Western European Political Polarization: An Emerging Cross-Party Divide

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There is a long and detailed literature about American political party polarization (Layman et al., 2006). However, little work has been done on analyzing political polarization in Western Europe. This project analyzed the role electoral and political institutions played in enabling or controlling polarization. To concentrate on these factors, case selection focused on countries that were otherwise quite similar (western European and highly developed). I selected Ireland, Great Britain, France, and Germany.

The quantitative project, completed in Spring 2016, used a measure of "justifiability" of certain items (such as homosexuality) and sought to compare those responses with the justifiability of another item. Over the years, the correlation of responses increased for politically salient issues (i.e. people who viewed abortion as unjustifiable also viewed homosexuality as unjustifiable). This meant the public's political preferences were increasingly clustered, indicating polarization. Additionally, people did not view these issues as disagreements but instead as "unjustifiable." This is also an important measure of polarization, showing people felt much stronger about issues.

The Summer 2016 project expanded the analysis of those four cases to study the role elites played in the increasing polarization. I spent a number of days in each of the four countries and conducted interviews with 15 subject matter experts from seven colleges and universities. As this project was conducted in the midst of the United Kingdom Referendum on European Union membership, the most salient divide was that between the winners and losers of globalization, which gave birth to populist right wing movements in each of the countries. In the paper, I analyzed the importance of electoral institutions, members of parliament, party control, and various institutional idiosyncrasies in enabling or controlling this polarization.
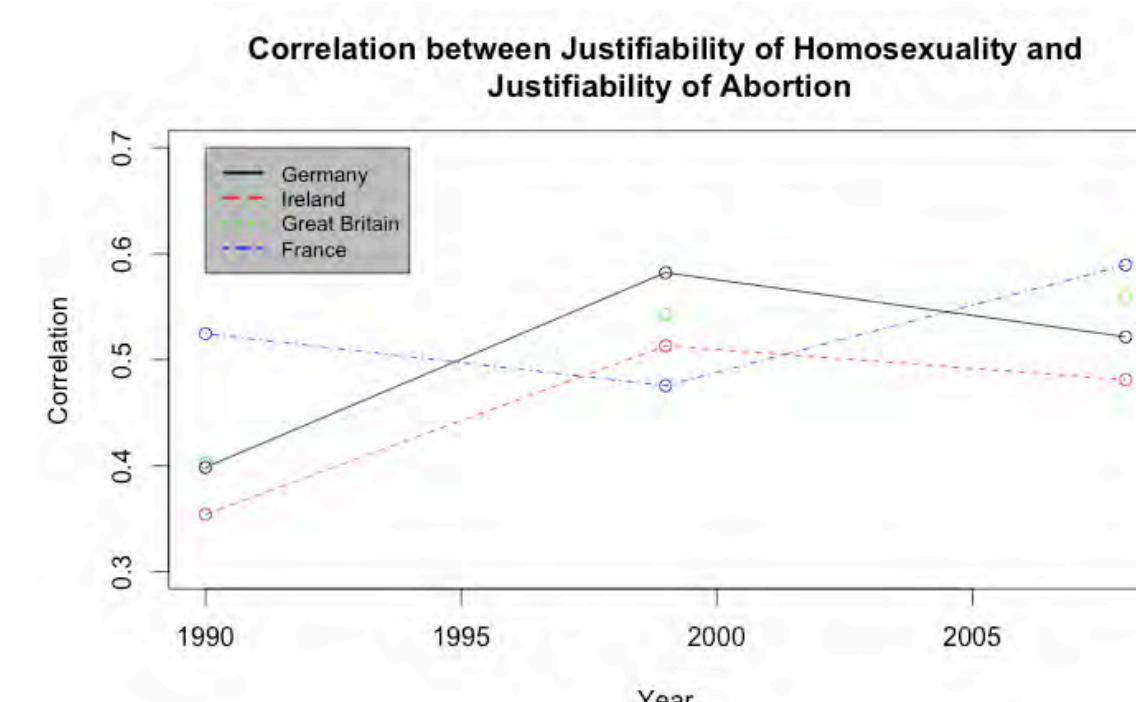
Data and Case Selection

- **Spring 2016 Quantitative Project**
  - Data from European Values Survey (EVS) conducted in 1990, 1999, and 2008
  - Analysis of public opinion polarization evidenced by sorting of policy preferences
  - Measured by questions on 1-10 scale of justifiability of an item
- **Summer 2016 Interviews with Subject Matter Experts**
  - 30-60 minute interviews of political science or political history professors
  - Conducted over one month period from June 2016 to July 2016
  - Over 100 professors invited to participate from Ireland, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany
  - 15 interviews conducted with professors from 7 universities

