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The Impact of Affective Polarization on Political Participation: A Systematic Review

Political Studies
2026, Vol. 74(2) 525–548
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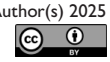
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Abstract

Affective polarization is widely considered detrimental to democratic processes, yet recent research suggests it may play an important role in political participation. This systematic review investigates the impact of affective polarization on political participation, synthesizing findings from 18 empirical studies. Through a comprehensive search across multiple databases, we address the fragmented understanding of the link between affective polarization and institutional (e.g. voter turnout) and non-institutional (e.g. protest) forms of participation. Our findings indicate that most studies show a positive association between affective polarization and political participation, with stronger evidence for its impact on institutional than on non-institutional participation. This pattern also holds for habitual versus non-habitual participation, albeit with variations across different cultural and political contexts. Finally, we highlight the need for further research, particularly through longitudinal and experimental designs and by examining the mechanisms through which affective polarization is linked to political participation.

Keywords

affective polarization, political participation, systematic review, institutional participation, non-institutional participation

Accepted: 17 March 2025

Introduction

Affective polarization, defined as the extent to which individuals feel more positively toward their own political party (in-group) and more negatively toward opposing parties (outgroups) (Rudolph and Hetherington, 2021; Wagner, 2021), has received significant attention in recent years (e.g. Wagner, 2024). Although research has largely focused on the USA (Rudolph and Hetherington, 2021; Webster and Abramowitz, 2017), recent

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studies have explored affective polarization also in multiprty systems that exist across Europe (Bettarelli et al., 2022; Harteveld and Wagner, 2022; Wagner, 2024).

An individual's identification with a political party forms a significant part of their social identity (West and Iyengar, 2022) and is a crucial factor influencing political behavior and beliefs (Azrout and de Vreese, 2018; Campbell et al., 1980; Collins et al., 2021; Krishna and Kim, 2023). Furthermore, such identification may evoke strong emotional reactions—in-group love (favoring one's own party) and out-group hate (opposing other parties) (Rudolph and Hetherington, 2021). While ideological polarization refers to divisions based on policy preferences and ideological beliefs (Iyengar et al., 2019), affective polarization captures the extent to which individuals feel positively toward their own political party (in-group) and negatively toward opposing parties (outgroups) (Rudolph and Hetherington, 2021; Wagner, 2021). In this way, affective polarization encapsulates both in-group love and out-group hate (Rudolph and Hetherington, 2021; Wagner, 2021), making it a particularly useful framework for understanding political attitudes and behaviors.

Affective polarization is associated with several outcomes that undermine democratic functioning. For instance, it may undermine support for democratic norms (Kingzette et al., 2021), decrease social trust (Lee, 2022), and heighten discrimination against those from opposing parties (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). An analysis by Orhan (2022) of 170 national election surveys across 53 countries found that rising affective polarization is linked to democratic backsliding, defined as a decline in the quality of democratic governance within regimes (Orhan, 2022: 719). This, in turn, leads to weakened democratic institutions, reduced civil liberties, lower political accountability, increased corruption, and a departure from democratic norms and principles. Given these effects, affective polarization is often viewed negatively (Harteveld and Wagner, 2023).

However, research suggests that affective polarization may have positive consequences, such as increased political participation (Bettarelli et al., 2022; Cubillos Ramdohr, 2022; Harteveld and Wagner, 2023; Johnston, 2006; Ward and Tavits, 2019) and greater political knowledge (Holmgren, 2021; Suk et al., 2022). Ward and Tavits (2019) build on social identity theory to explain that when politics is perceived as a competition between groups (ingroups and outgroups), the stakes seem heightened. This perception leads to increased political participation because a party's success or failure is seen as directly impacting the individual's social group, making voting more significant. Other studies also show increased turnout under conditions of heightened affective polarization (Ellger, 2023; Kim, 2017). In addition, Bettarelli et al. (2022) found that high levels of affective polarization correlate with increased participation in protest activities.

Despite the evidence linking affective polarization with increased political participation, some studies fail to find a consistent association (Ali & Altawil, 2023; Phillips, 2024). For example, Phillips (2024) shows that affective polarization is associated with higher turnout among those who have previously voted, but not among those who have not previously participated. Similarly, he found that affective polarization is linked to non-voting political participation, but only among those who were already politically active (Phillips, 2024). Nevertheless, the majority of evidence suggests that, under certain conditions, affective polarization is positively linked to political participation (Bettarelli et al., 2022; Cubillos Ramdohr, 2022; Harteveld and Wagner, 2023).

In addition to this mixed evidence, research on affective polarization's impact on political participation is fragmented. First, there are discrepancies in definitions and measures of affective polarization (Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021). Furthermore,

some authors focus on institutional participation (Ahn and Mutz, 2023; Ellger, 2023; Harteveld and Wagner, 2023), while others study non-institutional participation (Bettarelli et al., 2022; Scherman et al., 2022), while some scholars examine both types of participation (Kim, 2017; Lee and Cho, 2023). In addition, existing studies have been conducted in different cultural contexts. For example, Ali and Altawil (2023) found no significant link between affective polarization and political participation in the USA, while Lee et al. (2023) observed a positive association in South Korea. Similarly, Harteveld and Wagner (2023) found a positive association between affective polarization and voter turnout across three European countries. In sum, varying methodologies and contexts in research on the link between affective polarization and political participation result in a scattered understanding.

In addition, even though political participation is often viewed as a key characteristic of democracy (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010; Mutz, 2002; Pattie and Jonston, 2013), its impact is not uniformly positive. For example, while participation can strengthen democracy by making governments more accountable to their citizens (Fernandes et al., 2015), it can also heighten divisions between groups that do not have equal access to political participation, which can skew representation and undermine democracy (Mathisen and Peters, 2024). Thus, recognizing these differences and distinguishing between types of political participation (e.g. institutional and non-institutional) is crucial for understanding the effects of political participation and promoting a fair and effective democratic process.

We are unaware of any systematic review that has examined existing research on whether affective polarization affects political participation. We seek to fill this gap by synthesizing studies on this issue, including selected gray literature as suggested by Harrer et al. (2021). The objective of this systematic review is to examine the association between affective polarization and institutional political participation, such as voting, and non-institutional political participation, such as participating in protests. We define institutional political participation as participation organized by the political elite, particularly political parties, whereas non-institutional participation is mainly used by non-elite actors to challenge the political elite or to influence the political agenda (Hooghe and Quintelier, 2012). In addition, we aim to examine the measurement and operationalization of affective polarization and political participation as well as theoretical frameworks employed in existing studies. Such an integrated perspective is essential for guiding future research and informing policymakers and educators to better understand whether and how affective polarization can motivate political participation. This is especially crucial in light of evidence that some forms of political participation, such as voter turnout, have been declining in recent years (Akram et al., 2014; Graudiņa, 2022; Sloam et al., 2021).

