

Hutter, Swen; Schwander, Hanna; Specht, Jule; von Scheve, Christian

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Coping with affective polarization: A research program

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Swen Hutter, Hanna Schwander, Jule Specht and Christian von Scheve

Coping with Affective Polarization: A Research Program

Discussion Paper

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WZB Berlin Social Science Center
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Germany
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Affiliation of the authors:

Swen Hutter

Department of Political and Social Sciences, Freie Universität Berlin
Center for Civil Society Research, Freie Universität Berlin & WZB Berlin Social Science Center

Hanna Schwander

Department of Social Sciences, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Jule Specht

Department of Psychology, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Christian von Scheve

Department of Political and Social Sciences, Freie Universität Berlin

Coping with Affective Polarization: A Research Program

Swen Hutter^{1, 2}, Hanna Schwander³, Jule Specht⁴, and Christian von Scheve¹

¹Department of Political and Social Sciences, Freie Universität Berlin

²Center for Civil Society Research, Freie Universität Berlin & WZB Berlin Social Science Center

³Department of Social Sciences, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

⁴Department of Psychology, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Abstract

This discussion paper outlines a research program that addresses the question of how societies can cope with the negative consequences of affective polarization. Polarization is at the center of current debates about the erosion of social cohesion. Particularly prominent is the phenomenon of affective polarization – the tendency of individuals and groups to feel close to like-minded people while harboring negative emotions and derogatory attitudes towards those with opposing views. Affective polarization is especially harmful because it may inhibit cooperation and compromise across political camps, reduce trust in government, increase intolerance, fuel hate speech and even political violence, and thereby threaten democracy itself.

The central question is how societies can manage affective polarization to mitigate its detrimental effects. We argue that social cohesion represents a key resource for societies to constructively address affective polarization and prevent its negative consequences, with civil society serving as a critical arena for implementing and examining this capacity.

Our proposed research program builds on a theoretically grounded and extensive empirical investigation of affective polarization and coping strategies, combining interdisciplinarity with a rich set of methodological approaches. Specifically, the program pursues three goals:

- 1) Establishing the Berlin Polarization Monitor: This infrastructure will track developments in affective polarization in Berlin and Germany at large. The monitor, based on a large-scale panel survey study, will enable continuous analysis of the dynamics of affective polarization and inform both academic research and the broader public about its patterns and drivers.
- 2) Identifying coping strategies: The main empirical ambition is to identify strategies at the levels of (a) individuals, (b) situated social interactions, and (c) civil society organizations to manage and cope with affective polarization.
- 3) Developing applied interventions: Based on the empirical findings, we will derive two sets of interventions at the micro- and group-level to support coping and constructive engagement with affective polarization. A key feature is the co-design of these interventions in collaboration with civil society partners, ensuring their relevance and applicability to everyday contexts.

Introduction¹

Polarization is at the center of current debates about the erosion of social cohesion (Mau, 2022; Teney & Rupieper, 2023). Particularly hotly debated is the phenomenon of affective polarization – commonly understood as the tendency of individuals to feel closer to like-minded people and more distant towards other-minded people. Originating from the U.S. two-party system and initially focusing on partisan feelings, the concept has been increasingly applied to European democracies and beyond, which are found to be polarized as well, although to a varying extent (Gidron et al., 2020; Herold et al. 2024; Reiljan, 2020; Röllicke, 2023; Wagner, 2021). Moreover, recent research has also shown that not only partisan feelings can serve as the basis for affective polarization, but also issues (Hobolt et al., 2021; Hrbková et al., 2023; Schieferdecker et al., 2024). The very idea of democracy is unthinkable save in terms of controversy and conflict. But while controversies about issue positions, issue priorities, and informed critique of political actors, their competencies, and performances are a democratic *sine qua non*, this becomes less and less true when it comes to democratic principles, such as tolerance for legitimate views, acceptance of democratic outcomes, and trust in democratic institutions. If individuals start to engage in in-group favoritism and out-group hostility, this can have potentially detrimental consequences for society: A society in which political debates are not characterized by rational deliberation and the exchange of factual arguments but rather by a confrontation of agitated political camps may lose the ability to cooperate and compromise as there is no longer the possibility to “see us in them” (Sirin et al., 2021).

In such polarized situations, people may be less willing to interact with “the other side” in their daily lives (Gidron et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019; Wagner, 2021). Increasing hate speech, tribalization, incivility, intolerance, and moralization of opponents are among the more severe identified negative consequences of affective polarization. Furthermore, affective polarization might also threaten democracy as a rule of governance by undermining the problem-solving capacity of democratic institutions and the peaceful transfer of power (Kalmoe & Mason, 2022a, 2022b; Orhan, 2022) as well as trust in the government more generally (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015). It may even lead to the dehumanization of the political opponent (Martherus et al., 2021), inciting the risk of political violence (Kalmoe & Mason, 2022a, 2022b), and ultimately risking democratic backsliding (Haggard & Kaufmann, 2021).

