Affective Polarisation in Citizens' Own Words: Understanding Group Construction Beyond Party Lines*

*Henry Maes, Ambroos Verwee, Lien Smets, Virginie Van Ingelgom & Louise Knops***

Abstract

Research on affective polarisation is increasingly focused on conflict between broader political groups beyond party electorates. We add to this literature by exploring how affective polarisation is shaped by citizens' construction of political group boundaries. Employing a qualitative approach, the study reanalyses focus group data collected between 2019 and 2021 in Belgium. The results reveal that citizens affirm the distinction between vertical and horizontal dimensions of polarisation, but also that political elites are considered without distinguishing along party lines. Second, horizontally, participants rarely mention party electorates, challenging the partisan focus of affective polarisation research. To better understand how affective polarisation takes shape, we zoom in on several socio-political groups that were salient throughout all focus groups. We examine the intersubjective negotiation of group boundaries and how they shape affective polarisation. In turn, we question the seemingly mechanistic nature of intergroup relations and highlight the affective weight group boundaries hold.

Keywords: affective polarisation, qualitative, abduction, political groups, partisanship.

1   Introduction

> Anna: I had written down mainly polarisation. As we are moving more towards a society … where subgroups are pitted against each other like young versus old or rich and poor. That the gaps between such groups are getting bigger and bigger…. I think that is an important social problem. (FG10 – Middle-class citizens)

As underlined by this quote from Anna – a research participant to our focus groups – it is no longer just about what we believe; it is about how we feel about those who believe differently. In today's polarised world, political and social divides have evolved into a clash of emotions, loyalties and identities – leading to gaps between groups that are getting bigger and bigger. Affective polarisation, the growing emotional gap between "us" and "them, has transformed disagreements and opposition into dislike. What Anna captures is the breadth of this phenomenon, and how it is not confined to debates over policies or party politics. It seeps into our workplaces, friendships, and even family dinners, shaping how we view – and judge – those on the '"other side".

The concept of affective polarisation has emerged as a significant focus in political science, extending the traditional understanding of political polarisation beyond policy and ideological differences to underscore the importance of growing emotional divisions between partisan groups. Originally coined by Iyengar et al. (2012), it breathes new life into the field, bringing the role of identity and intergroup relations to the fore. Hence, moving beyond debates regarding the extent to which mass polarisation exists or is confined to an elite phenomenon (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Fiorina et al., 2005), this effervescent research programme has been able to document the intensifying negative sentiments between political groups, such as Democrats and Republicans, in the US context, or the mobilising effect of affective polarisation on citizens' participation in Western Europe (Le Corre Juratic, 2024). A decade of research later, the conceptualisation of affective polarisation stabilises around the idea of an interplay of positive feelings and negative feelings organised along partisan identities.

Recently, an increasing number of researchers have started broadening the scope in two directions. First, the existing scholarship distinguishes horizontal (towards voters) from vertical (towards parties) dynamics (Areal & Harteveld, 2023; Comellas Bonsfills, 2022; Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Harteveld, 2021). Second, at the horizontal level, contributions expanding the playground of affective polarisation importantly highlight the contentious character of divisions between non-partisan groups such as opinion-based groups (Hobolt et al., 2021) or groups centred on other various objects of dislike (Röllicke, 2023). This broader approach is particularly pertinent in contexts like Europe, where traditional partisanship is on the decline (Heath, 2017; Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002). However, despite these

conceptual evolutions, it remains unclear how affective polarisation beyond partisan lines actually takes shape.

This article aims to deepen our conceptual understanding of affective polarisation by exploring how citizens perceive political group boundaries beyond the confines of party lines. Building on this emerging literature, we stress that political group boundaries should be understood by taking into account their deep roots in context and social structures (Hunter, 1991; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). To do so, we rely on a perspective which emphasises the subjective character of how political group boundaries are constructed (Duveen, 2001; Huddy, 2013) and embrace the need to pay attention to the meaning of those categories laying ground to affective polarisation. Specifically, we draw on the qualitative turn in affective polarisation scholarship (Röllicke, forthcoming) to examine citizens' understanding of political group boundaries, i.e. how they negotiate these constructions in their own terms, and ask:

RQ1: How is affective polarisation, beyond political parties, shaped by citizens' construction of political group boundaries?

The article thus contributes to a differentiated and thicker analysis of affective polarisation from the perspective of citizens themselves. We argue for a broader approach to studying affective polarisation, one that transcends the boundaries of party politics. By examining how affective polarisation manifests beyond the partisan divide, it aims to provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding affective polarisation.

Consequently, we examine the group boundary construction at the root of affective polarisation from a qualitative perspective, through a reanalysis of focus group data collected in Belgium. In a field dominated by quantitative scholarship, our approach is aimed at contributing to a growing collective effort towards a deeper understanding of the way interaction and experience feed into social and political conflicts (Röllicke, forthcoming). The focus group data (Amara-Hammou et al., 2020) were collected between 2019 and 2021 as part of the EOS RepResent project (FNRS-FWO No. G0F0218N). In total, ten focus groups were reanalysed, each organised around participants' affiliation to a specific group. For the analysis, we rely on Vila-Henninger and colleagues' (2022) abductive analysis method. It is oriented towards concept-building by combining deduction and induction. We start from existing theories of affective polarisation, paying particular attention to empirical instances that deviate from them. Our approach grounds our theoretical efforts at generating a better fit between theory and data and results in expanding our understanding of affective polarisation beyond political parties.

The results reveal that participants consider a wide range of social and opinion-based groups, rooted in everyday experiences, social structures and following a number of existing social and political categorisations. To make sense of the complexity of our data, we develop two sub-questions:

RQ1.1: How are vertical and horizontal boundaries distinguished by citizens?

In line with the most recent literature, we find that participants make a distinction between horizontal and vertical dimensions. On the vertical dimension, which was very salient throughout all focus groups, participants separate themselves, as 'the people', from a homogenous category of the (political) elite and institutions. On the horizontal dimension, we find that mentions of – let alone identifications with – party electorates are scarce, going against the partisan focus of much affective polarisation research. When considering other political groups constructed by citizens, we find that they are often mentioned in very vague terms, occupying an interesting position at the interplay between the social and political. Consequently, taking into account all group mentions (2,077) throughout the focus groups and classifying them into overarching categories (see Appendix 3), we conclude that the groups citizens mobilise are particularly context dependent – not only in terms of which groups get mentioned but also in terms of their meaning. Accordingly, we examine our second sub-question:

RQ1.2: How does the meaning of group boundaries inform in-group and out-group dynamics?

Through an in-depth discussion of the codes related to political parties, age and socio-economic dimensions, we illustrate the different ways in which the underlying meaning of group categories can be consequential for the formation of intergroup relations. Accordingly, our analysis highlights the intersubjectively negotiated nature of political group boundaries and, therefore, of affective polarisation beyond parties. In turn, we challenge the assumptions of necessarily interdependent in-group positivity and out-group negativity, eventually examining how complex emotions play into these dynamics.

In what follows, we first discuss the existing research on the concept of affective polarisation, highlighting several discussions and ambiguities raised by previous works. Next, in the 'Methodology' section, we outline our research design and the data analysed for this study. In the 'Results' section, we present the key findings in relation to our main research question (*RQ1*) and sub-questions (*RQ1.1* and *RQ1.2*). Finally, we conclude by exploring how these results shed light on broader challenges for the conceptualisation of affective polarisation.

2   Conceptualising Affective Polarisation

2.1   *From Polarisation to Affective Polarisation: The Contribution of Social Identity Theory*

A rising tide of concern has emerged over the deepening rift of political polarisation. Although the idea of polarisation has a long history, current studies mostly follow the conceptualisation by US scholars since the early 2000s (Schedler, 2023). For them, polarisation is defined as the difference in policy attitudes between Democrats and Republicans (Fiorina & Pope, 2005) – ranging from elected politicians to voters. In the electoral context, the notion of polarisation refers specifically to the movement away from the centre and towards the (political) extremes (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008, p. 567). As a consequence of this perceived

partisan cleavage, a fierce debate emerged on the magnitude of polarisation in society. Some scholars argued that people had become more ideologically polarised, implying a deflation of the political centre (Abramowitz, 2010; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008). Others contend that mass polarisation remains very limited, narrowing the phenomenon to its elite dimension (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Fiorina et al., 2005). Instead, they argued that what was at stake, partly geographically, was a sorting of electorates (Levendusky, 2009). In sum, scholars studying 'ideological' (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008), 'attitudinal', 'structural' (Schedler, 2023) or 'idea-based' polarisation (Bernaerts et al., 2022) hold conflicting viewpoints about the degree to which individuals have increasingly distinct perspectives and whether this is ideological polarisation.

