

Chapter 3

Nordic Political Culture: Democracy, Emancipative Values and the Rise of Populism

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Abstract

The Nordic countries have long been considered beacons of liberal democracy, marked by strong social support structures, high institutional trust, and deeply ingrained emancipative values. However, the rise of populist parties with authoritarian tendencies disputes the conventional view of Nordic exceptionalism. This chapter explores the paradox of the Nordic political landscape, where high levels of support for liberal democratic principles coexist with a growing inclination toward populist and nationalist parties. The findings suggest that the Nordic's are truly exceptional in their cultural orientation towards emancipation and liberal democracy. Apart from Finland, this exceptionality is also reflected in political profiles of their populist parties. Nordic populism focuses less on the reestablishment of traditional family models, is less discriminatory towards queer people and features weaker anti-elitism than their central European counterparts. Despite these differences the growing power of Nordic populism and its strong anti-immigration stance are a worrisome development which contradicts the liberal mindset of the Nordic cultures and needs to be monitored closely.

Keywords: Values. Democracy. Emancipative Values. Populism. Nordic States. Exceptionalism. World Values Survey.

Summary

This chapter explores the paradox of the Nordic political landscape, where high levels of support for liberal democratic principles coexist with a growing inclination toward populist and nationalist parties.

Drawing on data from the World Values Survey (WVS) and the Varieties of Party (V-Party) dataset, this study examines how Nordic citizens conceptualize democracy, distinguishing between liberal and authoritarian notions. While Nordic societies demonstrate near-universal endorsement of democratic freedoms, they also exhibit a notable acceptance of obedience to authority, a trait commonly connected to authoritarian governance. This willingness to comply with state authority, however, appears to stem from high trust in institutions rather than a fundamental opposition to principles of democracy.

Despite their commitment to democratic values, Nordic countries have seen a significant increase in support for populist parties, with voter shares averaging 15–20% in some cases. These parties leverage public dissatisfaction with traditional elites, economic anxieties, and

concerns over immigration. However, Nordic populism differs from its counterparts in Central and Eastern Europe; it tends to be less anti-EU, less socially conservative, and more focused on preserving welfare state benefits for native citizens rather than promoting an overtly authoritarian agenda.

The concept of "inner diversity" is introduced to explain the complex interplay between democratic stability and the rise of populism. Traditionally homogenous, Nordic societies have been challenged by increasing immigration and globalization, prompting tensions over national identity. Populist parties capitalize on these concerns by advocating nationalist policies and restrictive immigration measures while maintaining an overall commitment to the democratic process.

A key finding of this study is the correlation between emancipative values and democratic resilience. Nordic countries consistently score among the highest in the world on indicators of individual autonomy, gender equality, and civil liberties, which act as safeguards against democratic backsliding. However, the rise of populist rhetoric, particularly in Finland and Denmark, signals an ongoing negotiation between pluralism and protectionism within these societies. Unlike in Poland and Hungary, where populism has eroded democratic norms, Nordic populist parties operate within a robust democratic framework, facing constraints from institutional checks and public scrutiny.

Ultimately, this article argues that while the Nordic political culture is undergoing a transformation, it remains fundamentally committed to liberal democracy. The increasing support for populist parties does not necessarily indicate a decline in democratic values but rather a shift in political discourse that mirrors shifting societal concerns. As emancipative values remain strong, they continue to serve as a critical counterbalance to illiberal tendencies, ensuring that Nordic democracies retain their resilience in the face of political and cultural change.

Introduction

The idea that the Nordic countries – often regarded as crusaders of democracy, equality, and social welfare – could also harbor relatively high levels of authoritarian values may seem paradoxical. However, this is what seems increasingly evident in this region of the world. In recent years, there has been a rise in populist parties that have espoused racist and anti-immigrant views, which suggest that the Nordic societies are not as immune to these tendencies as has been traditionally suggested. Determining the relative balance between liberal democratic values and certain authoritarian beliefs seems to be central to understanding what is shaping Nordic political culture today.

Accordingly, we intend to analyze whether traditionally strong democracies such as the Nordics may be better equipped to handle the rise of populist parties and to reconcile certain value contradictions within their communities. To better understand democratic developments, we look at individuals' notions of democracy and how much these are deemed essential in society. Liberal notions of democracy include civic freedoms where people can make their own choices within the limits of the laws that are democratically decided. These laws protect them and give them a voice and a vote in politics. They also protect minorities and gender equality. Contrary to this, certain authoritarian notions of democracy suggest that citizens need to obey their rulers and that the military and/or church should be able to influence the government. Clearly, these latter ideas do not resonate well with most established views of democracy. Nevertheless, there

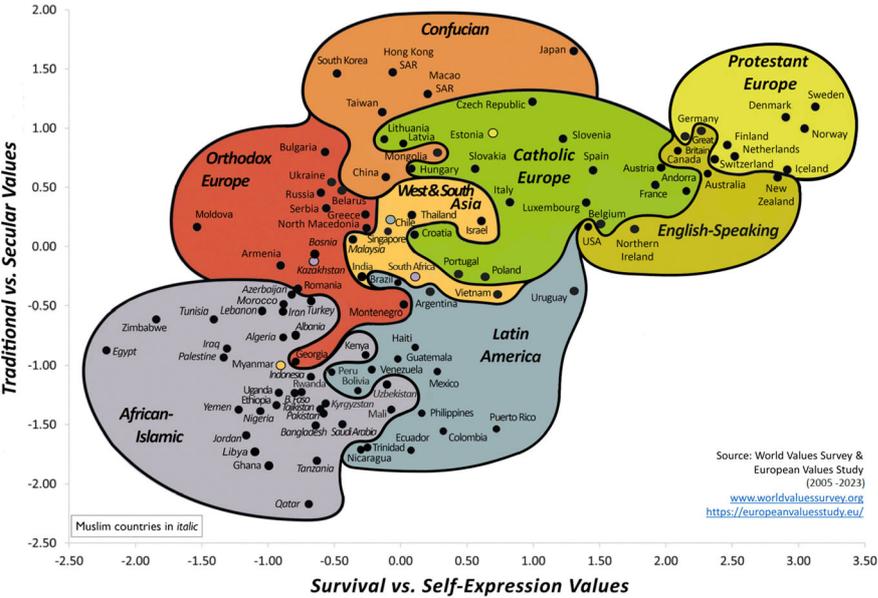
is a surprisingly large number of European citizens who are unable to clearly delineate democratic from authoritarian practices, as we will see.

