



TOWARD A COMPARATIVE RESEARCH AGENDA ON AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION IN MASS PUBLICS

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Western politics seems increasingly characterized by hostility, distrust, and incivility across partisan lines. As noted in the *Guardian*, British politics is currently shaped by raw anger across the partisan divide (Beckett 2018). In Germany, according to the *Washington Post*, politics has become more spiteful in recent years (Witte and Beck 2018). And the *New York Times* reported that Americans feel “angry and afraid of the other side” (Peters 2018).

Heads of states – and even royalty – have commented on the angry politics of our time. On the background of heated divisions between Remainers and Leavers in the Brexit debate, Queen Elizabeth II stated in her 2018 Christmas message: “Even with the most deeply held differences, treating the other person with respect and as a fellow human being is always a good first step towards greater understanding.” The German President Frank Walter Steinmeier made a related point in his 2018 Christmas address: “Wherever you look – especially on social media – we see hate; there is shouting and daily outrage. I feel that we Germans are spending less and less time talking to each other.” These examples suggest that concerns over partisan and ideological hostility extend across advanced democracies.

This mass-level animosity across party lines is commonly defined as *affective polarization* (Hetherington et al. 2016; Iyengar et al. 2012; Iyengar et al. 2019; Levendusky 2018). There is an ongoing debate among American politics scholars about the relationship between affective polarization and other forms of polarization (Lelkes forthcoming). Some argue that affective polarization is rooted in overlapping social identities, whereby American partisans have sorted into socially homogenous parties (for instance, in terms of religion and race), which in turn increased hostility between partisan groups (Mason 2016; Mason 2018). Others argue that intensifying hostility towards partisan opponents is driven by growing policy differences between the parties (Abramowitz and Webster 2017).

While inter-party policy disagreements provide voters with clear policy choices (Levendusky 2010) and have been shown to strengthen citizens’ attachments to established parties (Lupu 2015; Lupu 2016), mass-level affective polarization is disconcerting. Affective polarization prompts preferential treatment of co-partisans (Lelkes and Westwood 2017), and there is evidence that more polarized partisans tend to discriminate against out-partisans in economic



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transactions (McConnell et al. 2018; Carlin and Love 2018). Affective polarization thus contributes to democratic dysfunction and may undermine liberal, pluralist democratic norms and institutions (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Somer and McCoy 2018).

While affective polarization has attracted academic and public interest, nearly all we know about this topic is based on the well-developed American literature (see Huddy et al. 2018; Reiljan forthcoming; Wagner 2017; Westwood et al. 2018). As Iyenger et al. (2019) note in a recent literature review, “more work is needed to build bridges between Americanists and comparativists” interested in affective polarization. This note is one step in this direction.



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We address two issues. First, we report descriptive statistics based on analyses of survey data from twenty western democracies, which suggest that affective polarization in the United States is not especially intense compared to other Western polities. This finding may be welcomed by Americans (who may be glad that they are not extremely affectively polarized in comparative perspective), while it may dismay citizens of many other western democracies (who may be disappointed that they are as intensely polarized as the US). In either case we find this comparison instructive. Second, and related, we argue for the advantages of analyzing American affective polarization within a comparative context.

Affective polarization in America is not high in comparative perspective

As noted above, research on affective polarization is almost exclusively US-centered. Does

this American focus reflect exceptionally strong partisan dislike in American society, compared to other Western polities? Perhaps, since affective polarization has intensified in the United States over time. American partisans’ evaluations of out-parties, based on the like-dislike scales included in the American National Election Studies, have increased sharply across the past few decades—and the proportion of Americans who state that they would be displeased if their child married someone from the other party had increased from 5% in the 1960s to more than 40% by 2010 (Iyengar et al. 2012). This prompted Sunstein (2015, 2) to declare that American “partyism is now worse than racism” (see also Westwood et al. 2018). But how do contemporary levels of American affective polarization compare with other western polities?

To explore this question, we analyzed survey data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), which has compiled national election studies since 1996. We focus on 20 Western democracies, for which we have 76 election surveys across the 1996–2015 period, while excluding East European and other non-Western democracies.¹ A common module of all CSES surveys elicits respondents’ ratings of the political parties in their country on a 0–10 thermometer scale, where higher numbers denote more positive evaluations. These scales are commonly used to measure affective polarization in American politics. To simplify the interpretation of our results, we reversed this scale so that 10 denotes the most negative party evaluation and 0 the most positive. The CSES surveys also asks respondents which party they feel the closest to. We consider respondents who named a party to be the partisans of that party.

