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Article — Published Version

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West European Politics

Provided in Cooperation with:

WZB Berlin Social Science Center

Suggested Citation: Mierke-Zatwarnicki, Alex; Borbáth, Endre; Hutter, Swen (2025) : Cleavage theory meets civil society: a framework and research agenda, West European Politics, ISSN 1743-9655, Routledge, Taylor & Francis, Basingstoke, Iss. Latest articles, pp. 1-30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2025.2543136>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/325697>

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Cleavage theory meets civil society: a framework and research agenda

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ABSTRACT

How does civil society shape the development of cleavages? While intermediary organisations, such as trade unions and churches, featured heavily in historical accounts, neo-cleavage theory tends to ignore the meso-level dynamics of the new 'transnational' divide beyond party politics. This agenda-setting article introduces a general framework for studying the relationship between civil society and cleavages, capable of facilitating comparisons across contexts. Specifically, the article identifies two mechanisms through which civil society – in different forms – can shape emerging cleavages: by structuring patterns of group-party *linkage* on the supply-side and by deepening *social closure* on the demand-side. The article develops hypotheses about how the changing structure of civil society in Western Europe affects its capacity to perform these functions. Empirical evidence from expert and population surveys, complemented by illustrative case studies, suggests that civil society continues to influence cleavage politics, albeit in more differentiated and volatile ways.

KEYWORDS Cleavages; civil society; political parties; green parties; far right parties

In the last two decades, scholars have revisited theories of cleavage formation, arguing that the structural basis of Western European party competition is undergoing a grand transition (e.g. Bornschier 2010; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Kriesi *et al.* 2008). With globalisation, old divisions – between workers and owners, Protestants and Catholics, and so on – are losing their structuring power. In their wake, a new divide is emerging between people positioned differently within the knowledge economy, mobilised by Green/New Left and far-right parties. Focusing mainly on

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2025.2543136>.

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evidencing the emergence of this cleavage on the micro- and macro-levels, works of ‘neo-cleavage theory’ have paid less systematic attention to processes at the meso-level, despite the prominence of intermediary associations in historical models of cleavage politics (Bartolini and Mair 1990; Lipset and Rokkan 1966). This omission is notable given scholarly accounts of the ‘hollowing out’ of parties and social organisations, which treat today’s political developments as the culmination of a long-term process of de-structuration (e.g. Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Mair 2013). Taken together, these developments raise an important and underexplored question: (how) does civil society matter for contemporary cleavage politics?

In this agenda-setting article, we re-assess the role of civil society in the formation, institutionalisation, and stabilisation of cleavages, intervening in the growing literature on the new ‘transnational’ divide.¹ Surveying both recent and classic scholarship, we propose two mechanisms through which civil society impacts cleavage development: by structuring group-party *political linkage* on the supply-side and by deepening *social closure* on the demand-side.

These dual mechanisms are clearly visible in historical accounts, yet empirical evidence remains limited regarding the extent to which civil society performs these functions today. Neo-cleavage theory has made great strides towards examining new dynamics in cleavage formation – including the changing group bases of politics (e.g. Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Oesch 2008), the formation of new collective identities (e.g. Bornschier *et al.* 2021; Zollinger 2024a), and the increasing role of political agency (e.g. Enyedi 2005; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Kriesi *et al.* 2008). However, this work tends to pay relatively limited attention to corresponding processes of social organisation that operate through associational life, protest, and non-partisan channels. Indeed, evidence from civil society and social movement research suggests that a broad range of civil society actors beyond political parties continue to engage with contemporary cleavages, both through diverse forms of protest and social movement activism (e.g. Borbáth *et al.* 2023; Giugni and Grasso 2019) as well as through the politicisation of established formal civil society organisations (e.g. Della Porta 2020; Grande 2023). Systematically studying these organisational dynamics would strengthen our understanding of the new cleavage.

In order to make the development of a general framework possible, we adopt a broad concept of civil society, encompassing both the dense, mass-membership associations that characterised the early twentieth century and the more informal networks that predominate today. We conceptualise civil society as ‘the sphere of uncoerced human association between the individual and the state, in which people undertake

collective action for normative and substantive purposes, relatively independent of government and the market' (Edwards 2011, p. 4).² In this view, civil society encompasses a wide variety of associations and forms of civic engagement. While we acknowledge that political parties can be considered part of civil society in a broader sense, we exclude them from our framework to focus on non-party actors. Further, we group civil society actors into two categories: 'community-oriented' associations (such as sports and music clubs, neighbourhood groups, and charities) and 'movement-oriented' associations, which articulate explicit political demands (such as social movement organisations, political watchdogs, and protest networks). Adopting an encompassing, empirical definition allows us to examine how structural changes in today's civil society landscape interact in multiple and ambivalent ways with the transnational cleavage.

Overall, we aim to make an agenda-setting contribution, bridging cleavage theory with literature on civil society and social movements (for related previous efforts, see Della Porta 2015; Hutter 2014; Kriesi *et al.* 2012; McAdam and Tarrow 2010). In a related recent paper, Westheuser and Zollinger (2025) have emphasised the role of symbolic boundaries and group identities in cleavage formation. We extend this line of work by theorising how civil society organisations shape these identity dynamics through organisational embedding.

Our empirical sections take stock of comparative indicators available to study the social embedding of the new cleavage, reviewing their strengths and limitations, and assessing the extent to which civil society shapes political linkage and social closure today. These data suggest a continued, yet more differentiated and volatile role for civil society in cleavage politics and also indicate asymmetries across the divide. Specifically, we find evidence that Green/New Left parties and voters have stronger links to civil society than their far-right counterparts but hypothesise that existing measures may fail to capture important forms of mobilisation on the right. A final empirical section complements the limited available quantitative evidence with brief qualitative case studies of three key parties (the German Greens, the Alternative for Germany, and the Swiss People's Party), highlighting their varied interactions with civil society. As expected in an agenda-setting article, we raise more questions than the currently available evidence can answer. We thus conclude by suggesting avenues for future research.

Civil society in classic and neo-cleavage theory

Cleavage scholarship can be broadly periodized into two bodies of work, each focusing on a different historical period and employing a distinct theoretical model. Works of classic cleavage theory focus on the

development of cleavages in the early twentieth century and adopt a largely bottom-up model of politics. In contrast, works of neo-cleavage theory focus on the political developments of the post-war period and tend to emphasize the central importance of political agency. Each body of work differs in the importance it assigns to civil society in cleavage development.

Work by Lipset and Rokkan (1966), as well as Rokkan (1970) separately, forms the starting point of classic cleavage theory. This work sought to map the structural divides that underlay Western European societies in the early twentieth century, and their translation into enduring political alignments through to the immediate post-war period. These works understood cleavage formation as a bottom-up process, whereby structural changes led to the formation of distinct groups in society, who subsequently formed mass associations and, ultimately, political parties. In these early works, as well as in their subsequent formalisation by Bartolini and Mair (1990), empirical primacy was given to evidencing the stabilisation of political alignments and understanding the mechanisms through which this stability persisted or declined over time (see also: Bartolini 2000; Caramani 2004; Mair 2001, 2006).

Civil society appears consistently in these classic accounts, as organisations such as trade unions, churches, and agrarian societies were important agents of party formation. Common amongst early works is a tendency to focus on mass associations as the only relevant civil society actors, without discussing more informal modes of participation such as protest. Divergent across classic approaches is the degree of independent explanatory power attributed to civil society in developing stable political divides. Some early accounts treat social organisation as an almost inevitable outcome of group formation, and thus more useful as a proxy for group size than as a separate independent variable. Other works posit civil society actors as themselves pivotal to the development of cleavages.

