

# Does Affective Polarization Make Citizens More Extreme and Less Democratic? Experimental Evidence from Chile\*

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## Abstract

We study how affective polarization shapes ideological stances and democratic attitudes in a context of weak partisan identities – the 2022 constitutional plebiscite in Chile. In our first experiment, we randomly activate affective polarization using an open-ended question to assess its effects on ideology and democratic views. We then provide respondents with statements attributed to hypothetical speakers with randomly assigned positions on the plebiscite. We do not find that heightened affective polarization directly influences ideological polarization. However, our second experiment provides mixed evidence of an indirect impact on ideology via strengthening the effects of party cues. Thus, while affective polarization does not polarize ideology in the abstract, responses to partisanship can be stronger when ideological stances come from a partisan speaker, mirroring real-life scenarios. Finally, affective polarization erodes democratic attitudes in the abstract, which raises concerns for a region with weak democratic records.

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# 1 Introduction

Amid growing concerns over political divisions and ideological extremeness, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to affective polarization – animosity between parties, or the tendency to dislike and distrust those from the outgroup. [Iyengar et al. \(2012\)](#)’s seminal argument that people are divided on “affect, not ideology” sparked a growing research agenda, as well as debate over the ultimate causes of affective polarization. The connections between polarization in ideology and affects are highly complex. A large literature has examined the (intertwined) roots of interparty animus; several studies have concentrated on the role of ideology in affective polarization (e.g., [Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016](#); [Webster and Abramowitz, 2017](#); [Lelkes, 2021](#); [Orr and Huber, 2020](#); [Dias and Lelkes, 2022](#); [Orr et al., 2023](#)). An emerging strand of research investigates how affective polarization may causally influence parties’ and candidates’ evaluation or ideology.

This article has two main objectives. The first is to shed further light on this complex relationship by exploring the effects of heightened animosity between political camps over ideological polarization based on the results of two survey experiments. Recent work has studied the causal impacts of a reduction in affective polarization on different outcomes ([Broockman et al., 2022](#); [Levendusky, 2023](#)). We examine how an increase in affective polarization influences ideology, and partisan cue taking. We studied the case of Chile’s September 4, 2022 plebiscite, when voters had to approve (Apruebo) or reject (Rechazo) a new constitution drafted by a Constitutional Convention, focusing on this new political divide. In this context, trust in parties and party identification were radically low, and there were several diverse salient issues, some of which cross-cut traditional party divides or generated intra-party division, thus blurring “party positions” associated with the Apruebo and Rechazo camps. Hence, we do not expect policy disagreements to be strongly linked to party brands or partisan identities, making this a useful scenario to study the links between affective polarization and ideology.

We first assess affective polarization’s direct, causal effect on ideological polarization. Our first experiment induced (short-lived) affective polarization using an unobtrusive primer (based on the approach of [Simonovits et al., 2022](#)) on randomly selected respon-

dents. We then measured respondents' ideological positions on several issues. Our second experiment, administered at the end of the survey, explored an indirect link with ideological polarization. Respondents were presented with statements on two salient policy issues made by hypothetical partisan persons who were randomly assigned an electoral position on the constitutional plebiscite, and asked about the extent to which they agreed with the person in the statement. Our experimental design relates to the party cues literature (e.g., [Bullock, 2020](#)), but differs in three relevant ways. First, we focus on affective polarization's causal impact on the effect of party cues. Second, we provide a weaker cue since we do not offer information on the party's position or elite stances on the issue (e.g., [Broockman and Butler, 2017](#)); we only state the position of a hypothetical, anonymous voter. Third, we analyze agreement with a proffered statement rather than the respondent's position on the issue. This enables us to directly address the possibilities of dialogue and building agreements and measure the likelihood of agreement conditional on the respondents' own issue positions.

Our first (priming) experiment effectively activated affective polarization, but this did not directly influence respondents' ideological stances. However, the second experiment yielded mixed evidence of an indirect impact of affective polarization on ideology that appears when ideological positions are linked to partisan speakers. In line with the partisan cue literature, we find that for both analyzed issues, when ideological statements are attributed to a voter from the respondent's outgroup rather than ingroup (i.e., *Apruebo* or *Rechazo*), her chances of agreeing with them decrease dramatically. We do find that affective polarization has an independent effect on agreement with statements about abortion: this differential agreement based on the speaker's partisanship is further reinforced among respondents who received the affectively polarizing treatment. In the final section we discuss how this evidence suggests that affective polarization may enhance motivated reasoning.

Thus, although affective polarization may not make citizens' ideology more extreme in the abstract, it can importantly affect ideology when partisan speakers mediate the stances, as occurs in real life, where political interactions and decisions never take place in the abstract. These results suggest that even where partisanship is weak and political identities are new and blurry, belonging to a political group defined based on a highly

salient and divisive election shape how citizens interpret policy positions. These results also raise serious concerns about the possibilities of democratic deliberation and agreement on policy issues among affectively polarized citizens, as agreement remains elusive even when there are no large differences in underlying policy preferences.

Our second goal is to further explore how affective polarization influences democratic backsliding by analyzing how it shapes citizens' democratic attitudes. Several studies have detected an association between affective polarization and anti-democratic attitudes ([McCoy and Somer, 2019](#); [Kingzette et al., 2021](#)), and established that polarization makes citizens more accepting of undemocratic behavior exhibited by politicians from their side ([Graham and Svulik, 2020](#); [Simonovits et al., 2022](#)). But recent work on the impact of decreasing affective polarization does not replicate these findings ([Broockman et al., 2022](#); [Voelkel et al., 2022](#); [Levendusky, 2023](#)).

We included support for democracy as an outcome in our two experiments described above, measured both in the abstract (after the first (priming) experiment) and as agreement with an anti-democratic statement by a partisan speaker (in the second experiment). We find that individuals who were primed to be more affectively polarized decreased their support for democracy. Like the effect of a partisan speaker on ideological stances, agreement with an anti-democratic position increases if it is attributed to a co-partisan of the respondent. But affective polarization in this context does not reinforce the effect of party cues, in contrast to our findings for abortion. These results are in line with recent studies which demonstrate that polarization threatens democracy in the U.S.

As mentioned above, we study these phenomena in a context where political parties are extremely weak and uprooted from society ([Bargsted and Maldonado, 2018](#); [De la Cerda, 2022](#)), and where some longstanding partisan divides do not clearly map onto the contending groups. Thus, we measure affective polarization along multiple dimensions in the context of the Chilean constitutional plebiscite and study how this type of polarization along electoral lines relates to animosity along other political divides that produce an "us vs. them."

By analyzing a presidential democracy in Latin America, we help shed light on a region where affective polarization has been understudied; our study is one of the firsts

to address this issue empirically in the region. This scarcity may be partly explained by two important challenges associated with studying polarization along party lines in the region in general and in Chile in particular. The first is a measurement challenge given that there are several political parties. Recent studies have applied approaches drawn from Europe, where multiparty systems are also the norm, to Latin America (Wagner, 2021; Knudsen, 2020; Torcal and Comellas, 2022; Garzia et al., 2023). Yet the very low levels of partisan identity in Latin America pose an additional challenge to our traditional understanding of polarization based on party identification. In Chile – where identification with parties, and even coalitions, is extremely low (e.g., LAPOP 2018)<sup>1</sup> – it is not even clear that parties or coalitions are the main dividing line in politics.<sup>2</sup> Although low levels of party identification represent a challenge to the study of ideology and partisanship, they do not necessarily rule out the possibility of animosity between political camps, as it may travel through other political divisions that separate citizens into opposing groups. For this reason, we explore affective polarization along multiple dimensions besides the one produced by the plebiscite, which is the focus of our study. Furthermore, this context provides an opportunity to study the links between affective and ideological polarization with less risk of confounding ideology and partisanship (Dias and Lelkes, 2022; Orr et al., 2023).

Overall, this research advances our understanding of the links between affective and ideological polarization and affective polarization beyond the U.S. context. Although affective polarization may not lead to more extreme ideological positions in the abstract, it may do so when individuals are exposed to more extreme positions from within their political ingroup. Moreover, the detrimental impact of affective polarization on democratic ideals highlights the importance of studying polarization, particularly in the current global context of democratic erosion (e.g., Haggard and Kaufman, 2021) and in regions where democracy has been vulnerable in the past.

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<sup>1</sup>Of the 18 countries surveyed by LAPOP in 2018 that included question vb10 on identification with a political party, Chile ranks second to last: only 10.7% of the population identified with a party, after Guatemala (10.3%), and similar to Peru (10.8%) ([https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/lapop.central/viz/LAPOPV3\\_2/Combination?publish=yes](https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/lapop.central/viz/LAPOPV3_2/Combination?publish=yes)).

<sup>2</sup>Recent research on affective polarization has addressed the problem of low partisan identification by relying on the evaluations of political figures that are members of political parties (e.g., Segovia, 2022).

## 2 Affective polarization, ideology, and democratic attitudes

While ideology remains a key dimension of polarization, [Iyengar et al. \(2012\)](#)’s seminal work inspired a rich and growing literature on affective polarization. Many studies highlight how ideological and affective polarization are distinct. Indeed, people who are affectively polarized – i.e., who despise those from the other party – in the U.S. context do not necessarily hold extreme issue positions ([Iyengar et al., 2012](#); [Mason, 2015](#); [Bougher, 2017](#)). [Iyengar et al. \(2012\)](#) established that over time both Republicans and Democrats increasingly disliked their opponents and that this “us vs. them” approach to politics is inconsistently associated with policy stances. While both types of polarization are linked, they “do not fully cover each other” ([Wagner, 2021](#) p. 11). For example, [Mason \(2018\)](#) finds that affective polarization in the U.S. is primarily due to the increasing overlap of religious, racial, and partisan identities, but not ideology. Likewise, [Reiljan \(2019\)](#) explores correlations between both types of polarization in Europe but highlights that high levels of ideological polarization do not necessarily lead to strong inter-party hostility.

Given the rising levels of affective polarization in the U.S. ([Iyengar et al., 2019](#)), the underlying causes have become a central scholarly concern. Several studies explore the direct impact of ideological polarization on affective polarization (see, for example, [Lelkes, 2021](#); [Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016](#); [Webster and Abramowitz, 2017](#)). Yet ideology and party identity are inextricably linked because ideological stances are often party branded, and party identities are not independent of ideology.<sup>3</sup> These complexities have inspired a debate in the literature about how best to empirically identify each – and how much each element contributes to affective polarization (e.g., [Dias and Lelkes, 2022](#); [Orr et al., 2023](#)).

We concentrate on the opposite link – whether affective polarization influences ideological polarization. We build mainly on three strands of literature. First, on work by [Simonovits et al. \(2022\)](#), who use an unobtrusive primer to enhance respondents’ affective polarization and assess how it shapes democratic commitment. We employ a similar

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<sup>3</sup>There is a longstanding debate in the literature regarding the nature of partisan identity – whether it represents a strong psychological attachment or a running tally of policy preferences and past political experience ([Campbell et al., 1960](#); [Fiorina, 1981](#)), which continues today ([Fowler, 2020](#); [Rogers, 2020](#)).

primer to assess how affective polarization shapes ideological extremeness and support for democracy. In a similar vein, [Broockman et al. \(2022\)](#) experimentally reduce levels of affective polarization using a trust game and find that it does not affect electoral accountability or support for either bipartisanship or democratic norms. [Levendusky \(2023\)](#) also experimentally decreases affective polarization by priming respondents with what parties share, and finds a reduction in ideological polarization and sorting via cue taking.

