

DEBATE/DEBATE: POLITICAL POLARISATION. A MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH/
LA POLARIZACIÓN POLÍTICA. UN ENFOQUE MULTIDIMENSIONAL

Editorial: Political Polarisation: Definition, Dimensions, Measuring, Results and Effects

Editorial: La polarización política: definición, dimensiones, medición, resultados y efectos

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an introduction to the current state of research on political polarisation. It is part of the Debate section of the *CENTRA Journal of Social Sciences*, which contrasts different approaches concerning its definition, dimensions, measurement and the empirical evidence regarding its impact and evolution in Spain from a comparative perspective. Political polarisation—regardless of its variant (ideological, affective, everyday, etc.), its origins or its discursive battleground (ideological, identity-based, value-driven, etc.)—is characterised by confrontation between elites and/or citizens aligned into irreconcilable block. The article begins by establishing a conceptual framework and highlighting its socio-political significance, distinguishing its presence among elites and the general public to emphasise its emotional component, as well as its possible causes and effects. Its multidimensional nature and measurement serve as a prelude to the three articles included in this section, which focus, respectively, on the measurement and assessment of ideological polarisation, identity-based polarisation and the so-called GAL/TAN dimension.

KEYWORDS: polarization; ideology; public policies; national identity; postmaterialism; GAL/TAN.

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RESUMEN

Este artículo realiza una introducción al estado de la cuestión de la polarización política. Se enmarca en la sección Debate de la *Revista CENTRA de Ciencias Sociales*, dedicada a contrastar los distintos enfoques sobre su definición, sus dimensiones, su medición y las evidencias empíricas sobre su impacto y evolución en España, en una perspectiva comparada. La polarización política, sea cual sea su variante (ideológica, afectiva, cotidiana, etc.) o inspiración y campo de batalla dialéctico (ideológico, identitario, valorativo...), es la confrontación entre élites y/o ciudadanos alineados en bloques irreconciliables. Se comienza con una delimitación conceptual y las evidencias de su relevancia sociopolítica, distinguiendo su presencia entre las élites y la ciudadanía para resaltar su componente emocional, así como sus posibles causas y efectos. Su carácter multidimensional y la medición dan paso, precisamente, a los tres artículos referidos, respectivamente, a la medición y evaluación de la polarización ideológica, la identitaria y la llamada GAL/TAN.

PALABRAS CLAVE: polarización; ideología; políticas públicas; identidad nacional; postmaterialismo; GAL/TAN.

1. Introduction

Liberal democracy is characterised by competition among party elites over the politicisation of interests, social conflicts and preferences of all kinds, aiming to align citizens around programmatic alternatives to power, which can be achieved through the maximisation of support and electoral aggregation. This dynamic, inherent to pluralist societies and systems, fosters fragmentation among competitors and, above all, competitive polarisation within an unstable equilibrium based on alternation and negotiation, which may be more or less inclusive.

The degree of fragmentation (ranging from bipartisanship to more or less extreme multi-party systems) and the intensity of polarisation (between centripetal competition and centrifugal, anti-system segmentation), along with their characteristics and reciprocal dynamics, have long posed challenges to the governability, stability and performance of our democracies (Sani and Sartori, 1983). These issues have become a major academic concern and a central subject of study within the field of Western political science. We are witnessing the resurgence of old political spectres of an ethnocentric and authoritarian nature, infused with xenophobia and populism. These forces give rise to aggressively introverted movements, characterised by the search for a scapegoat and the predominance of emotion over reason (Arias, 2016).

Undoubtedly, the most extreme manifestation of this polarising dynamic occurs when attitudes and discourses of allegiance versus hatred escalate into violent behaviour, leading to confrontations between opposing factions or even the eradication of adversaries. The consequences of such developments can be difficult to predict and, more importantly, to contain. The past decade has been marked by violent incidents rooted in political polarisation, of which we will highlight only a few cases that have occurred in consolidated democracies and during key moments of electoral