In the latter vein, the work of Bartolini and Mair was essential in situating civil society as an important factor in its own right. Their influential 1990 book proclaims the 'organizational element' – encompassing the ways a social group is organised into mass associations and parties – as definitional to a cleavage. Bartolini (2000)'s later work expanded these ideas, arguing that the class cleavage had more long-term structuring power where the trade union movement was dense and organisationally cohesive. Other work on socialist parties further supports a conclusion that social organisation along the class divide was a fundamental factor producing 'cleavaged' politics in the early twentieth century (Katznelson and Zolberg 1986; Przeworski and Sprague 1986). There is also strong evidence for the importance of civil society actors in the development of political divides around religion. Kalyvas (1996), for example,

demonstrates that Catholic churches and affiliated confessional organisations were pivotal in the emergence of the church-state cleavage and subsequent consolidation of Christian Democratic parties (see also: Grzymala-Busse 2012; Kalyvas and van Kersbergen 2010).

Classic cleavage theory thus asserts a clear role for civil society in the development of cleavages. Yet, the centrality of dense mass associations in these historical accounts leaves ambiguous whether civil society in other forms could have the capacity to shape cleavages. Returning to the contemporary period – in which mass associations are less common and thus non-electoral participation often takes alternate forms – classic cleavage theory provides little guidance on how other modes of social organisation could influence cleavage development and stability. Indeed, prominent party politics scholars writing at the turn of the twenty first century expressed a profound scepticism about the possibility of cleavage politics in this context of ‘destruction’, suggesting that the ‘hollowing out’ of social and political organisations would produce a form of electoral competition that was ever-more volatile and fragmented (e.g. Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Katz and Mair 1995; Luther and Müller-Rommel 2002; Mair 2013).

Such a prognosis is disputed by neo-cleavage theory, the body of work which aims to update cleavage theory for the contemporary period. While in the classic model, political parties emerged as inevitable representatives of social groups, neo-cleavage theory centres the role of political agency, positioning parties as crucial actors in the emergence of cleavages (Bornschier 2024). In particular, this work has emphasised the agency of challenger parties who, embedded in ‘cleavage-coalitions’, organise and represent voters around new structural divides (Kriesi *et al.* 2012). Challenger parties, by this model, have created and stabilised the transnational cleavage through repeated, direct interactions with voters, without much meaningful intervention by intermediary actors (Hooghe and Marks 2025).

Neo-cleavage theory perspectives tend to treat civil society as largely epiphenomenal to cleavage politics. Because civil society in the classic model was synonymous with mass organisations, the emergence of new, enduring political alignments in their absence seems to evidence civil society’s overall unimportance to the formation of stable political divides (see: Hooghe and Marks 2025; Westheuser and Zollinger 2025). Disinterest in the organisational embedding of structural divides can be linked further to the prevailing view of parties as autonomous organisations, separated from civil society (Katz and Mair 1995; Kitschelt 2003) that operate under conditions of declining party membership (van Biezen *et al.* 2012) and party identification (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). Neo-cleavage theorists appear to have adopted the ‘hollowing out’ thesis as far as it applies

to patterns of social organisation, while rejecting its conclusions about the future of party competition. Such a position – that stable cleavages can form without intermediaries – is staked out explicitly by Hooghe & Marks (2025) and appears as a background motivation in recent ‘social network’-focused papers, which seek to evidence the emergence of cleaved social milieus in the absence of encompassing associations (de Jong and Kamphorst 2024; Zollinger and Attewell 2023).

Yet this synthesis leaves several questions unresolved: Are patterns of social organisation truly epiphenomenal to cleavage politics? And is it really the case that intermediation is absent today? Indeed, extant literature suggests that civil society actors, especially social movements and protest networks, continue to play a role in electoral politics (Kitschelt 2000). Studies of the Western European context document how challenger parties have sought to harness grassroots mobilisation for electoral purposes (e.g. Caiani and Cisař 2019; Della Porta *et al.* 2017; Hutter and Kriesi 2013) and demonstrate that protests influence the structure and content of electoral competition (e.g. Bremer *et al.* 2020; Ellinas and Lamprianou 2024; Valentim 2025). Work elsewhere also suggests that civil society can shape cleavage politics in the absence of dense organisation. Civil society actors have played a key role in diffusing illiberal ideas and fomenting coalitions amongst antidemocratic forces in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. Bohle *et al.* 2024; Ekiert 2020; Greskovits 2020; Jakli *et al.* 2025) and are a major influence on party programmes and voter identities in the United States (e.g. McAdam and Kloos 2014; Tarrow 2021).

Taken together, we find good reason to revisit the relationship of civil society to core processes in cleavage theory. While civil society featured heavily in historical accounts, classic cleavage theory perspectives centred a particular, now-outdated conception of civil society as mass associations. In the contemporary period, the changing structure of civil society has led neo-cleavage theorists to dismiss its potential relevance. Lacking in both literatures is a comparative account theorising the role of civil society – in differing forms – in processes of cleavage development.

Building blocks towards a new theory of civil society and cleavages

How might civil society matter for the development of cleavages? To develop a general framework capable of exploring this question, we make two theoretical moves: (I.) we distinguish between different processes (or ‘stages’) of cleavage development, across which the importance of civil society may vary, and (II.) we focus on core *mechanisms* through which civil society can influence these stages.

We conceptualise cleavage development as a function of three interrelated processes, which civil society can intersect with differently. First, there is a process of group formation in society, that is, the emergence of groups with a basis in social structure who share a common identity (Bartolini 2000). A second process is the political institutionalisation of social cleavages into patterns of electoral competition, that is, how divides between social groups become mobilised into divides between political parties (Lipset and Rokkan 1966). Finally, there is electoral stabilisation, wherein cleavage-aligned dynamics of political competition are reinforced over time, whether through the consolidation of particular parties or broader ideological blocs (Bartolini and Mair 1990). Classic cleavage theory treated the first two processes as strictly sequential stages. In contrast, neo-cleavage theory treats their relationship as more fluid, or even reversed.

Our second theoretical move is to take a ‘mechanistic’ approach to studying the relationship between civil society and cleavages. Instead of thinking in ‘all or nothing’ terms about civil society as alternately strong or weak, necessary or irrelevant, we identify general mechanisms through which extra-party organisations and movements could impact cleavage development across these stages. While the precise unfolding of these mechanisms is clearer historically, they could theoretically apply today. The two mechanisms emerging most clearly from the historical record and extant literature are political linkage and social closure.

First, civil society can shape cleavage politics by structuring political linkage on the supply-side. Civil society organisations can act as primary intermediaries structuring the relationship between parties and groups: consolidating and communicating group demands and pressuring parties to enact them. Civil society’s role in political linkage should be particularly important in the political institutionalisation and stabilisation of cleavages. Regarding political institutionalisation, civil society organisations’ capacity to articulate collective demands and coordinate collective action can be a driving force in the creation of a new electoral vehicle. In the long-term, civil society can help stabilise group-party alignments by acting as an ongoing channel for the communication of group demands, constraining parties to provide continuous representation. While linkage has received limited direct attention in cleavage research – in part because some classic models treated civil society and parties as too overlapping to be separate – it is a central concept in the broader literature on party organisation and representation, where the term is used to encompass relationships between governments, parties, and voters and their differing forms (e.g. Allern and Bale 2012; Katz and Mair 1995; Scarrow *et al.* 2017).

