The Downsian roots of affective polarization

Carlos Algara [a],[*],[1], Roi Zur [b],[1]

[a] *Department of Politics & Government, Claremont Graduate University, United States of America*
[b] *Department of Government, University of Essex, United Kingdom*

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

A growing literature studies the relationship between ideological and affective polarization. By taking a Downsian approach to affective polarization we contribute to this literature and demonstrating that affective polarization is driven by congruence between citizens and their party, *relative* to other parties, in the general liberal-conservative space and across a host of salient issue domains. We find robust support for our theory using individual-level national election survey data from the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Finland. Moreover, we find that ideological differences inform affective polarization independently from partisan identifications and that they drive more out-party animosity than in-party affinity. These findings have implications towards a more unified understanding of the citizen determinants of affective polarization and the role ideology plays in shaping the views held by partisans across democracies.

1. Policy or identity determinants of affective polarization?

The animosity by citizens towards opposing partisans, relative to their own partisan attachment is largely described as "*affective polarization*" by scholars of both American (e.g., Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015; Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2015; Dias and Lelkes, 2021; Lelkes, 2019; Orr and Huber, 2020) and Comparative politics (e.g., Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021; Gidron et al., 2020, 2022b,a; Harteveld, 2021).[2]

Traditional frameworks accounting for both the presence and rise of affective polarization in democracies largely center on the role of partisanship as a social identity rather than ideological disagreements (Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2015). Early models of affective polarization in the US context posit that animosity towards the opposing party and partisans relative to one's own is largely "inconsistently related to policy preferences." Iyengar et al. (2012), and "largely distinct" from ideological considerations (Iyengar et al., 2019). Yet, recent and rapidly growing literature shows that affective polarization is related to ideological differences between parties (Webster

and Abramowitz, 2017; Gidron et al., 2020), party system polarization (Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021), and policy incongruence (Hobolt et al., 2020; Marchal and Watson, 2021; Dias and Lelkes, 2021; Lelkes, 2019; Orr and Huber, 2020; Harteveld, 2021).

Moreover, traditional work on how citizens evaluate partisan elites relative to one another stresses that these relative comparisons are inherently rooted in policy terms (American Political Science Association, 1950; Downs, 1957). Regardless of the number of parties, Downs (1957) classically posits that citizens are motivated in their electoral evaluations of parties on the basis of congruence between their own ideological preferences vis-à-vis the distinct policy positions of the competing candidates, selecting the candidate closest to their preferences in ideological terms. We advocate for a Downsian framework positing that affective polarization is driven by ideological proximity between individual citizens and collective parties, across a host of issues, rather than solely due to partisan identity or general policy polarization. We evaluate our Downsian ideological framework using

---

[2] While *affective polarization* refers to the animosity towards partisans of opposing parties, the lack of a direct measure of this concept force us to compromise on citizens' thermometer rankings of parties. In terms of measurement, throughout this manuscript, we characterize *affective polarization* in the conventional relative difference-based approach first conceptualized by Iyengar et al. (2012), where *affective polarization* is measured as the differential in feeling thermometer rankings between their preferred party and an opposing party. Given that these thermometers are rankings of political stimuli (i.e., groups, institutions, parties, candidates) on a 101-point scale of cold (0) to warm (100), greater differential values of *affective polarization* suggests greater animosity towards the opposing party (Iyengar et al., 2019; Abramowitz and Webster, 2016). Following Reiljan (2020) and Wagner (2021) we use the 11-point scale from 0 to 10 in the European context. Consequently, we refer to *affective polarization* at the individual-level as the degree of animosity citizens hold for the opposing parties and partisans relative to the affinity towards their own partisan attachment identity.

individual-level survey data from the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Finland and demonstrate that ideological proximity to a citizen's political party across various issues leads to greater affective polarization evaluations in the form of larger feeling thermometer differentials between their party and an opposing party. That is, we contribute to the literature on affective polarization by demonstrating that it is driven by *both* ideological distance from opposing parties *and* ideological proximity to one's preferred party. We further show that this result is, by and large, independent from partisanship and the fact that partisans are predisposed to already be closer ideologically to their preferred party does not mitigate our findings. We also show that this ideological proximity component of affective polarization is strongly associated with out-party animosity, but only slightly (and in some cases insignificantly associated) with in-party affinity.

While the traditional understanding of feeling thermometers is that they are rooted in both ideological and affective judgements of parties, we reduce concerns about endogeneity between citizens' affect towards parties and the parties' perceived policy positions we leverage perceptual-based scaling methods placing citizens and parties within the same ideological space of the polity. Building on the works of Druckman and Levendusky (2019) in the US context and Gidron et al. (2022b) in the comparative context, which demonstrate the validity of thermometer scores as measures of affective polarization, we are able to differentiate between citizens' affective and policy perceptions of parties.

Our theoretical arguments and empirical evidence contribute to the growing literature on affective polarization in both two- and multi-party contexts. We argue theoretically and demonstrate empirically that citizens' ideological distance from both in- and out-party positions is associated with greater affective polarization. Moreover, we show that these ideological differences are associated with warmer feelings towards the in-party *and* colder feelings towards out-parties. Our theoretical argument is based on the ample evidence that citizens' vote choice and partisan affiliation are rooted in the policy congruence between their own preferences and parties' policy platforms. Complimenting existing work, we also contribute to the growing literature on the determinants of affective polarization by showing cross-nationally that ideological congruence is not limited to vote choice or partisan affiliation, but also to the levels of affective polarization. Indeed, we find support for a model positing the Downsian logic that voters use their ideological preferences, relative to the clear distinctions in policy positions offered between competing political parties, to inform pronounced animosity partisans have for opposing partisans. As we explain in details below, affective polarization is associated not only with the ideological distance between partisans and the policy positions of the out-party, but also with the triangular relationship between citizens' policy preference, the in-party policy position, and the out-party policy position.

2. Theoretical framework: Downsian roots of affective polarization

2.1. The Downsian framework of affective polarization

While some previous work finds evidence that ideological differences (i.e., policy polarization) among the mass public is not a necessary condition for affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2015) and, in fact, may correspond with lower levels of affective polarization (Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016), many other studies assess the ideological roots of affective polarization (e.g., Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016; Webster and Abramowitz, 2017; Wagner, 2021; Dias and Lelkes, 2021; Lelkes, 2019; Orr and Huber, 2020; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021; Gidron et al., 2020, 2022b,a; Harteveld, 2021), but lack a direct evaluation of the role ideological preferences play in shaping how citizens evaluate parties and candidates relative to one another (Grofman, 2005; Adams et al., 2020). Moreover, while

recent work by Costa (2021) in the United States posits that citizens demand ideological congruence from their elected elites rather than simply partisan representation, this argument is largely not evaluated in a cross-country comparison of western democracies. We concur with Costa (2021) that ideological congruence plays a large role in the evaluation of political elites, including parties, in addition to demands of partisan representation rooted in identity. Indeed, this argument positing that ideological preferences help citizens make policy-based electoral decisions regarding candidate choice largely takes the spatial framework advocated by Downs (1957). This Downsian spatial framework posits that citizens are motivated to select among parties not on the basis of political attitudes or partisanship, but on the basis of choosing the closest party to their policy preferences. Moreover, probabilistic Downsian models demonstrate both theoretically and empirically, that the odds of citizens voting for the closest party increases in congruence with the distance from all other parties in the system (see review of these models in Magyar et al., 2022). That is, in the Downsian framework, voting is a function of both proximity to one's party *and* distance from other parties. Given recent advancements in the methodological ability to estimate ideological preferences of both citizens and elites in the same ideological space, the Downsian spatial model is enjoying a resurgence in the two-party American electoral context (Jessee, 2009; Joesten and Stone, 2014; Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2017; Algara and Hale, 2019) and comparative literature of electoral choice situated within multiparty systems (Kurella and Rosset, 2017; Carroll and Kubo, 2018; Zur, 2021a; Seeberg, 2020).

This Downsian framework of ideological proximity has also been extended towards citizen evaluations of elite stimuli, such as the approval rating of United States Senators (Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016), Congress (Algara, 2021), and Supreme Court (Malhotra and Jessee, 2014). We advocate that this Downsian spatial framework can also be applied to affective polarization both within the United States and across multiparty democracies. Indeed, in a recent aggregate-level comparison of affective polarization within the United States and across nineteen different western democracies, Gidron et al. (2020) find varying levels of affective polarization across western democracies independent of electoral institutions or party systems. The empirical findings presented by Harteveld (2021), Gidron et al. (2020), Reiljan (2020) and Wagner (2021) are particularly striking given the degree of variation in partisan attachments and loyalties between the United States and other western democracies, with partisan loyalties in the United States being generally weaker relative to their European counterparts (Schmitt, 2009; Lupu, 2015). This suggests that despite variation in partisan social identity and loyalties across polities, there are varying levels of affective polarization in the form of animosity by citizens towards opposing parties and partisans relative to their own.

