Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe

ISSN: 2573-9638 (Print) 2573-9646 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cdeb20

Lessons in division and unity: the Weimar Republic as a historical case of pernicious polarization and the collapse of democratic trust

István Benedek

To cite this article: István Benedek (2026) Lessons in division and unity: the Weimar Republic as a historical case of pernicious polarization and the collapse of democratic trust, Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe, 34:3, 609-636, DOI: 10.1080/25739638.2026.2719475

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2026.2719475

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 30 Aug 2026.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 140

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=cdeb20

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE
2026, VOL. 34, NO. 3, 609–636
https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2026.2719475

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Lessons in division and unity: the Weimar Republic as a historical case of pernicious polarization and the collapse of democratic trust

István Benedek [a,b]

[a]Institute for Political Science, ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest, Hungary; [b]Institute of Political Sciences, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

ABSTRACT

This article revisits the collapse of the Weimar Republic through contemporary polarization theory. It does not offer a new archival explanation but uses a well-studied historical case to clarify how ideological and affective divisions can escalate into pernicious polarization and the collapse of democratic trust. The argument is that Weimar was not doomed by polarization alone. Social-moral cleavages, segmented publics, economic anxieties, political violence and status fears became democratically destructive when political actors transformed them into antagonistic camps that increasingly ceased to recognize opponents as legitimate participants in a shared political order. The article makes three contributions. First, it clarifies the relationship between ideological, affective, pernicious and democratic polarization. Second, it interprets the Nazi promise of *Volksgemeinschaft* as a strategy of exclusionary unity: National Socialism did not overcome polarization but reorganized it by redefining the political community against internal enemies. Third, it differentiates the mechanisms through which Nazi anti-pluralist mobilization, Communist sectarianism and conservative institutional bypass eroded mutual toleration, institutional restraint, coalition-building and the legitimacy of opposition. The Weimar case illuminates how democratic breakdown becomes more likely when political conflict loses the capacities that make it democratic.

KEYWORDS

Political polarization; social-moral milieus; cleavages; elite strategies; institutional bypass; democratic breakdown

1. Introduction

Contemporary democracies are increasingly shaped by forms of polarization that extend beyond ordinary ideological disagreement. Partisan conflict becomes democratically dangerous when it is embedded in hostile collective identities, competing political realities and deepening suspicion about the democratic commitments of opponents. This development has renewed scholarly attention to the conditions under which polarization becomes destructive for democracy. Recent research has therefore distinguished

CONTACT István Benedek benedek.istvan@tk.hu; benedek.istvan@ajk.elte.hu Institute for Political Science, ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Tóth Kálmán utca 4, Budapest 1097, Hungary

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

between ideological polarization, affective polarization and more severe forms of pernicious and democratic polarization, in which opponents are no longer treated as legitimate rivals within a shared political order (Iyengar et al. 2019; Mason 2018; McCoy and Somer 2019; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018; Schedler 2023a, 2023b). This problem has become increasingly relevant in the study of contemporary autocratization, populist mobilization and democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019).

This article revisits the Weimar Republic as a historical case through which these distinctions can be clarified. Weimar has long served as a paradigmatic example of democratic breakdown, polarized pluralism and anti-system politics. Its collapse has been examined through institutional design, Germany's military defeat in 1918, the Versailles settlement, economic crisis, political violence, elite miscalculation and strategic failures by democratic actors (Evans 2004; Jones 2020; Schumann 2009; Ullrich 2025; Ziblatt 2017). This article does not seek to replace these explanations or to offer a new archival account of Weimar's fall. Its contribution is conceptual and analytical: it uses a theory-guided historical case to clarify how political conflicts can escalate into pernicious polarization and undermine democratic trust.

The article addresses a gap in the polarization literature: the still limited reconstruction of how ideological and affective divisions become democratically destructive under specific institutional, organizational and elite-strategic conditions (Kish Bar-On et al. 2024). Much comparative research has focused on measuring polarization rather than tracing mechanisms of regime-threatening escalation (Garzia, Ferreira da Silva, and Maye 2023; Reiljan 2020; Reiljan et al. 2024). Weimar is useful for this purpose because it combines ideological distance, anti-system parties, centrifugal competition and a weakening centre with the outcome of democratic collapse (Sartori 2005). Its value lies not in direct analogy, but in mechanism-level insight: it shows how democratic conflict can lose its democratic form when social divisions are reorganized into mutually illegitimate camps, institutional channels of compromise are weakened and claims of unity become tied to exclusionary and anti-pluralist projects. In this sense, the article makes a two-way contribution: polarization theory helps reconstruct Weimar's collapse as a sequence of mechanisms, while the Weimar case clarifies how polarization becomes regime-threatening when conflict loses the capacities that keep it democratic. This makes the case relevant for contemporary debates not as a historical template, but as a way of specifying how polarization, elite strategy, institutional weakness and exclusionary claims of unity can interact in processes of democratic erosion.

The central argument is that Weimar was not doomed by polarization alone. Ideological conflict, affective hostility and social segmentation were present from the beginning (Lepsius 1993; Mergel 2022), but they became fatal only when they interacted with crisis-driven threat perceptions, elite strategies of mutual delegitimation, political violence, institutional bypass and weakened parliamentary conflict-management capacities. The decisive question is therefore not whether Weimar was polarized, but how and under what conditions polarization lost its democratic form. The Nazi promise of *Volksgemeinschaft* was central to this transformation. It did not overcome polarization but reorganized it through exclusion by shifting politics from plural competition among social groups to an antagonistic boundary between the authentic national community and those cast outside it (Childers 1983; Falter 1991; Mommsen 1996).

The article first develops the conceptual framework, then outlines the methodological logic and analytical expectations guiding the historical reconstruction. The empirical analysis reconstructs how socially embedded cleavages and segmented publics were transformed, under conditions of crisis and threat perception, into Nazi exclusionary unity and the collapse of democratic trust. The conclusion argues that Weimar's lesson is not that polarization mechanically destroys democracy, but that democracy becomes vulnerable when political conflict loses the capacities that keep it democratic.

2. Conceptualizing the forms of political polarization

Political polarization generally refers to the division of a political community into increasingly separate and antagonistic camps, but it is best understood as an umbrella concept rather than as a single phenomenon. Ideological disagreement, emotional hostility, identity-based social sorting and the rejection of an opponent's democratic legitimacy are analytically different forms of political conflict. They may overlap and reinforce one another, but they do not have the same mechanisms or democratic consequences.

This article distinguishes between four related forms of polarization. *Ideological polarization* refers to programmatic or worldview distance. *Affective polarization* denotes negative emotions, distrust and social hostility towards political out-groups. *Pernicious polarization* captures the broader process through which conflict becomes organized around a mutually reinforcing us-versus-them divide. *Democratic polarization* marks the regime-threatening threshold at which opponents are no longer recognized as legitimate participants in a shared democratic order. The central question is therefore not simply whether a polity is polarized, but what kind of polarization is present, how different forms of polarization interact, and under what conditions it becomes democratically destructive.

2.1. Ideological polarization

Ideological polarization refers to increasing distance between political actors, parties or voters in terms of political values, policy preferences or broader visions of social order. In its classical meaning, polarization was mainly understood as ideological differentiation along programmatic lines. Political actors become ideologically polarized when they move away from a shared centre and organize competition around increasingly opposed positions. Such divisions often emerge from social and economic conflicts that become politically salient, including class, religion, region, culture or competing interpretations of national identity (Kleinfeld 2023).

Ideological polarization has an ambivalent relationship to democracy. Democratic competition requires meaningful alternatives. Clear ideological differentiation can strengthen accountability by allowing voters to choose between distinct political programmes. Classical cleavage theory showed how parties historically translated social divisions into structured democratic competition, especially through class, church-state, centre-periphery and rural-urban conflicts (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). From this perspective, polarization is not necessarily destructive. Without some degree of ideological differentiation, democratic politics risks becoming technocratic, depoliticized or unresponsive.

At the same time, ideological polarization can weaken democratic governance when political actors become so distant that compromise and coalition-building become increasingly difficult. Sartori's concept of polarized pluralism remains important in this respect: he described Weimar as a system marked by centrifugal tendencies at the electoral, parliamentary and party-leadership levels, and as one that was '"doomed to quick deflagration" (Sartori 2005, 143). This formulation is directly relevant to systems in which parties hostile to the democratic order compete against democratic forces while centrist actors lose their capacity to structure political conflict.

The contemporary literature also shows that ideological polarization is often mediated by elite behaviour and should not be inferred mechanically from mass preferences. Debates over whether mass polarization is overstated (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008), whether partisan sorting has intensified (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008), and how far elite cueing shapes public opinion (Barber and McCarty 2015; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013) caution against treating polarization as a single-level phenomenon. The key point is that ideological conflict becomes democratically dangerous when party competition, elite framing and institutional incentives turn partisan distance into mutual delegitimation.

2.2. *Affective polarization*

Affective polarization refers to emotional hostility, distrust and social distance between political groups. It concerns less what people believe about policy than how they feel about political opponents and the negative moral qualities they attribute to them (Iyengar et al. 2019). It is commonly measured through feeling thermometers, trust deficits, partisan social distance and discrimination against out-partisans (Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason 2016).

The concept draws on social identity theory. Individuals tend to distinguish between in-groups and out-groups, assigning positive qualities to their own group and negative qualities to rival groups (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Tajfel and Turner 1979). In politics, this process becomes especially powerful when party identity aligns with and absorbs other social identities, such as religion, class, ethnicity, region, education or lifestyle, into a single rigid dimension (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018, 16). Mason (2018) describes this as the stacking of identities, through which partisanship becomes a broader mega-identity rather than a mere voting preference. Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe (2015) similarly conceptualize partisan identity as expressive partisanship, where party attachment becomes a meaningful social identity rather than only an instrumental policy preference. Under such conditions, political polarization becomes increasingly rooted in who people *are*, rather than only in what they believe.

