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

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Abstract

Although public opinion research has made tremendous progress in identifying the conditions under which citizens adopt coherent political beliefs, comparatively little attention has been paid to the role of national political context in shaping mass belief system coherence. Using dedicated statistical network models built from representative surveys conducted across 38 European countries between 2002 and 2020, this article demonstrates that national-level attitude systems vary substantially and systematically in overall constraint. Drawing on both a novel, networkderived measure of belief system coherence and node-level centrality metrics, this paper further shows that political systems characterized by programmatic linkages between citizens and political parties sustain far more coherent mass beliefs than those in which party-citizen interactions typically involve personal favors. Furthermore, just under one third of the belief-structuring effect of party-citizen relations is mediated by the relative centrality of citizens' symbolic ideological attachments within national-level belief systems. Abstract ideological summary positions are not central to all belief systems, but where they are, mass beliefs tend to be more coherent overall

Keywords Mass belief systems · Attitude constraint · Comparative belief system structure · Belief network analysis · European Social Surveys (ESS)

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Introduction

Past research has made considerable advances towards understanding the drivers of attitude constraint, 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; Conover and Feldman 1981; 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 (Daenekindt et al. 2017; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017; Brandt et al. 2019; Pan and Xu 2020) or transnational (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017) analyses, which has likely limited insights about how national-level particularities influence attitude coherence.

By comparing belief system networks across 38 countries based on data from ten waves of the European Social Surveys (2002–2020), this paper reveals that nationallevel belief systems are characterized by substantially large differences in overall constraint,¹ and that these differences remain remarkably stable across time. Furthermore, a substantial share of cross-national variation in mass belief coherence can be attributed to differences in the national character of party-citizen relations. In line with established theoretical expectations centered on the nature of interactions between parties and citizens, this article shows that political systems characterized by ideologically delineated, programmatic party-citizen linkages are indeed more likely to sustain well-constrained political attitudes systems.

Methodologically, this paper makes two advances. First, it demonstrates that belief network-derived statistics have important advantages compared with established metrics of mass attitude constraint because they holistically model mass attitude spaces as interconnected systems. Second, it showcases how statistical network models can account for structural dependencies across different levels of analysis. In particular, the present investigation reveals that the relative centrality of citizens' symbolic-ideological identities within attitude systems mediates the belief structuring effect of programmatic party-citizen linkages. This discovery adds intriguing nuance to concurrent debates in political psychology about the significance of symbolic attachments within belief systems (Brandt et al. 2019; Fishman and Davis 2022). In short, symbolic ideology is not central to mass belief systems everywhere. However, in countries where ideological self-placements are central, belief systems tend to be more coherent overall.

Party-Citizen Relations and Belief System Coherence

Public opinion research typically conceptualizes political belief systems as the set of interrelations that bind together different politically relevant ideas, attitudes, and identities (Converse 1964; Gerring 1997; Dalton 2013, p. 18 f.). Converse (1964) famously argued that political belief systems vary in the overall degree of "constraint"

¹ Throughout this manuscript, the terms "coherence" and "constraint" are used interchangeably, as are "attitude" and "belief."

- or functional interdependence – they provide. Well-constrained belief systems feature a multitude of interconnected attitudes which are often tied to a central idea or organizing theme and, once established, shape how people process new information and evaluate novel issues (Converse 1964; Conover and Feldman 1981; Zaller 1992; Kuklinski and Peyton 2007; Jost et al. 2008; Huddy et al. 2015).

Converse (1964) was the first to demonstrate that constraint systematically varies not just among individuals but also across different segments of society. His results (p. 25–34) revealed a sharp contrast in aggregate 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). 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? In line with a long research lineage in political sociology, I pose that the national-level character of the relationships between political parties and citizens provides an important determinant of mass belief structure (Converse 1969; Inglehart and Klingemann 1976; Dalton 2013; Gordon and Segura 1997; Carroll and Kubo 2018; Gonthier and Guerra 2022; Keskintürk 2022). In representative democracies, political parties assume a key function in mediating political positioning between citizens and elites (Schattschneider 1942; Campbell et al. 1960; Sartori 1976; Cohen 2003; Slothuus and Bisgaard 2021). In this role, parties 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 convey more coherent political 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 parties in systems that foster stable, policy-based, expectations in exchange for electoral support (LaPalombara and Weiner 1966; Huber et al. 2005; Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Dalton 2013, pp. 186–194). Together, the elite supply of, and the mass demand for, consistent and differentiated positioning on a variety of political issues should foster informational environments that are more conducive to citizens receiving and internalizing 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 (Bartolini & 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" representations of the social cleavages that gave rise to them (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; 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 & Nelson, 2021) and in some cases, have sustained their appeal with their original core constituencies (Marks et al. 2023).

