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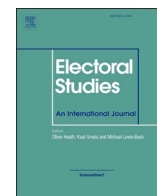
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Polarisation, identity and affect - conceptualising affective polarisation in multi-party systems

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to contribute to the nascent field of research on affective polarisation in liberal democracies by reflecting on the conceptual ambiguities as well as potentials inherent in the concept. Based on a systematic, critical review of 78 articles, I discuss three main ambiguities in the current literature on affective polarisation in multi-party democracies. Those concern firstly, the object of dislike; secondly, the nature of dislike; and thirdly, how to make sense of the concept of “polarisation” in the context of affective polarisation. I then propose to use the existing ambiguities as a basis to work towards a more nuanced conceptualisation of affective polarisation which allows us to distinguish it from neighbouring concepts and to further differentiate between different constellations and degrees of affective polarisation. I conclude by arguing in favour of taking a broader approach to studying affective polarisation than done so far, and by suggesting some directions for future research.

1. Introduction

There seems to be a widespread sense among politicians, pundits and the general public that politics and societies in liberal democracies are becoming increasingly hostile and divided. The United States are probably still one of the most widely discussed examples of this phenomenon, which research has increasingly started to refer to as ‘affective polarisation’ – dynamics of political conflict which are more about seeing each other as a “disliked outgroup” than about mere ideological disagreement (Iyengar et al., 2012, p. 406). But not least in the context of Brexit, the rise of (anti-) populism, identity politics or the recent Covid-19 crisis, concerns over hateful rhetoric, tribalisation, incivility, moralisation and – at least to some extent – an unwillingness to even talk to “the other side” have spread across the Atlantic.

While first empirical studies show that affective polarisation is indeed by no means unique to the US (e.g. Gidron et al., 2020; Harteveld, 2021a; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021), research is still trying to grasp how exactly it unfolds in contexts in which the dividing line between opposing camps is far less clear than in the two-party system of the United States. Some adjustments in the classic survey-based measurement instruments have already been made to account for the possibility of having multiple out-groups in multi-party systems (e.g. Wagner, 2021). However, the translation of research on affective polarisation in the United States to other contexts is not only a question

of measurement. It also raises conceptual questions about who or what is actually polarised and along which line of division; what polarisation means and what is affective about it; and more generally, what exactly the phenomenon actually is that instruments such as the traditionally-used feeling thermometers or social distance measures capture.

This paper aims to shed light on and engage with those conceptual ambiguities. Based on a systematic, critical review of 78 articles, I argue that conceptual ambiguities in the current literature on affective polarisation in multi-party systems arise both from differences between existing definitions and from a lack of specification and clarification on what exactly the concept consists of beyond a certain measurement instrument. Those variations and conceptual ambiguities can be categorised along three dimensions which can be summarised by the following three questions: 1. Who is the out-group? 2. What exactly is “dislike”? and 3. How to make sense of “polarisation” in the context of “affective polarisation”?

Taking the discussions of those ambiguities as a starting point, I argue that research on affective polarisation would benefit from, firstly, distinguishing more clearly between vertical and horizontal directions of dislike; secondly, from differentiating between different expressions of dislike, ranging from cognitive evaluations to emotions and behaviour; and thirdly, from engaging more explicitly with the concept of “polarisation” at the heart of affective polarisation. This involves

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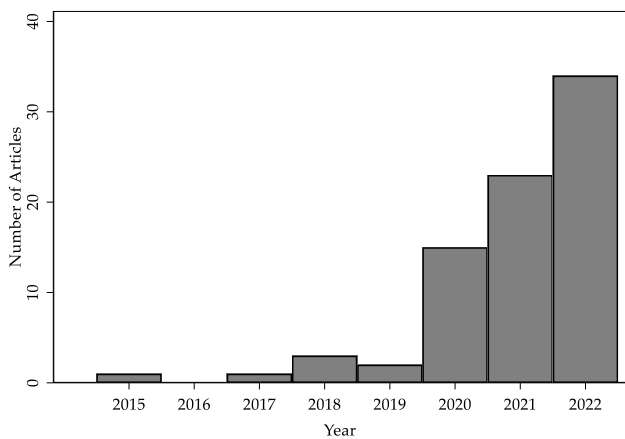


Fig. 1. Publications on Affective Polarisation in Multi-party Systems over time
Note: Web of Science search for term “affective polari*ation”; only includes articles that look at affective polarisation in at least one multi-party system and that provide at least a minimal definition or conceptualisation (whether explicit or implicit) of affective polarisation; only includes articles published in English and before 1st of October 2022; for more details, see Appendix.

clarifying the relationship, nature and presence of in- and out-group evaluations to distinguish affective polarisation from related concepts; distinguishing between polarisation as a state or a process; and exploring different constellations and degrees of affective polarisation in multi-party systems.

The paper is structured as follows: I start by discussing the three main ambiguities in Section 2. I then move towards a more nuanced conceptualisation of affective polarisation in Section 3, addressing a) the relationship between in- and out-group evaluations; b) the question of state or process; and c) different constellations of in- and out-group evaluations, and proposing potential further conceptual distinctions for each of those issues respectively. I conclude by summarising the main arguments and making suggestions for future research.

2. Ambiguities in the current literature on affective polarisation in multi-party systems

Originally developed to describe growing distance between Democrats and Republicans in the United States, the concept of affective polarisation is increasingly also discussed in contexts with often very different political conditions than the two-party system of the United States. A systematic review of the literature on affective polarisation in multi-party systems¹ shows that, especially since 2020, the number of publications dealing with affective polarisation beyond the original US context has grown almost exponentially (see Fig. 1).

While the majority of those publications come from the field of Political Science, the concept is also discussed in other disciplines, particularly Communication Science and, to a lesser extent, Psychology.² They are predominantly empirical studies which shed light on the development of affective polarisation in comparative perspective, explore potential causes and consequences or suggest measurement approaches that adapt to the specificities of multi-party contexts. Despite this burgeoning interest in affective polarisation beyond the United States, however, there is to date no single, agreed-upon definition nor a clear conceptualisation of affective polarisation.

¹ More details on which articles were selected and how can be found in the Appendix.

² I also identified one article each from the fields of Anthropology, Geography, Philosophy and Sociology.

Most definitions that are currently in use seem to be more or less based on Iyengar et al.’s (2012) seminal characterisation of affective polarisation as “the extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked out-group” (p. 406). In explicit contrast to the original focus of political polarisation research on ideology- and policy-based division, affective polarisation is thus presented as an alternative measure which has a more affective (‘dislike’) and identity-based (‘out-group’) understanding of polarisation. In other words, it tries to capture not whether people disagree about a certain issue but how they feel about and relate to those with whom they disagree. This is commonly measured with quantitative survey items such as feeling thermometers, social distance measures and trait ratings (Renström et al., 2021) or, less frequently, experimental methods such as trust games (e.g. Helbling and Jungkunz, 2020; Westwood et al., 2018).

While most definitions share a broad affective and identity-based understanding of affective polarisation, however, there are nevertheless variations in the precise formulations and operationalisations, some of which have significant implications for the meaning of the concept.³ Next to that, there is, to some extent, also a lack of specification and clarification of what exactly the concept consists of beyond a certain measurement instrument. In the following, I discuss those ambiguities and potential conceptualisations in more detail. I start with the question of who or what is the out-group, followed by, secondly, a discussion of what exactly is “dislike” and, thirdly, how we can make sense of “polarisation” in the context of affective polarisation. In the next section, I then move towards a more nuanced conceptualisation of affective polarisation by sketching how existing ambiguities could be used to distinguish affective polarisation from neighbouring concepts as well as to differentiate between specific constellations and degrees of affective polarisation in multi-party systems.

2.1. First ambiguity: Who or what is the out-group?

Whether consciously or due to a lack of specification, there is disagreement about the nature of the out-group towards which the dislike at the heart of affective polarisation is directed. When looking at the different definitions, one can distinguish three different targets of dislike that are frequently invoked: *parties* or party elites; *partisans* or, more generally, voters and supporters of political parties; and *citizens* with other political views or identities more generally. According to the first group of definitions, affective polarisation captures dislike of opposing *parties* (Boxell et al., 2020; Hernández et al., 2020; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021; Ward and Tavits, 2019). Boxell et al. (2020), for example, state that “[a]ffective polarisation refers to the extent to which citizens feel more negatively toward other political parties than toward their own” (p.2). In multi-party systems, this might not only include feeling negatively towards one out-party, but also towards multiple individual parties or blocs of parties (Basan-Nygate and Weiss, 2022; Reiljan and Ryan, 2021). As Wagner (2021) specifies, “affective polarisation in multiparty 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” (p.3).

According to the second group of definitions, affective polarisation is not about dislike of parties but of parties’ supporters, i.e. *partisans*. Torcal and Comellas (2022), for example, define affective polarisation as the “emotional attachment to in-group partisans and hostility towards out-group partisans” (p.1). Similarly, Knudsen (2021) argues that affective polarisation occurs when citizens “dislike voters of the other party and view their co-partisans positively” (p. 34). The target category “partisans” thus includes not only formal party members but also voters

³ For a more detailed overview of the different definitions and conceptualisations in current research on affective polarisation in multi-party systems, see Supplementary Material.

and, more generally, supporters of a party or a bloc of parties (Kekkonen and Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Knudsen, 2021). As in the case of parties described above, in multi-party systems, the positive and negative feelings towards partisans are not restricted to partisans of one party, respectively, but can be directed at partisans of multiple parties, whether united in a bloc or not.