Traditionally, the Nordic countries are at the forefront of liberal democratic values and score high according to all traditional notions of liberal democracy. How, then, can we explain the growing number of voters in the Nordic countries who support populist parties with authoritative agendas?

One way of finding out is to ask people in representative surveys about their perceptions on what constitutes a democracy and how they relate to questions of equality, freedom, and self-determination. This is exactly what the World Values Survey (WVS) has done since 1981 by conducting face-to-face interviews. [For more information, see www.worldvaluessurvey.org]. Since its launch, this large-scale NGO survey, coordinated by researchers from all participating countries, has collected data from over 600,000 respondents, reflecting the thoughts, values, and ideas of approximately 90 percent of the world's population. In the most recent wave (Wave 7, completed in 2022), around 150,000 individuals were interviewed.

The well-known WVS Culture Map (see Figure 1 below) indicates that the Nordic countries are outliers, being highly secular and demanding of individual freedom expressed in terms of emancipative values. As such, they can be seen as “exceptional” when compared with other societies. Political culture research suggests that these value-dimensions – being emancipative and secular – form the baseline for enduring democratic systems and a liberal–democratic mindset within these.

Figure 1, the World Values Survey Culture Map, 2023



Source: worldvaluessurvey.org

However, despite being on the emancipative and secular end of the spectrum, a surprisingly large share of the Nordic population has, over the past few decades, voted for various populist parties. Although these parties have not received a majority of the vote, their electoral support

has nonetheless at times hovered around 15–20 percent of the Scandinavian electorate (SCB statistics; Jungar and Ravik-Jupskåps 2013). Over time, the balance of political power has shifted. In Denmark, public dissatisfaction is now channeled through three different populist political parties. In Sweden, the government is now ruling with support from the populist Sweden Democrats. In Iceland, the recent coalition government resigned because of internal strife between the various parties who failed to secure the trust of the public (government.is, 2024).

The former Danish Social Democratic leader, Jens Otto Krag, has remarked that the success of these populist parties likely represents a form of voter retribution. He argued that voters felt confused and disappointed by the established politicians. This “revenge of the voters” has created an opening for populist parties to relay the electorate's discontent (Lindroth, 2016; 2024; Lidegaard, 2011). It has also been argued that the sometimes-blurred borders between liberal and authoritarian notions of democracy are reinforced by the media, and not least by the rise of social media, which can lead to a normalization of populist parties and their narratives (Norris, 2019).

The Concepts of Inner Diversity and Nordic Exceptionalism

This raises a crucial question: Is liberal democracy losing ground, or are we simply witnessing ripples on the surface of political discourse expressed in public discontent? Or is it possible, as some international scholars have suggested, that we are truly experiencing a democratic recession or even a period of autocratization? (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Mechkova, Lührmann and Lindberg, 2017; Foa and Mounk, 2017; Mounk, 2018; Schäfer, 2023). The question before us is whether a significant increase in the vote for populist parties within the Nordic countries indicates an overall decline in democracy or simply an adjustment in party systems accommodating diverse political voices.

Populism within democracies often arises fueled by a sense of disillusionment with political elites. However, when populism is driven by nativism (anti-immigration and nationalism) and also fueled by authoritarian notions of democracy, it may challenge established democratic norms. This may potentially undermine democratic institutions (Appelbaum 2020, Carter 2018, Czarnek, Szwed and Kossowska, 2019; Gidron and Hall, 2020; Goodhart, 2017, Brunkert 2022, 2024, Alexander 2017, Haerpfer 2018, Norris, 2011, 2012, 2019). This may be especially pertinent in the Nordic context, where populist parties have grown substantially strong within traditionally stable democracies (Jungar and Ravik-Jupskås, 2014; Mudde, 2017; Mudde, 2019; Puranen, 2022; Rydgren, 2018; Wikforss, 2021).

The question here is whether current Nordic populism is also “exceptional.” We hypothesize that Nordic populism might be a localized version of populism seen elsewhere in Europe but being less anti-EU, less misogynist and less traditional in character. Nevertheless, we expect it to feature other key elements of European populism, including anti-elitism and people centrism (Mudde, 2004; Kaltwasser and Mudde, 2017, Crum 2023, Fassin 2017). Nordic populism also allegedly seeks to protect the strong welfare systems of the region and the homogeneity of small nations. In other words, it is a populism with a certain nationalist image but without radicalism. It does contain, however, a strong anti-immigration agenda.

Towards More Inner Diversity – Towards more Populism?

The concept of inner diversity may be of use in better understanding the anti-pluralist populism that seems to be emerging in the Nordic region. In this case, we are not referring to the inner diversity in public policies among the Nordics countries that is discussed in other chapters of this volume. Rather we are considering the nature of internal diversity found in different societies of the world. Some can harbor a variety of differences and coexist with different cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and social groups within their population. Others are in constant fights both within the country and with neighbors. The concept as utilized here encompasses suggests that a range of identities, traditions, and worldviews contribute to a nation's societal structure. It highlights the multifaceted nature of most countries and emphasizes the importance of inclusivity, mutual respect, and unity among diverse groups. "Inner diversity" is often considered a strength in many societies as it can foster innovation, cultural richness, and resilience.

