Research note

Vertical vs horizontal affective polarization: Disentangling feelings towards elites and voters

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ABSTRACT

The way people feel towards other voters has garnered enormous attention with the rise of affective polarization, or hostility across political lines. As this literature grows increasingly comparative, scholars often rely on the widely available feeling thermometer towards political parties. This carries the strong assumption that (dis)affect towards parties ("vertical") extends to voters ("horizontal"). We test this assumption using 14 independent samples covering 10 countries. Firstly, we ask whether people differentiate between parties/politicians and their voters. We find that individuals consistently differentiate between elites and voters, though this is conditional on whether evaluations are towards in- or out-groups. Secondly, we examine which factors are associated with a greater gap in evaluations. We find that differentiation may be more related to the type of party-voter group being evaluated rather than individual-level features. Put together, these findings suggest researchers should be cautious when equating vertical and horizontal affective polarization.

1. Introduction

Politics around world appears to become increasingly tribal and contentious. Scholars and pundits alike worry that citizens across political divides increasingly dislike, loathe, and avoid each other, and recent research has suggested that such "affective polarization" can extend to implicit bias (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015), a refusal to deliberate (Strickler, 2018), discrimination (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015), dehumanization (Martherus et al., 2021), and even support for political violence (Kalmoe and Mason, 2022). Given these potential "downstream" threats to (peaceful) democratic norms and practice, a growing literature aims to understand the causes of consequences of affective polarization.

While the interest in affective polarization is widespread among academics, there is no consensus regarding its conceptualization or measurement. One central point of ambiguity is how we should understand the *object* of affective polarization. Most scholars define affective polarization as dislike towards *fellow citizens* with opposed political views — say, those supporting the Democrats (from the point of view of Republicans) or Remainers (from the point of view of Brexiteers). At the same time, the workhorse item to measure affective polarization has been the widely available *party dislike* measure, which asks respondents to what extent they 'like' or 'dislike' various parties *as elite actors* (say, "the Democratic party" or "the Green party") (e.g., Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021). Hence, there is a disconnect between the popularity of

this (widely available) measurement and the definition most scholars apply. Our research note aims to shed light on the question whether this matters. Do citizens make a systematic distinction when evaluating politically defined elites rather than politically defined fellow citizens? And, if so, are certain types of people more likely to extend their (dis)affect of elites towards fellow citizens?

In doing so we build on important previous insights. While previous research has confirmed that evaluations towards supporters and parties are systematically related (e.g., Gidron et al., 2022; Tichelbaecker et al., 2023), several studies suggest that citizens do distinguish between these two objects (Comellas Bonsfills, 2022; Druckman and Levendusky, 2019; Harteveld, 2021a). There is also evidence that not all citizens do so to the same degree (Comellas Bonsfills, 2022; Tichelbaecker et al., 2023), creating heterogeneity in the extent to which *party dislike* can act as a proxy for what one might call *voter dislike*. Our study goes beyond these previous studies in terms of both the range of cases and the design. We combine a multitude of different survey data sources to study systematically whether and how citizens differentiate between the two objects across 14 independent samples across 10 countries, spanning Brazil, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Poland, and Sweden. In each survey, respondents were asked to evaluate both parties and their supporters (or voters) on a similarly worded like-dislike or thermometer scale.

We assess, first, whether citizens differentiate between parties and their respective voters, and whether they do so to the same degree in different countries; and second, whether the extent of differentiation differs between subgroups in society.

Answering these questions is important for both methodological and theoretical reasons. Most importantly, from a methodological perspective, it helps shed light on past and future studies that use *party sympathy* measures to make inferences about affective polarization between citizens. Can such "vertical" measure validly capture "horizontal" antipathy between citizens? From a theoretical perspective, it is crucial to know whether citizens' evaluations of party supporters – their fellow citizens – are informed by the same considerations that apply when judging political parties – powerful elite entities that are subject to democratic scrutiny and accountability. This has implications for the way polarization impacts democracy and society.

We combine data sources that are complementary in terms of measurement and external validity. The dataset that we call Data 1 is our primary source and provides the most valid measurements of the two main constructs, party sympathy and voter sympathy. It consists of data pooled from five separate survey collection efforts that took place in five countries. While they all include suitable measurements of the main constructs of interest, they vary in terms of sampling procedure (including one convenience sample) and do not consistently include items on all covariates we are interested in. We triangulate our findings with Data 2, which is the Consequences of Affective Polarization (CONAP) dataset (Harteveld et al., 2024). It covers a set of nine countries (partly overlapping with Data 1) that were surveyed at the same moment in time, although it provides a more limited number of party sympathy measures. Hence, while our setup generally does not allow to isolate the origin of any differences between country samples, we can use it to gauge patterns of differentiation that hold regardless of the specifics of measurement. As we will show, the two sources of data provide essentially the same conclusions, which strengthens our confidence in their complementary validity.

