

The consequences of affective polarization

Is accountability still working?

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Abstract

Affective polarization has become the political phenomenon of the moment. Although specially American scholars have studied thoroughly its causes, less effort has been devoted to explain its consequences. In order to do so, I propose a causal mechanism through which affective polarization impacts political attitudes. By a process of motivated reasoning, more polarized people are expected to a) assess incumbent's performances worse, b) form political preference (i.e. public policy choice) in a perhaps pernicious way for them, and c) be less supportive in general for incumbent's measures (specially during times of crisis). I propose to test the first of this effects, namely, the impact of affective polarization on economic voting. My hypothesis is that those who are more polarized will be less rational or, in other words, they will be less able to reward or punish the incumbent according to economic events. Hence, this paper tries to make a contribution to our knowledge of affective polarization and speaks to the general problem of accountability in our contemporary polarized societies.

Introduction

Some scholars have recently pointed out that American people are far more polarized than 40 years ago (Lelkes, 2018). Since the seminal piece of work by Iyengar et al. (2012) we know that political polarization is not only related to ideology but also to affects. Inter-party animosity has been increasing at least since the 1980s in American politics. Nonetheless, some others have shown that United States is by no means the most polarized nation around the world. From a comparative perspective, (Gidron et al. 2018 and 2019, and Westwood et al. (2018)) (see Figure 1) have pointed out that whereas Americans display just average levels of affective polarization, in Europe, we find much higher levels, for instance, in countries like Spain, Greece or even France. The ugly discourse surrounding recent elections in the US, the Brexit campaign, or the Community of Madrid electoral campaign in a frame with only two apparent options 'Communism or Freedom', are just some examples of the increasingly divisive political discourse of our times. What we call affective polarization is, loosely speaking, the phenomenon that voters dislike their political opponents, that is, they see themselves belonging to an in-group and therefore, they dislike (or even hate) the out-group members.

Affective polarization has been well-documented since 2012 –specially regarding its causes–, at least in the US (Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015; Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016; Webster and Abramowitz, 2017; Lelkes, 2018; Iyengar et al., 2019; Klein, 2020). However, scholars in Europe –and also in Spain– have only started to focus on this issue recently, although as Miller (2019) points out, the prominence of the concept makes it the “political phenomenon of the moment”. Moreover, little effort has been made investigating the consequences of the phenomenon. Perhaps, the reason behind the lack of studies focused on the consequences of affective polarization is related to poor data (that is the case of Spain), or that's simply because it is a very complex phenomenon that depending on the country can be very correlated with simple ideological polarization and other similar phenomena, making it difficult to disentangle its

