Every Rose Has Its Thorn?

The Interplay Between Elections, Affective Polarization, and Political Behaviour

Thesis submitted by Bjarn ECK
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Abstract

Affective polarization – the extent to which voters feel positively about their own party and its voters and negatively about other parties and their voters – has become a central concept in the study of political behaviour in contemporary democracies. A key finding is that voters are more affectively polarized around elections, which has raised concern about the potential destabilizing role of electoral competition. This dissertation argues that assessing the normative implications of election-induced affective polarization requires understanding both (1) how elections drive affective polarization and (2) how affective polarization influences political behaviour during elections. Drawing on five empirical chapters that use original and secondary survey data from European multiparty contexts, the findings show that elections generate small increases in vertical (toward parties) but not in horizontal (toward voters) affective polarization. Crucially, these changes are not driven by rising hostility toward political opponents, but by differentiated increases in sympathy toward all parties and electorates. In addition, policy congruence with other parties – an inherent feature of multiparty systems – reduces hostility toward their voters, highlighting how multiparty systems contain institutional safeguards that constrain extreme affective polarization. Regarding political behaviour, affectively polarized citizens are more likely to vote across a range of electoral contexts, and this effect is more robust than that of ideological polarization. Finally, in the aftermath of elections, affective polarization widens winner-loser dynamics, but this is primarily driven by electoral winners, who may reduce support for institutional constraints. Taken together, these findings nuance the impact of elections on affective polarization and show that election-induced increases in affective polarization do not uniformly undermine democratic functioning. They suggest that democratic stability does not require the absence of affective polarization, but rather its containment within manageable bounds that structure political conflict.

Preface

This dissertation is based on the collection of the following five articles:

1. Eck, B. & Michel, E. Election Salience Revisited: How Elections (Do Not) Boost Affective Polarization. *Under second-stage review.*

2. Eck, B., Michel, E., & Van Haute, E. (2025). The Impact of Party-Voter Congruence on Affective Polarisation: Evidence from Belgium. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2025.2598210.

3. Eck, B., & Michel, E. (2025). Towards a Polarized Electorate? How Polarization Affects Turnout Decisions in the Belgian Context of Compulsory Voting. *Politics of the Low Countries, 6*(3), 117-143. https://doi.org/10.5553/PLC/.000079.

4. Eck, B. National or European? The Sources of Political Polarization Behind EP Turnout. *Working paper.*

5. Eck, B., & Paulis, E. (2025). Defending the Status Quo or Seeking Change? Electoral Outcomes, Affective Polarization, and Support for Referendums. *British Journal of Political Science, 55,* e75. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123425000365

These articles form the empirical basis of this dissertation in the presented order. Some of them are slightly adapted for better flow, but the core arguments and analyses remain unchanged. The articles can be read independently from each other or as a whole. Some overlap may occur, especially in the theoretical sections, due to the use of the same concepts across articles. The collection of articles is preceded by a general introduction and followed by a general conclusion. Co-authored work is written in the "we"-perspective, while single-authored work is written in the "I"-perspective.

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> *De wind, die eigenlijk alleen zo nu en dan maar eens komt neergestreken, voortdurend komende van en onderweg naar elders, maar nooit constant op één plaats bezig, draagt vlaagsgewijs nu eens verkwikkende, dan weer onverkwikkende geuren aan, en soms een wolk vlinders of libellen, maar ook wel soms een zwerm zwarte vogels, – en is hij weer voorbij, dan blijft nog geruime tijd alles in de tuin, wat maar bewegen kan en door hem is aangeraakt, in beweging.*
>
> — Jeroen Brouwers, *Bezonken Rood* (1981)

In the summer of 2016, I was preparing for my bachelor studies after a gap year in the US. As an aspiring journalist, I decided to study International Relations – conveniently only offered by the University of Groningen, the Dutch university most distanced from my hometown which I had been desperate to leave since high school. I did not know what a PhD was, and I viewed university as a temporary place between high school and a job. In the decade since, new adventures and insights brought me to Leiden, Amsterdam, Maastricht, Cologne, Aachen, Brussels, Montréal, and Antwerp. This dissertation marks the end of that journey, which was filled with joys, laughter, disappointments, grief, successes, and failures. Above all, it has been a journey of intellectual and personal development that I could not have remotely foreseen 10 years ago, shaped by numerous encounters with people who each left their mark.

I am very thankful to my supervisor, Jean-Benoit Pilet, for guiding me through these years and offering me the freedom to pursue a dissertation in my own way. His ability to get straight to the heart of the problem, formulate it coherently, and provide constructive feedback for the way forward has been both a privilege and a source of inspiration. In particular, his 10-minute median reply time to e-mails – while leading multiple research projects and serving as faculty dean – has humbled me about ever claiming that I am too busy. I also wish to thank the other members of my doctoral committee, Caroline Close and Emilie Van Haute, who have been on board from the

beginning. Their sincere interest in my projects and feedback have helped me develop as a researcher, and their kind characters are an example to everyone in the field.

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Although not officially one of my supervisors, Elie Michel has helped me navigate the labyrinth that academia can feel like in the early stages of a PhD, for which I am very thankful. The coincidence of being hired on the same project has resulted in many academic collaborations and a friendship that transcends the importance of research papers. Above all, his talent for effortlessly matching – and even exceeding – my own cynical nature has been impressive and probably foundational to our friendship.

Several people played a key role in sparking my research interest during my bachelor's or nurturing it during my master's. It is hard to overstate how important such mentorships are. In particular, I thank Chitralekha Basu, Björn Bremer, Bruno Castanho Silva, Anna Herranz-Surrallés, Herman Hoen, Menno Kamminga, and Yf Reykers.

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Moving around a lot is not always easy, but I have been fortunate enough to have met great people in each and every place. Distances and daily whims have faded

some of these friendships, but while my heart may not always be easy to enter, those who ever did remain there. With Gijs, Hessel, Lea, Moana, Or, Teun, and Wietse I shared happiness, frustrations, and challenges in our most formative years in Groningen, which I look back at with great nostalgia. Aleyna, Bart, Elodie, Josi, and Jules significantly improved my quality of life during the pandemic in Maastricht and Cologne. In Brussels, I am grateful to have met Luca, Michael, Mili, and Nico, who have truly made my life more enjoyable during these PhD-years. As long as I remember, I have been surrounded by Erwin, Jasper, and Rens, with whom I grew up in the same neighbourhood in Kerkrade. Although we all took our own routes in life after high school, our friendships endured, which makes me extremely happy.

My family has always been the greatest source of support both in- and outside of academic matters. The presence of my brothers, first Jens and later Raf, shaped my youth and provided many moments of joint laughter. I am proud of the persons you have become, and while life makes us more distant nowadays, I know that you are always there whenever needed. My grandparents did not live to see this achievement, but I am grateful to have experienced their unconditional love that made me feel like there was always a home to return to. Finally, the tremendous love and support of my parents are difficult to fully capture in words. For various reasons, they never made it to university, which turned them into the biggest supporters of my academic experience – stimulating me to embark on this journey and visiting me wherever I am. Thank you for your meticulous advice on any aspect in life, for practical help whenever I need it, and for simply always giving me the feeling that I do not have to face things alone. I hope you stay around for another while.

I dedicate my last words to Sarah, who has accompanied and supported me through the most stressful times of this PhD when I was not always the most present person. Your relentless curiosity, energy, intelligence, kindness, and patience – in spite of the strong winds life sometimes brings – shape you into the person that I love, the person that I feel extremely lucky to have met. Wherever life takes us.

Bjarn Eck

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Polarization has become a buzzword in the media in recent years. Although a clear definition is often not provided, the term is generally used to describe antagonism between different political actors, ranging from uncivil language in parliament to extreme forms of hostility such as political violence. Whereas such animosity between political actors is not new, its visibility has increased markedly in the last decade: online, especially on social media, it is out in the open. This development has also simplified the interaction between political opponents and their potential use of antagonistic rhetoric. As a result, polarization is increasingly used in the media to make sense of political and societal developments, and these narratives are often accompanied with the claim that it has strongly increased over time.

Academically, this type of polarization has become known as affective polarization in the last decade. Rather than focusing solely on ideological differences between voters, affective polarization shifts attention to affective attachments and aversions – the tendency of voters to be sympathetic to their own party and its voters and to be hostile toward other parties and their voters. These affective divides have been linked to a range of other behaviours, such as the tendency to discriminate political out-groups and to harm social cohesion. Politically, affective polarization has often been linked to the presence or absence of democratic attitudes, political participation, and support for political institutions.

Elections play a prominent role here. Election periods are moments when political identities and conflicts between those identities are most salient. Existing research has,

accordingly, connected election salience to higher levels of affective polarization. More anecdotally, extreme events during or in the aftermath of elections that threatened democracies have been linked to (affective) polarization. On January 6, 2021, a violent mob of American citizens stormed the Capitol to overturn the 2020 Presidential election results, after then-US president Donald Trump refused to acknowledge his election loss against Joe Biden. In a remarkably similar event two years later, a mob of supporters of Jair Bolsonaro stormed government buildings in the capital of Brazil after Bolsonaro had lost the October 2022 Presidential election against Lula da Silva. While such events are exceptional, they illustrate how election periods are widely perceived as moments of heightened affective conflict.

At the same time, evidence about how election salience drives affective polarization is still inconclusive, and the connection between affective polarization and political behaviour has received remarkably little attention. This dissertation addresses these gaps by examining how elections shape affective polarization in multiparty systems and by unpacking how affective polarization drives political behaviour.

The remainder of this introduction situates this dissertation. It begins with a conceptualization of affective polarization, particularly in multiparty systems. After that, I review the rapidly expanding literature on affective polarization and identify the research gaps connected to elections and political behaviour, which lead to the introduction of my research puzzle and the research design and empirical scope. I then discuss the core contributions of this dissertation to the academic literature of affective polarization, elections, and political behaviour. Finally, I provide an overview of the five empirical chapters that follow the introduction, as well as the final concluding chapter.

1.1 Affective polarization: the concept

Although research on affective polarization has grown rapidly in the past years, it is not always clearly conceptualized in the literature. In this section, I examine the aspects that I believe are essential in order to provide a full conceptualization of

affective polarization in multiparty systems: its distinction from and similarity with ideological polarization as well as positive and negative partisanship, determining the in- and the out-parties, and determining the object of affect.

1.1.1 From ideological to affective polarization

Although the scholarly literature on affective polarization only started to take shape in the last decade, the concept did not emerge in a vacuum. Political science research has studied the concept of polarization for decades already, but focused for a long time on ideology. Ideology is generally seen as a set of coherent beliefs and values about how to organize society. In political science, especially in Europe, one of the key ways to classify the ideology of political actors is the left-right continuum, which itself is informed by programmatic preferences for policies about socio-economic and cultural issues (Kriesi et al., 2006). As such, Sartori (1976) famously defined ideological polarization as the distance between political parties on the left-right continuum. In principle, this is independent of the number of political parties in a system: what matters is the ideological distance between parties.

Much of this early work focused on party systems and how political parties were ideologically polarized (Abedi, 2002; Crepaz, 1990). The further the distance between parties on the left-right continuum, the more ideologically polarized the party system is. Over time, scholars also began studying ideological polarization among the general public (Adams, Green, & Milazzo, 2012; Adams, Vries, & Leiter, 2012; Bischof & Wagner, 2019; Castanho Silva, 2018; Munzert & Bauer, 2013). Although scholars generally agreed that Republican and Democratic elites in the US had ideologically polarized in their policy preferences over time (Hetherington, 2001, 2009; Layman et al., 2006; McCarty et al., 2006), a fierce debate erupted about whether the mass public had witnessed a similar transition. While some scholars argued that most Americans remained centrists on a large set of policies (Fiorina et al., 2005; Layman & Carsey, 2002; M. Levendusky, 2009), others argued that the ideological distance between Democratic and Republican voters had significantly increased in the preceding decades (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008).

Following up on this debate, Iyengar et al. (2012) suggested that whether ideological divisions had deepened over time might not matter as much as previously assumed in order to determine whether the American public had polarized. Instead, they shifted focus from ideology to *affect*. In their seminal article, they argued that partisanship functions like a social identity, which in turns triggers negative evaluations of partisans from the other party. Their view is rooted in social identity theory, which has shown that citizens tend to divide society into social groups (Tajfel, 1970). As a result, they are likely to evaluate fellow group members positively, while members of other groups are viewed more negatively (Tajfel et al., 1971). Such behaviour is particularly likely to emerge when group identities are salient and when groups compete with each other (Brewer, 1979; Turner et al., 1987).

Iyengar et al. (2012) applied these insights to the group memberships of the Democratic and Republican party, and confirmed that voters hold positive affect toward fellow partisans and negative affect toward opposite partisans. The gap between both attitudes is what they called affective polarization. Moreover, they demonstrated that affective polarization had increased significantly among the American electorate in the preceding decades, and this change was by and large the result of intensified dislike of political opponents. Attitudes about co-partisans, on the other hand, had remained relatively stable over time. These negative evaluations of out-partisans also extended to attitudes in social situations completely unrelated to politics. In 2010, Americans were much more likely to be unhappy if their child married someone from the opposite party than in 1960. Similarly, the same period witnessed a sharp growth in their likelihood of holding stereotypes about the personal traits of co-partisans and opposite partisans – positive (intelligent) for the former, and negative (selfish) for the latter. Even more, in a follow-up study, Iyengar and Westwood (2015) found that these attitudes translate into discriminating behaviour to an extent that Americans are more likely to discriminate others based on party than on race.

This new view on polarization is, importantly, conceptually distinct from ideological polarization. Although later research has shown that affective evaluations of co-partisans and political opponents are also to some extent rooted in ideological differences (Clifford et al., 2024; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2015; Webster & Abramowitz,

2017), the core distinction is that affective polarization does not necessarily change in response to ideological polarization. That is, affective polarization can be high or amplify even when ideological polarization is low or remains stable (Iyengar et al., 2012; M. Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016).

1.1.2 Affective polarization and positive and negative partisanship

Affective polarization is closely related to the two concepts of partisanship and negative partisanship. Partisanship, specifically positive partisanship, refers to a voter's loyalty to a specific party. It has been a central concept in explaining political behaviour since the seminal work by Campbell et al. (1964) and functions as a heuristic and social identity that guides how voters perceive, evaluate, and make decisions in politics (Green et al., 2004; Zaller, 1992). Recently, there has been much debate about the difference between instrumental and expressive partisanship (Huddy et al., 2015, 2018). Instrumental partisanship reflects the rational support for a party rooted in ideological preferences and performance evaluations. It is, by definition, in flux: citizens support the party as long as they believe it serves their own policy preferences. Expressive partisanship, on the other hand, reflects voters' long-term loyalty to a party, independent of policy agreement and performance. It functions as a social identity, where partisanship is part of who they are – supporting and defending the party is thus a way for citizens to express who they are. In the US, where the concept of affective polarization took root, the expressive form of partisanship is particularly present (Green et al., 2004; Huddy et al., 2015).

In contrast, negative partisanship has only been introduced as a concept more recently and refers to the opposite process where a voter forms an identity in response to negative feelings toward an opposing party (Bankert, 2021; Mayer, 2017). The idea here is that citizens strongly condemn the values and worldview of an opposite party. Rejecting that party and its views can itself become a political identity (Russo & Areal, 2025). Importantly, positive and negative partisanship can exist independently from each other (Bankert, 2024); positive partisanship does not imply negative partisan-

ship, and citizens can be negative partisans without necessarily positively identifying with a party.

Furthermore, while closely related, affective polarization does not require positive and/or negative partisanship. Positive affect for a party can be present without necessarily being a (strong) partisan, while negative affect can exist without forming someone's negative partisan identity. In practice, however, especially positive affect and (at least instrumental) partisanship largely overlap. The link between negative affect and negative partisanship is somewhat weaker, mostly because the bar for negative partisanship is higher: negative affect can be present, but should be strong to become someone's identity.

In sum, affective polarization is best described as the joint presence of sympathy for co-partisans and dislike of opposing partisans. Both components are necessary: citizens who feel warmly toward their own party but do not dislike the other side are better described as positive partisans – either expressive or instrumental ones – rather than affectively polarized. Likewise, voters who dislike a party but lack positive affect toward any other party are not affectively polarized – and depending on their level of dislike, they might be negative partisans. Among those who are affectively polarized, polarization increases when in-party sympathy and/or dislike of the opponents increases.

1.1.3 Affective polarization in multiparty systems

The conceptualization so far has largely centered around the US context, where the concept of affective polarization took root. Yet, this dissertation focuses on affective polarization in multiparty systems, which carry some important differences with the US two-party system. To come to a full conceptualization of affective polarization in multiparty systems, two aspects need to be clarified: (1) identifying the in- and the out-parties; and (2) identifying the object of affect.

The distinction between the in- and out-party is straightforward in the US. The mere

presence of two parties, as well as the strong presence of expressive partisanship among citizens who rarely change parties, simplifies the assignment of in- and out-groups for citizens. However, this assignment is less straightforward in European multiparty systems and requires clarification. Specifically, expressive partisanship is generally weaker and less dominant in European multiparty systems (Bankert et al., 2017; Huddy et al., 2018). The presence of (more) proportional representation, multiple viable parties to choose from, and coalition governments encourage more instrumental and flexible party support. In the last decades, European multiparty systems have also "unfrozen", with high electoral volatility and a general decline of partisanship as a consequence (Dalton, 1984; Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002; Garzia et al., 2022; Mair, 2013). During elections, many voters now view several parties as a potential option for their vote (Dassonneville, 2023). For the same reasons, assigning the out-party is also more challenging in these systems.

Nonetheless, the discussion in the previous section guides this distinction in multi-party systems likewise. As mentioned, although positive and negative partisanship are closely related to in-party affect and out-party dislike, they are not equivalent – and neither is necessary for affective polarization. What matters in determining the presence and level of affective polarization is whether citizens feel positive affect for at least one of the parties in the system combined with dislike of at least one of the parties in the system. From multi-party research on affective polarization, we know that this is the case for many voters (Garzia & Ferreira da Silva, 2025; Garzia et al., 2023; Gidron et al., 2020; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021; Westwood et al., 2018). In practice, positive affect in multiparty systems often closely relates to the party of which someone is a partisan (at least an instrumental one). In the absence of partisanship, it aligns closely with vote choice and additionally with parties that are closely aligned ideologically. Negative affect, or dislike, is also present, mostly toward parties that citizens do not vote for and are ideologically distant (Algara & Zur, 2023; Eck, Michel, & van Haute, 2025; Marchal & Watson, 2022; van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022).

Positive and negative affect can thus be present for multiple parties, but both are required for affective polarization to occur in a multiparty system. Citizens that like,

dislike, or are indifferent to all parties equally are not affectively polarized. Similar to the two-party context, affective polarization increases when positive or negative affect for one of the actors increases.

Finally, when conceptualizing affective polarization, the question always arises what the object of affect is. Roughly, there are two distinctions in the literature. First, positive or negative affect can be given to political parties or their leaders – usually referred to as vertical affective polarization. Second, citizens can also hold affective feelings toward ordinary supporters of parties – horizontal affective polarization. Whereas the discussion about the distinction between elites and rank-and-file supporters is not unique to multiparty systems (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Kingzette, 2021; Klar et al., 2018), the differences between both – conceptually and empirically – have mostly developed separately from findings in the US (Areal & Harteveld, 2024; Comellas Bonsfills, 2022; Vanagt, 2024), which is why I treat this distinction here.

Although there is overlap between both vertical and horizontal affective polarization – not least because they are often measured very similarly – research has time and again found that they are not the same (Areal & Harteveld, 2024; Tichelbaecker et al., 2023). Citizens tend to be more negative about other parties than about their supporters (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Harteveld, 2021a; Kingzette, 2021). Furthermore, voters of centrist parties often do not display much dislike to one another, even if they are not from the same party (Comellas Bonsfills, 2022; van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022). Citizens mostly start to show negative affect toward supporters of opposite parties once these parties are ideologically very distant – such as the radical right (Bantel, 2023; Harteveld et al., 2022).

Most of the literature on affective polarization in multiparty systems has focused on vertical affective polarization. Largely, this has been a choice out of empirical necessity: a large data source for vertical affective polarization is the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, whereas such cross-national data over a large period of time do not exist for horizontal affective polarization.

However, I argue that affective polarization is most ideally conceptualized (and hence

operationalized) in a horizontal way. Affective polarization is fundamentally about intergroup emotions among citizens defined by partisan identity, rather than attitudes toward political elites. A horizontal conceptualization captures the extent to which partisan identities structure interpersonal hostility and social distance between ordinary voters. This also matters normatively: if citizens extend their feelings about political parties to fellow citizens, it seriously risks harming social cohesion. In contrast, vertical affective polarization overlaps conceptually with related constructs such as dissatisfaction with representative democracy (Singh & Mayne, 2023), anti-elite sentiment (Akkerman et al., 2014), and distrust in political institutions (Bertsou, 2019), rather than capturing interpersonal partisan hostility. As Wagner (2024, p. 380) argues about vertical affective polarization measures, "by definition they arguably do not capture a core component of affective polarization, namely the fact that it relates to mutual affect of run-of-the-mill party supporters towards each other, rather than of voters towards party elites." This is not to say that previous research on vertical affective polarization is not insightful, as both correlate to a strong extent. But it is important that insights from research on vertical affective polarization are not taken at face value to draw conclusions about horizontal affective polarization, and – where data allow – affective polarization should be conceptualized and operationalized horizontally.

1.2 Affective polarization: the literature

After the seminal article by Iyengar et al. (2012), research on affective polarization grew rapidly. Roughly, this new research agenda focused on 5 different domains: (1) its level and development over time (Boxell et al., 2020; Garzia & Ferreira da Silva, 2025; Garzia et al., 2023; Gidron et al., 2020; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021); (2) its conceptualization and measurement (Röllicke, 2023; Schedler, 2023; Tichelbaecker et al., 2023); (3) its causes (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Algara & Zur, 2023; Davis et al., 2024; Harteveld, 2021b; Hobolt et al., 2024; Lelkes et al., 2017; Martin & Nai, 2024; Mason, 2018; Nordbrandt, 2021); (4) its consequences (Armaly & Enders, 2021; Berntzen et al., 2024; Huber & Malhotra, 2017; Jenke, 2024; Lee, 2022; Ward & Tavits, 2019);

and (5) interventions to decrease it (Fishkin et al., 2021; Huddy & Yair, 2021; M. S. Levendusky, 2018; W. Z. C. Marsh, 2023).

Whereas studies in the first couple of years by and large focused on the American two-party system (Iyengar et al., 2019), research also expanded to European multiparty systems over time (Wagner, 2024). In multiparty democracies, affective polarization is also widespread, and in some cases even higher than in the US (Reiljan, 2020; Reiljan et al., 2024; Wagner, 2021; Westwood et al., 2018). At the same time, the increase of affective polarization in the US over the last couple of decades has been comparatively exceptional. In fact, affective polarization has remained stable or even decreased in multiple European countries in the same time period (Boxell et al., 2020; Garzia & Ferreira da Silva, 2025; Garzia et al., 2023; Ryan, 2023).

A lot of the early research focused on the consequences of affective polarization – particularly the non-political ones. Many of these are generally undesirable for society and democracy. For example, affective polarization drives discrimination of political out-groups in non-political settings, ranging from the labour market (Gift & Gift, 2015; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; McConnell et al., 2018) to medical situations (Druckman et al., 2021; Hersh & Goldenberg, 2016; Stoetzer et al., 2023; Wagner & Eberl, 2025a). It also has the ability to harm cohesion in families consisting of political opponents (Chen & Rohla, 2018). More generally, it stimulates the dehumanization of out-partisans (Martherus et al., 2021) and erodes social trust and cohesion (Lee, 2022; Torcal et al., 2025).

These negative consequences incentivized research on the drivers of affective polarization, which points in several directions. One of the key explanations is that society has socially sorted over time (Mason, 2018). Social and political identities are increasingly aligned; more than ever, the partisan identities of citizens overlap more strongly with their social identities, such as race, religion, education, and place of residence, leaving less room for cross-cutting identities. Although this explanation resonates particularly well in the US, where social sorting has increased alongside affective polarization, evidence for this explanation has also been found in the Netherlands (Harteveld, 2021b). Another prominent explanation is ideological difference – citizens tend to dislike other

parties and their supporters if they are ideologically distant (Algara & Zur, 2023; Eck, Michel, & van Haute, 2025; Jang et al., 2024; Marchal & Watson, 2022; Orr & Huber, 2020; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2015; van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017), although in multiparty systems the distinction is mostly based on ideological camps of multiple parties (Bantel, 2023; Harteveld, 2021a; Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Reiljan & Ryan, 2021). Others have also pointed toward the impact of social media (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Reisman & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2025), but evidence so far has been inconsistent (Asimovic et al., 2021; Bail et al., 2018; Boxell et al., 2017; Guess et al., 2023a, 2023b; Levy, 2021; Matthes et al., 2023; Milli et al., 2025; Nordbrandt, 2021; Piccardi et al., 2025; Riera & Madariaga, 2023; Törnberg, 2022).

Some scholars also focused on the connection between affective polarization and political behaviour. For example, the rise of affective polarization in the US and other places often occurred alongside the global development of democratic backsliding by political elites and the erosion of democratic norms among the public. Although there exists a correlation between democratic backsliding and affective polarization (Orhan, 2022), it is still unclear whether that relationship is causal and, if so, what the direction of causality is. At the voter level, early contributions warned that affective polarization might erode citizens' democratic commitment (Kingzette et al., 2021), but more recent work has failed to find a causal impact of affective polarization on democratic norms (Broockman et al., 2023; Voelkel et al., 2022, 2024). Instead, it has been suggested that the relationship is rather curvilinear – with those least and most polarized being least supportive of democracy (Janssen & Turkenburg, 2025; McWagner & Kidd, 2025). At the same time, affective polarization can hamper citizens' willingness to punish in-party candidates who engage in undemocratic behaviour (Frederiksen, 2024; Graham & Svolik, 2020; Simonovits et al., 2022). Another important finding for political behaviour is that affective polarization has a positive effect on political participation among citizens (Ahn & Mutz, 2023; Ellger, 2023; Harteveld & Wagner, 2022; Phillips, 2024; Ward & Tavits, 2019).

Still, despite the extensive academic attention to affective polarization, early studies connecting affective polarization and political behaviour have been relatively scarce

compared to other areas of attention. In a systematic review of the American literature on affective polarization in 2019, Iyengar et al. (2019, p. 139) wrote that "there is also the question of political consequences. Interestingly, little has been written on this topic, as most studies have focused on the more surprising apolitical ramifications discussed above." Likewise, in the introductory article of a special issue on affective polarization in multiparty systems in *Electoral Studies* in 2023, Harteveld et al. (2023, p. 3) concluded that "two areas of research on affective polarization deserve more attention in the future", one of them being the consequences for political behaviour.

This relative lack of attention is particularly striking considering that one of the key initial findings was that affective polarization increases during the election period. Through the use of panel data around the 2011 Danish elections, Hansen and Kosiara-Pedersen (2017) showed that Danish voters increased affect for their most-liked party during the campaign, while they decreased affect for their least-liked party. Furthermore, in a cross-national analysis of post-election surveys, Hernández et al. (2021) found that citizens were less affectively polarized (vertically) if they were interviewed longer after the elections. With a similar identification strategy, Bassan-Nygate and Weiss (2022) found comparable results for Israeli citizens using pre-electoral surveys fielded during the campaign: the closer to the election, the more affectively polarized citizens are. Indirect evidence also points toward the polarizing role of elections: not only are citizens more likely to express a form of positive partisanship when elections are near (Michelitch & Utych, 2018), their likelihood to discriminate out-partisans also significantly decreases when elections are over (Sheffer, 2020).

At the same time, very recent studies in the US two-party system – relying on panel data – suggest that elections have only a limited impact on affective polarization among the American public, if at all (Fasching et al., 2024; Phillips & Warner, 2026; Singh & Thornton, 2024). However, it remains unclear to what extent these findings generalize to multiparty systems. The US context is characterized by simpler in- and out-group dynamics and a stronger presence of expressive partisanship than is typically observed in European democracies (Huddy et al., 2015, 2018). Moreover, the highly personalized nature of presidential elections, the intensity of negative campaigning (J. Maier & Nai, 2022), and the comparatively low electoral participation

distinguish the US electoral context from most multiparty contexts.

1.3 The research puzzle

These results are potentially troubling, since elections form the cornerstone of representative democracy. They allow citizens to find political representation, influence political decision-making for the upcoming years, and punish or reward the incumbent government for its performance in the preceding years. Without elections, there is no democracy. At the same time, elections drive affective polarization – a phenomenon which has the potential to erode social trust and cohesion, which is not only essential in itself but is also a known frontrunner of democratic stability and prosperity. However, it remains unclear what the exact size and nature of election-induced affective polarization is.

Furthermore, the election period is the main moment when citizens become politically active: they start paying attention to politics, form attitudes about pressing policy issues, and – ideally – cast a vote. Precisely at this moment, when most citizens' political behaviour takes place, affective polarization tends to be high. It is therefore also likely that affective polarization plays a role in driving at least some of this behaviour. Nonetheless, we are still largely in the dark about how affective polarization and political behaviour are connected, particularly around elections.

Taken together, the literature leaves us with two key unknowns: how elections drive affective polarization, and how affective polarization shapes citizens' political behaviour. These questions are analytically linked: elections are moments of heightened political salience that can activate affective polarization, which in turn may shape how citizens behave politically. Understanding this two-step relationship is crucial to assess whether the interplay between elections, affective polarization, and political behaviour poses a challenge to democratic functioning. This dissertation addresses this interplay by focusing on the following two research questions:

1. How do elections drive affective polarization?

2. What is the influence of affective polarization on political behaviour?

Answering these questions is crucial to understanding how elections, affective polarization, and political behaviour interact in democracies. Elections are central to democratic functioning, yet they may also contribute to heightened political conflict and hostility. At the same time, affective polarization may mobilize citizens and stimulate political participation, suggesting that its consequences are not unambiguously negative. It is therefore important to understand how and to what extent elections indeed contribute to affective polarization, and how this change in turn shapes political behaviour. By examining this interplay, this dissertation assesses whether election-induced affective polarization poses a challenge to societal cohesion and democratic functioning, or whether it is an acceptable by-product of electoral competition.

This dissertation examines this interplay in multiparty systems, where patterns of party competition, electoral campaigning, electoral participation, and affective polarization differ fundamentally from the US two-party context in which much of the existing literature has developed. Focusing on these contexts allows for a more comprehensive account of these dynamics. Empirically, it draws on multiple survey datasets across different electoral settings, combining evidence from Belgium with cross-national analyses of European democracies. These analyses are presented across five empirical articles. In the remaining three sections, I first present the data, methods, and scope of this dissertation in more detail. Subsequently, I describe the core contributions of this dissertation to the literature, and finally provide an outline of the articles in their consecutive order.

1.4 Research design and empirical scope

To examine the research questions outlined in the previous section, this dissertation draws on a combination of original and secondary survey datasets across multiple multiparty contexts. Across all chapters, there is a trade-off between methodological rigour and cross-national generalizability. Chapters that rely on richer data have the

advantage of shedding more light on causality or the robustness of results over time, but are limited to specific national contexts. In contrast, findings from chapters with cross-national survey data have greater external validity, yet are constrained by their cross-sectional designs at a specific time point. This limits insights into causality and the robustness of the findings over time. Across the dissertation, the nature of each chapter's research question informs how this trade-off is balanced.

Chapters 2 to 4 rely on detailed data from the Belgian multiparty context. These chapters leverage panel data, survey designs integrating Voting Advice Applications, and long-term election studies spanning multiple decades. This allows, respectively, for stronger causal leverage on within-individual developments during the election, a more fine-grained measure of party-voter congruence, and the robustness of findings across electoral cycles. At the same time, the focus on a single national context reduces the extent to which these findings can be directly generalized to other multiparty systems.

Chapters 5 and 6 complement this approach by drawing on cross-national survey data from a range of European multiparty democracies. These analyses extend the scope of the dissertation beyond a single-country context and allow for broader generalization of the findings. However, their cross-sectional design makes it more difficult to establish causal relationships and to assess the robustness of these findings over time. Table 1.1 provides an overview of the datasets used in the different chapters.

Given the focus on Belgium in the first three empirical chapters, it is important to briefly situate this case within the broader landscape of European multiparty democracies. Belgium shares several key characteristics with other European systems. It relies on proportional representation, resulting in fragmented party competition and

Table 1.1: Overview of survey datasets by chapter

Chapter	**Survey design**	**Geographical scope**	**Time period**	**N**
2	Panel survey	Belgium	2024	4,115
3	Cross-sectional	Belgium	2019	4,602
4	Cross-sectional	Belgium	1991–2019	20,150
5	Cross-sectional	27 European countries	2024	22,343
6	Cross-sectional	13 European countries	2021–2022	14,802

coalition governments as the norm. Political conflict is structured along both economic and cultural cleavages, and levels of partisanship are relatively low, with voters often considering multiple parties within ideological blocs. Levels of electoral volatility are comparable to other European countries (Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2017), and have likewise been on the rise in more recent elections (Walgrave et al., 2024). Together, these features make Belgium a suitable case to study affective polarization in a multiparty context where voters navigate multiple potential in- and out-parties, and hold sympathy for more than one party in the same ideological camp (Bantel, 2023; Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021).

At the same time, Belgium also displays features that are less common. Most notably, the party system is divided along linguistic lines: Dutch-speaking voters in Flanders and French-speaking voters in Wallonia vote for separate party systems[1]. Party competition predominantly takes place within the same linguistic region, which is assisted by strongly separated media systems. As a result, the country effectively contains two parallel multiparty systems. An important difference between these regions is the presence of a radical-right party in Flanders (Vlaams Belang), whereas no such party has become electorally relevant in Wallonia, partly due to a strong *cordon sanitaire* by both political parties and the media (de Jonge, 2021).

This difference in the presence of a radical-right party is consequential for levels of affective polarization in both regions. While Belgium displays relatively low-to-average levels of affective polarization in cross-national perspective (Bettarelli et al., 2023; Garzia et al., 2023; Wagner, 2021), this masks substantial variation between both regions. In line with research highlighting the polarizing role of radical-right parties (Harteveld et al., 2022), affective polarization is consistently higher in Flanders than in Wallonia (Eck & Michel, 2024).

Finally, Belgian elections are characterized by compulsory voting. Although sanctions for abstention have not been enforced in recent decades, turnout rates remain consistently high at around 90 percent. While this limits direct comparability with

[1]Note that the country also has a third region, the Brussels-Capital Region. However, given the difficulty of retrieving consistent data for this region, the analyses in this dissertation focus on Flanders and Wallonia.

voluntary voting systems, it allows for a clearer assessment of how affective polarization relates to turnout intentions in a high-participation context where electoral participation is the norm from the outset.

1.5 Contributions of the dissertation

This dissertation contributes to the literature on affective polarization, elections, and political behaviour in four key ways. Empirically, it draws on multiple original and secondary survey datasets across different electoral and geographical contexts, combining panel and cross-sectional designs. Building on this empirical foundation, the dissertation advances several theoretical, conceptual, and normative insights.

First, this dissertation contributes theoretically by refining our understanding of how elections shape affective polarization in multiparty systems. Prior research has established that elections tend to increase affective polarization, but its reliance on cross-sectional data has limited its ability to address core questions about the underlying affective mechanisms of this relationship. The increase in affective polarization around elections has therefore been assumed to be the result of increased out-group hostility and, consequently, harmful to democracies. Using multi-wave panel data fielded during an election year, this dissertation shows that election-induced increases in affective polarization are driven by differentiated increases in both in- and out-group affect. If affective ties increase more strongly for the in-group than for out-groups, affective polarization can rise even in the absence of growing out-group hostility. These findings challenge accounts that interpret election-induced affective polarization primarily as a surge in negative affect, and instead reveal a nuanced realignment of in-group and out-group affect among voters and between voters and parties during elections.

Second, this dissertation makes a conceptual contribution by systematically distinguishing between vertical – toward parties – and horizontal – toward fellow voters – affective polarization. Whereas this distinction is not entirely new in the literature, existing research has rarely examined vertical and horizontal affective polarization side by side or assessed their respective implications. Across multiple empirical papers, I

show that treating affective polarization as a single, party-centered construct obscures important dynamics of voter–voter affect. In the context of elections, affective ties toward other parties and other voters do not evolve identically, demonstrating that voters make a meaningful distinction, also during elections. Furthermore, I show that affect toward fellow voters in multiparty systems is not strictly structured by partisan identities. Policy overlap between parties around elections mitigates affective hostility across electorates, and voters tend to be more positive toward other voters if they are more congruent with their party – even if they do not vote for that party. At the same time, horizontal affective polarization proves to be at least as consequential for electoral participation as vertical affective polarization. Together, these findings underscore the theoretical and empirical importance of distinguishing horizontal from vertical affect.

Third, this dissertation contributes theoretically to research on electoral turnout by demonstrating that affective polarization is a more consistent predictor of voter turnout than ideological polarization. Traditional theories of political mobilization have emphasized the importance of ideological differences between parties as a driving force behind electoral turnout. More recent studies have shown that the emotional stakes associated with affective polarization can likewise mobilize voters. What has received much less attention, however, is how these two forms of polarization relate to on another in shaping turnout. Across a wide range of electoral contexts, including national, regional, and European elections as well as settings with compulsory voting, this dissertation shows that affective polarization is a stronger and more robust force in driving electoral turnout than ideological polarization. Once affective polarization is taken into account, the effect of ideological polarization weakens substantially or disappears altogether. These findings suggest that the mobilizing power of polarization runs primarily through affective rather than ideological mechanisms. Although ideological polarization may contribute to affective polarization, these two do not necessarily run in parallel. Accordingly, this dissertation challenges more traditional accounts of voter turnout that prioritize ideological conflict as the central driver of political participation.

Finally, this dissertation contributes normatively and theoretically to research on the

democratic consequences of affective polarization. While prior research has predominantly focused on the potential implications of affective polarization for electoral losers, this dissertation demonstrates that this overlooks the consequences affective polarization may have on electoral winners. Focusing on the winner-loser gap in democratic attitudes, it shows that affective polarization primarily reshapes the preferences of electoral winners rather than further alienating electoral losers. Specifically, polarized election winners are much less supportive of referendums than electoral losers, suggesting a resistance to institutional constraints on governing parties. By shifting attention from electoral losers to winners, this thesis contribution reframes normative concerns about the democratic consequences of affective polarization and adds to the literature on democratic hypocrisy and winners' constraint.

1.6 Outline of the dissertation

This dissertation consists of seven chapters. In this first chapter, I have introduced the topic, defined affective polarization, contextualized the literature leading to the research puzzle, laid out the empirical scope, and described the key contributions. After this chapter, five empirical chapters will follow that are largely based on articles that have been published before, are under review, or are working papers (see the Preface on page v for an overview). Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the question of how elections drive affective polarization. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 focus on the question of what the influence is of affective polarization on political behaviour.

Chapter 2 starts with a detailed examination of the influence of election salience on affective polarization. We use three-wave panel data (pre-campaign, campaign, and post-election) around the 2024 Belgian election year to study when and how citizens become affectively polarized during the election campaign and in the aftermath of the election results. We find that both the campaign and the election results lead to a small similar increase of vertical affective polarization, whereas horizontal affective polarization remains stable. When we disaggregate between in-party and out-party affect, however, we find that citizens increase their affect to all parties and voters,

both during the campaign and after the election. The increase of vertical affective polarization is thus the result of a stronger increase of in-party sympathy compared to out-party sympathy, whereas the stability of horizontal affective polarization is the result of an equal increase of sympathy toward both in-party voters and out-party voters. These results nuance the impact of election salience on affective polarization and instead point to the role of elections in strengthening ties between voters and parties, as well as among voters themselves.

In **Chapter 3**, we study how horizontal affective polarization is influenced by policy congruence between voters and parties during the election period. We create a novel measure of voter-party congruence by matching survey responses with party stances on a Voting Advice Application during the 2019 federal elections in Belgium. We find that policy congruence with a party, regardless of in- or out-party, increases sympathy toward its voters. There is, moreover, a cross-directional effect: strong congruence with the in-party reduces sympathy toward voters of other parties, whereas strong incongruence with one of the other parties increases affect toward in-party voters. These results imply that multiparty systems, by definition, reduce hostility between voters because policies are likely to overlap to some extent.

Chapter 4 is the first chapter where affective polarization is taken as the predictor for political behaviour, to answer the second main research question of this dissertation. In this chapter, we examine how affective polarization affects voter turnout, and we contrast this with the more traditional predictor of ideological polarization. We focus on the case of Belgium, which has been left out of many analysis because of its electoral system of compulsory voting. Methodologically, we pool three decades of election surveys and exploit a question that asks respondents about their turnout intention in a hypothetical future scenario of voluntary voting. We find that affective polarization most strongly and robustly predicts turnout, whereas the effect of ideological polarization is less evident. These results challenge the effects of ideological polarization on voter turnout. Moreover, they point toward a potential process of polarization in a scenario where compulsory voting is abolished.

In **Chapter 5**, I continue the question of how polarization influences voter turnout

by shifting attention to another underdeveloped context: European elections. Besides affective and ideological polarization, I argue that voters can also perceive a specific type of ideological polarization in these elections, namely over the issue of European integration, which is more difficult to capture on the classic left-right continuum. Using data from the 2024 European Election Study, I find that affective polarization has, by and large, the strongest impact on the decision of voters on whether to turn out or not. Polarization over European integration, however, also has a small independent effect, whereas ideological left-right polarization does not drive voters to the ballot box. This chapter again demonstrates the role of affective ties rather than ideological differences in driving voter turnout.

Chapter 6 shifts focus to the potential impact of affective polarization on democratic attitudes by focusing on the winner-loser gap. Specifically, it argues that elections create winners and losers, which influences how they view alternative instruments of decision-making such as referendums. Whereas electoral losers should be more supportive of these alternative ways to exercise policy influence, electoral winners should see them more negatively as it potentially interferes the ability to govern without constrain for the party they voted for. This gap, importantly, should be stronger for voters that are more affectively polarized, as this increases their emotional stakes regarding the election outcome. Using survey data from thirteen European democracies, we find strong evidence for both expectation. However, the amplifying effect of affective polarization is solely attributed to electoral winners, who become much less supportive of referendums as they are more affectively polarized. This finding calls into question whether the focus of the winner-loser literature on electoral losers is justified, and confirms concerns about the potential negative impact of affective polarization on electoral winners.

Finally, **Chapter 7** provides a general conclusion to the dissertation. It discusses the main results, the main implications of the findings, the limitations, and directions of future research.

Chapter 2

Election Salience Revisited: How Elections (Do Not) Boost Affective Polarization

Abstract

Research has shown that affective polarization is higher around election time. However, important questions remain about whether this election boost extends to horizontal affective polarization, as well as about the size, timing, and the underlying shifts in in-party and out-party sympathy. In this research note, we use three-wave panel data collected during the 2024 Belgian elections to examine within-individual change in vertical and horizontal affective polarization. We find that election salience produces a small increase in vertical, but not horizontal, affective polarization. Crucially, these patterns are not driven by growing in-party sympathy alongside out-party dislike, but by differential increases in sympathy toward all parties and electorates. Yet, for parties, in-party sympathy rises more steeply than out-party sympathy, whereas for electorates, both rise similarly. Our findings contribute to the ongoing research on the drivers of affective polarization and further nuance the impact of elections.

This chapter is based on a paper co-authored with Elie Michel and currently under second-stage review.

2.1 Introduction

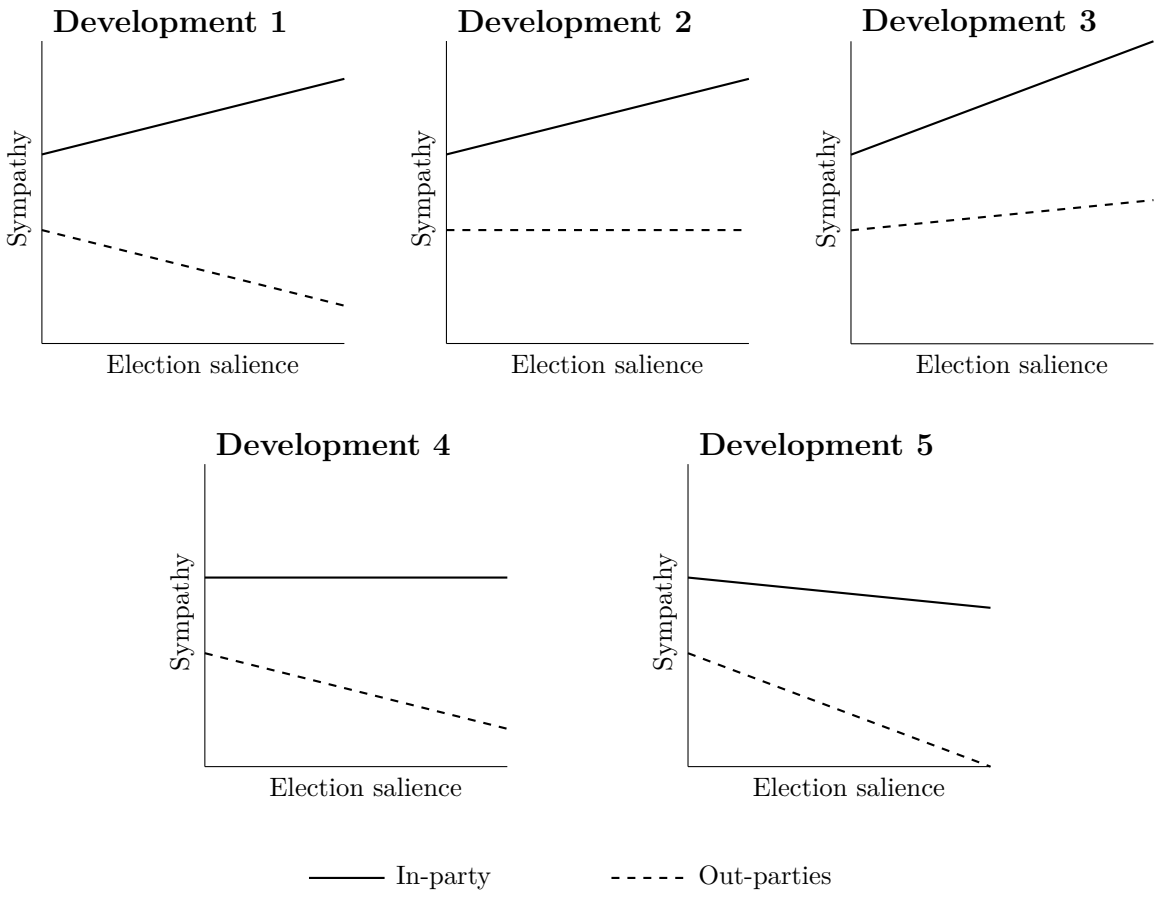
Affective polarization, the extent to which voters show affect toward their own party but are hostile toward other parties and their voters (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Iyengar et al., 2012), is widespread in established democracies (Boxell et al., 2020; Garzia et al., 2023; Gidron et al., 2020; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021). Many studies have pointed toward the negative consequences of high levels of affective polarization for democratic societies, such as eroding social trust and cohesion (Chen & Rohla, 2018; Lee, 2022; Torcal & Thomson, 2023; Torcal et al., 2025), driving discrimination in non-political settings (Gift & Gift, 2015; McConnell et al., 2018; Stoetzer et al., 2023), and undermining support for democratic norms – evidence that is largely based on the US context (Graham & Svolik, 2020; Kingzette et al., 2021). More recently, scholars have questioned the direct negative impact of affective polarization on democratic norms (Berntzen et al., 2024; Broockman et al., 2023; Voelkel et al., 2022, 2024), and proposed that certain levels of affective polarization can also be beneficial for democratic attitudes and behaviour (Berntzen, 2025; Gessler & Wunsch, 2025; Harteveld & Wagner, 2022; Janssen & Turkenburg, 2025). Taken together, this suggests that the consequences of affective polarization depend on its form and underlying dynamics, rather than being uniformly negative.

In parallel, much research has been devoted to examining the drivers of affective polarization (Davis et al., 2024; Harteveld, 2021b; Martin & Nai, 2024; Nordbrandt, 2021; Wagner & Harteveld, 2025). An important early finding pointed toward the role of election salience – the proximity of elections. Across democracies, citizens tend to be more affectively polarized if elections are near (Hernández et al., 2021). This raised the concern that elections, the cornerstone of electoral democracies, might contribute to attitudes that are potentially harmful to democratic societies, especially when present at high levels. In the US, follow-up panel studies that measured within-individual change over time strongly nuanced these findings. If at all, American elections barely contribute to increased affective polarization toward political parties or presidential candidates among voters (Fasching et al., 2024; Phillips & Warner, 2026; Singh & Thornton, 2024).

In multiparty systems, affective polarization tends to be higher around elections likewise (Bassan-Nygate & Weiss, 2022; Hernández et al., 2021), particularly when they are competitive (Robinson & Dassonneville, 2026). However, two questions about the relationship between election salience and affective polarization remain unanswered. First, previous research has exclusively focused on how election salience drives *vertical* affective polarization (toward political parties) rather than *horizontal* affective polarization (toward other voters). Although related, vertical and horizontal affective polarization are conceptually and empirically distinct. Voters are generally more affectively polarized toward parties than they are toward other voters (Areal & Harteveld, 2024; Comellas Bonsfills, 2022; Tichelbaecker et al., 2023). As Harteveld (2021a, p. 6) puts it, "[a]ffective polarization as a 'horizontal' evaluation is thus a distinct phenomenon with distinct causes, and hence relevant to study on its own". Drawing inferences about horizontal affective polarization based on its vertical counterpart may therefore be premature, and it is thus still unclear whether election salience drives horizontal affective polarization at all. Specifically, the effect on vertical affective polarization is likely stronger, as campaign messages largely centre around political parties rather than voters.

