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DOI
10.4337/9781035310609.00041
Publication date
2025
Document Version
Final published version
Published in
Handbook of Affective Polarization
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26. Affective polarization, democratic norms, and support for elite transgression

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INTRODUCTION

Does affective polarization damage the health of democracies? Ever since the term was coined, authors have expressed concerns that affective polarization undermines the norms that underpin liberal democracies. Chapter 27 in this *Handbook* assesses the relationship between affective polarization and democratic backsliding from a 'macro' perspective – that is, by assessing the societal and institutional fallout of affective polarization. In the current chapter, we will focus on this relationship in terms of individual-level mechanisms. How does affective polarization transform the norms and perspectives citizens have regarding democracy and their role in it?

Democracy requires both conflict and cooperation. If affective polarization turns politics into an emotionally charged, zero-sum intergroup conflict, it becomes attractive for citizens to discard their fellow citizens' rights, to demand from politicians to win whatever the cost, and even to even question the utility of liberal democracy itself. By turning opponents into enemies, affective polarization makes us behave worse as democratic citizens.

At least, this is the implicit or explicit diagnosis of many studies on affective polarization, often constituting the rationale for studying the phenomenon in the first place (see e.g., Broockman et al., 2022, Table 1). As we will document in this chapter, scholars have only recently started to seriously investigate this assumption theoretically and empirically. This emerging body of work has added important nuance to our understanding of the repercussions of affective polarization. On the one hand, there are plausible mechanisms linking affective polarization to democratic norm erosion and the condonement of elite transgression (e.g., McCoy et al., 2018; Kingzette et al., 2021; Orhan, 2022). On the other hand, it has been argued that as an *interpersonal* phenomenon (i.e., antipathy between groups of citizens), the impact of affective polarization on citizens' views of democracy might actually be limited (Broockman et al., 2022; Voelkel et al., 2023a). As we will see, empirical studies have provided some evidence for a relation between affective polarization and democratic norm erosion, but at the same time suggest that this relation is neither complete, unconditional, nor universal. All in all, we argue for a middle road between alarmism and complacency. At the same time, many fundamental questions remain unanswered. Some of the remaining discussions concern the mechanisms involved and the need to expand the empirical scope to other world regions.

We follow the growing literature by focusing on both democratic norms per se and (expressed) support for transgressive or autocratizing actions by politicians. While these are in many respects different phenomena, it is relevant to assess them in tandem. Arguably, an erosion of democratic norms has its most tangible and immediate effect on democracy when it results in electing politicians who are willing to transgress against it. In fact, this 'enabling' function is probably the main channel or mechanism linking affective polarization

as a citizen phenomenon to autocratizing by politicians (see Chapter 27 in this *Handbook*). Moreover, there are methodological difficulties in operationalizing democratic norms, and studying (reported) behavior in the electoral realm provides a complementary approach. It is in the voting booth that citizens can punish or reward politicians who strengthen or subvert democracy. We therefore discuss these two sides of the coin together, and in the concluding section reflect on this practice, arguing that it is important to understand the relation between norms and expressed behavior.

This chapter proceeds as follows. We will first discuss general theoretical mechanisms and subsequently zoom in on more specific norms. While democratic norms can be classified in multiple ways, we organize the chapter by three more concrete manifestations that have been dominant in the literature: political intolerance, condoning elite transgression, and satisfaction with democracy (and in particular, the extent to which this becomes instrumental). We also present descriptive information about their relationships with affective polarization based on the nine-country CONAP dataset. In a final section, we point to unanswered questions and suggest directions for future research.

FROM INTERGROUP CONFLICT TO DEMOCRATIC NORMS

In this chapter, we use the term 'democratic norms' in a broad sense to refer to a catalog of norms held by citizens (rather than elites) regarding democratic politics that have been argued to be important in sustaining liberal democracy. In trying to understand how these relate to affective polarization, this chapter understands the latter as a form of negative affect towards politically opposed fellow citizens – hence, as an interpersonal phenomenon. Below, we first discuss their relation on a more general level; we then proceed to discuss three more concrete manifestations.

