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Value orientations and social cohesion in organizational discourses: a civil-society perspective

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of political polarization and societal fragmentation, liberal democracy, more than ever, rests on social cohesion. Civil-society organizations (CSOs) are pivotal in fostering this cohesion by building social capital and serving as catalysts of social change. However, civil society is also a space of ambivalence where conflicting values and priorities are negotiated and, at times, contested. Integrating insights from social psychology, political sociology, and communication scholarship, this study seeks to better understand the extent and ways in which values are articulated in the external communication of CSOs, and how these values are linked to their public claims of fostering social cohesion. Combining organizational survey data of nearly 800 CSOs in Germany with a content analysis of their websites, this study finds clear tendencies toward communitarian (vs. individualistic), postmaterialist (vs. materialist), and secular-rational (vs. traditional) values in the CSOs' self-portrayals. CSOs that view themselves as agents of social change and, to some degree, politically active CSOs tend to invoke values more often, while those focused on sports/leisure and cultural activities were least likely to do so. Finally, for articulating organizational visions of socially cohesive communities, it does not matter much which value orientations in particular are invoked by CSOs as long as values are present in their external communication.

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Introduction

In the face of multiple crises, polarization, and fragmentation within contemporary societies, liberal democracy, more than ever, rests on social cohesion. Civil-society organizations (CSOs) play a pivotal role in fostering this cohesion by building social capital, promoting moral values, and serving as agents of change (Bashri, 2021; Grande, 2021; Häussler,

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2021). Values are ubiquitous in contemporary organizational discourses and typically referenced to legitimize actions. Social movements like Fridays for Future or Black Lives Matter frequently invoke terms like climate justice, social justice, and racial equity, embedding these values at the core of their public demands and societal visions.¹ Similarly, more established CSOs like labor unions or relief organizations typically center their messaging on economic security and humanitarian values, aiming to broaden public appeal and convey the urgency of their causes.² Regardless of size, structure, or sociopolitical orientation, CSOs provide institutionalized civic opportunities for people to experience communal life, political action, and the common good (De Vries et al., 2024), enabling social exchange and accumulating social capital (van Deth et al., 2016). Additionally, CSOs can serve as anchor points, helping their members navigate complex and emotionally charged situations through shared value orientations. However, this role underscores the ambivalence inherent to civil society in contemporary democracies (Grande, 2023), representing a space where conflicting values and priorities are negotiated and, at times, contested.

Values play a critical yet ambiguous role in fostering social cohesion – an ‘attribute of a collective, indicating the quality of collective togetherness’ (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017, p. 592). As seen in the examples above, value invocations are often vague – whether intentionally or not – especially when embedded in political discourse. Core political values like liberty help shape public opinion, electoral behavior, and visions for society (Goren, 2022). In interpersonal contexts, shared values can smoothen social interactions and foster trust. Yet across contexts, values can be interpreted in vastly different ways, leading to contrasting priorities and trade-offs (Kaasa, 2021; Mann, 1970). For this study, we define values as ‘guiding beliefs about desirable conduct at both the individual and collective levels’ (Trillò et al., 2021, p. 879). They serve as underlying principles and logics that direct evaluations (Heinich, 2020; Scharlach et al., 2024; Schwartz, 1992), guiding communication behaviors. Organizationally, values are articulated to set agendas, justify goals, and shape an organization’s cultural fabric, reflected in its symbols, norms, and practices (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013; Sagiv et al., 2011).

Against this backdrop we ask: *To what extent and in what ways are values articulated in the communication of CSOs, and how are these values linked to their public claims of fostering social cohesion?* Our study aims to make three contributions: First, it seeks to understand the connection between values and social cohesion – two concepts that have generated a wealth of scholarship *on their own*, yet their theoretical linkages remain underexplored (Nowack & Schoderer, 2020). Second, while much of the literature on values and cohesion focuses on individual-level data, this study seeks to extend these insights to the organizational level. Specifically, it aims to map CSOs along different value dimensions that originate in social psychology and political science. Third, by combining organizational survey and text data, the study explores the link between values and cohesion in the external communication of CSOs in Germany, thus contributing to organizational communication scholarship.

Literature review

Values and civil society

CSOs are linked to societal values in various ways. They advocate for human rights, environmental protection, or social justice, and hold political actors accountable for

adhering to societal norms. CSOs can shape values externally via awareness and advocacy campaigns and internally via organizational socialization processes (Wolf, 2019). They act as a bridge between citizens and government, ensuring that citizens' voices are heard, mediating conflicts, and safeguarding a democratic political culture and community (Hegre et al., 2020).

Values play a key role in theories of civil society as CSOs often define their mission to promote and uphold social values while also maneuvering the interplay between sometimes conflicting internal and external goals (Hasenfeld & Gidron, 2005). More culturally resonant values tend to elicit thoughts, evoke emotions, and activate group identities among target groups (Sheets et al., 2023). Aligning organizational values with the social identity needs of its members and the dominant cultural values of the system in which they are embedded is key to understanding the institutionalization of CSOs (Scott, 1995).

Cultivating a shared understanding of values and fostering an agreement on how to enact those values within an organization can strengthen members' sense of solidarity and togetherness. This value orientation is particularly evident in faith-based or activist civil-society groups (Chen et al., 2013, p. 869), where strong internal cohesion may translate into sustained advocacy, volunteerism or resilience (e.g., via strengthening organizational networks or fostering local leadership) (Woznyj et al., 2024). This can benefit the community it serves, especially its capacity to adapt and thrive in times of crisis and disruptions.

In heterogeneous societies (as in the case of Germany), however, alignment with values cannot be taken for granted, and it is likely that contradictory value orientations – and varying degrees of emphasis – are present in the public communication of CSOs. To better understand this variance beyond religious and activist civil-society groups, we first ask:

RQ1: To what extent do CSOs explicitly invoke values in their external communications?

Different value concepts

Across various social science and humanities disciplines, scholars define values as reflexive standards to evaluate preferences (Joas, 1999, p. 201; see also Thome, 2019) and governing principles to direct such evaluations (Heinich, 2020). Scholarship on how values are articulated in organizational discourses remains scarce (few notable exceptions with a focus on social media include Hallinan et al., 2022; Scharlach et al., 2024). With regard to the objectives of CSOs, three sets of value orientations are relevant.

