

Unaffected Polarization? Populism and Affective Polarization in Comparative Perspective*

Abstract

With both affective polarization and populism on the rise in several countries, many have proposed a link between the two phenomena. Yet, research offers little direct evidence on whether populist individuals are more polarized. This paper aims to fill this gap by using CSES data from 37 elections in 31 countries to provide a comparative account of the relationship between populism and affective polarization at the individual level. We show that populist individuals are not more polarized than their mainstream counterparts. Instead, we identify a curvilinear relationship wherein both citizens who strongly endorse or reject populist ideas exhibit high levels of polarization, with substantial variations across countries. Furthermore, populism is associated with a general disdain for all political parties rather than just rival parties. These findings challenge the prevailing assumption that populism is asymmetrically associated with affective polarization and suggest that ideological extremism, rather than populism, may be associated with the upsurge in affective polarization observed in some Western democracies.

1 Introduction

In recent years, populism and affective polarization have emerged as prominent phenomena, shaping the dynamics of electoral competition across the globe. Populist leaders have come to power in some of the largest global democracies, such as India, Brazil, and the United States. Concurrently, affective polarization—a deepening hatred and distrust toward the members of the rival political groups—has increased in some countries, most notably the United States (Garzia, Ferreira da Silva, and Maye 2023, e.g.,). The observation that affective polarization appears to rise together with the success of populists has led many to suggest that the two phenomena should be connected (e.g., Abramowitz and McCoy 2019). The underlying assumption is that populism promotes a brand of divisive antagonism revolving around the idea that a malevolent and

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morally inferior out-group of impostors—“Them”, the “establishment,” the financial or intellectual “elites”—is acting against the people’s “common will” and, thus, needs to be defeated at any cost.

Research on the topic, however, has found mixed results so far. Westwood, Peterson, and Lelkes (2019) find no evidence of increased affective polarization in the United States in the lead-up to the 2016 elections, which saw a marked increase in populist rhetoric among both Republicans and Democrats (Hawkins and Littvay 2019). Stefanelli (2023), looking at data from the United States, finds that affective polarization and populism are related only among Republicans, while populist attitudes are rather associated with ideological extremism among Democrats. The picture remains also unclear in comparative research that goes beyond the US. For example, Kekkonen and Ylä-Anttila (2021) find that in Finland, populist right-wing voters tend to display lower levels of partisan hostility compared to voters of main parties. In a comparative study of nine European countries, Fuller et al. (2022) found that populism is weakly correlated with affective judgments in Italy and is not associated with affective polarization in Spain and the UK. Similarly, in a multicountry experiment conducted in several European countries, Hameleers and Fawzi (2020) found limited evidence supporting the notion that populist messages lead to citizen polarization along affective lines. Finally, Davis, Goodliffe, and Hawkins (2024) using data from 53 countries, find that in contexts with more successful populist parties, voters of non-populist parties are polarized as well, suggesting the presence of a symmetrical process across different segments of the electorate and not just among populist voters.

We contribute to this debate by investigating in depth how populist attitudes and affective polarization are connected, providing the most comprehensive theoretical and empirical account of the relation between these two phenomena so far. We argue that, based on existing literature, there are three possible ways in which populist attitudes and affective polarization are (or are not) related among citizens: a) a positive relationship due to the us-versus-them nature of populist discourse; b) a U-shaped relationship, whereby both populists and non-populists are more polarized due to a

backlash against populists by those who oppose it; and c) no relationship, due to the partisan disdain that drives populist individuals to have a general dislike for all parties in the system, not only for mainstream ones.

We test our hypotheses with data from Module 5 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), which includes a battery of questions to measure populist attitudes and feeling thermometers towards parties, which the literature has been using to measure affective polarization. Our analysis reveals three key findings. First, we discover a curvilinear relationship between populist attitudes and affective polarization: individuals who strongly embrace populism and those who vehemently oppose it tend to exhibit a high level of affective polarization. Importantly, this relationship does not follow a generalizable pattern across countries but manifests as an idiosyncratic phenomenon. Second, populist attitudes—instead of fostering polarized judgments—are associated with a negative evaluation of all political parties, confirming that populism is connected with partisan disdain. Third, in line with previous studies, we find that ideological extremity strongly correlates with affective polarization. This suggests that polarization on the left-right continuum, rather than populism, may be connected with the rise of affective polarization observed in some Western democracies. We corroborate these results with an extensive series of robustness checks that employ different analytical strategies and operational measures of affective polarization and populism.