decision-making: 1) the assault on M. Rajoy during a campaign event in Pontevedra on 16 December 2015; 2) the insurrectional acts surrounding the illegal referendum on Catalan independence on 1 October 2017 (with a 43% turnout of the Catalan electorate) and, in particular, the violent demonstrations by the CDR and the so-called Democratic Tsunami strategy in response to the *procès* trial verdict issued by the Supreme Court on 14 October 2019; 3) the attempted assassination of Jair Bolsonaro during a campaign event in Brazil on 6 September 2018; 4) the violent assault on the United States Capitol on 6 January 2021, opposing the proclamation of Joe Biden as President of the United States; 5) the assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during a campaign event on 8 July 2022; 6) the attempted assassination of Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico on 15 May 2024; 7) a series of assassinations of political leaders during electoral processes in India; 8) violent clashes in France surrounding the 2024 European and legislative elections; and finally, 9) the attempted assassination of former US President Donald Trump during a campaign event on 14 July 2024 in Butler, Pennsylvania. It is evident that this issue holds undeniable relevance from any perspective, particularly as it strikes at the very heart of our advanced democracies.

2. Elites and citizens

The first distinction to address is the differentiation between the polarisation of the elites (primarily partisan), the polarisation of the citizenry (or electorate) and, increasingly, that of opinion and/or emotion shapers, such as the *mass media* and *social media*. Evidently, the key issue lies in whether the competitive strategies of the elites and the media permeate the electorate or broader citizenry beyond mere alignments or the formation of preferences, fostering attitudes that are, to varying degrees, “tribal” (Clark *et al.*, 2019), structured around an *us-versus-them* or *friend-versus-enemy* confrontation.

This phenomenon is, therefore, deliberately cultivated by the elites (and their *communication strategists*) and reinforced by the media and social media to segment the citizenry into groups defined by adherence or rejection, based on an imaginary yet functionally effective boundary (Miller, 2023, p. 41) from the standpoint of political competition. The challenge arises when this dynamic escalates into radicalisation, intolerance and mutual rejection among these segments, ultimately hindering deliberation and restricting pluralism.

3. From the programmatic to the emotional

It is one thing for political competitors to offer distinct programmes and policy proposals aligned with their ideological framework of beliefs and values, aimed at addressing the interests of a defined “social base” and thereby fostering party identification (*policy preferences*). It is quite another when polarisation is driven by positions taken either positively (in favour of *one’s own side*) or negatively (against the *others*).

This type of polarisation takes on an attitudinal, social and emotional dimension, leading to unconditional loyalties and/or extreme delegitimisation of the opposition, resulting in a deeply personal form of Manichaeic division (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012, pp. 405 ff.). In this sense, it resembles the behaviour of *hooligans* on both sides of sporting events, whom we are forced to endure, powerless, all too often.

Thus, while partisan elites—depending on the context—are ultimately compelled to negotiate and find common ground on matters of the *political agenda*, no matter how far apart they may be (political or programmatic polarisation), this dynamic becomes significantly more challenging, if not impossible, when emotional vetoes rooted in incompatibility, delegitimisation or even the hatred of personal radicalisation come into play (affective polarisation). In this way, political polarisation seeps into social relations like a self-destructive poison and, as such, becomes inherently *anti-systemic* (Rojo and Crespo, 2023).

The steady rise of support for anti-system parties and attitudes in recent decades across our liberal democracies is an undeniable and ever-present reality (Hernández and Kriesi, 2016; Wolinetz and Zaslove, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019), leading to a corresponding intensification and expansion of both political and affective polarisation. The centripetal, moderating and inclusive dynamics of previous decades—characterised by high levels of electoral mobilisation, party loyalty, institutional trust and intersubjective confidence—have been replaced, more or less abruptly, by centrifugal, radical or even extremist attitudes, electoral demobilisation, increasing dissatisfaction with institutional functioning, the crisis of traditional parties and intersubjective distrust, all of which are key drivers of affective polarisation (Westwood *et al.*, 2018).

4. Possible causes

Social scientists have sought to diagnose the causes of this phenomenon by distinguishing between several analytical levels: partisan or social movement elites, the citizenry or general public, and opinion shapers (traditional and social media). At the same time, three types of explanations have been proposed: economic, institutional and cultural. First, it is not unreasonable to link the emergence or, in some cases, the strengthening of extremist *anti-establishment* movements and parties—and the corresponding rise in popular support—to periods of economic downturn, increasing inequality, the deterioration of social protection and major public services and heightened social exclusion and vulnerability. Similar patterns were observed during the Great Depression of the 1930s and, more recently, following the Great Recession triggered by the 2008 global financial crisis (Funke, Schularick and Trebesch, 2016). These adverse social and economic conditions create fertile ground for populist and delegitimising narratives of traditional parties (“austericide”) to take root among discontented sectors of the citizenry, fuelling radical attitudes of rejection.