Lastly, the third group of authors looks at dislike towards citizens with other *political identities more generally*. Hartevelde et al. (2021), for example, state that “[a]ffective polarisation generally refers to a situation of antipathy between citizens based on their respective political identities” (p. 5). Political identity, as defined by Huddy (2013), is “a social identity with political relevance” (p. 4). While some political identities are inherently political, such as those based on ideologies, specific policy issues or political parties, others become political through processes of politicisation. A political identity is thus “a social identity that is either defined on the basis of a common political outlook or has become political through the emergence of explicitly political group norms governing members’ outlook and action” (p. 5). Thus far, empirical studies of affective polarisation that take into account political identities other than partisanship have looked at supporters of ideological camps or groups (Bassan-Nygate and Weiss, 2022; Hartevelde, 2021a; Kobayashi, 2020; Simon et al., 2019; Tsfati and Nir, 2017); cleavage identities, specifically the demarcation – integration cleavage (Helbling and Jungkunz, 2020; Schwander et al., 2022); politicised territorial identities (Lorenzo-Rodríguez and Torcal, 2022; Padró-Solanet and Balcells, 2022; Rodríguez et al., 2022); and opinion-based groups in the context of the Brexit (“Leavers” vs. “Remainers”) (Hobolt et al., 2020; Simonsson et al., 2022a; Simonsson et al., 2022b), the Covid-19 crisis (Neumann et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022; Schieferdecker, 2021; Wagner and Eberl, 2022) or those based on specific policy preferences such as migration (Hartevelde, 2021a; Simonsen and Bonikowski, 2022) or territorial preferences in the Catalan independence conflict (Balcells and Kuo, 2022).

Whether affective polarisation is a phenomenon that is restricted to affective relations between partisans or whether it could also serve to capture relations between other types of political identities (e.g. those based on ideological position or on (politicised) social identities) is arguably a question of scope. However, whether the target of dislike are parties (or party elites) or fellow citizens (whether partisans or members of other political identities or groups) actually changes the nature of the phenomenon, as others have also started to point out (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019; Hartevelde, 2021a; Kekkonen et al., 2022; Knudsen, 2021; Torcal and Comellas, 2022). On the one hand, empirically, while there is, of course, a correlation between disliking a certain party and disliking its supporters, this correlation has been shown not to be perfect (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019; Hartevelde, 2021a; Kekkonen et al., 2022; Knudsen, 2021). Next to that, normatively, as Hartevelde (2021a) argues, many of the worries about detrimental consequences of affective polarisation concern the deterioration of relations between citizens rather than the relationship of citizens towards parties, e.g. increasing intolerance, avoidance or even violence. Lastly, theoretically, dislike of citizens *can* – even if it need not – represent a relational – and mutual – facet of polarisation. This is not the case for parties. Here, the distribution of affective evaluations of given objects (in this case, parties) might be polarised; however, given the difference in nature between those who dislike (i.e. citizens) and those who are the object of dislike (i.e. parties), such dislike is neither mutual nor is the resulting affective polarisation relational in nature.⁴

In line with Hartevelde et al.’s (2022) conceptualisation of ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ consequences of affective polarisation, I thus propose to

distinguish more carefully between *vertical* (dis)like,⁵ which is directed at parties and political elites, in other words, those “at the top” of the political system, and *horizontal* (dis)like, which is directed at fellow citizens who are at the same level of the political system (see Fig. 2). Within horizontal targets of (dis)like, one can then look at different groups of citizens, which form based on different political characteristics.

Distinguishing between the vertical and horizontal targets of dislike also includes being more transparent when it comes to empirical measurements. Especially in the nascent field of research on affective polarisation in multi-party systems, dislike towards *parties* is sometimes used as a proxy for affective polarisation between *partisans*. Given the scarcity of data on relations between *partisans*, this is sometimes the only option available. However, given the empirical, normative and theoretical differences outlined above, it is important to treat the results with caution and to be transparent about the fact that one might be measuring a slightly different phenomenon than the one that one set out to measure.

2.2. Second ambiguity: What exactly is “dislike”?

Next to the disagreement on the target, the second ambiguity concerns the nature of one of the central components of affective polarisation: “dislike” towards a political out-group. Despite its centrality, little effort has been made to clarify what exactly “dislike” actually is. To start with, “dislike” is sometimes used interchangeably with “antipathy” (Hartevelde, 2021b, p. 1) but also with “animosity” (Iyengar et al., 2019, p. 130) – which is arguably stronger than negative dislike – or even “distrust” (Westwood et al., 2018), which is a different feeling or attitude altogether. Similarly, both in definitions and in measurement instruments, it is sometimes operationalized as “having cold feelings” towards someone. In other cases, it is more about “negative evaluations” (Berntzen et al., 2021), which could also be of a more cognitive nature.

This is thus not just a semantic concern but one that touches on the question of what phenomenon one really tries to grasp with research on affective polarisation. Is the concern with negative *emotions* – as the name “affective polarisation” might also suggest? Is it with negative *evaluations* more generally, including those based on moral values or ideological convictions that are threatened by the outgroup, cognitive biases, stereotypes or other mental representations of the out-group which entail negative attributes?⁶ Or is it, in fact, primarily with the *behavioural consequences* of negative emotions and evaluations, such as avoidance, discrimination, intolerance or even violence (see, e.g., Berntzen et al., 2021)?

In the social psychological literature, “dislike” is generally treated as an expression of an evaluation or attitude, which could have both cognitive and affective bases (e.g. Ajzen, 2001; Ajzen and Fishbein,

⁵ Given that this discussion (as well as the one in the following sub-section) departs from Iyengar’s et al.’s (2012) definition of affective polarisation as “the extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked out-group”, I focus here on dislike and the out-group as a target of dislike. However, this schematic differentiation between horizontal and vertical targets of dislike of course also applies to the counterpart of out-group dislike, i.e. to different targets of “in-group like”.

⁶ While I argue here that it would be important to disentangle negative emotions from other negative evaluations, emotions are of course not separate from cognition. There are different accounts of how exactly they relate (the most prominent arguably being the Theory of Affective Intelligence (e.g. Marcus et al., 2000) and Appraisal Theory of Emotion (e.g. Lazarus, 1991; Scherer, 2009)) but they all agree that emotions and cognition are deeply interlinked and that emotions play a crucial role in any judgment and decision-making (Bonansinga, 2020; Demertzis, 2020; Jasper, 2011; Slaby and von Scheve, 2019; Webster and Albertson, 2022). It is thus not my intention to uphold a false dichotomy between emotions and rationality but rather to take a closer look at *how exactly* emotions permeate social and political realities.

⁴ See also the discussion on mutuality in the context of degrees of affective polarisation in multi-party systems in Sub-section 3.3.

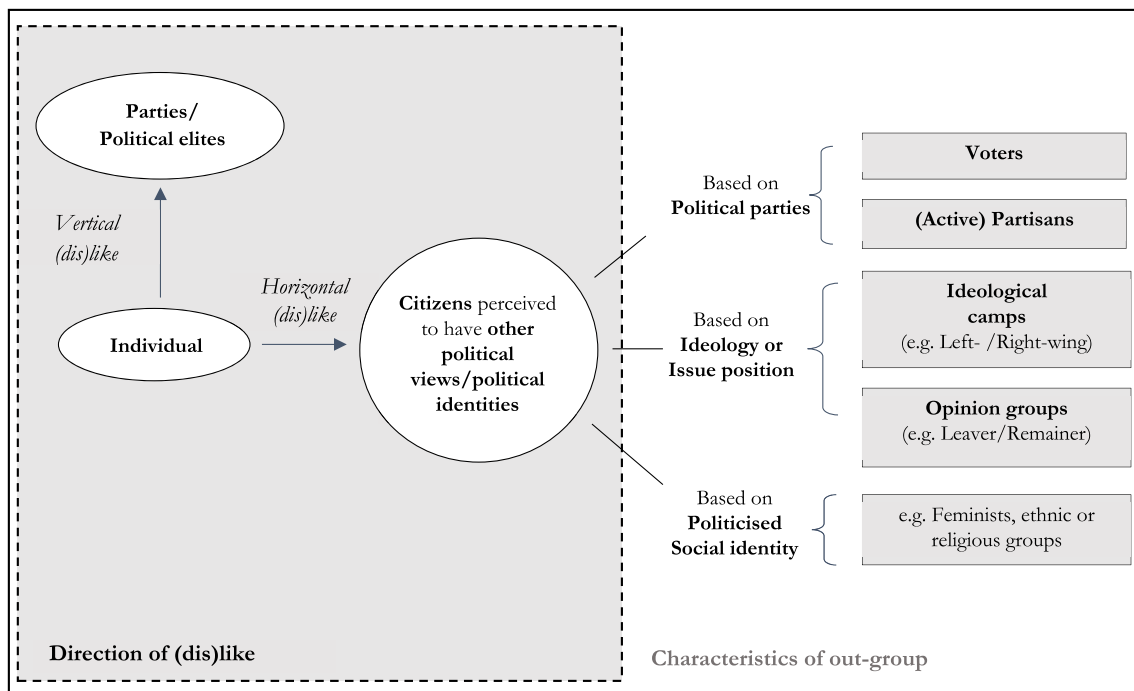


Fig. 2. Targets of (dis)like.

