Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

# Social Science Research

# Moral opinion polarization and the erosion of trust

## Carolin Rapp

*University of Bern, Institute of Political Science, Fabrikstrasse 8, CH-3012 Bern, Switzerland*

A B S T R A C T

Since Puntam's seminal work on declining levels of social capital, the question of how social trust is formed has reached unprecedented heights of critical enquiry. While most of the current research concentrates on ethnic diversity and income inequality as the main influences driving down generalized trust, we focus on opinion polarization as another potential impact factor on trust. In more detail, we investigate the extent to which polarization over morally charged issues such as homsexuality, abortion and euthanasia affects individuals' likelihood to trust others. We hypothesize that moral issues have a natural tendency to divide societies' opinions into opposing poles and, thus, to challenge social cohesion in modern civil societies. Based on hierarchical analyses of the fifth wave of the World Values Survey (WVS) — comprising a sample of 39 countries — our results reveal that individuals living in countries characterized by more opinion polarization tend to have less trust in other people.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Initiated by Robert D. Putnam's (2000) seminal work on America's declining social capital and the notion that social cohesion is falling apart in modern societies, research on social capital — and, in particular, social trust — has grown rapidly in the last 20 years. Today, this continuing research is dominated by the question of what factors challenge the formation of social trust (Fairbrother and Martin, 2013; Freitag and Buehlmann, 2009; Gundelach, 2014; Hooghe et al., 2009; Putnam, 2007; Uslaner, 2011). The general consensus view is that trust is the "glue" that holds modern civil society together and which has numerous positive consequences for the public's social, economic, and cultural life (see e.g. Bjørnskov, 2008: 271). In recent years, however, we observe continuously decreasing levels of trust pointing to the erosion of social cohesion in modern societies (Putnam, 2000; Rahn and Transue, 1998; Stolle and Hooghe, 2005). An explanation for this phenomenon is often found in the increasing levels of social, ethnic, and economic diversity which challenge the very foundations of such societies by driving down generalized trust. Following the economic as well as the cultural threat theories, these types of diversities tend to marginalize societal groups, resulting in a deeper gap between them. As individuals prefer to interact with others who are similar to themselves, this marginalization and differentiation between groups will challenge social solidarity and ultimately reduce individuals' willingness to trust one other (Gundelach, 2014; Hooghe et al., 2007, 2009; Putnam, 2007; Uslaner, 2002, 2011). However, ethnic and economic diversities are not the only factors having the potential to divide societies into different groups: opinion polarization represents an additional factor threating social cohesion by constituting a societal conflict over irreconcilable differences (Hunter, 1991). It is well known that social capital and trust are based on "a measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings" (Etzioni, 2001: 223). This suggests that trust can emerge only if

*E-mail address:* carolin.rapp@ipw.unibe.ch.

consent over certain core values is achieved. Opinion polarization taps into this line of reasoning by capturing the extent of disagreement over certain issues among citizens (DiMaggio et al., 1996). In such a polarized environment, consent over basic values is rarely achieved, a failure which may bear significant consequences for the societal life in a country.

Opinion polarization appears in different forms and with respect to numerous societal, political, and economic issues (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Fiorina, 2011; Hunter, 1991). In this paper, we concentrate on moral opinion polarization in terms of how the public is divided on issues concerning abortion, euthanasia, and homosexuality. The polarization literature has long shown that this type of polarization is the most persistent and prevalent in modern societies (see e.g. Wroe et al., 2014). In recent years, the clash of fundamental values regarding moral issues has fuelled heated public debates and scholarly research (Knill, 2013; Mooney, 2001; Mooney and Schuldt, 2008; Rapp et al., 2014; Studlar, 2001; Studlar et al., 2013). These debates are often grouped under the rubric "culture war" by political actors and social commentators. The culture war thesis, therefore, refers to the emerging conflicts over cultural, religious, and moral issues in contrast with the former economic conflicts (Fiorina, 2011: 2). These considerations raise the assumption that, in societies where opinions and attitudes over morally charged issues are highly polarized, individuals could be less likely to trust others.

