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Political Extremism in a Global Perspective

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Abstract

Examining data from the World Value Survey about left-right political orientation, the paper explores political extremism among common people worldwide. Our analysis reveals (i) a positive correlation between left-wing and right-wing extremism across countries, (ii) an average rise in political extremism globally in the last decade, (iii) greater political extremism in less developed countries, (iv) and a surge, during the last decade, in political extremism for less developed countries and for countries where development has not met expectations. Besides offering a picture of how successful political extremism is globally, our investigation provides insight into the driving forces behind this phenomenon.

Keywords: political extremism; global; human development index; world value survey; political orientation

Introduction

Recent political events suggest that, at least in some countries, radical political views are gaining momentum among people. For example, a large body of evidence indicates that in the USA, polarization has raised among political elites (Fiorina et al., 2008; Layman et al., 2006; McCarty et al., 2006; Poole & Rosenthal, 1984; 1997; Rhode, 2010) and lay people alike (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Mason, 2015; Iyengar et al., 2012), and recent elections in Europe have revealed a marked increase of votes for populist parties (Bernhard & Kriesi, 2019; Noury & Roladnd, 2020; Vachudova, 2021). The success of political extremism seems to extend beyond the West, as evidenced, for example, by Narendra Modi (leader of the far-right party Bharatiya Janata Party) serving as prime minister of India since 2014, and by Gabriel Boric (leader of the far-left coalition Apruebo Dignidad) being elected as president of Chile in 2021.

This line of evidence raises a set of questions about the nature of political extremism on a global scale. Has political extremism increased worldwide in recent years? And where? Which countries manifest higher levels of political extremism? And which features of a country foster political extremism? Surprisingly, insofar as research has focused on single countries or, at best, on small groups of countries (e.g., Europe), these questions remain yet to be addressed. This requires adopting a global perspective where several countries

are compared against one another. The criteria one should employ for such comparison are not obvious, though, because it is not obvious how political extremism should be quantified in a way that can be compared across countries that are so diverse: each country has its own peculiar political concepts, issues, and values. Yet, on the other hand, modernity has to some degree spread a common political lexicon all over the globe. Traced back to the French revolution, this lexicon is grounded on the dichotomy between the left and the right (Bobbio, 1996; Caprara et al., 2017; Caprara & Vecchione, 2018). Although the precise meaning of these concepts is unlikely to be perfectly shared by all countries, yet their general sense appears to be universally understood (Bobbio, 1996; Caprara et al., 2017; Caprara & Vecchione, 2018). This is also the rationale adopted by prior research endeavours with a global scope, such as the World Value Survey (WVS) (Inglehart et al., 2020), where peoples' political orientation (PO) is assessed in terms of placing oneself on the left-to-right spectrum. Building on this, here we propose to rely on right-left PO as a way to probe political extremism on a global scale. As we shall see below, although measuring political extremism in this way does not come without limitations, this approach can still offer valuable insight on the key questions about political extremism outlined above.

Methods

This study examines data about left-right PO as assessed in the World Value Survey (Inglehart et al., 2020), a large database of representative samples collected for several countries at multiple time points. The focus is on the question assessing PO by asking participants to place themselves on a scale ranging from 1 (Left) to 10 (Right). For each country at each time point, we considered the distribution of PO, and we extracted four bins: Extreme Left (encompassing a score of 1, 2, and 3), Moderate Left (encompassing a score of 4 and 5), Moderate Right (encompassing a score of 6 and 7), and Extreme Right (encompassing a score of 8, 9, and 10). Thus, for each country at each time point, we obtained the percentage of people expressing extreme left, moderate left, moderate right, and extreme right PO. Based on this, we quantified the degree of political extremism by defining this concept as the percentage of people embracing extreme POs compared to the percentage of people embracing moderate POs. More precisely, the level of extremism on the left was calculated as follows:

$$\text{Left Extremism} = \text{Extreme Left} - \text{Moderate Left}.$$

This captures the difference in the percentage of people embracing extreme versus moderate left PO. Similarly, the level of extremism on the right was calculated as follows:

$$\textit{Right Extremism} = \textit{Extreme right} - \textit{Moderate Right}.$$

This captures the difference in the percentage of people embracing extreme versus moderate right PO. Finally, the total level of extremism was defined as equal to:

$$\textit{Total Extremism} = \textit{Left Extremism} + \textit{Right Extremism}.$$

