

**Affective Polarization Between Opinion-Based Groups in A Context of Traditionally Low
Partisan Discord: The Case of COVID-19 Containment Policies in Germany**

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Abstract

Processes of affective polarization shape political contestation beyond policy preferences of mass publics. So far, scholarship has primarily concentrated on affective polarization along lines of partisanship. Only recently, Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley (2020) showed that affective mass polarization also works for opinion-based groups, i.e. temporary political identities that form around extraordinary issues and potentially cross-cut partisanship. In this study, we ask for the first time whether affective polarization of opinion-based groups can also happen in contexts with traditionally low levels of partisan polarization. As a case, we study public opinions around COVID-19 containment policies in Germany, a multi-party context where containment policies were heavily debated, yet where established parties were generally in favor of the measures. Drawing on primary data from a representative online survey (N = 3207) that included a high-powered survey experiment, we demonstrate that affective polarization around the COVID-19 containment existed outside of partisan lines. Consistently over numerous indicators, supporters and opponents showed ingroup favoritism and outgroup denigration, with the numeric majority of supporters generally showing stronger biases. We discuss implications for future research and what it means for democracy when deep political rifts open up outside the party systems.

Keywords: affective polarization, opinion-based groups, COVID-19, multi-party system, Germany

Affective Polarization Between Opinion-Based Groups in Contexts of Traditionally Low Partisan
Discord: The Case of COVID-19 Containment Policies in Germany

Political polarization describes a situation in which two political camps find it increasingly hard to settle on a compromise over a policy issue (Abrams & Fiorina, 2008). In the last two decades, studies showed that not only differing policy preferences can lead to distance between two political camps, but that identifying as someone with a certain preference can trigger processes that further exacerbate divides. So far, studies on so-called affective polarization predominantly focused on partisanship as an identity and mainly come from bipartisan political systems like the U.S. or the U.K. (e.g., Iyengar et al. 2012; 2019; West & Iyengar, 2015; Mason, 2015; Levendusky, 2018).

In a seminal study, Hobolt et al (2020) demonstrated that processes of affective polarization are not restricted to long-standing, established forms of political identification like partisanship or ideology, but can also emerge along fleeting identities that form around issues. Using the Brexit campaign as a case, they showed that temporary social categorizations formed around preferences of remaining or leaving the EU, and that identifying as “remainer” or “leaver” went along with favoritism for your own group and denigration of the outgroup. Although highly instructive, their evidence is a snapshot from only one campaign. Moreover, it comes from a country context whose political culture is characterized by long-standing (predominantly bipartisan) party polarization, so that the public may be used to understand politics as intergroups dynamics.

In the present study, we expand their work by investigating affective polarization of opinion-based groups for a new issue in a new context: the COVID-19 containment policies in

Germany. This represents a valuable case. The containment policies affected all citizens and called for ongoing readjustment and interest mediation. At the same time, Germany has a multi-party system with traditionally low levels of political polarization and, for a long time, its established parties generally supported the containment policies. In this situation, it is not clear whether and how differing policy preferences are expressed. So, we ask: Do we see indications of affective polarization between opinion-groups in the COVID-19 crisis? Do people differ in their evaluation of supporters and opponents of the COVID-19 policies depending on their own opinion?

To answer this question, we draw on observational data and a survey experiment from an online survey with a representative quota sample of the German voting population and trace group biases on various dimensions of group bias. By that, we make two valuable contributions. First, we respond to the call of taking research on affective polarization beyond the US and other bipartisan systems. Specifically, we add to our understanding by testing whether group biases between temporary opinion-camps can also manifest in contexts where group biases along political identities are not a dominant part of the political culture. Second, we add to our understanding of the political response to the pandemic by considering factors that go beyond partisanship and individual affectedness.

Theoretical Background

Affective Polarization

Mass polarization describes a phenomenon in which citizens' attitudes about a public policy issue are so disparate and "incompatible with each other, such that satisfying one side will inevitably frustrate the other side" (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020: p.2) and that settling on

compromise becomes less and less likely (see also Lelkes, 2016). On the level of the individual, polarization may put individuals on the opposing ends of a Likert-scale. On the level of public opinion, polarization over policy preferences can be thought of as a bimodal distribution of positions with a considerable distance between the two modes (for a discussion of the various distributions, Fiorina & Abrams, 2008).

In the last two decades, scholars established that the distance between two opinion camps cannot only result from incompatible preferences, but also from group identities that form around having preferences and belonging to a specific opinion camp. In other words, as soon as people perceive a choice between two positions and taking one stance becomes integral to who they are, policy preference becomes a social identity (Iyengar et al., 2012; 2019; Iyengar & West, 2015; West & Iyengar, 2020). Once a political position is conceived as a social identity, it will work in a similar way as other social identities (Tajfel, 1974). As soon as membership of the group is activated by an external stimulus, people will engage in biases that favor the ingroup and denigrate the outgroup in order to gain a more positive self-concept.

The literature on affective polarization suggests that biases between opinion groups can take on various forms. At the core are affective dimensions of prejudicial group evaluations, usually measured by using feeling thermometers, group traits or indicators of social distance (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). Also, more cognitive biases taking the form of stereotypes can manifest – for example, in the form of the attribution of group traits, misperceptions about the group composition (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Rothschild et al., 2019) and hostile meta-perceptions (Moore-Berg et al., 2020). These affects and cognitions can have real consequences: they can lead to the avoidance of interactions with members of the other camp and their

arguments (Stroud, 2010), they may lead to dehumanization (Martherus et al., 2019) and can make political violence more likely (Kalmoe & Mason, 2019).

So far, scholars predominantly studied affective polarization with respect to partisanship. This is reasonable as partisanship is a formalized form of political action, is acquired during socialization, tends to be stable, and is regularly activated during campaigns (Iyengar et al., 2019). The few studies that ventured beyond party support or membership examined group dynamics around other rather stable and long-standing political preferences like ideologies (Mason, 2018; Lelkes, 2019). Moreover, the vast majority of studies of affective polarization come from democracies with bipartisan political systems and most of the work focuses on the U.S. (but see for a comparative perspective, Gidron et al., 2020; Harteveld, 2020*; Reiljan 2019; Wagner, 2021).

