European Political Polarization: Developing Divide between Elites and the Public

By Sahil Mehrotra

Introduction

In the summer of 2016, in the middle of this project, my travel expenses dropped sharply. Overnight, everything was instantly 15 percent cheaper, and my costs were falling by the second. The sudden change was a result of the instant crash of the British Pound after the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union in the 2016 referendum. I was conducting a research project on political polarization and I experienced a concrete consequence of it. Political polarization is a topic on which much academic work in the United States has focused. While the academic literature on political polarization in Europe is limited, some form of political polarization certainly exists across the continent. That existing limited literature is outdated as the most salient shift between people is no longer the traditional left-right divide, but instead a new divide on globalization that cuts across the major parties. This divide has been largely driven by the entrance of, or resurgence of, protest parties who adopt anti-globalist positions. I seek to explain the cause of this new polarization, and the extent to which governing institutions restrict or encourage it. Governing and electoral institutions that are more amenable to third parties should lead to increased levels of polarization, as polarizing movements find it easier to take hold and therefore take political power.

Research Design and Case Selection:

In Spring 2016, I completed a research project analyzing public opinion polarization in Europe using data available through the European Values Survey. Other studies (Bauer 2016) have used a similar approach to make claims about polarization, but I wanted more information

on elite level causes of polarization in Europe. I was most interested in the fact that some countries had more apparent levels of polarization than others. I hypothesized that electoral rules and other institutional designs either controlled or promoted polarization in Europe. There are no polls of elites or partisanship datasets such as DW-NOMINATE in the United States, so I determined an interview approach would be the best way to capture this data. To collect the most unbiased information (as well as for ease of subject solicitation), I interviewed political science professors at various universities.

The number of countries in Europe provides many different institutional and electoral rules to compare. The most important institutional differences are proportional representation systems versus "first past the post" systems. To best analyze the effects of these factors and reduce the impact of other differences, while taking account of the financial restrictions of the research project, I limited the number of cases to four. However, Ireland, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany provided sufficient variation on electoral institutions within the context of stable, highly developed democracies.

Each of the four counties has a unique combination of electoral rules and institutional structure that allow comparisons between these variables to look at the impact on political polarization. Ireland is a semi-presidential system (although parliamentary in practice) that uses a proportional representation system elected via single transferable vote. The United Kingdom is a pure parliamentary democracy with single member districts using a first past the post system. France has a semi-presidential system, where power is shared between an elected president and prime minister. All national elections (President and members of the National Assembly) are elected via a two ballot system, where if no candidate secures 50% of the vote in the first round, there is a runoff election between the top two finishers. Germany is a federal system, with the

Chancellor selected from the legislature, and the members are elected via a mixed member proportional representation system. Each country has different levels of political polarization. I hope to explain how the institutional variations have controlled or enabled political polarization in each country.

Methodology:

The data for this project was collected from June 16th, 2016, to July 13th, 2016, via interviews with academic experts in the field of political science or political history. Four countries were selected as cases: Ireland, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. Using a list of universities and institutions of higher learning in each country with a political science department, experts working at those institutions were emailed asking to participate in an approximately 30-minute in-person interview. Overall, four interviews were conducted in Ireland, the UK, and France, and three in Germany, for a total of 15 interviews. The audio of these interviews was recorded and was destroyed following transcription and anonymization. These interviews were conducted in the semi-structured style, following a set of questions (Appendix A) while allowing conversational deviation from these core questions.

Results

Characterizing the Salient Societal Cleavage

      The overall finding was that while the left-right divide continues to play a major role in politics of the four nations, the newer, more pervasive, cross-cutting cleavage in the public is the emergence of a right-wing populist movement. There are a growing number of people who think "both parties have failed them" and that they are not represented in the current system. The problem is that while these people usually disengage from the political process and abstain from voting, in recent elections they have cast protest votes. The most powerful of the protest parties is the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). A direct manifestation of their power, and the power of protest votes, was the success of the Leave campaign in the 2016 referendum on European Union (EU) membership. UKIP very much represents the new right party phenomenon that ties to immigration, refugees, and other issues, that has popped up in countries all over Europe. This same movement is visible in France through the National Front and in Germany through the Alternative for Germany (AfD). These movements are all anti-elite, authoritarian, anti-immigrant, and populist in their messaging.

