Designed Buffers: How Swiss Institutions Decouple Elite Polarization from Mass Affective Hostility

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Abstract

Switzerland presents a puzzle for theories that link elite polarization to mass affective animosity. Over three decades the Swiss People's Party rose from roughly 15 to 28 percent of the vote, the Federal Council has moved from amicable agreement toward open elite conflict, and observers classify the party system as among the most ideologically divided in Western Europe. Yet new long-run survey and behavioural evidence shows that mass affective polarization rose once between 1999 and 2003 and has not moved since, while geographic vote congruence between local populations has increased. Standard psychological, informational, and elite-driven accounts cannot accommodate this decoupling. Through analytical case-mechanism tracing, this paper argues that Swiss institutional architecture functions as a designed buffer system: three coupled affordances absorb elite antagonism without permitting it to compound into ambient mass hostility. Proportional representation with continuous coalition arithmetic removes winner-take-all incentives. The optional referendum coupled with the Vernehmlassung routes mobilized affect into bounded episodes. Federalism with strong subsidiarity provides identity-salience offsets that prevent partisanship from consolidating into a master identity. Comparison with Belgium, Austria, and the Netherlands identifies the buffer's scope conditions.

Keywords: affective polarization; consociational democracy; direct democracy; federalism; institutional design; Switzerland; affordances

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1. Introduction

The dominant comparative anxiety of the past decade has concerned the apparent compounding of elite and mass polarization. A party system that drifts toward the extremes is widely expected to drag its public with it. Partisans should come to dislike the other side more intensely, to extend that dislike into the social and economic spheres, and to harden against democratic norms perceived to benefit opponents. The American literature has both motivated and reinforced this expectation (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2015; Iyengar et al. 2019), and a growing comparative literature has sought to determine whether American patterns travel (Reiljan 2020; Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020; Garzia, Ferreira da Silva, and Maye 2023; Reiljan et al. 2024; Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2024).

Switzerland is the case that least cooperates with this expectation. At the elite level the country has experienced one of the most pronounced realignments in postwar Europe. The Swiss People's Party (SVP) rose from 14.9 percent of the National Council vote in 1995 to 27.9 percent in October 2023 (Bundesamt für Statistik 2023; Freiburghaus 2024, 494–96). Parliamentary voting cohesion has tightened along sharpening ideological lines, the magic-formula composition of the Federal Council has come under repeated strain (Vatter 2016; Freiburghaus 2019), and analyses of party positions place the SVP and the Social Democrats among the most ideologically distant pairs of electorally successful parties in Western Europe (Bornschier 2015; Bochsler, Hänggli, and Häusermann 2015; Jansen and Stutzer 2026, 4). Yet evidence on mass-level affect tells a different story. Drawing on the Swiss Electoral Studies for 1995, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, and 2023, alongside continuous administrative data on split-ticket voting since 1983, Jansen and Stutzer (2026, abstract) find a one-time level shift between 1999 and 2003 followed by no detectable trend. Cross-country work places Switzerland on the moderate rather than the extreme end of mass affective polarization (Reiljan 2020; Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020). Koseki (2018, abstract) reports that “political congruence between Swiss local populations increased in the last forty years, while regional political factions and linguistic alignments have lost their salience to new divides.” Switzerland's mass public, on this evidence, has not followed its elites.

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The puzzle is more pointed than a general observation about Swiss exceptionalism. It is a specific decoupling. If elite ideological distance produces mass affective hostility through the mechanisms that the comparative literature has identified — social-identity dynamics, elite cue-taking, sorting of overlapping cleavages — the Swiss case ought to look quite different from how it does. Either Swiss citizens are doing something cognitively unusual, or the mechanisms operate within an institutional setting that does work the literature has not specified. This paper develops the second possibility.

The contribution is to specify, through analytical case-mechanism tracing, three coupled institutional affordances that channel elite antagonism into discrete, bounded outlets rather than allowing it to congeal into ambient cross-partisan dislike. The first is proportional representation with continuous coalition arithmetic — the absence of any equilibrium in which antagonistic mobilization, by itself, converts into exclusive executive control. The second is the system of direct-democratic instruments coupled with the formal pre-parliamentary consultation procedure known as the *Vernehmlassung* — the institutionalization of scope expansion at the drafting stage and of bounded affect-discharge at the campaign stage. The third is federalism with strong cantonal subsidiarity — the preservation of multiple loci of political identification, which prevents national partisan identity from becoming a mega-identity in the sense Mason (2018) developed for the United States. None of these features is unique to Switzerland. What is distinctive is their coupling.

Three positioning moves anchor the argument. First, the paper does not claim that Switzerland is sui generis. It uses Switzerland as an analytical case to specify mechanisms that should travel to other systems with similar institutional configurations, and identifies the scope conditions under which travel is possible. Second, the paper does not claim that the Swiss public is uniquely tolerant or that Swiss political culture is uniquely pragmatic. Cultural accounts of Swiss exceptionalism are difficult to test and of limited portability. The argument here is institutional. Third, the paper builds on but does not replicate existing analyses of Swiss consociationalism. Lijphart's (2012) classic typology, Vatter's (2016) consociational-centrifugal continuum, and Bornschier's (2015) analysis of the new cultural conflict all operate

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at the regime level. The contribution here is design-level: the specification of which institutional features afford which behavioural micro-outcomes within the regime.

Methodologically, the paper conducts a theory-building case-mechanism analysis in the tradition of Beach and Pedersen (2013) and Bennett and Checkel (2014), supplemented by controlled most-similar-systems comparisons with Belgium, Austria, and the Netherlands. Switzerland is selected as the puzzle case because it sits at the most depolarization-favouring point in the comparative-institutional space identified by the prior cross-national literature (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020; Reiljan 2020; Reiljan et al. 2024) while exhibiting the elite-level realignment that the literature treats as a sufficient driver of mass affect. Belgium, Austria, and the Netherlands are selected as comparators because each shares the consociational classification or PR core with Switzerland but differs in at least one of the three coupled affordances the paper identifies, allowing the framework's predictions to be checked against systematic institutional variation. The argument is theory-building rather than theory-testing in the strict Hempelian sense, and the comparative evidence is descriptive rather than quantitative; the limits of this approach are discussed in section 6.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 specifies the empirical puzzle in detail, drawing principally on Jansen and Stutzer (2026) and the comparative literature. Section 3 reviews why the four standard families of accounts cannot explain the decoupling. Section 4 develops the analytical framework, drawing on the design-affordances tradition of Norman (2013), the systems-theoretic notion of leverage points (Meadows 2008), and the scope-of-conflict tradition of Schattschneider (1960). Section 5 applies the framework to the three Swiss mechanisms. Section 6 places the argument in controlled comparison with Belgium and Austria, identifying the scope conditions under which the buffer holds. Section 7 closes by drawing out implications for institutional design research and the comparative study of polarization.