Second, it remains unclear what the exact size, timing, and underlying dynamic of in- and out-party changes of election-induced affective polarization is. Previous research in multiparty systems has mostly relied on the interview date of cross-sectional election surveys to study election salience (Bassan-Nygate & Weiss, 2022; Hernández et al., 2021). Although insightful, this design does not allow for within-individual analyses and lacks a baseline measure before the start of the campaign. It is therefore still unclear whether the boost in affective polarization is the result of the election campaign, the election results, or both, and how large this boost actually is. Furthermore, affective polarization consists of two components: sympathy toward the in-party and sympathy (or dislike) toward out-parties. Increases in affective polarization can therefore result from five distinct developments, depicted in Figure 2.1. If in-party sympathy increases during the election period, affective polarization rises if out-party sympathy decreases (Development 1), remains stable (Development 2), or increases at a slower rate (Development 3). If in-party sympathy remains stable

Figure 2.1: Theoretical overview of the five developments increasing affective polarization



or decreases, affective polarization may still increase if out-party sympathy decreases (Development 4) or decreases more strongly (Development 5). The cross-sectional nature of previous research cannot identify which of these processes is actually driving the increase in affective polarization during the election period.

Much of the literature implicitly assumes Development 1, where increased electoral competition heightens in-party sympathy and out-party hostility. Yet, other dynamics – where out-party dislike remains stable or even decreases – are also plausible. For example, elections in multiparty systems drive satisfaction with democracy and political trust (Kostelka & Blais, 2018; van der Meer & Steenvoorden, 2018), presumably because they signal the legitimacy of the political system. It is conceivable that this positive effect extends to the political actors at the center of elections, even among voters who do not support them. In addition, in most multiparty systems, parties rarely win outright majorities and must form coalition governments. Questions of po-

tential coalition governments are often central to the election campaign, and become even more dominant once the election results are known. Accordingly, voters may anticipate post-election cooperation between parties, which generally increases sympathy toward out-parties and their voters (Gidron, Adams, & Horne, 2022; Gidron & Sheffer, 2024; Hahm et al., 2024; Horne et al., 2022; Vanagt & Kollberg, 2025; Wagner & Praprotnik, 2024). If, at the same time, in-party sympathy increases more strongly, overall levels of affective polarization may still rise.

Two important exceptions exist regarding our second contribution. Öhberg and Cassel (2023) employed a three-wave panel survey among Swedish politicians around the 2014 elections: two years before, during the campaign, and two years after. They found that both government and opposition politicians became more sympathetic toward their own group of parties during the campaign, while anger toward the other group rose only for government politicians. However, it is hard to say how these findings translate to voters, as politicians' levels of affective polarization are not representative for the larger population (Enders, 2021; Lucas & Sheffer, 2025). The large lag between the waves also complicates making precise inferences about the size and timing of the election boost. Furthermore, (Hansen & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2017) use multi-wave panel data in the run-up to the 2011 Danish elections to show that voters' sympathy toward their most-liked party increases during the start of the campaign and after the election result. An opposite process occurs for the least-liked party, where sympathy decreases at the same moments. However, their sole focus on the most- and least-liked party makes it difficult to assess how their findings translate to multi-party affective polarization, especially horizontally.

To summarize, existing research in multiparty systems suggests that election salience is associated with higher levels of vertical affective polarization, but we do not know whether this is equally the case for horizontal affective polarization. Furthermore, for both types of affective polarization, we have limited insights about when changes take place, what the within-individual size is, and how they are shaped by differential changes of in-party and out-party sympathy. To address these gaps, this research note makes two contributions. First, we examine the effect of election salience on horizontal affective polarization and directly compare it to vertical affective polarization. Second,

using panel data, we identify the size, timing, and underlying dynamics of election-induced changes in affective polarization. Specifically, we answer the following two research questions:

> **RQ1:** What are the effects of election salience on horizontal affective polarization, and how does it compare to the effect on vertical affective polarization?

> **RQ2:** What are the size, timing, and underlying mechanisms of in- and out-party sympathies that drive changes in vertical and horizontal affective polarization as a result of election salience?

Answering these questions is important because they nuance our understanding of how democratic elections might impact democracies themselves. First, we believe that high levels of horizontal affective polarization are more problematic for democratic societies than their vertical counterpart. Although it is inherent to democracies that citizens dislike some political parties (and in some cases even desired, see Meléndez and Kaltwasser (2021)), it is also important that citizens do not view fellow citizens solely in terms of their partisan identity. Horizontal affective polarization has been linked to lower levels of social trust (Torcal & Thomson, 2023; Torcal et al., 2025), and experimental work shows that voters discriminate against fellow citizens based on their partisan identity in non-political settings (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; McConnell et al., 2018). More broadly, we think that horizontal affective polarization, especially when high, is in itself negative for democracies, as it concerns evaluations of fellow citizens rather than political parties or elites. As such, it is more directly related to core aspects of democratic functioning such as social trust, interpersonal tolerance, and willingness to engage with other citizens.

Second, we can only assess the normative impact of election salience on affective polarization if we understand the exact timing and size of the boost. Elections might activate hostility, but it is less problematic if this effect is small and does not lead to extreme levels of affective polarization. Furthermore, as Figure 2.1 revealed, the

increase in affective polarization can be the result of distinct processes, and not all are equally problematic for democracy. In fact, some are rather beneficial. For example, in Development 3, affective polarization rises because in-party sympathy increases more strongly than out-party sympathy, which nonetheless also increases. This would be rather good news for democracy, as it would imply that voters become more sympathetic toward *all* parties (and/or their voters) during the election period.

We address these questions in this research note by employing three-wave survey panel data fielded around the 2024 Belgian federal elections. Our within-individual analyses confirm earlier cross-sectional findings that election salience increases vertical affective polarization, with similarly sized boosts during the campaign and after the election. However, this overall increase is relatively small (about 20% of the pre-campaign standard deviation). Moreover, it is driven not by increasing hostility toward out-parties, but by voters becoming more sympathetic toward all parties – including the most-disliked party – and especially toward their own (Development 3 in Figure 2.1). In contrast, horizontal affective polarization does not increase, as voters become more sympathetic toward all electorates to a similar extent.

2.2 Data and methods

2.2.1 Case

We study the effects of election salience on affective polarization by focusing on the 2024 Belgian federal elections. We interpret this as a relatively most-likely case among multiparty systems to observe changes in affective polarization due to election salience. The 2024 federal elections were the first elections at any level of government to be held in Belgium since 2019, and they were held at the same time as regional and European-level elections. The May 2019 elections were followed by a series of failed federal government formations. Only by October 2020, a grand coalition was formed by four Dutch-speaking and three French-speaking parties, characterized by the absence of the largest Flemish party, the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA). Given the genuine salience of

the 2024 elections after a long period without elections, we expect a relatively strong election effect on affective polarization. As such, if the size of the election boost on affective polarization turns out to be small, it is likely even smaller in other contexts.

Furthermore, Belgium is a traditional European multi-party system, characterized by its split along linguistic lines – voters in Flanders vote for Dutch-speaking parties, whereas voters in Wallonia vote for French-speaking parties. Alongside separate party systems, this split also entails separate media environments and election campaigns. As such, Belgium essentially offers us two separate cases, which vary in overall levels of affective polarization – higher in Flanders than in Wallonia (Eck & Michel, 2024; Garzia et al., 2023) – and the presence (Flanders) and absence (Wallonia) of a radical right party, which is a known driver of affective polarization (Harteveld et al., 2022). Furthermore, the campaign was strongly focused on the regional and federal level, and most salient issues were not particular to one level. Split-ticket voting was relatively low around 15%, and those who did choose different parties at different levels stayed mostly within the same ideological camp. This aligns with earlier findings that many voters in multiparty systems have sympathy for more than one party in the same ideological camp (Bantel, 2023; Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021). We therefore think that the impact of multiple elections on creating cross-cutting partisan identities – and as such decreasing affective polarization – is minor, and not particularly different from other multiparty systems. We therefore expect the direction of our findings to be informative for other European multiparty systems with and without strong radical-right parties.

In Flanders, the election campaign was dominated by the question of whether the then-largest Flemish party, the rightwing N-VA, would be surpassed by the radical right Flemish Interest (VB) (Camatarri et al., 2025). This also raised the question whether the N-VA would break the *cordon sanitaire*, the agreement between Flemish parties to exclude VB from any governing coalition. N-VA leader Bart de Wever eventually ruled out a government with VB, but only two weeks before the elections. This contributed to an election win for N-VA (Walgrave et al., 2024), although Vlaams Belang came in a close second. In Wallonia, the rightwing Reformist Movement (MR) surprisingly triumphed over the Socialist Party (PS), which had dominated the region

for decades (Stiers & Hooghe, 2025).

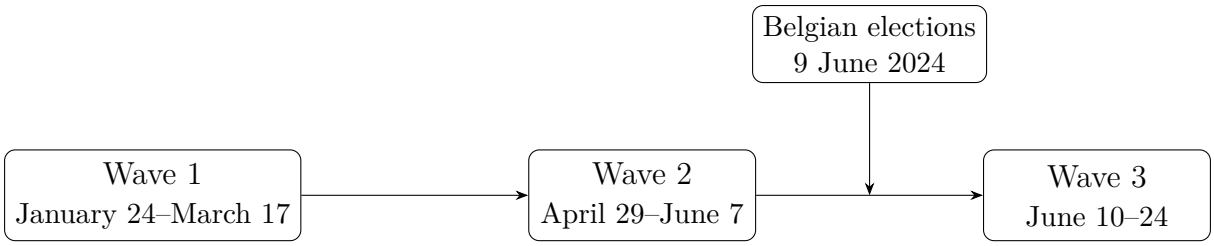
2.2.2 Dataset

Answering our research questions is methodologically demanding in several ways. First, we need to test the within-individual change in affective polarization during the electoral period, requiring panel data that trace the same individuals over time. Second, to measure the magnitude of the election boost, the first panel wave needs to be fielded before the start of the campaign. Third, we need to measure levels of affective polarization both during the campaign and directly after the elections to make valid claims about the timing of the election boost, as well as the differential dynamics of in-party and out-party sympathy. Finally, we need repeated measures of both horizontal and vertical affective polarization.

We therefore fielded a panel survey throughout the Belgian electoral year of 2024, with federal, regional, and European elections all being held on June 9th (Eck, Michel, Lefevere, et al., 2025). We surveyed the same respondents over a period of 5 months, with three waves of measurement (pre-campaign, campaign, and post-election). The first pre-campaign wave was fielded in February and March 2024 ($\tilde{4}$ months before the election), the second wave took place during the campaign in May 2024 (several weeks before the election), and the third wave was fielded directly after the election in the weeks following June 9th. The long period without elections (as described in the previous section) makes us confident that the first wave was a "clean" pre-campaign wave, which distinguishes our panel from other panels conducted during a period with multiple elections (Gidron, Sheffer, & Mor, 2022a), making it more difficult to assess what the real impact of the election (campaign) is.

A quota sample based on age, gender, and education was drawn from an online panel in both regions of Flanders and Wallonia. In both regions, approximately 4,000 respondents filled out the first wave of the survey. The panel suffered from some attrition, particularly between Waves 1 and 2, and especially in Wallonia. This regional pattern of unbalanced attrition is consistent with earlier political panel studies in Belgium,

Figure 2.2: Structure of the panel survey



including those conducted around the 2019 elections (Michel et al., 2023). In Wave 3, we finished with a sample size of 4,115, with 2,779 respondents in Flanders and 1,336 respondents in Wallonia. In our analysis, we only include respondents who completed the relevant questions in all waves. In Appendix 2.A, we present more details on the data. We note that the final sample is somewhat underrepresented in younger and lower-educated respondents.

2.2.3 Dependent variables

To measure affective polarization toward both parties and voters, we use the sympathy thermometers commonly used in the affective polarization literature (Gidron, Sheffer, & Mor, 2022b; Wagner, 2021), which measure attitudes toward parties and voters on a scale of 0 (no sympathy) to 10 (full sympathy). To ensure that respondents were not confused by the similarity of the questions, we proceeded as follows. First, we asked respondents to declare their sympathy toward the different parties in their respective system – Flemish parties for respondents in Flanders and Walloon parties for respondents in Wallonia. We then asked respondents to think about the voters of those parties, and to indicate the extent to which they feel cold and negative, or warm and positive toward these voters, again on a 0-10 scale.

To calculate levels of affective polarization at the individual level, we use the spread-of-scores approach suggested by Wagner (2021). This approach is particularly suited for multi-party systems like Belgium's as it acknowledges that voters can have positive affect toward multiple parties, for example because they are closely situated in ideological terms (Algara & Zur, 2023). This leads to a theoretical range of the variable

from 0 to 5, with 5 reflecting the most polarized citizens. It is calculated as follows:

$$\sqrt{\sum_{p=1}^{P} v_p(\text{sympathy}_{ip} - \overline{\text{sympathy}}_i)^2}$$

Where p represents the particular party, i the respondent, sympathy_{ip} a respondent's sympathy toward a party, and v_p the vote share of the particular party. The mean sympathy as reflected in the end of the equation should also be weighted according to party size:

$$\overline{\text{sympathy}}_i = \sum_{p=1}^{P}(v_p \cdot \text{sympathy}_{ip})$$

Throughout the three waves, the correlation between vertical and horizontal affective polarization is respectively 0.75, 0.69, and 0.71 (all $p < 0.001$). These correlations are very similar to correlations between both variables found in a range of other democracies (Areal & Harteveld, 2024; Harteveld, 2021a; Iyengar et al., 2012). This reinforces the notion that voters extend their sympathy and dislike from parties to voters, but make a meaningful distinction between both at the same time.

2.2.4 Methods

We rely on multilevel growth curve models to analyze our data. These models are well suited for panel data, as they allow us to estimate within-individual change over time while accounting for the nested structure of repeated observations within respondents (Bell & Jones, 2015). The within-respondent effects enable us to make valid inquiries about the magnitude and timing of changes in affective polarization over time. Given the hierarchical structure of our data, we nest wave-responses (level 1) within individuals (level 2). The models include the different waves as a categorical independent variable, with the first wave as the reference category. The other two waves thus signal the within-individual change in affective polarization during the campaign and just after the election relative to the baseline level before the election

campaign. Each individual has their own intercept, and we add a random slope for the wave variable to account for heterogeneous change rates between individuals.

2.3 Results

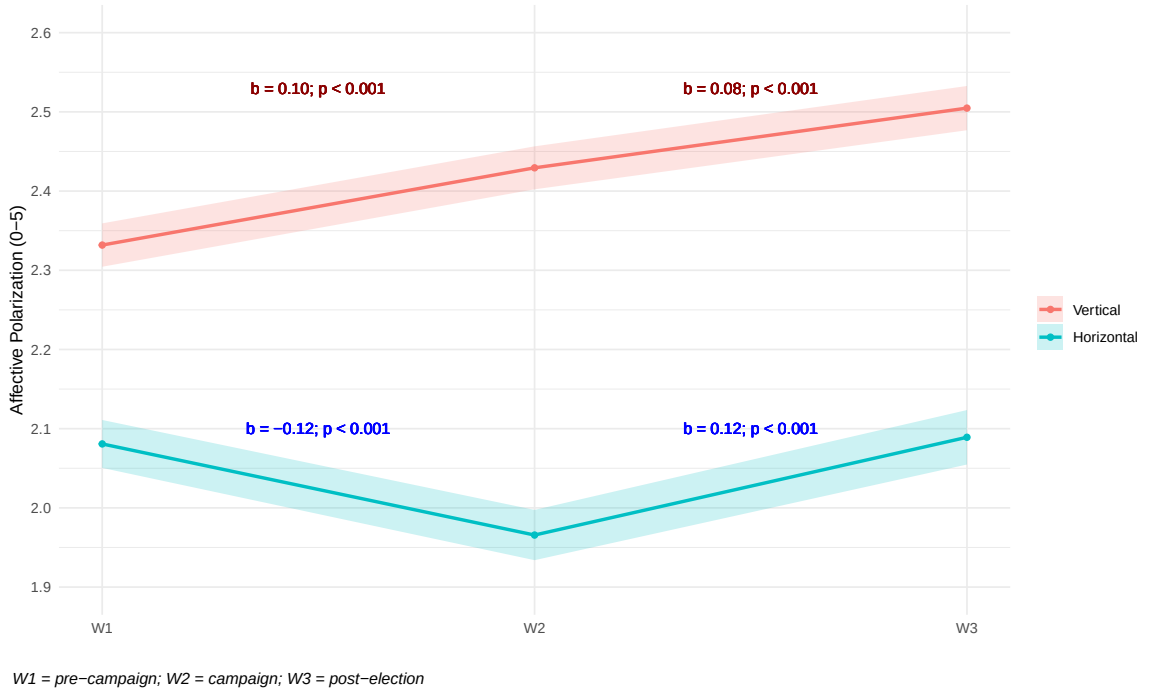
2.3.1 Affective polarization

Figure 2.3 presents the results of two models analyzing the development of vertical and horizontal affective polarization, respectively, over time (full table results are shown in Table 2.B.1 in the Appendix). The models confirm two findings of earlier research. First, the level of vertical affective polarization is significantly higher than that of horizontal affective polarization in all waves (Areal & Harteveld, 2024; Comellas Bonsfills, 2022; Harteveld, 2021a; Kingzette, 2021; Tichelbaecker et al., 2023). Second, it confirms earlier cross-sectional studies in finding that election salience also drives within-individual vertical affective polarization (Bassan-Nygate & Weiss, 2022; Hernández et al., 2021).

Regarding our research questions, we find that individuals are 0.17 units more vertically polarized after the election compared to the pre-campaign period ($p < 0.001$), which corresponds to roughly 19.5% of the pre-campaign standard deviation. This total increase is the result of a combination of two similar sized increases, first during the campaign ($b = 0.10$; $p < 0.001$) and subsequently after the elections ($b = 0.08$; $p < 0.001$).

Figure 2.3 also shows that we cannot simply transpose these findings onto horizontal affective polarization. In fact, voters significantly depolarized during the campaign period compared to the pre-campaign wave ($b = -0.12$; $p < 0.001$). After the election, horizontal affective polarization increases significantly ($b = 0.12$; $p < 0.001$), such that the overall difference in horizontal affective polarization between Wave 1 and Wave 3 is indistinguishable from 0 – voters display roughly similar levels of horizontal affective polarization before the campaign and after the elections.

Figure 2.3: Development of vertical and horizontal polarization



Note: Regression output of multilevel growth curve models, including 95% confidence intervals. The reference category is the pre-campaign wave 1. Full regression results can be found in Table 2.B.1 in the Appendix.

2.3.2 In-party and out-party dynamics

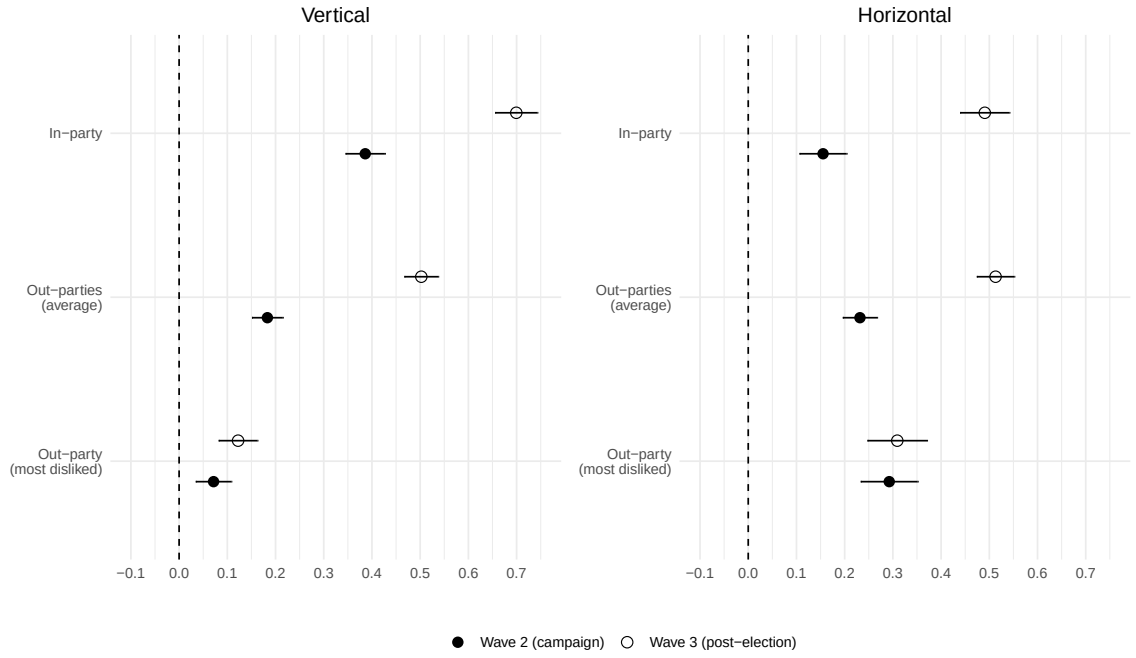
We now look at how developments in in-party and out-party sympathies drive the aggregated measure of affective polarization. To do so, we run three additional models: one for sympathy toward the in-party and two for sympathy toward the out-parties. For the development of in-party sympathy, we focus on the development of sympathy toward the most-liked party in each survey wave. For out-party sympathy, we first study the average (weighted) sympathy toward all parties except the most-liked one. In addition, we focus on the development of sympathy levels toward the least-liked party for each respondent. Note that we do not keep this party stable, but examine the development of the level of sympathy toward the least-liked party in every wave. This should offer a more conservative estimate than keeping the least-liked party stable throughout the waves.

We present the results of these models in Figure 2.4, where the coefficients show the effect for Wave 2 (campaign) and Wave 3 (post-election), each compared to Wave

1 (pre-campaign). For vertical affective polarization, we find that election salience significantly increases sympathy toward both the in-party and the out-parties. In fact, respondents even become more sympathetic toward the most-disliked out-party, although to a lesser extent than toward the average for all out-parties. The largest increase of sympathy, however, is reserved for the in-party, which is why aggregate affective polarization slightly increases, corresponding to Development 3 in Figure 2.1. The increase of sympathy occurs in two stages, starting during the campaign and continuing until (at least) directly after the elections. The only exception is the least-liked out-party, for which sympathy increases during the campaign, but remains at that level after the election.

Our findings align with earlier work by Gidron and Sheffer (2024), who found that specifically election winners became more sympathetic to all out-parties in the Israeli case (compared to the campaign). Furthermore, whereas Hansen and Kosiara-Pedersen (2017) found a similar increase in sympathy for the in-party in Denmark, Danish respondents became rather more negative about the least-liked party – con-

Figure 2.4: Development of in- and out-party sympathies



Note: Regression output of multilevel growth curve models, including 95% confidence intervals. The reference category is the pre-campaign wave 1. Full regression results can be found in Tables 2.B.2 and 2.B.3 in the Appendix.

trary to our findings. We cannot fully account for the source of this difference, but it may reflect variation across electoral contexts in how campaigns and outcomes are perceived by voters. Notably, the effect for the least-liked party is remarkably similar across Flanders and Wallonia (see Appendix 2.C.1), despite their substantial differences in party and media structures. The increase for the least-liked party is also the smallest in size and confined to the election campaign only. In contrast, the average sympathy toward other parties continues to rise even after the election result. One possible explanation is that voters anticipate post-election coalition formation, which increases sympathy toward parties perceived as viable coalition partners (Gidron, Adams, & Horne, 2022; Hahm et al., 2024; Horne et al., 2022; Vanagt & Kollberg, 2025; Wagner & Praprotnik, 2024), while the least-liked party is typically excluded from such considerations due to ideological distance (Plescia & Aichholzer, 2017a).

Figure 2.4 shows a similar process for horizontal affective polarization. Compared to the pre-campaign (Wave 1), voters are significantly more sympathetic toward all other voters during the campaign (Wave 2) and directly after the elections (Wave 3). During the campaign period, this increase is stronger for out-party electorates – including for voters of the most-disliked party – than for the in-party electorate. This explains the aggregate decrease in horizontal affective polarization during the campaign, as shown in Figure 2.3. Ultimately, in Wave 3, the increase of sympathy is similar toward in-party voters and out-party voters. As a result, the level of horizontal affective polarization is similar after the election compared to the pre-campaign period, but this masks the fact that voters have actually become more sympathetic toward all other voters.

When comparing the disaggregated developments of vertical and horizontal affective polarization, two patterns stand out. First, the change in vertical and horizontal out-party sympathy is relatively similar across waves. One possible explanation is that voters simply extend increases in sympathy toward parties to their electorates. However, this increase is slightly more pronounced for other voters than for their parties – especially for the least-liked party. It may be that increased exposure to political actors and information during the campaign humanizes opposing voters. Ordinary voters may also be perceived as less threatening than the parties they support.

Second, the change in vertical and horizontal in-party sympathy differs across waves; voters become much more sympathetic toward their own party than toward its voters, both during the campaign and after the election. This is the main reason for the differential changes in vertical and horizontal affective polarization during the election period. This difference between the in-party and its voters may be rooted in the central role that parties play during election campaigns. Campaign communication is primarily focused on parties as political actors, which may strengthen affective attachment to one's own party more strongly than to its voters. However, alternative interpretations are also plausible, and the current data do not allow us to adjudicate between these mechanisms.

2.4 Robustness checks

We run several additional analyses to ensure the robustness of our results. First, we run all main models in the paper separately for Flanders and Wallonia to assess whether they are driven by only one of the regions (Appendix 2.C.1). For all models, the results are remarkably similar: coefficients are always in the same direction, statistically significant at least at the 0.01 level, and relatively similar in size. Given the differences between Flanders and Wallonia – in terms of the presence or absence of the radical right, and the level of affective polarization – this enhances our confidence of the external validity of our findings to other European multiparty systems.

Second, we use the alternative mean-distance measure for affective polarization as proposed by Wagner (2021), which takes the mean (weighted) distance between the in-party and all out-parties (Appendix 2.C.2). We also replicate the analyses for both the spread-of-scores and the mean-distance measure by weighing parties according to their pre-election size (Appendix 2.C.3) and without any weighing for party size at all (Appendix 2.C.4). The results of all these additional analyses are substantively similar.

Third, we use several alternative ways to determine the in- and out-party to trace the development of sympathies. For in-party sympathy, we replicate our models by

keeping the in-party stable across waves: First, we base it on the most-liked party in Wave 1, and subsequently on the eventual vote choice in Wave 3 (Appendix 2.C.5). Regarding the most-disliked out-party, we rerun the models by keeping the most-disliked out-party stable throughout the waves, based on wave 1 (Appendix 2.C.6). All of these models yield essentially similar results to our main models.

Fourth, as noted above, the panel – particularly in Wallonia – suffered from attrition, leading to an underrepresentation of younger and lower-educated respondents. We therefore construct post-stratification weights to align the final sample with population benchmarks on interlocked age and gender, as well as education (Appendix 2.C.7). The results remain substantively unchanged.

In addition, we examine potential attrition bias (Appendix 2.C.8). First, we compare baseline levels of affective polarization (Wave 1) across respondents who remained in the panel and those who dropped out. In Flanders, baseline levels are very similar, while in Wallonia respondents who dropped out are somewhat less polarized. Second, we assess within-individual change between Wave 1 and Wave 2 among respondents who dropped out after Wave 2. The results show the same directional pattern as in the main sample: vertical affective polarization increases, while horizontal affective polarization remains stable or decreases. Although some coefficients are not statistically significant due to smaller sample sizes, the substantive pattern is consistent. Since, as noted earlier, the main results of Flanders and Wallonia are also strikingly similar, we believe that attrition does not bias our main results.

Finally, we run fixed-effects estimations as alternative to our multilevel growth curve models (Appendix 2.C.9). Again, we find very similar results compared to our main models, which strongly enhances our confidence in the robustness of the results.

2.5 Conclusion

In this research note, we build on earlier cross-sectional findings (Bassan-Nygate & Weiss, 2022; Hernández et al., 2021) by using panel data from Belgium's 2024 election

year to examine how election salience shapes affective polarization in a multiparty context. Our study makes two main contributions. First, we show that the election boost identified in earlier research applies to vertical, but not horizontal, affective polarization: voters are more polarized toward parties after the election than before the campaign, but not more polarized toward other voters. Second, our panel design allows us to identify the size, timing, and underlying sympathy dynamics of this election effect. We find that the increase in vertical affective polarization is relatively small (about 20% of the pre-campaign standard deviation), unfolds in two similar stages during and after the campaign, and is driven not by diverging in- and out-party sympathy, but by voters becoming more sympathetic toward all parties, especially their own. Horizontally, voters likewise become more sympathetic to all electorates, but these changes are similar for both in- and out-parties, which keeps overall levels of horizontal affective polarization stable.

With our study, we add to existing work that has nuanced the impact of election salience on affective polarization, reinforcing the notion that its rise during the election period is unlikely to be a major reason for concern, also in multiparty democracies. First, election salience drives vertical affective polarization, but not because voters' in- and out-party sympathies take diverging trends; voters become more sympathetic toward all parties, yet most strongly to their own. We interpret this as good news for multiparty democracies: elections not only drive political trust (van der Meer & Steenvoorden, 2018) and satisfaction with democracy (Kostelka & Blais, 2018); they also connect voters more strongly to the party system. Even the most-disliked party receives an election bonus from voters, which is important given the general increase of out-party hostility over time in Western democracies (Garzia & Ferreira da Silva, 2025). Second, any lingering concern about the net increase in vertical affective polarization is mitigated by the small size of the effect. Third, the election-induced increase in vertical affective polarization, also found by prior research, cannot be extended to horizontal affective polarization. Again, we believe that the increase in sympathy toward both in-party and out-party electorates is a beneficial consequence of elections, and that it matters less whether the overall level of horizontal affective polarization increases, decreases, or remains stable.

At the same time, these findings do not allow for definitive conclusions about the normative implications of election-induced changes in affective polarization, as we are unable to shed light on specific mechanisms. In particular, it remains unclear why election periods produce increases in sympathy toward both parties and voters. These patterns could reflect mechanisms such as increased democratic engagement or anticipation of post-election coalition dynamics, which may have different normative implications. We invite future research to examine this in more detail.

Another implication of our work is that descriptive studies about affective polarization will find significantly different levels if they rely on post-electoral surveys compared to surveys fielded outside of the electoral period. Furthermore, common panel studies around elections – with a measure just before and just after the election – are likely to miss a part of the polarization picture, as respondents have already significantly changed their levels of affect during the campaign. Our results suggest that these designs likely underestimate the size of the change in party (electorate) sympathies.

Although the particularity of our data allows us to extend previous research in several ways, it comes at the cost of geographical generalizability. We believe that the 2024 Belgian elections were a relatively most-likely case to find the effect of election salience on affective polarization because it was the first election at any level in 5 years. As such, the effects that we find are likely somewhat smaller in other contexts where voters have cast a ballot more recently. However, the fact that we find strikingly similar results in both Flanders and Wallonia enhances our confidence that the direction of our results should be similar in other European multiparty contexts. Both regions have their own political parties which operate in separate political environments and media campaigns, and are moreover different in important aspects such as the presence and absence of the radical right and levels of affective polarization. Indeed, findings in other multiparty systems largely align with our study (Gidron & Sheffer, 2024; Hansen & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2017).

Clearly, the results are less comparable to earlier findings in the US two-party system, where elections generally have no clear impact on affective polarization toward parties (Fasching et al., 2024; Singh & Thornton, 2024). One of the reasons might

be the endurance of political hostility outside of the election period in the US. As Fasching et al. (2024) conclude, “political animosity has become such a durable feature of public life that it no longer “cools off" in the aftermath of contentious political campaigns" (p. 9). This contrasts with the Belgian case and European democracies in general, where campaign elite animosity is lower to begin with (J. Maier & Nai, 2022), but also decreases more strongly after the election. Furthermore, the standard 2-year lag between American elections might reduce the impact of the “treatment" compared to places where the last elections were a longer time ago. This reinforces our interpretation that the 5 years since the last Belgian elections created a relatively most-likely case to find effects for election salience.

Finally, it would be very interesting for future research to examine for how persistent the increase in party and voter sympathies is after the elections. Do sympathy levels decrease to pre-campaign levels after elections, or do elections establish a new equilibrium? Previous research has revealed that citizens are less polarized when interviewed longer after an election (Hernández et al., 2021), but it remains unclear whether the size of this post-election depolarization is similar to the increase in polarization occurring in the preceding period, and what in- and out-group sympathy dynamics lie behind it.

Appendix

2.A Details on the data

Table 2.A.1: Descriptive statistics

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Vertical AP	12,345	2.422	0.902	0.000	4.946
Horizontal AP	12,345	2.045	1.054	0.000	4.946
In-party sympathy (ver.)	12,336	7.749	1.627	0	10
Out-party sympathy (ver., average)	12,336	3.510	1.396	0.000	9.485
Out-party sympathy (ver., most disliked)	12,339	0.999	1.474	0	9
In-party sympathy (hor.)	12,336	7.263	1.770	0	10
Out-party sympathy (hor., average)	12,336	3.983	1.367	0.000	10.000
Out-party sympathy (hor., most disliked)	12,339	1.887	2.043	0	10

Table 2.A.2: Representativeness of the panel

Variable	Category	Population	W3
Gender	Female	51.1%	49.2%
Gender	Male	48.9%	54.8%
Age	18–29	17.2%	6.9%
Age	30–49	31.7%	25.9%
Age	50–64	25.1%	32.5%
Age	65+	25.9%	31.6%
Education	Low	19.4%	9.4%
Education	Middle	45.3%	36.6%
Education	High	35.3%	54.0%

2.B Regression results

2.B.1 Figure 2.3

Table 2.B.1: Regression results figure 2.3

	Vertical	Horizontal
Intercept	2.332***	2.081***
	(0.014)	(0.015)
Wave 2	0.098***	−0.115***
	(0.011)	(0.014)
Wave 3	0.173***	0.008
	(0.012)	(0.015)
AIC	26817.243	31486.251
BIC	26869.191	31538.198
Log Likelihood	−13401.622	−15736.126
Num. obs.	12345	12345
Num. groups: ID	4115	4115
Var: ID (Intercept)	0.644	0.601
Var: ID wave	0.032	0.045
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	−0.055	−0.019
Var: Residual	0.237	0.373

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

2.B.2 Figure 2.4 (vertical)

Table 2.B.2: Regression results figure 2.4 (vertical)

	In-party	Out-party (avg.)	Out-party (most disliked)
Intercept	7.386***	3.281***	0.934***
	(0.026)	(0.022)	(0.022)
Wave 2	0.386***	0.183***	0.071***
	(0.021)	(0.016)	(0.019)
Wave 3	0.699***	0.502***	0.122***
	(0.022)	(0.018)	(0.021)
AIC	41658.864	36791.327	39447.318
BIC	41710.806	36843.269	39499.262
Log Likelihood	−20822.432	−18388.664	−19716.659
Num. obs.	12336	12336	12339
Num. groups: ID	4115	4115	4115
Var: ID (Intercept)	2.480	1.638	1.535
Var: ID wave	0.090	0.075	0.090
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	−0.293	−0.147	−0.118
Var: Residual	0.846	0.510	0.683

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

2.B.3 Figure 2.4 (horizontal)

Table 2.B.3: Regression results figure 2.4 (horizontal)

	In-party	Out-party (avg.)	Out-party (most disliked)
Intercept	7.046***	3.735***	1.686***
	(0.027)	(0.021)	(0.031)
Wave 2	0.155***	0.232***	0.292***
	(0.025)	(0.018)	(0.030)
Wave 3	0.491***	0.513***	0.309***
	(0.026)	(0.020)	(0.032)
AIC	45074.201	38022.221	49237.338
BIC	45126.143	38074.163	49289.282
Log Likelihood	−22530.101	−19004.110	−24611.669
Num. obs.	12336	12336	12339
Num. groups: ID	4115	4115	4115
Var: ID (Intercept)	2.036	1.507	2.089
Var: ID wave	0.081	0.089	0.117
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	−0.138	−0.182	−0.072
Var: Residual	1.236	0.632	1.809

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

2.C Robustness checks

2.C.1 Flanders and Wallonia separately

Table 2.C.1: Affective polarization (Flanders)

	Vertical	Horizontal
Intercept	2.432***	2.183***
	(0.015)	(0.017)
Wave 2	0.098***	−0.131***
	(0.012)	(0.016)
Wave 3	0.169***	0.000
	(0.013)	(0.017)
AIC	16287.076	20146.363
BIC	16336.275	20195.562
Log Likelihood	−8136.538	−10066.182
Num. obs.	8337	8337
Num. groups: ID	2779	2779
Var: ID (Intercept)	0.537	0.484
Var: ID wave	0.023	0.030
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	−0.048	−0.001
Var: Residual	0.194	0.338

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 2.C.2: Affective polarization (Wallonia)

	Vertical	Horizontal
Intercept	2.123***	1.867***
	(0.028)	(0.030)
Wave 2	0.097***	−0.082**
	(0.023)	(0.027)
Wave 3	0.181***	0.025
	(0.025)	(0.030)
AIC	10002.004	11093.318
BIC	10046.076	11137.391
Log Likelihood	−4994.002	−5539.659
Num. obs.	4008	4008
Num. groups: ID	1336	1336
Var: ID (Intercept)	0.801	0.779
Var: ID wave	0.050	0.078
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	−0.068	−0.055
Var: Residual	0.328	0.446

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 2.C.3: Vertical in-party and out-party sympathies (Flanders)

	In-party	Out-party (avg.)	Out-party (most disliked)
Intercept	7.500***	3.199***	0.750***
	(0.030)	(0.023)	(0.024)
Wave 2	0.388***	0.160***	0.055**
	(0.023)	(0.018)	(0.020)
Wave 3	0.691***	0.464***	0.093***
	(0.025)	(0.019)	(0.022)
AIC	26828.178	22917.979	24521.234
BIC	26877.374	22967.175	24570.433
Log Likelihood	−13407.089	−11451.989	−12253.617
Num. obs.	8333	8333	8336
Num. groups: ID	2779	2779	2779
Var: ID (Intercept)	2.136	1.242	1.038
Var: ID wave	0.071	0.053	0.057
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	−0.252	−0.082	−0.044
Var: Residual	0.729	0.399	0.544

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 2.C.4: Vertical in-party and out-party sympathies (Wallonia)

	In-party	Out-party (avg.)	Out-party (most disliked)
Intercept	7.149***	3.452***	1.318***
	(0.052)	(0.045)	(0.047)
Wave 2	0.382***	0.231***	0.105**
	(0.042)	(0.035)	(0.040)
Wave 3	0.716***	0.583***	0.183***
	(0.045)	(0.038)	(0.044)
AIC	14558.523	13334.500	14207.361
BIC	14602.587	13378.564	14251.424
Log Likelihood	−7272.262	−6660.250	−7096.680
Num. obs.	4003	4003	4003
Num. groups: ID	1336	1336	1336
Var: ID (Intercept)	3.108	2.440	2.386
Var: ID wave	0.128	0.118	0.159
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	−0.376	−0.291	−0.288
Var: Residual	1.088	0.740	0.974

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 2.C.5: Horizontal in-party and out-party sympathies (Flanders)

	In-party	Out-party (avg.)	Out-party (most disliked)
Intercept	7.158***	3.669***	1.465***
	(0.032)	(0.023)	(0.035)
Wave 2	0.169***	0.233***	0.316***
	(0.029)	(0.020)	(0.035)
Wave 3	0.489***	0.492***	0.313***
	(0.030)	(0.022)	(0.036)
AIC	29613.090	24194.489	32448.458
BIC	29662.285	24243.685	32497.656
Log Likelihood	−14799.545	−12090.244	−16217.229
Num. obs.	8333	8333	8336
Num. groups: ID	2779	2779	2779
Var: ID (Intercept)	1.838	1.144	1.449
Var: ID wave	0.083	0.058	0.054
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	−0.136	−0.107	0.076
Var: Residual	1.110	0.542	1.713

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 2.C.6: Horizontal in-party and out-party sympathies (Wallonia)

	In-party	Out-party (avg.)	Out-party (most disliked)
Intercept	6.813***	3.870***	2.147***
	(0.052)	(0.044)	(0.059)
Wave 2	0.127**	0.229***	0.243***
	(0.048)	(0.037)	(0.057)
Wave 3	0.495***	0.557***	0.300***
	(0.050)	(0.041)	(0.061)
AIC	15330.063	13503.610	16579.971
BIC	15374.127	13547.674	16624.035
Log Likelihood	−7658.032	−6744.805	−8282.986
Num. obs.	4003	4003	4003
Num. groups: ID	1336	1336	1336
Var: ID (Intercept)	2.366	2.254	3.127
Var: ID wave	0.077	0.154	0.248
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	−0.144	−0.345	−0.380
Var: Residual	1.496	0.821	2.008

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

2.C.2 Mean distance measure

Table 2.C.7: Mean distance measure

	Vertical	Horizontal
Intercept	4.568***	3.880***
	(0.031)	(0.032)
Wave 2	0.211***	−0.126***
	(0.023)	(0.028)
Wave 3	0.249***	−0.052
	(0.025)	(0.030)
AIC	45384.165	49057.330
BIC	45436.107	49109.272
Log Likelihood	−22685.082	−24521.665
Num. obs.	12336	12336
Num. groups: ID	4115	4115
Var: ID (Intercept)	3.219	2.703
Var: ID wave	0.134	0.108
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	−0.293	−0.033
Var: Residual	1.060	1.594

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

2.C.3 Weighted for 2019 party sizes

Table 2.C.8: Spread-of-scores

	Vertical	Horizontal
Intercept	2.286***	2.041***
	(0.014)	(0.015)
Wave 2	0.101***	−0.077***
	(0.011)	(0.014)
Wave 3	0.180***	0.003
	(0.012)	(0.015)
AIC	26154.978	31009.266
BIC	26206.925	31061.213
Log Likelihood	−13070.489	−15497.633
Num. obs.	12345	12345
Num. groups: ID	4115	4115
Var: ID (Intercept)	0.608	0.554
Var: ID wave	0.033	0.039
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	−0.057	−0.010
Var: Residual	0.225	0.365

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 2.C.9: Mean distance

	Vertical	Horizontal
Intercept	4.492***	3.793***
	(0.030)	(0.032)
Wave 2	0.228***	−0.113***
	(0.023)	(0.028)
Wave 3	0.293***	−0.022
	(0.025)	(0.029)
AIC	45288.641	48841.716
BIC	45340.583	48893.658
Log Likelihood	−22637.320	−24413.858
Num. obs.	12336	12336
Num. groups: ID	4115	4115
Var: ID (Intercept)	3.178	2.599
Var: ID wave	0.133	0.102
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	−0.286	−0.015
Var: Residual	1.050	1.571

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

2.C.4 Unweighted for party sizes

Table 2.C.10: Spread-of-scores

	Vertical	Horizontal
Intercept	2.281***	2.037***
	(0.013)	(0.015)
Wave 2	0.108***	−0.076***
	(0.010)	(0.013)
Wave 3	0.177***	−0.003
	(0.011)	(0.014)
AIC	25004.609	30331.645
BIC	25056.556	30383.592
Log Likelihood	−12495.305	−15158.822
Num. obs.	12345	12345
Num. groups: ID	4115	4115
Var: ID (Intercept)	0.556	0.505
Var: ID wave	0.031	0.035
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	−0.053	−0.003
Var: Residual	0.203	0.346

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 2.C.11: Mean distance

	Vertical	Horizontal
Intercept	4.104***	3.529***
	(0.031)	(0.031)
Wave 2	0.323***	−0.048**
	(0.022)	(0.017)
Wave 3	0.507***	−0.090***
	(0.024)	(0.019)
AIC	38689.525	34948.541
BIC	38740.671	34999.687
Log Likelihood	−19337.763	−17467.270
Num. obs.	11010	11010
Num. groups: ID	3670	3670
Var: ID (Intercept)	3.245	3.610
Var: ID wave	0.125	0.091
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	−0.331	−0.305
Var: Residual	0.849	0.478

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

2.C.5 Alternative in-party operationalizations

Table 2.C.12: 2024 vote choice

	Vertical	Horizontal
Intercept	7.035***	6.857***
	(0.032)	(0.031)
Wave 2	0.558***	0.300***
	(0.024)	(0.025)
Wave 3	1.036***	0.760***
	(0.027)	(0.028)
AIC	38670.371	39922.175
BIC	38721.517	39973.321
Log Likelihood	−19328.186	−19954.087
Num. obs.	11010	11010
Num. groups: ID	3670	3670
Var: ID (Intercept)	3.931	3.057
Var: ID wave	0.164	0.157
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	−0.681	−0.453
Var: Residual	0.967	1.112

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 2.C.13: Most-liked party in wave 1

	Vertical	Horizontal
Intercept	7.388***	7.048***
	(0.027)	(0.028)
Wave 2	0.079***	0.016
	(0.023)	(0.025)
Wave 3	0.698***	0.490***
	(0.024)	(0.026)
AIC	43505.619	45309.654
BIC	43557.560	45361.595
Log Likelihood	−21745.810	−22647.827
Num. obs.	12334	12334
Num. groups: ID	4114	4114
Var: ID (Intercept)	2.223	2.115
Var: ID wave	0.008	0.064
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	−0.136	−0.126
Var: Residual	1.119	1.269

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

2.C.6 Alternative out-party operationalization

Table 2.C.14: Most-disliked party in wave 1

	Vertical	Horizontal
Intercept	0.934***	1.686***
	(0.023)	(0.031)
Wave 2	0.383***	0.418***
	(0.024)	(0.030)
Wave 3	0.515***	0.548***
	(0.025)	(0.032)
AIC	43823.418	49452.247
BIC	43875.358	49504.187
Log Likelihood	−21904.709	−24719.124
Num. obs.	12333	12333
Num. groups: ID	4111	4111
Var: ID (Intercept)	0.737	2.129
Var: ID wave	0.125	0.193
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	0.164	−0.086
Var: Residual	1.074	1.729

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

2.C.7 Survey weights for age, gender, and education

Table 2.C.15: Affective polarization

	Vertical	Horizontal
Intercept	2.332***	2.074***
	(0.014)	(0.016)
Wave 2	0.092***	−0.110***
	(0.011)	(0.014)
Wave 3	0.176***	0.023
	(0.013)	(0.017)
AIC	28097.170	32542.380
BIC	28149.023	32594.233
Log Likelihood	−14041.585	−16264.190
Num. obs.	12180	12180
Num. groups: ID	4060	4060
Var: ID (Intercept)	0.749	0.786
Var: ID wave	0.057	0.090
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	−0.109	−0.114
Var: Residual	0.218	0.331

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 2.C.16: Vertical in-party and out-party sympathies

	In-party	Out-party (avg.)	Out-party (most disliked)
Intercept	7.399***	3.281***	0.942***
	(0.027)	(0.022)	(0.024)
Wave 2	0.380***	0.183***	0.070***
	(0.023)	(0.016)	(0.019)
Wave 3	0.205***	0.502***	0.100***
	(0.029)	(0.018)	(0.023)
AIC	44978.126	36791.327	40730.973
BIC	45029.971	36843.269	40782.823
Log Likelihood	−22482.063	−18388.664	−20358.487
Num. obs.	12167	12336	12174
Num. groups: ID	4060	4115	4060
Var: ID (Intercept)	2.626	1.638	1.921
Var: ID wave	0.336	0.075	0.174
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	−0.529	−0.147	−0.303
Var: Residual	0.882	0.510	0.635

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 2.C.17: Horizontal in-party and out-party sympathies

	In-party	Out-party (avg.)	Out-party (most disliked)
Intercept	7.039***	3.744***	1.707***
	(0.029)	(0.022)	(0.032)
Wave 2	0.182***	0.220***	0.275***
	(0.026)	(0.019)	(0.030)
Wave 3	0.223***	0.489***	0.266***
	(0.031)	(0.023)	(0.035)
AIC	46987.713	39379.732	50279.544
BIC	47039.558	39431.580	50331.394
Log Likelihood	−23486.857	−19682.866	−25132.772
Num. obs.	12167	12171	12174
Num. groups: ID	4060	4060	4060
Var: ID (Intercept)	2.610	1.833	3.160
Var: ID wave	0.306	0.178	0.347
Cov: ID (Intercept) wave	−0.490	−0.363	−0.581
Var: Residual	1.167	0.591	1.617

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

2.C.8 Attrition bias checks

Table 2.C.18: Baseline comparisons (Wave 1)

	N	Vertical	Diff. vs. final	p-value	Horizontal	Diff. vs. final	p-value
Flanders							
Dropout after W1	562	2.34	-0.09	0.017	2.22	0.03	0.410
Dropout after W2	227	2.44	0.01	0.846	2.24	0.05	0.385
Final sample	2779	2.43	0.00		2.18	0.00	
Wallonia							
Dropout after W1	2101	1.89	-0.23	0.000	1.73	-0.14	0.000
Dropout after W2	303	1.90	-0.22	0.001	1.67	-0.20	0.003
Final sample	1336	2.12	0.00		1.87	0.00	

Table 2.C.19: Changes in affective polarization for respondents who dropped out after W2

	Vertical (Fl)	Horizontal (Fl)	Vertical (Wal)	Horizontal (Wal)
Intercept	2.465***	2.270***	1.889***	1.699***
	(0.059)	(0.067)	(0.062)	(0.065)
Wave 2	0.026	−0.156**	0.143**	−0.031
	(0.045)	(0.059)	(0.055)	(0.060)
AIC	883.232	1022.704	1477.244	1553.500
BIC	899.238	1038.709	1494.483	1570.740
Log Likelihood	−437.616	−507.352	−734.622	−772.750
Num. obs.	404	404	550	550
Num. groups: ID	202	202	275	275
Var: ID (Intercept)	0.501	0.555	0.622	0.673
Var: Residual	0.209	0.347	0.421	0.502

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

2.C.9 Fixed-effects models

Table 2.C.20: Affective polarization

	Vertical	Horizontal
Wave 2	0.098^{***}	-0.115^{***}
	(0.011)	(0.014)
Wave 3	0.173^{***}	0.008
	(0.011)	(0.014)
Num. obs.	12345	12345
Num. groups: ID	4115	4115
R^2 (full model)	0.779	0.749
R^2 (proj model)	0.027	0.011
Adj. R^2 (full model)	0.669	0.624
Adj. R^2 (proj model)	0.027	0.011

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 2.C.21: Vertical in-party and out-party sympathies

	In-party	Out-party (avg.)	Out-party (most disliked)
Wave 2	0.388***	0.183***	0.072***
	(0.024)	(0.017)	(0.019)
Wave 3	0.245***	0.502***	0.122***
	(0.024)	(0.017)	(0.019)
Num. obs.	12327	12335	12338
Num. groups: ID	4110	4114	4114
R^2 (full model)	0.729	0.800	0.763
R^2 (proj model)	0.030	0.100	0.005
Adj. R^2 (full model)	0.594	0.700	0.644
Adj. R^2 (proj model)	0.030	0.099	0.005

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 2.C.22: Horizontal in-party and out-party sympathies

	In-party	Out-party (avg.)	Out-party (most disliked)
Wave 2	0.157***	0.232***	0.292***
	(0.026)	(0.019)	(0.031)
Wave 3	0.236***	0.513***	0.309***
	(0.026)	(0.019)	(0.031)
Num. obs.	12327	12335	12338
Num. groups: ID	4110	4114	4114
R^2 (full model)	0.713	0.743	0.692
R^2 (proj model)	0.010	0.084	0.015
Adj. R^2 (full model)	0.570	0.614	0.539
Adj. R^2 (proj model)	0.010	0.084	0.015

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Chapter 3

The Impact of Party-Voter Congruence on Affective Polarization: Evidence from Belgium

Abstract

Ideology drives affective polarization, yet research often overlooks horizontal polarization – emotions toward other voters – and struggles to disentangle ideology from partisanship. This study shifts the focus from vertical to horizontal affective polarization, examining how policy congruence shapes voters' feelings toward in-party and out-party electorates in Belgium's dual multiparty system. Using data from the 2019 federal elections and a Voting Advice Application, we compute a novel measure of party-voter congruence that minimizes partisan signalling. Our findings reveal that policy congruence predicts sympathy toward both in-party and out-party voters, with significant regional differences linked to the presence of a populist radical right competitor. While voters show greater sympathy for their own electorates when policy congruence is high, stronger congruence with one's own party also correlates with reduced sympathy for voters of other parties. Conversely, greater incongruence with other parties reduces sympathy for their electorates and reinforces affective ties with one's own electorate. These results contribute to a nuanced understanding of horizontal affective polarization dynamics in multiparty contexts, underscoring the complex interplay between policy preferences and partisan identities.