We proceed as follows. First, we provide a brief survey of prior research on the relation between party sympathy and partisan sympathy, discussing our two sub-questions in turn. We then outline our data sources and discuss their respective strengths and weaknesses. Thereafter, we answer our two research questions and conclude by reflecting on the implications of our findings for the study of affective polarization.

2. Theoretical considerations

In this section, we discuss the two questions that guide our analysis. First, why would citizens evaluate political parties and the supporters of said parties in a similar or different manner? Secondly, why might we see greater differentiation among some groups of citizens, or towards some parties?

2.1. Do citizens differentiate?

It appears obvious that citizens who dislike a party will also be more negative towards the supporters of said party. Indeed, previous studies have confirmed that evaluations of voters and parties are systematically correlated (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019; Gidron et al., 2022; Tichelbaecker et al., 2023). This relation might come about both ways. Dislike of a voter group (say, through everyday experience or media depictions) might give rise to antipathy towards their party. Reversely, and arguably more commonly, views of a party might be used to infer what to think about its supporters. Our study does not make nor require a causal claim either way, as our main interest is in understanding whether (and among whom) the two evaluations align. Rather, our starting point is that, while the two evaluations will be related, it is not obvious (dis)like towards political elites and voters will develop *to the same degree*. Indeed, previous studies on the

US, Spain and the Netherlands show that citizens are generally not as negative towards partisans as they are towards elites or abstract parties (Comellas Bonsfills, 2022; Druckman and Levendusky, 2019; Harteveld, 2021a; Kingzette, 2021). This divergence is plausible for two reasons, rooted in psychology and norms.

On a psychological level, it is likely that citizens are predisposed to be milder towards fellow citizens than towards either abstract entities or distant elites. One reason for this is "person-positivity bias", as "attitude objects that resemble individual human beings are evaluated more favourably than inanimate objects or grouped versions of the same individuals" (Comellas Bonsfills, 2022, p. 2). Similarly, political elites may be harshly evaluated by politically disillusioned individuals who are generally "anti-politics" but do not necessarily extend this dislike to other voters (Klar et al., 2018). However, a continued mild predisposition towards ordinary fellow citizens cannot be taken for granted: as polarization entrenches, citizens might come to see political camps in very monolithic, de-individualized or even dehumanized terms (Martherus et al., 2021).

From the point of view of (democratic) norms, it is likely citizens will feel they *should* be milder towards fellow citizens than towards political elites. Democracy involves a disagreement to disagree and many citizens are aware of the norm to be tolerant of different opinions (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). Again, this cannot be taken for granted. In highly polarized contexts, this norm might easily be discarded and replaced by the feeling that the gloves are always off when it comes to politics.

Given these arguments, we expect citizens to (still) differentiate systematically, assigning more positive feelings towards partisans than towards parties. At the same time, we point out the "gap" between the two might be smaller in some societies, in particular in cases of entrenched polarization and the lack of a consensual democratic culture. If we indeed find (sizeable) variation between countries, this means that the extent to which one item can be used as a proxy for the other differs across contexts and possibly over time.

2.2. Who differentiates?

Some (groups of) citizens might differentiate less between parties and voters than others. This, too, bears important implications for understanding and measuring affective polarization. If the "affect gap" differs in size between different groups of people, the extent to which *party sympathy* can be used to infer *partisan sympathy* would differ within the population. Building, and expanding, on Comellas Bonsfills (2022), we formulate a set of expectations of plausible sources of differentiation pertaining to attributes of individuals, the parties they dislike, and how the individual differs from the party. Each attribute we mention will be included in our models, although we note that our paper aims to uncover patterns of divergence rather than firmly isolating the underlying mechanisms. Hence, we refrain from formulating these as formal hypotheses.

Features of the individual Most of the affective polarization literature has focused on partisanship and more broadly group identities as sources of affective evaluations (Iyengar et al., 2019). Similarly, we argue it is likely that differentiation depends on the importance of politics for a given individual. For those for whom politics is very central to their lives – because they are interested in politics and/or feel strong attachment to a party – there is more reason to judge fellow citizens along the same lines as parties (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). In contrast, those who are uninterested and lack a strong identification with a particular party are still quite likely to dislike particular parties, but they will not be invested enough to also "punish" ordinary citizens to the same degree (Klar et al., 2018). Relatedly, and following Comellas Bonsfills (2022), voters who are highly socially sorted into their party, i.e. whose other social identities align with their political affiliation, are expected to act more "tribally" around their

party identity, and hence to project feelings towards other parties on its supporters.

Furthermore, and also following Comellas Bonsfills (2022), we expect that citizens are more likely to extend their dislike of a party towards its supporters if they are ideologically further away from the party: after a certain degree of ideological distance, the shared sense of person-hood that underpins person-positivity bias is undermined and individuals are more judged based on their ideological features. Finally, differentiation may also depend on the way individuals are informed about politics. We expect social media users to differentiate less, as they encounter a particular type of partisan: "they remember fervent partisans pleading their cases, rather than their neighbours or colleagues who happen to be from the other party but rarely discuss politics" (Druckman et al., 2022, p. 1108).

