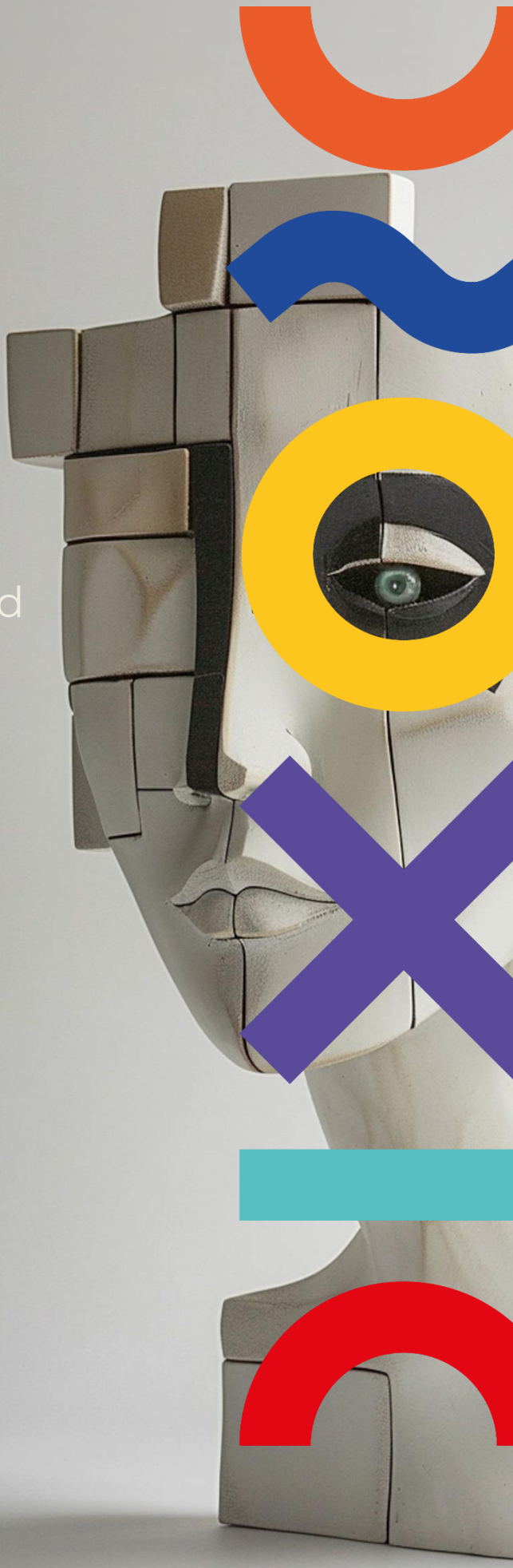
D2.1

Key ENCODE's concepts and their intersections



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ENCODE - Unveiling emotional dimensions of politics to foster European democracy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report, "Key ENCODE's concepts and their intersections," presents the research categories and other critical notions which map the research fields of ENCODE and furnish the project's theoretical background. A careful selection of the concepts discussed in the report is implied by the project's scope and objectives.

These concepts and their intersections are examined in several thematic groups. The report begins by discussing the fundamental notions of emotions, affects, values, and beliefs. Notably, ENCODE distinguishes affects from emotions, a distinction further clarified in this report to support empirical research and analysis. Numerous other significant concepts and their interrelations are also addressed, ranging from broad categories and phenomena such as political participation, populism, social identities, and political communication to more specific topics, including conspiracy theory and affective citizenship. Since ENCODE aims to study emotive mechanisms in both natural and digital contexts, a separate chapter is devoted to digital-related concepts to deliver a thorough foundation for examining the socio-political and emotional dynamics they represent.

In addition to the thematic clusters, the report includes dedicated chapters on affective polarization and affective pluralization. Affective polarization refers to the recently increasing, emotively driven type of political polarization, a phenomenon that poses serious concerns for maintaining a resilient and functional social and political order. While affective political polarization involves negative affects and emotions toward political opponents, ENCODE proposes a concept and theory of affective pluralization, designed to promote a positive emotional shift that is central to the project's impact goals. The concluding discussion on affective pluralization encapsulates the theoretical foundations of these concepts, its relation to affective polarization, and its potential role in fostering a positive and realistic emotional turn.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE ENCODE PROJECT

The ENCODE project, titled "Unveiling Emotional Dimensions of Politics to Foster European Democracy," aims to explore and decode the role of emotions in political discourse and their impact on democratic processes. Recognizing that emotional appeals have significantly influenced political movements and voter behavior, ENCODE seeks to understand the interplay between emotions, values, and identities. The project's primary goal is to create new positive narratives that can foster trust and engagement in European democratic processes, thereby counteracting the negative emotions that often dominate political discussions. Through innovative methodologies, including social media sentiment analysis, biometric research, and surveys, ENCODE aims to provide policymakers with tools and strategies to better incorporate the emotional needs of citizens into governance, ultimately enhancing democratic resilience and fostering a more inclusive political environment.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF DELIVERABLE

In this report, we provide a conceptual toolkit for ENCODE. Given the proliferation of various theories, approaches, and understandings of relevant concepts and their relations, it is essential to develop and propose the conceptual and theoretical common ground, especially for an interdisciplinary project such as ENCODE. To achieve this objective, we reviewed existing positions and conceptualizations using the literature in political science, psychology, philosophy, information and communication technology, political communication, and sociology. We analyze this literature through the lens of the scope and objectives of the project to make sure that our conceptualizations are valid and applicable in the upcoming ENCODE research. In doing so, we explain the meaning of the concepts studied and their significance in terms of democratic processes. We also focus on the intersections of the concepts investigated, which is relevant for ENCODE's empirical research aimed at examining the relationships between different variables derived from our concepts. The selection of the concepts was driven by their being instrumental in empirical research on sundry political dimensions of emotions and affects that will be carried out in ENCODE using a few scientific perspectives.

When discussing the objectives of this deliverable, two concepts deserve to be addressed separately, namely affective polarization and affective pluralization. As one of the primary concerns of contemporary democratic societies, affective pluralization can be considered a central context of the ENCODE project itself. Therefore, we analyzed this concept in detail to explicate its meaning, character, and relationship with other types of political polarization, political identity, and related values. We also address the problem of the consequences of affective polarization and mitigating strategies. Next, we describe the new concept of affective pluralization. We present its theoretical and normative foundations, explore its relationship to affective polarization, and discuss its potential positive role in addressing the affective and emotional challenges facing civil society.

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1.3 STRUCTURE OF THE DOCUMENT

The structure of this deliverable is organized by problem areas, aligned with the nature of the selected concepts. The remaining part of the document is structured as follows. The second chapter encompasses the fundamental concepts of the project: emotions, affects, values, and beliefs. The third chapter discusses politics-relevant concepts which broadly refer to the socio-political environment and affect the whole political system. In the framework of ENCODE, these concepts represent political participation, populism, conspiracy theory, and European identity. Afterward, we analyze policy-relevant concepts which refer to policymaking and influencing public policies. They cover political decision-making, evidence-based policy, political communication, and political narratives. Chapter Five gathers the concepts with a particular meaning for citizenship such as collective and individual experiences, emotional resilience, emotional needs, social trust, social identities and affective citizenship. In turn, Chapter Six establishes a conceptual framework for digital-related concepts (digital universe, metaverse, multiverse, internet memes, echo chambers) and discusses them within the limits of political processes and a digitalized public sphere in democracy. The two flowing chapters are devoted, respectively, to affective polarization and affective pluralization. The closing chapter concludes.

1.4 RELATION TO OTHER TASKS

This deliverable is a project milestone which indicates its relevance for ENCODE. As the conceptual toolkit of the project, the report clarifies and suggests the understanding of the concepts involved and serves their further operationalization by the consortium for the purposes of conducting empirical research. Therefore, all methodological tasks and reports will be influenced by the present work. Added to this, as a first report in Work Package 2 (WP2), it is essential for the following deliverables in WP2, that is, D2.3 and D2.3. A particular connection is between the description of the concept of affective pluralization and the further development of the theory of affective pluralization, which will be the culmination of D2.2, "Theories of emotional politics".

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2. FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS

Among the fundamental notions to be conceptualized for ENCODE purposes, we identified affect, emotion, value, and belief. The first two terms are in the main interest of the so-called affective sciences (see Scarantino & de Sousa, 2021), but other disciplines have to do with emotive aspects as well. These can be addressed from various angles and ENCODE is interested in social and particularly political dimensions of the emotive fabric. Added to this, ENCODE studies values and beliefs that have been examined by social scientists for a long time. Again, we will cover these concepts, particularly through the lenses of the social sciences. In what follows, we will present the conceptualizations of these terms and the intersections between them. It is crucial for ENCODE to define the boundaries of these notions so that we can prepare empirical tools at later stages of the project.

2.1 EMOTIONS AND AFFECTS

Although some scholars use the terms "emotion" and "affect" as synonyms (Eklundh, 2019, Chap. 1), it is important for ENCODE and its specific tasks to make a distinction between emotions and affects, both being critical concepts of the project.

Affect theory is the product of the so-called affective turn, which brings emotional components of human action into the central discussion in social sciences. The theory takes its origins from the new materialism. However, the role of emotions, understood as cognitive elements, has been stressed within the emotional turn. Comparing the two, affect theory is more deeply rooted in biology (Eklundh, 2019, ch. 1).

An affect is an emotive aspect that is characterized by the following features: It is embodied (experienced through one's body), impulsive, not fully formed, and not fully conscious. The dimensions of affects include valence and arousal. We refer to valence when we are interested in how negative or positive, pleasant or unpleasant a given affective state is. Arousal concerns how high or low an autonomic nervous system is activated when a person experiences a particular affect. An example of an affect is anxiety. Observing anxious people, we might see them chaotically walking around or having anxious tics such as eye blinking or coughing, or vocalizations. Objects of affects are constantly changing, which demonstrates that they are instrumental as outlets rather than objected towards anything specific. Hence, affects are fluid and unstable, and all this makes them potential political triggers, hard to predict and control. Rage, paranoia, or panic might spread quickly in various groups, even when there is no direct contact. Jonathan Haidt posits that affects are "small flashes of positive or negative feeling that prepare us to approach or avoid something" (Haidt, 2012). Or, even more tellingly, "[t]hese flashes occur so rapidly that they precede all other thoughts about the thing we're looking at" (Haidt, 2012). What is particularly relevant for politics is that some scholars argue that certain affects, although usually short-lived and considered politically indifferent, could last long and become the cause of one's political activity. James Jaspers describes this phenomenon as abiding affects. Another term in use is 'mood' which is defined as a relatively long-standing affective state that spreads between individuals or groups. It is argued that moderate anxiety improves the quality of political participation. It motivates people to find information and to counteract injustice. Moving beyond mere political activity, Chantal Mouffe uses the term "passions" to describe common affects which underlie political identities, thereby being the foundation of the political

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(Hoggett & Thompson, 2012, pp. 2-5; Eklundh, 2019, ch. 1; Koschut, 2020, p. 5; Mouffe, 2014; Crigler & Hevron, 2017, p. 665; Bakker & Lelkes, 2024, p. 426–427).

Let us now turn to emotions. Haidt claims that "[e]very emotion (…) includes an affective reaction, but most of our affective reactions are too fleeting to be called emotions" (Haidt, 2012). Emotion is an emotive component that is more conscious than affect, and it concerns some objects. Therefore, emotions have meaning and focus, and they are intentional (Hoggett & Thompson, 2012, pp. 2–3). They stem from affects, thus representing affects, explicating them, and attaching meaning to them (Eklundh, 2019, Chap.1). Barbara Gould has it (quoted in Eklundh, 2019) that: "An emotion (…) brings a vague bodily intensity or sensation into the realm of cultural meanings and normativity, systems of signification that structure our very feelings".

In general, there are three theoretical positions on emotions. The naturalist conception, developed by Charles Darwin and William James, is that emotions are embodied experiences and "natural kinds," that is, they are independent of subject or culture. On the other hand, cognitivist theory, proposed by thinkers such as Magda Arnold, Martha Nussbaum, and Richard Lazarus, connects emotions to individual value judgments built on one's considerations and beliefs. The third theory, which can be traced back to Emile Durkheim, is constructivist. It assumes that emotions are "socially constructed representations of affects and feelings', based on both culture and social structure (Koschut, 2020, p. 4). The constructivist theory borrows from the cognitivist one; however, it takes a social ontology of emotions as opposed to the subjective ontology of naturalism and cognitivism. Simon Koschut (2020, pp. 7–8) mentions the following key points of the constructivist approach: emotions are culturally appraised; learned, not innate; socially prescriptive and purposive.

It is rather clear that naturalist theories are not promising for ENCODE objectives, while cognitivist and constructivist seem functional for the project research, depending on specific tasks and research designs.

Regarding ENCODE, Thompson and Hoggett (2012, pp. 7-12) proposed an interesting typology of political feelings. They distinguish:

1. Positive moral emotions – feeling states that attach people to objects of emotions. Examples: sympathy, concern, compassion and forgiveness.
2. Negative moral emotions – feeling states that separate us from the objects of our emotions. Examples: disgust, contempt. Negative moral emotions drive moral panics, that is, widespread hostility towards some group because of their imagined profile[1].
3. Positive feelings (of attraction) – good feelings that impact public spheres:
    a. *enhancing social relations; examples:* trust, love, gratitude. In this context, only trust has been studied which resulted in well-known research findings on social capital, social networks and contracts.
    b. *expressing positive relations to people or ideas that we consider "higher"* – examples: admiration, love, awe. An illustration are feelings to political leaders.

[1] A more precise definition of moral panics might be found in Cohen (2011) who describes this phenomenon as follows: "a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests."

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   c. *"optimistic affects"*[2] – unformed feelings resembling affects, examples: hope, happiness, enthusiasm, joy, optimism. They might drive millenarian ideas such as communism, but also serve as "positive illusions" which contribute to our well-being.
4. Negative feelings (of repulsion) – negative feelings in public life:
   a. *ressentiment* – a set of negative feelings directed at others, including hatred, envy, malice, spite and loathing. Nowadays, ressentiment has been identified as a source of authoritarian populism.
   b. *intangible negative feelings* – feelings towards such abstract objects as life or time; examples include cynicism, pessimism and despair.
5. Feelings associated with loss – these are such feelings as grief, disappointment, disillusionment, sorrow, sadness, melancholy. In social life, they accompany social and economic changes, e.g., urbanization, migration, development.
6. Feeling associated with hurt – the feelings that emerge in groups experiencing negative emotions such as hatred or disgust.
7. Feelings associated with injustice – the feelings that fuel protests, including anger, grievance, outrage, resentment.
8. Feelings related to 'flight' – these types of feelings refer to fear, anxiety, terror which might produce paranoia.

As can be observed, in the discussion above, including in the typology of Thompson and Hoggett, yet another term referring to emotive states is used, that is, "feeling." Although the theoretical tradition we follow makes a clear distinction between emotions and affects, the term "feeling" may remain undefined (see, e.g., Barret, 2017). It may function as an umbrella term, with affects and emotions regarded as types of feelings. (Within ENCODE, an equivalent umbrella term used is "affective state" or "emotive state".) Some scholars, though, distinguish between affects, emotions and feelings. For example, Peggy A. Thoits (1988, p. 318) assumes that emotions "culturally delineated types of feelings or affects," the difference between the latter two concepts being that a feeling denotes "the experience of physical drive states (e.g. hunger, pain, fatigue) as well as emotional states," while affects are valences and arousals. On the other hand, Anna Wierzbicka (1999, p. 306) claims that "feelings are subjective, and they appear to be universally thought of as related in some cases to what is happening in the body; but they are also often thought of as based on certain recurrent thoughts – cognitive scenarios shaped by the particular culture."

