

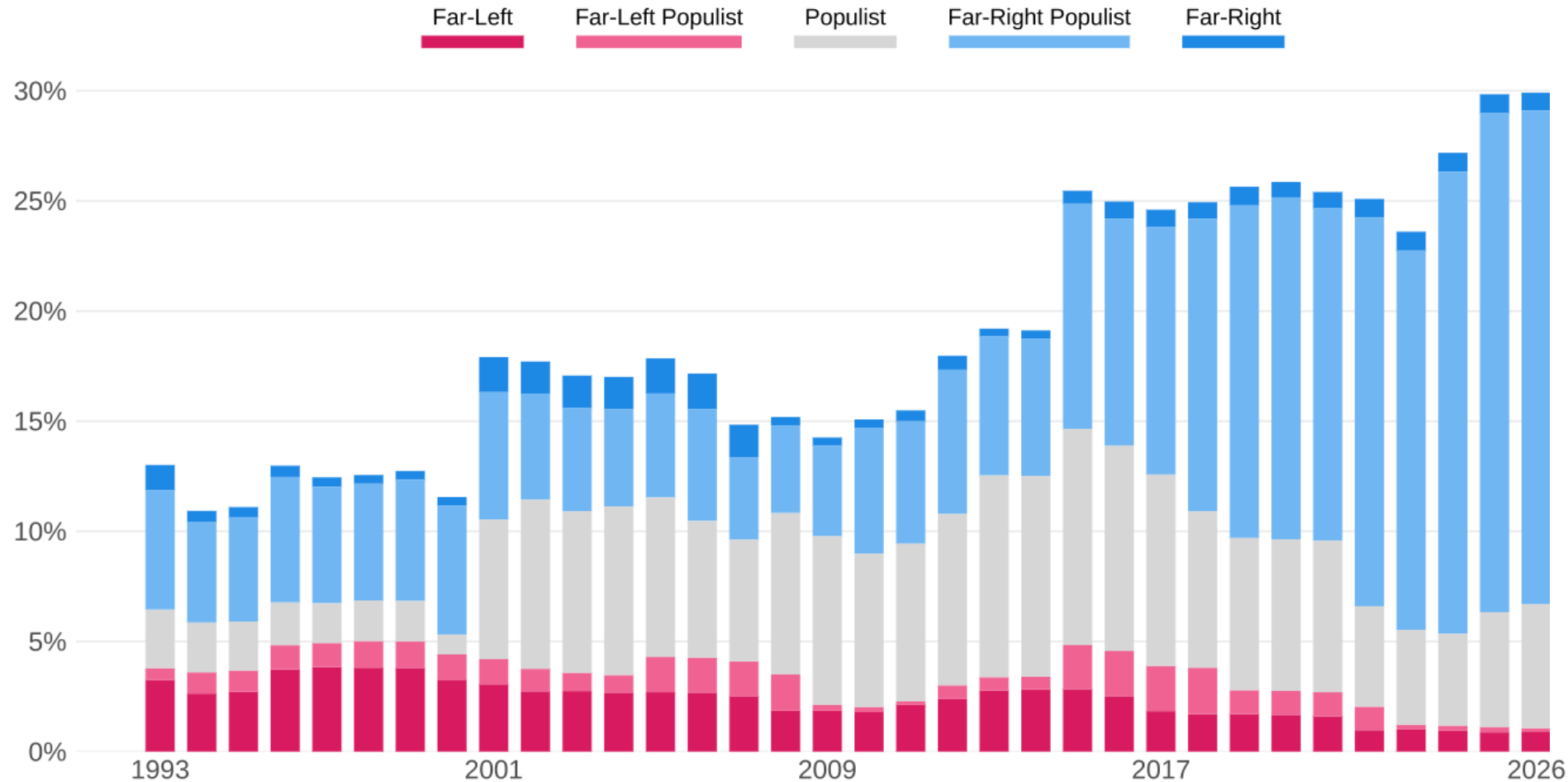


Selling the Past

**How Populists
Turn Nostalgia into
Political Gain**

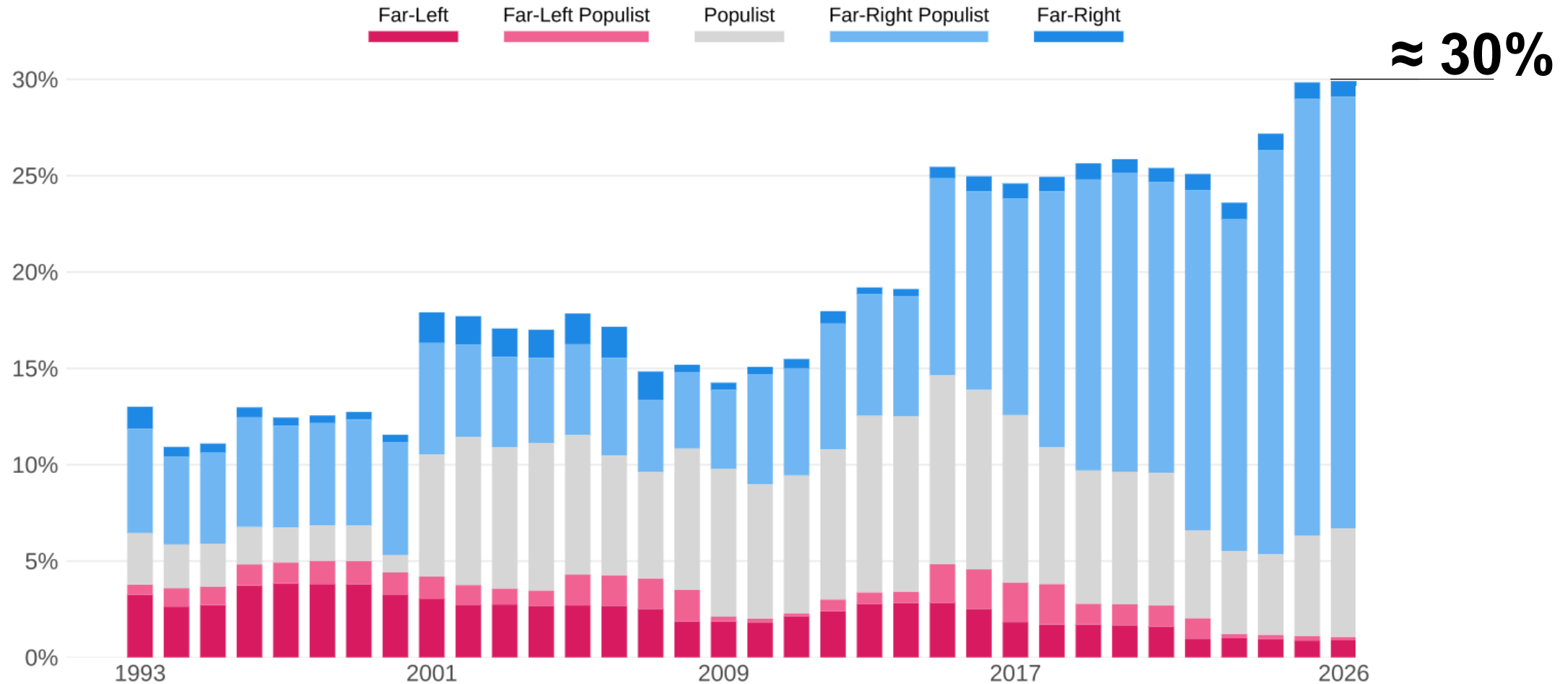
AGI Webinar
23 September 2026

Point of Departure: Rise of Populist Voting in Europe



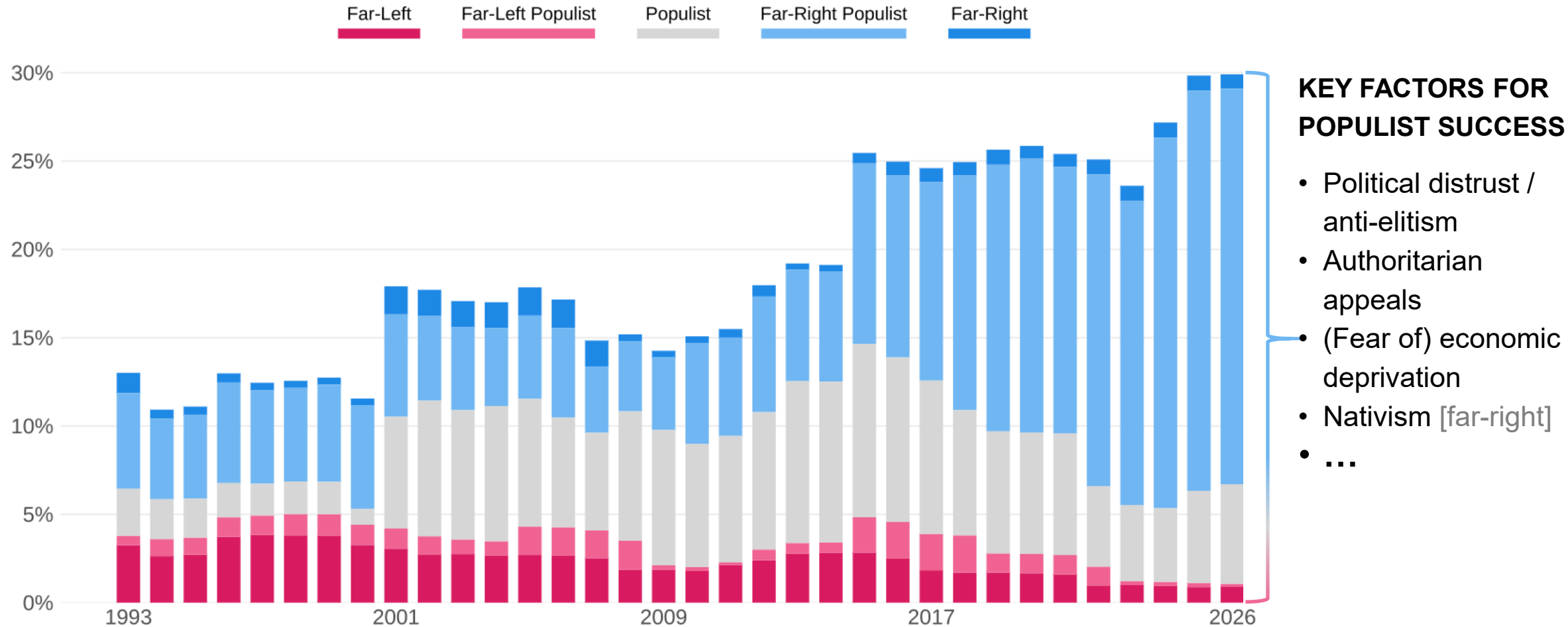
Note. Vote shares of (1) far-left, (2) far-left populist, (3) populist, (4) far-right populist, and (5) far-right parties in 31 European countries, weighted by population size.

Point of Departure: Rise of Populist Voting in Europe



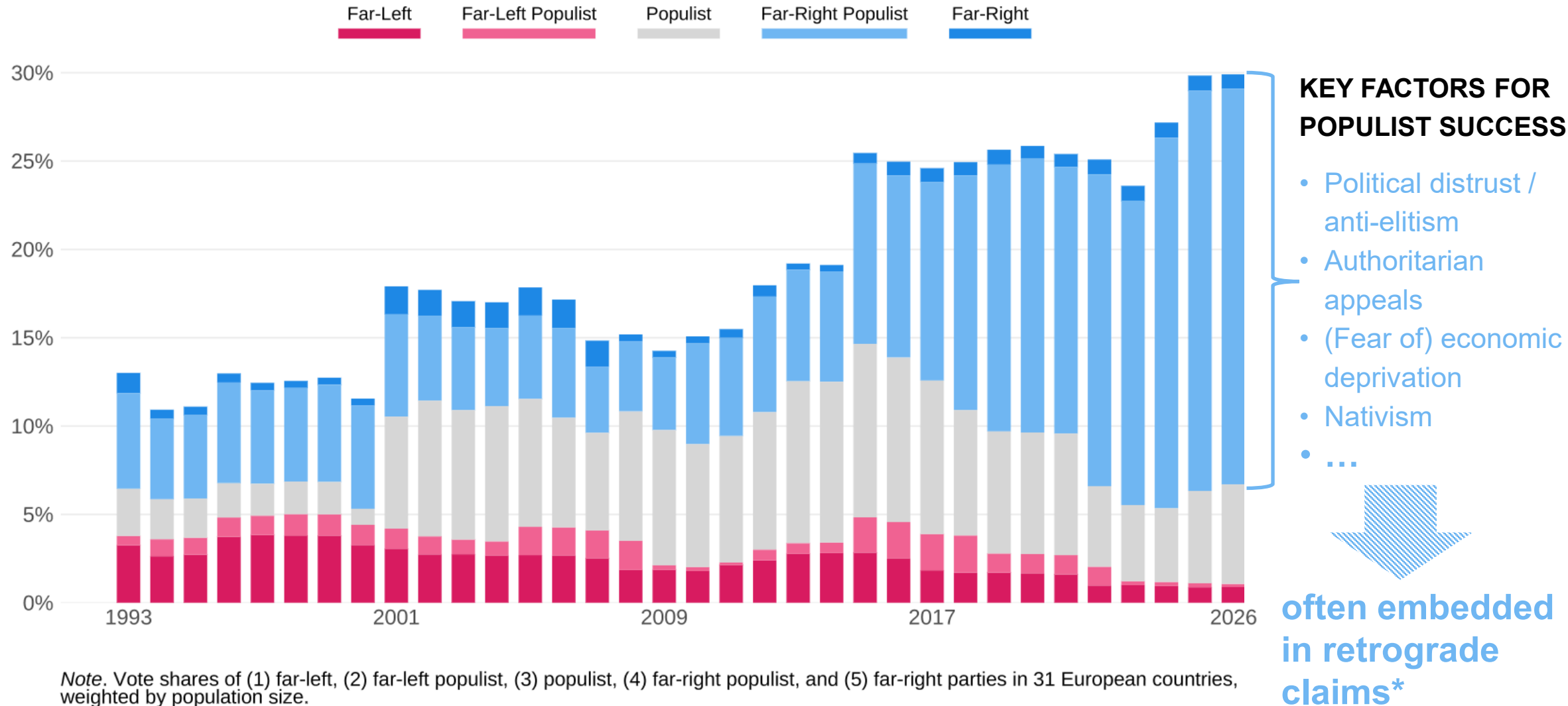
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Point of Departure: Rise of Populist Voting in Europe



Note. Vote shares of (1) far-left, (2) far-left populist, (3) populist, (4) far-right populist, and (5) far-right parties in 31 European countries, weighted by population size.

Point of Departure: Rise of Populist Voting in Europe



Point of Departure: Rise of Populist Voting in Europe



*Netherlands Ours Again



KEY FACTORS FOR POPULIST SUCCESS

- Political distrust / anti-elitism
- Authoritarian appeals
- (Fear of) economic deprivation
- Nativism
- ...



often embedded
in retrograde
claims

Point of Departure: Rise of Populist Voting in Europe



How the Sweden Democrats use AI – manipulates clips of opposition politicians



Dutch government led by far-right PVV asks EU for opt-out from asylum rules

Move by coalition headed by Geert Wilders' Freedom party is unlikely to get a positive reception in Brussels



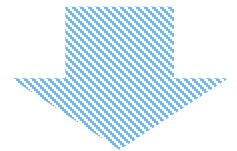
“
Hitler and the Nazis are just a bird shit in more than 1000 years of successful German history

Alexander Gauland, Alternative for Germany

Suspicious Attack in Saxony-Anhalt: AfD Politicians Are Said to Have Followed 14-Year-Olds with Baseball Bats

KEY FACTORS FOR POPULIST SUCCESS

- Political distrust / anti-elitism
- Authoritarian appeals
- (Fear of) economic deprivation
- Nativism
- ...



often departing from ordinary politics

Overarching question:

Who is susceptible to this form of political mobilization?

