



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Ripping the public apart? Politicians' dark personality and affective polarization

Nai, A.; Ferreira da Silva, F.; Aldering, L.; Gattermann, K.; Garzia, D.

DOI

[10.1111/1475-6765.70002](https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.70002)

Publication date

2025

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

European Journal of Political Research

License

CC BY-NC

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Nai, A., Ferreira da Silva, F., Aldering, L., Gattermann, K., & Garzia, D. (2025). Ripping the public apart? Politicians' dark personality and affective polarization. *European Journal of Political Research*, 64(3), 1575-1588. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.70002>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Ripping the public apart? Politicians' dark personality and affective polarization

ALESSANDRO NAI,¹  FREDERICO FERREIRA DA SILVA,² 
LOES AALDERING,³  KATJANA GATTERMANN¹  & DIEGO GARZIA² 

¹*Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands;* ²*Institute of Political Studies, University of Lausanne, Switzerland;* ³*Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands*

Abstract. Growing evidence exists about the importance of dark personality traits – narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism – in political leaders, broadly leading to heightened political aggressiveness and partisan conflict. Building on this expanding research agenda, we study the possible association between dark personality in politicians and deepened affective polarization – that is, increased affective distance between partisan groups coupled with stronger dislike for out-parties – in the public. We do so by linking a large-scale expert survey (NEGex) and a collection of post-election surveys (CSES), including information for more than 90 leading candidates having competed in 40 elections worldwide. Our results show that the dark personality of top politicians can be associated with upticks in affective polarization in the public – but only when it comes to the personality of in-party candidates (that is, a candidate from voters' preferred party), and only for high levels of ideological proximity between the candidate and the voter.

Keywords: affective polarization; dark personality; political leaders; comparative

Introduction and rationale

Affective polarization – that is, the deep divide between partisan in-groups and out-groups that is driven by affective considerations – has become a defining feature of contemporary Western democracies (Garzia et al., 2023; Gidron et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2012), shaping political attitudes and behaviour. Heightened affective polarization has been associated with lower willingness to cooperate with political opponents (e.g., Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Finkel et al., 2020), undermining support for democratic principles (Kingzette et al., 2021, but see also Broockman et al., 2023) and even increased support for political violence (Kalmoe & Mason, 2022). The negative consequences of this partisan animosity extend beyond the political realm, carrying broader societal implications. Polarized individuals are less likely to marry, befriend or socialize with people from out-parties, even when they belong to the same family (Chen & Rohla, 2018; Huber & Malhotra, 2017). Intra-party hostility may also possibly negatively impact citizens' health and well-being (Nelson, 2022). Affective polarization can, furthermore, have important economic impact, introducing biases in professional activities (Gift, & Gift, 2015), economic expectations (Guirola, 2022) and conditioning consumption patterns (McConnell et al., 2018).

Within the manifold drivers of affective polarization that have been identified in the literature (for a review see, e.g., Iyengar et al., 2019), attention is increasingly turning towards the role of political elites. On the one hand, this “top down” effect could be fundamentally ideological, manifesting through a growing ideological divide among the positions of elites, that is, elite

polarization (Banda & Cluverius, 2018). On the other hand, it could derive from elites' political communication styles and political rhetoric, for example, their use of political attacks (Iyengar et al., 2012; Lau et al., 2017; Martin & Nai, 2024) or incivility during election campaigns (Liang & Zhang, 2021; Mutz, 2007). Against this backdrop, however, it remains unclear to what extent specific characteristics of politicians themselves, and in particular their personalities, relate to levels of mass affective polarization.

Recent research has asserted the relevance of polarized feelings towards political leaders (Ahn & Mutz, 2023; Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Reiljan et al., 2024). At the same time, we have seen a stark rise in popularity of politicians, often populists, with a dark, divisive and uncompromising personality – some examples immediately come to mind, from Donald Trump in the United States (US) to Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. This type of politician tends to be disliked by the public at large, while being at the same time rather popular among more aggressive voters (e.g., Nai, 2022; Nai et al., 2023). Because voters take cues from their leaders, both on issue stances and on attitudes (e.g., Levendusky, 2010), a fundamental – yet, as of today, unanswered – question is whether such cue taking also unfolds with regards to the dark personality of political leaders when it comes to affective polarization. Can the presence of leaders with dark personality traits be associated with affective polarization?

In this article, we investigate to what extent politicians' dark personality traits – that is, the 'dark triad' of *narcissism* (bombastic self-promotion and egotistic entitlement), *psychopathy* (coldness and callous disregard of others' emotions) and *Machiavellianism* (proclivity for cunning and scheming behaviours) (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) – is linked to heightened levels of intra-party animosity in the public.

Specifically, our intuition is that it is in particular the (dark) personality of *in-party politicians* that matters. Insights from several streams of research support this intuition. First, from the psychological standpoint of information processing, ideologically congruent cues should be expected to be the most influential for people's opinion. As amply shown by research in motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990; Slothuus & De Vreese, 2010), humans are hardwired to reject attitudinally incongruent cues and lend an attentive ear to inputs that match their predisposition, may they be ideological or otherwise. Specifically, partisans tend to sample information from the ideologically congruent in-group preferentially, leading them to develop more skewed evaluations in favour of that in-group (Derreumaux et al., 2022), while at the same time actively engaging in motivated rejection of inconsistent information (Jain & Maheswaran, 2000). With this in mind, normative cues from ideologically proximate elites should be more influential than equivalent cues from disliked or ideologically distant elites.