This central debate animated most of the literature on polarisation until the introduction of affective polarisation (Iyengar et al., 2012) proposed to shift the focus from policy opinions to the growing 'feelings of dislike' between Democrats and Republicans in the US. More broadly, and beyond this context, affective polarisation designates "a situation where citizens increasingly hold positive feelings towards their own party and its supporters, while disliking and even despising citizens with opposing political views" (van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022, p. 388). Relying on social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorisation theory (Turner et al., 1987), the novelty of affective polarisation lies in its claim that partisanship is a social identity, giving rise to partisan intergroup dynamics: in-group like and out-group dislike. Leading to a prolific amount of empirical research, documenting different trends, patterns, causes and consequences of affective polarisation, the concept was originally structured around two core elements: an interplay of (1) positive and negative views and feelings (2) organised along partisan identities (e.g. Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Iyengar et al., 2019; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021).

Since then, the field engaged in distinguishing distinct forms of affective polarisation, raising perhaps some ambiguities of the concept. First, concerning the object of dislike, whereas some study the dislike towards political parties (e.g. Boxell et al., 2020; Wagner, 2021), others seem more interested in the dislike towards partisans (e.g. Knudsen, 2021; Harteveld, 2021). Asking the question of 'who' is disliked, and some are even broadening their analysis to other, non-partisan political identities (see below). As a result, it is argued that there exists a notable conceptual distinction between vertical (i.e. directed towards parties) and horizontal (i.e. directed towards partisans) forms of polarisation (Areal & Harteveld, 2023; Comellas Bonsfills, 2022; Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Harteveld, 2021).

Second, and relatedly, the interweaving of in-group positivity and out-group negativity is questioned. While some argue that the presence of both in-group positivity and out-group negativity is a prerequisite for affective polarisation (e.g. Neumann et al., 2021), others are predominantly focused on out-group negativity only (e.g. Iyengar et al., 2012). These different approaches interrogate the relevance of perspectives which frontstage the mechanistic relationship between in-groups and out-groups, as described by Social Identity Theory: identification with a group, no matter how minimal, triggers positive feelings for the in-group and negative

feelings towards the out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In her thorough discussion on this issue, Röllicke (2023) challenges the "two sides of the same coin" (p. 7) condition, urging the field to pay more attention to the complexity and irregularity of intergroup relations.

2.2 Affective Polarisation Beyond Political Parties

The bulk of research on affective polarisation thus focuses on the conflict between party voters (e.g. Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Iyengar et al., 2019; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021). However, scholars have recently taken up the study of more general political groups in the framework of affective polarisation. Anchoring their work in the social fluidity of identities highlighted by foundational Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987), they question the idea that party electorates are the only relevant political groups in society between whom affective polarisation might occur. Furthermore, they regard any political identity, defined as "a social identity with political relevance" (Huddy, 2013, p. 3), as a potential basis for affective polarisation. Given the decline of partisanship, particularly in Europe (Heath, 2017; Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002), compared to the salience of issue-based identities (Hobolt & Tilley, forthcoming) and the importance of institutional context (consensus democracies vs. majoritarian systems), as evidenced by Bernaerts et al. (2022), an approach that goes beyond political parties is not only relevant but is also essential.

From a historical perspective, this 'broadening of the scope' is not surprising. One would be mistaken to think that the phenomenon at stake has only been recently observed and solely exists in terms of partisan conflict. Antecedent to discussing polarisation, the concept of culture wars held considerable prominence, particularly within the US. Besides, it could be argued that it is in this literature, coined by Hunter (1991), that the current subfield of polarisation finds its origin (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Mouw & Sobel, 2001; Muste, 2014). Culture wars scholars' argument extends beyond the simple opposition of Democrats and Republicans, instead seeking to underscore the deeper restructuring of US society along social, cultural and religious lines (Hunter, 1991; Wuthnow, 1988, 1989, 2018). The same is true for Western Europe, where Lipset and Rokkan (1967) explain the structure and stability of the political system and related parties through certain socio-structural cleavages. In essence, both research traditions are built on the idea that political parties and identification with them is deeply connected to the evolving lines of conflict in our societies, inviting us to look deeper and beyond party politics when we approach affective polarisation.

A growing body of affective polarisation research is precisely focused on a wide spectrum of political identities. Most famously perhaps, Hobolt et al. (2021) propose the concept of 'opinion-based groups', conceptualising affective polarisation along three main components:

> (1) in-group identification based on a shared opinion, (2) differentiation of the in-group from the out-group that leads to in-group favourability and out-group denigration, and (3) evaluative bias in perceptions of the world and in decision making. (Hobolt et al., 2021, p. 1478; see also McGarty et al., 2009)

Thanks to this approach, scholars in this field were able to document cases of issue-based affective polarisation that cut across party lines: the COVID-19 crisis (Neumann et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022; Schieferdecker, 2021; Wagner & Eberl, 2024), Brexit (Hobolt et al., 2021), migration policies (Harteveld, 2021; Simonsen & Bonikowski, 2022), ideology (Harteveld, 2021; Kobayashi, 2020), left-right camps (Bantel, 2023) and cleavage identities (Bornschier et al., 2021, Helbling & Jungkunz, 2020). Subsequently, in her critical review of the affective polarisation concept, Röllicke (2023) distinguishes three types of targets for horizontal (dis) like based on political characteristics: (1) political parties, (2) ideology or issue position and (3) politicised social identity, arguing that the type of political identities subjected to affective polarisation is "arguably a question of scope" (p. 3). Collectively, these efforts aim to comprehend an ever-evolving political landscape, seemingly defined by a mix of old and emerging lines of social conflict. If affective polarisation denotes a real-world issue with real-world consequences, it is vital to understand where that conflict is situated (i.e. between which groups).

2.3 Our Approach to Citizens' Understanding of Political Group Boundaries
The experimental minimal group paradigm highlights how intergroup conflict can occur between any given groups, not only between partisans. Building on this emerging scholarship on affective polarisation that considers the plurality of the targets of dislike, we argue for the renewed necessity to investigate the subjective labour involved in the construction of political group boundaries. The current perspectives on affective polarisation, much like earlier cognitive approaches to group identity, neglect the significance of the context (Deaux, 1993) and the meaning that individuals attach to group membership (Duveen, 2001; Huddy, 2001, 2013; Reicher, 2004). In other words, political groups (and mainly partisans) are overly conflated with seemingly objective categories, even when they are thought in terms of ideological/issue-based or opinion-based affective polarisation. Of course, this is not to say that researchers deny the constructed nature of these categories. Several authors highlight how some polarised political identities, for example, vaccinated versus unvaccinated, are contingent of the peculiar context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Neumann et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022; Wagner & Eberl, 2024). However, affective polarisation scholars rarely engage in the project of understanding the complex meaning of any specific 'us' and 'them'. Yet, their details being like the contours of a mould – solidifying the 'versus' that emerges in this dialectic – merit particular attention. We therefore argue that understanding affective polarisation from a citizen's perspective requires attention to the boundaries of in-groups and out-groups that are precisely (re)shaped by citizen's interactions.

Recent studies in the field of affective polarisation have increasingly turned to the concept of "entitativity" (Harteveld, forthcoming) to address what we call the issue of meaning, specifically examining the degree to which a group is perceived as a cohesive entity. This perspective underscores the role of individuals' varying perceptions of the same group, which can lead to distinct interpretations and, consequently, different understandings of "like" and "dislike". Harteveld (forthcoming) argues that examining stereotypes offers a promising avenue for

understanding the specific characteristics that contribute to the perception of group cohesion, and how this perception, in turn, shapes affective polarisation. In this regard, we contend that qualitative methodologies, with their capacity to explore complex concepts and expand perspectives (Röllicke, forthcoming), are crucial for revealing how categories are intersubjectively constructed and endowed with (stereotypical) meaning. Despite being rarely utilised in the study of affective polarisation, there is a growing appetite to rely on qualitative methodologies. This qualitative turn in the study of affective polarisation is mostly based on interviews (Ciordia et al., 2024; Revers & Coleman, 2023; Röllicke, 2023; Schieferdecker, 2021; Versteegen, 2024), ethnography (Kinga, 2020) and focus groups (Mau et al., 2024). Furthermore, Röllicke (forthcoming) highlights how critical psychology (Balinhas, 2023), performance studies (Revers, 2023; Revers & Coleman, 2023) and, more broadly, qualitative perspectives on public opinion research (Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2018) shed an innovative light on the subfield of affective polarisation. Following up on the COVID-19 vaccine polarisation example, Schieferdecker (2021) expands this argument by pointing out the signification supporters and opponents of a policy attributed to each other, relying on the importance of the elaboration of stereotypes and meta-stereotypes. What this teaches us is that affective polarisation, perhaps even more when constructed beyond party lines, is made meaningful by the delineation of the boundaries that shape the 'us' and the 'them'. The existence of affective polarisation between pro-vaccine citizens and anti-vaccine citizens is conditioned not only to the specific context leading to these events but also to the intersubjectively constructed characteristics of these new political groups. Therefore, we emphasise the importance of adopting a qualitative approach to examine how the creation and negotiation of group boundaries actively shape the dynamics of affective polarisation.

