



SCRIPTS

**Crisis, Regression, and Resilience of the Liberal Script.
A Research Programme**

SCRIPTS Working Paper No. 60

CLUSTER OF EXCELLENCE “CONTESTATIONS OF THE LIBERAL SCRIPT (SCRIPTS)”

SCRIPTS analyzes the contemporary controversies about liberal order from a historical, global, and comparative perspective. It connects academic expertise in the social sciences and area studies, collaborates with research institutions in all world regions, and maintains cooperative ties with major political, cultural, and social institutions. Operating since 2019 and funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), the SCRIPTS Cluster of Excellence unites eight major Berlin-based research institutions: Freie Universität Berlin, the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB), as well as the Hertie School, the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW), the Berlin branch of the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA), the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS), and the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO).

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PREFACE

In 2019, the Cluster of Excellence “Contestations of the Liberal Script” set out to study why liberal ideas and institutions regarding the organization of societies had become increasingly under pressure. Six years later, contestations of the liberal script have multiplied and intensified or deepened. The attack on the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, and the re-election of Donald Trump four years later, Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine which escalated the hybrid conflict in Donbass in February, 2022, the massacres of October 7, 2023, and the ensuing wars in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria, the continuing rise of authoritarian populism and religious nationalism around the world – these deep contestations all target the liberal script and have been fueled by multiple crises, including climate change, mass migration, pandemics, and famines.

The research program of SCRIPTS is as relevant as ever. People want to know why liberal ideas and institutions continue to be contested and what these contestations mean for the resilience of the liberal script. The working paper presents the abridged version of the renewal proposal of the Cluster of Excellence 2055 “Contestations of the Liberal Script” approved in May 2025. SCRIPTS looks forward to another seven years of funding to inquire why liberal ideas and institutions continue to be under pressure and how resilient they are in coping with deepening contestations.

The renewal proposal draws on five years of joint research in the Cluster and numerous discussions among the SCRIPTS PIs. It represents a truly collaborative endeavor and claims many authors.

Tanja A. Börzel

Director of SCRIPTS

Crisis, Regression, and Resilience of the Liberal Script

A Research Programme

1 INTRODUCTION: A WORLD IN TURMOIL

The liberal script under stress. Contestations are becoming not only more frequent but also more intense. At the inception of SCRIPTS, we identified expansionist authoritarian and illiberal states as well as violent non-state actors as the most severe challenges faced by liberal democracies and the liberal international order. Russia, China, and the Islamic State (Daesh) deliberately and assertively reject liberal values and norms. They also pose a threat within liberal societies by empowering left-wing and right-wing extremists as well as homegrown terrorism. The election of Donald Trump as US president along with the continued rise of authoritarian populism around the world has shifted our attention towards domestic parties and movements within liberal democracies that claim to adhere to liberal values but contest their meanings. Such contestations manifest themselves in the resurgence of ethno-nationalism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and the rejection of the diversity of lifestyles. Many of these contestations are advanced by authoritarian populist parties that challenge open borders, regional and international institutions, as well as the separation of powers, free media, autonomous civil society, and independent academia. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 exemplifies the entanglement of threats from outside and from within liberal societies.

2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Amidst the growing wave of deepening contestations of the liberal script, our Cluster has investigated the following three research questions ("the 3 Cs"). We have already made major progress on

the first two,¹ while the third will assume centre stage in the second period:

1. What is the nature of the current contestations of the liberal script (C1)?
2. Which are the major causes of deep contestations (C2)?
3. What are the consequences of deep contestations (C3)?

We have conceptualized the liberal script as a set of shared understandings about the organization of society. These understandings are expressed in prescriptive and descriptive statements on how a society ought to be (Sollen) and how it is (Sein). The core of the liberal script consists of the rights to individual and collective self-determination.

Script is a set of shared understandings about the organization of society, expressed in prescriptive and descriptive statements on how a society ought to be (Sollen) and how it is (Sein).

The liberal script consists at its core of the rights to individual self-determination (all individuals are equal and free to govern themselves) and to collective self-determination (individuals act collectively to determine how the community they form governs itself). Spatial and temporal varieties of the liberal script resolve tensions between the two core principles differently.

¹ For an overview over publications within the framework of SCRIPTS please refer to this website: www.scripts-berlin.eu/publications

Illiberal scripts fully subordinate individual self-determination to collective self-determination, or vice versa.

Non-liberal scripts negate both individual and collective self-determination.

Our conceptualization captures temporal as well as spatial varieties of the liberal script, which differ in how they balance the inherent tension between individual and collective self-determination. It also allows us to demarcate liberal from illiberal and non-liberal scripts. Illiberal scripts fully subordinate individual self-determination to collective self-determination (e.g., fascism, communism, religious fundamentalism) or vice versa (e.g., moral individualism, anarcho-capitalism). Non-liberal scripts (e.g., military dictatorship) negate both.

(C1 – Contestations) The focus on tensions between individual and collective self-determination offers a nuanced way to explore the **nature of contestations** of the liberal script. Historically speaking, contestations have been pervasive and emerged in relation to five core tensions within the liberal script:

- Political (individual liberty vs. majority rule),
- Economic (market efficiency vs. social justice),
- Socio-cultural (inclusion vs. exclusion),
- Temporal (current vs. future generations),
- Epistemological (epistemic authority vs. epistemic uncertainty).

All scripts face contestations. For the liberal script specifically, contestations are constitutive as long as they do not question core liberal principles. Such *internal* contestations seek to rebalance tensions within the liberal script, e.g., calling for more or less state intervention into the market. They play a crucial role in validating and internalizing liberal norms and values. In contrast,

external contestations challenge the liberal script and its tensions from illiberal or non-liberal perspectives, e.g., as Russia's aggressive nationalism, China's one-party state capitalism or Egypt's authoritarian rule do.

Our findings of the first funding period show that, since the turn of the millennium, a wave of contestations has been rising and deepening across the globe. Deep contestations have evolved along all five tensions and come from within liberal democracies as well as from the outside. Our research shows that the deepening of contestations is characterized by the growing divergence of political attitudes from the centre (polarization), on the one hand, and the support for illegal goals and illegal means to achieve them (radicalization), on the other (see *research approach* below).

Contestations are social practices that express disapproval of ideas and institutions or their implementation, are publicly justified or recognized by others, and come with some degree of social mobilization. Contestations are crucial for the internalization of liberal principles and norms and their social acceptance.

Internal contestations accept core principles of the liberal script but invoke them to justify disapproval of how liberal ideas and institutions are interpreted or applied. They can also involve competition between different varieties of the liberal script over how to balance inherent tensions.

