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New Conflicts' Mapping in the age of Globalization (NEWCOMING)

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Abstract

The theory advanced by Seymour Lipset and Stein Rokkan on social cleavages, considered foundational to the formation of political parties, remains one of the most influential frameworks in political science. Over time, various studies have sought to examine the extent to which this theory still explains voting behavior and whether new globalization-related cleavages have emerged. The purpose of the NEWCOMING project (New Conflicts' Mapping in the Age of Globalization) is to provide an in-depth comprehension of these phenomena by collecting original cross-sectional survey data in seven Western European countries: France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Through quantitative analyses of these surveys, NEWCOMING will explore the relevance of both traditional and alleged new cleavages, seeking to understand whether Western Europe is characterized by an overarching 'globalization' cleavage, or a multitude of less-structured conflicts. Hence, NEWCOMING's survey relies on specific items capturing the key characteristics of social conflicts: people's positions in them, their salience, their identity-producing capacity, and finally, political parties' ability to represent them. Additionally, NEWCOMING aims to trace the causes of rising voters' political disengagement, detecting whether this trend is also related to people's specific positions in social conflicts. To this end, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with citizens who feel alienated from politics. Therefore, NEWCOMING ultimately aims to provide insights into both the evolution of cleavage politics and wider transformations in the democratic functioning of Western European countries.

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1. Introduction

In 1967, Seymour Lipset and Stein Rokkan introduced a prominent analytical framework to study historically determined societal divides. The authors identified four rifts that characterized 19th-century Western European societies, structuring national party systems and citizens' voting behavior: center vs. periphery, State vs. church, urban vs. rural and owners vs. workers. This conceptual device, named 'cleavage', gained prominence within Comparative Politics due to its versatility, applicability to both theoretical and empirical research, and relevance in understanding the dynamics and long-term stability of polities and party systems.

In recent times, renewed scholarly attention has been dedicated to the study of cleavages and their politicization. Some authors have discussed the decline of traditional Rokkanian cleavages, arguing that they no longer adequately capture the evolving socio-political landscape of contemporary Western societies, which appear as 'less frozen' than those described by Lipset and Rokkan (Bornschier and Kriesi, 2012; Dalton, 1984; Emanuele, 2023; 2024; Ford and Jennings, 2020; Franklin, 1992; Goldberg, 2020; Oesch and Rennwald, 2018). In fact, starting from the 1970s, the emergence of parties not aligned with traditional cleavages – all those based on post-materialist concerns, such as green parties – raised several questions about the suitability of the original theory to fully account the underlying dynamics of political competition. These shifts in the structure of Western societies became particularly evident after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the advent of the globalization era (Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Kriesi et al., 2006, 2008, 2012).

Structural changes – such as trade liberalization, increased capital mobility, post-industrialization, European integration, shifting gender roles and class structures, secularization – alongside various socio-economic crises, have prompted academic interest in the emergence of potential new conflicts or even cleavages in Western Europe (Borbáth et al., 2023; Inglehart, 1997; Kitschelt, 1994; Knutsen, 1997; Marks et al., 2021). Some researchers have highlighted the structuring of a new divide between 'winners' and 'losers' of globalization/transnationalism (Bornschier, 2010; Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Kriesi et al., 2006), politicized by radical right and green/left-libertarian parties. However, the claim that contemporary European societies and politics are predominantly defined by an overarching division between 'winners' and 'losers' must be open to critical examination, as it seems overly simplistic – and eventually unrealistic.

This led to the development of a project titled 'New Conflicts' Mapping in the age of globalization (NEWCOMING)'. The goal of NEWCOMING is to better identify the multifaceted landscape of new conflicts emerging in the age of globalization, the groups involved in these conflicts, the trajectories of their political mobilization, and the impact of these processes on democracy. The project focuses on seven Western European countries: France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

After a positive assessment, the proposed two-years project was funded and started its activities in October 2023, involving four research units (Luiss Rome, University of Siena, University of Florence, University of Bologna), with Vincenzo Emanuele as Principal Investigator.

