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New results by Hans Böckler Foundation

Survey on EU elections in 10 countries: Participation opportunities at work and good working conditions positive for democratic climate – transformation worries threaten it

Across Europe, working conditions have an influence on how employees feel about democracy. This is shown by a new study by the Hans Böckler Foundation's Institute of Economic and Social Research (WSI), for which around 15,000 employees and jobseekers in ten EU countries were surveyed. Workers who are dissatisfied with their working conditions, whose pay is not right and who have little say in their job have above-average negative attitudes towards democracy in their country and towards immigrants in Germany and many other countries surveyed. They also feel more threatened by the transformation of the economy and the world of work. Better working conditions, on the other hand, correlate with more positive attitudes towards democracy and greater trust in its institutions. This also applies to trust in the European Union.

For the study, 1,500 people of the labour force in each country were surveyed, i.e., people who are employed or looking for work. The surveys were conducted online in November and December 2023 in Germany, Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and Hungary, i.e., in countries that differ in terms of their current political and economic situation as well as their institutional structures in politics, the labour market and industrial relations. The survey covers a representative sample of the working population in the respective countries in terms of age, gender, and education. However, the results should not be interpreted as a detailed prediction of the elections, as it is not based on a random sample and is conducted among the working population only. However, reliable correlations can be identified, for example between attitudes towards democracy and working conditions.

In the European elections, 350 million eligible voters can decide on the future of Europe, many of whom belong to the labour force. Surveys and political commentators alike predict strong growth for right-wing populist and far-right parties. "The study sends out three messages: Firstly, it shows that poor working conditions and the resulting potential for frustration and experiences of disadvantage and powerlessness are a breeding ground for the emergence of anti-democratic attitudes in all the countries studied, which can then be mobilized by right-wing parties. Secondly, good working conditions strengthen confidence in the EU, even in countries where anti-EU parties are in government or have been in government until recently. Thirdly, worries about transformation strengthen extreme right-wing parties. Progressive forces in the EU

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should therefore have an interest in shaping these transformation processes in a socially just way. The world of work is relevant across Europe when it comes to understanding and combating the rise of the political far right," says Prof. Dr Bettina Kohlrausch, Scientific Director of the WSI, summarising the key findings of the study. "For example, fair pay, the feeling of not being at the mercy of the employer when it comes to the amount of work and working hours, as well as participation rights in the job, as promoted in particular by trade unions and co-determination institutions - such as works and staff councils in Germany - play an important role. Similar correlations can be seen in most countries: those who have better working conditions feel more socially integrated and have a more positive attitude towards democracy," says the sociologist. "In view of the transformation challenges posed by digitalisation and the climate crisis, this makes it clear how important a socially just and co-determined arrangement is, especially in the workplace," concludes WSI Director Kohlrausch.

The WSI has already been able to show in empirical studies for Germany that there is a link between the experiences people make in the context of gainful employment and their attitudes towards democracy. The more gainful employment guarantees employees material participation, democratic co-determination and social recognition, the less likely they are to hold anti-democratic attitudes. Together with her WSI research colleague Dr Andreas Hövermann and Prof Dr Bart Meuleman from the KU Leuven in Belgium, Kohlrausch investigated whether similar correlations can also be observed in other EU countries.

Three dimensions of working conditions surveyed

The respondents were asked the same questions across all countries. These related to three dimensions of working conditions: Firstly, participation opportunities in the workplace, which WSI Director Kohlrausch also refers to as "economic citizenship rights". It is important to know, for example, whether employees are ignored or involved in day-to-day decisions at work or whether they can speak openly about trade unions and co-determination in the company without having to fear disadvantages. Secondly, it was about good working conditions, e.g., whether the work offers the opportunity to learn, whether there are opportunities for promotion or whether the respondents can influence the daily organisation and pace of work. Thirdly, subjective satisfaction with working conditions, which includes key aspects of social recognition, such as the extent to which respondents feel that their performance is adequately recognised in their salary. In addition, respondents were asked whether or not their own working hours made it possible to reconcile life and work (the exact wording of the statements measured can be found in Figures 1-3 in the appendix).