We begin this systematic review by detailing the strategy for finding the relevant studies, including the inclusion criteria and the analytical framework employed to synthesize existing literature. The results include a descriptive analysis, highlighting differences in the link between affective polarization and institutional versus non-institutional political participation. In addition, we examine methodological aspects of the studies in our sample, focusing on how affective polarization and political participation were measured. We conclude by summarizing the key insights and proposing areas for future research and practical implications.

Methods

Design and Search Strategy

We performed a systematic review following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines, a cornerstone for ensuring methodological rigor in conducting systematic reviews (Moher et al., 2009) (Figure 1). This approach was complemented by Petticrew and Roberts' (2005) guidelines for conducting structured reviews in social sciences. We searched databases including the Web of Science (WoS), JSTOR, ProQuest, Sage Journals, Taylor & Francis Online, and ScienceDirect in December 2023 for articles on affective polarization and various types of political participation. We restricted our search to articles published in English from 2000 onwards. We used the following search terms, adapting them to each database's indexing style (the example below is adapted to search in WoS):

TS=("attitude polari$ation" OR "affective polari$ation" OR "social polari$ation" OR "partisan affect") AND TS=("political participation" OR "institutional participation" OR "institutional engagement" OR "formal political participation" OR "governmental involvement" OR "voter turnout" OR "electoral participation" OR "electoral involvement" OR "voting" OR "formal political engagement" OR "governmental activity participation" OR "political campaigns" OR "electorate behavior" OR "non-institutional participation" OR "grassroots involvement" OR "civic engagement" OR "civic involvement" OR "protest" OR "demonstration participation" OR "activism" OR "social movement participation" OR "demonstration" OR "demonstrations" OR "political involvement")

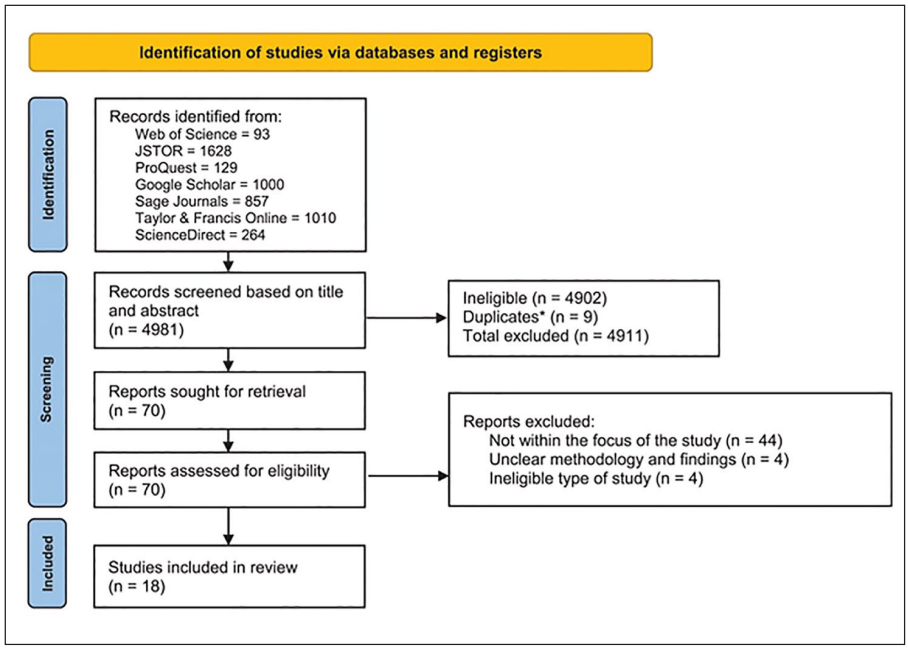

Figure 1. PRISMA Text Selection Process.
*Duplicates assessed after first screening of abstract and title.

Recognizing the importance of comprehensive coverage, our search strategy included gray literature to address potential publication bias (Harrer et al., 2021; Moher et al., 2009). Our searches for gray literature were conducted via Google Scholar and ProQuest's repositories for dissertations, conference papers, and working papers in January 2024. Given the sheer volume of results, we decided to limit the Google Scholar search to the first 1,000 hits, in line with established guidelines for handling large datasets (Haddaway et al., 2015). In addition to limiting publication bias, this inclusion of gray literature ensured comprehensive coverage of findings (Harrer et al., 2021; Moher et al., 2009).

Inclusion and Exclusion

In the screening phase, titles and abstracts were manually screened against the exclusion criteria before full-text screening. We excluded studies where (1) the primary focus of the study was not on the link between affective polarization and political participation (e.g. voter turnout, protest participation) (n = 44); (2) the methodology or findings were not clearly presented (n = 4); and (3) the articles were methodologically ineligible (e.g. non-empirical, such as theoretical or model-based studies) (n = 4). The same exclusion criteria were used in all stages of paper selection for the final sample. If information on one or more criteria was incomplete, papers were included in the full-text screening stage. The final dataset for analysis included 18 empirical studies (Appendix A) that directly addressed our research questions regarding how affective polarization affects political participation.

Extraction, Analysis, and Quality Assessment. To extract the data from the 18 eligible studies, we used an MS Excel summary table (Berman et al., 2023; Palmaccio et al., 2021), enabling comparisons of study population, affective polarization measurement and operationalization, types of political participation included, and the relationship between affective polarization and political participation, along with the theoretical backgrounds and methods of each study.

Study quality was assessed using a modified Newcastle–Ottawa scale (NOS), evaluating sample selection, comparability, and outcome ascertainment (Herzog et al., 2013). Most studies were of good quality, achieving a total score of 7 or 8 out of 10 (n = 11). The average quality score was 7.7 (range = 6–10 stars) (see Appendix B, Table B1). The most common quality issues included unsubstantiated sample size choice, insufficient detail on response rates, and incomplete information on the characteristics of both respondents and non-respondents.

We did not perform a meta-analysis due to substantial methodological differences in design, measurement, and context across the studies analyzed. Consequently, this systematic review presents its findings in a narrative format.

Classification of Participation Types. A key challenge in synthesizing the literature on affective polarization and political participation lies in the diverse ways studies handle political participation variables. For example, some studies separate voting from other forms of political participation (e.g. Phillips, 2024, who distinguished voting from non-voting participation). Other studies distinguish between multiple forms of political participation (e.g. Wiezel and Wagner, 2023, who analyzed activities like displaying campaign material, attending protests, and posting online as distinct variables). In contrast, some studies, like Ali and Altawil (2023), combine institutional and non-institutional participation into

a single composite measure, making it challenging to fully disaggregate results. To accurately reflect these distinctions, we adopted the study as the unit of classification. Studies addressing overlapping dimensions are included in joint categories (e.g. "institutional and non-institutional") to represent their broader focus, while studies with distinct variables are categorized accordingly.

