

Affective Polarization Among Radical-Right Supporters: Dislike Differentiation and Democratic Support

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Abstract

Partisan affective polarization describes the extent to which different partisans like or dislike each other. In Europe, affective dislike is strongest towards the radical-right, as mainstream voters tend to hold particularly negative affect towards radical-right supporters. This is an important pattern given the recent high levels of support for radical-right parties, for example in the Netherlands, France, and Italy. However, the perspective of radical-right supporters themselves has been largely neglected in existing work. To remedy this, we examine how radical-right supporters feel towards supporters of mainstream parties. We develop a new concept, dislike differentiation, which refers to the extent to which radical-right supporters differentiate in the dislike they harbor towards mainstream parties. We use two new studies that sampled 2,628 radical-right supporters in nine European polities. We find that some supporters reject all mainstream parties, whereas others follow more typical patterns of political competition along ideological lines. Dislike differentiation among radical-right supporters is linked to key socio-political phenomena, including party attachment, ideological extremism, satisfaction with democracy, and political tolerance. By creating a novel typology combining out-party dislike and dislike differentiation, we show that anti-system radical-right supporters, characterized by high out-party dislike and low dislike differentiation, are the least supportive of democracy. By centering our analysis on those voters that receive and radiate the highest levels of negative affect, we advance knowledge on what fosters polarized attitudes and intolerance in Europe’s multiparty systems in times when the electoral popularity of the radical-right is surging.

Keywords

affective polarization; comparative design; democratic support; patterns of affect; radical-right supporters

1. Introduction

Affective polarization first became a concern in the United States, where scholars noted the increasing dislike that Republicans and Democrats feel towards each other (Iyengar et al., 2012). In the United States, affective distance runs right through the center of the political system. Many European multiparty systems can instead be divided into three affective camps: a center-left, center-right, and radical-right block (Bantel, 2023; Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Reiljan & Ryan, 2021). This reflects the tripolar nature of many party systems (Oesch & Rennwald, 2018). The pole of radical-right supporters, however, clearly stands apart from the rest: Radical-right parties are not only uniquely disliked within multiparty systems, but also exhibit the most dislike vis-à-vis mainstream parties (Gidron et al., 2019; Hartevelde et al., 2022; Helbling & Jungkunz, 2020; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Reiljan & Ryan, 2021). This has been labelled as a case of radical-right exceptionalism (Gidron et al., 2023; Hartevelde, 2021).

At the same time, our understanding of these patterns of interpartisan affect concerning the radical-right is still rudimentary (with, as key contributions, Gidron et al., 2019, 2023; Hartevelde et al., 2022; Helbling & Jungkunz, 2020). Existing studies have focused on the sentiments of mainstream voters towards radical-right voters, treating the latter as one group. Previous research has however found that radical-right supporters are ideologically diverse (Lancaster, 2020), but no research has so far examined whether the same holds true for affective polarization. Therefore, it remains less clear to what extent radical-right supporters distinguish between different out-parties when exhibiting negative affect, and whether radical-right voters themselves vary in the extent they differentiate between mainstream parties.

Understanding this exceptional position of the radical-right within patterns of interpartisan affect as well as potential differences within the group of radical-right voters in European party systems has taken on even greater importance in recent years, given the great popularity of radical-right-wing parties in many countries. In Italy, the Netherlands, and Hungary, the radical-right is in government, while in Flanders, Germany, and Sweden they have reached unprecedented levels of support. Even countries such as Portugal, which so far had no significant radical-right party, have seen one emerge in recent elections.

While radical-right parties in Europe share some defining traits such as populism, nativism, anti-immigration, anti-Islamic stances, and Euroscepticism (Mudde, 2007), they differ substantially in how they relate to mainstream (right-wing) parties. In some countries, the radical-right constitutes a clearly demarcated, separate ideological block, such as in France and Germany. In other countries, such as Italy, the radical-right perceives itself (and often is perceived) as simply more right-wing than the mainstream right. Moreover, in some countries, the radical-right is excluded from coalition formation, whereas it has been in government in others (Russo & Schulze Brock, 2024). However, we do not know whether these patterns of elite cooperation are mirrored by how radical-right voters think of other partisans.

In this article, we focus on radical-right supporters and their affect towards mainstream party supporters by making use of data from two new studies on radical-right supporters in nine polities in Western, Northern, and Southern Europe ($N = 2,628$). Our analyses are structured as follows: First, we present cross-country differences in the affective patterns exhibited by radical-right supporters and show that some countries fit a tripolar pattern, while others follow a more proximity-based logic. Second, based on these findings, we present a new concept called dislike differentiation, which refers to the difference between radical-right

supporters' dislike score towards the center-left and the center-right. A model explaining variation in dislike differentiation reveals that radical-right supporters differentiate more in their dislike towards the mainstream party blocks if they show higher levels of party attachment, political engagement, and ideological extremism. Finally, we examine the potential consequences of dislike differentiation on democratic systems by looking at satisfaction with democracy, political trust, and political tolerance. Here, we introduce a novel typology, which classifies radical-right supporters based on their level of out-party dislike and dislike differentiation. We find that those radical-right supporters who strongly dislike out-parties and do not differentiate between mainstream out-parties are the least supportive of democracy.