The Nordic countries, however, developed as relatively small, homogenous populations with shared cultural, social, and institutional values. Characteristic of these societies was the degree of trust existing since the Viking Age and their (relatively) inclusive decision-making practices. Over the centuries, common social structures were built. Later, social policies based on equality, education, and welfare further strengthened this sense of trust and community. (Tolinson-Ting, 2020; Rothstein, 2005, Harrison 2000, Barrling 2024, SOU 2020). Over recent decades, increasing globalization, migration, and cultural changes have introduced new layers of inner diversity within the Nordic societies and challenged centuries-old national narratives. These forces have brought with them greater ethnic, cultural, and ideological differences within the population. While many Nordic citizens embrace this diversity, others perceive it as a challenge to traditional norms or values. Support for populist parties can be seen, in part, as a reaction by some groups to this growing diversity. These parties often capitalize on concerns about cultural preservation, economic competition and political influence. They often frame such inner diversity as a potential threat to the cohesion and trust that Nordic societies prize.

Despite the growing populist vote, the Nordic countries remain among those European countries with the highest levels of inter-individual trust and trust in institutions. Yet, high levels of general trust in a society does not imply the absence of tension or disagreement. Instead, it provides a baseline willingness to cooperate, even among individuals with different backgrounds. The coexistence of trust and populist voting reflects the complexity of internal diversity in Nordic countries today. Even those citizens who vote for populist parties may still trust institutions like the judiciary or healthcare systems. Their vote may not signify a complete rejection of the system but rather a demand for addressing perceived issues within it—such as migration policies, economic inequality, or political representation.

Robert Putnam's studies on the impact of migration and diversity provide a framework for understanding how inner diversity can create challenges in the Nordic countries (Putnam, 2007, Radkiewicz 2017, Dalton 2014, Lindroth 2022,2021). The values and social norms of the newly arrived migrants from non-Western societies creates high stress not only on the migrants themselves but also on the whole of society (Puranen, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2023). The existence of inner diversity challenges societies to adapt trust frameworks to include these new groups. In the Nordic context, this involves negotiating between the desire to preserve traditional societal models and embracing the new opportunities that diversity offers. Support for populist parties is part of this negotiation process. Still, we would expect the Nordic societies, overall, to be less xenophobic and to behave more inclusive than others given their above-average support for the protection of civil liberties, their focus on emancipative values and their trust in other people. And indeed, studies of the "Nordic model" emphasize the balance that exists

between social equality, democracy, and economic openness, even under the strain of increased inner diversity (Kuhnle, 2004; 2017; Mudde, 2017; Kvist, 2011a, b). One representative example of this openness, trust and respect for individual liberty lies in the Nordic countries' strong focus on emancipative values. This we will discuss in the final section of this chapter.

Authoritarian versus Liberal Notions of Democracy

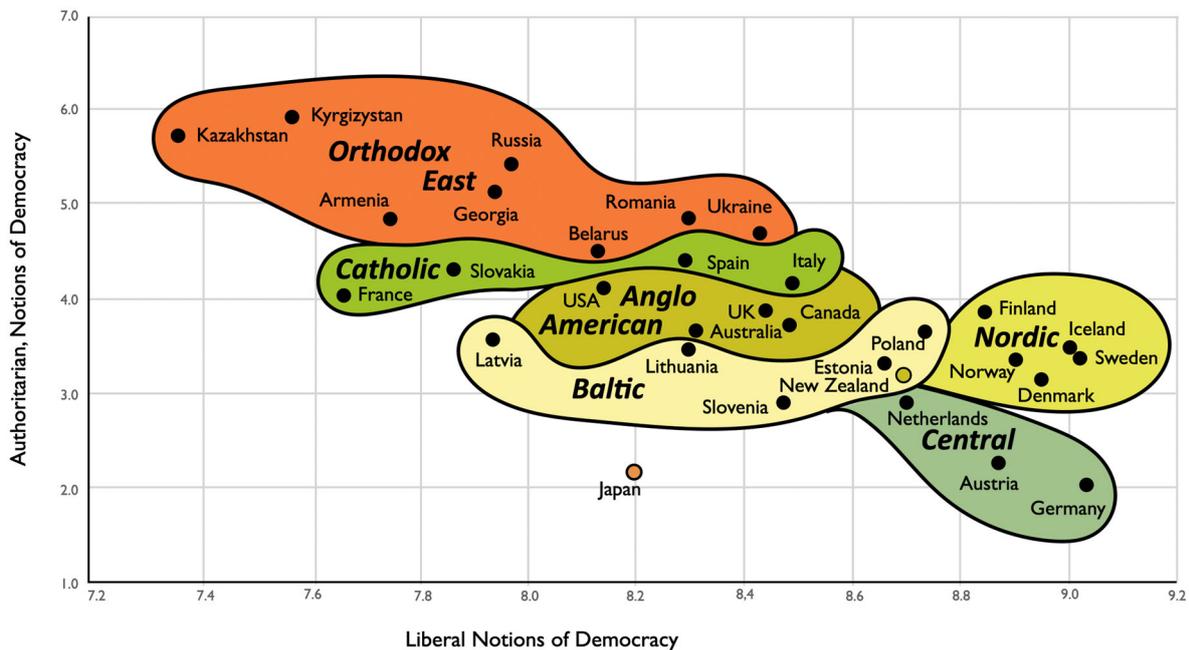
As a first step, to better understand the differences between liberal and authoritarian we will make use of the World Values Surveys data from its 7th wave. This allows us to compare results from the Nordic region with other findings from across the globe. The comparative method is a well-established approach in the social sciences science that helps to explain why certain societal features are dominant in one case and not in another (Della Porta, 2008). In addition, we rely on the Varieties of Parties project data, which uses expert coding to evaluate the characteristics of countries' parties, including their degree of populism (Lindberg et al., 2022). As we are focusing on Nordic exceptionalism, we compare the Nordic countries with other countries from Europe and beyond. We do this to better understand the historical and contemporary influences that distinguish Nordic political culture from the rest of Europe and the world

To measure liberal versus authoritarian notions of democracy, we follow the example of Kirsch and Welzel (2019) and utilize three indicators from the what *democracy means* portion of the WVS (www.worldvaluessurvey.org) survey ¹ We would expect that citizens of established democratic countries should be able to clearly identify free and fair elections, civil liberties and equality as prime features of liberal democracy. At the same time, they would reject army rule, religious laws and unconditional obedience to authorities as undemocratic features. Figure 2 (below) summarizes the average score for a number of countries. These scores are, in turn, grouped into separate cultural zones. The differences between these zones are striking and will be discussed below.