2.2 VALUES AND BELIEFS

As already mentioned, emotions have a lot to do with values and beliefs. However, the interconnections between values and beliefs on the one hand and emotions and affects on the other might be misleading. Although both cognitivist and constructivist approaches assume that emotions are derived from values and beliefs, they have different views on the origin of the latter two. Cognitivists claim that emotions are produced from affects filtered by values and beliefs chosen by an actor, whereas constructivists argue that the source of these values and beliefs is sociocultural rather than individual (Koschut, 2020, pp. 7–8). Depending on the preferred approach, we need to keep these peculiarities in mind when designing research and making inferences.

[2] The term is coined by us because the Authors do not provide a specific term for that category.

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The study of values is typical for several disciplines; therefore, we need to stress that ENCODE adopts a typical understanding for sociology and political sciences, such that it will be instrumental in the empirical research of the project, especially to study values in mass politics. From this perspective, values pave the way for understanding what matters to people.

In 2021, the European Commission issued a report Values and Identities, a policymaker's guide that gathers the relevant literature in the field and applies it to sociopolitical considerations in the European context. The definition adopted in the report is that values are "abstract goals or motivations that are important in many situations", e.g., freedom, security, equality, tradition and toleration" (Scharfbillig et al., 2021, p. 22). The publication brings to our attention a few more important points: (1) citizens are committed to their values, meaning that values are relatively stable at the individual level; (2) values build identities; (3) shifts in societal values depend on generational changes; (4) people need choose between competing values in given situations, however (5) there are values that might be considered as absolute and sacred; (6) certain values are interpreted in the same manner across the globe, but in general (7) the hierarchies of values cause political differences between citizens concerning particular policies; (8) when significant differences in values occur, political polarization increases; (9) studying values allows us to forecast collective activity. Finally, it should be stressed that values are not another word for world views, ideologies, attitudes, opinions, and morals, despite being principal components thereof (Scharfbillig et al., 2021).

Empirical studies on values are well grounded in social sciences. The first critical attempt to make values an object of systematic empirical research was undertaken in the 1970s by Milton Rokeach, who presented the distinction between instrumental and final (terminal) values (Kaiser, 2024). Among the latter, he listed, e.g., a world at peace, family security, freedom, equality, self-respect, or happiness. In turn, the illustrations of instrumental values are ambition, love, capability, cheerfulness, or courage (https://psynso.com/rokeach-value-survey/).

Nowadays, among the most popular approaches is the theory of basic human values, developed by Shalom Schwartz, and postmaterialism identified by Ronald Inglehart (Beckers et al., 2012). According to Schwartz, values are "desirable, trans- situational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or other social entity" (quoted in Beckers et al., 2012, p. 14), the definition which is in line with the one in the EC report cited above. Values motivate people to act according to them and serve as evaluation criteria as well as form our choices and preferences. Within the alternative approach, values are defined in a pretty similar way: "Value orientations set standards for desirable and undesirable goals" (quoted in Beckers et al., 2012, p. 14). That said, it seems that Schwartz's typology of values is perhaps more instrumental in ENCODE research due to the expected explanatory power of this with respect to affective phenomena in polarized societies. Thus, Schwartz distinguished the following types of value: self-enhancement (power, achievement), openness to change (hedonism, stimulation, self-direction), self-transcendence (universalism, benevolence), and conservation (tradition, conformity, security) (Beckers et al., 2012).). The list originally counted ten values, but the number was extended to nineteen in further work (see Schwartz et al., 2012).

From ENCODE's perspective, a more recent division may also be worth mentioning and perhaps applying in research, namely Paul Goren's (2020) distinction between the *core political values* and the *core human values*. The former underlie the political scientific

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approach and treats values as consisting of abstract beliefs concerning political system, society, and public matters, while the latter tradition is more psychologically oriented. The core human values are then "transsituational beliefs about desirable end states and modes of conduct that can be rank ordered in terms of personal importance". Goren argues that human values are much better conceptualized and have a deeper theoretical and methodological grounding than political values.

When comparing values with beliefs, simple beliefs are much weaker, and thereby they change more easily. However, functionalist theories of values, like the ones mentioned above, consider values as special sorts of beliefs, moral beliefs (Kaiser, 2024). A general take on belief is that it is a sort of attitude which we have when we regard something as existing, happening or being true. Believing in something does not have to follow from reflection. Beliefs might concern trivial things, e.g., that we have eyes or that a notebook is on the table. Furthermore, belief is a 'propositional attitude', which is expressed in sentences. "A *propositional attitude*, then, is the mental state of having some attitude, stance, take, or opinion about a proposition or about the potential state of affairs in which that proposition is true" (Schwitzgebel, 2024). Therefore, while values and beliefs are often considered together, we must bear in mind how different these categories are.

In a very recent paper, Matthias Kaiser (2024) challenges functionalist approaches to values by arguing that emotive aspects might provide a more powerful explanation of our actions than values. Moreover, Kaiser claims that the value theory leaves too little room for individual differences. Another sort of criticism, existing in the literature, is that value theory is taken for granted rather than open for testing, and that values are too abstract construct to be subject to rigorous measurement. At least some of this criticism does not hold if we consider the first paragraph of this section, that is, the one touching upon the relationship between values/beliefs and affects/emotions. The thing is not to select one of the alternatives as drivers of action, but rather that this is an interrelated network. What is more, cognitivist accounts of affects and emotions leave much room for individuals.

Hence, the intersections between values and beliefs on the one side and affects and emotions on the other can be presented graphically as:

AFFECT —> VALUE/BELIEF (filter) —> EMOTION ----> POLITICAL ACTION/Behavior}

We can add that this scheme is not universal because some *behaviors* may be driven solely by affects, and some *actions* might result only from values. However, another important distinction here is between automatic-like behaviors and deliberate actions. In a strict sense, only actions are purposeful, whereas behaviors may be, at most, reactions to incentives. The distinction can be found in several disciplines, such as sociology and economics, but it is also pertinent to political science, where it helps differentiate between two understandings of politics: (1) as an activity related to addressing collective needs and issues, and (2) as an arena of political conflict in which citizens are continuously misled by politicians competing for power.

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3. POLITICS-RELEVANT CONCEPTS

Since the ENCODE project has chosen Chantal Mouffe's agonistic theory as one of its theoretical foundations, it seems essential to understand how her call to "radicalize democracy" can be interpreted in Europe and, ultimately, how this process might shape European identity. It is important to note, as Mouffe emphasizes, that radicalization in this context does not imply a total break with liberal democracy but rather a 'radicalization' of its ethical-political principles (Mouffe, 2018, p.25).

In line with some theories of populist mobilization, we argue that it is insufficient to merely construct a narrative of a European "heartland" or "true European people." Without a deeper understanding of the needs underlying such an endeavor, its outcome risks becoming an exclusionary idea for a significant part of the European population (Taggart, 2004, p.274). The debate surrounding the dangers of populism and the absence of a unified European identity becomes especially relevant in times of crisis, such as the Brexit referendum (Bergbauer, 2018, p.112), COVID-19 pandemic—often seen as a source of medical populism (Lasco, 2020; Stojanov et al., 2023) —and Russia's invasion of Ukraine ('2nd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats A Framework for Networked Defence', 2024; Ivaldi and Zankina, 2023).

However, if we view populism merely as a symptom of the dysfunction of democratic representation, we must confront the argument that the European integration project has been plagued by a "democratic deficit" from its inception—"it was not founded on representative politics but on elite agreements dependent on a 'permissive consensus' at the mass level" (Taggart, 2004, p.269). Therefore, as Mouffe suggests, we should strive to understand that the "populist moment" signals a time of potential breakthrough, a marker of the need for a radical response to successive crises of faith in the European project, which highlight its detachment from the lived emotions and affective states of individuals.

3.1 POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

In short, **political participation covers "citizens' activities affecting politics"** (van Deth, 2021, p. 1) **or "those actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or to support government and politics"** (Milbrath, 1981, p. 198). These activities encompass, among other things: "voting, demonstrating, contacting public officials, boycotting, attending party rallies, guerrilla gardening, posting blogs, volunteering, joining flash mobs, signing petitions, buying fair-trade products, and even suicide protests" (van Deth, 2021, p. 1). Originally, the scope of the term was outlined narrowly; however, nowadays, as illustrated on the list above, there is a huge variety of participatory means, which makes it difficult to demarcate between what counts as political participation and what does not. Added to this, differences in defining this category reflect differences in defining politics. If one understands politics as the area dominated by political institutions, one's definition of political participation will be reduced to influencing the government, in elections or direct actions. On the other hand, if one takes politics to be an overwhelming phenomenon (such as in the slogan "everything is political"), one's conception of political participation will be greatly expanded. ENCODE is between those extremes, however, it implicitly leans towards the latter approach, as can be inferred from its deep interest in sociopsychological factors as well as from its theoretical references (e.g., its approach to emotions and affects).

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Broadening the conceptual scope of political participation reflected the structural changes in the character of activities connected with influencing politics. Political participation used to require some level of organization and coordination, but currently such activities might be done individually without cooperation with others. The goals and motivation can also differ from person to person (van Deth, 2021). As Jan W. van Deth (2021, p. 5) summarizes: "By now almost every conceivable nonprivate activity can be understood as a form of political participation when a political context is evident or political goals are manifest."

Anyway, the basic characteristics of political participation are the following (van Deth, 2021, p. 3):

1) it is a purposeful and active engagement in political matters,
2) it is voluntary,
3) it does not come from your professional function (politician, lobbyist),
4) it relates to broadly understood politics, the state or government, and transcends levels, areas or phases that might be considered as essential.

In political participation, rationality usually goes hand in hand with emotions, and affective factors often motivate and demotivate citizens to engage in political matters. For example, discourse dominated by negative emotions, political participation becomes a risky and unpleasant experience as commenters are easily labeled radicals or insane people (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 13). The intersections of affects, emotions and participation have recently been reflected in the concept of Midān moments which was developed by Bilgin Ayata and Cilja Harders. The Arabic word "Midān" means "square" or "battlefield" which conveys spatiality and antagonism. Midān moments refer to events that occur in some spaces and are marked by intense emotive connections formed through the physical presence of protesters and emerging activities. What happens during these moments is disrupting established emotional patterns such as fear, hatred, repression, or acceptance toward the system. Although they open up new possibilities for interaction, they also have the potential to spark new conflicts (Ayata & Harders, 2019). Concerning the participation crisis resulting from the "democratic deficit" in the EU, it seems one could conceive of the European Midān moments as grassroots responses to the said deficit.

3.2 POPULISM

Populism is a socio-political phenomenon that, in its minimalist and non-normative form, primarily functions as a popular mechanism for political mobilization, although, its compatibility with the typical goals, values, and institutional frameworks of contemporary liberal democracies—such as checks and balances and constitutional guarantees—remains highly debatable (Urbinati, 2019, p.116; Canovan, 2004, p.244; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013; Laclau, 2005; Krunke et al., 2022, pp.212–213). In the scientific literature, populism is variously described as a movement, a regime, a practice, a syndrome, or a dimension of political culture (Demertzis, 2006, p.112). However, for the purposes of ENCODE, it is most useful to focus on two competing perspectives: (1) populism as an expression of "thin-centered ideology" and (2) populism as a feature of the ontological structure of democracy. In both perspectives, populism is linked to the mentioned mechanism of political mobilization, which capitalizes on the antagonism between the underrepresented "true people" and the hegemonic "elite groups" (Urbinati, 2019, p.112; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013, p.499). In both cases this can lead to extreme forms of exclusion, labeling parts of society as potential 'traitors.' On the other hand—something less frequently observed—it can also foster bonds based on love, loyalty, and affection (Fierman, 2021). Yet, when choosing between the aforementioned perspectives, one must remember that this antagonism is interpreted

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differently: either as a mechanism playing an (1) ideational or (2) structural role in political processes. (Stanley, 2008, p.95; European Center for Populism Studies, n.d.). For this reason, it should be noted that the second approach is more important for the philosophical and theoretical background of the project, whereas the first approach is more commonly used in the well-established tradition of empirical research.

What we want to highlight at the outset of this description is the fact that it is often emphasized that populists offer "simplistic solutions to complex political problems in a very direct language, appealing to the common sense of the people and denouncing the intellectualism of the established elites" (Abts and Rummens, 2007, p.407). While this may be true in many cases, Nadia Urbinati rightly points out that such an *interest in populism* was "strongest among those who saw it as a problem" and does not take into account the fact that many scholars and citizens today have started "conceiving it not only as a symptom of the decline of representative institutions but also as an opportunity for rejuvenating democracy" (Urbinati, 2019, p.112).

In a more in-depth approach, populism might be understood as a form of ideology. While we can seemingly identify 'symptoms or expressions of an underlying populist ideology,' it "does not provide a comprehensive vision of society" (Abts and Rummens, 2007, p.408). Furthermore, although political scientists sometimes use the term "New Populism" to describe a global phenomenon uniting political movements with similar modus operandi, its supporters and leaders rarely describe themselves as "populists," and "despite some links, they have not so far seen themselves as branches of an international ideological movement" (Canovan, 2004, p.242). For these reasons, scholars such as Cas Mudde propose defining populism within an ideological framework as "a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups… and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people" (Mudde, 2004, p.543). Compared to "thick-centered" or "full' ideologies (e.g., fascism, liberalism, socialism), populism has a 'restricted morphology, which necessarily appears attached to—and sometimes is even assimilated into—existing ideological families" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013, p.498).

Populism, understood in this way, is therefore an extremely diverse phenomenon that may include religious or nationalist traits, employ various rhetorical styles (such as those associated with republican patriotism or indigeneity/nativism), and draw on different types of sociopolitical cleavages (Urbinati, 2019, p.114). There are no definitive indicators of populism, but key characteristics of this *ideology* are typically considered to include the presence of a strong leader who expresses the will of the people (often in a polarizing way) or, increasingly, the exploitation of negative aspects of social media platforms, such as filter bubbles (Heiss et al., 2019).

In this sense, populism is often understood as a specific form of political communication aimed at electoral mobilization through the use of a set of 'core concepts'—the people, the elite, and the general will—which help construct narratives that create an ideological community and provide individuals with a sense of inspiration and identity (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013, p.494). Importantly, from the perspective of ENCODE, this allows for the construction of narrative mechanisms, the functioning of which is well described by Paul Taggart's notion of a 'mythical heartland.' This concept represents an imagined place in space or time that populists use to depict 'ordinary people' as representatives of an idealized community (Taggart, 2004, p.274). It can be argued that, in practice, this narrative mechanism was employed by Donald Trump, who, through his famous slogan 'Make

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America Great Again,' invoked an ambiguous vision of a true America, a mythical heartland of the ordinary Americans.

Objections to this approach stem from the concern that, in the end, it lumps together—and in a sense stigmatizes—all those who oppose the mainstream notion that "there is no alternative to neoliberal globalization" (Mouffe, 2018, p.15). It also fails to distinguish between the functioning of "populism in power" and the methods used by social movements contesting the established social order (Urbinati, 2019, p.113). Populism, understood as a thin ideology, still carries an evaluative element, which is why in public discourse, the terms "populist" and "extremist" are often used interchangeably. Therefore, it does not provide a sufficient basis for explaining the "demand-side of populism," which focuses on the question: why do citizens support populist leaders? (Hawkins et al., 2020; Rechica et al., 2022).