This identity-based logic helps explain why affective polarization can distort political judgement. Citizens may evaluate policies, facts and political behaviour according to partisan alignment rather than substantive content (Kleinfeld 2023, 22). Achen and Bartels (2016, 325) describe these attachments as "affective tribal loyalties," which can resist reasoned argument and empirical correction (Disch 2021, 74). Schedler (2023b, 351) captures the emotional structure of this dynamic through the analogy of sports fandom, where attachment to one's own side and hostility towards rivals are sustained less by policy reasoning than by affective allegiance.

Although the concept was developed most influentially in research on the United States, affective polarization is not confined to two-party systems. This point is especially important for studying fragmented and multiparty contexts. Much of the early literature emerged from the American case, but comparative research has adapted the concept to European and multiparty systems. Reiljan (2020) shows that affective polarization can be measured beyond the United States and that European party systems display substantial variation in partisan hostility. Wagner (2021) further shows that affective polarization in multiparty systems cannot be reduced to one binary partisan divide, because voters may feel different levels of hostility towards several parties at once. Kekkonen and Ylä-Anttila (2021) capture this more complex structure through the notion of affective blocs, where hostility and attachment cluster across multiple parties rather than around a simple government-opposition or left-right divide. Comparative studies also caution against overly simple claims about a universal rise in affective polarization, since trends vary across countries and over time (Garzia, Ferreira da Silva, and Maye 2023; Reiljan et al. 2024).

Affective polarization can damage democracy by reducing willingness to compromise, increasing distrust of opponents, and making citizens more receptive to elite cues that portray the other side as dangerous. Perceived polarization may also become politically consequential when citizens exaggerate opponents' composition, extremity or democratic unreliability (Ahler and Sood 2018; Levendusky and Malhotra 2016). Affective polarization may also produce double standards in evaluating democratic norms: citizens who perceive the out-group as threatening may tolerate violations by their own side (Kingzette et al. 2021; Littvay, McCoy, and Simonovits 2024; Voelkel et al. 2023). The relationship between emotional dislike and democratic erosion is therefore conditional. Affective hostility becomes especially dangerous when linked to elite strategies, threat narratives, institutional hardball and justifications for extraordinary measures.

2.3. *Pernicious polarization and the collapse of democratic trust*

Pernicious polarization refers to a more destructive and self-reinforcing form of polarization. It emerges when political conflict becomes organized around a dominant us-versus-them divide that absorbs multiple social, ideological and institutional conflicts into a single antagonistic axis. McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018) describe this as a process in which political life becomes divided into mutually distrustful camps that increasingly view one another as threats to the community. McCoy and Somer (2019) further emphasize the role of political entrepreneurs who activate grievances, sharpen group boundaries, and create reciprocal spirals of polarization.

The concept is useful because it connects social structure, elite agency and democratic erosion without reducing polarization to any single cause. Pernicious polarization does not arise simply because societies contain cleavages. Cleavages become pernicious when political actors frame them as existential conflicts and when rival elites respond in ways that reinforce the same antagonistic logic. In this process, politics becomes increasingly organized around the question of which camp represents the authentic people, the nation, the revolution or democracy itself.

This framework helps connect older theories of party-system polarization to more recent theories of democratic erosion. Sartori's polarized pluralism refers to "real

conflict" over the "fundamentals" of politics (Sartori 2005, 14), capturing the centrifugal party-system logic of ideological distance, anti-system parties, and the weakness of the centre. Pernicious polarization adds a mechanism of escalation. It explains how existing divisions can be activated, intensified and reorganized into mutually exclusive camps through elite rhetoric, organizational mobilization and threat narratives (McCoy and Somer 2019). It also helps avoid two symmetrical errors: treating polarization as a structural fate produced automatically by old cleavages and treating it as merely the result of extremist ideology detached from broader social and institutional processes. In this sense, pernicious polarization is best understood as the process through which conflict becomes organized in a zero-sum and self-reinforcing form.

Democratic polarization should be distinguished from pernicious polarization, even though the two are closely connected. Pernicious polarization describes the broader process through which conflict is reorganized into a mutually reinforcing us-versus-them divide. Democratic polarization refers to the specific moment when this conflict targets the foundations of democratic coexistence. It emerges when political actors and citizens no longer trust their opponents as legitimate democratic competitors. At this stage, polarization is not merely about ideology, identity or group hostility. It concerns whether rival actors can continue to share a democratic order.

This distinction builds on a classical democratic insight. Democracy is inherently conflictual, but it requires the recognition that opponents remain legitimate participants in the political system (Lipset 1981, 78–79). Mouffe's (2005) distinction between agonism and antagonism captures this boundary from an agonistic perspective, while Ferrara's (2014) renewal of political liberalism makes a complementary point: under conditions of hyperpluralism, democracy cannot eliminate deep disagreement but must sustain a framework in which plural conflicts remain politically legitimate rather than destructive. In democratic politics, opponents may defend deeply opposed projects, but they must remain adversaries rather than enemies. Democratic polarization begins when this agonistic structure collapses into antagonism. Rival actors are no longer merely ideologically misguided or affectively disliked. They are portrayed as dangers to the political community itself (Schedler 2023b, 352).

Schedler's concept of democratic polarization is useful because it shifts attention from policy distance or emotional dislike to the erosion of *basic democratic trust* (Schedler 2023b). Basic democratic trust does not require parties to like one another. It requires a minimal belief that political opponents will remain within democratic rules, accept electoral uncertainty and allow alternation in power. When this trust collapses, defeat becomes intolerable and institutional constraints come to be seen as obstacles to survival rather than as conditions of democracy. In contemporary settings, this process often appears under the language of democratic defence: actors accuse their opponents of being anti-democratic and then justify their own norm violations as necessary to protect democracy (Schedler 2023b, 337–338).

This process is closely connected to Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) distinction between *mutual toleration* and *institutional forbearance*. Mutual toleration means accepting political opponents as legitimate rivals. Institutional forbearance means refraining from using the full letter of the law in ways that destroy the spirit of democratic competition. Democratic polarization erodes both. If opponents are perceived as existential enemies,

restraint appears naïve, compromise appears betrayal and institutional hardball becomes defensible. Elections are no longer seen as fair contests, but as existential battles. When political actors adopt a "win at all costs" mentality, they undermine the norms that uphold democratic governance (Abramowitz 2022, 671). Once democracy is no longer viewed as "the only game in town," the political order becomes fragile and vulnerable to collapse (Linz and Stepan 1996).

Threat perceptions help explain this transition. They can increase in-group loyalty, out-group hostility and acceptance of extraordinary measures (Jonas et al. 2014; Mason 2018). When partisanship becomes a social identity, threats to one part of the group may be experienced as threats to the whole (Lelkes 2016), while violent metaphors can normalize the idea that opponents are dangers rather than legitimate rivals (Kalmoe 2014). Economic insecurity and inequality can further intensify this process by making political out-groups appear threatening or illegitimate (Casal Bértoa and Weber 2019; Kleinfeld 2023, 17). Citizens may still claim to support democracy while tolerating anti-democratic behaviour by their own side when partisan stakes are high or when they expect the other side to violate democratic norms first, reflecting a pre-emptive "strike first" logic (Braley et al. 2023; Graham and Svolik 2020; Svolik 2019). The result of this democratic hypocrisy is a dangerous feedback loop in which each side's norm violations validate the other side's fears (Berntzen, Kelsall, and Harteveld 2024; Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay 2022).

Affective polarization is therefore not the same as democratic polarization. The former concerns how groups feel about one another. The latter concerns whether they still recognize one another as legitimate participants in a shared democratic order. The transition from one to the other requires political work: elites must frame opponents as existential threats, institutions must lose their capacity to mediate conflict and citizens must come to view democratic constraints as less important than defeating the other side.

2.4. Cleavages, organizations and elite activation

To understand how polarization becomes politically consequential, one must examine the social cleavages and organizational structures through which conflict is mobilized. Classical cleavage theory provides the starting point. Lipset and Rokkan (1967) argued that modern party systems were built upon historical conflicts such as class, religion, centre-periphery relations and rural-urban divisions. These cleavages did not merely reflect opinions. They linked social structure, collective identity and political organization.

Bartolini and Mair (1990) sharpened this point by arguing that a full cleavage contains three dimensions: an empirical social division, a normative collective identity, and an organizational expression such as parties, unions, churches or associations. This formulation is especially useful because it shows why cleavages matter politically only when they are organized and mobilized. Social divisions may exist without becoming politically decisive. They become powerful when actors construct identities around them and build organizations capable of turning them into political conflict.

Classical cleavage theory emphasized relatively stable social divisions, but later scholarship showed that cleavages can weaken, shift, or be reconfigured. Inglehart's (1977) theory of post-materialist value change showed how new cultural conflicts could cut across older class and religious cleavages, contributing to political dealignment. Norris and Inglehart's (2019) cultural backlash thesis further shows how rapid cultural change

can generate status-based resentment and defensive political mobilization. These revisionist cleavage theories show that polarization is not simply inherited from social structure. It can be reconstructed through changing identities, new issues, perceived threat and political mobilization.

This point is central to Sartori's understanding of parties. Parties do not merely express pre-existing social identities. They help construct, organize and intensify them (Sartori 1969, 84). The organizational dimension is therefore crucial for connecting cleavage theory to pernicious polarization. Parties, newspapers, unions, churches, paramilitary groups and associations not only reflect social cleavages but also shape how people understand those cleavages, whom they trust, whom they fear and what forms of political action appear legitimate. Dense organizational worlds may stabilize political representation, but they can also harden group boundaries and complicate the formation of shared democratic commitments.

Table 1 summarizes the four forms of polarization across their core definitions, primary bases, mechanisms, cleavage dimensions, democratic risks and guiding analytical questions. The table does not imply a linear or necessary progression. Rather, it identifies analytical differences that help trace how ordinary conflict can, under specific conditions, become democratically destructive.

