

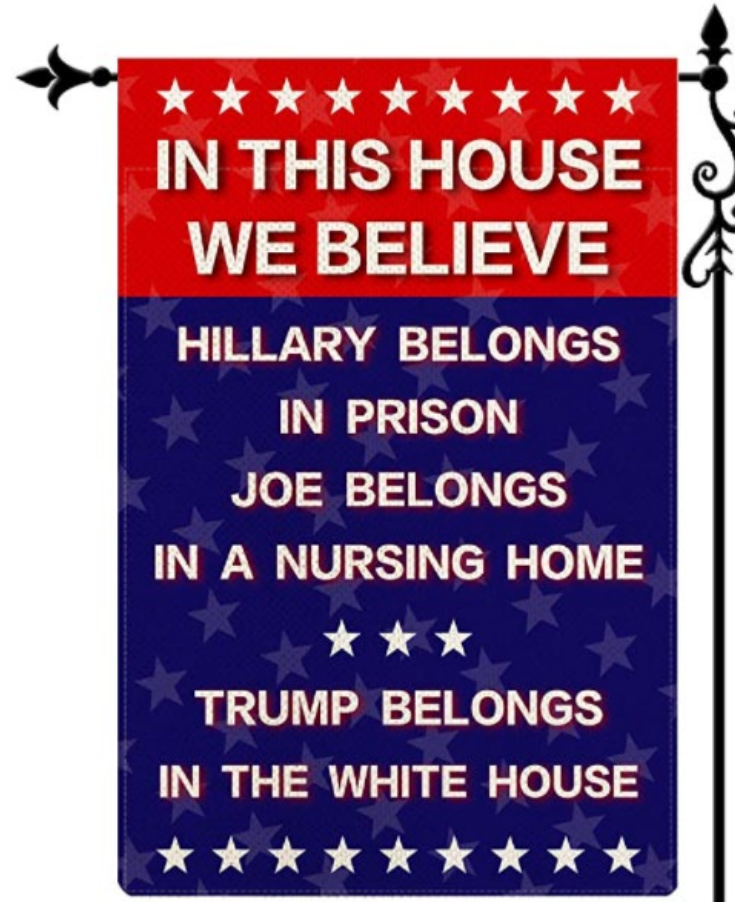
What Explains Country-Level Differences in Belief System Coherence?

Philip Warncke
UNC Chapel Hill

pwarncke@live.unc.edu
Prepared for EPSA 2023, Glasgow

June 21, 2023

What are political belief systems?



What are political belief systems?

- Political belief systems govern how different idea elements relate to, depend on, and interact with one another
- Differ in providing functional interdependence (a.k.a. “constraint”) between distinct ideas and attitudes about politics
- Well-structured (“constrained”, or “coherent”) belief system features many, mutually reinforcing ties between different political idea elements
- Poorly structured belief systems have fewer, more loosely connected, disjoint elements
- Belief systems influence political information processing and attitude formation

Theory and research question

- Past research investigates the properties of collective-level belief systems (e.g. Converse, 1969; Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2017; Maxwell, 2019; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Baldassarri & Goldberg, 2014; Cornelis et.al., 2009; Boutyline & Vaisey 2017)
 - but no systematic comparison of belief system cohesion at the national level
- Comparative studies on citizens' ideological orientations imply cross-national variation in issue anchoring of symbolic ideology (e.g. Inglehart & Klingemann 1976; Fuchs & Klingemann 1990; Freire 2006; 2008)

