

Divulga UAB

Revista de difusió de la recerca de la
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

09/05/2025

Does Populism Fuel Affective Polarization?



Both populism and affective polarization are concepts that refer to a divided society. Understanding these dynamics could be key to designing strategies that mitigate the alleged negative effects of populism in politics and society. Therefore, this article analyzes the relationship and influences of both terms for the case of Spain between 2014 and 2022.

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The terms populism and affective polarization describe a divided society, and it is common to see connections between these concepts in journalism, politics, and academia. However, despite the growing number of studies on these phenomena, the relationship between populism and affective polarization is not yet fully understood.

This article argues that the populist division between the *pure people* and the *corrupt elite* can deepen the divides inherent in affective polarization. That is, it can lead individuals to develop stronger positive feelings towards their own political group and more negative emotions towards those who think differently. To test this hypothesis, a recent study analyzed panel data from Spain between 2014 and 2022, examining whether increases in populist attitudes or becoming a supporter of a populist party influence individuals' levels of affective polarization.

The results are clear: individuals with stronger populist attitudes also exhibit higher levels of affective polarization. This effect occurs because these attitudes reinforce loyalty to one's own group while intensifying rejection of others. However, merely supporting a populist party does not have the same effect as an increase in individual populist beliefs. In other words, not everyone who votes for a populist party necessarily becomes more affectively polarized.

These findings have important implications. First, they show that it is crucial to distinguish between support for populist parties and individual populist attitudes. These two concepts, often used interchangeably, capture different aspects of reality. Second, they help us understand how populism can affect democratic coexistence, as a more emotionally polarized society may struggle to reach consensus and maintain respectful public debate.

Therefore, gaining a better understanding of these dynamics could be key to designing strategies that mitigate the alleged negative effects of populism in politics and society.

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References

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