2. The empirical puzzle: a long-run elite-mass decoupling

The puzzle has two halves that need to be specified carefully, because each rests on different bodies of evidence.

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Elite polarization has unambiguously intensified. Three streams of evidence converge. The first is electoral. The SVP rose from a quiet conservative-agrarian party with roughly 11 percent of the National Council vote in the 1980s to 14.9 percent in 1995, surpassed 22 percent in 1999, reached 29.4 percent in 2015, declined modestly in 2019, and recovered to 27.9 percent in October 2023 (Bundesamt für Statistik 2023; Freiburghaus 2024, 494–96). The Social Democrats have generally held between 16 and 19 percent. The result is a party system whose two largest parties sit at the extremes of the Western European left-right space rather than near its centre. Jansen and Stutzer (2026, 4) summarize the consensus position: “Switzerland's Swiss People's Party (SVP) has been identified as one of the most extreme (large) right-wing parties, and the Swiss Social Democrats (SP) as one of the most extreme (large) left-wing parties in Western Europe.”

The second stream is parliamentary and governmental. Vatter (2016) traces the transformation of Swiss elite behaviour since the 1990s and characterizes the present arrangement as a mixed democracy, partly consensual and partly polarized, along the Lijphart consociational-to-centrifugal continuum. Freiburghaus (2019) documents the erosion of the informal “amicable agreement” tradition between government and parliament that had functioned as a constitutive feature of Swiss elite cooperation through the 1980s. Helms (2019) places the Swiss trajectory in comparison with Austria's and argues that, while Switzerland has not de-consociationalized to the same degree, the direction of travel is unmistakable. Roll-call cohesion data and analyses of Federal Council collegiality both support this diagnosis.

The third stream concerns the issue dimension. Bornschier (2015) documents the emergence since the early 1990s of a new cultural conflict in the Swiss party system, organized around a universalistic-versus-traditionalist communitarian axis and substantially distinct from earlier economic and welfare-state divides. Bornschier argues that party relationships in Switzerland have become substantially more antagonistic over the past decades, driven primarily by the SVP's mobilization on immigration and identity rather than by Switzerland's relationship to the European Union per se. Afonso and Papadopoulos (2015) document parallel developments in welfare politics: SVP-led mobilization has transformed coalitional patterns in welfare reform from compromise to polarization. The cumulative weight of the three streams is

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consistent: Swiss elite politics is more polarized in the early 2020s than it was in the early 1990s on every reasonable measure.

The temporal pattern of elite-level transformation deserves further specification. The pivotal episode, on most readings, was the failure of the Swiss European Economic Area accession vote on 6 December 1992, when 50.3 percent of voters rejected EEA membership against the recommendation of the Federal Council and a majority of established parties. Within the SVP, the wing led by Christoph Blocher used the campaign and its outcome to consolidate organizational control, displace the moderate cantonal branches associated with the Bernese tradition, and reposition the party along the new cultural axis. The 1999 federal elections produced the first sharp electoral signal of the realignment; the 2003 elections produced the constitutional break, when the SVP claimed a second Federal Council seat in place of the Christian Democrats and the magic formula was renegotiated for the first time in nearly half a century. The period from 1992 to 2003 is the decade in which Swiss elite politics moved from the post-war consociational equilibrium to the present configuration. Mass affective polarization, according to Jansen and Stutzer (2026), made its one and only level shift inside this same window. After 2003 the elite trajectory continued — Bornschier (2015), Afonso and Papadopoulos (2015), and Freiburghaus (2019) all document continued intensification — but the mass-level series flattened. The decoupling, in other words, has a clean temporal signature: a brief period of co-movement followed by two decades of divergence.

Mass affective polarization has not tracked elite polarization. Three findings carry the analytical weight.

The first is that the long-run trend is essentially flat. Jansen and Stutzer (2026) construct affective polarization measures from the Swiss Electoral Studies for 1995 through 2023, supplemented by newly collected 2023 data, and find that aggregate affective polarization rose between 1999 and 2003 and has shown no clear trend since (Jansen and Stutzer 2026, sec. 4.2.1). Their behavioural complement — a revealed-preference measure constructed from cantonal administrative records on straight-ticket versus split-ticket voting going back to 1983 — points in the same direction. The PR system with open lists covers the cantons that contain

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97.4 percent of the Swiss population (Jansen and Stutzer 2026, sec. 3.4), and the share of voters who use that capacity to mix candidates across parties has not declined. This finding is critical for the argument here. It dramatically narrows the window in which Swiss mass affect could plausibly have followed the elites — essentially the four years around the entry of Christoph Blocher into the Federal Council in 2003 — and demonstrates that the subsequent two decades of intensifying elite competition have produced no further mass-level affective response.

The second finding is that in comparative perspective Switzerland is not at the high end of affective polarization. Reiljan (2020), studying 22 European democracies plus the United States between 2005 and 2016 with the Affective Polarisation Index, places Switzerland in the Northwestern European cluster that he characterizes as moderate in terms of partisan feelings, with the most affectively polarized countries concentrated in Central Eastern and Southern Europe (Reiljan 2020, abstract). Reiljan et al. (2024), in the *American Political Science Review*, extend the comparative analysis to global democracies and explicitly note that "at the bottom of the list, we find the countries that are known for consensual political culture and broad-based governing coalitions: the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the Nordic countries" (Reiljan et al. 2024, 660). Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro (2024, 557) measure trends across twelve OECD countries since the 1970s and report that "the US experienced the largest increase in polarization over this period. Five countries experienced a smaller increase…[and] six countries experienced a decrease." Switzerland is among three countries (alongside Canada and New Zealand) whose estimated trend is positive but markedly smaller than the United States, and Jansen and Stutzer (2026, 4) note that this rise is "mainly driven by highly questionable data from 1975" and is "only valid for the years up to 2003," consistent with the level-shift pattern in better-curated Swiss data.

