



Overlapping polarization: On the contextual determinants of the interplay between ideological and affective polarization[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Previous literature has distinguished two types of polarization: ideological and affective. However, little is known on how the interconnection of these two polarizations (which we call overlapping polarization) varies depending on the political context. Is affective polarization always associated with ideological polarization? What is the role of the institutional framework (i.e., democratic age and popular election of the head of state) and the party system (i.e., elite polarization and number of parties) in determining how wide this overlap is? This article examines the contextual determinants of overlapping polarization by using information from the four first CSES waves. According to our analyses, the individual-level positive effect of ideological polarization on affective polarization is stronger when the party system is ideologically polarized and in older democracies, and is weaker in presidential democracies and when the number of parties is higher.

1. Introduction

Feelings of resentment and dislike towards political parties other than the preferred one, what is commonly known as out-party animosity, have become quite ubiquitous in the world.¹ The recently registered intensification of this pattern in many contemporary democracies, also called inter-party affective polarization, constitutes bad news for democratic politics itself. Evidence from the United States (US) shows that mass-level hostility across party lines prompts preferential treatment of co-partisans (Lelkes and Westwood, 2017), in-group favoritism in economic transactions (McConnell et al., 2018), or a more general decrease of trust in government (Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015). There exist multiple explanations for this phenomenon that range from short-term dynamics associated with specific electoral cycles (Hernández et al., 2021) to long-term structural transformations such as the increasing uncivility on either mass (Mutz, 2015) or social media (Barberá, 2015). Within this framework, the American politics literature has examined the potential link between ideological or issue extremism and affective polarization with so far mixed results (Bougher, 2017; Druckman et al.,

2021; Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2015). However, to date there is no cross-national research on the effect of ideological extremism on affective polarization.

In this article, we argue that the correspondence between these two phenomena is, at least partially, the consequence of the salience of the left-right dimension in a certain political system. Because some contextual factors intensify this salience, we expect the individual-level interplay between ideological extremism and affective polarization, what we coin as overlapping polarization, to become tighter in some countries and moments than in others. We analyze this question drawing on data from 104 post-electoral surveys conducted in 45 countries between 1996 and 2016 and included in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, 2020). In brief, our analyses show that ideological extremism and affective polarization overlap to a larger extent in older democracies, in parliamentary systems, in countries with lower levels of party system fragmentation, and when citizens perceive elite-level ideological polarization to be higher. We also explore the role of three mechanisms that could explain the existence of overlapping polarization: two at the

[☆] The goal of this article is precisely to identify the contexts where these circumstances concur so we can properly understand when and where ideological extremism fuels the fire or dampens the flames of affective polarization. Hence, our results inform reform-oriented debates about the implications of institutional design by examining whether, and under what conditions, does inter-party hostility have an ideological component. As such, this article contributes to shed light on the existing opportunity structures for ideology-based political conflict in democracies – quite an unexplored research avenue up until the date.

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¹ Gidron et al. (2020) and Boxell et al. (2022) document exceptions to this rather universal pattern.

mass level (lack of ideological positioning of the electorate and considerable sorting of ethnic groups into political parties) and one at the elites' level (citizens-politicians' programmatic linkages). We find that the relationship between ideological extremism and affective polarization is mediated by all these factors, but strong connections between ethnicity and partisan identities, and the predominance of citizens-politicians' programmatic linkages are slightly more relevant than the lack of ideological positioning of the electorate in this regard.

Our findings have implications for at least three areas of research. First, we contribute to the emerging comparative literature on the determinants of affective polarization by analyzing in what contexts ideological extremism goes hand in hand with this phenomenon. While Americanists have previously touched upon the theoretical and empirical characteristics of overlapping polarization (Bougher, 2017; Druckman et al., 2021; Lelkes, 2018; Orr and Huber, 2020; Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016; Webster and Abramowitz, 2017), we extend this discussion in a comparative fashion. More broadly, our findings speak to the quite-established literature on the electoral implications of ideological shortcuts (Fortunato et al., 2016). Previous scholarship demonstrates that the salience of the left-right dimension varies across countries depending on their exposure to globalization (Hellwig, 2008), and that this has sizeable implications for democratic accountability (Hellwig and Samuels, 2007). The findings in this article suggest that the context-induced variation in the salience of the left-right dimension matters for our understanding of affective polarization. On top of that, these findings speak to Lipset's (1960) long-standing insight about the corrosive effects of overlapping cleavages (Taylor and Rae, 1969). If political divisions have an ideological background, antagonism between political camps can be expected to be reduced or amplified, depending on the distribution of ideological positions in each country. We conclude that overlapping polarization does not emerge in all cases: only under certain circumstances ideological discrepancies bring about out-group animosity.

2. The (dis)connection between ideological extremism and affective polarization

Ever since the appearance of the idea of affective polarization in the US, scholars have tried to trace back the origins of this phenomenon. Drawing on social identity theory, most research has characterized affective polarization as predominantly driven by a process of partisan sorting that has created worrying levels of distrust and dislike between citizens across partisan lines in the US (Webster and Abramowitz, 2017). The widening of political elites' ideological divide (Gidron et al., 2020), their increasingly negative and long-lasting political campaigns (Iyengar et al., 2019), the parallel development of high choice media environments, as well as the proliferation of partisan news outlets (Boxell et al., 2017; Lelkes et al., 2017), all have been identified as contributors to the political animosity between Democrat and Republican voters nowadays.

Interestingly, as part of the combined theoretical and empirical effort behind the construction of this concept, scholars have put quite a lot of emphasis in distinguishing the nature of affective polarization from that of ideological or issue polarization. While no one denies the existence of important connections between ideological extremism and affective polarization in the US (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016; Webster and Abramowitz, 2017), the mainstream approach characterizes the former as largely distinct from the latter. Affective polarization is portrayed as being more emotional and tribal than cognitive in nature (Burden and Kloststad, 2005), and, as such, individual-level extremity in issue opinions is not considered to be a necessary condition for affective polarization to happen (Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019). Indeed, affective polarization has been shown to increase while ideological divisions shrink in the US (Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016). As Mason nicely points out, citizens have learned to disrespectfully agree; that is, "*partisan-ideological sorting has increased social polarization to a greater extent than it has increased the extremity of held issue positions*" among

Americans, leading to the conformation of "*an electorate that may agree on many things, but nonetheless cannot get along*" (2015, 129).

Rather than being an artifact of the highly idiosyncratic American political system, recent comparative evidence seems to suggest that ideological extremism and affective polarization are not fully congruent either in other Western democracies, as the manifestations of the latter are much more intense than those of the former (Boxell et al., 2020; McCoy and Somer, 2019; Reiljan, 2019; Wagner, 2021; Westwood et al., 2018). The implications of these findings are truly intriguing since they seem to suggest that, in multiple advanced democracies, citizens are trapped in a competitive political scenario where representation is increasingly "symbolic" rather than "operational" (Ellis and Stimson, 2012). Even more intriguing is the fact that, despite not experiencing significant differences in issue positions across partisan lines, affectively polarized voters are "*more likely to view politics as high stakes competition, where ideological polarization is rampant, participation is crucial, and electoral outcomes are highly consequential*" (Ward and Tavits, 2019). Yet, as Iyengar and colleagues note (2012: 139), "*little has been written on this topic (that is, the political effects), as most studies have focused on the more surprising apolitical ramifications*". Similarly, Mason (2015, 128) recognizes that "*the difference between the social elements of polarization and the polarization of issue positions has not been clearly elaborated*", and, in her later work, she proposes to separate the issue- and identity-based components of ideology to analyze affective polarization (Mason, 2018). Therefore, demonstrating that affective polarization (and its key underlying component, out-party animus) relates to policy considerations appears to be complicated (Lelkes, 2018).