Why Affective Polarization Might Erode Democratic Norms

As noted, we understand affective polarization as pertaining to antipathy between citizens over politics. What links such intergroup conflict to (more or less abstract) norms about democracy? Kingzette et al. (2021) provide a general account, proposing two classes of mechanisms. First, affective polarization increases the (perceived) *threat* posed by the other camp, and this makes it harder to accept both their democratic rights as citizens and the need for one's preferred politicians to play it fair. The threat seems larger because affectively polarized citizens will be biased to see the other camp as more extreme and malicious regardless of their actual behavior. (Perceived) threats are a crucial component linking citizens' understanding of intergroup conflict to their emotional and behavioral responses (see Chapter 13 in this *Handbook*). Indeed, studies confirm that affectively polarized citizens feel the stakes are higher at elections (Ward & Tavits, 2019) and that (relatedly) strong partisans overestimate how hostile the opposing camp is (Ruggeri et al., 2021). This increases the cost of 'losing' politically beyond a point citizens are willing to accept (Esaiasson, 2011; Orhan, 2022; Janssen, 2024). The result is a strain to adhere to the norms of liberal democracy, and citizens' willingness to act on it, for instance by switching their political allegiance. As Orhan (2022) notes, 'affectively attached individuals become less likely to cross party lines, even if incumbents violate democratic principles or if their economic policies do not appeal to their supporters' interests'.

Similarly, 'affectively polarized [citizens] want to limit the other party's ability to vote, speak freely, and protest' (Kingzette et al., 2021, p. 666). Perceived threats bolster the willingness to enhance one's own camp's political power, if necessary at the expense of the other.

A related argument can be found in the literature on the so-called 'winner-loser gap'. These studies show that losing elections can strain democratic support, and this is exacerbated in contexts with high levels of affective polarization in which the (emotional) stakes are extraordinarily high (Janssen et al., 2024). There is a clear analogy with studies on the impact of left-right divergence and partisanship on democratic principles: the cost of holding on to democratic principles and accepting electoral defeat increases with the distance to the other side (e.g., Svolik, 2019; Graham & Svolik, 2020), ideologically or emotionally.

The second mechanism discussed by Kingzette et al. (2021) is that under conditions of affective polarization, democratic norms become more strongly *politicized*. This mechanism is arguably particularly relevant for systems with two parties competing for power (like the United States), but has a general appeal – in particular for outcomes concerning elite behavior – when understood more broadly. They argue that under conditions of affective polarization, ruling parties want a free hand (often pointing to their popular legitimacy through elections), whereas opposing parties prefer to rein them in (pointing to the checks and balances which are also part of democratic institutions). This is nothing new, but affective polarization means that citizens will be more likely to take these as cues for how they look at democracy: 'if the affectively polarized engage in motivated cognition, then norms are not about fundamental principles, but are rules that only apply to the other party' (idem: p. 666). This dovetails with findings that many citizens are instrumental in their support for democratic instruments (Esaiasson, 2011; Werner, 2020; Kokkonen & Linde, 2023).

It could be argued that the selective application of norms does not equate to *discarding* them. Arguably, it is possible to sincerely care about democratic rights but still be willing to suspend them to overcome some immediate threat. In fact, this might be the *democratic* thing to do. The discussions on resilient democracy show that citizens might be, or at least feel, legitimized in withholding political rights from undemocratic or illiberal actors to protect democracy. Indeed, rather than a foreboding of democratic erosion, the heated backlash against illiberal actors across the political mainstream has been interpreted by many as a sign of resilience (Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2021). To rephrase the mechanism, affectively polarized citizens might be especially likely to let (true or imagined) ulterior democratic concerns override their tolerance of the outgroup's democratic rights.

The fact that affective polarization *can* be a defense mechanism against illiberal actors does not mean it is always productive. Exactly because affective polarization likely involves cognitive biases, it can foster an unwarranted spiral of perceived (although in due course possibly increasingly real) democratic threats on both sides. Increasing affective polarization means that the applicability of democratic norms becomes increasingly contingent on their utility in fighting the political enemy, whose threat to democracy might be more projected than real (for at least one of the camps). As noted by Schedler (2003: 358), once 'political contenders come to see each other as enemies of democracy, democracy stares into the abyss'. History shows that once democratic norms themselves have become weaponized, it becomes very hard to return to a situation in which all camps accept them (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

In short, it is likely that affective polarization strains citizens' ability, or motivation, to hold on to democratic norms (broadly defined). At the same time, there are two important points of nuance. First, the association between different norms (or the erosion thereof) and affective

polarization will be contingent. It will depend on political institutions, as these moderate the sort of threat a political outgroup can pose, as well as an individual's relation to governing parties, as this matters for *which* norms they might care about. Second, the discussion on democratic resilience above shows that it is not straightforward which attitudes or behaviors 'democratic norms' prescribe in a particular case. This has important implications for the empirical field. Survey items capturing, say, the wish to restrict rights of political groups cannot be taken as a lack of such norms in all circumstances, as there are conceivably cases where citizens might legitimately withhold particular rights from opponents. Still, even allowing for this, there is a real danger that affective polarization introduces biases that make citizens perceive undue threats and hence lower the bar to declare a democratic emergency of this sort.