Features of the party Some groups of supporters are more easily equated with their party, and hence we expect a smaller gap in their case. Our main argument here is that this likely depends on the extent to which voters are easily identifiable or "typecast", weakening the distinction between person and group. Distinctive salient minority groups, for instance, are often perceived as more homogeneous (Leonardelli et al., 2010). In a political context, this might happen, first of all, when parties are extreme or controversial. In particular, supporters of populist parties stand out starkly by their political preference, which diverges from those deemed mainstream and is often stigmatized. We thus expect voters of populist parties to be particularly associated with their party of choice, leading to more negative evaluations. This is true of any populist party, but especially so on the right (Harteveld et al., 2021). Partisan groups are also more identifiable in case their party is quite small and/or niche, which suggests a more homogeneous and recognizable supporter base. Hence it is possible that citizens are more harsh towards the supporters of small parties (which, additionally, are not as socially sanctioned as larger parties).

3. Data and methods

3.1. Data

Our interest lies in comparing citizens' evaluations of parties – representing political *elites* – with evaluations of their respective *supporters* along a common measure of affect (rather than, say, comparing a thermometer score towards parties with social distance towards its voters (see Tichelbaecker et al., 2023)). We compiled a collection of datasets where respondents evaluate both political elites (parties or leading politicians) and groups of voters through feeling thermometers or like/dislike scales.[1] Our case selection was driven by data availability rather than substantive considerations, though the resulting cases present significant heterogeneity of political cultures and systems.

Table 1 summarizes the data sources. For our main source, Data 1, we combine survey data from five countries (Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, the United States, and Brazil) collected between 2019 and 2023. Data 2 is the Consequences of Affective Polarization (CONAP) dataset (Harteveld et al., 2024), which contains survey data from nine countries collected in March 2022 using the same questionnaire: Brazil, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The two sources are complementary. Data 1 generally covers more parties (usually, all large parties in a country), whereas Data 2 contains data only on an individuals' most and least-liked party. A second source of differentiation is that respondents evaluate "leading politicians" of the party in Data 2 rather than the

party itself. Though past research (e.g., Druckman and Levendusky, 2019) suggests these measures are strongly correlated, an explicit measure of affect towards leading politician avoids conflating party labels with associated social groups (Ahler and Sood, 2018). In short, Data 1 provides internal validity through a more consistent measurement of party-voter affect, while Data 2 adds external validity through more country cases (all studied using the same survey wording, mode, and timing) and a "cleaner" measure of elite affect.

3.2. Comparative design considerations

Our setup means that there is more consistency in operationalization and survey mode across Data 2 than across Data 1. Moreover, Data 2 differs from all samples in Data 1 in some important respects. This has important implications for the inferences we can make.

First, it means we cannot provide any substantive explanation for between-country differences that appear. After all, the individual country samples differ in more than one methodological respect in Data 1 (item wording, scale length, survey order etc.) and even in Data 2 (which has homogeneous operationalization) any contextual factor might explain differences between countries. Hence, we will focus on patterns that are consistent within each data source across cases. We are more confident of our conclusions to the extent that our expectations are confirmed or refuted across most cases and data sources. Hence, we proceed to report our findings for each country individually.

Second, because Data 1 and Data 2 differ in key aspects (in particular, the assignment of ingroup status and the number of parties for which the feeling thermometer is included), we report all findings separately for each. This allows us to observe whether patterns differ systematically across the two sources of data.

3.3. Measures

Table 1 summarizes the operationalization of affective evaluations of parties (party elites in Data 2) and voters in each country case. In the Appendix we provide more detailed information on how other variables were operationalized, with a brief description in the following paragraphs. Overall, we prioritized consistency across datasets (i.e. most similar measurements) to the potential detriment of more fine-grained measures. We build dyadic datasets with repeated observations (party-voter evaluations) for individuals, which allow us to calculate and estimate models across multiple evaluated parties. To ensure some level of comparability, we z-standardize all continuous variables per country (and across the whole dataset when running a pooled, fixed-effects model for Data 2). We use sample weights whenever provided by their respective data source.

In- and out-parties: We determined individuals' in-party based on their stated vote choice, with out-parties referring to every other remaining party. For individuals without an in-party (e.g. non-voters), every party is an out-party. In Data 2, however, respondents affectively rated only their most-and least-liked parties, which were determined by an explicit filter question. This restricts the range of parties for which we can analyse the relation between views of out-parties and out-voters to the least-liked-party. As such, in Data 2 the out-party always refers to the least-liked-party, as indicated by the respondent.[2]

Dependent variable: We obtain an individual-level measure of party-voter differentiation by subtracting the party affective rating from the rating assigned to the voters of the respective party, obtaining a *voter bonus* measure. This allows us to detect whether there is any differentiation between feelings towards parties and voters, as well as the direction of this differentiation (i.e. greater values indicate more positive bias towards voters).