2000; Petty et al., 1997; Rosema, 2006; Verplanken et al., 1998). Evaluations are considered to have either positive or negative valence, in other words, they consist of a certain degree of favour or disfavour towards a given attitude object. According to this perspective, dislike would thus simply be a manifestation of an evaluation with negative valence (Verplanken et al., 1998). Behaviour, in turn, is usually regarded as a potential consequence of attitudes.⁷ In attitude research, there has, however, been some terminological confusion regarding the use of the term “affect”, which might bear similarity to potential confusion arising from the term “affective polarisation”. While in the past, “affect” has sometimes been used as an equivalent for “evaluation” (which is, again, often used interchangeably with “attitude”), “affect” is nowadays mostly used to denote arousal or moods and emotions (Ajzen, 2001). Even if the concept of “dislike” at the heart of affective polarisation is taken from the social psychological literature on attitudes and evaluations, it thus remains conceptually ambiguous what the underlying nature of those evaluations is supposed to be.

This conceptual ambiguity is also reflected in the diversity of empirical approaches to measuring affective polarisation (see Appendix, Table 3). In the US context, research frequently relies on feeling thermometers, social distance scales (which include, e.g., questions about respondents’ willingness to marry someone from the out-group, to be friends with someone from the out-group, to live in the same neighbourhood with them or to spend social time with them (e.g. Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2018)), or trait ratings (Renström et al., 2021) to gauge the level of “out-group dislike”. In the absence of appropriate survey data, research outside the US has mostly resorted to like-dislike scales of parties (e.g. the CSES item which asks respondents to rate how much they like or dislike a given party on a scale from 0 to 10 (e.g. Reiljan, 2020)). Studies that do use social distance measures, feeling thermometers of partisans or trait ratings have, until recently, mostly been restricted to single countries (e.g. Harteveld et al., 2021; Hobolt et al., 2020; Renström et al., 2021; but see recent work by Harteveld

et al., 2022). Lastly, some studies also use experimental methods such as trust games (e.g. Helbling and Jungkunz, 2020; Westwood et al., 2018).

While those measures are all used as proxies for the out-group dislike at the heart of affective polarisation, they actually measure quite different phenomena. Social distance measures, for example, primarily capture behaviour or intended behaviour rather than “dislike” itself. While such behaviour is often interpreted as a sign of dislike, this need not necessarily be the case. Firstly, one should be conceptually clear about whether avoidant behaviour is part of the concept of affective polarisation itself or rather a consequence of it (see also Berntzen et al., 2021). Secondly, as Klar et al. (2018) show, such measures might conceal that what people really dislike are not opposing partisans as such but, for example, having to engage in political discussions with them. In contrast, trait ratings reveal more about mental representations or stereotypes of the out-group than about how respondents feel or behave towards them. Trust games might also reflect underlying mental representations but, again, capture primarily people’s behaviour rather than their emotions or explicit attitudes. Feeling thermometers, on the other hand, give a general impression of sympathy and antipathy but without differentiating whether this is based on emotions or other negative evaluations. Neither do they indicate whether those negative evaluations have any implications for people’s behaviour.

While each of those conceptualisations and empirical measurement instruments thus cover a different aspect of how people might relate to their political out-groups, when lumped together into a generic “dislike”, unfortunately, a lot of their analytical potential gets lost. Social distance measures, trait ratings and trust games arguably already add some more nuance to out-group behaviour or mental representations of the out-group. More could potentially be done to analyse the precise content or construction of stereotypes or to capture what exactly it is that people try to avoid or do not tolerate. In the realm of the emotional underpinnings of “dislike”, one could distinguish not only between negative and positive emotions (e.g. Marcus et al., 2000), but also between different *discrete* emotions (e.g. Bonansinga, 2020; Lazarus, 1991) such as fear, shame, anger, disgust, contempt, pity, or envy (see, e.g. Nguyen et al. (2022) on anger and affective polarisation). At the same time, one should keep in mind that emotions are not entirely individual, automatic biological processes. They can also be mobilised

⁷ There is a vast body of literature that covers the link between attitudes and behaviour (e.g. Ajzen and Fishbein, 2000 on the Theory of planned behaviour). It would go beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this link in more depth.

by social and political entrepreneurs (Demertzis, 2020; Hutchison, 2019) and are often more ambivalent and contradictory than one single emotional reaction (Capelos and Demertzis, 2018).

Taking those emotional complexities behind the seemingly simple “out-group dislike” into account not only helps gain a better understanding of the dynamics at play; it also has significant implications for potential behavioural consequences of affective polarisation.⁸ It is widely noted that different emotions motivate different types of action; for example, anxiety generally induces more information-seeking and political learning (Marcus et al., 2000; Marcus and MacKuen, 1993), while anger and hope stimulate political action (Capelos and Demertzis, 2018). Knowing what is behind a negative affective evaluation of a given out-group is thus essential for getting a better sense of what behaviour might follow such negative affect.

As a first step towards a better understanding of “dislike”, I thus propose to distinguish more carefully between different expressions of dislike, as well as to measure and conceptualise them accordingly. Table 1 offers a possible starting point for such a differentiation.

Having a clearer conception of what exactly is behind “out-group dislike” is also normatively important. Not every kind of out-group dislike is necessarily problematic from a normative standpoint. In fact, it would be naïve to assume that everyone has to like each other in a democratic society. On the contrary, there might be very good and legitimate reasons for disliking a certain political group, for example if a marginalised group strongly dislikes those who oppress them or uphold their marginalised status in society. Dislike might be representative of historically and culturally embedded contempt, anger or resentment which now find their expression, e.g., in struggles for empowerment. Simply assuming that any kind of dislike should be worrisome thus also risks depoliticising healthy political processes.

However, certain types of dislike can of course also be harmful to democratic societies. When the dislike represents evaluative biases, leads to discriminatory, intolerant or even violent behaviour towards the out-group or otherwise prevents political compromise or erodes democratic norms, this might indeed threaten the functioning of liberal democracies.⁹ As current empirical research on affective polarisation also increasingly shows (see, e.g., Broockman et al., 2022), however, rather than assuming that any kind of dislike is per se harmful, it is important to differentiate more carefully what kind of negative evaluations lead to what consequences and whether, all things considered, those are necessarily harmful to democratic societies.

2.3. Third ambiguity: Why “polarisation”? How to make sense of “polarisation” in the context of affective polarisation

The third ambiguity of current research on affective polarisation in multi-party systems concerns the other, not least semantically central, component of “affective polarisation”: polarisation. As the previous two sections have shown, there is a central concern with dislike of out-groups. However, what remains unclear is how this out-group dislike relates to polarisation, who or what exactly is polarised and what polarisation even means in this context. With a few exceptions (e.g. Reiljan, 2020), the literature hardly engages theoretically with what “polarisation” exactly refers to, let alone whether it is really an adequate term to describe the dynamics at play.

In the following, I therefore briefly sketch how “polarisation” has been conceptualised in a more abstract sense and how it has mostly been used in relation to political contexts, namely in relation to the distribution of ideological or issue positions. I then analyse how one could

make sense of “polarisation” in the context of affective polarisation in the broadest sense before moving to more fine-grained distinctions between different constellations of affective polarisation in the next section.

2.3.1. Polarisation in the abstract sense

Polarisation is of course no new concept in the political and social sciences. However, as Bramson et al. (2017) have already pointed out, despite its frequent use, there is surprisingly little clarity on what exactly the term means. In its most basic definition, polarisation refers to a state or the movement towards a state of intergroup differences and division in a given population. According to Esteban and Ray (1994), one can speak of polarisation when “a population of individuals may be grouped according to some vector of characteristics into clusters, such that each cluster is very similar in terms of the attributes of its members, but different clusters have members with very dissimilar attributes” (p. 819). As Arbatli and Rosenberg (2021) point out, polarisation thus implies a certain degree of intragroup homogeneity and inter-group heterogeneity. This definition captures what DiMaggio et al. (1996) call the bimodality principle of polarisation – the idea that “a given population can be usefully broken down into two subpopulations” (Bramson et al., 2017, p. 129), or, to put it more formally, that members of the overall population “cluster into separate camps, with locations between the two modal positions sparsely occupied” (DiMaggio et al., 1996, p. 694).

Following this characterisation and the definition of Esteban and Ray, different types of polarisation can be distinguished primarily based on the relevant attributes or vectors of characteristics by which individuals can be grouped into clusters. Broadly speaking, *political* polarisation thus describes the formation or existence of clusters based on attributes relevant to the political sphere, such as ideology or political identities, while *societal* polarisation refers to divisions based on socio-economic or socio-cultural characteristics such as income, ethnic background, education, cultural identities, social status, etc.

2.3.2. Polarisation in political science

In political science, among the most famous discussions of polarisation are probably Downs’ (1954) and Sartori’s (1979) theories on party competition and centrifugal dynamics in the party system (Green-Pedersen, 2004). Those theories look at polarisation based on the ideological position of different actors in the political system, be it political parties (cf. Sartori) or individuals (cf. Downs). They are thus examples of the sub-type referred to as *ideological* polarisation, which is arguably the most prominent type of political polarisation.¹⁰

Within this subtype of ideological polarisation, efforts have been made to further clarify what different shapes and forms polarisation can actually take. As outlined above, the most basic condition to speak of a polarised society (based on ideology or political attitudes) would be simply to identify whether the population can be meaningfully separated into two camps; in other words, whether the distribution of political attitudes clusters around two modal points (cf. the bimodality principle (DiMaggio et al., 1996)). Next to identifying the mere existence of clusters, however, one can also further conceptualise the relationship between those clusters. As Reiljan (2020), for example, defines polarisation, it involves an element of groups being on “opposite sides” (p. 377). This condition introduces the idea of a certain spatial dimension, or a spectrum, along which the clusters are distributed. Apart from simply being separated into two camps, polarised societies can thus also be characterised by a particularly dispersed distribution of political

⁸ For a comprehensive and recent overview of potential impacts of emotions on public opinion and political behaviour, see Webster and Albertson (2022).

