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14. Ideology and affective polarization

Emma Turkenburg and Patrick van Erkel

INTRODUCTION

The field of affective polarization has long been concerned with the question of to what extent this phenomenon is related to ideological differences and ideological polarization. Already in the seminal study by Iyengar et al. (2012), which kickstarted widespread interest in affective polarization, this question was central. In their article – even titled ‘Affect, Not Ideology’ – the authors argued that the connection between affective polarization and ideology is limited at best. Finding only a marginal relationship between ideological positions and affective polarization scores, they argue that affective polarization is primarily associated with a social identity approach instead, emphasizing the central role party identities play (see Chapter 11 of this *Handbook*). Since then, the notion that affective polarization is primarily rooted in social identity has gained traction in the field (see also Mason, 2013; and Mason & Wronski, 2018). However, an increasing number of studies have recently begun to challenge this view that affective polarization is mostly disconnected from ideology, presenting evidence that it is, at least to a certain extent, rooted in ideological differences – or individuals’ perception thereof – among voters and elites as well (e.g., Harteveld, 2021; Orr & Huber, 2020; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016; van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022), thereby reopening the debate on the role of ideology.

From a normative perspective, knowing to what extent affective polarization is rooted in ideological conflict or in partisan and political identities is important, not least because this may inform us what kind of solutions could work best to ameliorate partisan animosity.¹ If antipathy toward political others is mostly the result of (perceptions of) ideological differences, then to alleviate such intergroup hostility, solutions that focus on overcoming these differences and stressing where there is consensus may prove most fruitful (Orr & Huber, 2020). Moreover, in this situation, the animosity at least reflects disagreement based on substance about which one cares enough to be affectively involved, which is not necessarily democratically unhealthy. When, instead, the antipathy is more identity-based, there is no association with actual disagreement, which seems more worrisome and may rather call for solutions that bring people into contact and make common identities more salient (Levendusky, 2018).

The goal of this chapter is to structure the existing literature on this topic and to discuss the ways in which affective polarization is or could be rooted in ideology. We aim to give an overview of what we can learn from current research about the role of ideological polarization (IP), ideological differences, and identities in spurring intergroup animosity. By doing so, we hope to provide a useful resource for studies investigating the connection between ideology and affective polarization. More specifically, we argue that to better understand this connection, we should focus on two separate central questions about the relation between ideology and affective polarization that somewhat overlap and are often discussed in tandem, but that in our opinion should be distinguished from one another: (1) to what extent affective

polarization is *rooted in* ideological identities and ideological differences between different political groups, and (2) to what extent it is *driven by* – and, in turn, a driver of – ideological polarization. The first question pertains to the nature, or the roots, of polarization. Does it mostly have an ideological basis, and is citizens' dislike mostly tailored towards those with whom they disagree ideologically? Or is affective polarization 'largely distinct from the ideological divide' (Iyengar et al., 2019a, p. 131) and is the animosity rather identity-based: tailored towards political opponents because they simply belong to a different political group? The second question, alternatively, relates more to the dynamics of the interplay between affective polarization and ideology. Does affective polarization arise from the increasing extremity of ideological positions held by elites and citizens, and from the tendency of voters to sort into more ideologically coherent parties? Throughout the chapter, relevant distinctions will be identified and discussed when needed, including two-party and multiparty systems, IP between citizens and between elites, and perceived and actual ideological polarization and differences.

IDEOLOGY

Ideology is traditionally understood as a relatively coherent body of ideas, values, and principles that shape how a person or party thinks society should be organized and how they understand political issues: a 'belief system' that serves as an umbrella for connected attitudes and convictions (e.g., Blau & Abramovitz, 2004; Converse, 2006; Heywood, 2021; McLellan, 1986). By functioning as a *framework*, ideology can both summarize political orientations, as well as guide and color one's interpretation of and opinions on political issues, helping to decide which societal challenges should be addressed, and what solutions are appropriate to do so. As a framework of political orientation, ideology is not confined to specific categories and may comprise any set of overarching ideological identities. Different ideological distinctions and categories exist and can be distinguished (e.g., liberalism, conservatism, socialism, populism; Heywood, 2021). The mechanisms outlined in this chapter, which are based on particular distinctions, may thus apply in the absence of these precise labels as well.