Elite activation is the bridge between cleavage structure and pernicious polarization. Cleavages can remain latent, cross-cutting or democratically manageable (Bartolini and Mair 1990, 15). They become destructive when elites activate them in existential terms, connect them to threat narratives and reorganize political competition around mutually

Table 1. The forms and the dimensions of political polarization.

Dimension	Ideological polarization	Affective polarization	Pernicious polarization	Democratic polarization
Core definition	Programmatic, policy-based, or worldview distance	Emotional hostility, distrust, and social distance towards out-groups	Dominant us-versus-them divide absorbs multiple conflicts	Opponents are no longer recognized as legitimate democratic actors
Primary basis	Values, interests, ideology, policy conflict	Identity, emotion, expressive partisanship, group belonging	Threat construction, elite activation, camp formation	Collapse of basic democratic trust
Main mechanism	Ideological distance between parties, movements, or voters, centrifugal competition	Identity stacking, negative partisanship, moralized out-group hostility	Reorganization of cleavages into mutually exclusive camps by elite strategies	Mutual delegitimization, institutional hardball, rejection of restraint
Cleavage dimension	Empirical and structural social divisions become politicized	Normative identities, perceived out-party extremity, and affective blocs harden	Organizational and elite-driven activation aligns multiple conflicts	Democratic rules and institutions become objects of existential struggle
Democratic risk	Compromise and coalition-building weaken	Opponents become morally disliked and distrusted	Conflict becomes zero-sum and self-reinforcing, institutional distrust	Defeat becomes intolerable and alternation in power loses legitimacy, anti-system rhetoric
Key analytical question	How distant are actors' political positions?	How hostile are groups towards one another?	How are conflicts absorbed into a dominant antagonistic divide?	Do actors still trust one another as democratic competitors?

illegitimate camps, especially where partisan polarization is observable not only in ideological distance but also in asymmetric evaluations of government performance (Patkós 2023).

Populist leadership can intensify this process by translating social division into a Manichaean struggle between the "true people" and their enemies (Benedek 2021, 2025). In such a frame, opponents are not simply rival representatives of alternative interests: they become enemies of the people, democracy, or the nation, making norm violations easier to justify as defensive acts.

This article therefore does not treat cleavages as a sufficient explanation for democratic collapse. It asks how cleavages are activated, weakened, crossed and realigned. The empirical analysis reconstructs this sequence: organized social segmentation initially stabilized representation while also fragmenting the political community; crisis-driven threat perceptions later enabled elites to transform these divisions into strategies of delegitimation, institutional bypass and exclusionary unity. What requires explanation is not polarization in a generic sense, but the emergence of pernicious polarization and the collapse of basic democratic trust.

3. Methodology and analytical expectations

3.1. Weimar as a theory-guided historical case

This article adopts a theory-guided historical case study design. It does not provide a new archival or comprehensive historiographical explanation of Weimar's collapse. Instead, it uses a well-studied historical case to refine and apply contemporary concepts of political polarization. The analysis proceeds through analytical reconstruction, with elements of process tracing, in order to examine how socially embedded political divisions, crisis-induced threat perceptions, elite strategies and institutional weakening interacted over time (Beach and Pedersen 2013; George and Bennett 2005).

The selection of Weimar is justified by its dual analytical status. First, Weimar is a typical case of polarized pluralism in Sartori's sense: it combined ideological distance, anti-system parties, centrifugal competition and a weakening political centre (Sartori 2005). Second, it is an extreme case of democratic collapse, because political conflict culminated in the destruction of democratic institutions and the rise of a totalitarian regime. Detailed qualitative analyses are particularly well suited to reconstructing how crises, threat perceptions, organizational structures, institutional choices and elite strategies interact over time (Slater and Arugay 2018). This combination makes Weimar an analytically useful extreme and mechanism-revealing case rather than a representative case of all polarized democracies (Seawright and Gerring 2008). The article therefore treats Weimar as a bounded historical case, not as a direct analogy for contemporary politics.

The empirical analysis relies primarily on established secondary historiography and social-scientific studies of Weimar politics. This source strategy follows from the article's conceptual and mechanism-oriented purpose. The relevant evidentiary base includes historical syntheses, electoral studies, parliamentary analyses, media histories and work on political violence, conservative elites, Communist sectarianism and Nazi mobilization. The article does not claim to identify one necessary and sufficient cause of Weimar's

collapse. Instead, it reorganizes existing historical knowledge through the lens of polarization theory.

The concepts used in the analysis are operationalized through historically observable indicators. Ideological polarization is identified through programmatic distance, anti-system positions and centrifugal party competition. Affective polarization is traced through hostile group identities, segmented media realities, social-moral separation and the normalization of political violence. Pernicious polarization becomes visible when elites activate grievances, construct threat narratives and consolidate mutually hostile camps. Democratic polarization is indicated by the erosion of basic democratic trust, including the refusal to recognize opponents as legitimate, the delegitimation of parliamentary compromise, the normalization of emergency rule and the increasing acceptance of anti-democratic shortcuts. The process-tracing element lies in reconstructing how these forms of polarization changed over time, rather than simply observing that Weimar was polarized and then collapsed.

3.2. Analytical expectations

The article does not test hypotheses in the large-N sense. Instead, it derives four analytical expectations from the conceptual framework to guide the historical reconstruction. These expectations are heuristic: they discipline the analysis without implying deterministic causality or universal laws.

First (E1), embedded cleavages are expected to stabilize representation while fragmenting democratic identity. Political subcultures gave political conflict durable organizational form by linking parties to social groups and interpretive communities, but they may also limit the emergence of a shared democratic culture. Second (E2), crisis is expected to operate as a threat multiplier. Economic shock, unemployment, political violence and status anxiety become destabilizing when interpreted through narratives of betrayal, national humiliation, class threat, or institutional failure. Crisis is therefore treated not as a mechanical cause of extremism, but as a politically mediated condition that can make existing divisions available for radical mobilization. Third (E3), pernicious polarization is expected to emerge through elite activation. Parties, movements, media actors and conservative power holders frame grievances, identify enemies, delegitimize compromise and make institutional shortcuts appear defensible. Fourth (E4), democratic breakdown is expected to become likely when democratic capacities erode together: mutual toleration, institutional restraint, coalition-building and recognition of legitimate opposition. The empirical analysis therefore asks not merely whether Weimar was divided, but how political conflict lost the capacities that make it democratic.

4. From division to destruction: the fall of the Weimar Republic

The empirical analysis reconstructs the transformation of Weimar politics from structured pluralism into pernicious polarization and, ultimately, the collapse of democratic trust. It does not claim that polarization alone caused Hitler's rise, nor does it offer a full historiographical explanation of the Republic's fall. Rather, it uses selected evidence from the established historiography to show how social cleavages, organizational embedding,

media segmentation, economic crisis, threat perceptions, political violence, elite strategies and exclusionary claims of unity interacted over time. The central point is not that Weimar was simply "too divided." It is that division increasingly ceased to be processed through institutions, parties, and norms capable of keeping conflict democratic.

4.1. Social cleavages and the limits of stability

Weimar society was deeply segmented, but segmentation did not simply mean chaos. The Republic inherited strong social-moral milieus – subcultures formed by overlapping cleavages – that linked citizens to parties, churches, unions, associations, newspapers and local worlds of sociability. Lepsius's classic account of "*sozialmoralische Milieus*" provides a central starting point because it shows that parties were embedded in broader subcultures rather than operating as isolated electoral machines. These milieus were structured by class, confession, region, urban-rural divisions, economic position and cultural authority (Lepsius 1993, 25). This explains why the Weimar party system, despite the institutional rupture of 1918–1919, closely resembled that of Imperial Germany (Mergel 2022). Parties represented not only interests, but also "basic values" and social loyalties rooted in distinct segments of German society (Jones 2020, 2).

The four-milieu schema prevents the analysis from reducing Weimar conflict to a single social axis. Protestant-conservative, Catholic, Protestant-bourgeois, and socialist milieus linked parties to class, confession, region, culture and associational life (Lepsius 1993; Mergel 2022; Mommsen 1996). The *Catholic* milieu, represented by Zentrum and the Bavarian People's Party (BVP), was shaped by confessional identity and the memory of the *Kulturkampf* (Kösters 2018). The *socialist* milieu remained rooted in the organized working class, but the split between Social Democratic (SPD) reformism and Communist (KPD) anti-system politics weakened its capacity to stabilize democracy at the system level (Bois 2014; Petzold 1992). The *Protestant-bourgeois* milieu, represented especially by the German Democratic Party (DDP) and German People's Party (DVP), became increasingly divided between democratic liberalism and nationalist orientations (Lepsius 1993, 48; Mochmann 2002, 42). The *Protestant-conservative* milieu, linked to agrarian, monarchist, nationalist and authoritarian traditions, became especially consequential as the radicalization of the German National People's Party (DNVP) and the erosion of the bourgeois centre opened space for anti-republican and Nazi mobilization (Jones 2020; Ziblatt 2017).

This embeddedness had a double democratic effect. On the one hand, it provided stability by creating "cradle-to-grave" communities and structuring representation. Parties could speak for relatively coherent constituencies, and citizens found political meaning through organizations that connected everyday life to public conflict. Mochmann's (2002) reconstruction of lifestyles, social milieus, and voting behaviour translates Lepsius's framework into an operational account of how social location, collective identity, and party support were connected. On the other hand, these milieus limited the formation of an overarching democratic identity. Lehnert and Megerle (1993) describe Weimar as a fragmented society in which problems of identity and consensus persisted despite dense organization. The Republic inherited organized pluralism, but not a broadly accepted republican political community. Consequently, the party system combined stability and vulnerability. It offered organized representation, but weak democratic integration. Hansen and Debus (2012) show empirically that parliamentary competition

in Weimar was structured not only by an economic left-right dimension, but also by a pro-/anti-democratic dimension. The anti-democratic axis was therefore visible in parliamentary behaviour, not merely imposed retrospectively after 1933.