This chapter is based on a paper co-authored with Elie Michel and Emilie van Haute and is published in the Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties.

3.1 Introduction

Affective polarization – the extent to which politics generates prejudice, discrimination, and hostility among voters along party lines – is widespread among both American (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Iyengar et al., 2012; Lelkes, 2016; Mason, 2018) and European voters (Garzia et al., 2023; Gidron et al., 2020; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021). This partisan hostility threatens democratic institutions (Orhan, 2022; Svolik, 2019) and undermines societal cohesion (Jenke, 2024; Lee, 2022; Wagner & Eberl, 2025b), underscoring the importance of studying its causes. Yet, the drivers of affective polarization are less straightforward in European multiparty systems without zero-sum dynamics like the US two-party system.

Research on affective polarization in multiparty systems highlights the importance of diverging policy preferences among voters (Harteveld, 2021a). When voters disagree with the policies of parties, they will respond with hostility to both the parties and their voters – while voters sympathize with those who share their preferences. However, existing work has mostly studied the impact of policy congruence on vertical affective polarization – hostility toward parties and their leaders (Algara & Zur, 2023; Marchal & Watson, 2022). Yet, it is horizontal affective polarization – hostility between citizens based on political preferences – that raises most concern in democratic societies, as it tends to erode social trust and social cohesion (Lee, 2022; Torcal & Thomson, 2023; Torcal et al., 2025). In addition, it has been challenging to truly disentangle the effects of policy preferences from partisanship (Dias & Lelkes, 2022), since salient policy issues often signal partisan identities (Homola et al., 2023) or even serve as expressive identities in themselves (Hobolt et al., 2021).

To advance this debate, we examine the effects of policy congruence on horizontal affective polarization, focusing on the case of Belgium, which offers the advantage of two co-existing multiparty party systems. We use the Represent Belgium Panel dataset, a survey conducted during the 2019 federal Belgian elections. This dataset is combined with data from a Voting Advice Application (VAA) that asked the same respondents to position themselves on 18 issue statements covering a wide range of policy areas. This data allows us to make two unique contributions. For the dependent variable,

we shift the focus from vertical to horizontal affective polarization, and we examine both sides of affective polarization, that is, respondents' feelings toward in-party voters (voters of their own party) and out-party voters (those of other parties), thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of affective polarization dynamics in multiparty systems. For the independent variable, by comparing respondents' policy preferences with the actual policy positions of political parties, we compute a novel measure of party-voter congruence. This approach captures policy (dis)agreement beyond the simple left-right spectrum or a limited set of salient issues, and minimizes partisan signalling on policy issues, helping to disentangle policy preferences from partisanship and identity.

We find that sympathy toward voters of the same party is predicted by individual-level policy congruence with both the own as well as other parties, although important variations exist between the two Belgian regions. Sympathy for electorates of other parties, nonetheless, is robust in both regions. Voters show lower affect toward other electorates when they disagree more with these parties, but also when they are more congruent with their own party. These results hold across various operationalisations of the in-party, different waves of the panel study, and when accounting for respondents' issue salience. Crucially, we observe significant differences between the two party systems, which we attribute to a key structural distinction: the presence of a populist radical right competitor. In the following sections, we review the relevant literature and outline our hypotheses, describe our datasets and measures, present the results and robustness checks, and conclude.

3.2 Affective polarization and party-voter policy congruence

The study of political polarization is not new, but earlier research primarily focused on polarization among political parties (Dalton, 2008; Sartori, 1976). Affective polarization, on the other hand, pertains to polarization at the citizen level and is grounded in social identity theory. This theory suggests that citizens categorize society into

in-groups (groups they belong to) and out-groups (groups they do not belong to). Such group-thinking fosters positive feelings toward the in-group while evoking negative emotions or even hostility toward out-groups, especially when competition arises (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel et al., 1971). Politics often provides these tangible groups, most notably through partisanship. Citizens identify with the party they support and tend to view opposing parties and their voters more negatively. In the U.S., partisanship has evolved into a stable expressive identity, with partisans engaging in motivated reasoning to defend their party, relying more heavily on identity than issues to determine their vote, and discriminating against voters of the other party (Huddy et al., 2015; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). This contrasts with the classical instrumental view of partisanship, where voters adjust their partisanship based on issue preferences and the performance of the party leadership (Garzia, 2013).

The partisan explanation behind affective polarization is, however, more contested in European multiparty systems. Although European party systems were originally considered closed (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967), the past decades have witnessed a significant dealignment between voters and parties (Casal Bértoa & Enyedi, 2021). This is reflected in the sharp decrease of voters reporting feeling close to any political party (Dassonneville et al., 2012). Elections in Europe have also become increasingly volatile, with voters more likely to switch parties between elections than voters in the American two-party system (Dassonneville, 2013; Dassonneville et al., 2012). Also the expressive form of partisanship, albeit present, is lower in European democracies than in the US (Huddy et al., 2018).

In parallel, ideology plays a crucial role in explaining affective polarization (Orr & Huber, 2020; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2015). As parties represent conflicting ideologies, they generate varied emotions from voters. In the US, the perceived ideological distance and extremity of the parties is often advanced to explain the country's surge in affective polarization in the past decades (Lelkes, 2021). However, since ideology and partisanship are so closely intertwined in contemporary American politics, disentangling their effects on affective polarization is challenging (Dias & Lelkes, 2022). For instance, ideological conservative-liberal scales or salient issues such as gun control or abortion are strong cues for partisanship (Homola et al., 2023) and can even function

as expressive identities themselves (Ellis & Stimson, 2012). It remains therefore an open question whether studies manipulating ideological positions are truly capturing the impact of ideology on affective polarization.

Furthermore, findings focused on American ideological issues – such as liberal-conservative frames – are difficult to translate to the European multiparty context. While ideological differences among European publics have not necessarily increased (Munzert & Bauer, 2013; Perrett, 2021), multiparty systems in Europe have witnessed a surge in radical parties in recent years. The effect of ideology on affective polarization in multiparty systems is, however, less evident. While aggregate-level ideological distance correlates with affective polarization, the relationship is imperfect (Gidron et al., 2020; Reiljan, 2020). At the individual level, voters dislike voters of other parties when they perceive themselves as more distant from these out-parties on the left-right scale (Harteveld, 2021a; van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022). Still, this cannot circumvent the concern that left- and right-wing positions can inherently function as expressive identities comparable to conservative-liberal ideologies in the US.

Moreover, ideological distance is further complicated in European multiparty systems because parties compete in a multidimensional political space (Kriesi et al., 2006). We argue that policy congruence offers a more accurate measure, as it captures the policy (mis)match between voters and political parties across a range of specific policy proposals (Pitkin, 1967). Policy congruence thus transcends the simplified, unidimensional left-right ideological spectrum, reducing the risk of overestimating party-voter congruence (Louwerse & Andeweg, 2020). It introduces a more nuanced measure of positions, which is particularly valuable in a multiparty system where voters may feel ideologically aligned with more than one party. Even if voters align ideologically on the left-right scale, they may disagree on specific policies. Therefore, policy congruence offers a clearer indication of distance to a party in such systems.

Accordingly, a couple of studies have recently looked at the more precise measure of policy congruence between voters and parties to explain affective polarization in multiparty systems (Algara & Zur, 2023; Marchal & Watson, 2022). However, these studies have two key limitations. First, party-voter congruence measures in prior

work only limitedly move beyond the impact of ideological distance, mostly focusing on very salient policy issues. Salient issue positions such as immigration or EU membership can still function as cues for partisanship, or constitute expressive identities in themselves (Hobolt et al., 2021). Our study expands this perspective by measuring policy congruence as the distance between voters and parties across a wider range of policy issues.

Second, the focus of most of these studies is vertical affective polarization – hostility toward parties and their leaders. However, it is generally horizontal affective polarization – hostility toward other voters – that raises most societal concern. While citizens' evaluations of political parties and their voters correlate (Gidron et al., 2020), research shows that citizens distinguish between the two (Harteveld, 2021a). For example, citizens are generally more hostile toward other parties than toward their voters (Comellas Bonsfills, 2022; Tichelbaecker et al., 2023). It remains therefore unclear whether, and to what extent, party-voter policy congruence has an effect on horizontal affective polarization.

Normatively, the distinction between vertical and horizontal polarization is crucial for democratic societies. Negative feelings toward other parties are not inherently problematic, and in some cases may even justified when radical parties propose policies that are at odds with liberal democracy (Meléndez & Kaltwasser, 2021). After all, parties should be evaluated on the basis of their policy agenda, as that is their primary purpose. However, citizens, as fellow voters and members of society, have broader roles and responsibilities. Ideally, voters thus do not directly transfer hostility from parties to their voters. This also speaks to the democratic ideal that different voices and opinions should be able to coexist in societies.

Empirically, studies on the consequences of horizontal affective polarization are limited thus far. However, the few existing studies offer a rather negative picture and confirm that it has negative consequences for democratic societies, mostly by reducing social cohesion. For example, horizontal affective polarization has a negative impact on social trust (Torcal & Thomson, 2023; Torcal et al., 2025), which is a well-known correlate of, amongst others, democratic attitudes (Zmerli & Newton, 2008), civic en-

gagement (Jennings & Stoker, 2004), effective governance (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008), and economic growth (Algan & Cahuc, 2010). Even if societies are not polarized, the individual-level perception of widespread political polarization can already reduce social trust (Lee, 2022). More broadly, horizontal affective polarization negatively impacts attitudes towards minorities such as immigrants and homosexuals (Torcal et al., 2025).

Therefore, we focus in this study on the effects of party-voter congruence on horizontal affective polarization. We disaggregate between affect toward voters of the same party (in-party affect) and affect toward voters of other parties (out-party affect). Regarding affect toward in-party voters, research shows that voters in multiparty systems exhibit greater sympathy for their own party compared to other parties (Gidron et al., 2020; Wagner, 2021). We also know that this affect, though less strongly, is extended toward voters of the same party (Harteveld, 2021a). Several mechanisms may explain this. For example, voters might believe that voters of the same party hold the same preferences as the party, which can be a reason to like the party in the first place. In a similar vein, we know that people identify with those who hold the same views (Bliuc et al., 2007). While it can be difficult to gauge others' opinions, party preference provides a straightforward cue. In addition, electoral performance is a key aspect of party competition, and for strong partisans, election outcomes can feel personally significant (Huddy et al., 2018; Ward & Tavits, 2019). Since other in-party voters contribute to the party's electoral success, voters might be inclined to have positive feelings toward them – regardless of the actual election result.

We expect that the mechanisms driving in-party sympathy will vary depending on the level of policy congruence between voters and their parties. This congruence can differ significantly among voters – while some may align closely with their party, others may disagree on several issues. In extreme cases, voters may feel little alignment with their party but vote strategically. We anticipate that affect toward in-party voters will differ between these groups. Specifically, voters with higher policy congruence with the in-party should exhibit stronger affect toward its electorate than those with lower congruence. For instance, if a voter feels positive toward other in-party voters due to a belief in shared preferences, that effect should be more pronounced when

the number of shared preferences is greater. Moreover, election performance is likely more significant for voters who strongly align with their party than for those who struggle to find a congruent party. This is also why congruent voters are more likely to turn out to vote (Hobolt & Hoerner, 2020; Wessels & Schmitt, 2008).

H1a: *The higher a voter's level of policy congruence with their in-party, the higher their sympathy toward in-party voters.*

We also expect that sympathy for in-party voters is not solely a function of congruence with the in-party, but is also influenced by the extent to which voters agree or disagree with at least one of the competing out-parties. If an out-party's policy agenda is highly incongruent with a voter's preferences, the psychological contrast between the in- and the out-group increases. According to self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), greater distinctiveness of one's in-group bolsters in-group favouritism. In this context, the in-party becomes a more meaningful and exclusive identity anchor, which reinforces the affective ties with its supporters.

At the same time, the opposite also holds: voters who are relatively congruent with other parties should be less attached to their own party and its voters. High policy congruence with out-parties may blur in-group boundaries, as the in-party is less distinct. This diluted distinctiveness of the in-party undermines the motivational basis for strong in-group favouritism (Hogg, 2000; Tajfel et al., 1971), translating into lower sympathy for in-party voters compared to a voter who is less congruent with the out-parties.

H1b: *The higher a voter's level of policy congruence with their out-parties, the lower their sympathy toward in-party voters.*

However, voters do not only express emotions toward their own party and its voters. Scholars have argued that it is predominantly the negative emotional expression toward voters of out-parties which raises greatest concern for democracies (Gidron

et al., 2020). This is less straightforward in a multiparty system where voters can have multiple out-parties than in the American two-party system where the out-party is evident. In fact, voters could be relatively congruent with parties that they do not vote for. From vertical affective polarization research, we know that voters increase their dislike of other parties as they perceive them to be less congruent (Algara & Zur, 2023; Marchal & Watson, 2022). We expect similar mechanisms to be at play when voters evaluate electorates of parties that they did not vote for as when they evaluate their own electorate.

When comparing out-party electorates, voters are likely to exhibit higher sympathy for voters of a party whose preferences align more closely with their own party. This stems from the belief that those voters share similar preferences as the party. These affective dynamics are especially significant in multiparty systems, where coalition governments are the norm. In this context, voters are likely to consider the necessity of their preferred party to cooperate with others after the elections. Their preferences for potential coalition partners are logically influenced by the congruence between these partners and their own party (Plescia & Aichholzer, 2017b). Consequently, we would expect voters to show greater sympathy toward electorates that contribute to the success of parties aligned with their own, compared to electorates that vote for highly incongruent parties.

> H2a: *The higher a voter's level of policy congruence with their out-parties, the higher their sympathy toward out-party voters.*

Finally, we expect that sympathy toward out-party voters also depends on congruence with one's own party. First, voters who are strongly congruent with their own party are more likely to adopt a clear social identity as supporters of that party, which shapes how they view out-party voters. Self-categorization theory suggests that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups based on shared characteristics (Turner et al., 1987). Increased congruence with the in-party increases the likelihood of adopting such a social identity along partisan lines, and makes the boundaries between the in- and out-group more salient. Closely related, insights from social identity theory show that such a social identity can also lead to negative out-group

evaluations (Tajfel & Turner, 2000). Consequently, higher congruence with the in-party is thus more likely to create a shared identity, which in turn can drive out-group hostility toward voters of other parties. Second, when voters are strongly congruent with their own party, they might perceive stronger threats from other parties and their voters (Stephan et al., 2015). In turn, this might trigger emotional responses to out-parties, with a reduction in sympathy toward their voter bases.

H2b: *The higher a voter's level of policy congruence with their in-party, the lower their sympathy toward out-party voters.*

Table 3.1 summarizes our hypotheses and the directions of expected relationships between a voter's policy congruence and their level of sympathy toward in- and out-party voters.

Table 3.1: Summary of the hypotheses

	Sympathy in-party voters	Sympathy out-party voters
Congruence in-party	+	-
Congruence out-party	-	+

3.3 Data and operationalisation

3.3.1 Case selection

We analyse party-voter policy congruence as a driver of horizontal affective polarization in Belgium, focusing specifically on the 2019 federal elections. Belgium represents an ideal case to better understand horizontal affective polarization in a multiparty system due to its high fragmentation. Since the split of parties along the linguistic divide in the 1960s and 1970s, Belgium has been characterized by two distinct party systems operating separately: Flemish parties compete in Flanders (north of the country), whereas Francophone parties compete in Wallonia (south of the country). This division allows for the study of two cases within one country: Flemish

voters are (in-)congruent with and vote for Flemish parties, while Walloons voters do so for Francophone parties. Both systems, however, feature parties within similar party families (see Table 3.2).

The main difference between these two party systems is the presence of an established populist radical right party in Flanders (Vlaams Belang, VB), which Wallonia lacks. Despite being excluded from government participation due to a *cordon sanitaire*, the VB – or its predecessor Vlaams Blok – has consistently secured significant electoral support, maintaining a strong presence in both the Regional and Federal parliaments since 1991. This difference in party system structure matters because populist radical right parties strongly influence affective polarization: they evoke the highest levels of dislike from voters, while their own supporters also exhibit strong animosity toward other parties and voters (Harteveld et al., 2022). In contrast, Wallonia has historically managed to prevent the rise of a meaningful populist radical right party, partly through a successful political and a media cordon sanitaire (de Jonge, 2021). For example, the populist radical right Parti Populaire (PP) contested in the 2019 elections but failed to gain support, losing its sole parliamentary seat. Right-wing voters in Wallonia thus face a lower party offer than voters in Flanders. Even with the PP on the ballot in 2019, its isolation in the party system curtailed its appeal, and the party dissolved shortly after its electoral defeat.

To analyse the effect of policy congruence on horizontal affective polarization, we rely on the RepResent Belgian Panel (RBP) dataset, a panel survey conducted around the 2019 federal, regional, and European elections in Belgium (Michel et al., 2023).

Table 3.2: Respondents' vote intention for Federal election 2019

Party familiy	Flanders	N	%	Wallonia	N	%
Radical left	PVDA	163	6.3	PTB	373	18.6
Social democrats	Vooruit	275	10.6	PS	385	19.2
Greens	Groen	380	14.7	Ecolo	441	21.9
Christian democrats	CD&V	289	11.1	Les Engagés	153	7.6
Liberals	OpenVLD	262	10.1	DéFI	109	5.4
Regionalists	N-VA	810	31.3	MR	451	22.4
Radical right	VB	413	15.9	PP	98	4.9
Total		2,592	100.0		2,010	100.0

Specifically, we focus on the pre-electoral wave of the survey (wave 1), which was fielded between April 5 and May 21, 2019, with 99% of respondents completing it before May 6 – several weeks before the May 26 elections. The pre-electoral wave allows us to capture respondents' vote intention before the election outcome, which could influence their perceptions. Furthermore, this wave provides a larger group of respondents compared to subsequent waves, due to attrition. Our final sample includes N=4,602 respondents, with 2,592 in Flanders and 2,010 in Wallonia (see Table 2). Using this dataset, we assign respondents to one in-party (the one they intend to vote for) and 6 out-parties within their respective party systems. This setup allows us to explore the relationship between policy congruence and horizontal affective polarization in multiparty systems, leveraging the distinct contexts of Flanders and Wallonia to test our hypotheses.

3.3.2 Dependent variables

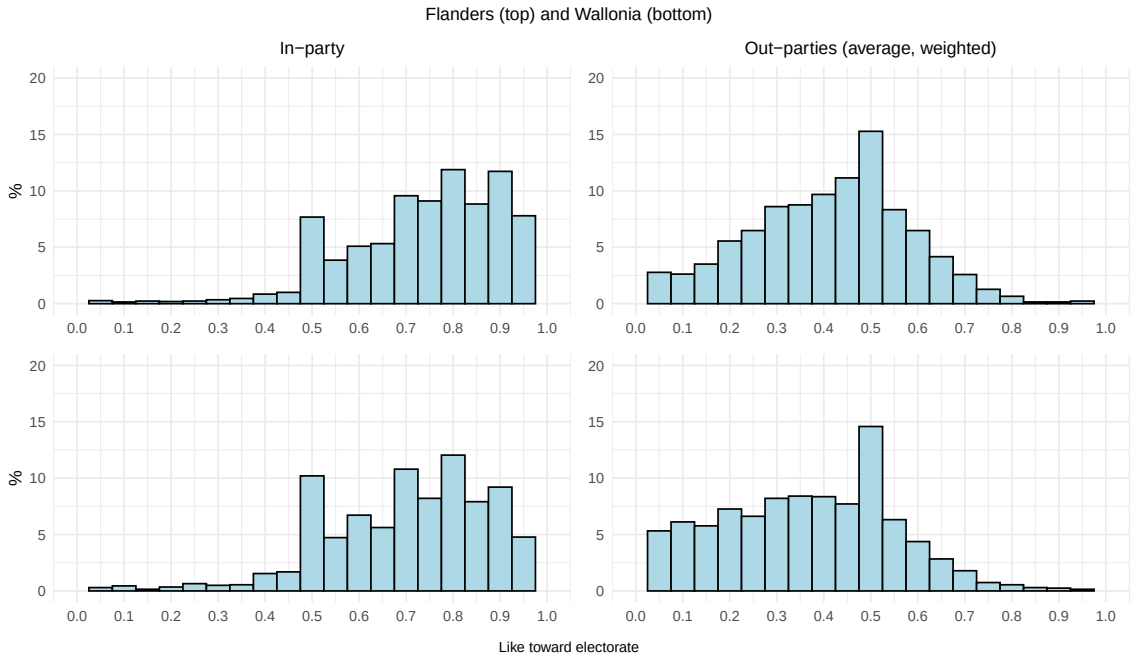
To measure in-party and out-party sympathy, we rely on feeling thermometers, which are widely used and validated tools that effectively capture levels of like and dislike (Gidron, Sheffer, & Mor, 2022b). Thermometer scores are particularly common in research on affective polarization in multiparty systems (Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021). We focus on two main dependent variables: level of sympathy toward the electorate of the in-party and toward the electorates of the 6 out-parties in Flanders and Wallonia respectively. We assign the in-party through vote intention for the Federal election. The second dependent variable reflects respondents' sympathy toward the electorates of parties they do not intend to vote for. Each respondent is assigned 6 separate scores, which we use as dependent variables in a multilevel model (see Methods section).

We assign the in-party based on vote intention, rather than partisanship. We argue that using partisanship to define the in-party would be too restrictive in our case, as more than 50 percent of voters in Belgium do not declare a partisan identity, a pattern consistent with other European countries. Relying on partisanship to assign in-parties would thus exclude a significant portion of respondents from the analysis. In contrast, vote intention is a more suitable measure in Belgium's multiparty context,

where elections are party-centred, unlike the candidate-centred politics of the US (Thomassen & Rosema, 2009). Nonetheless, we test additional operationalisations of the in-party in our robustness checks (section 5), and these alternative measures do not substantially alter our findings.

The sympathy scores are based on a question asking respondents to evaluate supporters of each party on a scale ranging from 0 to 100[1], with higher values indicating higher levels of sympathy. These scores have been rescaled to range from 0 to 1 for the analysis. Figure 3.1 displays the distribution of affect toward the in-party electorate and the average affect toward out-parties (weighted for party shares) in both regions. Sympathy toward the in-party is clearly left-skewed, with respondents expressing positive affect toward their in-party electorate. Conversely, affect toward out-party electorates is much more negative, with most values falling below 0.5. There are no substantial differences between the two regions in these descriptive scores.

Figure 3.1: Distribution of sympathy toward electorates.



[1]Original question wording: "Could you use the scale below to indicate how you feel about the following groups?", with the groups being '<party> sympathisers' for each party. The proposed scale ranged from 0 to 100, where 0-49=Not very favourable; 50=Neutral; and 51-100=Favourable. Each respondent located the seven parties from their respective region (Flanders or Wallonia) on the scale.

3.3.3 Independent variables

We measure party-voter policy congruence based on the distance between a respondent's self-placement on specific issues and the actual placements of the in- and out-parties on these issues. Respondents were asked to position themselves on 18 issue statements included in a Voting Advice Application (VAA), which covered important political issues in Belgium at the time of the 2019 election (Talukder et al., 2021, see Appendix 3.A.1 for full list of statements). The VAA also allowed us to determine the position of the parties on these issues. While voters could position themselves on a 4-point Likert scale on each statement (ranging from "agree completely" to "disagree completely"), party positions were dichotomous ("in favour" or "against").

To construct the party-voter congruence measure, we first subtracted the party's position from the voter's position for each statement and then calculated the mean of these values. Since the parties' responses are dichotomous compared to the respondents' 4-point Likert scale, there are 4 potential congruence outcomes: 0 (no congruence), 0.25 (low congruence), 0.75 (high congruence), and 1 (full congruence). For example, if a voter agrees somewhat with a statement and Party X disagrees and Party Y agrees, the congruence scores for that issue would be 0.25 for party X and 0.75 for Party Y. We admit that this, however, might risk underestimating (in)congruence for moderate voters who might be more likely to avoid extreme positions on issues. As a robustness check, we therefore also construct a measure of congruence where we collapse respondents' answers into a dichotomous measure comparable to the party positions. However, we find little differences in the distribution of the congruence measures (Table 3.3) as well as when we use them interchangeably in the regression models.

Although we cannot entirely rule out that congruence is influenced by partisan motivated reasoning (Bolsen et al., 2014), we believe that this mechanism is somewhat mitigated by the large range of statements included in our policy congruence measure. The range covers both high-salience and lower-salience issues that are less directly associated with specific parties. Furthermore, respondents were unable to retrieve party positions within the survey environment. As a result, we argue that this approach

Table 3.3: Summary statistics of core variables

(a) Flanders

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Like towards in-party	0.77	0.18	0.01	1	2,592
Like towards out-party (average, weighted)	0.41	0.17	0	1	2,592
Congruence in-party	0.55	0.11	0.19	0.93	2,592
Collapsed congruence in-party	0.56	0.14	0.11	1	2,592
Congruence out-party (most incong.)	0.37	0.08	0.06	0.54	2,592
Collapsed congruence out-party (most incong.)	0.33	0.09	0	0.56	2,592

(b) Wallonia

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Like towards in-party	0.74	0.19	0	1	2,010
Like towards out-party (average, weighted)	0.35	0.19	0	1	2,010
Congruence in-party	0.58	0.10	0.32	0.92	2,010
Collapsed congruence in-party	0.60	0.13	0.22	0.94	2,010
Congruence out-party (most incongruent)	0.44	0.06	0.18	0.64	2,010
Collapsed congruence out-party (most incong.)	0.42	0.08	0.11	0.67	2,010

moves beyond the simple left-right scale or a limited selection of salient policy issues, offering a more nuanced understanding of how policy differences impact horizontal affective polarization in multiparty systems.

We thus have a party-voter congruence score for each respondent across all parties in the system (7 parties per respondent in both regions). This score corresponds to the mean congruence across all issue statements. In-party congruence is the mean congruence on all statements with the party that a respondent intends to vote for. Out-party congruence is the mean congruence for each of the out-parties. While the theoretical range of congruence values is 0 (full incongruence) to 1 (full congruence), respondents always exhibit some level of congruence and incongruence with each party (see Table 3.3).

To assess the effect of policy congruence on affective polarization, we also control for other factors: political extremism (calculated as the squared root of the squared difference between a respondent's left-right self-placement and the average placement), political interest, left-right placement (all recoded to range from 0 to 1), gender, age, and education.

3.3.4 Methods

We present two main sets of models to differentiate between the two aspects of affective polarization: like toward in-party voters and like toward the out-party voters. The first set of models takes sympathy toward the in-party voters as the dependent variable. Since respondents only have one in-party, the regression models include congruence with the in-party and congruence with the least congruent out-party. We expect that sympathy toward in-party voters particularly increases when there is one highly incongruent out-party. This dynamic accentuates the demarcation of the out-group. Indeed, affective polarization in multiparty systems is often divided into distinct ideological blocs (Bantel, 2023; Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021). A congruence score that includes all out-parties may include congruence with like-minded parties, thereby deflating the ideological distances. Such an approach could therefore obscure the importance of a single important competitor during the election.

To explain out-party sympathy, we follow the approach of van Erkel and Turkenburg (2022), and employ multilevel regression models to regress each out-party like score on the corresponding level of congruence. We create 7 variables for the like scores toward all party electorates, excluding respondents who belong to the same party electorate for each variable. Thus, each respondent in Flanders and Wallonia expresses their like score toward 6 out-party electorates. We nest these different responses (level 1) within respondents (level 2) to account for correlated error terms that potentially result in false positives. Specifically, we employ a random intercepts model, where intercepts of the different clusters (respondents) are allowed to vary. In addition to out-party congruence, this model also accounts for in-party congruence, which does not vary within respondents and is included at level 2.

3.4 Results

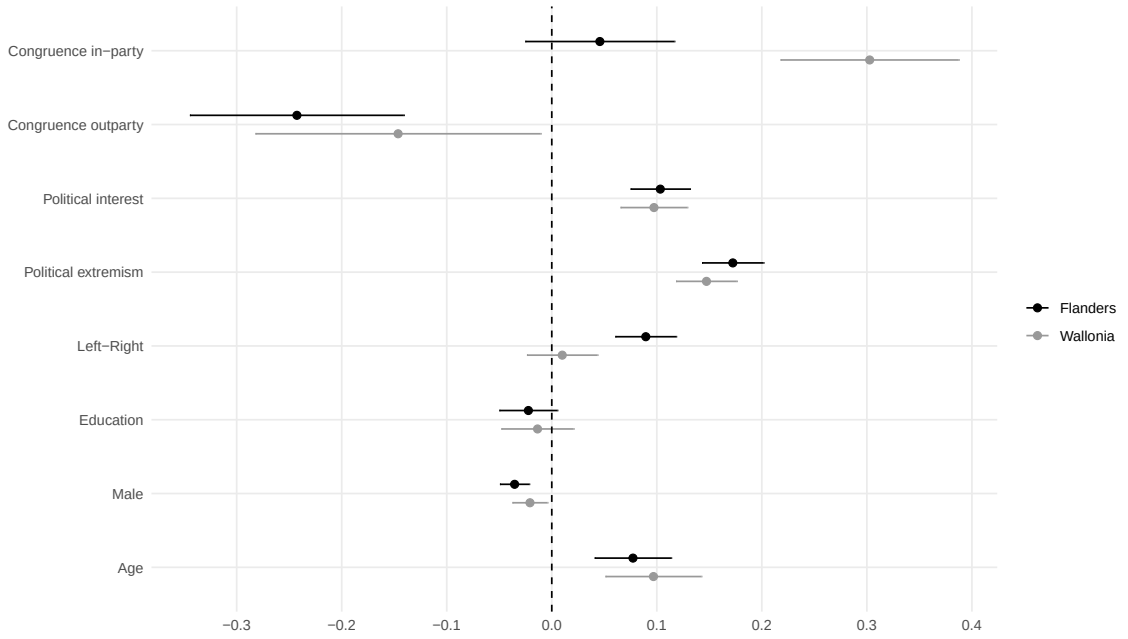
To test our hypotheses, we begin by examining the effects of in-party and out-party congruence on affect toward in-party voters (H1a and H1b). Figure 3.2 summarizes the

results of the linear regression models in both Belgian regions (for the full regression tables, see Appendix 3.B).

In-party congruence indeed has the expected positive association with affect toward in-party voters in both Flanders and Wallonia. This suggests that voters who are more aligned with their party on a range of policy issues exhibit higher levels of affect toward voters of the same party compared to voters with lower levels of policy congruence. However, the variable only reaches statistical significance in Wallonia, where the effect is substantial. Among the least-congruent 10 percent of voters, agreement with their party averages 43 percent of the issues, whereas the most-congruent 10 percent align with their party on 77 percent of the issues. All else being equal, moving from the least to the most congruent position increases in-party sympathy by more than 10 points on the thermometer scale.

Notably, even after controlling for left-right self-placement, policy congruence remains a significant predictor of sympathy toward in-party voters. This indicates that among

Figure 3.2: Sympathy toward in-party voters



Note: Regression output of linear regression models, including 95% confidence intervals. Full regression results can be found in Table 3.B.1 in the Appendix.

voters with the same ideological position, differences in policy congruence can still explain variation in their levels of sympathy. This underscores our interpretation that solely looking at ideological differences in multiparty systems might miss part of the picture in explaining sympathy toward other voters.

In both regions, higher congruence with the main out-party reduces affect toward in-party voters, confirming Hypothesis 1b. In other words, when voters strongly disagree in terms of policy preferences with the out-party, their sympathy toward other in-party voters is higher. We interpret this as a demarcation effect: if one competitor is clearly different, attachment to one's own group increases as the demarcation of the out-group becomes more accentuated. This effect is significant in both regions, although it is stronger in Flanders than in Wallonia.

Since only looking at the most incongruent out-party simplifies the structure of a multiparty system, we also look at the standard deviation of congruence with all out-parties per respondent (Appendix 3.C.1). This measure captures the variation in actual ideological distances between the respondent and all out-parties, reflecting the structural heterogeneity of the political landscape. The idea is that respondents facing a more diverse set of out-party positions may feel more attached to the in-group. We therefore replace the most incongruent out-party measure with this measure, and indeed confirm that this has a strong positive relationship with in-party sympathy.

Thus, liking the voters of one's own party is not solely a matter of being congruent with the party's policy positions, but also depends on how distanced one is from other parties' positions. This aligns with literature on negative partisanship, which has shown that political behaviour is not just influenced by support for a party, but also – or even solely – by the dislike of one of the parties that one is not voting for (Bankert, 2021; Mayer, 2017).

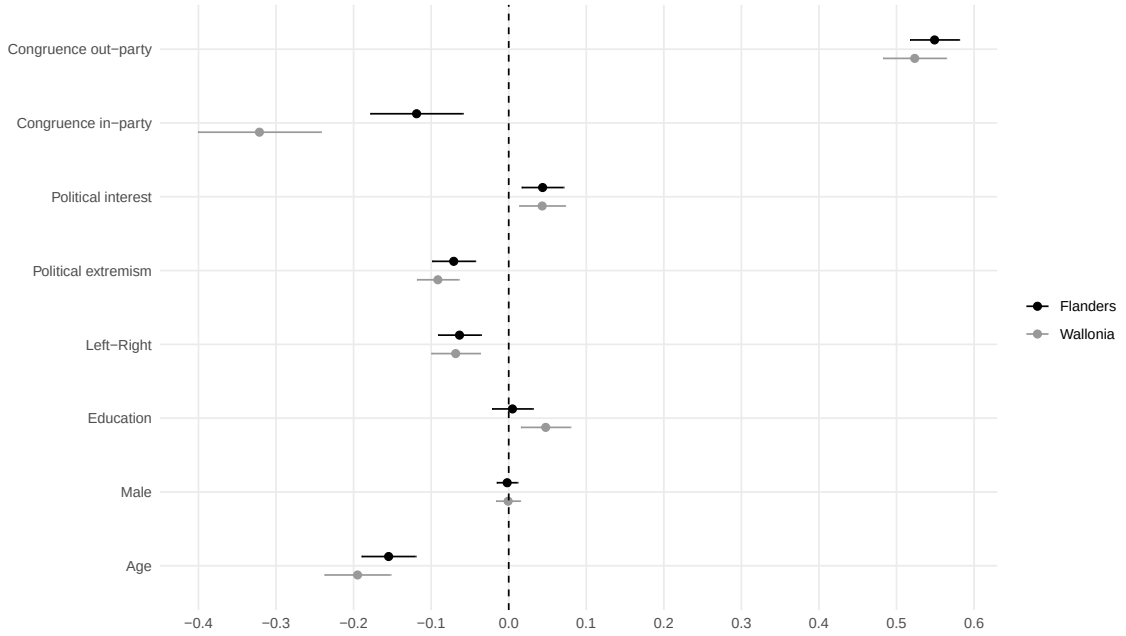
In conclusion, we find mixed evidence for Hypothesis 1a and strong support for Hypothesis 1b. The difference between the regions seems largely attributed to the presence and absence of the populist radical right. In Flanders, congruence with the in-party is also significantly related to sympathy for in-party voters if the variable for

the most incongruent out-party is not included. Once this variable is included, the relationship remains positive, but significance collapses. While aligning with one's in-party matters more in Wallonia, in Flanders, affect toward the in-party depends more on the (in)congruence with one of the competitors. Although the party offer in both systems is large, the quality of the offer is larger in Flanders, with more polarization through successful radical right and regionalist parties. As a result, how voters align with these out-parties seems to matter more for how they perceive in-party voters.

Figure 3.3 shows the results of the multilevel regression models testing the relationship between out-party and in-party policy congruence and sympathy toward out-party voters. To test the expectation that higher policy congruence with one of the out-parties increases sympathy toward its electorate, the multilevel models regress affect toward each out-party electorate on the level of congruence with the respective party (rather than focusing only on the most incongruent out-party). Confirming H2a, in both Flanders and Wallonia, respondents show greater affect to electorates of parties they (strongly) agree with, despite not voting for them. To interpret the coefficients more substantively: an increase in congruence by 10 percentage points is associated with a more than 5-point increase in sympathy on the like-dislike scale (0-100). The reversed relation also holds: voters become increasingly hostile toward voters of other parties as they disagree more with those parties. This confirms earlier work and shows that voters of other parties in multiparty systems do not necessarily receive hostility, but that it is dependent on how distant the party is positioned from a voter (Comellas Bonsfills, 2022).

Furthermore, Figure 3.3 also shows the influence of in-party congruence on attitudes toward out-party voters. Higher congruence with the in-party is associated with lower sympathy toward out-party voters, regardless of how incongruent a voter is with these parties, as hypothesized (H2b). Similar to affect toward in-party voters, sympathy for out-parties voters is explained by congruence with both one's own party and, partially, other parties. As in previous findings, in-party congruence matters more in Wallonia than in Flanders. This supports our interpretation of the party system dynamics in the two regions, which may explain the asymmetrical results. In other words, the presence of the radical right in Flanders indeed decreases the importance of in-party

Figure 3.3: Sympathy toward out-party voters



Note: Regression output of multilevel regression models, including 95% confidence intervals. Full regression results can be found in 3.B.2 in the Appendix.

alignment for most voters in their assessment of other party electorates.

3.5 Robustness checks

We perform several additional analyses to ensure that our findings are robust (Appendix 3.C). First, we employ four alternative operationalisations for the in-party. To address potential split-ticket voting, we assign the in-party by the intended regional vote instead of the federal one (3.C.2). Regarding strategic voters, rather than looking at vote choice we assign voters to an in-party based on the highest sympathy given to one of the electorates (in case of a tie, they were excluded from the sample; 3.C.3). We also use a more stringent in-party test: voters are only categorized into a party group if they both intend to vote for the party in the federal election and give the electorate of the party a higher score than any other party electorate 3.C.4. To remedy the concern with the timing of the pre-electoral wave, we run the same

models with the second post-election wave where the in-party is assigned by actual federal vote choice (3.C.5).

We find very robust and consistent results. The only difference we encounter is that in the post-election wave (3.C.5), the significant effect of congruence with the out-party on like toward the own electorate becomes insignificant in Wallonia, although the coefficient remains large and negative. This effect was already a borderline case in the main analysis, and of less importance than it is in Flanders. This finding strengthens our interpretation that, because of the absence of the radical right in Wallonia, out-party congruence is less relevant than in Flanders.

Finally, while voters were able to position themselves on a 4-point Likert scale for each issue statement of the VAA, for parties we only know whether they are in favour or against. To use a more rigorous test, we collapse respondents also into a dichotomous categorization, merging those tending to disagree and fully disagreeing as well as those tending to agree and fully agreeing (3.C.6). We also focus solely on issues salient to voters (3.C.7), as we know that issue salience influences voting behaviour (Walgrave & Lefevere, 2013) and affective polarization (Han, 2024). Again, for both additional analyses, the only difference we find is the collapse of significance of out-party congruence on like toward the own electorate in Wallonia, although it always remains negative (as hypothesized). We also run similar models with party (3.C.8) and respondent (3.C.9) fixed effects, which again yielded similar results.

3.6 Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined how individual-level policy congruence between voters and parties drives horizontal affective polarization in a multiparty system. Using survey data combined to party positions extracted from a VAA fielded around the 2019 Belgian federal elections, we created a novel measure of party-voter policy congruence. In this way, we moved beyond the classical measures of left-right identification or a handful of salient policy issues which suffer from signalling partisan identities.

We find that party-voter congruence has a large impact in predicting individual-level sympathy towards other voters, both from the same party and from other parties. Voters that are more in line with their own party tend to show greater affect toward their own electorate. At the same time, disagreement with other parties also makes voters more sympathetic toward their own group. Though we find some differences between the two regions of Flanders and Wallonia for the effects on the in-party – the presence of the radical right decreases its importance in Flanders – the results for sympathy toward voters of the other parties is robust in both regions. The more a voter disagrees with a party that they did not vote for, the more negative their attitudes become towards their voters. Still, this also has the important implication that voters tend to show less dislike toward voters of parties that are close to their own party in terms of policy offer. At the same time, congruence with the own party matters as well for sympathy toward other electorates: voters that are closely aligned with their own party tend to dislike voters of other parties more.

Recent scholarship focusing on the determinants of affective polarization has predominantly looked at the role of individual-level factors. A growing number of comparative studies have analysed macro-level factors, but these studies often restrict their analysis to institutional or socio-economic factors. This paper contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics behind affective polarization by linking individual-level factors such as policy preferences to the structure of the party system and how voters respond to it, through policy congruence. If good democratic representation decreases affective polarization, then striving for a better match between political offer and demand should also decrease the latter.

Our results suggest that actual differences in policy positions between voters and parties are important predictors of how voters sympathize with other voters – horizontal affective polarization. Voters agree or disagree with the position of certain parties, which has an impact on how they feel toward these parties' voters. The important implication of these findings is that policy overlap between parties is likely to increase affect between voters. In a multiparty system, such overlap is very likely, as parties cannot be distinct on each and every policy that is presented to them. At the same time, if policies become increasingly distinct, this can potentially lead to higher lev-

els of affective polarization, especially when parties and voters align closely in their preferences.

These results also point to a conditional effect of the party system structure. The advantage of looking at the Belgian case is that we contrasted our findings in two regions characterized by a different party system structure, most significantly characterized by the presence (Flanders) and absence (Wallonia) of the radical right. We have seen that congruence with the impact of congruence with the in-party on sympathy with other voters reduces as congruence with out-parties is taken into account, most likely because of stronger incongruence due to the presence of the radical right. Although more research into other cases is desired, we would expect that this key difference between the two regions defines how these mechanisms translate to other contexts with or without radical right parties.

Our results highlight how voters make assessments about other party supporters based on how their own policy preferences align with the entire party offer, in a dynamic way. The positive relationship between policy congruence with an out-party and out-party voters is stronger as policy congruence with the in-party decreases, which is especially marked in systems with a more limited party offer like in Wallonia. These findings call for a more in-depth and nuanced analysis of the relationship between congruence and affective polarization that would expand to other types of multiparty settings.

The cross-sectional nature of the survey poses some limitations to this study, particularly with regards to causal claims. In theory, voters may align themselves with their party through a process of motivated reasoning. The test of alternative operationalisation of the in-party and the large set of policy issues in the VAA partially mitigate this issue. However, we cannot fully exclude the possibility of reversed causality, particularly for strong partisans. Furthermore, although we found important variations between Flanders and Wallonia driven by the difference in the structure of party competition, our research design did not allow us to systematically study differences at the party system level, such as its fragmentation or proportionality. We have presented preliminary evidence that the offer of the party system matters, but more (system-

atic cross-country) research is needed to fully grasp how party system features drive affective polarization in multiparty systems.

Finally, another avenue for future research would be to focus on the role of issue ownership. Previous research has revealed that issue ownership – the view of the public that a certain party is most competent in handling a specific issue – influences political behaviour (Walgrave et al., 2015), in particular when that issue is salient (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008). It would be interesting to examine, for example, whether disagreement on a salient issue owned by an out-party leads to a greater decrease in sympathy towards its electorate in comparison to disagreement on a non-owned issue.

Appendix

3.A Details on the data

3.A.1 VAA issue statements (translated from Dutch and French)

Table 3.A.1: VAA issue statements

1	Hosting transit migrants must be a punishable offence.
2	Situation tests must be put in place to detect discrimination in recruitment.
3	Newcomers must first pass an exam on European values before they can acquire Belgian nationality.
4	If the request for asylum of families with children is rejected, these families can be placed in detention pending their repatriation.
5	Commercial vehicles that run on petrol or diesel must be banned before 2024.
6	The VAT on electricity must be reduced from 21% to 6%.
7	Flying should become more expensive by taxing tickets.
8	Nuclear power plants must remain operational after 2025.
9	When you drive, you may not have consumed any alcohol at all.
10	Even after 12 weeks of pregnancy, abortion should still be allowed.
11	Sperm donation can no longer be done anonymously.
12	Large wealth assets should be taxed more.
13	Wages must no longer be automatically adjusted to price indexes.
14	Fingerprints of all citizens must be kept in a central database.
15	Shops must be able to choose when to do sales.
16	There must be a minimum pension of at least €1,500 per month.
17	The government should be composed of an equal number of men and women.
18	Important political decisions must be left to citizens via a referendum.