One of the most prevalent and prominent (yet not per se universally applicable) differentiation in both academic work and public debate is likely between 'left' and 'right' orientations (Jou & Dalton, 2017). While it should be noted that the meanings of left and right have shifted over time and are context- and person-dependent, the right side of the political spectrum is traditionally understood to represent more conservative political positions aimed at stability, tradition, and maintaining the status quo, whereas the left wing is associated with change-seeking, progressive, liberal views (Bauer et al., 2017; Caprara & Vecchione, 2018; Heywood, 2021).

Within this left-right continuum, two dimensions are often identified: an economic one and a cultural one. The former relates to topics such as welfare, regulation, government interference, taxes, and redistribution, whereas the latter concerns, for instance, immigration, gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights, and environmental issues (Achterberg & Houtman, 2009; Caprara & Vecchione, 2018; Hooghe et al., 2002; Jou & Dalton, 2017). Some argue that the left-right continuum captures both these dimensions, whereas others advocate that a two-dimensional ideological space has emerged along economic and cultural societal cleavages

(see, e.g., Achterberg & Houtman, 2009; Bornschier, 2010; Kriesi et al., 2006; Van Der Brug & Van Spanje, 2009).

This more classic understanding of ideology discussed above is sometimes dubbed ‘issue-based’ or ‘operational’ ideology and conceptually contrasted with ‘identity-based’ (‘symbolic’) ideology (Comellas & Torcal, 2023; Free & Cantril, 1967; Mason, 2018). Scholars drawing this distinction relate ideology to social identity and state that labels, such as ‘left’ and ‘right’ (or ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’), do not strictly connect to issue positions, but can rather be understood as a component of identity that drives political opinions. In this view, one’s ideology is not an umbrella term neatly summarizing opinions in a certain category, but rather presents a meaningful identity that drives those opinions and can constitute a social connection to a group with same label (Barber & Pope, 2019; Comellas & Torcal, 2023; Levitin & Miller, 1979; Malka & Lelkes, 2010; Mason, 2018).

This conceptual distinction ties into different operationalizations of ideology as well. Likely the most-used measure of ideology in work on affective polarization is placing either oneself, others, or political parties on a scale ranging from one side of an ideological spectrum to the other (e.g., left-right, liberal-conservative; Dassonneville & Çakır, 2021). Indeed, people generally recognize such a continuum and are able to place themselves on such a scale (Dalton, 2008; Mair, 2007). Yet, critics point to the function of labels like ‘left’ and ‘right,’ or ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ as ideological cues, which citizens use as a shorthand to understand and make sense of politics and which reduce the complexity of the political space, potentially without thoroughly understanding the substantive meaning of these terms (Bauer et al., 2017; Caughey et al., 2019; Jou, 2010; Jou & Dalton, 2017; Lesschaeve, 2017; Mason, 2018). These self-placement measures may thus not only measure substantive ideological preferences but additionally, capture ideological identification as well (although more fine-grained measures asking about the *degree* of identification exist; see Mason, 2018). As an alternative to self-placement measures, scholars have opted for and advocated for questions that ask about several (perceived) issue stances directly and assess the consistency of answers in terms of ideological leaning (Caughey et al., 2019; Jou & Dalton, 2017).

THE ROOTS OF AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION: IDENTITY OR IDEOLOGY?

Ever since affective polarization started garnering widespread public and scholarly attention, the question of its roots has been a key point of discussion. Even though affective polarization scholars emphasize the importance of looking beyond opinions and issue stances (Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason 2013), this does not necessarily mean that affective polarization is fully disconnected from ideology. Ideological differences between political groups or partisan supporters, or the perceptions thereof, may still lie at the root of the animosity between these groups. As such, the question of *whether affective polarization is rooted in ideological differences between political groups or in different identities* remains central in affective polarization research. Does political intergroup animosity come about because people belong to and identify with different political groups, or rather because people take opposite ideological positions, and thus disagree with one another on different policy stances?

A view that was held by early studies on affective polarization, and that is still prominent in the field today, is that ideological differences only play a subordinate role, and that political

intergroup animosity is mostly the consequence of different partisan identities (Algara & Zur, 2023; Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2013). According to this perspective, party identities have become more salient as social identity over time due to parties becoming more homogeneous with regard to race, religiosity, geography, and other social factors (Lelkes, 2021; Mason & Wronski, 2018). Consequently, partisan divisions have become a stronger criterion around which people form in- (i.e., supporters of their own party) and out-groups (i.e., supporters of the other party or parties), which subsequently triggers more positive feelings towards their own group and negative or even hostile feelings towards the outparty electorate. In this sense, just knowing that someone belongs to the political outgroup is enough to develop negative feelings, irrespective of the ideological position or policy opinions this person holds. This approach is discussed in more detail in Chapter 11 in this *Handbook*.

