

Economic Crisis and Political Polarization A Challenge to Civic Culture?

Yilmaz Esmer

Abstract

This essay uses survey data collected from representative samples of parliamentarians of Chile, Germany, Poland, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, and Turkey at two points in time coinciding with shortly before the start of the global financial/economic crisis and well after the impact was felt on a broad international scale. Comparing the mean differences between two major political parties in each country between the two points in time over nine indicators, we find support for the hypothesis that the ideological rift (as measured on a ten-point left-right ideology scale) between the parliamentarians of the two parties has widened. Yet, the picture is mixed with regard to the indicators of economic ideology, with Poland and Turkey standing out as the most polarized and Chile as the least polarized. However, the degree of polarization among parliamentarians does not reach alarming levels and cannot, as of the time of the survey, be interpreted as posing a threat to democratic values.

Keywords: Polarization, democratic culture, democratic values, civic culture, elites, parliamentarians.

—*medio tutissimus ibis*¹

The oracles of Delphi were certainly in distinguished company when preaching to avoid extremes and to take the middle path, which was deemed to be the safest. Whether referred to as moderation or temperance, or dubbed

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¹ The legend has it that this warning was inscribed on the Temple of Delphi, advising all to avoid excesses and preaching that the “middle road” is the safest.

the “golden mean,” ancient Greek philosophers, by and large, seemed to be wary of the undesirable consequences of extremes, both for individuals and for states.

Plato is well known for equating the characteristics of citizens with those of the state and is widely regarded as a major pioneer of what we today know as the “political culture approach.” So much so that, “the States are as the men are; they grow out of human characters.” And from this premise, it is one easy step to the conclusion that, “if the constitutions of States are five, the dispositions of individual minds will also be five.”² One cannot help but admire the reasoning that,

in each of us there are the same principles and habits which there are in the State; and that from the individual they pass into the State—how else could they come there? Take the quality of passion or spirits;—it would be ridiculous to imagine that this quality, when found in States, is not derived from the individuals who are supposed to possess it.³

Indeed, could present-day students of political culture express the point in a clearer and more succinct way?

More to the point with regard to the topic of this essay, one of the four important virtues that a good state as well as its citizens are expected to possess is “temperance.”⁴ Temperance is so vital that we cannot hope to “find justice without troubling ourselves about temperance.”⁵ Temperance, or avoiding extremes, is the key to harmony in a state. It “produces a harmony of the weaker and the stronger and the middle class” and is “the agreement of the naturally superior and inferior, as to the right to rule of either, both in states and individuals.”⁶ In elaborating the significance of harmony, Plato almost seems to be referring to the trendy topic of present-day politics, that is, polarization. “In our city the language of harmony and concord will be more often heard than in any other” because in this ideal city state, citizens will have “their pleasures and pains in common.”⁷ Polarization, if allowed to use the term, is dysfunctional because “there is unity where there is community of pleasures and pains. ...Where there is no common but only private feeling, a State is disorganized—when you have one half of the world triumphing and the

² Charles M. Bakewell, ed., *Plato, The Republic* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1928), 315.

³ *Ibid.*, 163-164.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 151. Ideally, according to Plato, states *and* citizens should be “wise, valiant, temperate and just.”

⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 203.

other plunged in grief at the same events happening to the city or citizens... ”⁸ Finally, the size of the state should not grow beyond the limit which would make this “unity of feelings” of citizens difficult or even impossible. There again, the clear advice is moderation: “Let our city be accounted neither large nor small... ”⁹

It would not be fair to conclude our discussion of ancient Greeks’ disdain for extremes without a reference to Aristotle, one of the earliest “culturalists” and one of the greatest thinkers of all times. In the interest of space, let us limit ourselves to the following extract taken from *Politics*, which, we believe, needs no further elaboration:

...there is another [thing] which ought to be remembered, but which, in fact, is forgotten in perverted forms of government. This is the value of the mean. Many of the measures which are reckoned democratic really undermine democracies: many which are reckoned oligarchical actually undermine oligarchies. The partisans of either of these forms of government, each thinking their own the only right form, push matters to an extreme. They fail to see that proportion is as necessary to a constitution as it is (let us say) to a nose.¹⁰

Ernest Baker, in a footnote to the above excerpt, writes that, “A moderate constitution, which steers between the extremities of the right and the left, will tend to command a general allegiance.”¹¹

The point made by Plato and Aristotle is clear: polarization induces disharmony and disunity and these are detrimental to any form of government.

