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New trends or old habits?

Stability and changes in political styles in European democracies since 1960

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Abstract

Hardly a week goes by without reports of elected officials—often depicted as ‘populists’—having used vitriolic language and viciously attacked their opponents. In a context of ‘restyling of politics’, the style of political actors is presented as increasingly emotional and confrontational. Some scholars have argued that these styles directly challenge the democratic functioning of our modern societies. Yet, in the absence of longitudinal studies, such claims remain trivial intuitions and anecdotes that are as old as politics. Do the styles of modern politicians constitute new trends or reflect old habits? What are the factors constraining or favouring certain styles? In the face of a form of nostalgia for good old times, I critically challenge the idea that emotive and confrontational styles are necessarily threats in contemporary democracies. Instead, I posit that the challenges that some styles posited to democracy is the fact that such styles have increasingly targeted groups, in their private traits and personal life. This change has occurred at the expense of the substance that focused on political issues and policy orientation. While ‘politics is all about conflicts’, the real democratic threats concern ‘group conflicts without politics’. This contribution will present the POLSTYLE project and how it intends to make empirical, methodological and theoretical breakthroughs by analysing the evolution of political styles in four European democracies since the 1960s, studying performance of actors’ style in distinct arenas (TV, print press, Parliamentary debates and Twitter).



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Introduction

“Welcome to the race Sleepy Joe. I only hope you have the intelligence, long in doubt, to wage a successful primary campaign” (@realDonaldTrump, April 2019). “I wouldn’t rape [Maria do Rosario] because she doesn’t deserve it” (Jair Bolsonaro’s interview in newspaper *Zero Hora*, 2014). Every week, offensive comments by prominent politicians—often pictured as ‘populists’—hit the headlines because of outrageous language and nasty attacks. A well-known example is Donald Trump’s political style: his 2016 electoral campaign was defined as “post-ideological” (Hohmann 2016), while it relied upon negative emotions such as anger and resentment towards his opponents (Tavernise & Seelye 2016). Trump’s style echoes wider concerns of a **‘restyling of politics’** (Corner & Pels 2003). That is, political styles have changed in the “ensemble of ways of speaking, acting, looking, displaying, and handling things, which merge into a symbolic whole that immediately fuses matter and manner, message and package” (Pels 2003: 45). Political styles are more than mere communication strategies. Political styles mix *content* and *form*, thereby defining the very nature of democratic linkages (Saward 2006; Moffitt & Tormey 2013).

In a context of alleged affective polarization, many political observers and scholars have alarmed us about this changing nature of political styles. Iyengar and colleagues (2019: 133) wrote that “[i]f anything, the rhetoric and actions of political leaders demonstrate that hostility directed at the opposition is acceptable and often appropriate”. In this wake, scholars and political observers have raised concerns about the centrality of emotions *over* reason-based politics (Davies 2018), and they fear the effects of political styles that are fueled by negativity and polarisation *over* deliberation and cooperation (Haselmayer 2019). However, what is exactly *new* and *different* compared to political styles of the past? Emotive-conflictual styles seem to be as old as politics. During the 1953 German elections, the Social-Democratic Party developed a negative personalised campaign through the slogan “Ollenhauer instead of Adenauer”, which yielded highly polarised elections (Spicka 2018). During the Cold War, political styles were decisively emotional (e.g., the “red scare”, Delwit & Gotovitch 1996) and based on personal attacks (e.g., Nixon referring to Douglas as “pink right down to her underwear” during the 1950 Senate campaign). These historical examples raise critical questions: do modern political styles constitute new trends or old habits? Are emotive and confrontational political styles a classic feature of politics, or do modern political styles reflect a structural trend that has evolved over the last decades? What specific factors have triggered rapid transformations while other factors have induced path dependency over time?

To date, there have been no satisfying answers to these questions. The current literature suffers from an overwhelming focus on contemporary actors, with rare longitudinal approach whereas the very concept of affective polarization induces a longitudinal transformation over the last years/decades. In addition, the focus remains predominantly on American politics (Mutz 2005; Brooks & Geer 2007; Sobieraj & Berry 2011). Last but not least, existing studies use radically different analytical frameworks and methodologies (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha 1995; Walgrave & De Swert 2007; Vliegthart 2012; Walter 2014; Crabtree et al. 2020; Goovaerts & Turkenburg 2022; Haselmayer et al. 2022). This heuristic diversity has led to contradictory results across similar cases (Walter 2021). In sum, the longitudinal study of evolutions of political styles in European democracies is critically missing.

The POLSTYLE project seeks to address these gaps in the literature with three main contributions. Empirically, the POLSTYLE project provides a systematic analysis that will describe the evolution of political styles from a historical perspective (1960-2025) and across four European countries (Belgium, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom). The historical view seeks to understand what is new in modern politics as well as what are ‘normal’ – albeit ‘uncomfortable’ – styles in democracies. Methodologically, the project will create a unique inventory of four innovative datasets combining audio-visual archives and written materials (TV, parliaments, printed press, and Twitter). Recent cutting-edge techniques in content analysis (e.g. supervised algorithm techniques), coupled with a greater access to digitalized archives, allow a cross-sectional and longitudinal empirical analysis. Finally, theoretically, I seek to explain the impacts of institutional, political and media contexts as enhancing—

or moderating—factors in the evolution of styles. At this early stage of the project, I do not present empirical findings yet. The goal of this contribution is to present the main conceptual assumptions behind my project, the research design, and critically enrich the project by engaging scholars from other disciplines at the Amsterdam interdisciplinary workshop on affective polarization. It is a unique opportunity to discuss the normative implications of political styles, in a context of affective polarization and their effects upon democracies.

