European Journal of Political Research ●●: ●●–●●, 2018
doi: 10.1111/1475-6765.12260

Public opinion polarisation and protest behaviour

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Abstract. Does an increasing divide in normative notions within a population influence citizens' political protest behaviour? This article explores whether public opinion polarisation stimulates individuals to attend lawful demonstrations. In line with relative deprivation theory, it is argued that in an environment of polarisation, individuals' normative notions are threatened, increasing the probability that they will actively participate in the political decision-making process. Using the European Social Survey from the period 2002–2014 and focusing on subnational regions, multilevel analyses are conducted. Thereby a new index to measure public opinion polarisation is introduced. Depending on the issue, empirical results confirm the effect of polarisation. While average citizens are not motivated to demonstrate over the issue of whether people from other countries are a cultural threat, they are motivated by the issues of reducing inequality and of homosexuality. The article goes on to examine in a second step whether ideological extremism makes individuals more susceptible to environmental opinion polarisation. Findings show that members of the far left are more likely to protest when their social environment is divided over the issue of income inequality. In contrast, members of the far right are motivated by rising polarisation regarding homosexuality. In sum, citizens become mobilised as their beliefs and values are threatened by public opinion polarisation.

Keywords: public opinion polarisation; protest behaviour; normative deprivation; subnational regions; Europe

Introduction

Does a 'drifting apart' of normative notions influence citizens' political behaviour? The present study seeks to answer this question by investigating whether *public opinion polarisation* drives political action. More specifically, it examines: (1) whether opinion polarisation in individuals' social environment causes them to become politically active in terms of protest behaviour; and (2) whether ideological extremists are particularly receptive to the influences of environmental opinion polarisation.

Protesting is a growing mode of political participation outside the formal representational framework. People may protest to express their views, make demands or voice grievances more directly and with a higher perceived influence on politics compared to voting (Harding et al. 1986: 96; Oliver 2001: 21). Thus, if opinion polarisation affects protesting and unevenly mobilises different groups within the citizenship, a shift can occur in the representation of people's preferences. For instance, if ideological extremists are mobilised by increasing polarisation while moderate citizens are not, the overall picture of people's needs and desires may be distorted.

The research gap that I address is twofold. First, the potential *consequences* of public opinion polarisation have remained largely unconsidered to date. In the 1990s, scholars observed that American citizens began 'taking sides in a civil war between incompatible

views of the American way of life' (Baker 2005: 65), and they detected a 'disagreement about basic value orientations' (Jacoby 2014: 755) in American society.[1] This Culture War thesis (Hunter 1994) contributed to the development of the *public opinion polarisation* concept (Baldassarri & Gelman 2008: 35), which has drawn increasing attention in recent years. Within the research field, the academic discussion is dominated by two questions. The first question is whether public opinion has become increasingly polarised with regard to different ideological notions, such as liberalism/conservatism, economic orientations and distributional issues, attitudes towards other social groups, and moral beliefs (see, *inter alia*, Baldassarri & Gelman 2008; DiMaggio et al. 1996; Evans 2003; Abramowitz & Saunders 2008; Layman 2001; Layman & Carsey 2002; Fiorina et al. 2006; Fiorina & Abrams 2011; Fiorina & Levendusky 2006; Alwin & Tufiş 2016). The second question is whether people's views have indeed become more extreme (see, *inter alia*, Abramowitz & Saunders 2005; Bafumi & Shapiro 2009; Baldassarri & Gelman 2008; Layman & Carsey 2002), or whether the increasing elite polarisation merely better sorts individuals along ideological lines, increasing the gap between partisan subgroups, which makes mass polarisation an echo of elite polarisation but not an ideological movement *per se* (see, *inter alia*, Baldassarri & Gelman 2008; Lachat 2008; Hetherington 2001; Fiorina & Levendusky 2006; Levendusky 2010). However, the potential consequences of polarisation for the political and social system have not been generally considered. We have limited knowledge about what happens when normative notions about resource allocation, moral beliefs or questions about how to organise social life become polarised. Does this lead to societal conflicts or even threaten social integration (Jacoby 2014: 755)?[2] Does it politicise day-to-day life? Do people react to opinion polarisation in their social surroundings? One conceivable consequence could be a change in citizens' political behaviour. To my knowledge, this consequence has not yet been examined.

The second research gap pertains to the geographical focus. So far, research on mass polarisation has largely been limited to the United States context, and the few studies related to Europe concentrate on the questions presented above (Jensen & Thomsen 2011; Down & Wilson 2010; Adams et al. 2012a,b; Schmitt & Freire 2012; Munzert & Bauer 2013). The considerable challenges in Europe, however – autocratic tendencies, the Ukraine war, Islamic terrorism, ideological extremism, the strengthening of populist parties, growing immigrant populations, increasing numbers of refugees and increasing socioeconomic inequality – necessitate further investigation of polarisation tendencies and their societal impacts in Europe.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. After introducing the notion of polarisation, I argue that protest behaviour is driven by anticipated normative deprivation due to mass polarisation. Next, I describe the operationalisation and the methodological design used for the empirical analyses. Two-level regressions are conducted, and a new index to measure opinion polarisation is introduced. I then examine whether regional polarisation with regard to (1) immigration, (2) social inequality and (3) homosexuality has an impact on protest behaviour.[3] Empirical results indicate that polarisation in the social environment regarding certain beliefs motivates citizens to protest. Findings also show that ideological extremists react differently to polarisation compared to non-extremists, depending on whether the issue in question is at the heart of their ideology. Thus, it seems that participation is strongly driven by ideological content.

Public opinion polarisation

Public opinion polarisation extends beyond a simple variation in opinion. Rather, it can be interpreted as *the intensification of opinion discrepancy dividing substantive parts of the society into opposing camps, while the moderates are losing ground* (see Fiorina & Abrams 2011: 309; DiMaggio et al. 1996; Baldassarri & Gelman 2008).[4] Public opinion may systematically sort individuals along multiple lines of potential conflict and organise them into groups centred on exclusive identities (Baldassarri & Gelman 2008: 2), but such grouping does not necessarily lead to exclusive social identities. Rather, public opinion polarisation results in an increase in the ideological distance between oppositional factions within society – more precisely, the divide between the antagonistic camps becomes larger.

