

Diving Deep: Political Psychology and the Experimental Method in the Study of Affective Polarization

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Abstract. This article analyses the methodological approaches used in research on affective polarization. Affective polarization is defined as positive feelings toward one's own political group and negative emotions toward political opponents. Research on this phenomenon in political science typically relies on quantitative surveys, indices derived from them, and other predominantly quantitative methods, which allow researchers to reliably measure levels of affective polarization and compare them across different contexts using comparative approaches. However, these conventional methods do not allow for strong conclusions about causal relationships. It is argued that the use of a political psychology methodological approach – especially the experimental method associated with it – makes it possible to better uncover the causal mechanisms of affective polarization. The experimental studies on affective polarization reviewed in this article expand our understanding of its causal dynamics and its interactions with different types of stimuli.

Keywords: affective polarisation, political psychology, experiments.

Neriant giliai: politinė psichologija ir eksperimentinis metodas tiriant emocinę poliarizaciją

Santrauka. Šiame straipsnyje analizuojamos emocinės poliarizacijos tyrimuose taikomos metodologinės priemonės. Emocinė poliarizacija apibrėžiama kaip palankumas savo politinei grupei ir neigiamos emocijos opojuojančiai politinei grupei. Šio politikos mokslų reiškinio tyrimuose įprastai naudojamos kiekybinės apklausos, iš jų išvedami indeksai, kiti, daugiausia kiekybiniai, metodai. Jie leidžia patikimai pamatuoti emocinės poliarizacijos lygį ir jį palyginti skirtinguose kontekstuose pasitelkiant lyginamuosius metodus. Vis dėlto šie įprasti emocinės poliarizacijos tyrimų metodai neleidžia daryti tvirtų išvadų dėl priežastinių ryšių. Argumentuojama, kad politinės psichologijos metodologinės priemonės naudojimas, o ypač su ja siejamas eksperimentų metodas, leidžia geriau atskleisti emocinės poliarizacijos priežastinius mechanizmus. Straipsnyje apžvelgti eksperimentais paremti emocinės poliarizacijos tyrimai praplečia žinojimą apie emocinės poliarizacijos priežastingumus bei sąveikas su skirtingais stimulais.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: emocinė poliarizacija, politinė psichologija, eksperimentai.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyse which methodological approaches are commonly used in studies of affective polarisation and to explain how the methodological approach of political psychology, along with the methods applied within it, could contribute to the study of this important phenomenon in political science.

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Affective polarisation refers to the tendency of party partisans to favour their in-group while expressing growing dislike, negative emotions and social distance toward opposing groups¹. As a type of political polarisation, affective polarisation is associated with negative attitudes between groups holding different political preferences. It extends beyond the conventional boundaries of the political sphere, as its effects spill over from the political arena into the broader social domain.

Research on affective polarisation shows that polarisation in all its forms leads to highly negative outcomes: an affectively polarised political environment may result in a society in which members of opposing political camps are unwilling to meet, befriend one another, cooperate in civic or economic activities, or even live in close proximity. This phenomenon also contributes to democratic erosion, the radicalisation of the political system, the formation of extreme attitudes, and declining trust in institutions². Affective polarisation also contributes to the growth of political violence³ and may therefore be considered a threat to national security. In countries with particularly high levels of polarisation, a situation of legislative paralysis may gradually emerge, where it becomes difficult to reach broad consensus on fundamental state reforms⁴.

As noted by Mariano Torcal and Eelco Hartevelde⁵, significant progress has recently been made in understanding the origins and consequences of affective polarisation. However, this field of research still faces important questions regarding normative implications, the causal mechanisms linking polarisation to democratic erosion, and the most effective ways to measure its emotional, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions. Put simply, while there is relatively broad agreement on how to measure the level of affective polarisation and identify its consequences, there is still no clear understanding of how affective polarisation interacts with different factors. Moreover, affective polarisation is a phenomenon shaped by multiple factors operating at different levels, including interpersonal communication, economic conditions, political elite discourse, political competition, social cleavages, and others (ibid.).

The theory of affective polarisation in political science was formulated in 2012 in the study “*Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization*” by Shanto Iyengar, Gourav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes⁶. However, the roots of this theory can be traced to one of the most influential theories in political psychology – social identity theory. This theory was developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner. Their psychological studies of in-groups and out-groups in the 1970s and 1980s demonstrated that members of in-groups tend to attribute undesirable or negative traits to members of out-groups^{7,8}. These insights provided the theoretical foundation for the development of the theory of affective polarisation.