Before doing so, however, we need to point to the difference in the scale-ranges for the two notions of democracy. With regard to the authoritarian view of democracy, we find average values among the countries sampled ranging from a strong rejection of these values (around 2.0 for Germany) to strong support for them (around 6.5 for Kirgizstan). For liberal notions of democracy, on the other hand, we only find average values above 7.0. for all the countries sampled. Accordingly, we can conclude that most societies around the world have a relatively good knowledge of what democracy traditionally means. In the central European and Nordic countries there is almost universal, absolute agreement that elections, civil liberties and gender equality are central pillars for the concept of democracy. The main differentiator among the countries, seems to be how strongly citizens also include elements of an authoritarian concept into their individual view of democracy.

¹ The liberal notions of democracy consist of the items V249: *Women have the same rights a men*; V246: *Civil Rights protect people's liberty against oppression* and V243: *People chose their leaders in free elections*. Authoritarian notions of democracy consist of V248: *People obey their rulers*; V245: *the army takes over when government is incompetent* and V242: *Religious authorities interpret the laws*. The items are each scaled from 1-10 with 10 meaning that the statement is an essential feature of democracy. We created the index by averaging the values across the three components for each notion of democracy. For an extensive discussion of these indices, please see Kirsch and Welzel (2019).

Figure 2. Authoritarian versus liberal democracies – Nordic, Baltic, Catholic, Central EU, Anglo-American and the Orthodox East.



Source: worldvaluessurvey.org

The Nordic Countries

Scores for Liberal democratic values are consistently high across all Nordic countries, ranging from 8.83 to 9.14. Iceland and Sweden showing particularly strong support for these ideas. These figures are the highest in the world and reflect a deeply ingrained commitment to pluralism, freedom, and democracy. The Nordics are also known for having strong social safety nets, well-functioning political institutions, and active civil societies. All of which are consistent with liberal democratic values.

It may seem contradictory, however, that the authoritarian scores in the Nordic countries are generally higher than in Germany or Austria, especially considering the strong democratic traditions of the Nordic countries. The reason for this lies in one of the three components of the index (see SOM, A1). Citizens of the Nordic countries consistently score high on the variable asking whether obeying one's rulers is an essential characteristic of democracy. For some it might be surprising that all the Nordic countries score relatively high on this statement. However, in the case of these societies, this obedience results from the Nordic citizens' above average trust in the political system, their willingness to follow commonly agreed upon rules and the high degrees of accountability ingrained into their democracies. This means that obeying is not considered an act of blind followership but rather stems from the perceived legitimacy of their systems' political outcomes. Conceptually, obedience to rulers may seem to contradict the impartiality embedded in democratic governance, where procedures and laws are more important than individuals. However, if some survey respondents (including the Nordics) see their elected officials as highly trustworthy, they may extend their willingness to obey to these individuals as well. In our score of authoritarian notions of democracy this is now captured as support for authoritarian ideals, though it may rather indicate that individuals perceive a public office and the current incumbent as legitimate and worthy to be obeyed.

The Nordic countries have historically had a strong sense of social cohesion and societally agreed upon rules, which lend legitimacy to their institutions. They score the highest among those sampled on trust, measured by an index consisting of generalized trust and trust in people you meet for the first time. Among the 64,607 worldwide respondents to the survey, some 22 percent trust their fellow citizens. In the Nordic countries, agreement with this statement rises to an astonishing 55 percent, highlighting the high levels of societal cohesion within the region. Likewise, their level of confidence in political institutions is above average. Their confidence in the parliament, in the government, the courts, the armed forces, the churches, the universities, the police and the civil services is among the highest found in this study. While this trust is often directed toward democratic institutions, it can also be regarded as a broader embrace of institutional authority in general, including state control and regulations. This Nordic acceptance of state intervention might obscure the line between liberal and authoritarian values – especially when people see strong state leadership or regulatory power as positive for maintaining welfare and societal equality. High trust in the government’s ability to make decisions in the best interest of the people leads people to accept government-imposed restrictions or regulations without perceiving them as a threat to democracy.

So, paradoxically, the slightly higher authoritarian scores among the Nordic countries compared with those found in Germany or Austria could be attributed to a combination of cultural factors including trust in institutions and a consensus-oriented political systems. All of these societies tend to be more comfortable with state authority and centralized governance due to their strong welfare-state models and historical reliance on their governments to maintain social cohesion (SOU 2020). Especially in the case of the Nordics, societal homogeneity, common good and consensus orientation increase the willingness to obey authoritative decisions.

Introducing Emancipative Values into the Analysis

Already in this chapter, we have made mention of “emancipative values”, which are closely related to the WVS cultural maps’ secular and self-expression values. Emancipative values measure attitudes towards equality, autonomy, choice, and voice among the population and have been found to encourage demands for liberal democracy, mutual respect and individualism (Welzel, 2013). Accordingly, we expect that – in a comparative perspective – high levels of emancipative values would encourage liberal notions of democracy. In turn, these notions help to create and maintain a democratic system that institutionalizes the civil liberties that emancipative values demand.

The Emancipative Values Index consists of four subindices tapping respondents’ attitudes to autonomy, equality, choice, and voice:

Autonomy includes questions on what the respondent prioritizes when bringing up a child. Will the objective be to develop your child into an independent and creative being, or do you want to prioritize discipline and obedience with respect to the child?

Equality asks the respondents to evaluate if men should have priority in jobs, university/education, and political leadership.