In fact, very few studies have focused on the directional relationship between ideological extremism and affective polarization. Theoretically, this relationship could stem from three possible scenarios. In the first one, system-level elite-issue polarization leads separately to both individuals' ideological (Levendusky, 2009) and affective polarization (Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016; Webster and Abramowitz, 2017). For instance, Rogowski and Sutherland (2016) found experimental and observational evidence of how increasing ideological differences between candidates for the US Congress produces substantially more polarized evaluations of those candidates by voters. In the second scenario, individual-level ideological extremism leads to higher levels of affective polarization (Fiorina, 2017). By using both, cross-sectional and panel analyses, Bougher (2017) demonstrated that the ideological realignment of issue positions that has characterized political polarization in America may help explain the asymmetrical rise in out-party animosity over in-party favorability, the existence of a moderate yet hostile electorate, and the negative affect amongst independents who do not self-identify with either party. According to her argument, "*issue positions underlie out-party derogation*" (2017, 732). In a similar vein, Orr and Huber (2020) find that issue positions influence interpersonal evaluations more than partisanship when explaining warmth toward people in a series of survey experiments. In the last of the scenarios though, the relationship of interest is exactly the opposite and, thus, individual-level affective polarization drives citizens' issue positions. In this regard, Druckman et al. (2021) have recently shown that American partisans with high levels of animus toward the other party are more motivated to distinguish themselves from their political opponents on new issues. Specifically, during the COVID-19 pandemic, party identifiers took positions on novel pandemic-related issues that differed from the other (disliked) party and matched those of their own preferred party.

While micro-level approaches to the study of the connection between ideological extremism and affective polarization might represent the most appropriate way of tackling this question from a causal perspective, the increasing interdependence of both phenomena in several democracies around the world speaks to the necessity of understanding the way in which the institutional and the political contexts intervene in this relationship. Therefore, this article advances the existing literature by combining the above-explained scenarios one and two. We delve into

the intricacies of the contextual determinants of what we here define as overlapping polarization – that is, the simultaneous occurrence of ideological extremism and affective polarization at the individual level. We do so by following Boucher (2017), and, thus, assuming that issue position extremism at the individual level precedes out-party animus. We argue that, under certain country-level circumstances, ideological alignment of citizens on issues is more likely to underlie out-party derogation. A premise that recent experimental evidence on this same relationship largely confirms (Homola et al., 2022). Moreover, we believe that, rather than contradicting Druckman et al.'s (2021) findings on the effect of affective polarization on individuals' positions on new issues, this approach complements their work by showing that certain contexts might lay the groundwork for the harmful coexistence of both types of extremisms among citizens.

3. The contextual determinants of overlapping polarization

Our concept of overlapping polarization refers to a context-induced political attitude that connects ideological extremism to affective polarization at the individual level. We contend that whether affective polarization varies alongside ideological extremism in response to specific contextual factors gives us a clear sense of the opportunity structures that institutional settings create to those political actors involved in democratic systems. Within this framework, we expect the proposed correlation between ideological extremism and affective polarization to vary across elections and countries. Specifically, we expect ideological extremism to be more clearly associated with affective polarization in contexts where the left-right dimension is particularly salient.²

Ever since the publication of the *American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960), public opinion studies have shown a great interest in the concept of salience. Salience is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for an issue to become influential for vote choice (Edwards et al., 1995). The mechanism that accounts for this relation is that salient issues become more cognitively accessible for voters and, thus, more likely to come to their minds when evaluating government performance. Salience also increases incentives to gather information about party positions and government performance on these topics (Krosnick, 1990). In our view, the emergence of contexts where the left-right dimension becomes salient and, hence, tends to foster overlapping polarization depends on certain political milestones that come in different stages.

First, there needs to be an electorate that has an ideology that could be portrayed in left-right terms. If non-ideological citizens account for a considerable portion of the people of one country, it is reasonable to think that differences within this dimension will not be particularly salient. Second, ideological reasoning must be one of the main determinants of citizens' political decision-making. For this to happen, voters' choices need to be not mainly driven by alternative elements of judgment such as incumbency advantage or candidates' valence. The final stage in this sequential line up of requirements involves political parties' behavior, which brings us to the importance of electoral campaigns and legislative alliances. Theoretically, different strategies lead to vote-maximization. Parties with higher valence should conduct less ideologically driven campaigns, whereas parties that are perceived as less competent should produce more ideologically centered campaigns (Adams et al., 2005). Another potential reason of why the salience of a main dimension of competition may be higher in some countries than in others has to do with the way ideology influences the partisan composition of governments. Axelrod (1970) argued that, when necessary, parties tend to form governments with political competitors that are located close to them on the policy space. By doing this, parties manage

to implement policies that are closer to their own ideal points. Therefore, some political contexts epitomize situations of maximum electoral relevance for the left-right dimension, laying the groundwork for our idea of overlapping polarization.

We elaborate on the macro-level factors that moderate overlapping polarization following this line of thought. Accordingly, the first contextual determinant that we hypothesize could intervene in this relationship is democratic age. More specifically, we argue that the described individual-level association between ideological extremism and affective polarization becomes stronger as democracies grow older. In the years after the first democratic elections, party systems tend to be characterized by high levels of electoral volatility (Powell and Tucker, 2014). Even more importantly for our purposes here, it could be argued that interest-based competition connected to the left-right dimension is less important in this scenario (Tavits and Letki, 2013). However, things change as democracies age. As a political system moves further away from the founding election, party competition stabilizes, and it increasingly revolves around programmatic (ideological) differences (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007). In relatively older democracies, the entry and exit of parties and the overall number of voters that switch between established forces become lower. Moreover, parties' ideological positions become stickier and more salient. On top of this, voters increasingly resort to ideological shortcuts to make electoral decisions. Within this framework, we expect the following:

Hypothesis 1. The positive relationship between ideological extremism and affective polarization becomes stronger as the democratic age of a country goes up.

Delving into country-level specific institutional features, one of the most important for a democracy is whether the origin and survival of the executive and legislative authorities are separated or not (Shugart and Carey, 1992). In presidential regimes, the winner of the presidential elections is appointed head of state for a fixed term. Coupled with the absence of political responsibility of the executive to the legislature, this usually means that the president's party is in government for the full inter-election period and cabinet appointments and dismissals do not depend on inter-party negotiations (Cheibub, 2007). Moreover, the superior executive power resources and autonomy within the party of heads of government in presidential democracies imply that the electoral process is decisively shaped by the personalities of the candidates rather than the ideologies of the parties. As Linz (1978) noted a long time ago, these candidates are usually apartisan, contributing to further diminish the ideological component of elections in these countries. In parliamentary systems, political actors face a different set of incentives and opportunities given that, to survive in office, the prime minister needs to have at least the implicit support of a legislative majority during the whole term, which frequently implies securing the support of other political parties. A typical way of achieving this goal is by giving portfolios to ideologically proximate parties, forming the so-called connected coalitions (Axelrod, 1970). The formation of these policy-oriented multi-party governments in parliamentary democracies explains a higher salience of the left-right dimension in this type of systems and, as a result, a stronger positive association between ideological extremism and affective polarization. However, what about semi-presidential democracies? Samuels (2009) argued that they represent a middle ground between presidentialism and parliamentarism (see also Elgie, 2011). Although semi-presidential and presidential regimes present several important aspects in common, including the celebration of direct presidential elections by majority rule and a high level of personalism within the executive, the existence of a government whose survival in office depends on keeping the legislature's confidence forces political actors to behave in a more ideological way. Likewise, as Carey (2007) shows, confidence provisions in semi-presidential and parliamentary systems largely explain the higher level of party unity in legislative voting in these democracies since the costs of crossing ideological lines becomes higher. Finally, it is important to mention that the

² Although for the sake of simplicity we will rely on a single ideological dimension (left-right), the posited arguments could be extended to alternative dimensions of programmatic policy competition in Kitschelt and Wilkinson's (2007) words.

powers of presidents in semi-presidential democracies are often small. Bearing these considerations in mind, we posit our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. The positive relationship between ideological extremism and affective polarization becomes weaker in systems where there is not political responsibility of the government to the legislature.