The Einstein Research Unit on Coping with Affective Polarization shares the view of affective polarization as a potentially worrisome development across contemporary societies. It is potentially worrisome because, other than the simple disagreement over political issues or even issue-based polarization, affective polarization might imply the devaluation of and negative affect towards other-minded people and seeing societies and their institutions in antagonistic terms of “us versus them.” The perception of political competitors in binary terms (“them”) reduces incentives for the kind of policy compromises that are required for democratic governance to be effective, especially in times of rising societal differentiation and coalition complexities. The innovative core of the Einstein Research Unit on Coping with Affective Polarization lies in developing a more nuanced, group-based, and dynamic understanding of affective polarization, adapted to the multidimensional conflict structures in contemporary European democracies (Borbáth et al., 2023; Hooghe & Marks, 2019; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Schwander et

¹ The discussion paper is a shortened version of our proposal for the Einstein Research Unit on “Coping with Affective Polarization: How Civil Society Fosters Social Cohesion.” We thank all our fellow PIs and the people involved in writing and evaluating the proposal.

al., 2022; Teney et al., 2014). Moreover, in contrast to the many approaches on how to eliminate affective polarization (see Hartman et al., 2022, for a review), we contend that some level and form of affective polarization is a characteristic of almost every society (see Gidron et al., 2020, for a comparative assessment in advanced democracies) but we have to pay close attention to its negative behavioral, attitudinal, and emotional consequences.

Affective polarization thus tends to be a part of societies that experience conflict and competition between political entities over ideas and policies; more recently, however, polarization has extended from group-based antagonisms to democratic institutions and their established rules and social norms designed to foster rational deliberation. Therefore, in our view, contemporary challenges are not so much to ward off affective polarization entirely, but to develop a better understanding of it and, on this basis, create policies and nourish practices that allow societies to cope with citizens' tendencies to feel distant to other-minded people and closer to like-minded people while limiting its negative consequences. Ultimately, in this consortium, we argue that social cohesion is a resource for societies to constructively handle the tendency of humans to categorize others using simplified "us versus them" dichotomies.

In the following, we outline the research program of the Einstein Research Unit in four steps: First, we present the main goals of the research program; second, we discuss our understanding of social cohesion as a resource for coping with affective polarization; third, we examine the essential role of civil society in fostering social cohesion; and finally, we sketch how this work will advance existing research across various fields and disciplines.

Main Goals of the Research Program

The goal of the Einstein Research Unit on Coping with Affective Polarization is a theoretically grounded, extensive empirical examination of affective polarization and coping strategies, combining a rich set of rigorous methodological approaches. Its central question is what kind of coping strategies work in today's more individualized and informal civil society landscape. Specifically, our project pursues three sets of goals:

- (1) Establishing a Berlin Polarization Monitor (BPM) to track developments of affective polarization in Germany lies at the heart of the research program. The monitor will be a data infrastructure to continuously examine the dynamics of affective polarization based on a large-scale panel survey study. The monitor is designed to empirically assess the rise and fall of affective polarization around both well-known and newly emerging political issues and study the political and social dynamics around these issues. Furthermore, we will communicate its findings to the public in regular intervals, delivering an empirical base for ongoing public debates around the state of public opinion and polarization in Germany.
- (2) Most empirical work in the current funding period is done in three Research Streams that identify strategies at the level of (a) the individual, (b) situated social interactions, and (c) civil society groups to cope with affective polarization in contemporary societies. Complementing existing social science approaches to societal resilience and conflict resolution, a cross-level study on the psychological literature on problem- and emotion-focused coping and predictors that may promote engagement and empowerment or provide protection and resilience is built on. Note that all three levels address issues of civic and political engagement.
- (3) We will combine our results from the three levels of analysis to derive two sets of applied interventions on the micro- and the group-level for coping and actively dealing with

affective polarization. In this step, we will collaborate closely with our civil society partners to co-design interventions and translate the identified strategies into their everyday contexts.

Within our established interdisciplinary research team—comprising personality, developmental, and social psychologists, as well as political scientists, sociologists, communication scholars, psychiatrists, and philosophers—and supported by a strong and reliable network of transdisciplinary partners, we are well positioned to bridge questions of international basic research with national and, ultimately, transnational applications. Aside from empirical and applied research, our aim is to also advance theoretical, conceptual, and methodological work on affective polarization and social cohesion going beyond an understanding of affective polarization that capitalizes on the U.S. bipartisan context.