Methods of Studying Affective Polarisation and Challenges in Their Application

During the first decade of the development of affective polarisation theory, particular attention was devoted to measuring the level of this phenomenon. This is understandable, as once a seemingly new

¹ Iyengar, S.; Sood, G.; Lelkes, Y. Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 2012, Vol. 76 (3), p. 405–431.

² Orhan, Y. E. The Relationship between Affective Polarization and Democratic Backsliding: Comparative Evidence. *Democratization*, 2022, Vol. 29 (4), p. 714–735.

³ Gidengil, E.; Stolle, D.; Bergeron-Boutin, O. The Partisan Nature of Support for Democratic Backsliding: A Comparative Perspective. *European Journal of Political Research*, 2022, Vol. 61 (4), p. 901–929.

⁴ Agarwal, K. How Does Political Polarization Impact Legislative Gridlock And Policy-Making Processes. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2024, Vol. 29 (10), p. 53–64.

⁵ Torcal, M.; Hertevelde, E. Introduction to the Handbook of Affective Polarization. In: Torcal, M.; Hertevelde, E. (eds.). *Handbook of Affective Polarization*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2025, p. 1–20.

⁶ Iyengar, S.; Sood, G.; Lelkes, Y. Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 2012, Vol. 76 (3), p. 405–431.

⁷ Tajfel, H. Experiments in Intergroup Discrimination. *Scientific American*, 1970, Vol. 223 (5), p. 96–102.

⁸ Tajfel, H.; Turner, J. C. An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict. In: Austin, W. G.; Worchel, S. (eds.). *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. Monterey, CA: Brooks-Cole, 1979, p. 33–47.

phenomenon was conceptualised, the initial goal was to assess its scope and prevalence before seeking broader explanations for its existence. Traditionally, the measurement of affective polarisation relies on sociological methods (surveys), incorporating feeling thermometers, social distance questions, and indicators capturing racial or other forms of polarisation. In addition, models assigning stereotypical traits to groups are used to capture political stereotyping.

In the aforementioned study by S. Iyengar, G. Sood, and Y. Lelkes, the use of feeling thermometers revealed that, in the United States, polarisation along racial and religious lines has declined over time, whereas affective polarisation – based on dislike of supporters of the opposing party – has increased six-fold. According to the authors, social distance measures indicated a growing unwillingness among individuals with strong partisan identification to accept their children marrying supporters of other political parties. Furthermore, using stereotype measurement models, the study demonstrated that between 1960 and 2008 there was a significant increase in the attribution of negative traits (such as “angry”, “hypocritical”, “selfish”, and “closed-minded”) to opposing groups⁹.

In recent years, particular attention has been given to measuring affective polarisation in multiparty systems – especially in Europe. The transfer of measurement approaches from the two-party American context to the multiparty European context has revealed a significant methodological challenge. In the United States, the object of polarisation is relatively clear: democrats vs. republicans. Consequently, the issue of the direction of polarisation – conceptualised as vertical or horizontal affective polarisation – is less pronounced.

In contrast, this issue is highly salient in the European multiparty context. *Vertical affective polarisation* refers to citizens’ negative attitudes directed toward parties and political elites, whereas *horizontal affective polarisation* refers to negative attitudes toward party supporters and voters¹⁰. In simple terms, there is a fundamental difference between asking respondents to evaluate their feelings toward “the Democratic Party” and toward “democrats,” that is, another group of citizens. Many studies demonstrate that this distinction between vertical and horizontal targets is significant.

As shown by S. Iyengar, G. Sood, and Y. Lelkes, this issue is less pronounced in the U.S. context¹¹. Therefore, in the United States, measuring affective polarisation can rely on standard quantitative survey data and feeling thermometers, calculating the difference between in-group favourability and out-group hostility. In multiparty systems, however, the situation is considerably more complex, as it is necessary to account for the relative weight of individual parties. Failure to do so may result in a single highly polarising political force distorting the overall picture of polarisation¹². It is also important to consider that voters may evaluate more than one party positively – for example, expressing favourable attitudes toward several parties within a governing coalition¹³.