Moving ahead in time more than two millennia, it should not come as a surprise to anyone that moderation is an essential dimension of Almond and Verba’s definition of civic culture as well. In their seminal work on comparative political cultures, as admirers of “Aristotle’s sophistication and rigor”¹² on political culture and socialization, they constantly emphasize the role of moderate politics for achieving a sustainable and healthy democracy. Their approach prescribes “the middle way,” and can be summarized as “this but also that” kind of thinking concerning all dimensions of political culture. Indeed, what they call the “third culture” is “neither traditional nor modern but

⁸ Ibid., 201.

⁹ Ibid., 144.

¹⁰ Ernest Baker, ed. and trans., *The Politics of Aristotle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 232.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Gabriel Almond, “The Intellectual History of the Civic Culture Concept,” in *The Civic Culture Revisited*, ed. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980), 4.

partaking of both; a pluralistic culture based on communication and persuasion, a culture of consensus and diversity, a culture that permitted change but moderated it.”¹³ In short, “it is a political culture of moderation.”¹⁴ Almond and Verba borrow from Talcott Parsons the term “limited polarization” in their elaboration of the “cultural prerequisites” of democracy.¹⁵

Polarization and its consequences are the major concerns of the present essay. Hence, we seek to answer two related questions. First, does extreme political polarization pose a threat to civic culture and therefore to the democratic system of government? Second, has the global financial/economic crisis that started in 2007-2008 in the United States increased political polarization in any significant way?

The answer given to the first question by the political culture tradition, going all the way back to Plato and Aristotle, is clear. Polarization invites extreme and uncompromising positions and is clearly detrimental to a culture of moderation and consensus. Commenting on the decreasing support of the populations of South Korea and the Philippines for the democratic system of government, Diamond holds “protracted polarization” at least partially responsible for this “drop in the preference for democracy.” He clearly sees polarization as a threat to democratic values.¹⁶ In all societies, including the most advanced and consolidated democracies, there are extreme and uncompromising elements, but they constitute a very small minority. Consolidated democracies can deal with this situation but only thanks to the prevalence of democratic values that both the elites and the great majority of citizens espouse. However, they are not immune to the perils of polarization either. Once again, in the words of Diamond, “Although the United States remains one of the most liberal, institutionalized, and vigorous democracies in the world, it is also a democracy with serious and even growing problems of political corruption, influence peddling, abuse of liberties, decline of constitutionalism, and *polarization of partisan politics* [emphasis added].”¹⁷

At this point, we should clarify what we mean—and what we do not mean—by polarization. As we understand it, the term most certainly does not refer to differences of opinion or the existence of contradictory viewpoints on issues or policy preferences. Such differences are essential in a democracy, which would be void of all content if all citizens agreed on all or even most important issues facing the country. In fact, representing various, and often conflicting, interests and policy preferences in the society is the *raison d’être* of political parties and

¹³ Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *Civic Culture* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965), 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 368.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 358.

¹⁶ Larry Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies throughout the World* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2008), 214.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 346.

civil society organizations in a democracy. Diverse interests and preferences not only will but also definitely should exist in a democratic system. A moderate degree of schism—or polarization, if you will—is also of no major consequence for the system and is even considered healthy and, therefore, desirable. We believe the problem arises when strong identification with a “pole” (ethnic, denominational, ideological, partisan, and so on) overrides everything else and excludes independent evaluation of policies on their own merits and individual judgment on issues that arise and reach to the point of eliminating at least occasional deviations from the party line. “Sharp differences between political parties are the stuff of a vibrant democracy, but when the gulf between parties becomes too intense and diffuse—pervading every issue—it can obstruct the search for pragmatic solutions to pressing policy problems and diminish public confidence in parties and politicians.”¹⁸

Examples of severe polarization around ethnic, religious, or denominational identities are to be seen in many corners of the world, although such examples are rare in consolidated democracies.¹⁹ Nevertheless, there is hardly any disagreement that polarization around deeply rooted identities makes even the establishment, let alone sustainability, of a democratic regime impossible. These are extreme cases and, to repeat Plato, citizens of these countries are no longer able to grieve or rejoice over common events. There is no doubt that this spells huge and usually insurmountable problems.