Second, while expressions of political aggressiveness – in our study dark personality traits in elites, but also the use of political attacks and incivility – tend to be generally disliked by the public at large (Bøggild & Jensen, 2024; Frimer & Skitka, 2018; Nai & Maier, 2024), it is to be expected that this should not be the case in hyper-partisan situations. In times of heightened political conflict (for instance during elections), voters are expected to undergo a stronger pull from in-group loyalties, possibly even leading them to support a more muscular profile in their elites (Iyengar et al., 2012). In line with this logic, Laustsen and Petersen (2020) show that voters showcase a stronger preference for more 'dominant' candidates in times of increased political conflict. In competitive contexts such as elections, in other terms, more dominant and dark personality traits in in-party elites can be expected to exert a stronger pull in voters.¹

Third, and more generally, considerable evidence exists that voters express a preference for candidates that showcase a similar personality profile as their own (Aichholzer & Willmann, 2020). With this in mind, we could expect that people feeling particularly close to dark politicians to be more likely to espouse a more aggressive and confrontational political stance themselves as well, for instance when it comes to affective polarization. Evidence showing that it is particularly voters high in populist attitudes that express a high appreciation for darker candidates (Nai, 2022) seems in line with the general idea.

All in all, these different strands of research seem to suggest that voters should pay more attention to cues coming from in-party candidates, and that dominant and generally 'dark' traits could be more likely to exert an effect on subsequent political attitudes. In short, we advance the intuition that *it is in particular for 'close' (in-party) candidates that dark personality traits are associated with more marked affective polarization in voters*. Recent evidence showing a similar mechanism for campaign negativity (Martin & Nai, 2024) seems to support this intuition.

To avoid excessive case-driven determinism (e.g., the fact that dark traits in politicians might be more endemic in the politics of certain countries or electoral systems), we test our intuition on a large-scale dataset that covers more than 90 'top' politicians having competed in 40 recent (2016-2021) national elections worldwide - from Donald Trump to Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron, Narendra Modi and many more - linked with a compilation of post-election surveys with national samples of voters (CSES data). Our results show that the dark personality of top politicians can be associated with upticks in affective polarization in the public – but only for candidates of voters' in-party (that is, their preferred party), and only for high levels of ideological proximity between the candidate and the voter. All data and codes are available for replication and re-analysis at the following OSF repository: <https://osf.io/2c7w4/>

Data and methods

Datasets

We link two independent data sources. Measures for the personality of candidates come from a large-scale expert survey covering a large sample of national elections worldwide between 2016 and 2022 (NEGex dataset; Nai & Maier, 2024). After each election covered, a sample of experts rated candidates for both the Big Five and the Dark triad (see below). Experts are scholars with expertise in electoral politics, political communication, country politics, identified via their scientific outputs (publications) and self-described expertise (e.g., on their personal website). Table A2 (online Appendix A) includes, for each election, details about the average expert that provided ratings for all countries included in the investigation.

Measures for mass affective polarization come from the Module 5 (2016-2021) of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES),² a collection of post-electoral surveys including a common module of questions across countries. The overlap between NEGex and the CSES includes 91 'top' candidates having competed in 40 unique national elections in both two-party and multi-party systems across the world. The list includes world top players such as recent US presidential candidates Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump and Joe Biden, Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen (France), Angela Merkel (Germany), Theresa May, Jeremy Corbyn and Boris Johnson (UK), Viktor Orbán (Hungary), Narendra Modi (India),

Silvio Berlusconi (Italy), Shinzō Abe (Japan), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Turkey), Mark Rutte and Geert Wilders (The Netherlands) and many more (see Table A1 for the full list).

In order to isolate the effects of personality traits of specific candidates, we have pooled all country-level datasets and assigned at the upper level for each voter (i) the personality of their preferred candidate (in-party), and (ii) the personality of their most disliked candidate (out-party). In-party candidates have been assigned based on the party respondents declared to feel closest to; individuals that declared not to feel close to any political party were thus excluded from the analysis. Out-party candidates have been identified based on the party leader receiving the lowest feeling thermometer score among all leaders scored by a respondent; individuals scoring equally low two or more candidates have been excluded from the analysis because we were unable to uniquely identify the personality of the least liked candidate.

The pooled dataset, hierarchical in nature (voters nested into their preferred candidate), includes information for approximately 34,000 individuals and 91 unique candidates.

Measures

Dark personality of candidates. The NEGex questionnaire asks experts to rate the personality of a selection of 2–3 top candidates for the election surveyed. Three dark personality traits, that is, Machiavellianism, psychopathy and narcissism, are measured via a simplified version of the ‘Dirty Dozen’ (D12; Jonason & Webster, 2010). Experts had to assess whether the candidate might be someone who, for example, ‘wants to be admired by others’ or ‘tends to be callous or insensitive’ (from 0 ‘disagree strongly’ to 4 ‘agree strongly’).³ Scores on items are averaged to yield separate measures for narcissism ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 0.7$), psychopathy ($M = 2.2$, $SD = 0.9$) and Machiavellianism ($M = 2.1$, $SD = 0.8$). The average score on the three traits reflects the ‘dark core’ of candidate personality ($M = 2.4$, $SD = 0.7$).

