



# Policy's role in democratic conflict management

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## Abstract

This article proposes rethinking democratic conflict management by acknowledging the increasingly important role policy plays in it. As the debate on the health of democracy intensifies, research on how democracies manage and absorb political and societal conflicts becomes broadly relevant. Existing theories and perspectives view conflict management through the lens of elections and other institutional mechanisms, or they examine the social and economic preconditions for successful conflict management while inadequately understanding how policies contribute to conflict management. The article develops a theoretical framework that allows for the analysis of how policies' material and interpretive effects influence societal conflicts and thereby strengthen (or weaken) democracy. While the article focuses on hypothesis-generation rather than hypothesis-testing, it draws on a large variety of policy and case examples to corroborate and illustrate the theoretical expectations embodied in the framework. Insights into policy's role in democratic conflict management expand our understanding of the challenges to democracy in the twenty-first century and create new possibilities for comparative, policy-focused research into what makes democracy work.

**Keywords** Democratic conflict management · Democracy · Policy · Policy feedback · Institutions

## Introduction

Democracies all over the world have entered into a tumultuous period. The conflictual forms of politics that have developed in recent years, from populism to polarization to norm erosion, raise fundamental questions about the well-being of advanced democracies. Contributions that seek to make sense of this democratic malaise abound (e.g., Levitsky &

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Ziblatt, 2018; Przeworski, 2019; Runciman, 2018). As the debate over the health of democracy intensifies, research into how democracies manage and absorb political and societal conflicts becomes broadly relevant.

This article argues that public policy plays an increasingly important role in democratic conflict management. Increased social and cultural heterogeneity, economic inequality, globalization and climate change are policy problems that strain the conflict management capacities of advanced democracies. By relegating policy to a secondary role in conflict management, the dominant conceptualizations of democratic conflict management in the political science literature become increasingly outdated and inadequate. Most of the existing literature focuses on elections as the primary conflict management mechanism (Przeworski, 2019), on the design of formal institutions (Lijphart, 2012), on political norms (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004) and on social and economic preconditions for successful conflict management (Hirschman, 1994; Putnam, 1993). In this literature, policy is either the uninteresting outcome of the more fundamental question of institutional design, or it is the uninteresting adjunct to the social preconditions or economic developments that make conflicts easier to solve in the first place.

We draw on literature from the “policy influences politics” tradition, notably policy feedback theory (Mettler & SoRelle, 2014) and research on policy accumulation (Adam et al., 2019) and the policy state (Orren & Skowronek, 2017) to argue that policies, once they have been signed into law, influence societal conflicts in diverse and important ways. As modern governments undertake more over a broader range of issues, policies accumulate and permeate almost all areas of social, political and economic life. While institutional characteristics and aspects of policy design can account for differences between countries and policy sectors, the existing evidence clearly suggests that policy accumulation is a global phenomenon (Adam et al., 2019). Policy research captures the transformations brought about by policy accumulation using the concept of the policy state (e.g., Jenkins & Milkis, 2014; Orren & Skowronek, 2017; Pierson & Skocpol, 2007). In the policy state, sometimes also referred to as the “activist state” or “activist government,” policies increasingly influence democratic politics. Following in the footsteps of E. E. Schattschneider (1935), Theodore Lowi (1964), and others who argued that policies create their own politics, scholars of policy feedback have found that policies, from pension policies to healthcare policies to financial regulations, have material and interpretive effects on political elites and mass publics (Anzia & Moe, 2017; Mettler & SoRelle, 2014; Patashnik & Zelizer, 2013; Pierson, 1993). Summarizing the findings of this (mainly US-focused) research program, Hacker and Pierson (2014, 644) conclude that policies have “become a core feature of the American political system, fundamentally reshaping political contestation.” We build on this research to examine how specifically designed policies can contribute to the mediation of societal conflicts.

We propose a theoretical framework that allows for an analysis of how policies’ post-legislative impacts, i.e., the material and interpretive effects they emit once they have been adopted, influence conflict intensity and thereby strengthen (or weaken) democracy. The framework proposes testable expectations on how specifically designed policies influence citizens’ perceptions and behavior when they approach and engage in a conflict. The novelty of our approach is that we view policy as an *independent* variable in conflict management whose design influences the emergence and development of societal conflicts. While our primary purpose is hypothesis-generation rather than hypothesis-testing, we draw on a large variety of policy and case examples to corroborate the plausibility of our theoretical expectations. We suggest that whether, and to what degree, democratic states become more conflictual and democratically unstable increasingly depends on how effectively their

policy infrastructures mediate conflicts. Our conceptualization of policies' influence on societal conflicts provides an updated understanding of how modern democracies can manage conflicts, and it creates new opportunities for comparative, policy-focused research on what makes democracy work.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section demonstrates that policies only play a secondary role in the existing literature on democratic conflict management, and it demonstrates the limitations that result from neglecting them. The third section develops and illustrates the theoretical framework. The last section outlines avenues for systematic, comparative research on policy's role in democratic conflict management.