External contestations reject core principles of the liberal script, seeking to abolish the liberal script or replace it with an illiberal or non-liberal alternative.

Deep contestations, internal or external, are characterized by heightened polarization and radicalization.

The deepening of contestations puts the liberal script under severe stress, as it threatens to escalate internal contestations into external ones, with the latter rejecting core liberal principles. It is unclear, however, which particular constellations of polarization and radicalization are especially likely to facilitate this escalation. **In the second funding period, SCRIPTS will analyse how different forms of polarization and radicalization relate to and interact with each other, with the aim of identifying distinct types of deep contestations and the respective threats they pose to the liberal script.**

(C2 – Causes) A key finding of the first funding period is that most underlying **causes** of deep contestations are endogenous to the liberal script. The liberal script carries the seeds of its own contestation. It does not only enable contestations; it produces them itself. The liberal script is challenged due to its incomplete progress and the differential effects of this progress. Contestations evolve around the uneven redemption of universal rights, equality, and democracy (*broken promises*) and the tolerance and use of illiberal means to reach liberal ends (*hypocrisy*). Our research shows that the ensuing grievances (based on, e.g., perceptions of economic inequality, political disenfranchisement) are drivers of deep contestations, which explain variation in levels and types of contestations between different regions and countries as well as with regard to different tensions. Polarization and radicalization appear much stronger in some countries, like the United States, Brazil or India, than in others. Likewise, economic components of the liberal script (market economy, property rights, meritocracy) are less deeply contested than political, legal, and cultural ones (judicial independence, immigration, LGBTQ+ rights).

Because these self-undermining tensions and trade-offs are built into the liberal script, it has been contested throughout its history. This also

means that these underlying causes alone cannot account for the current deepening of contestations that threatens the liberal script. We posit two sets of proximate causes that are exogenous to the liberal script and have made the endogenous causes more salient. First, the liberal script became dominant after the end of the Cold War and has become more progressive since that time; as a result, its performance is now measured against its own heightened promises rather than compared to alternative scripts (e.g., communism). Second, exogenous crises and disruptions over the past two decades, including the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, and the digital revolution, have accentuated the perception of broken promises, leading to the current deepening of contestations. **In the second funding period, SCRIPTS will further specify how exogenous factors (dominance, crises) interact with causes endogenous to the liberal script (broken promises, hypocrisy) and identify when contestations deepen to a threatening degree – that is, when internal criticism transitions into the rejection of core principles of the liberal script.**

(C3 – Consequences) We will continue to work on pertinent questions regarding the changing nature of current contestations of the liberal script and their major causes, also in light of ongoing crises. However, the main focus of the second funding period will be on the **consequences**. We distinguish five possible consequences of deep contestations for the liberal script:

1. *Resistance*, whereby the status quo of the liberal script is maintained;
2. *Progressive* or
3. *Regressive re-scripting*, whereby the tensions related to major grievances are recalibrated by extending or scaling back liberal rights;
4. *Replacement*, whereby the liberal script erodes and is possibly replaced by a non- or illiberal script;
5. *De-scripting*, resulting in chaos and disorder.

In the second funding period, SCRIPTS will map the consequences of deep contestations in terms of de-scripting (disorder), replacement (non- or illiberal script), resistance (status quo), or re-scripting (progressive vs. regressive) across spatial and temporal varieties of the liberal script.

The deepening of contestations identified in the first funding period poses a threat to the liberal script both at the domestic and the international levels. Whether deep contestations result in de-scripting or replacement rather than resistance or re-scripting indicates the **resilience** of the liberal script. A script is resilient when it is able to preserve its core features by adapting and transforming in a rapidly changing environment and under stress. For the liberal script, resilience refers to the capacity of coping with the deepening of contestations without turning illiberal or non-liberal. Drawing on the literature on resilience, we posit three scope conditions of resilience:

1. Institutional opportunity structures shaping actors' response to deep contestations;
2. Legitimacy understood as the social belief in the rightfulness of the liberal script as a model for organizing society, and
3. Social trust as the belief that others will honour cooperative commitments.

We expect these three factors to influence how actors respond to deep contestations. **In the second funding period, SCRIPTS will develop explanations for why some varieties of the liberal script are more resilient than others in dealing with deep contestations.**

3 CONTRIBUTION TO RESEARCH AREAS

SCRIPTS' impact is based on its institutional set-up as a research platform that brings together the plurality of theoretical perspectives and

methodologies as well as the broad area studies expertise in the scientific landscape of Berlin. The Cluster contributes to multiple research areas and scholarly debates with its particular focus on the internal tensions of the liberal script and the associated deepening of contestations:

- Democratic regression and populism (Börzel et al. 2024a; Schäfer/Zürn 2023);
- New cleavage theory (contending perspectives: Mau et al. 2023 vs. Borbáth et al. 2023; Hutter/Kriesi 2022);
- Norm contestations and the future of the liberal international order (Lake et al. 2021; Viola 2020; Narlikar 2020; Hallerberg et al. 2019);
- Multiple inequalities (Stoetzer et al. 2023; Gruijters, Van Winkle et al. 2023);
- Border and migration studies (Drewski/Gerhards 2024; Mau 2023);
- Socio-ecological transformation (Lepenies 2022; Dann et al. 2020);
- Academic freedom (Kovács/Spannagel 2024; Roberts et al. 2022).

Moreover, SCRIPTS has uniquely positioned itself in Germany, Europe, and globally as a central hub for an emerging research area which studies the challenges of liberal ideas and institutions in a global, comparative, and integrated way, focusing on the entanglement of contestations across different levels, regions, and sectors (Börzel et al. 2024b; Goddard et al. 2024; Berger 2023; Lerch et al. 2022; Söderbaum et al. 2021; Kim et al. 2023). Numerous research institutes and centres around the world study particular aspects of our research agenda.² SCRIPTS cooperates with many of them, including other German Clusters of Excellence.

² To mention but a few: the Varieties of Democracy Institute, University of Gothenburg, the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law, Stanford University, and the Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society, Berlin, on challenges to democracy; the World Society Research Group at Stanford University on illiberal back-lash to the liberal world culture and order; the Re-imagining World Order Project, Princeton University, and the LOEWE Research

Our Cluster stands out in its holistic and comprehensive research approach on the contestations of the liberal script. It is based on interdisciplinarity and methodological pluralism. By bringing together research on liberalism in political science with sociology, history, philosophy, law, economics, educational science, postcolonial studies, and area studies, we have developed a concept of the liberal script that provides a common conceptual framework to bridge epistemological, theoretical, and methodological boundaries between and within disciplines. The concept offers a unique way to understand the increasing opposition to and rejection of liberal ideas and institutions, which are seriously testing the resilience of the liberal script. It has at least four advantages.