For this reason, in multiparty systems, affective polarisation is measured using indexed rather than direct survey data. Notable examples include survey-based tools derived from feeling thermometers, such as the *Affective Polarisation Index* developed by Andres Reiljan¹⁴ and the *Weighted Affective Polarisation (WEP) index* proposed by Markus Wagner¹⁵. Many studies also employ comparative methods to

⁹ Iyengar, S.; Sood, G.; Lelkes, Y. Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 2012, Vol. 76 (3), p. 405–431.

¹⁰ Röllicke, L. Polarisation, Identity and Affect – Conceptualising Affective Polarisation in Multi-Party Systems. *Electoral Studies*, 2023, Vol. 85, p. 1–16.

¹¹ Iyengar, S.; Sood, G.; Lelkes, Y. Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 2012, Vol. 76 (3), p. 405–431.

¹² Reiljan, A. ‘Fear and Loathing across Party Lines’ (Also) in Europe: Affective Polarisation in European Party Systems. *European Journal of Political Research*, 2020, Vol. 59 (2), p. 376–396.

¹³ Vanagt, J. Appraising Measurements of Affective Polarisation in Multiparty Systems: Comparative Insights from the Low Countries. *Politics of the Low Countries*, 2024, Vol. 6 (3), p. 96–116.

¹⁴ Reiljan, A. ‘Fear and Loathing across Party Lines’ (Also) in Europe: Affective Polarisation in European Party Systems. *European Journal of Political Research*, 2020, Vol. 59 (2), p. 376–396.

¹⁵ Wagner, M. Affective Polarization in Multiparty Systems. *Electoral Studies*, 2021, Vol. 69, p. 1–13.

assess and compare levels of affective polarisation across countries. This is essential, as only cross-national and contextual comparisons allow for a meaningful evaluation of whether affective polarisation is high or low and how it evolves over time. However, while these methods – rooted in political sociology and comparative approaches – enable the measurement and comparison of affective polarisation, they do not allow for strong conclusions about causal relationships, nor do they explain why individuals become polarised when exposed to specific information.

The situation encountered in the study of affective polarisation is typical of positivist political science. Survey techniques make it possible to observe large amounts of individual-level data – voters' attitudes and behaviours. However, as Matt Ryan argues, although such data are abundant, they do not allow for the direct observation of causality. As he notes, we cannot observe causal effects directly. Sociological data therefore provide only a snapshot of a given moment in time. By combining such observations across time or comparing multiple countries, researchers can identify patterns of change. Yet even when change is observed across contexts, what is typically identified are correlations rather than clearly established causal relationships. Establishing causality, however, remains one of the central objectives of political science research, and the study of affective polarisation is no exception¹⁶.

This limitation in identifying causal relationships is linked to the fact that traditional political science methods – both quantitative and qualitative – are often associated with macro or mesolevel factors that may influence the phenomenon under study¹⁷. Examples of such macro or mesolevel factors include economic conditions, social cleavages, and political competition. To uncover genuine causal mechanisms, it is necessary to delve much deeper – into the level of individual cognitive processes. This requires understanding what individuals think and why, how they arrive at particular decisions, what influences them, what emotions are triggered by these influences, and why some emotions are more impactful than others. These questions can be at least partially addressed through the methodological approach of political psychology, which primarily focuses on individual-level factors¹⁸.

The Methodological Approach of Political Psychology

Political psychology is an interdisciplinary field of research that examines political processes from a psychological perspective. In its broadest sense, political psychology studies the political thinking and behaviour of individuals living in politically organised communities¹⁹. It is important to emphasise that the key distinction of the political psychology methodological approach, compared to other approaches commonly used in political science – such as political sociology or comparative methods – is that political psychology operates at the individual level. As Philippe Braud argues, sociology is generally concerned with collective behaviour, whereas psychology focuses on the individual. He notes that many sociologists downplay the importance of individual psychology, either because they consider the true motivations of behaviour to be inaccessible to scientific inquiry, or because they see social structures and roles as the main explanatory factors²⁰.

Scholars employing the political psychology approach do not deny the importance of institutions or political structures, which are more commonly emphasised in political science research and its theoretical frameworks. However, they reject the notion that political life can be explained solely by macro

¹⁶ Ryan, M. The Comparative Method. In: Lowndes, V.; Marsh, D.; Stoker, G. (eds.). *Theory and Methods in Political Science* (4th ed.). London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 271–289.

¹⁷ Mols, F.; 't Hart, P. Political Psychology. In: Lowndes, V.; Marsh, D.; Stoker, G. (eds.). *Theory and Methods in Political Science* (4th ed.). London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 142–157.