Our focus of attention is not on these extreme cases but on the more common instances of ideological polarization, which have the potential of disrupting societal harmony and posing a challenge to democratic culture. In related literature, there is more or less consensus on values, which are deemed to be conducive to sustainable democracy.²⁰ They are trust for fellow citizens, tolerance for, and acceptance of, differences (be they differences of race, ethnicity, religion or religious denomination, sexual preference, ideology, and the like), categorical rejection of force in resolving conflicts, avoidance of extremes in favor of more moderate positions, and, last but certainly not least, a feeling of “being on the same boat,” thus sharing common aspirations which stand over and above differences. It is only common sense that these values will not benefit from polarization. Quite to the contrary, levels of trust and tolerance for each other will diminish between opposing groups. Then again, a sense of togetherness will also suffer if the groups have conflicting dreams,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 362.

¹⁹ A number of countries in the Middle East (for example, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, and more) immediately come to mind, but other regions and even developed countries are not immune to the problem.

²⁰ See, for example, Dieter Fuchs, “The Political Culture Paradigm,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*, ed. Russell J. Dalton and Hans-Dieter Klingemann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 161-184, and Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

aspirations, and expectations. Worst of all, the tendency to resort to force may increase if the fault lines run very deep. This much is beyond dispute.

The next question is whether the global economic crisis has increased levels of polarization. If so, would it be the elites, the masses, or both that would display this tendency? These are empirical questions that can be addressed only with the help of relevant empirical data. However, we believe there is ample evidence to think that there is a causal link between economic recession and increased polarization and this seems to be true for even the most advanced and prosperous economies. John B. Taylor, a Stanford University economist, for instance, writes that,

It is a common view that the shutdown,²¹ the debt-limit debacle and the repeated failure to enact entitlement and pro-growth tax reform reflect increased political polarization. I believe this gets the causality backward. Today's governance failures are closely connected to economic policy changes, particularly those growing out of the 2008 financial crisis.²²

Indeed, there is a considerable amount of credible evidence that financial crises of any kind are likely to induce an increased level of polarization. Examining data from no less than seventy countries, Mian, Sufi, and Trebbi claim their data

show that banking, currency, inflation, or debt crises lead to greater ideological polarization in society, greater fractionalization of the legislative body, and a decrease in the size of the working majority of the ruling coalition. The size of the governing coalition shrinks after almost any type of crisis (banking, currency, or inflation crises); at the same time, political fragmentation increases.

They conclude that “political gridlock and polarization is more common in the aftermath of financial crises.”²³

²¹ The reference is to the so-called “shutdown” of the United States Government due to Congressional delay of the approval of the Federal Budget because of a tug-of-war between the president and the Republican wing of the Congress.

²² John Taylor, “Economic Failure Causes Political Polarization: Americans Worried about Sluggish Growth and High Unemployment Are Not Extremists,” *Wall Street Journal* (October 28, 2013), <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303442004579121010753999086> (accessed July 19, 2015).

²³ Atif Mian, Amir Sufi, and Francesco Trebbi, “Resolving Debt Overhang: Political Constraints in the Aftermath of Financial Crises,” *American Economic Journal: Macroeconomics* 6, no. 2 (2014):1-28.

For those who have a preference for more “tangible data,” we may recall that recent elections in a number of democracies have clearly shown that support for radical parties and candidates, both of the right and the left, is on the rise. The Syriza victory in Greece is perhaps the most glaring example, but it is certainly not the only one. The Scottish Nationalist Party and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the United Kingdom have substantially increased their electoral support, and it would not surprise any observer if the National Front in France or Podemos in Spain were to follow suit. We realize that Greece is a somewhat exceptional case, but Greece has demonstrated to us all how a severe economic crisis can bring about deep polarization and can ruin the fabric of a society.

With that background, we now proceed to look at before-and-after data on parliamentarians in seven countries in an attempt to understand whether they have drifted farther apart ideologically after the global crisis. We find justification in studying the political elites to observe the signs of polarization in Diamond’s comments that, “Partisan politics is a more serious problem at the level of America’s elite ‘political class’...than among the general voting public.”²⁴

Data and Analysis

Our analysis is based on data collected from the parliamentarians of seven countries before the economic crisis hit (around the years 2007-2008) and after its impact was felt globally (around the year 2013). As explained in a number of essays in this volume, the seven countries included in the comparative project are: Chile, Germany, Poland, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, and Turkey. Unfortunately, seven is a rather limited sample size and, furthermore, our seven countries are not among those hardest hit by the crisis, or at least that was the case at the time of data collection. On the other hand, these countries represent a wide range of geographic, political, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Additionally, the variance among them with respect to the levels of economic development and income is considerable.