## Conflict management and the functioning of democracy

Although broad and diverse, the literature on democratic conflict management tends to relegate policy to a secondary role. This section aims to demonstrate the limitations that result from the literature's inattention to policy. To structure the diverse literature on democratic conflict management, we focus on the factors that do the "main lifting" in terms of conflict management in a particular piece of scholarship. While this approach unavoidably simplifies rich and often complex contributions, it allows us to capture the principal conflict-managing mechanisms at their basis.

## Research on the social and economic preconditions for conflict management

Seymour Martin Lipset (1960, 1985) was one of the first scholars to explicitly observe that the functioning of democracy depends on conflict management that successfully incorporates new societal demands into the democratic state. Democracies should neither suppress conflicts (as this would mean the suppression of societal demands) nor let conflicts spiral out of control and escalate into violence. Democratic states that balance conflict and consensus allow for "the peaceful play of power" (Lipset, 1960, 21), or what Hannah Arendt termed "cultivated conflict" (see Dubiel, 1998). However, Lipset's explanation of why American democracy had historically been effective in conflict management did not center on the active role of the government but rather on *societal preconditions*. Many issues that could have potentially been brought to the government and subjected to conflict management were actually bracketed out of politics and handled by other means, notably by local self-government and voluntary associations.<sup>1</sup>

Robert Putnam's concept of social capital (1993, 11) partly builds on Lipset's work and points to a broader set of societal preconditions that facilitate democratic conflict management. Research on social capital suggests that generalized trust between people helps to resolve conflicts. People that trust each other can better overcome collective action problems and solve conflicts than people who do not. Moreover, in democratic societies with high levels of social capital, conflicts over norms, values and shared understandings are less likely to escalate because citizens agree on these things to a significant degree.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This conflict management arrangement was, of course, deeply troubling from a contemporary democratic perspective. Some groups were better able to "self-govern" than others, as the US's history of racism and racial disenfranchisement suggests.

<sup>2</sup> Dankwart Rustow's (1970) work, which posits that an important prerequisite for democracy is national unity, develops a comparable argument.

Another research tradition focuses on how *economic developments* influence democratic stability (e.g., Knutsen et al., 2019). For example, scholars have long associated the development of democracy in the USA with lower levels of economic inequality, which made resolving economic conflicts easier and made the stakes of democracy lower in the early Republic (Tocqueville, 2002). This line of research also suggests that economic growth facilitates conflict management by allowing governments to make everyone better off by widely distributing gains. Albert Hirschman (1994) credited Western democracies' surprising success in conflict management to the thirty years of strong economic growth following the end of the Second World War. Economic growth made many conflicts divisible that would have been indivisible in other economic contexts. Hirschman argued that political conflicts are much easier to manage if the conflict parties treat them as divisible rather than indivisible. While divisible conflicts are about "more or less", indivisible conflicts are "either-or", i.e., conflict parties define advantages and demands in exclusionary terms. Indivisible conflicts are often about social characteristics that play a "fundamental role in the personal and collective self-identity of the adversaries" (Dubiel, 1998, 212), such as race, gender, religion, or culture.

Democratic states can manage divisible conflicts on repeated occasions,<sup>3</sup> with conflict settlements appearing less final to the conflict parties. For example, the division of the social product—the paradigmatic divisible conflict in democratic market societies (Hirschman, 1994)—can be renegotiated at the next best opportunity, while the democratic state's stance on abortion takes on a much more final character for the conflict parties. Moreover, divisible conflicts are more likely to form part of package deals than indivisible conflicts, i.e., part of a broader conflict solution that includes conflict settlements where both parties win and lose but where the overall package is somehow beneficial to both. For various reasons, therefore, it is easier for democratic states to manage divisible conflicts than indivisible conflicts. In an indivisible conflict, the conflict parties are likely to exhibit an uncompromising and obstructive stance that makes it difficult to settle the underlying conflict.