1. Literature review: the study of ‘emotive-conflictual’ style in context of affective polarization

The study of political styles is not new and can be traced back to philosophers in Antiquity. Cicero promoted the use of the sober Attic style for the ‘educated members’ of the senate, while he recommended the bombastic Asiatic styles to address the ‘emotional mass’ in the forum (Schoor 2017). This approach was later developed in political sciences, communication studies, and sociolinguistics (Taguieff 1995; Ankersmit 1996; Knight 1998; Canovan 1999; Moffitt & Tormey 2013; Moffitt 2016). In recent years, the electoral successes of populist leaders have particularly boosted academic interest (de Vreese et al., 2018). The political styles of populist leaders have been presented as disruptive *vis-à-vis* conventional styles (e.g., bad manners, uncivil interaction and even nasty words, Moffitt 2016). The study of political styles has also triggered a renewed interest thanks to the burgeoning literature on affective polarization. As Iyengar and colleagues wrote (2019 : 133): “[i]f anything, the rhetoric and actions of political leaders demonstrate that hostility directed at the opposition is acceptable and often appropriate”. In this respect, we can identify two main dimensions of political styles in a context of affective polarization, namely (1) the performative *forms of expressions* of political styles in terms of affects & emotions, and (2) the *nature of interactions* among actors in terms of negativity, incivility, and antagonism towards outgroups (i.e., individual and collective political adversaries).

First, scholars have investigated political styles from the viewpoint of emotive forms of expression, especially since the ‘affective turn’ in social and human sciences (Marcus 2000; Thompson & Hoggett 2012). The analysis of emotions is relatively new in political sciences (Heaney 2019), even in the study of populist actors, despite their alleged negative emotive style (see Immerzeel & Pickup 2015; Stanyer et al., 2017). However, scholars in computer sciences have long developed various techniques for natural language processing to study emotions (Hirschberg & Manning 2015), which they have named *sentiment analysis*. This scholarship has remained clearly text-oriented, as studies have focused predominantly on party manifestos (Kosmidis et al., 2018; Crabtree et al., 2020; Koljonen et al., 2022) and parliamentary debates (Rheault et al., 2016; Cochran et al., 2022). By contrast, the performative analysis of emotive forms of expression based on audio-visual material remains rare (e.g., emotive facial and voice expression of a candidate during a TV electoral debate).

Second, in communication and political sciences, political styles have been primarily studied from the viewpoint of incivility and negative campaigning (see review in Haselmayer 2019). According to Lau and Pomper’s (2002: 48) seminal definition, such style is defined as “talking about the opponent—his or her programs, accomplishment, qualifications, associates, and so on—with the focus, usually, on the defects of these attributes” (see also Skaperdas & Grofman 1995). Going negative upon opponents also includes the explicit use of verbal insults and nonverbal expressions displaying irony or derision (e.g., eye rolling, see Brooks & Geer 2007; Stryker et al., 2016). This literature further refers to the distinction between civil and uncivil interactions (Berry & Sobieraj 2013; Rossini 2020; Mason 2022).

Overall, these various disciplines and research traditions have permitted the creation of analytical frameworks and indicators to measure the alleged increase of “emotive-conflictual political style” in modern politics. Various contents have been studied: parliamentary debates, social networks, interviews in the printed press, performance on TV, and even expert surveys evaluating the political styles used by leaders (see Kaid & Holtz-Bacha 1995; Jagers & Walgrave 2007; Ahuja 2008; Walter & Vliegenthart 2010; van Heerde-Hudson 2011; Nai 2013; Walter 2014; Elmelund-Præstekær & Mølgaard-Svensson 2014; Vasko & Trilling 2019; Nai 2021; Haselmayer et al. 2022; Hargrave & Blumenau 2022; Frimer et al., 2022; Boussalis et al., 2022; Goovaerts & Turkenburg 2022). Scholars in

the U.S. have provided the greatest insights from a longitudinal perspective, as their conclusions have seemed to indicate a certain tendency in the intensity of attacks towards opponents—although with significant ups and downs over time (Benoit 1999; Johnston & Kaid 2002; Geert 2006; Herbst 2010; Shea & Sproveri 2012; Mutz 2015). Yet, even in the work of scholars in the U.S., “the most oft-cited pieces in the field, concern themselves with effects [on voters] rather than content” analysis of the evolution of political styles (Sobieraj & Berry 2011: 35). Hence, different scholars have further assessed the impact of styles on voters’ attitudes and behaviours through electoral surveys and research experiments (Kruikemeier et al., 2013; Gervais 2017; Hameleers et al., 2017; Capelos & Demertzis 2018; Otto et al., 2020). Likewise, scholars in media studies analysed how the media reports styles in the printed press and on TV (Holtz-Bacha 2004; Walgrave et al. 2004; Van Aelst & De Swert 2009; Vliegthart et al., 2011; Zeh & Hopmann 2013).