Second, parties with programmatic legacies of voicing the grievances of distinctive social groups may be more adept at forging programmatic linkages 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 (Rennwald and Evans 2014; Gingrich and Häusermann, 2015; Abou-Chadi & 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 them. 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 induces parties, more consistently compared to the remainder of the continent, to attract voters based on predictable and distinct policy alternatives (Gunther and Diamond 2003, p.177–179; Gunther 2005). During election campaigns, parties and their ideological commitments tend to matter more than the idiosyncrasies of individual candidates (Mainwaring and Torcal 2006). 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 & 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 predictable expectations for government agendas, and provide a stable basis for inter-generational transmission of partisan attachments (Converse 1969; Dalton and Weldon 2007).

Strong ideological 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).

In consequence, personalistic systems are more susceptible to corruption and graft as an electoral strategy (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007). In such 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 furthermore less bound to parties as instruments for stirring up grass-root support and can more freely alter ideological messaging if it opportunistically serves their interests (Enyedi 2016; Semenova 2015; Szanyi 2022). Thus, citizens should be more likely to hold coherent political attitudes in political systems where programmatic-ideological ties between them and political parties predominate. Hypothesis H1 summarizes this expectation:

Hypothesis H1: Programmatic linkages between citizens and ideologically distinct parties 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, p. 18 f.; 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. He also claimed that affective attachments to social groups are more likely to be central to the belief systems of ordinary citizens (p. 40). Follow-up research has largely confirmed this, showing that people's symbolic attachments to salient groups, political parties, and ideological symbols tend to occupy more central positions in mass belief systems (Boutyline and Vaisey 2017; Brandt et al. 2019). Furthermore, rational choice theorists as well as social cognition researchers 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-level 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 left-right ideological summary scale depends on citizens' incentives to form stable identities with socially identifiable groups and organizations, including political parties. Greater ideological clarity among policy position signals from parties should therefore help citizens better connect their ideological identities with substantive issue beliefs (ibid.; see also: Knutsen 1997; Freire 2006; Lachat 2008). 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 suggest an important, mediating role of symbolic ideological attachments: In political systems where parties offer more consistent policy alternatives, citizens are more likely to align their ideological summary positions with substantive issue considerations. Consequently, as symbolic ideological identities become more central to citizens' attitude systems, these systems should gain coherence. Hypothesis H2 summarizes this prediction:

Hypothesis H2: The relative centrality of symbolic ideological attachments within belief systems mediates the belief structuring effect of programmatic party-citizens linkages on overall attitude coherence.

Data and Methodology

Country, Survey, and Item Sample

I rely on all available waves of the European Social Survey (ESS) to assess differences in national-level belief coherence. The ESS is based on large, nationally representative surveys that have been conducted for almost two decades across 38 (mostly European) countries. Moreover, it includes a sufficient number of consistently fielded items that tap into substantively different political considerations. I selected the eight items common to all ESS waves that pertain to distinct political attitudes, covering citizens stances on socio-economic justice and redistribution, the environment, gay rights, immigration, law obedience, the proper scope of government authority, and their abstract, left-right self-placements.² Table 1 lists full item codes and wordings.

Belief Network Analysis

While public opinion scholars have long conceptualized political attitude 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 belief systems as dedicated statistical networks (Baldassarri and Goldberg 2014; Boutyline and Vaisey 2017; Brandt et al. 2019; Keskintürk 2022; Gonthier and Guerra 2022). A key advantage of belief network analysis over traditional, bi-variate association-based methods to assess mass attitude coherence is the ability to simultaneously investigate 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). Researchers can, for example, estimate how much the relative centrality of individual beliefs influences the structural cohesion of belief networks at large.