By assuming that successful conflict management largely depends on exogenous social and economic preconditions (relating to either pre-existing societal characteristics and venues for conflict management or to conflict characteristics), this literature accords governments a very limited role in conflict management. Governmental agency is only possible through the adoption of policies that help to maintain the economic and societal preconditions for conflict management (Hooghe & Stolle, 2003). A recent example of literature in this tradition is Torben Iversen and David Soskice's (2019) *Democracy and Prosperity*. This book explains the rise of democracy-corroding populism in advanced capitalist societies by arguing that mainstream political parties committed several political mistakes that prevented the middle class from participating in the market economy. In this perspective, governments' only alleged opportunity to reverse the populist trend is by adopting policies that would allow the middle class to once again benefit from capitalism.

According governments a functionalist role in conflict management implies that they are rather powerless when it comes to actively working toward maintaining democratic stability. In this view, democracies can thus only hope that certain conflicts will remain bracketed out of politics and that the conflicts that do reach the government would be rather easy to manage, for example because they would be divisible rather than indivisible. However,

<sup>3</sup> As the rational choice literature suggests, "repeat play" makes actors willing to play by the rules and seek a cooperation dividend (Shepsle 2008).

this functionalist interpretation of governments' role in conflict management omits modern democracies' greater policy activity and, by extension (and as we will show), this activity's conflict-mediating (or -escalating) effects.

## Research on institutions' role in conflict management

Much of the literature focuses on the institutional characteristics of democratic states and their influence on political processes that allows them to manage political conflicts. For Adam Przeworski (2018, 16–17) and many others, *elections* are democratic states' primary conflict management mechanism: "The greatest value of elections [...] is that at least under some conditions they allow us to process in relative liberty and civic peace whatever conflicts arise in society, that they prevent violence." The conflict management logic of elections is straightforward. Citizens can periodically elect politicians that best represent their interests and, crucially, can get rid of those who do not. Conflict management thus consists of periodically exchanging politicians and parties to ensure that those in power are those who best represent the interests of citizens and address the problems that they deem relevant.

Scholars also analyze *other institutional features* from a conflict management perspective. In this broad category, the design of formal institutions like presidentialism, parliamentarism, federalism or corporatism plays an important role. This literature examines how institutional "patterns" or "architectures" combine to manage political conflicts. Arend Lijphart's (2012) distinction between consensus democracies and majoritarian democracies is probably the most famous example of democracy literature that examines conflict management more broadly as the result of the interplay of various institutional factors (Reynolds, 2002; Weaver & Rockman, 1993).

Another institutional feature that scholars have analyzed from a conflict-management perspective are *democratic norms*, such as mutual tolerance between and respect for political opponents or restraint in the exercise of formally granted political power. Helmke and Levitsky (2004, 727) define political norms as "socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels." Many researchers interpret political norms in functional terms, i.e., they understand them as the conflict-mediating devices of democratic states. By binding political actors to legitimate and predictable behavior, political norms prevent democratic contestation from escalating into full-blown, violent conflict (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Political norms often complement formal institutions, thereby improving their capacity for conflict management. For example, legislative institutions such as the US Congress are characterized by elaborate norms of vote trading or "logrolling". By trading votes for issues that individual legislators hold dear, legislators can increase the overall support for specific pieces of legislation (Evans, 1994).

A major finding from the literature on institutions' role in conflict management reveals that institutions that allow social groups to voice their demands—and that provide them with the perception that it is possible to achieve them—enhance the likelihood that the eventually crafted policies will reflect conflict settlements that the groups can (albeit grudgingly at times) live with. On the contrary, institutions that grant a few powerful actors exceptional influence on policies are less likely to manage societal conflicts sustainably. For example, the literature on neo-corporatism shows how policy formulation processes can settle conflicts through the tripartite economic concertation of labor interests, employer interests and the state. It is under the state's "shadow of hierarchy" (Scharpf, 1994, 41)

that the two opposing economic interest groups sort out their differences. In this context, negotiations between divergent interests take place with the explicit goal of dispute settlement rather than the utility maximization of winner-takes-all politics. The governmental threat of coercive state power serves as a powerful scope condition that ensures the negotiating parties do not lose sight of the common goal of general welfare (Schmitter, 1985). Another example is the Swiss system of direct democracy, which allows citizens to hold a referendum on policies adopted by parliament (Sager & Zollinger, 2011). The prospect of a referendum discourages powerful groups from insisting on excessive demands during the policy process because excessive demands are more likely to trigger referendums. Referendums lead to the expansion of a policy conflict because they allow citizens to weigh in and directly influence it (Schattschneider, 1975). Conflict expansion injects a dynamism into a conflict that is difficult for the stronger group to control. Referendums can stall or suppress the policy plans of the stronger group or lead to watered-down policies that contain even more concessions than the original compromise proposal made by the weaker group. Institutions in the Swiss system thus help to create an environment of negotiation where powerful groups develop incentives to make concessions and agree on a compromise (Hinterleitner, 2020).