The analyses below concern Left Extremism, Right Extremism, and Total Extremism as defined here. For comparison, we also examined the average PO score for each country as derived from the original scale ranging from 1 (Left) to 10 (Right).

In addition to data about PO, our analyses examined several general indexes that describe each country – the rationale for focusing on these specific indexes is explained below. The indexes encompass the Human Development Index (HDI) (Sagar & Najam, 1998), the Coefficient of Human Inequality (CHI), the rate of Unemployment, and the Median Age. This information was taken from the United Nations Development Program website (United Nations Development Program, 2020). Employed by the United Nations Development Program as the gold standard for quantifying the level of progress of a country, the HDI summarises three components deemed to be essential ingredients of development, including (i) per capita income (GNP (PPP)), (ii) life expectancy at birth, and (iii) education (combining average adult years of schooling with expected years of studying for students under the age of 25), each component carrying equal weight. The CHI is adopted by the United Nations Development Program to quantify a country's general level of inequality across the three key dimensions also considered for the HDI (income, life expectancy, and education).

Results

The Link Between Left-Wing and Right-Wing Extremism

We started by exploring the link between Left extremism and Right Extremism worldwide. Are these two forms of extremism related? Does one increase when the other decrease? Or does the opposite occur? To answer these questions, we formulated two alternative hypotheses about how the PO distribution changes

over time within a country. One hypothesis (a left-right drift hypothesis) is that the prevailing change occurs on the left-right axis, with countries drifting either towards the left or towards the right over time. This implies that, as time passes, public opinion drifts progressively towards the left or towards the right. The alternative hypothesis (a polarization hypothesis) is that, instead, the prevailing changes occur between centre and extremes. This implies that sometimes people gather in the middle and abandon extreme political views (both on the right and on the left), while other times people leave the middle ground in favour of both extremes. As described by Figure 1A-B, the two hypotheses make different predictions about how the PO distribution should change over time. The left-right drift hypothesis predicts that if Left Extremism increases (i.e., if the percentage of extreme leftists grows compared to the percentage of moderate leftists), then Right Extremism will decrease (i.e., the percentage of moderate rightists will grow compared to the percentage of extreme rightists). Conversely, the polarization hypothesis predicts that if Left Extremism increases, then Right Extremism will increase too.

We arbitrated between the left-right drift hypothesis and the polarization hypothesis by running two analyses, one cross-sectional and the other longitudinal. In the cross-sectional analysis, we calculated Right Extremism and Left Extremism for countries available from the latest WVS waves (Inglehart et al., 2020), 95 in total (for each country, the most recent data available were considered, within a temporal interval ranging from 2005 to 2020 – encompassing wave 5, 6 and 7 of the WVS). Concerning the relationship between Right Extremism and Left Extremism, the left-right drift hypothesis and the polarization hypothesis predict a negative and positive correlation, respectively. Results (Figure 1C) show a positive correlation ($\rho(93) = .471$, $p < .001$; Spearman's ρ is adopted throughout the paper given the presence of outliers), supporting the latter hypothesis. In the longitudinal analysis, we considered 39 countries for which data were available at two-time points (one between 2005 and 2009 (wave 5 of the WVS), the other between 2017 and 2020 (wave 7 of the WVS); Inglehart et al., 2020). The left-right drift hypothesis predicts that Left Extremism for time 2 minus time 1 will correlate negatively with Right Extremism for time 2 minus time 1 (i.e., it predicts that if Left Extremism increases over time, then Right Extremism should decrease). Conversely, a positive correlation is predicted between Left Extremism for time 2 minus time 1 and Right Extremism for time 2 minus time 1 by the polarization hypothesis. Results (Figure 1D) fit with the latter prediction ($\rho(37) = .344$, $p = .032$).