Furthermore, belief system networks require no prior assumptions about ideological dimensionality. Converse (1964) famously operationalized belief system constraint in terms of how well respondents' answers mapped onto the uni-dimensional liberal-conservative divide in American politics. However, a respondent

² Unfortunately, the ESS does not feature a dedicated, symbolic ideological self-identification question battery. This is why the present analysis relies on the standard, ESS left-right self-positioning item as a stand-in for respondents' overall, symbolic ideological orientation.

Item	ESS code	Question wording
Symbolic Ideology	lrscale	In politics people sometimes talk of 'left' and 'right'. Using this card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?
Income Differences	gincdif	[P]lease say to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels
LGTBQ Rights	freehms	Gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish.
Immigration Attitudes	impentr	[Allow many/few immigrants from poorer countries outside Europe:] How about people from the poorer countries outside Europe?
Environmentalism	impenv	[Now I will briefly describe some people. Please listen to each description and tell me how much each person is or is not like you. Use this card for your answer.:] She/ he strongly believes that people should care for nature. Looking after the environment is important to her/him.
Egalitarianism	ipeqopt	She/he thinks it is important that every person in the world should be treated equally. She/he believes every- one should have equal opportunities in life
Obedience to Rules/Authority	ipfrule	She/he believes that people should do what they're told. She/he thinks people should follow rules at all times, even when no-one is watching.
Safety/Strong Government	ipstrgv	It is important to her/him that the government ensuresh- er/his safety against all threats. She/he wants the state to be strong so it can defend its citizens.

 Table 1 ESS survey items used for modeling national-level belief systems

sample which is constrained along two or more salient dimensions, such as separate socio-cultural and economic axes, might falsely appear as unconstrained if evaluated against a unidimensional yardstick. Network models, by contrast, possess far greater flexibility as they remain agnostic about the directionality and clustering of attitude correlations. In this way, belief network models would take a strong connection between pro-LGTBQ and anti-immigration attitudes as a marker of belief system constraint if this specific attitude combination happens to be prevalent among respondents in a particular country (Daenekindt et al. 2017). Belief network analysis is therefore more resilient to bias from scholars' preconceived notions about which attitudes should logically or ideologically be connected.

Estimating Belief Networks

In belief 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; Brandt et al. 2019; DellaPosta 2020). To estimate national-level belief system networks, I obtained the absolute value of the polychoric correlation between each attitude pair pertaining to a single country-wave.³ The resulting

³ ESS post-stratification weights were used to retain national representativeness and cross-national comparability.

attitude correlation matrices can subsequently be interpreted as weighted, undirected graphs which encapsulate the structure of a country's belief system for a given survey year. To aid generalizability and ensure optimal sparseness in the resulting belief networks, I additionally employed Constantini et.al.'s (2015) graphical Lasso algorithm which applies a machine-learning optimized penalty on very small correlation pairs.

Belief Network Average Correlational Network Path Strength as a Measure of Attitude Constraint

I rely on the belief network average correlational path strength (ACPS) as the key metric for capturing overall belief system coherence. The ACPS is defined as the average correlational proximity of each pair of nodes contained within the same network if one exclusively travels along the strongest correlational paths between them. For belief networks as a whole, a greater ACPS implies that idea elements are better connected with one another and that there exist few, if any, isolated sections that are difficult to reach from elsewhere in the network. Low values on this metric instead indicate more sparse connections between nodes, inhibiting the ability of issue attitudes to influence one another.

To obtain ACPS estimates, I rely on a modified version of Dijkstra's (1959) algorithm to find the strongest correlational pathways between each node pair within a given belief network.⁴ The average of the thus obtained strongest correlational paths constitutes the ACPS estimate for each of these networks.

Advantages of the Belief Network ACPS as Measure of System-wide Attitude Coherence

In belief networks, the strongest correlational path between any pair of nodes may not directly connect them but rather follow an indirect route via third, intermediary nodes. Consider, for example, the hypothetical belief networks BN1 through BN3 depicted in Fig. 1. Each of these networks features five identical attitude elements (labeled A through E) and possesses the same average inter-item correlation ($\overline{r}=0.42$). However, these belief systems markedly differ in structure: while all items are uniformly correlated at 0.42 in BN1, the correlational weights are more strategically allocated in BN2, producing a 'bow tie'-like shape with central node C bridging information across two distinct communities, A-B and E-D. BN3, by contrast, possesses a disjointed structure consisting of a well-connected center (A-B-C) and two largely unconnected, peripheral nodes, D and E.

