

Affective Polarization in Multiparty Systems? Comparing Affective Polarization Towards Voters and Parties in Norway and the United States

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A growing body of comparative studies on partisan hostility – a phenomenon known as affective polarization – is providing evidence that partisan affective polarization is generally no greater in the United States than it is in many European multiparty systems. This article takes the comparative literature on affective polarization one step further by presenting the first comparative study on affective polarization that simultaneously uses, compares and combines a direct measure of affective polarization towards voters (using the inter-party marriage measure) and an indirect measure of affective polarization towards parties (using the like/dislike of party measure) while accounting for the fact that multiparty systems have numerous political parties. This is done by comparing the levels of affective polarization in the United States and Norway. The results show greater affective polarization in the United States relating to parties, but the differences between these two countries are indistinguishable from chance when focusing on the affect relating to voters. This provides empirical evidence that comparative evidence of negative affect towards parties cannot necessarily be generalized to suggest that there is comparative evidence of negative affect towards voters. Yet the results also suggest that negative feelings towards out-parties move to some extent to the personal level in terms of negative feelings towards voters of these out-parties.

Introduction

Are Americans more hostile across party lines than Europeans in countries with multiparty systems? A large body of literature has established that Americans are affectively polarized along partisan lines – that is, they dislike voters of the other party and view their co-partisans positively (Iyengar & Westwood 2015; Iyengar et al. 2019). This focus on the United States has led scholars (e.g., Gidron et al. 2019; Iyengar et al. 2019) to call for more

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comparative studies on affective polarization. Consequently, a growing body of literature is providing comparative evidence of affective polarization suggesting that the US situation is not unique (Carlin & Love 2016; Hansen & Kosiara-Pedersen 2017; Huddy et al. 2018; Lauka et al. 2018; Westwood et al. 2018; Gidron et al. 2019; Reiljan 2020; Wagner 2020).

This article addresses a key limitation in the comparative literature on affective polarization. Studies have either mainly focused on measures of affective polarization towards *parties*, rather than using more direct measures of affective polarization towards *voters*, or have not accounted for the fact that multiparty systems have several (i.e., not only two or a few) major parties in parliament. On the one hand, studies that have included several parties in multiparty systems, yet have relied on measures of affect towards parties, have not directly addressed polarization as a manifestation of social identity (Wagner 2020). Thus, they cannot necessarily speak to comparative differences in levels of affective polarization towards voters (Druckman & Levendusky 2019). On the other hand, comparative studies that have focused on affect towards voters have not accounted for the fact that multiparty systems have more than two major parties in parliament (Iyengar et al. 2012). As affective polarization towards two major parties may not reflect the level of affective polarization towards all parties in parliament, such studies may have underestimated the measured level of affective polarization in multiparty systems.

Largely missing from the literature is comparative evidence of the extent to which negative feelings towards parties move to the personal level and translate to negative feelings towards those who vote for those parties. To address the aforementioned gaps, I contribute the first comparative study on affective polarization that simultaneously uses, compares and combines a measure of affective polarization towards voters (the so-called inter-party marriage measure) and a measure of affective polarization towards parties (the so-called like/dislike of party measure) while accounting for the fact that multiparty systems have numerous political parties. I do this by comparing the levels of affective polarization in the United States and Norway.

Partisan Affective Polarization

This study builds on research on affective polarization that views partisanship as a social identity (e.g., Iyengar et al. 2019). Social identity involves a subjective sense of belonging to a group and a desire to differentiate this group positively from other groups (Tajfel 1981). From this perspective, voters divide the world into an in-group (their own party) and an out-group (opposing party or parties). Such divisions into ‘us vs. them’ tend to trigger both positive feelings towards the in-group and negative feelings towards the out-group(s) (Tajfel 1981). As partisanship is an important social

identity to partisans, they tend to be less willing to interact with voters of the other party in close interpersonal relations, such as an in-law from the out-group (Iyengar et al. 2019).

