

# From Booths to Beliefs: A Cognitive Dissonance Approach to Elections in Europe

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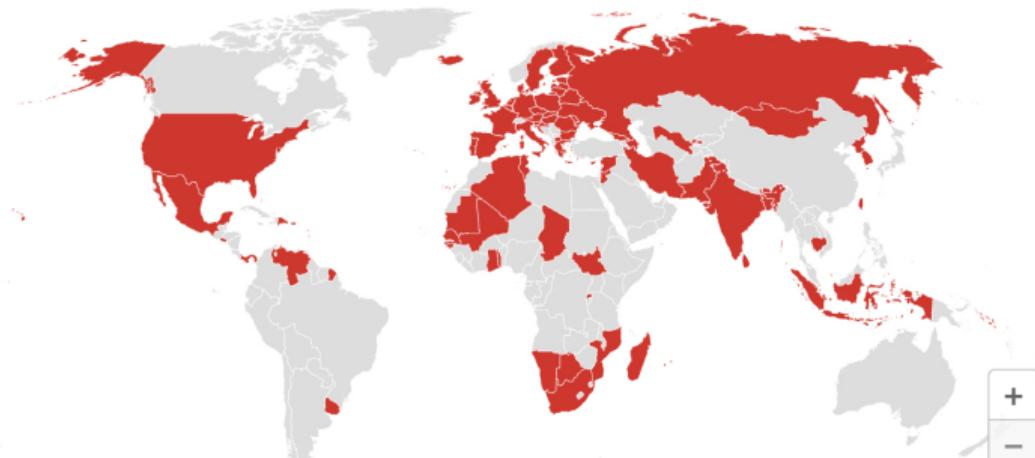
8th October 2024



# The Year of Elections

## 2024: The Ultimate Election Year Around the World

National elections are scheduled or expected in at least 64 countries, as well as the European Union, which all together represent almost half the global population.



# In a nutshell 1/2



## In a nutshell 2/2

# Violent clashes break out in Paris after shock exit poll results in France's general election

The protests came after the leftwing New Popular Front won 182 seats, blocking Marine Le Pen's National Rally

Alexander Butler • Monday 08 July 2024 14:33 BST • [Comments](#)



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Protests erupted in France after the country's left-wing alliance blocked the far-right from taking power (Getty Images)

# Elections & Attitudes

Voting → Attitudes

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- ▶ Electoral participation is equivalent to behaviourally committing to a political team. This commitment has the power to enhance attachment towards the chosen political team and animus towards political opponents (Dinas 2014; Sorace and Hobolt 2021).

# When "I" becomes "We"



# How? A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger 1957)

- ▶ Individuals experience mental discomfort when their behaviours are inconsistent with their beliefs.
- ▶ To alleviate this discomfort, they may adjust their preferences to better align with their actions.
- ▶ When individuals make a choice among a **limited set of alternatives** they tend to develop a more favourable perception of their initially preferred option.
- ▶ How does this apply to elections?

# Can Elections Change Your Mind?

- ▶ Under a group theory perspective, voting is a declaration of allegiance to a political group which shapes how citizens view themselves and their opponents.
- ▶ **Evidence:**
  - ▶ After voting for a party, voters tend to view that party more positively than before the election.
  - ▶ Citizens' levels of Partisan Identity (PID) becomes stronger among those who vote in alignment with a prior partisan leaning (Dinas 2014).

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- ▶ **The Puzzle:** Does this mechanism also apply to animus towards political opponents?

# What are we talking about?

- ▶ **Polarisation:** partisan gap in ideology and policy preference.
  - ▶ In the US, Democrats adopting more extremely liberal positions and Republicans embracing more extremely conservative ones (Mason and Wronski 2018).

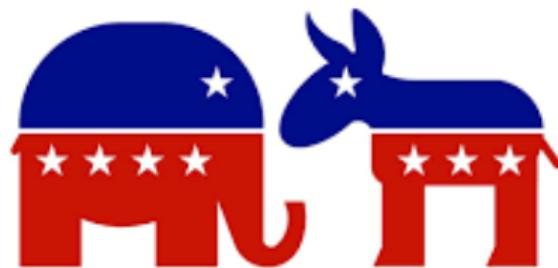
# What are we talking about?