More recently, however, a growing number of studies have demonstrated that affective polarization is rooted in ideological differences, both between elites and citizens, as well (Algara & Zur, 2023). Many of these studies do acknowledge that party identities play an important role (Viciana et al., 2019; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). However, according to this school of thought, affective polarization, and particularly outparty hostility, is a consequence of the fact that politically other-minded citizens *hold different ideologies and opinions*, or at least support a political party that defends a different ideology. The negative affect towards certain partisan groups is therefore not solely the result of social identity mechanisms, where every outgroup is automatically perceived as ‘bad,’ but rather comes into existence when citizens also disagree with one another ideologically, or at least hold the perception that this is the case. Because of the ideological differences, they feel ‘threatened’ by political opponents and/or ‘despise’ them for holding opposing ideas or supporting a party that does so, which may ultimately drive negative outgroup feelings (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016; van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022). This also implies that people become more negative about out-party groups the more they differ with regard to their ideology and policy positions.

First evidence that affective polarization may be rooted in ideological differences after all was found in a series of experimental studies in the American context. In a study in 2016, Rogowski and Sutherland investigated to what extent people become more negative towards opposing politicians when these politicians take more extreme positions. In a survey experiment, they provided respondents with biographical information about two candidates, manipulating their ideological positions. In one condition, the candidates were relatively close to one another with moderate ideological positions, whereas in another condition, candidates took ideological extreme positions and sharply differed from one another. The authors show that in the condition where candidates took more extreme ideological positions, respondents were much more outspoken in their feelings towards the candidates and much more affectively polarized, with a difference of about 12 percentage points compared to the more moderate condition. A shortcoming of this experiment, however, is that Rogowski and Sutherland (2016) did not include the party identity of the candidates, making it impossible to distinguish the effect of ideology from party identity. Somewhat similar experiments were conducted by Webster and Abramowitz (2017) and Lelkes (2021) who overcome the shortcomings of the experiment by Rogowski and Sutherland by manipulating both the party label and the substantive positions of the candidates. Both studies conclude that while both party cues and ideological cues matter, the latter exerts a stronger effect on the feeling thermometer scores than the former. Lelkes (2021), for instance, finds that learning that a candidate holds extreme opposite ideological ideas decreases feeling scores towards that candidate roughly 2.5 times

as much as learning that the candidate belongs to the opposite party. Complementary to these experiments, Webster and Abramowitz (2017) also find this using survey data from the US. They show that both the perceptions people have of the ideological position of the other party, as well as people's own ideological positions, can predict their affective scores towards the political opponents. Concretely, they demonstrate that citizens feel more negative about the opposing party when they perceive this party as more ideologically extreme, and when they take a more ideologically extreme position themselves.

Together, these studies demonstrate that ideology does play a role in fostering affective polarization – at least when it comes to feelings towards opposite parties – and that party animosity is higher when the ideological distance is larger. However, these three studies focused mostly on ideological differences between politicians and political parties, leaving open the more prominent question of to what extent this mechanism also works at the level of party supporters. In a recent study, also conducted in the US, Orr and Huber (2020) aim to provide an answer to this question. Conducting a series of experiments, they presented participants with different possible vignettes describing a random person where several social cues were held constant across conditions. However, they manipulated whether information was given about the party identity and ideological position of the person. In one condition, information was given about the party identity, but not about that person's policy stance. In a second condition, no information was given about the person's party identity, but their policy stances were mentioned. Whereas in a third condition both information about the party identity and the policy stance were given. The findings of the experiments demonstrate that when no information was given about a person's policy stances, party identity was an important predictor of participants' feelings towards that person, with people being on average 23 degrees warmer towards co-partisans on a 100-degree scale. However, this effect dropped by more than 50 percent, to only 10 degrees, when ideology was accounted for. Vice versa, Orr and Huber (2020) find that people were on average 28 degrees warmer towards persons sharing their ideology and policy ideas, an effect that more or less remained the same (26 degrees) when information about party identity was introduced. According to the authors, these findings demonstrate that ideological and policy differences are a much more prominent predictor of partisan animosity than party identity. Insofar as party identity is a driver of negative feelings towards opponents, they argue, it is mostly because people use party identity to infer the ideological and policy stances of other people. Using a very similar experimental design, the robustness of these findings was further supported in a study by Homola et al. (2023), who not only manipulated whether information on the person's policy stances was given, but also manipulated the extremity of this position. They also find that ideological distance exerts a stronger effect on partisan animosity than party identity and show that negative feelings are particularly prominent towards those persons who take an extreme opposite ideological position.