Although items A and E possess no direct correlational path in BN2, this item pair is in fact better informed of one another because of its strong intermediary con-

⁴ To generate ACPS estimates, I made a small adjustment to Dijkstra's (1959) algorithm: Instead of relying on the inverse of the correlation weights as additive network distances (e.g., Newman 2001), the adjusted algorithm treats correlation edge-weights multiplicatively which better accounts for the rate of information attrition in multiple effect paths (e.g., Hayes, 2017, pp. 85–87). See Online Appendix A for further details.



Fig. 1 Belief networks with same number of issue items and mean inter-item correlations

Table 2 Belief network coher-ence metric comparison

Coherence metrics	BN1	BN2	BN3
Mean correlation	0.42	0.42	0.41
Leading Eigenvalue	2.68	2.76	2.94
Item total information entropy	6.15	5.56	5.36
Network ACPS	0.42	0.59	0.41
MSE performance evaluation*	0.6935	0.2089	0.9491

Bold-faced estimates indicate the most coherent attitude system. See Online.

Appendix B for details on simulation procedure.

*Lower MSE values indicate higher predicative performance and thus greater belief constraint.

nection via Item C. Here, the strongest correlational path between A and E consists of the combined edges AC (0.65) and CE (0.65), yielding a strongest path value of 0.65*0.65=0.4225, which exceeds the equivalent strengths in both BN1 and BN3.

Because it takes all possible correlational pathways within a belief network into consideration, I argue that the ACPS captures belief coherence more holistically compared to other, commonly employed statistics in the literature on attitude constraint. These include the mean correlational strength (e.g., Converse 1964; Boutyline and Vaisey 2017; Keskintürk 2022), the size of the leading eigen-value of the item correlation matrix (e.g., Stimson 1975; Jessee, 2012), and the item total information entropy (e.g., Martin 1999; 2002). Table 2 displays each of these constraint metrics for the example belief networks in Fig. 1. As stated above, BN1 and BN2 possess an identical mean across all item-correlation pairs while BN3 exhibits the highest

leading Eigenvalue and lowest combined item entropy. Among all candidate metrics, only the ACPS unequivocally ranks BN2 as most coherent attitude system.

Is BN2 indeed the most constrained belief network among these examples? To approximate an objective performance comparison between the candidate metrics, I simulated 10,000 data matrices consisting of 2,000 hypothetical responses based the three example networks ⁵ and subsequently obtained Mean-Squared-Error (MSE) estimates via iterative regression, ten-fold cross-validation.⁶ This procedure involves repeatedly dividing the data samples into nine training and one test sets. From these, I extracted out-of-sample MSE estimates by iteratively regressing each attitude from the remaining set of attitudes across all training samples and evaluate the average predicative performance in each corresponding test set. When pooled across all simulations, MSE estimates approximate the general predictability of the simulated data (lower values indicate a more coherent data-generating process). The results in Table 2 strongly and unanimously point to BN2 as the by far most coherent data-generating network among the examples in Fig. 1 – a quality which only the ACPS correctly discerns.

To what extent does the analysis of the example belief systems in Table 2 generalize to other attitude systems? Online Appendix Figures OA 1–3 summarize evidence from a far more comprehensive statistical simulation (n=100,000), showing that the ACPS consistently outperforms the mean correlation, leading Eigenvalue, and item combined entropy in differentiating attitude systems based on MSE estimates across a wide array of differently sized and weighted belief systems. On this basis, I adopt the belief network ACPS as the preferred metric for comparing national-level attitude constraint throughout the remainder of the paper.

Node-level Measures of Belief Centrality

Similar to how the mean, median, and mode provide different notions as to what defines the center of a random variable, so do strength-, closeness-, and betweenness-centrality offer different nuances as to what constitutes node centrality within a network (e.g., Borgatti 2005). Strength is the simplest and most general node centrality measure, defined as the average of all (correlational) edges emanating from that node. This measure best captures immediate connectivity and local importance. Closeness centrality is defined as the weighted inverse of the sum of the closest distance between a node and all other nodes in the network. Intuitively, this metric measures how efficiently a given node can influence the remainder of the system and thus better captures the idea of global importance within a network. Betweenness centrality tallies the shortest paths that pass through a given node and captures the extent to which a node helps bridge information from one network segment to another. Since hypothesis H2 does not provide strict guidelines for selecting any particular among the aforementioned centrality metrics, I conducted the main analysis using a common

⁵ Assuming standard multivariate normal distributions.