A first distinction can be made between *individualistic values*, focused on self-enhancement, and *communitarian values*, focused on self-transcendence (Schwartz, 1992). Individualistic values are characterized by seeking achievement, power, as well as satisfaction, and broadly align with mastery and hierarchy. Inevitably, this means putting the pursuit of one's own interests, needs and dominance over others, thus enabling interpersonal and intergroup conflicts. In contrast, communitarian values are typically associated with universalism and benevolence, and align with harmony and egalitarianism, thus foregrounding concerns for the welfare and interests of (largely unknown)

others (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022; Schwartz et al., 2012; see also Maleki & de Jong, 2014; Nardon & Steers, 2009).

Second, *survival* (or *materialist*) *values* highlight economic and physical security, whereas *self-expression* (or *post-materialist*) *values* emphasize tolerance, trust, and general quality of life (Inglehart, 1997). As emancipative values (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005), self-expression values ‘comprise a conglomerate of egalitarian, liberal, autonomous and expressive orientations’ (Welzel & Inglehart, 2010, p. 51) and are associated with democratic principles like protecting freedom of speech (Welzel, 2013). The materialism versus post-materialism approach refers to the dichotomy between basic needs on the one hand (e.g., safety) and self-fulfillment needs on the other hand (e.g., self-actualization).

A third distinction relates to cultural norms, specifically between *traditional* and *secular-rational values*. People who uphold traditional values typically emphasize the role of religion, conventional family models, customs, and rituals. They tend to have strong national or regional ties. In contrast, endorsing secular values means promoting equality and tolerance toward unconventional situations, minorities, and outgroups (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Social conformity is key: Whereas traditional values are associated with obedience, passive acceptance of authority figures, and the importance of religion and family, secular-rational values are linked to the importance of politics as a guiding framework (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; for a comprehensive overview see Kaasa, 2021). Extending RQ1, we ask:

RQ2: To what extent are (a) communitarian/individualistic, (b) self-expression/survival, and (c) secular-rational/traditional values reflected in the external communications of CSOs?

Values and the role of purpose, politicization, and place of CSOs

Considering the diversity of civil society in modern democracies, varying value orientations are likely championed by different CSOs. However, it remains unclear how organizational features, contexts, and conditions correspond with differing value patterns in CSOs’ external communications. We argue that CSOs’ value invocations are contingent upon three factors: the primary sphere of activity, the political nature of their activity, and the place where an organization is rooted and active, be it urban versus rural spaces, or determined by regional political cleavages.

First, we presume that organizational values are conditioned by the purpose and type of activity. For instance, groups that work on grand societal challenges need to appeal to the common interest and form broad strategic coalitions of supporters while organizations with more narrowly defined activities can be more specific in their value approach. One can assume that an internationally active climate advocacy group stands for values such as promoting pro-environmental behaviors, which are rooted in fundamental morals and ethical beliefs (Feinberg & Willer, 2013), whereas a local sports club is more focused on their service quality. Similarly, NGOs engaged in disaster relief or humanitarian aid mobilize support for their goals by invoking widely supported values to create broader coalitions (Willetts, 2019). For instance, in its mission statement, Human Rights Watch highlights its ‘commitment to justice, dignity, compassion, and equality.’³ This highly visible communication about values may differ from many leisure-oriented

organizations, which often revolve around shared interests and practices than values. Their contribution to social cohesion lies in providing civic space and opportunities for people with different values and backgrounds to come together (Nichols, 2021). However, this is not to say that CSOs promoting recreational activities are less value-driven as they are likely to promote different types of values, for instance, creativity, self-expression, and togetherness. It is therefore important to analyze how different types of organizations (based on what they view as their main field of activity) feature different value orientations, if at all. As these examples also illustrate, different emphases and prioritization of values are also contingent upon the extent to which CSOs enter the political arena and how they position themselves within that space.

Second, CSOs increasingly consider themselves actors relevant to political decision-making and involved in public contestation (Grande, 2023). The politicization of issues such as migration or cultural diversity may partly explain their outward orientation. While their activities shape public debate and politics, this external focus can come at the expense of their inward (member-centered) identity (Schubert et al., 2023). Politicization has been widely studied in the context of political debates (e.g., Gessler & Hunger, 2024; Hutter et al., 2016) and media coverage (e.g., Bolsen et al., 2014) but less so in relation to CSOs. Some studies associate politicization with contentious politics, the framing of contested issues (Chinn et al., 2020) and protest (De Vries et al., 2021). Traditionally pre-political values such as empathy, tolerance, justice, respect, and social responsibility form the foundation of liberal democracies (Weber, 2024). However, these values are increasingly subject to politicization as well. For instance, expressing solidarity with the victims of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine is now seen as a political statement, as is organizational noncompliance with lockdown rules during the COVID-19 pandemic (Popescu & Jugl, 2025; Szpak et al., 2023).

The drivers of the politicization of civil society are thus manifold. Social conflicts may be imposed on (ostensibly) non-political organizations (Grayson, 2022; Schroeder et al., 2023), pressuring them into taking an ideological or policy position in the political arena. CSOs with (often diverging) sociopolitical goals may also respond to – or emerge from – societal challenges like increased migration (Van den Berg et al., 2025). Structurally, volunteer-run CSOs are often less politically active than staff-driven organizations (Bolleyer, 2021). Ultimately, an increasingly politicized information environment poses challenges to any CSO to effectively maneuver tensions, trade-offs, and their positioning in the political arena to provide orientation for relevant stakeholders. One such tension emerges when the 'logic of membership' collides with the 'logic of influence' (Schmitter & Streeck, 1999, pp. 53–55). The former has the potential to incentivize a value discourse that highlights members' interests and internal cohesion (e.g., respect, tolerance, solidarity) whereas the latter may foreground values associated with political influence (e.g., justice, equality, sustainability).

