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Why Albania Has No Stable Culture-War Cleavage: Moral Conservatism, Generational Change, and Weak Partisan Differentiation

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Abstract
Why have gender, family, and sexuality issues failed to become a stable axis of party competition in Albania despite recurring elite rhetoric and persistent social conservatism? This article analyses nationally representative data from the Euronews Albania Barometer (late 2023–early 2024), using a module patterned on the European Social Survey (ESS) on everyday values, moral evaluations, social distance, and family norms. Albanian society remains strongly familistic and normatively conservative regarding sexuality and heteronormative family structures, with younger and more educated groups displaying selective but limited liberalization. These value differences, however, are weakly translated into partisan competition: major party electorates differ far less on moral issues than public rhetoric suggests, and socio-demographic gradients substantially exceed partisan ones. In this post-communist context, where classical Lipset–Rokkan cleavages prove inadequate and communist legacies no longer sufficiently explain party competition, political divisions remain structured primarily by incumbency, personalized leadership, and clientelist access. Consequently, value-laden issues enter public debate through elite rhetoric or European Union (EU)-incentivized legal reforms without crystallizing into durable culture-war divisions. The article contributes to post-communist cleavage formation research by showing that widespread moral conservatism may exist without generating stable partisan cleavages.

Keywords: Albania; post-communist cleavage formation; moral conservatism; culture-war politics; familism

Introduction

In Albania, controversies over family, gender, sexuality, and "European values" periodically erupt in public debate. Political actors, media commentators, religious representatives, and civil-society organizations invoke tradition, national identity, women's rights, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) issues, and European standards in emotionally charged language. At first glance, Albania appears to be developing the kind of value-based polarization commonly associated with contemporary "culture wars." Yet this impression is fundamentally misleading. Despite recurring public controversy, these issues have not become a stable axis of

party competition. This article addresses that puzzle: why do morally charged issues generate rhetorical intensity without consolidating into a durable partisan cleavage?

The answer challenges conventional expectations. Albania exhibits moral conservatism without culture-war competition. Traditional attitudes toward sexuality and family remain widespread across society, but they do not divide party electorates in ways that would sustain stable value-based competition. Instead, more permissive attitudes are concentrated among younger and more educated citizens – cutting across party lines rather than defining them.

This pattern is theoretically important because Albania combines three features that do not easily coexist. First, moral conservatism remains socially widespread, especially regarding sexuality, LGBTI acceptance, and heteronormative family structures. Second, modest but visible liberalization is occurring along generational and educational lines. Third, these differences do not map onto partisan identities. This article contributes to the literature on post-communist cleavage formation by demonstrating that the presence of socially distributed value differences does not necessarily lead to their political institutionalization. In contexts where party competition is structured primarily by incumbency, leadership, and clientelist linkages, moral conflicts may remain visible but fail to crystallize into durable partisan cleavages.

The classic Lipset–Rokkan model, which assumes stable cleavages rooted in historical conflicts, proves inadequate where communist rule disrupted these foundations, yet purely path-dependent explanations also grow insufficient after three decades of pluralism.

Albania illustrates this double inadequacy particularly well after 36 years of the fall of communism. Party competition has been structured less by ideological worldviews or inherited communist-era divisions than by personalized leadership, incumbency, control of state resources, and clientelist linkages. Under these conditions, moral issues may enter public discourse through elite rhetoric or European Union (EU)-driven legal reforms, but they lack the organizational infrastructure and electorate differentiation necessary to become a stable cleavage.

The governing Socialist Party (*Partia Socialiste*, PS) faces clear risks in openly politicizing questions like gender–family related issues or LGBTI rights since its own electorate is far from uniformly liberal, making selective adaptation and rhetorical moderation more viable. It is a more viable approach that involves selective adaptation, rhetorical moderation, and framing potentially divisive reforms as technical compliance with European obligations. The opposition may invoke family or traditional values more directly, but the underlying electorate is not distinct enough to sustain a durable culture-war bloc. Value-laden issues thus remain visible and sometimes emotionally charged, yet weak candidates for stable partisan structuring.

Empirically, this article draws on nationally representative survey data from the Euronews Albania Barometer (late 2023–early 2024), using a module on everyday values, moral permissiveness, social distance, and family norms patterned on the European Social Survey (ESS).

Using structured descriptive analysis, the article assesses whether differences are strong enough to sustain a political cleavage and whether partisan gaps outweigh socio-demographic ones.

Three findings emerge. First, Albanian society remains organized around a strong familistic core. Second, attitudes toward sexuality and LGBTI people remain restrictive, though younger and more educated groups are somewhat more open. Third, the main gradients are socio-demographic rather than partisan – party electorates differ far less than public rhetoric suggests.

Albania functions here as a critical case in which the coexistence of widespread moral conservatism and observable value change would normally be expected to generate culture-war competition, yet empirically fails to do so.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section develops the theoretical framework on post-communist cleavage formation and party strategy. The third section presents the data and analytical approach. The following four sections examine empirical patterns: the familistic core of Albanian society, moral boundaries around sexuality and social distance, selective liberalization along generational and educational lines, and weak partisan differentiation despite visible moral conflict. The final two sections discuss theoretical implications and conclude.

Theoretical framework

Cleavage formation after communism: limits of the classical model

The classic Lipset–Rokkan framework treats party systems as the political institutionalization of historically rooted social conflicts—primarily class, religion, center–periphery tensions, and state formation processes.[1] Central to this model is the notion of "freezing": once cleavages become organizationally consolidated and electorally aligned, they exhibit remarkable stability across time.[2] Bartolini and Mair[3] refined this, emphasizing that cleavages require three elements: empirical social division, normative consciousness, and organizational expression—without which differences remain politically latent.

This framework has proven difficult to apply in post-communist Europe. Communist rule disrupted cleavage formation by repressing religious institutions, dismantling class organizations, and crushing independent associational life.[4] Party competition resumed after 1989–1991 in societies where historical 'carriers'—churches, unions, civic associations – had been weakened or destroyed.[5] Consequently, scholars of post-communist politics have long argued that the region's party systems cannot be understood as the reemergence of frozen Western cleavages but must instead be analyzed through the lens of regime legacies, elite strategies, weak institutionalization, and volatile voter alignments.[6]

Yet purely path-dependent accounts centered on communist legacies grow increasingly insufficient. Three decades after regime change, legacies remain relevant but no longer determine structures alone.[7] Party agency, clientelist networks, and strategic framing increasingly shape conflict,[8] creating what Enyedi[9] terms "institutionalization without consolidation." The Albanian case exemplifies this pattern: neither classical cleavage theory nor static path-dependence suffices to explain its competitive dynamics.

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[1] Lipset, Seymour Martin, and Stein Rokkan. 1967. Cleavage structures, party systems, and voter alignments: An introduction, in *Party systems and voter alignments: Cross-national perspectives*, edited by Lipset, Seymour Martin, and Stein Rokkan. New York: Free Press, 1–64.

[2] Lipset and Rokkan, *Cleavage structures, party systems*, 50.

[3] Bartolini, Stefano, and Peter Mair. 1990. *Identity, competition, and electoral availability: The stabilisation of European electorates 1885–1985*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 215-220.

[4] Kitschelt, Herbert / Mansfeldova, Zdenka / Markowski, Radoslaw, and Gábor Tóka. 1999. *Post-communist party systems: Competition, representation, and inter-party cooperation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Evans, Geoffrey, and Stephen Whitefield. 1993. Identifying the bases of party competition in Eastern Europe. *British Journal of Political Science* 23(4), 521–548.

[5] Berglund, Sten / Hellén, Tomas, and Frank Aarebrot (eds.). 2001. *The handbook of political change in Eastern Europe*, 2nd ed. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

[6] Kitschelt, Herbert. 1995. Formation of party cleavages in post-communist democracies: Theoretical propositions. *Party Politics* 1(4), 447–472; Tavits, Margit. 2005. The development of stable party support: Electoral dynamics in post-communist Europe. *American Journal of Political Science* 49(2), 283–298; Markowski, Radoslaw. 1997. Political parties and ideological spaces in East Central Europe. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 30(3), 221–254.

[7] Pop-Eleches, Grigore, and Joshua A. Tucker. 2017. *Communism's shadow: Historical legacies and contemporary political attitudes*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[8] Grzymała-Busse, Anna. 2007. *Rebuilding Leviathan: Party competition and state exploitation in post-communist democracies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Kitschelt, Herbert, and Steven I. Wilkinson (eds.). 2007. *Patrons, clients, and policies: Patterns of democratic accountability and political competition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[9] Enyedi, Zsolt. 2005. The role of agency in cleavage formation. *European Journal of Political Research* 44(5), 697–720.

Albania: weak ideological structuring, strong personalized competition

Albanian party competition has never been entirely devoid of programmatic content, but ideological differentiation has remained weak relative to personalist and clientelist dimensions.[10] Rather than competing along clear left–right, secular–religious, or urban–rural axes, or regional divisions, Albanian parties have been organized primarily through bipolar antagonism, personalized leadership, and party-controlled access to state resources.[11] Bogdani and Loughlin[12] describe Albanian democracy as characterized by "winner-takes-all" logic, where electoral victory translates into comprehensive control over state institutions, patronage networks, and economic opportunities. Under these conditions, party competition revolves less around programmatic alternatives than around incumbency, leadership personalities, and claims to managerial competence, especially regarding EU integration.[13]

Kajsiu argues Albanian politics operates through 'polarized antagonism,' where camps define themselves through opposition to externalized enemies rather than programmatic agendas. Party loyalty is sustained less through ideological alignment than through patron–client networks, state employment, selective service delivery, and localized exchanges.[14]

Communist-era memories remain symbolically available[15] but no longer structure politics durably. As Elbasani[16] notes, "political divisions inherited from the communist past have been gradually replaced by competition over state resources and European integration narratives." In this environment, "us versus them" is reproduced more through power, incumbency, and patronage than through enduring ideological or historical blocs. Under these conditions, party competition is weakly structured by ideology and more strongly structured by access to state resources and leadership competition, limiting the incentives to mobilize value-based divisions.

