Strengthening Democracy in Europe

How movement parties, social movements and active citizens are reshaping Europe

November 2023

Contents

1. Introducing ProDem

ProDem is a 3-year research project (2020 - 2023) funded by the Volkswagen Stiftung under the call "Challenges for Europe". The project is conducted by a consortium made up of Goethe University Frankfurt, University of Copenhagen, University of Milan, City, University of London, and Babeș-Bolyai University.

ProDem investigates how interactions between citizens, social movements, and a specific breed of political parties - so-called '**movement parties**' - influence **democratic quality** in Europe. We approach democratic quality from a citizens' perspective as the acquisition of political, civil, and social citizenship rights through democratic institutions and processes.[6] The interplay among citizens, media, and political organisations is at the heart of our inquiry, focused on six countries: Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Romania, and the UK.

The five working groups of ProDem are led by the following principal investigators (PIs): **Claudius Wagemann** (Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany), **Christina Neumayer** (University of Copenhagen, Denmark), **Lorenzo Mosca** (University of Parma, Italy), **Dan Mercea**, (City, University of London, UK), **Toma Burean** (Babeș-Bolyai University, Romania). The ProDem team includes six postdoctoral researchers: Daria Glukhova (Goethe University Frankfurt), Matthias Hoffmann (University of Copenhagen), Fred Paxton (University of Milan), Felipe G. Santos (City, University of London), Diana Mărgărit and Dana S. Trif (Babeș-Bolyai University).

2. Executive summary

Since 2011 and in the wake of the European financial, economic, and migration crises, mass protests engendered new social movements and political parties. The new parties that emerged from these protests, and hold close links with them, are often labelled 'movement parties'. Examples of this type of party include the Five Star Movement in Italy, Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece.

Key concepts

- **Movement parties:** political parties that are distinctive in their similarity to social movements in organisation and degree of involvement in protests.
- **Democratic quality:** the capacity for citizens to exercise their political, civil, and social citizenship rights through democratic institutions and processes.

What are the consequences of these newly emerged parties for European democracy, procedures, and institutions? Their increasing prominence tends to be interpreted in two contrasting ways. An optimistic perspective sees in them a rising participation of 'critical citizens', who question authority but remain committed to democratic values. A more fearful perspective instead focuses on the emergence of conflictual and polarising narratives challenging fundamental values of liberal democracies. Such discourses feed on, and exacerbate, the discontent of citizens and may serve to erode liberal democratic standards. ProDem enters this debate and seeks to provide robust and innovative answers to the question prompted by these developments.

To do so, **ProDem comparatively analyses the medium- and long-term effects of the triple interaction between citizens, social movements, and movement parties on democratic quality in European democracies**. We assess the consequences for democratic quality in six European countries (Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Romania, and the UK) during a global wave of protests between 2011 and 2019.

Figure 1. The triple interaction between citizens, social movements and movement parties
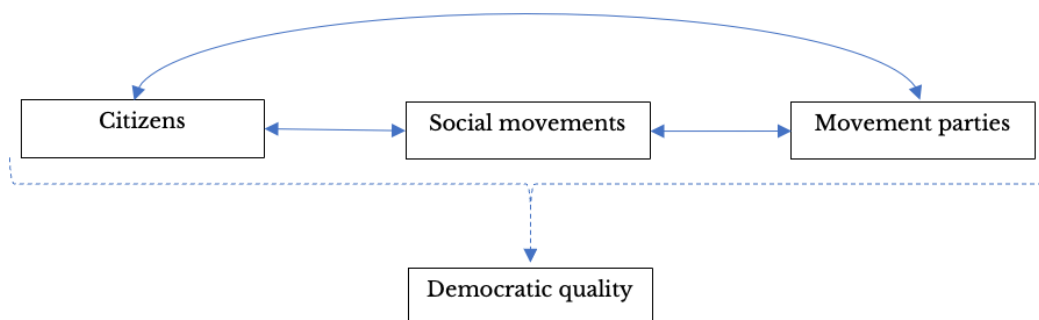
In this report, we highlight some results of the ongoing research conducted in the ProDem project. Our research focuses in particular on the opinions regarding democracy held by citizens across Europe, the efforts by new parties to revitalise European democracy, and the contemporary challenges from political forces that are hostile towards liberal democracy. We would highlight the following key takeaways from the research so far conducted by ProDem.

Key takeaways

- **Declining democratic quality** is a concern in Europe, particularly in the last decade amid a global wave of protest.
- **Distrust of democracy** among European citizens is widespread across Europe, concerning both national and EU democratic institutions.
- State of the art survey experiments reveal that distrusting citizens are l**ess likely to participate in politic**s, and **social inequalities are worsened by the perception that European democracies are in decline**.
- New '**movement parties**' emerging from protests are making effective use of social media to become relevant forces in institutional politics.
- While **relations between movement parties and news media** were strained initially due to perceived unfair treatment, they have grown closer over time.
- '**Democracy**' is not a frequently used keyword in movement parties' discourse, and they present contrasting opinions towards 'Europe'.
- New social movements can and do contribute to reviving the links between society and political parties and help the latter **channel as yet unrepresented political interests through democratic institutions**.
- Through close cooperation with prominent social movements, influencing their issue priorities and the policy agenda, **movement parties can bring forth the adoption of their desired policies, even with small representation in parliament.**

As a result of these findings, ProDem makes some concrete recommendations to policy-makers in order to sustain and improve democratic quality in Europe.

Recommendations

- **EU institutions** (which tend to be more trusted than national institutions in countries with particularly low levels of political trust) must do more to improve citizens' attitudes towards democracy.
- It is paramount that interventions are made to foster greater **political participation** to confront attempts to erode democratic principles and to demand necessary institutional reforms.
- To remedy existing inequalities, institutions should implement measures aiming at fostering the participation of **women and low-income groups**. In

addition to targeted campaigns encouraging their participation, representatives should also facilitate participation in non-electoral (e.g., protest) activities.

- **Social media platforms** should be regulated so as to effectively restrict the spread of anti-democratic content in the public sphere.
- Political parties should **nurture linkages with social movements** to foster more involvement of active citizens with the political system and democratic practices.
- In policy adoption and implementation, party politicians should make efforts to **avoid the erosion of trust between the party and the social movement** associated with it, both in order preserve their own electoral base and, importantly, **to prevent disillusionment with democracy**.
- All political parties should be careful about choosing coalition partners when forming the government and garnering support in the parliament for their policy proposals, if they would like to have **lasting policy impact**.

3. Defining democratic quality

There is a growing concern with the global state of democracy. Global civil liberties have been declining for 16 consecutive years, according to reports by Freedom House. Moreover, according to the 2022 Economist's Global Democracy Index, there are more non-democratic than democratic regimes in the world and the majority of the world's population now lives under authoritarian rule. These claims are shared by other major democracy monitoring organisations such as the Varieties of Democracy Institute, The Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), and the Bertelsmann Stiftung.[1]

Since 2011 and in the wake of the European financial, economic, and migration crises, mass protests have engendered new social movements and political parties. This development has been interpreted in two main ways. Research into political culture describes the increase in protests as a consequence of long-term sociocultural change, leading to growing numbers of 'critical citizens' who question authority but remain committed to democratic values, procedures, and institutions.[2] **Protesting belongs to civic attitudes deeply rooted in European democracies**.