Second, we build on a related strand of literature that explores how party cues shape policy positions. Prior studies have analyzed a wide range of issues, based on both observational data and experimental surveys. But in all cases, they have relied on party leaders ([Barber and Pope, 2019](#); [Broockman and Butler, 2017](#); [Tappin and Hewitt, 2023](#)), party position ([Armstrong and Wronski, 2019](#); [Guntermann, 2019](#)), or the position of the majority of party representatives ([Bolsen et al., 2014](#); [Boudreau and MacKenzie, 2014](#); [Cohen, 2003](#)). Overall, there is wide variation in the estimated impact of party cues on policy positions ([Bullock, 2020](#)), though recent work suggests this may be partly due to the type of issue ([Tappin, 2023](#)), which highlights the relevance of including more than one issue in studies of party cues.

Recent studies have focused on how affective polarization influences party cues. [Druckman et al. \(2021\)](#) find that affectively polarized Americans are less likely to distinguish their views about the U.S. response to the Covid-19 pandemic from their opinions of President Trump – although they do not have exogenous variation in affective polarization. As mentioned above, studies that have experimentally reduced affective polarization find mixed results: [Levendusky \(2023\)](#) found that it decreased party cue taking, but [Broockman et al. \(2022\)](#) did not. Therefore, further research is needed to better understand the relationship between these two types of polarization.

Finally, a recent literature has focused on how polarization affects democracy. [Graham and Svobik \(2020\)](#) find that the U.S. public's viability as a democratic check decreases with various measures of polarization, including the strength of partisanship, policy extremism, and candidate platform divergence. Likewise, [Simonovits et al. \(2022\)](#) conclude that extended "democratic hypocrisy" – the tendency to support democratic norm-eroding policies only when one's own party is in power – is further amplified

in the U.S. according to two indicators of polarization: strong expressive partisanship and the perceived threat from the opposing party. If the public plays a role in sustaining democracy, this evidence suggests polarization erodes democracy. Consistent with these results, [Levendusky \(2023\)](#) establishes that reducing affective polarization improves democratic attitudes. However, [Broockman et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Voelkel et al. \(2022\)](#) experimentally reduced affective polarization but did not detect an improvement in democratic norms. We examine these conflicting results in the Discussion and Conclusion.

## 2.1 Polarization in Latin America and Chile

Latin America has exhibited the greatest increase in political polarization in recent decades based on individual countries' Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) scores ([UNDP, 2023](#)). A small and emerging literature explores this trend. [Comellas and Torcal \(2023\)](#) investigate the sources of affective polarization in different multiparty systems, including Argentina and Chile, and find a robust positive relationship between ideological identity and affective polarization, which is stronger than the one between stances on issues and affective polarization. [Reiljan et al. \(2023\)](#) compare the levels of affective polarization based on party identity vs. leaders in contemporary democracies in the Americas, and find that only in the U.S. is affective polarization higher when it is based on leaders. Finally, [Castro \(2023\)](#) finds that affective polarization helped predict voting for Lopez Obrador in Mexico's 2018 presidential election. Interestingly, [Reiljan et al. \(2023\)](#) identified one of the highest ratios of leader vs. party affective polarization in Mexico.

Data and research on affective polarization in Chile are scarce, which makes it difficult to assess its extent and evolution over time. Measures of affective polarization from a nationally representative survey<sup>4</sup> administered in late 2022 indicate that among groups defined by how they voted in the plebiscite, in the presidential election, and the left-right divide, the most polarizing dimension was the plebiscite, while the least polarizing was the left-right divide (CEP Nov–Dec 2022).<sup>5</sup> [Segovia \(2022\)](#) uses evaluations of political

<sup>4</sup>The Chilean research center Centro de Estudios Públicos (CEP) has conducted nationally representative surveys continuously since 1994 (more information is available [here](https://www.cepchile.cl/opinion-publica/encuesta-cep/)). This article cites several CEP surveys, which can be found at <https://www.cepchile.cl/opinion-publica/encuesta-cep/>.

<sup>5</sup>We employ the same measures of affective polarization as the 2022 CEP survey (see Section 4.3). Respondents were asked to rate



figures from all parties to proxy for affective polarization and finds that it has ebbed and flowed in Chile since 1990, and has increased since the mid-2000s. The year of the most recent presidential election, 2021, exhibits one of the highest – or even the highest – levels since 1990 according to some measures (Segovia, 2022). However, the evaluations of political figures do not necessarily reflect the animosity between political camps that divide Chilean society, since a politician may produce effects in the public that do not correlate with those between social groups. For example, Reiljan et al. (2023) show that affective polarization based on leaders is weaker than party-based affective polarization. Thus, all the available data indicates a highly polarized context, in which the traditional left–right divide is less salient than the more recent and contextual plebiscite dimension.

Finally, we know little about how affective polarization influences democratic attitudes in Latin America. Given the region’s poor democratic record and worrisome indications of a rise in authoritarianism, it is important to better understand their relationship.

### 3 Context

We investigate a highly polarized developing country – Chile. Starting on October 18, 2019, Chile experienced a severe social outburst that started over an increase in subway fares and evolved into a critique of the development model. The outburst was accompanied by violence and massive protests, which triggered a deep political crisis. The following month, parties from the entire political spectrum (except the Communist Party) signed an agreement that opened the way for a new constitution. After the entry plebiscite was approved with 78% of the vote in October 2020, a Constitutional Convention was elected in April 2021.

The first presidential election after the 2019 protest was held in 2021. The runoff election took place in December of that year, since no first-round candidate received a majority of the votes. For the first time since the return of democracy in Chile in 1990, neither runoff candidate belonged to the two main coalitions that dominated the country’s pol-

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groups of people on a 0–10 scale. The survey evaluated three sets of opposing groups: people who identified as left or right, voters in the recent presidential runoff (Boric and Kast), and Apruebo and Rechazo plebiscite voters. We constructed affective polarization measures as the absolute distance between the ratings of each group.

itics for almost 30 years. Gabriel Boric (35 years old), one of the founders of the young left-wing Frente Amplio coalition born out of the 2011 student protests, unexpectedly won a primary of voters from his coalition and the Communist Party; traditional center-left parties backed him in the runoff. The other runoff candidate, José Antonio Kast (55 years old), had resigned from the traditional right-wing party Unión Demócrata Independiente in 2016 and founded the far-right Republican Party in 2019. In the first round Kast received 28% of the vote, beating the traditional right coalition's candidate (Sebastián Sichel, with 13%). The runoff had a record turnout of 56% and Boric won with 56% of the vote.

The binary organization of the political landscape around two coalitions that had prevailed in Chile since 1990 had given place to an increasingly complex scenario. New coalitions to the left of the traditional left and to the right of the traditional right appeared in the 2021 election. Around 20 parties won seats in the concurrent parliamentary election. Despite this greater diversity, at the time of our study (CEP, Nov–Dec 2022) only 24% of the population identified with a political party, a dramatic decline from around 70% in the early 1990s (CEP Nov 1994). A slightly higher percentage identified with a political coalition (30%) in 2017, the last time CEP asked this question (CEP Sep–Oct 2017). Nearly a third of Chileans (31%) do not position themselves on the left–right axis (CEP April–May 2022). Nor is politics organized around religious or family lines, or a specific political figure, as occurs elsewhere. And while there are multiple contested policy issues, it is hard to pick one or two as the main dividing lines. Thus, when thinking of affective polarization, it is not even clear how the ingroup/outgroup should be defined in Chile.

The constitution was being redrafted during this election period and the Constitutional Convention gradually lost support. Most polls conducted since April 2022 indicate majority support for rejecting the draft constitution. Voting was mandatory for the September 4, 2022 plebiscite, and 86% turned out; the Rechazo (reject) option won with 62% of the vote.

The constitutional discussion involved a wide range of issues, from the rights of nature, collective rights for indigenous peoples, reproductive rights, and gender diversity, to the role of government, labor rights, and private property. The draft's first article stated

that Chile would be plurinational, intercultural, regional, and ecological, all of which represented a stark departure from the existing constitution. According to the CEP survey conducted in November–December 2022, which included a closed list of the central issues under debate to inquire into voters’ reasons, the main three drivers for Rechazo voters were the (controversial) behavior<sup>6</sup> of the Constitutional Convention members and the beliefs that the new constitution would engender more division among Chileans, and damage the economy. The main drivers for Apruebo voters were the establishment of social rights, that the current constitution came into force under Pinochet’s dictatorship, and with equal percent, the beliefs that the new text would improve coexistence and equality, and advance women’s rights.

Throughout this paper, we take an agnostic stance regarding what the most relevant political division in Chile is. While our treatment exploits variation along the 2022 plebiscite, a highly contested issue at the time, we include several different measures of affective polarization: along the lines of the two last elections (the plebiscite and presidential runoff), along the traditional left–right divide, along the social class divide (rich/poor), and along the social divide produced by a contested policy issue – abortion. In all cases, we ask about evaluation of groups of persons who voted or support a certain stance.

## 4 Research design and implementation

### 4.1 Research design

Our main aim is to assess the causal effects of affective polarization on ideological polarization and attitudes toward democracy. We study these phenomena in a Latin American country, a region where these issues have only recently received scholarly attention. We explore the various dimensions along which individuals may become polarized by measuring affective polarization in multiple ways and its relationship with ideological polarization on several dimensions.

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<sup>6</sup>Several members of the convention openly admitted to attempts to exclude political minorities from the debate. Others were involved in scandals, including a member who lied about having cancer during his campaign (see, for example, [Aleman and Navia, 2023](#)).

We designed two survey experiments to assess, in a controlled setting, the mechanisms that causally link these two types of polarization. First, in the “prime experiment,” we randomly activated affective polarization with an open-ended unobtrusive primer based on the approach of [Simonovits et al. \(2022\)](#). They induced affective polarization by asking respondents to “List a few things that make you feel threatened about the Democrats/Republicans.” Their primer successfully activated respondents’ animosity toward the outgroup by relying on respondents’ own views about what their animosity is based on. We started by asking respondents how they planned to vote in the upcoming plebiscite; the primer for individuals assigned to treatment read:

Thinking of [outgroup] voters, please list a few things you dislike about them. Please note that we are not asking you about the constitutional proposal, but about the people who vote for the proposal. We very interested in your views on this. Please take at least 30 seconds to answer this question without rushing.

The control group received a placebo question (about promotional phone calls),<sup>7</sup> to ensure that both groups expended the same cognitive effort, as well as a negative prompt to avoid inducing different levels of fatigue and negative thoughts between the groups that could eventually explain the differences. We pretested the treatment and placebo and established that respondents understood them and did not feel uncomfortable.

After the treatment (or placebo), we measured affective polarization in different ways as a manipulation check. We assessed affective polarization as the difference in the evaluations of binary groups defined based on different political divisions (Apruebo vs. Rechazo supporters, Boric vs. Kast voters, left vs. right, rich vs. poor, and pro-life vs. pro-choice). We also included questions about whether the outgroup voters are perceived as a threat or as evil ([Kalmoe and Mason, 2022](#)). We then measured ideological stances on various policy issues, including economic and social issues, and calculated each respondent’s distance from the median respondent. Finally, to study the impact of affective polarization on democracy, we measured support for democracy.

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<sup>7</sup>The placebo read: “Thinking about the times you have been called to offer you a product or service, please write down at least three things that bother you about those calls. Please note that we are not asking you about the service or product offered, but about the calls. We are very interested in your views on this. Please take at least 30 seconds to answer this question without rushing.”

The second “randomized speaker” experiment also investigates the extent to which affective polarization changes people’s opinions on relevant issues. It included three statements by persons 1, 2, and 3, who randomly support either the Apruebo or Rechazo options, and asks respondents the degree to which they agree with this “speaker.” The statements cover an economic policy issue (“economic growth should always be given a higher priority than reducing inequality”), a social issue (“abortion should always be permitted”), and democratic attitudes (“when the country is passing through difficult times, it is justified for the president to shut Congress and govern without it”). These statements were presented in random order to control for order effects. Thus, for example, the democracy statement read:

Person 1, who votes [*Rechazo/Apruebo, assigned at random*], says that when the country is passing through difficult times, it is justified for the president to shut Congress and govern without it. To what degree do you agree with Person 1?