Social Cohesion as a Resource to Cope with Affective Polarization

Beyond Partisan Understandings of Affective Polarization

Affective polarization, as understood here, is the idea that individuals tend to feel closer to social groups of like-minded people and more distant from those with opposing views, which simultaneously comes along with the expression of “positive in-group affect and negative out-group affect” (Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2024). Affective polarization is thus a ‘horizontal’ evaluation of in- and out-group affects that capture patterns of like and dislike at the citizen level. As such it is distinct from ‘vertical’ evaluations of partisan elites (Harteveld, 2021).

Affective polarization is also distinct from ideological polarization. The latter refers to differences based on policy preferences, be it at elite level (elite polarization) or the level of ordinary citizens (issue-driven/ideological mass polarization). The literature on ideological polarization advances two distinct understandings of ideological polarization. Some scholars (Abramowitz, 2010; Abramowitz & Webster, 2016) consider polarization as alignment between partisan identity and personal ideology combined with an internal consistency of attitudes (see also Hill & Tausanovitch, 2015), while others see diverging policy preferences as the key component of ideological polarization (Fiorina, 2017; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Fiorina & Levendusky, 2006). In contrast to these forms of polarization, affective polarization encompasses more affective, valence-based attitudes (e.g., “dislike,” “hate”) that can be void of propositional contents (such as beliefs). Second, it is usually identity-based (“in-group” versus “out-group”) and has an intentional structure (an “aboutness”; Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019; Mason, 2016; Neubaum, 2021). Affective polarization imbues targets (i.e., other individuals or groups) with an affective (dis-)value. We also take a broader perspective on affective polarization in that we not only account for a basic valence (positive vs. negative) dimension of polarization, but also assume that discrete emotions (e.g., hate, spite, malice, resentment, anger) indicate specific types of affectively polarized social relations.

Our conceptualization of affective polarization enriches traditional understandings in two important ways: First, key to our understanding of affective polarization is the separation of affective polarization as the human tendency to feel closer to like-minded people and more distant to other-minded people from its negative consequences in terms of attitudes, emotions, and behavior. We argue that in today’s societies with their many conflicts, the informal organization of their civil societies, the rise of social media and relevance of affect, this tendency to categorize and to load the categorization with affect is inherently human and almost unavoidable. From a normative, democratic theory standpoint, it is the negative attitudinal, emotional and behavior consequences (such as a reduced willingness to cooperate or compromise,

reduced trust in governments, the erosion of democratic norms [e.g., disregarding the rules of democratic transfer of power], and a willingness to accept or even engage in political violence) to which so many scholars and commentators refer when they denounce affective polarization as a worrisome development (Haggard & Kaufmann, 2021; Klein, 2020; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Mason, 2018; McCoy et al., 2018; Orhan, 2022; Sirin et al., 2021; Wagner, 2024).

Second, our conceptualization of affective polarization goes beyond social categories along partisan lines. In today's diverse societies with multi-dimensional conflicts, focusing on different kinds of social units and categories is a more appropriate starting point to capture emerging affective polarization in advanced democracies. Rather than limiting affective polarization to partisan camps—an approach common in much of the research focused on the two-party U.S. context (for a review, see Iyengar et al., 2019)—this perspective instead considers the multi-party systems of advanced democracies in Europe and Israel (Gidron et al., 2022; Rejljan, 2020; Wagner, 2024). These units and categories include, but are not limited to, social and political identities (e.g., religious affiliations, party preferences), sociodemographic categories (e.g., age, gender, origin), associations (e.g., clubs, unions), as well as digital and local communities, including the various intersections of these identity-shaping dimensions. Many of these categories and identities become vocal and organized in civil society groups as sites of conflict and contestation, but also as sources of compromise and communal bonds. In our view, this perspective better reflects the multidimensional conflict structures in Europe today, where conflicts related to economic, cultural, and political issues do not necessarily align in partisan camps, as can be seen in cleavages over responses to climate change, social inequality, national security and financial stability (see, e.g., Borbáth et al., 2023; de Wilde et al., 2019; Ford & Jennings, 2020; Hooghe & Marks, 2019; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Schwander et al., 2022). With this conceptualization of affective polarization, we bring the literature of affective polarization closer to the study of social cleavage, a bridge that is currently weakly developed (but see Borbáth et al. 2023, Helbling & Jungkunz, 2020; Schwander et al., 2022), but strongly warranted (Wagner, 2024).

Our approach is also more apt to capture crisis-related developments: In times of multiple and rapidly successive crises, affective polarization might ignite over many different conflicts (Mau et al., 2023). These conflicts can arise from momentary issues evoked by one of the many crises (e.g., energy costs, inflation, the Russian war in Ukraine), longstanding issues of contestation (e.g., migration, climate change, social inequality), or the complex interplay and overlap of these issues (e.g., Hunger et al., 2023). Furthermore, focusing on different kinds of social units instead of exclusively non-partisan camps offers the possibility to examine affective polarization in the context of civil society and social movements, which often act at the center of negotiating and debating emerging conflicts before they are embedded in partisan competition.

Why might Affective Polarization Be on the Rise in Contemporary Societies?

