



ORIGINAL PAPER

Long-term Polarising Trends in the Western Democracies

Ladislav Cabada¹⁾

Abstract: One of the significant attributes of the current rise in illiberal sentiments and protagonists in Western democracies is the erosion of political mainstream and centripetal politics. Ideological polarisation, which underpins pluralism and democratic competition, is being replaced by extreme or emotional polarisation. The emergence of bloc politics based on irreconcilable differences is also accompanied by a significant decline in trust in political and non-political institutions. Trust is being increasingly transferred from institutions to closed communities, social bubbles or new leaders who build their charisma on a combination of media presentation and political entrepreneurship. Thus, among political elites and within societies, ideological polarisation is giving way to affective polarisation, which in some cases displays sectarian features. In our analysis, we present both the main causes of the growing polarisation and the possibilities for overcoming this trend. Our analysis focuses on the key factors that are driving increasing polarisation and the formation of new divisions based on transformed identities.

Keywords: cleavages, identity; polarization; affective polarisation; trust

This paper has been prepared with the support of the TRUEDEM “Trust in European Democracies” research project funded under the European Union's Horizon research and innovation program (grant agreement No 101095237). The views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or Horizon research and innovation program. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

¹⁾ Full Professor, PhD, Metropolitan University Prague, Department of Political Science and Anglophone Studies, E.mail: ladislav.cabada@mup.cz

Introduction

The post-war stabilisation of Western liberal democracies was based on a centrifugal model of party systems and social interaction, i.e. on the principle of reducing polarisation and building barriers – educational and socialising, media, political and, if necessary, legal – against anti-liberal and extreme political protagonists. Over the last two decades, however, it is apparent that the importance of long-standing partisan predispositions of electoral preferences and voter cleavages has been declining. This has resulted, among other things, in the growing prominence of issue-based voting as opposed to the formerly predominant class-based voting, but also in increasing political polarisation. Party competition is changing accordingly. Since this trend has become relatively intense, there is a need to pay more attention to the broader social changes that have led to this development.

In our paper, we briefly analyse the changes in the basic characteristics and trends of political polarisation, linking them partially to another key issue – which may represent both the trigger and the effect of polarisation – i.e. (dis)trust in political and other institutions.

(Post)modernisation as a Key Impulse for Intensifying Polarisation?

From the point of view of our analysis, cleavage theory is particularly noteworthy because it considers interest antagonism growing out of conflicting demands and expectations as a key and characteristic feature of democratic societies. At the same time, it presents the key questions to which antagonistic social groups offer different or outright contradictory answers, thereby shaping and reinforcing their social and political identities. A stabilising element of modern democratic systems is the pursuit of consensus among rival social groups. This constitutes the basis of the welfare state (social reconciliation), with decentralised decision-making based on multi-level governance (easing tensions between centres and peripheries, or urban and rural regions) or neocorporatism (key corporations as partners of the state). The stability of the liberal-democratic welfare state is also ensured by the acknowledgment that key socio-political cleavages, with their structural, cultural and organisational dimensions, are as important and durable as other sources of conflict (Sass & Kuhnle, 2023: 189).

Social scientists agree that western societies have been undergoing a process of value adaptation since the 1960s. Inglehart (1977) described this process as a “silent revolution” that has resulted in the postmodernisation of societies. This transformation represented a major trigger for the disruption or weakening of petrified cleavages and initiated a process of greater individualisation of electoral and, more generally, political behaviour. Together with other important factors - in particular the transformation of political communication tools and means - this process has heralded the emergence of greater volatility, a decline in political party membership, the weakening of links between political parties and their affiliated social organisations, the emergence of new social movements, etc. (Cabada & Charvát, 2024).

The impulses stemming from Western democracies and (part of) their societal transition to a postmodern understanding of statehood, society and politics have also fundamentally influenced the construction of identity and polarisation. New social movements and newly framed issues and political priorities include: the environmental agenda, feminism and, more recently, broader gender issues, integration (including migration and multiculturalism), the democratisation of foreign and security policy, which entered the social debate and was at the same time exposed to much greater social

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scrutiny, and many others. All these differences naturally lead to polarisation in the form of widening differences between partisan, ideological or income groups. Polarisation involves a variety of single as well as collective issues that become prominent due to political cleavages. Such polarisation at both elite and public levels leads, on the one hand, to destabilisation of the political and legal environment and, on the other, to a weakening of trust in political institutions and politics as such.

