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IS EUROPEAN POLITICS POLARIZING?

And if so, what does that
mean for the democratic process?

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INTRODUCTION

Currently, insults and denigration form part of the daily political news. Whether it be the routine use of the term “remoaner” in British politics, or the overdrawn comparisons of the [European Union’s \(EU\) protection of LGBT+ rights with Hitler’s dictatorship](#), many of the insults we witness on the daily news all have in common that they purely aim to denigrate political opponents without even engaging with their arguments. It seems increasingly difficult to bridge the rifts between different political camps that some political personnel seem bent on widening. The consequences could imperil the functioning of representative democracies.

This article investigates whether the perceived shift in rhetoric is reflected in political polarization of the party and electoral landscape in the EU and how polarization may hinder efficient policymaking.

METHOD

After introducing the concept of polarization, we move on to explain the structural and psychological mechanisms through which polarization can be detrimental to policymaking. Then, we study the [manifesto project’s dataset](#) of electoral platforms and results in Europe from the year 1990 until 2018 (Volgens et al. 2020) to find out whether overall, the political landscape has indeed polarized. Additionally, we categorize the general trends in the party landscape to give an overview of country-specific developments. The individual cases of France, Hungary, Belgium, and Germany are discussed as examples. Finally, we analyze the remaining period from 2018 to today, looking at each election. We draw the conclusions that (1) polarization in the EU does not seem to be as advanced as, e.g., in the U.S., yet (2) it poses a significant threat to effective policymaking once it occurs. We thus recommend observing and countering polarizing trends before they become a detriment to democratic decision-making.

WHAT IS POLARIZATION?

The split of societies into two groups that keep to themselves is described as polarization. This is partly due to people liking one party (partisanship) but at least equally, to them disliking the other party/parties (Wagner, 2020). A common dynamic of polarization is seen in us-versus-them thinking, based on exclusive identities.

To resume our example of British politics: us, the Beleavers, versus them, the Remoaners or vice versa. In the news, polarization or partisanship is often cited to explain political blockages, e.g., over minority rights or Brexit. It is also thought to leave the middle of societies disenfranchised, as the political parties race to the extremes (Carothers, 2019). More recently, a perceived rise in societal and political polarization has been attributed to the spread of “fake news” and “bubbles” of like-minded users on social media (Spohr, 2017). The question is whether the current perceived polarization is

also translated into political platforms and election results in Europe. While investigating this question, we will inevitably expose ourselves to (justified) criticism:

Whereas the process of polarization can unequivocally be observed as there is movement of elected parties towards the extremes of the political spectrum, there is yet some disagreement regarding the specifics of what does and does not constitute polarization at any given moment.

As such, polarization does not have any other implication than political parties formulating more extreme ideas. However, in practice, it is usually accompanied by “affective polarization” (Reilijan, 2020), meaning people feeling closer to “their” party and more detached from others. This increases partisanship, i.e., support for one’s “own” party no matter what.

HOW DOES POLARIZATION AFFECT POLICYMAKING STRUCTURES?

Hardened ideological stances, especially those defined in contrast to another camp, make political cooperation extremely difficult. If a party defines itself as being against another party, collaborating with it looks like defeat or a betrayal of the voters. Most EU countries are parliamentary democracies (ruled by a government formed by the parliament) and usually led by coalition governments (see table 1 on page 5). Here, polarization can become particularly problematic: Coalitions are based on compromise and collaboration.

If a party illustrates its uniqueness mainly by contrasting itself to others, it may be tempted to formulate very extreme positions or attack the other parties, both of which makes coalition-building after the elections more difficult. In presidential or semi-presidential systems, such as the one of France, right-wing governments may face a left-wing majority in parliament or vice versa, which can lead to political

blockages if ideological differences cannot be overcome between the two.

Even in systems governed by one party, majorities change, which means that deep ideological rifts can make transitions from one government to the next more difficult.

Continuity in any policy is more difficult to achieve if one party outright rejects everything its predecessor in government has done. This is especially problematic in policy areas which require a commitment to a long-term strategy that outlasts several governments and thus, almost always depend on a degree of bipartisan support. Setting up agencies for health services, climate or environmental protection, investing in long-term retirement schemes is all futile if the effort is reversed every four or five years.

