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Conflict thinking: Exploring the social basis of perceiving the world through the lens of social conflict

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Abstract

Both human rights organisations and studies in political communication have noticed an increasing use of conflict frames in contemporary politics within Western societies. As such frames are only interesting for political actors if they find resonance among a substantial share of the population, these observations raise the question as to who supports conflict thinking and why? Whereas public opinion research has studied many attitudes that are based on conflict thinking (e.g., ethnic prejudice, populism, feelings of collective deprivation, and welfare chauvinism), this paper addresses the more fundamental question as to whether it is possible to measure people's general tendency to perceive the world through the lens of social conflict. Data from the European Quality of Life Survey (34,655 respondents; 34 countries) reveal strong correlations between the perceptions of the amount of tension between seven pairs of groups. These correlations are combined into a single scale reflecting the amount of perceived social conflict in society. Subsequent multilevel analyses support the claim that conflict thinking is embedded in different feelings of vulnerability. In the conclusion, we elaborate on the implications of our findings.

Keywords: conflict thinking, vulnerability, survey research, European Quality of Life Survey

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