3.A.2 Descriptive statistics

Table 3.A.2: Flanders

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Like toward same electorate	2,592	0.77	0.180	0.01	1
Like toward other electorates (average, weighted)	2,592	0.41	0.17	0	1
Congruence in-party	2,592	0.55	0.11	0.19	0.93
Congruence out-party (most incongruent)	2,592	0.37	0.08	0.06	0.54
Congruence out-parties (average, weighted)	2,592	0.49	0.04	0.34	0.62
Age	2,592	51.04	17.15	18	91
Male	2,592	0.59	0.49	0	1
Education	2,592	3.50	0.95	1	5
Left-Right self-placement	2,592	5.72	2.34	0	10
Political extremism	2,592	1.91	1.36	0.38	5.62
Political interest	2,592	6.27	2.52	0	10

Table 3.A.3: Wallonia

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Like toward same electorate	2,010	0.74	0.19	0	1
Like toward other electorates (average, weighted)	2,010	0.35	0.19	0	1
Congruence in-party	2,010	0.58	0.10	0.32	0.92
Congruence out-party (most incongruent)	2,010	0.44	0.06	0.18	0.64
Congruence out-parties (average, weighted)	2,010	0.56	0.07	0.28	0.87
Age	2,010	48.90	16.25	18	88
Male	2,010	0.53	0.50	0	1
Education	2,010	3.56	0.93	1	5
Left-Right self-placement	2,010	4.89	2.56	0	10
Political extremism	2,010	2.00	1.59	0.04	5.04
Political interest	2,010	5.74	2.72	0	10

3.B Regression results

3.B.1 Figure 3.2

Table 3.B.1: In-party sympathy

	Flanders	Wallonia
	(1)	(2)
Congruence in-party	0.046	0.303***
	(0.036)	(0.043)
Congruence out-party	−0.243***	−0.146*
	(0.052)	(0.069)
Political interest	0.103***	0.097***
	(0.014)	(0.016)
Political extremism	0.172***	0.147***
	(0.015)	(0.015)
Left-Right	0.090***	0.010
	(0.015)	(0.017)
Education	−0.022	−0.014
	(0.014)	(0.018)
Male	−0.035***	−0.021*
	(0.007)	(0.009)
Age	0.077***	0.097***
	(0.019)	(0.023)
Constant	0.671***	0.500***
	(0.038)	(0.048)
Observations	2,592	2,010
Adjusted R^2	0.141	0.132
Note:	*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001	

3.B.2 Figure 3.3

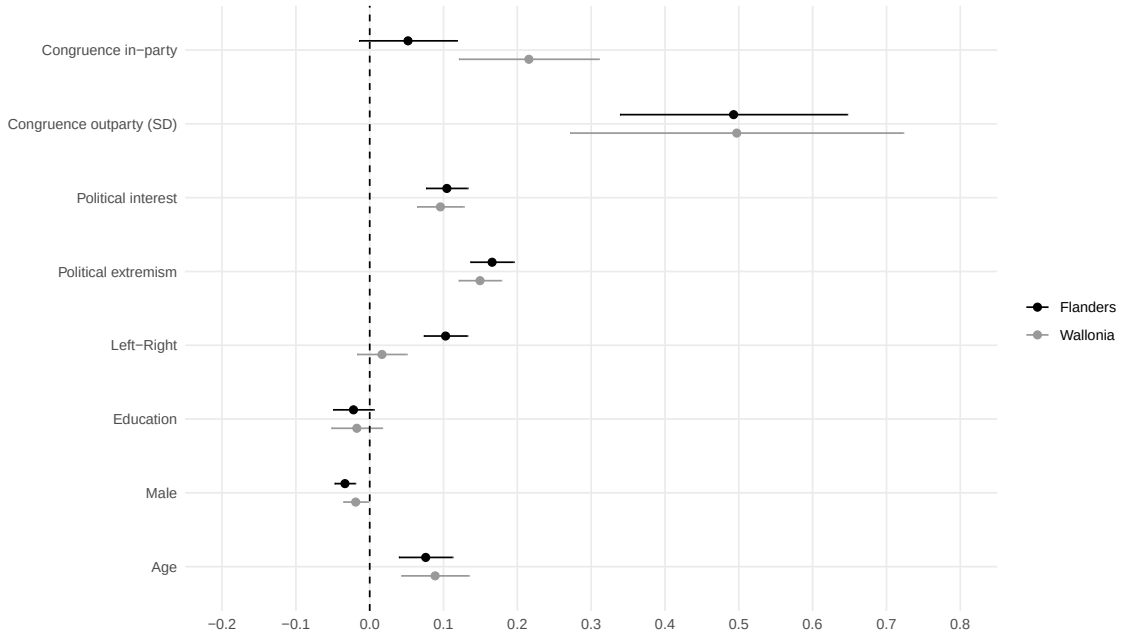
Table 3.B.2: Out-party sympathy

	Flanders	Wallonia
	(1)	(2)
Congruence out-party	0.549***	0.523***
	(0.016)	(0.021)
Congruence in-party	−0.119***	−0.321***
	(0.030)	(0.040)
Political interest	0.044**	0.043**
	(0.014)	(0.015)
Political extremism	−0.071***	−0.091***
	(0.014)	(0.014)
Left-Right	−0.063***	−0.068***
	(0.014)	(0.016)
Education	0.005	0.048**
	(0.013)	(0.016)
Male	−0.002	−0.001
	(0.007)	(0.008)
Age	−0.155***	−0.195***
	(0.018)	(0.022)
Constant	0.258***	0.328***
	(0.024)	(0.031)
Observations	15,552	12,060
Note:	*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001	

3.C Robustness checks

3.C.1 Out-party congruence based on standard deviation of all out-parties

Figure 3.C.1: Sympathy toward in-party electorate



3.C.2 In-party based on regional vote intention

Figure 3.C.2: Sympathy toward in-party electorate

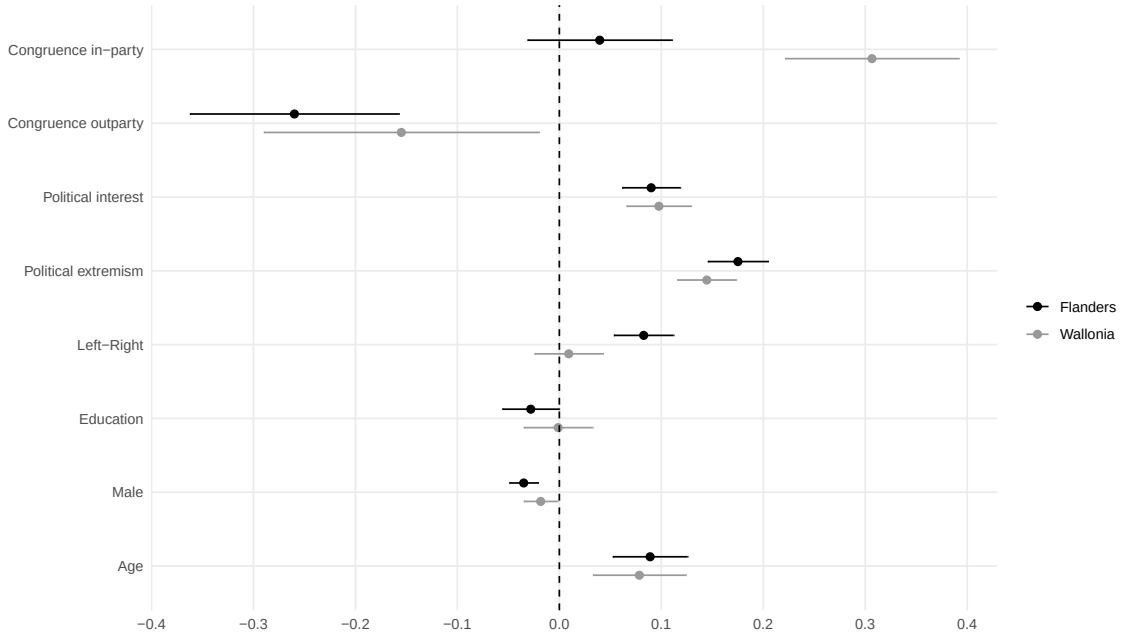
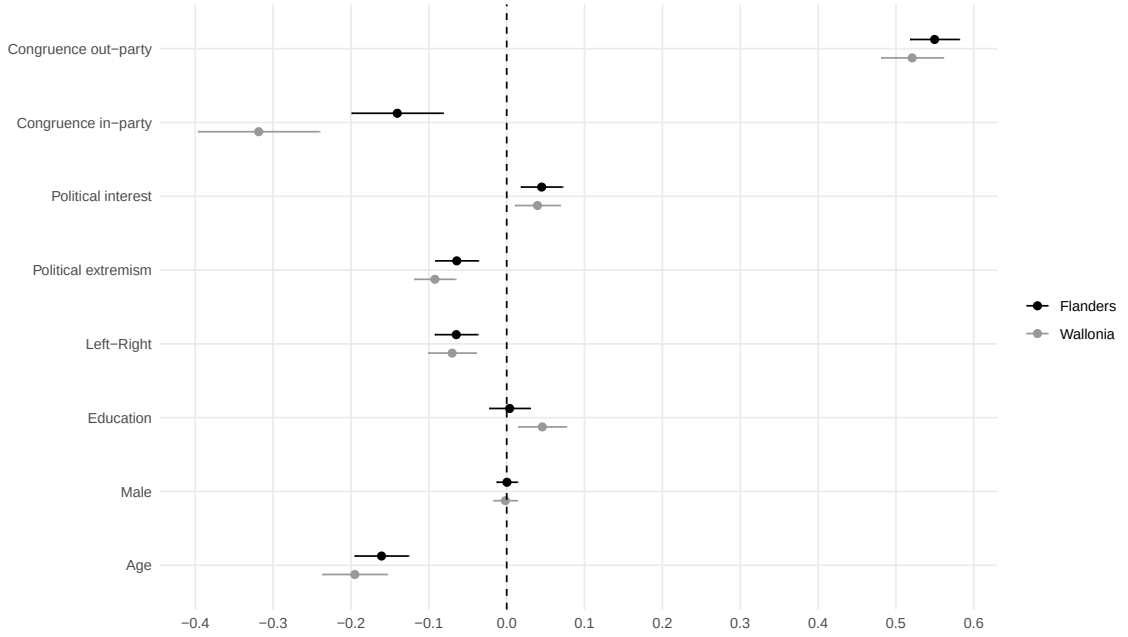


Figure 3.C.3: Sympathy toward out-party electorates



3.C.3 In-party based on highest sympathy score

Figure 3.C.4: Sympathy toward in-party electorate

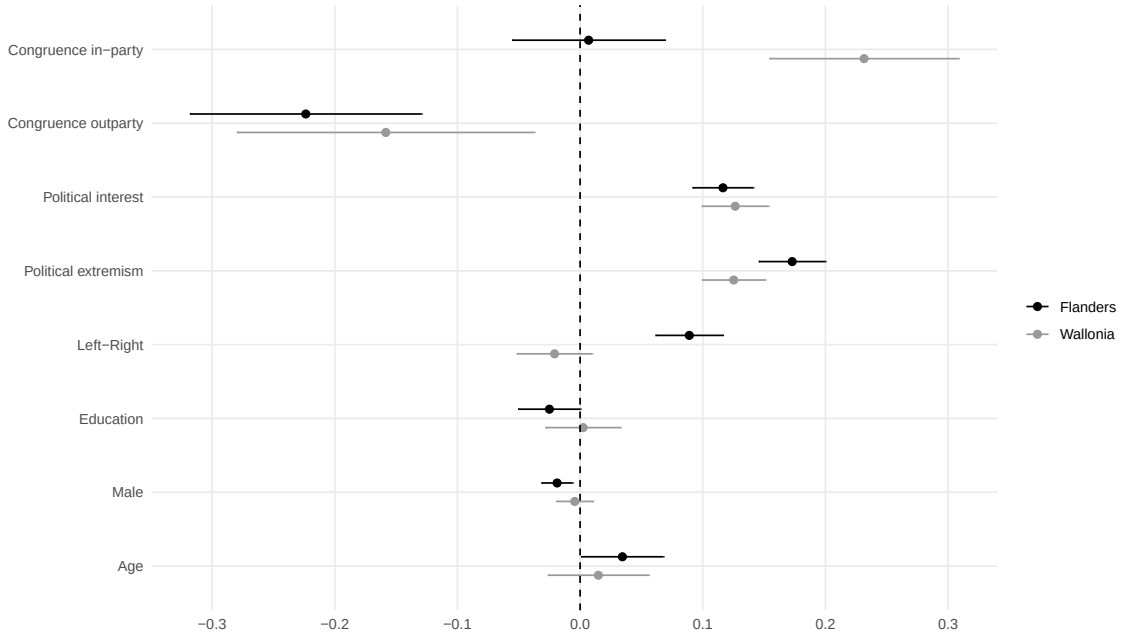
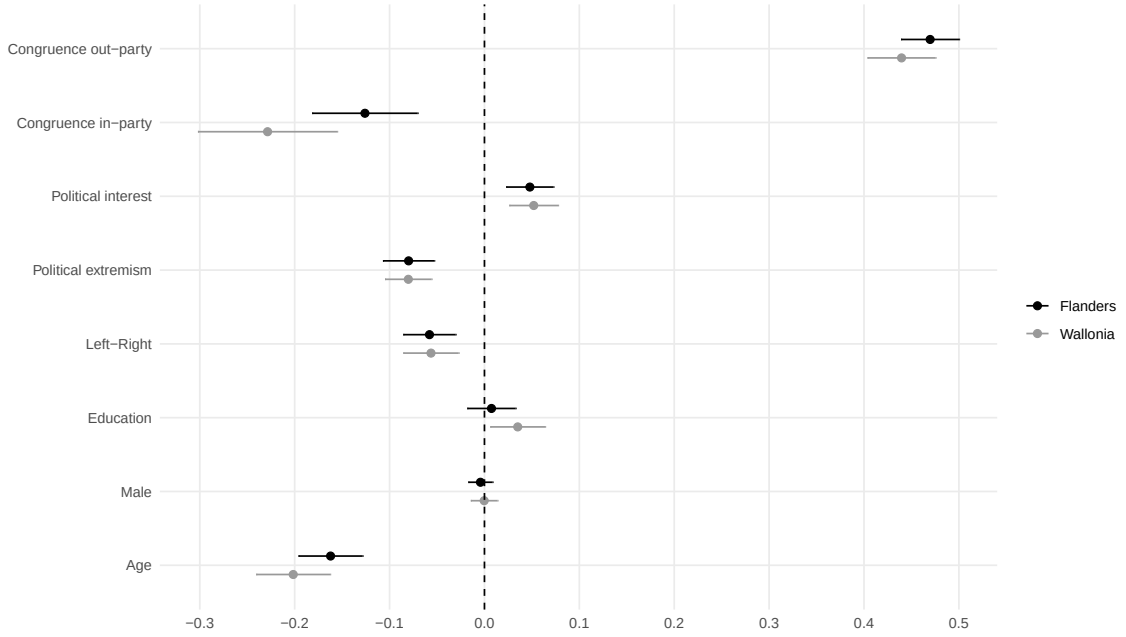


Figure 3.C.5: Sympathy toward out-party electorates



3.C.4 In-party based on highest sympathy and federal vote intention

Figure 3.C.6: Sympathy toward in-party electorate

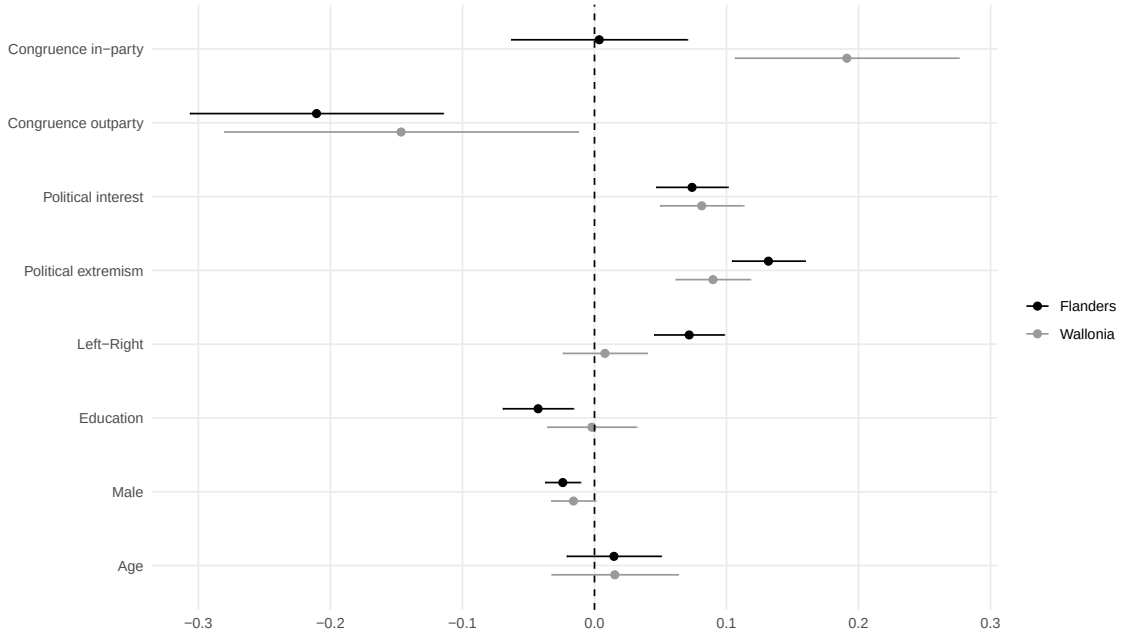
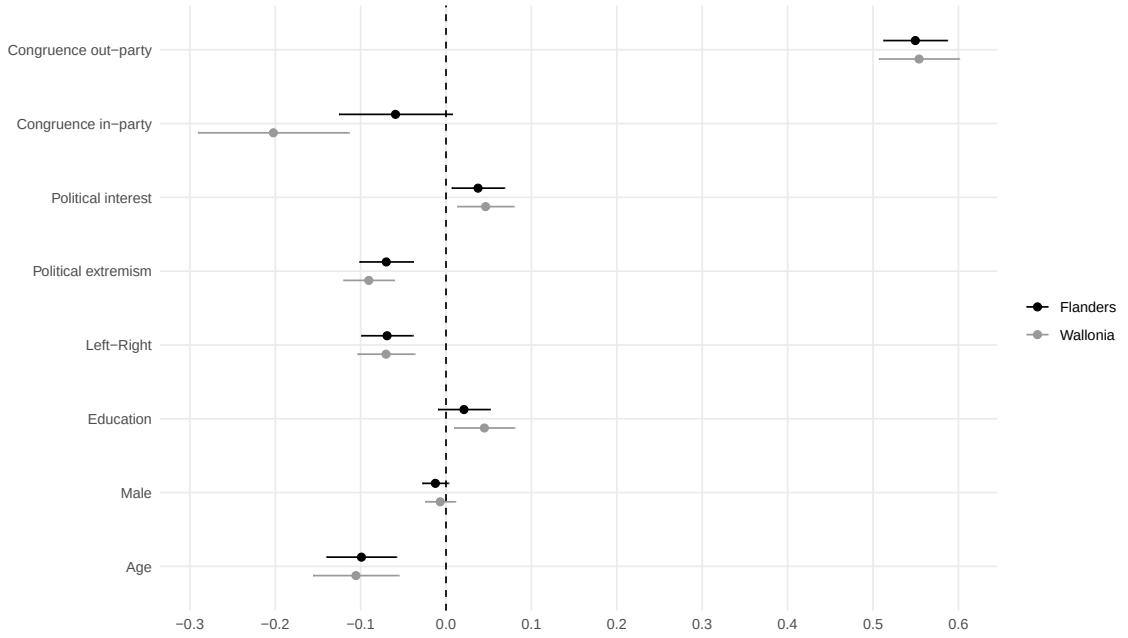


Figure 3.C.7: Sympathy toward out-party electorates



3.C.5 Wave 2 data

Figure 3.C.8: Sympathy toward in-party electorate

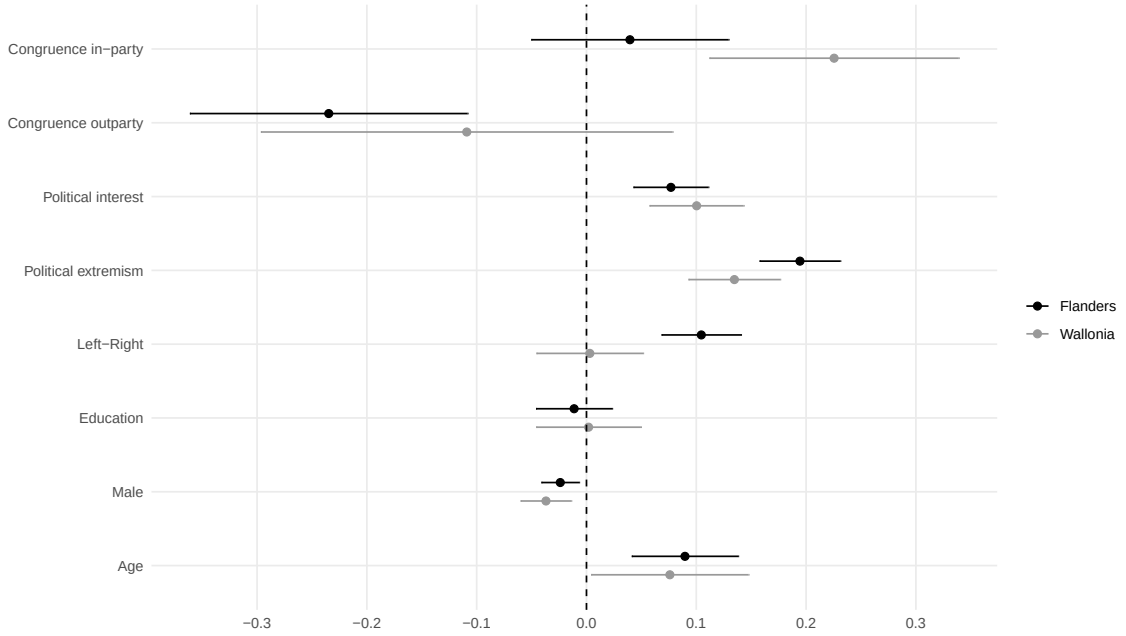
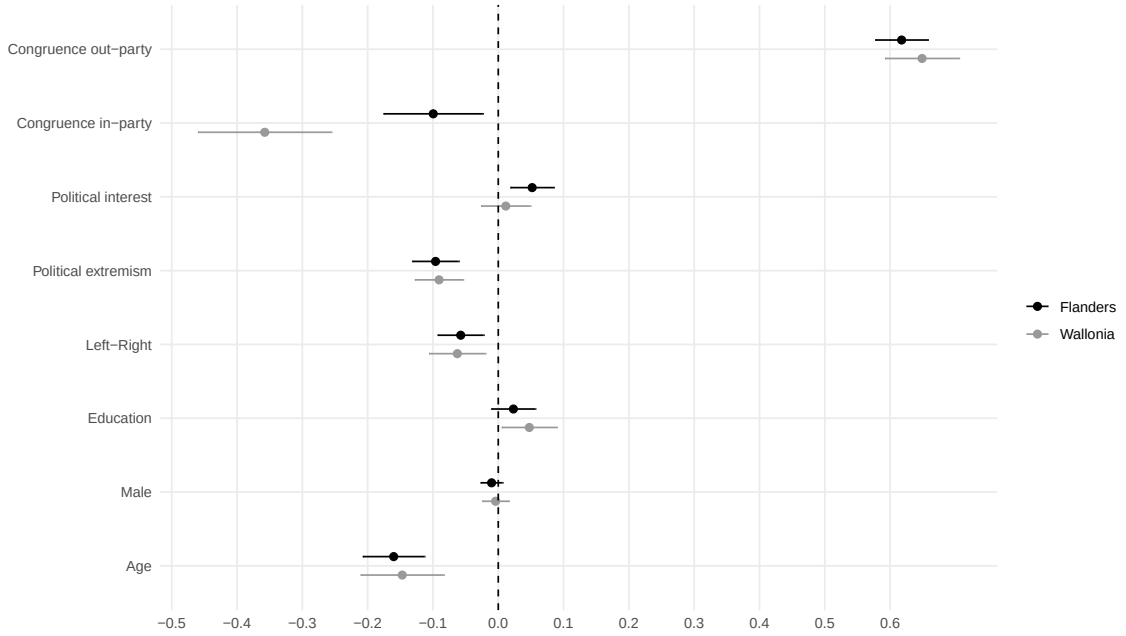


Figure 3.C.9: Sympathy toward out-party electorates



3.C.6 Collapsed congruence

Figure 3.C.10: Sympathy toward in-party electorate

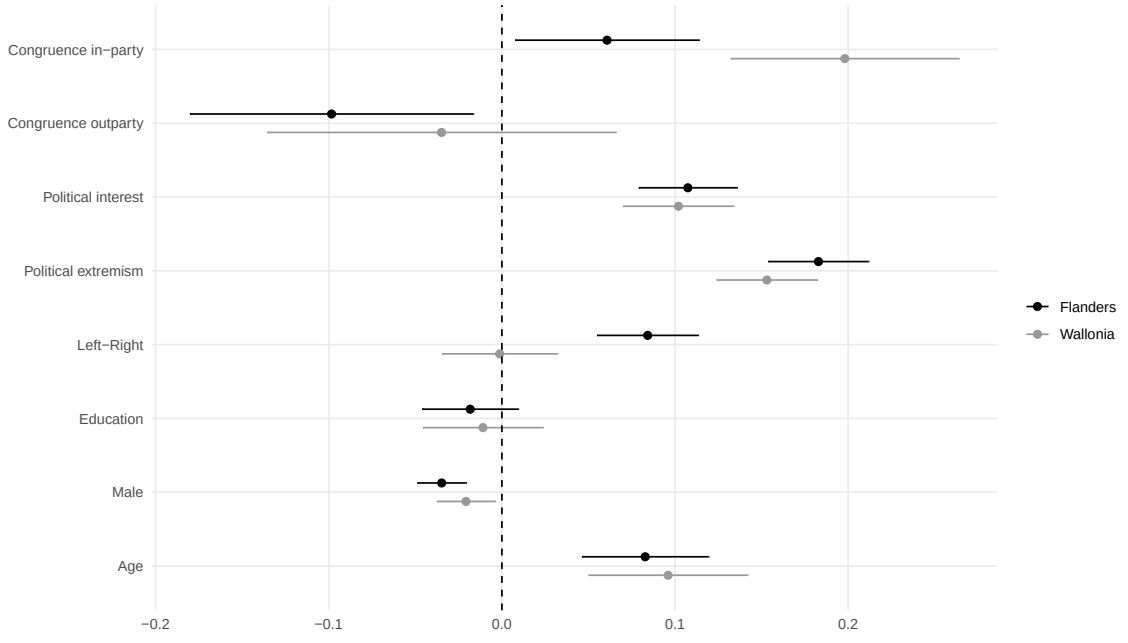
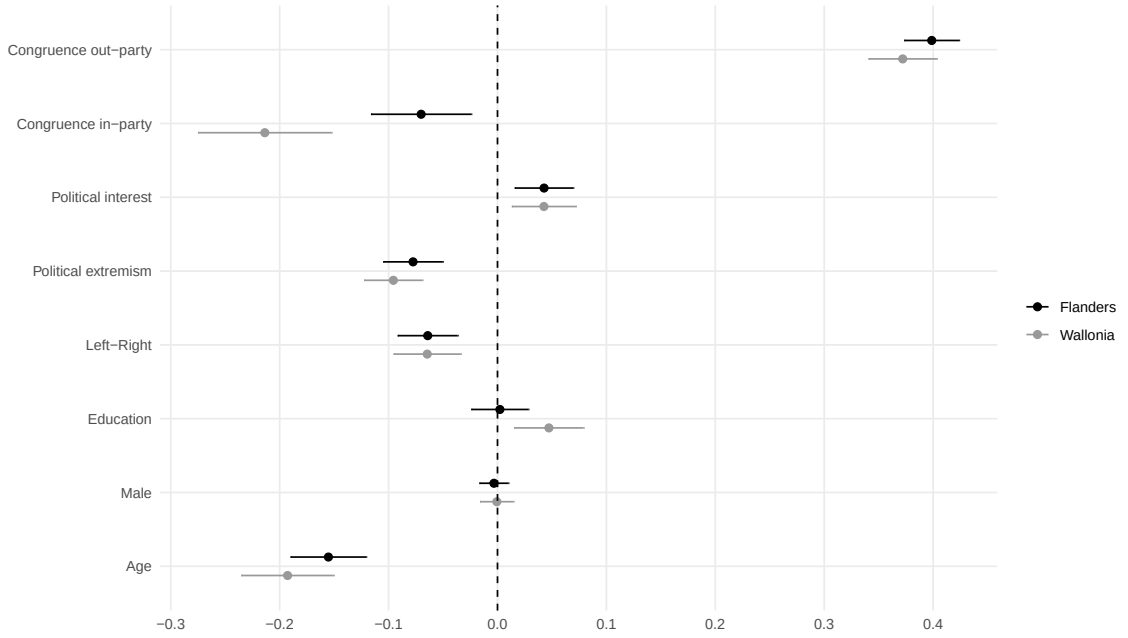


Figure 3.C.11: Sympathy toward out-party electorates



3.C.7 Salient issues

Figure 3.C.12: Sympathy toward in-party electorate

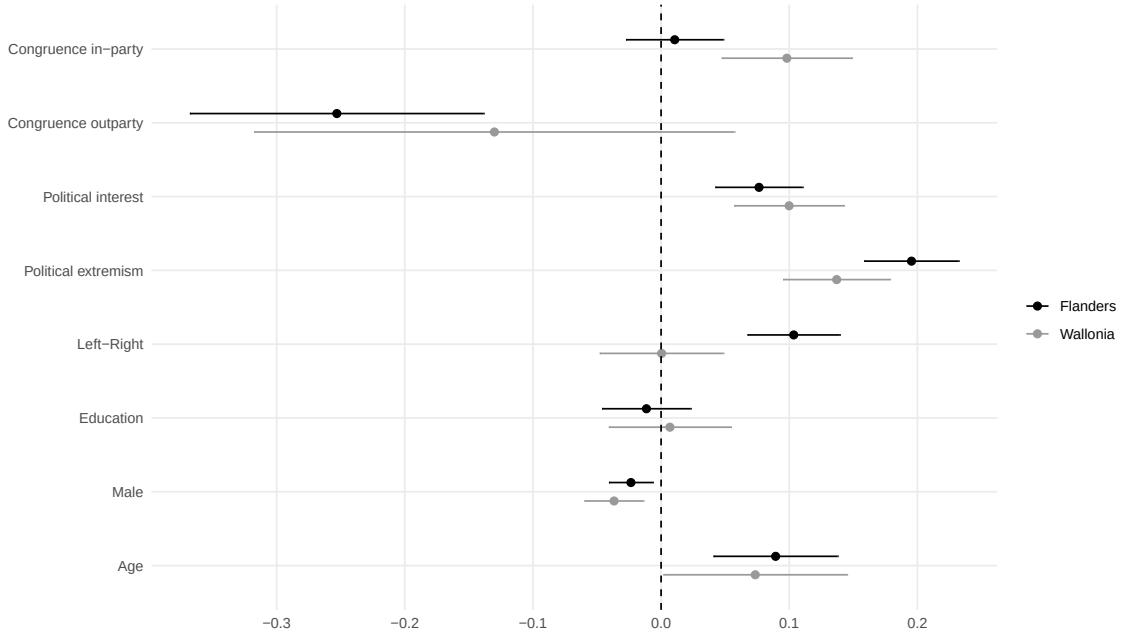
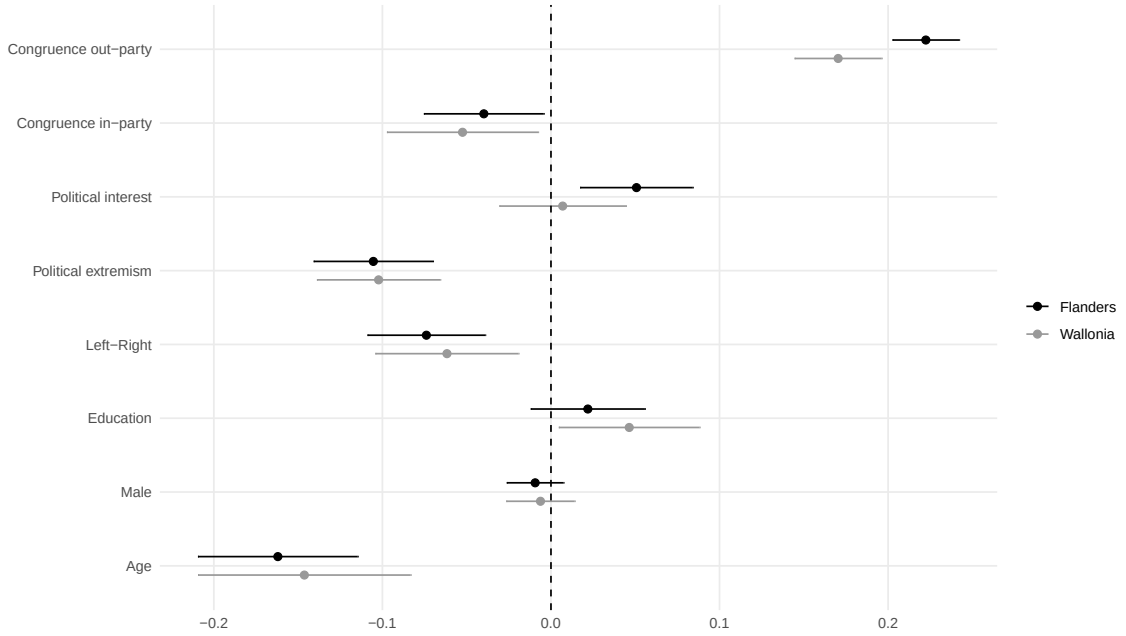


Figure 3.C.13: Sympathy toward out-party electorates



3.C.8 Party fixed effects

Figure 3.C.14: Sympathy toward in-party electorate

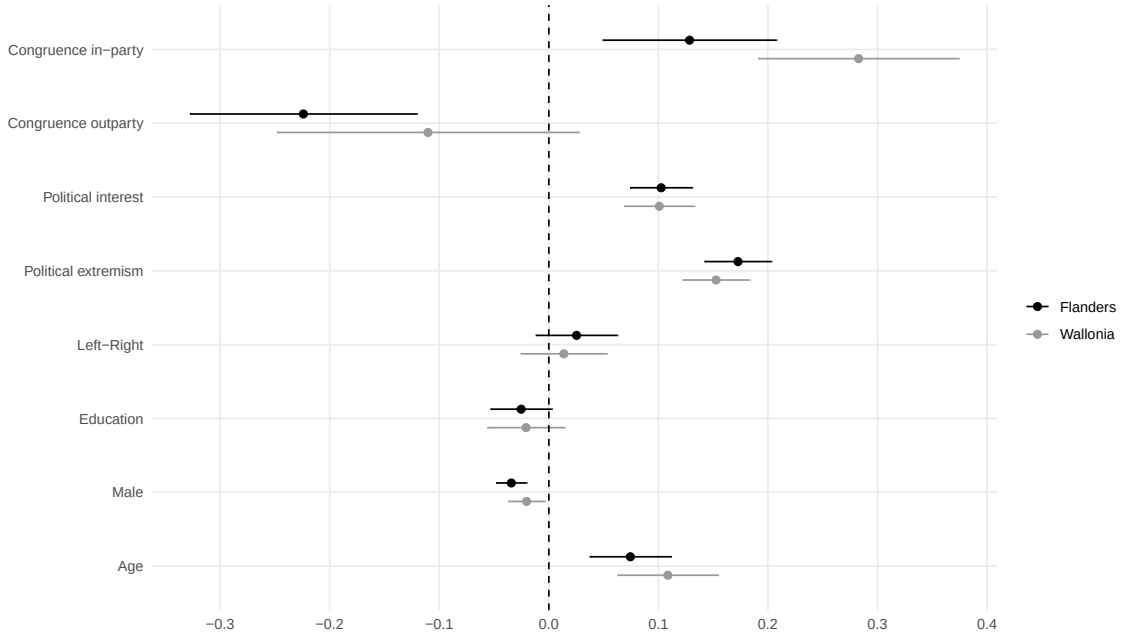
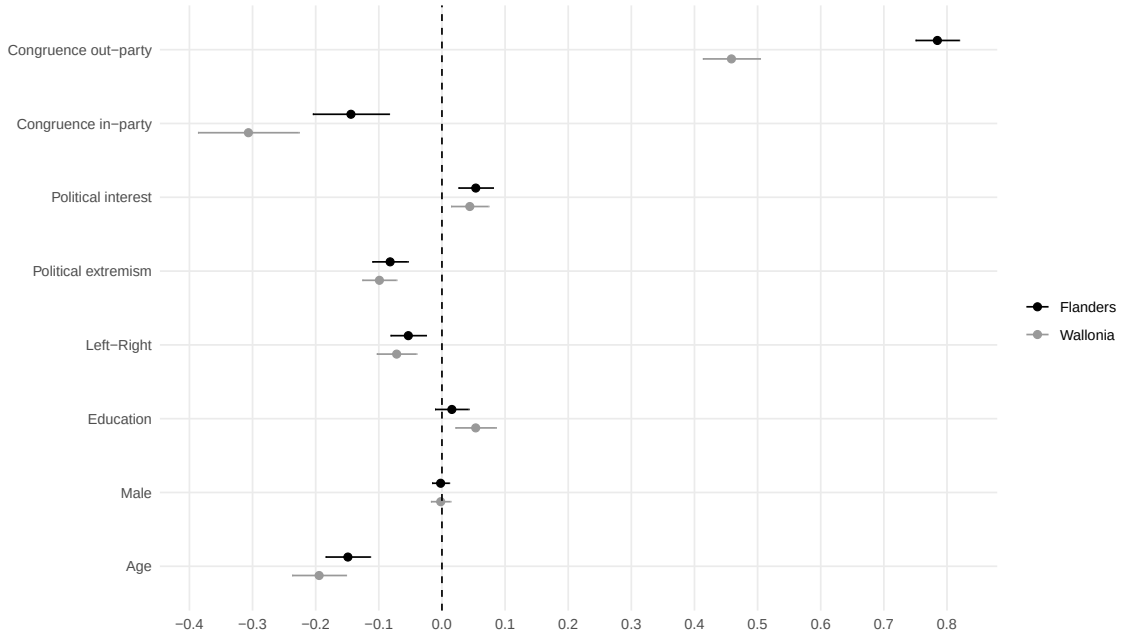
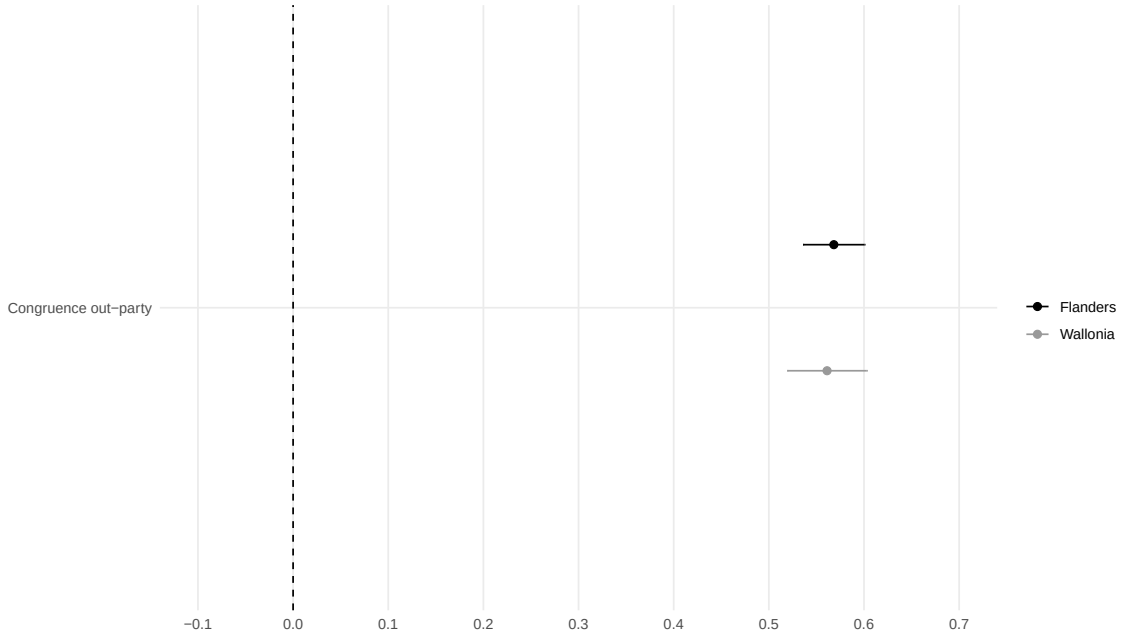


Figure 3.C.15: Sympathy toward out-party electorates



3.C.9 Respondent fixed effects

Figure 3.C.16: Sympathy toward out-party electorates



Chapter 4

Towards a Polarized Electorate? How Polarization Affects Turnout Decisions in the Belgian Context of Compulsory Voting

Abstract

Both ideological and affective polarization tend to increase turnout, but we know little about whether these mobilizing effects also hold among an electorate characterized by a history of compulsory voting. In fact, theory suggests that the effects of polarization might be suppressed in this context, for example because compulsory voting stimulates a civic duty to vote among the electorate. To address this question, we focus on turnout decisions in the context of compulsory voting in Belgium. We integrate three decades of election surveys in both Flanders and Wallonia and exploit a question about hypothetical willingness to vote in future elections in case compulsory voting would be abolished. We find that affective polarization increases the likelihood to mobilize voters in the case compulsory voting is replaced by voluntary voting. The effect of perceived ideological polarization is less evident. We discuss the implications of these findings, which are increasingly relevant considering the recent decision of the Flemish government to abolish compulsory voting at the local level.

This chapter is based on a paper co-authored with Elie Michel and is published in Politics of the Low Countries.

4.1 Introduction

Research on political behaviour gives enormous attention to the question of what compels citizens to turn out to vote in democratic elections (Blais, 2006; Blais & Carty, 1990; Blais & Dobrzynska, 1998; Crepaz, 1990; Frank & Martínez i Coma, 2023; R. W. Jackman, 1987; R. W. Jackman & Miller, 1995; Kostelka & Blais, 2021; Radcliff, 1992; Radcliff & Davis, 2000). This focus is largely grounded in normative concerns. Since elections are so instrumental for democracy by giving citizens a key instrument to influence policies and to find representation, it is of vital importance that turnout is high (Lijphart, 1997; Powell, 1982). Sufficiently high turnout is the condition for elections to produce governments that are representative of the people (Dahl, 1971; Pitkin, 1967).

Two of the most consistent determinants of voter turnout are polarization and compulsory voting regulations (Birch, 2009; Kostelka et al., 2022; Singh, 2021). Polarization drives voter turnout in two ways; either because ideological polarization increases the utility of voting (Dalton, 2008; Ellger, 2023; Stokes, 1963) or because affective polarization strengthens the emotional value that is attached to the outcome of the election (Harteveld & Wagner, 2022; Phillips, 2024; Serani, 2022; Ward & Tavits, 2019). Compulsory voting, meanwhile, drives turnout because it requires citizens by law to vote in an election (Birch, 2009; Dassonneville et al., 2023; Kostelka et al., 2022). Yet, we know little about how these two interact. That is, studies that examine the role of polarization in stimulating turnout often exclude compulsory voting countries (Ellger, 2023; Wessels & Schmitt, 2008). This is problematic, because the context of compulsory voting can influence political behaviour (Dassonneville et al., 2019; Singh, 2023), and it is often suggested to stimulate a civic duty to vote (Chapman, 2019; Feitosa et al., 2020; Quintelier et al., 2011). The impact of polarization on the motivation to vote among such an electorate might therefore be seriously suppressed.

Yet, testing the polarization-turnout mechanism in a context of compulsory voting is challenging, as both polarized and non-polarized are required to vote. Making a meaningful distinction between their turnout behaviours is therefore complicated. In this paper, we aim to overcome this issue. Relying on the Belgian case, we employ

a survey question that asks respondents to what extent they would still be willing to cast a vote in a hypothetical future scenario where compulsory voting is lifted. Accordingly, we examine whether polarization – both ideological and affective – has a positive impact on this voluntary voting intention. This allows us to detect whether polarization is also a driving force of turnout in a compulsory voting system, and offers some short-term insights about a potential 'polarization participation gap' in case compulsory voting would actually be replaced by voluntary voting. We test our argument relying on data from Belgian national election studies of the past three decades (1991-2019), and we analyse the two regions of Flanders and Wallonia separately.

We find that turnout attitudes are similar across both linguistic regions, and remarkably stable across time. Both ideological and affective polarization are indeed positively associated with the willingness to vote, but ideological polarization is not consistently statistically significant. Affective polarization, on the other hand, significantly contributes to turnout in almost all elections under study. In what follows, we first review the literature on polarization and compulsory voting, from which we derive our set of hypotheses. We then describe our case, data and methods, and present the results. We conclude with some implications of our findings.

4.2 Polarization and the turnout calculus

Election and party scholars have studied the topic of political polarization over several decades (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Downs, 1957; Hetherington, 2009; Powell, 1982; Schattschneider, 1960; Stokes, 1963). Generally speaking, we can identify two main conceptualizations of political polarization: ideological and affective polarization. In this section, we outline these two conceptualizations, their differences, and how they are theorized to stimulate voter turnout. Finally, we discuss how compulsory voting might alter these mechanisms.

4.2.1 Ideological polarization

Ideological polarization revolves around ideological divides, usually at the party level (Sartori, 1976). It is concerned with the extent to which political parties occupy different positions in the ideological space, which can be captured on the simplified left-right continuum. This ideological positioning offers the main framework for parties to compete electorally and to attract voters that are ideologically close. In essence, the concept of ideological polarization refers to one of the core tasks of political parties: to channel societal divisions into clear policy platforms that are distinguishable and to create room for political competition during elections, which provides voters the opportunity to find adequate ideological representation (Powell, 1982; Schattschneider, 1960). Accordingly, ideological polarization is low when parties position themselves ideologically close to each other, with little discernible differences between them. In contrast, when parties are more dispersed alongside the ideological divisions of a political system – for example, the left-right continuum – ideological polarization increases.

From the start, research on ideological polarization has studied its connection with voter turnout. For example, the spatial theory of voting argues that voters behave rationally during an election and engage in a cost-benefit analysis to find a party that is ideologically nearest (Stokes, 1963). With higher ideological polarization among the parties, the choice subset of parties increases for voters. This increases the utility of voting, as the maximum distance between a voter and the party that is ideologically closest reduces. In turn, the higher utility of voting should drive more voters to the ballot box (Downs, 1957). Conversely, if the political offer is low, chances are higher that the distance between voters and parties increases, which in turn fuels the likelihood of abstention. Another way in which low ideological polarization can contribute to vote abstention is when there are virtually no differences between the political parties. In this case, a voter might be closely aligned to several parties in the system, but sees no utility in voting since the different parties barely offer diverging views, leading to indifference about the vote.

Importantly, the utility of voting – and thus the decision whether to turnout – depends on how parties position themselves before an election. The spatial polarization of

parties offers voters increased options for representation, which increases with the emergence of new parties that fill a gap in the ideological spectrum (Tavits, 2006). For instance, emerging populist radical right parties have appealed to voter groups that were poorly represented by existing (mainstream) political parties (Kriesi, 2014). Still, existing parties can also engage in this process by addressing new voter groups and taking more radical positions (Spoon & Klüver, 2019).

Proximity to a party is only one part of how ideological polarization stimulates turnout. Additionally, when voters perceive parties as ideologically distant to them, the utility of keeping them out of power should be high. Again, this is dependent on the full dispersion of ideological polarization in the system (Dalton, 2008). If a voter is ideologically distant to all the parties in the system, and the differences between these parties are minor, the ideological distance will not drive the utility of voting. It will only do so if there are also parties that are ideologically close to the voter, and the ideological dispersion in the party system is high. This is also why the original way of measuring ideological polarization, namely through counting the number of political parties, has been insufficient to determine its effects on turnout (Blais & Carty, 1990; Blais & Dobrzynska, 1998; Crepaz, 1990; R. W. Jackman & Miller, 1995; Powell, 1982; Radcliff & Davis, 2000). Recent studies that capture ideological polarization through the dispersion of parties on the left-right continuum indeed consistently find that it increases turnout across the globe (Béjar et al., 2020; Dalton, 2008; Ellger, 2023; Hobolt & Hoerner, 2020; Moral, 2017).

4.2.2 Affective polarization

Affective polarization, which focuses on the level of political polarization between voters rather than parties, has recently received much scholarly attention (Iyengar et al., 2019; Wagner, 2024). Affective polarization is rooted in social identity theory, and it posits that people are strongly influenced by group identities that offer cues to categorize the world around them (Tajfel et al., 1971). Most evidently, group categorizations lead people to positively assess other people from the same group, while out-group members are treated with bias, discrimination, or outright hostility

(Tajfel, 1970). By applying this theory to political behaviour, Iyengar et al. (2012) argue that one of the core political identities functions through partisanship, and as such offers a salient group membership for voters. Voters thus tend to categorize other people according to the party for which they vote: they familiarize with voters of the same party, but show more negative attitudes toward people of other parties (Garzia et al., 2023; Harteveld, 2021a; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Reiljan, 2020; Reiljan et al., 2024; Wagner, 2021). The extent of affective polarization among individuals is therefore reflected by the extent to which affect toward the in- and out-party diverges: increased positive affect for the in-group party (voters) and/or increased negative affect toward out-groups of parties and voters.

Overall, affective polarization is studied to apprehend a range of negative consequences on political (Kingzette et al., 2021; Torcal & Carty, 2022) or social (Huber & Malhotra, 2017; Lee, 2022; Martherus et al., 2021) behaviour, yet it has also been suggested to foster political participation (Ahn & Mutz, 2023). However, the mechanism between affective polarization and turnout is different than for ideological polarization. While ideological polarization should trigger a rational calculus of whether or not to participate, the effect of affective polarization is rather rooted in emotions. In this regard, both constitutive aspects of affective polarization matter: positive in-group emotions and/or negative out-group emotions. On the one hand, positive feelings toward the political in-group entail that voters are positively attached to people that share their political opinion. These like-minded people offer them a social identity that is often expressed through partisanship (Huddy et al., 2015), or an issue that is strongly politicized (Hobolt et al., 2021). The larger the sympathy of voters for their own side, the higher the likelihood that they want it to perform well – which activates their political participation. Indeed, voters that are strongly affectively polarized tend to mix their social identity with their political identity (Ward & Tavits, 2019). As a result, the success of their party also becomes a voter's personal success, and accomplishments – as well as failures – are taken at a personal level. As elections are the key moment of competition between parties in electoral democracies, the best way to increase the chances to experience success and to avoid failure is thus turning out to vote and casting a vote for the own party.

On the other hand, voters tend to dislike political opponents and the parties that represent these ideas. In fact, these out-groups might even be viewed as a threat, especially when dislike for them is high. During elections, voters that strongly dislike other parties are thus more likely to vote because they fear the success of these parties, which comes at the expense of the success of the own party. A straightforward mechanism that leads negative affect towards voting is that affectively polarized voters strongly dislike the issue positions or ideologies of other parties (Algara & Zur, 2023; van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022). As such, voting can be an act to keep the parties that represent these unfavourable ideas out of office. This is especially important considering that many voters are not partisans, nor exhibit strong attachments to one of the parties. Rather than being concerned with the success of the party voted for, they are mostly concerned with the failure of other parties that are strongly disliked, also known as negative partisanship and negative voting (Bankert, 2021; Mayer & Russo, 2024; Weber, 2021). These effects have also been discerned in Belgium, in particular toward the radical right party Vlaams Belang (Boonen, 2019).

Another mechanism taps into the role of emotions connected to winning and losing: voters who strongly dislike other political parties and their voters should be particularly happy when their party wins the elections and other parties are defeated (Andrews & Huang, 2024; Hamrak, 2025; Janssen, 2024; Ward & Tavits, 2019). The prospect that their party could lose the election against this disliked group should motivate them to influence the election as much as they can, with the most obvious act being voting on election day.

Recent findings support the positive association between affective polarization and political participation. Serani (2022) finds that the propensity to vote in Spain indeed increases as affective polarization rises, more specifically because of out-group dislikes. Similarly, Harteveld and Wagner (2022) show that affective polarization is indeed an important driver of actual turnout in Germany, the Netherlands and Spain (controlling for partisanship and levels of ideological polarization). Additionally, affective polarization also positively affects other types of political participation, such as protest behaviour (Bettarelli et al., 2022) or political activism (Wagner, 2021).