Nonetheless, it is also worth noting that there seems to be a positive correlation

between the polarization of a party system and democratic participation, particularly voter turnout. (Wilford, 2017/Wang, 2014)

For the purpose of our analysis, it is helpful to distinguish between parliamentary and (semi-) presidential systems, and to categorize by coalition and single-party governments. This is relevant as presidential elections are an additional channel for voters to express their preferences and parties to formulate an agenda, while in parliamentary systems, a general election is the most relevant occasion for voting on party platforms at the national level. Coalition governments naturally require political compromise between ruling parties, whereas single-party governments do not. In semi-presidential systems, the president may represent a different political camp than the governing party or parties, which again requires a degree of compromise between the two institutions.

COUNTRY	SYSTEM	PARTIES IN GOVERNMENT
Austria	Parliamentary	2
Belgium	Parliamentary	3
Bulgaria	Parliamentary	2
Croatia	Parliamentary	2
Cyprus	Semi-presidential	2
Czechia	Parliamentary	2
Denmark	Parliamentary	1
Estonia	Parliamentary	3
Finland	Parliamentary	5
France	Semi-presidential	1
Germany	Parliamentary	3
Greece	Parliamentary	1
Hungary	Parliamentary	2
Ireland	Parliamentary	2
Italy	Parliamentary	3
Latvia	Parliamentary	6
Lithuania	Parliamentary	2
Luxemburg	Parliamentary	3
Malta	Parliamentary	1
Netherlands	Parliamentary	4
Poland	Semi-presidential	1
Portugal	Semi-presidential	1
Romania	Semi-presidential	1
Slovakia	Parliamentary	4
Slovenia	Parliamentary	4
Spain	Parliamentary	2
Sweden	Parliamentary	2
UK	Parliamentary	1

←

Table 1 lists whether the country's system is parliamentary or semi-presidential (ruled by a directly elected president and a government formed by the parliament) (Carey, 2008), as well as the parties currently in government.

TABLE 1: POLITICAL SYSTEM AND NUMBER OF GOVERNING PARTIES IN EU MEMBER STATES

PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION

Polarization makes policymaking difficult as it leaves no room for common ground and undermines evidence. Especially if policymaking is to address highly politicized policy areas. A simplified way of describing this is to regard partisan political support as a kind of religion. Beliefs are deeply engrained in our identities and are hardly negotiable. It is unlikely that a Muslim and a Jew would agree that the correct scripture is something of a mix between Tora and Quran. Similarly, an Ardent Arsenal supporter would not say that a 1:1 against Tottenham is a good outcome because both teams took home a point. It is important to understand this because most discourse of how democracy works is essentially based on the idea of rational choice: informed voters cast their ballot for the party that is most likely to deliver the best outcomes for them. Other limitations of this theory aside, this could only work if people were willing to shift their support from one party to another. If their party alignment is part of their

identity though, this is not likely to happen. The more “closed” one’s identity becomes to an “other”, and the more the ingroup and the outgroup are aligned with political parties that each cater to voter groups’ identities, the more each group benefits from distancing itself from the “other”, thus accelerating polarization. This phenomenon directly prevents two key behaviors that an enlightened democracy requires: (1) voters casting their ballot to reward or punish policymakers for their performance regardless of what party they belong to and (2) policymakers adjusting their policy preference when presented with new evidence.

If the polarizing tendencies undermining these two behaviors continue, the very basic functions of democratic control and sound governance are at stake: voters might no longer punish politicians who take bad decisions or cast their vote for the candidate that they expect to deliver the best outcomes; policymakers could

legislate and governments could base their decisions on nothing more than partisan support. This practically means that votes are rendered useless, and policies are arbitrary, both of which are characteristics of authoritarian regimes. In fact, this scenario may already seem eerily familiar to the citizens of some democracies across the globe.

There are a great number of studies explaining exactly how that political polarization impinges on voters' and politicians' judgment of good governance.

VOTERS JUDGE POLICIES BASED ON THE PARTY ORIGIN, RATHER THAN THEIR CONTENT.

A [study](#) by Hawkins and Nosek (2012) finds that voters judge policies based on the party that brought them forward. In their study, participants were given a newspaper article describing two competing policies: one on welfare and the other on special education. Each policy was labeled as either “Democrat” or “Republican”. And while manipulating the political origin of each policy was part of the experimental set-up, partisanship led participants to favor policies brought forward by “their” party. Similarly, a [study](#) by Martin Bisgaard (2015) conducted after the meltdown of the British national economy 2008-2010, finds that although

there was an agreement among partisans that economic conditions deteriorated, they disagreed on whether the government was responsible for it or not.

POLITICIANS EVALUATE POLICIES BASED ON PRE-HELD POSITIONS, NOT THE EVIDENCE PRESENTED.