The third finding is that the geographic distribution of voting agreement at the municipal level has trended toward congruence, not divergence. Koseki (2018) constructs a network-based agreement measure on more than 680,000 municipal results from Swiss federal popular votes since 1981 and finds that congruence between local populations has increased over the past four decades. The Röstigraben (the German-French language divide) and historic religious-cantonal cleavages have eroded as predictors of vote agreement, replaced by less

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geographically bounded divides that do not concentrate hostility within particular places. If elite polarization were producing the kind of geographic sorting documented in the United States (Brown and Enos 2021), we would expect divergence rather than congruence at the locality level. The Swiss pattern runs in the opposite direction.

These findings need to be qualified rather than overstated. Zumbrunn (2025) shows that rural-urban affective polarization exists but is asymmetric — "unrequited" in her term. Rural residents are affectively polarized against urban and suburban out-groups; urban residents are not similarly polarized against rural residents; suburbanites are polarized only against urbanites. The pattern is real and rooted in place-based identity and resentment about distributional outcomes. But it is asymmetric, place-based rather than party-based, and concentrated within a single demographic stratum rather than diffused across the partisan electorate. It does not constitute the symmetrically reciprocated, partisan, mass-level animosity that the cross-national literature documents as polarization's most worrying form.

The puzzle is not that there is no polarization in Swiss society. Place-based animosities exist; positions on immigration are sharply contested; satisfaction with democracy is unevenly distributed (Jansen and Stutzer 2026, sec. 5). The puzzle is that the coupling between elite ideological distance and mass partisan affect that the comparative literature treats as the modal pattern is absent in Switzerland over the long run. Elites have moved apart. Mass affect, on the best available evidence, has not followed. Any explanation that takes elite distance as sufficient cause of mass animosity has to confront this case.

3. Why standard frameworks cannot explain the decoupling

The dominant approaches to affective polarization fall into four families, and each is in tension with the Swiss pattern.

The first family is psychological-identitarian. Its pioneering account is Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012), which traces partisan animosity to social-identity dynamics rooted in in-group/out-group categorization. Mason (2015, 2018) develops the implications: as partisan identities become sorted with overlapping social identities — racial, religious, geographic, cultural — they consolidate into broader mega-identities that intensify both social and issue

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polarization. The mechanism is general; it does not require any particular institutional setting. But it has trouble accommodating the Swiss case in a specific way. Switzerland in the 1990s had substantial cross-cutting cleavages — language, religion, urban/rural, canton — but those cleavages have weakened. Koseki (2018) shows that linguistic and regional alignments have lost salience as geographic predictors of vote agreement. Religious-cantonal cleavages have eroded. If sorting were the master variable, the Swiss case should be moving toward more affective polarization, not stable mass affect. Either Swiss identities are sorting in some unmeasured way that does not produce mass affect, or the sorting-affect link is weaker than the literature has supposed when the institutional environment buffers it. The latter possibility is what this paper develops.

The second family is informational and platform-centric. Versions of this account treat affective polarization as downstream of changes in media markets, social media exposure, and elite cue-giving. Switzerland is not insulated from any of these dynamics. Cantonal print media has shrunk, online consumption has risen, and SVP campaigning has been notably aggressive in tone since the 1990s. The Swiss media system retains substantial linguistic and cantonal fragmentation, with three main public-service broadcasters (SRF, RTS, RSI) and distinct cantonal print markets. This fragmentation is itself sometimes treated as a buffering mechanism. The paper takes that possibility seriously but does not place primary weight on it for one reason: the level-shift-then-flat pattern in Swiss mass affect (Jansen and Stutzer 2026) is hard to reconcile with a story paced by gradual changes in the media environment. Media shifts have been continuous. The mass affect pattern is discontinuous and then flat. Media fragmentation may contribute to the Swiss buffer, but it does not by itself explain its temporal shape.

The third family is elite-driven. The simplest version holds that mass affect tracks elite cues: when elites polarize, publics follow. This framework cannot accommodate the Swiss case on its own terms, because the time-series evidence runs the opposite way. Swiss elite polarization has continued to intensify through the 2010s and into the 2020s; mass affect has not. A more sophisticated version of the elite-driven account holds that mass affect tracks elite cues only when other conditions are met — when out-group elite behaviour is perceived as

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threatening to in-group status, for example, or when the policy stakes are high and visible. This is closer to what one needs. It implies that institutions which manage the visibility and stakes of elite competition should matter to whether elite signals translate into mass affect. That is the move this paper makes.

The fourth and most recent family is intervention-based, growing out of behavioural and experimental work. Voelkel et al. (2023) report that interventions designed to reduce affective polarization in the United States — correcting misperceptions of out-partisans, priming inter-partisan friendship, exposure to warm cross-partisan leader interactions — reliably reduced affective polarization but did not consistently reduce anti-democratic attitudes or support for partisan violence. Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood (2023) reach a related conclusion in a separate experimental design. The implication is that affect and democratic-norm dispositions can be decoupled at the individual level. This is theoretically important for the present argument because it raises the question whether institutions can do at the structural level what individual interventions do unevenly: decouple elite-issue conflict from mass affective hostility. The Swiss case is interesting in light of this finding. Jansen and Stutzer (2026, sec. 5) report that more affectively polarized Swiss citizens are if anything more politically engaged, not less democratic in sentiment, although they report lower satisfaction with democracy. The Swiss pattern does not reproduce the standard affective-polarization-causes-democratic-erosion story even where affective polarization exists.

