

The QoG Podcast Ep 11

Matthias vom Hau: Ethnic diversity in politics

Victor Lapuente

I'm Victor Lapuente, the University of Gothenburg and today in the podcast we have a political scientist and sociologist by training Matthias vom Hau, currently at IBEI Barcelona, but who has studied and researched at many highly prestigious institutions such as Brown University, University of Manchester, Princeton, Humboldt University, the University de St. Martin in Buenos Aires University and the National Autonomous University of Mexico. His research is engaging in thrilling and hot debates on current democracies, and in particular on the relationship between ethnic diversity and politics. Welcome to the podcast. Welcome to this session.

Matthias vom Hau

Thank you so much Victor, for your kind invitation. I'm glad to be here and visit beautiful Gothenburg.

Victor Lapuente

Thank you. We are gonna start talking about the one core issue on your research, which I think is a current debate in many democracies, which is diversity and ethnic diversity. When we hear the word diversity and ethnic diversity sometimes people start to think in politics in terms of problems. You know, ethnic diversity leads to more divisions, and we remember the work of some economies like Alberto Lesina, for example, who have been pointing out that there is a relationship that the more diverse societies are societies where the welfare state is developed the least. Why? Because there are different ethnic groups, and apparently the reason would be that the members of the majority may be of the ethnically majority group. They don't wanna share their income, their taxes that is going to be devoted to programs of other or ethnic minorities. Do you agree with that? Do you think diversity is a course for economic development or the development of the welfare state.

Matthias vom Hau

I think we need to be careful with this assessment of diversity being inherently problematic or curse for development outcomes, for one thing, it's important to differentiate what kind of diversity are we talking about? Are we talking about diversity with respect to language linguistic differences? So you have a city or a country that's that's more linguistically diverse? Or are we talking about ethnic and racial differences with respect to perceived differences in physical appearance, or are we talking about religious differences, or are we talking about diverse migration based diversity?

So you have places in the world where you have where there are more people who come originally from different countries and you have other places where they're not. On the ladder I would like to say the the research, the current research shows that migration based diversity actually has been shown to be positive for economic growth and economic innovation.

Victor Lapuente

It's very interesting. It is shown to be positive, but at the same time, if you go to the media or the public opinion would be probably very different view of of diversity. On the contrary, they see immigration as a problem or as a curse. Why is this discrepancy between what the studies are showing these positive effects and the perception may be at the street level? That is a more negative impact like it's because of the I mean populist parties.

Matthias vom Hau

O yeah, I think it depends on what kind of diversity is, is politically relevant and it's turned into a hot topic and it's used in politics and in the moment, I think, this is migration based diversity and religious diversity. That have obtained the status I mean for example in, yeah in Germany, which I know a little bit better because that's the country where I'm originally from, maybe also in Sweden. But if for example, if you look historically at diversity, I think it's important to take a step back. And look at how diversity comes about and is made and remade over time. I'm saying this because in Germany, for example, you have all this concern around migration based diversity and this concern of right wing parties around Islam and Muslim migration in particular. But then if you go back in time, do we really think of that 50 or 60 years ago, Germany was less diverse. Well, it depends on how you look at it. I mean, there were if you go back in time and if you look at what historians have identified, what you see for example, that religious diversity matter but in a different way, for example, the distinction between Protestants and Catholics was a major political cleavage and had implications for people's everyday lives and in many parts of Germany Catholics were not seen as really part of the community or they were suspicious around it. So I think these sort of, having this idea that in the past we were homogeneous and right now we become more diverse and it's a problem we need to be taking this with a grain of salt.

Victor Lapuente

That's very interesting. You are pointing out that maybe one of the reason it is the kind of nostalgia of a myth, that actually was not, never so true, along the same lines you have been mentioned one cleavage between Protestants and Catholics that could actually, it led to lots of conflicts for many centuries, but now has been cured or it doesn't represent a problem for the economic development or the development of the welfare state in Germany.

In northern Europe, here in the Nordic countries, we have some examples as well, with the good assimilation, or the good performance let's say, or good adaptation of the Swedish minority in Finland for example, and actually the regions where there is a majority of Swedish minority in Finland are regions highly developed economically and also with good public services and so on which is the reason I hypothesis this is I would like to know your opinion on that hypothesis that maybe these kind of cleavages between Protestants and Catholics in Germany or the Swedish minority in Finland have not created so much problems because of the role of the state.