NEWCOMING has several analytical aims: to map the emerging conflicts characterizing Western European societies by examining contemporary relevant economic,

social, and cultural shifts and their impact on different groups; to identify the groups arising from these conflicts, particularly focusing on their socio-demographic features, shared values and beliefs, and the existence of overlapping or cross-cutting identities; and, finally, to trace the potential mobilization of these groups, both in terms of political participation patterns and exclusion from the political circuit. NEWCOMING also has an assessment aim: to investigate the consequences of these processes for the proper functioning of democratic systems. Different patterns of political translation could produce two alternative outcomes: integration or alienation of citizens. While the former involves citizens' involvement in the political system, the latter points to the development of sentiments of distrust and apathy due to political actors' inability to address citizens' demands. Lastly, NEWCOMING has the proactive goal of identifying solutions to boost citizens' involvement in the democratic process, with a particular focus on alienated groups, providing operative roadmaps to political actors, civil society organizations, and citizens.

This research note provides an overview of the project in terms of its scope, objectives, methodology, expected results, and their dissemination. The first section is dedicated to a review of the current state of the literature on socio-political conflicts and cleavage politics. The second section focuses on the project objectives. The third section concerns the methods, while the fourth outlines the expected results and planned dissemination.

2. State of the art

Recently, comparative politics scholars have shown renewed interest in cleavages and their consequences. While the persistence of the cleavage-based model proposed by Lipset and Rokkan (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967) has been lengthily debated (Rose and Urwin, 1970; Bartolini and Mair, 1990; Franklin et al., 1992), recent studies (Clark and Lipset, 2001; Dalton, 2002; Knutsen, 2018; Goldberg, 2020; Emanuele, 2021) overwhelmingly highlight a crisis of traditional cleavages. Along with this decline, some argue that the 'age of globalization' has led to the emergence and structuring of a new overarching cleavage.

According to many authors (Kriesi et al. 2006, 2008; Bornschier, 2010; De Vries, 2018; Hooghe and Marks, 2018), this proposed new 'demarcation-integration' cleavage would divide society between 'winners' and 'losers' of globalization. Emerging after a series of critical junctures that created a globalized society, this cleavage would have gained a prominent position in national political systems, often replacing traditional cleavages and dividing the electorate and party system between pro-market cosmopolitans and protectionists/nationalists (Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Emanuele et al., 2020; Jackson and Jolly, 2021). From a partly different perspective, Piketty's school emphasizes the 'education cleavage', which opposes a 'Brahmin left' – supported by highly educated voters – and a 'merchant right' - backed by affluent citizens (Gethin et al., 2022).

This body of literature has undoubtedly revitalized the importance of looking at the political consequences of societal divisions. However, it suffers from two critical shortcomings – one theoretical and one empirical. First, the idea that, in 21st century Western Europe, society and politics can still be crossed by a generalized, overarching division between winners and losers seems too simplistic. Indeed, a globalized society is inevitably

characterized by several economic, social, and cultural conflicts that are likely to generate multiple, fragmented groups with cross-cutting identities and allegiances rather than a straightforward dichotomy of 'winners' and 'losers'. Furthermore, the progressive liberalization of trade and capital flows, alongside the rise of global value chains (Baccini et al., 2018, Kim and Osgood, 2019), has enabled multinational firms to organize production globally. Consequently, only the largest and most productive firms benefit from international trade, and even the most globalized countries are now witnessing a substantial backlash against it (Baccini et al., 2022). In addition, new sociocultural conflicts have also emerged, centered on issues such as intergenerational equity (Emery, 2012), women and LGBTQ+ rights (Flanagan and Lee, 2003), and immigration (Grande et al., 2019).

Moreover, the political translation of such different conflicts should not be taken for granted: only a few social demands are able to enter the 'black box' of the political system (Easton, 1953). Here, groups' grievances must find feasible support among political entrepreneurs, through 'conventional' or 'unconventional' mobilization (Dalton, 1988), namely, via parties or social movements. If this process is successful, citizens' Voice' (Hirschman, 1970) enters the political system, and citizens develop feelings of integration and democratic legitimacy (Verba and Nie, 1972). However, if the 'political opportunity structure' (Tarrow, 1994) is unfavorable to the political translation of societal demands and citizens opt for an 'Exit' strategy (Hirschman, 1970), they will progressively detach themselves from the circuit of representation and even develop feelings of alienation and distrust towards democracy (Aberbach, 1969; Blais, 2006).