Researchers studying the 'quality of democracy' have developed a more ambivalent approach, regarding the spread of protests as symptomatic of democratic backsliding.[3] Dissatisfied with the performance of democracies, sizable sections of the citizenry have protested by voting for anti-establishment parties. Some social movements and their party vehicles have mobilised citizens by framing political conflicts as a confrontation between corrupt, unaccountable, foreign-controlled, mainstream media-supported elites and ordinary people, expressing their grievances on social media. **Polarising worldviews, often coupled with nativist frames, tend to negate political pluralism and erode attachment to the norms underpinning liberal democracy**.[4] Activists have, however, also resorted to protest to resist illiberal policies.[5]

ProDem approaches democratic quality from a citizens' perspective as the acquisition of political, civil, and social citizenship rights through democratic institutions and processes.[6] **The interactions between citizens, the media, and political organisations is at the heart of our inquiry into democratic quality.**

4.   Breaking the cycle of distrust

Dissatisfaction with democracy is widespread among citizens across Europe. ProDem conducted a survey that asked citizens from Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Romania, and the UK about their **satisfaction with the way democracy works in their country**, on a scale of 0 ('not satisfied at all') to 10 ('completely satisfied'). The results are shown in **Figure 2**. The dashed vertical lines that appear in each chart represent the average citizen's assessment of democracy. **Only Danish and German citizens give their democracies a 'passing grade', i.e. more than 5 out of 10**. While in the United Kingdom average satisfaction with democracy is a little under 5, citizens in Italy, Hungary and Romania are far less satisfied. In all countries besides Denmark, **there is a high proportion of citizens who state that they are 'not satisfied at all' (0 out of 10) with the way democracy works in their country**. In sum, these data demonstrate that democracy is not working for a substantial proportion of European citizens.

Figure 2. Satisfaction with democracy across European countries
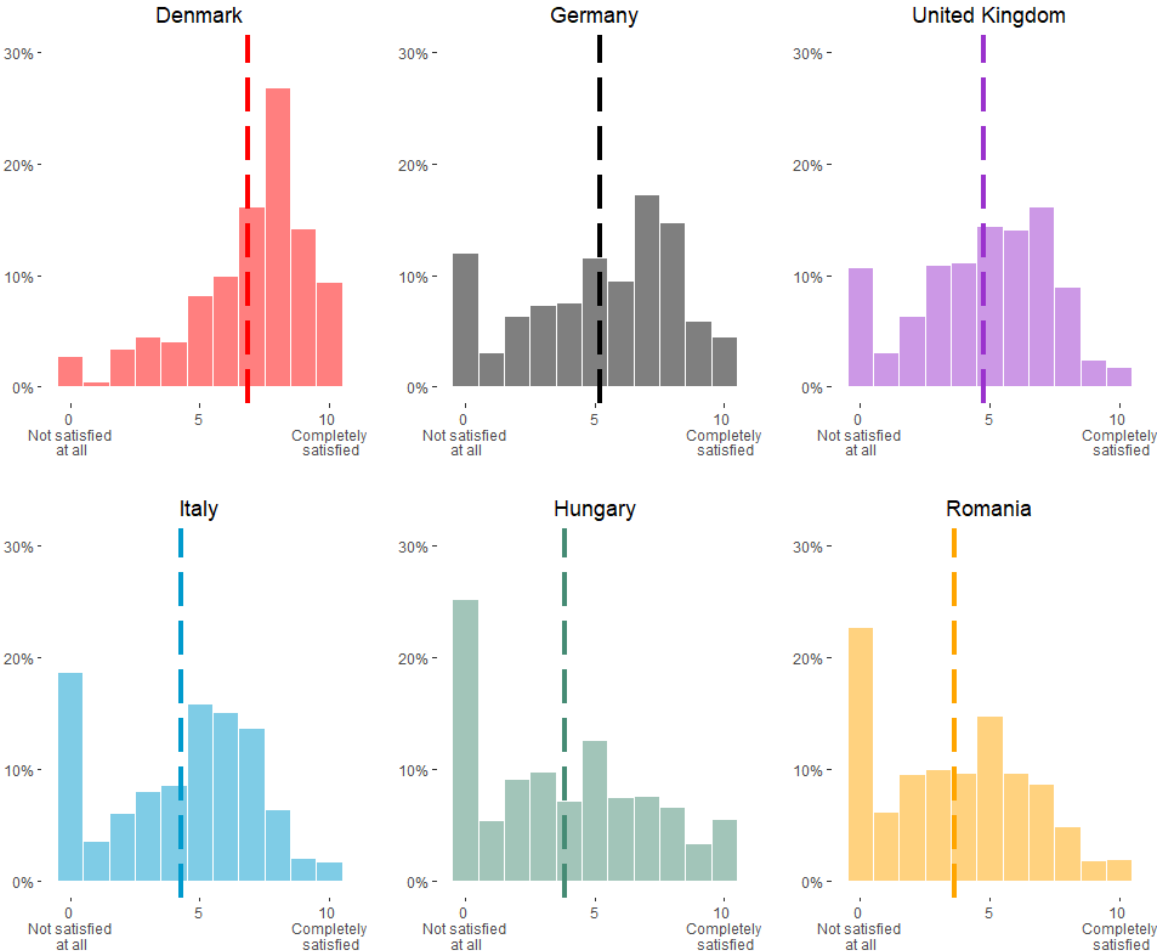
As well as asking about the satisfaction with the overall democratic system, we also inquired into how much **trust** citizens have in different institutions, including the European Union. **Figure 3** shows the results. The coloured dashed line represents the average trust in the EU in each country, while the dotted black line represents the average trust in national institutions (the national judiciary, parliament and political parties), provided for comparison. We can see that in none of the countries is the average above 'neither trust nor distrust', for either EU or national institutions. Yet there are some noteworthy differences in sentiment between the two. **In countries where the average citizen distrusts its national institutions (Romania, Italy and Hungary), the level of trust towards the EU is higher**. These are also the countries where citizens are the most dissatisfied with democracy. **As a result, particularly in countries where national institutions are not as trusted by citizens, there is room for the more trusted EU institutions to improve citizens' attitudes towards democracy**.

