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A conjured-up polarisation endangers democracy

European societies are less polarised than we are led to believe. Yet, this alleged divide is benefitting undemocratically minded politicians

Social and political polarisation is increasing everywhere and it is destroying democracy — or so it is widely claimed. This narrative on the destructive force of polarisation, warning of a range of negative social consequences, has come to feature in many editorials and political speeches.

In the United States, polarisation has indeed increased in recent years, thanks in part to a majority voting system facilitating the creation of dichotomies. And, using an experimental research design, Milan Svolik of Yale University has shown that strong polarisation in the US does correlate with a creeping dismantling of democratic standards – such as attacks on electoral integrity or prosecution of critical journalists – because voters become more tolerant of such violations of democratic rules.

Svolik's survey-based experiment indicated voters tolerate support for undemocratic behaviour by candidates significantly more if these belong to their own political camp, in terms of party affiliation and positioning on political issues. Once such candidates are in office, they can then hollow out democracy from within.

In Europe, the situation is more complicated

While in Europe we like to peer across the Atlantic to predict social developments, the issue of polarisation proves a lot more complicated in electoral systems with proportional representation. So the *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung* partnered with Svolik to conduct the same experiment in seven European countries: Estonia, Germany, Poland, Sweden, Spain, Serbia and Ukraine.

European voters generally punish candidates for supporting undemocratic behaviour: in a direct comparison with a competitor with congruent policy positions and party affiliation, candidates lose votes if they propose something undemocratic. But American voters generally do that too. And, just like their American counterparts, European voters are loyal party supporters first and democrats second, clearly placing the party affiliation of a candidate above all other considerations.

Quantitatively, there is much greater unity than is generally assumed.

Yet, when it comes to polarisation, a more differentiated picture emerges for European democracies. On the one hand, certain issues do polarise some European societies and, in parallel, motivate voters to forgive undemocratic behaviour. In Sweden, we found the most polarising issue was immigration; in Spain, it was the use of the Catalan language; in Germany, it was energy/environmental policy and in Estonia, Poland, Serbia and Ukraine, it was the rights of same-sex couples.

On the other hand, there is a need for nuance. On many issues, European societies are not polarised. Rather, society converges in the middle or exhibits overall strong support or rejection of certain policy stances. So, quantitatively, there is much greater unity than is generally assumed.

Another recent survey confirmed this finding for Germany. The sociologist Steffen Mau and his team showed that Germans were very much in agreement on most major issues, with no general increase in polarisation over the last 30 years.

A focus on identity-based topics

Where polarisation does occur, it centres almost exclusively on identity-based, rather than socio-economic issues. Rather than conceiving of societies as being polarised throughout, we should thus consider polarisation in Europe as issue-specific.

Moreover, while voters tolerate undemocratic behaviour on the most polarising issues in their respective countries, they reward undemocratic candidates even more on certain *less* polarising issues. In Sweden, Germany and Spain, for example, this was true of rights for same-sex couples.

In Spain, this is not polarising at all: the vast majority favour equal rights for everyone. Yet, respondents were willing to sacrifice democratic

standards by voting for a candidate who clearly held undemocratic positions on other issues, because of their preferred position on rights for same-sex couples.

Voters could of course perceive the withholding of these rights as undemocratic in itself. The dismantling of democratic standards was, however, also accepted on other non-polarising issues, namely foreign-policy orientation in Serbia and education policy in Germany.

While some issues may not polarise, they are simply considered so important by voters that, on these topics, the dismantling of democratic standards is perceived as an acceptable course of action.

This may be where 'issue salience' comes into play — a factor some researchers such as Larry Bartels have long identified as relevant to the mechanisms of autocratisation. While some issues may not polarise, they are simply considered so important by voters that, on these topics, the dismantling of democratic standards is perceived as an acceptable course of action.

Correspondingly, not all polarising issues are the first concern of voters. Environmental policy is a polarising theme in Poland but voters do not tolerate the dismantling of undemocratic standards in that connection.

Polarisation plays a complex role in European societies. The simplistic impression that it is steadily increasing all around us may be due to the loud fringes of society and to the dominance that small but vocal and often radical minorities can attain on social media.

Once other media report on these prevalent discourses, the impression of a deep and broad division in society is created and perpetuated. And, in the worst case, this conjured-up polarisation benefits precisely those undemocratically minded politicians who promote the dismantling of democracy from within the offices to which they are elected.

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