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The distance between us: the role of ideological proximity in shaping perceptions of inter-partisan relationships

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ABSTRACT

Escalating hostility between partisans threatens democratic governance and social cohesion by eroding trust and fuelling discriminatory behaviour towards opposing groups. This study investigates how people perceive the relations between different partisan groups and why certain pairs of partisans are viewed as friendlier or more hostile towards one another. Drawing on similarity-attraction theory in social psychology and research on affective polarization, I argue that citizens perceive the relationship as more friendly between individuals who support ideologically similar parties. The claim is empirically supported through the use of a novel survey item that assesses the likelihood of two partisans becoming good friends, across three multi-party democracies: Canada, Germany, and the UK. The findings suggest that the ideological proximity of parties not only shapes citizens' perceptions of parties themselves but also influences their views of fellow citizens across party lines. By demonstrating that people consider party proximity and ideological alignment when evaluating inter-partisan relations, the study sheds light on how ideological and affective dimensions intertwine within these relationships in multi-party democracies.

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The rise of inter-partisan hostility poses a significant threat to democratic governance by eroding political trust and fostering discriminatory behaviour towards opposing groups (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015; Huber and Malhotra 2017; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; McConnell et al. 2018). Understanding how people perceive the relationship between different partisan

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groups is crucial for comprehending inter-group dynamics, social prejudices, and social cohesion. This study investigates the factors shaping these perceptions and why certain partisan groups are viewed as more friendly (or hostile) towards one another.

While existing research on affective polarization has offered insights about how partisans view their own and opposing partisans (i.e. in-group favouritism and out-group hostility among partisans), less is known about how the general public, including both partisans and non-partisans, perceive the relationship between different partisan groups themselves. Are the public also recognizing the inter-partisan animosity at the same level as the partisans themselves feel about? How do people evaluate the relationship between groups of fellow citizens who support different political parties? This study expands our understanding of these perceptions by examining factors influencing perceptions of inter-partisan relations as seen by the broader public in multi-party settings.

Drawing on insights from similarity-attraction theory and research suggesting that perceived similarity can reduce inter-group animosity, this study proposes a hypothesis highlighting the role of ideological similarity between parties in shaping public perceptions of the relationship between supporters of different parties. To test the hypothesis, original surveys were fielded in Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom, where a novel survey item was introduced. This measure is to capture people's perceptions of inter-partisan relationships by asking about the likelihood of supporters from two different parties becoming (and remaining) good friends. The results provide strong support for the hypothesis, confirming that people perceive the relationship as more friendly between supporters of ideologically similar parties. The finding also suggests that individuals are likely to rely on their perceptions of the *parties* themselves when inferring the relationship between different *partisans*.

This study has several important implications. First, the study suggests individuals draw on their perceptions of political parties to infer relationships between their supporters. This finding contributes to the broader literature on the formation of political perceptions and inter-group relations. Second, by demonstrating that individuals consider party similarity and ideological proximity when gauging inter-partisan relations, the study sheds light on the connections between ideological and affective aspects in shaping voter perceptions about other groups. Lastly, the study introduces a novel measure of perceived inter-group relations that could be used in future research on inter-group dynamics and partisan relations in multi-party settings. The measure could also be adapted for studies on inter-group relations and affective polarization that focus on the voter-level affections (rather than party-level) since it offers explicitly comparative and relational accounts for individuals in different (partisan) groups. This contributes to the diversity in the measures of affective polarization towards partisans (e.g. Druckman

and Levendusky 2019; Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2019; Wagner 2021). The paper concludes by discussing its implications, along with future research agendas and limitations of the study.

How people assess inter-partisan relationships

Previous studies have suggested that voters take into account party behaviours and elite interactions when assessing party positions. Voters' perceptions of parties are influenced by factors such as the level cooperation between parties (Adams, Weschle, and Wlezien 2021; Fortunato and Stevenson 2013), party leadership (Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu 2019; O'Brien 2019), and issue emphases (Plescia and Staniek 2017; Wagner and Meyer 2023). Compared to this body of literature, however, less is known about how people view the relationship between partisan groups themselves.

