"Who are those people?"

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"Who are those People?" Causes and Consequences of Polarization in the Schooled Society

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Quita Muis,

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Promotoren:
Prof. dr. A.J.A. Bijsterveld (Tilburg University)
Prof. dr. F. Hendriks (Tilburg University)

Copromotor:
Dr. T. Reeskens (Tilburg University)

Leden promotiecommissie:
Prof. dr. P.H.J. Achterberg (Tilburg University)
Prof. dr. D. Baldassari (New York University)
Prof. dr. A.C. Wille (Leiden University)
Dr. J.M. den Ridder (The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP))
Dr. K. Noordzij (Erasmus University Rotterdam)

Summary

Polarization panic is omnipresent in the public as well as scientific debate in Europe. However, much is unclear about what kind of polarization is taking place, who is polarizing and why, and what the consequences of polarization are. Guided by theories regarding modernization, the schooled society, social identification, cleavage formation, a cultural backlash, and agonistic pluralism, I aim to clarify the "what," "who," "why," and "whatever" of polarization in Europe. I do so by investigating different forms of polarization between educational groups (Part I), between social identity groups and birth cohorts (Part II), and by disentangling the relationship between polarization and democracy (Part III). Grounded in six empirical chapters based on qualitative and quantitative methods, I conclude that polarization is perceived rather than actually occurring. These false perceptions are driven by a search for social recognition in an ever more individualistic society, resulting in identification with narrow social groups. Educational level is one example of such a social identity, as the schooled society has made knowledge and cognitive skills primary sources of social (mis)recognition. Stereotypical ideas about cognitive and moral superiority are strengthened by politics and (social) media, distorting the image we have of ourselves and others. This false polarization increases the risk of actual polarization becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, which will strengthen distinctions between social identities in turn. Although polarization can be good for democracy, the lack of a shared identity is affecting the democratic values of younger generations and conflict can erode the system when becoming too moralized. Therefore, the question "who *are* those people?" turns out to be a cause as well as a consequence of polarization in Europe, but it may also form the key to a solution.

Samenvatting

Polarisatiepaniek is alom aanwezig in zowel het publieke als wetenschappelijke debat in Europa. Er is echter veel onduidelijk over het type polarisatie dat plaatsvindt, wie er polariseren en waarom, en wat de consequenties van polarisatie zijn. Geleid door theorieën over modernisering, de geschoolde maatschappij, sociale identificatie, breuklijnvorming, een culturele terugslag en agonistisch pluralisme, beoog ik het "wat," "wie," "waarom" en "*whatever*" van polarisatie in Europa te verhelderen. Dat doe ik aan de hand van onderzoek naar verschillende vormen van polarisatie onder opleidingsgroepen (Deel I), onder sociale identiteitsgroepen en geboortecohorten (Deel II), en door de relatie tussen polarisatie en democratie te ontwarren (Deel III). Steunend op zes empirische hoofdstukken op basis van kwalitatieve en kwantitatieve methodes concludeer ik dat polarisatie waargenomen wordt, maar niet daadwerkelijk plaatsvindt. Deze valse percepties worden gedreven door een zoektocht naar sociale erkenning in een steeds individualistischere samenleving, wat leidt tot identificatie met beperkte sociale groepen. Een voorbeeld van zo'n sociale identiteit is opleidingsniveau, omdat de geschoolde maatschappij kennis en cognitieve vaardigheden tot belangrijke bronnen van sociale mis- en erkenning heeft gemaakt. Stereotiepe ideeën over cognitieve en morele superioriteit worden versterkt door politiek en (sociale) media en vervormen ons beeld van onszelf en anderen. Deze valse polarisatie verhoogt de kans dat daadwerkelijke polarisatie een zichzelf vervullende voorspelling wordt, wat het onderscheid tussen sociale identiteiten verder zal versterken. Hoewel polarisatie goed kan zijn voor democratie, tast het ontbreken van een gedeelde identiteit de democratische waarden van jongere generaties aan en kan het systeem eroderen als conflict te gemoraliseerd raakt. De vraag "wie *zijn* die mensen?" is dus zowel een oorzaak als een gevolg van huidige polarisatie in Europa, maar het kan ook de sleutel tot een oplossing vormen.