To isolate the specific effect of dark personality traits, all models control for the candidate Big Five personality traits. We rely on the ten items personality inventory (TIPI; Gosling et al., 2003), which yield five separate variables for extraversion ($M = 2.4$, $SD = 0.8$), agreeableness ($M = 1.7$, $SD = 0.8$), conscientiousness ($M = 2.7$, $SD = 0.8$), emotional stability ($M = 2.3$, $SD = 0.8$) and openness ($M = 1.9$, $SD = 0.7$). To avoid over-specifying the models by including five measures, we use them to compute the ‘huge two’ meta-traits of plasticity and stability (Silvia et al., 2009), reflecting, respectively, average scores of extraversion and openness (plasticity; $M = 2.2$, $SD = 0.6$) and agreeableness, conscientiousness and emotional stability (stability; $M = 2.2$, $SD = 0.7$). Table A2 (online Appendix A) includes the personality scores for all candidates in the analysis (separate dark traits, plus three meta-traits of dark core, plasticity and stability). The average level of agreement across all experts on the personality traits rated is relatively good, as indicated with standard deviations that are not excessively high; the higher average standard deviation ($SD = 1.04$, reflecting a range just above 20 per cent of the 0–4 original scale) is for the statement ‘Tends to use flattery to succeed’ (second item for the Machiavellianism trait), whereas the lower average standard deviation ($SD = 0.87$) is for the statement ‘Wants attention from others’ (second item for the narcissism trait).

It might seem unorthodox to rely on expert ratings to measure the personality profile of leading political figures. Yet, especially when working on large-scale comparative investigations, no valid alternative exists (as of today); self-assessments (e.g., via questionnaires; Maier et al., 2023) are unrealistic, and the analysis of candidates’ output, such as speeches (e.g., Ramey et al., 2017)

remains possibly complex when different languages come into play. Of course, using expert ratings should not be done incautiously, most notably due to the possible biasing effect of experts' ideological preferences with regards to the candidates they are asked to assess (e.g., Wright & Tomlinson, 2018). With this in mind, we will discuss below two important sets of robustness checks, that (i) use adjusted measures of personality that 'filter out' the effect of average expert ideological leaning, and (ii) control for the average profile of experts, including their ideological leaning. Results of these checks yield robust results, suggesting that the potentially biasing role of experts' political leanings, while certainly not absent, should not be overestimated.

Affective polarization. Feeling thermometers have typically been used as the workhorse instrument to measure affective polarization in comparative perspective (Iyengar et al., 2019). The CSES surveys include a 0–10 feeling thermometer asking respondents to rate candidates in their country, where 0 denotes maximum dislike and 10 denotes maximum liking. Leveraging on these items, we adapt Reiljan's (2021) Affective Polarization Index, replacing party with candidate feelings thermometers. Since the primary focus of interest of our research question is the relationship between *candidates'* personalities and affective polarization, we deem it more plausible that their personality translates most significantly into polarized feelings towards party leaders, along the lines of recently proposed conceptualizations of Leader Affective Polarization (Reiljan et al., 2024).⁴

This measure calculates, for each respondent, the mean difference between the thermometer score given by survey respondents to the leader of the party they identify with and each other party leader running on any given party system, weighted by their respective parties' vote shares. The resulting measure ranges from 0 (Minimum distance/polarization; all leaders receive the same score on the feeling thermometer) to 10 (Maximum distance/polarization; the most liked leader is rated with a 10 and all other leaders with a 0).

Results

To what extent is the personality of major political figures associated with affective polarization in the public? We answer this fundamental question by looking, first, at the driving role of the personality of *in-party* candidates, that is, the personality traits of candidates of respondents' preferred party. In a second time, we will replicate the analysis but looking at the personality of out-party candidates, that is, the personality traits of candidates of respondents' most disliked party. In line with the idea that proximity should be more likely to drive attitudes, we expect stronger effects exerted by the personality of in-group, versus out-group, candidates.

In-party candidates

The dark personality profile of respondent's in-party candidate is not directly associated with a significant or substantial higher (nor lower) level of affective polarization (Table B1, model M1, Appendix B). This is also the case for the two other personality traits, that is, the meta-traits of plasticity (extraversion, openness) and stability (agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability).

We do, however, find strong support for the general idea that candidate *proximity* matters. Figure 1 plots the results of three separate models, where the effect of the in-party candidate

