

# Media consumption and polarized views of other parties.

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November 2024

## **Abstract**

News consumption is generally seen as beneficial for democracy given that citizen should be informed about political processes. On the other hand, partisan news consumption has also been linked to affective polarization – especially in the US context – and a lot of negative outcome associated with the phenomenon. In this paper, we address this question under a different format and focus on the link between media consumption and affective polarization in Switzerland with its high levels of polarization but a not very partisan media landscape and a multiparty system. We ask what effect the consumption of certain media (e.g. NZZ) has on the liking and disliking of other parties and whether the effect is the same for the left and the right of the political spectrum. To do so we use two-wave panel survey administrated before and after the Swiss National Elections 2023.

# 1 Introduction

Question: Is media consumption related to polarized views of other parties? How does media consumption relate to affective polarization.

## 2 Causes of affective polarization in Europe

Affective polarization has become a central political phenomenon in American and European countries in recent years (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood, 2019). Researchers started to focus on the more emotional and identity-based aspects of political divisions, once it became clear that we cannot fully grasp polarization among partisans by solely studying political ideology (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). In the USA in particular, party identification is an important group identity, structuring society beyond political interactions, so that divisions are found not only in ideology but also in everyday lives, affecting people's place of residence and even cultural consumption (Mason, 2018; Mutz & Rao, 2018).

Building on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1982) as well as Self-Categorization Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), affective polarization describes the relation between in-group and out-group evaluations, referring to the tendency of individuals to favour their in-group while holding more negative sentiment towards the out-group. Affective polarization increases with higher levels of in-group favouritism and with stronger out-group animosity, although both components are not always studied separately (Gidron, Adams, & Horne, 2020; Iyengar et al., 2012; Torcal & Harteveld, 2024). While it seems undisputed that affective polarization has increased in the US, more recent comparative research including European multi-party systems find more mixed results, and have so far focused on measurement and description of affective polarization in different countries (Gidron et al., 2020; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2024). Hence, within a very short time period, we gained much more knowledge about differences between countries and changes in affective polarization over time. However, we still know very little about the causes of affective polarization and even less about the mechanisms.

When it comes to the causes, we can broadly distinguish between contextual factors and individual-level factors. Comparative research on affective polarization in Europe has mostly focused on context so far. The economic environment, and levels of inequality are associated with more affective polarization, albeit the direction of causation still needs to be established (Horne, Adams, & Gidron, 2024). Further, it has been shown that poor government performance and ethnic divisions are important drivers of affective polarization (Bradley & Chauchard, 2022; Reiljan, Garzia, Silva, & Trechsel, 2024). Other drivers are political culture and polarization among political elites. Finally, an important aspect - in some cases deemed the main factor for

increased hostility, especially in the US - is the media environment (Iyengar et al., 2019; Lelkes, Sood, & Iyengar, 2017; Levendusky, 2013). However, knowledge about the relationship between media and polarization in Europe is lacking. Even less is known about the mechanisms that connect the media environment and affective polarization in Europe.

## **2.1 Media consumption and affective polarization**

Most research has focused on the impact of social media on (affective) polarization in the US. Results of this broad literature are inconclusive and to this day there is no agreement whether and to what degree social media affects polarization (Reisman & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2024). The mechanisms brought forward for a negative or positive impact seem similarly convincing: The “optimists” argue that social media technologies allows to communicate across social boundaries and interact with people from different backgrounds and with different political views (Barberá, 2020). The more pessimistic perspective has claimed that social media technology fosters the creation of “echo chambers” – self-referential spaces in which like-minded people exchange information and thereby create stronger ingroup identities and out-group aversion (e.g. Sunstein, 2018; for an overview of the debate see Barberá, 2020). Trust towards other political views and social environments decreases, and the overall level of affective polarization increases. While both mechanisms seem plausible, empirical findings are contradictory so far about which mechanism is more prevalent (or actually occurring), pointing to the need for more research (Asker & Dinas, 2019; Bail et al., 2018; A. M. Guess et al., 2023; Nyhan et al., 2023).

