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**Special issue on Affective Polarisation in the Low Countries**

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EDITORIAL

# Affective Polarisation in the Low Countries

*Luana Russo**

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 on 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


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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.

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ARTICLES

# Appraising Measurements of Affective Polarisation in Multiparty Systems: Comparative Insights from the Low Countries*

*Jochem Vanagt***

**Abstract**

*Affective polarisation is increasingly viewed as a threat to democratic societies. However, the lack of consensus on measurement approaches hinders our understanding. This study assesses the concurrent validity of several affective polarisation measurements, challenging existing US-centric measurement approaches and advocating for a more nuanced understanding tailored to Europe's diverse multiparty contexts. It leverages data from Belgium and the Netherlands (N = 2,174), two ideal-type multiparty systems to test various measurements of affective polarisation. Its novelty arrives from its examination of like-dislike and social distance measures in conjunction with social avoidance and out-group dislike. The findings reveal that while these measurements share common drivers, their outcomes differ substantially. Only out-group dislike and social distance are linked to decreased satisfaction with democracy, whereas affective polarisation as the difference between in- and out-group affect seems to stimulate voting intentions. Hence, this study cautions researchers against interchangeably using different measurements.*

**Keywords:** affective polarisation, multiparty systems, operationalisations, comparative research.

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## 1 Introduction

Over the past years, affective polarisation has gained widespread attention and discussion among academics and the general public (Iyengar et al., 2012). Referring to the extent to which citizens feel positively towards co-partisans and negatively towards out-partisans, it is now understood to eclipse ideological considerations (Iyengar et al., 2019). Several worrisome consequences have been associated with affective polarisation, at the political level, increasing political dysfunction and gridlock (Reiljan, 2020) and decreasing satisfaction with democracy (Ridge, 2020), and, at the interpersonal level, inciting heightened tensions and incivility among citizens (Lelkes & Westwood, 2017; Martherus et al., 2019; Westwood et al., 2018).

European research has more recently turned towards studying the phenomenon of affective polarisation, leaving several domains understudied. One particular aspect is the lack of consensus on measurement approaches. Various measurements are currently used interchangeably, without sufficient explanation why certain measures are preferred or chosen over others. Consequently, researchers may inadvertently tap into different aspects of affective polarisation, which severely hinders our understanding of this phenomenon. Although research has proposed ways of operationalising affective polarisation in multiparty systems (Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021), and confirmed its validity in different national contexts (Russo et al., 2023; Tichelbaecker et al., 2023), much remains unexplored regarding the testing of different operationalisations.

To address this gap, this study aims to conduct a concurrent validity test by juxtaposing multiple measurements of affective polarisation, building on previous conceptual (Röllicke, 2023) and empirical (Areal & Harteveld, 2024; Harteveld, 2021; Renström et al., 2022; Tichelbaecker et al., 2023) work. Two operationalisations central to the polarisation literature are investigated: like-dislike scores (the affect expressed to specific parties and voters) and social distance (the hesitation to interact with out-partisans). It also includes social avoidance (the tendency for individuals to avoid out-partisans altogether) and out-group dislike (the negative affect expressed towards out-partisans and out-parties), neither of which has so far been examined in conjunction with other measures. This selection does not solely refer to an evaluation (like/dislike); it refers also to intended behaviour (distance/avoidance). In line with previous research, measurements of both the vertical (parties) and the horizontal (voters) dimensions are compared (Harteveld, 2021). As a final validity check, this study explores the different dimensions they capture by correlating them with key drivers and outcomes associated with affective polarisation. It draws on data collected in Belgium and the Netherlands (N = 2,174), two ideal cases to study measurements in a context highly divergent from the US, as they are multiparty systems with high, albeit varying, levels of fractionalisation.

The results reveal that while the measurements share common factors, their drivers are not identical. In a similar vein, the impact on alleged consequences of affective polarisation varies strongly. Only out-group dislike and social distance are linked to decreased satisfaction with democracy. Affective polarisation measured as the difference between in- and out-group affect does not correlate with

democratic satisfaction, but it does seem to stimulate voting intentions. As different measures operate differently both as a dependent variable and an independent variable, concurrent validity may not be as high as some would tend to believe. In sum, this study offers valuable insights with broader relevance to the study of affective polarisation in European multiparty systems. If researchers are mainly interested in studying the negative consequences of affective polarisation, out-group dislike and social distance seem to be more appropriate. Social avoidance, on the other hand, displays particularly low concurrent validity, suggesting that it should be considered a separate dimension. Although more research is needed to uncover which measurements manage to best capture affective polarisation, researchers are strongly cautioned against interchangeably using different measurements in light of their low concurrent validity. Instead, ample thought should be put in the selection of the measurement.

## 2 Conceptualisations and Operationalisations of Affective Polarisation

Since the past decade, affective polarisation has increasingly become a focal point of political behavioural research. Its theoretical foundations originate from Social Identity Theory, which states that individuals use group membership to navigate social reality (Robinson, 1996; Tajfel et al., 1971; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In particular, individuals view the world through an 'in-group' that they consider themselves a part of, and an 'out-group', referring to everyone else. Subsequently, people couple positive emotions to their in-group and negative emotions to the out-group (Sherif et al., 1988; Tajfel, 1970). Political groups are no exception (Mason, 2018b). Iyengar and his colleagues indeed show that US citizens are increasingly affectively polarised (2012). Affective polarisation also seems to be rising in several Western European countries, such as Germany and the United Kingdom (Garzia et al., 2023; Knudsen, 2020; Reiljan, 2020). Hence, some researchers have turned their attention towards the measurement of affective polarisation. The following section will lay out numerous difficulties as well as conceptual ambiguities that scholars face when tackling this issue.

### *2.1 Measuring Affective Polarisation in Multiparty Contexts*

Multiple measurements were developed in the US with which researchers have studied affective polarisation (for an overview, see Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). The most popular is the like-dislike or feeling thermometer, which asks respondents to rate parties or voters from *strongly dislike* to *strongly like* or *cold* to *warm*, respectively (Iyengar et al., 2019). However, when trying to adapt these US-developed measures to Europe, two particular challenges arose: (1) operationalising affective polarisation in multiparty systems and (2) testing measurement validity in highly diverging socio-political contexts.

In the US, scholars simply have to compute the difference between the level of in-group favouritism and out-group animosity to arrive at someone's level of affective polarisation (Iyengar et al., 2012). Multiparty systems require a more sophisticated method. Multiple approaches have been proposed since, the most


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common of which is the Weighted Affective Polarisation (WAP) Index, which creates a sophisticated spread of the affective scores for all citizens (Wagner, 2021). This reflects the notion that voters continue to view the party system through two opposing camps, of which they favour one (Bantel, 2023). It has the distinct advantage of weighing affective polarisation according to party size, which better captures a society's affective polarisation as the size of a party mirrors its importance in the political arena (Wagner, 2021, p. 3), and it provides scores for all citizens rather than for partisans only (Reiljan, 2020, p. 381).

Researchers may however inadvertently tap into different aspects of affective polarisation when blindly adopting US-developed scales. To test their validity in multiparty contexts, Russo et al. (2023) compared several operationalisations of affective polarisation using a diverse European student sample spanning nine countries and found that they hold a strong cross-cultural applicability. Similarly, Gidron et al. (2022) validate the feeling thermometer as a measure of partisan affect in Israel's multiparty system. They showcase that there is indeed a strong overlap between the feeling thermometer towards party supporters, social distance measures and discrimination in economic games.

### *2.2 Horizontal versus Vertical Affective Polarisation*

In one of the first conceptual works on affective polarisation in multiparty systems, Röllicke (2023) highlights a number of important ambiguities that remain in the literature. One central such ambiguity is the *object* of dislike. Although commonly understood as the difference between in-group favouritism and out-group animosity displayed towards political parties *or* their voters, affective polarisation vis-à-vis political parties and voters is not identical. In particular, animosity towards out-parties does not necessarily translate to similar levels of animosity towards out-party voters (Areal & Harteveld, 2024; Harteveld, 2021). Instead, respondents tend to think of *party elites* when rating parties, with party elites receiving more negative scores than party *voters* (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Knudsen, 2020).

Recently, scholars have increasingly utilised two terms to make this distinction: the *vertical* or *political* dimension versus the *horizontal* or *social* dimension. The vertical dimension pertains to the affect displayed by citizens towards parties or party leaders, whereas the horizontal dimension looks at partisans or party supporters among each other, although it can also examine intergroup affect of ideological camps or other political and issue groups (Comellas & Torcal, 2023; Reiljan & Ryan, 2021; Röllicke, 2023). Whether scholars should focus on one or the other depends on what facet of affective polarisation they are interested in (Areal & Harteveld, 2024). Their consequences are also believed to differ. Horizontal affective polarisation (voters) is said to affect social interactions and lead to ideology-based discrimination, whereas vertical affective polarisation (party elites) should mostly impact the political sphere, such as contributing to political gridlock (Peters, 2021, p. 26). Even though the vertical dimension has been criticised in the US, as it conflates general dislike towards politics with dislike towards specific parties (Klar et al., 2018; Krupnikov & Ryan, 2022), comparing the nuts and bolts of these dimensions in multiparty settings has only recently started (e.g. Gidron et

al., 2022; Tichelbaecker et al., 2023). One such reason could be that the two dimensions are more alike in two-party systems where only one partisan out-group exists, resulting in voters more readily extrapolating their affect towards party elites to voters (Areal & Harteveld, 2024). Whether the relationship between these two dimensions is unidirectional, or reciprocal, remains an important gap in the literature.

### *2.3 Shallow versus Entrenched Negative Affect*

Despite the prevalence of feeling thermometers and like-dislike scales in the literature, they tend to capture a rather shallow version of affective polarisation (Huddy & Yair, 2021; Kingzette, 2021), reflecting an evaluation rather than true affect or emotion (Verplanken et al., 1998). As a result, *strongly disliking* an opponent may be multidimensional in itself, ranging from mere dislike to feelings of deep hatred. Measures exist that allow researchers to disentangle them and distinguish between *shallow* and *entrenched* types of negative affect. Here, the latter should tap into more extreme forms of out-group bias that are not as easily expressed as shallow negative affect.

More entrenched forms of horizontal affective polarisation have previously been captured with social distance items (Iyengar, 2022). These ask respondents how they would feel interacting with out-partisans in different social settings, such as their level of comfort if their child would marry someone from a political out-group (Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019; Mason, 2018b). Social distance indeed seems to better capture a more deep-rooted dislike towards the 'other side', as it constitutes a more extreme form of ostracisation (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). This is reflected in scores being lower overall than for the feeling thermometer or like-dislike scales (Tichelbaecker et al., 2023). Moreover, it has the advantage of capturing (intended) behaviour, which does not necessarily arise from pre-existing levels of affect (Clore & Schnall, 2019; Terry & Hogg, 1996). Similarly, *social avoidance*, or the general tendency of people to avoid others based on certain characteristics such as their political views, taps into more general conflict avoidance and is strongly placed on the horizontal dimension (Huber & Malhotra, 2017). It may also in part capture the behavioural *consequences* of affective polarisation (Iyengar et al., 2019).

Two additional examples of measurements which capture more entrenched forms of dislike are traits and discrete emotions. Trait batteries tend to include both positive and negative items (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Kelly Garrett et al., 2014; Renström et al., 2021). Little research has however been conducted on the application of the traits battery in multiparty settings. Similarly, measuring discrete emotions is only remarkably rarely done in European literature (Berntzen et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2022; Renström et al., 2023) and receives less focus in the US as well (Webster, 2020; Webster & Albertson, 2022). Nevertheless, political psychology has theorised extensively on which mechanisms drive and influence emotions and affect (Marcus et al., 2000; Redlawsk & Mattes, 2022).


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*2.4 Affective Polarisation versus Out-Group Dislike*

Another important ambiguity in the affective polarisation literature, as pointed out by Röllicke, is that "negative out-group evaluations can occur for reasons that have nothing to do with an in-group" (2023, p. 7). Although affective polarisation is commonly conceptualised as the difference between one's favouritism towards the political in-group(s) and animosity towards the political out-group(s) (Bantel, 2023; Iyengar et al., 2012; Wagner, 2021), a review of the literature reveals that many scholars solely study out-group dislike, omitting affective polarisation's in-group component (e.g. Gidron et al., 2022; Harteveld et al., 2021; Harteveld & Wagner, 2023; Simas et al., 2020). This interest is likely driven by the fact that negativity bias has been described as more pervasive than positivity bias (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018, p. 212), which is theoretically and empirically a distinct phenomenon (Bougher, 2017; Brewer, 1999). Both types of biases are likely driven by different factors. For example, political system fragmentation seems more strongly associated with out-party animosity than in-group favouritism (Gidron et al., 2020, pp. 66-67).

Indeed, out-group dislike is sometimes considered to be more pertinent than in-group attachment, particularly in a multiparty context (Wagner, 2021, p. 7), which has been discussed extensively in the literature on negative partisanship (Bankert, 2020, 2022; Mayer & Russo, 2023). The reason may stem from the fact that in most multiparty systems, the negative affect of centre-left and centre-right individuals towards one another may not be as high as in the US, where it has become a defining characteristic of American politics (Iyengar et al., 2019). European polarisation is mostly driven by negative affect towards and from the radical right (Harteveld et al., 2021). This suggests that affective polarisation in Europe may be less typified by a tug of war between the left and the right, but more as a clash between mainstream party voters and the radical right (Bantel, 2023). Affective polarisation may therefore be better captured in multiparty systems by solely examining affect towards the out-group.

Currently, most Europe-developed measurements based on feeling thermometers do not separate the in- and out-party components and instead consider them equal in shaping affective polarisation (Wagner, 2021). Iyengar and his colleagues, however, claim that "the precise mix of in- and outgroup sentiment" may differ depending on an "individuals' prior information and how they update beliefs based on exposure to new information" (2019). There are reasons to believe that there are situations in which only considering out-group dislike has some merit. For example, Wagner's index shows that, perhaps counter-intuitively, polarisation decreased in the US between 2012 and 2016 (2021), which is driven by the fact that the decrease in in-group favouritism was stronger than the increase in out-group animosity (Iyengar et al., 2019).

As a consequence of decoupling the in- and out-groups, we do not study 'polarisation' as such anymore. This detaches affective polarisation from its theoretical foundations in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which are mostly based on an experiment (*Robber's Cave*) in which scholars carefully designed the environment to maximise the chance of creating group attachments and triggering intergroup conflict. However, this may not necessarily reflect daily

political settings (for a discussion, see Krupnikov & Ryan, 2022), especially in multiparty contexts where multiple in- and out-groups are present. As mentioned previously, scholars of negative partisanship do not consider in-group favouritism a required precondition of out-group animosity. Particularly in contexts where in-group favouritism or partisan attachment is considered low (Huddy et al., 2018), or when the research question is mostly interested in the causes or consequences of out-group animosity, it may be more appropriate to focus solely on out-group dislike, and even though one deviates from studying polarisation in the strictest sense of the word, one could still categorise it under the umbrella term of affective polarisation.