So the theory according to Bo Rothstein would be that if we have a state apparatus, an administration that provides public services to everyone in the population without discriminating according to your ethnic group, but to everyone, that creates a fosters social trust, fosters the trust between people belonging to different ethnic groups. And that diminishes the potential bad effects of ethnic diversity. Would you agree with that hypothesis?

Matthias vom Hau

To large extent, yes, I do, because yet it brings us back to this issue of the what you started out with the question of is, is diversity really a curse or problem for a development like whether you think of development as economic growth but also as social development forms of public goods provision, public service, healthcare, pension and so on. I mean if you take a more historical perspective as you say, so if were you in settings where you have a stronger state, a state that's able to provide public services to enforce property rights to enforce the rule of law and so on. Research has shown that overtime in those settings, it's more likely that that citizens adopt to the overarching of national identity promoted by that state. In exchange for having access to these, these services provided and at the same time the strong, stronger state can can do this these things. Whereas in institutionally weak states, on the one hand, the citizens don't necessarily see the need to adopt the identity

promoted by the state, but at the same time the state is not as effective in providing things such as schooling, roads, other kinds of services. So yes, I would subscribe to this hypothesis.

Victor Lapuent

Following along these lines about the consequences of diversity for the well-being of our community and in particular democracy, if we go back in time to the 1990s, the collapse of the socialist regimes in Central Eastern Europe, people were looking at the map and they were saying, OK, look at these countries like the Czech Republic, Hungary or Poland are not very ethnically diverse. They are ethnically quite homogeneous. Therefore, democracy is gonna be quickly consolidated in these countries.

On the contrary, look at the of course former Yugoslavia, with all the ethnic conflicts there that ended up in a war. Look at Estonia or Latvia, countries with a very strong ethnic diversity or ethnic cleavage. And in these countries democracy will probably not survive or will have problems because precisely of ethnic diversity. However, 30 years afterwards, the situation might be exactly the opposite. And as Jan Rovny of the Sciences Po has shown in a research, actually, the countries like Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland that have few politically organized minorities are actually suffering a democratic backsliding, democracy is suffering there, and Hungary and Poland have stopped being full-fledged or full liberal democracies, and they are within the European Union, while on the contrary, more ethnically diverse society like Estonia, Latvia, Bulgaria, democracy seems to be performing better. So this also adds more material to this good view of ethnic diversity that your research is showing as well.

Matthias vom Hau

Yeah, it certainly goes into the direction of revisiting and challenging this idea that diversity is inherently problematic for development. Another country I would like to add to the mix is India like in the global South one of the most ethno linguistically, religiously diverse countries which of course has its shares of ethnic conflict, but it is one of the most longest functioning democracies, or in the global South, so that similar, so that there's what this shows is that there's not necessarily a direct association between how diverse a country is and how democracy is performing.

Victor Lapuente

On the other hand, I think you're right on that. On the other hand, once if we look at the countries that are suffering in terms of democracy, not becoming autocratic but up to the very least suffering in their democratic foundations are tend to be relatively large countries like the US, Brazil, India but probably you would not say it's because of the ethnic diversity but maybe because or at least from my point of view, I don't think that has to do so much about ethnic diversity, but with the fact that these countries are polarizing in different ways between the left and the right, between different territories, not necessarily is overlapping with the ethnic issues, isn't it?

Matthias vom Hau

There are a lot of other factors that go into accounting for democratic backsliding. That are not necessarily directly related to ethnic diversity, but it has to do with how the party system is structured and changing. And how this in turn contributes to the polarization of society, I mean in the in this context of the United States, for example, this stark polarization between Democrats and Republicans, has something to do, in my view, with the two party system that doesn't allow for a third or fourth party to enter the formal political competition more so than with the fact that the US is more ethnically diverse than, let's say, your your average European country.

Victor Lapuente

Yeah, probably there is a role of the media, and the social media is polarizing factors in this society. Anyway I would like to ask you about one aspect related with ethnic diversity you have already mentioned that the immigration, the percentage of the number of people born in a different country that live in western democracies and this increase of immigration has been linked to the rise of the far right populism, far right or radical right or new right, whatever you wanna call these new parties, that more or less represent 25 percent of the votes of the European Parliament and and between 10 and 20 percent of the votes in many western democracies. What do you think about this link?