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Rich or poor, a sunny day a sunny day (Mac Miller, 2010)

This introductory chapter is based on a commissioned literature review for the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, providing a scientific background to the report 'Values and Identities – a policymaker's guide' (Scharfbillig et al., 2021).

1 Introduction

1.1 Polarization Panic

The only thing we do not seem to be polarizing on these days is the worry that we are polarizing (Devlin, Fagan & Connaughton, 2021; Eurofound, 2018; Herold et al., 2023). Our fixation with polarization has been dominating European public debate, as every disagreement seems a new source of concern about rising tensions, such as the debate about our coexistence with wolves (e.g., Nijhuis, 2019); any form of conflict seems to increase worries about deepening divides, as shown by claims about rising "low trust societies" (e.g., Engbersen et al., 2021); and every American controversy seems to ask for a reflection on the current state of affairs on our continent, for example regarding abortion laws (e.g., Alexander, 2023). "Polarization panic" is omnipresent (Ros, 2023).

To what extent is this panic justified? The scientific debate on polarization is, in fact, not much different from the public one, as there exists a wide variety of approaches to this popular phenomenon and the United States is often used as a blueprint for what is or will be happening in Europe. So far, this has led to many different conclusions regarding the occurrence, intensity, and danger of polarization (e.g., Adams, De Vries & Leiter, 2012a; Adams, Green & Milazzo, 2012b; Bakker, Schumacher & Homan, 2020; Bartels, 2013; Boxell, Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2022; Dekker & Den Ridder, 2019; Den Ridder et al., 2020; Gidron, Adams & Horne, 2019a; 2019b; Harteveld, 2019; Knudsen, 2020; Lauka, McCoy & Firat, 2018; Munzert & Bauer, 2013; Nuesser, Johnston & Bodet, 2014; Reiljan, 2020; Somer & McCoy, 2019; Wagner, 2020). Nevertheless, there are legitimate reasons to expect that some groups in society are increasingly growing apart, due to large-scale developments that have vastly changed their lives economically, culturally, and socially over the past decades.

Two such groups are the lower and higher educated.[1] At the start of this PhD-project in 2018, debates on how our modern-day

[1] I am aware that the labels “lower” and “higher” educated are contested these days because of the value judgement they implicitly express. I deliberately choose to use these terms throughout this dissertation, because the attached stigma is expected to be one of the sources of educational polarization and is, therefore, of research interest. Moreover, these labels are still most common

"schooled society" resembles eras of consociationalism, class conflict, or even apartheid were far from settled (Baker, 2014; Bregman, 2012; "In Nieuwe Klassenmaatschappij", 2011; Vlasblom, 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2022 further highlighted the risk of education becoming "the greatest divider" instead of "the greatest equalizer" (United Nations, 2022). Worries about rising educational polarization have been especially widespread in the fourth largest knowledge society in the world (Knoema, 2021), the Netherlands, where the early tracking school system separates children based on educational performance as early as the age of 12 (Koçer & Van de Werfhorst, 2012), and where around 90% of the politicians in the House of Representatives are higher educated, in contrast to only roughly a third of the Dutch population (Bovens, 2021).

So, in a schooled society such as the Netherlands, there are signs that polarization entails more than growing attitudinal extremity on issues such as wolves, institutional trust, or abortion, even if this form of polarization has received the most public and scientific attention so far (Fiorina, 2016). Rather, as education has become ingrained in our social lives, culture, and institutions (Baker, 2014; Bovens & Wille, 2017), the lower and higher educated seem to slowly drift apart into distinct and unfamiliar worlds (Bovens, 2012; 2015). This is well illustrated by the question "who *are* those people?," expressed by former Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs Sigrid Kaag when confronted with a potential rise in voters for radical-right party *Forum voor Democratie* during the 2019 elections in the Netherlands (Tan, 2021). This question has been compared to the "basket of deplorables," the phrase used by Hillary Clinton during the 2016 elections in the United States (Reilly, 2016). These expressions not only demonstrate the dissociation between groups, but also emphasize the disdain from the elite in powerful positions towards those outside their higher educated "bubble."