The literature on affective polarization sheds light on this aspect through a social identity perspective. It suggests that partisanship becomes increasingly salient as a social identity, leading to heightened out-party hostility and in-party favouritism (particularly in the United States). While this binary dynamic is less clear-cut in multi-party systems, where multiple parties are aligned along a left-right ideological continuum, recent scholarship has explored affective polarization from comparative perspectives. These studies have examined variations across a wider range of countries, and found equally strong affective polarization in certain multi-party democracies (Helbling and Jungkunz 2020; Ryan 2023; Westwood et al. 2018). However, by focusing primarily on in-party and out-party, this literature often overlooks the public's understanding of broader patterns of partisan relationships.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating how individuals assess the relationship between different partisan groups, such as supporters of social democrats and Green Party identifiers.¹ How likely do we believe Labour Party supporters get along well with the Conservatives compared to their relationship with supporters of a far-right party? Are there specific groups of partisans that we perceive as having a more friendly or hostile relationship with others? And what are the party-level and individual-level factors that influence these perceptions? By examining these questions, the study seeks to explain what shapes citizens' perceptions of partisans as a social group. These perceptions of inter-partisan relations inherently reflect how people understand political divides and the extent to which they believe individuals with different political views can get along within society. This relational perception is a crucial yet understudied aspect of

¹In other words, the study is investigating a form of second-order belief – how one thinks the other two typical group members would interact.

voter perceptions, which is likely associated with social and political sorting as well as social cohesion as it influences individuals' willingness to interact with and trust members of other groups.

Assessing relationships between social groups can be a complex task. Individuals may employ various methods to evaluate the relationship between individuals who support or identify with different political parties. One such method might be to rely on their perceptions of political "party" relationships and project these perceptions onto the relationship between "individual" supporters. For example, if a person perceives two parties as engaged in intense political conflict, pursuing divergent policy goals, and exhibiting a lack of cooperation, they are likely to characterize the relationship between the supporters of these parties as conflictual. Conversely, if someone perceives that a party has maintained a positive relationship with another party, they are more likely to perceive the relationship between supporters of these parties as friendly rather than hostile.

Another way to infer inter-partisan relationships could be based on personal experiences. Expanding on the previous example, witnessing two individuals who support different parties getting along well and becoming good friends might directly influence one's assessment of the inter-partisan relationship, even if they perceive the relationship between the two parties as hostile rather than friendly.

While personal experiences may play a role, this study prioritizes the party-based inference mechanism for two reasons. First, relying solely on personal interactions has limitations due to social homophily. People tend to interact with others who are similar to them in terms of attitudes, values, and actions (e.g. McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Pew Research 2016). As a result, personal interactions as the basis for understanding inter-group relations may be less useful in making inferences about supporters of different parties, thereby limiting the generalizability of such inferences to the broader population of party supporters. Second, research suggests that citizens in multi-party democracies tend to have accurate and sensible perceptions of parties' left-right positions (Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-topcu 2014; Lee, Santoso, and Stevenson 2018) and hold reasonable beliefs about patterns of cooperation and conflict between political parties (Santoso, Stevenson, and Weschle 2024). This suggests that their existing perceptions of parties can be readily used to make inferences about inter-partisan relations.

Who do we think gets along well with whom? The similarity-attraction linkage

Social science research demonstrates a robust link between similarity and attraction (Byrne 1961; Byrne 1971; Byrne, Clore, and Worchel 1966; Drigotas

1993; Graziano and Bruce 2008; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Montoya, Horton, and Kirchner 2008). This link applies to various types of relationships, including romantic relations, workplace interactions, and friendship building, among others. According to similarity-attraction theory, this connection stems from our desire for a coherent understanding of the world: when others share our views, it validates our beliefs and reinforces our worldview, resulting in positive feelings (e.g. Byrne et al. 1973; Montoya and Horton 2013). Additionally, favourable information about someone can lead to attraction not just due to the information itself but also because we infer positive attributes based on that similarity. In other words, similarity leads us to expect that the person has various other positive characteristics (Kaplan and Anderson 1973; Stalling 1970). This theory, rooted in cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957), is connected to broader theories that explain social stereotypes and prejudices (social cognition theory) and inter-group perceptions and interactions (social categorization theory; Abbasi, Billsberry, and Todres 2024).

