

"How partisan emotions and negativity shape our politics: examining affective polarization in the Nordic region"

Political polarization has become one of the buzzwords of the 21st century political vocabulary. Several political and societal developments, such as the success of populist parties, negative discord on social media, and the smearing of political opponents, to name just a few, all get lumped together under the umbrella term of increased political polarization. However, in contrast to the traditional conceptualization of political polarization as policy disagreement, these developments are arguably better captured by what researchers have labeled affective political polarization, i.e., the difference between positive feelings toward ingroup parties/partisans and negative feelings toward outgroup parties/partisans. Affective polarization is often described as both normatively and empirically distinct from polarization in terms of ideology and policy differences. Moreover, it has been ascribed several important consequences, ranging from decreased trust in political institutions and condoning violations of democratic norms when the in-party is in government to increased political activism and discrimination in nonpolitical settings.

Yet, despite its apparent relevance, it was not until recently that research on affective polarization started gaining traction outside of the US. The aim of this thesis is to study affective polarization in Nordic countries that are often viewed as consensual, egalitarian and compromise-oriented political systems. This has been done with single case studies of Sweden (two articles), Norway (one article), and one article that focuses on all five countries together. Thus, the first research question compares how affective polarization has changed over time in Nordic countries. Is the perceived increase in polarization mentioned above also visible in terms of affective polarization? What differences have there been between the Nordic countries that are otherwise thought of as similar political systems?

Next, expanding affective polarization research from US two-party systems to other multiparty systems presents methodological challenges. A second overarching research question therefore explores how patterns of affective polarization can be understood by breaking down the electorate into supporters of different party blocs and by examining how the importance of ideology for affective party evaluations has changed over time. While one objective of the thesis consists of outlining patterns of affective polarization, another aim has been to explore some of its causes and consequences. More specifically, the research questions examine factors that go together with higher levels of affective polarization and how negative out-party affect impacted attitudes about the political response to the coronavirus in Norway.

The thesis relies on survey data of representative samples of citizens from the respective countries, spanning the course of several decades. Furthermore, to provide causal leverage when exploring the causes and consequences of affective polarization, I also make use of survey experiments and panel data. The results suggest that affective polarization has increased in the Nordic region as a whole during the last election years, thus pointing to the relevance of the subject. However, in contrast to the typical view of Nordic countries as similar systems, it has tended to be higher in Sweden and Denmark than in the other three countries, at least if we focus on the 2010s. In addition, the articles illustrate several important

correlates of affective polarization and, in particular, that a subtle priming of people's partisanship can be enough to trigger it. Finally, with a design based on previous research in the US, the results show, among other things, that dislike toward out-parties influenced attitudes about the response to the coronavirus crisis in Norway, although this effect depended on whether people evaluated the response of the government or Norway more generally.