4.2.3 Compulsory voting

Existing work linking polarization to turnout has predominantly – if not solely – focused on countries with voluntary voting systems. In fact, most cross-national analyses that studied the impact of voter polarization on turnout simply exclude countries with compulsory voting (Ellger, 2023; Wessels & Schmitt, 2008). Accordingly, there is little evidence as to whether the turnout-polarization mechanism also holds in a context of compulsory voting, such as in Belgium.

Importantly, research on compulsory voting suggests that the mechanism between polarization and turnout might not equally apply in these systems or that it may even not apply at all. Evidently, regulations that make voting compulsory are among the most robust predictors of electoral turnout (Birch, 2009; Singh, 2023). Countries that require their citizens to vote, rather unsurprisingly, witness consistently higher turnout rates than countries that do not, and these differences are substantial. Indeed, compulsory voting also answers the *equity dilemma*, as famously presented by Lijphart (1997): given that citizens with higher education and income are more likely to vote, policies are biased in favour of this group, and tend to disadvantage citizens of lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Çakır, 2025; Gilens, 2012; Peters & Ensink, 2015; Schakel, 2021). Correcting such bias is usually an argument to favour compulsory voting.

Compulsory voting might also affect the polarization-turnout mechanism in multiple ways, to the extent that it might not apply in Belgium. First, while compulsory voting is an established effective way of raising turnout levels, the reasons behind this relationship remain understudied. The most straightforward explanation — voters do not want to risk the legal consequences of abstention — fails to account for the fact that turnout is also exceptionally high in compulsory voting countries without sanctioning for non-voting (Kostelka et al., 2022), or without enforcement of the legislative penalties for non-voting (Dassonneville et al., 2023). For example, while Belgian voters should officially be fined when they abstain from voting, this law has barely been enforced in the last twenty years (Engelen, 2005; Kużelewska, 2016), with public prosecutors openly saying that they do not give priority to its enforcement

(Overheid, 2021).

As a consequence, factors besides legal consequences should also play a role in compulsory voting systems, as "the presence of a compulsory voting law has led many Belgians to view voting as a moral obligation" (Dassonneville et al., 2023, pp. 54–55). For example, compulsory voting is often argued to foster a civic duty to vote (Chapman, 2019; Feitosa et al., 2020; Quintelier et al., 2011). Of course, it is possible that this sense of civic duty solely rests on the legal obligation to vote, but it is also conceivable that such moral effects are part of an electorate that is used to turn out when elections take place. That is, citizens that voted in past elections are also more likely to vote in future elections (de Kadt, 2017; Denny & Doyle, 2009), most likely because the act of voting is self-reinforcing by creating an image among citizens of being a regular voter (Dinas, 2012). Furthermore, while non-voters are likely to become habitual voters during their lives, habitual voters are much less likely to become habitual abstainers (Plutzer, 2002).

In turn, this could mean that polarization matters less for the decision to vote. Voters that do not find ideological representation or that are not strongly emotionally involved in the election still cast a ballot because they believe it is their civic duty to do so. Indeed, in terms of ideological polarization, citizens in compulsory voting systems are less likely to vote ideologically coherently (Dassonneville et al., 2019; Selb & Lachat, 2009). In addition, compulsory voting also changes political behaviour beyond turnout, for example by decreasing the post-election winner-loser gap in democratic satisfaction (Singh, 2023).

Finally, compulsory voting was introduced in many countries in order to reduce costs for political parties by not having to worry about mobilizing voters (Birch, 2009). This suggests that parties under this system need not to polarize to move voters to the ballot box, and that they might focus on other aspects during the campaign. This might also decrease the importance of the mechanism that runs from polarization to turnout. Simply put, if the electorate is not used to polarizing parties, it might be driven by other factors to make the effort to vote.

Accordingly, while polarization usually drives turnout, we acknowledge that this mechanism might be different in a country with a history of compulsory voting such as Belgium. We therefore deem it important to test this mechanism in this context. Still, the exact change of the mechanism is difficult to predict; if anything, the previous discussion would lead us to expect null results at most. However, we formulate the hypotheses as we would expect them to apply in regular voluntary systems but in the case of compulsory voting. In the data section, we discuss in more detail how we interpret potential null results, particularly in relation to our measure of turnout.

H1: *In compulsory voting systems, voters who perceive larger ideological differences between parties are more likely to vote.*

H2: *In compulsory voting systems, voters with higher levels of affective polarization are more likely to vote.*

4.3 Case selection

We analyse the relationship between polarization and voter turnout in Belgium, which constitutes a relevant case for two reasons. First, the party system is highly fragmented, particularly since political parties split alongside the linguistic divide in the second half of the 20th century. In fact, Belgium essentially harbours two party systems: Flemish parties compete for votes in the Dutch-speaking part of the country (Flanders), while Francophone parties represent voters in the southern French-speaking part of the country (Wallonia). Regarding polarization, previous studies have found that Belgian voters in both systems show important variation in their levels of affective polarization (Bettarelli & Van Haute, 2022; Westwood et al., 2018), which is to some extent explained by ideological polarization (Eck, Michel, & van Haute, 2025; van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022). In terms of ideological polarization, both systems also present a key difference: the presence or absence of a successful and established radical right party. In Flanders, the radical right Vlaams Belang is

one of the most successful parties since the 1990's, while no radical right party has established a continuous and significant presence in parliament in Wallonia thus far.

Although both regional systems include parties within the same party families, the ability of these parties to reach governmental agreements has shrunk over the years. This is symbolized by exceptionally long coalition formations at the overarching federal level in recent years (De Winter, 2019), which contrasts sharply with the classical image of Belgium of a typical consociational democracy with elites bridging social cleavages by compromise (Paulis, Ognibene, et al., 2021). The 2019 elections also saw a polarizing trend in the political party offer, with higher seat shares both for the radical left (PTB-PVDA) as well as the radical right (Vlaams Belang).

Second, Belgium is a classical example of a compulsory voting system, with mandatory voting included in the constitution since 1893 and enforced for the first elections with universal suffrage in 1894. One of the core reasons to introduce compulsory voting was to increase the legitimacy of elections, as compulsory voting was designed to raise turnout levels and as such reflect the general will of the people more adequately (Kużelewska, 2016). Indeed, the effect of the constitutional change directly led to an enormous increase of turnout, reaching levels above 90 percent (Robson, 1923). On top of legitimacy arguments, compulsory voting was also instrumental to try and reduce the influence of radical parties, notably in urban areas among working-class voters. Elections were originally always held in Brussels, which forced political parties to reimburse voters for their incurred travel costs. With the introduction of compulsory voting, political parties needed not to worry about mobilization anymore, as voters were required to cast a ballot in their own surroundings (Kużelewska, 2016).

The system of compulsory voting in Belgium continues to date. Officially, voters can be sanctioned with a fine if they do not participate on election day, although these have seldomly been issued in the past twenty years (Dassonneville et al., 2023; Engelen, 2005). Despite the virtual absence of sanction, the system has remained highly effective: all elections in the 21st century have attracted turnout levels of around 90 percent. Throughout its history, the abolishment of the compulsory voting system has been an important topic of discussion in Belgian politics, with particularly

liberal parties arguing that compulsory voting infringes on personal freedoms. Still, the topic has not been particularly salient in political debates, and M. Hooghe and Deschouwer (2011) notice that the high (constitutional) barrier to replace compulsory voting by voluntary voting at the federal level has made parties reluctant to even propose it, especially because the Socialist parties has indicated to veto such proposals.

Nonetheless, the Flemish government abolished compulsory voting at the municipal and provincial elections in Flanders in a majority vote in July 2021. Given that the aforementioned constitutional barrier does not apply at these levels, the centre-right government (consisting of the conservative N-VA, the Christian-democratic CD&V, and the liberal Open Vld) was able to change the election rules for these lower-level elections. The compulsory voting system remains unchanged for elections at the regional, federal and European elections (as well as for the municipal and provincial elections in Wallonia and the Brussels-Capital Region). In an explanatory memorandum, the Flemish government explained that it decided to abolish compulsory voting because it is not in line with most other advanced democracies, and the non-enforcement of sanctions in case of non-voting have made the system essentially already a voluntary one (Overheid, 2021). Such transformation has increased the relevance of mobilization strategies in Flanders, and thus the question whether polarization could contribute to turnout.

4.4 Data and methods

4.4.1 Data

To map polarization and turnout attitudes, we study Belgian election surveys over almost three decades. More specifically, we pooled data from eight election surveys (seven at the federal level and one at the regional level) between 1991 and 2019 (see Table 4.1) (for an overview of national election studies from 1991 to 2007 see Frognier et al. (2011)). These surveys were either cross-sectional post-electoral studies or part of larger panels survey fielded around the time of the particular election (in 2009,

Table 4.1: Election surveys in the dataset

Year	Election	Non-compulsory voting	Ideological polarization	Affective polarization
1991	Federal	X	X	
1995	Federal	X		
1999	Federal	X	X	X
2003	Federal	X		X
2007	Federal	X		
2009	Regional	X		
2014	Federal	X	X	X
2019	Federal	X	X	X

2014, and 2019, for an overview see Michel et al. (2023)).[1] In this paper, we only rely on post-electoral surveys. Our pooled dataset is thus composed of all election surveys that include the same question on respondents' willingness to vote in case of voluntary voting (see the dependent variable section). Additionally, most studies also include questions that allow us to measure ideological polarization, affective polarization, or both. In total, we can study the effect of either ideological and affective polarization on vote intention in four elections separately, and in three elections combined. The dataset also provides relevant control variables for each election year. All election surveys provide us with representative samples of the voting population in both linguistic regions, and thus allow to study differences between the party systems.

4.4.2 Dependent variable

Election surveys generally overrepresent turnout, which complicates establishing the relationship between one variable and turnout. Mapping turnout attitudes in an election with compulsory voting comes with the additional challenge of differentiating between citizens that turned out volitionally, and those who only turned out because of the law. This is one of the core reasons why it has been so challenging for scholars to map the impact of polarization on turnout in compulsory voting systems. Fortunately, the collected election studies in Belgium address this with a variable that asks respondents whether they would still vote in elections in case the system of com-

[1]Panel surveys of 2009 (Deschouwer et al., 2009); panel of 2014 (Deschouwer et al., 2014); panel of 2019 (Walgrave et al., 2022).

pulsory voting would be abolished. This question is frequently used in research to map the impact of (abolishing) compulsory voting (S. Jackman, 1999; Mackerras & McAllister, 1999).[2] Respondents could choose between the answer options "never", "sometimes", "generally", and "always". We code the answer options from 1 to 4, such that higher values reflect a higher intention to vote (1 = never; 4 = always). Up to and including 2003, respondents were also offered a "don't know" option.

Obviously, this survey question does not go without criticism, as it asks respondents about behaviour in a hypothetical scenario about the future. Still, we believe that this measure can be interpreted for two purposes in this study. First, it should map rather accurately the willingness to vote of Belgians in the current system. Even though future behaviour cannot be predicted perfectly, we do believe that this question gives respondents a straightforward way to answer whether they wanted to have voted in the past election at all would they have had the freedom to make this decision themselves. This holds regardless of whether respondents voted because they think that penalties are enforced in case of abstention, or simply because they think it is just to abide by the law. Second, we concur with Dassonneville et al. (2023) that since voting is such a regular behaviour (particularly in a compulsory voting system), the attitude toward it should predict future behaviour relatively well. As such, we think that this attitude should also reflect future turnout behaviour relatively well in case compulsory voting would be replaced by voluntary voting, but only in the short term (for example, the first couple of elections).

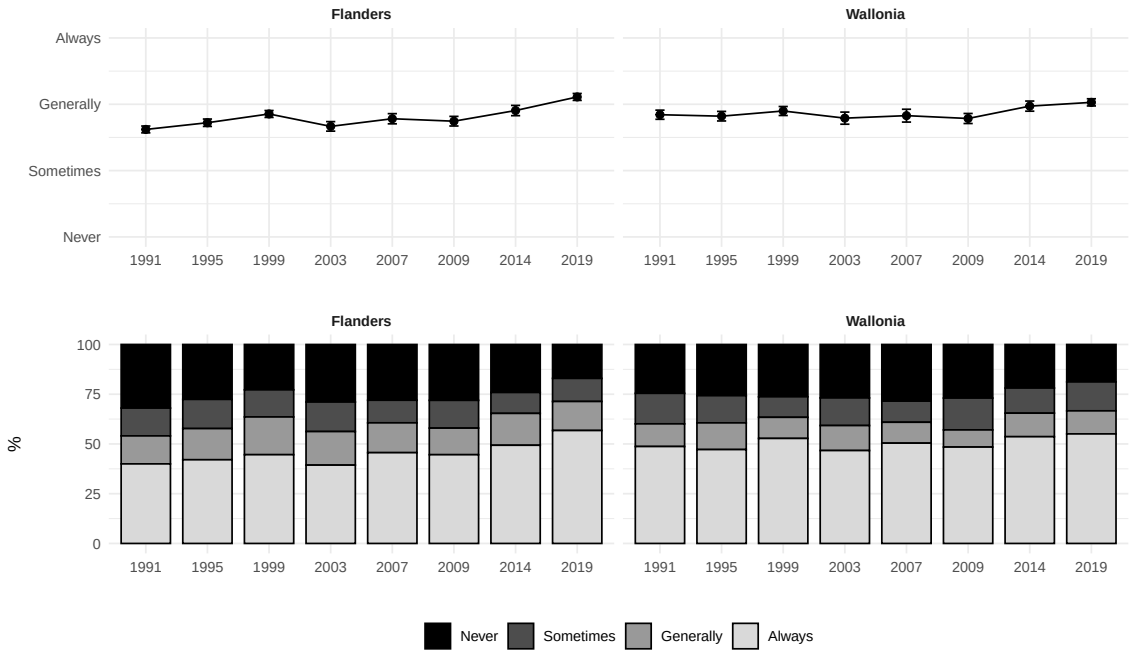
This also guides our interpretation of the absence or presence of effects of polarization. That is, in case we do find a positive effect of ideological or affective polarization, we can assume that the same causal mechanism is at play in voluntary voting systems. Yet, in case of an absence of effect, our interpretation is that (1) the willingness to vote of citizens under a compulsory voting system is not determined by levels of polarization, either ideologically or affectively; and (2) if compulsory voting would be replaced by voluntary voting, the role of polarization on turnout should be smaller, or even absent, at least in the short term. We emphasize that our research design

[2]Specifically, the question asks respondents: "If voting for parliament was no longer obligatory in Belgium, would you then always, generally, sometimes, or never vote or don't you know for certain?"

does not allow to make inferences about the effects of lifting compulsory voting on political behaviour in the long term.

Given that the survey question was asked in all election studies of our dataset, we can map the willingness to vote under a voluntary voting system over time. Figure 4.1 shows the average score toward this question as well as its distribution, with 95 percent confidence intervals, but excluding the respondents who indicated that they do not know.[3] Overall, this score is very stable, averaging just below a score of 3 ("would generally still vote"), and there are no substantial differences between both regions. In Flanders and in Wallonia the willingness to vote if mandatory voting would be replaced by voluntary voting is largely similar. Arguably, in the past ten years, the willingness to vote slightly increased – specifically, during the elections of 2014 and 2019.

Figure 4.1: Hypothetical non-compulsory turnout



Note: Graphs show descriptive data on the question how often a respondent would still vote if elections were no longer compulsory. The line bar shows the average answer answer to this question for each election year including 95% confidence intervals. The bar chart shows the distribution of the answer category for each election year.

[3]The percentage of voters that gave the don't know option is only somewhat considerable in 1991, with numbers around 10 percent in both regions. In the three following election studies, the percentages are around 5 or even lower.

4.4.3 Independent variables

Two different questions allow us to operationalize our two independent variables of polarization. For ideological polarization, we use a question asking respondents to place the different parties running for election on a left-right continuum, ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right) (Dalton, 2008). For affective polarization, we use a typical feeling thermometer question asking respondents how much they like each party, ranging from 0 (lowest sympathy) to 10 (highest sympathy) (Gidron, Sheffer, & Mor, 2022b). In 2019, the survey actually asked respondents their sympathy toward the voters of the different parties rather than the parties themselves. This difference taps into the discussion about differences between horizontal (toward voters) and vertical (toward parties) polarization (Areal & Harteveld, 2024; Harteveld, 2021a; Kingzette, 2021; Tichelbaecker et al., 2023). We acknowledge these differences, but argue that they do not affect our demonstration: both horizontal and vertical affective polarization should positively relate to turnout.

Both scales of ideological and affective polarization follow the spread-of-scores calculation as proposed by Wagner (2021). While this measure was specifically designed for the calculation of affective polarization, it also suits the calculation of ideological polarization. As a matter of fact, the established measure of ideological polarization as proposed by Dalton (2008) relied on a similar calculation. The spread-of-scores measure is particularly suited to measure polarization within multiparty systems, as it acknowledges that voters can be sympathetic or ideologically close to more than one party. Theoretically, these variables can range from 0 to 5, with values of 5 reflecting the most polarized citizens. It is calculated as follows:

$$\sqrt{\sum_{p=1}^{P} v_p(\text{party LR}_{ip} - \overline{\text{party LR}}_i)^2}$$

Where p represents the particular party, i the respondent, party LRip a respondent's left-right placement of a party, and vp the vote share of the particular party. For affective polarization, party LR is simply replaced by the sympathy score toward the party. The mean left-right placement (or mean sympathy score for affective polariza-

tion) should also be weighted according to the party size, which is done as follows:

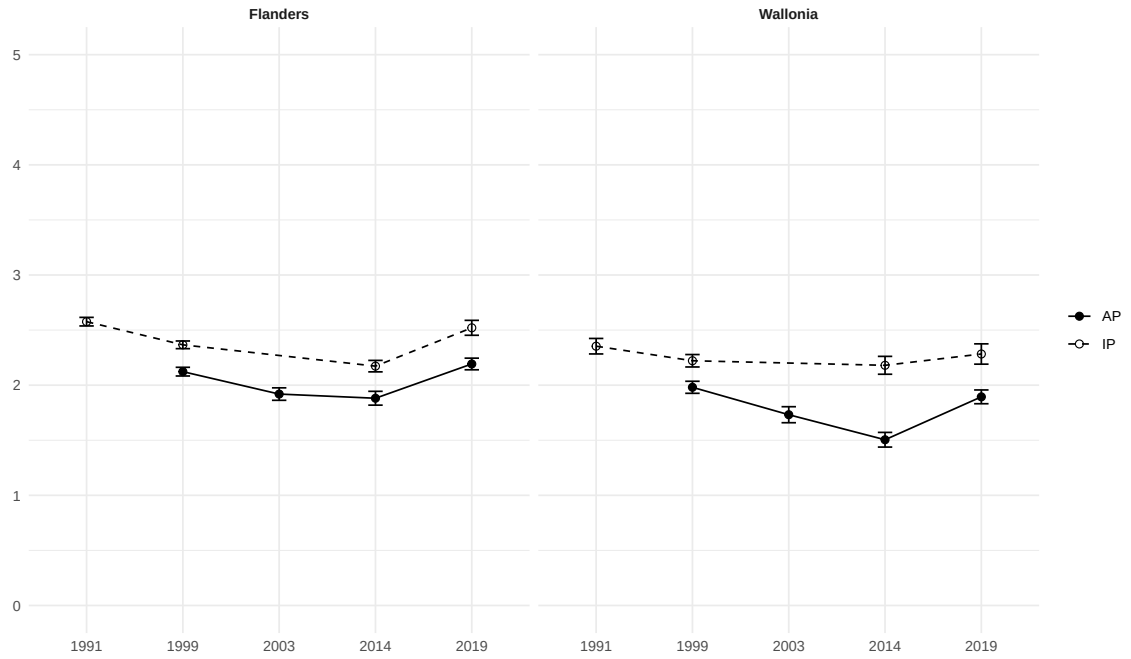
$$\overline{\text{party LR}}_i = \sum_{p=1}^{P} (v_p \cdot \text{party LR}_{ip})$$

Importantly, this calculation of ideological polarization concerns, essentially, perceived ideological polarization by voters rather than the actual ideological polarization of parties. Still, the use of voters' assessment of the ideological position of parties to calculate ideological polarization is common in the literature (Dalton, 2008; Ellger, 2023; Hobolt & Hoerner, 2020; Lachat, 2008; Moral, 2017). In addition, as much as actual ideological polarization matters, it mainly matters if this is picked up by voters – as such, whether they perceive ideological polarization themselves, as this should drive the turnout decision (Enders & Armaly, 2019).

In Figure 4.2, we show the average levels of ideological and affective polarization for the years in which the respective variables are included in the election study. The mean levels of ideological polarization have been very stable over the past decades, ranging between more or less 2.2 and 2.5, which is rather average compared to other countries (Dalton, 2008). There are some noticeable, albeit small, differences between the regions: Flanders is more ideologically polarized, most likely due to the higher presence of (radical) right-wing parties such as N-VA and Vlaams Belang, whereas the only party in Wallonia that occupies a somewhat centre-right position is MR. Yet, although the level of affective polarization is stable over the past decade, it is also slightly higher in Flanders than in Wallonia. This difference could result from the fact that affective polarization can be predicted relatively well by ideological polarization (van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022), with the populist radical right voters both receiving and giving relatively high levels of dislike toward other parties and voters (Harteveld et al., 2022). Furthermore, the levels of affective polarization, which barely go above a value of 2, are comparatively rather low (Garzia et al., 2023; Wagner, 2021).

Finally, our models explaining willingness to vote control for several variables that are important for political behaviour, and more specifically for individual-level voter turnout. First, we include a variable that measures respondents' political interest,

Figure 4.2: Development of affective and ideological polarization



Note: Average levels of affective and ideological polarization for each election year including 95% confidence intervals.

ranging from 0 to 10 (except for 1991 when the question was not included in the survey). We also control for a respondent's left-right positioning (0 = left, 10 = right) and for political extremism by taking the square root of the squared difference between a respondent's left-right placement and the average left-right placement of the region in each election. Finally, we control for sociodemographic variables: gender (1 = male), age, education (1 = no education; 5 = university education), and employment status (0 = unemployed, 1 = not in labour force, 2 = employed) (See Appendix A1 for full variable description).

4.4.4 Methods

We employ OLS-regressions for each independent election year and each region separately. The variables for ideological polarization and affective polarization are included separately to avoid losses of observation due to item non-response. Since the main

independent variables were asked in four elections, we present eight separate regression coefficients. Three of them – 1999, 2014, and 2019 – can be compared directly, given that these elections included both variables. Additionally, we also run regression models for the election studies of 1991 and 2003. The former includes the ideological polarization variable, while the later offers another option to study the effect of affective polarization. For reasons of readability, we present coefficient plots with the different election years such that the impact of the independent variables can be compared over time. Full regression tables can be found in the appendix. We standardize our independent variables around the mean, such that the coefficients represent the effect of one standard deviation (except for employment status (nominal) and gender (binary)).

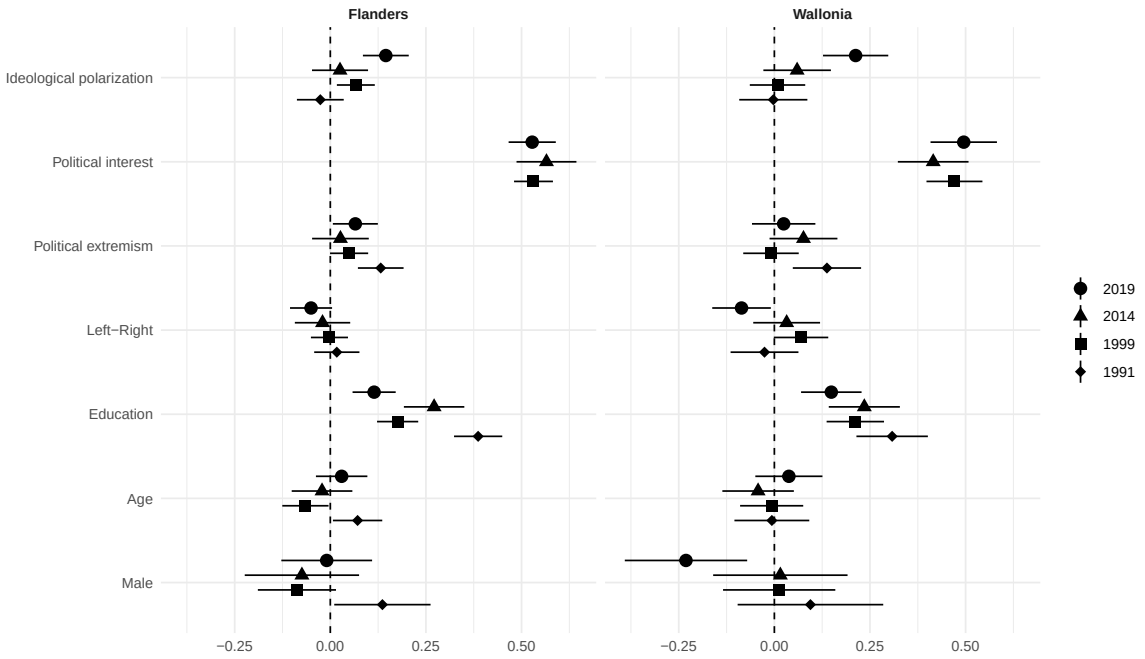
4.5 Results

We start by testing how differences in ideological polarization between citizens affect their willingness to vote (H1). Figure 4.3 presents the coefficients of the main ideological polarization variable as well as control variables divided by region [4].

With the exception of Flemish voters in 1991, the effects of ideological polarization on turnout are in the expected positive direction: the more ideologically polarized, the more likely citizens are to vote in future elections even if mandatory voting would be abolished in Belgium. However, this effect is only significant in three of the eight regressions, which means that though we can speak of a consistent effect, it appears to be weak. When significant, we find that the effect sizes are of about 0.1, while standard deviations of ideological polarization are around 1 as well (with some difference per election and region, Appendix A1). Substantially, moving from the least to the most ideologically polarized citizen would thus increase the willingness to vote under non-compulsory elections by 0.5 units on the 1-4 scale.

[4]Note that, for reasons of readability, we do not include the employment dummies. Generally, we find that citizens that are unemployed are less likely to vote in future non-compulsory elections than employed citizens or citizens that are not part of the labour force. Also note that we cannot control for political interest in 1991 because the variable was not included in the survey.

Figure 4.3: Ideological polarization



Note: Regression output of linear regression models, including 95% confidence intervals. Full regression results can be found in Tables 4.B.1 (Flanders) 4.B.2 (Wallonia) in the Appendix.

Our results show no significant difference between Flanders and Wallonia. That is, there are election(s) where increased ideological polarization is significantly associated with increased willingness to vote under voluntary voting in both regions. Over time, we find that the effect of ideological polarization is most evident in the last election of the dataset, 2019 – in both regions. This could be the result of the particular developments during that election, with increased voting for radical parties both on the left and on the right. For example, radical right party Vlaams Belang increased its parliamentary representation with 18 seats, and the radical left PTB-PVDA also won 12 seats, while most mainstream parties lost seats. Still, we acknowledge that our measure captures the impact of ideological polarization between voters, and not between elections. As such, the nature of the relationship -– as hypothesized — should remain the same. It is, however, possible that the rise of radical parties changed the distribution of ideological polarization. For example, voters who perceived average ideological polarization during previous elections could be perceiving stronger polarization during the 2019 elections, yet their attitude toward voting under voluntary

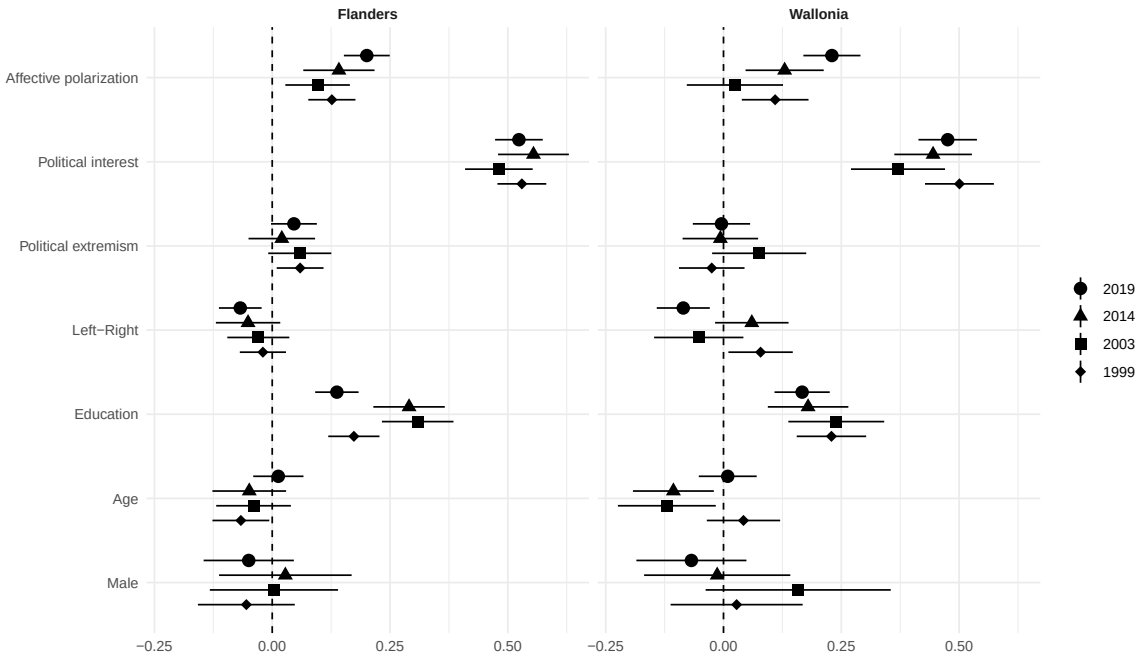
voting remained unchanged. If these voters were likely future voters, it could impact the relationship. Establishing such finding would require panel data, which are unfortunately not available. Yet, we still find some evidence that points in this direction: the standard deviation of ideological polarization is notably higher in 2019 than in all other election years (1.23 vs. 0.83), but the standard deviation of the willingness to vote in a voluntary system question is stable around 1.18.

As the impact of ideological polarization on voluntary voting is only marginal, we turn to the impact of affective polarization. To recall, voters with higher levels of affective polarization should display a higher intention to vote in future elections characterized by non-compulsory voting (H2). Similarly, we run four separate regression models for each election year, in both regions (however, the party (or voter) sympathy used to measure the affective polarization variable is available for 2003 but not for 1991). Figure 4.4 presents the effects of affective polarization on turnout by region.

All coefficients of affective polarization are in the hypothesized positive direction in all elections. Voters with higher levels of affective polarization show a stronger willingness to vote, even if it was voluntary, than voters with lower levels of affective polarization. Furthermore, these effects are strongly significant ($p < 0.01$) in all elections but Wallonia in 2003. As such, we find that the effect of affective polarization on willingness to vote is much more robust than the effects of ideological polarization are. Effect sizes vary only slightly, from about 0.1 to 0.2. For instance, considering an average effect size of 0.15, the effect of moving from the least affective polarized citizen (0) to the most affectively polarized citizen (5) is 0.75 units on the voluntary voting question (1-4), provided that the standard deviation of affective polarization revolves around 1.

Consequently, the results suggest that the emotional mechanism that drives voters to vote in voluntary electoral systems, plays a similar role in a system where voters are compelled to vote. Voters that are more emotionally invested in Belgian elections, for example because they strongly like or dislike one of the parties, are more eager to vote. Apparently, the political culture of the country, where voting has become habitual through enforcement, has not altered the effect that emotions have on the

Figure 4.4: Affective polarization



Note: Regression output of linear regression models, including 95% confidence intervals. Full regression results can be found in Tables 4.B.3 (Flanders) 4.B.4 (Wallonia) in the Appendix.

willingness to vote. Given that this is the case for both regions, which show quite strong differences in the party offer, makes us confident that these results are robust. They also indicate that if Belgium were to make voting voluntary, the first elections should witness some kind of a 'polarization participation gap'. Whether this holds in the long term is difficult to say through our research design, but considering the recently unfolding evidence on the impact of affective polarization on turnout in voluntary systems (Ellger, 2023; Harteveld & Wagner, 2022) suggests that it would. We again find that the 2019 election year has a stronger impact on the willingness to vote than before, as we also did for ideological polarization. While the same aforementioned caveats exists about the nature of the relationship, we do again find that the standard deviation of the affective polarization increases visibly. Whether the nature of this relationship indeed changes more structurally because of the influence of fringe parties should be revealed by future Belgian election studies.

Finally, we take a closer look at the control variables. Contemporary debates on

compulsory voting often focus on the type of voters that would be affected by the abolishment (or introduction) of such a system, yet they remain largely theoretical (see Lijphart (1997); for an overview of the arguments in favour and against compulsory voting, see Birch (2009)). Therefore, we also assess the effects of the control variables on the willingness to vote under a voluntary voting system based on three decades of data. To increase the number of observations, we run regressions for each election year with only the control variables and the same dependent variable in Appendix 4.B.3.

We find that political interest is the most influential variable on willingness to vote: it has a positive and strongly significant effect in all elections under study, and the largest effect size. This is in line with recent cross-country evidence (Dassonneville et al., 2023). As such, our results point toward a strong effect of political sophistication on voluntary turnout, since the effects of education are also positive and significant in each election year that we study (Gordon & Segura, 1997; Lachat, 2008; Luskin, 1990). Accordingly, a likely turnout gap is expected between politically sophisticated and unsophisticated citizens if Belgium were to replace its system by voluntary voting. More specifically, the gap would emerge between citizens with lower and higher education, thereby confirming Lijphart's warnings.

Furthermore, researchers have often argued that older people are more likely to vote than younger citizens (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012), while a gender gap in voting points toward the trend of a higher likelihood of voting among men than among women (Franklin, 2004). In fact, recently Dassonneville et al. (2023) found that Belgian females and younger citizens are less likely to vote if voting is no longer compulsory. In our dataset, we fail to find these effects. For age, we find both positive and negative coefficients in the elections under study, but most of them are not statistically significant. For gender, our coefficient represents the effect of being male – and should thus be positive. Again, most of our coefficients are statistically insignificant, which is in line with more recent research arguing that the gender gap in voting is decreasing or even disappeared (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Kostelka et al., 2019).[5]

[5]As a robustness check, we also ran the models of control variables without ideological and affective polarization, thus increasing the number of elections included, as well as the number of observations. Results reported in Appendix B.5 confirm the influence (or lack thereof) of these control variables.

Still, we must stress that our results are somewhat more nuanced: the null effects of gender are driven by the inclusion of political interest. If we exclude political interest in the regressions, we indeed find that males are more likely to turn out during voluntary elections. This appeals to the difference in political interest that we find between both genders in our dataset, with males being significantly more politically interested. At the same time, these results also suggest that if a man and woman have the same level of political interest, they should not display significantly different attitudes in turnout intention. Notably, the other variables display the similar association (size) when political interest is excluded, also in bivariate regressions.

4.6 Robustness checks

To test the robustness of our results, we run a set of robustness checks in Appendix 4.C. First, we estimate models which include both ideological polarization and affective polarization together (for the election years in which they are both available: 2003, 2014, and 2019). However, including both variables in the models leads to a substantial drop of observations, in particular compared to the models that tested the impact of affective polarization. Including both variables is therefore most likely to impact the result of affective polarization. Therefore, we test the models incrementally: first, we test the original models with only ideological or affective polarization included (for elections in which both are available); second, we test the models but only with the observations for which both variables are available. Finally, we include both variables of polarization jointly (see Appendix 4.C.1).

In Flanders, we do not detect major differences once both variables of polarization are included in the models. The significance of the positive coefficient of ideological polarization collapses in 1999 only, once affective polarization is included in the model ($p = 0.104$). Additionally, the coefficient for ideological polarization in 2014 changes direction from positive to negative once affective polarization is included. Yet, since this coefficient was already statistically insignificant and very close to 0 in the original model, we do not see this is as a meaningful change. For affective polarization, we

see that all effects remain in the same direction, and that their significance is robust.

In Wallonia, the inclusion of affective polarization does not meaningfully change the coefficient of ideological polarization in any of the election years. For affective polarization, we do detect some changes in 1999 and 2014, where the originally strongly significant positive coefficient loses its significance in the joint model. This collapsed significance already occurs in the original model with the observations of the joint model only. As such, we can assume that the collapse of significance is not due to spuriousness, but rather because of the loss of observations, which is indeed substantial (respectively 16% and 39%).

Finally, we run the joint models using multiple imputation for the missing values of ideological and affective polarization (Appendix 4.C.2). This leaves us with the same models, but with the number of observations that reflect the number of observation after listwise deletion of respondents with a missing value for employment, education, left-right placement, political extremism, and/or political interest. We impute m = 20 for every missing value in the variables of affective polarization, ideological polarization, or both, and thus generate 20 possible values for each missing value in either of the variables (this is well above the conventional amount of imputations, see Rubin (1987)). For ideological polarization, we again only detect the loss of significance in Flanders in 1999 (again not completely vanishing with $p = 0.099$). However, we do not observe the collapse of significance for affective polarization in Wallonia in 1999 and 2014 using multiple imputation; the coefficients remain positive and strongly significant ($p<0.01$). These results support our interpretation that the significance loss is largely due to a drop of observations across models. All in all, we conclude that the original models are robust, except for the result of ideological polarization in Flanders in 1999.

4.7 Conclusion

Political polarization among voters, either ideologically or affectively, has been consistently found to stimulate voter turnout (Béjar et al., 2020; Dalton, 2008; Ellger,

2023; Harteveld & Wagner, 2022; Hobolt & Hoerner, 2020; Phillips, 2024; Wessels & Schmitt, 2008). Still, most of this evidence has been found in systems with voluntary voting. Given that compulsory voting has the potential to alter political behaviour and attitudes (Chapman, 2019; Feitosa et al., 2020; Quintelier et al., 2011; Singh, 2023), we therefore studied whether the polarization-turnout mechanism also holds in the context of compulsory voting in Belgium.

Through an analysis of three decades of election studies in Belgium, we find that the willingness to vote — captured through a question about hypothetical future voting behaviour under voluntary voting — is mainly driven by affective polarization rather than ideological polarization. Belgian voters that are more affectively polarized show a higher willingness to vote in future elections, even when these would be non-compulsory. We find that these positive effects are strongly significant, and robust across both linguistic regions. Ideological polarization, the way in which parties are perceived to be ideologically distinct from each other, only plays a marginal role (consistent positive effects, which are statistically insignificant in most of the elections under study).

Our findings make a threefold contribution. First, we contribute to the literature on the correlates of voter turnout (Frank & Martínez i Coma, 2023; Smets & Van Ham, 2013), which has extensively studied how polarization contributes to turnout (Béjar et al., 2020; Dalton, 2008; Harteveld & Wagner, 2022; Hobolt & Hoerner, 2020; Wessels & Schmitt, 2008), but often overlooked this relationship in compulsory voting systems. In these systems, we show that affective polarization matters. The mechanism that drives turnout through affective polarization applies in a similar way as in non-compulsory voting systems. At the same time, the effect of ideological polarization appears to be absent in such a context. Additional research in other countries with compulsory voting is needed to uphold these mechanisms even further. Second, we add to the literature on compulsory voting (Birch, 2009; Singh, 2021), which often remains theoretical in nature and had mainly analysed the common sociodemographic turnout gaps when compulsory voting is lifted rather than the effect of polarization (Gallego, 2010; Lijphart, 1997; Singh, 2015; Söderlund et al., 2011). Finally, we contribute to the booming literature on the political consequences of affec-

tive polarization in multi-party systems (Harteveld & Wagner, 2022; Torcal & Carty, 2022; Wagner, 2021; Ward & Tavits, 2019), and show that despite of its often-argued negative consequences it actually has the potential to foster political participation.

More broadly, our findings imply that if compulsory voting is replaced by voluntary voting, Belgium might witness a “polarization participation gap", at least in the short term. Less polarized voters are less likely to vote, or they might abstain for good. This could impact the way citizens engage in political discussions or other types of political behaviour. Furthermore, given that political parties should re-engage in mobilizing the electorate when voluntary voting is put in place, they might resort to polarizing strategies. While ideological polarization is arguably one of the core duties of political parties, this might be unlikely to move citizens to vote. Instead, polarizing the electorate in more affective ways could be more fruitful, but potentially also has severe negative consequences for the democratic system. Therefore, if parties resort to increased negative and uncivil rhetoric or actions to mobilize the electorate, lifting compulsory voting might actually harm democracies on the long term.

Appendix

4.A Details on the data

4.A.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 4.A.1: Flanders

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Non-compulsory voting	11,867	2.855	1.240	1	4
IP	5,060	2.438	0.889	0.000	5.000
AP	5,165	2.072	0.992	0.000	5.000
Political interest	9,722	4.653	2.645	0.000	10.000
Political extremism	11,867	1.462	1.337	0.073	5.619
Left-right self-placement	11,867	5.307	1.993	0	10
Education	11,867	2.963	1.156	1	5
Employment status	11,867	1.525	0.572	0	2
Age	11,867	47.027	16.451	18	92
Gender	11,867	0.537	0.499	0	1

Table 4.A.2: Wallonia

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Non-compulsory voting	8,283	2.958	1.238	1	4
IP	2,642	2.266	1.026	0.000	4.993
AP	3,500	1.815	1.030	0.000	4.990
Political interest	7,203	4.567	2.755	0.000	10.000
Political extremism	8,283	1.636	1.451	0.018	5.398
Left-right self-placement	8,283	4.801	2.192	0	10
Education	8,283	3.091	1.161	1	5
Employment status	8,283	1.455	0.635	0	2
Age	8,283	46.113	16.270	18	95
Gender	8,283	0.509	0.500	0	1

4.B Regression results

4.B.1 Figure 4.3

Table 4.B.1: Flanders

	1991	1999	2014	2019
Ideological polarization	−0.033	0.095**	0.035	0.120***
	(0.039)	(0.036)	(0.051)	(0.025)
Political interest		0.531***	0.565***	0.528***
		(0.026)	(0.040)	(0.031)
Political extremism	0.132***	0.049	0.026	0.065*
	(0.030)	(0.025)	(0.038)	(0.030)
Left-right	0.017	−0.002	−0.020	−0.050
	(0.030)	(0.025)	(0.037)	(0.028)
Education	0.387***	0.176***	0.271***	0.115***
	(0.032)	(0.027)	(0.040)	(0.029)
Not in labour force				
(ref: unemployed)	0.300*	0.103	0.459*	0.189
	(0.151)	(0.153)	(0.217)	(0.164)
Employed				
(ref: unemployed)	0.312*	0.237	0.339	0.132
	(0.147)	(0.149)	(0.213)	(0.163)
Age	0.071*	−0.065*	−0.022	0.030
	(0.033)	(0.031)	(0.040)	(0.034)
Male	0.136*	−0.087	−0.074	−0.009
	(0.064)	(0.052)	(0.076)	(0.061)
Intercept	2.544***	2.661***	2.643***	2.698***
	(0.178)	(0.172)	(0.232)	(0.172)
Adj. R^2	0.103	0.284	0.312	0.314
Num. obs.	1554	1555	747	1204

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 4.B.2: Wallonia

	1991	1999	2014	2019
Ideological polarization	−0.003	0.009	0.059	0.171***
	(0.051)	(0.041)	(0.045)	(0.035)
Political interest		0.471***	0.415***	0.495***
		(0.037)	(0.047)	(0.044)
Political extremism	0.137**	−0.009	0.076	0.024
	(0.046)	(0.037)	(0.045)	(0.042)
Left-right	−0.026	0.070	0.032	−0.086*
	(0.045)	(0.036)	(0.045)	(0.039)
Education	0.308***	0.212***	0.235***	0.149***
	(0.048)	(0.038)	(0.047)	(0.040)
Not in labour force				
(ref: unemployed)	0.038	0.356*	0.333	0.216
	(0.224)	(0.154)	(0.190)	(0.157)
Employed				
(ref: unemployed)	−0.052	0.231	0.303	0.311*
	(0.212)	(0.147)	(0.181)	(0.149)
Age	−0.007	−0.007	−0.043	0.038
	(0.050)	(0.042)	(0.048)	(0.045)
Male	0.094	0.013	0.016	−0.231**
	(0.097)	(0.075)	(0.090)	(0.082)
Intercept	3.120***	2.895***	2.673***	2.487***
	(0.245)	(0.168)	(0.205)	(0.167)
Adj. R^2	0.078	0.225	0.206	0.301
Num. obs.	584	797	574	687

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

4.B.2 Figure 4.4

Table 4.B.3: Flanders

	1999	2003	2014	2019
Affective polarization	0.157***	0.105**	0.149***	0.174***
	(0.032)	(0.038)	(0.040)	(0.021)
Political interest	0.530***	0.481***	0.554***	0.524***
	(0.026)	(0.037)	(0.038)	(0.026)
Political extremism	0.059*	0.058	0.020	0.046
	(0.025)	(0.034)	(0.036)	(0.025)
Left-right	−0.020	−0.030	−0.051	−0.068**
	(0.025)	(0.034)	(0.035)	(0.023)
Education	0.173***	0.309***	0.290***	0.137***
	(0.028)	(0.039)	(0.039)	(0.024)
Not in labour force				
(ref: unemployed)	0.242	0.580***	0.297	0.199
	(0.155)	(0.166)	(0.197)	(0.131)
Employed				
(ref: unemployed)	0.325*	0.389*	0.158	0.174
	(0.152)	(0.162)	(0.193)	(0.130)
Age	−0.067*	−0.040	−0.049	0.013
	(0.031)	(0.040)	(0.040)	(0.027)
Male	−0.055	0.004	0.028	−0.050
	(0.052)	(0.069)	(0.072)	(0.049)
Intercept	2.395***	2.127***	2.441***	2.577***
	(0.169)	(0.172)	(0.205)	(0.137)
Adj. R^2	0.301	0.307	0.331	0.315
Num. obs.	1519	953	879	1814

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

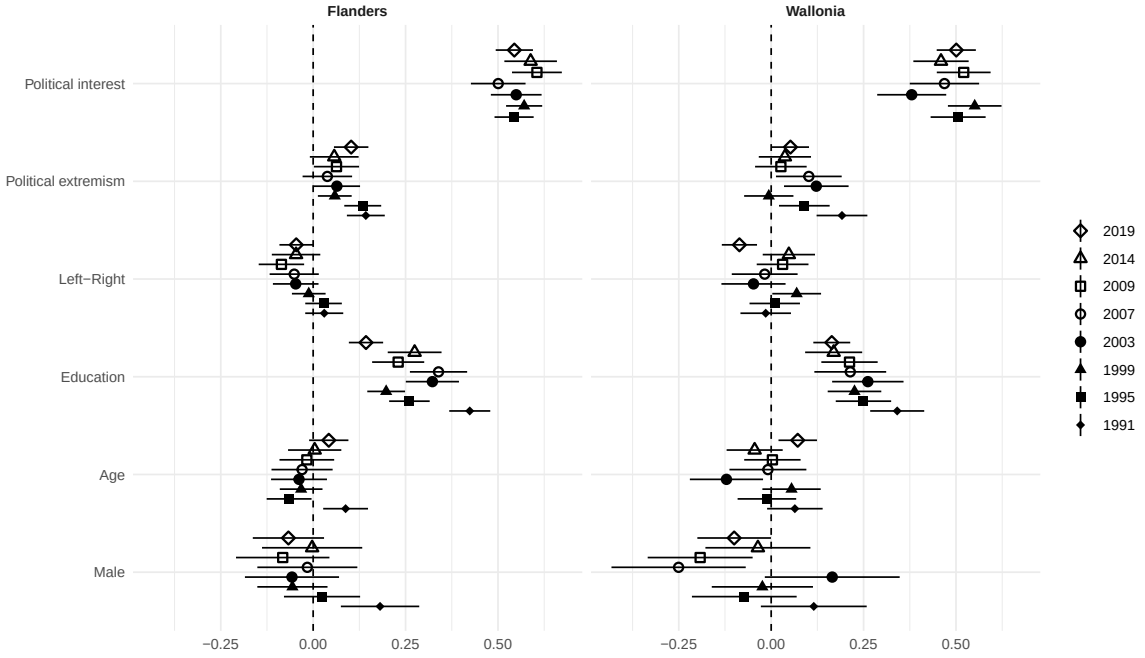
Table 4.B.4: Wallonia

	1999	2003	2014	2019
Affective polarization	0.123**	0.027	0.138**	0.197***
	(0.041)	(0.057)	(0.045)	(0.026)
Political interest	0.501***	0.370***	0.445***	0.476***
	(0.037)	(0.051)	(0.042)	(0.032)
Political extremism	−0.025	0.076	−0.007	−0.004
	(0.036)	(0.051)	(0.041)	(0.031)
Left-right	0.079*	−0.053	0.060	−0.085**
	(0.035)	(0.048)	(0.040)	(0.029)
Education	0.229***	0.239***	0.179***	0.167***
	(0.038)	(0.052)	(0.044)	(0.030)
Not in labour force				
(ref: unemployed)	0.282*	0.292	0.336*	0.374**
	(0.135)	(0.192)	(0.153)	(0.114)
Employed				
(ref: unemployed)	0.256*	0.149	0.324*	0.421***
	(0.130)	(0.191)	(0.145)	(0.109)
Age	0.042	−0.120*	−0.106*	0.009
	(0.040)	(0.053)	(0.044)	(0.031)
Male	0.028	0.158	−0.013	−0.068
	(0.071)	(0.100)	(0.079)	(0.060)
Intercept	2.592***	2.646***	2.568***	2.263***
	(0.144)	(0.209)	(0.159)	(0.117)
Adj. R^2	0.280	0.165	0.214	0.281
Num. obs.	894	548	751	1307

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

4.B.3 Control variables only

Figure 4.B.1: Affective polarization



Note: Regression output of linear regression models, including 95% confidence intervals. Full regression results can be found in Tables 4.B.5 and 4.B.6 on the next two pages.