Affective Polarization in Two-Party vs. Multiparty Systems

A key question that the comparative literature on affective polarization seeks to address is whether the levels of partisan affective polarization are higher in two-party systems (e.g., the United States) than in multiparty systems (e.g., several European countries). Differences in affective polarization across party systems may stem from differences in partisan social identity, but as Aarøe and Petersen (2014) argue, people tend to be largely similar at the level of psychological predispositions (e.g., holding negative views against out-partisans). This would suggest that observed differences in levels of affective polarization largely stem from other variables, such as the current political environment in a country, where a less hostile environment between parties may result in lower levels of affective polarization (Gidron et al. 2019). However, differences may also arise due to how affective polarization is measured and operationalized.

Much of the literature indicates that affective polarization is no higher in the United States than it is in countries with multiparty systems. For instance, comparative studies measuring affective polarization have reached this conclusion using trust games (Westwood et al. 2018) and voters' feelings towards parties (e.g., Gidron et al. 2019; Reiljan 2020). However, comparing multiparty and two-party systems is not straightforward. Polarization relates to the affective distance between the in-party and out-party. As affective polarization in two-party systems concerns the extent to which one feels positively about one's own party (the in-group) and negatively about the 'other' party (the out-group), it is an intuitive concept. However, as Wagner (2020) argues, the task of measuring and theoretically understanding affective polarization in multiparty systems is complex because the 'other' party may refer to several other parties.

One solution is to conceptualize affective polarization in multiparty systems as the average distance between positive feelings towards the party for which one intends to vote (the in-party) and negative feelings towards all other parties (the out-parties). However, this conceptualization overlooks that voters in a multiparty system may feel close to more than one party (Garry 2007). Another solution is to restrict the analysis to voters of the two major parties (e.g., Iyengar et al. 2012; Gidron et al. 2019). However, this solution disregards that multiparty systems consist of several parties. Voters in multiparty systems are not likely to exclusively feel positively about partisans from one party and exclusively negative about all other partisans (Garry 2007; Wagner 2020). Thus, reducing the number of parties

likely also decreases the measured level of affective polarization in a multiparty system.

With this in mind, I focus on an alternative solution that views partisan affective polarization as affective distance from voters between blocs of multiple parties (Reiljan 2020; Wagner 2020). Party blocs can arise, for instance, when a coalition of parties forms government. Huddy et al. (2018) detect affective polarization between (and within) the government coalition bloc and the opposition bloc in Sweden.

Case Selection and Research Questions

According to Gidron et al.'s (2019) analyses of indices of affective polarization towards parties, Norway stands out as the least likely European country with a multiparty system to show levels of affective polarization resembling those in the United States. Gidron and colleagues argue that the Scandinavian countries feature consensual institutions and promote power-sharing among parties, which might produce a less hostile political environment. Thus, by comparing the United States and Norway, I conduct a strong test of whether the levels of affective polarization are higher in the United States than in a European multiparty system. That said, the comparative literature on differences in levels of affective polarization between Norway and the United States has yielded conflicting results depending on the empirical strategy applied. Using the same data (the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems data) to focus on affect towards parties but a different analytic strategy, Wagner (2020) finds quite similar levels of affective polarization between the two countries, while Gidron et al. (2019) find that Norway is statistically significantly less affectively polarized than the United States. Given these conflicting results and the fact that no published study has compared affective polarization towards both parties and voters across party systems, I formulate research questions rather than formal hypotheses.

RQ1a: To what extent are the levels of affective polarization towards voters different in the United States compared to Norway?

RQ1b: To what extent are the levels of affective polarization towards parties different in the United States compared to Norway?

While Druckman and Levendusky (2019) argue that affective polarization towards parties cannot necessarily indicate levels of affective polarization towards voters, it is reasonable to assume that affect towards parties is related to affect towards voters. However, we know less about the extent to which negative feelings towards out-parties move to the personal level in terms of negative feelings towards voters of out-parties.

RQ2: To what extent does affective polarization towards parties reflect affective polarization towards voters?

Methods, Data, Measurement and Analysis

To measure affective polarization towards voters, I conduct a survey experiment in Norway and the United States using the inter-party marriage measure of affective polarization – a less obtrusive measure that focuses on the extent to which voters feel discomfort or comfort with having an in-law who votes for an opposing party (Iyengar et al. 2019). I incorporate Klar et al.'s (2018) design suggestions to avoid conflating people's dislike for the out-party and dislike for partisanship in general by randomly assigning a hypothetical in-law to talking often or rarely about politics.¹ The design also accounts for Druckman and Levendusky's (2019) argument about differences between elites and voters by specifying that the in-law is a party voter.