⁶ MSE-based simulations are commonly used in machine-learning to compare the relative predicative accuracy of different candidate metrics (e.g., Cawley and Talbot 2010). See Online Appendix B for details on the simulation and MSE estimation procedure.

factor that holistically combines the strength, closeness, and betweenness centrality of each attitude node within a given belief network.⁷

Limitations of Belief Network Analysis and Robustness Tests with Larger item Pools

Comparing results across belief network models requires that each belief system contains identical issue components to maintain cross-national and cross-temporal comparability (Van Wijk et al. 2010). Not only would different attitude compositions across time fundamentally change the object of comparison, increasing and shrinking the size of belief networks would also lead to arbitrary rescaling of network statistics leading to "apples-to-oranges"-type comparisons (Albert and Barabási 2002). Unfortunately, this makes it impossible to utilize a larger, heterogeneous set of attitudes without compromising the statistical power afforded by relying the full, longitudinal ESS sample. ⁸

Comparing Real-World Belief System Networks

Figure 2 presents four belief system networks based on Swiss and Slovakian data from the 2004 and 2018 waves of the ESS. These belief systems were modeled based on responses to eight core political attitudes referenced above. Figure 2 illustrates how the Swiss belief systems are, on average, better integrated, connected, and hence coherent than their Slovakian counterparts. Furthermore, the left-right ideological self-placement node occupies a far more central position in Swiss belief networks. The examples further showcase the relative structural stability of national-level belief systems across time.

Modeling Programmatic and Ideologically Distinctive Party-Citizen Linkages

I rely on V-Dem's (2022, p. 91 f.) 'v2psprlnks' and 'v2psplats' variables to capture key characteristics of national-level party-citizen relations. 'V2psprlnks' focuses on party systems' "most common form of linkage to their constituents" (p. 93), where linkages are more specifically defined in terms of the main type of good that political parties offer in exchange for support. V-Dem experts rate these goods as ranging from fully "clientelist" to fully "policy/programmatic" (p. 94). Clientelist goods typically entail particularistic (and often clandestine) benefits such as cash, commodities, land,

⁷ When left in their raw metric, 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 centrality factor.

⁸ Online Appendix C details a robustness analysis which relies on the maximum number of distinct political issue items common to each ESS wave. The results in Figure OA 4 show that the between-country variance in belief system constraint within each wave is at least as large as the estimated variance among the smaller, consistent item belief networks utilized in the main text. Online Appendix Table OA 2 further shows that the bi-variate correlation between belief system ACPS and programmatic-ideological linkages is positive within each wave and reaches statistical significance at p < 0.05 or lower in every year except for 2002. This suggest that the main results likely generalize to larger attitude sets.



Fig. 2 Example belief system networks of Switzerland and Slovakia. *Note*: Belief networks in Switzerland and Slovakia estimated on the basis of ESS data. Nodes represent political attitude items; edges between them are proportional to the strength of bi-variate correlations.

or local community improvements which party agents directly provide to core their supporters. Programmatic linkages are instead based on voter choice between different national-level policy agendas with (near) universal coverage. Programmatic policies, such as public healthcare or education, typically apply to the electorate as a whole; party agents usually cannot (easily) restrict such benefits to their core clientele. In line with the expectations of hypothesis H1, the "v2psprlnks" variable thus provides variation on voters' incentives to develop stable expectations around parties' policy agendas and incorporate these in their electoral calculus.

V-dem's "v2psplats" variable measures the degree to which the parties represented in a country's legislature possess "relatively distinct" party platforms (e.g. in the form of manifestos) which are, at least in principle, available to the wider public (p. 94). Both aspects are important here, as party manifestos, although programmatically differentiable, could be relatively obscure and thus hard for voters to gain knowledge of. The scale of this variable ranges from "none, or nearly none" of the parties to "all, or nearly all" parties for which both qualities – ideological distinctness and visibility – are simultaneously true (ibid.).

