*“The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.”*

(Article 2 of the Treaty of Lisbon 2007*)*

What binds Europe? According to the Lisbon Treaty, what connects Europeans is a shared vision of society promoting liberal values of diversity, human rights, openness and egalitarianism. This vision, however, is increasingly contested by critics maintaining that “European identity is rooted in Christianity”, and as such it should curtail the impact of those outside this tradition (Orbán, Frankfurter Algemeine 3 September 2015). The fact that Eastern European leaders such as Viktor Orbán and Robert Fico are taking the charge in this critique has raised concerns about the unity of Europe and the shared commitment to the values the European Union espouses. In addition to this rift between the ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Europe, the financial crisis and its aftermath has pitted North and South against each other, while Brexit has championed national identity at the expense of the idea that European nations have much in common. All these tensions conjure up an image of a divided Europe, consisting of people with different visions of what a modern European society is about and should look like. It raises the question to what extent the values on which the European Union is founded, as listed in the Lisbon Treaty, are shared among the European population and what this implies for European unity.

In this paper, we address these concerns by exploring which competing visions of society co-exist within Europe. What—if any—are the shared values characterizing Europe? And ,in so far as there is heterogeneity, what are the major fault lines?

Our approach in answering these questions differs from existing work on European values. Traditional contributions have focused on identifying the values of individuals in various societies, seeking to expose what people in different countries on average regard as desirable and important. However, polarization is usually not seen by looking at the distribution of individual attitudes. In the US, a long history of studies into the evolution of value and attitude diversity has not shown any divergence (Baldassari and Bearman 2007; DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Evans 2003; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005), as attitudes of social groupings appear to move largely in parallel to each other (Page and Shapiro 1992). This stands in sharp contrast to the widespread perception that American society is polarizing (Baldassari and Bearman 2007). An explanation for this paradox may be the practice of moral stereotyping (Graham, Nosek and Haidt 2012). Through this process, individuals exaggerate the moral conflict between ingroup and outgroup, ascribing more extreme positions to both. Research in social psychology and political science has shown that individuals base their attitudes and behavior less on their own ideological beliefs or values than on the positions of reference categories they identify with (Cohen, 2003; Gerber, Huber, & Washington, 2010; Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). In this way, attitude polarization comes about through identification with opposite stereotypes. Small differences in values translate into strongly polarized oppositions between extreme value constellations.

To accommodate this insight, we aim to identify such reference categories by focusing on extremes rather than averages. We argue that what defines the debate about the direction of society is not the position of the representative member of society, but the corner positions between which contestation takes place. These archetypical corner positions represent unique value configurations reflecting identifiable, comprehensive outlooks on society, which individuals more or less relate to. It is these archetypes—the archetypical liberal vs. the archetypical religious conservative for example—that frame the discussion and that people more or less identify with, even though individuals rarely ever completely share all values with any of these extremes. Studying the degree of identification with these corner positions is more insightful than studying average values.

Using WVS data from 26 European nations, we analyse the beliefs people hold on a selection of defining topics and first find that all people can be described based on three archetypes, each representing an ideal-typical configuration of values, attitudes and beliefs with which people more or less identify. While one of these archetypes (which we label ‘the post-modern liberal’) reflects the liberal, cosmopolitan set of values espoused in the Lisbon Treaty, the other two archetypes (‘the religious conservative’ and ‘the leftist conservative’) conjure up images of Europe that are decidedly less liberal. Each individual is a combination of these extremes, with people tending towards the conservative types forming the majority of the European population. Secondly, we find that the fault lines between people run across member states rather than between them. People resembling each archetype can be observed in each and every member state individually, although they differ in their degree of prominence in different countries. Thirdly, even though the fault lines run across countries, we find that the conflict between the various archetypes is projected onto inter-country oppositions. Specifically, we show that the chance that two people from two different European countries tend towards the same archetype is a strong predictor of bilateral trust between countries.

We conclude that the vision of society underpinning the European project is not widely supported among the European population. What is more, the contestation of European identity takes place within as much as between member states, and occurs along similar lines in each of them. Although heterogeneity is often projected onto inter-country oppositions because national borders act as focal points, in reality the main divisions run across countries rather than between. European societies are united in diversity; countries are more or less uniformly divided between liberal and conservative leaning camps.

This paper contributes to the literature about European values and identity, by highlighting the intra-societal, normative divisions that European societies have in common. We show that there is relatively scarce popular support for the values on which the European Union is founded, but at the same time that differences between member countries herein are relatively small. These insights shed new light on the question whether there is a shared cultural foundation for European unification, and related questions about the popular legitimacy of the European project. Second, this paper offers a novel take on studying value diversity, focusing on the extreme corner positions that shape the debate in a society rather than on the position of the average member of society. We thus link value research to insights about the role of social identity and reference groups on social and political attitudes. Third, this paper presents a novel methodological approach to achieve this in the form of archetype analysis, which allows us not to just score countries on individual value dimensions, but to assess unique value configurations that serve as basis for interaction.

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