Second, the literature on the new overarching globalization-cleavage has employed many heterogeneous tools (newspaper content analysis, party manifesto analysis, expert surveys) and primarily focused on the cleavage's supply-side, thus neglecting sociodemographic characteristics, attitudes, and behavior of the conflicting groups of citizens involved. Conversely, survey data are widely used by scholars of class voting, although they usually rely on standardized batteries in cross-national datasets, focusing on profession and the position of individuals in the economic structure (e.g., the schemes by Erikson et al., 1979 or Oesch, 2006). However, such batteries cannot fully map the interaction of socio-demographic characteristics with political attitudes nor capture individuals' integration into the electoral circuit and democratic process. To overcome these limitations in previous related studies, the central tenet of NEWCOMING is to adopt an original survey design and data collection strategy.

Therefore, we consider 'neo-cleavage' theory (Marks et al., 2021) as the starting point to pore over – along with the four traditional, Rokkanian conflicts – the rising of new globalization-related conflicts in Western Europe. Such conflicts may or not develop into a fully-fledged 'cleavage' depending on both their social and political structuring. Among the types of conflicts that have been created or reinforced with the advent of globalization, we consider the following four: skilled vs. unskilled workers, cosmopolitans vs. ethnonationalists, traditionalism vs. LGBTQ+ rights, economic growth vs. environmental sustainability.

3. Project objectives

Based on the puzzle highlighted in the 'State of the Art' section, NEWCOMING aims to explore the political consequences of new societal conflicts, including their repercussions on democratic systems. To do so, NEWCOMING has outlined five main objectives, summarized in Figure 1. The first objective is to map emerging conflicts in Western European societies by answering the following research question (RQ): What are the most relevant economic, social, and cultural conflicts in today's globalized world?

Accordingly, the project examines the key economic characteristics of contemporary globalization that began in the late 1970s and gained momentum after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. This phase of globalization has been shaped by the free movement of capital, ongoing trade liberalization, and the rise of global value chains. These dynamics, driven both by political decisions and market forces, allow capital to flow to regions with higher potential returns, whether for investment or speculation, and foster competition that increasingly favors large multinational corporations over local small and medium enterprises. As multinationals capitalize on liberalized capital and trade flows, they often relocate production to regions with lower labor costs.

In advanced economies, particularly in Western Europe, these shifts have led to significant economic and social impacts. Industrial production has generally declined due to offshoring and intensified global competition, which often renders domestic firms unprofitable. Technological advancements have added pressure on labor costs through automation and modular production. As a result, economies are increasingly dependent on the service sector, with firms clustering in major urban hubs.

This transformation has also driven increased migration flows, directed primarily to advanced economies, reshaping the economic landscape. Furthermore, economic globalization has coincided with the emergence of post-materialist values, which are reflected in calls for expanded civil rights for women and LGBTQ+ people, as well as an increasing emphasis on environmental issues. All these trends define current advanced polities: as more people see their basic needs met, there is a growing emphasis on self-realization and freedom of expression.

Concurrently, we observe an emerging conflict between low- and high-skilled workers (Polk and Rosén, 2024). Globalization, with its adverse effects on industries that produce low value-added goods, has had a negative impact on low-skilled labor, while it has largely benefited high-skilled workers, particularly those with higher education and digital skills, who can navigate a global job market. At the same time, low-skilled workers face intensified competition due to the increased availability of cheaper foreign labor.

In addition, the shift from industrial to service sectors has increased the economic centrality of large urban areas, deepening divides between these hubs and peripheral/remote regions. Cities, which often stand out in terms of economic diversity and cultural tolerance, appear in tension with less culturally diverse - and often more nativist - rural areas (Crulli, 2024).

