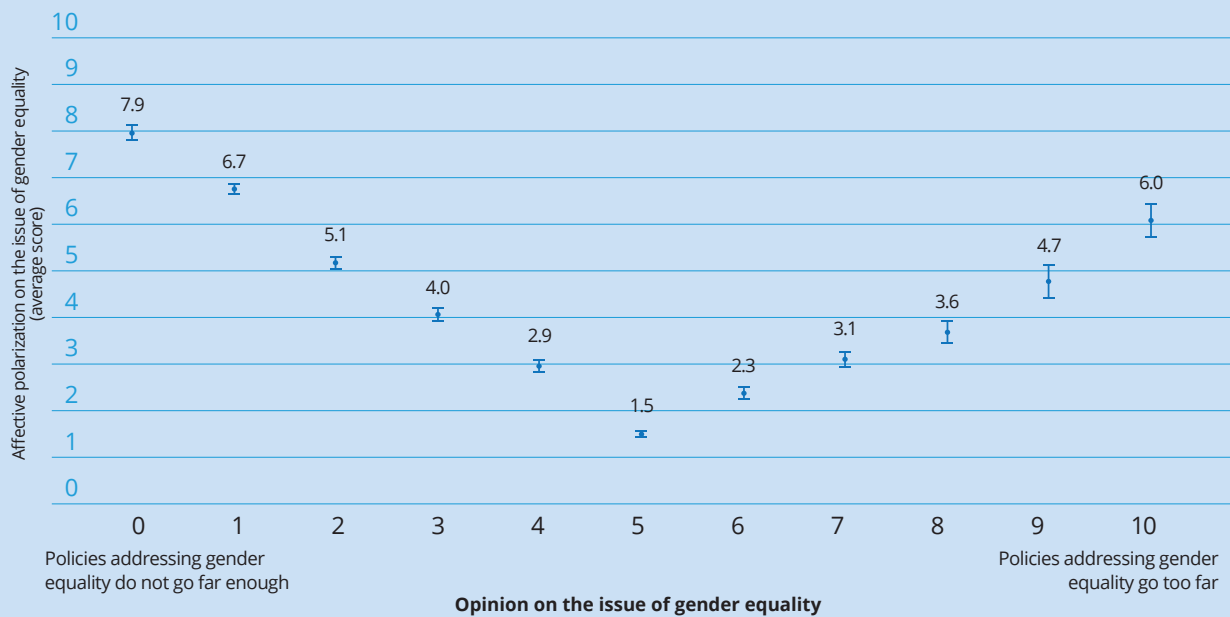
Fig. 2.6c: Distribution of distances (affective polarization) on the issue of gender equality (%)



Note: Calculations are based on the evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People for whom policies addressing gender equality **still do not go far enough**" and "People for whom policies addressing gender equality **already go much too far**." Respondents could rate their feelings toward each of the groups of people on an eleven-point scale ranging from "-5 – very cool and negative" to "+5 – very warm and positive." The resulting figure, ranging from "0 – No affective polarization" to "10 – Maximum affective polarization," represents the distance between the respondent's numerically expressed feelings toward the two groups of persons. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. 2.6d: Average level of affective polarization according to self-position on the issue of gender equality (average scores and confidence intervals)



Note: Y-axis: Affective polarization scores on the issue of gender equality are based on evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People for whom policies on gender equality still **do not go far enough**" and "People for whom policies on gender equality **already go much too far**." The figure depicts the average distance (with associated 95% confidence intervals) between respondents' evaluations of these two groups.

X-axis: Self-identified position on the issue of social benefits and their financing Survey question: "There are different opinions on the issue of gender equality in society. Where would you place your personal opinion here?" Respondents were asked to position themselves between "0 – Policies addressing gender equality **still do not go far enough**" and "10 – Policies addressing gender equality **already go much too far**." Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

tions itself at "0" has an average affective polarization score of 7.9. On the other hand, the group of vehement opponents of further gender equality measures has an average score of only 6.0. Finally, the group of undecided respondents who position themselves in the middle has the lowest affective polarization score of only 1.5.

Affective polarization on the issue of gender equality by subgroup

When comparing countries, the southern European countries of Italy, Greece, and Spain once again show strong affective polarization (Fig. 2.6e). In contrast, Czechia has significantly lower levels of polarization, with only seven percent of respondents being maximally polarized and an average affective polarization score of 2.8 for the topic of gender equality. Hungary, Poland, France, and the Netherlands also had comparatively low levels of polarization.