3 Methodology

3.1 Data Collection: Focus Groups

Secondary analysis, taken to mean "a research strategy which makes use of pre-existing … research data for the purposes of investigating new questions or verifying previous studies" (Heaton, 2004, p. 16) informs our approach. We perform a qualitative secondary analysis (Hughes & Tarrant, 2020) of focus groups data to enable us to study citizens' understanding of political groups boundaries to analyse affective polarisation beyond political parties. From this perspective, we build on the recent – yet scarce – qualitative turn in affective polarisation studies, which provides a heuristic standpoint to analyse citizens' group boundaries and their constructed meanings (Röllicke, forthcoming). To study citizens' understanding of political groups boundaries to analyse affective polarisation beyond political parties, we conduct a constitutive analysis of citizens' understandings of subjective understanding of political group identities, "an examination of what th[ese] thing[s] … consist of and how [they] work" (Cramer Walsh, 2012, p. 518; McCann, 1996). In this sense, we are not concerned with the

frequency of specific understandings from subgroups of citizens across socioeconomic or political divides, but whether citizens across relevant divides share understanding of political group identities, what these understandings are and how they are articulated as a common understanding. We examine affective polarisation through an exploration of citizens' understanding of political group boundary construction motives, using our secondary analysis and the analysis of focus group data.

Our choice to rely on focus group data is motivated by three main epistemological and methodological justifications. First, we mobilise elements of social interactionism (Gamson, 1992), which conceptualises that meaning is constructed in interaction and, thus, shared and negotiated. Focus groups, because they encourage participants to 'think out loud', allow the researcher to observe this "process of opinion-formation in action and interaction with one another" (Van Ingelgom, 2020, p. 1993). Second, focus groups allow participants to mobilise their own everyday experiences and representations (Duchesne, 2017; Gamson, 1992) when discussing politics. This method of data collection thus represents an adequate tool to make sense of the political spilling over to the social (and vice versa), a fundamental aspect of studying affective polarisation (Gimpel & Hui, 2015; Iyengar et al., 2012, 2018). Third, participants were invited to take part based on their affiliation with a specific group. In this way, each focus group was organised around a specific commonality, allowing every participant to feel at ease to discuss their viewpoints (McElroy et al., 1995). In a nutshell, the need for a subjective understanding of group identities (Huddy, 2001) calls for data collection that aims to capture citizens' understanding in their own words, and focus groups are well suited to achieve this objective. Relatedly, such approach echoes recent contributions highlighting the interactionist and everyday nature of political groups building (Billig, 1991, 1995). Specifically, we highlight Revers and Coleman's (2023) observation of "micropolarization" (p. 1) in personal interactions and Ciordia and colleagues' (2024) focus on the importance of interpersonal networks.

Concretely, the data analysed consist of focus groups that were held between 2019 and 2021 in Belgium. In total, we reanalysed ten focus groups with either French- or Dutch-speaking citizens. The focus groups were originally conducted by the EOS RepResent project (FNRS-FWO No. G0F0218N), a Belgian inter-university project. Crucially, they studied democratic resentment across different social groups, ranging from activists (Knops, 2021; Knops & Petit, 2022) to socially disadvantaged groups (Amara-Hammou, 2023). They are all displaying different types of resentful attitudes towards representative institutions (Celis et al., 2021). This variety of groups and the focus on resentment are key elements of our research design as it supports a sufficient degree of cross-study comparability between different groups (Hughes et al., 2023), allowing for both vertical and horizontal affective polarisation to eventually emerge. In our effort of concept-building, we are empirically interested in teasing out meaningful commonalities in citizens' understanding of political group boundaries across different socioeconomic and political backgrounds.

Thus, we analyse one focus group per category: middle-class citizens, students, European Union working class, 'Syndicat des immenses' members,[1] Dansaert

inhabitants,[2] Molenbeek inhabitants,[3] Youth for Climate activists, Yellow-Vest activists, anti-vaccination protestors and Vlaams Belang voters[4] (for details, see Appendix 1). In total, 56 participants took part in the discussions, representing a wide variety of citizens (for socio-demographic information, see Appendix 2). The focus groups were conducted in person or online since they partly took place during COVID-19 restrictions. On average, the focus groups lasted 2.5 hours. Both the online and in-person focus groups were audio- and video-recorded after participants gave their informed consent. The recordings were anonymised and transcribed. All discussions were moderated to ensure a respectful conversation and to allow all participants to share their perspectives. In addition, the discussions were semi-structured with some guiding questions that invited participants to reflect on what the bigger societal problems are today, as well as to identify who is responsible for them.[5] In line with the goal of allowing citizens to interact in their own words, the questions revolved around the idea of society, challenges and issues, intentionally avoiding priming solely political matters. Importantly, in neither of the groups were research participants prompted to discuss affective polarisation or their understandings of political group boundaries as such. Thus, the remaining heterogeneity in types of data collection and primary research questions not focusing on group boundaries strengthens, and not weakens, our findings. Specifically for our research, this research design allows to explore which social and opinion-based groups the participants mentioned during the focus groups, in which broader context they were brought up and how citizens' understanding of political groups boundaries are constructed to analyse affective polarisation beyond political parties.

3.2 Abductive Analytical Approach and Operationalisation

Aiming at filling the gap in the conceptualisation of affective polarisation beyond parties and building our constitutive approach, we rely on an abductive research design. Abduction has proven its strength in building and improving concepts, recognising the virtue of the iterative process between induction and deduction (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014, 2019). Thus, on the one hand, in a deductive approach, we want to expand the conceptualisation of affective polarisation to social and political groups that are yet understudied in the literature on affective polarisation. On the other hand, benefiting from an inductive look at this gap, we want to remain open to the various groups that matter to citizens and how research participants understand their political group boundaries. In this abductive perspective, our analysis is driven by the existing conceptualisation of affective polarisation and specifically by its recent qualitative turn. Consequently, our study is not designed to offer a representative description of these understandings across socioeconomic backgrounds but, rather, to conceptualise citizens' understandings that are anchored in both the existing literature and in our constitutive analysis.

Specifically, we rely on Vila-Henninger and colleagues' (2022) abductive coding method (see Dupuy & Van Ingelgom, 2023, for recent application). This method has been designed specifically to deal with the issue of reanalysing qualitative data. Indeed, abduction in its different steps, conceptualised in the phases of revisiting phenomena, defamiliarisation and alternative casing[6] (Tavory & Timmermans,

2014, 2019), entails the idea of shedding new light on existing research objects. Specifically, it proves helpful in mobilising theoretical frameworks that were not initially considered in the data collection. Besides, this method allows for the analysis of large sets of data, which in a purely inductive perspective would difficultly be possibly reduced and thus (re)used by researchers (Vila-Henninger et al., 2022). In our case, the focus group data were initially collected to understand democratic resentment along a variety of groups, which proved helpful in understanding affective polarisation both in its vertical and horizontal dimensions.

Vila-Henninger and colleagues' (2022) abductive analysis method relies on the idea of coding and is structured in three steps: (1) generating an abductive codebook, (2) abductive data reduction through code equations and (3) in-depth qualitative analysis. In a first step, the generation of an abductive codebook played an important role in our analysis. To build our abductive, one the one hand, we deductively relied on the theoretical contributions of affective polarisation, thus highlighting three codes: (1) 'party electorates', the main category studied in affective polarisation; (2) 'in-group' and 'out-group', in line with the social identity theory roots of the affective polarisation literature; and (3) we distinguished codes relating to 'vertical polarisation' and to 'horizontal polarisation', following recent conceptualisations (Areal & Harteveld, 2023; Comellas Bonsfills, 2022; Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Harteveld, 2021). On the other hand, we openly coded each occurrence of any group mentioned by participants. We grouped those inductive codes to build broader codes, progressively structuring our codebook in several overarching codes, sub-codes, category codes and detailed codes, entailing in total 729 distinct codes (see Appendix 3 for details on the codebook). This inductive phase allowed us to identify the group categories that were relevant for research participants to discuss social and political issues, already providing some answers to our research questions. We coded for a total of 2,077 references to groups. In our bid to understand which political groups were mobilised by research participants, we catalogued a very wide range of mentioned groups into several overarching categories; age, gender, race, humanity, opinion-based groups, place and social class (see Appendix 3).

