First empirical evidence of an identity-related societal cleavage

17 June 2021

An international survey by the University of Münster's Cluster of Excellence "Religion and Politics" provides the first empirical evidence of an identity-related political cleavage of European societies that has resulted in the emergence of two entrenched camps of substantial size. "We see two distinct groups with opposing positions, which we call "Defenders' and "Explorers", says psychologist Mitja Back, spokesperson of the interdisciplinary research team that conducted the most comprehensive survey of identity conflicts in Europe to date. "Who belongs to our country, who threatens whom, who is disadvantaged? Across all such questions of identity, the initial analyses of the survey reveal a new line of conflict between the two groups, which have almost diametrically opposite opinions. In debates over identity, these opinions have hardened into seemingly irreconcilable conflicts. The study could open up new avenues to tackle these conflicts."

The two camps together account for a significant proportion of citizens in all countries: more than one-third in Germany and almost three-quarters in Poland. In liberal democratic states like Germany, the proportion of "Defenders' is 20% and that of "Explorers," 14%. In France and Sweden, 14% and 29% "Defenders," and 11% and 15% "Explorers," respectively, were observed. In a semi-authoritarian country like Poland, where according to the researchers the government provides populist support to the "Defenders' opinions, the proportion of both groups combined is 72%. "This shows how much the conflict can escalate in a country: the polarized positions can grow to form the majority," says Mitja Back. "The degree to which a population becomes polarized and how far feelings of threat and narrow ideas of identity also entail feelings of disadvantage and mistrust therefore vary depending on the political system. This suggests that identity conflicts are open to political influence."

Who are "Explorers' and "Defenders'?"
more distrustful of political institutions.

The "Explorer' group, on the other hand, reject a narrow definition of belonging based on ethno-religious criteria. Its members do not feel threatened by foreigners, but instead see immigration and growing diversity as an opportunity, and they also advocate a society with many notions of life oriented towards equality. They see themselves as being well represented by the political system, are more satisfied with democracy, and are more likely to trust political institutions. In semi-authoritarian Poland, however, where the government provides populist support to "Defenders' positions on ethno-religious homogeneity and protection against foreigners, the "Explorers' also feel disadvantaged and are dissatisfied with democracy and government.

The two groups also differ strongly in cultural, religious, psychological and social terms, with "Defenders' in all countries being far more attached to home and religious than "Explorers." The former also have a stronger preference for social hierarchies and trust other people less, while the reverse is true of the latter. "Explorers' also tend to be quite young, highly educated, more likely to live in a city, and less likely to be affected by socio-economic hardship. Except in Poland, "Defenders' are more likely than "Explorers' to be found among the elderly and the low educated. They tend to live in rural areas and, again with the exception of Poland, consider themselves to have a lower social status.

Political effects and recommendations

The cultural conflict also has strong political effects: "Defenders' favor populist parties and believe much more in the concept of a "strong leader"; they are also prone to conspiracy theories and advocate elements of direct democracy. "Explorers' hold diametrically opposed views. For example, 26% of "Defenders' in Germany and 57% in Poland are likely to vote for a populist party, while "Explorers' tend not to.

According to the researchers, this can represent fundamentally different concepts of politics: "Defenders' favor concepts more in line with anti-pluralist ideas that claim that political regulations should express a single popular will; "Explorers," in contrast, share attitudes more compatible with pluralist ideas that claim that politics is a process of negotiation and compromise between different interests. Mitja Back: "A person's positioning in the conflict as "Explorer' or 'Defender' can have a strong impact on the form of democracy desired. Cultural conflicts over identity have therefore become very entrenched politically, and now structure the population's social and political views to a significant extent."

By linking their results to other insights from current research, the authors see the polarized positions as being rooted in fundamental and rather stable psychological needs of varying strength, such as security and stability ("Defenders"), or openness and change ("Explorers"). According to the report, this implies that societies are always composed of a mixture of "Explorers' and "Defenders." In contrast to more material conflicts, the identity conflict is therefore more difficult to negotiate, and especially so when ideas of identity are framed in religious or fundamentalist terms. Identity conflict is also exacerbated by the effects of globalization, such as migration, increasingly supranational instead of national policies, and crises such as the financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. "This makes questions of identity—who belongs to the country, or who triggers feelings of threat—all the more urgent."

The researchers therefore urge politicians to refrain from taking one of the two sides. Neither in liberal democracies nor in authoritarian countries has this led to movement in entrenched conflicts, as at least one group always feels excluded. Rather, it is important to take the underlying psychological needs on both sides seriously, and to understand them as social resources, while tracing the sometimes widely divergent demands of both groups back to their functional core. "In this way, it is possible to filter out which positions are not acceptable to each group, and which are open to negotiation. Only by doing so can we find a basis for compromise that currently seems impossible, as well as space for dialog without one side devaluing the other."