
18. Party competition and affective polarization

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INTRODUCTION

Political parties reflect and articulate socio-structural divisions and competing interests in the political arena. They play a key role in translating societal conflicts into political terms and influence how these are expressed in public life. Parties also compete on a number of different dimensions in order to maximize citizen support and gain access to government.

In this chapter, we focus on how party competition, as the set of interactions among political parties, influences affective polarization. We first examine party competition as a dynamic process that can either exacerbate or alleviate political antagonisms (McCoy et al., 2018; Somer et al., 2021; Stavrakakis, 2018). Competitive or cooperative dynamics between parties are important sources of citizens' affective polarization and depolarization, respectively (Bassan-Nygate & Weiss, 2022; Gidron et al., 2023; Horne et al., 2023; Huddy & Yair, 2021; Wagner & Praprotnik, 2023). These partisan dynamics of competition and cooperation are the central focus of our chapter.

We then examine two additional structural elements that influence party competition and its dynamics of confrontation or cooperation: electoral systems and the dimensions of political competition. Majoritarian features in the political system have been linked to higher levels of affective polarization (Bernaerts et al., 2023; Somer & McCoy, 2018), though this relationship has nuances (see, for instance Reiljan et al., 2023). Regarding the dimensionality of party competition, while the traditional left-right dimension is crucial and has received the most attention in the analysis of affective polarization, other dimensions may be or become relevant. These different dimensions of political competition can overlap or cross-cut, leading to different party competition landscapes that may be more or less fragmented, each with potentially different implications for affective polarization. This is particularly important for studying affective polarization beyond WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) countries, where oftentimes political competition and collective identities revolve around different dimensions.

PARTY COMPETITION DYNAMICS AND PARTY COOPERATION

Democracy cannot exist without some degree of competition and rivalry between political parties. Parties must differentiate themselves to offer a meaningful plural set of options from which to choose, and they should also legitimately confront and debate each other's proposals. Party competition is a dynamic process in which intense political struggle is expected. Depending on the context, however, there is also a time for cooperation and agreement between political actors. These different moments tend to be closely related to the electoral cycle and the processes of government formation that follow elections, especially in proportional electoral

systems. The oppositional and coalitional dynamics that elections (and democracy more generally) generate and require can have a relevant impact on affective polarization. Factors such as elections and their corresponding campaigns, post-election bargaining between parties, and, more generally, the interactions between parties and party leaders have a significant influence on affective polarization.

Recent research has shown that the proximity of elections enhances voters' preferences for their in-party and their dislike for the out-party (Hansen & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2017). Crucially, though, as we move away from election time, affective polarization levels decrease significantly, through a reduction in ideological polarization and in the intensity of partisan identities (Hernández et al., 2021). These aspects suggest that levels of affective polarization follow electoral cycles and the different partisan dynamics that unfold at various points within these cycles. Pre-election contexts heighten party competition since parties may see a need to distance themselves from their rivals. In contrast, post-election contexts may give way to negotiations, party cooperation, and, ultimately, power sharing.

Election campaigns epitomize the competitive nature of partisan competition. During campaigns, ideological and policy-based differences between parties are expected to be highly salient and visible, likely to influence affective polarization (Hernández et al., 2021). However, the tone of campaign communications is expected to play a role in whether and how much pre-election contexts alter affective polarization. Iyengar et al. (2012) suggest that campaign environments marked by negativity can foster negative attitudes toward out-party members and, consequently, contribute to affective polarization. Building on this, Lau et al. (2017) experimentally tested what specific campaign aspects promote affective polarization in the US. Their findings show that the combination of contemporary high-choice media together with campaigns characterized by advertisements with a negative tone towards opponents substantially increases citizens' affective polarization. Hence, while we generally expect that the partisan dynamics defining pre-election contexts and campaigns will foster affective polarization, this increase is likely to be more pronounced in campaigns characterized by a higher degree of negativity and incivility. Chapter 21 in this *Handbook* delves deeper into the role of negative campaigning for affective polarization, while Chapter 22 deals with the important role of social media.

