

Mass polarization reduces political trust

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Abstract

There are increasing concerns about mass polarization and political distrust in many democracies. While most work connecting the two focuses on elite behavior, or the individual level relationship between polarization and distrust, the relationship between mass polarization and political distrust is less clear, despite its prominence in the wider polarization literature. I argue that the polarization of society contributes to the widespread political distrust that we see in many democracies. By aggregating national election studies and cross-national surveys, I find that mass affective polarization is negatively associated with political trust, while mass ideological polarization is largely unrelated to political trust. I then conduct a survey experiment which suggests that mass polarization causally affects political trust. I conclude that mass polarization may be a substantial cause of political distrust in democracies and that efforts to rebuild trust should look toward depolarizing public attitudes.

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Affective polarization is seen as an increasingly pressing issue in many democracies. It is said that partisans not only disagree strongly on policy, but they are increasingly hateful and intolerant of those with whom they disagree (Iyengar et al. 2019; Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018; Iyengar et al. 2012; Hobolt et al. 2021). This trend appears to be worsening over time (Phillips 2022; Enders 2021), even in multiparty systems traditionally thought to be immune (Wagner 2021; Reiljan et al. 2023; Knudsen 2021). In addition, the public generally believe that their fellow citizens are highly ideologically and affectively polarized (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016b; Westfall et al. 2015)¹, spurred on both by their own observations of politics and by a mass media that covers polarization both frequently and negatively (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016a; Robison and Mullinix 2016).

Yet, despite this widespread concern, the political consequences of affective polarization are not clear (Iyengar et al. 2019). Scholars initially focused on whether political disagreement spills over into daily life, finding that affectively polarized partisans discriminate against the other side in social (Lelkes and Westwood 2017; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Huber and Malhotra 2017) and economic interactions (McConnell et al. 2018; Gift and Gift 2015). However, the consequences for politics are hotly debated. Some have argued that democratic norms are politicized and ignored by affectively polarized partisans (Kingzette et al. 2021; Berntzen et al. 2023; Graham and Svolik 2020), but experimental work tends not to confirm this (Broockman et al. 2023; Voelkel et al. 2023). A more optimistic view is that some degree of affective polarization is simply part of normal politics and motivates political participation (Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018), but it is again unclear whether this hypothesis survives rigorous causal testing (Phillips 2024).

In this paper, I argue that *societal* affective polarization undermines political trust. I suggest that previous work has tested whether polarization affects trust at the wrong level of analysis, either by focusing on elite politics (Skytte 2021; Mutz and Reeves 2005), or by looking for changes in trust among partisans at the individual level (Hetherington and Rudolph 2020; Enders and Armaly 2019), and this may explain the mixture of results (Van’t Riet and Van Stekelenburg 2022, Phillips 2024). This overlooks the key link between affective polarization and political distrust. People of all political persuasions, and especially those who are less political, are likely to lose trust in a system they believe is

¹In the case of ideological polarization however, this may be a misperception (Fiorina et al. 2008; Abramowitz and Saunders 2008).

responsible for ordinary partisans becoming vicious and volatile toward one another. In this way, societal affective polarization not only undermines trust in governments of the opposing political colour. It reduces generalized political trust among a much broader cross section of society.

Political trust is a vital resource for democratic governance. Trust is associated with voluntary law compliance (Hooghe and Zmerli 2011) and institutionalized political participation (Hooghe and Marien 2013), while distrust makes taxes more difficult to collect (Scholz and Lubell 1998), and public health mandates more difficult to enforce (Leavitt 2003; Devine et al. 2023). It is therefore all the more concerning that there have been large falls in political trust in many democracies over the last 50 years (Valgarðsson et al. 2024). Yet, scholars seeking to explain low trust have focused on outputs, especially economic performance (Meer 2018; Meer and Hakhverdian 2017) and scandals (Ares and Hernández 2017; Elsas et al. 2020). It is only recently that people have argued instead that the public is fed up with the *way* politics is conducted (Bøggild 2020). I build on these claims of dissatisfaction with elite politics to argue that people are also dissatisfied with how ordinary partisans conduct themselves and that this undermines political trust.

While some degree of societal ideological polarization may be welcomed by people seeking meaningful political choice, I argue that societal affective polarization is likely to undermine political trust for several reasons. For one thing, it may foster suspicion that partisans will trade democratic norms for partisan gain, a fear that may well be justified (Graham and Svobik 2020; Kingzette et al. 2021). In addition, people may blame the negative interpersonal consequences of affective polarization on a political system which has failed to contain it (Gift and Gift 2015; Huber and Malhotra 2017). They are also likely to punish the perceived violations of social norms they associate with affectively polarized partisans by reducing their trust in politics. Accordingly, Citrin and Stoker (2018) claim in their review of the recent literature on political trust that “party polarization is a prime suspect for the overall downward trend in trust”. Societal affective polarization may therefore help to explain the long run decline in political trust we see in many democracies².

²In support of this, those who believe society to be more polarized tend to report lower interpersonal trust (Lee 2022), but we do not know whether this relationship extends to political trust, or whether it is driven by ideological or affective polarization.

I first test the society-level relationship between polarization and trust. I aggregate questions on political trust from cross-national election surveys and national election studies covering 150 country-years, which I then link with polarization indices constructed from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (Reiljan 2020; Reiljan et al. 2023). I find that while there is no societal relationship between ideological polarization and political trust, there is a strong negative relationship between societal affective polarization and political trust. Contra previous work, this is strongest among the *less* polarized and I find no evidence that it is driven by widening ‘trust gaps’ between opposing partisans. There is a strong negative association between societal affective polarization and political trust.

While the cross-national approach provides breadth and external validity, it is ultimately associational. I therefore conduct a randomized survey experiment in which I perceptions of mass ideological and affective polarization. This demonstrates that the association between mass polarization and political trust is likely to be causal in origin. It also has policy implications. Trying to correct misperceptions about the extent to which the public is polarized, and to depolarize public attitudes in the first place, may help to arrest the low and declining political trust we see in many democracies today.

In what follows, I first explain how the polarization of ordinary partisans might affect political trust. I then present the data and analysis I use to test this relationship. I conclude by suggesting that political distrust and societal affective polarization may operate in a mutually reinforcing relationship, explaining some of the downward spiral in political trust we observe in many democracies.

Polarization and political distrust

How might polarization affect political trust? I assume that polarization may affect trust at three different levels of analysis: polarization among the political elite, among ordinary partisans, and whether you are polarized yourself. Each of these imply different empirical expectations and I explain these in each row of Table 1. While some previous studies have considered how polarization among elites, or being polarized yourself, may affect political trust no previous work considers how mass polarization among ordinary partisans may affect political trust.