⁹ An interesting theoretical distinction that could be further explored in this context is, e.g., the distinction between agonistic and antagonistic modes of political conflict (Mouffe, 2014).

¹⁰ In fact, the term political polarisation is often used synonymously with ideological polarisation. I would, however, argue that it would be instructive to be more precise and to use political polarisation as an umbrella term for all forms of polarisation that are related to the political sphere, including ideological polarisation, identity-based polarisation, affective polarisation and pernicious polarisation.

Table 1
Expressions of dislike and respective measurement approaches.

Attitudes					Behaviour	
Beliefs		Perceptions	Emotions		Intended behaviour	Manifest behaviour
General valence of evaluation	Moral or ideological evaluations	Mental representations, stereotypes, biases	Emotional valence	Discrete emotions	Avoidance, discrimination, violence	Avoidance, discrimination, violence
e.g. feeling thermometers, like-dislike scales	e.g. more specific survey questions, interviews	e.g. trait ratings, focus groups	e.g. feeling thermometers (warm/cold feelings)	e.g. more specific survey questions, experiments, interviews	e.g. social distance measures	e.g. trust games, experiments, participant observation

attitudes. According to this so-called dispersion principle, a society is polarised insofar as “opinions are diverse, ‘far apart’ in content, and relatively balanced between ends of the opinion spectrum” (DiMaggio et al., 1996, p. 694). This spatial dimension thus not only allows to determine simple intragroup homogeneity and intergroup heterogeneity in terms of the members’ political attitudes. It is also the basis for assessing different *degrees* of polarisation. Of course, the condition for such a measure of distance is the existence of a certain identifiable and linear spectrum along which the attributes can be located. In the case of political attitudes, the common translation of ideologies into spatial dimensions (e.g. Left-Right, Authoritarian-Liberal, Cosmopolitan-Communitarian (e.g. de Wilde et al., 2019; Norris and Inglehart, 2019)), makes such location of attributes possible and insightful for identifying polarisation trends.

While other typologies of polarisation (e.g. Bramson et al., 2017) go even further in differentiating different ways of characterising and measuring ideological polarisation, it seems that the most commonly used conditions for assessing the existence and degree of polarisation are “the distance between, the homogeneity within and the size of th[e] opposing groups” (Reiljan, 2020, p. 377). As the term polarisation also semantically suggests, the mere division of individuals into two groups – without any measure of distance or dispersion between them – is thus neither a very precise nor a satisfactorily differentiated way of conceptualising polarisation. Such a principle of distance or dispersion, however, becomes more difficult to adopt once one moves from ideological polarisation to other subtypes of polarisation – amongst others affective polarisation.

2.3.3. Affective polarisation – what are the shared characteristics of the clusters and how to conceptualise distance between them?

Following the previous accounts of polarisation, two questions seem important to clarify in order to make sense of “polarisation” in affective polarisation: What are the (shared) characteristics of the clusters and how do we conceptualise the distance between them?

As discussed above, one of the central components of affective polarisation is dislike of a political out-group (which can be based on different characteristics, as shown in Fig. 1 in Section 2.1). While shared dislike of an out-group can explain a uni-directional distancing of a group of individuals sharing a negative evaluation of a perceived out-group, it is nevertheless questionable whether this shared dislike is sufficient to speak of the formation of two clusters. Not only would those clusters form on the basis of different characteristics – on the one hand shared dislike, on the other hand perceived membership of a political group – but the perceived out-group also need not correspond to actual or felt group membership of its presumed members. Out-group dislike alone thus does not seem to suffice to speak of affective polarisation in the strict sense of the term.

While often less central in the discussion than out-group dislike, many definitions of affective polarisation, however, include an additional component: in-group like. They thus operationalise affective polarisation as the simultaneous occurrence of “positive ingroup affect and negative out-group affect” (Wagner, 2021, p.1), or, as Reiljan (2020) puts it, “the tendency among party supporters (partisans) to view other party/parties as a disliked out-group(s), while holding positive

in-group feelings for one’s own party [emphasis added]” (p. 376). On this account, the clusters themselves could be based on shared positive in-group feelings while the spatial distance between them could be conceptualised as the degree of dislike towards the respective other group(s). Such a conceptualisation of polarisation arguably also underlies, for example, the study by Fuller et al. (2022) who use multidimensional scaling to provide a spatial model of affective distances between different partisan constituencies along a left-right and a degree-of-populism dimension.

Such a conceptualisation of affective polarisation based on the aggregated affective distance between people’s political in-group and out-group evaluations arguably presents a suitable way to make sense of affective polarisation as a sub-type of political polarisation. In the current literature, there are nevertheless certain ambiguities regarding this conceptualisation, which relate to the *relationship between in- and out-group evaluations*, the question of *state versus process* and the specific *constellations of in- and out-groups*. However, in the following section, I aim to show that, when properly addressed, those ambiguities can in fact be used to further refine the conceptualisation of affective polarisation. That way, rather than clouding our understanding, they can contribute to shedding more light on the respective dynamics of affective polarisation at hand. Concretely, I posit that, a) in- and out-group evaluations need not necessarily be two sides of the coin but that it is their co-occurrence which distinguishes affective polarisation from other, neighbouring phenomena and concepts; b) affective polarisation can be a state or a process; as a process, it can take three different forms which are analytically and normatively distinct; and c), to account for different degrees of affective polarisation in multi-party systems, one needs to look even beyond the simple size of the affective gap between in- and out-group evaluations. I discuss each of those points in turn.

3. Towards a more nuanced conceptualisation of Affective Polarisation

3.1. Relationship between in-group and out-group evaluations

One central feature of the conceptualisation of affective polarisation proposed above is the requirement that, in order to make sense of the “polarisation metaphor”, both positive in-group evaluations and negative out-group evaluations need to be present. This requirement as such does not say anything about the relationship between those two sets of evaluations. In most of the current literature on affective polarisation, however, there is an implicit or explicit assumption that positive in-group evaluations and negative out-group evaluations are two sides of the same coin. This assumption is based on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1979), according to which even in the most minimal group-setting, in which people are assigned to groups based on entirely random criteria, people develop a sense of in-group favouritism and out-group bias (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel et al., 1971; Turner et al., 1979). As a consequence of mere processes of differentiation, they thus express positive feelings towards their in-group and negative feelings towards their out-group. This phenomenon is typically explained by the psychological need to enhance the status of one’s own group by positively distinguishing it from an out-group (Huddy, 2013). The more strongly one identifies with a

certain in-group, the more closely one's self-esteem is tied to the status of the group and the more strongly one in turn reacts emotionally to perceived threats to the status of the in-group (Mackie et al., 2000; Mason, 2015).

While it is certainly possible that this mechanism applies in the case of affective polarisation, I would like to caution the field not to take it for granted – but neither to throw the baby out with the bathwater and forget about the in-group altogether. In the following, I thus argue that, firstly, the relationship between in- and out-group evaluations need not be as mechanistic as sometimes assumed by Social Identity Theory accounts. Secondly, affective polarisation is not necessarily about identity; rather, identity-based affective polarisation could be considered one variant of affective polarisation. Thirdly, while in- and out-group evaluations can also be unrelated from each other, it is nevertheless their co-occurrence which allows us to distinguish affective polarisation from other, neighbouring concepts.

3.1.1. Two sides of the same coin? Beyond Social Identity Theory

Accounting for negative out-group evaluations with Social Identity Theory is very widespread in the literature on affective polarisation. Neumann et al. (2021) even explicitly say that “[o]ne precondition for developing negative assessments of another group is the identification with an ingroup” (p. 324). Such accounts often build on research which argues that partisanship (as one possible basis for political groups) can take the form not only of an attitude but also of a social identity (Bankert et al., 2017; Bartle and Bellucci, 2009; Greene, 1999, 2002, 2004; Huddy et al., 2018). As such, it can thus trigger inter-group processes as described by Social Identity Theory. Despite its prominence in the literature, however, this account of the relationship between in-group and out-group evaluations has certain limitations in describing the complex reality of political inter-group relations and evaluations.

Most importantly, the relationship between in-group and out-group evaluations might not be as mechanistic as sometimes portrayed by Social Identity Theory. To start with, unlike in the two-party system of the United States, in multi-party systems, it is by no means clear who the relevant out-group is against which the dislike should be directed. Not least in settings in which coalitions between parties are common, it is highly unlikely that all out-groups are disliked to the same extent, simply by virtue of being an “out-group”. Some out-groups might be viewed more positively than others and potentially even “liked” instead of “disliked”. Similarly, one in-group might have several disliked out-groups at the same time. Especially, but not only, in multi-party systems, it is thus important to take a closer look at when and why in-group identification leads to out-group dislike and why certain out-groups are more disliked than others.

This could include taking into account existing power struggles or conflicts of interest between the respective groups (cf. Realistic group conflict theory (Böhm et al., 2020; Sherif, 2017)), as well as symbolic threats the groups pose to each other (cf. Integrated threat theory (Böhm et al., 2020; Stephan and Stephan, 2000)). It is, after all, important to keep in mind that, in contrast to the minimal group setting, identities in real-world settings are imbued with subjective and intersubjectively constructed meaning which is embedded in cultural and historical contexts (Abdelal et al., 2006; Huddy, 2001). Identities are thus not objective, predetermined categories but the result of social negotiation processes which can take place within the in-group itself but also among potential new identifiers and even out-group members (Modood, 1998). As such, identities can be highly politicised and their meaning consciously created, changed or manipulated by political and social actors to serve political ends (Huddy, 2013; McCoy and Somer, 2021a, 2021b; Reicher, 2004; Somer, 2001; Somer and McCoy, 2019).