The experiment and conclusions of Orr and Huber (2020) faced some criticism, however. Dias and Lelkes (2022) propose that rather than people inferring ideological positions from party identity, it may also work reversely with people inferring party identity from ideological positions. Particularly on prominent issues, such as abortion in the US, individuals are often aware of the positions parties take on that issue. Therefore, when information is provided that, for example, another person is pro-life, they may infer that the person is likely a Republican and dislike the person for supporting that party, meaning that the identity mechanism would still be at play after all. To better distinguish the effects of party identity from ideology, Dias and Lelkes replicated the experiment of Orr and Huber (2020), but compared policy stances

where the party positions are generally known with policy stances where these positions are mostly unknown. They were able to replicate Orr and Huber's results for the former, but not for issues where party positions are generally unknown. In those instances, the effect of party identity remained relatively strong even after introducing the information on a policy stance, thus finding more support for the identity approach. Nonetheless, even in this study, there is still a substantial effect of the policy position left, demonstrating that this is also a relevant dimension. Taken together, while these experimental studies present somewhat divergent conclusions regarding the dominance of either the identity approach or the ideological approach, they all consistently find evidence that affective polarization is, to a considerable extent, rooted in the ideological differences between opposing political groups.

This conclusion is further supported by a number of recent studies that investigated the link between ideological distance and affective polarization outside of the US, mostly in European multiparty systems, by means of survey data. An advantage of studying this question in a multiparty system is that it is easier to distinguish party identity from ideological distance than in the two-party system of the US, where there is only one out-party and thus no variation in the ideological distances between electorates. In multiparty systems, however, individuals have several out-parties with some being more ideologically distant than others. Leveraging this variation in ideological distance provides further insight into how much this factor matters. Hartevelde (2021), for instance, finds that in the Netherlands there is a clear relationship between the ideological distance between party supporter groups and their ratings of one another. Generally, people display positive feelings towards supporters of their own party, neutral feelings towards supporters of parties that are still close, and more negative feelings as the distance with a political party and their supporters becomes larger. Similar patterns have been noted in other multi-party systems such as Belgium (van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022), Finland (Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021), Spain (Viciana et al., 2019), and Sweden (Reiljan & Ryan, 2021). These studies all demonstrate that negative affective feelings towards out-party supporters are a function of ideological distance, where these feelings become more negative as the ideological distance increases.² This effect holds when controlling for party identification (Algara & Zur, 2023; Viciana et al., 2019) and also holds for individuals with weak partisan identities (van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022). Moreover, the effect is found both when measuring ideological distance using objective ideological scores of political parties such as the Chapel Hill expert scores (Hartevelde, 2021), and when using *perceptions* of ideological distance by taking the difference between the ideological score of the respondent and their estimation of the ideological position of the out-party and their supporters (van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022; Viciana et al., 2019). Studies have also found that differences on the cultural ideological dimension in particular drive partisan hostility, at least across Western democracies. Using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) for 20 countries between 1996 and 2017, Gidron et al. (2023) find that over time, the importance of distance between party supports on the cultural ideological dimension (including issues like immigration, climate, and ethical issues) for predicting partisan hostility has increased, whereas the importance of the economic dimension has decreased.

