Affective polarization towards parties and leaders, and electoral participation in 13 parliamentary democracies, 1980-2019

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Abstract

Comparative research on affective polarization provides evidence that this phenomenon is present also in parliamentary democracies. Although it has been typically understood as the difference in levels of affect toward in- and out-parties, more recent research has established the relevance of polarized feelings toward party leaders as objects of affective polarization also in parliamentary systems. While several studies have cross-sectionally examined the effect of affective polarization on turnout, a recent study by Ahn and Mutz (2023) has taken an innovative approach by systematically comparing the impact of polarized feelings toward parties and candidates in the probability of turning out in US presidential elections, showing the primacy of the latter in predicting patterns of electoral participation.

We expand the contribution of that and other studies by providing the first longitudinal account of the relationship between affective polarization and turnout in multi-party systems, as well as the first systematic comparison of the effects of party and leader affective polarization on turnout beyond the United States. Using post-electoral survey data covering 87 elections from 13 Western parliamentary democracies collected between 1980-2019, our results confirm that polarized feelings towards both parties and leaders are positively

associated with turnout in parliamentary democracies. More importantly, our findings highlight the growing relevance of leader affective polarization in accounting for patterns of electoral participation. These results are robust to the use of self-reported and validated measures of turnout in selected countries, as well as different model specifications. Our conclusions contribute both theoretically and methodologically to the literature on affective polarization.

The pervasiveness of affective polarization – i.e., the idea that people harbor simultaneously a deep sense of animosity for the other side and a strong affinity for their own side (Krupnikov and Ryan 2022) – in Western publics has motivated a growing research interest in the topic, now extending beyond the original American focus into multi-party contexts (Gidron, Adams and Horne 2020; Reiljan 2020; Wagner 2021; Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro 2022; Garzia, Ferreira da Silva and Maye 2023). While extant research invested into understanding its attitudinal effects and broader societal ramifications, less attention has been devoted to assessing its potential consequences for political behavior.

For all its negative sociopolitical implications, as well as potential pernicious effects for democracy (McCoy, Rahman and Somer 2018; McCoy and Somer 2019), a growing number of studies has identified increased electoral participation as a potentially positive consequence of affective polarization. Comparative research has already shown evidence of this relationship (Ward and Tavits 2019; Wagner 2021; Harteveld and Wagner 2023). Regardless of the major contributions of these comparative studies, they do not illuminate on the longitudinal dynamics of this relationship, and their focus is narrowed to political parties as targets of polarization. These shortcomings are partially addressed by two case studies on the United States. Leveraging on ANES data from 1972-2012, Enders and Armaly (2019) find that perceived polarization is strongly related to voter turnout. Through a longitudinal analysis of survey data, Iyengar and Krupenkin (2018) find a growing positive relationship between affective polarization and electoral participation over the last 40 years of US Presidential elections. Ahn and Mutz (2023) build on this finding and demonstrate that, more than polarized evaluations of political parties, it is polarization in candidate evaluations that bears an increasingly stronger impact on turnout in American Presidential elections. Could this impact of polarized evaluations in candidate/party leader evaluations on turnout extend beyond the United States? And, if so, what are the longitudinal dynamics underlying party and leader polarization's correlation with electoral participation?

These questions find support in two sorts of interrelated theoretical arguments. First, while studies on the American context had revealed that the party thermometers used to measure affective polarization tend to mostly capture attitudes towards elites (Druckman and Levendusky 2019; Kingzette 2021), recent comparative research provides more conclusive evidence that party leaders are relevant objects of in- and out-party affective evaluations. According to Reiljan et al. (2023, p. 3), "[w]hen thinking about parties, people can perceive them as broad organizations [or] as narrow groups of political elites, with party leaders being their most prominent personal representatives". Hence, even if we may expect polarization to develop predominantly around views of political parties because of their central role in the institutional architecture of parliamentary systems, their research shows that polarized feelings toward party leaders are also present to a significant degree in multi-party systems.

