What Explains Country-Level Differences in Political Belief System Coherence?

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Abstract: Public opinion research has made incredible progress in identifying the conditions under which individual- and group-level factors induce citizens to form coherent political attitudes, yet comparatively little attention has been given to the role of national political context for belief system constraint. By modeling political beliefs as dedicated statistical networks based on social surveys covering 38 European countries between 2002 and 2020, I show that national-level belief systems vary substantially and systematically in attitude constraint. I theoretically motivate and empirically support a path mediation model that explains country-level belief system coherence as jointly driven by the elite- supply and mass-demand for programmatic party-citizen linkages. Compared with elite-centered explanations, bottom-up drivers such as dense civil society organizations and high levels of civic activism emerge as surprisingly strong and direct predictors of mass belief coherence. Furthermore, where symbolic, ideological identities are central to political attitude systems, mass beliefs tend to be more coherent overall.

Key words: Mass belief systems, attitude constraint, comparative belief system structure, belief network analysis, European Social Surveys (ESS)

Word Count: 8406

Introduction

Past research has made tremendous advances towards understanding the drivers of public attitude coherence, documenting the importance of individual-level factors such as political knowledge, interest, and partisanship to citizens' ability to access, integrate, and reconcile a wide range of political beliefs (Converse 1964; Nie and Andersen 1974; Conover and Feldman 1981; Feldman 1988; Zaller 1992; Galston 2001; Jost et al., 2008; Boutyline and Vaisey, 2017). However, the vast majority of extant studies on mass belief structure is based either on single-country (e.g., Daenekindt et al., 2017; Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017; Brandt et.al., 2019; Pan and Xu, 2020) or transnational (e.g., Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2017) analyses, which has likely limited our insights about how national-level particularities influence attitude constraint. I argue that the national character of party-citizen relations establishes crucial perimeters for the overall consistency of citizens' political attitudes. By comparing belief system networks generated from ten waves of the European Social Surveys (2002-2020), I document substantial, cross-national variation in belief system coherence, highlight the stability of this variation over time, and propose a substantive explanation.

My contribution is twofold. First, I introduce and validate a new measure of aggregate attitude constraint based on correlational pathlengths in belief system networks. Second, I theorize and empirically confirm that country-level variation in mass attitude constraint partially stems from systematic differences in party-citizen relations that have developed over time. In a nutshell, countries with earlier transitions to democracy are more likely to experience party competition that is structured by long-standing societal cleavages (Bartolini and Mair, 1990; Rovny and Polk, 2019). Cleavage-driven politics, in turn, demands more programmatically consistent parties who transmit ideologically coherent attitudes to partisan audiences (Mainwaring and Zoco, 2007). More abundant, politically active civil society organizations also exert greater bottom up pressures for

programmatically consistent politics. Conversely, I anticipate weaker ideological linkages between parties and citizens, and as a result, lower attitude constraint in more recent democracies, such as in post-communist Europe, where politicians are generally less constrained by party affiliations and can more freely adjust ideological messaging to suit their short-term calculus (Howard, 2003; Pop-Eleches, 2010).

The results of my path-mediation model indicate that party systems characterized by programmatic-ideological linkages are indeed more likely to sustain well-constrained mass attitude systems. However, my initial analysis underestimates the direct influence of organized civil societies. In the final section of the paper, I discuss the implications of a revised model that better incorporates grassroots political activism as an independent driver of belief system coherence.

Methodologically, the present work showcases how statistical network models can account for structural dependencies across different levels of analysis. In particular, my results uncover that the relative centrality of citizens' symbolic-ideological (i.e., "left-right") identities within belief system networks structurally mediates the effect of programmatic party-citizen linkages on the overall consistency of belief system networks. This discovery adds intriguing nuance to concurrent debates in political psychology about the significance of symbolic attachments within wider belief systems (Brandt et al., 2019; Fishman and Davis, 2022). Symbolic ideology is not central to mass belief systems in all countries. However, in countries where symbolic placements are central to political beliefs, belief systems tend to be more coherent overall.

Party-Citizen Linkages and Aggregate Belief System Structure

Public opinion research conceptualizes political belief systems as the set of interrelations that bind together different politically relevant ideas, attitudes, and identities (Converse, 1964; Gerring, 1997; Maynard and Mildenberger, 2018). Philip Converse (1964) famously argued that political belief systems vary in the overall degree of "constraint" - or functional interdependence - they

provide.[1] A well-constrained belief system features a multitude of interconnected beliefs which are often tied to a central idea or organizing theme and, once established, constrained belief systems shape how people process new information and evaluate novel issues (Converse, 1964; Conover and Feldman, 1981; Zaller, 1992; Jost et al., 2008; Huddy et al., 2015).

Converse (1964) was the first to demonstrate that constraint varies systematically not just among individuals but also across different segments of society. His results (p. 25-34) revealed a sharp contrast in aggregate-level belief system coherence between a sample of congressional candidates and the American public at large. An impressive array of comparative and ecological public opinion research has since documented how the content and organizational structure of political attitudes differs across communities defined by geographic location (Conover et al., 2004; Lachat, 2008; Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2017; Maxwell, 2019), socio-economic status (Martin, 2002; Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; Baldassarri and Goldberg, 2014) age, (Cornelis et al., 2009), and race/ethnicity (Lefley et al., 1993; Kinder and Sanders, 1996; Kinder and Kam, 2010). In an exceptionally thorough investigation of 44 socio-demographically defined groups, Boutyline and Vaisey (2017), for instance show that Catholics exhibit far lower degrees of overall attitude constraint than other religious communities in the United States.

If different socio-demographic groups vary noticeably in the content and organizational depth of their collective attitude structures, is there reason to expect belief system cohesion to also systematically vary across countries? Classic studies on cross-national differences in mass ideological thinking are suggestive of this. Works by Klingemann (1979) and Dalton (2013)[1996], for instance, found that the degree to which citizens attribute meaning to ideological labels varies substantially among European democracies (see also Knutsen, 1997; Freire, 2006; Lachat, 2008).

[1] I use the terms "coherence" and "constraint" interchangeably throughout this manuscript.

This variation motivated subsequent researchers to stipulate that the political context in which citizens receive political information may affect the structure of belief systems largely independent of individual level factors - such as political interest and sophistication - that drive citizens' ability and motivation to form ideologically coherent attitudes (Gordon and Segura, 1997; Kuklinski and Peyton, 2007; Carroll and Kubo, 2018; Gonthier and Guerra, 2022).

I argue that the national character of the relationship between party elites and citizens is an important determinant of mass belief constraint. A long research lineage documents how political parties mediate political positioning between citizens and elites (Schattschneider, 1942; Campbell et al., 1960; Sartori, 1976; Cohen, 2003; Slothuus and Bisgaard, 2021). Parties can facilitate the transmission of ideologically consistent issue attitudes through at least two mutually re-enforcing mechanisms: First, from a top-down vantage point, politicians have incentives to transmit more coherent policy attitudes to citizen if they can rely on stable, disciplined, programmatic, and ideologically distinguishable parties as organizational vessels for electoral competition and legislative politics (Mainwaring and Zoco, 2007; Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007; Levendusky, 2010; Carroll and Kubo, 2018). Second, from a bottom-up perspective, citizens should demand more coherent political positions from party leaders in systems that foster ideological and affective bonds between voters and candidates (LaPalombara and Weiner, 1966; Converse, 1969; Huber et al., 2005; Bartolini and Mair, 1990; Dalton, 2013, p. 186–194). Together, the elite supply of and mass demand for consistent party positioning should foster informational environments that are more conducive to citizens receiving and accepting ideologically coherent attitudes (Zaller, 1992).