Viewing populism as a feature of the ontological structure of democracy, on the other hand, emphasizes the depth of structural transformation that can occur within the democratic political order during what Chantal Mouffe (2018) describes as the "populist moment". In this interpretation, populism cannot be reduced to a matter of communication style, because it represents a fundamental mechanism by which citizens construct themselves as a collective subject—the people—positioning themselves against the existing hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). This perspective aligns well with the constructivist framework for understanding emotions described in the previous section, but Mouffe, especially in her works with Ernesto Laclau, primarily describes populism according to the assumptions of the poststructuralist paradigm. In their structuralist ontology, populism is not only a discursive strategy employed by individuals but also a direct expression of 'democratic logic'—a mechanism capable of reconfiguring a social order that is widely experienced as unjust (Mouffe, 2018, p.12). Its essence lies in creating broad coalitions ('chains of equivalence') of numerous heterogeneous unfulfilled needs or unsatisfied interests, strategically grouped under the shared banner of 'populist demand' around key symbols, slogans, or figures ('empty signifiers') (Laclau, 2005; Hasanović et al., 2024).

Criticism of this approach highlights the ambiguous role of individual agency, assuming that political changes occur primarily at the structural level and operate in accordance with the "ineluctable operation of formal logic" (Stanley, 2008, p.97). It is also noted that grounding this approach in Carl Schmitt's theory of friend/enemy dualism might lead to an oversimplified Manichean moral dualism between the people and the elite (Urbinati, 2019, p.117). Populism is also often linked to rhetorical strategies based on conspiracy theories, which are similarly grounded in "simplistic responses to pressing issues," as we will demonstrate in the following section (Bergmann and Butter, 2020, p.332). In the end, if we accept that populism can alter the very structure of entire democratic systems, then it is reasonable to be concerned that the radicalization it engenders might—contrary to Mouffe's earlier response—lead to illiberal forms of democracy (Pappas, 2019).

3.3 CONSPIRACY THEORY

Some popular definitions of a conspiracy theory (see, e.g., Van Prooijen, 2018; disinfo.eu) evoke Marvin Zonis and Craig M. Joseph's (1994, p. 448) statement in which they mention "the belief that a number of actors join together in secret agreement, in order to achieve a hidden goal which is perceived to be unlawful or malevolent". However, it is overlooked that with these words the authors define a conspiracy, not a conspiracy theory. The matter is rather complex, therefore, we will come back to the definition at the end of the section.

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Conspiracy theories are not theories *sensu stricto*. Rather than reflecting the usage, which is typical for scientific reasoning, the concept of conspiracy theory embraces the word "theory" in a popular understanding. To be exact, we should speak about a belief offering an explanation or perception of some events, processes or phenomena, or briefly about *conspiracy thinking* (see (Zonis & Joseph, 1994) rather than a theory. However, since the collocation "conspiracy theory" is well-established, we will follow the common usage, while being aware that in what follows, the word "theory" indeed refers to a specific kind of belief. Conspiracy theories are by no means a new phenomenon. For example, some theories about Covid-19 resemble the ones on HIV as having been released by America or Soviet Union (see Keeley, 1999). Conspiracy theories are widespread among the general population, often influencing significant life decisions. These beliefs can shape choices such as voting preferences, decisions about vaccinating children, the commitment to reducing one's carbon footprint, the use of contraceptives, and even the likelihood of displaying aggression toward out-groups perceived as different. The far-reaching consequences of such beliefs highlight their profound impact on both individual and societal actions (Van Prooijen, 2018, p. VII).

Jan-Willem Van Prooijen argues that there is nothing unusual in believing in conspiracy theories, as they are related to typical psychological processes. From the perspective of ENCODE, it is important to note that believing in conspiracy theories is strongly related to emotive dimensions. Such beliefs are rooted in deeply held ideologies and frequently serve to defend one's in-group against perceived threats from opposing groups. As Van Prooijen (2018, p. VIII) has it: **"Conspiracy theories are a natural defensive reaction to feelings of uncertainty and fear, blaming dissimilar out-groups for the distressing circumstances that one has to deal with."** Other authors distinguish the following groups of motives to believe in conspiracy theories: (1) existential (aimed at overcoming threats), (2) epistemic (aimed to understand and gain certain knowledge), and (3) social (aimed at valuing oneself or one's group) (Douglas et al., 2017).

Added to this, recent research (van Prooijen et al., 2022) shows that the popularity of conspiracy theories lies in their entertaining character. Some people, it is claimed, find such beliefs exciting and interesting, and what is more, such emotive reactions match with accepting conspiracy theories as true. The authors claim that perceived entertaining value of those theories is among the reasons to believe in them.

The question we should ask is whether a conspiracy theory always implies wrongness. As pointed out by Brian L. Keeley (1999, p. 111) "In fact, as the cases of Watergate and the Iran-Contra affair illustrate, small groups of powerful individuals do occasionally seek to affect the course of history, and with some nontrivial degree of success." In this vein, a position considered just a conspiracy theory today, could prove a fact tomorrow, although most conspiracy theories we observe nowadays seem *unwarranted conspiracy theories*, to use Keeley's term. This is a philosophical perspective that usually avoids evaluative understanding of the discussed notion.

Another way to explain this puzzle is by separating a conspiracy theory from a real conspiracy. Following this assumption, Stephan Lewandowsky and John Cook (Lewandowsky & Cook, 2020), distinguish between conventional thinking and conspiratory thinking. It is the former that allows us to expose actual conspiracies through healthy skepticism, being responsive to evidence and striving for coherence. On the other hand, conspirational thinking leads to imagined conspiracies by overriding suspicion, over-interpreting evidence, and contradiction. The authors mention **seven characteristics of**

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conspirational thinking under the acronym CONSPIR, namely: contradictory, overriding suspicion, nefarious intent, something must be wrong, persecuted victim, immune to evidence, re-interpreting randomness.

These authors' approach corresponds well with the current discourse of social sciences, but these authors do not proffer their definition of a conspiracy theory. This work has been done in a recent paper on the definitional aspects of our concept. The authors present their own definitions which reads:

"A conspiracy theory is a belief that two or more actors have coordinated in secret to achieve an outcome and that their conspiracy is of public interest but not public knowledge. Conspiracy theories (*a*) are oppositional, which means they oppose publicly accepted understandings of events; (*b*) describe malevolent or forbidden acts; (*c*) ascribe agency to individuals and groups rather than to impersonal or systemic forces; (*d*) are epistemically risky, meaning that though they are not necessarily false or implausible, taken collectively they are more prone to falsity than other types of belief; and (*e*) are social constructs that are not merely adopted by individuals but are shared with social objectives in mind, and they have the potential not only to represent and interpret reality but also to fashion new social realities" (Douglas & Sutton, 2023).

3.4 EUROPEAN IDENTITY

European identity is a form of collective identity that can be understood in two ways: (1) broadly, as a sense of belonging to Europe as a geographical and cultural realm with its comprehensive heritage and history, and (2) narrowly, as the effect of a specific supranational political project, namely the European Union (EU identity). From the perspective of the ENCODE project's goals, the latter understanding is particularly important, where European identity is still more of "an issue to address, a goal to achieve" (Capello, 2018, p.489), and the concept itself is viewed as "an idea expressing contrived notions of unity rather than an identity in the proper sense of the word" (Stråth, 2002, p.388).

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when the idea of European identity became part of the political process of European integration. Some scholars suggest this began with the signature of the Treaty of Rome in 1957, while others argue it occurred later, at the Copenhagen EC summit in December 1973 (Capello, 2018). Although differences between the broader and narrower interpretations of the term have been noted, it is clear that even in its narrower sense, it is based in a history of diverse reflections on the concept of Europe, drawing on Europe's heritage in the form of classical Graeco-Roman civilization, Christianity, and the ideas of the Enlightenment as the "core elements of this claimed European legacy" (Stråth, 2002, p. 388).

In a socio-cultural approach, European identity can be defined as a form of "collective identity in which people accept that they have a fundamental similarity which causes them to feel reciprocal solidarity" (Capello, 2018, p.492). Importantly, Europe is understood here as a cultural entity, which helps to conceptualize this similarity in terms of shared history, ethnicity, civilization, and heritage. It is a specific 'imagined community' that has developed, among other factors, through a shared understanding of a significant "other" (Kaina and Karolewski, 2013, p.15). This helps with identification through shared opportunities and constraints afforded by a common understanding and experience of the world.
Similarly, socio-psychological approaches focus on individual identification with Europe, which is defined by combining several elements:

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- "citizens' self-categorization as European",
- "their evaluations of their membership in the European collective",
- "their affective attachment to Europe and other Europeans" (Bergbauer, 2018, p.6).

From the perspective of ENCODE's objectives, it is also necessary to emphasize the distinction between an empirical approach on the one hand and a normative approach on the other, as the lack of this divergence often hinders definitional efforts (Kaina and Karolewski, 2013, p.17). Adopting a normative approach, our starting point will be that a democratic Europe needs its 'people'—its democratic polity (Eder, 2009, p.434). In this view, first, it is recognized that citizens may identify directly with "particular political structures such as the European Union and its institutions" (Capello, 2018, p.492). Second, it emphasizes that such identification is necessary for the effective functioning of these institutions: "from a functional perspective, the emergence of a collective European identity among citizens in the member states is a crucial precondition for citizens to accept majority decisions and redistributive policies at the EU level" (Bergbauer, 2018, p.244).

The literature highlights also that European identity-building is a "circular process," which involves both top-down efforts by political elites directing integration policies and bottom-up processes where individuals actively participate in constructing European identity through grassroots actions and engagement in the collective life of the political community (Capello, 2018, p.490).

In the context of the top-down perspective, particular attention is given to the role of the media, which remain a primary tool for persuasive communication. Bergbauer refers to this as an "information-based way of European identification," which is based on the idea that citizens' identification with Europe "is rooted in exposure to elite messages and communications establishing the European community as a relevant category for self-representation" (Bergbauer, 2018, p.6). This perspective emphasizes the importance of EU-related news and other types of media coverage of EU affairs. In a somewhat broader context, it can also be argued here that European identity, like other collective identities is a *narrative construction*, with the media and political elites actively participating in its creation (Eder, 2011). Here it is noteworthy that EU institutions and political actors deliberately use various technologies for identity creation, including the manipulation of symbols and the creation of foundational myths (Kaina and Karolewski, 2013, p.35).

The bottom-up perspective assumes an 'experience-based' process of creating European identification, in which "citizens' identification with Europe is rooted in direct encounters between EU citizens and their personal experience of EU integration" (Bergbauer, 2018, p.6). This view aligns with social identity theory, which suggests that collective identification depends on the distance and proximity individuals feel towards institutions that represent their collective reference point (Eder, 2009, p.432). This proximity—beyond the previously mentioned historical and cultural factors—also stems from participation in various European programs, such as those related to European cohesion policies (Capello, 2018, p.490). Special attention should also be given to the Erasmus exchange program in higher education (Bergbauer, 2018, p.246), which, in addition to fostering emotional engagement among young people involved in the project, is supported by scientific observations that the degree of education of citizens is positively correlated with a sense of European identity (Capello, 2018, p.490).

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European identity coexists with other forms of identity. While it provides a separate and specific sense of belonging, it largely relies on identities at the national and regional levels: "ideas of belonging are overlapping, inclusive, and exclusive in complex and contradictory patterns, where it would be far too simple to juxtapose European identity against national ones" (Stråth, 2002, p.390). European identities are "nested" within various types of identities, from national to local, though an open question remains regarding the extent to which they are complementary or may come into conflict with each other (Fligstein et al., 2012, p.112). But it is important to note that European identity develops not only as a socio-cultural practice but also, or perhaps primarily, as a 'civic conception.' This perspective assumes the existence of a 'constitutional identity' grounded in the uniqueness of a constitutional order, whether national or supranational, and is deeply rooted in European civic tradition (van der Schyff, 2021). This tradition holds that people who identify as European are closely aligned with certain values (peace, tolerance, democracy, and cultural diversity) (Fligstein et al., 2012, p.112), what might indicate, in the end, a convergence between the top-down perspective and the bottom-up perspective discussed above.

The intersections between key concepts essential for understanding the process of radicalizing democracy at the European level might be fruitfully presented in light of the so-called 'two-strand theory,' which posits that liberal democracy is a combination of two fundamentally different sets of principles as:

- Liberalism is "concerned with individual rights, universal principles and the rule of law, and is typically expressed in a written constitution" while
- Democracy is "concerned with the sovereign will of the people, understood as unqualified majority rule" (Canovan, 2004, p.244).

The narrative shift we propose within ENCODE must take into account that the stability of these systems depends on a delicate balance between these principles within representative politics. In this sense, it is often argued that populism destabilizes this complex system because it is hostile to the key mechanism that ensures its functioning—representative politics (Taggart, 2004, p.273). While populism is not a regime in itself, it "questions electoral or mandate representation" and can lead to a "machinery of nepotistic favors with orchestrated propaganda" (Urbinati, 2019, p.113). However, it is worth reminding that the popularity of populism indicates a lack of sufficient recognition of the role of emotions in politics—populism is "a political phenomenon charged with ressentiment" (Demertzis, 2006, p.112; Rico et al., 2020). If the traditional forms of participation in liberal democracies fail to capture the dominant emotions in society, more radical forms of political mobilization will emerge, often drawing on potentially harmful narratives e.g., based on conspiracy theories. A striking example are the elements of conspiracy theory identified in the 2016 Brexit campaign in the UK, which tapped into anti-Muslim sentiments and false claims about Turkey's impending EU membership (Bergmann, 2018, pp.129–130).

If the process of forming a European identity is to align with the ideals of liberal democracy, its radicalization must involve the EU's ability to generate positive emotions (Capello, 2018, p.491). This position is supported by psychologists, who highlight that a person's sense of belonging to a collective often requires some form of official *acknowledgment*: the individual's experience of belonging is shaped by collective recognition (Kaina and Karolewski, 2013, p.20). Such popular recognition must involve the construction of a new 'narrative network' that includes engaged individuals, regions, civil society organizations, economic entities, and nation-states, which will not be perceived as a purely political project for controlling society (Eder, 2009, p.444). Even if European identity has not yet fully

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emerged, we might continue to rally around a common interest (Staehr Harder, 2020): the welfare of the EU.

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4. POLICY-RELEVANT CONCEPTS

While the concepts and phenomena addressed in the previous chapter refer to sociopolitical developments and challenges in terms of the European polities and the EU itself, this chapter concentrates more on a policy process. In brief, this is a process in which political problems are defined and considered, policies are formulated, decision are made and implemented, which is followed by their evaluations (see, e.g., Birkland, 2019). In this area, affects and emotions play a critical role because the main point of reference is political action and interactions between people involved in politics. The intersections between the concepts discussed above are multilayered and investigating how affects and emotions intermediate between them, is an important research problem. In fact, one may build a hypothetical chain linking these concepts randomly. For example, political narrative can influence political communication which might affect political decision-making which produces some evidence-based policy. Affects and emotions are more than likely to accompany those processes. As Ann N. Crigler and Parker R. Hevron (2017, p. 664) posit: "Emotions function as critical factors of political choice by explaining how people communicate about politics, how they seek information and learn, how they make judgments and form preferences, and how they participate."