In a [study](#) (Baekgaard et al., 2019) Local Danish Politicians were given the task to judge the quality of a private versus publicly funded school, a topic emotionally discussed in Danish politics and one that most have prior attitudes and beliefs on. Evidence was added throughout the study to demonstrate that there is only one correct answer when evaluating. Yet, the judgment of performance information was based on pre-held beliefs, which subjects did not let go of even when the presented evidence would point to the exact opposite.

THE BASIS FOR POLITICAL COMPROMISE AND FOR PERCEIVING A POLICY OUTCOME AS FAIR, EVEN IF ONE WOULD NOT LABEL THE OUTCOME AS THE RIGHT ONE IS TO UNDERSTAND WHERE THE OPPOSING VIEW STEMS FROM: THEIR PERCEPTIONS, EXPERIENCE, AND MOTIVATION.

The rejection and disengagement with “the other” and a lack of dialogue discourage political compromise (Cowen & Arsenault, 2008). The degree to which both voters and policymakers prefer sticking to their colors rather than engaging with “others” on policies is in fact one of the most important objects of analysis for scientists studying political polarization (Barber & McCarty, 2019).

While such an analysis of all EU member states goes beyond the capacities of our research team, the next section investigates to which extent polarization is already visible in party programs and electoral platforms.

DATA

The manifesto project (Volkens et al., 2020) is a widely used dataset comprising information on the electoral platforms of parties before parliamentary and presidential elections. Below, we analyze a composite index of left-right positions multiplied by the vote share of the respective party to represent the influence of the respective manifesto on actual politics. Since the dataset lists all manifestos of elected parties regardless of their strength, multiplying the ideological score with the electoral success helps show the degree to which the respective party platform is supported by voters. It is important to note that this data refers only to written political manifestos and cannot capture political promises made in speeches.