Matthias vom Hau

If there is one, it's a very indirect one that's politically mediated. I mean, of course there isn't when we look at the political landscape of Europe in the moment, there is a connection or there's an association between the rise of right wing politics on the one hand and the so-called refugee crisis in 2000. And if you go back a little bit in time, you have a similar sort of association between refugee major influx of refugees in the 1990s and an earlier wave in the rise of right wing politics in, in many European countries. When you look a little bit closer, there's no necessarily not a direct link between the volume of refugees or forced migrants that the country receives and the rise of of right wing politics.

I mean to give you an example, for example in Spain, I think it has not received, comparatively speaking, a lot of refugees, but still you have a rise of a right wing, nativist, anti immigrant party in the form of Vox which politicizes this issue, but it's not necessarily linked to the. And then also when you look at within countries more specifically, for example in Germany, it's usually the the regions that receive the least amount of refugees and migrants in Germany where you have the most, the strongest votes in favor of the new right wing populist party, such as the the IFD. So yeah, the link it depends more how politicians frame and politicize this issue rather than on the yeah on the brute demographic facts of how many refugees or migrants or people who are not born in the country, are in a, in a in a particular region.

Victor Lapuente

I think this is very good. You are pointing out to the supply side factor. So the supply of the politicians might explain more than the demand from the citizens. But anyway, these politicians are building on some resentment in the in the population. And the experts on the rise of populism, they divide in many camps, but we could say they divide in two large camps on the 100, those that are arguing there is a a cultural gap, a cultural cleavage, a cultural resentment of people. In native people in one country, the members of the ethnic majority, when they see people from the ethnic minority, so it's kind of cultural reaction and others who, on the contrary, point out, it's more an economic reaction.

I mean, they are people without jobs, unemployed and so on. So in this, in this fight between the economic factors and the cultural factors, would you emphasize more this idea of the of the economy? Because you also have mentioned something that this thing is very interesting, which is the role of the territory. It seems that, at least in our research or the Quality of Government Institute, looking at the quality of government in in different regions, we see how those regions where citizens perceived that the administration, the public sector is corrupt, is partial, is benefiting some people at the expense others this kind of resentment against the public sector is driving as well a lot of the of population and actually this could explain also the vote for Trump in the middle Rust Belt on many areas in the US or in the in the Midlands they vote for Brexit or in Spain they vote for populist, also separatist in some regions or so on.

Matthias vom Hau

So, I mean, you're you're already alluding to it and I think I would neither support a crude economic nor a cultural explanation of the rise of right wing populism. I think it has been shown that that just focusing on sort of the support for right wing populism is not just concentrated among citizens who feel economically deprived, who are the losers of globalization. It's more broadly differentiated. You also have people of comparatively high income secure jobs to support these kind of parties. So I think it's, this perception or this understanding that public services are not working in the way as they should be the so the. For example, the decline of also like whether it's the National Health services in the United Kingdom or the quality of schools in Germany that are not maintained that are then this, these kinds of frustrations with the provision of public goods on the states are then the seat bed for these kinds of parties to mobilize and to use. Openness to migration and to politicize migration use this as a scapegoat and mobilise people this way. So I think this is where I would draw the connection.

Victor Lapuente

Thank you, I think we have covered quite a lot on the consequences of ethnic diversity or diversity. And I would like to conclude this discussion before we open for questions on the causes, on the factors explaining diversity. I think your research is quite unique because most of the scholars like to do research on how ethnic diversity has effects on the development of the democracy or the economy or the welfare state. As you have mentioned sometimes in many regressions on what explains economic development, what explains democracy, what explains quality of government many scholars introduced as a control variable the ethnic fragmentation of a society, and they normally it has an effect, normally a negative effect. Not always, but many times a negative effect, but a significant effect. But you have your, you are facing that challenge of saying, OK, let's study why in some countries the originally there is more ethnic diversity than others or diversity in general. That's one of the things that probably you need to explain. What do you understand by diversity?

But what can you say of the of which factors explain why some societies are more ethnically or more etnolinguistically more fragmented than others. Can you tell us a little bit about the, let's say geographical factors or the institutional factors explaining that?

Matthias vom Hau

Yeah, happy to do so. So the starting point is, diversity doesn't fall from the sky, it's historically made and unmade. And one group of scholars looks at geography. And here the idea is that in more geographically, so in more mountainous regions where you have more differences in sort of what kind of agricultural you can do at what kind of altitude. So they think of Switzerland for example. These kinds of settings have been historically conducive to linguistic diversity because you had small communities that would specialize on one particular kind of agriculture. And then because of that, whatever, in herding and then another group would specialize on one particular type of weed and another group on, and so you would get these sorts of highly specialized communities that then would endogenous would kind of develop their own dialects or and then overtime over centuries.