These signs of educational polarization in the schooled society formed the foundation of this dissertation. To examine whether current polarization panic is justified and educational differences are indeed at

in science and policy (e.g., Stubager, 2008; ISCED, 2011; Baker, 2014; Green, 2017; Kuppens et al., 2018; Eurostat, 2023), and alternatives such as “practically” and “theoretically” educated do not represent the intended distinction adequately.

the heart of this presumed polarization trend, I started off "what," "who," "why," and "whatever" of polarization. What kind of polarization - if any - is taking place in Europe? Who is polarizing? Why are they polarizing? And what are the consequences of this polarization; is it really something to worry about? By diving deeper into those questions, the importance of not only educational groups, but social identities more generally became increasingly apparent. This made me decide to broaden the scope of the research along the way, eventually revealing the significance of the question "who *are* those people?" even more clearly. I will now elaborate on the "what," "who," "why," and "whatever" of polarization and provide the research question that guides this dissertation.

1.2 What?

In the most general sense, polarization refers to "the extent of disagreement" (DiMaggio, Evans & Bryson, 1996, p. 692). This typically concerns disagreement in attitudes, opinions, issue positions, beliefs, preferences, values, or ideologies. Without going into mathematical detail, there are at least nine different ways to measure this kind of attitudinal polarization,[2] which can also be combined, leading to an even wider variety of manifestations (Bramson et al., 2016; 2017). The most prominent literature summarizes these different forms into three main elements: 1) discernible groups; 2) attitudinal divergence; and 3) attitudinal consistency (Axelrod, 1997; Bramson et al., 2016, p. 95; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Esteban & Ray, 1994; Lelkes, 2016).

For polarization to occur, at least two groups should be identifiable (Bramson et al., 2016). These groups can be based on the population as a whole (for example, when society is divided into people holding more conservative and more progressive attitudes) or on specific socio-demographics or group identities, such as gender, age, education, or political affiliation (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008; Munzert & Bauer, 2013; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Mason & Davis, 2015; Harteveld, 2019). The second and third element of attitudinal polarization may

[2] Throughout this dissertation, I will often use “attitudes” as an umbrella term for concepts like attitudes, opinions, issue positions, beliefs, preferences, values, and ideologies, but there are important differences between these concepts (see Halman & Sieben, 2020).

seem contradictory, but attitudinal divergence refers to heterogeneity *between* groups, while attitudinal consistency refers to homogeneity *within* groups (Axelrod, 1997; Bramson et al., 2016; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Esteban & Ray, 1994; Lelkes, 2016).

So, attitudinal polarization exists when two or more groups in society hold highly distinct attitudes and when there is strong attitudinal consensus within these groups. Put differently, the more society is divided into dissimilar, but homogeneous attitude clusters, the stronger attitudinal polarization is. Yet, one can exist without the other: even when groups are not far apart in their (mean) attitudes, there can be little variation within these groups and vice versa (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008; Bougher, 2017; Bramson et al., 2016; Mason, 2015). Importantly, not every dispute is an indication of a polarizing society: polarization only really becomes societally ingrained when disagreement is strong, on a wide variety of issues, between groups substantial in size (DiMaggio et al., 1996). However, the meaning of "strong," "wide," and "substantial" remains arbitrary. Furthermore, polarization can be a state in which disagreement in strong ("the population is polarized") or a process in which disagreement becomes stronger ("the population is polarizing") (Bramson et al., 2017, p. 119; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Lelkes, 2016).

This definition of polarization can also apply to "nonattitudinal properties" (Bramson et al., 2017, p. 81). For example, two or more groups can be (increasingly) homogenous and distinct in their income, indicating income polarization. When this holds for multiple aspects of society, it is more common to speak of cleavages than of polarization. In the cleavage literature, attitudes are only one of the domains of society in which disagreement between groups can occur (Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Deegan-Krause, 2007; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). If disagreement additionally exists structurally - in terms of segmentation, segregation, and stratification - and institutionally - in terms of participation - we can speak of a full societal cleavage (Deegan-Krause, 2007).