Second, the literature on the personalization (McAllister 2007) and presidentialization of politics (Poguntke and Webb 2005) postulates that candidates/party leaders have become the central actors of political competition in Western parliamentary democracies since the closing decades of the last century, at the expenses of political parties as collective entities. This process unfolds as a byproduct of waning partisan identities and changes in the media landscape favoring more personalized media content, to which parties adapted their political communication styles. Research on the electoral implications of this process provides evidence that voters' sympathy toward party leaders is significantly correlated with a higher propensity to turn out in parliamentary elections (Ferreira da Silva 2018), and that, over time, party mobilization is being progressively replaced by leader-based mobilization (Ferreira da Silva, Garzia and De Angelis 2021). Along these lines, though parties are supposed to remain the core targets of polarization in multi-party systems, polarized feelings toward their leaders may also play a significant role in accounting for patterns of electoral participation in these contexts. Therefore, the process of personalization may have contributed to increasing the

relevance of polarized feelings toward party leaders over the last decades, with implications in citizens' decisions to participate in general elections.

Drawing on these theoretical expectations from the literature on affective polarization and personalization, this research note expands on Ahn and Mutz's (2023) findings by comparing the effects of polarized evaluations of parties (Party Affective Polarization: PAP) and leaders (Leader Affective Polarization: LAP) on turnout over 87 elections held in 13 countries between 1980-2019. Building upon their findings, we provide the first comparative and longitudinal analysis of the relationship between different "vertical" forms affective polarization (i.e., PAP and LAP)[1] and electoral participation. Furthermore, in the footsteps of Ahn and Mutz (2023), we cross-check the robustness of our findings in selected countries with validated measures of turnout. In this sense, beyond providing an important extension to their study, our findings can help draw important conclusions about the nature of affective polarization in multi-party systems and its evolving relationship with political behavior.

Data and measures

This study uses post-electoral survey data drawn from the national election studies of 13 Western democracies: Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.[2] The pooled dataset comprises a total of 87 elections held between 1980-2019. Since we are guided by a comparison with the findings from the United States provided by Ahn and Mutz (2023), we

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[1] As opposed to "horizontal" forms of affective polarization based on feelings towards party supporters (see Reiljan et al. 2023)
[2] Data for the twelve European democracies come from the "West European Voter" harmonization project (Garzia et al. 2023), while data for Canada comes from the Canadian Election Study.

have restricted the timeframe of the analysis to the same period.[3] The full list of countries and election-years included is available in Supplementary Materials Table A1.

While measuring affective polarization in the United States is simplified by the dichotomous structure of party competition, measures typically used in that context are not directly translatable to more complex multi-party systems. To measure party affective polarization in multi-party systems, we have thus resorted to Wagner's (2021) weighted distance from the most liked party measure. This individual-level measure assigns the in-party to the party receiving the highest score on a 0-10 like-dislike battery and subsequently calculates the average affective distance of all other parties from that most liked party. Party scores on the 0-10 like-dislike scale are weighted by the party vote shares. This measure "captures how much lower on average affect for other parties is" (Wagner 2001, p. 5), and ranges between 0 (minimum affective polarization) and 10 (maximum affective polarization). The leader affective polarization measure is calculated in the exact same way, using leader like-dislike items instead of party like-dislike items. We preferred this measure over alternatives using partisanship to ascribe the *in-party* (Reiljan 2020) because of the well-documented widespread process of partisan dealignment across Western democracies (Garzia, Silva and De Angelis 2021), which would imply that our measures of affective polarization are calculated over a shrinking proportion of respondents. While this might not pose a problem for cross-sectional studies, within-country longitudinal analysis could be severely affected by such measurement choice.

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[3] It is worth noting that the timeseries still vary across countries, depending on data availability. Given that our goal is to compare party and leader affective polarization throughout, we have also restricted the analysis to the elections in which both party and leader like-dislike items are simultaneously available, as these are essential to calculate our measures.