Paradoxically, the growing number of parties registered in established democracies since the 1970s might attenuate the positive association between ideological extremism and affective polarization. The available theoretical arguments in this regard are mixed, with different studies showing that the relationship between number of parties and party system ideological polarization may be positive (Cox, 1997; Downs, 1957; Sartori, 1976), negative (Dow, 2011), or even null (Dalton, 2008; Ezrow, 2008). Given such ambiguous results, we significantly depart from this body of research and focus on individual-level ideological extremism. We claim that high party system fragmentation leads to a weaker connection between ideological extremism and affective polarization because of three main reasons. First, we resort to strategic voting considerations. As Daoust and Bol (2020) shows for the Canadian case, strategic vote becomes more frequent when the number of parties goes up. If citizens end up voting for second-best options from the ideological point of view because of considerations on parties' viability, we expect a decrease in left-right salience. Second, we build our argument on the different number of niche parties that exist across countries. According to Wagner (2011), "niche parties are best defined as parties that de-emphasize economic concerns and stress a small range of non-economic issues" (p. 846). The proliferation of niche parties in fragmented party systems has a direct effect on the lower salience of the classic left-right dimension. However, this is only part of the story. As Meguid (2008) argues, mainstream party reactions to the emergence of niche parties are not limited to the standard spatial tools of convergence and divergence on the established left-right dimension and can also involve engaging with the niche party's predominant issue. When mainstream parties try to own it, they also contribute, albeit indirectly, to the lower salience of the left-right dimension. Finally, in contexts of high party system fragmentation, extreme parties might manage to obtain a considerable parliamentary representation and become members of a coalition government. If this is the case, the affective evaluations of the ideological extremists whose party is represented in government towards the other coalition members will be warmer, further decreasing the level of overlapping polarization registered in one country (Horne et al., 2022). Our third hypothesis is based on this line of reasoning:

Hypothesis 3. The positive relationship between ideological extremism and affective polarization becomes weaker as party system fragmentation increases.

Finally, we consider the effect of party-system or elite-level ideological polarization on overlapping polarization. As the level of the former grew in the US after the 1970s (McCarty et al., 2016), scholars started to show that elite-level ideological and mass-level affective polarization were closely interlinked (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016). According to this scholarship, it should be easier for citizens to attribute negative traits to other parties when their perceived or actual core ideological beliefs are rather different (against this, see Lelkes, 2018). However, Gidron et al. (2020) have recently tested for this possibility and found no relationship between party manifesto left-right polarization and mass-level affective polarization. We here take a different stance and delve into the individual-level consequences of living in a highly polarized party system. Left-right salience is higher within these contexts not only at the party level, where government formation is expected to be driven, above all, by policy concerns, but also at the mass level, where voters are more likely to cast a ballot based on ideological considerations. The ideological stakes are simply too high in these systems to, on the one hand, cast a ballot for options occupying a distant position on the left-right dimension and, on the other, see coalition

agreements happening between ideologically incompatible parties. The individual-level relationship between ideological extremism and affective polarization should be tighter in these contexts given that left-right extremists are more likely to blame rival parties for the high level of disagreement over political issues. Hence, our fourth and final hypothesis proceeds as follows:

Hypothesis 4. The positive relationship between ideological extremism and affective polarization becomes stronger when a party system is ideologically polarized.

4. Data and methods

To test these hypotheses, we draw on data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) Integrated Module Dataset (IMD), complemented with data from the first four CSES modules.³ The IMD includes data from 174 post-electoral surveys fielded in 59 countries. However, we exclude those studies conducted in non-democratic countries,⁴ and those for which there is no data for at least one of the variables considered in our analyses. The resulting dataset includes data for 104 parliamentary/legislative and presidential elections held between 1996 and 2016 in 45 countries. Figure A1 displays the full list of considered elections. Although we only examine democracies, the elections included in the sample vary considerably in terms of their historical context, economic conditions and institutional framework.⁵

To measure affective polarization, we mainly rely on the indicator developed by Wagner (2021), which is based on the 0–10 like-dislike scores respondents assigned to each party considered in the CSES data. This measure has the advantage of being widely available for many elections. To be more specific, Wagner proposes two different approaches to operationalize affective polarization at the individual level: a measure based on the spread of like-dislike scores for all the parties (*spread* measure), and a measure based on the distance from the most liked party to all other parties in the party system (*distance* measure). In this article, we prioritize the former. The spread measure is more applicable to multiparty contexts, which are more common in our sample (Wagner, 2021). In any case, we also replicate our main analyses using the alternative *distance* measure.

The spread measure is operationalized as the weighted average party like-dislike difference relative to each respondent's average party like-dislike score. Following Wagner (2021), the formula for this measure is as follows:

$$SPREAD_i = \sqrt{\sum_{p=1}^P V_p * (Like_{ip} - \bar{Like}_i)^2}$$

where $like_{ip}$ is the like-dislike score assigned to each party p , and v_p is the vote share of this party.

The mean of affect \bar{like}_i is also weighted so that it reflects party size. The mean like parameter is therefore calculated as follows:

$$Like_i = \sum_{p=1}^P V_p * Like_{ip}$$

The resulting measure ranges from 0 to 5, with higher values

³ We needed to do so to calculate our measures of affective polarization because the vote share of each party in the lower house is missing in the CSES-IMD. This implies that CSES post-electoral surveys fielded after a presidential election that was not held concurrently with a legislative/parliamentary election are excluded because the last legislative/parliamentary election in that country might have happened a relatively long time ago.

⁴ Countries with a value lower than 6 in the Polity IV index at the time (year) of the election, that do not appear on that dataset or are considered non-democratic according to Cheibub et al. (2010) are excluded from the analyses.

⁵ Yet, we show that our findings are not driven by specific observations and report some additional analyses in the Appendix in which we replicate our main individual-level models by excluding one country at a time (see Figure C5).

indicating higher levels of affective polarization. In our sample, the spread index ranges between 0 and 4.99, with an average and a standard deviation of 2.35 and 1.02, respectively. The two countries with the highest average levels of affective polarization in our sample are Kenya and Albania, whereas the two countries with the lowest average levels of affective polarization are Taiwan and Philippines. Likewise, we can distinguish countries where the levels of affective polarization are more similar across individuals, such as the Netherlands and Norway, and countries where the levels of affective polarization more largely differ across individuals, such as Albania and Uruguay.

To operationalize the level of ideological extremism at the individual level, we exploit variation in the average left-right position in each context. More specifically, we calculate for everyone the difference in absolute terms between her left-right position and the mean left-right position for each country-election. The resulting measure has a theoretical range from 0 to 10, with higher values indicating higher levels of ideological extremism at the individual level. In our sample, this index ranges between 0.01 and 7.21, with an average and standard deviation of 1.93 and 1.5, respectively. The two countries with the highest average levels of ideological extremism are curiously the same countries with the highest average levels of affective polarization (Albania and Kenya), whereas the two countries with the lowest average levels of ideological extremism in the sample are Taiwan and the United Kingdom. Likewise, we can distinguish countries where the ideological positions of individuals are more similar, such as the Netherlands and Philippines, and countries where the ideological positions of individuals more largely differ, such as Ukraine and Uruguay. In general, the country-level correlation between these two indices is 0.53 and is statistically significant at the 5%, suggesting that affectively polarized societies are also frequently polarized from the ideological point of view.⁶

To operationalize the conditional effects posited in the hypotheses section, we first resort to the number of years of the current democratic period in the country under consideration and take the decimal logarithm because we expect non-linearities in the effect.⁷ We then distinguish between presidential, parliamentary and semi-presidential systems. Third, we employ the effective number of parliamentary parties (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979), which captures the level of party system fragmentation at the legislative level. Finally, we estimate respondents' perception of elites' ideological polarization following Wagner's (2021) operationalization of the distance measure of affective polarization. In other words, we apply the same formula than previously but now we rather use respondents' placement of each of the parties included in the CSES data on the 0–10 left-right scale. Hence, in the previous formula we substitute $like_{ip}$ and \bar{like}_i with $position_{ip}$, that is the position assigned to a given party p by individual i on the 0–10 left-right scale, and $\bar{position}_i$, that is the mean left-right ideology of all parties positioned by each respondent on that scale weighted by their vote shares, respectively.