I conduct the exact same experiment in both countries, asking 'How happy or unhappy would you feel if you had a son or daughter who married a person who votes for [party] [frequency] talks about politics?' The treatment 'party' randomly varies between the two parties in the United States and between the nine parties in the Norwegian parliament. The treatment 'frequency' varies between 'but who rarely' and 'and who often.' I employ a seven-point scale ranging from 'very unhappy' to 'very happy' as the dependent variable in both countries.

To measure affective polarization towards parties, I measure the extent to which respondents like each of the parties in the two countries using a seven-point scale ranging from 'extremely dislike' to 'extremely like.'

Data and Sample

The Norwegian data (N = 1,350) derive from a probability-based online national survey conducted by the Norwegian Citizen Panel (NCP) in June 2018. For details about response rates or other methodological matters, please see the NCP methodology report (Skjervheim & Høgestøl 2018).

The US data (N = 500) derive from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in October 2018. Eligibility to take the survey was restricted to US-based MTurk workers, and participants were paid \$0.36 for three minutes of their time. Participants were screened for answering time and randomly assigned to a CAPTCHA trial to enhance data quality. A common critique of MTurk samples is that although they are fairly diverse, they are not representative of the American population as a whole (Huff & Tingley 2015). Although studies have demonstrated the potential value of MTurk as an experimental source relative to probability-based US samples (Mullinix et al. 2015; Coppock et al. 2018), the use of MTurk can potentially cause biased estimates of the

treatment effects. This can hinder comparability between effects in the US and Norwegian samples, as the measured effects in the United States might differ from those in a representative sample of the population. To mitigate against biased estimates of the treatment effects and enhance comparability across samples, all analyses in the main text employ entropy balancing for the US data (Hainmueller 2012; for a similar approach, see Huff & Kertzer 2018) and the survey weights provided by the NCP to reweight the data to more closely match demographic characteristics from the two national populations. For all analyses presented in the main text, the conclusions remain the same regardless of whether weights are employed.

Analytic Strategy

I use three different approaches to explore affective polarization. For all approaches, I use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models and illustrate the effects as the predicted marginal mean effects on the dependent variables (i.e., happiness with in-law and difference in like/dislike scores for parties) with 95% confidence intervals.

To answer RQ1a, I focus on affective polarization towards voters by dividing the Norwegian respondents into two groups: voters² of the opposition bloc and voters of the coalition bloc (see Huddy et al. 2018 for a similar strategy). The coalition bloc in Norway consists of (at the time) the two government coalition parties (i.e., the Conservative Party and the Progress Party) and the two parties in a coalition agreement with the government coalition (the Liberal Party and the Christian Democratic Party). The opposition bloc consists of (at the time) the opposition parties (i.e., the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party, the Red Party, the Green Party and the Center Party). This measure allows for comparing the difference between negative and positive affect towards the two blocs in Norway to the difference between negative and positive affect towards the two parties in the United States.

To answer RQ1b, I focus on affective polarization towards parties. In Norway, I again divide voters into a coalition bloc and an opposition bloc and use the like/dislike of parties' measure to calculate³ the average difference in voters' feelings towards their in-bloc and out-bloc. In the United States, I use the same measure to calculate the average difference in Democrats' and Republicans' feelings towards both parties.

To answer RQ2, I combine the measures of affective polarization towards parties and voters by matching each treatment party with the measure of the degree to which respondents like or dislike each treatment party.