The conflict-mediating effects of institutions also play a prominent role in research on policy processes and policy-making in both the main political arena and within specialized policy venues (Weible & Sabatier, 2017). For example, the advocacy coalition framework conceptualizes the policy process as shaped by stable long-term conflicts between competing coalitions (Sabatier, 1988). Likewise, implementation studies have focused on conflict that occurs during the process of policy implementation (Matland, 1995). Another prominent example is collaborative governance, which Ansell and Gash (2008, 544) define as a “governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets.” Collaborative governance can be understood as an institutionalized policy-making process during which conflict is managed so that broadly accepted and durable policy solutions can be crafted.<sup>4</sup> While the existing research on policy-making treats political conflict as an important element<sup>5</sup> of the policy process, it primarily examines how conflicts influence (the making of) policies, not how policies influence conflicts.

Overall, the existing literature overwhelmingly treats policy as the dependent variable of institution-driven, potentially conflict-mediating political processes whose post-legislative impacts are, at best, of secondary importance for conflict management. However, since there is still very limited knowledge on how specific policy characteristics influence political and societal conflicts, it is unlikely that policies’ conflict-mediating effects are a conscious and deliberate result of institution-driven conflict management. And even if this knowledge were readily available, it would still be hard for policy-makers to predict the conflict-mediating effects of (usually long-lasting) policies in changing socio-economic

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<sup>4</sup> While processes of dispute resolution, mediation, and conflict management can also be found within individual (public) organizations (Roche et al. 2014) and larger policy networks (Koppenjan 2007), these processes are often more informal and less institutionalized than the processes that characterize collaborative governance. Even more importantly, these processes often deal with purely private conflicts while the literature reviewed here (and our article) focuses on conflicted public (policy) issues (for more on this distinction, see Ansell and Gash 2008, 544–548).

<sup>5</sup> However, many policy frameworks and theories only indirectly conceptualize and measure conflict (see Weible and Heikkila, 2017).

contexts. These reasons speak against discounting policies' conflict-mediating effects as uninteresting mediating variables in institution-driven conflict management. Hence, by looking at processes rather than their "end products" (i.e., the material and interpretive effects policies emit long after their adoption), the literature is prone to neglect important aspects of policies' contribution to conflict management. In the following section, we develop a theoretical framework that allows for a more exhaustive analysis of policies' contribution to conflict management.

## A framework for the analysis of policies' role in conflict management

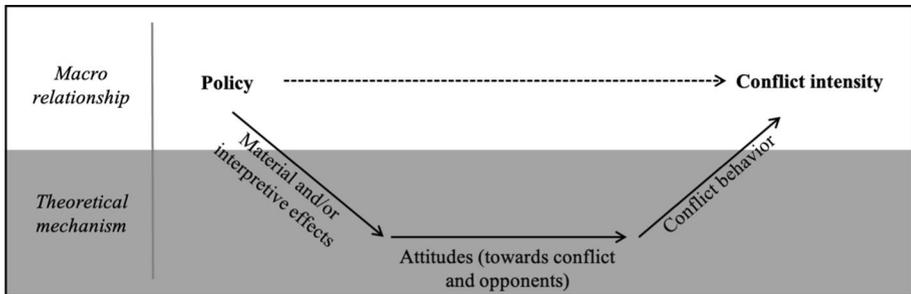
Before we can outline how policies contribute to the management of societal conflicts, we need to describe the characteristics of "managed conflicts." As conflicts act as a necessary component of any democracy by allowing for the expression of diverging interests, we limit ourselves to identifying the properties of conflicts that undermine democracy. In doing so, we draw inspiration from Lipset's (1960) aforementioned finding that democracies should neither suppress conflicts nor let them spiral out of control. We thus argue that whether a conflict undermines democracy primarily depends on its *intensity* as measured by the means that the conflict parties<sup>6</sup> (can) employ to get their way. According to this logic, two types of conflicts undermine democracy: escalated conflicts, where the intensity is too high, and suppressed conflicts, where the intensity is too low. *Escalated conflicts* are conflicts that damage or ignore institutional channels and democratic forums designated to conflict management because the conflict parties violate formal rules and political norms (Gunther & Mughan, 1993). For example, after the French government had raised carbon taxes and reduced speed limits on country roads in 2017 in order to reduce France's ecological footprint, many rural citizens mobilized and formed the Yellow vests movement, which engaged in mass demonstrations and riots to make the government repeal the new policies (Chamorel, 2019). *Suppressed conflicts* are conflicts where weaker conflict parties have no chance whatsoever to achieve their policy goals because stronger conflict parties can afford to ignore them. For instance, opponents of welfare programs that manage to put disproportionate administrative burdens on welfare recipients make it harder for them to claim the benefits they are entitled to and undermine their capacity to politically engage and advocate for their policy goals (Moynihan et al., 2015).<sup>7</sup> *Managed conflicts* are the conflicts that remain if we subtract the sets of escalated and suppressed conflicts from all the conflicts on policy priorities (Weible & Heikkila, 2017) that occur in a democracy at any given point in time.<sup>8</sup> Note that our definition of managed conflicts includes situations where societal groups do not perceive themselves to be in conflict with another group or

