

EDITORIAL

Affective Polarisation in the Low Countries

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Affective polarisation, that is, “view[ing] opposing partisans negatively and copartisans positively” (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015 p. 691), seems to have become a buzzword in field of political behaviour. Since the seminal article of Iyengar et al. (2012), where the concept was delineated for the first time, a plethora of studies engaged with it, making it one of the most popular constructs of the last decade.

However, until about four years ago, the study of affective polarisation was primarily a US-centric endeavour. In Europe, affective polarisation has attracted scholarly attention only in about the last four years. This is likely due to the fact that in countries that do not have a two-party system, the feelings of in-group and out-group membership, on which affective polarisation rests, are less immediately visible.

In fact, affective polarisation is particularly intuitive in a two-party system like that of the US, as it aligns closely with the theoretical base of the theory upon which the concept was built, that is, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1979).

Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive a sense of self-esteem and belonging from their group memberships, which naturally leads to a tendency to favour their in-group while harbouring negative biases against out-groups (as some of the contributions in this special issue will implicitly or explicitly discuss). The clear and stable division between Democrats and Republicans in the US provides a well-defined framework for this dynamic, where partisanship functions as a salient social identity. Voters can easily categorise themselves and others into distinct, opposing groups, amplifying in-group favouritism and out-group hostility. This binary structure, with its stark contrasts in ideology and party affiliation, simplifies the process of identifying allies and adversaries, making it an ideal setting for studying the psychological and emotional dimensions of affective polarisation.

However, the importance of studying affective polarisation extends far beyond the US context. It represents a growing challenge to democratic systems worldwide, contributing to social fragmentation, reduced trust in political institutions and declining willingness to engage in bipartisan cooperation. Affective polarisation shapes not only electoral behaviour but also everyday interactions, fostering hostility and undermining the cohesion necessary for functioning democracies. Understanding how it operates in different political contexts is therefore critical to addressing these challenges and finding ways to mitigate its effects.

Recent research has demonstrated that affective polarisation is far from an exclusively American concern. European scholars have increasingly turned their

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attention to this topic, spurred by ground-breaking work such as Wagner's (2021) study, which showed that levels of affective polarisation in European multi-party systems are equally high and worrisome. Since then, the study of affective polarisation in Europe has blossomed, with researchers adapting the concept to the distinct characteristics of multi-party democracies. This special issue builds on this growing body of work, showcasing four articles that advance our understanding of affective polarisation, particularly in European contexts. These contributions engage with several dimensions of affective polarisation, including both vertical affective polarisation (towards parties and elites) and horizontal affective polarisation (towards voters), enriching the field with fresh perspectives and methodologies.

The special issue opens with an article by Jochem Vanagt, 'Appraising Measurements of Affective Polarisation in Multiparty Systems', which tackles the challenge of placing the concept of affective polarisation in a European context and translating it into effective measurement instruments. The author critically investigates how affective polarisation can be operationalised in multi-party systems, where partisanship has different meanings and implications and in-groups and out-groups are less clear-cut than in two-party systems. This contribution is particularly valuable in ensuring that researchers can adapt affective polarisation measures to the unique characteristics of European democracies, enhancing the robustness and comparability of future studies.

The second article, 'Towards a Polarised Electorate?' by Bjarn Eck and Elie Michel, addresses the interplay between ideological and affective polarisation, a topic that has sparked considerable debate in the literature. The authors bring this discussion into the realm of electoral behaviour, examining how polarisation influences citizens' likelihood of voting in future elections. Using the Belgian context and considering both compulsory and voluntary voting scenarios, the study highlights the enduring impact of affective polarisation on voter mobilisation, offering critical insights into the behavioural consequences of polarisation in multi-party systems.

The third article, 'Gendered Divides' by Robin Devroe and Bram Wauters, investigates the intersection of vertical affective polarisation and politicians' gender. This study delves into whether disagreement with politicians' policy positions is moderated by their gender and explores the role of gender stereotyping in shaping voters' evaluations. While the findings reveal that gender does not affect vertical affective polarisation as expected, the research sheds light on how identity factors like gender interact with ideological disagreement, offering new dimensions to the study of polarisation in multi-party systems.

Finally, 'Affective Polarisation in Citizens' Own Words' by Henry Maes, Ambroos Verwee, Lien Smets, Virginie Van Ingelgom and Louise Knops, employs a qualitative approach to examine how citizens in Belgium perceive political group boundaries. Unlike the binary partisanship seen in the US, the findings reveal that European citizens often define out-groups based on broader socio-political identities rather than strict party lines. This study is particularly noteworthy for its use of qualitative methods, which remain overall scarce in a field dominated by quantitative approaches. By adding depth and nuance, these qualitative findings

help tackling aspects of affective polarisation that are difficult to capture through survey methods, enriching our understanding of polarisation in diverse political contexts.

The four articles in this special issue collectively advance the study of affective polarisation by adapting its conceptual and methodological frameworks to the European context and, more specifically, in the Low Countries. They highlight the complexity of affective polarisation in multi-party systems, addressing issues such as measurement, ideological interplay, identity factors and the nuances of citizens' perceptions. As the field continues to grow, it is essential to embrace both innovative methodologies and comparative approaches to deepen our understanding of how polarisation manifests and evolves across different political landscapes.

By showcasing diverse perspectives and methods, and the dynamics at play in this particular region of Europe, this special issue underscores the importance of context-sensitive research in uncovering the dynamics of affective polarisation in multi-party democracies. Together, these contributions not only expand the boundaries of the field but also provide valuable insights for policymakers and scholars seeking to address the challenges of polarisation in an increasingly divided world.

References

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