Moreover, the combination of increased civil rights and multiculturalism occasionally generates friction between those who embrace multiculturalism and others who hold traditional values. For some, immigration and post-materialist agendas represent a

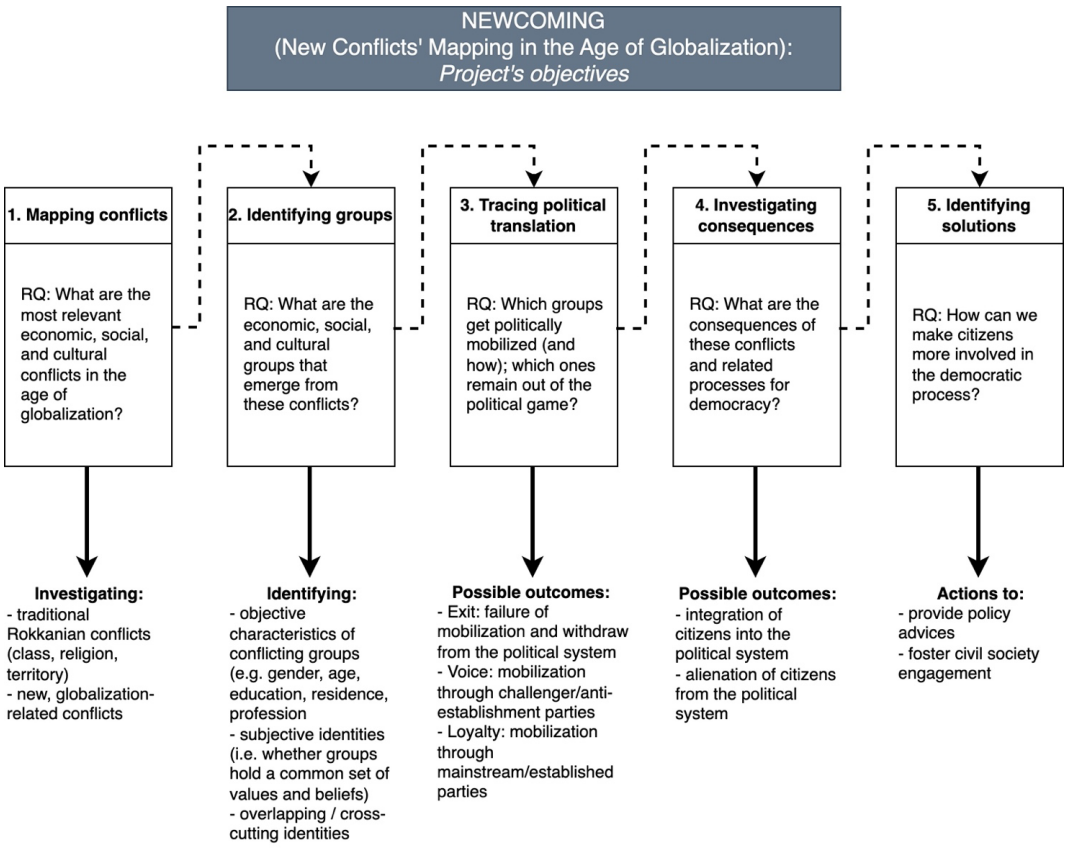
cultural threat, prompting them to defend traditional societal structures (a stance sometimes reinforced by religious views).

In tracing these conflicts, NEWCOMING will examine their variations across countries and interactions with traditional Rokkanian cleavages such as territory, religion, and class. Since these conflicts arise from distinct economic and cultural shifts, their expressions are expected to differ across European countries, potentially reinvigorating or cutting across established socio-political divides.

The second objective of NEWCOMING is to identify the economic, social and cultural groups emerging from each conflict. Unlike mainstream research on social cleavages, which emphasizes the idea of a generalized, overarching conflict that divides the whole society into two opposing groups (e.g., working class vs. bourgeoisie; losers vs. winners of globalization), we argue that today's society is far more fragmented. In the 21st century, it is unrealistic to conceptualize society as divided into two large, opposing camps, as multiple intersecting conflicts create a mosaic of smaller, diverse groups, which will be examined through the collection of original individual-level survey data. This project seeks not only to examine the socio-demographic characteristics of these groups (such as gender, age, education, residence, and profession), but primarily to investigate whether groups emerging from social conflicts share a common set of values and beliefs that provide them with a sense of collective identity. NEWCOMING aims to assess whether these group identities overlap or diverge from each other.