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[1] While concerns have been raised about the validity of such affective measures (Lelkes, 2019; Wilcox et al., 1989), they remain the most common metric for affective polarization research (Tyler and Iyengar, 2023; Wagner, 2021). Moreover, for our purposes, it is the possible divergence in answers between objects that is most important, not the absolute values of the scale.

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[2] For greater comparability across data sources, we replicate all Data 1 findings using the least-liked-party as the sole out-party (Figures A2, A9).

Table 1

Summary of data sources and measures of party/voter evaluations.

Country	Data source	Party evaluation	Voter evaluation
Brazil	Areal (2022). Convenience sample. Collected in 2020. N = 1,103	0–10 dislike/like scale towards Workers' Party (PT)/Bolsonaro	0–10, dislike/like scale towards voters of PT/Bolsonaro in 2018 election
Germany	PINCET wave three (Bach et al., 2023). Representative sample. Collected in 2021. N = 2,223	0–10 dislike/like scale towards six parties	0–10 dislike/like scale towards voters of the respective parties
Netherlands	LISS AP module, wave two. Representative sample. Collected in 2021. N = 720	0–10 sympathy scale towards 12 parties	0–100 cold/warm scale towards voters of the respective parties. Divided by 10.
Spain	E-Dem wave three (Torcal et al., 2020). Representative sample. Collected in 2019. N = 1,287	0–10 dislike/like scale towards 5 national parties	0–100 favourable/unfavourable feelings scale towards voters of the respective parties. Divided by 10.
US	Kingzette (2021). Representative sample. Collected in 2019. N = 982	0–100 cold/warm scale towards Democratic/Republican parties. Divided by 10.	0–100 cold/warm scale towards "ordinary members of...[party]". Divided by 10.
Data 2: Brazil, Spain, US, France, Italy, Poland, Sweden, Germany, UK	CONAP. Representative sample. Collected in 2022. N around 2,000 per country.	0–100 cold/warm scale towards "leading politicians" of in-party and least-liked party	0–100 cold/warm scale towards "supporters of...[party]"

Note: See Table A3 for list of parties per country. Sample sizes refer to number of respondents included in subsequent analyses once item missing data are excluded. See Appendix for further information on question ordering and straightlining.

Independent variables: Individuals who indicated they identify or feel close to a party are coded as *partisan*. We use items on self-reported interest in politics to obtain a continuous measure of *political interest*. We follow Harteveld (2021b) and calculate *social sorting* as the predicted probability of an individual to vote for their stated party of choice estimated via a model including only socio-demographic variables. *Social media usage* reflects frequency of access to social media platforms (not available in the US in Data 1), though in Data 2 this item explicitly mentions online *political* discussions. *Ideological distance* is measured as the absolute difference between an individual's left–right placement and the median value of the party being evaluated, obtained from that party's partisan group. We code parties as *populist* based on PopuList (Rooduijn et al., 2023), and use within-data vote preferences to measure *vote share*. Table A3 in the Appendix lists all parties included in the analyses and their populist classification.

Control variables: We control for standard socio-demographics, namely age, sex, and educational levels. We also control for the rating assigned to the party, which acts as a particularly important control. Voter bonus, our dependent variable, is likely to be mechanically higher for extremely disliked parties due to a "floor effect": party affect cannot be any lower, such that there is more "space" in the affective scale for voter affect. Substantively, this also accounts for heterogeneity in how individuals feel towards different out-parties.

4. Findings

4.1. Do citizens differentiate?

To what extent do individuals differentiate between parties and voters? We first compute the correlation between affective evaluations of all parties ("leading politicians" in Data 2) and their respective voters for each country in our two main data sources. This is shown below each country name on the *y*-axis in Fig. 1. We then compute separate correlations based on whether the party in question is an in- or out-party, with results displayed above the point estimates that measure the mean level of affective ratings mapped to the *x*-axis. For example, evaluations of parties and voters correlate at 0.87 in Germany (Data 1), though this falls to 0.74 if we only take into account affective

ratings assigned to the in-party and its voters. The in-party is evaluated slightly more positively than its voters (7.85 versus 7.65 on a 0–10 scale), as shown by the hollow shapes. Shapes are merely illustrative and are not indicative of overlapping confidence intervals, which we plot in the Appendix (Figures A3 and A4). All mean differences are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, with the exception of out-party/voter in the US (Data 2).

