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Perceptions of an Ideal Society: Evidence from the ESS-CRONOS Panel

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This paper examines the perceptions of an ideal society among European citizens, comparing them based on their relative priorities. These perceptions shape citizens' values and expectations, influencing social cohesion and political engagement. Consensus on the priorities of an ideal society fosters the legitimacy and stability of democratic systems. Our goal is to investigate these rankings in the context of the economic downturn caused by the financial and pandemic crises, the sovereign debt crisis, increasing inequalities and insecurities, the refugee crisis, and the rise of populist authoritarian movements across Europe. We use data from the fourth wave of the Cross-National Online Survey (CRONOS-2) of the European Social Survey from 2022, which includes 6,032 respondents (51% female, $M_{age} = 47.31$, $SD_{age} = 17.01$) across eleven European countries. Exploratory factor analysis was employed to identify the underlying constructs of 15 items measuring subjective priorities for an ideal society. The analysis revealed four distinct factors explaining 38.88% of the total variance. The first factor, named Democracy and Cohesion, encompasses items such as having a well-functioning democracy and strengthening social ties among people. The second factor we named Traditionalism, and it emphasizes ideals like emphasizing religious values and increasing birth rates. The third factor, named Financial Security, consists of priorities like getting rid of poverty and making life easier for families. Finally, fourth factor we named National Strength, and it captures items such as maximizing economic prosperity and having strong military power. The results also suggest that, on average, respondents place the most importance on Democracy and Cohesion (4.10 out of 5). Financial Security follows closely behind, remaining highly valued (3.98). NationalStrength comes next (3.33), while Traditionalism had the lowest mean (2.59) among respondents. The high value placed on democracy and cohesion can be viewed as a reflection of both the postmaterialist shift and the universalist values that remain highly prioritized in European societies. The relatively low prioritization of traditionalism and national strength further supports this claim. In conclusion, although the state of democracy has eroded in many countries, it remains the most valued ideal among the people.

Keywords: Ideal society priorities, Democracy, Europe, ESS-CRONOS Panel