

PHD SUMMARY

Friends or Foes, Does Polarisation Really Undermine Democracy? Understanding the Two-Way Relationship Between Polarisation Dynamics and the Processes and Institutions of Democratic Contestation

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Abstract

The relationship between polarisation and democracy has become a central concern in political science, yet the nature of this connection remains contested. This dissertation addresses the puzzle by arguing that to understand the democratic implications of polarisation, we must distinguish between different types of polarisation and different types of democratic institutional design. It finds that only societal polarisation in the form of social distance and negative emotions relates with anti-democratic attitudes, and that consensus democracies can act as a buffer, weakening the link between high levels of polarisation and its most destructive outcomes. In short, it reminds us that polarisation is not uniformly harmful and that conflict is a normal part of democracy.

Keywords: Affective polarisation, Democracy, Institutional design, Political violence, Political intolerance, Support for democracy

Storm clouds seem to have gathered over democracies across the world. Scholars and observers increasingly suggest democracies have entered turbulent waters (Bächtiger & Dryzek, 2024; Kriesi & Schulte-Cloos, 2020; Valgarðsson et al., 2025; Wuttke et al., 2022). Although there are many potential causes, one particularly

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fashionable one in the latest decade has been affective polarisation: identity-based conflict, which is expressed through affective distance between actors (Graham & Svolik, 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019; Kingzette et al., 2021; Somer & McCoy, 2025).

Yet, the evidence for its destructive impact remains surprisingly inconclusive, as recent experimental studies challenge this claim, leaving the field with a conceptual and empirical puzzle (Broockman et al., 2023; Voelkel et al., 2022). This doctoral dissertation addresses that puzzle by arguing that two crucial distinctions have been overlooked: the difference between **types of affective polarisation** and the difference between **types of democratic institutional design**. By bringing these distinctions to the forefront, this research reframes the debate on whether polarisation truly undermines democracy and under which conditions it does so.

The dissertation begins by tracing the conceptual roots of polarisation and situates affective polarisation within this broader genealogy. Although polarisation as a concept essentially stems from a conflictual perspective on studying social relations (Lipset, 1960; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Oberschall, 1978; Turner, 1975), it has recently been studied more as a distributional characteristic of broader society (Blau, 1977; Dimaggio et al., 1996; Lüders & Carpentras, 2022; Sartori, 1966). To bring these two perspectives together, rather than treating polarisation as a monolithic phenomenon, it develops a typology that distinguishes between types of conflict (*conflictual*) and types of distance (*distributional*) (Rostbøll, 2024; Schedler, 2023). On the one hand, a distinction is made between conflicts based on ideas and conflicts based on identities. On the other hand, there are different forms of distance that arise from these conflicts: cognitive, affective, and relational.

This conceptual refinement matters because the dominant operationalisation of affective polarisation – spread of dislike towards political parties – fails to capture the emotional and behavioural dynamics that threaten democratic norms. After all, building on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and intergroup emotions research (Mackie et al., 2008; Smith & Mackie, 2015), the dissertation argues that dislike is too weak a predictor of democratic erosion compared to more intense forms of affect, such as hate, anger, and frustration, and to relational forms of distance.

A second reason why polarisation's relationship with democracy appears inconsistent lies in the institutional context in which it unfolds. Democracies are not uniform; they differ in how they structure conflict and distribute power. These institutional arrangements shape whether polarisation becomes a manageable feature of democratic contestation or spirals into a destructive force. Drawing on the distinction between consensus and majoritarian democracies (Lijphart, 2012), the dissertation argues that systems designed to share power provide pressure-release valves that absorb conflict and reduce incentives for zero-sum politics. In contrast, majoritarian systems that concentrate power in the hands of electoral winners risk amplifying polarisation. Understanding the link between polarisation and democratic

resilience, therefore, requires not only distinguishing between types of polarisation but also accounting for the institutional architecture that conditions its impact.

To test these claims, the first part of the dissertation builds on a survey experiment conducted in Belgium and the United Kingdom (N = 2,000). It examined how different dimensions of affective polarisation relate to anti-democratic attitudes in the first study, and to support for liberal democracy in the second. In the second part, at the macro level, two additional comparative studies analyse institutional variation across democracies using data from the Varieties of Democracy and Comparative Political Data Sets. The third study examines how consensus institutions – such as proportional representation, coalition governments, and federalism – relate to levels of idea-based and identity-based polarisation in 36 democracies between 2000 and 2019. The fourth explores whether these institutions moderate the relationship between polarisation and political violence across 113 countries from 1900 to 2023.

The findings challenge key assumptions in the literature. At the micro level, affective polarisation measured as dislike towards political parties shows no positive relationship with anti-democratic attitudes and, in some cases, even a negative one. In stark contrast, when polarisation is measured towards an individual situated in a salient societal conflict and operationalised through social distance and negative emotions, strong positive relationships emerge. Social distance predicts higher political intolerance, while emotional distance – hate, anger, frustration – predicts both support for political violence and lower support for liberal democracy. These patterns hold consistently across both countries, despite their contrasting institutional contexts. At the macro level, the results demonstrate that consensus democracies are systematically associated with lower levels of polarisation compared to majoritarian democracies, particularly for identity-based polarisation (Bernaerts et al., 2023). Moreover, consensus institutions weaken the link between polarisation and political violence, with federal systems and strong constitutional rigidity acting as effective buffers against polarisation's most destructive consequences (Bernaerts & Caluwaerts, 2025).

Taken together, these findings make two key contributions. First, they show that affective polarisation is not a uniform phenomenon: its democratic implications depend on the type of conflict and the form of affective distance involved. Second, the research demonstrates that democracies are not powerless in the face of polarisation: institutional design matters. Consensus arrangements that disperse power and foster inclusion can reduce polarisation and mitigate its escalation into violence. Rather than treating polarisation as inherently pathological, the dissertation suggests that democracies are fundamentally engineered to manage conflict and that institutional architecture determines whether polarisation becomes destructive or remains within the bounds of healthy democratic contestation.

By disentangling the conceptual and empirical foundations of the polarisation–democracy nexus, this dissertation invites scholars to move beyond alarmist narratives and adopt a more nuanced perspective. For researchers, it underscores the need for finer measurement and contextualised inference; for policymakers, it highlights the democratic value of inclusive institutions. Ultimately, the work concludes that polarisation does not inevitably undermine democracy.

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