All in all, the wide body of research discussed above provides convincing evidence that affective polarization is to a considerable extent rooted in ideology, with ideological differences between political groups driving at least part of the animosity between them. This does not necessarily mean, however, that (party) identity plays no role. Ideology and identity may both be at play and could even reinforce one another. More generally, one can wonder

to what extent the identity and ideological approaches are as separate from one another as often presented in the literature. As we discussed earlier, recently some scholars have argued that ideology could actually function as a form of identity. Labels like ‘Left’ and ‘Right’, or ‘Progressive’ and ‘Conservative’, may not only signal a policy position, but may be an important part of someone’s political identity as well (Bantel, 2023; Devine, 2015), particularly in multiparty systems. Since party identities are often less important in this context than in two-party systems like the US, people may identify with an ideological or ‘affective’ bloc, rather than with a single party (Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Reiljan & Ryan, 2021). In this regard, Comellas and Torcal (2023) make a distinction between *issue-based ideology* – which aligns with the classical view on ideology and sees it as the coherent set of issue positions one takes – and *identity-based ideology* – which views ideology more as an attachment to ideological labels. Using survey data where they measure issue-based ideology via respondents’ extremity on a set of issues and identity-based ideology by asking people how much they identify with ideological labels such as ‘the Left’ and the ‘Right’, they find that identity-based ideology is more strongly linked to negative feeling thermometer scores towards political opponents than issue-based ideology. This gives an indication that the effect of ideology on affective polarization could still largely work through different (ideological) identities rather than real ideological issue conflict. However, it should be noted here that the authors looked at the ideological extremity of respondents, rather than directly measuring the ideological distance with other groups, which would provide a more accurate test. In this sense, we still lack full insight into the extent to which ideology exerts an influence on affective polarization through policy differences and the extent to which it exerts an effect through different identity markers, forming an important research gap.

IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION AND AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

Thus far, we have drawn the distinction between understanding ideology in a more operational and in a more symbolic sense, and have delineated how affective polarization seems, at least to a certain extent, to be rooted in ideological disagreements. A logical next step is to ask whether an exacerbation of such ideological differences can actually explain the rise in affective polarization witnessed in some countries. In other words, *can ideological polarization be seen as a driver of affective polarization?*

When considering affective polarization as, to some extent, rooted in ideology, *ideological polarization* is often pointed to as the culprit in particular (e.g., Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Riera & Madariaga, 2023). Instead of referring to emotional or social aspects, ideological polarization is about ideas and opinions. Ideological polarization can be understood in terms of divergence: when the difference between people with different ideological viewpoints is large or becomes larger, because they hold increasingly extreme and contrasting positions (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Lelkes, 2016). Existing cross-national work on longitudinal trends in ideological polarization is mixed, however. Some point to a slight increase in ideological polarization among citizens, although this trend is more pronounced in some countries (e.g., the US) than in others (Bernaerts et al., 2023; Draca & Schwarz, 2021; but see Lelkes, 2016) and others report no increasing opinion extremity over time (e.g., Kawecki, 2022 in Finland).

Alternatively, ideological polarization can also be understood in terms of attitude consistency, meaning that one’s issue stances are all aligned with one ideological view (Abramowitz

& Saunders, 2005; Lelkes, 2016; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). Abramowitz and Saunders (2005, p. 4) posit: 'It is the existence of subgroup cleavages, rather than the overall distribution of opinion, that is critical in determining the extent of ideological polarization in a society.' The notion of opinions fully matching one's ideological identity is often referred to as *sorting*. This phenomenon has predominantly been studied in the US context as *partisan sorting*, where US researchers indeed report that Republicans are increasingly conservative and Democrats increasingly liberal in their opinions (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2005; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). In other countries, however, a decrease in issue consistency over time has previously been reported, pointing to lowering levels of ideological polarization in, for instance, Germany (Munzert & Bauer, 2013), the Netherlands (Adams et al., 2012).

Whether it is alignment or divergence, citizens or elites: ideological polarization has been pointed to as a potential driver of increased affective polarization. Positive or negative feelings towards someone are driven by several factors and processes, but one of these factors is often considered sharing 'common ground', or similarity (Casciaro & Sousa Lobo, 2005; Fiore & Donath, 2005). Moreover, stark ideological differences could signal different or even conflicting goals, which can drive negative feelings and perceptions of the other (Carlin & Love, 2018). This could work through substantive opinion differences between citizens. When someone disagrees with you on everything (different alignment) or holds an opinion that is diametrically opposed to yours (extremity), you might like them less as a person because of their ideas. In this case, the difference in opinion may be too large to 'agree to disagree' and become a source of dislike and negative feelings. Ideological polarization among political elites may also play a role in spurring mass-level affective polarization, by making ideological differences more visible and pronounced, emphasizing the 'wrongness' of the other.