We argue that many of today's advanced democracies are at particular risk for affective polarization. This is due to a number of different societal developments:

First, society is less and less structured along permanent formal social groups. For example, there is a decreasing number of memberships in formal civil society organizations, in political parties, and a decreasing number of individuals with religious affiliations (e.g., Grande et al., 2021; Putnam & Feldstein, 2004; van Biezen et al., 2012). This does not mean that people have become less social over time, but rather that identification with and the feeling of

belonging to social groups is more volatile against the backdrop of increasingly heterogeneous societies nowadays (Fuchs et al., 2021). From this follows that people leave social groups they feel less connected to (instead of, for example, debating or making a change within the social group). This means that social groups continuously have to campaign to retain existing members, gain new members, and combat or refrain from others they consider hostile to their group identity. Therefore, emotions play a central role in identification with a social group and are strategically used to win and maintain group members.

Second, social media and digital platforms are increasingly crucial as infrastructures and motors of public discourse. Whereas traditional mass media features one-way communication from journalists to the public, social media offers networked flows of communication and a broad and dynamic set of attitudes that compete with each other for societal attention. Social media postings with a higher intensity of emotional tone are known to elicit more attention and are shared more widely. Thus, emotive arguments have a systematic benefit in the various social media, igniting, and reinforcing discourses that are polarizing instead of compromising (Banks et al., 2021; Törnberg, 2022; Yarchi et al., 2021).

Third, and in contrast to early research arguing that modern societies are largely “affect neutral” (Parsons, 1937), recent research has shown that this view is mistaken and that, on the contrary, affect and emotion are essential to all key domains and institutions of modern societies (Slaby & von Scheve, 2019). Historically, modes of social organization have shifted from highly integrated, close-knit communities with strong emotional bonds and polarized intergroup relations to functionally differentiated forms of social coexistence characterized by the division of labor, complex procedural rules and norms, and formal institutions, many of which are designed to keep emotions at bay and to promote rational deliberation. This does not imply, however, that emotions have been confined to the private and communal spheres. They are as much a part of democratic processes and social institutions as they are of groups and communities (Churcher et al., 2022). Contemporary societies are characterized by a notable sensitivity to and preoccupation with emotions: Reckwitz (2018), for example, describes an “affect society” whose logics are largely determined by an “intensification of affect” (p. 17). Similarly, Bude (2016) refers to emotions as central to the relationship between individuals and societies. Arguably, contemporary societies and their institutions have not yet developed techniques and strategies to address, channel, and productively use highly politicized forms of affect, such that affective polarization remains a significant risk factor for societies today.

As a result of these scholarly insights, we consider affective polarization to be an enduring characteristic of contemporary societies (see Gidron et al., 2020), which does not imply that it is in itself a historically novel phenomenon, but rather that different trends and transformations have contributed to an amplification and increased visibility of it. These structural trends are amplified by the quick succession of shocks and crises in the last two decades, providing ample room for conflict and group (trans-)transformations (e.g., the Euro crisis, climate change, COVID19, Russia’s war against Ukraine), that are in themselves sources of strong affect (ranging from insecurities and hopelessness to anger, rage, and hate), which are highly visible and a central locus of public debate.

Therefore, our consortium argues that affective polarization is a common characteristic of many types of social organization which tends to become problematic from the normative standpoint of liberal democratic societies when (a) large parts of a population are engaged in affective polarization, (b) affective polarization overlaps with reinforcing worldviews, political issues, and ideologies, (c) emotional group attachment translate into overly negative affective,

cognitive, behavioral outcomes, such as prejudice, misperceptions, lack of empathy or willingness to compromise, verbal aggression, dehumanization or political violence, and (d) norms of democratic accountability deteriorate (e.g., Hartman et al., 2022; Santoro & Broockman, 2022; McCoy et al., 2018). Affective polarization, is therefore of utmost importance to explore.

What May Limit and Contain the Negative Consequences of Affective Polarization?

Recent research has seen a surge in studies that started examining different kinds of interventions at cognitive, relational, and institutional levels to reduce affective polarization and, potentially, its detrimental consequences (see Hartman et al., 2022, and Voelkel et al., 2023, for comprehensive reviews). Aside from the inconclusive evidence these studies yield, a major challenge is that many successful interventions seem to have a limited half-life, with effects lasting for weeks or months at best (e.g., Levendusky & Stecula, 2021), which is in line with more general findings of the intergroup contact literature (Paluck et al., 2019).