Our main contribution lies in developing and applying the concept of dislike differentiation, which opens up the black box of radical-right supporters. We show that radical-right supporters are not a homogeneous group. Instead, they differ strongly in how much they dislike other parties in general, but also in the extent to which they differentiate in terms of the dislike they exhibit towards the mainstream parties. We argue that dislike differentiation is a characteristic of radical-right voters that is important in understanding the heterogeneity of radical-right support and the potential consequences of their surging electoral popularity. Anti-system radical-right supporters, characterized by high average out-party dislike and low dislike differentiation, are strongly disenchanted by politics and hold more populist attitudes. While we also show that many supporters of the radical-right are politically nuanced and are still—to some extent—supportive of democracy, some radical-right supporters could pose a threat to democratic societies. Future research should set out to examine ways in which we can both ensure that such attitudes do not become more widespread and encourage those with concerning stances to become more supportive of democratic norms.

2. Patterns of Affect Among Radical-Right Supporters

Extensive research has examined the characteristics of radical-right supporters. One strand of research has studied the socio-demographic aspects of this voter group, focusing for instance on their gender, class background, or education levels (Harteveld & Ivarsflaten, 2018; Rydgren, 2007). Another strand of research has examined the attitudes these voters hold. Radical-right voters stand out in terms of their anti-immigration, nationalist, and Eurosceptic attitudes (Aichholzer et al., 2014; Arzheimer, 2018). They also tend to hold stances that are more skeptical of democracy and political elites than many other voters (Ivarsflaten, 2008). Overall, this research has concluded that radical-right supporters form their own, unique pole within electoral competition in Europe (Oesch & Rennwald, 2018), even if the precise patterns of characteristics and attitudes vary across contexts.

Previous findings about radical-right supporters imply that there are two ways in which these voters relate to mainstream parties, that is, which level of affect they feel towards other partisans. As radical-right supporters hold anti-elite, anti-system attitudes (Aichholzer et al., 2014; Ivarsflaten, 2008), they should feel distant from and dislike all mainstream parties and their supporters more or less equally. Note that this rejection could be strengthened by mainstream party supporters themselves, who often strongly dislike the radical-right (Harteveld et al., 2022). This might subsequently be reciprocated by radical-right supporters. Overall, there are good reasons to expect radical-right supporters to exhibit similar levels of negative affect towards all mainstream party supporters.

However, radical-right supporters may also differentiate their affect towards different groups of mainstream party supporters. Hence, they could exhibit what we call dislike differentiation. Radical-right parties tend to be ideologically more proximate to the mainstream right. As these voters also hold more authoritarian, culturally conservative positions, radical-right party supporters should dislike these parties and their supporters less (van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022). This is supported by data on voter transitions: radical-right voters get more support from previous mainstream right voters than from mainstream left voters (Abou-Chadi et al., 2021).

Beyond ideological proximity, governing together could also influence patterns of affect. Coalition membership decreases dislike between supporters of those coalition partners (Ekholm et al., 2022; Gidron et al., 2023; Hahm et al., 2024; Horne et al., 2023; Wagner & Praprotnik, 2023). When radical-right parties enter government, such as in Austria or Italy, this is almost always together with parties on the center-right. Radical-right parties also tend to support minority governments on the center-right, such as in the Netherlands and Sweden.

Given that both patterns—i.e., universal dislike for mainstream parties and dislike differentiation—are plausible, it is likely that individual radical-right supporters will vary in terms of how much they differentiate between mainstream parties. Some radical-right supporters may therefore dislike all mainstream parties and their supporters, while others will have more nuanced patterns of affect.

So far, no research looks at whether or why radical-right supporters differ in their affect towards mainstream parties. Existing work has tried to explain the role of radical-right support in shaping affective polarization by providing party-dyad descriptive statistics or looking at country or political-system differences. As a result, within-group differences are usually not examined. We remedy this by examining the factors that predict to what extent radical-right supporters differentiate in the dislike they hold towards the two mainstream party blocks. Therefore, we aim to explain why certain radical-right supporters display higher levels of dislike differentiation than others.