Basic Interview Questions

- **What is the main source of political polarization, if any?**
- **Are the politics more issue-based or identity based?**
- **What effect do specific electoral systems have on political polarization?**
- **Who controls the political agenda and does the opposition have any role in framing it?**
- **What is the role and culture of compromise?**
- **What degree of control do parties have over its members?**

Case Comparison

Country	Method of Election of Lower House of legislature	Executive Power
Germany	Mixed-Member Proportional Representation	Chancellor (leader of plurality political party)
Ireland	Multi-seat constituency by single transferable vote	Taoiseach (Prime Minister, leader of plurality political party)
Great Britain	Single Member first-past-the-post	Prime Minster (leader of plurality political party)
France	Two-round system of single member constituency	President (directly elected) and Prime Minister (leader of plurality political party).

Results From Spring

Correlation between Justifiability of Homosexuality and Justifiability of Abortion

Correlation between Justifiability of Suicide and Justifiability of Abortion
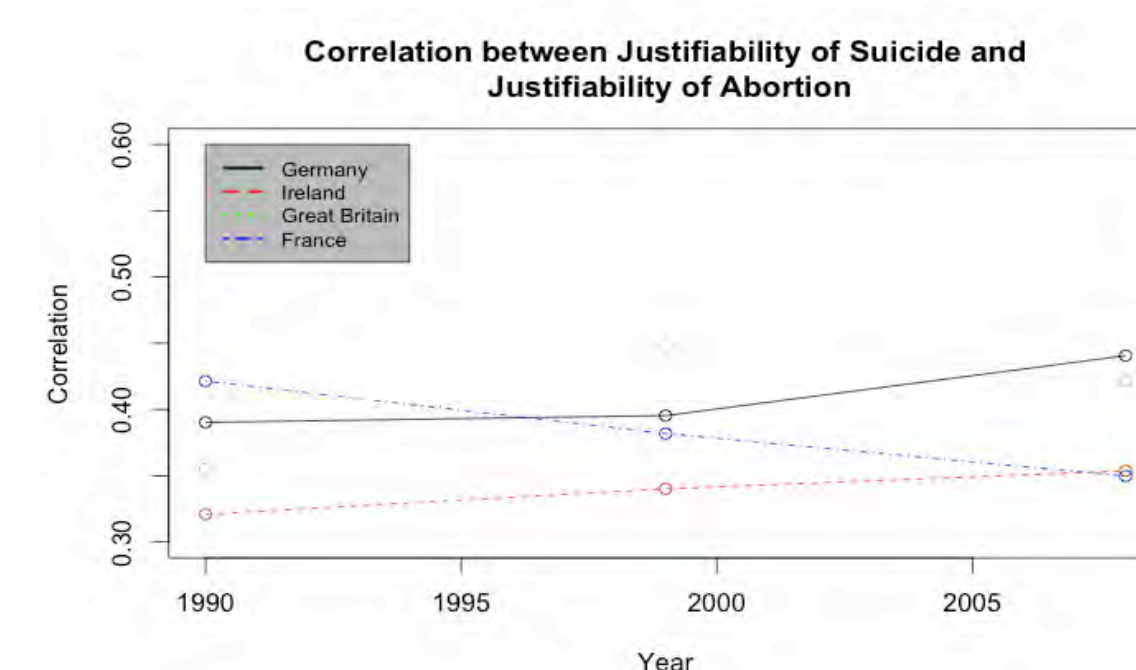
- **Top:** Correlation of people saying both homosexuality and abortion are justifiable
- **Bottom:** Correlation of people saying both suicide and abortion are justifiable.
- **Analysis:** While the correlation of people who say both suicide and abortion are justifiable has remained relatively flat, the first graph is markedly different. It shows that, increasingly, more people who think abortion is justifiable also think homosexuality is justifiable (and vice versa).

  This steady increase of this number is evidence for political polarization.

Results From Summer

- **After UK referendum on European Union membership, it became clear that most prominent divide is due to globalization**
- **While elite has benefited from globalization, a majority believe they have been left behind and look for protest votes**
- **Protest votes have manifested in right wing populist movements**
- **Proportional representation systems in Ireland and Germany have constrained success of this movement**
- **Countries with members of parliament more focused on constituency service (Great Britain and Ireland) can provide demand for compromise**
- **Stronger party control leads to less compromise and more polarization as members of parliament wish to appease party leaders more than voters**

Future Steps

- **Mass survey to determine detailed attitudes regarding globalization and importance of candidates who highlight compromise**
- **Targeted survey of political elites and elected officials to determine culture regarding compromise and impact of party control over leadership**
- **Additional research into other causes of political polarization in Europe beyond effects of globalization**
- **Expanding research into the United States to see the effect of globalization on voter attitudes**