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Challenging the Decline of Party's Representative Role: A Comparative Analysis of Evolutions of Party' Group Appeals in European Democracies (1960-2024)

ECPR Joint sessions of workshops Prague 2025 *The End of the Party Paradigm?*

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Abstract

Political parties' group appeals have gained renewed attention in the scholarship, particularly as democracies worldwide experience rising group-based polarization (Boese et al. 2022). This study investigates how parties appeal to social groups (e.g. nurses, workers and youths), defending their interests against the perceived dominance of other groups (e.g. hedge fund managers, Tech CEOs and business owners). Historically, group-based mobilization is rooted in Lipset & Rokkan's (1967) cleavage theory, where political parties were the political arms of social groups, channelling their interests into democratic systems. This central role of political parties has eroded as group-based mobilizations declined because of voters' dealignment under modernization processes (Beck 2006), the waning of (traditional) ideological cleavages (Mair 2003, Kriesi 2012), demobilization of party organizations (Van haute & Gauja 2016), and the rise of personalized politics over party politics (Rahat & Kenig 2018).

Under these transformations, we argue that parties' use of group appeals has not disappeared but has reshaped significantly since the "golden age of mass parties" in the 1960s. Our hypotheses test how traditional parties have broadened their *positive* group appeals over time, while they have reduced *negative* group framings against outgroups as party competition declined (Mair 2003). Furthermore, we hypothesize a spillover effect of party system transformations as challenger and niche parties entered the electoral arenas. Our contribution seeks to provide a comparative analysis in seven European democracies.

For that goal, we analyse 'day-to-day' parliamentary speeches (1960–2024), relying on supervised deep learning techniques (i.e. Natural Language Inference using a fine-tuned multilingual encoder model *EuroBert*). We categorize group appeals into six meta-categories and explore their evolution over time: (1) Socio-demographic groups, (2) Socio-economic groups, (3) Occupational professional groups, (4) Non-economic social groups, (5) European and international groups, and (6) surrogate groups for non-human entities. This contribution presents the results for a pilot study on the UK (\approx 54 million parliamentary sentences). Ultimately, this research seeks to highlight how parties' strategies of group appeals have reshaped over the last decades as European democracies experienced societal transformations.

Keywords: Polarization, party decline, established parties, challenger parties



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Introduction

“It’s not the hedge fund managers or the billionaires who will make this country work—it’s the teachers, the nurses, the cleaners and the carers” (Jeremy Corbyn’s speech at the 2017 Labour Party Conference—UK).

“Taking more money from the man who goes out to work long hours each single day, so the family next door can go on living a life on benefits without working—is that fair?” (David Cameron’s declaration in October 2010—UK)

“The future belongs to the young. We will invest in climate protection and education for the next generation” (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen during 2021 Election Campaign—Germany).

“We are no longer willing to see our welfare system abused by people who don’t belong here.” (Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)—Germany)

As democracies surge into political polarization across the world (Boese et al. 2022), politicians seem to be increasingly appealing to social groups (e.g. nurses and youths), defending their interests against the interests from other dominant groups (e.g. hedge fund managers or the billionaires). The interest for *group appeals* has encountered a renewed interest in the party politics scholarship (Dolinsky 2023; Haffert et al. 2024; Horn et al. 2021; Huber 2022; Thau 2018, 2019). Far from being new, group-based mobilizations are at the core of Lipset and Rokkan’s seminal work (1967). Social groups-based conflicts are the foundations of their theory of cleavages which they explain emergence of party families across Europe in the early 20th century. Historically, “[political parties’] appeals and their support suggest that they do represent the interests of different classes” (Lipset 1960). In this respect, political parties were the political arms of social groups that mobilize to try and fix unbalance of interests, resources, and values in societies (i.e., “the oppressed workers against the capitalist owners”, “the center’s elites against the culturally distinct periphery”, “the traditional rural world against the new urban economic area”, “the Church servants versus the secular defenders”).

In this wake, our contribution aims to contribute to the burgeoning scholarship on *group appeals*. The latter refers to explicit statements in which political actors seek to defend the interests of a specific social group (Huber 2022; Thau 2018). There are *positive group appeals* when parties seek to defend the interest of a social group (e.g. defending the well-being of blue-collar workers, women, the elderly, rural residents, or small business owners), while they are *negative group framings* when parties criticize another social group (e.g. contesting responsibility of bankers or Tech CEOs about wealth inequality). The growing scholarship establishes that parties make extensive use of group-based appeals for various objectives such as acting as claim makers (Dolinsky and Huber 2023), but also for electoral signalling and vote-seeking motivations (Dassonneville et al. 2022; Huber 2022; Huber and Haselmayer 2024; Thau 2019, 2021). In this respect, political parties’ group appeals serve a critical role in the

democratic electoral process, enhancing voters' decision-making capacity. Understanding how parties' group appeals have evolved over the last decades allow to study the alleged decline of party role in democracy under a new perspective.

In this contribution, we argue that this party role has been corroding over the last decades for established political parties. Since the "golden age of mass parties" in the 1960s, parties' group appeals declined due to a combination of interrelated phenomena, i.e. voters' dealignment under modernization processes (Beck 2006), the waning of (traditional) ideological cleavages under socioeconomic development (Mair 2003, Kriesi 2012), demobilization of party organizations (Van haute & Gauja 2016), and the rise of personalized politics over party politics (Rahat and Kenig 2018) in the new media age (Croner 2003). During this period (1960s-1990s), we expect that traditional parties' have been increasingly appealing to a wider set of social groups, associated with decreasing negative framings towards outgroups as the competition between parties was declining (Mair 2003).

Our main argument is that parties' use of group appeals have not fully vanished over time, they have been reshaping instead (see Thau 2019). Recent events and crises have reactivated the prevalence of group appeals since the 2000s/2010s with the expansion of global markets, the process of European unification, the impact of climate change, the consequences of the 9/11 attacks, and large-scale migration processes (Hooghe and Marks 2018; Kriesi *et al.* 2008). This is the case for radical right-wing parties (deeply relying on "nativists *versus* migrants" appeals), as well as the radical left-wing parties ("bankers *versus* hard-working people" appeals). As those parties encountered significant electoral successes, traditional political parties often responded by reactivating 'historic core group appeals' (e.g. social democratic parties' defending blue-collars against hedge fund managers' dominance on the globalized economy). In other words, we expect evolutions in party's group appeals to reflect the restructuring of party systems in industrial democracies.

Overall, our contribution seeks to offer a systematic empirical analysis of the changes in parties' group appeals as the result of deep societal transformations that have been taking place since the 1960s in eight advanced industrial democracies. This contribution is structured as follows. Section 1 presents the literature review on group appeals and the theoretical foundations of our hypotheses in section 2. Section 3 presents the comparative research design while section 4 provides the methodology (i.e. supervised deep learning techniques to identify and classify 72 types of social groups). Section 5 presents preliminary empirical insights on a pilot study on the United Kingdom (54 million parliamentary speech acts). In the provisional conclusion section, we reflect on the role of parties' group appeals in the organization and resolution of conflicts under democratic conditions.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Group Appeal as an instrument for political parties

A burgeoning literature is emerging on the use of group appeals by political parties. *Group appeals* are defined as “as explicit statements that link a political party to some category of people”(Thau 2019, 3) or, more specifically, “explicitly stated support (*positive* group appeals) or criticism of other group categories (*negative* group appeals) by parties or candidates” (Stuckelberger and Tresch 2024, 467). The literature tackles the topic from various methodological and analytical perspectives (i.e. strategic use of group appeal, analyse of party manifestoes, communication in social media, parliamentary speeches, etc.).

Scholars from this literature argue that group appeals fulfil at least two functions: vote seeking and representative claim-making. First, the study of group appeals is from the representation/political communication perspective, which perceives group appeals as mean for political parties to make a claim as a representative of a specific group within the population (Dolinsky and Huber 2023). Second, group appeals are mobilized as vote-seeking and electoral signalling instruments (Dassonneville *et al.* 2022; Stuckelberger and Tresch 2024; Thau 2019, 2021). By positively appealing to a specific group, parties aim to position themselves as the defenders of a specific group (e.g. Labour Party campaigning against Thatcher “in favour of working people” in 1979). In addition, when parties name and criticize outgroups as responsible for the issue they defend, parties identify the opponents they are fighting against (e.g. François Hollande, candidate of the Socialist Party who stated during the 2012 French presidential campaign that his ‘real political opponent was the world of finance’).