Counterarguments

Several counterarguments can be made against the account above. First, while the mechanisms are plausible, their impact *might, in practice, be limited* because democratic norms are subject to other considerations. In fact, as *norm*s, they should have some durability even in the face of heated political conflict. Broockman et al. (2022) and Voelkel et al. (2023a) suggest that interpersonal animosity is just one consideration and not a very relevant one for that matter when judging elites or abstract norms. Letting your antipathy toward those with different political identities get in the way of these political judgments comes at a cost (if only in the need to consistently apply norms), which might deter people from doing so. (In this respect, there is a difference with ideological polarization, which is about the content of policies and thus is directly relevant for cost-benefit analyses of adhering to democratic norms; Svolik, 2019; Graham & Svolik, 2020.) Hence, in the words of Voelkel et al. (2023b, p. 15), understanding whether the consequences of affective polarization travel beyond the interpersonal realm to those of democratic norms has important implications for 'understanding the psychology underlying polarization and democracy, with important implications for the design of interventions.' Moreover, the main driving force or norm erosion might be 'vertical' rather than 'horizontal' affective polarization. As discussed in Chapter 2 of this *Handbook*, one should be careful to equate hostility toward a politician or party with dislike toward those who support said party. The two are related but imperfectly so, and to different degrees for different people (see also Comellas Bonsfills, 2022; Areal & Harteveld, 2024). Hence, while disliking parties might translate into a call for reducing their rights, this is not necessarily joined by ill feelings towards the voters of these parties. This might, if anything, be a more indirect result.

Second, any relation that has been observed between 'horizontal' affective polarization and low adherence to democratic norms might be brought about by *confounding factors* – for instance, partisanship or political interest that might drive both affective polarization and a willingness to discard democratic norms. If so, the threat to democratic norms might be real enough, but attributing it to increasing negative sentiment between groups of politicians is not the most effective way to understand it (Wagner, 2024). Rather, the roots would lie in the increased identification of citizens with a political camp. This would call for both a different diagnosis and different solutions.

In addition, democratic norms might very well also be (partial) *causes rather than consequences* of affective polarization. Arguably, all else being equal, lackluster commitment to democratic ideals lowers the bar to develop ill feelings towards political opponents.

Conversely, one might reason that a firm commitment to democracy could involve a norm to 'agree to disagree', and hence not hold a grudge against fellow citizens for supporting an opposing political camp. A (cross-sectional) association between affective polarization and adherence to democratic norms can, thus, not on its own be taken as evidence that affective polarization erodes democratic norms. Disentangling them from 'true' causal effects of affective polarization is challenging empirically, although (as we will see below) issues of causal inference have received more attention recently.

POLITICAL INTOLERANCE, CONDONING ELITE TRANSGRESSION, AND (INSTRUMENTAL) DEMOCRATIC SUPPORT

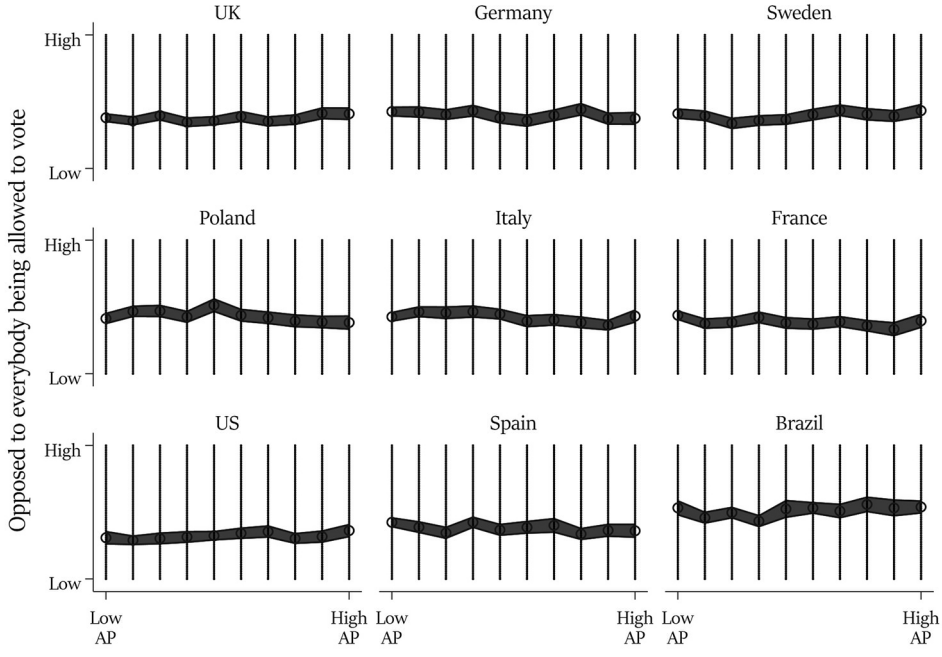
We will now discuss three more specific manifestations that have been most prominent in empirical studies: political intolerance, condoning of elite transgression, and (instrumentalized) democratic support. For each of these, we summarize what arguments and empirical evidence have been brought forward in previous studies, what other arguments could be made, and where possible, present descriptive data taken from the CONAP (Consequences of Affective Polarization) dataset.[1]