Results

This section synthesizes and analyzes the research findings from our final dataset. Following a common approach in systematic literature reviews (e.g. Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021; Vásquez-Vera et al., 2017), we begin with a descriptive analysis of publication dates and geographic contexts of the studies. Next, we highlight the key findings and theoretical foundations of the included studies and examine authors' operationalization of affective polarization and political participation. Finally, we address the methodological limitations and recommendations identified in the studies within our dataset.

Descriptive Analysis

Most of the 18 studies in the final sample were conducted in high-income countries, predominantly the United States, with sample sizes ranging from 387 to over 48,000 participants. The main characteristics are shown in Table 1. The studies used various research designs, including cross-sectional (n = 10), panel (n = 4), and mixed (n = 3) approaches, with data collection years ranging from 1980 to 2023. Sixteen of the studies were published after 2020, with the oldest paper in the sample published in 2017. The studies included both national and cross-national populations.

We first examined the association between affective polarization and both institutional (activities organized by political elites) and non-institutional (actions by non-elite actors to influence political outcomes) political participation. In examining the link between affective polarization and institutional political participation, most studies indicate a positive association. Specifically, 7 out of 13 studies that examined institutional participation separately report a positive effect of affective polarization on activities like voter turnout. The remaining studies presented mixed results, showing both positive and non-significant associations (Figure 2). For instance, Harteveld and Wagner's (2023) research in Germany, The Netherlands, and Spain found a positive correlation between affective polarization and voter turnout. A similar finding was reported in a broader analysis by Wagner (2021) across 51 countries and by Ward and Tavits (2019) in 34 countries. Conversely, a study by Phillips (2024) in the USA found no significant effect of affective polarization on voter turnout among individuals without a history of voting. This suggests that the impact of affective polarization may depend on an individual's previous engagement in political participation or established voting habits. Collectively, the research in our sample suggests that affective polarization drives electoral participation, though further research is needed to understand how contextual factors (such as specific cultures or political events) might moderate this link.

Three studies in our sample focused specifically on non-institutional political participation, examining it separately from institutional participation. Two of these studies showed mixed results, with outcomes varying by national context or type of participation, while one study found a consistently positive link (Figure 2). In Belgium, Bettarelli et al. (2022) found that affective polarization, when accompanied by a combination of anger and hope, is more strongly associated with protest actions than anger alone, making it a key driver of protest behavior. Therefore, while affective polarization can be a significant driver of non-institutional political participation, its effects may depend on specific

Table 1. Summary of Main Characteristics.

Author and Year	Country	Study design	Study population and sample size	Type of PP	Summary of findings	NOS
Ahn and Mutz (2023)	USA	Mixed (cross-sectional and panel)	Data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) spanning presidential election years from 1980 to 2020, and nationally representative panel survey data, collected from October 2016 (N = 3214) to October 2020 (N = 1297).	Institutional: intent to vote, self-reported turnout, and validated voting	AP had limited, inconsistent effects on voter turnout, while candidate thermometer differences more reliably predicted both pre- and post-election self-reported turnout. When using validated voting data, AP significantly predicted turnout in only one of five years, and candidate thermometer differences showed no significant prediction in individual years, though pooled results with year fixed effects suggested a higher likelihood of voting based on candidate thermometer differences. Concluded that rising AP has little to no significant consequences for voter turnout.	9
Ali and Altawil (2023)	USA	Cross-sectional	Nationally representative U.S. sample of 1100 participants.	Both, institutional and non-institutional, e.g. signing a petition and donating money to a campaign or organization	No significant relationship between AP and PP was found.	9
Bettarelli et al. (2022)	Belgium	Panel	Quota sample for panel participants based on gender, age, education, region; slight overrepresentation of higher educated and age group 45–65. Samples for relevant models M2: 5990; M3: 5829; M4: 5753.	Non-institutional participation: reported participation in protest actions	Anger and hope combined are more strongly associated with protest action than anger alone. AP is a key driver of protest behavior.	6
Cubillos Ramdohr (2022)	Chile	Experimental	Presidential study in Chile with 2133 respondents, plebiscite study with 1499 respondents; samples balanced across gender, age, socioeconomic groups, and geographical areas.	Institutional: Self-reported turnout	AP has a significant positive effect on intended turnout behavior.	6

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Author and Year	Country	Study design	Study population and sample size	Type of PP	Summary of findings	NOS
Ellger (2023)	22 European countries	Cross-sectional	ANES data from 1980 to 2020; survey data from 22 European parliamentary systems with responses ranging from 46,505 to 48,681 individuals, depending on inclusion of covariates.	Institutional: Actual and self-reported turnout	Negative affect drove both actual and self-reported turnout, while positive affect was only linked to self-reported turnout and had no effect on actual turnout.	8
Garzia and Ferreira da Silva (2022)	USA	Cross-sectional	CAWI survey by Qualtrics International, representative of American voting population in terms of age, gender, macro-region; fieldwork conducted November 9–29, 2020; total N = 1064.	Institutional: Negative voting	Negative voting significantly increases among individuals for whom out-candidate hate outweighs in-candidate love.	8
Harteveld and Wagner (2023)	Germany, The Netherlands and Spain	Mixed (repeated cross-sectional and panel)	Data from Germany: 'Politbarometer' polls (telephone, sample size 908 to 7198); Spain: E-DEM dataset, four-wave online panel; Netherlands: LISS panel based on probability sample, total of 8205 unique individuals from 2008–2018.	Institutional: Actual and self-reported turnout	The study confirms a positive correlation between AP and voter turnout across three countries.	8
İmamoğlu (2022)	Turkey	Cross-sectional	Study on voter turnout in Turkey using CSES Modules 3 to 5, three post-election surveys (2011, 2015, 2018); effective sample size of 2565.	Institutional: Voter turnout	AP has a positive and statistically significant effect on voter turnout across all measures.	6
Kim (2017)	USA	Cross-sectional	Utilized data from the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey, a rolling cross-sectional study involving a random sample of Americans surveyed during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. 1677 observations.	Institutional: campaign-related activities	AP has a significant positive effect on PP.	7

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Author and Year	Country	Study design	Study population and sample size	Type of PP	Summary of findings	NOS
Lee and Cho (2023)	USA	Panel	Employed national panel survey data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) covering the 2012, 2016, and 2020 U.S. presidential elections. Sample sizes: 5914 for 2012, 4271 for 2016, 8280 for 2020. Representative of the U.S. voting population.	Institutional: various voluntary participatory activities	Like-minded news exposure is positively associated to PP through political talk and AP. However, the impact of cross-cutting news exposure is less consistent and varies across different election contexts. AP has a significant positive effect on PP.	8
Lee et al. (2023)	Korea	Panel	Three-wave national panel survey in South Korea during the 2022 presidential election. Sample matched to Korean population based on age, gender, region. W1: 1713 participants, W2: 1223, W3: 881 complete surveys with 51.4% retention rate.	Both, institutional and non-institutional, but not voting	AP is positively associated with PP. The results show a unidirectional influence from AP to PP without a reciprocal effect.	10
Nelson (2022)	USA	Cross-sectional	Nationally representative sample of Americans from the Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel; total of 4685 participants.	Both, institutional and non-institutional, but not voting	AP positively associated with PP.	8
Phillips (2024)	USA	Mixed (cross-sectional and panel)	Data from 2016 ANES with 1293–3295 observations, depending on the model; 1992–1996 ANES Panel survey for non-voting political participation (1994: 519 observations, 1996: 387 and 382 observations).	Both, institutional and non-institutional: voter turnout and non-voting participation	The study found no clear overall link between AP and validated voter turnout. For individuals with a history of voting, AP significantly increased their likelihood of voting in the current election. This effect was driven primarily by positive feelings toward one's own political party (in-party warmth) rather than feelings toward the opposing party. Notably, AP did not influence voter turnout among those who had not voted previously. Similar to the findings regarding voter turnout, AP was found to positively influence PP beyond voting, but only among those who were already politically active.	8