Econometric analyses conducted on CSES data also include a battery

of additional control variables. At the individual level, some models are estimated controlling for respondents' age, gender, education, income, occupational status, habitat size, political knowledge and satisfaction with democracy.⁸ At the aggregate level, the control variables that we include in our specifications are the decimal logarithm of the Gross Domestic Product per Capita (GDP) adjusted by purchasing parity power and the total unemployment rate at the year of the survey.

Finally, we analyze the mechanisms linking left-right salience and overlapping polarization by relying on measures at the voters' and the elites' level. Regarding the former, we first employ the percentage of respondents that do not position themselves on the left-right scale. We take this variable as indicator of how many non-ideological voters exist in each context and, hence, it should decrease left-right salience and overlapping polarization. Alternatively, we use the measure of social sorting created by Hartevelde (2021). For each of the elections included in the dataset, we calculate a bivariate Cramer's V association between party identification and ethnicity (operationalized as "majority ethnic group" vs. the rest).⁹ The availability of information on ethnicity is restricted across election studies, but still it arguably captures one of the major social fault lines that tend to be expressed politically and fits very well the previous analyses. The Cramer's V scores reflect how well party identification can be predicted by this non-political variable and, hence, how less driven by the left-right dimension political competition is. This factor is expected to decrease overlapping polarization. Finally, we take an aggregate measure of parties' general programmatic tendencies in the three most important economic issues calculated at the party system level (Kitschelt 2013).¹⁰ We expect this factor to increase the salience of the left-right dimension and, hence, to exacerbate overlapping polarization.

We employ hierarchical linear models with country-election random intercepts. To assess whether findings are driven by the choice of this econometric technique, we replicate all main models by replacing the country-election random intercepts with country-election fixed effects and main results remain practically identical. Likewise, we test the conditional effects posited in hypotheses 1–4 by running random-slope models for the level-1 ideological extremism variable and its corresponding cross-level interactions with the other level-2 contextual variables.

Based on d1-d5 and country specific issues (d7+), the indicator measures the cohesion of parties' appeals on an issue position, the salience of the issue position, and the degree of spatial distinctiveness or polarization of parties on issue positions. Cohesion (Co): the standard deviation of expert scores for each issue each party. Salience (Sal): the percentage of valid answers from experts for each issue each party. Polarization (Po): the mean distance of a focal party's position on the issue from the positions of each of the other parties in the system, with each dyad's distance weighted by the relative size of the two parties whose distance is being compared. T.

⁶ Figure A3 of the Appendix displays the average levels of affective, ideological and perceived elite-level ideological polarization across countries and over time. The perceived ideological polarization among elites is often higher than the affective polarization among voters; and the latter is in turn higher than voters' ideological extremism, suggesting that patterns are not necessarily congruent across types of polarization.

⁷ Following CSES, this variable captures the number of years since the last fundamental abrupt polity change. We operationalize fundamental abrupt polity change as a three-point change in the Polity score over a period of three years or less.

⁸ Full details about the coding and the descriptive statistics of all variables employed in the analyses appear in Table A1 of the Appendix. Moreover, Figure A2 in the Appendix displays the distribution of the main variables. Finally, Table A2 in the Appendix summarizes the correlation between them. Ideological extremism and affective polarization are also positively correlated at the individual level, but the strength of this association is only 0.32, suggesting that they capture two different dimensions of the same phenomenon.

⁹ This variable was dichotomized because the number and specificity of ethnic options varied widely in the CSES data, and this impacted Cramer's V.

¹⁰ This variable takes into account three elements (cohesion or how much experts disagree when assigning positions to parties, salience or how frequently experts are not able to assign positions to parties, and distinctiveness or how different the positions assigned to parties are) with regard to three of these issues (Social spending on the disadvantaged, State role in governing the economy and overall public spending). Parties are weighted by their size.

5. Results

5.1. Evidence of overlapping polarization

We begin by analyzing the predicted levels of affective polarization only as a function of individual-level ideological extremism (see Fig. 1).¹¹ Consistent with our theory, we find the highest levels of affective polarization when the individuals are highly ideologically polarized. According to this evidence, the values of the spread measure of affective polarization increase by about 1.5 points when we move from the minimum to the maximum value in the ideological extremism scale. We reach a similar conclusion when we control for the long battery of individual-level factors that we have listed above. In fact, judging by the comparison with the other included covariates, the effect of the increase in ideological extremism on affective polarization is considerable.¹² For example, according to Fig. 2, a two standard deviation change in ideological extremism is associated with a 0.61 increase in affective polarization. Even more importantly, the size of the coefficient remains almost unchanged (i.e., from 0.62 to 0.61) when we control for a long list of individual-level variables. In the light of the provided evidence, the second-best predictor of affective polarization is having a university degree, which is associated with a reduction in the outcome of interest of 0.14. More generally, our models largely corroborate previous findings in the affective polarization literature and confirm that older women with at least some education degree, who belong to the highest income group and whose occupational status is neither employed nor unemployed present higher levels of affective polarization than the rest of their counterparts (Hernández et al., 2021).

To examine the contextual modifiers of the interplay between ideological extremism and affective polarization, we have conducted a preliminary analysis that involves re-estimating Model 1 of Table B1 in the Appendix country by country. This allows us to obtain an initial answer to the question on whether specific contextual characteristics in each country drive the existence of overlapping polarization. Specifically, we have estimated 45 models. The results of these analyses, summarized in Fig. 3, indicate that the effect of ideological extremism on affective polarization is, as expected, stronger in some countries than in others. For example, the impact of ideological extremism ranges from 0.12 to 0.21 in Israel and Kenya, respectively, to 1.07 and 1.3 in Albania and US, respectively. In fact, in Kenya the effect is not statistically significant at the 95% level.

Yet, while these results indicate that the patterns of overlapping polarization vary across countries, we do not know under what exact contextual conditions this relationship becomes stronger or weaker. To find out, we first specify a new model in which affective polarization is regressed on ideological extremism at the individual level, as well as the contextual covariates listed above.¹³ The results of this exercise are reported in Fig. 4. Consistent with previous findings in the article, ideological extremism has a significant positive effect on affective polarization. However, the effect of a two standard deviation change in ideological extremism just amounts to 0.37 points according to this specification. In fact, perceived elite-level ideological polarization becomes the most powerful predictor of affective polarization. An increase in the effective number of legislative parties is also associated with a decrease in respondents' affective polarization. Moreover, presidentialism and semipresidentialism relative to parliamentarism negatively affect the levels of affective polarization registered in a democracy. Finally, it appears that the other independent variables

included in the model (i.e., GDP per capita, unemployment rate and democratic age) do not have any substantial effect on affective polarization.

5.2. The conditional effects of institutional and political moderators

We then turn to analyze whether and how contextual factors moderate the relationship between ideological extremism and affective polarization. We fit a new model in which affective polarization is regressed on GDP per capita, unemployment rates, and ideological extremism on its own and interacted with the log number of years under democracy, effective number of legislative parties, perceived elite-level ideological polarization and system of government. Fig. 5 plots the marginal effect of ideological extremism on affective polarization as a function of the three first of these conditioning factors, and the predicted affective polarization as ideological extremism changes conditional on the type of system of government (presidentialism, semipresidentialism and parliamentarism). In all cases, effects are significant and confirm hypothesized expectations.