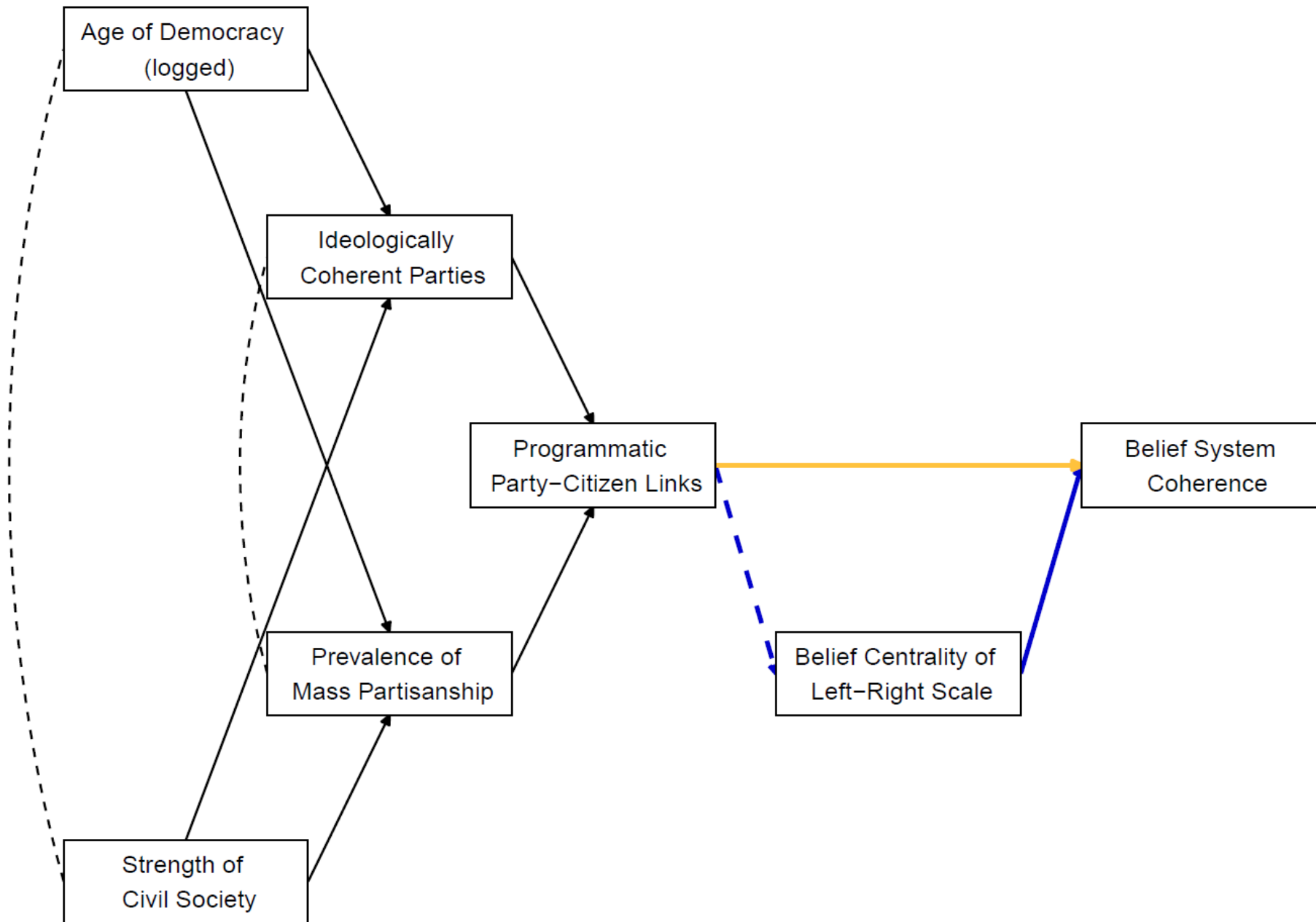
Theory and research question

- Past research investigates the properties of collective-level belief systems (e.g. Converse, 1969; Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2017; Maxwell, 2019; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Baldassarri & Goldberg, 2014; Cornelis et.al., 2009; Boutyline & Vaisey 2017)
 - but no systematic comparison of belief system cohesion at the national level
- Comparative studies on citizens' ideological orientations imply cross-national variation in issue anchoring of symbolic ideology (e.g. Inglehart & Klingemann 1976; Fuchs & Klingemann 1990; Freire 2006; 2008)
- **Do some national belief systems exhibit more constraint than others?**

Theory & hypothesis

Political parties act as mediators between elite supply and mass demand for ideological attitude content

- H1: Countries with a higher density of programmatic party-citizen linkages are more likely to sustain highly constrained mass attitude systems
- H2: Belief system centrality of abstract ideological symbols (i.e. “left-right” placements) mediates effect of party-citizen links on belief system centrality