Therefore, a central tenet of our approach is that certain properties of societies—such as institutional arrangements, patterns of stratification, and structures of public and political deliberation and communication—make them more or less resilient to these detrimental consequences. In particular, social cohesion can be seen as a society’s capacity to cope with affective polarization. We suggest understanding social cohesion as a multi-dimensional resource (at micro-, meso-, and macro-social levels) that can be drawn upon to minimize or prevent the negative attitudinal, behavioral, and emotional outcomes of in-group favoritism and out-group hostility, such as intolerance, hostility, or even violence. This perspective draws on theory and research that emphasize the relational properties of social cohesion (i.e., social networks, social capital), thereby complementing long-dominant individualistic approaches in social cohesion research (Chan et al., 2006; Friedkin, 2004; Schieffer & van der Noll, 2017).

A relational understanding acknowledges the importance of well-established individual-level dimensions of social cohesion, such as trust, solidarity, shared values, feelings of belonging, and mutual tolerance, but ultimately sees cohesion as a property of different types of social collectives (e.g., teams, communities, organizations, societies). In this view, cohesion is thus understood in terms of (the properties of) individuals and of social collectives, and how they relate to each other through various forms of exchange, communication, and social interaction (von Scheve et al., 2023). This requires paying attention to the principles of these relations, in particular (a) networks, communications, discourses, social encounters, and mediated interactions, (b) the rules and institutions governing these types of exchange, as well as (c) their potential to generate (or prevent) the emergence of horizontal bridging/bonding and vertical linking capital (e.g., Kyne & Aldrich, 2020; Putnam, 2000).

Importantly, a relational understanding of social cohesion also goes beyond static and normative ideals of a centripetal, homogenous, and conflict-free “cohesive” society. The relational approach to cohesion acknowledges that contemporary societies are characterized by “a complex diversity of difference” (Landfried, 2011, p. 15) and related conflicts and cleavages. Relational approaches to cohesion therefore do not imply the absence of conflict but instead assume that the ways in which conflicting interests and worldviews are enacted, negotiated, resolved or protracted determine the emergence, maintenance, and erosion of cohesion. From this vantage point, cohesion can very well be conceived of as society’s resources and abilities to cope with and actively shape potentially detrimental outcomes of affective polarization. This requires, for example, understanding whether and how societies supply means and

opportunities for meaningful interactions within and across polarized groups; build institutions that may revise or prevent misconceptions of outgroup members and strengthen democratic values, or incentivize civil society initiatives that motivate citizens to “see us in them” (Sirin et al., 2021), despite negative affect and antagonism.

Our proposed focus on (a relational understanding of) social cohesion as a resource to cope with detrimental consequences of affective polarization also implies a specific social theory. We broadly subscribe to a relational social theory which assumes, first, that social order is not regarded as an already established structural or symbolic form but is rather conceived of as a process or a set of processes produced in interactions (Dépelteau, 2018). Second, individual and collective actors do not exist independently of their relationships to others but are only mutually constituted through these very relations (Emirbayer, 1997, p. 296). Relational social theory is, amongst other things, a response to the persistent challenges of overcoming agency structure or micro-macro divides, such as in methodological individualism: Relations are not understood as static, but rather as dynamic and process-related connections between social entities (Emirbayer, 1997). The link between actors and social order is thus in principle construed dialectically since both actors and social orders are constantly and mutually reconfigured. These constant reconfigurations take place primarily through interaction and communication and are mediated by more or less stable interaction structures, in particular at meso-levels of analysis, for example networks, fields, institutions, organizations, or arrangements (see also Crossley, 2022; Donati & Archer, 2015; von Scheve, 2018).

Contemporary Civil Society, Affective Polarization, and Social Cohesion

These perspectives on affective polarization and social cohesion, and in particular the relevance of meso-level social entities, such as institutions and organizations, for linking social micro- to macro-levels, suggest to us that civil society is an essential site of analysis, both theoretically and empirically, because it has traditionally been associated with both affective polarization and social cohesion.

The concept of civil society has a long tradition in political thought and public debate. It is often directly associated with ideas of the common good or desirable forms of human interactions (for an overview, see Edwards, 2011). Standard approaches in civil society and social cohesion research have often assumed a straightforward positive relationship between the two phenomena: the stronger civil society and civic engagement are, the stronger is social cohesion. This assumption builds on the idea that civil society offers sites where social circles overlap, where people with different opinions meet and interact, and where organizational integration ultimately allows forging compromises and bridging social and political divisions accordingly (e.g., Putnam, 1994; Taylor-Gooby, 2012). The positive link between civil society and social cohesion is also visible in standard social cohesion measures, counting the share of people who engage in civic and political actions regardless of the specific activities and makeup of the groups involved in organizing and mobilizing citizens (for an overview, see Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017).

