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It's not about 'open' vs 'closed'

The most important social fault line in our societies lies beyond – and it's one we've long been familiar with

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Much of the current debate about the 'populist surge' has a tendency to fall into false dichotomies. Perhaps the best example of the pervasive black-and-white thinking is the idea that, nowadays, the sharpest dividing line is between supporters of 'open' and 'closed' societies.

This view was championed by *The Economist* back in 2016 in a piece claiming that the ideological divide between left and right is now obsolete: 'The contest that matters now is open against closed.' This line of argument can also regularly be heard from politicians, especially those in the political centre. Tony Blair, for example, warned in 2006 that a new social divide between open and closed was emerging.

And in the wake of the 2015 refugee crisis, it has repeatedly been claimed that German chancellor Angela Merkel is defending an open society against populists who favour isolationism. According to this worldview, a conflict has ignited between those who want to build walls and those who want to tear them down.

Beyond the conventional divide

There's certainly something to the notion of a schism that goes beyond the conventional ideological left-right divide – but that's by no means a new idea. Political scientists have long been preoccupied with the question of how to categorise ideas, movements and parties along a line from authoritarian to libertarian that supplements the right-left axis. However, there are several reasons why it is problematic to understand this new axis simply in terms of an opposition between open and closed.

In reality, while the EU is indeed committed to abolishing internal

For a start, *The Economist* rightly pointed out that political elites often invoke the opposition between open and closed simply as a way to

borders, it has also spent years strengthening the union's external borders.

discredit ideas or political projects they find disagreeable and to present themselves as open; a similar tendency can be observed with the concept of populism. But that still leaves the question of whether the distinction between open and closed is in fact better suited to analysing sociopolitical developments than the standard left-right schema.

Following Britain's EU referendum, pro-European centrist politicians have begun to routinely equate the European project with the idea of an open society in an open world. Eurosceptics from both the right and left of the political spectrum are accused of harbouring fantasies of a closed society. The lesson that Emmanuel Macron drew from the Brexit referendum is that the EU is at the heart of this new ideological conflict. In the 2017 French election, he firmly positioned himself as the pro-European candidate, on the side of openness – in contrast to Front National leader Marine Le Pen's vision of isolationism – and won.

Trade, immigration and globalisation

But fundamentally equating the EU with openness and Eurosceptics with isolationism is not a very persuasive view; the reality is far more complex. In fact, there's little evidence for a divide between pro-openness pro-Europeans on the one hand and isolationist Eurosceptics on the other.

What proponents of the idea of a clear divide between openness and isolationism normally have in mind – though they don't always spell it out so explicitly – is attitudes towards trade and immigration. Debates about openness and isolationism are thus closely linked to questions about globalisation. However, there is simply no evidence that the supposedly open pro-Europeans (that is, all those who support the EU in its current form) are more supportive of open trade and open borders than the supposedly closed Eurosceptics.

This is especially evident in the debate on immigration: the open vs closed narrative presents the EU as opposed not merely to internal European borders, but to borders full stop. But in reality, while the EU is indeed committed to abolishing internal borders, it has also spent years strengthening the union's external borders. So even pro-Europeans don't want to abolish borders, just relocate them.

Macron's strategy of

And what exactly is open about this view? Just consider certain German pro-Europeans who

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supposedly support openness: for them, this appears not to mean wanting borders to disappear, but wanting them to be as far away from Germany as possible, thereby boosting not just the German economy but also their own sense of moral superiority. However, that's not open, merely self-interested.

Simplistic narrative

The open vs closed narrative is also overly simplistic when applied to trade. If we attempt to view trade policy through the prism of openness and isolationism, a similarly complex picture emerges. Certainly, there are Eurosceptics who want to set up new trade barriers both within the EU and between the EU and the rest of the world. But quite aside from the question of whether that is necessarily always a bad thing, there are also many Eurosceptics who are economic liberals and regard the EU as a protectionist bloc.

In the UK, for example, many people voted to leave the EU because they support a radically open world, at least in terms of trade policy: they have nothing against openness when it comes to the movement of capital and goods, but want borders to be closed against the free movement of people, or at least against uncontrolled movement of people from the EU. In and of itself, however, this position is neither hypocritical nor contradictory.

Macron's strategy of framing the 2017 French elections as a choice between open and closed was, to be sure, politically successful. But the limitations of the idea of an all-new, all-decisive political divide between open and closed are made clear by the challenges that Macron now faces as president.

France has locked horns with Germany over EU reform, especially the transformation of the eurozone. Macron has recently been far more critical towards Berlin on this subject than in his earlier speeches on Europe. The conflict is often viewed in geographical terms: as a clash between France and Germany or North and South. But what it boils down to is a direct political confrontation over the question of how much redistribution there should be within the EU. And it is at this point, if not before, that the concept of open vs closed definitively proves to be too simplistic – quite unlike the traditional schema of left vs right.



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