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19. Populism and affective polarization

Nayantara Ranganatha, Dániel Komáromy and Matthijs Rooduijn

INTRODUCTION

In his seminal article ‘The Populist Zeitgeist’, Cas Mudde notes that liberal democracies are not destined to ‘stay populist forever,’ but that the dynamic of populism is episodic.

When explicitly populist outsider groups gain prominence, part of the establishment will react by a combined strategy of exclusion and inclusion; while trying to exclude the populist actor(s) from political power, they will include populist themes and rhetoric to try and fight off the challenge. This dynamic will bring about a populist Zeitgeist, like the one we are facing today, which will dissipate as soon as the populist challenger seems to be over the top. (Mudde, 2004, p. 563)

Populism is no less of a hot topic today than it was in 2004, when Mudde captured the dynamic (and ‘episodic’) place of populism in liberal democracies (Mudde, 2004). The concept was contested in much of the early literature, but Mudde’s ideational definition has become most widely used in contemporary scholarship. It defines populism as ‘an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde, 2004). At the core of this thin ideology is thus a Manichean or antagonistic relationship between the ‘good people’ and the ‘evil elite,’ resulting in two necessary sub-dimensions: people-centrism and anti-elitism (Rooduijn, 2019).

The dynamic that Mudde describes in his article, where mainstream parties react to populists with similar rhetoric, is one that has captured the attention of burgeoning literature at the intersection of populism and affective polarization. Research on affective polarization has experienced a ‘boom’ in recent years, comparable to that experienced by the populism literature in the past. Increased interest in combining these fields may be due to the exceptional positioning of populist parties. McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018) and Pappas (2019), amongst others, have noted that the populist’s Manichean division of the ‘good’ people versus the ‘corrupt’ elite shares a common pattern with the ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ logic that underpins affective polarization. Several scholars have examined to what extent there exists an affective partisan space that is structured along a new ‘populism vs. anti-populism’ dimension (Moffitt, 2018; Stavrakakis, 2014, 2018), whereas others have studied the presence of populist leadership, parties, and movements, and their relationships with the growth (or decline) of affective polarization (Fuller et al., 2022; Hartevelde, 2021).

We argue that, conceptually, populism and affective polarization are underpinned by a similar antagonism. In this chapter, we review recent explorations of how the two concepts are interconnected. First, we provide an overview of research that aims to study the relationship between populism and affective polarization, driven by the assumption that the former

precedes the latter. Then, we explore related concepts, including the role of nativism, similarities to negative partisanship, and efforts to study the polarizing effects of populist political communication. We review the sparse literature on populism as a *consequence* of affective polarization and, finally, propose several avenues for future research.

POPULISM AND AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

Early contributions to the literature on populism and affective polarization highlight two important themes. McCoy et al. (2018) note that a common ‘Us’ vs. ‘Them’ pattern underpins polarized politics around the world, noting that the mobilization of an electorate around new cleavages may be difficult to capture with the traditional left-right dimension. Initial efforts at the cross-fertilization of the two disciplines share the observation that polarization, and the dualistic divide that comes with it, appears to be inherent and conceptually similar to the concept of populism. In parallel, Moffitt (2018), Stavrakakis (2014), and Zanotti (2021) note that the rise of populism has been followed by the growth of ‘anti-populism’, and the gradual reorganization of parties and voters along a new ‘populism vs. anti-populism’ dimension. Tracing the emergence of this new cleavage to the collapse of traditional linkages between parties and voters, Zanotti (2021, p. 2) notes that ‘partisan politics cannot be fully understood without considering all the dimensions of the political space.’ These ideas set the groundwork for several empirical contributions in the field. While Harteveld, Mendoza, and Rooduijn (2022) focus on the populist radical right (PRR), Fuller et al. (2022) and Bantel (2023) directly study the extent to which the ‘populism vs. anti-populism’ dimension makes up affective polarization amongst voters in different European democracies.