It is worth pausing here on the relation between the present argument and the comparative-institutional literature that immediately precedes it. Gidron, Adams, and Horne (2020) and Reiljan et al. (2024) both document that proportional electoral institutions are associated with lower mass-level affective polarization in cross-national perspective. The present paper accepts this finding and seeks to push past it. The question this paper asks is not whether the correlation between PR and lower mass affect holds — it does — but what specific institutional mechanism produces the buffering effect, and whether PR alone can be expected to do the work in the absence of other coupled features. The Swiss case is useful precisely because it sits at the configuration that the cross-national literature identifies as most strongly buffering, and so any residual buffering effect observable in Switzerland that exceeds what PR alone explains points

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to features the cross-national literature has not specified. The argument in section 5 is that two such features — the optional referendum coupled with the *Vernehmlassung*, and federalism with cantonal subsidiarity — are doing identifiable additional work in the Swiss case.

The lesson is not that the standard families are wrong about the dynamics they identify. It is that those dynamics operate within an institutional envelope that can absorb, redirect, or amplify them. Switzerland is a case in which the envelope appears to absorb a great deal, and the analytical task is to specify what about the envelope does the work.

4. Institutions as affordance systems: an analytical framework

This paper proposes a framework that synthesizes three traditions not usually read together. The synthesis is analytical, not metaphorical. Each tradition contributes a specific component of the argument.

The first component is the concept of affordances developed in design theory by Norman (2013). An affordance is a relational property of a designed object that makes certain actions possible, easy, or attractive while making others difficult or unattractive. Affordances are not properties of the object alone but of the object-in-use by a particular kind of agent. A doorknob affords pulling; a flat plate affords pushing; a poorly designed object communicates the wrong affordances and produces predictable errors. Applied to political institutions, an affordance lens treats rules and procedures not as constraints alone but as designed objects that make certain political actions easy or attractive and others difficult or unattractive for the agents who encounter them — elites, citizens, organized interests. Crucially, affordances operate at the behavioural micro-level, below the level of regime classification. Two systems classified as consociational by Lijphart's (2012) typology can afford quite different behaviours if their specific design features differ.

The second component is the systems-theoretic notion of leverage points, developed by Meadows (2008). Complex systems have specific places — feedback loops, parameter settings, goal structures — at which small interventions produce large changes in system behaviour. The deepest leverage points are typically not the visible parameters that public debate focuses on but the underlying structures that shape how parameters interact. Applied to institutional

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analysis, the question becomes which institutional features sit at high-leverage points in a polity's political-conflict system: which features, if changed, would alter polarization dynamics most.

The third component is the scope-of-conflict tradition developed by Schattschneider (1960). The central claim is that political conflicts have boundaries — they involve some participants and not others, mobilize some interests and not others, become visible at some times and not at others — and that the contest over who is drawn into a conflict is more consequential than the contest over the conflict's substance. Expanding the scope of conflict tends to favour the weaker side in a local dispute by bringing in new participants whose interests cross-cut the original cleavage; narrowing the scope tends to favour entrenched players. For the present argument, the temporal scope of conflict matters as well as the participant scope. An issue mobilized intermittently around discrete decisions produces a different affective signature than an issue mobilized continuously through partisan identification.

Synthesized, the three components yield a tractable analytical question. Which institutional features afford, at high-leverage points, the routing of conflict into bounded scopes that prevent it from compounding into ambient mass hostility?

This is a different question from the one the consociational tradition asks. Lijphart's (2012) framework treats consociational institutions as variables affecting aggregate system outcomes — stability, representativeness, minority protection — and assesses Switzerland accordingly. Vatter (2016) follows this approach in placing Switzerland on a consociational-centrifugal continuum. The framework offered here is complementary but distinct: it asks how specific institutional features shape the behavioural and affective microstructure of elite-mass interaction, rather than aggregate macro-outcomes. It is a design-level analysis nested within regime-level analysis.

The framework also differs from culturalist accounts of Swiss exceptionalism. Cultural accounts attribute Swiss outcomes to a long-standing tradition of compromise, multilingualism, and pragmatic civic identity. There is something to such accounts, but they are difficult to test, difficult to falsify, and difficult to use as a guide to other systems. A design-level framework, by

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contrast, asks what specific institutional levers do specific work, and is portable to systems with different cultural starting points.

Three propositions follow. The first proposition is that polarization is not a single thing. It has at least three distinct components — ideological distance between parties, issue-based mobilization, and mass affective hostility — and institutional design can decouple them. A polity can be highly polarized in one component while moderate or weak in others. Switzerland is high on the first, intermittent on the second, and moderate on the third. The second proposition is that the institutional features doing the decoupling work are not single levers but coupled affordances. Proportional representation by itself does not buffer affect; what matters is how PR interacts with veto institutions, intergovernmental structure, and consultation routines. The buffering is a property of the system, not of any one feature. The third proposition is that the buffer is conditional rather than fail-safe. Features that work as buffers under one set of conditions can fail or even invert under others — for example, when an issue is sufficiently salient and territorially concentrated to overwhelm cross-cutting identities.

These propositions guide the analysis of the three Swiss mechanisms in the next section.

5. Three coupled mechanisms

5.1 Proportional representation with continuous coalition arithmetic

Switzerland uses open-list proportional representation to elect the 200-seat National Council, with cantons serving as multi-member districts. The cantons that elect at least two seats contain 97.4 percent of the Swiss population (Jansen and Stutzer 2026, sec. 3.4). The Federal Council, a seven-member collective executive, has since 1959 been composed by a magic-formula proportionality among the four largest parties, with one variant or another of 2-2-2-1 distribution. There is no winner-take-all national executive election. There is no parliamentary moment at which a single party constructs a governing program by exclusion.

The affordance structure of this arrangement has two consequences that bear directly on polarization. The first concerns elite strategic incentives. In a winner-take-all environment, the dominant strategic affordance is mobilization through opposition — building turnout by intensifying out-group threat. Under multi-party PR with a permanent oversized cabinet, the

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structure of available payoffs is different. A party that aspires to influence has to enter coalition arithmetic that does not end on election night and does not resolve at the cabinet level. Even the SVP, which has consciously sought to combine governmental presence with oppositional rhetoric (Vatter 2016; Afonso and Papadopoulos 2015), operates within a structural constraint that no single party can pass legislation alone. The affordance to mobilize antagonism remains, and the SVP uses it. The affordance to convert antagonism into exclusive policy victories does not. Antagonistic mobilization in this setting has different downstream consequences than antagonistic mobilization in a majoritarian setting, because what it can convert into is different.