The extent to which political parties rely on programmatically consistent and ideologically buttressed bonds with mass publics varies considerably across the European continent. Parties were far more instrumental to the social and political emancipation of the mass citizenry in the early

democratizing states of Northwestern Europe than in Southern, and particularly, Eastern Europe (Pizzorno, 1981; Bartolini and Mair, 1990). Several historical and sociological factors converged in producing these geographic differences. First, as multi-party competition consolidated in Northwestern Europe, the programmatic differences between parties tended to become abstract—"frozen in time"—ideological representations of the social cleavages that gave rise to them (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Rovny and Polk, 2019). However, even as social conflicts shifted, societies diversified, and social groups shrank or expanded, many parties continue to show a remarkable degree of stability in their programmatic commitment to the original grievances that prompted them (Dalton and McAllister, 2015; Fagerholm, 2017; Guth and Nelson, 2019; Borbáth, 2021) and in some cases, have sustained their appeal with their original core constituencies. For instance, Marks et al. (2023) show that smaller and medium sized Christian Democratic parties continue to be heavily over-represented among regular churchgoers.

Second, parties with programmatic legacies of voicing the grievances of distinctive social groups may be more adept at forging programmatic links with new distinctive social groups—extrapolating an old strategy to a new environment. For instance, several Social Democratic and Socialist parties in Western Europe have strategically responded to the steady decline in manual laborers by integrating service sector workers and socio-cultural professionals into their core constituencies (Kitschelt, 1994; Rennwald and Evans, 2014; Abou-Chadi and Hix, 2021; Hildebrandt and Jäckle, 2022).

Third, new parties also tend to have a more structured social base in Western and Northern Europe. Here, educational attainment and occupational choice strongly underpin the contemporary cleavage between green-alternative-libertarian (GAL) and traditional-authoritative-nationalist (TAN) parties (Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015; Oesch and Rennwald, 2018; Marks et al., 2023), lending

predictable grassroots support and organizational continuity to these parties. By contrast, new parties that strategically engage the GAL-TAN cleavage elsewhere in Europe show far greater social and organizational fluidity (Rovny and Polk, 2017).

Socially rooted politics in Europe's older democracies, then, induces parties to attract voters based on programmatic policy alternatives—more consistently so than in the remainder of the continent (Gunther and Diamond, 2003, p.177-179; Gunther, 2005). During election campaigns, parties and their programmatic commitments tend to matter more than the idiosyncrasies of individual candidates (Mainwaring and Torcal, 2006; Wlezien and Jennings, 2023). Politicians, in turn, value predictable levels of grassroots support by ideologically motivated rank-and-file partisans. Over time, these dynamics foster both intra-party ideological alignment and inter-party ideological differentiation (Bartolini and Mair, 1990). Where the same parties have existed for decades, party labels are also more likely to afford voters with lasting anchors to evaluate the performance of past policy delivery, set expectations for the type of policies future governments will likely implement, and provide a stable basis for inter-generational transmission of partisan attachments (Converse, 1969; Dalton and Weldon, 2007).

Strong programmatic ties between parties and citizens are less common in Europe's post-communist space where decades of totalitarian rule have prevented similar legacies of socially anchored, multi-party competition (Mair, 1997; Kitschelt et al., 1999; Pop-Eleches, 2010). Voters in Europe's newer democracies are instead more likely to choose candidates on the basis of their personal characteristics, such as charisma or populist appeal (Gunther and Diamond 2003, p.187-188; Pop-Eleches 2010). Personalistic systems, in turn, are more susceptible to corruption and graft as an electoral strategy (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007). In these systems, it makes less sense for voters to learn about parties' ideological reputations since benefits are mostly given on a selective,

quid-pro-quo basis (Mares and Young, 2019; Szanyi, 2022). Paternalistic elites are consequently less bound to parties as organizational vessels for stirring up grass-root support and can more freely alter ideological messaging if it opportunistically serves their interests (Enyedi, 2016; Szanyi, 2022). Politicians also face fewer repercussions for switching parties or failing to deliver on key policy promises (Semenova, 2015; Enyedi, 2016). Party systems characterized by more personalist and clientelist linkages thus harbor fewer incentives for elites transmit and for citizens to adopt ideologically structured attitudes.

In short, greater ideological differentiation among political elites and stronger partisan attachments among the mass citizenry should lead to more programmatically structured party-citizen linkages. These linkages, in turn, are key prerequisites for citizens to receive and accept ideologically consistent messages and subsequently form more constrained attitudes. I summarize the main empirical expectation in hypothesis H1:

Hypothesis H1: *More programmatically structured party-citizen linkages lead to greater mass belief system coherence.*

The Mediating Role of Symbolic Ideological Attachments

In addition to attitude constraint, public opinion scholars frequently focus on the concept of centrality as key to explaining the structural differences between political belief systems (Converse, 1964; Dalton, 2013; Brandt et al., 2019; Fishman and Davis, 2022). Converse (1964) conceptualized the centrality of belief system elements in terms of their relative importance to the structural integrity and temporal stability of the wider system. More central elements are deemed more important insofar as they stabilize and build bridges between other, more peripheral belief system components. Converse (1964, p. 40) also claimed that affective attachments to social groups are more likely to be central to the belief systems of ordinary citizens. Follow-up research has largely confirmed this,

showing that people's symbolic attachments to salient groups, political parties, and ideological symbols occupy more central positions in mass belief systems (Boutyline and Vaisey, 2017; Brandt, Sibley, and Osborne, 2019; Fishman and Davis, 2022). Interestingly, scholars from conceptually distant schools of thought, such as rational choice theory and social cognition research, have long argued that symbolic attachments to an ideological summary position can foster belief system integration by helping people cognitively reduce the complexity of the political world around them (Downs, 1957; Campbell et al., 1960; Klingemann, 1979; Conover and Feldman, 1981).

Comparative research on European public opinion spheres, in turn, suggests that national belief systems likely exhibit systematic differences in the relative centrality of people's attachments to symbolic ideological labels. Inglehart and Klingemann (1976), for instance, argued that the issue anchoring of the ubiquitous left-right ideological summary scale depends on citizens' incentives to form stable identities with socially identifiable groups and organizations - the most important of which the authors identified as political parties. Greater ideological clarity among policy position signals from political parties should therefore help citizens better connect their ideological identities with substantive issue beliefs (Knutsen, 1997; Freire, 2006; Lachat, 2008). Programmatically and ideologically reinforced bonds between citizens and parties should thus not only foster greater consistency between issue attitudes more broadly, but also lead to a greater centrality of the symbolic left-right identities within mass belief systems.

Together, the literatures on the micro-structure of mass belief systems and comparative public opinion point to an important, mediating role of symbolic ideological attachments: Political systems in which parties establish lasting programmatic links with citizens should increase the centrality of left-right identities within mass belief systems. The centrality of such ideological summary positions should, in turn, foster belief system cohesion at large. Symbolic endorsements on the left-right scale should thus function as a mediator in the main causal hypothesis outlined in H1. Hypothesis H2

summarizes this prediction:[2]

Hypothesis H2: *The belief centrality of symbolic ideological attachments partially mediates the belief system structuring effect of programmatic party-citizen boundaries.*

