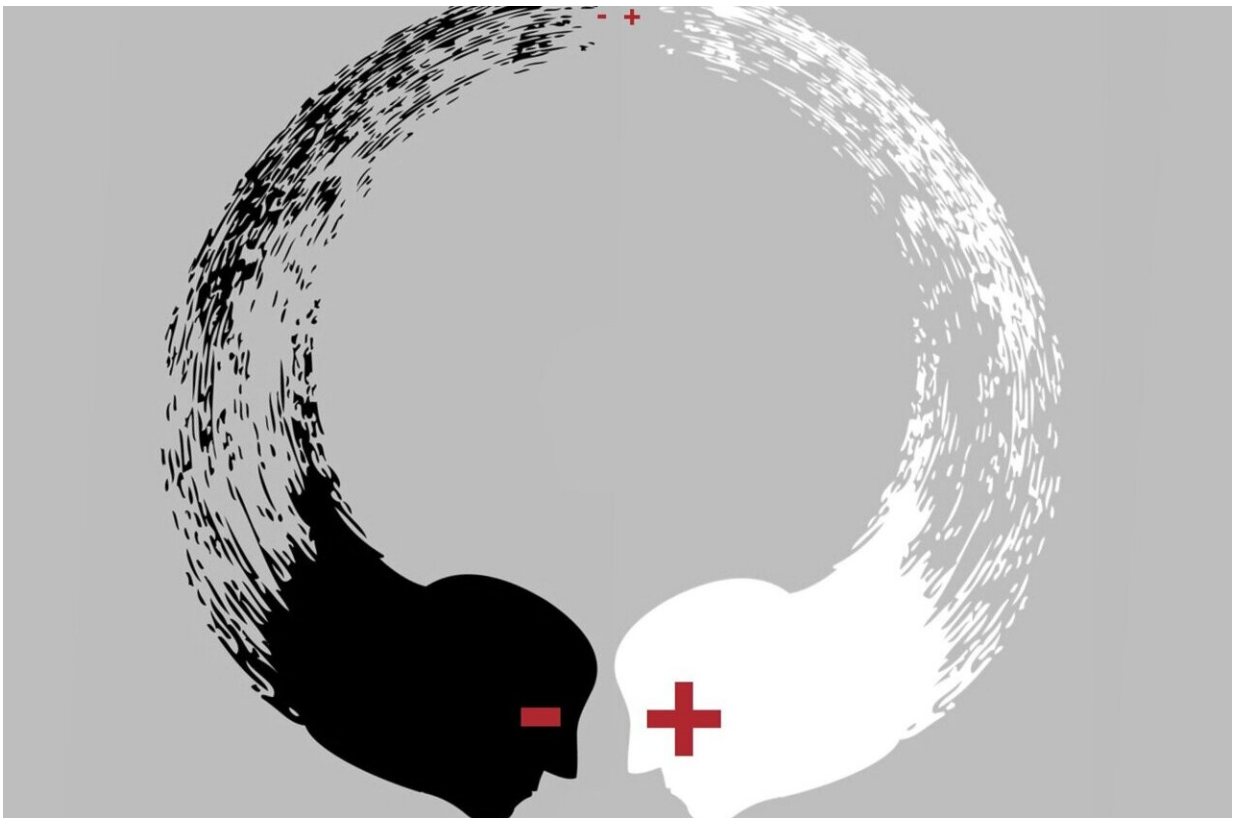


Immigration polarizes the right, and climate change polarizes the left: Study reveals Europe's fault lines

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The analysis of a representative survey conducted in ten European countries shows that affective polarization is at its greatest when it

comes to "climate change" and "immigration."

Generally, people on the political left are more polarized than those on the right. Those on the political right, however, show more affective polarization on the issue of immigration.

Italy has the highest level of affective polarization

In Europe, the amount of polarization varies from country to country. In general, Italy exhibits the greatest degree of affective polarization, ahead of Greece and Hungary. In contrast, those surveyed in the Netherlands and Czechia are the least polarized. Germany lies in the middle of the rankings, along with Hungary and Spain.

Climate change and immigration are the most polarizing issues

Emotional aversion is at its strongest between people who hold differing views on the issues of "climate change" and "immigration."