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Author and Year	Country	Study design	Study population and sample size	Type of PP	Summary of findings	NOS
Scherman et al. (2022)	Chile and Colombia	Cross-sectional	Chile: Probabilistic sample of 1625 from urban centers (Santiago, Valparaíso, Concepción); Colombia: Probabilistic sample of 1118 from 10 regions; both surveys urban-focused, face-to-face interviews.	Non-institutional: non-conventional PP	No direct relationship with non-conventional PP in either country.	7
Serani (2022)	Spain	Panel	Panel data from E-DEM dataset, four waves; used last two waves for analysis. Participants: 1st wave—2501, 2nd wave—1890, 3rd wave—1659, 4th wave—2059. Final analysis on 1484 individuals participating in 3rd and 4th waves.	Institutional: Propensity to vote	Both in-party like and out-party dislike are predictors of increased propensity to vote. The effects of out-party dislike are stronger.	7
Wagner (2021)	51 countries	Cross-sectional	Comparative Study of Electoral Systems data; 51 countries, 166 elections; 84,109 (turnout) and 16,682 (other forms of participation) observations.	Both, institutional and non-institutional: Self-reported turnout and other forms of participation	Consistent positive link between AP and PP across 51 countries. Non-consequential differences in results when using different measurement approaches.	7
Ward and Tavits (2019)	34 countries	Cross-sectional	Survey data from 43 elections in 34 countries (2005–2011), from CSES; approximately 34,000 respondents across various political, economic, institutional contexts.	Institutional: Self-reported turnout	AP is positively linked to the importance individuals place on voting and their actual voting behavior.	7
Wiezel and Wagner (2023)	USA	Cross-sectional	The relevant study (1B) had 761 respondents; demographics include 49.4% females, age range 18–65+, majority White, income range <$10,000 to $150,000+, political affiliation almost equally split between Democrats/Democrat-leaners and Republicans/Republican-leaners.	Both, institutional and non-institutional: various forms of political participation	Displaying campaign material was predicted by in-party affinity. Contacting an elected official, attending a rally were predicted by out-party animosity. Contributing money and posting political material online was predicted by out-party animosity and in-party affinity. Attending a protest was not predicted by either in-party affinity or out-party animosity.	9

AP: affective polarization; PP: political participation.

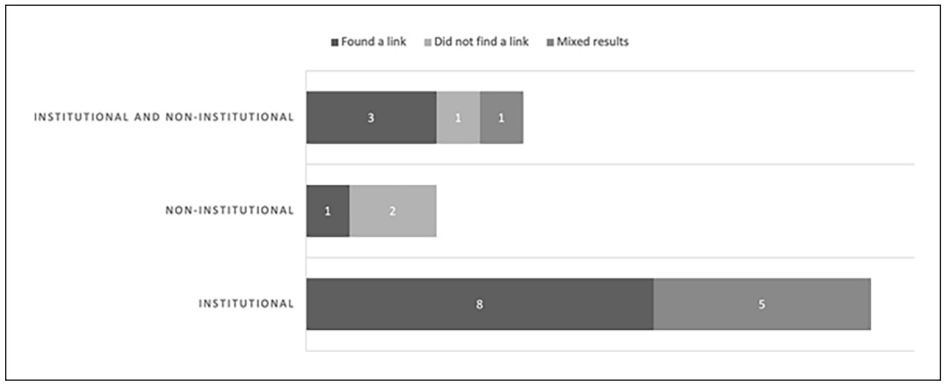

Figure 2. Findings on the Relationship Between Affective Polarization and (Institutional and Non-Institutional).[1] Political Participation.

political and cultural contexts. In addition, Wiezel and Wagner (2023), who examined distinct forms of political participation, found that attending protests is not significantly associated with either out-party animosity or in-party affinity. In contrast, in their study, attending a rally was predicted by out-party animosity, while posting political material online was predicted by both out-party animosity and in-party affinity. Overall, affective polarization can drive non-institutional political participation, though its effects vary across political and cultural contexts and depend on the specific form of participation.

Among studies examining the link between affective polarization and various forms of political participation, three out of five reported a positive association, while two found no significant relationship (Figure 1). In the US, Nelson (2022) observed a positive association between affective polarization and political participation. In addition, Wagner (2021) found a consistent positive link between affective polarization and political participation across 51 countries. Conversely, Ali and Altawil (2023) found no significant relationship between affective polarization and political participation in their US study.

Overall, our findings indicate a positive relationship between affective polarization and political participation, with stronger evidence for its effect on institutional rather than non-institutional forms of participation, and no study showed a negative link. However, as suggested by Phillips (2024) and Ahn and Mutz (2023), the effect of affective polarization on political participation may depend on prior political engagement. Our sample lacks sufficient data to draw strict distinctions between habitual and non-habitual participation. Nevertheless, theories of habitual voting suggest that voters (or abstainers) tend to repeat their behavior in future elections (Fowler, 2006). Moving from abstaining to voting for the first time entails initial costs for the individual, such as time required to learn about elections and candidates (Downs, 1957), whereas continued participation in subsequent elections incurs lower costs. Thus, habitual voting behavior suggests that people who vote tend to always vote, while those who abstain tend to always abstain. Therefore, we focused on the relationship between affective polarization and voting to serve as a proxy for habitual participation, while classifying other forms of political engagement as typically non-habitual participation.