Historically, civil society organisations were crucial conduits for political linkage. Often, voluntary associations preceded and created parties, playing a direct role in the political institutionalisation of social divides. Civil society actors were also significant cleavage ‘stabilizers’, functioning as ongoing conduits of group interest that structured relationships between voters and parties. The ties between parties and civil society organisations took many forms. Relationships were often formalised, with organisations holding decision-making power in party constitutions and/or control over candidate nominations. This allowed civil society organisations to actively shape the policies and social composition of the parties they allied with. More generally, the resources that social organisations possessed – including an activist base, financial capital, skilled personnel, and infrastructure for voter mobilisation – gave them immense leverage over political parties. While changes in practices of party organisation and the structure of civil society make it less likely that social organisations would have a similar level of *formal* influence today, civil society organisations, particularly those that are movement-oriented, could nonetheless continue to perform linkage functions in more informal ways, such as by developing policy proposals, training and ‘feeding in’ candidates for office, and exerting targeted pressure through protest mobilisation.

The second mechanism by which civil society can influence cleavage politics is by increasing social closure on the demand-side. Social closure refers to the ‘groupishness’ of groups – the firmness of their boundaries, the strength of their shared identities, and the embeddedness of their social networks. Where social closure is higher, group memberships are more important to individuals and more determinative of how they live their lives – making those identities more stable and politically salient. Where social closure is lower, group boundaries are more porous and individuals associate less strongly with their group identities (see: Lamont and Molnár 2002; Weber *et al.* 1978; Westheuser and Zollinger 2025). Social closure has received keen attention in both classic and neo-cleavage theory, viewed as a core mechanism for the stabilisation of electoral alignments. To the extent that civil society increases social closure, this should have effects at all stages of cleavage development but matter most strongly in processes of group formation and electoral stabilisation.

Historically, civil society significantly increased social closure along cleavage lines; effects were especially marked where associationism was densest, such as in pillarized Dutch society. Civil society consolidated segregated social milieus, making group membership highly salient and stabilising group-party alignments over time. Even where social organisation was less encompassing, civil society organisations increased social closure by providing meeting spaces, deepening group-based social networks, and diffusing programmatic demands. While participatory mass associations of this historical model were especially well-suited to deepening groups’

Table 1. Role of civil society across stages of cleavage development.

Stage of cleavage development	Importance of political linkage	Importance of social closure
I. Group formation	Low	High
II. Political institutionalisation	High	Medium
III. Electoral stabilisation	High	High

bonds and boundaries, more informal groups could also influence social closure today through repeated interaction in movement-oriented protest groups or community-oriented spaces like online forums or sports clubs.

We thus propose studying civil society and cleavages comparatively through these two mechanisms, considering their impact across the three processes of cleavage development. We summarise this framework in [Table 1](#) above.

We presently know more about the historical unfolding of these mechanisms than their relevance today. Processes of political linkage have received comparatively little attention in neo-cleavage theory, which tends to view parties as flexible agents, impervious to outside pressure. While evidencing the emergence of education-based social closure has been treated as a central empirical task of neo-cleavage theory (Bornschier *et al.* 2024; Hooghe and Marks 2025), such closure is largely understood to have emerged spontaneously, or otherwise through direct, unmediated interactions between parties and voters (see also: Westheuser and Zollinger 2025). The next section discusses changes in the structure of contemporary civil society in more detail, developing hypotheses about how this might influence each mechanism.

Civil society and the transnational cleavage

Civil society facilitated group-party linkage and deepened social closure in the historical period. An open question is to what extent – and how – civil society performs these functions with regard to the transnational cleavage today. Multiple contemporary trends have shifted social organisation away from large, membership-based formal associations towards more diverse forms of civic engagement. Three developments, each reflecting broader societal changes, are particularly relevant for how civil society intersects with cleavage politics in contemporary democracies: fragmentation, informalization, and politicisation. While these trends have long been discussed in related literatures – from the ‘hollowing out’ of party democracy (Mair 2013), to evolving forms of citizen engagement (Dalton 2002), and analyses of new social movements (Kriesi and Duyvendak 1995) – their implications for cleavage development have rarely been explored systematically.

Broadly, civil society increasingly consists of many, often loosely organised, community- and movement-oriented groups. This structural change

reduces the overall centrality of single civil society organisations in most citizens' day-to-day lives, diminishing such organisations' capacity to leverage centralised resources and present unified demands to parties. However, this does not imply civil society has no political impact; rather that relationships between civil society groups, political parties, and voters have become, on the whole, more differentiated and volatile.

At the organisational level, these structural changes are reflected in the decline of formal mass organisations (such as unions and faith-based associations; e.g. Putnam *et al.* 2004), the rise of informal and loose network structures and initiatives, as well as the emergence of new heterogeneous social movements, bound by their lowest common denominator of hostility against particular out-groups or the political class (e.g. Gattinara and Pirro 2024). At the individual level, we observe ad-hoc and episodic engagement beyond classical settings, the emergence of 'new volunteers' or 'plug-in activists' with different expectations concerning their civic engagement (e.g. Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014), and activism and social movements driven by specific issues and crises (e.g. Borbáth 2024).

In this civic landscape, citizens' repertoire for engagement in political and social life has expanded, with formal membership-based organisations coexisting alongside informal organisations and networks. Moreover, Europe's recent crises and political conflicts have led to a growing overlap and blurred boundaries between established civil society organisations and social movement activism. Scholars observe a process of politicisation, characterised not only by the spread of protest politics but also by traditional non-profit associations and service providers in civil society increasingly engaging in contentious actions (Della Porta 2020; Grande 2023).

Considering these changes, we develop several hypotheses about how civil society may interact with cleavage politics today.

First, civil society is expected to still facilitate political linkage, integrating people in formal organisations and informal networks, and enabling collective mobilisation as in the past. Yet, the form political linkage takes may look different today, through punctuated episodes of crisis and protest, and organising concentrated around specific policy issues, candidates, and elections, rather than ongoing formal relationships. Further, the increasing flexibility with which voters engage with civil society may change organisations' incentives, as they gear their efforts towards retaining existing adherents, gaining new ones, and combating outsiders, rather than pursuing longer-term campaigns, projects, and collaborations. Ultimately, this might lead to a more fragmented, yet potentially internally very cohesive organisational landscape, integrating social groups pitted against each other along the transnational cleavage. We expect these dynamics to produce more volatile patterns of political linkage, with relationships between civil society groups and political parties that are more

antagonistic and instrumental than in the past. Moreover, we expect cyclical patterns of influence, wherein civil society groups – particularly movement-oriented ones – exert coordinated pressure in some moments but face inter-organisational gridlock in others.

Second, contemporary civil society may have diminished capacity to generate social closure overall. Yet, formal organisations and informal networks in civil society – whether community- or movement-oriented – are likely to still play a significant role in group formation, and to reflect its contemporary properties. The fragmentation, informalization, and politicisation observed at the meso-level may manifest at the micro-level, where voters' group identities and memberships become differentiated, flexible, and volatile. Rather than being anchored to single identities and organisations, individuals develop multiple group identities and associational attachments, which can become alternately dormant or active at different times. Consequently, people may exit groups and associations they feel less connected to (instead of debating or making changes internally) and participate in associational life less consistently. Broadly, we predict these organisational dynamics to produce bifurcated patterns of social closure: a large mass of 'untethered' voters whose participation is context-dependent will exist alongside highly cohesive subgroups of 'joiners' who have strong identities and participate actively in movement- and/or community-oriented groups.