Beyond social media, is an important question how changing media environments (and in particular the prevalence of online media) leads to different types of media consumption. Exposure and consumption might be more selective, such that readers are caught in “filter bubbles” (Barberá, 2020; A. M. Guess, 2021; A. M. Guess et al., 2023; Sunstein, 2018). The mechanisms connecting consumption and polarization are similar: one-sided media consumption will lead to more narrow information about political issues, and perceptions that are not necessarily accurate but in line with one’s political views, leading to stronger mistrust towards other political views, and potentially more negative perceptions of political opponents (Asker & Dinas, 2019; Iyengar et al., 2012; Levendusky, 2013; Tsfat, n.d.; Zhu, Weeks, & Kwak, 2024). When it comes to the literature on media consumption and (affective) polarization, we can identify similar problems as discussed above: results are inconclusive and mechanisms are under-studied. And since the majority of research has studied the US case, we even know less about the relation between media consumption an affective polarization in European multi-party systems.

## 2.2 Hypotheses

In this study, we are interested in (selective) media consumption and how it affects affective polarization on the individual level. We study this relationship in a real-world political campaign: the 2023 Swiss national elections.

We expect first, that affective polarization is influenced by the type of media citizens consume. Different sources of information may have a different impact on the affective polarization of citizens during political campaigns. Specifically, more traditional media sources – newspapers, TV, radio, newsletters – have a broad reach and disseminate political information to a general public. As a result, the type of political information distributed by more traditional media is expected to be more balanced, and to include less partisan information. Thus, our first hypothesis is that consumption of more traditional media sources during electoral campaigns leads to lower levels of affective polarization (H1a).

In contrast, voters who consume less traditional media sources – online media or social media – are supposedly presented with less balanced news during the political campaigns. As a result, they are exposed to political information that reinforces their political predisposition, highlighting the difference between partisan in- and out-groups. We thus expect that exposure to and consumption of non-traditional media during electoral campaigns increases affective polarization (H1b).

Although more traditional sources generally present more balanced political information, there exists a large variety of newspapers aiming at different ideological segments of the electorate. Indeed, while some media’s readership is distributed along the ideological space, readership composition of others are largely concentrated in different poles of the ideological spectrum. Reading polarizing newspapers affects voters’ evaluation of partisan in- and out-groups. While the readership of centrist newspapers may be presented with more balanced political information, the readership of polarized newspapers are exposed to content confirming their pre-existing beliefs. As a consequence, the polarized content of news outlet should increase affective polarization, and we expect that the level of affective polarization increases among voters who are more exposed to polarized newspapers (H2).

However, voters may consume polarized newspapers that are in the opposite direction of their ideological position. This could have two effects: either strengthening existing stereotypes of partisan out-groups (increase in affective polarization), which is in line with H2, or leading to more understanding of different partisan groups and therefore no impact on affective polarization (Bail et al., 2018; Garrett et al., 2014; A. Guess & Coppock, 2020).

### 3 Data and Methods

The paper relies on original survey data collected during the 2023 Swiss National election. During this election, electoral district (canton) elect their representative for the two parliamentary chambers of the National parliament. We conducted a two wave panel survey during the National Swiss election campaign. The first wave was conducted about six weeks before the election, at the start of the electoral campaign. The second survey wave was fielded right after the election. Using this data, we estimate how the electoral campaign, and specific news consumption of individual voters, affect their level of affective polarization.

To investigate the impact of electoral campaign and news consumption on voters' affective polarization, we rely on a set of questions from the two wave panel survey to operationalize our variables. First, to measure selective exposure, we asked respondents to place the six main parties - SVP, SP, FDP, Mitte, GPS, and GLP - on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means that they dislike the party and 10 means that they like the party. We ask respondents to indicate the affect for these parties in the first wave, before the election and in the second survey wave, after the election. Doing so enables us to see how the level of affective polarization changes during the campaign for individual voters.

Second, we rely on different survey questions related to the political news consumption of survey respondents. During the second survey wave, we asked respondents what was the main source of information used during the political campaign, the news consumption frequency of the different type of sources, as well as the three main newspaper respondents consume to get information on the election with a text-entry related to an auto fill software for 95 different newspaper of different importance in the Swiss media landscape. Using these survey questions, we operationalize the political news consumption of survey respondents.

Finally, we also rely on the reported political interest of voters as well as their left-right self position to operationalize voters' ideology and control for their political interest. Indeed, as political interest is a driver of both news consumption and affective polarization, controlling for the level of interest of voters is fundamental in our analyses.