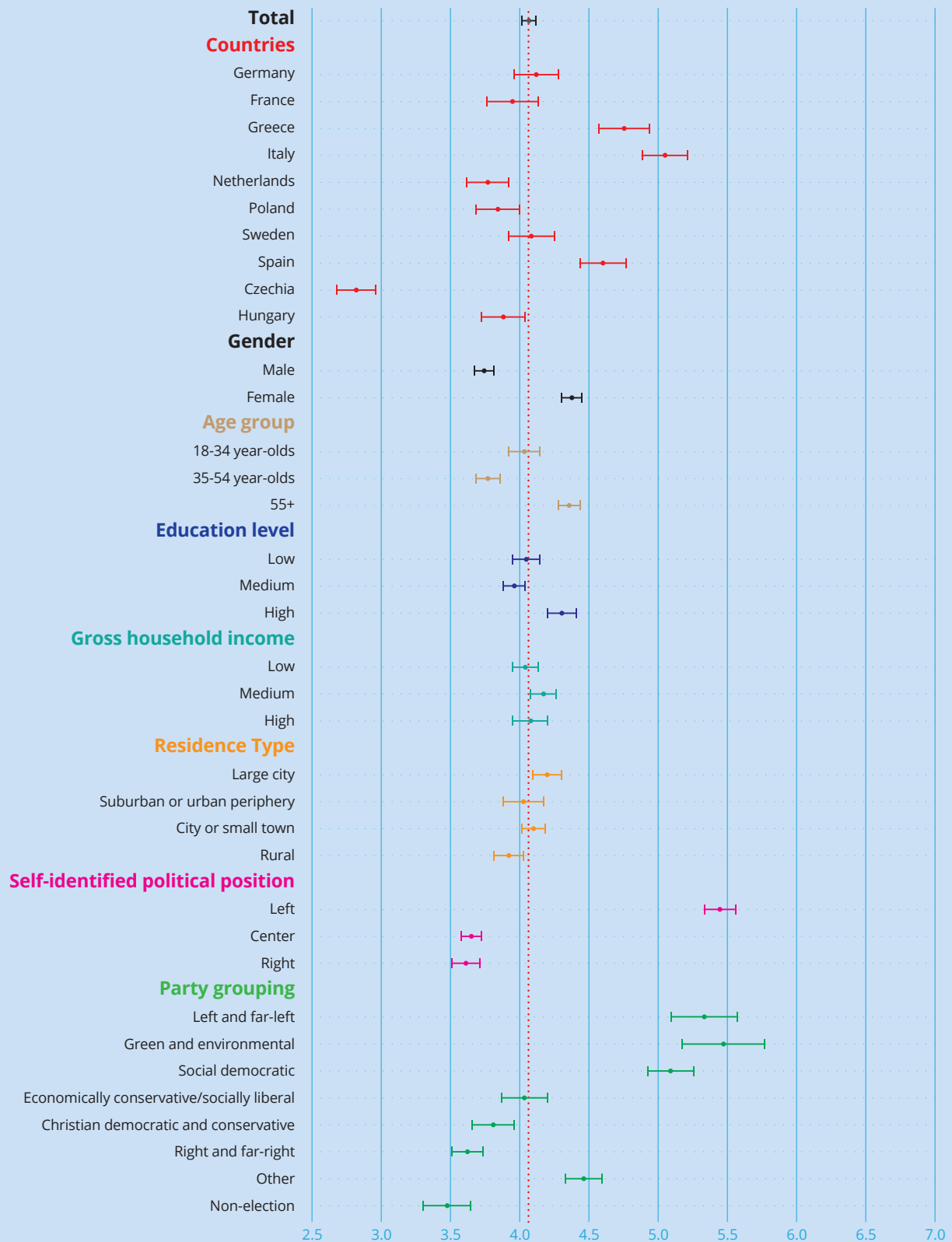
There was also a significant difference in polarization levels between men and women, with 12 percent of men and 17 percent of women being maximally polarized, and average affective polarization scores of 3.7 and 4.3, respectively. In terms of political positioning, strong polarization was observed in the left-wing milieu, with 23 percent being maximally affectively polarized (average score 5.4). This is considerably higher than those in the political center and those on the right end of the spectrum, which shows 12 percent (average score 3.6) and 11 percent (average score 3.6), respectively. We see a similar pattern in terms of party affiliation. Those who vote for "left to far-left" parties or green or environmental parties have the highest

**SOUTHERN EUROPEANS
PARTICULARLY POLARIZED**

**WOMEN MORE POLARIZED THAN
MEN; PEOPLE ON POLITICAL LEFT
MORE POLARIZED THAN THOSE
ON RIGHT**

proportion of affectively polarized individuals, with 24 percent and 23 percent, respectively (average scores of 5.5 and 5.3). Among Social Democrats, the share is 19 percent with an average of 5.1. Among those who vote for Christian democratic and conservative as well as right to far-right parties, only 11 percent and 12 percent, respectively, are maximally affectively polarized (average scores of 3.8 and 3.6).

Fig. 2.6e: Average level of affective polarization on the issue of gender equality, by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics (average scores and confidence intervals)



Note: Affective polarization (average scores with associated 95% confidence intervals) based on evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People for whom policies on gender equality still **do not go far enough**" and "People for whom policies on gender equality **already go much too far**." The data is grouped by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region ($n = 20,449$, except for gross household income and party groupings, where $n =$ at least 16,569; missing values = "don't know"/no answer).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

2.7

POLICY TOWARD SEXUAL MINORITIES

Despite some countries showing progress, discrimination and violence against sexual minorities remain a persistent problem in Europe. In the summer of 2022, a transgender individual participating in Christopher Street Day in Münster, Germany was attacked and subsequently passed away due to their injuries. Additionally, there has been a rise in self-proclaimed “LGBT-free zones” in Poland, and Hungary passed a law in 2020 that restricts the legal recognition of transgender individuals and prohibits the promotion of homosexuality or transgender rights in schools or media (Korolczuk 2020; Tunk/Ahlefeld 2022; tagesschau 2021). These developments have made fighting discrimination against sexual minorities a controversial social debate topic in several European countries (Kováts 2018).