Besides actual polarization - in the sense that disagreement in different societal domains can be observed - more subjective forms of polarization can take place as well, namely perceived polarization and affective polarization (Lelkes, 2016). The former refers to the extent to which people perceive (groups in) society to be polarized, while the latter refers to "the extent to which citizens hold both positive ingroup

affect and negative outgroup affect" (Wagner, 2020, p. 1). Who the in- and outgroups are, is again subjective and can be understood in terms of groups with conflicting attitudes, or members from different social or political groups. These subjective manifestations of polarization can occur without actual polarization taking place (DiMaggio et al., 1996).

Lastly, a relatively new and underdeveloped field of research regards factual belief polarization, which means "disagreement over matters of fact" (Lee et al., 2021, p. 1315). Group differences in perceptions of reality can again occur in terms of divergence - when differences in truth perceptions increase between groups - or consistency - when consensus on truth perceptions increases within groups (Lee et al., 2021; Rekker, 2022).

These many different forms of polarization raise the question which form - if any - is manifesting itself in Europe and, more specifically, among whom?

1.3 Who?

Polarization can occur on the level of the elite or the masses, in broadly three ways: among political parties or politicians (referring to elite polarization), among electorates, or among society at large (both referring to mass polarization) (Adams et al., 2012a; Bramson et al., 2017; Reiljan, 2020). The occurrence and intensity of both elite and mass polarization in Europe seems to be dependent on the type of polarization as described above, the economic or cultural nature of the polarizing issues, the novelty of the democratic system, and the magnitude of the changes in a country in terms of economic, social, cultural, and political context (e.g., Adams et al., 2012a; Adams et al., 2012b; Bakker et al., 2020; Bartels, 2013; Boxell et al., 2022; Dekker & Den Ridder, 2019; Den Ridder et al., 2020; Gidron et al., 2019a; 2019b; Harteveld, 2019; Knudsen, 2020; Lauka et al., 2018; Munzert & Bauer, 2013; Nuesser et al., 2014; Reiljan, 2020; Somer & McCoy, 2019; Wagner, 2020).

These contextual changes have raised concerns about mass polarization among the lower and higher educated particularly (Bovens, 2015; Bovens & Wille, 2017; Houtman, 2017; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; 2017). However, Norris and Inglehart (2019) stress that generational differences cannot be overlooked when it comes to

individuals' reaction to their (changing) environment. Yet, disagreement exists in the literature on whether the oldest or youngest birth cohorts display more polarizing reactions (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Foa & Mounk, 2016; 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Furthermore, a growing body of literature focuses on polarization among social identity groups more generally, including categories such as gender, nationality, and religion (e.g., Bein, 2022; Fukuyama, 2018; Mason & Davis, 2015); the urban-rural divide has (re)gained attention during the writing process of this dissertation as well (e.g., De Voogd & Cuperus, 2021; Kruyswijk, 2019; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

Why polarization is expected to increase among educational groups, birth cohorts, and social identity groups in general will be discussed now.

1.4 Why?

Modernization processes have changed the basic value patterns of postindustrial societies (Inglehart, 1977; Schwartz, 2009). In times of (economic) insecurity, people prioritize values such as survival, economic growth, social order, conformity, and tradition. With the increase in wealth, education, technology, globalization, and overall stability, value priorities change, however. Being an adaptive process, such change happens gradually and becomes visible over generations: a "Silent Revolution" (Inglehart, 1977). Generally, the more advanced a society becomes, the more its citizens will value self-expression, individual freedom, openness to change, and social equality. Especially in older European democracies, this has resulted in a change from "old politics," primarily concerning socioeconomic issues, to "new politics," with emphasis on sociocultural issues (Dalton, 2013; Flanagan, 1987; Ignazi,1992). This strong focus on new cultural issues, particularly among the politically engaged elite, has bred resistance among certain subgroups since the 1980s, by prioritizing more traditional, conservation, and self-enhancement values: the "Silent Counter-Revolution" (Ignazi, 1992).