Given that fierce democratic partisan competition is inherently rooted in differing policy programs and ideological positions advocated by relatively responsible political parties if given the opportunity to govern (Schattschneider, 1960; Samuels and Shugart, 2010), we posit that affective polarization is driven not only by general ideological polarization (Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021) or out-party incongruence (Gidron et al., 2020; Marchal and Watson, 2021), but also by the ideological positions held by *both* in- and out-parties relative to the positions of individual citizens. Since greater ideological proximity between citizens and parties stresses increased congruence between what public policies citizens would like to see enacted by the government and the policy platforms espoused by parties, we posit that this congruence should drive animosity towards the opposing parties—and affective polarization—given that the opposing parties advocate for policies out-of-step with the ideal policy preferences of citizens. This point is particularly important, given that scholars of affective polarization largely posit that these evaluations are done in a pairwise relative comparison, with citizens shaping their favorable assessments of focal out-parties relative to their own party. Given this relative comparison in the conceptualization of affective polarization, an ideological
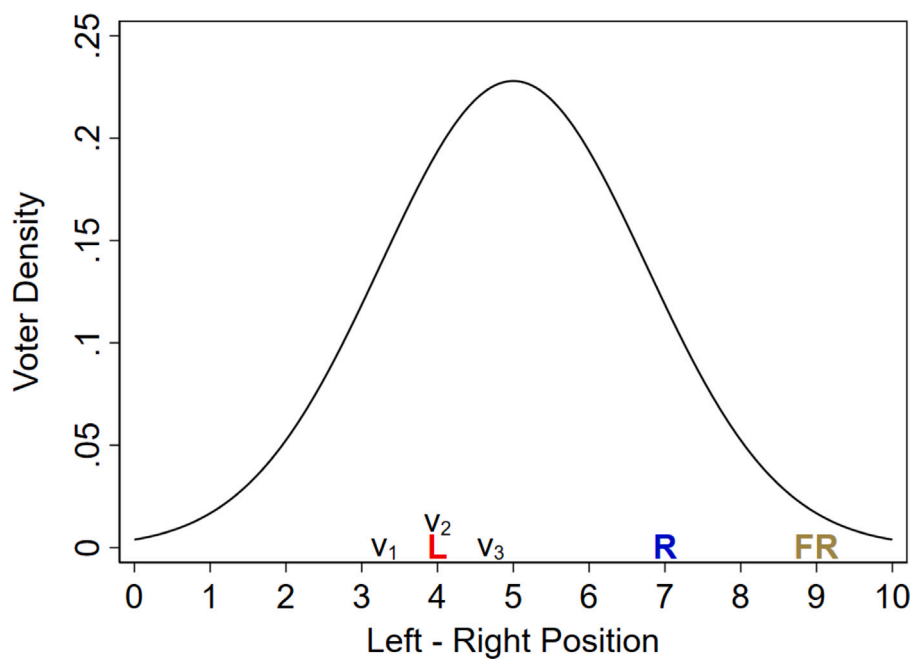
Fig. 1. Theoretical example of downsian framework of affective polarization.
Fig. 1 shows a hypothetical party system with three parties' positions and three voters' preferences on a single 0–10 Left–Right dimension. Party L is located at 4, Party R is at 7 and Party FR is at 9. Voter 1 is located at 3.5 and Voter 2 is at 4, and voter 3 is at 4.5.

component should manifest itself in a relative comparison between the policy positions of one's own party and focal out-parties. As such, we argue that the favorable differential between an opposing party and a citizen's preferred party (i.e., affective polarization) increases as a function of greater spatial congruence between a citizen's ideological preferences and that of their preferred party relative to the opposing party. To state the hypothesis more formally:

★ **H₁**: Greater ideological proximity towards one's preferred party in the ideological space, relative to the ideological positions of other parties within the ideological space, corresponds to a greater degree of affective polarization expressed by citizens.

Support for this hypothesis would suggest that greater Downsian ideological proximity towards a citizen's preferred party, *relative* to the position of other parties, drives both greater animosity for opposing parties *and* warmer feelings towards the preferred party, thus intensify affective polarization. A hypothetical example can provide a better understanding of our theoretical argument. In Fig. 1 we show a hypothetical three-party system, with a moderate-left party (L) placed at 4 on a 0–10 Left–Right scale, a moderate-right (R) party placed at 6 on the same scale and a far-right (FR) party placed at 9. We discuss our theoretical argument in light of three voters, V_1, V_2, and V_3, all are self-reported partisans of the moderate-left party. V_1 and V_3 are equally distanced from their party (3.5 and 4.5 respectively), while V_2 is self-placed at the same position as their party (4). Despite being equally distanced from their preferred party 'L', we expect that V_1 will report larger levels of affective polarization than V_3 towards both out-parties because V_1 is further away from the opposing parties R and FR, while being equally distanced from their own party. Additionally, we expect V_2 to report larger levels of affective polarization than V_3 because V_2 position is *both* closer to their own party *and* further away from the out-parties. Taking these hypothetical voters together, we argue that distance from both in- and out-parties matters for affective polarization.

2.2. Accounting for partisan identity: The independence of ideology

Our preceding theoretical framework argues that one of the key determinants of affective polarization in the mass public is ideological proximity. We argue that this ideological component of affective

polarization is both *distinct* and *independent* of salient partisan affiliation. Recent work using advancements in estimating the ideological positions of citizens and parties finds a healthy degree of ideological heterogeneity among partisans in the American (Hill and Tausanovitch, 2015; Hare et al., 2015) and comparative contexts (Bakker et al., 2014; Saiegh, 2015), suggesting that comparatively ideological and partisan preferences are not perfectly congruent across political contexts.

This degree of variation in ideological preferences among partisans suggests that an ideological proximity component of affective polarization could manifest itself independently of partisan considerations. Congruent to this point, recent works on electoral choice and job performance evaluations of the U.S. Congress provide support that citizens can use ideological proximity considerations, independent of partisanship, to inform their political choices and attitudes. Jessee (2010) finds evidence that, even with partisan bias, Democratic partisans closer in ideological proximity to Republican U.S. Senator John McCain (AZ) were more likely to vote for him over Democratic U.S. Senator Barack Obama (IL) during the 2008 American presidential election. Moreover, Algara (2021) finds evidence that Republican partisans closer in ideological proximity to congressional Democrats are more likely to approve of a Democratic Congress advocating and passing liberal policies. These findings show that, even after holding partisan identity constant, ideological heterogeneity among partisans can still inform political attitudes and choices independently. In sum, we expect that the ideological proximity component of affective polarization to be distinct and independent of partisan considerations.

While previous work has assessed the role of symbolic ideology (i.e., raw ideological placements) in determining affective polarization (Webster and Abramowitz, 2017; Harteveld, 2021) or specific policies (Orr and Huber, 2020; Hobolt et al., 2020), no standing theoretical model applies a standing Downsian framework to affective polarization assessments of citizens. Moreover, such policy-based theories do not explicitly model the relative ideological policy base to assess the role of citizen and party ideological positions play in shaping affective polarization assessments. Furthermore, we extend this argument by holding partisanship constant, to evaluate whether ideological proximity plays an independent role in shaping affective polarization within partisan coalitions. As such, we extend this argument to the following formal hypothesis:

★ H_2: Among partisans (i.e., holding partisanship constant), closer proximity towards a citizen's preferred party, relative to the location of other parties, drivers greater animosity towards opposing parties and thus greater affective polarization evaluation.

This finding of affective polarization being driven by ideological proximity independently from self-reported partisan affiliation would strongly suggest that policy preferences play a salient, and independent, role in shaping citizen animosity towards opposing parties relative to their own (i.e., affective polarization). That is, in the theoretical example above, if both voters are L's partisans, they are expected to feel warmer feelings toward their own party relative to the other parties. Yet, the difference between in- and out-party feelings is expected to be larger in the case of V_1 because V_1 is further to the left than V_2 (i.e., which in turn makes V_1 more proximate to the moderate-left party than to other parties, relative to V_2). As mentioned earlier, given that the conceptualization of affective polarization is rooted in a pairwise comparison between partisan's party and a focal party, the independent ideological component of affective polarization should manifest itself in V_1 giving higher affective polarization evaluations (i.e., a greater difference between in- and out-party evaluations) than co-partisan V_2 on the premise of ideological distance rather than partisan identity, which is held constant. Given this relative comparison in the conceptualization of affective polarization, an ideological component should manifest itself in a relative comparison between the policy positions of one's own party and focal out-parties.

3. Research design

3.1. Survey data sources

To evaluate our framework positing that ideological proximity between citizens and parties drives affect polarization, we rely on national elections survey data. We rely on the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES) to assess our framework in the American context. Unlike other standing sources of American public opinion, such as the *Cooperative Election Study*, this data source is ideal given the presence of feeling thermometers measuring affective polarization differentials between parties and ideological placements of respondents and parties across a host of policy issue domains in addition to a general liberal-conservative policy space.[3] For the comparative country cases of the United Kingdom, Finland, and Germany; we rely on survey data from national election studies leveraging system-specific evaluations of affective polarization, Left–Right ideological placements, and at least one additional issue placements. Specifically, we rely on the 2019 British Election Study (BES), 2011 Finnish Election Study (FES), and the 2017 German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) to evaluate our theoretical framework of the Downsian roots of affective polarization.[4]

These differing country-specific survey datasets provide for a critical test of our theoretical framework given inclusion of required measures of: (1) standard feeling thermometer evaluations of parties in the system to measure our outcome variable of affective polarization; and (2) both liberal-conservative (Left–Right) and at least one policy-based placement scale of survey respondents and parties necessary to scale citizens and parties in the common ideological space. Indeed, to our knowledge, with the exception of Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social sciences (LISS) panel (see Harteveld, 2021, for a relevant study of these data) these are the only publicly available survey datasets suited towards assessing our Downsian ideological framework of affective polarization, given that these surveys contain measures of affective polarization and ideological placements required to scale citizens and parties in the same ideological space.

3.2. Scaling parties & voters in ideological spaces

Before specifying our statistical models evaluating our theoretical framework, we turn to estimate our key independent variable of interest assessing the degree of ideological proximity between citizens and parties within the polity. To estimate the ideological ideal points of preferences in the mass public and the location of parties in the same ideological common space, we turn to the Aldrich and McKelvey (1977) scaling method rooted in the spatial theory of choice and judgement. This method estimates the location of citizens and political elites in the same ideological space using citizen perceptions of their ideological preferences and their collective placement of political stimuli (i.e., parties, candidates, institutions, etc.).[5]

What makes Aldrich–McKelvey scaling a potent analytical tool is that it corrects for the inherent bias in how respondents interpret and evaluate issue scales, also known as differential item functioning. An example of this systematic measurement error due to differential item functioning can be found in the American context through the systematic observation of liberal Democratic respondents placing themselves and their party as more moderate than conservative respondents, which may place the Democratic party as far left (Hare et al., 2015).[6] The scaling method corrects for such biases by treating raw self-placements as linear distortions of the "correct" location of stimuli and estimating distortion parameters for each respondent. Thus, this method allows for the recovery of unbiased "true" stimuli positions and for estimated ideal point estimates corrected for differential item functioning.[7] This is a pervasive methodological issue, given that scholars have noted, for example, variation in cultural acceptance of the term "liberal" in contemporary American politics (Ellis and Stimson, 2009; Iyengar et al., 2012). For our purposes, this scaling method helps alleviate

---

[3] Note that the 2016 ANES omits ideological party-placements across all forthcoming issue domains. Rather than place the Democratic and Republican parties, respondents were asked to only place the presidential candidates, which made identification of forthcoming scaling models implausible given only two elite-level stimuli.