Table 4.B.5: Regression output Figure 4.B.1 (Flanders)

	1991	1995	1999	2003	2007	2009	2014	2019
Political interest		0.544***	0.571***	0.549***	0.501***	0.605***	0.588***	0.544***
		(0.027)	(0.025)	(0.035)	(0.038)	(0.034)	(0.036)	(0.026)
Political extremism	0.142***	0.134***	0.058*	0.064*	0.038	0.063*	0.057	0.103***
	(0.026)	(0.025)	(0.023)	(0.032)	(0.034)	(0.031)	(0.034)	(0.024)
Left-right	0.030	0.028	−0.012	−0.047	−0.051	−0.086**	−0.046	−0.046*
	(0.026)	(0.025)	(0.023)	(0.031)	(0.034)	(0.031)	(0.033)	(0.023)
Education	0.424***	0.260***	0.197***	0.323***	0.339***	0.230***	0.275***	0.143***
	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.026)	(0.037)	(0.040)	(0.036)	(0.037)	(0.024)
Not in labour force								
(ref: unemployed)	0.128	0.398***	0.077	0.577***	0.210	0.436*	0.282	0.262*
	(0.131)	(0.120)	(0.145)	(0.159)	(0.185)	(0.170)	(0.192)	(0.132)
Employed								
(ref: unemployed)	0.137	0.378***	0.200	0.400*	0.076	0.470**	0.160	0.233
	(0.128)	(0.114)	(0.142)	(0.156)	(0.182)	(0.166)	(0.189)	(0.131)
Age	0.088**	−0.065*	−0.033	−0.038	−0.030	−0.017	0.004	0.042
	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.029)	(0.039)	(0.042)	(0.038)	(0.037)	(0.027)
Male	0.181***	0.024	−0.056	−0.057	−0.016	−0.082	−0.003	−0.067
	(0.054)	(0.053)	(0.048)	(0.065)	(0.069)	(0.064)	(0.069)	(0.049)
Intercept	2.465***	2.380***	2.763***	2.256***	2.671***	2.349***	2.715***	2.910***
	(0.124)	(0.112)	(0.140)	(0.151)	(0.178)	(0.162)	(0.188)	(0.131)
Adj. R^2	0.114	0.307	0.303	0.322	0.293	0.310	0.316	0.282
Num. obs.	2145	1727	1827	1074	1046	1187	977	1884

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 4.B.6: Regression output Figure 4.B.1 (Wallonia)

	1991	1995	1999	2003	2007	2009	2014	2019
Political interest		0.506***	0.551***	0.380***	0.469***	0.521***	0.459***	0.501***
		(0.038)	(0.037)	(0.048)	(0.048)	(0.037)	(0.038)	(0.027)
Political extremism	0.192***	0.090*	−0.006	0.122**	0.102*	0.026	0.037	0.052*
	(0.035)	(0.035)	(0.034)	(0.045)	(0.045)	(0.036)	(0.036)	(0.026)
Left-right	−0.015	0.010	0.069*	−0.048	−0.018	0.031	0.048	−0.086***
	(0.035)	(0.035)	(0.034)	(0.044)	(0.045)	(0.036)	(0.036)	(0.024)
Education	0.341***	0.250***	0.225***	0.261***	0.214***	0.212***	0.169***	0.164***
	(0.037)	(0.038)	(0.037)	(0.049)	(0.050)	(0.039)	(0.039)	(0.025)
Not in labour force								
(ref: unemployed)	0.034	0.147	0.309*	0.259	0.036	0.359*	0.238	0.358***
	(0.161)	(0.138)	(0.129)	(0.178)	(0.189)	(0.141)	(0.139)	(0.100)
Employed								
(ref: unemployed)	0.078	0.138	0.328**	0.113	0.272	0.284*	0.204	0.417***
	(0.155)	(0.130)	(0.124)	(0.178)	(0.176)	(0.138)	(0.134)	(0.096)
Age	0.064	−0.012	0.055	−0.121*	−0.009	0.003	−0.045	0.072**
	(0.038)	(0.040)	(0.040)	(0.051)	(0.053)	(0.039)	(0.039)	(0.027)
Male	0.115	−0.073	−0.024	0.165	−0.250**	−0.192**	−0.036	−0.100*
	(0.073)	(0.072)	(0.070)	(0.093)	(0.093)	(0.072)	(0.072)	(0.051)
Intercept	2.838***	2.783***	2.682***	2.589***	2.802***	2.589***	2.800***	2.721***
	(0.154)	(0.128)	(0.116)	(0.164)	(0.169)	(0.131)	(0.130)	(0.094)
Adj. R^2	0.102	0.239	0.275	0.178	0.200	0.208	0.183	0.250
Num. obs.	1080	980	982	659	683	1070	984	1845

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

4.C Robustness checks

4.C.1 Joint inclusion IP and AP

Table 4.C.1: Flanders, 1999

	Original	Non-missing AP	Original	Non-missing IP	Joint
Ideological polarization	0.067**	0.073**			0.046
	(0.025)	(0.027)			(0.028)
Affective polarization			0.127***	0.111***	0.098***
			(0.026)	(0.027)	(0.028)
Political interest	0.540***	0.546***	0.544***	0.533***	0.536***
	(0.026)	(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.028)	(0.028)
Political extremism	0.050	0.066*	0.060*	0.066*	0.057*
	(0.026)	(0.028)	(0.026)	(0.027)	(0.028)
Left-right	−0.002	−0.005	−0.020	0.002	0.000
	(0.024)	(0.026)	(0.025)	(0.026)	(0.026)
Education	0.177***	0.163***	0.175***	0.160***	0.161***
	(0.028)	(0.029)	(0.028)	(0.029)	(0.029)
Not in labour force					
(ref: unemployed)	0.103	0.247	0.242	0.266	0.269
	(0.153)	(0.161)	(0.155)	(0.161)	(0.161)
Employed					
(ref: unemployed)	0.237	0.343*	0.325*	0.374*	0.371*
	(0.149)	(0.157)	(0.152)	(0.157)	(0.157)
Age	−0.066*	−0.089**	−0.068*	−0.097**	−0.098**
	(0.031)	(0.033)	(0.032)	(0.033)	(0.033)
Male	−0.087	−0.106	−0.055	−0.098	−0.094
	(0.052)	(0.055)	(0.052)	(0.055)	(0.055)
Intercept	2.824***	2.735***	2.697***	2.705***	2.703***
	(0.147)	(0.155)	(0.150)	(0.154)	(0.154)
Adj. R^2	0.284	0.288	0.301	0.293	0.294
Num. obs.	1555	1344	1519	1344	1344

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 4.C.2: Flanders, 2014

	Original	Non-missing AP	Original	Non-missing IP	Joint
Ideological polarization	0.025	0.019			−0.012
	(0.037)	(0.038)			(0.040)
Affective polarization			0.142***	0.112**	0.116*
			(0.039)	(0.043)	(0.045)
Political interest	0.589***	0.602***	0.555***	0.582***	0.582***
	(0.042)	(0.043)	(0.038)	(0.043)	(0.043)
Political extremism	0.027	0.016	0.020	−0.012	−0.011
	(0.039)	(0.039)	(0.035)	(0.040)	(0.041)
Left-right	−0.020	−0.027	−0.050	−0.032	−0.033
	(0.037)	(0.038)	(0.034)	(0.038)	(0.038)
Education	0.275***	0.290***	0.288***	0.292***	0.293***
	(0.041)	(0.042)	(0.038)	(0.042)	(0.042)
Not in labour force					
(ref: unemployed)	0.459*	0.527*	0.297	0.499*	0.503*
	(0.217)	(0.224)	(0.197)	(0.223)	(0.224)
Employed					
(ref: unemployed)	0.339	0.377	0.158	0.356	0.359
	(0.213)	(0.220)	(0.193)	(0.219)	(0.219)
Age	−0.022	−0.038	−0.049	−0.072	−0.073
	(0.041)	(0.044)	(0.040)	(0.045)	(0.045)
Male	−0.074	−0.068	0.028	−0.048	−0.047
	(0.076)	(0.078)	(0.072)	(0.078)	(0.079)
Intercept	2.627***	2.555***	2.693***	2.568***	2.563***
	(0.211)	(0.219)	(0.192)	(0.217)	(0.218)
Adj. R^2	0.312	0.329	0.331	0.335	0.334
Num. obs.	747	686	879	686	686

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 4.C.3: Flanders, 2019

	Original	Non-missing AP	Original	Non-missing IP	Joint
Ideological polarization	0.145***	0.152***			0.094**
	(0.031)	(0.031)			(0.033)
Affective polarization			0.201***	0.185***	0.149***
			(0.025)	(0.031)	(0.033)
Political interest	0.533***	0.534***	0.524***	0.536***	0.526***
	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.026)	(0.032)	(0.032)
Political extremism	0.066*	0.074*	0.046	0.056	0.041
	(0.030)	(0.030)	(0.025)	(0.031)	(0.031)
Left-right	−0.051	−0.054	−0.068**	−0.057*	−0.062*
	(0.028)	(0.029)	(0.023)	(0.028)	(0.028)
Education	0.116***	0.121***	0.138***	0.137***	0.124***
	(0.029)	(0.030)	(0.024)	(0.029)	(0.029)
Not in labour force					
(ref: unemployed)	0.189	0.169	0.199	0.146	0.135
	(0.164)	(0.164)	(0.131)	(0.164)	(0.163)
Employed					
(ref: unemployed)	0.132	0.092	0.174	0.076	0.065
	(0.163)	(0.164)	(0.130)	(0.163)	(0.163)
Age	0.032	0.021	0.013	0.010	0.002
	(0.037)	(0.037)	(0.027)	(0.037)	(0.037)
Male	−0.009	−0.012	−0.050	0.014	0.008
	(0.061)	(0.061)	(0.049)	(0.061)	(0.060)
Intercept	2.956***	2.992***	2.960***	2.997***	3.012***
	(0.162)	(0.163)	(0.129)	(0.162)	(0.161)
Adj. R^2	0.314	0.324	0.315	0.331	0.335
Num. obs.	1204	1164	1814	1164	1164

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 4.C.4: Wallonia, 1999

	Original	Non-missing AP	Original	Non-missing IP	Joint
Ideological polarization	0.008	0.001			−0.012
	(0.037)	(0.038)			(0.039)
Affective polarization			0.110**	0.057	0.060
			(0.036)	(0.039)	(0.040)
Political interest	0.493***	0.481***	0.505***	0.469***	0.469***
	(0.039)	(0.040)	(0.038)	(0.041)	(0.041)
Political extremism	−0.009	−0.007	−0.025	−0.019	−0.017
	(0.037)	(0.038)	(0.036)	(0.038)	(0.039)
Left-right	0.068	0.071	0.079*	0.072*	0.073*
	(0.035)	(0.036)	(0.035)	(0.036)	(0.036)
Education	0.218***	0.217***	0.232***	0.220***	0.221***
	(0.039)	(0.040)	(0.038)	(0.040)	(0.040)
Not in labour force					
(ref: unemployed)	0.356*	0.375*	0.282*	0.365*	0.364*
	(0.154)	(0.155)	(0.135)	(0.155)	(0.156)
Employed					
(ref: unemployed)	0.231	0.258	0.256*	0.246	0.248
	(0.147)	(0.148)	(0.130)	(0.148)	(0.148)
Age	−0.007	0.013	0.043	0.012	0.014
	(0.043)	(0.044)	(0.040)	(0.044)	(0.044)
Male	0.013	−0.012	0.028	−0.003	−0.004
	(0.075)	(0.076)	(0.071)	(0.076)	(0.076)
Intercept	2.816***	2.834***	2.806***	2.838***	2.839***
	(0.140)	(0.141)	(0.122)	(0.141)	(0.141)
Adj. R^2	0.225	0.218	0.280	0.220	0.219
Num. obs.	797	750	894	750	750

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 4.C.5: Wallonia, 2014

	Original	Non-missing AP	Original	Non-missing IP	Joint
Ideological polarization	0.060	0.059			0.046
	(0.045)	(0.048)			(0.049)
Affective polarization			0.130**	0.099	0.090
			(0.042)	(0.055)	(0.056)
Political interest	0.433***	0.444***	0.449***	0.430***	0.427***
	(0.049)	(0.053)	(0.042)	(0.053)	(0.053)
Political extremism	0.077	0.064	−0.007	0.042	0.040
	(0.046)	(0.047)	(0.040)	(0.050)	(0.050)
Left-right	0.032	0.035	0.058	0.041	0.038
	(0.045)	(0.046)	(0.038)	(0.046)	(0.046)
Education	0.234***	0.211***	0.177***	0.232***	0.228***
	(0.047)	(0.050)	(0.043)	(0.051)	(0.051)
Not in labour force					
(ref: unemployed)	0.333	0.394	0.336*	0.397*	0.399*
	(0.190)	(0.202)	(0.153)	(0.202)	(0.202)
Employed					
(ref: unemployed)	0.303	0.389*	0.324*	0.385*	0.391*
	(0.181)	(0.189)	(0.145)	(0.188)	(0.188)
Age	−0.045	−0.073	−0.108*	−0.078	−0.080
	(0.051)	(0.057)	(0.045)	(0.057)	(0.057)
Male	0.016	0.002	−0.013	0.005	0.006
	(0.090)	(0.095)	(0.079)	(0.095)	(0.095)
Intercept	2.686***	2.660***	2.712***	2.662***	2.656***
	(0.180)	(0.187)	(0.140)	(0.187)	(0.187)
Adj. R^2	0.206	0.219	0.214	0.222	0.222
Num. obs.	574	459	751	459	459

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 4.C.6: Wallonia, 2019

	Original	Non-missing AP	Original	Non-missing IP	Joint
Ideological polarization	0.213***	0.202***			0.145**
	(0.044)	(0.045)			(0.047)
Affective polarization			0.230***	0.210***	0.165***
			(0.031)	(0.043)	(0.045)
Political interest	0.504***	0.504***	0.482***	0.504***	0.483***
	(0.045)	(0.047)	(0.032)	(0.046)	(0.047)
Political extremism	0.024	0.032	−0.004	0.016	−0.005
	(0.042)	(0.043)	(0.031)	(0.044)	(0.044)
Left-right	−0.087*	−0.091*	−0.087**	−0.096*	−0.084*
	(0.040)	(0.041)	(0.029)	(0.040)	(0.040)
Education	0.152***	0.146***	0.171***	0.168***	0.159***
	(0.041)	(0.042)	(0.031)	(0.042)	(0.042)
Not in labour force					
(ref: unemployed)	0.216	0.226	0.374**	0.212	0.204
	(0.157)	(0.160)	(0.114)	(0.159)	(0.158)
Employed					
(ref: unemployed)	0.311*	0.321*	0.421***	0.315*	0.311*
	(0.149)	(0.152)	(0.109)	(0.152)	(0.151)
Age	0.040	0.026	0.009	0.040	0.015
	(0.047)	(0.049)	(0.033)	(0.048)	(0.048)
Male	−0.231**	−0.234**	−0.068	−0.240**	−0.227**
	(0.082)	(0.084)	(0.060)	(0.083)	(0.083)
Intercept	2.888***	2.890***	2.668***	2.910***	2.908***
	(0.146)	(0.148)	(0.106)	(0.148)	(0.147)
Adj. R^2	0.301	0.290	0.281	0.294	0.303
Num. obs.	687	652	1307	652	652

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

4.C.2 Multiple imputation

Table 4.C.7: Flanders

	1999	2014	2019
Ideological polarization	0.046	0.008	0.080**
	(0.032)	(0.042)	(0.030)
Affective polarization	0.118***	0.139**	0.170***
	(0.029)	(0.043)	(0.027)
Political interest	0.550***	0.557***	0.512***
	(0.025)	(0.037)	(0.026)
Political extremism	0.027	0.026	0.030
	(0.024)	(0.035)	(0.025)
Left-right	−0.010	−0.049	−0.064**
	(0.023)	(0.033)	(0.023)
Education	0.195***	0.279***	0.125***
	(0.026)	(0.037)	(0.024)
Not in labour force (ref: unemployed)	0.112	0.250	0.201
	(0.144)	(0.192)	(0.130)
Employed (ref: unemployed)	0.234	0.134	0.198
	(0.142)	(0.188)	(0.129)
Age	−0.050	−0.033	0.011
	(0.029)	(0.038)	(0.027)
Male	−0.032	0.010	−0.052
	(0.048)	(0.069)	(0.048)
Intercept	2.770***	2.744***	2.951***
	(0.139)	(0.187)	(0.129)
Imputations	20	20	20
Num. obs	1827	977	1884
Adj. R^2	0.316	0.325	0.310

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Table 4.C.8: Wallonia

	1999	2014	2019
Ideological polarization	0.009	0.056	0.103*
	(0.039)	(0.045)	(0.039)
Affective polarization	0.123**	0.135**	0.182***
	(0.037)	(0.044)	(0.032)
Political interest	0.508***	0.432***	0.455***
	(0.036)	(0.038)	(0.027)
Political extremism	−0.033	−0.003	−0.021
	(0.035)	(0.038)	(0.027)
Left-right	0.073*	0.051	−0.074**
	(0.034)	(0.036)	(0.024)
Education	0.231***	0.182***	0.155***
	(0.037)	(0.040)	(0.025)
Not in labour force			
(ref: unemployed)	0.289*	0.248	0.337***
	(0.128)	(0.138)	(0.098)
Employed			
(ref: unemployed)	0.296*	0.217	0.404***
	(0.124)	(0.133)	(0.094)
Age	0.043	−0.067	0.039
	(0.039)	(0.039)	(0.027)
Male	−0.007	−0.033	−0.078
	(0.070)	(0.072)	(0.050)
Intercept	2.774***	2.795***	2.727***
	(0.117)	(0.129)	(0.093)
Imputations	20	20	20
Num. obs.	982	984	1845
Adj. R^2	0.284	0.197	0.283

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$

Chapter 5

National or European? The Sources of Political Polarization Behind EP Turnout

Abstract

Recent research has shown that political polarization drives turnout in national elections. Yet, it is less clear how polarization influences turnout in supranational elections such as those for the European Parliament (EP). In this paper, I argue that the second-order election thesis would expect that polarization associated with the national level – ideological and affective polarization – drives turnout in EP elections. Conversely, if EP elections have truly become European, turnout should predominantly be influenced by polarization over European integration – EU polarization. Using the 2024 European Election Study, I examine the effects of these three types of polarization on turnout. The results show that turnout in EP elections is by and large driven by affective polarization, whereas the impact of ideological left-right polarization is less evident. EU polarization also drives voters to the ballot box, but the effect is much smaller. The implication of these findings is that turnout at EP elections is still largely driven by national factors, but European aspects of party competition also play a key role.

This chapter is based on a working paper.

5.1 Introduction

The elections for the European Parliament (EP) have since their inception in 1979 attracted lower turnout than national-level elections. Even more, levels of turnout have decreased over time. In the literature, EP elections are often marked as second-order elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980) because voters think less is at stake than during national elections, forcing them to act on domestic political cues to make up their mind about turning out to vote or not (Ehin & Talving, 2021; Hix & Marsh, 2007; Lefevere & Van Aelst, 2014; M. Marsh, 1998; Reif, 1984). Nonetheless, turnout suddenly rose again in the 2019 EP election, a pattern that persisted in the follow-up 2024 elections.

At the same time, academic and societal attention has increasingly been devoted to the concept of political polarization (Garzia et al., 2023; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Iyengar et al., 2012; Koedam et al., 2025; Le Corre Juratic, 2025; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021; Westwood et al., 2018). Whereas political polarization is often discussed in relation to its negative consequences (Berntzen et al., 2024; Kingzette et al., 2021; Lee, 2022; Martherus et al., 2021; Svolik, 2019), it also tends to increase political participation such as turnout (Ahn & Mutz, 2023; Harteveld & Wagner, 2022; Phillips, 2024). Yet, whether polarization also has the ability to increase turnout at the supranational level for EP elections remains unclear.

In this paper, I speak to this research puzzle. I argue that if the second-order election thesis still holds, turnout at EP elections should predominantly be driven by polarization that finds its roots at the national political level – perceived ideological left-right polarization and affective polarization. Yet, if EP elections are actually about European issues, as is increasingly argued (Braun, 2021; Eugster et al., 2021; Gattermann et al., 2021; Hobolt & Spoon, 2012; van Elsas et al., 2019), it should rather be polarization over the question of European integration that should stimulate turnout – perceived EU polarization.

To address this question, I make use of the 2024 European Election Study, a post-election study fielded in all 27 Member States. I find that turnout is by and large

driven by affective polarization – the hostility of voters toward voters of other parties. At the same time, I also find a positive effect of EU polarization, albeit much smaller. Ideological left-right polarization, on the other hand, does not have a significant effect on turnout once the other types of polarization are taken into account.

I proceed as follows. I first conceptualize ideological and affective polarization and explain why they should drive turnout if EP elections are still second-order. I then shift focus to EU polarization and hypothesize that this should stimulate turnout if EP elections have actually become European. I then introduce the data, explain how I operationalize the key variables of the models, and describe my methods. Subsequently, I present the results as well as a set of robustness checks to scrutinize the results more thoroughly. I end with a conclusion and the wider implications of my findings.

5.2 Polarization and turnout

Political polarization has recently attracted a lot of academic attention (Iyengar et al., 2019; Koedam et al., 2025; Le Corre Juratic, 2025; Wagner, 2024). This line of research usually distinguishes between ideological and affective polarization. Ideological polarization refers to the extent to which political parties diverge in their ideological positions (Sartori, 1976), typically measured along a simplified left–right or liberal-conservative continuum. It captures how similar or dissimilar party stances are, reflecting the degree of ideological competition within a political system. This concept relates closely to the core function of parties in offering voters distinct policy platforms and clear choices during elections (Schattschneider, 1960). When parties adopt ideologically proximate positions, ideological polarization is low; when their positions become more distinct and distant, ideological polarization is high.

For decades, research has examined the role of ideological polarization in stimulating voter turnout. Theoretically, two mechanisms should drive turnout as a result of ideological polarization. First, spatial theories of voting argue that voters behave rationally during elections and vote for a party that is ideologically nearest to their own

preferences (Stokes, 1963). Increased ideological polarization offers a larger subset of ideological options to voters, which should reduce the ideological distance between voters and one of the parties. As this increases the utility of voting (Downs, 1957), voters are more likely to cast a ballot. Second, ideological polarization not only decreases the ideological distance between voters and their preferred party, but also widens the distance with other parties. This matters, because finding close representation is of little importance if the other parties are ideologically not that different. Ideological polarization thus raises the stake of the elections, which should drive turnout. It is thus not solely the quantity of supply that drives turnout, but also the quality of supply (Dalton, 2008). Accordingly, whereas the effective number of parties has an ambiguous effect on turnout in national elections, studies measuring ideological polarization as the dispersion of political parties on the left-right continuum find a consistent positive effect around the globe (Béjar et al., 2020; Dalton, 2008; Ellger, 2023; Hobolt & Hoerner, 2020; Le Corre Juratic, 2025; Moral, 2017).

In addition to ideological polarization, recent studies have increasingly focused on affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019; Wagner, 2024). Rather than emphasizing the ideological distance between parties, affective polarization concerns the extent to which politics evokes strong emotions and animosity between voters. It reflects the tendency of individuals to strongly identify with their own party and view its supporters positively, while perceiving opposing parties and their voters with hostility and distrust (Berntzen et al., 2024; Iyengar et al., 2012; Westwood et al., 2018). At its core, affective polarization captures the alignment of political identities with social identities, leading to in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination that can extend beyond the political sphere into everyday interpersonal relationships (Huber & Malhotra, 2017; Lee, 2022; Westwood et al., 2018). Affective polarization is high when a voter exhibits strong sympathy for their own camp and simultaneous aversion toward others, fostering division and bias in social and political life. In recent, cross-national analyses, it has been shown that affective polarization is widespread in democratic societies, yet the intensity varies greatly between countries (Garzia et al., 2023; Gidron et al., 2020).

The literature on affective polarization has mostly focused on its negative conse-

quences. Yet, one of the positive effects of affective polarization is that it also tends to motivate voters to participate in politics, for example through electoral turnout (Ahn & Mutz, 2023; Ferreira da Silva & Garzia, 2024; Harteveld et al., 2022; Phillips, 2024). Whereas ideological polarization increases the utility of elections, affective polarization raises the emotional stakes of elections. The mechanism flows both through the in- as well as out-group aspect of affective polarization. Voters that are strongly attached to their party assess the performance of their party in a more emotional way. Good performance, mostly visible through election outcomes, thus triggers positive emotions, whereas a party's failure might feel like personal failure (Ward & Tavits, 2019). The main way to contribute to this at the individual level is to vote on election day. At the same time, success of disliked other parties should feel threatening, whereas their failure should activate positive emotions. Both processes can occur independently; voters without negative affect toward other parties can be triggered to vote because of strong attachment to the own party, whereas voters without strong party attachments can still be triggered to vote because of strong dislike for another party. Evidently, a combination of both processes should trigger turnout most strongly.

Whereas the positive effects of both ideological and affective polarization on individual-level turnout are clear for national elections, it is unclear whether these effects also hold for supranational elections such as those for the EP. Ideological polarization is captured through the supply and distance of political parties on the left-right continuum. This ideological divide is at the heart of party competition in European multiparty systems, but it matters much less for EP elections. For example, party competition over support for European integration is, apart from the extremes, not adequately captured by left-right positioning in the domestic arena (L. Hooghe et al., 2002). The impact of affective polarization is also less clear at the supranational level, as it is generally captured as the hostility toward other parties and their voters at the domestic level. Although most of these parties compete at the EP elections as well, the drivers of affective polarization in multiparty systems are predominantly rooted in domestic issues such as the divide over cultural issues and immigration or the presence or absence of a populist radical right party (Han, 2024; Harteveld et al., 2022). An important driver of affective polarization in European multiparty systems is also the

division of politics between ideological blocks (Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Reiljan & Ryan, 2021), which only limitedly appeal to European politics. It seems thus less evident that affective polarization drives turnout at the supranational level.

Yet, the existing literature on EP elections suggests that ideological and affective polarisation may, in fact, also drive turnout in supranational elections. In their seminal study of the first elections for the EP in 1979, Reif and Schmitt (1980) argued that EP elections are best understood as second-order elections. Voters see them as less important than first-order elections at the national level, mostly because they assess European issues as remote and of lower importance. As a result, EP elections are dominated by domestic rather than European issues, and decisions of voters in these elections reflect attitudes towards domestic politics. Consequently, opposition and protest parties perform much better during EP elections, and government parties suffer from electoral loss. In the following decades, many studies found support for the second-order election thesis (Ehin & Talving, 2021; Hix & Marsh, 2007; Hobolt & Wittrock, 2011; M. Marsh, 1998; Reif, 1984).

Accordingly, the second-order election thesis argues that voters do not care much about European politics, and that they mostly see the EP elections in domestic terms. In their decision between the different political parties, or to turn out to vote at all, they rely on cues from national politics. As described, two of the most prominent drivers of turnout in national politics are ideological and affective polarization. If the second-order election thesis still holds, voters should thus be driven by the domestic cues of ideological and affective polarization in their decision to cast a vote for the EP elections or not. This leads to the following hypotheses:

> H1: *Citizens with higher levels of perceived ideological polarization are more likely to vote during the EP elections.*

> H2: *Citizens with higher levels of affective polarization are more likely to vote during the EP elections.*

Alternatively, a different strand of literature argues that turnout in supranational EP

elections is not only a reflection of domestic cues, but also of specific issues related to the EP election (campaign) (Gattermann et al., 2021; Hobolt & Spoon, 2012). Although these studies do not necessarily deny the importance of domestic cues, they argue that merely focusing on domestic issues to explain electoral behaviour such as turnout in the EP elections offers an incomplete picture. Rather, attitudes towards the EU as well as specific campaign events during each EP election also play a role in voters' behaviour.

Several studies have indeed revealed the impact of EU-specific drivers on voters' behaviour in EP elections. For example, van Elsas et al. (2019) showed play an important role in the party choice of Dutch voters during EP elections, and the impact of these attitudes is not limited to the European election campaign. Research has also revealed that contrary to early EP elections, government parties do no longer shy away from EU issues during EP elections (Eugster et al., 2021; M. Maier et al., 2021). Furthermore, Braun (2021) showed that the public debate around the 2019 EP elections was strongly influenced by European issues, and that voters held genuine attitudes toward European integration. Importantly, these attitudes contributed to higher turnout, which is in line with other studies showing that information about and interest for the EU and EP elections in particular drives participation (Clark, 2014; Hogh & Larsen, 2016; Schmitt et al., 2015).

These changes at the party and voter level are in line with more structural changes at the European level. In the recent decades, citizens' influence on EU decision-making has grown considerably, most notably by the enhanced powers of the EP in the EU legislation process. As such, EU policymaking has become more directly accountable to European citizens. In this changed environment, EP elections are the key vehicle for European citizens to exercise their influence. Voters have, accordingly, also participated at higher rates in the two most recent EP elections after a decades-long declining trend in turnout.

Accordingly, this line of research has thus provided evidence for the idea that EP elections are slowly moving away from their second-order nature. I argue that if EP elections indeed are becoming first-order elections, then turnout should rather

be driven by polarization over European issues (henceforth *EU polarization*) instead of polarization rooted in domestic cues such as ideological left-right polarization or affective polarization. EU polarization reflects the extent to which political parties take diverging positions on the issue of European integration. If political parties are closely positioned to each other in their view on further European integration, EU polarization is low. Yet, if they offer a wide range of ideological viewpoints on whether to integrate further at the European level, EU polarization is high.

In some way, EU polarization resembles ideological left-right polarization, as it focuses on the offer of party ideologies. The main difference is the continuum on which the parties can take diverging positions: for EU polarization, this ranges from no further European integration at all to much stronger European integration than is currently the case. Neither side of this spectrum is necessarily left- or right-wing (Prosser, 2016). Thus, it is a distinct type of ideological polarization. In essence, EU polarization captures the extent to which political parties truly compete over European issues or whether their positions are largely the same.

If voters take decisions in the EP elections based on first-order, European issues rather than second-order, national issues, EU polarization should thus likewise have a positive effect on turnout. The mechanism that links EU polarization to turnout is relatively comparable to how ideological polarization drives voters to cast a vote in national elections. First, higher EU polarization increases the chances of voters to find a party that is ideologically close to them on the European integration issue. Second, greater EU polarization raises the stake of EP elections, because voters see that political parties distant from their personal European integration preferences also compete for votes. This second aspect might be even more important at EP elections, as especially mainstream parties have generally offered voters little distinct choices over the issue of European integration (Rohrschneider & Whitefield, 2016).

Some previous research has touched upon the idea that EU polarization drives turnout in EP elections, but has not directly studied this mechanism. Hobolt and Spoon (2012) found that voters were more likely to switch parties or abstain during the 2009 EP elections if they were more distant from the party of their last national vote on the

European integration issue. In addition, (Braun & Schäfer, 2022) found that voters with more extreme positions on the European integration issue were more likely to cast a vote during the 2019 EP elections. Accordingly, I hypothesize:

> H3: *Citizens with higher levels of perceived EU polarization are more likely to vote during the EP elections.*

5.3 Data and methods

To examine my hypotheses, I make use of the 2024 European Election Study (EES) (Popa et al., 2024). The EES is a post-election survey fielded in all 27 European Member States, intended to study comparative political and voting behaviour in the 2024 EP election. The dataset consists of roughly a 1,000 individuals per country, largely representative of the voting population through quota for gender, age, education, region, and level of urbanization.[1] The data collection took place in the weeks directly after the 2024 EP election, between 10 and 30 June 2024.

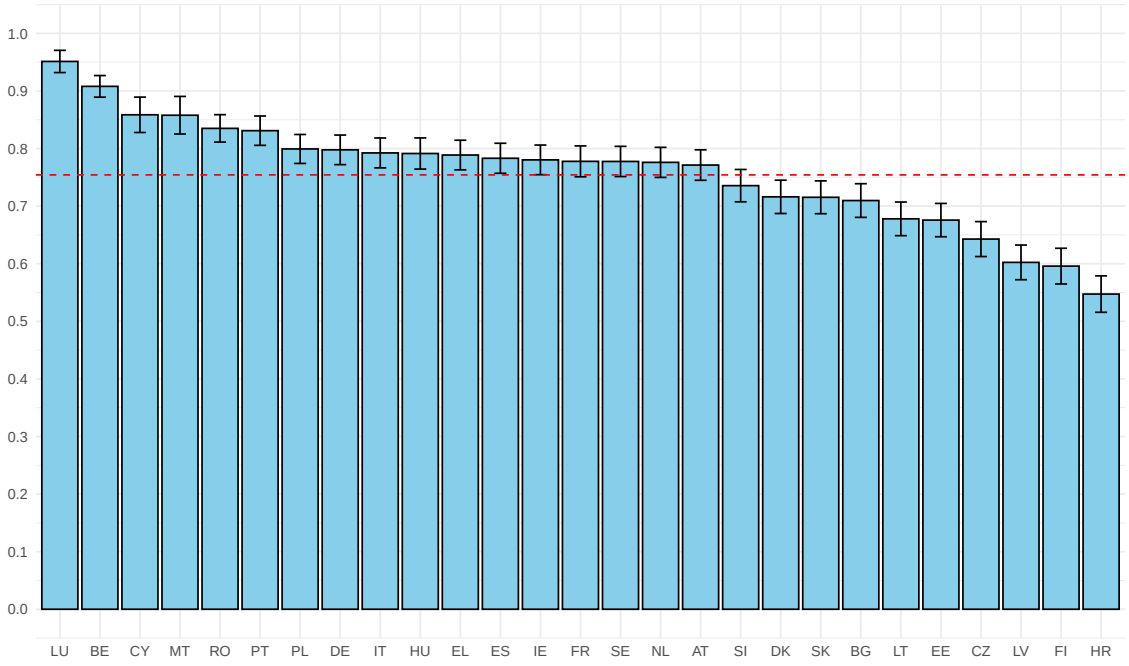
For the dependent variable of turnout, I rely on a question that asked respondents whether they had turned out to vote or not. I code respondents that turned out as 1, and those who abstained as 0. Figure 5.1 maps the average level of reported turnout for each country in the dataset.

To measure ideological, affective, and EU-level polarization, I rely on questions about the different political parties in their country. Specifically, respondents were asked 3 sets of questions about the 8 most important political parties in their country. For ideological polarization, I rely on the question that asked respondents to place all of these parties on a left-right continuum, ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right). For EU-specific polarization, respondents were asked a similar question, but with regards to what extent they believed the parties were in favour of further European integration. Specifically, they placed their view of the parties' stance on a similar 0-10 scale, ranging from "European unification has already gone too far" (0) to "European unification

[1]The samples for Cyprus, Luxembourg, and Malta consist of 500 respondents.

should be pushed further" (10). Finally, the question used for affective polarization asked respondents what they think about the *supporters* of the same parties. For this question, they could indicate their sympathy for different electorates ranging from 0 (strongly dislike) to 10 (strongly like). This question is the predominant way to measure affective polarization in multiparty systems (Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021), and has been validated to adequately capture the concept (Gidron, Sheffer, & Mor, 2022b).

Figure 5.1: Reported turnout



Note: Average level of reported turnout for the 2024 European elections per country, including 95% confidence intervals. The dashed line represents the average level of reported turnout across all 27 member states.

To create the three polarization measures, I follow the spread-of-scores measure proposed by Wagner (2021). This measure acknowledges that voters can have sympathy toward multiple parties (or their voters) and is therefore especially well-suited for to measure affective polarization in European democracies with more than two parties. Although this measure was created to measure affective polarization, it is also suited to measure ideological polarization as it captures the spread of the left-right positions of the different parties in a system as perceived by a respondent. Accordingly, it

measures the full dispersion of left-right polarization of the political offer as seen by a respondent. In fact, the golden standard in the literature for measuring ideological polarization indeed follows essentially the same approach (Dalton, 2008). Although a measure of EU-specific polarization is lacking in the literature, I follow the same approach with the use of the European unification question. Again, this approach should adequately measure to what extent respondents believe that parties are relatively similar in their position on EU integration (low polarization), or whether they believe that a wide range of options is available to them regarding this specific topic (high polarization).

Theoretically, the polarization measures can range from 0 (low polarization) to 5 (high polarization). It is calculated in the following way:

$$\sqrt{\sum_{p=1}^{P} v_p(\text{sympathy}_{ip} - \overline{\text{sympathy}}_i)^2}$$

Where p represents the particular party (electorate), i the respondent, like_{ip} a respondent's sympathy toward a party electorate, and v_p the vote share of the particular party. I weigh the party sizes according to the outcome of the EP elections. The mean like at the end of the equation should also be weighed for party size in the following way:

$$\overline{\text{sympathy}}_i = \sum_{p=1}^{P}(v_p \cdot \text{sympathy}_{ip})$$

As mentioned, the measures of ideological polarization and EU-specific polarization are constructed with the same calculation. For ideological polarization, *sympathy* is replaced by each party's score on the left-right question. For EU-specific polarization, I replace this part of the equation with the score for the European unification question for each party.

It is important to mention that for both ideological and EU-specific polarization, the questions used capture the respondent's *perceived* level of polarization – which

is not necessarily the actual polarization as measured by, for example, expert party placements. Yet, perceived polarization matters more for political behaviour such as turnout than actual polarization (Enders & Armaly, 2019), most likely because voters can only behave in relation to what they actually perceive. Operationalizing ideological polarization in this way also follows previous work (Dalton, 2008; Ellger, 2023; Hobolt & Hoerner, 2020; Lachat, 2008; Moral, 2017).

To avoid spurious effects, I control for a set of variables that has a history of influencing turnout. The models include a measure of political interest ranging from 1 (not at all interested) to 4 (very interested). For economic evaluations, I include a respondent's assessment of the national economy compared to 12 months ago (1 = a lot worse; 5 = a lot better). To control for political support, I include a respondent's satisfaction with their national democracy (1 = not at all satisfied; 4 = very satisfied). I also control for a respondent's ideological orientation through a left-right self-placement question (1 = left; 10 = right). Finally, I include a set of socio-demographic variables: employment status (1 = not in labour force; 2 = unemployed; 3 = employed), gender (1 = male), age (in years), and education (6 ISCED categories).

Given the binary nature of the dependent variable, I employ logistic regressions to analyse the data. I include country fixed-effects to account for auto-correlation at the country level. For the ease of interpretation, all independent variables are standardized (except for the binary variable gender and the nominal variable employment status) such that coefficients represent the effect of a one standard-deviation change in the predictor and are directly comparable.

5.4 Results

In Table 5.1, I present the results of four logistic regression models. I first include the three polarization variables separately, including the aforementioned control variables. In the final fourth model, I include them jointly to assess the impact of each type of polarization while controlling for other types of polarization.

Table 5.1: Logistic regression results

	AP	IP	EU	Joint
Affective polarization	0.392***			0.352***
	(0.020)			(0.029)
Ideological polarization		0.207***		0.040
		(0.021)		(0.027)
EU polarization			0.239***	0.063*
			(0.022)	(0.028)
Political interest	0.544***	0.597***	0.564***	0.546***
	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.023)	(0.025)
Nat. economy	0.096***	0.087***	0.084***	0.099***
	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.024)	(0.026)
SWD	0.218***	0.215***	0.207***	0.238***
	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.024)	(0.026)
Unemployed				
(ref: not in labour force)	−0.351***	−0.353***	−0.482***	−0.417***
	(0.083)	(0.086)	(0.089)	(0.098)
Employed				
(ref: not in labour force)	0.171***	0.123**	0.127**	0.166**
	(0.045)	(0.046)	(0.048)	(0.052)
Left-right	0.022	0.021	0.029	0.041
	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.023)
Male	−0.029	−0.053	−0.047	−0.039
	(0.038)	(0.039)	(0.041)	(0.044)
Age	0.223***	0.234***	0.233***	0.201***
	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.022)	(0.024)
Education	0.137***	0.124***	0.140***	0.137***
	(0.019)	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.022)
Intercept	1.368***	1.454***	1.386***	1.375***
	(0.101)	(0.102)	(0.105)	(0.111)
AIC	17971.392	17260.667	15830.795	13596.027
Num. obs.	20364	19492	17973	16005

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Logistic regression models with country fixed-effects.

When included separately, all three types of polarization have a positive and significant effect on turnout in Models 1-3. Voters with higher levels of affective, ideological, or EU polarization were more likely to turn out during the last EP elections than voters with lower levels of such polarization. However, there is a clear difference in effect sizes between these models. The effect of affective polarization is clearly the largest, and nearly twice as large as the effect of ideological and EU polarization on turnout.

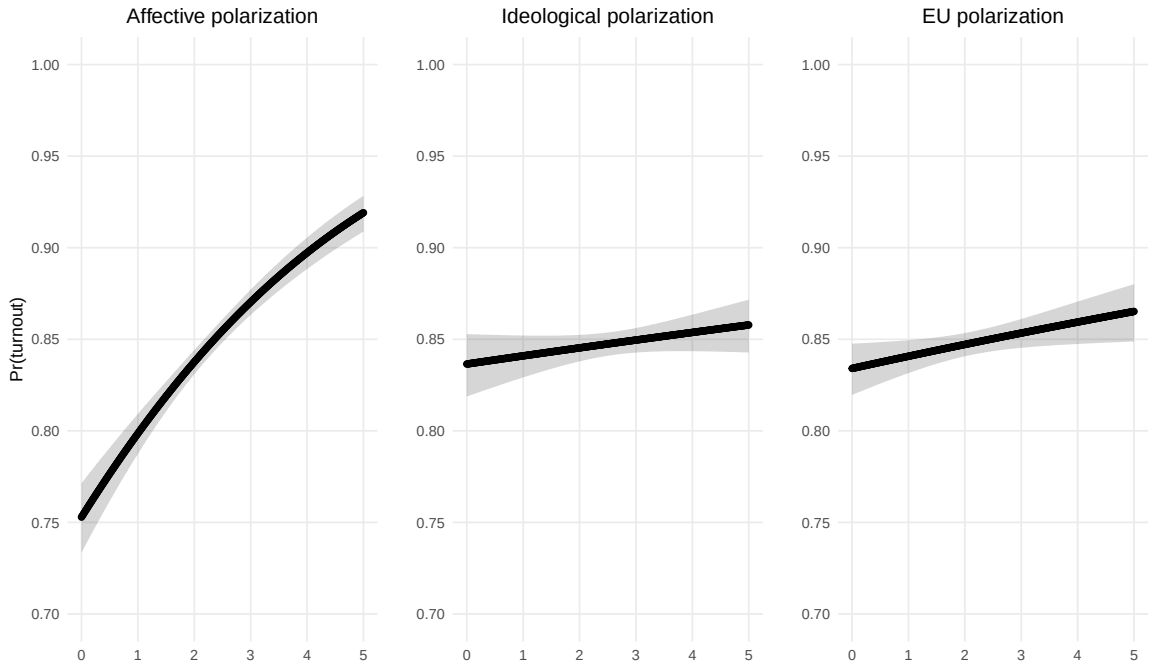
In Model 4, I include the three different types of polarization jointly in the model to see if the effects hold when controlling for other types of polarization. Interestingly, this

changes the results quite dramatically. The effect of affective polarization is robust: the effect size is nearly identical as in Model 1, and the coefficient remains strongly significant. Yet, the impact of ideological polarization collapses. Although the effect remains positive, the size shrinks to less than a fifth of the original. The coefficient is, additionally, no longer significant at conventional levels ($p = 0.15$). This result is largely in line with earlier findings at the national level, which has documented that the impact of ideological polarization on turnout is more suppressed in regression models that additionally include affective polarization (Eck & Michel, 2024; Ellger, 2023). Although both types of polarization also predict each other to some extent (Algara & Zur, 2023; van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022), this research generally shows that affective polarization has the largest impact on turnout.

Furthermore, Model 4 shows that EU-specific polarization matters too, even when controlling for affective and ideological left-right polarization. Although the effect size is visibly smaller, it remains positive and statistically significant. In comparison, though, the impact of affective polarization is almost 6 times as large as the impact of EU polarization. In their decision to vote or stay at home on EP election days, voters thus predominantly rely on their emotional involvement with national politics. This lends support for the idea that the second-order election thesis is still relevant. At the same time, how parties position themselves on European integration matters too, but less so. This is important, because it means that EP elections are not completely second-order, and voters also rely on issues that are specific to the EU in order to make up their mind about voting or abstaining.

To get a clearer picture of the exact effects of the different types of polarization, I present predicted probabilities for each variable in Figure 5.2. The figure visualizes Model 4 and holds all covariates at their mean. It clearly shows that the impact on turnout is most prominent for affective polarization. Citizens with the highest level of affective polarization are 17 percentage points more likely to vote in EP elections than citizens with the lowest level of affective polarization. For EU polarization, these effects are smaller, but still present. The difference between those who perceive the most and least polarization over European integration is about 4 percentage points.

Figure 5.2: Predicted probabilities



Note: Predicted probabilities of turnout across levels of affective, ideological and EU polarization, including 95% confidence intervals. The graphs are based on the fourth model in Table 5.1.

5.5 Robustness checks

To check the robustness of the regression analyses, I perform a set of additional analyses on the data. First, the different types of polarization are not completely distinct, and it could be argued that the results are suffering from multicollinearity issues. In Appendix 5.A.2, I provide a correlation table of all variables. The three measures indeed correlate to a considerable extent (0.45 – 0.53). These levels are, however, not necessarily too strong, and show that a large amount of the variation of each variable is not explained by another type of polarization. To test whether they can be included jointly in the model without issues of multicollinearity, I present the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values in Appendix 5.A.3. These values are all below 1.7, which is well below the threshold of where multicollinearity becomes a more serious issue (2.5) (Johnston et al., 2018).

Second, the polarization variables were weighted according to party sizes of the 2024 EP elections. However, some parties that are represented in the national parliament do not make it to the EP due to a lower number of seats that is available for each country. As an additional check, I weigh for party sizes according to seat shares in the national parliament according to the last national election in each country and replicate the same models (Appendix 5.B.1). The results are very similar to the original analyses.

Third, the main regression models did not make use of the survey weights provided by the EES. The EES provides a post-stratification weight to correct for under- and overrepresentation of the sample based on gender x age (interlocked), education, urbanization, and region. I replicate the main analyses while using this survey weight in Appendix 5.B.2, but the results do not differ substantially from the results in the main models.

Finally, the three variables of polarization suffer from some item non-response in the surveys, leading to a drop of observations especially when included jointly. Particularly the questions that asked respondents to position the political parties on a left-right or a integration-disintegration continuum have missing values. In the main analysis, these were treated with listwise deletion. To examine whether the results are driven by the exclusion of these observations, I run the same models using multiple imputations for the missing values of affective, ideological, and EU polarization. Specifically, I impute $m = 10$ for every missing value of these variables, which is well above the conventional amount of imputation (Rubin, 1987). These additional analyses are, however, very similar to the main analyses (Appendix 5.B.3).

5.6 Conclusion

Recent research has revealed that polarization has the ability to drive turnout in national elections, but it is unclear whether this mechanism also plays a role at the supranational level. In this paper, I have examined whether polarization also drives turnout at EP elections. The results show that it is predominantly affective polariza-

tion that drives turnout at EP elections. This effect size is substantial: voters with high levels of affective polarization are up to 17 percentage points more likely to cast a vote than voters with the lowest levels of affective polarization. Additionally, there is a small role for EU polarization: voters who perceive more party polarization in their country on the issue of European integration are slightly more likely to turn out than voters who do not perceive such polarization. Finally, I do not find robust evidence for the positive effect of perceived ideological left-right polarization on turnout in EP elections.

The main implication of these findings is that EP elections are still largely second-order elections. Whether citizens turn out to cast a vote is strongly influenced by how they feel about voters of other parties in their national political system. Strong emotional responses to the parties and their voters elevate turnout also at the supra-national level. Since this type of polarization is largely driven by matters that are at the national level, it speaks to the second-order election hypothesis. It is also in line with findings at the national level that attribute an important role to affective polarization in driving turnout (Ferreira da Silva & Garzia, 2024; Harteveld & Wagner, 2022; Phillips, 2024), and that show that the role of ideological polarization is much more suppressed when regression models also take affective polarization into account (Eck & Michel, 2024; Ellger, 2023).

At the same time, it is also important to emphasize that even when controlling for affective polarization, I find a robust effect of the role of EU polarization. This means that the European elections are not entirely second-order. Crucially, it implies that how parties position themselves on the issue of European integration – and even more importantly, ensure that voters pick this up – matters during EP elections. Voters do not solely focus on domestic cues when deciding to cast a vote or abstain. Instead, they assess whether there is something at stake during these elections, and whether parties offer distinct platforms on the issue that matters most during these elections. It would be interesting to assess whether the impact of EU polarization on turnout has increased over time, since this would offer a clearer picture of whether the second-order election thesis is fading or not. I leave this question for future research. Since previous European election studies might not offer the necessary data to replicate

the findings of this paper longitudinally, EU polarization may instead be measured through alternative sources such as expert ratings (Jolly et al., 2022).

It is also important to mention one crucial limitation of this paper. In measuring EU polarization, I relied on the question that asked respondents to place political parties on a continuum ranging from less to more EU integration. This simplifies the issue of European integration to its most basic aspect. Parties can polarize in more ways than just on the polity itself, for example by taking diverging positions on specific policies of European integration (Gattermann et al., 2021). Arguably, in an ideal European democratic space, parties would indeed go beyond the question of more or less European integration and rather focus on *how* they want to shape European integration. Future research would benefit from measuring EU polarization this way and examining whether this has a different impact on turnout than the simplified measure in this paper. In addition, it might be the case that polarization on specific policy fields of European integration – economic policy, immigration, defence – is more strongly related to turnout than other types of policy fields.