4.1 POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING

In order to conceptualize political decision-making, it is vindicated to start with some more basic concepts. First, we should describe the key notion of decision. A decision is made as a choice between the alternatives. Alternative choices lead to different results and those results are valued differently by the person making the decision. The outcomes in question might be expected as certain or only as probable. When we can estimate that probability, we talk about risk, whereas uncertainty or ambiguity is the case when we are not able to make such an estimation (Lau & Redlawsk, 2023).

To make a choice, we need judgement and decision-making. Judgements allow us to ascertain which alternative is better based on some criteria. There are (Lau & Redlawsk, 2023):

- Psychophysical judgments (e.g., how heavy or dark something is),
- Person judgements (e.g., how attractive or smart someone is),
- Probabilistic judgement (e.g., how probable it is that something will happen).

Among judgements there are subjective value judgements (i.e., preferences) and inferences (i.e. judgments based on verifiable beliefs). We should distinguish between judgements and decision-making, as it is not always the case that the result of people's evaluations matches their decisions. First, decisions are sometimes made without an overall assessment of the alternatives. But most notably, even judgments might not inform choices which is the case in so called strategic voting, when people do not vote for their most preferred parties if those parties are at high risk of not performing sufficiently well (Lau & Redlawsk, 2023). There are numerous methods of decision-making, such as habit, impulse, social custom, procrastination, and avoidance; advice-seeking, cogitation, intuition, delegation, prayer for guidance, bargaining, voting, consensus, or chance (Stone, 2012, p. 248).

Now, we can point out that there are two branches of political decision-making. One covers institutional decisions (e.g., legislative, executive, and so on), and the other encompasses decisions of individual actors, including both politicians and ordinary citizens (Lau &

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Redlawsk, 2023). We focus on the first field because we want to bring light into the institutional background in the context of both ENCODE's research and its usage by different institutions. Also, individual decision-making is part of the project's more general research design composed of a conceptual mix including affects, emotions, values, identities, and so on. Studies on the concept of political decision-making not only match well with affective approaches in social sciences but even increasingly incorporate the emotive dimensions. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Political Decision Making* (2021) includes articles putting political decision-making in the context of affective intelligence and emotional dynamics, anger, anxiety and fear, moral emotions, and discrete emotions. This body of knowledge will be used when discussing ENCODE's research results for comparison and references.

Institutional decision-making is investigated within the policy process or policymaking process studies, which belong to a broader field of policy analysis. Policy always refers to a series of decisions and sometimes decisions are amended or seriously changed during the implementation phase of the policy process. Hence, policy decisions constitute a dynamic and complex field (Hill, 2005, pp. 7-8). A popular approach is a **rational decision-making model which hints a decision-maker to compare what each of the alternatives can bring about, and to select the one suiting best a pursued goal. Within this model, cost-benefit analysis is the most popular technique. This is simply comparing positive and negative expected outcomes of each alternative and choosing the one that promises more benefits than costs** (Stone, 2012, p. 250). Alternative approach is incrementalism that was developed as an alternative to the rational model. The latter was criticized for a few reasons, including that it was insufficient in solving real problems of people, that it required full information, and that its application was expensive. **Incrementalism or successive limited comparisons makes the decision-making process simpler. It considers fewer alternatives that are similar to existing solutions and does not study the implications of policies taken into account. Another difference is that incrementalism does not preclude considering facts and values, and means and end, taken together.** The proponents of incrementalism argue that this is the model according to which policy decisions are made and should be made (Hill, 2005, p. 148).

At any rate, emotions are considered inherent in decision-making, whether we are referring to individual or institutional dimension of it. Affect and reason interrelate in this process (Crigler & Hevron, 2017, p. 663). Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2019, p. 28) summarizes that even "rational decision-making (…) is both inseparable from and inextricably linked to emotion."

4.2 EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY

Evidence-based policy is a conception rather than merely a concept and one of the most questionable notions in this report. Even in the scientific literature, we may easily come across the rhetorical and somewhat sarcastic rephrasing of evidence-based policy into its caricature, policy-based evidence.

As per United Nations: **"evidence-based policymaking refers to a policy process that helps planners make better informed decisions by putting the best available evidence at the centre of the policy process"** (as quoted in Segone, 2004, p. 27)

The evidence-based policy movement began in medicine in the 1980s or 1990s, depending on the source. The basic idea was to use randomized controlled trials to establish sound medical and policy findings. Over time, this approach has been extended to other areas. For

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example, it served to provide an ex-ante evaluation of the impact of some programs (Saltelli & Giampietro, 2017). Evidence-based policy is consistent with a rational decision-making model used in policy process (see Munro, 2014; cf. section 4.1). In social sciences, the principal method of the evidence-based policy approach is comprehensive literature review (Young et al., 2002).

The approach, though, has been under criticism since its formulation. The paths of argumentation appertained to the myth of the power of rationality in solving policy challenges, the technocratic approach of the evidence-based position and its overlooking of power relations (Saltelli & Giampietro, 2017). Evidence-based policy is also accused of being ideological by following dominant cultural paradigms, "determined by definitions of effectiveness as a quantitative measure, professionalism as performativity, teaching as technicist delivery, research as randomized clinical trials, and 'credible' evidence as statistical meta-analysis" (Packwood, 2002). Another point is that the corpus of scientific knowledge is already available to policymakers and, but they rarely draw on scientific pointers, which is called "the paradox of policy analysis" (Young et al., 2002, p. 218). An additional portion of concerns is related to the current condition of science, with the crises of replication, legitimacy, and integrity as well as to different problems involved in undertaking a successful and conclusive review of scientific works on a given topic, especially when it comes to social sciences (Saltelli & Giampietro, 2017; Young et al., 2002).

When it comes to extending evidence-based policy to social sciences, there are two issues involved. The first touches upon proceeding within the policy process, while the second suggests that social sciences deliver evidence (Young et al., 2002, pp. 215–216). This reflects a positivist epistemology, centered on discovering causal explanation (Munro, 2014).
Ken Young and colleagues (Young et al., 2002, pp. 216-217) distinguish a few models of the relationship between policy and research:

1) *Knowledge-driven model* – the meaning of the model is captured in the phrase "research *leads* policy"; in the extreme version, it is an expert-driven policy that leaves out political choice.
2) *Problem-solving model* – this model builds on the idea that "research *follows* policy", which is the opposite direction to the first model.
3) *Interactive model* – this model is driven by logic different from the previous two; the idea is to keep the interrelations between science and politics.
4) *Political/tactical model* – in this model, the policy is the result of a *political* process; "this model sees the research agenda as politically driven, with studies commissioned and/or used to support the position adopted by the government of the day, the relevant minister, or perhaps the civil servants most closely concerned"; this model brings to the social science the risk of politicization.
5) *Enlightenment model* – this approach is characterized by some distance between research and current politics; research supports politics indirectly through illumination, explanation and providing understanding.

The authors of this typology represent the *ESRC UK Centre for Evidence-Based Policy and Practice* (Queen Mary, University of London). They support the enlightenment model and motivate it using two-fold argumentation. First, they argue, social scientists deliver the best research when driven by the need for understanding and explanation. The second rationale behind this approach is related to the reality of the policy process, including decision-making. Here, Young and collaborators reject the rational model as unrealistic. They claim that in fact the policy process looks like the following description: "Goals are ambiguous, and the means of achieving them uncertain. Decisions are less about projected consequences

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and more about process and legitimation. Politics is about shaping interpretations and expressing preferences. Information is never conclusive but reflects the indeterminacy of cause-and-effect relationships; it is infused with values" (Young et al., 2002).

To determine how ENCODE is situated against those models, we need to consider a few facts. ENCODE is a research project funded by the European Commission. The EC called for specific research and findings that could contribute both to understanding particular social and political issues and to overcoming them. Although general assumptions, including normative assumptions about adhering to a democratic political regime and democratic values, were clearly expressed in the call for projects, participants were not asked to provide a justification for particular political action or even specific public policy. Importantly, ENCODE will invite citizens and will use their input. To sum up, it seems that portions of different models might be involved in ENCODE, however we posit that the enlightenment model should be the ideal because it enables scientists to focus on what is their primary vocation, while keeping their sensitivity towards the social challenges. Therefore, the ideal approach is more about 'evidence-based society' than 'evidence-based policy' (see Smith, 1996).

4.3 POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

A straightforward definition of political communication is that it is a "pure discussion about the allocation of public resources (revenues), official authority (who is given the power to make legal, legislative and executive decision), and official sanction (what the state rewards or punishes)" (Denton & Woodward, 1985).

This definition has been adopted by Brian McNair (2011, p. 3), one of the leading scholars in the field, who nonetheless observes that the quoted exposition omits one relevant dimension, i.e., symbolic communication acts which refer not only to verbal and written communication, but also include body language and political acts. This is an important addition which allows for including affects and emotions into the analysis of political communication. However, this author's approach might fail to be fully compatible with ENCODE because that author stresses that political communication is intentional, claiming that it is "*purposeful communication about politics*" (McNair, 2011, p. 4). Recalling our conceptualization of affects given in the first chapter, we should point out that affects, as bodily responses, are not entirely purposeful, yet they do have a say in political communication processes. Hence, we need to address political communication from a broader perspective, thereby moving beyond the scope of deliberative communications.

Emotive dimensions appear to be involved in a more nuanced and regulative definition of political communication, used by the authors of *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication* (Kenski & Jamieson, 2017). They define this category as "making sense of symbolic exchanges about the shared exercise of power" or, more precisely, "the presentation and interpretation of information, messages or signals with potential consequences for the exercise of shared power" (Jamieson & Kenski, 2017, p. 5). Nowadays, virtually everyone can partake in the creation of political messages and in attaching meanings to them, notably thanks to social media. Making political communication more emotional influences people's level of interest in politics, as well as their judgements and activities. Notably, emotions might be conveyed at the subliminal level by political actors, thereby creating precognitive incentives (Crigler & Hevron, 2017, p. 664, 667, 669).

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Emotive components have been found to powerfully boost the results of political advertising which is one of the key interests of political communication. The research demonstrates that emotional appeal of political ads translates into their effectiveness in terms of voting behaviors (Fallis, 2017). Moreover, political actors use their messages to shape affective framing (Crigler & Hevron, 2017, p. 668). In a book that presents crucial concepts in political communication, we can find a few directly related to the emotive sphere, that is, aestheticization, cynicism, and emotionalization (Lilleker, 2006, pp. 25-26, 63–65, 78). *Emotionalization* manifests in an increasing tendency to employ emotional messages in political communication. The revelation of emotions and feelings by politicians or any political actors is perceived as required by citizens who perceive their political engagement in terms of emotional experiences. It is related to the fact that politics has become part of popular culture and serves as consumption to many (Richards, 2004). *Aestheticization* of political communication brings our attention to style and presentation and is in a way connected to emotionalization through the narrative on overcoming a stereotypical masculine style in politics and taking emotions into account. *Cynicism* is a phenomenon discussed in relation to emotional politics in general, but it also has a special place in communication. The political audiences are skeptical about the messages they receive, which implies that they do not trust political actors.

Introduced in political communication, emotions might sustain three patterns of group relations (Valentino & Vandenbroek, 2017, pp. 458-459):

1) *Closeness*. Emotions triggered by media and political actors might strengthen in-group ties. Enthusiastic messages referring to hope or pride as well as to anger are particularly effective.
2) *Conflict*. Different groups may become more competitive with each other when anger and anxiety dominate political messages.
3) *Condemnation*. Condemnation, accompanied by hatred and discrimination, is probably driven by anger and disgust, the latter of which has gained much attention in the literature on emotions in politics.

4.4 POLITICAL NARRATIVES

Some scholars conceptualize narratives as stories told by individual people (Datta et al., 2009), while others might use the Narrative Policy Analysis approach that aims to examine the narratives of policymakers which they take on in a policy process (Faustini-Torres, 2020). Yet another approach is to single out personal narratives as well as collective narratives conceived as a more generalized concept (Gómez-Estern & de la Mata Benítez, 2013). The last perspective seems to be the most appropriate for ENCODE.

A narrative is a process by which people construct various facts from their own lives and cognitively connect those facts to develop a meaningful interpretation of the reality. In regard to politics, narratives influence the way people understand and interpret political reality and what they do about it (Patterson & Monroe, 1998, p. 315). Hence, it is crucial to recognize that narratives serve not only to explain the reality but also to guide political actions, including collective ones. Narratives can also be controlled, predominantly by telling stories, to organize the panorama of the political reality and to create political outcomes manifesting in debates and elections (Groth, 2019, p. 3).

A similar approach to the concept of a political narrative has been adopted by Narratives Observatory to combat Disinformation in Europe Systemically (NODES, LC-01967516), an EC

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funded Pilot Project coordinated by Research and Innovations Europe which is a member of the ENCODE consortium. In *The Narratives That Shape Our World. Narrative Analysis Report* (Nowak et al., 2024, p. 9), the authors collaborating within NODE argue:

„Since we are unable to change human psychology, we should focus on two other possible solutions:

First, our goal should be to make the truth more interesting and relevant than misinformation by understanding different narratives and the reasons why some audiences may prefer false information.

Second, we need to rethink our narrative ecosystem so that it is not biased toward fake news anymore."

ENCODE will be heavily instructed by NODES on the tasks associated with narratives. In researching narratives, NODES adopts a few clear assumptions (Nowak et al., 2024, p. 10–11):

1) Narratives are not "themes" (meaning that narratives are deeper than their verbal/textual manifestations).
2) We collect narratives without assessing their veracity.
3) We use rich qualitative data.

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5. CITIZENSHIP-RELEVANT CONCEPTS

Considering the development of new technologies, particularly social media, it might appear that "connectivity is replacing collectivity" (Mortensen, 2015, p.1402). On the surface, both seem to apply the fundamental sociological assumption that "there is no pure 'individuality' which can be apprehended independently of social relations" (Duveen and Lloyd, 1986, p.219). However, within the ENCODE framework, we emphasize that to better understand how emotions and affects influence politics at the European level, we must explore a more nuanced conceptualization that explains how social interactions translate into more lasting social structures, especially during times of crisis.

On one hand, our reflections align with the general premises of the Broaden-and-Build Theory, which suggests that positive emotions can be key, as they broaden thought–action repertoires and encourage more flexible and creative thinking, both in the context of future-oriented emotions and emotional memories (Philippe et al., 2009, p.141-142). On the other hand, following the spirit of Mouffe's radical democratic theory, we emphasize that such emotions might still "[be] experienced and reproduced within existing hierarchies and embodied social categories of race, religion, sexual orientation, class, caste, and gender" (Rajan-Rankin, 2014, pp.2429–2430). Failing to recognize this perspective risks misrepresenting concepts like emotional resilience as apolitical and hinders the understanding of social and emotional well-being as central to the aims of modern political institutions.

5.1 COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES

Collective and individual experiences refer to two fundamental levels of social praxis, encompassing a set of actions and events, as well as the ways in which they are emotionally and intellectually experienced and given meaning. By distinguishing between collective and individual experiences, we identify the different subjective positions from which these experiences are communicable and evaluated.