Detailed findings of the study:

Voting intentions in the European elections, satisfaction with democracy and its institutions

"The view of the upcoming European elections is worrying", Kohlrausch, Hövermann and Meuleman state. As in other surveys, it is becoming apparent that a considerable number of voters are leaning towards far-right parties. At the same time, however, the majority of working people in all countries neither plan to vote right-wing nor have voted right-wing in the past. Men and people in the labour force with low levels of education plan to vote for an extreme right-wing party with above-average frequency. As expected, negative attitudes towards immigrants are the strongest drivers for intentions to vote for an extreme right-wing party.

According to the researchers' analysis, it is also important to note that the electoral success of extreme right-wing parties is not directly related to the attitudinal climate in a country - for example, the prevalence of anti-democratic attitudes. For example, populist or anti-Muslim attitudes are widespread in almost all countries. Nevertheless, the extent of support for extreme right-wing parties varies considerably from country to country. The supply side of politics, for example the respective party spectrum, and the extent to which extreme right-wing parties have been able to establish themselves in the countries - also play an important role in the country-specific voting preferences for extreme right-wing parties.

In all countries surveyed, the principle of democracy is considered very important by a majority of respondents, but satisfaction with the concrete functioning of democracy is weaker in comparison to this fundamental appreciation and differs greatly from country to country. Remarkably, there is also no uniform pattern in the correlation between satisfaction with democracy and support for right-wing parties. In many countries, respondents who are satisfied with democracy are less likely to support far-right parties, but the statistical correlation is usually weak. In Germany and Spain, however, it is more pronounced.

Special situation in Hungary, Poland, and Italy

The picture is completely different in Hungary, Poland, and Italy, where right-wing parties are in government or were until recently. The opposite effect can be seen there: the higher the level of satisfaction with democracy, the higher the intention to vote for an extreme right-wing party. This makes it clear that people have different interpretations of what democracy entails, and that the concept of democracy "can also be successfully instrumentalised by right-wing or totalitarian regimes", according to the researchers. "The Fidesz government in Hungary and the former PiS government in Poland have noticeably curtailed media freedom, the rule of law and democratic opportunities in general," emphasises WSI researcher Hövermann.

Similarly, Hungary, Poland and Italy show that, in contrast to the other European countries, trust in institutions goes hand in hand with more

extreme right-wing party votes - a clear sign of the influence of right-wing parties on the institutions there. This also shows that established political science correlations, according to which more trust in institutions goes hand in hand with fewer right-wing party votes, do not continue to apply equally to countries with extreme right-wing governments, but have become significantly more complex.

Furthermore, only in Poland, Hungary and Italy, a pattern can be found that "anti-elitist" populist views are not associated with an increased preference for extreme right-wing parties. In Hungary, it is even the case that these are associated with a lower right-wing voting preference. If the populist far right is in power, it could therefore lose its credibility to represent the will of "the people". The anti-establishment element of populism and dissatisfaction with democracy could even turn against the populist forces in power.

In Poland, Hungary and Italy, a different correlation is also at work: if one asks about trust in the EU, this tends to go hand in hand with a lower tendency to vote for the far right, as in all the other countries analysed. This shows that trust in the EU strengthens democratic attitudes, even in countries governed by extreme right-wing parties.

Experiences of democratic participation at work and good working conditions usually strengthen democracy overall

According to the WSI study, all ten countries show that democratic participation opportunities in the workplace strengthen employees' democratic attitudes. This also applies when other socio-demographic factors are statistically controlled for, which emphasises the relevance of the link between working conditions and attitudes towards democracy, as the differences observed cannot be explained by other factors, such as higher education among respondents with greater confidence in democracy. Employees who can shape their everyday working life and have a say in their workplace are more satisfied with democracy in all the countries analysed (see also Figure 1 in the appendix). In seven countries, democracy is also more important to respondents in this case.