In this respect, group appeals create a proximity link between social groups and the parties which might influence voters’ behaviour (Dassonneville *et al.* 2022). As underlined by several studies, voters rely on group identities and sentiment to make political choices (Achen and Bartels 2016; Butler and Stokes 1974; Campbell *et al.* 1960; Thau 2018). One of the questions currently studied in the literature is whether group appeals is effective in terms of electoral support: a few studies (using survey experiments) tend to find a positive effect of group appeals on political support (Abou-Chadi *et al.* 2022; Dassonneville *et al.* 2022; Haffert *et al.* 2024).

Regarding our main expectation about the erosion– or rather the reshaping – of group appeals, there are only a handful of studies that investigated transformations over time. First, group appeals tend to have been an ever-used instrument by political parties in their communication. For instance, Howe and colleagues (2022)’s study of archival data from the 1907 Austrian

election showed that nationalist parties mobilized policy and group appeals to both cultural and economic groups.

Second, group appeals seem to evolve over time. Thau (2019) studied party manifesto in the UK (1964-2015) and identified a rising use of group appeals, increasingly targeting broader or consensual groups (e.g. “families,” “young people”); whereas parties decreasingly use references to specific class-based groups (e.g. “blue-collar workers”). A similar result is found for the Danish Social Democratic Party (1961-2004) for which class-related appeals have been replaced by appeals targeting non-economic groups (Thau 2018). In another two-case study of Israel and the Netherlands (1970s–2015), Dolinsky (2023) found a widening of groups appeals.

Third, transformations over time can be explained by the changes in the types of issues appealing to distinct generation of voters. Jocker and colleagues (2025:921) recently established that “newer generations are more aligned on socio-cultural issues than previous generations, whereas older generations exhibit stronger issue alignment on ‘traditional’ issues that were more salient during their formative years”. As a consequence, Abou-Chadi and colleagues (2022) showed that parties face trade-offs between economic group appeals and cultural/identity appeals. The younger and more progressive voters respond positively to inclusive group references in comparison with older cohorts about cultural policies (e.g. gender equality & climate change). As older cohorts are more mobilized with traditional appeals (e.g. workers and unions), social democratic parties risk losing younger voters to green and radical left parties when ignoring them.

Although there are limited longitudinal studies in this emerging scholarship, we find some evidence for our central hypothesis that group appeals are a common instrument used by political parties, but that its nature has changed over time. Our contribution aims to contribute to this literature by studying group appeals from a longitudinal and comparative perspective. In the next section, we elaborate the theoretical foundations of our hypotheses linking party organizational changes and its consequences on the evolutions of positive group appeals/negative group framings as party organizations has been evolving over time.

1.2. The declining role of parties and its consequences on group appeals

Lipset and Rokkan (1967)’s seminal work contends that the presence of cleavages (i.e. Centre-Periphery, Church-State, Rural-Urban, and Labor-Capital) are core explanatory factors behind the formation of party systems across Western Europe. Their argument is that these cleavages effectively crystallized political competition, creating opportunities for political parties to

defend the interests of social groups. For instance, the Labour Party in the UK has been founded by trade unions and socialist groups as a materialization of the Labor-Capital cleavage. Likewise, globalization of the world induced a new cleavage (Kriesi *et al.* 2008) between the Greens (cosmopolite view) and far-right parties (nationalist view) such as *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* and *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) in Germany.

The emergence of these cleavages led to the creation of political parties, but also to a relatively stable alignment between social groups and the political parties that emerged from these group-based conflicts. In other words, theories of cleavage explained the direct *organic* link between political parties and social group appeals for decades. Until the 1960s, ideologically polarized politics prevailed during the “golden age of mass parties”, mass parties were highly connected to society as they constituted the ‘political arm’ to channel the demands of voters, who had stable preferences on clear ideological divides opposing social groups. For instance, the working class voting for Social-Democratic parties, the free-thinking and dominant economic class voting for Liberal parties, while the Catholic parties could rely both on their fervent religious voters and the conservative class. A textbook example of alignment between social groups are consociational political systems before the 1960s (Lijphart 1968), such as Belgium and the Netherlands (Deschouwer 2012). In these countries, citizens were clearly associated with a pillar (i.e. Christian, Socialist, Liberal) from “the cradle to the grave”. The ability of both parties and citizens to distinguish clearly between a homogenous “Us” and another homogenous “Them” (i.e. “us the workers” vs “them the industrial owners”).

As social modernization developed, some authors claimed that the “the ideological age has ended” (Bell 1960: 373). Party structure evolved in terms of organization (Duverger 1964), adapting to new electoral arenas. Mass parties had changed and evolved into “catch-all parties” (Kirchheimer 1966). From the 1960s and onwards, parties could not only increasingly rely upon the new mass television to directly connect with new voters (instead of socialization via their organization), but social cleavages started to erode, blurring seminal social cleavages. Furthermore, national decision-making was increasingly transferred to supranational institutions, especially in Western Europe (Poguntke and Webb 2005, 18). This power shift started to restrict government parties’ capacity to act on behalf of social groups.

These processes of party transformations culminated with the rise of the “cartel parties” in the 1980s (Katz and Mair 1995). In an increasingly fragmented party systems and dealignment of voters (Franklin *et al.* 1992; Thomassen 2005; Dassonneville 2023), parties in government sought to secure their dominant position vis-à-vis their competitors. Parties in government were facing even more limited economic and fiscal capacity to satisfy new demands from

voters. In other words, as traditional parties' electoral supremacy was disputed, they secured their position in the political systems thanks to public funding or electoral reforms reducing new party entries (De Vries & Hobolt 2020). As parties went through a process of cartelization (Katz & Mair 1995), between traditional parties and civil society were fading away.

2. Hypotheses

2.2. Depolarization and rise of catch-all parties

Given these structural changes in modern industrial democracies, we develop several hypotheses. First, we argue that these evolutions in party organization and ideological reconfiguration have been re-shaping the way established political parties *positively* appeal to social groups. As developed in the work of Dalton and Wattenberg (2000), voters' dealignment was driven by transforming societal changes in industrial democracies (such as rising education level, higher access to political information and the expanding influence of mass media and interest groups). This led to the weakening of political parties' traditional role and a general erosion of partisan ties. The weakening ties between citizens and political parties, combined with higher electoral volatility and the tertiarization of society (with declining blue-collar workers and increased level of education) have pushed political parties to evolve into "catch-all parties" (Kirchheimer 1966). In the 1970s/1980s, parties generally tried to gather votes from increasingly heterogenous social groups because parties could not take the support of social groups for granted anymore (Mair *et al.* 2004). We argue that parties' catch-all strategy has broadened *positive* group appeals towards more heterogenous social groups (instead of their former core social groups based on original cleavage).

H1: The use of *positive* group appeals by established parties has widened over time, from specific homogenous groups to wider heterogenous social groups.

Second, we argue that established parties' *negative* group framings have evolved over time. In the age of mass parties (until the 1960s), group appeals towards the in-group were closely associated with the blaming of the out-groups (e.g. the capital owners are responsible for limited wealth redistribution on favour of the working class). At that time, adopting an adversarial approach toward political opponents—who's supporters were unlikely to change their votes—had limited electoral cost for political parties. Yet, in the context of depolarization and dealignment of voters, we expect that adversarial *negative* framings towards outgroups declined over time. Attacking frontally political opponents has become an electoral risky

strategy: it can afraid potential new voters that catch-all parties are now trying to attract. A textbook example of this evolution is the European Social Democracy. The latter went through key ideological changes because of the challenges faced in maintaining Keynesian economic policies. During the two economic crises in the 1970s and early 1980s, Social-Democratic parties went to various ideological adaptations (Green-Pedersen & Van Kersbergen 2002). Giddens (1998)'s "Third Way" is one of these adaptations in which Social-Democratic parties fully endorsed market mechanisms – albeit still arguing for state's key role in promotion of social justice (Green-Pedersen and Van Kersbergen 2002). Such ideological evolutions dramatically reduced the polarized nature of politics and–consequently–of the use of *negative* group framings. Recent experimental studies (Haffert *et al.* 2024) provide further support for this hypothesis: they show that negative out-group appeals are disliked among dominant groups. Therefore, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H2: The use of *negative* group framings by established political parties has declined over time.