¹⁸ Staerklé, C. Political Psychology. In: Wright, J. D. (ed.). *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*. Miestas: Elsevier, 2015, p. 427–433.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ Braud, P. Political Psychology. In: Badie, B.; Berg-Schlosser, D.; Morlino, L. (eds.). *International Encyclopedia of Political Science*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2011, p. 2000–2010.

or mesolevel factors. According to political psychology scholars, there are situations that cannot be adequately explained using conventional political science approaches, as they require an examination of the psychology of political actors and/or individuals in order to account for macro level, institutional, or even rational choice phenomena (Mols & Hart, 2018).

As Matt Ryan states, “we study politics so that we can better understand and explain political outcomes”²¹. This is a concise formulation of the core objective of political science. However, as the same author notes, one of the most important ways to explain political outcomes is through the identification of causal relationships²². Yet political science faces a fundamental challenge: causal relationships cannot be directly observed. To observe causality directly, one would need to step outside the real world, reverse time, and re-run it without a given condition, or alternatively find a parallel world without that condition and observe both simultaneously to determine whether the outcome would still occur²³. Clearly, this is impossible – particularly when analysing the causes of wars, social reforms, or even voting behaviour. It is important to stress that affective polarisation, which is central to this paper, faces the same challenge: we know how to measure it and understand its consequences, but causal relationships and interactions with different variables remain the primary object of inquiry²⁴.

This challenge in political science is often addressed through statistical methods and theories that allow researchers to manipulate large datasets and, to some extent, approximate experimental conditions. Comparative methods are particularly important in the analysis of sociological data, as they enable the comparison of multiple countries and provide a more comprehensive picture of correlations between potential causes and outcomes²⁵. However, when the objects of comparison are not institutions or states but living individuals – voters – both sociological and comparative methods reveal their limitations, as observation still occurs indirectly at the meso or macro level, through the prism of institutions, social structures, and organisations. The methodological approach of political psychology can help fill this gap in political science.

Political psychology contributes most significantly to individual-level analysis and enhances our understanding of political elites’ behaviour, leaders’ personalities, decision-making processes, citizens’ political behaviour, socialisation, participation, voting tendencies, political communication, and many other phenomena studied in political science²⁶. While political psychology employs essentially the same techniques as other branches of political science – both quantitative and qualitative methods – one method stands out in particular: experimentation. As an interdisciplinary field drawing on psychology, political psychology adopts methodological tools that are more prevalent in psychological research, with experimental methods being especially prominent. As Hele Margetts and Gerry Stoker, building on Arend Lijphart, argue, experimental methods are often considered the most robust approach for identifying causal relationships in political science, even though their application has historically been limited by practical and ethical constraints. Nevertheless, since the late twentieth century, political science has undergone significant methodological development, and experimental approaches – including laboratory, field, natural, and online experiments – are now increasingly applied, substantially improving our understanding of political processes²⁷.

²¹ Ryan, M. The Comparative Method. In: Lowndes, V.; Marsh, D.; Stoker, G. (eds.). *Theory and Methods in Political Science* (4th ed.). London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 271–289, p. 273.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ Torcal, M.; Hertevelde, E. Introduction to the Handbook of Affective Polarization. In: Torcal, M.; Hertevelde, E. (eds.). *Handbook of Affective Polarization*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2025, p. 1–20.

²⁵ Ryan, M. The Comparative Method. In: Lowndes, V.; Marsh, D.; Stoker, G. (eds.). *Theory and Methods in Political Science* (4th ed.). London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 271–289, p. 273.

²⁶ Staerklé, C. Political Psychology. In: Wright, J. D. (ed.). *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*. Miestas: Elsevier, 2015, p. 427–433.

²⁷ Margetts, H.; Stoker, G. The Experimental Method. In: Lowndes, V.; Marsh, D.; Stoker, G. (eds.). *Theory and Methods in Political Science* (4th ed.). London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 290–305.

Experiments are attractive to political scientists because they allow for a more robust identification of causal relationships than other methods²⁸ and enable analysis at the individual cognitive level. If an experiment is well designed and properly implemented – meeting the core conditions of intervention, random assignment to groups, and outcome measurement – it can provide strong evidence of causal relationships between the intervention and observed differences between groups. Moreover, replication of such experiments further strengthens the reliability of causal inferences²⁹.