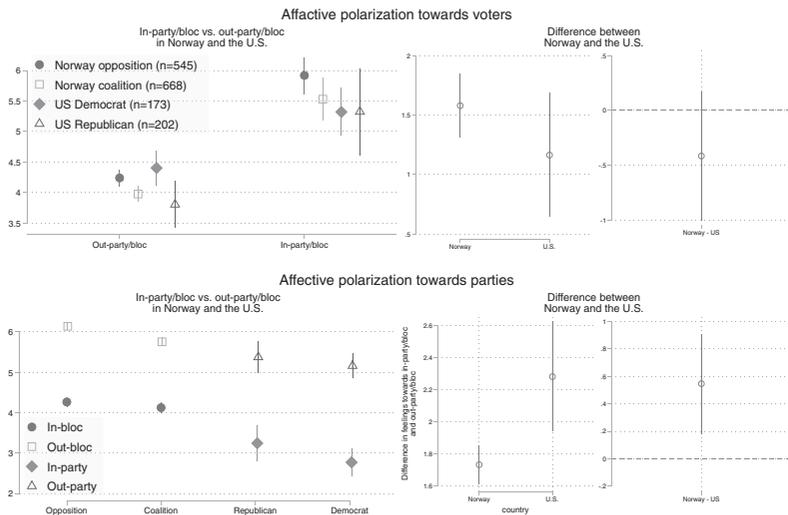
Findings

Starting with the question of whether levels of affective polarization towards voters are similar in the United States and Norway (RQ1a), the top

panels in Figure 1 show the results of the comparison of the two blocs in Norway (opposition vs. coalition) and Republicans and Democrats in the United States. The top left panel in Figure 1 shows the results by party bloc in Norway and by party in the United States. For both party blocs and parties, we see a statistically significant difference between the in-party/bloc and out-party/bloc. The two top right panels in Figure 1 show the differences between Norway and the United States in terms of the average differences between respondents' happiness with an in-group in-law and an out-group in-law. While the average distance between the in-group in-law and out-group in-law is higher in Norway than in the United States, the gap between the two countries is not statistically significant ($F(1) = 1.95, p > .1$). It is important to note that while the wide confidence interval of the in-party mean for Republicans is largely due to the survey weights applied, the difference between the two countries remains statistically insignificant when analysing unweighted data as well.

The bottom panels in Figure 1 address the question of whether the levels of affective polarization towards parties is similar in the United States and Norway (RQ1b). These panels show the difference in average feelings towards parties/blocs in both countries. The results in these bottom panels

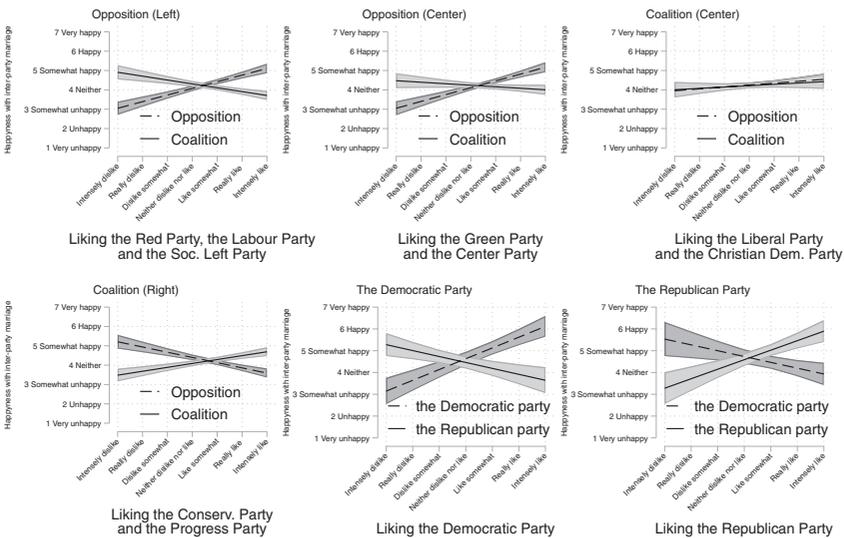
Figure 1. Comparing Affective Polarization towards Voters and Parties in Norway and the United States. *Note:* The upper panel shows the marginal mean effects of the party treatment by bloc/party on happiness with in-law in Norway and the United States, with higher numbers indicating more happiness. The lower panel shows the average difference between the like/dislike scores for the in-party/bloc and out-party/bloc by country. Higher numbers indicate a larger difference. Vertical bars show 95% confidence intervals.



in Figure 1 indicate that affective polarization towards parties is statistically significantly higher in the United States than in Norway ($p < .001$). Note that I find a similar statistically significant difference using Gidron et al.'s (2019) suggested approach – comparing the feelings of voters of the two largest parties for the other party ($t(923) = -2.5, p < .01$).

