

The political dimension of social cohesion in Europe

Introduction

In the past two decades, Europe has faced a series of challenges. The 2007–2008 financial crisis, which led to an economic recession and austerity, was followed by the European debt crisis in 2010, a migration crisis in 2015 and the Brexit referendum in 2016. More recently, Europe was hit by COVID-19, the worst pandemic since the Spanish flu, and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has resulted in a severe inflation crisis. In addition, important structural changes are ongoing: the population is ageing rapidly, challenging our social security systems and intergenerational solidarity; rapid digitalisation is changing labour markets; and the consequences of global warming are now starting to be felt on the European continent. Given these challenges, policymakers have begun worrying about the social relations that hold the EU together, partly because of the recent increase in political polarisation, the weakening of social cohesion and the increase in discontent with institutions across Europe.

Against this backdrop, it is important to investigate whether people who choose not to participate in the political process are more likely to express distrust in institutions. Are certain countries more likely to express dissatisfaction through stronger political activities? Do cohesive societies enable a climate of trust and participation? As social cohesion is characterised by togetherness, resilience and a focus on the common good, how does it affect political participation? Focusing on the political dimensions of social cohesion, this report demonstrates how social cohesion has evolved in Europe and, in particular, how political participation is directly related to the legitimacy of political institutions.

Policy context

Social cohesion is a challenging concept to define, but it is associated with strong social trust, well-functioning communities, political participation, engagement and social inclusion. Social cohesion comes with improving social trust, which is associated with high economic

prosperity, low inequality and low corruption. The political dimensions of social cohesion include institutional legitimacy (how much citizens trust and approve of institutions) and citizens' political participation. Therefore, stronger cohesion is expressed through stronger institutional trust, which is important for a healthy functioning of democracy and hence fundamental to the EU, and citizens being politically engaged.

The onset of austerity after the 2007–2009 financial crisis was interpreted by many as an institutional failure, worsening the public's perception of politicians' management of public finances and their integrity. Globalisation has disrupted traditional industries in many European countries. In this new political landscape, many populists leveraged the increase in migration flows partly generated by the refugee crisis triggered by the conflict in Syria in 2015.

It is clear that the consequences of these crises have differed across the EU Member States. For instance, the austerity following the 2007–2008 financial crisis was far worse for some countries than for others. Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain experienced a dramatic surge in youth unemployment, and any reversal in that trend was hampered by the subsequent European debt crisis. Other countries, for example the Nordic countries, fared considerably better.

It is also clear that the crises have had different impacts on social cohesion. The economic recession of 2008 was different from the COVID-19 pandemic because blame attribution differed and these crises did not affect the same social strata of the European population.

Over the past two decades, Europe has seen a rise in political polarisation and populism, a trend that manifests, in part, through anti-establishment attitudes and, in some cases, a drift towards authoritarian rule. Several indicators suggest that trust in national establishments and institutions has eroded, which is usually accompanied by increased discontent.

Key findings

- There was no evidence of a decline in political social cohesion in the past 20 years in Europe. Despite the existing disaffection, citizens have consistently participated in the democratic process, including voting, over the past two decades. Their engagement appears to increase during times of crisis, such as during the financial crisis in 2007 and 2008, the European debt crisis of 2010–2012 and the COVID-19 crisis.
- Unemployment is a key factor in political participation. There are notable differences across Europe; for instance, unemployment does not result in stronger political participation in the Nordic, western Mediterranean and central and eastern European regions, whereas unemployment resulted in stronger political participation in continental Europe and Ireland.
- Unemployment is important for political engagement through protesting: the higher the unemployment rate, the higher the levels of protest.
- Political activity tends to be higher in areas where the population is older and better educated. Surprisingly, economic prosperity and migration rates do not seem to play a significant role, except in eastern Mediterranean and Balkan countries, where political engagement is notably higher.
- Electoral absenteeism, on the other hand, is influenced primarily by unemployment. Unemployed individuals are generally less likely to vote, and rural areas tend to have lower voter turnout.
- Electoral participation is closely linked to political legitimacy: citizens are more likely to vote when they have confidence in their political institutions.
- There is a tendency for regions with higher levels of protest to also have higher voter turnout, indicating a correlation between active engagement and voting behaviour. When there is a dip (at least a slight one) in non-voting, we see an increase in protest.
- Institutional distrust differs between regions. For example, those in Nordic countries show considerably less distrust in their institutions than those in continental Europe. Economic factors, such as economic development, tend to decrease institutional distrust, although the influence of unemployment is relatively minor.

- There is a positive connection between engagement in political activities and institutional trust. The effect of satisfaction with democracy and the government on voter absenteeism is six times larger than on political engagement. To put it simply, the connection between voter turnout and discontent is significantly more robust than the link between political involvement and discontent.
- When dissatisfaction in institutions goes up, so does distrust, and vice versa. In particular, distrust in institutions and dissatisfaction appear to increase during hardship, such as during the 2008 economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Policy pointers

- Staying employed and securing work opportunities are crucial factors. Unemployment stands out as the primary cause of reduced political involvement, which leads to dissatisfaction with institutions. While providing income support during economic shocks is essential for immediate relief, it is equally important to create employment opportunities.
- During crises, unemployment rates tend to rise more dramatically among young people. It is crucial for policymakers to focus their efforts on this group, as a lack of employment opportunities for young individuals can have lasting negative effects on their long-term political engagement.
- To ensure employment opportunities for young people during crises, we must enhance access to education to enable them to build resilience and better prepare themselves for navigating an increasingly uncertain future. A greater focus on addressing and developing job guarantee schemes is equally important.
- Creating a positive feedback loop between social cohesion and political participation is vital. Strengthening social cohesion increases political engagement and vice versa.
- There is no uniform trend of growing political discontent across Europe. Instead, there are significant variations between different nation states. Consequently, there is not a one-size-fits-all policy approach that can be effective everywhere.

Further information

The report *The political dimension of social cohesion in Europe* is available at <https://eurofound.link/ef23012>

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