

Cultural Backlash? Trends in Opinion Polarisation between Educational Groups in Five European Countries

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Abstract: We examine trends in political attitudes among citizens with varying education levels in France, Italy, Sweden, Hungary, and Poland. Utilizing Norris and Inglehart's (2019) cultural backlash theory, we expect to find a widening gap between low- and high-educated individuals, driven by the quicker adoption of libertarian values by the highly educated over the last decades. Using data from the European Values Study (1980-2020) and European Social Survey (2001-2021), we analyse attitudes towards immigrants, LGTBQI+, and gender roles measured by six recurring items. Ordered logistic regression analyses reveal the hypothesized trend pattern in Hungary and Poland for three LGTBQI+ and gender role items, two gender role items in France, and one immigration item in Italy. We conclude that the cultural backlash theory is most applicable to Hungary and Poland, while it inadequately explains rising right-wing political action in the other cases.

Keywords: *polarization, backlash, cultural issues, right-wing populism, education*

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Supplementary material

A pdf file that serves as an Online Appendix and includes Figures S1, S2 and S3 is provided as Supplementary Material.

Data availability statement

Replication data for this article will be made available on the authors' Open Science Framework page (<https://osf.io/2escf/>). This article uses survey data sets are available to researchers after signing a data sharing agreement and downloadable from the following sources: European Values Study DOI: 10.4232/1.14021; European Social Survey DOI: 10.21338/NSD-ESS-CUMULATIVE.

Introduction

In the past few years, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart's *Cultural Backlash* (2019) has become a landmark book in social sciences to understand the rise of right-wing populist movements in advanced democracies. It has inspired numerous social scientists, as evidenced by the number of citations (over 3,800 as of January 2024, according to Google Scholar).

Norris and Inglehart's (2019) core argument is that the worldwide rise of right-wing political parties and movements can be explained by a particular configuration in the opinion landscape within the single countries, which is the result of cultural changes that took place over the last decades. In line with Inglehart's (1977) classical theory of postmaterialism, they argue that the expansion of mass education and increasing material security has resulted in a societal value shift towards libertarian values¹ since the late 1960s and the early 1970s (alongside urbanisation and ethnic diversification). This shift towards values regarding minority rights and individual liberty cumulates to a tipping point, where the proportion of those holding more conservative social attitudes shrinks to become a new cultural minority (Norris and Inglehart 2019: 449). This, in turn, triggers an "authoritarian reflex" among those who feel most disoriented and threatened by the libertarian value shift. The authoritarian reflex leads to behavioural outcomes like supporting right-wing grassroots movements, or voting for right-wing populist parties (also see Ignazi, 1992, and Betz, 1993, for a similar argument). The increasing readiness to enact authoritarian sentiments at the ballot is what we will refer to as cultural "backlash" in this paper.

In this study, we investigate the development of opinion differences between educational group from the perspective of cultural backlash theory. According to Norris and Inglehart (2019: 87), the social groups that feel the most threatened by the societal value shift are lower-educated citizens and citizens belonging to older generations (Norris & Inglehart 2019: 87). While previous work by Schäfer (2021) convincingly demonstrates that inter-generational differences are unlikely explanations of cultural backlash, differences in the specific trends in educational groups are yet to be investigated, despite the common finding that political attitudes are consistently structured

¹ We follow Norris and Inglehart's (2019) terminology and use the terms libertarian versus authoritarian attitudes to refer to approving versus unfavourable sentiments towards members of underrepresented groups (in our case, opinions on immigrants, homosexuals and the role of women).

by educational inequalities. Furthermore, education is a central attribute in the theory of value change, as we elaborate below, in the Theory section.

This study offers two main contributions. First, we translate Norris and Inglehart's theory into observable implications and derive concrete hypotheses about how average opinion trends are assumed to have developed along educational lines. We analytically distinguish between six trend patterns that can theoretically occur. We argue that cultural backlash theory implies that higher educated become libertarian at a faster pace than the lower educated, which results in a widening gap between higher and lower educated citizens. Second, we empirically assess whether we observe the constellations assumed by Norris and Inglehart's theory in the most likely cases that nevertheless reflect the diverse landscapes of political contestation in Europe.

Based on European cross-national survey data, we analyse the evolution of the endorsement of libertarian attitudes between high- and low-educated citizens from the 1980s to 2020. We focus on three types of attitudes that are widely used to represent the divide between libertarian and authoritarian values: attitudes towards women, LGBTIQ+, and immigrants. We focus our analysis on France, Italy, Hungary, Poland, and Sweden. These countries include the largest EU member states from Scandinavia, Western, Southern, and Central Eastern Europe, which have also seen the highest share of votes for right-wing populist parties in their most recent national elections. Thus, we are most likely to find evidence in favour of cultural backlash theory in these countries. Furthermore, they represent the diversity of cleavage structures, party competition, and protest mobilization in Europe (Borbáth and Gessler 2020; Hutter and Kriesi 2019).

Our findings suggest that backlash theory is most applicable to Hungary and Poland, whereas this theoretical framework cannot explain right-wing populist successes in the other three countries. In Hungary and Poland, the higher educated adopt libertarian attitudes at a markedly faster pace than lower educated, as indicated by responses to one item about the moral status of homosexuality and two items measuring the acceptance of traditional role of women. We can see a similar pattern in France, but it is restricted to two items regarding the traditional gender roles, and in Italy, where it is restricted to views on whether immigration makes the country a better or worse place.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. We first draw on Norris and Inglehart's theory to derive two hypotheses about trends in libertarian values in different educational groups. We end the theoretical section by discussing potential country differences in the presence of a cultural

backlash among low-educated citizens. Then, we present our data and methods, and interpret our results. In the conclusion, we reflect on our main findings in light of recent right-wing populist party successes.

Theoretical framework

Norris and Inglehart's cultural backlash theory (2019) builds on Inglehart's theory of post-materialism (1977): increasing material security (Inglehart and Flanagan 1987) together with the expansion of mass education (Inglehart 1977) have led to a libertarian value shift at the societal level at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. Those who were exposed to higher education and its emancipatory function, and those who experienced material security in their childhood, are more likely to endorse libertarian values, which emphasize minority rights, individual freedom, and civil liberties. Indeed, evidence of a libertarian value shift can be empirically observed in the majority of advanced democracies (Welzel 2013; Caughey, O'Grady, and Warshaw 2019). The proliferation of libertarian values led to a new cultural divide within the population, with, on the one hand, citizens endorsing libertarian values and, on the other hand, citizens holding authoritarian values (or postmaterialist vs materialist values in Inglehart's earlier wording) (Inglehart and Flanagan 1987).

The counter-part to libertarian values are authoritarian values, which Norris and Inglehart (2019) define as values that prioritise the importance of security against risks of instability and disorder, group conformity, the preservation of traditions, the guarding of a certain way of life, and loyal obedience towards strong leaders who claim to protect the group they represent (p. 7). Authoritarian values include opposition to gender equality, unconventional gender roles, immigration, and increasing ethnic diversity (p.72). We restrict our analysis to attitudes towards three main underrepresented groups: immigrants, women, and LGTBIQ+. Attitudes towards these groups constitute typical attitudes tapping into the cultural dimension of political contestation (Mau, Lux, and Gülzau 2020).

Norris and Inglehart (2019) argue that older generations and low-educated citizens are the groups most likely to hold authoritarian values. We restrict our analysis to educational differences. This

is for two reasons. First, previous work by Schäfer (2021) demonstrates that generational attitudinal differences are hardly conceivable as a basis of cultural backlash. By drawing on European cross-national survey data, Schäfer (2021) replicates Norris and Inglehart's (2019) analyses and concludes that "different age groups have very similar cultural attitudes, and there are few signs of polarization among old and young cohorts" (Schäfer 2021, 15).