While the partisan dynamics fostered by election campaigns highlight differences, distance, and conflict, they are often followed by a reduction in the levels of partisan conflict once the votes have been cast. In most cases, responsible leaders concede defeat on election night and contribute to reducing the conflictual partisan dynamics that characterize democratic elections (Mirer & Bode, 2015). As pointed out by Esaiasson et al. (2023), these responsible actions by political leaders help to ameliorate the partisan conflict generated by elections in a peaceful manner. We would argue that this 'loser's consent' may be a key element in the depolarizing dynamics observed after elections (Hernández et al., 2021; Janssen, 2024). In the absence of consenting leaders, partisan hostility may persist, and affective polarization may not diminish. However, this is an area of research that remains largely unexplored.

Beyond the loser's consent, elections are often followed by the need to reach agreements once the votes have been cast, especially in highly fragmented multi-party systems. Parties need to cooperate when, as is often the case, there is not a single-party parliamentary majority, either to form a government or to pass legislation. Importantly, these partisan patterns of cooperation, compromise, and the formation of coalitions directly affect people's perceptions of parties (Fortunato & Stevenson, 2013), and often lead to a reduction of affective polarization.

Contexts where there is some cooperation and shared goals between different political parties see lower affective polarization levels between those cooperating (Gidron et al., 2023; Bassan-Nygate & Weiss, 2022). The comparative analysis by Gidron et al. (2023), and Bassan-Nygate & Weiss' (2022) experimental study focused on the Israeli case both show that coalition partners feel higher levels of warmth toward each other than we would expect based on the levels of objective ideological distance between the elites—i.e., ideological polarization—of these parties. Therefore, there is a co-governance affective bonus (see Gidron et al., 2023), which consists of a warmer evaluation by supporters of the different governing parties towards the other co-governing parties, regardless of ideological proximity. Interestingly, there is also a significant, though weaker, co-opposition affective bonus. The latter implies that supporters of parties that do not take part in the government also like the other opposition parties more than would be predicted by their ideological differences.

Similarly, in a recent study on the Austrian case, Wagner and Praprotnik (2023) provide experimental evidence that indicates coalition signals between political rivals reduce affective polarization. When individuals learn that their in-party may form a coalition with an out-party, they show significantly lower animus towards said out-party. What is more relevant, though, is that this study also suggests that even when these patterns of inter-party cooperation do not involve individuals' preferred party (i.e., they only occur between out-parties), there is also a reduction in the levels of affective polarization and a general increase in levels of positivity towards parties. This is even the case when far-right parties are involved in these dynamics of partisan cooperation (Wagner and Praprotnik, 2023). Hence, it seems that party cooperation has a potential reduction effect on affective polarization that spills over to the entire party system.

How do these patterns of party cooperation and bargaining lead to a reduction in affective polarization? While the evidence is more limited in this regard, Huddy and Yair (2021) test two possible mechanisms through which elites' political cooperation might reduce affective polarization levels in the US. One relates to the policy compromises that any negotiation entails, and the other relates to the hostility and warmth of the interactions between leaders. Their findings indicate that this latter mechanism, related to the nature of the interactions between political leaders, explains the reduction in affective polarization. Conversely, policy compromises do not have the expected negative effect on affective polarization. Wagner and Praprotnik (2023) also explore these mechanisms that may lead to a reduction in affective polarization. However, they do not find consistent evidence regarding the role of potential mediating factors for their proposed mechanisms: perceptions of ideological distance and warm interactions among leaders. Additionally, recent insights have shown the importance of media coverage of inter-party, day-to-day cooperation in increasing partisans' affection towards the out-parties that are reported to be collaborating with the in-party (Santoso, 2024). Significantly, this phenomenon was observed among individuals with low and moderate levels of political knowledge and remains consistent even after controlling for factors such as the ideological proximity of the political parties and their current degree of collaboration within the cabinet.

A final relevant aspect to consider regarding partisan cooperation is that the relationship between coalition behavior and affective polarization must take into account the historical patterns of coalition behavior in a given party system. Through a comparative analysis of 18 Western democracies, Horne et al. (2023) indicate that the effects of coalition dynamics impact inter-party affect long after the coalition is dissolved (15 years). While the mechanisms

through which these long-term coalition effects operate may still be unclear, the consequences of these coalitional dynamics on affective polarization seem to be robust and sustained in the long run.