Familism, social trust, and moral boundaries

The concept of familism provides essential context for understanding moral attitudes in Albania. In comparative research on Southern Europe, strong family orientation has been identified as a central organizing principle of social life, welfare provision, and moral obligation.[17] Reher[18] distinguishes between "strong family" regions (Mediterranean Europe) and "weak family" regions (Northern/Western Europe), arguing that family strength shapes not only demographic behavior but also institutional development, trust patterns, and welfare state formation.

Banfield's[19] concept of 'amoral familism' – where family interest dominates, and cooperation weakens – remains useful despite criticisms.[20] Albania presents similar conditions where family functions as the primary unit of trust, welfare, and protection, given weak institutions and low generalized trust.[21]

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[10] Kajsiu, Blendi. 2010. Down with politics! The crisis of representation in post-communist Albania. *East European Politics and Societies* 24(2), 229–253; Elbasani, Arolda. 2013. *European integration and transformation in the Western Balkans: Europeanization or business as usual?* London: Routledge.

[11] Kajsiu, *Down with politics*.

[12] Bogdani, Mirela, and John Loughlin. 2007. *Albania and the European Union: The tumultuous journey towards integration and accession*. London: I.B. Tauris.

[13] Elbasani, *European integration and transformation*.

[14] Kajsiu, *Down with politics*; Bogdani and Loughlin, *Albania and the European Union*.

[15] De Waal, Clarissa. 2005. *Albania today: A portrait of post-communist turbulence*. London: I.B. Tauris.

[16] Elbasani, *European integration and transformation*, 11.

[17] Reher, David Sven. 1998. Family ties in Western Europe: Persistent contrasts. *Population and Development Review* 24(2), 203–234; Dalla Zuanna, Gianpiero, and Giuseppe Micheli (eds.). 2004. *Strong family and low fertility: A paradox?* Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

[18] Reher, *Family ties in Western Europe*.

[19] Banfield, Edward C. 1958. *The moral basis of a backward society*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

[20] Muraskin, William A. 1974. The social-control theory in American history: A critique. *Journal of Social History* 9(4), 559–569; Pizzorno, Alessandro. 1966. Amoral familism and historical marginality. *International Review of Community Development* 15–16, 55–66.

[21] Schwandner-Sievers, Stephanie, and Bernd J. Fischer (eds.). 2002. *Albanian identities: Myth and history*. London: Hurst & Company; De Waal, *Albania today*.

Albanian scholarship consistently shows that family and kin networks constitute the 'basic social infrastructure' under institutional weakness,[22] with survey evidence confirming exceptionally high family trust alongside very low institutional trust.[23] This matters because familism structures not only material solidarity but also moral boundaries. The family becomes both a source of solidarity and a moral reference point against which alternative identities and practices are evaluated, and threats to family structure provoke disproportionate moral anxiety.[24]

Moral boundaries without stable culture-war polarization

Research on symbolic boundaries demonstrates that societies often draw strong moral lines between acceptable and suspect identities, practices, and lifestyles without those divisions necessarily becoming stable bases of party competition.[25] Lamont[26] defines symbolic boundaries as "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space." Moral boundaries – a subset concerned with qualities like honesty, integrity, and proper conduct – are particularly powerful because they invoke collective values and emotional attachments.[27] Yet critically, the existence of strong moral boundaries does not automatically generate partisan cleavages.

Moral positions may cluster socially without aligning electorally unless elites actively mobilize them,[28] and cultural conflicts crystallize into party competition only when parties face challengers willing to politicize them.[29] In the absence of such entrepreneurship, cultural divisions may remain socially real but electorally dormant.[30]

Public controversies can create the impression of binary division (traditional vs. progressive), yet this may substantially exaggerate political institutionalization.[31] A society can be broadly conservative without producing a culture-war party system.[32] It can also display visible generational and educational change without translating that change into stable partisan alignment.[33]

This is precisely the possibility explored here. The Albanian case suggests that moral conservatism is socially widespread, especially regarding sexuality and heteronormative family norms, but only weakly translated into partisan competition. Younger and more educated groups may be somewhat more permissive, but these gradients remain primarily socio-demographic rather than partisan. What exists, in other words, is not an absence of moral conflict, but a social distribution of moral difference that has not crystallized into durable party blocs. This distinction between social boundary formation and political institutionalization is central to the Albanian case.

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[22] Schwandner-Sievers and Fischer, *Albanian identities*, 14-18; Elbasani, *European integration and transformation*, 68-70.
[23] UNDP Albania. 2018. *National human development report: Decentralization and local development*. Tirana: United Nations Development Programme.
[24] Reher, *Family ties in Western Europe*, 206-208; Dalla Zuanna and Micheli, *Strong family and low fertility*, 8-12.
[25] Lamont, Michèle. 1992. *Money, morals, and manners: The culture of the French and American upper-middle class*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Lamont, Michèle, and Virág Molnár. 2002. The study of boundaries in the social sciences. *Annual Review of Sociology* 28, 167–195.
[26] Lamont, *Money, morals, and manners*, 4.
[27] Lamont and Molnár, *The study of boundaries*, 168-170.
[28] Baldassarri, Delia, and Barum Park. 2020. Was there a culture war? Partisan polarization and secular trends in US public opinion. *Journal of Politics* 82(3), 809–827.
[29] Kriesi, Hanspeter / Grande, Edgar / Lachat, Romain / Dolezal, Martin / Bornschier, Simon, and Timotheos Frey. 2008. *West European politics in the age of globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[30] Kriesi et al., *West European politics*, 5-9; De Vries, Catherine E., and Sara B. Hobolt. 2020. *Political entrepreneurs: The rise of challenger parties in Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
[31] Fiorina, Morris P. / Abrams, Samuel J., and Jeremy C. Pope. 2005. *Culture war? The myth of a polarized America*. New York: Pearson Longman.
[32] Adams, James / Green, Jane, and Carole Milazzo. 2012. Has the British public depolarized along with political elites? An American perspective on British public opinion. *Comparative Political Studies* 45(4), 507–530.
[33] Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. 2019. *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Elite agency, external incentives, and weak partisan translation

The crucial question, then, is not whether moral differences exist, but whether they are politically usable enough to become a cleavage in the stricter Bartolini–Mair sense. As Bartolini and Mair[34] emphasize, social divisions become cleavages only when they are organizationally stabilized and translated into structured political representation. Enyedi[35] adds an equally important point: parties are not passive mirrors of social structure; they actively shape, combine, mute, or activate potential divisions, depending on political incentives and strategic opportunities. Party elites act as "coalition-builders" and "issue entrepreneurs," selecting which conflicts to emphasize and which to downplay based on competitive advantage.[36]

This insight is central for Albania. Questions such as gender–family issues, same-sex marriage, or LGBTI rights may enter public discourse through multiple channels: elite rhetoric, media amplification, transnational advocacy networks,[37] and legal reforms linked to European integration conditionality.[38] In Albania, European integration operates as a dominant frame encouraging formal adaptation despite partial domestic absorption.[39]

The EU's transformative power operates through 'passive leverage':[40] adopting norms becomes conditionally linked to membership. Yet this induces formal legal change far more easily than reshaping embedded social norms or generating domestic political mobilization,[41] making culturally sensitive reforms appear externally imposed rather than domestically internalized.[42] Research on LGBTI politics in Central and Eastern Europe illustrates this: EU conditionality created a 'rainbow curtain' pressuring formal adoption while publics remained opposed,[43] framing rights as externally imposed and vulnerable to backlash.[44]

Under these conditions, major Albanian parties have limited incentives to politicize moral reforms. The Socialist Party may absorb reforms using Europeanizing language[45] but avoid open progressive positioning, given its conservative electorate. The opposition may invoke traditional values[46] but faces limits given undifferentiated electorates and reputational costs of opposing EU reforms.[47]

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[34] Bartolini and Mair, *Identity, competition, and electoral availability*, 215-220.
[35] Enyedi, Zsolt. 2008. The social and attitudinal basis of political parties: Cleavage politics revisited. *European Review* 16(3), 287–304.
[36] Riker, William H. 1986. *The art of political manipulation*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Carmines, Edward G., and James A. Stimson. 1989. *Issue evolution: Race and the transformation of American politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
[37] Keck, Margaret E., and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. *Activists beyond borders: Advocacy networks in international politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
[38] Schimmelfennig, Frank, and Ulrich Sedelmeier. 2005. Introduction: Conceptualizing the Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe, in *The Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1–28.
[39] Elbasani, *European integration and transformation*; Börzel, Tanja A., and Frank Schimmelfennig. 2017. Coming together or drifting apart? The EU's political integration capacity in Eastern Europe. *Journal of European Public Policy* 24(2), 278–296.
[40] Vachudova, Milada Anna. 2005. *Europe undivided: Democracy, leverage, and integration after communism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[41] Ayoub, Phillip M. 2016. *When states come out: Europe's sexual minorities and the politics of visibility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Grabbe, Heather. 2006. *The EU's transformative power: Europeanization through conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
[42] Börzel and Schimmelfennig, *Coming together or drifting apart*, 12-15.
[43] Ayoub, *When states come out*.
[44] Slootmaeckers, Koen, and Heleen Touquet. 2016. The co-evolution of EU's eastern enlargement and LGBT rights in the Balkans, in *The EU enlargement and gay politics: The impact of eastern enlargement on rights, activism and prejudice*, edited by Slootmaeckers, Koen / Touquet, Heleen, and Peter Vermeersch. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 19–44; O'Dwyer, Conor. 2018. *Coming out of communism: The emergence of LGBT activism in Eastern Europe*. New York: New York University Press.
[45] Kajsiu, *Down with politics*, 370-372.
[46] Elbasani, Arolda, and Olivier Roy. 2015. Islam in the post-communist Balkans: Alternative pathways to God. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 15(4), 457–471.
[47] Bogdani and Loughlin, *Albania and the European Union*, 145-150.