The goal is to assess the causal effect of affective polarization on the likelihood of agreeing with an outgroup speaker – that is, its effect on cue taking. Thus, we estimate the degree to which respondents’ answers to each statement vary depending on whether the speaker voted the same way as the respondent on the plebiscite, in line with the long-standing literature on party cues. We then test whether respondents who were primed to be more affectively polarized in the first experiment answer these questions differently.

## 4.2 Ethics

Our priming experiment, approved by the appropriate Ethics Committee, was designed to activate affective polarization not by providing negative information about outgroup voters but by relying on individuals’ own views about them. We believe our treatment question subtly boosts affective polarization, especially in the context of a polarized election in which highly aggressive (often false) information about outgroup voters spread broadly via social networks and word of mouth.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, we implemented the study more than a week before the election so that any effects would have time to dissi-

<sup>8</sup>A March 2022 Datavoz survey found that 58% of Chileans had been exposed to fake news (available [here](#)).

pate. Finally, during the pretesting process, we assessed the questionnaire and treatment to ensure they were not complicated for participants for any reason.

### 4.3 Data and measurement

Netquest, an experienced online polling firm with an established presence in more than 20 countries, implemented the survey, which was programmed in Qualtrics. We conducted it 2 weeks before the election. To ensure we have a sufficient sample size for every socioeconomic group and geographic area, as well as a balanced sample across gender and age groups, we requested specific quotas in the first wave that are not proportional to the population distribution. The quotas, as shown in Appendix Table A1, are based on socioeconomic groups (five categories defined by Netquest), geographic areas (northern regions, capital city region, and southern regions), gender, and four age groups (18–29, 30–44, 45–59, and 60+). Hence, when analyzing the aggregate results for descriptive evidence, we use weights to reflect the population distribution (see Appendix C).

Following the standard approach to measuring affective polarization at the individual level, we use respondents' feeling ratings toward groups of persons. Given the country's multiparty system, we take advantage of the binary setting of the plebiscite to construct two opposing political groups. Respondents were asked to rate groups of people on a scale from 0 (very negative) to 10 (very positive). We included questions on Apruebo and Rechazo voters, on voters in the recent presidential runoff (Boric and Kast), as well as additional pairs of opposing groups related to relevant divisions in Chilean politics. Respondents rated groups of persons from the left and right, rich and poor, and those with pro-choice and pro-life stances on abortion (Appendix Table A2 lists the full question wordings). We randomized the order of appearance of the various pairs, as well as the order of each group within each pair. We calculate affective polarization as the absolute difference between the ratings of groups within each pair. This gives us five measures of affective polarization based on: voters in the plebiscite ("plebiscite voters"), voters in the presidential election ("presidential voters"), political position ("left-right"), socioeconomic group ("rich-poor"), and abortion position ("abortion"). Finally, we included two additional affective polarization outcomes based

on [Kalmoe and Mason \(2022\)](#) – whether the outgroup voters are “a threat to Chile and its people” and if they are “downright evil.”

We include a set of questions that asks respondents to place themselves on a scale from 0 to 10, and calculate ideological polarization as the absolute distance from the median position. We explore several issues that were relevant in the presidential election and constitutional process, such as taxes, growth vs. inequality, abortion rights, liberty vs. public order and security, government responsibility for personal advancement (replication from an American National Election Surveys, ANES, question), as well as left–right and liberal–conservative scales for social issues (full wordings in Appendix Table [A2](#)). In all cases the median position coincides with the midpoint of the scale (5), except for the questions on liberty vs. public order and security, and on government responsibility, for which the medians were 7 and 4, respectively.

## 5 Descriptive evidence: affective vs. ideological polarization in Chile

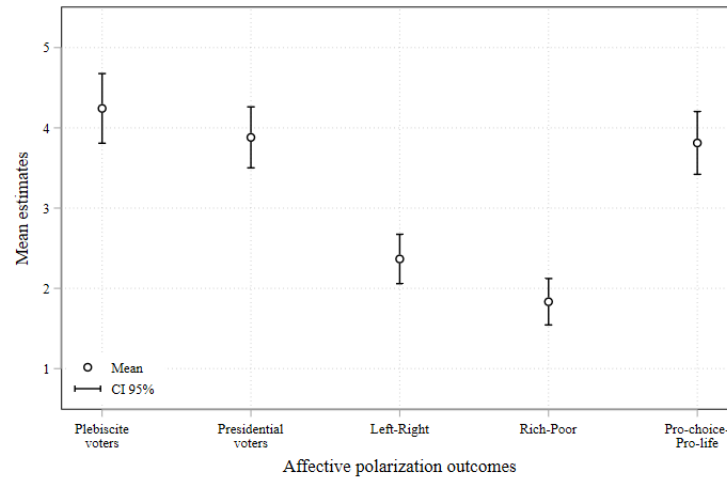
We start by looking at the levels of affective polarization on different dimensions, then at those of ideological polarization, and finally at the relationship between both types of polarization. Since these measures are constructed based on post-treatment questions, we implement these analyses for the control group.

Figure [1](#) depicts our five measures of affective polarization. Affective polarization within groups defined by electoral politics – plebiscite and presidential voters – is substantively higher than when using traditional left–right and class-based divides (rich–poor). Abortion has similarly high levels of affective polarization. Within groups defined by individuals’ baseline plebiscite vote (see Appendix Figure [A1](#), panel A),<sup>9</sup> respondents who had a vote choice – who we refer to as “partisans” – generally exhibit higher levels of affective polarization than those who did not have a clear choice – “non-partisans.” The levels of affective polarization for partisans’ electoral dimensions are of the same order of magnitude as those found in the evaluations of Democrats and Republicans for partisans in the U.S. (56 for Democrats and 63 for Republicans, on a

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<sup>9</sup>Replicating this analysis by position in the more permanent divide of the left–right axis yields similar results (see Appendix Figure [A1](#), panel B).

**Figure 1: Affective polarization I**



**Note:** Means for the control group using weights by population group. Measures of affective polarization as described in Section 4.3.

0–100 scale; ANES 2020). As expected, for the group that was undecided about how they would vote in the plebiscite, affective polarization levels are much lower (0.8 and 1.5 for the plebiscite and presidential dimensions, respectively), and are lower than affective polarization among non-partisans in the U.S. (32 on a 0–100 scale; ANES 2022). Apruebo voters are more polarized than Rechazo voters on all measures, but the differences are statistically significant only for the plebiscite voters and rich–poor dimensions. Notably, abortion appears to be a highly affectively polarizing issue even among undecided plebiscite voters, a group that shows very low levels of affective polarization in all the other measures.

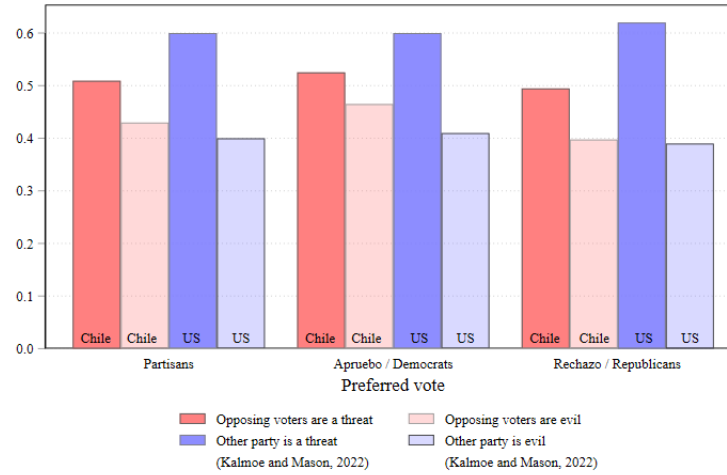
A related indicator of affective polarization is the degree to which individuals perceive opposing voters as a threat to the country or even as “downright evil.” Figure 2 presents the results for the plebiscite study alongside [Kalmoe and Mason \(2022\)](#)’s results for the U.S. Both countries exhibit high degrees of affective polarization, although in the U.S. outgroup voters are more frequently viewed as a threat than in Chile.

Our various measures of affective polarization are positively correlated (Table 1), especially those defined on an electoral base. Measures based on class (rich–poor) and abortion exhibit weaker correlations with the other measures.

We also detect substantive persistence of affective polarization on the presidential elec-



**Figure 2: Affective polarization II**



**Note:** Means for the control group using weights by population group. Results for the U.S. come from [Kalmoe and Mason \(2022\)](#), who use binary questions; thus, for comparability, we consider responses over 5 on our 0–10 scales as a “yes.”

**Table 1: Correlation between measures of affective polarization**

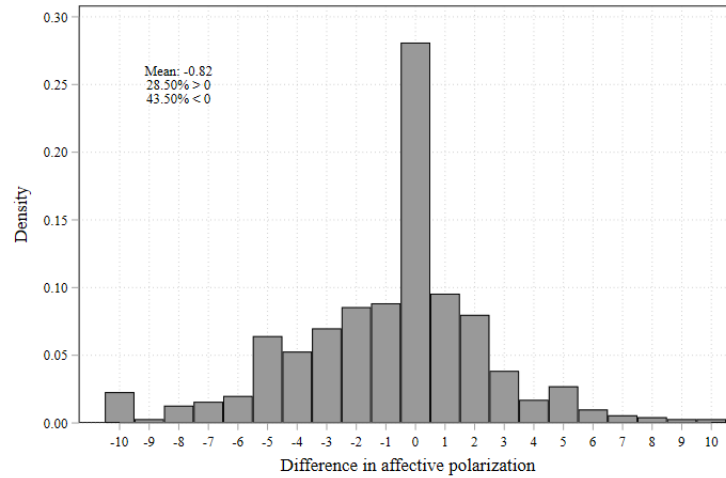
Affective polarization variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1) Plebiscite voters	1.00				
(2) Presidential voters	0.67	1.00			
(3) Left-Right	0.57	0.58	1.00		
(4) Rich-Poor	0.28	0.31	0.25	1.00	
(5) Pro-choice–Pro-life	0.31	0.33	0.24	0.18	1.00

**Note:** Correlations are estimated using only the control group. Measures of affective polarization as described in Section 4.3. All correlations are statistically significant at the 99% confidence level.

tion dimension, which we measured at two points in time. Figure 3 depicts the distribution of the difference between the Boric vs. Kast voters affective polarization measure in December 2021 (prior to the runoff) and September 2022 (9 months later) for the 1,365 individuals who answered both surveys. The distribution is clearly centered around zero and has a mean of -0.82, revealing high persistence of the measure. The positive correlations across different measures of affective polarization and the persistence of the presidential affective polarization almost a year after the election suggest that our approach to measuring animosity between political camps in Chile provides meaningful measures.

We observe varying degrees of ideological polarization across issues, measured as the distance from the median response (Figure 4). Abortion rights (which are contested in Chile and were debated during the constitutional process) as well as liberty vs. pub-

**Figure 3:** Persistence in affective polarization along the presidential runoff lines (Sep. 2022 – Dec. 2021)



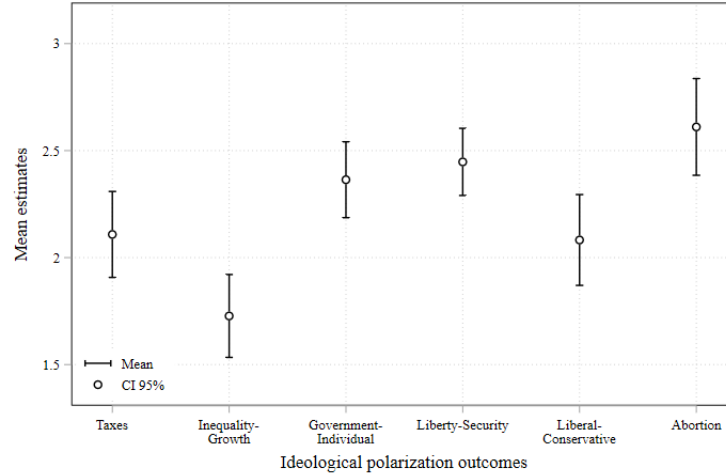
**Note:** The figure shows the distribution of the differences in presidential affective polarization for the control group between two different surveys conducted in December 2021 (presidential election) and September 2022 (plebiscite).

lic order and security exhibit higher levels of ideological polarization. Inequality vs. growth exhibits the lowest level of polarization. Apruebo voters are more polarized than Rechazo voters on abortion and inequality vs. growth (see Appendix Figure A2, panel A). The means in ideological polarization are also slightly higher for Apruebo voters on the other issues, but the differences are no longer statistically significant.