## 3 Data and Methods

This study relies on a survey conducted in Belgium and the Netherlands in June 2020 by the market research company Respondi. Using computer-assisted web interviews via an Online Access Panel (N = 2,174; Belgium: N = 1,071; the Netherlands: N = 1,103), data were derived from a nonprobability sample with matched quotas for age (5 categories), gender and NUTS-1 region, and 18- to 69-year-olds were sampled, resulting in a nationally representative sample that focuses on people at working age. Most respondents completed the questionnaire in ±15 minutes.

Belgium and the Netherlands are two ideal cases to study affective polarisation measurements in multiparty systems, as they have a long history of coalition governments and their political systems are highly fractionalised; that is, the effective number of political parties is (very) high in both systems. This makes them strongly diverge from the US, a most well-examined case. Belgium and the Netherlands also differ from one another in important ways. The Netherlands stands out as one of the least affectively polarised countries in Europe (Harteveld, 2021; Wagner, 2021). Parties in Flanders and the Netherlands also take a very different approach to the radical right. This is important in light of the radical right's centrality in shaping affective polarisation (Harteveld et al., 2021). Whereas parties have gone so far as to cooperate with the radical right in the Netherlands, Belgium (so far) maintains a strict *cordon sanitaire* (Mudde, 2002). Lastly, the degree of fractionalisation is much higher in the Netherlands, whereas Belgium contains a strong linguistic divide which leads to separate party systems for each region (Deschouwer, 2012).

Exactly due to the (highly) fractionalised systems present in Belgium and the Netherlands, party selection for the affective polarisation questions was particularly tricky. For Flanders and Wallonia, the survey included all parties with seats in federal parliament (7 and 6, respectively). Wallonia lacks a strong radical right party, whereas Flanders' radical left party is considerably smaller than Wallonia's. As the makeup of their party systems thus differs considerably, the Belgian data will be split according to the party system of respondents, resulting in two subsets in the analysis: Flanders (N = 615) and Wallonia (N = 448). As 17 parties were seated in the Dutch national parliament at the time of data collection, different


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selection criteria needed to be considered. Cognitive strain on respondents would have been enormous, resulting in high drop-out rates, non-response and satisficing. The number of parties was whittled down to the 10 biggest parties, each of which has at least 5 seats and 3% of the votes (VVD as the largest, ChristenUnie as the smallest). This also includes all coalition parties. Although some (very) small parties are excluded that some people may feel particularly strongly attracted towards, their effect on the eventual like-dislike score would be small regardless, as these are weighted by vote share. The parties that are at the ideological extremes and attract the most negative affect (PVV, FvD and SP) are present (Harteveld et al., 2021). Although conceptual validity would increase slightly when including all 17 parties, the reliability of the scale would strongly decrease due to the expected satisficing and non-response. The selection of 10 parties is therefore preferred.

This study will follow the approach by Druckman and Levendusky (2019) and Russo et al. (2023) by incorporating a large number of the items. The main measurements examined here are the like-dislike scale towards parties and voters, social distance towards a close friend and romantic partner, and social avoidance (response scales: 1-7). The first captures the vertical dimension, whereas the horizontal dimension is measured by the four other measures (Areal & Harteveld, 2024; Iyengar et al., 2019). The first of these horizontal measures refers merely to an evaluation, whereas the last three tap into more entrenched forms of polarisation, namely its (intended) behavioural tendencies (Röllicke, 2023). Social distance was measured towards voters of the respondent's three 'least-liked' parties. Social avoidance was measured by asking respondents to what extent they tend to avoid people based on their political views, similar to items used in previous research (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Lelkes, 2016; McCoy & Somer, 2019).

The study is also interested in the concurrent validity of out-group dislike. As citizens tend to hold multiple in-group and out-group identities in multiparty systems (Bantel, 2023), one cannot simply use the (dis)favourability rating of the out-party (Simas et al., 2020). To tackle this, this study leverages a novel question which asks respondents to rank all parties according to their favourability, so the analysis can link this question to the like-dislike scale and examine whether patterns emerge depending on negative affect towards one's first, second or third out-party.

In addition, the analysis utilises exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to assess whether these different measurements tap into one or multiple latent constructs. Subsequently, a series of linear and logistic regression analyses examine a number of alleged key drivers and consequences of affective polarisation. The said analyses report findings for each measurement for the combined dataset using party-system fixed effects and for each party system separately.

For the key drivers of affective polarisation, widely believed in the literature to increase affective polarisation, the analysis includes political interest (Banda & Cluverius, 2018; Krupnikov & Ryan, 2022); ideological extremism (Mason, 2018a; Reiljan, 2020; van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022); positive partisanship, that is, the extent to which an individual identifies with a certain party (Harteveld, 2021; Hobolt et al., 2020; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Wagner, 2021); and negative partisanship, that is, the extent to which one is repulsed by their out-party

(Bankert, 2020; Huddy et al., 2018; Martherus et al., 2019). Positive partisanship is measured through the party closeness question. Negative partisanship relies on a novel two-item battery developed by Mayer and Russo (2023),[1] which is asked for the most disliked party only.

Research on the consequences of affective polarisation is less unanimous. The analysis will test the following often-considered outcomes: satisfaction with democracy (Ridge, 2020, 2021), social trust (Hye & Lee, 2022; Torcal & Thomson, 2023), and voting participation (Harteveld & Wagner, 2023). Voting participation is captured through intention to vote if elections were held tomorrow.[2] All analyses control for age, gender and education attainment.

It is important to note that the regression analyses are purely exploratory in nature. There is a potential for reversed causality between most, if not all, affective polarisation measurements and their alleged drivers and outcomes. The analysis will therefore not seek to make causal claims.

## 4 Results

### *4.1 Descriptive Statistics*

As we know from previous research, out-group dislike decreases with increasing ideological similarities, and the radical right is uniquely disliked, both in Belgium (van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022) and the Netherlands (Harteveld, 2021). Before moving to a full comparison of all the measures, this section zooms in on out-group affect. Figure 1 displays the different levels of affective dislike and social distance towards respondents' three most disliked parties. Negative affect decreases when moving away from the least-liked party, suggesting that the rank-order question functioned as intended.[3] The degree of negative affect is comparable across the three different party systems, except for social distance, as Wallonia scores consistently lower. Moreover, only in the Netherlands and Flanders, the question on social distance towards a romantic partner scores higher than towards a close friend. Overall, scores within each measurement do not differ substantially, which is confirmed by a correlation analysis ($r > 0.84$; see Appendix A). Further analysis will combine the separate scores for each party into one for each measurement.

Averages for each measurements are displayed in Figure 2. For comparability's sake, measures were rescaled to 0-1. In line with the literature, both the spread measure (referred to as WAP, short for Weighted Affective Polarisation Index) and dislike towards parties are slightly higher than for voters (diff. = 0.07-0.08, $p < 0.001$). As can be expected, the WAP measures are lower than the dislike measures, as they also include the in-group component. Similar patterns are observed as in Figure 1. In addition, respondents tend to exhibit relatively little social avoidance, suggesting that it serves as a more conservative estimate of negative affect.[4]


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***Figure 1*** ***Out-Group Dislike***

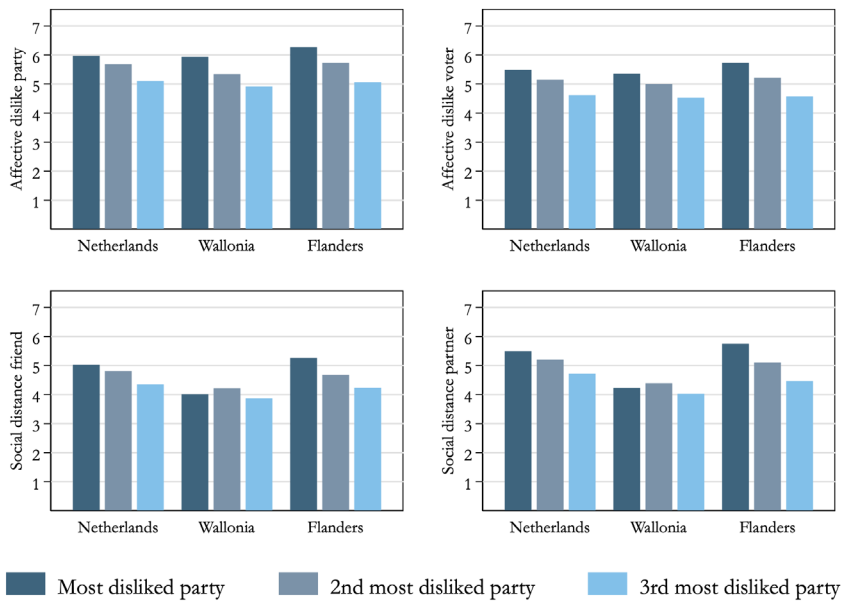
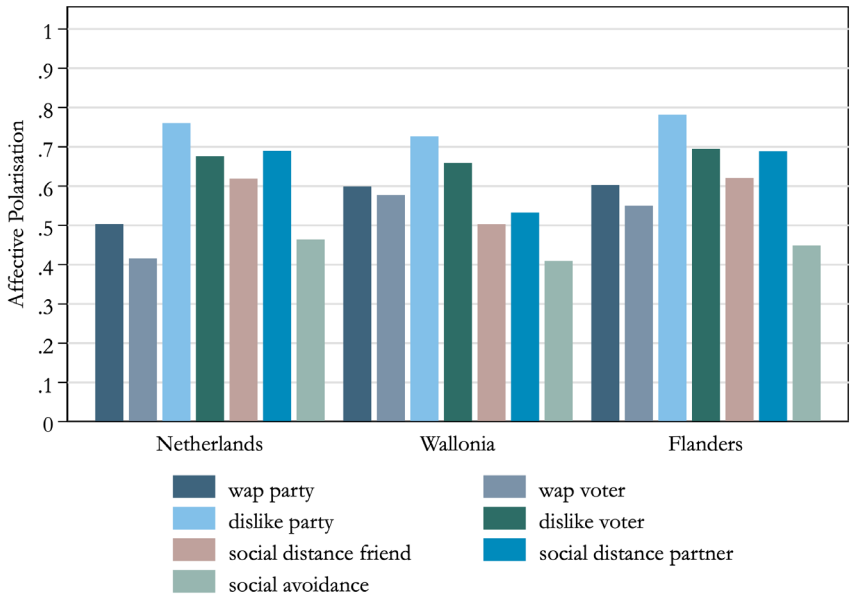
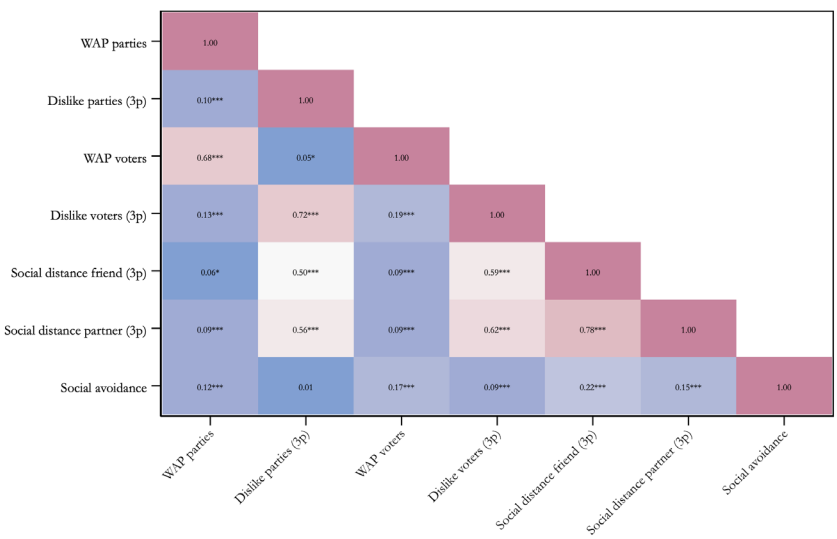



***Figure 2*** ***Affective Polarisation Measurements***



Correlation analysis of the main measurements (see Figure 3) shows that most correlations are significant ($p < 0.001$). The WAP measures towards parties and voters correlate strongly ($r = 0.68$), as do the out-group dislike measures ($r = 0.72$). The two social distance measures are also strongly related ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.001$). The connection between the WAP and dislike measures is much weaker ($r = 0.10$-$0.19$). Social avoidance stands out, only moderately correlating with social distance towards a close friend ($r = 0.22$). To further examine the relation between these different measurements, this section now turns to factor analyses.

***Figure 3*** ***Correlation Matrix***




*4.2 Factor Analysis*

Following Russo et al.'s approach (2023), only scores towards the most disliked party are considered, holding the partisan group constant. This prevents the choice of parties from influencing the results, instead solely focusing on the measurement and *object* of dislike. Social avoidance is also included, as it probes people's avoidance towards those holding different political views. As shown in Table 1, two factors are retained (Eigenvalue1 = 2.91; Eigenvalue2 = 1.01). Factor 1 captures dislike and social distance, whereas social avoidance constitutes its own factor. When removing social avoidance, all variables load unto one factor and reliability increases to 0.87. This process is repeated for scores towards the second and third most disliked party (see Appendix B). Results are highly similar, with Eigenvalue2 hovering around 1.00, and an improvement in reliability from 0.69-0.76 to 0.82-0.86 when removing social avoidance. When examining party systems separately, Eigenvalue2 only dips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below 1.00 in Flanders (0.96). In sum, whether there are two factors depends on the parties and party systems examined, but social avoidance differs consistently from the other measures and its removal leads to substantially higher reliability ratings.