At the same time, experiments have both advantages and limitations. Their application often raises ethical concerns and presents practical challenges in implementation. They are also difficult to apply in certain areas of analysis, such as international relations, which imposes limitations on the scope of research. Nevertheless, in my view, experiments can significantly expand knowledge in areas of political science that focus not on institutions or states (i.e., meso and macro levels), but on individuals. This method, within the broader paradigm of political psychology, enables a deeper understanding of individual and group cognitive processes. Therefore, in research areas such as voting behaviour, the formation of political attitudes, or affective (and other forms of) polarisation, experimental methods are particularly advantageous, applicable, and valuable.

The Application of the Political Psychology Approach and Experiments in the Study of Affective Polarisation

In the following part of this article, I review some of the more prominent studies in the field of affective polarisation in which the use of a political psychology approach can be observed and experimental methods were employed. The studies are grouped and discussed according to the type of intervention stimulus used for the experimental group. Although all intervention stimuli operate at the same individual level and analyse cognitive processes, they differ in content. This demonstrates the broad applicability of the political psychology approach and experimental methods in the study of affective polarisation.

The review must begin with what is considered a classic study in the field of affective polarisation research: Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood's *"Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization"*³⁰. The study examined how partisan affect compares to affect arising from other social divisions, and to what extent supporters of U.S. political parties are inclined to discriminate against supporters of the opposing party in non-political decisions. This highly important study for the field of affective polarisation research is based on four experiments.

In the first experiment, the researchers conducted an Implicit Association Test (IAT), which showed that partisan polarisation in the United States is stronger than racial polarisation. In addition, because the IAT measures response speed, it was observed that negative associations toward political opponents were assigned more quickly – and thus more automatically – than negative associations based on race.

In the second study, a conjoint experiment was conducted to analyse how partisan affect spills over into the non-political sphere, in this case university admissions. The experiment showed that both democrats and republicans, when informed about a university applicant's partisan affiliation, were more likely to choose a student closer to their own party. This occurred even when the student supporting the opposing party had better academic results.

In the third experiment, trust games and dictator games were used to measure the extent to which partisan affect spills over into collective action. This experiment showed that participants were more

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ Iyengar, S.; Westwood, S. J. Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization. *American Journal of Political Science*, 2015, Vol. 59 (3), p. 690–707.

generous toward players who shared their partisan preferences, whereas ethnic or racial identity was not a significant factor.

Finally, the fourth experiment used the same trust and dictator games, but introduced a control group. This design made it possible to assess which mechanism ran deeper: favouritism toward supporters of the same party or discrimination against supporters of the opposing party. The study revealed that discrimination was stronger than favouritism.

All four of these classic experiments demonstrated that partisan polarisation is stronger than racial polarisation; that partisan favouritism and opposition are more automatic responses; that partisan favouritism and hostility spill over into the non-political sphere; and that discrimination against opponents is more pronounced than favouritism toward supporters of one's own party.

Communication Stimuli

In recent years, a particularly large number of studies have appeared in which various communicative stimuli are used in experiments. Their shared aim is to determine how communicative content – media consumption, negative political language, or misinformation – may affect the level of affective polarisation.

In his study *“Americans, Not Partisans: Can Priming American National Identity Reduce Affective Polarization?”*³¹, Matthew S. Levendusky sought to examine whether it is possible to reduce hostility between supporters of political parties. The study was based on the common ingroup identity model borrowed from social psychology. This model makes it possible to theorise that if the sense of American national identity among participants is strengthened, they will view members of the opposing party as fellow Americans rather than as rivals from an opposing partisan camp. As a result, they should view the other side more positively, thereby reducing affective polarisation.

Levendusky tested this theoretical model and its hypotheses using a survey experiment in which the intervention stimulus consisted of newspaper articles about the strength of America and the American people. After reading the article, participants were asked to write a short paragraph explaining what people like most about America and why they are proud to be American. In the control group, participants read a short non-political story and then wrote a short non-political text. Affective polarisation was measured using a feeling thermometer and a method based on the attribution of stereotypes to the opposing group. The experiment confirmed the theoretical model: participants exposed to the intervention stimulus showed significantly lower affective polarisation toward their opponents.