The analysis is limited to the parliamentarians of two major parties in the parliaments of our seven countries and is a simple comparison of “before” and “after” scores of the representatives of these countries with respect to a number of indicators. An increase in the distances between parties from roughly 2007 to 2013 is indicative of an increase in the degree of polarization. We hasten to add that this is not a simple “yes” or “no” question, but the magnitude of change in the ideological distances is of major consequence.

²⁴ Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy*, 364.

Table 1. Countries and Party Affiliations of Parliamentarians in the Sample

Country	Total n		Party Affiliation	n		Party Family
	2007	2013		2007	2013	
Chile	99	105	Unión Demócrata Independiente - Independent Democratic Union (UDI)	26	35	Center right
			Partido Demócrata Cristiano - Christian Democratic Party (PDC)	13	15	Center left
Germany	101	112	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands - Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU)	29	28	Center right
			Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland - Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD)	31	29	Center left
Poland	99	150	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość - Law and Justice (PiS)	25	44	Center right
			Platforma Obywatelska - Civic Platform (PO)	25	62	Center right
South Africa	100	142	African National Congress (ANC)	51	63	Center left
			Democratic Alliance (DA)	24	58	Center right
South Korea	100	105	Saenuri Party-New Frontier Party (NFP)	42	54	Center right
			Democratic United Party (DP)	47	51	Center left
Sweden	101	107	Sverigedemokraterna - Sweden Democrats (SD)	41	34	Center left
			Moderata samlingspartiet - Moderate Party (MS)	25	33	Center right
Turkey	148	152	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - Justice and Development Party (AKP)	96	90	Right/center right
			Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi - Republican People's Party (CHP)	47	37	Center left

Table 1 gives the list of parties included in the analysis and the ideological families to which they belong, along with the number of completed interviews belonging to each party.²⁵ The indicators used for comparison follow.

Political Ideology

We use the ten-point left-right scale which is commonly used in many well-known international surveys (e.g., World Values Survey, European Values Study, European Social Survey, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, and others). On our scale, 1 indicates the far left and 10 indicates the far right positions. We look at the answers given to two items using this scale:

- Respondent's position on the left-right scale: this item asks the respondent (member of national parliament) to place *himself* or *herself* on the left-right scale.
- Respondent's assessment of his or her *party's position* on the left-right scale.

Free Market Ideology vs. More State Control of the Economy

Once again, ten-point scales (three items) are used to understand whether the MPs have become more supportive of market- or a state-controlled economy after the crisis. They are:

- Position on the income equality scale: this item asks the respondent to place himself or herself on a scale, with 1 indicating a strong preference for "incomes should be made more equal in the country," and 10 indicating full support for "we need larger income differences as incentives for individual effort."
- Position on the private vs. state ownership scale: this scale asks the respondent about his or her position on a scale which measures the support for more private vs. more state ownership of business and industry.
- Position on the individual welfare scale: this item asks the respondent's position on whether the government or the individual should assume more responsibility for one's basic welfare.

Economic and Welfare Interpretation of Democracy

The four ten-point scales that we have grouped under this title aim to assess whether the respondent's definition of democracy includes economic and/or social democratic elements as well. All four items start with the question, "To what extent is ... a characteristic of democracy?"

²⁵ The author is grateful to Hans-Dieter Klingemann who supplied the ideological classification of parties.

- Taxing the rich to subsidize the poor
- Economic growth and prosperity
- Government providing basic necessities such as housing, food, and clean water for every citizen
- Government finding jobs for every citizen

The selection criterion for these three groups of items was the expected high correlations between the attitudes on these issues and the macro-economic indicators (such as economic growth, unemployment rates, consumer prices, and so on). Put differently, it is assumed that if an economic/financial crisis is to increase polarization, left-right ideology, economic system preference, attitudes toward the welfare state, and definition of democracy would be among the best indicators that would allow us to measure that impact.

It follows that the overall hypothesis we intend to test is whether a deep economic crisis and recession increase ideological polarization among political elites. Further regarding that hypothesis, we assume that such an outcome (if it exists at all) should be expected to drive ideological positions further to the left or right, with leftists becoming more leftist and rightists becoming more rightist. A corollary to that assumption is that this sharpening of political ideologies is a package deal that includes changes in economic policy preferences as well. Thus, for example, support for welfare state policies, measures to equalize incomes, and more government involvement in economic matters should increase or decrease as the case is compared to pre-crisis levels.

Findings

As we begin to discuss our findings, we would like to warn the reader once again about the limitations of our data. With only seven countries in our sample, we do not claim our findings to be conclusive evidence either in favor of or against the polarization hypothesis. With that important caveat, we proceed to review the results for the nine indicators explained above.