Figure 3. Trust in the European Union, compared with trust in national institutions
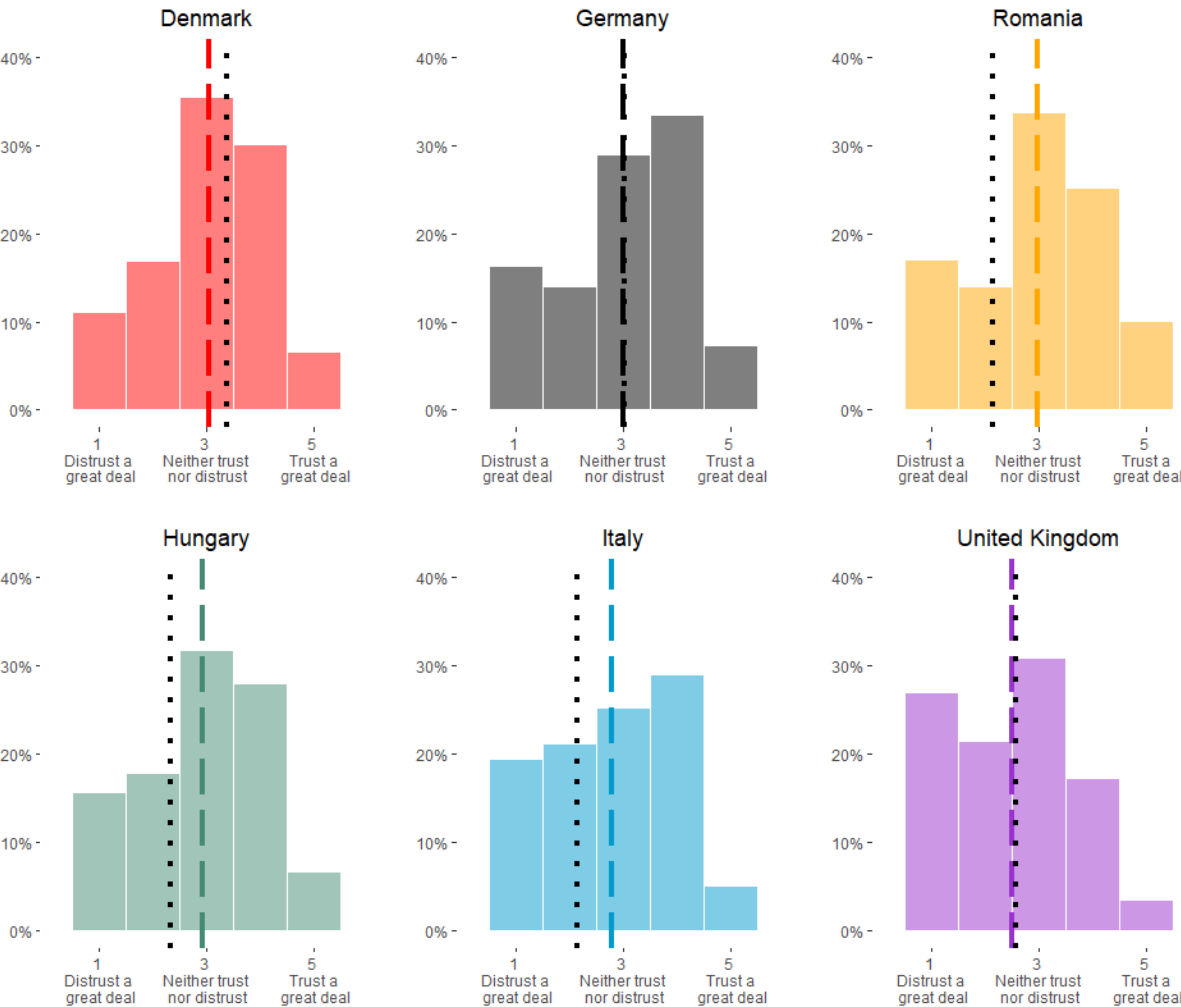
5. Targeting the vulnerable and increasing their political participation

As well as assessing the level of satisfaction with and trust in democracy, ProDem has investigated the consequences for **participation** using state of the art survey experiments. **We found that when citizens are more concerned about democratic quality, they are less willing to participate in politics.** More specifically, they are less willing to join political parties and civil society organisations, to participate in demonstrations, and instead more likely to stop participating in politics altogether. This means that institutions cannot stay passive in face of democratic decline, hoping for citizens to react and demand greater democratic quality. There needs to be decisive action to reverse the cycle of democratic deterioration.

Declines in democratic quality deepen already existing social inequalities. We have found that, when presented with the notion that democracy suffers with multiple problems (e.g. unresponsive governments, curbs on protests), the political participation of **women and low-income groups** is more heavily hampered than that of men and higher-income people. Thus, when made aware of an erosion of democratic quality, women are more likely than men to say that they will not vote in the next election and that they are not willing to participate in demonstrations.

When it comes to low-income groups, their exposure to problems with democracy leads to them being less willing to join a political party, to vote in the next election and join civil society organisations, in comparison to higher-income citizens. Consequently, our analysis shows that, beyond the institutional problems that are created by the erosion of democratic quality, such an erosion is also likely to discourage women and low-income citizens even further in their attempts to participate politically to redress social inequalities.

To remedy these inequalities, institutions should implement measures aimed at fostering the participation of women and low-income groups. In addition to targeted campaigns encouraging their participation, representatives should also facilitate participation in non-electoral activities. Academic research convincingly shows that participation in protests and social movements is an effective tool for empowering groups underrepresented in politics.[7] However, scholars have also pointed out that these groups are more risk-averse when it comes to participating in politics.[8] Institutions need to make participation in demonstrations and social movements safer, to encourage wider political engagement by women and low-income groups. This objective requires significant reforms to the policing of demonstrations and social movements, decreasing the number of instances when police agents crack down on these groups, particularly in cases of non-violent activities.

6. Media interactions with movement parties

Beyond investigating the attitudes of citizens towards democracy, ProDem has conducted research into the **actions of political parties and their consequences for democratic quality**. In particular, we focus on new challenger parties that have emerged from and/or interact closely with protest movements: the so-called '**movement parties**'.

As detailed below, we conducted analyses of the **interactions between movement parties and other, more traditional parties on social media**. We found that the acceptance of these new parties within established institutional politics is strongly related to their electoral performance. That is, the better that movement parties perform electorally, the more recognition they gain from other parties online.

This, in turn, means that **established parties should carefully review their stance toward challengers in digital communicative arenas**. On the one hand, doing so can serve as an effective '*cordon sanitaire*' to contain anti-democratic forces and avoid steering attention towards their narratives. On the other hand, withholding recognition from challengers to the establishment might lead to (further) alienation of their supporters from institutional politics.

We also support the use of **platform regulations to effectively contain the development of anti-democratic content and networks.** Effective monitoring of anti-democratic accounts and pages severely limits the capacity to (publicly) network between civil society organisations and movement parties. While networking activities among far-right parties and civil society organisations may still take place on less visible and recognized social media platforms, effective regulations on major social media platforms can help to contain the spread of anti-democratic content.

We base these recommendations on analyses conducted into the social media presence of movement parties and the news media coverage of (far-right) movement parties. It is to these analyses that we turn next.

The social media presence of movement parties

ProDem has mapped the social media presence of movement parties across six European countries. **Our analyses have identified substantial shifts over time in their activities online, and the networks they have formed with social movements, media, civil society, and political institutions.**

Our analysis of referencing patterns between movement parties and traditional parties on Twitter and Facebook in six different countries supports the idea that 'movement parties' are likely transitional phenomena. As movement parties develop over time, there are shifts in the (mutual) recognition patterns between traditional and movement parties, depending on the latters' positioning within the polity. We see this clearly in **Figure 4**, in the case of Italy.