In the very recent study *“How Does Exposure to Discordant Media Sources Affect Political Attitudes and Behavior? Experimental Evidence from Turkey”*³², Horacio Larreguy, Jeremy Bowles, Ahmet Akbiyik, and Shelly Liu implemented a seven-month online field experiment in Turkey involving 4,720 Turkish citizens. The aim of the experiment was to determine whether exposure to more diverse online media content can reduce political polarisation under conditions of electoral autocracy. During the study, participants were required to use a mobile application designed specifically for the research. Citizens supportive of the government were shown content from opposition-leaning news outlets, and vice versa. The study also included a control group that was shown news from outlets regarded as neutral.

The study found that participants exposed to pro-government media content developed a long-lasting increase in positive evaluations of the governing party and stronger intentions to vote for it. By contrast, participants exposed to anti-government media content did increase their favourability toward opposition parties, but this effect was weaker and shorter-lived. The study suggests that patterns of media

³¹ Levendusky, M. S. *Americans, Not Partisans: Can Priming American National Identity Reduce Affective Polarization?* *The Journal of Politics*, 2018, Vol. 80 (1), p. 59–70.

³² Larreguy, H.; Bowles, J.; Akbiyik, A.; Liu, S. *How Does Exposure to Discordant Media Sources Affect Political Attitudes and Behavior? Experimental Evidence from Turkey*. Working paper, 2025.

consumption can have a significant impact on political preferences and polarisation, but that this relationship is asymmetrical.

In another recent study, “*Seeing ‘Us’ and ‘Them’: How Political Symbols Polarize through Anger, Anxiety, and Enthusiasm*”³³, Christian Staal Bruun Overgaard and Renita Coleman sought to identify causal relationships between political symbols and affective polarisation. For this purpose, they conducted a survey experiment in the United States in which participants were randomly shown well-known partisan or national symbols. No control group was used. Each participant viewed four partisan or national symbols, after which the researchers measured enthusiasm, anger, anxiety, and affective polarisation. The study showed that partisan symbols more often triggered anger and anxiety and reduced enthusiasm toward supporters of the opposing party.

In the study “*Communicating a Common Front: Mainstream Party Rhetoric and Affective Polarisation towards the Radical Right*”³⁴, Markus Kollberg and Ivo Bantel analysed the impact of negative political rhetoric on affective polarisation toward radical right parties in Germany using a vignette-based survey experiment. At the beginning of the experiment, the participants’ level of affective polarisation toward the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) was measured. The experimental group was then shown real quotations from German members of parliament containing negative messages about AfD. The control group received neutral messages about federal budget discussions. After the intervention, the level of affective polarisation among all participants was measured again. The experiment showed that a certain type of message (cross-party messages) increased affective polarisation toward AfD.

In the study “*Preaching to the Converted: Misinformation and Voter Preferences in Election Campaigns*”³⁵, Ursula Daxecker and Neer Prasad analysed how misinformation influences voters’ attitudes and beliefs during elections. In their theoretical model, the authors argued that the effectiveness of misinformation in election campaigns should depend on whether the misinformation aligns with partisan or non-partisan identities. According to the authors, misinformation based on a non-political but politically salient social identity may appeal to voters who share that social identity. In this way, such voters may be drawn closer to the position of the actor spreading the misinformation.

By contrast, if misinformation is aimed only at party supporters, it should appeal only to existing supporters. The study used a representative vignette experiment conducted after the election in India, with a design imitating how the opposition uses misinformation to polarise voters and their beliefs on religious issues. The experiment showed that misinformation was only partially effective. Although some participants increased their support for the political position promoted by the disinformant, this shift proved rather short-lived. Misinformation did not persuade those voters who had already firmly declared that they did not support the party spreading the misinformation.

Political Stimuli

In the study “*The Polarizing Effect of Partisan Echo Chambers*”³⁶, Sara B. Hobolt, Katharina Lawall, and James Tilley analysed how the homogeneity of partisan groups affects polarisation. They conducted a large-scale pre-registered “lab-in-the-field” experiment in the United Kingdom. The experiment involved supporters of national-level parties. Participants were assigned either to groups composed of

³³ Overgaard, C. S. B.; Coleman, R. Seeing ‘Us’ and ‘Them’: How Political Symbols Polarize Through Anger, Anxiety, and Enthusiasm. *Mass Communication and Society*, 2025, Vol. 28 (1), p. 130–153.

³⁴ Kollberg, M.; Bantel, I. Communicating a Common Front: Mainstream Party Rhetoric and Affective Polarisation towards the Radical Right. *West European Politics*, 2025, p. 1–31.