Third, differentiating between urban and rural areas is another important category for understanding value discourses. As 'dense "hubs" of cultural expressions (with) multiple and complex layers of embodied values' (Pauwels, 2016, p. 1310), urban spaces encompass more diverse communities and require CSOs to deal more proactively with value heterogeneity (Matejskova & Leitner, 2011). A diverse civil society that enhances different identities promotes public dialogue, but also the salience of conflicting interests. Providing opportunities to protest and voice opinions, cities can thus serve as arenas for

public value contestation between social groups (Castells, 2010; Drucker & Gumpert, 2016). In contrast, rural areas with less heterogeneous populations provide fewer opportunities for culturally diverse intergroup contact. Chances of social seclusion and contention are usually more limited due to stronger and more homogenous social networks, greater informal social control, and less anonymity, while urban residents enjoy more anonymity and opportunities to withdraw from social life. Unlike urban environments, there is often not enough critical mass to form homogeneous subgroups. Individuals are generally more easily integrated into their local community (Henning-Smith et al., 2019); however, conflicts and individual isolation from community affairs are more noticeable and impactful in rural communities (Putnam, 2000, p. 205). While rural districts often suffer from limited public resources and disadvantaged infrastructures, civic engagement to create spaces for social encounters can positively impact a local community's cohesion and citizens' quality of life (Manthey, 2024).

The spatial dimension of organizational activity may also manifest in regional political cleavages. In Germany, the perception of regional differences and conflict extends to the rift between the 'East' (the areas of the former GDR) and the 'West'. The historical experiences of East Germans left a persistent mark on political cultures, political representation, and economic development (Weisskircher, 2020). Studies demonstrate that, until today, East Germans' orientations are characterized by perceptions of inequality towards West Germans, lower levels of political trust, higher levels of xenophobia, and support for right-wing and right-populist parties (for a detailed examination see Mau et al., 2024; Rainer et al., 2018). It can thus be assumed that this opinion climate is also reflected, to a certain extent, in the values communicated by CSOs. Even before reunification, civil society in West Germany included volunteer associations, NGOs, and social movements, actively participating in political life and promoting values like pluralism, liberty, and individual freedom. In the former GDR, civic engagement was closely tied to the workplace and organized activities around the Socialist Unity Party. Due to the restricted scope for action imposed by the East German regime, value discourses revolved around conformism and collectivism. The collapse of socialism and the subsequent transformation also broke the backbone of civil society in the East. The systemic differences in political culture and associational life in East Germany appear to persist at the individual level even after reunification (Roßteutscher, 2009). This might easily translate into different value patterns at the organizational level as well.

To better understand which CSOs tend to promote which values, we ask:

RQ3: How do value invocations differ between CSOs regarding their (a) primary sphere of activity, (b) sociopolitical orientations, and (c) place related to rurality and sociopolitical cleavages?

Values and social cohesion

Values are key ingredients in many academic or civic definitions of social cohesion: The European Commission (2001) associates the need to 'share common values and goals' (p. 13) with social cohesion; others focus on processes of 'developing a community of shared values' (Jenson, 1998, p. 4) or 'the need for a shared sense of morality and common purpose' (Forrest & Kearns, 2001, p. 2128). Values enable group members to identify common objectives and shape their social interactions via shared behavioral codes

and scripts (Botterman et al., 2012). As such, they are an integral part of intergroup communication (for a systematic review and a discussion on value homogeneity vis-à-vis social cohesion, see Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017).

But what does the term *social cohesion* comprise? In light of a plethora of conceptualizations – starting with Durkheim (1893, 1897) and Le Bon (1896) – a cohesive society manifests itself on three dimensions: First, cohesion is constituted by strong *social relations* among its members (Dragolov et al., 2016). This dimension, largely anchored in the political science literature, typically foregrounds the importance of social capital (Putnam, 2000) and related concepts like reciprocity and social trust (van Deth, 2008). A second constitutive factor is a *sense of connectedness* or belonging (Chan et al., 2006). Cohesion increases when people identify with a superordinate entity (e.g., their state or nation), have faith in their institutions, and harbor a sense of fairness (Dragolov et al., 2016; see also Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017, pp. 588/589). Third, socially cohesive environments tend to have a strong *orientation toward the common good*. This typically comprises an active citizenry that shows solidarity, care for others, and compliance to social rules and norms, with the latter being linked to values as they regulate behavior and are sustained by what members of a political community approve or disapprove of (for a comprehensive empirical assessment of social cohesion as a multidimensional concept see Dragolov et al., 2016).

Scholarship has identified several ways how values may affect cohesion (for a detailed exploration, see Nowack & Schoderer, 2020). First, shared values may facilitate transactions if common ground is identified. Such a value consensus represents an intrinsic path (Holtug, 2017). Second, as guiding principles, values shape social cohesion by promoting prosocial behaviors – representing an extrinsic pathway (Holtug, 2017). Values do not necessarily have to be shared; rather, their substance is conducive to certain aspects relevant to cohesion, such as individualism regarding civic engagement (Allik & Realo, 2004) or egalitarianism regarding social trust (Schwartz, 2006). A political community may be based on shared practices even in the absence of common values (Pouliot, 2008). Third, values may positively affect institutional designs and policy choices, which are conducive to social cohesion. To illustrate, welfare institutions may mediate between egalitarian values and social/institutional trust (as domains of social cohesion). This perspective considers different levels of value negotiation and argues that values find expression – and are reproduced – in institutions and policies (Schwartz, 2011).

We argue that CSOs' external communication reflects this institutional component and mechanism through which organizational values might contribute to cohesion. Admittedly, not all values may be equally relevant for fostering cohesion, and some value orientations may even be counterproductive. To better understand the *communicative* linkage between invoking values and an organization's broader cohesion discourse, we ask:

RQ4: To what extent are values made salient in CSOs' external communication about social cohesion?

Method

This study integrates two data sources: an organizational survey of a large sample of CSOs and a systematic content analysis of their websites ($N = 789$). Combining these

allows for linking patterns of organizational communication regarding values and social cohesion with specific organizational characteristics and self-reported organizational perceptions and behaviors.