The construction of mutually disliked camps thus arguably does not happen in a contextual void but can be much more *political*¹¹ than many

Social Identity Theory-based accounts of affective polarisation make it sound. Rather than assuming that in- and out-group evaluations are related to each other via Social Identity Theory mechanisms only, the field would thus do well to also consider alternative approaches that pay more attention to context and meaning in general and political processes involved in the construction of mutually disliked camps in particular.

3.1.2. Evaluation or identification – identity-based affective polarisation as one variant of affective polarisation

Even when broadening the range of approaches that could account for the relationship between positive in-group and negative out-group evaluations, however, it is important to keep in mind that a positive in-group *evaluation* need not imply an in-group *identification*. In other words, positively evaluating a certain group does not necessarily mean that one also *identifies* with that group and that inter-group processes based on in-group identification are activated. Even a long-term tendency to support a certain group (e.g. to vote for a certain party) can be the result not only of an identity but also of an attitude or evaluation (Bartle and Bellucci, 2009; Greene, 2002; Rosema, 2006; see also Huddy et al. (2018) on the difference between instrumental and expressive partisanship), defined “simply as a positive or negative disposition towards an attitude object: the parties” (Converse, 1995, as in Bartle and Bellucci, 2009, p. 36). Similarly, mere group membership based on certain ‘objective’ characteristics, which is sometimes used to infer in-group identification, does not automatically imply that one also adopts and internalises the meaning and emotions ascribed to the identity of that group. Social, or in this case political, identity, in contrast, refers to group membership which has been incorporated into one's self-concept. In social psychological research, social identity is thus measured by taking into account four sub-aspects: the subjective importance of identity, one's subjective sense of belonging, the feeling that one's status is interdependent with that of other group members as well as positive feelings for members of the ingroup (Huddy, 2013).¹²

Rather than assuming that affective polarisation is necessarily about identity, it is thus important to empirically test whether the positive in-group evaluation actually represents an in-group identification and a sense of belonging with the in-group.¹³ When this is the case, it might be useful to explicitly speak of “*identity-based affective polarisation*” as one particular variant of affective polarisation. Given that it is very well possible that a positive in-group evaluation represents nothing more than a favourable attitude towards that group, however, it is important not to assume that any affective gap between in- and out-group evaluations is necessarily due to identity dynamics but to carefully check what the nature of the evaluation and the relationship between the different evaluations in fact looks like.

3.1.3. Affective polarisation and neighbouring concepts

Not only are in- and out-group evaluations not necessarily related via identity-based inter-group processes; they also need not be related at all. The social-psychological literature on in-group formation and prejudice shows that in-group favouritism need not necessarily be associated with out-group derogation (e.g. Allport, 1985; Brewer, 1999). At the same time, negative out-group evaluations can occur for reasons that have nothing to do with an in-group. As an attitude, out-group dislike can, for example, be based on ideological convictions, moral evaluations or personal distaste. Or it can simply be the result of a cognitive mechanism

¹² See also Mael and Tetrick's (1992) Identification with a Psychological Group Scale, which is used in research on partisanship as an identity (Greene, 2004; Rosema, 2006).

¹³ The term “in-group” as such might implicitly suggest that there is an identification with that group. In the absence of more concrete measurement of positive evaluations as an identity, however, it should be understood more broadly to simply refer to that group which receives positive evaluations, regardless of whether those are the result of an identity or an attitude.

¹¹ McCoy and Somer (2021a, 2021b, see also Somer and McCoy, 2019) thus also speak of polarisation as a *strategy*.

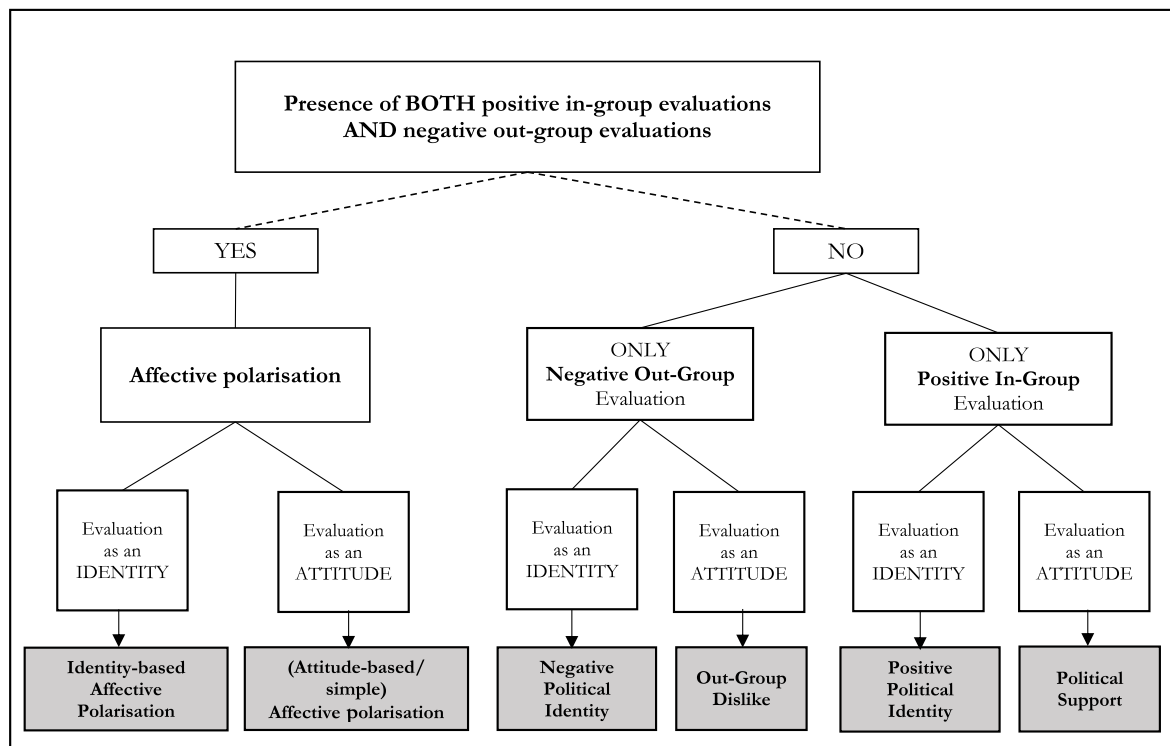


Fig. 3. Decision-tree Affective polarisation and neighbouring concepts.

that aims to reduce the cognitive dissonance that can arise from being exposed to arguments, convictions or ideologies that contradict one's own beliefs (Nordbrandt, 2021).

This conceptual claim is also supported by empirical research. As Wagner (2021) points out, "(...) affective polarisation can also be measured for those without a positive party identification. Indeed, in many European party systems, dislike of an out-party on the radical left or right might be stronger than in-group affect with a favored party" (p. 7). The fact that negative out-group evaluations can also occur without positive in-group evaluations has also extensively been discussed in the literature on negative partisanship (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016; Bankert, 2020, 2021, 2022; Medeiros and Noël, 2014). As Rose and Mishler (1998) have shown, in post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe, for example, 77% of the surveyed population only indicated a party they outright rejected but no party they were partisans of, while only 30% reported a positive partisanship.

Just like with its positive counterpart, here again, a distinction can be made between negative partisanship as a stable attitude and negative partisanship as an identity, in other words, a *negative identity* (Bankert, 2020, 2022; Mayer and Russo, 2022). In the case of a negative identity, the "exclusion from a group – the 'not being one of them' [is turned] into a meaningful social identity" (Bankert, 2022, p. 300). While this identity can be a function of a positive identity, it can also be psychologically prior to an in-group and thus exist without any positive identification. Examples of this have been found not only in relation to political parties or party leaders (e.g. Peronism – Anti-Peronism, Fujimorismo – Anti-Fujimorismo, Chavismo – Anti-Chavismo in Latin America (Bankert, 2020, p. 92)), but also, amongst others, in the anti-nuclear movement, anti-feminism or an identity against the National Rifle Association in the USA (Bankert, 2020, 2021).

While both the social-psychological literature on in-group favouritism and the cases of negative partisanship and negative identity thus show that negative out-group evaluations and positive in-group evaluations need not be (causally) related at all, it is nevertheless their *co-occurrence* that renders affective polarisation distinct from related

concepts and phenomena. There can be positive evaluations of a political in-group without out-group derogation, and there can be dislike of a political out-group without an in-group. Either of those can take the form of an attitude or an identity. Either can also be a precursor to affective polarisation, for example if a shared negative evaluation forms the basis of a new in-group (e.g. *anti-racism*, *anti-Peronism*) or if an in-group develops a new shared enemy. However, for the sake of analytical clarity, they should be distinguished from affective polarisation *sensu stricto*, which, as argued above, requires the simultaneous occurrence (whether related or not) of a positive in-group evaluation *and* a negative out-group evaluation, whether based on identification or more attitudinal evaluations, as can be seen in the decision-tree below (Fig. 3).

Based on distinctions outlined above, one could thus tentatively come up with a typology of political group relationships and evaluations which consists of two dimensions, the presence of evaluations on the one hand and the nature of those evaluations on the other (see Fig. 4). This typology builds on existing typologies of partisanship (e.g. Bankert, 2022; Rose and Mishler, 1998) but additionally takes into account the difference between evaluations as identity or attitudes and extends beyond partisanship to political groups and identities more generally.