Left-Right Ideology

The mean scores for the two indicators of left-right ideology (self-position on the scale and the respondent's assessment of his or her party's position on the scale) are reported in table 2 (with higher scores indicating a preference for the right end of the ideological spectrum).

We observe that although in Chile MPs of both parties moved further to the right between the two waves of surveys, this seems to be an exception. The opposite pattern seems to hold in Germany and South Korea, where Social Democrats and Conservatives have, on the average, somewhat lower scores, indicating that they now place themselves *minimally* closer to the left. Indeed, for both countries and all four parties, the changes are rather insignificant.

What is of particular interest for us is the fact that for all our seven countries,

Table 2. Self-Position and Supporters' Estimated Position on Left-Right Scale (means)

Country	Party	Left-Right Position of R		Estimate of R's Party's Position	
		2007	2013	2007	2013
Chile	UDI	7.27	7.91	6.96	7.91
	PDC	4.38	4.87	4.85	5.07
	UDI-PDC	2.89	3.04	2.11	2.84
Germany	CDU	6.24	6.12	6.39	5.82
	SPD	3.53	3.10	4.00	3.52
	CDU-SPD	2.71	3.02	2.39	2.30
Poland	PiS	8.13	8.82	7.31	8.64
	PO	7.32	6.37	6.53	6.00
	PiS-PO	0.81	2.45	0.78	2.64
South Africa	ANC	3.98	3.89	4.00	4.49
	DA	4.50	4.84	4.79	5.09
	ANC-DA	-0.52	-0.95	-0.79	-0.60
South Korea	NFP	6.68	6.59	7.39	7.39
	NPAD	4.09	3.62	4.51	4.16
	NFP-NPAD	2.59	2.97	2.88	3.23
Sweden	SD	3.61	3.44	4.00	4.00
	MS	7.92	8.06	7.72	7.73
	SD-MS	-4.31	-4.62	-3.72	-3.73
Turkey	AKP	6.89	7.45	6.77	7.20
	CHP	3.19	2.14	3.55	3.44
	AKP-CHP	3.70	5.31	3.22	3.76

the differences between the mean left-right positions of the two major parties increased between 2007 and 2013. For some (e.g., Chile, Germany, South Korea, and Sweden), the increase between the party differences is very small and perhaps can be regarded as negligible. However, for others (e.g., Poland and Turkey), the change is rather significant. In Poland and Turkey, the right and the left, moving in opposite directions, are now considerably further away from each other compared to where they were before the crisis. In Poland, for example, while the average score for Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [Law and Justice] (PiS) Party MPs increased from 8.13 to 8.82, indicating a move to the right, the mean for Platforma Obywatelska [Civic Platform] (PO) Party MPs dropped from 7.32 to 6.37. As a result, the difference between the mean scores of these two parties tripled between the two surveys. A similar development

took place in Turkey, where the MPs of the conservative/religious Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi [Justice and Development Party] (AKP) became considerably more right-wing and where exactly the opposite happened with the social democratic Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi [Republican People's Party] (CHP).

Given the fact that the left-right gap has increased in all of our seven countries and that the increase is considerable in some, we can, with some caution, say that the signs of greater ideological polarization among political elites are becoming visible.

On the other hand, the parliamentarians' assessment of their own party's ideological positions displays a less clear pattern. Except Poland and, only to some extent in South Korea, the changes in differences are either nonexistent or insignificant. Looking at the figures in table 2, one is tempted to conclude that perceptions have not caught up with reality—not yet anyway! Although this may well be true, the findings allow another interesting observation. In Chile, Germany, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, and Turkey, the mean left-right scores of social democrat or center-left parties' parliamentarians are lower than their evaluations of their party positions. In other words, on the average, social democrat or center-left MPs, without exception (in Poland, both of the two major parties are to the right of the center), perceive their own parties' ideology as being somewhat to the right of where they stand. Interestingly enough, center-right party MPs, as a rule, place themselves more to the right of their perceived party positions. In short, left party MPs see themselves more to the left of their own party's position and right party MPs believe they are more to the right than their parties!