This article makes a dual contribution to the literature on populist polarization. First, it supports the idea that affective polarization among populist voters is by no means a generalized feature of advanced democracies. The relationship between populism and affective polarization is likely to vary based on contextual factors and leaders' programmatic considerations, highlighting the complex and conditional nature of this connection. Second, we add to existing studies showing that affective polarization is a relational phenomenon that tends to emerge concurrently among opposing societal and political groups. In instances where populism plays a prominent role in structuring the electoral competition, it can trigger emotionally charged counter-reactions among mainstream voters who respond by seeing populists as a dangerous out-group

that needs to be marginalized.

2 Populism and Polarization

Scholars have frequently defined populism through various conceptual lenses, conceptualizing it as a “thin-centered” ideology (Mudde 2004), a rhetorical style that emphasizes appeal to the people (Jagers and Walgrave 2007), a discourse that opposes hegemonic practices (Laclau 2005), and a political strategy to mobilize voters (Weyland 2001). In this paper, we draw upon the so-called “ideational definition” (Hawkins, Carlin, et al. 2018) and understand populism as a set of ideas that sees “the people” as a good, homogeneous, and unified entity with a “general will” that should be the principle and end of all politics. The people are opposed to an evil conspiratorial elite bent on oppressing and dominating the people for their interests and benefits (Canovan 2004; Mudde 2007). The division between people and the elites is considered a fundamental cleavage in politics, leaving little room for recognizing other legitimate differences of opinion or interests. Fundamentally, this division is moral, characterizing the people as inherently virtuous and the elite as intrinsically malevolent. Such perspective of politics led Hawkins (2010) to brand populism as a *Manichaeian* discourse characterized by a dichotomous good-versus-evil view of politics.

Scholars tend to agree that the divisive and us-versus-them logic embedded within populist ideas is associated with heightened levels of political polarization (e.g., Pappas 2014). Country-level analyses have found a connection between ideological polarization and the rise of populist parties (Bischof and Wagner 2019; Castanho Silva 2018), and previous research has generally shown that populism is related to voting for anti-establishment and radical candidates (e.g., Uscinski et al. 2021; Mudde 2004). In addition to policy disagreement, scholars recently started to argue that populism is also related to affective polarization across party lines (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018). Affective polarization can be briefly defined as antipathy, dislike, anger, and even fear for members—both the elite and rank-and-file—of opposing parties (Gidron,

Adams, and Horne 2020; Iyengar, Lelkes, et al. 2019). In particular, anger and resentment towards established political parties are considered a “motivating factor for populist mobilization” (Betz and Oswald 2022, p.122), responsible for accentuating the perceived moral division between common people and an ostensibly unscrupulous, evil, and self-serving outgroup (Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza 2017; Marx 2020).

As we argue in the following pages, there are three potential mechanisms connecting populism and affective polarization at the individual level. First, it may be that populist attitudes *per se* are polarizing because they capture politics as an us-versus-them struggle between “the people” and the elites. Second, populist parties may generate strong negative responses among those who oppose them, potentially leading to a backlash of polarization driven by anti-populist voters. Lastly, it may be that the negative view that populists have of politics may translate into a broader aversion to all political parties rather than affective polarization across party lines. We elaborate on each of these mechanisms below.

Attitudes

We call the first mechanism connecting populism and polarization the “attitudinal” argument. According to it, the populist division of society into the (good) people and the (corrupted) elite can fuel strong political animosity, ultimately leading to what McCoy and Somer (2019) term “pernicious polarization.” For someone who believes that politics is not dealing with legitimate differences of opinion but rather is a moral struggle, it is natural to develop a general animosity toward anyone not on their side, while sticking together with “the good ones” who belong to the same party or political group (Martínez, Van Prooijen, and Van Lange 2023; Bos, Wichgers, and Van Spanje 2023). The so-called Manichaeian aspect of populism, therefore, naturally leads populists to see politics through us-versus-them lenses, leading to more negative assessments of opposing parties (Hawkins 2010). If this is the case, we should observe that citizens who hold more populist views of politics have a stronger sense of in-group belonging and out-group hostility, leading to higher levels of affective polarization.

Thus, the “the attitudinal” hypothesis posits the following:

- H1. Populist attitudes are associated with higher affective polarization among individuals.