      Attitudes towards membership in the EU has provided a cleavage that cuts across all mainstream parties in the United Kingdom While the leadership of both major parties, Conservative and Labour, supported the Remain campaigns in the recent referendum on the European Union, the members of the parties were divided. Some have even accused the Labour leader of not being committed enough to the Remain campaign, causing more intraparty dispute. However, the biggest divide developing in the UK, seen especially in the results of the referendum, is in the "territorialization of voter behavior" in the UK, as a professor at King's

College London put it. Northern Ireland has its own, completely independent, party system. With the last election, almost all of Scotland's representation was from the Scottish National Party. Northern England, Southern England, London, and Wales also are all unique and somewhat homogenous voting blocs.

In France, a professor at Sciences Po attributed the increasing political polarization to the breakdown of the Social Democratic Compromise. The post-war social democratic compromise, he said, was an agreement with the public that as long as people worked hard and stayed against communism, they would get full employment and generous social welfare policies. However, he says, in Europe as a whole, this compromise is breaking down. This leads people to look beyond the mainstream parties, to more radical fringe parties, because they feel the government is not keeping its promises. In France, his theory on the issue was that the emerging divide in French society was between the "winners" and "losers" of globalization and this leads to the popularity of the National Front among the "losers." The core concept is that the global elite, including politicians, have largely benefitted from globalization, because their skills are multinational. A highly skilled technology worker can play the labor markets of multiple nations against one another and take the job in the country with the highest wage. However, low skilled workers and people outside of this elite cannot do the same. In highly developed nations, the middle class has suffered the disappearance of industrial unemployment and decreasing public services.

One particularly memorable example involved French bread stores. It is an important part of French culture to buy bread every day from a local bakery in walking distance of your home. However, with the advent of multinational corporations, benefitting from globalization, local bakeries were not financially sustainable. With fewer bakeries, many French people have to drive to the closest bakery, something unheard of and shocking in France.

The geographic divide in France mirrors a similar territorial divide in the UK. While this professor said that the geographic divide between voter anger over globalization may be pure economics (people in rural areas are more economically disadvantaged than Parisians), factors such as having a train line go through the town, allowing workers to find replacement jobs farther away, also had a big impact on which side of this growing divide people fell. The success of Marine Le Pen, the leader of the far-right populist party National Front, was attributed to the fact that the main parties have abandoned those rural areas, and the National Front is the only party that goes there and promises to improve things. In that sense, the National Front is extremely similar to UKIP in engaging disaffected voters who are tired of the entire system as a whole.

Germany is also facing the growing power of a new far-right movement, although on a lesser scale than in the UK or France. A professor at Humboldt University said that the major dividing line in Germany is still a left-right ideological division. This dimension is highly dominated by what one would expect of a traditional left-right spectrum, of various social economic issues like taxation, redistribution, and unemployment. This professor went on to identify alternate dimensions of polarization which, while not as strong as the left-right dimension, were growing. This included a social-cultural dimension ranging from the Green alternative left to authoritarian politics, and the newest dimension of "pro and anti-democracy or political institutions" embodied by the rising popularity of the Alternative for Germany (AfD). This party embodies what UKIP, the National Front, and even what Donald Trump does: opposition towards the ruling elites and the system. And while Germany has always been traditionally more pro-European integration, even the AfD is starting to take over that issue. However, a professor at the Free University of Berlin disagreed as to the importance of the old

divide. This professor said the left-right cleavage is not as salient as it used to be, instead saying that even in Germany the issues revolve around "What does it mean to be a German? Do you have to be White? Christian? Or do you have to accept German values?" The professor identified these questions about social identity as the salient issues, all dealing with the economic and cultural consequences of globalization. So this cleavage, which is orthogonal to the left-right spectrum, is also rapidly growing in Germany, along with the rest of Europe.

Explaining the Emergence of the Divide

These movements are visible in all of these countries, but they do not exert the same amount of political power. This is because the various institutions of each country constrain the extent to which these right-wing movements can find success and power. Those institutions that promote compromise and cooperation lead to countries with less polarization. While the anti-intellectual, populist movement still exists, these factors can significantly control their success, relevance, and ultimately political power. The electoral districts and seat allocation, the function of a given member of parliament, party control over members, the importance and culture of compromise, and the specific institutional design of some countries all play important roles in determining the degree of polarization and success of the authoritarian factions.