First, the positive association between ideological extremism and affective polarization becomes stronger as democracies age. According to Hypothesis 1, we argued that respondents increasingly link affects towards parties to their position on the ideological scale as they gain democratic experience. In the case of older democracies, both citizens' and parties' left-right positions tend to be more stable and, as a result, voters are more able to accurately perceive these positions and to vote accordingly. Moreover, parties are more likely to form governments with parties that are close to them on the policy space. When all this occurs, the positive relation between ideological extremism and affective polarization becomes stronger. Hence, our results seem to suggest a so far neglected consequence of the higher levels of ideological anchoring that is present in established democracies.

The second and third panels of Fig. 5 show evidence on the extent to which the positive effect of ideological extremism on affective polarization is moderated by party system characteristics. In both cases, our hypotheses 3 and 4 are clearly supported. On the one hand, the effect of ideological extremism on affective polarization is moderated by party system fragmentation. The marginal effect of ideological extremism in this regard significantly declines as we move away from a two-party system and, as a result, a reduction in the salience of left-right ideology takes place. On the other hand, the meaningful rise in the size of the effect of ideological extremism on affective polarization as individuals increasingly perceive the party system as ideologically polarized suggests that left-right salience in citizens' minds is also a function of parties' stances. In other words, inter-party animosity is more clearly driven by ideological considerations as we move away from scenarios in which parties adopt largely the same policy positions.¹⁴

Alternatively, the last panel of Fig. 5 tests whether the effect of ideological extremism on affective polarization depends on the type of government system and a clear pattern emerges in this regard as well. Even though in all cases ideological extremism increases affective polarization, this effect is somehow weaker in presidential democracies compared to semi-presidential and parliamentary systems. Hence, results suggest that it is not the direct election of the head of state for a fixed term per se, something that also occurs in semi-presidential regimes, but the absence of political responsibility of the executive to the legislature, an exclusive feature of presidential systems, what significantly decreases the positive association between ideological extremism

¹¹ Full results can be found in Table B1 of the Appendix.

¹² Since all numeric covariates (including, obviously, ideological extremism) have been rescaled by subtracting their mean and dividing them by two times their standard deviation (Gelman, 2008), the magnitudes of the coefficients are comparable among themselves and to untransformed categorical predictors.

¹³ Full results can be found in Table B2 of the Appendix.

¹⁴ Using Dalton's (2008) measure of party system polarization leads to the same conclusion (see Figure C4 in the Appendix). Whereas we use each respondent's perception of a party's left-right position to calculate our measure of elite-level ideological polarization, Dalton's index employs the public's mean perception of a party's left-right position. This is why the results are similar, but not exactly the same.

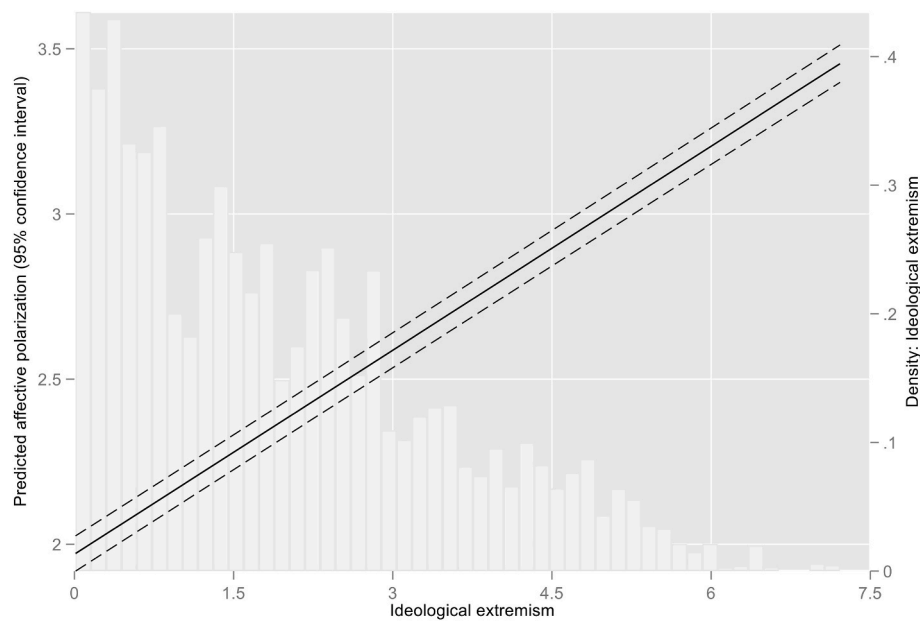


Fig. 1. The effect of ideological extremism on affective polarization
Note: Based on Model 3 of Table B1 in the Appendix. These are predicted levels of affective polarization with 95% confidence interval. The histogram in the background summarizes the distribution of the variable measuring ideological extremism.

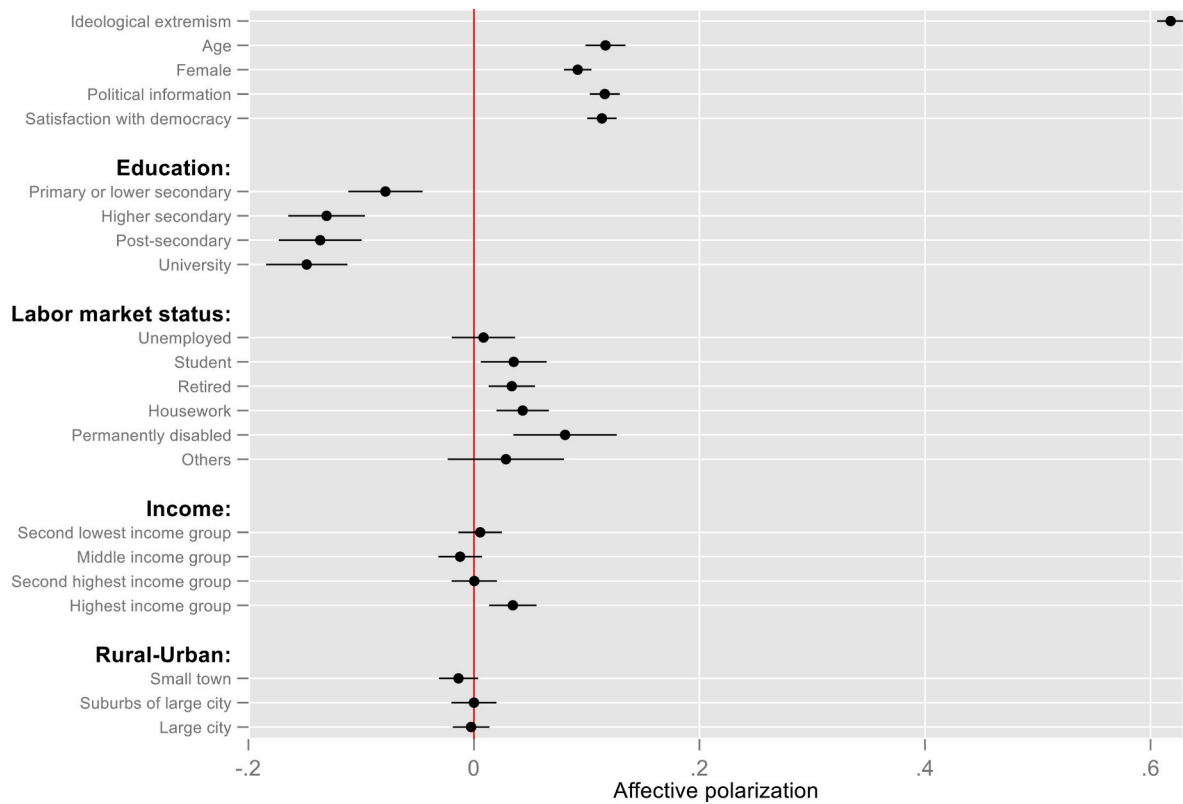


Fig. 2. The effect of respondents' characteristics and ideological extremism on affective polarization
Note: Based on Model 5 of Table B1 in the Appendix. The horizontal lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