In a second step, to reduce our data, we relied on a code equation for selecting only the excerpts that relate both to 'in-group' or 'out-group' and the three specific group dimensions: 'party electorates', 'age' and 'socioeconomic characteristics'. This code equation allows to target our analysis on the instances where groups were mobilised to differentiate oneself from others and vice versa. We thus decided to focus on three specific groups: 'party electorates', 'age' and 'socioeconomic groups'. Considering their centrality in the affective polarisation literature, we were first especially attentive to party electorates. However, we found only 12 references to voters, and they were only mentioned in 4 out of 10 focus groups. We added the age and socio-economic codes as these two groups were relatively salient and transversal as observed across various themes discussed during the focus groups and across focus groups. The age category was not the most salient with 65 mentions but was present across the different focus groups. With 181 references, categories related to socio-economic dimensions were substantially salient throughout all focus

groups, emerging from a long list of inductive codes that distinguished people based on their socioeconomic situation.

Finally, in a third step, we moved on to examine those excerpts in-depth, allowing us to interpret how participants were constructing the groups underlying affective polarisation. Importantly, we focus our analysis to understand not only how those categories were mobilised to (self-)describe citizens but also how research participants articulate them politically. In particular, from this in-depth analysis emerged a broad list of themes that we inductively coded to structure all the socioeconomic group occurrences (see Appendix 4 for detailed themes). In this final step, we then inductively analysed the quotes to unveil participants' understandings of political groups to study conceptually affective polarisation beyond parties.

4 Results

The guiding research question for this article can be further explored through two sub-questions, and in this section we will address both.:

RQ1.1: How are vertical and horizontal boundaries distinguished by citizens?

RQ1.2: How does the meaning of group boundaries inform in-group and out-group dynamics?

Regarding the first question, we start with a discussion on the vertical axis of affective polarisation – which was very salient throughout all focus groups. Next, we turn to the horizontal axis, first zooming in on several political groups that are often studied in affective polarisation research and later zooming out to all groups citizens mobilised throughout the focus groups and organising them into overarching categories. Moving on to our second sub-question, we demonstrate the importance of paying attention to the meaning of categories if we want to understand the way affective polarisation takes shape. To illustrate this, we make use of the codes related to age and socioeconomic dimensions.

4.1 Who Do We Dislike? The Many Faces of Polarisation
A first finding that emerged through the reanalysis of the focus groups was that participants made a distinction between vertical and horizontal dimensions. While one could argue that this can be attributed to the context in which the focus groups were organised – that is, documenting democratic resentment – the significance and recurrence of this vertical framing cannot be overlooked. Furthermore, this finding is in line with recent scholarship on the difference between vertical and horizontal affective polarisation, which argues that citizens evaluate partisans differently from party elites or institutions (Areal & Harteveld, 2023; Comellas Bonsfills, 2022; Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Harteveld, 2021). We elaborate our findings regarding the horizontal and vertical dimensions below.

4.1.1   Vertical Polarisation: Us, the People, Versus Them, the Elite

In all focus groups, the salience of vertical polarisation is illustrated by the finding that a homogeneous category of 'the people' functioned as the in-group for participants against which the 'elite' (out-group) was contrasted. However, despite major parts of the discussions highlighting this vertical dimension, we found that participants did not differentiate elites based on different parties or ideologies. Our participants do not express specific preferences for or against party A, B or C; instead, they exhibit a general sense of distrust, anger and disgust towards all parties indiscriminately. Interestingly, the lack of distinction citizens make in everyday conversations stands in stark contrast to the findings of polarisation researchers looking at party-dislike measures (e.g. Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021). Moreover, the vertical dimension extends beyond the political establishment to include cultural and economic elites (e.g. 'the rich', 'multinationals'), with discussions revealing overlap that frames an overarching 'ruling class' contrasted with 'the people'. These observations prompt the need for a nuanced conceptualisation of vertical polarisation, aiming to understand its intricate connections with populism (Davis et al., 2024; Harteveld et al., 2022). Notably, a pivotal aspect of populism lies, specifically, in the dichotomy articulated between the people and the elite within its discourse (Canovan, 1999; Laclau, 2005).

Furthermore, on several occasions, divergences among the 'people' were blamed on the elite, who create disparities among 'people'. Polarisation, as a phenomenon, is therefore negatively connoted and deemed undesirable. Conversely, calls to unite and overcome useless opposition stood out across various focus groups.

> Félix: All those people on top [looks up] ... and people on the bottom [pointing down]. Well, I'd like to break all that up and put everyone around the same table, on the same scale, so that we can say "fuck, guys, we're all on the same Earth, we've all got to get moving, we've all got to do something." (FG4 – Youth for Climate activists)

This observation highlights, on the one hand, the precautions we should take when using the term *affective polarisation* or prompting related reactions with research participants. Comparably, Röllicke (2024), when interviewing survey respondents on how they perceived the traditional dislike-based feeling thermometer questions, noted how they were "concerned with the performative consequences of classifying people in such a way" (p. 17). Citizens are aware of the existence of this phenomenon and of its normative implications and might want to push back on it, considering how they associate it with nefarious elites. On the other hand, noting that participants link up vertical and horizontal polarisation encourages us to investigate how they interact.

While the focus group discussions thus support the theoretical and empirical relevance of the distinction between vertical polarisation and horizontal polarisation, we also find that there is often a degree of overlap between both dimensions. Certain groups of citizens, who should in the strict sense of the definition be the subject of horizontal affective polarisation, are considered by

participants to be 'outliers' in their own in-group. Empirically, we find illustrations of this dynamic by participants who often highlight this power dimension in everyday experiences; for example, when speaking of those who have company cars, higher education or homeowners, without including those groups in the 'elite' out-group.

> Kees: So yes, for example global warming or … how people have to adapt: a family with more money can also obviously consider eating vegetarian or help [in]other ways compared to a family with less money. (FG7 – Students)

> Karl: [Discussing the end of compulsory voting in local elections] But don't you then run the risk of mostly motivated people voting? So again, that so-called elite. (FG10 – Middle-class citizens)

This observation invites future research to explore how horizontal polarisation between groups can demonstrate an element of verticality, caused by a perceived power discrepancy.

4.1.2   *Horizontal Polarisation: beyond a Question of Scope*

• Voters, not Partisans

When we turn to the horizontal dimension – that is, how citizens relate to each other and form group divisions – we find a broad range of categories. Considering their centrality in the affective polarisation literature, we were especially attentive to party electorates. However, their presence was underwhelming. The only occurrence of partisan in-group mentioning was in the focus group with radical right voters. Yet, we assume this is mostly due to priming by the interviewer, who asked participants to explain what it meant for them to vote for the radical right-wing party Vlaams Belang. This was mostly answered with the argument of 'the party of the last resort', seemingly lacking the identification component that should be present in the case of affective polarisation.

> Krista: It's inevitable that there will be more and more protest votes because I never voted for it [Vlaams Belang] before.
>   Renée: I didn't either.
>   Krista: I will now, just because I want to see something change. (FG9 – Extreme right voters)

Still, it is telling that the most salient party electorate, across various focus groups, seemed to be that of Vlaams Belang, echoing studies in other multi-party systems that find mostly radical right voters are disliked (Bjånesøy, 2023; Helbling & Jungkunz, 2020; Iyengar & Wagner, forthcoming; Meléndez & Kaltwasser, 2021).

• 'Targets of Dislike': Overlapping Political Groups

Additionally, we must highlight that in the one instance where participants did express themselves in negative terms towards a partisan out-group, they did so

through discussion of their age. Only the young voters of (radical) right-wing parties were an affectively disliked partisan group, perhaps saying more about the relevance of age as a category than about partisanship, leading us to consider other lines of tensions.

> Sara: Yeah, and then you have situations where young people suddenly vote for N-VA… Okay, I don't want to say it's bad or anything. But lots of young people suddenly voted for Vlaams Belang. Whereas if I ask, "Okay, are you against abortion or something then?" Why do you vote for that? Surely that's a bit extreme [and then they say]: "Ah no, no." (FG2 – Dansaert inhabitants)

Affective polarisation, extending beyond strictly party politics, has recently been investigated by measuring like/dislike dynamics among socio-political groups. Yet, the distinction between political parties, ideology or issue position, and politicised social identity (Röllicke, 2023) was not easy to discern in the focus group discussions. Participants used labels like 'greens', 'the left' and 'socialists' with unclear boundaries, often interchangeably targeting voters, partisans, politicians and activists. The overlap of these categories highlights the horizontal fuzziness of socio-political groups. Moreover, participants, relying on the equivalence of these labels, can interact with each other, advancing their conversations. The blurriness of these categories was not merely a limitation but a crucial enabler of (dis)agreement. For instance, in their conversations, participants from the 'Syndicat des immenses' focus group built a connection between the dynamics of social categories, for example, 'people lining their pockets' versus 'people who have nothing' and the political endeavour of landlords' interest groups. It thus appears that it is by building on a shared sense of like/dislike that they were able to politicise a category, connecting the social and the political.

