

Background information on Affective Polarization:

Spurring from the much older academic debate surrounding ideological polarization, Shanto Iyengar, Yphtach Lelkes, and Gaurav Sood, coined the term “affective polarization” to capture the development that “Republicans and Democrats increasingly dislike, even loathe, their opponents” (Iyengar et al., 2012, p. 405). Affective polarization is commonly explained through a social identity lens. It is thought to be rooted in political affiliation that is self-internalized as a social identity as a way to create security about one’s own beliefs, actions and belonging. From this internalization, a dislike towards the out-group emerges. The measure of the intensification of affective polarization is explained through different mechanisms. On the one a change in communication systems is emphasized, on the other hand the increasing ‘trickle down’ effect of elite polarization is emphasized. Nonetheless, conceptualizations of affective polarization diverge as to whether affective polarization is a ‘given’ feature of groups relations or a transformation of group relations. Furthermore, the negative attitude towards the other is differently described as hatred, contempt or disappointment. Also, it is unclear why these negative emotions towards the outgroup exist in the first place.

A gap in the current empirical literature on affective polarization regarding its origin, functioning and intensification emerges. *The Handbook of Affective Polarization* alludes to this gap when mentioning a possible future problem for the literature on affective polarization (Torcal & Harteveld, 2025, p. 6):

As the field of affective polarization develops, there is a danger of fragmentation, with different subfields studying different classes of explanations in isolation. While this is reason for caution, the field does benefit from some unifying theoretical approaches, most importantly SIT [social identity theory] and related traditions, which help to bring insights from different studies together.

This quote highlights that theories such as social identity theory and related traditions that bridge various disciplines are insightful, and provide an alternative to possible fragmentation. However, I argue that SIT still leaves a large part of affective polarization and its many components unexplained. The field could benefit from a comprehensive meta-theory on affective polarization that merges philosophical anthropology and sociology. For instance, SIT describes group-formation and positive and negative sentiment towards the in- and out-group, but it cannot fully explain on a more fundamental level *why* this sorting in political identities occurs, and where this negative sentiment towards the other to feel security about oneself comes from. Furthermore, SIT does not shed much light on the functioning of disappointment, hatred or contempt in affective polarization. Also, there are unanswered question when it comes to the relationship between elite and popular polarization. There is no clear meta-theorizing how these two polarizations influence each other, and in what cases that can be problematic. Other phenomena related to the intensification of affective polarization, such as the role of social media, the language of political elites ‘trickling down’ and their interplay, are yet to be explained by a comprehensive meta-theory on the functioning of affective polarization.

With regards to political theory and affective polarization, affective polarization has been studied from liberal-democratic, agonistic and deliberative democratic points of view. The current existing political theory seems to talk at cross-purposes, because there is disagreement about whether affective polarization is a ‘given’ feature of society or not, what type of affect plays a role in affective polarization and how affective polarization ought to be defined in the first place. For instance, scholars who analyze affective polarization from either a liberal-

democratic standpoint or a deliberative democratic standpoint base their normative evaluations and concerns on affective polarizations' possible effects. These scholars highlight the effects affective polarization can have on social trust, rights restrictions, biases, the mobilization of citizens, the politicization of norms, and the prominence of affect in contrast to reason. The question as to whether affective polarization is a 'given feature' of a society is not asked. Agonistic scholars, however, distinguish their approach by analyzing to what extent forms of affective polarization necessarily exist in a liberal-democratic order and in what forms affective polarization threatens the liberal-democratic order. The current political theoretical literature seems unanimous with regards to the extreme cases in which polarization is problematic such as polarization that leads to hatred, rights-restriction and unfair treatment, but seems vague on effects and types of polarization that remain on the middle line. Namely, polarization's mobilizing effects, or types of polarization that are reasonable and possibly modifiable.

Against the backdrop of both a gap in the current empirical literature on affective polarization and the relatively sparse political theorizing on affective polarization, it seems that the field lacks a comprehensive theory that explains affective polarization's origin, functioning, and intensification. A theory on human anthropology with a further reach than social identity theory is missing. In my thesis, I will show that Rene Girard's theory of mimetic desire, mimetic rivalry, and the scapegoat mechanism can shed new light on affective polarization. By comparing affective polarization to Girard's concept of mimetic rivalry, I will argue that the literature on affective polarization forgets to include a third party: the scapegoat. It is the treatment of the scapegoat where democratic backsliding may also be visible. Thus, I argue that scapegoating ought to play a larger role in affective polarization theory.