1. For more on comparative polarization outside Western democracies, see McCoy and Somer 2019.

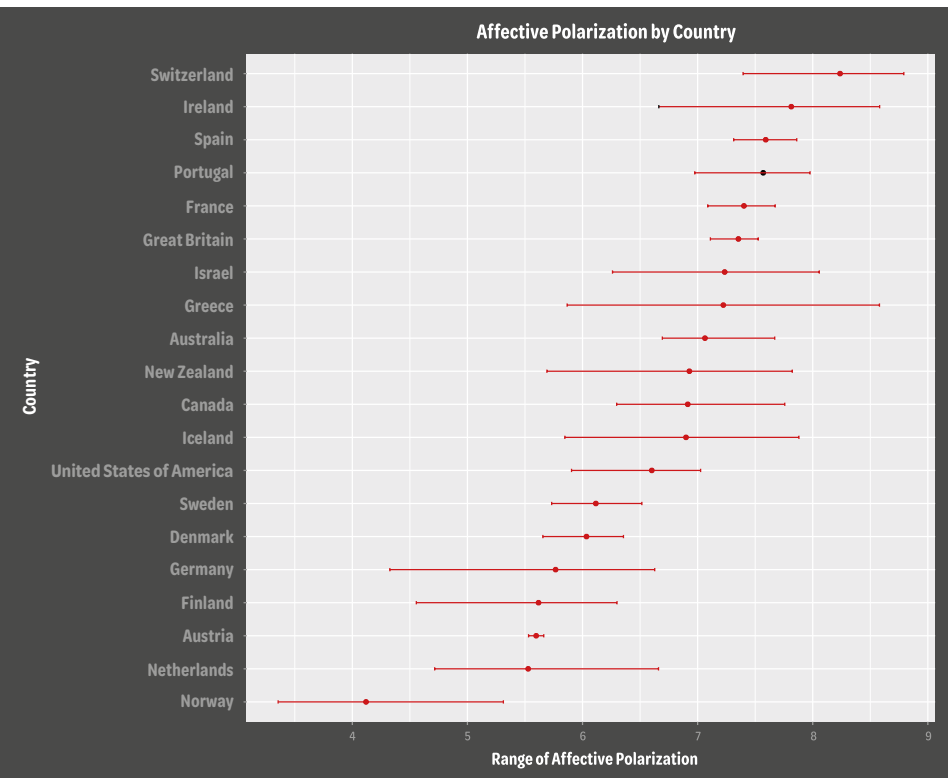


Figure 1:
Affective Polarization in
Comparative Perspective

*Affective polarization
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perspective.*

For each country/election year, we compute the average thermometer rating that supporters of the largest left-wing party expressed towards the largest right-wing party, and vice-versa – a measure that arguably provides the most relevant comparison between affective polarization in the American two-party system versus the multiparty systems in other western democracies. For instance, for Britain we analyze Labour partisans' thermometer ratings of the right-of-center Conservative Party, and Conservative partisans' ratings of the leftist Labour Party. We weight these averages by the relative sizes of these parties to obtain a national-level measure of affective polarization.² We classified parties into left and right based on expert surveys. On the left, these are mostly social democratic/labour parties; on the right, most

large parties are either conservative or Christian democrat.

Figure 1 displays the two-party affective polarization scores for the aforementioned 20 western polities, computed over the 76 national election surveys for these polities compiled by the CSES between 1996 and 2015. The dots represent the mean affective polarization score for each country averaged across the available surveys; the bars represent the range between the minimum and maximum computed values in each country. We observe significant differences *between countries* in terms of their averages, and in some cases also *within countries* in different election years.

The figure shows that affective polarization United States is not high in comparative perspective. Put differently, the US is not unusual in the degree to which partisans of the largest left- and right-wing parties dislike their opponents: By this criterion the mean level of affective polarization in the US public (6.60) is actually below the mean of what we find across the 20 western polities in our study (6.68). Moreover, in several countries including Spain, France, the UK, and Switzerland, supporters of the largest left- and right-wing parties expressed more intense mutual dislike in *every* CSES election survey we analyzed than did the American Republican and Democratic supporters in *any* of the CSES surveys.

We identify less intense affective polarization in several European countries—including Sweden, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, and Finland—which feature consensual institutions, including proportional electoral laws,

2. For instance, in the 2015 CSES British Election Survey, Labour supporters' mean evaluation of the Conservative Party was 7.12, and Conservative supporters' mean evaluation of Labour was 7.19.

multiparty governments, and provisions for opposition parties' policy influence that promote power-sharing between parties. Lijphart (2010) argues that these types of institutions promote "kinder, gentler" politics, and the empirical patterns displayed in *Figure 1* largely support his arguments.³ And in light of recent emphasis on the relationship between economic inequality and intensifying affective polarization in the United States (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018), we note that these consensual democracies also display relatively low levels of economic inequality (a pattern that Lijphart has documented).

