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Press Release

Radicalism, Extremism, Fundamentalism: International Study Finds Numerous Commonalities—and Certain Differences

Extremist or fundamentalist attitudes threaten democracies and peaceful coexistence. For the first time, a large-scale, systematic, and cross-national study paints a comprehensive picture.

From a social sciences perspective, people with radical, extremist, or fundamentalist attitudes are similar in some respects: In most cases, they are younger and less educated men who feel that they are not taken seriously enough. This is one of the key findings of a research team led by professor Marc Helbling, sociologist at the University of Mannheim focusing on Migration and Integration and Executive Board member of the Mannheim Centre for European Social Research (MZES). Together with his MZES colleague Nina Fadarkhan Osenbrügge and Dr. Sebastian Jungkunz (University of Halle and University of Bamberg), Helbling has, for the first time, systematically compared radicalism, extremism, and fundamentalism in Germany and across various European countries on a large scale. “Using newly developed and validated measures, we make commonalities and differences more clearly visible and can better understand the backgrounds of these tendencies—this facilitates developing effective prevention and countermeasures,” Marc Helbling says, outlining the relevance of the study.

Based on survey data from more than 6,000 respondents from Germany, Great Britain, and the Netherlands, the team investigated the extent to which radical, extremist, and fundamentalist attitudes can be explained by similar or different factors at an individual level—and how much support these people show for political violence. “We find many commonalities in the sociodemographic and sociopsychological backgrounds of radical, extremist, and fundamentalist people,” Helbling states. He goes on to explain that in many cases, they are younger men with a relatively low level of education who also feel that they are not taken seriously enough. This perceived or actual lack of importance can arise, for example, from disillusionment with politics, marginalization within social groups, experiences of discrimination, or income inequality. This results, among other things, in alienation, social isolation, and perceived or actual material and financial disadvantages.

Despite all these commonalities, the research team also finds differences: For example, women rather tend to be left-wing radicals than right-wing ones. And while older people are generally less inclined to hold fundamentalist, extremist, and left-wing radical attitudes, they are not less right-wing radical than younger people. According to the study, religious people

are generally more susceptible to radicalism, extremism, and fundamentalism. This applies equally to Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims. The only exception is that Protestants are less likely to be left-wing radicals.

While, according to the study, between four and nine percent of the overall population support various forms of political violence, the same applies to around 60 percent of right-wing and left-wing extremists. As for religious fundamentalists, regardless of their denomination, only between 10 and 20 percent show such support. "In all societies analyzed, there is only a small minority that justifies violence. And apparently very few of them also want to use violence themselves. However, merely supporting violence can already legitimize it and thus encourage others to use it," Marc Helbling summarizes.

Who is considered "radical," "extremist," or "fundamentalist"?

However, when is someone actually "radical," "extremist," or "fundamentalist"? The research team uses the following scientific definitions as a basis: "Extremism" means any anti-democratic attitude that calls into question the rule of law. Religious fundamentalism shares these anti-democratic elements but focuses on religious aspects: Fundamentalists believe that there is only one interpretation of religious rules, in which they see the infallible truth about mankind and divinity. In contrast to extremism, radicalism accepts procedural democracy but opposes the fundamental values of liberal democracy. Right-wing radicals and right-wing extremists express their sympathy for ethnic nationalism, racism, and social Darwinism. Left-wing radicals and left-wing extremists extend the idea of equality to the point of superimposing individual freedom, which manifests itself in the support of socialism, anti-fascism, and opposition to capitalism and imperialism.

The freely accessible study "A comparison of individual needs and support of violence among radicals, extremists and fundamentalists in Western Europe" was recently published in *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*. It emerged from the MZES project "Political and Religious Extremism: Measuring and Explaining Explicit and Implicit Attitudes" led by Marc Helbling and funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

Further information and contact:

Helbling, Marc, Sebastian Jungkunz, Nina Osenbrügge (2025): A comparison of individual needs and support of violence among radicals, extremists and fundamentalists in Western Europe. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 12.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-06295-5> (Open Access).

MZES project: ["Political and Religious Extremism: Measuring and Explaining Explicit and Implicit Attitudes"](#) Helbling.

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