[4] Specific citations of our four country-specific datasets are as follows: (1) United States 2012: The American National Election Studies (ANES). ANES 2012 Time Series Study. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2016-05-17. https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR35157.v1; (2) United Kingdom 2019: Fieldhouse, E., J. Green., G. Evans., J. Mellon, C. Prosser, R. de Geus, and J. Bailey (2021) 2019 BES Post-Election Random Probability Survey.; (3) Finland 2011: Borg, Sami (University of Tampere) and Kimmo Grönlund (Åbo Akademi University): Finnish National Election Study 2011 [dataset]. Version 2.1 (2013-01-22). Finnish Social Science Data Archive [distributor]. http://urn.f/rn:nbn:fi:fsd:T-FSD2653; (4) Germany 2017: Roßteutscher, Sigrid; Schoen, Harald, Schmitt-Beck, Rüdiger; Weßels,Bernhard; Wolf, Christof; Wagner, Aiko (2019): Post-election Cross Section (GLES 2017). GESIS Data Archive, Cologne: ZA6801 Data file Version 4.0.1, doi: 10.4232/1.13235.

[5] This is usually done on the standard 7 point scale from 1 (very liberal) to 7 (very conservative). The ideological scales used in the non-U.S. survey data of this study measure ideological placements on an 11-point scale from 0 (left) to 10 (right).

[6] Indeed, this logic holds in reverse with conservative Republicans placing themselves and party more moderate than liberal Democrats, which would place the Republican Party to the far right.

[7] Thus, the ideal point of respondents (x_i) can be articulated in the following form: $x_i = \frac{z_{i(self)} - \alpha_i}{\beta_i}$, where $z_{i(self)}$ is raw self-placement on the ideological scale, α_i is the shift distortion parameter, and β_i is the weight distortion parameter. Note that positive values of α_i indicate over-placement of themselves and the stimuli on the scale (in this case, too conservative given that higher values on the scale indicate more conservative) while positive values of β_i (the weight parameter) indicate the correct placement of the stimuli (i.e. placement of liberal stimuli to the left of the conservative stimuli) (Hare et al., 2015). Respondent ideal points (x_i) are recovered from citizen Left–Right placements of themselves and national stimuli consistently present in the survey (i.e., placements of parties, national candidates, collective national institutions). We bound the ideal points produced by the model on a scale of -3 (liberal) to -3 (conservative).
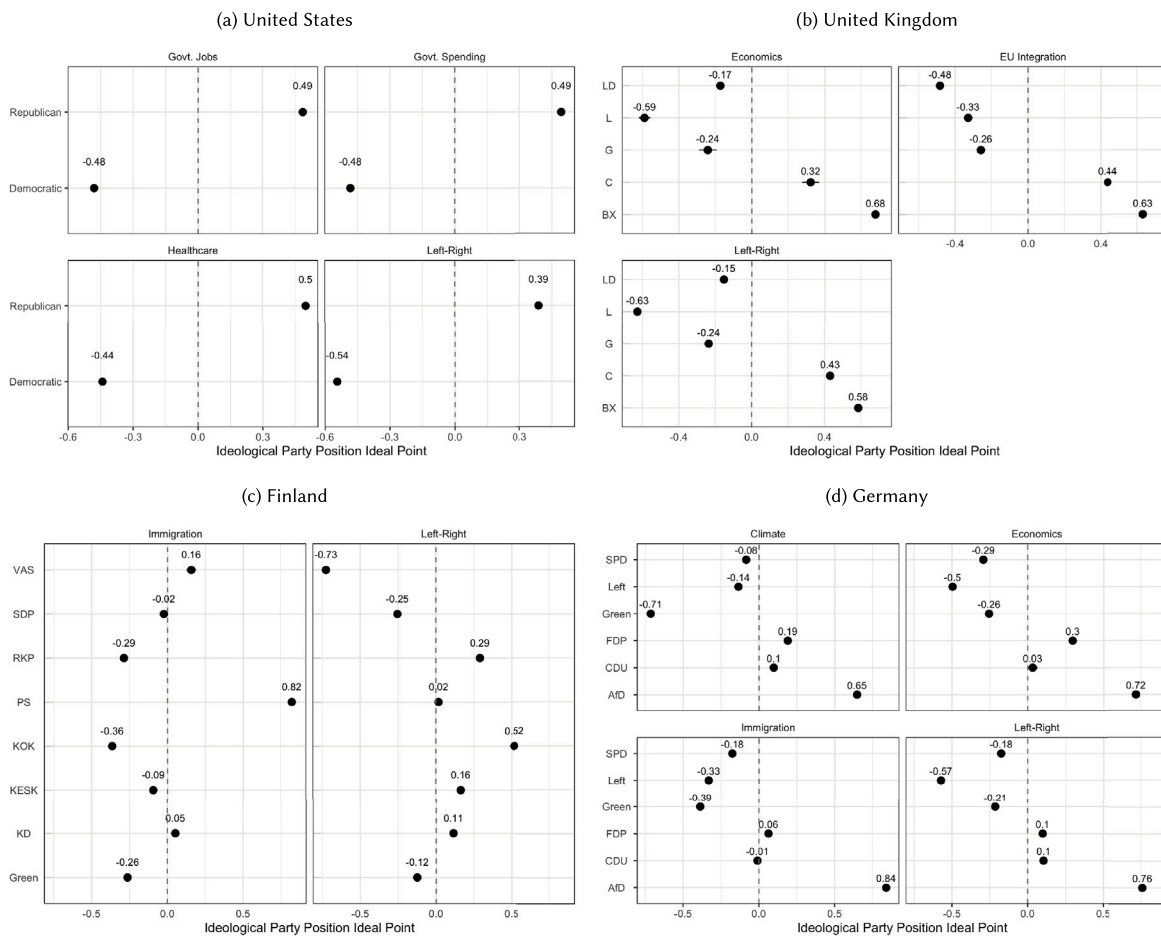
Fig. 2. Scaled party positions across country cases & issue areas.
Fig. 2 shows the scaled (Aldrich–McKelvey) positions of the major political parties in the US, UK, Finland, and Germany. Each box shows the position of the parties on a specific issue dimension.

the concerns that ideological perceptions of political parties and individual ideological positions may be distorted by differential item functioning sourced by affective feelings towards individual parties. Recently, scholars have turned their attention to the Aldrich–McKelvey method to recover unbiased measures of party ideological placements and citizen preferences and estimate spatial models of public opinion across various political contexts (e.g., Saiegh, 2015; Ramey, 2016; Algara, 2021).

To identify the polarity of our Aldrich–McKelvey models scaling citizens and parties in each country data source, we follow a similar approach of Lo et al. (2014) and rely on party positions provided by the *Chapel Hill Expert Survey* to identify the most conservative and liberal parties in the ideological space (Bakker et al., 2015). Given that each data source contains multiple issue domain liberal-conservative scales, we use the *Chapel Hill Expert Survey* to identify the liberal and conservative parties in the issue space. For example, in the German case, this approach allows us to set the polarity for each available issue domain of the standard Left–Right space, the economic space, the immigration space, and the climate change space.[8] We scale citizens and parties for each issue space available in the country-specific survey.

Fig. 2 shows the scaled party positions across each of our country cases encompassing the United States, United Kingdom, Finland,

and Germany. To capture uncertainty around our estimates of party positions, we also use the nonparametric bootstrapping method to estimate 95% confidence intervals around our point estimates, with higher values indicating more conservative ideological positions.[9] With the exception of the United States, there is heterogeneity in the party positions across dimensions. For example, the Liberal Democrats are much more to the left on the EU Integration issue than on the Left–Right dimension or economics. As a whole, we find rich variation in party positions across policy spaces.

To articulate the general liberal-conservative ideological space we plot the distribution of citizen ideal points and party positions in Fig. 3.[10] Interestingly, in terms of liberal-conservative ideological preferences, each country exhibits a Gaussian distribution indicating a relatively moderate mass public within each polity. Our scaling models also capture the relative extremity of some parties relative to the ideological preferences of the broader electorate. For example, we capture just how ideologically extreme the right-wing Alternative

---

[8] Given the two-party context in the American case, the Democratic Party is the liberal party across all issue domains and the Republican Party is the conservative party. For this case, we have 4 ideological spaces: standard Left–Right, healthcare, government services, and government spending.

[9] We follow the same bootstrapping method as Armstrong III et al. (2014, pg. 55) to estimate confidence intervals through 1,000 repeated random draws of respondents for each scaling procedure. This results in a distribution of 1,000 estimates of each party's position in a corresponding issue space, which can be used to capture standard errors of the position estimates and subsequent confidence intervals. Note that given the relative ideologically developed party systems in this study across issues, corresponding confidence intervals are relatively small indicating a high degree of certainty in order party positions.