A Model of National-level Belief System Constraint

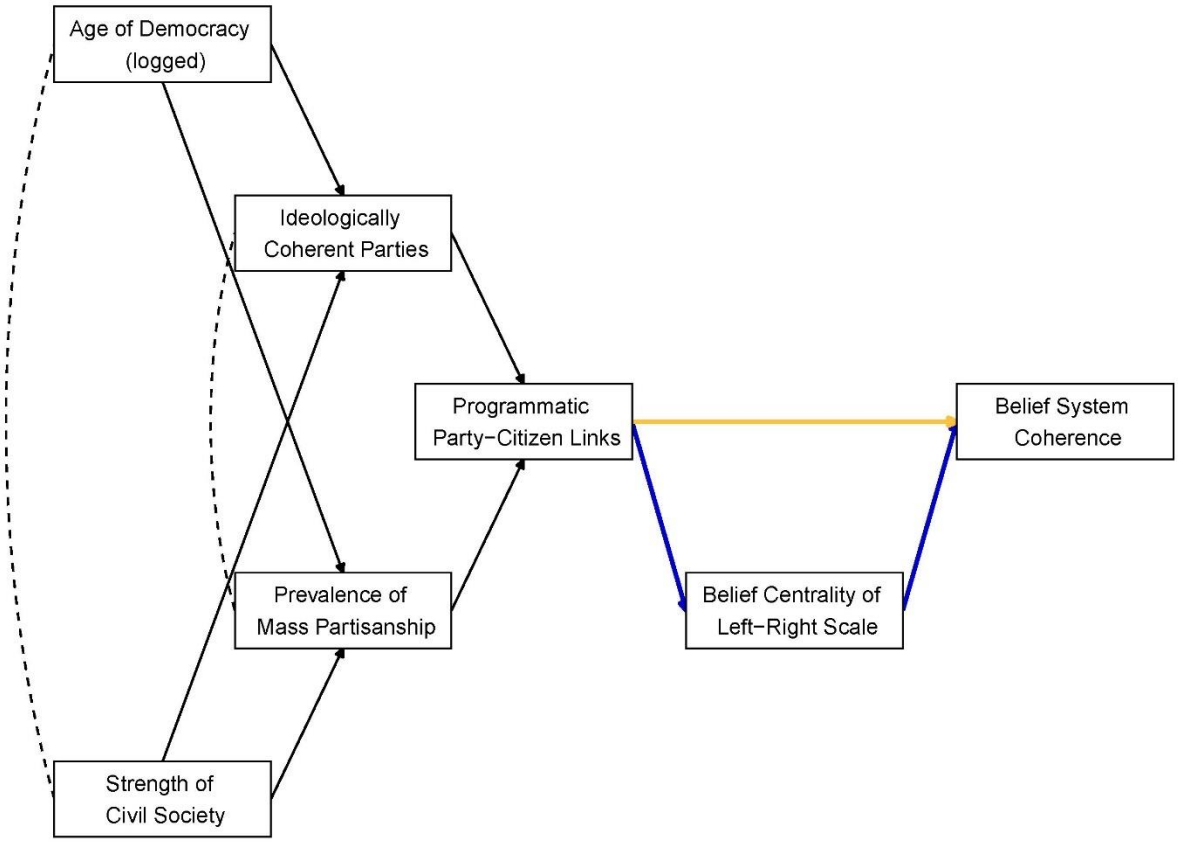
The theoretical framework outlined above implies that programmatic party-citizen linkages are themselves affected by several distal and proximate country-level factors. While Hypotheses H1 and H2 are testable with available cross-national survey data, multi-variate regression models offer only limited insights into the causal ordering between these country-level factors, party-citizen linkages, and mass belief constraint. I hence propose a path modeling strategy that unifies testable claims about the likely causal ordering of several drivers of country-level belief system constraint.

The full path model appears in Figure 1. Read from left to right, the model resembles a causal funnel that links more distant with more proximate drivers of mass attitude constraint. Along the vertical axis, the model differentiates between pathways originating from bottom-up, mass-focused, and top-down, elite-centered predictors. At the far left, the path model features country's democratic legacies and civil society strength as exogenous origins of mass attitude structuration. The age of democracy variable captures the differences between older and more newly established democratic regimes. Viewed from a top-down perspective, democracy is largely an elite game that requires habituation of the political class to free and fair competition (Dahl 1972). Over time, democratic rule accustoms political elites to regular electoral contestation which incentives them to form disciplined and ideologically differentiable parties as a means for routinized grass-roots

[2] Hypothesis H1 and H2 are neither mutually exclusive, nor fully contingent on one another. In case that H2 remains unsupported, H1 could still be true (i.e., there is no mediation effect). However, if H2 is supported, H1 must be true as well, although the causal effect of programmatic linkages on belief system constraint may be fully mediated by symbolic ideological endorsements (i.e., all of the effect is absorbed by the causal mediator).

electoral mobilization (path from Age of Democracy to Ideologically Coherent Parties). As outlined above, another argument supporting this link states that Europe's older democracies were better able to preserve legacies of socio-political cleavages in form of lasting ideological divisions between major political parties (Mainwaring and Zoco, 2007; Rovny and Polk, 2019). I rely on the Boix et al. (2022) regime type codes for data on the duration of democratic experience. Data for party-elite ideological differentiation stem from the V-Dem (2022) "v2psplats" variable.

Figure 1. Theoretical predictions as path regression model



Note: Hypothesis H1: Programmatic party citizen linkages lead to greater national-level belief system cohesion (yellow and blue arrow). Hypothesis H2: The belief system centrality of ideological summary positions partially mediates the effect of programmatic party-citizen links on national-level belief system centrality (blue arrows alone). Hypothesis H3: The nature and causal ordering of the theoretical links summarized in the path-regression model are broadly supported.

As party systems mature, new voters become more likely to inherit the party-affective bonds

formed by their parents and grand-parents (Dalton and Weldon, 2007). Figure 1 depicts this relationship with the path from Age of Democracy to Prevalence of Partisanship. I measure the prevalence of mass partisanship as a simple, country-level aggregate of two survey items featured in each ESS wave: whether the participant feels close to any political party in particular and how close they feel to that party.

Mass demand for programmatic, ideologically differentiated politics is also likely rooted in a society's capacity for grassroots political action. Influenced by the writings of De Tocqueville and earlier work by Almond and Verba (1963), Putnam et al. (1992) grounded the historical and sociological origins of participatory democracy in strong civil societies - that is the depth and density of a society's non-political, volunteer organizations. Following this argument, countries featuring more dense networks of civic associations should foster increased exchange of opinions, political interest, and capacity for collective political action. Citizens who are more likely to join volunteer groups are also more inclined to shape party politics by forming attachments to parties (path from Strength of Civil Society to Prevalence of Partisanship) that promote their interests and to demand programmatic discipline from their elected leaders (path from Strength of Civil Society to Ideologically Coherent Parties). I again rely on V-Dem (2022) for my country-level measure of the strength of non-political civil society organizations ("v2canonpol").

The final set of arrows in Figure 1 depict that programmatic party-citizen linkages jointly depend on top-down pressures emanating from ideologically coherent and differentiated party elites and on mass partisanship as key bottom-up driver. I employ the V-Dem's (2022) "v2psprlnks" variable which summarizes country-expert ratings of a party systems' "main or most common form of linkage to their constituents" ranging from fully "clientelist" to fully "policy/programmatic" (p.93).

If my theoretical framework is supported at large, all regression arrows shown in Figure 1

should be positive and achieve statistical significance. In addition, the model needs to accurately reproduce the underlying covariance structure in the data. I use the following fit thresholds for the path model in Figure 1: CFI > 0.95, TLI > 0.95, SRMR < 0.05, lower confidence bound RMSEA < 0.05. All thresholds must be jointly met for acceptable fit.[3] Hypothesis H3 summarizes this prediction at large.