Affective Polarization Beyond Partisanship: Opinion-Based Groups

Most recently, scholars branched out to investigate whether affective polarization influences political processes beyond partisanship. Scholars draw on the social-psychological concept of ‘opinion-based groups’, i.e. groups that form around an opinion, but are not necessarily tied to preexisting social identities. Often, these groups emerge in times when societies struggle with divisive issues (e.g., referenda, wars), but parties have not sorted and policy preference cross-cut existing ideologies (Bliuc et al., 2007; McGarty et al., 2009).

The majority of research on opinion-based groups focuses on the interplay between group membership and collective action (McGarty et al., 2009; Musgrove & McGarty, 20). However, most recently, Hobolt et al. (2020) provide robust evidence that affective polarization can also happen around opinion-based groups. Using various secondary surveys, they demonstrated that

affective polarization as a phenomenon is not unique to partisanship. While their study is highly instructive, their case is peculiar since Brexit was a referendum with two choices, accompanied by a months-long campaign, and held in a country that has a political history and culture of party polarization. So, this is a context where affective polarization seems rather likely and we need to study it in contexts that are harder cases.

Polarization in the Context of COVID-19

Research on mass polarization around COVID-19 is growing quickly. So far, the majority of studies demonstrated that citizens' responses to the pandemic systematically varied along partisan lines. The majority of these studies come from the U.S.-context (Allcott et al., 2020; Bhanot & Hopkins, 2020; Clinton et al., 2021; Gollwitzer et al., 2020), however, there is evidence that reactions to the containment measures also varied along party lines in the U.K. and Canada (Freira et al., 2020*), Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil (Pennycook et al., 2020*) and Indonesia (Soderborg & Muhtadi, 2020*). The existing research suggests that partisanship on the level of the mass public is influential where elite polarization is high and parties take clearly distinguishable positions on COVID-19 and its containment (Soderborg & Muhtadi, 2020*; Pennycook et al., 2020).

Literature on affective polarization during the pandemic is yet scarce. As a notable exception, Druckman et al. (2020) showed that partisan animosity predicts attitudes and prevention behaviors, although the strength of the relationship depended on the number of infections in a region. With regards to opinion-based groups, one study has been published that studies whether opinion-based groups emerged around COVID-19: Using survey-based network data from the U.K., Maher et al. (2020) describe the emergence of two distinct groups over time. These groups are mainly characterized by trust (/distrust) in science during the pandemic, but also

diverge in their public health behaviors. As with Hobolt et al. (2020) study on Brexit, the groups' socio-demographics suggests that they partially reproduce existing societal divides. To our knowledge, no study has researched the affective polarization dimension of opinion-based groups during the pandemic yet.

The German Context

Germany represents a valuable case since it neither has a history of strong party polarization, nor of long-standing outer-parliamentary issue polarization (e.g., segregational movements). Germany has a multi-party system that is orientated towards organized pluralism and consensus-finding rather than towards majoritarian vote and individual representation (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Moreover, Germany has seen three decades of centrist politics and falling levels of positional polarization (Munzert & Bauer, 2013). Also, with regards to affective polarization, comparative work suggests that Germany has relatively low and falling levels of affective polarization within the last 30 years (Boxell et al., 2020*). Having said this, it has also been noted that the populist, far-right protest party AfD ("Alternative for Germany") has grown in popularity over the last decade (Bremer & Schulte-Cloos, 2019) and that Germany has seen a profound form of issue polarization in the wake of the 2015 migration crisis (Bock, 2018).

While Germany has experienced a relatively mild first COVID-19 wave in early 2020, it experienced a heavier second wave from November 2020 to January 2021 and a third wave from March 2021 onwards. In general, public opinion was supportive of the COVID-19 containment measures, yet this support decreased over time (Betsch et al., 2020). While results differ from survey to survey, the amount of Germans who opposed the measures likely grew from between 10% to 30% from March 2020 to March 2021 (Betsch et al., 2020; Boettcher & Schneider, 2020*; Reinemann et al., 2020*). While the portion of outright opponents seems small, the

contestation was a dominant theme in 2020 with protest marches erupting (Nachtwey et al., 2020*) and heated debates in social media (Boberg et al., 2020*). While the majority of surveys focused on the distribution of positions, a small-N, qualitative study found various indications for affective polarization with people holding stereotypes, experiencing regular conflicts over the issue in their personal networks and tend to avoid cross-cutting exposure (Schieferdecker, 2021*).

Method

Data Collection and Sample

This study uses original data from a multi-wave panel study that is accompanied by two control cross-sections. The data used for this paper was collected during the first (N = 3207) wave in December 2020 and the second wave in February/March 2021 (N = 2874) of the panel study. We recruited respondents via YouGov's online access panel using quotas for age, gender, education, and region to create a sample representative of the population eligible to vote. Panel attrition from wave 1 to wave 2 was minimal (10.38%) and a comparison with a cross-section revealed no systematic bias; therefore, we consider wave 2 to still be representative of the German electorate. We incorporated available sample weights for all our analyses.

Observational Measures

Since no single agreed-upon indicator of affective polarization exists (Druckmann & Levendusky, 2019), we assessed various forms of affective and cognitive group bias. The survey was worded in German and we used the same two labels to denote the opinion camps throughout:

“people who reject the Corona-measures to curb the pandemic” and “people who support the Corona-measures to curb the pandemic” (- the full survey wording is available at [XXX](#)).

Attitude Towards Containment Measures

We asked respondents how they evaluated the containment measures in wave 1 and wave 2 on an 11-point-scale ranging from “totally reject” to “totally support”. We used the answers as the grouping variable for the rest of the analysis splitting respondents into three groups: supporters (>5 , $n_{\text{Wave 1}} = 2306$, $n_{\text{Wave 2}} = 1791$), opponents (< 5 , $n_{\text{Wave 1}} = 595$, $n_{\text{Wave 2}} = 731$), and neutral respondents ($= 5$, $n_{\text{Wave 1}} = 305$, $n_{\text{Wave 2}} = 352$). Neutral respondents were excluded from all subsequent analyses. We grouped respondents always according to their most recent opinion (i.e., for variables from wave 2 according to answers from wave 2). As a robustness check, we ran all analyses with a more conservative specification of supporters (> 7.5) and opponents (< 2.5), yet, the pattern of results remained the same (see Online-Appendix).