The similarity-attraction linkage applies directly to understanding perceptions of partisan groups. Huber and Malhotra (2017) demonstrate that discordant partisanship decreases the likelihood of forming friendships. Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) show that it extends beyond friendship – people are reluctant to have their children marry members of the opposing party and to have neighbours from the opposing party. The burgeoning field of affective polarization, largely based on the social categorization theory, further highlights (growing) out-party hostility and in-party favouritism in the US and other countries (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2019; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Knudsen 2021; Reiljan 2020; Wagner 2021). In their cross-national study, Horne, Adams, and Gidron (2023) reinforce this by demonstrating an increased out-party dislike with greater ideological distance. These findings well align with the similarity-attraction theory, suggesting that partisans hold positive views towards their own group and negative affection towards opposing groups.

This line of research, based on identity-based theories, primarily focuses on partisans. Within the framework of social categorization theory, discussing in-group favouritism and out-group hostility necessitates party identification, which creates distinct “us” and “them” groups. However, this approach does not directly address how partisans see the relationship *between members of different out-parties* or how *non-partisans* form the perceptions of inter-partisan relationships.

Building on this, I propose that, for partisans and non-partisans alike, the similarity between political parties could be a useful cue when inferring the relationship between their supporters. The similarity between parties can be assessed based on various dimensions such as the parties’ policy stances, values, issue emphases, and represented groups in society, often

captured by the left-right ideological spectrum. This leads to the hypothesis that highlights the role of ideological similarity between parties in shaping the perceived inter-partisan relations, expecting that *individuals will perceive the relationship as more friendly between supporters of political parties that are ideologically more similar*.²

Data and measurements

To test the hypothesis, I use original survey data collected in 2019 in three multi-party systems: Canada, Germany, and the UK. These countries were selected to represent different types of multi-party democracies in terms of party systems and the type of government formation (e.g. whether coalitions or minority governments are the norm). Participants were recruited from Qualtrics' online panel, mirroring each country's population demographics in terms of age, gender, and education. The resulting sample comprises approximately 1,000 respondents per country (N = 3,015). The survey asked participants about their socio-demographic backgrounds, political interests, the ideological locations of political parties and respondents themselves, party identification, and political knowledge. Importantly, participants were asked to rate the likelihood of two different partisans (or party supporters) becoming friends, which is the outcome variable of interest in this paper.

Measuring perceived inter-partisan relationship

Perceived inter-partisan relationship is measured by asking respondents about the likelihood of two fellow citizens, who support different parties, becoming and remaining good friends.³ For example, the UK survey asked

²While acknowledging that party similarity can stem from various dimensions, this paper focuses primarily on ideological proximity. Previous studies have shown that left-right ideology effectively summarizes policy programs of political parties and serves as a prominent shortcut for understanding policy orientations and values (e.g., Busch 2016; Dahlberg and Hartevelde 2016; Downs 1957; Knutsen 1995; Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Todosijevic 2004). However, it does not dismiss the possibility that individuals may assess party similarity based on specific policy sub-dimensions or other significant factors influencing the perception of similarity beyond ideology. Moreover, different individuals might employ different inference methods when evaluating party similarity. This warrants further investigation of the proposed hypothesis using alternative operationalizations and measures of inter-party similarities.

³Precisely speaking, the measure captures both first-order assessments and second-order perceptions, with the latter constituting the vast majority in the dataset. The former refers to perceptions about the respondent's own group and other partisans, which has been the primary focus of studies on affective polarization (e.g., a Labour party supporter's view on the relationship between Labour and other party supporters). The latter involves perceptions about two distinct groups to which the respondent does not belong (e.g., a Labour party supporter's view on the relationship between Green party supporters and Tory supporters). This feature enables us to examine these perceptions broadly shared within the population, which this study aims to examine, as well as allows to compare them with partisans' own perceptions.

respondents how likely they think a Conservative party supporter and a Labour supporter would be (and would remain) good friends. Respondents rated this likelihood on an 11-point scale ranging from “Very unlikely” (0) to “Very likely” (10).⁴ Each respondent was assigned the friendship scores for fifteen pairs of partisans in the UK and Germany and ten pairs in Canada. To create these partisan dyads the survey used six political parties in the UK and Germany and five parties in Canada that had run in the previous general and federal elections. Table A1 in online appendix lists the political parties chosen in each country. Combining the friendship ratings across dyads, the dataset contains over 40,000 observations.