> Yves: … Uh, when you see, uh, those people lining their pockets, but what are they lining their pockets with? Off the backs of people who have nothing. When you see the number of [empty] buildings or apartments in Brussels… That's why a law was passed [to open up buildings and housing for people on the street] to … but which has never been applied [angrily]
> …
> Dimitri: Yes, that's it, but landlords or landlords lobbying never stopped dismantling this. It's abolished now, you know.
> Pierre-Jean: There was an attempt near De Brouckère … for one house to be, expropriated by the municipality … to put people in [it]; but it's being debated on TV, it's incredible, the owners' union has… [shakes head in despair] anyway. (FG3 – 'Syndicat des immenses' member)

Whether participants refer to parties, ideology groups or social identities is unclear and, we argue, questions what affective polarisation actually entails. It reveals the deeply context-dependent nature of the mobilisation of categories and situational presence of affective polarisation. One the one hand, the context determines which groups are mentioned. This is exemplified by the saliency of scientists/researchers

as an out-group for antivaxxers, compared to its absence in other focus groups. On the other hand, context also determines the way categories are constructed. In line with Social Identity Theories, we find that the meaning of group categories varies with context, so does their affectivity. And it is precisely the meaning of group categories that is needed to understand the consequences of their categorisation (Huddy, 2001), for example, affective polarisation. As such, if we want to study how affective polarisation takes shape, investigating the intricacies of the mechanism behind it, we have to pay attention to the meaning of group categories. Current research on affective polarisation often stops short of this crucial aspect, yet, as Huddy (2001) argues, "an emphasis in social identity research on groups that lack meaning may seriously hamper our understanding of both identity acquisition and its consequences" (p. 142). In the next section, we attempt to bridge this gap by precisely investigating how affective polarisation is shaped by the way meaning is attributed to the boundaries of political groups.

4.2 Shaping Boundaries: The Power of Meaning

4.2.1 Colouring Outside the Lines of Affective Polarisation
In essence, we point out the difficulty in picturing a polarisation with clear, defined contours. Upon closer examination of the targets of like/dislike that citizens use to frame their social reality, we see how their boundaries are not only thick but also intimately tied to the meanings of the categories they circumscribe, shedding light on our second sub-question:

RQ1.2: How does the meaning of group boundaries inform in-group and out-group dynamics?

Noticeably, what we highlight is how the ambiguities of affective polarisation constitute a challenge when one is trying to make sense of this concept from a qualitative perspective. By initially investigating the objects of affective polarisation, we encountered the challenge of documenting how affective polarisation actually takes shape. This process revealed that these targets are not merely a matter of scope, as suggested by Röllicke (2023), but instead offer an opportunity to interrogate the construction of affective polarisation between subjectively defined groups. Below we elaborate on the ways citizens mobilise categories and how these are intrinsically filled with meaning and emotion.

• Young and Old: Two Sides of the Same Coin?
First, we find that intergroup dynamics are more complex than a simple mirroring effect between opposed categories. As argued by Röllicke (2023), social and political reality can hardly ever be reduced to a clear-cut case of mutual dislike between two groups. To investigate this, we analysed the codes related to age. For participants, discussing politics often involved the mobilisation of groups related to age, spontaneously expressed in terms of young people and old people. More precisely, the youth group dominated the 'age' category and was conceptualised in terms of 'youth', 'students' or even '(grand)children'. The other group related to 'age' was old

people. Characterised by their old age or retired status, participants referred to them as '(grand)parents', 'elderly' or 'people at age'. Yet, we find that the explicit use of these two main groups, youth and elderly, is consistently predicated on the implicit construction of a third, middle-aged group. Diving deeper into the content of the discussions on age groups, we find that tensions rarely arise between young and old people. Instead, it seems to be mostly present between young people and the third, implied middle-age category, using old people as a reference point against which other categories can be characterised.

The existence of this third category becomes apparent when we look at how youth is described: politically active, yet ignorant. Whether this ignorance is approached as an irritating flaw or as an understandable imperfection, there seems to be agreement that youth are missing some form of knowledge or understanding that middle-aged people – and not per se old people – seem to possess by default.

> Léonard: I have the impression of having realised realities, well at least I take them as realities, that young people, of which young people are becoming aware off, but for me [already] on a very different scale. (FG4 – Youth for Climate activists)

Building on this point, we find that the same mechanism is at play when young people are being compared to previous generations. Whether the approach to youth is compassionate or blameful, older generations are used as a scale against which young people today are weighed.

> Sébastien: I don't know how young people are going to live in the future, I don't know what they're going to do. If I were to be born today, I think I'd throw myself straight into the canal, because … I don't know what their future holds. (FG8 – Anti-vaccination protestors)
>
> Tonya (about the COVID-19 lockdowns): They [the youth] cannot do anything anymore, they are not allowed to do anything, they are considered to be poor little things, only they are important. But the older people, who have maybe ten good years left to live, are not talked about. People aged eighteen or twenty, who have a whole life left and who lose a year, okay we all lose a year, but our parents lost four years in the war. Did anyone talk about that? Not at all. (FG9 – Extreme right voters)

Thus, the young-versus-old tension is better understood as a contrast between the middle-aged and non-middle-aged groups (of which young and old are part of), underscoring deeper worldviews about merit and entitlement. This is because (age-related) categories are far from static, continually negotiated through intersubjective processes, and embedded within broader cultural and historical contexts. Our findings highlight the necessity of exploring the meaning of categories to better understand the complex reality of intergroup dynamics.

• Rich and Poor: The Everyday Stereotypes We Live By

To further expand on this point, we turn to categories along the socioeconomic dimension. It is a long-known fact for political scientists that material disparities, even if they play a role in the objective delineation of political categories, are accompanied by subjective negotiations of their meaning (Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; see also the concept of class consciousness in the Marxist tradition). Therefore, making sense of the contentiousness at stake goes beyond surveying how much 'rich' and 'poor' are (dis)liked. It is also about understanding how these 'us' versus 'them' dynamics become perceptible through specific meaning (Duveen, 2001; Huddy, 2001, 2013) such as in our data: cheating, property ownership, employment status, disrupting order, freeloading, food insecurity, or feeling left behind. In turn, it is these specific dimensions giving substance to horizontal polarisation that warrant our attention because they allow for understanding how these political groups are constructed and oppose each other (Oakes & Haslam, 2001).

> Pierre: But then you really have to be at the top of your game to be able to say, "I don't care if [fuel] goes up by 50 euros," but who cares, these people have a company car. I had a partner until the beginning of the year who [does not understand]. Simply because she has a company car [and] a fuel card … she says to me. I don't understand. And I tell here it's normal that you don't understand, you don't even know how much your full tank costs. (FG1 – Yellow Vests)

> Emma: … Whereas … people, … who work in a fast-food restaurant or so they still must go to their job even though there's high risk of contamination [during the COVID-19 period] and they have to go or there's no more paycheck coming in. (FG7 – Students)

These characteristics are not simply anecdotal, or rather because they are anecdotal, play a major role, we argue, in the delineation of the social and political (in and out) groups that matter for participants (Billig, 1991, 1995). Indeed, when they were engaging in conversations on what characterises opposing groups, participants rarely relied on abstract overarching narratives about the world. Instead, they drew upon a dazzling array of personal experiences: an argument they had with their partner, a moment shared with a daughter, the last time they went to the gas station and the absence of classmates during the COVID-19 period. More than simple examples, those occurrences were opportunities for participants to share, discuss and negotiate the meaning of opposing categories based on socioeconomic dimensions. Unsurprisingly then, having conversations about societal issues, as it was presented to participants, rarely went without emotional engagement about what 'us' and 'them' are, inviting us to reflect on how those processes are intertwined.

4.2.2   Affective Threads in the Construction of Boundaries

As categories are formed over time through intersubjective processes, they are constantly renegotiated – not only in terms of meaning but also in terms of their affect. Accordingly, this contributes to the argument we make: the boundaries of social groups are not set in stone; they are heatedly negotiated by citizens. In the quote below, Youssef is expressing unease – perhaps even frustration – with the meaning of 'precariousness', not only because of what it means but also because of the emotional charge it carries with it. He has no issue admitting he is 'in difficulty' yet feels belittled by the word 'precariousness'.