This organizational density created both resistance and vulnerability. Catholic networks, Zentrum loyalties, and church institutions often limited Nazi penetration, especially in strongly Catholic regions (Kösters 2018). The socialist milieu retained dense organizational resources through the SPD, trade unions, workers' associations and cultural organizations. Yet this strength did not translate into stable system-level democratic integration: the SPD's participation in government fluctuated from key coalition roles in the early 1920s and the Grand Coalition of 1928–1930 to the collapse of Müller's Grand Coalition in 1930, while the SPD-KPD split further weakened coordinated democratic resistance (Bois 2014; Petzold 1992). Liberal-bourgeois networks, by contrast, were especially vulnerable to the erosion of the political centre.

Civil society was similarly ambivalent. Berman (1997) famously argued that dense associational life can undermine democracy when weak political institutions fail to integrate organized social energy into democratic governance. This should not be read as a claim that civil society caused Weimar's collapse. Its value lies in showing that organization without democratic integration can reinforce subcultural separation and provide channels for anti-system mobilization. P. C. Weber's (2015) reassessment further nuances the point: the problem was not simply "too much" association, but the unresolved tension between social fragmentation, democratic individualism, and the desire for homogeneity. In polarization terms, Weimar possessed strong mobilizational capacity without an equally strong shared democratic identity.

By the late 1920s, these structures began to loosen. Modernization, industrialization, urbanization and increased social mobility gradually eroded the integrative capacity of traditional social-moral milieus. Civil society organizations no longer tied citizens to political communities as effectively as before, economic crises fostered anxiety about social decline, and mass media, especially newspapers and, increasingly, radio, intensified the circulation of competing political narratives. As a result, the close links between social groups, milieus and parties weakened (Lepsius 1993; Mommsen 1996), a process that amounted to cleavage dealignment. This did not mean that German society became unstructured or depolarized. It meant that inherited organizational loyalties became less capable of containing political realignment. The erosion of social-moral milieus therefore created an opening for new forms of polarization, which the Nazis would later exploit through the promise of national unity.

The symbolic order of the Republic remained fragile as well. Constitutional celebrations, republican rituals and efforts to create a shared democratic identity never fully overcame memories of wartime collapse, revolutionary rupture and the Versailles settlement. Constitution Day on 11 August failed to become a genuinely unifying ritual (Lehnert and Megerle 1993, 46–47). It could be dismissed by communists and left-wing socialists as a bourgeois façade, while the right could interpret it as a symbol of national decline (Achilles 2010). Republican ideas and identities did exist, as Rossol emphasizes, but they competed with powerful anti-republican narratives from the right and revolutionary narratives from the left (Rossol 2022). Although the constitution passed with a three-quarters majority in 1919 and the Republic had democratic actors and democratic

symbols, they were not sufficiently hegemonic to stabilize the system under severe crisis (Lehnert and Megerle 1993, 57).

Media segmentation reinforced this structure. Weimar's press did not merely reflect political division. It helped reproduce it through ideologically framed content, voter recommendations and selective interpretations (Lehnert and Megerle 1993, 56). Fulda's work on Weimar's *Weltanschauung journalism* shows that newspapers served specific ideological audiences and constructed camp-specific political realities. In this "polyphony of partisan press discourses," partisan interpretation became a normal feature of political reporting as political conflict intensified (Fulda 2009, 72, 223). Nguyen's (2022) quantitative study of newspaper circulation further demonstrates that newspapers possessed measurable political power and could shape electoral behaviour rather than simply reflect it. Ross (2008) situates the emotionally charged narratives within the modernization of German mass communication, while Hung's (2023) book on *Tempo* shows that even liberal and modernist media projects were vulnerable to changing expectations about political performance and crisis. The mechanism-level relevance for contemporary politics is limited but important: segmented media environments and current virtual political communities can intensify identity-based affiliation and facilitate rapid mobilization across fragmented political spaces (Kubin and von Sikorski 2021).

The first expectation (E1) is therefore supported, but in an ambivalent sense. Weimar's social-moral milieus did not simply destabilize democracy. They structured representation, sustained political belonging and in some cases limited Nazi penetration. Their democratic weakness lay elsewhere: they organized political life without producing a sufficiently shared republican identity. Weimar thus entered the crisis years with dense political communities, but without a democratic framework strong enough to translate their differences into sustained cooperation and mutual legitimacy.

4.2. Crisis, threat perception, and institutional bypass

The Great Depression transformed Weimar's vulnerabilities, but crisis did not mechanically produce Hitler. Economic shock became politically destructive because it intensified threat perceptions and made existing grievances available for radical mobilization and pernicious polarization. Lepsius (1993, 36) described the Depression as a watershed because it weakened the social-moral milieus that had structured German party competition since the late nineteenth century. Comparative research reinforces this mechanism: extremist growth is linked less to chronic inequality alone than to acute crises that discredit established political arrangements and intensify anti-establishment mobilization (Casal Bértoa and Weber 2019; de Bromhead, Eichengreen, and O'Rourke 2013).

In Weimar, the scale of the shock was dramatic. Unemployment rose sharply between 1930 and 1932 (from 15% to 30%), and the experience or anticipation of social decline spread far beyond those already unemployed. Stögbauer's (2001) analysis supports the responsibility hypothesis, according to which voters punished incumbent parties for economic hardship and rising unemployment. Yet the politics of crisis cannot be reduced to the direct radicalization of the unemployed. Falter (1991) shows that fear of unemployment and downward mobility could be at least as politically consequential as unemployment itself. This distinction matters because pernicious polarization is fuelled not only by material deprivation, but also by insecurity, status anxiety, and perceived threat.

The Depression unfolded in a society already burdened by unresolved conflicts over Germany's wartime defeat, the revolutionary rupture of 1918–1919, hyperinflation, the Versailles settlement, and the legitimacy of the Republic. Peukert (1992) and Kolb (2005) both emphasize that Weimar's crisis accumulated across social, economic, institutional, and cultural layers rather than emerging suddenly in 1929. Agricultural protests, deteriorating labour conditions, resentment against Berlin politics, and memories of inflation had already damaged confidence in parliamentary rule and added to a widespread sense of instability. The Depression therefore did not create anti-republican resentment from nothing. It reactivated older narratives of national humiliation, betrayal, and systemic failure.

Austerity is central to this mechanism. Galofré-Vilà et al. (2021) find that areas more affected by austerity measures saw stronger increases in Nazi support. It created material suffering and political vulnerability that radical actors could frame as evidence that parliamentary democracy imposed sacrifice without protection. Brüning's deflationary policy mattered not only economically, but institutionally. It belonged to a broader shift from parliamentary compromise towards emergency government.

Article 48 and presidential cabinets intensified this shift. What began as a constitutional emergency mechanism became a routine instrument for bypassing parliamentary deadlock. Mommsen (1996) interprets this as part of the cumulative hollowing-out of parliamentary democracy, while Evans (2004) emphasizes the interaction between crisis, institutional weakness, and elite misjudgement, encouraging the view that democratic institutions could be suspended, circumvented, or disciplined in the name of order and necessity. Stibbe (2022) shows that coalition-building and fragmentation were already acute in the mid-1920s and worsened in the final parliamentary years. The problem was not simply that parties disagreed. It was that key elites increasingly treated parliament as an obstacle rather than as the central arena of democratic conflict management. In terms of polarization, this contributed to pernicious polarization by weakening the channels through which conflict might still have remained democratic.

Political violence added an affective and coercive dimension to this process. Weimar politics had involved violence from the beginning, but after 1929 this violence became more central to public life. Berlin's "Bloody May" and the rural *Landvolkbewegung* illustrated different forms of extra-parliamentary confrontation, from street battles and paramilitary mobilization to rural protest and political violence (Rossol 2022; Schumann 2009). Violence did not simply express polarization. It helped produce it by making opponents appear physically dangerous, strengthening in-group solidarity, and pushing ideological and affective polarization towards a more pernicious form. Paramilitary politics deepened this dynamic. Rosenhaft's (1983) work on Communist street politics shows how anti-fascist confrontation became embedded in parts of working-class militancy, while Bessel's (1984) book on storm troopers in eastern Germany highlights the local and organizational roots of Nazi violence. On the nationalist right, patriotic and paramilitary organizations emerging from the experience of war promoted visions of national unity that explicitly rejected liberal parliamentary pluralism. Republican actors also mobilized defensively through the Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold, supported by the SPD, Zentrum, and DDP (Rossol 2022). Even defensive mobilization therefore unfolded in a political space where uniforms, marches, and street confrontation raised the stakes of conflict.

Saxony illustrates the symbolic dimension of crisis particularly well. Long associated with strong socialist and working-class traditions, the "Red Kingdom" became a site of sharp polarization between left-wing labour movements and bourgeois-conservative forces. Szejnmann (1994, 167–173) shows that the abolition of the Ninth of November holiday by a bourgeois majority in 1929 deepened left-wing alienation because the date carried the memory of revolution and republican founding. The subsequent confrontations and party splintering demonstrate how polarization operated through symbols and commemorations as well as through votes, class interests and economic hardship (Szejnmann 1994, 131–135).

The KPD's role must be handled carefully. It would be misleading to treat the KPD and the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) as equivalent forces. Their ideologies, political projects, social bases and historical consequences were not symmetrical. Yet the KPD's sectarian anti-system strategy weakened democratic capacities, especially by obstructing cooperation on the left. The *Sozialfaschismus* doctrine treated the SPD as "social fascist," transforming a potential anti-fascist ally into an ideological enemy. Bois (2014) and Petzold (1992) show how Communist strategy intensified left fragmentation and made coordinated democratic resistance less likely. The mechanism was not the same as Nazi anti-pluralism, but it contributed to the narrowing of coalition-building capacity.

The escalation of polarization therefore involved not only extremist mobilization, but also the discrediting of compromise itself. For the radical right, compromise with republican forces meant surrender to the "system." For the KPD, cooperation with Social Democracy meant betrayal of revolutionary politics. For parts of the conservative establishment, parliamentary negotiation increasingly appeared as weakness and disorder. The cumulative effect was the erosion of the centre not only as an electoral position, but as a democratic practice: coalition-building, toleration and procedural restraint became increasingly difficult to justify in a political environment structured by existential claims.