Figure 1-6: Representation of left-right positions in elections, 1990-2019

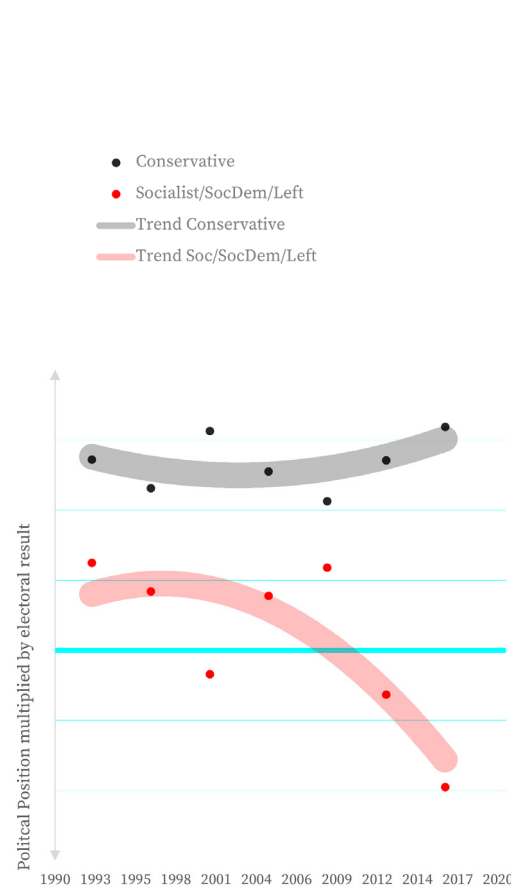


FIGURE 1 | REPRESENTATION OF LEFT AND RIGHTS POSITIONS IN US NATIONAL (PRESIDENTIAL AND LEGISLATIVE) ELECTIONS

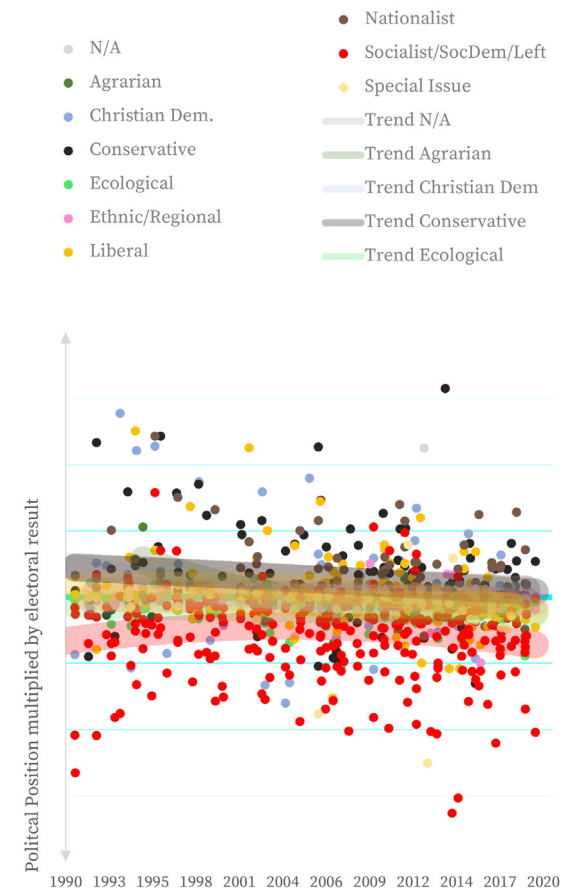


FIGURE 2 | REPRESENTATION OF LEFT AND RIGHTS POSITIONS IN ELECTIONS (ALL EU/EU MEMBERS)

ANALYSIS

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Figure 1 to figure 9 are extracted from a comprehensive, interactive graph¹ listing party scores on the manifesto project's compounded left-right spectrum of all parties' electoral platforms (positive: right wing, negative: left-wing) multiplied by the vote share the respective party received in the election (0-100). The dots are colored according to party family affiliation. The lines describe rough trends based on a binomial model automatically generated by Microsoft Excel for a better overview. Social democratic parties were subsumed into the "socialist and other left" group in the dataset by the author.

¹ Visit the interactive graph to filter and compare data from different regions, party families, countries, and parties [here](#).

While subjectively one may perceive a polarizing tendency in political rhetoric, and there is evidence of affective polarization across the EU (Reilijan, 2020), there is no support in the manifesto data that elected parties in Europe are systematically polarizing or have consistently been doing so over the past decades. In fact, the average absolute deviation from the center decreased slightly between 1990 and 2018. Outliers in past years have been Hungary and Sweden (both 2014) given their strong right- and left-leaning election winners, respectively. Given that the data consists of an international index of political orientation, all Swedish policies are rather to the left (even center and center-right) and all American policies, e.g., rather to the right (even Democratic electoral platforms, see figure 1). This is visible as the deviation from "ideologically neutrality," represented by the thick light blue horizontal line in the center of the graph. The U.S. on the other hand, show a clear tendency

towards the extremes of the political spectrum. Here, we can see the opposite data points of the Democrats and Republicans move away from the center simultaneously.

EXEMPLARY CASES

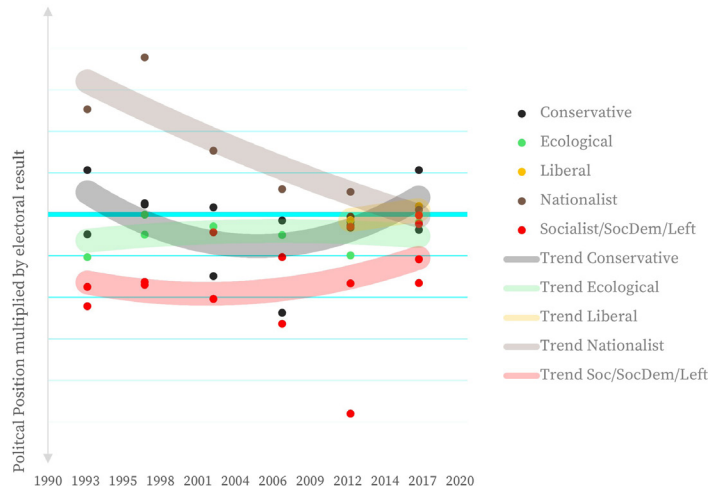


FIGURE 3 | REPRESENTATION OF LEFT AND RIGHTS POSITIONS IN FRENCH NATIONAL (PRESIDENTIAL AND LEGISLATIVE) ELECTIONS

FRANCE HAS RECENTLY SEEN A CONVERGENCE OF ITS POLITICAL AND ELECTORAL LANDSCAPE AROUND THE CENTER.

Mainly driven by the moderation of policy positions by the far-right National Front/National Rally. Simultaneously, the leftist Socialist Party, has lost much of its voter support, while the centrist République on Marche and Democratic Movement attracted more votes. The Conservative score is higher in the graph than any other

due to the increased vote shares won by the party. If these trends continued in the next elections, we might see a consolidated center shifted slightly to the right. The convergence of political representation around the center has however coincided with the rise of extra-parliamentary opposition to the government’s reformist course in France, the so-called Yellow Vests movement.