Altogether, both the cross-sectional and longitudinal analysis support the polarization hypothesis, claiming that the prevailing changes in the PO distribution concern movements from the centre to the extremes and the other way around. This indicates that when extremism rises on the left, it also tends to rise on the right. Of course, this does not mean that PO averages never drift towards the left or the right, nor that left-right shifts are unimportant: left-right shifts do occur, and, arguably, they are of critical importance. However, these results suggest that, at least in the last ten years, left-right drifts have been overshadowed by centre-extreme movements across the globe. This highlights the centrality of polarization dynamics in the contemporary global political landscape.

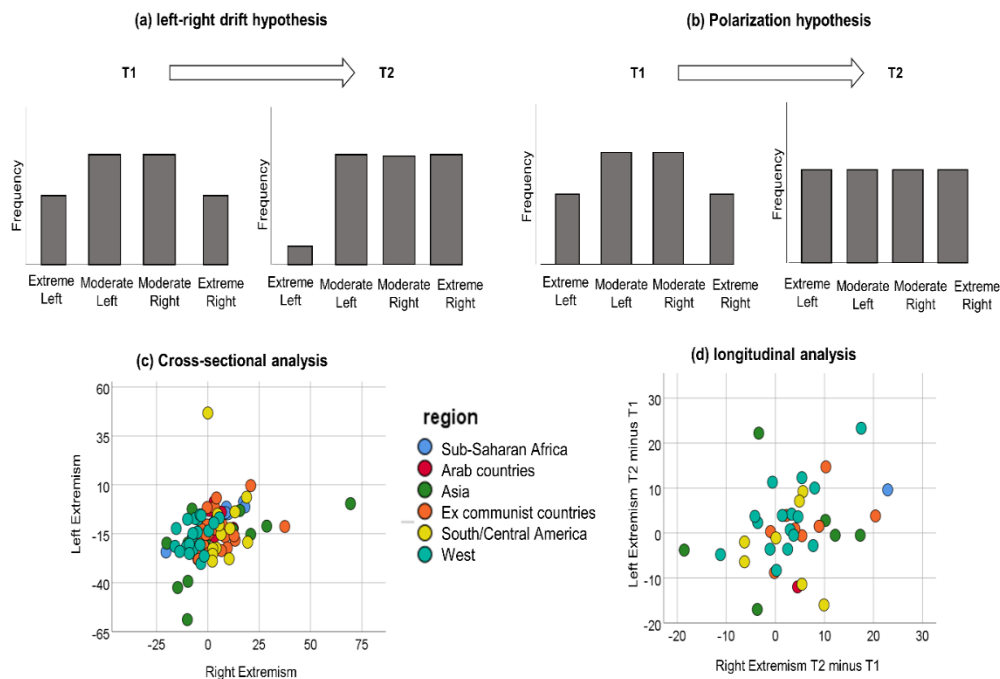


Figure 1. Analysis of the link between Left Extremism and Right Extremism

Note: **(a)** Example of a change of the PO distribution as predicted by the left-right drift hypothesis. Moving from time 1 (T1) to time 2 (T2), this example describes a drift towards the right. This example shows that, according to the left-right drift hypothesis, if Left Extremism decreases, then Right Extremism increases. **(b)** Example of a change of the PO as predicted by the polarization hypothesis. Moving from T1 to T2, this example describes a polarization rise. This example shows that, according to the polarization hypothesis, if Left

Extremism increases, then Right Extremism increases too. (c) Data about the relationship between Right Extremism and Left Extremism across countries ($n = 95$; $\rho(93) = .471$, $p < .001$). (d) Data about the relationship between Right Extremism for T2 minus T1 and Left Extremism for T2 minus time T1 across countries ($n = 39$; $\rho(37) = .344$, $p = .032$).

