Ideological and Affective Polarization in a Multidimensional European Space

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Abstract

Affective polarization, or dislike for the party out-group, is of great concern to political observers. While prior research initially focused on the US context, there is growing evidence that affective polarization is widespread among European democracies as well. We contribute to this literature by exploring the relationship between ideological and affective polarization in multiparty and, crucially, multidimensional systems. In particular, while it is understood that ideological disagreement may fuel animosity towards political opponents, existing work typically relies on a simple left-right divide to capture these positional differences. We argue that (1) we need to unpack the effect of the different ideological dimensions, and (2) the effect of party polarization on affective polarization is assuaged when the relevant divisions in society cross-cut—rather than reinforce—each other. Combining party and voter data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey and the Comparative Study of Electoral systems, we find empirical support for our hypothesis. We then further corroborate this finding using a vignette survey experiment. This study has important implications for our understanding of party-voter relations and democratic stability in fragmented political landscapes.

1 Introduction

There is growing concern over the political divisions in many established democracies. Not only are the ideological differences among parties and voters pronounced, the emotional gulf between partisan groups is said to be widening (Gidron, Adams and Horne, 2020). Such affective polarization, which captures in-group party favoratism and out-group party hostility (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012), has major behavioral ramifications for democratic societies. It may boost electoral turnout Harteveld and Wagner (2022), but it lowers satisfaction with democracy (Wagner, 2021), and the public's willingness to accept undemocratic behavior of 'their' politicians is greater when partisan loyalties and policy extremism are high (Graham and Svolik, 2020).

Although much of the initial research on partisan hostility focused on the United States, looking at the negative affect between Democrats and Republicans (e.g., Iyengar and Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2015), recent work suggests that similar dynamics play out in many European democracies (e.g., Gidron, Adams and Horne, 2020; Hernández, Anduiza and Rico, 2021; Huddy, Bankert and Davies, 2018; Reiljan, 2020).

Given the political nature of these divisions, one would expect that affective polarization is, at least partially, rooted in ideological disagreement. The existing evidence is mixed, however. Some argue that the two should be treated as distinct phenomena (Iyengar et al., 2019; Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016), while various other studies suggest that partisan animosity is a product of party polarization (e.g. Gidron, Adams and Horne, 2020; Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016; Webster and Abramowitz, 2017). The inconclusive evidence, coupled with the importance of affective polarization in European politics, warrants a comprehensive analysis of its relationship to ideological polarization.

Specifically, we propose that the European political landscape is fundamen-

tally distinct due to its fragmented and, especially, multidimensional nature. One cannot meaningfully capture the relevant ideological differences in society with a single left-right divide. Rather, multiple dimensions are needed, raising the question whether economic and cultural disagreements align or not—which we presume to have important consequences for partisan hostility. While dimensional overlap may reinforce the impact of party polarization, its effect on affective polarization is undermined when the political divides are cross-cutting and working against each other.

We explore this relationship with data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (or CHES; Jolly et al., 2022) and the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), 1996–2019. Initial evidence suggests that the positive effect of party polarization on affective polarization is indeed mitigated when the two ideological dimensions crosscut each other. We then test this finding at the individual level with a vignette survey experiment in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (UK). This study has important implications for our understanding of ideological and affective polarization in European democracies.

2 The ideological roots of affective polarization

In a political context, affective polarization refers to the emotional opposition between opposing partisan groups. Building on insights from social psychology, it is argued that party identification can produce partisan identities, which result in group thinking, bias, and positive and negative perceptions of co- and opposing partisans, respectively (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe, 2015; Iyengar and Westwood, 2015; Iyengar et al., 2019).

The origins of affective polarization are complex. Existing research highlights the role of the media landscape, negative campaigning, and growing inequality as potential sources of the exacerbated social divisiveness (Gidron, Adams and Horne, 2020; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012; Lelkes, Sood and Iyengar, 2017), increasing especially negative partisanship.

A factor of particular interest to us concerns the degree to which affective polarization is shaped by the ideological disagreements between parties. Programmatic conflict lies at the heart of electoral politics, but its intensity varies, as some party systems are more polarized than others (Sartori, 1976). One might presume that, the greater the ideological disagreement, the greater the animosity between opposing sides. Surprisingly, however, the relationship between ideological and affective polarization has received relatively limited attention (Iyengar et al., 2019).