Overall, recent research highlights the dynamic character of affective polarization, showing that it is intimately connected to the dynamics of party competition and closely related factors. Affective polarization is linked to the electoral cycle, the degree of negativity of campaigns, the patterns of cooperation between parties, and the characteristics (warmth vs. hostility) of interactions between party leaders. We now turn to examine factors closely related to these dynamics of party competition within countries that may influence affective polarization: electoral systems and the dimensionality of party competition.

THE INSTITUTIONAL SETTING AND THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

The institutional setting and, within it, the electoral system, configure the rules of the game under which party competition takes place. The characteristics of the electoral system have an impact on how people vote and how votes are translated into seats. Consequently, they also influence the strategies of parties and the characteristics of the party system, including its fragmentation and ideological polarization. Indirectly, via fragmentation, electoral systems also influence the need for multi-party coalitions to form governments in parliamentary systems or to pass legislation in presidential systems. This shapes parties' tendency to compromise and share power (Ware, 2015). The electoral system is not completely exogenous, though. Generally, more plural societies with more dimensions of political conflict tend to adopt power-sharing institutions, including proportional representation (PR), to accommodate and represent diversity (Lijphart, 2012).

Electoral systems are embedded in broader institutional contexts which, following Lijphart's (2012) categorization, can come closer to majoritarian or to consensual models of democracy. Majoritarian democracies are characterized by majoritarian electoral systems, low party system fragmentation, the prioritization of majority rule, and the production of concentrated political power in single-party governments. Consensus or consociational democracies have proportional electoral systems, higher levels of party system fragmentation, power-sharing institutions, and usually require inter-party agreements to proceed to policymaking.

Recently, political polarization literature has examined how these institutional characteristics can relate to affective polarization dynamics. Comparative evidence drawing on the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) data found that affective polarization tends to be higher in more disproportional (i.e., majoritarian) systems. However, this effect of disproportionality on affective polarization disappears when accounting for elite policy disagreements and economic conditions (Gidron et al., 2020). However, while proportionality does not appear to have a monotonic effect on affective polarization, citizens' feelings towards in- and out-parties (the constitutive components of affective polarization) are consistently warmer in more proportional systems (Gidron et al., 2020). Complementarily, Reiljan et al. (2023) have found that presidential systems are characterized by higher levels of leader affective polarization, and that the ratio between the latter and party affective polarization tends to be higher in these systems, *vis-à-vis* non-presidential and more fragmented institutional designs. At the same time, Bernaerts et al.'s (2023) analyzing 36 OECD countries from 2000 to 2019, found that countries with consensual characteristics, such as higher proportionality, exhibit lower

affective polarization levels. Hence, while the evidence is not univocal, most results point to lower levels of polarization in more consensual systems.

In line with this idea, McCoy and Somer (2019), through the analysis of 11 country cases, observed that countries with majoritarian institutions (including presidentialism) constituted, in their words, ‘the most extreme cases of polarization’ (p. 261). The majoritarian nature of these democracies and their patterns of party competition may even facilitate a more pernicious form of polarization with negative consequences that spill over to the political system as a whole. This is especially true when there are processes of social sorting (Mason, 2018), and when mainstream parties become internally controlled by radical factions or leaders that manage to win elections (i.e., the Trump government in the US). In these systems, polarized elites might use their unconstrained institutional power to make legislative changes to preserve it, thus promoting electoral immobilism and the entrenchment of a party in power, which can lead to a Manichean dynamic (see also McCoy et al., 2018).

A key element for the patterns of increasing affective polarization in majoritarian systems seems to be the dynamics of partisan opposition and the lack of incentives for cooperation among parties fostered by these systems. Highly proportional systems in parliamentary multi-party systems usually require the formation of coalitions. The latter tends to lead to the adoption of less conflictual interactions and implies inter-party negotiations, emphasis on ideological similarities, and the search for compromises (Curini & Hino, 2012). Majoritarian electoral systems, in turn, reduce the degree of political fragmentation by concentrating seats in the larger parties. This facilitates the winning party governing without resorting to multi-party negotiations or coalitions. Parliamentary majorities alternate in power, and there is less need to reach agreements and compromises (but see Wagner and Praprotnik (2023) as discussed above).

