

They are not like us. The perception of differentness, polarization amongst citizens and dissatisfaction with representatives (2022 - 2025)

NOTLIKEUS

Abstract

The project examines an hitherto under-examined driver of two of the main problems representative democracies are wrestling with: horizontal affective polarization among citizens and vertical political dissatisfaction with politicians. The 'new' driver is the perception that other-minded citizens and other-minded politicians are not only politically different—they have other political preferences—but that they also are different human beings with different social, cultural and economic features.

Ingroup-outgroup mechanisms make that such broad perceptions of differences lead to deepening intergroup animus. Although the theoretical logic of perceptual differences deepening dislike of others is not new, it has never been applied empirically to the study of horizontal polarization and vertical dissatisfaction.

NOTLIKEUS engages in a broad and encompassing research program that (1) describes and conceptualizes citizens' perception of differentness of other-minded citizens/politicians, (2) examines its causes, (3) analyses its effect on polarization and dissatisfaction, (4) investigates its ultimate effect on anti-democratic behaviour, and (5) explores possible solutions to the negative fall-out of high levels of perception of differentness. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative methods, the project examines the Belgian case, a case that is suitable both theoretically and empirically.

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