The evidence we do have suggests that ideological polarization, indeed, affects partisan hostility. First, the vehemence of ideological conflict at the party and voter-level tend to be related. As a party system becomes more polarized, the electorate tends to follow suit (Bischof and Wagner, 2019; Callander and Carbajal, 2022; Moral and Best, 2022; Silva, 2018). Second, and more directly, prior work shows that increased party polarization can lead to greater partisan animosity among voters (Gidron, Adams and Horne, 2020; Hernández, Anduiza and Rico, 2021; Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016)—while elite cooperation can lower it (Bassan-Nygate and Weiss, 2022; Huddy and Yair, 2021). At the individual level, policy disagreement and ideological distance shape out-group dislike Harteveld (2021a); Westwood et al. (2018), at times even circumventing the impact of partisanship or other social divisions (Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley, 2021; Orr and Huber, 2020; Webster and Abramowitz, 2017)

We build on this literature, but highlight an important limitation. Existing research has typically studied the relationship between ideological and affective polarization through a single left-right lens. This may certainly suffice at some times and in some contexts. The US, for example, is (at least his-

torically) characterized by a more one-dimensional ideological landscape (e.g., Poole and Rosenthal, 1997), with strong partisan identities and low electoral volatility (Huddy, Bankert and Davies, 2018), allowing negative partisan affect to emerge in the absence of issue polarization (Mason, 2015). The European party systems, however, are more fragmented, volatile, and multidimensional. Here, different ideological camps may form that oppose each other in different ways (e.g., Harteveld, 2021a). But the role of ideological dimensionality remains insufficiently explored, raising important questions about the state of polarization in Europe.

3 The role of cross-cutting divides

What should we expect of the relationship between ideological and affective polarization in the European, at times more complex, setting? Crucially, many European democracies are now structured by more than one ideological dimension. In addition to an established economic divide, an opposition has emerged in the last half century over cultural issues (Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Kitschelt, 1994; Kriesi et al., 2006), constituting a dramatic transformation of the European landscape. The rise of new challengers, including greens and populist radical right parties, has upended mainstream politics and fueled the politicization of issues hitherto ignored by the political establishment.

The cultural divide has major polarizing potential, possibly exacerbating the political climate in many Western democracies. Its issues, such as immigration and gay marriage, tend to be highly principled in nature, as they are rooted in religion, race, and national identity, making its associated positions particularly resistant to change (Tavits, 2007). Reflecting this entrenched characterization, and the moral conviction of its attitudes (Skitka, Wisneski and Brandt, 2018), this opposition has been labeled a 'culture war' (e.g. Goren and Chapp, 2017).

Indeed, much like in the US, cultural polarization has increased (Dassonneville and Çakır, 2021) and may be the main driver of contemporary partisan hostility (Gidron, Adams and Horne, 2020; Harteveld, 2021a).

We develop an alternative theoretical argument. Bringing in insights from cleavage theory (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), we argue that one cannot study the role of party polarization without taking a key feature of any multidimensional space into account: the degree to which its ideological dimensions reinforce or crosscut each other. The cultural divide did not form in a vacuum, but was more or less absorbed into established political conflict, depending on existing social structures and the continued attempts of parties to manipulate the dimensionality of the political space (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020; De Vries and Marks, 2012; Gidron and Hall, 2017; Van der Brug and Van Spanje, 2009). This process is dynamic, varying both by country and over time (Koedam, Binding and Steenbergen, 2023).

The relationship between the different ideological divides has fundamental implications for affective polarization in Europe—and elsewhere. If the cultural and economic dimension align perfectly, meaning that the same parties are consistently on opposite sides on each divide, the conflicts reinforce each other. Indeed, already in the 1950s, political scientists warned that intense political conflict over a single ideological divide is not sustainable (Dahl, 1956; Lipset, 1959). In this case, affective polarization is likely exacerbated, solidifying already ingrained group identities, with important ramifications for voter attitudes and democratic behavior.

If, however, the different ideological divides intersect, this may undermine the entrenchment of party-voter relations, as citizens are not consistently organized into the same partisan groups. This resonates with work on the importance of social sorting and the alignment of political and non-political—but not ideological—divisions (see Mason, 2015; Harteveld, 2021b). In consociational democracies, such cross-pressures may lead to elite cooperation and moderation (Lijphart, 1969). In turn, co-governance can lower partisan hostility at the mass level (Horne, Adams and Gidron, 2023). Put differently, 'diffused polarization' lowers the intensity of political conflict and its consequences (Hoerner and Hobolt, 2020).

There are at least two reasons why multidimensional, cross-cutting polarization may lower partisan hostility. First, in a multidimensional context, the preferences of both parties and voters are more complex, challenging the representational linkage between them (Bakker, Jolly and Polk, 2012; Dassonneville, Fournier and Somer-Topcu, 2022). This lack of consistent ideological alignment makes it more likely that a voter, at times, disagrees with their party (and its supporters), undermining in-group identity and favoritism. Second, by the same token, a voter is, at times, more likely to agree with an opposing party (and its supporters). This rotation in who the out-group is, should lower animosity towards them (Bougher, 2017).

Taken together, we argue that one cannot satisfactorily evaluate the consequences of ideological polarization for affective polarization without taking cross-cutting divides into account. This is true for ideological disagreement more generally, as well as for the galvanizing potential of cultural polarization, which can neither be captured in isolation, nor with a simple left-right measure. We need to take multidimensionality seriously if we seek to understand contemporary levels of affective polarization across Europe. In the next section we develop a research design to do exactly that.