We start by assessing the evidence for our expectation that – due to person sensitivity bias and related mechanisms – voters receive milder evaluations. We note that the extent to which voters are judged more positively than parties is conditional on group status and – surprisingly – survey design. Data 1 provides evidence that voters are indeed evaluated more positively than parties, but this is only true when it comes to out-groups, i.e., out-parties (solid squares) and out-voters (solid circles). In contrast (and running counter to our expectations), individuals assigned *higher* ratings to the *in*-party compared to *in*-voters in all Data 1 cases except Brazil. One potential explanation is that party labels evoke party elites and stereotypical partisans (i.e., also individuals), leading to greater (less) affect towards the in-group (out-group) "archetype" (Ahler and Sood, 2018). Hence, rather than providing evidence for a generic "affect bonus" towards individuals, Data 1 suggests that the mechanisms might differ depending on in- or out-group status (see also Bolsen and Thornton, 2021).

Even more surprisingly, we find an entirely reversed pattern in Data 2: here, voters of the least-liked-party are more disliked than leading politicians of the party itself, and in-voters are seen more positively than the corresponding party elites. Because this puzzling pattern emerges even in countries also covered in Data 1, we attribute it to the design of the CONAP survey. As noted, the CONAP survey asked respondents to evaluate all voters groups, but only two parties (their least- and most-liked). This seems to have artificially created less outspoken answers: only in Data 2 is the dispersion in partisan sympathy larger than for party elite sympathy. Evaluations towards voters are more extreme (e.g. more liked in the case of the in-group and disliked in case of the out-group) than those towards party elites, generating the reverse pattern from that established previously. This unexpected patterns tells us an important lesson about survey design: whether parties and voters are judged more mildly or harshly may
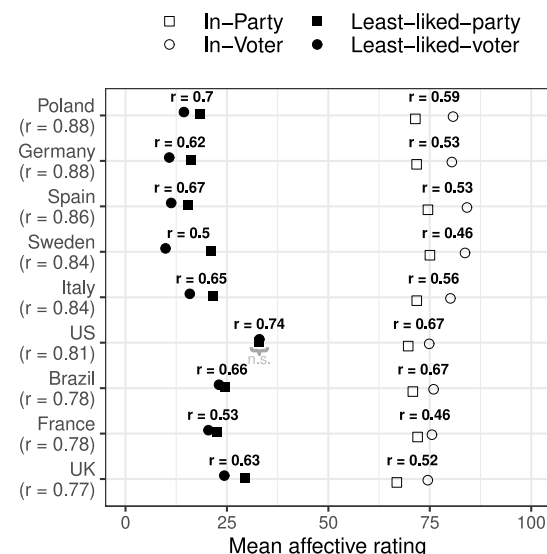
(a) Data 1
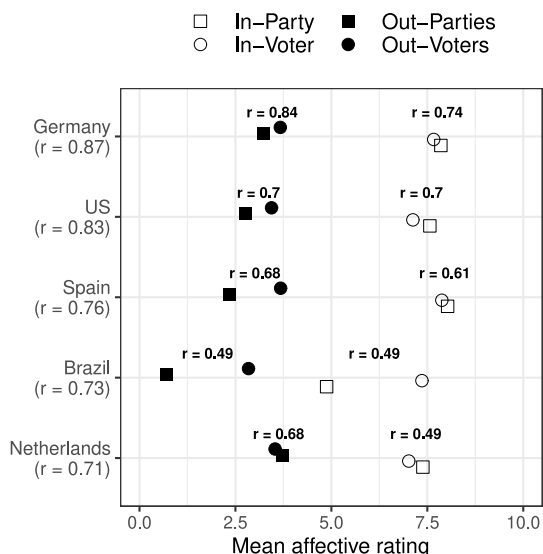
(b) Data 2 (CONAP)

Fig. 1. Affective evaluations of parties and voters across datasets.

Note: Dots and squares denote point estimates for affective ratings. Numbers below the country names are correlations across all parties in a country. Numbers above the point estimate are correlations for in-groups and out-groups separately. All mean differences are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, except when underlined by grey curly braces ("n.s."). See Appendix (Figures A3–A4) for confidence intervals.

depend on the number of options on offer. The fewer options, the lower overall affective polarization may, mechanically, turn out to be. We will return to this in the Discussion. For now, we note that this finding rules out comparisons of the nominal affective gap between elites and voters across the two datasets, but does not rule out predicting whether the correlation differs systematically across countries and social groups, which is the aim of the next section.

Second, and leaving the descriptive pattern aside, an important finding is that the overall correlation between party and voter evaluations is generally high, and remarkably consistently so across countries (ranging from 0.71 in the Netherlands in Data 1 to 0.88 in Germany and Poland in Data 2). This correlation, which is of a similar magnitude as those reported in previous country studies, suggests that citizens do not strongly differentiate. However, this seemingly high correlation is partly artificial, as it is confounded by group status: in all cases and across data sources, the group-specific correlations (i.e. in- an out- calculated separately) are lower than the overall correlation. To understand this, we plot in- and out-group evaluations from Data 2 in the Appendix (Figure A7) for illustration purposes. The main difference respondents make is between parties they like and those they do not like, and, because this watershed is expressed in their views of both parties and party voters, the overall correlation appears very high.[3] Arguably the more relevant metric is how similarly (or not) respondents evaluate parties and voters of either their own camp or those of the opposing camp. Taking this into account reveals that party and voter evaluations correlate much more moderately, between 0.4 and 0.7. This means that party evaluations generally explain less than 50% of variation in voter evaluations and at times as little as 20%. Hence, citizens do often differentiate. This number also various more substantively between countries. We cannot confidently establish the origin of this heterogeneity, but do note that correlations appear to be generally lower in systems with more parties (e.g., Netherlands, Sweden, Italy) as compared to countries with fewer or only two parties

(Brazil, US), although the latter group is also characterized by generally higher level of affective polarization.