Finally, addressing the question of the extent to which affective polarization towards parties reflects affective polarization towards voters (RQ2), I correlate the extent to which respondents like or dislike the treatment party and respondents' happiness with the in-law. The overall correlation between liking/disliking the treatment parties and attitude towards the in-law is moderate in both countries (overall: $r = .59, p < .001$, US: $r = .6, p < .001$; NO: $r = .58, p < .001$). Figure 2 further breaks down these correlations by showing the treatment effects of an in-law from either an out-party/bloc or an in-party/bloc (separated into four groups – the opposition left and centre and the coalition centre and right). In the Appendix S1, I include analyses of liking/disliking each of the treatment parties. Figure 2 indicates that there are almost identical patterns in the two countries in terms of negative affect towards an out-group in-law and positive affect towards an in-group in-law. Yet Figure 2 also reveals an important nuance. For all parties except the centre parties in the coalition (the Christian Democratic Party and the Liberal Party) in Norway, we see a cleaved interaction effect between liking/disliking the parties by treatment party bloc (i.e., opposition or coalition).

Figure 2. Interaction Effects between Party Treatment and Like/Dislike of Parties/Bloc on Happiness with in-law (with 95% Confidence Intervals).



The low levels of affective polarization towards these two parties suggest that not all parties in multiparty systems inspire negative or positive affect towards out-party voters and in-party voters to the same extent. Note that these low levels of affective polarization are not necessarily observed because the two parties are centre parties, as we see a cleaved interaction effect for the centre parties in the opposition.

While this provides evidence that the centre parties in the coalition bloc are less likely to be affectively polarized, thus possibly influencing the overall measured level of affective polarization in Norway, it is important to note that the results reported in the top panels of Figure 1 remain substantively similar if I exclude the Liberal Party and Christian Democratic Party treatments from the analysis. Note that the difference between the United States and Norway is also statistically insignificant ($F(1) = 0.46, p > .1$) if I instead use the like/dislike measure to calculate differences in affective polarization towards voters (also when excluding the Liberal Party and Christian Democratic Party treatments from the analysis).

Conclusion

In this article, I move the growing body of literature comparing affective polarization across party systems one step further. Through a comparison between the United States and Norway, I contribute the first cross-country comparison of affective polarization towards both voters and parties to take into account that multiparty systems have numerous parties.

The findings suggest that the differences in levels of partisan affective polarization between the United States and Norway are indistinguishable from chance when using a direct measure of affective polarization towards voters. However, when using a measure of affective polarization towards parties that has been applied frequently in comparative studies (e.g., Gidron et al. 2019; Reiljan 2020; Wagner 2020), I find, in line with Gidron et al.'s (2019) results, that the US respondents are statistically significantly more affectively polarized than Norwegians. This is an important addition to existing evidence concerning affective polarization across systems because these results provide empirical support for Druckman and Levendusky's (2019) argument that evidence of affect towards parties cannot necessarily be generalized to affect towards voters. Thus, the findings contribute to our theoretical understanding of affective polarization by demonstrating that the conclusions one draws about cross-country differences may depend on how affective polarization is measured and operationalized. That said, this does not mean that affect towards parties and towards the parties' voters are unrelated, as my results indicate a moderate positive correlation between party-related affect and voter-related affect in both countries. While these are two different phenomena, citizens' negative feelings towards out-parties

do move to some extent to the personal level in terms of negative feelings towards the voters of these out-parties.

The similarity between affect towards voters in Norway and the United States may also speak to the potential mechanisms that shape affective polarization. Gidron et al. (2019) suggest that the Scandinavian countries might have lower levels of affective polarization due to less hostile political environments and low levels of economic inequality. While neither their study nor this study could explore the causal mechanisms behind differences in affective polarization across countries, the results of the present study indicate that the differences in hostility in political environments and levels of economic inequality seem to be less important in the rise of affective polarization towards voters.

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NOTES

1. The frequency of talk treatments has no influence on the results presented in the main text. See the Appendix S1 for more details on these results.
2. To measure party preference in Norway, I ask, 'If a national election was held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?' In the United States, I ask, 'Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, or an independent?' Note that I do not collect information about Republican and Democrat leaners, and the measure in the United States captures partisan identity, while the measure in Norway captures voting intention.
3. Inspired by Reiljan's (2019) and Wagner's (2020) approach, I use the like/dislike measure to calculate the average difference in voters' feelings towards their in-bloc and out-bloc.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

Appendix S1. Descriptive statistics and Additional analyses.