In the UK, while UKIP does not hold many seats due to the single member district nature of the parliament, the sentiment among the public was strong enough to cause the nation to leave the European Union. In France, the National Front does not yet seem to have the political power to win a Presidential election, but they are a major force in the politics, earning almost 20% of the vote in the previous election (and this is forecasted to increase in the next). While the AfD has been less successful in Germany, the mixed member proportional representation system may

soon grant them power. There is a 5% threshold to receive seats in the Bundestag, the parliament, and in the last election the AfD received 4.9%, and their support has only grown since them, essentially guaranteeing them representation in the next elections. Therefore, while the varied electoral systems have granted the movements different levels of legislative power (or soon to be power in Germany's case), the anti-globalization divide and cleavage clearly has taken root.

Another factor in constraining the extent to which these protest parties can find success is in the role of a Member of Parliament (MP). In countries where MPs are simply robots for their party, unknown to their constitutions, there are no rewards for breaking the party line and combating polarization, only punishments. However, in countries where MPs are personalized and focused on constituency service, there is a demand for representatives who compromise. In Ireland, the role of an MP (called Teachta Dála or TD) is extremely focused on constituency services. A professor at Dublin City University said that Irish politics is characterized by a TD performing favors for constituents. A constituent could need help getting an emergency passport and the TD will put in a call to the office to expedite it. Another example a University College Dublin professor gave was that it is nearly impossible to get a new license plate without contacting your local TD for help in even getting the DMV to answer the phone. That same professor said that this role of TDs is self-perpetuating, because TDs use it to maintain their importance to voters.

There are two major effects of this style of representation. The first is that the type of individuals who run for office are those more interested in currying favor rather than policymaking. The other, more important, effect is that the elections of TDs in Ireland is a very personal matter. That is, a candidate must go to many different local events and be an active and

visible member of the community. This causes the given constituency to have a very strong loyalty to their member of parliament. The professor said in public opinion polls many people say they would vote for their current TD even if they were a member of the opposing party. A Professor at Dublin City University said it was unlikely that people shift parties because one is not providing enough constituency services, yet Irish politics still sees waves for some parties. Therefore, people may be overstating their loyalty to their TD when they claim they will vote for them regardless of party membership. Constituency service is still extremely important when it comes down to two candidates of the same party because the electoral system (single transferable vote) does encourage voting for candidates that one is more familiar with. Because of this, loyalty to a specific person is promoted over loyalty to a specific party, limiting polarization.

While constituency service is not as important as it is in Ireland, there has been a "massive shift towards the workload of MPs being dealing with constituency casework" in the UK over the last decade, a professor at King's College London remarked. And that professor attributed the difference to the electoral system. He said the single transferable vote system in Ireland created a competition between MPs to represent that different area, since voters could rank their representatives and each constituency has more than one representative. In the UK, while people will not elect an MP based on the value of their constituency services, they will still go to the MP with their problems. The growing trend of people going to MPs with problems has led to criticism that representatives are turning into social workers. Concurrently, when people are polled, they generally do not know who their MP is, so this professor said the line of accountability from voters to representatives is breaking down.

In this respect, France and Germany are quite similar. Even though France has single member constituencies and Germany uses a mixed member proportional representation system,

the members of parliament elected are somewhat anonymous. Few people know their representative, and almost all of the voting is done on the basis of the party identification next to a given candidate's name.

Constituency service is much less important than appeasing the party leadership and keeping defections to a minimum. When members are incentivized to appease party leaders more than constituents, this increases polarization because parties become more homogenous as members adopt the views of leaders. Given fewer defections, a majority does not need minority support for legislation, and when they look, it is difficult to find.