Asking about friendship in this form is novel in the sense that it is explicitly comparative and relational. The question explicitly requests respondents to assess the “relationship” between two entities (i.e. two individuals belonging to different parties). This departs from the typical practice in the field, which involves surveying assessments of a single target using scales like feeling thermometer, left-right placement, and like-dislike, and then relating two independent assessments by calculating a value to indicate the relationship between the two objects, such as ideological distances and differential affective ratings. The pairwise structure of our measure provides an advantage in studying relationships as it is specifically designed to capture the relational nature of these perceptions.⁵

While this format has not been widely used in the past, asking about friendship is one of the most common methods in social psychology to measure inter-group relations and sentiments (Allport, Clark, and Pettigrew 1954; Bagci and Çelebi 2017; Pettigrew et al. 2011; Simonsson, Narayanan, and Marks 2022) and increasingly so in political science (Huber and Malhotra 2017; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Levendusky and Malhotra 2016; Wojcieszak and Warner 2020). It serves as a measure of social distance, capturing the level of prejudice, intimacy, and valence between groups or their members.⁶ Unlike feeling thermometers or like-dislike scales, social distance measures are less obtrusive and specifically capture attitudes towards

⁴Specifically, participants were instructed: “Now we are going to show you some pairs of people who are supporters of different parties. Please tell us how likely you think it is that two people, one a supporter of [PARTY A] and the other a supporter of [PARTY B], would be (and would likely remain) good friends.” In this paper, I use “partisans” and “supporters” interchangeably. “Don’t Know” option was not offered, and respondents were not allowed to skip the question. Instead, they were encouraged to guess if they were uncertain. “Don’t Know” option was not offered, and respondents were not allowed to skip the question. Instead, they were encouraged to guess if they were uncertain.

⁵One notable example is Santoso, Weschle, and Stevenson’s study (2023), in which they employed a survey item with the same structure as the one described here. They measured perceived cooperation between political parties by asking respondents to assess the likelihood of cooperation between pairs of parties (party dyads).

⁶The social distance measures typically ask respondents about their comfort level in interacting with out-group members in different scenarios. For example, a child marrying someone from the opposing party or about their interactions with neighbours or colleagues from different ethnic backgrounds.

individuals who belong to a certain party, rather than the parties themselves (Druckman and Levendusky 2019).

Compared to other social distance measures, friendship has the merit of tapping into relationships voluntarily formed, distinguishing it from other measures examining feelings towards family members marrying someone from an opposing party or neighbours or colleagues from different ethnic groups (Gómez, Tropp, and Fernández 2011; Wojcieszak and Warner 2020). Given these advantages, as well as other merits discussed earlier, assessments of friendship can serve as an alternative measure for studying affective polarization (when focusing on partisans exclusively) and inter-group perceptions, relations and dynamics more broadly. This is because the measure inherently reflects how citizens perceive political divides among various political and social groups and the extent to which citizens believe individuals with different political preferences can get along within society.

The outcome variable

The outcome variable is the dyadic friendship score, which represents respondents' ratings of the likelihood of friendship between supporters of two different parties. The resulting dataset comprises over 40,000 assessments across 40 partisan dyads in three countries. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of friendship scores in the pooled dataset and for each country. Generally, the scores exhibit a normal distribution, although there are some

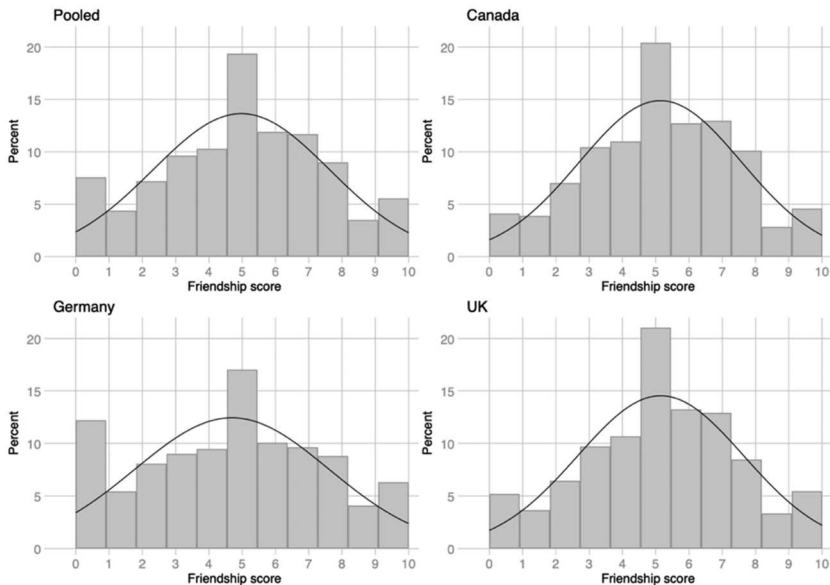


Figure 1. Friendship scores in Canada, Germany, and the UK.