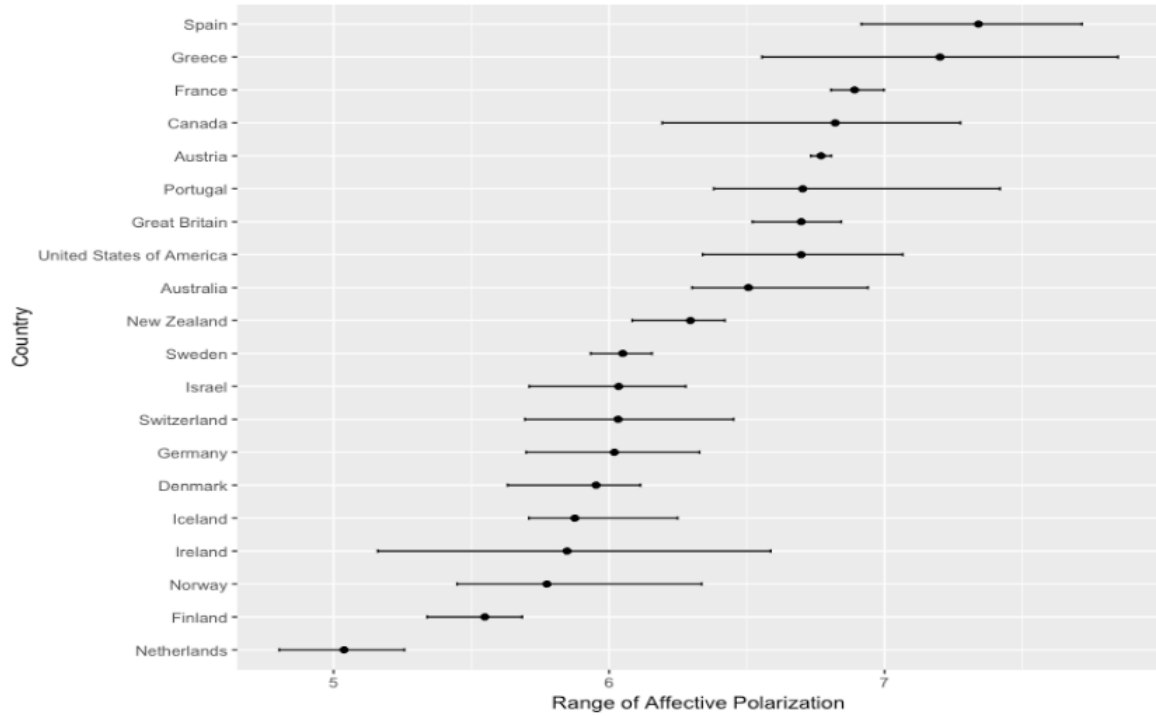


Figure 1: Levels of affective polarization across countries. Source: [Gidron et al. \(2018\)](#)

effects. For example, we already know that 2008 financial crisis had a great impact on the european party systems. In some places like Spain, after more than two decades of stable bipartidism, a multiparty system emerged. This increase in the number of parties confronting in parliament brought altogether a sharp increase of affective polarization which, in the case of Spain, has ended up leading spanish people to polarize even more in two big blocks of parties ([Orriols and León, 2020](#)).

The majority of studies addressing this question points out that high levels of affective polarization could be dangerous for democracy. Scholars usually argue that it makes democracy work worse although they do not test in which way. Some exceptions are worth noting though: [Wagner \(2021\)](#) finds that it has an impact on democratic values. Specifically, he finds a negative effect on satisfaction with democracy. Similarly, [Ward and Tavits \(2019\)](#) finds that affective polarizations affects perceptions of political choice as well as turnout and participation. Likewise, there is a common intuition in the literature that polarized citizens are less able to collaborate and to work together to solve collective action problems ([Garrett et al., 2014](#)). Citizens trust in political institutions and legitimacy of governments are also negatively affected ([Orriols, 2021](#)). In the same vain, affective polarization can also foster political radicalism ([Levendusky, 2013](#); [Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016](#); [Webster and Abramowitz, 2017](#)) since the dynamics of polarized politics makes the radicals more prone to speak and, at the same time, it makes polarized –but less radical– people, more prone to follow the former. There is also a concern regarding satisfaction with democracy, electoral participation, and a long list of attitudes towards western liberal electoral democracy. However, almost none of those pernicious effects of affective polarization have been empirically tested. In this study, I propose a mechanism through which affective polarization may affect different key stages of the democratic process and I try to test one of them.

The general argument is that affective polarization makes people assess political phenomena –and also non-political phenomena– using their own ‘political glasses’. Hence, they are less permeable to political information and political cues, or in other words, they are less prone to process political information from

a critical standpoint. That is, our own biases are exacerbated because we identify an in-group to which we belong, and an out-group that we see as totally opposed to us. This situation reduces our critical assessment of political –and non-political– phenomena. Therefore, it has implications in –at least– three key democratic mechanisms: voting, public policy choice (i.e. preferences) and political support. First, polarized people should be less able to assess government performance and to vote accordingly, so the first implication of affective polarization is related to economic voting but also to accountability itself. Second, they should be less able to place themselves in the ideological scale when affective polarization implies a high party identification which, in turn, makes some citizens be for (or against) policies that are pernicious (or beneficial) for them (i.e. working class people being against universal basic income if the policy is not endorsed by their party). And third, specially during political crisis (of economic, health or other nature) they should be less prone to support the incumbent (unless they voted for it) and, more importantly, the incumbent response to the crisis (measures or policies) that can even be necessary in such a context.

Hence, the goal of this study is twofold: first, I propose a theoretical mechanism that explains why affective polarization has negative effects on the democratic process. And second, I test empirically if that is the case regarding economic voting (i.e. performance voting). According to the argument, we should see polarized people unable to reward or punish incumbents according to economic performance, that is, we should observe that accountability does not work properly. The remaining of this study proceed as follows: first I present my argument discussing the relevant literature on affective polarization and economic voting. Second, I present my data and experimental design. After that I discuss the main results. Finally, I conclude.

Understanding affective polarization

Affective polarization is a fairly new field of research. The concept relates to the fact that citizens feel sympathy towards partisan in-groups and antagonism towards partisan out-group (Wagner, 2021). Regardless of its novelty, it has been largely studied in the US. After the work of Iyengar et al. (2012) came out, a lot of different aspects of this phenomenon have been empirically tested in many different countries. However, the vast majority of the literature has focused on the causes, and only a few instances have said something about its consequences. Also, given the salience of the topic in American politics, scholars have measured affective polarization ¹ mostly in the arguably most straightforward case, the american two-party system (Wagner, 2021). However, some authors have recently tried to fill this gap and they have proposed new ways of measuring it in multi-party systems (Reiljan, 2020). Moreover, affective polarization is usually addressed at the aggregate level, that is, as the average affective polarization of the political system. Nonetheless, it can also be studied from an individual perspective, since in the end, each individual has a level of affect (or disaffect) for these in-groups and out-group members. (Wagner, 2021).