Sample and coding procedure

In a first step, we ran a survey among CSO representatives in 2020. To ensure geographic heterogeneity, 55 places in Germany were identified, including the three city states (Berlin, Bremen, Hamburg), 13 state capitals, 13 large cities, 13 mid-sized cities, and 13 small towns in each remaining territorial state (*Bundesland*). For each place, a comprehensive search for formally registered CSOs (*eingetragene Vereine*) was conducted based on the country's commercial register (*Handelsregister*). In addition, a systematic online search was conducted to account for the more informal but crucial sector of civil society, namely citizen initiatives without an official entry in the register. 1,066 CSOs participated in the survey, yielding a response rate of 28% (for details regarding sampling and response rates, see Hutter et al., 2021). Among the responses that included a clearly identifiable name for their CSO in the survey, we checked whether they had a functioning website in German. We then conducted a quantitative content analysis of the organizations' public profiles. Coder training took place in 2022, with three coders practicing with CSO websites that were similar in structure, content, and complexity (as recommended by Lacy et al., 2015).⁴ Reliability coefficients, using Krippendorff's alpha ($K-\alpha$), are reported below (Freelon, 2013).

This study centers on the self-portrayals of CSOs as conveyed by their websites. Given varying complexity and structure, this analysis focuses on the text on the landing page and the 'About Us' (or similarly labeled) section as places where organizations are most likely to communicate their vision, values and mission to the public, and address relevant communities. Several reasons guided our decision to content-analyze this format over others like social media channels: CSO websites are tools to provide information and create participation and consultation opportunities for a broader audience (Duberry, 2019), including journalists. They mobilize volunteers (Gerodimos, 2008), often beyond social media engagement (Boulianne & Steen-Johnsen, 2025). In addition, both website creation and navigation have become considerably easier. Despite an organization's social media presence, professional websites remain essential for relationship building and maintenance (Jun, 2011), especially for younger users (Bennett et al., 2011). Given their relatively stable and intentional nature, professional websites are essential to the broader repertoire of an organization's communication channels. We therefore argue that they are an ideal site to examine CSOs' messaging about values, social cohesion, and their vision for the communities they intend to serve and society at large.

Measures

In the organizational survey, we captured the following variables:

Primary activity sphere

The domain in which the CSO is predominantly active was recorded using the categorization by Priemer et al. (2017). Respondents were able to select multiple choices among

14 available options, including civil protection, public health, and education – before choosing their organization's primary domain of activity. Those were then collapsed into five categories: culture, sports/leisure, education/research, nature/environment, and social services.

Geographical location

We included information about the location (state, city) to detect differences between CSOs in (1) rural areas (villages and small towns) and urban spaces (mid-sized and larger cities); and (2) former East and West Germany, accounting for different political cultures.

Sociopolitical orientations

Six items were used to capture organizational self-cognitions and behaviors: whether the CSO views itself as (1) an *agent of social change* and (2) a *political actor*; (3) the extent to which the CSO *engaged in political activities* before the COVID-19 pandemic (using an additive measure ranging from 0 to 5 self-reported distinct behaviors, including contacting a politician and organizing a protest; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78$).⁵ Additionally, for the cluster that indicated prior political activity, three binary items were created to gauge the extent of politicization during the pandemic: whether the CSO (4) engaged more actively in an *existing* form of political activity; (5) engaged in a *new* form; and (6) *publicly intervened on a new issue* since the beginning of the pandemic. This decision was guided by the observation that the pandemic measures, especially the contact restrictions and the limited freedom of assembly, required CSOs to also address issues of political relevance, including digital participation and social justice (Hutter et al., 2021). The far-reaching preventive measures to contain the virus (e.g., social distancing, vaccination campaigns) were contentious issues that led to polarization in Germany and other contexts (Schieferdecker et al., 2024). Marking a potential turning point, the COVID-19 crisis could be a catalyst for political action, with CSOs increasingly not only representing member interests of limited scope or within a specific sector, but also pointing to larger political changes.

Sample summary descriptives are reported in Table 1.

In the quantitative content analysis, we recorded the following categories:

Value communication

Three types of *predominant* value orientations were coded as binaries: (1) communitarian (e.g., social justice, equality) vs. individualistic values (e.g., competitiveness, personal success) ($K\text{-}\alpha = 0.93$); (2) survival (e.g., physical/economic security) vs. self-expression values (e.g., personal autonomy, freedom of speech) ($K\text{-}\alpha = 1.00$); (3) traditional (e.g., obedience, religious authority) vs. secular-rational values (e.g., self-determination, importance of politics in people's life) ($K\text{-}\alpha = 1.00$). Since the boundaries are not always clear and an organization may cite multiple specific values, it should be noted that tendencies rather than unambiguous classifications were recorded. Specifically, for each organizational website, up to five value notions, including their corresponding frame of reference (e.g., personal independence, group creativity, social justice), were recorded in the order they appear on the relevant website sections. To facilitate manual coding, coders were provided with a list of values, including synonyms, derived from the scholarly literature (consisting of higher-order value frameworks and specific value domains, e.g., Inglehart & Baker,

Table 1. Summary sample statistics of organizational features of CSOs.

Organizational feature	N	%
Primary activity sphere		
Culture	243	30.8
Nature & Environment	174	22.1
Education & Research	131	16.6
Social services	105	13.3
Sports & Leisure	82	10.4
Geographic location		
Urban	726	93.0
Rural ^a	55	7.0
(Former) West Germany (incl. Berlin)	641	82.1
(Former) East Germany	140	17.9
Sociopolitical orientations		
CSOs that view themselves as political actors ^b	337	42.7
CSOs that view themselves as agents of social change ^b	374	47.4
Engaged in at least one political activity ^c	493	62.5
Engaged in at least one new political activity ^d	69	14.0
Intensified the use of at least one form of political activity ^d	87	17.6
Publicly intervened on a new issue ^d	93	18.9

N = 789. ^aRural includes villages/small towns; *urban* includes mid-sized/big cities, state capitals, and the city states Berlin, Hamburg, Bremen; ^bIncluding those that view themselves as such, either in whole or in part; ^cPre-pandemic; ^dDuring the pandemic (based on *N* = 493).