The second expectation (E2) is therefore supported, but not in a mechanical sense. Crisis did not create Weimar's divisions or make Nazi victory inevitable. Rather, economic shock, austerity, political violence and institutional failure changed the meaning of existing cleavages by making grievances easier to interpret as betrayal, humiliation, disorder, and existential threat. Crisis therefore acted less as an independent cause than as a multiplier: it weakened the stabilizing functions of inherited milieus and made radical mobilization more plausible. What mattered next was how political actors responded to fragmentation and rising fear.

4.3. Nazi realignment and exclusionary unity

The weakening of traditional milieus did not eliminate polarization: it created an opening for realignment. As older party-milieu linkages lost binding force, the demand for unity became more powerful precisely because polarization made Weimar's conflicts appear exhausting, unproductive, and incapable of generating order. Under conditions of economic fear, parliamentary paralysis, symbolic disintegration and anti-party resentment, the Nazis presented themselves not as one party among others, but as a movement capable of transcending class, confession, region, and party fragmentation.

Mochmann (2002, 3) describes the late Weimar period as an "orientation vacuum" in which traditional anchors no longer provided sufficient guidance for voters. Mergel (2022) similarly emphasizes that the novelty of the NSDAP lay in its capacity to break through older patterns of political belonging and appeal across milieu boundaries. Fritzsche's (1998) account of Weimar political imagination captures the experiential side of this transformation: Nazi mobilization converted disorientation, resentment and longing for renewal into a new political belonging organized around the nation rather than around inherited republican party politics.

The Nazis exploited this vacuum through a politics that was anti-systemic, emotionally charged, and integrative in appearance. Their appeal lay in promising to transcend the fragmented politics associated with Weimar's established parties by offering *Heimat*, renewal and community to voters who experienced the Republic as incapable of restoring order or collective purpose. This promise was central to the Nazi transformation into a *Volkspartei* and *Sammelpartei*. Falter (1991) famously described the NSDAP as the first German "people's party" in electoral terms because it attracted support across several social strata rather than remaining confined to one traditional milieu. Childers (1983) characterizes it as a "catch-all party of protest," while Mommsen (1996, 355) calls it a "people's party in a negative sense" because it united heterogeneous voters less through coherent policy than through shared rejection of the existing order. The NSDAP's broad appeal did not reflect democratic integration. It reflected the aggregation of grievances against Weimar.

Electoral literature on Nazi voters is especially important because it challenges monocausal explanations. Hamilton (1982), Childers (1983), Falter (1991), and King et al. (2008) all show that Nazi voting cannot be reduced to a single class, region or economic variable. The NSDAP performed especially well among Protestants, rural voters, parts of the lower middle class and voters alienated from older party loyalties, while remaining more constrained in Catholic and organized socialist milieus (Falter 1991). After the Great Depression, it exploited these fractures by appealing across older milieu boundaries, including unorganized or non-traditional working-class voters, lower-middle-class families, civil servants and smallholders (Stögbauer 2001, 256–258). This socially uneven but cross-milieu appeal produced what Mommsen (1996, 354) described as an "omnibus effect": the NSDAP blurred social and class distinctions while presenting itself as committed to the welfare of the entire nation.

The Nazi breakthrough is therefore best interpreted as a realignment project that exploited the weakening and recombination of several cleavages. The 1930 Reichstag election revealed the power of this strategy. The Nazis gained dramatically at the expense of the radical right-wing DNVP and other, more moderate centrist and bourgeois parties, showing that the older conservative and nationalist camp was no longer able to contain anti-republican mobilization within established party structures. Childers argues that the Nazis succeeded by uniting diverse voter groups around a shared and "vehement rejection of an increasingly threatened present" (Childers 1976, 31), while also exploiting the perceived failures of Weimar's established parties to solve Germany's problems (Lehnert and Megerle 1993). In other words, the NSDAP succeeded because it converted diffuse grievances into a more comprehensive antagonism.

The *Volksgemeinschaft* ("people's community") stood at the symbolic centre of this narrative. It promised a pre-political national community capable of overcoming class,

confessional, regional and party fragmentation by fusing *national* and *social* unity in opposition to Marxist *internationalism* and *class struggle* (Baranowski 2000; Jones 2020; Szejnmann 1994). It resonated because many Germans experienced Weimar pluralism not as democratic representation, but as weakness, disorder, and "party egoism." Yet this was not democratic integration. It was a project of boundary-making and social ordering that defined unity through exclusion (Steber and Gotto 2014). Jews, Marxists, liberals, Social Democrats, "November criminals" and defenders of the Weimar "system" were cast as enemies of the people and nation. As Koonz (2003) and Wildt (2012) show, Nazi community-building depended on moral, racial and political exclusion. It offered a way out of fragmentation by intensifying the boundary between those who belonged and those who did not. Hitler adeptly capitalized on this demand by portraying the established parties as "rotten and fragile" and presenting himself as the charismatic leader capable of transcending fragmented party politics and restoring Germany's "unity of will" (Mommsen 1996, 350–351).

The populist dimension of this mechanism should be stated carefully. Nazi ideology cannot be reduced to generic populism, because its racial anti-Semitism, paramilitary violence, and totalitarian ambition went far beyond ordinary populist mobilization. Yet the anti-pluralist claim to represent the authentic people against corrupt and alien enemies resembles the Manichaean logic identified in contemporary populism research (Benedek 2021, 2025). This is also why some theorists have emphasized the authoritarian potential of populist anti-pluralism. Abts and Rummens (2007, 421) describe populism as "proto-totalitarian," while Finchelstein (2016, 229) stresses the historical connection between modern populism and dictatorship. In Weimar, this logic did not remain rhetorical. It became a strategy of *political realignment* through exclusion.

Propaganda and the leadership myth intensified this transformation. Nazi rallies, symbols, modern visual techniques and emotionally charged communication projected the image of a unified and rejuvenated nation (Ross 2008; Szejnmann 1994). The Hitler myth promised decisiveness, rescue and a direct bond between leader and people (Kershaw 1987), while frustration with parliamentary bargaining made *Führertum* attractive even beyond explicitly Nazi circles (Unger-Alvi 2021). Hitler portrayed himself as the transcendent *Führer*, merging expectations of a "man of the people" with conservative demands for decisive, authoritarian leadership under the banners of the "national" and the "social" (Mergel 2022). Nazi propaganda converted frustration with pluralist politics into an anti-pluralist fantasy of unity, in which leader, movement and people would merge. Hitler's appeal therefore cannot be reduced to programmatic persuasion. It drew on identity attachment, anti-party resentment and the promise of restoring collective purpose by overcoming pluralism itself (Achen and Bartels 2016; Fritzsche 1998).

The limits of Nazi appeal are equally important. The Nazis were less successful among the most organizationally embedded groups, especially Catholics and parts of the left-wing working class. Robust organizational structures – such as trade unions, charitable associations, *Bürgervereine* and church-affiliated groups – maintained identity boundaries and limited Nazi penetration (Lepsius 1993). Catholic networks, Zentrum loyalties, and church institutions limited Nazi penetration in many Catholic areas, especially in Bavaria and the Rhineland (Kösters 2018). The socialist working-class milieu, despite the SPD-KPD split, retained organizational resources that constrained full Nazi breakthrough among many workers (Falter 1991). This reinforces the article's central argument: organization

mattered. Where older milieus remained cohesive, Nazi realignment faced stronger barriers.

The third expectation (E3) is supported in an actor-specific and asymmetric form. Nazi mobilization did not merely reflect inherited cleavages or mass discontent. It actively reorganized them by framing Weimar's fragmentation as national decomposition, identifying internal enemies and presenting *exclusionary unity* as the answer to crisis. Pernicious polarization here appeared not only as intensified division, but also as a promise to end division by eliminating legitimate party pluralism itself. This mechanism was distinct from Communist sectarianism and conservative institutional bypass, even though all three later interacted in weakening democratic capacities.

4.4. The collapse of democratic trust and the Republic

The final collapse of the Weimar Republic cannot be understood as the automatic outcome of social fragmentation, economic crisis or Nazi mobilization alone. By the early 1930s, Germany was deeply polarized, violent and institutionally unstable, but democratic breakdown still required a further transformation: the abandonment of democratic conflict management by key political actors. The Republic collapsed when anti-system mobilization from below converged with conservative institutional bypass and elite strategy from above. Pernicious polarization thus culminated in the erosion of basic democratic trust.

This erosion was visible in the declining legitimacy of parliamentary democracy. Brüning's government, followed by Papen and Schleicher, increasingly relied on presidential authority, emergency decrees and minority rule rather than parliamentary coalition-building. What had begun as crisis management became a mode of governing that hollowed out democratic practice. Parliamentary compromise was not only difficult. It was increasingly treated as unnecessary, ineffective or harmful (Mommsen 1996). The July 1930 dissolution of the Reichstag marked a decisive step away from serious coalition-building and towards presidential government. It widened the gap between Brüning's minority government, backed by President Hindenburg, and increasingly vehement parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition, pushing political conflict towards executive rule, mass mobilization, street confrontation and elite intrigue (Stibbe 2022). This mattered because democratic institutions depend not only on formal legality, but also on the expectation that political actors will continue to treat them as the normal framework of conflict.

The *Preußenschlag* of July 1932 further demonstrated the fragility of constitutional democracy. Papen's removal of the caretaker Social Democratic-led Prussian government was justified as a measure to restore order, but it struck at one of the strongest remaining institutional pillars of republican democracy. Prussia had been governed by pro-republican forces and represented an important counterweight to national radicalization. It showed that legally constituted democratic governments could be removed when conservative elites interpreted them as obstacles to order (Evans 2004).