Recent research has shown that populist attitudes are related to intolerance of different groups and opinions (Bos, Wichgers, and van Spanje 2021), dogmatism and rejection of political compromise (Stefanelli, Meuleman, and Abts 2023; Plescia and Eberl 2021), and even the endorsement of political violence (Uysal et al. 2023). While these studies suggest that populist attitudes may be a promising explanation for the increase of affectively charged evaluations, the empirical evidence for this link remains mixed. For instance, Stefanelli (2023), looking at individual data from the United States, finds that the relationship between affective polarization and populism exists only among Republicans, while populist attitudes are connected with ideological extremism among Democrats. Using panel data from Spain, Pérez-Rajó (2024) finds that higher populist attitudes increase affective polarization, but voting for a populist party does not.

However, focusing on voters of populist parties, Davis, Goodliffe, and Hawkins (2024) find that they have higher levels of affective polarization across countries compared to voters of non-populist parties. Their research, however, identifies populist voters by the level of populism of the party that respondents report voting for. This measure is not optimal because there are many reasons someone may vote for a populist party. Individuals may vote for populist parties to protest against the current system of power (Muis, Brils, and Gaidytė 2022), for tactical and strategic reasons (Morlino and Raniolo 2017), or for the often extreme ideological positions of these parties (Castanho Silva, Neuner, and Wratil 2022). Therefore, to study the actual relationship between populism and polarization, we should not rely on measures based on party preference, as those are likely to be confounded by other factors.

The Backlash Argument

Scholars have recently argued that populist parties also generate high levels of animosity *against them* from non-populist citizens (Stavrakakis 2018). Similarly to their populist counterparts, mainstream forces often employ strategies that marginalize and vilify populist actors. They characterize their demands as unreasonable, delegitimize their leaders and supporters, and construct institutional barriers as a strategic response to their influence and electoral success. According to this view, affective polarization is not limited to populist individuals alone, but rather, it is a relational and intertwined process that involves the simultaneous vilification of both populist and anti-populist forces (Whitt et al. 2020).

For instance, Harteveld, Mendoza, and Rooduijn (2022) find that, while populist parties receive high levels of disapproval, they also evoke strong negative sentiments among moderate voters. Fuller et al. (2022) note that populism structures citizens' affective ratings of parties both among mainstream and populist voters, indicating the presence of a symmetrical polarization across party lines. Gidron, Adams, and Horne (2023) observe that radical right populist parties receive markedly heightened levels of aversion that surpass what could be attributed to their policy positions, even after accounting for these parties' extreme stances on immigration and national identity (on this point, see also Jungkunz 2021). Based on survey experiments conducted in Sweden and Germany, Renström, Bäck, and Carroll (2023) suggest that moderate voters may feel threatened by populist radical right parties, which, in turn, causes them to form polarized judgments of competing parties. Davis, Goodliffe, and Hawkins (2024) finds that voters of non-populist parties show higher levels of affective polarization in countries with strong populist parties than in countries where populists are not a strong political force. These studies collectively suggest that mainstream voters who strongly dislike populist parties “can be equally—if not more—confrontational, vitriolic, and polarizing than [*their*] populist opponents” (Stavrakakis 2018, p.51).

If populist forces are perceived as dangerous and disruptive by individuals who oppose populist ideas, one would expect to observe a curvilinear relationship between

affinity with populism and affective polarization, wherein both those strongly aligned with populism and those vehemently opposed to it experience more negative evaluations of the rival parties. This proposition aligns with what we term the “backlash hypothesis”.

H2. Individuals on the upper or lower ends of the populist attitude scale have higher levels of affective polarization than those with mild populist attitudes.

Partisan disdain

Finally, Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser (2019) make a convincing argument that citizens with populist attitudes tend to have *negative partisanship* in relation to established political parties. According to this logic, populist individuals are inclined to cast their votes *against* mainstream parties rather than *for* a populist party, should they choose to vote at all (Anduiza, Guinjoan, and Rico 2019; Ardag et al. 2020). This argument aligns with the idea that populism is linked to the rejection of electoral politics as a way to challenge established party-driven mechanisms of interest aggregation (e.g., Mény and Surel 2002). This aligns with what Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan (2018) call *partisan disdain*, or the simple repulsion many people have for political parties and politics in general. The authors find that affective polarization in the U.S. is conflated with disdain for parties in general. We argue that the same mechanism is in place for the relationship between populism and polarization.