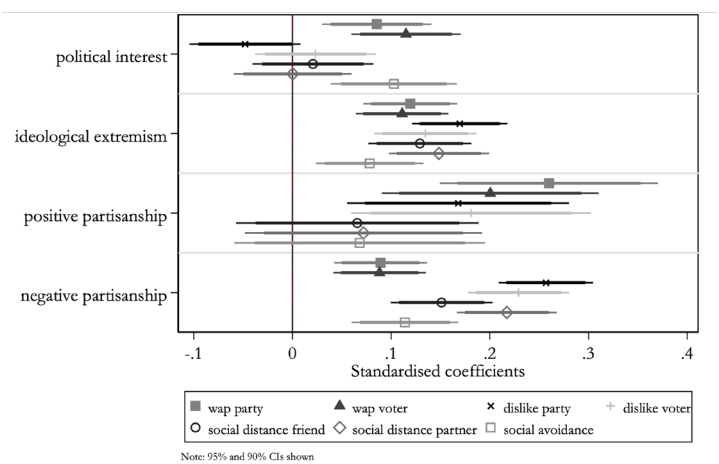
*Table 1 Explanatory Factor Analysis*

| Variable | Factor 1 | Factor 2 | Uniqueness |
|---|---|---|---|
| Dislike party | **0.78** | −0.31 | 0.29 |
| Dislike voter | **0.86** | −0.12 | 0.24 |
| Social distance friends | **0.85** | 0.13 | 0.27 |
| Social distance partner | **0.88** | −0.01 | 0.23 |
| Social avoidance | 0.25 | **0.94** | 0.05 |

*4.3 Regression Analysis: Key Drivers*

The standardised results of four key drivers of affective polarisation are presented in Figure 4 (see Appendix C for full regression results). Political interest seems to matter most for the WAP measures. Ideological extremism and negative partisanship return the most robust results, with significant associations between higher levels of ideological extremism and negative partisanship on the one hand, and higher levels of affective polarisation on the other hand ($p < 0.05$). For positive partisanship, an interesting pattern can be observed. Albeit not entirely unexpected, it seems to be most consequential for the WAP measure towards parties ($p < 0.05$) and (slightly less) towards voters ($p < 0.10$). The social distance and avoidance items are not predicted by positive partisanship ($p > 0.05$). This should not come as a great surprise, as these items lack an in-group component.[5]

*Figure 4 Key Drivers (Belgium and Netherlands)*



*4.4 Regression Analysis: Key Outcomes*

The following section focuses on three key outcomes of affective polarisation: satisfaction with democracy, social trust and voting intention (full results in Appendix C). The standardised results for satisfaction with democracy are included in Figure 5. WAP towards parties is significantly associated with *higher* satisfaction with democracy ($p > 0.05$), whereas WAP towards voters is insignificant ($p > 0.05$). Higher dislike towards parties and voters and increased social distance predict lower satisfaction with democracy ($p < 0.001$). Results for social avoidance are inconclusive ($p > 0.05$). For social trust, shown in Figure 6, only the two dislike measures lead to significant reductions with very small effect sizes ($p < 0.05$). In other words, affective polarisation only seems to play a marginal role in shaping social trust in Belgium and the Netherlands. Lastly, the analysis turns towards the association between affective polarisation and voting intention (see Figure 7). As voting intention is a binary variable, logistic regression analyses are computed and log odds are displayed below. Overall, affective polarisation seems to matter in increasing voting intention, in line with findings by Harteveld and Wagner (2023), but results are not conclusive across measurements. The WAP and dislike scores towards parties, but not voters, are associated with an increased likelihood to vote ($p < 0.05$), in line with the results for social distance ($p < 0.05$).[6]

***Figure 5 Satisfaction with Democracy (Belgium and Netherlands)***

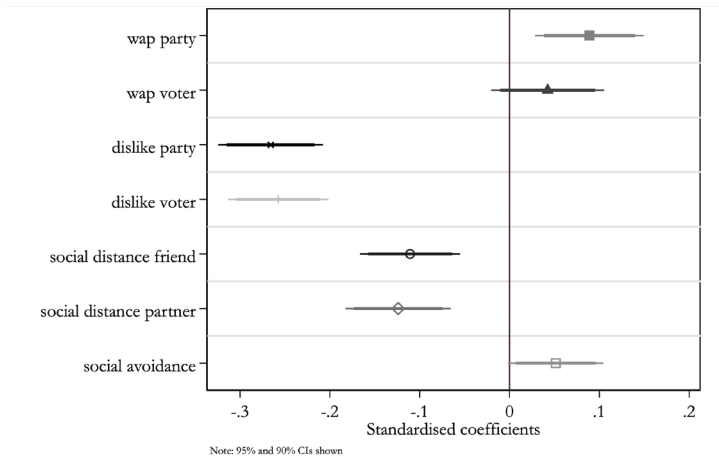





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*Figure 6* *Social Trust (Belgium and Netherlands)*

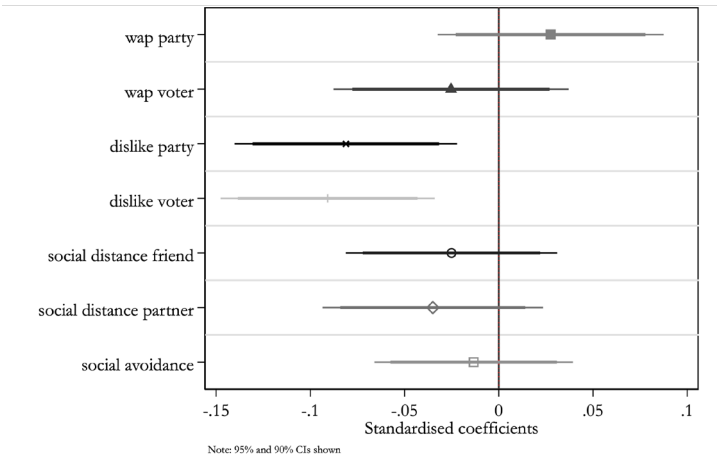
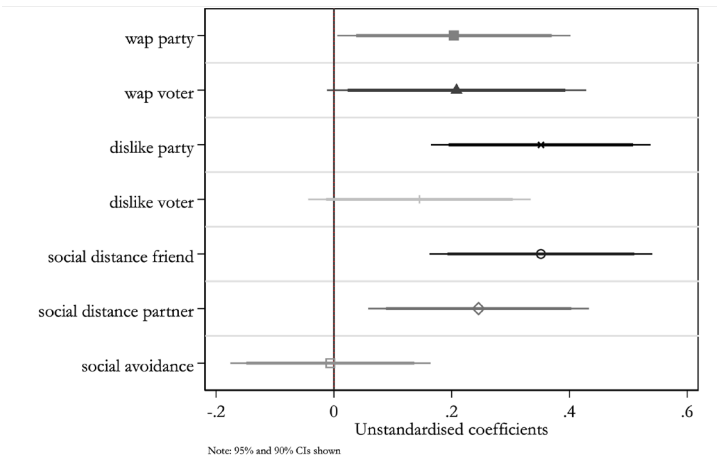



*Figure 7* *Voting Intention (Belgium and Netherlands)*




## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

As scholars of political science have increasingly turned towards studying affective polarisation, few studies have yet examined how US-developed conceptualisations and operationalisations extend to (European) multiparty contexts. Researchers nonetheless have a wide variety of measurements at their disposal, but the selection of appropriate measurement methods from the available options remains

challenging and often arbitrary. This article aimed to explore how these measurements are interconnected, assessing their concurrent validity and exploring their various dimensions and implications for political behaviour and social cohesion. Leveraging cross-country data from Belgium and the Netherlands (N = 2,174), the present study aimed to uncover nuanced insights into the complexity of affective polarisation, both challenging and extending existing frameworks. As a result, it further adds to an increasing body of research that also aims to inform polarisation research as to which measurement they should pick for their data collection and analysis (Areal & Harteveld, 2024; Russo et al., 2023; Tichelbaecker et al., 2023). It aimed to further expand the palate of measurements available to affective polarisation researchers, as well as examining how each of them is related to one another and under which circumstance(s) which measurement is the most appropriate. Several notable results should be highlighted.

The study combined several goals. First, it assessed the concurrent validity of several affective polarisation measures – like-dislike scales, social distance and social avoidance – in a multiparty system. The findings reveal that while they share commonalities, they also seem to capture unique facets of affective polarisation. Social avoidance in particular stands apart, further confirming that affect does not necessarily translate into (intended) behaviour (Clore & Schnall, 2019; Terry & Hogg, 1996). However, the relation between behavioural and affective polarisation is not yet well understood, warranting future research to examine whether one is causally prior to the other, for example, whether behavioural polarisation requires some level of affective polarisation. The study also showed that the horizontal and vertical dimensions of affective polarisation are related but are not necessarily driven by similar factors or exert analogous influences. This is in line with previous research (Areal & Harteveld, 2024), validating that researchers should not conflate one with the other. Interestingly, the difference between the vertical dimension and the horizontal dimension is not nearly as pronounced as the difference between the horizontal like-dislike and social distance items, suggesting that the type of measurement matters more than the dimension one is interested in. What exactly drives these differences so far remains unclear. Future research should examine under which conditions, for example, out-party dislike and social distance diverge and what consequences such patterns have downstream. So far, scholars are in the dark about what respondents exactly picture when filling out affective polarisation questions. Qualitative interviews could be particularly well-suited to tackle this challenge.

Second, the study's focus on Belgium and the Netherlands, with their similar, yet distinct, political landscapes, served to offer insights into the manifestation of affective polarisation in diverse multiparty systems. Results often differed between party systems. This became particularly evident when focusing on a number of key drivers of affective polarisation. Ideological extremism was the most robust predictor of affective polarisation, regardless of its measurement of context. Positive partisanship only predicted the weighted spread scores, whereas negative partisanship only mattered in Flanders and the Netherlands. The absence of a radical right party in Wallonia might explain this difference, underscoring the diverseness of the three cases. While the results may more broadly apply to other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European countries, this study emphasises that the nuances observed in each context are important and may influence results depending on which measurement one uses.

Third, this article shed light on the relationship between affective polarisation and key political behaviours. The findings indicate varying, and often inconclusive, impacts of affective polarisation on satisfaction with democracy, social trust and voting intentions. Nonetheless, higher levels of out-group dislike and social distance are robustly linked to decreased satisfaction with democracy, signalling the potential erosion of democratic health due to intense partisan animosity (Ridge, 2020). When considering both in- and out-group components of affective polarisation, the analysis found no negative effect. Interestingly, affective polarisation *as such* even appears to stimulate voting intentions, suggesting a mobilising effect despite its negative connotations (Harteveld & Wagner, 2023).

This study comes with several limitations. The sample only encompassed three party systems in two countries. Although the varying measures of affective polarisation seemed to operate differently across party systems, statistical power issues prevent the analysis from concluding whether and how these might be conceptually driven. Further research is now needed to examine which contextual factors explain these differences. Moreover, expanding the country selection by including less fractionalised party systems (e.g. Germany) or countries with clear ideological blocks (e.g. Denmark and Sweden) would lead to stronger generalisability. The number of examined causes could also be enlarged to strengthen the concurrent validity test, such as propensity to vote. Lastly, several measures used in affective polarisation research were not examined. Two particular examples are emotions and traits, which strike at a more entrenched form of polarisation, but are quite rarely used. For a concept called *affective* polarisation, the relative lack of research focusing on the underlying emotions of this *affect* is surprising. Future research should test their concurrent validity with the other measures examined in this study.

To conclude, this study contributes to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of affective polarisation in multiparty systems. The generally low levels of concurrent validity highlight the need for a multifaceted approach to comprehensively grasp the phenomenon and for future research to focus on understanding what respondents think when filling out their responses to polarisation questions. The study also confirmed Russo et al.'s finding (2023) that measures in a multiparty context strongly depend on which parties are surveyed and whether researchers only consider the out-group or both in-group and out-group. Although more research is required, this study puts forth the following three pieces of advice: (1) if researchers are interested in studying the negative consequences associated with political intergroup conflict in multiparty systems, they should focus on out-group dislike and social distance. If they are interested in more entrenched forms of affective polarisation, social distance seems the more appropriate measure, keeping in mind that it may be strongly affected by the presence or absence of a radical right party. (2) As social avoidance displayed particularly low concurrent validity, it is better viewed as a distinct measure which captures *behavioural* or *social* rather than *affective* polarisation. Measuring *affective*

polarisation exclusively with social avoidance is not advisable. (3) Researchers should think carefully about what they are trying to measure conceptually, letting these considerations guide the choice as to which measurement(s) to include in a study rather than falling into the trap of post hoc cherry-picking. Although considerable overlap exists, confirmed by previous research (e.g. Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Russo et al., 2023; Tichelbaecker et al., 2023), this study shows that the different measurements of affective polarisation cannot and should not be used interchangeably.

In sum, as affective polarisation continues to shape political landscapes and dominate political discourse, further measurements research remains imperative, as it allows researchers to explore the evolving dynamics of affective polarisation in order to prevent the deterioration of political systems into destructive 'us versus them' confrontations.

## Notes

1 Agree-disagree: (1) Because of their worldviews, I could never vote for this party. (2) It is important to me that I am not one of those people who vote for this party.
2 Due to mandatory voting in Belgium, it asked whether respondents would vote if elections were not mandatory.
3 According to paired t-tests, these differences are significant ($p < 0.001$).
4 According to paired t-tests, all pairs of measurements are significantly different ($p < 0.01$).
5 Separate results for each party system are presented in Appendix D.
6 Separate results for each party system are presented in Appendix D.

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# Towards a Polarised Electorate? How Polarisation Affects Turnout Decisions in the Belgian Context of Compulsory Voting

*Bjarn Eck & Elie Michel**

**Abstract**

*Both ideological polarisation and affective polarisation tend to increase turnout, but we know little about whether these mobilising effects also hold among an electorate characterised by a history of compulsory voting. In fact, theory suggests that the effects of polarisation might be suppressed in this context, for example, because compulsory voting stimulates a civic duty to vote among the electorate. To address this question, the authors focus on turnout decisions in the context of compulsory voting in Belgium, exploiting a question about hypothetical willingness to vote in future voluntary elections. The authors find that affective polarisation increases the likelihood to mobilise voters in the case where compulsory voting is replaced by voluntary voting. The effect of ideological polarisation on such decision is more contrasted. The authors discuss the implications of these findings, which are increasingly relevant considering the recent decision of the Flemish government to abolish compulsory voting at the local level.*

**Keywords:** ideological polarization, affective polarization, turnout, compulsory voting, elections.

## 1 Introduction

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

Two of the most consistent determinants of voter turnout are polarisation and compulsory voting regulations (Birch, 2009; Kostelka et al., 2022; Singh, 2021).

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Polarisation drives voter turnout in two ways; either because ideological polarisation increases the utility of voting (Dalton, 2008; Downs, 1957; Ellger, 2023; Stokes, 1963) or because affective polarisation strengthens the emotional value that is attached to the outcome of the election (Harteveld & Wagner, 2022; Phillips, 2024; Serani, 2022; Ward & Tavits, 2019). Compulsory voting, meanwhile, drives turnout because it requires citizens by law to vote in an election (Birch, 2009; Dassonneville et al., 2023; Kostelka et al., 2022). Yet, we know little about how these two interact. That is, studies that examine the role of polarisation in stimulating turnout often exclude compulsory voting countries (Ellger, 2023; Wessels & Schmitt, 2008). This is problematic, because the context of compulsory voting can influence political behaviour (Dassonneville et al., 2019; Singh, 2023), and it is often suggested to stimulate a civic duty to vote (Chapman, 2019; Feitosa et al., 2020; Quintelier et al., 2011). The impact of polarisation on the motivation to vote among such an electorate might therefore be seriously suppressed.