The “silent revolution” (Inglehart 1977) that resulted in post-modernisation of societies represents a fundamental impulse to disrupt or weaken the petrified cleavages and initiated a process of greater individualisation of electoral and, more generally, political behaviour. Together with other significant factors – in particular the transformation of the tools and means of political communication – this process has heralded the phenomena of strengthening volatility, declining membership in political parties, weakening of ties between political parties and their allied social organisations, the emergence of new social movements, etc. “Yet, while partisanship is an influential group identity, there are other important identities that cut across partisanship and influence these attitudes” (Klar 2018: 610).

Today, this development, linked to the big themes of climate change or full equality for all individuals regardless of their identity, can be reflected through the prism of two visible social groups and political concepts that often refer to each other pejoratively, e.g. as “pioneers” and “laggards”, but also as “progressives” and “reactionaries”. The dispute between these antagonistic groups is both economic (e.g. the disagreement related to the promotion of the European Green Deal, where supporters see it as an opportunity for technological innovation and economic empowerment, while opponents often refer to it as “economic suicide”) and cultural; here it is basically about issues related to value schemes, usually linked to identity. Needless to say, such polarisation at the level of elites and mass public leads both to destabilization of the political and legal environment (e.g. by repeatedly changing the basic parameters of some public policies after the former opposition takes over the government after the elections) and to weakening of trust in political institutions and politics as such (Cabada & Charvát, 2024).

Dominance of the Economic or Cultural Dimension?

If we have repeatedly mentioned post-modernisation as one of the key impulses for the transformation of identities and polarisation in Western societies and political systems, it seems logical to begin the presentation of theoretical reflections by introducing the concept of so-called neo-modernisation theories. For example, Antonio and Brulle (2011: 198) present “a family of related neomodernization theories (NMTs), framed in response to globalization, economic and cultural change, the collapse of communism, and decline of labor-centered left politics. Suggesting taints of Deweyan-like democracy, NMTs implied that representative democracy and its political dynamics are being vitalized by much more citizen-based, civil society-centered, participatory, plural, critical networks, institutions, and communications.”

In their analysis of polarisation that accompanies the debate on climate change and adaptation policies, Antonio and Brulle (2011: 198) highlight a set of so-called non-modernisation theories. They emphasise that this is only one dimension of a broader and more general polarisation that can be seen in the tension between the modern welfare nation-state and the postmodern globalising state and society. This paradigmatic conflict can be understood, among other things, as advocating the ideal of a small state or as

promoting the perception of a state (or of a transnational protagonist taking over part of its role) as a powerful regulatory and caring actor. Although the neo-modernisation theory favours an economic/rational approach to polarisation, one should not fail to notice that it also mentions other dimensions, explicitly linking changes in the fabric of Western democracies to cultural changes, i.e. values.

Although the presented approach of neo-modernization theories prioritizes the economic/rational choice nature of polarisation, we should not overlook the fact that it also mentions other dimensions – it explicitly links the changes in the structure of society in Western democracies with cultural change, i.e. values. In addition, it reflects the fundamental change associated with the weakening of the link between the working class (which is shrinking or undergoing a transformation towards a new form: the precariat) and left-wing politics. This change has both an economic and a socio-cultural dimension. In this sense, in the contemporary debate on the motivations for new forms of polarisation in social sciences we can reflect both the proponents of primarily economically based discontent of major social groups and researchers who prefer more culturally based explanations (Cabada & Charvát, 2024).