The result is a pattern of discursive visibility without durable cleavage formation – what Bornschier[48] calls "issue ownership without structural anchoring." Moral issues surface periodically, generate controversy, and may even produce legislative action, but they do not crystallize into stable, mutually reinforcing packages of partisan identity, organizational mobilization, and electoral competition. The result is not the absence of moral conflict, but its weak translation into structured party competition.

Argument and expectations

The argument of this article follows directly from this framework. Albania is not a case of absent moral conservatism, nor a case of absent social difference. It is a case of moral conservatism without stable culture-war competition. The country combines a strong familistic core, visible but limited generational liberalization, and a party system structured more by leadership, incumbency, patronage, and bipolar antagonism than by consolidated moral blocs.[49]

Three specific expectations follow.

First, if moral conservatism is socially broad rather than sharply partisan, then restrictive attitudes toward sexuality and heteronormative family norms should appear across the electorate rather than being concentrated exclusively in one major party camp. This contrasts with consolidated culture-war systems – such as the United States after the 1980s[50] or Poland after 2015[51] – where moral attitudes strongly predict party choice and partisan identity reinforces moral worldviews.

Second, if value change is occurring but remains primarily social rather than electoral, then the clearest differences should run by generation, education, and urbanization rather than by party vote. This expectation aligns with findings from value change research showing that generational replacement and educational expansion drive liberalization on post-materialist issues,[52] but such changes translate into partisan competition only where parties actively mobilize them.[53]

Third, if moral conflict is weakly translated into partisan competition, then partisan differences should be flatter and less systematic than socio-demographic ones. Under such conditions, issues such as gender balance or LGBTI rights may become recurrent objects of controversy, amplified by media, advocacy organizations, or external actors, but they are unlikely to crystallize into a durable electoral axis comparable to a fully institutionalized culture war.[54] These expectations allow us to distinguish between socially structured value differences and politically institutionalized cleavages.

The article, therefore, asks a specific empirical question: are the moral and value differences visible in Albanian society structured strongly enough, and aligned partisanly enough, to sustain a durable cleavage in party competition? The argument advanced here is that they are not. Albania exhibits moral boundaries, social gradients of liberalization, and periodic public controversy—but it lacks the organizational infrastructure, electorate differentiation, and elite incentive structures necessary to transform these elements into a stable culture-war party system.

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[48] Bornschier, Simon. 2010. *Cleavage politics and the populist right: The new cultural conflict in Western Europe*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

[49] Kajsiu, *Down with politics*; Elbasani, *European integration and transformation*.

[50] Hunter, James Davison. 1991. *Culture wars: The struggle to define America*. New York: Basic Books; Layman, Geoffrey C. 2001. *The great divide: Religious and cultural conflict in American party politics*. New York: Columbia University Press.

[51] Bustikova, Lenka, and Herbert Kitschelt. 2021. Extreme right parties in Eastern Europe: Organizational strategies and trajectories of competition. *Perspectives on Politics* 19(4), 1040–1059.

[52] Inglehart, Ronald, and Christian Welzel. 2005. *Modernization, cultural change, and democracy: The human development sequence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural backlash*.

[53] Kitschelt, Herbert. 1994. *The transformation of European social democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Kriesi et al., *West European politics*.

[54] Bornschier, *Cleavage politics and the populist*; Kriesi et al., *West European politics*.

Data, measurement and methodology

Data source and survey design

The empirical analysis is based on a nationally representative survey of the adult population of Albania (18+) conducted in late 2023 and early 2024 through the Euronews Albania Barometri public poll implemented by the research firms Data Centrum and MRB. The questionnaire included a module patterned on the European Social Survey (ESS) on everyday values, moral permissiveness, social distance, and family norms, plus standard socio-demographic indicators and 2021 vote recall. The article relies on weighted survey outputs and uses them to compare patterns across gender, age, education, employment, marital status, household income, urban–rural residence, region, and 2021 vote categories.

The available data consists of weighted aggregate tabulations rather than respondent-level microdata. Instead of micro-level causal modeling, it examines whether the observed value differences are patterned strongly enough across social and electoral categories to support claims about the presence, absence, or weakness of potential cleavage structuring.

Measurement and substantive domains

The survey captures four substantive domains central to the argument of the article. First, it measures everyday priorities (family, friends, work, free time, religion, politics). Second, it measures personal virtues and moral qualities (responsibility, good behavior, obedience, tolerance, religiosity, independence). Third, it measures social distance and symbolic boundaries, including attitudes toward LGBTI people and other stigmatized groups. Fourth, it measures moral permissiveness and family norms, including views on divorce, premarital sex, homosexuality, corruption, violence, motherhood, marriage, and whether children need both a mother and a father. The data also incorporate a political background variable by distinguishing between voters of the Socialist Party, voters of the Democratic Party (*Partia Demokratike*, PD), and its allies, voters of other parties, and non-voters.

The aim is to assess whether visible moral and family-related differences are distributed to sustain a stable axis of party competition, comparing socio-demographic versus partisan gradients.

Analytical strategy: structured comparison of weighted distributions

Data structure and methodological implications

Our data consist of weighted aggregate cross-tabulations published by Data Centrum/MRB following European Social Survey reporting conventions. We have access to percentage distributions by demographic and political categories rather than individual-level microdata. This data structure reflects standard practice in the ESS and the European Values Study (EVS) tradition of nationally representative values research[55], but carries two important methodological implications.

First, we cannot estimate conventional multivariate regression models that would isolate the independent effect of party vote while simultaneously controlling for age, education, urbanization, and other covariates. The aggregate structure of our data does not support such decomposition.

Second, and more importantly for our theoretical question, we can directly observe whether value differences manifest strongly enough across partisan categories to constitute a politically structured cleavage. This is precisely what cleavage theory requires us to demonstrate: not merely that attitudes vary individually, but that they align with collective political identities in ways that can sustain organized competition.[56]

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[55] Jowell, Roger / Roberts, Caroline / Fitzgerald, Rory, and Gillian Eva (eds.). 2007. *Measuring attitudes cross-nationally: Lessons from the European Social Survey*. London: Sage.

[56] Bartolini and Mair, *Identity, competition, and electoral availability*, 215-220.

Our analytical strategy, therefore, employs structured descriptive comparison guided by three evaluative dimensions.

Magnitude: Are differences substantively large enough to be politically meaningful? Following established practice in cleavage research,[57] we use a threshold of approximately 10 percentage points as indicating meaningful group differentiation, though we interpret magnitudes contextually rather than mechanically.

Consistency: Do observed patterns hold across multiple conceptually related indicators, or are they isolated, inconsistent, and item-specific? A robust cleavage should produce coherent gradients across families of related attitudes.[58]

Relative strength: Are partisan gradients larger than, comparable to, or smaller than socio-demographic gradients such as age and education? If socio-demographic divisions systematically exceed partisan ones, this indicates that value conflicts remain socially structured but politically untranslated – which is central to our argument.

Assessing partisan differentiation

For a value divide to support stable culture-war competition, partisan differences must be substantively large (not merely statistically detectable but large enough to define distinct electoral constituencies), consistent across multiple indicators (not confined to one or two isolated items), and at least comparable in magnitude to major social divisions (otherwise party vote adds little to what demographics already predict).

If, by contrast, age or education consistently produces larger gaps than party vote across multiple domains, this demonstrates that the value divide is present in society but not structured into party competition. This is the core empirical pattern we seek to establish.

Analytical workflow

In practical terms, the analysis proceeds in three stages. First, the descriptive sections map the hierarchy of everyday priorities, personal virtues, social distance, moral permissiveness, and family norms, establishing the overall structure of Albanian value orientations and identifying where the sharpest moral boundaries are drawn. Second, the analysis compares marginal gradients across age, education, urban–rural residence, and party vote to determine which categories produce the strongest and most consistent differentiation. Third, the partisan-differentiation section synthesizes these patterns across domains to assess whether partisan differentiation is large, consistent, and comparable to socio-demographic gradients, or whether it remains weak and secondary.

Because the data are weighted aggregate tabulations rather than respondent-level microdata, the analysis cannot estimate interaction effects or true within-group partisan differences. The comparison, therefore, remains at the level of marginal distributions across age, education, urbanization, and party vote. This approach prioritizes pattern recognition over causal decomposition, which is appropriate given both the data structure and the theoretical question. The article seeks to establish whether Albania's progressive–traditional divide has crystallized into partisan blocs – a question about manifest political structuring rather than latent individual-level causation.[59] For that purpose, a systematic comparison of weighted marginal distributions is sufficient to assess whether party electorates display large and consistent value differences.

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[57] Knutsen, Oddbjørn. 2006. *Class voting in Western Europe: A comparative longitudinal study*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books; Elff, Martin. 2007. Social structure and electoral behavior in comparative perspective: The decline of social cleavages in Western Europe revisited. *Perspectives on Politics* 5(2), 277–294.