Table 1: Levels of polarization and political distrust

Level of polarization	Source of political distrust	Predicted correlate of political distrust	Previous studies	Previous results
Elite	Incivility between <i>elites</i> .	Perceived and actual elite incivility scores.	Meta-analysis: Van’t Riet and Van Stekelenburg (2022).	Negative effect, but substantively small.
Personal	Being ideologically and/or affectively extreme <i>yourself</i> .	Individual-level polarization scores.	Enders and Armaly (2019) Torcal and Carty (2022) Janssen (2024) Phillips (2024)	No overall effect.
Mass	<i>Other people</i> being polarized (especially affectively polarized).	Aggregate polarization scores, and perceptions of mass polarization.	None.	N/A.

Elite polarization and political distrust

The first level at which polarization might contribute to political distrust is that polarization among elites may undermine public trust in politics. Political elites are highly ideologically and affectively polarized (McCarty et al. 2016; Enders 2021), with the latter typically manifesting as uncivil behavior. This incivility breaks norms of everyday social interaction and voters are likely to punish these violations by reducing their trust in politics (Mutz and Reeves 2005). Viewing uncivil interactions may also lead voters to expect violations of democratic norms by affectively polarized elites, reducing their trust in the political system (Forgette and Morris 2006). By contrast, the effect of elite ideological polarization on political trust is less clear. Voters, especially those with more moderate ideological views, may see ideologically polarized parties as being too distant and this may further reduce trust. Yet, elite ideological convergence may also contribute to distrust if voters feel that they lack meaningful choice (Grant 2021). It appears therefore that elite affective polarization is likely to be negatively associated with political trust, but the relationship between elite ideological polarization and trust is less clear.

There is some evidence that elite polarization contributes to political distrust. In the United States, the trends in congressional ideological polarization and political distrust are highly correlated (Hetherington 2005; Jones 2015; Uslander 2015). In addition, Robison and Mullinix (2016) show that increasing the salience of elite ideological polarization in a survey experiment reduces political trust. Trust also tends to be higher when the public

focuses on foreign policy, likely because these are seen as less partisan (Hetherington and Husser 2012). In addition, those who perceive more elite ideological polarization tend to be more affectively polarized themselves, (Rogowski and Sutherland 2016), which may be associated with lower trust (Torcal and Carty 2022). It appears then that elite polarization may contribute to political distrust.

It is difficult to empirically disentangle the effects of elite ideological polarization and incivility because observational and experimental designs often implicitly cue both. For example, Bøggild and Jensen (2024) find that elite incivility reduces political trust using Danish panel data and a natural experiment, but it is unclear whether this effect is driven primarily by incivility or perceived ideological differences. Nonetheless, Mutz and Reeves (2005) find in that televised incivility between politicians reduces political trust, although civil disagreement does not, suggesting that elite ideological polarization is less influential. Skytte (2021) also separately primes perceived elite ideological and affective polarization and finds that incivility matters more for trust than ideological polarization.

It appears therefore that the public are willing to tolerate respectful disagreement among elites, even when the ideological distance between parties is substantial, but that elite affective polarization tends to reduce political trust. However, a meta-analysis by Van't Riet and Van Stekelenburg (2022) finds that although there tends to be a significant effect of incivility on political distrust, its magnitude is small and there is evidence of publication bias. So, while elite polarization may affect political trust, this is unlikely to explain the widespread political distrust that we see in many democracies.

How does being polarized affect your political trust?

The second level at which polarization might contribute to political distrust is that those who are themselves more polarized might become less politically trusting. On the one hand, being more ideologically polarized increases the perceived costs of political defeat and leads one to view politics as a zero-sum game. This in turn reduces partisans' willingness to cooperate with the other side and thereby their interpersonal trust, which is strongly associated with political trust (Sønderskov and Dinesen 2016; Dinesen et al. 2022). On the other hand, those who hold stronger ideological views tend to be more politically

knowledgeable and engaged (Zaller 1992), both of which are associated with higher trust (Hooghe and Marien 2013; Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017). It is therefore unclear whether being more ideologically polarized would make you less politically trusting.

It is also unclear how being more affectively polarized would affect your political trust. For one thing, the more affectively polarized tend to perceive greater ideological differences between the parties, which may contribute to political distrust (Armaly and Enders 2021). The more affectively polarized are likely to question the moral character of their opponents and to believe that their opponents will try to usurp power (Graham and Svobik 2020; Kingzette et al. 2021). However, one might expect that this effect would be conditional on one's favoured party being out of power (Hetherington 2005; Iyengar et al. 2012; Hetherington 2018). Accordingly, Janssen (2024) shows that the post-election winner-loser gap in political trust is higher among more affectively polarized partisans. It is therefore unclear whether the more affectively polarized would be less trusting under all circumstances, although we would expect the 'trust gap' between opposing partisans to be larger for the more affectively polarized.

There is some nonetheless some evidence that the more polarized are less trusting of politics. Enders and Armaly (2019) find that one's perceived ideological distance from the other side is negatively associated with trust, but not one's actual distance ideological distance from the other side. This effect might therefore be driven by people being more ideologically polarized themselves, or by their perceptions of party elites. For affective polarization, the evidence is weak. Torcal and Thomson (2023) find that the more affectively polarized are less trusting of strangers, suggesting that they may also be less politically trusting. Meanwhile, Torcal and Carty (2022) find that out-group affective polarization is negatively associated with political trust, but in-group affective polarization is positively associated with trust. Given that those who are strongly affectively polarized tend to simultaneously hold positive affective orientations toward their preferred party and negative orientations toward their opposition, the net effect is unclear. In addition, Phillips (2024) argues that the individual-level association between affective polarization and political distrust is not robust to a panel fixed effects design. It is therefore unlikely that being polarized yourself has a substantial effect on trust.

The final level at which polarization might contribute to political distrust is that those who perceive society to be more polarized might become less trusting. Although being more polarized yourself is likely to amplify your perceptions of societal polarization, many people are not polarized themselves and yet still believe society to be highly polarized (Ahler 2014; Westfall et al. 2015; Enders and Armaly 2019)³. In addition, longitudinal data suggests that the perceived ideological polarization of many party systems is growing (Ahler 2014; Westfall et al. 2015) and that people also believe partisans to be more affectively polarized than before⁴. It appears that there are significant concerns about the substantial and growing polarization of ordinary partisans.

Concern about the negative consequences of affective polarization often centers on ordinary partisans in society. It is argued that affectively polarized partisans will carry over their animosity into their social interactions (Lelkes and Westwood 2017; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Huber and Malhotra 2017) and economic behaviour (McConnell et al. 2018; Gift and Gift 2015). Despite this, the literature connecting affective polarization to political trust has largely considered polarization among elites, and the effects of being more polarized yourself. In the latter case, this restricts the analysis to more polarized partisans, which is surprising given that independents and the less polarized report the greatest frustration at the perceived polarization of their party camps (Groenendyk 2018). It is for these reasons that I focus mass polarization among ordinary partisans.

It is unclear whether those who think that society is ideologically polarized would be less trusting. On the one hand, the Responsible Party Model implies that presenting citizens with clear policy alternatives will improve the perceived representativeness and thereby the trustworthiness of the political system (Association et al. 1950). By contrast, ideological convergence might be seen to reduce political choice: convergence is in turn associated with political discontent (Grant 2021; Grant and Tilley 2023). People may therefore regard some ideological polarization as normal, and even desirable. On the other

³These perceptions may or may not be accurate, and misperceptions of polarization tend to be quite large (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016a). Nonetheless, the effect on trust should be driven by perceived polarization.