Second, education is essential in Inglehart's theory of value change and Norris and Inglehart's 2019 book "Cultural Backlash". First, education directly leads to the internalisation of libertarian values during a person's most formative age in adolescence (Inglehart 1977). Second, a central idea of the cultural backlash theory à la Norris and Inglehart is that a segment of society struggles to adjust to the societal libertarian value shift, which leads to disorientation and a desire for authoritarian solutions. Education is likely to reduce feelings of disorientation and marginalization because it grants prospects for material security in the global market economy and allows highly educated individuals to navigate effectively in societies with rapidly changing social norms (Kriesi et al. 2008). Third, the mere demographic shrinkage of the proportion of the low educated citizens through educational expansion may lead low educated citizens to feel marginalized. Therefore, we expect the seeds of backlash primarily among the lower-educated segments of society because of the perception of becoming a minority group in both cultural and demographic terms.

The perceived minority status and the struggle to adjust to a quickly changing society lead to a heightened sense of urgency to act politically which can cumulate into what Norris and Inglehart call "cultural backlash". One expression of this backlash is the success of right-wing populist parties in advanced democracies, which have been on the rise in Western Europe since the 1990s (Bornschiefer 2010; Ignazi 1992; Betz 1993). Indeed, various empirical studies have highlighted the growing salience of gender and LGTBIQ+ issues since the beginning of the 21st century, which have become part of the discourse of right-wing populist parties across Europe (see Morgan 2017 for France, Off 2022 for Sweden, Choluj 2015 for Poland, Paternotte 2015 for France and Italy, Paternotte and Kuhar 2018; and Corredor 2019 for Europe in general). Similarly, the immigration issue has gained in salience in European countries, which is a viable explanation for the increasing success of right-wing populist parties (Claassen and McLaren 2022; Dennison and Geddes 2019; Teney and Rupieper 2023; Dennison 2019).

Similar to Norris and Inglehart's (2019) cultural backlash theory, globalization cleavage theory also expects an increasing attitudinal gap between low and high educated citizens on cultural-related issues (Hutter and Kriesi 2019; Kriesi et al. 2008). Accordingly, increasing globalization pressures lead to the polarization of citizens into groups of winners and losers who support antagonistic positions with respect to globalization-related issues and, more broadly, issues on the cultural dimension. Globalization's losers are citizens who see the opening of national borders as a threat to their chances in life, as they consider their social status and security to be protected by the nation state. They are more likely to identify with their national community, and to be attached to its exclusionary norms and political institutions. By contrast, globalization's winners perceive opportunities in the opening of national borders, endorse universal norms and share a global consciousness such as cosmopolitanism (Kriesi et al., 2008; Teney et al. 2014). Education is expected to be one of the key socio-demographic characteristics structuring this opinion divide, as education is hypothesized to provide citizens with the necessary specialized skills to benefit from the opening up of borders. In contrast to the cultural backlash theory, globalization cleavage theory considers increasing globalization pressures to be the main cause behind this growing opinion divide along educational lines. Nevertheless, both cultural backlash theory and globalization cleavage theory expect an increasing attitudinal gap between low and high educated citizens on the cultural dimension over time.

Despite their theory's emphasis on changes in the distribution of authoritarian attitudes in the population, Norris and Inglehart (2019) only assessed static educational differences. This is unfortunate, because one of the intriguing features of Norris and Inglehart's theory is its concrete prediction about the opinion trends that lead to cultural backlash. In particular, the theory assumes that the gap in libertarian attitudes between higher and lower educated citizens increased in the past decades. In the ideal version of Norris and Inglehart's argument, highly educated citizens endorse increasingly more libertarian values over time, while less educated citizens remain at a stable, more authoritarian level (or, in extreme cases, grow more authoritarian over time). We will call this pattern "*one-way liberalization*" (see first panel in Figure 1). A trend pattern that is also compatible with Norris and Inglehart's general theory, but which is arguably less forceful in creating backlash, consists of both higher and lower educated citizens adopting more libertarian attitudes, but at a different pace. Under what we will call "*two-pace liberalization*", the higher educated adopt libertarian values at a faster rate than lower educated citizens, but the lower

educated citizens also grow to be more libertarian over time (see second panel in Figure 1). Following Norris and Inglehart, one-way liberalization and two-pace liberalization are the patterns to expect in countries which experienced right-wing backlash:

Hypothesis 1 (divergent liberalization hypothesis): The educational gap in attitudes towards women, LGTBIQ+, and immigrants increases over time, with the higher educated group showing an increasing adoption of libertarian values.

While the two patterns summarized under the divergent liberalization hypothesis are consistent with Norris and Inglehart's theory, we distinguish four further patterns (see Figure 1). A third pattern would see authoritarian values rising among all groups. This would constitute “*counter-liberalization*”, a society-wide decrease in the openness towards immigrants, LGTBIQ+ or a trend towards endorsing more conservative roles of women. While it is highly likely that an opinion landscape that follows these lines is beneficial to right-wing populist parties, it is not what Norris and Inglehart expect. Under counter-liberalization, there is no liberalizing trend that leaves behind a certain marginalized minority.

A fourth pattern, in our paper termed “*stability*”, consists of stability in the opinion landscape over decades. A fifth pattern consists of a general liberalization trend across educational groups, but no convergence between them. In this scenario of “*parallel liberalization*”, the gap between the two educational groups does neither widen nor decrease; but both groups develop more libertarian values. A sixth pattern consists of general liberalization across educational groups coupled with trends that lead to a convergence between the two groups, observed with a decrease in the educational gap over time (“*convergent liberalization*”). Figure 1 shows the stylized trends corresponding to the typology we introduce.

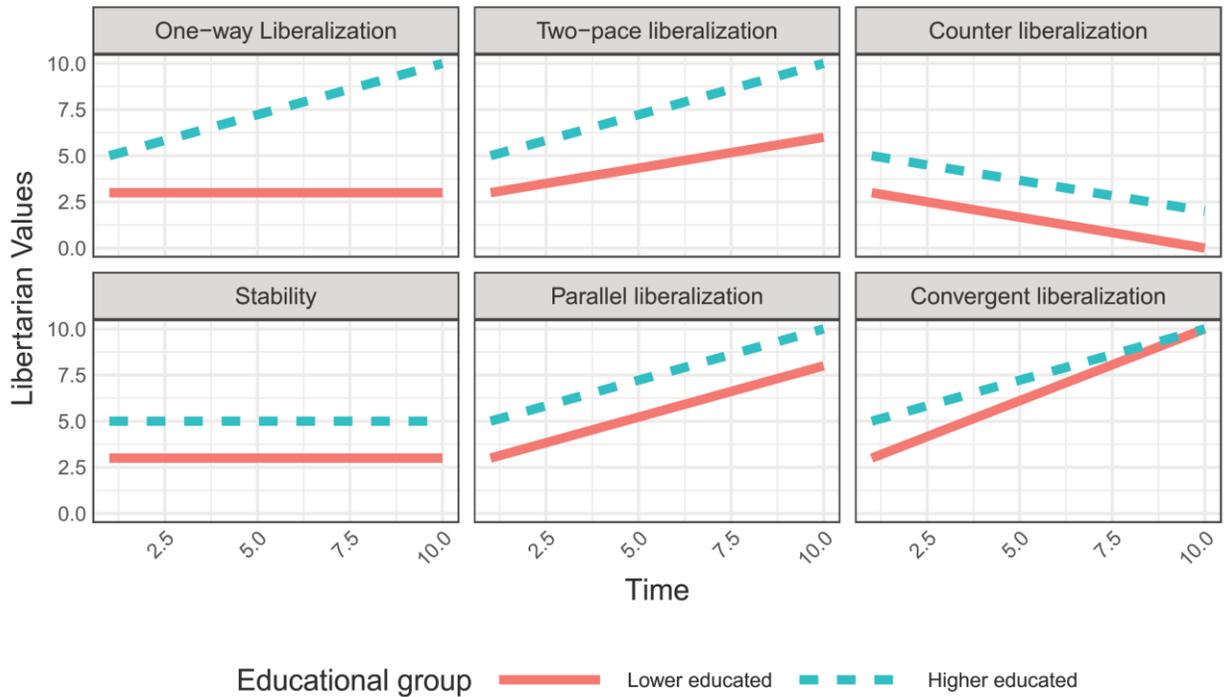


Figure 1: Stylized depiction of potential trend patterns of the development of libertarian values. Y-axis and x-axis values are arbitrarily chosen. One-way liberalization and two-pace liberalization are implied to cause cultural backlash according to Norris and Inglehart (2019).