Distribution of positions on the issue of policy toward sexual minorities

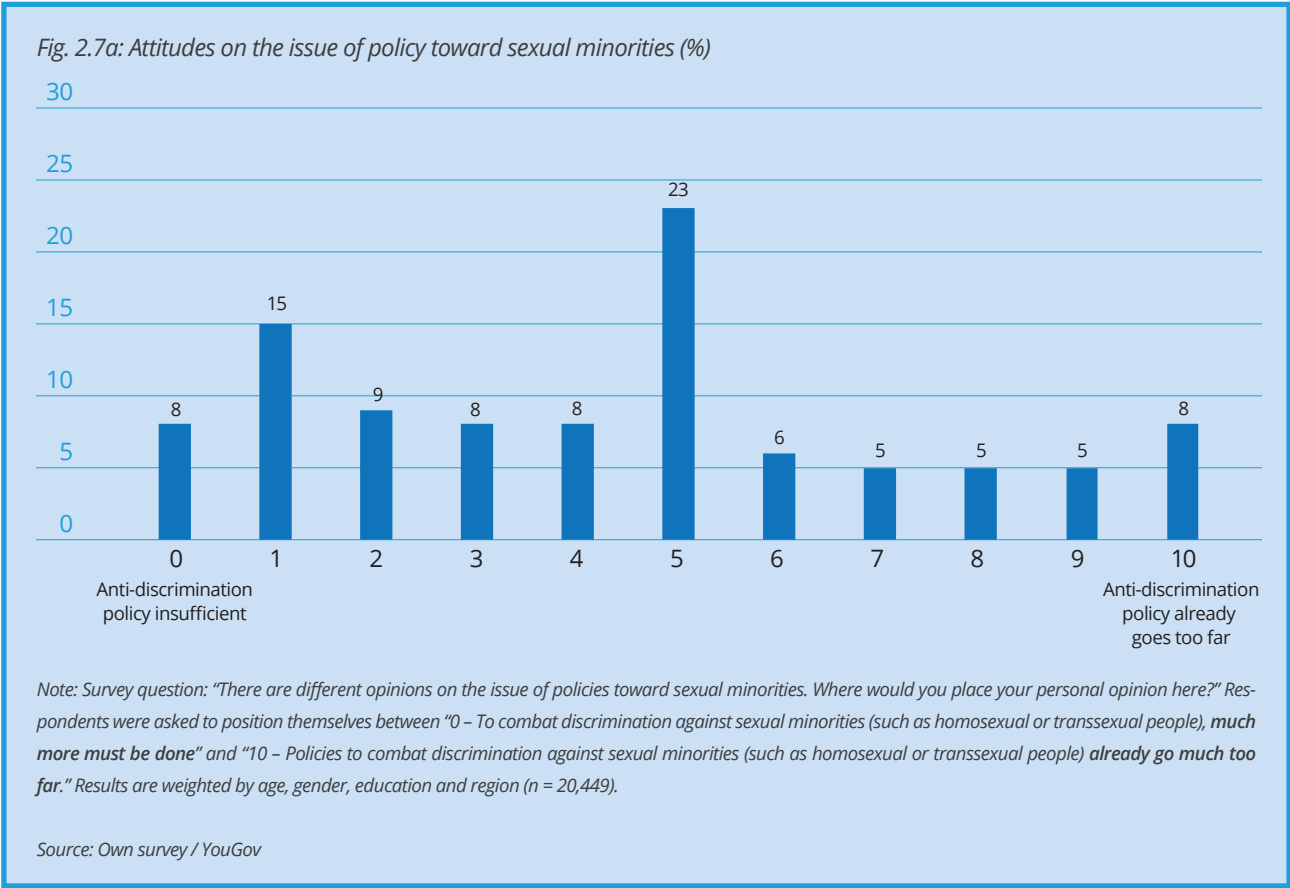
MORE OR FEWER MEASURES TO COMBAT DISCRIMINATION AGAINST SEXUAL MINORITIES

The survey used in this study also addressed this issue. Respondents were asked to indicate their personal stance on a scale of 0 to 10. A selection of 0 meant that, in their view, “much more must be done” to combat “discrimination against sexual minorities (such as homosexual or transsexual people).” A 10, on the other hand, indicated full agreement with the statement that existing “policies to combat discrimination against sexual minorities ... already go much too far.”

RELATIVE MAJORITY IN EUROPE IN FAVOR OF EXPANDING MEASURES

ABOVE-AVERAGE OPPOSITION TO ADDITIONAL ANTI-DISCRIMI- NATION MEASURES IN VISEGRÁD COUNTRIES

As illustrated in Fig. 2.7a shows, 48 percent of respondents across Europe tend toward the view that “much more must be done,” while 29 percent hold the opposite view. A total of 23 percent positioned themselves in the middle, showing no clear preference. Particularly in the so-called Visegrád states of Poland, Czechia and Hungary, there is strong opposition to additional measures aimed at combating discrimination against sexual minorities. The average response scores in these countries are 5.4 (Czechia), 5.1 (Hungary) and 4.6 (Poland), all of which are above the full-sample average of 4.4. By contrast, respondents in Italy (average score 3.8), Spain (average 3.8) and the Netherlands (average 3.9) are most clearly in favor of further policies to combat discrimination against sexual minorities. More pronounced differences in opinion exist between individuals who identify as left or right on the political spectrum (average scores of 3.0 and 5.6, respectively) and supporters of “green or environmental” (average score 2.7) and “right to far-right” parties (average score 5.7).



