

Why America is dangerously polarised — and Europe is not

Pundits often extrapolate from the US case, whereas in fact it's an outlier

Simon Kuper

Financial Times, January 20, 2022

Contrast two leaders. Donald Trump's approval ratings barely budged during his presidency, and his supporters dismissed every scandal as "fake news". But when Boris Johnson turned out to have doubled as a party host during lockdown, his supporters fled: his net favourability rating went from +29 per cent in April 2020 to -52 per cent last week, according to pollsters YouGov.

Here, in microcosm, is the uniqueness of American polarisation. People often discuss polarisation as a global problem, but in fact, in most western European and even Latin American democracies, rival camps aren't deeply entrenched or always entirely serious.

Western polarisation peaked between 2016 and 2018, with the victories of Brexit, Trump and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, the violent clashes over Catalan independence, and the entry of the anti-system Five Star and nativist League into Italy's government.

Today the US remains dangerously polarised — more like Turkey or India than western Europe. Among Republicans in particular, [ethnic, religious and ideological identities are often perfectly aligned](#). Many believe God supports their party. Egged on by Trump, they fear their tribe is under existential threat. In [a survey by George Washington University](#), most Republicans said, "the traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast we may have to use force to save it". They have enough firearms.

The US is also handicapped by its constitution, which among other things has made the Supreme Court — arguably the country's mightiest political institution, given congressional gridlock — a past-winner-takes-all prize. (Poland has a similar problem.) The step back from democracy is short in the US, since southern states impeded many black people from voting until the late 1960s.

But western Europe is tamer. Divides are deep, but most of its citizens just aren't very interested in political issues and cannot stay angry about them for years on end. Europe's history is about forgetting past polarisation, or else Finland would still be brooding over its 1918 civil war and the heads of Protestants would be hanging from the gates of French towns.

Today's British depolarisation is a case in point. Most Leavers celebrated victory in the Brexit referendum less as a revolution than as a sort of football match: "You lost, get over it!" They don't believe God wants Brexit. Nor do Leavers lie awake at night afraid that Remainer hordes will slaughter them in their beds. Indeed, these labels are peeling off as [Brexit loses salience](#) and drifts into impenetrable negotiations over something called Article 16. Last year, Britons conducted more Google searches for Aston Villa Football Club than for Brexit.

Helpfully too, most elected leaders other than Trump seek to reduce tension. Democracy is a conflict-management system that usually tends towards tedium. Chile's new leader, Gabriel Boric, promises to be "[president of all Chileans](#)". In Spain, prime minister Pedro Sánchez has lowered temperatures over Catalan independence by pardoning nine jailed separatist leaders. In Barcelona recently, I noticed far fewer Catalan flags than before hanging from apartment balconies.

Sánchez had another motive for his pardons. He wanted Catalan parties to back his other policies. The need to build coalitions is a force for unity in many European democracies. In Italy, the League and Five Star now sit in Mario Draghi's technocratic government. Some polarising parties such as Eric Zemmour's in France or Vox in Spain still try to identify society's faultlines and then sit on top of them, but they attract few followers — many of whom understand that there's no risk of these outfits ever taking power, and just want a bit of excitement. Mathieu Lefevre, director of the anti-polarisation NGO More in Common, warns that there's more danger of certain societies sliding into apathy than of electing extremists.

One thing holding European societies together is that most people still get their news from state broadcasters. In Britain, nearly 100 per cent of adults use the BBC every month. People moan about BBC news, but most of them trust it. When scandals broke around Johnson, hardly anybody said it was all just "fake news". Even in Brazil, many of Bolsonaro's supporters see him clearly: his poll ratings collapsed after he mishandled Covid-19. Anti-system politicians outside the US generally pay a price for misrule.

There's a broader lesson here. Pundits often extrapolate from the US case, whereas in fact it's an outlier among western democracies. Its polarisation, filter bubbles and economic inequality are unusually bad. Yet because international debate is disproportionately driven by anglophone media and academics at US universities, we sometimes end up discussing American problems as if they afflicted the whole developed world.

Instead, in a new version of American exceptionalism, we should recognise the US as a special case, and make plans to cope should its democracy collapse.

Follow Simon on Twitter [@KuperSimon](#) and email him at simon.kuper@ft.com