Despite their respective merits, current studies thus suffer from an overwhelming focus on political styles as performed by contemporary actors and with limited insights beyond the U.S. case study. As a result, the study of the evolution of political styles has remained critically missing in the study of European democracies. The very concept of affective polarization induces to study longitudinal transformations over the last years/decades though. In this respect, the rare European longitudinal studies have used radically different analytical frameworks and various methodologies. Even in the most recent comparative efforts, this heuristic diversity has led to contradictory results in identical or similar cases. It is thus urgent to develop a systematic approach within a common analytical framework (Walter 2021). The goal of this project is precisely to offer the first systematic analysis of styles in European democracies longitudinally.

3. Central claim: emotive-conflictual styles in affective polarized politics are *not* the democratic problem

The contribution of the POLSTYLE project is therefore twofold: (1) a comparative empirical study of evolutions of political styles over time and, (2) an ontological reappraisal of the (un)democratic dimensions of political styles. First, I offer a systematic empirical description of the (alleged) transformations of political styles in four European democracies since the 1960s. In other words, I seek to determine whether there has been a structural transformation leading to an increase in the use of ‘emotive-conflictual’ styles. Moreover, at what pace and with what intensity are these transformations observed over time and across different countries? In answering this question empirically, the POLSTYLE project contributes to the ongoing societal and academic (normative) debates on the functioning of democracies. Because passionate, nasty or uncivil political styles have often been associated with populist (authoritative) leaders (Moffit 2016), such styles have mostly been presented as threats to modern democracies. Some scholars have posited that such ‘emotive-conflictual’ styles challenge the democratic functioning of modern societies (Dryzek et al., 2019). The rise of a so-called Trumpist style is ‘how democracies die’ (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) and entails nothing other than modern democracies’ ‘final act’ (Rosenberg 2021).

Second, my contribution seeks to reflect about the (un)democratic dimensions of political styles under alleged context of affective polarization. **My central claim is that passionate, vivid, confrontational, uncivil and even nasty political styles are *not* necessarily democratic threats.** In contrast, these styles can even be seen as core components of modern democracies. As per Lipset’s seminal work (1959: 83), “group conflicts are democracy’s lifeblood”, while Mouffe’s (1999) work has underlined that the “task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions [...] but to mobilise those passions towards the motion of democracy” (see also for the U.S. Brader 2006 & Geer 2006). Against a form of nostalgia for good old times, I critically challenge the conventional idea that emotive-conflictual styles threaten our contemporary democracies in peculiar ways. The central assumption of the POLSTYLE project is that threats to democracy is not to be found in the alleged increase in the intensity of emotive-conflictual styles over time. Such styles are indeed defining features of democratic politics. As a consequence, affective polarization in modern politics should not – necessarily – be seen as an exceptional modern feature that is detrimental to our contemporary time in European democracies. Instead, I posit that the

challenges that some styles posited to democracy is the fact that such styles have increasingly targeted individuals and groups, and even their private traits and personal life. This change has occurred at the expense of the substance that focused on political issues and policy orientation. In European politics, this change are to be explained by structural changes that have been taking place over the end of the 20th century, namely “the hollowing out of western democracies” (Mair 2013). This process refers to the decline of political parties as linkage agents, ideological de-polarisation as well as depoliticisation of policy orientation (Majone 1994; Boix 1998; Lodge 2008, Thatcher & Stone Sweet 2002). Since the golden age of “mass parties” (until the 1960), parties’ organisations and strategies went to major structural and organisational changes transforming them into “catch-all parties” (Kirchheimer 1966). From the 1970s and onwards, traditional policy cleavages started to erode leading to a form of issue depolarization in European democracies¹. To put it simply, under these structural transformations of politics, political parties “increasingly resemble each other concerning campaign style, and the content of their campaign messages is expected to show evidence of losing its ideological edge” (Karvonen & Rappe, 1991: 245).

As the ideological divide and strength of collective partisan actors have been declining, the major risk for our democracies is that the emotive hostility towards outgroups is increasingly identarian and viscerally personal towards outgroups. **‘Politics is all about conflicts’, but modern democracies might thus be entering an era of ‘group conflicts without politics’.** In the most worrying scenario, this emotive based hostility in political styles could even induce a radical shift in the ontological nature of our modern democracies. Using Mouffe (1999; 2022)’s seminal distinction between agonistic democracies and antagonist democracies, “political adversaries” might not be anymore driven by victory over policy orientation, but by the delegitimizing – and potential annihilation – of their “political enemies” (see also Mason 2018). In this wake, Rossini (2022) also suggested to critically distinguish ‘though and unpleasant tone’ in styles (which is part of the democratic conflicts, albeit potentially unpleasant for some profiles of voters) from ‘intolerant styles’ (which is a direct threat towards democratic pluralism and incompatible with the functioning of our modern democracies). In Rokkan’s words, the problem with affective polarization is not that elected officials and political parties are “agents of conflict”, but that they cease to – complementary – act as “agents of integration”.