The most influential literature (Fiorina & Abrams 2011; DiMaggio et al. 1996: 693; Baldassarri & Gelman 2008) identifies five characteristics of public opinion polarisation. The first is *relevance*: The subject of disagreement is relevant not only to political elites, but also to the general population. The second characteristic is *bimodality*: The public is divided, clustering at opposite extremes of opinion (Fiorina & Abrams 2011). Of course, the opinion structure can also be multimodal, but DiMaggio et al. (1996: 693) point out that bimodality is associated with the highest risk of social tensions. The third characteristic is *exclusion*: Tensions and polarisation become more likely as meeting the preferences and desires of both sides implies mutually exclusive social arrangements and societal goals (Jacoby 2014: 754; DiMaggio et al. 1996: 693). The fourth characteristic is *constraint*: Although a population may occasionally be polarised on a single issue, it is more plausible that 'people align along multiple … issues' (Baldassarri & Gelman 2008: 409). According to DiMaggio et al. (1996: 693), 'the more closely associated different social attitudes become …, the greater the likelihood of implacable conflict' – that is, antagonisms about individual concerns rarely expand into serious problems, but those arising around a combination of social and political issues linked to a specific philosophy of life or world view have a greater tendency for expansion. And the final characteristic is *consolidation*: These philosophies or worldviews underlie individuals' identities, and the greater the degree to which opinions are bound to individual identities, the more likely they are to become the foci of social conflict (see Blau 1977, cited in DiMaggio et al. 1996: 693).

Polarisation and protesting

Typically, the ordinary citizen concentrates on her or his private and working life and has little interest in becoming involved in politics or matters of public life (Hunter 1994: 10; Oliver 2001: 29). But social forces can influence an individual's decision to behave in a political way (Oliver 2001: 110; Pattie et al. 2004: 144). Living in a social environment in which comparatively few fellow citizens hold moderate normative beliefs, while the number of citizens with extreme positions – at both ends of the spectrum – is high, not only heightens the pressure to choose a side, but also leads to people to wonder if and to what extent politics takes their values, needs and interests into consideration. I argue that increasing opinion polarisation triggers worries about future social and political developments which could concern one's values, convictions and worldviews. Such worries may be accompanied by an anticipation of collective political deprivation, which in turn incites citizens to act. I derive

my argument from the relative deprivation paradigm as well as theoretical considerations compiled by Chantal Mouffe and Émile Durkheim, outlined in the following section.

Relative deprivation

The notion of relative deprivation has had widespread influence in social sciences as an explanation for social protest (Dubé & Guimond 1986). It is centred on the sociological tradition of collective action research suggesting that citizenship is a product of structural aspects of the environment and that the social context explains political behaviour (Dalton & Wattenberg 1993; Ellemers 2002: 242). The starting point for relative deprivation is individuals with particular socioeconomic characteristics and members of various social groups comparing and contrasting their life situation with that of comparable individuals or groups. They develop expectations about how economic, political and social systems should operate in terms of equity-fairness and evaluate how fairly these systems treat them or their group. If these comparisons are unfavourable and people's expectations about the goods and conditions of life to which they believe they are entitled are unmet, they experience a sense of grievance and frustration labelled 'relative deprivation' (Merton & Kitt 1950; Clarke et al. 2004: 225; Pattie et al. 2004: 147; Taylor 2002: 14). People may compare themselves to other individuals and feel *personally deprived*, or they may compare themselves as members of an important reference group to another group and feel *group deprived* (Runciman 1966; Smith & Ortiz 2002: 92). The larger the gap between expectations and evaluations, or the more unfavourable the comparison, the greater the sense of disadvantage and the more likely people are motivated to redress the perceived inequity (Walker et al. 2002: 288). Studies have shown that personal deprivation leads to individual reactions, such as writing letters to politicians or newspapers, but feelings of group deprivation promote collective behaviour and active attempts to change the social system (Vanneman & Pettigrew 1972; Walker & Mann 1987; Smith & Ortiz 2002).

The sense of entitlement may stem from an uneven distribution with regard to socioeconomic characteristics between groups (Taylor 2002: 14), and most portrayals of group deprivation indeed emphasise structural factors such as class, status and power (Runciman 1966; Vanneman & Pettigrew 1972). It is likewise conceivable that groups compete for values, convictions and the feeling of belonging (Kaase 1976: 11). As moral concepts and convictions become politically relevant and citizens see that authorities can change outcome decisions, people may become active to improve their situation (Kaase 1976: 9, 13). The more central the value dimensions on which deprivations are experienced and the clearer the perceived responsibility of political authorities for felt deprivation, the higher the potential for unconventional political behaviour (Kaase 1976: 17).

Deprivation always implies some kind of comparison, but the standard does not have to be current; it can be a past or future standard as well (Ellemers 2002: 243). Thereby, deprivation consists of a *cognitive component*, as the situation is judged and a comparison is drawn, as well as an *affective component*, like frustration or anger (Taylor 2002: 15). I argue that the fear of losing something valuable or not getting what one strongly desires triggers deprivation and can be a driver for collective protest. Anticipated loss of the validity of one's own values and normative notions can be very threatening and energises people to act. To exemplify this argument, I additionally refer to Mouffe and Durkheim.

Values and identity

According to Chantal Mouffe, politics has a strong affective dimension. She argues that social systems are organised into groups with collective identities that contend for resources as well as sovereignty of definitions (Mouffe & Neumeier 2007: 12, 34–36). She further argues that this struggle within the political arena is neither rational nor harmonic, but very passionate, especially if one's way of life is at stake (Mouffe & Neumeier 2007: 39). This passion can easily be understood through Émile Durkheim's concept of 'mechanical solidarity'. Without going too deep into his argumentation, it is important to know that Durkheim searches for a mechanism that regulates social life and assures social cohesion, and he suggests that collectively shared moral values are the key to both. According to Durkheim (2013: 60), societies need common ideas about morality and concepts of obligations that are internalised and 'shared by most average individuals in the same society … inscribed upon everyone's consciousness'. Durkheim calls this moral intersection the 'collective conscience', which encompasses values, beliefs, ideas and perceptions. Any violation of this collective conscience leads to feelings of morality infringement. If these values and beliefs are questioned or even threatened, the experience is not simply a violation of one's personal values, but rather a violation of a universal principle. This experience of principle violation in turn typically triggers very fierce reactions and attempts to protect one's own worldview (Durkheim 2013: 76ff). To put it differently, values and moral convictions are not restricted to the personal self, but have universal claim and are experienced in this way (Van Zomeren et al. 2012: 66). The mechanism is obvious: The threatening of the 'social' part of one's personal identity is experienced as a violation of a universal principle which must be protected for the 'greater good' (Durkheim 2013: 76ff). In this way, opinion polarisation can lead to a defence of one's own values as well as solidarity with those who share them.