Second, the identity and programmatic crisis of traditional parties—driven by the phenomenon of so-called “political cartelisation” (Katz and Mair, 2018) and their

colonisation of state institutions as instruments of power—along with irregular financing, political corruption and leadership crises, has rendered them giants with feet of clay. Fixated on a centripetal competitive dynamic that left them without alternative agendas, merely alternating and sharing institutional power, these parties have fostered a sense of political “orphanhood” across the competitive spectrum. As a result, growing segments of the electorate have felt unrepresented and devoid of political prospects. Once again, conditions were ripe for the emergence of extremist movements and populist, staunchly *anti-establishment* (or *anti-elite*) leaders.

The third explanatory approach concerns the transformations within our societies resulting from the effects of globalisation in general and regional integration processes in particular. This is especially evident in the EU, where there has been a clear loss of sovereignty for nation-states in crucial economic matters such as investment, the financial system, public debt, taxation, energy and technological autonomy and the sustainability of traditional productive sectors, among others. As a result, the political agenda of the elites has increasingly shifted towards cultural issues related to beliefs, values and social practices (gender identities, the climate crisis, abortion, euthanasia, secularism, immigration, multiculturalism, drug consumption, disinformation, privacy, solidarities, pacifism and more). Many of these have escalated into full-scale battlegrounds (*culture wars*), marked by extreme positions held by movements and parties (Hunter, 1991). This form of emotional polarisation, centred on values and identities, is actively pursued by the elites and their media affiliates to secure their hegemony (Gramsci, 1924; and the neoconservative reinterpretation by De Benoist, 1977) in both social and political spheres through the imposition of their ideological world view via mechanisms such as disinformation, denialism, historical revisionism and various forms of cancellation. All of this gives rise to a new *cleavage* or axis of confrontation (Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

Beyond the combined impact of these three causal factors on each particular case, additional contextual elements must also be considered. These include the structure and dynamics of party competition, the persistence of unresolved historical *cleavages*, electoral regulations, elite selection processes, *accountability* mechanisms and, above all, the increasing personalisation of politics and electoral campaigns (particularly through negative advertising). In this context, communication and image “strategists” play an increasingly significant—yet insufficiently examined—role in exacerbating emotional polarisation, particularly with the rise of social and digital media (Crespo, Melero, Mora and Rojo, 2024).

In social and political environments where such dynamics operate, whether temporarily or over the long term, the emergence of extremist *anti-establishment* parties and/or movements—driven by populist discourse (Mudde and Rovira, 2018) and intent on destabilising the prevailing partitocratic balance—fosters affective polarisation when they succeed in becoming reference points for group structuring and position-taking within competing ideological blocs. This is particularly true when partisan elites are more inclined towards conflict than cooperation. One might assume that the climate of affective polarisation is activated and intensified only dur-

ing electoral cycles, following the rhythm of campaigns in which group identities and partisan allegiances are emotionally reinforced through mutual distancing and rejection between competitors (*us vs them, friends vs enemies, good vs evil*). However, this climate has ceased to be cyclical or temporary, instead evolving into a state of permanent negative campaigning, controlled by weakened party organisations dominated by populist leadership (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012).

While this is the reality at the elite level, affective polarisation among the electorate is more likely in contexts of social *segmentation* (Sartori, 1980, pp. 224 ff.), where ideological and partisan divisions take root in homogeneous socio-demographic profiles with mutually negative perceptions. Beyond hindering cooperative interactions, these divisions derive their primary incentive for reinforcement from rejection and confrontation. Thus, ideological, programmatic or partisan divisions become further exacerbated when they are *tribalised*, taking root in social environments marked by strong group identification and fostering attitudes and behaviours of prejudice and intergroup rejection, leaving little room for connection.