The Rise of Political Extremism

Our analyses allowed us to ask another fundamental question: has political extremism arisen or diminished globally? And in which countries the most? To answer the first question, we run a paired-sample t test comparing Total Extremism for time 2 (mean = -17.43; SD = 14.90) (wave 7 of the WVS) versus time 1 (mean = -22.27; SD = 13.35) (wave 5 of the WVS) across the 39 countries available (Inglehart et al., 2020). This revealed a significant increase in Total Extremism ($t(38) = 2.200$, $p = .034$). To address the second question, Figure 2 plots Total Extremism for time 2 as a function of Total Extremism for time 1 (not surprisingly, the two were correlated: $\rho(37) = .565$, $p < .001$). The diagonal line separates countries where Total Extremism has arisen (above the line) from countries where Total Extremism has diminished (below the line). South Korea and Hong Kong are examples of countries where Total Extremism has diminished greatly, whereas the USA and Ethiopia are instances of a dramatic rise in Total Extremism. The finding about the USA is consistent with previous literature revealing a polarization increase encompassing both political elites (Fiorina et al., 2008; Layman et al., 2006; McCarty et al., 2006; Poole & Rosenthal, 1984; 1997; Rhode, 2010) and laypeople (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Mason, 2015; Iyengar et al., 2012).

For comparison, we also asked whether, during the last decade, the world has overall moved towards the right or the left. This was assessed by looking at the average PO (indicating, for each country, the average score for the scale ranging from 1(left) to 10 (right)). Comparing time 2 (mean = 5.56, SD = .53) versus time 1 (mean = 5.63, SD = .54), no difference emerged for average PO across countries ($t(38) = .907$, $p = .370$), indicating that overall the world has not moved to the left nor to the right during the last decade.

Altogether, our findings show that, although substantial variability exists (with several countries manifesting decreased extremism), overall political extremism appears to be on the rise at the global level.

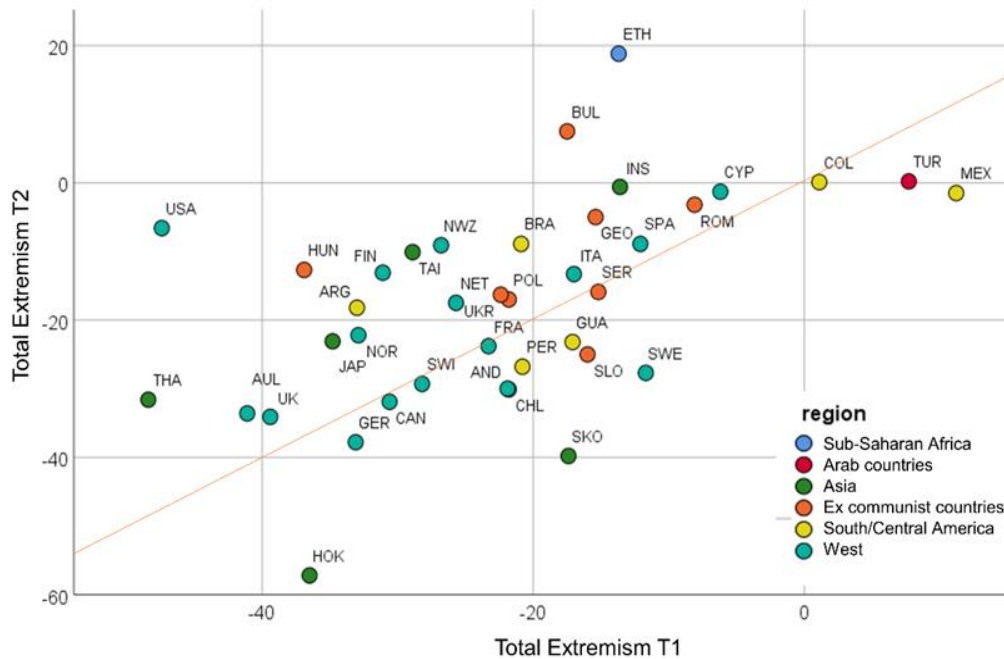


Figure 2. Data about the relationship between Total Extremism for time 1 (T1) and Total Extremism for time 2 (T2) across countries.