[10] Figures 2A–D, in the appendix, articulate the same figures for each issue domain by country case.
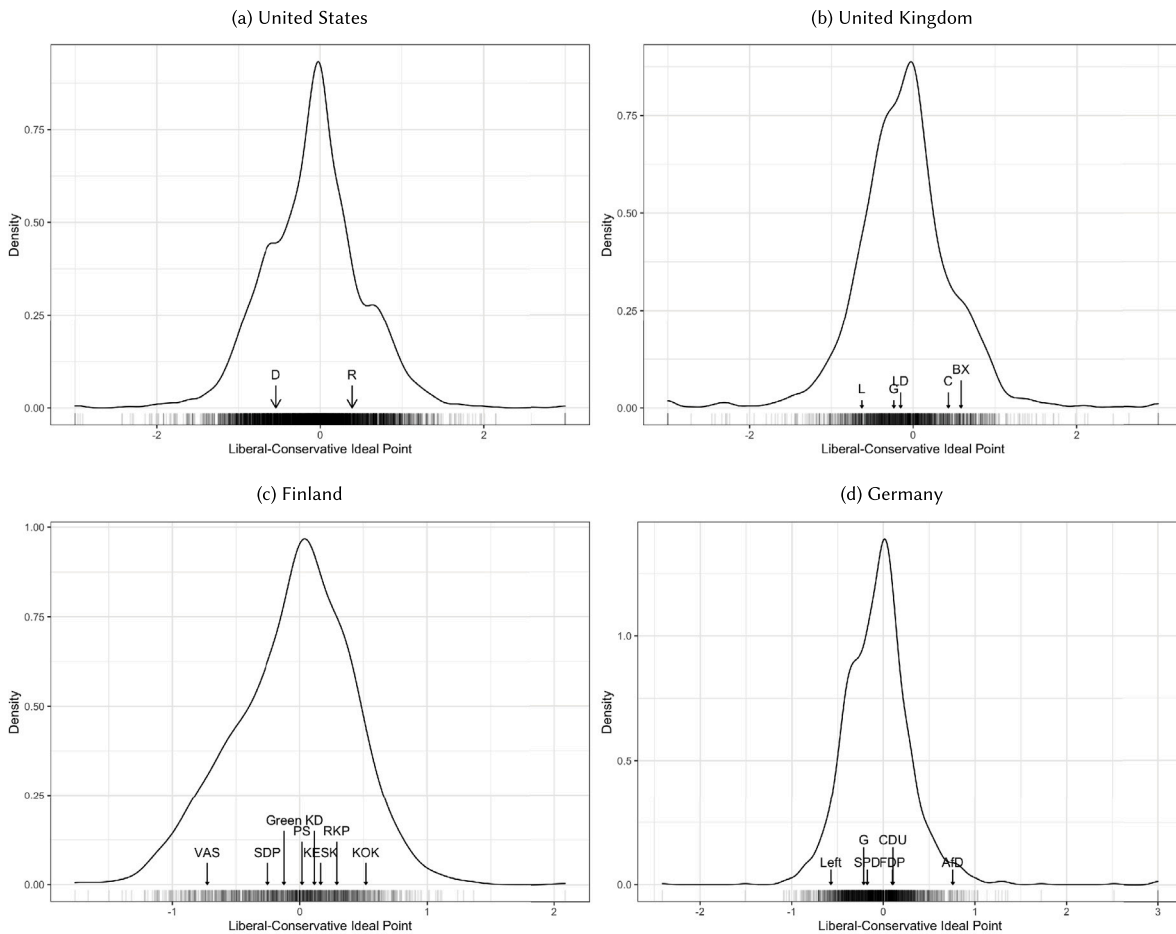
Fig. 3. Distribution of citizen ideal points & party positions in the general liberal-conservative ideological space.
Fig. 3 shows the positions of the major parties in each country on the Left–Right (Liberal-Conservative) dimension along with the respondents' preferences distributions on the same ideological scale. Both parties' positions and respondents' preferences are scaled using Aldrich–McKelvey method.

for Germany (AfD) and left-wing socialist The Left are relative to the broader German public. Given that our Downsian framework of affective polarization requires the ability to empirically measure the proximity between citizens and parties in the same ideological space, the scaling procedure provides a great degree of external validity in our scaling models estimating the ideological positions of parties and ideal point preferences of the mass public across countries.[11]

3.3. Specifying models of affective polarization

Similar to recent works in comparative affective polarization (e.g. Gidron et al., 2020; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021), we capture affective polarization using the standard like–dislike (thermometer score) question included in the election surveys mentioned above. In all the analyses presented below the *dependent variable* is the unweighted pair-wise thermometer score differential. That is, the difference between the thermometer score voter i, who is a partisan of party j, assigns to party j minus the thermometer score voter i assigns to any other focal out-party k. More formally, our outcome pair-wise variable takes the following form:

$$Affective\ Differential_{ijk} = Thermometer_{party\ j} - Thermometer_{party\ k} \quad (1)$$

As such, greater positive values indicate the degree to which voter i views their party (party j) more warmly than the focal out-party k being evaluated in the pair-wide comparison. For example, think of a voter who feels closest to the German moderate-right party, the CDU, and assigns it a thermometer score of 10. When this voter assigns a thermometer score of 5 to the SPD, then our dependent variable takes the value of 5. If the same voter assigns a thermometer score of 0 to the AfD, then our dependent variable takes the value of 10. Lastly, if the same voter assigns a thermometer score of 10 to the FDP, then our dependent variable takes the value of 0.

The thermometer score differential has become a standard measure of affective polarization when researchers work with observational data, as we do in this article. Yet, one concern is that the American 101-point thermometer scale has been utilized to uncover underlining perceived Liberal-Conservative placements of parties (e.g., Cahoon et al., 1978; Brady, 1990; Bakker and Poole, 2013). However, scholars note that feeling thermometers may be inadequate to estimate ideological preferences and may be better suited to be measures of partisan affect, particularly given the fact that feeling thermometer data is not suited to recover citizen ideal points in the same ideological space as parties (see Hare et al., 2015; Ramey, 2016). Indeed, the strength of the approach of using Aldrich–McKelvey scaling described in the previous section is the leveraging of ideological self-placements, and the placements of parties, to recover unbiased ideal points of citizens and parties in the ideological space.[12] Moreover, recent works on the

---

[11] The scaling procedure estimating unbiased party positions and citizen ideological ideal points helps alleviate concerns that ideological perceptions are driven by affective feelings towards party rather than the other way around.

[12] Moreover, feeling thermometer data do not ask respondents to place themselves on the feeling thermometer scale, thus not providing a requirement

validity of thermometer scores show that they are strongly related to other measures of affective polarization, such as social distance, trust, and discrimination against out partisans (Bakker and Poole, 2013; Iyengar et al., 2012). What is interesting about the validation literature is that the thermometer scores differentials have been established as measures of affective polarization both in the context of strong partisan attachments of the US (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019) and the context of weaker partisan attachments outside of the US (Gidron et al., 2022b; Sheffer, 2020). Taking all of these together we reiterate the conclusion that the standard measure of affective polarization is related to, but distinct from, measures of ideology (e.g. Gidron et al., 2020, 2022b; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021). Moreover, our second hypothesis (H_2) provides some additional leverage in assessing the ideological foundations of affective polarization by testing whether the relationship between ideological preferences and affective polarization is independent of partisan identities.

Because we analyze the pair-wise comparison of the major parties in each of our four countries, each respondent contributes n-1 observations to the data, depending on the number of parties they evaluated. In the US this number equals 1, 3 in the UK, 5 in Germany, and 7 in Finland. Consequently, the dependent variable cannot be calculated for respondents that have not evaluated the party they 'feel closest to' (i.e., partisan independents), and thus they are not included in the analysis. Given the stacked nature of our data, we specify all forthcoming country-specific regression models with respondent clustered standard errors.

Our main independent variables measure how much closer voters' ideal points are to their preferred party relative to each other focal party in the system. These proximity differential variables are calculated, for each policy dimension, based on the scaled voters' ideal points and parties' policy positions described above. We first calculate the absolute distance between a given voter i's ideal point and the position of each focal party k on each dimension p present in the country-case. This step yields a measure of voter-party proximity (congruence) for each focal party k. We then repeat this step with respect to taking the absolute distance between voter i's ideal point and the position of their preferred party j on each dimension p considered. We then take the difference between these two quantities of interest to measure voter i's ideological proximity to their preferred party j relative to each focal party k on each policy dimension p considered given the pair-wise comparison in the outcome variable. More formally, our main pair-wise covariate of interest takes the following form.

$$Proximity_{ijk} = |Party_k - voter_i| - |Party_j - voter_i| \qquad (2)$$

Using the CDU's partisan example from above, if the voter i's ideal point is 0, focal out-party SPD's (party k) estimated Left–Right position is −0.18, and preferred party CDU's (party j) estimated Left–Right position is 0.10, then the voter's distance from the focal out-party SPD and preferred party CDU equals 0.18 and 0.10, respectively. In the example above, the Left–Right proximity differential, $Proximity_{ijk}$, (our independent variable) is 0.18–0.10 = 0.08. That is, the voter's ideal point on Left–Right is 0.08 units closer to his preferred party j (CDU) than to the focal out-party k SPD. We replicate this calculation of relative $Proximity_{ijk}$ for each pair-wise comparison of parties in each policy dimension k estimated in the respective country case.

4. Cross-national evidence of ideological proximity origins of affective polarization

In this section, we provide empirical support for our first hypothesis. We demonstrate that increased proximity between one's ideal point and their preferred party's position in the ideological space, relative

to the ideological positions of other parties within the ideological space, corresponds to a greater degree of affective polarization. Put differently, as the proximity differential between a voter and each pair of parties increases, we find a greater level of affective polarization.

Fig. 4 evaluates H_1 by presenting the relationship between a one standard deviation increase in ideological proximity and affective polarization. Recall that our main covariate of interest is the ideological proximity of a given voter i to their preferred party j relative to the focal k party being evaluated in the pair-wise comparison while our outcome variable of interest is the feeling thermometer differential between the preferred party of voter i and focal party k being evaluated. Model 1 (in black) in Fig. 4 estimates the relationship between party-voter congruence and affective polarization. This model includes all available policy domains and pools all parties and partisans together but excludes all the control variables. In all four cases, we find evidence that an increase in Left–Right and policy incongruence drives a significant increase in affective polarization. Indeed, as closer a voter's ideal point is to the Left–Right position of their favorite party, relative to the position of the out-party, the difference between the thermometer score that the voter assigns to their preferred party and the out-party increases. The substantive meaning of these results is that affective polarization is rooted in voters' Left–Right preferences *and* parties' ideological stands. Moreover, these findings contribute to the existing literature by showing that the relationship between ideological and affective polarization goes beyond the party system polarization or the direct congruence between a voter and their preferred party. These results emphasize that direct distance from the out-party's position does not fully explain the magnitude of affective polarization, and that the direct distance from the out-party is just one of the two components of affective polarization (the other component is the proximity to the in-party). For example, when comparing two supporters of the Republican party, an ideologically conservative and a moderate one, the former is expected to have warmer feelings toward the Republican party and cooler feelings toward the Democratic party. Therefore, the former is expected to be more affectively polarized, *even when the two supporters are equally distanced from the Republican party*. Similarly, in the multiparty context, a CDU's supporter who is to the right of the CDU's moderate-Right position reports warmer feelings towards the far-right AfD than a CDU's supporter that is to the left of the CDU's position, even when the two are equally distanced from the CDU.

Affective polarization is not only rooted in Left–Right proximity but in specific policy domains as well. In the US, we find that larger proximity differentials on all three policy domains are associated with larger affective polarization. Specifically, we find that government spending, healthcare insurance spending, and voters' preference regarding jobs are significantly associated with the difference between animosity towards the opposing party and liking of one's party.

In Germany, immigration is the second most important issue in predicting individual-level affective polarization. Greater proximity towards one's preferred party with respect to immigration, relative to the immigration position of other parties, corresponds to a greater degree of affective polarization expressed by German citizens. The same is true for the trade-off between environmental protection and economic growth. German citizens also express a greater degree of affective polarization when the economic proximity differential is greater.