First, our conceptualization decentres the liberal script by putting individual and collective self-determination on an equal footing (Börzel/Risse 2023). Western political thought often considers collective self-determination as merely derivative of individual self-determination (cf. Zürn/Gerschewski 2021). We treat the two principles as part of the core of any script that claims to be liberal. This provides for a better appreciation of how different traditions within and outside the “West” relate to the liberal script and form part of its development.

Second, treating individual and collective self-determination as co-constitutive allows us to chart temporal and spatial varieties of the liberal script. These varieties differ in how they resolve the

tension between the two core principles in different world regions (Börzel/Risse 2023).

Third, focusing on tensions between individual and collective self-determination and their resolution is important to tackle the varying nature of contestations. Based on our empirical research, we have developed a framework to capture variation in the depth of contestations across time, countries, and regions as well as different components of the liberal script.

Fourth, we seek to understand and explain the global trend of polarization and radicalization as well as the variation in outcomes of this deepening of contestations by focusing on causes endogenous to the liberal script and their interaction with exogenous factors. The liberal script requires and enables contestations; at the same time, tensions between individual and collective self-determination inherent to the liberal script produce their own contestations. The dominance of the liberal script and the various crises the world has been facing over more than two decades make the broken promises and the hypocrisy of the liberal script more salient.

To investigate the consequences of deep contestations for the liberal script, we introduce the concept of **resilience**, understood as the ability to respond to major challenges without compromising core features. Our research will delineate the contemporary and historical contexts in which internal criticism has become so severe that it undermines core principles of the liberal script. We will then identify scope conditions of the ability of different varieties of the liberal script to cope with deep contestations without compromising these principles. To this end, we will continue to employ an integrative interdisciplinary approach along with methodological pluralism. Both serve to study contestations as well as their multifaceted consequences in a nuanced fashion.

Group World Order Conflicts, Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, on the liberal international order; the International Inequalities Institute, London School of Economics, and the Center for the Study of Inequality, Cornell University, for the study of multiple inequalities; the Borders and Boundaries Project, University of Pennsylvania, and the Viadrina Center Borders in Motion, Europa-Universität Viadrina, on border and migration studies, the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and the Climate Change Center Berlin Brandenburg on climate change and social transformation, and the Center for Studies in Higher Education, UC Berkeley, and the Global Observatory on Academic Freedom, King's College London, on academic freedom.

4 RESEARCH APPROACH: THE 3-C MODEL – CONTESTATIONS, CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES

To capture the dynamic relations between contestations of the liberal script as well as their causes and consequences, we developed the 3-C model. It builds on our previous findings and will guide our research in the second funding period. The 3-C model is rooted in a broad historical institutionalist perspective which focuses on how individual agency shapes institutions, and how institutions structure and shape individual behaviour (Hall/Taylor 1996; Fioretos et al. 2016). It thereby provides the necessary link between the micro level (individual attitudes and behaviour), the meso level (institutions), and the macro level (structures), and accommodates middle-range theories within the different disciplines and sub-disciplines that will help us specify causal relations and mechanisms.



Figure 1: The 3-C Model

The 3-C model (Figure 1) conceptualizes the dynamic relations between contestations of the liberal script, their causes, and their consequences. Rather than a linear sequence from causes to contestations to consequences, we assume that consequences also have effects on contestations. Likewise, consequences can turn into causes of contestations. To account for the endogenous processes that produce and deepen contestations

and for the conditions under which these processes can be moderated or reversed, we need to look at political responses. While broken promises and hypocrisy as two main drivers of contestations are endogenous to the liberal script and reinforced by crises as the major exogenous factor, different political responses can escalate or de-escalate contestations and address their underlying causes. Institutional opportunity structures, legitimacy, and social trust as three scope conditions of resilience crucially shape how actors respond to deep contestations and what consequences follow from them. In the following, we explain this 3-C model in more detail.

4.1 C1: THE CHANGING NATURE OF CONTESTATIONS

Contestations are crucial for the validation and internalization of liberal principles and norms and their social acceptance (Möllers 2020; Wiener 2014). They highlight normative commitments and allow actors to question and appropriate these commitments. At the same time, contestations have been the drivers of the continuous evolution of the liberal script. Liberal ideas and institutions have evolved over time and space, through disapproval, refutation, and resistance, both from within and outside liberal societies (Manent 1994; Sartori 2014; Ryan 2015; Simmerl 2023; Kindler et al. 2023; Krämer 2022; Rupprecht 2020). Today, the liberal script prescribes the right to protest while also providing the rules and procedures for challenging the status quo (Volk 2022b). Contestations need to be channelled and constrained to remain internal and not spiral into fundamental attacks against the liberal script. Liberal norms, rules, and procedures define the domain of legitimate disagreement over how to realize the script's normative claims and commitments. Institutional guardrails serve to ensure that internal contestations do not become external (Deitelhoff/Schmelzle 2023; Riedl et al. 2023). They delimit what can be contested and define the means of

contestation. Violation of basic human rights and violent power transition are off limits (Volk 2024).

Internal contestations accept the core principles of the liberal script as valid but criticize their specific interpretation (too narrow, too broad) or their imperfect or incomplete realization (e.g. double standards). Internal contestations can also involve competition between different varieties of the liberal script over how to balance inherent tensions. *External contestations* reject core principles of the liberal script partially or wholesale, demanding their abolishment or advocating replacement by an alternative script (e.g. religious fundamentalism). Our research shows that the distinction between internal and external contestation is not dichotomous. Rather, the two form a continuum allowing for dynamic interaction (deepening of internal contestations; accommodation of external contestations) and entanglement (internal and external contestations). External contestations can be cast as internal ones, and vice versa. Illiberal actors rarely profess an ideological alternative or advocate the abolition of democracy in the name of an alternative order. Rather than opposing liberal norms and principles, illiberal leaders like Victor Orbán or Nicolás Maduro re-purpose or misappropriate them to stay in power. They invoke liberal language, tools, and frameworks to legitimize the exclusion or repression of particular groups and individuals while consolidating their power and authority (de Búrca/Young 2023). Such subversive contestations are not per se part of an illiberal script. Rather, external contestants borrow from a playbook of “autocratic legalism” (Scheppele 2018) on how to dismantle major components of the liberal script, including free media, independent courts, autonomous civil society organizations, and academic freedom (Bermeo 2016; Carey/Gohdes 2021; Lehmann/Zehnter 2022; Riedl et al. 2023; Kovács/Spannagel 2024; Roberts Lyer et al. 2022). Rhetorical strategies and methods of re-purposing and misappropriation diffuse through

transnational networks (Bar-On 2011; Börzel/Risse 2021b; Alter/Zürn 2020; Stoeckl 2020; Berger 2023; Berger/Vir Garg 2024).