Based on our classification, the impact of affective polarization on habitual versus non-habitual political participation differs only slightly (see Figure 3). In our sample, seven out

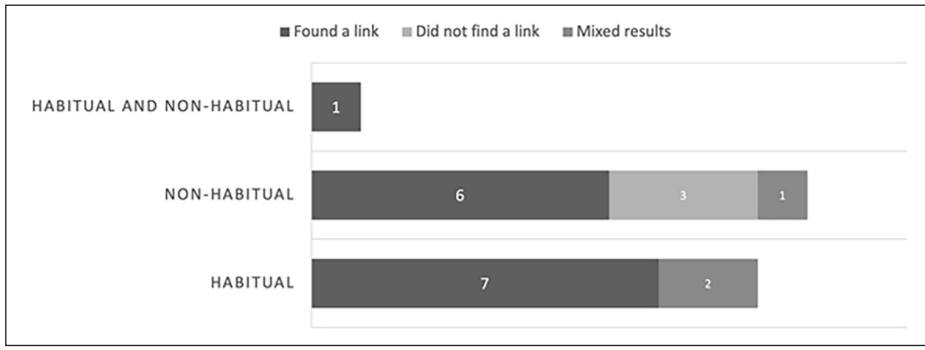

Figure 3. Findings on the Relationship Between Affective Polarization and (Habitual and Non-Habitual)[2] Political Participation.

of nine studies examining habitual participation found a positive link with affective polarization, while six out of nine studies on non-habitual participation also reported a positive relationship. Although Phillips (2023) suggests that affective polarization may have a weaker effect on non-habitual voters, the overall evidence shows a generally positive association for both habitual and non-habitual participation. However, more research is needed to clearly differentiate between forms of habitual and non-habitual political engagement.

Because Ellger (2023) and Ahn and Mutz (2023) found differences in the effect of affective polarization on voting participation based on validated versus non-validated voting data, we investigated whether the type of data affected the results in our sample (see Figure 4). For example, Ellger (2023) reported that negative affect was associated with both actual and self-reported turnout, while positive affect was linked only to self-reported turnout, with no effect on actual turnout. In contrast, Harteveld and Wagner (2023) found a consistent link between affective polarization and turnout across both validated and non-validated voting data. Overall, our analysis revealed that, among studies using validated data, three identified a link between affective polarization and voting, while two reported mixed results. Conversely, of the studies using self-reported voting data, four found a positive association and one had mixed results. This small difference suggests that, as Ahn and Mutz (2023) proposed, non-validated data may overstate the association between affective polarization and voting behavior. However, further research is needed to confirm this possibility, but it is important to note that in most countries, validated data are not available to researchers.

Social identity theory is the most frequently cited theory across the studies in our sample (n = 7) (see Appendix B, Table B2). Social identity theory posits that individuals categorize themselves and others into socially constructed groups, including political affiliations, forming partisan attachments (Wiezel and Wagner, 2023). Political party affiliation becomes part of an individual's identity, which enhances emotional motivation for political participation (Ellger, 2023; Serani, 2022; Wiezel and Wagner, 2023). According to Ellger (2023), this framework shows how strong identification with a political party can incite animosity toward opponents, driving political behavior through emotional rather than purely rational decision-making.

Several other theories frequently appear in the literature, such as media theories (n = 6) and socio-psychological theories (n = 5), among other perspectives. Scherman et al. (2022) discuss how social media creates online echo chambers that reinforce beliefs and

increase polarization. Garzia and Ferreira da Silva (2022) integrate socio-psychological perspectives with rational choice theory, arguing that voting behavior is shaped by both rational evaluation and voters' emotional ties to parties and candidates. Moreover, Lee et al. (2023) combine concepts from media theory (media perception and partisan communication flows) and self-perception theory, explaining that affective polarization drives political participation through partisan media, amplifying emotions like anger and enthusiasm.

We categorized the studies in our sample into three main categories based on the theories and mechanisms they drew from (1) social identity and emotion-based mechanisms (n = 14), (2) rational choice and ideological mechanisms (n = 3), and (3) media influence and communication models (n = 6). Studies using social identity and emotion-based mechanisms are often based on strong emotional and group identities that may lead to higher political participation (Serani, 2022; Wagner, 2021). Theories stemming from rational choice and ideological mechanisms focus on how voters' evaluations of policies and candidates influence participation decisions (Garzia and Ferreira da Silva, 2022; Kim, 2017). Studies focused on media and communication models highlight the significant role of media in shaping political participation. These studies find that consuming media aligned with one's political views, or highly polarizing media, can intensify emotional responses and influence political participation (Lee and Cho, 2023; Scherman et al., 2022). These theories are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, Ahn and Mutz (2023) suggest that affective polarization, by raising the stakes of political competition through strong emotional connections or animosities, can impact participation positively or negatively, ultimately driving decisions based on rational cost–benefit calculations.

Measuring Affective Polarization and Political Participation

The studies in our dataset primarily used feeling thermometer scales, which measure emotional warmth or coldness, to assess sentiments toward political entities (n = 17). Furthermore, as shown in Figure 4, most studies conceptualized affective polarization as a single, one-dimensional construct (n = 11). For example, Ahn and Mutz (2023) and Ali and Altawil (2023) employed this approach, calculating polarization by finding the absolute difference in thermometer scores for major parties or candidates. In contrast, Ellger (2023) and Garzia and Ferreira da Silva (2022) used a two-dimensional approach, distinguishing between positive and negative affect toward political parties or candidates. Similarly, Wiezel and Wagner (2023) examined two dimensions of partisan affect—in-party affinity and out-party animosity. Finally, Nelson's (2022) measure of affective polarization focused exclusively on negative emotions toward the out-party. In sum, although most studies analyzed use feeling thermometers to measure affective polarization, the operationalization of this variable varies considerably.

Political participation was measured in several different ways across the studies in our sample. As shown in Figure 5, most studies measured either institutional participation (n = 10), such as voting turnout, or a combination of institutional and non-institutional participation (n = 6). In the latter case, the variable was constructed by summing institutional and non-institutional forms, or different types of participation were examined separately. Studies examining institutional participation predominantly focused on voting behavior, as exemplified by Ellger (2023) and Harteveld and Wagner (2023), who used self-reported and actual turnout data. By contrast, Bettarelli et al. (2022) and Scherman et al. (2022) focused exclusively on non-institutional participation (n = 2), specifically

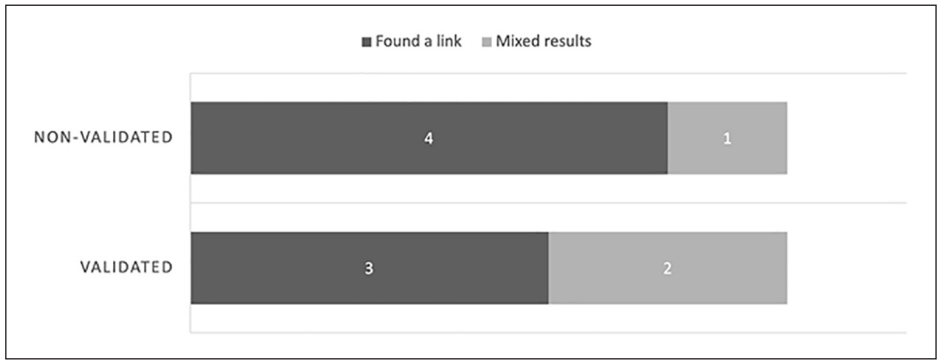

Figure 4. Findings on the Relationship Between Affective Polarization and Validated and Non-Validated Voting.[3]