2.2. The rise of challenger parties

Third, we seek to assess the transformations of the party system with the entrance of niche and challenger parties (Meguid 2006; De Vries and Hobolt 2009). The electoral emergence of challenger parties covers two specific periods in industrial democracies (the 1970s/80s, and more recently in the aftermath of the 2010s economic and migration crises. On the one hand, the "silent revolution" taking place in the 1970s (Inglehart 1977) led to the creation of green parties across Western democracies. Their platforms emphasized "new politics" with a focus on ecology, peace, and self-determination. While they remained marginal political forces in some countries (e.g. UK, Denmark, Greece and Spain), green parties gained important success and even accessed government offices in other democracies (e.g. Germany and Belgium). At the same moment, extreme radical right parties – some were founded in the interwar period – encountered a new electoral audience thanks to the "silent counter revolution". Against "new politics", they favored nationalism and the defense of the traditional social and political order.

On the other hand, the 2010s witnessed the electoral successes of radical and populist parties across the world. In the wake of the 2008-2012 financial and economic crises, new actors (re)activated traditional cleavages, especially about the issue of wealth redistribution (Hopkins 2020). Extreme left parties encountered electoral successes in multiple countries (e.g. *Podemos* in Spain, *Syriza* in Greece, *PTB-PVDA* in Belgium), undermining the Social-Democratic parties already in electoral decline. The immigration crisis in 2015 combined with

terror attacks in Western Europe, furthermore, favored extreme right parties which (re)gained success thanks to “welfare chauvinism” blaming migrants (De Vries & Hobolt 2020, e.g. *Vlaams Belang* in Belgium, *UKIP/Reform UK* in the UK, or *AfD* in Germany). Some of those parties make the use of populist rhetoric distinguishing between the pure people and the corrupt elite (Mudde 2007; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). This contributed to the increase of negative framings towards outgroups. Rather than observing the end of group-based politics (Dalton 2006), there was a reshaping of political polarization on emerging cleavages for challenger and niche parties. We thus expect challenger political parties to make more often use of negative group framings (e.g. towards elites, dominant parties and/or social outgroups).

H3: the use of *negative* group framings by challenger parties was more frequent than for established political parties when they entered the electoral competition

2.3. Spillover effects between challenger and established parties

Finally, we argue that the deep reconfigurations of party systems in industrial democracies induced dialectic relationships, with spillover effects between challenger parties and established parties. On the one hand, as established parties’ electoral dominance was threatened, they tended to use accommodation strategies (i.e. importing core issues of challenger parties in their own program) (Meguid 2005), instead of ignoring them. They felt the urge to stand out in the “electoral market” highlighting which categories of voters they seek represent (Thau 2019). One common strategy observed is the radicalization of (some) Social-Democratic parties towards originally core ingroups (e.g. “workers”/ “hard-working people”), as a response to radical left parties. In the aftermath of the 2010s crises, we thus posit that:

H4: the use of *positive* group appeals by established political parties has shifted back towards core ingroups while the use of *negative* out-group framings increased.

On the other hand, challenger parties (e.g. Greens, Ethno-regionalist, Radical Right and Left Parties) were also at the risks of being “Victims of their own success” as their core issues were increasingly discussed and adopted by established parties (van Haute & Pilet 2006). Challenger parties often reacted by widening their electoral basis to survive which entails:

H5: The use of *positive* group appeals by Challenger Parties has widened over time, while the use of *negative* group framings declined.

3. Research design: a cross-sectional and longitudinal analysis

This contribution uses data from the POLSTYLE project¹ which contains data from parliamentary speeches from seven European democracies (Belgium, Czechia, Germany, Spain, Hungary, Sweden and the United-Kingdom), while it covers 65 years of transformations in European societies (1960-2025)². The case selection reflects a trade-off between the generalisability of the results (eight countries with specific institutional and political variance) and the management of large-N data analysis in several countries over time. The case selection is guided by the aim of identifying structural transformations beyond country specificities and to go beyond case studies/limited comparative approach in the literature (Dolinsky 2023; Huber 2022; Thau 2019). Yet, at this stage of the project, given the highly consuming IT and time resources required, we present the preliminary results of a pilot study on United Kingdom to validate our approach. This allows to adapt our theoretical and methodological strategies before extending our analysis to the other countries of the project.

First, all countries are European representative democracies with parliamentary regimes. Consequently, this case selection allows to control for the shared European Union-related economic and political contexts, while parliamentary systems allow for the control of personalized presidential regimes (Rahat & Kenig 2018). The case selection is specifically relevant for the purpose of this study as the cleavages structures in Europe is quite similar and led to the creation of similar party families across Europe. This contribution seeks to first analyse changes under the European political contexts in which cleavages theory and group appeals have shaped distinctively.

Second, the countries selected are mostly established democracies located in western and northern Europe. The inclusion of Spain, Czech Republic and Hungary permit to test the robustness of our hypotheses for countries under recent democratic transitions (late 1970s in Spain; early 1990s in Czech Republic and Hungary). Third, these eight countries offer the necessary institutional and political diversity to test our hypotheses under varying political settings. In terms of party competition, our comparative approach includes countries with bipolar party system (United Kingdom, Spain, and Sweden) that substantially differs from countries characterised by moderate pluralism and extreme multipartyism (Belgium, Germany, Hungary, and Czech Republic). All these countries offer distinct levels of ideological

¹ The POLSTYLE project also includes parliamentary speeches from the U.S., Canada and New Zealand. This contribution seeks to first analyze changes under the European political contexts in which cleavages theory and group appeals have shaped differently. We are interested in the readers' thoughts about extending our analysis to non-European countries in the future.

² Our research focuses on the democratic period of each country (i.e. Spain starts in 1978; Western-Germany is considered in the 1960-1989 period; and Czechia and Hungary are studied after 1990).

polarisation (Dalton 2008): this polarisation has been weaker in Belgium and Germany, average in the United Kingdom, and Spain, and greater in the Czech Republic, Sweden, and Hungary. Variations within countries over time are substantial, although there is a tendency towards bipolarity, which reflects a restructuring of party competition towards depoliticisation (Mair 2008).

Finally, including a long period of times allow us to test the dynamic nature of our hypotheses and to analyze evolutions of group appeals across time. This long-time period consolidate the findings by accounting for contextual variations (e.g. political crises that can occur within the period of study).

4. Data and Methods

In the previous literature, the kind of empirical material used is predominantly Party Manifestos (Dolinsky 2023; Thau 2019). There are also a few studies on Party advertisement (Dolinsky 2023), Political speeches and press releases (Huber and Haselmayer 2024; Stuckelberger and Tresch 2024) or social networks (De Mulder *et al.* 2025). This section presents our methodological strategies for analysing group appeals in parliamentary speeches.

4.1. Data collection: parliamentary speeches

As established, there is a limited knowledge on how parties make the use of group appeals from the longitudinal perspectives as European societies went through major societal transformations. The few studies that adopted a longitudinal approach rely on party manifestos: the latter are easily available and accessibly for multiple elections and permit to study the official position of political parties. Despite the usefulness of the use of manifestos, we argue in favour of considering parliamentary speeches studying group appeals over time.

First, the analysis of parliamentary speeches allows to consider ‘day-to-day politics’. This permit to study constraints of party representatives when they mobilize group appeals. By contrast, party manifestos tend to be a “Christmas Wishlist” in case the party control all policy-making leverages. This virtually never happen – even under majority rules – as parties in government must compromise with the administration, civil society, stakeholders, and the opposition – to cite be a few. Furthermore, party manifestos are formal documents that reflects party internal compromise drafted a less controversial way. Group appeals in parliamentary ‘day-to-day politics’ cover, however, more diverse positions put forward by party representatives (especially by some maverick party members), sometimes worded in a direct

controversial way. A final limit of party manifestos in the study of group appeals is that they are “frozen picture” at electoral times, which prevent from studying critical junctures as exogenous shocks take place (e.g. 1973 oil crisis, 2015 migration crisis).