Yet, testing the polarisation-turnout mechanism in a context of compulsory voting is challenging, as both the polarised and the non-polarised voters are required to vote. Making a meaningful distinction between their turnout behaviours is therefore complicated. In this article, we aim to overcome this issue. Relying on the Belgian case, we employ a survey question that asks respondents to what extent they would still be willing to cast a vote in a hypothetical future scenario where compulsory voting is lifted. Accordingly, we examine whether polarisation – both ideological and affective – has a positive impact on this voluntary voting intention. This allows us to detect whether polarisation is also a driving force of turnout in a compulsory voting system and offers some short-term insights about a potential 'polarisation participation gap' in case compulsory voting would actually be replaced by voluntary voting. We test our argument relying on data from Belgian national election studies of the past three decades (1991-2019), and we analyse the two regions of Flanders and Wallonia separately.

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

## 2 Polarisation and the Turnout Calculus

Election and party scholars have studied the topic of political polarisation over several decades (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Downs, 1957; Hetherington, 2009; Powell, 1982; Schattschneider, 1960; Stokes, 1963). Generally speaking, we can identify two main conceptualisations of political polarisation: ideological polarisation and affective polarisation. In this section, we outline these two


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conceptualisations, their differences and how they are theorised to stimulate voter turnout. Finally, we discuss how compulsory voting might alter these mechanisms.

### *2.1 Ideological Polarisation*

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

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

Importantly, the utility of voting – and thus the decision whether to turn out – depends on how parties position themselves before an election. The spatial polarisation of parties offers voters increased options for representation, which increases with the emergence of new parties that fill a gap in the ideological spectrum (Tavits, 2006). For instance, emerging populist radical right parties have appealed to voter groups that were poorly represented by existing (mainstream) political parties (Kriesi, 2014). Still, existing parties can also engage in this process by addressing new voter groups and taking more radical positions (Spoon & Klüver, 2019).

Proximity to a party is only one part of how ideological polarisation stimulates turnout. Additionally, when voters perceive parties as ideologically distant to them, the utility of keeping them out of power should be high. Again, this is dependent on the full dispersion of ideological polarisation in the system (Dalton,

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

### *2.2 Affective Polarisation*

Affective polarisation, which focuses on the level of political polarisation between voters rather than parties, has recently received much scholarly attention (Iyengar et al., 2019; Wagner, 2024). Affective polarisation is rooted in social identity theory, and it posits that people are strongly influenced by group identities that offer cues to categorise the world around them (Tajfel et al., 1971). Most evidently, group categorisations lead people to positively assess other people from the same group, while out-group members are treated with bias, discrimination or outright hostility (Tajfel, 1970). By applying this theory to political behaviour, Iyengar et al. (2012) argue that one of the core political identities functions through partisanship and, as such, offers a salient group membership for voters. Voters thus tend to categorise other people according to the party for which they vote: they familiarise with voters of the same party but show more negative attitudes towards people of other parties (Garzia et al., 2023; Harteveld, 2021; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021). The extent of affective polarisation among individuals is therefore reflected by the extent to which affect towards the in- and out-party diverges: increased positive affect for the in-group party (voters) and/or increased negative affect towards out-groups of parties and voters.

Overall, affective polarisation is studied to apprehend a range of negative consequences on political (Kingzette et al., 2021; Torcal & Carty, 2022) or social (Huber & Malhotra, 2017; Lee, 2022; Martherus et al., 2021) behaviour, yet it has also been suggested to foster political participation (Ahn & Mutz, 2023). However, the mechanism between affective polarisation and turnout is different than for ideological polarisation. While ideological polarisation should trigger a rational calculus of whether or not to participate, the effect of affective polarisation is rather rooted in emotions. In this regard, both constitutive aspects of affective polarisation matter: positive in-group emotions and/or negative out-group emotions. On the one hand, positive feelings towards the political in-group entail that voters are positively attached to people who share their political opinion. These likeminded people offer them a social identity that is often expressed through partisanship (Huddy et al., 2015), or an issue that is strongly politicised (Hobolt et al., 2021). The larger the sympathy of voters for their own side, the higher the likelihood that they want it to perform well – which activates their


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political participation. Indeed, voters who are strongly affectively polarised tend to mix their social identity with their political identity (Ward & Tavitz, 2019). As a result, the success of their party also becomes a voter's personal success, and accomplishments – as well as failures – are taken at a personal level. As elections are the key moment of competition between parties in electoral democracies, the best way to increase the chances to experience success and to avoid failure is thus turning out to vote and casting a vote for the own party.

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

Another mechanism taps into the role of emotions connected to winning and losing: voters who strongly dislike other political parties and their voters should be particularly happy when their party wins the elections and other parties are defeated (Janssen, 2023; Ward & Tavits, 2019). The prospect that their party could lose the election against this disliked group should motivate them to influence the election as much as they can, with the most obvious act being voting on election day.

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

### *2.3 Compulsory Voting*

Existing work linking polarisation to turnout has predominantly – if not solely – focused on countries with voluntary voting systems. In fact, most cross-national analyses that studied the impact of voter polarisation on turnout simply exclude countries with compulsory voting (Ellger, 2023; Wessels & Schmitt, 2008).

Accordingly, there is little evidence as to whether the turnout-polarisation mechanism also holds in a context of compulsory voting, such as in Belgium.

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

Compulsory voting might also affect the polarisation-turnout mechanism in multiple ways, to the extent that it might not apply in Belgium. First, while compulsory voting is an established effective way of raising turnout levels, the reasons behind this relationship remain understudied. The most straightforward explanation – voters do not want to risk the legal consequences of abstention – fails to account for the fact that turnout is also exceptionally high in compulsory voting countries without sanctioning for nonvoting (Kostelka et al., 2022) or without enforcement of the legislative penalties for nonvoting (Dassonneville et al., 2023). For example, while Belgian voters should officially be fined when they abstain from voting, this law has barely been enforced in the last 20 years (Engelen, 2005; Kużelewska, 2016), with public prosecutors openly saying that they do not give priority to its enforcement (Vlaamse Overheid, 2021).

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

In turn, this could mean that polarisation matters less for the decision to vote. Voters who do not find ideological representation or who are not strongly emotionally involved in the election still cast a ballot because they believe it is their civic duty to do so. Indeed, in terms of ideological polarisation, citizens in compulsory voting systems are less likely to vote ideologically coherently (Dassonneville et al., 2019; Selb & Lachat, 2009). In addition, compulsory voting


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also changes political behaviour beyond turnout, for example, by decreasing the post-election winner-loser gap in democratic satisfaction (Singh, 2023).

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

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

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

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

## 3 Case Selection

We analyse the relationship between polarisation and voter turnout in Belgium, which constitutes a relevant case for two reasons. First, the party system is highly fragmented, particularly since political parties split alongside the linguistic divide in the second half of the 20th century. In fact, Belgium essentially harbours two party systems: Flemish parties compete for votes in the Dutch-speaking part of the country (Flanders), while Francophone parties represent voters in the southern French-speaking part of the country (Wallonia). Regarding polarisation, previous studies have found that Belgian voters in both systems show important variation in their levels of affective polarisation (Bettarelli et al., 2022; Westwood et al., 2018), which is to some extent explained by ideological polarisation (van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022). In terms of ideological polarisation, both systems also present a key difference: the presence or absence of a successful and established radical right party. In Flanders, the radical right Vlaams Belang is one of the most successful parties since the 1990s, while no radical right party has established a continuous and significant presence in parliament in Wallonia thus far.

Although both regional systems include parties within the same party families, the ability of these parties to reach governmental agreements has shrunk over the years. This is symbolised by exceptionally long coalition formations at the overarching federal level in recent years (De Winter, 2019), which contrasts sharply with the classical image of Belgium of a typical consociational democracy with

elites bridging social cleavages by compromise. The most recent elections also saw a polarising trend in the political party offer, with higher seat shares both for the radical left (PTB-PVDA) and for the radical right (Vlaams Belang).

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

The system of compulsory voting in Belgium continues to date. Officially, voters can be sanctioned with a fine if they do not participate on election day, although these have seldom been issued in the past 20 years (Dassonneville et al., 2023; Engelen, 2005). Despite the virtual absence of sanction, the system has remained highly effective: all elections in the 21st century have attracted turnout levels of around 90%. Throughout its history, the abolishment of the compulsory voting system has been an important topic of discussion in Belgian politics, with particularly liberal parties arguing that compulsory voting infringes on personal freedoms. Still, the topic has not been particularly salient in political debates, and Hooghe and Deschouwer (2011) notice that the high (constitutional) barrier to replace compulsory voting by voluntary voting at the federal level has made parties reluctant to even propose it, especially because the Socialist parties has indicated to veto such proposals.

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


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## 4 Data and Methods

### *4.1 Dataset*

To map polarisation and turnout attitudes, we study Belgian election surveys conducted over almost three decades. More specifically, we pooled data from eight election surveys (seven at the federal level and one at the regional level) between 1991 and 2019 (Table 1) (for an overview of national election studies from 1991 to 2007, see Frognier et al., 2011). These surveys were either cross-sectional post-electoral studies or part of larger panels survey fielded around the time of the particular election (in 2009, 2014 and 2019; for an overview, see Michel et al., 2023).[1] In this article, we only rely on post-electoral surveys. Our pooled dataset is thus composed of all election surveys that include the same question on respondents' willingness to vote in case of voluntary voting (see the Dependent Variable section). Additionally, most studies also include questions that allow us to measure ideological polarisation, affective polarisation, or both. In total, we can study the effect of either ideological polarisation and affective polarisation on vote intention in four elections separately, and in three elections combined. The dataset also provides relevant control variables for each election year. All election surveys provide us with representative samples of the voting population in both linguistic regions and, thus, allow for studying differences between the party systems.

***Table 1*** ***Election Surveys in the Dataset***

| Year | Election | Compulsory Voting | Ideological Polarisation | Affective Polarisation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1991 | Federal | X | X | |
| 1995 | Federal | X | | |
| 1999 | Federal | X | X | X |
| 2003 | Federal | X | | X |
| 2007 | Federal | X | | |
| 2009 | Regional | X | | |
| 2014 | Federal | X | X | X |
| 2019 | Federal | X | X | X |

### *4.2 Dependent Variable*

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

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

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

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

Given that the survey question was asked in all election studies of our dataset, we can map the willingness to vote under a voluntary voting system over time. Figure 1 shows the average score towards this question as well as its distribution, with 95% confidence intervals, but excluding the respondents who indicated that they do not know.[3] Overall, this score is very stable, averaging just below a score of 3 ('would generally still vote'), and there are no substantial differences between both regions. In Flanders and in Wallonia, the willingness to vote if mandatory voting would be replaced by voluntary voting is largely similar. Arguably, in the past ten years, the willingness to vote slightly increased – specifically, during the elections of 2014 and 2019.


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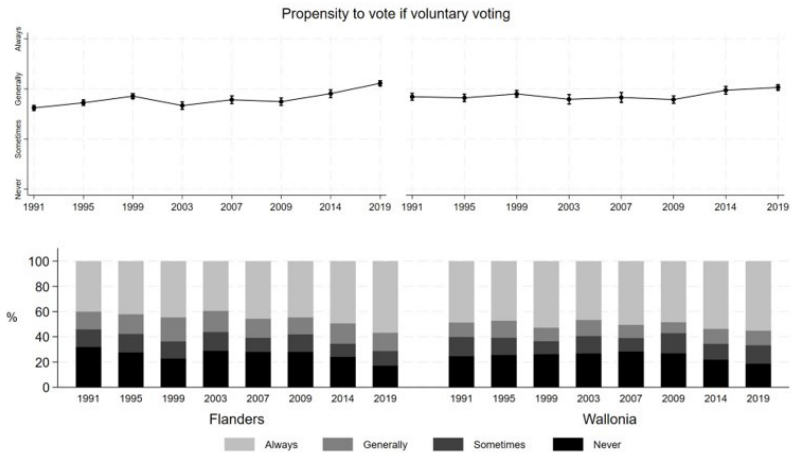
***Figure 1 Development of willingness to vote if voting became voluntary***




*Line graphs on top present the mean score of willingness to vote if voting became voluntary (1-4 scale). The bars present the proportion of respondents for each answer category.*

*4.3 Independent Variables*

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

Both scales of ideological polarisation and affective polarisation follow the spread-of-scores calculation as proposed by Wagner (2021). While this measure was specifically designed for the calculation of affective polarisation, it also suits the calculation of ideological polarisation. As a matter of fact, the established measure of ideological polarisation as proposed by Dalton (2008) relied on a similar calculation. The spread-of-scores measure is particularly suited to measure polarisation within multiparty systems, as it acknowledges that voters can be sympathetic or ideologically close to more than one party. Theoretically, these

variables can range from 0 to 5, with values of 5 reflecting the most polarised citizens. It is calculated as follows:

$$\sqrt{\sum_{p=1}^{P} v_p(party\ LR_{ip} - \overline{party\ LR_i})^2}$$

Where *p* represents the particular party, *i* the respondent, $party\ LR_{ip}$ a respondent's left-right placement of a party, and $v_p$ the vote share of the particular party. For affective polarisation, *party LR* is simply replaced by the sympathy score towards the party. The mean left-right placement (or mean sympathy score for affective polarisation) should also be weighted according to the party size, which is done as follows:

$$\overline{party\ LR_i} = \sum_{p=1}^{P} (v_p * party\ LR_{ip})$$

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

In Figures 2 and 3, we show the average levels of ideological polarisation and affective polarisation for the years in which respective variables are included in the election study. The mean levels of ideological polarisation have been very stable over the past decades, ranging between more or less 2.2 and 2.5, which is rather average compared to other countries (Dalton, 2008). There are some noticeable, albeit small, differences between the regions: Flanders is more ideologically polarised, most likely due to the higher presence of (radical) right-wing parties such as N-VA and Vlaams Belang, whereas the only party in Wallonia that occupies a somewhat centre-right position is MR. Yet, although the level of affective polarisation is stable over the past decade, it is also slightly higher in Flanders than in Wallonia. This difference could result from the fact that affective polarisation can be predicted relatively well by ideological polarisation (van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022), with the populist radical right voters both receiving and giving relatively high levels of dislike towards other parties and voters (Harteveld, 2021).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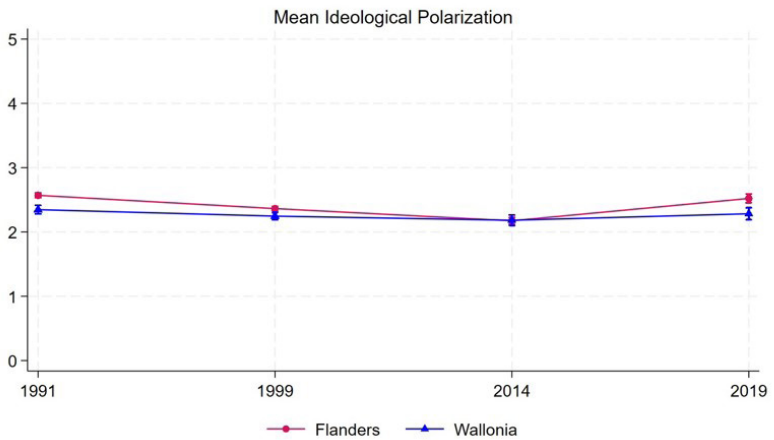
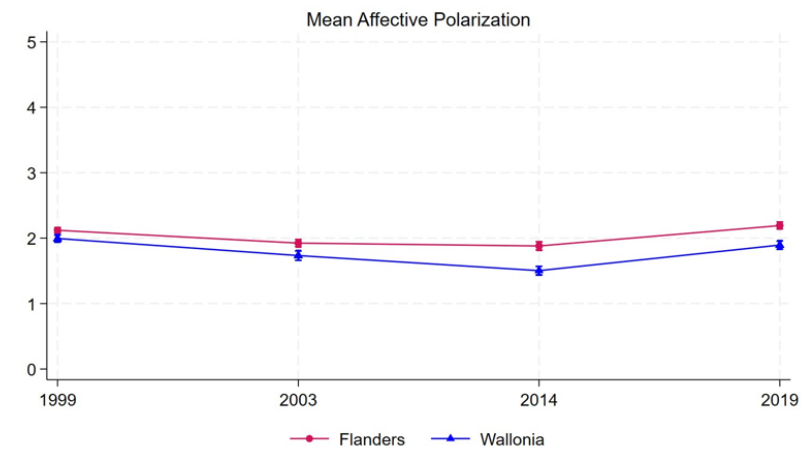
Furthermore, the levels of affective polarisation, which barely go above a value of 2, are comparatively rather low (Garzia et al., 2023; Wagner, 2021).

