

Hellenic Observatory Research Calls Programme

Cultural Divides and Affective Polarisation

Policy Brief

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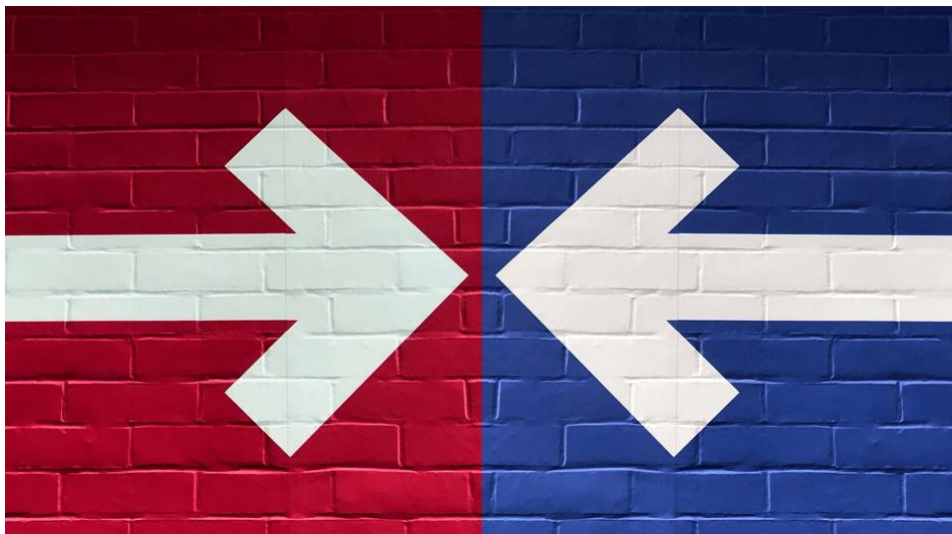
Affective polarisation in Greece

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Executive Summary

- We have collected **new representative data** of the Greek population measuring the level of animosity and distrust citizens have towards individuals from the opposing political party.
- With this innovative dataset, we can **evaluate the extent of** a new emerging form of societal polarization called **affective polarisation** – a type of mass polarisation expressed by voters as animosity towards the supporters of the political party they oppose.
- Our analysis reveals that **supporters of Syriza and New Democracy**, respectively, **hold negative perceptions of each other**. Specifically, they view members of the other party as closed-minded, untrustworthy, and overall they are unwilling to socialise with the supporters of the “other” party.
- The supporters of SYRIZA and of New Democracy are marginally more affectively polarised compared to the supporters of all other parties represented in the Greek parliament.
- Our analysis reveals that the **supporters of Syriza and New Democracy**, respectively, **hold negative perceptions of each other**. Specifically, they view members of the other party as closed-minded, untrustworthy, and overall they are unwilling to socialise with the supporters of the “other” party.
- Our analysis suggests that **affective polarisation around the issue of austerity measures has been decreasing over the past years**. This marks a significant departure from the highly charged political climate of the previous decade and suggests that other issues are now emerging as major points of contention.

- Our analysis reveals that **cultural values and beliefs have emerged as a significant source of affective polarisation among Greek citizens**, highlighting the growing impact of cultural factors on political attitudes and perceptions.

Key Findings

According to our analysis of comparative and longitudinal data from countries as diverse as Germany, Lithuania, Greece affective polarisation is on the rise in most European countries. In fact, the majority of citizens in these countries report experiencing affective polarisation. Over the past decade, the proportion of individuals who are affectively polarised has increased significantly.

Greece is one of the most affectively polarised societies in Europe. Our data suggests that Greece has higher levels of affective polarisation than many other European countries, including Spain, Germany, and Italy. This is likely due to a combination of factors, including the country's recent economic crisis and cultural divisions.

After a large increase in civic dissatisfaction during the economic crisis, Greece reached its highest level of affective polarisation on record in recent years. The rise of affective polarisation has been especially sharp since 2009. The year that marks the beginning of the so-called "economic recession".

The supporters of New Democracy and SYRIZA are among the most affectively polarised groups in the Greek society, with strong negative feelings of animosity towards each other. However, **it appears that the supporters of New Democracy exhibit a more distinct and cohesive group identity compared to SYRIZA's supporters.**

For the supporters of New Democracy their pro-memorandum identity is still relevant and is a driver of their polarisation as if they still experience a social trauma from the period when SYRIZA was in government.

For the supporters of SYRIZA the anti-memorandum identity is not relevant anymore. This could be attributed to the fact that when in government, Tsipras signed the third memorandum, contradicting the outcome of the referendum.

The political and non-political implications of affective polarisation

Affective polarization has important implications for the democratic process. First of all, **it undermines democratic accountability, for if perceptions of economic performance or probity in office are influenced by partisan bias.** What this means is that voters may fail to credit the successes of their opponents, or more importantly to punish mistakes and wrongdoing by their own side.

Secondly, it undermines democratic legitimacy, for **high levels of affective polarisation lead partisans and party leaders to view their opponents as illegitimate even when they have won in free and fair elections,** thereby eroding the primacy of the electoral mandate.

Affective polarisation has important political implications, but its impact extends beyond politics. We know that **it affects social cohesion and various non-political aspects of society.** For example, as we have shown in our research it affects interpersonal relationships both within and outside of political contexts. For example, as it was the case during the referendum in Greece it creates divisions within families, friends, and communities since different political views are accompanied by strong feelings of animosity. For example, in our study we observed that **affectively polarised citizens avoid residing in close proximity to individuals who supported the opposite political party.**

Finally, through an experimental design we have obtained evidence suggesting that a robust national identity can mitigate the effects of affective polarisation. We found that **national identity, characterised by shared values, beliefs, common historical references, cultural elements, and moments of collective pride, can promote social cohesion within a nation and reducing the level of affective polarisation in society.**

By emphasising the elements that bind individuals together as a cohesive whole, national identity has the potential to bridge divides and inspire a sense of collective purpose, thereby overcoming the negative consequences of affective polarisation.