Results

We first model the relationship between party and leader affective polarization and self-reported post-election turnout through a pooled logistic regression model with country fixed effects. This aggregate model provides a cross-sectional estimate of the effects of party and leader affective polarization over the entire period of analysis. The model controls for age, gender (0. Male; 1. Female), education (1. No education/Primary; 2. Secondary; 3. Tertiary), interest in politics (0. Not at all interested; 2. Not very/fairly interested; 3. Very interested), and strength of partisanship (0. Not close to any party; 1. Sympathizer; 2. Fairly close; 3. Very close). The inclusion of further control variables is hampered by their limited availability across countries and over time.[4]

Figure 1 presents the average marginal effects with 95% confidence intervals for the different independent variables' correlation with self-reported post-election turnout (full model results in Supplementary Materials Table A2). The results largely conform to our initial expectations, showing a significant correlation between both party and leader affective polarization and electoral participation. While the findings confirms the sustained primacy of polarized feelings toward parties in parliamentary democracies – contrasting with the pattern found by Ahn and Mutz (2023) for the US presidential elections –, it is also noteworthy that polarized feelings toward leaders have a comparable effect, especially if we consider that in the first decades of the period covered by this aggregate model, the personalization of turnout was still unfolding (Ferreira da Silva, Garzia and De Angelis 2021).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

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[4] No weights have been used in the analyses and item-missing data has been listwise deleted.

In a second logistic model, party and leader affective polarization are initially interacted with the election year, to capture their changing association with self-reported turnout in general elections over time. Recall that the personalization of politics theorizes a growing centrality of leaders *vis-à-vis* parties in the impression-formation and voting decision-making process since the closing decades of the previous century, implying that polarized feelings toward leaders could have become more relevant over time in accounting for electoral participation. The model includes the same control variables and country fixed effects.

The results from the interaction model do not sustain the existence of a statistically significant change in the relationship between party affective polarization (PAP) and self-reported voter turnout over time (full model results in Supplementary Materials Table A2). On the contrary, the interaction term tapping on the relationship between leader affective polarization (LAP) and turnout resulted positive and significant, suggesting that this relationship has become increasingly shaped by voters' polarized views of party leaders. Figure 2 shows the marginal effects of party and leader affective polarization on self-reported voter turnout across the 13 parliamentary democracies. They confirm that, while the marginal effects of PAP have remained relatively stable over the four decades analyzed, the impact of LAP on turnout has grown significantly. In contemporary elections, the marginal effects of LAP on turnout have become comparable, if not greater than those of PAP.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Our modelling strategy was subject to a number of alternative specifications to check the robustness of our findings.

First, we addressed the possibility that the relationship between our key independent variables and electoral participation does not linearly increase over time. To that end, we have recoded the year variable into 8 dummies covering half-decade periods from the beginning to the end of the time-series and replicated the previous analysis. Figure 3 presents the average marginal effects of a logistic regression model interacting party and leader affective polarization with half-decade dummies. The results tend to support the findings from Figure 2. More granular analyses, replacing half-decade dummies with election-year dummies, are available in Supplementary Materials Figure A1.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Second, we have disaggregated the analysis by country, to zoom in on potential heterogeneity in the dynamic relationships between party and leader affective polarization, and turnout within and across countries (Supplementary Materials Figure A2). The results confirm those reported in Figure 1 for the wide majority of countries under analysis.

Third, we have computed measures of variance inflation to dismiss the possibility that the simultaneous inclusion of party and leader affective polarization in the same model could cause problems of collinearity, which the results indicate not to be the case (Supplementary Materials Table A3). In any case, we have also re-estimated the models, including PAP and LAP alternatively (Supplementary Materials Table A4). While, when included in isolation, PAP does increase significantly over time, its interaction effect remains substantially smaller than LAP (Supplementary Materials Figure A3), not altering the substantive interpretation of our findings.

Fourth, we included additional control variables for left-right self-placement (0. Left; 10. Right) and perceived left-right party polarization, measured by the standard deviation of

each respondent's placement of the several parties along the left-right scale (Supplementary Materials Table A5). These variables are not part of the main analyses since their inclusion would significantly depress sample size due to the exclusion of election studies where these questions are not asked.

Fifth, given the varying length in our country timeseries, we have re-estimated the models restricting the sample to the six countries with timeseries ranging for the four decades of the period of analysis (Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom, and Canada). The results do not alter the substantive interpretation of our findings (Supplementary Materials Table A6 and Figure A4). We also replicate the half-decade models from Figure 3 only for these six countries (Supplementary Materials Figure A5).