Norris and Inglehart (2019: p.460-461) state that it would be difficult to estimate a precise tipping point for cultural backlash within a particular country because it involves several different factors, such as the ratio of those holding libertarian values to those holding authoritarian values, the level of economic and physical security, the rate of immigration by culturally distinct people, and the level of ethnic diversity during citizens' formative years. We follow their argument and refrain from making a prediction about the period in which these tipping points could have occurred. However, we can estimate that a tipping point should have happened at the earliest in the 1990s, as the 1990s marked the rise of New Right parties (Bornschier 2010; Kriesi et al. 2008). If the electoral success of right-wing populist parties is to be explained by an authoritarian reflex among citizens who feel left behind, our data covering the period from the 1980s onwards should cover such a tipping point.

Country selection

We test our expectations by analysing survey data covering 1980 to 2020 in five EU countries: France, Italy, Hungary, Poland and Sweden. We selected these countries because they represent the largest EU member states from a diverse set of regions (Scandinavia, Western Europe, Southern Europe, Central and Eastern Europe) that have been shown to vary in the landscape of political mobilization and underlying cleavage structures (Borbáth and Gessler 2020; Hutter and Kriesi 2019). These are also the EU countries with the largest success of right-wing populist parties during their latest national elections, making them the most likely case to observe the implications of Norris and Inglehart's theory. The *Rassemblement National* (National Rally) obtained 23,15% of the votes during the first round of the 2022 presidential election in France. *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy) reached 26,00% of votes during the 2022 parliamentary election in Italy. *Sverigedemokraterna* (Sweden Democrats) obtained 20,54% of votes during the 2022 Swedish general elections. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's party *Fidesz* (Hungarian Civic Alliance) received a majority of the votes (54,13%) during the 2022 parliamentary election. Finally, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice Party) reached 35,4% of votes during the 2023 Polish parliamentary election. Since these are the cases where we are most likely to find evidence confirming the Cultural Backlash theory, if we do not observe its empirical implications in the five countries, we can safely conclude that the theory is limited in explaining the rise of right-wing populist parties.

While these countries have in common a recently successful right-wing populist party, their populations nevertheless vary widely in their average attitudes towards women, LGTBIQ+ and immigrants. Based on European Social Survey data from 2016, Lux, Mau, and Jacobi (2022) show that differences between our five countries in the average opinion on LGTBIQ+ issues are larger than country differences in the average opinion on immigrant-related issues. Furthermore, they highlight that the average attitudes towards LGTBIQ+ and immigrants are most authoritarian in Hungary, followed by Poland, Italy and France. In contrast, the most libertarian average attitudes towards LGTBIQ+ and immigrants are found in Sweden. Akaliyski and Welzel (2020) point to a similar country ranking by computing a libertarian-authoritarian value index comprising both gender-related and LGTBIQ+-related issues based on 2014 European Values Study data. Cross-national studies focusing on attitudes towards a single underrepresented group have come to a

similar country ranking. For instance, Claassen and McLaren (2022) show that attitudes towards immigrants are more libertarian in countries characterised by a large immigrant share (e.g., France, Italy and Sweden) than in countries with lower immigrant shares (e.g., Hungary and Poland). Turning to gender egalitarian attitudes, Norris and Inglehart (2003: p.45) use pooled 1995-2001 EVS/WVS data to show that citizens from Scandinavian countries hold the most gender egalitarian attitudes, followed by citizens from Western European countries. By contrast, citizens from Central and Eastern European countries have more traditional gender attitudes. Finally, our five countries follow a similar country ranking on population average attitudes on LGTBIQ+ issues: the most libertarian attitudinal average on LGTBIQ+ issues is found in Sweden, followed by France, Italy, Hungary, and Poland at the bottom of the ranking (Rozenberg and Scheepers 2022; Dotti Sani and Quaranta 2020).

Besides these country differences in the population attitudinal average, previous studies also point to country differences in the shape of the societal libertarian value shift over the last decades. All five countries have been facing a societal libertarian value shift on gender-related and LGTBIQ+-related issues (see Pampel 2011 for gender egalitarianism between 1990 and 2002 and Akaliyski and Welzel 2020 for both gender-related and LGTBIQ+-related attitudes between 1990 and 2014). However, such a societal libertarian shift could not be observed in the five countries regarding the immigration issue. Based on a compilation of multiple cross-national surveys for the 1988-2017 period, Claassen and McLaren (2022) point to an overall shift towards more libertarian attitudes on immigrant-related issues in Sweden. In contrast, the average libertarian attitude toward immigrants remained stable during the study period in France, Hungary and Poland. Finally, the population-average attitudes toward immigrants became more authoritarian in Italy from 1988 to 2017.

This country variation in both the average attitudes towards immigrants, LGTBIQ+ and women, and in the trend of the societal emancipatory value shift highlights the necessity to take historical contexts and national factors into account in our assessment of an authoritarian reflex. The tipping point triggering an authoritarian reflex is unlikely to have occurred simultaneously in the five countries. Without going into a detailed historical case analysis, we expect to find differences between Western European countries (i.e., France, Italy and Sweden) and Central and Eastern European countries (i.e., Hungary and Poland). Indeed, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and

the radical societal, political, and economic transformations required for Central and Eastern European countries to join the EU, the shift in societal libertarian value was more abrupt in Central and Eastern EU countries than in Western EU countries (van Houwelingen, Iedema, and Dekker 2019; Akaliyski and Welzel 2020). This sudden and salient cultural change might have induced a larger authoritarian reflex among the low-educated citizens, as opposed to the highly educated ones who embrace emancipatory values associated with modernisation. Accordingly, we expect that cultural backlash is more likely to manifest in Central and Eastern European countries (Akaliyski and Welzel 2020) which we therefore over-sample, by selecting both the largest state, Poland, and one of the smaller member states, Hungary. Societal opinion polarisation on cultural issues seems indeed larger in the Central and Eastern European countries than in the Western European countries (Pless, Khoudja, and Grunow 2023). This leads us to the following hypothesis on cross-national differences:

Hypothesis 2: An increasing educational gap in attitudes towards women, LGTBIQ+ and immigrants is more likely and more pronounced in Hungary and Poland than in France, Italy and Sweden.

Methods

Datasets

We rely on the European Values Study (EVS 2022), and the European Social Survey (ESS) (Sikt 2020). We use all four EVS waves (1981-1984, 1990-1993, 1999-2001, 2008-2010, 2017-2020) and all ESS waves from 2001 to 2021. A particularly important feature of both data sets is that they cover a fairly long period to investigate the dynamic of value change.

Attitude items

We chose measures of attitudes related to central cultural issues and which are repeatedly measured over a long period to allow for meaningful trend analysis. Table 1 illustrates all the items used in this paper. Of the six items, the three ESS items were also used by Norris and Inglehart (2019) to measure libertarian values concerning immigration and LGTBIQ+. We coded all variables such

that higher values imply more libertarian values and negative values imply more authoritarian values.

Short name	Survey	Domain	Item wording	Response scale
im1	ESS	Immigrants	Would you say that [country]'s cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?	1 "cultural life undermined" 11 "cultural life not undermined"
im2	ESS	Immigrants	Is [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?	1 "worse place to live" 11 "better place to live"
ho1	ESS	LGTBIQ+	Gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish	1 "agree strongly", 2 "agree", 3 "neither agree nor disagree", 4 "disagree", 5 "disagree strongly"
ho2	EVS	LGTBIQ+	Please tell me for each of the following whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between... ... Homosexuality	1 "never justifiable" 10 "always justifiable"
wo1	EVS	Women	A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works (bf. 2017); When a mother works for pay, the children suffer (2017)	1 "agree strongly", 2 "agree", 3 "disagree", 4 "strongly disagree"
wo2	EVS	Women	A job is alright, but what most women really want is a home and children	1 "agree strongly", 2 "agree", 3 "disagree", 4 "strongly disagree"

Table 1: List of variables used to measure authoritarian values.