The third objective of NEWCOMING is to trace the patterns of political expressions of conflicts by answering the following questions: which conflicting groups get politically mobilized (and through what means) and which ones remain outside of the political game? Recognizing that only some social demands can enter the political system's 'black box' to avoid an overload crisis, we expect that not all conflicts will receive political attention. Particularly with new conflicts, it is likely that only some groups will successfully capture the political system's focus while others see their demands ignored. Taking our cue from Hirschman's schema, we identify three patterns of political translation of conflicts. The 'Conventional Voice' refers to the classical model of political mobilization through interactions between groups and political parties: this is what arguably happened with Rokkanian cleavages in the past century. The 'Unconventional Voice' is observed when groups, finding their demands unmet through traditional, established channels, turn to challenger/anti-establishment social movements or parties to voice their concerns. Lastly, the 'Exit' phenomenon arises when social demands go unaddressed, leading groups to withdraw from the electoral process, either by abstaining from elections or disengaging from the democratic system. NEWCOMING aims to study the political preferences of these conflicting groups and analyze the strength and diversity of conflict translation patterns across Western European countries.

Figure 1. NEWCOMING's Objectives



The fourth objective of NEWCOMING is to investigate the democratic implications of these processes. The way conflicts are politically expressed can shape democratic systems, leading to two main scenarios: integration and alienation. In the first scenario, citizens engage with the political system, participate in elections and trust institutions. In contrast, the alienation scenario involves citizens distancing themselves from the system, resulting in lower electoral participation and trust. When conflicts receive a 'Conventional Voice', mobilization by political parties can foster loyalty among citizens, engaging them in the political landscape. Conversely, if conflicts remain unaddressed ('Exit'), citizens may disengage, developing feelings of alienation. For conflicts with an 'Unconventional Voice', the outcome depends on the extent of initial mobilization. If challenger social movements or parties gain political traction, citizens are likely to re-engage into the system; if not, they may experience greater alienation.

The fifth and final objective of NEWCOMING is to identify potential solutions to enhance citizen participation in the democratic process by answering the question: How can citizens become more involved in the democratic process? This objective seeks to provide an actionable roadmap for political actors, civil society organizations, and ordinary citizens, helping them navigate the previously identified transformations and conflicts. Starting from the results achieved by fulfilling the previous objectives, a series of short- and long-term policy recommendations will be proposed to address the multiple risks faced by contemporary democracies.

These objectives will be pursued primarily through a comparative analysis of transformations and conflicts based on cross-national surveys and interviews aiming to measure voters' positions within these conflicts, political preferences, and attitudes towards democracy. Therefore, the following section describes in greater detail the project's methodology.

4. Methodology

The above-mentioned objectives will be carried out through two main methodological tools: original cross-national survey data and in-depth qualitative interviews. A preliminary step before conducting our surveys was to undertake a conceptual and comparative longitudinal analysis of the economic, social, and cultural transformations and conflicts in post-1989 Western Europe. This entailed a literature review and the collection of existing secondary data. We considered both aggregate data from various databases (e.g., OECD, World Bank, IMF, V-DEM, Comparative Political Data Set) and survey repositories (e.g., Eurobarometer, European Social Survey). This effort allowed us to identify emerging conflicts and formulate expectations about the opposing groups involved in such conflicts.

Objectives 1-4 ('Mapping Conflicts', 'Identifying Groups', 'Tracing Political Translation', and 'Investigating Consequences') will be primarily addressed through original cross-national, individual-level survey data. Indeed, as existing surveys either completely overlook new conflicts or lack the level of detail to effectively address our research questions, the collection of original survey data is essential for the NEWCOMING project. Specifically, the surveys were administered through CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) in seven Western European countries: Italy, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Data collection started on March 15 and concluded on May 31, 2024. Respondents in each country were selected through quota samples, with sample sizes in each country of around 1,500. The total number of observations of the final pooled sample is 10,701. Each country's sample is representative of the voting-age population based on education, a combination of gender and age, and another combination for geographical area and municipality size. Data were collected by the Italian polling company Demetra opinioni.net in close collaboration with the LUISS unit of the project. We also relied on the expertise of country specialists for the harmonization and fine-tuning of the survey questionnaires across the different countries involved in the project.