Because I do praise (some) virtues of emotive-conflictual styles in democracy, my approach goes against a certain dominant view in the political sciences literature. For decades, emotions-based politics was presented as irrational and impulsive elements that were clouding political actors’ judgement and undermining the ‘ideal-type’ of the rational informed-based actors in our representative democracies (Damasio 1994; Dalton et al. 2000). Against such dominant view, other scholars have yet argued that emotive and negativity in politics are essential for the quality of democracy (Geer 2006; Valentino et al. 2018). Likewise, several studies in social psychology have praised the added-values of emotions as

¹ Some scholars could arguably dispute this statement. While some predicted that “the ideological age has ended” (Bell 1960: 373), the “silent revolution” taking place in the 1970s (Inglehart 1977) led to the creation of new cleavages and new parties. For instance, Green parties activated cleavages based on “new politics” (with a focus on new issues such as ecology, peace, and self-determination). In Europe, they encountered different electoral successes (even entering government coalitions) in Belgium and Germany, but remain marginal actors in other countries such as the United Kingdom and Spain. At the same moment, extreme and radical right-wing parties encountered a new electoral audience thanks to the “silent counter-revolution”. Against “new politics”, these parties favoured nationalism and the defence of the traditional social and political order. In the 2010s, protest and extreme right parties gain even more electoral success thanks to an ideology centered on “welfare chauvinism” (e.g. VB in Belgium, AfD in Germany, UKIP in the UK). More recently, in the wake of the 2008-2012 financial and economic crises, new actors (re)activated traditional cleavages, especially about the question of redistribution of wealth (Hopkins 2020). Radical left parties encountered electoral success in multiple countries (e.g. Podemos in Spain and PTB-PVDA in Belgium), undermining the social-democratic parties already in decline.

I agree that these transformations over the last decades prove that Mair’s assumption of the “the hollowing out of western democracies” is not a completed nor a linear process. Yet, I do believe that it remains a *systematic* trend under modern European politics. My goal in the POLSTYLE project is precisely to assess under which conditions this systematic trend has been going faster or slower in some countries than others (see below, my five main hypotheses explain variations over time, across types of parties and across countries in section 4).

they can help voters to better understand policy issues and arguments in a political debate (Lecheler et al. 2013), trigger information-seeking behaviour (Valentino et al. 2008; Ryan 2012), being more critical (Marcus 2002), shape political engagement (Kleres & Wettergren 2017; Capelos & Demertzis 2018), shape voting behaviour and policy preferences (Inbar et al. 2009; Garry 2014; Nielsen 2017), while emotional content can help representatives to connect with voters (Metz et al. 2020). More recently, several authors have evoked that the absence – not the presence – of such passionate, vivid, or confrontational has been the cause of political apathy in modern European politics. As observed by Curtis (2018) during the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign, British political and voters seem to have re-learn how to passionately engage with politics, even though if this seems engaging on dividing issues.

4. Research design of the POLSTYLE project

4.1. Analytical framework and hypotheses

In this project, I seek to empirically assess that emotive-conflictual styles (i.e., forms of expression and the nature of interactions) are a relatively constant (and democratic) feature of politics, but that the targeted content has evolved over time, with the increasing use of attacks against outgroups *at the expense* of the substance in terms of issues and policies. I furthermore expect that these transformations over time reflect complex and multifaceted phenomena: they result from political actors’ interactions with their broader political and institutional contexts. My goal is to explain how these contexts mitigate change over time, across arenas, parties, and countries as I develop below. Overall, table 1 thus presents the main three components of political styles I will study: (1) the targeted object of content, (2) the nature of interactions, and (3) the forms expressions (see table 1).

Table 1. Analysing three components of political styles

1. Targeted subjects / objects	Issues & policies	<i>versus</i>	Individual & collective actors
2. Nature of interactions	Going negative against outgroups’ traits	<i>versus</i>	Praising ingroups’ traits
3. Forms of expressions	Negatively oriented emotions	<i>versus</i>	Positively oriented emotions

In addition, I seek to theoretically explain the stability and change in the patterns of political styles. In other words, what are the moderating and enhancing effects of technological, institutional and political factors on the observed transformations in political styles? To answer this question, the project relies on a neo-institutionalist framework in which I identify three hypotheses (H1-H2-H3) that have triggered the transformation in political styles over time. I also identify two main factors of stability emerging out of the self-reproduction of styles (H4-H5). Such approach will allow me to explain how political actors have been adapting differently their political styles *vis-à-vis* abrupt exogenous shocks (e.g. a social or an economic crisis as in 1968 and in 2008) and endogenous incremental changes (e.g. long-term effects of new social groups entering politics gradually or the technological transformations in political communication). This theory-building approach explaining evolutions over time and across countries has not been proposed to date. This is an urgently needed contribution (Maier & Nai 2020; Walter 2021).