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<sup>6</sup> We assume that conflict parties variably consist of (groups of) citizens, economic actors, and political representatives.

<sup>7</sup> By assuming that suppressed conflicts can also undermine democratic stability, we limit our argument to consolidated democracies, excluding cases of seeming "democratic stability" that rest on the permanent suppression of parts of the population, such as the US south during the Jim Crow era (Mickey 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Note that our focus on conflict intensity is different from Schattschneider's (1975) concept of conflict expansion, which underlies much of the literature on agenda setting (see e.g. Rochefort and Cobb 1994; Baumgartner and Jones 2009). Conflict expansion denotes a situation in which a conflict becomes "contagious" and attracts additional, hitherto uninvolved, actors. Conflict expansion is an inherent part of the interest articulation process in a democracy and, unlike certain conflict intensities, does not undermine it. Nevertheless, conflict expansion can be an important driver of increased conflict intensity.



**Fig. 1** How Policies Influence Conflict Intensity (based on Coleman, 1990)

decide not to escalate a conflict even though there is the realistic possibility of conflict emergence and escalation.

To emphasize the novelty of our framework and position it with regard to existing research on democratic conflict management, we formulate two scope conditions for the framework's applicability. First, and contra elements of the literature on the societal and economic prerequisites for democratic conflict management, we expect governments to play a more active role in conflict management. Instead of viewing the "manageability" of conflicts that confront a polity as something that is exogenously given, we assume that *governments can shape or reshape these conflicts through policy design*. In other words, we assume that most conflicts, even those framed as indivisible cultural conflicts, usually exhibit divisible aspects and that policies can influence how conflict parties approach a conflict. Our framework therefore applies to cases where governments can move conflicts up and down a scale of intensity through their policy activity. Second, and contrary to the literature on institutions' role in conflict management and the literature on policy-making processes, we view *policy as an independent variable in conflict management whose post-legislative effects influence societal conflicts*. This shift in perspective implies that our framework neglects the (often conflictual) processes through which policies are adopted, implemented, and administered. Instead, it focuses on the material and interpretive effects of specifically designed policies and how they influence the perceptions and behavior of citizens when they approach and engage in a conflict.

We suggest that there is a basic mechanism at work (pictured in Fig. 1) that allows us to formulate specific, testable theoretical expectations on how policies, through their post-legislative effects, influence conflict intensity (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010). The mechanism captures our central idea that policies influence conflict intensity through the material and interpretive effects they have on (groups of) citizens when they approach and engage in a conflict. While policies (potentially) mitigate conflicts through the distribution of benefits and burdens (material effects), they also influence how people think about a particular policy issue, whether they perceive themselves as part of a conflict and how they think of the people they consider to be their opponents (interpretive effects) (see Campbell, 2003; Mettler & Stonecash, 2008). Peoples' attitudes toward a conflict and their opponents influence their conflict behavior, i.e., their eagerness to engage in a conflict or to ignore it, to agree on a compromise and accept a policy settlement, or to escalate/suppress a conflict.

In the following, we detail and illustrate three versions of this basic mechanism: (i) policies can influence whether conflicts emerge at all through their influence on cleavage structures in society; (ii) policies can influence how conflict parties approach a conflict by providing incentives for focusing on divisible rather than indivisible aspects; and (iii) policies

can influence conflicts that are already entrenched by influencing conflict parties' relative strength. In the three versions of the basic mechanism, material and interpretive effects often influence conflict attitudes in combination rather than in isolation. Sometimes material incentives are what primarily make conflict parties change their attitudes while sometimes the interpretive effects of policies are what primarily influence conflict attitudes. And sometimes it is a combination of material and interpretive policy effects that influence conflict attitudes.