Educational groups

In the ESS, respondents were differentiated based on their educational degrees, as indicated in the ISCED scale. We consider respondents with at most a lower secondary degree as "lowly educated". Next, we consider respondents with at most an upper secondary degree or a different type of post-

secondary education degree (except tertiary education) as “intermediately educated”. Finally, we considered respondents with completed tertiary education as “highly educated”.

In the EVS waves around 1980 and 1990, the only available education variable measured the age at which respondents attained their final educational degree. For these two waves, we categorise respondents who finished education before the age of 16 as “lowly educated”, between 17 and 19 as “intermediately educated”, and after the age of 20 as “highly educated”. In later EVS waves, an EVS-specific education variable is used to construct educational groups analogous to the categories in the ESS: respondents who indicated that they have not completed technical or university-preparatory secondary education are considered “lowly educated”. Respondents who completed either technical or university-preparatory secondary education, are considered “intermediately educated”. Finally, respondents who indicated some university experience or have a tertiary degree were considered “highly educated”.

Figure S1 in the Supplementary Material shows the development of the share of individuals in the selected countries in the highly and lower educated group according to official Eurostat statistics. Educational expansion is visible in a steady increase in individuals with tertiary education degree and a decline of the share of lowly educated individuals. Thus, from a mere demographic perspective, lower educated individuals are more and more in a minority position (an exception is Italy with a comparably large share of lower educated individuals).

Statistical analysis

For the most part, our research question is descriptive. We are interested in the patterns of trends in theoretically relevant social groups over decades. However, educational groups underwent substantial compositional changes in the period that we study. For example, there was an enormous increase in female educational participation among tertiary educated. Thus, many readers might wonder whether our results are robust to adjusting for these changes in within-group composition. To adjust for composition effects, we use ordered logistic regression models. We run models for each outcome and each country with a linear time trend (measured in years), interacted with our education variable. We then obtain marginal predictions using Stata’s margins command to characterize both the direction of the trend in each educational group and the trend in the contrast between lower and higher educated.

In the underlying ordered logistic regression models, we add several demographic composition variables. These control variables are necessarily restricted to those measures that are available in both the ESS and the EVS to yield comparable results. First, we add triple interactions with time, education and both sex and age to account for (1) changing composition of sex and age and (2) potential differential effects of these variables between educational groups. Second, we add interactions between time and the following variables: whether there are children in the household (yes/no), income categories (10 categories)², and employment status (working, unemployed, housekeeper, other).

Based on these regression models, we obtain average marginal effects (AME) of time on the average response on the full scale of each item (i.e., by combining the predicted probabilities for each response category to yield one average mean score) for the lower educated, the higher educated, and the contrast between lower and higher educated for each outcome attitude and each country. The trend in the contrast between higher and lower educated measures whether the gap between the two groups increases over time. Importantly, when obtaining the AMEs, we set the covariates at their average values in the 1980 wave of the EVS within a specific country and within the respective educational group for which the trend is calculated. Our aim is to hold the composition within educational groups constant at the levels of 1980.

Results

Figure 2 summarizes our main results by showing which of the six types of trend patterns that we distinguished in the theory section are present in each country for each attitudinal outcome variable. The results are based on time trend estimates (the marginal effect of time obtained from our models) that allow us to infer whether gaps between the educational groups increase, as well as the direction of the trends in the case of both lower and higher educated, for each outcome and each country. We consider a trend to be substantively significant if it corresponds to a yearly increase or decrease of at minimum .0025 on a standardized scale (original response scale divided by scale length). For comparison, .0025 on the standardized scale equals an increase of a quarter scale point on a ten-point scale over ten years. Our selected threshold should therefore enable us

² Respondents can choose between 10 categories, which are based on the deciles of the net household income distribution in the country.

to identify even minimal changes in attitudinal trends. We operationalize the six types of trends as follows:

1. One-way liberalization occurs if the standardized gap between lower educated and higher educated increases by .0025 or more per year, the higher educated show trends towards more libertarian values of .0025 or more, and the lower educated show trends of .0025 or lower.
2. Two-pace liberalization occurs if the gap between lower and higher educated increases by .0025 per year or higher, and both the higher and lower educated have positive trends of .0025 or higher.
3. Counter liberalization occurs if one of both educational groups has negative trends of $-.0025$, and the other group has either stable or also negative trends (irrespective of whether the gap between them grows).
4. Stability occurs if both groups have trends in between $-.0025$ to $.0025$.
5. Parallel liberalization occurs if both educational groups have positive trends of .0025 or higher and the gap between the groups does not increase.
6. Convergent liberalization occurs if both educational groups have positive trends of .0025 or higher and the gap between the two groups decreases by .0025 per year.

Country	Imm. enrich culture (ESS)	Imm. make cuntry better (ESS)	Hom. free to live (ESS)	Hom. is justified (EVS)	Mot. works, child suffer (EVS)	Wom. home and child (EVS)
Sweden	Counter lib.	Stability	Parallel lib.	Convergent lib.	Parallel lib.	Parallel lib.
France	Parallel lib.	Parallel lib.	Parallel lib.	Parallel lib.	Two-pace lib.	Two-pace lib.
Italy	Counter lib.	(One-way lib.)	Stability	Parallel lib.	Stability	Stability
Hungary	Counter lib.	Counter lib.	Stability	Two-pace lib.	One-way lib.	One-way lib.
Poland	Counter lib.	(Convergent lib.)	Parallel lib.	Two-pace lib.	Two-pace lib.	Two-pace lib.

Figure 2: Categorization of liberalization trends in attitudes of the higher educated, the lower educated, and the gap between the two groups into one of six theoretically relevant trend patterns. “lib.” is short for liberalization. Colors help distinguish between the six types of trends. The two types of trends consistent with Norris and Inglehart’s theory are shown in red (two-pace liberalization and one-way liberalization).

As the red cells in Figure 2 show, we only find the trends consistent with the cultural backlash thesis (one-way liberalization and two-pace liberalization) in a minority of countries and items. The patterns in the development of libertarian values that are in line with hypothesis 1 can predominantly be found in Hungary and Poland in the responses to the question whether homosexuality can be justified, and in responses to our two items about the role of women in society. Two further instances are (1) the two items on traditional women roles in France and (2) opinions on whether immigrants make Italy a better place in Italy. In these instances, there is a significantly widening gap between the educational groups, where higher educated adopt libertarian values at a faster pace than lower educated.

In what follows, we discuss the country-specific patterns in more detail. In Figure 3, 4 and 5, we show detailed trends from the regression models that underlie Figure 2 for each of the attitudinal domains.

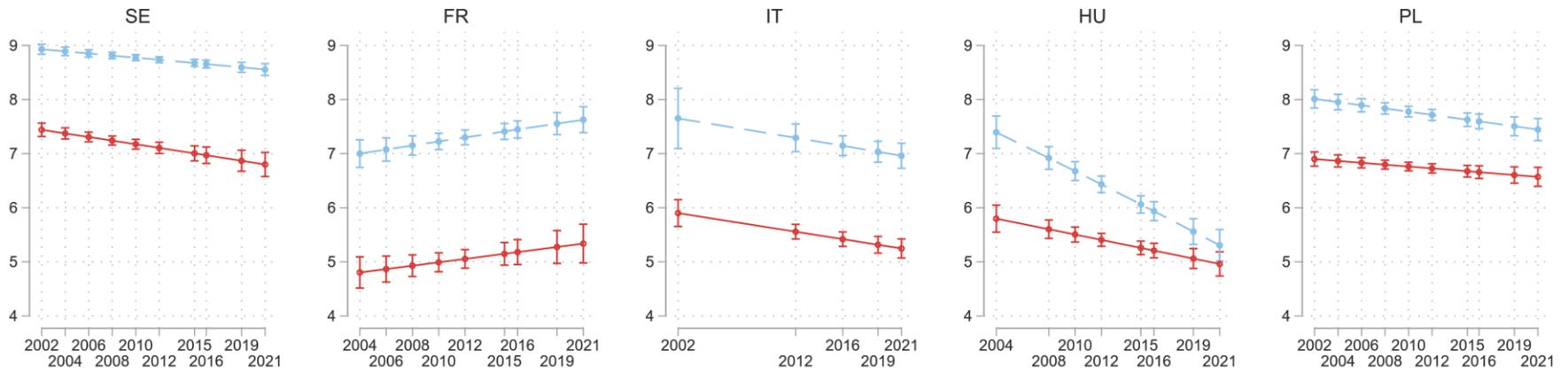
Responses to our items measuring attitudes towards immigrants show no pattern in line with hypothesis 1, except for one item in Italy. Opinions on whether immigration enrich culture develop to a more anti-immigrant direction in both educational groups (counter-liberalization) in all countries, except for France, where immigration sentiments develop in a more libertarian direction