Third, we note that – in almost every country case – citizens' views of parties and their voters are more closely correlated when it comes to opponents (out-groups) than when it pertains to one's own camp (in-group). That is, citizens appear to directly extend their feelings towards disliked parties towards the supporters of these parties, whereas in the case of in-groups this is not as automatically the case.[4] This suggests that feelings towards in-groups and out-groups may respond to different mechanisms (Medeiros and Noël, 2014), which is important from a theoretical as well as methodological perspective. We will return to this in the Discussion section, but for now note this may be an important silver lining for much of the affective polarization literature, which tends to focus on attitudes towards political out-groups.[5]

All in all, we conclude that citizens differentiate between parties and their voters to some degree, and consistently so across countries, but that this is less the case for their in-groups than their out-groups. We also note that the person-sensitivity bias might appear larger or smaller (or even absent) depending on how the questionnaire is designed. Together with the moderate correlations established above, this urges caution.

4.2. Who differentiates?

We now move on to factors that explain the degree of differentiation between parties and voters. Since the findings above suggest that this differentiation is conditional on group status, we run separate models for in- and out-groups. For the sake of simplicity, and given that the affective polarization literature tends to focus on political out-groups, below we present models predicting out-group differentiation only.[6]

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[3] In more formal terms: due to different intercepts, two moderate correlations can result in an artificially high correlation if group status is ignored.

[4] In the Appendix we plot the distribution of least-liked-parties in Data 2 (Figure A1). Though populist parties are over-represented, we believe there is enough variation for this to be a general argument.

[5] However, the correlation between least-liked-party/voter in Data 1 (Figure A2) is still significantly lower.

[6] In the Appendix we present equivalent models for in-groups (Figure A8), as well as several alternative models to test the robustness of our main findings.
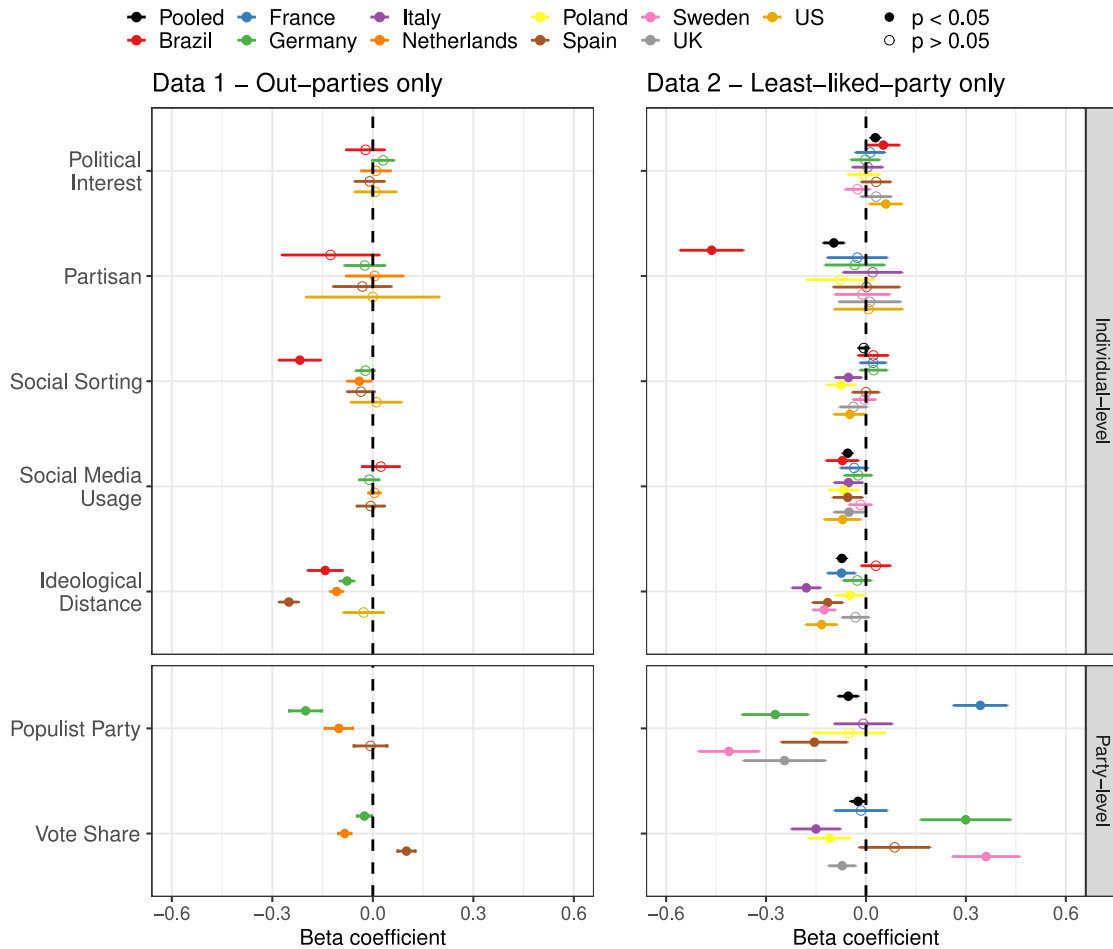
Fig. 2. Results of models predicting net voter affect across datasets.