Political Intolerance

A first set of outcomes associated with democratic norms is denying or withholding democratic rights from opponents (on the elite or mass level). Graham and Svolik (2020) make a distinction between principled intolerance (rejection of such rights as such) and strategic intolerance (rejecting it only for one's opponents). As discussed above, the latter is the most likely to be stimulated by affective polarization by amplifying the perceived threat posed by the outgroup.

Kingzette et al. (2021) find that affectively polarized Republicans – who at the time tended to support the incumbent president, Donald Trump – were more likely to agree that 'some protests need to be prevented or stopped, even if they are completely peaceful,' while affectively polarized Democrats were less likely to think so than less-polarized Democrats. Hence, here too, they find evidence that affective polarization is associated with a politicization of norms. The CONAP data presented in Figures 26.1a and 26.1b show substantive variation between countries in the strength and shape of this relation. There is no consistent relationship with the more generally posed question that asks whether people who are very misinformed about basic political facts should not be allowed to vote. But affectively polarized respondents are generally more prone to want to disallow out-partisans to become teachers in schools and to campaign in their neighborhoods. However, it should be noted that the out-partisans that respondents are asked about are often supporters of rather extreme populist radical right parties, such as AfD in Germany and the Sweden Democrats in Sweden.

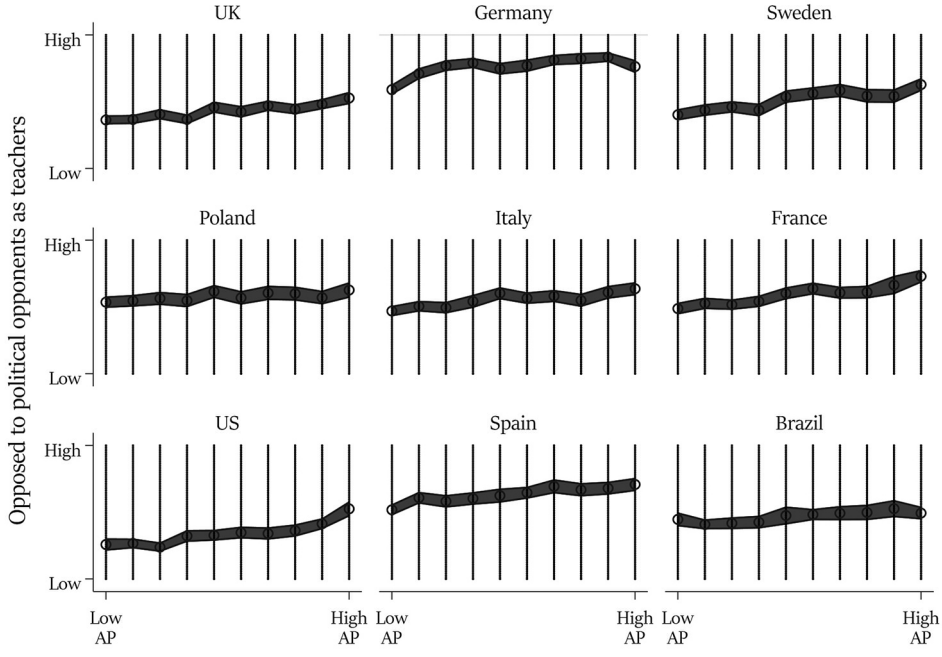
Leveraging a survey experiment in the same data, Harteveld et al. (2022) find that citizens in the depolarization condition became less likely to want to disallow out-partisans to become teachers and campaign in their neighborhood (in line with the study of Berntzen et al. [2023] on Norway and the UK.), whereas they do not find a corresponding effect on retracting voting rights for the disinformed. The right to vote might be a stronger norm than the rights to become a teacher and campaign freely, but it is also possible that the absence of an effect in



Source: Authors.