Group Affect

To measure respondents’ group affect, we used feeling thermometers -- a standard indicator in the affective polarization literature (Druckmann & Levendusky, 2019). We asked respondents to rate opponents and supporters on a thermometer on which “-5” implied feeling “very cold and negative” and “+5” feeling “very warm [wohlgesonnen] and positive” towards the group. We asked this question in wave 1 and wave 2. For this question and all the following, we randomized which group respondents had to rate first.

General Group Traits

In wave 2, we asked respondents to rate how well several attributes applied to members of the two groups. We used four positive attributes (“unselfish”, “open”, “honest”, “intelligent”) and four negative attributes (“selfish”, “narrow-minded”, “hypocritical”, “uneducated”) deduced from prior research (Hobolt et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2012). Respondents answered on a five-point scale ranging from “does not apply at all” to “absolutely applies”.

Attributed Deliberative Qualities

While our indicator of general group evaluations covered very broad group traits, this indicator taps into respondents’ perceptions of the group as a conversation partner. Particularly, we were interested in whether the other group is seen as fulfilling ideals of participation in deliberative discourse. While the indicator is yet not common in polarization literature, it seems pertinent given the utmost importance of interactions and cross-cutting exposure (Yarchi et al., 2020). We assessed this construct in wave 1 using existing formulations that were modelled on work on Deliberative Quality Index (Steenbergen et al., 2003). Respondents subsequently reported for both groups in six items on five-point-Likert-scales to what extent they agreed that arguments of group members are “plausible”, that members of the groups “approach people with differing opinions with respect”, that they “are responsive to arguments from the other side”, that “they only think about their own interests”, that they are “open for compromise” and that “their arguments are credible”. Items were randomized.

Perceived Group Homogeneity

In wave 2, we asked respondents to what extent they perceive members of the groups to be alike/similar (vs. unlike/dissimilar). Respondents answered on a five-point scale ranging from “very dissimilar” to “very similar”.

Perceptions of Group Composition

In wave 2, we asked respondents of what kind of individuals the group were composed of. Offering 10% intervals from 0 to 100 %, respondents reported in six items how many opponents/supporters they assumed to “be male”, “to have a college degree”, “to be voters of the [right-wing populist] AfD?”, “to be voters of the [liberal-ecological] Greens?”, “to be under 30” and “to have personal net income below 1500€”. Since estimates can vary with assumed base rates (Ahler & Sood, 2018), we split the respondents and presented half of them with results from wave 1 as a base line. We randomized the items.

Survey Experiment on Social Distance

In addition to the observational measures, we included a between-subjects survey experiment in wave 1. In the survey, we randomly assigned respondents to one of eight experimental groups, of which two are pertinent for this paper. In our stimulus, we asked respondents to imagine a hypothetical scenario in which they talk to a new neighbor for the first time. As part of the manipulation, we described the neighbor either “supporting” or “rejecting” the containment measures.

After reading the vignette, respondents reported how much ***social distance*** they felt towards this neighbor. Social distance is an established indicator in the affective polarization literature and we adapted items from prior work to our vignette (Iyengar et al., 2012). Respondents reported on five items with four-point scales ranging from “no, never” to “yes, definitely” whether they would like to “stay in touch” with the neighbor, “invite the neighbor for a coffee if feasible”, talk to the neighbor about “private matters” and “political issues”, and give “their neighbor the keys for their apartment, for example during a vacation”. Since all items

loaded on one factor, we computed a mean index and inverted it, so that a higher value represents a larger distance.

Vignette Study on Behavioral Intentions

In addition to the measures of group perceptions, we included a vignette study to gauge whether group members were biased in their behavioral intentions. In wave 2, respondents were asked to imagine how they observe their neighbor inviting five persons into his/their home. Nobody would wear a mask or keep physical distance - which was required by law at the time of data collection. Respondents reported on a 11-point scale ranging from “very unlikely” to “very likely” whether they would sanction their neighbor, i.e. whether they would “complain about the neighbor with other people”, “talk to the neighbor again about the situation”, “generally avoid closer contact to the neighbor”, and “report the neighbor to the authorities” for the misconduct. Since all items loaded on one factor, we computed a mean index.

Notably, the vignette did not present a neutral situation to gauge bias in behavioral intentions (e.g., helping someone to carry luggage), but one that is specific to the contested policy. We decided to do that, because it seems more likely that group bias manifests within the domain rather than outside. In order to increase external validity, we varied the contexts for the non-compliance in the vignette. Respondents were randomly assigned to vignettes in which the neighbor were quoted to organize the small meeting either for a local committee of (a) a sports team, (b) the AfD, (c) the Greens, or (d) muslim community organization.

Results

Observational Data

Attitude Towards Containment Measures.

Figure 1 shows that a majority of Germans supported the measures to contain the pandemic in both waves of data collection ($M_{\text{Wave 1}} = 6.89$, $SD_{\text{Wave 1}} = 2.96$; $M_{\text{Wave 2}} = 6.08$, $SD_{\text{Wave 2}} = 2.96$). Only 19.09 % in wave 1 (26.23 % in wave 2) rejected the measures and 9.90 % in wave 1 (12.30 % in wave 2) were neutral. The numerical majority-minority-constellation is consistent with earlier findings from Germany (Betsch et al., 2020), even in the size of the opinion camps. Within both camps, we find a continuum of support/rejection, suggesting a remainder of within-group-heterogeneity.

[Insert Figure 1 about here.]