Affective polarization on the issue of policy toward sexual minorities

Finally, in order to measure the level of affective polarization on the issue of policies toward sexual minorities, respondents were asked to evaluate two groups of people – those who believe that “*much more must be done to combat discrimination against sexual minorities (such as homosexual or transsexual people)*,” and those who believe that such measures “*already go much too far*.” The greater the difference between a respondent’s evaluations of these two groups, the stronger the affective polarization. If this difference reached its highest possible value of 10, the person making the evaluation is considered to be “maximally polarized.”

As shown in Fig. 2.7b, nearly half of the respondents (about 48%) gave a “warm and positive” evaluation to people who believe “much more must be done” to combat discrimination against sexual minorities. By contrast, people who think anti-discrimination measures already go too far were given a “warm and positive” evaluation by only 28 percent of respondents, and a “cool and negative” evaluation by 47 percent. Overall, nearly 30 percent of all respondents showed no affective polarization at all – that is, they gave identical ratings to each of the two groups. However, 16 percent of the sample were maximally polarized, with a distance of 10 between their numerical evaluations of the two groups (Fig. 2.7c).

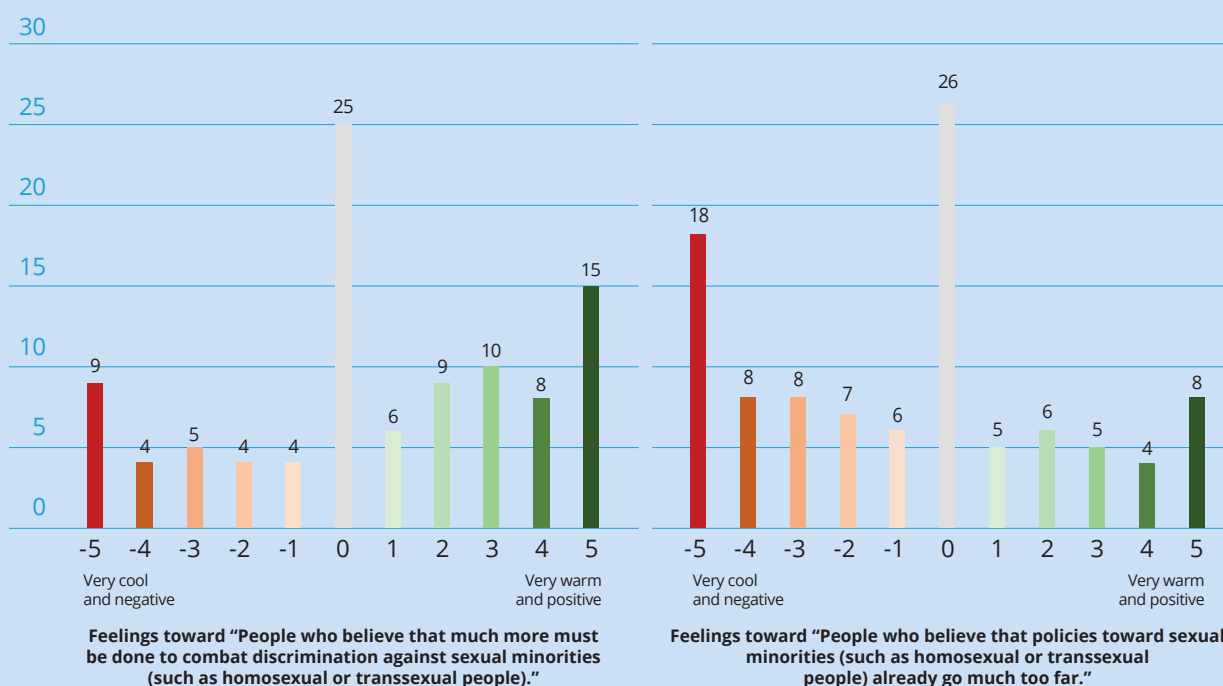
A closer look at the data reveals that in both camps, those with the most extreme positioning on either side of the scale also have the highest average polarization scores. Among those who think that policies have already gone “much too far” (positioning at 10 as seen in Fig. 2.7a), 50 percent are maximally polarized, and the average polarization score is 6.8. Meanwhile, within the group composed of the strongest supporters of additional policy measures (positioning at 0 as seen in Fig. 2.7a), fully 61 percent are maximally polarized, and the average polarization score is 8.3 (Fig. 2.7d).