From the perspective of ENCODE, it is crucial, as noted by Becker et al., to define:

- individual experience as "An individual actor's enactment of consciousness—in the form of bodily or tactile sensations, perception, thoughts, imagination, desires, emotions, volition, or actions—directed at a reference object in a social context" (Becker et al., 2023, p.2);

- collective experience as "An individual actor's enactment of consciousness directed at a reference object in a social context in a way that the individual actor perceives the experience as shared among a collective actor" (Becker et al., 2023, p.2).

When assessing the intensity, repetition, and coherence of these experiences, we can assume that they may produce a specific form of subjectivity, possessing "the internal consistency and permanence of a form or a structure" (Straub, 2022, p.63).

On one hand, these experiences can ultimately lead to the formation of various forms of identity. At the individual level, the significance and impact of these experiences can solidify into what is known as "individual identity." In scholarly literature, this relationship is often explored in developmental psychology within the context of identity formation (Eccles, 2009, p.78). At the collective level, these experiences may contribute to the creation of a collectively

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constructed identity, which can either be publicly negotiated or individually claimed through reflective, self-conscious actions (Straub, 2022, pp.71–72).

On the other hand, even if collective or individual experiences lack sufficient intensity, continuity, or coherence to shape identity formation, they may still become partially ingrained as unconscious internalized structures (habitus, as described by Bourdieu, 1977) or as learned rules that both constrain and enable action (Henriques, 2014, p.459; Giddens, 1984).

There is ongoing debate about the relationship between individual and collective levels of experience, particularly regarding their impact on people's emotional and affective states. Classical "crowd psychology" posited that intense collective experiences could block the possibility of individual emotional processing and reflection. However, more recent research often points in the opposite direction: "the study of private emotional experiences reveals that an emotion is typically followed by social sharing" (Rimé, 2007, p.307). This suggests that individual experiences can lead to the creation of an **emotional climate** that "reflects how individuals think the majority of others are feeling in a society's current situation" (Rimé, 2007, p.307). Finally, memory studies highlight that the relationship between these levels of experience is ultimately reciprocal: retrospective perceptions of individual experiences always occur within the context of collective experiences, and conversely, individual experiences help shape collective memory (Straub, 2022, p.66).

5.2 EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE

Emotional resilience can be defined as an individual's adaptive response to adversity, involving an interactive process between a person and their environment, and the ability to "bounce back" emotionally (Rajan-Rankin, 2014, p.2426). Resilience is both attributional and contextual—a dynamic process that occurs both internally and externally (Chadwick, 2014, p.32). In this sense, "context" can be operationalized as a "specific emotion-eliciting event," while "response" refers to the "initial reactivity to that event" (Waugh et al., 2011, p.1059).

The concept of emotional resilience emerged as a byproduct of longitudinal studies on at-risk children, which led to a paradigm shift from focusing on risk factors to investigating protective factors (Chadwick, 2014, pp.31–32). It is also important to note from the outset that a major challenge in researching emotional resilience is that it often manifests in traumatic situations or those that evoke intense, often abnormal feelings, which are difficult to articulate (Abarbanel, 2009, p.135). For this reason, scientific literature often adopts a phenomenological understanding of emotion, closely aligned with our definition of affect as not fully expressed "embodied experience" (Rajan-Rankin, 2014, p.2426).

The development of emotional resilience is most often associated with the growth of what's known as emotional competence, defined as "the extent to which one is aware of, and able to act on, one's own and others' emotions, as well as the ability to regulate emotional experience within oneself (intrapersonal) and to be effective in interactions with others (interpersonal)" (Chadwick, 2014, p.34). In this context, emotional intelligence is also sometimes discussed, which researchers describe as comprising a set of four emotional skills, including:

- accurately perceiving emotions,
- integrating emotions with cognition,
- understanding emotional causes and consequences, and
- managing emotions for personal adjustment (Schneider et al., 2013, p.909).

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There are many ways to enhance one's emotional resilience, including spirituality, critical reflection, and social support. From the perspective of the ENCODE project, a particularly important method is building emotional resilience through the creation of emotion-explaining narratives ("discourses-in-the-making") (Rajan-Rankin, 2014). On both an individual and societal level, the ultimate goal of working on emotional resilience is to develop emotionally flexible individuals—those who have the "ability to respond flexibly to changing emotional circumstances" (Waugh et al., 2011, p.1059).

5.3 EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Emotional needs can be seen as a controversial term, potentially based on a causal fallacy, where the effect (emotional response) is mistaken for the actual object of our needs. In this context, some psychologists suggest that we should instead refer to psychological needs, while keeping in mind that "emotional responses are largely driven by the relevance of events to individuals' psychological needs" (Dizén et al., 2005, p.1141).

At the outset, it should be noted that this term will be used in the ENCODE project. Despite these ambiguities, emotional needs emerge as a crucial category in many areas of social life, such as education and social services, emphasizing that social support must provide not only material or informational assistance but also emotional help (Fornia and Frame, 2001, p.385). This requires fostering specialized caregiving competencies to address the emotional needs, especially of groups at risk of exclusion (Brotherson et al., 2010, p.33). In this context, the term "emotional labour" was coined, referring to demanding and time-consuming tasks that are often not recognized as labor, but involve understanding and interpreting the needs of others and offering a personal response to these needs (Staden, 1998, p.153; Hochschild, 1983).

The recognition of the importance of addressing emotional needs in social life has influenced the culture of many European societies, for example, by reshaping the role of art (Mirza, 2005). The emergence of a "therapeutic ethos" in culture has elevated the concept of "social exclusion" to a place of particular significance. Munira Mirza even argues that "addressing the emotional needs of citizens is now a core, rather than supplementary, function of government," and adds that "while social experiences in the past, such as nationalism, religious faith, or political activism, contained a crucial emotional element, these experiences are today understood in terms of private emotional needs." (Mirza, 2005, pp.263–264).

5.4 SOCIAL TRUST

Social trust is the belief or mutually shared expectation that, when needed, people will engage in reciprocally beneficial behavior in their interactions with others. This, in turn, helps to reduce the complexity and uncertainty of the social world (Welch et al., 2005, p.457).
In the scholarly literature, it is argued that we trust each other and want to maintain our relationships because it is mutually beneficial—it helps us *to cooperate under uncertainty* (Herreros and Criado, 2008, pp.54–55; Falcone and Castelfranchi, 2001, p.55). This understanding of social trust is fundamental to the widely recognized social capital theory, which posits that "generalized social trust" is the foundation for stable and effective democratic governance, as it helps establish "a cooperative social climate, facilitates collective behavior, and encourages a regard for the public interest" (Zmerli and Newton, 2008, p.706).

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There is a consensus among researchers that the degree of similarity between an individual and others on specific attributes (e.g., values, identities) is a determining factor in social trust (Welch et al., 2005, p.461). From an economic perspective, this similarity can be interpreted as economic equality or equality of opportunity. However, scholars from other social sciences emphasize that the true socio-economic significance of social trust becomes apparent when it connects us to people who are, in fact, different from us (Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005, p.45; Sønderskov and Dinesen, 2016, p.180).

Among the factors most commonly cited as strengthening social trust are environmental factors such as education, professional occupations, and higher income (Sturgis et al., 2010, p.206). Individual psychological predispositions, such as the willingness to adopt a long-term perspective in evaluating relationships (Welch et al., 2005, p.460), are also emphasized, as well as even general genetic predispositions (Sturgis et al., 2010, p.205).

From a macro-social perspective, social trust is a measure of "how people evaluate the moral fabric of their society," making it a good predictor of the feasibility of implementing broad social programs that require trust across group divides (Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005, p.43). In this context, politics can be a factor that either decreases or increases the level of social trust within a society. On one hand, political diversity is a type of fractionalization that can reduce trust between individuals who identify with different political factions (Bjornskov, 2008, p.274). On the other hand, within the framework of experiential theories of trust formation, it is emphasized that trust is shaped by experiences throughout life, highlighting that political institutions can both negatively and positively influence the level of social trust in society (Sønderskov and Dinesen, 2016, p.181). Therefore, the relationship between social trust and a given institutionalized political order can vary, which is important to note in the context of large-scale comparative studies that seem to confirm correlations between generalized social trust and both confidence in political institutions and satisfaction with democracy (Zmerli and Newton, 2008).

5.5 SOCIAL IDENTITIES

Social identities refer to the declared or perceived sense of belonging to a particular group (e.g., family, local community) or social category (e.g., gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality, social class, or age). These identities arise as the intentional or unintentional consequence of social interactions, through which individuals involved develop a sense of solidarity among themselves and recognize a certain level of similarity that distinguishes them from individuals belonging to significant "other" groups (Fligstein et al., 2012, p.108; Bornschier et al., 2021, p.2091). In this sense, social identities are considered to be socially constructed.
The dominant approach in current research still stems from social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and the related self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), which are often collectively referred to as the social identity approach (Hornung et al., 2019, p.212). This approach emphasizes that social identity is linked to belonging to multiple social groups, which provides individuals with (1) a definition of the group and (2) a description or prescription of what it means to be a group member (Neville et al., 2021). This framework also assumes that, as a result, individuals develop a "self-concept," which is "highly flexible and changes as a function of situational cues that activate different social identities" (Sinclair et al., 2006, p.530).

The concept of social identity was first developed in response to Erikson's work (1959) in various areas of social psychology, where its significance was emphasized as a source of "feelings of belonging, participation in a shared reality, and group-related emotions"

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(Bornschier et al., 2021, p.2092). Later, its importance was also discovered in sociology, notably in the work of Stone, who argued that possessing a (social) identity is linked to being situated in social relations (Brekhus, 2008, p.1059; Stone, 1962, p.93). Similarly, this concept was further developed within the symbolic interactionist tradition, which examined how individuals formulate a sense of self through interactions with others. More recent approaches have moved away from the notion of a single unified coherent self as the starting point in research on social identity, exploring the complexity, multidimensionality, and fluidity of various forms of social identity (Brekhus, 2008, p.1060). Consequently, it is increasingly emphasized that individuals harbor multiple, potentially conflicting social identities, and the outcome of their confrontation is crucial for shaping behavior (Bornschier et al., 2021, p.2091). This way of thinking about social identities is referred to as intersectionality approaches to identity, which note that individuals have multiple intersecting social attributes that help to comprise their self-identity (Brekhus, 2008, p.1063).

At the level of political analysis, social identities are a key phenomenon in social cleavage theory, which uses them to explain both the economic and cultural foundations of voting behavior (Bartolini and Mair, 2007). Proponents of this theory argue that social identities form the "link between social structure and politics," which allows them to explain, among other things, the durability of cleavages (Bornschier et al., 2021, p.2091). As a theoretical concept, social identities are sometimes used to study the policy process, emphasizing that "policy actors thus act in accordance with their salient social identity" (Hornung et al., 2019, p.211).

Finally, the concept of social identity is sometimes criticized as ultimately redundant, as it does not add anything to research that cannot be explained by analyses of shared values or group norms, and instead arises from the widespread acceptance of a groupist "social ontology," which excludes the "diversity of patterns of non-groupist social forms" (Eder, 2011, p.429; Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). However, defenders of this concept argue that it remains a fundamental tool in research on politically salient attributes such as race, class, and gender, enabling the conscious inclusion of distinct, context-specific 'ways of knowing' (particular standpoints) typical of certain social identities (Brekhus, 2008, pp.1061–1063).

5.6 AFFECTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Affective citizenship refers to "both institutional and individual practices of making citizens or citizenship, including practices that seek to redefine, decentre, or even refuse citizenship" (Fortier, 2016, p.1039). As part of the affective turn in the social sciences, this term has enabled a shift beyond analyses focused on understanding citizenship as a strictly legal, institutional product of state authority, towards a view of citizenship as an affective institution (Ayata, 2022, p.48). It highlights that studying affective citizenship requires attention to how citizenship demands and produces specific affective states (Fortier, 2016, p.1038).

Research on affective citizenship at the theoretical level is rooted in feminist, queer, and postcolonial critiques, challenging "rationalist paradigms" in the description of the state, bureaucracy, and citizenship itself (Slaby and Von Scheve, 2019, p.330). In this framework, not only emotions but also affect are seen as "at once deeply felt and embodied, and social and public," meaning that some feelings are publicly validated while others are not (Fortier, 2016, p.1039). The question researchers aim to answer is how this is influenced by social structure and existing power relations. Affective citizenship thus possesses a potentially dual nature—it can serve as a concept within governing technologies but also as a potential instrument of contestation and transformation for citizens. A key insight here is that in order to become

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informed and engaged citizens, individuals must develop a "critical awareness of emotion and its role in politics" (Keegan, 2021, p.16).

From the perspective of the ENCODE project's goals, a significant issue in the current approach to affective citizenship is the tendency to conflate emotions with affect (Fortier, 2016, p.1039). This contrasts not only with our previous definitional conclusions but also with research highlighting the distinct roles of affect and emotions in cognitive processes. Studies suggest that cognition and affect are not as closely connected as previously believed; instead, they may be governed by semi-independent systems (Organ and Konovsky, 1989, p.159). Nevertheless, this concept provides a framework for broader considerations, demonstrating that, especially in times of increased international mobility, there exist "differential regimes of belonging" that determine who can feel like a citizen of a particular state (Ayata, 2022, p.50). This issue is also relevant to some extent within the European Union. Some theorists to argue that we are living in an era of 'personalized politics,' where the paradigm of 'collective identity' no longer applies, and even new social movements are seen more as expressions of the 'public experience of self' (Mcdonald, 2002, pp.124–125). What ENCODE gains from Mouffe's theory is the understanding that the intersections of these key concepts are inextricably linked to emotions and, in this way, form the foundation of key social processes. As Mouffe emphasized, "the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, but to mobilize these passions towards democratic designs" (Mouffe, 2005, p.103).

An essential aspect of this approach should be recognizing that responding to the emotional needs of individuals will become an increasingly important task, as our awareness of the political consequences of unmet needs among those experiencing severe individual and collective hardships is growing. This includes those suffering from depression, anxiety disorders, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), especially refugees arriving in Europe from countries affected by armed conflict or extreme poverty (Groark et al., 2011, p.422). It is also important to note that such experiences can form the basis of a shared collective identity, though this does not negate the fact that some traumatic experiences can be passed on to future generations. Therefore, efforts toward successful reconciliation must address the diverse emotional needs of the involved parties, particularly in the case of European societies with a distant history of conflicts (Shnabel et al., 2009, p.1022).

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6. DIGITAL-RELEVANT CONCEPTS

In the following discussion, we will pursue the project goals from *the perspective of the socio-technological ecosystem's development*, where social and political dilemmas are inextricably linked to the evolving capabilities of information and communication technologies. The conceptions at hand are multifaceted and layered, so it is therefore, we need to stress that ENCODE adopts a typical systemic understanding for social sciences, such that it will be instrumental in the empirical research of the project. This helps us explore how emotions and affects are embedded in (1) the overall evolution of the mentioned ecosystem (Digital Universe, Metaverse, Multiverse) and (2) the structural and semantic factors (memes, echo chambers) that shape and influence the communication processes within this system.

6.1 DIGITAL UNIVERSE(S)

Digital universe(s) is an intuitive model used to describe the range of phenomena emerging from the development of information and communication technologies (ICT). This model was developed in the early stages of the socio-technological ecosystem, distinguishing fundamentally between the physical world and the digital universe—a parallel reality where events occur outside typical spatial and temporal constraints (Chesher, 1997, p.79). The evolution of this model was influenced by early discoveries in cybernetics, which popularized the idea of "digital ontology," the belief that the ultimate nature of reality might be digital (Floridi, 2009, p.151; Berto and Tagliabue, 2014, p.482). While these concepts initially attracted the interest of physicists and academic philosophers (Mainzer, 2019), they also permeated public discourse and popular culture, raising questions about the relationship between these two parallel worlds.