Similar patterns can be seen in the UK, where both wealth redistribution (economic proximity) and EU integration correspond to levels of affective polarization. The magnitude of the relationship between proximity and affective polarization is greater in the case of EU integration preferences than in the case of redistribution. Moreover, the proximity differentials in the case of EU integration are as impotent in explaining affective polarization as Left–Right proximity. This result relates to a recent finding by Hobolt et al. (2020), who demonstrate that British citizens' Brexit identities (Leavers v. Remainers) produce levels of affective polarization that are as high as partisan identities. In Finland, our analysis shows that the issue of work-related immigration
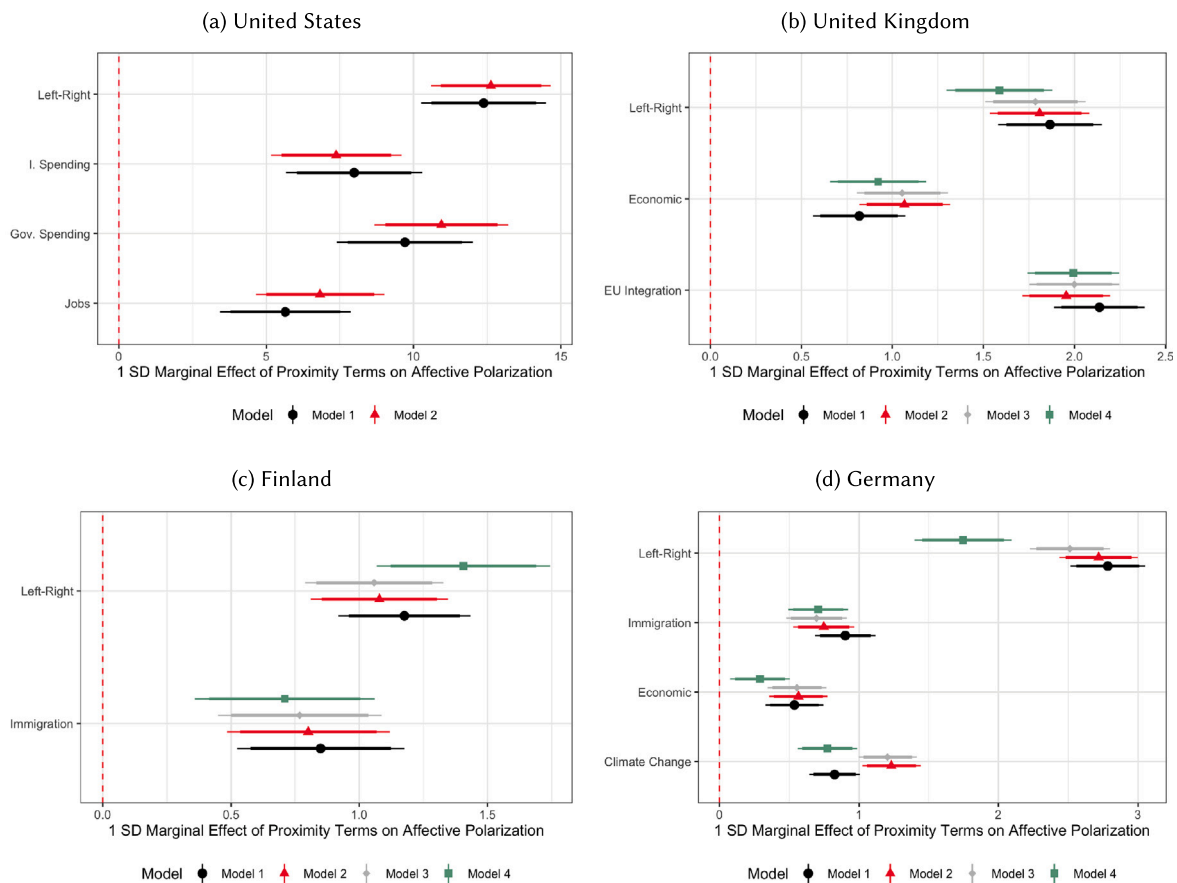
Fig. 4. Proximity differentials & affective polarization across country cases.

Fig. 4 shows the marginal effects of interest for each proximity differential of our main models when all parties and partisans are aggregated.[13] In all models the dependent variable is the unweighted pair-wise thermometer score differential and we estimate confidence intervals from respondent-clustered standard errors. We shade the significant relationships in the figure at $\rho < 0.10$ and present both 90% & 95% confidence intervals around our point estimates. The model fit information is shown in the appendix. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

restrictions is associated with the level of affective polarization, and the magnitude of this association is marginally smaller than in the case of the overarching Left–Right dimension.

These results give strong evidence for our theoretical argument that affective polarization is rooted in the structure of electoral competition when individual-level data is aggregated among all parties and partisans. Our results are robust to other model specifications as well. Model 2 in Fig. 4 (triangular red marks) includes three control variables in addition to the proximity variables. These are the respondent's age (coded as a continuous variable), gender (coded 1 for females and 0 for males), and most importantly the partisan identification of the survey respondent.[14] We argue that partisan voting, i.e., voting for the party one feels closest to, has two important implications for our general argument. First, as one should expect from the literature, partisan voting corresponds with greater levels of polarization, and citizens who turnout to vote are more likely to be affectively polarized (Harteveld and Wagner, 2021), especially near election time (Hernández et al.,

2021). Second, our finding that voting for one's preferred party relates to greater levels of affective polarization confirms the independent relationship between ideological preferences and affective polarization. We find evidence that ideological proximity is a salient predictor of affective polarization across a host of comparative contexts. In all four countries, the control variables do not alter the results in Model 1, the estimated coefficients are similar, and the confidence intervals overlap. Additionally, we provide in the appendix evidence that our substantive conclusions hold for other model specifications such adding a directional spatial component and party level fixed-effects.

Recent works demonstrate that cooperative elite behavior alleviates affective polarization (Bassan-Nygate and Weiss, 2021; Horne et al., 2022). To account for the possibility that our results depend on such elite behavior Model 3 in Fig. 4 (gray diamonds) adds a shared coalition variable to the model specification in Model 2.[15] The shared coalition variable is coded as 1 if the out-party participate in a coalition with the respondent's preferred party in the last decade. If elite behavior does indeed affect levels of affective polarization we should observe two outcomes from adding the shared coalition variable to the model. First, we should not see changes to the direct relationship between proximity and affective polarization. Second, we should expect a negative and significant relationship between the shared coalition variable and affective polarization. The results in Model 3 in Fig. 4 confirm our expectations. Concerning our variables of interest (proximity differentials), the

---

[13] See the appendix for full results of the forthcoming additive and interactive models.

[14] In the U.S. context, we code partisanship as a binary variable indicating whether a respondent identifies as a Republican or Democratic partisan. For the comparative contexts, we code partisanship from a variable measuring whether the respondent voted for "the party they feel closest to" in the last election and which party they voted for. For the models specified within the German and Finnish context, we include an additional control measuring whether a respondent resides in a rural, urban, or township contextual setting.

[15] Note that, given the lack of coalition government, we do not specify a Model 3 for the U.S. case.

results of Model 3 are substantially the same as those of Models 1 and 2. This result gives confidence that affective polarization is rooted in ideological incongruence between voters and parties, even after accounting for the coalition politics that underpin the parliamentary multiparty country contexts we assess.

Lastly, we build on Model 3 by including out-party fixed-effects (intercepts) in the model estimation to account for unmodeled heterogeneity in how voters evaluate a given party relative to their own party in this pair-wise comparison. Inclusion of these out-party specific fixed-effects in Model 4, our fully specified model, is important given that unmodeled heterogeneity in parties, particularly in terms of valence, may also correlate with affective polarization assessments (see Zur, 2021b, for a similar modeling strategy with respect to the relationship between valence and electoral support.). The results of our fully specified model, Model 4, are articulated in the green squares found in Fig. 4.[16] The results of our fully specified model specified with party-specific fixed-effects confirm our hypothesis across each country case, ideological proximity differentials across each issue domain correlates with greater affective polarization. This last, comprehensive, test provides robust evidence for *H₁* positing that greater ideological proximity towards one's preferred party, relative to the positions of other parties, corresponds to greater affective polarization expressed by citizens. Simply put, the results so far demonstrate that *both* proximity to one's in-party *and* distance from the out-party are important predictors of affective polarization.

4.1. Within-party variation in proximity & affective polarization

Above we demonstrate that ideological and policy proximity shape affective polarization among the mass public across a host of western democracies. The previous results support *H₁*, that greater ideological proximity towards one's preferred party in the ideological space relative to other parties correlates with a greater degree of affective polarization expressed by citizens. However, ideological proximity may simply be a proxy measure for partisan identity. In other words, the proximity result may simply be driven by the fact that partisans are predisposed to already be closer ideologically to their preferred party, thus driving greater affective polarization for opposing parties. We take an alternative approach and argue in *H₂* that ideological preferences are distinct from partisan ones, with these ideological preferences (i.e., proximity) informing affective polarization independent of partisan identification. To test this hypothesis, we take our fully specified model and interact each proximity differential with citizens' partisanship. This approach estimates the relationship between our ideological proximity differentials and affective polarization across citizen partisan identification in a given country.[17]

As one can see in Fig. 5, there is robust evidence that affective polarization is, at least to some degree, independent from partisan affinity. Turning to Fig. 5A evaluating the U.S. case, we show that across all policy domains closer ideological proximity towards one's own party, relative to a given focal party, significantly correlates with greater affective polarization among Democratic and Republican partisans. For example, among Democrats (Republicans), a one-standard deviation increase in ideological proximity on the Left–Right dimension towards their party corresponds to a predicted increase of 10.33 (17.53) in Democratic–Republican (Republican–Democratic) affective polarization differential evaluations. Indeed, across all issue domains, we find that closer ideological proximity shapes affective polarization among partisans in the U.S. context. Turning to Fig. 5B in the United Kingdom

case, we find a similar relationship across almost all policy domains. With the exception of Brexit partisans on the economic dimension, greater ideological proximity correlates with greater affective polarization across all partisan groups and policy domains. Congruently, a one-standard deviation increase in ideological proximity towards one's own party, relative to a given focal party, increases affective polarization evaluations by 0.88, 2.01, 1.90, 2.66, and 1.36 units among Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Green, and Brexit partisans. Note that this is a sizable relationship given that, unlike the American National Election Study, feeling thermometers in the British Election Study are on an 11-point scale rather than the 101-point scale.[18]