The second consequence concerns the structure of voter choice. Swiss voters in PR cantons can cast votes for individual candidates from multiple parties — the practice known as *panaschieren*. Jansen and Stutzer (2026) construct revealed-preference measures of straight-ticket versus split-ticket voting from administrative records going back to 1983 and find no trend in straight-ticket voting at the aggregate level. This is striking against the backdrop of elite ideological divergence. If elite polarization were structuring mass behaviour, Swiss voters should be increasingly unwilling to mix their votes across party boundaries. They are not. The PR-with-*panaschieren* design preserves, at the act of voting itself, a cross-cutting affordance that interrupts the consolidation of in-party loyalty into out-party hostility.

This mechanism aligns with the cross-national finding that affective polarization is more intense in majoritarian electoral systems (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020; Reiljan et al. 2024). PR is doing depolarization work in many places, not only in Switzerland. What is distinctive about Switzerland is that PR is coupled with a permanently oversized executive: the affordance to convert a plurality into an exclusive program is absent at the cabinet level as well as at the legislative level. This double absence narrows the action space for antagonistic mobilization more than PR alone does in systems where governing coalitions still form and dissolve along clearer lines.

In leverage-points terms, the Swiss combination operates not on the visible parameter of party-system fragmentation, which is high in many democracies, but on the underlying structure of payoffs that converts fragmentation into either cooperation or conflict. The high-leverage feature is that there is no plausible institutional path by which any single party's

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antagonistic mobilization translates into exclusive control of the executive, and the magic-formula composition rule has effectively constrained the executive's partisan balance even through periods of substantial vote-share movement (2003 being the partial exception that proves the rule, since the renegotiation produced a 2-2-2-1 reconfiguration rather than majoritarian capture). That feature is institutional, not cultural. It is exportable in principle, although as section 6 shows it is not always exportable in practice.

5.2 The optional referendum, the popular initiative, and the Vernehmlassung

The second mechanism is the system of direct-democratic instruments coupled with the formal pre-parliamentary consultation procedure they have generated. Three direct-democratic instruments matter most: the mandatory referendum on constitutional change (in force since 1848), the optional referendum on federal legislation (introduced in 1874 and triggerable by 50,000 signatures), and the popular initiative for constitutional amendment (introduced in 1891 and triggerable by 100,000 signatures). The *Vernehmlassung* — formal consultation with cantons, parties, and organized interests during the drafting of federal legislation — emerged historically as elite anticipation of these veto instruments (Papadopoulos 2001; Sciarini, Fischer, and Traber 2015).

Papadopoulos (2001) argues that the indirect effects of direct democracy on Swiss politics far exceed the direct effects of any particular ballot outcome. Because the optional referendum can credibly be triggered against major legislation, prudent legislators consult organized interests in advance, broaden coalitions, and dilute provisions likely to mobilize opposition. The mechanism is a system of pre-bargaining: conflicts are absorbed into the legislative process before they become public, and when they do become public they are channeled into discrete ballot campaigns rather than continuous partisan warfare. Sciarini, Fischer, and Traber (2015) provide an extended analysis of contemporary Swiss decision-making that documents the pressures the consensus model now faces from polarization, time constraints, and Europeanization, while noting the continued importance of pre-parliamentary consultation in legislative practice. The full causal chain by which the *Vernehmlassung* buffers mass affect — from consultation, to coalitional dilution, to reduced post-passage referendum mobilization, to

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reduced accumulation of partisan affect — is plausible at each step and consistent with the available evidence, but the empirical verification of each individual link is uneven, and the argument here is best read as identifying a coherent mechanism whose components deserve quantitative testing in future work.

From the perspective of the affordance-leverage-scope framework, this design does three distinct kinds of work. The first is that it institutionalizes scope expansion at the front end of policymaking. The *Vernehmlassung* draws cantonal governments, peak interest associations, and parties into draft legislation before parliamentary debate, expanding the set of actors with stakes in the eventual law. In Schattschneider's terms, scope expansion at the drafting stage means that no single coalition controls the framing of the eventual conflict. The second is that direct-democratic instruments provide a structural veto point that converts ambient discontent into discrete decision episodes. A voter who is angry about a piece of legislation does not have to wait for a general election four years off, and does not have to channel that anger into general partisan identification. She can sign a referendum petition, vote on a specific ballot question, and — most importantly — see the matter resolved on a determinate date. The third is that direct-democratic campaigns bound the temporal scope of mobilized conflict. A direct-democratic campaign has a beginning, a middle, and an end. After the vote, even when the result is contested, the issue is settled in a procedural sense, and the campaign-mobilized affect is released rather than retained.

This last feature is critical for the elite-mass decoupling argument. In a system without direct-democratic outlets, dissatisfaction with elite-driven policy decisions can be expressed only through partisan channels — voting, party identification, party-mediated mobilization — and consequently accumulates into partisan affect. In the Swiss system, dissatisfaction has alternative outlets that are issue-specific rather than partisan. The 1992 EEA vote, the 2014 mass immigration initiative, the 2009 minaret ban, the 2021 COVID-19 Act referendum, and the 2023 OECD minimum-tax referendum (Freiburghaus 2024) all drew on intense affect but produced a decision and a procedural settlement rather than a continuous partisan accumulation. Whether the campaign-mobilized affect dissipates entirely or partially carries forward into subsequent partisan competition is an empirical question that the available data do

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not fully resolve; the claim advanced here is the weaker one that direct-democratic resolution converts continuous discontent into discrete, dated episodes rather than allowing it to compound continuously through partisan channels. Jansen and Stutzer (2026, sec. 5.2) note that more affectively polarized Swiss individuals are more likely to participate in collecting signatures, signing initiatives, and signing facultative referendums, suggesting that the direct-democratic channel functions at least in part as an affect-routing infrastructure rather than an affect-generating one.