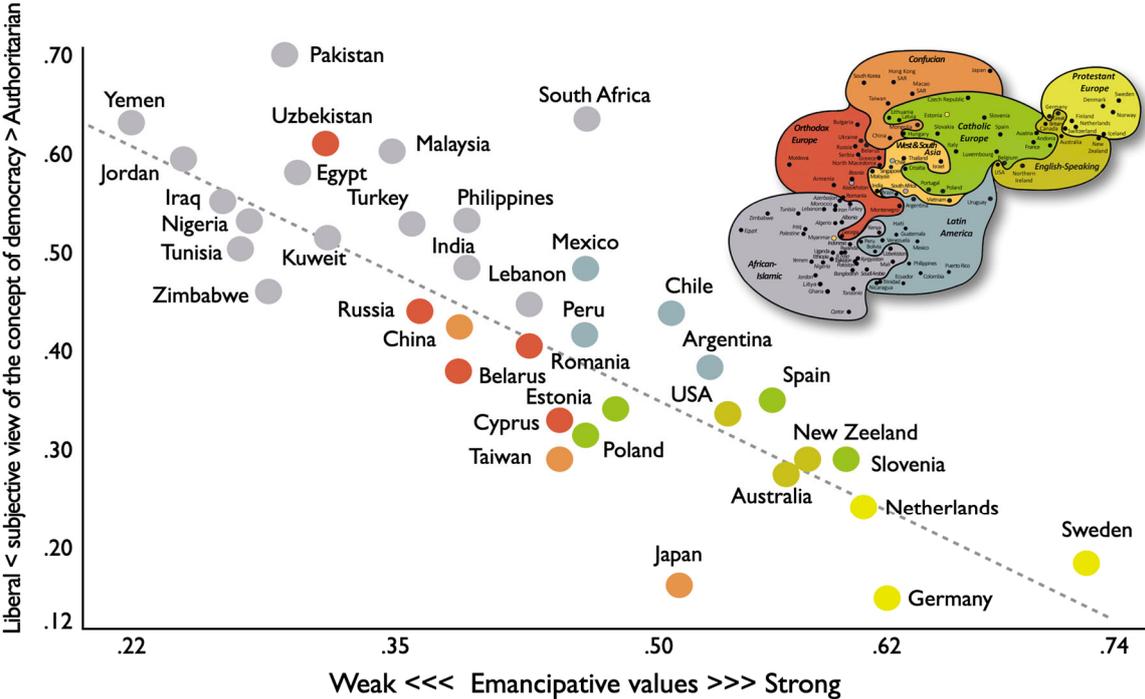
Choice is about the individual’s right to decide for him/herself on issues such as marriage, divorce, abortion and sexual preferences.

Voice, relates to whether one’s voice heard. Can it exert influence in one’s workplace, local community or with government.

These sub-indices create the Emancipative Index, which is plotted together in Figure 3 (below) with our index of liberal – versus – authoritarian notions of democracy.

We suggest that “emancipative values are most influential, exerting a two-fold ‘enlightening’ effect in (a) making people recognize the contradiction between liberal and authoritarian notions of democracy and (b) turning them against authoritarian notions. In a nutshell, the prospects of democracy are bleak where emancipative values remain weak” (Welzel 2013, Kirsch and Welzel 2019).

Figure 3. The Association between the Countries’ Individual-level on liberal and authoritarian notions and their Emancipative values.



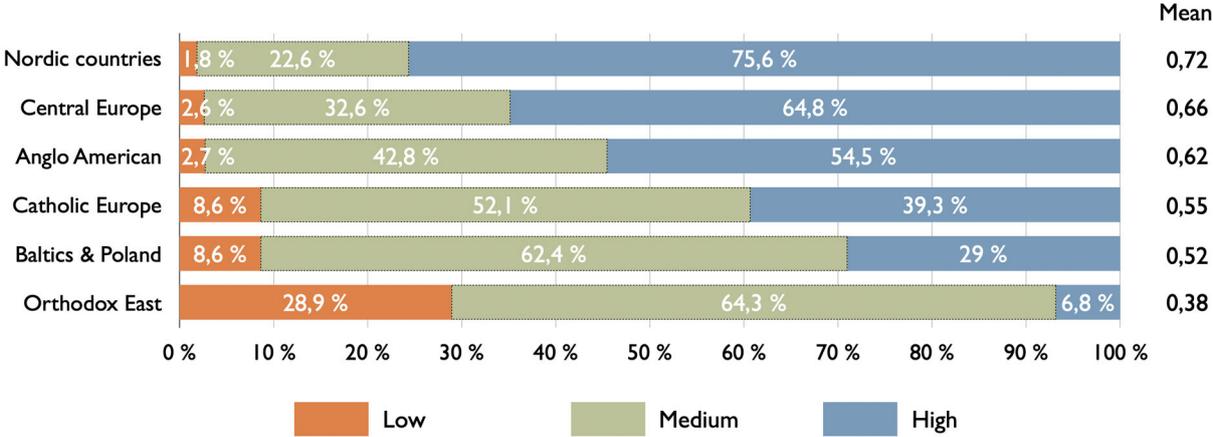
Source: WVS and Kirsch & Welzel, Democracy Misunderstood, which measures the degree to which respondents support a definition of democracy that includes military or religious rule and/or obedience to those in power

When plotting liberal/authoritarian values against the level of emancipative values from sampled countries, it becomes apparent that the level of EV is decisive in determining the level of liberal democracy and its stability. Both value dimensions go hand-in-hand, because growth in one dimension benefits growth in the other. Individuals who value individual freedom, such as the liberty to love and live together with whomever they please, will certainly advocate a political system that enshrines these civil liberties into its constitution. They will certainly not like to have church laws interfere in their personal life. Similarly, individuals who do not see obedience to authority as an important factor in their political system would be more likely to also educate their children in ways that promote autonomy over dependence.