EVALUATION OF OPPOSING OPINION GROUPS

16% MAXIMALLY POLARIZED

PEOPLE WHO FAVOR ADDITIONAL MEASURES ARE MORE POLARIZED THAN THOSE WHO OPPOSE THEM

Fig. 2.7b: Attitudes toward groups of people with different opinions on the issue of policies toward sexual minorities (%)



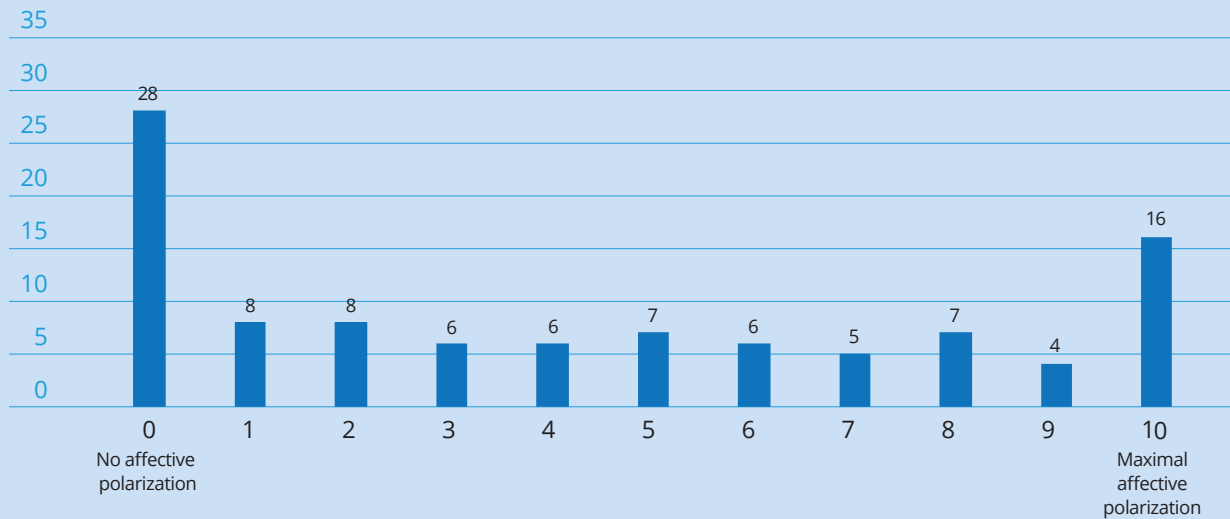
Note: Survey question: "When you think of other people in [country] with their different opinions on the issue of policies toward sexual minorities, how do you feel about each of the following groups of people?" Respondents were asked to position themselves between "-5 – Very cool and negative" and "+5 – Very warm and positive" with respect to each group. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Affective polarization on the issue of policy toward sexual minorities, by subgroup

In comparing different countries, we observe that that southern European countries in particular display a higher average level of affective polarization (Fig. 2.7e) on the issue of "policy toward sexual minorities." Italy shows the highest value, with an average polarization score of 5.0, followed by Spain with 4.8 and Greece with 4.5. Czechia and France, on the other hand, show the lowest average levels of polarization, with respective scores of 3.5 and 3.9. Interestingly, among the entire group of 20,449 respondents, women are on average slightly more polarized than men on this issue (average score of 4.3 vs. 4.2). Once again, however, the most significant differences emerge when we look at respondents' self-positioning on the left or right side of the political spectrum. We see here that people locating themselves on the left are more polarized on this issue, and that the share of maximally polarized individuals within this group is significantly higher (25%) than among those who position themselves on the right (15%) or in the center (13%). This is also reflected in average polarization scores, which are 5.6 for the group on the left, 4.0 for those on the right and 3.7 for those in the political center. A look at voting intentions reveals a similar pattern. Here, the groups voting for parties in the left-green spectrum show the largest shares of maximum polarization (between 22 and 26%). Conservatives and Christian Democrats, on the other hand, show the least amount of polarization on the issue (maximally polarized share of 11%).

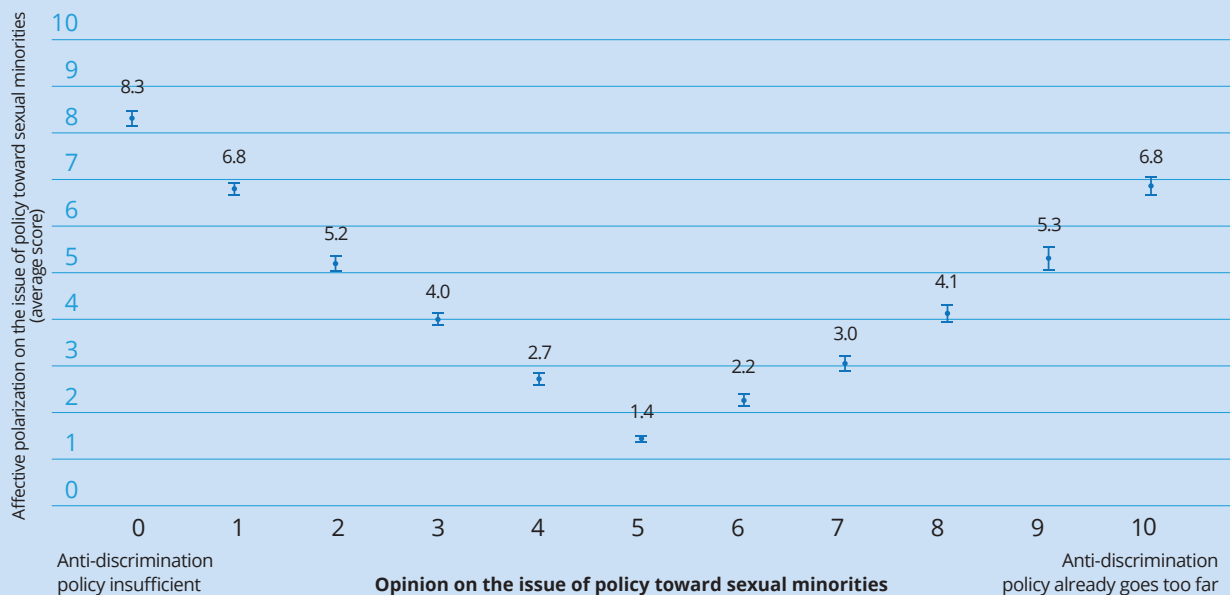
Fig. 2.7c: Distribution of distances (affective polarization) on the issue of policy toward sexual minorities (%)