[58] Knutsen, Oddbjørn, and Elinor Scarbrough. 1995. Cleavage politics, in *The impact of values*, edited by Jan van Deth and Elinor Scarbrough. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 492–523.

[59] Bartolini and Mair, *Identity, competition, and electoral availability*; Enyedi, *The social and attitudinal basis*.

Scope and limitations

This strategy has clear limitations, which should be stated explicitly. Because the article does not rely on respondent-level microdata, it cannot test net effects, model interactions, or distinguish cleanly between cohort, compositional, and contextual mechanisms. The findings should therefore not be interpreted as demonstrating causal relationships between social characteristics and moral attitudes. They show patterned associations at the level of weighted group distributions.

This limitation does not invalidate the contribution. The question concerns whether divisions are structured and aligned partisanship enough to support a durable cleavage, for which aggregate distributions remain informative.[60] If electorates appear similar while socio-demographic gradients are pronounced, this suffices to show weak partisan translation.

Empirical expectations

The analytical strategy is guided by the theoretical expectations developed in the previous section. If Albania lacks a stable culture-war cleavage despite visible public controversy, three empirical patterns should appear.

First, restrictive attitudes toward sexuality and heteronormative family norms should be socially broad rather than concentrated within a single major electoral bloc. Second, the clearest gradients should run across generation, education, and, to a lesser extent, urbanization rather than party vote. Third, differences between the electorates of the main parties should remain flatter and less systematic than socio-demographic contrasts. The empirical sections that follow examine these expectations across the domains of everyday priorities, social distance, moral permissiveness, and family norms.

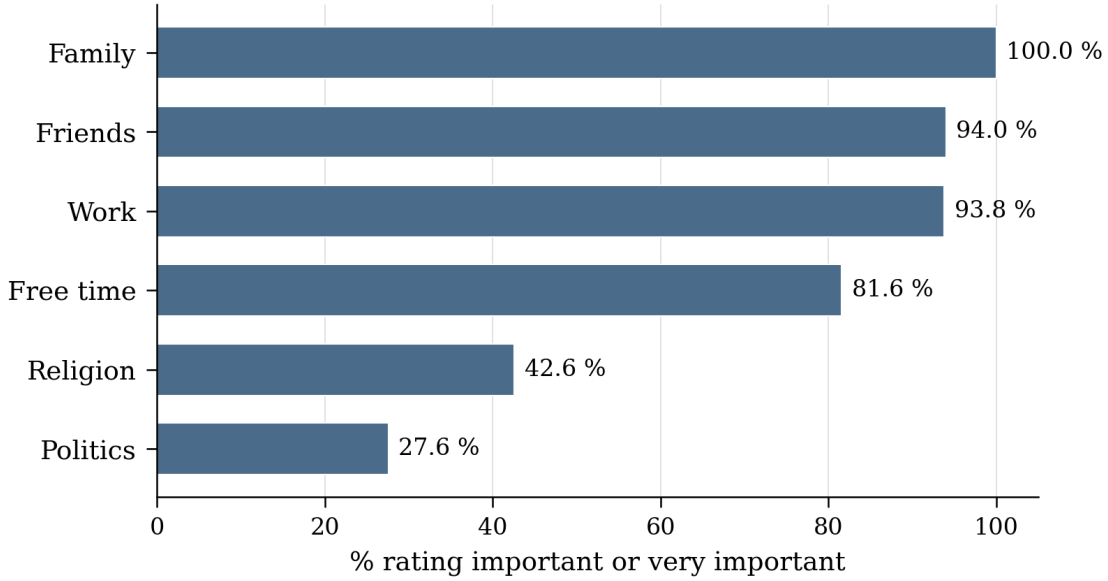
Empirical findings

The familistic core: everyday priorities and the weak place of politics

The first set of findings establishes the broader moral and social context within which value conflict in Albania must be understood. The survey reveals a highly stable hierarchy of everyday priorities, with family occupying an overwhelmingly dominant position across all major social categories. Virtually all respondents across all demographic and partisan groups rate family as important or very important in their lives. This unanimity shows no meaningful variation by gender, age, education, region, income, or party vote. Family, therefore, appears not simply as one value among others, but as the central normative anchor of everyday life.[61] This finding directly confirms the familistic social structure theorized earlier.

[60] Knutsen, *Class voting in Western Europe*; Elff, *Social structure and electoral behavior*.
[61] Reher, *Family ties in Western Europe*; Dalla Zuanna and Micheli, *Strong family and low fertility*.

Figure 1: Family, work, and friends dominate everyday priorities, while politics remains peripheral



Source: Own illustration based on Euronews Albania Barometer (2023–2024).

Immediately below family, work and friends follow closely, with 93.8% and 94.0%, respectively, rating them as important or very important. Their consistently high salience across groups suggests that Albanian society remains organized around a dense relational and duty-based core in which family ties, close social networks, and work-related obligations are treated as the main sources of meaning, security, and social worth.[62] Work is valued across employment categories, functioning as a moral ideal rather than merely reflecting labor-market position.[63]

The hierarchy of life domains thus points toward a social order structured less by public ideology or political mobilization than by family-centered and relational forms of everyday orientation. This has important implications for the potential emergence of culture-war politics, since politically mobilized value conflicts typically require some degree of salience for public and ideological domains.[64]

Free time occupies an intermediate position. It is widely valued—typically cited as important by 81.6 % of respondents – but clearly ranks below family, friends, and work. Politics and religion, by contrast, are distinctly less central to everyday life. Politics is especially marginal: only a minority of respondents (typically 20–35%) consider it important or very important, while religion occupies a somewhat stronger but still secondary position (typically 40–55%). Taken together, these distributions portray a society in which the meaningful core of life remains concentrated in the private and relational sphere rather than the public or ideological one.

This matters directly: cleavages require organizational carriers and politically salient identities.[65] Where politics ranks low in everyday priorities, conditions for mobilizing value conflicts are fundamentally weakened. Albania thus lacks the kind of strongly politicized everyday value environment in which cultural conflict would easily crystallize into a stable axis of party competition.[66]

[62] Schwandner-Sievers and Fischer, *Albanian identities*.
[63] Verdery, Katherine. 1996. *What was socialism, and what comes next?* Princeton: Princeton University Press; Stenning, Alison / Smith, Adrian / Rochovská, Alena, and Dariusz Świątek. 2010. *Domesticating neo-liberalism: Spaces of economic practice and social reproduction in post-socialist cities*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
[64] Hunter, *Culture wars*; Layman, *The great divide*.
[65] Bartolini and Mair, *Identity, competition, and electoral availability*, 220.
[66] Kriesi et al., *West European politics*; Bornschier, *Cleavage politics and the populist*.

At the same time, this hierarchy is not entirely static. The clearest differences emerge across age and education, precisely as the second expectation predicted. Younger respondents (18–29 years) are substantially more likely to prioritize free time and less likely to attach strong importance to religion compared to older cohorts (60+ years). The religious salience gradient is more moderate, ranging from 34.9% among those aged 25–34 to 51.3% among those aged 55–64. Higher education points in a similar direction: respondents with university education tend to value free time somewhat more and religion somewhat less than those with primary or secondary education only. Urban respondents also display a slightly more secular and leisure-oriented profile than rural respondents, though this gradient is smaller than that for age and education.

These differences suggest modest liberalization among younger and educated Albanians, consistent with generational value change in post-communist societies,[67] yet without altering the hierarchy's broader structure. Family and work remain dominant across all groups – young and old, educated and less educated, urban and rural. The observed pattern thus represents recalibration within a stable familistic framework rather than a sharp value realignment or the emergence of anti-familistic counter-cultures.[68]

Most importantly for the article's central argument, these life priorities do not map strongly onto party electorates. Supporters of the PS, the PD, and its coalition allies (PD+), and other parties all share the same broad ordering of domains: family first, followed by work and friends, with politics and religion remaining secondary. Opposition voters are somewhat more politically attentive,[69] and non-voters least engaged, but variations are modest relative to consensus and far smaller than generational gradients.

Even religion – which might plausibly differentiate a progressive from a conservative bloc if such a cleavage were emerging[70] – fails to separate the main party electorates in any substantial way. PS and PD+ voters display nearly identical levels of religious salience, and the small differences that do appear are inconsistent across categories and far smaller than the age gradient.

The evidence, therefore, points to a common familistic core that cuts across partisan lines, directly confirming the first expectation (broad conservatism) and the third (weak partisan structuring). Albanian party electorates are not differentiated by fundamentally distinct everyday value orientations. Instead, they share a relational, family-centered, work-oriented moral framework within which partisan differences remain secondary.