Likewise, in all countries, greater democratic participation in the workplace correlates with greater trust in institutions and more positive attitudes towards immigration. In all countries, there is also a positive correlation between the experience of democratic participation opportunities at work and greater trust in the EU. This also confirms that trust in the EU strengthens democratic attitudes.

In most countries, respondents with experience of democratic participation at work can be found where there is employee representation, such as works and staff councils in Germany. "In this study, work councils also prove to be important enablers of democratic participation and good working conditions," explains WSI researcher Hövermann.

The correlations between good working conditions and the democratic integration of the labour force are very similar in most of the countries studied. In the vast majority of the countries surveyed, employees are more satisfied with democracy and generally value it more, have greater trust in national institutions and the EU and a more positive attitude towards the EU and immigration if their work gives them the opportunity to learn, or if they can influence the daily organisation and pace of work, if they are paid appropriately, their working hours also leave room for their family and they feel recognised in their job (see Figures 2 and 3).

While there are very clear links between the conditions in the world of work and the democratic climate in all of the countries analysed, the picture is less clear when it comes to voting preferences for extreme right-wing parties. It should be borne in mind here that the supply side of the party spectrum differs greatly between the countries and comparisons are therefore only possible to a limited extent. In Germany and Sweden, respondents with more opportunities to participate in their job are noticeably less likely to express a preference for extreme right-wing parties; in Spain, satisfaction with working conditions in particular and, in Sweden, good working conditions are also associated with a lower probability of voting for extreme right-wing parties. In most other countries, this effect is also present, but only weakly pronounced.

In Hungary and Poland, and to a lesser extent in Italy, the trend is again in the opposite direction. If one takes into account the finding that in all countries considered - i.e., also in countries where right-wing governments have been able to shape national institutions - economic citizenship rights are associated with higher trust in institutions, good working conditions also appear to have certain system-stabilising effects - regardless of the political colour of the country. However, in Poland, Hungary and Italy, democratic participation opportunities, good working conditions and satisfaction with working conditions correlate with a higher level of trust in the EU, which in turn is associated with a lower preference for extreme right-wing parties. "The latter means that good working conditions in the EU certainly have the potential to strengthen trust in the EU, even in countries governed by right-wing governments," says Hövermann. The EU should therefore have an interest in creating framework conditions for good working conditions.

To summarise: Overall, good working conditions across Europe are a breeding ground for attitudes that strengthen democracy. However, the extent to which these then translate into corresponding voting preferences depends heavily on the supply side of the respective party system and the political climate of the country in question.

Worries about the effects of the transformation usually have a negative impact

Finally, it is noticeable that job worries about the transformation are relevant for the voting preference of an extreme right-wing party (see Figures 4 and 5). Specifically, in five countries (Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, France and Sweden) respondents with worries about transformation, i.e., the fear of negative effects on their own work due to digitalisation or political anti-climate change measures, have a significantly higher preference for extreme right-wing parties. These worries about transformation are particularly relevant among respondents with low incomes, as they are particularly widespread in all countries surveyed. It is also evident that those who are worried about the transformation of their job are less satisfied with democracy and express less trust in institutions in the vast majority of countries.

"In view of the enormous transformation challenges, how the job worries of the labour force are dealt with also has consequences for attitudes towards democracy. If the socio-demographic distribution of these worries is taken into account, a socially just and cushioned organisation of the transformation becomes particularly important," summarises WSI Director Kohlrausch.

At the same time, in some countries, those who report greater autonomy at work and generally better working conditions are less worried about the changes in the world of work. Accordingly, working conditions and opportunities for co-determination also appear to be a lever for mitigating worries about the transformation.

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Figure 1.