Programmatic party-citizen links provide a key prerequisite for ideologically distinguishable parties to transmit coherent issue content to the mass electorate. The reverse, however, is not true: only if citizens can reasonably expect future governments to enact programmatically consistent and universally applicable policies does it make sense for them to internalize the positional differences between parties. To model this dependency, I evaluate hypothesis H1 with a simple path-regression model in which programmatic linkages ("v2psprlnks") first predicts ideologically distinct party platforms ("v2psplats"), upon which the latter is regressed on the outcome variable (i.e., belief system coherence). The test for hypothesis H2 simply adds the centrality of symbolic ideological attachments as a mediator to the last regression path.

Figure 3 visualizes the complete framework for testing hypothesis H1 and H2. In all models, I employ full-information maximum likelihood estimation with Yuan-Bentler robust standard errors, clustered at the country level, to account for partial missingness and heteroskedasticity, respectively.

Control Variables

Observational regression models may be biased by a number of spurious correlates. At the individual level, scholars have long posited that belief systems constraint varies as a function of political knowledge (e.g., Converse 1964; Zaller 1992; Pachucki and Breiger 2010). National-level differences in belief system coherence could thus simply result from differences in sample aggregate political sophistication. Unfortunately, the ESS does not feature any political knowledge items, and as far as the author is aware, no comparable political sophistication data exists covering all 38 countries for the period of observation. As a second-best alternative, I therefore rely on ESS aggregates for political interest and educational attainment– two variables known to be positively correlated with political sophistication (Jennings 1996; Galston 2001).



Fig. 3 Modeling framework for hypothesis H1 (solid elements) and H2 (dashed elements)

Furthermore, political polarization – both issue- and affect-based – could bias the results by lowering information costs for citizens to acquire positional information on different parties (Levendusky 2010; Gonthier and Guerra 2022). To capture issue-based polarization, I rely on the weighted standard deviation of a generalized left-right party-position index ("rile") taken from the Manifesto project dataset (Lehmann et al., 2024). As a measure for elite-affective polarization, I employ V-Dem's (2020) "v2cacamps" variable which holistically captures the extent to which a given national political climate is dominated by antagonistic ideological camps engaged in hostile rhetoric and action.

At the party-institutional level, I control for country's legislative fractionalization to account for differences in the number of parties contesting for electoral support. On the one hand, a wide variety of options could facilitate party linkages as diverse groups of citizens may find it easier to identify with a party whose policy platform most closely matches own their political interests. On the other hand, an oversupply of parties with similar ideological profiles could make it more difficult for citizens to differentiate between them, which can be an obstacle to the development of stable partisan attachments. I utilize the legislative fractionalization index provided by the Comparative Political Dataset (Armingeon et al. 2021) to control for the potentially distorting effects of different numbers of electorally viable parties in a given system.

Finally, party-ideological platforms can have a much-diminished role in election campaigns and policy-making in presidential systems due to the concentrated nature of executive and legislative authority (e.g., Samuels & Shugart, 2003, 14.f.). To capture some of the differences in political communication and information transmission between presidentialist and parliamentary systems, I rely on V-dems' "v2xnp_pres" variable which holistically rates countries in terms of institutional and practical constraints on presidents.

Results

Descriptive Validity

An 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 and H2, I will therefore provide brief statistical summaries about the size of country-level variation in belief system coherence and investigate whether spatial or temporal effects better account for this variation.

Table 3 provides an overview of the ACPS statistics for all 252 country-level belief networks. Unfortunately, interpreting variation in ACPS estimates is not straightforward as there is no known probability distribution that analytically characterizes this metric. However, a simple bootstrapping exercise involving randomly redrawn samples of respondents (without regard of time and nationality), can make such variation interpretable via simulated reference distributions. If the ACPS estimates of empirically estimated belief networks show significantly greater variation than the corresponding, randomly resampled (i.e., bootstrapped) reference networks across all

Table 5 Benef network concrence statistics							
Belief networks	1st Prctl.	1st Qrt.	Median	Mean	3rd Qrt.	99th. Prctl.	St.Dev.
Empirical networks	0.053	0.087	0.099	0.098	0.110	0.125	0.016
Reference networks	0.087	0.094	0.094	0.097	0.099	0.105	0.004

Table 3 Belief network coherence statistics

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



Fig. 4 ACPS range comparison in empirical and resampled belief networks. *Note*: Probability density plots of belief network average-path-length (ACPS) statistics for country-level and re-sampled belief networks

country-years, we can infer that country-level belief systems possess systematic and theoretically meaningful diversity.