- ▶ **Polarisation:** partisan gap in ideology and policy preference.
  - ▶ In the US, Democrats adopting more extremely liberal positions and Republicans embracing more extremely conservative ones (Mason and Wronski 2018).
- ▶ **Affective Polarisation:** the acute tendency of partisans to view co-partisans positively and political opponents negatively

# Us vs. Them

## US vs THEM?

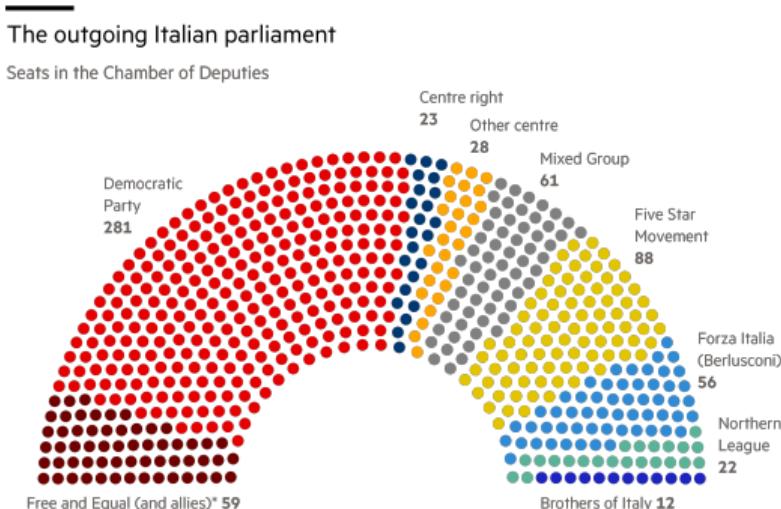
- ▶ The United States: partisan divisions between **Republicans** and **Democrats** (Mason, 2018).



# The Puzzle: Us vs. them, them, them and them

## US vs THEM?

- ▶ In multiparty systems, citizens might feel positively, or negatively, towards multiple parties at once (Reiljan 2020; Westwood et al. 2018; Wagner 2021).



\*Includes Articolo 1 - Movimento Democratico e Progressista, Sinistra Italiana - Sinistra Ecologia Libertà - Possibile

Source: Open Parlamento

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# Research Design

**Objective:** Investigate how electoral participation influences political attitudes in multi-party systems

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**Data:** Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) - Wave 5

**Method:** Regression Discontinuity Design

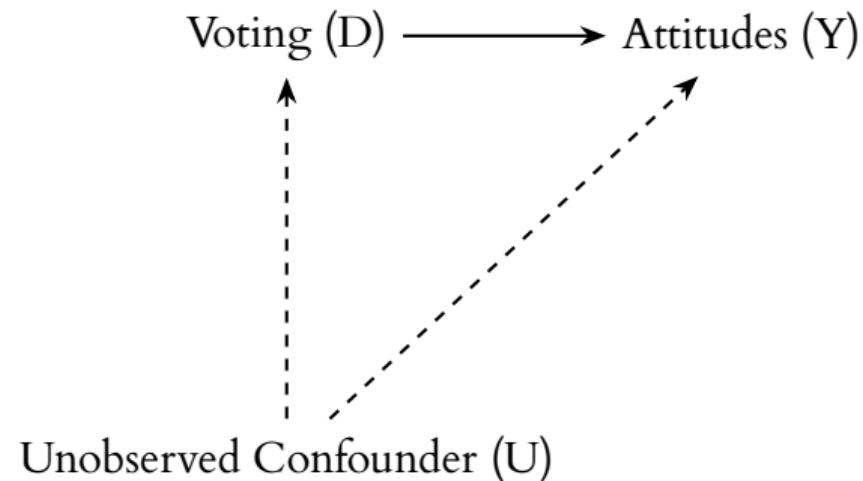
**Instrument:** Voting age eligibility (in the previous round of elections)