Empirically, several studies have investigated whether ideological polarization can be seen as a driver of affective polarization. Focusing specifically on ideological *extremism*, Riera and Madariaga (2023) outline three scenarios underlying the relationship between ideological and affective polarization (coining the term 'overlapping polarization'). In theorizing about this overlap, they discuss (1) the potential role of ideological differences at the elite-level, (2) the influence of individual ideological extremity, and (3) the probability of a reversed or reciprocal relationship between ideological and affective polarization.

We first turn to the notion of elite-issue polarization on the system level, increasing both affective polarization and ideological extremity separately on the individual level (Riera & Madariaga, 2023). Indeed, existing studies focusing on *elite* ideological differences seem to point to increased ideological extremity and policy disagreement among politicians, spurring more affective polarization among voters (Banda & Cluverius, 2018; Gidron et al., 2023; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016; Skytte, 2020).

Moving beyond the effect of differences between elites, Webster and Abramowitz (2017) experimentally show that perceptions of larger ideological distance between oneself and a politician from one's opposing party decrease feeling thermometer ratings of that politician. They moreover argue, based on observational data, that increasing *consistency* of citizens' ideologies and partisanship in the US has contributed to more hostile feelings towards the other side, concluding that ideological polarization (interpreted as ideological sorting) spurs affective polarization. Lelkes (2018) challenges the notion that increased ideological consistency and sorting drive affective polarization, showing increased affective polarization for both ideologically sorted and non-sorted individuals in the US. Whilst ideological consistency

does play some part in inter-partisan hostility, its effect is small and it is not *the* driving force behind it.

The notion of individual-level ideological *extremism* increasing individual-level affective polarization has been put forth by Riera and Madariaga (2023) as a second scenario. However, empirical evidence for such a causal connection is limited and small at best (Lelkes, 2018; Mason, 2013; Reiljan, 2020; Riera & Madariaga, 2023; Wagner, 2021). The cross-national work of Reiljan (2020) does show a significant correlation between affective polarization and ideological polarization, signaling a relation between the two. Yet, ideological polarization (be it between citizens themselves or perceived between elites) still does not account for much of the variation in affective polarization, indicating that ideological polarization is not necessarily *the* driver of increased affective polarization (see also e.g., Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Wagner, 2021). Moreover, European countries vary substantially in how pronounced the relation between ideological and affective polarization is (Reiljan, 2020). And, as Kawecki (2022) shows in the Finnish case, the *type* of ideological divide (e.g., left-right vs. GAL-TAN) that matters for affective polarization may change over time (see also Gidron et al., 2023). Using survey data from 45 countries, Riera and Madariaga (2023) corroborate earlier findings, showing that the highest levels of affective polarization are reported by individuals who are ideologically also more extreme than the average citizen in their country. Yet, they also show how the strength of this relation is dependent on many contextual factors, such as perceived elite polarization, the presence of cross-cutting cleavages, and levels of party-system fragmentation.

Importantly, the causal direction of the relationship between affective and ideological polarization may be opposite or at least more reciprocal than is oftentimes assumed, with affective polarization causing citizens to adopt more extreme issue positions (the third scenario proposed by Riera & Madariaga, 2023) or spurring increased ideological sorting (as shown by Lelkes, 2018). Taken together, there may be a relationship between ideological and affective polarization, but studies demonstrate that if ideological polarization causes affective polarization, it is a limited driver at best.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

To what extent is affective polarization *rooted* in ideological differences and identities and *driven* by ideological polarization? To some extent, the answers to the central questions of this chapter contradict one another and create a paradox. On the one hand, the literature provides convincing evidence that affective polarization is at least to a certain extent rooted in ideological conflict and that part of the existing animosity can be explained by the fact that different political groups hold different ideological beliefs. Normatively, we could interpret this ideological rooting of affective polarization and its weak association with ideological polarization with cautious optimism. The fact that previous research finds that affective polarization is at least partly rooted in ideological differences indicates that this animosity to a certain extent reflects disagreement based on substance about which one cares enough to be affectively involved. Given that democracies are built on political disagreement, this would mean that (some degree of) affective polarization is not necessarily democratically unhealthy. Solution-wise, it would indicate that the stark hostility may be alleviated through the promotion of consensus and understanding of other perspectives (Orr & Huber, 2020). Still, as

noted, ideological identity and perceptions of elite and mass ideological polarization may still impact affective polarization as well. These call for different types of interventions, such as intergroup contact and the correction of misperceptions, in which the media and politicians may have an important part to play (Druckman et al., 2022; Levendusky, 2018).