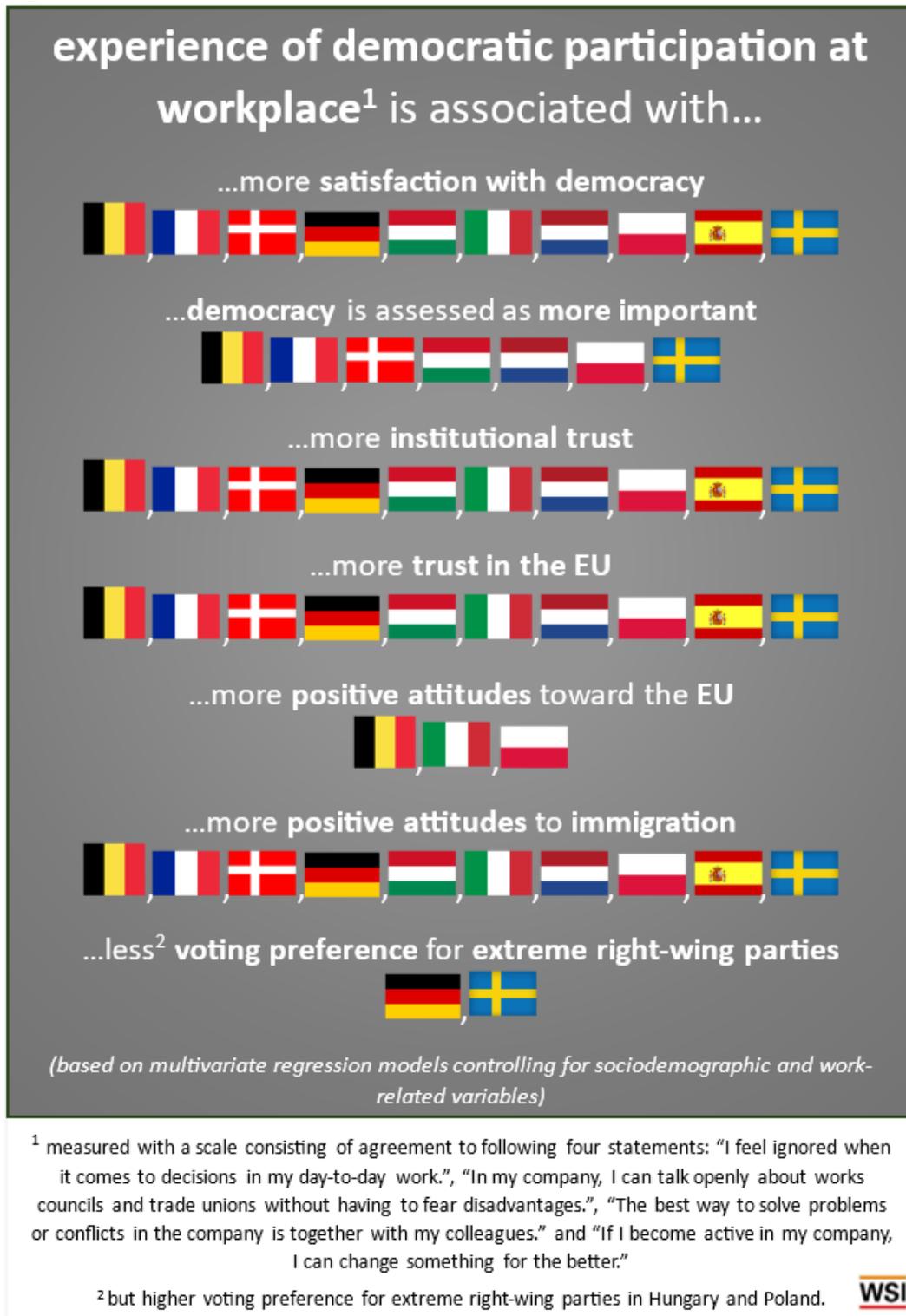


Figure 2.