In this sense, the current debate about the motives behind new forms of polarisation may include both advocates of primarily economically based discontent among large social groups and those who favour more culturally based explanations. These studies focus primarily on the rise of illiberal tendencies in contemporary democracies, the hybridisation of democratic political systems, the strengthening of radical and far-right political parties, anti-integrationist attitudes in the European environment, and nationalism (see e.g., Cianetti, Dawson & Hanley, 2019; Krastev, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Tucker, 2020). These and other sub-polarising impulses are very often integrated under the term populism, which is sometimes supplemented with various adjectives (e.g. right-wing, illiberal, authoritarian, anti-European, etc.) and which manifests itself not only at the national but also at the European and even global level (Söderbaum, Spandler & Pacciardi, 2021).

In addition to party and more generally political polarisation, we currently observe a growing polarisation in relation to other, mainly ‘non-political’ institutions, such as science, education, media, etc., and also in relation to institutions directly linked to politics, such as the army, police, health, religion and the judiciary. Value debates often address institutions that produce knowledge and information (media, science, education) and institutions that enforce norms (justice, police, military) on opposite sides of the debate. “The rise of talk radio, then cable television, and more recently the Internet and the twenty-four-hour news cycle have amplified these political identifications and debates” (Brady & Kent, 2022: 60).

These findings confirm the assumption that the economic and socio-cultural drivers of polarisation cannot be decoupled but are an interrelated complex. Affective polarisation adds another element to the mix – the highly subjective perception of one's own status, including categories of success, and not only in economic terms. The causes of deepening polarisation and de-democratisation are much more complex, however, including important cultural factors concentrated in the axiological split between “liberals” and “neoliberals”. As Tucker (2020: 137) points out, “all countries where non-liberals have won democratic elections have been theoretically too rich for democracy to face such challenges”.

In the tradition of major cycles in economic, political or social development, he observes an anti-democratic and anti-liberal wave accompanied by growing polarisation

and deepening distrust as a set of partial incidents integrated into the general phenomenon of democratic backsliding. He highlights the snowball effect of populist neoliberalism, which has awakened “passionate archaic demons” and an “atavistic mechanism” in the form of a “vicious circle of economic decline, the breakdown of trade and mobility, and economic and political hostility” (Tucker, 2020: 131). In this situation, clear socio-economic class demarcations disappear and a more complex set of determinants that politically identify individuals come into play.

From Ideological to Affective Polarisation

When political scientists talk about polarisation and its binary nature, they often distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ polarisation. In this sense, Kopecky, Meyer-Sahling and Spirova (2022) distinguish between ‘normal/ideological’ and ‘affective’ polarisation. Similarly, Schmitt (2019: 2) considers a risk too high, too low or even absent of polarization. Thus, both too high polarisation and its absence are risks. The former case often leads to unstable governments, legislative deadlocks, populism and strong social polarisation, including the rise of anti-systemic forces (which perfectly describes the current Czech situation). What is particularly worrying is that extreme and persistent polarisation can ultimately mean the collapse of a democratic system. Conversely, too little polarisation can reveal dysfunctional competition, where voters do not have a sufficient and competitive choice.

Affective polarisation is a type of social polarisation in which the adherents of two antagonistic parties “increasingly dislike the other, are biased against each other, are ready to defeat the other, feel anger towards each other, and all this without any direct or conditional connection to an ideological difference in position on a topic or issue” (Mason, 2015: 6). Affective polarisation is based on a strong psychologically motivated trust towards members of one's own group (in-group identity), and, on the contrary, a strong distrust towards members of the out-group. As Klar (2018: 611) notes: “common identities might increase trust across partisan rivals, a concern that is particularly prevalent during times of increased social distance and affective polarisation.”

Elites, and not only political elites, play a significant role in reinforcing affective polarisation. This occurs, on the one hand, by emphasising the irreconcilable positions of different political protagonists and ideologies and generally questioning the government's credibility; they mobilise citizens to become more active. The extremising vocabulary and labelling of the political opponent as “the enemy” leads, on the other hand, to the breakdown of the pro-democratic consensus and to the perception of politics not as a space for finding good solutions, but as a gladiatorial arena in which there is no win-win strategy, but only a zero-sum game (Lee, 2013; Cabada & Charvát, 2024).