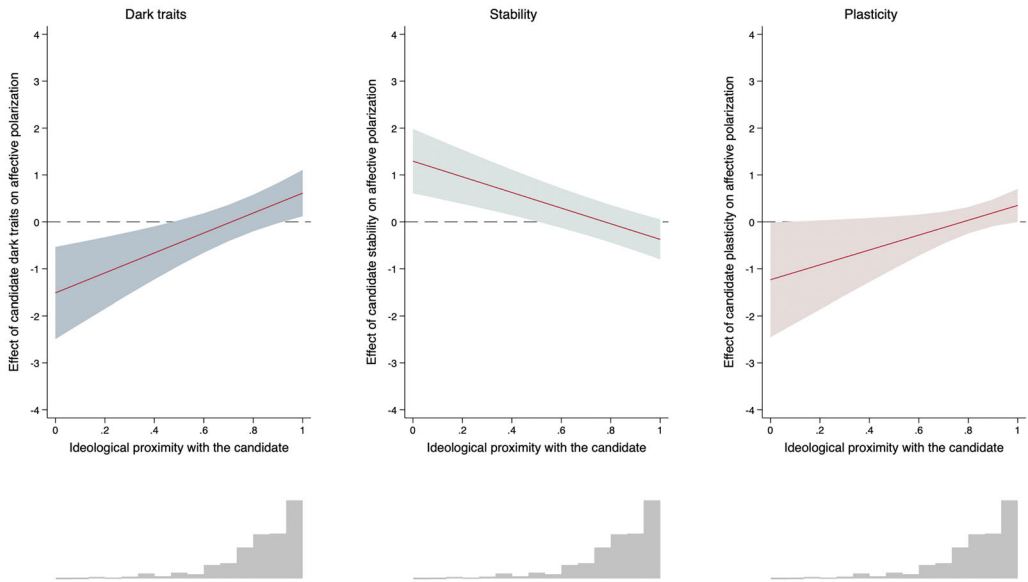


Figure 1. Affective polarization by in-party candidate personality * ideological proximity with the candidate. Note. Marginal effects with 95 per cent confidence intervals. All covariates fixed at their mean value. Full results in Tables B1 and B2 (Appendix B).

personality traits on respondents' level of affective polarization are moderated by the ideological distance between the respondent and the candidate.⁵ The leftmost panel tests for the moderated effect of candidate dark traits, the middle panel for the moderated effect of candidate stability, and the rightmost panel for the moderated effect of plasticity. All models are controlled for important covariates at the candidate (gender, age, incumbency status, left-right ideology), country (regime type, number of effective parties, geographical region) and voter levels (gender, age, interest in politics). Full results are in Tables B1 (model M2) and B2, Appendix B. All panels plot marginal effects with 95 per cent confidence intervals, reflecting the effect of personality on affective polarization for increasing proximity between the candidate and the voter (x-axis).

As the figure shows (leftmost panel), for high levels of ideological proximity between the in-party candidate and the voter, the effect of candidate dark personality on affective polarization is positive, whereas it is negative for candidates that are more ideologically distant.⁶ Inversely (middle panel), though more weakly so, the effect of candidate stability on affective polarization is negative for high levels of ideological proximity, whereas it is positive for low levels of proximity. Finally, there does not seem to be a meaningful interaction effect between plasticity and proximity (rightmost panel). All in all, very close in-party candidates' dark traits bolster affective polarization, whereas stability somewhat reduces it. Compared to the other two meta-traits, the effects are strongest for the dark traits, likely reflecting the importance of negative assessments (negativity bias) over positive ones.

Figure 2 presents models that replicate the same analysis, but for the three dark traits taken separately (full results in Table B3, Appendix B). While the effect is nominally stronger for narcissism, it is for Machiavellianism that we find the strongest moderation of close ideological proximity on the positive effect of in-party candidate personality trait on affective polarization.

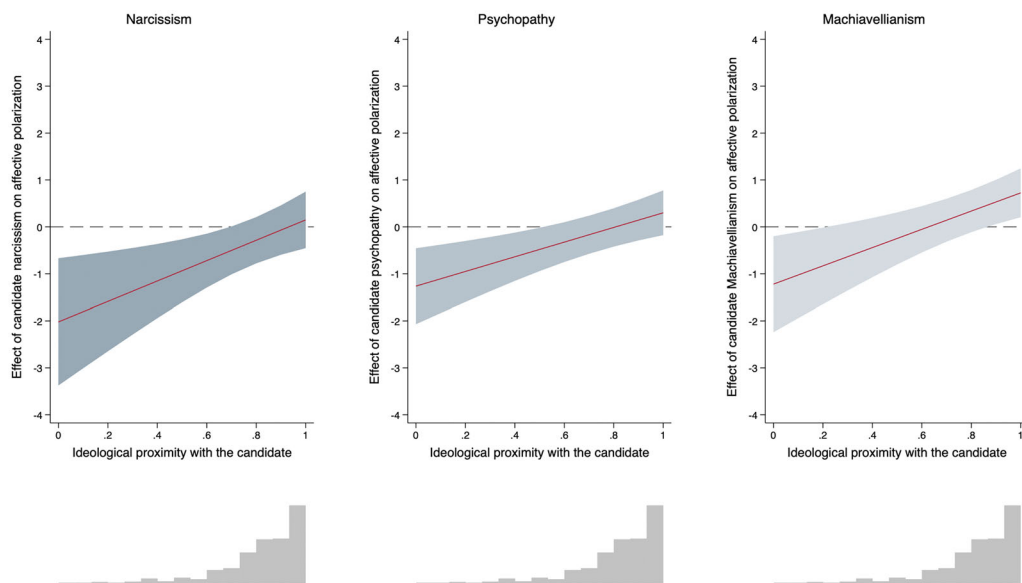


Figure 2. Affective polarization by in-party candidate separate dark traits * ideological proximity with the candidate.

Note. Marginal effects with 95 per cent confidence intervals. All covariates fixed at their mean value. Full results in Table B3 (Appendix B).

While a significant upwards trend appears also for narcissism and psychopathy, the effect at high levels of proximity is less clear-cut for these two dark traits.