Current varieties of the liberal script seem to have become less effective at keeping contestations in check. In some respects, the current situation in liberal democracies seems to resonate with the 1920s and 1930s, notably with regard to the multiplicities of contestations. The late 1960s and 1970s appear to constitute another historical reference point when liberal democracies were confronted with a sense of systemic failure, expressed by crisis theories from the left and the right (Offe 1972; Crozier et al. 1975; Hof 2018; Gabbas 2022; von Bernstorff/Dann 2019). Today, contestations of the liberal script originate among a wide range of actors, not only at the extremes of the political spectrum. We have also found that contestations have increased in number and become more intense or deeper. Contestations are increasingly polarized and radicalized, both at the domestic and at the international level. They involve not only longstanding opponents but also former supporters who have turned against the liberal script out of disappointment. This deepening carries the risk of transforming internal into external contestations.

Our original distinction between internal and external contestations alone has turned out to be insufficient to capture the deep nature of contemporary contestations. We therefore introduce two different forms of radicalization and polarization, respectively, which characterize deep contestations:³

1. *Ideational radicalization* relates to contestants' shift from challenging specific norms or policies to challenging the political institutions or political systems that produce them;

³ Wolff and Zimmermann adopt a similar approach but do not consider polarization (Wolff/Zimmermann 2016).

2. *Ideational polarization* denotes an increasing societal support for diverging extremes related to either specific norms and policies or institutions and political systems;
3. *Behavioural radicalization* means contestants' growing acceptance and application of illegitimate and illegal means in contesting the liberal script, including the use of violence;
4. *Affective polarization* splits people into antagonistic "us vs. them" camps that no longer see themselves as unified by the same core principles.

Contestations become deeper as they move towards higher levels of polarization and radicalization. The deepening of contestations is not a unidirectional process, though. Ideational and affective polarization do not necessarily align (Borbáth et al. 2023), nor do ideational and behavioural radicalization (Zürn et al. 2024). Moreover, polarization and radicalization can weaken or intensify depending on how actors respond to contestations (see below). If polarization and radicalization coalesce, however, internal contestations appear more likely to turn external. They inhibit compromise across diverging interests (Wojcieszak/Warner 2020), undermine political trust in government (Hetherington/Rudolph 2020), and thereby erode social cohesion and democratic stability (Sirin et al. 2021; McCoy et al. 2018; Kalmoe/Mason 2022; Orhan 2022).

Our findings suggest that the four dynamics of polarization and radicalization combine into different configurations. Empirical research in the second funding period will explore how the four dynamics relate to and interact with each other. The new *Cluster Professorship "Political Psychology"* will help us address the question of how and under what conditions the dynamics of polarization and radicalization can be decoupled. For instance, how can the negative behavioural consequences of strong "us-versus-them" distinctions, such as the unwillingness to compromise or even

the inclination to violence, be avoided without losing the energy of emotions and affect needed for mass involvement in civic and political action? The ensuing typology based on the four dynamics applies to both internal and external contestations. It may be intuitive to assume a linear relation whereby deep contestations reject the liberal script while shallow ones only seek reforms. Indeed, Russia's war against Ukraine illustrates how illiberal actors use violence to contest the liberal script externally (Sasse 2023). Yet liberal principles have also been attacked and rejected by non-violent means (e.g. by voting for illiberal parties). Likewise, demands for policy change (internal contestation) have been articulated through the use of force (e.g. violent farmer protests in France and Germany). In the second funding period, we will investigate how the four dynamics of polarization and radicalization relate to each other and how their different configurations affect the likelihood that internal contestations turn in to external ones.

4.2 C2: CAUSES – ENDOGENOUS AND EXOGENOUS

Current contestations of the liberal script appear to be puzzling in light of the broad developments in world society over the past decades or compared to the conditions of previous periods of deep contestations, such as the 1920s/30s in Europe and the United States or the 1960s/70s around the world: fewer interstate wars, significant growth rates and poverty reduction in a number of emerging economies, modest average unemployment rates in consolidated economies, and the lowest number of full-fledged autocracies in history. Moreover, for the first time in history, there is no illiberal or non-liberal competitor that is as attractive to people around the world as the liberal script still is. While its global dominance is deeply contested, our research has not identified a fully developed alternative model of political, social, and economic order so far.

It remains an open question to what extent China offers an illiberal or non-liberal script for modernity that effectively delivers human progress without individual freedom or whether it pragmatically patches together liberal and non-liberal and illiberal components that do not integrate into a coherent script.

Social scientists have identified numerous structural, institutional, and actor-based causes of contestations (Norris/Inglehart 2009; Piketty 2014; Levitsky/Ziblatt 2019; Mudde 2021; Schäfer/Zürn 2023; Hutter/Kriesi 2022; Trubowitz/Burgoon 2023 among others). SCRIPTS distinguishes between causes endogenous to the liberal script and exogenous factors that mediate their effects. *Exogenous factors* are crises and massive disruptions produced by circumstances outside the liberal script as well as by its dominance – as indicated by the absence of an (attractive) alternative. *Causes endogenous to the liberal script* are embedded in its very own fabric. The liberal script turns on itself by producing its own contestations due to inherent tensions, contradictions, and trade-offs, which are historically or structurally inscribed in the liberal script.

Our research finds that many contestations of the liberal script are driven by causes endogenous to the liberal script, while exogenous factors, such as pandemics and natural disasters, mediate their effect. Drawing on historical institutionalist arguments about decreasing return and negative feedback effects, we hold that the liberal script's promise regarding the continuous improvement of the human condition carries the seed of its own contestations (Deneen 2019; Müller 2016). The more the liberal script delivers, the more the delivery is taken for granted. Next to complacency, delivery heightens expectations and demands (Reckwitz 2021). Rather than failure, the liberal script is contested despite – or because of – its relative success in delivering on its promises.

This argument is not merely about cultural backlash (Norris/Inglehart 2009) or an “anti-liberal counter-revolution” (Garton Ash 2017) by those who lose their privileged position in society (e.g. white heterosexual Christian males). It is also about **two causes of contestations endogenous to the liberal script**, which SCRIPTS has identified and which relate to the incomplete and unequal delivery on its promises. Major contestations target:

1. The liberal script's incomplete and uneven progress on the path toward universal rights, equality, social justice, and democracy (**broken promises**); and
2. The tolerance or use of illiberal means to reach liberal ends (**hypocrisy**).