Conceptual foundation: A Proto-Theory of *Backlash Politics*

Proposed by Alter, K. and Zürn, M. (2020)

- *Backlash politics* is a distinct form of political contestation that combines **retrograde objectives** – i.e., efforts to restore an idealized prior social and political condition – with **extraordinary claims and tactics**, including challenges to fundamental democratic principles such as the rule of law and non-violence.
- *Backlash movements* employ both elements. They become *backlash politics* once their rhetoric and tactics **enter and transform mainstream public discourse**.

Special Issue Article

Political Studies Association | BJPIR

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SAGE

Theorising backlash politics: Conclusion to a special issue on backlash politics in comparison

Karen J Alter¹ and Michael Zürn^{2,3} 

Abstract
This conclusion to a special issue on backlash politics develops a proto-theory of backlash politics. The special issue's introduction defined backlash politics as a particular form of political contestation with a retrograde objective as well as extraordinary goals or tactics that has reached the threshold level of entering mainstream public discourse. While a sub-category of contentious politics, we argue that backlash politics is distinct and should not be understood as 'regressive contentious politics'. Drawing from the contributions to this special issue, we discuss the causes of backlash politics, yet we argue that the greatest theoretical advances may come from studying backlash dynamics and how these dynamics contribute to different outcomes. We develop a proto-theory of backlash politics that considers causes for the rise of backlash movements, how frequent companions to backlash politics – emotive politics, nostalgia, taboo breaking, and institution reshaping – intensify backlash dynamics and make it more likely that backlash politics generate consequential outcomes.

Keywords
backlash politics, contestation, emotional politics, taboo breaking, nostalgia, public discourse,

RETROGRADE OBJECTIVES



EXTRAORDINARY TACTICS



ENTER MAINSTREAM DISCOURSE



Our approach:

Develop a model of subjective backlash affinity to assess the extent to which individuals endorse retrograde objectives and accept extraordinary political tactics.

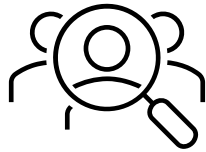
2024-2026: Scale Development, Validation & Employment

- Our *backlash affinity scale* has been developed in four steps:



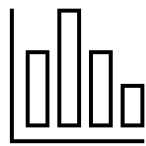
**Individual
interviews**

N=48
(DE,PL,ESP)



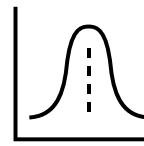
**Focus
groups**

N=12 FGs
(DE,PL,ESP)



**Validation
survey**

N=1,012
(DE)



**Tool
develop-
ment**

- v1.0 of scale employed in 5 largest EU countries (July 2025)



France
N=2,002



Germany
N=2,002



Italy
N=2,007



Poland
N=2,002

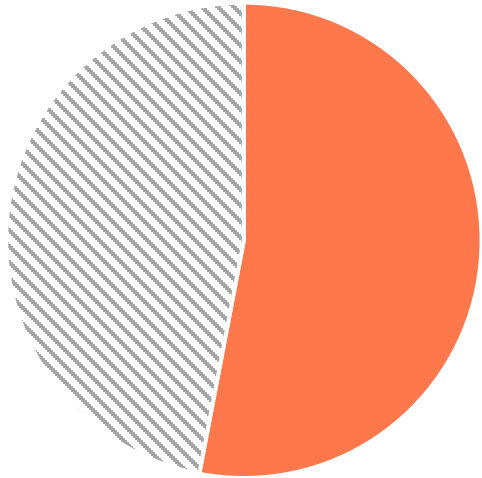


Spain
N=2,007

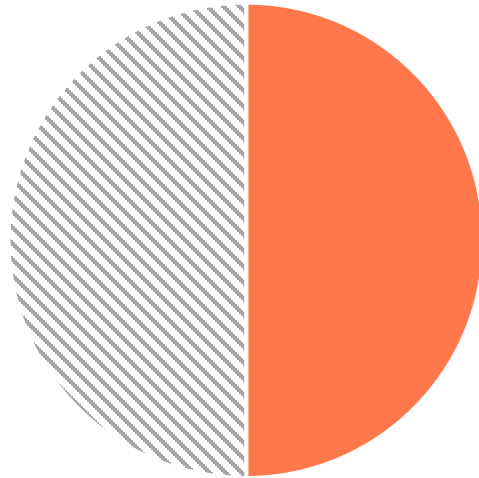


Subjective Backlash Affinity Scale v1.0

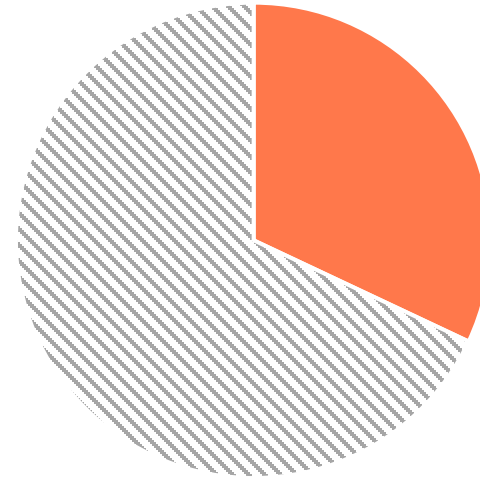
Tracking Affinity Along Four Factors (% of 16-74-year-olds in EU5)



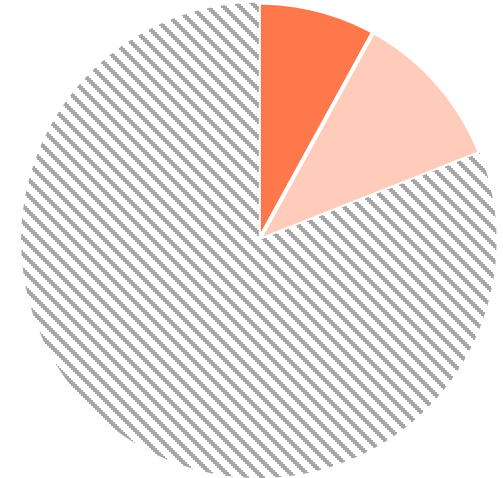
53%
Political deprivation



50%
Retrograde aspirations



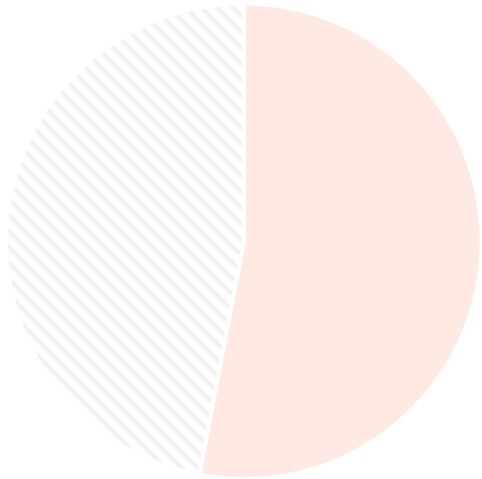
32%
Regressive values



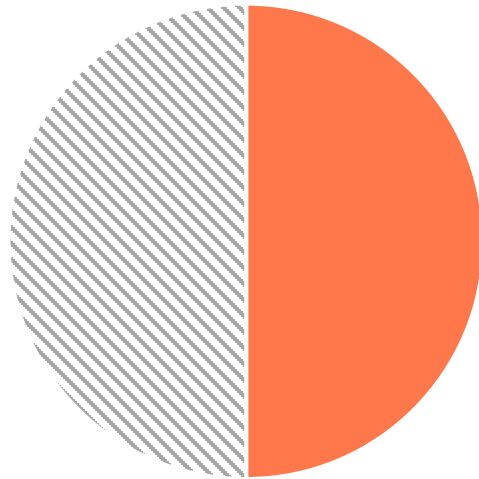
8%
Acceptance of extraordinary political tactics
19% partial