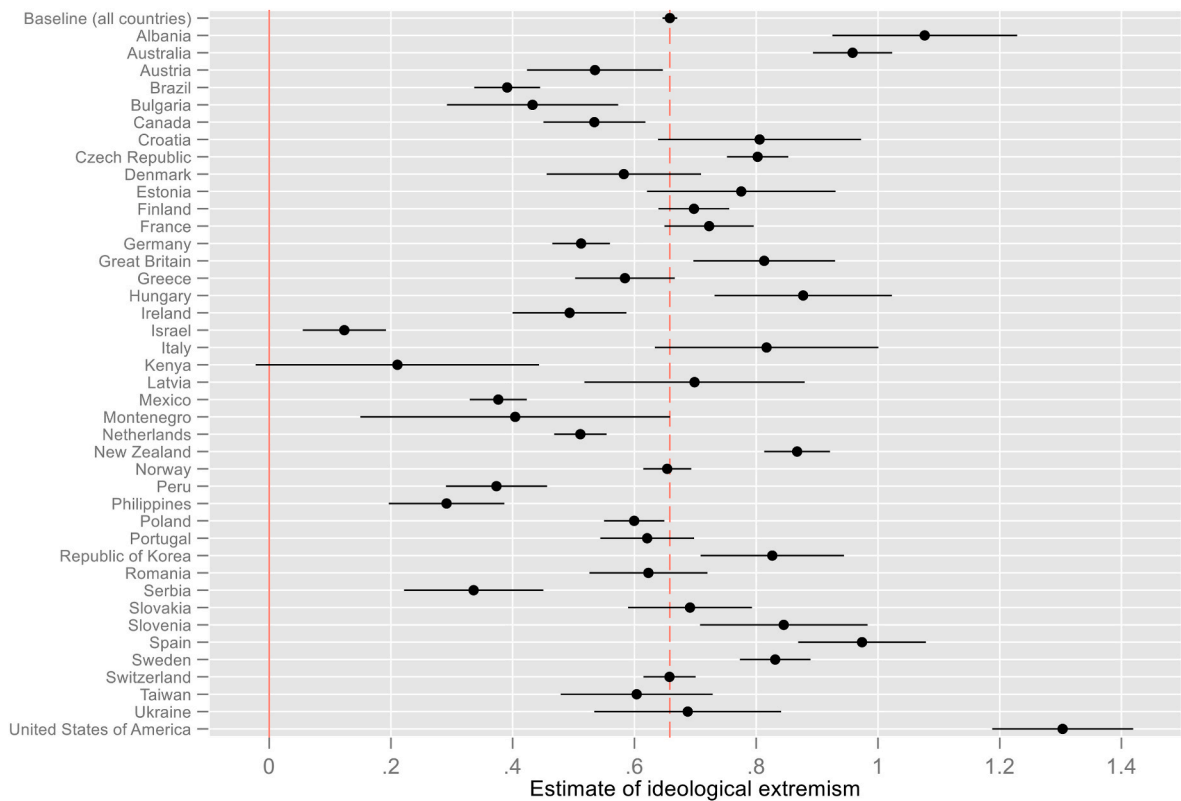


Fig. 3. The effect of ideological extremism on affective polarization by country
Note: Based on Model 4 of Table B1 in the Appendix. The horizontal lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

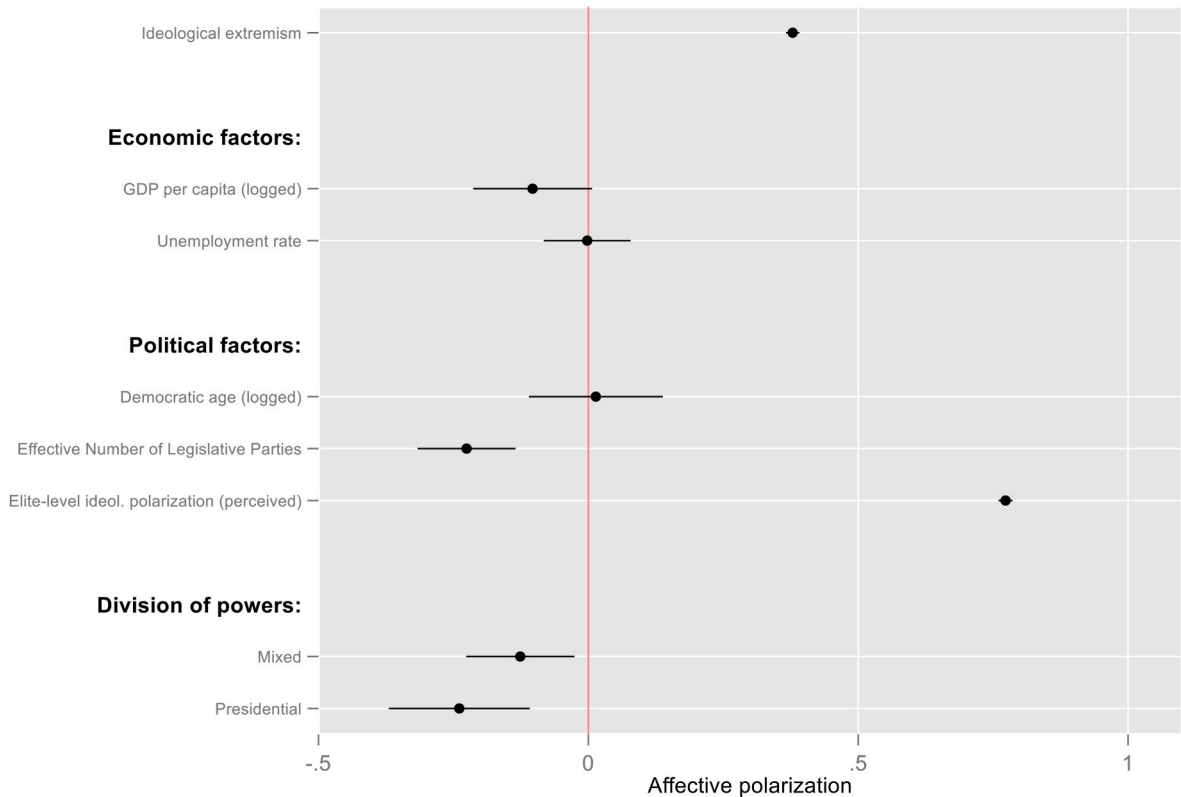


Fig. 4. The effect of contextual characteristics and ideological extremism on affective polarization
Note: Based on Model 1 of Table B2 in the Appendix. The horizontal lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