Both causes are related to the inconsistency between liberal principles and non- or illiberal practice, also referred to as *decoupling* (DiMaggio/Powell 1983; Jepperson/Meyer 2021). Decoupling does not necessarily have to give rise to contestations, as it may provide the flexibility to negotiate tensions and trade-offs between principles of the liberal script. However, decoupling becomes an issue if liberal principles are continuously compromised (broken promises) or if decoupling is asymmetric, with some actors having greater flexibility to act upon their liberal commitments than others (hypocrisy).

Due to its inherent tensions, the liberal script is not able to fulfil all its promises at the same time. Trade-offs are unavoidable and therefore give rise to contestations. Broken promises, in contrast, relate to economic, political, and cultural grievances that people attribute to the liberal script in its current varieties, e.g. because the “failure to deliver” affects certain groups or regions more than others. In the first funding period, we identified five major **broken promises**, which are related to the five inherent tensions and trade-offs within

the liberal script (see above) and are inscribed in different “sub-scripts”:

1. *Social and political exclusion* by borders and boundaries – demarcating social spaces bound together by shared cultures and traditions – which run against the promise of universal freedom and prosperity (borders);
2. *Political disenfranchisement* – resulting from social and economic inequality, on the one hand, and the delegation of political authority to non-majoritarian institutions to solve collective problems, on the other – which contradicts the liberal promise of democratic participation, representation, and accountability (orders);
3. *Social and economic inequality* – due to the prioritization of market freedoms over social solidarity – which breaks with the promise of individual prosperity and upward mobility based on meritocratic principles (allocation);
4. *Exhaustibility of resources, the “flattening of time”, and the foreclosing of any future*, as a result of which the liberal promise of a better future is abandoned (temporalities);
5. *Epistemic uncertainty and injustice*, which contravene the epistemic authority of science on which the promise of progress through innovation relies (science).

Besides broken promises, **hypocrisy** is an additional cause of contestations endogenous to the liberal script. Actors do not practice the liberal principles they preach. This becomes particularly problematic if actors use liberal principles to hold others accountable while using them to justify their own illiberal practices (Finnemore 2009). Such double standards have given rise to two major contestations, one internal, the other external (cf. Kerner 2024; Viola 2024; Çağlar 2024). First,

illiberal practices are *internally* contested as temporal aberrations to be overcome by the emancipatory potential of the liberal script. Excluded or marginalized groups invoke liberal principles to claim equal rights and social and political inclusion (Kunkel et al. 2023; Çağlar 2024). The workers, women, and civil rights movements demand to be given the same rights as capitalists, men, and whites. Likewise, colonized countries and peoples successfully claimed the right to collective self-determination in their fight for independence (Braig 2024; Eckert 2024; Risse 2024a).

Second, *external* contestations denounce illiberal practices as being not merely historically but structurally inscribed into the liberal script, and therefore hard, if not impossible, to overcome (Amir-Moazami 2024). On the one hand, the universal claims of free and equal individuals render it imperative for the liberal script to expand. Capitalism, colonialism, and other forms of domination and exploitation are intrinsic to liberalism, manifesting themselves in attempts to spread the liberal script through military intervention, development cooperation, democracy promotion, or financial assistance (Mehta 1999; Gädeke 2017). On the other hand, the wealth and stability of liberal societies depends on the resources of non-liberal societies (Braig 2024). Liberalism at home necessitates illiberalism abroad (Jahn 2018). In the 21st century, colonial systems of overt domination and exploitation have been replaced by global economic and political structures that perpetuate racial and gender inequalities (Amir-Moazami 2024; Menzel 2024; Braig 2024). Former colonial powers have used the liberal script to justify the ensuing exploitation and domination of “uncivilized” and “underdeveloped” communities that are considered to follow illiberal or non-liberal scripts (Fanon 1963; von Bernstorff/Dann 2019; Rauhut 2021; Braig 2024; Eckert 2024). They invoke liberal principles to stigmatize political opponents as illiberal (e.g. as religious fundamentalists), legitimizing their exclusion and repression at home

and abroad (Viola 2020; Amir-Moazami 2022a, 2024; Menzel 2024). Finally, the liberal imperative of economic growth has not only disproportionately benefitted industrial democracies; the negative effects of economic growth hit poor and marginalized individuals and societies much harder (Brehm/Pellow 2022; Caruso/Maul 2020; Eckert 2021; Narlikar 2020; Braig 2024), and its anthropocentrism destroys the most fundamental livelihood of coming generations (Hickel 2019; Ladwig 2024).

Broken promises and hypocrisy are underlying causes endogenous to the liberal script. They are related to globalization and the ensuing cultural changes (e.g. recognition of marginalized groups) which took off in the 1970s. So why are contestations deepening now? To account for the current wave of deep contestations, we study the role of two proximate causes which are exogenous to the liberal script and mediate the effects of causes endogenous to the liberal script: the **dominance of the liberal script** after the end of the Cold War, and the ongoing **crises** of the past two decades.

The end of the Cold War brought the **dominance of the liberal script**. After the demise of the Soviet system as its last standing illiberal competitor, the liberal script has been increasingly measured against its own standards. Alternative scripts, to the extent that they exist, still lack global attraction. The absence of an attractive contender has also reinforced the endogenous causes of contestations. The end of the Cold War saw a progressive rewriting of the liberal script in international and domestic institutions, recalibrating certain tensions by promising rights and freedoms to previously marginalized groups (e.g. ethnic and sexual minorities). This re-scripting ultimately did not result in the global spread of the liberal script. The “third wave of democratization” (Huntington 1991) was instead followed by democratic backsliding and a return of autocracies (Diamond 2021), while social, economic, and political inequalities have

prevailed in liberal democracies (Atkinson/Piketty 2010; Stoetzer et al. 2023). In other words, heightened expectations for peace, prosperity, and freedom for all contrasted with continued, if not increasing, social and economic inequality, political disenfranchisement, and cultural dis-bounding.

20 years of subsequent and interrelated **crises** have made internal tensions within the liberal script more salient, hypocrisy more visible, and the broken promises more tangible (Gädeke 2017; Narlikar 2020). Over the past two decades, the world has seen one transboundary crisis after another, including a global financial crisis, a global pandemic, and a major war of state aggression. In addition, the digital revolution and the ensuing transformations of the public sphere entail mobilization dynamics on a novel scale. Crises as critical junctures can have both transitory and long-term effects on contestations of the liberal script. Political responses to crises may involve short-term limitations on rights with the potential to exacerbate polarization and radicalization. While restrictions may be tolerated by many, they unmask broken promises and hypocrisy for others (Hartmann et al. 2024; Geissler et al. 2022), particularly when policy-makers appear unresponsive to the related grievances (Wappenhans et al. 2024; Bojar et al. 2021). At the same time, short-term responses can have longer-term consequences, as they open up space for re-evaluating liberal principles and institutions. While crises increase the likelihood of contestations, they also provide opportunities for the liberal script and occasions to display its resilience. Our future research will explore how exogenous factors reinforce causes endogenous to the liberal script and accelerate their effects on contestations.