***Figure 2 Development of Ideological Polarisation***




*Markers depict the average level of ideological polarisation per region, including 95% confidence intervals.*

***Figure 3 Development of Affective Polarisation***




*Markers depict the average level of affective polarisation per region, including 95% confidence intervals.*

Finally, our models explaining willingness to vote control for several variables that are important for political behaviour and, more specifically, for individual-level

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

### *4.4 Methods*

We employ OLS regressions for each independent election year and each region separately. The variables for ideological polarisation and affective polarisation are included separately to avoid losses of observation due to item non-response. Since the main independent variables were asked in four elections, we present eight separate regression coefficients. Three of them – 1999, 2014 and 2019 – can be compared directly, given that these elections included both variables. Additionally, we also run regression models for the election studies of 1991 and 2003. The former includes the ideological polarisation variable, while the later offers another option to study the effect of affective polarisation. For reasons of readability, we present coefficient plots with the different election years such that the impact of the independent variables can be compared over time. Full regression tables can be found in the appendix. We standardise our independent variables around the mean, such that the coefficients represent the effect of one standard deviation (except for employment status [nominal] and gender [binary]).

## 5 Results

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

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


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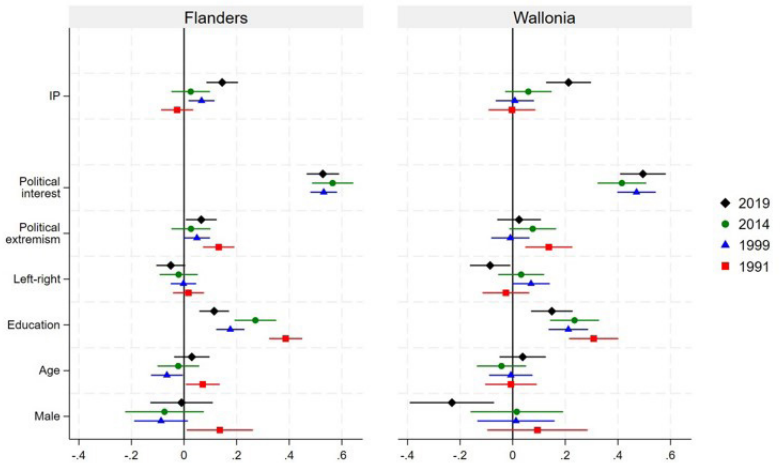
*Figure 4* *Effects of Ideological Polarisation on Willingness to Vote under Voluntary Voting*

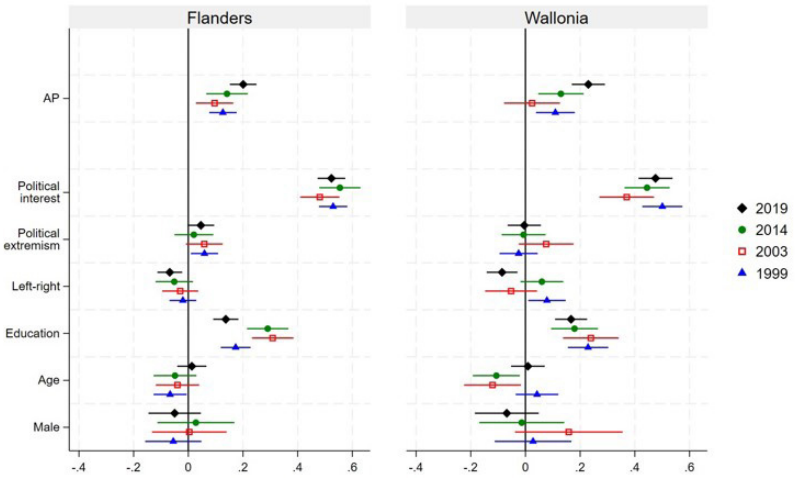



Our results show no significant difference between Flanders and Wallonia. That is, there are election(s) where increased ideological polarisation is significantly associated with increased willingness to vote under voluntary voting in both regions. Over time, we find that the effect of ideological polarisation is most evident in the last election of the dataset, 2019, in both regions. This could be the result of the particular developments during that election, with increased voting for radical parties both on the left and on the right. For example, radical right party Vlaams Belang increased its parliamentary representation with 18 seats, and the radical left PTB-PVDA also won 12 seats, while most mainstream parties lost seats. Still, we acknowledge that our measure captures the impact of ideological polarisation *between voters* and not *between elections*. As such, the nature of the relationship – as hypothesised – should remain the same. It is, however, possible that the rise of radical parties changed the distribution of ideological polarisation. For example, voters who perceived average ideological polarisation during previous elections could be perceiving stronger polarisation during the 2019 elections, yet their attitude towards voting under voluntary voting remained unchanged. If these voters were likely future voters, it could impact the relationship. Establishing such finding would require panel data, which are unfortunately not available. Yet, we still find some evidence that points in this direction: the standard deviation of ideological polarisation is notably higher in 2019 than in all other election years (1.23 vs. 0.83), but the standard deviation of the willingness to vote in a voluntary system question is stable around 1.18.

As the impact of ideological polarisation on voluntary voting is only marginal, we turn to the impact of affective polarisation. To recall, voters with higher levels of affective polarisation should display a higher intention to vote in future elections characterised by non-compulsory voting (H2). Similarly, we ran four separate

regression models for each election year, in both regions (however, the party [or voter] sympathy used to measure the affective polarisation variable is available for 2003 but not for 1991). Figure 5 presents the effects of affective polarisation on turnout by region.

*Figure 5* ***Effects of Affective Polarisation on Willingness to Vote under Voluntary Voting***




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

Consequently, the results suggest that the emotional mechanism that drives voters to vote in voluntary electoral systems plays a similar role in a system where voters are compelled to vote. Voters who are more emotionally invested in Belgian elections – for example, because they strongly like or dislike one of the parties – are more eager to vote. Apparently, the political culture of the country, where voting has become habitual through enforcement, has not altered the effect that emotions have on the willingness to vote. Given that this is the case for both regions, which show quite strong differences in the party offer, it makes us confident that these results are robust. They also indicate that if Belgium were to make voting voluntary,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the first elections should witness some kind of a 'polarisation participation gap'. Whether this holds in the long term is difficult to say through our research design, but the recently unfolding evidence on the impact of affective polarisation on turnout in voluntary systems (Ellger, 2023; Harteveld & Wagner, 2022) suggests that it would. We again find that the 2019 election year has a stronger impact on the willingness to vote than before, as we also did for ideological polarisation. While the same aforementioned caveats exist about the nature of the relationship, we do again find that the standard deviation of the affective polarisation increases visibly. Whether the nature of this relationship indeed changes more structurally because of the influence of fringe parties should be revealed by future Belgian election studies.

Finally, we take a closer look at the control variables. Contemporary debates on compulsory voting often focus on the type of voters who would be affected by the abolishment (or introduction) of such a system, yet they remain largely theoretical (Lijphart, 1997; for an overview of the arguments in favour and against compulsory voting, see Birch, 2009). Therefore, we also assess the effects of control variables on the willingness to vote under a voluntary voting system based on three decades of data. To increase the number of observations, we run regressions for each election year with only the control variables and the same dependent variable in Appendix B.5.

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

Furthermore, researchers have often argued that older people are more likely to vote than younger citizens (Bhatti et al., 2012), while a gender gap in voting points towards the trend of a higher likelihood of voting among men than among women (Franklin, 2004). In fact, recently Dassonneville et al. (2023) found that Belgian females and younger citizens are less likely to vote if voting is not compulsory anymore. In our dataset, we fail to find these effects. For age, we find both positive and negative coefficients in the elections under study, but most of them are not statistically significant. For gender, our coefficient represents the effect of being male and should thus be positive. Again, most of our coefficients are statistically insignificant, which is in line with more recent research arguing that the gender gap in voting is decreasing or even disappeared (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Kostelka et al., 2019).

Still, we must stress that our results are somewhat more nuanced: the null effects of gender are driven by the inclusion of political interest. If we exclude political interest in the regressions, we indeed find that males are more likely to

turn out during voluntary elections. This appeals to the difference in political interest that we find between both genders in our dataset, with males being significantly more politically interested. At the same time, these results also suggest that if a male and a female have the same level of political interest, they should not display significantly different attitudes in turnout intention. Notably, the other variables display the similar association (size) when political interest is excluded, also in bivariate regressions.

## 6 Robustness Checks

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

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

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

Finally, we run the joint models using multiple imputations for the missing values of ideological polarisation and affective polarisation. This leaves us with the same models, but with the number of observations that reflect the number of observations after list-wise deletion of respondents with a missing value for employment, education, left-right placement, political extremism, and/or political interest. We impute $m$ = 20 for every missing value in the variables of affective polarisation, ideological polarisation, or both and thus generate 20 possible values


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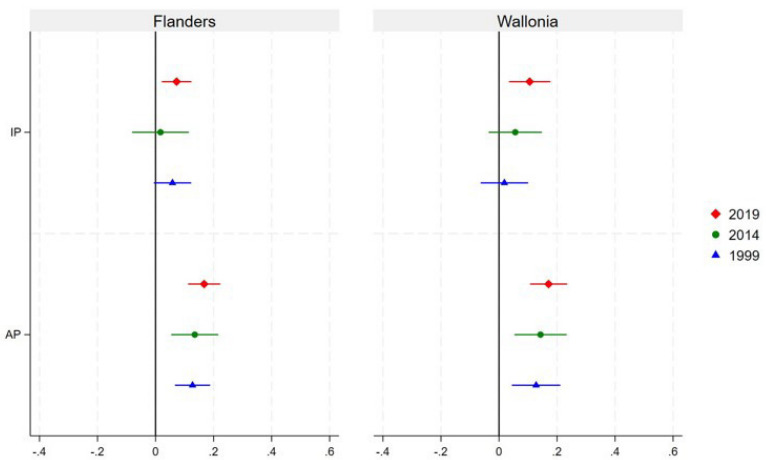
for each missing value in either of the variables (this is well above the conventional amount of imputations; see Rubin, 1987). We report these results in Figure 6 (full regression tables in Appendix B.6). For ideological polarisation, we again only detect the loss of significance in Flanders in 1999 (again not completely vanishing with $p = 0.099$). However, we do not observe the collapse of significance for affective polarisation in Wallonia in 1999 and 2014 using multiple imputation; the coefficients remain positive and strongly significant ($p < 0.01$). These results support our interpretation that the significance loss is largely due to a drop of observations across models. All in all, we conclude that the original models are robust, except for the result of ideological polarisation in Flanders in 1999.

***Figure 6*** ***Effects of Affective Polarisation and Ideological Polarisation on Willingness to Vote under Voluntary Voting with Multiple Imputations***




## 7 Conclusion

Political polarisation among voters, either ideologically or affectively, has been consistently found to stimulate voter turnout (Béjar et al., 2020; Dalton, 2008; Ellger, 2023; Harteveld, 2021; Hobolt & Hoerner, 2020; Phillips, 2024; Wessels & Schmitt, 2008). Still, most of this evidence has been found in systems with voluntary voting. Given that compulsory voting has the potential to alter political behaviour and attitudes (Chapman, 2019; Feitosa et al., 2020; Quintelier et al., 2011; Singh, 2023), we studied whether the polarisation-turnout mechanism also holds in the context of compulsory voting in Belgium.

Through an analysis of three decades of election studies in Belgium, we find that the willingness to vote – captured through a question about hypothetical future voting behaviour under voluntary voting – is mainly driven by affective polarisation rather than ideological polarisation. Belgian voters who are more

affectively polarised show a higher willingness to vote in future elections, even when these would be non-compulsory. We find that these positive effects are strongly significant and robust across both linguistic regions. Ideological polarisation, the way in which parties are perceived to be ideologically distinct from each other, only plays a marginal role (consistent positive effects, which are statistically insignificant in most of the elections under study).

Our findings make a threefold contribution. First, we contribute to the literature on the correlates of voter turnout (Frank & Martínez i Coma, 2023; Smets & Van Ham, 2013), which has extensively studied how polarisation contributes to turnout (Béjar et al., 2020; Dalton, 2008; Harteveld & Wagner, 2022; Hobolt & Hoerner, 2020; Wessels & Schmitt, 2008) but often overlooked this relationship in compulsory voting systems. In these systems, we show that affective polarisation matters. The mechanism that drives turnout through affective polarisation applies in a similar way as in non-compulsory voting systems. At the same time, the effect of ideological polarisation appears to be absent in such a context. Additional research in other countries with compulsory voting is needed to uphold these mechanisms even further. Second, we add to the literature on compulsory voting (Birch, 2009; Singh, 2021), which often remains theoretical in nature and has mainly analysed the common sociodemographic turnout gaps when compulsory voting is lifted rather than the effect of polarisation (Gallego, 2010; Lijphart, 1997; Singh, 2015; Söderlund et al., 2011). Finally, we contribute to the booming literature on the political consequences of affective polarisation in multiparty systems (Harteveld & Wagner, 2022; Torcal & Carty, 2022; Wagner, 2021; Ward & Tavits, 2019) and show that regardless of its often-argued negative consequences it actually has the potential to foster political participation.