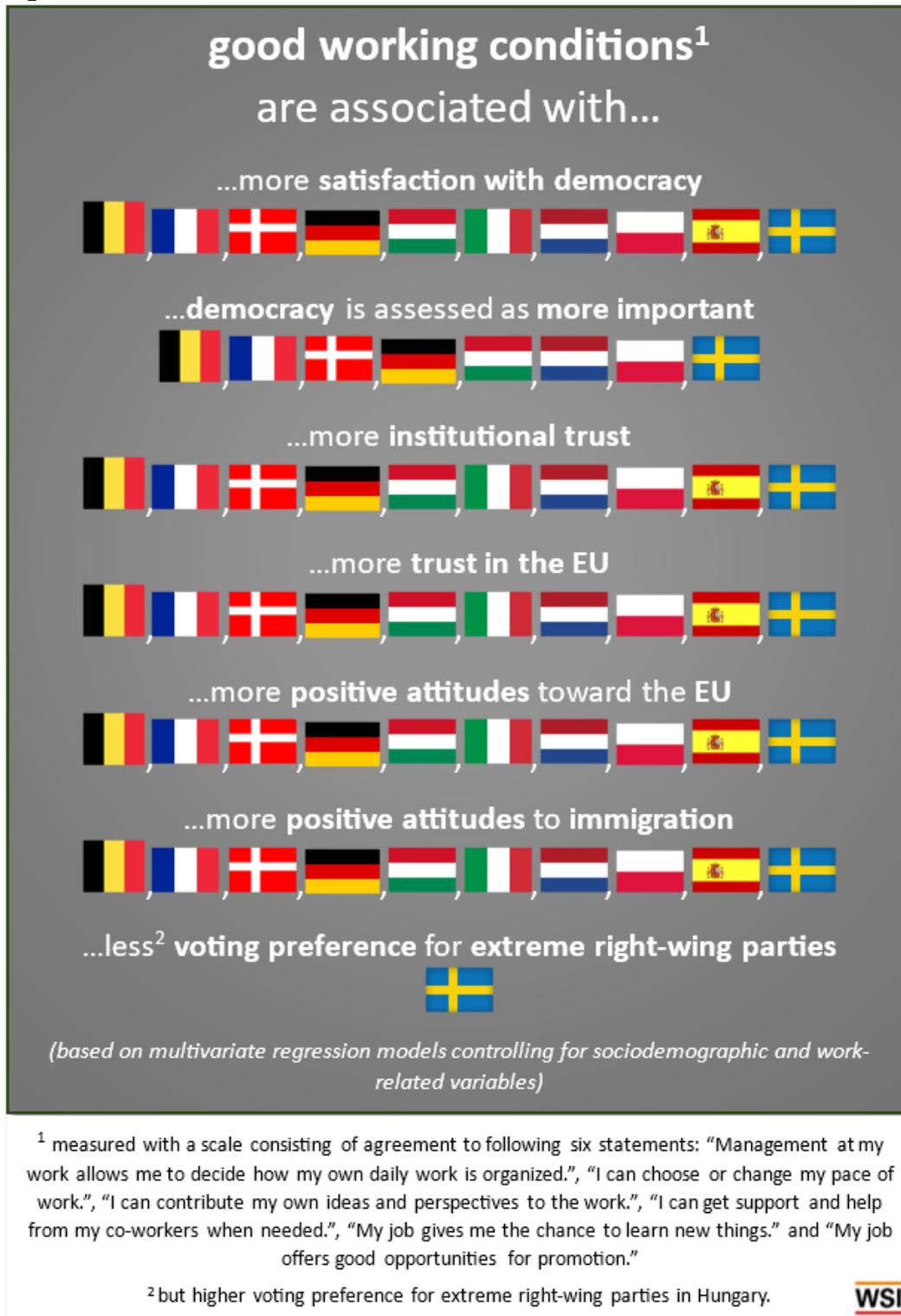