Hypothesis H3: *The nature and causal ordering of the theoretical connections summarized in the path-regression model are broadly supported by empirical data.*

Data and Methodology

While public opinion scholars have long conceptualized political belief systems as networks of interconnected beliefs (Converse, 1964; Klingemann, 1979; Pachucki and Breiger, 2010; Dalton, 2013, p.18), researchers have only recently begun to model attitude networks as dedicated statistical objects (Baldassarri and Goldberg, 2014; Boutyline and Vaisey, 2017; Brandt et al., 2019; Gonthier and Guerra, 2022). A key advantage of belief network analysis over traditional, bi-variate association-based methods to analyzing mass attitude coherence is the ability to simultaneously assess the relative importance of belief system components as well as the system's overall level of constraint (Costantini et al., 2015; Boutyline and Vaisey, 2017). Instead of focusing on the relationship between a few issue items at a time, network models estimate the overall degree of belief system coherence alongside structural metrics about the relative importance of each element. Researchers can, for example, estimate how much the relative centrality of individual political attitude components influences the structural cohesion of belief networks on the system level.

Furthermore, belief system networks require no prior assumptions about ideological

[3] See Chen et al., (2008) and Hu and Bentler, (1999) for similar recommendations.

dimensionality. Converse (1964) operationalized belief system constraint in terms of how well respondents' answers mapped onto the liberal-conservative divide in American politics. Network models possess significantly greater flexibility as remain agnostic about the directionality of attitude correlations. In this way, belief network models take a strong connection between pro-LGTBQ and anti-immigration attitudes as a marker of belief system constraint if this specific attitude combination is prevalent among respondents in a particular country (Daenekindt et al., 2017; Lancaster, 2020). Belief network analysis is therefore more resilient to bias from scholars' preconceived notions about which attitudes should be logically, or ideologically related.

Belief Network Estimation

In belief system networks, attitude items (i.e. survey questions) constitute individual nodes which are connected by weighted, correlational edges; these edge weights are equivalent to the absolute strength of the bi-variate correlations between each pair of items (Costantini et al., 2015). To estimate national-level belief system networks, I first obtained the absolute value of the polychoric correlation between each attitude pair pertaining to a single country-wave.[4] The complete attitude correlation matrix can subsequently be interpreted as a weighted, unidirectional graph representing the structure of a country's belief system for a given survey year. To ensure optimal sparseness in the resulting belief system networks, I additionally employed Constantini et.al.'s (2015) graphical Lasso algorithm which employs a machine-learning optimized penalty on very small correlation pairs. Because it is based on pairs of attitude-item correlations, my modeling approach is designed to capture the macro-level belief system structure of a pre-defined population - in this case, the citizens of a particular country (see Brandt et al. (2019), DellaPosta (2020), and Fishman and Davis (2022) for similar belief network estimation methods). This procedure differs from the more inductive,

[4] I rely on ESS post-stratification weights to retain national-level representativeness and cross-national comparability.

community detection-based belief network modelling strategies proposed by Goldberg (2011) and Boutyline (2017) which treats nodes as individual people and edges as relational ties based on their relative attitudinal similarities and differences (see Daenekindt et al. (2017) and Gonthier and Guerra (2022) for recent applications). Although the latter approach is well-suited to detecting self-contained ideological communities within larger populations, it has limitations in characterizing the overall structure of collective belief systems. Most importantly for the purposes of the present inquiry, it provides no direct information about which issue attitudes are more central to mass belief systems - a key prerequisite to testing hypothesis H2.

Belief average network path length as a measure of attitude constraint

I employ the belief network average path length (APL) as a key metric for capturing overall belief system constraint. The APL is an aggregate network statistic that holistically captures the strength and robustness of statistical information flow by leveraging information on all potential associational pathways contained within the same attitude system. In Online-Appendix 2, I present evidence that the APL possesses important advantages compared with conventional metrics used to assess belief system coherence. In brief, the analysis in Online-Appendix 2 suggests that the belief network APL outperforms the mean correlational strength (see Converse, 1964, Boutyline and Vaisey, 2017) and the leading eigen-value of the item correlation matrix (Stimson, 1975; Jessee, 2012; Ellis and Stimson, 2012) in detecting attitude systems that possess both a high amount and a low variability of embedded statistical information. Belief network ALP, more so than the alternative metrics, strikes a balance between qualities indicative of coherent attitude systems.

The belief network APL is defined as the mean number of steps that lie between each pair of nodes if one exclusively travels along the shortest paths between them (Albert and Barabási, 2002). For belief system networks, a shorter relative APL implies that political ideas are well integrated and

that there are few - if any - isolated sections that are difficult to reach from elsewhere in the network. Higher values on this metric instead indicate more sparse connections between nodes, inhibiting the ability of issue attitudes to influence one another. Following Newman (2001)'s approach to weighted network statistics, I calculated the APL's for each national-level belief system network by first determining the shortest correlational path between any pair of item-nodes (using Dijkstra's algorithm) and then taking the average among the thus obtained shortest path values.

Node-level measures of belief centrality

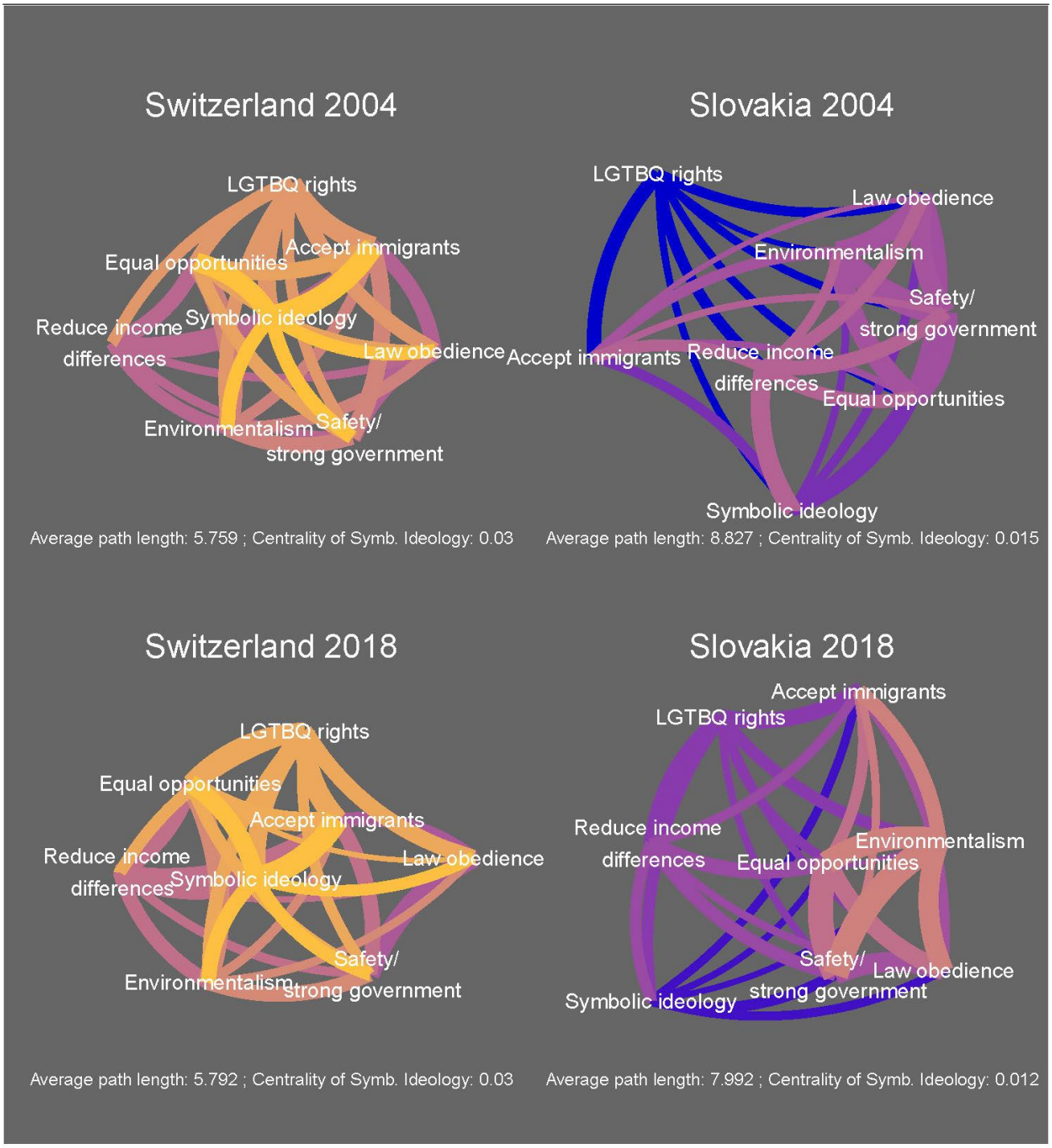
Recent applications of psychological belief network analysis have focused on three centrality measures for attitude nodes: strength, closeness, and betweenness centrality (Borgatti 2005; Brandt et al., 2019; Brandt and Sleegers, 2021; Fishman and Davis, 2022). Strength is the simplest and most general measure, defined as the average of all pairwise correlations directly involving that attitude node. Closeness is defined as the weighted inverse of the sum of the distance between a node and all other nodes in the network, and measures how efficiently a given node can influence the rest of the belief system network while betweenness simply tallies the shortest paths that pass through a given node. Since hypothesis H2 does not provide strict guidelines for selecting any particular among the aforementioned node centrality metrics, I conducted the main analysis using a common factor (extracted via principal component analysis) that combines the strength, closeness, and betweenness centrality of each attitude node within a given belief system network.