It is important to note that the main trends for the dark meta-trait are replicated in alternative model specifications in four key robustness checks. First, because expert ratings of social and political phenomena have been criticised in the past for the potential presence of ideological biases (e.g., Wright & Tomlinson, 2018), we estimated models with an ‘adjusted’ measure of personality that ‘filters out’ such biasing influence.⁷ These yield even slightly stronger results (Table B4). Second, the main results hold in models controlling for the average profile of experts in terms of gender, domesticity, left-right ideology, familiarity with elections in the country and ease of answering the survey (Table B5). All in all, what these additional models seem to suggest is that the positive effect of dark personality on affective polarization, for ideologically close in-party candidates, is likely not a fluke due to biased measurement. Third, additional models that control for the ‘dark’ rhetoric employed by the candidates during the election, in terms of their use of political attacks and fear appeals,⁸ yield robust results (Table B6). These additional controls are important to ensure that the effect unfolded by the dark personality traits on affective polarization comes from personality itself, and not from the fact that dark candidates are more likely to use more aggressive rhetoric in their campaigns (Nai & Maier, 2024, 2020). Finally, fourth, the results are robust – and even slightly stronger (Table B7) – when using an alternative measurement for the dependent variable that relies on party instead of candidate feeling thermometers. For this alternative dependent variable, our models even pick up a significant ($p < 0.1$) direct positive effect for candidate dark traits on affective polarization (model M1).

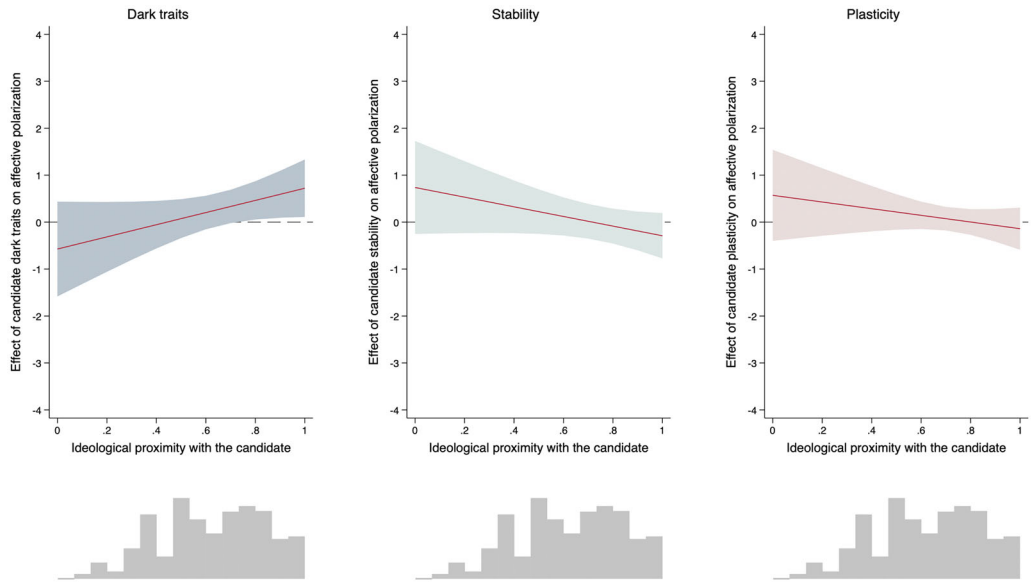


Figure 3. Affective polarization by out-party candidate personality * ideological proximity with the candidate. Note. Marginal effects with 95 per cent confidence intervals. All covariates fixed at their mean value. Full results in Tables C1 and C2 (Appendix C).

Out-party candidates

To what extent do we find similar trends when it comes to the (dark) personality traits of out-group candidates, that is, candidates of respondents' most disliked party? On paper, while the effect should likely be stronger for in-party candidates, reasons exist not to exclude an effect for out-party candidates as well. Much evidence exists that voters make up their mind also with regards to candidates or parties they particularly dislike ('negative voting'; e.g., Garzia & Ferreira da Silva, 2024), which suggests that such despised actors can alter the way they feel about politics in general.

As earlier for in-party candidates, the personality of out-party candidates does not affect directly respondents' levels of affective polarization (Table C1, model M1, Appendix C). None of the three meta-traits (dark core, stability, plasticity) has a significant direct effect. Additionally, the effect of personality is in this analysis a weaker function of the ideological distance between the voter and their most disliked candidate; proximity does significantly interact with dark traits, but rather weakly so and only significantly at $p < 0.1$ (see also as Figure 3, left-hand panel). None of the three dark traits, taken separately, drive affective polarization upwards (or downwards) in a substantial way with changing levels of voter-candidate distance. Our models do pick up a significant (but rather weak) effect for psychopathy (Table C3, model M2, Appendix C; see also Figure 4): increasing levels of psychopathy in the most disliked candidate are associated with higher affective polarization for candidates that are less ideologically distant. Beyond being relatively weak, this effect is not suggestive of strong out-group effects – for that, we would have had to identify stronger effects for dark traits among disliked candidates that are particularly *far* ideologically from the voter, which is not what we find. If anything, then, this effect is again suggestive that it is not candidates that are relatively far from the voter (either ideologically, or in