The primary objective of the questionnaire was to identify the underlying basis of each conflict in terms of (1) socio-structural, (2) normative, and (3) organizational-behavioral dimensions (Bartolini and Mair 1990). To achieve this, we first developed a question for each conflict to capture respondents' positions on them. This approach asked participants to align themselves with one of two opposing sides in each specified conflict. For instance, Table 1 presents the question used to determine the respondent's stance on the conflict between traditionalism and LGBTQ+ rights. Additionally, three follow-up questions were crafted to assess: (1) the perceived importance of each conflict, (2) whether the conflict contributes to identity formation among the relevant social groups, and (3) the extent to which certain political parties are seen as particularly credible in representing the interests of these groups.

As for the in-depth qualitative interviews, they will concern the Italian case and will primarily focus on citizens who adopt an 'Exit' strategy, specifically those who abstained in the most recent general elections or who are considering doing so in the future. Abstentionism has become a significant phenomenon in this country, which has seen a consistent decline in turnout over the past twenty years (Chiaramonte et al. 2022; Marini and Piccolino 2022). The purpose of the interviews is to reconstruct the mechanisms underlying political disaffection. Our interview guide is focused on two main topics.

First, we aim to study whether this disaffection is directed against the functioning of politics and democracy in the country or toward liberal democracy per se. The second topic, which links this part of the project with previous ones, aims to explore the salience of conflicts within this segment of citizens. To strengthen the connection with other parts of the project, we have chosen to prioritize respondents to our survey as interviewees. Specifically, we asked those interested in a more in-depth interview to leave an email address at the end of the survey, through which they were contacted with the interview offer on these topics.

Finally, Objective 5 ('Identifying Solutions') will be addressed by using a variety of actions and measures to reach citizens and civil society organizations. This final objective aims to provide an operative roadmap for political actors, civil society organizations, and ordinary citizens to help them cope with the previously identified transformations and conflicts. Hence, a series of short- and long-term policy recommendations will be provided to address the multiple risks faced by contemporary democracies. This specific output will be developed as part of a policy report on the Italian case, which will be fully discussed and amended in collaboration with civil society organizations and research centers that already operate to support democracy and democratic practices. The repertoire of deliverables may include: a dedicated webpage on the project website, a webinar and podcast series, and public lectures for secondary schools

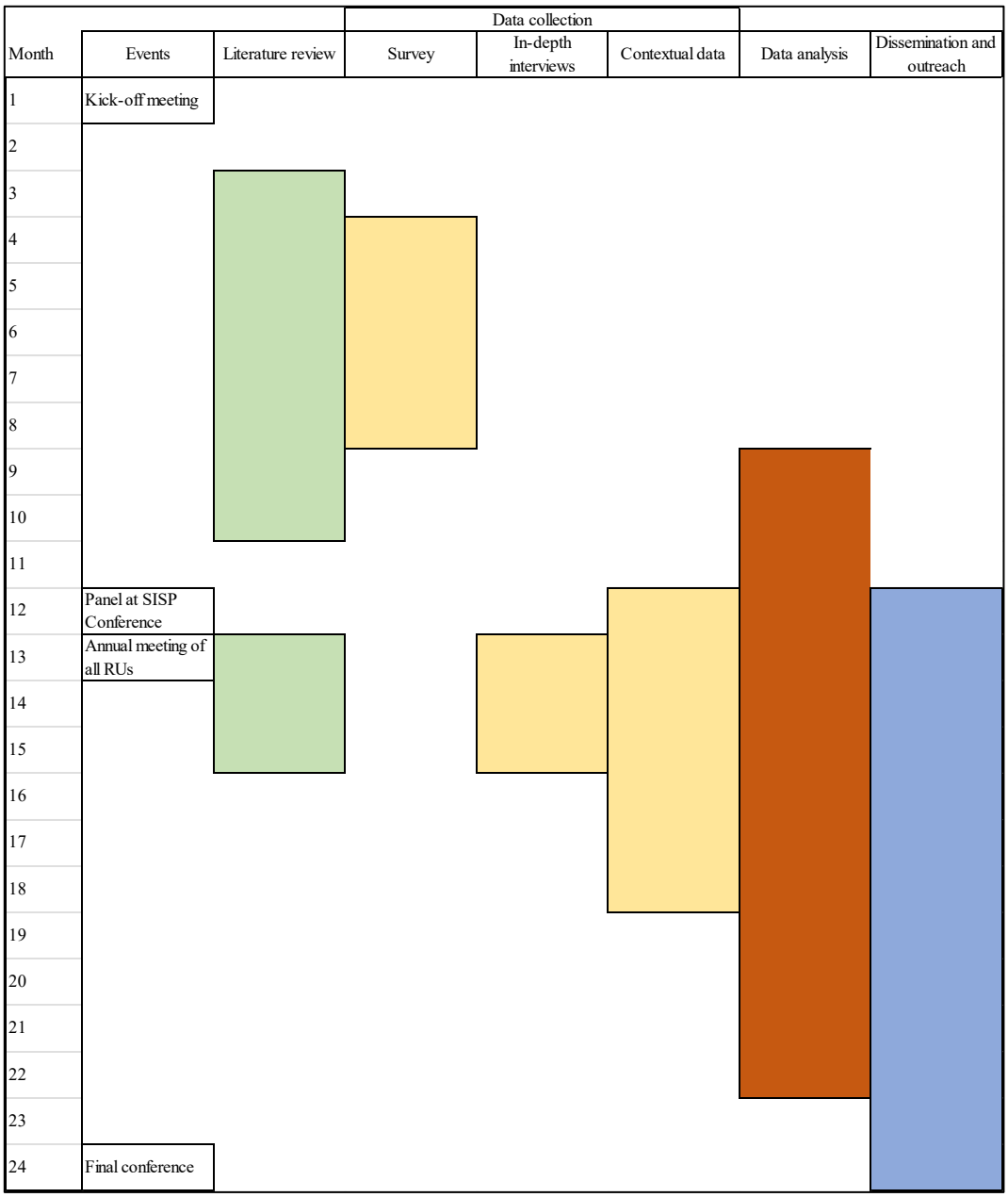
Table 1. Survey items used to assess respondents' positions on conflicts and evaluate their salience, identity-forming capacity, and politicization by distinct party families