Figure 4. Monthly share of references made by Italian movement party (Five Star Movement) to traditional parties (PD, Lega), and vice versa
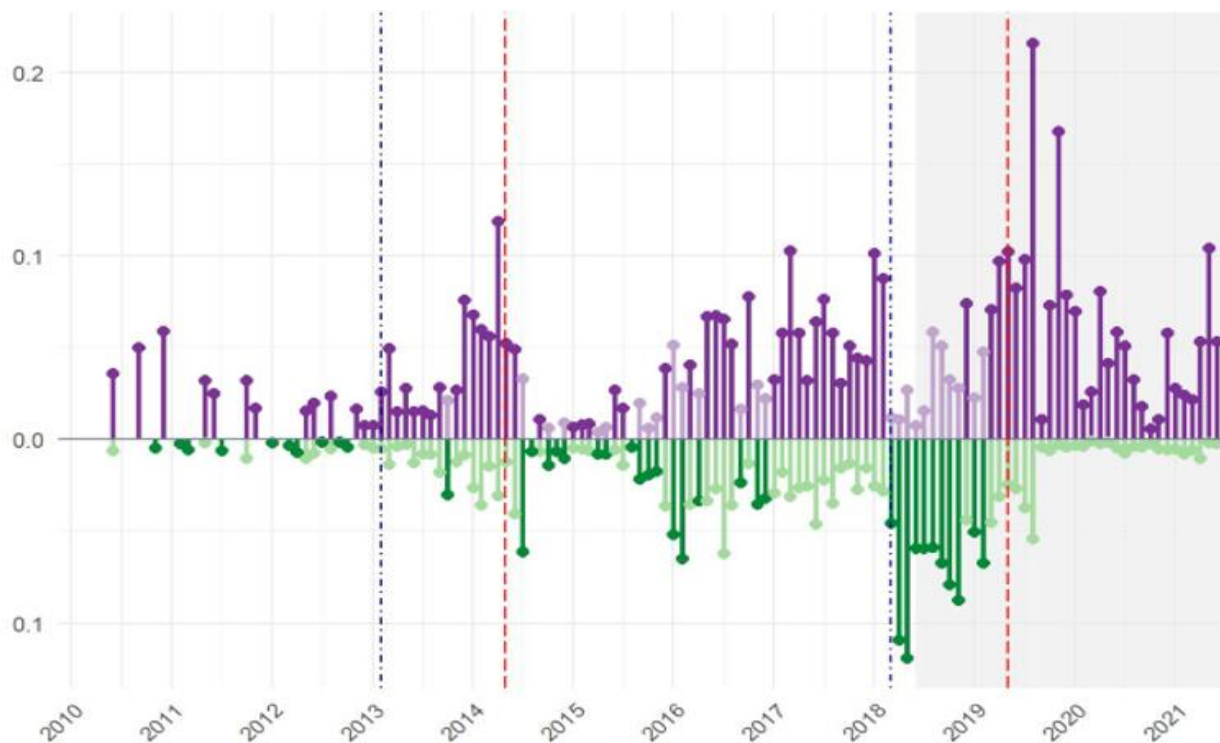
Note: movement party's activity on the upper side, traditional parties' activity on the lower side. Darker shading of lines indicates that party group had a higher referencing ratio that month. Blue dot-dashed vertical lines mark national elections. Red dashed vertical lines mark European elections. Grey background indicates period of movement party government participation.

Passing the parliamentary representation threshold changes the dynamics of referencing patterns. **Once they enter parliament, movement parties can no longer be ignored - also online - and begin to be recognized by traditional parties as**

relevant competitors. In turn, the referencing of traditional parties by movement parties often reduces after the passing of the representation threshold.

There are different trajectories, depending on the movement parties' further progress. Parties that clearly succeed in becoming *relevant* members of institutional politics can reverse the referencing patterns between challenger and established party and hence attract more recognition from established parties than they sent out to them. This is the case for movement parties that go on to participate in government, like the Five Star Movement in Italy, as shown in **Figure 4**, and USR-PLUS in Romania.

Regarding protest-related communications by political parties on social media, our findings suggest that by referencing protest activities and movement organisations in their official communication channels movement parties follow similar 'strategic action repertoires' to those of social movements.

Figure 5. German political parties' (yellow circles) Twitter mentions of social movement organisations (blue circles) in protest-related tweets
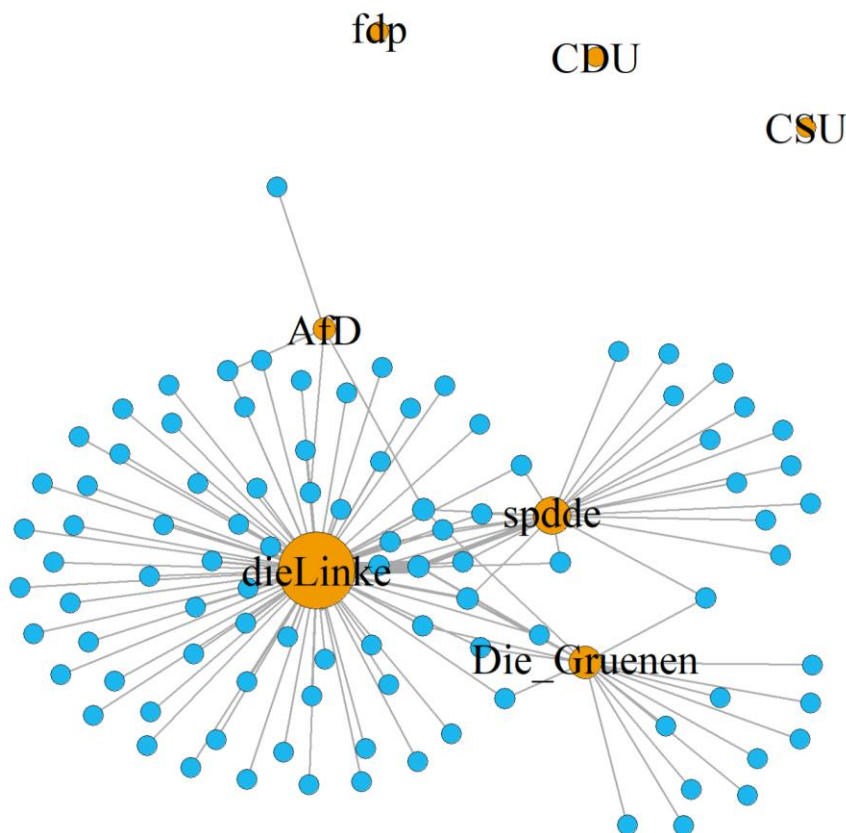
We find that movement parties engage more with protest and social movement organisations than other, more traditional parties. Then, focusing on German parties, we find that the networks formed between political parties and movement organisations consist of both supportive and antagonistic ties.

Left and progressive parties from different historic waves of movement parties - from the long-established social democratic parties to the more recently emerging green parties - display intense supportive connections to movement organisations. Far-right movement parties, on the other hand, tend to hold more antagonistic ties and so lack the opportunity to publicly display supportive links to civil society organisations. One reason for the lack of opportunity to publicly display linkages to anti-democratic civil society organisations on mainstream social media is the more or less effective moderation of offensive content, which may lead to the exclusion of certain accounts from a platform. Parties who are instead conceived as outside of the movement party category (for example, liberals, conservatives) often display limited interactions with movement organisations or remain isolated in a social movement-to-political party network (as shown in Figure 5).

Media Dynamics and Democratic Quality

Amidst recent transformations in the media landscape, newspapers continue to wield powerful political influence. Movement parties have sought to strategically engage with these traditional media channels. Our research delves into the dynamics of these movement party - media interactions. Here we present insights gathered through interviews with journalists and representatives from various movement parties: the AfD, the German far-right party; Alternativet, the Danish green party; and the Five Star Movement, the Italian eclectic populist party.

Initial Strains

Our initial findings reveal that, during their foundational stages, relations between movement parties and the media were characterised by strains. A shared sentiment among these parties is a perception of unfair coverage. This dissatisfaction manifested in different forms, such as not being taken seriously (as perceived by the Alternativet), being viewed as a threat to be obstructed (in the case of the Five Star Movement), and facing outright hostility (in the case of the AfD).