in both educational groups (parallel liberalisation) (see Figure 2 and the upper part of Figure 3).³ Opinions on whether immigration makes the respective country a better place show varying patterns (Figure 2 and lower part of Figure 3). In Poland, we can see a convergence on a more liberal position with an increase in libertarian values among the lower educated and higher educated. In the case of Italy, we interpret the pattern as one of one-way liberalization given the large increase in educational gap over time, but it is important to note that the trend in responses to our second immigration item for the higher educated does not reach the threshold of yearly increases that we outlined in the beginning of this section. This is why we put this result in brackets in Figure 2.

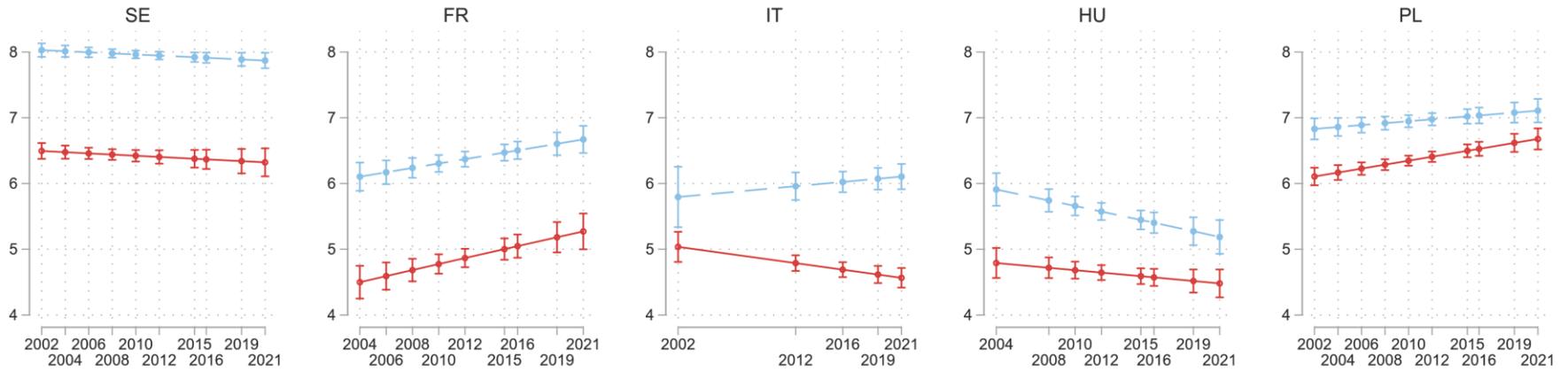
Overall, the responses to both immigration-related items in all countries show patterns that are not in line with Inglehart and Norris's (2019) argument, except for responses to "make country better" item in Italy. To be sure, both a society-wide counter liberalization trend in cultural threat perceptions and the fact that anti-immigrant sentiments are more widespread among lower-educated individuals could benefit right-wing populist parties. However, this voting behaviour cannot be interpreted as an authoritarian reaction against the accelerated liberalisation of immigration attitudes of the higher-educated segments of society.

³ This shift in societal attitudes might be enforced by the so-called 2015-2016 European refugee crisis. Unadjusted trends in year-by-year estimates in Supplementary Material S2 suggests that the refugee crisis intensified trends that already existed before in Hungary, whereas in Italy and Poland, a substantial drop in pro-immigrant attitudes is visible after 2015.

im1: Immigrants enrich culture



im2: Immigrants make country better place



— Lower ed. — Higher ed.

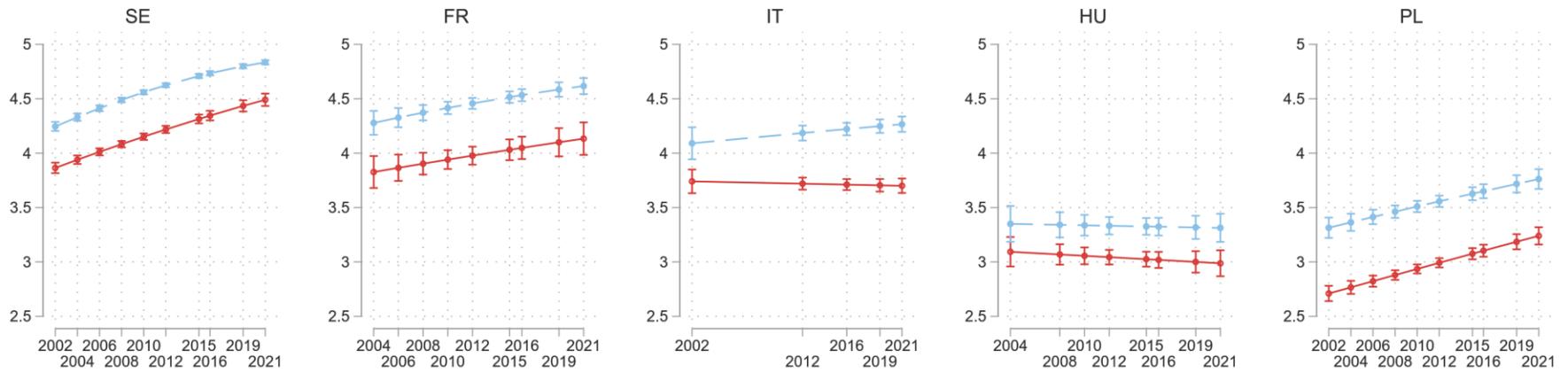
Figure 3: Trends in average attitudes towards immigration for lower and higher educated based on ordered logistic regression models. Adjusted for socio-demographic composition within groups. Higher values on the y-axis imply more libertarian values.

Attitudes towards LGTBQ+, in our case, attitudes towards homosexuality, show widely differing patterns in different countries. Patterns in line with Norris and Inglehart, and our Hypothesis 1, can be found in Hungary and in Poland, where we observe marked growing divergence between educational groups on the issue of whether homosexuality is justified (lower part of Figure 4). Hungarian and Polish lower-educated individuals remain opposed to justifying homosexuality (item *ho2*) at levels close to the 1990s over time, while higher-educated respondents show a substantial liberalization trend.⁴ In Hungary and Poland, messages portraying homosexuality as morally unjustifiable are likely to find overwhelming support among lower-educated, putting their positions on this issue in direct conflict with the higher educated. However, in Poland the mobilization potential of the homosexuality issue might be less pronounced than in Hungary because we can also observe parallel liberalization on the first homosexuality item in the upper part of Figure 4. This suggests that Polish society at large becomes more open to letting homosexuals live their private lives, while the lower educated still condemn homosexuality on a moral basis.