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

## Data availability

The replication material can be found at OSF via the following link: https://osf.io/8uqys/?view_only=7ff818b7f54e42a788995bea4ed82df6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## Notes

1 Panel surveys of 2009 (Deschouwer et al., 2009); panel of 2014 (Deschouwer et al., 2014); panel of 2019 (Walgrave et al., 2022).
2 Specifically, the question asks respondents: "If voting for parliament was no longer obligatory in Belgium, would you then always, generally, sometimes, or never vote or don't you know for certain?"
3 The percentage of voters who gave the 'don't know' option is only somewhat considerable in 1991, with around 10% in both regions. In the three following election studies, the percentages are around 5 or even lower.
4 Note that, for reasons of readability, we do not include the employment dummies. Generally, we find that citizens who are unemployed are less likely to vote in future non-compulsory elections than employed citizens or citizens who are not part of the labour force. Also note that we cannot control for political interest in 1991 because the variable was not included in the survey.

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# Gendered Divides: Exploring How Politicians' Gender Intersects with Vertical Affective Polarisation

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**Abstract**

*This article investigates the prevalence of vertical affective polarisation in the multi-party and consociational context of Flanders (Belgium) and explores how politicians' gender intersects with vertical affective polarisation. More specifically, we test whether gender dissimilarity (voter and politician being of opposite gender) and/or gender-based stereotyping (female and male politicians taking positions on issues they are stereotypically not associated with) temper or reinforce vertical affective polarisation. Our results, based on an online survey experiment conducted among a representative sample of the general population in Flanders (Belgium), show that respondents' level of disagreement with politicians' policy positions significantly influences their evaluation of politicians' general likability and psychological traits. Contrary to our expectations, however, the relationship between ideological disagreement and vertical affective polarisation is not moderated by politicians' gender. By delving into the relationship between vertical affective polarisation, disagreement and gender, this study provides valuable insights into the interplay between identity, disagreement and affective divide.*

**Keywords:** affective polarisation, gender, dissimilarity, stereotyping, experiments.

## 1 Introduction

Recent developments demonstrate that polarisation is gripping established democracies across the globe. Both electoral polarisation (i.e. the electoral rise of anti-system parties) (Casal Bértoa & Rama, 2021), party system or ideological polarisation (i.e. the increased distance in policy positions between parties) (Dalton, 2021) and affective polarisation (i.e. negative animosity between other-minded voters and politicians) (Reiljan, 2020) appear to be on the rise. Polarisation is widely recognised as a significant challenge to contemporary democracies (Somer & McCoy, 2018), with potential far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the political realm and impact society as a whole (McConnell et al., 2018).

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This article focuses on affective polarisation. Although this phenomenon was initially described in the US context as negative feelings between Democrats and Republicans (Iyengar et al., 2012), recent studies have shown that affective polarisation also occurs in multi-party contexts in European countries (Harteveld, 2021; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021). The core of this concept is that citizens feel sympathy towards partisan in-groups and antagonism towards partisan out-groups (Wagner, 2021). Although most studies concentrate on how citizens feel about other-minded citizens (i.e. horizontal affective polarisation) (Reiljan, 2020; van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022; Wagner, 2021), these negative feelings could also be developed against parties in general and against politicians of particular parties (i.e. vertical affective polarisation). In this article, we focus on the prevalence of vertical affective polarisation in a least-likely case (i.e. the multi-party and consociational context of Belgium; Bernaerts et al., 2022). Furthermore, we bring in two new elements, both related to the role of individuating information in the assessment of politicians (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). Individuating information includes factors or details unique to a specific individual, such as specific personality traits, socio-demographic characteristics or political/policy positions. We focus on politicians' gender, which is not only a demographic characteristic but also carries a significant social and psychological weight that can impact individuals' attitudes and interactions. As such, politicians' gender potentially moderates the relationship between (ideological) disagreement and affective polarisation in two different respects.

A first element that we test is whether gender dissimilarity exacerbates the perception of 'out-group' belonging and the negative feelings associated with it. Building on insights from Social Categorisation Theory (Turner, 1987) and the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner et al., 1993), we investigate whether voters have more negative feelings towards other-minded politicians of the opposite gender. We hypothesise that gender functions as a superordinate identity that is shared and unites people even if they disagree with each other. Conversely, belonging to a different gender category could exacerbate negative feelings, as socio-demographic dissimilarity adds to dissimilarity based on policy disagreement.

A second and alternative expectation is that gender stereotyping reinforces affective polarisation. The literature on gender stereotyping points to a number of stereotypical patterns in which female politicians are more likely to be perceived as competent in 'soft' issues linked to the traditional domain of the family, such as education, healthcare and helping the poor. Men, on the other hand, would do a better job with hard issues, such as the military, foreign trade and taxes (see, for example, Devroe & Wauters, 2018; Dolan, 2014; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). Building on the literature on motivated gender stereotyping (Kundra & Sinclair, 1999), we investigate whether voters have more negative feelings towards other-minded politicians taking stances on issues for which politicians with a specific gender are generally perceived to be less competent. The reasoning here is that perceived incompetence adds to negative feelings based on policy disagreement.

In sum, we have three research questions:

RQ1: Do voters evaluate the psychological traits[1] of politicians they do not agree with as more negative in a consensus democracy?

RQ2: Is this effect moderated by (the difference in) the gender of the politician and the voter?

RQ3: Is this effect moderated by the link between the gender of the politician and the nature of the policy issue on which the politician takes a stance?

We find that, even in a multi-party consociational political system as Belgium, voters evaluate psychological traits of politicians they disagree with more negatively compared to politicians whose views they share. This indicates that ideological disagreement is a powerful force in shaping voters' perceptions. Contrary to our expectations, the relationship between ideological disagreement and vertical affective polarisation is not moderated by politicians' gender, and the prevalence of vertical affective polarisation is, as such, not reinforced by gender dissimilarity or gender stereotyping.

## 2 Affective Polarisation

Affective polarisation, that is, the negative animosity between other-minded voters and/or politicians, or the extent to which partisans hold positive feelings towards their own party (the in-group) and dislike politicians and voters of other parties (the out-group), is considered by several authors to be increasingly prevalent in many contemporary Western societies (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Reiljan, 2020; but see Fiorina et al., 2008, for a more critical account). A key characteristic of affective polarisation is the perception of difference rather than actual difference. People who identify with particular groups often believe that out-group members are radically different from themselves and that in-group members are highly similar, despite this not necessarily being the case (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016). Affective polarisation is driven by different factors. First, while the foundational Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1979) does not specifically address partisanship and ideological identity, subsequent political science literature has extended the theory to include them as a form of social identity (Huddy, 2001). This perspective posits that partisanship and ideological identity evoke positive feelings towards the in-group and negative emotions towards the out-group (Bolsen & Thornton, 2021; Iyengar et al., 2012). As such, supporting a party is not just a choice confined to the political sphere; it also has an impact on all walks of life (Mason, 2015). A second factor that causes affective polarisation is the fact that politicians and parties take more extremist ideological positions than before. Put differently, party system or ideological polarisation is thought to stimulate affective polarisation: when actual and perceived ideological distances between parties are large, affective polarisation tends to be higher (Reiljan, 2020; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016).[2] A third factor that is suggested is 'social sorting', that is, the correspondence of partisan division lines with existing social cleavages (Reiljan, 2020; Robison & Moskowitz, 2019; Wagner, 2021). Ethnic, religious or other cleavages that have existed in societies for many decades and that run parallel with partisan cleavages could strengthen social identity feelings and the corresponding positive and negative feelings.


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Previous research, furthermore, highlights that institutional features of political systems can attenuate affective polarisation. More in particular, European countries with consensus institutions (including PR electoral systems and multi-party coalitions) are found to have lower levels of polarisation (Bernaerts et al., 2022). However, even in these countries where electoral volatility is on the rise (Dassonneville, 2018), where simultaneously holding multiple partisan identities is possible (Wagner, 2021) and where partisanship has always been a contested concept because of its lack of stability and predictive power (Bankert et al., 2017), there is considerable evidence to suggest that affective polarisation is becoming increasingly prevalent (Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021; Westwood et al., 2018).

The burgeoning field of research on affective polarisation has primarily focused on horizontal aspects of polarisation. As such, vertical affective polarisation currently remains underexposed, especially in research conducted in consensus democracies (van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022; Wagner, 2021). Our first aim is, therefore, to investigate the prevalence of vertical affective polarisation in the Belgian context, a textbook example of a consensus democracy (RQ1). More in particular, we will assess whether voters associate negative character traits with politicians they disagree with. In multi-party systems in Europe, partisan identities are less strong than in the US and the out-group party is generally not a single party but all parties except the preferred one (Wagner, 2021). This makes the operationalisation of affective polarisation more difficult in such contexts. As a consequence, some scholars argue to use the broader concept of 'ideological identity' rather than 'partisan identity' as a source of affective polarisation (Bantel, 2023; Wagner, 2021). That is the logic we also follow in this article. We use the level of ideological disagreement as a proxy to capture ideological identity. In other words, we conceptualise other-minded politicians as politicians with whom one disagrees in ideological terms, rather than politicians from any other party. The level of disagreement indicates how far away this politician is from one's own ideas. We expect that when voters agree with a candidate or politician, they tend to give that person positive evaluations without any further critical engagement and, vice versa, for candidates they disagree with. These evaluations, and hence also the level of affective polarisation, will be measured as an assessment of the psychological characteristics of politicians (see later).

H1: Voters will evaluate the psychological traits of Belgian politicians presenting policy positions they disagree with as more negative compared to politicians presenting policy positions they agree with.

## 3 The Moderating Effect of Politicians' Gender

The second aim of this article is to investigate whether the relationship between ideological disagreement and vertical affective polarisation (our dependent variable measured by means of evaluations of politicians' personality traits; see later) is moderated by politicians' gender, thereby contributing to the growing scholarship on gender and affective polarisation (Klar, 2018; Ondercin & Lizotte, 2021). This can be linked to discussions about the role of individuating information,

encompassing unique factors or characteristics specific to individuals, such as particular personality traits, socio-demographic characteristics or political/policy positions (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). In reality, voters' evaluations of politicians are likely to reflect both ideological and biographic sources of information (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016). Indeed, previous research identifies a wide range of personal factors such as characteristic traits (Druckman, 2004; Funk, 1997) and stereotypes based on candidates' ethnicity (Jacobsmeier, 2014; Van Trappen et al., 2020), gender (Devroe & Wauters, 2018; Dolan, 2014; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993) and religion (Bolce & De Maio, 1999; McDermott, 2009) that influence voters' evaluations of politicians. Given this context, when voters are presented with individuating information about candidates, the relative significance of policy (dis) agreement may either diminish or intensify, leading to reduced or increased levels of vertical affective polarisation, respectively. Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley (2021) argue, in this regard, that affective polarisation can also stem from other non-partisan identities that divide the world into in-groups and out-groups, such as ethnicity, religion or opinion-based groups. Furthermore, Rogowski and Sutherland (2016) found that adding biographical information to a politician's profile can mitigate affective polarisation as politicians with divergent opinions were evaluated less negatively when more biographical background information was provided. However, we hypothesise that the nature of the biographical information is crucial: while general or biographical details that signal similarity may improve evaluations, specific negative information or information that emphasises differences may exacerbate negative feelings. We centre our attention on politicians' gender with the aim of uncovering whether the relationship between (ideological) disagreement and voters' evaluation of the psychological traits of politicians is moderated by gender dissimilarity (RQ2) and/or gender stereotyping (RQ3). We hypothesise that (ideological) disagreement has more severe consequences in terms of negative feelings towards a politician when specific negative information is available. This could either be information on characteristics of a politician that underscores differences with the evaluator (gender dissimilarity) or information aligning with stereotypes about particular social groups that undermines favourable evaluations of that politician (gender stereotypes).

More specifically, for the former reasoning, we expect that gender dissimilarity reinforces the prevalence of affective polarisation. This can be linked to Social Categorisation Theory highlighting that people tend to view individuals as belonging to distinct social categories based on their salient attributes, such as gender, ethnicity and age (Turner, 1987). These social categories influence our sense of connection with, or alienation from, others because people are likely to take into account whether they belong to the same social category as someone they are evaluating. In-group members are generally assumed to be more similar to the perceiver in terms of attitudes, values and personality. As similarity is known to breed familiarity and more positive evaluations (Sears, 1983), individuals tend to have more favourable evaluations of in-group members than of out-group members (Bauer, 2015).

The Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner et al., 1993), furthermore, states that highly salient superordinate identity categories, such as gender, can


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potentially reduce intergroup bias when two out-group members belong to the same superordinate in-group (or the other way around when out-group members also belong to the superordinate out-group). Not all identity characteristics are equally strong to temper other differences, however. Brewer (1991) argues that identity groups who simultaneously provide a sense of belonging and a sense of distinctiveness have the greatest potential to function as superordinate identity moderating other differences. Additionally, for a superordinate identity to effectively temper other differences, individuals must (1) consider themselves to be members of a specific group, (2) they need to have a common understanding of what it means to be part of this group and (3) the identity category must be salient. Gender identity, when cohesive and salient, can function in this way. However, Klar (2018) demonstrated that, in the US, gender identity fails to act as a unifying superordinate category because Republicans and Democrats differ in their conceptions of gender, respectively adopting a 'traditional' and a more 'egalitarian' view on the role of women. As a result, gender identity did not mitigate distrust towards out-group members and, in some cases, exacerbated polarisation.

Gender identity becomes salient primarily in contexts where gender inequality is more pronounced. In such environments, gender identity can evoke strong identification and a sense of solidarity among individuals (e.g. "We must unite as women against this injustice"). This heightened salience can interfere with affective polarisation, as gender identity becomes more central in individuals' evaluations of others in these cases. Relatedly, the gender affinity effect in voting behaviour highlights how voters are more likely to support candidates of the same gender, demonstrating the significance of gender identity in shaping political preferences (Sanbonmatsu, 2002).

In regions such as Flanders (Belgium), where there is a broad societal consensus on women holding prominent positions in politics and higher levels of gender equality (see later), gender identity may be less salient. As a result, the moderating effect of gender on affective polarisation may be less pronounced. Despite this overall gender-neutral environment in Flanders, we do acknowledge that the cohesiveness of gender identity, as exemplified by the gender affinity effect (Marien et al., 2017), still exists to some extent. This makes it plausible that gender may function as a moderating variable in the relationship between policy preferences and voter aversion, potentially reducing negative feelings towards politicians of the same gender.