Affective polarization must be considered one of the key processes in the development of contemporary Western democracies. It is based on a strong psychologically motivated trust towards members of one's own group (in-group identity) and, in contrast, strong distrust of out-group members. In the case of bipartisanship, it is usually a situation in which trust in members of one's own group (party), as well as distrust in representatives of the opposite camp/party, significantly or almost completely suppresses rational argumentation. Even in multipartism, typical for continental party systems, one of the prominent manifestations of affective polarization, however, is the division of society into two ‘irreconcilable’ camps. As Wagner (2021) has shown in his recent analysis, “the size of parties matters for levels of affective polarization. Hence, a

citizen's perception of the political system is more affectively polarized if they feel negatively towards a large competitor than if they dislike a minor party."

In this sense, the presence of a strong protest, radical, or even anti-system party with a tendency to divide society into two antagonistic groups in a populist way clearly represents a significant impulse to intensify polarization, including distrust in state and political institutions. Supporters of this party distrust institutions because they are not controlled by their favourite party, and opponents of this party distrust institutions if this party comes to power. The distrust of the two antagonistic political camps is thus not only related to their perceptions of each other, but more generally to their a priori perception of the government exercised by their political opponents as untrustworthy in the event of their own electoral defeat.

Furthermore, in addition to party polarisation, we can observe strengthening polarisation in relation to the other, primarily "non-political" institutions such as science, education, media etc., as well as regarding the institution directly related with politics such as military, police, medicine, religion, law. "In addition to significant declines in confidence, there have been substantial increases in partisan polarisation in confidence in which the partisans of one party have more confidence in an institution than the partisans of the other party, merely because of perceptions about which party controls the institution" (Brady & Kent, 2022: 50).

One should not omit, however, a critical analysis of the (new or social) media. The possibility of choosing as a source of information the media whose presentation corresponds to our subjective perception has reached a qualitatively new level of "parallel societies" thanks to the existence of social or even 'alternative' media and the construction of highly polarised social bubbles. Tucker (2020: 58-61) refers to social media as an instrument of unmediated politics: "New information technologies, mostly social media, dismantled the barriers to direct communications from leader to followers. Social media reconstructed the ancient public square in cyber space, thereby weakening the power of the press to constrain politics" (Tucker 2020: 58). Furthermore, "the populist media gives narrative form to the passions, most notably fear" (Tucker, 2020: 61).

In the tradition of great cycles in economy, politics or societal development, he observes the recent anti-democratic or anti-liberal wave accompanied by the strengthening polarisation and deepening mistrust as the set of partial cases integrated into the general phenomenon of democratic backsliding. He stresses the snow-ball effect of populist neo-illiberalism that awoke the 'passionate archaic demons' and 'atavistic mechanism' in the form of a "vicious cycle of economic decline, breakdown of trade and mobility, economic and political hostilities, possesses the body politics, spreads, and infects the whole world" (Tucker, 2020: 131). In this situation, the clear socio-economic definition of class disappears and a more complex set of determinants that identify individuals politically come into play.

Traditionalism and cultural backlash

Let us stress at this place the negative consequences of poly-crisis and growing disillusionment and also fear in the Western societies in the last decade/s. Such development seems to be similar to the notion of anti-modernity in the second half of the 19th century that grew primarily out of disillusionment with Europe's industrial revolution. Nowadays, we observe similar processes regarding the globalisation processes, negative consequences of neoliberal reforms and the transition toward an information society (Industry 4.0 etc.). In our opinion, in such a poly-crisis the return of

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traditionalism, anti-modern and anti-liberal narratives is logical despite the question of whether we face and observe the new anti-modern revolution or a new version of traditional conservative (counter-)revolutions (Cabada & Charvát, 2024). Specifically, some of the mentioned crises even deepened the polarisation between the “winners” and “losers” of transformation from the (post)modern industrial society towards the knowledge and information society (Sass 2020).

When we are looking for a simple generalizing framework for the above-mentioned clash between two value-different social groups profiling contemporary political institutions and processes in Western democracies, several other typologies or concepts, in addition to the repeatedly mentioned Cultural Backlash study, also work with binary opposition. One of the first and, in our view, very successful contributions reflecting on the specifics of voting behaviour and value orientations in the post-Communist area of Central Eastern Europe, was offered by Lars Rensmann. Based on Rensmann (2012), if we analyse the important social and political cleavages related with the segmentation of East-Central European societies into the visible political camps, at least three important cleavages should be mentioned, playing important and even decisive roles in the polarisation of these societies.