While this typology could be even further elaborated by future research, it nevertheless shows again that it is the co-occurrence of negative out-group and positive in-group evaluations that distinguishes affective polarisation from related phenomena, while it is the nature of the evaluations which differentiates an identity-based variant of affective polarisation from a more general variant where positive in-group evaluations represent a (stable) attitude rather than a sense of in-group belonging. Paying closer attention to the specific nature, constellation and (contextual) relationship between in- and out-group evaluations is thus an important step towards a more nuanced understanding and conceptualisation of affective polarisation.

3.2. State or process (es)

Next to the question about the assumed relationship between and the

		Presence of evaluations		
		ONLY negative out-group evaluation	BOTH negative out-group AND positive in-group evaluation	ONLY positive in-group evaluation
Nature of evaluations	Evaluation (Evaluation as attitude)	<i>Out-group dislike</i>	<i>Affective polarisation (attitude-based/ simple)</i>	<i>Political support</i>
	Identification (Evaluation as identity)	<i>Negative political identity</i>	<i>Affective polarisation (identity-based)</i>	<i>Positive political identity</i>

Fig. 4. Typology of political group relationships and evaluations.

presence of in- and out-group evaluations, a second ambiguity regarding the conceptualisation of affective polarisation concerns the specific *configuration* of in- and out-group evaluations. As briefly mentioned above, polarisation can refer to both a *state* of intergroup differences and division and to the movement towards such a state, in other words, to a *process*. As a *state*,¹⁴ it describes the presence of two camps which each consist of people who positively evaluate their own group(s) and dislike the respective other group(s).¹⁵ In terms of feeling thermometers, people's in-group scores would thus be very high and their out-group scores very low, in other words, at – or close to – the respective poles of the spectrum. As a *process*, polarisation describes the development of a less polarised state towards a more polarised state, which means a widening gap between in-group and out-group evaluations. This development could, in principle, take three different forms: a) the gap widens due to increasingly negative out-group evaluations; b) the gap widens due to increasingly positive in-group evaluations; c) the gap widens due to *both* increasingly negative out-group evaluations *and* increasingly positive in-group evaluations (see Fig. 5 for an illustration of this difference for individuals or a single group, and Fig. 6 for the resulting relationship between two groups).

While this difference between state and process has been acknowledged in some parts of the literature (e.g. Bramson et al., 2017; Harteveld, 2021b; McCoy and Somer, 2021a, 2021b), it nevertheless often gets somewhat side-lined. As the review of the literature shows, there seems to be a general concern with a deterioration of the relationships between political groups which is conceptually usually focused on increasing out-group dislike (see also Table 3 in Appendix). While this would be most in line with Process a),¹⁶ this process is rarely measured as such. Not only is there often a lack of longitudinal data which would capture the development over time. As Garzia and Ferreira da Silva (2022) point out, most operationalisations of affective polarisation currently also do not distinguish between the type of affective polarisation that results from respondents strongly liking their in-group and being more or less indifferent about their out-group(s) and the one resulting from respondents being indifferent towards their in-group and strongly disliking their out-group(s).

Distinguishing between different types of affective polarisation-as-

process could, however, allow us to generate important analytical and normative insights about the precise phenomenon at hand. Growing in-group like is arguably most likely caused by different processes than growing out-group dislike – and potentially also leads to different societal and political effects. If both increase simultaneously, this can (but, as argued above, need not) indicate that there is indeed an inherent relationship between them. It is thus worth paying more attention to the precise configuration of in- and out-group evaluations, whether they are conceived of as a state or as a process, and, if the latter, what specific form this process takes.

3.3. Degrees of affective polarisation in multi-party systems

As outlined above, the distinction between different forms of affective polarisation-as-a-process is based on the way in which the affective distance between in- and out-group increases. This by nature also implies that there can be different *degrees* or levels of affective polarisation. Especially in multi-party systems, the distinction between such degrees is, however, slightly more complex than the schematic illustrations above might make it seem. To start with, unlike in a two-party system, in multi-party systems, there are by definition more than two groups involved. Not only can each group thus have several out-groups, those out-groups can also be liked or disliked to different extents. As a consequence, dislike also need not per se be mutual but can be more scattered. And lastly, some (liked or disliked) groups might be much smaller and less politically relevant than others, which also influences the nature and consequences of the phenomenon at hand. In the following, I therefore argue that it is crucial to keep those different aspects – the number of in- and out-groups, the mutuality of dislike, the degree of alignment between different groups, and the size of the respective groups – in mind when conceptualising and ultimately measuring different degrees of affective polarisation in multi-party systems.

While some of those aspects directly affect the size of the affective gap between in- and out-group(s) itself, others also add an additional dimension to the idea of degrees of polarisation which goes beyond the mere size of the affective distance between in- and out-groups. Taken together, however, they allow us to capture one overarching conceptual point: the more society as a whole becomes divided into two political camps that mutually dislike each other, and the more other divisions present in society align along this one antagonistic dimension, the more strongly affectively polarised that society becomes.

While in a two-party system, the main political antagonism is more

¹⁴ McCoy and Somer (2021a, 2021b) also speak of an “equilibrium”.

¹⁵ I come back to the question of multiple out-groups in Sub-section 3.3.

¹⁶ Here, it is of course important to check whether there is any positive in-group evaluation to start with. If not, it would be more precise to speak of out-group dislike or negative identity, as argued in Section 3.1.3.

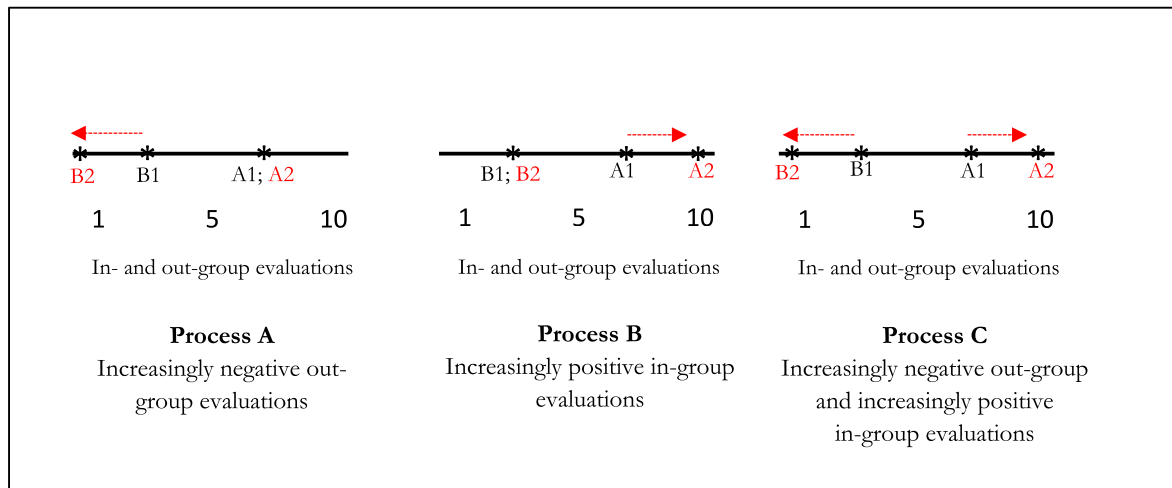


Fig. 5. Three forms of affective polarisation-as-a-process (individual or single group). Note: Each graph illustrates the development of in-and out-group evaluations of an individual (or a single group) over time, from Time 1 (A1; B1) to Time 2 (A2; B2). In each case, the affective distance increases from T1 to T2; however, due to different processes.

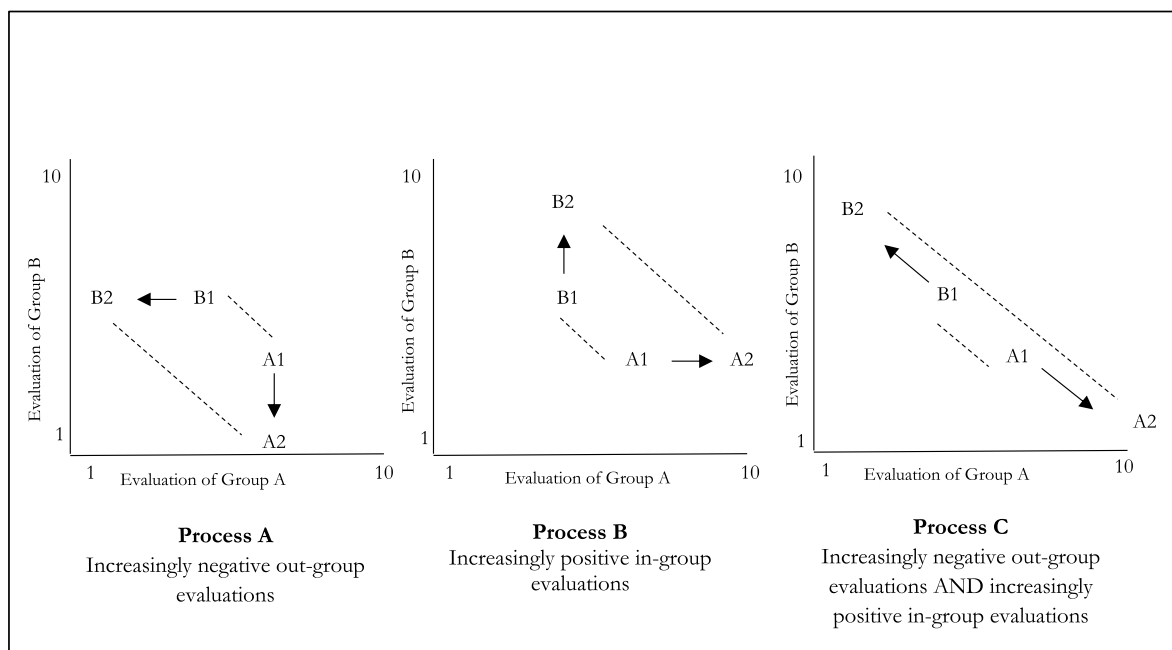


Fig. 6. Three forms of affective polarisation-as-a-process (two groups). Note: Each graph illustrates the development of in-and out-group evaluations of Group A and Group B over time, from Time 1 (A1; B1) to Time 2 (A2; B2). The dotted lines show the respective affective distance between the two groups' evaluations. In each case, the affective distance increases from T1 to T2; however, due to different processes.