2000; Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022, and comprehensive overviews, e.g., Kaasa, 2021; Lakatos, 2015). Coders then decided on the value tendency for each of the three categories.

Social cohesion communication

Based on a combination of deductive and inductive approaches (as recommended for exploratory work by Neuendorf, 2017, p. 19), we developed several indicators of social cohesion. Deductively, we reviewed the extant literature (e.g., Dragolov et al., 2016; Leupold et al., 2018; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017) to identify (mostly survey-based) items that can be adapted to text-based analysis. Inductively, we performed various rounds of close reading of CSO websites to detect emergent themes. Each item was defined, described, illustrated, and compiled in a codebook along with coding instructions that were refined in iterative rounds. Thirteen dichotomous items representing the three core dimensions of social cohesion resulted from this process and were used to create a summative index to indicate the extent to which a CSO engages in cohesion-oriented communication on its website ($K-\alpha = 0.84$). For instance, several inclusivity markers were coded to gauge the social relations dimension, such as explicit references to different age groups or (dis)ability status when describing CSO activities. To capture connectedness to a social entity, coders assessed whether the CSO views itself as part of a larger civil-society network (e.g., via hyperlinks, text-based, visual references) or explicitly references attachment to a geographical place (e.g., local, regional). Lastly, a CSO's common-good orientation was assessed by explicit references to acts of solidarity (e.g., assisting neighbors, promoting intercultural gatherings) or civic engagement (e.g., calls to protest, local political participation) (for more information see Neumann et al., 2023).

Results

General and specific value discourses

Our first research question asked about the extent to which CSOs explicitly invoke values in their self-portrayals. The majority – roughly three in four – organizations in our

sample engage in value discourse (76%, $N = 601$). While it seems intuitive that CSOs do that rather explicitly, that also means, conversely, one in four does *not* cite values in their self-portrayals. Those tend to focus on conveying information such as event dates, agendas or organizational history.

Regarding our second research question about the occurrence of particular value orientations, there are clear tendencies: When CSOs make values explicit in their self-portrayals, they are considerably more likely to invoke communitarian (87%, $N = 526$) than individualistic, self-expression (95%, $N = 569$) than survival, and secular-rational (94%, $N = 565$) than traditional values.⁶

Value discourses and organizational characteristics

Considering that value discourses manifest differently across CSOs, our third research question sheds light on differences along organizational features. Figure 1 shows the results of a binary logistic regression to predict an organization's likelihood to invoke values *in general*.

Organizations focused on sports/leisure and cultural activities are significantly less likely than social services (used as reference category) to invoke values on their websites ($p < .001$). In terms of location, there is no significant difference: CSOs in rural areas and

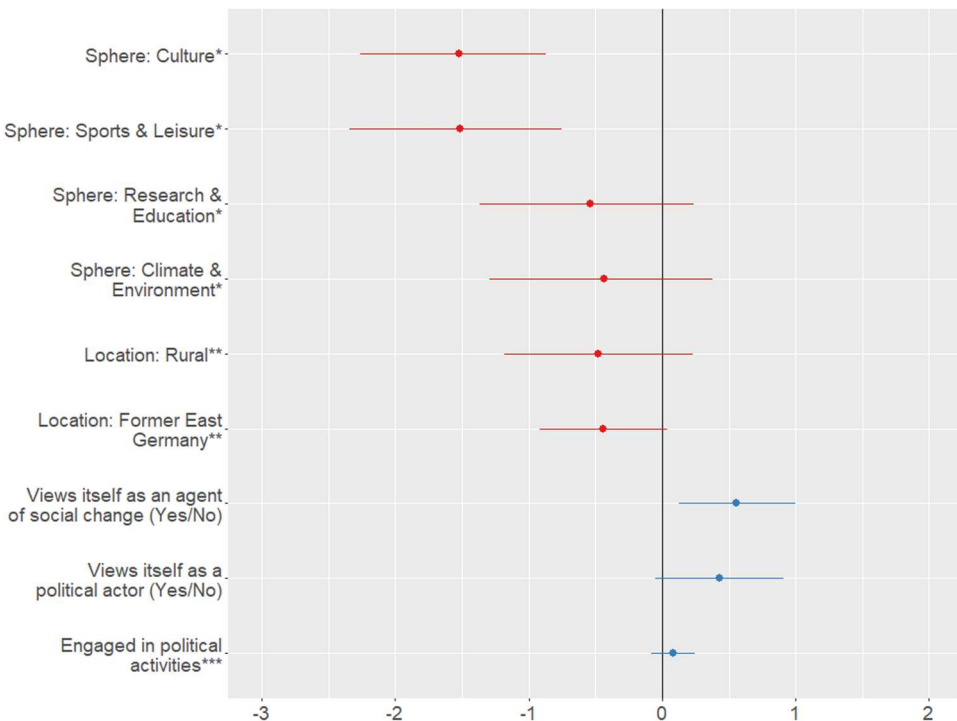


Figure 1. CSO's likelihood to invoke values based on its activity sphere, location, and sociopolitical orientation.

Note: $N = 725$. Values shown are binary logistic regression estimates, including 95% confidence intervals. *reference category (sphere): social services; **reference category (location): urban and former West Germany, respectively; ***continuous predictor (min: 0, max: 5).

former East Germany, respectively, are similarly likely to invoke values as those in cities and West German states ($p > .05$).⁷ In terms of sociopolitical orientations, there is a strong statistically significant association between organizational self-conceptions of serving as a change agent and invoking values ($p < .01$). However, whether a CSO views itself as a political actor and the extent to which it engaged in actual (pre-pandemic) political activities were not significant predictors ($p > .05$), suggesting that the observed effect is more strongly rooted in organizational self-concepts than actual political behaviors.⁸

Zooming in on the latter aspect of a CSO's sociopolitical orientations, the subset of the sample of organizations that indicated some form of pre-pandemic political activity (62%, $N = 493$) was then analyzed regarding their politicization tendencies. As Figure 2 shows, only publicly intervening on a new issue during the pandemic (e.g., an artists' association campaigning for financial support for independent/self-employed artists, a museum association campaigning against conspiracy narratives that emerged during the pandemic) was significantly ($p < .05$) associated with invoking values: If a CSO uses the public arena to raise its voice about a public grievance, it likely appeals to values.⁹