These findings seem to posit that proportional, multi-party systems promote ‘kinder, gentler’ politics (Lijphart, 2012) when it comes to affective polarization, through the above-mentioned dynamics of party cooperation. Nevertheless, proportional systems can also nurture inter-party conflict and ideological polarization, which may, under certain conditions, create a breeding ground for affective polarization.¹ This is consistent with classic works that underlined the centrifugal tendencies within proportional electoral systems and centripetal ones within majoritarian systems (Cox, 1990; Sartori, 1976). The underlying argument here is that proportional systems provide a freer environment for parties to pursue their political objectives, whereas in majoritarian systems the incentives tend to push them toward the more moderate position of the median voter. Proportionality also has a mechanical effect on the fragmentation of the party systems, and more parties typically lead to more ideological polarization. In any case, research on the relationship between proportionality and ideological polarization has produced mixed results. Some previous research has established a positive correlation between these two variables (Dalton, 2021; Dow, 2001), whereas others did not identify this correlation (Ezrow, 2008).

A different mechanism through which the proportionality of the electoral system can heighten affective polarization is by facilitating the institutional access of far-right parties (Carter, 2002). These are particularly polarizing because citizens tend to strongly dislike these parties (Bischof & Wagner, 2019; Hartevelde et al., 2022). The effect of proportionality on affective polarization via far-right parties is not necessarily only the consequence of increased ideological polarization, though, as they tend to generate higher levels of animosity than those that would be predicted only by levels of ideological distance. Research has shown

that the emergence of a far-right party tends to go hand in hand with a legitimization and a backlash effect (Bischof & Wagner, 2019). That is, both far-right supporters and opposers tend to adopt more extreme ideological positions after these parties' electoral breakthrough. Initially, the entry of this party family into the political scene can legitimize extreme views, this shift occurring because the presence of a radical party alters social norms, making previously taboo ideologies more acceptable (Valentim, 2021). The emergence of a radical party also prompts a backlash effect, that is, a strong opposition from those with differing political affiliations who try to resist the normalization of far-right ideologies. This occurs particularly among voters who fear potential changes to the established norms and rights, such as those of minority groups. Hence, proportional systems may lead to higher affective polarization by facilitating the emergence of radical right parties.

Some preliminary evidence points to an effect of the emergence of far-right parties that goes beyond the well-documented strong dislike that these parties generate. Torcal and Comellas (2022) highlight that previous affective polarization levels were crucial for the emergence of the far-right in Spain, while its emergence further increased affective polarization among the electorate. Similarly, Rodon (2022) and Balinhas (2024) found evidence that in Spain, the emergence of the radical-right party Vox increased affective polarization, especially among left-wing citizens.

Overall, the evidence on the impact of electoral systems on affective polarization is complex and far from conclusive, as both proportional and majoritarian systems possess characteristics that could theoretically be positively related to affective polarization. The limited comparative evidence points to majoritarian systems as the institutional settings that promote higher levels of affective polarization. However, as we have seen, many plausible exceptions need to be considered and tested. The relationship between these macro-level institutional configurations and affective polarization is contingent and not fully clear.

DIMENSIONALITY OF PARTY COMPETITION

We conclude by examining the structure and dimensionality of party competition. The dimensions of competition are relevant for affective polarization for three reasons. First, some dimensions may be inherently more polarizing than others. Second, the various dimensions or lines of division can either be orthogonal, creating cross-cutting alignments, or overlapping, reinforcing each other, and this has different implications for affective polarization dynamics. Lastly, the polarizing potential of a dimension of party competition can change over time and vary among different individuals.

Some lines of political division may be more polarizing than others (Gidron et al., 2020, 2023; Hartevelde, 2021). Dimensions of competition that tap into moral questions, deeply rooted values, and identities would more easily lead to strong emotional attachments and responses (Hetherington et al., 2016; Medeiros, 2017). Conflicts about religion, ethnicity, or nationalism/patriotism easily imply strong identities based on ways of living, faith, or language—elements that are both stable and crucial to many people's identity constructions. Furthermore, finding common ground and compromising between competing identities in these terrains seems to be consistently more difficult, as oftentimes the accomplishment of some political groups' aims (i.e., independence of a region) implies an unacceptable transgression and violation of other groups' political worldviews (i.e., an existential threat to the State).