(i) *Policies can influence the emergence of conflicts through their effects on cleavage structures in society.* Conflicts can only emerge if people actually perceive themselves to be part of a conflict and identify others as their opponents. The easier it is for people to identify others as their opponents, the easier it is to stigmatize or stereotype them and the more likely it is that a cleavage will open up, thus facilitating the emergence of a conflict. The influential policy typologies by Lowi (1972) and Wilson (1995) emphasize the important role policies play in the formation of cleavages through the ways they distribute costs and benefits. For example, distributive policies can be expected to be more conducive to conflict mediation than redistributive policies because distributive policies only appear to create winners (Lowi, 1972). Likewise, policies whose costs and benefits are tightly concentrated can be expected to contribute to the formation of cleavages as they create clear winners and losers who can stereotype each other. On the contrary, policies whose costs and benefits are more diffuse are more likely to prevent the formation of cleavages (Wilson, 1995).<sup>9</sup>

These foundational ideas have informed research on welfare policies, which, by distributing benefits and burdens among people, divide people into those who benefit from a policy and those who have to pay for it (Mettler & Soss, 2004). Policy targets and the wider population perceive these divisions to be more or less fair. Welfare policies that only distribute benefits to a small minority of people by coupling entitlement to the strict fulfilment of a narrow set of criteria create a clear division between recipients and taxpayers (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Such policies manifest or create societal divisions between needy and privileged and between deserving and undeserving groups. Recipients may resent being stigmatized while taxpayers may resent paying for the stigmatized. On the contrary, universal welfare policies that distribute benefits more widely smooth these divisions by overlapping the groups to some degree.

A related example of how policies can smooth (or exacerbate) divisions can be found in the literature on the social construction of target populations (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). This literature shows that policies send messages to the wider public about the deservingness and perceived worth of their target groups, or about the legitimacy of their demands (on this, see also Flores & Barclay, 2016). For instance, policies that rely on coercive policy tools such as sanctions, force, or re-education are likely to emphasize policy targets' negative standing in society because they signal that there is no other, more lenient, way of changing their behavior. Policies that create or reinforce the negative construction of target groups in society increase the likelihood that the wider public will perceive itself as being in distributional and/or moral conflict with the target group. Both examples suggest that

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<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007) show how specific policy instruments structure societal processes and outcomes, for example by privileging some actors and interests over others or through the distribution of resources. Importantly, these "political" effects are often independent of the policy objectives pursued.

policies can influence whether a conflict between societal groups emerges at all by making it harder for people to identify others as their opponents.

Another example of how policies can smooth divisions between different groups in society is the case of policies that aim to strike a balance between multiculturalism and civic integration. Most democratic states formulate multiple policies that seek to integrate migrants and ethnic and other minorities by reducing discrimination, promoting equal opportunities, acknowledging cultural identities and fostering cultural understanding across groups (Freeman, 2004; Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). Policies need to strike a delicate balance between acknowledging the identities of minority groups and fostering civic integration into the democratic state (Kymlicka & Banting, 2006). Research suggests that policies that overwhelmingly focus on civic integration while not acknowledging the particular identities of minority groups are likely to alienate minorities and lead to their social, economic, or spatial isolation (Reckwitz, 2020). Isolation can contribute to the formation of oppositional identities. On the contrary, policies that focus on diversity while neglecting the need for civic integration run the risk of classifying identity groups and reinforcing their concerns of marginalization (Wolfe & Klausen, 1997). Moreover, diversity policies that lack a visible civic integration component may contribute to the stigmatization of minority groups as free riders in the eyes of the majority. Both policy orientations are therefore likely to pit minority groups against the majority and are likely to exacerbate group cleavages between them. According to this logic, policy mixes (Howlett & Rayner, 2007) that balance civic integration and multiculturalism are most likely to be perceived as fair by minorities and the majority, and they are therefore best suited for preventing conflicts from emerging between them.

Another example of policies that foster understanding across groups are those that expand access to higher education. Research suggests that people in states that invest in higher education are less likely to think in zero-sum terms. Higher education “militates against simplistic thinking, undermines stereotypes, opens people up to other points of view, and encourages them to tolerate social differences” (Norrlof, 2019, 138).<sup>10</sup> Policies that increase access to higher education can thus mitigate cleavages by encouraging people to tolerate the views of others. Yet another example is policies that create a realistic prospect for social and economic advancement like economic integration policies for migrants (Freeman, 2004). Policies that create prospects for advancement encourage people to assess situations based on flexible, meritocratic identities. The general idea here is a familiar one: People who imagine that they can advance economically or socially harbor fewer animosities toward people who are better off than they are when compared to people who feel trapped in their inferior social and economic status. Policies that encourage people to make meritocratic identity attributes salient simultaneously discourage people from focusing on fixed, often more discriminatory, identity attributes like race or ethnicity (Collier, 2018). To summarize, policies that smooth divisions between groups and help people tolerate social and political differences are likely to mediate people’s conflict attitudes and behavior.