Third, we predict asymmetries across the cleavage line, with Green/New Left and far-right parties interacting with civil society differently. Research on civil society and social movements in Western Europe evidences important left-right differences in patterns of movement-party interaction and civic participation. Green/New Left parties tend to maintain clear ties to social movements, whereas far-right parties engage with them more instrumentally, aligning with protests and adopting movement symbols when strategic, whilst avoiding formal ties (e.g. Gattinara and Pirro 2024). Micro-level research suggests that a higher share of left-wing voters attend protests than right-wing voters, who tend to be more reluctant to participate in civil society (e.g. Giugni and Grasso 2019; Hutter and Kriesi 2013). Collectively, this suggests civil society's capacity to structure political linkage and social closure along the transnational cleavage may be overall higher on the left.

We summarise our core hypotheses in [Table 2](#). The following empirical sections offer a preliminary attempt to test them systematically.

Surveying available quantitative evidence: opportunities, limitations, and preliminary results

Quantitative sources available to study the meso-level embedding of the transnational cleavage can be categorised along two dimensions: whether

they provide indicators of civil society-party linkages, and whether they capture civil society's contribution to social closure.

We illustrate the use of the various indicators for five countries: Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. These countries have been extensively covered in work on the transnational cleavage, showing comparatively advanced stages of cleavage development (e.g. Bornschier *et al.* 2024; Hutter and Kriesi 2019). In addition, they are extensively covered by quantitative datasets. All five countries have strong and established Green parties of varying ages and relatively robust far-right parties. In four cases (Austria, France, the Netherlands, and Switzerland), far-right

Table 2. Implications of the changing structure of civil society.

Trend in civil society	Implications for political linkage	Implications for social closure
Fragmentation	Civil society groups have less capacity to present unified demands to parties and are more likely to compete for influence and adherents. Groups that persist are likely to be highly mobilised and ideologically distinct, exerting targeted pressure on priority issues and succeeding when they find points of cross-organisational consensus.	Groups and identities likely to be more heterogeneous; individuals tend to form multiple, competing group attachments which vary over time in their personal salience. Likely to produce pockets of high social closure amongst 'untethered' masses.
Informalization	Civil society organisations less likely to have ongoing formal relationships with parties; influence comes through mobilisation in moments of political crisis or indecision.	Interactions between group members become less frequent and more spontaneous, reducing social closure for most people while increasing it amongst committed adherents.
Politicisation	Landscape of civil society organisations is more differentiated and issue-specific, with groups pursuing alternate (and occasionally competing) linkage strategies; pressure on parties comes from different sources during different periods of mobilisation and is most effective in moments of coordination.	Salience of voters' group identities changes across different moments, depending on how parties and civil society groups invoke them. 'Groupishness' of the population as a whole may become very high in particular critical moments.
Overall effect	Move towards more volatile forms of linkage, operating through punctuated equilibrium moments of mobilisation and contestation rather than stable formal ties.	Proliferation of multiple identities leads social closure to bifurcate; 'tight', mobilised groups coexist alongside heterogeneous masses who become sporadically activated.
	Combination of the three trends widens the number and types of civil society actors that intervene in processes of political linkage, leading different groups to exert influence at different times and 'successful' pressure to hinge on effective cross-group coordination.	Combination of the three trends simultaneously widens and blurs possibilities for participation, leading to a growing gap between people who are activated consistently and those whose group identification is more fluid and context-dependent.

parties had already established themselves before the 2008 Great Recession, while in Germany, the far-right on the national level represents a more recent phenomenon.

We review datasets capturing different aspects of these mechanisms. Firstly, to identify civil society-party linkages, we use expert surveys from the V-Party dataset (Lindberg *et al.* 2022) paired with information about party statutes (Poguntke *et al.* 2019). While current measures are best-suited for capturing formal linkages, we also discuss data that could be used to study informal linkages, namely, candidate surveys and protest event data. Secondly, to assess social closure by movement- and community-oriented groups, we use population surveys from the joint database of the European Values Study and the World Values Survey.

Although existing datasets illustrate the potential of a quantitative approach, the available indicators have significant limitations for fully capturing our framework (see [Online appendix A](#), [Table 1](#), for an overview of potential datasets and indicators, along with their advantages and disadvantages). In particular, we lack indicators that adequately capture the transnational cleavage's civil society embedding —ones that are comparable across cases and over time and which bridge the different analytical levels of cleavage theory (Bartolini and Mair 1990). We proceed with a preliminary analysis of the limited publicly available data, but emphasise the need for new data collection and the development of novel indicators – a point we return to in the conclusion.

Measuring political linkage

Expert surveys provide the best opportunity to assess formal civil society-party ties as they bridge the different analytical levels required by a cleavage perspective. The most widely used comparative expert survey on party organisations is the V-Party dataset (Lindberg *et al.* 2022), which includes several relevant items. Experts are asked whether a given party maintains 'ties to prominent social organisations' (v2pasoctie) as well as whether the party receives 'Large-scale donations from civil society organisations (including trade unions)' (v2pafunds). These items allow ranking parties by their civil society connections but have major limitations. References to 'prominent' organisations and trade unions may prompt respondents to think mostly of large, left-leaning formal associations, overlooking informal protest movements and niche groups, such as those associated with the far-right. Further ambiguity relates to the general terms 'social organisations' and 'ties', which respondents may interpret differently. Despite these limitations, [Figure 1](#) plots organisational ties against civil society donations, with both indicators centred around country mean.

The far-right party family exhibits significant variation. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Austrian People's Party (FPÖ) have weak