Like the geographical argument, sort of like in more mountainous regions, more geographically heterogeneous regions, you have more diversity. The problem with that is obviously it doesn't take migration into account. And it doesn't take institutions such as the state or the market into account. So other scholars have looked at, OK, so why is it that one country or a particular region and countries more diverse. This has to do with colonialism and sort of countries that have been targeted by European overseas colonialism. Are set on average to be more ethnically diverse, largely because European colonizers wanted those set, for example, in in sub-Saharan Africa, like ruled

selectively through different chiefs and privileged some over others and really encouraged the social and political fragmentation of society, so they really link contemporary diversity to legacies of colonialism. And then a third group that my current work also belongs to looks at the state and crudely speaking, in historically stronger states. Yeah, states that police school tax. Otherwise regulate their populations. What went on is that on the one hand they socialize, but also created incentives for diverse people like speaking different languages belonging to the to adopt the identity sponsored by the state, whereas in the context of weak states, states that barely reach beyond the limits of their capital states that have problems in schooling or taxing their population. These settings were more conducive for the for the preservation of diversity, but also for the reaction against sort of against the weak state that tries to impose itself so an example for the first one would be France. I mean would be. So France was extremely heterogeneous with respect to languages and dialects in the 19th century, but you had the strong centralized state that imposed French through the rolling out public mandatory education in the 19th century. And then when you go across the border to Spain, a more fragmented, comparatively weaker state gave more room for other actors to engage in the first round of mass schooling and alphabetization like Catalan civil society, Basque, Basque Organization and I think the legacies for today is Spain is in the European context and more a more diverse country than France.

Victor Lapuente

Taking this idea of France as a successful, let's say state in, or whatever but successful state building. One side effect of that is nationalism. The nationalistic ideology. And which are the effects of that nationalism, because you have been studying that. On the one hand, it seems that there is a positive effect that is that nationalism gave the French this idea that we live in a community of equals. We are all equal, no matter you live in Burgundy or in Paris, we are all equal members of the same community, but it does, it have also negative effects or you would consider. Could you tell us a little bit what your research shows on the effects or what you have been discussing on the effects on consequences of nationalism.

Matthias vom Hau

I mean, nationalism is one of these catchy terms that we attach to a lot of different things. I mean at the broadest level, I think nationalism is the ideological principle, yeah, that the world is divided into different nations that each are or should be sovereign and that are unique. But then how this ideological principle is put to work vary. So you can have a state like the French state that uses nationalism in order to justify, let's say, the imposition of French on across the territory and the eradication of any type of dialect. You can also draw on you have political parties, political movements that draw nationalism in order to exclude minorities or migrants. So this I mean utterly I can't give you a straightforward answer whether nationalism is good and bad. It depends on how and by whom it's used.

Victor Lapuente

And in Ukraine, which is the role of nationalism in Ukraine?

Matthias vom Hau

OK, so one is we look at the reasons why Putin decided to invade in the Ukraine war are complicated and they're differences. But the way in which he justifies is by drawing on a particular variant of Russian nationalism that imagines Ukraine or large parts of Ukraine, to be originally part of Russia, and this narrative this, yeah, let's say ideological message in the beginning of the war at least resonated in the Russian public. But interestingly, when we look at the Ukrainian side I mean, from what I know about Ukraine, it has been very divided between Ukrainian speakers and Russian speakers, and this goes back to the 19th century in, in how public education came about in Ukraine.

And it often described as a country with relatively weak sense of national identification. It's very strong internal divisions. And interestingly, right now if you look at recent research on the strength of national identification and how Ukrainians so there has been an upsurge in the part of Ukrainians who solely identify or primarily identify as Ukrainians, and then whether they're Russian speaker or Ukrainian speakers that has a secondary place, so in a sense the war propelled yeah, a stronger national identity yeah, rather than the other way around. And this kind of links up with a lot of research on Europe historically where and other where war and especially international war has been identified as a key driver of a sense of national identification. So we often think of nationalism as a cause of conflict. But conflict can also be a driver of nationalism.

Victor Lapuente

Thank you very much Mathias for a fantastic conversion. I would like now to open the floor for questions and comments.