Predictors of Political Extremism

A key question is which characteristics of a country favour political extremism. To examine this, we performed a cross-sectional analysis where the following variables were considered as predictors of Total Extremism (as above, for each country, the most recent WVS data (Inglehart et al., 2020) were employed to estimate Total Extremism). The first variable was the HDI (the score for 2019 was considered for this and the other predictors below), adopted by the United Nations Development Program to quantify the level of progress of a country (United Nations Development Program, 2020). This variable was included in light of a large body of evidence indicating that the HDI reflects the major dimension distinguishing countries worldwide with regard to cultural, social, and political characteristics (Inglehart, 2018). Motivated by research suggesting that measures of polarization (a phenomenon linked with extremism) have increased in Western countries where inequality is higher (Duca & Saving, 2016; 2017; Gidron et al., 2019; 2020; Pontusson & Rueda, 2008; Winler, 2019), the second predictor considered was the CHI. Third, we included the level of Unemployment, given previous research suggesting that political polarization is exacerbated in Western countries characterised by higher unemployment (Gidron et al., 2019; 2020; López & Ramírez, 2004). Our fourth predictor was Median Age, based on the reasoning that political extremism might be stronger in countries with a higher percentage of young people. Finally, we added the average PO (indicating, for each country, the average

score for the scale ranging from 1(left) to 10 (right)) as the last predictor. When the relation between each predictor and Total Extremism was examined individually, a positive correlation emerged for all four predictors (HDI: $\rho(90) = -.606$, $p < .001$; CHI: $\rho(83) = .450$, $p < .001$; Unemployment: $\rho(89) = .258$, $p = .013$; Median Age: $\rho(90) = -.534$, $p < .001$; average PO: $\rho(90) = .314$, $p = .002$). However, when the predictors were all included in the same Regression model of Total Extremism (comprising 85 countries for which all variables were available), a significant regression coefficient emerged for the HDI ($t(79) = -3.039$, $p = .003$) and for average PO ($t(79) = 2.207$, $p = .030$), but not for other predictors (CHI: $t(79) = -1.054$, $p = .295$; Unemployment: $t(79) = 1.169$, $p = .246$; Median Age: $t(79) = .269$, $p = .788$). Thus, while HDI and average PO explain an independent portion of the variance of Total Extremism, CHI, Unemployment, and Median Age do not contribute to explaining Total Extremism above and beyond HDI and average PO.

Figure 3 plots Total Extremism as a function of the HDI, with different geographical regions described by different colours. This shows that highly developed Asian countries such as South Korea and Hong Kong manifest the lowest Total Extremism, followed by Western countries. Ex-communist countries appear next, intermingled with countries from South/Central America and followed by Arab Countries. The lowest extreme of HDI is associated with the highest level of Total Extremism and encompasses poorly developed Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Philippines, and Pakistan, followed by most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Countries outside this general pattern are not uncommon, though, such as Albania (manifesting remarkably high Total Extremism despite its relatively high HDI), Vietnam (associated with the greatest Total Extremism despite an intermediate HDI), and Rwanda (exhibiting very low Total Extremism despite its low HDI).