Anticipated political deprivation and political action

Having reviewed these theoretical approaches, I am now able to raise my argument. Social groups vie with each other for resources as well as for prevailing norms. As long as the opinion structure is complex, the number of discussants is high and people are more likely to discuss their views with persons who think differently (DiMaggio et al. 1996: 693). In the public arena, prestige bearers, leaders and group representatives present their ideas in public meetings or conventions, and these ideas are published and discussed in the media. But as the opinion structure becomes bimodal – that is, the number of people holding extreme beliefs and attitudes rises, while comparatively few fellow citizens hold moderate normative views – selection and evaluation of information as well as communication tend to reinforce attitudes and become circular (Leeper 2014).

As polarisation rises, the number of individuals posing a threat to the existence of one's own worldview increases, putting the ordinary citizen under social stress. Either there is a rather large group of people with a different worldview, or one finds herself or himself in an environment of extreme positions around provocative issues. Either way, the situation is competitive with regard to normative notions. People start to wonder how responsive politics are to differing needs and interests and to what extent politics will consider their own needs

and interests. The anticipation of increasing social and political influence of the opposing group (or two groups with opposing worldviews), accompanied by specific political policies that do not represent one's own convictions, triggers political deprivation.

If the individual frames the situation in personal terms, discomfort may lead to personal reactions such as writing a letter or withdrawing from public space and hoping that someone else will improve the situation. But if individual deprivation spills over to fraternal deprivation, people see themselves as members of a group and thus feel empowered to deal with the inequity. In that case, the willingness to challenge the problem may rise (Smith & Ortiz 2002: 111).

The process of becoming aware of such developments is a result of complex observations, interactions and communication processes between individuals who hold the same views or between individuals with different views. It may even be more of a felt sensation than a conscious process. But certain social actors anticipate and articulate deprivation and push it over the threshold of individual awareness (Kaase 1976: 14). Once deprivation has crossed the threshold of awareness and people attribute responsibility to politics, the potential exists for them to become active to alleviate the situation (Kaase 1976: 13).

In sum, public opinion polarisation threatens collective values and triggers collective political deprivation, which in turn makes collective protest behaviour more likely.

Ideological extremism

Until now, the focus has been the general effect of public opinion polarisation on protesting. However, it is also plausible that people who are already politically sensitised may react differently from the ordinary citizen. People who are emotionally or cognitively involved in politics tend to be more attentive to developments in their sociopolitical environment and are aware that 'doing something' is important to the decision-making process (Rogowski 2014).

One such type of citizen is the *ideological extremist*, who positions herself or himself at the fringe on one end or the other of the left-right spectrum.[5] Ideological extremists are already politicised; they typically hold high levels of political information and are more involved in political actions than ideological moderates (Harding et al. 1986: 100; Whitford et al. 2006; Van der Meer et al. 2009). This involvement can partly be explained by their generally greater distance from the government's ideological position (Van der Meer et al. 2009), but opinion polarisation is also likely to influence the relationship between extremism and political action.

Although not devoid of ideological commitment (Lane 1962), ideology exists and matters in most people's everyday lives (Jost et al. 2008: 134)[6] and political beliefs are linked to a subset of core values and principles (Feldman 1988, 2003; Jost et al. 2009: 316).[7] Most citizens are not experts in the various ideologies; however, some are more willing or better able than others to learn the constructed content of political ideologies which allows them to select the ideology that seems right to them (Converse 1964, cited in Jost et al. 2009: 319). Indeed, research shows that individuals who are highly engaged in politics exhibit attitudes about both social and economic issues that are more stable, intercorrelated and more coherent with different forms of ideology than those of ordinary citizens (Jennings 1992).

Although very different in their beliefs, the extreme right and the extreme left are unhappy with the current sociopolitical order and strive for alternative social, economic and political arrangements (Domhoff 2015: 9). They very much identify with the normative content of their ideology, which not only helps them to envision a better world, but also assists in rationalising how they think things should be. Thus, as their vision differs from reality, ideological extremists experience political deprivation whether their environment is polarised or not. In the context of polarisation, however, their longstanding grievance is combined with newfound support; the group of supporters grows, and new resources become available. This situation heightens the internal efficacy and the expectancy for future success in terms of envisioned political outcomes. Hence, the relationship between ideological extremism and protesting is conditioned by public opinion polarisation.

In sum, following my theoretical considerations, I suggest that polarisation has a mobilising effect on individual protest behaviour. This effect is especially true for ideological extremists. I expect the following associations:

H1: The level of contextual public opinion polarisation is positively associated with the citizens' probability of protesting.
H2: The effect of citizens' ideological extremism on political protest is conditioned on the level of contextual public opinion polarisation.

Data and operationalisation

Design

Data are drawn from the European Social Survey (ESS) cumulative data file conducted from 2002 to 2014, covering seven rounds of the survey. The question of whether public opinion polarisation affects the individual's probability of protesting is addressed in two-level regressions with random intercept coefficients, whereby citizens (level 1) are nested in subnational regions (level 2).

By 'subnational regions', I mean geographical units within the national border. The reasoning underpinning this definition is the belief that social, political, structural, economic and cultural features are spatially condensed within national borders, making subnational regions referential contexts for human behaviour (see, e.g., Fitzgerald & Lawrence 2011; Freitag 2010; Hooghe et al. 2011; Hirschle & Kleiner 2014; Jesuit et al. 2009; Kestilä & Söderlund 2007; Kleiner 2016; McVeigh & Cunningham 2012; Oliver 2001; Vanhoutte & Hooghe 2013). Statistically, the subnational level offers the opportunity to broaden the analysis focus and to examine the relationship between polarisation and individual participation on a greater number of context units, increasing the reliability of the estimates (Meuleman & Billiet 2009; Freitag 2010). It also allows controlling for country-level effects (Kestilä-Kekkonen & Söderlund 2009; Beugelsdijk & Klasing 2016). Thus, I use regions at NUTS-II[8] level to model the context. To ensure representativeness at the regional level, my analysis only includes regions with at least 50 respondents with valid answers.[9] Furthermore, I only include a country if information is available from at least three regions in that country[10] (see Beugelsdijk & Klasing 2016: 535).

Variables and controls

To measure the dependent variable, I use an item obtained by the ESS asking the respondent whether he or she has taken part in a lawful public demonstration within the last 12 months. Therefore, the dependent variable is dichotomous (dummy).