First, I examine how the development of new technologies of mass communication has transformed political styles (**H1-new media logic**). Since the 1960s, the audio-visual performance of political actors on TV has increasingly become the main medium of politics (styles as ‘sounds and images’). However, European politics has remained more newspaper-centred than American politics (Plasser & Plasser 2002). Furthermore, the media logic has varied across the four democracies under study (Hallin & Mancini 2004; Dobek-Ostrowska 2015), together with a transition from low to high-choice media environments (Van Aelst et al., 2017). My goal is precisely to assess how these media-based factors have

shaped styles over time. Second, I test how changes in political styles have reflected a dynamic process resulting from the actors' strategic reactions to changes in their electoral environment (**H2-strategic incentives**). I expect that changes in styles to reflect the varying degree of party fragmentation and ideological polarisation observed over time in the four democracies under study (Dalton 2008). In a context of lower levels of disagreement about policy content (Mair 2013), attacks towards outgroups should increase as a strategy to stand out *vis-à-vis* opponents. Third, I test whether the introduction of 'new profiles of representatives' came with alternative patterns of political styles (**H3-opening of politics to new social groups**). In particular, the project examines women's increasing access to politics (Cotta & Best 2008). Some studies have indicated that women are more likely to attack their opponents on issues than on personal traits, showing more emotion and less aggressivity (Walter 2013; Hargrave & Langengen 2020). The scholarship is, however, indecisive because gender stereotypes are a key mediating factor (Eagly & Wood 2012). My goal is to test whether gender differences have evolved over time as a greater number of women have become involved in politics or whether they constitute an everlasting feature of European politics.

Fourth, I expect that actors' styles are decisively shaped by their institutional environment, which cause an overall pattern of stability over time (**H4-institutional systems**). In this respect, I expect greater stability in 'prudent' styles in consensus-based political systems than in majoritarian systems. Indeed, a prudent style is a necessary condition for a consensus-based political structure to survive (Lijphart 1969; Caluwaerts & Reuchamps 2015). Likewise, the (negative) emotions present in political life are framed by cultural and historical contexts (Langhamer 2016) such as a history of authoritarianism and totalitarianism. I thus expect to find lower evolutions towards negative form of expression in these systems. Finally, in verifying **H5 (norms of delivery contexts)**, I expect to find that patterns of stability reflect path dependency effects *across* arenas *within* countries. In the parliamentary arena, members of parliament share some expectations about how to behave and communicate (Ilie 2003; 2018), while internal parliamentary regulations enforce certain behaviours and ban others. In contrast, social media present greater freedom of expression, even inciting specific angry and negative communication (Ryan 2012; Mueller & Saeltzer 2020). In sum, I expect to find path-dependency effects in certain arenas, as actors' styles reflect (in)formal codes of conduct associated with each arena.

4.2. A comparative research design: 4 countries and 2,000 individual political actors

The POLSTYLE develops a comparative research design including four countries (BE, DE, ES, and the UK) and covering long-term temporal evolutions (1960-2025). The case selection reflects a trade-off between the generalisability of the results (four countries with specific institutional and political variance) and the management of a large-N data analysis in four countries over time. First, all countries are located in Europe and are democratic parliamentary regimes. The fact that all cases are located in Europe allows me to control for the shared economic and political contexts, while parliamentary systems allow for the control of personalised presidential regimes (Rahat & Kenig 2018). By controlling for these external intervening factors, I mitigate the risks of "too many variables, too few cases" (Lijphart 1971). Second, the countries selected are mostly established democracies located in western Europe (BE, DE, the UK). The inclusion of a southern country (ES) allows me to test the robustness of my hypotheses for countries under democratic transition (from the late 1970s).

Third, these countries offer the necessary institutional and political diversity to support my hypotheses (see above). To account for changes in electoral competition, I selected countries in which party competition is structured through a bipolar party system (UK, ES) that substantially differs from countries characterised by moderate pluralism and extreme multipartyism (BE, DE). All these countries offer distinct levels of ideological polarisation (Dalton 2008): this polarisation has been weaker in BE and DE while greater in the UK and ES. 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). This approach allows me to test H2 to find out about changes in styles as a way for actors to react to their environment in responsive and dynamic ways. Likewise, the emergence and success of populist parties

across and within countries allow me to test the mimetic process in style (e.g., AfD in Germany,, UKIP in the UK). The selected cases also cover the necessary variance to test for distinct media logics: the ‘Mediterranean model’ (ES), the ‘Democratic corporatist model’ (BE, DE), and the ‘Liberal model’ (UK).