Two episodes illustrate the affect-routing function with particular clarity. The first is the 2021 COVID-19 Act referendum. The Federal Council's pandemic measures had generated genuine and durable opposition from a coalition of libertarian, populist, and religious groups, and the opposition organized through the optional referendum process rather than through partisan organization. The vote on 28 November 2021 confirmed the Act with 62 percent support after a campaign that absorbed the energy of the dissenting movement into a discrete decision. After the vote, mobilization continued for a brief period but receded substantially; the movement's organizational infrastructure did not transfer into durable partisan realignment. The second is the 2023 referendum on the OECD minimum corporate tax, which passed with substantial cross-party support after pre-parliamentary consultation had broadened the original federal proposal to address cantonal fiscal concerns. The case illustrates the *Vernehmlassung* function in its mature form: a federally driven initiative was reshaped during consultation to accommodate cantonal objections, with the result that no cantonal coalition mobilized organized opposition against the eventual ballot question. Both episodes are consistent with the framework's prediction. Discrete decision episodes contain affect within campaign cycles, and pre-parliamentary consultation absorbs distributive conflict before it reaches the public stage.

The mechanism is not without costs. Papadopoulos (2001) notes that corporatist coordination among parties and interest organizations to minimize referendum risk can effectively narrow the practical scope of policy choice and exclude unorganized interests. The instruments have specific failure modes: they can be captured by well-funded campaigns, they can put minority rights at risk, and they have on occasion produced outcomes — most prominently the 2014 mass immigration initiative — that subsequent constitutional and

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international-law adjudication has had to manage at considerable legislative cost. These costs are real, and the design is not Pareto-superior to a representative arrangement on every dimension. For the polarization-buffering question specifically, however, the mechanism does identifiable work: it converts continuous discontent into discrete, dated episodes and reduces the channels through which discontent can compound into ambient partisan hostility.

5.3 Federalism and cantonal identity offsets

The third mechanism is federalism with strong subsidiarity. Switzerland's 26 cantons retain substantial fiscal and administrative autonomy, run their own school systems, levy income tax at the cantonal and communal levels, and operate as the primary unit of constitutional reference for many citizens. Cantonal political systems are not miniatures of the federal system. Cantonal party branches differ from one another in ideological position, programmatic content, and tactical style. Bochsler (2016) documents that Swiss parties have nationalised in certain respects between 1991 and 2015 — the SVP in particular extended its electoral presence into Western and Southern cantons where it had previously been weak — but that substantial cantonal heterogeneity persists, with parties retaining cantonal organisational distinctiveness even as their national footprint has become more uniform. Storz and Bernauer (2018) document, through quantitative text analysis of cantonal SVP manifestos around the 2015 election, that cantonal SVP branches vary substantially in the populism of their manifestos. The variation persists even after the 2008 split of the BDP from the SVP, which removed the most moderate cantonal branches and might have been expected to produce ideological convergence.

This heterogeneity matters for the polarization-buffering argument in a specific way. The mega-identity hypothesis (Mason 2018) holds that affective polarization intensifies when partisan identification consolidates with other social identities into a single overlapping mega-identity. The mechanism requires that partisan identification become the master identity into which others flow. Federalism with cantonal subsidiarity makes that consolidation harder, because it preserves multiple loci of political identification at salience levels comparable to or higher than the national-party level. The relevant Swiss cleavage-politics literature (Kriesi et al. 2008; Bornschier 2010) has documented this multi-locus pattern across the post-1970s

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realignment: the cultural cleavage that drives the new conflict cuts across cantonal and linguistic boundaries rather than aligning with them, with the result that the national partisan axis is one organizing dimension among several rather than the dominant one.

A voter in canton Zug encounters a tax system, a school curriculum, a set of cantonal political competitions, and a cantonal SVP whose programmatic profile is not identical to the SVP in canton Ticino or canton Geneva. National partisan identification is one thing among many. The architecture of cantonal politics offers what I call identity-salience offsets: alternative locations for political identification that do not align cleanly with the national left-right axis. Even Swiss-German and Swiss-French citizens, who differ noticeably in their referendum preferences on European questions and on some welfare items, do not consolidate those differences into single dominant partisan camps, because the cantonal political contexts in which they vote are themselves heterogeneous.

Koseki's (2018) finding that linguistic and regional alignments have lost salience as predictors of vote agreement deserves emphasis here. The result might initially seem to undercut the federalism argument: if regional alignments are weakening, federalism should be losing its identity-offset function. The interpretation the affordance framework suggests is different. The decline of regional alignments specifically is not the decline of cantonal identification more broadly. What Koseki documents is that geographic clustering of vote agreement on the old language-religion axes has weakened and that newer divides cut across geography rather than along it. This is the pattern one would expect if cantonal identification is functioning as a salience offset rather than a cleavage line. Cantons remain meaningful political contexts, but their boundaries do not predict vote agreement in the way they did when religious-linguistic cleavages were the master organizing structure.

The federalism mechanism is qualified, importantly, by Zumbrunn's (2025) finding that an asymmetric rural-urban affective polarization does exist in Switzerland. From the framework's perspective, this is not a refutation of the federalism mechanism so much as a specification of one of its limits. Place-based identity at the village or rural-region level is not exhausted by cantonal identity, and where cantonal-level structures do not intermediate between local identity and national policy outcomes — for example, on questions of land use, infrastructure

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investment, or distributional transfers — place-based animosity can build up. The buffering does not extend to every kind of group-based affect; what it extends to is the particular kind that consolidates into reciprocal partisan animosity at the national level.

5.4 Coupling and emergent effects

Each of the three mechanisms does identifiable work. The system-level effect emerges from their coupling. PR with continuous coalition arithmetic limits what antagonistic mobilization can convert into. Direct-democratic instruments and the *Vernehmlassung* give discontent specific outlets that bound it in time. Federalism with cantonal identity offsets prevents partisan identification from becoming the master identity. Each mechanism by itself can be found in other polities. The coupling is what makes the Swiss case distinctive — and it is also what generates the comparative test the next section conducts.

6. Controlled comparisons: Belgium, Austria, and the scope conditions of the buffer

If the argument here is correct, the Swiss buffering effect should track the coupled affordances rather than any single institutional feature. The two natural comparison cases are Belgium and Austria. Both shared, in the mid-twentieth century, classification as consociational democracies alongside Switzerland. Both have proportional representation. Both have substantial federalism (Belgium) or cooperative federalism (Austria). Yet neither has produced the elite-mass decoupling the Swiss case exhibits.