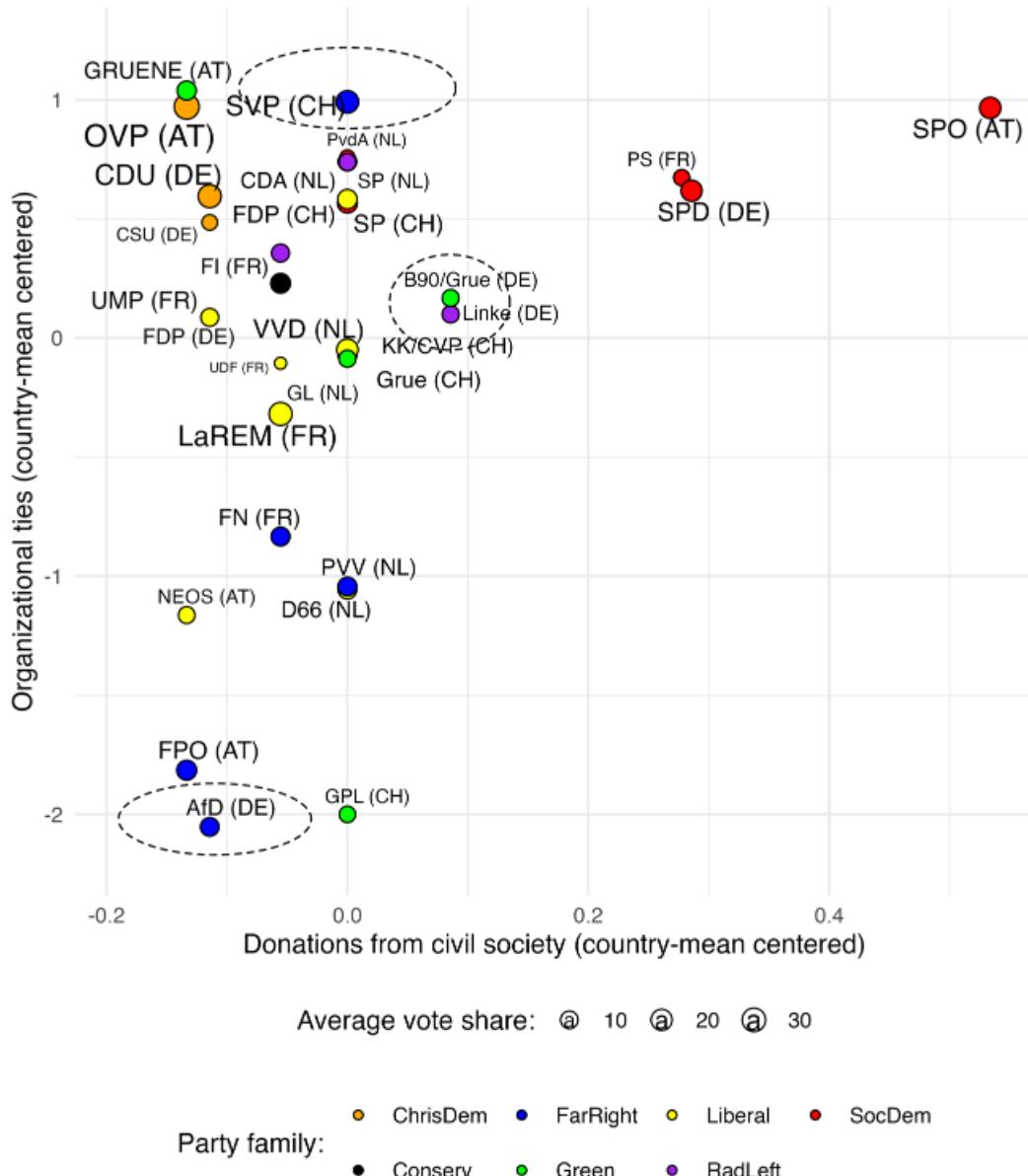


Figure 1. Organisational ties and civil society donations received by parties in Austria, France, Germany, The Netherlands, and Switzerland (2017–2022).

Note: The figure uses V-Party dataset indicators `v2pasoctie` and `v2pafunds_3` (Lindberg *et al.* 2022), centred around country means. Indicators refer to 2017 for France, Germany, and the Netherlands, and 2019 for Austria and Switzerland. The vote share data also comes from V-Party. [Online appendix A](#), [Tables 17-18](#) include more information on how parties are classified in party families.

organisational ties and receive little or no civil society donations. In contrast, the data indicates that the Swiss People's Party (SVP) maintains strong organisational ties and receives some civil society donations, with France's National Rally (RN) and the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) positioned between these extremes.

Other parties cluster by party family. Socialist parties score highest on both dimensions. Centre-right, Christian democratic, liberal, and conservative parties generally have moderate organisational ties but receive few civil society donations.

Green and radical left parties fall in between, exemplified by Germany's Greens and Left Party. Excepted are Austria's Greens, who display strong organisational ties but receive relatively few civil society donations.

Expert surveys aggregate information but scores can be difficult to interpret. One alternative to study formal linkages is the coding of party statutes. The largest comparative source on party statutes is the Political Party Database (Poguntke *et al.* 2019), collected in two waves covering European parties from 2010–2015 and 2017–2018. It includes information on the number and types of organisations affiliated with parties and their specific entitlements. However, this dataset suffers from severe missing-data issues because parties rarely codify their organisational affiliations explicitly in statutes. For instance, among our selected countries, only the Swiss Socialist Party has affiliates that send delegates to congress, and only the Austrian People's Party involves affiliated organisations in candidate selection. With just two data points from two waves, these data do not currently enable a robust comparative analysis of parties' civil society embedding.

Earlier sections outlined additional predictions about emergent patterns of *informal* linkage, whereby civil society groups interact with parties more-so as outside pressure groups, intervening externally in nomination processes and raising demands through protest. While we lack the data – and the space – to empirically explore these possibilities in full here, some existing datasets could be employed for this purpose. The Comparative Candidates Survey, which includes information on candidates' civil society memberships, could be used to study civil society influence in candidate nominations. However, relevant items adopt a sectoral understanding of civil society (also see: Martin *et al.* 2022). As with the V-Party measures, such data are likely to systematically under-report candidate ties to civil society groups linked to the far-right, such as anti-immigration, Eurosceptic, and neo-Nazi groups. Another empirical avenue for studying informal linkage could focus on protests (e.g. Heaney and Rojas 2015). Work that combines protest event data with party-level information has observed a high degree of involvement of Green/New Left and far-right parties in protests (Borbáth and Hutter 2021). Studies advancing the 'far-right movement parties' thesis have highlighted that far-right parties sponsor demonstrations even while in government (Ekiert 2020; Susánszky *et al.* 2016). Future work could revisit these data from a cleavage perspective, exploring how protests have specifically shaped the institutionalisation and stabilisation of the transnational divide.

Measuring social closure

We next aim to assess the social closure mechanism with available quantitative data. Population surveys offer an opportunity to investigate these

dynamics through the study of overlapping membership, that is, the extent to which supporters of cleavage-aligned parties are active in civil society (e.g. Baldassarri 2011; Giugni and Grasso 2021). Among the available population surveys, the European Values Study (EVS) and the World Values Survey (WVS) provide the most comprehensive questions on civil society membership, asking respondents about their involvement in different sectors. Both surveys also include items on party preference, allowing analysis of the civil society dimension of the transnational cleavage from both party-centred and civil society-centred perspectives.

We first assess whether civil society engagement varies systematically by party type. To do this, we calculate the share of each party's electorate who are members of at least one type of civil society organisation in our five country cases from 2017 to 2022. To enable cross-country comparisons, we centre this indicator around the mean for each party system.

As Figure 2 shows, far-right electorates tend to be less active in civil society, whereas Green parties tend to attract more engaged electorates. Among the Green parties, the Dutch Party for the Animals is the outlier, approximating far-right parties in its electorate's low level of civil society

