

Affective polarization and in-group emotional consensus: Evidence from the climate and immigration cleavages in Germany

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Partisan context with clearly defined in- and out-group boundaries. In multi-party systems, however, the most relevant polarized groups may be defined by criteria other than partisanship, for instance, issue positions. Second, affective polarization typically emphasizes valenced stances towards out-groups, neglecting emotional in-group dynamics. The present study addresses these gaps. Using an innovative social media sampling approach, we fielded a survey of politically engaged individuals living in Germany interested in climate change (N = 2,477) and immigration (N = 3,177). Relative to respondents' policy positions on these cleavages, we assess their affective stances towards those holding the same or opposing positions and measure their perceived emotional consensus, i.e., the degree to which respondents interpret their own emotional reactions towards these issues as aligned with reactions of those who hold the same or opposing (conservative vs. progressive) positions. Cluster analyses based on these measures reveal a four-cluster solution across the two cleavages: (1) conservative positions, negative affect towards progressives, and a high emotional consensus; (2) progressive positions, negative affect towards conservatives, and a high emotional consensus; (3) respondents with generally negative affect and low emotional consensus; (4) and a cluster of mixed patterns. This indicates that strong out-group affect is associated with the perception of consensual in-group emotions in view of political issues, regardless of the policy position.

However, our data show that conservatives and progressives differ in their pathways to polarization: conservatives favor more private forms of political engagement, discussing issues primarily amongst strong-tie networks, whereas progressives favor public forms of political expression, showing higher levels of political engagement. Finally, polarized conservatives and progressives are also distinct in terms of socio-demographics, as indicated by their positioning in a Blau space. These distances limit bridging interactions, tend to reinforce stereotypical out-group perceptions, and may thus exacerbate affective polarization.