This counterreaction is claimed to be particularly strong among the lower educated, who are disadvantaged in multiple ways by the large-scale societal processes that have been taking place over the past decades. Educational expansion resulting from modernization has

vastly increased the number of higher educated, who now dominate practically every domain of our seemingly meritocratic schooled society (Baker, 2014), where success as well as failure are considered one's own "merit." The higher educated have been labelled "winners" (Kriesi et al., 2006), while the lower educated "losers" find themselves in similar insecure circumstances, arguably making them more homogeneous in their economic, cognitive, and cultural resources, which in turn affects their attitudes and behavior (Häusermann & Schwander, 2012; Jaspers et al., 2007; Kriesi, 1998). The lower educated could, therefore, be perceived as the drivers of polarization. However, other research shows that the higher educated are primarily exposed to likeminded people through their increasingly homogenous circles (Bovens, 2012; 2015), suggesting that socialization processes at school influence their social identity and induce group conformity, arguably making *them* the driving force behind polarization. In any case, there seems to be a separation of educational worlds, which is visible in politics as well - or may be even driven by it. The overrepresentation of higher educated in the "diploma democracy" makes policy hardly responsive to the insecurities of the lower educated (Bovens & Wille, 2017; Schakel, 2019; Schakel & Van der Pas, 2020). The higher educated elites have drifted off into their own world to such an extent that they can no longer imagine the circumstances of those outside of it. The lower educated may not feel recognized in modern-day society, arguably affecting their self-image and identity (Sandel, 2020), causing societal discontent or even withdrawal (De Voogd & Cuperus, 2021).

Nevertheless, Norris and Inglehart (2019) claim that the strongest predictor of the current countermovement, or "Cultural Backlash," is birth cohort - not education. Since it remains unclear which generations are the instigators of this backlash, there are different ideas about its causes. The rapid value changes in society have arguably strengthened the authoritarian values of older cohorts due to experienced insecurity about their established culture, identity, and power, while younger cohorts are increasingly embracing liberal values due to familiarity and stability in their formative years (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). To the contrary, other scholars have argued that authoritarian values are developing more strongly among younger compared to older cohorts (Foa & Mounk, 2016; 2017). The former are growing up in a highly uncertain, neoliberal and individualistic

environment, which raises socioeconomic concerns as well as sociocultural insecurities about identity formation, more so than among their older predecessors (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). In any case, the occurrence of a generational backlash may indicate that not only educational groups wonder "who those people are," but that this phrase represents a broader sentiment of social disconnectedness that is present among others in the schooled society as well.

More specifically, the alleged polarization between educational groups and birth cohorts suggests that social identification plays a role in the occurrence of polarization in Europe. Social identity can be defined as "those aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which he/she belongs, as well as the emotional and evaluative consequences of this group membership" (Hornsey, 2008, p. 206). According to Freire (2008, p. 191), social identities have indeed become increasingly salient as "a new politics syndrome," because the cultural nature of new political issues facilitates conflict over essentialist identities (Bein, 2022; Fukuyama, 2018; Mason & Davis, 2015; Mouffe, 1999). That is, socioeconomic topics such as social benefits, wealth redistribution, and privatization have been overshadowed by conflicts over sociocultural issues, such as protecting ethnic and gender minorities vs. protecting national identity and traditional family structures. Opponents, therefore, clash over who they *are*, which quickly moralizes the debate into "good" and "bad" (Avramovska, 2022; Bonikowski, 2017; Harteveld, 2021; Johnston & Wronski, 2015). As elaborated above, this shift in issue focus can be explained by the fact that politics has become dominated by the higher educated elite, who prioritize post-materialist values over materialist concerns due to their relatively stable and secure position (Canovan, 1999; Inglehart, 1977). Moreover, social identities are argued to become more apparent in politics when political identities are no longer well-represented (Mouffe, 1999). Indeed, the strong alignment that used to be present in consociated times is decreasing, as people no longer feel closely connect or loyal to a specific political party or party family (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018).