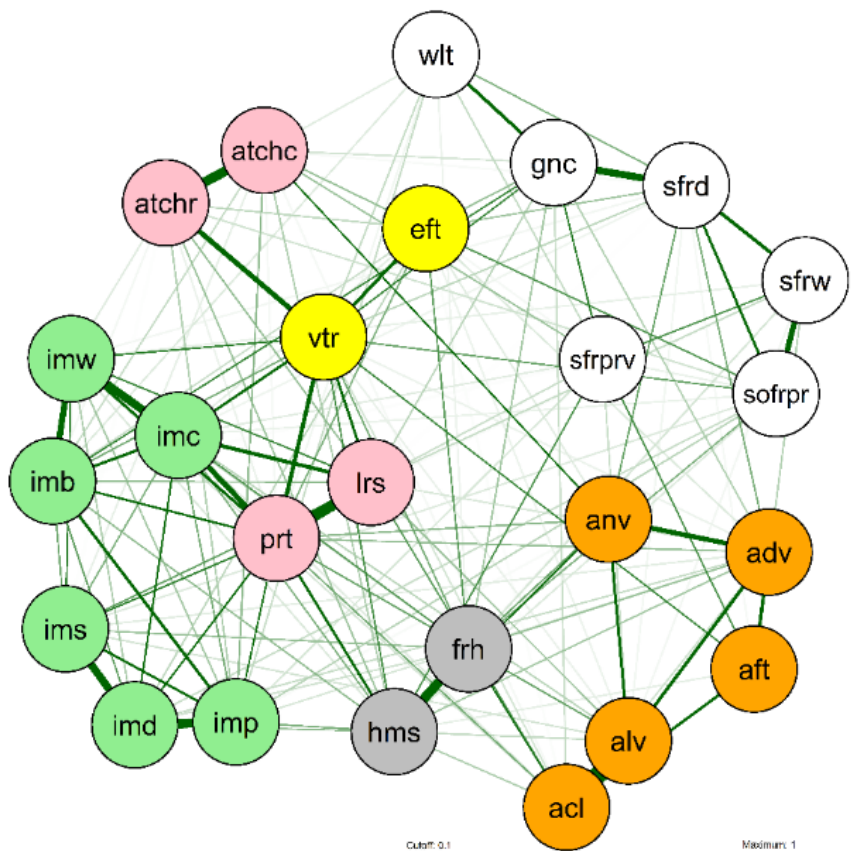


Methodology

- Country-level belief systems can be modeled as statistical networks
- Core of eight political issue & identity items asked across all nine waves of the European Social Survey (ESS)
- Uneven panel of 38 countries covered between 2002 and 2022; n = 242 bi-annual country-level belief systems
- Network estimation using absolute polychoric correlation matrices for each country year
- Key quantity of interest: Network average path length
 - Step 1: calculate the relative distance between any pair of nodes
 - Step 2: determine the shortest path between any pair of nodes
 - Step 3: take the average among all shortest paths within network