⁴In the latter case, there is reasonable evidence that this perception is correct (Enders 2021; Phillips 2022).

hand, those who perceive society to be ideologically polarized may feel unrepresented if their own views are more moderate, especially as polarization becomes more severe. In addition, people may become concerned that ideologically polarized partisans are less committed to democratic norms, and so reduce their trust in political institutions, which are after all staffed by partisans. Justifying this concern, Torcal and Magalhães (2022) find that ideologically polarized partisans are less committed to democratic norms. The relationship between societal ideological polarization and political trust is therefore unclear.

Why might thinking that society is affectively polarized reduce political trust? Following King (1997), perceived societal polarization should particularly prompt distrust among the less polarized. For one thing, it would not be unreasonable to believe that affectively polarized partisans will fail to check leaders who promote partisan gain over social well-being (Graham and Svobik 2020; Kingzette et al. 2021). People may express this concern with a generalized distrust of politicians and political institutions.

Second, living in an affectively polarized society may lead one to believe that partisans will abandon social norms (for example, honesty, integrity and fairness) in pursuit of partisan gain. In addition, one is likely to observe violations of these norms in the increasingly emotive interactions between affectively polarized partisans. This is likely to undermine trust in partisans, and to thereby undermine trust in the political institutions shaped by these partisans. In addition, perceiving violations of social norms will reduce interpersonal trust (Lee 2022), which is in turn strongly associated with political trust (Sønderskov and Dinesen 2016; Dinesen et al. 2022).

Third, the negative interpersonal consequences of an affectively polarized society, in which conversations about politics become more difficult (Huber and Malhotra 2017; Bakshy et al. 2015) and partisans are less willing to interact with one another (Iyengar et al. 2019), are likely to reduce political trust. This is likely to directly reduce political trust to the extent that people identify these interactions as symptoms of a broader political malaise, and to further reduce political trust by diminishing interpersonal trust. As ordinary partisans become more affectively polarized, therefore, we would expect people to become less trusting of the political system.

Fourth, in more affectively polarized societies it is likely that politics will be more visible and this may reduce political trust. As Klar et al. (2018) point out, while some people are affectively polarized, many more people simply dislike politics and would rather not discuss it or be reminded of it and this can reduce trust (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Affectively polarized partisans tend to participate in and discuss politics more often than their less polarized peers (Ahn and Mutz 2023; Bankert 2021; Wagner 2021). We might therefore expect that mass affective polarization in particular would reduce political trust.

Accordingly, Lee (2022) finds that perceived mass polarization undermines interpersonal trust. However, they do not differentiate between ideological and affective polarization. Torcal and Magalhães (2022) find a non-linear relationship between perceived mass ideological polarization and commitment to democratic norms⁵, underlining the ambiguous effect of ideological polarization. Given the strong link between interpersonal and political trust, it is plausible that mass affective polarization is also associated with political distrust (Sønderskov and Dinesen 2016; Dinesen et al. 2022), but this has yet to be tested.

In addition, there is some suggestive evidence that the association between mass polarization and political distrust strengthens over time, for which there are several possible explanations. For one thing, those with lower trust are likely to interpret politics through a more negative lens and to exaggerate their belief that their fellow citizens are more polarized, which in turn is a key driver of affective polarization (Druckman et al. 2022). In addition, those without trust in political institutions to protect them against overreach by their partisan opponents may increase their fear and dislike of their opponents. As such, mass affective polarization and political distrust may act in a mutually reinforcing loop.

There are also likely to be spillovers within social networks, because the distrusting are more likely to disseminate negative beliefs about mass polarization (Bøggild et al. 2021), which in turn may drive further distrust. In addition, there may be a threshold effect. Many people, and especially the less polarized, do not pay much attention to politics (Lupia 2016), and trust tends to be somewhat sticky over time (Devine and Valgarðsson 2022). We might expect that only when mass polarization reaches a critical level will the public take notice and update their political trust accordingly.

⁵Those who are most committed to democracy are those who perceive the parties to be neither too ideologically distant nor too ideologically close.

Summary: Can polarization help to explain low political trust?

In general, when considering all three levels of analysis, there is no clear relationship between ideological polarization and political trust, but affective polarization is likely to be negatively related to political trust. Yet only for affective polarization among *ordinary partisans* do we expect a substantial negative effect on wider political trust. While we would also expect the relationship between elite level affective polarization and political trust to be negative, the extensive empirical work on this question has only found a small aggregate effect (Van't Riet and Van Stekelenburg 2022). In addition, the effect of being affectively polarized yourself on political trust is theoretically and empirically unclear (Torcal and Carty 2022) and almost certainly conditional on whether your preferred party is in government (Hetherington 2018).

Overall, therefore, it is only by considering the affective polarization of ordinary partisans are we likely to explain the low political trust we see in many democracies. Nonetheless, despite its many consequences for non-political behavior, the consequences of societal affective polarization for political trust are yet to be tested. In what follows, I state my hypotheses about the relationship between the societal polarization and political trust, before explaining the data and methods I use to test them.

Hypotheses

My hypotheses follow straightforwardly from the preceding discussion. It is unclear whether polarization among the mass public contributes to political distrust, despite this being the level of polarization at which the literature on the consequences of affective polarization is typically the most concerned.

I first hypothesize that there will not be a relationship between ideological polarization and political distrust. While people may welcome ideological polarization as providing meaningful choices between parties, those with more moderate views may come to feel unrepresented, and may become distrusting of institutions which they view as attempting to implement extreme views. Given these competing pressures, I do not expect an overall

relationship between ideological polarization and political distrust.

H1. Mass ideological polarization is negatively associated with political trust.

H2. Mass ideological polarization is not associated with political trust.

By contrast, I hypothesize that there will be a negative relationship between affective polarization among the public, and political trust. In more affectively polarized societies, people may be less confident that ordinary partisans are committed to democratic norms. They are also likely to experience negative interpersonal consequences from the polarization of those around them, and to punish the perceived and experienced violation of social norms by affectively polarized partisans. I therefore expect that affective polarization among the general public will contribute to generalized political trust.

H3. Mass affective polarization is negatively associated with political trust.

H4. Mass affective polarization is not associated with political trust.

In what follows, I propose two tests of the relationship between societal polarization and political trust. I then detail the results of my cross-sectional analysis before proposing a survey experiment to test the direction of causation between polarization and trust.

Observational analysis

I first construct a time-series cross-sectional dataset by combining societal scores on affective and ideological polarization computed from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems with questions on political trust drawn from cross-national surveys and national election studies. This provides me with indices on polarization and trust covering 42 countries and 150 country-years, from 1996 to 2020. The panel is somewhat uneven, with the number of years per country varying from 1 to 7. The primary analysis I conduct is with OLS regression, predicting political trust with ideological and affective polarization⁶.