Contestations of the liberal script vary across time, space, and sectors. The interaction of causes endogenous to the liberal script with exogenous factors accounts for the global trend towards deep contestations (temporal variation). It

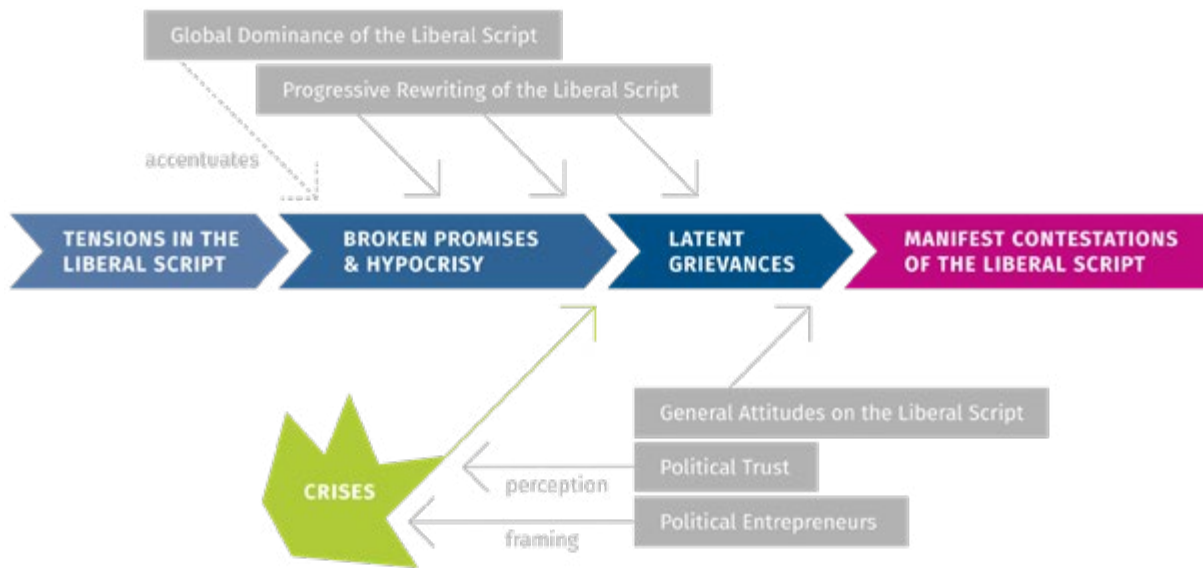


Figure 2: From Grievances to Contestations

can only partly explain differences in the depth of contestations between regions and countries (spatial variation) as well as regarding which components of the liberal script are being contested (sectoral variation). We have therefore developed a model that theorizes when latent grievances – related to broken promises and hypocrisy – translate into manifest contestations of the liberal script. Contestation is only one way to cope with grievances. Actors can also internalize them or resign in apathy and cynicism (Börzel/Zürn 2021; cf. Hirschman 1970). We find that three factors are particularly relevant in mobilizing contestations of the liberal script (see Figure 2: From grievances to contestations): political entrepreneurs, political trust, and general attitudes towards the liberal script.

First, political entrepreneurs frame crises as a threat and link them to latent grievances (Mau et al. 2023; Hutter/Kriesi 2019, 2022). Strategic framing is particularly effective if, second, public trust in political institutions, parties, and elites falls below a certain level at which “critical citizens” (Norris 1999, 2022) turn into “angry citizens” (Dawson/Krakoff 2024; Grande/Gonzatti 2024). Or, third, general attitudes towards the liberal script

are negative to begin with (Hooghe/Dassonneville 2018; Hartmann et al. 2024; Petrarca et al. 2022).

In the second funding period, our research will systematically explore how broken promises and hypocrisy interact with ongoing crises to drive the global trend of deepening contestations. We will further investigate how political entrepreneurs, political trust, and general attitudes towards the liberal script account for why contestations are deeper in some countries than in others, and why certain components of the liberal script are more deeply contested than others.

4.3 C3: CONSEQUENCES

We argue that deep contestations pose a particular challenge for the liberal script, as strong polarization and radicalization are likely to turn internal contestations over how to interpret and enact the liberal script into external ones which reject core liberal principles. Research often focuses on the consequences of growing polarization and radicalization for liberal orders in terms of democratic erosion, regression, and breakdown (Bermeo 2016; Waldner/Lust 2018; Levitsky/Ziblatt 2019; Svobik 2019; Somer/McCoy 2018; Haggard/

Kaufman 2021; Lührmann/Merkel 2023; Riedl et al. 2023). Yet, similar to contested norms, liberal orders can stabilize or even progress as a result of contestations (Lantis 2017; McCoy et al. 2018; Zimmermann et al. 2023; Deitelhoff/Schmelzle 2023). Likewise, the liberal script does not have to perish by way of its *replacement* by non- or illiberal scripts, such as authoritarianism or religious fundamentalism. Nor is *de-scripting* – involving chaos and disorder in the absence of any alternative – necessarily the result. Existing varieties of the liberal script can resist change, although this may pose the risk of deepening contestations in the long run as underlying grievances are not addressed. Historically, contestations have often resulted in a *progressive re-scripting* (Bergner 2022). This involves the recalibration of the tensions related to major grievances, extending rights to marginalized or excluded groups (e.g. transgender persons, migrants, future generations) or other sentient creatures (animals) and inanimate features of the planet (rivers, forests, robots, or artificial intelligence). Conversely, a *regressive re-scripting* could scale back liberal rights and freedoms, e.g. by revoking any abortion rights or the rights of sexual and religious minorities (Ritholtz et al. 2022; Reuterswärd 2021).⁴

Resistance: Status quo.

Progressive re-scripting: Recalibrating the tensions related to major grievances by extending rights to marginalized or excluded groups, other sentient creatures, or inanimate features of the planet.

Regressive re-scripting: Recalibrating the tensions related to major grievances by scaling back liberal rights or freedoms.

Replacement: Erosion of the liberal script and its replacement by a non- or illiberal script, such as authoritarianism or religious fundamentalism.