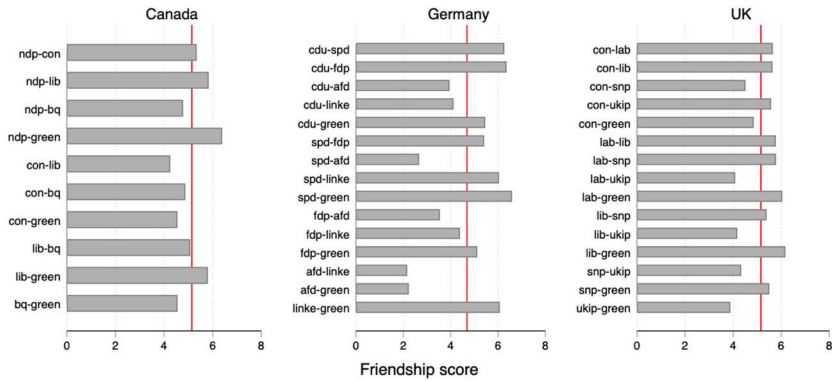


Figure 2. Average friendship score by partisan dyads.

Note: Vertical lines indicate country mean.

spikes at the lowest and highest extremes, particularly noticeable in Germany compared to other countries.

Shifting the focus to the average friendship score for each dyad, we observe significant variation across different partisan pairs. As depicted in [Figure 2](#), while some pairs of partisans are perceived as having a good relationship, such as supporters of the NDP and Green party in Canada and SPD and Green party supporters in Germany, others, like supporters of AfD and Green party in Germany, and supporters of UKIP and Liberal Democrats in the UK, are seen as much less friendly each other.⁷

The explanatory variables

The explanatory variables in this study fall into two broad categories: characteristics of party dyads and characteristics of the respondents themselves. The main independent variable is the ideological proximity of the party dyads. To measure ideological proximity, I use two variables: subjective and objective assessments of the ideological distance between two parties. For the subjective assessment, I utilize respondents' placements of the parties on an 11-point Left-Right scale. The perceived distance is calculated by taking the absolute value of the perceived ideological distance between the parties. For the objective assessment, I rely on the difference between the parties' RILE scores from the Comparative Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2020).

While objective measures, typically assessed by experts or based on policy documents and party manifestos, better reflect actual ideological differences or similarities, it is also possible that individual respondents perceive party

⁷I have further disaggregated the outcome variable to illustrate the distribution for each partisan dyad. This information can be found in Figure A1 in Online Appendix.

positions differently from the objective measures. In such cases, the subjective measure may offer a better explanation for the assessment of inter-partisan friendships compared to the objective measure. Considering the reasons to expect both the objective and subjective measures as predictors of the perceived similarity between parties, both measures are included in the main model. As a robustness check, I also run models with only the subjective or objective measures. As discussed later in the section, the results remain robust. The two measures exhibit a moderate to weak correlation, with a correlation coefficient of 0.387.

In addition to the main explanatory variables, several other party-dyad characteristics that may influence the friendship score are considered. First, partisans of larger parties might be more likely to be perceived as having a friendly relationship with other partisans. As discussed earlier, perceptions of inter-partisan friendship are likely to be influenced by respondents' personal experiences. On average, respondents are more likely to have chance interactions with partisans of larger parties rather than smaller parties, and increased interaction may contribute to perceiving more friendly relationships. This aligns with the contact theory (Allport, Clark, and Pettigrew 1954; Pettigrew et al. 2011; Wright et al. 1997; Zhou et al. 2019), which suggests that increased interaction tends to result in more positive perceptions. Second, certain types of parties are likely to receive lower friendship scores due to ideological distances and/or infrequent interaction given the smaller size of their support bases. That is, partisans of niche parties, including parties that focus only on specific issues and parties representing extreme ideas, could be seen as having a less positive relationship with other partisans due to their smaller pool of supporters (e.g. special issue parties) and/or greater distance from other parties (e.g. compared to extreme parties, parties closer to the centre can be perceived as being closer and more alike by partisans from both sides). To account for these possibilities, the model includes the vote share of the parties in the dyad from the previous election, and three dummy variables indicating whether the party dyad includes a radical-right party, a special issue party, and an ecological party. The categorization of party families is based on the Manifesto Project's party family variable (*parfam*).