The Nordic countries are at the very top of the contemporary world with regard to these emancipative values (See Figure 4 below) Independence, trust, respect for privacy and non-interference in other peoples’ lives rank high in the political cultures of these societies This can also be seen in their comparatively late marriage ages, fewer children per women and a high levels of female employment. To empirically validate this point, Figure 4 (below)

captures data from 39,997 interviews in all represented countries and shows their respective shares of individuals with *low*, *intermediate*, and *high* emancipative values.

Figure 4. Emancipative values index within the cultural zones analyzed



The disparity in emancipative values (EV) between the Nordic countries and those like Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, compared to Nordic and Western European nations stems from a combination of many factors. The latter likely share a legacy of authoritarianism rooted in the Soviet era, where individual freedoms were subordinated to collective goals and state control. This inheritance stifled the development of emancipative values such as self-expression, individual autonomy, and participatory decision-making. Today, many Central Asian countries and Russia are governed by regimes that suppress political opposition, limit civil liberties, and control media narratives. These environments discourage the development of emancipative values by restricting freedom of thought, speech, and political participation.

Additionally, emancipative values tend to grow with economic security. When basic needs are unmet, individuals frequently prioritize survival over self-expression and the protection of civil liberties becomes less important. We find the same result, where education levels are uneven in societies and when limited emphasis is placed on critical thinking and civic education. Restricted access to independent media seems also to reinforce authoritarian narratives and hinders the dissemination of emancipative ideals. Overcoming this multitude of disparities between these countries of the East and the Western societies of the EU and Anglo-American countries will require profound political and economic reforms as well as substantial shifts in cultural attitudes and educational systems (Snyder 2018, Gessen 2017). In comparison the Nordic countries already have a head-start. Their consensus-based style of decision-making, their valuation of female independence, and their protestant faith have embedded an emancipative mindset within these societies and propelled them toward establishing democratic institutions.

Populist Parties in the Nordic Countries and Beyond

In the first part of this chapter, we compared the Nordic countries views of liberal versus authoritarian notions of democracy with a wide range of different societies. These value profiles help to make sense of underlying political preferences among the specific national populations.

However, they do not tell us much about the actual operation of political system in these countries. Hence, we should ask whether more authoritarian and less liberal notions of democracy also allow for the creations of authoritarian parties and if there is a specific Nordic form of contemporary political populism. In this section, we will compare the main populist parties found in the Nordic countries. These are the Danske Folkeparti (Danish People's Party), the Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats), the Perussuomalaiset (True Finns) and the Fremskrittspartiet (Progress Party, Norway).

To identify the degree of populism evident in these parties, we use the last available coding available from the V-Party dataset (referring to elections between 2016-2019) which uses expert ratings to identify a set of party characteristics (Lindberg et al., 2022) We are most interested in those characteristics that are traditionally associated with populist parties. As mentioned above, these parties often stress elements of people-centrism and anti-elitism. They also assume a unidimensional will of the people and advocate a majoritarian understanding of democracy which does not take minorities and foreigners into consideration. Additionally, such parties establish an *us-vs-them* narrative where the political elites are portrayed as greedy, corrupt and power-hungry. From their perspective, the purity of the people stands against this (Mudde, 2004).

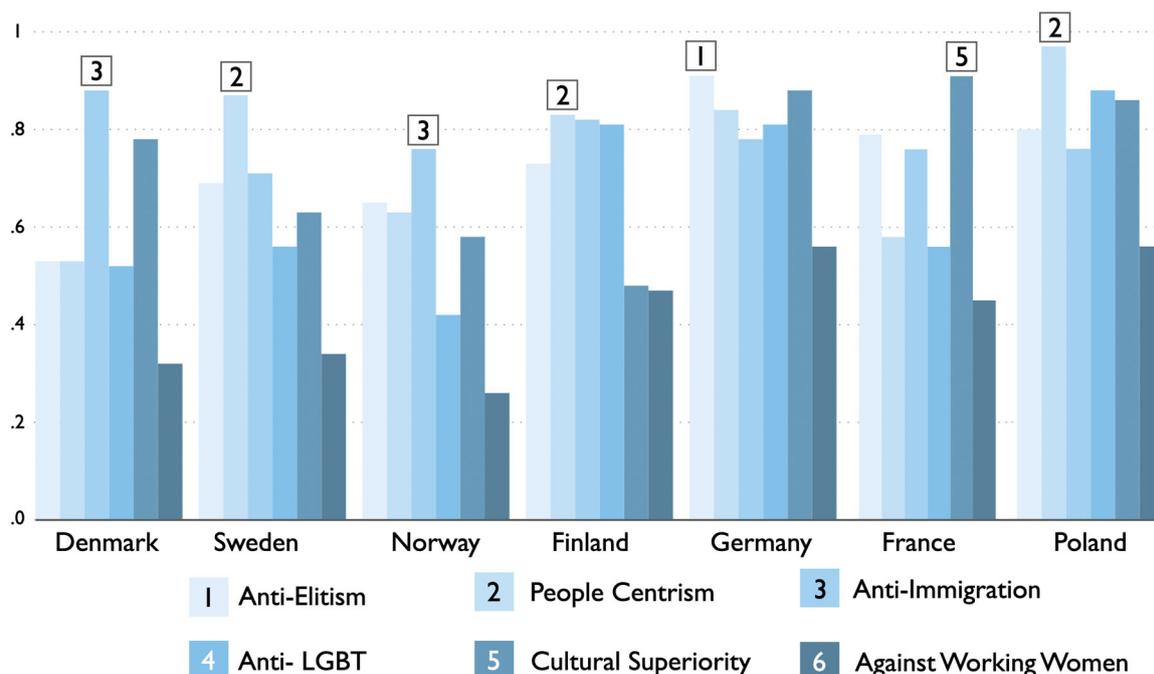
In addition to these main features of populist parties, there also exist a variety of ideological orientations held by members. The V-Party dataset includes items measuring the degree of anti-immigration attitudes, anti-LGBTQI+ feelings, perceptions of cultural superiority, and a belief in a traditional family-pattern with stay-at-home mothers. We use these indicators to compare populist parties in the Nordic countries with other European countries where populism has already taken a significant foothold. In line with their existing emancipative and liberal democratic values, we would expect the countries of Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark to feature a different style of populism than for example seen in Poland and Hungary. There populist leaders have actually governed and have been backed by less liberal societal values.