³⁵ Daxecker, U.; Prasad, N. Preaching to the Converted: Misinformation and Voter Preferences in Election Campaigns. *Electoral Studies*, 2025, Vol. 98, p. 1–10.

³⁶ Hobolt, S. B.; Lawall, K.; Tilley, J. The Polarizing Effect of Partisan Echo Chambers. *American Political Science Review*, 2024, Vol. 118 (3), p. 1464–1479.

like-minded partisans (creating “echo chambers”) or to mixed groups of supporters of different parties. These groups then discussed the issue of immigration reform. The experiment measured participants’ levels of policy polarisation and affective polarisation, the strength of attachment to their preferred party, stereotypes toward supporters of their own and opposing parties, and negative partisan identity. These measurements were conducted both before and after the intervention. This design made it possible to examine how group composition changes polarisation. The study found that like-minded “echo chambers” increased affective polarisation, whereas mixed groups reduced it. It also identified a very clear effect of group type on attitudes toward the policy measures under discussion.

In the study “*Affective Polarization and Coalition Signals*”³⁷, Markus Wagner and Katrin Praprotnik analysed whether signals from political elites about potential post-election coalitions influence affective polarisation. The study used a vignette-based survey experiment conducted in Austria. Participants were divided into six experimental groups and one control group. Those in the experimental groups were asked to read fictional newspaper articles about possible snap elections and the most likely post-election coalitions. The vignettes involved coalition scenarios among the three largest parties: the Christian Democrats (ÖVP), the Social Democrats (SPÖ), and the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ). To measure affective polarisation, the researchers used feeling thermometers and two measures of social distance (questions about marriage and close colleagues). The results of these three measurements were then combined into a like-dislike index. Respondents were also asked to place all three parties on the left-right scale.

The study showed that coalition signalling positively affected the level of affective polarisation among supporters of the parties toward their potential coalition partners. A particularly strong positive shift was observed when signalling a possible coalition with the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ). However, signalling had no significant effect on voters who did not sympathise with the signalling parties, with the exception of a somewhat weaker positive effect toward FPÖ. No effect was observed among voters of smaller parties.

The previously outlined experiment was later replicated on a broader scale by Jochem Vanagt, Katrin Praprotnik, Luana Russo, and Markus Wagner in the recent study “*Partisan Affect and Political Tolerance in the Context of Shifting Norms: The Effect of Coalition Signals towards the Radical Right*”³⁸. The vignette-based survey experiment was conducted in Germany, Flanders (Belgium), Spain, and Austria. It examined the effects of coalition signals on polarisation, social distance, and political tolerance. During the experiment, respondents were shown fictitious newspaper articles about the polling strength of far-right parties, their previous participation in government, and signals from mainstream centre-right parties concerning post-election coalitions. The control group received the same information, but without signals about a potential coalition. Respondents’ vertical affective polarisation was measured using feeling thermometers, while horizontal affective polarisation was measured using social distance questions. Political tolerance was also assessed.

The results showed that such signalling reduced mutual hostility between supporters of the radical right and the centre right and encouraged supporters of centre-right parties to become more politically tolerant toward the radical right. However, the experiment also demonstrated that this type of flirting between the centre and the far right intensified the antipathy of centre-left supporters toward centre-right parties. This suggests that signalling a willingness to cooperate with the far right does not reduce overall political division but rather redirects the direction of polarisation.

In the study “*Strong Partisans, Conditional Democrats? Partisanship and Reactions to Electoral Outcomes in Argentina*”³⁹, Ezequiel Gonzalez-Ocantos and Carlos Melendez conducted a scenario-based

³⁷ Wagner, M.; Praprotnik, K. Affective Polarization and Coalition Signals. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 2024, Vol. 12 (2), p. 336–353.

³⁸ Vanagt, J.; Praprotnik, K.; Russo, L.; Wagner, M. Partisan Affect and Political Tolerance in the Context of Shifting Norms: The Effect of Coalition Signals towards the Radical Right. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2025, p. 1–31.

³⁹ Gonzalez-Ocantos, E.; Meléndez, C. Strong Partisans, Conditional Democrats? Partisanship and Reactions to Electoral Outcomes in Argentina. *Comparative Political Studies*, 2025, p. 1–36.

vignette experiment on the day of the 2023 Argentine presidential and parliamentary elections. The experimental groups were presented with information stating that one of the three major Argentine parties had won the election by a large margin. The control group did not receive such information. After exposure to the stimulus, participants were asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 10 the emotions they felt after reading the information about the election winner (anger, anxiety, fear, hope, joy). They were then asked about their level of satisfaction with democracy, their preference for the democratic system, and their trust in elections. The study showed that strong party supporters reacted to the results with the strongest emotions. Disappointment with democracy was also observed when the preferred party lost, although this effect was not strong. The study demonstrated that partisan identities are intertwined with individuals' perceptions of regime legitimacy.