Harteveld et al. (2022) are among the first to empirically study whether PRR parties fuel affective polarization and focus on the mechanism by which a PRR ‘exceptionalism’ ties PRR parties to ‘unusual degrees of affective polarization’ (p. 704). They highlight that PRR supporters are uniquely situated in ‘the affective political landscape’ (idem: p. 705) because they homogeneously harbor negative affect about mainstream parties and their supporters, and because they attract similar evaluations from (supporters of) mainstream parties. The mechanism confirmed by the findings is that PRR parties introduce a double in-group-out-group logic. Both espouse populist and nativist elements characterized by a Manichean struggle between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ in the case of populism, and natives versus non-natives in the case of nativism. The moral struggle inherent to this form of in-group and out-group thinking is translated into the narratives and messages of party elites and supporters, resulting in equally strong affective reactions from mainstream parties. The authors highlight the role of nativism in this double in-group-out-group thinking by comparing PRR parties to populist radical left (PRL) parties, which do not share the nativist element and show less extreme levels of dislike. The strength of in-group-out-group thinking in the ideology and narratives of the PRR party is thus centered as the mechanism through which the presence of parties increases affective polarization.

Fuller et al. (2022) consider the growing scholarship about a ‘populist vs. anti-populist’ divide and note the asymmetric dislike that PRR parties both receive and espouse. They explore whether voters’ intense dislike for some parties, as opposed to their ambivalence or great liking of others, is increasingly determined by their identification along a new ‘populist vs. anti-populist’ dimension. If voters’ affective ratings of parties were determined by the

traditional ‘left vs. right’ dimension, PRL partisans would be expected to rate non-populist left-wing parties more favorably than PRR parties. Fuller et al. suggest that the affective partisan space may be structured along two dimensions: the traditional ‘left vs. right’ dimension. In practice, this could mean that PRR parties receive far greater dislike from mainstream right voters while these voters show greater openness to the mainstream left, despite some shared policy preferences with the former and differences with the latter. Fuller et al. ask participants to rate their affect towards parties across the spectrum and employ multidimensional scaling to map parties on a two-dimensional affective partisan space. Their findings confirm that the mapping, or positioning, of parties on the affective partisan space is ‘strongly related’ to both the parties’ varying degrees of populism (their position on the ‘populist vs. anti-populist’ dimension) as well as their position on the traditional left-right position. These findings provide important support for how populist parties on the left and the right may shape, or re-shape, voters’ affective ratings, or *likes* and *dislikes*, of parties across the spectrum.

Stefanelli (2023) examines whether populist *attitudes* are related to affective polarization amongst Republicans and Democrats in the United States (US). He finds that populist attitudes are linked to more extreme policy positions, but not with significant negative party affect. The author then separates Democratic and Republican respondents to understand whether the association varies across partisan groups. He finds that the association between populism and ideological extremism is far stronger for Democratic than for Republican voters, while the reverse is true for the relationship between populist attitudes and affective polarization. Among Republicans, higher levels of populist attitudes are associated with more negative perceptions of out-party leaders. While Fuller et al. (2022) and Bantel (2023) find variations in the association between populism and affective polarization *between* countries, Stefanelli finds that the strength of the relationship is also dependent on the parties in question.

These early attempts to study populism and affective polarization vary considerably in how they measure the concept. While Stefanelli (2023) focuses on populist attitudes in individuals (voters), Hartevelde et al. (2022) study *supporters* of populist and mainstream parties. Fuller et al. (2022), on the other hand, compare degrees of populism in parties at the country level. Some recent research has made an effort to understand how these different measurements compare in their relationship to affective polarization.

For example, Davis, Goodliffe, and Hawkins’ (2024) cross-regional analysis of 53 countries differentiates between an individual’s support for populist parties, the ‘degree’ of populism of each party, and the weighted average of all parties’ ‘degrees’ of populism at the country level. Their analysis confirms that individual-level support for populist parties is correlated with greater affective polarization. Interestingly, they find that both populist and non-populist individuals tend to be more affectively polarized when the degree of populism for the country in question is greater. On the other hand, Pérez-Rajó’s (2024) analysis of a Spanish panel survey measures individual-level populist attitudes and individual’s identification with populist parties. The findings suggest that populist attitudes are correlated with greater affective polarization, including more positive feelings towards the in-group as well as more negative feelings towards the out-group. Interestingly, there is a conditional effect of an individual’s identification with a populist party on their affective polarization. Supporters of the left-wing party Podemos appear to experience an immediate and short-term increase in affective polarization, whereas supporting the right-wing party Vox seems to have an immediate negative impact on affective polarization.