> Youssef: Listen. Someone … in a precarious situation, doesn't even have a euro in his pocket. That's precariousness. Someone who's begging, you know? Who … asks for money from anyone who's left, that's precariousness. I'm not in a precarious situation. I've already got a mobile phone worth 600 euros [shows his phone vigorously]. I'm not in a precarious situation! I'm in difficulty. (FG3 – 'Syndicat des immenses' member)

Furthermore, the tendency to oversimplify emotions as negative towards out-groups and positive towards in-groups hinders a nuanced understanding of the intricate interplay between emotions and intergroup dynamics. Participants often expressed multiple, complex, even conflicting emotions towards one category of people. One such example is when participants identifying themselves in the lower-class group were discussing groups of people 'below' them – whose situation is even worse – towards whom they expressed both empathy and contempt.

> Alexis: Well, I'm in contact with workers, with members too, and I say hello to everyone. And I behave the same way with everyone.
> John: Me too. Or laughs, or else….
> Alexis: Some people won't say hello to … cleaning people…. (FG6 – EU Working class)

> Annabelle: In fact, I get the impression that it's people who don't want to do anything about [their lives] who come up with excuse[s]. For me, it's, it's a, it's a freeloader reaction…. That's not all you can count on. (FG5 – Molenbeek inhabitants)

5   Conclusion

If we are to be worried about the pernicious nature of affective polarisation (McCoy et al., 2018), framed within the context of democratic backsliding, it is imperative to examine the specific groups between whom polarisation actually occurs. Drawing on focus group data gathered in Belgium, we have sought to understand which social and political in-groups and out-groups that citizens mobilise when discussing politics. Employing abductive coding analysis (Vila-Henninger et al., 2022) through the lens of affective polarisation (and vice versa), our findings reveal that vertical

relations with political elites dominate participants' discussions, regardless of party affiliation. Among horizontal groups, party electorates hold marginal importance to citizens and are not typically invoked to sharply differentiate individuals. Conversely, to make sense of the social world, a wide array of social and political groups is used: social class, race, age, gender, activism, opinion-based groups, professions and so on. This simultaneously complex and diverse categorical landscape prompted us to interrogate how in-groups and out-groups are constructed by participants and, in turn, how it broadens our understanding of the phenomenon in question. Accordingly, we were able to challenge the necessarily bonded nature of the 'us' and the 'them' in affective polarisation by documenting how the age dimension served, beyond young-versus-old dynamics, to build a third, in-between category, against which the two others were characterised. Moreover, by examining the richness of codes related to socioeconomic groups, we elaborated on the intersubjectively negotiated nature of categories. Subsequently, what was at stake went beyond 'rich' versus 'poor', as the meaning of this conflict was structured by perceived characteristics, and stereotypes, about each other. Lastly, the emotional work performed by focus group participants was enlightening. Beyond simple out-group negativity and in-group positivity, discrete emotions emerged, including positive feelings towards certain out-groups.

Calls, mostly by qualitative researchers, to acknowledge the complexity of political phenomena often echo like barking from a dog in the manger. Nevertheless, rather than being an obstacle, complexity might hold the key to properly addressing affective polarisation. In that regard, intending to bridge across the field, we opted for an intermediate approach, aggregating codes across focus groups of distinct composition. While we previously highlighted the weight of context-dependent categories, we did not engage fully in the granularity of the social world as perceived by our participants. Therefore, we call for future research endeavouring to engage critically with the concept affective polarisation to rely on in-depth case analyses. This approach would allow for a deeper exploration of the dimensions we pinpointed but could not extensively discuss, such as the role of place-based identities, movement collective identities, race contentions and so on.

This limitation aside, we still engaged in the complexity of our data investigating the intricate interplay of boundary construction and affective polarisation and, in doing so, raised two research avenues. First, conceptualisation-wise, the current theoretical foundation and measurement of affective polarisation mostly limit affect to negative-positive or like-dislike dualities, facing similar oversimplification challenges we raised for group boundaries. Scholars have recently engaged in operationalising discrete emotions, such as anger, hope, enthusiasm and so on, to understand affective polarisation (Bettarelli et al., 2022; Renström et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2024). Following this, there is a need for further conceptual work to grasp the essence of what affect entails for the field (e.g. Bakker & Lelkes, 2024). Second, returning to the idea of complexity, it might present promising perspectives on solutions. Indeed, our observation of the relatively low salience of partisan groups and multiplicity and fluidity of other targets of dislike could give us cause for optimism. If conflicts that overlap in multiple layers pose a greater danger, understanding how we can still be pitted against each other in a myriad of

intersecting ways could hold the promise of agonism rather than antagonism (Mouffe, 2005). Along the same lines, investigating 'identity complexity' and its potential for fostering tolerance (Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Roccas & Brewer, 2002) has been highlighted as a fruitful avenue (Mason & Versteegen, forthcoming).

Lastly, dedicating our time to seeing the world through the eyes of the participants invites us to take a critical look at our field and its normative presuppositions. On the one hand, we noted that participants were keenly aware of the existence of a polarisation phenomenon and resisted it. Relatedly, the important question of self-fulfilling prophecy or even the performative nature of our research (Röllicke, forthcoming) will have to be tackled. On the other hand, adopting a reflexive perspective on our relationship to participants' discourses, we could not help but wonder if a less polarised society is per se desirable. We empathised with EU working class's concerns for hierarchy problems, with Youth for Climate worries about a liveable future, with the crushing weight of economic difficulties for 'Syndicat des immenses' members and even with the disillusion of radical right voters with our democratic system. By opting for a more consensual and depoliticised political landscape, we might take the risk of endorsing a neoliberal perspective on democracy, emptied of its conflictual substance (Brown, 2015). Further, drawing an equivalence between citizens who aim at stripping others of their democratic rights and citizens who defend equality (Mondon & Smith, 2022), we could deprive the latter of the tools to fight for a better society.

6 CRediT author statement

Henry Maes: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Ambroos Verwee: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Lien Smets: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Virginie Van Ingelgom: Funding acquisition, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. Louise Knops: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft.

Notes

1 Syndicat des Immenses (standing for "Individu dans une Merde Matérielle Énorme mais Non Sans Exigences", "Individual in a huge, material shitty situation but not without demands", translation by Amara-Hammou, 2023, p. 18.). It is an action group which decides to refer to this 'immense' category instead of other pejorative denominations such as homeless, undocumented, asylum seekers and so on.
2 Dansaert neighbourhood in Brussels, Belgium. It is considered a trendy neighbourhood that went through gentrification. Its inhabitants hold a higher socioeconomic status.
3 Molenbeek neighbourhood in Brussels, Belgium. Although this neighbourhood is experiencing some gentrification, it is characterised by an ethnically diverse population, generally with a low socioeconomic status.

4 Vlaams Belang ("Flemish Interest") is a Belgian political party of the far right, advocating Flemish nationalism and Flemish independence.

5 More specifically, the three guiding questions were as follows: (1) What are the most important societal challenges that Belgium is facing today? (2) Who should take care of those issues? (3) How should they be resolved?

6 Those three steps can be defined as follows: (1) revisiting the phenomenon leans on the idea of (re)considering data in light of different theoretical approaches, allowing the researcher to identify anomalies in existing knowledge; (2) defamiliarisation is the shift away from the everyday way of perceiving the world by actively engaging in rigorous data collection and subsequent treatment of this data; (3) alternative casing is the key analytical moment consisting in the iterative association of different theories and hypotheses to the empirical cases to build new theoretical explanations.

References

Abramowitz, A. I. (2010). Transformation and Polarization: The 2008 Presidential Election and the New American Electorate. *Electoral Studies, 29*(4), 594-603. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2010.04.006.

Abramowitz, A. I., & Saunders, K. L. (2008). Is Polarization a Myth? *The Journal of Politics, 70*(2), 542-555. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381608080493.

Amara-Hammou, K., Knops, L., Petit, G., Randour, F., Mercenier, H., van der Does, R., Verhaegen, S., Celis, K., Deschouwer, K., Rihoux, B., & Van Ingelgom, V. (2020). RepResent Focus Group Dataset: Representation and Democratic Resentment in Belgium, Excellence of science project (EOS)-FNRS-FWO funding n°G0F0218N (2018-2022).

Amara-Hammou, K. (2023). *Theorizing Representation from the Perspective of the Represented, How People in Socio-economically Difficult Situations in Brussels Understand Representation* [Doctoral Thesis, Vrije Universiteit Brussel].

Areal, J., & Harteveld, E. (2023). *Vertical vs Horizontal Affective Polarization: Disentangling Feelings towards Elites and Voters* [Preprint]. Open Science Framework. https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/j4hmd.

Bakker, B. N., & Lelkes, Y. (2024). Putting the Affect into Affective Polarisation. *Cognition and Emotion, 38*(4), 418-436. https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2024.2362366.

Balinhas, D. (2023). Bringing Critical Social Psychology to the Study of Political Polarization. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 17*(1), e12721. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12721.

Bantel, I. (2023). Camps, Not Just Parties. The Dynamic Foundations of Affective Polarization in Multi-party Systems. *Electoral Studies, 83*, 102614. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102614.