Group Affect

When we asked supporters and opponents among our respondents how warm/positive they felt towards supporters and opponents, we found a textbook example of affective polarization (see Figure 2). Across both waves, supporters showed very positive ingroup feelings ($M_{\text{Wave 1}} = 3.89$, $SD_{\text{Wave 2}} = 1.72$; $M_{\text{Wave 2}} = 3.82$, $SD_{\text{Wave 2}} = 1.64$) and very negative outgroup feelings ($M_{\text{Wave 1}} = -4.03$, $SD_{\text{Wave 2}} = 1.78$; $M_{\text{Wave 2}} = -3.56$, $SD_{\text{Wave 2}} = 2.12$) with distributions being heavily skewed towards the extremes of the scale. For opponents, the basic pattern was similarly showing a tendency feeling very positive to the ingroup and very negative to the outgroup except for the fact that the mode fell on the neutral score. In other words, respondents who oppose the measures also showed ingroup and outgroup bias, but only a proportion of them.

[Insert Figure 2 about here.]

General Group Traits

When we asked respondents to evaluate members of the two groups on various attributes, we again found a clear pattern of group bias. Respondents did not only evaluate the ingroup as more positive than the outgroup, they even consistently evaluated the ingroup as positive and the outgroup as negative. Again, group bias was more marked among respondents who supported the measures: Pooled over all attributes ($\alpha = 0.93$), we find a mean difference of 1.36 on a five-point scale among respondents who support the measures. In contrast, the mean difference among opponents was small to marginal ($\Delta = 0.41$). Also, supporters rated the outgroup in more negative terms than opponents ($\Delta = 0.51$). Notably, both groups were more hesitant to evaluate the other group as uneducated as compared to other negative items.

[Insert Figure 3 about here.]

Attributed Discourse Qualities

When we asked respondents to what extent they perceived members of the other group as ideal/suitable conversation partners, we found a similar picture. Supporters attested positive discourse qualities to supporters, but not to opponents. Pooled over all items ($\alpha = 0.90$), the bias amounted to 1.85 on a five-point scale. Opponents did not attest the supporters positive discourse qualities either; yet, their ratings of other opponents were also only neutral or marginally positive. Again, supporter's outgroup ratings were more negative than those of opponents ($\Delta = 0.62$).

[Insert Figure 4 about here.]

Perceptions of Group Composition

When we asked respondents about the socio-demographic make-up of the groups, we found more evidence of affective polarization around the containment measures (see Figure 5). In general, respondents from both groups were rather similar in their estimates. This suggests that stereotypes had formed about the groups. When comparing opponents with supporters, both supporters and opponents conceived opponents to be slightly more often male, to vote more often/frequently for the right-wing, populist AfD and less so for the ecological-liberal Greens, to have slightly more often a lower to lower-middle income, and to be less often older than 60 years. In terms of education and youth, respondents disagreed: Respondents evaluated members of their group as having more often a college degree and to be slightly more often younger than 30 years. Finally, our data provides us with ‘true scores’ of the composition of the groups in both waves. While respondents were close to the true sample values with regards to the estimated percentage of males and people older than 60, they overestimated the portions for all other items by at least 10 to 15 % (see Online-Appendix Figure XXX). As expected (Ahler & Sood, 2018), estimates were closer to the true scores for those respondents with a baseline from wave 1. The crucial point, the stereotypical patterns were the same, irrespective of whether respondents received the baseline information or not.

[Insert Figure 5 about here.]

Perceived Group Homogeneity.

When asked whether they perceived members of the other group to be rather alike or unlike, respondents attested both supporters and opponents some within-group heterogeneity. While opponents made no difference between the groups ($M_{\text{Supporters}} = 3.14$ vs. $M_{\text{Opponents}} = 3.20$), supporters found their supporters to be more similar within the group ($M_{\text{Supporters}} = 3.58$

vs. $M_{\text{Opponents}} = 2.90$). This is interesting since supporters showed altogether more positive attitudes about their own group.

Survey Experiment on Social Distance.

To corroborate the observational findings on biased group perceptions, we ran a survey experiment. After respondents imagined meeting a fictitious new neighbor whom we either described as a supporter or opponent, they reported their social distance towards this neighbor. Corroborating our observational data, we found that group membership is causal for the bias (see Table 1). Supporters perceived significantly less distance towards the neighbor who supports the measures and significantly more distance towards a/the neighbor who opposes the measures. Opponents felt less distance towards another opponent than towards supporters, however, the effect was not significant.

[Table 1 about here.]

[Figure 4 about here.]

Vignette Study on Behavioral Intentions

We ran a vignette study to gauge whether affective polarization over the issue does not only affect group perceptions, but also leads to bias in behavioral intentions between the opinion camps. After imagining a situation in which they observe how their neighbor violates containment regulations, respondents reported the likelihood of sanctioning the neighbor for this non-compliance - for example, by avoiding contact or reporting him to the authorities. In line with intuition, we found that respondents who supported the measures more strongly, had a higher intent to sanction non-compliance ($b = 0.35$, $p < 0.000$, see Table 1). Crucially, when we

added group affect, measured with our feeling thermometers, it predicted intentions to sanction the neighbor beyond the ‘mere’ level of support/opposition to the containment policy. In other words, more positive feelings towards the group of supporters were associated with higher intent to sanction, and more positive feelings towards opponents were associated with less intent to sanction. Notably, these dynamics of affective polarization worked over various contextualizations of the non-compliance: non-compliance by persons stereotyped as opponents of the measures (a committee of the right-wing populist AfD), persons stereotyped as supporters of the measures (a committee of the ecological-liberal Greens) and persons without a clear policy preference (committees of a sportsteam or a Muslim community organization).

[Table 2 about here.]

Discussion

Using observational and experimental data and a wide range of indicators, we found manifest group biases between supporters and opponents of the COVID-19 containment measures in Germany. Our study corroborates recent findings by Hobolt et al. (2020) from the context of Brexit: Affective mass polarization is not bound to long-lasting forms of political identity, but may emerge within a short time between opinion camps that manifest around fleeting issues. Our study is the first study to show that this can happen in contexts that have a history of comparatively low partisan discord and are not used to bipartisan divides in political culture.