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<sup>10</sup> Although expanding access to higher education from a low baseline might create a division between “Somewheres” and “Anywheres” (Goodhart 2017), i.e., a higher polarization of attitudes between people harboring traditional values and those who have more cosmopolitan values, this effect should reverse once the majority of people has access to higher education – a situation that increasingly applies to younger people in OECD countries (OECD 2017).

(ii) *Policies can influence conflict intensity by encouraging conflict parties to focus on the divisible rather than indivisible aspects of a conflict.* In situations where a conflict can no longer be avoided, policies can arguably influence conflict parties' willingness to work toward reaching a conflict settlement. The policy literature has conceptualized conflicts over policy controversies as "framing contests," with conflict parties strategically highlighting some aspects of a conflict while downplaying, or altogether ignoring, others (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell 2009; Entman, 1993). This research suggests that conflict parties can choose which aspects of a conflict they want to focus on, and policies can be expected to influence this choice.

An example includes policies and their role in the conflicts that are currently taking place in many democracies regarding the transition from carbon-heavy industries to sustainable energy production. In Wyoming, for instance, many local residents heavily contest the transition from coal to wind. Conflicts over the transition to sustainable energy production exhibit both divisible and indivisible aspects. While locals fear job and income losses resulting from the transition, they also oppose wind farms because they cause an "identity crisis," i.e., a perception that the clean-power transition will destroy their traditional "way of life," upend communities' cultural ties to coal and clutter open landscapes with wind turbines (Searcey, 2021). What observers often call "pragmatism" is locals' grudging embrace of economic opportunities in spite of these cultural repercussions.

One can therefore expect that policies that create economic opportunities for locals during the transition process enable them to adopt a pragmatist attitude, or conflict perceptions that focus on divisible aspects. Experts have proposed taxation schemes that make wind farm operators pay enough local taxes to enable local officials to create job alternatives (such as in landscape restoration after coal mine closings), or have argued for policies that facilitate local ownership of wind farms (Searcey, 2021; Wehrmann, 2019). Of course, the degree to which policies can render a conflict amenable to compromise and negotiation will vary from case to case. It is likely that policies' effects on conflict perceptions would be rather limited when conflict parties have their eyes firmly set on indivisible, often cultural, aspects. Nevertheless, as Jan-Werner Müller (2019, 40) observes, what "is routinely presented as a cultural conflict [...] usually involves a much less dramatic fight over how opportunities are distributed through regulatory and infrastructure decisions." In any case, conflict parties that focus on divisible aspects are less likely to adopt an uncompromising attitude, and therefore also less likely to escalate or suppress a conflict.

(iii) *Policies can influence conflict intensity by influencing the relative strength of conflict parties.* In situations in which a conflict is already entrenched and the conflict parties appear to be irreconcilably opposed to each other, policies can still try to create a level playing field. As a considerable amount of literature on democratization suggests (e.g., Rustow, 1970), conflict parties that cannot topple each other are more likely to resign and agree on a compromise. On the contrary, powerful conflict parties often feel tempted to use their advantages to ignore the policy goals of weaker groups in order to get their way. A level playing field may thus temporarily lead to greater conflict intensity, however, it may simultaneously create the precondition for conflict management, if the parties realize that they cannot topple each other.

One way for policies to create a power balance is to divide, and thereby weaken, powerful conflict parties. For example, policies that generate job alternatives for workers in carbon-heavy industries can help break up conflict parties that block clean-power transitions. The challenge today, from a conflict management perspective, is that as the pressure for governments to adopt emission-reducing policies increases, carbon-heavy industries and their workers find themselves on the losing side and may potentially morph into a powerful

conflict party that can obstruct change (Hale et al. 2018). Policies that offer employment and income alternatives for workers in these sectors, such as President Obama's POWER Initiative,<sup>11</sup> a federal funding scheme to support workers and communities affected by the transition away from coal, can create a "beneficial" cleavage between these workers and their current employers.