Yet, while we find that affective polarization has ideological roots, at the same time, when we look at what drives the worldwide increase of affective polarization, the literature finds no, or only weak support that ideological polarization is one of the key drivers. In many countries, affective polarization increases without citizens becoming more ideologically extreme (Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021). One of the tasks for future research will be to make sense of this paradox. How do these two findings fit together? Although further research is necessary, we offer at least two tentative explanations that warrant further scrutiny in future research.

A first potential explanation may lie in the *perceptions* of ideological differences with the out-party. While citizens may not have become more extreme in their ideologies and political ideas per se, they may increasingly *perceive* that this is the case and that members of their political outgroup (politicians and/or citizens) hold more extreme positions. Indeed, recent studies have shown that individuals tend to overestimate the ideological extremity of their opponents. In a study conducted in the US, Druckman et al. (2022) asked respondents to estimate the percentage of supporters of the opposing party who hold extreme positions. On average, people believed that 78 percent of the opposing electorate took an extreme position, whereas in reality, this was only 39 percent. In another study by Ahler (2014), respondents were asked to estimate the average position of political opponents for various political issues on a 7-point scale where 1 means Left or Liberal and 7 means Right or Conservative. The findings showed that respondents, on average, perceived opponents as one point more extreme than they actually were. Outside the US, such discrepancies between actual and perceived levels of polarization have moreover been reported in the Netherlands, where a recent report showed that roughly 75 percent of citizens believe opinion differences are increasing, whereas actual ideological polarization is not on the rise (Miltenburg et al., 2022).

Thus, while the actual ideological positions of citizens may not have changed much over the years, the perceptions of these positions may have, as a consequence of both an increase in partisan media – at least in the context of the US – and social media. Partisan media often emphasize conflict and display political opponents using stereotypes (Druckman et al., 2022; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016), while on social media people may disproportionately encounter partisans who are highly engaged and extreme – who are generally more active on social media (Settle, 2018) – thus also distorting perceptions. Indeed, recent work from Sweden shows that use of the term ‘polarization’ in the media quadrupled between 2010 and 2021 (Farjam et al., 2023).

A second explanation may lie with political elites. While there is not much evidence that ordinary citizens have become more ideologically extreme, there is evidence that political elites have, at least in certain countries (e.g., Schmitt & Freire, 2013). As the experiments by, among others Webster & Abramowitz (2017) and Lelkes (2021) have shown, sharper ideological divisions between political elites may drive intergroup animosity between their supporters. In this sense, there can be a spillover effect, where even when supporters of opposing parties themselves do not change their ideology, they are still blamed for supporting political candidates or parties that are more extreme, thus fostering affective polarization.

Beyond the explanations offered above, the operationalization and measurement of ideology warrant further attention. Whilst the distinction between identity and (issue-)ideology is

frequently discussed in relation to affective polarization drivers, identity is generally understood in terms of partisanship in these instances. Only recently, scholars have started to advocate a distinction between issue-based and identity-based ideology, showing that affective polarization relates differently to both (Comellas & Torcal, 2023). This ties in with the differing approaches to measuring ideology as discussed earlier in this chapter. Whilst affective polarization scholars increasingly acknowledge the difference between measuring left-right self-identification or asking about issue stances, and justify their measurement choices, this is not always the case. Scholars revisiting and building upon previous work are thus advised to be aware of how ideology is measured and how this speaks to the connection between ideology and affect. This way, hasty generalizations of one understanding of ideology to the other can be avoided when claims are put forth about the relation between ideology and affective polarization. Moreover, we encourage future work to improve and use measures tailored to different dimensions of ideology. Not only will this further the field of affective polarization by improving our understanding of *if* affective polarization is rooted in ideology, it also enables a better understanding of when and how it does so.

NOTES

1. It should be noted that throughout this chapter we use the terms affective polarization and partisan animosity both when we speak about affective feelings towards other parties and when we speak about affective feelings towards other party supporters. While these are conceptually different (Harteveld, 2021), they are often used interchangeably in the studies we discuss throughout this chapter.
2. One exception is supporters of populist radical right parties. The negative feelings other partisan groups have towards this group exceed the scores one would expect based on ideological distance alone.

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