#### 3.1 Operationalization

In our analyses, we use the level of affective polarization and the news consumption of voters as independent variables. However, measuring affective polarization and news consumption is not straightforward. First, the measure of affective polarization in multi party-systems has been subjected to some debates and recent advancement suggest different operationalization (). We use the measure developed by Wagner (2021) to measure affective polarization and

more specifically the weighted distance metric. However, while Wagner (2021) argues that the weighted distance is an appropriate measure of affective polarization in multiparty systems, he compares four different measures and shows that they yield different results. Thus, while we operationalize the affective polarization of voters as the weighted distance, we replicate the analyses presented in the paper with the spread, weighted spread and distance measure in the appendix. Using the measurable distance metric, we compute the affective polarization of voters before and after the electoral campaign. Figure 1 presents the distribution of affective polarization of individual between wave 1 and wave 2.

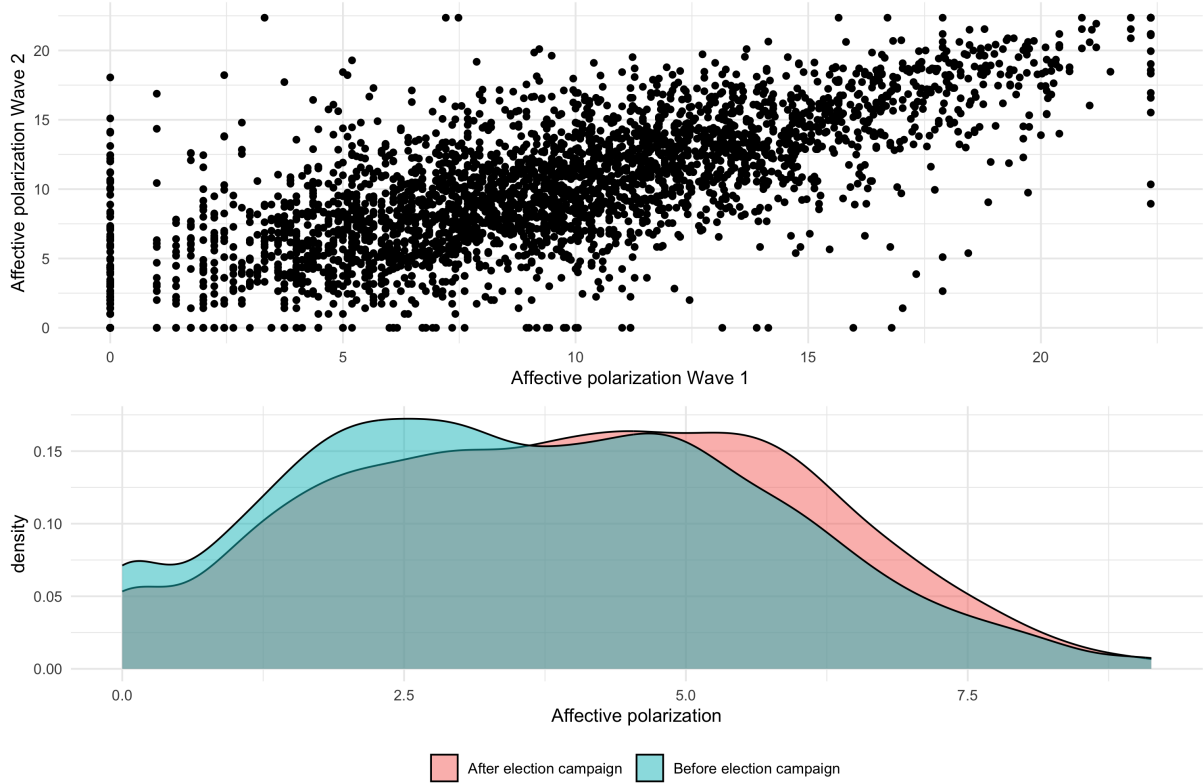


Figure 1: Distribution of affective polarization before and after the electoral campaign.

Figure 1 shows on top a scatter plot with the level of affective polarization of individual voters before the election on the x axis and after the election on the y axis and shows that while there is a strong positive correlation between affective polarization of voters in the first and second waves, there is a strong variation in the change in levels of affective polarization before and after the election. Indeed, while we observe a clear increase in affective polarization during the electoral campaign for some voters, other see a net decrease in affective polarization. This variation is the key point of interest in this paper. The lower part of Figure 1 compares the distribution of affective polarization before and after the electoral campaign. It shows that while distribution are relatively similar, there is a net increase in the level of affective polarization during the political campaign. This result indicates that the electoral campaign seems to increase

the general level of affective polarization of voters.