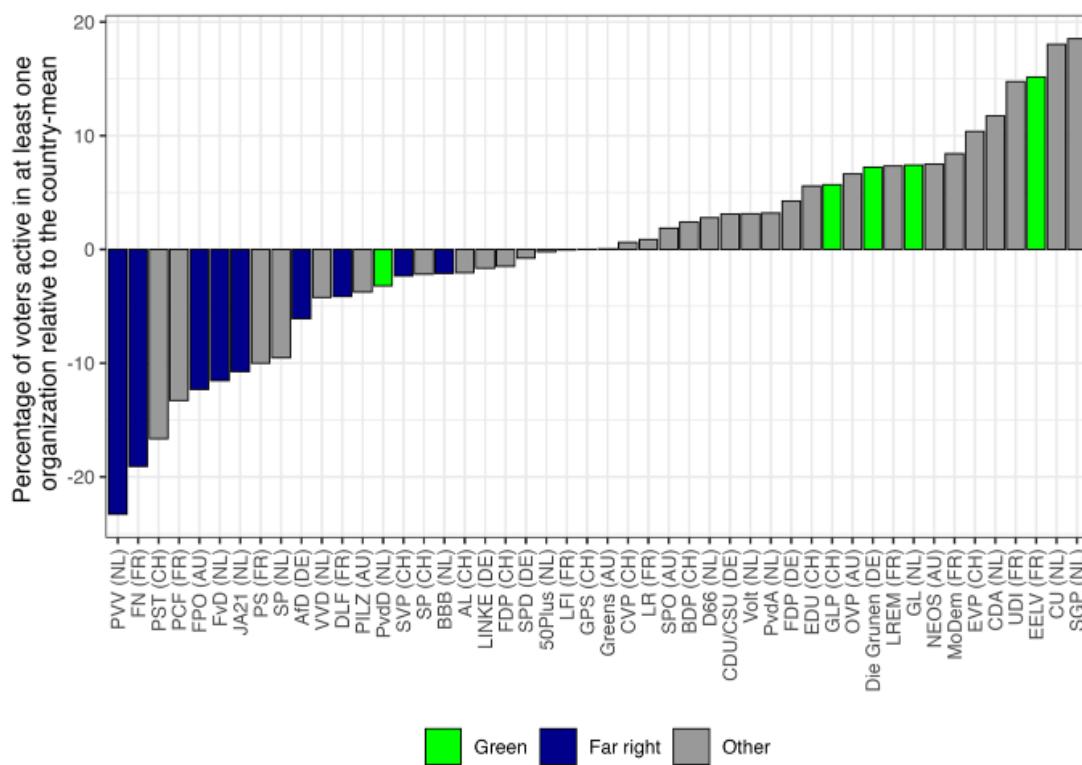


Figure 2. Members of civil society organisations among the electorate of political parties in Austria, France, Germany, The Netherlands, and Switzerland.

Note: The figure is based on the Joint EVS/WVS 2017-2022 Dataset (2022). It uses the battery of membership in organisations and partisanship questions. In the WVS, partisanship is measured with 'Which party would you vote for?'; in the EVS, with 'Which political party appeals to you most?' For this figure, the two items are treated as functional equivalents. The percentage of members is calculated from all respondents indicating sympathy towards the respective party.

engagement. Within the far-right party family, we observe clear variation: the electorates of the SVP and the Dutch Farmer-Citizen Movement show relatively higher levels of civil society engagement. In comparison, those of the Dutch PVV and the French RN exhibit much lower levels of engagement.

However, this analysis does not account for differences among specific types of civil society organisations. To explore that distinction, we take a more civil society-centred perspective and calculate how much support for Green and far-right parties differs between members and non-members of various sectors of civil society. Here, we focus on whether Green or far-right parties are over- or underrepresented, illustrated in [Figure 3](#). [Online appendix B](#) provides details on all combinations of civil society membership and parties in the five countries.

The results cover four possible organisational constellations: organisations dominated by Green supporters (quadrant I; 66% of data points), by both Green and far-right supporters (quadrant II; 12% of data points), by far-right supporters (quadrant III; 6% of data points), or by neither Green nor far-right supporters (quadrant IV; 16% of data points). In most cases (quadrant I), only the left side of the transnational cleavage is mobilised – this includes organisations focused on the environment, religion, education, arts, and culture. A smaller number of cases (quadrant II) show the mobilisation of both sides, such as environmental organisations in France and self-help groups in France and the Netherlands. There are three instances in which primarily the right is mobilised (quadrant III), all in Switzerland: sports clubs, labour unions, and self-help groups. Finally, some organisations demonstrate minimal cleavage embedding (quadrant IV), such as self-help/mutual aid groups in the Netherlands, Austria, and France, consumer groups in France, and professional associations in Austria.

Qualitative insights from three parties

Our quantitative analyses of political linkage and social closure suggest three general observations. First, there are fundamental differences between parties aligned with the older, class cleavage – especially social democrats – and the ‘new cleavage’ parties, with the latter having fewer formal ties to civil society. Second, there are clear asymmetries across the new cleavage line, with Green parties having more formal ties and a more socially-embedded voter base than the far-right. Third, there is significant variation within the far-right party family in levels of social-embeddedness; the Swiss SVP, for example, stands apart from the Dutch PVV and the German AfD across all analyses. At the same time, limitations of the existing data may obscure important dynamics, particularly for the far-right. To overcome these deficits, we now move beyond quantitative

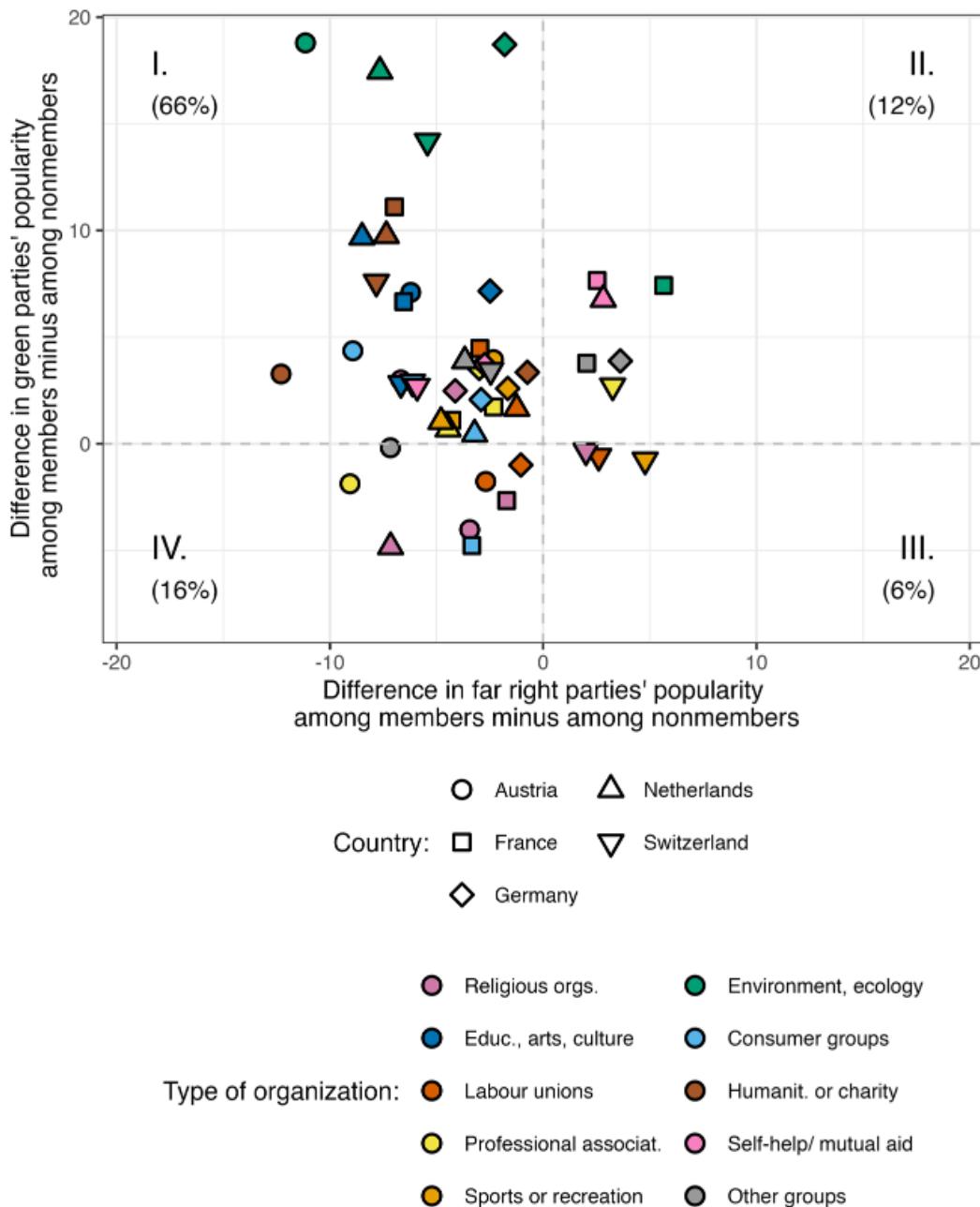


Figure 3. Difference in support for green and far-right parties among members of civil society organisations compared to non-members (2017–2022).