The second remarkable finding was that group biases were asymmetric. Ingroup favoritism and outgroup denigration were generally weaker among opponents than among supporters. Potentially, this can be explained by supporters’ majority status. We know from work on social

identity theory that a majority group status tends to offer more positive identification due to the association of ‘power in numbers’ (REF). Moreover, being outnumbered by supporters, opponents are more likely to get into contact with supporters in their personal networks. This may make it harder for them to stereotype members of the opposing camp. News coverage may be another factor: Although systematic evidence is lacking, we assume that established media houses focussed on protests of more radical opponents and the protests, which resulted in a stereotype of opponents as selfish conspiracy theorists (Schieferdecker, 2021*). Finally, opponents seem to be a relatively heterogeneous group (Nachtwey, 2020*; Reinemann et al.*, 2020), which may not hinder supporters to stereotype them, but may hinder ingroup identification and, thus, outgroup denigration among opponents themselves.

Our findings underline - together with those of Hobolt et al. (2020) - that researchers should look beyond affective polarization among partisans to understand the full impact social identities have on political contestation today. If we had studied the contestation around the COVID-19 containment measures with a narrow focus on partisanship, we had missed the full divisive potential of the issue. Ample questions call for future investigation: How strong are group biases about highly emotive, yet fleeting issues in comparison to long-standing identities like partisanship? Does this strength vary between bi- and multi-party systems? Do temporary politics-based social identities interact with long-standing identities? What happens if partisanship and issue identities do not correspond? And do voters penalize parties for sorting too late? Under which context-level conditions does affective polarization between opinion-based groups manifest and which individuals are more prone to opinion-based group biases? What are the effects of that issue-based polarization outside the realm of the policy (for example, on institutional trust or voting intentions) and outside of politics (for example, perceptions of social cohesion and psychological well-being)? How do affective polarization and extremity in issue

position interact over-time and when do opinion-based identities merge into long-standing identities (see also, Hobolt et al., 2020)? Finally, what are measures to mitigate these divides?

Affective polarization among fleeting opinion-based groups does not only present ample opportunity to learn about polarization, it is also a phenomenon of utmost social relevance. If opinion-based social identities hinder cross-cutting exposure and deliberative discourse over an issue, they may push citizens into a vicious circle of attitude radicalization. If parties do not sort around an issue – or do not sort quick enough, citizens may feel increasingly unheard and doubt the responsiveness of the political system. As a result, citizens may be less motivated to comply with legislation, which can have dire consequences in times of crisis. Moreover, it can lead to a further erosion of generalized institutional trust (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015).

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Data Availability Statement

The data and script to reproduce all analyses in this article are available at XXX.

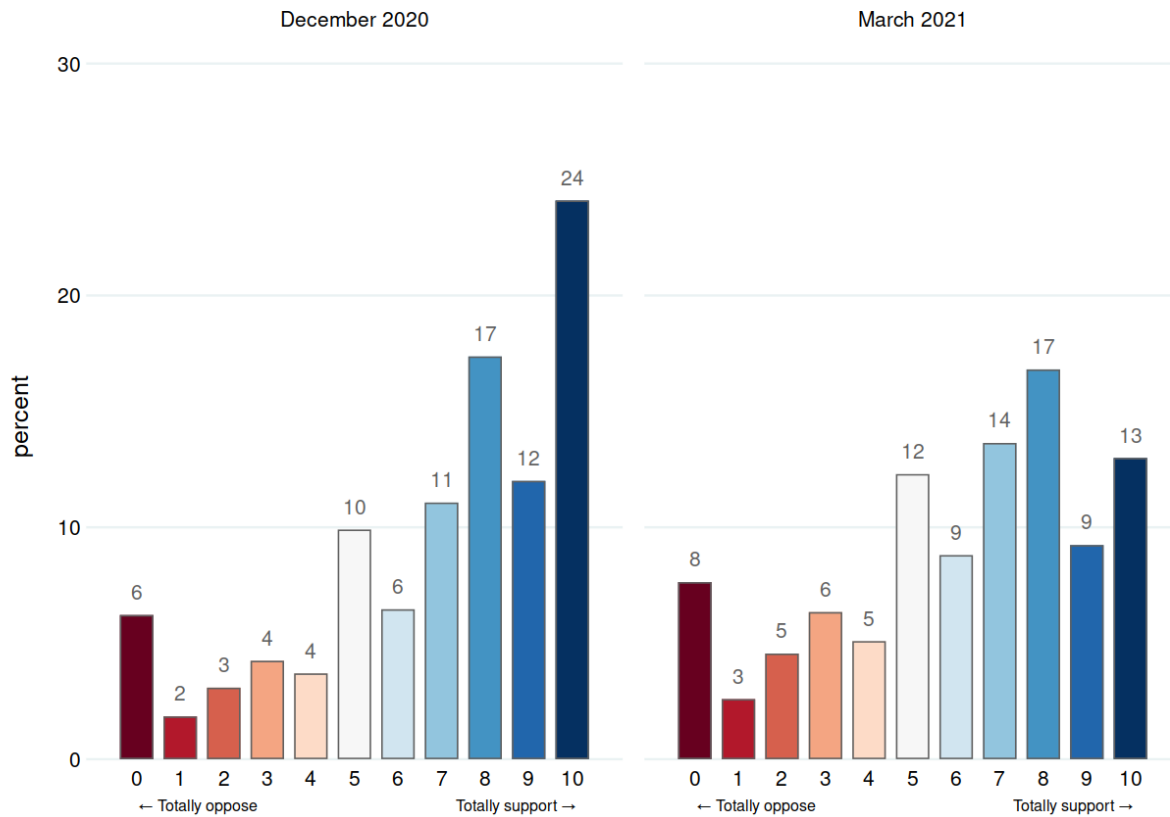
Figure 1*Levels of Support for Containment Measures*