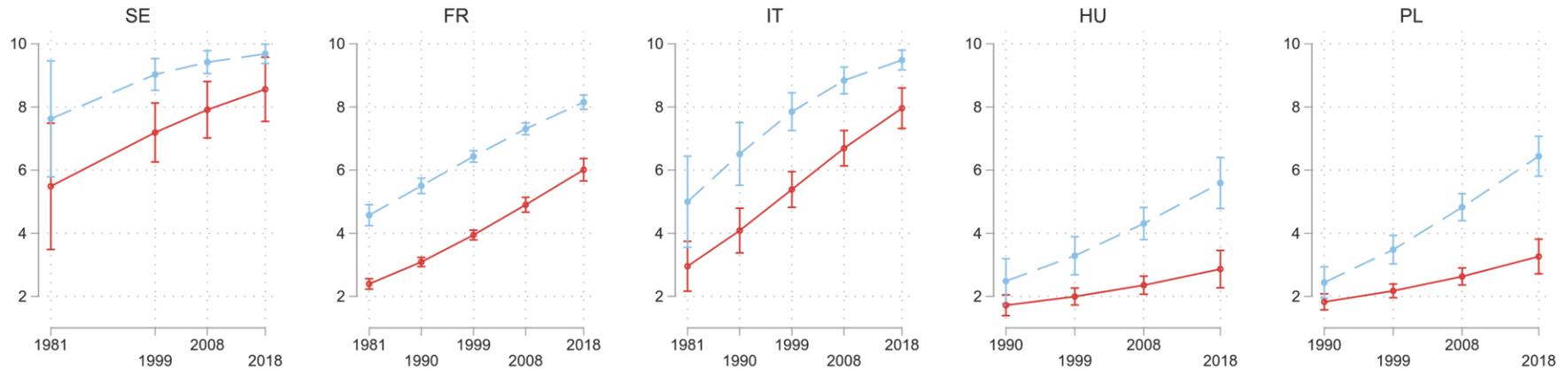
Concerning the remaining country and LGTBQI+ item cases, we observe substantial increases in libertarian values towards homosexuality in responses to both items and for all educational groups in Sweden and France. In Italy, we can also observe a strong liberalization trend in responses to the item asking whether homosexuality is justified. Despite this trend, the Italian public experiences only minimal changes in attitudes towards gays and lesbians to freely choose their lifestyle, which do not reach the threshold laid out above. Thus, this case is categorized as “stability” in Figure 2. The difference between the two attitudinal items in the Italian case indicates the multifaceted character of the issue. While a large societal shift occurred in Italy over time in increasingly positive attitudes towards the LGTBQI+ community, when it comes to the rules of living together, the issue continues to be polarising with little sign of change over time.

⁴ On top of that, as shown in the Supplementary Material S3, the lower educated are very uniform in their opinion in Hungary and Poland, suggesting that they are easily mobilizable on the basis of moral arguments against homosexuality.

ho1: Gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish



ho2: Homosexuality is justified

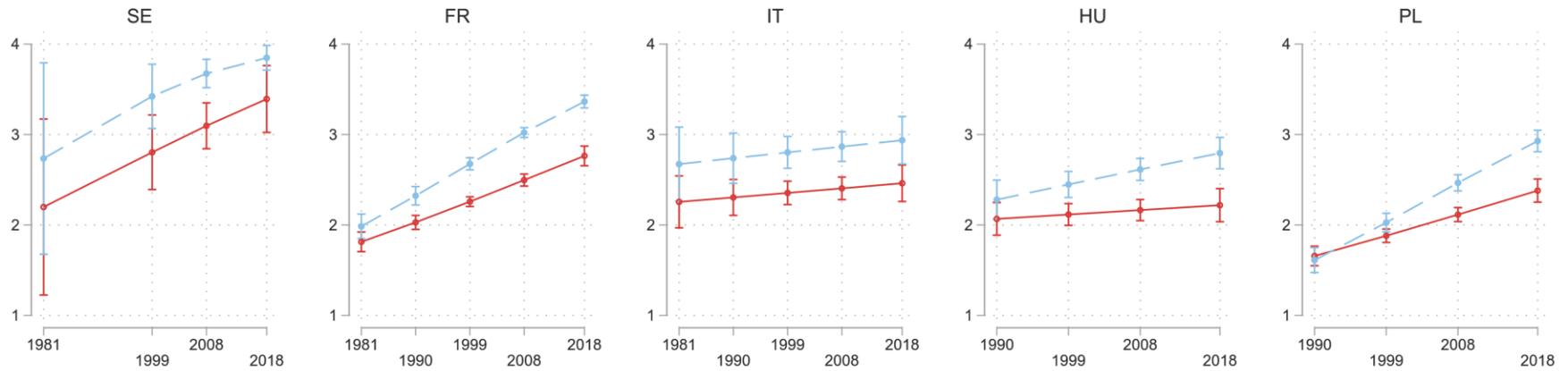


— Lower ed. — Higher ed.

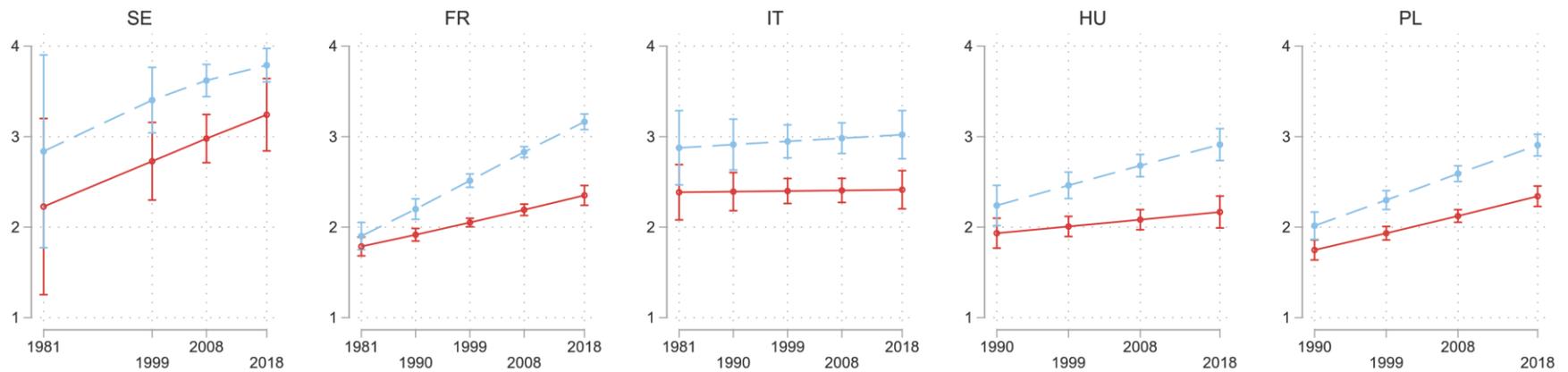
Figure 4: Trends in average attitudes towards homosexuals for lower and higher educated based on ordered logistic regression models. Adjusted for socio-demographic composition within groups. Higher values on the y-axis imply more libertarian values.

The trends in the responses to our two items measuring attitudes towards the role of women show quite consistent patterns of growing educational group divergence across Hungary, Poland and France (Figures 2 and 5). These cases are in line with Hypothesis 1. In Hungary, we observe one-way liberalization: The lower educated preserve authoritarian values about the role of women at levels of the 1990s, whereas the higher educated steadily become more libertarian in that regard. In France and Poland, we observe two-pace liberalization: On the one hand, there is a society-wide trend towards more libertarian positions towards the role of women in the family and economy. On the other hand, we also observe a growing gap because this trend occurs at a different pace for the different groups. Thus, against the background of society-wide trends towards more libertarian views about the role of women, there is the danger of increasing social tension based on relative opinion differences in France and Poland. Even though these tensions might decrease in the far future, current political actors might use them to mobilise those segments of society who feel that the change is occurring too rapidly. By contrast, both educational groups develop steadily more libertarian values in Sweden (parallel liberalization) and remain stable in Italy (stability).

wo1: When a mother works, her children suffer



wo2: What women want is a home and children



— Lower ed. — Higher ed.

Figure 5: Trends in average attitudes towards women's roles in society for lower and higher educated based on ordered logistic regression models. Adjusted for socio-demographic composition within groups. Higher values on the y-axis imply more libertarian values.