Note: Based on data from the Joint EVS/WVS 2017–2022 dataset (2022), drawing on survey questions about organisational membership and partisanship.

indicators and compare three illustrative cases, each of which occupied different positions in the preceding plots: the German Greens, the Swiss People's Party, and the Alternative for Germany.

These parties' distinct histories highlight different modes of party–civil society interaction along the transnational cleavage. Specifically, the Greens emerged from left-libertarian movement-oriented groups, the SVP from traditional rural and economic networks and community-oriented organisations, and the AfD from recent far-right mobilizations. In examining

each case, we highlight how patterns of linkage and social closure vary across these parties and their electorates.

Divergent paths of formal and informal linkages

The German Greens (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) exemplify a Green/New Left formation that emerged through close cooperation with the new social movements (NSMs) in the 1970s and 1980s (Kitschelt 1989). Activists from ecological and anti-nuclear movements were key to the party's formation, alongside those mobilising for internationalism, feminism, and other left-libertarian demands. Many civil society groups informally overlapped with the nascent party, providing an ongoing exchange of ideas and personnel (Kriesi 1993). While these relationships were not exclusive (Müller-Rommel and Poguntke 1992) and the party quickly became formally independent, informal linkages persisted, including overlapping directorates and multiple activism, as party members were often involved in various NSMs (Rihoux 2016). This 'movement party' model, characterised by informal ties and shared protest repertoires, initially allowed civil society to intervene in party decision-making (Poguntke 1993). Over time, however, the Greens adopted more professionalised procedures and reduced direct civil society influence, though they remain open to episodic alliances with protest networks (Bukow 2016; Valentim 2025).

By contrast, the SVP stands out for its long-standing formal ties to traditional social organisations, reflecting its origins in the Party of Farmers, Traders, and Independents. The party rebranded as the Swiss People's Party following a merger with the Democratic Party in 1971. Since the 1990s, under the influence of the Zürich faction and leadership of Christoph Blocher, the SVP has radicalised, transforming into one of Europe's most successful far-right parties (Kriesi *et al.* 2005). Historically, the SVP has represented Protestant, rural Switzerland, forging stable relationships with farmers' associations and small-business groups (David and Müller 2007). Such ties are facilitated by comparatively low levels of professionalisation and reliance on 'after-work politicians,' as well as the strong direct-democratic system, wherein political parties depend on organised interests for financial resources or mobilisation capacity (Ladner *et al.* 2023). Local organisations and referenda serve as institutional channels for civic participation, leaving fewer incentives to pursue informal protest-based alliances (Skenderovic 2009). The SVP does, however, align itself with issue-based groups like the Campaign for an Independent and Neutral Switzerland, which has bolstered the party's Euroskeptic stance (Kriesi *et al.* 2005).

The AfD demonstrates a different path to building party-civil society ties on the far-right. Partly due to its status as the youngest party under

scrutiny, and its top-down origins as a vehicle for critics of Germany's management of the Eurozone crisis, the AfD lacks dense organisational connections to any established civic groups. Over time, it has formed informal alliances with right-wing protest movements, including PEGIDA and COVID-related demonstrations, yet these affiliations are often volatile and factionalised (Heinze and Weisskircher 2023; Weisskircher *et al.* 2023). Many traditional civil society actors in Germany adopt an explicitly oppositional stance towards the AfD (Schroeder *et al.* 2023), limiting the party's ability to institutionalise stable alliances. The AfD has also radicalised, especially during and after the so-called refugee crisis, becoming one of the most extreme parties within the European far-right spectrum (Arzheimer and Berning 2019). As a result, it remains reliant on opportunistic or discursive linkages to certain protest networks, rather than formal partnerships.

Mechanisms of group formation and social closure

Civil society also served as a catalyst for the development of social closure in the formative years of the German Greens. The 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of a new social movement milieu, particularly in urban centres, characterised by strong collective identity and organisational integration through a network of groups engaged in political mobilisation, representation, and service provision (Brand 1985). This environment bolstered a shared left-libertarian identity, echoing the cohesion of older cleavages despite its relative informality. Such dynamics evolved over time, as some environmental groups were professionalised and absorbed into the Greens' party apparatus, while other groups developed a more distant or strained relationship with the party. Over time, the fragmentation of these movements weakened the original social milieu (Vester *et al.* 1993), leaving a residual but less all-encompassing sense of group identity. Today, adherents of left-libertarian values remain especially active in protest campaigns and associations, suggesting some degree of social closure persists. However, existing metrics cannot systematically capture who interacts with whom in civil society, limiting our understanding of the full extent of organisational integration today (Bukow 2016).

In the Swiss context, a long history of robust organisation by rural, community-oriented civil society groups and economic interest groups has provided fertile ground for the development of a social milieu friendly to the far-right. The SVP, further, has played an active role in knitting these strands together, contributing to the development of a collective identity centred around traditional values, Swiss sovereignty, and a culturally conservative stance (Bornschier *et al.* 2021). Engagement with these organisations, particularly in the framework of direct democracy, has helped to

further anchor the SVP in local civil society, especially in its regional strongholds. By repeatedly bringing like-minded people together – whether through farmers' associations, shooting clubs, or referendum campaigns – Swiss civil society networks have helped foster a stable sense of 'us' against perceived external threats (Zollinger 2024b). While further research is needed to assess the precise contributions of these organisations to social closure, SVP-aligned civil society groups seem to play an important role in cementing and diffusing emerging group boundaries along the trans-national cleavage line in Switzerland.

In the German case, far-right sentiments have periodically coalesced into subcultures and small protest networks outside mainstream party structures, well before the AfD's emergence. However, these early formations typically lacked stable, long-term organisation – reflected, perhaps, in AfD supporters' below-average civil society membership in the analyses above. While this could provide a relatively weak foundation for everyday group reinforcement, paradoxically, widespread opposition from the mainstream appears to fuel a sort of 'outsider identity' among AfD supporters, who feel isolated and stigmatised (Grande 2023; Schroeder *et al.* 2023). This dynamic plays out in right-wing protest movements and online subcultures, where being shunned by major associations may intensify in-group solidarity. Moreover, intra-party disputes between the AfD's protest-oriented faction and its more institutionalist wing seem to reflect the presence of competing tendencies and identities within the broader far-right social sphere. Whether these networks eventually coalesce into a durable social milieu (or even multiple) remains uncertain; far-right social organisation in Germany is still relatively inchoate as compared to the civil society ecosystems that underlie the Greens and SVP.