Table 3 and Fig. 4 summarize such a bootstrapping exercise involving a total of 100,000 sets of re-sampled "country-years", each consisting of 2,000 individuals drawn from the entire pool of ESS respondents. The results demonstrate that the ACPS statistics of the empirical networks indeed exhibit far greater variation than the bootstrapped counterparts; the standard deviation among "real world" networks exceeds that of the resampled networks by a factor of four.

In addition to the "real" and resampled ACPS distributions, Fig. 4 also indicates the approximate positions of the Swiss and Slovakian belief system networks depicted in Fig. 2. Based on the corresponding density of the reference distribution, the probability of obtaining a random sample as (un)constrained as Swiss (Slovakian) respondents to the 2004 ESS is less than 0.001. To estimate whether spatial or temporal effects better account for the empirical variation in belief system constraint, I regressed the national-level ACPS statistics onto country-, wave-, and combined country-wave fixed effects and assessed the relative variance explained under each specification. The same procedure was repeated for a subset of 17 ESS countries featured in at least nine out of ten survey waves to minimize potential distortions caused by the uneven nature of the ESS country panel. Aggregate results are presented in Table 4 while Fig. 5 re-expresses the same information in form of ranked, country- and wave-specific, random-effect plots. Across model specifications, country-level fixed effects explain about 70% of the variation in ACPS statistics. Wave effects, in contrast, account for little more than 2% 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.⁹ In sum, the differences across belief-system topology are not only sizable but systematically attributable to largely stable, country-level differences.¹⁰

Programmatic, Ideological Linkages as Drivers of Belief System Cohesion

Table 5 presents standardized results from the path regression model depicted in Fig. 3. Hypotheses H1 and H2 are strongly supported by the empirical evidence as all

Table 4 Predicting belief systemcoherence: Country- and waveeffects comparison	Sample	Obervations	Fixed effects by	R-Squared	Adj.R- Squared
	All Ess countries (38)	252	Country	0.689	0.634
R-squared statistics from fixed effects regression models predicting country-level belief network ACPS statistics.	All ESS countries (38)	252	Wave	0.025	-0.011
	All ESS countries (38)	252	Coun- try & wave	0.694	0.623
	At least 9 waves (19)	164	Country	0.671	0.635
	At least 9 waves (19)	164	Wave	0.02	-0.037
	At least 9 waves (19)	164	Coun- try & wave	0.686	0.629

⁹ Readers should note that this claim relates to aggregate differences in belief structures measured over the course of 18 years. The fact that spatial variation outstrips its temporal counterpart does in no way preclude the possibility that at least some of the observed temporal variance is of systematic nature and attributable to theoretically meaningful and predictable drivers such as increasing (or weakening) partisan-ideological alignment (e.g., Baldassarri and Gelman 2008).

¹⁰ Online Appendix E additionally compares country-level variation in belief coherence with empirical estimates across socio-demographic groups delineated by, age, gender, years of education, and political interest. The results in Table OA 6 show that country-level variance in belief coherence exceeds each of the estimated inter-group variances.



Fig. 5 Country and wave-based random effect size comparison of belief system coherence

relevant regression coefficients are positive, of substantial size, and reach statistical significance at p < 0.05 or lower. The model predicts that a single standard-deviation increase in programmatic party citizen linkages leads to a direct increase of approximately 0.3, and a combined increase of approximately 0.42 standard-deviation units of belief system constraint (hypothesis H1). About 30% of the combined effect is

Table 5 Path regression model predicting national-level belief system coherence	Main predictors					
	Programmatic linkages \rightarrow Distinct party platforms					
	Distinct party platforms \rightarrow Belief system coherence	0.296*				
	Distinct party platforms \rightarrow Centrality of symbolic ideology	0.454*				
Regression parameters marked with * achieve statistical significance at p < 0.05 or lower.	Centrality of symbolic ideology \rightarrow Belief system coherence	0.275*				
	Mediated Effect	0.125*				
	Total Effect	0.421*				
	Share Mediated	0.297*				
	Control variables (directly predicting Belief system coherence)					
	Education	0.022				
	Political interest	0.008				
	Issue polarization	0.014				
	Affective polarization	-0.072				
	Party-electoral fractionalization	0.028				
	Presidentialism index	-0.040				
	R-squared: Belief system coherence	0.288				
	Number of Observations	252				

mediated via the relative centrality of the symbolic ideology (hypothesis H2).¹¹ None of the control variables show consistent relationships with belief system coherence above and beyond what is explained by the main predictors.¹²

Does the Type of Centrality Metric Matter?