If this is the case, populism should be connected to negative evaluations of all the competing political parties instead of a positive evaluation of one’s own party and negative judgment of all the others. In this case, populist individuals may still opt to vote for the “lesser evil”, yet they are likely to refrain from assigning high ratings to their in-party. This is primarily because they perceive political parties as untrustworthy, illegitimate, and fundamentally indistinguishable from one another (e.g. Mair 2013). Our third hypothesis is thus that people with high populist attitudes exhibit a “hating-them-all” logic and, thus, do *not* show higher levels of affective polarization (for a

conceptual distinction between negative partisanship and affective polarization, see Röllicke 2023).

H3. Populist attitudes are related to a higher dislike for all parties in the party system.

3 Data and Measurement

3.1 Data

To test our hypotheses, we employed data from Module 5 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) titled “Democracy Divided? People, Politicians and the Politics of Populism”. This module comprises data from various emerging and established democracies. The data are based on post-election nationally probabilistic samples of respondents aged 16 and older, primarily collected through self-administered web surveys. Along with other relevant attitudes pertaining to politics, the CSES Module 5 encompasses a common module of questions related to populism, which allows us to assess whether populist citizens are more polarized than non-populist ones.

3.2 Case selection

We are interested in established democracies where party evaluations are a meaningful aspect of electoral competition. To draw valid comparisons and increase the analytical leverage of the presented analysis, country cases were excluded based on two criteria. First, some countries (i.e., Ireland and Sweden) were excluded because not all items of the populism battery were asked, particularly the one item that taps into the “Manichaeian outlook” sub-dimension. This is particularly problematic for our analysis due to the fact that some hypotheses ground the association between populism and affective polarization precisely on the good-versus-evil side of populism. For this reason, those countries are not included. Second, we restrict our analysis to those countries where the populist attitudes battery performs relatively well—meaning that, based on confirmatory factor analysis models, the model fit of the scale is acceptable

and factor loadings are above a minimal threshold (i.e., $\lambda \geq .20$). If the measurement model performs poorly, then it is not recommended to investigate further relationships since we are not even sure what we are measuring to begin with. After this procedure, our data set covers 37 elections in 31 unique countries. The total sample size after listwise deletion equals 65970 individuals. More details on the included country cases are reported in the Online Appendix.

3.3 Instruments

3.3.1 Dependent variables

Affective Polarization: This work measures affective polarization as the extent to which citizens develop polarized evaluations of the competing parties. Following Wagner (2021), we formalize affective polarization as $Affective_i = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{p=1}^P (like_{ip} - \overline{affect_i})^2}{n_p}}$ where p is the party, i the individual respondent, $like_{ip}$ the like-dislike thermometer score assigned to each party p by individual i , $\overline{affect_i}$ is the average thermometer score by the individual i (see infra). According to this measure, an individual with low affective polarization rates all the parties similarly, regardless of a positive or negative score. In contrast, an individual with a high level of affective polarization has very different ratings for the different parties. To calculate the index, we used all the available party ratings present in the CSES data¹. In countries with two-party competition (i.e., USA), affective polarization is calculated as the difference between in- and out-party evaluations (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). For Switzerland, party evaluations are not asked; thus, we use leader evaluations.

Average affect: To assess respondents' overall sentiment toward the major political parties in each country-election, we computed the mean of all the party feeling thermometers. The measurement is represented as $\overline{Affect_i} = \frac{\sum_{p=1}^P like_{ip}}{n_p}$, where higher values indicate a more favorable outlook toward all the political parties in the system,

¹It is important to highlight that in the CSES data, feeling thermometers are exclusively administered for the most popular parties. Consequently, smaller parties, accounting for roughly less than 4% of the popular vote, are excluded from the analysis. This prevents potential bias in the affective polarization index resulting from including small, electorally insignificant parties that voters might be unfamiliar with or hold strong negative feelings towards.

while lower values correspond to more unfavorable evaluations. Unlike the affective polarization index, this measure allows us to test whether individuals, particularly those with stronger populist attitudes, are more inclined to hold general disapproval of all the parties without necessarily exhibiting greater polarization in their evaluative judgments, thereby examining Hypothesis 3.