Person from the audience

Hello. Thank you. How do you think that the democracy will survive? Because I think that we people make our choice because of propaganda.

Victor Lapuente

I think the democracy has always relied on some sort of propaganda, but electoral campaigns have changed quite a lot over the years, and I think that it is true that now we are in a in a particular problem because maybe there is more propaganda as you say than before in the sense that news for example are less reliable for the voters. So in the 60s or in the 70s and in the 80s most of the citizens in most Western countries trust their media sources. Therefore, they trust that the news they got from them were good reflection of the statements of the politicians or policies, and so on.

Now people don't trust the media. The percentage of trust in media has collapsed all over the West. There are some exceptions within some countries, and there are some countries as well that are they are exceptions from themselves relatively speaking like the northern countries. But overall there has been a decrease of trust that makes much more difficult the communication and that gives more space for as you call it propaganda or this kind of targeted manipulated messages, especially of politicians, especially taking into account the social media and the polarization, and that has also allowed these new political parties on the far left and also on the far right, particularly to grow.

I think that's the scenario now. I think there is an optimistic view of that and is the that the same way that in the end of the 19th century there were free tabloids free newspapers in most Western countries, there was an explosion of these tabloids with tons of lies about politics and so on, and the media managed to control that and from that propaganda or bad media emerge a good media system that we have enjoyed for large parts of the 20th century. I believe that maybe we will be able our societies to control social media and the new platforms for distributing; YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, the news platforms, to kind of achieve again what we had before. Which is an increase in levels of trust in the media.

Matthias vom Hau

I concur with you that there is the problem of an increasing fragmentation through social media of the public space, so that yeah, there's no, it's it's more difficult to have a conversation and exchange of arguments around different political positions in the current climate. But at the same time, I mean from a historical perspective, there have been quite a number of revolutions in communications and in media technologies over time. So if you think back like I've worked quite extensively on the the early and mid 20th century in Latin America and the introduction of radio broadcasting and many

commentators at the time were very worried about the radio because it doubt politicians who were good at talking to capture a nationwide audience rather than gaining votes through more personalized town hall meetings where you could get an impression of the whole persona, and that was seen as a really as a problem for democracy. Yeah, that, that and in the end we're working with radio broadcasting as one of the communication channels and today I mean in the way in which it then has become regulated it, it has become part and parcel of our daily life.

So in that sense these changes in communication technologies pose a real challenge to democracy I'm not neglecting that but then if you take a more historical perspective, I think there is a sense of taking slightly more optimistic view and not seeing kind of the end of democracy on the immediate horizon.

Person from the audience

Hello, a quick question. We were talking a little bit about the rise of right wing political parties across Europe. Do you think this has to do with the message that they are putting forth to the people or is it more of a reaction due to the or, can say the reluctance or incompetence of mainstream, established parties? Things that are causing this shift from left to right. What do you think the focus is on that?

Matthias vom Hau

I've been talking about it, so maybe Victor if you want to.

Victor Lapuente

So well, I think it's both things. There is a demand on the side of the voter because there is a disappointment, there has been an increase in the before I was talking about the mistrust in the media, but there has been also an increase in the mistrust in public institutions. So all across Western countries people trust government, trust their national parliament, trust even their local politicians less than what they used to trust in the past. So they perceive elites, a political elite, as distant, and the extreme case would be the Brexit.

So you see the Brussels elite taking decisions that affect farmers in in the Midlands or workers in Manchester and since you see them as distant and corrupt and not concerned about your daily works and daily problems, but concerned about their workings of their own bureaucracy and their own things that is a factor that has created resentment, particularly in some territories and then that depends as you have said, I think very wisely, on the ability of the politicians to have a message.

There are many European countries, Sweden for some years now Spain as well for all other years where people were wondering why there is no far right party, well, sometimes the far right party needs also talented far right politicians who are able to create a message, who are able actually to break even if some of them have fascist routes, they have been, they have to be able to say, well, we are not fascist like our fathers, literally in the case of Marie Le Pen, but we are more kind of even leftish when it comes to some policies of the welfare state. So we are not former Nazis, former fascist we are new politicians and this kind of fresh new message has been able to resonate to a larger audience because you have a fascist of Nazi message. Strictly speaking you will get one two percent of the vote, you do not preach much more.

Organizer

Another question? Or we are happy? I have to say thank you for this talk about an important issue. Thank you.

Matthias vom Hau

Thank you so much for having us here today. Much appreciated.