In addition to dividing powerful conflict parties, policies can also strengthen the more moderate actors within a conflict party, thereby reducing the likelihood that they will opt to escalate a conflict. A historical example is the US National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 1935, which increased the bargaining power of private sector employees by granting them with the right to form unions, engage in collective bargaining and organize strikes. The NLRA thus fueled the emergence of new organizations that centralized and legitimized decisions to go on strike, and, in doing so, suppressed the possible (but rare) extremes of out-of-control wildcat strikes that had been seen in the late nineteenth century or early twentieth century (Rayback, 1959). As Pierson (2015) has emphasized, there are various ways in which newly adopted policies can shift the power balance between competing groups in enduring ways (see also Hertel-Fernandez, 2018). For example, new policies may change resource flows and resource stocks, thereby empowering weaker conflict parties. Moreover, new policies may come equipped with opportunities for weaker conflict parties to insist on their prerogatives and make themselves heard, such as by granting them with the opportunity to use the courts to adjudicate conflict. More generally, by influencing the relative strength of conflict parties, policies are likely to affect whether conflict parties develop a compromising attitude or choose to escalate a conflict and/or suppress their (weaker) opponents.

## Conclusion

This article argues for an updated understanding of democratic conflict management that acknowledges policies' increasingly important role in it. We propose a novel theoretical framework that allows us to analyze how the increased policy activity of modern democratic states influences the emergence and development of societal conflicts. We outline how specifically designed policies, through their material and interpretive effects, can influence peoples' conflict attitudes and behavior, which ultimately determines whether societal conflicts stay within managed bounds, or whether they become suppressed or spiral out of control. Our theoretical framework leads to the overarching expectation that democratic states with conflict-mediating policy infrastructures will be more stable over time than states with conflict-escalating and/or -suppressing policy infrastructures.

Research that examines policies' material and interpretive effects and traces their influence on conflict attitudes, behaviors and overall intensity is likely to face some specific challenges. For one, material and interpretive effects are often tightly interwoven and affect conflict parties differently. Material benefits for one societal group or conflict party might constitute (negative) interpretive effects for the other conflict party. Moreover, it should often prove challenging to isolate and identify the conflict-mediating effects of specific policies. This is first because citizens form political judgements in a web of influences, and

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<sup>11</sup> See <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/08/24/fact-sheet-administration-announces-new-economic-and-workforce> (retrieved February 22, 2022).

second, because it is often difficult to establish the concrete channels through which people “experience” a policy—directly as recipients or contributors, or indirectly through media consumption or some form of personal experience. It should thus be particularly important to clearly specify the hypothesized connections between (i) some policy aspect(s) and (ii) specific conflict attitudes and behaviors by (iii) certain societal groups or conflict parties, and connect these variables through carefully developed causal models.

Finally, there is the question of whether a specific policy has conflict-mediating effects or some aspects of a larger policy mix (Capano & Howlett, 2020). Distinguishing between the conflict-mediating effects of individual policies and larger policy mixes or entire policy sectors should be important for examining whether and how a country’s policy infrastructure influences the functioning of democracy in the long run. After all, a single policy’s influence on the intensity of a specific conflict is unlikely to measurably influence the functioning of democracy, regardless of whether one approximates it in terms of the number of riots or of sentiments of democratic disaffection among citizens. Rather, the overall policy infrastructure of a country, applied to a large number of conflicts over longer time spans, should influence the functioning of democracy. Against this background, it is particularly important for future research to measure the conflict-mediating aspects of entire policy sectors, compare them over time and across countries, and assess their impact on a range of variables that indicate democratic qualities.

While we do not downplay the role and importance of societal and economic preconditions, formal institutions (such as elections or collaborative governance arrangements), or political norms in democratic conflict management, we suggest that policies’ role in conflict management is still underappreciated and underexplored—even in research on policy feedback. Exploring policies’ impact on societal conflicts is all the more important given that several of the factors and preconditions that were traditionally considered to facilitate conflict management no longer exist in modern democratic states, or they are at least in shorter supply than they once were. There is now wide agreement across disciplines that greater social and cultural differentiation, heightened economic inequality and extensive migration have made modern societies increasingly heterogeneous and multicultural. These trends challenge the social fabric that the political economy and social capital literatures consider to be important for the functioning of democracy. Moreover, there is a rapidly growing literature on democratic backsliding that finds that the erosion of democratic procedures and political norms has become widespread in consolidated democracies (Levitky & Ziblatt, 2018; Waldner & Lust, 2018). Against this background, it is tempting to jump to the conclusion that governments’ ability to manage political and societal conflicts is dwindling. This article shows that this conclusion would be premature, as it rests on an incomplete and outdated understanding of democratic conflict management. Assessments of modern democracies’ conflict management practices should be made with an eye on policies’ post-legislative effects.

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