3.3.2 Independent variables

Populist attitudes: We follow previous literature on the topic and extract a measure of latent affinity with populism from the populist attitudes scale included in the CSES questionnaire (Table 1) through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The scale was originally developed by the CSES planning committee (Hobolt et al. 2017) using items from the battery developed by Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde (2012) and further expanded by Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014). Castanho Silva, Jungkunz, et al. (2020) have demonstrated that this scale operates in a similar manner and exhibits a correlation of $r > .8$ with other widely utilized populist attitudes scales. As the CSES scale displays an imbalance in favor of anti-elitism, we have adopted the approach proposed by Castanho Silva, Fuks, and Tamaki (2022), which involves selecting items with the highest factor loading for each sub-dimension. In the Online Appendix, we report a series of robustness tests using different operationalizations of populism, detailed insights into the CFA models, and results from the invariance tests, which show that the scale can be used in cross-country/election regression models.

	Item	Mean	Std Dev	Std. Loading (λ)
E3004_2 (AE)	Most politicians do not care about the people.	3.20	1.27	0.75
E3004_6 (PC)	The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.	3.34	1.27	0.55
E3004_1 (M)	What people call compromise in politics is really just selling out one's principles.	2.92	1.24	0.62
CFI=0.983, RMSEA=0.061, SRMR=0.028				

Note: AE= anti-elitism, PC= people centrism, M= Manicheism. Std. loadings (λ) based on the pooled sample. Fit indices obtained from a metric model with fixed factor loadings across the different country-election cases.

Table 1: Populist items, means, and standardized (Std.) factor loadings across the entire sample.

Controls: The main factor we control for is ideological extremity, which has been found to explain support for populist parties better than populist attitudes themselves across different contexts (Castanho Silva, Fuks, and Tamaki 2022; Dai and Kustov 2023; Neuner and Wratil 2022). We follow previous literature on the topic and use a folded measure of left-right ideological self-identification to measure ideological extremity (Mason 2015). The resulting index is a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (moderate) to 5 (strong left- or right-wing).² To rule out potential confounders and account for compositional differences between countries, we control for gender (Male, Female),

²The reason for using the left-right scale instead of policy issues is twofold. Firstly, the CSES data lacks a comprehensive set of concrete issues for measuring ideological extremity within multidimensional issue spaces. The left-right spectrum serves as a "super issue," summarizing the political conflict across various dimensions and offering a way to gauge respondents' extremity on society's most significant divisions (Conover and Feldman 1984; Azevedo et al. 2019; Knutsen 1995). Secondly, and related, the left-right continuum functions as a general heuristic that maps into unique ideological divisions related to equality (left-wing) and liberty (right-wing) (Bobbio 1996). As such, it is less vulnerable to sudden shifts in the dynamics of the party competition, making it a more robust measure of ideological extremity across different contexts and time (Caprara 2020).

age (continuous), and education (continuous, 9 categories). Descriptive statistics are reported in the Online Appendix.

3.4 Modelling approach

To test our hypothesis, we resort to OLS regressions with country-election fixed effects and cluster robust standard errors. The continuous variables are centered and standardized by subtracting the means of each country-election from the individual scores. All analyses apply weights such that the estimated coefficients are adjusted for (1) sampling design and non-response rate and (2) a weighting factor that divides the total weights for the whole sample by the weights for each election, thus giving each case equal weight (Abou-Chadi and Finnigan 2019).

To answer our hypotheses, we estimated two sets of models. The first set employs fixed-effect models to estimate a general measure of association between our key variables. By pooling the sample and introducing country-election fixed effects, we control for unobserved country-election-specific factors that might influence the outcome variable³. The second set of models estimates country-election-specific coefficients interacting the independent variable of interest with the country-election fixed effects. This procedure is similar to estimating a regression model for each case but has the added advantage of taking into account compositional differences between the included cases and increasing statistical power.

The factor models are estimated using the SEM package Lavaan (Rosseel 2012) while the fixed-effect OLS regressions are fitted using the fixest package (Bergé 2018) in the R version 4.2.1 (R Core Team 2022). More details on the modeling approach are reported in the Online Appendix.

³To be more specific, fixed-effects models don't actually "control" for country-election confounders. Rather, they solely rely on within-unit (i.e., individual) variation, which is inherently unaffected by between-unit disparities (Kropko and Kubinec 2020).