This finding establishes the structure within which later conflicts must be interpreted: Albanian society is organized around family, work, and close ties, with politics peripheral. That combination helps explain why public rhetoric around values may become visible and intense without necessarily being rooted in sharply differentiated partisan worlds.[71] The private moral core is strong and widely shared; the partisan translation of that core is much weaker. Social similarity across electorates reduces incentives to mobilize cultural conflicts,[72] making familistic consensus a strategic constraint on culture-war mobilization.[73]

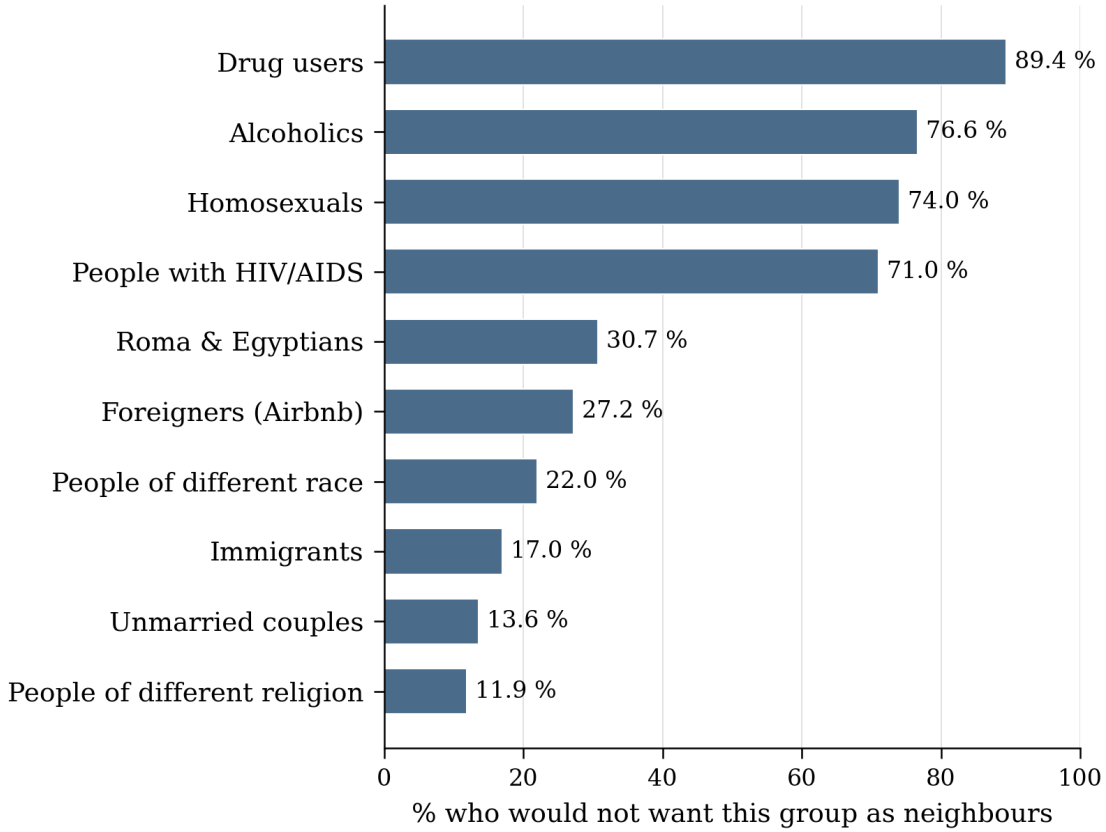
Moral boundaries in Albania: Respectability, sexuality, and social distance

If the hierarchy of everyday priorities establishes the familistic core of Albanian society, the next set of findings shows where the boundaries of that moral world are drawn. The survey data reveal

[67] Inglehart and Welzel, *Modernization, cultural change, and democracy*; Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural backlash*.
[68] Reher, *Family ties in Western Europe*, 228.
[69] Anderson, Christopher J., and Christine A. Guillory. 1997. Political institutions and satisfaction with democracy: A cross-national analysis of consensus and majoritarian systems. *American Political Science Review* 91(1), 66–81.
[70] Layman, *The great divide*; Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. 2004. *Sacred and secular: Religion and politics worldwide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[71] Zaller, John R. 1992. *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[72] Enyedi, *The social and attitudinal basis*, 295.
[73] Riker, *The art of political manipulation*.

that Albanian society is not characterized by diffuse permissiveness or generalized acceptance of difference. Instead, respondents draw clear lines between socially acceptable and unacceptable identities, practices, and lifestyles.[74] These lines are especially sharp where questions of respectability, bodily discipline, and sexuality are concerned. This matters for the argument of the article because it demonstrates that the social raw material for moral conflict is clearly present, even if it does not crystallize into a stable axis of party competition – precisely the pattern theorized earlier as "moral boundaries without culture-war polarization."

Figure 2: Social exclusion is strongest around respectability and sexuality: percentage of respondents who would not want selected groups as neighbors



Source: Own illustration based on Euronews Albania Barometer (2023–2024).

The strongest rejection is directed at groups associated with disorder, dependence, or moral degradation, especially drug users (rejected by approximately 89.4 % of respondents) and alcoholics (76.6 %). This indicates Albanian moral evaluation remains organized around self-control, social order, and respectability – characteristic of societies where weak institutional capacity makes informal sanctions crucial.[75]

Yet the data also show that sexuality constitutes one of the strongest lines of exclusion. Homosexuals are rejected as potential neighbors by approximately 74 % of respondents, placing them among the most rejected categories, below drug users but close to alcoholics and people with AIDS. By contrast, rejection of people of another religion (typically 11.9%), people of another race (22%), or immigrants (17%) is substantially lower.

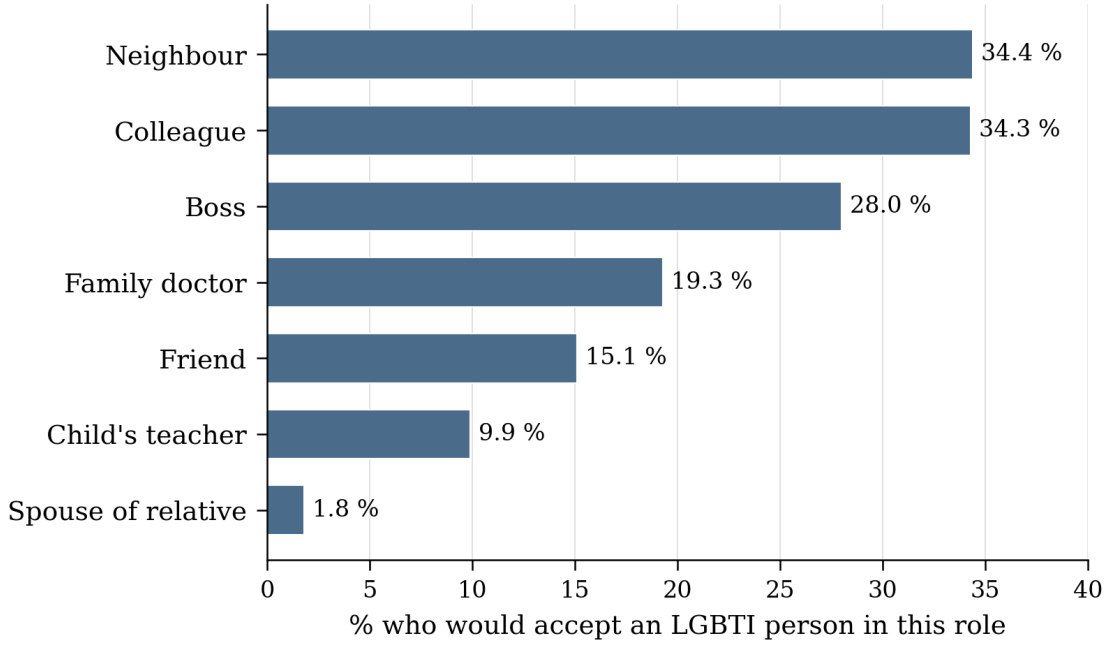
In substantive terms, this suggests that the strongest symbolic boundaries in Albanian society are not distributed evenly across all forms of difference. They are concentrated especially around conduct, sexuality, and particular stigmatized social statuses rather than around religious or

[74] Lamont, *Money, morals, and manners*; Lamont and Molnár, *The study of boundaries*.
[75] Elster, Jon / Offe, Claus, and Ulrich K. Preuss. 1998. *Institutional design in post-communist societies: Rebuilding the ship at sea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; De Waal, *Albania today*.

ethnic pluralism per se. This contrasts with neighboring Balkans, where religious/ethnonational boundaries structure communities more sharply.[76]

This distinction is analytically important. It means that Albania should not be described simply as a generally exclusionary society in every dimension. The pattern is more specific. Social difference is not rejected uniformly; rather, exclusion is strongest where respondents perceive threats to moral order, family integrity, and social respectability.[77] The Albanian moral community remains structured around familistic and heteronormative assumptions,[78] shaping where boundaries activate under threat.[79]

Figure 3: Acceptance of LGBTI people declines as social intimacy increases



Source: Own illustration based on Euronews Albania Barometer (2023–2024).

The LGBTI-specific items sharpen this conclusion further. When respondents are asked whether they would accept an LGBTI person in a range of different social roles, the pattern is not flat but strongly graduated by intimacy. Acceptance is relatively higher in less intimate roles, such as neighbor (34.4%), colleague (34.3%), or boss (28%). Acceptance drops to approximately 15.1 % for a friend, 9.9% for a child's teacher, and falls to only 1.8 % when the LGBTI person is imagined as the spouse of a close relative. This produces what may be called a gradient of intimacy:[80] the closer the relationship to the familial core, the stronger the rejection.

