

Estimating the Relationship between Education and Political Polarization over Immigration across Europe

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Abstract : The political left and right appear to disagree not only over questions of value but, also, over questions of fact—over what is true “out there” in society and the world. Alarming, a large body of survey data collected during the past decade suggests that this disagreement tends to be greatest among the most educated and most cognitively sophisticated opposing partisans. In other words, the data show that these individuals display the widest political polarization in their reported factual beliefs. Explanations of this polarization pattern draw heavily on cultural and political factors; yet, the large majority of the evidence originates from one cultural and political context—the United States, a country with a rather unique cultural and political history. One consequence is that widening political polarization conditional on education and cognitive sophistication may be due to idiosyncratic cultural, political or historical factors endogenous to US society—rather than a more general, international phenomenon. We examined widening political polarization conditional on education across Europe, over a topic that is culturally and politically contested; immigration. To do so, we analyzed data from the European Social Survey, a premier survey of countries in and around the European area conducted biennially since 2002. Our main results are threefold. First, we see widening political polarization conditional on education over beliefs about the economic impact of immigration. The foremost countries showing this pattern are the most influential in Europe: Germany and France. However, we also see heterogeneity across countries, with some—such as Belgium—showing no evidence of such polarization. Second, we find that widening political polarization conditional on education is a product of sorting. That is, highly educated partisans exhibit stronger within-group consensus in their beliefs about immigration—the data do not support the view that the more educated partisans are more polarized simply because the less educated fail to adopt a position on the question. Third, and finally, we find some evidence that shocks to the political climate of countries in the European area—for example, the “refugee crisis” of summer 2015—were associated with a subsequent increase in political polarization over immigration conditional on education. The largest increase was observed in Germany, which was at the centre of the so-called refugee crisis in 2015. These results reveal numerous insights: they show that widening political polarization conditional on education is not restricted to the US or native English-speaking culture; that such polarization emerges in the domain of immigration; that it is a product of within-group consensus among the more educated; and, finally, that exogenous shocks to the political climate may be associated with subsequent increases in political polarization conditional on education.

Keywords : beliefs, Europe, immigration, political polarization

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