**Variables:**

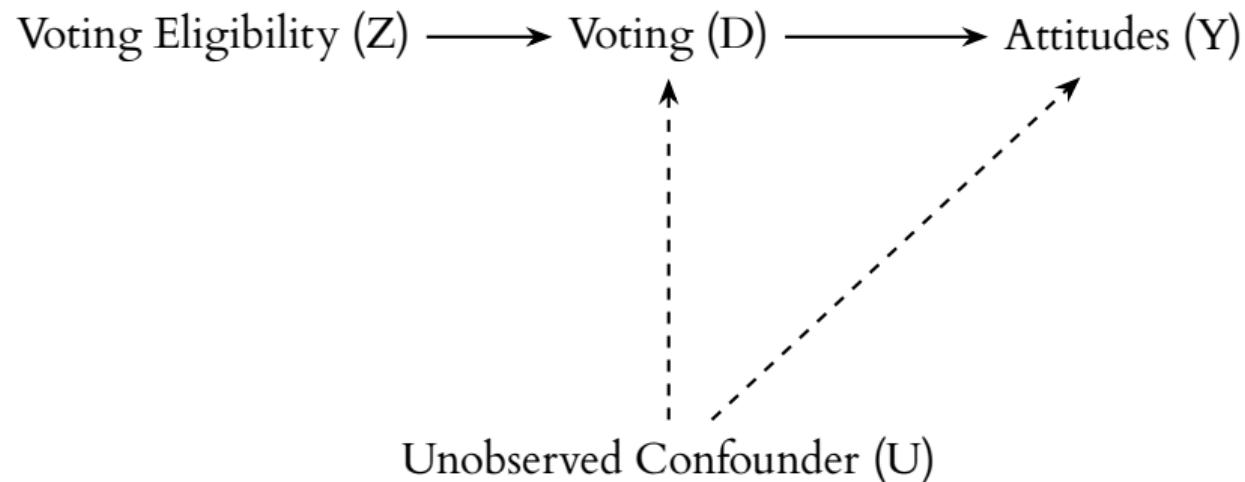
- ▶ **Running Variable:** Year of birth ↗ trying to access **month of birth**
- ▶ **Treatment:** Voting in (previous) salient election
- ▶ **Outcome Variables:** Partisanship, Affective Polarisation, (Negative) Attitude Towards Minorities, (Negative) Attitude Towards Political Leaders, Mean Like Scores, Mean Dislike Scores

**Estimation Strategy:** 2SLS

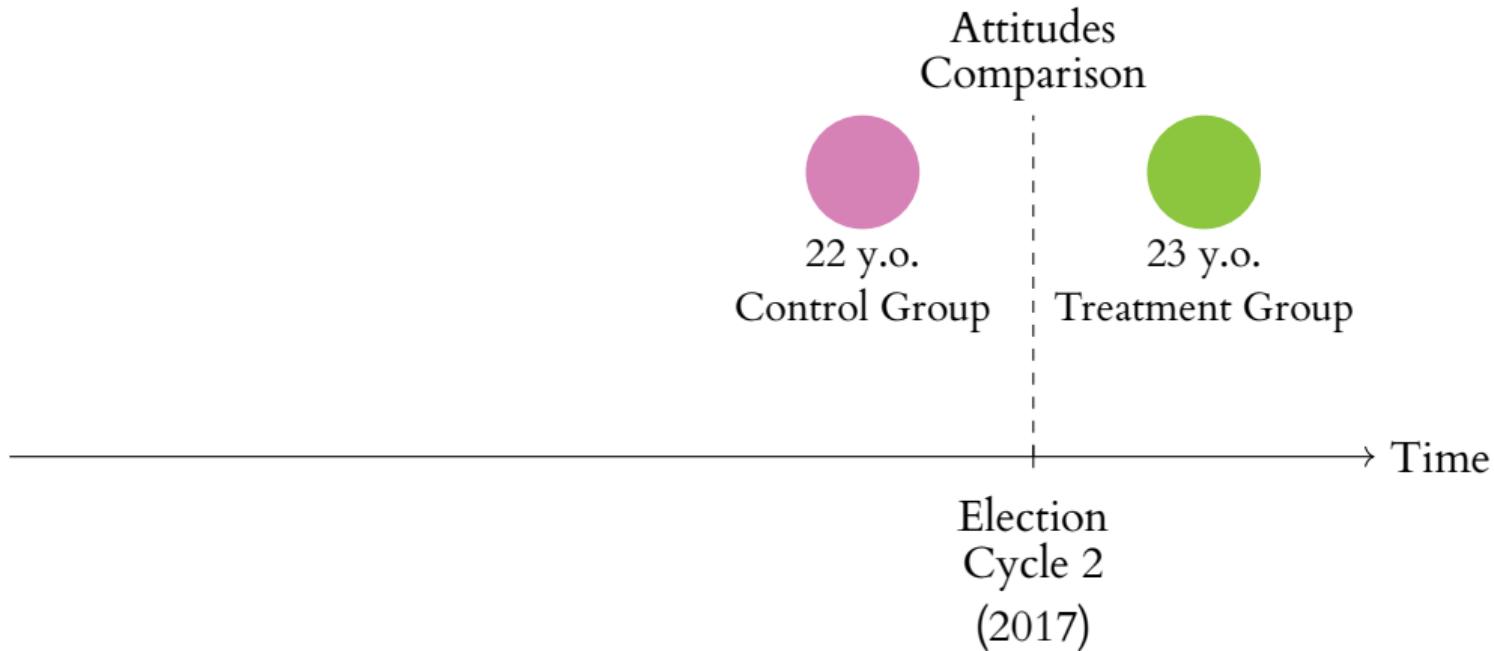
# How?