In this familistic setting, the symbolic integrity of the family itself is defended.[81] Where family functions as the primary unit of trust and welfare,[82] threats to heteronormative structure threaten social security itself. This gradient clarifies why sexuality issues occupy such a sensitive place despite weak partisan mobilization: difference crossing into the intimate family sphere challenges inherited norms of kinship, parenthood, and respectability.[83] Public debate around LGBTI rights

[76] Bieber, Florian. 2018. Patterns of competitive authoritarianism in the Western Balkans. *East European Politics* 34(3), 337–354; Elbasani and Roy, *Islam in the post-communist Balkans*.
[77] Douglas, Mary. 1966. *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Lamont, *Money, morals, and manners*.
[78] Reher, *Family ties in Western Europe*.
[79] Lamont and Molnár, *The study of boundaries*, 169.
[80] Parrillo, Vincent N., and Christopher Donoghue. 2005. Updating the Bogardus social distance studies: A new national survey. *The Social Science Journal* 42(2), 257–271.
[81] Douglas, *Purity and danger*; Reher, *Family ties in Western Europe*.
[82] Elbasani, *European integration and transformation*.
[83] Ayoub, *When states come out*; O'Dwyer, *Coming out of communism*.

becomes rhetorically charged despite the absence of partisan cleavage because these issues touch the most protected moral zone.[84] Yet such resonance alone does not translate into stable cleavage formation without organizational carriers and elite mobilization.[85]

At the same time, the survey also shows that these moral boundaries are not entirely fixed. Age is the clearest line of differentiation, precisely as the second expectation predicted. Younger respondents (18–29 years) are distinctly less rejecting than older respondents (60+ years) across multiple LGBTI-related indicators. The intergenerational gap in acceptance of homosexual neighbors typically ranges from 15 to 25 percentage points, with similar or larger gaps for more intimate roles. Education shows a parallel gradient: university-educated respondents display systematically higher acceptance than those with primary education only, with gaps of 10–20 percentage points depending on the specific item. Urban respondents are somewhat more accepting than rural respondents, though this gradient is smaller and less consistent than those for age and education.

Yet this opening should not be overstated. Even among younger respondents, acceptance remains limited: 46.9% of those aged 18–24 and 48.0% of those aged 25–34 accept an LGBTI person as a neighbor, but only 1.4% and 3.1% respectively accept marriage into the close family circle. The evidence points not to a fully emergent liberal bloc but to partial attenuation within a broadly conservative framework.[86] Crucially, party vote shows far weaker differentiation than age or education, directly confirming the third expectation. Supporters of the Democratic Party (PD+) appear somewhat more exclusive than supporters of the Socialist Party (PS) on some measures—for example, PD+ voters are only around four percentage points less likely than PS voters to accept an LGBTI person as a neighbor. But this difference remains one of degree rather than of moral polarization. Large majorities in both major electorates continue to express discomfort with homosexuality in intimate roles. More than 90% of both major electorates reject the idea of an LGBTI person marrying into the close family circle, while rejection of homosexual neighbors also remains high across both camps. These figures stand in sharp contrast to consolidated culture-war systems where partisan differences on such items often exceed 30–40 percentage points.[87]

In that sense, the strongest moral boundaries in the data cut more clearly through society than between parties. The gradient of age typically exceeds the gradient of party vote by a factor of two to three on comparable items. This directly confirms the article's central claim: moral conservatism is socially broad-based rather than partisanly concentrated (Expectation 1), liberalization follows socio-demographic rather than partisan lines (Expectation 2), and partisan differences remain flatter and less systematic than socio-demographic ones (Expectation 3).

These findings support two conclusions. First, Albania retains clear symbolic boundaries around sexuality and family, structured by familistic logic and respectability concerns. Second, these boundaries are socially real but weakly partisan. The survey confirms that moral content associated with 'culture-war' politics is present but broad-based, familially structured, and insufficiently aligned with electorates to produce a stable cleavage[88]—the pattern theorized earlier as 'moral conservatism without culture-war competition.'

Selective liberalization: generation, education, and uneven value change

The previous section demonstrated that Albanian society retains clear symbolic boundaries, especially around sexuality and the family. Yet the data also indicate that these boundaries are not entirely fixed. Change is visible, but it is uneven, partial, and socially concentrated rather than

[84] Douglas, *Purity and danger*.
[85] Bartolini and Mair, *Identity, competition, and electoral availability*; Kriesi et al., *West European politics*.
[86] Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural backlash*.
[87] Layman, *The great divide*; Baldassarri and Park, *Was there a culture war*.
[88] Bartolini and Mair, *Identity, competition, and electoral availability*; Bornschier, *Cleavage politics and the populist*.

bloc-forming. This section argues that Albania is best understood not as a society divided into two fully consolidated moral camps, but as one undergoing selective liberalization: some dimensions of private life change have been normalized, while others remain strongly bounded by familistic and heteronormative assumptions.[89] As theorized earlier, the clearest lines of movement run by generation and education rather than by party vote (Expectation 2).

Personal virtues: relational duty with modest autonomy shifts

The dominant moral profile remains strongly relational and duty-oriented. Good behavior (69.7%), responsibility (54.9%), tolerance (43.4%), and hard work (41.3%) rank highest in the hierarchy, while imagination (5.4%) and religiosity (4.4%) remain less central. The morally valued person is imagined as socially respectful, responsible, and well-behaved – consistent with societies where social capital depends on reputation and informal networks.[90] This aligns with research showing societies with weak institutions prioritize conformity and relational harmony over self-expression.[91] Yet the Albanian data reveal modest shifts. The clearest generational difference appears in tolerance and respect for others rather than in independence, which remains relatively stable across age groups: 51.3 % of respondents aged 18–24 select this quality, compared with 33.3 % among those aged 65–75. Respondents with higher education are more likely to value tolerance and respect for others, with noticeable but variable differences compared to those with primary education only.

These changes signal movement within the moral order: younger and educated Albanians orient toward autonomy and pluralism without abandoning duty and responsibility. This corresponds to Inglehart and Welzel's[92] 'emancipative values' – gradual shifts through generational replacement rather than ideological conversion. These shifts remain socio-demographic rather than partisan (Expectation 2). PS and PD+ voters show broadly similar distributions on most personal virtues, while the clearest differences appear across education and age, especially regarding tolerance, responsibility, and obedience.

Moral permissiveness: normalized heterosexual change, persistent homosexual stigma

The same logic is visible in the moral permissiveness items, which ask respondents to rate the justifiability of various behaviors on a 1–10 scale (1 = never justifiable, 10 = always justifiable). The justifiability scales reveal strong consensus against corruption, bribery, tax evasion, and domestic violence (mean scores < 2.5), indicating the moral economy remains highly restrictive regarding public wrongdoing.[93] Albanian moral boundaries around civic duty remain intact despite weak institutional enforcement.

But on questions related to sexuality and family life, the pattern is more differentiated. Divorce (mean score approximately 5.76) and premarital sex (mean approximately 6.21) are comparatively normalized, suggesting that major aspects of heterosexual private-life change have already been absorbed into mainstream moral understanding. Casual sex occupies an intermediate position (mean 4.01), indicating ambivalence. Abortion is more restrictive (mean 3.40), reflecting Catholic and Muslim conservative traditions.[94] Homosexuality remains heavily stigmatized (mean 2.59)—closer to bribery (2.24) than to divorce or premarital sex.

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[89] Reher, *Family ties in Western Europe*; Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural backlash*.

[90] Coleman, James S. 1988. Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology* 94(1), 95–120; De Waal, *Albania today*.

[91] Schwartz, Shalom H. 2006. A theory of cultural value orientations: Explication and applications. *Comparative Sociology* 5(2–3), 137–182; Inglehart and Welzel, *Modernization, cultural change, and democracy*.

[92] Inglehart and Welzel, *Modernization, cultural change, and democracy*.

[93] Rose-Ackerman, Susan. 1999. *Corruption and government: Causes, consequences, and reform*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Uslaner, Eric M. 2008. *Corruption, inequality, and the rule of law: The bulging pocket makes the easy life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[94] Elbasani and Roy, *Islam in the post-communist Balkans*.

Table 1: Albania combines selective liberalization with persistent heteronormative conservatism

Item	Mean score (1–10)	Interpretation
Premarital sex	6.21	Largely normalized
Divorce	5.76	Moderately normalized
Casual sex	4.01	Contested middle ground
Abortion	3.40	More restrictive
Homosexuality	2.59	Strongly stigmatized
Bribery	2.24	Strongly rejected
Tax evasion	2.03	Strongly rejected
Husband hitting wife	1.73	Strongly rejected

Source: Own elaboration based on Euronews Albania Barometer (2023–2024).

This shows liberalization is selective: Albanian society accepts certain heterosexual choices while resisting departures from heteronormative family structure.[95] Sexual liberalization proceeds along a 'heteronormative gradient' – tolerance for non-marital heterosexual behavior but persistent rejection of same-sex sexuality.[96]

Theoretically, this selectivity reflects the familistic moral logic theorized earlier. Where the family functions as the primary unit of trust, welfare, and social reproduction, practices that can be assimilated into eventual family formation (premarital sex, divorce followed by remarriage) become tolerable, while those perceived as threatening heteronormative reproduction (homosexuality, permanent singlehood) remain stigmatized.[97] As Douglas[98] argues, moral systems organize pollution boundaries not randomly but around perceived threats to foundational institutions – in Albania's case, the heteronormative family.

Family norms: pronatalist and heteronormative consensus

Table 2: Family norms remain heteronormative and pronatalist

Family norm item	% Agree	Interpretation
Child needs both mother and father	94.2 %	Near-consensual heteronormative ideal
Woman must have children to be fulfilled	57.3 %	Pronatalist norm remains strong

Source: Own elaboration based on Euronews Albania Barometer (2023–2024).

The family-norm items reinforce this conclusion. Agreement that a child needs both a mother and a father is overwhelming (94.2%), with little variation across groups. Even among the youngest (18–29 years), agreement exceeds 85%; among university-educated, it remains above 90%. Heteronormative family ideology remains broadly hegemonic across Albanian society.[99]

Motherhood also remains central to dominant understandings of female fulfillment, with a clear majority (57.3 %) agreeing that a woman must have children to be fully fulfilled. This pronatalist norm shows more variation than the two-parent ideal. The clearest differences appear across age and education: agreement falls to 41.8% among those aged 18–24 and to 50.3% among university-educated respondents, while remaining substantially higher among older and less-educated

[95] Welzel, Christian. 2013. *Freedom rising: Human empowerment and the quest for emancipation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Hadler, Markus. 2012. The influence of world societal forces on social tolerance: A time cross-national analysis, 1981–2008. *British Journal of Sociology* 63(3), 415–432.