Based on these arguments, we propose that when voters disagree with politicians of the same gender, negative feelings will be tempered. Conversely, when voters find themselves in disagreement with politicians of the opposite gender, these politicians will be categorised as belonging to a (perceived) 'double out-group', marked by differences not only in policy positions but also in gender. This dual distinction has the potential to amplify intergroup bias, consequently leading to a more negative evaluation of individuals associated with this 'double out-group'. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H2: Voters will evaluate the psychological traits of politicians of the opposite gender they do not agree with more negatively compared to politicians of the same gender they disagree with.

Yet, there is also another theoretical reasoning possible, which is linked to gender stereotyping and the nature of policy issues. Issue competence stereotypes, that is, the different expectations among voters about the types of issues handled well by male and female politicians, have proved to be the most consistent form of political gender stereotyping (see, for example, Dolan, 2014; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). Although there is some variation over time and across contexts, female politicians are generally more likely to be perceived as competent in soft-policy issues linked to the traditional domain of the family, such as education, healthcare and helping the poor, whereas men would do a better job with hard-policy issues, such as military spending, foreign trade, agriculture and taxes.

When voters do not agree with the policy positions presented by a politician and when, on top of that, voters perceive some kind of incongruity between politicians' gender and the nature of the policy issues for which they present their opinions, this might result in the activation of stereotypes (Kunda & Thagard, 1996) and, hence, lead to a more severe negative evaluation of (the characteristic traits associated with) that politician. For female politicians, the violation of the prescriptive aspects of gender stereotypes is higher when they present policy positions dealing with topics close to the public sphere, such as the economy or national defence, compared to positions where they engage with topics close to the private sphere, such as childcare and education (Burrell, 1995). This can also be linked to Motivated Gender Stereotype Theory (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Kundra & Sinclair, 1999) arguing that individuals will only use feminine/masculine stereotypes to negatively judge female/male politicians when they perceive a conflict or disagreement with that particular woman or man.

Based on these arguments, we expect that:

H3a: Voters will evaluate the psychological traits of politicians they do not agree with more negatively when female candidates proclaim policy positions for hard-policy topics compared to male politicians proclaiming similar policy positions

H3b: Voters will evaluate the psychological traits of politicians they do not agree with more negatively when male candidates proclaim policy positions for soft-policy topics compared to female politicians proclaiming similar policy positions

## 4 Methodology

This study is conducted in Flanders, the largest region of Belgium. Belgium has a number of characteristics that should in principle temper the prevalence of affective polarisation (especially compared to the US) and is therefore a least-likely case to find affective polarisation. Electoral volatility is rising in recent years making partisanship a fuzzy concept (Dassonneville, 2018), Belgium's list PR system allows the parliamentary representation of many parties and urges these parties to form coalition governments (Timmermans, 2017), and the country has a long history of consociational decision-making according to which elites try to find compromises between different societal groups (Lijphart, 1969). Previous research indicates that countries with these kinds of consensus institutions


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(including PR electoral systems and multi-party coalitions) have lower levels of polarisation (Bernaerts et al., 2022). Also for the effect of gender as moderating variable (RQ2 and RQ3), Flanders is a least-likely case, as the number of female MPs is high in international-comparative perspective (IPU, 2021) and women also occupy prominent positions in governments on all policy levels. As Flemish voters have been extensively exposed to the presence of women in top political positions, the presence of stereotyping patterns should in principle be tempered.

In order to test our hypotheses, an online survey experiment was designed in which hypothetical politicians were presented to respondents in written messages in which their gender, some biographical information and their policy position on a number of issues were included. Our study used a 2 × 2 × 3 mixed complete block design. The politician's gender (male vs. female) and the policy position (outspoken leftist or outspoken rightist) were manipulated as between-group factors. Following Krook and O'Brien (2012), three different policy issues were manipulated as within-groups factor to capture issue competence stereotypes: one topic that is generally perceived as being soft policy (childcare), one hard-policy topic (defence) and one neutral topic (climate).[3]

We decided not to offer party labels to the respondents in order to fully capture the effect of ideological disagreement. This might, on the one hand, lower the social identity effect as it is not entirely clear to which party the presented politician belongs, leading to lower levels of affective polarisation. On the other hand, Lelkes (2021) demonstrated that (extremist) political positions have a larger effect on affective polarisation than the party label, which would lead to the expectation that polarisation increases when only ideological positions are presented. By offering respectively an outspoken leftist and rightist profile, we also connect to the reasoning of Wagner (2021), who argues that affective polarisation in multi-party settings should be defined and assessed as the extent to which politics is seen as divided into two distinct camps, each of which may consist of one or more parties. In the US context, research on affective polarisation generally assumed the existence of positive in-group identification towards a single party, but this is not appropriate for multi-party contexts. By grouping politicians according to 'ideological camp' rather than specific party labels, we aim to reflect this broader conceptualisation and acknowledge that voters may use ideological heuristics to categorise politicians as in-group or out-group members.

Respondents were randomly assigned to three different treatments in the experimental design. After each text message, they were asked to complete a list of questions about the presented politician and his or her policy position, before continuing to the next profile. The order of the issue domains was randomised in order to control for learning or order effects. There was also a random variation of male and female politicians and of outspoken leftist or rightist politicians.

The presented stimuli included several elements: a written message, including the politician's policy position, and a facial silhouette of the presented politician. The text messages were outspoken rightist or leftist and were based on a mix of the party programmes of the Flemish rightist parties (Open VLD, N-VA and Vlaams Belang) and the Flemish leftist parties (sp.a, Groen and PVDA).[4] As physical appearance also impacts voters' perceptions (Lammers et al., 2009) and names can

evoke certain prejudices, we decided not to include pictures or names and opted for a visual presentation of the gender cue by means of facial silhouettes. In all other respects, speeches and questionnaires were identical in order to keep hidden the intention of our study. An example of the presented profiles and a translation of the different text messages can be found in the Appendix.

Manipulation checks were included to verify whether respondents were able to correctly answer questions about the politician and the content of the message. All respondents had to answer a question about the sex of the presented politician after the first treatment. Respondents who were not able to correctly answer this question could not further complete the questionnaire, and their answers were not taken into account for the data analysis.[5] In order to control for the possible intervening effect of respondents' characteristics, respondents were randomly assigned to one of the different treatments, and comparisons were made between experimental groups. As there were no significant differences on respondents' background variables (age, gender or level of education) across the treatments, we can be confident that the random assignment worked as intended.

The experiment was conducted in February 2020 among a sample of the general Flemish population. Respondents were drawn from Bilendi's internet-based access panel, which is the largest online panel in Flanders with about 150,000 potential respondents.[6] An invitation to participate was sent to 3,891 respondents. 2,723 of them actually received and read[7] the invitation and 966 agreed to participate. After omitting respondents who could not correctly answer the question about the sex of the first presented candidate (see above), we retained 605 participants,[8] which is a response rate of about 22%. As each respondent had to assess three vignettes, we have a total number of observations of 1,084. In order to avoid post-treatment biases (Montgomery et al., 2018), no additional categories of respondents were excluded from this sample.[9] A description of the basic characteristics of the respondents can be found in the Appendix (see Table A.1).

### *4.1 Dependent Variables*

The question arises how affective polarisation can be operationalised in empirical research at the individual level. Druckman and Levendusky (2019) distinguish four ways to measure affective polarisation in surveys: (1) a thermometer rating how warm respondents feel about particular parties, politicians or party voters (Robison & Moskowitz, 2019); (2) assessing how well particular psychological traits are applicable to particular parties, politicians or party voters; (3) indicating how much trust respondents have in particular parties, politicians or party voters (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019); and (4) measuring social distance by assessing how comfortable one feels with people from another party as a friend, neighbour or as someone who marries their child, which is called the social distance or Bogardus Scale (Bogardus, 1933; Iyengar et al., 2012).

We link here to the second and third approach, that is, assessing psychological traits of politicians (including their level of trustworthiness) in order to grasp the level of affective polarisation. Many studies focus on psychological traits as explanatory factors to measure higher or lower levels of affective polarisation (Luttig, 2017; Rice et al., 2021), but only a few studies use the evaluation of


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politicians' psychological traits to measure affective polarisation. Most notably, Iyengar et al. (2012), who coined the term 'affective polarisation', distinguish between positive traits, such as patriotism, intelligence and honesty, and negative traits such as hypocrisy, selfishness and meanness. The score on negative traits and explicit dislikes listed towards the opposing party is taken as an indicator for affective polarisation in their study. A similar approach is adopted by Garrett et al. (2014) and Hobolt et al. (2021). They argue that voters are more critical towards acts of politicians from the opposing side and attribute more blame to them for unpopular decisions. As a consequence, voters will rate politicians from the opposing side lower on psychological characteristics, resulting in more negative feelings towards them.

After each presented politician, our respondents were asked to evaluate the politician in terms of perceived general competence, and they had to indicate how applicable a range of psychological characteristics were to the presented politician (on a fully labelled 7-point scale ranging from 1 [very inapplicable] to 7 [very applicable]). The following characteristics were included: ambitious, caring, flexible, hard, helpful, sensitive, soft, strong leader and trustworthy.[10] While some of these traits may carry a positive connotation, the evaluation scale allows respondents to express both positive and negative perceptions. Lower ratings on the scale (closer to 1) indicate that respondents perceive these traits as inapplicable or lacking in the politician, which captures negative evaluations of politicians' perceived psychological characteristics as an indicator of affective polarisation.

### *4.2 Independent and Moderator Variables*

Respondents' (dis)agreement with the presented policy positions was measured on a fully labelled 7-point scale ranging from 1 (very much disagreeing) to 7 (very much agreeing). This was recoded into a continuous variable ranging from 1 (very much agreeing) to 7 (very much disagreeing), with the purpose of allowing higher values indicating higher levels of disagreement. The politicians' policy position is a simple binary variable with the categories Outspoken Leftist (0) and Outspoken Rightist (1).

In order to capture gender (dis)similarity, we include a binary variable indicating whether the presented politician and the respondent have the same gender (0) or different genders (1). In order to analyse the effect of stereotypes, we run analyses on subsamples, based on the issue domain at stake – respectively, childcare (soft-policy issue; linked to female attributes), and defence (hard-policy issue; linked to male attributes).

### *4.3 Control Variables*

In the multivariate analyses presented below, we also include a series of socio-demographic and political control variables. Respondents' level of education was measured by the highest obtained degree: 1 = no degree, 2 = primary education, 3 = lower secondary education, 4 = higher secondary education, 5 = non-university higher education and 6 = university education. This was recoded in a binary variable: 'Lower Educated' (including categories 1, 2, 3 and 4) and 'Higher Educated' (including categories 5 and 6). A control variable was also included for the

ideological position of the respondents. Ideological positioning was measured by self-placement on a 7-point left-right scale ranging from very rightist (1) to very leftist (7). The gender variable for the respondents is a simple binary variable with the categories Male (0) and Female (1). Age (number of years) is a discrete variable. We also include the kind of issue (Defence or Childcare, with Climate as reference category) as a control variable in the aggregated analyses.

## 5 Results

This section is divided into two parts. The first section (5.1) focuses on the extent to which respondents' ideological disagreement with politicians' policy positions (independent variable) affects their evaluation of the psychological characteristics of these politicians (dependent variable). In Section 5.2, we present more in-depth explanatory analyses focusing on the potential moderating effect of gender dissimilarity and issue competence stereotyping.[11]

### *5.1 Respondents' Evaluation of Politicians' Psychological Characteristics*

A number of regression analyses with respondents' evaluation of the politicians' psychological characteristics and general competence to function in politics as main dependent variables were conducted (RQ1). These analyses were performed at the aggregated level, implying that the total number of observations increases to 1,815 (605 × 3) and that we also control for the nature of the policy issues in the regression models. All models were checked for multicollinearity by looking at the variance inflation factors (VIF), which never exceeded 1.20. The full regression models can be found in the Appendix (see Table A.2). To visualise how respondents' perceptions of the politicians' psychological characteristics and their general competence to function in politics vary according to respondents' level of disagreement with politicians' policy positions, marginal effect plots are presented in Figure 1.


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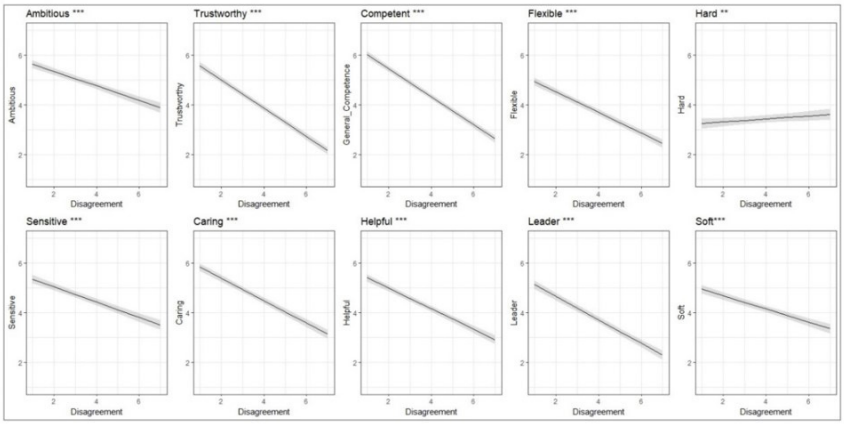
***Figure 1*** ***Marginal Effects of Disagreement on Affective Polarisation (Measured as the Perceived Psychological Characteristics of the Presented Politicians)***




*p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.001 – Plots based on regression models presented in Appendix (Table A.2)

The regression models in Table A.2 clearly show that respondents' level of disagreement with politicians' policy positions significantly affects their evaluation of all politicians' psychological characteristics and their perceived general competence to function in politics ($p < 0.001$). All but one of the coefficients are negative, implying that the more one disagrees with a politician's policy positions, the more negatively one perceives this politician in terms of ambition, trustworthiness, leadership, general competence, flexibility and so on, which is also confirmed in the marginal effect plots (Figure 1). For hardness, we find an inverse effect suggesting that the more respondents disagree with a politician's viewpoints, the harder this politician is perceived to be. This could be due to the fact that being hard is not considered to be a positive characteristic in general, hereby thus also indicating respondents' dislike of politicians they disagree with. These findings clearly demonstrate patterns of vertical affective polarisation in the Belgian context, thereby confirming H1 stating that voters will associate negative traits with politicians they disagree with.