> "Initially, there was a perception of us as competitors because we were delivering news independently. This created an adversarial dynamic. But this tension has diminished over time."
>
> *Quote from Five Star Movement party representative*

Evolution of Relations

As time progressed, dynamic shifts took place in the media relations among the three parties under scrutiny. In the cases of Alternativet and the Five Star Movement, relations with the media have undergone a noticeable softening and a growing closeness over time. This transformation is ascribed to a combination of factors, including the **maturation and increasing professionalisation** of these political entities. Furthermore, **the media's evolving perception of the parties, and their acknowledgment of their significance in the political process, played a crucial role in fostering a more amicable relationship**.

> "When we launched the party, no one believed in it, and that's why the established media didn't bother to relate to it at all. It was like we were an irrelevant story. So, of course, we had to try to look at some other parameters to see if there was any interest out there after all. And we could see that there was. Either by virtue of the reach of our Facebook posts, or whether people wanted to get involved in political laboratories or set up local branches and so on. It seemed to us that the entire traditional media universe had missed this."
>
> *Quote from Alternativet movement party representative*

In stark contrast, the relations between the media and the AfD has seen a hardening over time. Representatives from the AfD attribute this shift to their perception of media intolerance toward differing viewpoints, particularly on contentious issues such as immigration and Covid. From the perspective of the media, **the transformation in the relationship is attributed to the AfD's increasingly radical positions on key issues, viewed as diverging to an extent that raises concerns about their impact on the democratic fabric.**

Impact on Democratic Quality

The three cases exhibit notable diversity in their perspectives on how the other side influences democratic quality. In the case of the AfD, a mutual distrust prevails, with both the party and the media viewing each other as negative influences on democracy.

Conversely, the Five Star Movement displays a milder form of distrust. Party actors highlight concerns about the media's lack of quality, excessive superficiality, and a perceived lack of scrutiny toward the political system, especially due to perceived coziness with traditional parties. On the media side, there is an acknowledgment of the Five Star Movement's positive contributions—shaking up the political system, introducing new issues, and challenging entrenched practices, notably corruption. However, the party's anti-system rhetoric, including a negative focus on the media, has been identified as a factor eroding public trust in democratic institutions.

A similar narrative unfolds with Alternativet in Denmark. While the media appreciates the fresh perspectives offered by the party, there are expressed concerns about the rhetorical impact on political trust. Alternativet, in turn, critiques the media for a perceived lack of seriousness in reporting, emphasising a focus on personalities and scandal over the pressing issues at hand. This intricate interplay between political movements and media dynamics underscores the complex challenges inherent in shaping and maintaining democratic quality.

7. Questioning 'democracy' and 'identity' in movement parties' discourse

ProDem has analysed political ideologies embraced by movement parties across our 6 country cases. Political parties are key actors not only in terms of political action, but also in terms of discourses. Based on the assumption that strategies for action include the way parties describe themselves, we have focused on how they shape their political narratives by analysing their manifestos and programs. Our analyses have highlighted the usage of a series of preselected *key words*, all of them derived from previous studies of ideology as well as frequent appearance in contemporary public debates. Besides 'democracy', we have also investigated the recurrence of: 'corruption', 'equality', 'freedom', 'inclusiveness', 'justice', and 'law'. Another major focus of our studies has been the process of identity building, which we broke down into four specific codes: textual references to 'self', textual references to 'other', and textual references to the 'self-other relationship'. The subcode 'country/nation' was added to the code 'self', to capture specific mentions of the former, with 'country/nation' acting as a wider category for 'self'.

We found that 'democracy' is not the most frequently used keyword in their discourses (*colour code*: red, see Fig. 6-8). Some parties prefer to focus on other political demands, such as 'freedom', 'equality', and 'law', whose meanings may at times overlap with 'democracy'. 'Inclusiveness', 'justice', and 'corruption' are also included in these messages, although they are not as prominent, and their direct ties to 'democracy' characterise only some political messages. Another noticeable feature of these discourses is that, irrespective of their Left or Right leanings, movement parties appear to advocate 'change' qua 'reform' (*colour code*: black) of the political system.

ProDem finds that the discourse of movement parties varies as well in their relationship to Europe. We find that liberal progressive movement parties ask for multi-level European reforms, both institutional and policy-related, that should improve the Union's functioning. 'Change' and 'reform' are associated with Europe. Yet these changes are projected to be functional instead of structural. This is one of the most striking differences between the radical approach of the populist discourse, which advocates major systemic change, and the incremental, policy-centred approach of the liberal progressive movement parties.

Some movement parties' programs are rather focused on building their own identity (*colour code*: variations of yellow). Their vision for the party, their 'country/nation', and its future all feature prominently in such discourses. For example, liberal progressive movement parties in the two Eastern European cases

display a strong tendency to build an identity which is positively related to the 'nation', 'Europe', 'NATO', and the 'US'. However, the importance attached to other discursive elements - such as 'corruption', 'democracy', 'equality', 'freedom', 'inclusiveness', 'justice', and 'law' - varies. We can see an example of this variation, comparing the 2018 political program of the Hungarian Momentum Movement party (see Fig. 7) and the Romanian USR 2019 Charter of Values (Fig. 6), with the discourse of Green Danish political party Alternativet being more balanced in terms of the keywords used (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7). Identity matters, but it is only one element among others in the party's political discourse (see Fig. 8).

The disadvantages of identity-driven political messages are many. While a focus on 'self' and a strong differentiation from the 'other' may increase the homogeneity of one's political group in the short-term, in the long-term the effects can be detrimental to inclusiveness and the flourishing of socially diverse communities.

For example, a discourse centred around a strong relationship of the 'self' with key political demands such as 'law' and 'corruption' would create a greater division between 'us', those on the side of the 'law', and 'them', the 'corrupt' ones. Such a discursive barrier would lower the possibility of building consensus across political divides, being less conducive to ideologically diverse governing coalitions.

Discursive divisions often translate in societal ones, a situation that will not strengthen the democratic process, but weaken it by polarising voters.

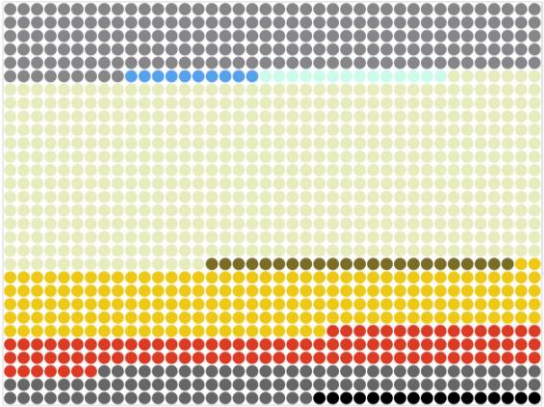**Figure 6.** USR, Romania, Document Map of 2019 USR Charter of Values

