

# Rising Conflicts and Polarisation in European Societies?

Indicators, Empirical Evidence, and Future Prospect

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# Introduction

- The topic of polarisation is in the media and on the political agenda :
  - “We are not a divided country”, President of the German Constitutional Court in his talk of the 33<sup>th</sup> German Unity Day (October 3, 2023)
  - “Polarisation has not been good for Switzerland,” front page story of the weekend edition of the NZZ (September 23, 2023)
- Empirical evidence seems to be less conclusive
- “Polarisation paradox” (Liliane Mason), i.e. that the subjective perception of polarisation is greater than “objective” polarisation

# Conceptualizing & measuring polarisation

- Competing conceptualizations:  
polarisation – divergence – cleavages – segregation – inequality...
- Borrowing from political sciences (Sartori 1976): polarisation includes:
  - a movement towards two (antagonistic) poles
  - convergence within and divergence between groups/parties
  - a disfunction of the underlying system like the erosion of basic norms
- Different analytical levels:
  - national, subnational/local levels, but also regional (Europe) and global
  - individuals, groups, institutions/organisations (e.g. parties)
- Variety of domains and dimensions of polarisation:
  - perceived polarisation vs. (self-reported) behaviour
  - domains: political, social, economic polarisation
  - subdomains, for instance regarding political polarisation:
    - thematic polarisation concerning specific issues
    - Ideological polarisation, affective polarisation
  - structural and institutional polarisation

# Some recent empirical studies

- Avramovska, E., Lutz, J., Milacic, F., Svulik, M. 2023. *Identity, Partisanship, Polarization*. Bonn: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- Kapeller, J., Gräbner C., Heimberger, Ph. 2019. *Economic Polarisation in Europe*. Bonn: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung/WIIW.
- Kalmoe, N.P., Mason, L. 2022. *Radical American Partisanship* (Univ. of Chicago Press).
- Roose, J. 2021: *Politische Polarisierung in Deutschland*. Berlin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.
- Caravaca, F. et al. 2022. *Estimating ideology and polarization in European countries using Facebook data*, *EPJ Data Science*.  
(see also the link at Univ. Carlos III Madrid on party polarisation in Europe:  
<https://eupoliticalbarometer.uc3m.es/dashboard/ideology>)
- Mau, St., Lux, Th, Westheuser, L. 2023. *Trigger point. Consensus and conflict in contemporary society*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp (in German)
- Herold, M., Joachim, J., Otteni, C., Vorländer, H. 2023. *Polarisierung in Deutschland und Europa. Eine Studie zu gesellschaftlichen Spaltungstendenzen in zehn europäischen Ländern*. Mercator Forum Migration und Demokratie (MIDEM), Dresden.