Subjective Backlash Affinity Scale v1.0

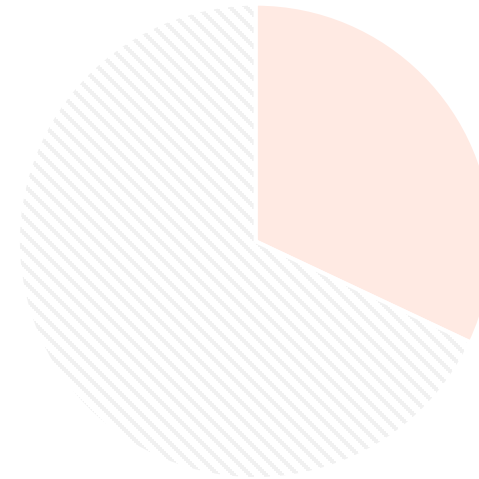
Tracking Affinity Along Four Factors (% of 16-74-year-olds in EU5)



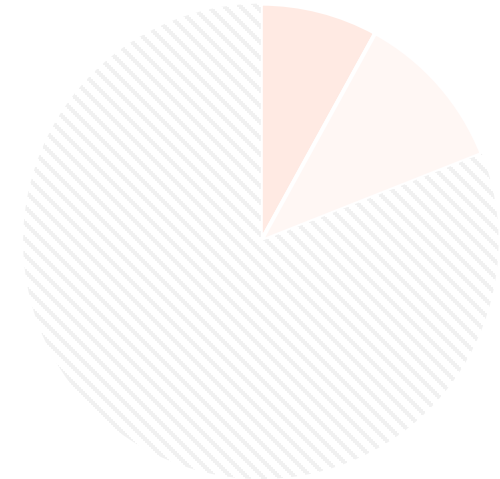
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Political
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RETROGRADE ASPIRATIONS

We've now reached the point where the majority in our country must reclaim democracy.

Our country used to be a role model for other countries, but unfortunately that's no longer the case.

In my country, many things have been going wrong for years because politicians have made the wrong decisions.

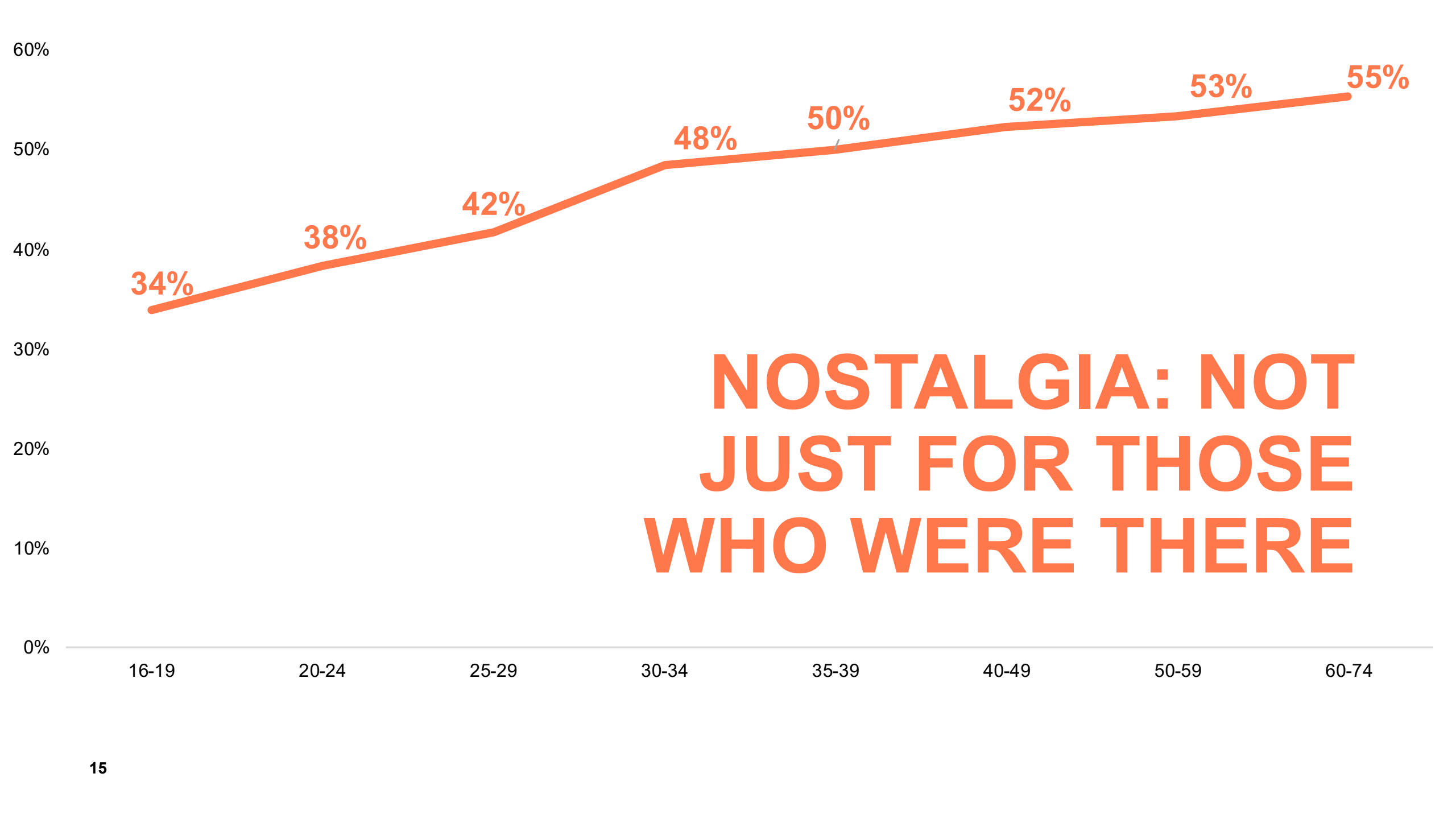
There needs to be a fundamental change in politics, because the established parties are leading the country downhill.

50 % of Europeans agree with **all four statements.**

In a nutshell:

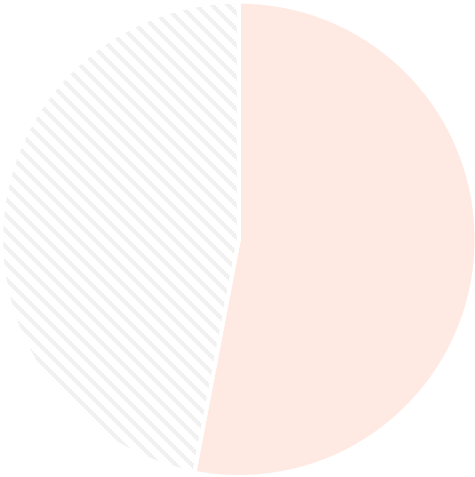
Longing for a prior social and political condition (real or imagined)

This longing is **not** automatically regressive.