The dimensions of political competition are country- and, sometimes, region-specific, though. Left-right is an important and encompassing dimension that is relevant in many different contexts, but not everywhere (Freire & Kivistik, 2013; Lupu & Riedl, 2013; Ozen et al., 2022). Other generally relevant dimensions of competition are the center-periphery conflict (Albright, 2010; Alonso et al., 2015), the rural-urban divide (Claassen et al., 2023), the GAL-TAN (Kawecki, 2022), the universalism/particularism dimension (Kriesi et al., 2008; Zollinger, 2022), or the populism/antipopulism divide (Stavrakakis et al., 2018).

Findings by Gidron et al. (2020, 2023) and Kawecki (2022), measuring two broadly defined dimensions of conflict (cultural and economic), show that in some countries these two different dimensions of conflict contribute to affective polarization in their own right. However, Gidron et al. (2020, 2023), comparatively, and Kawecki (2022), focusing on the case of Finland, show that disagreements revolving around the cultural dimension—related to national identity, migration, and moral issues—are progressively becoming more associated with affective polarization than disagreements around economic issues. This seems to be different in the US, where citizens' negative feelings towards out-parties have a stronger association with attitudes towards welfare than with attitudes towards LGBTIQ+ rights (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Iyengar et al., 2012). In short, both dimensions of party competition (economic and cultural) are significant predictors of affective polarization, but the relative weight of each dimension can change across periods and contexts. Complementarily, the populism/antipopulism divide also seems to matter in countries where this division is politically meaningful. For instance, in Argentina, both the divide between left-wing and right-wing identities as well as Peronist/Justicialist versus anti-Peronist/anti-Justicialist identities (which combine the populist and the partisan elements) seem to be predictors of affective polarization, with the latter presenting a stronger relationship (Torcal & Carty, 2023).

Recent studies also suggest that the polarizing capacity of a given dimension of party competition varies among different individuals. For example, longitudinal evidence from Spain identified conflict on the territorial dimension as a relevant source of affective polarization. This is a dimension that generates identities that form the base for the emergence of territorial affective polarization (Torcal & Comellas, 2022), and perceptions of elite disagreements around this dimension foster party affective polarization, especially among right-wing citizens (Balinhas, 2024). Similarly, in Sweden, ideological disagreements regarding immigration explain the affective distance between mainstream and far-right blocs, whereas disagreements regarding economic issues explain the affective distance between center-left and center-right blocks (Reiljan & Ryan, 2021). That is, the importance of a given dimension of political competition in explaining affective polarization might vary between different individuals depending on their positions on other dimensions of political competition, between different pairs of parties or ideological blocs, and between different political identities (as partisan identities are not the only political identities that can provide the basis for the development of affective polarization dynamics).

In addition, the relationship between the different dimensions of political competition may bear significant relevance for their impact on affective polarization. Specifically, orthogonal conflict dimensions and the resulting cross-cutting political identities may prevent the alignment of different political aims and identities, and reduce levels of affective polarization (McCoy & Somer, 2019). Conversely, overlapping dimensions—and identities—may reinforce one another and lead to increased affective polarization. As discussed in Chapter 16 of this *Handbook*, in a societal situation where politically relevant social identities tend to

converge around a political identity, such as those provided by the identification with parties or ideologies,² these multiplicity of identities—and political struggles—can lead to the deepening of inter-group political conflict. The logic behind these insights implies that socially sorted individuals might perceive that there is more at stake in electoral contests and public decisions, as the in-party(ies) incarnate the defense of the majority of their interests and their values, whilst the out-party(ies) imply a threat and even the negation of these values and the identities formed around them. This would turn party competition into a zero-sum game and result in fewer individuals with cross-cutting identities.