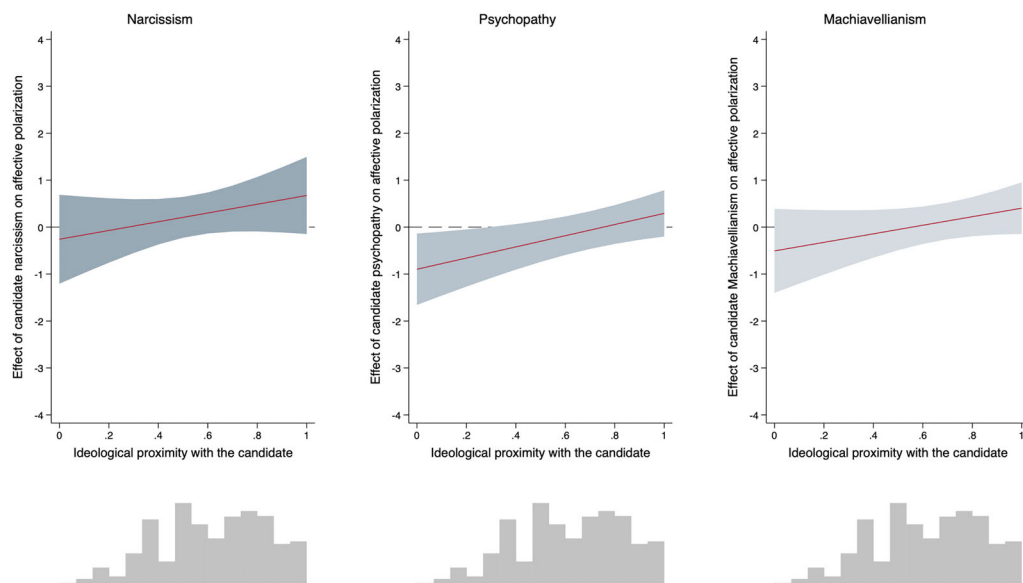


Figure 4. Affective polarization by out-party candidate separate dark traits * ideological proximity with the candidate.

Note. Marginal effects with 95 per cent confidence intervals. All covariates fixed at their mean value. Full results in Table C3 (Appendix C).

the out-party) that matter when it comes to their personality, but rather candidates that are close to them.

The (already weaker) interaction between candidate dark traits and proximity, furthermore, disappears when using adjusted measures of personality that filter out the possible intervening effect of experts' ideology (Table C4), even if it resists in models that control for average expert profile (Table C5) and candidates' usage of negative and fear-based rhetoric (Table C6), and in models that use an alternative dependent variable based on party thermometers (Table C7).

Conclusion and discussion

Our study addresses an important omission in the increasingly dense field of affective polarization research: whether the dark personality of political leaders can fuel affective polarization. In order to shed light on such a question, our article linked large-scale observational data coming from two independent sources: a collection of post-electoral survey data (CSES), and a large dataset including the personality profiles of politicians worldwide, based on expert judgements (NEGex; Nai & Maier, 2024) – the intersection of the two yielding an integrated dataset respectively covering the personality of 90+ top politicians worldwide and the profile of more than 30,000 voters that have taken part in elections where these candidates competed.

Our results suggest that the dark personality of top politicians can be associated with heightened affective polarization in the public – but only for candidates of voters' in-party (that is, their preferred party), and only for high levels of ideological proximity between the candidate and

the voter. The other personality traits have weaker effects, and the personality of out-group candidates (that is, candidates of voters' most disliked party) seems overall rather marginal. In other terms, what our results suggest is a proximity effect for dark personality in elites. Somewhat at odds with the popular idea that people might become cynical and radicalized due to how much they dislike the character of their political opponents – for example, in the US, a deepening of out-partisan antipathy among Democrats rising in response to the cantankerous personality of Donald Trump Nai & Maier, 2021, – what our results suggest is that dark traits in elites have an 'in-house' effect. It is 'our' candidate, in particular if we feel close to them, that drives our partisan animosity the most – specifically, their dark traits. In other terms, our models predict that it is in particular among *very close supporters* of dark candidates that we find the highest levels of affective polarization. As discussed in the article's front end, this main trend should not surprise us. Voters tend to lend a preferential treatment to congruent political cues (e.g., Slothuus & De Vreese, 2010), suggesting that it is in particular the example given by proximate candidates, more than ideologically distant ones, that should be attitudinally consequent for voters. Partisan proximity, furthermore, should be particularly consequent in times of heightened political conflicts, during which voters should naturally express a stronger preference for more 'dominant' politicians (Laustsen & Petersen, 2020).

The trends shown in our analysis come with some notable limitations. On the one hand, although they stem from a large-scale analysis and should thus be more resistant towards critiques of low external validity, they nonetheless build on evidence that is essentially observational in nature, with the inherent risk of endogeneity. Specifically, our data and results cannot exclude the fact that voters self-select into being close to darker candidates *because* they are affectively polarized – and not the other way around. That is, we cannot prove that it is the dark personality of politicians that cause affective polarization to move upwards. Moving ahead, experimental evidence and/or longitudinal designs should be considered to disentangle the essential matter of causality between candidate profile and affective polarization in the public. Second, due to data availability, our analyses include 'top' politicians only – party leaders and main presidential candidates – and are unable to pick up likely effects exerted at more local levels, for instance during subnational elections. And because it seems likely that voters have a closer and more personal contact with more local candidates, we cannot exclude that the dynamics shown here exists even stronger at subnational levels.

These limitations notwithstanding, the trends shown in this article unpack a novel research agenda on the intersection between candidate (dark) personality and intra-party animosity in voters. Beyond their intrinsic electoral interest, the findings discussed in our article are furthermore worrisome in light of dynamics of democratic backsliding (e.g., Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019). Dark traits seem to be particularly prevalent among autocrats and populist (Nai & Toros, 2020, Nai & Martinez i Coma, 2019), suggesting a potentially nefarious intersection between uncompromising leaders, democratic deconsolidation and affective polarization. Further research should investigate these dynamics more in detail, including regarding the intervening role of (dark) communication strategies linking elites and voters directly.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the EJPR editors and anonymous reviewers for their inputs during the revisions process – their constructive comments were instrumental to rework our piece and get it to its current form. All remaining mistakes are of course our responsibility alone. A sincere thank you to all NEGex experts for donating their precious time, and to CSES for making the cross-national survey data available to the scientific community. Alex Nai acknowledges the generous financial support by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF Ref. P300P1_161163).