⁶Of course, an observational analysis is always associational and cannot demonstrate a causal relationship. By lagging my independent variables in Appendix XX, I provide some preliminary evidence that the relationship is likely to be reciprocally causal with both affective polarization and political distrust mutually reinforcing one another. This has the added benefit of excluding countries in which I only have data for a single year. Combined with the strength of the observational relationship this provides strong

Dependent variables

Measures of political trust

Questions relating to political trust are asked in many cross-national surveys and national election studies, although the precise question wording and question level vary between each survey. I have gathered data on trust to match the 150 country years in the CSES with polarization data.

I first relied on data from cross-national surveys covering many of the countries in the panel. These were the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems itself (which includes questions on political trust in its fifth round), the European Social Survey, and the combined World Values Survey-European Values Survey dataset (which measures confidence in political institutions in several waves). I also include data from the Asian, African, and European barometers. Once these sources were exhausted, I then collected relevant national election studies to fill the remaining country-years.

In each case, I select all relevant variables relating to generalized trust in political institutions or ‘politicians’. I then coded each variable as relating to either trust in politicians, trust in the national parliament, trust in the national government, or trust in national political parties. I re-scaled each variable to run from 0 to 1, and combined them into a single index of political trust for each country year. Confirmatory factor analysis which I present in Table 2 suggests that the four political trust items scale closely together. Their Cronbach’s Alpha is 0.86 and the factor loadings are generally quite high, although the factor loading is somewhat lower for trust in government. The different trust measurements can therefore be treated as a single scale⁷, although as a robustness test I replicate my results excluding trust in government.

preliminary evidence for a mutual causal relationship between affective polarization and political distrust.

⁷As is standard in research on political trust (Devine 2022).

Table 2: Confirmatory factor analysis for political trust

Variable	Loading
Trust in parliament	0.92
Trust in political parties	0.84
Trust in politicians	0.74
Trust in government	0.54
Alpha	0.86
Prop. variance	0.60

Independent variables

Measures of ideological polarization

I measure perceived ideological polarization among partisans using partisans' own left-right self-placement scores in the CSES data, which run from 0 to 10. I define the ideological polarization of each country-year to be the (weighted by the respective vote shares of the parties) sum of ideological distances between the average self-placement scores of those who identify with each party. I group respondents based on their stated party identity⁸. The below formula summarizes the ideological polarization index, in which n is the in-party, m is the out-party, and N is the total number of parties⁹.

$$IPI = \sum_{n=1}^N \left[\sum_{\substack{m=1 \\ m \neq n}}^N (Placement_n - Placement_m) \cdot \left(\frac{1 - \text{Vote share}_n}{\text{Vote share}_m} \right) \cdot \text{Vote share}_n \right]$$

Measures of affective polarization

⁸Following the affective polarization index developed by Reiljan et al. (2023), I include only cases in which the highest electoral office was elected, thereby excluding cases of presidential systems which only conducted a legislative election.

⁹This measure differs from that proposed by Dalton (2008), who uses respondents' perceived left-right placements of each political party in their country. However, this measure is likely to conflate the perceived ideological polarization of the party elite with that of ordinary partisans. In addition, people, especially those who are more polarized, are likely to project their own ideology onto their preferred party, while exaggerating the ideological distance from opposing parties (Merrill III et al. 2001). Accordingly, the correlation between the demand-side measure of ideological polarization and the measure developed by Dalton (2008) is quite low, suggesting that using respondents' self-placements is more appropriate for measuring the ideological polarization of partisans. I do however use a measure of ideological extremity as a robustness check which measures the average gap between people and the average ideological position in their country.

Affective polarization is ‘the distance between the sympathy individuals hold towards their in-party and the animosity they hold towards out-parties’ (Wagner 2024, p. 2). I measure affective polarization using the index developed by Reiljan et al. (2023) and Garzia et al. (2023), and which are also very similar to those used by Boxell et al. (2024). Both use the same formula for computing affective polarization scores, with the former relying on data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, and the latter on data from national election studies. These scores rely on the consistent inclusion of party like-dislike scores in these data to construct scores for affective polarization among ordinary partisans. Respondents are again grouped based on their stated party identification¹⁰. The affective polarization index is the (weighted by vote share) sum of affective distances between each party, summarized in the below formula with the same labelling as the IPI¹¹:

$$API = \sum_{n=1}^N \left[\sum_{\substack{m=1 \\ m \neq n}}^N (Like_n - Like_m) \cdot \left(\frac{1 - \text{Vote share}_n}{\text{Vote share}_m} \right) \cdot \text{Vote share}_n \right]$$

While I do not have direct measures of positive or negative partisan identities, I use the average in-party and (weighted) out-party evaluation in separate models as a partial test for whether positive or negative partisanship are also associated with political trust¹².

Control variables

I control for various factors which may simultaneously cause political trust and polarization, in addition to the question type controls discussed previously. These largely follow the controls used by Meer and Hakhverdian (2017) and Hakhverdian and Mayne

¹⁰In the main analysis, respondents are also weighted by their respective survey weights. In the Online Appendix I also present unweighted results.

¹¹As with all measures, these estimates of affective polarization are imperfect. In particular, evaluations of political parties may differ from evaluations of the supporters of those parties (Bonsfills 2022). As a ‘horizontal’ evaluation, affective polarization is generally held to be distinct from ‘vertical’ evaluations of party leaders (Harteveld 2021). However, party like-dislike scores have the key advantage of being the only standardized measure of party-based animosity included a wide variety of national election studies and cross-national surveys (Boxell et al. 2024). While imperfect, they are the only viable way to measure affective polarization across a wide range of countries and are therefore the standard measure used in comparative research on affective polarization (Wagner 2021). In addition, empirical work suggests that party like-dislike scores are an acceptable proxy for affect toward partisans. Harteveld (2021) shows that the two are highly correlated, while Gidron et al. (2022) shows that party affect scores correlate with behavioral measures of social distance and discrimination.

¹²As further robustness tests, I also use: a measure developed by Boxell et al. (2024) which includes respondents’ survey weights, and the measure developed by Wagner (2021) which measures the dispersion of affective evaluations rather than paired in-out party evaluations and therefore can be calculated for the entire electorate as well as the subsample of stated partisans. See the Appendix for details.

(2012) when measuring the society-level relationship between economic conditions, levels of corruption and political trust. These are: economic development, which I measure with GDP per capita (PPP) and average years of education among people aged over 25 (both from the World Bank); economic performance, which I measure with GDP growth, the Gini coefficient of income inequality, unemployment rates and consumer price inflation, all taken from the World Bank; the Effective Number of Electoral Parties, which I measure using the formula developed by Laakso and Taagepera (1979); the index of corruption¹³ taken from V-Dem; and the proportion of partisans in the electorate¹⁴. I also control for two items which capture variation in the political trust questions across datasets¹⁵. For comparability, I re-scale all continuous variables into standard deviation changes. I do not use country or year fixed effects because in a small T, large N context¹⁶ this would severely downwardly bias the estimated effect (Nickell 1981), but I do cluster my standard errors within countries, following (Reiljan et al. 2023), to account for the non-independence of cases from the same country

Analysis

Does societal ideological polarization affect political trust? As a preliminary step, in Figure 1, I plot the bivariate relationship between ideological polarization and political trust, with polarization on the horizontal axis and political trust on the vertical axis. There is little evidence of a relationship, supporting Hypothesis 1. The overall trend is close to zero and it is not statistically significant. It appears then that ideological polarization among ordinary partisans is not associated with political distrust.