4 Results

We begin our analysis by examining the connection between affective polarization and a latent measure of populist attitudes. Table 2 shows that populist individuals do not exhibit more or affectively polarized evaluations of the competing parties compared to individuals scoring lower on the populist attitudes scale: In Model 1, populist attitudes do not correlate with respondents' levels of affective polarization. Notably, populist attitudes fail to explain any substantial amount of variance in the measure of affective polarization and the estimated coefficients are small and insignificant. This contradicts H1, which posited a positive relationship between populist attitudes and affective polarization.

In Model 2, we include a polynomial term of degree 2 for the populist attitudes measure to capture non-linear effects. This allows us to test H2 by assessing whether both populist and non-populist individuals are equally polarized. The results show a pronounced U-shaped curvilinear relationship between populist attitudes and affective polarization. Individuals scoring low and high on the populist attitudes scale exhibit greater affective polarization when contrasted with those with an average affinity with populism. It is important to highlight that affectively charged evaluations are only present among individuals who score 1.5 standard deviations above or below the mean of the populist attitude scale, indicating that polarization is linked to either the strong acceptance or strong rejection of populism. These findings lend support to H2, suggesting the presence of a backlash effect where both populist and anti-populist citizens display heightened levels of affective polarization.

As we show in Figure 1, this curvilinear relationship holds in most countries, but there is no discernible pattern as to where it does or does not, contrary to the findings by Davis, Goodliffe, and Hawkins (2024) using the proxy measure of populist voting. For example, in Czechia (2021), Germany, and Montenegro, we find a linear but negative relationship between populist attitudes and affective polarization, while in Austria, Italy, Mexico, and Slovakia, all of which had very significant populist forces at the time, the curvilinear relationship is absent, showing that non-populist voters

do not appear to be particularly polarized. These findings confirm the observation we made in the pooled sample model (Model 1), indicating that there is insufficient evidence to support the notion that individuals with a stronger affinity for populism exhibit heightened levels of affective polarization.

In Model 3, we include ideological extremism, a potential confounder in any relationship between populist attitudes and political outcomes. Our results indicate that the curvilinear relationship between populist attitudes and polarization remains, but those who are more extreme on the left-right scale are also significantly more polarized ($\beta = .165, SE = .019$). This is in line with previous literature that consistently finds a relationship between extremism and polarization (e.g., Mason 2015). It also shows that ideological extremism is a stronger correlate of affective polarization than populist attitudes. In the Online Appendix, we look at the coefficients of ideological extremity on affective polarization across countries: it is consistently positive and linear in all countries in the study, confirming that it is a much more relevant substantive correlate of affective polarization than populist attitudes.

Finally, in Model 4 in Table 2, we observe that individuals with high affinity with populism show lower average affect levels. This result indicates that, on average, populist individuals hold more negative sentiments toward all political parties. The estimated coefficients in the average affect model are notably larger than those in the affective polarization model, hovering around 1/5 of a standard deviation. In the Online Appendix, we show that the negative relationship between populism and average affect is consistent and linear across the selected cases, indicating that populist individuals are consistently more negative towards political parties compared to non-populists. This finding, together with the limited support for the polarizing effect of populism (H1), corroborates H3, which suggests that populist attitudes are linked to general disapproval of all the parties in the system rather than polarized and negatively charged evaluations of the out-party.