Note: Based on the evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People who think that **much more must be done** to combat discrimination against sexual minorities (such as homosexual or transsexual people)" and "people who think that policies intended to combat discrimination against sexual minorities (such as homosexual or transsexual people) **already go much too far**." Respondents could rate their feelings toward each of the groups of people on an 11-point scale ranging from "-5 - Very cool and negative" to "+5 - Very warm and positive." The resulting figure, ranging from "0 - No affective polarization" to "10 - Maximum affective polarization," represents the distance between the respondent's numerically expressed feelings toward the two groups of persons. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. 2.7d: Affective polarization according to self-positioning on the issue of policy toward sexual minorities (average scores and confidence intervals)

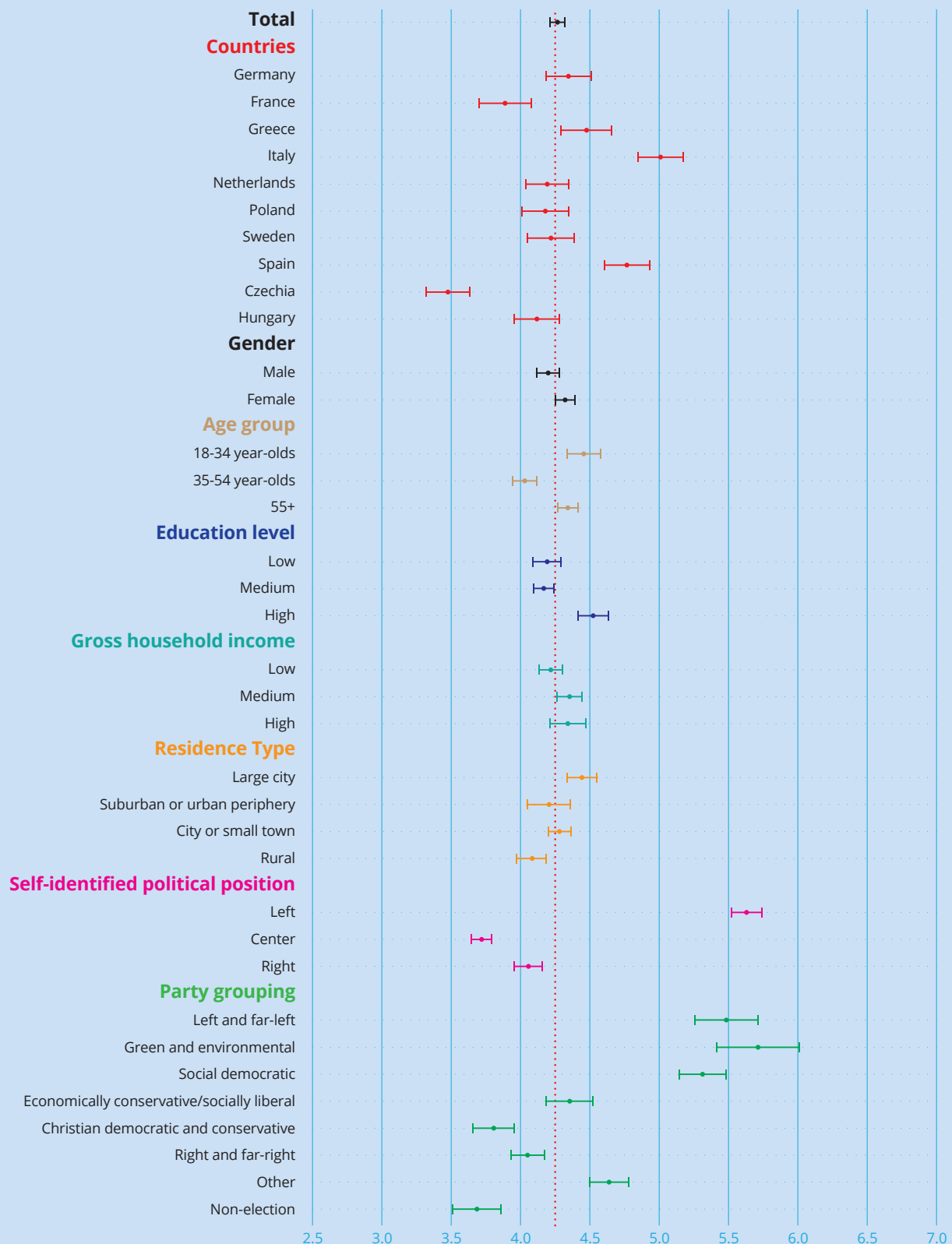


Note: Y-axis: Affective polarization on the issue of policy toward sexual minorities based on evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People who think **much more must be done** to combat discrimination against sexual minorities (such as homosexual or transsexual people)" and "people who think that policies to combat discrimination against sexual minorities (such as homosexual or transsexual people) **already go much too far**." The figure depicts the average distance (with associated 95% confidence intervals) between respondents' evaluations of these two groups.