Finally, depending on exogenous political events and/or the role of political discourses and practices, one dimension might become increasingly salient at a given point in time, thereby maximizing its potential to lead to affective polarization (Balinhas, 2024). In fact, the polarizing capacity of a dimension may also change over time as a function of its degree of politicization (de Vries et al., 2013). As Simon et al., (2019) indicate, politicization, understood as the collective aim of making an issue a matter of public concern and mobilizing around it, constitutes an antecedent of affective polarization. For example, some divisive issues that arise at specific points in time have proven especially polarizing, as the recent example of the Brexit process shows (Hobolt et al., 2021 and also Chapter 15).

WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW YET

Based on the preceding discussion, in this section, we discuss and develop what we see as the most relevant pending questions regarding the relationship between party competition and affective polarization.

Coalition Dynamics

Previous research has shown that cooperation generates an affective bonus between co-governing and co-opposition parties, which extends to other parties. However, there is still scant and conflicting evidence about the mechanisms by which coalitions depolarize the electorate. The usual suspects (warmness in interactions, ideological proximity of coalition partners) seem to work in some cases but not in others (Huddy and Yair, 2021; Wagner and Praprotnik, 2023). Horne et al. (2023) suggest an alternative mechanism related to the development of a social-psychological sense of shared fate. Although individuals' perceptions of ideological distance between coalition parties might remain unaltered, their perception of these parties as having shared goals may increase, leading to lower levels of affective polarization levels.

Wagner and Praprotnik's (2023) work in the Austrian context also raises some relevant questions for future research on this particular issue. They found that inter-block coalitions have a depolarizing effect, even when the far-right is involved. It remains to be seen whether this depolarizing effect might travel to other political contexts, given that individuals tend to show very high levels of dislike towards both far-right parties and their supporters (Harteveld et al., 2022), and that in many countries, far-right parties carry the stigma of extremism (Mendes & Dennison, 2021). It would be interesting to assess to what extent entering an inter-block coalition with the far-right penalizes those involved in the coalition (through increases in dislike towards these parties). Here, the history of parties and coalitions may also be relevant, as the

increasing frequency of governing responsibilities by far-right parties may reduce their stigma and lead to their normalization.

When focusing on patterns of cooperation with far-right parties and their implications for affective polarization, most existing studies have concentrated on the national level. We could argue that considering party cooperation at subnational levels might be a promising strategy to explore this question further, especially in countries where the far-right has not participated in national governing coalitions in recent decades. Some regional, municipal, or local cooperation examples between mainstream and far-right parties can be found within some of these countries (e.g., Spain, Germany). Devoting some attention to subnational levels might help us better understand how the dynamics of party competition and cooperation might be related to affective polarization (Bettarelli et al., 2023).

Another promising avenue for further research has to do with the temporal or longitudinal dynamics of coalition governments. While Horne et al. (2023) offer relevant insights regarding this question, we need further work on how the long-term effects of partisan cooperation unfold and on the type of coalitions that might have particularly strong and long-lasting effects on affective polarization. Future studies should also analyze how loser's consent, which can be considered a minimal form of inter-party cooperation, may contribute to changes in affective polarization after elections (see Essaisson et al., 2023 for an excellent example of the analysis of the effects of "good loser messages" on process evaluations).

Electoral Systems

As we have argued, electoral systems and affective polarization seem to be connected, but the relationship between these two phenomena intersects with many other factors that make it difficult to isolate the particular effects of electoral systems. We need further comparative explorations that disentangle the relationship between electoral systems, different types of ideological and issue-based polarization, and affective polarization. The variation in the operationalization of a complex concept such as affective polarization (see Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021) and some of its correlates, such as ideological polarization (see Dalton, 2021; Leininger & Grünwald, 2023) makes this a more challenging issue. Affective and ideological polarization operationalizations vary across studies exploring the relationship between electoral systems and affective polarization. For instance, Gidron et al. (2023) use an objective measure of ideological polarization and operationalize affective polarization by considering partisans, for whom they can identify an in-party (see also Reiljan, 2020). Bernaerts et al. (2023), instead, use expert-based measures to build both measures of ideological and affective polarization (see more on this question in Chapter 5 of this *Handbook* by Torcal and Comellas). Further research on affective polarization should explore if the findings regarding the relationship between different electoral systems and affective polarization hold for different conceptualizations of ideological, issue-based, and affective polarization.