The concept of the digital universe not only explains how this new reality works, but also indicates how to create a narrative about the emotions and feelings it evokes. On a semantic level, the idea of digital universes served as a "spatial metaphor," helping to create more tangible narratives that explain how ICT functions and facilitating discussion on its socio-political significance (Ritzi, 2024, p.161). Although there is no physical equivalent for online phenomena, and the new technologies create completely "new fields of possible action in which different logics and dynamics emerge," (Chesher, 1997, p.79) understanding the digital universe as a parallel space made it easier to grasp that the effects of network-mediated, elucidating that results of incorporeal events might be just as real as physical events. This applied not only to the evolving forms of economical transactions but also to the broader perception of cyberspace as a new *space of political communication* (Ritzi, 2024, p.159), which was crucial in the debate on its future functioning.

6.2 METAVERSE

The Metaverse is currently the leading model for describing the socio-technological ecosystem as a unified multiuser environment that merges physical reality with digital virtuality (Mystakidis, 2022, p.486). More broadly, the Metaverse represents an evolving paradigm that is shaping the next-generation Internet, with the goal of creating a fully immersive and self-sustaining space where people can play, work, and socialize (Wang et al., 2023, p.319). Etymologically, the word "Metaverse" combines "Meta" (a Greek prefix meaning beyond or transcending) and "universe," symbolizing the coexistence of different forms of

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reality across various perspectives, such as Augmented Reality, which embeds digital inputs and virtual elements into the physical environment to enhance it or Mixed Reality, where the physical environment interacts in real-time with projected digital data (Mystakidis, 2022, p.487).

The development of the Metaverse relies on two main sources of information: (1) input from the real world (information processed and delivered to the Metaverse from external sources), and (2) output from virtual worlds (information generated by digital objects and Metaverse services within the virtual space) (Wang et al., 2023, p.321). These elements form the foundation of the emerging virtual economy, which leverages the newest technological achievements such as ubiquitous computing (an environment where computing is available anytime and everywhere) (Wang et al., 2023, p.321), artificial intelligence (AI) that powers personalized Metaverse services or blockchain technology, which uses a decentralized architecture to mitigate risks like low transparency and control by a few entities.

The Metaverse is an incredibly complex phenomenon, but from a communication-driven perspective, the key features of the Metaverse are:

1) immersiveness, meaning that the new forms of reality are realistic enough to make users feel fully psychologically and emotionally immersed;
2) interoperability, allowing users to move seamlessly through the different areas of the Metaverse without interrupting the immersive experience; and
3) heterogeneity, which, from the user's perspective, covers the effects of interactions between heterogeneous spaces, physical devices, data types, communication modes and human emotional states (Wang et al., 2023, p.323).

6.3 MULTIVERSE

The Multiverse is one of the proposed models for the next socio-technological ecosystem, suggesting that the differences between phenomena with distinct combinations of physical and digital dimensions point to the emergency of multiple types of universes rather than a single, unified environment (Rostami and Maier, 2022, p.110797). It's also often seen as an alternative path for *understanding* the Internet's development since this vision is reinforced by common communication experiences, where users engage in interactions that vary widely in their fundamental characteristics (i.e. their openness, ranging from public to semi-public to private) (Wu and Wall, 2019, pp.42–43).

One of the most significant consequences of this model is the potential risk of widespread misinformation, closely tied to the post-truth phenomenon, which hinges on the idea that "there is no such thing as a singular truth" within the context of multiverse entanglement (de Saille, 2006, p.8). From this perspective, the definition of what constitutes *fake news* depends on the type and dynamics of the specific digital-physical nature of the universe in question.

6.4 (INTERNET) MEMES

(Internet) memes are small cultural units of transmission, artifacts that drive evolutionary change within the current internet model by generating countless derivatives through imitation, remixing, and rapid dissemination by multiple participants in technologically mediated communication (Yus, 2019, p.106). More specifically, an Internet meme is a piece of

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culture, typically a joke, that gains influence through online transmission (Davison, 2020, p.122). Memes are somewhat analogous to genes (Dawkins, 1976, p.363), as they contain information passed from person to person, gradually evolving into a shared social phenomenon (Shifman, 2013, p.364). Importantly, from the perspective of ENCODE, memes cannot be reduced to the ideas they convey—their evaluation critically depends on the form and behavior they generate (Shifman, 2013, p.366), including the emotions they transmit and the affective states they provoke.

Memes are typically "multimodal," meaning they "combine various sign systems (modes), and their production and reception require communicators to semantically and formally interrelate all sign repertoires present" (Yus, 2019, p.106). They often involve an intertextual combination of images and text that is disseminated through the active participation of internet users and becoming popular among them. Nonetheless, memes are generally considered to have three dimensions:

1) content—the idea(s) conveyed by a specific message;
2) form—the "physical formulation of the message perceived through our senses"; and
3) stance—information about the communicative positioning in relation to the message, including the message's context, the structure of participation in its creation, and its communicative function (Shifman, 2013, p.369; Wiggins, 2019, p.16).

Memes typically spread through strategies of mimicry and remix (Shifman, 2013, p.365), which often raises issues of attribution—namely, the challenge of assigning authorship to a particular meme (Davison, 2020, p.129)—and, ultimately, distinguishing between explicit and implicit interpretations of its meaning (Yus, 2019, p.107). A distinctive feature of internet memes is that they are invariably linked to a "family," and effective understanding of memes involves recognizing this initial family ascription (Yus, 2019, p.106). This shows that memes can be viewed as fundamental building blocks of the internet's semiotic structure, explaining how emotions *structurally* contribute to the broader transformation of the socio-technological ecosystem.

6.5 ECHO CHAMBER

In a narrower sense, echo chamber refers to the interplay between media supply, distribution, and demand (Webster, 2014), which creates "a bounded, enclosed media space that has the potential to both amplify the messages within it and insulate them from rebuttal" (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, p.10). More broadly, it is *an epistemic community* that creates a significant "trust disparity" between members and non-members by employing epistemic discrediting or amplifying the epistemic credentials among its members (Nguyen, 2020, p.146). In this broader context, it is important to differentiate between an epistemic bubble and an echo chamber. An epistemic bubble is a social structure where relevant voices have been left out, perhaps inadvertently. In contrast, an echo chamber is a structure from which relevant voices have been actively excluded and discredited (Nguyen, 2020, p.141).

From a media studies perspective, it is often emphasized that media supply is rarely the sole reason for the creation of "media echo chambers" (Bennett et al., 2008). More frequently, the causes are found within media distribution—search engines, news aggregators, and social networks increasingly personalize content through machine-learning models. Algorithms inadvertently amplify ideological segregation by automatically recommending content that aligns with an individual's existing beliefs creating "filter bubbles" (Flaxman et al., 2016, p.290).

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Finally, the so-called activity-driven model suggests that echo chambers emerge from interactions among individuals, mediated by the degree of homophily—i.e., two agents with similar opinions are more likely to interact (Currin et al., 2022, p.2). This leads to a feedback loop that correlates the distribution of opinions with the network structure. Echo chambers are a key element in the topology of the modern information and communication ecosystem. While they pose several alarming risks, they also help explain how emotions and affects structure the flow of information throughout the entire ecosystem.

6.6 DEMOCRATIC POLITICS IN A DIGITALIZED PUBLIC SPHERE

There is broad consensus on the need for some form of political governance in the Metaverse, but the challenge lies in determining to what extent this process can or should influence changes to the existing model.

Governance is needed to ensure security, accountability, user decision-making rights, and effective solutions for privacy and security breaches (Dwivedi et al., 2022, p.13). However, existing grassroots regulatory efforts suggest that the core principles should be openness and independent, community-driven oversight (Mystakidis, 2022, p.493). This highlights a significant dilemma faced by modern liberal democracies: to what extent can the evolving structure of the metaverse achieve these goals without state intervention.

On the one hand, the lack of political oversight might be dysfunctional since there is no *parallel digital universe*—democratic political actors operate within the Metaverse, which permeates the daily functioning of liberal societies. The absence of clearly defined democratic rules for the metaverse is replaced by the balance of power between key tech giants such as Facebook, Microsoft, Tencent, and NVIDIA. In this sense, the scope of their power currently poses a significant challenge to the (digital) sovereignty of modern states. Such reasoning could lead to attempts to politically fragment the techno-social ecosystem, a direction that seems more aligned with the classical liberal concept of a pluralistic media system. Contrary to what theorists like Benkler (2006) have argued, the possibility of achieving a *valuable pluralism* through the spontaneous evolution of the techno-social ecosystem now appears doubtful (Flaxman et al., 2016, p.299).

On the other hand, the political realization of some version of the multiverse, a controlled division of the techno-social ecosystem, could risk entrenching, rather than eliminating, negative phenomena such as media-driven group polarization or extremism. It should be noted that the "grassroots" emergence of phenomena like echo chambers can be interpreted not only as the fall of classical (media) gatekeepers but also (paradoxically) as a result of the rise of democratized news (Rhodes, 2022, p.4). The formation of the filter bubble is not solely due to the effects of personalization technology, as seen in Google searches, but also from self-selected informational networks.

Moreover, democratic politicians are not passive observers of the evolution of the socio-technological ecosystem; they are active creators of it (Mandiberg, 2012). Political oversight will not automatically eliminate mechanisms that lead to constricted information and omitted viewpoints, as long as these mechanisms remain crucial for electoral mobilization. Nevertheless, there is a risk that without political intervention, phenomena such as misinformation, fake news, or hate speech could ultimately lead to a "situation where people are so far apart that they have no common ground—effectively inhabiting different realities" (Ross Arguedas et al., 2022, p.11).

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6.7 ROLE IN POLITICAL PROCESSES

There is a need to view the information and communication ecosystem not only as a target of policymaking but also as the environment where the political process itself takes place. The resulting development of the metaverse model has introduced numerous risks, which can generally be classified into four categories related to (1) physical well-being, health, and safety, (2) psychology, (3) morality and ethics, and (4) data privacy (Mystakidis, 2022, p.493). In this context, it is also important to note that the evolution of the socio-technological ecosystem has led to the latest structural shift in what we traditionally refer to as the modern public sphere—a space for discussing such threats (Ritzi, 2024, p.165). Here, various forms of virtual communities can be seen as new actors in the policy-making process. However, it is important to recognize that their rhetorical strategies can sometimes evolve into extreme positions, including science denialism, conspiracy theories, and religious zealotry (Diaz Ruiz and Nilsson, 2023, p.19). Addressing this issue also requires acknowledging that some of these agendas may be shaped by automated actors (i.e., bots, AI algorithms; see Sessa, 2023).

At the individual citizen level, research suggests that the negative phenomena associated with the structural informational limitations of the socio-technological ecosystem (e.g., fake news) also promote an unconscious, emotion-driven mode of thinking, which tends to override conscious, deliberate thought when processing new information (Flaxman et al., 2016, p.2). In other words, these behaviors are not purely irrational, as might be assumed from classical views of public sphere, but are mechanisms that rely on heuristic processing, triggered by the nature of the situations individuals find themselves in. The increasing pressure for this kind of thinking, driven especially by the rapid pace of development of information and communication technologies, can the beginning of a new form of a well-known phenomenon referred to in the literature as a "limited-attention world" (Simon, 1971). From the ENCODE perspective, it should be noted that its functioning is better illustrated by the concept of the "attention economy" rather than "affective democracy": the narratives explaining the evolution of the socio-technological ecosystem are primarily shaped by economic, rather than political, rules and objectives (Weng et al., 2012).

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7 AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

Affective polarization is a term that appeared relatively late in the social sciences. As Lena Röllicke (2023, p. 2) suggests:

"Most definitions that are currently in use seem to be more or less based on Iyengar et al.'s (2012) seminal characterisation of affective polarisation as 'the extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked out-group' (p. 406)."

Notwithstanding, the roots of the concept in question can be traced back, for example, to the classical works of Max Weber, who coined the concept of "elective affinities" to describe how certain political ideas resonate with specific types of people (as cited in Federico, Malca, 2018). The scholarly literature in this area is primarily developed by political scientists and social psychologists, though it also draws the attention of sociologists and media researchers.

In line with our approach in this report, we adopt a definition of affective polarization as "an *affective* distance between political opponents" (Talisse, 2021, p. 210), where opposing groups of citizens have acute distrust and antipathy towards each other. The said distance is identified as the combination of two components: "(a) positive in-group affect towards a party and its supporters and (b) negative out-group affect towards the other party and its supporters." (Wagner, 2021, p.2). Thus, in compliance with the scope of the ENCODE project, we understand affective polarization as pertaining to citizens rather than solely to political parties and their members (cf. Röllicke, 2023).

But affective polarization is a complex phenomenon the discussion about which is thriving. Therefore, in what follows we will attempt to disentangle the key components of this concept and their relationships and intersections with related phenomena. We will discuss two major perspectives on affective polarization (the top-down and bottom-up perspectives) and proffer integrating them. Then, we will explicate the specifics of affective polarization by discussing the variety of polarization types and the role of cognition and affect in this concept. With this work done, we will continue to present the level of affective polarization and the significance of political identity, where we will also refer to partisanship and social categorization. In concluding remarks, we will briefly enter on a more normatively oriented discussion of the consequences of affective polarization for a democratic regime and their mitigation.

7.1 TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP PERSPECTIVES

7.1.1 TOP-DOWN

As Christopher M. Federico points out, the top-down process of polarization means that "citizens begin to drift apart from one another in their attitudes and in their feelings toward political opponents when political elites model more extreme ideological positions and appear to represent more ideologically opposed social groups" (Federico, 2021, p.17). This perspective emphasizes the dominant role of political elites — namely, party leaders, elected officials, and pundits — in shaping both (1) belief systems, or the packages of beliefs, values, and stances that make up different ideologies, and (2) communication mechanisms that ensure voters' exposure to elite political signals. It also assumes that political elites

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themselves have become more ideologically polarized in recent decades and that a sizable segment of the population is possibly either unconcerned or unaware of the ultimate implications of their political attitudes and beliefs, allowing themselves to be led. Naturally, the way the top-down perspective is applied depends on the social and institutional contexts in which polarization occurs, such as the dominant form of political culture or the type of party system. It is often assumed that in two-party systems, it is easier to employ narratives based on simplistic dualistic thinking (us vs. them), which can lead to radical polarization (Wagner, 2021).

7.1.2 BOTTOM-UP

As Federico further explains, some scholars suggest that affective polarization may have deep psychological roots: "As an influential line of research in personality and social psychology indicates, political differences can reliably be predicted from psychological differences in a bottom-up fashion. Individuals with varying personality traits, needs, and motives tend to adopt different political preferences" (Federico, 2021, p.17). In this approach, it is assumed that two sets of factors or needs play a decisive role in whether and how individuals become polarized: (1) "existential needs to maintain safety and security and to minimize danger and threat," and (2) "epistemic needs to attain certainty, order, and structure" (Jost et al., 2013, p.236). In this sense, this perspective expands on the broader tradition of research exploring how individual variation in traits, needs, and motives can be used to predict political attitudes and beliefs. In simplified terms, this approach indicates that individuals with strong needs to reduce insecurity and minimize uncertainty are more likely to be attracted to the political right, with its emphasis on stability and hierarchy, while those who are more tolerant of insecurity and uncertainty tend to gravitate toward the left, with its openness. However, there are also factors that modify this relationship – for example, an individual's level of political engagement or exposure to political messaging (Federico, 2021, p.22).