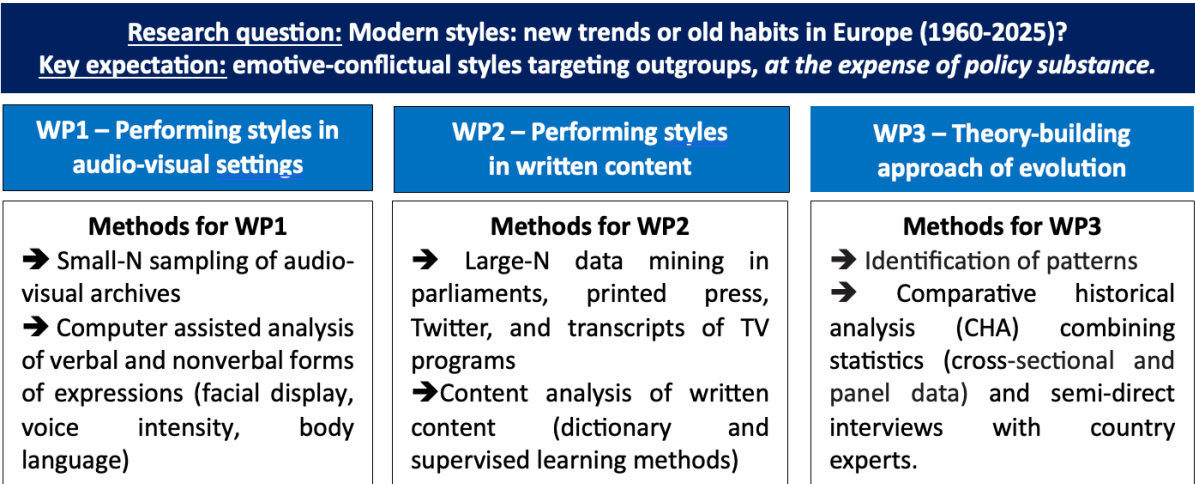
Within these four countries, I specify a sampling procedure covering 2,000 individual actors according to three main criteria. First, individual actors are selected from a pool of actors beyond the populist “usual suspects”: I analyse the wider spectrum of political parties (as per H2). The relevance of parties to be included is not merely a question of electoral strength, but also depends on the capacity of these parties to impact the broader party system (Sartori 1976). The goal is to obtain a diversity of types of parties in terms of different organisational resources and electoral strategies (Kirchheimer 1966; Potguntke et al., 2006; Gunther & Diamond 2003), the emergence of traditional cleavages for mainstream parties (Lipset & Rokkan 1967) and the authoritative-libertarian dimensions for niche parties (Meguid 2008). Second, the project innovates by extending the scope of analysis beyond top national political leaders (i.e., heads of governments, ministers or party leaders). As established in my recent work, (personalized) politics is “not only about leaders” (Dodeigne & Pilet 2022). The recent literature has underlined the need to study politicians who have distinct political capital (MPs, “mavericks” and other prominent party personalities). Parties strategically rely on people with different profiles to achieve distinct vote-seeking and policy-seeking goals (Dolezal et al. 2017; Dodeigne et al., 2019) across different electoral arenas (Dodeigne 2018). Finally, the sampling procedure includes political actors with distinct gender and individuals belonging to different political generations (as per H3).

Overall, my sampling procedure will guarantee a representative array of profiles. The number of 2,000 individuals is an estimation based on the number of countries studied, the average duration of the legislative terms, and the types of profiles and parties included. Information for selection will be obtained through ad hoc comparative research projects: the Party Leaders database, Constituency-Level Elections Archives, ParlGov, Political Party Database Project, Manifesto Project database, Comparative Political Data Set, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey, Evolv’EP project, and IntraPartyComp.

5. Methods: Mixed methodological strategies for analysis of written and audio-visual material

The POLSTYLE project is structured around three work packages (WPs, see figure 1).

Figure 1. Structure of the project



WP 1 provides the first study on political styles performed on TV settings in European democracies since the 1960s. Following the ‘age of mass parties, printed leaflets and printed press’ in the early 20th century, the introduction of TV has made styles evolve into performances based on ‘images and sounds’. Moving away from the predominant literature that has been based on text analysis, WP1 is a study about how

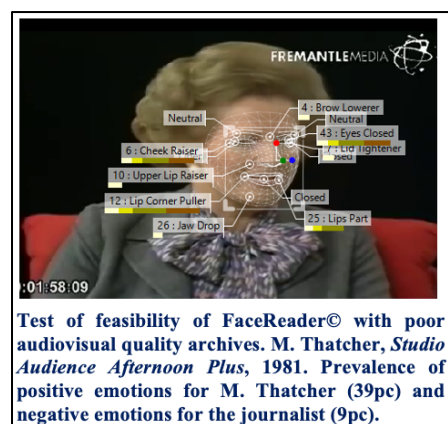
actors connect ‘day-to-day’ with their audience via audio-visual forms of expressions on TV (a central medium of mass communication until the early 21st century). Verbal and nonverbal forms of communication are decisive dimensions shaping voters’ attitudes (Boussalis et al., 2021). This approach allows me, for instance, to study the ways in which an MP uses emotions through facial expressions as a display of his or her disgust towards an opponent during a weekly TV debate. Likewise, I can record how a party leader aggressively points fingers when contradicting his or her political opponent. Collecting and analysing audio-visual archives dating back to the 1960s is risky, but new cutting-edge techniques make it possible.

Despite the growing development of audio-visual technologies, ‘written content’ has not fully vanished from politics. Political styles have continued to be performed through interviews in the printed press or in parliamentary interventions. Even the digital era has reinstated the importance of ‘written content’: on Twitter, posts of 280 characters are instantly transmitted to thousands of followers. WP2 is an analysis of the ways in which politics has developed in other arenas where written content predominates (interviews in the printed press, activities in parliaments and posts on Twitter). Overall, WP1 and WP2 permit the creation of quantitative indicators that monitor the stability or changes in politics over time based on three components of political styles, namely, targeted content, forms of expressions and the nature of interactions.