The correlations between affective polarization and individual-level measures of ideological polarization on different issues are all positive, but their strength varies across domains (Table 2). Measures of ideological polarization on more social dimensions – abortion and liberal–conservative – show lower correlations with the other measures, but higher between them.

Finally, Figure 5 presents the association between affective and ideological polarization. Since we have multiple measures, we constructed summary indexes following Anderson (2008) and Kling et al. (2007). The Affective Polarization Index includes the five affective polarization measures already described, plus the two additional measures from Kalmoe and Mason (2022), which indicate whether the outgroup voters are perceived as a threat or as evil (see Section 4.3). The Ideological Polarization Index includes the six measures of ideological polarization. Both types of polarization exhibit a positive association (correlation=0.45; and a  $\beta$  of 0.39 when controlling for a set of sociodemo-

**Figure 4: Ideological polarization**



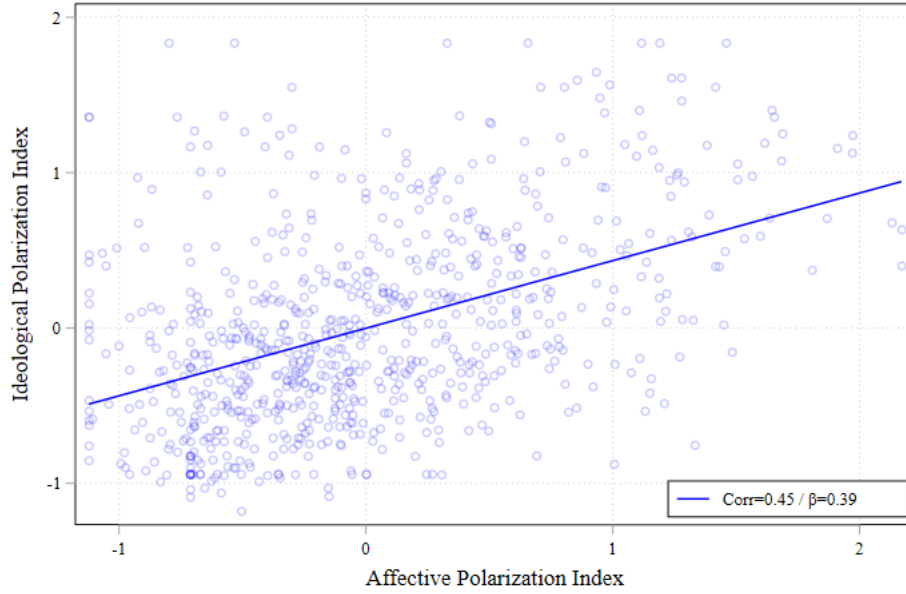
**Note:** Means for the control group using weights by population group. Measures of ideological polarization are the absolute distance between the respondent's position on the issue and the sample median. "Taxes" corresponds to a question on cutting vs. raising taxes, while the other questions pose tradeoffs between growth and inequality, government vs. individual responsibility on personal advancement, liberty vs. public order and security, and abortion.

**Table 2: Correlation between measures of ideological polarization**

Ideological polarization variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(1) Taxes	1.00					
(2) Inequality-Growth	0.32	1.00				
(3) Government-Individuals	0.30	0.36	1.00			
(4) Liberty-Security	0.24	0.32	0.22	1.00		
(5) Liberal-Conservative	0.19	0.28	0.22	0.32	1.00	
(6) Abortion	0.19	0.25	0.27	0.28	0.43	1.00

**Note:** Correlations are estimated using only the control group. Measures of ideological polarization are the absolute distance between the evaluation of each issue and the median value. "Taxes" corresponds to a question on cutting vs. raising taxes, while the other questions pose tradeoffs between growth and inequality, government vs. individual responsibility on personal advancement, liberty vs. public order and security, and abortion. All the correlations are statistically significant at the 99% confidence level.

**Figure 5:** Association between affective and ideological polarization



**Note:** The Affective Polarization Index is based on the seven measures of affective polarization described in Section 4.3. The Ideological Polarization Index is based on the six ideological polarization measures. Both indexes are constructed following [Anderson \(2008\)](#) and [Kling et al. \(2007\)](#). Only indexes for the control group are shown.  $\beta$  is the coefficient of affective polarization in a linear regression that controls for sociodemographic variables (age, sex, region, education, and socioeconomic status), left-right ideology (in three groups), interest in politics, party ID, and baseline preferences for the past runoff and the plebiscite.

graphic and political behavior variables, both statistically significant at the 95% confidence level), but as Figure 5 shows, there is considerable variation along the fitted line. The  $R^2$  is 20% without controls (and 30% when we include the control variables specified in the note to Figure 6); thus neither is a strong predictor of the other. Overall, in line with prior research, affective and ideological polarization in Chile appear to be different concepts that do not always go hand in hand.

## 6 Experimental results

### 6.1 The treatment

Our priming experiment elicits individual affective polarization, which allows us to causally identify its effects in an unobtrusive way. The treatment asked respondents to list at least three things they dislike about outgroup voters. Almost all treated respon-

dents engaged with the prompt<sup>10</sup> and on average spent considerably more time than the required minimum 30 seconds: the average time on the question was 121 seconds for the treatment and 107 for the placebo, statistically different at the 5% level. The average number of words for the treatment was 16, and 15 for the placebo.

Respondents' responses to the treatment prompt rarely referred to policy issues. We defined families of words related to four policy areas discussed in the plebiscite: inequality/economic growth, abortion, the environment, and indigenous peoples (see Appendix Table A3). We then measured the percentage of responses that included at least one of the words in the policy area. Very few respondents used these words: only 2.8% mentioned words related to inequality/economic growth, 2.9% about abortion, 0.1% about environmental issues, and 1.4% about indigenous peoples. As a reference, we included words related to misinformation and fake news; 38% of respondents mentioned at least one of these words. We conclude that the treatment did not lead respondents to think of policy disagreement with the outgroup.

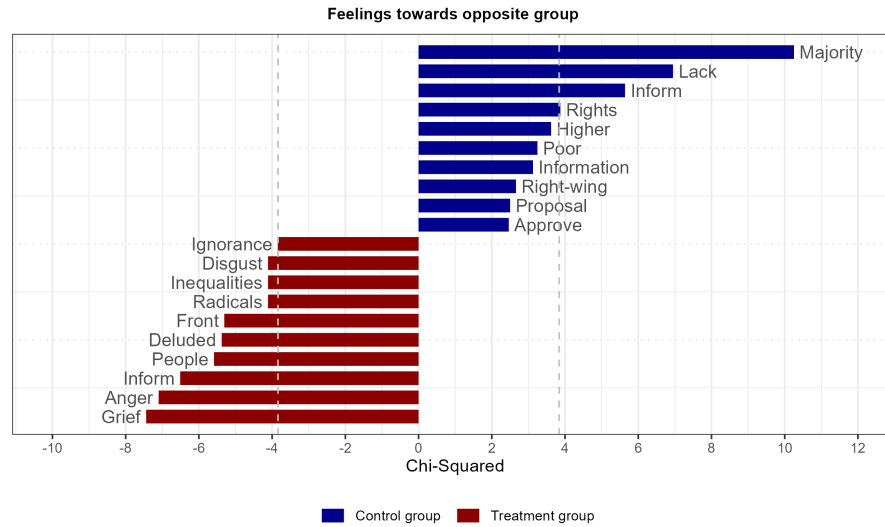
To assess the treatment effects on respondents' views toward the outgroup, we use answers to the question that we included for all respondents at the end of the survey: "What is the main feeling that the people who vote for the different options generate in you? Remember that we are asking you about the people who support these options and not about the constitutional proposal. We are very interested in your views on this. Please take at least 30 seconds to answer this question without rushing." We then asked the respondents how they felt about Apruebo and Rechazo voters, in random order. Following Ferrario and Stantcheva (2022), we employ keyness analyses to compare the frequency of words used in their responses to the question on feelings toward outgroup voters between the treated and control groups. To determine whether the differences in the prevalence of keywords are statistically significant, we use chi-square statistics at the 95% level ( $|\chi^2| > 3.84$ ). Figure 6 depicts the results for respondents who indicated how they planned to vote in the plebiscite—our "partisans" (85.3% of the sample). We do not know whether undecided voters have an ingroup/outgroup; thus, our treatment is unlikely to "activate" affective polarization.

While the words that significantly distinguish the control group's responses do not have

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<sup>10</sup>Only 0.67% of respondents left the question blank.

**Figure 6:** Keyness analysis: feelings toward the opposite group by treatment condition (only partisans)



**Note:** Dashed lines represent 95% significance levels ( $|\chi^2| > 3.84$ ).

a clearly negative connotation (majority, lack, inform, rights), at least seven of the terms that distinguish treated respondents have a strongly negative tone: grief, anger, deluded, radicals, inequality, disgust, and ignorance. We repeat this analysis on feelings toward the opposite group on subgroups defined by the respondents' baseline plebiscite position. The results are less significant because the sample sizes are smaller, but they are in the same direction and, as in the main analysis, the concepts that distinguish the responses by treatment assignment and plebiscite position have little to do with policy disagreement (see Appendix Figure B1). This finding suggests that our open-ended priming question effectively activated animosity toward outgroup voters.<sup>11</sup>

## 6.2 Estimation

Section 6.3 reports the results of a series of manipulation checks to confirm that the treatment indeed increased the levels of affective polarization. Then, we move to the effects on ideological polarization (Section 6.4) and support for democracy (Section 6.5).