Turning to the last two country cases, we find considerable evidence that the relationship between proximity and affective polarization is largely independent of partisan identity in the country cases of Finland and Germany. Fig. 5C presenting the results of the Finnish case shows that—with the exception of PS partisans on both the Left–Right and immigration dimensions, along with KD and SDP on the immigration dimension—greater ideological proximity significantly correlates with greater affective polarization assessments within each partisan group. A similar result can be found in the German case in Fig. 5D, with closer ideological proximity correlating with greater affective polarization evaluations for all partisan types on the general Left–Right ideological dimension. Turning to the economic dimension, we find mixed evidence of a significant relationship between proximity and affective polarization. This relationship is significant for CDU, SPD, and Green partisans, but insignificant for FDP, Left, and AfD partisans. By contrast, this significant relationship between proximity and affective polarization holds for all partisans in the climate change and immigration dimensions with the exception of FDP in the former and AfD in the latter, respectively. Taken together, while we find weaker support for *H₂* in the German case, we do find that in the 19 out of 24 total partisan-dimension marginal effect point estimates in this context that greater ideological proximity towards one's party correlates with greater affective evaluations of their party relative to other focal parties in the party system. On the general Left–Right dimension, we find a significant relationship between greater ideological proximity and affective polarization for all partisan groups in the American, British, Finnish, and German cases. Taken together, the results of the model show that ideological proximity shapes affective polarization assessments largely independent of partisan identification in each of the four countries evaluated on the general Left–Right dimension and in specific policy domains. To that point, across the 63 partisan-proximity marginal effects estimated, only 10 were insignificant predictors of affective polarization evaluations, suggesting that in most cases closer ideological proximity towards one's party relative to a focal out-party correlates with greater affective polarization (i.e., a greater differential between affect for one's party relative to the focal out-party) within partisan groups across individual policy domains.[19] This provides substantive evidence for *H₂* positing that ideological proximity is a distinct predictor of affective polarization and that, even within partisan groups, can be a significant source of partisan pair-wise evaluations.[20]

---

[16] Note that, given the presence of only two parties in the out-party specific fixed-effect would be collinear given the data structure of the pairwise comparisons. As such, we do not specify a Model 4 for the U.S. case.

[17] Full model results can be found in the Model 5 column of each county-specific table in the appendix.

[18] All other country cases are also on this eleven-point scale.

[19] Specifically, we find only zero, one, four, and five insignificant proximity-partisan group point estimates in the American, British, Finnish, and German country cases.

[20] In the appendix, we also consider an alternative hypothesis that the relationship between the proximity differential and affective polarization is driven by strategic elite behavior through party positioning rather than the ideological preferences of parties. We provide evidence that affective polarization evaluations in the mass public are not only based on ideological proximity between citizens and parties, but primarily driven by elite decisions on party positioning. The discussion of this additional argument, along with its empirical implications, can be found in the online appendix.
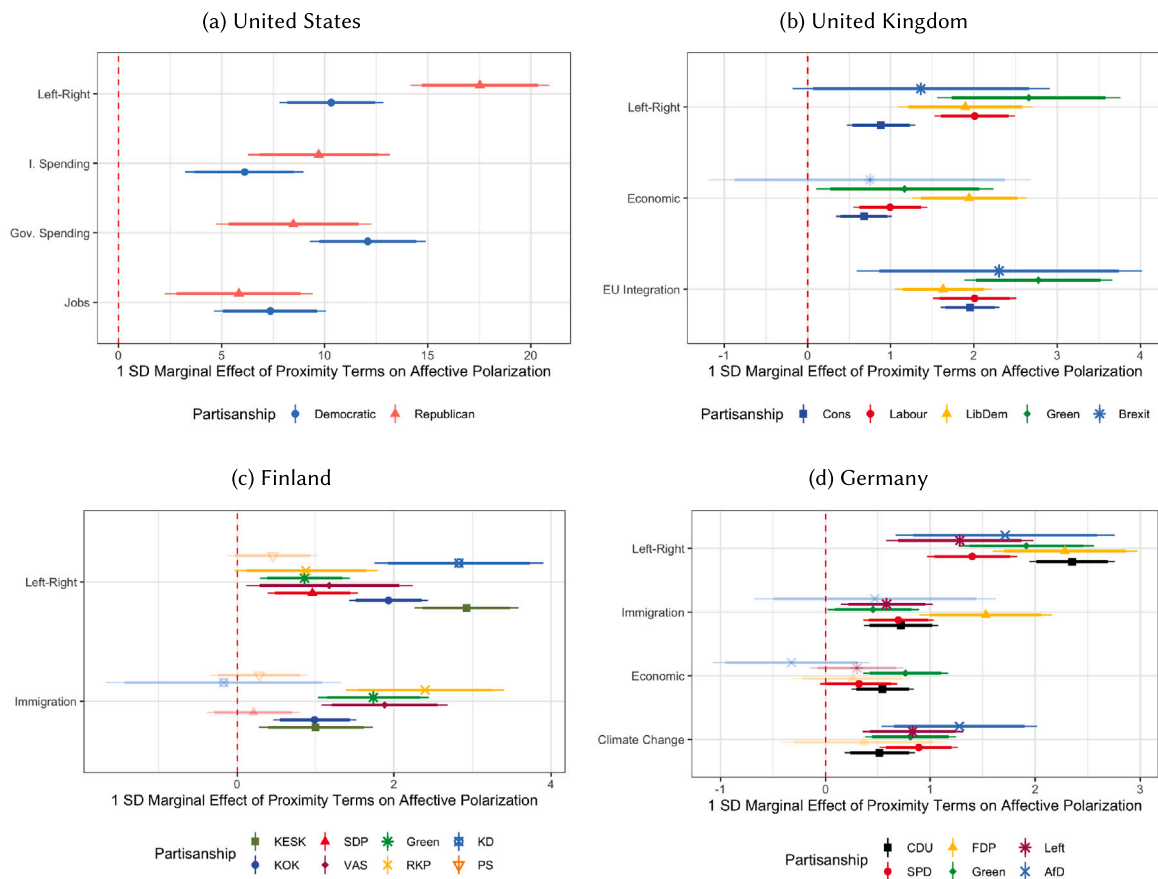
Fig. 5. The independent effect of proximity differentials on affective polarization across country cases.

Fig. 5 shows our marginal effects of interest of each proximity differential across partisan groups within each country-case. These marginal effects are estimated from interactions between the proximity differentials and partisanship from our fully specified model, which is Model 2 for the U.S. case and Model 4 for the British, Finnish, and German cases. In all multiplicative models, the dependent variable is the unweighted pair-wise thermometer score differential and we estimate confidence intervals from respondent-clustered standard errors. We shade the significant relationships in the figure at $\rho < 0.10$ and present both 90% & 95% confidence intervals around our point estimates. The multiplicative model fit information and the full set of coefficients are shown in the appendix.

5. Proximity and citizen evaluations of in & out parties

The analyses presented provide strong support for our theoretical arguments that (1) affective polarization is associated with ideological and policy differences between parties and citizens, and (2) that this association is largely independent of specific groups of partisans. Because we take a Downsian approach to affective polarization, up until this point, our theoretical and analytical focus centers on how ideological proximity predicts the *pair-wise* affective polarization. That is, the differential between one's evaluation of their own party and their evaluation of a given out-party. An interesting question that follows from our findings is—are these relationships between ideological proximity and affective polarization driven by affect towards one's own preferred party (in-party evaluations) or the opposing (out-) party? In this section, we attempt to explore whether the predictive nature of ideological proximity towards one's preferred party, relative to the positions of other parties, is more salient when citizens evaluate their own in-party or the opposing parties in the party system. Indeed, this exploratory analysis would shed light on whether ideological proximity correlates with out-party hate to a greater degree than in-party affinity, thus suggesting that the results of our affective polarization models are primarily driven by out-party, rather than in-party, assessments.

To that end, we respecify our full model—which is Model 2 for the U.S. case and Model 4 for the British, Finnish, and German cases—twice, one with an outcome variable predicting in-party thermometer score evaluations and the other predicting out-party thermometer score

evaluations. This approach allows us to estimate the relationship between our ideological proximity differentials and one's thermometer evaluations of their (1) in-party and (2) each out-party occupying the party system.[21] Fig. 6 articulates the results of our model by showing the one standard deviation marginal effect of ideological proximity towards one's own party, relative to other parties, on thermometer evaluations of a given voter's (1) in-party (which we expect to be positive and significant) and (2) each out-party (which we expect to be negative and significant) in the party system. Before discussing these results in detail, we emphasize that our models show a strong and consistent relationship between ideological proximity and out-party animosity, and a weaker relationship between ideological proximity and in-party affinity.[22] Turning to Fig. 6A, we find evidence that the

---

[21] For the (1) in-party model models, this approach results in each respondent contributing n-1 row observations to the data, depending on the number of focal parties they evaluated. In this setup, the outcome variable is the thermometer score rating of one's own party and the proximity covariates capturing proximity towards one's preferred party, relative to the position of a given focal party in the system. For the (2) out-party models, we use the same approach of each respondent contributing n-1 observations to the data depending on the number of focal parties evaluated in the system, but the outcome variable is the thermometer score rating of a given focal (out-) party in the system rather than a measure of affective polarization or evaluations towards one's in-party.

[22] We note that it is essential to compare the absolute magnitude of the marginal effects measuring a one standard deviation increase in ideological

left–right ideological proximity term is a more salient predictor of the out-party than one's in-party in the U.S. party system when comparing the magnitude of the estimated marginal effects across the in-party and out-party models. In this U.S. context, a one-standard deviation change in ideological proximity towards one's own party, relative to the position of the out-party, correlates with a predicted increase of 3.04 [95% CI: 1.64, 4.45] on the 101-point thermometer rating scale for one's own party while the same proximity term correlates with a −9.56 [95% CI: −10.97, −8.14] predicted decrease for the out-party. Fig. 6A finds a similar dynamic in the U.S. case with respect to the jobs and government spending proximity terms. A one-standard deviation increase in the jobs (government spending) proximity term correlates with a predicted thermometer increase of 1.83 [95% CI: 0.39, 3.26] (4.56 [95% CI: 3.07, 6.05]) for the in-party while correlating with a greater predicted thermometer decrease of −5.02 [95% CI: −6.52, −3.51] (−6.40 [95% CI: −7.99, −4.80]) for the out-party. Taken together, we find evidence in the U.S. case that three of our four ideological proximity terms are more salient predictors of out-party evaluations than in-party valuations when comparing the absolute magnitude of the marginal effects of ideological proximity towards one's own party relative to a given opposing party.