Second, political news consumption is a complex concept that can be operationalized in various ways. In this study, we differentiate between two types of news consumption: the type of media voters use (1) and the ideological leaning of the consumed outlet (2). To operationalize the type of news consumption by voters, we rely on two different indicators. First, we consider the main source of information consumed by voters. We asked respondents to indicate the main source they use to get political information and differentiate between Classical sources (TV, Newspaper and Radio), internet in general, social media, messengers apps, or informal discussion with friends colleagues and family. Second, we operationalize the intensity of consumption of the different sources. We use two survey questions to operationalize the frequency of news consumption. First, we asked respondents to indicate whether they used different source of information. In a second step, if they indicated using it, we asked them to indicate the frequency of use in a five point scale, each point representing a different intensity: (1) once a month, (2) once a week, (3) several times a week, (4) once a day, and (5) several times a day. We used these two questions to operationalize the frequency of use for Newspaper, TV, Radio, Party website, Newsletter emails, Internet, Social Media, Discussion with friends and family or discussion with colleagues. The variables take the value 0 if respondents indicated not using the media, and the value of the frequency of use if they indicated using the media. This leaves nine six point scale variables indicating the intensity of usage for the different type of media. Table 1 presents descriptive summary of the distribution of the main source and the usage frequency.

Table 1 first shows that traditional media sources - TV, newspaper and radio - remain the main source for political information for the majority of the respondents, while less than 10% of respondents indicate that social media is their primary source of information and barely 1% of respondents indicate using primarily messenger apps. Internet is the main source of information of around 18% of respondents, just as informal discussion with friends, family or colleagues. Interestingly, this shows that interpersonal contact is the main source of information for almost one fifth of respondents in our survey. Second, we see that the frequency of source usage is largely skewed toward lower use. This is largely driven by the fact that respondents who do not use the source are coded 0. Nevertheless, we can see that usage frequency is higher for newspaper and TV, as well as for discussion with Friends and Family. However, voters don't rely frequently on party websites or newsletters.

In the analyses, we use the main source of information and the usage frequency to investigate the effect the type of media consumption has on affective polarization during the political campaign. However, we also aim to test the effect of the ideological leaning of sources has affective polarization during the electoral campaign. To operationalize the ideological leaning of news

Main sources	Media Type	Number of observations	Share
	Traditional Media	1601	0.529
	Internet	559	0.185
	Social Media	268	0.089
	Messenger apps	36	0.012
	Informal discussion	562	0.186
Usage frequency	Media Type	Average	Standard Deviation
	Newspaper	1.609	1.74
	TV	1.039	1.54
	Radio	0.59	1.38
	Party Website	0.19	0.71
	Internet	0.48	1.2
	Email newsletter	0.11	0.56
	Social Media	0.34	1.09
	Discussion with Freinds and Family	0.77	1.33
	Discussion with colleagues	0.23	0.82

Table 1: Caption

sources, we rely on a proxy measure and compute the average ideological self-position of the source readership. In the post-election survey wave, we asked to respondents who indicated using newspapers as information sources, to write the three main newspaper they consume to get political information. Based on their responses, we computed the average left-right self position of the readership combining 2740 valid responses distributed among the 95 pre-identified sources. Figure 2 presents the distribution of the ideological score of the 95 pre-identified newspapers.

Figure 2 shows that most sources have a readership that position on average between 4 and 7 on the left-right scale. While the large majority of news outlets are relatively centered, we see that the distribution of readership is skewed to the right end of the scale, suggesting that more newspapers have right leaning readerships than left leaning readerships. Using this values which is giving an ideological score for each of the 95 sources, we operationalize the ideological leaning of respondents news consumption by imputing the corresponding ideological score of each newspaper to each respondent who indicated using the source.

Finally, we also operationalize political interest and the ideology of voters rely on two questions asked in the first survey wave before the election campaign. We asked respondents to report the interest in politics with a five point scale, from not interested (1) to very interested (5). To operationalize the ideology of respondents, we rely on a question asking them to self