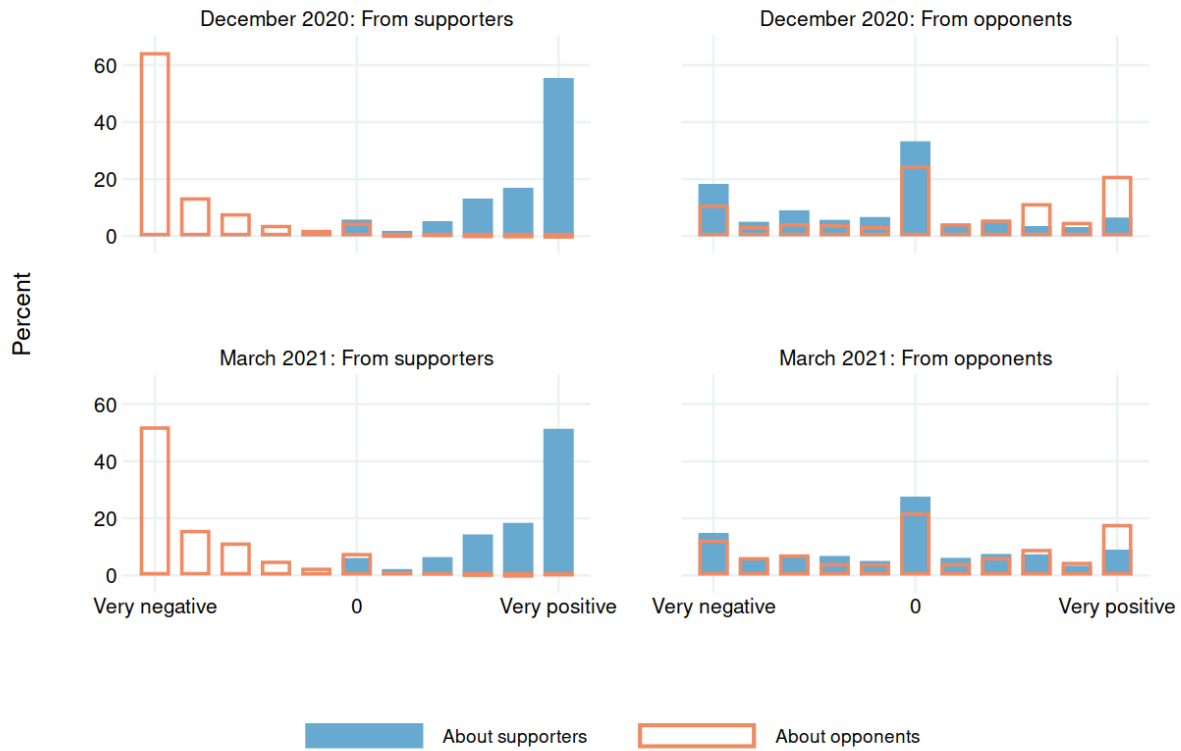
Figure 2*Affect Towards Opinion Camps by Group and Panel Wave*