When left in their original metric, however, higher node-level centrality scores necessitate higher overall network coherence statistics which can lead to positively biased estimates. I addressed this issue by standardizing the node centrality scores within each belief system network before extracting the common centrality factors. Because standardized node centrality statistics provide relative - rather than absolute - information about the location of each node within their respective network, they avoid mathematical tautologies between network-level APL and node-level centrality

metrics. Some readers may question whether symbolic ideology is the only attitude node that can reinforce overall belief system cohesion. Although prior theory suggests that placements on the left-right continuum are uniquely situated to bridging different substantive political issue areas (Brandt et al. 2019), other attitude nodes may possess similar qualities. In fact, my methodological framework does not rule out the possibility that the centrality of different political values or issue attitudes, such as deference to authority or commitment to environmentalism could also systematically increase belief system constraint. To put the role of symbolic ideological attachments into better perspective, I performed a placebo-sensitivity analysis, documented under Online-Appendix Section 6, by sequentially replacing symbolic ideology with all other belief system components in the path mediation model. Online-Appendix Table 7 shows that the left-right ideological scale is the sole belief system element with consistent evidence for structural mediation. While it is still plausible that other belief system elements may systematically buttress belief system cohesion, only symbolic ideology possesses this quality among the issue sample used.

I present four exemplary belief system networks based on Swiss and Slovakian data from the 2004 and 2018 waves of the European Social Surveys (ESS) in Figure 2. These belief systems were modeled based on responses to eight politically relevant survey items: people's symbolic placements on the left-right scale, their position on LGBTQ rights, environmental protection, immigration policy, and income differences, as well as their core beliefs about obedience to authority and their commitments to equal opportunities for everyone in their country. Figure 2 shows how the Swiss belief systems are more compact and coherent and that symbolic ideology (i.e. the left-right schema) occupies a more central position. The visible differences in aggregate belief system structure are nicely captured by differently sized APL statistics and the centrality parameter of symbolic ideology (printed below each graph). Furthermore, the examples showcase the structural stability of national-level belief systems across time.

Figure 2. Example belief system networks of Switzerland and Slovakia



Note: Belief networks in Switzerland and Slovakia estimated on the basis of ESS data collected in 2004 and 2018. Nodes represent political attitude items; edges between them are proportional to the strength of bi-variate correlations. Network layouts were generated with a force-directed algorithm (Fruchterman-Reingold).

Country, Survey, and Item Sample

I rely on all available waves of the European Social Survey (ESS) as my primary data source for belief network estimation. This cross-national survey collection is based on large, nationally representative probability samples, features a diverse set of countries measured at multiple points in time, and includes a sufficient number of identical survey questions tapping into different core political attitudes.

I selected the eight survey items common to all ESS waves that pertain to substantially different political considerations. These items are identical to those used to generate Figure 2; Online- Appendix Table 1 lists full questionnaire wordings. It is critical that national-level belief system are modeled using identical issue components to maintain cross-national and cross-temporal comparability (Van Wijk et al. 2010). Unfortunately, this is why it is not possible to utilize a larger, heterogeneous set of survey items as empirical basis to map belief system structure. However, the results of a bootstrapping-based sensitivity analysis in Online-Appendix Section 5 using the maximum number of available political issue items common to each individual ESS wave show that between-country differences in belief system constraint are as large - if not larger - when compared with the estimation approach based on the eight political attitude items listed in Online-Appendix Table 1. Furthermore, Online-Appendix Table 6 shows that the bi-variate correlation between the main dependent and independent variables in this study (belief system constraint and programmatic party-citizen links) is positive within each ESS wave and reaches statistical significance at $p<0.05$ or lower in every year except for 2002. It is therefore plausible that the main effects estimated here also translate to larger and heterogeneous belief systems.

Results

One important prerequisite to evaluating potential drivers of cross-national variation in belief system

coherence lies in evaluating if such variation is substantively meaningful in the first place. Before addressing hypothesis H1 through H3, I will therefore provide brief statistical responses to the following questions:

- How large is the country-level variation in belief system coherence?
- Do spatial or temporal effects better account for this variation?
- How consistent over time are within-country estimates of belief system coherence?

Table 1. Belief network coherence statistics

Belief networks	1st Prctl.	1st Qrt.	Median	Mean	3rd Qrt.	99th. Prctl.	St.Dev.
Empirical networks	5.44	6.23	7.14	7.57	8.30	13.07	1.72
Reference networks	6.09	6.76	7.08	7.12	7.43	8.48	0.51

Note: Belief network APL statistics from 242 country-level belief systems (top row) and re-sampled networks using random samples of all ESS respondents (bottom row).

How large is the country-level variation in belief system coherence?

Table 1 provides an overview of the APL statistics for all 242 country-level belief system networks. However, understanding variation in APL metrics is not straightforward because there is no general, closed-form probability distribution that characterizes the statistical properties of this metric (Van Wijk et al. 2010).[5] A simple bootstrapping procedure, however, can restore the interpretability of APL measures by generating reference estimates that are unlikely to have occurred by chance. I achieved this by randomly re-sampling groups of respondents, each comprising approximately 1,000 people, from the entire pool of ESS respondents (total n = 464,269). By repeating this process a large number of times (e.g., 100,000 iterations), I generated a reference distribution for APL statistics under the assumption that the boundaries of national communities do not meaningfully contribute to explaining variation in aggregate belief system constraint. If the empirical networks exhibit greater

[5] Belief network APL's have a theoretical lower bound of zero - a value that would describe a network of maximally correlated items. The measure does not have an upper bound; as the correlation between insular nodes atrophies, network path length statistics grow exponentially.

variation than their randomly resampled counterparts, there is strong evidence that country-level belief systems show systematic and theoretically meaningful diversity.

The results in the bottom row of Table 1 and the density curves in Figure 3 demonstrate that the APL statistics of empirical networks exhibit far greater variation than the bootstrapped reference networks. The right half of Figure 3 is particularly revealing as it shows that the highest density area among national-level belief systems lies significantly to the right of the most constrained belief system among resampled respondents. This suggests that a considerable proportion of national-level belief systems exhibit higher levels of constraint than expected by pure chance. Additionally, Figure 3 highlights that numerous national-level belief systems are more disorganized compared with the reference networks.