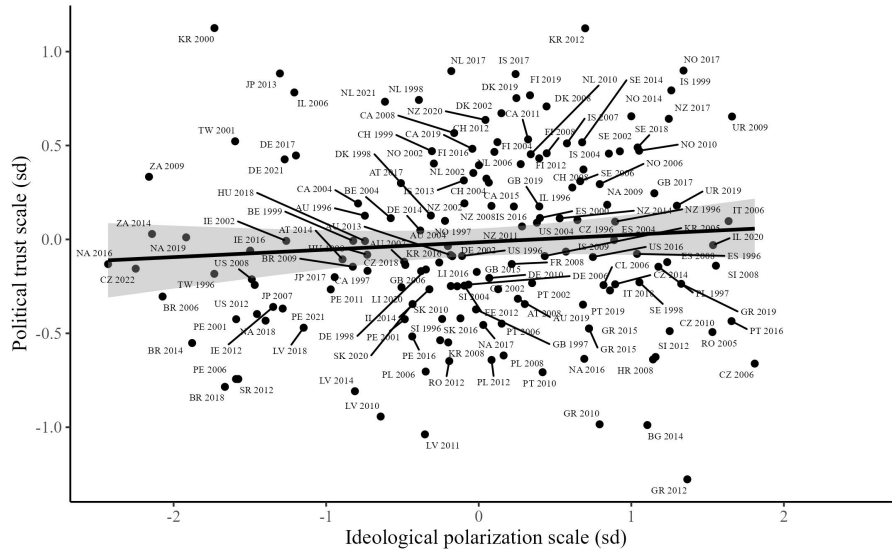
¹³This index covers corruption in the executive branch, legislative branch and in the public sector.

¹⁴The proportion of respondents who stated a party identity in the CSES data.

¹⁵One item controls for whether the question mentions the word "trust" (as opposed to confidence, for example) and the other measures the number of possible responses.

¹⁶My final dataset has $N = 42$ countries but T is below 5 in almost all cases.

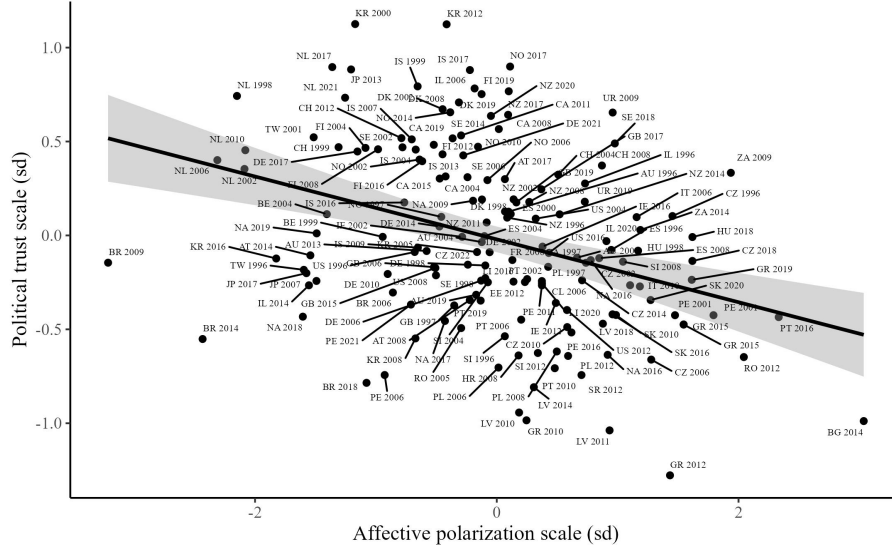
Figure 1: Ideological polarization and political distrust in 42 democracies



Note. OLS regression line and its 95 per cent confidence interval shown. Ideological polarization scores are built using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems. All values are expressed in terms of standard deviation changes in both the independent and dependent variables.

In Figure 2, I plot the bivariate relationship between affective polarization and political trust using the same data. In contrast to ideological polarization, I find that the relationship between affective polarization and political trust is negative and quite strong. A two standard deviation increase in affective polarization is roughly associated with a half standard deviation decrease in political trust. I therefore find evidence for Hypothesis 2: there is a negative association between societal affective polarization and political trust. It appears therefore that societal affective polarization is strongly negatively associated with political trust, but societal ideological polarization is not associated with political trust.

Figure 2: Affective polarization and political distrust in 42 democracies



Note. OLS regression line and its 95 per cent confidence interval shown. Affective polarization scores are taken from Reiljan et al. (2023) All values are expressed in terms of standard deviation changes.

Following this preliminary analysis, in Table 3, I report linear regression models showing the relationship between ideological and affective polarization and political trust. To ensure comparability of coefficients, I standardize all continuous variables by subtracting their mean and then dividing by their standard deviation. Model 1 includes only affective and ideological polarization alongside controls for question type, while Model 2 adds the economic controls and Model 3 also adds the political controls.

Table 3: Affective polarization, ideological polarization, and political trust in 42 countries.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Affective polarization	-0.240*	-0.164*	-0.121*
	(0.038)	(0.032)	(0.041)
Ideological polarization	0.094	0.043	0.017
	(0.050)	(0.043)	(0.043)
Economic controls	N	Y	Y
Political controls	N	N	Y
Num. obs.	150	150	150
N	42	42	42
T	7	7	7
Adjusted R squared	0.271	0.395	0.419

Note. * $p < 0.05$. Standardized coefficients and their standard errors from country-year aggregated models. All coefficients are expressed in terms of standard deviation changes in both the independent and

dependent variables. All models include question-type fixed effects and cluster their standard errors at the country level. All models were run using the `estimatr` package in R. See Appendix Table XX for full results.

Once again, ideological polarization does not seem to affect political trust. Its effect is insignificant in all models and is close to zero. I therefore do not find support for Hypothesis 1: societal ideological polarization does not affect political trust. By contrast, affective polarization and political trust are negatively associated and that this association is again quite strong. A one standard deviation increase in affective polarization is associated with a 0.1 to 0.2 standard deviation decrease in political trust and it is similar in magnitude to the estimated effect of corruption. When affective polarization is included as the sole predictor of political trust, it accounts for just under 20 per cent of the variation in trust. In addition, the effect is not driven by positive or negative partisanship alone: in models which replace the affective polarization score with either in-party evaluations, out-party evaluations, or both, neither measure achieves statistical significance and the coefficients are small¹⁷. I therefore find strong support for Hypothesis 1, but no support for Hypothesis 2. There is a strong negative relationship between societal affective polarization and political trust, but there is no relationship for ideological polarization.