Slovenia: 2018

Slovenia

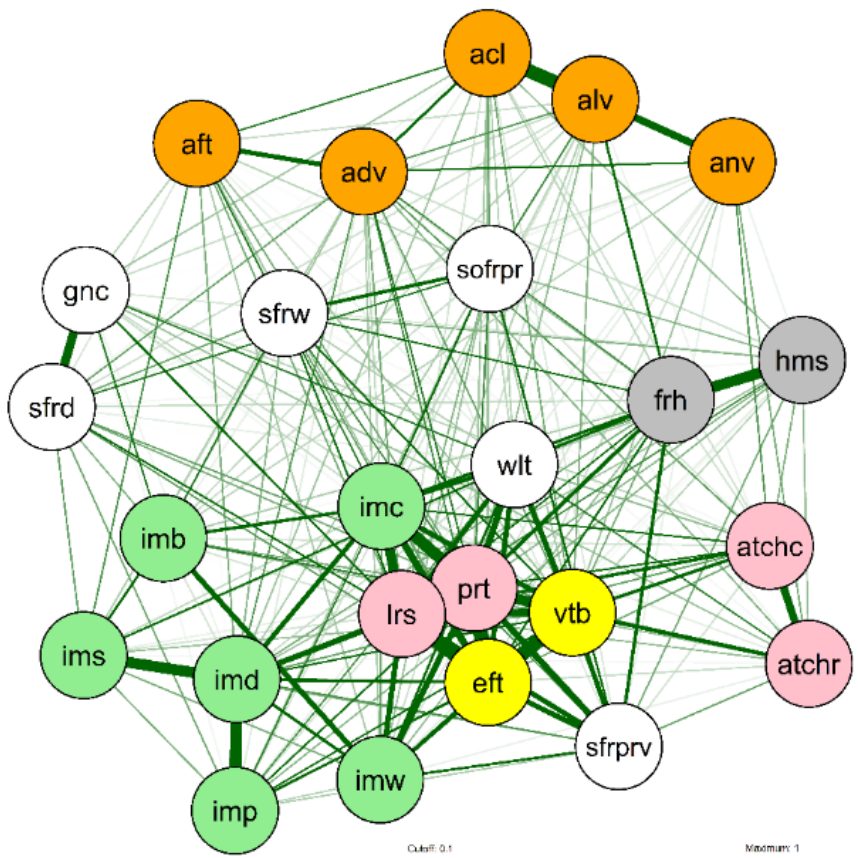


Cutoff: 0.1 Maximum: 1

AVPL: 6.14

Switzerland: 2018

Switzerland



Cutoff: 0.1 Maximum: 1

AVPL: 4.26

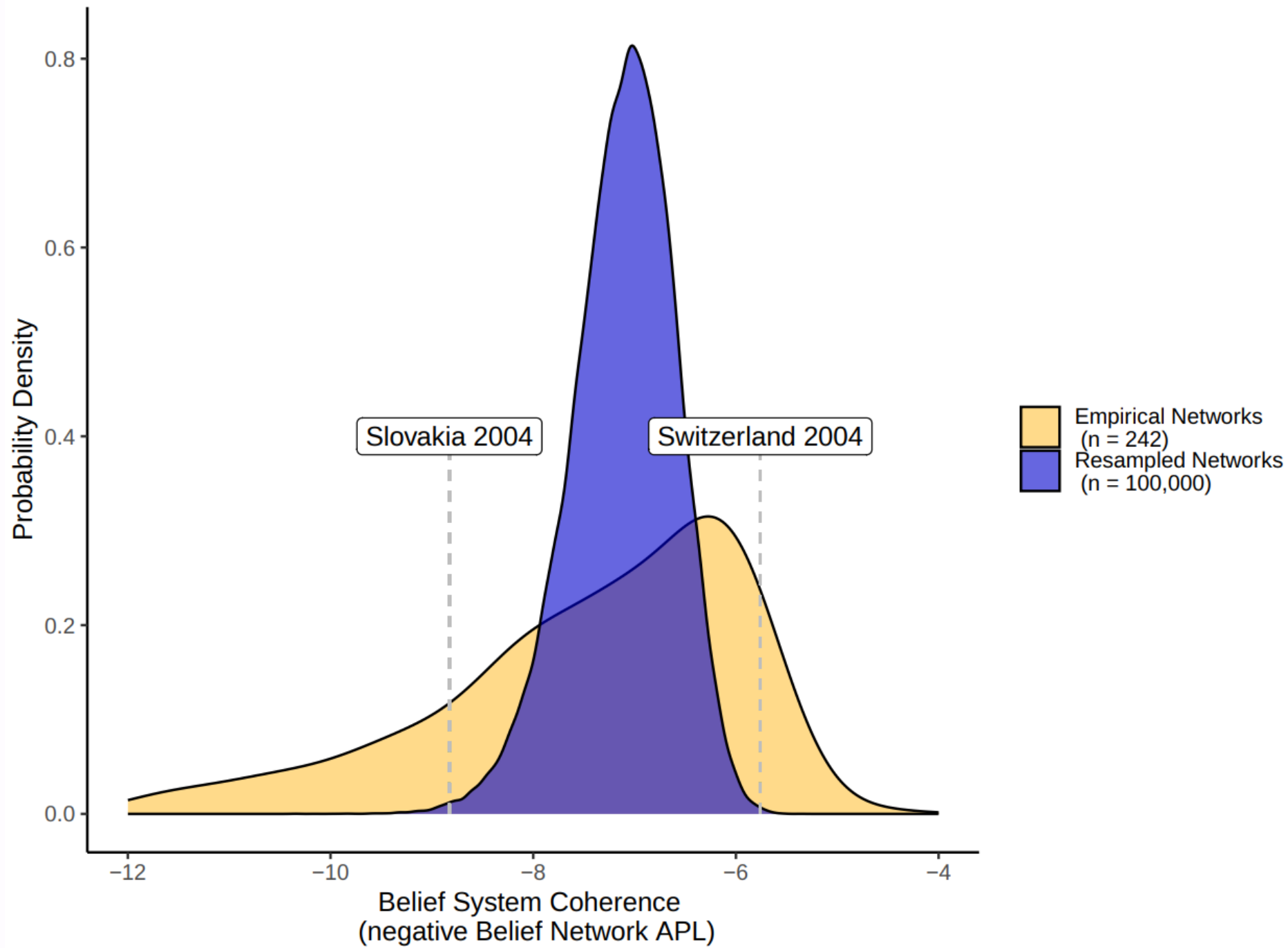
Descriptive inference: Key questions

1. How sizable are differences in average path-length across countries?
2. Are structural differences in country-level belief system coherence attributable to stable, country-level factors ?