Bartolini, S., & Mair, P. (1990). *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability*. ECPR Press.

Bernaerts, K., Blanckaert, B., & Caluwaerts, D. (2022). Institutional Design and Polarization. Do Consensus Democracies Fare Better in Fighting Polarization than Majoritarian Democracies? *Democratization, 30*(2), 153-172. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2022.2117300.

Bettarelli, L., Close, C., & van Haute, E. (2022). Is Protest Only Negative? Examining the Effect of Emotions and Affective Polarization on Protest Behaviour. *Politics and Governance, 10*(4), 311-324. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i4.5665.

Billig, M. (1991). *Ideology and Opinions: Studies in Rhetorical Psychology*. Sage Publications.

Billig, M. (1995). *Banal Nationalism*. SAGE.

Bjånesøy, L. (2023). Negative Partisanship and the Populist Radical Right: The Case of Norway. *Scandinavian Political Studies, 46*(1-2), 99-120. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9477.12247.

Bornschier, S., Häusermann, S., Zollinger, D., & Colombo, C. (2021). How 'Us' and 'Them' Relates to Voting Behavior – Social Structure, Social Identities, and Electoral Choice. *Comparative Political Studies, 54*(12), 2087-2122. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414021997504.

Boxell, L., Gentzkow, M., & Shapiro, J. (2020). *Cross-country Trends in Affective Polarization* (w26669; p. w26669). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://doi.org/10.3386/w26669.

Brewer, M. B., & Pierce, K. P. (2005). Social Identity Complexity and Outgroup Tolerance. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 31*(3), 428-437. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167204271710.

Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Zone Books. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt17kk9p8.

Canovan, M. (1999). Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy. *Political Studies, 47*(1), 2-16. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00184.

Celis, K., Knops, L., Van Ingelgom, V., & Verhaegen, S. (2021). Resentment and Coping with the Democratic Dilemma. *Politics and Governance, 9*(3), 237-247. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v9i3.4026.

Ciordia, A., Alcalà-i-Rams, M., & Lubbers, M. J. (2024, February 21). *A personal network study of informal political conversation in Catalonia: Fieldwork report of Work Package 3 of the INCLUSIVITY research project*. https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/t8f3d

Comellas Bonsfills, J. M. (2022). When Polarised Feelings towards Parties Spread to Voters: The Role of Ideological Distance and Social Sorting in Spain. *Electoral Studies, 79*, 102525. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2022.102525.

Cramer-Walsh, K. J. (2016). *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. University of Chicago Press.

Cramer, K. W. (2012). Putting Inequality in Its Place: Rural Consciousness and the Power of Perspective. *American Political Science Review, 106*(3), 517-532. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055412000305.

Dalton, R. J., & Wattenberg, M. P. (2002). *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (R. J. Dalton, Ed.). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/0199253099.001.0001.

Davis, B., Goodliffe, J., & Hawkins, K. (2024). The Two-way Effects of Populism on Affective Polarization. *Comparative Political Studies, 58*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140241237453.

Deaux, K. (1993). Reconstructing Social Identity. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 19*(1), 4-12. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167293191001.

DiMaggio, P., Evans, J., & Bryson, B. (1996). Have American Social Attitudes become More Polarized? *American Journal of Sociology, 102*(3), 690-755. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2782461.

Druckman, J. N., & Levendusky, M. S. (2019). What Do We Measure When We Measure Affective Polarization? *Public Opinion Quarterly, 83*(1), 114-122. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfz003.

Duchesne, S. (2017). Using Focus Groups to Study the Process of (de)Politicization. In R. S. Barbour & D. L. Morgan (Eds.), *A New Era in Focus Group Research: Challenges, Innovation and Practice* (pp. 365-387). Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-58614-8_17.

Dupuy, C., & Van Ingelgom, V. (2023). Neither Responsive, nor Responsible? Citizens' Understandings of Political Actors' Responsiveness and Responsibility in the Socio-Economic Governance of the EU. *Journal of European Public Policy, 31*(4), 1-27. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2288236.

Duveen, G. (2001). Representations, Identities, Resistance. In K. Deaux & G. Philogène (Eds.), *Representations of the Social: Bridging Theoretical Traditions* (pp. 257-270). Blackwell Publishing.

Fiorina, M. P., & Abrams, S. J. (2008). Political Polarization in the American Public. *Annual Review of Political Science, 11*(1), 563-588.

Fiorina, M. P., Abrams, S. J. & Pope, J. C. (2005). *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. Longman.

Gamson, W. A. (1992). *Talking Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Gimpel, J. G., & Hui, I. S. (2015). Seeking Politically Compatible Neighbors? The Role of Neighborhood Partisan Composition in Residential Sorting. *Political Geography, 48*, 130-142. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2014.11.003.

Harteveld, E. (2021). Fragmented Foes: Affective Polarization in the Multiparty Context of the Netherlands. *Electoral Studies, 71*, 102332. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102332.

Harteveld, E. (forthcoming). Political stereotypes and affective polarization. In M. Torcal & E. Harteveld (Eds.), *Handbook of Affective Polarization* (pp. 393-408). Edward Elgar. https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/rh29g.

Harteveld, E., Mendoza, P., & Rooduijn, M. (2022). Affective Polarization and the Populist Radical Right: Creating the Hating? *Government and Opposition, 57*(4), 703-727. https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.31.

Heath, O. (2017). Trends in Partisanship. In J. Fisher, E. Fieldhouse, M. N. Franklin, R. Gibson, M. Cantijoch & C. Wlezien (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Elections, Voting Behavior and Public Opinion* (pp. 158-169). Routledge.

(2017). The Routledge Handbook of Elections, Voting Behavior and Public Opinion. Routledge.

Heaton, J. (2004). *Reworking Qualitative Data*. Sage Publications Ltd.

Helbling, M., & Jungkunz, S. (2020). Social Divides in the Age of Globalization. *West European Politics, 43*(6), 1187-1210. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1674578.

Hobolt, S. B., Leeper, T. J., & Tilley, J. (2021). Divided by the Vote: Affective Polarization in the Wake of the Brexit Referendum. *British Journal of Political Science, 51*(4), 1476-1493. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123420000125.

Hobolt, S. B, & Tilley, J. (forthcoming). Affective Polarization around Issues. In M. Torcal & E. Harteveld (Eds.), *Handbook of Affective Polarization* (pp. 343-359). Edward Elgar. https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/rh29g.

Hochschild, A. R. (2018). *Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. The New Press. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12152.

Huddy, L. (2001). From Social to Political Identity: A Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory. *Political Psychology, 22*(1), 127-156. https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895X.00230.

Huddy, L. (2013). From Group Identity to Political Cohesion and Commitment. In *From Group Identity to Political Cohesion and Commitment* (pp. 737-773). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199760107.013.0023.

Hughes, K., & Tarrant, A. (2020). *Qualitative Secondary Analysis*. SAGE.

Hughes, K., Frank, V. A., Herold, M. D., & Houborg, E. (2023). Data Reuse across International Contexts? Reflections on New Methods for International Qualitative

Secondary Analysis. *Qualitative Research, 23*(4), 1155-1168. https://doi.
org/10.1177/14687941211052278.

Hunter, J. D. (1991). *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. Basic Books.

Iyengar, S., Konitzer, T., & Tedin, K. (2018). The Home as a Political Fortress: Family
Agreement in an Era of Polarization. *The Journal of Politics, 80*(4), 1326-1338. https://
doi.org/10.1086/698929.

Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The Origins
and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of
Political Science, 22*(1), 129-146. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-
073034.

Iyengar, S., Sood, G., & Lelkes, Y. (2012). Affect, Not Ideology. *Public Opinion Quarterly,
76*(3), 405-431. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfs038.

Iyengar, S., & Wagner, M. (forthcoming). Conceptualizing Affective Polarization. In M.
Torcal & E. Harteveld (Eds.), *Handbook of Affective Polarization* (pp. 36-54). Edward
Elgar. https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/rh29g.

Iyengar, S., & Westwood, S. J. (2015). Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence
on Group Polarization. *American Journal of Political Science, 59*(3), 690-707.

Kinga, S. (2020). *Democratic Transition in Bhutan: Political Contests as Moral Battles*.
Routledge.

Knops, L. (2021). Stuck between the Modern and the Terrestrial: The Indignation of the
Youth for Climate Movement. *Political Research Exchange, 3*(1), 1868946. https://doi.
org/10.1080/2474736X.2020.1868946.

Knops, L., & Petit, G. (2022). Indignation as Affective Transformation: An
Affect-Theoretical Approach to the Belgian Yellow Vest Movement. *Mobilization, 27*(2),
169-192. https://doi.org/10.17813/1086-671X-27-2-169.

