

## We should not politicise polarisation research

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I came across a critical yet insightful piece of feedback online after my [interview with Yle](#). The comment pointed out that researchers often discuss increasing polarisation without explaining why it happens. The concern was that it is unfair to treat opposing groups as equals, especially when one side is fighting for fundamental rights while the other seeks to suppress them.

Political polarisation has been widely studied, with researchers examining its causes, consequences, and ways to measure it. My recent work has focused primarily on the latter – developing and refining metrics to assess polarisation. It is easy to express concern about a divided society in speeches or casual conversations, but breaking the phenomenon down into measurable components quickly reveals its complexity. Beneath the surface, a web of structural and psychological factors drives the process.

This complexity is precisely what fascinates me. At first, studying polarisation feels like navigating through fog – we are dealing with a situation where individuals and social groups hold differing attitudes and political views. However, these differences manifest in various ways. They might remain limited to opinions, or they can extend into daily life, influencing our social circles and how we respond to information that contradicts our beliefs. In the worst cases, ideological divisions lead people to distance themselves from one another, even in areas unrelated to their political views.

Despite its intricacy, polarisation is visible everywhere. In the last presidential elections, campaign slogans such as *A Uniting Factor*, *Our Finland*, and *Everyone's President* reflected the intense competition over who could best promote a sense of national unity. In the never-ending news cycle, decision-makers keep “thundering” and experts remain “mad”. On social platforms, the most viral content is often that which

fuels outrage and ridicules those outside one's ideological group. So, amid all this noise, there are plenty of issues to measure.

We must take even the smallest signs of social polarisation seriously—not by panicking or overreacting, but by asking where and how it is observed. Sometimes, polarisation can be seen as a tool for exercising power: a topic is labeled divisive even when a broad consensus exists. In other cases, it reflects a genuine power struggle, where a group can only advance its position by visibly distinguishing itself from the mainstream.

Phenomena are strongly shaped by the prevailing political environment, but we should strive to keep our ability to detect changes in the intensity or nature of polarisation separate from it. The fundamental purpose of polarisation metrics is to describe the strength of division and its development within a given dimension. While the methods may have certain limitations at times, we can at least remain transparent about how we have arrived at our conclusions.

The author is set to publish a [general handbook on polarisation online](#) in January 2025 (In Finnish).