Stefanelli and Castanho Silva (n.d.) draw on survey data from 25 elections across 21 countries to compare populist attitudes and individual populist party voting. They identify a curvilinear effect of populist attitudes on affective polarization, where individuals scoring on the lower and higher ends of the populist attitude scale are more affectively polarized than those with average levels of populist attitudes. These findings support the authors' 'backlash hypothesis,' which considers that the presence of populism evokes 'anti-populist' backlash amongst mainstream voters. This proposed mechanism echoes the contributions of Hartevelde et al. (2022), Fuller et al. (2022), and several other publications reviewed in this chapter, which suggest that both populists and non-populists are involved in restructuring electoral competition along a new populist dimension. Most importantly, they note that populist attitudes alone do not explain a 'substantial amount of variance' in affective polarization (idem, p. 14), and find the differences in affective polarization between mainstream and populist radical right party voters are only marginal in most countries studied. In sum, this is one contribution to a growing literature about voting along the new 'populist vs. non-populist' axis. It provides greater insight into the nuanced relationships between populist attitudes, identification with populist parties, and affective polarization across different countries.

INSIGHTS FROM ADJACENT FIELDS

Thus far, we have outlined research that sets out to study populism and affective polarization most directly. In the next sections, we will explore some adjacent concepts that provide greater insight into potential avenues for research.

Populism or Nativism?

Populism often gets conflated with nativism (De Cleen et al., 2018; Rooduijn, 2019). Whereas populism concerns the antagonistic relationship between the 'good' people and the 'evil' elite, nativism constructs the nation as the in-group and non-native 'dangerous others' as the out-group (Mudde, 2007). We have discussed several studies that single out the role of PRR parties in affectively polarizing mainstream voters, and vice versa (see Bantel, 2023; Hartevelde et al., 2022) – so-called 'PRR exceptionalism' (Gidron et al., 2020; Hartevelde et al., 2022). This raises an important question: is it populism or nativism that fuels this affective divide? Hartevelde (2021) suggest that the double in-group and out-group logic underpinning both populism and nativism leads PRR parties to be uniquely positioned in the partisan space and strengthens their tendency to organize voters in line with an 'Us' versus 'Them' mindset. They highlight that PRR voters have a greater tendency to moralize politics. Additionally, nativist parties may receive additional dislike from mainstream parties due to the stigma attached to their rhetoric and stances (Hartevelde et al., 2019).

Parallely, some studies examine the tendency for PRR voters to exhibit greater dislike for mainstream issues based on the basis of the preferences underlying their nativism. Renström, Bäck, and Carroll (2022) draw on intergroup threat theory (see Stephan et al., 2009) to argue that individuals with right-wing authoritarian (RWA) traits are more likely to find issues related to immigration threatening to their in-group. This perceived threat is hypothesized to increase intergroup distancing and affective polarization. Note that PRR parties, populism, or

nativism are not explicitly identified in this argument, which is focused on immigration and affective polarization.

Reiljan and Ryan (2021) examine the ‘tripolar affective structure’ of the Swedish electoral landscape, where the multiparty system is divided into two moderately polarized mainstream blocs and one ‘asymmetrically polarized’ PRR party. They find that affective polarization along the left-right spectrum is driven by socioeconomic positions, while the polarization between the PRR Sweden Democrats and the mainstream is largely due to cultural issues, particularly immigration. Other studies that touch upon nativism and affective polarization can largely be divided into examinations of the role of threats and emotions (Renström et al., 2022), and contributions (predominantly from the US) that focus on anti-immigrant and xenophobic discourse (Simonsen & Bonikowski, 2022).