Along the X-axis, Figure 3 also displays the APL locations the Swiss and Slovakian belief system networks depicted in the top half of Figure 2. Expressed numerically, the probability of obtaining a random sample as constrained as Swiss respondents to the 2004 ESS is less than 0.0007; it is more likely to win twice in a row after betting on a single number in a game of Roulette than it is to by chance measure the same level of belief system coherence evident in the Swiss example.6

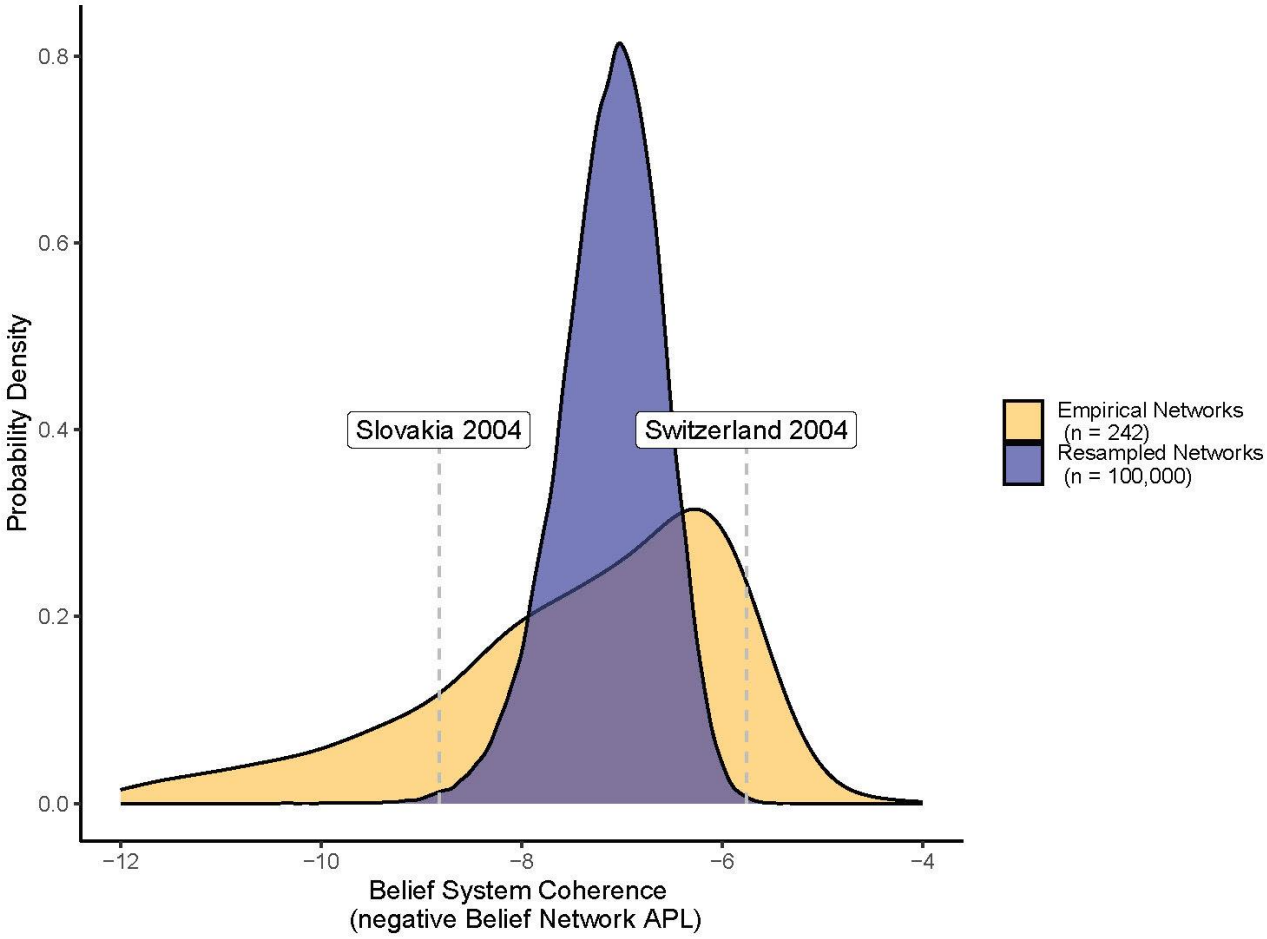
Do spatial or temporal effects better account for variation in belief system constraint?

I regressed the national-level APL statistics onto country-, wave-, and country-wave fixed effects and assessed the relative variance explained under each model specification. To minimize potential distortions caused by the uneven nature of the ESS country panel (i.e., different places were sampled during different waves), I repeated the same analysis for a subset of 17 ESS countries featured in at

[6] The probability estimate for the Switzerland (2004) example was obtained via Riemann sum integration of the reference APL distribution. The odds of winning twice in a row when betting on a single number in a game of French Roulette are $(1 : 36)^2$ which translates into an approximate probability of 0.00073.

least nine out of ten survey waves. The results are presented in Table 2. Across model specifications, country-level fixed effects explain about 70% in aggregate APL statistics. Wave effects, in contrast account for 1-3 percent of the same variance. I take this as strong evidence that place, rather than time, explains why belief system constraint differs at the aggregate level.[7]

Figure 3. Coherence in empirical and resampled belief networks



Note: Probability density plots of belief network average-path-length (APL) statistics for country-level and re-sampled belief system networks.

How consistent over time are within-country estimates of belief system coherence?

[7] Online-Appendix Figure 4 visualizes these country-level differences using a geographic heat map.

I conducted Chi-squared tests for unequal variances on 17 countries that were sampled at least nine times between 2002 and 2020, normalizing the APL statistics across all cases for ease of interpretation. If country-level estimates are unstable over time, the within-country variance of the belief system structure metric should be close to or greater than unity. I also performed one-sided (lower-tailed) null-hypothesis test to evaluate which country-level estimates achieve statistical significance. The results appear in Online-Appendix Table 4.

The estimated within-country variance in belief system APL exceeds unity in only two out of 17 countries - Poland and Hungary. More so than any other European nations, these countries saw a rather steep increase in mass belief system constraint between 2002 and 2020. In Online- Appendix Section 7, I briefly elaborate on the potential causes for such rapid growth in mass opinion structuration and discuss the extent to which the cases of Poland and Hungary are unique in broader European context. In sum, however, the descriptive results suggest that the differences across belief-system topology are not only sizable but systematically attributable to largely stable, country level-effects.

Table 2. Predicting belief system coherence: Country- and wave effects comparison

Sample	Observations	Model	R-Squared	Adj. R-Squared
All ESS countries (38)	242	Country Fixed-Effects	0.726	0.675
All ESS countries (38)	242	Wave Fixed-Effects	0.033	-0.005
All ESS countries (38)	242	Country & Wave F.E.	0.737	0.673
At least 9 waves (19)	157	Country Fixed Effects	0.69	0.654
At least 9 waves (19)	157	Wave Fixed Effects	0.018	-0.042
At least 9 waves (19)	157	Country & Wave-FE	0.717	0.663

Note: R-squared statistics from fixed effects regression models predicting country-level belief network APL statistics.

What Explains Country-level Differences in Belief System Constraint?

The results of the full path regression model appear visually in Figure 4 and numerically in Table 3.[8]

[8] Online-Appendix Figure 6 visualizes the bivariate relationships between the main independent (programmatic linkages & belief centrality of symbolic ideology) and dependent variable (belief system cohesion).