Indeed, we can clearly see differences when we compare the Nordic cases with other European examples. (See Figure 5 below). The anti-LGBT rhetoric used by populist parties in Denmark, Norway and Sweden is less pronounced than is seen in these other countries. Only the True Finns come close to the German AfD in their hate for sexual liberty. Likewise, in the three countries, we find that their populist parties are far less traditional in their view on gender roles. Again, the populists of Finland tend to follow a different path.

Anti-Elitism (1) is the strongest value in Germany. People Centrism (2) is the most common response in Sweden, Finland and Poland. Anti-Immigrating (3) is scoring highest in Norway and Cultural Superiority (5) is the dominant answer in France. In none of the countries Anti-LGBT or Against working women is scoring particularly high.

Looking at the remaining European countries in figure 5, we can clearly see here populism in these societies is not only about opposing immigration and claiming to “take back power” for the people. Populism in these countries seems about the exclusion of LGBTQ+ people from society and the return of women and children to a “traditional” family arrangement.

Figure 5. Main populist parties in the Nordics and some European countries



Source: V-Party Dataset v2, V-Dem Institute, Gothenburg University, 2022

With regard to other dimensions of populist belief, there seems to be a bit more diversity in the attitudes of populists within each Nordic country. In Denmark, the defining positions of populist there seems to be a rejection of immigrants along with a strong nationalist view of the cultural superiority of Danes. There is less focus on anti-elitism or people-centrism. The “Swedish Democrats”, on the other hand, rely most strongly on a people-centered rhetoric in their appeals and a commitment to “recapturing the state for the people”. Norwegian populism like its Danish counterpart is also immigration centered. However, its other features are much less pronounced. The populist True Finns again clearly stand apart from their other Nordic brethren. In their attitudes they are much closer to Central European variants of populism, but with less pronounced narratives on cultural superiority and disrespect for women in the workforce.

Iceland has no history of populist far-right parties so far. According to the **Authoritarian Populism Index**, support for populist parties in Iceland is among the weakest in Europe.² In the 1990s, Iceland's proportion of foreign-born residents was very low, under 3% of the population. However, following the EU's eastward expansion, immigration—primarily from Eastern Europe—increased significantly. Today, more than 18% of Iceland's population is foreign-born, one of the highest shares in the Nordic region.³

This has prompted the Progressive Party (Framsóknarflokkurinn), one of Iceland's established parties, to make anti-immigration policy statements in recent years. Despite the debate, Iceland has not had strong nationalist or anti-immigration parties in the same way as other Nordic countries. However, discussions continue to better integrate immigrants into society, particularly concerning language learning and citizenship.

² Authoritarian Populism Index 2024. <https://www.epicenternetwork.eu/publications/timbro-authoritarian-populism-index-2024/>

³ Statistics Iceland, *Innflytjendur 18,2% íbúa landsins*, 12. desember 2024 <https://hagstofa.is/utgafur/frettasafn/mannfjoldi/mannfjoldi-efir-bakgrunni-1-januar-2024/>

The strong anti-pluralist populism found in other European countries does not seem to fit to the overall Nordic value profile. Instead, it seems that a “milder” form of populism has emerged in the Nordic countries when compared to the rest of Europe. It is exclusionary towards foreigners but less opposed to societal inner diversity in terms of sexuality and gender. This does not make it less dangerous, but shows that (a) prevailing emancipative values also influence those actors most opposed to them and that (b) liberal democratic values have deeply engrained the protection of civil liberties into the shared values of most Nordic populations – at least for those belonging to the perceived *in-group*. Interestingly, the success of the populist True Finns seem to deviate from these observations. This makes our findings not generalizable for all Nordic countries.⁴ This suggests that the degree of Nordic political cultural exceptionalism is not uniform throughout the region.

Discussion

The influx of migrants and refugees to Europe, particularly during the 2015 refugee crisis, has significantly influenced the rise of right-wing populists. Immigration is often framed as a threat to national identity, culture, and security by populist leaders. They advocate stricter border controls and policies that prioritize native populations. Populism also thrives on the perception that political elites are corrupt, out of touch, and serve the interests of global corporations and international organizations rather than ordinary people. Many reasons have been suggested as fundamental causes of this expressed skepticism toward liberalism and democratic institutions. One of the leading theories suggests that economic inequality and discontent, exacerbated by factors such as globalization, automation, and austerity policies have left many people, particularly in rural areas, and among the working class, feeling left behind. These economic challenges have created fertile ground for illiberal movements, which often blame elites and international institutions for the population’s economic difficulties.

Nevertheless, Europe remains a continent of liberal democracies, which have to make new compromises to keep their national populist opponents in check. The mixed dynamic of mostly liberal—and partially authoritarian values—within these societies reflects a broader European struggle over the future of democracy. This is particularly the case in those regions facing economic challenges, political disillusionment, or historical legacies of authoritarianism.

While citizens generally express support for democracy, the WVS’ data spanning 40 years of interviews shows that their understanding of what democracy means can vary widely. A vast majority of the respondents value the classical idea of democracy (fair elections, representation, and freedom) and support the institutions and norms that are essential to a functioning liberal democracy. In many European countries liberal democratic values retain their strength against the backdrop of rising populism and illiberal movements. The populations in many countries express a clear preference for inclusive, rights-based democratic governance rather than centralized, authoritarian rule. This suggests the resilience of liberal democracies, which have the tools to adapt and respond to challenges while maintaining their core principles of freedom, equality, and justice.

⁴ Turning to additional countries for comparison does not change our findings, since the Anglo-Saxon bi-party systems (UK, USA) lack the diversity to identify an outlier populist party. Russia and other Eastern countries lack all competition between parties and Latin American parties have traditionally been more populist, though often with a leftist outlook.