Appendix

5.A Details on the data

5.A.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 5.A.1: Descriptive statistics

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Affective polarization	22,343	2.256	1.337	0.000	5.003
Ideological polarization	20,968	2.617	1.202	0.000	5.003
EU polarization	19,442	2.071	1.296	0.000	5.003
Political interest	25,656	2.671	0.849	1	4
Nat. economy	25,374	2.581	1.121	1	5
SWD	25,510	2.329	0.887	1	4
Employment	25,904	2.310	0.920	1	3
Left-right	23,339	5.372	2.639	0	10
Male	25,855	0.484	0.500	0	1
Age	25,904	48.498	15.599	16	99
Education	25,781	3.788	1.412	1	6

5.A.2 Correlation table

Table 5.A.2: Correlation between variables

	AP	IP	EU	Pol.int.	Econ	SWD	Empl.	L-R	Gender	Age	Edu
AP	1.00	0.53	0.53	0.18	-0.11	-0.08	-0.13	-0.03	-0.02	0.23	-0.01
IP	0.53	1.00	0.45	0.08	-0.13	-0.10	-0.11	-0.01	-0.04	0.23	-0.03
EU	0.53	0.45	1.00	0.16	-0.10	-0.06	-0.09	-0.01	0.02	0.18	0.02
Pol.int.	0.18	0.08	0.16	1.00	0.09	0.10	-0.02	0.04	0.11	0.13	0.08
Econ	-0.11	-0.13	-0.10	0.09	1.00	0.48	0.04	0.06	0.07	-0.10	0.03
SWD	-0.08	-0.10	-0.06	0.10	0.48	1.00	0.02	0.07	0.05	-0.05	0.04
Empl.	-0.13	-0.11	-0.09	-0.02	0.04	0.02	1.00	0.08	0.06	-0.38	0.14
L-R	-0.03	-0.01	-0.01	0.04	0.06	0.07	0.08	1.00	0.05	-0.04	0.03
Gender	-0.02	-0.04	0.02	0.11	0.07	0.05	0.06	0.05	1.00	-0.02	-0.03
Age	0.23	0.23	0.18	0.13	-0.10	-0.05	-0.38	-0.04	-0.02	1.00	-0.05
Edu	-0.01	-0.03	0.02	0.08	0.03	0.04	0.14	0.03	-0.03	-0.05	1.00

5.A.3 VIF table

Table 5.A.3: VIF values for linear model

	VIF
Affective polarization	1.694
Ideological polarization	1.657
EU polarization	1.505
Political interest	1.123
National economy	1.390
SWD	1.428
Employment	1.253
Left-right	1.040
Gender	1.028
Age	1.271
Education	1.051
Country	1.566

5.B Robustness checks

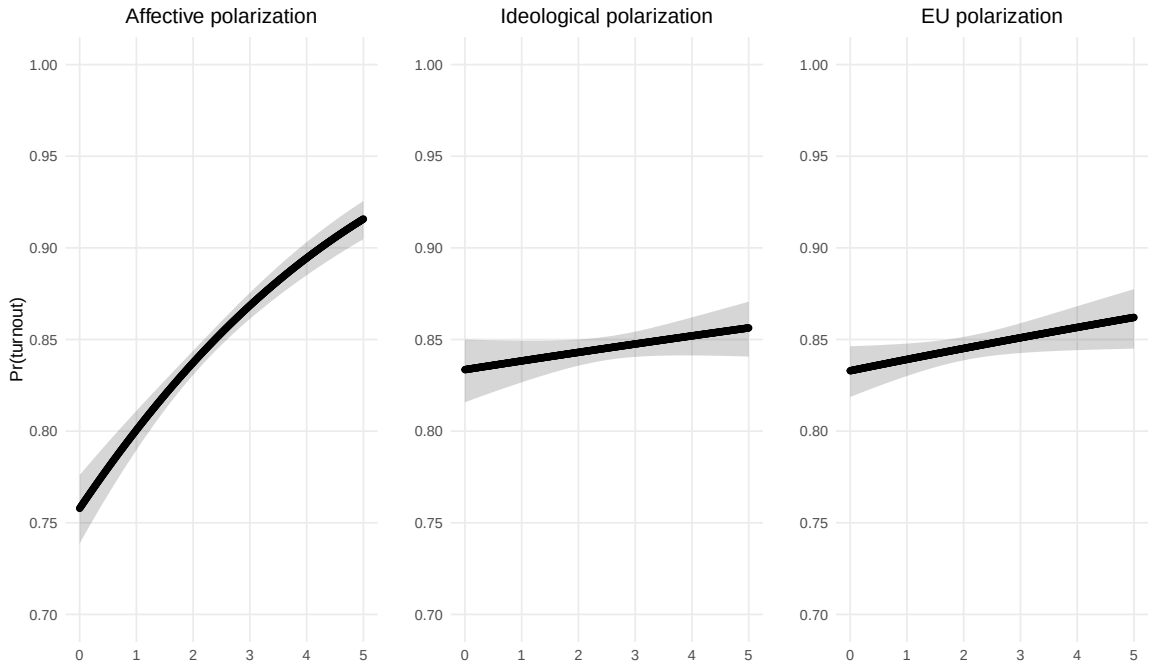
5.B.1 Weighted for national seat shares

Table 5.B.1: Logistic regression results

	AP	IP	EU	Joint
Affective polarization	0.366***			0.328***
	(0.020)			(0.029)
Ideological polarization		0.199***		0.041
		(0.021)		(0.027)
EU polarization			0.224***	0.057*
			(0.021)	(0.027)
Political interest	0.552***	0.593***	0.569***	0.545***
	(0.021)	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.025)
Nat. economy	0.090***	0.085***	0.073**	0.092***
	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.024)	(0.026)
SWD	0.206***	0.219***	0.207***	0.238***
	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.024)	(0.026)
Unemployed				
(ref: not in labour force)	−0.365***	−0.363***	−0.489***	−0.437***
	(0.083)	(0.085)	(0.089)	(0.098)
Employed				
(ref: not in labour force)	0.171***	0.135**	0.123*	0.175***
	(0.045)	(0.046)	(0.048)	(0.052)
Left-right	0.020	0.018	0.033	0.042
	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.023)
Male	−0.023	−0.054	−0.051	−0.032
	(0.038)	(0.039)	(0.041)	(0.044)
Age	0.220***	0.236***	0.229***	0.201***
	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.022)	(0.024)
Education	0.139***	0.126***	0.142***	0.141***
	(0.019)	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.022)
Intercept	1.395***	1.473***	1.427***	1.410***
	(0.100)	(0.102)	(0.105)	(0.111)
AIC	17929.786	17194.801	15753.102	13554.347
Num. obs.	20270	19329	17829	15832

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Logistic regression models with country fixed-effects.

Figure 5.B.1: Predicted probabilities



Note: Predicted probabilities of turnout across levels of affective, ideological and EU polarization, including 95% confidence intervals. The graphs are based on the fourth model in Table 5.B.1.

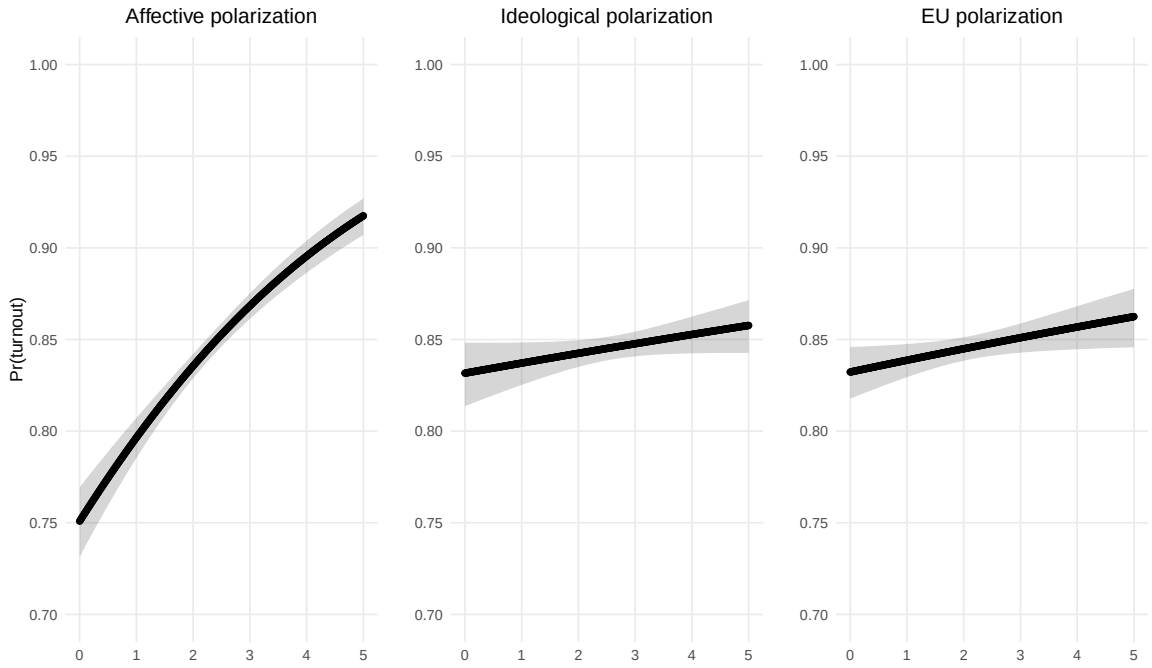
5.B.2 Survey weights EES

Table 5.B.2: Logistic regression results

	AP	IP	EU	Joint
Affective polarization	0.391***			0.349***
	(0.020)			(0.029)
Ideological polarization		0.211***		0.048
		(0.021)		(0.027)
EU polarization			0.241***	0.061*
			(0.022)	(0.028)
Political interest	0.551***	0.602***	0.569***	0.554***
	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.022)	(0.025)
Nat. economy	0.099***	0.089***	0.089***	0.103***
	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.024)	(0.026)
SWD	0.208***	0.206***	0.196***	0.228***
	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.024)	(0.026)
Unemployed				
(ref: not in labour force)	−0.344***	−0.365***	−0.493***	−0.426***
	(0.082)	(0.084)	(0.088)	(0.098)
Employed				
(ref: not in labour force)	0.177***	0.124**	0.128**	0.164**
	(0.044)	(0.046)	(0.048)	(0.052)
Left-right	0.024	0.023	0.034	0.043
	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.023)
Male	−0.027	−0.047	−0.046	−0.038
	(0.038)	(0.039)	(0.041)	(0.044)
Age	0.219***	0.231***	0.231***	0.197***
	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.022)	(0.024)
Education	0.127***	0.118***	0.138***	0.132***
	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.023)
Intercept	1.368***	1.449***	1.393***	1.389***
	(0.101)	(0.101)	(0.105)	(0.111)
AIC	18333.204	17609.023	16152.486	13866.924
Num. obs.	20364	19492	17973	16005

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Logistic regression models with country fixed-effects.

Figure 5.B.2: Predicted probabilities



Note: Predicted probabilities of turnout across levels of affective, ideological and EU polarization, including 95% confidence intervals. The graphs are based on the fourth model in Table 5.B.2.

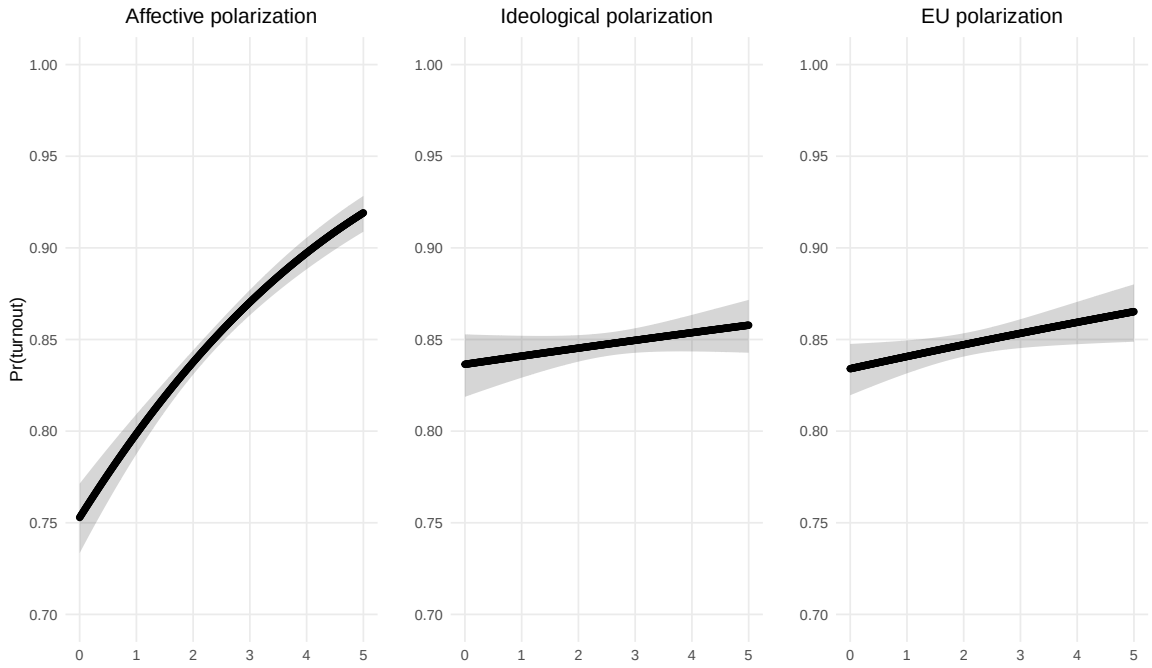
5.B.3 Multiple imputation

Table 5.B.3: Logistic regression results

	AP	IP	EU	Joint
Affective polarization	0.385***			0.346***
	(0.020)			(0.028)
Ideological polarization		0.203***		0.039
		(0.020)		(0.027)
EU polarization			0.236***	0.063*
			(0.022)	(0.028)
Political interest	0.519***	0.569***	0.538***	0.521***
	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.024)
Nat. economy	0.096***	0.087***	0.084***	0.099***
	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.024)	(0.026)
SWD	0.217***	0.214***	0.206***	0.237***
	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.024)	(0.026)
Unemployed				
(ref: not in labour force)	−0.351***	−0.353***	−0.482***	−0.417***
	(0.083)	(0.086)	(0.089)	(0.098)
Employed				
(ref: not in labour force)	0.171***	0.123**	0.127**	0.166**
	(0.045)	(0.046)	(0.048)	(0.052)
Left-right	0.022	0.021	0.029	0.041
	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.023)
Male	−0.029	−0.053	−0.047	−0.039
	(0.038)	(0.039)	(0.041)	(0.044)
Age	0.224***	0.235***	0.234***	0.202***
	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.022)	(0.024)
Education	0.137***	0.124***	0.141***	0.137***
	(0.019)	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.023)
Intercept	1.461***	1.540***	1.473***	1.470***
	(0.101)	(0.102)	(0.105)	(0.111)
AIC	17971.392	17260.667	15830.795	13596.027
Num. obs.	20364	19492	17973	16005

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Logistic regression models with country fixed-effects.

Figure 5.B.3: Predicted probabilities



Note: Predicted probabilities of turnout across levels of affective, ideological and EU polarization, including 95% confidence intervals. The graphs are based on the fourth model in Table 5.B.3.

Chapter 6

Defending the Status Quo or Seeking Change? Electoral Outcomes, Affective Polarization, and Support for Referendums

Abstract

Voters of governing parties are more satisfied with democracy than opposition voters, but the consequences of this winner-loser gap remain underexplored. We argue that electoral losers should be more supportive of referendums than electoral winners, as representative democracy has failed electoral losers, whereas electoral winners aim to protect their party's ability to govern without constraint. In addition, we theorise that affective polarization should strengthen this gap. Using cross-national survey data from 13 European democracies, we find that electoral losers consistently show greater support for referendums than winners, and affective polarization amplifies this effect. Yet, the effect of affective polarization is solely attributed to a decrease in support for referendums among polarized election winners. These findings raise questions about the role of affective polarization in undermining the accountability mechanism between electoral winners and their parties. Concerns about electoral losers might be overstated, and potentially overlook the democratic implications of electoral victory.

This chapter is based on a paper co-authored with Emilien Paulis and is published in the British Journal of Political Science.

6.1 Introduction

Citizens' satisfaction with democracy is vital for political stability, but a persistent gap exists between those who win and lose the election (C. J. Anderson & Guillory, 1997; C. J. Anderson et al., 2005; Blais & Gélineau, 2007; Daoust & Nadeau, 2023; Esaiasson, 2011; Kern & Kölln, 2022; Singh et al., 2012; van der Meer & Steenvoorden, 2018). Despite the robustness of this finding in the literature, it is still rather disputed to what extent this so-called winner-loser gap is problematic, for example for democratic legitimacy or considering losers' consent to the election outcome. In fact, little is still known about the actual consequences of the winner-loser gap. Understanding how winners and losers react to electoral defeat is therefore crucial for assessing broader challenges to democratic stability, particularly in times of growing political polarization and increasing dissatisfaction with traditional democratic institutions.

In established European democracies, we believe it is unlikely that citizens who lose the elections – electoral losers – would abandon democracy following an electoral defeat. Instead, in seeking alternative ways to influence political decisions while their preferred party is in opposition, they may desire more democracy. Specifically, they might be more inclined to support additional instruments to influence decision-making – such as referendums. While studies have revealed that support for the use of referendums is generally high among European citizens (Schuck & de Vreese, 2015; Werner et al., 2020), little is known about the dynamic determinants of this support. Existing research has mainly focused on stable determinants such as political attitudes or sociodemographic backgrounds (Bowler et al., 2017; Coffé & Michels, 2014; Gherghina & Geissel, 2020; Már & Gastil, 2023). However, studies in the US have found that instrumental considerations, rooted in electoral win and loss, can also play a key role in predicting support for referendums (Bowler et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2010). These explanations could similarly affect support for democratic reforms in Europe as well (Pilet et al., 2024; Werner, 2020).

In this article, we test whether electoral losers are more supportive of the use of referendums than electoral winners. In addition, we theorise that affective polarization

plays an important moderating role in the winner-loser gap in support for referendums. Affective polarization refers to the extent to which politics generates prejudice, discrimination, and hostility among voters, marked by a strong emotional attachment to one's own party and dislike or even hostility toward other parties. We expect that this emotional involvement in politics amplifies the winner-loser gap in referendum support. For affectively polarized electoral losers, referendums offer a promising alternative route to power, which partially mitigates the electoral defeat. In contrast, electoral winners should be displeased with the prospect of the disliked opposition influencing politics even when they are not in government.

We test this argument using a survey dataset collected in 13 European democracies in the latter half of 2022. Our findings show that support for referendums is high overall, with electoral losers consistently more supportive of their use than electoral winners. Furthermore, we confirm that affective polarization has a strong amplifying effect. Specifically, when voters are not at all polarized, there is no significant difference in referendum support between electoral losers and winners – they express similar, high levels of support. However, as voters become more polarized, electoral winners start to become less supportive of referendums, while the attitudes of electoral losers remain stable. This suggests that the winner-loser gap in referendum support exists only among polarized voters who are strongly emotionally involved in politics.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we review the literature on the winner-loser gap in democratic satisfaction, theorise how this may extend to support for referendums, and argue that affective polarization should function as an important moderator. Next, we introduce our dataset and explain how variables are measured. We then begin with a descriptive analysis of attitudes towards referendums, followed by the presentation of our full fixed-effects linear regression models. Finally, we conclude and reflect on the broader implications of our findings.

6.2 The winner-loser gap and support for referendums

A large body of literature has sought to unravel the effects of elections on democratic attitudes among citizens living in Western democracies. One of the most consistent findings in this literature is that citizens who voted for a party that joins the government (either alone or in coalition) after the election are more satisfied with democracy than citizens who voted for a party that ends up in the opposition (C. J. Anderson & Guillory, 1997; C. J. Anderson et al., 2005; Blais & Gélineau, 2007; Daoust & Nadeau, 2023; Daoust et al., 2023; Esaiasson, 2011; Kern & Kölln, 2022; Ridge, 2024; Singh, 2014; Singh et al., 2012). This so-called winner-loser gap in democratic satisfaction has been consistently observed, although its magnitude can vary across different contexts and among various subgroups of the electorate. Nonetheless, these variations reflect differences in the size of the gap, not its existence. For example, while the winner-loser gap is more pronounced in majoritarian democratic systems, it is also present in proportional systems (C. J. Anderson & Guillory, 1997; C. J. Anderson et al., 2005; Dahlberg & Linde, 2016). In a similar vein, the winner-loser gap is larger in elections where voting is voluntary, but it is still present in compulsory voting systems likewise (Singh, 2023). Accordingly, Daoust and Nadeau (2023, p. 51) recently referred to it as "arguably one of the most robust relationships in political science".

Broadly speaking, there are two main reasons for the relevance of studying the winner-loser gap in democratic satisfaction. First, it touches on the broader discussion about citizens' satisfaction with democracy, which is seen as a vital attitude for democratic survival. Scholars have argued that democracies need a certain level of public approval to remain relevant, functional, and stable (Easton, 1965; Lipset, 1959). Consequently, much of the literature has focused on the factors that drive satisfaction with democracy among the public (Aarts & Thomassen, 2008; Banducci & Karp, 2003; Dahlberg & Holmberg, 2014; Ezrow & Xezonakis, 2011; Quaranta & Martini, 2016). At the individual level, winning and losing elections is one of the most important predictors (Singh & Mayne, 2023). Democratic elections naturally create winners and losers, both among political parties and the voters that elect them. For democracies to re-

main legitimate and relevant, it is crucial that electoral losers assess their defeat as part of the democratic game, with a chance to perform better in the future. If, instead, they come to believe that the democratic system does not work for them, they may choose to abstain from future elections.

Second, while elections are central to the democratic system, they also serve as a test of the system's resilience. Democracies can only thrive when electoral integrity is undisputed, there are no doubts about the legitimacy of the results, and the outgoing incumbent adheres to a peaceful transition of power. In essence, this means that electoral losers must accept the results, no matter how displeasing they may be. As Nadeau and Blais (1993, p. 553) already pointed out three decades ago, "the viability of electoral democracy depends on its ability to secure the support of a substantial proportion of individuals who are displeased with the outcome of an election." The level of democratic satisfaction among this group after an election is generally seen as an indicator of how likely it is that electoral integrity may be challenged (Nadeau et al., 2023). While the mere presence of a winner-loser gap is not necessarily problematic, this gap should not become too large.

In sum, research into the winner-loser gap is generally driven by concerns about support for representative democracy and losers' consent. Electoral losers who are too dissatisfied with the election outcome might be unwilling to accept it. Others might accept the outcome, but lose faith in the ability of representative democracy to deliver for them. Despite the large scholarly attention devoted to the winner-loser gap and its potentially negative implications, surprisingly little is known about its actual consequences. In this regard, Esaiasson (2011) criticized that the worrying impact of the winner-loser gap may be overstated, as it is largely driven by an increase in democratic satisfaction among electoral winners, rather than a decrease among electoral losers.

While we acknowledge that dissatisfaction rooted in electoral defeat can potentially lead to dissatisfaction or even aversion to representative democracy, we do not believe that these voters would lose interest in their primary means of influencing politics in such systems. Electoral losers are not a monolithic group. Some may have won

previous elections and maintain faith that they can win elections in the future. Others might have lost several elections already but still value their possibility of finding representation (Pitkin, 1967), even if it does not produce clear results in terms of policies after the election.

Rather, we believe that citizens who find themselves on the losing side of national elections are more likely to desire even more democracy. That is, in a desire to find alternative routes to influence policies, they focus on alternative democratic instruments that can enhance their influence on decision-making. This desire is rooted in utility: since national elections occur only once every several years, the ability of voters to influence politics is limited. This is particularly problematic for electoral losers, who are likely to expect that the incoming government will implement undesired policies. Accordingly, we suggest that electoral losers should be particularly supportive of alternative mechanisms to influence decision-making.

Often presented as the main instrument inspired by direct democracy theories, one of the most well-known innovations aimed at providing citizens with more direct influence in politics is the referendum. In light of the various though increasing use of referendums among European countries (Hollander, 2019; Leininger, 2015), the referendum is likely the best-known democratic instrument among citizens beyond general elections. Cross-national survey results indicate that referendums are generally a popular instrument among the public (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Bowler et al., 2007; Dalton et al., 2001; Font et al., 2015; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015; Werner et al., 2020). Although different types of referendums exist (Hug, 2004), all referendums bypass the government by asking citizens directly to vote on a specific policy and then present the government with the outcome. This process offers electoral losers a unique opportunity to express dissatisfaction with policy proposals and to steer the government in a desired direction. Furthermore, compared to other types of democratic innovations that provide electoral losers with possibilities to influence policies beyond general elections — especially talk-centric democratic innovations such as deliberative mini-publics — referendums exert more influence, are accessible to all electoral losers, and are less time-consuming. Electoral winners, on the other hand, should be less convinced of the use of referendums. Given that their party has ended up in government,

they would expect that the government creates policies that align with their own preferences, leaving them with little incentive to advocate for (more) referendums. In fact, they might view these participatory tools as a threat to their preferred policy agenda precisely because referendums bypass their government. This should, in turn, lead to lower support compared to electoral losers. Indeed, prior research into the effects of direct democracy has shown that it has the ability to decrease the winner-loser gap in satisfaction with democracy, most likely because it softens the burden of electoral loss and weakens the strength of electoral victory (Leemann & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2022). Greater use of direct democracy also reduces the importance of national elections for voters (Freitag & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2010).

The idea that citizens' support for referendums depends on instrumental considerations is not new. While existing explanations regarding the broader aspect of public support for democratic innovations and process preferences primarily focus on relatively stable determinants — such as political attitudes like distrust in representative institutions or dissatisfaction with democracy (Bedock & Pilet, 2023; Bertsou & Caramani, 2022; Gherghina & Geissel, 2020; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015) or sociodemographic backgrounds (Coffé & Michels, 2014; Már & Gastil, 2023; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015) — some accounts emphasise the importance of more dynamic factors. Furthermore, Bowler et al. (2007) studied public support for democratic reforms in the United States, such as nation-wide referendums or proportional representation in Congress. Despite general high support, framing the reform as an electoral risk for one's own party reduced support only among electoral winners. In contrast, electoral losers were more willing to accept the risk of electoral reform regardless of the risk. In the same context, Smith et al. (2010) studied preferences for referendums around the 2008 US presidential elections. They found that independents – long-term structural losers in the US two-party system – strongly support the introduction of a national referendum regardless of the election outcome. In addition, they causally showed with a panel survey that even Republican voters, who had only just lost the presidency to the Democrats, already significantly increased their support for nation-wide referendums in response to the electoral loss.

Although this argument has not been tested in Europe thus far, suggestive evidence

from across the Atlantic does exist. Through an experimental design, Werner (2020) demonstrated that Dutch citizens are more likely to support referendums on policy proposals that they support themselves, or for which they believe a majority of the electorate holds similar views on. In a similar vein, Brummel (2020) studied the effects of winning or losing a referendum on citizens' support for the instrument using panel survey data from five referendums held in three different countries (Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands). He found some limited evidence that a referendum victory leads winners to increase their support for the instrument, but stronger evidence that a defeat results in decreased support among the losers. While these findings are not directly related to the winner-loser gap generated by electoral outcomes, they do indicate that instrumental considerations are important predictors of support for referendums. Additionally, a recent study by Pilet et al. (2023) examined the election-based winner-loser gap as an explanation for the support of deliberative mini-publics, a talk-centric form of democratic innovation in which citizens are selected by lot to participate in discussions about policy issues (Paulis, Pilet, et al., 2021). Their main finding is that European voters from opposition parties, especially those that have never been in power, are more supportive of the use of DMPs. We expect a similar process among European voters in support for referendums.

H1: *Electoral losers are more supportive of referendums than electoral winners.*

6.3 The moderating role of affective polarization

We argue that the winner-loser gap in support for referendums depends on an important moderator: affective polarization. This concept is relatively new and refers to the increased political hostility between citizens that democracies have been witnessing recently. It is rooted in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel et al., 1971), which posits that individuals tend to think along group lines. In this process, they are inclined to treat people of their own group favourably, while members of other groups are treated with bias or even outright hostility. Applied to the context of

politics, Iyengar et al. (2012) argue that partisan identities provide precisely such a group that conducts to group-thinking. Voters hold positive views of other voters who cast their ballot for the same party, while voters from other parties are strongly disliked. Though originally studied in the US two-party system (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2018), affective polarization is also widespread in European multi-party systems (Garzia et al., 2023; Reiljan, 2020).

Early studies on affective polarization predominantly focused on its effects on non-political behaviour and attitudes, such as social trust (Lee, 2022; Torcal & Thomson, 2023), discrimination (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Westwood et al., 2018), or the willingness to engage in social relationships with voters of the other party (Huber & Malhotra, 2017; Lelkes & Westwood, 2017). Importantly, though, affective polarization also influences political behaviour and attitudes, such as political trust (Skytte, 2021; Torcal & Carty, 2022), turnout (Harteveld & Wagner, 2022; Phillips, 2024), and satisfaction with democracy (Guedes-Neto, 2022; Ridge, 2022; Wagner, 2021).

Affective polarization consists of two components: sympathy toward one's own political group and hostility toward political outgroups. High levels of affective polarization are characterised by strong emotional responses toward different parties (and their voters) to such an extent that partisan identities become social identities. As such, the performance of someone's party also becomes more personal (Ward & Tavits, 2019). When someone's party performs well, positive emotions are triggered; likewise, poor performance triggers negative emotions. In a similar vein, affectively polarized voters should be particularly happy when the disliked outparty performs poorly, even regardless of their own party's performance. While party performance can be assessed in several ways, the most obvious one is the election result. Indeed, Janssen (2024) studied how the winner-loser gap is influenced by affective polarization. In a panel study of British voters, she showed that affective polarization amplifies the post-electoral winner-loser gap in democratic satisfaction; voters who are more affectively polarized respond more strongly to electoral win and loss.

Accordingly, we expect that affective polarization also strengthens the winner-loser gap in support for referendums. That is, voters who are only mildly polarized will

experience a moderate emotional response to the election result. In contrast, the emotional response among strongly polarized voters should be higher: positive for election winners and negative for election losers. This translates into their attitudes toward referendums, which essentially offer an alternative route to decision-making alongside the traditional governmental one. Affectively polarized winners should thus be less supportive of referendums than non-polarized winners, and affectively polarized losers should be more supportive than non-polarized losers. We expect that this occurs because of two potential mechanisms: utility and emotions. With regards to utility, we expect that polarized election winners see referendums as a threat to their electoral victory and the ability of their party to govern without constraint. Since their preferred party is already in power, there is little need for additional mechanisms to steer policy-making. In fact, since a referendum bypasses the government, it could actually harm the government's policy agenda if its outcome directly conflicts with it. Non-polarized winners, on the other hand, are less invested in their government and should therefore see less threat in the use of referendums. Moreover, as they are less hostile toward other parties, they should see their potential use of referendums also as less problematic.

In contrast, polarized election losers are likely to be very disappointed with the electoral result. Losing elections is painful, especially for voters who are heavily attached to their party and their desired policies. This makes the prospect of being unable to influence policies for several years even more difficult. In addition, other strongly disliked parties will create these policies instead. Electoral losers who are less attached to their party will also experience disappointment with the electoral result, but less severely. Given that they identify less strongly with the party for which they voted, coping with the electoral defeat should be easier, as they may be less attached to the party's policy agenda, for example because they do not care that much about politics or because they casted a strategic vote. As such, we would expect that polarized electoral losers view referendums as potential avenues to soften the burden of the election result by means of an alternative instrument. They provide a way to influence policies despite the electoral defeat and counter the disliked government parties in the pursuit of their policy agenda.

With regards to emotions, we know that affectively polarized citizens strongly like their own party but dislike other parties. Winning an election therefore becomes a personal victory for polarized voters, and seeing the electoral loss of disliked other parties should also provide certain joy. Yet, referendums offer these parties the possibility to still influence politics, which diminishes the pain of the electoral defeat. We expect that polarized winners are displeased with this, and thus do not want to grant these parties any alternative possibility to become meaningful in politics again. For electoral losers, we expect the opposite. While losing the election in itself was already painful, it hurts even more to see parties in power that are strongly disliked. Gaining the possibility to frustrate these parties through a referendum, while increasing the relevance of the own party, should therefore be an attractive possibility. For both winners and losers, these emotional responses should be less present with low levels of affective polarization, simply because these voters do not care that much about the own party and also do not feel large hostility toward other parties.

Admittedly, the two mechanisms of utility and emotions are closely related and intertwined, and probably cannot be completely disentangled. Emotions tied to electoral performance are, at least to some extent, likely to be driven by considerations about future policies. Our goal here is not to see which mechanism applies, but rather to acknowledge that both likely operate simultaneously. We do not have differential expectations with regards to the effects of affective polarization on electoral winners and losers. As we described above, similar mechanisms should apply to both.

H2a: *The decrease in support for referendums among electoral winners is stronger for citizens with higher levels of affective polarization.*

H2b: *The increase in support for referendums among electoral losers is stronger for citizens with higher levels of affective polarization.*

6.4 Data and methods

6.4.1 Dataset

To test our argument, we rely on survey data collected in 13 European democracies: Belgium (with samples in both Flanders and Wallonia), the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and the UK. The survey was fielded between June 2021 and March 2022 and used country-specific quotas for age, gender, education, and region. This ensured that the sample filling out the questionnaire was representative of the larger population in each country at the time of the survey. Most sample sizes range from 1,200 and 1,400, with only the Czech Republic ($N = 1,985$) and Flanders ($N = 1,066$) somewhat deviating. This dataset is particularly suitable for our research purpose because it includes both variables on support for referendums and affective polarization. While there are some other cross-national datasets (such as the European Social Survey) that measure referendum support, they do not capture affective polarization.

Importantly, we exclude two countries that were originally part of the dataset: Bulgaria and Italy. In both cases, it is difficult to assign voters into groups of electoral winners and losers. In Bulgaria, fieldwork took place during the third parliamentary election of 2021, in November, as parties had been unable to form a coalition after the previous elections in April and July of that year. In Italy, the survey was conducted between June and August 2021, during which the government was headed by Maro Draghi. This government consisted of a supermajority of nearly all parties, representing almost 90 percent of the seats in both houses of parliament. As a result, nearly all respondents in our sample would be classified as electoral winners.

Still, for generalization, the country selection ensures contextual diversity in several aspects. First, it covers European democracies with different political systems and government structures (ranging from single-party to broad coalition governments), with varying degrees of experience with the use of referendums. Second, all geographical regions of Europe are represented. Finally, the countries exhibit different average

levels of affective polarization (Garzia et al., 2023). The obvious trade-off that comes with the generalizability of these data is their limited ability to support strong causal claims. Given the cross-sectional nature, unobserved confounders could be driving the relationship between electoral loss and referendum support. To partially address this, we provide multiple additional analyses in the robustness section that control for potential confounders.

6.4.2 Dependent variable

To test our argument, we rely on two variables that capture attitudes toward referendums. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale in response to a series of statements. The first statement we use to measure our dependent variable is: When collecting a sufficient number of signatures, citizens can force the government to hold a referendum on a policy issue. The second statement is: It is important for democracy that citizens have the final say on political issues by voting in referendums. Higher values on these statements signal greater support for referendums. Given the low proportion of "Don't know" responses ($\tilde{3}$ percent), we are confident that respondents are familiar with the principle of a referendum.

We report the frequencies in Table 6.1 for all countries combined. Support for both variables is high, consistent with previous research on public support for referendums (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Bowler et al., 2007; Dalton et al., 2001; Font et al., 2015; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015; Werner et al., 2020). Although the aggregated distribution of responses for both variables shows a strikingly similar pattern, support for the first variable is slightly higher. Crucial to our paper is the expectation that the same effects apply to both variables. Therefore, we combine the two variables into a single dependent variable by summing the responses for each respondent and dividing them by 2, resulting in a robust measure of referendum support ranging from 1 (strongly opposed) to 5 (strongly supportive).

Table 6.1: Distribution of attitudes toward the use of referendums

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	N
When collecting a sufficient number of signatures, citizens can force the government to hold a referendum on a policy issue	2.2%	6.5%	16.4%	42.6%	32.4%	14,802
It is important for democracy that citizens have the final say on political issues by voting in referendums	2.6%	8.8%	22.0%	39.4%	27.2%	14,802

6.4.3 Independent variables

Following existing literature on the winner-loser gap (C. J. Anderson et al., 2005; Esaiasson, 2011; Singh, 2014), we operationalise election winners as those who voted for a party that is currently in government. We use a variable in the dataset that asked respondents about their vote choice during the last national election. This choice is not without criticism. For example, winning and losing elections may have meanings that transcend the simple classification of being in government or not. Another important aspect, for example, could be the seat share (or its growth) obtained in the last election (van der Meer & Steenvoorden, 2018). Nevertheless, since subjective feelings about winning elections are strongly driven by voting for a party in government (Plescia, 2019), we are confident that this approach is suited for our research purpose. In Table 6.2, we present which parties were in government at the time the survey was fielded, and thus which voters are classified as electoral winners.

Regarding affective polarization, we rely on the commonly used party thermometer sympathy question, which asks respondents how they feel about the various political parties in their system, ranging from 0 (very negative) to 100 (very positive). This question is widely used in affective polarization research, particularly in studies focusing on multi-party systems (Garzia et al., 2023; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021). More importantly, the party thermometer question has been validated as a reliable measure of affective polarization (Gidron et al., 2020). To calculate affective polarization

Table 6.2: Government parties by country

Country	Last national elections	Government parties	% dataset
Belgium (WAL)	26/5/2019	Ecolo, MR, PS	57.1
Belgium (FL)	26/5/2019	CD&V, Groen, Open VLD, Vooruit	45.1
Czech Republic	8/10/2021	ODS, STAN, KDU, TOP 09, Pirates	43.1
Denmark	5/6/2019	Socialdemokratiet	26.6
Finland	14/4/2019	Social Democratic Party, Centre Party, Green League, Left Alliance, Swedish People's Party	55.4
France	18/6/2017	LREM, Modem	23.5
Germany	24/9/2017	CDU, CSU, SPD	49.5
Greece	7/7/2019	New Democracy	42.0
Ireland	8/2/2020	Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Green Party	44.9
Netherlands	17/3/2021	VVD, D66, CU, CDA	36.6
Poland	13/10/2019	PiS	33.7
Spain	10/11/2019	PSOE, UP	41.5
UK	12/12/2019	Conservative	40.5

at the individual level, we use the spread-of-scores approach suggested by (Wagner, 2021). This approach is especially suited for multi-party systems as it acknowledges that voters may feel positively toward multiple parties, for example because they are closely aligned ideologically (Algara & Zur, 2023). To remain consistent with the original approach, we divide the scores by 10. The theoretical range of the variable is 0 to 5, with 5 reflecting the most polarized citizens. It is calculated in the following way:

$$\sqrt{\sum_{p=1}^{P} v_p(\text{sympathy}_{ip} - \overline{\text{sympathy}}_i)^2}$$

Where p represents the particular party for which the sympathy score is given, i the respondent, sympathy_{ip} a respondent's sympathy toward a party, and v_p the vote share of the particular party. The mean like sympathy, as reflected at the end of the equation, should also be weighted according to party size:

$$\overline{\text{sympathy}}_i = \sum_{p=1}^{P}(v_p \cdot \text{sympathy}_{ip})$$

We also control for several variables that we expect to influence support for referendums based on previous literature (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Coffé & Michels, 2014; Font et al., 2015; Gherghina & Geissel, 2020). Concerning political variables, we control for internal political efficacy (to what extent a respondent agrees that politics is too complicated for them, 4-point scale of agreement), political interest (1-4, ranging from not at all to very), and a respondent's left-right self-placement (0-10). Additionally, we account for sociodemographic background through gender, education, age (7 categories), and occupational status (unemployed, not in labour force, employed).

6.4.4 Modelling strategy

Despite the hierarchical data structure (with respondents nested in countries), we believe that using a multilevel model is ill-suited because of the low number of clusters (13). In addition, our independent variables are not measured at the country-level, which is one of the primary reasons to use a multilevel model. We therefore opt for a regular linear model, including country-fixed effects. This approach removes all variation that might be caused by contextual factors at the country level.

6.5 Results

To provide an initial insight into the data, we begin with a descriptive analysis of the difference in support for referendums between electoral winners and losers. In Table 6.3, we display the mean scores for our dependent variables, split by electoral losers and winners, and divided by country. This yields 13 opportunities to analyse the differences in referendum support between electoral losers and winners. These first results indeed point toward a systematic difference, with electoral losers being more supportive of the use of referendums across all the countries under study. In particular, the differences are substantial in Czech Republic, France, and the Netherlands, approaching half a unit of difference on the 1-5 scale. In addition, we conducted one-tailed t-tests to assess whether the higher support for referendums among electoral

Table 6.3: Difference in support for referendums between electoral losers and winners

Country	Mean electoral losers	Mean electoral winners	Difference	p-value
Belgium (WAL)	4.032	3.701	**0.331**	0.000
Belgium (FL)	3.977	3.838	**0.139**	0.007
Czech Republic	3.846	3.435	**0.411**	0.000
Denmark	3.992	3.797	**0.195**	0.000
Finland	3.903	3.759	**0.144**	0.003
France	4.005	3.600	**0.405**	0.000
Germany	3.937	3.665	**0.272**	0.000
Greece	4.048	3.789	**0.259**	0.000
Ireland	4.143	4.016	**0.128**	0.001
Netherlands	3.821	3.333	**0.488**	0.000
Poland	4.250	3.994	**0.256**	0.000
Spain	4.065	4.045	**0.020**	0.347
UK	3.819	3.764	**0.055**	0.143

Note: The p-values are based on a one-tailed t-test. Differences in bold are in the hypothesised direction.

losers is statistically significant. In 11 out of the 13 cases, the p-value is indeed below 0.01. The only two countries that show null results are Spain and the UK. Although electoral losers in these countries are more supportive of referendums, the differences are small and not statistically significant.

Thus, this analysis overall supports H1. To account for potential confounders, we now turn to the linear fixed-effects regression models in Table 6.4, where we also test the moderating effect of affective polarization, as outlined in H2. We present three models: first, we include the main independent variables (electoral loser and affective polarization); next, we add the control variables; and finally, we add the interaction term to test H2.

The results presented in Table 6.4 confirm that electoral losers are indeed more supportive of the use of referendums. In Model 1, we find a positive effect of being an electoral loser on support for referendums, which is highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Once we add the control variables to the regression in Model 2, this positive effect remains unchanged: both the effect size and statistical significance remain consistent. This indicates that the positive effect of being an electoral loser on

Table 6.4: Fixed-effects linear regression models

	M1	M2	M3
Electoral loser	0.235^{***}	0.232^{***}	0.002
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.030)
Affective polarization	-0.046^{***}	-0.039^{***}	-0.099^{***}
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.010)
Loser*Affective polarization			0.105^{***}
			(0.013)
Political interest		0.092^{***}	0.092^{***}
		(0.010)	(0.010)
Left-right		0.002	0.003
		(0.003)	(0.003)
Internal political efficacy		0.078^{***}	0.078^{***}
		(0.008)	(0.008)
Male		-0.029^{*}	-0.027^{*}
		(0.014)	(0.014)
Age		0.019^{***}	0.019^{***}
		(0.005)	(0.005)
Education		-0.037^{***}	-0.037^{***}
		(0.005)	(0.005)
Not in labour force (ref: unemployed)		−0.020	−0.023
		(0.033)	(0.033)
Employed (ref: unemployed)		0.042	0.040
		(0.032)	(0.031)
Intercept	3.842^{***}	3.457^{***}	3.592^{***}
	(0.018)	(0.063)	(0.065)
Adj. R^2	0.023	0.069	0.073
Num. obs.	14,802	14,802	14,802

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Country fixed effects not displayed.

support for referendums is robust, in line with H1 and the descriptive analyses of individual countries using one-tailed t-tests.

In addition, while we did not hypothesise a direct relationship between affective polarization and attitudes toward referendums, we find a small negative effect, which is statistically significant at the 0.001 level. However, we attribute this relationship to the interaction effect that we test in Model 3. Simply put, we believe that affective polarization (as hypothesised) has different effects on the relationship between being an electoral winner or loser and referendum attitudes. Therefore, the overall negative

relationship between affective polarization and referendum attitudes is likely a reflection of the distribution of electoral winners and losers in the dataset. Nevertheless, recent studies have found a similar pattern – a small negative effect, where polarized citizens are less inclined toward democratic innovations (van Dijk et al., 2023).

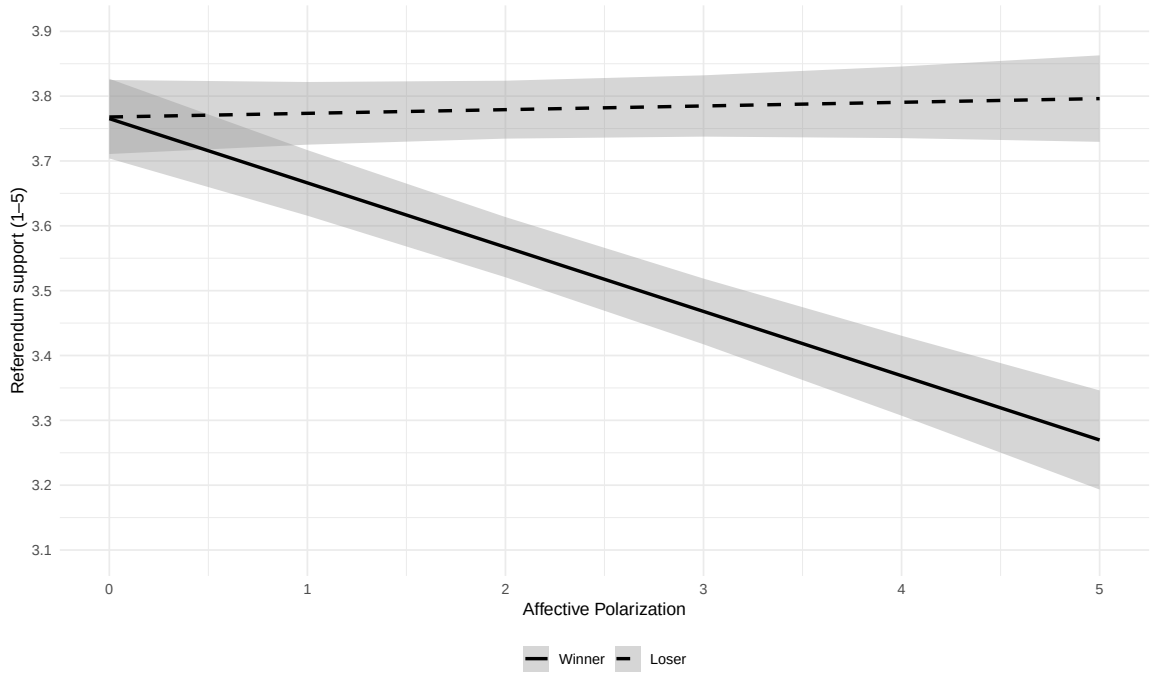
In Model 3, we include the interaction terms between affective polarization and being an electoral loser in the regression models. We hypothesised that affective polarization should have a positive effect on the winner-loser gap in attitudes toward referendums, which means that the difference in referendum support between electoral losers and winners should be larger for voters who are more strongly polarized. This is exactly what we find: the interaction term between affective polarization and being an electoral loser has a positive coefficient and is highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). This confirms H2 and our expectation that affectively polarized voters show greater differences in their support for referendums, depending on whether they voted for a party in or out of government. The standalone coefficient for being an electoral loser becomes basically 0 in Model 3, and loses its statistical significance. Since this coefficient reflects the impact of scoring a 0 for affective polarization, this means that there is virtually no difference in referendum attitudes between electoral winners and losers when they are not affectively polarized.

To provide a clearer understanding of the interaction effect, we plot the predicted probabilities in Figure 6.1. This graph reveals that the moderating effect of affective polarization, as indicated in the regression models, is primarily driven by electoral winners. That is, electoral winners and losers indeed show nearly the same levels of support for referendums when affective polarization is low. However, as polarization increases, electoral winners become less supportive of referendums (though they remain above the neutral mid-point on average). In contrast, electoral losers maintain relatively stable attitudes toward referendums. Their support increases slightly with affective polarization, but the change is rather modest. Thus, the moderating effect of affective polarization on the winner-loser gap in referendum attitudes can be attributed largely to the decrease in support among electoral winners. The difference in support for referendums between electoral losers and winners becomes substantial at high levels of affective polarization, with the most polarized voters differing by

approximately half a unit on the 1-5 scale. Accordingly, we conclude that H2a is confirmed, but we find no evidence for H2b.

Interestingly, our results suggest that referendum support among electoral losers is primarily driven by their structural position rather than their level of polarization. A ceiling effect may explain this: since referendum support among losers is already high, polarization leaves little room for further increases. Alternatively, while polarization intensifies in-group loyalty and out-group hostility, it may not shape losers' strategic calculations in the same way as it does for winners. Regardless of how much they dislike the governing parties, losers consistently view referendums as a tool to influence policy from outside power. This contrasts with winners, for whom polarization increases defensiveness, making them less supportive of direct democracy.

Figure 6.1: Interaction effects on support for referendums



Note: Predicted values of support for referendums for electoral winners and losers across levels of affective polarization, including 95% confidence intervals. The graph is based on the third model in Table 6.4.

6.6 Robustness checks

To test the robustness of our results, we perform several additional analyses, with the full models available in Appendix 6.B. First, instead of using a linear regression model, we replicated our analyses with ordered logistic models. This addresses potential criticism regarding our dependent variable, in particular that the 1-5 scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) should not be interpreted linearly (Appendix 6.B.1). The results of these models are nonetheless consistent with those obtained using linear regression.