This picture is further reinforced at the level of traditional media and social media, beyond the influence of communication campaigns already mentioned. Exposure to and consumption of media with a clear political bias—particularly when presented in a radical manner—directly amplifies the emotional polarisation of audiences, deepening the “perceptual gap”. “Spectacle politics” (infotainment, partisan talk shows, etc.) and disinformation are two inherently polarising mechanisms, often strategically programmed and scripted by audiovisual media. Added to this, in recent decades, is the growing prominence of the digital ecosystem, with its strong capacity for social penetration and segmentation, further intensifying mechanisms of disinformation, discursive simplification and negative radicalism (Yarchi, Baden and Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021, pp. 98 ff.; Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021, pp. 188 ff.).

5. Effects

As Sani and Sartori (1983) warned, polarisation becomes particularly dangerous for democracy when it distorts the competitive dynamic between political *adversaries* who seek to persuade in order to prevail, transforming it instead into a relentless battle between *enemies* to be eliminated. This fractures society into irreconcilable factions, obstructing any possibility of understanding or agreement between opposing blocs. In this way, the inherently *centripetal* nature of democratic competition and governance is supplanted by a *centrifugal* dynamic, shaped and dictated by the extreme poles of each political bloc. At the same time, centrist or moderate political attitudes and actors are increasingly marginalised—an ongoing trend observed in nearly all democracies today, with few exceptions. The *anti-system* movement finds space to take root and gains incentives for its consolidation precisely through institutional and non-institutional practices that strengthen its capacity to weaken or eliminate political adversaries, even at the expense of the separation of powers or the fundamental principles of the rule of law. This creates fertile ground for *politics of*

overpromise and for populist discourses and movements that are blatantly irresponsible and dismissive of the democratic demands of *accountability*.

The institutional consequences are evident in terms of partitocratic instability and volatility, systemic governance challenges and, ultimately, the risk of collapse (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Democratic quality inevitably deteriorates, as such institutional instability weakens institutional performance and fosters the rise of leaderships inclined towards personalist imposition. These leaders often pursue clientelist political agendas, implement reforms and institutional practices aimed at restricting freedoms and rights (such as freedom of information or judicial independence), curtail political competition (through electoral mechanisms and financing) and undermine the separation of powers—consistently favouring the executive over other branches of government (Llera, 2016b).

As previously mentioned, the problem worsens when the effects of polarisation permeate the social fabric and influence the citizenry, particularly through increasing negative attitudes towards politics, dissatisfaction with key political actors (anti-party sentiment), the widespread erosion of institutional trust, a crisis of representation, and growing scepticism about the functioning of democracy (Torcal and Montero, 2006). These dynamics ultimately lead to the erosion of democratic support and, consequently, its social legitimacy. The next stage occurs when political disaffection begins to erode social trust (Torcal and Martini, 2018) and interpersonal relationships, exacerbating intolerance, dismantling value systems and subordinating ethical principles to incompatible group loyalties.

Once a polarised mindset takes hold among voters—who perceive themselves as deeply divided along dual *cleavages* of group loyalty—emotions, fears and unconscious desires increasingly filter and distort the interpretation of information and political positions, both their own and those of others. Such a context is particularly conducive to polarising leaderships and their communication teams, who, by reinforcing these induced patterns of reasoning, pursue electoral success by exploiting the fears and anxieties of their supporters.

6. Measuring a multidimensional reality

Polarisation, therefore, can be studied and measured either as a state (the degree of opposition between opinions or perceptions relative to a theoretical maximum) or as a process or dynamic (the evolution of such opposition over time). The study of bipolar competition in liberal democracies is an integral aspect of political analysis, encompassing both political culture and, more specifically, electoral behaviour. The key lies in identifying and, where possible, measuring the substantive dimension that explains, on the one hand, the defining characteristics of partisan strategies and, on the other, the nature of political alignments within the electorate. Thus, different explanatory paradigms of bipolar competition emerged in each democracy, shaped by the specific historical developments that accompanied their formation and the

crystallisation of their political cultures.

The first major paradigm in American political science was that of “party identification” (Campbell, Gurin and Miller, 1954; Stokes, Campbell and Miller, 1958; Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes, 1960; Budge *et al.*, 1976), which corresponded to a stable model of bipartisan competition.