Overall, analyses of political parties’ priority issues and group appeals based on party manifestos entail multiple reliability issues (Walgrave *et al.* 2015). By contrast, parliamentary speeches allow to study a much broader scope in the use of group appeals by party representatives. MPs make use of parliamentary speeches with very different purposes, such as to communicate policy positions and influence legislative agenda (e.g. Maltzman and Sigelman 1996), to justify such positions, namely in a context of coalition government (e.g. Martin and Vanberg 2008), or to signal to their regional or local interests (Bäck and Debus 2018; Santos *et al.* 2025). The use of parliamentary speeches to signal to their electorate – and the fact that they travel beyond parliamentary arenas, both to traditional (Lupacheva and Mölder 2024; Yildirim *et al.* 2023) and social media (Poljak 2025)– are key to leverage them to assess parties’ group appeals.

Table 1. Data collection of the Parliamentary speeches in eight democracies (1959-2024)

Countries	Chambers	Time scope	Approximate number of Speeches and sentence acts
United Kingdom	House of Commons	1959-2024	N=3.619.955 speeches N=53.769.695 sentences
Belgium	<i>De Kamer / La Chambre</i>	1960-2024	Data collected (N =TBC)
Czech Republic	<i>Parlament</i>	1993-2024*	Data collected (N =TBC)
Germany	<i>Bundestag</i>	1960-2021	Data collected (N =TBC)
Hungary	<i>Országgyűlés</i>	1990-2019*	Data collected (N =TBC)
Spain	<i>Congreso de los Diputados</i>	1977-2024*	Data collected (N =TBC)
Sweden	<i>Riksdag</i>	1990-2024	Data collected (N =TBC)

**Note:* starting data collection starts with the democratic transitions in those countries

Despite the emergence of various comparative projects (e.g. ParlSpeech), the availability and access of parliamentary speeches data ‘ready-to-use’ remain critically limited (especially for comparative and longitudinal analysis). Table 1 provides a summary of the data collection for the 7 European democracies covered in this contribution. Note that for the pilot study in this contribution, we focus on British parliamentary speeches that we have collected from the 42nd (starting in 1959) until the 58th (ending in 2024). We use the ‘UK Hansard platform’ (using computational-assisted techniques for online data collection).

4.2. Group appeals conceptualization and categories

As an emerging scholarship, the conceptualization and definition of group appeals emerged with varying labels. As underlined by Dolinsky and Huber (2023) there is no consensus on what constitutes a *social group* which encompasses a broad range of elements, including socio-demographic categories, institutional or organizational affiliations, political alignments, and even universalist notions like “the people” or “everyone” nor on what constitutes an appeal. Dolinsky and Huber (2023) claim that studies vary in how they conceptualize parties’ appeals to social groups with notable inconsistencies in the use of related concepts like group-based appeal, group appeal, and group targeting. In this research, we develop a slightly different conceptualization of group appeals, namely “*explicit references (positive or negative) to the members of a specific social group*”³. In this wake, we refer to “*positive group appeals*” when party representatives seek to defend the interest of a specific group, and we label “*negative group framings*” when party representatives criticize another social group.

Last but not least, we consider that social group appeals must strictly refer to social group categories within societies. By contrast, references to an abstract institution or organization (e.g. “the banks” – instead of the bankers or the hedge fund managers) do not constitute a group appeal per se. We consider that such statements rather reflect broader issue and policy statements by party representatives. In fact, the blurring in the naming and labelling of social groups in party representatives’ communication serve different strategic interests. *Appealing* to social groups requires to clearly identify the social group. This strict conceptualization is a bit more conservative, but it prevents from encompassing all sorts of statements as group appeals that would lead to concept stretching.

³ While we recognize the importance and relevance of implicit references for understanding party behaviour and communication, such task requires interpretive discourse analysis. Being aware of the trade-off between scope and depth, we have proceeded with the former, which allow us to analyse more than 60 years of political communication.

For the identification of social groups, we combined deductive and inductive approaches. On the one hand, we reviewed existing literature on group appeals (Dolinsky 2023; Dolinsky and Huber 2023; Thau 2018, 2019), and various literature associated with cleavage theories (Hooghe and Marks 2018; Kriesi *et al.* 2008; Lipset and Rokkan 1967) as well as political representation (Carnes 2012; Phillips 1995; Williams 1998). In addition to the deductive approach, we mobilized an inductive approach by manually coding samples of the data in each country ($n \approx 2000$ parliamentary speech sentences in each country). The inductive coding allows us to corroborate the categories found deductively, but also to consider country/time-specific groups that might not be found in the deductive approach. As a result, we obtained six “meta categories” of social groups: **(1) Socio-demographic categories** (e.g. the youth and the elderly), **(2) Socio-economic groups** (e.g. trade unionists and small business owners), **(3) Occupational professional groups** (e.g. nurses, police officers and teachers), **(4) Non-economic social groups** (e.g. religions based such as Christians and Muslims), **(5) European and international groups** (e.g. activists of climate change from transnational organizations) and **(6) surrogate groups for non-human actors** (e.g. animals and environment-related groups defending ‘the Oceans’ or ‘the Nature’). Overall, we have established a coding scheme of 87 specific social categories belonging to these six meta social group categories. Table with all the categories are detailed in appendix A1.

4.3. Identification of group appeals – the use of transformer-based models for large-N analysis

Considering the very large-N technical capacity required for identifying group appeals in millions of parliamentary speeches, we leverage the most recent innovations in computer-assisted techniques for content analysis, namely supervised deep learning procedures. We apply these techniques through a two-step procedure. First, we proceed to manual coding to establish a “golden benchmark” to train our transformers models. For that goal, two junior coders were trained by the three senior authors of this contribution. The coding procedure consisted of three different tasks: (1) identifying explicit reference to social groups at the sentence level; (2) identifying the social group(s) mentioned in group appeals; (3) coding whether the speaker was defending (*positive*), criticizing (*negative*), or being *neutral*, towards the social group mentioned (for the latter ask, an abstract of the speech act was provided to the coder to put the sentence into the context of the broader speech act). While previous literature overlooked and/or disregarded the valence of group framings, our hypotheses directly rely on the key distinction between “*positive* group appeals” and “*negative* group framings” to achieve a comprehensive understanding on how parties make use of *group appeals* in their

communication. In practice, positive and negative appeals account for most cases, while neutral references to groups occur in hardly 19 percent of all speech acts.

Overall, for this first step, the coding team coded a portion of the random sample of our data to validate the coding book of 87 social group categories. The sample is representative of the legislative terms within countries ($N \approx 400$ speech sentences per country). The authors of this contribution also proceeded with the coding of the same sample. In case of coding disagreements between the trained coders and/or the authors⁴, we extensively discussed and decided the category to be coded as the “golden benchmark”. This intensive coding allowed to establish a final coding book in an abductive process (Vila-Henninger et al. 2024) for a total of 6 meta group categories covering 87 specific group categories. Finally, the remaining portion of the sample was given to the coders to finalize the coding process ($N \approx 2.000$ speech sentences per country).

Second, we use the manual coded material to fine-tune transformer-based models tailored to our very large- N classification task. Considering the multilingual nature of our corpus, we proceeded with the open-sourced encoder model *EuroBERT* (Boizard et al. 2025), that is tailored for multilingual natural language processing. We have fine-tuned different versions of the model (with 210M and 610M parameters) in a Natural Language Inference (NLI) framework (Yin et al. 2019). NLI is a specific application of broader NLP tasks that allows us to determine the presence/absence of a specific group appeal in parliamentary speech sentences. This NLI approach performs better than traditional approaches for imbalanced data and with little training data (Laurer et al. 2024) as in this study. Furthermore, the NLI framework emerges as an effective approach to face the challenges associated with multi-label classification considering that our coding labels are not mutually exclusive (e.g. reference to female workers)⁵.

⁴ In case of disagreement between trained coders, additional training was provided by the senior authors.