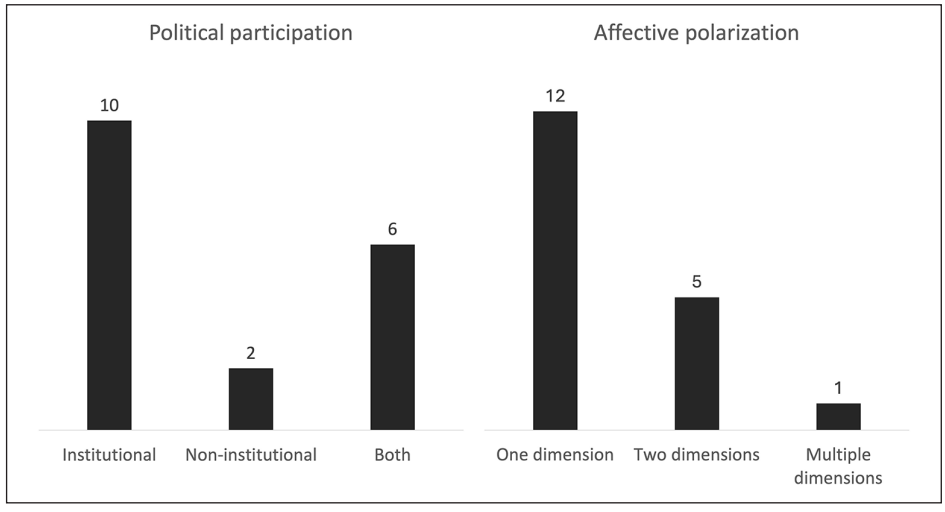

Figure 5. Measurement and Operationalization of Affective Polarization and Political Participation.

activities like protesting and online activism. In conclusion, while most studies in our sample focus on institutional forms of political participation or combine both types, there is a noticeable lack of research dedicated specifically to non-institutional participation and to comparisons of both participation dimensions.

In addition, we examined how different operationalizations of affective polarization might influence the results (Figure 6). First, when comparing one-dimensional versus two-dimensional constructs, more evidence supports the link between affective polarization and political participation when measured as a one-dimensional construct. Specifically, studies that used a one-dimensional construct for affective polarization found a positive link in eight out of eleven cases, with only two studies finding no link and one study reporting mixed results. In contrast, among studies measuring affective polarization as a two-dimensional construct, half (three out of six) found a link with political participation, while the other half reported mixed results. For example, Ellger (2023) found that negative affect was

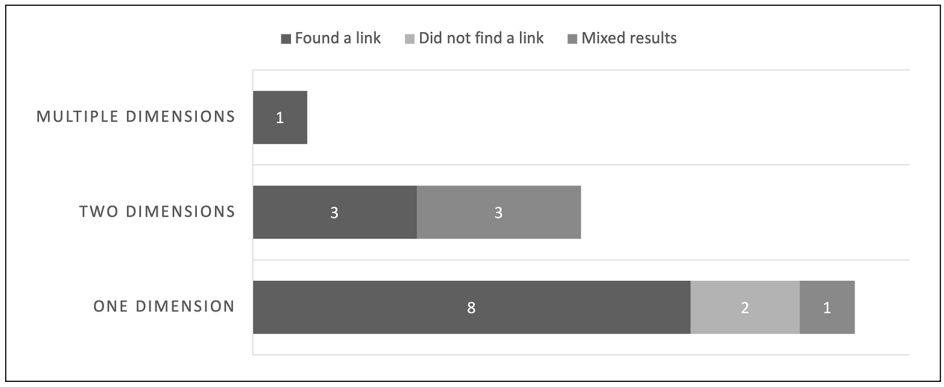

Figure 6. Political Participation Outcomes by One-Dimensional, Two-Dimensional, and Multi-Dimensional Affective Polarization.

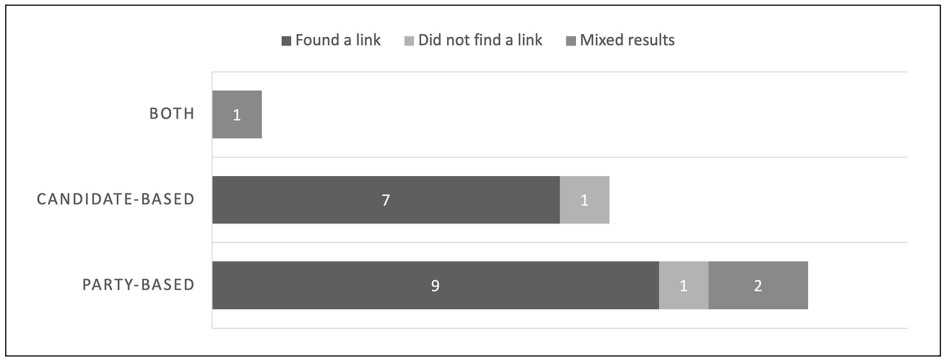

Figure 7. Political Participation Outcomes by Party-Based and Candidate-Based Affective Polarization Operationalizations.[4]

associated with both actual and self-reported turnout, while positive affect was linked only to self-reported turnout, with no effect on actual turnout. In addition, Wiezel and Wagner (2023) showed that out-party animosity is associated with most forms of participation, particularly medium-cost activities (e.g. donating money to a political cause, attending a rally), while in-party affinity is linked primarily with lower-effort forms (e.g. wearing a campaign button, posting on social media). Finally, one study (İmamoğlu, 2022) operationalized affective polarization using multiple dimensions and consistently found a link between affective polarization and political participation.

Next, we examined whether measuring affective polarization as a party-based or candidate-based construct impacts its relationship with political participation (Figure 7). In our study, party-based affective polarization refers to the emotional distance in evaluations of political parties or their associated supporters, while candidate-based affective polarization captures the emotional distance in evaluations of political candidates. Studies that operationalized affective polarization as a party-based concept provided stronger evidence for a link to political participation, with 9 out of 12 studies confirming a positive association. Only one study did not find a link, and two studies reported mixed results. Seven out of eight studies that

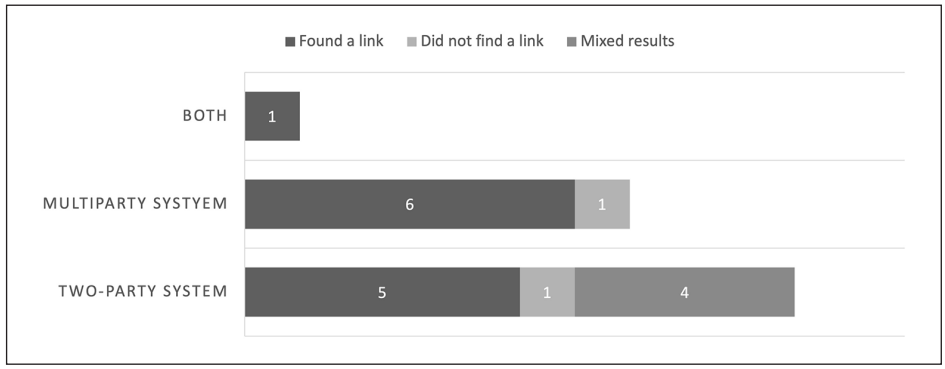

Figure 8. Political Participation Outcomes by Affective Polarization Operationalizations in Two-Party and Multiparty Systems.

used candidate-based operationalizations confirmed this link, with only one study finding no link. One study combined party- and candidate-based measures of polarization and reported mixed results (Wiezel and Wagner, 2023). These findings suggest that studies using both party-based and candidate-based measures of affective polarization provide similarly strong evidence for a predominantly positive link to political participation.