Finally, WP3 will have long-lasting impacts on the scholarship as the theory-building approach used is meant to explain why patterns either remain stable or change over time. My first objective is to determine how the different dimensions analysed in WP1 and WP2 have merged into meaningful patterns of evolution of political styles. The second goal is to explain how and why patterns have unfolded in certain configurations, validating or invalidating my five hypotheses. In other words, what are the causal mechanisms inducing critical shifts in specific time periods or self-reinforcing patterns over elections in other countries? What conditions are the decline and emergence of new patterns? Answering these questions requires a long-run analysis, which is at the heart of this project (65 years of politics are covered). In this respect, my historical approach allows me to account for critical junctures, but also for incremental transformations (Mahoney & Thelen 2010).

Methods for WP1: Analysis of audio-visual performance via the study of emotive facial display, voice intensity and body language.

WP1 tackles interventions by politicians as they perform styles on TV. I collect audio-visual archives, covering a diversity of audiences and contexts (evening news, electoral debates and weekly political programs involving a host). The analysis of audio-visual performances constitutes a highly innovative empirical approach. Contrary to written forms of expression, the display of emotions and of negative interactions goes beyond the choice of words in oral speech. Major developments in computational methods proved that computer-assisted methods make large-N analysis of audio-visual material possible today, even in the case of poor-quality archives (see the test of feasibility conducted on Margaret Thatcher’s interview in 1981). Cutting-edge techniques allow me to record emotions in facial expressions and voice intensity (see, for instance, Boussalis et al. 2021). Furthermore, by recording nonverbal interactions between actors, I analyse their body posture, such as Donald Trump’s famous finger pointing behaviour (a typical way to attack political adversaries) and other body gestures displaying attacks (e.g., irony through eye rolling). I can rely on recent techniques developed by the *HuMaLearn* and computer sciences UNamur teams to identify body postures. However, these techniques require higher-quality audio-visual footage. In case of poor quality, the project instead relies on the qualitative coding by trained human coders.



Methods for WP2: Content analysis of written material

In WP2, I use four types of written empirical material: (1) interviews published in the print press, (2) written parliamentary interventions, (3) posts on Twitter, and (4) transcripts of TV interventions. The analysis of the three dimensions of political styles (targeted content, nature of interactions, and forms of expression, see table 1) is conducted via a combination of content analysis methods. For targeted content, I use dictionary-based approaches to identify the mention of *issues*, *policies* and *actors*. Existing coding books serve as the basis for identifying these items (e.g., comparative agenda project). For the coding of emotive forms of expression, I can rely on psycholinguistic dictionaries such as the *Affective Norms for English Words* (ANEW) and the *Linguistic Inquirer and Word Count* (LIWC). These psycholinguistic dictionaries are available—or can be translated (e.g., Silva et al., 2022)—in the languages used in the four countries studied in this project. Finally, the analysis of the nature of interactions presents the greatest challenges: there is no systematic coding book that describes the complexity of these interactions (e.g., the use of insults in ‘going negative’ on opponents). The project thus uses deep learning techniques. This approach proved successful in recent large-N analyses of political science material (Petkevic & Nai 2021; Dodeigne et al. 2023). To limit the risks of a rigid and purely deductive approach, WP2 develops a unique analytical framework that account for the evolving cultural contexts over time.

Methods for WP3: Comparative historical analysis (CHA)

The goal of WP3 is to build a theory about the causes of stability and changes in the (re)emergence of patterns of political styles. Considering the long temporal scope and the comparative nature of the POLSTYLE project, I use a CHA approach, which permits the development of thick theories (Coppedge 1999) allowing for complex arguments to be developed to explain the way in which patterns are sequenced. The goal is to identify sequences of openness and contingency that create changes in patterns or, on the contrary, path dependency and self-reinforcing sequences. The CHA is developed through a mixed-method research design combining qualitative and quantitative techniques of analysis. The first step consists in the identification of the different sequences by which patterns of political styles unfold. Quantitative methods specifically designed to identify longitudinal patterns are used (e.g., low-order autoregressive models, phase-space models, and state-space models). Interviews with country experts are conducted to discuss, refine and improve the patterns identified (approximately 5-7 interviews per country until saturation). The second step of WP3 is to test the causal factors that explain changes and stability over time according to my five hypotheses. For that goal, the project relies upon statistical methods specifically designed for time-series data across six decades of analysis. Existing comparative projects (including my own) permit the collection of the necessary empirical material to test independent and control variables. In WP3, I will focus in particular on deviant cases (e.g., when the intensity of conflictual styles increases faster in a consensus-based democracy than in a majoritarian democracy, which contradicts H4). This allows me to refine causal mechanisms accordingly.