Subjective Backlash Affinity Scale v1.0

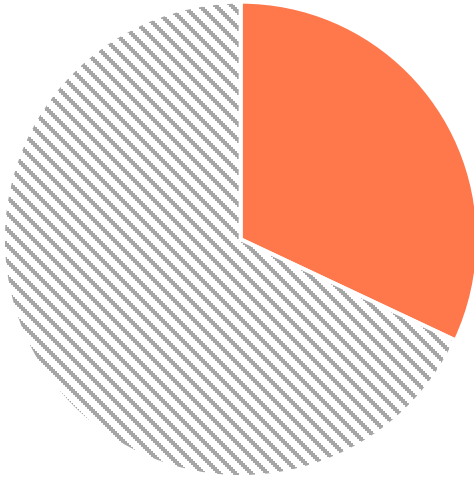
Tracking Affinity Along Four Factors (% of 16-74-year-olds in EU5)



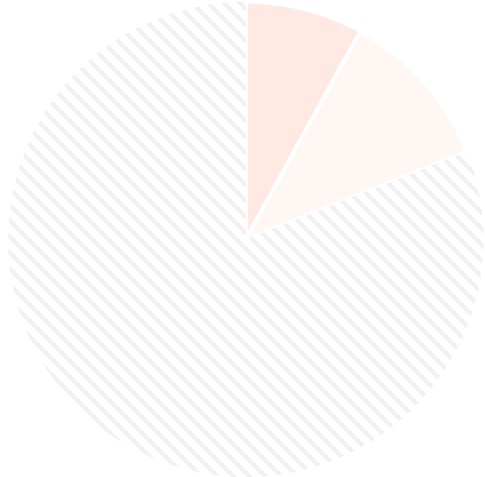
53%
Political deprivation



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Regressive values



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Acceptance of extraordinary political tactics
19% partial

REGRESSIVE VALUES

A return to traditional values
is necessary to preserve
our country's cultural identity.

Nowadays, you can't be
proud of our country without
being condemned for it.

I think that social and cultural
minorities (e.g., transgender people,
immigrants, climate activists, etc.)
have too much influence and impose
their demands on our society.

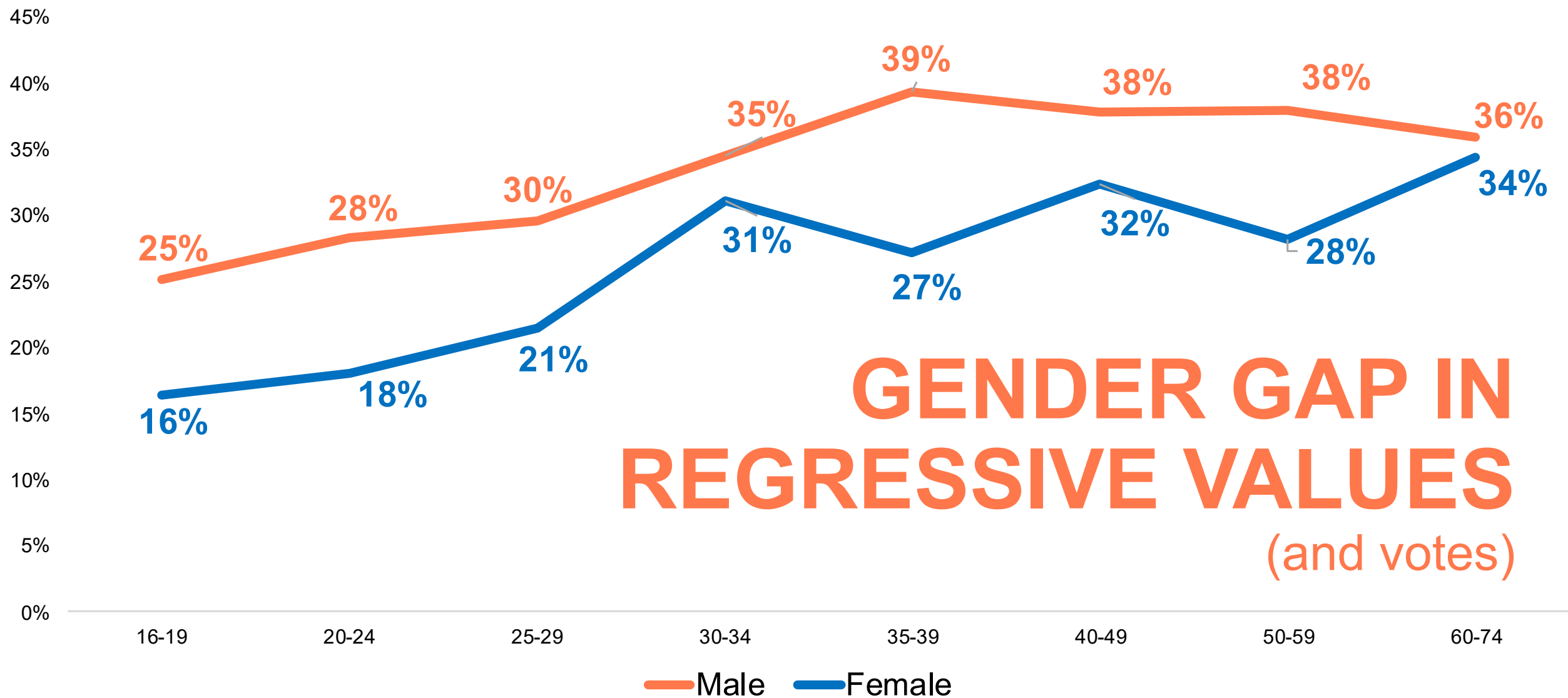
Politicians should provide greater
support for traditional gender roles
and family structures.

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In a nutshell:

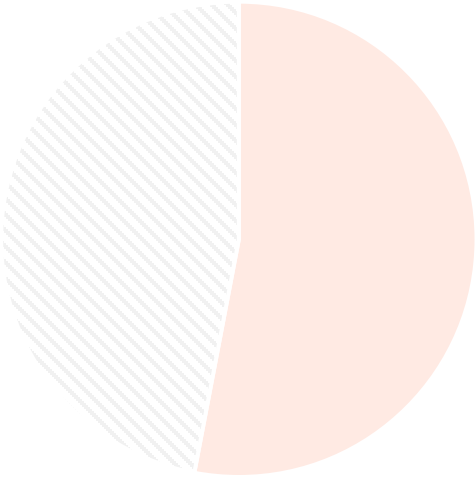
Longing for a prior
social and political
condition (real or
imagined)

This longing **is**
decidedly regressive.



Subjective Backlash Affinity Scale v1.0

Tracking Affinity Along Four Factors (% of 16-74-year-olds in EU5)