⁵ A note must be made regarding the second and third task in Table 3. While an NLI approach has its merits and strengths, it also comes with its shortcomings. Virtually every political science task can be converted into an NLI format. However, this translates in formulating one hypothesis per each class of interest. In the case of identifying the socio-demographic group mentioned in a single sentence, this means that each sentence will have as many hypotheses as there are socio-demographic groups. Considering time and computing costs of this procedure, we followed a hierarchical logic. The 87 socio-demographic groups identified were clustered into nine meta-groups in light of some common features. We have then fine-tuned the model, in a NLI approach, to identify, in each sentence, the references to one, or more, meta-groups (second task in Figure 2). Then, considering the positive cases for each meta-group, we fine-tuned the model once-more to identify each socio-demographic group belonging to each meta-group (third task in the table 3). In this way, we avoided prohibitive time and computing costs, and we hold both to the advantages of a NLI framework to the extensive number of socio-demographic categories established.

Table 2. Illustration of Natural Language Inference (NLI) for group appeals identification

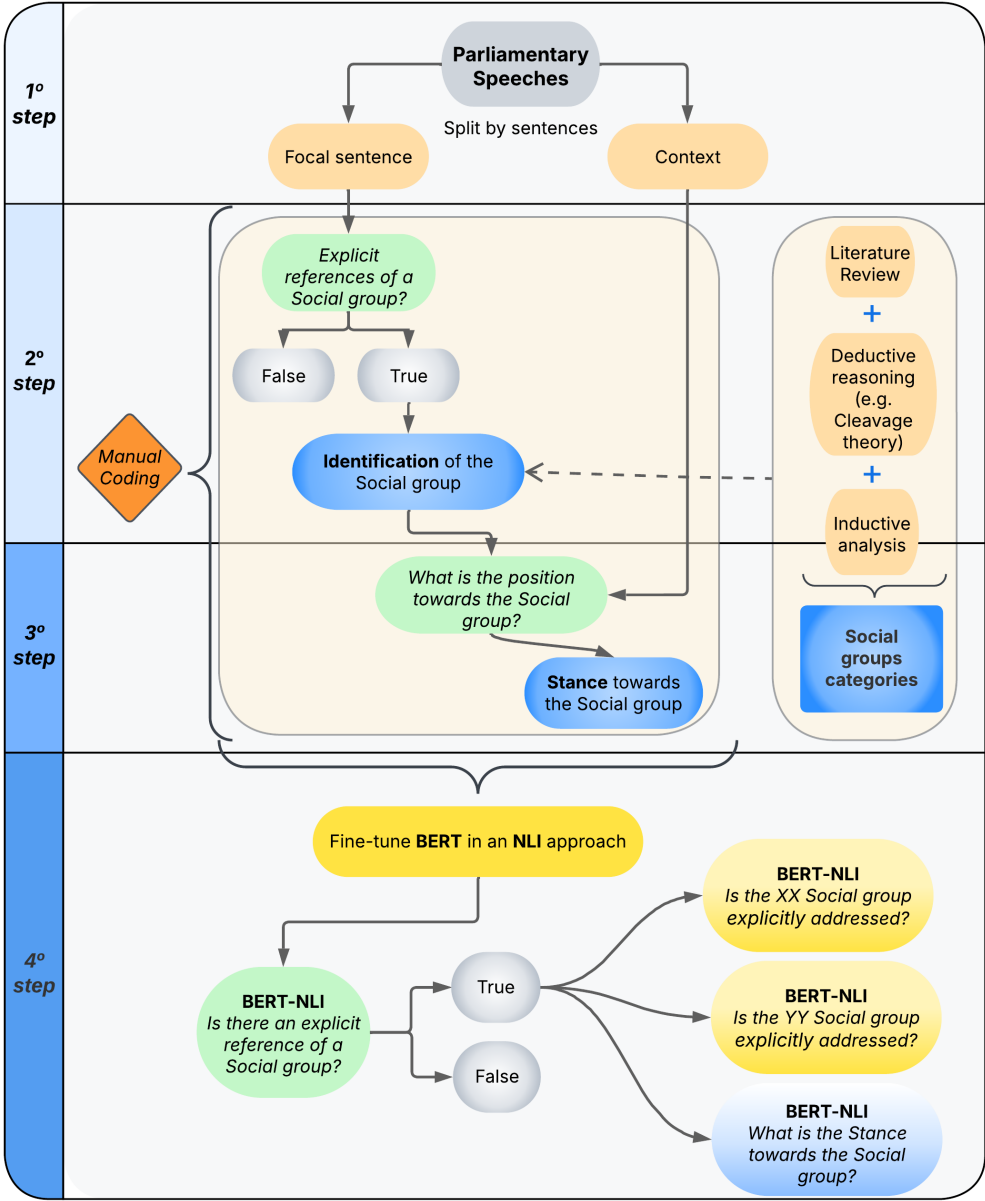
Premise	Hypothesis	Coding class
“The miners were on strike due to low wages”	A socio-demographic group is mentioned in the premise	True (=1) or False (=0)
“the Government needs to take action”	A socio-demographic group is mentioned in the premise	True (=1) or False (=0)

Proceeding with the fine-tuning in an NLI framework, we have fine-tuned four different models. The first model is designed to identify sentences in which the speaker explicitly addresses a socio-demographic group. The second model, applied only to the positively classified cases, aims to determine which overarching meta-group is being referenced. Third, within each meta-group, we fine-tuned a separate model to identify the specific group mentioned. Finally, we fine-tuned an additional model to infer the speaker’s stance toward the specific group identified in the previous step. For details on the models used, tasks, and metrics, please see Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of the tasks, models used, and the corresponding metrics

Tasks	Model	Metrics	Training arguments
Identifying the presence of group appeals in parliamentary speech acts	EuroBERT (610M)	<i>Accuracy: 0.92</i> <i>Precision: 0.92</i> <i>Recall: 0.92</i> <i>Evaluation Loss: 0.23</i> <i>F1: 0.92</i>	<i>Epochs: 3</i> <i>Warmup ratio: 0.1</i> <i>Learning rate: 2e⁻⁵</i> <i>Weight decay: 0.01</i> 32-bit precision
Classifying the type of broad group appeals (6 “meta-groups”)	EuroBERT (210M)	<i>Accuracy: 0.90</i> <i>Precision: 0.95</i> <i>Recall: 0.94</i> <i>Evaluation Loss: 0.5</i> <i>F1: 0.94</i>	<i>Epochs: 5</i> <i>Warmup ratio: 0.1</i> <i>Learning rate: 2e⁻⁵</i> <i>Weight decay: 0.01</i> 16-bit precision
Classifying the type of specific group appeals (89 “specific group categories”)	<i>[Next step of the analysis]</i>		
Evaluating the stance (positive appeals or negative framings towards social groups)	<i>[Next step of the analysis]</i>		

Figure 1. Four step procedures for identification of group appeals



4.4. Data analysis

To test our hypotheses, we develop several indicators for our dependent variable to track transformations of group appeals over time. The socio-economic cleavage being central in politics during the 1960s, we first look at the evolution of socio-economic group appeals across time, which serves as our benchmark indicator to assess the widening of group appeals towards other non-socio-economic groups. For established parties, if the ratio of group appeals for socio-economic groups tends to diminish over time and to increase for other social groups, it will provide support for H1. The same indicator will be computed for challenger parties to test

H5. The stance of the coded group appeals will also be instrumental to tests for H2, H3 and H4. More specifically, to test H2 and H4, we account for the evolution of negative group framing by established parties over time. We expect a declining trend of negative group appeals in the 1960s' and onwards until an upsurge with the rise of challenger parties. We expect a reverse trend for challenger parties with declining negativity over time [*Note for the reader: due to highly intensive IT and time resources required: H2, H3, and H4 are not empirically tested in this version of the paper*].

Our hypotheses require to further distinguish established parties and challengers' parties based on previous government participation (Vries and Hobolt 2020). More specifically, parties who did have a government participation at the beginning of the period of investigation are considered as established parties, while parties who were not in power/presented themselves at the election at a later stage are considered as challenger parties. For our pilot study in the United Kingdom, we consider the *Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats* as established parties while the *SNP, DUP, Plaid Cymru, Sinn Féin, UKIP and Reform UK* are considered as challenger parties. [*Note for the reader: this distinct between established and challengers parties is arguably less relevant in the British two-party systems. This distinction will be more influential in (fragmented) multiparty systems in the next version of this paper*].