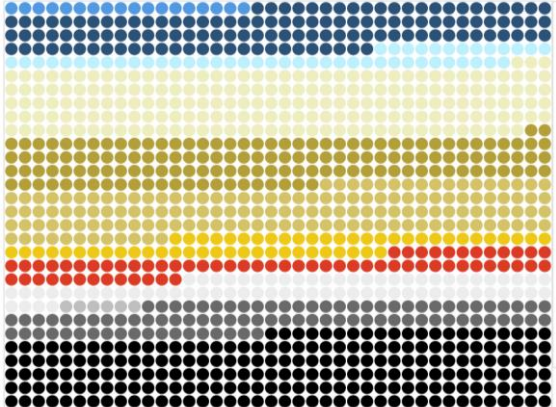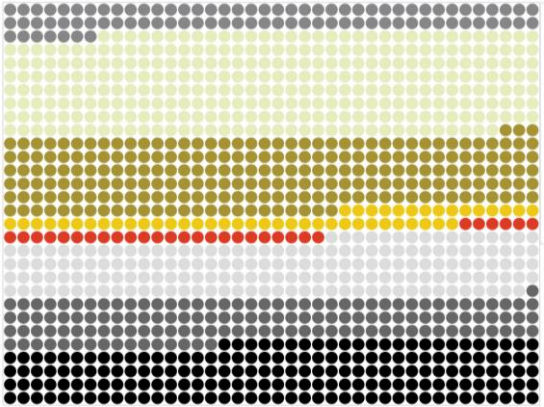**Figure 7.** Momentum Movement, Hungary, Document Map of 2018 Party Program Elections

Figure 8. Alternativet, Denmark, Document Map of Alternativet Manifesto

8. Reviving Linkages between Social Movements and Political Parties

The global wave of protests between 2011 and 2019 did not only inspire new movement parties, but also fed into the renewed popularity of some existing, more established parties. An example of this dynamic is found in the interaction between the Fridays for Future climate movement and the Green party in Germany. Unlike the Green parties in Southern Europe, the Greens in Germany have managed to stay relevant throughout the decades since the first environmental movements, entering regional and national parliaments in the 1980s and even entering national government in 1998. Recently their political relevance has been further bolstered by the protests of the Fridays for Future (FFF). **Studies have found that more Green party votes were registered in state and national elections following the FFF protests in 2019, helped by the reverse intergenerational transmission of pro-environmental attitudes from the young participants of the protests to their parents.**[9] Moreover, the Green party membership rose significantly following the FFF protests, with a high proportion of new young members.[10]

The Green party now still retains the organisational basis and professionalisation of a traditional political party, but **through associations with a popular social movement, it is able to capture unrepresented political interests, particularly of the younger generation**. This shows that a new, powerful social movement can rekindle the linkages between society and parties, which might, as in the case of German Greens, lead to impressive electoral results and the party benefiting from the movement and even entering the government coalition in 2021. **These kinds of linkages need to be nurtured by already professional, parliamentary parties, as it helps them to channel the discontent and interests of the people that are not yet addressed by the political system and thereby uphold democratic practices.**

9. Preserving Trust between Social Movements and Party Representatives

The entry of movement parties into government positions offers a great opportunity to put their ideas into practice: to implement their demands as policies. However, movement parties have not been entirely successful in transmitting the policy demands of the associated social movements into government institutions. For instance, the Five Star Movement (M5S) party in Italy had been a strong supporter of the local 'No TAV' movement, which protested against the construction of a high-speed railway line between Turin and Lyon. This has been a crucial issue of environmental protection for the M5S for many years, but in the end it was during the M5S term in government that the construction of this railway was given the final approval in 2019, due largely to the support of the TAV project by the Lega party, the Lega's relative power within the government coalition and recent victory in the 2019 European elections, and a threat of the government dissolution over the issue. Thus, the movement party was not able to meet the expectations of the 'No TAV' movement once it made its way into a governing coalition, even though the official position of the M5S itself regarding the TAV project has not changed.

In another example, the Green party in Germany was only partially able to secure some of the policy demands of the Fridays for Future movement for environmental protection. Fridays for Future demanded a "sevenfold increase in the expansion [of solar and wind energy]"[11] from the new government coalition, formed in 2021 by the Greens, SPD, and FDP. Both the Greens in their 2021 election programme and the coalition of the three parties in the Coalition Agreement mention the planned expansion, but the Greens' election programme envisions a total capacity of around 460-500 gigawatts of solar and wind energy, while in the final Coalition Agreement, the promised expansion only reaches the level of circa 300 GW[12,13]. Both these proposed measures fall well below the demand of the FFF, which aimed for the total capacity of solar and wind energy to increase up to 470-750 GW by 2035 in order to substitute fossil fuels as soon as possible (see Figure 9). This shows how the political demands of the movement have only been able to partially influence the policy-making agenda, even when the party most closely aligned with the movement gets into a government coalition.
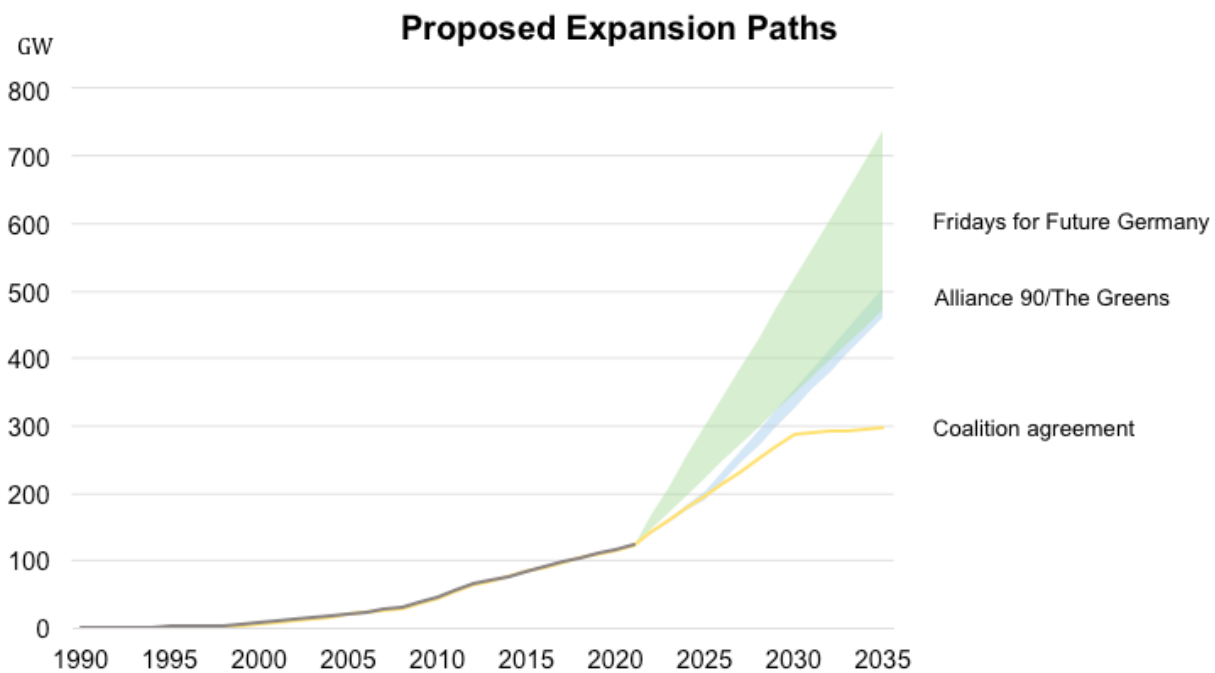
Figure 9. Proposed expansion plans for wind and solar energy by 2035 in Germany, based on the pledges made in 2021 by the Fridays for Future movement (green-shaded area), the Greens (blue-shaded area), and the Coalition Agreement (yellow line), projected up to 2035. X-axis: years; Y-axis: total capacity for wind and solar energy in Germany in gigawatts (GW).