Knudsen, E. (2021). Affective Polarization in Multiparty Systems? Comparing Affective
Polarization towards Voters and Parties in Norway and the United States.
Scandinavian Political Studies, 44(1), 34-44. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-
9477.12186.

Kobayashi, T. (2020). Depolarization through Social Media Use: Evidence from Dual
Identifiers in Hong Kong. *New Media & Society, 22*(8), 1339-1358. https://doi.
org/10.1177/1461444820910124.

Laclau, E. (2005). *On Populist Reason*. Verso.

Le Corre Juratic, M. (2024). Dimensions of Polarization, Realignment and Electoral
Participation in Europe: The Mobilizing Power of the Cultural Dimension. *European
Journal of Political Research*. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12718.

Levendusky, M. S. (2009). The Microfoundations of Mass Polarization. *Political Analysis,
17*(2), 162-176. https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mpp003.

Lipset, S. M., & Rokkan, S. (1967). *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-national
Perspectives*. Free Press. https://books.google.be/books?id=EpNCAAAAIAAJ.

Mason, L., & Versteegen, P. L. (forthcoming). Social Sorting and Affective Polarization. In
M. Torcal & E. Harteveld (Eds.), *Handbook of Affective Polarization* (pp. 362-391).
Edward Elgar. https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/rh29g.

Mau, S., Westheuser, L., & Lux, T. (2024). *Triggerpunkte: Konsens und Konflikt in der
Gegenwartsgesellschaft* (7. Auflage). Suhrkamp.

McCann, M. (1996). Causal versus Constitutive Explanations (or, on the Difficulty of being
So Positive…). *Law & Social Inquiry, 21*(2), 457-482. https://doi.
org/10.1111/j.1747-4469.1996.tb00087.x.

McCoy, J., Rahman, T., & Somer, M. (2018). Polarization and the Global Crisis of
Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for

Democratic Polities. *American Behavioral Scientist, 62*(1), 16-42. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218759576.

McElroy, A., Corben, V., & McLeish, K. (1995). Developing Care Plan Documentation: An Action Research Project. *Journal of Nursing Management, 3*(4), 193-199. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2834.1995.tb00076.x.

McGarty, C., Bliuc, A. M., Thomas, E. F., & Bongiorno, R. (2009). Collective Action as the Material Expression of Opinion-based Group Membership. *Journal of Social Issues, 65*(4), 839-857. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2009.01627.x.

Meléndez, C., & Kaltwasser, C. R. (2021). Negative Partisanship towards the Populist Radical Right and Democratic Resilience in Western Europe. *Democratization, 28*(5), 949-969. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1883002.

Mondon, A., & Smith, E. (2022, September 23). The Problem Isn't 'Polarization' – It's Right-Wing Radicalization. https://jacobin.com/2022/09/trump-maga-far-right-liberals-polarization.

Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the Political*. Psychology Press.

Mouw, T., & Sobel, M. E. (2001). Culture Wars and Opinion Polarization: The Case of Abortion. *American Journal of Sociology, 106*(4), 913-943. https://doi.org/10.1086/320294.

Muste, C. P. (2014). Reframing Polarization: Social Groups and 'Culture Wars'. *PS: Political Science & Politics, 47*(2), 432-442. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096514000353.

Neumann, T., Kelm, O., & Dohle, M. (2021). Polarisation and Silencing Others During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany: An Experimental Study Using Algorithmically Curated Online Environments. *Javnost – The Public, 28*(3), 323-339. https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2021.1969621.

Nguyen, C. G., Mayer, S. J., & Veit, S. (2022). The Impact of Emotions on Polarization. Anger Polarizes Attitudes towards Vaccine Mandates and Increases Affective Polarization. *Research & Politics, 9*(3), 20531680221116571. https://doi.org/10.1177/20531680221116571.

Oakes, P., & Haslam, A. (2001). Distortion V. Meaning: Categorization on Trial for Inciting Intergroup Hatred. In M. Augoustinos & K. J. Reynolds (Eds.), *Understanding Prejudice, Racism and Social Conflict* (pp. 179-195). SAGE Publications Ltd.

Reicher, S. (2004). The Context of Social Identity: Domination, Resistance, and Change. *Political Psychology, 25*(6), 921-945. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2004.00403.x.

Reiljan, A. (2020). 'Fear and Loathing across Party Lines' (also) in Europe: Affective Polarisation in European Party Systems. *European Journal of Political Research, 59*. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12351.

Renström, E. A., Bäck, H., & Carroll, R. (2023). Threats, Emotions, and Affective Polarization. *Political Psychology, 44*(6), 1337-1366. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12899.

Revers, M. (2023). Performative Polarization: The Interactional and Cultural Drivers of Political Antagonism. *Cultural Sociology*. https://doi.org/10.1177/17499755231188808.

Revers, M., & Coleman, S. (2023). Micropolarization: The Affective and Interpersonal Experience of Political Antagonism [Preprint]. SocArXiv. https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/czn3a.

Roccas, S., & Brewer, M. B. (2002). Social Identity Complexity. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 6*(2), 88-106. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0602_01.

Röllicke, L. (2023). Polarisation, Identity and Affect-conceptualising Affective Polarisation in Multi-party Systems. *Electoral Studies, 85*, 102655. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102655.

Röllicke, L. (2024, August 25). Varieties of Dislike. Using in-depth Interviews to Identify Underlying Dimensions of Like-dislike Scale Responses in Research on Affective Polarisation. https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/bhxzp.

Röllicke, L. (forthcoming). Affective Polarization and Qualitative Methods. In M. Torcal & E. Harteveld (Eds.), *Handbook of Affective Polarization* (pp. 130-152). Edward Elgar. https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/rh29g.

Schedler, A. (2023). Rethinking Political Polarization. *Political Science Quarterly, 138*(3), 335-359. https://doi.org/10.1093/psquar/qqad038.

Schieferdecker, D. (2021). Beliefs, Attitudes, and Communicative Practices of Opponents and Supporters of COVID-19 Containment Policies: A Qualitative Case Study from Germany. *Javnost – The Public, 28*(3), 306-322. https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2021.1969620.

Simonsen, K. B., & Bonikowski, B. (2022). Moralizing Immigration: Political Framing, Moral Conviction, and Polarization in the United States and Denmark. *Comparative Political Studies, 55*(8), 1403-1436. https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140211060284.

Tajfel, H. (1974). Social Identity and Intergroup Behaviour. *Social Science Information, 13*(2), 65-93. https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847401300204.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *Organizational Identity: A Reader* (pp. 33-37). Oxford University Press.

Tavory, I., & Timmermans, S. (2014). *Abductive Analysis: Theorizing Qualitative Research*. University of Chicago Press.

Tavory, I., & Timmermans, S. (2019). Abductive Analysis and Grounded Theory. In A. Bryant & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Current Developments in Grounded Theory*. SAGE Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526485656.

Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D., & Wetherell, M. S. (1987). *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-categorization Theory*. Basil Blackwell.

Van Erkel, P. F. A., & Turkenburg, E. (2022). Delving into the Divide: How Ideological Differences Fuel Out-party Hostility in a Multi-party Context. *European Political Science Review, 14*(3), 386-402. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773922000121.

Van Ingelgom, V. (2020) Focus Groups: From Data Generation to Analysis. In L. Curini & R. J. Franzese (Eds.), *Sage Handbook of Research Methods in Political Science and International Relations* (pp. 1190-1210). Sage.

Versteegen, P. L. (2024). We Love, They Hate: Emotions in Affective Polarization and How Partisans May Use Them. *Political Psychology, 45*(6), 1031-1049. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12955.

Vila-Henninger, L., Dupuy, C., Van Ingelgom, V., Caprioli, M., Teuber, F., Pennetreau, D., Bussi, M., & Le Gall, C. (2022). Abductive Coding: Theory Building and Qualitative (re)analysis. *Sociological Methods & Research*. https://doi.org/10.1177/00491241211067508.

Wagner, M. (2021). Affective Polarization in Multiparty Systems. *Electoral Studies, 69*, 102199. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102199.

Wagner, M., & Eberl, J.-M. (2024). Divided by the Jab: Affective Polarisation Based on COVID Vaccination Status. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 1-24. https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2024.2352449.

Wuthnow, R. (1988). *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II*. Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv18zhd59.

Wuthnow, R. (1989). *The Struggle for America's Soul: Evangelicals, Liberals, and Secularism*. W.B. Eerdmans.

Wuthnow, R. (2018). *The Left behind: Decline and Rage in Rural America*. Princeton University Press.

Zhu, Q., Weeks, B. E., & Kwak, N. (2024). Implications of Online Incidental and Selective Exposure for Political Emotions: Affective Polarization during Elections. *New Media & Society, 26*(1), 450-472. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211061336.