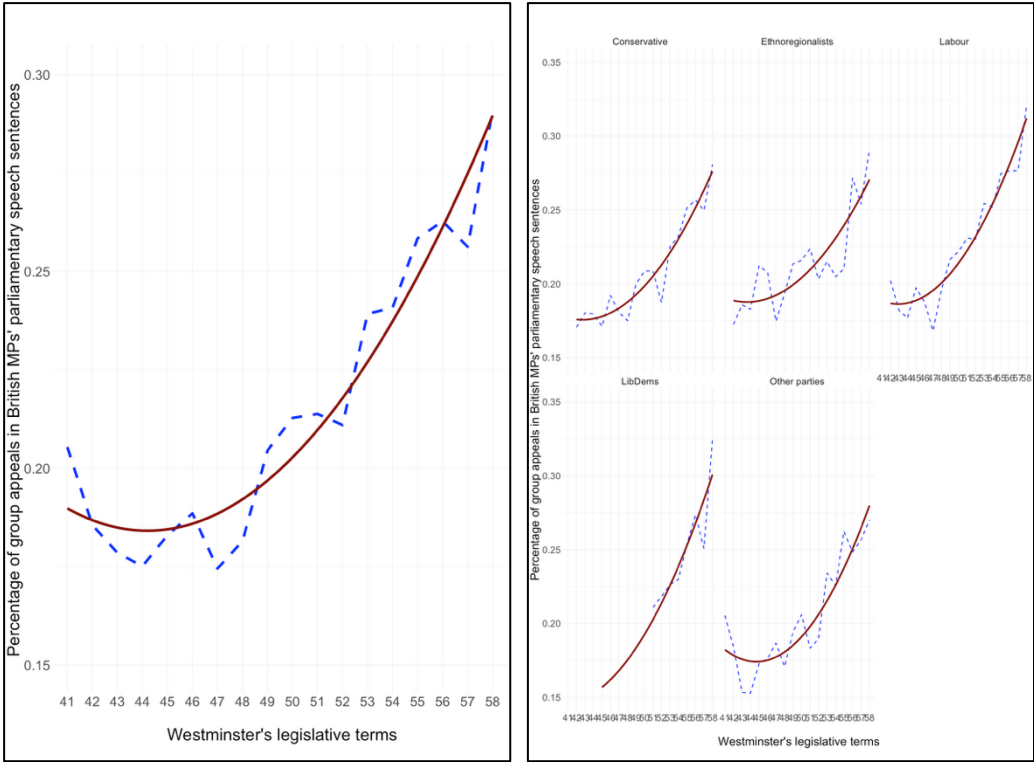
Our models are mostly testing structural transformations over time. Yet, we seek to control for country and year fixed effect in order to account for time variations associated to specific context. For that goal, our data collection also includes a variety of economic indicators, *party fragmentation and ideological polarization* which should be correlated to the use of group appeals (we use multiple indicators from ad hoc comparative projects, CMP, V-DEM, CHES). To better interpret change in the use of group appeals, we have listed political crises and events that occurred during the period of analysis. The list of crises has been developed based on political science textbooks of each country and through various election reports (published in the *European Journal of Political Research* and *West European Politics*)⁶. For instance, in the UK, we report 38 events, some being more critical than others (e.g. 1963's Profumo affair, 1972's Bloody Sunday, 1992's financial black Wednesday, 2003 Irak invasion, 2015's migration crisis, 2020's covid) over the 65 years covered in our dataset (1955-2024). This list has been inventoried for each of the eight countries which permits to monitor the effects of deep societal transformations and challenges over time and to better interpret changes in group appeals.

⁶ This list of critical events will be further consolidated by country-experts to insure exhaustivity.

5. Preliminary empirical results

Before diving into the test of our hypotheses, we provide some descriptive trends of the use of group appeals in British parliamentary speeches across the 41st legislature (1955) to the most recent 58th legislature (2024). In Figure 2, we observe that there is a clear trend reflecting an increase of group appeals in British parliamentary speeches overtime. In the time span studied (1955-2024), there is a shift from a bit less than 20 percent of social group appeals in parliamentary speeches to almost 30 percent of group appeals. The trend is consistent across all political parties and tends to hint toward an increase of group appeals. Consequently, it provides evidence to the “widening of group appeals” over time (H1 and H5), although these hypotheses complementary need to be validated by the type of group appeals (see below).

Figure 2. Evolution of group appeals in the UK (1955–2024), by Parties



Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the evolution of targeted *socio-economic* groups and of *non-economic social* group appeals in parliamentary speeches. In terms of socio-economic group appeals, we observe a declining trend until the mid-1990s (i.e. end of the “Thatcher era” and) culminating in the 52th legislature (i.e. Tony Blair's election under the "Third Way" revitalized the Labour Party, transformed it into a centrist political force). Furthermore, there is a steep increase *socio-economic* groups in the mid-2000s and onwards across all parties. For the Labour, these appeals even peaked at their highest levels in the late 2010s and early 2020s, coinciding with the party's shift towards more radical socio-economic positions under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership. While the general trend over time is distinctive, there are significant ups and

downs, though. In the future, we seek to unpack these ups and downs evolutions by refining our analysis using the 16 subcategories socio-economic appeals (e.g. ‘Employers’, ‘low-income people’, ‘unemployed’, ‘trade unions’, ‘middle class’, see appendix).

Figure 3. Evolution of ‘socio-economic’ group appeals in the UK (1955–2024), by Parties

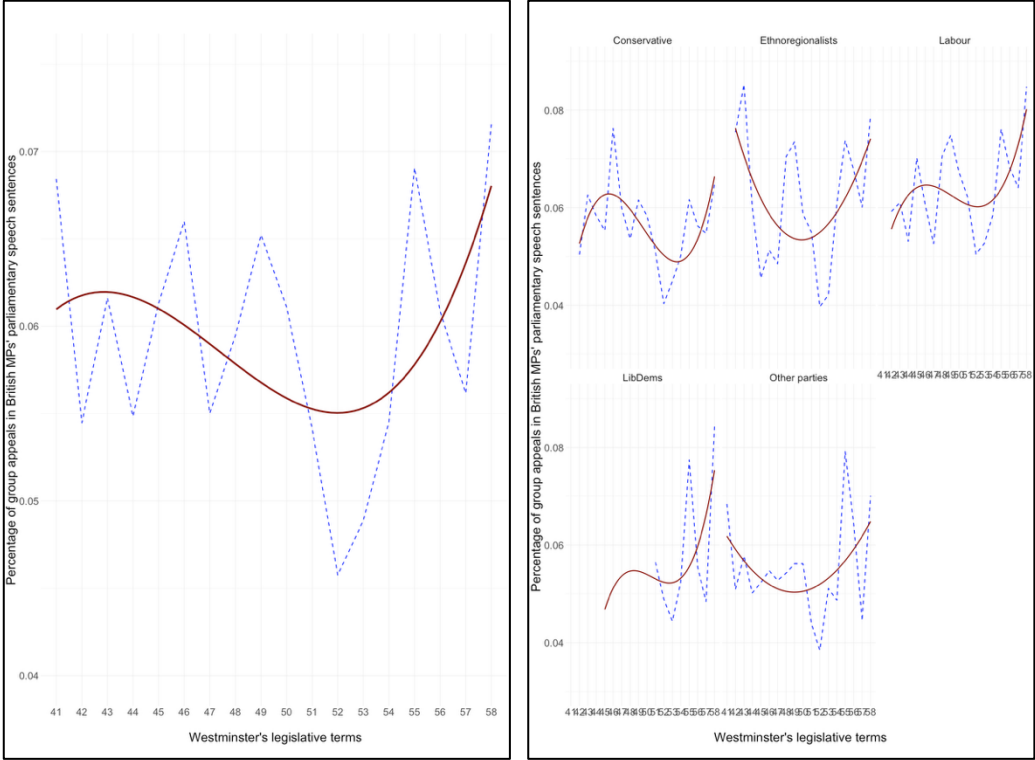
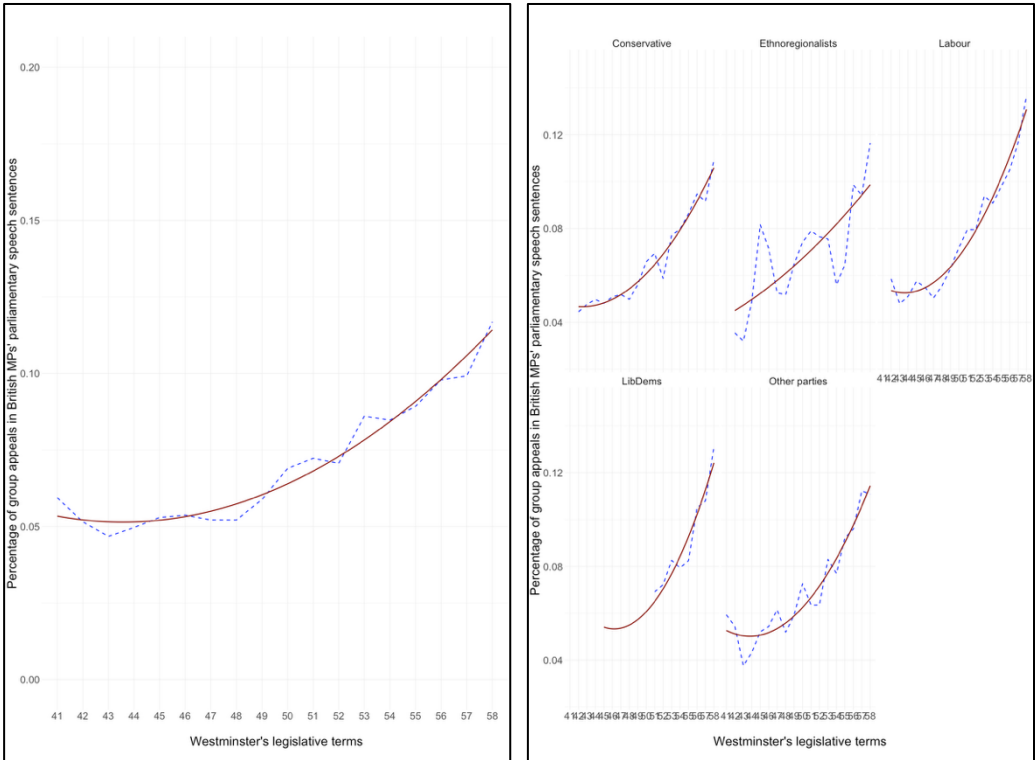