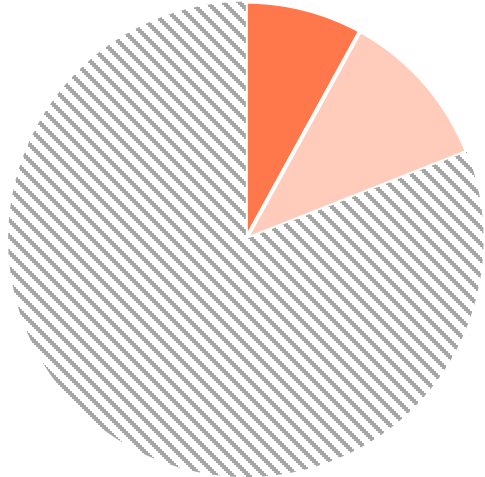
53%
Political deprivation



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Retrograde aspirations



32%
Regressive values



8%
Acceptance of extraordinary political tactics
19% partial

EXTRAORDINARY POLITICAL TACTICS



8% of Europeans agree with **all five statements.**

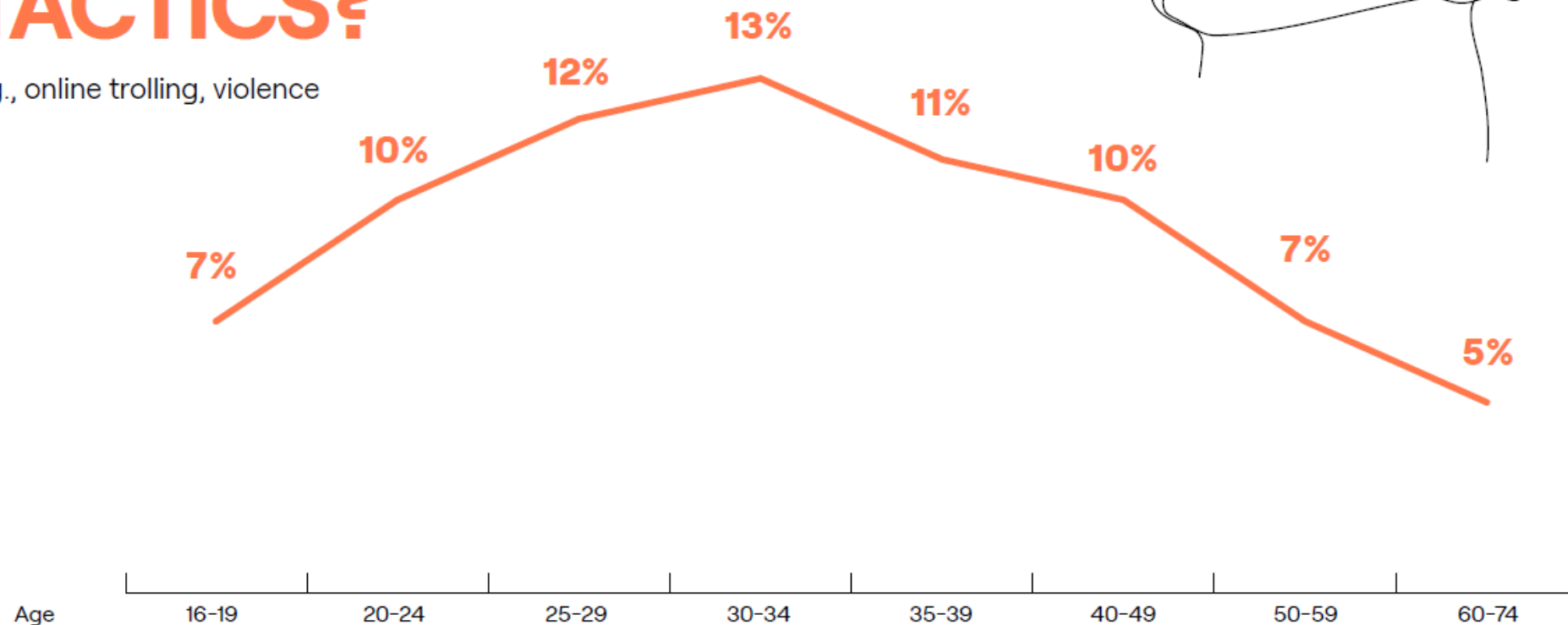
19% agree with a majority of them.

In a nutshell:

Regarding online trolling, hate and violence as acceptable political tactics.

WHICH AGE GROUP IS SUPPORTING RADICAL POLITICAL TACTICS?

e.g., online trolling, violence



Our preliminary reading of the data:

Although not a one-way street, appeals to nostalgia can provide a powerful entry point for political mobilization because:

Longing for a supposedly better past is a deeply rooted feature of human psychology, and arguably as old as civilization itself
(Sedikides et al., 2015; Bonnett 2010)

Although regressive nostalgia is even more potent (see, e.g., Europe-wide success of anti-migrant messaging), even non-regressive **retrograde aspirations can serve as a “dog whistle” for those with populist, chauvinist and xenophobic attitudes.**

Reaching a Wider Audience Through (Vague) Appeals to a “Better Past”

Correlation of Backlash Affinity Scale with Other Established Scales

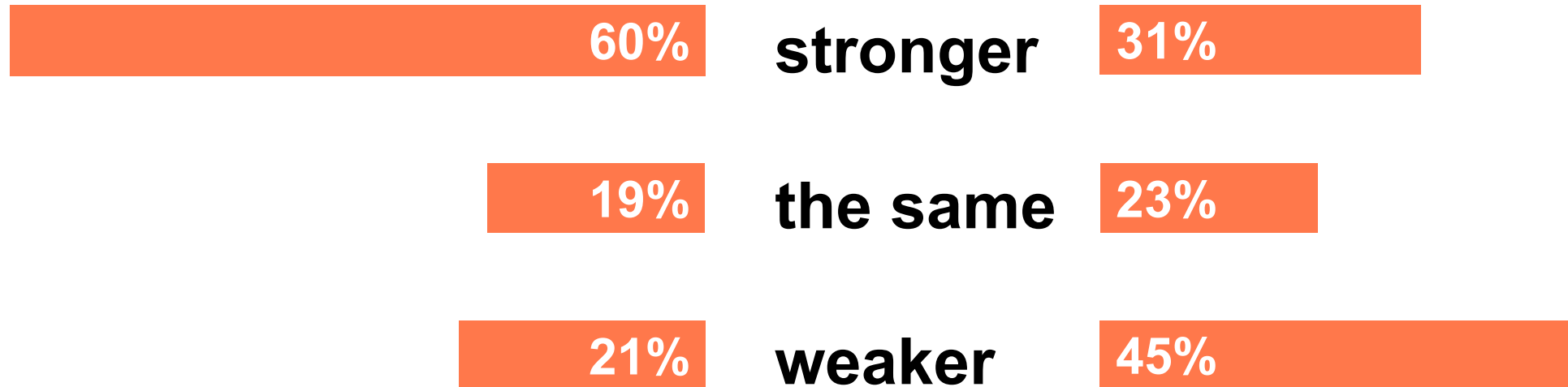
Correlations with...	Authoritarian aggression (Beierlein et al. 2015)	Authoritarian submission (Beierlein et al. 2015)	Authoritarian convention- alism (Beierlein et al. 2015)	Populism (Küpper et al 2025)	Conspiracy thinking (Küpper et al 2025)	Chauvinism (Küpper et al 2025)	Xenophobia (Küpper et al 2025)	Left-Right-Scale (Knutsen 1995)
Retrograde aspirations	,439**	,213**	,420**	,746**	,616**	,654**	,631**	,237**
Extraordinary tactics	,194**	,200**	,303**	,388**	,430**	,357**	,377**	,170**
Political deprivation	,250**	,032	,262**	,641**	,515**	,468**	,471**	,147**
Regressive values	,548**	,319**	,560**	,751**	,556**	,762**	,763**	,428**

What about the United States?

Strength of U.S. Democracy According to Americans

Thinking back **50 years ago**, based on what you know or have read, do you think U.S. democracy was...?

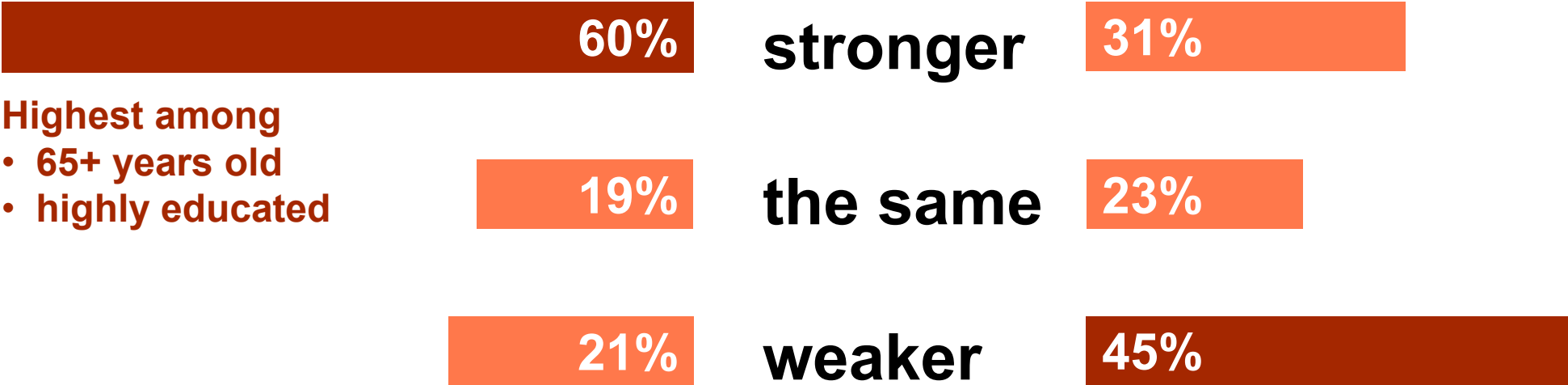
Looking ahead to the **next 50 years**, do you think U.S. democracy will be...?