[96] Kunovich, Robert M., and Sheri Kunovich. 2008. Gender dependence and attitudes toward the distribution of household labor: A comparative and multilevel analysis. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 49(5), 395–427; Štulhofer, Aleksandar, and Ivan Rimac. 2009. Determinants of homonegativity in Europe. *Journal of Sex Research* 46(1), 24–32.

[97] Reher, *Family ties in Western Europe*; Dalla Zuanna and Micheli, *Strong family and low fertility*.

[98] Douglas, *Purity and danger*.

[99] Lamont, *Money, morals, and manners*.

groups. Urban respondents are also slightly less likely to agree than rural ones. Despite this variation, the norm remains widespread across all major social and partisan categories.

The normative family ideal remains strongly pronatalist and heteronormative, yet coexists with normalized divorce and premarital sex. The result is selective moral adaptation: private heterosexual behavior has become flexible, while boundaries around parenthood and sexual identity remain rigid.[100] Albania occupies an intermediate position between Western European comprehensive liberalization and consistently conservative societies, characterized by asymmetrical change.[101]

Socio-demographic gradients dominate; partisan differences remain weak

The clearest gradients within this pattern are generational and educational, precisely as the second expectation predicted. Younger respondents are consistently more open on sexuality-related items, especially LGBTI social acceptance, where age gaps are often substantial. Higher education is associated with greater tolerance, with noticeable differences compared to lower education groups.

Urban–rural differences exist but are milder than the effects of age and education. Urban respondents are somewhat more liberal, though this gradient is generally weaker than those associated with age and education. Gender differences are small on most items, reflecting gendered double standards rather than fundamental divergence.[102] These gradients should not be overstated. Even among younger respondents, liberalization remains partial. Mean scores on homosexuality among younger respondents remain low, at approximately 3.25 on the 1–10 scale. The data reveal limited softening within a broadly conservative environment.[103]

Most critically, partisan differences remain weak and inconsistent (Expectation 3). PS voters are marginally more permissive across several items, including premarital sex, divorce, and homosexuality, but these differences remain small and inconsistent compared to socio-demographic gradients. The available marginal distributions indicate that generational differences are substantially larger than partisan differences. This stands in sharp contrast to consolidated culture-war systems. In the United States, partisan differences on homosexuality acceptance exceed 30 percentage points and have grown consistently since the 1990s.[104] In Poland, PiS and PO voters differ by 40+ percentage points on whether homosexuality should be socially accepted.[105] In Albania, by contrast, the gap between major party electorates remains too small and inconsistent to sustain a durable culture-war cleavage.[106]

Selective liberalization without value-bloc formation

A society experiencing selective liberalization differs from one divided into organized value blocs.[107] In Albania, gradual change occurs without full social realignment.[108] Strongest contrasts run between age and education groups rather than partisan camps, explaining why moral issues can be socially sensitive yet politically unstable.[109]

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[100] Lesthaeghe, Ron. 2010. The unfolding story of the second demographic transition. *Population and Development Review* 36(2), 211–251; Van de Kaa, Dirk J. 2001. Postmodern fertility preferences: From changing value orientation to new behaviour. *Population and Development Review* 27(Supplement), 290–331.
[101] Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural backlash*.
[102] Bourdieu, Pierre. 2001. *Masculine domination*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
[103] Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural backlash*, 395-402.
[104] Layman, *The great divide*; Baldassarri and Park, *Was there a culture war*.
[105] Markowski, Radoslaw. 2006. The Polish elections of 2005: Pure chaos or a restructuring of the party system? *West European Politics* 29(4), 814–832; Stanley, Ben. 2016. Confrontation by default and confrontation by design: Strategic and institutional responses to Poland's populist coalition government. *Democratization* 23(2), 263–282.
[106] Bartolini and Mair, *Identity, competition, and electoral availability*; Bornschier, *Cleavage politics and the populist*.
[107] Fiorina et al., *Culture war*.
[108] Inglehart and Welzel, *Modernization, cultural change, and democracy*.
[109] Kriesi et al., *West European politics*; Bornschier, *Cleavage politics and the populist*.

Albania's value landscape is characterized by asymmetrical transition rather than polarization.[110] The familistic moral core remains strong; heteronormative assumptions remain shared; and openings toward permissiveness concentrate in specific strata (younger, educated, urban) rather than crystallized political blocs. This confirms the theoretical framework: Albania exhibits moral boundaries without culture-war polarization, value change without partisan translation, and broad conservatism with weak structuring.

The next section examines whether moral differences translate into party support patterns. The argument, confirmed by evidence, is that they do not: main gradients remain socio-demographic, while partisan differentiation stays weak and insufficient to sustain a stable culture-war cleavage.

Why there is no stable culture-war cleavage: Weak partisan differentiation

The central claim is not that Albania lacks moral conservatism – previous sections demonstrate the opposite. Rather, these moral differences are only weakly translated into party competition. Across all examined domains—everyday priorities, personal virtues, social distance, and family norms – the most systematic contrasts run by generation and education rather than party vote (confirming Expectations 2 and 3). This is why value conflict can be socially real without becoming a durable electoral cleavage.[111]

Evidence for weak partisan differentiation appears consistently across domains. Supporters of the Socialist Party (PS), Democratic Party (PD+), and other parties share the same broad ordering of everyday priorities: family first, work and friends second, politics and religion tertiary. Some intensity differences exist—opposition voters are somewhat more politicized[112] – but these do not constitute the substantive value contrasts that underpin stable culture-war alignments.[113] Personal virtues show the same pattern: both major party electorates value good behavior, responsibility, and tolerance similarly. If a durable progressive-versus-traditional cleavage were emerging, one would expect clearer divergence precisely on such core moral orientations.[114] The data do not show this.

Sexuality and family items reveal the same logic. PD+ voters are somewhat more restrictive than PS voters on some LGBTI-related questions, but the differences are usually small, around 4 percentage points on neighbor-related items, and do not produce clearly opposed moral blocs (Expectation 3). On key indicators, large majorities of both electorates express discomfort with homosexuality in intimate roles (more than 90 % reject the idea of an LGBTI person marrying into the close family circle), and broad support for heteronormative family ideals cuts across party lines (90+ % agreement that children need both mother and father). In substantive terms, relevant moral conservatism is not owned by one partisan camp against another – it is socially widespread, with variation in degree rather than polarization in kind. That is the crucial distinction. A broad conservative baseline does not automatically generate a conservative political cleavage if major electorates share it.[115]

Table 3: Socio-demographic gradients systematically exceed partisan ones across moral domains

Domain	Strongest descriptive gradient	Partisan gradient	Interpretation
Free time priority	Age: about 25 pp	PS–PD+: about 4–5 pp	Younger cohorts value free time more
Religious salience	Age: about 16 pp; education: about 14 pp	PS–PD+: about 1 pp	Religion does not separate electorates

[110] Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural backlash*.
[111] Bartolini and Mair, *Identity, competition, and electoral availability*; Bornschier, *Cleavage politics and the populist*.
[112] Anderson and Guillory, *Political institutions and satisfaction*.
[113] Layman, *The great divide*; Hunter, *Culture wars*.
[114] Kitschelt, *The transformation of European social*; Kriesi et al., *West European politics*.
[115] Baldassarri and Park, *Was there a culture war*; Fiorina et al., *Culture war*.

Domain	Strongest descriptive gradient	Partisan gradient	Interpretation
Tolerance/respect as virtue	Age: about 18 pp; education: about 16 pp	PS–PD+: about 4 pp	Social gradients exceed partisan ones
Reject homosexual neighbour	Age: about 29 pp; education: about 16 pp	PS–PD+: about 4 pp	Conservatism broad-based, not partisan
Accept LGBTI neighbour	Education: about 34 pp; age: about 35 pp	PS–PD+: about 4 pp	Acceptance varies socially, weakly by party
Accept LGBTI marriage into close family	Very low across all groups	PS–PD+: about 2 pp	Near-universal family boundary
Child needs mother and father	Minimal variation	PS–PD+: below 1 pp	Near-consensual heteronormative ideal
Woman must have children	Education: about 22 pp; age: about 25 pp	PS–PD+: about 3 pp	Pronatalism varies socially, weakly by party

Source: Own elaboration based on Euronews Albania Barometer (2023–2024). Note: pp = percentage points. Gradients represent typical differences between marginal weighted distributions, not interaction models or respondent-level regression. They indicate descriptive differences across categories rather than net causal effects.

The decisive question is whether partisan differences are stronger than socio-demographic gradients.[116] The answer is no. Age and education produce clearer differentiation than party vote. Party differences are flatter, less systematic, and inconsistent. In this sense, the Albanian case is characterized by high moral salience but low partisan structuring.

This weak partisan translation explains strategic choices.[117] The PS cannot easily transform gender equality or LGBTI rights into a progressive project, given its non-uniformly liberal electorate. Its rational strategy is selective adaptation: accommodating EU reforms while framing them as institutional obligations rather than partisan identity.[118] The opposition faces similar limits given insufficiently polarized electorates. Even when moral discourse is available, its capacity to stabilize into cleavage remains weak.[119]

Albania should not be described as a "fake" culture war – the data demonstrate underlying moral concerns are real. What is missing is partisan crystallization, not social content.[120] Moral conflict exists, but it is not aligned with party competition strongly enough to structure a stable frontier. Public rhetoric can become intense when reforms appear externally encouraged,[121] but attitudes remain too broad and weakly partisan to sustain an institutionalized culture-war axis.[122]

The Albanian case demonstrates that moral conservatism alone does not produce culture-war politics.[123] For that, differences must link to durable party identities and distinct electoral constituencies.[124] Albania displays instead a familistic conservative core, partial liberalization in specific strata, and a party system organized around leadership, incumbency, and patronage rather than moral blocs.[125] This explains why public controversy is visible but unstable – the central puzzle.