Free Market Ideology

Since the very early days of the crisis, it has been widely argued (and, of course, counter-argued as well) that the root cause of the collapse was the neoliberal policies pursued by the major economic powers. Not surprisingly, the left, in general, espoused this argument enthusiastically. In our survey of parliamentarians, we asked our respondents to assess the role of neoliberal policies in the current crisis on a scale of 1 to 10. Again, perhaps not so surprisingly, the majority of parliamentarians in our sample of seven countries assigned more rather than less responsibility to neoliberal policies. (The overall mean for 839 MPs was 6.66, with a standard deviation of 2.6.) The three EU countries in our sample (Germany, Poland, and Sweden) had the lowest average scores on the “responsibility of neoliberalism scale,” meaning that they regarded neoliberalism as less of a devil than the others (table 3). On the other hand, Chile and Turkey have the highest mean scores on this scale, which is particularly noteworthy since, in the Turkish parliament, for instance, center-right parties held a more than comfortable majority.

Returning to our comparison of the differences between two major parties in 2007 and 2013, the picture is not so clear (table 4). With our three indicators of free market ideology and seven countries, we have altogether twenty-one

Table 3. To What Degree was the Economic Crisis a Consequence of Neoliberal Policies? (ten-point scale means)

Country	Scale Mean	St. Dev.	n
Chile	7.57	2.5	104
Germany	6.17	3.1	111
Poland	6.06	2.6	140
S. Africa	6.85	2.6	127
S. Korea	7.16	1.3	104
Sweden	5.45	2.9	107
Turkey	7.35	2.3	145
TOTAL	6.66	2.6	839

Table 4. Free Market vs. More State Control of the Economy

Country	Party	Incomes should be more equal vs. greater income differentiation needed (1=more equal)		More private vs. more government ownership of business and industry (1=more private)		Individual welfare is government vs. individual responsibility (1=more government)	
		2007	2013	2007	2013	2007	2013
Chile	UDI	4.96	5.34	2.96	5.34	5.69	4.80
	PDC	2.50	3.67	5.59	6.53	4.31	3.67
	UDI-PDC	2.46	1.67	-2.63	-1.19	1.38	1.13
Germany	CDU	5.96	5.78	3.79	4.18	7.55	7.29
	SPD	2.90	2.21	5.48	5.71	4.87	4.10
	CDU-SPD	3.06	3.57	-1.69	-1.53	2.68	3.19
Poland	PiS	4.67	4.93	4.04	5.49	4.91	4.69
	PO	6.42	6.28	2.08	3.15	5.82	6.41
	PiS-PO	-1.75	-1.35	1.96	2.34	-0.91	-1.72
South Africa	ANC	4.57	3.78	5.73	5.98	5.04	5.33
	DA	5.63	5.25	1.83	2.67	6.42	6.70
	ANC-DA	-1.06	-1.47	3.90	3.31	-1.38	-1.37
South Korea	NFP	6.98	6.17	3.69	4.22	4.64	4.93
	NPAD	5.26	3.55	5.04	6.02	3.13	2.94
	NFP-NPAD	1.72	2.62	-1.35	-1.80	1.51	1.99
Sweden	SD	3.44	3.24	5.63	5.91	4.70	3.24
	MS	7.80	7.79	7.80	2.36	8.40	7.91
	SD-MS	-4.36	-4.55	-2.17	3.55	-3.70	-4.67
Turkey	AKP	6.06	5.02	2.15	1.83	6.43	6.45
	CHP	3.54	1.84	4.36	4.51	3.65	2.33
	AKP-CHP	2.52	3.18	-2.21	-2.68	2.78	4.12

comparisons of the changes from the first to the last wave of our surveys. Of these twenty-one comparisons, in fourteen, the gap between the average scores of the two parties has not increased at all. If these three variables are any indication of the rift in economic ideology, we can conclude that in Chile, contrary to expectations, the differences, let alone widening, have actually narrowed.

On the other hand, the differences in the mean scores of the two parties have increased for all three indicators in South Korea, Sweden, and Turkey, while Germany, Poland, and South Africa display a mixed pattern. Overall, one cannot conclude that there is a clearly discernible tendency of polarization with respect to free market vs. government control preferences. Even for a question such as, “Is it desirable to have more equal income distribution in our country?” the parliamentarians subscribe to conflicting viewpoints. For example, members of both parties in the Chilean parliament advocate not more, but less equal distribution of income. Yet, German, South Korean, and Turkish parliamentarians of both parties now favor a more equal distribution of income compared to 2007. However, our main concern here is not how the MPs feel or in which direction (if any) they have changed, but rather whether the rift between them has increased. And the answer to that question is, at best, a mixed one. Polarization of economic ideology seems to be more pronounced in South Korea and Turkey and only to some extent in Sweden.