Overall, our results provide evidence that the opinion dynamics specified in Norris and Inglehart's backlash theory, which are explicated in our Hypothesis 1, can only be found in specific country contexts regarding specific issue domains. As shown in Figure 2, one-way liberalization, and two-pace liberalization are the exception rather than the rule. This result puts into question the general applicability of cultural backlash theory to explain the success of right-wing populist parties across national contexts. We only find one-way liberalization or two-pace liberalization (1) in Hungary and Poland for the item on whether homosexuality can be justified, and for the two items about the role of women in society; (2) in France for the item on "women only want a home and children" and (3) in Italy for the item "immigrants make Italy a better place to live". Thus, our results rather support Hypothesis 2, which states that cultural backlash theory is most applicable to Hungary and Poland but does not have a strong explanatory power for opinion trends on cultural issues in Italy, France, and Sweden. But even in Hungary and Poland, the immigration issue is distinct and follows a pattern like the remaining countries, at least concerning cultural threat perceptions through immigration: a general backsliding in the whole population instead of growing educational divides.

Conclusion

It is difficult to overstate the impact of Norris and Inglehart's (2019) work on our understanding of value change and its political consequences. The conceptual framework presented in "Cultural Backlash" promises to explain the driving forces behind the rise of right-wing populist parties in advanced democracies by stressing the influence of the attitude structure in the population. It proposes that ongoing cultural changes towards libertarianism in advanced democracies lead to an increasing distance between those segments of society who maintain conservative values and feel increasingly disoriented and threatened by value change, and those segments who readily embrace these new values. However, recent empirical work by Schäfer (2021) casts doubts on the size of generational differences in value orientations, the tide that is supposedly lifting the boat of the 'silent revolution' of post-materialist values, and backlash that it may cause. Our results complicate the generality of cultural backlash even further.

In our study, we focus our attention on educational differences, the other central structural characteristic beside birth cohort in Norris and Inglehart's theoretical framework. Our conceptual contribution is to distinguish between six theoretical patterns that characterize important aspects of the dynamics of group-based opinion polarization, and to propose suitable operationalizations. Our conceptualisation of six clearly defined and non-overlapping patterns of opinion trends helps to improve the dialogue between empirical social sciences and middle-range theories on opinion trends, such as cultural backlash theory (Norris and Inglehart 2019) or globalisation cleavage theory (Kriesi et al. 2008) by making their predictions more concrete and testable.

We then evaluate the extent to which empirical trends correspond to the scenarios described by Norris and Inglehart (2019). Our empirical contribution provides a detailed picture of trends in the educational gap in attitudes towards immigrants, LGTBIQ+, and the role of women -the key cultural issues presented by Norris and Inglehart (2019). We focus on opinion dynamics in five European countries with recently successful right-wing populist parties covering Southern, North-Western and Central and Eastern Europe, namely Italy, France, Sweden, Hungary and Poland.

Our results show that the thesis of a conservatively oriented lower educated segment of society that is steadily growing apart from an increasingly libertarian higher educated segment does only hold in a limited set of issue domains and country cases. The results complicate the backlash story in two fundamental ways.

First, the different domains of attitudes associated with the 'silent revolution,' such as immigration, LGTBIQ+ rights, and gender roles, do not polarize equally between education groups. For example, the pattern in responses to items measuring the perceived consequences of immigration to a country's culture that we mostly observe is one of a general backsliding among the population in general. Thus, while immigration attitudes are certainly highly relevant for the success of right-wing populist parties, our findings do not suggest that a growing discrepancy caused by unequally progressing liberalization trends are the root cause of this backlash. In contrast, trends in attitudes towards LGTBIQ+ and women are more likely to correspond to the hypothesised divergent liberalization patterns.

Second, however, we find the instances where attitudes towards LGTBIQ+ and women polarize in line with the divergent liberalization hypothesis (Hypothesis 1) most often and most clearly in only two countries, Hungary and Poland. Thus, our results suggest that cultural backlash theory is

more appropriate in explaining the rise of right-wing populism in Hungary and Poland, and less in Italy, Sweden and France. France shows two-pace liberalization regarding the two items on the role of women. Sweden does not show any of the expected opinion patterns on all six attitudinal indicators. Italy shows single instances of two-pace liberalization in the case of the “immigrants make Italy a better place” item for Italy.

The country-specific results highlight the relevance of considering national contexts in the empirical assessment of such influential theories. Small-N country comparisons provide valuable insights that help to refine the scope of Norris and Inglehart’s cultural backlash theory. Although primarily a theory of advanced liberal democracies, we find that the mechanisms behind cultural backlash resemble opinion dynamics on LGTBIQ+ and gender role in new Central and Eastern European democracies. In France and Sweden, the colloquial tide of cultural liberalism is lifting the boat on LGTBIQ+ issues, irrespective of the educational background of the respondents. Thus, our results suggest that the recent success of right-wing populist parties in France, Italy and Sweden can be better explained by considering other factors such as the increasing salience of cultural issues in public discourse (Dennison and Geddes 2019; Off 2022; Teney and Rupieper 2023).

Our research leaves four important paths for future research. First, the societal and political consequences of two-pace liberalization must be further investigated. Two-pace liberalization could be either interpreted as a successful, but unequally paced, spread of libertarian ideas through society or as a dangerously growing gap that furthers misunderstandings and political conflict. The latter scenario might arise when the better educated view themselves as forerunners on highly moralized issues, which might lead to defensive reactions in the remaining population. Second, our research cannot inform statements about which attitudinal domain, immigration, LGBTQ+ or gender roles, is most important in creating right-wing backlash. For example, cultural backlash theory would be applicable to France if further research shows that gender attitudes matter for political behaviour in line with backlash as gender attitudes show two-pace liberalization in France. Third, while established and repeatedly fielded cross-national surveys like the EVS or the ESS allow for the analysis of long-term trends, they also are necessarily constrained in the items included to measure libertarian values. For example, they only allow the analysis of public opinion

on broader issues (e.g., immigrants in general), instead of opinions on concrete issues like certain policies. Finally, our analysis does not permit us to make causal claims in terms of ‘who is cueing whom’ on the role of the political elite. It is safe to assume that there is an ongoing feedback mechanism between the average opinion of partisans of certain parties and cues from the party elites that may sustain certain sentiments among the population and work against ongoing liberalization.

The societal changes that we document in Central and Eastern Europe threaten to provide a fertile ground for further populist radical right mobilisation. In this regard, the societal basis of the backlash may not yet be fully mobilised. Furthermore, one can expect ongoing polarization on key cultural issues such as LGBTIQ+ rights in these countries. It remains open whether this increasing division will necessarily materialise in long-term electoral gains for right-wing populist parties.

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Supplementary Material to Cultural Backlash? Trends in Opinion Polarisation between Educational Groups in Five European Countries

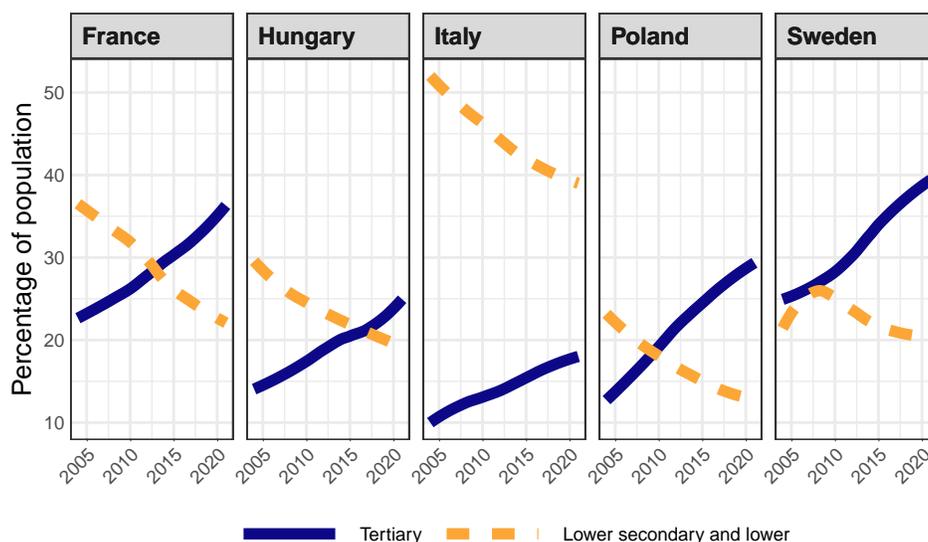


Figure S1: Trends in the share of individuals who hold certain educational degrees in the countries of analysis. Data: Eurostat Table 'Population by educational attainment level, sex and age (%)'. Accessed March 2, 2023. Link: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDAT_LFS_9903__custom_5172699/.