De-scripting: Chaos and disorder in the absence of any alternative.

We assume that the consequences of deep contestations hinge upon the **resilience** of the liberal script, which will be the major focus of our research in the second funding period. Resilience is the ability to preserve core features by adapting and transforming in a rapidly changing environment and under stress (Hall/Lamont 2013; Chandler 2014; Zebrowski 2015; Burnell/Calvert 1999; Merkel/Lührmann 2021; Riedl et al. 2023). For the liberal script, resilience refers to the capacity of self-correction in tackling challenges, such as social inequality, migration, or the climate crisis – which it at least partly created itself. This entails accommodating external contestations through the development of liberal solutions by liberal means (Przeworski 1995), i.e. by addressing the long-standing grievances that have driven the deepening of contestations without compromising liberal core principles. The ability of liberal self-correction appears particularly doubtful if the causes of deep contestations are endogenous to the liberal script. However, we adopt an actor-centred perspective that does not consider broken promises and hypocrisy to be structurally inscribed in the liberal script (cf. Zürn 2024). This leaves scope for agency. Whether contestations become deeper and eventually turn against the liberal script thus depends on how actors respond to them (Riedl et al. 2023; Zimmermann et al. 2023; Somer et al. 2021; Zürn 2018; Wiener 2014; Hall/Lamont 2013).

⁴ On the categories of progressive vs. regressive see Mansbridge and Shames 2008.

Resilience refers to the ability of the liberal script to preserve its core features by adapting and transforming in a rapidly changing environment. A resilient liberal script copes with deepening contestations without solving the tensions between its objectives in favour of one side only. We posit three scope conditions of resilience: (1) institutional opportunity structures, (2) legitimacy understood as the social belief in the rightfulness of the liberal script, and (3) social trust as the belief that others will honour cooperative commitments.

Politics is about problem-solving. Under the liberal script, political actors are expected to listen to people's grievances and remedy their causes. They also need to protect liberal institutions against contestations that aim at their destruction (Müller 2016). Accordingly, **political responses** can take different forms relating not only to deep contestations (Rummens/Abts 2010; Downs 2012; Kaltwasser 2017) but also to their causes (Taggart/Kaltwasser 2016). Political decision-makers can choose to ignore or defy deep contestations by delegitimizing, criminalizing, and repressing them (Adler-Nissen 2024). They may also shirk or deflect responsibility for the underlying grievances or shift responsibility to non-majoritarian institutions as the better problem-solvers (Zürn 2022). Finally, political decision-makers may choose to engage with and accommodate deep contestations and address the underlying grievances as problem-solvers.

Depending on whether political responses temper or exacerbate deep contestations, liberal incumbents may cede power to radical or extreme forces that seek regressive re-scripting or replacement of the liberal script. Alternatively, liberal incumbents may seek to maintain power by accommodating deep contestations through regressive or progressive re-scripting.

As political responses may address both contestations and their causes, the conversion of internal into external contestations is neither linear nor irreversible. The literature on norm contestations and polarization leads us to expect that accommodation and problem-solving are likely to mitigate or even decouple polarization and radicalization, whereas defiance and problem-deflection will deepen contestations further (Wiener 2014; Zimmermann et al. 2023; Kaltwasser 2017; McCoy/Somer 2019). The same can be expected of indifference and avoidance, at least in the long term, as neither the contestations nor their underlying grievances are addressed (Panke/Peterson 2012).

What are the scope conditions of resilience? What makes political actors respond to deep contestations and their underlying grievances rather than ignore or defy them? Existing research has identified three interrelated factors that appear to be particularly relevant for the resilience of the liberal script (Riedl et al. 2023; Stollenwerk et al. 2021; Merkel/Lührmann 2021; McCoy/Somer 2019; Hall/Lamont 2013).

Our research in the second funding period will start by examining the explanatory power of these **scope conditions of resilience**.⁵ First, the resilience of the liberal script may depend on *institutional opportunity structures*, which determine what forms of contestations are possible and permissible, which actors have access to contestations, and how actors respond to them. Researchers on norm contestations and social conflict argue that liberal orders become more resilient the more they grant all members an equal right to contest its norms, rules, and procedures (Wiener 2014; Deitelhoff/Schmelzle 2023).

⁵ Other scope conditions of resilience identified in the literature include the level of wealth as well as the quality and maturity of democracy and the degree of social pluralism (Riedl et al. 2023; Boese et al. 2021; McCoy/Somer 2019). We assume that political responses to deep contestations are the result of strategic choice rather than structurally determined and focus on factors that are likely to influence these choices.

Order-consistent (i.e. internal) contestations that are ignored, stigmatized, or repressed, are likely to escalate and turn against the order itself. Institutions provide resources, constraints, and incentives for actors to address deep contestations (Carothers/O'Donohue 2019; Merkel/Lührmann 2021; Somer et al. 2021; Müller 2022; Lieberman et al. 2022; Riedl et al. 2023). Parliamentary democracies with proportional representation, for instance, are deemed more likely to make political actors accommodate deep contestations and address their underlying grievances than presidential democracies with majoritarian electoral systems (Riedl et al. 2023; Boese et al. 2021; McCoy/Somer 2019). The winner-take-all principle tends to create two-party systems and to disproportionately represent majorities, while the direct election of presidents tends to centralize political power; both institutional features allow political actors to ignore contestations by minorities and shirk responsibility. Systems that sustain political patronage and electoral clientelism (Osei/Wigmore-Shepherd 2024) generate unequal access and uneven responses to contestations. At the same time, institutions can also facilitate self-reflexivity and social learning, fostering collective problem-solving and mutual toleration (Adler-Nissen 2024; Stollenwerk et al. 2021; Klüver et al. 2023).

A second scope condition of resilience that is partly related to institutional opportunity structures is its *legitimacy*, i.e. the social belief in its rightfulness as a model for organizing society. Inclusive institutions for making collective decisions generate participatory or “input” legitimacy, while efficiency, transparency, and fairness of collective decision-making processes are important for procedural or “throughput” legitimacy. Finally, when institutions make collective decisions that are perceived as effectively tackling societal challenges, they create performance or “output” legitimacy for the liberal script (Scharpf 1999; Stollenwerk et al. 2021; Merkel/Lührmann 2021; Panke et

al. 2022; Langvatn et al. 2020). Institutions, however, are not the only source of legitimacy. Others include shared social norms and values (Schmeltz/Stollenwerk 2018).