Hypotheses H1 and H2 are strongly supported by the empirical evidence as all relevant regression coefficients are positive, of substantial size, and reach statistical significance at $p < 0.001$ or lower. The model predicts that a single standard-deviation increase in programmatic party citizen linkages leads to a direct increase of 0.402, and a combined increase of 0.613 standardized units of belief system constraint (hypothesis H1). About 34% of this combined effect is mediated via the relative centrality of the symbolic ideology (hypothesis H2).[9] A single standard deviation increase in programmatic linkages is associated with a 0.587 standard deviation increase in the relative belief system centrality of symbolic ideological attachments.

Although all regression coefficients are positive and achieve statistical significance at $p < 0.05$ or lower,[10] the original model in Figure 1 did not reach acceptable levels of fit. I therefore do not find sufficient support for Hypothesis H3. Modification indices (see Online-Appendix Table 5), suggest that this is largely due to incorrect assumptions about the causal ordering of the strength of civil society variable. Rather than predicting belief system constraint solely via mass partisanship and ideologically coherent parties, the data strongly warrant direct pathways from civil society strength to the centrality of symbolic ideology and to mass belief coherence (indicated by the red arrows in Figure 4). Once these regression paths are added, the model fits the data excellently (see Table 3). Because of the direct predictive relevance of civil society strength, the regression coefficients evaluating hypotheses H1 and H2 are somewhat reduced in size, as shown in Figure 4 and the right-hand column in Table 3. The revised model, in other words, still supports the main hypotheses, albeit at lower effect sizes. I will further expand on the substantive implications of the unexpected relevance of civil society strength in the next section.

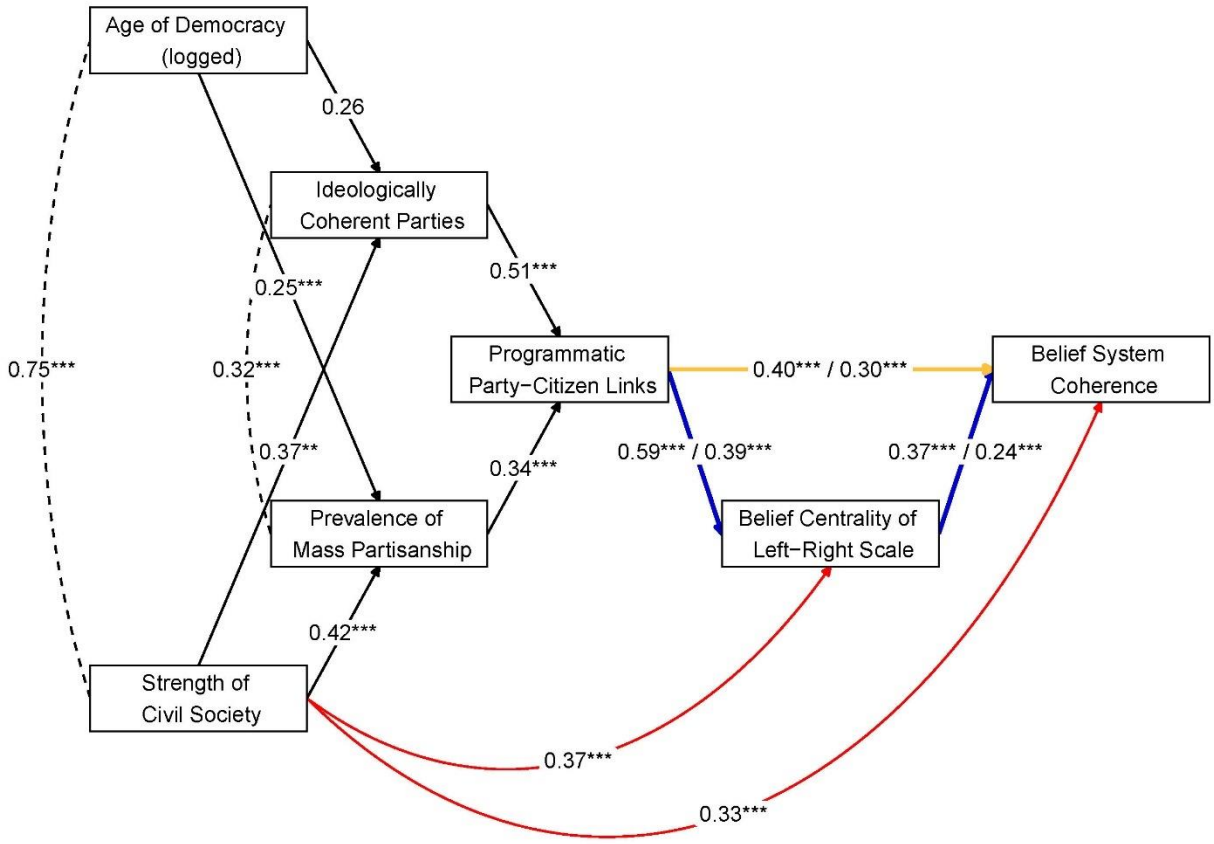
[9] The combined mediation coefficient achieves statistical significance at $p < 0.001$.
[10] All coefficients except for Age of Democracy (logged) with is only significant at $p < 0.1$.

Table 3. Regression path models predicting national-level belief system constraint.

Model Parameter	Original Model	Revised Model
Programmatic Links → Belief System Constraint	0.402***	0.29***
Programmatic Links → Symbolic Ideol. Centrality	0.587***	0.39***
Mediated Effect	0.21***	0.09***
Total Effect	0.613***	0.384***
Percent Mediated	34	25
Chi-Sq. (df)	53.693 (10)	13.871 (8)
CFI (Robust)	0.945	0.993
TLI (Robust)	0.883	0.982
RMSEA lower C.I. (Robust)	0.114	0
SRMR	0.097	0.03
Number of Observations	231	231

Note: Regression parameters marked with *** achieve statistical significance at $p < 0.001$ or lower. Online-Appendix Section 7 features summary statistics and regression output tables for all path-regression models.

Figure 4. Results of path regression models predicting belief system coherence



Note: Hypothesis H1: Yellow and blue arrows. Hypothesis H2: Blue arrows alone. The revised model features

direct regression paths from civil society strength to L-R belief centrality and belief system coherence (curved, red arrows). Whenever multiple regression coefficients appear on the same arrow, the left-hand estimate pertains to the original model; right-hand parameters are re-estimates based on the revised model. All coefficients are standardized and their uncertainty is marked with the following asterisks: *** = $p < 0.001$; ** = $p < 0.01$; * = $p < 0.05$. P-values were calculated based on Yuan-Bentler cluster-robust standard errors. Number of observations = 231 (11 observations deleted due to missingness). Original model R-squared for Belief System Coherence variable = 0.434; revised model R-squared = 0.505. Online-Appendix Section 8 features summary statistics and regression output tables for all path-regression models.

Strong Civil Societies and Political Grassroots Activism

What might explain the unexpected, direct relevance of civil society strength to the structure of mass belief systems? The surprising feature of the revised model in Figure 4 is not that civil societies matter in opinion structuration processes, but that they seem to matter above and beyond opinion influences emanating from political parties. In complex societies that harbor diffuse political interests, parties have long assumed to be essential for citizens to ideologically connect "what goes with what" (Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1992; Slothuus and Bisgaard, 2021). However, political parties may not be as fundamental for citizens to develop connections between different belief system components.