We examine three reasons why levels of dislike differentiation may differ among radical-right supporters: party attachment, political engagement, and ideological extremism. First, it could be that radical-right supporters differentiate less when they have stronger political identities (Reiljan & Ryan, 2021). The more salient partisan identities are, the less party supporters will differentiate between competitors: opponents will be lumped together to form a uniform out-group. However, such dynamics are actually rare in multiparty systems (Wagner & Praprotnik, 2023). Instead, strong partisans tend to divide competitors into allies and foes, based on ideological overlap and potential governing arrangements. Moreover, it is likely that those with stronger identities may also have more information about the dynamics of party competition and thus a more nuanced understanding of how ideologically distant different out-parties are. Empirically, we examine the impact of in-party affect, prior voting for the radical-right, and negative partisan identities.

Second, those who are more politically engaged should differentiate more between mainstream parties. We expect such voters to understand political differences between mainstream parties better and to develop a more nuanced understanding of whose support is needed to govern (Boonen et al., 2017). Empirically, we assess political engagement using the general salience of politics and a measure of political involvement (Krupnikov & Ryan, 2022).

The third factor, ideological extremism, is based on similar theoretical considerations. We expect that more extreme supporters should also differentiate more between mainstream parties. This is because such voters are likely to have more consistent political beliefs (Zwicker et al., 2020), to be more politically sophisticated, and also to understand ideological differences between parties better (Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2003). Thus, we hypothesize:

H(predictors): Party attachment, political engagement, and ideological extremism are associated with higher levels of dislike differentiation.

3. Dislike Differentiation, Out-Party Dislike, and Their Consequences

One reason why dislike differentiation is important is because it could have an impact on how radical-right voters relate to the political system more generally. Hence, a low level of dislike differentiation could have negative consequences for a democratic society. Dislike differentiation is likely to be associated with lower levels of key measures of democratic support. As noted in Section 2, a low level of dislike differentiation is likely reflective of anti-elite, anti-system attitudes, where only the radical party is seen as “good.” Moreover, those who differentiate little are likely to have low political engagement and sophistication.

However, it is also important to distinguish between types of voters who fail to see differences between mainstream parties. Some radical-right supporters will on average dislike out-partisans and see them as identical, so they will see the mainstream competitors as similar and dislikable. This combination of low differentiation with high levels of dislike is most concerning. Such individuals dislike out-partisans and see them as one homogeneous out-group, and they may feel particularly distant from mainstream political competition and the current political system. This group would be especially troubling if it encompassed a large number of voters.

In contrast, some radical-right supporters will couple low differentiation with indifference: while they see the mainstream out-parties as similar, they do not hold them in particularly low regard. Such individuals may be rather disengaged and uninterested, rather than actively dissatisfied with the democratic system.

To assess whether dislike differentiation and out-party dislike matter for key democratic outcomes, we examine their association with three outcome variables, namely satisfaction with democracy, political trust, and political tolerance. These items convey different levels of democratic support. Satisfaction with democracy taps into a more diffuse evaluation of regime performance, while political trust reflects one’s confidence in regime institutions, capturing a more specific form of democratic support (Norris, 2011). Similarly, political tolerance is also considered an essential facet of citizens’ democratic norms (Bjånesøy et al., 2023; Gibson, 2006). This results in the following overarching hypothesis:

H(consequences): Low dislike differentiation and high out-party dislike are associated with less satisfaction with democracy, political trust, and political tolerance.

4. Data and Methods

We triangulate two novel datasets using online access panels collected from February to August 2023 in nine European multiparty systems, which together sampled 2,628 radical-right supporters (see Appendix A.1 in the Supplementary File for the number of radical-right supporters per country). The first survey spans nine polities in Western, Northern, and Southern Europe ($N_{RR} = 1,405$), consisting initially of nationally representative samples of 1,000 respondents per country. Quotas were implemented for age, gender, education, and region at the NUTS2 or NUTS3 level. The second dataset covers Austria, Flanders, Germany, and Spain ($N_{RR} = 1,223$) and also contains a survey experiment; for the present study, we only use respondents from the control group to prevent any treatment effect from influencing our results. The data triangulation thus allows us to capture the attitudes of radical-right supporters in diverse societal and political contexts.

Supporters of the radical-right are selected through a question on prospective vote intention, i.e., the party for which the respondent intends to vote if elections were to be held soon. The reason we consider voting intention a more reliable measure of party sympathies than past vote choice is twofold: with increasing time since the last elections, party sympathies may shift, and vote recall questions are quite unreliable when elections did not take place recently (Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2016). Indeed, at the time of data collection, many of the sampled countries were either in the middle or towards the end of the election cycle. Nevertheless, we use the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) to replicate our findings using previous voting behavior rather than vote intention to identify party supporters.