In all cases, we use ordinary least squares (OLS) reduced-form estimates that control for sociodemographic variables (age, sex, region, education, and socioeconomic status),

<sup>11</sup> Appendix Figure B2 shows the keyness analysis of responses to the open-ended priming question by the respondents' baseline plebiscite choice.

left–right ideology (in three groups), interest in politics, party ID, and baseline preferences for the past runoff and plebiscite. All our dependent variables are standardized and the errors are robust. We posit that our priming treatment should affect the ideological polarization and support for democracy outcomes only or mostly through affective polarization. We focus on the reduced-form estimates in the main text, and report the instrumental variable (IV) results that use our treatment as an instrument for affective polarization in the Appendix.<sup>12</sup>

### 6.3 Manipulation checks

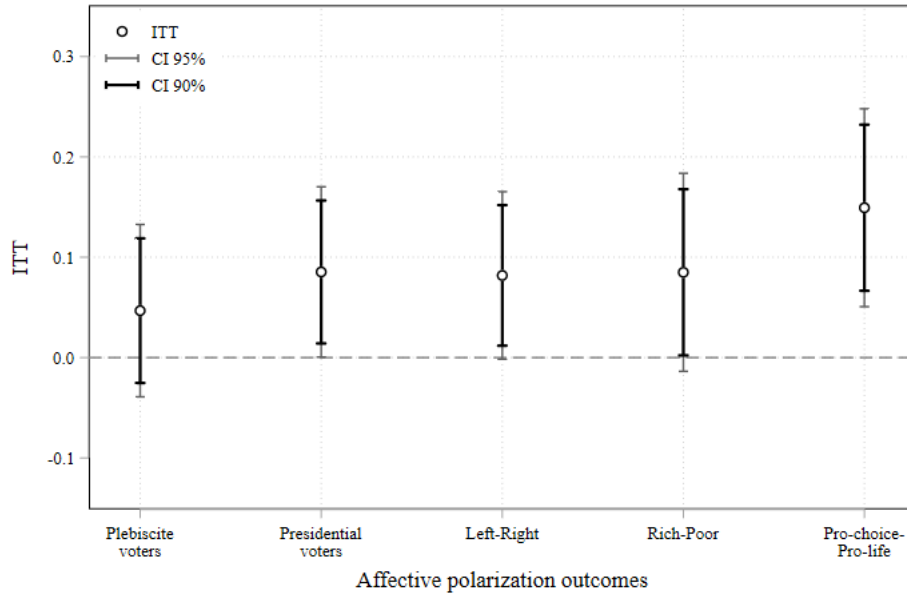
The validity of our prime experiment rests on whether it successfully activated affective polarization. Figure 7 displays the treatment effects on our five measures of affective polarization, all of which are standardized (see Table B1, Panel A in Appendix B). All the effects are positive and of the same order of magnitude, ranging from 5–15% of a standard deviation. The coefficients for presidential candidates and abortion are significant at the 95% level; for polarization of left–right and rich–poor, they are significant only at the 90% level. The result for the plebiscite’s affective polarization is not statistically significant, although it may be subject to ceiling effects.

Figure 8 presents the results for the two additional affective polarization outcomes from Kalmoe and Mason (2022): whether the outgroup voters are “a threat to Chile and its people” or “downright evil” (see Appendix Table B1, Panel B). Apruebo voters answered these questions about Rechazo voters, and vice versa. Respondents without a clear preference received a random option. These questions point more directly to the idea of despising the outgroup, and consequently show stronger results. Receiving the treatment significantly increased the chances of considering the outgroup a threat or evil by 0.19 and 0.1 standard deviations, respectively. In both cases, the results are stronger among Apruebo voters. The effect for the extent to which Rechazo voters believe Apruebo voters are a threat is significant only at the 90% level, and there is no effect in the extent to which they believe Apruebo voters are evil (although the differences in the coefficients by vote choice are not statistically significant).

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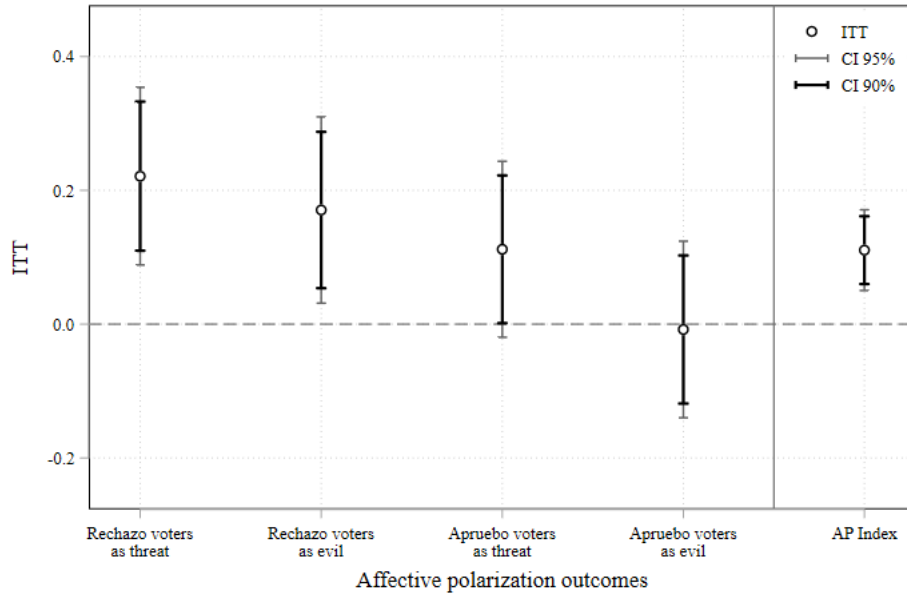
<sup>12</sup>For the IV estimations, we use the summary index described in Section 5. The IV’s first stage provides an F-test of 14.52.

**Figure 7: Treatment effect on affective polarization I (manipulation check)**



**Note:** Graphical depiction of OLS regression presented in Table B1, Panel A (see Appendix B). Measures of affective polarization as described in Section 4.3. All regressions control for sociodemographic variables (age, sex, region, education, and socioeconomic status), left-right ideology (in three groups), interest in politics, party ID, and baseline preferences for the past presidential runoff and plebiscite.

**Figure 8: Treatment effect on affective polarization II (manipulation check)**



**Note:** Graphical depiction of OLS regressions presented in Table B1, Panel B (see Appendix B). These affective polarization outcomes come from Kalmoe and Mason (2022): whether the outgroup voters are “a threat to Chile and its people” or “downright evil.” The Affective Polarization Index is constructed based on these five measures plus the two items from Kalmoe and Mason (2022), following Anderson (2008) and Kling et al. (2007). Controls as in the note to Figure 7.



The results depicted in Figures 7 and 8 reveal that our priming experiment increased respondents' affective polarization along multiple lines. For confirmation, Figure 8 also includes the Affective Polarization Index described in Section 5, which combines our five measures plus the two items from Kalmoe and Mason (2022). The treatment effect on this summary index is 0.111 standard deviations, and is significant at the 99% level, showing an important increase in affective polarization.

## 6.4 Impacts on ideological polarization

### 6.4.1 Priming experiment results

We start by evaluating whether affective polarization causally affects ideological polarization in the abstract. Figure 9 presents the reduced-form results for our six measures of ideological polarization, plus our Ideological Polarization Index from Section 5 (see Appendix Table B2 for the IV results). The coefficients switch signs, and none is statistically significant. The estimated treatment effect over our Ideological Polarization Index is exactly zero. These results barely change when looking at partisans (not shown). Thus, overall, we do not find that inducing affective polarization directly affects ideological polarization.

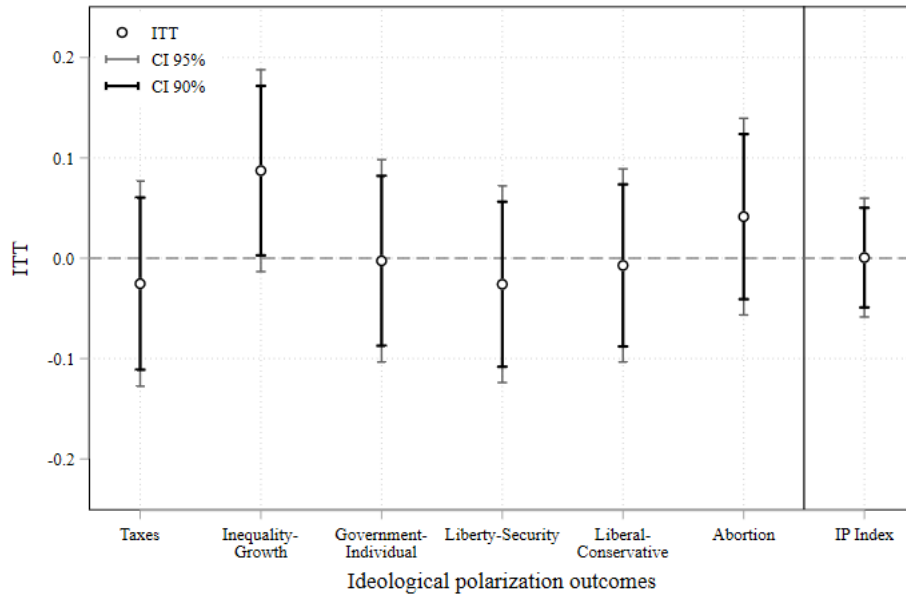
We also explore whether there are heterogeneous effects according to plebiscite choice or position on the left-right scale, presented in Figure 10 panels A and B, respectively. The results reveal no relevant differences across ideological polarization measures (see Appendix Table B3). The coefficients are generally small, and none is statistically significant after correcting for multiple testing.<sup>13</sup>

Our finding that heightened affective polarization does not directly affect ideological extremeness suggests respondents' policy preferences are not an irreflexive response to group belonging. We now explore whether other kinds of affective responses influence respondents' ideology.

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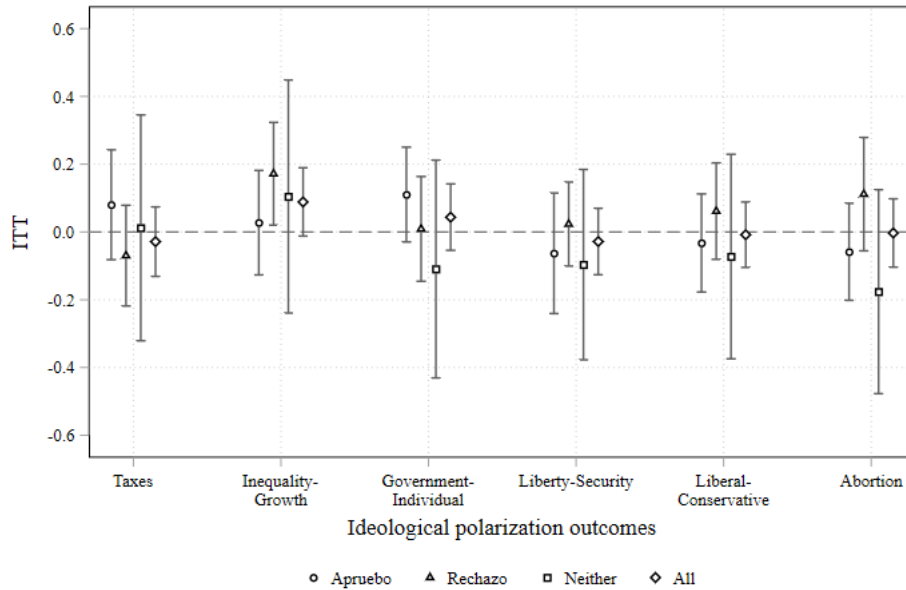
<sup>13</sup>Following the method proposed by Clarke et al. (2020), we control for multiple hypotheses and find that all p-values are larger than 0.64.

**Figure 9: Treatment effect on ideological polarization**



**Note:** Graphical depiction of OLS regressions presented in Appendix Table B2, Panel A. Measures of ideological polarization are the absolute distance between the respondent's position on the issue and the sample median. "Taxes" corresponds to a question on cutting vs. raising taxes, while the other questions pose tradeoffs between growth and inequality, government vs. individual responsibility on personal advancement, liberty vs. public order and security, and abortion. The Ideological Polarization Index is constructed based on these six measures, following Anderson (2008) and Kling et al. (2007). Controls as in note to Figure 7.

**Figure 10: Treatment effect on ideological polarization**



**Note:** Graphical depiction of OLS regressions presented in Appendix Table B2, Panel A. Measures of ideological polarization are the absolute distance between the respondent's position on the issue and the sample median. "Taxes" corresponds to a question on cutting vs. raising taxes, while the other questions pose tradeoffs between growth and inequality, government vs. individual responsibility on personal advancement, liberty vs. public order and security, and abortion. The Ideological Polarization Index is constructed based on these six measures, following Anderson (2008) and Kling, Liebman, and Katz (2007). Controls as in note to Figure 7.