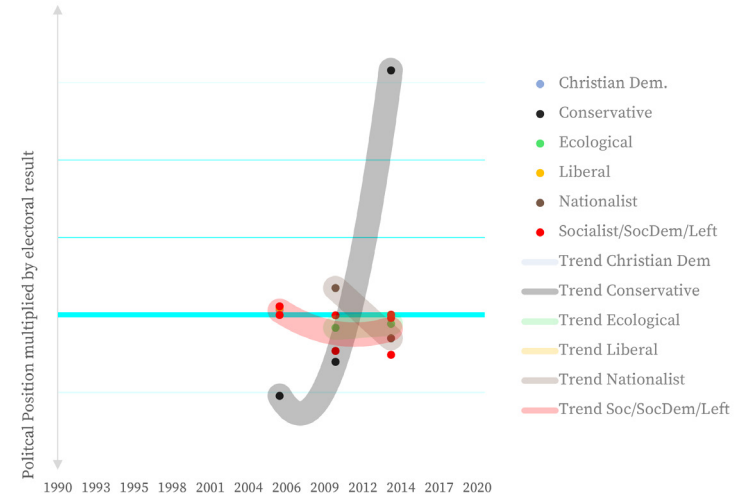


FIGURE 4 | REPRESENTATION OF LEFT AND RIGHTS POSITIONS IN HUNGARIAN GENERAL ELECTIONS

IN HUNGARY, WHERE A STRONGLY RIGHT-LEANING PARTY WITH STRONG ELECTORAL SUPPORT HAS BEEN GOVERNING UNINTERRUPTEDLY FOR TEN YEARS, THE OPPOSITION HAS BEGUN TO MERGE INTO A COALITION THAT IS ESSENTIALLY "NOT THEM."

The effect of anti-establishment parties making it into government and staying then, seems to be to provoke a lowest common denominator response as a counter movement somewhere near the political center. Considering our

arguments on affective polarization and partisanship above, this may make compromise between the camps even more difficult in the future as voters are increasingly incentivized to become partisans of one or the other bloc. It is worth noting here that in Hungary, press freedom is considered to be increasingly under threat by Journalists without Borders (2020), which likely has an influence on the opposition's strategy to merge simply to escape repression.

IN BELGIUM, WE CAN OBSERVE A RACE TO THE EXTREMES WHICH IS DRIVEN BY REGIONAL PARTIES.

In the Dutch-speaking north, the national conservative N-VA has been successful in attracting votes over the past two decades by continuously moving its position further to the right and becoming more expressly secessionist. This was accompanied by the rise of the even more nationalist revolutionary secessionist Vlaams Belang, and a drop of support for the

centrist and left parties. In the French-speaking south of the country, on the other hand, the Socialist Party has maintained its leading position, while the centrist Reformist Movement was weakened, and the left-leaning Greens (Écolo) gained ground. One party that operates across the language divide and gained significant vote shares in the last election, the Worker's Party of Belgium, is a far to the left of the electoral spectrum. These trends have led to a situation where the country is split into

an increasingly right-wing North and increasingly left-wing South, and voters who cast their votes for the only large party operating in all of Belgium did so for a far-left option. This clearly benefits further polarization and indeed, the current Belgian government took a full year to form. It includes none of the far-right election winners.