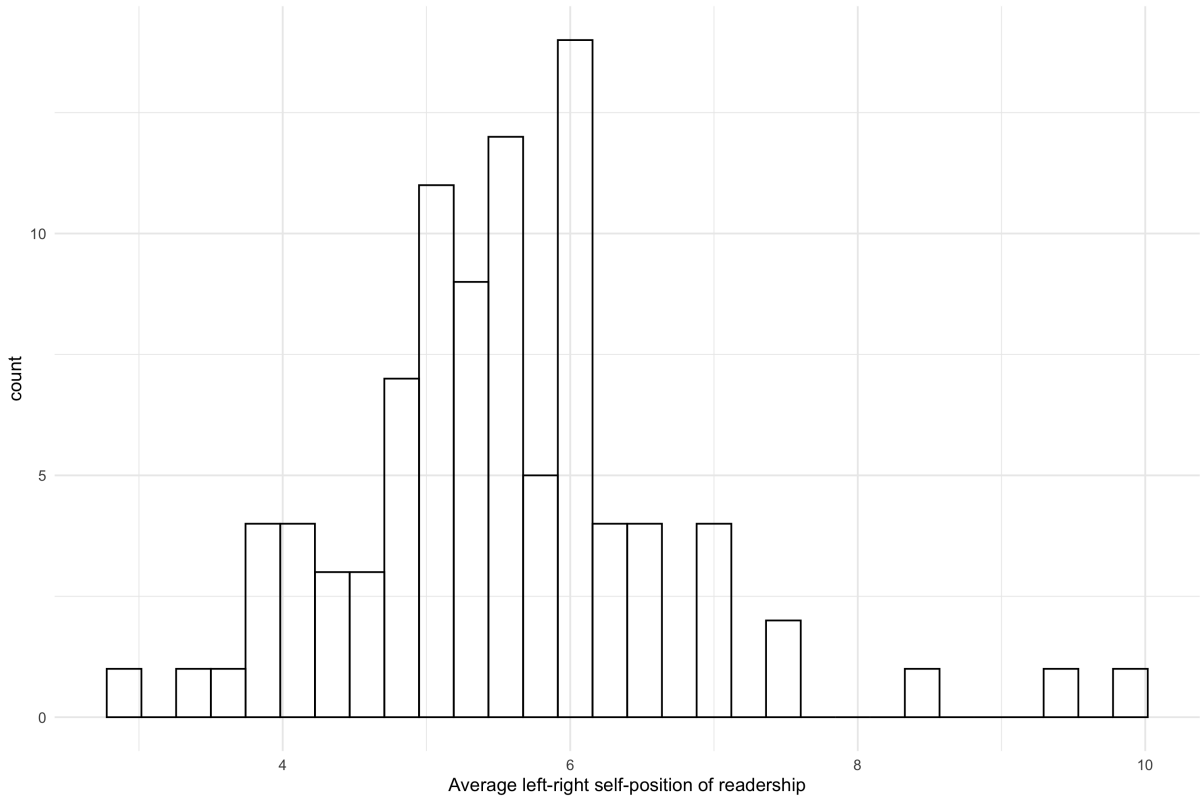


Figure 2: Caption

position on an 11 point scale where 0 is all left, 10 is all right and 5 represents the center of the scale. Overall, we operationalize affective polarization, most used media, usage frequency of media type, ideological leaning of consumed sources, political interest and voters ideology.

To test our hypotheses we rely on linear regression models with post-electoral affective polarization as the dependent variable. As the value of the dependent variable is strongly related to the pre-electoral affective polarization as shown in Figure 1, we use a lag dependent variable approach and control for the pre-electoral level of affective polarization. As independent variable, we include either the main source of political information, the usage frequency of the different sources or the ideological leaning of the newspaper as the dependent variable. In the latter case, respondents reported three sources of information, we thus compile a dataset at the respondents-reported source level. Finally, we control for political interest and ideology in each regression model. In addition, to test hypothesis 3, we use the ideology of respondents as a moderator, to estimate the interaction effect of the ideological leaning of news sources and the ideological position of voters on the post-electoral affective polarization.

In the following, we first present the results for the effect of the main source and the source frequency on post-electoral affective polarization. In a second step, we present the results for the direct effect ideological leaning of news outlet has on affective polarization as well as the interaction effect between respondents' ideology and ideological leaning of news outlets on post-

electoral affective polarization.

