Polarization in families and workplaces

Aim

To examine and explain the extent to which families and workplaces are (becoming) polarized, and to study how people navigate political disagreements with family members and co-workers, and how disagreements impact the functioning of individuals within families and workplaces.

Theoretical background

Political identities and partisanship have become increasingly salient in contemporary societies. While research does not unequivocally show that people disagree more strongly about political topics than they did before – despite public concerns – there is empirical evidence that people are increasingly negative about people who think differently about political topics. Such affective polarization has been linked to support for political violence and other outcomes that could undermine the functioning of modern liberal democracies. However, far less attention has been paid to how it plays out in our personal and, perhaps, most important relationships: those in the family and at work. This project therefore studies families and workplaces and aims to answer four research questions.

First, to what extent do the broader societal trends in terms of affective polarization trickle down into the family and the workplace? Recent studies from the U.S. suggest dating choices and hiring decisions are increasingly governed by political identities. Based on theories on assortative mating, social identity, and ingroup bias, it can be expected that people dislike people with different political views and would rather not work with them or date them. Consequentially, U.S. families and workplaces are becoming more politically homogenous over time. We will study whether similar trends are occurring in European countries. Second, and shifting the focus to places where political heterogeneity does persist: how do people navigate political disagreements in families and workplaces? Do people voice their disagreement; conform to other people's viewpoints; or ignore differences? Families and workplaces are particularly interesting contexts to study such coping strategies as avoidance of other people is difficult and relationship exit (e.g., divorce or quitting) is costly. Third, what are the consequences of political disagreement, especially in times of affective polarization, for the functioning of families and workplaces? To what extent does it generate emotional strain and relational conflicts? We will focus on outcomes such as family functioning, job satisfaction and job performance. Fourth, to what extent do similarities and differences in family characteristics (e.g., SES, migration background) and workplace characteristics (e.g., occupation, status) help explain whether political disagreement exists, how people navigate disagreements, and whether they disrupt family or workplace functioning?

Research design

To address our research questions, we will make use of a combination of data. Household panels in Europe (LISS, SOEP, BHPS, SHP) include yearly political values modules, filled out by multiple family members, allowing us to track disagreements in households over time and in relation to other survey questions about family functioning. The European Social Survey can be used to track socio-political attitudes within occupational groups since 2001. Additional options also include an extra wave in the Sustainable Workforce Survey to measure political attitudes in organization networks or qualitative interviews within families.

Literature

Arpino, B., & Di Nallo, A. (2025). Sleeping With the Enemy: Partners' Heterogamy by Political Preferences and Union Dissolution. Evidence From the United Kingdom. *Demography*, 62(3), 1059-1085.

Frake, J., Hurst, R., & Kagan, M. (2024). Partisan segregation in the US workplace is large and rising. *Available at SSRN:* http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4639165.

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Location

Utrecht