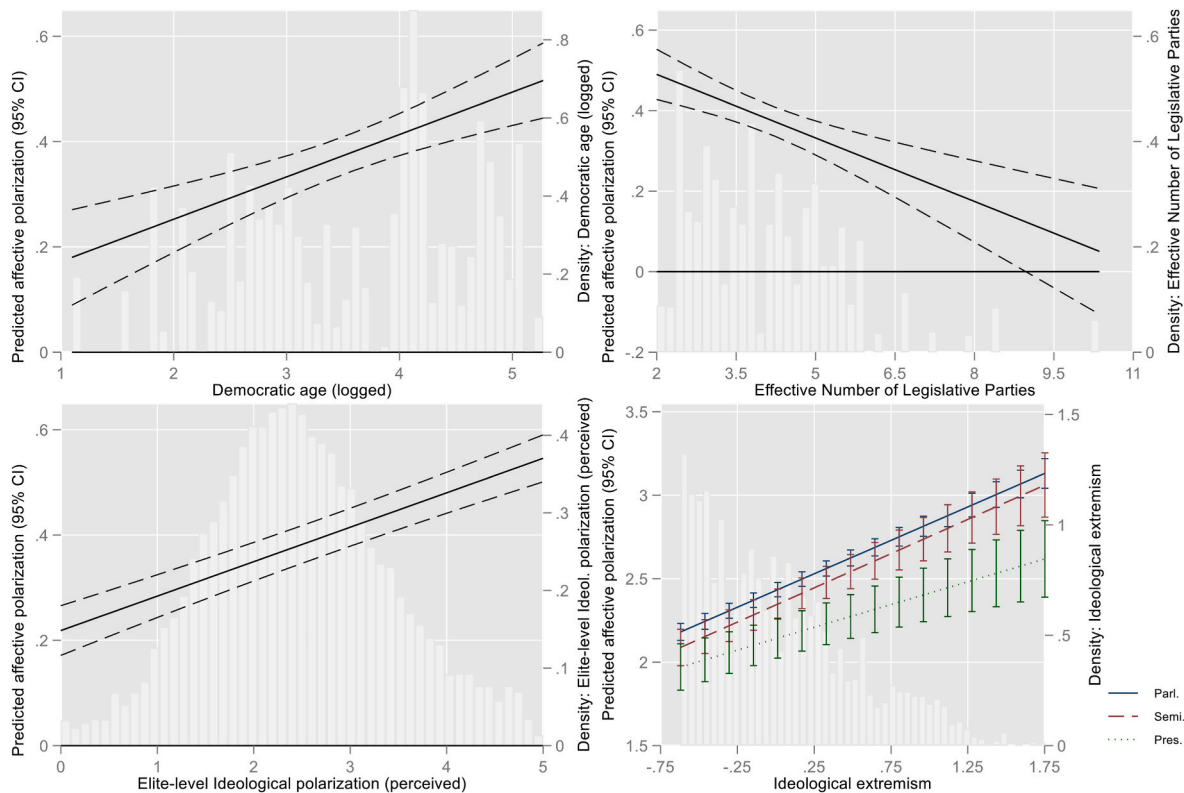


Fig. 5. The impact of ideological extremism on affective polarization conditional on contextual characteristics

Note: Based on Model 2 of Table B2 in the Appendix. In graphs 1–3, these are marginal effects with 95% confidence intervals and the histogram in the background summarizes the distribution of the modifying variable in each case. In graph 4, this is predicted affective polarization with 95% confidence interval and the histogram in the background summarizes the distribution of ideological extremism.

and affective polarization.¹⁵ Bearing these results in mind, we conclude that Hypothesis 2 is validated.

Finally, we delve into the potential underpinning theoretical mechanisms of overlapping polarization turning to analyze the mediating effect of the lack of positioning of the electorate on the left-right scale, the sorting of the society into partisan groups, and the parties' programmatic structuration of economic issues. For this purpose, we fit a new battery of models that include the macro-level variables included in previous specifications as controls.¹⁶ Fig. 6 summarizes the main results of these models, which bear out all previous expectations regarding the mechanisms. The first panel indicates that, when the percentage of respondents that do not place themselves on the left-right scale goes up, the effect of the ideological extremism on affective polarization shrinks. At the same time, the second panel of Fig. 6 indicates that, as the association between ethnicity and partisan identities gains power, the correlation between ideological extremism and affective polarization goes down. Finally, the results summarized in the last panel of Fig. 6 indicate that there is a significant positive association between ideological extremism and affective polarization when parties mainly compete around programmatic offers. This association is much less important when parties' programmatic structuration is considerably lower and, as a result, the left-right dimension is less salient.¹⁷

¹⁵ Focusing only on presidential and semi-presidential democracies, the effect of ideological extremism on affective polarization is stronger when presidential and legislative elections are concurrent than when presidential elections take place on their own (see Figure C2 in the Appendix).

¹⁶ Full results can be found in Table B3 of the Appendix.

¹⁷ We reach identical conclusions when using a similar measure built on Comparative Manifesto data (see model 5 of Table B3 and Figure C6).

5.3. Robustness checks

All the results presented so far are based on a measure of affective polarization operationalized through the spread of like-dislike scores that individuals assign to all parties. To assess the consistency of our results, we conduct a robustness analysis that involves re-estimating the previous interactive main models using the distance from the most liked party to all other parties in the party system as an alternative dependent variable (Wagner 2021). The complete results of the corresponding models are found in Table C1 of the Appendix and largely confirm the findings presented in the article so far.

Likewise, we do not know whether the positive association between ideological extremism and affective polarization is largely driven by a highly positive assessment of radical parties by extremist voters that occupy the same side of the ideological spectrum or, instead, by a considerably negative assessment of radical parties by extremist voters when these parties occupy the opposite side of the ideological spectrum. For this purpose, we specify a battery of additional models in which the highest and the lowest party evaluations of each respondent are regressed on her level of ideological extremism, as well as the relevant interactions to test the conditional hypotheses. The full set of results for these alternative specifications can be found in Tables C2 and C3 of the Appendix. Briefly speaking, we can conclude that the analyses using in-party likes and out-party dislikes as dependent variables provide additional support for the conditional hypotheses of the article, though we do not find clear evidence to conclude that one is more important than the other.

Likewise, for our measure of ideological extremism at the individual level to be valid, one would need to assume that an individual is exposed to the ideology of all other people in the country. However, this is hardly the case because citizens tend to live in places where the ideological positions of their neighbors are usually not substantially different from

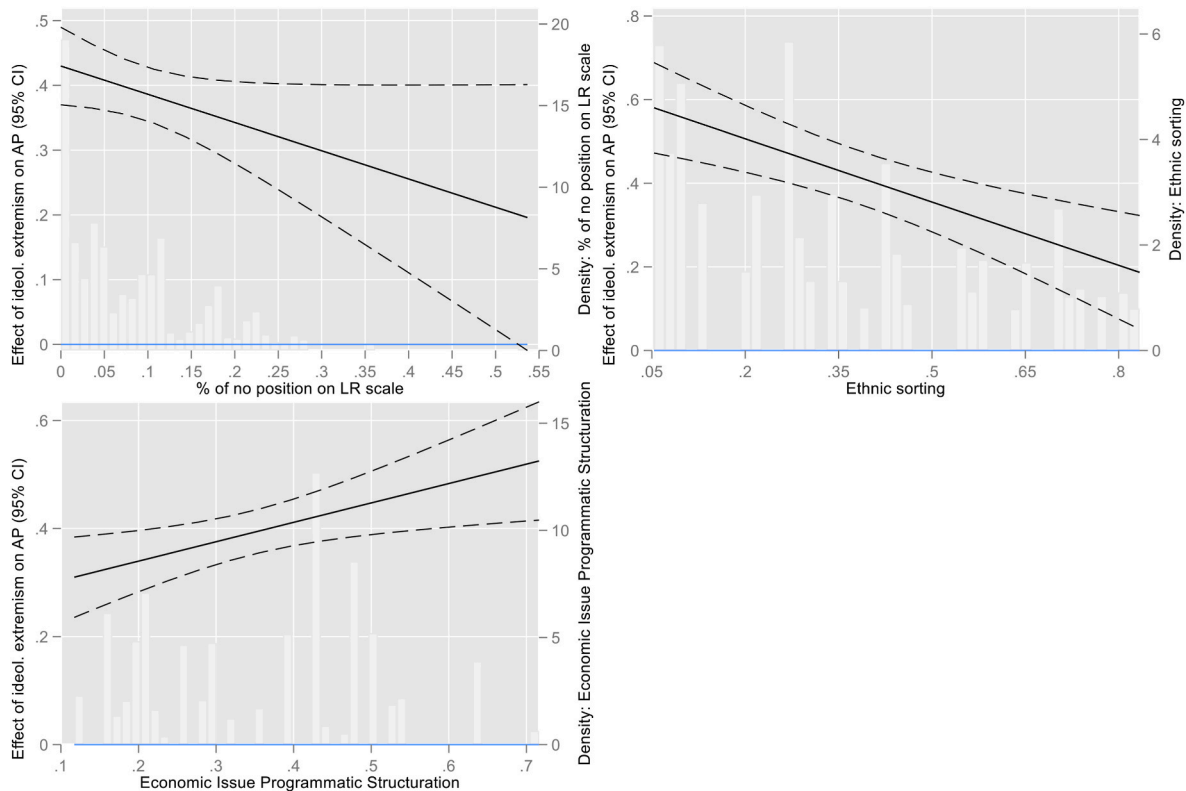


Fig. 6. The impact of ideological extremism on affective polarization (test of mechanisms)

Note: Based on Models 2–4 of Table B3 in the Appendix. These are marginal effects with 95% confidence intervals. The histograms in the background summarize the distribution of the modifying variable in each case.

their own. For this reason, Table C4 of the Appendix displays the results of some additional analyses where ideological extremism is calculated with respect to the average ideology at the regional level. Main results hold because, among other things, the correlation between this new measure of ideological extremism and the measure used in previous analyses is 0.97 ($p < 0.01$).