The model also considers respondents' individual characteristics that may affect their assessment of the friendship score. Factors such as gender, age, level of education, political interest, and political knowledge could lead to consistently higher or lower scores on the friendship scale or systematic differences in rating certain partisan dyads.⁸ Additionally, two binary

⁸Political interest is measured on a four-point scale ranging from "very interested" to "not at all interested." Political knowledge is measured through six items, consisting of three questions that gauge knowledge about medium-term information (such as unemployment rate, finance minister, and opposition party leader), and three questions concerning specific details of news items that were widely

variables are included to indicate whether the respondent identifies with any party (i.e. party identifier vs. non-partisan) and whether the respondent is identified with a party in the dyad. Party identifiers may perceive inter-partisan friendship differently from non-partisans: for instance, if partisans are less cynical about politics, this perspective could lead to generally higher friendship scores compared to non-partisans. The latter variable is to capture the potential positivity bias when assessing their own relationship with other partisans compared to when evaluating the relationship between two third-party partisans. This bias may arise from the tendency to evaluate their own attributes and attributes similar to their own more positively (Montoya, Horton, and Kirchner 2008). Table A2 presents descriptive statistics for all variables discussed in this section.

Results

The data exhibits a crossed multi-level structure, where respondents and party dyads are crossed within each country. In other words, all individuals assess all party dyads (within a country), and each party dyad is assessed by all individuals (within a country). This structure differs from a nested data structure, where observations sampled at one level (e.g. party dyad) are nested or clustered within units at another level (e.g. respondents). In this multi-level structure, where individuals were asked about a series of party-dyads, there may be variables at both the individual- and party-dyad levels that are not accounted for in the model. For example, although we have included a number of individual respondents' characteristics that may systematically contribute to variations in the friendship score, there might be unmeasured individual-level factors, such as response style (e.g. a tendency to provide ratings closer to the centre or to the extreme) or a tendency to speak positively about others. Likewise, there may be unmeasured factors specific to each party-dyad that could influence the overall friendship score, causing it to increase or decrease for a particular party dyad. To address these considerations and account for unmeasured factors at the individual and party-dyad levels, I employ a crossed random effects model, with and without country-fixed effects in the model.⁹

reported news items in the days leading up to the survey fieldwork (Price and Zaller 1993; Santoso, Stevenson, and Weschle 2024). Based on the respondent's score on these six items, a binary variable is created indicating whether the score is above the country's median (*High political knowledge*).

⁹The inclusion of a country-fixed effect is to capture the potential unmeasured effect that individuals residing in the same country may share a specific way to assess all dyads. This could manifest as a tendency to assess all dyads more positively or more negatively compared to individuals in other countries. However, I expect this effect is not particularly important in this study since the variations in friendship score would be foremost explained by factors at the individual- and dyad-levels. Nevertheless, I ran the models both with and without country-fixed effects, and as anticipated, the results are nearly identical.

To test the hypothesis, I use two variables to measure ideological similarity between two parties: the perceived ideological distance between the parties in the dyad, and the ideological distance based on RILE scores. I rescaled parties' RILE scores to range from 0 to 10 and computed the ideological distance based on this rescaling to facilitate a straightforward comparison of the effects of the two measures. I run the model in three different ways. Model 1 includes the subjective measure of ideological distance between two parties in the dyad, while Model 2 includes the distance based on the RILE score. Model 3 includes both variables. Models 4 to 6 replicate these three models but include country-fixed effects. The complete results are available in Table A3 in the online appendix. For easier comparison, Figure 3 displays the estimated coefficients from Model 3 (without country-fixed effects) and Model 6 (with country-fixed effects).