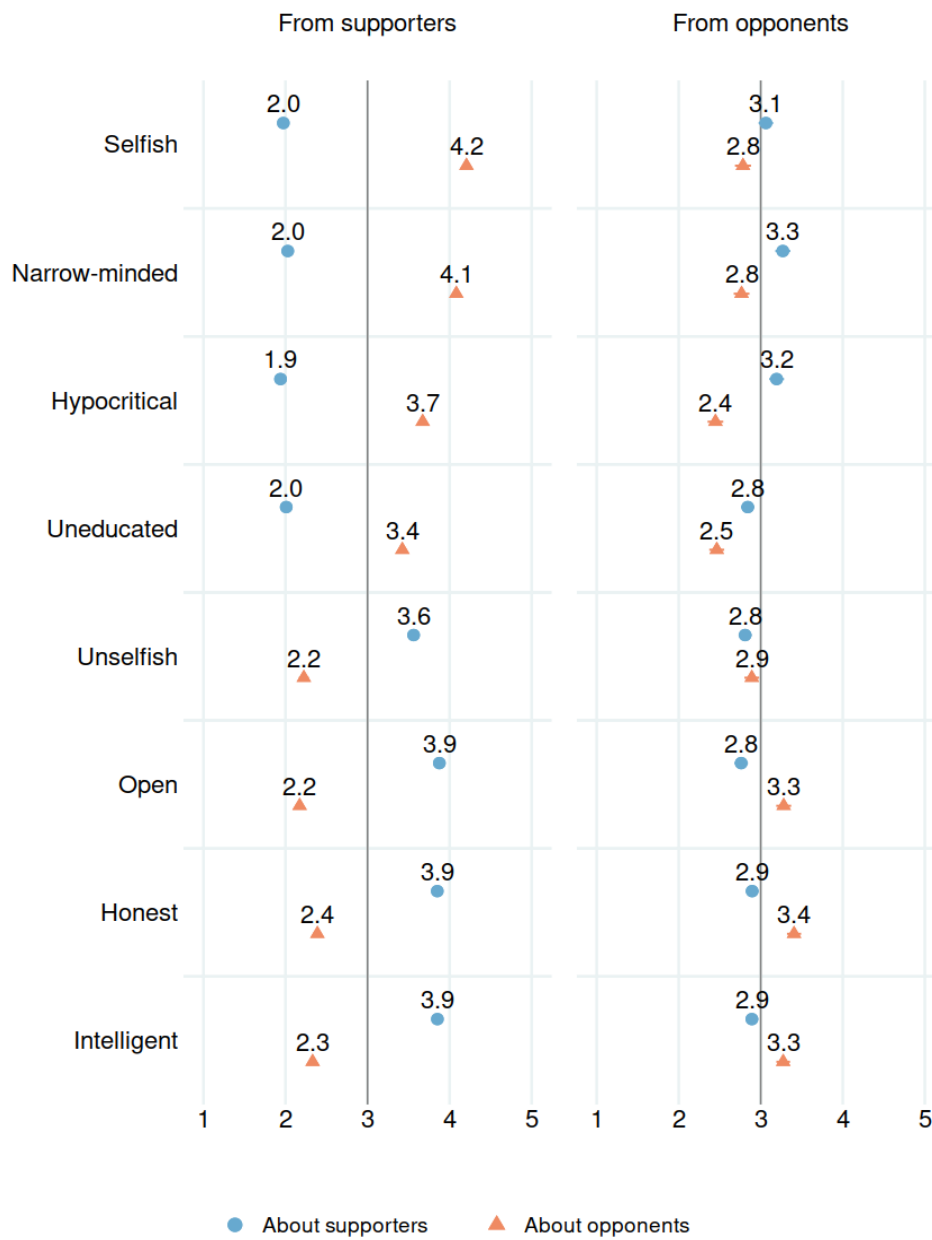
Figure 3*General Group Traits by Group*

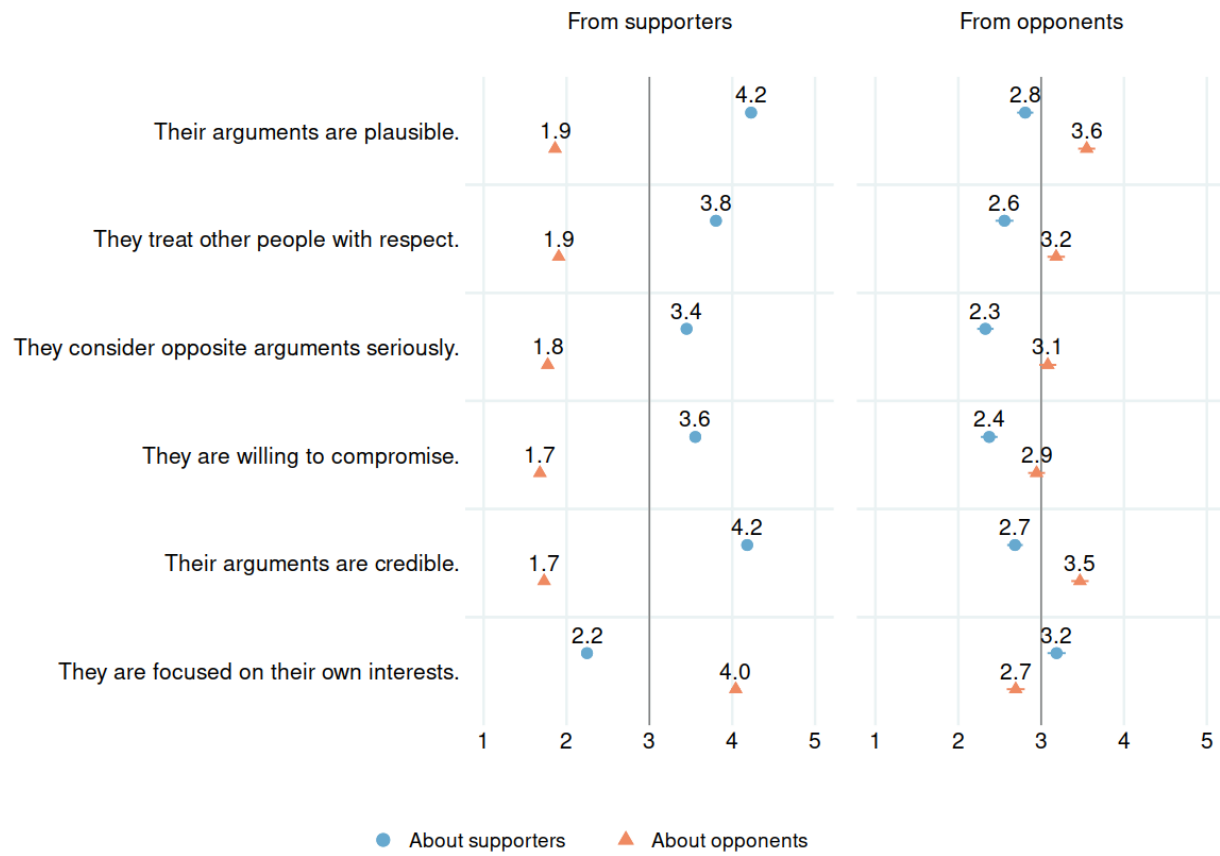
Figure 4*Attributed Discourse Qualities by Group*

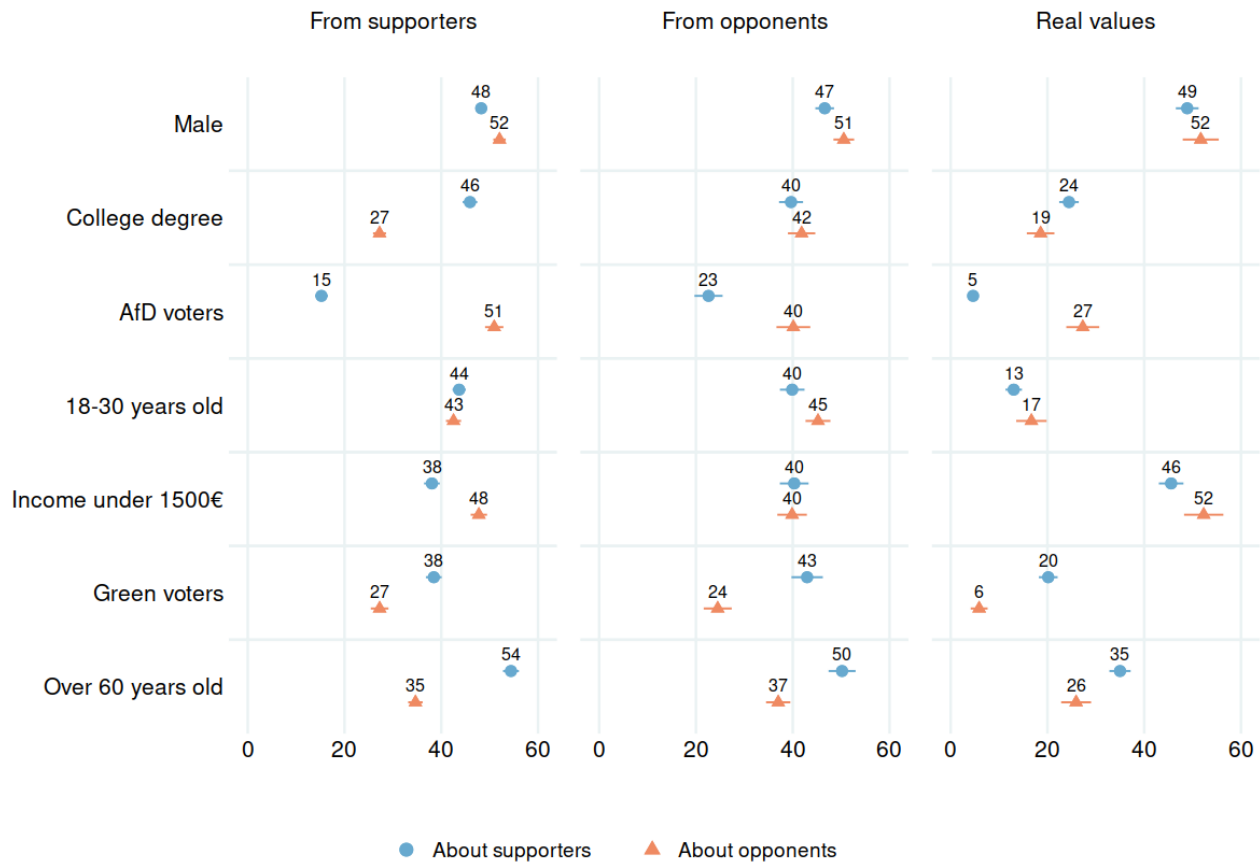
Figure 5*Perceptions of Composition of Opinion Camps by Group*