One cause for concern about the validity of hypothesis H2 might arise due to the particular choice of network centrality metric for the left-right self-placement in the above model. Online Appendix Table OA 4 presents the results of a robustness analysis which iteratively removes any one centrality metric when constructing the common node centrality factor. None of the tested configurations substantially affect the above reported effect sizes or statistical significance levels (Fig. 5).

Do the Results hold across Different Subsets of ESS Attitudes?

Online Appendix Table OA 5 features estimates for the main regression coefficients relevant to hypothesis H1 and H2 pooled across all 63 unique possibilities of selecting six, five, and four items to assess the sensitivity of the present results towards the

¹¹ As a robustness check, the centrality estimates for the left-right self-positioning item were replaced with those obtained from each the seven remaining belief system components to assess if hypothesis H2 is also supported for any of the other belief system elements. The results in Online Appendix Table OA 2 show that the centrality of citizens' desire for strong governmental control also mediates the same relationship although at an approximately 30% smaller effect size.

¹² Online Appendix Table OA 5 lists the results of a regression model that includes only the control battery. This analysis reveals a positive and statistically significant effect for pollical interest and a negative and significant effect for presidentialism on mass belief coherence.

inclusion of particular attitudes.¹³ The mean of all coefficients lies very close to its counterpart in Table 5; two-tailed t-tests reveal that the pooled mean of these estimates is significantly different from zero at p < 0.001 or lower in every case.

Discussion

The present analysis revealed a considerable degree of variation in country-level belief system coherence. This variation is largely stable in time and can partially be attributed to national-level differences in the nature of party-citizen relationships. Countries with programmatic-ideological ties between parties and voters sustain better integrated, predictable, and coherent mass belief systems.

These insights have several implications for research on comparative 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 for 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 likely depends on the differing agency of political elites and organizational of socio-political actors and institutions.

Second, the results point to the continued relevance of political parties as mediators between the elite supply of and the 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 (Converse 1964, p.52 f.; Caplan 2011) the present findings provide somewhat sobering prospects. Political parties will remain essential to representative government in modern democracies, yet if mass attitude coherence weakens as a consequence of eroding partisan bonds, 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 (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). 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 readily forthcoming.

Third, the results of the mediation component of the present analysis speak to an important debate about the nature of mass attitudes: What attitudes are central to political belief systems (Boutyline and Vaisey 2017; Brandt et al. 2019; Brandt and Sleegers 2021)? 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

¹³ The left-right self-placement scale must be present in each permutation as knowing its position within the network is vital to testing hypothesis H2.

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 abstract 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.

Although the empirical differences in mass belief coherence observed across almost 20 years of ESS data appear quite stable, readers should note that the present investigation is ultimately limited to inferences that largely pertain to a single generation of citizens. Mass belief systems likely undergo systematic shifts over longer periods, especially as new cohorts that were socialized under different external circumstances replace older ones. Thus, as more spatially and temporally comparable public opinion data become available, future research should investigate to what extent (and how quickly) mass belief structures adjust to systematic change.

Another possible avenue for future research may focus on the potential consequences of belief system coherence for cross-national electoral dynamics and policy outcomes. The link between party-citizen relations 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.

Conclusion

What explains country-level differences in political attitude coherence? Using all available waves of the European Social Surveys, this paper showed that the substantial and systematic national-level variation in belief system constraint can, in part, be attributed to the varying strength of programmatic, ideological bonds between citizens and political parties.

Methodologically, the present analysis showcases how 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 more holistically and consistently measure the structural properties of collective attitude systems but also leverage information about the location of individual beliefs within such systems. In taking advantage of multi-level nature of network statistics, the present work revealed that the relative centrality of symbolic ideology partially mediates the relationship between programmatic party-citizen linkages and mass attitude constraint. Abstract ideological summary positions are not central to all belief systems, but where they are, mass beliefs tend to be more coherent overall. Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi. org/10.1007/s11109-025-10015-9.

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Declarations

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