Finally, recent experimental research stresses the need to study the relative effects of voters’ populist attitudes and rhetoric as opposed to issue-based policy voting as drivers of vote choice. This research is relevant to assess the significance of the relationship between populism and affective polarization, because it reconsiders the extent to which populism, removed from its host ideology, is a driver of vote choice. Most observational studies thus far have suggested that a combination of policy voting and populism, the latter defined by its core components of anti-elitism, people-centrism, and anti-pluralism, drives support for populist parties and candidates. However, conjoint survey experiments conducted by Neuner and Wratil (2022) in Germany, Dai and Kustov (2022), and Silva et al. (2023) find that policy voting on immigration issues, especially when party-congruent, is a consistently stronger driver of populist voting.

The suggestion that policy voting on immigration issues is a more significant driver of support for PRR parties, rather than the party’s purely populist elements, as scholars consider to what extent the asymmetric affective polarization of PRR parties from other parties is a result of their exclusionary ideologies and rhetoric they espouse towards outgroups (Rooduijn et al., 2021). Rooduijn (2016: 317) notes that a little bit of populism can act as a force for good by recognizing discontent and broadening the political agenda.’ But current right-wing populists go further: they infuse their populism with nativism, which argues that the nation is being threatened by ‘dangerous others’. In a similar vein, Howse’s (2019) critique of anti-populism refers to the new ‘populism vs. anti-populism’ dimension but suggests that anti-populists conflate populism with nativism when they denounce it for its illiberal elements. In this regard, the main takeaway is that more research is needed to disentangle the role of nativism and populism. Specifically, research should focus on the antagonistic divide between natives and non-natives, rather than just anti-immigrant attitudes among PRR voters, to understand the extent to which populism, at its core, is affectively polarizing.

Negative Partisanship

We have frequently spoken about the growing prominence of a new ‘populism versus anti-populism’ cleavage throughout this chapter. When it comes to studying the relationship between populism and affective polarization, scholars appear to focus on one of two themes: the growing prominence of this new divide (Fuller et al., 2022; Moffitt, 2018; Stavrakakis, 2014), and the asymmetric polarization exhibited by and towards PRR parties, termed ‘PRR exceptionalism’ (Harteveld, 2021). Research on negative partisanship and affective polarization is covered thoroughly in Chapter 12 in this *Handbook*. It may allow us to conceptualize

the populist and anti-populist camps and understand the restructuring of electoral competition along this new axis with greater specificity.

Meléndez and Kaltwasser (2021) and Bjånesøy (2023) employ the concept of negative partisanship to describe how the presence of PRR parties appears to foster a decided dislike for PRR parties among mainstream voters. Negative partisanship has been defined as out-party hostility, which does not require the similar degree of in-party favoritism denoted by the concept of affective polarization (Bankert, 2021; Bankert, 2023). On the one hand, this conceptual difference means that negative partisanship does not contain both elements that form the Manichean antagonistic divide between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’, which binds populism and affective polarization. On the other hand, the widely documented separation of the electoral space between populist and anti-populist blocs (Moffitt, 2018; Stavrakakis, 2014; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2019), or between radical and mainstream camps (Bankert, 2021; Stefanelli, 2023), is captured well by the concept of negative partisanship. It describes a dislike so extreme amongst mainstream parties that voting for the populist bloc becomes unimaginable, while similar feelings develop amongst populist voters towards mainstream parties and candidates. The literature on negative partisanship uses a combination of feeling thermometer questions and more ‘pointed’ questions that directly assess the respondent’s likelihood to vote for the party or bloc in question. However, even when feeling thermometer questions are included, the main aim is to measure out-party dislike (and not in-party like) (Bjånesøy, 2023). The literature on negative partisanship may provide a vocabulary through which the new ‘populism versus anti-populism’ dimension can be linked to adjacent concepts in the literature on affective polarization.