While we agree that there is a tight link between civil society and social cohesion, we argue that we need to rethink how interactions in civil society can (or cannot) contribute to cope with the detrimental consequences of affective polarization. On the one hand, this is necessary because in the Einstein Research Unit on Coping with Affective Polarization we take a less normative and more sectoral approach to the phenomenon of civil society. We consider civil

society "the sphere of uncoerced human association between the individual and the state, in which people undertake collective action for normative and substantive purposes, relatively independent of government and the market" (Edwards, 2011, p. 4). The activities we consider range from political to civic engagement, and the ideological spectrum from progressive to regressive groups. The types of voluntary associations in civil society we have in mind range from recreational associations (such as sports or music clubs), non-profit organizations, environmental, and human rights advocacy groups to social movement and protest networks (such as Fridays for Future or the *Querdenker*). We pay particular attention to organizational networks in civil society – be it informal social movements or more formal coalitions (on the difference, see Diani, 2015) – as they are crucial for both the articulation of societal divisions and the building of bridges across different groups in society for achieving common goals (on the ever stronger empirical and theoretical overlaps between civil society and social movement studies, see Della Porta, 2020).

On the other hand, this reconsideration is warranted because the "cement of civil society" (Diani, 2015) itself has changed. Civil society research has systematically documented the structural changes in the civic landscape (for a recent summary of the German case, see Grande et al., 2021, or Hutter & Weisskircher, 2023). The crucial developments towards individualization, informalization, politicization, emotionalization, and crisis-induced engagement in civil society reflect the above-mentioned macro trends in society at large (see Section 2.3.2). On the organizational level, these trends are reflected in the decline of formal mass organizations (such as unions or faith-based associations), the rise of informal and loose network structures and initiatives, as well as the emergence of rather heterogeneous movements, often bound by their lowest common denominator of hostility against particular out-groups or the political class (e.g., Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2019; Hunger et al., 2023). On the individual level, we observe ad-hoc and episodic engagement, the emergence of "new volunteers" or "plug-in activists" with different expectations concerning their activism, which is often strongly driven by affect and emotion (e.g., Eliasoph, 2011; Lichterman & Eliasoph, 2014). Since these are often expressed and reinforced on digital platforms and social media infrastructures, it provides opportunities to explore and develop coping strategies specifically tailored to those information environments.

Civil society therefore becomes particularly relevant to our approach in two ways: First, it is a social arena that contributes significantly to the production and erosion of social cohesion – hence to the societal resources to cope with the negative consequences of affective polarization. From our relational perspective, it does so by influencing the ways in which individual and collective actors in society relate to each other, for example by providing means and avenues of meaningful social exchange across and beyond political camps or by shutting off certain citizens from others, promoting internal cohesion while at the same time driving overall segregation and exclusion. Second, if social cohesion is a resource to deal with the negative consequences of affective polarization, this resource needs to be mobilized and put to use. Civil society is an active agent in utilizing these resources, for example when engaging in prosocial collective action across cultural and social boundaries. At the same time, however, civil society can also drive affective polarization, for example when civil society organizations instigate discourses that reinforce in-group/out-group antagonism and cut off ties with other groups and institutions in society.

Given that civil society can contribute to the production or erosion of social cohesion, we asked how civil society is actively involved in driving or buffering affective polarization and how it actively engages in utilizing different dimensions of cohesion as coping resources for the

negative attitudinal, behavioral, and emotional consequences of affective polarization. Importantly, in our study of civil society, we consider the much more diverse structure of today's civil society, ranging from individual, often episodic civic and political engagement via informal and loosely structured networks and movements to highly professionalized and centralized associations. To conceptualize and empirically test how civil society on these different levels of analysis helps (or not) to cope with affective polarization, the project builds much-needed bridges between civil society research (with its strong organizational focus) and the coping literature in psychology, as introduced in the following section.

Strategies for Coping with Affective Polarization: Bringing in the Coping Literature In

To conceptualize the putting-into-use of cohesion resources that may buffer the detrimental consequences of affective polarization, the Einstein Research Unit on Coping with Affective Polarization relies on the broad literature on coping. Strategies for coping with the challenges resulting from affective polarization may come into effect at different levels, from the individual via the group to the societal level. We build on psychological, individual-centered coping theories and broaden them to the level of dyads, civil society groups, and society. As a result, we aim at identifying coping strategies that – in a specific context – may minimize or overcome detrimental effects of affective polarization.

Our starting point is the classical theory of Lazarus (1966), which describes coping as an individual reaction to two processes of appraisals: A primary appraisal that detects a threat or challenge and a secondary appraisal that deliberates about ways to address it. Coping may address the primary appraisal by, for example, reinterpreting a problem in a less problematizing way or address the secondary appraisal by, for example, coming up with a strategy on how to deal with a problem. Even though this theory builds on individual level coping, we argue that it may be broadened to examine shared understandings of stress and coping as well as individual differences and group divisions within society in reaction to the same societal challenge.

Some individuals, for instance, may perceive climate change as a threat and view activism as a means of coping—provided they believe their activism is recognized by society. Others may instead see civil disobedience within climate activism as the threat itself and regard measures against activists or against climate change as strategies to manage it—so long as those measures are seen as effective and fair. In both scenarios, primary and secondary appraisals can be shaped by various actors in society. One person might downplay the severity of climate change or civil disobedience (primary appraisal), while collective actors may promote new or revised strategies for actively addressing the climate challenge (secondary appraisal).