Belgium has experienced rising elite polarization along linguistic and regional lines and, on most descriptive accounts, growing partisan animosity between Flemish and Walloon political communities, though the comparative measurement of Belgian mass affective polarization is complicated by the structure of available survey data — Garzia, Ferreira da Silva, and Maye (2023) note that Belgium is excluded from their longitudinal API analysis for lack of consistent party-identification questions, and the linguistic segmentation of Belgian party competition makes the standard cross-national operationalization of affective polarization difficult to apply uniformly. Westwood et al. (2018), in a cross-national study of partyism, find that Belgian

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partisanship does function as a substantial basis for inter-group prejudice. The affordance framework predicts that the Belgian buffer should be weaker than Switzerland's for three specific reasons. Belgian PR is coupled with linguistically segmented party systems, which means that the multi-party fragmentation Belgium shares with Switzerland does not produce the same cross-cutting effect at the level of voter exposure. There is no Belgian *Vernehmlassung* equivalent that brings cross-linguistic interest organizations into pre-parliamentary consultation in a structurally consequential way. And most importantly, Belgian federalism does not provide identity-salience offsets to partisan identification — instead, the federal structure aligns with the linguistic cleavage, so regional identification reinforces rather than cross-cuts the master cleavage. Two of the three Swiss affordances are present in Belgium only in attenuated form, and the federalism mechanism is actively reversed. This pattern is consistent with the framework even if the magnitude of the Belgian elite-mass coupling cannot be precisely estimated on existing data.

Austria has trajected toward de-consociationalization, as Helms (2019) documents in his comparative analysis with Switzerland. Austria has PR, has a tradition of social-partner consultation analogous to the *Vernehmlassung*, and is federally structured. But Austrian federalism is administrative rather than identity-conferring in the Swiss sense — the Bundesländer do not function as primary loci of political identification at the level Swiss cantons do. Austrian social-partner consultation has weakened since the 1990s. And the Freedom Party's rise has been politically more polarizing than the SVP's because of the different position of the Austrian executive: Austrian governing coalitions form and dissolve, and the FPÖ has at times been a junior governing partner with concentrated executive influence, in contrast to the SVP's permanent and proportionally bounded Federal Council presence. Helms argues that Austria has de-consociationalized more thoroughly than Switzerland. The framework predicts higher polarization-buffering failure in Austria, and that is what the descriptive evidence shows.

The Netherlands provides a third comparator and a useful sensitivity check. Reiljan et al. (2024, 660) place the Netherlands alongside Switzerland and the Nordic countries at the bottom of the global affective-polarization distribution, in their grouping of countries known for

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602 "consensual political culture and broad-based governing coalitions." The Netherlands has PR,
603 multiparty competition, and a strong tradition of consensual policymaking, and has experienced
604 substantial elite-level fragmentation since the early 2000s with the rise of populist-right parties
605 (LPF, PVV, FvD) and the erosion of the traditional Christian-democratic and social-democratic
606 centre. Yet the Dutch case differs from Switzerland in two specific affordance features: there
607 are no national-level direct-democratic instruments comparable to the optional referendum or
608 popular initiative, and the unitary structure of the Dutch state provides no equivalent of
609 cantonal identity offsets. PR is present; the other two coupled affordances are absent. The
610 framework predicts that the Netherlands should sit between Switzerland and a system lacking
611 all three affordances — buffered by PR-with-multiparty competition but more exposed to elite-
612 mass coupling than Switzerland — and the Reiljan et al. (2024) ranking is consistent with that
613 prediction, with the Netherlands close to Switzerland but not below it. The Dutch case suggests
614 that PR with multiparty competition does substantial buffering work on its own, and that the
615 additional buffering attributable to direct democracy and cantonal federalism is identifiable but
616 smaller than the PR effect alone.

617 These comparisons are descriptive rather than definitive — all three are single-case
618 comparisons and other variables differ. There is also a genuine analytical worry that the three
619 conditions for the buffer to hold were extracted from the Swiss case and then tested against
620 systems where they happen not to hold; this is a known limitation of theory-building case-
621 comparative work (Beach and Pedersen 2013; Bennett and Checkel 2014). The comparisons
622 serve to demonstrate that the Swiss buffering pattern is not a function of consociational
623 classification alone but of the specific design coupling identified in section 5, and to specify the
624 scope conditions under which the buffer holds: (1) PR coupled with a permanently oversized
625 executive; (2) direct-democratic instruments coupled with institutionalized pre-parliamentary
626 consultation; and (3) federalism whose territorial units cross-cut the master partisan cleavage
627 substantially, even if not completely. Where any of these conditions is absent, the framework
628 predicts that the elite-mass coupling should be stronger. Where all three are reversed, the
629 framework predicts the coupling should be at its strongest.

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The framework is in principle falsifiable. If a polity could be identified that has all three of the coupled affordances in mature form and yet exhibits strong elite-mass coupling of affective polarization, the framework would be in serious trouble. If a polity could be identified that has none of the three and yet exhibits weak elite-mass coupling, the framework would similarly be challenged. The Swiss case as analyzed here is consistent with the framework's predictions, the comparative cases sketched in this section are descriptively consistent with the framework's predictions, and the burden on future research is to convert this descriptive consistency into quantitative estimation.

The Swiss case also has its own internal scope conditions. The buffer is conditional on elite restraint in deploying scope-of-conflict tools, on continued cantonal political distinctiveness, and on the absence of an issue salient and territorially concentrated enough to overwhelm cross-cutting identities. The 2014 mass immigration initiative was a partial example of buffer strain: an SVP-led nationalization of an immigration framing produced a result that strained Switzerland's institutional relationship with the European Union and required years of subsequent legislative repair (Freiburghaus 2024). The buffer absorbed the conflict, but it absorbed it less cleanly than in cases where pre-parliamentary consultation had room to operate. The mass-level affective consequence remained limited, but the elite-level consequence was substantial. This is consistent with the framework: the buffer operates principally on the translation of elite conflict into mass affective hostility, not on the elite conflict itself.