Finally, we examined how the political system context—specifically, two-party versus multiparty systems—affects the relationship between affective polarization and political participation (Figure 8). In two-party systems, the results were more varied: while five studies reported a link between affective polarization and political participation, four studies showed mixed results, and one study found no link. In contrast, studies conducted in multiparty systems provided more consistent findings, with six out of seven studies confirming a link and only one study finding no link. In addition, one study that examined both system types reported mixed results. These findings suggest that the relationship between affective polarization and political participation is more consistent in multiparty systems, whereas in two-party systems, the effects are more varied.

Future Research Directions

The main methodological challenges in studying the effects of affective polarization on political participation include data collection, sample representativeness, and the temporal scope of studies. For instance, several authors, including Ali and Altawil (2023), reported challenges with the use of self-reported data and survey-based methods. Importantly, Ahn and Mutz's (2023) findings highlighted a significant disparity in findings: results tended to be more modest or even non-significant when validated voting records were used, compared to self-reported voting data. For this reason, validated turnout data are preferable in affective polarization studies when available. In addition, Bettarelli et al. (2022) noted the limited generalizability of their findings due to their focus on a single nation's political context. Serani (2022) examined how affective polarization influences voting propensity in Spain, noting that the one-month interval between survey waves and the single-country focus might limit the generalizability of the results and the observation of long-term trends. İmamoğlu (2022) and Cubillos Ramdohr (2022) encountered biases and inaccuracies arising from non-probability sampling and self-reported measures. These challenges point to

complexities in designing research that accurately captures the nuances of affective polarization's impact on political participation.

One of the main methodological challenges in analyzing the effects of affective polarization on political participation is developing an effective, comparable, and comprehensive measurement of affective polarization. To address these challenges, Ahn and Mutz (2023) integrated affective polarization and candidate thermometer differences in their model, accounting for potential collinearity and ensuring robustness through variance inflation measures. Ellger (2023) addressed the measurement challenge in multiparty democracies by proposing a novel strategy to differentiate positive from negative affect in multiparty contexts. The variation in how affective polarization is measured and operationalized across studies presents a challenge for comparison when synthesizing results.

In response to this challenge, Wiezel and Wagner (2023) suggested developing standardized measures for in-party affinity and out-party animosity for future research. In addition, Ahn and Mutz (2023) suggested investigating the impacts of affective polarization on specific political figures or trends, as well as its normative implications for democracy. Ali and Altawil (2023) recommend exploring causal relationships and the influence of digital and social media environments on political attitudes. Harteveld and Wagner (2023) proposed studying the comparative impact of affective and ideological polarization (divisions based on policy preferences and beliefs; Iyengar et al., 2019) and examining polarization effects on citizens with varying levels of political sophistication. These recommendations highlight the need for more diverse and context-specific research on the relationship between between affective polarization and political participation.

Future research on affective polarization and political participation should explore contextual factors like cultural norms, political system structures, and historical contexts. For instance, Ellger (2023) and Scherman et al. (2022) highlight the importance of understanding the unique political and cultural contexts that influence this relationship. Comparative studies across political systems—such as multiparty versus two-party systems and stable versus emerging democracies—could offer insights into how these contexts shape the relationship between affective polarization and political engagement.

Longitudinal and experimental research designs examining the mobilization of people with varying levels of political interest and knowledge should be prioritized. Longitudinal studies, as suggested by Nelson (2022), İmamoğlu (2022), and Wiezel and Wagner (2023), can track changes over time. In addition, experimental studies can isolate factors such as media exposure or political messaging, as proposed by Kim (2017). Experimental and longitudinal approaches can also test the efficacy of interventions aimed at reducing polarization and fostering political participation. Moreover, Harteveld and Wagner (2023) suggest research on affective polarization's influence on the mobilization of different groups.

The role of digital media in amplifying affective polarization and influencing political participation requires further investigation. Studies should examine how various media types shape political beliefs, knowledge, and contribute to political attitudes and behaviors, as noted by Kim (2017), Scherman et al. (2022), and Nelson (2022). Scherman et al. (2022) suggest that future research could explore whether the link between affective polarization and political participation is mediated by factors like political discussions and specific conversation partners on WhatsApp. Research into digital literacy programs and media interventions could offer valuable strategies

for policymakers and educators to mitigate social media's polarizing effects while still fostering political participation.

Discussion and Conclusion

Synthesis of Key Findings

This study is the first systematic review of existing research on the relationship between affective polarization and political participation. The evidence predominantly indicates that affective polarization significantly motivates individuals toward both institutional and non-institutional political participation, including voting (e.g. Ahn and Mutz, 2023), protests (Bettarelli et al., 2022), campaign involvement (Kim, 2017), and other forms of participation (e.g. Nelson, 2022; Wagner, 2021). Notably, there is more evidence supporting a link between affective polarization and institutional rather than non-institutional political participation, whereas differences in outcomes between habitual and non-habitual participation are small. In addition, this review suggests that non-validated data may overstate the link between affective polarization and turnout.

A common approach in the studies in our sample is the one-dimensional measurement of affective polarization, which combines in-group attachment and out-group animosity into a single scalar measure, emphasizing the overall emotional intensity between the in-group and out-group rather than distinguishing between positive and negative emotions. On the other hand, a two-dimensional approach separates affective polarization into distinct components—typically positive affect (in-group attachment) and negative affect (out-group animosity) (e.g. Ellger, 2023; Wiezel and Wagner, 2023). These dimensions are measured independently and can then be analyzed for their individual or combined effects on political behavior, yielding occasionally mixed results. For example, Ellger (2023) found a link between negative affect and both actual and self-reported turnout, while positive affect was only linked to self-reported turnout.

When focusing on other aspects of operationalization, the differences are less clear. Our results suggest that studies using both party-based and candidate-based measures of affective polarization provide similarly strong evidence for a predominantly positive association with political participation. Although more research on the link between affective polarization and political participation has been conducted in two-party systems, a more consistently positive relationship is observed in multiparty systems.

Overall, most evidence points to a positive relationship between affective polarization and political participation, though some studies present mixed outcomes, suggesting that cultural and political context variations may explain these differences (e.g. Phillips, 2024; Scherman et al., 2022). Notably, no study found a negative link between affective polarization and political participation. Further investigation is needed into the multifaceted effects of affective polarization, especially as most studies in our sample were conducted in high-income countries, primarily the United States.