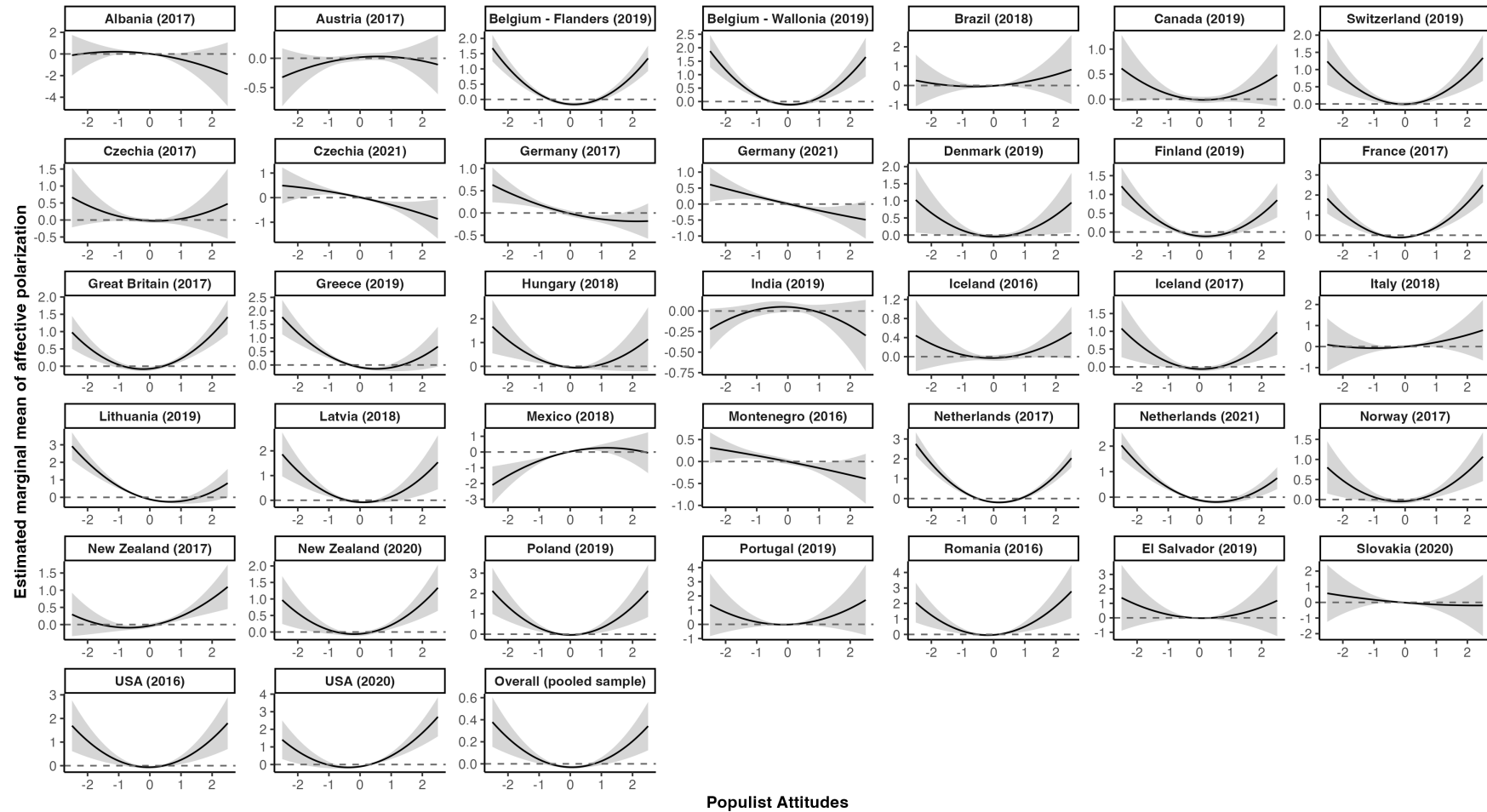
Dependent Variables: Model:	Affective Polarization			Average Affect
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Variables</i>				
Populist Attitudes	-0.0137 (0.0107)	-0.0095 (0.0110)	-0.0186* (0.0098)	-0.2310*** (0.0199)
Populist Attitudes Squared		0.0542*** (0.0159)	0.0416*** (0.0148)	
Ideological Extremity			0.1624*** (0.0188)	
Female (Ref: Male)	0.0211* (0.0123)	0.0234* (0.0126)	0.0218* (0.0115)	0.1047*** (0.0109)
Education	0.0258*** (0.0074)	0.0260*** (0.0075)	0.0273*** (0.0070)	-0.0042 (0.0143)
Age	0.0357*** (0.0116)	0.0348*** (0.0116)	0.0289** (0.0109)	-0.0326*** (0.0116)
<i>Fixed-effects</i>				
Country-election	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>				
Observations	65,970	65,970	65,970	65,970
R ²	0.33022	0.33155	0.38373	0.20169
Within R ²	0.00551	0.00748	0.08496	0.02963
Country-elections	37	37	37	37

Clustered (Country-election) standard-errors in parentheses

*Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Table 2: Fixed-effect regressions

Figure 1: Marginal mean of affective polarization at different levels of populist attitudes, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates. Full regression table reported in the Online Appendix.



Populist Attitudes

Results obtained allowing the coefficient of populism to vary across country-elections (Model 2)

4.1 Robustness

In the Online Appendix, we perform several robustness and sensitivity tests. First, we employ alternative measures of affective polarization based on different operationalizations proposed by Wagner (2021) and Reiljan (2020). These results consistently align with the paper’s findings, either remaining unchanged or indicating a linear and negative relationship between polarization and populist attitudes.