4 Research design

Our research question necessitates three pieces of information: (i) measures of affective polarization at the level of individuals, (ii) measures of party polarization along an economic and a cultural dimension, and (iii) a measure of the extent to which polarization along these two dimensions are mutually reinforcing or cross-cutting. CSES provides measures of affective polarization, CHES (CHES; Jolly et al., 2022) the remaining two pieces. CHES is an expert-based survey of party positions, in contrast to CSES' information on the extent to which voters (dis)like parties, but voter and expert evaluations of parties are highly correlated (Dalton and McAllister, 2015).

To measure affective polarization, we follow Wagner (2021) in calculating the spread in individuals' like/dislike of different parties, weighted by party size. The advantage of this approach is that it does not restrict our analysis to party identifiers, and allows for positive feelings towards more than one party. Higher values indicate that a respondent has distinct levels of affect for different parties. This measure fits our theoretical predictions, because it can capture the anticipated decrease in both in-group enthusiasm and out-group animosity—reducing a respondent's overall affect.

Party polarization along either dimension is calculated as the weighted variance of party positions on each dimension (see, e.g., Dalton, 2008). Finally, we use *effective dimensionality* as a measure of how correlated party positions across these two dimensions are: if positions are completely orthogonal, then this value will be 2, and if they are perfectly correlated, the resulting value will be 1 (Del Giudice, 2020; Koedam, Binding and Steenbergen, 2023).

CSES waves are fielded after national elections in the included countries at uneven intervals, while CHES generally collects data every five years. We combine the individual-level data of the CSES with the system-level data of CHES by focusing on the closest CSES wave prior to a data collection of CHES. Throughout, we concentrate on Western European countries. This provides us with data from 51 post-electoral surveys with roughly 88'600 respondents across 14 countries from 1996 to 2019.

5 Findings

We estimate three main model specifications: (i) a baseline model in which affective polarization is a function of ideological polarization along either dimension (see Gidron, Adams and Horne, 2020); (ii) an extended model in which we control for the degree to which polarization across dimensions is correlated via effective dimensionality; and (iii) a conditional model in which the association between economic and cultural polarization and affective polarization depends on effective dimensionality. The resulting estimates from a multilevel specification without (columns 1-3) and with (columns 4-6) additional sociodemographic and national control variables are shown in Table 1.1

In line with Gidron, Adams and Horne (2020), we find that cultural polarization of parties is a significant predictor of individual-level affective polarization, while economic polarization is not (columns 1 and 4). However, the way in which parties are positioned across dimensions also matters for individual-level affective polarization: as effective dimensionality increases (i.e., party positions across dimensions are more orthogonal), levels of affective polarization decrease (columns 2 and 5). Moreover, effective dimensionality has a conditioning effect on the association of party polarization with affective polarization on either dimension: as effective dimensionality increases, the association between ideological polarization and affective polarization decreases (columns 3 and 6).

¹Proportionality is measured as the difference between parties' vote and seat shares (Gallagher, 1991), and the effective number of parties is measured via parties' seat shares (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979).

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^{***}p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05

Table 1: Statistical models

The conditional coefficient sizes of cultural and economic party polarization on affective polarization across different levels of effective dimensionality are shown in Figure 1 (these are based on model 6 in Table 1). When effective dimensionality is low (i.e., party positions across dimensions are correlated), party polarization on either dimension is associated with an increase in affective polarization. However, as effective dimensionality increases (and the dimensions act in a cross-cutting rather than in a reinforcing manner), this association weakens. While the conditional association tends towards 0 for cultural polarization, it reverses direction in the case of economic polarization. Put differently, party polarization on this dimension reduces affective polarization if party positions on this dimension are orthogonal to party positions on the cultural dimension.

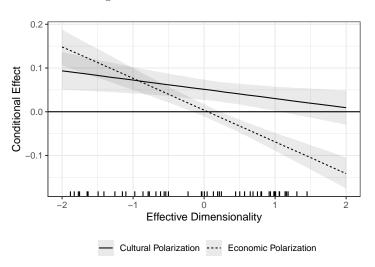


Figure 1: Conditional Coefficient

6 Discussion

This study explores the relationship between ideological and affective polarization in a multidimensional space. The European political landscape is fragmented and complex, which can lead single left-right measures to misreport the degree to which parties disagree ideologically. This is true especially when the constituent dimensions do not align, a characteristic that we argue is key to understanding contemporary levels of affective polarization. Our initial findings lend credence to this argument, and highlight the importance of a multidimensional measurement approach to ideological polarization that captures the relationship between the different divides (see Koedam, Binding and Steenbergen, 2023).

Moving forward, we plan to further unpack these results, although we are limited by the lack of voter-level data on multidimensional ideological preferences. Original survey experiments may help to shine a light on the mechanisms behind the outcomes presented here.

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