According to the literature, value differences that can trigger processes of social division within society and split their members into clusters concern economic/social questions, on the one hand, and cultural/moral questions, on the other (Jacoby 2014: 756; Hussey 2012: 86; Keeter & Smith 2006; Maddox & Lilie 1984; Swedlow & Wyckoff 2009). While economic/social questions deal with the (re)distribution of resources and/or (educational, professional) opportunities and the role of the state in the economy, cultural/moral subjects regularly address questions about the proper order of society and how this order can be achieved (Beugelsdijk & Klasing 2016: 526).

But which values and beliefs demonstrate the central aspects of societal ideologies such as normative notions? Although some ideological differences are historically and culturally specific, others are relatively stable and enduring. The right-wing label has come to represent political views that are conservative, supportive of the status quo and hierarchical in nature, whereas the left-wing label connotes progressive social change and egalitarian ideals (Jost et al. 2008: 128, 2009: 310). More specifically, individuals on the far right are likely to value tradition, conformity, social order and consensual adherence to rules, norms and conventions (Feldman 2003; Jost et al. 2009; Van der Meer et al. 2009). They additionally show comparatively harsh attitudes in personal–sexual morality, including homosexuality (Harding et al. 1986: 102). Right-wing orientations are generally associated with stereotyping, prejudice, intolerance and hostility towards outgroups, especially to low status or stigmatised groups such as immigrants who the far right believe undermine the national community (Jost et al. 2009: 325; Harding et al. 1986: 101). Conversely, individuals on the far left are concerned about social injustice and endorse change in the direction of greater social and economic equality (Van der Meer et al. 2009; Jost et al. 2008: 127, 132; 2009: 312). Left-wingers also favour flexibility and individual self-expression and are more likely to reject values of order, authority, religious belief and moral strictness (Harding et al. 1986: 102).

Consistent with these insights into political ideology, I use three different attitudinal dimensions that seem relevant regarding either the sexual/moral dimension or the socioeconomic dimension, and for which I expect contextual polarisation to be relevant enough to mobilise citizens. The first dimension is *homosexuality*, or attitudes towards homosexuals in terms of whether they should be free to live their own life as they wish. The second dimension is *cultural threat*, or the perceived undermining or enrichment of one's own cultural life by people from other countries. And the third dimension is *economic inequality*, or attitudes concerning whether the government should take measures to reduce income differences.

In order to measure opinion polarisation, I created three indicators, each following the same pattern. First, two variables were generated for each of the three dimensions to indicate opposite directions of a normative belief. For example, to generate the variable indicating a pro-gay rights attitude, all answers expressing an anti-gay attitude on the original variable were coded 0. Answers expressing a pro-gay attitude were recoded, with increasing

	CONTRA									PRO
Original variable	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
PRO	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	3	4	5
CONTRA	5	4	3	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0

Figure 1. Recoding of attitudinal dimension.
Note: Author's own illustration.

advocacy reflected by ascending values. Analogously, a second variable was created to reflect opposition to homosexuality (Figure 1).

Subsequently, for each variable the aggregated mean per region was determined. Next, the level of public opinion polarisation of a region was calculated by multiplying these two mean values:

$$\mathrm{POP}_{\mathrm{Reg}} = \mathrm{MEAN}_{\mathrm{Pro}} \times \mathrm{MEAN}_{\mathrm{Contra}} \quad (1)$$

The greater the index score, the greater the clustering of the respondents at the 'normative extremes' and the greater the polarisation of the region in question. I was able to obtain polarisation for 747 NUTS-II regions in 23 European countries.

Of course, there are alternatives for measuring polarisation. For instance, it could be measured by simply using the variance of positions (Down & Wilson 2010: 70; Baldassarri & Gelman 2008). However, this measure does not fit the understanding of polarisation being more than just variance (see above). Some authors therefore use three criteria at once (variance, kurtosis, skewness) to measure polarisation (DiMaggio et al. 1996; Evans 2003), which is reasonable if the development of polarisation is analysed. This study, however, seeks to detect potential consequences of polarisation and therefore needs an *individual indicator* to feasibly handle associations. A more sophisticated measure, proposed by Esteban and Ray (1994), has the advantage of incorporating information about the 'distance' between groups on a given characteristic. For example, Beugelsdijk and Klasing (2016: 524) adapt this fraction index by defining the different groups in a society according to the possible answers that can be given to a question and the distance between groups through the difference in the corresponding answer codes. The index value is 0 when all respondents give the same answer, and it reaches a maximum when a society has two equal groups with strongly opposing viewpoints (Beugelsdijk & Klasing 2016: 524).

My measure has a lot in common with this fraction index. It is small, as opinions are homogenous. It is sensitive to the ratio between the clusters. If group A at one pole increases, while group B at the other pole decreases, the polarisation value declines, but if the respondents are clustered at the 'normative extremes', it reaches a maximum. Thus, my index is very highly correlated with Esteban and Ray's index at the regional level (see Table 1 in the Online Appendix). However, the great advantage of my index is its implementability. It is easy to generate, and thus it can be produced using standard statistical software packages.

Ideological extremism is measured by the three outermost categories of the left–right dimension included in the ESS survey. Since it is unlikely that right- and left-wing preferences have the same impact on political action (see Van der Meer et al. 2009: 1430), I generate one dummy per political fringe.

From the perspective of the civic voluntarism model, deprivation should translate to apathy rather than political action because resources are the factor that motivates and enables participation (Pattie et al. 2004: 149). Furthermore, protest activity is more usually identified with younger, male, middle-class and rather leftist citizens, but it is not confined to these groups (Harding et al. 1986: 97). However, in this study I am not concerned with deprivation in terms of 'time, money and civic skills' (Verba et al. 1995: 271), but rather anticipated normative deprivation with regard to ideological beliefs. Accordingly, due to alternative explanations I control for several characteristics of individuals to exclude spurious effects: party attachment, ideological position, policy awareness through media consumption, political interest, age, gender, education, subjective household income, size of residence, religiosity and left- as well as right-wing extremism (see Table 2 in the Online Appendix). To control for unobservable country-specific characteristics, country dummies are included, too (Beugelsdijk & Klasing 2016). I also include a dummy for each point in time to control for time-varying features. The analyses incorporate all the valid answers from respondents holding citizenship of the nation in which the survey was conducted.

Analyses

Of the more than 200,000 [201,418; 207,084] respondents processed, approximately 7 [6.84; 7.04] per cent reported that they had taken part in a lawful public demonstration within the last 12 months. About 17.5 per cent of the interviewees claimed that they hold an extreme position regarding immigration, 31.7 per cent regarding economic inequality, 39 per cent regarding homosexuality and approximately 12.7 per cent positioned themselves at the margins of the left-right spectrum.[11]

As a starting point, I analyse the relationship between the key variable measuring regional polarisation and the individual's probability of participating in a demonstration, holding country differences and variations in time constant (see Tables 3 and 4 in the Online Appendix). Since the dependent variable is dichotomous, logistic regressions are conducted. The intra-class correlation coefficient shows that 6.5 per cent of the total variance can be explained by introducing a second regional level of analysis.