#### 6.4.2 Randomized speaker experiment

As explained in Section 4, we also assess to what extent affective polarization shapes partisan cue taking – that is, how an increase in affective polarization changes the degree to which agreement with policy stances varies depending on whether the respondent supports the speaker’s position on the plebiscite. Hence, the second experiment asks respondents whether they agree with the statements associated with two salient policy positions declared by a hypothetical “speaker” who is randomly said to vote for either Apruebo or Rechazo: an economic policy (tradeoff between inequality and growth), and a social policy (abortion). Our estimating equation is:

$$Agreement_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Opposite_i + \beta_2 Treat_i + \beta_3 Opposite_i \times Treat_i + X_i' \gamma + \beta_3 Position_i + \varepsilon_i, \quad (1)$$

where  $Opposite_i$  is an indicator for whether the speaker and respondent have opposite voting preferences,  $Treat_i$  is an indicator of the priming treatment, and  $X_i$  represents the same set of control variables as above. Note that since we randomized the speaker’s position,  $Opposite_i$  is a random variable. We also control for  $Position_i$ , the respondent’s position on the same or a very similar question that was asked before the randomized speaker experiment, and was unmediated (i.e., without a speaker). We focus these analyses on partisans, for whom  $Opposite_i$  is a relevant variable; thus,  $\beta_1$  corresponds to the effect of the speaker’s vote choice being the opposite vs. the same as the respondent’s and  $\beta_3$  is our main coefficient of interest.

Table 3 summarizes the results. For inequality–growth, we find that having the opposite position to the speaker decreases the probability of agreeing by approximately 0.43 standard deviations, while for abortion it does so by 0.17 (columns 1 and 4); both are highly statistically and substantively significant. These changes correspond to 31.7% and 12.0% of their sample means, respectively, in the high and middle of the 3–43% range of the party-cue effects surveyed by Bullock (2020). There is no effect for the interaction with the priming treatment for inequality–growth, but for abortion, it reinforces the effect of having the speaker’s opposite position, with an interaction of -0.16 standard devia-

tions (significant at the 95% level). Thus, affective polarization enhances this “affective” response to who the speaker is. These results are fairly similar by political position, although the coefficients for  $Opposite_i$  and the interaction are no longer significant among Rechazo voters.

**Table 3:** Agreement with ideological statements (partisans only)

	Inequality vs. Growth			Pro-Choice vs. Pro-Life		
	Partisans (1)	Apruebo voters (2)	Rechazo voters (3)	Partisans (4)	Apruebo voters (5)	Rechazo voters (6)
Opposite plebiscite preference	-0.425*** (0.07)	-0.454*** (0.08)	-0.379*** (0.10)	-0.165*** (0.06)	-0.255*** (0.08)	-0.107 (0.08)
Opposite $\times$ Treatment	0.009 (0.09)	-0.053 (0.13)	0.017 (0.14)	-0.162** (0.08)	-0.216* (0.12)	-0.096 (0.11)
Individual controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1,262	610	652	1,263	611	652
$R^2$	0.352	0.266	0.267	0.555	0.427	0.512
	3.910	2.844	4.979	4.934	6.415	3.450

**Note:** All regressions are for respondents who have a plebiscite option (“partisans”). Controls as in note to Figure 7. Treatment corresponds to the priming treatment. Only partisans (those with vote preferences for the plebiscite) are included. Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Thus, we have mixed evidence of how an increase in affective polarization influences the degree to which partisans respond to cues from their in/outgroup. For abortion, the most polarized issue (see Figure 1), an increase in affective polarization causally decreases the probability of agreement with someone from the outgroup, further reducing the possibility of deliberation and reaching a working political compromise. We do not find such an effect for the economic issue (inequality vs. growth).

Our findings demonstrate that individuals rely on partisan cues even when the statement is proffered by an anonymous voter. Overall, the effect of a statement from an outgroup member is larger for inequality vs. growth than for abortion, likely because most respondents have stronger opinions about abortion. Respondents react to the speaker’s position on the plebiscite, conditioning their agreement on salient issues even after having answered questions about these same issues a couple of minutes before. Several mechanisms may play a role; further research is needed to understand and identify them. Perhaps, as Cohen (2003) argues, group information “defined the object to be processed,” and thus the imagined content of the policy differs depending on the speaker’s partisanship. Orr, Fowler, and Huber (2023: 953) similarly maintain that “learning of a

speaker’s partisanship likely also communicates their values and policy commitments.” Nevertheless, the compound influence of affective polarization suggests that group affects that are not grounded in ideology influence whether citizens’ agree with others’ statements.

Either way, these results raise serious concerns about the prospects for political agreement: group identity influences political behavior in a way that hinders the possibility of reaching a consensus through rational deliberation.

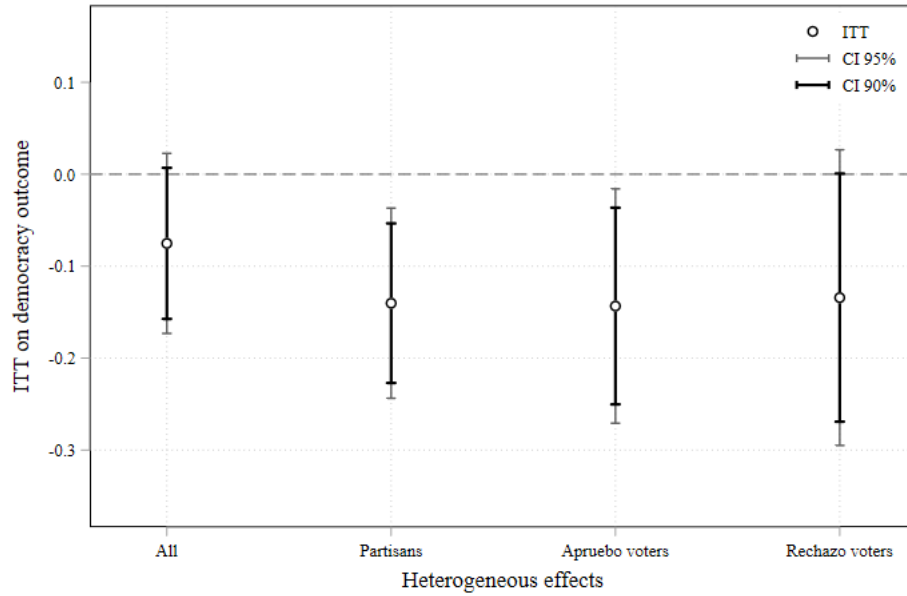
## **6.5 Impacts on democratic attitudes**

### **6.5.1 Priming experiment**

Our second goal is to explore how affective polarization shapes democratic commitment. We first analyze how affective polarization influences support for democracy in the abstract. Figure 11 presents the results of the priming experiment for support for “democracy as the best system of government” for diverse groups of respondents (see Appendix B Table B4, Panel A). Although the results are not always significant, we consistently identify a negative treatment effect ranging from 0.08 to 0.15 of a standard deviation. This effect is especially strong among partisans: it reduces support for democracy by 0.15 standard deviations, which is significant at the 99% level. Thus, we causally show that abstract democratic convictions are undermined simply when individuals become more affectively polarized, which is in line with research establishing a democratic risk of affective polarization (Graham and Svolik, 2020; Simonovits et al., 2022).

As expected, the IV results for support for democracy follow the same pattern (Appendix Table B4, Panel B). The results for partisans are strong and significant at the 95% level. They suggest that a 1-standard-deviation increase in the Affective Polarization Index decreases support for democracy by 1.26 standard deviations – a substantive and theoretically relevant effect.

**Figure 11:** Treatment effect on support for democracy, by group



**Note:** Graphical depiction of OLS regressions presented in Table B4, Panel A (see Appendix B). Controls as in note to 7.

### 6.5.2 Partisan speaker

As in the case of ideological positions, discussions about democracy rarely occur in the abstract. We therefore explore support for an anti-democratic stance when presented by a speaker with a randomly assigned plebiscite option and assess whether the response is influenced by an increase in affective polarization. Previous research has established that citizens are more likely to accept democracy-eroding policies when their own party is in power (Simonovits et al., 2022). Thus, in this section we focus on agreement with anti-democratic stances communicated by an ingroup speaker ( $Same_i$  instead of  $Opposite_i$  in equation 1). We find that when a speaker who holds the same position as the respondent argues that Congress should be shut down, agreement with the statement increases by around 0.16 standard deviations, which is significant at the 95% level (Table 4). This coefficient is of the same order of magnitude for both Apruebo and Rechazo voters when analyzed as subgroups, although it is not significant for Apruebo voters, and is significant at only 90% for Rechazo voters – note that the sample sizes are smaller. We do not find that affective polarization influences the effect of the partisan cue for support for democracy: the interaction between  $Same_i$  and  $Treat_i$  is not statistically significant in any of these cases.

**Table 4:** Agreement with anti-democratic stance, by group

	Agreement with anti-democratic stance		
	(1) Partisans	(2) Apruebo voters	(3) Rechazo voters
Same plebiscite preference	0.160** (0.08)	0.108 (0.11)	0.225* (0.12)
Same $\times$ Treatment	0.047 (0.11)	0.121 (0.16)	-0.091 (0.16)
Individual controls	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1,264	611	653
$R^2$	0.114	0.166	0.139

**Note:** The anti-democratic stance corresponds to the justification of “shutting the Congress under challenging times and governing without it.” Controls as in note to Figure 7. Treatment corresponds to the priming treatment. Only partisans (those with vote preferences for the plebiscite) are included. Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

## 7 Discussion and conclusion

A rich and growing literature analyzes whether and how affective polarization shapes political behavior, its relationship with ideological polarization, and its implications for governance and the quality of democracy. Previous studies have argued that affective polarization may hinder cross-partisan agreements (Iyengar et al., 2019; Levendusky, 2023; Mason, 2018), undermine electoral accountability and thus democratic checks (Graham and Svolik, 2020; Pierson and Schickler 2020), or weaken democratic norms (Simonovits et al., 2022; McCoy and Somer, 2019). Despite these concerns, recent research has suggested affective polarization does not have real-world political-behavioral implications (Broockman et al., 2022; Voelkel et al., 2022), although there is some evidence that it does (Levendusky, 2023). Hence, more research is needed to better understand how affective polarization influences political behavior.

We investigate how affective polarization and partisanship influence ideological polarization, and their potential effect on deliberation and the possibility of reaching agreements. We examine a context in which policy disagreements are expected to be less closely linked to parties, which decreases the amount of information on ideological positioning implied by group membership (for a recent discussion of the empirical relevance of this, see Dias and Lelkes, 2022; Orr et al., 2023). We study a context of low party

identification among groups defined by the 2022 constitutional plebiscite in Chile – a high-stakes binary election with multiple issues at play, some of which overlapped with traditional party divides, while others were not. Taking an agnostic stance, we measure animosity along multiple divisions to understand how they relate to each other. The various measures of affective polarization are all positively correlated, suggesting that despite the absence of strong party lines, there is an underlying political divide. Our data also shows that affective and ideological polarization are only moderately correlated, suggesting they truly measure different concepts. This study also broadens the comparative lens as it empirically studies the relationship between affective and ideological polarization in a Latin American country with a multiparty system.

We find that an increase in affective polarization has no consistent direct causal effects on ideological polarization. However, when ideological positions were attributed to an individual who voted the opposite way on the plebiscite, we found evidence that, at least on the most polarized issue (abortion), the increase in affective polarization (induced by our affective polarization treatment) compounds the effect of the speaker's position. Hence, although affects do not seem to shape ideological stances in the abstract, they may importantly influence people's ideological positions due to, say, affective responses to the speaker's political camp. Our results also indicate a strong party-cue effect based on the Apruebo/Rechazo divide. Prior work has demonstrated that references to parties influence citizens' views and that elite position taking affects voters' attitudes (e.g., [Broockman and Butler, 2017](#); [Bullock, 2020](#)). Our study does not mention parties' views on the issue, or the position of a party leader, but just a hypothetical, anonymous person who happens to vote (or not) in the same way as the respondent in the plebiscite. In our case it is unlikely to find any ideological association based on a strong, long-held shared identity or trust; the effect of the speaker's partisanship appears as a merely affective response, which is further reinforced by enhanced affective polarization in the case of abortion. Even in a context where parties are weak, political identities seem (indirectly) to shape how people take positions on relevant policy issues like abortion.