7.1.3 ATTEMPT TO INTEGRATE BOTH PERSPECTIVES

It seems that the most important factor leading to the emergence of those two distinct research traditions is their roots in different disciplines: the top-down perspective originates in political science, while the bottom-up perspective stems from social psychology (Federico and Malka, 2018, p.36). However, the observations made within both perspectives overlap, creating a complex web of interactions and causality. A helpful concept that bridges these traditions is the notion of emotional needs, discussed in this report. This allows for a subtle shift, especially from a bottom-up perspective: rather than focusing only on the more stable existential or epistemic needs that individuals have, we should also recognize emotional needs, which tend to be more contingent and tied to their immediate emotive states. In other words, affective politics not only exploits existing psychological predispositions but also shapes more or less durable affective states, which can develop further into more concrete attitudes.

7.2 AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION AS A SORT OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION

Political polarization has become an increasingly popular term in the public sphere, but it is far from clear what this notion is taken to mean (Talisse, 2021, p. 209; Bakker & Lelkes, 2024; Schedler, 2023). At the basic level, political polarization is about political distance and related

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phenomena. We might distinguish between issue-based or ideological polarization and social or affective polarization. Traditionally, polarization has been associated more with issue-based polarization, where political views between competing groups are increasingly distanced. Affective polarization is driven by raised levels of partisan bias, emotional responsiveness and activism (Mason, 2018; Schedler, 2023, p. 337).

According to a recent typology (Talisse, 2021) the political distance in question might be understood threefold, as:

1) *Platform* political polarization – this type concerns ideological differences between political parties; when these differences are major, polarization raises, meaning that political parties find themselves in a continuous dispute which undermines the chances for cooperation and compromise.
2) *Partisan* political polarization – its sources are in ideological purism and unification of partisan groups which implies that the moderate views are eliminated thus preventing cooperation and compromise.
3) *Affective* political polarization – in this type "polarization is an *affective* distance between political opponents" (p. 210), where opposing groups have acute distrust and antipathy towards each other.

Platform political polarization has typically been the understanding of the term "political polarization" (see Mason, 2018; Iyengar, 2021, p. 90). However, what currently draws the most attention from scholars and commentators is mass polarization, particularly affective polarization, which is believed to have intensified significantly in the 21st century.

It is striking that affective political polarization does not have to go hand in hand with differing views about specific policy issues. It might happen that people are more or less on the same page concerning actual political matters, but the fact they support different political leaders or belong to different partisan groups triggers their mutual antipathy (Talisse, 2021, p. 210). To some extent, it can be explained by the differentiating character of partisan identities being examples of the mechanism that drives positive attitudes towards one's own group, whereas enhances negativity towards other groups (Iyengar, 2021, 90). It is maintained that since political identities in contemporary democracies are becoming pivotal, they strongly influence emotive relationships between citizens (see Mason, 2018).

The empirical research on American politics supports the argument that we should not infer ideological polarization from affective polarization. In fact, it is argued that the American society is not ideologically polarized. At the same time, polarization based on negative emotions towards the opponent partisan groups has increased dramatically. Researchers have observed more out-group anger, fear and disgust. The result is that American society is affectively polarized without being ideological polarized (see the discussion in Hannon & de Ridder, 2021).

Besides these three types representing political polarization, there is also belief polarization. "In short, belief polarization is that regularity by which discussion with likeminded others turns us into more extreme versions of ourselves" (Talisse, 2021, p. 210). The point is that belief polarization is less about intergroup relations and more about the in-group dynamics which can be found in various groups, including formalized assemblies as well as informal groups of citizens. It is this internal climate within the group that becomes the source of mutual radicalization among its members (Talisse, 2021, p. 210). That said, belief polarization influences our picture of the outside world which facilitates political polarization in all of its forms. People belonging to one political group become more like-minded which fosters

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partisan political polarization. Distrust and animosity are deepening, thereby creating or increasing affective political polarization. Next, platform political polarization continues as political parties take advantage of the situation to fight their opponents more brutally. "Thus, we actually become more like what our most vehement political opponents say we are; and they grow more closely to fit our images of them" (Talisse, 2021, p. 222).

Belief polarization is also known as sorting. As Mason (2018) explains: "Social sorting involves an increasing social homogeneity within each party, such that religious, racial, and ideological divides tend to line up along partisan lines." It is argued that this process of enhancing social identities leads to affective polarization. However, although the basic classification of political polarization encompasses its ideological and affective types, some scholars contend that ideological polarization fuels the affective one (see the discussion in Iyengar et al. 2019)

7.3 COGNITION AND AFFECT IN AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

Conceptualizations of affective polarization are simplified. In general, "Affect is (...) often used as a heuristic to simplify a complex judgment into a simpler question: do I like this attitude object" (Broockman et al., 2023, p. 809). It seems that political science literature shows a particular propensity to such simplifications (see Röllicke, 2023; Bakker & Lelkes, 2024).

While the role of affect in affective polarization is crucial, cognitive elements should not be neglected either. In this regard, let us refer to a distinction which lies between cognitive and practical polarization. Cognitive polarization refers to how people think about those with whom they disagree, while practical polarization concerns how they treat them (de Ridder, 2021). Michael P. Lynch (2021) argues that the cognitive polarization is an element of affective polarization. Cognitive components can be found in deep suspicion between political groups as well as in perceiving each other as irrational, less intelligent and trustworthy. These elements usually coexist with purely emotive states, "but what they are attitudes *about* are the capacities and reliability of other epistemic agents." (Lynch, 2021, p. 245) This once again demonstrates that emotive and cognitive states are intertwined (see also Röllicke, 2023, p. 3).

Affects do not operate in the same way vis-à-vis in-groups and out-groups, which needs to be elucidated in more detail. An illustrative definition of affective polarization reads: "*Affective polarization* occurs when partisan groups experience strong and persistent negative affect or sentiment towards opposing groups, while having positive sentiment towards their own group" (McWilliams, 2021, p. 145). Bearing in mind the concepts of belief polarization and social sorting, one could expect affective polarization manifesting in both negative emotive states representing hostility towards other partisan groups as well as in positive states towards one's own group. In fact, the latter was not observed in data, which would suggest that affect in affective polarization is one-sided. In other words, while belief polarization may lead to stronger in-group agreement, it does not necessarily mean we grow more fond of our group (Iyengar 2021, p. 91). While it is sometimes claimed that negative affects matter more than the positive ones, citizens declare their partisanship results more from positive emotions towards their party rather than from the negative emotions they have about the other party. Negativity weighs more only in the case of partisan-leaners, i.e. people who have not got a clear partisan identity (Lee et al., 2022; Bakker & Lelkes, 2024, p. 425). Notwithstanding, positive emotive states might be misleading as they do not always alleviate polarization and conflict. For instance, we should be aware of the phenomenon

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called "partisan schadenfreude" which is about enjoying suffering of the out-group. Another example is enthusiasm which can lead to endorsing extreme candidates who will polarize the public further (see discussion on both issues in Bakker & Lelkes, 2024, p. 426).

Negative emotions and affects vary in their polarizing influence. Research on the roles of anxiety and anger found that anxious citizens look for new information to clarify their views on specific issues, albeit they are not free from biases which makes them search mostly for threats. On the other hand, anger does not incentivize for searching information, but rather for leaning on social identities and searching for counterarguments that could be used against the other side. At the same time, anger and enthusiasm spark political activity. These conditions have a strong potential of facilitating affective polarization (Mason, 2018; Bakker & Lelkes, 2024). Another affect that provokes polarization is a disgust which, similarly to anger, is pivotal for moral views and value judgements (Haidt, 2003; Clifford, 2019). To wit, the literature finds that anger and disgust facilitate moralization and thus polarization, whereas the same cannot be said about anxiety, sadness and fear (Clifford, 2019; Renström et al.,2023). The significance of anger for affective polarization can be explained by evoking that affective polarization is considered as a sort of stereotyping and that "anger decreases cognitive processing and increases reliance on stereotypes and heuristics" (Renström et. al, 2023).

As the above discussion suggests, affective polarization is primarily about *affects* in the strict sense of the term which was adopted in section 2.1. However, it would be too restrictive, and indeed idiosyncratic, to interpret the adjective "affective" in the term "affective polarization" as referring solely to affects, distinct from emotions. On the contrary, it seems justified to include all emotive states under the umbrella of affective polarization. Which can be additionally supported by the position that cognitive states are also embraced by this concept.

7.4 LEVELS OF AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

When examining the psychological roots of political polarization, emotions and affective states influence it in three main ways: through one's emotional outlook, ideology, and identity (Prinz, 2021). The term *affective outlook* refers to the assumption that voters of different political parties differ in their emotional dispositions — they react differently to various stimuli, which creates an "emotional divide" that can contribute to divergent perspectives, concerns, and policy preferences (Prinz, 2021, p.6). This perspective assumes that natural differences in how and to what extent emotions are experienced directly form the basis of political divisions in a form of political parties or ideological formations. One example is the assumption that individuals identifying as politically conservative are naturally *less trusting* than liberals, while self-identified liberals may be more prone to *expressing anger* (Yang et al., 2019). This somehow reductionist approach to emotions — viewing them as pre-political traits of individuals rather than as results of social or demographic factors — can also be referred to as an approach focused on the political significance of differences in human "temperament."

Emotions, however, can influence affective polarization in a more mediated way, namely through the impact of values and beliefs held by citizens. These factors provide "foundational principles" or "justifying reasons" for matters of political concern (Prinz, 2021, pp.9–10). Prinz argues that the best way to conceptualize this mechanism is by referring to the concept of *ideology*—a set of interconnected values—which, in turn, "can be understood as beliefs grounded in emotions" (Prinz, 2021, p.9). What distinguishes this type of analysis is that it focuses on "political ideals": emotions shape our preferences in the form of judgments about

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how things should be, rather than how they actually are. An example of such an attempt to operationalizing the mediated influence of emotions can be seen in the work of Jonathan Haidt and Joseph (2008), who sought to explain political divisions by appealing to "emotionally grounded norms".

Finally, on yet another level of analysis, it is assumed that emotions and affects influence the degree of affective polarization through the way they are woven into networks of relationships and interactions that shape our *identity* (Iyengar et al., 2012). The social identity approach, as already discussed in our report, focuses on how individuals organize and understand their belonging to various social groups, along with the associated emotive states (Sinclair et al., 2006, p.530). The potential use and limitations of this level of analysis will be explored in more detail in the section dedicated to political identity.

7.5 POLITICAL IDENTITY

The primary way of defining *political identity* in academic literature is through its reference either to the aforementioned ideologies (relatively stable belief systems) or to partisanship, which is discussed here. There is a long tradition of defining partisanship as party identification based on "the individual's affective orientation to an important group-object in his environment" (Campbell et al., 1980, p.121). We can expand this definition by arguing that partisanship is a kind of "loyalty to a party," arising from strong identification with a political party and manifesting in support for specific political decisions and long-term engagement (See: Bartels, 2000, p.36; Iyengar et al., 2012, p.408). Research also shows that partisanship is linked to the formation of partisan goals, which motivate individuals "to apply their reasoning powers in defense of a prior, specific conclusion" (Taber and Lodge, 2006, p.756). Approach that links affective polarization with partisanship is heavily influenced by analyses of the political situation in the United States (Lupu, 2015, pp.331–332). The particular interest in affective polarization in the U.S. stems from a combination of two factors: (1) despite significant demographic and social changes, there is a relative balance of power in American politics — comparable support for the two main parties in the U.S. has persisted; (2) studies point to a long-standing trend of increasing negative emotions and general animosity between supporters of both parties (Pew, 2022).

This situation has raised a legitimate question about the connection between a highly competitive political elite and the increasing "interparty hostility" among partisans (Lelkes et al., 2017; Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015). However, the U.S.-centric focus in research on affective polarization comes with significant limitations. First, due to the specific nature of the American political system, the forms of partisanship observed there cannot be easily translated to other countries, particularly those with multiparty systems (Wagner, 2021). Second, both in the United States and in many other countries, the stable (or even declining) levels of partisanship have led researchers to seek more nuanced relationships between political identification and affective polarization (Dalton, 2002; Lee, 2009, p.20). For example, they often refer to the phenomenon of "negative partisanship," where voters choose the lesser of two evils (Fiorina, 2017, p.112). Third, citizens may be polarized in different ways depending on the dimensions of their political preferences. From the perspective of ENCODE, it is crucial to assume that "psychologically different individuals are more likely to polarize on social issues than on economic ones" (Federico, 2021, p.22).

The list of reservations mentioned above could likely be extended, yet the American example allows us to observe an important relationship: as Lilliana Mason (2015) points out, many Americans are fiercely divided along party lines even when their policy preferences are

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closely aligned. Therefore, it is important to note that partisanship is understood as a form of "social identifications [that] are not based on any formal group membership, but rather self-perceived membership in a particular group" (Greene, 1999, p.394). This suggests that partisanship is not an institutionalized mechanism of direct pressure leading to affective polarization, but rather a form of social identity that generates group-based affects (Iyengar et al., 2012). According to our earlier conclusions, this identity creation process can be understood as a simple result of social categorization or more deeply as the outcome of experiencing specific social conditions.

The concept of *social categorization* can be linked with a *thin* understanding of political identity. Classic studies by Tajfel, already mentioned, show that merely declaring membership in a particular group can lead to preferential treatment of the in-group and derogation of the out-group, which can extend to partisanship (Tajfel, 1970). According to the theory, people strive to build a positive social identity by comparing their group to others (us vs. them) based on shared characteristics such as race, gender, age, nationality, social status, etc. (Turner et al., 1987). Similarly, Iyengar mentions the affective basis of polarization, stating: "the mere act of identifying with a political party is sufficient to trigger negative evaluations of the opposition, and exposure to prolonged media-based campaigns only reinforces these predispositions" (Iyengar et al., 2012). The essence of social categorization is a natural cognitive mechanism that helps us organize and simplify information about the world around us, but at the same time, it can lead to stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination, which may potentially fuel affective polarization.

However, one should consider whether the reference to social experience used in our report allows for a deeper understanding of political identity. Accepting that political identity is the source of self-concepts, we can assume that these concepts ultimately become something extremely *personal*. Prinz argues that political identity can become a part of personal identity, "something that cannot change without loss of self" (Prinz, 2021, pp.15–16). Against such an understanding, at least two important objections can be raised in the context of ENCODE's goals:

1) It might be overly essentialist, ignoring the fact that — in line with the previously discussed constructivist approach (see section 4.1) — our identities and the emotions that accompany them are (at least partially) socially constructed, thus contingent and changeable.
2) While this may be true for some forms of social identity, it seems quite a risky assumption when applied to political identity.

The first objection is an existential-philosophical issue with serious normative consequences, which we revisit in the next section. Regarding the second objection, Prinz responds that such a broader understanding of social identity can indeed be applied to the political sphere as there is a "personal nature of political identity" (Prinz, 2021, p.15). What matters, rather, is that we perceive political identity as an inseparable dimension of who we are because it stems from the social networks in which we are embedded. Our political identity reflects the "long-term social alliances" we form in everyday life while seeking support and resources (social, cultural, etc.).