Populist Communication and Affective Polarization

While the publications reviewed thus far examine the association between populism and affective polarization using observational data, recent contributions in the field of political communication attempt to understand affective polarization as a process and to analyze the messages that are theorized to affectively polarize publics. Chapter 20 of this *Handbook* explores the relationship between political elite communication and affective polarization in greater detail, but there is a notable subset of this literature that focuses on the effects of *populist* political communication. Some of this scholarship explores how populist messaging primes its receivers to polarizing ideas by highlighting that the in-group is not represented by the elite (anti-elitism) and that the will of the ‘people’ should be prioritized in political decision-making (people-centrism) (Hameleers & Fawzi, 2020).

A parallel set of literature focuses on emotional appeals and narratives within populist messaging. Versteegen (2022) conducted a thematic analysis of interviews with PRR voters and argues that PRR partisans fuel affective polarization by using emotional narratives to favor their in-group and ascribe undesirable emotions towards their out-group. Versteegen’s study offers an in-depth examination of the process by which the negative emotions that underpin affective polarization are produced. The tendency to assume that affective polarization ‘happens’ to voters is rebutted by highlighting that PRR partisans transmit their dislike towards supporters of opposing parties through normatively positive or negative emotional narratives. Similarly, Nai and Maier (2024)’s experimental evidence reaffirms that populist messaging increases affective polarization. Notably, this association is moderated by individuals’

populist attitudes, as populist individuals seem to ‘like’ negative campaign messages more and also exhibit greater affective polarization.

In other words, research on populist communication is particularly relevant because it explores some of the mechanisms by which populist rhetoric and messaging are transmitted to the public, allows us to better draw connections to shared ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ dynamics, and consequently understand how they affectively polarize voters.

Electoral Success and Government Participation

Some studies examine contextual factors as moderators of the relationship between populism and affective polarization – specifically the electoral success of populist parties and their government participation. Hartevelde et al. (2022) outline two different lines of reasoning. First, supporters of mainstream parties could perceive the electoral success and government participation of PRR parties as threatening, heightening negative affect towards PRR groups. Second, and in contrast, electoral support and inclusion into coalitions could make PRR parties more politically acceptable, thereby reducing affective polarization between PRR and mainstream parties.

Findings regarding these contextual moderators are mixed. Hartevelde et al. (2022) find that electoral success increases the sympathy that PRR parties receive from mainstream voters (idem: 705), while government participation through inclusion into coalitions reduces sympathy, presumably through increased perceptions of threat. Bantel (2023), on the other hand, finds that the effect of the radical right divide on affective polarization – measured by a radical right partisan rating a non-radical right partisan or vice versa – becomes more pronounced as radical right parties gain electoral success. The effect of the radical left holds less broadly across countries but is believed to grow more important as the electoral success of the party increases. Additionally, Bantel’s study finds that affective polarization cuts across parties. Voters establish regions of “policy acceptability” within which they allow themselves to move. Polarization thus appears to be more about political identity than tribalism and partisanship.

Affective Polarization as a Driver of Populism

Many of the studies on the relationship between populism and/or nativism implicitly assume or explicitly argue that populism and/or nativism determine the degree of affective polarization. Interestingly, views on reverse causality are less common. Studies that *do* touch upon the role of affective polarization as a driver of populism provide conflicting arguments. Stefanelli (2023, p. 9) states that the results from his study do not provide a ‘basis for strong causal claims,’ acknowledging that affectively polarized partisans could be more easily roped in by populist narratives. This would support the idea that affectively polarized societies are more prone to give way to populist leadership. In contrast, Bantel (2023) sees it as unlikely that a long-term process of parties clustering (where one of the clusters would represent the radical right and another the radical left) could be driven by citizens’ dislike for supporters of opposing parties. He argues that such reverse causality would require ideological differences to result from affective polarization, implicitly questioning the cause of affective polarization in this scenario.

Considerations of reverse causality find sparse support in the literature. McCoy and Somer (2019) attribute pernicious polarization to the divisive messages and polarizing tactics of

‘political entrepreneurs,’ although they do not lean heavily on the concept of populism. The underlying idea in their contribution is that political leaders fuel polarization between political blocs, leading to a dangerous societal split between ‘us vs. them’ camps, which, in turn, threatens democracies and allows undemocratic leaders to flourish.