Two further reservations should be stated explicitly. The first is that the temporal coincidence between the 1992–2003 elite shift and the 1999–2003 mass-AP level shift is consistent with the institutional argument but is also consistent with an alternative cultural-adaptation reading in which Swiss citizens absorbed a shock once and then stabilized. The within-case temporal evidence does not by itself discriminate between these two readings, and the institutional framework gains its analytical support primarily from the cross-case comparison rather than from the Swiss within-case timing. The second is that the framework does not estimate the magnitude of the buffering effect. Because this paper is a theoretical-analytical case-mechanism tracing rather than a quantitative analysis, it cannot say how much

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polarization-buffering the Swiss configuration accomplishes relative to a counterfactual Switzerland with different institutions, nor can it estimate how much of the cross-national variation in elite-mass coupling is attributable to the three coupled affordances rather than to other features that co-vary with them. The argument establishes the existence and mechanism of the buffering. The magnitude is a question for future quantitative work, perhaps using synthetic control methods, panel designs exploiting institutional-reform episodes, or natural experiments that vary individual exposure to direct-democratic decision points.

7. Implications for institutional design research and conclusion

The Swiss case generates three implications for the comparative study of institutional design that go beyond the specifics of Swiss politics.

The first concerns the unbundling of polarization concepts. The comparative literature has tended to discuss polarization as a unitary phenomenon, sometimes distinguishing between ideological, issue-based, and affective polarization but rarely specifying how they interact under different institutional configurations. The Swiss case shows that ideological elite distance can grow substantially without corresponding mass affective intensification, provided that intermediating institutions decouple them. Future comparative work should treat the elite-mass coupling itself as a dependent variable rather than as a presupposition. The interesting analytical question is not whether a system is polarized but where the polarization sits and how it propagates — or fails to propagate — between elite and mass strata.

The second concerns the design level of institutional analysis. Lijphart's framework, and most of the consociational-versus-majoritarian literature that descends from it, operates at the level of regime types. Vatter's (2016) characterization of Swiss drift along a consociational-to-centrifugal continuum is a regime-level analysis. That analysis is valuable and necessary, but it leaves under-specified how particular institutional features generate the behavioural and affective microstructures that produce regime-level outcomes. A design-level analysis, in the sense developed in section 4, asks which specific affordances at which leverage points do which kinds of work. This level of analysis is not a substitute for regime-type analysis. It is a complement that lets us understand how particular features could be exported, modified, or

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substituted in other settings. PR alone does not produce the Swiss outcome; PR coupled with permanent oversized executives, direct-democratic veto points coupled with the *Vernehmlassung*, and federalism whose units cross-cut rather than reinforce the master partisan cleavage, together approximate the Swiss outcome. Reformers and constitutional designers need this level of resolution.

The third concerns the limits of individual-level intervention. The Voelkel et al. (2023) and Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood (2023) findings — that interventions reducing affective polarization do not consistently reduce anti-democratic attitudes — are striking and slightly disorienting for the field. If affect and democratic norms are decouplable at the individual level, the case for designing polities to manage their coupling at the institutional level is correspondingly stronger. Switzerland is not a case in which individual citizens are doing something different from their counterparts elsewhere. It is a case in which the institutional setting in which they encounter partisan elites does different work. The implication for democratic reform in deeply polarized polities is that interventions on individuals — civic education, contact programs, perception correction — should be expected to do less work than interventions on the institutional environment in which partisan competition unfolds. The Swiss case suggests where to look: at coupled affordances that bound the scope and temporality of elite-mass conflict.

The argument also raises a difficult comparative question. If institutional design can buffer affective polarization, why have so many democracies not done it? Part of the answer is that the Swiss configuration emerged historically rather than by design, through nineteenth-century compromises among cantonal authorities and the subsequent layering of direct-democratic instruments over a federal frame. The coupling is not easily replicated by deliberate constitutional engineering, both because each component has effects beyond polarization-buffering and because the components were not selected for the buffering function in the first place. Yet the analytical lesson is portable even where wholesale replication is not. Polities considering electoral reform, intergovernmental redesign, or new consultation routines should consider not only the immediate distributional effects of reforms but their downstream consequences for the scope, temporality, and identity structure of political conflict.

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Three lines of future work follow directly from the argument. The first is quantitative estimation of the magnitude of the buffering effect, ideally through difference-in-differences or synthetic-control designs that exploit institutional-reform episodes within consociational systems. Candidate cases include the 2014 Austrian abolition of the Bundesrat's effective veto, the staged Belgian state reforms of 1980–2014, and incremental Italian electoral reforms since 1993. Each represents partial movement along one of the three affordance dimensions identified here, and each should produce, on the framework's prediction, measurable changes in the elite-mass coupling. The second is fine-grained case work on episodes in which the Swiss buffer was strained but held — the 1992 EEA vote, the 2014 mass immigration initiative, the 2021 COVID-19 Act referendum — to specify the within-case dynamics through which the institutional architecture absorbed elite-driven shocks. The third is cross-system survey work testing whether the cognitive and behavioural micro-patterns the framework predicts — issue-specific rather than partisan-general mobilization patterns, lower correlation between partisan identification and mega-identity consolidation, higher acceptance of cross-cleavage policy compromise — are observable at the individual level in the cases the framework identifies as well-buffered. These three research lines would together establish whether the design-level claims advanced here can carry the analytical weight the comparative literature on polarization has been asking some account or other to bear.

Returning to the puzzle: Switzerland's mass public has not followed its elites because the institutional architecture in which Swiss elites operate constrains what their antagonism can convert into. Coalition arithmetic prevents exclusive program victories. Direct-democratic instruments and pre-parliamentary consultation bound discontent into discrete episodes. Federalism with cantonal subsidiarity prevents national partisan identification from consolidating into a single master identity. None of this requires Swiss citizens to be unusually civic, tolerant, or pragmatic. It requires only that they encounter politics through institutions that do specific kinds of work. The lesson of the Swiss case for institutional design research is not that Switzerland is exceptional, but that its institutions are designed objects whose specific affordances can be identified, analyzed, and learned from — and that, in an era of widespread

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anxiety about democratic erosion, the analytical move from psychology to institutions, from individual interventions to structural design, may be where the most useful research lies.

Data availability statement

This paper is a theoretical-analytical case-mechanism tracing and presents no new primary data. All empirical claims are drawn from existing peer-reviewed sources cited in the text. Sources used are open-access or otherwise available through standard academic channels, with full DOIs provided in the reference list.

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