CRedit authorship contribution statement. Alessandro Nai: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing; Frederico Ferreira da Silva: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing; Loes Aaldering: Conceptualization; Investigation; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing; Katjana Gattermann: Conceptualization; Investigation; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing; Diego Garzia: Conceptualization; Investigation; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing.

Data Availability Statement

All data and codes are available for replication and re-analysis at the following OSF repository: <https://osf.io/2c7w4/>

Online Appendix

Additional supporting information may be found in the Online Appendix section at the end of the article:

- APPENDIX A – Candidates included and expert samples
- APPENDIX B – In-party candidates: Full results and robustness checks
- APPENDIX C – Out-party candidates: Full results and robustness checks
- APPENDIX D – Research ethics
- APPENDIX E – Personality batteries

Notes

1. Interestingly, at odds with this general intuition, Frimer and Skitka (2018) find that one element of elite aggressiveness – political incivility – is also rejected by hyper-partisans.
2. <https://cses.org/data-download/>
3. Appendix E includes the full batteries used by experts to assess the personality of candidates.
4. We also replicated the main analysis using party instead of candidate feeling thermometers to build our measure of affective polarization (the correlation between the two measures is 0.86). The results (reported in Tables B7 and C7 of the Online Appendix) are consistent with the original analysis, suggesting that they are not strongly driven by the specific measurement of affective polarization.
5. Ideological distance is computed with the distance between respondents' left-right self-placement (0–10) and candidates' left-right position based on expert assessment (1–7). After forcing both measures into a 0–1 scale for comparability, we have computed the absolute value of the difference between the two measures (0–1 variable)

- which, when flipped, yields a variable varying between 0 (maximum distance) and 1 (maximum proximity) ($M = 0.82$, $SD = 0.16$).
6. Note that, because the model is run only on in-party candidates, the measure of ideological distance naturally skews towards higher scores (that is, there are extremely few candidates that are ideologically very distant with the voter among preferred candidates).
 7. Inspired by the procedure discussed in Walter and Van der Eijk (2019) for campaign negativity, we simply (i) regressed the personality scores on the ideological distance between the candidate and the average expert, and (ii) saved the residual of these models as adjusted measures of personality that are net of such ideological distance. These adjusted variables are strongly correlated with the original ones (e.g., $r(89) = 0.96$, $p < 0.001$, for the dark core).
 8. Both measures come from expert ratings in the NEGex dataset, and range between 0 'very low' and 10 'very high'.

References

- Abramowitz, A. I., & Webster, S. (2016). The rise of negative partisanship and the nationalization of US elections in the 21st century. *Electoral Studies*, *41*, 12–22.
- Ahn, C., & Mutz, D. (2023). The effects of polarized evaluations on political participation: Does hating the other side motivate voters? *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *87*(2), 243–266.
- Aichholzer, J., & Willmann, J. (2020). Desired personality traits in politicians: Similar to me but more of a leader. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *88*, 103990.
- Banda, K., & Cluverius, J. (2018). Elite polarization, party extremity, and affective polarization. *Electoral Studies*, *56*, 90–101.
- Bøggild, T., & Jensen, C. (2024). When politicians behave badly: Political, democratic, and social consequences of political incivility. *American Journal of Political Science*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12897>.
- Broockman, D. E., Kalla, J. L., & Westwood, S. J. (2023). Does affective polarization undermine democratic norms or accountability? Maybe not. *American Journal of Political Science*, *67*(3), 808–828.
- Chen, M. K., & Rohla, R. (2018). The effect of partisanship and political advertising on close family ties. *Science*, *360*(6392), 1020–1024.
- Derreumaux, Y., Bergh, R., & Hughes, B. L. (2022). Partisan-motivated sampling: Re-examining politically motivated reasoning across the information processing stream. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *123*(2), 316.
- Druckman, J. N., & Levendusky, M. S. (2019). What do we measure when we measure affective polarization? *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *83*(1), 114–122.
- Finkel, E. J., Bail, C. A., Cikara, M., Ditto, P. H., Iyengar, S., Klar, S., Mason, L., McGrath, M. C., Nyhan, B., Rand, D. G., Skitka, L. J., Tucker, J. A., Van Bavel, J. J., Wang, C. S., & Druckman, J. N. (2020). Political sectarianism in America. *Science*, *370*(6516), 533–536.
- Frimer, J. A., & Skitka, L. J. (2018). The Montagu Principle: Incivility decreases politicians' public approval, even with their political base. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *115*(5), 845.
- Garzia, D., & Ferreira da Silva, F. (2024). *Negative voting in comparative perspective*. Palgrave
- Garzia, D., Ferreira da Silva, F., & Maye, S. (2023). Affective polarization in comparative and longitudinal perspective. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *87*(1), 219–231.
- Gidron, N., Adams, J., & Horne, W. (2020). *American affective polarization in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press
- Gift, K., & Gift, T. (2015). Does politics influence hiring? Evidence from a randomized experiment. *Political Behavior*, *37*, 653–675
- Gosling, S. D., Rentfrow, P. J., & Swann Jr, W. B. (2003). A very brief measure of the Big-Five personality domains. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *37*(6), 504–528.
- Guirola, L. (2022). Does polarization have economic effects? It does on economic expectations. *SUERF Policy Note*, *266*, 1–9