In a second step, I include the individual characteristics into the model. Table 3 in the Online Appendix shows the results regarding regional polarisation in the matter of immigration (M1 and M2). As is evident, polarisation in immigration has a positive relationship with protesting, but although the coefficient's direction is in line with my expectations, it is non-significant at the 0.05 level. In contrast, regional polarisation in economic inequality (M7) and in homosexuality (M13) both enter the regressions positively with a statistically significant coefficient, which holds true when controlling for individual features (M8 and M14). Polarisation in economic inequality and in homosexuality are both related to protest behaviour, and as the level of polarisation rises, an individual's probability of protesting increases.

Next, I examine whether ideological extremism makes individuals more susceptible to environmental opinion polarisation, and whether polarisation shows conditional effects on the individual-level relationship between ideological extremism and protest behaviour. Since interesting differences may exist between ideological groups, I employ cross-level interactive terms by which left-wing and right-wing extremism are considered separately,

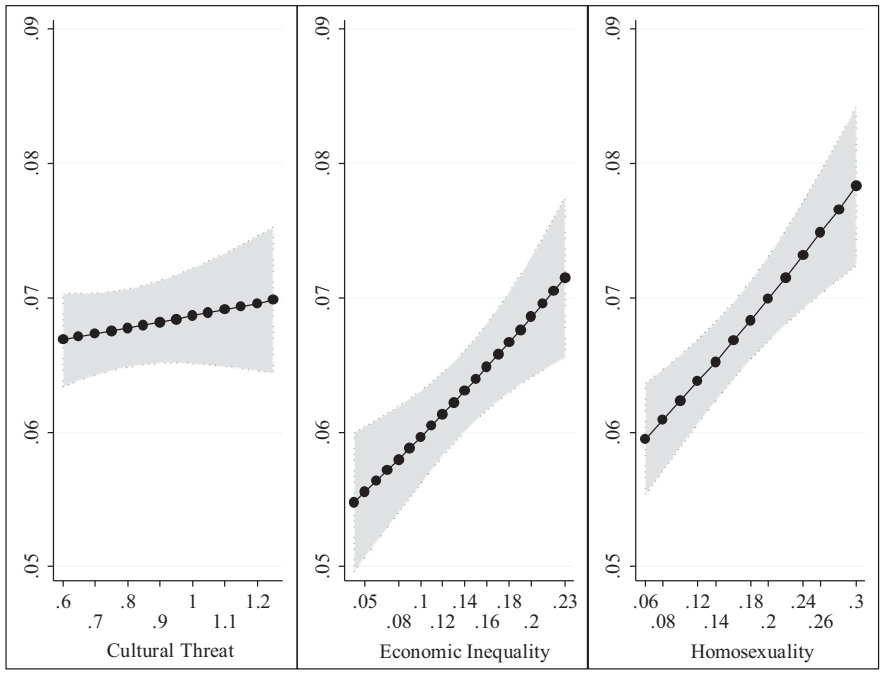

Figure 2. Substantive effects of public opinion polarisation (M2, M8 and M14).
Note: Predicted probability of protest participation (with 95 per cent confidence intervals) over the range of values of regional polarisation. Probabilities are generated from the estimates of M2, M8 and M14. M2: The probability of protesting increases from 6.68 [6.34; 7.03] per cent to 6.98 [6.44; 7.52] per cent. M8: The probability of protesting increases from 5.85 [5.35; 6.36] per cent to 7.43 [6.88; 7.98] per cent. M14: The probability of protesting increases from 5.95 [5.53; 6.36] per cent to 7.83 [7.24; 8.42] per cent.
Source: European Social Survey, 2002–2014 (www.europeansocialsurvey.org/).

and I re-run the regressions. Tables 5–7 in the Online Appendix show the results obtained with these modified models.

With regard to polarisation in immigration, I find no robust interaction effect between polarisation and extremism. The rightist-by-polarisation interaction does not meet statistical significance (M3 and M4). The leftist-by-polarisation interaction term shows a negative and statistically significant effect after controlling for left-wing extremism and polarisation (M5), but the effect loses significance when individual-level controls are included (M6). After controlling for the extremism-by-polarisation interaction, I find that right-wingers (M3 and M4) as well as left-wingers (M5 and M6) are more likely to participate in demonstrations than non-extremists, which means that their behaviour is not related to the level of regional polarisation. M9 shows that in regions with higher polarisation with regard to economic inequality the probability of protesting is generally increased. However, right-wing extremists do not seem to be further mobilised by this regional feature since its effect turns positive when controls are included, showing that the effect is not robust (M10). Conversely, those who position themselves at the left margin of the left-right scale seem to be additionally driven as the society is being divided with regard to income inequality (M11 and M12).