Figure 4. Evolution of ‘non-economic’ group appeals in the UK (1955–2024), by Parties



Finally, regarding the *non-economic social group* appeals, Figure 4 show we a positive and incremental rising trend curves over time for all political parties. Overtime, *non-economic social group* appeals have become the largest mentions compared to *economic group* appeals.

Overall, these preliminary empirical results underline a trend in supporting the hypothesis of the “widening of group appeals”. From the early 1960s until the 1990s, socio-economic group appeals become less frequent than other non-economic social groups (albeit with varying ups and downs in that general trend). Furthermore, we observe an important increase of socio-economic group appeals for the Labour since the 2010s and – to a lesser extent – for the Conservatives and the LibDems. Regarding non-economic social group appeals, we observe a similar trend for all parties, which might be associated to changes in British politics and the emergence of ‘catch-all strategy’ by mainstream political parties. Overall, the combined analysis of Figures 3 and 4 provide empirical support for several of our hypotheses. Regarding established parties, Figure 3 tends to support H4 according to which established parties appeal more to their core groups in recent time (i.e. they appeal more to socio-economic groups in the recent decades than at the beginning of the period of study). On the other hand, Figure 4 demonstrates a sharp increase of group appeals toward other social groups which support H1 (the targets of group appeals have widened across time for established parties). We also find support regarding the widening of group appeals among challenger parties and hence empirical support for H5.

Beyond the widening of group appeals hypothesis, the next steps of our empirical analyses include analysing the stance of group appeals (“positive group appeals” *versus* “negative group framings”). These additional analyses will be instrumental in corroborating or rejecting our hypotheses. [*Note for the reader: we have manually coded a sample of about 4000 speech sentences to fine-tune EuroBert models. The IT and time resources required did, however, not allow us to present this final result for the ECPR Joint Sessions 2025*]. Additionally, we also added some figures in appendix (A1-A3) which focuses on socio-demographic group appeals and need to be included in our analyses to better assess the evolution of group appeals by political parties.

Provisional discussion and conclusion

[Note for the reader: we provide a provisional conclusion as our contribution relies currently on preliminary empirical results from the pilot study on the UK].

The party politics scholarship has encountered a renewed interest for parties' *group appeals* (Dolinsky 2023; Haffert *et al.* 2024; Horn *et al.* 2021; Huber 2022; Thau 2018, 2019). The rise of affective polarization in which group-based conflicts seem to be 'new game in town' as democracies surge into political polarization across the world (Boese *et al.* 2022). With voter dealignment and the rise of "catch all parties", the scholarship on party politics seems to have overlooked this kind of group-based mobilizations in the last decades (Haffert *et al.* 2024). Our study aims to better understand the study of group appeals by bridging three scholarships: group appeals, the renewed focus on social cleavages (Bornschier *et al.* 2021a; Ford and Jennings 2020; Guth and Nelsen 2021; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Hooghe and Marks 2022) and scholarship on transformations of political parties.

In this wake, our contribution aims to contribute to the long-term transformations of party's role in group appeals in European democracies. We argue that this party role has been corroding over the last decades for established political parties, or rather it has been reshaping as European democracies encountered major societal evolutions (voter dealignment (Beck 2006), the erosion of traditional cleavages (Mair 2003; Kriesi 2012), the weakening of party organizations (Van Haute & Gauja 2016), and the rise of personalized politics in the new media era (Rahat & Kenig 2018; Croner 2003). First, we argue that parties' groups appeals have faded away since "golden age of mass parties" in the 1960s. Second, studying group appeals as a dynamic process over time, we complementary argue that transformations of party systems reshape parties' group appeals. The electoral emergence of challenger and niche parties (Meguid 2006; De Vries and Hobolt 2009) affected parties' strategies in group-based mobilization in the wake of the 1970s/80s's "Silent revolution" and counter "silent revolution" (Inglehart 1977), as well as in the aftermath of the 2010s economic and migration crises (Mudde 2007 ; Hopkins 2020).

Methodologically, our research design covers 7 European democracies (BE, ES, DE, HU, CZ, UK, SW). Regarding data analysis, we study parliamentary speeches to track evolution of group appeals in 'day-to-day politics' over time. We relied on supervised deep learning techniques for the identification and classification of group appeals (i.e. fine-tuning "EuroBert" Large Multilingual Language models based on the manual coding of group appeals by trained coders). Because of the high IT intensity and time resources required, we used the United Kingdom as a pilot study to test our analytical and methodological approach (i.e. for UK, we

classified \approx 54 million sentences of parliamentary speech). In the future, we aim to develop and expand our empirical analysis to the six other countries for which we collected all parliamentary speeches since the 1960s (since democratic transition for Spain, Hungary and Czech Republic).

This pilot study on the UK allowed to identify six “meta categories” of social groups: (1) Socio-demographic groups, (2) Socio-economic groups, (3) Occupational professional groups, (4) Non-economic social groups (e.g. religions based such as Christians and Muslims), (5) European and international groups, and (6) surrogate groups for non-human actors. Those six “meta categories” of social groups cover in total 89 sub-categories of social groups. Our first exploratory analysis provides several empirical evidence supporting our hypotheses regarding transformations of group appeals over time. In the next step of our research, we seek to better understand this dynamic in six other European democracies. Two main analyses will be included: (1) analysis of the stance of group appeals (i.e. “positive group appeals” towards versus “negative group framings”), and (2) spillover effects between established parties and challenger parties in (fragmented) multiparty systems. In the latter, strategical electoral incentives strongly differ compared to the British two-party systems analysed in this paper.

Finally, we conclude with some reflexive thoughts on the role of group appeals in society. Group based conflicts have developed a ‘bad reputation’ in today’s politics as affective polarization is seen as one of the most important issues of contemporary democracies (especially when fuelled by authoritarian and extreme right leaders). According to Boese and colleagues (2022: 993-4), “[m]oderate levels of political polarization are expected in a democracy to provide cues to help voters choose [...] Such polarization turns toxic when levels of polarization become high”. We argue that group appeals polarization is, however, not per se the issue, even under very intense divisions. Indeed, scholarship on parties group appeals established that parties make extensive use of appeals for electoral signalling (Dassonneville *et al.* 2022; Huber 2022; Huber and Haselmayer 2024; Thau 2019, 2021).