A final set of studies skirts around the concept of affective polarization and examines the effects of negative affect (mostly anger) on populism (Jost, 2019; Rico et al., 2017; Salmela & Von Scheve, 2017; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019; Ward et al., 2023). It is plausible that the anger present in societies that are affectively polarized increases the demand for populist leadership. However, the jump from negative affect as an individual or general sentiment to affective polarization between two (or several) groups or blocs is large. Studying this relationship also requires us to better understand how affective polarization at the individual level compares to measurements at the group level. In other words, there is little scholarship that directly studies whether affectively polarized publics are more likely to give root to populist beliefs and support.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Diversity in Cases

Research on populism and affective polarization has, for the most part, either focused on the two-party system in the US, or examined affective polarization between ‘blocs’ or ‘camps’ (Bantel, 2023, pp. 1–2) in the European multiparty context. Hence, the main contextual difference that hitherto has been considered is the nature of the party system. Departing from a different perspective, Hameleers and Fawzi (2020) study the effect of populist communication across three different clusters of European countries: Southern, Eastern, and Western Europe. Interestingly, they find significant variation, which they attribute to country-level opportunity structures. They argue that populist cues are more likely to activate attitudes and stereotypes towards immigrants, elites, or out-partisans when these cues resonate with regional grievances and experiences (Hameleers & Fawzi, 2020, p. 616). Specifically, the authors highlight that varying levels of unemployment, immigration, or experiences in the recent economic recession could shape the effects of populist communication on affective polarization. They find that populist communication can directly affect anti-elite and anti-immigrant stereotypes in Western Europe, which could be explained by the greater salience of both cues in the Western European political discourse compared to Southern and Eastern Europe. Indeed, anti-immigration cues are far less prominent in Eastern European countries, whereas the experiences of Greece and Spain in recent recessions may explain far greater anti-elitist cues and successful left-wing populist parties. Hameleers and Fawzi (2020) are not the only ones to highlight variation between countries. Bantel (2023, p. 6) finds that the radical right divide contributes significantly to affective polarization in countries with large radical-right parties, whereas the radical left is a significant contributor only in Ireland, Spain, and Greece.

The main takeaway is that there is a need for further research on these contextual differences. For one, this means research on regional differences *within* Europe to build on trends among the few empirical studies that currently constitute research at the intersection of populism and affective polarization (Bantel, 2023; Fuller et al., 2022; Hameleers & Fawzi, 2020). Furthermore, considerable attention needs to be paid to regions *beyond* Europe. Chapters 9

and 10 in this *Handbook* highlight characteristics specific to affective polarization in Latin American and (Southeast) Asian countries. In Southeast Asia, this includes more personalistic regimes. Research on Latin America, on the other hand, has highlighted the region's weak party system institutionalization (Segovia, 2022). These contextual differences could contribute significantly to our understanding of how populist parties reorganize the affective landscape. One example is a recent article by Torcal and Carty (2023), which argues that the identity conflict underpinning 'la grieta,' or the cleavage central to affective polarization in Argentina, is informed more by the 'Peronism/justicialism vs. anti-Peronism/anti-justicialism' divide than the traditional left-right ideological conflict. The Argentinian case, as presented in Torcal's article, exemplifies the growing prominence of the 'populism vs. anti-populism' cleavage that Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2019) and Moffitt (2018) highlight. However, nativism appears to be less relevant to Argentinian populism than the memories of the early Peronist movement and the conflicts and narratives that have built on this conflict since. Similar cases across Latin America, as well as the regional specificities of Asian populists, provide ample incentive to diversify the cases studied within the field.

What about the Radical Left?