This was not merely institutional drift. It reflected a broader conservative strategy of bypassing parliamentary democracy. Many conservative elites regarded the Republic and parliamentary democracy as alien to German traditions, associated it with defeat and revolution, and hoped to construct a more authoritarian form of rule. Their disdain

stemmed from ideological opposition and perceived status losses following democratization and the humiliation of military defeat in 1918 (Mommsen 1996). Their goal was an authoritarian-conservative restoration that would discipline mass democracy, weaken parliament, and restore elite control. However, by normalizing anti-parliamentary strategies, conservative actors undermined the democratic capacities that might have contained radical mobilization (Jones 2020; Ziblatt 2018).

The weakness of the German right was crucial. Ziblatt's comparative argument suggests that democracy is more likely to stabilize when conservative parties are strong enough to integrate old-regime elites into democratic competition (Ziblatt 2017, 334–363). In Weimar, conservative parties failed to perform this function. This failure became increasingly visible across the late Weimar elections: the NSDAP's breakthrough in 1930, its rise to the largest Reichstag faction in July 1932 and its continued dominance despite losses in November 1932 all showed that the bourgeois and nationalist right could no longer contain anti-republican mobilization within established party structures. The DNVP radicalized after 1928, bourgeois and national-liberal forces weakened, and conservative elites increasingly sought solutions outside ordinary party competition. Instead of isolating the Nazis, they moved towards cooperation with them, culminating in Hitler's appointment on 30 January 1933 in an NSDAP–DNVP-backed cabinet, which then leveraged state terror during the March 1933 election to secure a final, anti-republican majority in the Reichstag. Jones's work on the German right shows how factionalism, strategic miscalculation and anti-republicanism opened political space that the Nazis could occupy (Jones 2020, 495–523). This reflected a broader unresolved post-revolutionary settlement: anti-democratic forces were neither fully integrated into democratic competition nor effectively neutralized, while democratic coalitions failed to consolidate control over conservative power networks (Beck and Jones 2018).

The Harzburg Front of 1931 symbolized the convergence between conservative anti-republican forces and the radical right. It did not mean that conservatives and Nazis were identical. Their goals, constituencies, and preferred institutional arrangements differed. Yet the alliance helped legitimate the Nazis as part of a broader national opposition to the Republic and weakened the boundary between conservative authoritarianism and Nazi anti-pluralism (Evans 2004). In terms of pernicious polarization, it contributed to the construction of a common anti-system front against parliamentary democracy.

Presidential politics intensified the longing for strong leadership. Weber's plebiscitary vision of a directly elected ("Caesarist") Reich President could be understood democratically, but in the Weimar context it also created openings for authoritarian conceptions of popular leadership (M. Weber 1978, 1451–1459). Hindenburg's non-party image and Hitler's claim to embody national will turned the presidency into a site where frustration with party politics could be redirected against parliamentary democracy (Jones 2016; Mergel 2022).

The fatal assumption of conservative elites was that Hitler could be used, contained, or domesticated. Papen, Hindenburg and other conservative actors believed that a cabinet including Hitler could mobilize Nazi mass support while remaining under elite control. Turner's (1985) work complicates simple capitalist-capture explanations while still showing the importance of elite positioning and anti-republican calculation, and Ullrich (2025) emphasizes the contingency of conservative decisions that underestimated Hitler and overestimated their own capacity to control him. Conservative elites therefore did not

merely respond to polarization; they acted within it, intensified it and attempted to exploit it.

The democratic camp's weakness completed the picture. The SPD remained one of the Republic's most consistent defenders, but it faced electoral decline, Communist hostility, the absence of reliable support from the Reichswehr and state coercive apparatus and shrinking parliamentary leverage. In January 1933, the SPD did not call a general strike against Hitler's appointment, unlike during the Kapp Putsch of 1920. Its legalism became increasingly asymmetrical in an environment where opponents no longer shared the same restraint (Evans 2004). The KPD's *Sozialfaschismus* doctrine compounded this weakness by delegitimizing the SPD precisely when democratic defence required coalition-building (Bois 2014; Petzold 1992).

Political violence, fears of civil war, and institutional bypass reinforced one another in the final phase of the Republic. Violence made emergency rule appear necessary, while emergency rule weakened confidence in democratic procedures. Together, they signalled that parliamentary democracy could no longer preserve order.

By January 1933, basic democratic trust had disintegrated. The Nazis treated democracy as a temporary instrument. Many conservatives treated parliamentary democracy as a dispensable obstacle. Communists rejected bourgeois democracy and delegitimized social democracy. Democrats defended institutions whose practical authority had already been hollowed out. Schedler's (2023b) concept of basic democratic trust helps clarify the failure: democracy does not require affection between parties, but it does require a minimal expectation that opponents remain legitimate actors within a shared political order. In late Weimar, that expectation collapsed. The Republic's formal institutions still existed, but the democratic norms that gave them stabilizing meaning had been hollowed out. Hitler's appointment on 30 January 1933 was therefore not simply the product of Nazi electoral mobilization. It was the outcome of radical anti-pluralism, conservative authoritarian strategy, institutional bypass, and the cumulative erosion of democratic trust (Jones 2020; Ullrich 2025).

The fourth expectation (E4) is therefore supported as a conjunctural mechanism rather than as a deterministic law. Democratic breakdown became likely not because polarization alone destroyed the Republic, but because several democratic capacities eroded together. Mutual toleration, institutional restraint, coalition-building, and recognition of legitimate opposition weakened while anti-system mobilization, conservative institutional bypass and political violence reinforced one another. Weimar's formal constitutional structures survived for a time, but the practices that made them democratically meaningful had been hollowed out. Table 2 summarizes this cumulative transformation from structured cleavage politics to pernicious polarization and, finally, to the collapse of basic democratic trust.

5. Conclusions

This article has revisited the collapse of the Weimar Republic through contemporary polarization theory. Its argument has not been that polarization mechanically destroyed Weimar, nor that the Republic was doomed from the beginning by its cleavages, institutions, or ideological fragmentation. Rather, Weimar clarifies how polarization becomes democratically destructive when socially embedded divisions are intensified by crisis,

Table 2. Summary of cleavage transformation and polarization escalation in Weimar.

Period	Cleavage configuration	Polarization dynamic	Elite and institutional mechanism	Democratic capacity affected
1918–mid-1920s	Class, confession, region and social-moral milieus organize representation. Older party loyalties remain durable, but republican identity is weakly integrated.	Ideological distance and affective segmentation are strong, but still largely structured through parties, churches, unions, associations and newspapers.	Democratic parties possess real organizations, but republican symbols and cross-milieu democratic identity remain weak.	Shared democratic identity remains fragile. Conflict is organized, but not yet fully regime-destructive.
Late 1920s	Traditional milieus begin to loosen under modernization, economic pressure, symbolic conflict, and declining confidence in established parties.	Dealignment and threat perception intensify. Segmented publics, status fears, and political violence harden camp identities.	Anti-party sentiment, radical rhetoric and paramilitary mobilization make conflict increasingly existential.	Coalition-building and mutual confidence weaken. The democratic centre becomes less capable of organizing compromise.
1930 to 1932	Crisis realigns grievances across older boundaries. The NSDAP expands as a cross-milieu protest party, while the left remains divided by the SPD-KPD split.	Pernicious polarization accelerates through austerity, Article 48, presidential cabinets, street violence, anti-system rhetoric and sectarian delegitimation.	Parliamentary government is increasingly bypassed. Nazis offer exclusionary unity, Communists delegitimize the SPD as "social fascist" and conservatives normalize emergency rule.	Institutional restraint and parliamentary legitimacy erode. Democratic conflict management weakens.
1932–1933	The *Volksgemeinschaft* claim offers exclusionary unity, while conservative elites use institutional authority to bypass parliamentary democracy.	Democratic polarization culminates. Opponents cease to be legitimate rivals, and democracy becomes either a temporary instrument or an obstacle to be overcome.	Papen, Hindenburg and conservative elites seek to instrumentalize Hitler, while democratic actors lack the coalition capacity to resist effectively.	Basic democratic trust collapses. Mutual toleration, forbearance, coalition capacity and recognition of legitimate opposition erode together.

activated by elites, reorganized through exclusionary claims of unity, and accompanied by the erosion of institutional restraint and basic democratic trust.

The empirical reconstruction therefore refines the analytical framework rather than simply applying it. The Weimar case shows that cleavages were ambivalent rather than inherently destructive, that crisis amplified rather than mechanically caused radicalization, that elite activation operated through distinct and asymmetric mechanisms, and that democratic breakdown resulted from the cumulative erosion of several democratic capacities rather than from any single source of polarization. This is why Weimar remains analytically useful: it shows how structured conflict can become pernicious not by intensity alone, but through the interaction of social segmentation, crisis, elite strategy, institutional bypass and the collapse of basic democratic trust.

The Weimar case therefore shows why the distinction between structured conflict and pernicious polarization matters. Weimar's problem was not the mere existence of division, but the transformation of organized pluralism into antagonistic camps that no longer recognized one another as legitimate participants in a shared democratic order. As Lehnert and Megerle (1993) suggest, democratic alternatives such as consociational democracy would have

required preserving group identities while integrating them into a broader culture of political cooperation.

The Nazi promise of *Volksgemeinschaft* reveals the central paradox of exclusionary unity. The NSDAP crossed older social group boundaries and aggregated heterogeneous grievances, offering a vision of national cohesion that many perceived as a last viable alternative to Weimar's deep socio-cultural fragmentation (Lehnert and Megerle 1993, 58). Yet it did not integrate pluralism democratically. It promised to overcome division by redefining the political community against internal enemies, thereby reorganizing rather than resolving polarization. This also shows why Nazi anti-pluralism, Communist sectarianism and conservative institutional bypass should not be treated as equivalent. They were distinct mechanisms, but they interacted in ways that weakened coalition-building, restraint and the legitimacy of opposition.