Generally, party control over members in all European parliaments is very strong. In Ireland, even with the individualized nature of the politics, there is incredibly strong loyalty to parties. A professor at Dublin City University said it is a "puzzle in Irish political science" as to why elected officials don't exercise freedom from the parties. There is very strong party discipline and repeated rebellions would lead to expulsion from the party. One important difference from other European nations is that in Ireland, TDs who are expelled from parties can run as independents and get re-elected. In the UK, France, and Germany while there are a few representatives that can get re-elected without the support of their own party, this number is much more limited. Therefore, in these countries, adhering to the party line is extremely important for continued electoral success. Rebellions from party membership plays an important role in trying to broker political compromise, because often times the governing party requires votes from the other party to pass legislation. Therefore, in countries with stronger party control over its members, there are increased levels of polarization, as governing parties look only to their own membership to pass legislation.

When parties expel members, a new candidate is needed to fill that spot. This process is extremely important in determining how parties determine their candidates, which in some constituencies is tantamount to the general election. The candidates who end up being selected are often more extreme than their predecessor, exacerbating the polarization. The candidate selection process in Europe is very different from the process in the United States. In almost all of the cases, the party develops some rules for internally selecting the candidate. In the UK, a professor at King's College London explained how the selection process in the Conservative party can drastically affect the candidates selected. The Conservative head office, the national headquarters essentially, recommends and guides local party committees to select a certain candidate. However, all the power truly resides within these local committees in selecting the party nominee, which often reject the selection of the Head Office. Some parties in the UK use a more centralized selection process, but none use primaries. In Germany, while there is a similar bottom up process of candidate selection, behind the scenes, positioning on party lists and other mechanisms allow the party to exert great control. In France and Ireland, similar methods are used to select candidates (some political parties in France are now experimenting with primaries). All four countries have extremely strong control over their members though the selection process. The party control leads to a more unified party membership. Similar to MPs which are more responsible to the party than constituents, stronger party control leads to less compromise between the parties and increased polarization. When elected officials rely on party elites for nominations to office or placement on a party list, they are more concerned with appeasing those elites than compromising with the opposition and appeasing constituents. Decreased compromise pushes people towards more extreme solutions, exhibited recently through the right-wing populist movements, thereby increasing polarization.

The final factor that both enables and curtails the power of the right-wing populist parties is various institutional idiosyncrasies such as political culture and institutional design. Each country has its own culture of compromise, and within the countries the importance of compromise is changing. Historically, a Dublin City University professor noted that Irish politics is about winning. Politicians would only compromise if it suited them to retain their power. However, after the last Irish general election, in which the two historically antagonistic parties formed a coalition, there has been groundbreaking compromise. Historically, this culture of antagonism between the parties has increased polarization. Given the new coalition government, this might change in the coming years. The UK has had a markedly different history. The House of Commons has been an extremely majoritarian system. A professor from King's College London said that compromising goes on within the governing group, behind closed doors, but once the decision is made, the government implements that decision. The voting public in the UK is even suspicious of compromise, another King's College professor said. This does not mean that compromise is absent from Westminster. The current government is the first where the Conservative government, which has a majority in the lower House of Commons, does not have a majority in the upper House of Lords. In a bicameral government, this forces some degree of compromise. However, the House of Lords is much less powerful than the House of Commons, so the system is still quite majoritarian. In majoritarian systems, the policy preferences of the opposition parties are not relevant to the decision the majority makes. This ends up galvanizing the opposition, enabling the growth of the right wing populist parties.

The French relationship with compromise is quite similar to the United Kingdom's. In 2002, the French voted to hold legislative elections almost concurrently with Presidential elections. This gives the President an almost guaranteed majority in the legislature, because the

party that wins the Presidency almost always wins the legislative elections held soon after. A professor at Sciences Po said that this makes the system very majoritarian, and this was by design because of the extremely poor French experience with proportional representation in the 40s and 50s. Therefore, the French system is very similar to the British system, in that it provides a governing majority a lot of freedom. In Germany, conversely, compromise is extremely important, again for historical reasons. Professors from the Free University and Humbolt University indicated that "bad history" (the Weimar Republic and Third Reich) as reasons the public not only places an importance on compromise, but also shy away from charismatic and hardline politicians. In Germany, there is currently a Grand Coalition in Government (a coalition between the two largest parties). In detailing the role of electoral systems, a Humboldt University professor said if Germany were to have single member districts, the Christian Democratic Union, the largest party, would take about 80% of the seats. Therefore, the importance of the electoral system is plainly apparent. The two proportional representation systems, Ireland and Germany, both require a larger degree of compromise, and both of these nations have less apparent levels of political polarization than the UK and France, given the decreased political power of the right-wing populist movement. However, proportional representation is not the only constraint on these movements.