The FFF leaders have been quite critical of the Green party's performance in the government after the 2021 election, citing the fact that progress with regard to climate protection has since been slower than expected. Another reason for a split between the social movement and the party was the situation around the demolition of the Lützerath village for the expansion of the open cast lignite mine, which was approved by the Green party in a compromise with an energy giant for phasing out coal. This deal left many climate movement activists disappointed with the Green politicians, who had underlined the significance of climate protection before the 2021 general election but appeared to have undermined the principles of the party, the Paris climate, and the government coalition agreements very soon after.

Regardless of the policy at stake or the dyad of social movement–movement party in focus, such instances of disenchantment and loss of faith are dangerous for a party, as they can lead to big decreases in party membership and the possibility of many votes being captured by other parties in the future. Populist parties might also take advantage of such kind of rifts between the social movements and the party seen as representing them – for example, the Five Star Movement party in the 2013 and 2018 Italian general elections was able to capture many of the voters concerned with climate issues, who could have supported the Italian Greens, simply by acting as the voice of many local Italian pro-environmental movements (*NoTap, No Gronda*, etc.) and promising to represent them at the national level.

Beyond the implications for the movement party, there could also be grave consequences for the political system in the country and democracy in Europe. Disenchanted and disappointed with the actions of a party that is their closest and natural ally for climate protection, young protesters can lose trust in the democratic processes and instruments altogether. **Feeling betrayed by their representatives, they might either curb their democratic participation and ignore elections or even turn to more violent, extreme forms of protests to make sure their demands are heard.** Therefore, **party politicians should do their best to avoid rifts like this between their representatives and the social movement, which contributes to a renewed success of the party**. Of course, achieving any kind of progress for the movement and movement party's policy agendas requires pragmatic and unavoidable compromises, including with the industry and other political parties. In such cases, **party representatives should make extra effort to explain to their supporters in the movement why compromises were necessary and how they have actually helped to advance their joint policy agenda**. Doing so will facilitate the preservation of trust between movement supporters and the movement party.

10. Producing Lasting Policy Impact

Our research shows that movement parties, of both the left- and right- wing, are able to achieve policy successes even without holding major positions in the government. In fact, through close cooperation with prominent social movements, influencing issue priorities and the policy agenda, movement parties can bring forth the adoption of their desired policies even with little representation in parliament. Examples abound in recent history, from the Italian Green party successfully stopping the Italian nuclear programme in the 1980s and later preventing its revival, to the AfD party in Germany successfully contributing to the adoption of stricter migration and asylum policies in Germany after 2015 by channelling the demands of Pegida protesters and exploiting the party's increased popularity. **These dynamics need to be kept in mind by all political parties, especially those that support ideas of liberal democracy and would like to prevent the spread of policies that could undermine it.**

In contrast, we have found that **significant electoral success and access to the government by itself does not ensure lasting policy success.** As shown by the case of the policy of citizenship income (*reddito di cittadinanza*) in Italy, introduced thanks to the efforts of the Five Star Movement, the loud success of priority policy issues for the movement/movement party can be short-lived. The policy was adopted in the period of M5S' coalition government alongside the right-wing populist party Lega. Compromises were made by the M5S in order to achieve their key policy measure. However, *reddito di cittadinanza* was a problematic policy for the Lega not just for the costs incurred by the policy, but for its very principles of providing income unconditionally, and for disproportionately benefitting the southern regions of the country. Unsurprisingly, after the M5S lost power and the centre-right

coalition (which still included the Lega) took over the government after the 2022 general election, the measure was cancelled and substituted with much more selective anti-poverty subsidies from 2024. **This serves to show that all kinds of political parties, movement and established alike, should be careful about choosing coalition partners when forming the government and garnering support in the parliament among other parties, if they would like to have lasting policy impact. Coalitions of parties that have profound disagreements not over the degree but over the kind of policy measures they adopt are less likely to sustain and produce policies that stand the test of time.**

11. Conclusion

The survey research conducted by ProDem shows that a substantial proportion of European citizens have lost faith in democracy. In countries with particularly low levels of trust in national institutions (Romania, Italy and Hungary), the level of trust towards the EU is higher. This presents an **opportunity for EU institutions to take advantage of their more trustworthy reputation and take action to promote democratic quality.**

It is paramount that politicians, national governments, and the EU make **greater efforts to foster political participation**. Low levels of political participation are especially worrying for **low-income groups and women.** National and European institutions should target these groups through dedicated campaigns aimed at restoring their confidence in European democracy and the value of participation.

Our analysis shows that a new breed of political parties that emerged from the protests of the last decade have made their presence felt in the public sphere, both online and offline. These **'movement parties'** have increasingly connected with other, more traditional parties and transitioned towards becoming established members of our democratic political systems. Their interactions with traditional parties online points to an increasing level of recognition of newcomers by their more established peers, especially when the movement parties pass the threshold of electoral representation. These parties are more likely to **establish ties to social movements and other movement organisations**, although the nature of these ties - whether cooperative or antagonistic - varies.

As movement parties have grown in recognition and parliamentary representation, many have grown closer to traditional media establishments. Representatives from the parties report a feeling of unfair treatment and neglect, at least initially. **It is imperative for democratic quality that newspapers continue to focus on and scrutinise such new parties and their novel platforms, including to expose any anti-democratic elements.** It is likewise crucial that online content is actively moderated in accordance with EU regulations to **restrict the spread of anti-democratic content in the public sphere.**

Given the challenges that democracies are facing, **a strong commitment from political parties towards the principles of democracy is more important than ever**. The creation of inclusive, rather than antagonistic identities and relationships are prerequisites for strengthening democratic quality in Europe. It would therefore be welcome to see political actors do more to link their political demands with language that reflects their commitment to democracy.

Both movement parties and traditional parties can benefit from associating with new social movements and representing the yet unaddressed political interests and discontent of the protesters. In fact, efforts towards doing that **could help both the popularity of political parties individually and the overall citizen trust in a democratic system and democratic practices.** In terms of policy impact, it is also often achieved by a party via **close cooperation with social movements and influencing issue priorities of the voters without having a large representation in parliament.** In turn, lasting policy impact for a majority party in a government coalition can be ensured by **choosing coalition partners that can disagree over the extent, but not the kind of policy measures proposed by the majority party**.