I also conduct several robustness tests which I summarize in Online Appendix C. As a partial test for a causal relationship and to exclude cases with a single observation per country, I lag the ideological and affective polarization variables¹⁸. The effect strengthens when lagging the polarization variables, providing some suggestive evidence of a causal relationship¹⁹. Other robustness checks include: re-running the models with polarization scores using the weighted spread method developed by Dalton (2008) and Wagner (2021); using ideological and affective extremity; adding a time trend; excluding trust in government; and expanding the sample using affective polarization scores from Garzia et al. (2023). I also test for a non-linear effect of mass affective polarization²⁰. In each case, the coefficient estimates are similar to the main models, with affective polarization being robustly negatively associated with political trust while ideological polarization shows no

¹⁷One possible explanation for this is that negative partisanship is often concentrated against the radical right in Europe (Bjånesøy et al. 2023), and negative feelings toward the radical right may be strongest among the more politically trusting (Meléndez and Kaltwasser 2021).

¹⁸Some observations are lost in this process, because there is no lag for the first observation in each country, and a few countries only have one observation. Nonetheless, 31 of the original 42 countries remain in this sample.

¹⁹This effect appears to be driven by *polarization* and not by affective or ideological extremity alone.

²⁰The logic being that the public may only notice very high levels of mass polarization and only update their political trust in these cases.

relationship with political trust.

A particular concern is that the negative association between societal affective polarization and political trust could represent a growing trust gap between opposing partisans, rather than a general decline in political trust. It is a longstanding finding that election winners express higher political trust than election losers (Anderson and LoTempio 2002; Zmerli and Newton 2011). In particular, Hetherington and Rudolph (2020) find in the United States that the partisan trust gap is increasing in levels of affective polarization, while Janssen (2024) finds that the winner-loser gap is more pronounced among affectively polarized partisans in the UK. It could then be argued that the negative association between societal affective polarization and political trust does not represent a generalized negative effect of affective polarization on political trust, but a more localized effect in which election winners become even more trusting, and election losers become even less trusting. This would then have different implications: affective polarization would not be prompting a general loss of faith in democratic institutions, but an increasing polarization of political trust itself.

I then test this concern in Table 4 by running hierarchical models with random effects for country-years instead of aggregating the results at the country-year level. This allows me to include an individual-level variable recording whether each respondent supported the ‘winning’ party in the election in question²¹. In Model 1, I first re-confirm the negative relationship between affective polarization and political trust, and the null relationship between ideological polarization and political trust, with the economic and political controls as before. In Model 2, I confirm that the same relationship exists in the sub-sample in which the ‘election winner’ variable is present. In Model 3, I add an cross-level interaction with the ‘election winner’ variable. As expected, I find a trust gap between winners and losers. However, I find no evidence that this gap is increasing with levels of societal affective polarization. In addition, and most importantly, controlling for this gap does not affect the coefficient on affective polarization, which remains significant and negative. I therefore find no evidence that the trust gap between election winners and losers is larger in more affectively polarized societies.

²¹I define each respondent as having ‘won’ the election if either their preferred candidate for president was victorious, or their preferred political party gained at least one seat in cabinet after the election. This is based on each person’s self-reported vote choice in post-election data.

A further concern is that the negative societal association between affective polarization and political trust could be explained either by the aggregation of an individual-level association between affective polarization and political trust rather than a genuine society-level association. The aggregate correlation would exist because more affectively polarized societies have more affectively polarized people within them, who may be less trusting (Torcal and Carty 2022), rather than societal polarization affecting trust²².

To test this, in Model 5, I add a cross-level interaction between individual and society-level affective polarization within the subsample of cases whose underlying data was Module 5 of the CSES ²³. In Model 4, I first confirm that the underlying relationship still exists in this sub-sample before adding the interacting variables. Adding this new interaction allows me first to test the individual-level association between affective polarization and political trust and compare this to the aggregate-level association. It also allows me to test whether the association between society-level polarization and political trust is concentrated among the less affectively polarized, which may suggest that the aggregate association is not driven by more affectively polarized societies accumulating highly polarized, distrustful people. In contrast to the preceding individual-level literature, I find that those who are more affectively polarized are slightly more politically trusting. In addition, the effect of societal affective polarization is strongest among the less polarized; the cross-level interaction between societal and individual affective polarization is statistically significant and opposite signed to the aggregate negative association between affective polarization and political trust²⁴. This suggests that the perceived polarization of wider society is the predominant reason for the aggregate association between affective polarization and political distrust.

²²Although see a recent panel analysis by Phillips (2024), suggesting that these associations are likely to be spurious.

²³This was the only data source with appropriate like-dislike scores at the individual level which are comparable to the aggregate measure which allowed me to add individual level variables recording each person's level of affective and ideological polarization. I measure individual-level affective polarization using the same formula for society-level affective polarization. For ideological polarization, I measure the deviation of each person's left-right placement score from the average for that country year. I also added individual level controls for age, gender and education in this model. Due to a lack of variation among two of the society-level controls within the smaller sample, I removed the corruption and proportion of partisans society-level control variables from this model.

²⁴This suggests that King (1997) was right to suggest that the polarization of society would have the strongest effect on those who are less polarized themselves and therefore feel the most alienated.

Table 4: Polarization, election winners, and political trust in 41 countries.

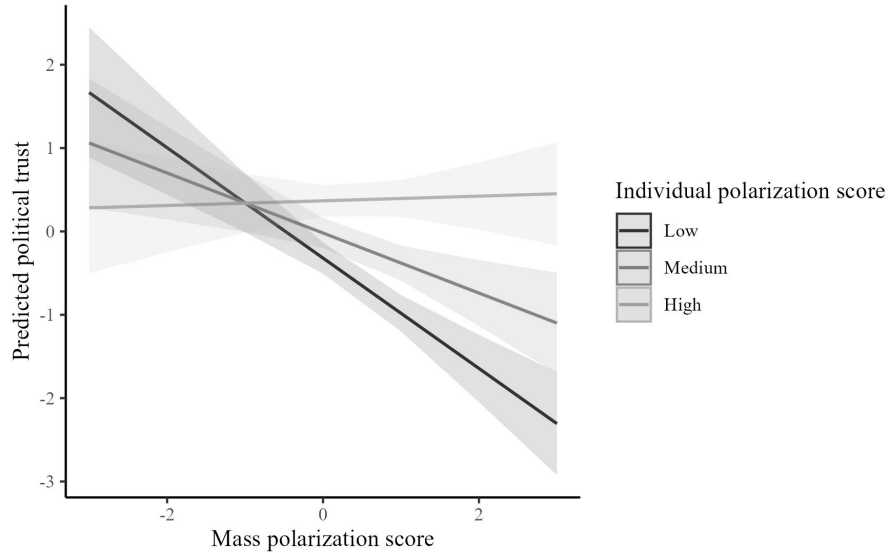
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<i>Society level variables</i>					
Affective polarization	−0.119*	−0.109*	−0.100*	−0.304*	−0.271*
	(0.041)	(0.047)	(0.046)	(0.115)	(0.114)
Ideological polarization	0.027	0.047	0.042	0.153	0.146
	(0.039)	(0.047)	(0.047)	(0.085)	(0.085)
<i>Individual level variables</i>					
Election winner			0.176*		0.071*
			(0.004)		(0.007)
Affective polarization					0.043*
					(0.003)
<i>Cross level interactions</i>					
Society AP × Election winner			−0.004		
			(0.005)		
Society AP × Individual AP					0.043*
					(0.002)
Num. obs.	303 329	202 574	202 574	59 291	59 291
Num. country-years	149	125	125	18	18
Num. countries	41	33	33	15	15
Conditional R squared	0.225	0.205	0.212	0.327	0.343

Note. * $p < 0.05$. Standardized coefficients and their standard errors from hierarchical models with random effects for country-years. All coefficients are expressed in terms of standard deviation changes in both the independent and dependent variables. All models include question-type fixed effects, and were run using the lmer package in R. See Appendix Table 4 for full results.