The literature thus far has found the PRR to be more affectively polarized than the PRL (Harteveld et al., 2022). In studies focusing on Europe, the PRL divide is usually only significant in Spain (due to Podemos), in Greece (due to Syriza), and, when included, in Ireland (due to Sinn Féin) (Bantel, 2023, p. 6). In the American context, Stefanelli (2023) found that the association between populism, ideological extremism, and affective polarization was conditional on partisanship. Republican supporters of right-wing populist candidates were on average more affectively polarized, whereas Democratic supporters of a left-wing populist candidate held more ideologically extreme views. This trend finds further evidence in the literature on the stigmatization effect (Bolin et al., 2023), the tripolar party structure in Sweden, and the concept of a 'cordon sanitaire' that alienates mainstream parties from the populist radical right in several European countries (Reiljan & Ryan, 2021).

This raises the following question: To what extent is the widely referenced 'populism vs. anti-populism' dimension in reality a 'PRR vs. anti-PRR' dimension? An alternative possibility is that the narrow geographic diversity of the countries studied so far, and the emphasis on studying immigration attitudes, have 'preemptively' filtered out cases of populist left parties exacerbating affective polarization. The belief that PRR parties are more significant contributors to affective polarization consequently reinforces a focus on anti-immigration attitudes and measures targeting nativism in future research. We recommend paying closer attention to the PRL by itself. This means supplementing existing affective polarization studies that pit the PRL against the PRR with research that focuses on the dislike it expresses and receives across a variety of cases.

Looking Beyond Immigration

One reason for the lack of significant effects among (populist) radical left parties could be the focus on immigration issues. As a result of the widespread focus on cultural issues as drivers of affective polarization, many studies examine the link between immigration and affective polarization (see Renström et al., 2022). In the case of populist communication research, this

means that immigration issues are often made salient in the populist messages presented to participants. Hameleers and Fawzi (2020, p. 618) note that country-level opportunity structures, including ‘unemployment, immigration or the severity of the recent economic recession,’ shape the effects of populist communication on affective polarization. Anti-immigration discourse is, for example, less prominent in Eastern Europe than in Western or Southern Europe. Making socioeconomic issues more salient in future studies could capture populist parties that do not satisfy all the conditions of the PRR but construct similar ‘us vs. them’ antagonisms.

Bantel (2023, p. 9) recognizes that the radical left’s limited electoral success could be one reason for the lack of an affective divide on this side of the political spectrum but suggests that the politicization of the economic dimension could change this. The literature on Latin American left-leaning populism is relevant in this regard because partisanship and political identities extend beyond existing mainstream parties and are associated with histories of dictatorship, protest movements, and economic reform.

Disentangling Measurements of Populism and Affective Polarization

It is important to recognize that the studies reviewed in this chapter vary greatly in how they conceptualize and measure populism and affective polarization. Thus, they differ in the precise questions they set out to answer. It is worth asking what we mean when we talk about populism. Is one interested in populism among parties or voters? Is one interested in support for populism at the individual or country level? Does one conceive of populism as a matter-of-degree (continuous) phenomenon or an either-or (dichotomous) category? Some of the research reviewed in this chapter focuses on individuals’ support for populist parties (Harteveld et al., 2022), while some others measure individual populist attitudes (Stefanelli, 2023) or the party’s degree of populism (Fuller et al., 2022).

A similar variety in conceptualizations and measurements is true for the literature on affective polarization. For one, one can broadly distinguish between individual and aggregate-level affective polarization. Individuals express a certain degree of in- and out-group affect which is generally measured either by the ‘average absolute party like-dislike difference relative to each respondent’s average party like-dislike score’ (*spread*; Wagner, 2021, p. 4) or by the difference between the highest affect one assigns to a party and the mean score of the other parties (*distance*; idem). Aggregate-level polarization is usually measured by a weighted average of individual scores and captures the average level of affective polarization in a political system. Chapters 2 and 4 cover the debates on the measurements of affective polarization in greater detail.