In Europe, however, due to the enduring influence of traditional society and the central role of revolutionary movements, the dynamics were different. Here, historical *cleavages* (such as rural vs urban, Church vs State, centre vs periphery or capital vs labour) were systematically theorised within the nation-building paradigm, primarily developed by Stein Rokkan (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Rokkan, 1970). This framework accounted for the greater degree of party pluralism in European political competition, which, despite its diversity, often coalesced into a bipolar—or at times even bipartisan—tension. Thus, ideological belief systems (Apter, 1963) soon found their explanatory framework in the spatial left-right model (Bartolini and Mair, 1960; Daalder and Mair, 1983; Enelow and Hinich, 1984 and 1990; Castles and Mair, 1984; Budge, Robertson and Hearl, 1987; Van Deth and Geurts, 1989; Enelow and Munger, 1992; Klingemann, 1995; Sanders, 1999; and Kroh, 2007), which remained dominant for a long time, particularly in Europe.

However, a new interpretative paradigm soon emerged in the United States, led by Inglehart (1977, 1990), presenting a less bipolar and more hierarchical or pyramidal view of value preferences, linked to a needs-based scale. This approach was rooted in the humanistic psychology of “need theory”, developed by Abraham Maslow (1943) in the 1940s. Nevertheless, it ultimately also applied a dichotomous model, oscillating between “materialist” and “post-materialist” values, preferences and political cultures. More recently, expanding on the new dimensions identified by the post-materialist paradigm and in response to the social, cultural, partisan and behavioural transformations in advanced democracies, a new analytical model—GAL/TAN (Green-Alternative-Libertarian vs Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist)—has been developed that aims to construct a bipolar scale parallel to the traditional left-right spectrum. This model prioritises the cultural dimensions of “new politics” (Hoodge, Marks and Wilson, 2002) over the economic primacy emphasised in the traditional model. However, it remains a contested framework due to concerns regarding the applicability and empirical validation of its corresponding scale (Moberg, 2014).

While the aforementioned dimensions of polarisation are the most prevalent and widely shared across different democratic cultures, it is also relevant to revisit the *cleavage* model of the *state-building* paradigm to examine specific cases where polarisation stems from other sources, such as religious, linguistic, ethnic or migratory tensions. In particular, the centre-periphery divide and the national/regional factor (Linz, 1985; Linz *et al.*, 1981) have constituted a fundamental *cleavage* in Spanish politics over the past two centuries (Linz, 1973, pp. 32 ff.; Pallarés, Montero and Llera, 1997). Thus, in the Catalan (Medina, 2018) and Basque (Linz *et al.*, 1986; Llera, 2013;

Leonisio, 2015; Llera, 2016a; Llera and Leonisio, 2017; Llera, Leonisio and Pérez, 2017; Llera, García and León-Ranero, 2022; Llera and León-Ranero, 2023) cases in particular, we can speak of “identity-based polarisation”.

The articles in this Debate section bring together three significant contributions aimed at understanding the multidimensional nature of polarisation, its empirical study, its current state and evolution, and its application within our context.

7. Conclusions

Professor Miller’s text provides an assessment of ideological and public policy polarisation in Spain, highlighting its continuous increase from a longitudinal perspective. However, it notes greater moderation in economic issues (taxation, redistribution, immigration management, etc.) compared to moral and ethical debates.

Professor León’s contribution focuses on measuring identity-based polarisation in Spain, validating various indicators used in datasets from the CIS, CEO, ICPS and Euskobarómetro (“Basque barometer”). His analysis tracks its evolution across the three regions with significant nationalist presence, applying both the *pluralist* (or bipolar) and *peripheral* (or unipolar) approaches, ultimately favouring the former.

Finally, Professors Mora, Rojo and Soler analyse the GAL/TAN dimension (Green–Alternative–Libertarian vs Traditional–Authoritarian–Nationalist) and its implications for sociocultural polarisation and emerging political agendas. Thus, citizens’ positions in survey studies on issues such as feminism, environmentalism, immigration and gender-based violence are examined quantitatively, with the aim of identifying the influencing variables and their impact on levels of affective polarisation. The findings highlight the role of these issues in exacerbating sociocultural divisions and intensifying interparty hostility, while also underscoring the growing significance of generational and gender-related factors, key empirical insights in the Spanish context.

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