X-axis: Self-identified position on the issue of policy toward sexual minorities. Survey question: "There are different opinions on the issue of policies toward sexual minorities. Where would you place your personal opinion here?" Respondents were asked to position themselves between "0 - To combat discrimination against sexual minorities (such as homosexual or transsexual people), much more must be done" and "10 - Policies to combat discrimination against sexual minorities (such as homosexual or transsexual people) already go much too far." Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. 2.7e: Average level of affective polarization on the issue of policy toward sexual minorities, by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics (average scores and confidence intervals)



Note: Affective polarization (average scores with associated 95% confidence intervals) based on evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People who think **much more must be done** to combat discrimination against sexual minorities (such as homosexual or transsexual people)" and "people who think that policies to combat discrimination against sexual minorities (such as homosexual or transsexual people) **already go much too far**." The data is grouped by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 20,449, except for gross household income and party groupings, where n = at least 16,569; missing values = "don't know"/no answer).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

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LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1.1: Countries surveyed	p. 13
Fig. 1.2: Issue areas	p. 14
Fig. 1.1a: Affective polarization index by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics (average index values and confidence intervals)	p. 22
Fig. 1.2a: Affective polarization by issue (average scores and confidence intervals) and share of maximally polarized (%)	p. 27
Fig. 1.2b: Affective polarization according to self-positioning within an issue area (average scores and confidence intervals)	p. 28
Fig. 1.2c: Percentage of those within each opinion group who are the most strongly polarized, by issue area (%)	p. 29
Fig. 1.3a: Salience of various issue areas in Europe (average scores)	p. 31
Fig. 1.3b: Affective polarization on the issue of immigration by salience (average scores and confidence intervals), with associated shares of opinion groups (%)	p. 32
Fig. 1.3c: Affective polarization on the issue of climate change by salience (average scores and confidence intervals), with associated shares of opinion groups (%)	p. 33
Fig. 1.4a: Measured affective polarization and subjective perception of division by topic (average values of responses)	p. 35
Fig. 1.4b: Subjective perception of division on a topic, by self-identified position in the respective issue area (average scores and confidence intervals)	p. 36
Fig. 2.1a: Attitudes on the issue of immigration policy (%)	p. 41
Fig. 2.1b: Attitudes toward groups of people with different opinions on the issue of immigration (%)	p. 42
Fig. 2.1c: Distribution of distances (affective polarization) on the issue of immigration (%)	p. 43
Fig. 2.1d: Average level of affective polarization according to self-positioning on the issue of immigration (average scores and confidence intervals)	p. 43
Fig. 2.1e: Average level of affective polarization on the issue of immigration, by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics (average scores and confidence intervals)	p. 45
Fig. 2.2a: Attitudes on the issue of the war in Ukraine (%)	p. 47
Fig. 2.2b: Attitudes toward groups of people with different opinions on the issue of the war in Ukraine (%)	p. 47
Fig. 2.2c: Distribution of distances (affective polarization) on the issue of the war in Ukraine (%)	p. 48
Fig. 2.2d: Average level of affective polarization according to self-positioning on the issue of the war in Ukraine (average scores and confidence intervals)	p. 49
Fig. 2.2e: Average level of affective polarization on the issue of the war in Ukraine, by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics (average scores and confidence intervals)	p. 51
Fig. 2.3a: Attitudes toward the issue of pandemics such as COVID-19 (%)	p. 53
Fig. 2.3b: Attitudes toward groups of people with different opinions on the issue of pandemics such as COVID-19 (%)	p. 54
Fig. 2.3c: Distribution of distances (affective polarization) on the issue of pandemics such as COVID-19 (%)	p. 54