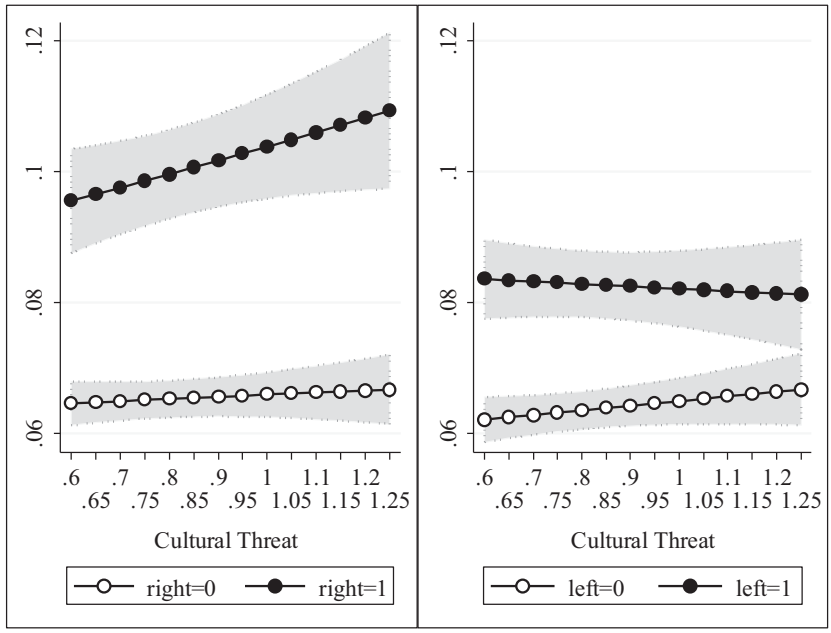

Figure 3. Substantive effects of public opinion polarisation (M6 and M4): Cultural threat.
Note: Predicted probability of protest participation (with 95 per cent confidence intervals) for rightist respondents (black circles) and non-rightist respondents (white circles) on the left graph as well as for leftist respondents (black circles) and non-leftist respondents (white circles) over the range of values of regional polarisation. Probabilities are generated from the estimates of M4 and M6. M4: The right-wing extremists' probability of protesting increases from 9.55 [8.75; 10.35] per cent to 10.93 [9.74; 12.12] per cent and the non-rightist probability increases from 6.46 [6.12; 6.80] per cent to 6.67 [6.14; 7.20] per cent. M6: The left-wing extremists' probability of protesting decreases from 8.35 [7.75; 8.96] per cent to 8.12 [7.28; 8.95] per cent and the non-leftist probability increases from 6.21 [5.87; 6.55] per cent to 6.70 [6.12; 7.22] per cent.
Source: European Social Survey, 2002–2014 (www.europeansocialsurvey.org/).

The results of Table 7 in the Online Appendix show that right-wing extremists have a higher probability of protesting as polarisation in homosexuality intensifies (M15 and M16), while left-wing extremists are demobilised by this contextual factor (M17 and M18). In sum, the impression is that depending on the issue at stake, regional opinion polarisation mobilises different groups of people living in these regions in different ways.

Since the effect size of coefficients from logistic regressions cannot be interpreted in an intuitively understandable way, I estimated the average marginal effects and plotted them across the full range of values of public opinion polarisation (see Figures 1–4). This approach allows an intuitive interpretation and an answer to the question of whether regional opinion polarisation provides a statistically substantial contribution to the dependent variable.

Figure 2 plots the substantive effects of regional opinion polarisation using the estimates of models M2 as well as M8 (Table 3 in the Online Appendix), and M14 (Table 4 in the Online Appendix). The black circles are the point estimates, and the grey area reflects the 95 per cent confidence intervals associated with the probability estimates. The graph on the left shows that as polarisation concerning cultural threat increases, the respondents' probability of protesting does not increase in a statistically substantive way – a finding that is

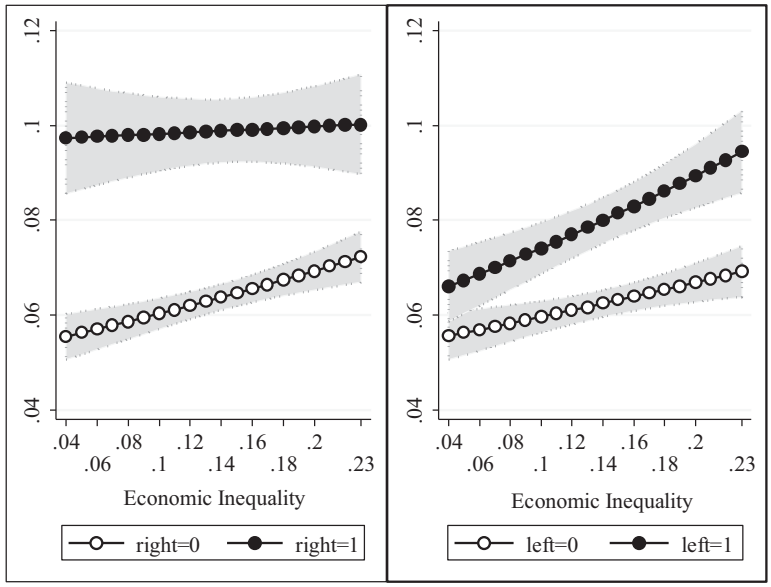

Figure 4. Substantive effects of public opinion polarisation (M10 and M12): Economic inequality.
Note: Predicted probability of protest participation (with 95 per cent confidence intervals) for rightist respondents (black circles) and non-rightist respondents (white circles) as well as for leftist respondents (black circles) and non-leftist respondents (white circles) over the range of values of regional polarisation. Probabilities are generated from the estimates of M10 and M12. M10: The right-wing extremists' probability of protesting increases from 9.74 [8.57; 10.90] per cent to 10.03 [8.97; 11.08] per cent and the non-rightist probability increases from 5.54 [5.05; 6.03] per cent to 7.22 [6.69; 7.76] per cent. M12: The left-wing extremists' probability of protesting increases from 6.61 [5.86; 7.35] per cent to 9.44 [8.57; 10.31] per cent and the non-leftist probability increases from 5.56 [5.05; 6.06] per cent to 6.92 [6.38; 7.46] per cent.
Source: European Social Survey, 2002–2014 (www.europeansocialsurvey.org/).

consistent with the regression estimates. In contrast, regional opinion polarisation regarding economic inequality shows a statistically substantive effect on protesting (albeit to a rather small degree). As polarisation increases, the likelihood of the average citizen attending a demonstration increases from 5.85 [5.35; 6.36] per cent to 7.43 [6.88; 7.98] per cent. The same is true for polarisation with regard to homosexuality. As polarisation rises, the respondents' probability of protesting increases substantially from 5.95 [5.53; 6.36] per cent to 7.83 [7.24; 8.42] per cent.

Figure 3 plots the predicted probability of participating for right-wing extremists (black circles) and non-extremists (hollow circles) across the full range of values of opinion polarisation in terms of cultural threat (left graph) and the same for left-wing extremists and non-extremists (right graph). Both the right-wing extremists' and non-extremists' probabilities increase, while the far left's probability decreases as polarisation rises, although none of the changes are statistically substantive. It seems that regional opinion polarisation concerning immigration shows no substantial effect on attending lawful demonstrations.