The institutional design of the governments has also made a massive impact on how the governments operate and political polarization in the public. Germany's system is different than the rest because it is a federal system. Therefore, it relies on cooperativism. All of the power of the national government rests on the states. In fact, the upper house of the German legislature, the federal chamber, is made up of representatives of the states in Germany. There, most of the time the government does not hold a majority, forcing compromise on almost all major

questions. In the UK and Ireland, there is no such institutional requirement for compromise. In Ireland, in part due to its smaller size compared to the other nations, there is a consolidation of power at the national level. Local governments are nearly powerless. In the UK, the lack of a written constitution exacerbates the consolidation of power, where until 2009 the Supreme Court was just a division of the upper house of parliament. In France, the semi-presidential system is designed to force compromise between two, but with the 2002 electoral changes, these have been of the same party. Therefore, the German institutional design forces compromise, while the British constitutional ambiguity does the exact opposite. The French and Irish cases occupy space in between these two extremes.

Conclusion: Looking Forward

The effects of increasing polarization go far beyond decreasing the travel expenses for an undergraduate research project. The polarization I observe has affected families all over the world, particularly those of immigrants, as this populist nationalist surge takes over developed nations around the globe. People are revolting against the elites and established political norms and creating dangerous precedents. This analysis of the movement's causes and what can control its growth will help leaders respond to it.

Overall, an increasing trend of political polarization is visible around the world, even with the varied party systems, role of representatives, electoral institutions, and institutional designs. This polarization has manifested in the form of right-wing populist movements across Europe. However, the degree to which these movements have taken hold is different, and while it is impossible to pinpoint the causes using interview based research on its own, it is clear that these factors, combined, make a difference. The proportional representation systems in Ireland and Germany have helped control polarization by promoting compromise. Conversely, the

majoritarian focus of the House of Commons has led to increased polarization in the UK. The federal nature of Germany has forced people to compromise as the nationally focused French system has led to widespread protest. The role of an MP, the degree of party control on members, and the institutional design of the country all either constrain or enable the political polarization through right-wing authoritarian parties. However, no institutional design has entirely prevented the growth of these parties. While they have been kept at bay by these factors, the new movement, completely orthogonal to the left-right spectrum, is still growing, even in the United States. As the effects of globalization play out, the role these parties play will only increase. In short, while rules and institutions can slow down polarization, it is impossible to completely stop.

Appendix A: List of base questions

Ireland

- Given that Ireland has multi-seat constituencies, party control is very important. How has party identification influenced political polarization in Ireland?
- Is Irish party identification based more on issues or identities?
- Regarding agenda control, how effective is the majority's ability to control the agenda? How difficult is it for the minority to force issues onto the agenda?
- To what extent does the party driven control in Ireland prevent compromise?
- The electoral systems in place can often drive the level of party vs. individual identity in elections. Would you say Ireland has stronger party (over individual) identity? If so, what role has this played on political polarization?

Great Britain
- In the US, Single member first past the post systems leads to weak party control over members. Would you say that it is mirrored in Great Britain? If so, how would stronger party control, in your opinion, help prevent political polarization?
- Is the party identification more issue based or identity based in Great Britain due to the single member districts?
- Especially in a coalition government, how is compromise and consensus brought in Great Britain?
- How effective is the government's ability to control the agenda? To what extent is this reflective of party control?

France
- How does the semi-Presidential system affect party identification? Does the President represent his/her party (a more identity based party structure), or are parties strong enough to be identified based on issues?
- How is agenda setting controlled by the legislature versus executive? How difficult is it for the executive to prevent the legislature from injecting issues onto the agenda
- To what degree does having a single member constituency influence the party control? Does the two round voting system encourage third party voting in practice, as it does in theory?
- How is consensus built given the single member districts and the weak party control they sometimes create?

Germany

- How does the mixed member proportional system change the strength of parties and the strength of party identification in Germany?
- What is the effect of the high level of consensus required in the German system? Generally, how is this consensus brought about?