To illustrate the interaction between individual and mass polarization, in Figure 3, I plot the predicted values for political trust across different levels of mass polarization and individual polarization. In a context of low mass polarization, both the highly polarized and the less polarized have modest political trust scores of around 0.15. However, while there is a substantial decrease in political trust scores in a high mass polarization context, this only primarily for those who are themselves less polarized. Among the least polarized group, moving to a more polarized society reduces political trust substantially compared to being in a less polarized society. By contrast, among the most polarized group, mass polarization has a minimal effect on political trust. It appears therefore that while mass polarization erodes political trust, this is particularly pronounced for those who are less

polarized.

Figure 3: The interaction between mass polarization and individual polarization



Note. Standardized predicted values for political trust and their 95 per cent confidence intervals are shown, from a hierarchical model with random effects for country-years (Model 3 in Table 4). ‘High’ individual polarization meaning toward the top of the individual polarization scale, ‘medium’ meaning at the mean level, and ‘low’ individual polarization meaning toward the bottom of the scale. All other variables are held at their mean, or, for binary variables, at their proportion.

Summary

Overall, there is strong evidence for a negative relationship between affective polarization and generalized political trust. In the main models, affective polarization alone appears to account for just under 20 per cent of the variation in political trust, and this effect is consistent across model specifications. As expected, this effect is concentrated among those who are less polarized, suggesting that mass polarization generates political disaffection among those not involved in partisan conflict.

Nonetheless, the cross national evidence is ultimately associational. I cannot account for all country-specific or time-invariant confounders, and a fixed effects design is not feasible without a much larger sample. Given the strength and consistency of the relationship between affective polarization and political trust, and its robustness to a lagged independent variable, it is unlikely that the entire relationship is entirely confounded, but it may run in both directions. In the following section, I therefore conduct a survey experiment to gain causal leverage.

Survey experiment

While the observational analysis makes it clear that perceived affective polarization and political distrust are strongly associated, it is unclear whether perceived polarization causes political trust. I therefore conducted a survey experiment to test this hypothesis.

Design

The experiment is a pre-registered, nationally representative survey fielded in the United Kingdom by YouGov in March 2025. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of five groups: three groups read short vignettes which sought to reduce perceptions of mass polarization, and two control groups read short (in one case political, and in the other apolitical) vignettes which did not mention polarization. These were written in the style of a newspaper article. The vignettes were between 100 and 200 words and designed to replicate and extend those used by Lee (2022) to separately prime perceptions of general polarization, affective polarization and ideological polarization. The full vignette wordings are in the Appendix.

The survey flow was then as follows. Respondents answered questions on political trust, then on mass polarization, and then an attention check question. I did not exclude those who failed the attention check or condition on responses to this question because of the known biases this induces²⁵. The full sample contained 2257 respondents with between 435 and 467 respondents per group. Additional details about the survey, including precise fieldwork dates, statistical power calculations, full question wordings and descriptive statistics, are provided in the Appendix.

Variables

For political trust, I followed the wording used by the European Social Survey and asked separately about trust in politicians, trust in political parties and trust in parliament. I

²⁵Following Kane and Barabas (2019) I used a factual manipulation check which asked respondents to correctly identify the tone of the article (positive for the polarization treatments, or neutral for the control groups). This followed the polarization and political trust questions and so its inclusion cannot have biased responses to the main variables of interest.

did not ask about trust in government given the likelihood that this could be contaminated by partisanship and the potential for increased measurement error, which I also mitigated by scaling the responses to run from 1 (least trust) to 11 (most trust). I then combined these three measures into a political trust scale by taking the mean for each respondent. I then standardized this scale in terms of standard deviation changes in political trust. The scale showed high reliability with a Cronbach Alpha of 0.95. In addition, these questions tend to show less volatility than the standard ANES political trust questions and therefore represent a conservative test for the effect of perceived polarization on political trust (Cook and Gronke 2005).

For mass polarization, I followed the wording used by Lee (2022). Unlike Lee, however, I ask questions which differentiate between ideological and affective polarization. Each question measured perceptions of mass polarization on a scale from 1 (least perceived polarization) to 11 (most perceived polarization), which I then standardized. The full question wordings for all variables are in the Appendix.

Results

In Table 5, I present linear regressions predicting the political trust scale with assignment to the treatment groups as the dependent variable. I use the apolitical control group as a baseline, to which I compare the political control group and the three treatment groups. However, it does not appear that the choice of control group is meaningful: the differences between the political and apolitical control groups are small and not statistically significant. I adjust for several pre-treatment sociodemographic variables²⁶ and use heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors throughout. See the Appendix for descriptive statistics and demonstrations of balance across the treatment and control groups²⁷.

²⁶Specifically, these are age, gender, an age by gender interaction, social grade, and government office region.

²⁷All three treatments successfully manipulated perceived polarization. This can be seen because the perceived polarization scores are generally both statistically and substantively lower in all three treatment groups, with the exception of the perceived ideological polarization measure in the affective polarization treatment group. See the Appendix for these results. As expected, the effects are particularly strong for perceived affective polarization in the affective treatment group, and for perceived ideological polarization in the ideological group. In the general polarization treatment, whose members read a passage arguing that levels of both affective and ideological polarization are lower than commonly thought, the effects on perceived polarization are between those in the affective and ideological groups for both perceived affective and ideological polarization. It appears, therefore, that there was a successful manipulation of perceived polarization in the treatment groups.

Table 5: Political trust and perceived polarization scores by treatment group

	(1)	(2)
Dependent variable	Political trust	Political trust
(Baseline) Apolitical control	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Political control	0.018 (0.065)	0.024 (0.065)
Full polarization treatment	0.141* (0.066)	0.201* (0.067)
Affective only treatment	0.090 (0.066)	0.148* (0.067)
Ideological only treatment	0.043 (0.068)	0.097 (0.071)
(Intercept)	-0.077 (1.136)	-0.069 (1.118)
Covariates	Yes	Yes
Excluding inattentive	No	Yes
Num.Obs.	2177	2045
R2 Adj.	0.044	0.046

Note: *p<0.05. OLS estimates and their standard errors from models predicting political trust and perceived polarization scores with treatment group assignment as the independent variable. All variables are standardized. The apolitical control group is the base category. Models adjust for pre-treatment age, gender, region, social grade, and an interaction between age and gender. The "polarization" treatment primes perceptions of both affective and ideological polarization. See Appendix for full results and question/vignette wordings.