Limitations

Like other systematic literature reviews, our study has limitations inherent in both the studies analyzed and the review process itself. Most studies, such as Nelson (2022)

and Ellger (2023), relied on cross-sectional designs, limiting the ability to infer causality between affective polarization and political participation. However, some studies employed panel or longitudinal designs, such as Serani (2022) and Lee and Cho (2023). The predominance of research in high-income, Western democracies limits the generalizability of findings to other contexts. Methodological variations across studies, including differences in measuring affective polarization and political participation, may affect the comparability of results. In addition, even though our keyword search was broad, it may not have captured all types of political participation included in existing studies. Combined with our strict inclusion and exclusion criteria, this may have led to the exclusion of some relevant studies that could have offered partial insights. Finally, although we included gray literature in our sample, following Moher et al. (2009) and Harrer et al. (2021), the review process may still be subject to selection bias. We only found two gray literature papers, as others did not fit our inclusion criteria, potentially skewing the overall assessment of the relationship between affective polarization and political participation.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings from the present review are most often explained by social identity theory. This theory posits that individuals' identification with a group, such as a political party and its members or leaders, enhances their emotional investment in the group's success, leading to increased political participation (Mayer, 2017; Ward and Tavits, 2019). The review's evidence aligns with social identity theory by demonstrating how affective polarization, as a form of heightened group identification, can enhance political participation.

While rational choice research has suggested that it may be illogical for an individual to go to the polls based solely on self-interest (Downs, 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968; Rutar, 2021), several studies in our analysis (e.g. Bettarelli et al., 2022; Nelson, 2022) indicate that motivations for political participation can extend beyond mere rational calculation. Emotional drivers associated with affective polarization, including anger, hope, and fear, can strongly motivate actions like voting and protesting (e.g. Bettarelli et al., 2022; Nelson, 2022). Therefore, our review contributes to the understanding the mechanisms through which affective polarization influences different forms of political participation, suggesting that affective polarization can drive both institutional and non-institutional participation.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal and experimental studies to better understand the causal relationship between affective polarization and political participation. Exploring diverse geographical and political contexts will enhance the generalizability of findings and provide insights into how different forms of governance and societal structures affect the relationship between affective polarization and political participation. In addition, the impact of digital media on affective polarization and political participation requires further examination, as suggested by Cubillos Ramdohr (2022), Scherman et al. (2022), Lee et al. (2023), and Lee and Cho (2023).

Building on the findings, we propose several hypotheses to guide future research. The effect of affective polarization on political participation, such as protests and online activism, varies by political and cultural context. For example, a positive link between affective polarization and political participation was found in Belgium (Bettarelli et al., 2022) and Turkey (İmamoğlu, 2022), but no link was observed in

Colombia (Scherman et al., 2022). To explain these differences, moderators such as the level of political freedom, strength of civil society, and media landscape should be examined. Moreover, mediators such as media consumption habits, political discussion frequency, and emotional responses to political events should be studied as mechanisms through which affective polarization affects political participation. In addition, examining affective polarization as negative and positive affect both separately and together would provide a clearer picture of each type's distinct impact on political participation. Similarly, research should focus on how affective polarization affects specific types of political participation since the results might differ.

Another area for further exploration is whether affective polarization increases political participation among less interested voters (Harteveld and Wagner, 2023; Phillips, 2024). Possible interventions to support the mobilizing effect of affective polarization, especially among the least engaged, could help minimize the gap between more and less interested individuals.

While the results for multiparty systems are more consistent, nearly all studies examining two-party systems were conducted in the United States. This raises the question of whether the observed differences are attributable to the party system itself or the unique political, cultural, and institutional context of the United States. Moreover, these differences suggest that further research is needed to better understand how affective polarization is linked to political participation. In addition, conducting cross-national studies that compare two-party systems in varied contexts would clarify whether observed trends are systemic or country-specific.

Finally, our review suggests that affective polarization influences political participation rather than the other way around (Lee et al., 2023). Consequently, we propose that affective polarization will have a one-way impact on political participation, with increased polarization leading to heightened political engagement. This hypothesis encourages future studies to employ longitudinal and experimental designs to verify the directionality of this relationship.

Empirical research of the mechanisms through which affective polarization influences various forms of political participation can provide building blocks for new strategies to politically engage citizens and mitigate the negative effects of polarization. Further understanding of such mechanisms can be particularly useful for political strategists, educators, and policymakers aiming to foster a more engaged and informed electorate. By recognizing the motivational role of affective polarization in driving political participation, strategies can harness these emotions constructively, promoting engagement without deepening divides (Ali & Altawil, 2023; Lee et al., 2023). Furthermore, civic education programs can benefit from integrating insights about affective polarization's effects, encouraging empathy, as suggested by Santos et al. (2022), to mitigate its negative aspects.

Conclusion

Overall, while affective polarization is often viewed negatively for its potential to undermine democratic norms (Kingzette et al., 2021) and decrease social trust (Lee, 2022), our systematic review indicates it also can increase political participation. By fostering a deeper emotional connection to political parties and issues, affective polarization can motivate individuals to become actively engaged in the political process. Understanding and leveraging both the positive and negative aspects of affective polarization is essential for promoting a healthy, engaged, and informed electorate.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The study was conducted as part of the research project N5-0293, titled "Political Participation in the Age of Polarization: Austria, Poland, and Slovenia from a Comparative Perspective," funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency and the Austrian Science Fund FWF (Grant DOI: 10.55776/I6295)

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.
Appendix A
A1. List of Studies Included in the Systematic Review.
Appendix B
Table B1: Quality Appraisal of Included Studies Using Newcastle–Ottawa Scale.
Table B2: Theoretical Perspectives.
Table B3: Affective Polarization and Political Participation Measurement and Operationalization.
Table B4: Methodological Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research.

Notes

1. Wiezel and Wagner (2023), Wagner (2021) and Phillips (2024) are included twice in Figure 2, due to their handling of multiple forms of participation. Wiezel and Wagner (2023) researched different forms of political participation as separate variables. In addition, Wagner (2021) and Phillips (2024) distinguished between voter turnout (institutional) and non-voting participation, combining both categories: institutional and non-institutional.
2. Ahn and Mutz (2023) and Phillips (2024) are included twice in Figure 3. Ahn and Mutz (2023) distinguished between voting and other forms of participation. In addition, Phillips (2024) distinguished between habitual and non-habitual voting and non-voting participation.
3. Ahn and Mutz (2023), Ellger (2023), and Harteveld and Wagner (2023) are included twice in Figure 4 because they examined the link between affective polarization and both validated and non-validated voting data.
4. Ahn and Mutz (2023) and İmamoğlu (2022) are included twice in Figure 7 because they employed both party-based and candidate-based approaches to measuring affective polarization.

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