So far, we know that affective polarization is more complex than one might think at first sight. It is neither ideological polarization (although correlation is high in certain contexts), nor party identification (although this is an essential part of it). It is rather something related to social identity. Therefore, it is rooted in political psychology and more precisely in social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). From this standpoint, affective polarization relates to the belonging sentiment to certain social groups. Although it can be the case that belonging to a social group is a matter of ideology, affective polarization is not exactly the same as ideological polarization since people who belong to the same part of the

¹To see a more in depth discussion about the concern about how to measure affective polarization see Druckman and Levendusky (2019)

ideological spectrum can have different in- and out-groups. In fact, as some scholarship has shown, in some settings affective polarization can increase while ideological divisions shrink (Iyengar et al., 2019; Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016). Nonetheless, some other scholarship has shown that ideological polarization impacts affective polarization (Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016; Webster and Abramowitz, 2017).

Moreover, affective polarization is not only party identification (i.e. positive in-group affect towards a party and its supporters) because it also relates to the positive or negative out-group affect towards other parties and their supporters. That is, as some have already pointed out (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016; Medeiros and Noël, 2014), there is ‘negative partisanship’ as well as positive partisanship. Moreover, specially in multi-party systems (in which I am interested here) the in-group and the out-group are not necessarily conformed by one single party each. On the contrary, there can be several combinations regarding the number and the distribution of parties in those groups.

Regarding the origins of affective polarization, although this paper is focused on its consequences, a brief comment is worthwhile. There are basically three main sources of affective polarization according to the literature: the high-choice media environment (including cable television and internet), political campaigns, and the polarization of political elites. Some scholars point to the selective consumption of partisan media as the main cause of the increase of affective polarization (Lelkes et al., 2017; Garrett et al., 2014). Although mechanisms are not clear and scholars find mixed empirical evidence. Others point towards the effect of political campaigns exacerbating partisan tensions (Sood and Iyengar, 2017) and also the positive effect of elections salience on affective polarization Hernández et al. (2021). Finally, a growing set of authors put emphasis on the fact that polarized political elites tend to polarize citizens views, fostering affective polarization (Druckman et al., 2013; Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020; Gidron et al., 2018).

Economic voting (briefly) revisited

A huge literature has been produced on Economic voting. The classical theory has received considerable empirical support (Lewis-Beck and Nadeau, 2011; Lewis-Beck and Paldam, 2000; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2009; Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979; Lewis-Beck, 1988). The basic claim of this theory is based on rational choice theory and says that voters, trying to maximize their utility, would vote accounting for the government economic performance. This is usually understood as one of the main accountability mechanisms in western liberal democracies. When economy goes bad, voters punish incumbents, whereas when they do well, voters reward them.

A similar way of putting the argument of this theory is looking at one of the main ‘stylized facts’ about economic voting, which is the following: retrospective voting is usually more important than prospective voting (Lewis-Beck and Paldam, 2000). This is sometimes called the ‘responsability hypothesis’: voters hold the government responsible (i.e. accountable) for economic events. Hence, according to this theory, we should observe that voters properly assess the performance of the incumbent and vote accordingly.

However, some scholarship has already pointed out that economic voting is influenced by the context (Singer and Carlin, 2013; Anderson, 2007). According to this literature, we shouldn’t look at the relation between vote and economy isolated, but accounting for contextual factors. As (Singer and Carlin, 2013, p. 1) point out, “there is still a debate about whether voters focus on past or future performance and whether they view the economy in primarily sociotropic or egotropic terms”. They find that prospective voting predominates early in the election cycle and retrospective voting gains traction as people observe incumbent’s performance. Moreover, they also find that sociotropic views predominates over the egotropic ones except for the least developed countries.

In the same vain, in a provocative paper, (Anderson, 2007, p. 1) argues that economic voting does not work as ‘envisioned by advocates of democratic accountability’. He calls for a reconsideration of the normative underpinnings of economic voting paradigm in light of recent evidence. The argument is that although the findings supporting empirically the theory enumerated above exist, they are contingent for both institutional and psychological reasons. I try to disentangle both in this study and focus on the latter.