Figure 26.1a *Relation between affective polarization and intolerance: opposition to everybody being allowed to vote*

the case of voting can be explained by the fact that the question does not ask explicitly about out-partisans but the misinformed. It is possible that a blunter question would yield similar results to those found for the other norms. Regardless, the found effects strongly suggest that affective polarization increases support for selectively withholding democratic rights from political opponents. This finding contrasts with more optimistic recent studies from the US. Broockman et al. (2022) do, for example, find that depolarized citizens do not become less likely to want to ban out-partisans from holding political rallies in this country. The fact that the out-partisans that respondents were asked about outside the US often are supporters of rather extreme radical right parties may perhaps explain the differences in the effects. After all, it is more drastic to withhold the right to become a teacher or campaign for a supporter of the Republicans or the Democrats than to withhold the same rights for a supporter of an extreme and small party. In the former case, supporters almost encompass half the electorate, whereas in the latter they only constitute a small fraction of the electorate. This difference might both affect the (perceived) cost of withholding rights to out-partisans and how easy it is to think about the outgroup as extremists who threaten democracy.



Note: Item wordings are 'People should be allowed to vote even if they are very misinformed on basic facts about politics' and '[outparty] supporters should be allowed to become teachers at schools in my local area.' Affective polarization operationalized as Wagner's (2021) weighted spread measure, in deciles per country.
Source: Authors.

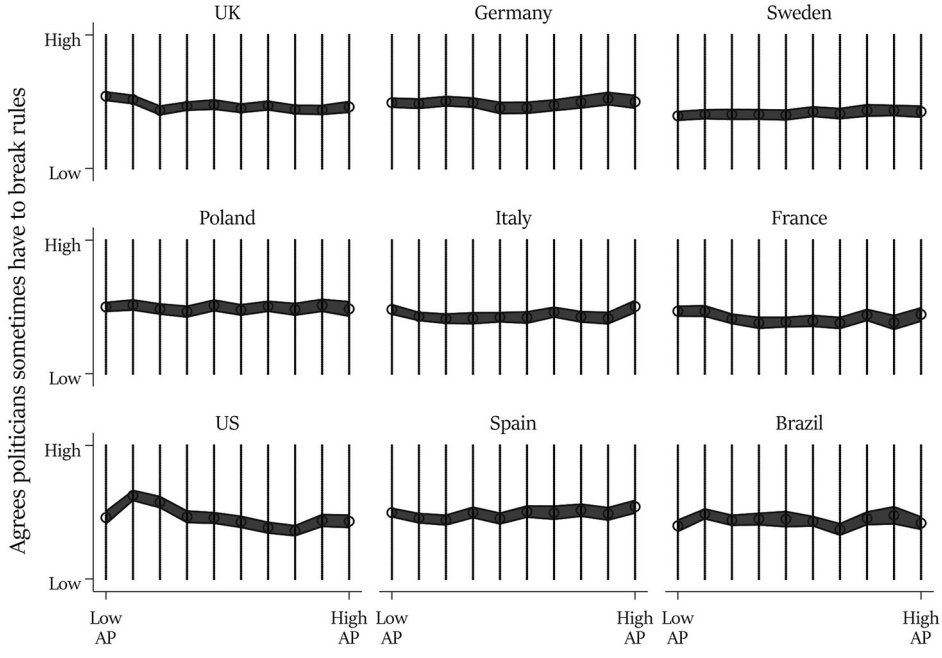
Figure 26.1b Relation between affective polarization and intolerance: opposition to political opponents as teachers

Condoning Elite Transgression

As noted above, allowing politicians to transgress democratic norms does not equal a lack of democratic norms, but the two are intertwined and therefore studied in tandem in most of the studies in this area. Kingzette et al. (2021) studied Americans' agreement with the statements that they 'do not mind a politician's methods if he or she manages to get the right things done' and '[when] the country is in great danger, it is often necessary for political leaders to act boldly, even if this means overstepping the usual processes of government decision-making.' They find that, rather than being reduced overall, support for such statements became more partisan among affectively polarized Americans: under Republican administrations, affectively polarized Republicans were more willing to agree, affectively polarized Democrats generally less so. The CONAP data has a more generally worded item (about inparty politicians 'breaking the rules' to prevent the outparty from getting what they want), which should

not be so dependent on incumbency status. Figure 26.2 shows that this CONAP item has a (if anything) positive but rather weak overall relationship with affective polarization in most countries.