Looking at the other independent and control variables in the models (see Table A.2 in the Appendix), we see that they also play a significant role in shaping evaluations. However, disagreement is by far the variable with the strongest effect. Also for the ideological direction of politicians' policy positions (outspoken leftist vs. outspoken rightist), the nature of the issue domain discussed in the policy position (Defence, Childcare and Climate) and the ideological positioning of the respondents, statistically significant effects could be uncovered for some characteristics. Gender dissimilarity seems to matter little. Being of a different gender only reaches statistical significance in the trustworthiness model, implying

that respondents consider politicians of the different gender as less trustworthy compared to politicians of the same gender (p = 0.012).

*5.2 The Moderating Effect of Gender Dissimilarity and Stereotyping*

In order to come to a better understanding of the moderating effect of gender dissimilarity on voters' evaluation of the characteristic traits of politicians they disagree with (RQ2), we ran a number of additional linear regression models including interactions between respondents' level of agreement and whether they are of the same gender as the presented politician. The full regression models can be found in the Appendix (see Table A.3). Looking at the interaction effects, we see that only (marginally) statistically significant results could be found for sensitive (p = 0.062), soft (p = 0.049), caring (p = 0.035) and helpful (p = 0.054), implying that respondents perceive politicians of the opposite gender with whom they disagree as less sensitive, soft, caring and helpful than politicians' of the same gender with whom they disagree. For the other psychological characteristics and perceived general competence, the interaction effects did not reach statistical significance. Looking at the other variables included in the models, disagreement again has a very strong (negative) statistically significant effect on respondents' evaluation of the psychological characteristics and perceived general competence of the presented politicians. Also for the nature of the issue domain (Defence, Childcare and Climate) statistically significant effects could be uncovered.

However, interpreting the results based on regression coefficients alone tells only one part of the story. Therefore, predicted values were computed (see plots in Figures 2). As these predicted value plots show parallel lines with overlapping confidence intervals, the effects cannot be considered statistically significant, which leads us to reject H2: voters do not evaluate the psychological traits of politicians of the opposite gender they do not agree with more negatively compared to politicians of the same gender they disagree with.


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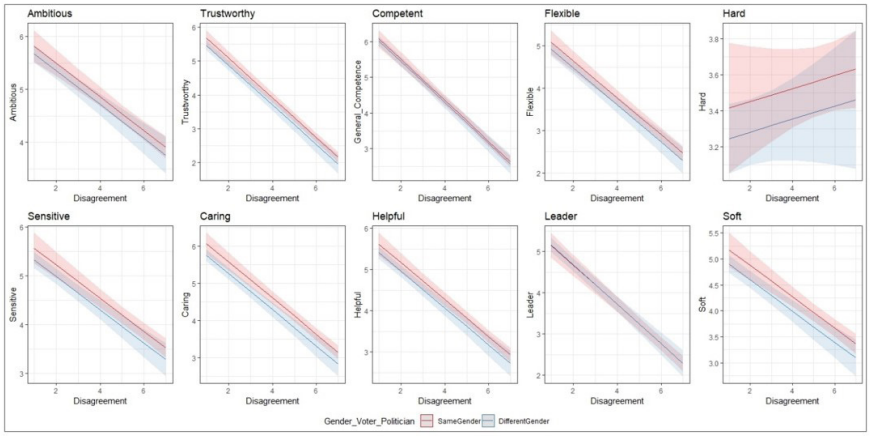
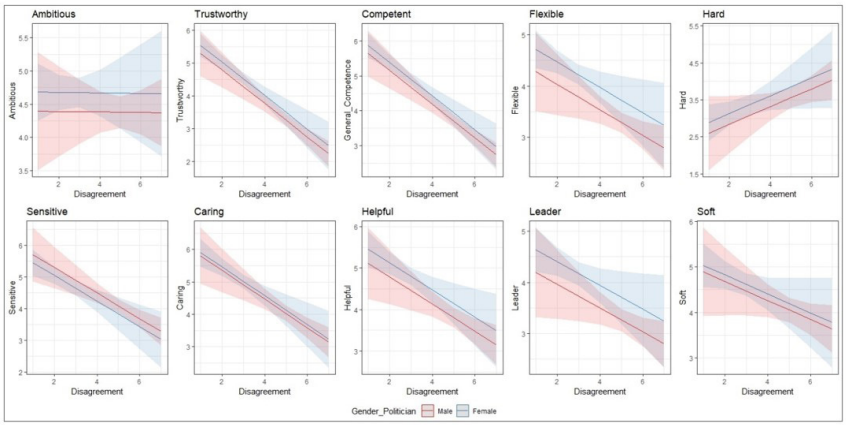
*Figure 2* ***Predicted Values for Perceived Psychological Characteristics – Gender Dissimilarity***




Note: All covariates were held at the mean – 95% Confidence Intervals.

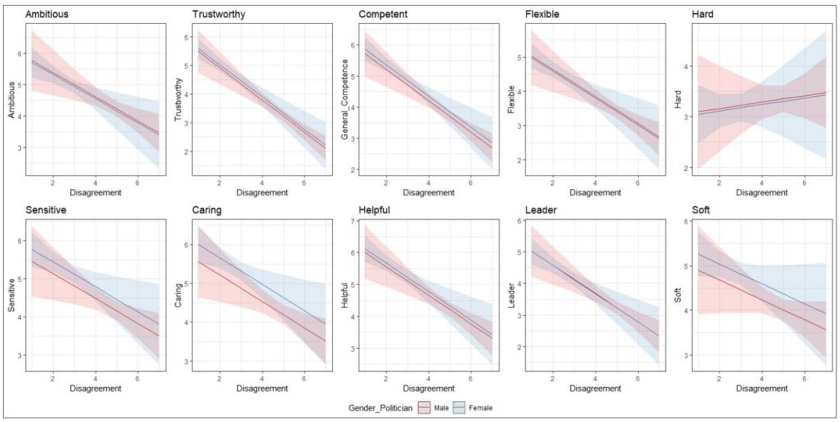
Furthermore, we ran a number of regression models to test whether voters more negatively evaluate female politicians proclaiming policy positions they disagree with for hard-policy topics compared to male politicians proclaiming similar policy positions (and vice versa for soft-policy topics) (RQ3). As the central focus of the analyses presented below concerns whether voters evaluate politicians they disagree with differently depending on the gender of the politician and the nature of the policy issue they are referring to, we rely on subsamples including only the results for the Defence (hard policy) and Childcare (soft policy) treatment. To grasp the (potential) moderating effect of politicians' gender, an interaction between respondents' level of agreement and the gender of politician was included in the models. The full regression models can be found in the Appendix (see Tables A.4 and A.5).[12] In general, these models mirror the previously presented models in the sense that disagreement has a very strong (negative) statistically significant effect on respondents' evaluation of the psychological characteristics and perceived general competence of the presented politicians. Also the ideological orientation of the presented policy positions (outspoken leftist vs. outspoken rightist) significantly adds to the models. When it comes to the interaction effects, they do not reach statistical significance in the models for Childcare. Looking at the models for Defence, a number of statistically significant interaction effects emerge, implying that respondents perceive female politicians presenting policy positions for Defence with which they disagree as less ambitious ($p = 0.039$), less flexible ($p = 0.037$) and less strong leaders ($p = 0.035$) compared to their male counterparts. However, as the predicted values plots presented in Figures 3 and 4 again show parallel lines and overlapping confidence intervals, we have to reject H3a and H3b.

*Figure 3 Predicted Values for Perceived Valence Characteristics – Defence*




Note: All covariates were held at the mean – 95% Confidence Intervals.

*Figure 4 Predicted Values for Perceived Valence Characteristics – Childcare*




Note: All covariates were held at the mean – 95% Confidence Intervals.

## 6 Conclusion

This article focused on the prevalence of vertical affective polarisation (i.e. between citizens and politicians) in the multi-party consociational context of Belgium, and the potential moderating role of politicians' gender in the relationship between (ideological) disagreement and vertical affective polarisation (operationalised through perceived personality traits). Our findings indicate that disagreement has a very strong and significant effect on voters' evaluations of politicians' psychological traits. These results are consistent with existing literature on affective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polarisation, which highlights that affective biases can distort perceptions of out-group members (Iyengar et al., 2019). Our results also contribute to the broader discussion on affective polarisation in multi-party systems. While much of the literature has focused on two-party systems like the US (Iyengar et al., 2012), our study, situated in the context of a multi-party democracy, aligns with recent research in multi-party systems (Harteveld, 2021; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021) which argues that affective polarisation can exist even when political identities are less clear-cut. Even in a least-likely case (a multi-party setting with rather low levels of partisanship and with a tradition of consociationalism and power-sharing), animosity between voters and other-minded politicians is outspoken. These findings highlight that disagreement is a powerful force in shaping voters' perceptions, even overshadowing political actors' other characteristics: when voters disagree with a politician, voters hold negative evaluations of that politician's psychological traits in any case, no matter what the gender of that politician is and whether or not it aligns with certain stereotypes. As such, disagreement seems to overtrump all other effects. This comparative perspective highlights the pervasiveness of affective polarisation across political systems and suggests that emotional biases may function similarly despite differences in party structures.

Furthermore, we did not find any significant moderating effect of politicians' gender on the relationship between (ideological) disagreement and vertical affective polarisation: voters do not evaluate other-minded politicians with a different gender (gender dissimilarity) more negatively than other-minded politicians with the same gender; nor do they do this for other-minded politicians defending a position on an issue for which they are stereotypically not considered competent (such as women taking positions on defence issues). The lack of a moderating effect could potentially be explained by the fact that gender identity is not salient enough in the Belgian 'gender-neutral' society (Meier, 2012) to yield large effects. This can be linked to the strong institutionalisation of gender in political life, with legally binding gender quotas (Devroe et al., 2020) and a high share of female representatives in parliament and government. Flemish voters have been intensively exposed in the last decades to female politicians taking up prominent roles, which makes gender less salient. An alternative explanation could be that, similar to the US (Klar, 2018), gender identity is conceived differently along party lines rendering the cohesiveness of this category not powerful enough to overtrump feelings based on differences in policy positions. The question thus arises whether the effect of dissimilarity would be larger when it comes to other socio-demographic identity categories related to, for example, ethnic origin, age or level of education.

We end by suggesting four avenues for further research. In the experimental study, two very outspoken profiles were presented to our respondents: a clearly rightist profile and a similar leftist profile, leading to strong affective reactions. Future research could usefully investigate whether the same affective reactions would appear when respondents are confronted with a more centrist profile. Disagreement is possible for this kind of profile, as well, but it remains to be seen whether it would result in the same negative evaluation and whether disagreement would also overtrump all other effects. Another suggestion for further research is

to operationalise affective polarisation in a different manner. We focused on the evaluation of personality traits of politicians, but there are other kinds of operationalisation possible, including thermometer scores or indicators capturing social distance (see also the 'Methodology' section in this article). Testing whether the same results would come forward when these other indicators are used could yield important new insights on how to effectively measure and operationalise affective polarisation. Third, we focused on gender as potential moderating factor, but (as suggested just above) there are other socio-demographic variables that could temper or reinforce negative feelings based on ideological disagreement. In addition, sociocultural factors, such as hobbies, cultural tastes and sports participation, could moderate the evaluation of politicians one disagrees with, which would be worth further exploring. Finally, there is the evident suggestion to study the moderating impact of gender in other contexts: either in other political systems that are less gender-equal than Belgium, or among specific subgroups in the population (such as old, lower-educated men, or radical right voters) for which gender constitutes an identity marker that could evoke negative feelings.

Taken together, these suggestions for further research could help provide a more coherent picture of the prevalence of vertical affective polarisation and potential moderating factors.

## Notes

1 Druckman and Levendusky (2019) distinguish four ways to measure affective polarisation in surveys (see later). We link here to their second and third approach by asking respondents to assess the psychological traits of politicians, including their level of trustworthiness. As such, we take negative evaluations of politicians' perceived psychological characteristics as an indicator of affective polarisation.

2 There is, however, an on-going debate over the extent of such ideological polarisation. We do not aim to take position in this debate, but we rather argue that while there are important connections between affective and ideological polarisation (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016), we consider them as theoretically and empirically distinct concepts. Hence, in this article, we focus exclusively on the affective dimension of polarisation (and not so much on ideological polarisation).

3 This categorisation is, furthermore, based on an extensive review of 16 international studies on the assignment of policy issues to men and women by three key actors, that is, (mass) media, voters and party elites, and we also checked the appointment of Flemish male and female ministers to these issue domains (Devroe & Wauters, 2018).

4 Pilot tests of the experimental design (among student samples) confirmed that the ideological orientation of the various policy positions was sufficiently clear and interpreted as outspoken leftist or rightist.

5 The incorrect answers are more or less equally spread over the different issue domains and over the different politician's profiles (male or female, outspoken leftist or rightist). The percentage of incorrect answers ranges from 0.80% to 6.00% for all 12 presented profiles. Because of the risk of a selection effect, we made a comparison between the final sample and respondents who could not answer the manipulation check correctly.


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These groups do not differ substantially on important aspects. There is a small selection bias in that our final sample is slightly younger, but there are no outspoken differences concerning gender and level of education.

6 Although it is difficult to determine how well the online panel members represent the general population, we tried to maximise their representativeness. We set several quotas: a hard quota for the gender of the respondents and soft quotas for their age and level of education. In addition, our sample was weighted for gender and age (weighting factors ranging from 0.79 to 1.14).

7 The other invitations were apparently sent to invalid or outdated email addresses.

8 A power analysis confirms that our analyses are sufficiently powered with this sample (see Appendix).

9 To test the robustness of our results, separate analyses (available upon request) were performed for those respondents (4) that could find out the purpose of the research and so-called speeder-respondents (51) who completed the survey faster than half the median completion time. However, the results of these analyses are in line with the results for the full sample, which adds to the robustness of our findings. Therefore, no additional respondents were excluded.

10 It is important to note that certain traits can have multiple interpretations. 'Ambitious', for example, might be seen positively as a sign of drive and determination by some respondents, while others might perceive it negatively as self-serving or overly aggressive. 'Soft' might be viewed positively as empathetic and considerate, or negatively as weak and indecisive. Similarly, 'hard' can be interpreted positively as strong and resolute, or negatively as harsh and unyielding.

11 In order to ensure the robustness of our findings, we conducted several additional analyses. First, we introduced disagreement as a dummy variable, confirming the results of our analyses when disagreement was treated as a continuous variable (see Tables A.7-A.10 in the Appendix). Second, we performed subsample analyses based on the respondents' political orientation (left or right; see Tables A.11-A.16 in the Appendix), gender (male or female; see Tables A.17-A.22 in the Appendix) and whether they agreed or not with the presented policy positions (see Tables A.23-A.28 in the Appendix). These analyses reaffirm our findings, showing little to no significant interaction effects.

12 For sake of clarity and transparency, we also provide the full regression table for Climate in the Appendix (see Table A.6).

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

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**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.*

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## 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?*


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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


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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


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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


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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 on 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


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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


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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


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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.


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- 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


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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.


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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.

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