Democracy and Economy

Our third and the final group of indicators concerns the definition of democracy. More specifically, we ask if economic prosperity and economic justice are essential characteristics of democracy. The question emphasizes that we are not asking whether these are desirable things, but rather whether they are indispensable and integral characteristics of a democratic regime. The results are summarized in table 5.

The first question in the group of indicators shown in table 5 is intended to tap opinions about the link between democracy and, in the exact wording of the questionnaire, “taxing the rich to subsidize the poor,” an unmistakably social democratic proposition. Before commenting on the changes in this variable, we first observe that of the fourteen parties that we include in our analyses, twelve are in agreement with this statement in varying degrees. The two exceptions are PO in Poland (mean=3.08) and Moderata samlingspartiet [Moderate Party] (MS) in Sweden (mean=3.88). On the other hand, the mean scores for the social democrats in Germany, South Korea, South Africa, and Turkey exceed seven and in some instances even eight, indicating an extremely strong preference for this policy as well as regarding it as an essential characteristic of democracy.

Has the gap between the two parties increased between the two points in time? Except for South Africa, the answer to that question is positive, although the increases are rather modest. Therefore, we cannot conclude that we observe a substantially increased polarization around this variable, perhaps with the

Table 5. Democracy and Economy (“Is ... an essential characteristic of democracy?”)

Country	Party	Taxing the rich to subsidize the poor		Economic growth and prosperity		Government providing basic necessities for all citizens		Government finding jobs for everyone	
		2007	2013	2007	2013	2007	2013	2007	2013
Chile	UDI	5.92	7.37	8.19	8.31	8.48	8.06	8.48	8.23
	PDC	6.46	8.07	6.15	7.87	7.77	8.47	7.62	8.73
	UDI-PDC	-0.54	-0.70	2.04	0.44	0.71	-0.41	0.86	-0.50
Germany	CDU	6.86	5.50	6.74	6.21	8.04	7.89	6.33	5.71
	SPD	7.61	7.48	6.39	5.66	8.87	8.90	6.65	6.69
	CDU-SPD	-0.75	-1.98	0.35	0.55	-0.83	-1.01	-0.32	-0.98
Poland	PiS	5.05	6.47	6.68	7.90	6.85	7.64	5.23	6.79
	PO	3.08	4.37	7.09	7.84	5.09	5.63	3.25	4.56
	PiS-PO	1.97	2.10	-0.41	0.06	1.76	2.01	1.98	2.23
South Africa	ANC	7.37	7.83	9.00	8.21	9.31	9.41	8.94	9.06
	DA	5.46	6.65	8.58	8.77	8.54	8.97	7.92	8.22
	ANC-DA	1.91	1.18	0.42	-0.56	0.77	0.44	1.02	0.84
South Korea	NFP	6.50	6.65	8.80	8.78	NA	6.54	6.62	6.94
	NPAD	7.52	8.10	8.24	7.71	NA	7.98	7.61	8.02
	NFP-NPAD	-1.02	-1.45	0.56	1.07	NA	-1.44	-0.99	-1.08
Sweden	SD	6.27	5.67	4.24	4.47	7.88	7.79	6.34	6.74
	MS	3.88	3.13	3.16	4.03	5.96	6.33	4.32	4.09
	SD-MS	2.39	2.54	1.08	0.44	1.92	1.46	2.02	2.65
Turkey	AKP	6.22	6.06	8.50	8.43	8.27	7.89	7.64	6.42
	CHP	7.09	7.36	8.04	8.27	9.40	9.49	9.04	8.73
	AKP-CHP	-0.87	-1.30	0.46	0.16	-1.13	-1.60	-1.40	-2.31

possible exception of Germany, where the gap has more than doubled but is still very small in magnitude to justify the confirmation of the polarization hypothesis.

The responses to the remaining three indicators in this group (whether economic prosperity, the government’s ensuring that every citizen has access to basic necessities, and the government’s being responsible for finding jobs for everyone) provide little if any confirmation of the polarization hypothesis. Once again, we observe that the tendency to include economic welfare and justice in the definition of democracy is strong but the differences between the parties have not increased to any appreciable degree after the global crisis.

