

Where do people like me belong?:

The Affective Dimension of Politics in Europe

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March 2024



When "I" becomes "We"

- ▶ Group membership and attachment are a crucial element of our self-definition
- ▶ Groups shape how we think about the world and define our place within it
- ▶ Ties to social groups not only shape:
 - ▶ social interactions
 - ▶ **but also political thinking and decisions** (Achen and Bartels, 2016)

Where are we going?

1. Context and Motivation

2. The Puzzle

5. Paper 1

6. Paper 2

7. Paper 3

8. Conclusion

What do I mean?



What do I mean?



Sounds Familiar?



The Puzzle:

At the dinner table and in politics conflict is often a matter of
US vs **THEM**

The Puzzle:

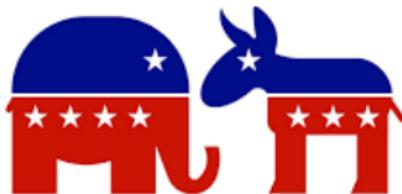
At the dinner table and in politics conflict is often a matter of
US vs **THEM**

- ▶ But, who is *Us* and who is *Them*?
- ▶ What exacerbates this division?
- ▶ And what are its consequences for the functioning of democracy?

The Puzzle: The Case

US vs THEM?

- ▶ This question has been widely explored in the United States, where this dichotomy aligns with partisan divisions between **Republicans** and **Democrats** (Mason, 2018)



The Puzzle: The Case

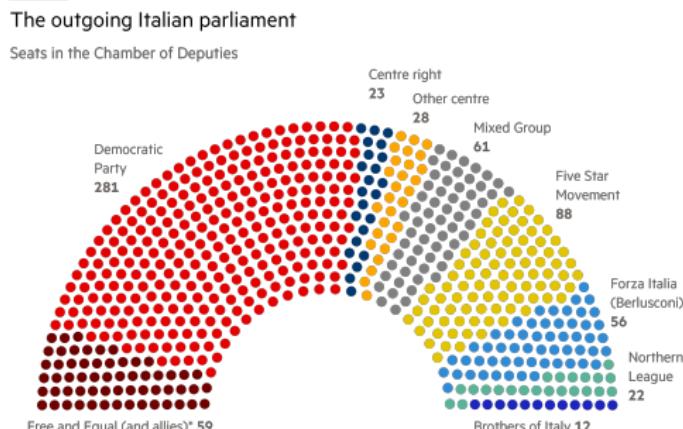
US vs THEM?

- ▶ But what would be the answer when there are **more than 2** actors at stake? Would people identify with any party?

The Puzzle: The Case

US vs THEM?

- ▶ But what would be the answer when there are **more than 2** actors at stake? Would people identify with any party?



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

Source: Open Parlamento

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The Outline

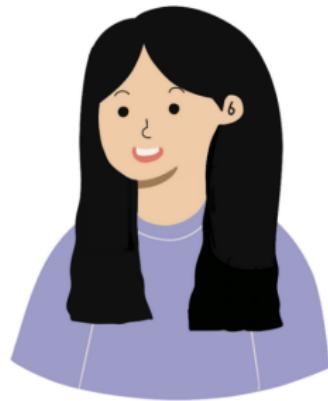
RQ: Which group attachments are **politically salient** and what are their implications for voters' **attitudes** and **perceptions** in Europe?

- ▶ **Paper 1:** How do voters define their political ingroups and outgroups?
- ▶ **Paper 2:** What is the connection between the act of voting and affective polarisation?
- ▶ **Paper 3:** What is the effect of group attachments on motivated reasoning?

A Guiding Example

Let me introduce you to Maria

- ▶ a white woman in her 40s
- ▶ Italian
- ▶ catholic
- ▶ works at a textile factory
- ▶ lives in a council estate



How does Maria think about politics?

Models of Partisanship

The instrumental model:

- ▶ weigh their party choice against policy preference (Fiorina, 1981; Garzia 2013)

The affective model:

- ▶ individuals' partisan identity can be regarded as a social identity (Huddy et al., 2015)

Models of Partisanship

- ▶ Who would Maria identify with?

The instrumental model:



The affective model:



Beyond Partisanship

- ▶ Voting does not entail attachment
- ▶ It is difficult for Maria to identify with a specific party because parties in Italy do not last long
- ▶ Partisanship for Maria, might be more a matter of identifying with a certain **ideology**
- ▶ Moreover, this could also just be one of the **many identities** that are important for Maria's self-definition

Beyond Partisanship: A Guiding Example

Maria:

- ▶ a white woman in her 40s
- ▶ Italian
- ▶ catholic
- ▶ works at a textile factory
- ▶ lives in a council estate
- ▶ **Right-wing**



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Beyond In and Out: Political Identities in Citizens' Own Words

Research Question: How do voters define their political ingroups and outgroups?