Multidimensionality

As we have argued earlier in this chapter, the multidimensionality of party competition is an essential aspect to consider in order to fully grasp the affective configurations of different party systems. However, the particularities of each party system increase the complexity

of this task. Most of the existing work on affective polarization has focused on the left-right dimension, partly due to the ability of this dimension to subsume different lines of conflict. We do not have clear expectations regarding the implications of different configurations of party systems for affective polarization. One potential reason for this lack of theoretical and empirical work is the difficulty in finding appropriate data to measure polarization across different dimensions that may vary in their salience and configuration across countries.

In multidimensional spaces of political competition, the alignment between citizens' positions into two main identities or 'camps' (see Bantel, 2023), seems a priori more difficult than in unidimensional spaces. The multiple potential combinations of positions along different orthogonal dimensions are more likely to produce cross-cutting divisions (Mason, 2018), thus hindering dynamics of pernicious polarization (McCoy & Somer, 2019). However, different dimensions can also align along a single axis of party competition (Liñeira et al., 2021). Considering different dimensions of conflict and competition may be particularly important when trying to understand affective polarization in countries where party systems are in the process of institutionalization (Mainwaring, 2018). We need more work to establish the conditions under which dimension alignments are more or less likely to happen, and their potential effects on affective polarization.

This complexity is further compounded when examining affective dynamics beyond WEIRD countries, where the political landscape often revolves around different axes of competition and not the traditional left-right dimension predominant in Western contexts. This makes the comparative study of affective polarization more challenging, as the relevant dimensions of political competition may differ significantly across countries, and the salience of these dimensions may fluctuate over time or in response to specific historical or cultural events.

Therefore, more work is needed to establish the conditions under which dimension alignments are more or less likely to happen, and their potential effects on affective polarization. In this respect, explicitly considering the history of inter-group relations in a given country may be an important addition to the political polarization literature. Scholars have shown the importance of the history of inter-group relations and its evolution over time to understand the social-psychological dynamics of political conflict, group stereotypes, prejudice, and social change (Dixon et al., 2012; Tileagă et al., 2021; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Recently, these elements have been stated as essential when trying to grasp affective polarization dynamics as well (Balinhas, 2023; Kreiss & McGregor, 2023). This may help to understand why, in some contexts, some dimensions of conflict (i.e., territorial) are more likely to generate confrontation and thereby polarization than others, as not all identities are internalized by people to the same degree. This may require a more contextualized in-depth analysis, situated mainly within the terrain of qualia or subjective experiences (Power et al., 2018).

Considering the history of inter-group relations and developing contextualized, in-depth analyses seems an adequate way to start examining political-affective landscapes and configurations beyond Western countries. Case studies employing qualitative or mixed-methods approaches can provide a foundation for more context-sensitive theories of affective polarization, capturing both the general drivers of this phenomenon and the specific, contingent factors unique to individual countries or groups of countries and/or regions. A promising path to achieve this is to foster interdisciplinary collaboration among researchers from diverse fields, including perspectives from disciplines such as political science, history, social psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Such multidisciplinary and multi-method approaches

have the potential to enrich and complement both comparative and single-country experimental research, offering a more nuanced understanding of how various dimensions of political competition and historical contexts influence affective polarization in different settings.

NOTES

1. There is still some degree of controversy between proponents of instrumental approaches to affective polarization—that is, those that prioritize the role of ideological or issue/policy-based differences as the main source of affective polarization—and proponents of approaches more focused on identity, which contend that political/party identities and thereby psychological attachments towards political groups constitute the main inducer of affective polarization, quite independently of ideological or issue-based disagreements (see Lelkes, 2021; Mason, 2013).
2. Parties and ideologies aggregate different sociopolitical identities, but different researchers have pointed out that leaders, competing versions of nationalism, or religiosity can also become relevant sources of conflict articulated through different identities (see Areal and Russo, Chapter 12 this *Handbook*; Masseti, 2018; McCoy & Somer, 2019; Ozen et al., 2022; Reiljan et al., 2023).

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