Turning to experimental evidence from the US, Broockman et al. (2022) find that decreasing affective polarization does not affect support for elite transgressions, such as agreeing that inparty politicians should ignore outparty appointed judges and outparty dominated legislatures, prosecute journalists who accuse inparty politicians of misconduct without naming sources, or reduce the number of polling places in areas dominated by out-partisans. This null finding is repeated in Voelkel et al's (2023b) so-called 'megastudy,' which explored 25 depolarizing interventions. Those interventions that succeed in depolarizing respondents do not affect their support for elite transgressions, and those interventions that succeed in affecting support for elite transgressions do not depolarize respondents. Affective polarization and support for elite transgressions also load on two different factors.



Note: Item wording is '[Inparty] politicians sometimes have to break a few rules to prevent [outparty] politicians from getting what they want.' Affective polarization operationalized as Wagner's (2021) weighted spread measure, in deciles per country.
Source: Authors.

Figure 26.2 Relation between affective polarization and support for elite transgression

Outside the US, Harteveld et al. (2022) find no effect of depolarization on agreeing that politicians should sometimes break the rules in any of the contexts where they succeed in depolarizing respondents either. Together with the inconsistent bivariate correlation, this suggests that affective polarization does not (greatly) increase support for *overt* elite transgression, and that the latter might be shaped by quite different considerations. Possibly, this outcome is too socially undesirable to move along with a simple stimulus, and more subtle measurements of this outcome might still uncover such an effect. For instance, activities that are in the gray zone ('hardball') might be endorsed more often by affectively polarized citizens.

At the same time, Voelkel et al.'s (2023b) so-called 'megastudy' shows that strong depolarizing interventions do decrease willingness to support undemocratic candidates – that is, those who engage in elite transgressions of the abovementioned type. The null findings in previous research might thus also be a consequence of weak interventions. Plausibly, it should take a large change in out-partisan animosity to affect support for candidates who transgress the rules of the game. This might explain why Voelkel et al. (2023a) do not find an effect of depolarizing respondents on their support for undemocratic candidates. Still, the most likely explanation for the contrasting findings with other studies on the effect of affective polarization on elite transgressions is that Voelkel et al. (2023b) study support for undemocratic candidates rather than democratic norms per se.

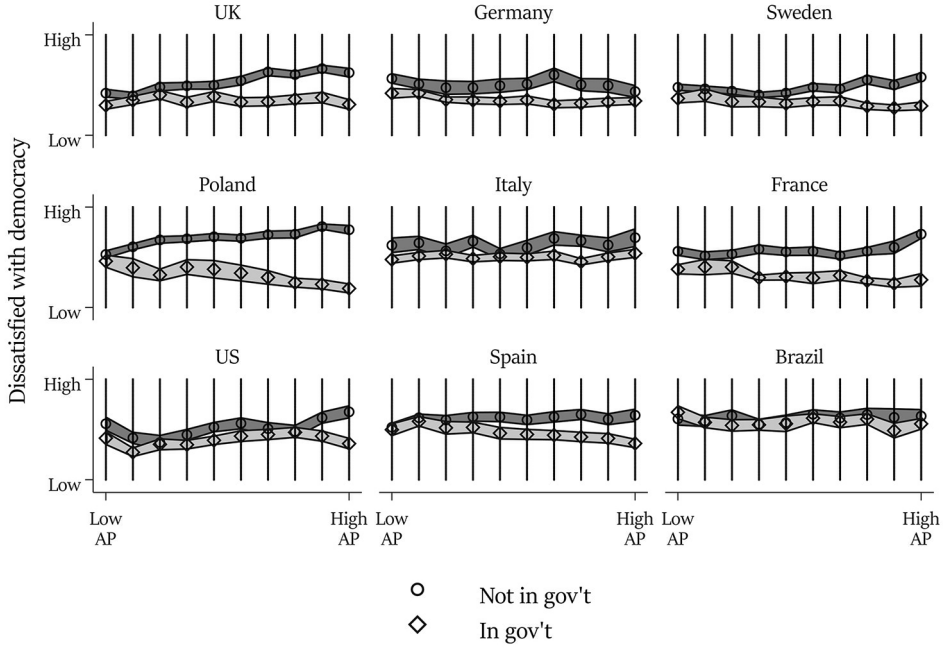
In short, depolarizing interventions do not affect direct explicit support for elite transgressions but do reduce support for candidates who engage in such transgressions when they run against candidates from the outparty (the transgressions are identical in both cases). In support of such a relationship, Frederiksen (2022) finds a strong positive correlation between disliking outparties and support for undemocratic candidates in the Czech Republic, Mexico, South Korea, the UK, and the US. Out-partisan animosity seemingly outweighs, or mitigate, concerns over inparty politicians' transgressions of democratic norms if the animosity is strong enough. This is not to say that citizens do not value democratic norms if they are affectively polarized – they still do. The costs of allowing the outparty candidate to win is just too high.