7.6 CONSEQUENCES AND REMEDIES

Pluralism is oxygen for democracy, polarization is a challenge for democracy, and affective polarization is a threat to democracy, or it seems so.

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Not only is polarization undermining democratic party politics and reaching political conclusions at the level of legislative and executive powers. Belief polarization is a threat to the fundamental basics of a democratic system hinging upon political equality of citizens. If we think that our opponents are irrational, untrustworthy and so on, we perceive them as obstacles to our socio-political goals rather than those having an equal right to have a say in public matters (Talisse, 2021, pp. 223–224; de Ridder, 2021, p. 226). The consequence may be the corruption of liberal democracy into what is known as majoritarianism, a system in which the winners take (almost) all. A recent comparative study spanning around 53 countries shows that "increasing affective polarization is highly correlated with democratic backsliding, less accountability, less freedom, fewer rights, and less deliberation in democracies." Interestingly, though, "ideological polarization has shown no correlation" (Orhan, 2022). What is more, studies show that young children have also become affectively polarized by mimicking the emotions and behaviors of their parents (Bakker & Lelkes, 2024, p. 431).

Nonetheless, in a recent article in "American Journal of Political Science," a few scholars argue that it is not evident that affective polarization is destructive for democratic norms (Broockman et a. 2023). These authors contend that other scientists who have lamented regarding negative consequences of affective polarization on political outcomes do not have neither strong theoretical assumption, nor empirical findings to support their claim.

Last but not least, affective polarization positively correlates with mental health issues, with both influencing each other – polarization undermines mental health, and poor mental health, in turn, fuels polarization (Bakker & Lelkes, 2024, p. 430).

Research and strategies on tackling affective polarization are naturally more recent than the very problem itself. As noticed in Mullinix and Lythgoe (20123), some strategies have been ineffective, one example being self-affirmation techniques aimed to raise partisan ambivalence. A more successful approach was to favor a national identity over partisanship; however, it could not work with people who had already internalized the national identity approach to a high extent. Kevin J. Mullinix and Trent Lythgoe tried a new approach based on group-based civic norms prioritizing a mutual obligation in terms of politics. As the authors argue: "Emphasizing civic norms reduces the effects of partisan endorsements and increases willingness to discuss politics with opposing partisans" (Mullinix, Lythgoe, 2023, p. 186). The results of their study were promising. Positive results in ameliorating polarization were also obtained from a brief befriending meditation (Simonson et al., 2022).

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8. AFFECTIVE PLURALIZATION

The fact that affective polarization has been spreading among societies does not mean that citizens are happy about it. On the contrary, research on emotion regulation indicates that when individuals experience negative emotions, they strive to regain a positive affective state. As far as politics is concerned, it might be achieved through cognitive reappraisal, i.e. reinterpreting situations to alter an emotional response. Another option is reducing the intensity of emotions by consciously down-regulating them. People may also try to divert their attention from the undesired emotions by focusing on unrelated topics, whether political or not, that do not provoke a strong emotive reaction. Yet another strategy is based on mindfulness interventions aimed at alleviating affective polarization. Apart from those individual techniques, there are also collective measures which are based on the engagement of some group members in activities aimed at regulating emotive states. When such collective methods happen to be effective, they are spread among the rest of the group (Bakker & Lelkes, 2024, p. 430; Pinus et al. 2023).

A previous section on affective polarization concludes with mentioning a few recent research which tested different methods to ameliorate this kind of polarization. Some seem promising. ENCODE welcomes and appreciates such endeavors, nonetheless the project's ambition is beyond that. We are interested in theoretical and empirical attempts to achieve something that we call a positive emotional shift. Therefore, while praising the abovementioned initiatives to depolarize individuals and groups, we seek for theoretical, empirical and narrative instruments that would enable us to challenge what is becoming an epistemic status quo, that is the opinion that affective political polarization is here to stay. At a theoretical level, we intend to **question the assumption about the natural *vel* necessary character of affective political polarization as well as to proffer a competing approach to understanding politics and to political participation and communication.** To emphasize that our approach is in a clear opposition to affective polarization, we coined a tentative term "affective pluralization." The basic idea behind this concept is that while recognizing the emotive character of a political sphere and the role of affects and emotions in public life, it takes political pluralism as a regulative sociopolitical norm in democracy, thus aiming to channel emotive states within a liberal democratic framework. This channeling is of course a great challenge for societies. It would require social commitment, civic education and sometimes reinterpreting the political. However, we believe the starting point must be a sound and robust theoretical account. A theory of affective pluralization needs development, which is to be done by ENCODE and anyone interested in this work. In what follows, we present the basic assumptions of the concept of affective pluralization. We start by addressing the problem of extrapolating political affective polarization from social identity theory. Then, we describe the concept of affective pluralization using inspiration from the political theory of Chantal Mouffe and liberal democracy.

The **problem of naturalizing the assumptions of political affective polarization** is particularly evident when considering its connection to enduring socio-political cleavages. According to classical theory, such cleavages consist of three components: "a distinct socio-structural basis such as class or religion, a collective identity, and a particular form of political organisation of this group" (Helbling & Jungkunz, 2020, p.1190; Bartolini & Mair, 1990, pp.213–220). However, contemporary researchers suggest that many traditional cleavages, such as those related to class divisions, have lost significance, while new ones, such as the integration-demarcation cleavage, are emerging (Kriesi et al., 2012). Some scholars even argue that Western Europe is experiencing the rise of 'twin issues' linked to the challenges

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and threats posed by immigration and European integration (Borbáth et al., 2023, p.635). These scholars suggest that it is not enough for a group forming the basis of a cleavage to have organizational structures capable of expressing a common interest—there must also be some form of political polarization. They argue that "that a fully-fledged cleavage implies a close link between ideological and affective polarization, shaping behaviour far beyond Election Day" (Borbáth et al., 2023, p.637). However, if there is a relationship between the formation of new cleavages and affective polarization, it is not a straightforward cause-and-effect dynamic. On the one hand, as per Tajfel's classic concept, even group divisions entirely unrelated to enduring social structures can lead to in-group/out-group bias. On the other hand, even deeply entrenched cleavages with political representation may not necessarily result in extreme animosities, as seen, for example, in the relationships between rural and urban populations in numerous countries. Political affective polarization, therefore, is one possible outcome, but it is not the natural trajectory for the development of a cleavage.

Lisa Disch, a leading advocate of the so-called *constructive turn* in political representation theory (Disch, 2015; Disch et al., 2019), controversially states in her latest work: "that mass democracies need plurality more than they need competence" (Disch, 2021, p. 9). In the same passage, Disch openly acknowledges that this radical interpretation draws on the work of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, who assert that "*Unfixity* has become the condition of every social identity" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 85, emphasis added by ENCODE). Disch opposes the "pedagogical approach" to constructing political theory, arguing that we must remember that politicians actively create, rather than passively reproduce, social divisions. A key element in this process is also how we talk about these divisions, for example, in terms of affective polarization:

"This portrayal serves up high drama on the campaign trail and on cable news, but it runs contrary to empirical studies of public opinion, which find that although political elites and political parties have charged to the ideological extremes, their constituencies have not" (Disch, 2021, pp. 10–11).

Disch is highly skeptical of how the assumptions of social identity theory are translated into interpretations of political divides, asserting that many political scientists have adopted a "foundationalist position" because of it—forgetting that party politics tends to shape rather than merely reflect social group divisions (Disch, 2021, p. 12).

Within ENCODE, we agree with many of Disch's arguments but emphasize that the issue of *emotional competence* is not so straightforward: the knowledge of how to steer emotions and elicit certain affective states in citizens is not evenly distributed. In an era of new technologies that affect not only our intellect but, perhaps most crucially, our feelings, a new concept of pluralism is essential—one based on the open acknowledgment of the role of emotions, including positive emotions, in politics. We call this concept *affective pluralism*. Chantal Mouffe, whose work serves as the starting point for our reflections on affective pluralization, argues that political philosophy can play a practical role in shaping a public culture that supports liberal democracies—but to do so, it must not shy away from engaging in critical debate with its opponents:

"I consider that political theorists, in order to put forward a conception of a liberal-democratic society able to win the active support of its citizens, must be willing to engage with the arguments of those who have challenged the fundamental tenets of liberalism. This means confronting some disturbing questions, usually avoided by liberals and democrats alike" (Mouffe, 1999, p.38).

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Mouffe herself follows this approach. She draws on the work of the famous German legal theorist Carl Schmitt, albeit against his original intentions—she transforms the reflections of this controversial critic of liberal democracy into a tool for defending it. Echoing Schmitt, she argues that the foundation of every political order is a logic based on the division between *us vs. them*, which we also find in the theory of affective polarization. As Mouffe states, "this cannot be avoided, even in the liberal-democratic model; it can only be negotiated differently" (Mouffe, 1999, p.43).

This statement holds a crucial lesson for ENCODE: the distinction between groups is important, but it can be articulated differently. The way in which the democratic *people* are defined is not a given—it is the subject of political contestation, which is the essence of democracy (Rancière, 2009). At this point, it allows us to pose a fundamental question: on what grounds are we constructing a theory that competes with the theory of affective polarization? If we are motivated by the fear of the *friend-enemy* distinction tearing apart the democratic community, we must remember that Schmitt's belief in the absolute unity of the democratic *demos* is an equally dangerous utopia. The point is that both affective polarization and affective pluralization are primarily ways of defining political rivalry. Both are mechanisms for defining political reality based on emotions and affects and, therefore, according to the assumptions of the constructivist paradigm, also ways of shaping it.

The task that lies at the heart of the ENCODE project is to explore how this mechanism can be defined differently. Its realization will not require us to reject all the assumptions of affective polarization theory, but rather to perform a *metaphoric redescription*: to remind ourselves that even significant political conflict "[does] not take the form of an 'antagonism' (a struggle between enemies) but the form of an 'agonism' (a struggle between adversaries)" (Mouffe, 2013, p.7). The first step was taken already by Mouffe. Now we need to follow her advice and try to determine "[how] to establish the we/they distinction, which is constitutive of politics, in a way that is compatible with the recognition of pluralism" (Mouffe, 2022). Hera also ENCODE agrees with Chantal Mouffe's claim that "it is impossible to understand democratic politics without acknowledging 'passions' as the driving force in the political field" (Mouffe, 2013, p.6).

At the individual level, political affective pluralization is a certain kind of affective openness which concerns the way individuals deal with the fact that the same things evoke different affects and emotions in different subjects which is related to their cognitions and, overall, their political views. To make it clear, we need to compare the affective responses of an affectively polarized citizen with that of an affectively pluralized one. For the former, a mismatch in affective responses between him and the others will be an alarming signal calling for partisan-based animosity and the whole repertoire of negative affects and emotions to combat "the enemy". On the other hand, an affectively pluralized individual will note the difference in affective responses between her and the others, but – while she might not like those fellow citizens and even wonder their reactions and reject their corresponding views – this will not automatically provoke hostility, animosity or disgust.

Having said that, it will stimulate some emotive reaction anyway, but what exactly? In line with ENCODE's theoretical leanings towards the agonistic position that politics is about passions and competition of inherently conflicting interests and values of different groups, we need to admit that such a situation is likely to provoke negative valence, that is, certain kind of displeasure and possibly some corresponding emotions (and opinions). However, while still negative, they are likely to fit into the boundaries of liberal democratic order which

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in fact hinges on disagreements about political issues and related antipathies, but "as long as they remain within the bounds of democratic tolerance" (Schedler, 2023, p. 352). Moreover, it is likely that affectively pluralized citizens will experience less arousal which decreases the political temperature.

These differences are of great importance. Affectively pluralized citizens and groups may not like each other, but they do not (strongly) dislike each other either. This in turn creates a space for disputes, bargaining, and political competition. But at the same time, it keeps the adversaries away from open conflict and the most negative affects and emotions. As Mouffe (1993, p. 4) has it:

"[W]ithin the context of the political community, the opponent should be considered not as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated. We will fight against his ideas, but we will not question his right to defend them. The category of the 'enemy' does not disappear but is displaced; it remains pertinent with respect to those who do not accept the democratic 'rules of the game' and who thereby exclude themselves from the political community."

Indeed, affective pluralization promotes rhetoric, with its rational and emotional components alike, over naked power since political opponents are not perceived as mere obstacles without any merit and understanding. Rather, we tend to perceive them as fellow citizens with whom we disagree and whom we have considered as going wrong, politically, strategically, and even morally, but whom we still deem as members of our political society. In this vein, affective pluralization safeguards equal political status and rights of all citizens, thus favoring some level of tolerance as well (cf. McKinnon, 2018; Graham et al., 2013). The core idea is, let us repeat, that in principle it is socially and politically tolerated that people can have different perceptions and emotive states about political reality.

There is yet another crucial principle which is implied by this approach. Namely, that our political positions, our partisanship, are not coined in the stone once and for all. One of the most far-reaching, although neglected, characteristics of affective polarization is that it gives us a one-way ticket. Arguably, it is much more difficult to change your political view if you think of the opposing side as insane and disgusting. Depolarizing strategies aim at ameliorating the affective polarization, but they are silent about the question of how possible it is for a once strongly affectively polarized individual to take the other side of the dispute. Affective pluralization does not pose such problems. This should be considered as an incentive to adopt it since it enables people to change their political identities without bearing much cost.

According to the assumptions of the constructivist paradigm, when defining phenomena like affective *polarization*, we should not start by asking *what they are,* but rather *what they do* (Saward, 2010, p. 4). This approach allows us to formulate a core assumption: **both affective polarization and *pluralization*, from the perspective of political practice, are primarily discursive mechanisms through which political rivalry is defined within a given society**. Crucially, this process of defining is based on "the affective dimension which is mobilized in the creation of political identities" (Mouffe, 2013, 137). The main difference is that, in a clear opposition to affective polarization, affective pluralization promises more resilient, stable and peaceful social and political order.

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CONCLUSIONS

Investigating emotive aspects in politics requires from a researcher to comprehend a few disciplinary perspectives. Naturally, scholars of different expertise will use different research methods and techniques and will be inclined to identify research problems within the framework of their fields. However, interdisciplinary research on emotions in politics is both possible and desirable. For example, it is beneficial for a political scientist to understand the characteristics of affects and emotions which were developed by psychologists. On the other hand, social psychology can benefit from political science when it comes to understanding the political system and the political itself. Sociologists might aid in studying the aspect of social groups and their mutual influences. The examples might be multiplied.

In this report, we attempted to pair up various perspectives to provide the ENCODE consortium with a conceptual guide that reflects the interdisciplinary character of the project. We did it using a broad literature in numerous fields. However, not every concept in our report refers directly to emotive aspects. Commitment to finding connections to affects and emotions in every single concept would be reductionist. Having said that, with emotional components explicitly expressed or not, this conceptual guide allows for designing research aimed to find such interconnections. Which will be the task of upcoming ENCODE's research.

Added to this, we outlined the new concept of affective pluralization which is our normative proposition to tackle the ongoing affective polarization issues. We presented the idea behind this concept, its theoretical assumptions, references to affective polarization, liberal democracy, and citizenship. We consider this concept promising and recognize its potential in contributing to the new narratives aimed at creating more flourishing political landscape. That said, this concept requires further theoretical work which will be presented in the following report D.2.2, "Theories of emotional politics".

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