Descriptive inference I: Are cross-national differences meaningful?

Table 2: Average-Path-Length Descriptive Statistics						
Percentile	1st Percentile	1st Quartile	Median	Mean	3rd Quartile	99th Percentile
Estimated (empirical) Networks	4.116	5.383	6.253	6.407	7.345	8.879
Resampled (reference) Networks	6.369	7.007	7.301	7.34	7.635	8.627

Top row: Empirical belief system networks based on ESS-country years. Bottom row: Simulation based networks (n=10,000) based on 1,000 randomly selected ESS respondents.



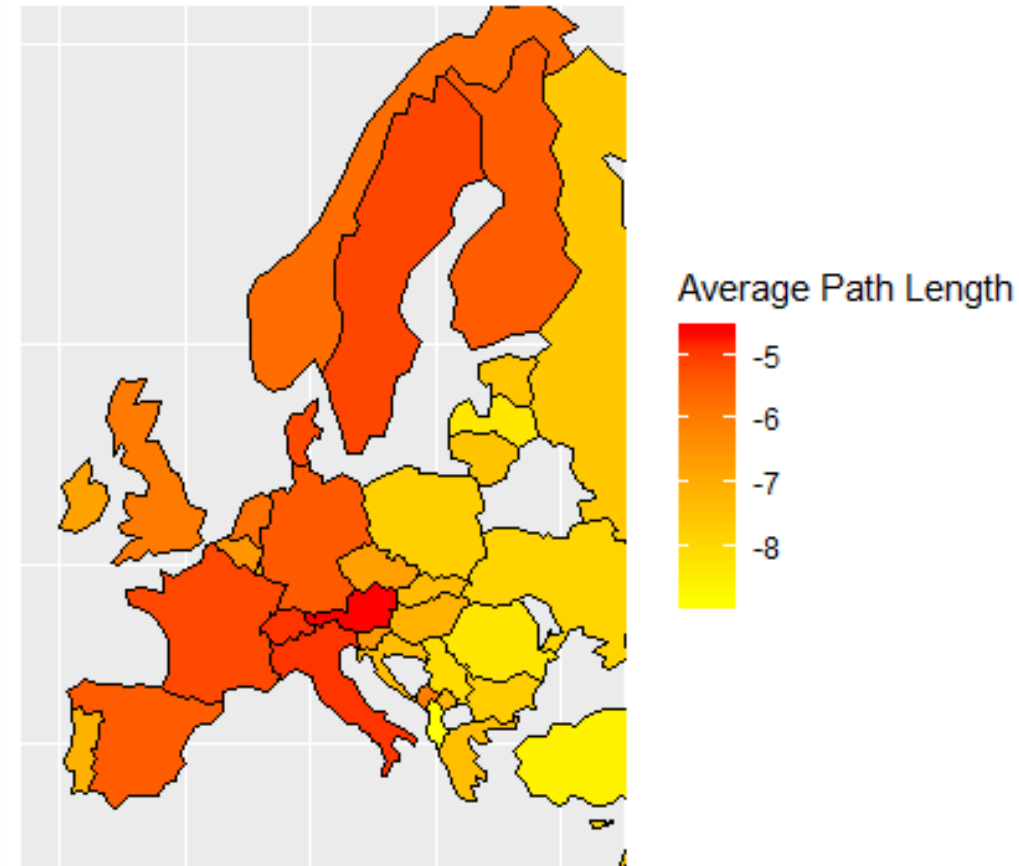
Descriptive inference II: Are cross-national differences attributable to stable, country-level effects?