(Instrumental) Democratic Support

Finally, affective polarization might reduce citizens' satisfaction with, and ultimately reduce overt support for, the ideal of democracy. If democracy means sharing power with a deeply disliked group, its appeal might wane compared to alternatives that do not (say, technocracy or autocracy). While this is plausible, we are not aware of studies that link affective polarization to overt regime preference items. As a more indirect way to gauge democratic support, we therefore discuss evidence for an (admittedly imperfect) proxy.

Wagner (2021) reports a negative correlation between affective polarization and satisfaction with democracy. Of course, even prolonged dissatisfaction does not necessarily result in a loss of support for democracy. Still, it is relevant to explore the relation between affective polarization and satisfaction with democracy. First, it could be argued reversely that if studies were to find *no* correlation between affective polarization and satisfaction with democracy, this would make it less likely that democratic norms were to be eroded down the line. Moreover, as discussed above, studying satisfaction with democracy can provide an insight into the gradual 'instrumentalization' of citizens' democratic support. Janssen (2024) provides evidence from the UK that losing elections indeed has a stronger dampening effect on democratic satisfaction among those Brits who are more affectively polarized.

The CONAP data (reported in Figure 26.3) paints a similar picture (note that higher values refer to *dissatisfaction* with democracy). There is no, or only a very weak, *overall* relation between affective polarization and dissatisfaction with democracy. Indeed, Harteveld et al. [(2022)] find that depolarizing citizens does not make them more satisfied with democracy in any of the countries they study. However, this average pattern hides the fact that affective polarization does exacerbate the 'winner-loser gap' in most of the countries. In other words, in contexts of high levels of affective polarization, the stakes feel higher (as documented by Hernandez et al., 2021) and as a result, democratic satisfaction becomes more contingent on remaining on the winning end. Future research has to further assess whether this does, in the medium or long run, also erode support for democracy as such. Still, this is worryingly plausible. While the evidence that affective polarization directly erodes democratic norms is mixed, as discussed above, possibly because these norms are deeply rooted, it might be hard to sustain such norms among those who are affectively polarized *and* on the losingend for a prolonged period.



Note: dissatisfaction with democracy is measured by the item 'On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]?, answered in reverse from (0) 'Extremely satisfied' to (10) 'Extremely dissatisfied.' Government participation is based on formal incumbency or coalition inclusion at the time of data collection.
Source: Authors.

Figure 26.3 Dissatisfaction with democracy, by 'winners' (in gov't) and 'losers' (outside of gov't)

GAPS IN KNOWLEDGE AND AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As stated in the introduction, the relationship between affective polarization and democratic norms is more complicated than it might appear at first sight. Whether affective polarization can be said to 'erode' democratic norms depends, in our reading of theory and evidence, on the type of norm involved, the nature of the system, the democratic credentials of the outparty, and one's role as a 'winner' or 'loser' in a given electoral cycle. While this gives ground to reject undue alarmism, it is no reason for embracing affective polarization as harmless either. Rather, it is crucial to better understand these contingencies. This requires theoretical development as well as more empirical studies. Below, we outline what we think are important next steps for this field.

Other Regions and Systems

Evidence is so far restricted to the US, to some degree Western Europe, and only sparsely from other world regions. This is all the more problematic because the impact of affective polarization on democracy is likely contingent on political systems and political culture (Harteveld et al., 2022). In this chapter, we have, for example pointed to the fact that the characteristics of the most disliked out-partisan group vary considerably between countries. Proportional electoral systems nowadays frequently include (often relatively small) controversial parties whose supporters are disliked by a large proportion of the electorate, with populist radical right parties being the prime example. We generally tend not to find such parties in majoritarian electoral systems: in these cases, the out-partisan group constitutes almost half the electorate. It is reasonable to assume such differences in size to matter for how affective polarization affects democratic norms given the proposed mechanisms in the literature. It is potentially more costly to withhold democratic rights from half of the electorate than a small fraction of it, as size is correlated with the likelihood of winning elections.