In conclusion, while trust in democracy appears to be shaken, ProDem has generated several evidence-based recommendations for politicians and civil society organisations. Following these steps will help to **repair the 'bridge' between citizens and their elected representatives** and so to restore confidence in a strengthened European democracy.
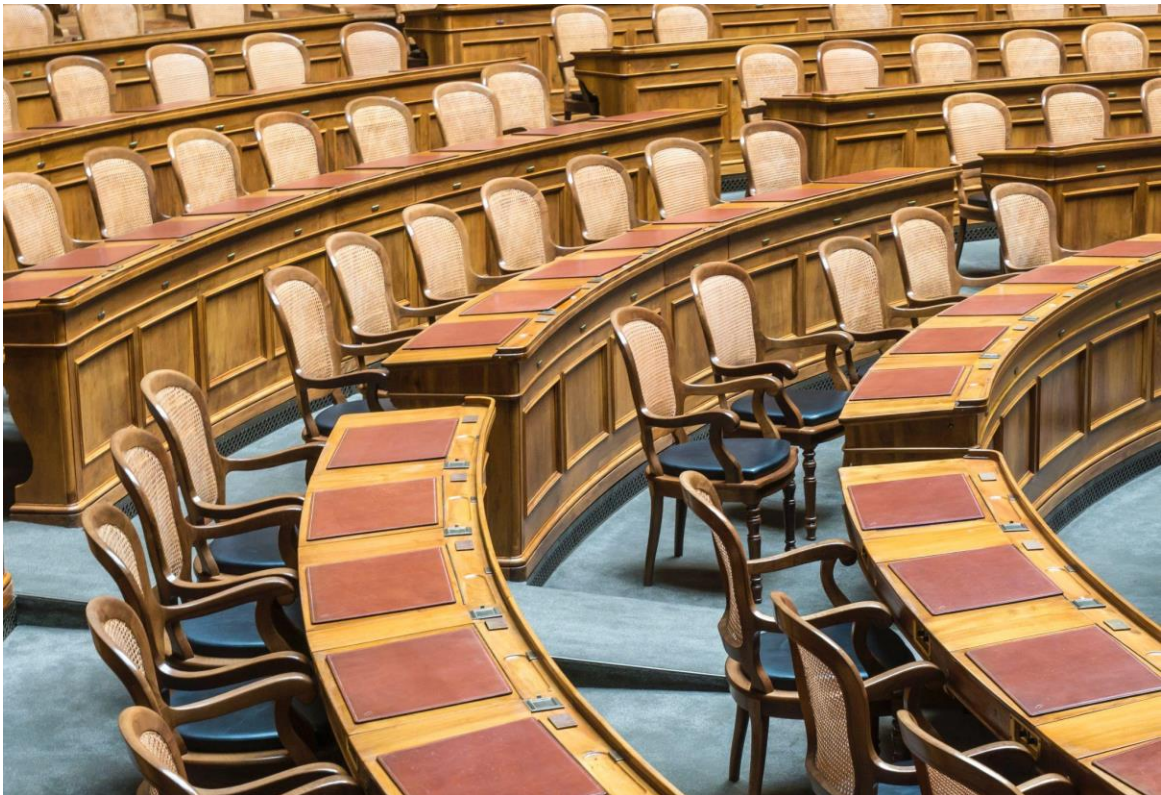
Appendix: Methods

Our findings are based on data from nationally representative surveys fielded by the public opinion and data company YouGov between 21 February 2022 and 11 March 2022, in Denmark (N = 1,001), Germany (N = 2,024), Hungary (N = 2,051), Italy (N = 2,101), Romania (N = 946), and the United Kingdom (N = 2,224), making a total number of 10,347 respondents. In these surveys, we asked citizens about their views on democracy and democratic institutions as well as their political participation. These data provided us valuable insights about the opinions from voters of different political parties, men and women, as well as people with different incomes.

The surveys contained an experimental element through the inclusion of a vignette. A vignette is a short text describing a situation, person or object holding a set of characteristics that are shown to respondents with the objective of inquiring into their intended behaviour and attitudes with respect to the scenario presented. We randomly divided respondents in five groups, each of which saw a different message highlighting a concern with democracy. After the message, we asked participants about whether they would be willing to participate in a number of actions to express how their country should be run. As participants are randomly allocated in the different groups, it can be assumed that differences among groups are due to the different messages they read. Comparing the responses from groups that saw messages highlighting concerns with democracy to a control group that did not read such messages, we can explore how concerns with democracy affect citizen participation.

ProDem's social media and traditional media analyses are based on a mixed-methods approach that combines large-scale quantitative as well as in-depth qualitative approaches. Data on parties' and civil society organisations' activities on the major social media platforms Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram is collected via the respective Application Programming Interfaces. The resulting datasets are analysed as time-series of activities, with dictionary-based quantitative content analyses to identify interactions among actors, and with qualitative techniques such as visual analyses to assess the meaning and narratives constructed and disseminated via digital social media. The analyses of interactions between movement parties and traditional media representatives were based on semi-structured interviews conducted in 2022-23 with representatives from the parties and journalists at a range of newspapers in the six case study environments.

ProDem relies on discourse analysis to understand ideological change across our sampled case studies of movement parties, social movements, and citizen-driven

protests. A preselected number of codes have been used for the coding of official documents issued by the respective actors. We have traced the discursive linkages established between various political demands, highlighting processes of identity-building and attempts at creating new hegemonic discourses.

Table 1. Movement parties considered in the analyses of ProDem

Country	Movement parties
Denmark	Alternativet, Frie Grønne, Nye Borgerlige
Germany	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen; AfD; Die Linke
Hungary	LMP; Párbeszéd Magyarországért; Jobbik; Mi Hazánk Mozgalom; Momentum
Italy	Movimento 5 Stelle, CasaPound Italia
UK	Green Party of England and Wales; Scottish Greens; Sinn Fein; UKIP; Brexit Party
Romania	AUR; USR

Endnotes

[1] Economist Intelligence Unit. 2022. *Democracy Index 2021: The China Challenge*. London: The Economist.

Boese, Vanessa A., Nazifa Alizada, Martin Lundstedt, Kelly Morrison, Natalia Natsika, Yuko Sato, Hugo Tai, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2022. *Autocratization Changing Nature? Democracy Report 2022*. Stockholm: Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem).

International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. 2021. *The Global State of Democracy 2021: Building Resilience in a Pandemic Era*. Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

Hartmann, Hauke, and Peter Thiery. 2022. *Global Findings BTI 2022: Resilience Wearing Thin*. Gutersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung

[2] Dalton, Russell, and Christian Welzel. 2013. *The Civic Culture Transformed: From Allegiant to Assertive Citizenship*. Cambridge University Press.

[3] Krastev, Ivan. 2014. *Democracy Disrupted: The Politics of Global Protest.* University of Pennsylvania Press.

[4] Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt.2018. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown Publishing.

[5] Dimitrova, Antoaneta L. 2018. The uncertain road to sustainable democracy: elite coalitions, citizen protests and the prospects of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, *East European Politics*, 34:3, 257–275.

[6] Porta, Donatella della. 2016. *Where Did the Revolution Go?: Contentious Politics and the Quality of Democracy*. Cambridge University Press.

[7] McAdam, Doug. 1982. P*olitical process and the development of black insurgency, 1930-1970*. University of Chicago Press.

[8] Grasso, Maria, & Smith, Katherine. 2022. Gender inequalities in political participation and political engagement among young people in Europe: Are young women less politically engaged than young men?. *Politics*, 42(1), 39-57.

[9] Fabel, Marc, Matthias Flückiger, Markus Ludwig, Helmut Rainer, Maria Waldinger, and Sebastian Wichert. 2023. "The Power of Youth: Did the 'Fridays for Future' Climate Movement Trickle-Up to Influence Voters, Politicians, and the Media? CESifo Working Paper No. 9742." *Munich Society for the Promotion of Economic Research - CESifo GmbH*

[10] Thurau, Jens. 2023. "On Climate, German Green Party Supporters Feel Betrayed." *Deutsche Welle*, January 22, 2023.

[11] Fridays for Future. 2021. "Forderungen für die ersten 100 Tage der neuen Bundesregierung | Fridays for Future." *Fridays for Future Deutschland* (blog). 2021.

[12] Alliance90/The Greens. 2021. "*Germany. Everything Is Possible. Manifesto for the 2021 Parliamentary Elections.*" *Gruene.de.*

[13] Koalitionsvertrag: Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands/Bündnis 90/Die Grünen/Freie Demokratische Partei. 2021. „Mehr Fortschritt wagen. Bündnis für Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit und Nachhaltigkeit." *Bundesregierung.*