Second, critical readers may argue that the gap in referendum support between electoral losers and winners is rather a reflection of their gap in satisfaction with democracy. As discussed earlier, the winner-loser gap in democratic satisfaction after elections is a well-documented phenomenon in the literature (C. J. Anderson et al., 2005). Therefore, we ran the same models and additionally controlled for satisfaction with democracy (Appendix 6.B.2). Although the effect sizes indeed shrink visibly, the main effect of being an electoral loser, along with the interaction effect with affective polarization, remains positive (as hypothesised) and highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Thus, while part of the effect is indeed channelled through satisfaction with democracy, an independent effect persists between voters with the same level of democratic satisfaction.

Third, as discussed, we merged two variables to create our dependent variable of referendum support. To ensure that the results here are not driven by attitudes to only one of the two items, we conducted both the descriptive analysis and the fixed-effects regression analysis separately for each item. For both variables, we find very similar results (Appendix 6.B.3). The effect of being an electoral loser, along with the interaction with affective polarization, exhibit comparable effect sizes and statistical significance throughout the analyses.

Fourth, there is ongoing debate in the literature regarding whether support for referendums is predominantly driven by voters of populist radical right parties (Bowler et al., 2017; Webb, 2013). Given that populist radical right parties often find themselves

in opposition, higher support for referendums among electoral losers could simply be a reflection of this. We therefore reran our analyses and included a dummy for respondents who voted for a populist radical right party, based on the PopuList classification (Rooduijn et al., 2024). While we indeed find that populist voters are significantly more supportive of referendums, it does not change our results in any meaningful way (Appendix 6.B.4).

Fifth, in our main models, we coded abstainers as missing values. Some may argue that abstainers are also electoral losers. To address this, we replicated our models coding abstainers, in addition to voters who voted for an opposition party, as electoral losers. We again find substantively similar results, with directions of effects as well as significance levels unchanged (Appendix 6.B.5).

Sixth, our cross-sectional design inherently raises questions about causality. While we cannot fully resolve this issue, we can account for it by controlling for two additional variables to assess the effects of more structural electoral loss. First, we add a binary variable that is coded 1 if voters were also electoral losers before the last election (Appendix 6.B.6). Second, we add the parliamentary size of the party a respondent voted for into the models (Appendix 6.B.7). Both variables have the expected effects: structural losers are even more supportive of referendums than one-time losers, while voters of larger parties are less supportive of referendums, most likely reflecting the larger size of governing parties. However, adding these variables does not change our main findings. We also run a final model that includes all aforementioned control variables: satisfaction with democracy, populist radical right vote, structural electoral loss, and party size (Appendix 6.B.8). Even with these additional controls, our main coefficients of electoral loss and its interaction with affective polarization remain unchanged.

Seventh, several countries in our sample are characterized by coalition governments. To account for this, we empirically test if there is a noticeable difference between voters of the largest coalition partner and voters of a junior coalition partner (Appendix 6.B.9). It could be argued that voters of the largest coalition partner should witness stronger winner effects than junior coalition partners. We find, however, that the

differences between both types of electoral winners are basically negligible.

Finally, we employed jackknife tests by replicating our analyses while excluding one country at a time from the regression models (Appendix 6.B.10). This allows us to assess whether the results are driven by an important outlier. However, we found no meaningful changes in the coefficients of our key independent variables. We also used a more rigorous sensitivity analysis by analysing the results by country (Appendix 6.B.11), where the direction of results is as expected in all countries (except Wallonia), and significance levels hold in most of the countries. Consequently, these additional tests reinforce confidence in the robustness of our results.

6.7 Conclusion

In this study, we examined how winning and losing elections shapes citizens' support for referendums. We theorised that electoral losers should be more supportive of referendums since they seek alternative avenues to power. Using cross-national survey data of 13 European democracies, we found that citizens are significantly more likely to support referendums when they have voted for a party that ended up in the opposition. This finding aligns with earlier research on support for electoral reform in the US, which similarly found that electoral losers are more likely to endorse the use of referendums (Bowler et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2010). More broadly, it speaks to voters' instrumental considerations regarding alternative decision-making processes beyond general elections, a trend also observed in Europe (Pilet et al., 2023; Werner, 2020).

In addition, we demonstrated that the winner-loser gap in support for referendums is strongly moderated by affective polarization – the extent to which voters view their own party favourably while treating other parties and their supporters with hostility. More precisely, electoral winners become less supportive of referendums as their levels of affective polarization increase. Their emotional engagement with politics makes them protective of their party's government, resulting in decreased support for an instrument that can bypass it. Conversely, electoral losers maintain consistent

support for referendums regardless of their level of affective polarization. This finding is crucial because, even though the winner-loser gap in democratic satisfaction has been widely documented, the measure of voting for a party in or out of government is rather crude. We nuance the impact of the winner-loser gap on attitudes toward referendums, showing that there is virtually no gap in attitudes between electoral winners and losers who are not polarized.

To a certain extent, we believe that our findings identify three groups of voters in terms of referendum support. First, (long-term and short-term) electoral losers are consistently support referendums, regardless of their level of polarization. This is in line with previous research (Bowler et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2010) in the American context and suggests that losing elections triggers a desire to influence politics beyond representative democracy. Second, electoral winners can be divided into two groups. On the one hand, non-polarized winners support referendums similarly to electoral losers. Their low level of polarization suggests a weaker attachment to their party, and might for some even reflect political apathy or disenchantment with representative actors. As a result, they may view mechanisms that enhance direct influence, particularly at the expenses of parties and politicians, positively. On the other hand, polarized electoral winners strongly identify with their preferred party in government, and hold intense negative feelings toward other parties that are not in power. These voters are thus more motivated to support their government from outside interference, which is translated into lower support for alternative forms of decision-making such as referendums.

These findings contribute to debates about the potential implications of affective polarization for democracy and democratic attitudes. More specifically, recent research suggests that affective polarization may weaken the accountability relationship between parties and voters (Ward & Tavits, 2019), increasing voters' willingness to tolerate undemocratic behaviour from their own party if it keeps them in power (Andrews & Huang, 2024). Our results support this concern: strongly polarized election winners are more willing to shield their party from outside interference once in power, which can be problematic for democracy in the long term. Nonetheless, our findings only indicate an indirect effect. Further research is needed to unpack the precise

role of affective polarization in undermining the willingness of voters to hold their own party accountable. Furthermore, it would be interesting to examine whether our results are unique to attitudes about referendums, or also travel to other forms of democratic reform.

It is also important to mention that the winner-loser gap in satisfaction with democracy might be less alarming than it seems. Our results suggest that electoral losers, even when polarized, do not turn their back to democracy; if anything, they seek additional ways to engage and turn toward participatory forms of democracy. Concerns about the winner-loser gap should perhaps rather be focused on electoral winners instead (Cohen et al., 2023; Moehler, 2009).

One key limitation of our study is the limited ability to establish causality. Whereas reversed causality seems less likely (i.e., referendum support leads to losing elections), our research might suffer from omitted variable bias, where another, non-measured variable is actually driving our results rather than losing elections and affective polarization. We have attempted to mitigate this issue by including a range of control variables, but future research should further scrutinize our findings with more causal designs. For example, the use of panel data seems a promising avenue for future research, as is often the case in the literature on the winner-loser gap. Panel designs would also address another limitation of our study: the possibility that respondents switched party affiliation since the last election. Because panel surveys are conducted closer to elections, they can help improve causal inference while also accounting for party-switching dynamics.

To conclude, our study contributes to the literature in three key aspects. First, we add to the body of research on public support for referendums and democratic innovations, which has primarily focused on stable determinants such as political attitudes or sociodemographic backgrounds (Coffé & Michels, 2014; Gherghina & Geissel, 2020; Már & Gastil, 2023; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015). Our findings indicate that dynamic, instrumental factors related to election cycles can also play an important role in explaining support. Second, we contribute to the literature on the winner-loser gap, which has robustly established its existence (C. J. Anderson & Guillory, 1997; C. J. Anderson

et al., 2005; Daoust & Nadeau, 2023; Esaiasson, 2011) but has largely overlooked its consequences. By affecting attitudes toward alternative democratic instruments such as referendums, we demonstrated that this gap is consequential for citizens' democratic preferences, yet dependent on the level of affective polarization. In other words, winning or losing elections influences people's views on how democracy should work – especially when they are polarized – and whether the democratic status-quo, i.e., representative democracy, should remain unchanged or be revised to allow alternative instruments based on the direct participation of citizens in decision-making. Finally, we contribute to research on the political impact of affective polarization, particularly its effects on democratic attitudes (Janssen, 2024; Kingzette et al., 2021; Wagner, 2021). While this research agenda has only recently started to emerge, it has raised concern about the negative impact of affective polarization on democratic attitudes, especially among electoral losers. Our results suggest, however, that it is mostly electoral winners that are impacted by affective polarization.

Appendix

6.A Details on the data

Table 6.A.1: Countries and respondents

Country	N
Belgium (FL)	1,066
Belgium (WAL)	1,100
Czech Republic	1,985
Denmark	1,384
Finland	1,316
France	1,119
Germany	1,251
Greece	1,223
Ireland	1,259
Netherlands	1,288
Poland	1,284
Spain	1,276
United Kingdom	1,216

Table 6.A.2: Descriptive statistics

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Referendum support	16,767	3.882	0.854	1.000	5.000
Electoral loser	14,802	0.586	0.493	0	1
Affective polarization	16,767	2.049	1.112	0.000	4.993
Political interest	16,767	3.057	0.795	1	4
Left-right	16,767	5.377	2.362	0	10
Political efficacy	16,767	2.262	0.892	1	4
Male	16,767	0.535	0.499	0	1
Age	16,767	3.659	1.580	1	7
Education	16,767	4.192	1.585	1	6
Employment	16,767	1.549	0.608	0	2

6.B Robustness checks

6.B.1 Ordered logistic

Table 6.B.1: Ordered logit models

	M1	M2	M3
Electoral loser	0.494***	0.502***	0.502***
	(0.030)	(0.031)	(0.031)
Affective polarization	−0.082***	−0.060***	−0.060***
	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.015)
Political interest		0.242***	0.242***
		(0.022)	(0.022)
Left-right		0.012	0.012
		(0.007)	(0.007)
Internal political efficacy		0.139***	0.139***
		(0.019)	(0.019)
Male		−0.039	−0.039
		(0.030)	(0.030)
Age		0.051***	0.051***
		(0.010)	(0.010)
Education		−0.080***	−0.080***
		(0.010)	(0.010)
Not in labour force (ref: unemployed)		−0.058	−0.058
		(0.073)	(0.073)
Employed (ref: unemployed)		0.084	0.084
		(0.070)	(0.070)
Cutoff 1	−4.570	−3.647	−3.647
Cutoff 2	−3.893	−2.970	−2.970
Cutoff 3	−2.885	−1.962	−1.962
Cutoff 4	−2.188	−1.264	−1.264
Cutoff 5	−1.193	−0.262	−0.262
Cutoff 6	−0.398	0.543	0.543
Cutoff 7	0.760	1.720	1.720
Cutoff 8	1.737	2.709	2.709

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Country fixed effects not displayed.

6.B.2 Control for SWD

Table 6.B.2: Fixed-effects linear regression models

	M1	M2	M3
Electoral loser	0.230***	0.154***	0.011
	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.030)
Affective polarization	−0.052***	−0.042***	−0.080***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.010)
Loser*Affective polarization			0.067***
			(0.013)
Political interest		0.116***	0.114***
		(0.010)	(0.010)
Left-right		0.013***	0.013***
		(0.003)	(0.003)
Internal political efficacy		0.095***	0.094***
		(0.008)	(0.008)
Male		−0.026	−0.025
		(0.014)	(0.014)
Age		0.021***	0.021***
		(0.005)	(0.005)
Education		−0.036***	−0.036***
		(0.005)	(0.005)
Not in labour force (ref: unemployed)		−0.006	−0.008
		(0.033)	(0.033)
Employed (ref: unemployed)		0.062	0.060
		(0.031)	(0.031)
SWD		−0.062***	−0.060***
		(0.003)	(0.003)
Intercept	3.839***	3.608***	3.688***
	(0.032)	(0.063)	(0.064)
Adj. R^2	0.054	0.096	0.098
Num. obs.	14802	14711	14711

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Country fixed effects not displayed.

6.B.3 Separate dependent variables

Table 6.B.3: T-tests dependent variable 1

Country	Mean electoral losers	Mean electoral winners	Difference	p-value
Belgium (WAL)	4.180	3.843	**0.337**	0.000
Belgium (FL)	4.101	3.977	**0.124**	0.028
Czech Republic	4.012	3.711	**0.301**	0.000
Denmark	4.036	4.822	**0.214**	0.000
Finland	3.926	3.789	**0.137**	0.013
France	4.046	3.693	**0.354**	0.000
Germany	4.106	3.828	**0.278**	0.000
Greece	4.104	3.842	**0.261**	0.000
Ireland	4.029	3.900	**0.128**	0.014
Netherlands	3.997	3.562	**0.435**	0.000
Poland	4.356	4.018	**0.338**	0.000
Spain	4.117	4.064	**0.053**	0.183
UK	3.810	3.768	**0.041**	0.244

Note: The p-values are based on a one-tailed t-test. Differences in bold are in the hypothesised direction. Dependent variable: *When collecting a sufficient number of signatures, citizens can force the government to hold a referendum on a policy issue* (1-5).

Table 6.B.4: T-tests dependent variable 2

Country	Mean electoral losers	Mean electoral winners	Difference	p-value
Belgium (WAL)	3.884	3.559	**0.325**	0.000
Belgium (FL)	3.854	3.700	**0.154**	0.012
Czech Republic	3.679	3.158	**0.521**	0.000
Denmark	3.948	3.773	**0.176**	0.002
Finland	3.880	3.729	**0.151**	0.005
France	3.964	3.507	**0.457**	0.000
Germany	3.769	3.503	**0.266**	0.000
Greece	3.993	3.736	**0.257**	0.000
Ireland	4.258	4.131	**0.127**	0.004
Netherlands	3.644	3.104	**0.540**	0.000
Poland	4.144	3.969	**0.175**	0.001
Spain	4.012	4.026	-0.014	0.595
UK	3.828	3.759	**0.069**	0.135

Note: The p-values are based on a one-tailed t-test. Differences in bold are in the hypothesised direction. Dependent variable: *It is important for democracy that citizens have the final say on political issues by voting in referendums* (1-5).

Table 6.B.5: Regressions dependent variable 1

	M1	M2	M3
Electoral loser	0.222***	0.222***	0.020
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.035)
Affective polarization	−0.036***	−0.029***	−0.082***
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.012)
Loser*Affective polarization			0.093***
			(0.015)
Political interest		0.092***	0.091***
		(0.011)	(0.011)
Left-right		−0.001	−0.000
		(0.004)	(0.004)
Internal political efficacy		0.061***	0.061***
		(0.010)	(0.010)
Male		−0.020	−0.018
		(0.016)	(0.016)
Age		0.022***	0.022***
		(0.005)	(0.005)
Education		−0.031***	−0.031***
		(0.005)	(0.005)
Not in labour force			
(ref: unemployed)		0.008	0.006
		(0.039)	(0.039)
Employed			
(ref: unemployed)		0.049	0.047
		(0.037)	(0.037)
Intercept	3.959***	3.591***	3.710***
	(0.035)	(0.073)	(0.075)
Adj. R^2	0.028	0.037	0.039
Num. obs.	14802	14802	14802

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Country fixed effects not displayed. DV: *When collecting a sufficient numbers of signatures, citizens can force the government to hold a referendum on a policy issue* (1-5).

Table 6.B.6: Regressions dependent variable 2

	M1	M2	M3
Electoral loser	0.239***	0.241***	−0.015
	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.035)
Affective polarization	−0.068***	−0.049***	−0.116***
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.012)
Loser*Affective polarization			0.117***
			(0.015)
Political interest		0.093***	0.092***
		(0.012)	(0.012)
Left-right		0.006	0.007*
		(0.004)	(0.004)
Internal political efficacy		0.095***	0.095***
		(0.010)	(0.010)
Male		−0.039*	−0.036*
		(0.016)	(0.016)
Age		0.016**	0.015**
		(0.006)	(0.006)
Education		−0.043***	−0.042***
		(0.005)	(0.005)
Not in labour force			
(ref: unemployed)		−0.049	−0.051
		(0.038)	(0.038)
Employed			
(ref: unemployed)		0.035	0.032
		(0.037)	(0.036)
Intercept	3.720***	3.323***	3.474***
	(0.038)	(0.075)	(0.076)
Adj. R^2	0.067	0.082	0.086
Num. obs.	14802	14802	14802

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Country fixed effects not displayed. DV: *It is important for democracy that citizens have a final say on political issues by voting in referendums* (1-5).

6.B.4 Control for PRR vote

Table 6.B.7: PRR vote

	M1	M2	M3
Electoral loser	0.230***	0.203***	−0.021
	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.030)
Affective polarization	−0.052***	−0.044***	−0.103***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.010)
Loser*Affective polarization			0.103***
			(0.013)
Political interest		0.095***	0.094***
		(0.010)	(0.010)
Left-right		−0.006	−0.005
		(0.003)	(0.003)
Internal political efficacy		0.079***	0.079***
		(0.008)	(0.008)
Male		−0.033*	−0.031*
		(0.014)	(0.014)
Age		0.019***	0.019***
		(0.005)	(0.005)
Education		−0.034***	−0.034***
		(0.005)	(0.005)
Not in labour force (ref: unemployed)		−0.015	−0.018
		(0.033)	(0.033)
Employed (ref: unemployed)		0.044	0.042
		(0.031)	(0.031)
Voted Populist Radical Right		0.204***	0.201***
		(0.021)	(0.020)
Intercept	3.839***	3.496***	3.628***
	(0.032)	(0.063)	(0.065)
Adj. R^2	0.054	0.075	0.079
Num. obs.	14802	14802	14802

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Country fixed effects not displayed.

6.B.5 Abstainers as electoral losers

Table 6.B.8: Abstainers

	M1	M2	M3
Affective polarization	-0.038^{***}	-0.031^{***}	-0.101^{***}
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.010)
Political interest		0.097^{***}	0.093^{***}
		(0.009)	(0.009)
Left-right		0.002	0.003
		(0.003)	(0.003)
Internal political efficacy		0.068^{***}	0.067^{***}
		(0.008)	(0.008)
Male		-0.026^{*}	-0.025
		(0.013)	(0.013)
Age		0.024^{***}	0.024^{***}
		(0.004)	(0.004)
Education		-0.038^{***}	-0.038^{***}
		(0.004)	(0.004)
Not in labour force (ref: unemployed)		0.001	-0.003
		(0.029)	(0.029)
Employed (ref: unemployed)		0.071^{*}	0.066^{*}
		(0.028)	(0.027)
Intercept	3.807^{***}	3.406^{***}	3.578^{***}
	(0.030)	(0.057)	(0.060)
Adj. R^2	0.047	0.064	0.068
Num. obs.	16767	16767	16767

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Country fixed effects not displayed.

6.B.6 Control for structural electoral losers

Table 6.B.9: Structural electoral losers

	M1	M2	M3
Electoral loser	0.230***	0.215***	−0.025
	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.030)
Affective polarization	−0.052***	−0.037***	−0.099***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.010)
Loser*Affective polarization			0.109***
			(0.013)
Political interest		0.092***	0.091***
		(0.010)	(0.010)
Left-right		0.004	0.005
		(0.003)	(0.003)
Internal political efficacy		0.079***	0.079***
		(0.008)	(0.008)
Male		−0.031*	−0.029*
		(0.014)	(0.014)
Age		0.021***	0.021***
		(0.005)	(0.005)
Education		−0.036***	−0.036***
		(0.005)	(0.005)
Not in labour force (ref: unemployed)		−0.019	−0.021
		(0.033)	(0.033)
Employed (ref: unemployed)		0.044	0.042
		(0.032)	(0.031)
Structural electoral loser		0.082***	0.090***
		(0.016)	(0.016)
Intercept	3.839***	3.372***	3.504***
	(0.032)	(0.066)	(0.067)
Adj. R^2	0.054	0.071	0.075
Num. obs.	14802	14802	14802

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Country fixed effects not displayed.

6.B.7 Control for party size

Table 6.B.10: Party size

	M1	M2	M3
Electoral loser	0.230***	0.215***	−0.035
	(0.014)	(0.017)	(0.032)
Affective polarization	−0.052***	−0.035***	−0.096***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.010)
Loser*Affective polarization			0.110***
			(0.013)
Political interest		0.092***	0.091***
		(0.010)	(0.010)
Left-right		0.003	0.005
		(0.003)	(0.003)
Internal political efficacy		0.078***	0.079***
		(0.008)	(0.008)
Male		−0.030*	−0.028*
		(0.014)	(0.014)
Age		0.020***	0.020***
		(0.005)	(0.005)
Education		−0.037***	−0.037***
		(0.005)	(0.005)
Not in labour force (ref: unemployed)		−0.020	−0.022
		(0.033)	(0.033)
Employed (ref: unemployed)		0.043	0.041
		(0.032)	(0.031)
Party size		−0.125*	−0.196**
		(0.061)	(0.061)
Intercept	3.839***	3.472***	3.623***
	(0.032)	(0.064)	(0.065)
Adj. R^2	0.054	0.070	0.074
Num. obs.	14802	14802	14802

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Country fixed effects not displayed.

6.B.8 Control for SWD, PRR vote, structural electoral losers, and party size

Table 6.B.11: All confounders

	M1	M2	M3
Electoral loser	0.230***	0.124***	−0.035
	(0.014)	(0.017)	(0.032)
Affective polarization	−0.052***	−0.044***	−0.083***
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.010)
Loser*Affective polarization			0.071***
			(0.013)
Political interest		0.116***	0.114***
		(0.010)	(0.010)
Left-right		0.007*	0.008*
		(0.003)	(0.003)
Internal political efficacy		0.095***	0.095***
		(0.008)	(0.008)
Male		−0.030*	−0.029*
		(0.014)	(0.014)
Age		0.022***	0.022***
		(0.005)	(0.005)
Education		−0.033***	−0.033***
		(0.005)	(0.005)
Not in labour force (ref: unemployed)		−0.002	−0.004
		(0.033)	(0.033)
Employed (ref: unemployed)		0.064*	0.062*
		(0.031)	(0.031)
SWD		−0.059***	−0.056***
		(0.003)	(0.003)
Voted Populist Radical Right		0.157***	0.157***
		(0.020)	(0.020)
Structural electoral loser		0.040*	0.043*
		(0.017)	(0.017)
Party size		−0.031	−0.076
		(0.064)	(0.064)
Intercept	3.839***	3.594***	3.682***
	(0.032)	(0.067)	(0.068)
Adj. R^2	0.054	0.100	0.102
Num. obs.	14802	14711	14711

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Country fixed effects not displayed.

6.B.9 Split electoral winners between junior and largest coalition partner

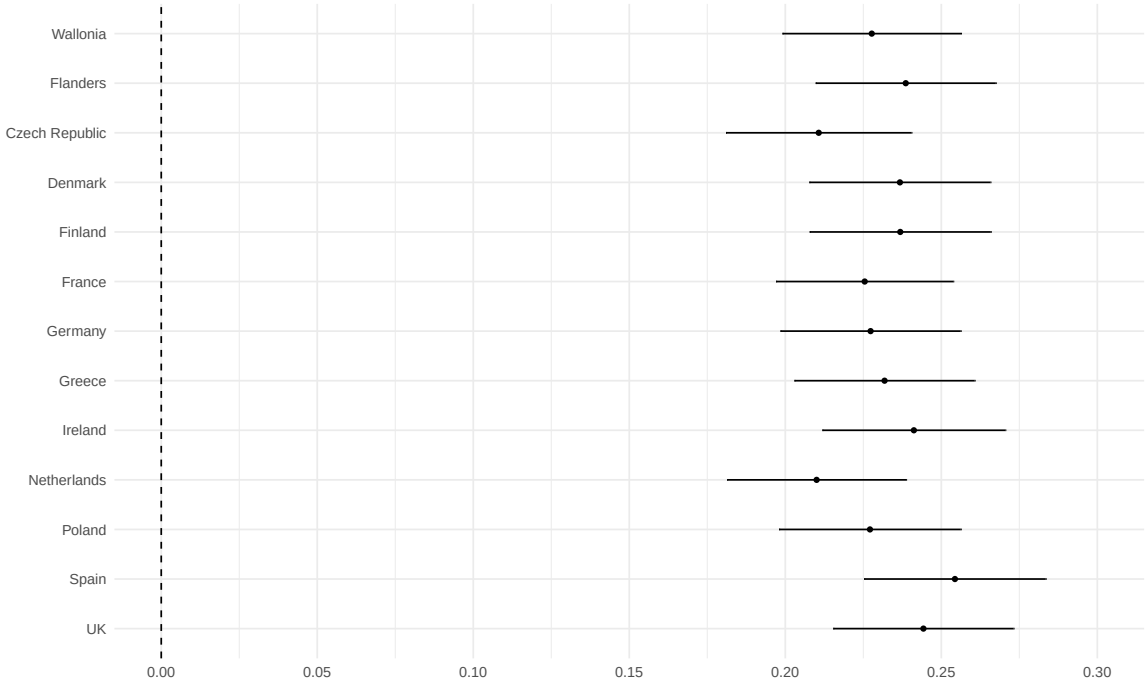
Table 6.B.12: Largest and junior coalition party

	M1	M2	M3
Junior coalition partner	−0.207***	−0.195***	0.051
	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.040)
Largest coalition partner	−0.246***	−0.257***	−0.044
	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.036)
Affective polarization	−0.051***	−0.038***	0.006
	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.009)
Junior coalition partner*Affective Polarisation			−0.117***
			(0.019)
Largest coalition partner*Affective Polarisation			−0.096***
			(0.015)
Political interest		0.092***	0.092***
		(0.010)	(0.010)
Left-right		0.003	0.004
		(0.003)	(0.003)
Internal political efficacy		0.078***	0.078***
		(0.008)	(0.008)
Male		−0.029*	−0.027
		(0.014)	(0.014)
Age		0.019***	0.019***
		(0.005)	(0.005)
Education		−0.038***	−0.037***
		(0.005)	(0.005)
Not in labour force (ref: unemployed)		−0.021	−0.023
		(0.033)	(0.033)
Employed (ref: unemployed)		0.043	0.040
		(0.032)	(0.031)
Intercept	4.063***	3.673***	3.587***
	(0.032)	(0.063)	(0.064)
Adj. R^2	0.054	0.070	0.074
Num. obs.	14802	14802	14802

***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Country fixed effects not displayed.

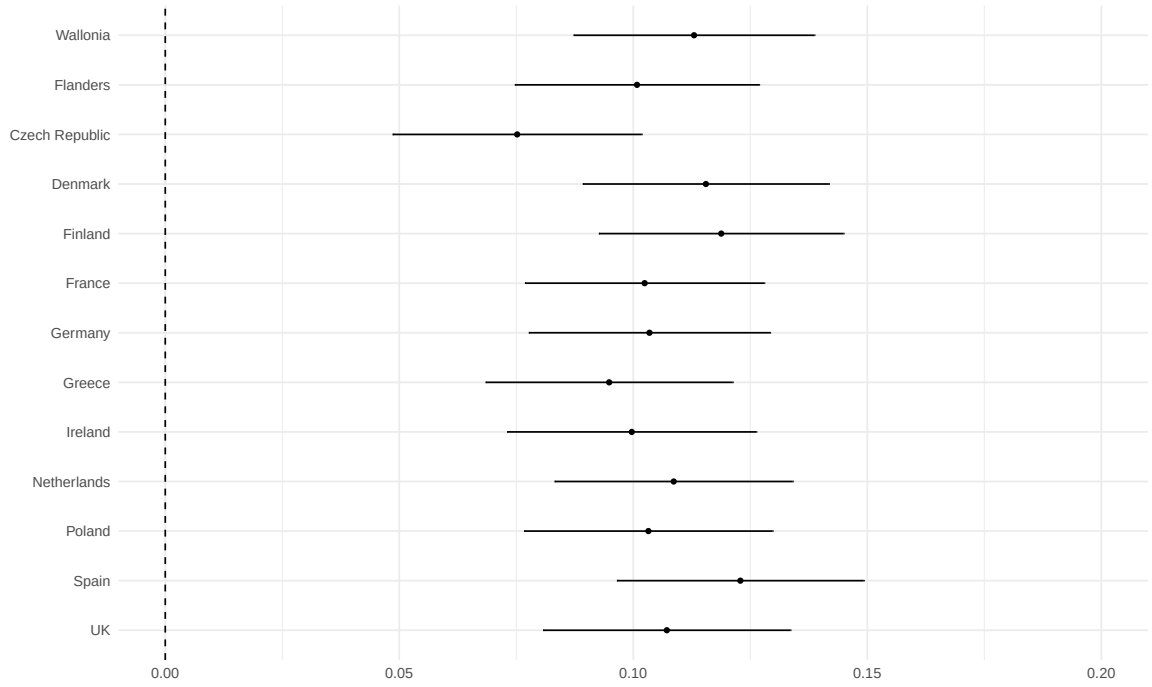
6.B.10 Jackknife tests

Figure 6.B.1: Electoral losers coefficient



Note: Regression output of linear regression models, including 95% confidence intervals. Coefficients display the results when the country is left out of the analysis.

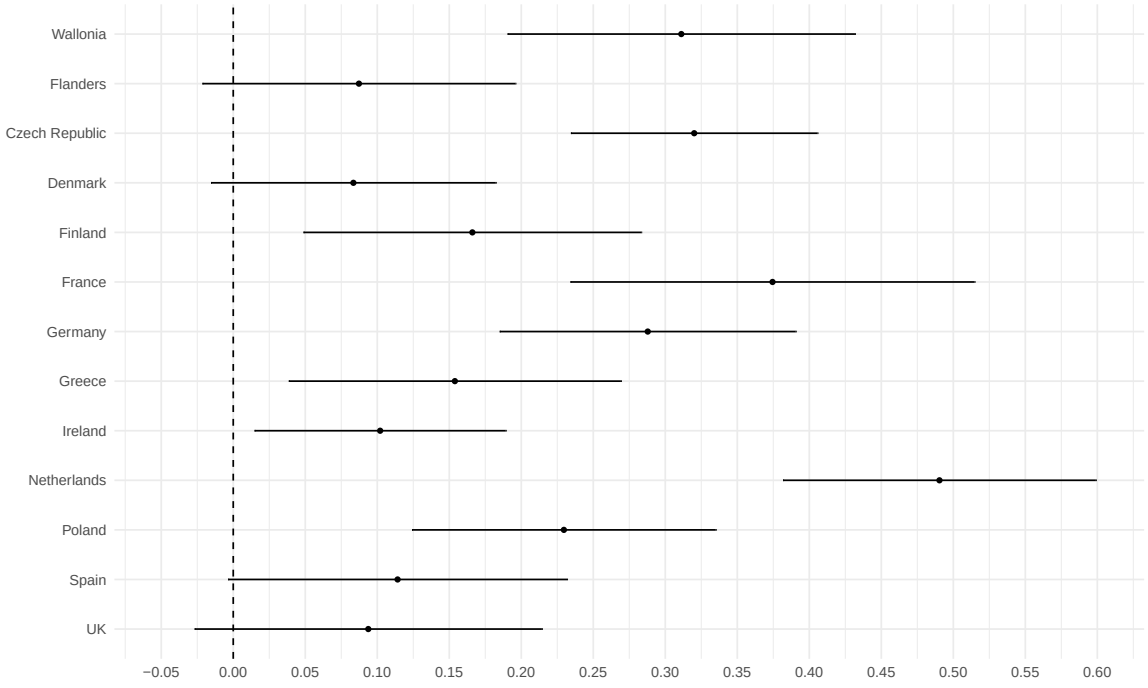
Figure 6.B.2: Interaction coefficient



Note: Regression output of linear regression models, including 95% confidence intervals. Coefficients display the results when the country is left out of the analysis.

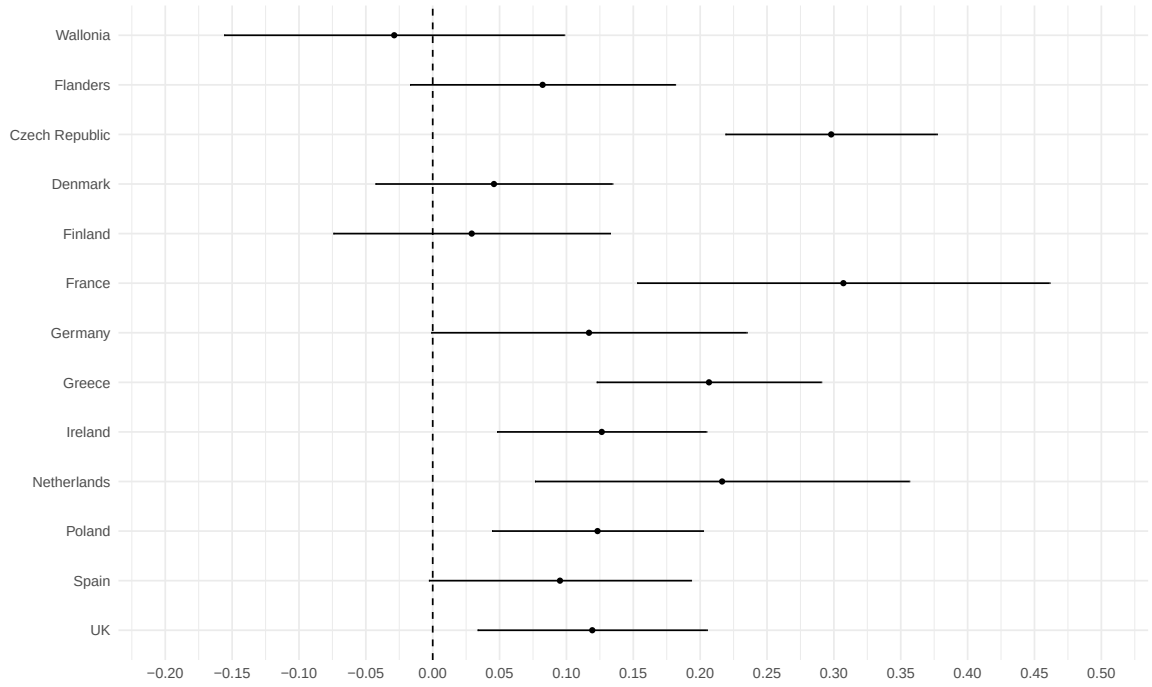
6.B.11 By-country analyses

Figure 6.B.3: Electoral losers coefficient



Note: Regression output of linear regression models, including 95% confidence intervals. Coefficients display the results when the country is analysed separately.

Figure 6.B.4: Interaction coefficient



Note: Regression output of linear regression models, including 95% confidence intervals. Coefficients display the results when the country is analysed separately.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

There has been widespread academic and societal attention for the concept of affective polarization in recent years. However, whereas it is established that affective polarization tends to be higher around elections, it remains largely unclear what the exact relationship between election salience and affective polarization is, or what its implications are for political behaviour. In this dissertation, I have aimed to contribute to both of these research questions in five empirical chapters, using a range of different research methods and multiparty contexts.

In this final chapter, I summarize and discuss the main findings of these articles and examine how they address these research questions. Then, I highlight the limitations of my research, followed by avenues for future research. Finally, I discuss the main implications of my findings.

7.1 Summary of the results

7.1.1 Research question 1: How do elections drive affective polarization?

The first research puzzle emerged from earlier findings in the literature that affective polarization tends to be higher around multiparty elections. Whereas that literature had largely established a correlation between election salience and affective polariza-

tion, it was mostly rooted in cross-sectional data focused on vertical affective polarization. It remained therefore still unclear whether there is an actual within-individual impact, how large that impact is, when it emerges during the election period, whether it extends to horizontal affective polarization, and which combination of in-group and out-group change drives this development. On top of that, it was still largely unclear what mechanisms were driving the election boost in affective polarization.

Chapter 2 and **Chapter 3** examined this first research question. **Chapter 2** exploited individual-level panel survey data during the Belgian elections of 2024. The panel consisted of three measurements of vertical and horizontal affective polarization to study the development of within-individual affective polarization during an election period. With a first measurement before the campaign, a second measurement during the campaign, and a third measurement after the elections, this design moved beyond earlier cross-sectional designs and allowed for an assessment of the timing and magnitude of election-induced affective polarization. The results confirm the impact of election salience on vertical affective polarization, but not on horizontal affective polarization. The size of the election boost on vertical affective polarization is small, however, and is the result of a similarly-shaped increase during the campaign and after the elections. Most importantly, for both vertical and horizontal polarization, these patterns are driven by increased affect toward both the in-party (voters) and the out-party (voters). Whereas this increase is larger for the in-party vertically, it is similar for both in- and out-parties horizontally.

Chapter 3 explored a potential mechanism that drives affective polarization during elections by focusing on the role of policy congruence between voters and parties. Matching party and survey data from a Voting Advice Application during the 2019 Belgian elections, the results show that policy congruence with any party – in- or out-party – is correlated with higher sympathy toward the voters of that party. In addition, they show a cross-directional effect: voters tend to be more sympathetic toward their own group if they are strongly incongruent with other parties, whereas they tend to be less sympathetic to other electorates if they strongly align with their own party.

Taken together, these results nuance the impact of elections on affective polarization in multiparty systems, and strongly question whether elections have a problematic influence on affective polarization in multiparty systems. The direct impact of election salience on affective polarization is a result of increased affect toward all parties and voters, rather than driven by increased hostility toward out-parties and their voters. Furthermore, the impact of party-voter congruence implies that voters will naturally hold some sympathy for other voters in multiparty systems, since policy overlap will always occur between parties on a range of issues. This implies that multiparty democracies have an institutional safeguard that prevents extreme levels of affective polarization driven by ideological disputes.

7.1.2 Research question 2: What is the influence of affective polarization on political behaviour?

Having examined the impact of elections on affective polarization, this dissertation shifts attention to the impact of these increased levels of affective polarization on political behaviour. Specifically, it focused on two phenomena in political behaviour closely related to the election period: voter turnout and the winner-loser gap. **Chapter 4** studied the impact of affective polarization, both vertically and horizontally, on voter turnout using three decades of election surveys in Belgium. **Chapter 5** shifted focus to the European level, examining to what extent horizontal affective polarization drove voter turnout in the 2024 European elections – often characterized as second-order. Both chapters contrasted the impact of affective polarization with the impact of ideological polarization, and – in the case of the European elections – with polarization over the question of European integration. Both find that affective polarization – both vertical and horizontal – is a robust predictor of voter turnout across countries and different types of elections. In fact, this predictor outweighs the impact of ideological polarization, which becomes less obvious when affective polarization is taken into account in regression models.

Chapter 6 shifted focus to the impact of affective polarization on democratic preferences by examining the winner-loser gap. Although the winner-loser gap in demo-

cratic satisfaction is a classic outcome of elections in the political science literature, this chapter moved beyond the election period by focusing on the winner-loser gap in process preferences – specifically referendums. The chapter examined whether affective polarization also has an impact outside of the election period when it comes to political behaviour resulting from elections. The results show that affective polarization increases the winner-loser gap in support for referendums, but only for electoral winners, who are much less supportive of this alternative form of decision-making when they are affectively polarized.

The findings of these chapters contribute to the literature of the impact of affective polarization on political behaviour. They again nuance the problematic impact of the correlation between election salience and affective polarization by showing that increased affective polarization does not only have negative consequences for political behaviour. In fact, it stimulates citizens to vote, and this impact is more consequential than the traditional impact of ideological polarization. Moreover, whereas affective polarization can be consequential for democratic preferences and attitudes, it seems that the large focus on electoral losers might have been overstated. Rather, it is important that electoral winners – especially those who are polarized – are kept in check such that they do not abuse their temporary majority in government.

7.2 Limitations and future research

This dissertation is not without limitations that spark potential for future research. Here, I outline the most important ones.

First, most of the chapters in this dissertation are of a correlational nature, raising the question whether the causal arrow actually travels in the other direction, or whether some of the findings might be driven by confounding variables. For example, in Chapter 3, it could be argued that sympathies toward other voters are driving policy congruence with parties because of a process of motivated reasoning, rather than the other way around. Similarly, it might be that rather than affective polarization driving turnout, it is the act of voting that actually polarizes respondents compared

to respondents that did not vote. Regarding confounders, there might always be a third variable that actually drives the relationship under study with correlational data. The research designs of my dissertation chapters have attempted to mitigate these risks as much as possible – both through theory and by running additional analytic checks that account for alternative operationalizations, methods of analysis, and control variables. Still, this cannot fully mitigate the risks described – at most, it decreases them. As such, this also leaves room for future research to come up with designs with stronger causal assumptions.

Second, while some of the chapters of this dissertation employed cross-national data, others were less extensive in their geographical scope and focused only on Belgium. This puts limits on the geographic generalizability of the findings and raises questions whether they hold in other contexts. At the same time, the chapters that focused on Belgium only – 2, 3, and 4 – examined research questions that required particular data. As such, there was a trade-off between using specific, valid measures in only one context and using less suitable measures yet in a larger range of contexts. For example, Chapter 2 used specifically timed panel data, which strongly improved the causal estimates of the relationship between elections and affective polarization. At the same time, it was only one election in one country. Other elections, like those that are more or less competitive (Robinson & Dassonneville, 2026), might lead to different effect sizes than the ones found here. Chapter 3, furthermore, used a novel measure of party-voter congruence that used a unique survey design which included a VAA that could be matched to respondents. This has limited partisan signalling and therefore decreased the potential for reverse causality, but again raises the question whether these findings are particular to one election, one country, or to a range of European multiparty systems. Finally, Chapter 4 collected three decades of Belgian election data to robustly establish the relationship between affective polarization and voter turnout in the context of compulsory voting. Yet, it remains the question whether this holds in other systems of compulsory voting, which vary in their strictness, enforcement, and – consequently – political culture (Birch, 2009; Singh, 2021).

Third, this dissertation has relied on the classic like-dislike questions to operationalize affective polarization. Although this is standard in the literature, there is an ongoing

debate about whether these measures adequately capture the different dimensions of affective polarization such as emotions and hostility (Bakker & Lelkes, 2024; Versteegen, 2024). In essence, these survey measures capture expressed affect rather than actual, enacted hostility or sympathy. Respondents may underreport negative feelings due to social desirability bias, or interpret the response scales differently across contexts (Röllicke, 2023). In such a booming field as the one on affective polarization, it is conceivable that a new – better – measure is adopted in due time. Until then, the use of like-dislike measures ensures comparability with a large body of existing research, while future work may reassess the relationships examined here using alternative or more fine-grained operationalizations.

Finally, the results of this dissertation raise the question whether the election-induced increase of affective polarization is short-lived and falls back to pre-election levels quickly or establishes a new equilibrium after the elections. Some earlier work has found that affective polarization tends to decrease after the elections (Gidron & Shefer, 2024; Hernández et al., 2021), but it would require panel data that track respondents over a longer time period to examine how this relates to pre-election levels over time. The use of panel data would also allow to study the underlying in-group and out-group developments, which, as Chapter 2 in this dissertation has shown, is essential in order to understand the normative implications of changes in affective polarization. Extending panel designs beyond the immediate electoral cycle would therefore be a crucial next step for assessing the durability and democratic significance of election-related changes in affective polarization.

7.3 Implications of the dissertation

In this final part, I reflect on some of the implications of the research findings throughout this dissertation. These implications can be relevant both for academic researchers and for policy makers.

One of the core implications of this dissertation is that elections in multiparty systems do not uniformly generate destabilizing surges in affective polarization. While verti-

cal affective polarization increases slightly during electoral periods, these changes are moderate in magnitude and are primarily driven by differentiated increases in sympathy toward parties and electorates rather than by growing hostility toward political opponents. This suggests that elections reinforce citizens' connection to the party system rather than undermine it, reflecting renewed political engagement rather than a rise in hostility between opponents. Additionally, sympathy toward other electorates increases during the electoral period, indicating that citizen-to-citizen relations are not negatively affected by campaign dynamics. These findings extend earlier findings about the positive role of elections, such as boosting satisfaction with democracy and political trust (Kostelka & Blais, 2018; van der Meer & Steenvoorden, 2018).

Importantly, the multiparty institutional context likely plays a role in containing polarization within manageable bounds. One of the key drivers of affective polarization is ideology – citizens dislike other parties and their voters if they strongly disagree with them politically. In multiparty systems, political parties will, by definition, agree with each other on at least some issues. As a result, most parties are likely to cooperate in some way (Andeweg et al., 2008), which is a strategy that is also preferred by many citizens (Louwerse & Zorina, 2025). This contrasts with two-party systems such as the US, where many legislators are unwilling to engage in bipartisan compromising out of fear for electoral loss (S. E. Anderson et al., 2020). Although election campaigns in multiparty systems may highlight electoral differences, they inherently show that political parties agree on several issues likewise. Multiparty systems thus have institutional guardrails that seem to soften affective divides even during heated periods of elections.

A second key implication is that increases in affective polarization cannot be normatively evaluated without examining their underlying components. Affective polarization is often treated as a single component whose increase is assumed to signal rising hostility between political opponents. Yet, this dissertation demonstrates that similar increases in aggregate levels of affective polarization can be the result of very different underlying dynamics.

Different combinations of developments of in-group and out-group sympathy can lead

to identical surges of aggregate affective polarization, but they do not carry the same democratic implications. If citizens become more sympathetic toward their in-group without a corresponding rise of out-group hostility, they are technically more affectively polarized than before. However, this development is not comparable to an increase of out-group hostility combined with unchanged in-group affect. Specifically, in-group sympathy is not normatively equivalent to out-group hostility. While in-group bias has the potential to become problematic under certain conditions, it is not inherently detrimental to democracies. In contexts where political disengagement has been a concern, increased in-group attachment might even reflect revitalized political involvement. In contrast, rising hostility to political opponents poses a far clearer risk to democratic stability and social cohesion.

Disaggregating in-group and out-group developments is particularly important during elections. Electoral competition emphasizes partisan identities and policy alternatives between different political actors, which is likely to drive affective responses. Yet, these responses need not be negative. This dissertation has shown that election-induced increases in affective polarization were driven by broad increases in sympathy rather than by growing animosity. This suggests that democratic concern should focus less on changes in aggregate polarization levels but rather on its underlying structures. Research designs that lack repeated measurement are especially limited in this regard, as they cannot distinguish between rising attachment and rising hostility, and may therefore overstate the normative risks of polarization.

A third important implication of this dissertation is that changes in affective polarization can diverge between its vertical and horizontal dimension. Although the two are related and partially overlapping, change in one does not automatically imply change in the other. This is particularly important during election campaigns, when the visibility of political elites is likely to reshape vertical affective ties. In such periods, an increase of vertical affective polarization might even be the result of both growing in-group sympathy and out-group hostility. Importantly, however, this change does not imply that horizontal affective polarization has increased likewise.

This distinction matters normatively. If citizens increasingly dislike (some) other

parties but not their voters, it does not necessarily pose a threat for the democratic order. It is inherent to democracy that citizens dislike certain political parties, their policies, and leadership. This shows that they care about the political system and its outcomes. A polity in which citizens do not differentiate their affect to political parties is not a well-functioning one. Rather, it reflects apathy or disbelief that political parties can deliver for them. Especially when the stakes are high around election time, when clear policy alternatives are on the table, it is important that politicians are scrutinized for their past and future actions and ideas. As long as these hostilities remain within the boundaries of democratic norms, they can be part of the process.

However, the situation becomes more concerning when those hostilities spill over from parties to fellow citizens. When hostility extends beyond parties to fellow citizens, political disagreement can transform into social division. This threatens to damage social cohesion which is an important prerequisite for the functioning of democratic societies. Obviously, this is a thin line to balance on as a democracy, and there will always be spillovers. As long as these are manageable, even elections that increase vertical affective polarization through out-party hostility are not directly a threat to the democratic order in multiparty systems.

A fourth implication is that rising levels of affective polarization do not have uniformly negative consequences for political behaviour. Much of the literature assumes that rising affective polarization erodes democratic functioning in various ways. The findings of this dissertation suggest a more nuanced, differentiated picture.

First, elevated levels of affective polarization are associated with increased electoral participation. High electoral participation is vital to democratic legitimacy, and ensures that parliamentary representation is reflective of the broader society – which in turn should lead to policies that take into account the different needs of that broader society as well. In this sense, not all forms of affective polarization weaken democratic processes; under certain conditions, they may energize them.

Second, the implications of affective polarization might differ between electoral win-

ners and electoral losers. Existing research has predominantly focused on the dissatisfaction of electoral losers. However, this dissertation suggests that electoral winners warrant equal, if not greater, attention. If affective polarization gets out of control, they might be the ones who believe that their electoral victory translates into unconstrained access to power. Although more research is needed to unpack these specific mechanisms, recent well-known episodes of democratic backsliding in Hungary, Poland, and the US anecdotally confirm that affective polarization might be much more detrimental to the political behaviour of electoral winners than electoral losers.

Taken together, these findings provide merit to the argument that democratic stability does not require the absence of affective polarization, but rather its containment within certain boundaries. A democracy in which citizens show no affective differentiation toward different political actors is likely to reflect apathy, whereas extreme hostility may pose a threat to democratic functioning – and to social cohesion when spilled over to citizen-to-citizen relations. The findings of this dissertation suggest that during elections in multiparty systems, affective polarization can remain within a relatively wide but bounded range. Within this range, affective differentiation can mobilize participation and structure political conflict without necessarily undermining democratic norms.

Replication materials

The replication materials for this dissertation can be found on the Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/zgwmr/overview. The repository is structured by empirical chapter and contains all datasets and code required to reproduce the figures and tables of the chapters relying on empirical analyses (2-6).

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