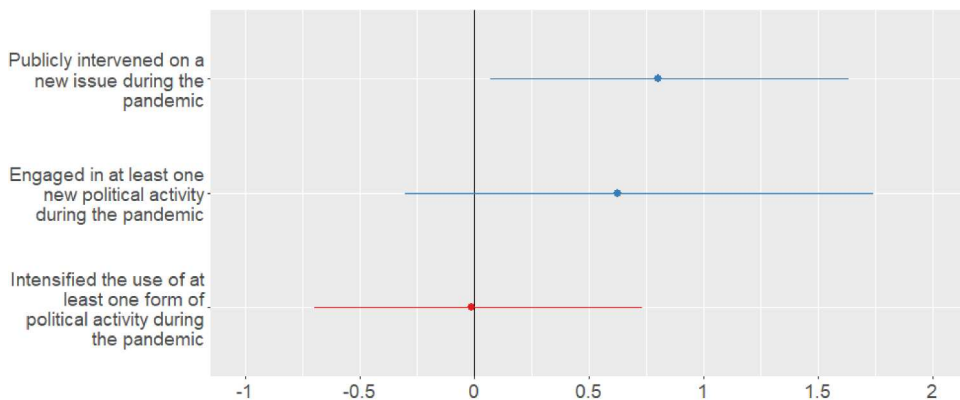


Figure 2. CSO's likelihood to invoke values in general based on sociopolitical behaviors.

Note: $N = 453$. Values shown are binary logistic regression estimates, including 95% confidence intervals.

Values and social cohesion discourses

Our final research question focused on whether the invocation of values is linked to CSO communication about social cohesion. The data suggest that the discursive presence of values also indicates a stronger emphasis on social cohesion in organizational self-portrayals ($M = 0.41$, $SD = 0.18$) compared to when values are absent ($M = 0.21$, $SD = 0.18$). This difference is statistically significant ($F(1,784) = 185$, $p < .001$), yields a large effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.19$), and holds true under multivariate conditions when controlling for a host of organizational characteristics (see Table 2).

Invoking values *in general* remains a significant predictor for the strength of an organization's social cohesion communication. Additionally, the degree to which a CSO engages in (pre-pandemic) political activities was positively associated with the strength

Table 2. Multivariate analysis of the strength of social cohesion discourse (dependent variable) based on value invocations alone (M1) plus organizational characteristics as controls (M2).

	(M1)	(M2)
<i>Intercept</i>	0.21*** (0.01)	0.23*** (0.02)
Value invocations (vs. absence of values)	0.20*** (0.01)	0.16*** (0.02)
Primary activity sphere:		
Culture ^a		−0.05* (0.02)
Sports & Leisure ^a		−0.06* (0.03)
Research & Education ^a		0.00 (0.02)
Climate & Environment ^a		−0.01 (0.02)
Geographical location:		
Rural (vs. urban)		−0.03 (0.03)
Former East (vs. West) Germany		−0.01 (0.02)
Sociopolitical orientations:		
Social change agent (Y/N)		0.02 (0.01)
Political actor (Y/N)		0.01 (0.02)
Political engagement (0–5)		0.01** (0.00)
<i>Total R²</i>	0.19	0.24
<i>F-statistic</i>	185.0***	22.6***
<i>N</i>	786	725

Note: Entries are unstandardized coefficients from ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions (standard errors in parentheses). ^aReference category: social services. # $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

of this type of communication whereas organizations engaged in sports, recreational and cultural activities are the least likely to communicate about social cohesion (thus corresponding to the pattern shown in Figure 1). Regarding specific value orientations, there are no statistically significant differences between the presence of one set of values versus its counterpart (see Appendix, Table A1). In sum, CSOs' social cohesion communication seems unaffected by the three sets of value orientations. Apparent differences only exist between those CSOs that do and do not invoke values. Put simply, it does not matter which values organizations primarily emphasize when it comes to communicating cohesion, as long as they reference values as a moral yardstick.

Discussion

CSOs of all types play a critical role in internalizing values among their members and may also affect interested audiences (Wolf, 2019). Motivated by the need to understand the communicative dimension of values from a civil-society perspective, this multi-method study sought to illuminate the discursive links between an organization's characteristics, value references, and public claims of fostering social cohesion. Several findings are worth highlighting.

First, values are a common ingredient in the self-portrayals of CSOs, with approximately three in four making value references on their websites. While differences exist regarding the primary activity domain, with sports clubs and culturally oriented associations being the least likely to invoke values and social-service providers the most likely. Contrary to our expectations, the location of a CSO's activities did not seem to matter much. In fact, our sample predominantly represents CSOs from urban centers within Germany. They are just as likely as their rural counterparts to invoke values. While the urban-rural divide appears to be an important dimension in the scholarly literature, this cleavage did not emerge in our study. It also came as a surprise that the regional cleavage between East and West Germany, which accounts for significant

differences at the individual level of orientations, does not translate into differences in CSOs' value exposure. An organization's sociopolitical orientation was more relevant to that effect: Considering itself a catalyst for social change tends to be critical for referencing values. The findings, however, need to be interpreted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic during which the organizational survey was conducted. Among CSOs that were politically active *before* the pandemic (based on their self-reported political behaviors), only publicly intervening on an issue *during* the pandemic was significantly related to invoking values in general, suggesting that perhaps the urge to interfere also activated the need to highlight values to bolster intervention messages.