Overall, authoritarian scores in these different European countries from wave 7 of the WVS survey remain comparably low. This shows that while populist and authoritarian movements may have some political influence, they have not managed to supplant the core democratic values in most societies. Still, there are some illiberal governments in Europe that have successfully undermined certain core democratic norms including independent judiciaries, civil societies, and a free media. Sometimes they have been able to do this without facing widespread domestic resistance (Applebaum, 2020).

Our results suggest that the Nordic countries are slightly more supportive of certain authoritarian precepts of democracy than some of their central European partners. While this is a surprising result, we can trace the Nordics' response to their sense of what *democracy means: people obeying their rulers*. It can be argued that in their case, obedience is voluntary, conditional, and rooted in the legitimacy of the democratic process. Nordic democracy allows for political authority to be checked, questioned, and eventually replaced through lawful means, providing a balance between order and freedom. The key distinction to be focused on in the Nordic case is that in their democracies, obedience is part of a broader social contract, where citizens maintain the power to influence and change the laws they are asked to follow. Obedience in such a democracy is conditional, grounded in the principles of participation, accountability, and the rule of law. Obeying the law in a Nordic democracy does not entail blind obedience to authority but rather an acknowledgment that laws are meant to protect the rights and well-being of all citizens.

The Nordic countries' exceptionally high scores on both emancipative and liberal democratic values may well stem from their unique wartime experiences and subsequent social development. While Denmark and Norway faced occupation, their post-war reconstruction emphasized social cohesion and egalitarianism. Finland, navigating a precarious position between the West and the Soviet Union, developed a pragmatic approach to governance that balanced external pressures with the need for internal stability. These factors may have contributed to a nuanced blend of liberal and authoritarian elements in Nordic democratic values. Additionally, the degree of emancipation—a society's emphasis on individual freedom and autonomy, self-expression, and participatory decision-making—might explain these differences. Societies with higher levels of emancipation tend to prioritize liberal democratic values, while those with moderate levels may integrate elements of authority into their conception of democracy.

Even before World War II, the Nordic countries began pioneering welfare state policies, emphasizing equality, education, and social security. This created a shared ethos of collective responsibility and egalitarianism. Despite Sweden's neutrality, it aligned culturally and politically with its Nordic neighbors during the reconstruction period after the war. The rise of the United Nations and the Nordic Council reinforced regional cooperation and shared values. Being relatively small in terms of population, the Nordic countries have historically relied on multilateralism and diplomacy, fostering open, democratic societies that prioritize cooperation, human rights, and rule of law.

High levels of general trust allow the Nordic countries to manage their societal inner diversity pragmatically. While people might view certain changes in their communities skeptically, they still trust institutions to mediate conflicts, uphold fairness, and implement reforms. For example, trust in the Nordic justice systems or welfare institutions may remain high even among those critical of immigration policies or global influences. The Nordic model's resilience lies in its ability to absorb differences without eroding trust. Institutions actively work to integrate

diverse groups, and social norms encourage dialogue and compromise. This Nordic trust creates opportunity for a broad spectrum of views, including populist critiques, to coexist without undermining the overall social fabric.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the interaction between liberal and authoritarian values, shaped by historical experiences and levels of societal emancipation, emphasizes the complexity of democratic ideals across cultures. The legacy of significant historical events, like World War II, and the unique trajectories of different regions of the world continue to inform their democratic frameworks and values today. Modern crises challenge political systems which have for most of their existence been dominated by relatively homogenous populations.

High levels of general trust in Nordic countries do not negate the presence of inner diversity within their societies but rather shape how that diversity is navigated. Trust acts as a stabilizing force, enabling these societies to adapt to demographic and cultural changes while maintaining social cohesion. Nordic Populism, in this context, is less about rejecting trust and more about negotiating its boundaries in a rapidly changing landscape. Nonetheless, Nordic populist narratives often oppose pluralist visions of present and future societies in the region and need to be constantly checked by the remaining political parties and the broader electorate.

The rise of right-wing populism, even in strong democracies like those of the Nordic region, forces us to reconsider simplistic narratives about democracy's decline. It may foretell neither a straightforward regression nor merely a minor disruption. Instead, it conveys the intricate, evolving nature of democratic systems, which must balance competing interests between adapting to inclusivity, representation, and stability in society. Whether these developments are a sign of democracy losing ground or adjustment to emerging challenges is a question that continues to drive debate among political thinkers. We share the conclusion earlier cited from former Danish prime minister Jens Otto Krag that the success of populist parties represents a form of voter retribution against the established order. However, this type of retribution may not exceed certain thresholds. Because as soon as populists start to govern and become more than reservoirs of the dissatisfied, they often start to attack the societal inner diversity of their countries and begin defining who belongs and who does not. In suggesting a return to "Bullerbyn" they are calling for a reduction of civil rights, the deportation of new citizens and a return to cultural practices that discriminate at least half of the population (women), if not more (LGBTQI+).⁵ Such actions may not be readily accepted within most contemporary Nordic communities

When politics fails to address pressing problems, voters, for legitimate reasons, express their democratic rights to object. Populist parties can channel the electorate's discontent within the democratic system even if it means giving the established political actors some tough criticism. This freedom of speech is a virtue of true democracy and is prevalent throughout the Nordic region. However, such opposition must not fall victim to intolerance. Democracy is a system where decision-making is based on rational deliberation, public debate, and dialogue, with a focus on the reasoning behind policies and laws. Emancipative values have shown to be the strongest vaccine against populism. When emancipative values are strong, democracy will

⁵ The term "Bullerby" in this context refers to an idealized, nostalgic, and overly simplistic vision of a harmonious, homogeneous society. The term is derived from the fictional village of Bullerbyn, created by the Swedish author Astrid Lindgren in her children's books. In these stories, Bullerbyn is portrayed as a small, idyllic rural community where life is simple, everyone knows each other, and harmony reigns.

remain strong. This is the dominant relationship that should continue within the Nordic countries.

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