From a psychological perspective, there are at least two basic categories of coping: problem- and emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused coping aims at solving the problem by actively managing the problem itself. Following Carver and colleagues (1989), it may include strategies like taking additional action, developing a strategy to stop the problem, suppressing competing activities, seeking instrumental support, or deliberating different activities. Emotion-focused coping aims at managing the own emotional response to a problem instead of the problem itself. It may include strategies like a more positive reinterpretation of a problem, finding meaning in a problem, seeking emotional support, relaxation, venting of emotions, accepting a problem, behavioral or mental disengagement, and denial (Carver et al., 1989; Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010).

Another prominent categorization within the psychological coping literature comes from the differentiation of approach (or engagement) and avoidance (or disengagement), which subsumes “cognitive and emotional activity that is oriented either toward or away from threat” (Roth & Cohen, 1986, p. 813; see also Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). Approach strategies include attention, vigilance, and sensitization that enable problem-focused coping but also venting one’s affect or rumination until acknowledgement and containment is achieved, that is a way to integrate stressful aspects into one’s identity. Avoidance strategies, on the contrary, include defense, rejection, withdrawal, and repression to reduce negative affect, procrastination or denial, for example, by fragmenting stressful aspects from identity, which results in an unstable self-system (Roth & Cohen, 1986).

We assume that all these strategies not only work for individuals but may very well also work for dyads, civil society groups or society as a whole. For example, the broaden- and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2004) offers potentials for emotion-focused approach-oriented strategies by suggesting that positive emotions (e.g., joy, interest, contentment) broaden people’s thought-action repertoires and build enduring additional resources, including social and psychological resources (e.g., increasing attention and intellectual ability, creativity and knowledge, social integration and support, effectiveness and resilience). This is true for an individual, who experiences joy, which increases their openness to try out new things, which strengthens their knowledge and social integration. But it is also true for a civil society group, in which positive collective emotions are elicited, which strengthens social connections between group members, resilience towards strains, and group-efficacy to promote social change.

Coping strategies can be purposefully promoted by leaders of civil society groups, political elites, or in public (media) discourses (Robinson & Mullinix, 2016), each resulting in different consequences for the individual and the society, depending on the context in which it takes place and the way it is applied. In addition, further strategies come into play in interaction with others. For example, social capital – the strength of networks of trust and reciprocity – is not only relevant for coping on an individual level (e.g., as a precondition for instrumental or emotional social support) but is also a characteristic of an interconnected society, which may impact how a society copes with the challenges resulting from affective polarization. As pointed out by Adger (2003) in the context of coping with climate change, each group-level coping strategy favors some interests over others, which is why social acceptability and institutional enabling are crucial for strategies to work, which are facilitated by social capital that allows for shared information, norms and values, and the capacity to act collectively.

Taken together, we argue that the rich psychological literature on coping strategies may be fruitfully applied to the societal level in the context of challenges that not only impact individuals but groups within society or society as a whole. This includes coping with challenges posed by affective polarization that may have detrimental consequences if a society is not able to sufficiently deal with its diversity.

To date, there is no comprehensive theory or theoretical model that applies psychologically informed coping strategies at different societal levels in response to affective polarization. However, there are studies examining coping in the context of common individual (e.g., Hahn et al., 2015; Specht et al., 2011) or collectively shared grand challenges (Wundrack et al., 2021). Particularly, studies examined the applicability of coping strategies in the context of racism (e.g., Brondolo et al., 2009; Gaylord-Harden & Cunningham, 2008; Joseph & Kuo, 2008; Lewis-Coles & Constantine, 2006; Romero et al., 2022; Tao & Fisher, 2022), climate

change (e.g., Caillaud et al., 2016; Hallman & Wandersman, 1992; Mah et al., 2020; Ojala, 2012, 2013; Ojala & Bengtsson, 2019), and the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., Cauberghe et al., 2021; Eisenbeck et al., 2022; Gerhold, 2020; Lueger-Schuster et al., 2022; Silveira et al., 2022).

While the vast majority of this research focused on coping styles at the individual level – even in the context of collectively shared grand challenges – attention recently shifted to social group and societal levels: For example, Hartman et al. (2022) reviewed interventions that aimed at reducing partisan animosity by summarizing intervention studies that focus on thoughts but also on social relationships and institutions. Empathy has been identified as a strategy for combating intergroup conflict and discrimination (e.g., Batson et al., 2002; Bruneaux & Saxe, 2012; Todd et al., 2012). Thus, an induction of empathy may work to bridge affective polarization on an individual and group level. In the context of climate change, Bingley et al. (2022) proposed a multiple needs framework for interventions aiming to reduce climate change anxiety by focusing on individual, social, and environmental needs. The Einstein Research Unit on Coping with Affective Polarization follows this line of research by examining strategies for coping with the detrimental effects of affective polarization at the level of the individual but also beyond, including the level of social groups and society at large.