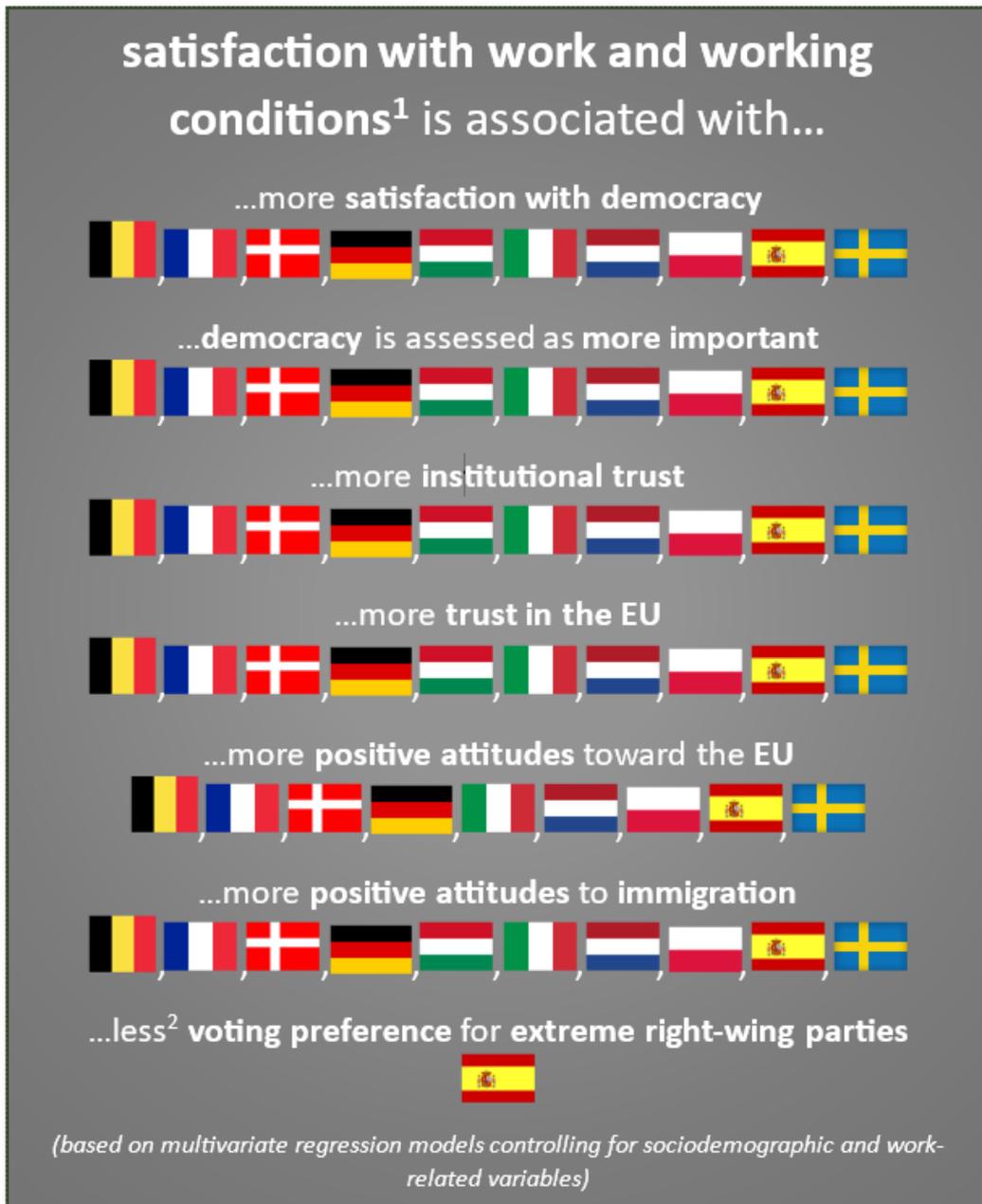