The contemporary relevance of Weimar lies not in direct analogy, but in mechanism-level insight. The case shows how democratic conflict becomes dangerous when institutional restraint erodes, elites instrumentalize anti-system forces, opponents are treated as enemies, and the desire for unity is captured by exclusionary projects. This resonates with contemporary research on democratic backsliding, which emphasizes the interaction between polarization, institutional weakness, elite opportunism and declining willingness to punish anti-democratic behaviour (Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Riedl et al. 2025).

This also cautions against simple depolarization arguments. Reducing hostility may be valuable, but it is insufficient if institutions, parties, and elites continue to convert disagreement into existential threat (Mernyk et al. 2022; Voelkel et al. 2023). Nor would appeals to shared identity have been sufficient where polarization was rooted in social insecurity, status fears, institutional distrust and perceived failures of representation. Democratic resilience cannot be reduced to moderation, civility, or legal prohibition. Loewenstein's (1937) classical argument that democracy must sometimes become militant against authoritarian techniques remains important, but Weimar also shows that resilience depends on broader capacities: integrative parties, credible representation, material responsiveness, social protection, institutional restraint and elite willingness to defend democratic rules even when doing so is costly.

The broader lesson is therefore not that democracies should suppress conflict, nor that unity is always dangerous. Democratic unity is necessary, but it must be built through pluralism rather than against it. Weimar shows that unity becomes destructive when it is defined by the elimination of internal enemies, while conflict turns destructive when institutions lose the capacity to keep opponents within a shared framework of legitimacy.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This project was funded by MORES (Moral Emotions in Politics. How they Divide, how they Unite) which received funding from the European Union under grant agreement No 101132601. However,

views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them. This research was supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (NKFIH), grant no. K142410 and the NKFIH Starting Grant, grant no. 153254. This study is supported by the EKÖP-25 and EKÖP-26 University Excellence Scholarship Program (ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary) of the Ministry for Culture and Innovation from the source of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund. István Benedek is a recipient of the János Bolyai Research Fellowship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, grant no. BO/00287/26.

Notes on contributor

István Benedek is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Political Science, ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, and an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Political Sciences, Faculty of Law, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary. He earned his Ph.D. in Political Science from Eötvös Loránd University in 2023. His main research fields include democratic theory, democratization, autocratization, populism, political polarization, Euroscepticism, and comparative politics. He has been a member of the Hungarian Political Science Association since 2018 and a Board Member since 2025.

ORCID

István Benedek http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4977-5774

References

Abramowitz, A. I. 2022. "The Polarized American Electorate: The Rise of Partisan-Ideological Consistency and Its Consequences." *Political Science Quarterly* 137 (4): 645–674. https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.13388.

Abramowitz, A. I., and K. L. Saunders. 2008. "Is Polarization a Myth?" *Journal of Politics* 70 (2): 542–555. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381608080493.

Abts, K., and S. Rummens. 2007. "Populism versus Democracy." *Political Studies* 55 (2): 405–424. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00657.x.

Achen, C. H., and L. M. Bartels. 2016. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Achilles, M. 2010. "With a Passion for Reason: Celebrating the Constitution in Weimar Germany." *Central European History* 43 (4): 666–689. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938910000750.

Ahler, D. J., and G. Sood. 2018. "The Parties in Our Heads: Misperceptions About Party Composition and Their Consequences." *Journal of Politics* 80 (3): 964–981. https://doi.org/10.1086/697253.

Baldassarri, D., and A. Gelman. 2008. "Partisans without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion." *The American Journal of Sociology* 114 (2): 408–446. https://doi.org/10.1086/590649.

Baranowski, S. 2000. "Nazism and Polarization: The Left and the Third Reich." *The Historical Journal* 43 (4): 1157–1172. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X00001576.

Barber, M., and N. McCarty. 2015. "Causes and Consequences of Polarization." In *Political Negotiation: A Handbook*, edited by J. Mansbridge and C. J. Martin, 37–90. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Bartolini, S., and P. Mair. 1990. *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability: The Stabilisation of European Electorates, 1885–1985*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Beach, D., and R. B. Pedersen. 2013. *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Beck, H., and L. E. Jones, eds. 2018. *From Weimar to Hitler: Studies in the Dissolution of the Weimar Republic and the Establishment of the Third Reich, 1932–1934*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Benedek, I. 2021. "Riders on the Storm: The Role of Populism in the Global Crisis of Democracy and in the Functioning of Electoral Autocracies." *Politics in Central Europe* 17 (2): 197–225. https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2021-0009.

Benedek, I. 2025. "Populist autocratization and populist electoral autocracies: Towards a unified conceptual framework." *Comparative European Politics* 23 (3): 331–352. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-024-00401-8.

Berman, S. 1997. "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic." *World Politics* 49 (3): 401–429. https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.1997.0008.

Berntzen, L. E., H. Kelsall, and E. Harteveld. 2024. "Consequences of Affective Polarization: Avoidance, Intolerance and Support for Violence in the United Kingdom and Norway." *European Journal of Political Research* 63 (3): 927–949. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12623.

Bessel, R. 1984. *Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism: The Storm Troopers in Eastern Germany, 1925–1934*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Bois, M. 2014. *Kommunisten gegen Hitler und Stalin: Die linke Opposition der KPD in der Weimarer Republik. Eine Gesamtdarstellung [Communists Against Hitler and Stalin: The Left Opposition of the KPD in the Weimar Republic. A Comprehensive Account]*. Essen: Klartext.

Braley, A., G. S. Lenz, D. Adjodah, H. Rahnama, and A. Pentland. 2023. "Why Voters Who Value Democracy Participate in Democratic Backsliding." *Nature Human Behaviour* 7 (8): 1282–1293. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-023-01594-w.

Casal Bértoa, F., and T. Weber. 2019. "Restrained Change: Party Systems in Times of Economic Crisis." *Journal of Politics* 81 (1): 233–245. https://doi.org/10.1086/700202.

Childers, T. 1976. "The Social Bases of the National Socialist Vote." *Journal of Contemporary History* 11 (4): 17–42. https://doi.org/10.1177/002200947601100404.

Childers, T. 1983. *The Nazi Voter: The Social Foundations of Fascism in Germany, 1919–1933*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

de Bromhead, A., B. Eichengreen, and K. H. O'Rourke. 2013. "Political Extremism in the 1920s and 1930s: Do German Lessons Generalize?" *The Journal of Economic History* 73 (2): 371–406. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050713000302.

Disch, L. 2021. *Making Constituencies: Representation as Mobilization in Mass Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Druckman, J. N., E. Peterson, and R. Slothuus. 2013. "How Elite Partisan Polarization Affects Public Opinion Formation." *The American Political Science Review* 107 (1): 57–79. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055412000500.

Evans, R. J. 2004. *The Coming of the Third Reich*. New York: Penguin Press.

Falter, J. W. 1991. *Hitlers Wähler*. Munich: C. H. Beck [Hitler's Voters].

Ferrara, A. 2014. *The Democratic Horizon: Hyperpluralism and the Renewal of Political Liberalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Finchelstein, F. 2016. "Populism and Dictatorship." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Mass Dictatorship*, edited by P. Corner and J.-H. Lim, 229–241. London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-43763-1_19.

Fritzsche, P. 1998. *Germans into Nazis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Fulda, B. 2009. *Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Galofré-Vilà, G., C. M. Meissner, M. McKee, and D. Stuckler. 2021. "Austerity and the Rise of the Nazi Party." *The Journal of Economic History* 81 (1): 81–113. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050720000601.

Garzia, D., F. Ferreira da Silva, and S. Maye. 2023. "Affective Polarization in Comparative and Longitudinal Perspective." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 87 (1): 219–231. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfad004.

George, A. L., and A. Bennett. 2005. *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Graham, M. H., and M. W. Svolik. 2020. "Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States." *The American Political Science Review* 114 (2): 392–409. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000052.

Haggard, S., and R. Kaufman. 2021. *Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Hamilton, R. F. 1982. *Who Voted for Hitler?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Hansen, M. E., and M. Debus. 2012. "The Behaviour of Political Parties and MPs in the Parliaments of the Weimar Republic." *Party Politics* 18 (5): 709–726. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068810389645.
Huddy, L., L. Mason, and L. Aarøe. 2015. "Expressive Partisanship: Campaign Involvement, Political Emotion, and Partisan Identity." *The American Political Science Review* 109 (1): 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055414000604.
Hung, J. 2023. *Moderate Modernity: The Newspaper Tempo and the Transformation of Weimar Democracy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
Inglehart, R. 1977. *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Iyengar, S., Y. Lelkes, M. Levendusky, N. Malhotra, and S. J. Westwood. 2019. "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States." *Annual Review of Political Science* 22 (1): 129–146. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034.
Iyengar, S., G. Sood, and Y. Lelkes. 2012. "Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76 (3): 405–431. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfs038.
Iyengar, S., and S. J. Westwood. 2015. "Fear and Loathing Across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization." *American Journal of Political Science* 59 (3): 690–707. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12152.
Jonas, E., I. McGregor, J. Klackl, D. Agroskin, I. Fritsche, C. Holbrook, K. Nash, T. Proulx, and M. Quirin. 2014. "Threat and Defense: From Anxiety to Approach." *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 49:219–286. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-800052-6.00004-4.
Jones, L. E. 2016. *Hitler versus Hindenburg: The 1932 Presidential Elections and the End of the Weimar Republic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Jones, L. E. 2020. *The German Right, 1918–1930: Political Parties, Organized Interests, and Patriotic Associations in the Struggle Against Weimar Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Kalmoe, N. P. 2014. "Fueling the Fire: Violent Metaphors, Trait Aggression, and Support for Political Violence." *Political Communication* 31 (4): 545–563. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2013.852642.
Kekkonen, A., and T. Ylä-Anttila. 2021. "Affective Blocs: Understanding Affective Polarization in Multiparty Systems." *Electoral Studies* 72:102367. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102367.
Kershaw, I. 1987. *The 'Hitler Myth': Image and Reality in the Third Reich*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
King, G., O. Rosen, M. A. Tanner, and A. F. Wagner. 2008. "Ordinary Economic Voting Behavior in the Extraordinary Election of Adolf Hitler." *The Journal of Economic History* 68 (4): 951–996. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050708000788.
Kingzette, J., J. N. Druckman, S. Klar, Y. Krupnikov, M. Levendusky, and J. B. Ryan. 2021. "How Affective Polarization Undermines Support for Democratic Norms." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 85 (2): 663–677. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfab029.
Kish Bar-On, K., E. Dimant, Y. Lelkes, and D. G. Rand. 2024. "Unraveling Polarization: Insights into Individual and Collective Dynamics." *PNAS Nexus* 3 (10): 426. https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgae426.
Kleinfeld, R. 2023. *Polarization, Democracy, and Political Violence in the United States: What the Research Says*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
Kolb, E. 2005. *The Weimar Republic*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
Koonz, C. 2003. *The Nazi Conscience*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
Kösters, C. 2018. "Catholic Milieu and National Socialism." In *Catholics and Third Reich: Controversies and Debates*, edited by K.-J. Hummel and M. Kißener, 147–168. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh / Brill.
Kubin, E., and C. von Sikorski. 2021. "The Role of (Social) Media in Political Polarization: A Systematic Review." *Annals of the International Communication Association* 45 (3): 188–206. https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2021.1976070.