We find a similar dynamic in Fig. 6B assessing our in-party and out-party model in the U.K. context. In this context, we find that greater proximity towards one's party relative to a given out-party correlates to a greater extent with evaluations of the out-party compared to the in-party for all ideological dimensions. Simply put, our models show that in the UK the proximity differentials are associated with both higher in-party affinity *and* out-party animosity, and more so in the latter than the former. For example, in the left–right dimension, this proximity marginal effect correlates with a predicted increase of 0.49 [95% CI: 0.30, 0.67] for the in-party and a greater 1.30 decrease [95% CI: −1.48, −1.13] for the out-party on the 11 point thermometer rating. We observe this to a greater degree in the EU integration, with this proximity marginal effect correlating with a predicted increase of 0.33 [95% CI: 0.17, 0.49] for the in-party and a greater −1.68 decrease [95% CI: −1.86, −1.50] for the out-party on the 11-point thermometer rating.

Turning to the Finnish context in Fig. 6C a similar pattern emerges. We find that the left–right and immigration proximity differentials are insignificant predictors of in-party thermometer evaluations while they are significant negative predictors of the out-party evaluations. This lends more evidence that greater ideological proximity to one's preferred party is a more salient predictor of out-party, rather than in-party, evaluations. This also holds in the evaluation of the German context in Fig. 6D. As one can see, ideological proximity terms for the economic and climate change dimensions are insignificant predictors of in-party evaluations while they are significant negative predictors of out-party evaluations in the German context. In terms of the left–right and immigration proximity terms, we find that they are far more salient predictors of out-party evaluations rather than in-party valuations, with these proximity terms correlating with a greater decrease in out-party evaluations relative to an increase in in-party evaluations. Taken together, we find consistent evidence across country cases that our proximity terms correlate to a greater extent with out-party evaluations when compared to in-party evaluations. Indeed, this exploratory analysis lends some support that the relationship between ideological proximity and affective polarization evaluations may be driven to a greater degree by voter evaluations of *out-parties* rather than their preferred *in-party* occupying the party system.

---

proximity towards one's party, relative to an opposing party, given that this proximity term will be *positive* when predicting evaluations towards the *in-party* and *negative* when predicting evaluations towards a given *opposing party*.

6. Conclusions: The ideological roots of affective polarization

The burgeoning literature on affective polarization argues that polarizing views of the parties are inherently rooted in "partyism" (i.e, social attachments to one's own party) rather than ideological preferences relative to the parties (Iyengar et al., 2019). Yet, several new works have found that affective polarization is associated with ideological polarization. In this research, we contribute to this growing literature by arguing theoretically and demonstrating empirically that not only are ideological preferences a key determinant of affective polarization across various democratic contexts, but this ideological component manifests itself within a Downsian framework. That is, *both* ideological distance from the out-part and ideological proximity to the in-party are important to explain affective polarization. Indeed, using latent variable scaling to place citizens and parties in the same ideological space, we find robust evidence across a set of model specifications that greater ideological proximity between citizens and their own party increases affective polarization evaluations across our countries of interest. We also find that, by and large, this finding extends to other policy domains beyond the traditional unidimensional Left–Right ideological space, with closer proximity between citizens and their own party in various policy domains increasing affective polarization evaluations. However, we also note that the standard Left–Right ideological dimension generally informs affective polarization to a greater degree than policy domain-specific proximity as evidenced by the results of our additive and interactive models. With the exception of the European integration question in the United Kingdom, which provided to be the most important divide in the country since the 2016 referendum (Hobolt et al., 2020), we find that Left–Right proximity correlates with affective polarization to a greater degree than domain-specific proximity. We contend that this is further evidence that affective polarization across these country cases is generally informed by the general Left–Right dimension of partisan competition, with citizens largely informing their view of the parties in standard Left–Right terms of affective polarization evaluations of parties. While we find that policy domain-specific proximity may shape affective polarization evaluations on the margins, we find that these evaluations are largely shaped by the general Left–Right dimension. We contend that future research should further assess how the multidimensionality of partisan competition across salient issue domains may shape affective polarization.

Extending these baseline findings, We also evaluate whether this effect of ideological proximity is independent of citizen partisan identity. We show that across almost all partisan groups in the US, the UK, Finland, and Germany there is a significant relationship between the Downsian proximity differentials and the level of reported affective polarization. This is true for both the overarching Left–Right dimension *and* the specific policy issues we study. Furthermore, we discuss how the two components of affective polarization (in-party affinity and out-party animosity) are driven by citizens' proximity to their preferred party, relative to their distance from each of the other parties in the system. Our analyses show that, for the most part, *both* in-party affinity and out-party animosity are driven by relative ideological proximity, but the relationship is stronger in the case of out-party animosity than in-party affinity. In the appendix, we extend this argument by separating the two components of our Downsian proximity differentials (proximity to the in-party and distance from the out-party). We find evidence for a larger magnitude of the ideology parameter for out-parties relative to in-parties in predicting affective polarization evaluations. That is, while *both* distance from the out-party and proximity to the in-party matter, the former seems to matter more than the latter.

The findings presented here have clear implications for the citizen-level determinants of affective polarization. First, we present cross-national evidence consistent with previous studies (see Dias and Lelkes, 2021) that both the policy attitudes of the mass public and the positions of the parties offered to them. As such, a critical component of affective
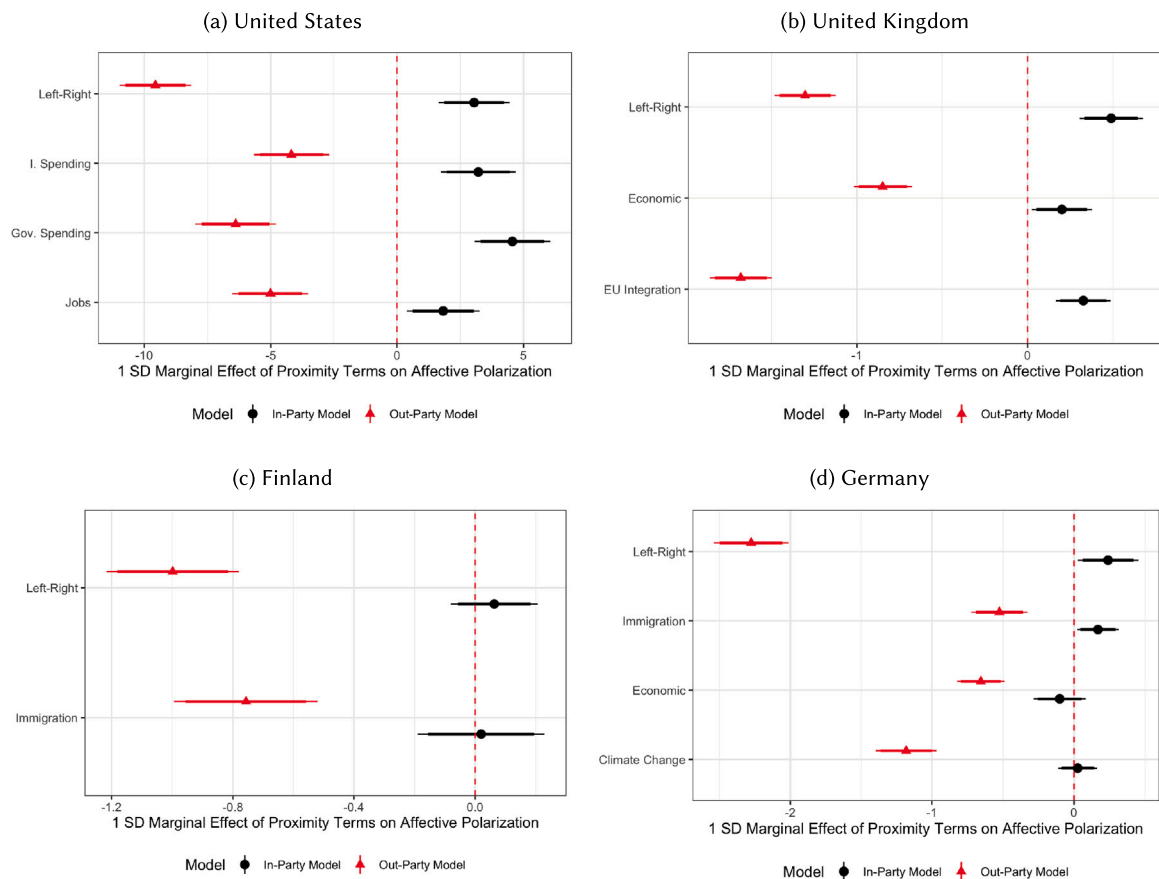
Fig. 6. The independent effect of proximity differentials on affective polarization across country cases.
Fig. 6 shows our marginal effects of interest of each proximity differential predicting (1) in-party thermometer ratings and (2) out-party thermometer ratings for two separate models within each country-case, resulting in a total of 8 models being reported in the figure. The dependent variable is the unweighted thermometer score differential for one's in-party or out-party, respectively, and we estimate confidence intervals from respondent-clustered standard errors. We shade the significant relationships in the figure at $\rho < 0.10$ and present both 90% & 95% confidence intervals around our point estimates. The model fit information and the full set of coefficients are shown in the appendix.

polarization comparatively is, in part, a manifestation of the Downsian rational choice framework. Indeed, we find support that individual-level assessments of affective polarization are rooted in the policy positions offered by competing parties in both the two- and multi-party contexts. This suggests that a certain degree of affective polarization is inherent to the party system given the constant of various political parties seeking electoral prominence. Secondly, within the U.S. context, our findings suggest that as the two parties become more polarized one should expect a greater degree of affective polarization in the American party system. As such, the pronounced and rapid growth of affective polarization should continue to grow as the two parties become more ideologically coherent and distinct from one another (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016). Taken together, our work here contributes to both of these considerations and we posit that future models of affective polarization, particularly those at the citizen-level, should incorporate policy congruence as a potential determinant of affective polarization across differing polities. Echoing recent work, we urge scholars to consider predictors of affective polarization beyond partisan identity by incorporating the role of citizen preferences on policy determining the degree of affective polarization observed in a given polity. Given that democracy is fundamentally motivated by citizen selection of parties tasked with, upon election, enacting ideological policy programs (Schattschneider, 1942); we believe theoretical work assessing affective polarization would be well suited to incorporate the role of elites in shaping partisan evaluations held by citizens.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102581.