Switzerland is a surprising exception to the above rules in that affective polarization between partisans of the largest left- and right-wing parties is intense even though Switzerland is a textbook consensual democracy that features only modest income inequality. This anomaly reflects the fact that – unlike most western party systems where the largest parties advocate mainstream policies – the largest Swiss party is the Swiss People's Party (SVP), an anti-immigration, radical right populist party that is intensely disliked by the left (and whose supporters in turn dislike leftist parties). We have conducted additional analyses showing that dislike directed towards radical right parties is on average far more intense than dislike toward all other party families. This suggests that in multi-party systems, the rise of radical right parties may directly shape not only mainstream parties' policy positions (e.g., Abou-Chadi and Krause 2019) but also mainstream partisans' affective evaluations of political opponents.

The descriptive statistics presented in *Figure 1* are intended to begin the conversation about

comparative affective polarization, not close it down. In particular, we confront challenges in developing cross-nationally comparable measures of this concept. Can we safely assume – as we have implicitly done here – that the thermometer scale ratings we use to measure out-party dislike are cross-nationally comparable? And when making comparisons to the American two-party system, is it valid to construct an affective polarization measure for other western multiparty systems that considers only the dominant left and right-wing party, as we have done here? Finally, it would be promising to consider other mass political attitudes that may (or may not) be connected to affective polarization, including the phenomenon of partisan dealignment, i.e., the notable declines in rates of party identification across many western democracies (Dalton 2013, Chapter 9). That being said, a host of additional research, which uses diverse measures of affective polarization (including measures that consider *all* the parties in the system), converge towards a similar conclusion: *Affective polarization in the United States is not an outlier in comparative perspective* (Gidron, Adams and Horne 2018, Lauka et al. 2018; Reiljan forthcoming; Wagner 2017).

When analyzing over-time changes in dislike of partisan opponents, we did not find clear-cut evidence for a surge in affective polarization across Western democracies in recent years. Aggregating data across the 20 western polities in our sample, we find only a small and statistically insignificant increase in out-party dislike over the last two decades. However we caution against reading too much into this non-finding which may reflect data limitations (for some countries, we only have 2 election surveys in-

3. But see Boix 1999 for arguments that political institutions may be endogenous to societal cleavages.

cluded in our data). In addition, while we have focused on dislike among the two largest parties, dislike of out-parties may mostly be channeled toward smaller, more radical parties—an issue which remains outside the scope of our analyses but offers fertile ground for future research.

The case for a comparative research agenda on polarization

We conclude by advocating for cross-national analyses of affective polarization. The United States is – by far – the most studied case of polarization yet *Figure 1* suggests that it is not affectively polarized in comparative perspective. If we are alarmed about partisan dislike and hostility in the United States, then we should arguably be concerned about these phenomena in many other western democracies. Yet to date there is relatively little cross-national research on this topic.

More specifically, we highlight two benefits of cross-national research on affective polarization. First, this comparative perspective may illuminate causal processes in the United States. The rise of partisan hostility in American politics has been linked to several factors, including increased elite-level ideological polarization, rising economic inequality, the rise of partisan media, and more general patterns of social isolation (see, e.g., McCarty et al. 2006; Levendusky 2013; Putnam 2001; on inequality and polarization from a comparative perspective see Iversen and Soskice 2015). Yet the American case in isolation is over-determined, since these variables have tended to move in tandem. We can gain

traction in understanding America's growing affective polarization by analyzing comparative cases that display different levels (and different over-time trends) of these possible causal factors. For instance, comparative analyses can advance the debate about the relationship between affective and ideological polarization (Abramowitz and Webster 2017; Lelkes forthcoming), thereby illuminating whether affective polarization is more intense in countries where elite ideological polarization is stronger, and whether, within countries, *changes* in elite ideological polarization are followed by *changes* in mass affective polarization (Reiljan forthcoming). Cross-national analyses could also explore whether, outside the United States, parties have become more socially homogenous over time (Mason 2016; Mason 2018)—and whether social sorting predicts intensified partisan dislike across Western democracies.

Second, and related, a comparative perspective can identify polities that display markedly low levels of affective polarization, and consideration of the characteristics of these “low partisan affect” polities may suggest possible remedies to policy-makers who are concerned about affective polarization in their home country. Thus, to the extent that cross-national analyses uncover strong associations between income inequality and affective polarization, these patterns might prompt policy-makers to devote additional resources to alleviating income inequality. Both Americanists and comparativists may benefit from greater engagements across sub-disciplinary boundaries. ●



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