If Broockman et al. (2022) are correct, and people consider the potential costs of allowing their dislike for the out-partisan group to impact how they reason about democratic norms, we should therefore expect affective polarization to affect democratic norms less in political systems in which the relevant outgroups are large. It might also be psychologically difficult to make the argument to oneself that the out-partisan group is so extreme that it warrants being intolerant to the intolerant if it constitutes half of the electorate, and by implication encompasses many friends, family members, and acquaintances. Both mechanisms can thus be interpreted to suggest that affective polarization should have a weaker effect on democratic norms in majoritarian systems such as the US than in multiparty systems, which highlights the problem of generalizing from US studies. Another factor that may be relevant is the degree of politicization of the administration. The more politicized the courts, bureaucracy, and other state institutions are, the more there is at stake when losing elections to the out-partisan group.

Concepts and Measurements

This chapter took a loose approach to the concept of democratic norms, as did most of the cited studies. However, this is obviously a complex phenomenon, highly contextual, and involving not only norms per se but also cognition, attitudes, and affect. For starters, additional subcategorizations beyond those presented before are possible and needed. There is

also a need to disentangle which of these are most relevant, and most likely to be affected by partisan animosity.

Voelkel et al. (2023a) do, for example, find that interventions that reduce partisan animosity do not improve democratic norms in general but do reduce support for undemocratic candidates who transgress them. Is it the fact that someone else is acting undemocratically and takes the responsibility it entails that makes the difference? Or do the costs of admitting defeat to the out-partisan group increase so much that democratic norms have to stand back, even if they are still considered important? The fact that only strong interventions affect the support for undemocratic candidates favors the second interpretation, but more research is needed.

One could even ask whether it matters that partisan animosity does not affect nominal support for democratic norms if it at the same time increases support for candidates that break those very democratic norms. The latter effect is probably the more interesting for real-world politics, as it is at the ballot box where the fate of established democracies is decided (Orhan, 2022). Many recent studies on democratic erosion indeedfocus on support for candidates who break democratic norms, rather than support for the norms themselves (e.g., Svolik, 2019; Krishnarajan, 2023). Krishnarajan (2023) even provides evidence that people change their definitions of democracy to justify their preferred candidate's behavior. Thus, asking about theoretical support for democratic norms may not capture the phenomena we are interested in. Rather, we should focus on real-world situations in which there is a tradeoff between democratic norms and partisan animosity. People might still cherish democratic norms, even though they allow their feelings toward out-partisans to override them.

Mechanisms

Why does affective polarization impact democratic norms (if at all)? Above, we discussed the 'threat' and 'politicization' mechanisms. These can be disentangled to some degree because they imply different sorts of norms to be impacted among different groups. Still, a test of these mechanisms (and possibly others) would require careful studies that directly measure or manipulate these factors. For instance, by adding perceived threat measures or by gauging how strategic and selective citizens are in applying norms. The same is true for possible reverse mechanisms. Do democratic norms shield citizens from becoming affectively polarized? If not, should they? It is also true for the suggested counter mechanisms. If citizens really care about the potential costs of allowing their outparty animosity to affect democratic norms, it should be possible to test this by manipulating their perceptions of the costs.

Normative Assessment

As a final point, we argue that more empirical and theoretical work is needed to gauge the ways in which affective polarization can not only erode but also strengthen democracies. Democratic norms in the abstract are universally deemed important by scholars, and hence possible erosion through affective polarization is worthy of study. However, when delving into the specifics of cases, the situation becomes less clear-cut, and survey items often fall short of uncovering the required nuance. As discussed above, it is not exactly clear what approach democratic norms prescribe when dealing with illiberal or undemocratic actors. Complacency with their rise might arguably be more problematic from a democratic perspective than heated contestation. Indeed, populist and radical parties are the object of unique

negative effect (Harteveld et al., 2022), and the heat they receive is strongest from those who are most committed to democracy (Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2021). Seen in this way, affective polarization might add guardrails to democracy by energizing citizens in the defense of democracy. At the same time, by increasing our perceptions of threat, affective polarization might lead *all* camps to project undemocratic behavior on their opponents. Adding this nuanced and dynamic perspective would help to arrive at a more nuanced picture of the complicated relation between affective polarization and democracy.

NOTE

1. See https://osf.io/z59rd/?view_only=6c2417499fe346359ab9c002268528ad.

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