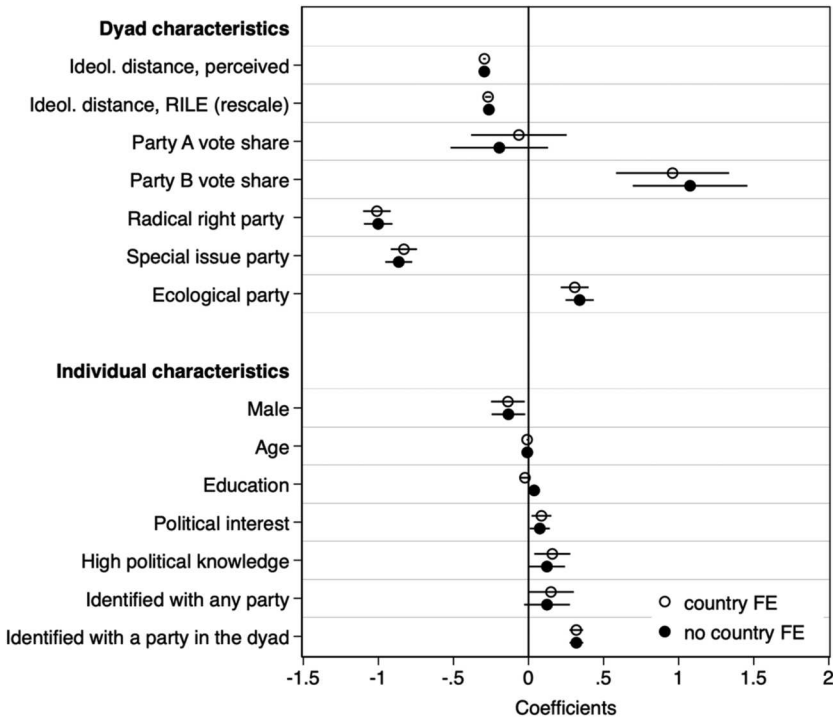


Figure 3. The effects of dyad- and individual-level factors on perceived inter-partisan relationships (dyadic friendship score).

Note: The estimates are based on the results from Model 3 (no country-fixed effects) and Model 6 (with country-fixed effects) reported in Table A3. The dependent variable is friendship score assigned to a partisan dyad. The horizontal bar indicates the 95% confidence interval. All coefficients are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ except for three variables: Party A vote share, Education, and Identified with any party.

Across all models, the results provide robust support for the hypothesis. Both the perceived ideological distance and the distance based on the RILE score have significant negative effects ($p < 0.001$). This indicates that greater ideological distance is associated with lower friendship scores, and individuals perceive a more positive relationship between supporters of ideologically closer parties. This finding is also robust to baseline models that exclude the control variables, and regardless of the choice of measures for ideological similarity and the inclusion of country-fixed effects (see Tables A4 and A5 for the results).

Beyond confirming the hypothesis, the analysis reveals interesting findings about factors influencing inter-partisan relationships. The results highlight the impact of party size (larger party advantage) and party family (niche party discount). Although beyond the theoretical focus of this paper, the larger party advantage may stem from personal interactions. As briefly discussed earlier, interacting with partisans of larger parties is relatively more common, and as contact theory suggests, more frequent encounters may lead to the perception of more friendly relationships.¹⁰

The effect of party family variables indicates that supporters of radical-right and special issue parties (e.g. AfD in Germany, UKIP in the UK) are perceived as less likely to form friendships with supporters of other parties, while supporters of ecological parties (Green parties) are generally perceived as being more likely to get along well with supporters of other parties.

Further, individual-level characteristics also shape the perceptions of inter-partisan relationships. Female respondents, younger individuals, and those with higher political interest, and greater political knowledge demonstrate more positive views regarding the possibility of inter-partisan friendship in general. Respondents also assign higher friendship scores when evaluating the relationship between their own partisan group and other groups, indicating the presence of in-group positivity bias. However, there was no significant difference between party identifiers and non-partisans in their assessments of friendship, suggesting that party affiliation itself does not directly translate to more optimistic or pessimistic views of inter-partisan relationships.

¹⁰Ample empirical evidence from contact theory indicates that increased inter-group contact can reduce prejudices and foster positive outcomes. Recent studies have demonstrated that interparty contact plays a role in reducing hostility toward outgroups (Bagci and Çelebi 2017; Simonsson, Narayanan, and Marks 2022; Wojcieszak and Warner 2020). Moreover, in line with the “extended” contact theory, it has been found that mere knowledge of cross-group friendship can have a similar effect to personally having cross-group friends (Wright et al. 1997; Zhou et al. 2019). If larger party size entails a broader base of supporters who interact with supporters of other parties, this could explain the larger party effect. Another possible explanation is that voters use the party size as a heuristic, as larger parties tend to have more prominent media visibility and are better known among voters. This explanation is plausible as voters are generally aware of the sizes of parties in multi-party systems (Lee, Haime, and Stevenson 2019).