Taken together, these three parties illustrate the diverse ways in which civil society can shape the new transnational cleavage. Whereas the Greens emerged through an interplay of mostly informal linkages with new social movements, the SVP has traditionally relied on robust formal connections to farmers' associations and local interest groups, and the AfD has been forging fragmented, opportunistic ties to protest networks. In terms of social closure, both the Greens and the SVP illustrate how organised civil society can consolidate strong group identities – either through a left-libertarian subculture or through highly institutionalised rural milieus. By contrast, the AfD's 'outsider' dynamic shows how civil society opposition and sporadic protest alignments can nevertheless spark a sense of collective identity, albeit in a more polarised and fluid manner. Overall, we find that civil society remains a crucial intermediary for structuring cleavage-based boundaries, even if the organisational forms and mobilisation strategies vary widely across parties and contexts. Yet, the evidence on these processes remains limited and, at best, indicative. We therefore return

to these gaps and propose avenues for future research in the next concluding section.

Conclusion: a plea for further research

This article has sought to understand whether – and how – civil society matters for the development of political cleavages. While civil society actors featured heavily in classic depictions of cleavage politics, such work centred on a narrow conception of civil society that has become outdated. In contrast, neo-cleavage theory has paid little attention to how patterns of social organisation beyond party politics may structure the transnational cleavage. Collectively, these two strains of research have left many questions unanswered concerning the role civil society can play in the development of cleavages, and its capacity to do so today.

We fill this gap by introducing a new theoretical framework for conceptualising the relationship of civil society to cleavages, both past and present. Specifically, we distinguish three stages in the development of a new cleavage structure – group formation, political institutionalisation, and electoral stabilisation – and delineate two core mechanisms through which community- and movement-oriented civil society organisations can impact these stages: by structuring group-party linkages on the supply-side and by deepening social closure on the demand-side. Tracing how these mechanisms unfolded in the historical period, we formulate expectations about how they may interact with three important macro-trends that characterise civil society today: fragmentation, informalization, and politicisation.

We expect that civil society continues to play an important role in the development of cleavage politics, but that the precise unfolding of the two mechanisms today likely differs from the past. Specifically, we expect to observe more volatile dynamics of political linkage, more differentiated patterns of social closure, and emergent asymmetries between the left and the right.

Concerning political linkage, we predict a decline of stable formalised ties between civil society groups and parties, and a corresponding proliferation of informal, even antagonistic patterns of interaction between electoral and nonelectoral actors. In this model, civil society's contemporary influence on parties comes not through consensual, institutionalised channels of input-seeking and decision-making, but rather through the application of external pressure in strategic moments of crisis or indecision. This results in a more volatile form of linkage, in which civil society's ability to influence party politics vacillates over time, peaking when external circumstances prompt civil society groups to coordinate around shared goals. Concerning social closure, we predict an emergent bifurcation whereby

pockets of robust attachment emerge within a broader ‘untethered’ mass public. Such pockets could comprise distinct subgroups who are highly mobilised and wield outsized influence, both socially and politically. Finally, we expect ideological asymmetries, with civil society’s capacity to influence political linkage and social closure being overall higher on the left than the right. Taken altogether, we suspect that although the era of mass associations is over, a transformed civil society continues to drive and reflect the evolution of cleavage structures in Western Europe.

As is inevitable with any agenda-setting article, we raise more questions than we can answer. Nevertheless, we also take some steps towards exploring these developments empirically. First, we take stock of the available comparative quantitative datasets, assessing their potential and limitations, and employing them to tap into various aspects of our theoretical framework. Data from expert and population surveys suggest that, in accordance with our expectations, there are clear links between civil society groups and political parties aligned along the transnational cleavage and these ties appear to be overall stronger on the left than the right. At the same time, the far-right party family exhibits substantial internal heterogeneity, and available indicators are especially likely to undercount forms of civil society mobilisation that are more likely on the right. Second, we dive further into these dynamics with brief case studies of three key parties: the German Greens, the Swiss People’s Party and the Alternative for Germany. Each party typifies a distinct mode of civil society-party interaction: the Greens’ long-standing roots in movement-based networks contrast sharply with the SVP’s more formal ties to rural and business associations, which differ further from the AfD’s fluid, protest-oriented linkages. These differences offer initial evidence that changes in contemporary civil society – such as the rise of more informal, often antagonistic protest groups – matter for the development of the transnational cleavage, shaping how parties mobilise and reinforce their core identities and constituencies.

Our work highlights several important methodological and empirical challenges for future research on the social embedding of the new cleavage. Most fundamentally, we lack quantifiable indicators of parties and voters’ relationships to civil society that can be applied across different contexts and compared over time. Special care should be taken to develop indicators that can bridge different levels of analysis, i.e. measures of social embedding that can be used not only to study the ties of high-level party organisations, but also to understand the ties of those parties’ factions, legislators, and candidates, as well as of their committed and peripheral voters. Recent work that focuses on social networks, the mobilisation of social groups by political parties, and the nature of

party-movement interactions are all important advancements in the study of contemporary cleavage politics. However, this work rarely examines cleavages across various levels of analysis and tends to give short shrift to conceptualising and measuring meso-level dynamics. Future work should build on existing research advancements but also give equal footing to both a party and civil society perspective. The latter would mean moving away from an aggregate view of civil society and collecting data that enables zooming in on specific organisations. For this, it is essential to take a broad, empirical definition of civil society that allows for the examination of developments not only on the left but also among far-right movements and organisations.

Future data collection efforts should also be developed with the aim of facilitating systematic comparisons across contexts. Our preceding analyses focused on Western European countries where the transnational cleavage is relatively well-established. While we expect our conceptual framework to travel, mechanisms of political linkage and social closure may operate differently elsewhere. For instance, the distinct histories of state-civil society relations in Central and Eastern Europe may shape how social closure develops in those contexts, and Nordic corporatism may generate distinct regional patterns of political linkage. Such potential differences should be studied systematically.

Our framework also complements recent work that highlights the role of symbolic boundaries and classification struggles in cleavage formation (Westheuser and Zollinger 2025). While these accounts emphasise the discursive construction of group identities, we argue that understanding cleavage stabilisation requires linking these identity processes to the organisational embedding provided by civil society. Bringing both perspectives together offers a more complete account of how durable cleavage alignments emerge in contemporary societies.

As broader society becomes more fragmented and polarised, civil society is also marked by fragmentation, informalization, and politicisation. This results in a setting where relationships between social groups and parties are less institutionalised and, by extension, less predictable than in the past. Given these changes, it remains to be seen whether the transnational cleavage will be as stable and durable as its Rokkanian predecessors. Nonetheless, we contend that, either way, an important part of the story will lie at the meso-level, with the intermediaries who seek – whether successfully or fruitlessly – to coordinate collective action and cement identity formation. We hope that our analysis will stimulate further research into these dynamics, building a broader scholarly enterprise on the role of civil society in cleavage development within and beyond Western Europe.

Notes

1. Many terms have proliferated to refer to the new cleavage, including: ‘integration–demarcation’ (Kriesi et al., 2008), ‘universalism–communitarianism’ (Bornschier, 2010), ‘cosmopolitanism–communitarianism’ (De Wilde et al., 2019), or the ‘transnational’ (Hooghe and Marks, 2018) divide.
2. Note that this is an empirical – rather than normative – definition of civil society, and thus includes, for example, far-right organizations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The open access publication was funded by the WZB Berlin Social Science Center.

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