Discussion: Moral conservatism without culture-war competition

The findings allow a clearer interpretation of the Albanian case than the language of "culture war" usually permits. Albania is neither a society without moral conflict nor one where value questions

[116] Knutsen and Scarbrough, *Cleavage politics, in The impact*; Elff, *Social structure and electoral behavior*.
[117] Enyedi, *The social and attitudinal basis*; Riker, *The art of political manipulation*.
[118] Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, *Introduction*; Elbasani, *European integration and transformation*.
[119] Kriesi et al., *West European politics*; Bornschier, *Cleavage politics and the populist*.
[120] Lamont and Molnár, *The study of boundaries*.
[121] Ayoub, *When states come out*; O'Dwyer, *Coming out of communism*.
[122] Bartolini and Mair, *Identity, competition, and electoral availability*, 215-220.
[123] Fiorina et al., *Culture war*; Baldassarri and Park, *Was there a culture war*.
[124] Bartolini and Mair, *Identity, competition, and electoral availability*; Enyedi, *The social and attitudinal basis*.
[125] Kajsiu, *Down with politics*; Elbasani, *European integration and transformation*.

are politically irrelevant. The evidence points instead to a specific configuration: a strongly familistic social order, persistent heteronormative moral boundaries, modest generational and educational opening, and weak partisan translation of these differences.[126] This combination explains why issues related to family, gender, sexuality, and "European values" can become publicly salient without stabilizing into a durable electoral cleavage.[127]

Two main implications follow. First, Albania is not divided into coherent moral camps.[128] Family, work, and close ties remain central; politics remains secondary; religion does not function as a partisan divider. Yet clear boundaries persist around sexuality and non-traditional forms,[129] coexisting with selective liberalization on divorce and premarital sex among younger and educated respondents.[130] What emerges is asymmetrical change within a conservative framework. This confirms that classical Lipset–Rokkan expectations travel poorly where communist rule interrupted historical carriers,[131] yet path-dependence alone is insufficient after three decades.[132] Leadership, incumbency, and clientelism structure competition more immediately than stable moral frontiers[133] – illustrating weakly institutionalized competition where parties operate in a conservative environment without converting it into a culture-war axis.[134]

Second, regarding party strategy: the absence of stable culture-war cleavage stems from insufficient partisan alignment to make issues electorally usable.[135] The PS cannot articulate an openly progressive project given its non-uniformly liberal electorate; the opposition faces similar limits. Parties handle issues selectively and instrumentally,[136] absorbing reforms through Europeanization language[137] while rhetoric intensifies episodically without bloc formation.[138]

This explains the motivating paradox. Value-laden issues like gender–family issues, same-sex marriage, or LGBTI rights may be publicly visible, rhetorically intense, and emotionally charged, especially when framed as externally promoted.[139] For a durable culture-war axis to emerge, social differences must align with party identities, organizational strategies, and relatively distinct electoral constituencies.[140] Albania displays discursive visibility without partisan crystallization.

The Albanian case thus contributes a broader comparative insight: moral conservatism alone does not generate culture-war politics.[141] What matters is whether moral differences become politically structured in ways that enable parties to repeatedly mobilize, institutionalize, and reproduce them.[142] In contexts where competition is organized more by leadership, incumbency, clientelism, and state access than by stable ideological blocs,[143] even socially meaningful moral conflict may remain weakly translated. Albania is therefore important not because it fits a classical polarization model, but because it shows conditions under which such polarization fails to consolidate.

This analysis has clear limitations. Relying on weighted aggregate tabulations rather than microdata, it cannot establish independent causal effects or model interactions between age,

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[126] Bartolini and Mair, *Identity, competition, and electoral availability*; Bornschier, *Cleavage politics and the populist*.
[127] Kriesi et al., *West European politics*.
[128] Fiorina et al., *Culture war*.
[129] Lamont, *Money, morals, and manners*; Douglas, *Purity and danger*.
[130] Inglehart and Welzel, *Modernization, cultural change, and democracy*; Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural backlash*.
[131] Kitschelt et al., *Post-communist party systems*; Evans and Whitefield, *Identifying the bases of party*.
[132] Pop-Eleches and Tucker, *Communism's shadow*.
[133] Kajsiu, *Down with politics*; Elbasani, *European integration and transformation*.
[134] Enyedi, *The role of agency*; Tavits, *The development of stable party*.
[135] Enyedi, *The social and attitudinal basis*; Riker, *The art of political manipulation*.
[136] Carmines and Stimson, *Issue evolution*.
[137] Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, *Introduction*; Elbasani, *European integration and transformation*.
[138] Ayoub, *When states come out*; O'Dwyer, *Coming out of communism*.
[139] Slootmaeckers and Touquet, *The co-evolution of EU's eastern*.
[140] Layman, *The great divide*; Bornschier, *Cleavage politics and the populist*.
[141] Baldassarri and Park, *Was there a culture war*; Fiorina et al., *Culture war*.
[142] Bartolini and Mair, *Identity, competition, and electoral availability*.
[143] Grzymała-Busse, *Rebuilding Leviathan*; Kitschelt and Wilkinson, *Patrons, clients, and policies*.

education, locality, and party vote.[144] The argument concerns patterned social differentiation rather than individual-level causality.[145] Even so, consistency of findings across multiple domains supports the main conclusion: the strongest gradients in Albanian value conflict remain socio-demographic rather than partisan – precisely why moral conservatism has not become a stable culture-war cleavage.

Conclusion

This article explains why family, gender, sexuality, and "European values" generate public controversy without becoming a stable axis of party competition. The answer: Albania represents weak partisan differentiation over moral conflict, not absent conflict. Social conservatism remains broad; clear boundaries persist around intimacy, kinship, and parenthood; modest liberalization occurs among younger and educated groups. Yet differences remain socially concentrated and weakly aligned with electorates – failing to crystallize into a durable culture-war cleavage.[146]

Three conclusions follow. First, Albanian society remains organized around a familistic core where family, work, and close ties dominate, while politics remains peripheral.[147] Second, moral change is selective: some liberalization occurred, but heteronormative ideals and restrictive attitudes toward homosexuality remain widespread.[148] Third, the strongest gradients are socio-demographic rather than partisan (confirming Expectations 2 and 3), explaining why rhetoric can be intense without producing stable electoral frontiers.[149]

Theoretically, the Albanian case speaks to broader debates on post-communist cleavage formation. It confirms that the classical Lipset–Rokkan model cannot be applied mechanically where historical carriers of party conflict were disrupted by communist rule.[150] But it also suggests path dependence alone is insufficient after three decades of pluralist politics.[151] Albanian party competition has been structured more by leadership, incumbency, bipolar antagonism, patronage, and state resource access than by consolidated ideological or moral blocs.[152] Under these conditions, even socially moderately meaningful moral conflict may remain weakly translated into party competition.[153]

The article thus contributes a broader comparative point: moral conservatism does not automatically generate culture-war politics.[154] For a stable culture-war cleavage to emerge, social differences must become partisanly aligned, organizationally usable, and electorally worth activating.[155] Albania does not yet display that configuration. It displays instead a familistic and broadly conservative social core, partial liberalization concentrated in specific strata, and a party system lacking the moral bloc formation required for durable value-based polarization.[156]

This analysis has limitations. Relying on weighted aggregate tabulations rather than microdata, it cannot establish net causal effects or model interactions between social background and political choice at the individual level.[157] Claims concern patterned social differentiation and weak partisan structuring rather than individual-level causation.[158] Even so, consistency of evidence across multiple domains supports the central conclusion: in Albania, value conflict is socially real, publicly

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[144] Glenn, Norval D. 2005. *Cohort analysis*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
[145] Knutsen and Scarbrough, *Cleavage politics, in The impact*.
[146] Bartolini and Mair, *Identity, competition, and electoral availability*.
[147] Reher, *Family ties in Western Europe*; Dalla Zuanna and Micheli, *Strong family and low fertility*.
[148] Welzel, *Freedom rising*; Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural backlash*.
[149] Kriesi et al., *West European politics*; Bornschier, *Cleavage politics and the populist*.
[150] Kitschelt et al., *Post-communist party systems*; Evans and Whitefield, *Identifying the bases of party*.
[151] Pop-Eleches and Tucker, *Communism's shadow*.
[152] Kajsiu, *Down with politics*; Elbasani, *European integration and transformation*; Grzymała-Busse, *Rebuilding Leviathan*.
[153] Enyedi, *The role of agency*; Enyedi, *The social and attitudinal basis*.
[154] Baldassarri and Park, *Was there a culture war*; Fiorina et al., *Culture war*.
[155] Bartolini and Mair, *Identity, competition, and electoral availability*; Carmines and Stimson, *Issue evolution*.
[156] Layman, *The great divide*; Hunter, *Culture wars*.
[157] Glenn, *Cohort analysis, 2nd ed*; Knutsen and Scarbrough, *Cleavage politics, in The impact*.
[158] Elff, *Social structure and electoral behavior*.

visible, and politically resonant, but remains insufficiently partisan to sustain a stable culture-war cleavage—a pattern that may characterize other weakly institutionalized party systems in post-communist Europe and beyond.

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