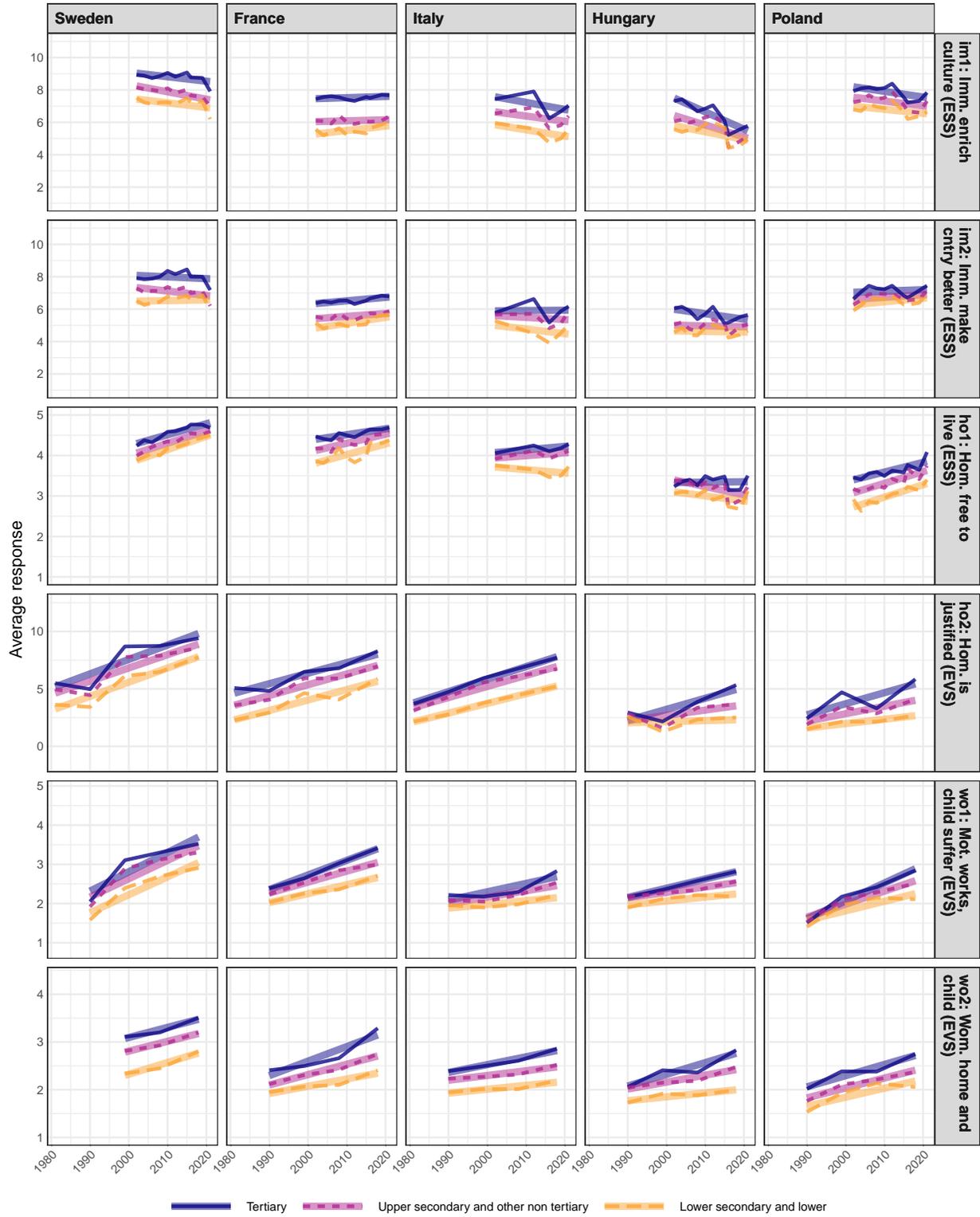


Figure S2: Descriptive trends in average opinion towards immigrants, LGTBIQ+ and women along educational groups. No adjustment for compositional effects as in the main paper. Y-axis covers the range of response options of the respective items. Higher values indicate more libertarian average responses. Linear trends are shown in bold lines, and loess curves are shown in thin lines.

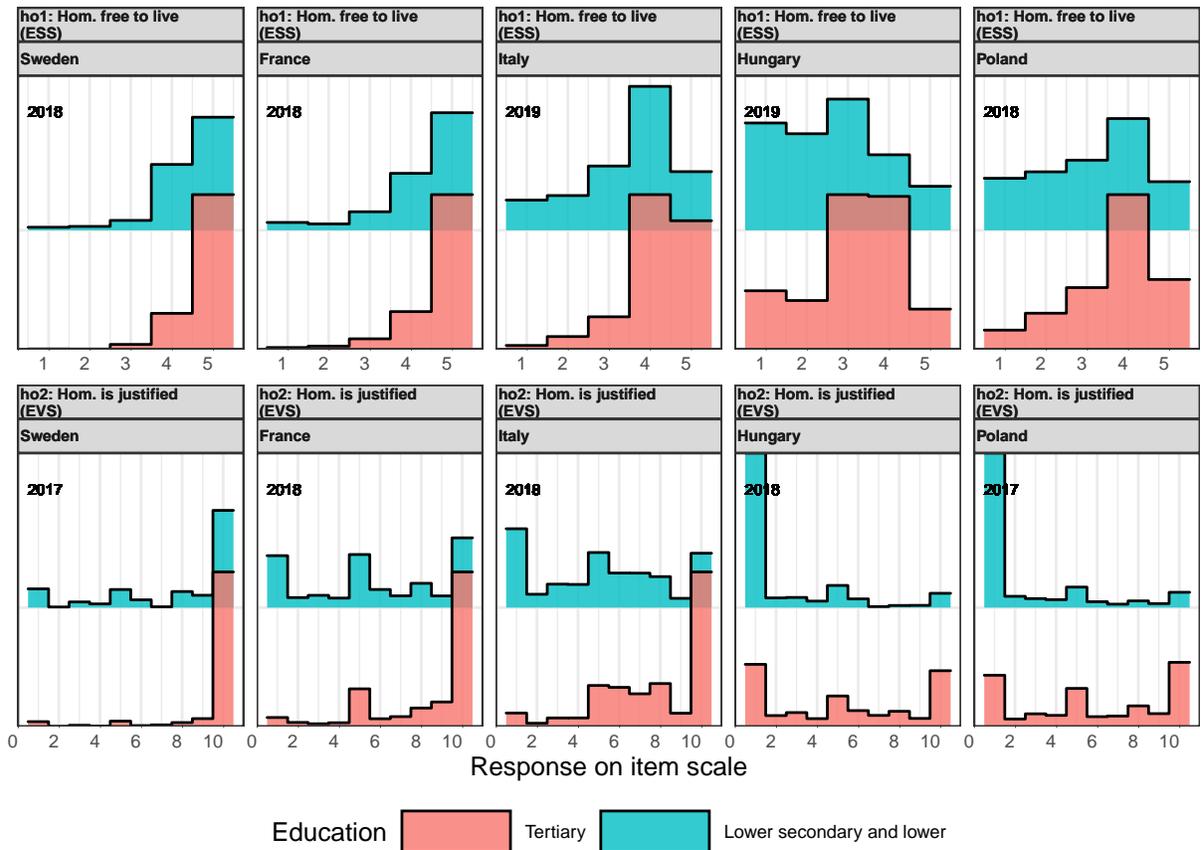


Figure S3: Histograms showing the distribution of responses to LGBTIQ+ items. Data comes from the latest EVS and ESS waves (between 2017 to 2019).