Lehnert, D., and K. Megerle. 1993. "Problems of Identity and Consensus in a Fragmented Society: The Weimar Republic." In *Political Culture in Germany*, edited by D. Berg-Schlosser and R. Rytlewski, 43–59. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lelkes, Y. 2016. "Mass Polarization: Manifestations and Measurements." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80 (S1): 392–410. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfw005.

Lepsius, M. R. 1993. "Parteiensystem und Sozialstruktur: Zum Problem der Demokratisierung der deutschen Gesellschaft" [Party System and Social Structure: On the Problem of the Democratization of German Society]. In *Demokratie in Deutschland: Soziologisch-historische Konstellationsanalysen [Democracy in Germany: Sociological-Historical Constellation Analyses]*, edited by M. R. Lepsius, 25–50. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht.

Levendusky, M. S., and N. Malhotra. 2016. "(Mis)perceptions of Partisan Polarization in the American Public." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80 (S1): 378–391. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfv045.

Levitsky, S., and D. Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown.

Linz, J. J., and A. Stepan. 1996. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Lipset, S. M. 1981. *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Lipset, S. M., and S. Rokkan. 1967. "Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments: An Introduction." In *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives*, edited by S. M. Lipset and S. Rokkan, 1–64. New York: Free Press.

Littvay, L., J. L. McCoy, and G. Simonovits. 2024. "It's Not Just Trump: Americans of Both Parties Support Liberal Democratic Norm Violations More Under Their Own President." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 88 (3): 1044–1058. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfae042.

Loewenstein, K. 1937. "Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights, I." *The American Political Science Review* 31 (3): 417–432. https://doi.org/10.2307/1948164.

Lührmann, A., and S. I. Lindberg. 2019. "A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here: What is New About It?" *Democratization* 26 (7): 1095–1113. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029.

Mason, L. 2016. "A Cross-Cutting Calm: How Social Sorting Drives Affective Polarization." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80 (S1): 351–377. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfw001.

Mason, L. 2018. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McCoy, J., T. Rahman, and M. Somer. 2018. "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities." *The American Behavioral Scientist* 62 (1): 16–42. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218759576.

McCoy, J., and M. Somer. 2019. "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How it Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681 (1): 234–271. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218818782.

Mergel, T. 2022. "Elections, Election Campaigns, and Democracy." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Weimar Republic*, edited by N. Rossol and B. Ziemann, 164–192. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mernyk, J., S. Pink, J. Druckman, and R. Willer. 2022. "Correcting Inaccurate Metaperceptions Reduces Americans' Support for Partisan Violence." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119 (16): e2116851119. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2116851119.

Mochmann, I. C. 2002. "Lifestyles, Social Milieus and Voting Behaviour in Germany: A Comparative Analysis of the Developments in Eastern and Western Germany" [Doctoral dissertation, Justus Liebig University Giessen].

Mommsen, H. 1996. *The Rise and Fall of Weimar Democracy*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Mouffe, C. 2005. *On the Political*. London: Routledge.

Nguyen, B. D. 2022. "Political Power of the Press in the Weimar Republic." *European Review of Economic History* 26 (4): 579–611. https://doi.org/10.1093/ereh/heac002.

Norris, P., and R. Inglehart. 2019. *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Patkós, V. 2023. "Measuring Partisan Polarization with Partisan Differences in Satisfaction with the Government: The Introduction of a New Comparative Approach." *Quality and Quantity* 57 (1): 39–57. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-022-01350-8.

Petzold, J. 1992. "SPD und KPD in der Endphase der Weimarer Republik: Unüberwindbare Hindernisse oder ungenutzte Möglichkeiten?" [SPD and KPD in the Final Phase of the Weimar Republic: Insurmountable Obstacles or Unused Possibilities?] In *Die deutsche Staatskrise 1930–1933: Handlungsspielräume und Alternativen [The German State Crisis, 1930–1933: Scopes for Action and Alternatives]*, edited by H. A. Winkler, 77–98. Munich: Oldenbourg.

Peukert, D. J. K. 1992. *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Reiljan, A. 2020. "'Fear and Loathing Across Party lines' (Also) in Europe: Affective Polarisation in European Party Systems." *European Journal of Political Research* 59 (2): 376–396. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12351.

Reiljan, A., D. Garzia, F. Ferreira da Silva, and A. H. Trechsel. 2024. "Patterns of Affective Polarization Toward Parties and Leaders Across the Democratic World." *The American Political Science Review* 118 (2): 654–670. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000485.

Riedl, R. B., J. McCoy, K. Roberts, and M. Somer. 2025. "Pathways of Democratic Backsliding, Resistance, and (Partial) Recoveries." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 712 (1): 8–31. https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162251319909.

Rosenhaft, E. 1983. *Beating the Fascists? The German Communists and Political Violence, 1929–1933*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ross, C. 2008. *Media and the Making of Modern Germany: Mass Communications, Society, and Politics from the Empire to the Third Reich*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rossol, N. 2022. "Republican Groups, Ideas, and Identities." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Weimar Republic*, edited by N. Rossol and B. Ziemann, 265–290. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sartori, G. 1969. "From the Sociology of Politics to Political Sociology." In *Politics and the Social Sciences*, edited by S. M. Lipset, 65–100. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sartori, G. 2005. *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis*. Colchester: ECPR Press.

Schedler, A. 2023a. "Basic Democratic Trust." *CEU Democracy Institute Working Papers*, No. 1. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4320683 .

Schedler, A. 2023b. "Rethinking Political Polarization." *Political Science Quarterly* 138 (3): 335–359. https://doi.org/10.1093/psquar/qqad038.

Schumann, D. 2009. *Political Violence in the Weimar Republic 1918–1933: Battles for the Streets and Fears of Civil War*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Seawright, J., and J. Gerring. 2008. "Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options." *Political Research Quarterly* 61 (2): 294–308. https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912907313077.

Simonovits, G., J. McCoy, and L. Littvay. 2022. "Democratic Hypocrisy and Out-Group Threat: Explaining Citizen Support for Democratic Erosion." *Journal of Politics* 84 (3): 1806–1811. https://doi.org/10.1086/719009.

Slater, D., and A. A. Arugay. 2018. "Polarizing Figures: Executive Power and Institutional Conflict in Asian Democracies." *The American Behavioral Scientist* 62 (1): 92–106. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218759577.

Steber, M., and B. Gotto, eds. 2014. *Visions of Community in Nazi Germany: Social Engineering and Private Lives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stibbe, M. 2022. "Coalition-Building and Political Fragmentation, 1924–1930." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Weimar Republic*, edited by N. Rossol and B. Ziemann, 72–94. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stögbauer, C. 2001. "The Radicalisation of the German Electorate: Swinging to the Right and the Left in the Twilight of the Weimar Republic." *European Review of Economic History* 5 (2): 251–280. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1361491601000107.

Svolik, M. W. 2019. "Polarization versus Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 30 (3): 20–32. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0039.

Szejnmann, C.-C. W. 1994. "The Rise of the Nazi Party in Saxony Between 1921 and 1933" [Doctoral dissertation, University of London].

Tajfel, H., and J. Turner. 1979. "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict." In *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, edited by W. G. Austin and S. Worchel, 33–47. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Turner, H. A. 1985. *German Big Business and the Rise of Hitler*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ullrich, V. 2025. *Fateful Hours: The Collapse of the Weimar Republic*. Translated by Jefferson Chase. New York: W. W. Norton.

Unger-Alvi, S. 2021. "Leaders, not Lords': Führertum, Democracy and Nazism in the Weimar Republic." *German History* 39 (4): 560–584. https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghab067.

Voelkel, J. G., J. Chu, M. N. Stagnaro, J. S. Mernyk, C. Redekopp, S. L. Pink, J. N. Druckman, D. G. Rand, and R. Willer. 2023. "Interventions Reducing Affective Polarization Do Not Necessarily Improve Anti-Democratic Attitudes." *Nature Human Behaviour* 7 (1): 55–64. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01466-9.

Wagner, M. 2021. "Affective Polarization in Multiparty Systems." *Electoral Studies* 69:102199. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102199.

Weber, M. 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Weber, P. C. 2015. "The Paradoxical Modernity of Civil Society: The Weimar Republic, Democracy, and Social Homogeneity." *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 26 (2): 629–648. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-014-9448-z.

Wildt, M. 2012. *Hitler's Volksgemeinschaft and the Dynamics of Racial Exclusion: Violence Against Jews in Provincial Germany, 1919–1939*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Ziblatt, D. 2017. *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ziblatt, D. 2018. "Reluctant Democrats: Old Regime Conservative Parties in Democracy's First Wave in Europe." In *Life After Dictatorship: Authoritarian Successor Parties Worldwide*, edited by J. Loxton and S. Mainwaring, 314–335. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.