Strong civil societies are characterized by dense networks of (semi-)organized interactions between volunteer groups that pursue different social goals and purposes (Putnam et al., 1992). Cross-cutting connections between different groups of volunteers, non-political associations, and social movements could help build attitude consistency parallel to party-citizens bonds. For example, members of a local environmental conservation group may decide to part-take in a Friday's for Future demonstration if one of their members happens to be active in the local chapters of both organizations. While at the protest, the conservationists likely learn about other organized groups committed to advancing slightly different, yet ideologically connectable agendas. They may, for instance, meet members of the national teachers' union who strike along with their students in an effort to achieve better climate science education. They might also come into contact with an older guard of activists who have been politically engaged against nuclear power since the 1980's. In this

vein, strong civil societies may facilitate bottom-up, ideological learning processes insofar as they mobilize people with different immediate interests to engage in joint grassroots activities.

An additional path regression analysis, depicted in Online-Appendix Figure 5, not only provides tentative evidence that countries with dense civil society networks are more likely to produce grassroots political activism, but also that this activism significantly contributes to mass attitude structuration.[11] Moreover, adding grassroots activism as a mediator obviates the need to include direct regression paths from civil society strength to mass belief system structure. Civic activism is thus a likely missing link between civil society strength and mass belief coherence.

There are two important caveats to this assessment. First, readers should note that the model in Online-Appendix Figure 5 was fitted after the results of the main hypothesis tests were known. The additional analysis should thus be seen as exploratory rather than confirmatory. Furthermore, the covariance patterns in the data strongly indicate that political activism is not uniquely caused by civil society strength but that it also depends on several party-centered factors, including mass partisanship and programmatic party-citizen bonds. This, in turn, suggests that political parties still play an active part in ideological diffusion processes involving grassroots activities. In the above example, it is likely that Green partisans are key brokers for mobilizing members of environmental conservation groups to attend Friday's for Future protests while helping them strengthen the connections between their civic and political attitudes.

Implications of the Present Findings

The present analysis revealed a remarkable degree of variation in country-level belief system coherence. This variation can partially be explained by national-level differences in the nature of party-citizen linkages and the organizational strength of civil societies. These insights have several implications for research on comparative

[11] Country-level political activism was measured a single factor combining responses to ESS survey questions about taking part in lawful protests, signing petitions, contacting legislators, political volunteer work, and participation in political campaigns.

mass attitude structure. First, national-level factors appear to influence belief system cohesion – a psychological construct that has been primarily conceived and measured at the individual level. While some political psychologists have argued that it is possible to develop universally applicable models for socio-political attitudes (Schwartz, 1992; Inglehart and Welzel, 2005), others have remained skeptical and posited that political value systems, particularly when concrete and tangible, do not travel very well (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Pachucki and Breiger, 2010). The present results underline that the transmission of interdependent political attitudes depends on the agency of political elites. This insight provides even more reason for researchers who wish to make cross-country inferences based on political attitude scales to validate that these scales capture the same construct (Weber, 2011).

Second, the results point to the continued relevance of political parties as mediators between elite supply and mass demand for ideologically coherent attitudes. Some observers have noted a general decline in partisanship across European democracies (Dalton, 2000; Dalton and Weldon, 2007; Garzia et al., 2022). Insofar as mass attitude constraint is normatively desirable for democratic politics (Caplan, 2011; Converse, 1964, p.52, 54f.) the present findings provide somewhat sobering prospects. Political parties will remain essential to representative government in modern democracies. If mass attitude coherence weakens as a consequence of eroding partisan bonds, however, political parties may gradually lose their ability to incentivize political leaders to offer programmatically discernible alternatives to the mass public (Garzia et al., 2022). In a worst-case scenario, parties may devolve into recruitment vessels for ambitious, self-interested, political entrepreneurs instead of translating mass demands into legislative action. However, the finding that belief system coherence has remained largely stable over the past two decades signals that change in belief structures may not be so quickly forthcoming. With a few exceptions in mind (e.g. Poland and Hungary), we should expect to see more of the same in places of relatively high constraint and in places where belief system consistency remains relatively low.

Third, the results of the structural network mediation analysis speak to two concurrent debates about the nature of mass belief systems: What attitudes are central to political belief systems (Brandt et al., 2019), and does the location of nodes in political belief system networks have any independent causal relevance (Fishman and Davis, 2022; Brandt and Sleegers, 2021)? To the first question, the present findings add that symbolic ideology is not central to mass belief systems in all countries. However, where it is central, belief systems tend to be more coherent overall. Rather than being a general feature of mass attitude structure, ideological symbols seem to have important anchoring functions, likely making them prerequisites for wider belief system integration. Where political parties (and other actors) do not imbue the left-right spectrum with substantive issue content, belief systems appear more disorganized and in flux as no other ideological "super-issue" (De Vries and Marks, 2012) seems to be as capable of bridging different political values and issue considerations. The latter debate deals with the potential issue of introducing causal tautologies due to the methodological practice of first imposing network structure on empirical data and then measuring the statistical properties of that very structure. Informed by such critiques, some recent work casts doubt on the causal significance of belief node position within wider belief system networks (Fishman and Davis, 2022). The present results, however, somewhat qualify this contention. My analysis reveals that the relative centrality of a particular, theoretically relevant belief network node - people's symbolic ideological placements - is robustly predicted by several country-level factors that were measured outside the scope of the imposed network structure. Moreover, the same belief system node structurally mediates the effects of programmatic issue linkages and civic political engagement on wider belief system constraint. Lastly, while they cannot outright defuse concerns about causal tautologies, the results of my placebo-sensitivity analysis increase confidence that symbolic ideological attachments are somewhat unique in this role.

Conclusion

What explains country level differences in political attitude coherence? Using all available waves of the European Social Surveys, I showed that national-level belief systems exhibit substantial variation, and that this variation can partially be attributed to the strength of programmatic, ideological bonds between citizens and political parties. Surprisingly however, bottom-up drivers of mass attitude constraint that stem from civil society appear more influential in my analysis than classic, top-down models of political attitude transmission would suggest. Follow-up research should investigate the micro-foundations of attitude structuring that involves peer-to-peer interactions among civil society organizations to confirm to what extent belief system coherence can truly emerge "organically" - that is outside the immediate scope of party-political agitation.

Another fruitful avenue for future research may focus on the potential consequences of mass belief system coherence for cross-national electoral dynamics and policy outcomes. The link between stable, disciplined, and programmatic parties and attitude constraint might have implications for the electoral prospects of challenger parties (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). While newcomers typically face uphill battles in consolidated party systems, low attitude constraint could incentivize single-issue (or non-issue) populists to mobilize the electorate on substantively narrow platforms. Low belief system coherence may, on the other hand side, facilitate populist agitators in using politics for personal gain, enacting radical (and often discriminatory) policy agendas, or even altogether dismantling democratic institutions. It remains to be seen if low but steadily rising levels of attitude constraint in cases like Hungary and Poland either help cement the power of populist, radical-right leaders or if they aid citizens in mounting issue coalitions to effectively challenge populist strongmen at the ballot.

Methodologically, the present work argues that network analysis can bring greater analytical depth to the comparative study of political belief systems. By modeling political attitudes as

dedicated statistical networks, scholars can not only holistically measure the structural properties of collective attitude systems but also leverage information about the location of individual beliefs within such systems. Here, I have shown that the relative centrality of symbolic ideology partially mediates the relationship between programmatic party-citizen linkages and mass attitude constraint. Similar analytical strategies could enhance research across other areas of social science. For instance, does the location of interest group donors within legislator's political friendship networks affect the outcome of political lobbying efforts and do the effects change with the size of such friendship networks (Marshall, 2015; Victor and Koger, 2016)? Does the relative centrality of regime elites within a dictator's inner circle affect who gets promoted and who ends up getting purged (Goldring and Matthews, 2021)? Does social media alter the political efficacy of inter-personal networks of protest leaders (Tufekci, 2017)? In these, and many more applications, statistical tools borrowed from network science can help unearth detailed patterns of associations across multiple levels of analysis without compromising the rigor of quantitative inference.

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