## 4 Results

Table 2:  
Affective polarization  
(post-election campaign)

Affective polarization	0.697***
(pre-election campaign)	(0.013)
Left-right self-position	−0.006
	(0.010)
Most used source (ref: Newspaper)	
Social Media	−0.096
	(0.086)
Internet	0.046
	(0.064)
Messenger apps	−0.077
	(0.218)
Informal conversation	0.054
	(0.064)
Political interest	0.135***
	(0.034)
Constant	1.045***
	(0.117)
Observations	3,022
R <sup>2</sup>	0.527
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.526
<i>Note:</i> <sup>+</sup> p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001	

## 5 Conclusion

Table 3:

Affective polarization  
(post-election campaign)

Affective polarization	0.716***
(pre-election campaign)	(0.016)
Left-right self-position	−0.002
	(0.013)
Usage Newspaper	0.055*
	(0.024)
Usage TV	−0.006
	(0.021)
Usage Radio	−0.032
	(0.020)
Usage Website	−0.020
	(0.037)
Usage Emails	−0.009
	(0.045)
Usage Internet	−0.022
	(0.024)
Usage Social Media	0.005
	(0.024)
Usage Discussion Family	0.024
	(0.023)
Usage Discussion Workplace	0.002
	(0.032)
Political interest	0.194***
	(0.046)
Constant	0.644***
	(0.132)
Observations	2,074
R <sup>2</sup>	0.563
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.560

*Note:*
<sup>+</sup>p<0.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

Table 4:

Affective polarization  
(post-election campaign)

Affective polarization	0.708***	0.706***
(pre-election campaign)	(0.013)	(0.013)
Ideological news leaning	−0.003	−0.168 <sup>+</sup>
	(0.041)	(0.093)
Left-right self-position	−0.013	−0.012
	(0.010)	(0.010)
Political interest	0.168***	0.165***
	(0.036)	(0.036)
Ideological news leaning X		0.030*
Left-right self-position		(0.015)
Constant	0.938***	0.944***
	(0.124)	(0.124)
Observations	2,733	2,733
R <sup>2</sup>	0.540	0.540
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.539	0.539

*Note:*<sup>+</sup>p<0.1; \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

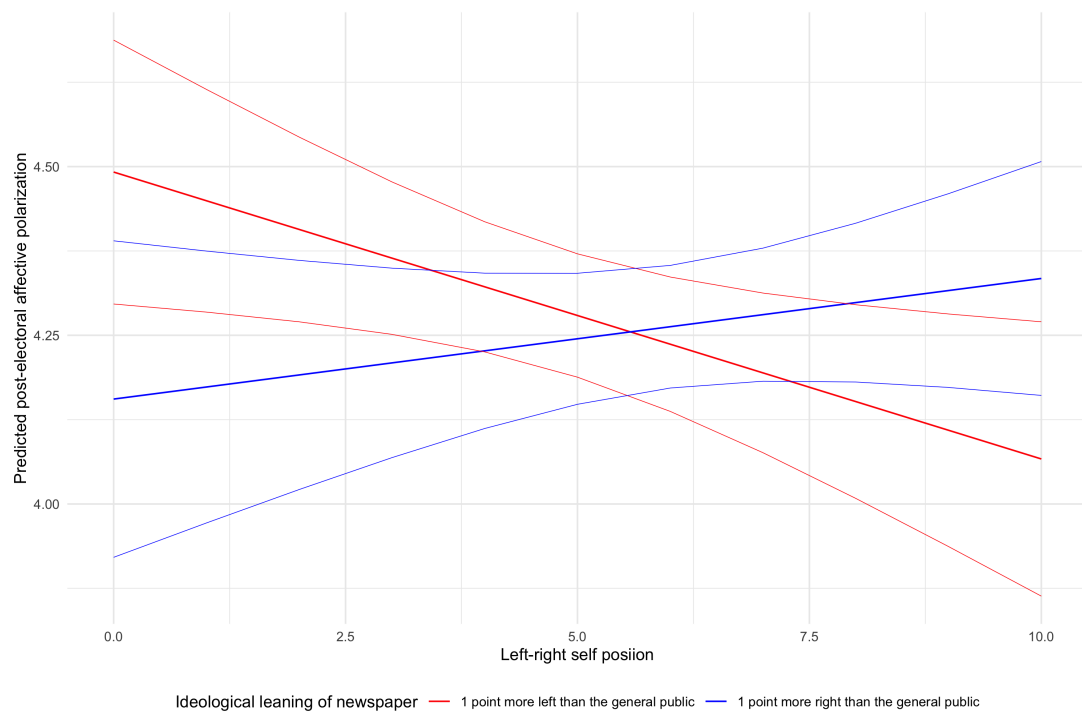


Figure 3: Interaction between voters ideology and ideological leaning of newspaper on the post-election affective polarization.

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