In practice, ideological choices are mostly associated with speakers (especially political representatives) who have positions on various issues. Therefore, our finding that affective polarization influences party cue taking for abortion is relevant. In a pure world of



ideas, people's views on critical issues should not depend on who the messenger is, but affective responses to partisanship may lead us to *ad hominem* ideological polarization.

We also find evidence that affective polarization undermines citizens' democratic commitment. An increase in affective polarization per se decreases support for democracy but does not influence the impact of a partisan speaker on agreement with an anti-democratic statement. However, we do find that having the same position as the speaker has a large impact on supporting an anti-democratic stance. These results highlight the dangers of polarization in countries with weak democratic records.

Recent research by [Broockman et al. \(2022\)](#) establishes that decreasing affective polarization does not enhance citizens' commitment to democracy. Our findings, together with those of [Graham and Svolik \(2020\)](#) and [Simonovits et al. \(2022\)](#), among others, indicate that affective polarization erodes citizens' commitment to democracy. Overall, this evidence may suggest that affective polarization has an asymmetric effect: greater affective polarization may undermine democratic commitment, while reducing affective polarization may not generate a commensurate improvement. In line with loss aversion theory (e.g., [Kahneman and Tversky, 1979](#)), several studies have found asymmetric impacts on political behavior.<sup>14</sup> According to this logic, positive impacts on affective polarization or trust need not affect behavior as strongly as negative impacts. Further research is needed to better understand the mechanism underlying these asymmetric effects since they imply additional challenges and highlight the difficulties of rebuilding institutional trust.

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<sup>14</sup>For example, [Cox \(2023\)](#) finds that unmet expectations have a greater impact on policy preferences than exceeded expectations, and [Ward \(2020\)](#) concludes that an individual's personal economic conditions have an asymmetric impact on their vote choice.

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## Appendix A: Descriptive evidence and measurement tables and figures

**Table A1:** Distribution of requested quotas to Netquest

	Target sample distribution
<b>Socioeconomic group</b>	
ABC1	17%
C2	21%
C3	21%
D	25%
E	17%
<b>Age group</b>	
18-29	20%
30-45	28%
46-60	28%
60+	25%
<b>Geographical area</b>	
Capital city	42%
Northern regions	29%
Southern regions	29%
<b>Gender</b>	
Men	50%
Women	50%

**Note:** Summary of quotas used to construct weights for the descriptive analysis.

**Table A2: Question wording**

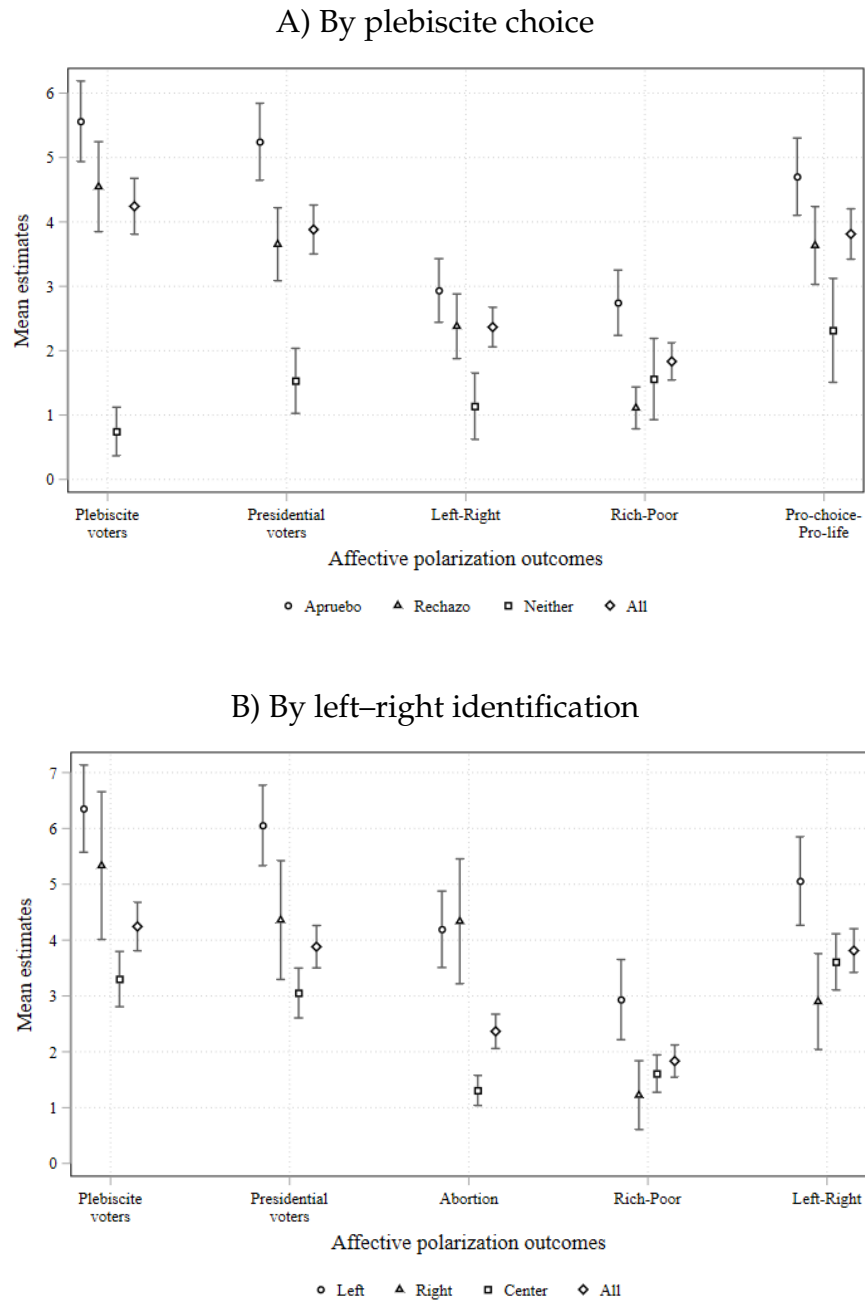
TYPE OF POLARIZATION	QUESTION	CREATED VARIABLES	SCALE
IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION	Where would you place yourself on the following scale where 0 represents the left and 10 represents the right:	Left–Right	0–10 scale 0: Left 10: Right
	Regarding <b>taxes</b> , where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means that taxes should be strongly reduced and 10 means that taxes should be strongly increased?	Taxes	0–10 scale 0: Strongly reduced 10: Strongly increased
	Regarding <b>inequality and economic growth</b> , where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means that the reduction of inequalities should be prioritized, even if economic growth is not generated, and 10 means that economic growth should be prioritized, even if inequality increases?	Inequality vs. Growth	0–10 scale 0: Prioritize the reduction of inequalities 10: Prioritize economic growth
	In democracies, the aspiration is for there to be public and private <b>freedoms</b> and for there to be <b>public order and citizen security</b> . In your case, which value do you give more relevance to? Where 0 is “Let there be public and private freedom” and 10 is “Let there be public order and citizen security.”	Liberty vs. Security	0–10 scale 0: Public and private liberties 10: Public order and security
	Regarding <b>abortion</b> , where would you place yourself on the following scale where 0 means that abortion should never be allowed and 10 means that abortion should always be allowed?	Abortion	0–10 scale 0: Abortion never allowed 10: Abortion always allowed
	Where would you place yourself on the following scale in which 0 means that the state must ensure the <b>jobs</b> and <b>standard of living</b> of the people, and 10 means individuals are responsible for their own jobs and standard of living?	Government vs. Individuals	0–10 scale 0: State responsibility 10: Individual responsibility
AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION	Up next, some groups of people are shown. On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates that you have a very negative opinion of these people, 5 that you have neither a negative nor a positive opinion, and 10 that you have a very positive opinion about these people, what is your opinion about each group of people?		
	People who vote for Approve People who vote for Reject	Plebiscite voters	0–10 scale 0= Very negative 5 Neither positive nor negative 10: Very positive
	People who voted for Gabriel Boric People who voted for José Antonio Kast	Presidential voters	
	Right-wing people Left-wing people	Left–Right	
	The rich The poor	Rich–Poor	
	People in favor of unrestricted abortion People against abortion under any circumstance	Pro-choice vs. Pro-life	



**Table A3:** Words related to four relevant policy areas and news misinformation (benchmark)

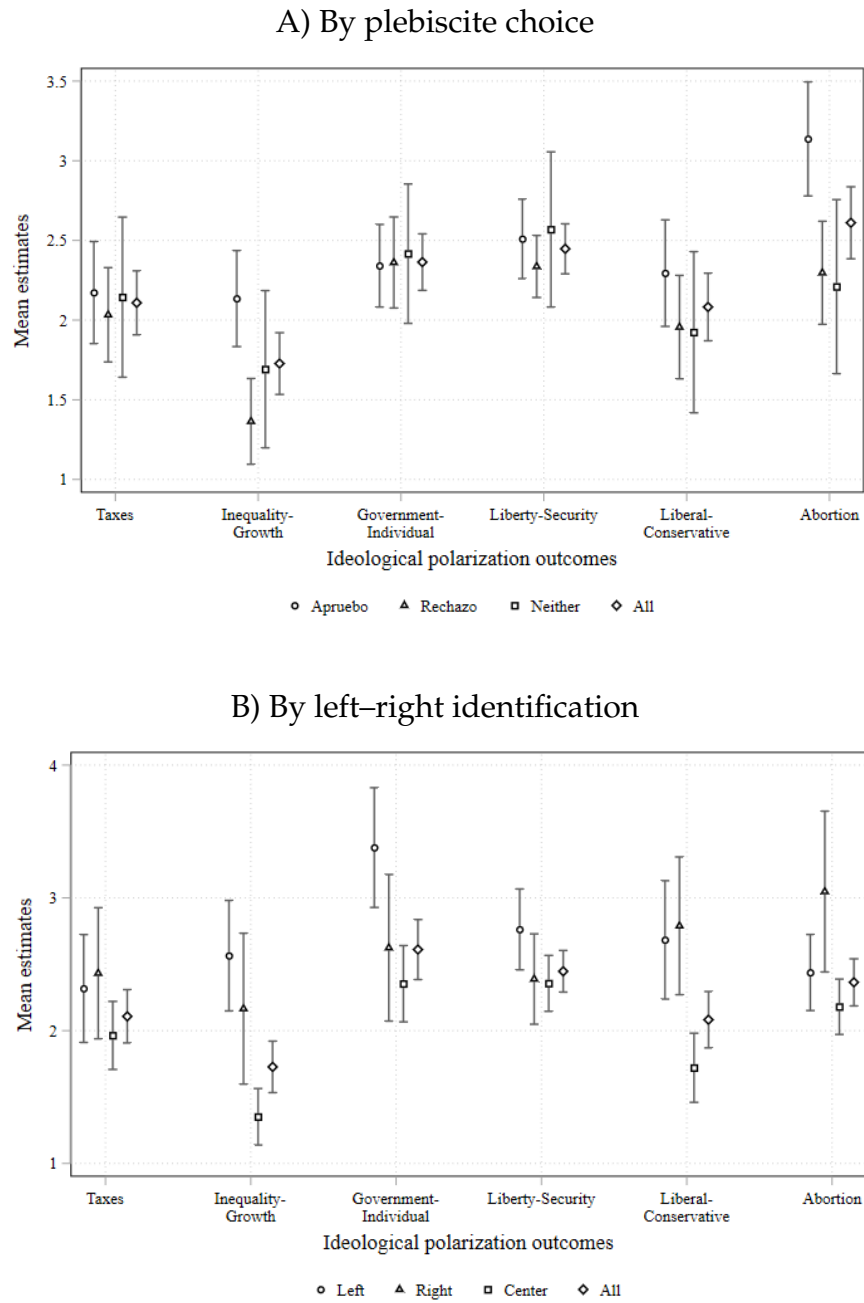
Inequality/Growth	Abortion	Environment	Indigenous	Benchmark
inequality	abortion	environment	indigenous	news
growth	reproductive	green	mapuche	fake
taxes	abort	ecology	race	lie
unequal	right to life	earth	native people	inform
job	women rights	planet	multicultural	Information
employment	life	drought	plurinational	naivety
unemployment	women	climate	mapudungun	liars
economy		weather		deception
equality		environmental		cheat
equal		permissions		ignorance
				read
				true
				false