Stimuli involving decisions in the non-political sphere

In the study *"Affective Partisan Polarization and Moral Dilemmas during the COVID-19 Pandemic"*⁴⁰, Lukas F. Stoetzer, Simon Munzert, Will Lowe, Başak Çalı, Anita R. Gohdes, Marc Helbling, Rahsaan Maxwell, and Richard Traunmüller sought to answer the question of whether dislike of supporters of opposing parties can go so far as to undermine human rights. The authors examined this question through a moral dilemma that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic – decisions regarding the allocation of intensive medical care. The study presents the results of a conjoint experiment conducted in five countries: Brazil, Germany, Italy, Poland, and the United States.

Participants in the experiment were shown pairs of patients with informational profiles. They had to decide, based on these profiles, which patient should receive intensive care and which should not. In total, each participant evaluated four pairs of patients. The patient profiles included information on age, gender, number of children, occupation, number of previous hospital visits, probability of survival, and partisan preference. The profiles were generated randomly. No control group was used, but in this study the function of the control condition was fulfilled by profiles of patients without partisan preferences. Respondents' level of affective polarisation was also measured using standard feeling thermometers.

Although the results did not indicate a particularly strong general effect of partisanship on such non-political choices, the findings changed substantially once their relationship with affective polarisation was analysed. The most affectively polarised individuals clearly discriminated against supporters of the opposing partisan camp. This was particularly evident in Poland, Brazil, and Germany, where participants supporting left-wing parties were less likely – by around 15–20 per cent – to choose right-wing patients. Correspondingly, stronger favouritism toward one's own partisan in-group was also observed in these countries. This study once again demonstrated that high levels of affective polarisation can spill over into the non-political sphere.

Conclusions

Political science is constantly evolving, and other academic disciplines exert a significant influence on it. This makes it possible to broaden our understanding of the phenomena observed in the political sphere. Many areas of political science face the same problem: we are able to measure the level of a phenomenon and capture a snapshot of it at a given moment, yet we still lack a sufficient understanding of causal relationships. Interdisciplinarity makes it possible to address this problem by introducing ever new research tools. A good example of such interdisciplinarity is the convergence of political science and

⁴⁰ Stoetzer, L. F.; Munzert, S.; Lowe, W.; Çalı, B.; Gohdes, A. R.; Helbling, M.; Maxwell, R.; Traunmüller, R. Affective Partisan Polarization and Moral Dilemmas during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 2023, Vol. 11 (2), p. 429–436.

psychology, which makes it possible to analyse political phenomena at the individual, cognitive level. This is particularly important in the study of polarisation, where one of the key objects of inquiry is the role of emotions.

As demonstrated in this paper, the methodological approach of political psychology, together with the experimental method that is closely associated with it, makes a significant contribution to the study of the causes of affective polarisation. The experimental method makes it possible to understand the causal relationship between different types of stimuli – political, non-political, and communicative – and changes in the level of polarisation. Even from the review of the experiments presented here, we can see that affective polarisation is more pronounced than forms of polarisation based on other grounds. It is reinforced by patterns of media consumption, negative rhetoric used by politicians, the formation of “echo chambers,” exposure to party symbols, and even the very fact of electoral victory.

Affective polarisation is often automatic in nature, and within it discrimination against the opposing group is more strongly expressed than favouritism toward one's own group. We have also seen that affective polarisation can spill over into the non-political sphere and influence such social processes as student admissions to universities or the allocation of intensive medical care to patients. Positive expressions of national identity and, in certain cases, party signalling about future coalitions may help reduce polarisation. However, the latter phenomenon works only partially, because although it reduces polarisation toward the party being signalled as a coalition partner, it also increases polarisation among supporters of other parties. In this way, the object of polarisation simply changes direction.

The studies reviewed in this paper have significantly expanded our knowledge of how affective polarisation operates. It would have been far more difficult to obtain all of these findings and to extend the boundaries of knowledge by using regular statistical methods and the more conventional methodological approaches of political science alone.

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