In this respect, political parties’ group appeals serve a critical role in the democratic electoral process, enhancing voters’ decision-making capacity. We argue that “social group” polarization allows voters to make sense of the issues at stake and navigate the electoral offer more effectively when party differences are more salient. Political parties’ group appeals, by clearly establishing representational claim making of specific social groups and by establishing redistribution of socioeconomic inequality against dominant outgroups, serve as a decisive cognitive shortcut for voters. In other words, polarization via group appeals contributes to democracy.

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Appendix

Table A1. Hierarchical identification of social groups

Socio-demographic categories	Age-based	Children/Youth	
		Young adults	
		Students	
		Elderly	
		Pensioners	
		Future generations (abstract)	
	Gender-based	Women	
		Man	
		Transgender/LGBTQ persons	
	Place-based	The British	
		The English	
		The Scots	
		The Welsh	
		The Irish	
		The Northern Irish	
		Immigrant/Refugees/Asylum-seekers	
		Rural residents	
		Urban residents	
		Constituents /Citizens	
Foreign individuals abroad			
International actors			
Socio-Economic	Trade unionists		
	Low-income / poor people		
	Middle class		
	Taxpayers		
	Tenants		
	Landlords/landowners		
	Consumers		
	High-income/rich people		
	Unemployed		
	Employers		
		Large employers and Large business owners	

	Employees	Employers in SMEs / Self-employed	
		White-collar and technical, highly paid professionals	
		Blue collar workers	
		Workers/working people	
		Immigrant workers	
Occupational/professional groups	Bankers/Traders/Investors/Shareholders		
	Legal professionals		
	Cultural workers		
	Farmers		
	Health and Social Workers		
	Health and Social Managers/Directors		
	Civil servants		
	Public authorities' managers		
	Private Managers/Directors (Executives)		
	Teachers		
	Scientists/Researchers		
	Security Forces	Police officers	
		Army officers	
	Journalists		
Politicians/Political class			
Social categories	Religious-based	Jews	
		Muslim	
		Christians	
		Catholics	
		Hinduists	
		Orthodox	
		Protestant	
	Political/Ideological-based	Nationalists	
		Social Democrats/Labour	
		Pro-European Union	
		Anti-European Union	
		Conservatives	
		Socialists/Communists	
		Greens	
Neo-Liberals			

		Fascist/Neo-fascist	
		Politicians/Political class	
	Identity-based	Minorities	Ethnic minority
			National minority
			Racial minority
	Interest-based	Disabled persons	
		Pedestrians	
		Public service users	
		Health care users and Patients	
		Cyclists	
		Car drivers	
	Other groups	'The people'	
		Families/single parents	
	Judicial	Criminals and offenders	
		Judicial victims	
European and International category		EU/ECC/EC actors (e.g. Commissioners, MEPs, Ministers in the Council, etc)	
		International actors (e.g. Leaders from foreign countries or institutions)	
Surrogate actors		Animal-related actors (including activist for animal rights)	
		Environment-related actors (the Sea, the Nature, the activists for the environment)	
Other actors		Monarchy	

Figure A1 Evolution in Gender appeals in the UK and by parties (1960–2025)

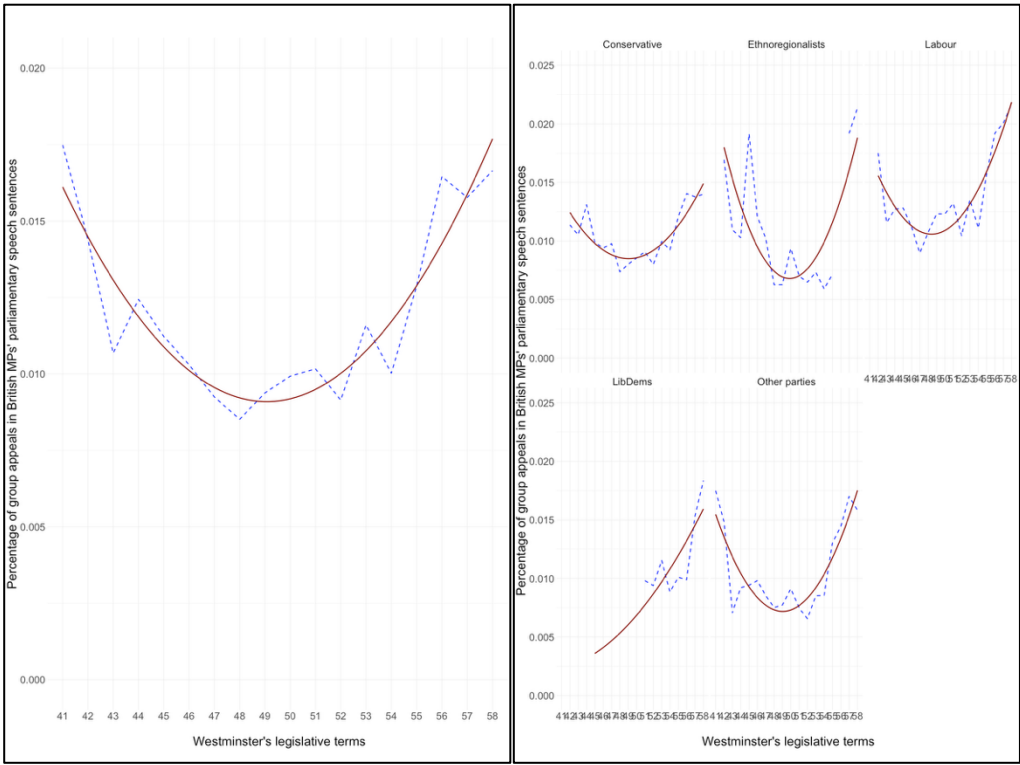


Figure A2 Evolution in Place-based group appeals in UK and by parties (1960–2025)

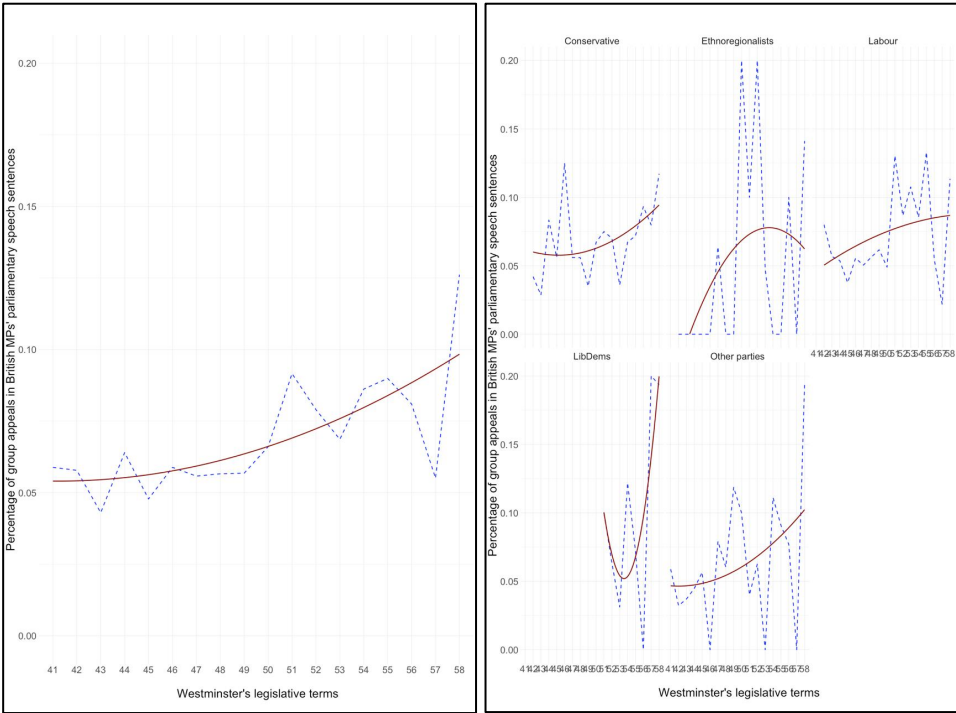


Figure A3 Evolution in Age-based group appeals in the UK and by parties (1960–2025)

