Value Conflicts in a Differentiated Europe:
The Impact of Digital Media on Value Polarization in Europe

#ValCon

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How can we explain the new salience of value conflicts?
What is the role of digital and social media in these value conflicts?

→ How far is the increasing contestation of democratic values linked to widespread use of new social media?

→ Are the opportunities for value pluralism undermined and the risks of value fundamentalism consolidated by filter bubbles and echo chambers?

→ What is the relationship between the erosion of value consensus at the national level and "drifting apart" of the EU as a community of values?

A crisis of liberal democracy in Europe?
Cultural backlash revised

There is a growing concern that support for democratic values and institutions in the European societies is waning, while support for illiberal and authoritarian values is increasing. This leads to severe value conflicts within and across European societies.

We argue for a new understanding of value conflicts as a form of mediatised conflicts. The ‚cultural backlash' is not simply driven by the change in peoples' attitudes, but also by the change of how people communicate with each other.

ValCon asks: How is the rise of new value conflicts interlinked with the increasing digital and social media usage?

Meta-analysis of scientific literature on values and polarization
1943-2020

4088 articles found on Web of Science and Scopus.
Preliminary conclusion:

→ Till 1990s, literature focused on values and their change

→ From 1990s onwards, research shifted focus to value conflicts and polarization

→ Post-2000s: growing interest in value conflicts and political politicization related to party politics, elections and issue of gender

→ Recently: climate change, populism and social media as new research avenues within the values literature
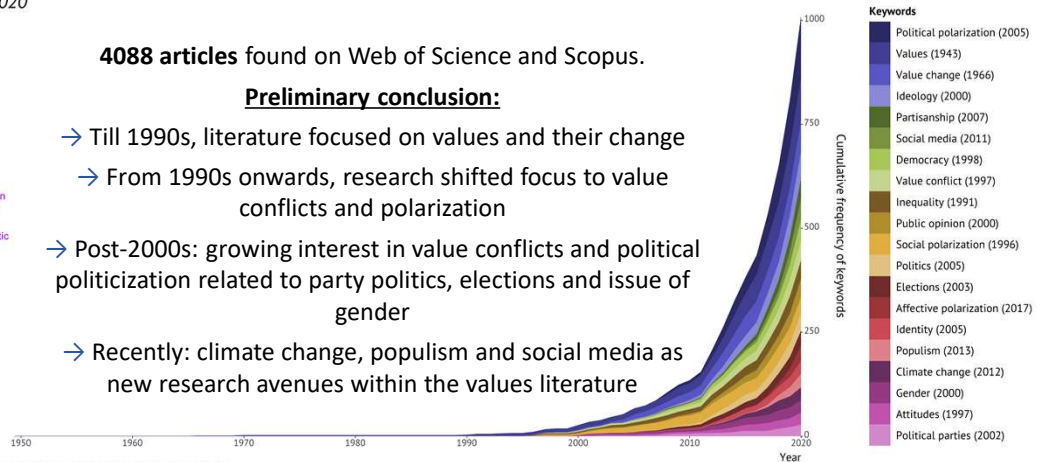

Keywords
- Political polarization (2005)
- Values (1943)
- Value change (1966)
- Ideology (2000)
- Partisanship (2007)
- Social media (2011)
- Democracy (1998)
- Value conflict (1997)
- Inequality (1991)
- Public opinion (2000)
- Social polarization (1996)
- Politics (2005)
- Elections (2003)
- Affective polarization (2017)
- Identity (2005)
- Populism (2013)
- Climate change (2012)
- Gender (2000)
- Attitudes (1997)
- Political parties (2002)

Figure 1: Word cloud of keywords in value research. *The more frequent the word, the larger it is visible in the cloud.*

Figure 2: Occurrences of top 20 keywords in value research. *The stacked yearly series shows how each of these keywords evolved over time, where the y-axis represents the sum total of all 20 keywords within the 1943 to 2020 period. Brackets in the legend keys denote the year the keyword first appeared in the literature.*

Research design

We combine a cross-country survey of media use and values with a comparative content analysis of (social) media debates.

The project focuses on three core democratic value conflicts:
(1) **freedom of speech**
(2) **rule of law**
(3) **gender equality**

We investigate these debates in six European countries **(ES, FR, DE, PL, IT, IRE)**

SURVEY
Relates degrees of social media use with value polarization

→ how do people use social media?

→ how strongly do they adhere to or contest core democratic values?

→ how is social media use related to the political polarization?

CONTENT ANALYSIS
Investigates polarized political discourses on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram

→ actors that contest values online and their relations over time

→ how are different types of media (online-offline) interlinked?

→ how do opinions polarize and radicalize?

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS
Investigates whether value contestation as a Europeanized field is emerging

→ is polarization and radicalization around core values nationally specific?

→ is Europeanized public emerging through these value contestations?

→ can we observe the cross-country cleavages in value contestation?

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