Figure 6

Predicting Social Distance Towards Neighbor as a Function of Respdent's and Neighbor's Attitudes towards Containment Measures

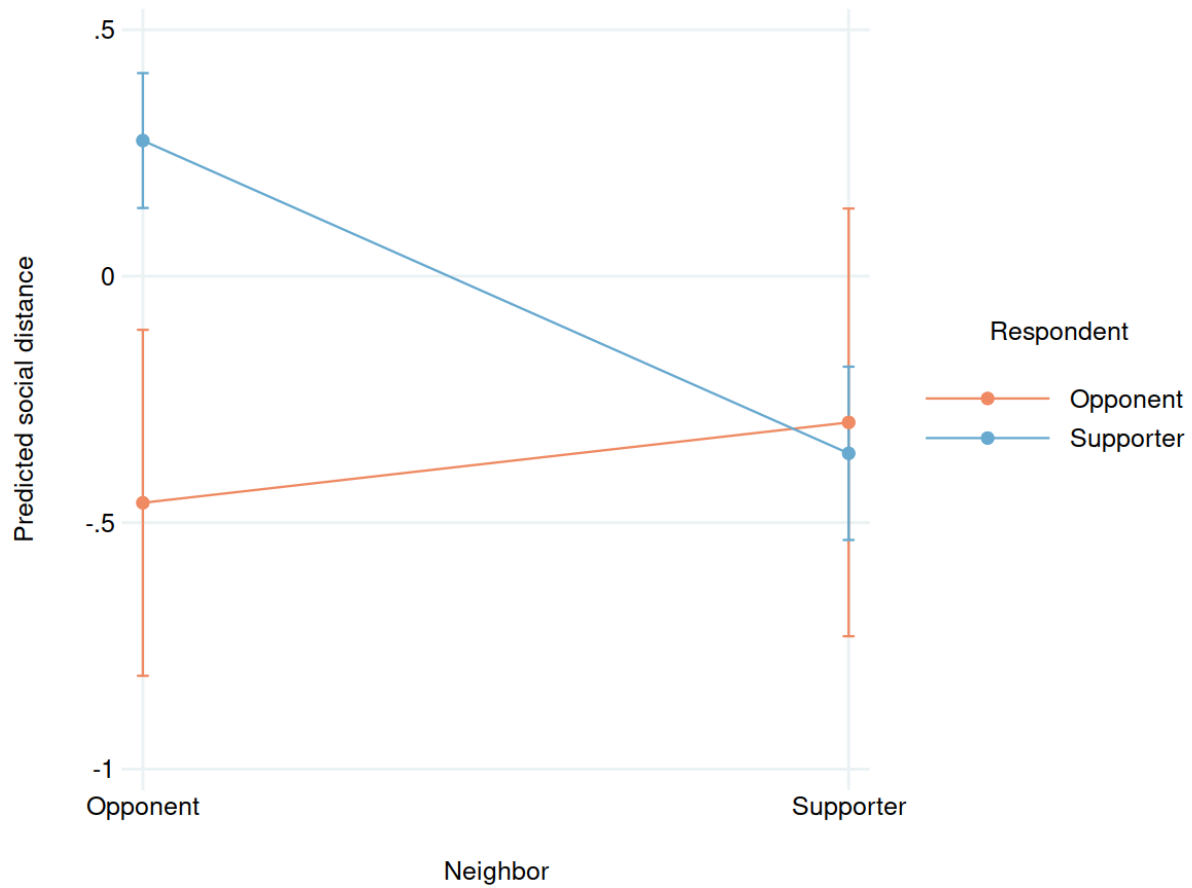


Table 1

Predicting Social Distance Towards Neighbor as a Function of Respondent's and Neighbor's Attitudes towards Containment Measures

Predictor	b	SE	P > t 	95% CI	
Respondents supports (vs. opposes)	.73	.19	0.00	.36	1.11
Neighbor supports (vs. opposes)	.16	.28	0.57	-.39	.72
Respondents supports X neighbor supports	-.8	.30	0.01	-1.4	-.2
Constant	-.46	.18	0.01	-.81	-.11

Note: OLS regression.

Table 2 *Predicting Intentions to Sanction Non-compliant Neighbors as a Function of Attitudes on Containment Measures, Group Affect, and Demographics*

Predictor	b	SE	P > t	95% CI	
Support for measures	.22	.04	0.00	.15	.29
Affect for supporters	.20	.04	0.00	.13	.27
Vignette AfD	.5	.19	0.01	.12	.88
Vignette Greens	.43	.19	0.03	.05	.81
Vignette Muslim	.21	.2	0.28	-.17	.6
Being female	-.08	.14	0.56	-.36	.19
Age	-.01	.00	0.2	-.014	.00
Constant	2.97	.4	0.00	2.2	3.75

Note. OLS regression. Using affect for opponents as a predictor yielded $b = -.21$ with all other coefficients being structurally similar.