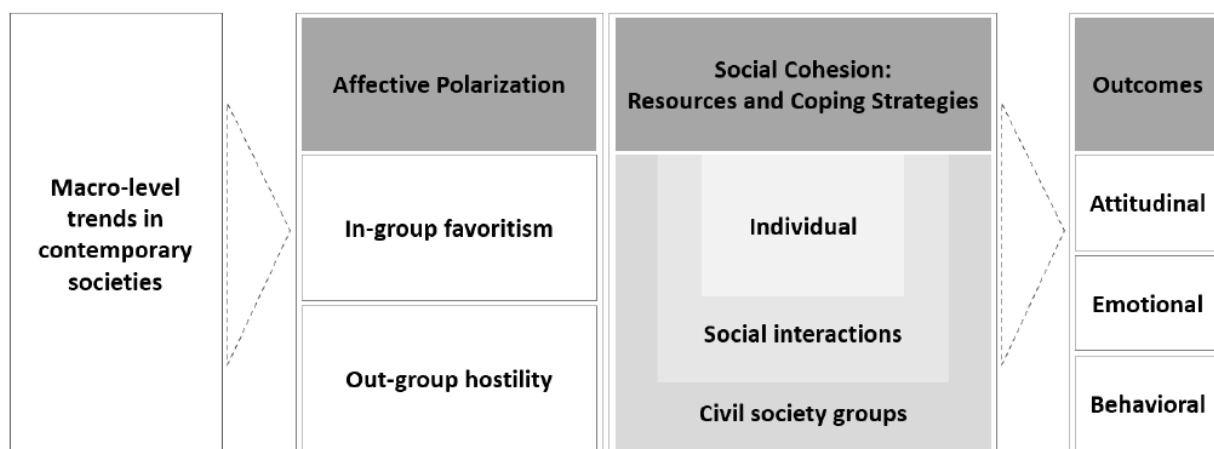
Concluding summary

In conclusion, the Einstein Research Unit on Coping with Affective Polarization offers a novel and comprehensive approach to understanding and addressing the challenges posed by affective polarization. By focusing on its behavioral, emotional, and attitudinal consequences at multiple levels — individuals, interactions, and civil society groups — the project moves beyond traditional conceptualizations to investigate how societies can constructively cope with the inherent tensions of polarization. Emphasizing the dynamic interplay between affective polarization and social cohesion, the research highlights the potential of cohesion as a resource to mitigate the detrimental effects of in-group favoritism and out-group hostility while fostering resilience and democratic principles.

Figure 1 summarizes the theoretical framework of the Einstein Research Unit on Coping with Affective Polarization. As the figure shows, affective polarization is characterized by in-group favoritism and out-group hostility. These tendencies are likely to further increase in response to closely paced, highly consequential societal crises and to developments that move affect and emotion center stage in many societies, namely certain structural changes (e.g., inequality and increasingly more volatile and informal social groups), media changes (from mainly one-directed classical media to interactive online social media), and developments of individualization and emotional reflexivity. These developments increase the likelihood of rising in-group favoritism and out-group hostility. However, whether such increases translate into detrimental consequences depends crucially on societies' capacities to cope with and actively shape these dynamics at various social levels, including individuals, social interactions, and groups.

Figure 1. Overview of our theoretical framework

Social cohesion as a society's capacity to cope with affective polarization



Building on this framework, the Einstein Research Unit is guided by three key questions which structure our research and intervention efforts:

- Assuming that affective polarization is a feature of almost all forms of social coexistence, but may have detrimental consequences when interfering with liberal and democratic principles: What can limit and contain these negative consequences?
- Which dimensions and configurations of social cohesion can be seen as resources for coping with the negative consequences of affective polarization, at the levels of individuals, social interactions, and groups and organizations?
- How does civil society contribute to the production or erosion of social cohesion, and how can it become an active agent in mobilizing cohesion resources to cope with the negative consequences of affective polarization?

It is evident that addressing these questions requires expertise from a range of different disciplines in the social and behavioral sciences. Through its interdisciplinary design, the Einstein Research Unit on Coping with Affective Polarization integrates insights from political science, psychology, sociology, communication studies, and philosophy to advance both theoretical and practical knowledge. Its emphasis on collaboration with civil society actors aims to ensure that the findings are directly applicable to real-world contexts, offering actionable pathways to address polarization's challenges. By combining rigorous empirical analysis with innovative interventions, the Einstein Research Unit on Coping with Affective Polarization contributes to a deeper understanding of polarization dynamics while equipping societies with tools to navigate and manage its impacts effectively.

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