Second, distinguishing between three types of value orientations, we find clear tendencies toward communitarian (self-transcendence), self-expression (postmaterialist), and secular-rational values in the CSOs' self-portrayals. This emphasis can be partly explained by the context in which these organizations operate: Each formally registered CSO has its charter. To obtain this organizational status (and thus an entry in Germany's registry), a CSO needs to legitimize its common-good orientation, with communitarian values like social justice and benevolence being more closely linked to that claim than individualistic values like self-expression and personal achievement. The latter two examples are also more present in the communication of sports/leisure clubs and more culturally oriented music or dance clubs. Additionally, the CSOs in our sample are all embedded in the same national context. According to Inglehart and Welzel's (2005) 'cultural map', Germany scores high on self-expression and (even higher) on secular-rational values, with its civil-society landscape more closely resembling this pattern. Lastly, a relatively strong welfare state ensures that basic needs (safety, shelter, health, food) are largely met so that survival (materialist) values take a back seat, thus creating room for self-expression values reflected in the communication of the vast majority of CSOs in our sample. However, these ratios are not set in stone: In times of wars, high inflation, and rising political violence, a (discursive) return to survival/materialist values appears more likely than ever.

Third, we were particularly interested in the connection between values and social cohesion as part of an organization's external communication. The discursive presence of values *in general* helps to contribute to a stronger cohesion discourse. Put differently, for a CSO's vision of a socially cohesive community, it does not matter much which value orientations are invoked *in particular*, as long as values – as an ethical yardstick *per se* – are present in their public outreach. For instance, a tennis club or a carnival association that emphasizes individualistic rather than communitarian values might – on a purely communicative level – contribute just as much to social cohesion of a community as the district's voluntary fire brigade or the workers' welfare association, which draw on communitarian rather than individualistic values. The same can be said about the other two value dimensions: traditional value discourses coming from largely faith-based organizations versus secular value discourses being promoted by environmental organizations; survival values being highlighted by food banks versus self-expression values primarily upheld in the communication of poetry clubs. It is the combination of all these CSOs that, within the study's scope, *collectively* contribute to discourse around social cohesion. It is, however, beyond the scope of this study to examine how these words are ultimately put into practice and to what extent they promote actual social cohesion.

Study limitations and directions for future research

As a cross-sectional study, data were collected at a pivotal moment for many CSOs, namely, within the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. This period was shaped by severe social restrictions and contact limitations, complicating many organizational activities. This introduces a temporal contextual bias as CSOs had to adapt quickly to new realities and rethink their communication strategies toward greater digital inclusivity, potentially reducing the generalizability and predictive utility of our findings to non-crisis periods. However, considering that values serve as fundamental moral and ethical yardsticks for attitudes and social behaviors, it may also be argued that these aspects are less likely to change because of a crisis as such. A possible crisis resistance (or crisis susceptibility) of value discourses remains a question for future research.

Going forward, a more holistic picture of organizational communication strategies also needs to include a CSO's presence and activity on social networking sites (SNS), which allow an organization to generate contact points with citizens and other stakeholders that function as quasi-membership ties. While, in direct comparison, visiting websites tend to mobilize more offline volunteers than semi-formal ties via social media, it is the combination of both communication strategies that yields the strongest effect on civic volunteering (Boulianne & Steen-Johnsen, 2025). Integrating SNS into organizational strategies is also increasingly critical for engaging and mobilizing younger audiences for voluntary work (Filsinger & Freitag, 2018). Future studies should consider research designs that account for such multi-modal communication strategies and different affordances of social media (Ronzhyn et al., 2023).

CSOs operate in rapidly changing sociopolitical and media environments, with implications on their communication. On the one hand, value discourses of existing organizations reflect and react to moments of crisis, for example, when (an impending) scarcity of resources may increase the likelihood of invoking and emphasizing materialist/survival values. For many CSOs, especially those whose services are guided by postmaterialist/self-expression values, funding may be increasingly difficult to secure when people's purchasing power and state subsidies decline. On the other hand, multiple overlapping crises in recent years have also given rise to new CSOs, especially protest movements in response to the aforementioned pandemic containment measures, the war in Ukraine, high inflation and energy costs, and the climate crisis (e.g., della Porta, 2023). Future studies should capture these dynamics and how the various progressive and reactionary players in civil society navigate increasingly politicized and polarized discursive spaces. This may include, for example, surveys with CSO elites and members, for which established value indicators and scales can be included and which go beyond the three dimensions examined in this study. Additionally, while our findings confirm many expected relationships, a stronger focus on the types of organizations known to promote value orientations that are underrepresented in this study (e.g., fraternity clubs, agrarian, faith-based or heritage organizations as major advocates of traditional values) might yield new and more nuanced insights into value cleavages.

This study's geographic focus on German CSOs limits the results' broader applicability to other contexts, particularly those with differing cultural or political dynamics. While comparative survey research (e.g., World Values Survey) has generated valuable

insights into citizens' value orientations (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005), it remains underexplored how and to what extent CSOs in other, especially non-Western cultural contexts, align their communication with their national value preferences. Similarly, our study leaves room for further investigation of the impact of CSO communication on policy-making, for example, with regard to advocacy work, driving reforms, or fostering public engagement. Additionally, against the backdrop of democratic backsliding and contested civic spaces in many countries (Freedom House, 2024), it is crucial for future scholarship to examine civil-society discourses in illiberal and non-democratic contexts to better understand the structural conditions under which CSOs can articulate their values and visions for society.

Besides the inherent bias that is introduced via self-reported survey responses, our study admittedly also has a normative bias toward the 'good side' of civil society. This leaves out much of the 'dark' part of civil society (Roth, 2021) with different, partly misanthropic and undemocratic visions for society and understandings of social cohesion in terms of the groups that should be held together. Certainly, the notion of a 'bad' or 'uncivil' civil society – one that can foster enmity between social groups while building strong member connections within the ingroup – is not new (Chambers & Kopstein, 2001). Thriving in fragmented and polarized public spheres that foster ingroup favoritism vis-à-vis outgroup derogation, some civil-society groups promote anti-democratic, fundamentalist, and exclusionary discourses while using values and norms as a disguise. In Germany, for example, the openly far-right, anti-immigrant extremist political movement organization PEGIDA (Vorländer, 2021) is, under federal law, a formally registered voluntary association that ostensibly serves 'the common good.' At the same time, the value discourses of such organizations often revolve around self-expression and traditions, hiding their agendas of xenophobia behind seemingly uncontroversial value references.¹⁰ In other cases, invocations of 'freedom of expression' and 'opinion diversity' are frequently used to delegitimize political opponents, while the reference to the common good serves as a pretext to maintain their organizational status. A systematic examination of value-infused discourses of inclusion and exclusion that dissociates from an idealized view of civil society as inherently positive or democratic is largely missing from scholarly literature. In addition to self-portrayals, future studies could also examine external perceptions of CSOs, for example, what values and contributions to social cohesion are perceived by potential members and organizational outgroups in CSO discourses.