Finally, we adopt Ahn and Mutz's recommendation to use validated measures of electoral participation, since "more expressive individual will both voice polarized evaluations of the current candidates, and exaggerate their likelihood of voting or claim that they have voted when they have not" (2023, p. 19). While such cross-validation for the whole sample proved impossible due to the large unavailability of these measures in election studies, we were able to carry it for Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. A seminal comparative study of turnout overreporting identified these three countries – together with the United States and New Zealand, which are not in our sample – as particularly relevant from a theoretical perspective, since there is significant variation in their turnout rates, as well as on their levels of overreporting (Karp and Brockington 2005). These countries have also implemented turnout validation measures relatively early on, enabling a cross-validation with some longitudinal scope rather than restricted to the latest elections. In this selection of countries, we have replicated Ahn and Mutz's (2023) modeling strategy and estimated the impact of PAP and LAP in a series of logistic regression models for each country's election-years, accompanied by an aggregate model pooling all elections for that country. The results

(Supplementary Materials Figure A6) confirm the findings reported in Figure 1 for all three countries, and the longitudinal increase of LAP in Sweden and the United Kingdom (although, in this case, also PAP increased). In the latest Swedish elections, only LAP has a significant effect on turnout. Considering that, using validated turnout, Ahn and Mutz (2023) did not find longitudinal effects for the United States and only found a significant effect of LAP in the aggregate model, the general pattern of confirmation of our findings using validated turnout measures vouches for the robustness of these relationships in parliamentary systems.

Conclusions

While "most studies have focused on the more surprising apolitical ramifications" (Iyengar et al. 2019, p. 139) of affective polarization, this study aims to contribute to a better understanding of its political and electoral consequences, with a specific focus on electoral participation. The conclusions from this research largely add to the findings of previous studies, while introducing some novel results. First, they confirm the existence of a positive significant relationship between affective polarization and turnout in contemporary Western democracies. Second, by carrying the first comprehensive examination of the relationship between polarized feelings towards party leaders and turnout in comparative perspective, we can show that not only polarized feelings towards parties, but also their leaders, significantly contribute to account for the patterns of electoral participation in parliamentary democracies. Moreover, our longitudinal analysis of the respective impact of party and leader affective polarization has shown that (only) the latter has become more important over the period of analysis (1980-2019), to the extent that its effects are, in the latest elections, virtually indistinguishable from party affective polarization. To date, this has been the first longitudinal examination of the relationship between affective polarization (measured either through

parties or leaders) and turnout in comparative perspective. Importantly, our results are robust to a number of checks, including the use of validated measures of turnout in selected countries.

Overall, these findings confirm the indication from previous studies that leaders are important objects of affective polarization (Reiljan et al. 2023), while also sustaining their relevance as mobilizing agents in contemporary personalized parliamentary democracies (Ferreira da Silva, Garzia and De Angelis 2021). The conclusions from this study invite future research to consider polarized evaluations of party leaders when measuring the impact of affective polarization on turnout (and beyond), as the longitudinal trend suggests their growing relevance over time. In cases like Sweden, where our models with validated turnout show a much stronger effect of leader than party affective polarization in recent elections, measures of affective polarization exclusively based on views of political parties may contribute to an underestimation of the impact of affective polarization on turnout.

While polarization has mainly been understood as a malaise of contemporary democracies, most studies exploring its relationships with turnout grapple with the paradoxical finding that it can contribute to promote electoral participation (Ahn and Mutz 2023; Harteveld and Wagner 2023). We largely concur with their authors in questioning whether increased electoral participation can be considered a democratic gain, in and of itself, even when it is motivated by political antagonism and animosity. Moreover, a growing polarization around candidates/leaders may contribute to increasing volatility in voter turnout rates across Western democracies. While there arguably are some structural incentives for candidates to adopt polarizing communication and campaign strategies, the relationship between leader affective polarization and turnout may be highly dependent on who the candidates are, their personal characteristics, and style of communication. With this piece, we

hope to have shown the necessity for more research at the intersection between

personalization and polarization in comparative and longitudinal perspective.