References

Abramowitz, Alan I., Webster, Steven, 2016. The rise of negative partisanship and the nationalization of U.S. elections in the 21st century. Elect. Stud. 41 (1), 12–22.

Adams, James, Merrill III, Samuel, Zur, Roi, 2020. The spatial voting model. In: Curini, Luigi, Franzese, Robert (Eds.), The SAGE Handbook of Research Methods in Political Science and International Relations. SAGE Publications, pp. 205–223.

Aldrich, John H., McKelvey, Richard D., 1977. A method of scaling with applications to the 1968 and 1972 presidential elections. Am. Political Sci. Rev. 71 (1), 111–130.

Algara, Carlos, 2021. Congressional approval and responsible party government: The role of partisanship and ideology in citizen assessments of the contemporary U.S. congress. Political Behav..

Algara, Carlos, Hale, Isaac, 2019. The distorting effects of racial animus on proximity voting in the 2016 elections. Elect. Stud. 58, 58–69.

American Political Science Association, 1950. Summary of conclusions and proposals. Am. Political Sci. Rev. 44 (3, Part 2 Supplement), 1–14.

Armstrong III, David A., Bakker, Ryan, Carroll, Royce, Hare, Christopher, Poole, Keith T., 2014. Analyzing Spatial Models of Choice and Judgment with R. CRC Press, Boca Raton, FL.

Bakker, Ryan, Jolly, Seth, Polk, Jonathan, Poole, Keith, 2014. The European common space: Extending the use of anchoring vignettes. J. Politics 76 (4), 1089–1101.

Bakker, Ryan, Poole, Keith T., 2013. Bayesian metric multidimensional scaling. Political Anal. 21 (1), 125–140.

Bakker, Ryan, de Vries, Catherine, Edwards, Erica, Hooghe, Liesbet, Jolly, Seth, Marks, Gary, Polk, Jonathan, Rovny, Jan, Steenbergen, Marco, Vachudova, Milada Anna, 2015. Measuring party positions in Europe: The Chapel Hill expert survey trend file, 1999–2010. Party Politics 21 (1), 143–152.

Bassan-Nygate, Lotem, Weiss, Chagai M., 2021. Party competition and cooperation shape affective polarization: Evidence from natural and survey experiments in Israel. Comp. Political Stud..

Brady, Henry E., 1990. Dimensonal analysis of ranking data. Am. J. Political Sci. 34 (4), 1017–1048.

Cahoon, Lawrence, Hinich, Melvin J., Ordeshook, Peter C., 1978. A statistical multi-dimensional scaling method based on the spatial theory of voting. In: Graphical Representation of Multivariate Data. Elsevier, pp. 243–278.

Carroll, Royce, Kubo, Hiroki, 2018. Explaining citizen perceptions of party ideological positions: The mediating role of political contexts. Elect. Stud. 51 (1), 14–23.

Costa, Mia, 2021. Ideology, not affect: What Americans want from political representation. Am. J. Political Sci. 65 (2), 342–358.

Dias, Nicholas, Lelkes, Yphtach, 2021. The nature of affective polarization: Disentangling policy disagreement from partisan identity. Am. J. Political Sci. 1–16.

Downs, Anthony, 1957. The statics and dynamics of party ideologies. In: An Economic Theory of Democracy. Harper & Row, pp. 114–141.

Druckman, James N., Levendusky, Matthew S., 2019. What do we measure when we measure affective polarization? Public Opin. Q. 83 (1), 114–122.

Ellis, Christopher, Stimson, James A., 2009. Symbolic ideology in the American electorate. Elect. Stud. 28 (3), 388–402.

Gidron, Noam, Adams, James, Horne, Will, 2020. American Affective Polarization in Comparative Perspective. Cambridge University Press, New York, NY.

Gidron, Noam, Adams, James, Horne, Will, 2022a. Who dislikes whom? Affective polarization between pairs of parties in western democracies. Br. J. Political Sci..

Gidron, Noam, Sheffer, Lior, Mor, Guy, 2022b. Validating the feeling thermometer as a measure of partisan affect in multi-party systems. Elect. Stud. 80 (June), 1–12.

Grofman, Bernard, 2005. Comparisons among electoral systems: Distinguishing between localism and candidate-centered politics. Elect. Stud. 24 (4), 735–740.

Hare, Christopher, Armstrong III, David A., Bakker, Ryan, Carroll, Royce, Poole, Keith T., 2015. Using Bayesian Aldrich-McKelvey scaling to study citizens' ideological preferences and perceptions. Am. J. Political Sci. 59 (3), 759–774.

Harteveld, Eelco, 2021. Ticking all the boxes? A comparative study of social sorting and affective polarization. Elect. Stud. 72 (June), 102337.

Harteveld, Eelco, Wagner, Markus, 2021. Does affective polarization increase turnout? Evidence from Germany, Spain and The Netherlands.

Hernández, Enrique, Anduiza, Eva, Rico, Guillem, 2021. Affective polarization and the salience of elections. Elect. Stud. 69 (July 2020).

Hetherington, Marc J., Rudolph, Thomas J., 2015. Why Washington Won't Work. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Hill, Seth J., Tausanovitch, Chris, 2015. A disconnect in representation? Comparison of trends in congressional and public polarization. J. Politics 77 (4), 1058–1075.

Hobolt, Sara B., Leeper, Thomas J., Tilley, James, 2020. Divided by the vote: Affective polarization in the wake of the Brexit referendum. Br. J. Political Sci..

Horne, Will, Adams, James, Gidron, Noam, 2022. The way we were: How histories of co-governance alleviate partisan hostility. Comp. Political Stud..

Iyengar, Shanto, Lelkes, Yphtach, Levendusky, Matthew, Malhotra, Neil, Westwood, Sean J., 2019. The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. Annu. Rev. Political Sci. 22, 129–146.

Iyengar, Shanto, Sood, Gaurav, Lelkes, Yphtach, 2012. Affect, not ideology: A social identity perspective on polarization. Public Opin. Q. 76 (3), 405–431.

Jessee, Stephen A., 2009. Spatial voting in the 2004 presidential election. Am. Political Sci. Rev. 103 (01), 59.

Jessee, Stephen A., 2010. Partisan bias, political information and spatial voting in the 2008 presidential election. J. Politics 72 (2), 327–340.

Joesten, Danielle A., Stone, Walter J., 2014. Reassessing proximity voting: Expertise, party, and choice in congressional elections. J. Politics 76 (03), 740–753.

Kurella, Anna Sophie, Rosset, Jan, 2017. Blind spots in the party system: Spatial voting and issue salience if voters face scarce choices. Elect. Stud. 49, 1–16.

Lelkes, Yphtach, 2019. Policy over party: Comparing the effects of candidate ideology and party on affective polarization. Political Sci. Res. Methods 9 (1), 189–196.

Levendusky, Matthew, Malhotra, Neil, 2016. Does media coverage of partisan polarization affect political attitudes? Political Commun. 33 (2), 283–301.

Lo, James, Proksch, Sven Oliver, Gschwend, Thomas, 2014. A common left-right scale for voters and parties in Europe. Political Anal. 22 (2), 205–223.

Lupu, Noam, 2015. Party polarization and mass partisanship: A comparative perspective. Political Behav. 37 (2), 331–356.

Magyar, Agnes, Wagner, Sarah, Zur, Roi, 2022. Party strategies: Valence versus position. In: The Routledge Handbook of Political Parties. New York, NY.

Malhotra, Neil, Jessee, Stephen A., 2014. Ideological proximity and support for The Supreme Court. Political Behav. 36 (4), 817–846.

Marchal, Nahema, Watson, David S., 2021. The paradox of poor representation: How voter–party incongruence curbs affective polarisation. Br. J. Politics Int. Relat..

Mason, Lilliana, 2015. "I disrespectfully agree": The differential effects of partisan sorting on social and issue polarization. Amer. J. Political Sci. 59 (1), 128–145.

Orr, Lilla V., Huber, Gregory A., 2020. The policy basis of measured partisan animosity in the United States. Am. J. Political Sci. 64 (3), 569–586.

Ramey, Adam, 2016. Vox Populi, Vox Dei? Crowdsourced ideal point estimation. J. Politics 78 (1), 281–295.

Reiljan, Andres, 2020. 'Fear and loathing across party lines' (also) in Europe: Affective polarisation in European party systems. Eur. J. Political Res. 59 (2), 376–396.

Rogowski, Jon C., Sutherland, Joseph L., 2016. How ideology fuels affective polarization. Political Behav. 38 (2), 485–508.

Saiegh, Sebastián M., 2015. Using joint scaling methods to study ideology and representation: Evidence from Latin America. Political Anal. 23 (3), 363–384.

Samuels, David, Shugart, Matthew S., 2010. Presidents, Parties and Prime Ministers. Cambridge University Press, New York, NY.

Schattschneider, E.E., 1942. Party Government. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, New York, NY.

Schattschneider, E.E., 1960. The scope & bias of the pressure system. In: The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, New York, NY.

Schmitt, Hermann, 2009. Partisanship in nine western democracies: Causes and consequences. In: Bartle, John, Bellucci, Paolo (Eds.), Political Parties and Partisanship: Social Identity and Individual Attitudes. Routledge, New York, NY, pp. 75–87.

Seeberg, Henrik Bech, 2020. How political parties' issue ownerships reduce to spatial proximity. West Eur. Politics 43 (6), 1238–1261.

Sheffer, Lior, 2020. Partisan in-group bias before and after elections. Elect. Stud. 67 (July), 102191.

Tausanovitch, Chris, Warshaw, Christopher, 2017. Does the ideological proximity between candidates and voters affect voting in U.S. house elections? Political Behav. 1 (1), 1–23.

Wagner, Markus, 2021. Affective polarization in multiparty systems. Elect. Stud. 69 (1), 1–13.

Webster, Steven W., Abramowitz, Alan I., 2017. The ideological foundations of affective polarization in the U.S. electorate. Am. Politics Res. 45 (4), 621–647.

Zur, Roi, 2021a. Stuck in the middle: Ideology, valence and the electoral failures of centrist parties. Br. J. Political Sci. 51 (2), 706–723.

Zur, Roi, 2021b. The multidimensional disadvantages of centrist parties in Western Europe. Political Behav. 43 (4), 1755–1777.