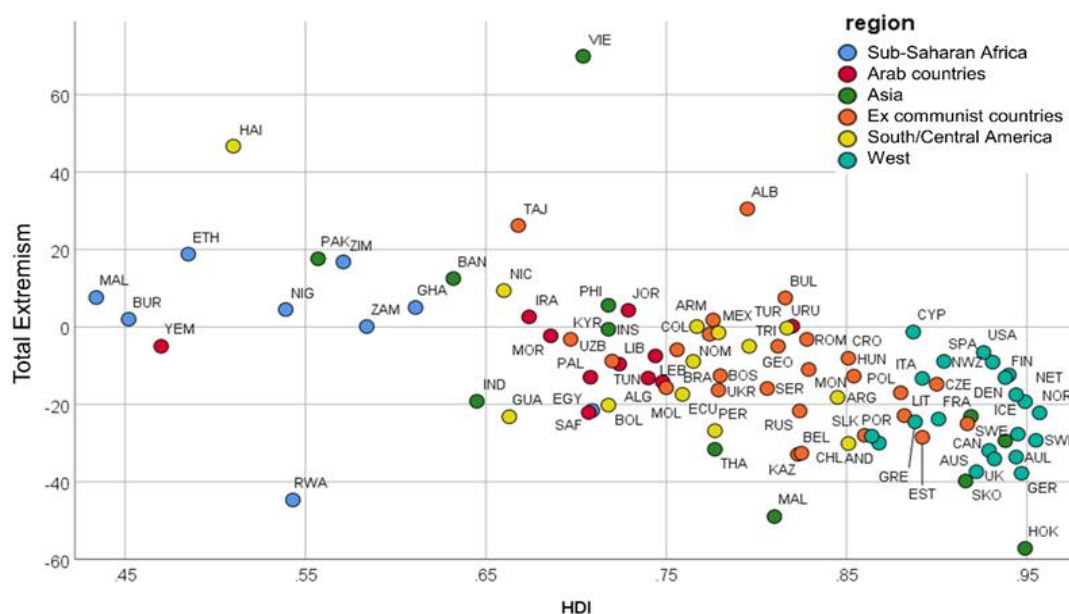


Figure 3. Data about the relationship between the Human Development Index (HDI) and Total Extremism across countries.

We probed further the role of HDI in a longitudinal analysis including 38 countries for which data were available at two-time points (one between 2005 and 2009 (wave 5 of the WVS), the other between 2017 and 2020 (wave 7 of the WVS)). For these countries, first, we calculated the change in Total Extremism (Total Extremism Change) for time 2 minus time 1. Next, for the same countries, we derived the change in HDI for time 2 minus time 1 (HDI Change; here, time 1 corresponded to 2010 and time 2 to 2019). Finally, we fitted a regression model of Total Extremism Change having (i) HDI and (ii) HDI Change as predictors. This analysis revealed that the model explained a substantial portion of variance ($F(2,35) = 4.830$, $p = .014$, $R^2 = .216$), with both predictors contributing (HDI: $t(35) = -2.917$, $p = .006$; HDI Change: $t(35) = -2.681$, $p = .011$). This shows that, in the last ten years, extremism has increased more (i) in poorly developed countries (as the effect of HDI indicates) and (ii) in countries that have developed less in comparison with what one would expect based on their current development (as the effect of HDI Change implies). The latter finding is subtle: by controlling for HDI, the regression analysis assesses the effect of HDI Change holding HDI constant, thus capturing the influence of changes in HDI *expected* based on the current level of HDI. Figure 4 plots the relationship between HDI Change and Total Extremism Change controlling for HDI ($p(36) = -.354$, $p = .029$). On the left (right), it reports countries for which, in the last ten years, the HDI has improved less (more) in comparison with what one would expect based on their current HDI. On the top (bottom), the figure reports countries for which, in the last ten years, the Total Extremism has increased more (less) in comparison with what one would expect based on their

current HDI. Again, the case of the USA is remarkable: holding the HDI constant, this country is the one where during the last ten years the HDI has improved the least and where Total Extremism has grown the most.

In sum, on a global scale, our findings show a link between human development and extremism which (with the exception of average PO) overshadows any influence of other potential variables (inequality, unemployment, and age) upon extremism. This supports the possibility that development decreases political extremism. Moreover, our results suggest that expectations about improvements in development are also critical: as exemplified by the USA, our results indicate that extremism surges substantially if expectations are not met, even when current development is high.