Conclusion

This study examines public perceptions of inter-partisan relationships, investigating factors shaping how people view the relationship between supporters of different parties. Understanding these mental images is crucial to comprehending inter-group dynamics. Building on similarity-attraction theory and recent findings from affective polarization studies, the study proposes that ideological proximity between parties influences perceptions of inter-partisan relationships. A novel survey item, asking about the likelihood of two partisans becoming good friends, is used to measure the perceived relationship between supporters of different parties in three multi-party democracies: Canada, Germany, and the UK.

The analysis reveals that people assign higher friendship scores to pairs of individuals who support ideologically similar parties. This finding sheds light on the connection between ideological and affective dimensions by demonstrating how (perceived and observed) ideological proximity between political parties influences perceptions of friendly relationships among supporters of these parties. The study's finding contributes to our understanding of how voters perceive the political world, providing evidence that supports the notion that citizens' perceptions are significantly influenced by party behaviour and elite discourses. This implies that perceived inter-group relations at the mass level could, to some extent, be altered by parties' policy stances, left-right images, and interactions at the party and elite levels. Conversely, it also suggests that perceptions of inter-group relationships could serve as an indicator of party relationships, which warrants further research.

This study advances the methodological approach. The measure employed in this study directly asks about the relationship (represented by the likelihood of becoming and remaining good friends) for pairs of supporters of different parties. This overcomes the drawback of survey items commonly used in comparative studies on valence and affective polarization, such as feeling thermometer, which does not clearly capture the affect towards fellow or opposing *partisans* but rather focus on the parties themselves (Druckman and Levendusky 2019; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Kingzette 2021). Social distance measures are deemed as an alternative since they directly measure one's affection and assessment of others (partisans) in different social contexts. However, these measures have rarely been employed outside the US (with Tichelbaecker et al. (2023) being an exception). Advocating for methodological diversity, the study presents a novel approach of asking about friendship in a pairwise structure, with the likelihood of friendship serving as a proxy for the relationship between different (partisan) groups. This measure, the perceived likelihood of friendship between members of different groups, inherently reflects how citizens

perceive political divides and the extent to which citizens believe individuals with different political preferences can get along within society. This allows us to explore the perceived distance or affection level between different groups.¹¹ While further investigation is necessary to establish the validity and comparability of this measure with other more traditional ones, it contributes to the growing demand for diversified measurements to capture inter-group perceptions, interactions, and relationships (e.g. Druckman and Levendusky 2019; Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2019; Wagner 2021).

The present study is not without limitations. While this paper focuses primarily on ideological proximity as a proxy for similarity between political parties, other sources of inter-party similarity and ideological proximity could be further examined. Expanding on the link between similarity and positive perceptions, additional factors that contribute to two parties appearing more similar could lead to a more positive perception of the relationship between their supporters. One such source might be the history of co-governing, as voters in multi-party systems perceive parties in coalition cabinets as more ideologically similar (Falcó-Gimeno and Fernandez-Vazquez 2020; Fortunato and Stevenson 2013; Hjermitslev 2023). Real event history of cooperation and conflict among parties could also be considered as the source of inter-party similarity (Adams, Weschle, and Wlezien 2021; Weschle 2018). To increase confidence in the theoretical argument and the empirical findings, it would be necessary to broaden the scope of the study. While the current data provides a satisfactory level of variation across forty partisan dyads, extending the investigation to other multi-party systems will further allow for examining the role of institutional constraints and political contexts in shaping public perceptions of inter-partisan relationships. As this study has taken a preliminary step towards identifying drivers of such perceptions, there are still important questions to be answered regarding the effects of other dyad-level and individual-level factors, as well as the consequences of perceived inter-partisan relationships.

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¹¹ Additionally, this approach has the potential to be applied to groups beyond partisans (e.g., between a union member and a Catholic, or between an immigrant and a Conservative party supporter), which could be relevant to studies on social and political sorting and inter-group dynamics more generally.

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