readily structured along such two camps in the first place,¹⁷ in multi-party systems, the multiplicity of potential in-and out-groups demands for a closer look at whether there is in fact one overarching dividing line or, if not, whether one can at least observe a movement towards such a two-camp division. As a first step, this of course involves taking into account the number of in- and out-groups, in other words, how many out-groups each in-group has. Beyond the mere number, however, the

¹⁷ While two-party systems clearly have an inbuilt division into two camps, one should nevertheless note that this division into two is – at least at face value – mostly present on the party level. Once one moves away from looking only at partisan division and includes other political groups and identities, even a two-party system such as the US might face antagonistic relationships between multiple in- and out-groups.

more crucial question is how strongly those respective in- and out-groups are liked or disliked.

On the one hand, one might argue that if the dislike is directed against one group, it is more targeted than if it is directed against multiple out-groups. This could be indicative of a strong degree of conflict or antagonism between the two groups in question. If the dislike is also mutual, i.e., if the respective disliked group also returns the dislike, those two groups could be considered to be strongly affectively polarised, even if society as a whole is not. In this case, the question of size becomes crucial. As Reiljan (2020), for example, argues, “it should not be overlooked that vast distances between sizeable parties signify greater polarisation from the perspective of the whole system compared to when similar distances are present between smaller fringe parties” (p. 380, see also Wagner (2021, pp. 8–9)). In other words, if the two mutually disliking parties make up a significant part of the electorate,

the overall degree of affective polarisation in society would be higher than if they were parties with a smaller voter base – even if that polarisation still does not affect all existing groups in society.

On the other hand, however, if a given in-group dislikes several parties to a significant extent, this also need not imply that the degree of affective polarisation is lower. Here, it would be important to take a closer look at the (perceived) nature of the disliked out-groups. Are those different disliked out-groups considered to be “similar”, in other words, are they conceived to belong to the same “camp”? If not, and if there is simply more or less equal affective distance between all different parties (or groups), it might be conceptually more appropriate to speak of *fragmentation* rather than polarisation.

If they are considered to have a common denominator, however, this could point towards a certain alignment of different political dimensions along one single line of division – and hence the formation of two overarching, antagonistic political camps. This might, for example, be the case with populism and anti-populism (Bankert, 2020), where parties with different ideological orientations cluster together based on their shared opposition towards populist parties.¹⁸ Here, again, two aspects are important when conceptualising the respective degree of affective polarisation between such aligned “camps”. Firstly, the more groups and identities become subsumed under one such dimension, the stronger the polarisation in society becomes. Once all political and social dimensions align along one single dimension, one can also speak of *pernicious polarisation* (McCoy and Somer, 2019, 2021a) as a particularly strong version of affective polarisation.¹⁹ Secondly, the more the respective dislike is mutual, the more strongly affectively polarised those two camps are. This includes both the direction of dislike, i.e. whether the two camps also mutually perceive each other as respective out-groups, and the (more quantitative) strength of such mutual dislike. Empirical research on 28 European countries has found, for example, that generally, the populist radical right is disliked homogeneously by mainstream parties and vice versa (Harteveld et al., 2021). However, the populist radical right tends to be disliked slightly more by mainstream parties than it dislikes mainstream parties itself. In this case, the discrepancy is thus a question of (quantitative) degree more than of who the respective antagonistic camps are.

While the number of out-groups, the mutuality of dislike, the degree of (perceived) alignment and the size of the groups are thus crucial to properly measure different degrees of affective polarisation in multi-party systems²⁰, they also help us capture conceptual differences of kind. Firstly, in the case of strong dislike towards multiple out-groups, it is instructive to distinguish between polarisation between camps on the one hand and a more general anti-establishment logic on the other hand. As Meléndez (2022), for example, points out in the context of negative partisanship, dislike of multiple parties can also represent a more general anti-establishment attitude. In such cases, it is not only important to check whether there actually is a positively evaluated in-group at all (as

argued in Section 3.1 above), but also whether the underlying logic of opposition is really best captured as one of polarisation between two mutually antagonistic groups.

Secondly, the question of size is not just a question of degree, which can be accounted for by weighting the affective distance between parties by party size or vote share, respectively (see, e.g. Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021). If one of the two sides is a small splinter group and the other a bigger group or camp, different dynamics might be at play, with different political consequences. It might thus be more adequate to capture those processes as radicalisation or marginalisation – depending on the power relations and the nature of the respective groups. Next to that, size is not only about numbers – which can also change over time, as Wagner (2021) has rightfully pointed out – but also about representative claims. As Rose and Mishler (1998) argue in the case of post-Communist Central and Eastern European countries, dislike of specialised minority parties is a different type of negative partisanship than dislike of large parties that appeal to a majority. While the former is considered to be less threatening for democracy, the latter might contribute more to polarisation. Next to the simple numerical size, the kind of representative claims and appeals the respective groups make might thus also be a relevant aspect to investigate.

Lastly, as those preceding points already show, it is important to keep in mind that the mere question of the quantitative degree of affective polarisation might not necessarily be the only criterion to assess how “severe” affective polarisation is. For both analytical and normative reasons, a more nuanced conceptualisation of affective polarisation should also include questioning the implicit (normative) symmetry assumption inherent in affective polarisation and paying closer attention to the context in which affective polarisation takes place. Current research on affective polarisation generally seems to leave the specific historical and contextual constellations of the different political identities and evaluations aside and investigates polarisation as a more or less ‘neutral’ development between two camps which are equally involved in the process. Especially against the background of growing clashes between emancipatory identity politics and right-wing populist backlash that many liberal democracies are witnessing today, however, it is important to question whether “polarisation” is really the most appropriate way to capture the ensuing dynamics of dislike or whether they should instead be seen at least as ‘asymmetric polarisation’ (Hacker and Pierson, 2015) or specifically of (illiberal) backlash (Alter and Zürn, 2020; Mansbridge and Shames, 2008; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). In line with that, even if the dislike is coming from both sides, it might be evaluated differently. Depending on the context, as Meléndez and Kaltwasser (2021), argue, dislike of certain political groups might even be considered as a sign of democratic resilience rather than necessarily a reason for concern.

This also implies that a stronger degree of affective polarisation – even if it accounts for the number of (in- and out-) groups, the mutuality of dislike, the degree of alignment and the size of the groups – need not always be equally problematic from a normative point of view. While a thorough discussion of the normative underpinnings and implications of affective polarisation would go beyond the scope of this paper, it is nevertheless important to keep in mind that a closer look at the reasons for dislike, the context and nature of the respective groups, their identity construction, the role of ideological and moral standpoints and values in generating out-group dislike and the political processes involved in all of these remains crucial for properly understanding and assessing the dynamics of affective polarisation at play.

4. Concluding remarks

There is clearly something going on in contemporary liberal democratic societies that makes people concerned about societal division, polarisation, hostility, intolerance or incivility. The United States are one example that shows quite effectively how serious political conflict can become not only on a political but also on a societal level. Research

¹⁸ See, e.g., Fuller et al. (2022, p. 5), which shows the right-wing populist RN in one corner and the other parties more or less closely together in the opposite corner.

¹⁹ It is arguably not only the degree of alignment but also the degree of mutuality and intensity of the mutual dislike that make pernicious polarisation a strong variant of affective polarisation. At the same time, while I here characterise the difference between affective polarisation and pernicious polarisation as a difference of degree, pernicious polarisation could also be considered to go beyond affective polarisation as it not only accounts for mass public opinion but also looks at the degree to which the division into camps permeates society and institutions as a whole (e.g. McCoy and Somer, 2021b).

²⁰ To a certain extent, the questions of size and mutuality of dislike also matter for capturing the degree of affective polarisation in two-party systems. However, given that the relevance of both parties is much more implied in the design of the system, and that the mutuality of dislike is much more probable if only two parties are present, those considerations are much less central than in multi-party systems.

on affective polarisation has started to take a closer look at the nature of such political conflict. It goes beyond ideological or issue disagreements by adding insights about the importance of political identities, the extent to which people dislike each other based on political characteristics and what this does to politics and society. In other words, it looks at how people relate to each other politically and how this affects political processes and societal relations.

While the literature on affective polarisation has recently started to move beyond its original focus on the United States, especially its application to multi-party systems has revealed several conceptual ambiguities. Those concern the question of who is the object of dislike, what the nature of that dislike is and how to make sense of the concept of polarisation in this context. In this paper, I have attempted to shed some light on those ambiguities but to also use them to clarify the concept of affective polarisation, differentiate it from neighbouring concepts and to further distinguish between different constellations and degrees of affective polarisation. I conclude by outlining the main arguments and possible directions for future research.