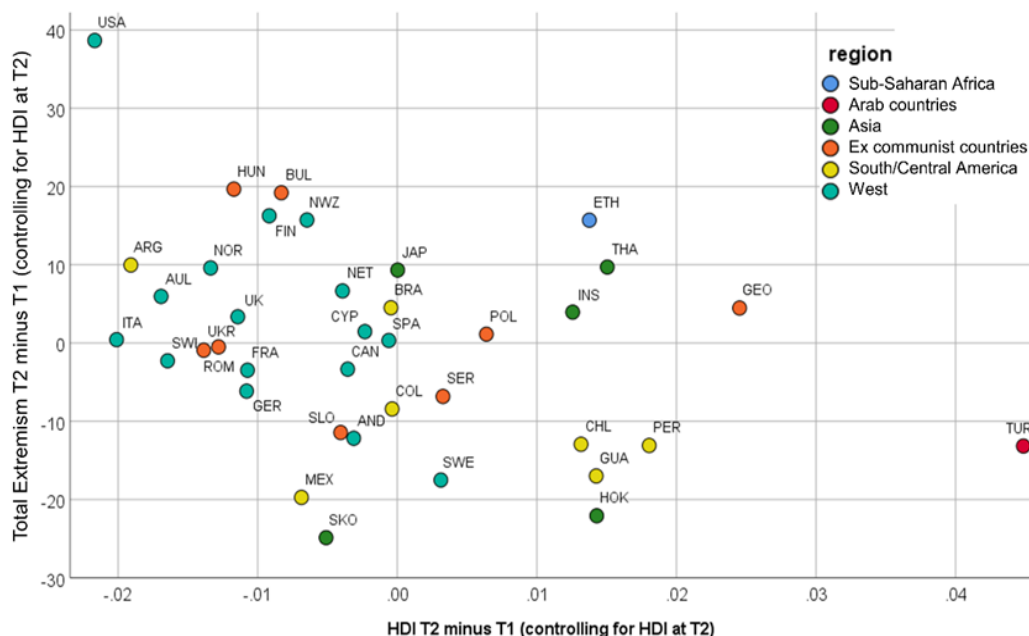


Figure 4. Data about the relationship between the Human Development Index (HDI) for time 2 (T2) minus time 1 (T1) (holding the HDI for T2 constant) and Total Extremism for T2 minus T1 (holding HDI for T2 constant).

Discussion

Based on analysing data from the WVS (Inglehart et al., 2020), this study explores political extremism globally, as it is manifested in the present and as it has evolved in the recent past. The main findings are (i) the observation of a

prevalence of centre-extremes, and not right-left, drifts in PO on a global scale (emphasising a key role for polarization/depolarization dynamics), (ii) the report of an average rise in political extremism globally in the last decade, (iii) the observation of greater extremism in less developed countries, (iv) and the observation of a surge in extremism during the last decade in less developed countries and in countries where improvements have not met expectations (i.e., where development has not grown as much as one would expect based on current levels of development).

The present study derives the notion of political extremism from a left-right scale. This approach has important limitations. First, the precise interpretation of the concepts of left and right is likely to vary across countries and even within countries (Jahn, 2011). For example, in some countries, people might interpret the concept of extreme right as corresponding to radical neo-liberalism, while in other countries, this might be viewed as analogous to fascism. Second, not all ideologies are easily reduced to a left-right polarity: for example, some contemporary populist movements combine nationalism, often interpreted as right-wing, with redistributive programs, commonly associated with the left (Moffitt, 2020). Third, political extremism might not necessarily correspond to extreme left and extreme right, but it might also encompass a form of extremism of the centre, manifested when one embraces ideas of the political centre with boldness (Ali, 2018). Despite these limitations, relying on a left-right scale appears as a reasonable option if one wants to compare political beliefs on a global scale: the notions of left and right represent rare instances of concepts that, at least in their essence, are intelligible to people living in different parts of the world (Bobbio, 1996; Caprara et al., 2017; Caprara & Vecchione, 2018).