To conclude, the discursive formation and perception of social cohesion is a complex process that involves various micro-, meso-, and macro-level considerations. In times of contested civic spaces and declining investment in and appreciation of democracy against the backdrop of a far-right surge and its discursive mainstreaming (Völker & Saldivia Gonzatti, 2024), it is ever more important to examine the reactions and communications by civil-society actors with different methodological approaches.

Notes

1. <https://fridaysforfuture.org/what-we-do/our-demands/>, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/blm-demands/>.

2. <https://www.ituc-csi.org/a-new-social-contract>, <https://www.ifrc.org/who-we-are/about-ifrc>.
3. <https://www.hrw.org/about/about-us>.
4. The coding was done using *PolDem*, a web-based tool for manual coding and annotating of texts (for more information see Hunger et al., 2021).
5. Internal consistency of the five-item scale was also evaluated using McDonald's ω ($\omega_t = .94/\omega_h = .72$).
6. The rather low proportion of CSOs primarily invoking traditional values most likely results from the overall limited number of CSOs in our sample that identify as predominantly faith-based/religious entities rather than, for example, general social-service nonprofits providing shelter, food, welfare or counseling. This result could also be related to the fact that CSOs from rural parts in Germany are underrepresented with only 7% of all CSOs in our sample.
7. This finding, however, must also be interpreted against the backdrop of the imbalance between rural and urban CSOs in our sample (see Table 1), particularly the difficulty in detecting statistically significant differences based on the small number of rural CSOs. This means that our findings predominantly represent the value orientations of CSOs in urban centers, despite the deliberate sampling strategy that aimed to give equal weight to small towns, mid-sized cities, large cities, and state capitals. In fact, the 13 rural communities represent about one-fourth of all sampled geographical units in the study.
8. Furthermore, this might suggest that CSOs with a more long-standing political role (e.g., labor unions) do not necessarily see more need to invoke values than their non-political counterparts. However, there may well be differences within this group (i.e., between more established and younger CSOs that see themselves as political actors).
9. Additional multinomial logistic regression analyses were performed to predict the likelihood to invoke the three specific value orientations; however, the patterns largely resemble the ones presented here.
10. E.g., promoting 'political awareness and responsibility' (PEGIDA e.V.), 'science and research, political education, civic responsibility' (EIKE e.V., the European Institute for Climate and Energy, an organization regularly engaging in climate change denial) or engaging in the 'fight to preserve civic values and the endangered freedom of opinion in Germany' (Zivile Koalition e.V., an organization founded by AfD Deputy Leader Beatrix von Storch). Examples from the radical Islamist milieu include 'Give Peace' (Gib Frieden e.V.), 'Culture and Families' (Kultur & Familien Verein e.V.) and 'Islamic Centre Hamburg' (Vereinigung Islamisches Zentrum Hamburg e.V.) – all of which used to be formally registered nonprofit/voluntary associations under German law, but have since been prohibited (see <https://www.bundesanzeiger.de/pub/publication/Gdre7mLbdv7tEjUJiYn?0>, <https://www.bundesanzeiger.de/pub/publication/Y3iKAXzUceHylsS5uq0?1>, <https://www.bundesanzeiger.de/pub/publication/lrXTsh2FSD2lgjw7RYW?2>). In this study, no extremist or anti-constitutional organizations were included. While a content analysis of their digital content is possible, there is no corresponding organizational survey data in this linkage study. Future research could emulate this combined study design by focusing only on that sub-segment of organized civil society.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Appendix

Table A1. Multivariate analysis of the strength of social cohesion communication (dependent variable) based on value invocations alone (1,3,5) and value invocations plus organizational characteristics as controls (2,4,6).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<i>Intercept</i>	0.37*** (0.02)	0.39*** (0.03)	0.45*** (0.03)	0.40*** (0.04)	0.42*** (0.03)	0.42*** (0.04)
Invoking primarily ...						
Communitarian (vs. individualistic) values	0.04 [#] (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)				
Self-expression (vs. survival) values			−0.04 (0.04)	−0.00 (0.04)		
Secular-rational (vs. traditional) values					−0.01 (0.03)	−0.03 (0.03)
Control variables						
<i>Primary activity sphere:</i>						
Culture ^a		−0.05* (0.02)		−0.05* (0.02)		−0.05* (0.02)
Sports & Leisure ^a		−0.06 [#] (0.03)		−0.06 [#] (0.03)		−0.06 [#] (0.03)
Research & Education ^a		0.00 (0.02)		0.00 (0.02)		0.00 (0.02)
Climate & Environment ^a		−0.02 (0.02)		−0.02 (0.02)		−0.02 (0.02)
<i>Geographical location:</i>						
Rural (vs. urban)		−0.03 (0.04)		−0.03 (0.03)		−0.03 (0.04)
Former East (vs. West)		−0.03 (0.02)		−0.02 (0.02)		−0.02 (0.02)
Germany						
<i>Sociopolitical orientations:</i>						
Social change agent (Y/N)		0.03 (0.02)		0.01 (0.01)		0.03 (0.02)
Political actor (Y/N)		0.01 (0.02)		0.01 (0.02)		0.01 (0.02)
Political engagement (0–5)		0.01* (0.01)		0.01* (0.00)		0.01* (0.01)
<i>Total R²</i>	0.006	0.062	0.002	0.063	0.000	0.064
<i>F-statistic</i>	3.84 [#]	3.58***	1.46	3.62***	0.05	3.72***
<i>N</i>	603	556	597	551	597	551

Note: Entries are unstandardized coefficients from ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions (standard errors in parentheses).

^aReference category: social services. [#] $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.