Before concluding this section, we present a summary table of differences over our nine indicators and try to assess whether, on the average, the distance between the two parties has increased between the two surveys (table 6). Needless to say, the choice of the nine indicators is arbitrary and the average of nine (or any number of) other indicators may well produce different results. The last column in table 6 gives the ratio of the average of 2013 differences to 2007 differences. We observe that, for these nine variables as a whole, in Chile and South Africa, let alone increasing, the gap has decreased. But even in these two countries, the left-right ideological gap has increased between the two major parties. Poland and Turkey, on the other hand, are the two countries where the gap has widened the most. In Poland, the 2013 average difference is 1.37 times and in Turkey 1.34 times the 2007 average difference.²⁶

An Alternative Measure of Polarization

Another way of considering if, after the crisis, heterogeneity has increased among parliamentarians would be to compare the variances of our nine

Table 6. Average Change in the Difference Scores between Two Parties over Nine Indicators

Country	Mean Difference, 2007	Mean Difference, 2013	Mean Difference 2013/Mean Difference, 2007
Chile	1.74	1.32	0.76
Germany	1.64	2.01	1.23
Poland	1.37	1.88	1.37
S. Africa	1.31	1.19	0.91
S. Korea	1.58	1.80	1.14
Sweden	2.85	3.13	1.10
Turkey	2.03	2.71	1.34

²⁶ In South Korea, the question about the government providing basic necessities being an essential characteristic of democracy was not asked in 2007. Therefore, the averages for this country are calculated over eight rather than nine variables.

Table 7. Comparative Standard Deviations

	Left-Right scale self-positioning		Left-Right scale party assessment		More equal distribution of income		Private vs. government ownership		Individual welfare government responsibility	
	2007	2013	2007	2013	2007	2013	2007	2013	2007	2013
Chile	2.24	2.18	2.00	2.16	2.37	2.33	2.47	2.22	2.37	1.86
Germany	1.79	1.85	1.75	1.64	2.51	2.45	2.78	2.09	2.66	2.55
Poland	2.41	2.35	2.05	2.24	2.39	2.72	1.91	2.18	2.06	1.92
S. Africa	2.20	2.59	1.94	2.49	2.92	3.11	3.04	3.21	2.63	2.82
S. Korea	2.01	1.94	1.98	1.90	2.15	2.00	2.01	1.63	1.92	1.80
Sweden	2.20	2.28	2.04	2.02	2.65	2.46	2.52	2.30	2.23	2.46
Turkey	2.45	3.02	2.12	2.46	2.63	2.73	1.98	2.04	2.66	2.90

Table 7 (cont.)

	Subsidizing poor characteristic of democracy		Economic prosperity characteristic of democracy		Providing necessities characteristic of democracy		Jobs for everyone characteristic of democracy	
	2007	2013	2007	2013	2007	2013	2007	2013
Chile	2.66	1.80	2.25	1.79	2.46	1.36	2.38	1.41
Germany	2.62	2.99	2.38	2.60	2.00	2.63	2.71	2.73
Poland	2.43	2.75	2.88	2.26	2.96	2.85	2.83	2.77
S. Africa	2.72	2.68	1.87	2.57	2.04	1.82	2.43	2.03
S. Korea	1.79	1.59	1.51	1.48	N/A	2.06	1.70	1.72
Sweden	2.98	2.89	2.70	2.92	2.98	3.00	3.03	2.93
Turkey	2.76	2.73	2.02	2.31	1.95	2.54	2.13	2.69

indicators for the two points in time and for each one of our seven countries.²⁷ We report the comparative standard deviations for our indicators in table 7.

The standard deviations reported in table 7 could, at least in a number of instances, be interpreted as evidence of decreasing rather than increasing parliamentary heterogeneity. The results are, at best, mixed and do not lend themselves to a straightforward reading.

Conclusion

This essay takes off from the millennia old assumption that polarization around extreme positions is detrimental to the well-functioning of a political system, and, in particular, to the functioning of a democracy. The evidence about how extreme polarization negatively impacts democratic culture is overwhelming. Based on this postulation, we attempt a test of the relationship between economic crisis and the polarization of political elites (more specifically, parliamentary elites) in seven countries.

Of our seven countries, the hypothesis is best confirmed in Poland and Turkey, although, in general, we observe an increased gap between the left-right ideologies between the parliamentarians of the two major parties in our samples. When we confine ourselves to that one indicator, we witness a widening gap in all countries. However, economic indicators display a rather mixed pattern, with Chile as the most resistant to the winds of polarization.

We conclude on the optimistic note that parliamentary polarization has not reached a threatening level in any of our seven countries. If Diamond is correct that polarization first affects political elites before the masses, we should assume that “civic culture” is not under threat either—not yet, anyway.

²⁷ This analysis has to be read with some caution since the observed change in variances may be spurious and due to the changes in the number of political parties in respective parliaments.