Here we want to reinforce the warning that conflating or confusing concepts and measurements makes it difficult to compare studies and to accumulate knowledge. Scholars run the double-edged risk of: (1) missing and therefore neglecting relevant studies that employ slightly different terms, and (2) too uncritically building on existing studies that use similar terms but in reality study different phenomena. To disentangle the various measurements and approaches to studying these concepts, future research should separate these concepts, be precise about what it intends to measure, and clearly distinguish its aims and measurements from the research it includes in its literature review. Additionally, we encourage scholars to draw on existing research and explore how different types of affective polarization differ from one another, and in their relationship to populism and political attitudes.

Earlier sections in this chapter highlight recent research that has made this effort. Davis et al. (2024), Pérez-Rajó (2024), and Stefanelli and Castanho Silva (n.d.) distinguish between individual populist attitudes, populist party identification, a party's 'degree' of populism, and country-level averages as measures of populism. They serve as great examples of how future research can be precise in its measurement of these concepts, and can thereby draw on research that, in reality measures several different phenomena while simultaneously building greater clarity in the literature.

Two Sides of the Same Coin?

In this chapter, we have examined the literature on the relationship between affective polarization and populism. The focus of virtually all studies we have examined here is on the extent to which these two separate phenomena are related. However, one interesting and important question has not been touched upon yet: To what extent are affective polarization and populism similar concepts? A relatively new thread of literature suggests that populist attitudes alone have limited power in explaining contemporary political processes (Arceneaux et al., 2020; Petersen et al., 2023; Petersen et al., n.d.; Uscinski et al., 2021). These studies suggest that we should employ a broader concept of what might be termed the 'anti-establishment mind.' This general concept would capture extreme political discontent, correlated with conspiratorial, populist, and Manichean orientations, and several antisocial psychological traits. It would also encompass behaviors like sharing and consuming mis- and disinformation about out-groups, the acceptance of political violence against them, and extreme affective polarization. This approach would emphasize that both affective polarization and populism are specific manifestations of a more general in-group/out-group mindset: A mindset that considers in-group love and out-group hate as the main drivers of societal reality. This implies that both are highly moralized, Manichean worldviews that emphasize the homogeneity of both the in-group and the out-group and evoke strong affective responses. This mindset can cover many other in-groups and out-groups. For instance, Hobolt et al. (2021) argue and demonstrate that publics can also be divided over opinion-based rather than partisan groups (or, as we added, elite-versus-people constructs). They examine Brexit-related identities in the UK and show how being in favor or against Brexit is a sociopolitical dividing line that can be just as salient and consequential as the standard Labour-Tory divide.

Of course, there are differences between populism and affective polarization too. In a large majority of the studies, affective polarization concerns the relationship between one's in-party and their out-party or out-parties. In other words, the focus is on (blocs of) political parties, leaders, and their supporters. Populism, on the other hand, examines the relationship between two other constructs: 'the people' versus 'the elite.' 'The people' is a much broader construct than someone's in-party, and also 'the elite' is a more general term that extends beyond someone's out-party or out-parties only. It is important to emphasize, however, that this difference might be less clear-cut than it seems.

Another difference between affective polarization and populism is one of symmetry, and this has important implications at the aggregate level. The more people are affectively polarized at the individual level (i.e., the more people love their in-party or the opinion-based group they identify with and hate their out-party, out-parties, or other group(s) they do not identify with), the more a society will also be divided at the aggregate level. Populism, on the other hand, is more of a one-way street. The more individuals love 'the people' and hate 'the elite',

the more populism there is at the aggregate level. But populism is *not* about the feelings the other way around; populism does not concern the feelings of ‘the elite’ towards ‘the people’. In other words, populism is affectively asymmetric. Hence, at the aggregate level, affective polarization leads to polarization by definition, whereas this is not the case for populism.

Future studies might therefore want to provide a closer examination of the common features of affective polarization and populism. They could, for example, apply the feeling thermometer measurement to the study of the ‘us vs. them’ thinking that underpins the ‘people vs. elite’ element at the core of populism. Such an endeavor would not only benefit the literature on affective polarization, but could also form an important incentive for the blossoming field of studies that examine the measurement of populist attitudes (Akkerman et al., 2014; Castanho Silva et al., 2020; Schulz et al., 2018; Wuttke et al., 2020).

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