Objectives:

- ▶ understanding **which social groups** are relevant for the definition of the political self
- ▶ whether voters actually think about politics (only) as an **antagonism between partisans**
- ▶ and if they do, what **partisanship** actually **means** to voters

Paper 1: Methodology

Open-ended survey questions (Zollinger, 2024):

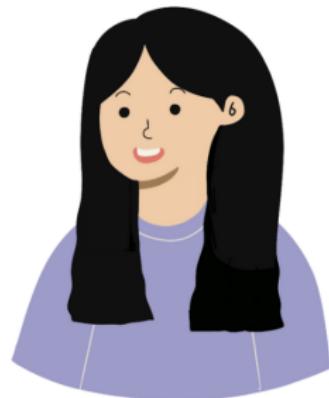
- ▶ "If you imagine people with a lifestyle and opinions similar to your own, what kind of people would these be? How would you describe them?"
- ▶ "And someone who is not at all like you? Someone who lives completely differently and who has very different opinions? How would you describe them?"
- ▶ if they mention partisanship
 - ▶ "What does identifying to this party mean to you?"

Data Analysis: Quantitative Text Analysis with LLMs

Paper 1: A Guiding Example

Maria:

- ▶ **lives in a council estate**
- ▶ a white woman in her 40s
- ▶ Italian
- ▶ **hates** being catholic
- ▶ works at a textile factory
- ▶ **Right-wing**



"Being right-wing and voting for Fratelli d'Italia for me means feeling represented as an Italian"

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From the Booth to Beliefs: A Cognitive Dissonance Approach to Elections in Europe

Research Question: What is the connection between the act of voting and affective polarisation?

Some Concepts:

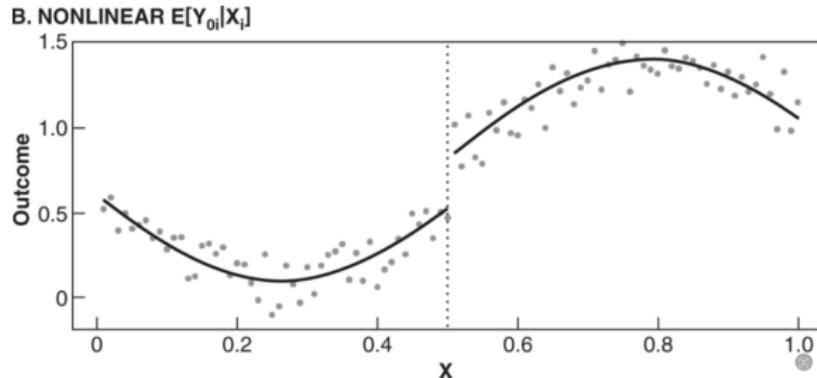
- ▶ cognitive dissonance
- ▶ issue-based vs affective polarisation (Iyengar et al., 2019)

Objectives:

- ▶ insights into the relationship between voting and polarisation within a multi-party system
- ▶ prompt a re-evaluation of the influence of democratic processes on citizens' attitudes

Paper 2: Methodology

- ▶ fuzzy RDD with voting eligibility as an instrument
- ▶ compare the current levels of affective polarisation (survey cycle 2) of respondents just above and just below the arbitrary cutoff
 - ▶ respondents **who were eligible** in survey cycle 1 vs. respondents **who were not eligible** in cycle 1
- ▶ Regression discontinuity designs expect a jump around the cutoff



Paper 2: Methodology

To measure the very act of voting:

- ▶ interaction between Eligibility*Voting, where the Voting variable measures whether eligible voters voted or not
 - ▶ this will give me the effect of eligibility on affective polarisation conditional on voting

Robustness check:

- ▶ average treatment effect on the treated (ATT) is calculated by dividing the intent-to-treat effect (ITT) by the compliance rate

Data and Measurement:

- ▶ Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), 25 countries in the European region
- ▶ **Outcome variables:** Wagner (2021) spread of like-dislike scores + out-group attitudes (?)

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We don't see things as they are. We see them as we are: Group attachment and motivated reasoning

Research Question: What is the effect of group attachments on motivated reasoning?

- ▶ Evidence shows that partisanship can lead individuals to engage in motivated political reasoning (Van Bavel et al., 2018) ↗ filtering and altering information **to align** with their partisan orientation
- ▶ Would other types of group attachments have the same effect?

Design: TBD

Data: political knowledge questions in the CSES

To conclude...

Social life and **politics** are a matter of figuring out *where do 'people like me' belong* and *what would 'people like me' do in this context?*

Contributions:

- ▶ **Paper 1:** clarify how voters think about themselves and their political opponents + it introduces a new empirical approach to measure partisanship
- ▶ **Paper 2:** insights into the relationship between voting and polarisation within a multi-party system ↗ clarify whether affective polarisation makes people vote, or the act of voting polarises people
- ▶ **Paper 3:** locate political disagreement to one of its sources: (mis-)perceptions

Thank you! Any Questions?