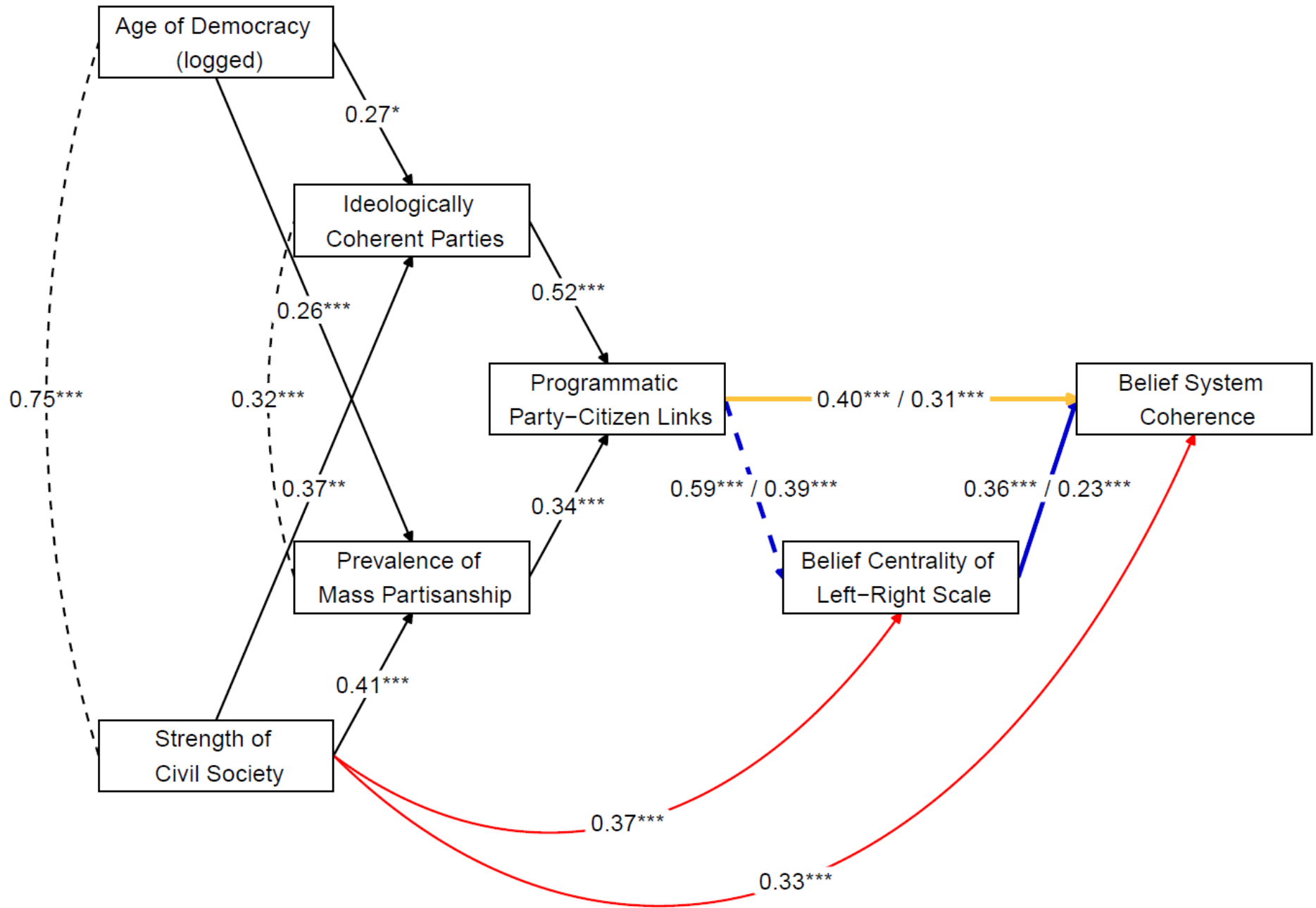
Table 1: Fixed-Effects Model Fit Predicting Belief System Cohesion

Model	R-Squared	Adj. R-Squared
Country-Fixed Effects	0.76	0.71
ESS Wave-Fixed Effects	0.12	0.09
Country & Wave-FE	0.82	0.78
Number of observations = 232		

Descriptive inference: Summary

- Differences in country-level belief-system coherence are
 - Sizable (not likely due to random fluctuations)
 - Stable (attributable to country, not temporal-level)





Conclusions

- Cross-national differences in belief-system coherence are sizable and attributable to relatively stable, national level particularities
- Countries which feature cohesive parties, programmatic party-citizen linkage exhibit higher degrees of belief system coherence
- Effect is mediated by relative belief system centrality of left-right ideology
- Bottom-up influence (strong civil societies) show unexpected, direct effect on country-level belief system constraint

Limitations

- Relatively small issue sample ($k=8$)
- No causal inference (results should be treated as exploratory)