With the rise of such "identity politics," social identities have not only become more political (Klandermans, 2014; Mason & Davis, 2015; Norris, 2020; Somer & McCoy, 2019; Somer, McCoy & Luke, 2021), political identities have become more social as well (Bankert, Huddy & Rosema, 2017; Harteveld, 2019; Huddy, Bankert & Davies,

2018). The fact that politics and social life increasingly intertwine can arguably induce polarization, as cleavages become more reinforcing instead of cross-cutting (Lipset, 1960). This clarifies the boundaries between the "good" ingroup and the "bad" outgroup. Other major developments of the past decades, such as the rise of (social) media consumption, are argued to contribute to the salience of stereotypical group identities (Bail, 2021; Devine, 2015; Wilson et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2016). Yet, research is still undecided on the attitudinal effects of such reinforcing identities (e.g., Bail et al., 2018; Bakshy et al., 2015; Barberá, 2014; Bruns, 2019; Flaxman et al., 2016; Möller et al., 2020).

So, the role of social identification in polarization in Europe has yet to be clarified, and the question remains to what extent such identity-based polarization is really worrisome.

1.5 Whatever?

So far, scholars have been divided on the consequences of polarization. In an era of eroding European democracies, polarization has particularly been linked to the future of democracy (Boese et al., 2022; Lindstaedt, 2021). On the one hand, polarization is argued to benefit democracy, as it leads to better representation and more political engagement: the democratic system thrives on a certain level of heated disagreement (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Dalton, 2013; Harteveld, 2019; McCoy, Rahman & Somer, 2018; Moral, 2017; Roblain & Green, 2021; Somer & McCoy, 2019; Stavrakakis, 2018).

However, when political mobilization is based on shared identities rather than shared interests, society is argued to become divided into "mutually distrustful 'us vs. them' blocs" (Somer & McCoy, 2019, p. 8). This increases hostility and decreases the willingness to listen to and engage with people who hold different views (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Mason & Davis, 2015; Somer & McCoy, 2019; Harteveld, 2019). It can lead to the rejection of democratic claims of the outgroup and refusal to accept defeat in elections (Strickler, 2018; Harteveld, 2019; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Tappin & McKay, 2019). Even more extremely, groups can start to perceive each other as an "existential threat to the nation or their way of life" (Somer & McCoy 2019, p. 9), which can eventually cause dehumanization and violence (Harteveld, 2019; Martherus et al., 2019; Kalmoe & Mason, 2019).

Yet again, one could argue that politics has always been identity-driven (Mouffe, 1999, 2013), and that the fight for representation by different marginalized identity groups is an integral part of democracy (Laclau & Mouffe, 1987). For example, the earlier described insecurities of the lower educated may be addressed more accurately when they would unify around this lower status group identity to gain more political power. In this light, identity-based polarization is in fact a necessity rather than a threat to democracy, as long as the initiated conflict remains within democratic bounds.

When it comes to the alleged generational backlash, the danger to democracy is dependent on who is lashing back exactly. When older cohorts are strengthening their authoritarian values due to experienced insecurities caused by modern times, they will eventually be replaced by the younger, more liberal cohorts, gradually changing the value patterns of European societies to be more strongly democratic (Inglehart, 1977; 2000). However, when support for democracy and its core principles is decreasing among younger cohorts and this trend progresses among every successive, increasingly insecure generation, this may eventually cause democratic deconsolidation (Foa & Mounk, 2016; 2017).

Combined, there is much uncertainty about what kind of polarization is taking place in Europe, who are the driving forces behind polarization, why this is the case exactly, and whether these developments are alarming for the future of democracies. Existing polarization debates still focus strongly on education in the context of the schooled society, while a review of the literature seems to suggest a central role for social identification more generally. Therefore, the following research question guides this dissertation: *what role does social identification play in the causes and consequences of polarization in Europe, and to what extent is education of particular importance in this relationship?* This question will be addressed in three different parts, consisting of six empirical chapters that will be outlined below.