Our findings indicate that, at least in the last ten years, changes in countries' PO distribution have been driven more by polarization/depolarization dynamics than by left-right drifts. A key question is how general this phenomenon is. Although it is important to stress that our results are confined to the last ten years, an intriguing possibility is that the primacy of polarization/depolarization dynamics over left-right dynamics might be more general. A possibility is that the average left-right orientation of a country might change rather slowly, for example, in the timescale of generations (Inglehart, 2018). Conversely, the level of polarization/depolarization might vary more rapidly, in the timescale of a few years. This is consistent with evidence indicating that individuals embrace a right or left orientation early in life and tend to stick with it thereafter (Block & Block, 2006; Fraley et al., 2012), while they might oscillate with respect to the extremism wherewith their orientation is expressed. At the societal level, this

oscillation aggregated among individuals might result in the emergence of measurable polarization/depolarization dynamics. If this is true, new generations would be required for a substantial right-left shift to occur in a country (Inglehart, 2018), while polarization/depolarization dynamics would be detectable over a much shorter time frame, like the one examined here.

Our data show that a country's level of development is a strong predictor of a country's level of political extremism, and that once the level of development is known, information about aspects such as inequality, age, and unemployment, is unhelpful in predicting extremism. Moreover, we found that information about development (i.e., its current level and its growth) is also diagnostic when predicting changes in extremism. This raises the possibility that development might influence extremism and, possibly, that extremism might in turn influence development. A question opened by this consideration concerns the mechanisms driving this influence. It is possible that poorly developed countries, more often than more developed ones, are characterized by a clash between those who hope for radical modernization, thus embracing the extreme left, and those who strongly desire conservation, thus manifesting extreme right PO. Another possibility is that psychological stress is overall stronger for people living in poorly developed countries, as suggested by evidence of lower life satisfaction in these countries (Inglehart, 2018). Based on data indicating that political extremism generally increases under stress (van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019; McGregor et al., 2013; Midlarsky, 2011; Webber et al., 2018), higher stress experienced by people living in poorly developed countries might result in higher extremism within those countries. Besides the role of current development, our data suggest that extremism increases in countries where expectations about improvements are disappointing (with the USA being a case in point). Here, more than the absolute grievances associated with scarce development, expectations might be critical (Yitzhaki, 2010). A possibility is that a condition where a country improves less than expected might increase an ideological divide between those who crave for change, thus endorsing an extreme left PO, and those who staunchly resist change, thus embracing the extreme right.

We found that political extremism has increased worldwide in the last decade. Based on our observation of a link between extremism and disappointment about development, a possible reason for the global rise in extremism might be that, in many countries, development has not met expectations. Besides this general factor, it is worth speculating about the role played by two more specific processes unfolding throughout the decade. First, on an economic level, the last

ten years have witnessed the consequences of a severe global financial crisis exploded in 2008, with the economy of many countries struggling throughout the decade (Roubini & Mihm, 2010; Tooze, 2018). Such widespread economic stress might have fuelled political extremism globally (Gidron, 2019; 2020; Kahler & Lake, 2013; Klapsis, 2014; Remmer, 1991). Second, on a geopolitical level, the last decade has witnessed a slow but steady erosion of the unipolar global power represented by the USA, which has been hegemonic since the end of the cold war (Woodley, 2015). This has favoured the formation of a multipolar landscape dominated by a plurality of weaker regional players. This increased geopolitical volatility might have encouraged ideological radicalization in many countries.

In conclusion, this study adopts a global perspective to shed light on the nature of political extremism. This approach stresses how assessing multiple countries together is critical to elucidate key aspects of this phenomenon.

Data availability statement

Data are available at the World Value Survey Website: <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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