The substantive effects of regional opinion polarisation concerning economic inequality are plotted in Figure 4. While polarisation substantially heightens the probability of non-rightists participating in demonstrations, right-wing extremists – who already take part to

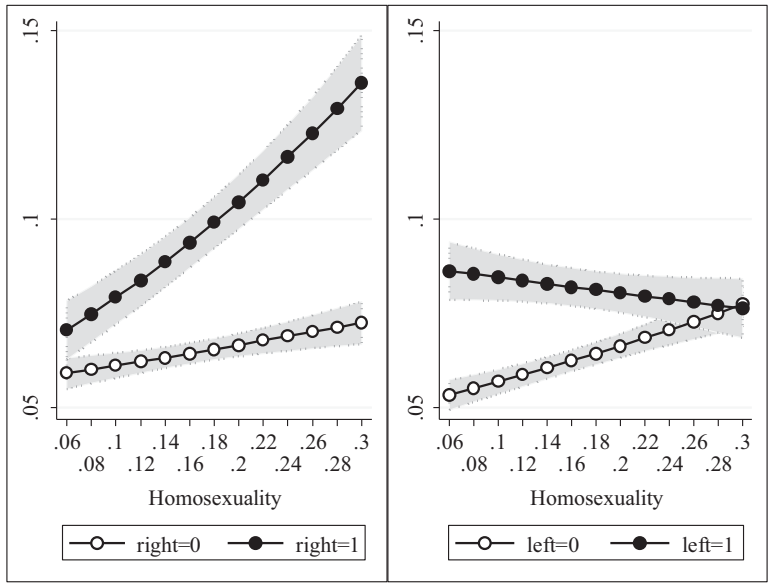

Figure 5. Substantive effects of public opinion polarisation (M16 and M18): Homosexuality.
Note: Predicted probability of protest participation (with 95 per cent confidence intervals) for rightist respondents (black circles) and non-rightist respondents (white circles) as well as for leftist respondents (black circles) and non-leftist respondents (white circles) over the range of values of regional polarisation. Probabilities are generated from the estimates of M16 and M18. M16: The right-wing extremists' probability of protesting increases from 7.06 [6.28; 7.84] per cent to 13.62 [12.36; 14.88] per cent and the non-rightist probability increases from 5.90 [5.49; 6.31] per cent to 7.25 [6.68; 7.81] per cent. M18: The left-wing extremists' probability of protesting decreases from 8.63 [7.86; 9.39] per cent to 7.63 [6.84; 8.42] per cent and the non-leftist probability increases from 5.33 [4.94; 5.72] per cent to 7.73 [7.13; 8.34] per cent.
Source: European Social Survey, 2002–2014 (www.europeansocialsurvey.org/).

a higher degree – are not additionally mobilised (left graph). Compared to the increase in the probability of protesting for non-leftists [1.36 percentage points], left-wing extremists are mobilised more effectively [2.83 percentage points]. Thus, polarisation on this subject – being at the heart of their ideology – additionally activates left-wing extremists.

Finally, the effects of polarisation in terms of homosexuality are plotted in Figure 5. The left graph shows that while non-rightists are substantially mobilised as polarisation rises [1.35 percentage points], the right-wing extremists' probability of protesting increases by a notable 6.56 percentage points. This increase means that right-wing extremists react to polarisation regarding homosexuality more strongly than non-rightists. In contrast, although they usually protest more, left-wing extremists are rather demobilised by a polarising environment with regard to homosexuality.

Discussion

The role of political participation is to transmit information to public authorities about citizens' needs, interests, preferences and objectives (Verba et al. 1995: 506–508), and protesting is a mode of participation which enables citizens to communicate their needs

and preferences in a detailed way (Verba et al. 1995: 530). However, citizens' decisions to participate in politics is not made in a sociopolitical vacuum, but is also determined by environmental factors.

This article concentrates on political culture as a contextual factor of protest behaviour. More specifically, it addresses the question of whether public opinion polarisation of the social environment influences individuals' decision to attend lawful demonstrations. My argument comprises two parts. In the first part, I argue that mass polarisation with regard to normative notions puts many citizens on the defensive with regard to their values and beliefs. In an environment of polarisation, people become insecure about whether their norms, values and standards will be superseded by other norms and standards accompanied by corresponding policies in the future. Hence, they experience deprivation, which in turn energises them for political action. I expected the level of contextual public opinion polarisation to be positively associated with citizens' probability of protesting, and I conducted two-level regressions to examine whether regional polarisation with regard to (1) immigration, (2) social inequality and (3) homosexuality has an impact on protest behaviour. My empirical results show that while the average citizen is not motivated to demonstrate over the issue of immigration, he or she is motivated by the issues of reducing income inequality and of opposing homosexuality.

In the second step, I specified my considerations by assuming that the mobilising effect of polarisation particularly affects individuals who are emotionally or cognitively fairly involved in politics and thus more attentive to developments in their sociopolitical environment. I identified ideological extremists as politically sensitised citizens giving politics great importance, and I presumed that public opinion polarisation may condition the effect of citizens' ideological extremism on political protest. My findings show that the values that are at the heart of people's ideologies are strong motivators for protesting. More precisely, members of the far left are more likely to protest when their social environment is divided over the issue of whether the government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels – a central aspect of the left ideology – while convinced rightists are not. In contrast, members of the far right are motivated by rising polarisation regarding homosexuality, while this issue does not incite activity within the left milieu. In short, the present study shows that protesting is positively related to public opinion polarisation (*H1*). In particular, citizens become active if their central notions are at stake. Moreover, the enhancement of efficacy boosts this effect (*H2*).

What are the implications of these findings? First, they provide a first step toward understanding how polarisation can affect democratic quality. The democratic ideal of equal responsiveness to the interests of the citizenship requires equality of the voices of citizens in politics. Although public officials have different ways of learning about what citizens want and need, systematic studies have shown that what policy makers hear from citizens influences what they do (Verba et al. 1995: 526; Wouters & Walgrave 2017).[12] Individuals who express their preferences in an active way have a better chance of being recognised by the political system (Oliver 2001: 19). This means, if the information communicated to the policy makers is biased in systematic ways, unequal participation bears the potential for representational imbalance. Why?

It is well known that participation is fostered by resources, generalised political engagements and recruitment (Verba et al. 1995: 513). Likewise, citizens' ideological

preferences have been shown to be an important determinant for political action (Van der Meer et al. 2009). This study reveals that public opinion polarisation is a source of participatory inequality as well. Ideological extremists differ from members of the public in terms of the extent of their activity. The issues that motivate their participation may deviate from the priorities of those who are less active, which may in turn jeopardise equal protection of interests. According to Van der Meer et al. (2009: 1427), participatory inequality across sociodemographic categories results in a biased composition of parliament or advocacy groups in terms of age, sex, ethnicity, income and education, whereas differential levels of participation across ideological groups directly result in bias in terms of political preferences and thereby policy output. It follows that if extremist citizens are more likely than moderates to protest, their voice is likely to be heard more strongly and more often by policy makers. In this manner, polarisation operates as an amplifier. Those with moderate views are rather quiescent and the messages heard by public officials are distorted by the shrillness of the extremists' voices; in other words, polarisation can stimulate participative inequality and lead to inequality in policy output. Of course, more research is required to identify which issues people make the subject of their activity and which in turn are under-represented as polarisation rises.

