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PHD REVIEW

# 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

This is a review of Kamil Bernaerts's dissertation "*Friends or foes: does polarisation really undermine democracy?*". I argue that the thesis offers a conceptually rich and empirically ambitious examination of the relationship between polarisation and the health of democracy. By distinguishing different types of polarisation and examining both individual-level mechanisms and institutional contexts, the thesis demonstrates that not all forms of polarisation are equally harmful to democracy.

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

Kamil Bernaerts's dissertation *Friends or foes: does polarisation really undermine democracy?* contributes to one of the big unresolved questions of contemporary political punditry and political science alike: how to assess our polarised age. Is polarization tearing democracies apart (as we often hear), or are we overly problematising heated democratic conflict, which is nothing new? The thesis does not offer either a gloomy or optimistic verdict, but rather shows that the answer depends very much on which kind of polarisation we are talking about, and which kind of democracy we have in mind.

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Among the most impressive achievements of the thesis is its conceptual depth and scope. The thesis reconstructs the intellectual history of "polarisation" across (sub)disciplines (including sociology and political theory). The overview shows how the term originally served to distinguish constructive from destructive conflict, but this distinction gradually disappeared and was replaced by an approach that centres on "neutral" distributions and distances between groups. However, that does not mean that the term has lost its (implicit) pejorative meaning, which keeps popping up. The thesis then offers a typology that moves beyond an "ideological vs affective polarisation" distinction to classify polarisation along two dimensions: the type of underlying conflict (idea or identity) and the type of distance (cognitive, social, or emotional). Of course, offering new typologies can be an uphill battle, as existing labels and divides can take root, and the field of polarisation is no exception. Still, Bernaerts's careful framework helps to take a step back and ask why we talk about polarisation in the first place. It is one of the clearest and most historically grounded conceptual treatments of polarisation I have read, which also makes it very useful in my teaching.

The empirical core of the first half of the thesis tests these ideas at the individual level through an original survey experiment in Belgium and the United Kingdom, centred on a conflict over "wokeness". (The choice for this highly salient but contentious term as the main case study makes sure that respondents are opinionated on both sides, but also imposes some limits in generalisability, given the ambiguities surrounding the term and its sometimes asymmetrical politicisation.) Respondents evaluate both political parties and a concrete individual ("Sam") who takes a position in this conflict. This design allows Bernaerts to compare classic (party-centred) measures of affective polarisation with more relational measures such as social distance and specific negative emotions. Across both countries, the striking pattern is that this more traditional party-based affective polarisation measure either has no relationship with anti-democratic attitudes or is even associated with more support for liberal democracy. By contrast, emotional and social distance towards the individual opponent robustly predict higher political intolerance and greater support for political violence. In other words, not all phenomena associated with (affective) polarisation play the same role in our democracy, and the most worrisome forms are those involving personalised, emotion-laden hostility in concrete conflicts.

The second half of the thesis zooms out to the institutional level. Using cross-national data across several decades and dozens of countries, Bernaerts and his co-authors show that consensus-oriented institutions (such as proportional representation) are systematically associated with lower levels of both idea-based and identity-based polarisation. More importantly, some of these institutions (like federal arrangements such as those in place in Belgium) appear to weaken the empirical link between polarisation and political violence. This suggests that where


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power is dispersed, high levels of polarisation are less likely to translate into democratic corrosion. This is a much-needed antidote to the fatalism that democracies are destined to ever increasing polarisation; they can, at least in principle, be designed to better manage and channel conflict. Of course, getting societies to change their political and constitutional systems will not be easy. A question this raises is how we can use these insights to alleviate problematic polarisation in societies *despite* their constitutional arrangements.

Taken together, the combination of 'micro' and 'macro' approaches and their interplay make for an ambitious thesis. It asks us to think about polarisation as involving individual-level mechanisms that are shaped and tamed (or not) by institutional architectures. This is one of the thesis's main strengths, but also where some of the remaining work for the field becomes visible. The integration between the parts is not yet complete: The conceptual refinements and rich distinctions developed in the first half cannot be fully carried through into the macro-level analyses, which necessarily rely on coarser indicators of polarisation. Likewise, a full test of the interaction between polarisation and institutions is still limited to one outcome in the thesis, political violence. More work is needed to explore it in full.

Taken together, one of the most intriguing questions raised by the thesis concerns the future of the concept of "polarisation" itself. If, as Bernaerts shows, the term has always carried both descriptive and normative meanings, and is now used for "many things at the same time" (per Bernaerts), is it still a helpful umbrella concept for scholars and publics? Or does it only lead us to endless semantic quarrels which distract from the more specific phenomena we ultimately care about (such as social segregation, democratic backsliding, and so on)? The typology developed here does not settle that debate, but it provides the tools to have it more fruitfully. The thesis clarifies which forms of polarisation (or whatever new word we may eventually invent!) are likely to be democratically problematic, and that understanding the interplay of polarisation with institutional architecture is deserving of much more of our attention.


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