**Figure A1: Affective polarization I means, by group**



**Note:** Means using weights by population group

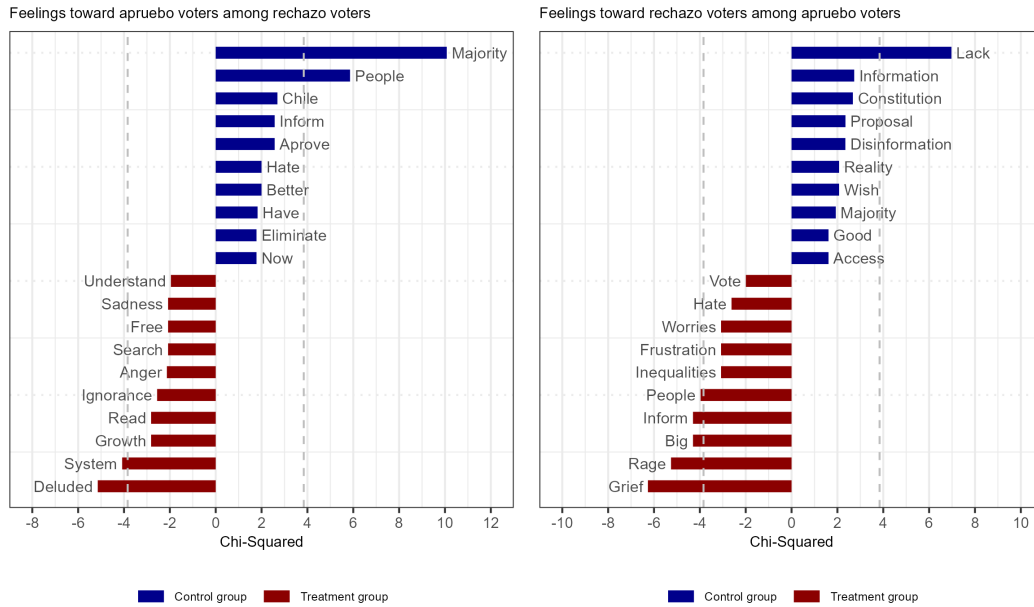
**Figure A2: Ideological polarization means, by group**



**Note:** Means using weights by population group

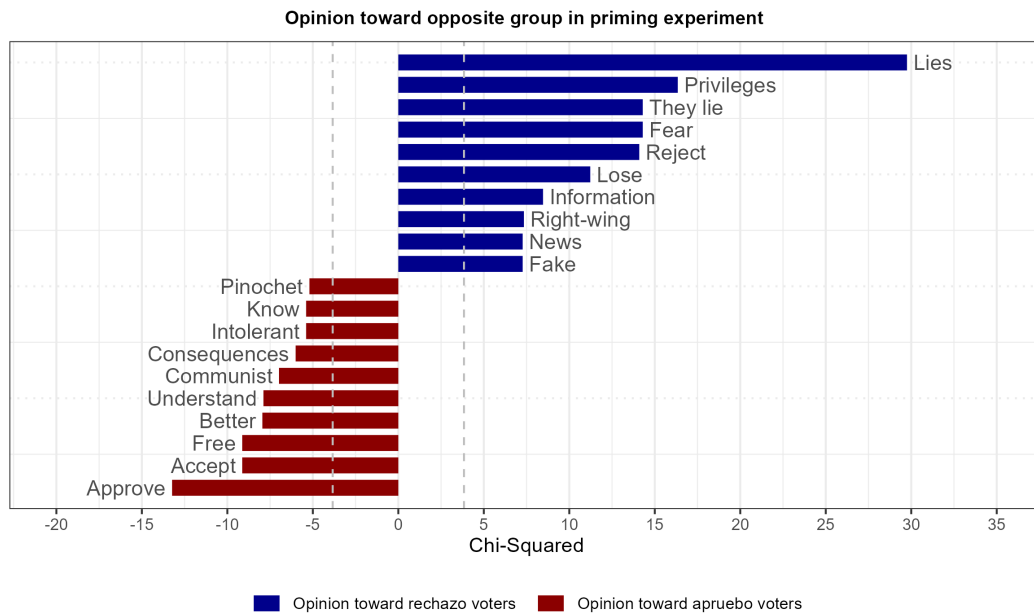
## Appendix B: Additional experimental results

**Figure B1:** Keyness analysis: Differences in feelings toward the opposite group among partisans in the treated and control groups, by baseline plebiscite vote



**Note:** Dashed lines represent 95% significance levels ( $|\chi^2| > 3.84$ ).

**Figure B2:** Keyness analysis: Differences in answers to priming question by plebiscite baseline position (only partisans)



**Note:** Dashed lines represent 95% significance levels ( $|\chi^2| > 3.84$ ).

**Table B1: Effect of treatment on affective polarization (manipulation checks)**

<i>Panel A: Manipulation checks I</i>						
	(1) Plebiscite voters	(2) Presidential voters	(3) Left vs Right	(4) Rich vs Poor	(5) Pro-choice vs Pro-life	(6) AP Index
Treatment	0.047 (0.04)	0.085** (0.04)	0.082* (0.04)	0.085* (0.05)	0.149*** (0.05)	0.111*** (0.03)
Individual controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1,481	1,485	1,482	1,481	1,484	1,466
R <sup>2</sup>	0.315	0.338	0.368	0.114	0.110	0.272
<i>Panel B: Manipulation checks II</i>						
	<b>Opposite partisan as a threat:</b>			<b>Opposite partisan as evil:</b>		
	(1) Any	(2) Apruebo voters	(3) Rechazo voters	(4) Any	(5) Apruebo voters	(6) Rechazo voters
Treatment	0.182*** (0.05)	0.221*** (0.07)	0.112* (0.07)	0.092* (0.05)	0.171** (0.07)	-0.008 (0.07)
Individual controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1,483	712	771	1,478	710	768
R <sup>2</sup>	0.185	0.239	0.247	0.150	0.178	0.218

Note: OLS regressions. Controls as in the note to Figure 7. \* p<0.10, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.01

**Table B2: Effect of treatment on ideological polarization (reduced form and IV)**

Ideological polarization measures						
	(1) Taxes	(2) Inequality vs Growth	(3) Government vs Individual	(4) Liberty vs Security	(5) Liberal vs Conservative	(6) Pro-choice vs Pro-life
<i>Panel A: Reduced form</i>						
Treatment	-0.019 (0.05)	0.083 (0.05)	0.002 (0.05)	-0.026 (0.05)	-0.012 (0.05)	0.051 (0.05)
Individual controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1,465	1,466	1,465	1,464	1,465	1,463
R <sup>2</sup>	0.066	0.110	0.092	0.112	0.131	0.104
<i>Panel B: Instrumental variable</i>						
Affective polarization index	-0.175 (0.48)	0.752 (0.48)	0.021 (0.46)	-0.241 (0.47)	-0.104 (0.45)	0.460 (0.42)
First stage test F	12.90	13.00	13.02	12.71	13.08	13.03
Individual controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1,465	1,466	1,465	1,464	1,465	1,463
R <sup>2</sup>	-0.042	-0.067	0.005	-0.085	-0.032	0.134

Note: OLS (Panel A) and IV regressions in which the treatment is used as an instrument for the Affective Polarization Index (Panel B). Controls as in the note to Figure 7. \* p<0.10, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.01

**Table B3:** Heterogeneous treatment effect on ideological polarization by plebiscite choice

	Ideological polarization measures					
	(1) Taxes	(2) Inequality vs Growth	(3) Government vs Individual	(4) Liberty vs Security	(5) Liberal vs Conservative	(6) Pro-choice vs Pro-life
<i>Panel A: Apruebo</i>						
Treatment	0.080 (0.08)	0.027 (0.08)	-0.059 (0.07)	-0.063 (0.09)	-0.032 (0.07)	0.110 (0.07)
Individual controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	612	612	612	612	612	611
R <sup>2</sup>	0.089	0.141	0.117	0.141	0.189	0.133
<i>Panel B: Rechazo</i>						
Treatment	-0.070 (0.08)	0.172** (0.08)	0.112 (0.09)	0.023 (0.06)	0.061 (0.07)	0.009 (0.08)
Individual controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	653	653	653	652	653	652
R <sup>2</sup>	0.123	0.129	0.143	0.128	0.190	0.070
<i>Panel C: Neither</i>						
Treatment	0.031 (0.17)	0.071 (0.17)	-0.111 (0.16)	-0.077 (0.14)	-0.064 (0.15)	-0.190 (0.15)
Individual controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	219	219	219	219	219	219
R <sup>2</sup>	0.223	0.189	0.142	0.297	0.205	0.193

Note: OLS regressions. Controls as in the note to Figure 7. \* p<0.10, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.01

**Table B4:** Effect of treatment on support for democracy, by group

	Support for democracy			
	(1) All	(2) Partisans	(3) Apruebo voters	(4) Rechazo voters
<i>Panel A: Reduced form</i>				
Treatment	-0.079 (0.05)	-0.147*** (0.05)	-0.160** (0.06)	-0.132 (0.08)
Individual controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1,465	1,250	603	646
R <sup>2</sup>	0.149	0.131	0.215	0.085
<i>Panel B: Instrumental variable</i>				
Treatment	-0.706 (0.50)	-1.260** (0.61)	-1.216 (0.75)	-1.314 (1.03)
First stage test F	13.37	11.78	5.95	6.00
Individual controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1,465	1,250	603	646
R <sup>2</sup>	-0.262	-0.816	-1.395	-0.521

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. OLS (Panel A) and IV regressions in which the treatment is used as an instrument for the Affective Polarization Index (Panel B). Controls as in the note to Figure 7. "Partisans" are respondents who had decided how they would vote in the plebiscite at the time of the survey. When separating Apruebo and Rechazo voters, we lose one observation of Apruebo voters because the IV command cannot retain singletons [Correia \(2015\)](#). \* p<0.10, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.01

## Appendix C: Construction of population weights

Post-survey weights were constructed based on the population distribution obtained from the 2017 Chilean Census. Each stratum corresponds to a subgroup given by the combination of education level, age group, and gender. We identify three education categories: "less than complete secondary education," "complete secondary education," and "more than complete secondary education"; three age groups: "18-35 years old," "36-55 years old," and "over 55 years old," and two gender categories. The combination of all three variables resulted in 18 strata. For each stratum, weights were calculated as:

$$w_i = (n \times \frac{N_i}{\sum_i N_i}) / n_i$$

where:

- $N_i$  = population size in stratum  $i$
- $n_i$  = final sample size in stratum  $i$
- $n$  = total sample size

Table C1 presents the population distribution and unweighted distribution (by construction, the weighted distribution corresponds to the population distribution).

**Table C1:** Population and unweighted sample distributions

Variable	Division	Census	Survey
Education	<Secondary complete	36.3%	8.9%
	Secondary complete	34.0%	32.9%
	>Secondary complete	29.8%	58.3%
Age	18–35	37.0%	22.4%
	36–54	35.4%	41.7%
	>54	27.6%	35.9%
Sex	Male	48.3%	49.0%
	Female	51.7%	51.0%
	N	13,314,848	1,499