According to Baldassarri (2011: 632) "scholars have failed to systematically relate dynamics of political division and polarization to changes in associational life". Important virtues of associational life — such as trust — are also norms of social cohesion. In this study, our aim is to combine the two research strands of trust and opinion polarization and, in the context of specific morally charged issues, scrutinize their relationship. In doing so, we try to go beyond existing research in decisive ways: First, while this potential culture war over moral issues has enormous social importance, the consequences of this societal division are less well-known. Numerous researchers have engaged with the issue of how polarization is formed and what consequences it may have for political systems (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Evans, 2003; Hetherington, 2009; Munzert and Bauer, 2013; Wroe et al., 2014). However, the question of whether polarization has an actual impact on political or social behavior remains unanswered.

Secondly, while analysis of the origins of trust comprises both national and international comparisons, research on the culture war thesis as well as polarization mainly concentrates on the United States and other single-country analyses (see e.g. Munzert and Bauer, 2013; for an analysis of Germany). To the best of our knowledge, there are very few cross-country comparisons on opinion polarization. Our aim is to broaden the prevailing research perspective by implementing an international comparison of 39 countries based on data from the World Values Survey (WVS).

And last, we follow the path-breaking approach by DiMaggio et al. (1996) by implementing three different measures of moral opinion polarization: we capture the dispersion of opinions with the help of their variance; we test for bimodality in these issues measuring their kurtosis; and, ultimately, we test the constraint between opinions on abortion, euthanasia, and homosexuality using their inter-item correlation. Our results thereby reveal that moral opinion polarization relates negatively to individual levels of social trust.

In the next steps we elaborate on the theoretical relationship between moral opinion polarization and trust. The third part of this paper is concerned with the issue of polarization measurement, which is followed by a discussion about our data and the implemented empirical method. Our main hypothesis is then tested in the fourth section where we further summarize and discuss our findings. Finally, a conclusion completes the article.

## 2. The theoretical relationship between moral opinion polarization and social trust

Within the countless publications on social capital, the question of how social trust is formed dominates the scholarly discussion (Bjørnskov, 2008; Freitag and Buehlmann, 2009; Freitag and Traunmueller, 2009; Uslaner, 2006).[1] According to academic analyses, generalized trust is commonly understood as the willingness to place faith in people who are different from you (cf. Freitag and Buehlmann, 2009; Uslaner, 2002). Trusters are said to be not only more tolerant but also more open-minded, and more actively engaged in societal life (Bjørnskov, 2006; Putnam, 2007; Uslaner, 2011). Trust further contributes to an effective society and economy: societies with high levels of generalized trust establish more effective institutions, are better able to prevent corruption, and tend to have higher growth rates (among others Knack and Keefer, 1997; Uslaner, 2002; Whiteley, 2000).

The formation of generalized trust depends on certain personal and societal preconditions. For example, Uslaner (2002: 18) states that "trust is the belief that others share your fundamental moral values"; Fukuyama (1995: 153) goes further in this context by arguing that "as a general rule, trust arises when a community shares a set of moral values". This line of reasoning suggests that social trust may evolve only if a certain level of consent is reached within society. In this regard, Fukuyama's (1995) concept of the "trust radius" implies that people tend to trust those who are similar to them. The perceived similarity helps people to evaluate — to a certain extent — how other individuals may act and what motives are behind their actions; such similarity is based on ethnicity, language, religion, social status, or opinions toward certain issues (Bjørnskov, 2008). In Uslaner's (2002) words, people within an individual's radius of trust build a "moral community" where high levels of trust are met.

The above presented considerations are based on the dissimilarity thesis which is rooted in psychological understandings of categorization and belief congruency. This thesis relies on the general observation that people prefer to associate — and are more comfortable — with those believed to share similar belief systems (Rokeach et al., 1960: 161); this phenomenon is also

---

[1] The question of the measurement of social trust is, furthermore, of utmost importance but will not be discussed in this paper.