Finally, *social trust* is an important scope condition of resilience that is not directly linked to the liberal script. Unlike political trust, which refers to institutions, social trust is about trust in people. It therefore relates to the ability of societies to cope with deep contestations. “Upfront risk-taking” (Luhmann 1989) and the belief that others will honour cooperative commitments provide the social glue among members of communities that enables them to solve collective action problems, particularly in the absence of effective state institutions. Social trust may create certitude that deep contestations will not turn against the liberal script and that collective decisions will be complied with even by those who contest them. This is why an autonomous civil society is crucial for resilience (Riedl et al. 2023; Putnam 2000; Stolle 1998).⁶ Finally, social trust facilitates collective action that is constructive rather than destructive (Stollenwerk et al. 2021; Somer/McCoy 2018). While political participation is a core component of the liberal script, the liberal script does not prescribe trust relations in communities. Liberal rights and freedoms (e.g. freedom of assembly) might be conducive to social trust building. Yet social trust is not exclusive to liberal societies.

We expect these three scope conditions of resilience to shape how actors respond to deep contestations and their underlying grievances, as well as how these responses are received, thus influencing the consequences of deep contestations for the liberal script (see Figure 3: Consequences and resilience).

⁶ To better understand the conditions under which civil society helps cope with the negative attitudinal, emotional, and behavioural consequences of affective polarization rather than be a driver of deep contestations, SCRIPTS collaborates with the Einstein Research Unit “Coping with Affective Polarization: How Civil Society Fosters Social Cohesion.”

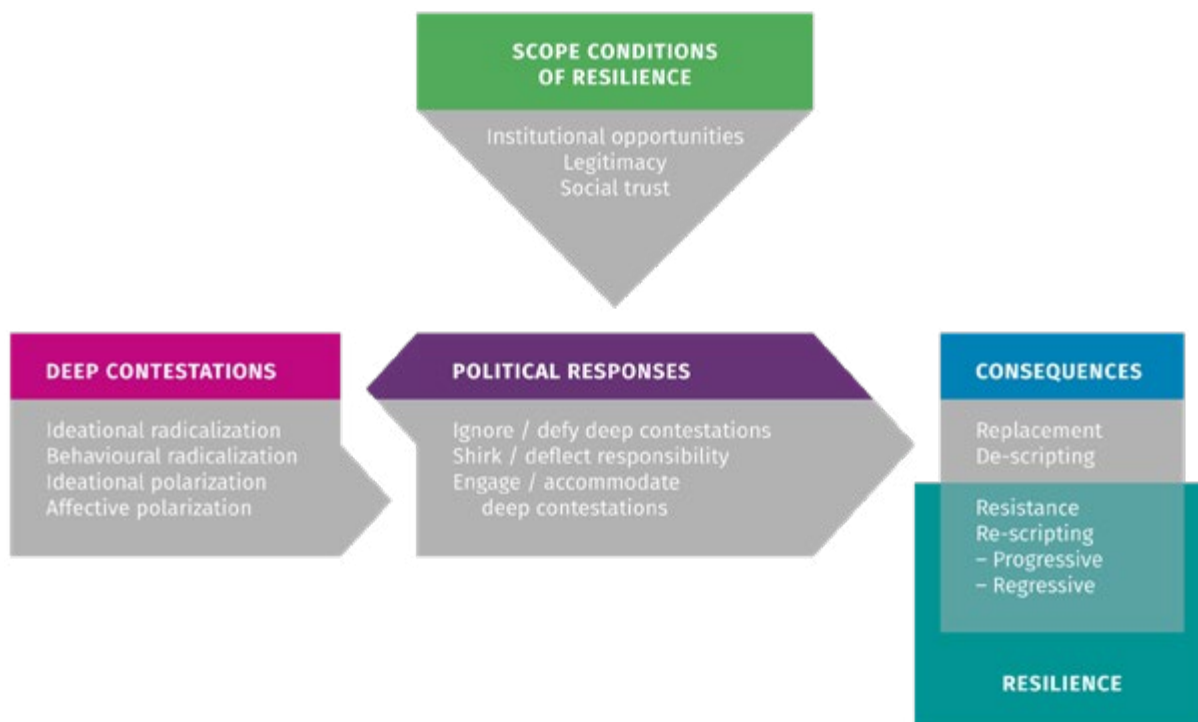


Figure 3: Consequences and resilience

The dynamic relations between contestations, causes, and consequences raises another major question we will be able to address in our research in the second funding period: To what extent and under what conditions does the liberal script provide for the scope conditions of its own resilience? How much do institutional opportunity structures, legitimacy, and social trust rely on liberal values, norms, and practices? How important is the discrediting of alternative scripts for the social belief in the rightfulness of liberal ideas and principles for organizing society? And relatedly, to what extent is the resilience of the liberal script in one society achieved at the expense or even destruction of the resilience of other scripts? The new *Cluster Professorship “Climate Change and Resilience”* will focus on climate change as a crucial case for the resilience of the liberal script. To what extent will core liberal principles such as individual rights, majority rule, or social inclusion as well as the Anthropocentrism of the liberal script allow it to master the socio-ecological transformation necessary to fight climate change?

5 CONCLUSION

The liberal script continues to be under pressure, at the domestic and the international level, particularly by authoritarian populist parties. Yet, contestations do not necessarily have to result into crisis, regression, or breakdown. After all, criticism and disapproval are crucial for the validation and internalization of liberal ideas and institutions and their social acceptance. Moreover, contestations have been the drivers of the continuous evolution of the liberal script. Liberal ideas and institutions have evolved over time and space, through disapproval, refutation, and resistance, both from within and outside liberal societies.

Contestation can strengthen the liberal script rather than destroy it as long as they remain largely *internal*, criticizing the interpretation and application of liberal values. Liberal institutions channel and constrain contestations so that they do not become *external*, fundamentally attacking the liberal script itself. It is these institutional

guardrails around which contestations evolve and deepen. And they seem to have become less effective in keeping these deepening contestations internal. While the liberal script is increasingly contested, it is not equally in decline. Varieties of the liberal script differ in how they cope with deepening contestations.

SCRIPTS hypothesizes that the resilience of the liberal script relies on three scope conditions: First, institutional opportunity structures should help contain deep contestations and prevent them from escalating into challenges against the liberal script itself. Second, legitimacy – defined as the widespread belief in the rightfulness of liberal ideas and institutions – should motivate key stakeholders to defend core principles of the liberal script. Third, social trust – understood as citizens’ confidence that others will honor cooperative commitments – should provide the foundation for addressing collective action problems in the defense of these core principles.

In the next seven years, SCRIPTS will explore the dynamics of contestations, crisis, regression, and resilience. Its research will shed light on a possible paradox faced by the liberal script: its core principles produce the very contestations they are intended to tame and constrain.

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