Second, we use several alternative operationalizations of populist attitudes, including a sum score index, a CFA model that uses the entire CSES scale, and the non-compensatory approach proposed by Wuttke, Schimpf, and Schoen (2020). These different models yield results in line with the ones presented in the manuscript, with minor deviations that do not significantly impact the overall conclusions.

Third, we gauge the effect of populism through respondents’ (stated) voting preferences. Our findings indicate that supporters of populist parties do not exhibit significantly more polarized party evaluations compared to those voting for mainstream parties. Nevertheless, our analysis reveals heightened polarization among voters of far left and right parties, further reaffirming that extremism is an important correlate of affective polarization.

Finally, we assess whether results are affected by controlling for additional confounding variables, namely left-right self-placement, political interest, and internal political efficacy. To maximize our sample size, we opted not to incorporate these extra variables into the main model’s specification. However, these additional analyses indicate that these variables do not substantially alter the conclusions reached in our study.

5 Conclusions

As Adam Przeworski (1991) famously said, democracy is a system where parties lose elections. The violent scenes observed in Washington DC and Brasília shortly after the defeats of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, respectively, carried out by supporters

who did not accept the electoral results, are a teaser of the dire consequences that can follow from highly polarized political environments. Given that both of these presidents and other polarizing figures around the world are often considered populists, the pressing question is whether and how populism and affective polarization are connected. In this paper, we tackle this question from a wide comparative perspective, looking at data from 37 elections in 31 countries.

Our findings challenge the conventional notion that populism is intrinsically linked to affective hostility across party lines. Our results suggest that individuals with a high affinity with populism do not exhibit significantly higher levels of affective polarization compared to their non-populist counterparts. In fact, the levels of affective polarization are similar for both those citizens who strongly endorse or reject populist ideas. At the same time, those in the middle of the scale tend not to see the political world so much in in-group versus out-group terms. Additionally, we observe distinct and idiosyncratic patterns in the selected cases, revealing a substantial amount of heterogeneity in the relationship between populism and affective polarization. Our analysis also indicates that populist attitudes are associated with a lower average appreciation for all parties in the system rather than polarized evaluations of rival parties. Altogether, these findings suggest that the connection between populism and affective judgments noted in previous studies (e.g., Fuller et al. 2022; Pérez-Rajó 2024) is, by no means, generalize to all western democracies, let alone other regions.

These results are important on several accounts. First, previous research has argued that the polarizing logic embedded within populist ideas is responsible for an asymmetrical polarization in the electorate, with populist voters becoming polarized against all the other parties in the political system (e.g. Roberts 2022). Our results indicate that this is not the case: populists do not disproportionately harbor significantly more contempt for members of opposing parties compared to non-populists. While there may be a correlation between the success of populist parties and affective polarization, populists are not the only ones who become negative towards political rivals. This runs contrary to previous analyses that identified a connection between

voting for populist parties and affective polarization (Davis, Goodliffe, and Hawkins 2024), a relationship likely confounded by other factors, notably ideological extremity, which motivates many individuals to support populist candidates.

Second, our results suggest populism is connected to disdain for all parties, reflecting a broader sense of democratic discontent. This aligns with an emerging body of literature that asserts that populism is closely intertwined with political apathy, a phenomenon rooted in disillusionment with party politics and cynicism toward traditional forms of political participation (Fieschi and Heywood 2004; Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser 2019; Krouwel and Abts 2007). While populism often capitalizes on a widespread resentment toward mainstream parties, it can also induce citizens to disengage from conventional political processes due to a perceived lack of political responsiveness. In this context, populist ideas may not necessarily polarize individuals against specific parties but exacerbate feelings of alienation and detachment from party politics.

Finally, our results follow recent research showing that ideological extremity, rather than populist attitudes, is an important correlate of citizens attitudes and behavior (Castanho Silva, Fuks, and Tamaki 2022; Castanho Silva, Neuner, and Wratil 2022; Dai and Kustov 2023; Neuner and Wratil 2022). It is, thus, likely that the increasing levels of affective polarization witnessed in some Western democracies are the result of the ability of (populist) party leaders to polarize the electorate around certain positional issues, notably those pertaining to redistribution (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2018) anti-immigration (Simonsen and Bonikowski 2022). Citizens may then utilize these issues as yardsticks to evaluate competing candidates, ultimately resulting in more critical assessments of parties holding differing ideological positions.

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