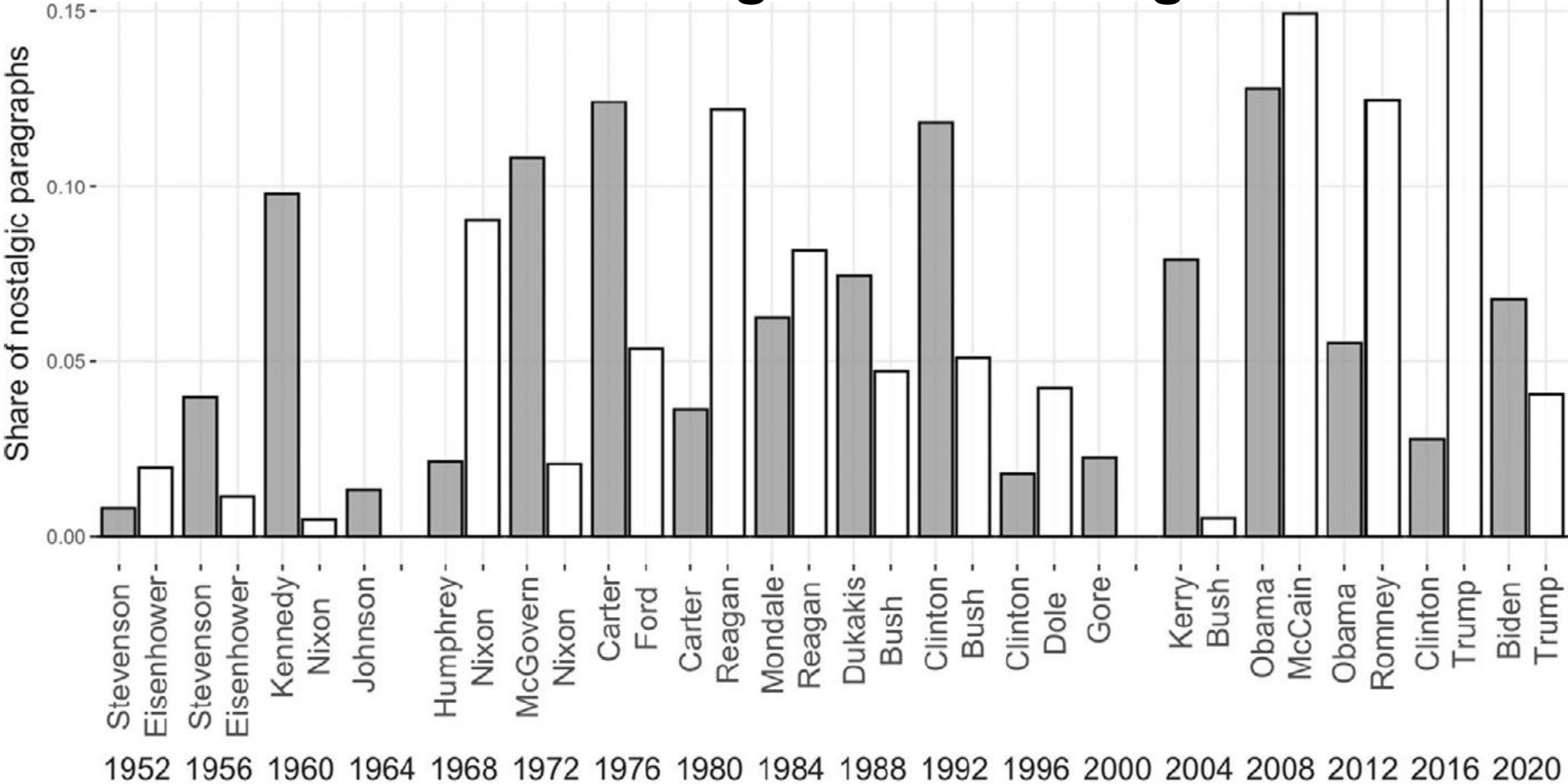
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Thinking back **50 years ago**, based on what you know or have read, do you think U.S. democracy was...?

Looking ahead to the **next 50 years**, do you think U.S. democracy will be...?



U.S. Case: Both Left & Right Use Nostalgia



Source: [Bonikowski and Stuhler 2022](#)

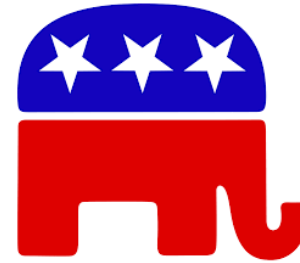
Party  Democrat  Republican

U.S. Case: The Versatility & Power of the “Better Past”

Analysis of 72k Paragraphs from U.S. Presidential Campaign Speeches, 1952-2020



- Democrats evoke nostalgia Re: past infrastructure & quality of education & (less so) economy & welfare state
- Nostalgia often co-occurs with anti-elite & country-in-decline messaging, but not with xenophobic & authoritarian claims



- Republicans evoke nostalgia Re: national values and past government integrity
- Nostalgia often co-occurs with anti-elite & country-in-decline messaging, but rarely with xenophobic & authoritarian claims
- Outlier: Trump 2016, who paired nostalgia with xenophobic & authoritarian claims

When it comes to sheer use, it is less about Democrats vs. Republicans, and more about incumbent vs. challenger. Nostalgia gives challengers a tool to blame the incumbent for the country's alleged downward trajectory.

Exploratory interviews during AGI fellowship:

To what extent do U.S. Democrats, including so-called democratic socialists, employ nostalgia and/or extraordinary tactics?

(✓)

X

Refining our Tool

RETROGRADE ASPIRATIONS

We've now reached the point where the majority in our country must reclaim democracy.

Our country used to be a role model for other countries, but unfortunately that's no longer the case.

In my country, many things have been going wrong for years because politicians have made the wrong decisions.

There needs to be a fundamental change in politics, because the established parties are leading the country downhill.

50 % of Europeans agree with **all four statements.**

We are considering to

add/replace selected items with items that reliably measure a longing for a prior *social* and/or prior *economic* condition?

Interviews / FG in DE, ESP, PL: People long for secure public places, more togetherness, more shared norms, feeling financially secure; in DE: prior political condition, too

REGRESSIVE VALUES

A return to traditional values
is necessary to preserve
our country's cultural identity.

Nowadays, you can't be
proud of our country without
being condemned for it.

I think that social and cultural
minorities (e.g., transgender people,
immigrants, climate activists, etc.)
have too much influence and impose
their demands on our society.

Politicians should provide greater
support for traditional gender roles
and family structures.

32 % of Europeans
agree with **all four
statements.**

We are considering to

add/replace selected items
with items that less
„descriptive“ and challenge
people to reflect on and share
their values.

EXTRAORDINARY POLITICAL TACTICS



8% of Europeans agree with **all five statements.**

19% agree with a majority of them.

We are considering to

add/replace selected items that touch upon hollowing out democratic institutions (which we did inquire about, too).

POLITICAL DEPRIVATION

Politicians don't listen to people like me.

Politicians don't care about people like me.

The government makes decisions that serve the interests of elites more than those of people like me.