"When it comes to 'immigration,' those who want to restrict the number of foreigners entering the country are the most polarized; for 'climate change,' it's those who believe policies to combat the problem don't go far enough. While climate change polarizes left-wing and green parties voters, aversion to people with different opinions from their own is dominant among those who vote for right-wing and far-right political parties," explains MIDEM Director Prof. Hans Vorländer.

In comparison, the topics of "gender equality" and "pandemics such as COVID-19" result in relatively low levels of social conflict. Affective polarization is lowest for the topic of "social benefits and their financing."

Protecting sexual minorities polarizes southern Europe, war in Ukraine polarizes Czechia

The topic of "policy towards sexual minorities" is particularly polarizing in Italy, Spain and Greece. What's striking is that women are more polarized on this issue than men. The war in Ukraine polarizes Czechia the most. Many Czechs are very critical of their government and its policies in support of Ukraine.

The differences between actual polarization effect and perceived potential for societal division

Not only is immigration the most polarizing topic, it also carries the greatest potential for societal division. However, not all topics that trigger emotional debate in the public sphere are attributed the same level of potential for societal division. This difference is most noticeable between the topics of "climate change" and "social benefits and their financing."

Political measures relating to climate change elicit strong negative feelings between people who hold differing views. Nevertheless, the respondents believe that there is only a slight potential for social division here. For "social benefits and their financing," the results are completely different—this issue causes little polarization, although respondents believe it has a high potential to divide society.

The educated urban class and those on the political left are the most polarized

The results show that [older people](#), people with a high degree of educational attainment and income, and residents of large cities have the

strongest negative feelings toward people who think differently. Political orientation also plays a role: On average, those who identify themselves as left-leaning are more polarized than those who identify themselves as right-leaning.

Voters of left-wing and far-left parties, and of green or environmental parties, are significantly more polarized than others across Europe. Individuals who show the least amount of aversion towards people with opinions different to their own are non-voters as well as the supporters of Christian democratic or conservative parties.

Germany: AfD voters and Bündnis 90/Die Grünen voters are more polarized than others

In Germany, older respondents are also significantly more polarized than younger people. However, there is no striking difference between people who have completed higher education and those who have not. Income as well as urban/rural differences also do not play a major role. People who place themselves outside of the center politically are more polarized.

Voters of the right-wing populist AfD party as well as Germany's Green party, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, display the highest degree of polarization. The AfD's supporters are more polarized than those of other right-wing parties in Europe. This can be seen especially in topics of "immigration," "war in Ukraine," and "pandemics like COVID-19."

Causes and effects of strong affective polarization

There are various causes of affective polarization—current events, media discourse, and political confrontations are as much responsible for affective polarization as strong political convictions and the desire to

make a change.

High affective polarization indicates that an individual's opinion is emotionally charged and linked to processes of identity formation, social association, and dissociation, as well as to related dynamics of ostracization from other groups: "High affective polarization can therefore indicate ideological hardening, insufficient understanding of differing views, and a lack of willingness to compromise. Democratic decision-making processes are then made more difficult and acceptance of these dwindles. This harms democracy," emphasizes MIDEM Director, Prof. Hans Vorländer.

About the study and methodology

The study is based on a survey conducted in collaboration with YouGov in the fall of 2022 in ten member states of the European Union (Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden). Around 20,000 people answered questions on the following topics: immigration, the war in Ukraine, pandemics such as COVID-19, [climate change](#), social benefits and their financing, gender equality, and policy toward sexual minorities.

Instead of surveying differences in attitudes on various political issues, the study measured the emotional evaluation of groups of people with opposing political views. For this purpose, the respondents were not only asked about their own views, but also their feelings towards other people with different points of view. It was therefore possible to analyze polarization dynamics that go beyond socio-structural factors.

"We still know so little about the determinants and consequences of affective polarization in Europe. We need research which addresses the divisive effects of political topics. This is why we are so grateful that the MIDEM study has provided initial findings and painted a picture of

[polarization](#) in Europe," explains Katja Lenz, Project Manager at Stiftung Mercator.

Provided by Dresden University of Technology

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