1.6 Outline

The first part of this dissertation focusses on educational polarization in the Netherlands and consists of three chapters. As elaborated above,

the dominance of knowledge, educational performance, and higher educated politicians makes the Netherlands a good example of a schooled society that is likely to reveal educational polarization if this is indeed occurring (Bovens, 2021; Knoema, 2021; Koçer & Van de Werfhorst, 2012). In the second part, two chapters are dedicated to the analysis of identity-based polarization in Europe. In the last section, a final empirical chapter addresses the consequences of such identity-based polarization for European democracies.

I. Educational polarization in the Netherlands

In Chapter 2, I will take the first step in investigating the occurrence of polarization between education groups. More specifically, I will examine whether the lower and higher educated are drifting apart on a wide variety of social and political attitudes and whether they are becoming more attitudinally homogenous among themselves at the same time. The role of their economic, cognitive, and cultural resources in these attitudinal developments will additionally be explored. Expectations are mainly based on the Modernization Theory (Inglehart, 1977; 1997) and will be tested by means of heteroskedastic ordered probit modelling of Dutch European Values Study (EVS) data (1981-2017). I will answer the following research question in this chapter: *to what extent have differences in social and political attitudes become larger between and smaller within educational groups over time?*

In Chapter 3, I will continue the investigation into educational polarization in the Netherlands by studying the role of educational identification in a subjective form of polarization, namely perceived educational polarization. I will additionally elaborate on whether these perceptions are primarily based on economic or cultural differences between educational groups. Hypotheses resulting from the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) will be tested through structural equation modelling of Dutch data (2019) from Longitudinal Internet studies for the Social Sciences (LISS). I will answer the following research question in this chapter: *to what extent can education-based group identification explain perceptions of educational polarization?*

In Chapter 4, I will finalize the study of educational polarization in the Netherlands and the role of educational identification in this. By examining the content of polarization perceptions in more detail, I will gain a better understanding of the role of social identities in societal

cleavage formation, and in how perceptions of differences can grow into perceptions of conflict. Based on the Cleavage Model of Deegan-Krause (2007), I will perform abductive analysis of qualitative data additional to the Dutch LISS Panel data (2019) used in Chapter 3. I will answer the following research questions in this chapter: *on what domains do educational groups perceive themselves to be (conflictually) different and what role does identification play in these perceptions?*

II. Identity-based polarization in Europe

In Chapter 5, the scope of the research into polarization will be widened, covering 19 European countries. I will provide a descriptive, yet comprehensive overview of the occurrence of identity-based polarization in Europe in the form of alignment. Elite polarization and (social) media consumption will be explored as possible drivers of this form of polarization. Based on the Self-Categorization Theory (Turner et al., 1987), I will formulate expectations that will be tested on a combination of European Values Study (EVS) and Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) data (1990-2017), using correlational measures. I will answer the following research question in this chapter: *to what extent and where is alignment increasing in Europe?*

In Chapter 6, I will address the contradictory claims regarding the occurrence of a cultural backlash by examining the development of democratic values among different birth cohorts. I will additionally investigate the explanatory role of economic and cultural insecurities as well as the influence of contextual economic and cultural changes. Contradicting hypotheses will be formulated based on the Cultural Backlash Theory (Norris & Inglehart, 2019) and the "four Ds" (Distrust; Dealignment; Destruction; and Deprivation) underlying a revolt against liberal democracy, according to Eatwell and Goodwin (2018). These will be tested by means of societal growth curve modelling of European Values Study (EVS) data (1999-2017) on 42 countries. I will answer the following research question in this chapter: *to what extent have cultural and economic insecurities triggered an authoritarian reaction from different generations in Europe?*

III. Consequences for democracy

In Chapter 7, I will investigate the consequences of polarization for democracy in Europe, by disentangling three forms of polarization (elite; partisan; societal), and three aspects of democracy (quality;