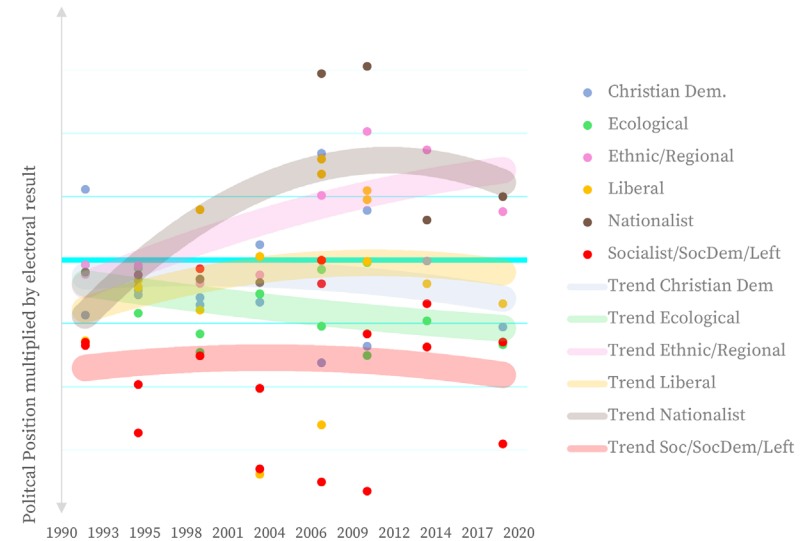


FIGURE 5 | REPRESENTATION OF LEFT AND RIGHTS POSITIONS IN BELGIAN GENERAL ELECTIONS

GERMANY IS ONE OF THE COUNTRIES WHERE A NATIONALIST PARTY WITH NATION-WIDE ELECTORAL SUCCESSES HAS ONLY FORMED RECENTLY, EVEN THOUGH PARTIES OF THE EXTREME-RIGHT HAD HAD CONSIDERABLE REGIONAL SUCCESS BEFORE.

We can observe that the Alternative für Deutschland started as a euroskeptic party and quickly shifted its political positions further to the right of the spectrum. At the same time, the ruling Christian Democrats moderated their position to move closer to the center. The left parties have lost ground to the Greens and the Christian Democrats, as

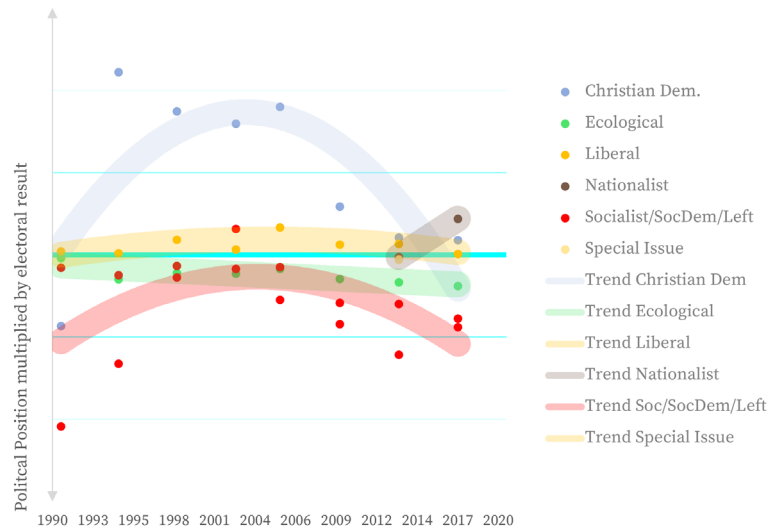


FIGURE 6 | REPRESENTATION OF LEFT AND RIGHT POSITIONS IN GERMAN GENERAL ELECTIONS

well as the Alternative für Deutschland, leading to an overall convergence of political representation around the center, and an overall shift of the party and electoral landscape to the left, caused by the Christian Democrats' swerve to the left. Nonetheless, the trajectory of the Alternative für Deutschland suggests that Germany may move towards a situation with a consolidated center and a far-right outlier.

DATA GAPS

In the time not covered by the manifesto data (from 2018/2019 to date) there is no consistent picture of polarization either. Single occurrences are worth mentioning but insufficient to signal a general trend: The far right has won in Estonia, (the national conservative EKRE joined a governing coalition), Spain (far-right Vox was first elected into parliament and doubled its vote in the repeat elections to win a total of 52 seats), Flanders in Belgium (the nationalist N-VA became the strongest party; in Wallonia, the French speaking half of Belgium, the far-left Socialist PS won), in Slovakia, and in the EU Parliament. In Finland, Greece, Austria, Portugal, Romania, Croatia, and Ireland, things did not polarize further, or the center was strengthened.

CONCLUSIONS

1

We can observe that the polarization trend seems much less pronounced in the EU than in the U.S. if we consider electoral platforms and the success of extreme political parties.

2

Once polarization occurs, however, it can lead to political blockage by making coalitions more difficult, endangering continuity on long-term projects, and provoking a clustering of the respective opposition parties into another bloc deriving its identity from its distinction from the “others.”

3

We recommend that policymakers observe polarizing trends early on to counter them in time to avoid these detrimental effects on decision-making.

However, voter turnout may be affected negatively by a lower degree of polarization and should be addressed simultaneously. We argue that turnout is key for the functioning of representative democracies but can be influenced through many other factors. Accordingly, an expectation of lower turnout should not detract from efforts to stop excessive polarization. More details on how to counter polarization as a policymaker can be found in our forthcoming articles.

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