Figure 3.



¹ measured with a scale consisting of answers to following three questions: “How satisfied are you in your main job?”, “Considering all your efforts and achievements in your job, how satisfied are you with your pay?” and “And how satisfied are you with the balance between the time you spend on your paid work and the time you spend on other aspects of your life?”

² but higher voting preference for extreme right-wing parties in Hungary, Italy & Poland. 

Figure 4.

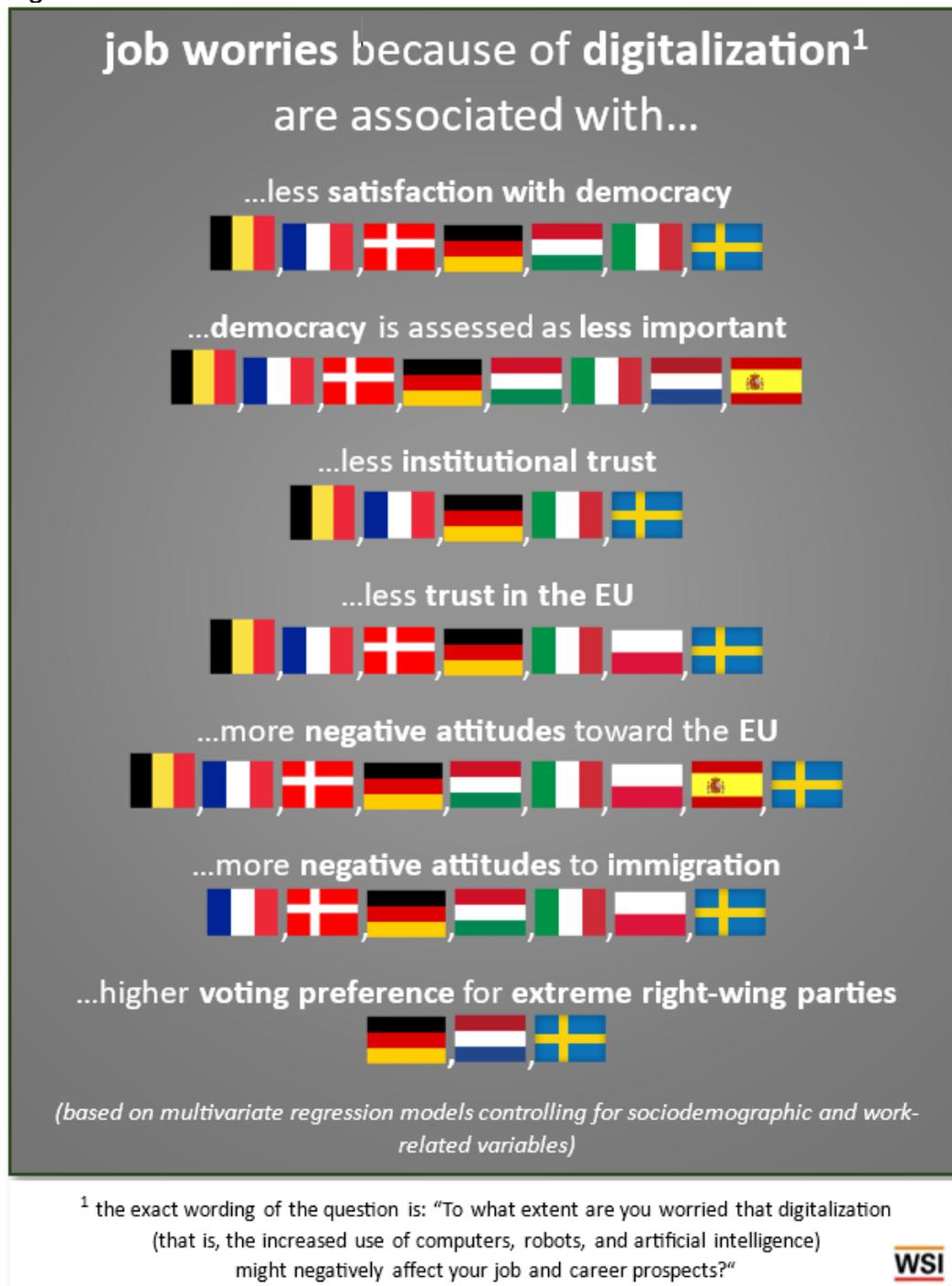


Figure 5.