Note: Dependent variable: voter bonus (voter affect - party affect). Random-intercept models on stacked dataset (one observation = one individual-party-voter rating). Party-level variables not applied in Brazil and the US due to bipolar system. All continuous variables are z-standardized. OLS models for Data 2 given single out-party. See Appendix for full regression tables (Tables A6–A20).

Fig. 2 presents models results for each country in Data 1 and Data 2, as well as a pooled model (with country fixed-effects) for the latter. Positive coefficients indicate a more positive evaluation of out-voters net of evaluations of the respective out-party, whereas null results suggest no differentiation.

A few exceptions aside, there is a general pattern of null-results regarding individual-level predictors. Individuals who are interested in politics, identify with a political party, and are socially sorted do not seem to differentiate between out-parties and out-voters. (We do note, however, that partisan identities predict differentiation between in-voters and in-parties; see Figure A8) There is, however, some country-based heterogeneity. Political interest predicts a greater voter bonus in the US and Brazil (Data 2), which runs against our expectations that party labels would be particularly important for these individuals when judging their fellow citizens on the other side of the political divide. Given that this result emerges only in the two cases of bipolar systems, it cannot be attributed to an "affective bloc" effect. In contrast, Brazilian partisans are unique in extending their dislike for the opposing party to its voters.[7] Further, there is some evidence that social sorting may contribute to an extension of dislike in Brazil and the Netherlands (Data 1), and Italy, Poland, and the US (Data 2).

Out-voters are also more harshly evaluated by individuals who are active online. This result is restricted to Data 2, though this may reflect diverging operationalizations: whilst in Data 1 this variable captures general social media usage, in Data 2 it directly measures whether individuals discuss *politics* online. This is closer to our argument that exposure to strong partisans, which is likely to occur in a context of online political discussion, increases the link between dislike for a party and its supporters. Still, however, we only find evidence in around half of Data 2 countries. Ideological distance returns more consistent results: in all but four out of 14 country-cases across both data sources, dislike of ideologically distant parties is extended to their voters.

There are more significant predictors at the party-level, suggesting that differentiation may be more a function of the type of group being evaluated rather than the type of individual performing the evaluations. Findings for populist parties are particularly consistent, with voters of populist parties receiving an affective penalty for their political allegiance in almost every country-case. As we show in the Appendix, however, this populist effect is driven by *right-wing* populists, whereas voters of the few left-wing populist parties receive an affective bonus (Figure A11). A party's vote share also seems to impact how their voters are evaluated, though not in a consistent pattern across countries: whilst voters of mainstream parties are evaluated more negatively in the Netherlands, Germany (Data 1), Italy, Poland and the UK (Data 2), the reverse is true in Spain (Data 1), Germany and Sweden (Data 2).

In sum, to the extent that individuals differentiate between out-parties and out-voters, they seem to "punish" voters of populist and

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[7] The share of partisans was much lower in Brazil (44%) if compared to other countries in Data 2 (generally over 70%), such that the survey item might have captured stronger partisans in Brazil than in other countries.

ideologically distant parties. There is also some evidence that socially sorted individuals extend their dislike of parties to their fellow citizens, though, surprisingly, we find little to no effects among partisans and the politically interested.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Scholars and pundits around the world are worried about affective polarization. In discussing and measuring this important phenomenon, scholars have regularly conflated citizens' negative evaluations of opposing parties (as political actors) with their hostility towards politically opposed fellow citizens. In this research note, which builds on survey data from 10 countries, we investigated whether citizens differentiate between the two, whether this is consistent across contexts and subgroups, and what this means for our understanding of polarization.

