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# Editorial: Affective polarization in comparative perspective

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## Editorial on the Research Topic

### Affective polarization in comparative perspective

The proliferation of research on affective polarization started about a decade ago when [Iyengar et al. \(2012\)](#) brought this hitherto very sparsely used concept under the spotlight. Challenging the dominant ideological paradigm, they argued for an alternative definition of polarization based on partisan feelings. Affective polarization can be defined as the simultaneous presence of affinity toward one's own party and fellow partisans (in-group) and hostility toward opposite political parties or compatriots with opposing political identities [out-group(s)]. This seminal article has been followed by a myriad of research on the topic (see [Iyengar et al., 2019](#) for an overview).

However, a large majority of this literature has focused solely on the two-party system of the US context, with comparative research lagging behind. This does not mean that intensely polarized partisan feelings are not present elsewhere: some recent comparative studies have highlighted that the USA is not a unique case and affective polarization clearly constitutes a global phenomenon ([Gidron et al., 2020](#); [Reiljan, 2020](#); [Wagner, 2021](#); [Torcal and Comellas, 2022](#)). Yet, the study of affective polarization outside of the United States is still in its infancy.

This Research Topic aims to address this gap and broaden our knowledge of affective polarization, especially in multiparty settings. The following eight articles provide a geographically and thematically diverse set of contributions that examine affective polarization in terms of its conceptualization and measurement, causes and consequences.

## Conceptualization and measurement of affective polarization

In existing literature, there are still several gray areas regarding how we should comprehend and measure affective polarization, and how it translates into multiparty contexts. The contribution of [Kekkonen et al.](#) of this special issue focuses most directly on these questions, identifying two central puzzles.

The first puzzle concerns the target(s) of partisan feelings. Some define and measure affective polarization as the divergence in feelings toward political parties, while others see the core of the concept in how people feel and behave toward their fellow citizens who support different parties ([Druckman and Levendusky, 2019](#)). Accordingly, different survey items have been employed to capture partisan affect, such as party/partisan thermometer scores, social distance indicators and trait ratings. Relying on data from Finland, [Kekkonen et al.](#) demonstrate that—although the different measures are strongly correlated to each other—the degree of polarization is larger

regarding parties and disliking some party does not necessarily mean feeling socially distant from its supporters. Although this is not their main focus, Renström et al. and Fuller et al. corroborate this finding in a number of other European countries. These results highlight the importance of distinguishing between the different measures and manifestations of affective polarization.

The second puzzle relates specifically to multiparty contexts. While affective polarization in two-party systems can be easily understood as the difference in feelings toward the one in-party and the one out-party, things get more complicated when the number of (relevant) parties is higher. Two central approaches have emerged to solve this conundrum: Reiljan (2020) defines and measures affective polarization as the average difference between the one in-party and the rest of the parties in the system, while Wagner (2021) captures the dispersion of people's party thermometer ratings (spread-of-scores) without defining an in-party. Bradley and Chauchard show that the Reiljan/Wagner measurements are strongly but not perfectly correlated (ca 0.7) with each other. Kekkonen et al. propose a novel solution that places itself between these two approaches: to tackle the issue that in multiparty systems people might have more than one in-party, they introduce a multiple-inparty affective polarization (MIAP) measure, which—unlike the spread-of-scores index—maintains the social identity theory element of dividing parties into in- and out-groups. Their results, however, indicate that MIAP is very highly correlated (> 0.9) with single in-party measure. Thus, we see that different measures are empirically akin to each other, although more research on the discrepancies between these approaches is certainly needed.

## Causes of affective polarization

Two central theories have emerged in the current literature about the drivers of affective polarization. The point of disagreement is whether it is primarily an expressive *tribalist* phenomenon, induced by political and social identities (and their mutual overlap) itself, or if it is rather a rational reaction to policy disagreements (Huddy et al., 2018; Lelkes, 2021). Several articles in this Research Topic tap into this debate, demonstrating that both theories have merit and their relevance varies in different contexts.

Bradley and Chauchard's comparative study of over 50 countries around the world (also in this issue) provides support for the identity approach (while not negating the rational account), as they show that in countries where ethnicity is more salient in politics, the level of affective polarization is higher among partisans, even when ideological polarization controlled for. As the authors contend, this might reflect that the importance of ethnic identity is especially high when ethnic and partisan identities are aligned. Segovia, on the other hand, reveals the declining impact of partisan identity in Chile and demonstrates that nowadays the levels of affective polarization are similar between partisans and non-partisans. This finding, which is the opposite of what has been found in the United States (Mason, 2015), shows that affective polarization might loom large even in low-partisanship societies.

There are two forms of ingroup-outgroup thinking that have been gaining ground in many countries—populism and nativism (Harteveld et al., 2022). The contributions of Fuller et al. and Renström et al. shed light to how these phenomena connect to affective polarization. Based on a survey conducted in nine European

countries, Fuller et al. show that varying degrees of populism across parties structures the partisan affective landscape in most of the studied cases to a degree comparable with the effect of parties' left-right ideology. Renström et al. focus on Sweden and find that individuals with negative attitudes toward immigration exhibit higher levels of affective polarization, but this linkage is stronger among those with a higher tendency to protect their in-group identity. Such findings indicate how affective polarization can be a result of an interaction between policy disagreement and identity considerations.

Regardless of whether the cognitive mechanism behind affective polarization is tribalistic or rational, hostility toward political opponents is often thought to be exacerbated by increasingly homogenous social networks ("echo chambers") which, in turn, can be connected with the rise of online communication. Nordbrandt, however, shows that social homophily in (online) communication networks has not likely contributed to the increased level of affective polarization leading up to the 2019 elections in Spain.

In sum, we see that the identity- and policy-based drivers of affective polarization could intertwine in various ways and that the knowledge we have from research on the US case does not always hold in different contexts.

## Consequences of affective polarization

The relevance of affective polarization research is often substantiated by its alleged adverse consequences. Yet, as Ryan contends in this same issue, there is not that much actual research on these consequences. Ryan addresses this gap, demonstrating that even in a context where parties displayed a rather unified and successful response to the COVID-19 crisis (Norway), individual evaluations of the government's performance in handling the situation were influenced by feelings toward government parties. Bettarelli and Van Haute conduct a novel study about the relationship between affective polarization and voters' coalition preferences, focusing on the case of Belgium during the first phase of COVID-19 pandemic. They show that despite the (initial) unifying effect of the healthcare crisis, affective polarization has a strong negative impact on support for inter-party co-operation in the form of coalition governments. Thus, if political elites try to induce co-operation, they might risk upsetting their constituents. This is an alarming conclusion, considering the long and arduous coalition formation processes that have recently occurred in numerous multiparty systems. Overall, these findings further highlight the importance of comparative research on affective polarization, and its negative consequences in particular.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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