Echo chambers, affective polarization, and democracy

The text below reflects our ideas regarding a possible topic and structure of a 4-year PhD project on the link between affective polarization and the ideological diversity citizens encounter in their daily lives. However, the PhD candidate is encouraged to develop their own focus as the project develops. For a description of the broader research project on *Affective polarization in Europe*, see [www.eelcoharteveld.nl/AFFPOL.pdf](http://www.eelcoharteveld.nl/AFFPOL.pdf).

**Supervisors:**
- dr. Eelco Harteveld
- prof dr. Wouter van der Brug

**Theme**

How does the ideological homogeneity of citizens’ social and information environment shape their evaluations of ideological opponents and support for democratic norms?

**Background**

The working hypothesis of this project is that an ideologically homogeneous social and information environment leads to *affective polarization* - i.e., dislike and intolerance towards people with a different worldview (Iyengar et al. 2018). If (in their jobs, towns, families, clubs, or online) people do not meaningfully engage with people holding opposing views, their understanding of their ideological opponents’ views and motives gets gradually distorted, and will start to *dislike* or even *loathe* them. Taken to its extremes, they might even start to question the *democratic legitimacy* of their claims. While disagreement is central to democratic practice, a well-functioning democracy cannot function without a critical amount of shared understanding (Dahl 1971).

The underlying mechanism is that affective polarization is rooted in ideological positions functioning as social identities. Many of us tend to see people who *agree with us* as “*one of us*”; members of a group we identify with. Like any other social identity (even the most trivial ones; Tajfel 1970), such identification has affective and behavioral implications, among them a disposition to like and favor the in-group (“us”). Under certain conditions it can also result in a disliking and disfavoring towards the out-group (“them”).

Given the social identity roots of affective polarization, the environment in which people hear and discuss politics seems to play an important role. After all, it is where the moral status of the outgroup is defined. A lack of meaningful engagement with ideological opponents likely boosts identification with the ingroup and negative affect towards the ideological outgroup. Residing in ideologically one-sided contexts bolsters the perception that *everybody* shares the dominant view (“spiral of silence”; Wang et al. 2014), in turn enforcing further homogenization but also delegitimizing alternative points of views. Because of the latter, a homogeneous information and discussion environment (online or offline) is also more likely to abound in highly negative affective depictions of the ideological outgroup.

Of course, citizens have always selected into groups and media that resonate with their worldview. It is likely, however, that the extent to which we tolerate opposing views is currently under pressure due to several developments. First, the rise of social media and ‘high choice media environments’ (Lelkes et al. 2017). Second, the allegedly increased “sorting” of people (Mason 2015; 2018), in which partisan and ideological divisions overlap more
closely with other societal divisions such as education, age, ethnicity or urbanity. This reduces the possibility for cross-cutting experiences. Third, the rise of the normatively loaded divisions between populists and ‘antipopulists’ (Moffit 2018). Populists (in the definition of Mudde [2007]) bring into the political sphere a strongly moralizing evaluation of political opponents, and are in turn greeted with a similar hostility. All of these developments are studied in the AFFPOL project. The PhD student is encouraged to develop, theoretically and empirically, a better understanding of the role of homogeneous online and offline information environments in this broader picture.

However, studying this has been difficult because of a lack of measures of such environments. The goal of this project is therefore to study the effects of such ‘echo chambers’ on democracy in Western European countries, partly by developing a survey instrument, to be fielded in surveys conducted as part of the AFFPOL and DEMOPOP projects (probably including representative samples in Norway and the Netherlands).

Existing evidence
An expanding body of research has studied the effects of residing in homogeneous information and discussion environments. Most of this research has focused on online environments, and has mostly been restricted to ideological polarization – the ‘distance’ between citizens in their stances regarding societal or policy issues. These studies find only limited evidence for the notion – popular in the public debate – that ‘echo chambers’ increase attitudinal extremity (Dahlgren et al. 2019). While algorithms can ‘narrow the walls’ of the echo chamber (Dylko 2015), their effects often seem limited, as the information people encounter online is still much shaped by self-selection and the “offline” world (Möller & Helberger 2018).

Furthermore, this field has looked primarily at the effects of homogeneous environments on the extremity of people’s views, thus potentially overlooking other types of polarization. The relation between ideological and affective polarization is complex. This becomes immediately clear in the aggregated trends in the United States: while affective polarization has exploded, ideological polarization seems stable or even in decline (Iyengar et al. 2018). Affective polarization is rooted in social identity dynamics that interact with, but are partly unrelated to, ideological polarization (see the AFFPOL project description for more information on the nature and role of affective polarization).

A couple of studies did look at ‘echo chambers’ in the context of affective polarization. Garett et al. (2014) show that exposure to supportive information is associated with increases in affective polarization in both the US and Israel. Lelkes et al. (2017) find that better internet access (as a proxy for the potential to inhabit a filter bubble) is associated with more affective polarization, while Boxell et al. (2017) find that affective polarization is actually strongest among people using little social media.

There is little research that also includes “offline” environments. Going beyond social media is important: like the causal role of media in general, that of social media should not be overstated: first, citizens heavily self-select into the media that resonates with their worldview; and second, citizens get informed about politics through many other sources. The most direct attempt to combine citizens’ different contexts is provided by Hutchens et al. (2019), who asked Americans, in three panel waves, how often they discuss politics with “people they agree with” or “disagree with”, both “online” and “face-to-face”. Their data suggests a homogeneous discussion environment both reflects and boosts negative affect towards presidential candidates in the US. Furthermore, there exists a tradition in the US (e.g. Zuckerman, 2005) of measuring ideological preferences of “network contacts” – discussion partners such as friends and families. However, these mostly study opinion conformity and extremity as an outcome, rather than other types of polarization.

Preliminary plan
This project aims to deepen and broaden the existing research on ideological homogeneity and polarization and move it to the European context. The three main contributions could be the following:
1. First, to study the homogeneity of the offline environment as well as the online one, developing and employing new survey measures of these environments. These measures can be piloted and conducted in the context of the AFFPOL/DEMOPOP data collection, with help of the DIGGSCORE expertise center in Bergen (Norway). Social media can be another source of data, ideally in connection with survey data collection.

2. Second, by theorizing and investigating how such ‘echo chambers’ affect different forms of polarization, and how this is moderated by characteristics of individuals, the public debate, and political system.

3. Third, by establishing whether – as is sometimes suggested – the emerging online and offline sorting into ideological and social worlds of ‘populists’ and ‘antipopulists’ (Moffit 2018) are especially self-reinforcing, and damaging to democratic norms, compared to other ideological divisions.

The PhD project could consist of the following elements/studies:

1. A study of existing (cross-sectional and longitudinal) survey data to establish the correlations between diversity in ideological opinions in networks, (social) media use, cross-cutting social contacts, different forms of polarization, and democratic norms;

2. A theoretical and methodological piece on homogeneous ideological environments, proposing and validating a new survey instrument;

3. A study on the effects of such ‘echo chambers’ on polarization and democracy, using surveys;

4. A study on the effects of these ‘echo chambers’ on polarization and democracy, using social media data.

References