- Huber, G. A., & Malhotra, N. (2017). Political homophily in social relationships: Evidence from online dating behavior. *The Journal of Politics*, 79(1), 269–283.
- Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129–146.
- Iyengar, S., Sood, G., & Lelkes, Y. (2012). Affect, not ideology: A social identity perspective on polarization. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 76(3), 405–431.
- Jain, S. P., & Maheswaran, D. (2000). Motivated reasoning: A depth-of-processing perspective. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 26(4), 358–371.
- Jonason, P. K., & Webster, G. D. (2010). The dirty dozen: A concise measure of the dark triad. *Psychological Assessment*, 22(2), 420.
- Kalmoe, N. P., & Mason, L. (2022). *Radical American partisanship: Mapping violent hostility, its causes, and the consequences for democracy*. University of Chicago Press.
- Kingzette, J., Druckman, J. N., Klar, S., Krupnikov, Y., Levendusky, M., & Ryan, J. B. (2021). How affective polarization undermines support for democratic norms. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 85(2), 663–677.
- Kunda, Z. (1990). The case for motivated reasoning. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108(3), 480.
- Lau, R. R., Andersen, D. J., Ditonto, T. M., Kleinberg, M. S., & Redlawsk, D. P. (2017). Effect of media environment diversity and advertising tone on information search, selective exposure, and affective polarization. *Political Behavior*, 39, 231–255.
- Laustsen, L., & Petersen, M. B. (2020). Online tallies and the context of politics: How online tallies make dominant candidates appear competent in contexts of conflict. *American Journal of Political Science*, 64(2), 240–255.
- Levendusky, M. S. (2010). Clearer cues, more consistent voters: A benefit of elite polarization. *Political Behavior*, 32, 111–131.
- Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2019). *How democracies die*. Crown.
- Liang, H., & Zhang, X. (2021). Partisan bias of perceived incivility and its political consequences: Evidence from survey experiments in Hong Kong. *Journal of Communication*, 71(3), 357–379.
- Maier, J., Oschatz, C., Stier, S., & Zettler, I. (2023). A short scale to measure self-reported aversive personality in political elites. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 105(5), 625–635.
- Martin, D., & Nai, A. (2024). Deepening THE Rift: Negative campaigning fosters affective polarization in multiparty elections. *Electoral Studies* (forthcoming).
- McConnell, C., Margalit, Y., Malhotra, N., & Levendusky, M. (2018). The economic consequences of partisanship in a polarized era. *American Journal of Political Science*, 62(1), 5–18.
- Mutz, D. C. (2007). Effects of “in-your-face” television discourse on perceptions of a legitimate opposition. *American Political Science Review*, 101(4), 621–635.
- Nai, A. (2022). Populist voters like dark politicians. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 187, 111412.
- Nai, A., & Maier, J. (2020). Dark necessities? Candidates’ aversive personality traits and negative campaigning in the 2018 American Midterms. *Electoral Studies*, 68, 102233.
- Nai, A., & Maier, J. (2021). Can anyone be objective about Donald Trump? Assessing the personality of political figures. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 31(3), 283–308.
- Nai, A., & Maier, J. (2024). *Dark politics. The personality of politicians and the future of democracy*. Oxford University Press.
- Nai, A., & Martínez i Coma, F. (2019). The personality of populists: Provocateurs, charismatic leaders, or drunken dinner guests?. *West European Politics*, 42(7), 1337–1367.
- Nai, A., & Toros, E. (2020). The peculiar personality of strongmen: Comparing the Big Five and Dark Triad traits of autocrats and non-autocrats. *Political Research Exchange*, 2(1), 1707697.
- Nai, A., Aaldering, L., da Silva, F. F., Garzia, D., & Gattermann, K. (2023). The dark side of the mood. Candidate evaluation, voter perceptions, and the driving role of (dark) personality traits. *Electoral Studies*, 86, 102715.
- Nelson, M. H. (2022). Resentment is like drinking poison? The heterogeneous health effects of affective polarization. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00221465221075311>
- Paulhus, D. L., & Williams, K. M. (2002). The dark triad of personality: Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 36(6), 556–563.
- Ramey, A. J., Klingler, J. D. & Hollibaugh Jr, G. E. (2017). *More than a feeling: Personality, polarization, and the transformation of the US Congress*. University of Chicago Press.

- Reiljan, Andres. (2021). Affective polarization in multiparty systems: Conceptualization, measurement and foundations. PhD dissertation, European University Institute.
- Reiljan, A., Garzia, D., Ferreira da Silva, F. & Trechsel, A. H. (2024). Patterns of affective polarization toward parties and leaders across the democratic world. *American Political Science Review*, 118(2), 654–670.
- Silvia, P. J., Nusbaum, E. C., Berg, C., Martin, C. & O'Connor, A. (2009). Openness to experience, plasticity, and creativity: Exploring lower-order, high-order, and interactive effects. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 43(6), 1087–1090.
- Slothuus, R., & De Vreese, C. H. (2010). Political parties, motivated reasoning, and issue framing effects. *The Journal of politics*, 72(3), 630–645.
- Walter, A. S., & Van der Eijk, C. (2019). Measures of campaign negativity: Comparing approaches and eliminating partisan bias. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 24(3), 363–382.
- Wright, J. D., & Tomlinson, M. F. (2018). Personality profiles of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump: Fooled by your own politics. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 128, 21–24.

Address for correspondence: Alessandro Nai, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Noord-Holland, the Netherlands. Email: a.nai@uva.nl