Conclusion

The POLSTYLE project seeks to contribute to our scholarly understanding of the evolution of political styles in a context of alleged affective polarization in Western democracies on three main accounts. First, I seek to empirically establish the first comparative inventory of political styles in four countries over a long period (1960-2025). My approach seeks to go beyond some limits present in the current scholarship, which remains divided because of varying research traditions across disciplines, the diversity of indicators and methodologies used, and the limited geographical and temporal scope of the studies involved. Moreover, researchers have faced barriers in their analysis of large-N data. This project takes up the challenge by using cutting-edge analytical techniques for verbal and nonverbal dimensions of styles. Furthermore, I want to move beyond mere intuitive and anecdotal accounts about the evolution of political styles in modern democracies. In particular, I seek to go against the nostalgia idea for good old times. Hence, some colleagues have underlined that “intensely felt political division seems to be an all-too-familiar feature of 21st century democratic politics” (Hobolt et al., 2020:15). Yet, despite today’s important challenges faced by European democracies, political and economic crises and

intensely felt divisions seem to be a continuous feature of European politics. A few events can be used as evidence: the 1968 social revolution, the 1973 oil crisis, the 1983 economic recession, the 1992 constraining dissensus on European integration, the 2008-2010 financial crisis, and the 2020 climate crisis. In the absence of any historical perspective, the 'idealisation of the past' is an easy temptation for researchers. We must resist defining the style of 21st century politicians as an exceptional feature of contemporary time in European democracies. Instead, what should be seen as the exception over time is the (relative) decline in polarisation in the late 20th century. This refers to "the hollowing out of western democracies" during the (late) 20th century (Mair 2013). That is, we have witnessed a process since the 1960s that has resulted in a greater consensus over the market economy and a decrease in ideological polarisation ("third way" Giddens 1999) as well as in the emergence of "regulatory states" with "nonpartisan bodies" (Majone 1994; Lodge 2008) and the depoliticisation of policy (Thatcher and Stone Sweet 2002). Parties and collective identities have profoundly eroded to the benefit of greater individualisation (Rahat & Koenig 2018). My longitudinal analysis allows us to discover the truly new elements of political styles, the old enduring habits, and ultimately the genuine new (un)democratic trends in political styles.

In this respect, the richness of the empirical material collected constitutes a new landmark useful beyond the POLSTYLE project. The data collected will permit to assess – in the future – the effects of political styles on peoples' voting behaviour, on parties' electoral successes, on the stability of governments, or on the satisfaction with and quality of democracy, among other factors. At the level of citizens, future projects could test how real-based political styles contribute to a decline in political trust (Mutz & Reeves 2005), an increase in cynicism about politics (Cappella & Jamieson 1997), and the extent to which individual issues and styles affect politics (Giger et al. 2021). As scholars have recently reiterated, we need to examine the effects of the 'real stuff' (Boussalis et al., 2021), and not only based on artificial vignettes in experimental research design (Skytte 2021). At the level of political parties, my study allows for an explanation of the circumstances under which 'going negative' is a risky strategy that can backfire (Van Kleef et al. 2015) and trigger intraparty competition that undermines a party's reputation (Green & Haber 2015; Mershon 2020). At the system level, future research could analyse how political styles impact a government's (in)stability; for instance, studies could explain how and why political actors are unable to cooperate, for example when personalised antagonising goes over a certain threshold of intensity (Vakso & Trilling 2019; Casal Bértoa & Rama 2021).

Second, the project seeks to provide a theoretical explanation on the factors explaining stability and change in political styles over time. The theory-build approach allows me to define the causal mechanisms that explain the cyclical emergence of specific patterns in some arenas and relative stability in others; it also allows me to explain why some political systems have experienced deep transformations at an early stage while other countries have remained relatively exempt from certain evolutions until recently. Longitudinal empirical analyses have been lacking beyond the case of the U.S., and theoretical engagements have been largely absent on the topic of European democracies. More broadly, I intend to stimulate critical theoretical reflections about the past and current functioning of modern European democracies.

To conclude, the POLSTYLE project also seeks to reflect on the normative implications of different political styles for the functioning of our democratic societies. Western democracies have witnessed a wave of contestations and the (re)emergence of protests and radical parties, as established parties have not been able to meet voters' demands on various accounts (Hopkin 2020). Some of these parties have accessed, or have been waiting to access, government offices in multiple countries (the U.S., Hungary, France, Belgium, Sweden or Italy). The political style of some leaders in these countries—often pictured as 'populists'—has largely contributed to defining emotive-conflictual styles as vices in the functioning of democracy. However, some authors have underlined that even the populist style includes some democratic virtues (de Vreese et al., 2018). Laclau (2005) concluded that the existence of populists (and the specific styles they use) allows for the political representation of demands from voters who have

been socially marginalised and politically excluded. Beyond the mere case of populist actors, other scholars have posited that the lack of, rather than the rise in, emotional politics might precisely have been the problem of modern politics over the last few years. Representatives have ceased to inspire and emotionally motivate voters (see, for instance, Curtice (2018) on his analysis of the Brexit campaign). In a context in which people's trust in political parties and representative institutions has declined, emotive styles might precisely be the way for representatives to (re)connect with voters. In other words, it could be argued that 'we need more, not less' of these styles for political systems to function as democracies. Yet, various public authorities and private organisations have intended to regulate the way actors should act during campaigns and on social networks (e.g., regulation of freedom of speech on social networks, or electoral reforms and party reforms that favour personalisation). A proper scientific diagnosis of the alleged threats and transformative evolutions is, therefore, critically needed before implementing reforms. The cure against certain styles might be more damaging to democracy than the wrongly identification of threats to democracy. Any attempt to regulate political styles should carefully consider the normative implications at stake. Overall, the POLSTYLE project seeks to critically inform these societal debates, both empirically and theoretically.

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