Left-right dimensionality is neither a theoretical nor an empirical necessity of our arguments, as shown by evidence displayed in Figure C1 of the Appendix. This graph replicates Fig. 1 by using data from the public's position on alternative dimensions of political competition available at the CSES dataset that are not the left-right scale. Although the number of available observations is remarkably lower, the results are almost identical and corroborate the idea that individual-level ideological extremism and affective polarization pretty overlap in most contexts. Unfortunately, the lack of sufficient variation at the country-election level regarding relevant variables does not allow us to test the battery of conditional hypotheses of the article with these data.

Finally, the above findings on the declining impact of ideological on affective polarization as party system fragmentation goes up prompt us to analyze whether social heterogeneity, electoral system permissiveness or both mediate this relationship. For this purpose, we re-estimate our basic interactive model while replacing the effective number of legislative parties by ethnic fractionalization and electoral system type. Figure C3 summarizes the largely inconclusive results of this exercise. On the one hand, there is some support for the idea that overlapping polarization is weaker in countries that register high ethnic fragmentation, which further suggests that in these scenarios left-right ideology loses political relevance and alternative dimensions of competition emerge as important. On the other hand, the positive association

between ideological extremism and affective polarization becomes weaker when a PR system is in place. However, we do not find especially strong effects in this regard.¹⁸ This partially null finding raises several additional questions for future research regarding the impact of the inter-party dimension of electoral systems on overlapping polarization.

6. Conclusions

The classical comparative politics literature used to point out that polarization had negative consequences for the proper functioning of democracy (Linz, 1978; Sani and Sartori, 1983). With the triumph of the catch-all parties in the second half of the XX century, the worry around the potential damaging effect of polarization vanished itself (Kirchheimer, 1966; Katz and Mair, 1995). However, the current electoral success of radical parties has brought the perils of highly polarized political systems back into the public debate (Bischof and Wagner, 2019). Most of this research has been largely concerned with ideological polarization, which focuses on citizens and elites' relative stances on an all-encompassing left-right dimension or on more specific issue dimensions, such as the economy, immigration, etc. Yet, as the articles in this special issue explain, recent years have witnessed a burgeoning body of scholarship focused on the analysis of another form of polarization: affective polarization or the degree to which party identifiers prefer their own party to its opponent(s). While the literature seems to be divided around the nature of this phenomenon, understanding affective polarization has become crucial given its corrosive effects for democratic attitudes, norms, and institutions (Gidron et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019).

Slightly departing from the approach in previous groundbreaking

¹⁸ The results are stronger when using logged district magnitude rather than electoral formula (see Table B6 of the Appendix).

work (Iyengar et al., 2019; Lelkes, 2018; Reiljan, 2019), this article has examined the individual-level relationship between ideological extremism and affective polarization across a diverse group of countries. We have seen that overlapping polarization is the rule in most of the examined contemporary democracies; that is, citizens that adopt most extreme stances on the left-right scale have, on average, worse feelings towards political parties other than their own. This might not be surprising at all for those readers approaching this topic at the individual level. However, the added value of the article lies somewhere else. By employing CSES data, we have studied whether and how contextual factors contribute to make this association stronger or weaker, emphasizing the role that the varying salience of the left-right dimension plays across countries. Leveraging the considerable heterogeneity of our sample of 104 country-election observations, this paper has provided evidence on how certain contexts boost and reinforce the hypothesized overlap, drawing novel and thought-provoking results regarding the potential opportunity structures for ideology-based political conflict in contemporary democracies.

First, relatively older, parliamentary democracies, with lower levels of party system fragmentation and perceived elite-level ideological polarization constitute contexts where this relationship becomes particularly strong. This is the case of countries like Great Britain or New Zealand in our sample.

Secondly, there are countries in our sample that, despite having very high levels of affective and ideological polarization at the aggregate level, show no overlapping polarization at the individual level. According to the literature, in least developed democracies there is no consistent and relatively stable left-right dimension (Luna and Kaltwasser, 2014; Rudra and Tobin, 2017), and political parties are built on a mix of traditionally left-right items and ethnic or religious identities that are largely shaped by politicians' personalities and clientelistic practices. This could be the case of Kenya, where according to Alesina et al.'s (2003) ethnolinguistic fractionalization variable is the highest (.89) in the world. In fact, in the round 8 of the Afrobarometer, developed in 2019, when asked to define themselves according to their "ethnic community, tribe or cultural group", Kenyans mentioned around 20 different adscriptions and only 0.5% defined themselves as "nationals". Thus, the presence of cross-cutting cleavages – that is, dimensions of identity or interest along which members of the same ethnic group may have diverse allegiances – may explain the existence of high levels of ideological and affective polarization in this country, and yet, no individual-level correlation between them.

Thirdly, although we argue that the left-right dimension is more salient as the number of political parties declines, our analyses are not able to disentangle the fact that, in certain small party systems, individual-level ideological positioning might be highly correlated with partisan identities, leading, consequently, to higher levels of overlapping polarization. In fact, as shown in Fig. 3, the exceptionally high levels of overlapping polarization in the United States, which is clearly an outlier, underscore the importance of considering that this overlap might have a different nature in these political systems.

All these results contribute to the debate on the comparative importance of the political component of affective polarization and present three notable implications. The first one has a substantive nature and suggests that, rather than the quasi-tribal character that the literature assigns to affective polarization, there are contexts where this phenomenon is much more policy grounded. Secondly, and following the former, as individuals increasingly move towards the extremes of the ideological spectrum, this might not only increase the acceptance of undemocratic practices (Graham and Svobik 2020; Torcal and Magalhães, 2022), but, in certain contexts, it might also fuel the conformation of antagonistic political camps. The third one has a more practical nature and suggests that efforts to prevent affective polarization from becoming unbearable should focus on decreasing ideological extremism via institutional reforms and derived political interventions. Based on the identified contextual effects, adopting a more proportional electoral

system, or switching to presidentialism, among others, might decrease the prevalence of overlapping polarization in a very significant way.

Although we have shed light on a so far relatively unexplored topic, our work opens several avenues for further research. Importantly, upcoming studies should dig deeper into the mechanisms behind the contextual effects examined here. Within this framework, it would be interesting to pay closer attention not only to the role of niche parties and the implications their importance has for the introduction in the political agenda of new topics such as globalization and Europeanization, but also to the potential impact of different levels of party system institutionalization from the point of view of government formation patterns. For example, is overlapping polarization higher when the government formulas tend to be the same over time? Even more importantly, given that our evidence is purely observational and, thus, our findings must be treated with caution because of reverse causality issues, it would be also worth exploring whether our main argument holds when applying causal identification strategies. Recent experimental evidence in the United States shows that social evaluations of out-group partisans reflect differences in ideological positions rather than reflexive responses based on partisanship (Homola et al., 2022). Given that our results confirm the relatively high levels of overlapping polarization in the US, future research should aspire to disentangle the way in which the context shapes this causal path.

Overlapping polarization represents a new approach to the study of affective polarization. It speaks to the substantive policy-based grounds of inter-partisan animosity and to the comparative contexts in which this relationship is more prone to arise. As such, it can be considered as a double-edged phenomenon. On the positive side, it demonstrates that affective polarization has a rational component. On the negative one, however, it uncovers the limits of democratic politics and the existing potential institutional spaces for democratic self-defeat.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102628>.

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