Furthermore, there is some evidence of a causal effect of perceived polarization on political trust. In all three treatment groups, there is a positive association between the assignment to the treatment and political trust, in comparison to the control groups. Given that the treatment persuaded people that levels of mass polarization are lower than commonly thought, this effect is in the expected direction. For the affective and ideological only treatment groups, this effect is statistically insignificant. However, for the combined treatment, there is a statistically significant and substantively modest association with political trust. It appears therefore that the combined polarization treatment was also successful in manipulating levels of political trust.

In addition, in Model 4 I exclude the small number of respondents (around 70 in total, or less than three per cent of the total sample) who failed the attention check question²⁸.

²⁸When conditioning on respondent attentiveness, there is a tradeoff between reducing bias and variance by removing those who misunderstood or ignored the treatment, and introducing bias by skewing the

This question asked respondents to identify the tone of the treatment passages, and I excluded the small number of respondents who incorrectly answered that the article was negatively toned (and therefore are likely to have misread the passage). When excluding these respondents, there are positive and statistically significant effects on political trust for both the affective polarization treatment, and for the combine polarization treatment. There is therefore consistent evidence that combined perceptions of mass polarization cause political distrust, and some evidence that perceptions of affective polarization specifically may cause political trust.

The experimental results therefore suggest that perceptions of mass polarization causally affect political trust, but that both perceptions of both affective and ideological polarization may be necessary to change political trust. Consistent with the observational analysis, the evidence for perceived affective polarization negatively affecting political trust is stronger than for perceived ideological polarization. In addition, given that the political trust questions used in this study tend to be less volatile than other measures (Cook and Gronke 2005), the estimates in Table 5 are likely to represent a lower bound for the effect of perceived polarization on political trust.

Additional results

To test the robustness of these results and to examine heterogenous treatment effects, I present several additional tables in the Appendix. First, I disaggregate the results into the three different types of political trust measured. Second, I present results with the political control group as the base category. Third, I test for heterogenous effects using multiplicative interaction models. I find some evidence that effects are particularly strong among supporters of the incumbent political party (Labour). In addition, I also present descriptive statistics for all variables, differences in means plots for the three outcome variables, and full tables for the main analyses reported above.

sample toward those more responsive to the treatment Aronow et al. (2019) and Montgomery et al. (2018). In this case, I am more concerned about the former bias given that the number of excluded respondents is quite small and restricted to those who gave the exact opposite answer to that expected on the attention question, suggesting that they likely misread the treatment as an invitation to believe polarization levels are higher than commonly thought. Nonetheless, both Model 1 and Model 2 are imperfect. For clarity and transparency, therefore, I present both results here.

Conclusion

Despite significant concerns about high affective polarization and low political trust in many democracies, the extent to which the two are connected has remained unclear. While we have a reasonable understanding of how the polarization of elites affects wider political trust, we know comparatively little about how the polarization of wider society affects trust, especially compared to our understanding of the non-political consequences of affective polarization. This paper has sought to examine whether mass polarization might help to explain the low political trust we see in many democracies.

I argued that perceiving mass polarization should reduce political trust, and particularly that the affective polarization of ordinary partisans in society negatively affects political distrust. In turn, those who are more distrustful of politics will be more likely to believe that politics is increasingly polarized, generating a reinforcing negative spiral of perceived polarization and political distrust. Yet, while several previous tests of how political trust may be related to elite polarization, or being more polarized yourself, have yielded mixed results, the effect of the mass polarization on political trust had yet to be tested.

By combining polarization scores drawn from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems with several sources for political trust, I established a negative association between mass affective polarization and political trust. This effect is not driven by confounding with government performance, and it is robust to several different model specifications and robustness checks. By contrast, I found no association between ideological polarization and political distrust. It appears that while people are willing to tolerate substantive disagreements on political issues, they are unwilling to tolerate the hateful, intolerant interactions brought about by higher levels of affective polarization. This association was stronger for those who are less polarized themselves, suggesting that a ‘squeezed middle’ may be excluded from politics and therefore reduce their trust.

Nonetheless, my cross-national analysis was associational. Given the strength of the effect, it is unlikely that the entire effect is confounded and it is therefore likely that, to some extent, perceived affective polarization causes political distrust. But a purely observational analysis cannot test whether this association is causal in origin. I therefore

conducted a randomized survey experiment in the United Kingdom which confirmed that perceptions of mass polarization are likely causally related to political trust. While the evidence was slightly stronger for perceptions of mass affective polarization, the evidence here was less clear about the type of polarization most responsible for political distrust. In any case, nonetheless, it provided further evidence that mass polarization to some extent causes political distrust.

As always, there are some caveats to my findings and opportunities for additional research. The survey experiment could not conclusively determine whether the relationship between perceived mass polarization and political distrust is driven by perceptions of ideological or affective polarization. While the observational analysis suggests that affective polarization is likely to be primarily responsible, further research will be necessary to make this judgement, for example by using appropriate longitudinal data with measures of perceived affective and ideological polarization, and political trust.

In addition, the survey experiment considered only one country, the United Kingdom. Of course, this may be an atypical case and efforts to expand this research to other countries would be welcome. Trust in politics in Britain is relatively low and has been declining for some time (Valgarðsson et al. 2024), although levels of affective polarization are more moderate, and certainly lower than in the United States (Reiljan et al. 2023). Further research will be needed to determine whether this association exists in many contexts, or only in countries with already low political trust.

All things considered, however, there are substantial implications to the finding that mass polarization causes political distrust. Given that trust in politics is low and has been declining in many democracies, understanding the causes of political distrust may aid us in remedying this trust deficit. This also has policy implications: efforts to depolarize public attitudes and correct misperceptions about the extent of polarization may alleviate the low political trust that we see in many democracies.

In addition, this study suggests that research on the consequences of affective polarization may wish to look more at mass polarization rather than individual-level affective polarization. Recent longitudinal and experimental work suggests that being polarized

yourself may not have substantial consequences for one’s political behavior, or one’s respect for democratic norms (Voelkel et al. 2023; Broockman et al. 2023; Phillips 2022). However, this does not mean that polarization is not a threat to democracy; we may need to look at a different level of analysis. Perceived polarization appears to undermine both interpersonal trust (Lee 2022) and political trust. Further research should consider whether there are other detrimental (or indeed, positive) consequences of mass polarization. For example, in contexts of widespread polarization, are people less likely to engage in institutionalized forms of political participation, or more likely to condone or engage in behavior that violates democratic norms? There may be direct effects of mass polarization here, and mass polarization might also interact with individual-level polarization. Perhaps there is no general effect of being affectively polarized on respect for democratic norms, but being polarized matters in certain contexts of mass opinion.

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