The second contribution of this study is a strengthening of grievance theories explaining collective action. The literature on social movements has been split between authors stressing the importance of resources for political action and those seeing grievances as a central spur for involvement (Grasso & Giugni 2016). Resource mobilisation theory is thus the prevalent theoretical framework for analysing social movements, which are viewed as rational, institutionally rooted, political challenges by aggrieved groups (Buechler 1993: 217ff). However, this logic understands participation based on a cost-benefit calculus and marginalises ideological and normative issues which are often vital in politicising discontent (Buechler 1993: 223–225). This logic has been criticised for ignoring that people often join movements for reasons of ideology, morality, frame alignment, collective attribution, solidarity and even spontaneity (Buechler 1993: 218–225).[13] My findings show that values and beliefs which are at the heart of group-based ideologies are strong motivators for protesting, even if one controls for sociodemographic factors. The threat to convictions and the prospect of harm to future policies generate fraternal deprivation which in turn leads to collective action against anticipated collective disadvantages.

A pure resource approach is one-sided, but I integrated aspects of the resource mobilisation approach into the second step of my argument by contending that group efficacy beliefs heighten the probability of joining demonstrations. As polarisation grows, ideological extremists experience their grievances being combined with newfound resources from a growing number of supporters, increasing their chances for sociopolitical changes. The source of action is still grievance, but heightened efficacy boosts the drive. Of course, this study is simply an initial step and future research is required to examine when and how these variables interrelate and predict collective action in conjunction.

Third, I not only added an essential macro feature of political culture to this research area, but I broadened the perspective by also looking at structural aspects of political culture. The impact of values as ecological properties on non-violent protest has been shown before (Welzel & Deutsch 2012), but my results additionally show that how the values are arranged is also important. Political culture is defined as 'the particular *distribution of patterns* of

orientation' (Almond & Verba 1963: 14; emphasis added), and by looking at political culture in terms of a polarised distribution – and not simply the regional mean of the orientations – I empirically verified that structural aspects of culture are significant for individuals' protest behaviour.

From a methodological point of view, this study makes another key contribution. The index I introduce for measuring public opinion polarisation includes all the characteristics of a sophisticated measure of polarisation, while also being easy to implement using standard statistical software packages. Hence, I enable and hopefully inspire a broad group of scholars to study mass opinion polarisation. Of course I recognise that the usability of the index must be established in further studies.

I also recognise the limits of the current study. The main limitation relates to my use of cross-sectional data. Mass polarisation is fundamentally a question of dynamics over time, so panel data are needed to understand its causes and effects. The correlational nature of my study does not enable identification of exactly which causal direction underlies my findings. Polarisation may lead to action, but the opposite is also possible, presuming that taking part in demonstrations strengthens polarisation; for example, protests may bring activists closer together but alienate friends and family (Jost et al. 2017). Likewise, the activists' selection and evaluation of information takes place in an attitude-reinforcing fashion which makes the development of even more extreme viewpoints more likely (Leeper 2014: 30). I expect that polarisation and action are mutually reinforcing, but there is a need for an ignition power as motivation and polarisation seems convincing as the original source. Nevertheless, further studies are needed to disentangle this puzzle; accordingly, my analysis offers a clear marker towards future research.

In summary, the present study suggests that public opinion polarisation mobilises citizens for collective action. As polarisation on certain issues increases, citizens become agitated and are motivated to actively defend their preferences. My findings also demonstrate that heightened efficacy boosts the identified effect. This study is a step towards understanding potential consequences of public opinion polarisation, but future research needs to validate the results and examine further downstream effects of this phenomenon.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to the two anonymous reviewers and the *EJPR* Editors for taking the time to provide valuable comments and suggestions to improve the article.

Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web-site:

Appendix Table 1: Macro correlations of polarization indices (Pearson's R)
Appendix Table 2: Variables
Appendix Table 3: Public opinion polarization and protest participation I
Appendix Table 4: Public opinion polarization and protest participation II
Appendix Table 5: Public opinion polarization and protest participation III

Appendix Table 6: Public opinion polarization and protest participation IV
Appendix Table 7: Public opinion polarization and protest participation V

Notes

1. Following Rokeach (1973: 5), I define a value as 'an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence. A value system is an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end-states of existence along a continuum of relative importance.'
2. To my knowledge, two studies recently examined this question (Beugelsdijk & Klasing 2016; Rapp 2016).
3. By 'region' I mean geographical units within the national border.
4. Although public opinion polarisation has gained increasing scientific interest, there is no common definition (yet). The definition presented here, however, is convincing.
5. In Europe, people use this heuristic to summarise and locate issues of their greatest concern in the political realm, whereby left and right are labels of political orientation, positioning, evaluation and identity (Downs 1957; Campbell et al. 1960; Fuchs & Klingemann 1989; Dalton 2006).
6. Generally, ideological belief systems such as liberalism and conservatism are frameworks of interrelated beliefs, attitudes and values that envision how the world should be by making assertions about human nature, historical events, present realities and possible futures (Jost et al. 2009: 309, 315). They normatively specify good and proper ways of addressing life's problems as well as means of attaining social, economic and political ideals which help to interpret the world, make judgements about political objects and justify actions (Jost et al. 2009: 310). Political orientations correlate with a variety of preferences suggesting that respondents' cognitive systems are ideologically structured (Jost et al. 2008: 129).
7. Jost et al. (2008, 2009) argue that ideologies like conservatism (being right) and liberalism (being left) are usually founded in psychological needs and motives – such as handling uncertainty and threat – which makes certain ideas attractive to certain members of society. In turn, affinities between psychological needs and motives lend ideological content to a certain degree of constraint, coherence and structure.
8. NUTS (Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics) is a geocode scheme developed by the European Union for statistical purposes. Subnational NUTS-II units consist of not more than three million and not less than 80,000 inhabitants.
9. For robustness, I re-run all analyses using 70 and 100 respondents per region. All results remain stable.
10. Included are: Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Great Britain, Italy, Israel, Croatia, Spain, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, Slovenia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. For better comparability, I also excluded countries that are 'not free' or 'partly free' according to Freedom House.
11. Due to the particular sample, there are minor discrepancies.
12. In a recent study, Wouters and Walgrave (2017) show by means of experiments that Belgian politicians' beliefs and intentions changed as they were exposed to the changing size and unity of a protest event.
13. This framework came under increasing challenge by several questions that cannot be resolved within this framework (for a discussion, see, e.g., Buechler 1993: 219).

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