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List of figures

Figure 1. Effects of party (PAP) and leader affective polarization (LAP) on self-reported post-election turnout. Average marginal effects with 95% confidence intervals from a pooled logistic regression model with country fixed effects.
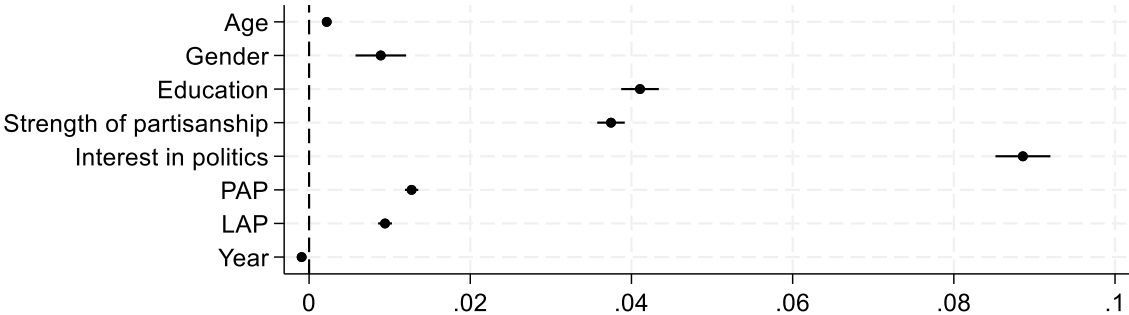

Figure 2. Marginal effects of party (PAP) and leader affective polarization (LAP) on self-reported voter turnout in 13 Western parliamentary democracies, 1980-2019. Logistic regression model with country fixed effects.
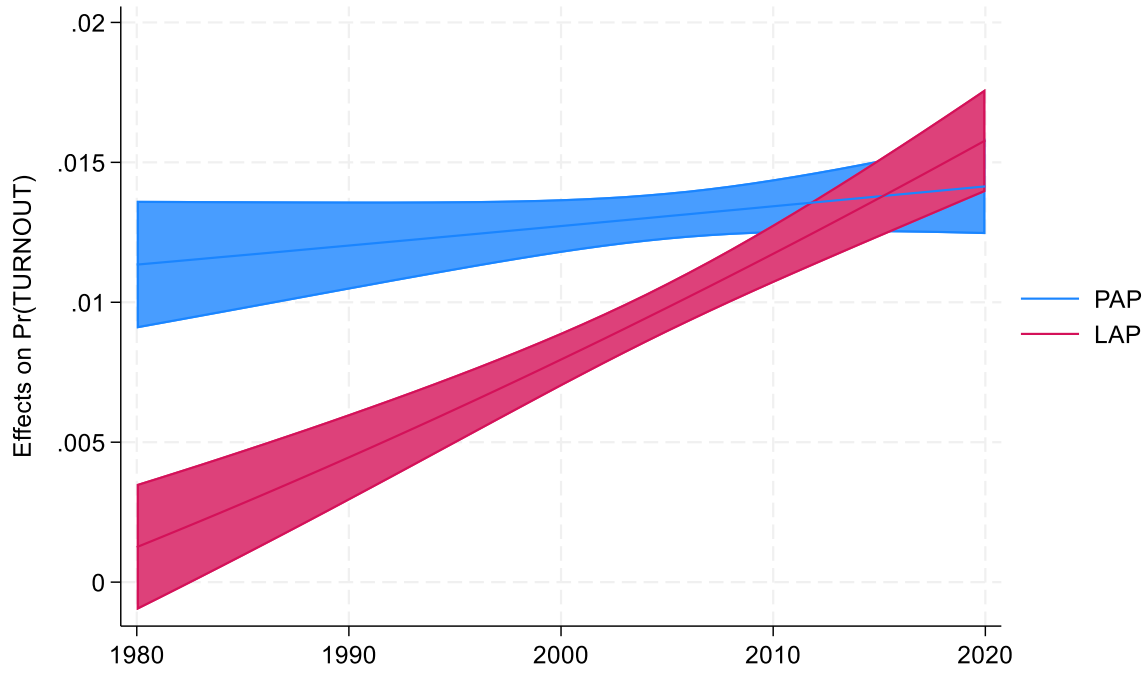
Figure 3. Average marginal effects of party (PAP) and leader affective polarization (LAP) on self-reported voter turnout in 13 Western parliamentary democracies estimated across half-decade dummies. Logistic regression models with country fixed effects.