Table 1: Structuring cleavages in CEE democracies

support of post-national political institutions (for example, EU)	opposition to post-national political institutions (for example, EU)
free (global) market allocation	economic redistribution or protectionism
liberal-cosmopolitan values and recognition of cultural diversity (secularism)	authoritarian conformism, social cohesion and cultural homogeneity (including clericalism)

Source: Rensmann, 2012: 77.

While the proponents of the stances presented in the first column might be understood as ‘cosmopolitan liberals’, the defenders of positions described in the second column tend to national or even nativist postures. The counter-cosmopolitans often tend to conspiracies and black-and-white thinking, which is also one of the typical signs of nativism, but more generally also affective polarisation. “Counter-cosmopolitanism tends to reduce multi-faceted globalization and cosmopolitanization processes to a single, unified and monolithic threat, often identified with actual or perceived ‘global agents’ who presumably ‘pull the strings’” (Rensmann, 2012: 74).

At the same time, in our view, it is clear that the three key cleavages or polarizing factors that Rensmann presents need not be limited to the specifics of the post-communist area, but on the contrary have proven to be a shared developmental feature of democracies over the last decade. In this respect, the so-called new democracies of East-Central Europe have complemented the traditional West European democracies regarding the current key cleavages (Cabada & Charvát, 2024). As Sass and Kuhnle (2023: 192) summarised in their analysis: “Some recent studies of the oppositions resulting from European integration, globalization, immigration, or educational expansion, and the growth of parties of the far right and new left have attempted to build on Rokkanian cleavage theory. A ‘transnational cleavage’, a ‘libertarian/authoritarian cleavage’, or a ‘universalism–particularism cleavage’ have been identified”.

The genesis of social groups and political actors rejecting the “precipitousness” of globalisation and integration processes, or offering various forms of conservative revolution or nativist revitalisation, has also influenced the research perspective with which Gethin, Martínez-Toledano and Piketty have approached the questions of contemporary polarisation and party competition (Cabada & Charvát, 2024). As the most important outcome of the analysis of the development of polarisation in Western democracies, the authors present “the existence of a gradual process of disconnection between the effects of income and education on the vote ... It has gradually become associated with higher-educated voters, giving rise in the 2010s to a divergence between the influences of income (economic capital) and education (human capital): high-income voters continue to vote for the right, while high-education voters have shifted to supporting the left. This separation between a “Merchant right” and a “Brahmin left” is visible in nearly all Western democracies, despite their major political, historical, and institutional differences. We also find that the rise of green and anti-immigration parties since the 1980s–1990s has accelerated this transition—although it can only explain about 15% of the overall shift observed—as education, not income, most clearly distinguishes support for these two families of parties today. As a result, many Western democracies now appear to have shifted from ‘class-based’ to ‘multidimensional’ or ‘multiconflictual’ party systems, in which income and education differentially structure support for competing political movements. One might call these systems ‘multi-elite’ party systems, in which governing coalitions alternating in power tend to reflect the views and interests of a different kind of elite (intellectual versus economic), assuming that elites have a greater influence on political programs and policies than the rest of the electorate” (Gethin, Martínez-Toledano & Piketty, 2022: 3-4; cf. Cabada & Charvát, 2024).

The authors focused their analysis on a range of different variables related with identity and polarisation – age, geography, religion, gender, and other socioeconomic variables – but only education turned out to be a variable that underwent a major transformation; for the other variables they conclude that “there has been no major realignment of voters along these other dimensions comparable to the one observed in the case of education”. In addition to this dimension, they also point to very different findings with regard to the gender, “the only variable other than education for which we find a clear reversal of electoral divides: in nearly all countries, women used to be more conservative than men and have gradually become more likely to vote for left-wing parties” (Gethin, Martínez-Toledano & Piketty, 2022: 6).