Fig. 2.3d: Average level of affective polarization according to self-positioning on the issue of pandemics such as COVID-19 (average scores and confidence intervals)	p.55
Fig. 2.3e: Average level of affective polarization on the issue of pandemics such as COVID-19, by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics (average scores and confidence intervals)	p. 57
Fig. 2.4a: Attitudes on the issue of climate change policy (%)	p. 59
Fig. 2.4b: Attitudes toward groups of people with different opinions on the issue of climate change (%)	p. 60
Fig. 2.4c: Distribution of distances (affective polarization) on the issue of climate change (%)	p. 60
Fig. 2.4d: Average level of affective polarization according to self-positioning on the issue of climate change (average scores and confidence intervals)	p. 61
Fig. 2.4e: Average level of affective polarization on the issue of climate change, by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics (average scores and confidence intervals)	p. 63
Fig. 2.5a: Attitudes on the issue of social benefits and their financing (%)	p. 65
Fig. 2.5b: Attitudes toward groups of people with different opinions on the issue of social benefits and their financing (%)	p. 66
Fig. 2.5c: Distribution of distances (affective polarization) on the issue of social benefits and their financing (%)	p. 66
Fig. 2.5d: Average level of affective polarization according to self-positioning on the issue of social benefits and their financing (average scores and confidence intervals)	p. 67
Fig. 2.5e: Average level of affective polarization on the issue of social benefits and their financing, by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics (average scores and confidence intervals)	p. 69
Fig. 2.6a: Attitudes toward the issue of gender equality in society (%)	p. 71
Fig. 2.6b: Attitudes toward groups of people with different opinions on the issue of gender equality (%)	p. 72
Fig. 2.6c: Distribution of distances (affective polarization) on the issue of gender equality (%)	p. 72
Fig. 2.6d: Average level of affective polarization according to self-position on the issue of gender equality (average scores and confidence intervals)	p. 73
Fig. 2.6e: Average level of affective polarization on the issue of gender equality, by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics (average scores and confidence intervals)	p. 75
Fig. 2.7a: Attitudes on the issue of policy toward sexual minorities (%)	p. 77
Fig. 2.7b: Attitudes toward groups of people with different opinions on the issue of policies toward sexual minorities (%)	p. 78
Fig. 2.7c: Distribution of distances (affective polarization) on the issue of policy toward sexual minorities (%)	p. 79
Fig. 2.7d: Affective polarization according to self-positioning on the issue of policy toward sexual minorities (average scores and confidence intervals)	p. 79
Fig. 2.7e: Average level of affective polarization on the issue of policy toward sexual minorities, by country, sociodemographic features and political characteristics (average scores and confidence intervals)	p. 80

ANNEX

Party family	Country	Party
Left and far-left	DE	Die Linke
Left and far-left	FR	Mélenchon (FI)
Left and far-left	GR	Synaspismos Rizospastikis Aristeras (SYRIZA)
Left and far-left	GR	Kommounistikó Kómma Elládas (KKE)
Left and far-left	NL	Socialistische Partij (SP)
Left and far-left	SE	Vänsterpartiet (V)
Left and far-left	ES	Unidos Podemos (UP)
Left and far-left	ES	Más País (M)
Green and environmental	DE	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen
Green and environmental	FR	Jadot (EELV)
Green and environmental	IT	Nuove Energie (NE)
Green and environmental	GR	Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (MeRA25)
Green and environmental	NL	GroenLinks (GL)
Green and environmental	SE	Miljöpartiet de Gröna (MP)
Social democratic	DE	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD)
Social democratic	GR	Kinima Allagis (KINAL)
Social democratic	IT	Partito Democratico (PD)
Social democratic	IT	Liberi e Uguali (LeU)
Social democratic	NL	Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA)
Social democratic	PL	Lewica
Social democratic	SE	Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti (S)
Social democratic	ES	Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)
Liberal	DE	Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP)
Liberal	FR	Macron (LREM)
Liberal	IT	Italia Viva (IV)
Liberal	IT	Più Europa (+EU)
Liberal	NL	Democraten 66 (D66)
Liberal	NL	Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD)
Liberal	PL	Koalicja Obywatelska (KO)
Liberal	SE	Liberalerna (L)
Liberal	ES	Ciudadanos (Cs)
Liberal	CZ	Politické hnutí ANO 2011 (ANO)
Conservative and Christian democrat	DE	Union (CDU & CSU)
Conservative and Christian democrat	FR	Lassalle (RI)
Conservative and Christian democrat	FR	Pécresse (LR)
Conservative and Christian democrat	GR	Nea Dimokratia (ND)
Conservative and Christian democrat	IT	Forza Italia (FI)
Conservative and Christian democrat	NL	Christen-Democratisch Appèl (CDA)
Conservative and Christian democrat	PL	PSL – Koalicja Polska (KP)
Conservative and Christian democrat	SE	Kristdemokraterna (KD)
Conservative and Christian democrat	SE	Moderate samlingspartiet (M)
Conservative and Christian democrat	ES	Partido Popular (PP)
Conservative and Christian democrat	CZ	SPOLU
Conservative and Christian democrat	HU	Mindenki Magyarországa Mozgalom (MMM)
Right and far-right	DE	Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)
Right and far-right	FR	Le Pen (RN)
Right and far-right	FR	Zemmour (REC)
Right and far-right	GR	Elliniki Lysi (EL)
Right and far-right	IT	Fratelli d'Italia (FDI)
Right and far-right	IT	Lega
Right and far-right	NL	Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)

Party family	Country	Party
Right and far-right	NL	Forum voor Democratie (FvD)
Right and far-right	PL	Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość (KON)
Right and far-right	PL	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS)
Right and far-right	SE	Sverigedemokraterna (SD)
Right and far-right	ES	VOX
Right and far-right	CZ	Svoboda a přímá demokracie (SPD)
Right and far-right	HU	Fidesz
Right and far-right	HU	Mi Hazánk Mozgalom (MHM)
Other	IT	Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S)
Other	SE	Centerpartiet (C)
Other	ES	Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC)
Other	CZ	Česká pirátská strana (PaS)

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PROFILE

The Mercator Forum for Migration and Democracy (MIDEM) examines about the impact of migration on democratic institutions, policies and cultures and looks into political decision making processes in the field of migration policies- in individual countries and in a comparative view of Europe. A spotlight is put on the relation between migration and populism.

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- Advising policy-makers and civil society
- Establishing international networks
- Providing a forum for public debates

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