Element	Question	Scale
Position (e.g. on the conflict between traditionalism and LGBTQ+ rights)	Many believe that in [country] there is a conflict between those who support traditional family values and those who support the rights of the LGBTQ+ community (e.g. homosexuals, bisexuals, transsexuals). Considering this conflict, how would you place your views on this scale, where 1 means you are completely in favor of traditional family values and 6 means you are completely in favor of the rights of the LGBTQ+ community?	1 = Traditional family values 6 = Rights of the LGBTQ+ community
Salience	How important is this conflict for you?	0 = Not at all important 10 = Very important
Identification	Thinking about [chosen group*], how close do you feel to this group? By 'how close' we mean how much you feel you have in common in terms of identity, values, and interests.	0 = I don't identify with this group at all 10 = I identify with this group a lot
Politicization	Thinking about [chosen group*], in your opinion, which political party is more credible to represent their interests? You can select up to 3 parties.	List of parties that were polling at least 1% by the time the survey was conducted + 'No party is credible' option

5. Expected results and dissemination

NEWCOMING's ultimate goal is to advance academic knowledge in the field of comparative politics by updating Lipset and Rokkan's conceptual framework to reflect contemporary conflicts and the resulting economic and cultural socio-political groups in contemporary Western Europe.

Figure 2. NEWCOMING's Objectives



We aim to accomplish this through a fine-grained examination of the multiple conflicts that have recently emerged, their patterns of political translation, and their related impact on democracy. The timeline of the project and its milestones are summarized in

Figure 2. The project unfolds over a two-year lifespan as required by the PRIN scheme but the team's research effort may yield results well beyond the duration of the project.

We expect NEWCOMING's findings to have a non-negligible social impact. Firstly, the results of this research will help policymakers reinvigorate the political participation of alienated groups and improve their ability to manage the consequences of globalization. Secondly, NEWCOMING's recommendations will provide a foundation for discussion with civil society, and especially the younger generations, aiming to make them critically reflect on complex political phenomena and empower their agency and motivation to actively participate in the democratic process. Finally, in terms of dissemination, NEWCOMING will produce an in-depth analysis focused on the Italian case, outlining policy strategies to engage citizens and limit their alienation.

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