(provisional) Argument

Once I have presented the most relevant literature to understand affective polarization and economic voting, the linking nexus must be analyzed. I argue that affective polarization has a direct effect on political attitudes, more specifically on the way citizens assess political performance, because it activates a process of motivated reasoning (see Figure 2).

Affective Polarization —————> Motivated Reasoning —————> Poor economic voting assessment

Figure 2: Effect of affective polarization on Economic Voting

Motivated reasoning is usually studied in cognitive science and social psychology and refers to the fact that some people use emotionally biased reasoning to produce justifications (or make decisions) that are most desired rather than those that accurately reflect the evidence (Kunda, 1990). In my setting, this is reflected by the fact that ‘affectively’ polarized people are so according to their emotions, that is, to the level of animosity against both the in-group and the out-group. They would use motivated reasoning to avoid being at odds with their in-group. They would prefer to be ‘loyal’ to their in-group than to punish them if economic situation goes bad. Or the other way around, they would avoid rewarding their out-group when economic performance was good. In other words, those more polarized are expected to use motivated reasoning to a larger extent and hence, would be less able to process (i.e. evaluate) and integrate political (or economic) information. They will be less willing to hold their party accountable for policy performance. That is, this motivated reasoning would lead them to vote in a less rational way, or in other words, economic voting will work worse. I also expect partisans to undermine rather than promote responsible government. Therefore, the main hypothesis I test in this study is the following:

H1: *Those more polarized are less prone to reward (punish) the incumbent according to economic performance.*

However, the general argument can be tested in many different outcomes. I expect affective polarization to have a similar effect on three key stages of the democratic process: voting, preference formation and political support (see Figure 3). Hence, some other tentative hypotheses that are plausible to be tested in future research [perhaps as part of a PhD proposal] are the following:

H2: Those more polarized are less likely to support a certain policy when it is endorsed by a party ideologically close but that belongs to the out-group.

H3: In times of crisis, those more polarized are less supportive of the incumbent measures even when they are imposed externally or the incumbent is forced to impose them.

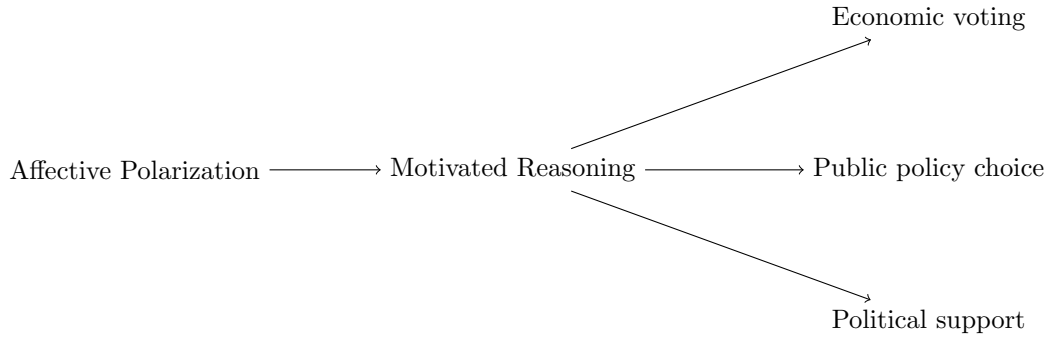


Figure 3: General effects of affective polarization on political attitudes

Similarly, some important derivations of this mechanism can bring worth analyzing consequences. For instance, if affective polarization levels are sustained over time, it is to expect a certain party realignment. Hence, this could be against the prominent idea of catch-all parties suggested by [Kirchheimer \(1966\)](#), (also see [Krouwel \(2003\)](#)). In polarized contexts, we should observe that parties are less willing to try to seduce the out-group, consequently, niche parties would be more likely to emerge. Although we already know that the levels of affective polarization are subject to the fragmentation of parliaments ([Orriols and León, 2020](#)) and hence, it could arise a concern about reverse causality, we don't have much information about the consequences of affective polarization. Therefore, it could be also something to be tested in future research. In the same vain, satisfaction with democracy can be impacted by affective polarization since the public opinion environment generated by the associated distrust can make governments perform worse. Hence, in the long run, people can get dissatisfied with the political system.

All in all, I think that this paper can contribute to our knowledge about affective polarization as such, and more specifically I can push the frontier of knowledge forward by analyzing its consequences. This piece of work can have even broader implications since it speaks to the general question of accountability itself. I believe that analyzing the consequences of affective polarization and its effects on political attitudes can open an inspiring intellectual debate about the perils of the phenomenon and the available tools we have to avoid the erosion of our democracies.

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