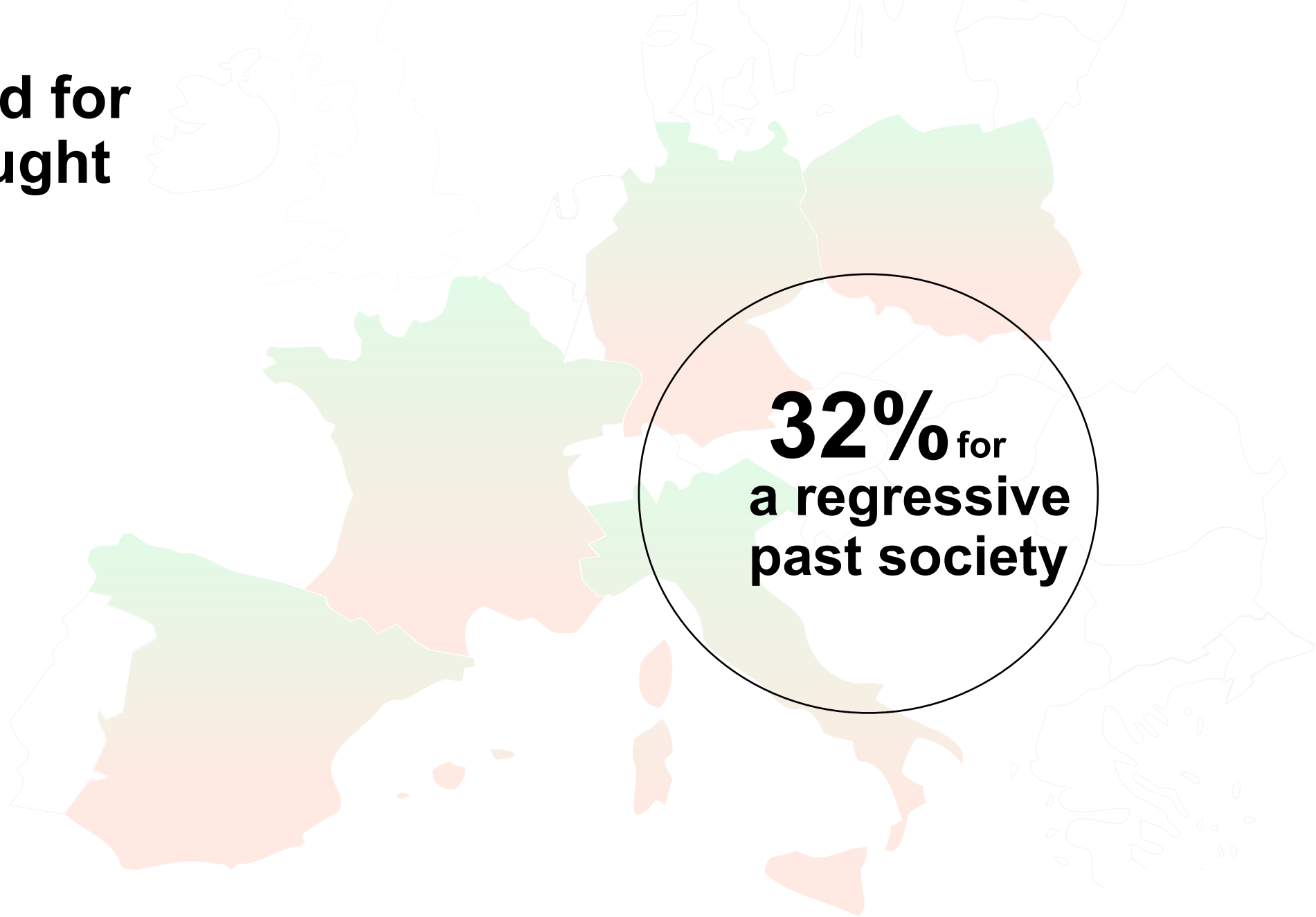
53 % of Europeans agree with **all three statements.**

We are considering to

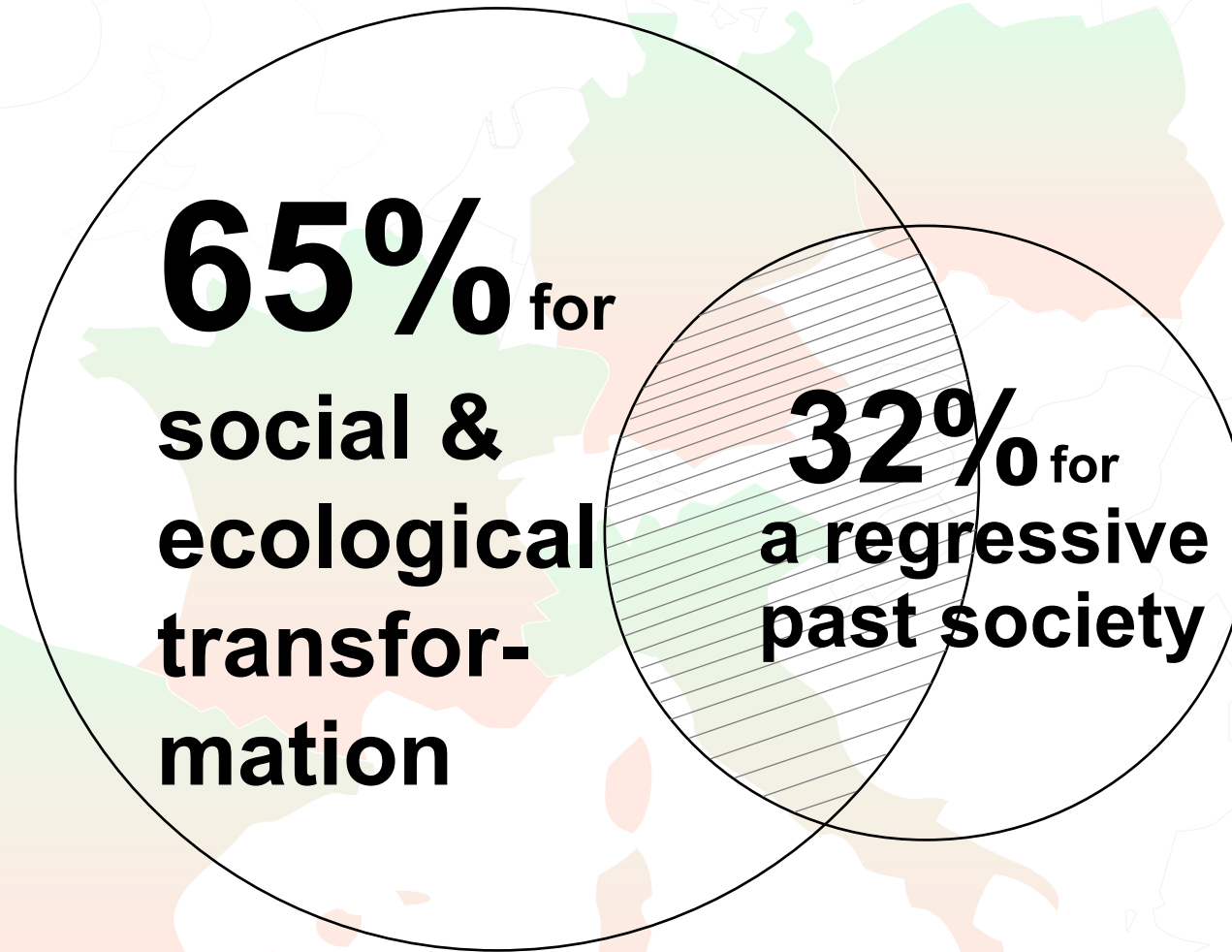
More explicitly inquire about authoritarian attitudes.

Since this is a baseline measure, it could make sense conceptually, to ask how people see their country's future/their own future.

Food for thought



Food for thought



Dr. Simon Morris-Lange

Head of Research
Allianz Foundation

simon.morris-lange@allianzfoundation.org

What We Have data on: Initial Subjective Backlash Affinity Model

The initial model comprised **three dimensions**, eight sub-dimensions, 25 aspects, around two survey questions per aspect based on the qualitative transcripts and scientific literature