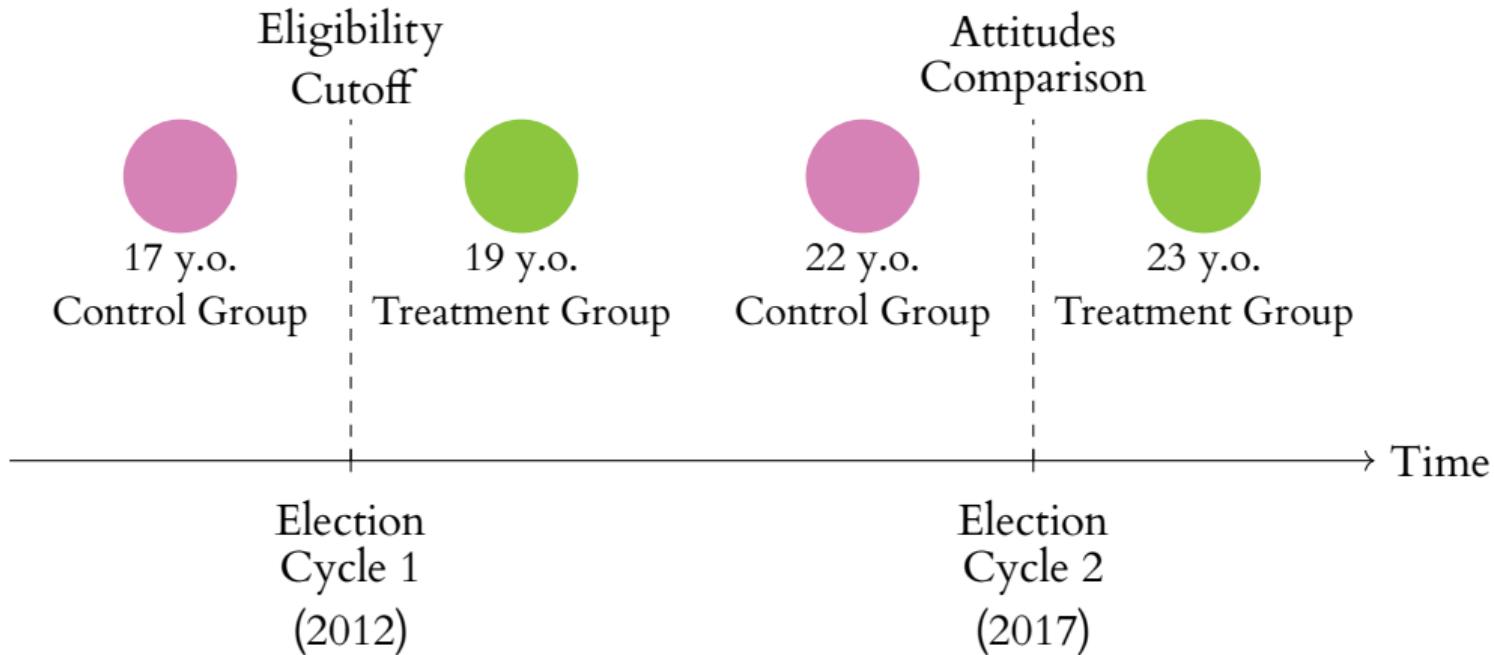
# How?



In practice:

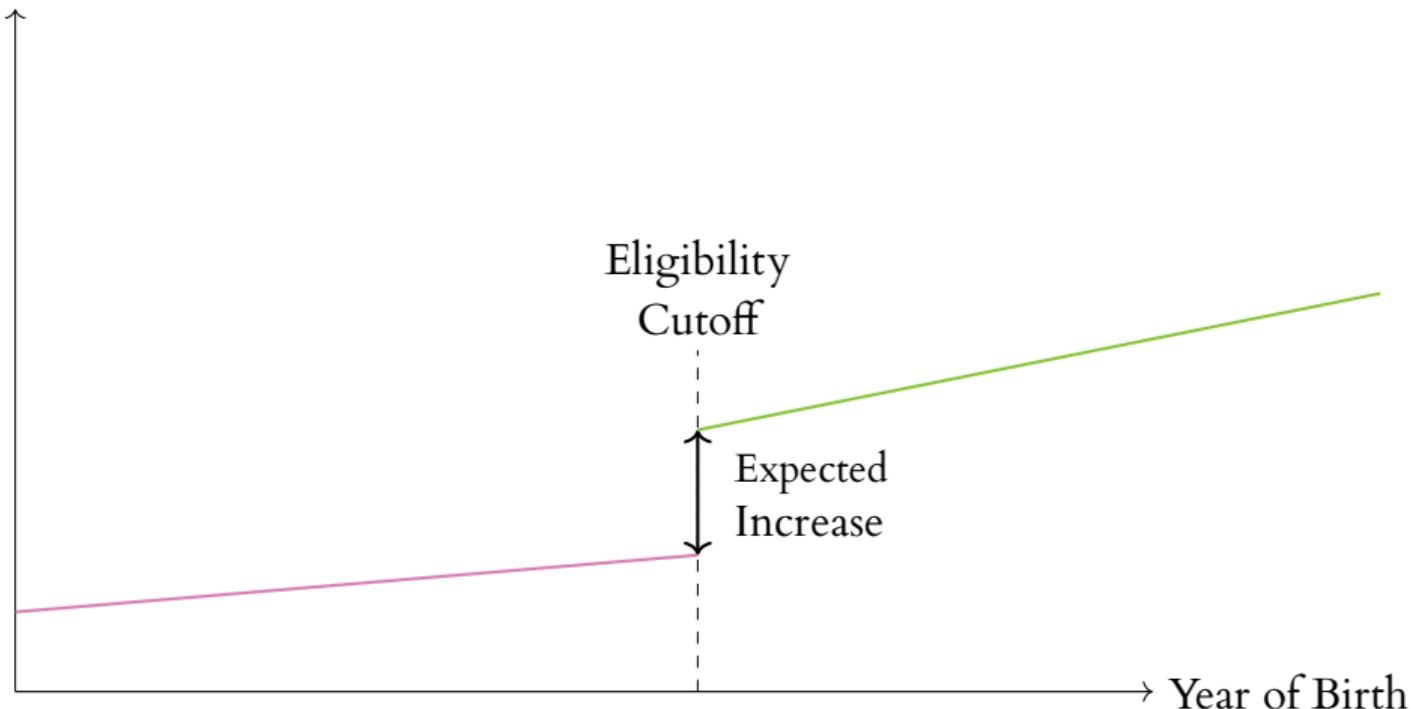


## In practice:



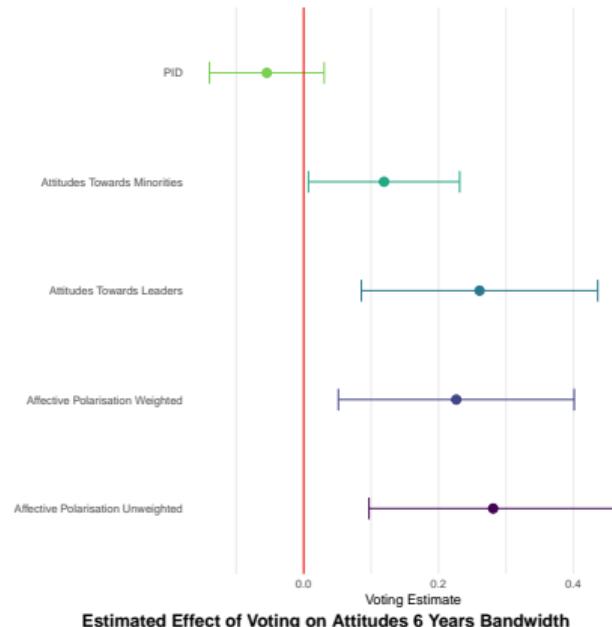
# Expectations

Level of Attitudes

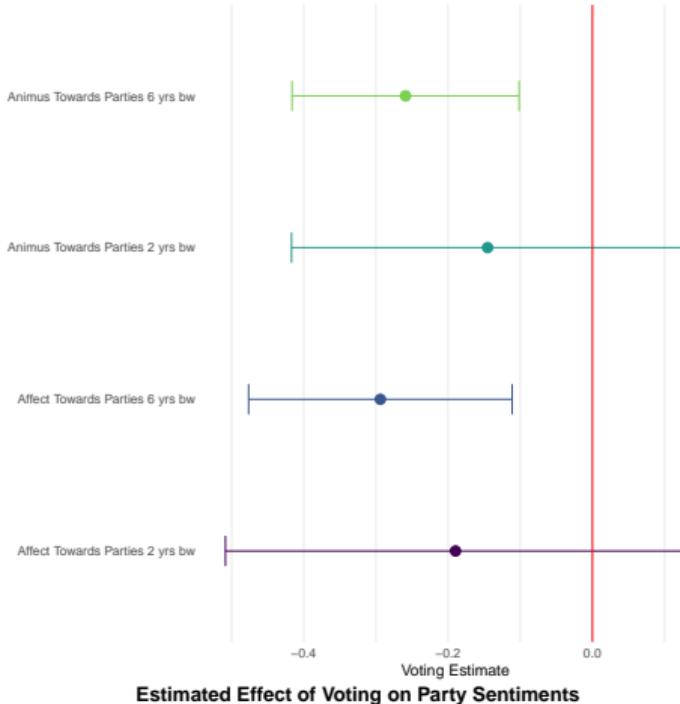


# Preliminary Findings 1/3

- ▶ Voting in salient elections increases both unweighted and weighted affective polarisation.
- ▶ No significant effect on partisan identification.
- ▶ Positive effect on negative attitudes towards political leaders and minorities.

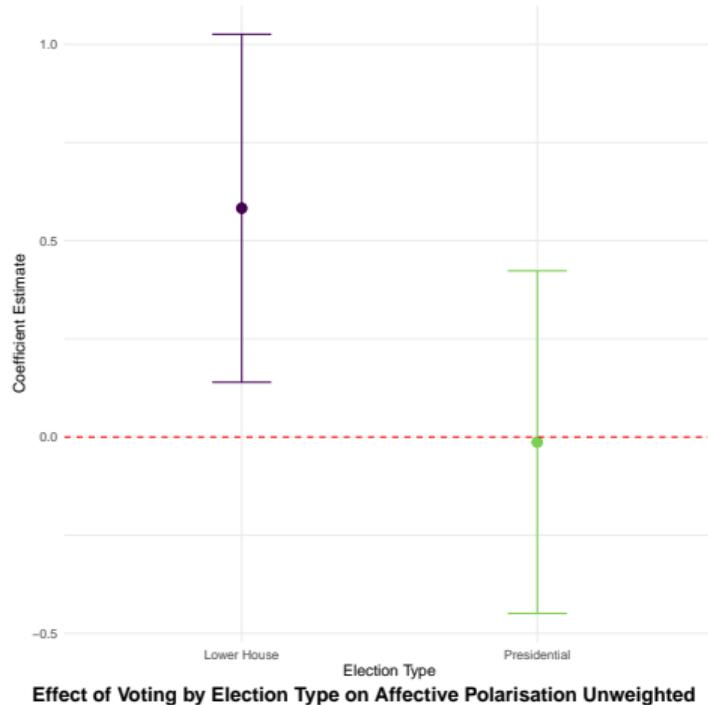


## Preliminary Findings 2/3: Like vs. Dislike



## Preliminary Findings 3/3: Effect by Election Type

- ▶ Lower house elections significantly increase affective polarisation.
- ▶ First round of presidential elections show smaller, non-significant effects.



# Discussion

## ► Preliminary Takeaways:

- ▶ Behavioural commitment to a party might have the power to shape attitudes towards political opponents, but it does not necessarily make people feel closer to the chosen party.
- ▶ Only respondents near the cutoff ↗ it is possible that developing partisanship is a gradual, habitual process. In contrast, it requires less behavioural commitment to identify political opponents and foster negative feelings towards them.

## ► Limitations:

- ▶ Respondents' evaluations of parties as a measure of affective polarisation.
- ▶ Is this really about cognitive dissonance?

# Going Forward

- ▶ **Cross-Comparative Analysis:**
  - ▶ Analyse variations over time.
  - ▶ Examine across countries, electoral, and institutional systems.
- ▶ **Robustness Checks:**
  - ▶ Implement placebo tests with different cutoffs to validate the chosen cutoff.
  - ▶ Analyse effects in countries with different voting age rules and electoral systems (e.g. Austria, Brazil).
  - ▶ Compare effects in compulsory vs. voluntary voting contexts to identify differences (e.g. Belgium).

# Any questions?



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