First, I argue that one should distinguish between vertical and horizontal *targets of (dis)like* and that it is horizontal (dis)like which allows one to capture the specifically relational nature of affective polarisation. Within such horizontal (dis)like, one could look at (dis)like between partisans but also go beyond the narrow focus on electoral politics to study the affective relationships between any other political or politicised social groups. In this context, it might also be interesting to compare those opinion groups that are more formally organised (and, e.g., have a “label”, such as “Remainers” and “Leavers”) and those that are not organised but simply consist of people who share the same attitudes on a certain policy issue.

Second, our understanding of affective polarisation would benefit from a more careful distinction and investigation of different *expressions of dislike*, ranging from latent attitudes or perceptions via discrete emotions to behavioural intentions or manifest behaviour. Distinguishing between different expressions of dislike can pave the way for a better understanding of different underlying causes and potential consequences of “dislike”. Future research could study those expressions more specifically, but also start looking into the different societal patterns that can arise from different expressions of “dislike”, such as more avoidant segregation on the one hand or active conflict on the other.

Third, affective polarisation as a subtype of political *polarisation* can be conceptualised as the affective distance between clusters which are characterised by shared positive in-group evaluations and whose distance from each other is based on mutual dislike. To speak of affective polarisation in the strict sense of the term, one thus needs to observe both negative out-group evaluations and positive in-group evaluations. Given existing ambiguities in the literature, however, further specifications can be made regarding this conceptualisation, which ultimately pave the way for a more nuanced conceptualisation of affective polarisation.

Firstly, in- and out-group evaluations need not be two sides of the same coin, as sometimes assumed by Social Identity Theory-based accounts. While positive in-group evaluations and negative out-group evaluations *can* be related, this process can also be much more political and less mechanistic than sometimes portrayed. Similarly, while affective polarisation *can* be a function of identity dynamics, not every positive in-group evaluation needs to reflect an in-group *identification*. Identity-based affective polarisation could thus be considered one particular variant of affective polarisation but not every type of affective polarisation is identity-based. At the same time, even if in- and out-group evaluations are not related via identity-based mechanisms – or even related at all – it is nevertheless their co-occurrence which distinguishes affective polarisation from neighbouring concepts such as out-group dislike, negative political identity, political support and positive political identity. I thus tentatively propose to use the presence and nature of in-and out-group evaluations as dimensions of a typology of political group relations and evaluations. Affective polarisation as a

wider umbrella term here describes one column (based on the simultaneous presence of in-and out-group evaluations) and identity-based affective polarisation one variant within that column (based on evaluations as identity rather than more general attitudes). Future research could further develop this typology (e.g. the attitude-based variant of affective polarisation). More generally, however, it could start paying even more explicit attention to the presence, nature and relationship between in- and out-group evaluations to avoid conflating affective polarisation with related, yet distinct, phenomena, and to get a better understanding of the political and contextual dynamics at play in political inter-group relations.

Secondly, one can distinguish between polarisation as a *state* of significant affective distance between two camps and polarisation as a *process* towards that state. This process can be driven by increasing in-group like, by increasing out-group dislike, or by both at the same time. Future research could trace such processes with longitudinal data, distinguish between the different forms they can take, and further conceptualise their respective implications for the functioning of liberal democracies.

Lastly, while the (growing) affective distance between two groups also implies a certain measure of *degree* of affective polarisation, in the specific context of multi-party systems, it is important to also take into account the number of (in- and out-)groups, the mutuality of their dislike, the degree of alignment of different groups and identities along one dimension and the size of the respective groups to properly capture the extent to which society is divided into two mutually opposing, antagonistic camps. Even when doing so, however, it remains important to also consider the historical and contextual constellations behind such antagonism to be able to make a more nuanced (normative) assessment of the dynamics at play.

Research on affective polarisation in contexts beyond the United States is yet in its infancy. This also means that there is still a lot of room to explore what exactly is at the heart of this phenomenon. This paper has tried to contribute to this exploration by providing a tentative conceptualisation of affective polarisation as well as suggesting potential pathways to account for the complexities of its core elements, identity and affect and polarisation. Hopefully, some of those ideas can help shed light on the dynamics of affective polarisation and provide a more nuanced understanding of their implications for the functioning of liberal democracy.

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Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

An overview of the articles used for the systematic literature review can be found in the [Supplementary Material](#).

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Appendix I

Methodological approach

Selection of Articles

The critical literature review is based on a systematic reading of 78 published articles that deal with affective polarisation in multi-party systems. Those articles have been identified by entering the keyword “affective polari*ation” in the academic search engines *Google Scholar* and *Web of Science* as well as by checking cross-references in those articles. Given the focus of the present article on affective polarisation in multi-party systems, only those articles have been selected that look at affective polarisation in at least one multi-party system. This means that articles with an exclusive focus on the United States, as well as those that only look at dynamics of affective polarisation online (with no specification of the context), have been excluded from the analysis. Furthermore, given my interest in definitions and conceptualisations of affective polarisation, articles that do not provide either, whether explicit or implicit, and that only mention affective polarisation in passing, have also been excluded. Lastly, while diverging conceptualisations of affective polarisation in different academic disciplines (especially Political Science and Communication Science) are part of the ambiguity that I aim to capture in this paper, those approaches that clearly speak to an entirely different phenomenon (e.g. psychotherapeutic discussions of affective polarisation) have also been excluded. The review includes only articles published in English and before the 1st of October 2022.

Coding of articles

For each article, I coded the following information.

- Author(s), Year of publication, Title,
- Journal and Academic discipline (if applicable, subfield)
- General Approach of the paper
- Countries
- Definition of affective polarisation (could be explicit or implicit)
- Role of affective polarisation in the paper/study (Dependent variable, Independent Variable, Control variable, Context/Background of study, Theoretical/Conceptual discussion, Methodological discussion, Description of trends)
- Who is the target of dislike in the conceptualisation (parties, party elites, partisans, citizens with other political identity more generally, or a combination of those)
- Who is the target of dislike in the measurement approach²¹ (parties, party elites, partisans, citizens with other political identity more generally, or a combination of those)
- Is the conceptual focus more on identity or on out-group dislike?
- How is affective polarisation measured?

Appendix II. Descriptive results

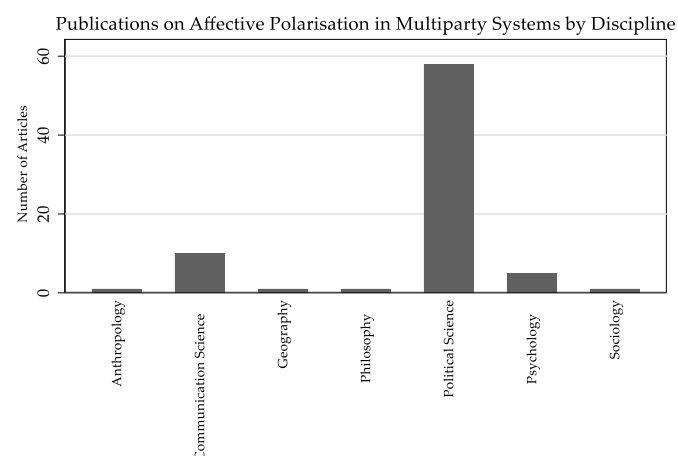


Fig. 1. Distribution of publications by discipline

²¹ Given the scarcity of data on dislike towards partisans or citizens, several authors conceptualise affective polarisation as horizontal and relational (between citizens/partisans) but nevertheless have to resort to measuring dislike towards parties (i.e. vertical dislike) as a proxy. To get a better sense of how affective polarisation is understood in the field, it is thus worth distinguishing between how it is conceptualised and how it is measured.

Table 1
Distribution target of dislike in conceptualisation^a:

Target	Frequency	Percentage
Parties	11	23.4%
Partisans	10	21.28%
Citizens	7	14.89%
Parties and Partisans	12	25.53%
Parties and Citizens	2	4.26%
Partisans and Citizens	2	4.26%
Parties, Partisans and Citizens	3	6.38%

^a Excluding articles where conceptualisation was unclear or not available.

Table 2
Distribution target of dislike in measurement^a

Target	Frequency	Percentage
Parties	31	45.59%
Partisans	9	13.24%
Citizens	14	20.59%
Parties and Partisans	8	11.76%
Parties and Citizens	3	4.41%
Partisans and Citizens	1	1.47%
Parties, Partisans and Citizens	2	2.94%

^a Excluding articles with no direct measurement of affective polarisation or unclear target of dislike.

Table 3
Distribution identity or out-group dislike^a

Focus of conceptualisation (I/O)	Frequency	Percentage
Identity	19	27.94%
Outgroup dislike	40	58.82%
Both	6	8.82%
Unclear	3	4.41%

^a Excluding articles with no direct measurement of affective polarisation or unclear target of dislike.

Table 4
Distribution of measurement approaches^{a,b,c,d}

Measurement approach	Frequency	Percentage
Feeling thermometer/like-dislike scale	45	65.22%
Social distance measures	3	4.35%
Trust games	1	1.45%
Trait ratings	2	2.9%
Qualitative approaches	2	2.9%
Mix of approaches	10	14.49%
Others	6	8.7%

^a Who is the object of dislike according to the paper's conceptualisation of affective polarisation?.

^b Who is the object of dislike according to the paper's measurement of affective polarisation?.

^c Does affective polarisation seem to be conceptualised primarily as a matter of identity dynamics (formation of camps, in-group identification required), or of outgroup dislike?.

^d Irrespective of the type of out-group/target of dislike.

Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary material to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102655>.

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