Our findings suggest that citizens indeed do differentiate, albeit in sometimes unexpected ways. On the one hand, as was to be expected, citizens' feelings towards parties and their respective supporters are clearly and consistently related, and they do so to a degree that is remarkably similar across the 10 countries despite their vast differences in political and social institutions. At the same time, the seemingly high correlation between affective evaluations of parties and voters reported in previous studies is partly confounded by in- versus out-group status. When looking at *either* citizens' preferred or disliked camp, the correlations are much lower, often explaining less than 50% of the variance. Moreover, whether citizens extend their feelings towards parties to their supporters depends on whether it concerns their opponents (for which they do so more automatically) or their own camp (in which case a stronger differentiation is made between elites and citizens).

The theme of consistency across countries also applies to our investigation of differentiation across subgroups in societies. We argued that it matters (theoretically and in practice) whether correlations between the two objects differ between groups of citizens. We find relatively little evidence that this is the case. Citizens are more likely to extend dislike of parties to their voters when they are evaluating ideologically distant parties (in line with Comellas Bonsfills (2022)) or populist ones (confirming that these are more easily stigmatized personally, e.g. Harteveld et al. (2021)). Both arguably show that it is easier to forego person-sensitivity bias when a person is deemed undeserving of such moral scruples. We found no systematic differences between groups depending on whether they were politically interested, strong partisans, or social media users, highlighting that citizens were otherwise very consistent in the extent to which they see the two objects similarly.

Before moving to a discussion of what this means for affective polarization research, we note two important limitations of our study. First, we prioritized scope over depth. Our focus on consistent operationalizations across country-cases hinders deeper analysis, and future (case) studies could leverage more fine-grained measures, such as levels of partisanship strength and ideological distance on certain dimensions (cultural versus economic). Secondly, several "moving parts" (not in the least the difference in the number of parties included) hinder full comparability between Data 1 and 2, and our analysis remains ultimately inconclusive about the root of any differences between these. However, given that our conclusion is as much one of consistency rather than heterogeneity, we are confident in our main take-away.

This take-away is a double-edged one. The good news for researchers on affective polarization is that knowing what voters think of parties – information that is widely available – can tell us something about the level of hostility between voters. This has been established before, for instance by comparing feeling thermometers with social distance items (e.g., Gidron et al., 2022; Tichelbaecker et al., 2023). We confirm this using a more similar operationalization (i.e., feeling thermometers and dislike/like scales) for both types of evaluations. Their correlation is not perfect, and there is some reason to believe

that citizens are not as negative towards fellow citizens as towards parties (except when dealing with populist and/or ideologically distant groups). Still, the association is generally consistent across societies, making the former valuable as a proxy for the latter. This gives researchers access to a wealth of data from which to infer affective polarization.

At the same time, we raise two main caveats. First, we conclude that the two types of items do differ in meaningful ways. If scholars are truly interested in "horizontal" affective polarization, it is still preferable to use measures that capture it directly (i.e. as evaluations of fellow citizens). If this is not possible, it is important to acknowledge the imperfection of this proxy, and reflect on the ways this impacts conclusions (for instance, it will matter less for exploring associations than for establishing and comparing point estimates across time and space). Second, we note that any such comparisons are sensitive to survey design. The CONAP data reported more polarized feelings towards voters than towards parties for (in our assessment) no other reason than the fact that respondents were presented with a different list of options. It seems crucial that comparisons over time are restricted to instances where this list remains constant. To ensure comparisons across contexts and over time are meaningful, we need to better understand how citizens respond to feeling thermometers in the first place. Future comparative and experimental research could fill this gap by analysing contextual factors and different questionnaire designs.

Our findings also have theoretical implications, even though these are more speculative. Most importantly, they highlight that we need to better understand how citizens relate to the two types of objects. The framework proposed by Comellas Bonsfills (2022), who focuses on the way humans differentiate between abstract and human objects, is a very fruitful starting point. Theorizing on this account should be expanded by exploring why this mechanisms applies to different degrees for one's own camp or to outright opponents, as suggested by our findings. For instance, several works have shown that in-group affection and out-group dislike are theoretically independent (Brewer, 1999), corresponding to different underlying factors (Bougher, 2017), and leading to different outcomes (Bankert, 2021). Treating in-group and out-group evaluations as two sides of the same coin may bias certain analyses, especially those concerned primarily with out-group hostility. The fact that differentiation is *not* dependent on the strength of in-group identification – a key explanation of affective polarization as such – is also telling.

We end with an optimistic note on a possible normative implication of our findings. Democracy ideally involves (at times heated) conflict between parties as well as some modicum of agreement to disagree between citizens. Given the high stakes, we should perhaps expect citizens to care about politics and hold parties accountable, while not automatically extending this antipathy towards ordinary citizens to the same degree. Our study suggests that this is indeed the case and that interpersonal relations are still ruled by other factors beyond political affiliation, though this could change if the ideological chasm between political camps grows and when populists increase their share of the vote. We have shown that to be able to track and explain these developments, scholars need precise measures of citizens' views of both their politicians and each other.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

João Areal: Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Eelco Harteveld:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2024.102814.

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