Nevertheless, we should not forget also about the rural-urban cleavages where the study observes “reshuffling of rural-urban divides within rather than across left–right blocs: support for green parties tends to be concentrated in cities today, just like other left-wing parties, while anti-immigration parties generally fare better in rural areas as is the case of other conservative parties” (Gethin, Martínez-Toledano & Piketty, 2022: 39; cf. Cabada & Charvát, 2024).

Conclusion: How to Find a New Pro-Democratic Societal Consensus

As has been shown above, current polarisation represents a complex process associated with a significant transformation of socio-economic attributes, identities and social structures in (post)modern society. Traditional political parties are not always able to effectively absorb new impulses and at the same time aggregate them into shared agendas representing coherent social groups. Gethin, Martínez-Toledano and Piketty (2022) focus on the positioning of political parties on two axes – ‘economic-distributive’

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and ‘socio-cultural’ – and show that the configuration of these two dimensions of political conflict and the divergence of income and education are closely related phenomena.

An important finding is that different age cohorts (generations) manifest significant differences in their preference for one of the axes or dimensions: while older voters with lower education continue to vote along class lines and thus support the left, social democratic and green parties attract an increasing share of young voters with higher education. The shift in the educational distribution was highest among non-religious voters and among men, although it also occurred in other sub-groups. One can also observe a ‘resistance’ to social progress in older generations.

The changes in polarisation, or rather in the strength and importance of the various cleavages in Western democratic societies, have not been dramatic and rapid over the last 70 years, but rather evolutionary. Postmodernisation, or rather neo-modernisation, coupled with the empowerment of the educated middle class, has been an impetus to weaken the traditional class divide. Indeed, traditional left parties responded to this by moving to new topics such as inclusion, protection of minorities, etc., and if they did not do so, faced competition from the Greens or, for example, the Pirate Parties.

As far as the political centre-right is concerned, it either sticks to liberal-conservative positions and moves closer to the centre, tends to slow down, stop or even return/revise, i.e. de-globalise, or instigates a cultural counter-revolution in response to the new problems arising from post-modernisation, which are in stark contrast to the social conservatism of the ‘old’ working class. This cultural counter-revolution has also become the basis for the rise of the populist right. It is this development that many analyses presented above identify as the key polarising factor in contemporary Western-style democracies.

As we have tried to point out, a significant role in the polarisation of contemporary societies is played by a psychology based on (dis)trust between members of different – not necessarily antagonistic – social groups, as well as on distrust in political institutions, especially when they are dominated by political parties/actors representing opposite political camps and different value systems. An a priori and largely prejudicial distrust of members of various outgroups and of these outgroups as a whole poses a fundamental challenge that undermines civic culture. As Jamal and Nooruddin (2010: 46-47) note, “one of the long-standing stated correlates of support for democracy has been generalized trust. This individual-level association between generalized trust and support for democracy has been highlighted by scholars of civic culture.” When significant social groups lose trust in political institutions, political culture changes towards low-trust societies in which people “tend to trust only those to whom they are similar” (Khodyakov 2007: 117).

In this context, some political thinkers emphasize the fact that postmodern societies, characterized by strong individualization and high volatility, begin to lack clear majorities and turn more into sets of minorities. However, when large parts of societies fail to define themselves with the majority, whether economically, socio-culturally or otherwise, a situation of inequalities in epistemic power arises; distrust in political institutions thus turns into a feeling that the individual is unable to influence political processes in any way (Catala 2015: 424-425; cf. Cabada & Charvát, 2024).

Overcoming the affective polarisation and returning to ideological polarisation is, however, a major challenge for democratic political protagonists. Recent research (Wagner & Praprotnik, 2023) suggests that an important tool for mitigating polarisation is primarily reduced tensions between political parties, i.e. depolarisation at the level of

political elites. Cooperation between rival parties, for example a coalition, plays a key role in reducing affective polarisation in society.

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Article Info

Received: April 18 2026

Accepted: June 20 2026

How to cite this article:

Cabada, L. (2026). Long-term Polarising Trends in the Western Democracies. *Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques*, no. 90, pp. 9-19.