Classification as radical-right is based on ParlGov's "right-wing" party family category. Radical-right parties included here are FPÖ (Austria), Vlaams Belang (Flanders), Rassemblement National (France), AfD (Germany), Danmarksdemokraterne, Dansk Folkeparti, and Nye Borgerlige (Denmark), Vox (Spain), Fratelli d'Italia and Lega (Italy), Forum voor Democratie, JA21 and PVV (Netherlands), and Chega (Portugal). Whereas the sample in the first survey is representative at the national level, it may not be representative of radical-right supporters in particular. Similarly, the second survey specifically targeted radical-right supporters, but oversampled hard-to-reach populations in the early stages of data collection, namely younger, male, and less well-educated respondents. However, as polling results change rapidly in many countries, implementing strict quotas for radical-right supporters is not possible. We present the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics as well as their past voting behavior in Appendix A.2 (in the Supplementary File).

The main variable of interest (affective dislike) is measured by asking respondents to what extent they like or dislike specific political parties, the question most commonly used to capture affective polarization (Röllicke, 2023; Vanagt, 2024). We subsequently examine the dislike scores for the main (as in largest) center-left and center-right parties. In our samples, the main party on the center-left and center-right were respectively the (largest) social-democratic party and either the Christian-democratic or (right-)liberal party, depending on which party held more seats in parliament: SPÖ and ÖVP (Austria), Vooruit and N-VA (Flanders), Parti Socialiste and Renaissance (France), SPD and CDU (Germany), Socialdemokratiet and Venstre (Denmark), PSOE and PP (Spain), Partito Democratico and Forza Italia (Italy), PVDA and VVD (Netherlands), and PS and PDD/PSD (Portugal).

We excluded the radical left as we are interested in attitudes towards the mainstream. Moreover, the radical left does not play a significant role in most of the polities we examine here. We focus on the largest mainstream

parties as the affect towards these will capture the most relevant patterns of affect in multiparty systems. While radical-right supporters will probably feel even more distant from green and left-liberal parties than from the main center-left party, we want to assess the gap between the central poles of the ideological divide.

Our new measure (dislike differentiation) takes the absolute difference between the dislike score towards the center-left and the center-right. Thus, a score of zero implies that the center-left and center-right ideological blocks/parties are (dis)liked equally. We find that most radical-right supporters like the center-right more than the center-left, though 16.5% of respondents like the center-left more. This group does not contain a disproportionate number of speeders and does not differ substantially in age, gender, or education. In the Supplementary File, we report robustness checks using two alternative operationalizations: a positive measure which recodes the respondents who like the center-left more than the center-right as zero (Appendix A.3 in the Supplementary File) and a measure which removes respondents who like the center-left more (Appendix A.4 in the Supplementary File). The results are very similar to those of the absolute measure presented in the results section.

We subsequently examine whether satisfaction with democracy, political trust (as the average trust towards parliament, politicians, and political parties), and public political tolerance are associated with dislike differentiation and out-party dislike of radical-right supporters. The question on political tolerance is adapted from Bjånesøy et al. (2023) and asks to what extent respondents would allow a party to rent a local community building to hold a meeting for its members and supporters. This allows us to examine respondents' absolute level of political tolerance towards the mainstream parties as a whole, and the center-right and center-left separately. In addition, as argued by Tilley et al. (2024), researchers should also take into account respondents' base level of political tolerance. To measure individuals' gap in tolerance or the tolerance they exhibit towards their in-party vis-à-vis an out-party, we subtract the level of tolerance towards the center-right or center-left from the radical-right. We find that a very small minority of respondents display more tolerance towards the out-party than the in-party (3.9% for the gap in tolerance towards the center-left and 4.4% for the center-right). As we are interested in whether party supporters display less tolerance towards the out-party than the in-party, we merge these respondents with those that attributed equal tolerance towards both parties. A correlation matrix of the outcome variables is included in Appendix A.5, while descriptive statistics are shown in Appendix A.6 (in the Supplementary File). As could be expected, political tolerance towards the center-right is higher than towards the center-left, but their averages lie above the midpoint in both cases. Conversely, average levels of satisfaction with democracy and political trust fall below the midpoint.

We run linear regression models with sample fixed effects and robust standard errors. Continuous variables are standardized. All analyses control for several political variables as well as age, gender, and education level (operationalized as primary/secondary vs. tertiary education). Political predictors include (a) in-party like, (b) the salience of one's political identity, which probes to what extent respondents' political convictions and beliefs determine who they are as a person, (c) political involvement, measured with a scale adapted from Krupnikov and Ryan (2022), and (d) ideological extremism, captured by recoding one's ideological left-right placement to the distance from the midpoint. In analyses using the first survey, we also include previous vote choice and negative partisanship, based on the two-item scale of Mayer and Russo (2024).

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive Statistics

To understand radical-right supporters' dislike of mainstream parties, we first show the absolute levels of affective dislike radical-right supporters display towards each ideological block. We rescale the intensity of negative affect from their original Likert scales to 0–1, where higher values signify greater dislike. In Figure 1, we see that dislike towards both ideological camps is negatively skewed, but towards the center-left much more so. That said, some respondents also display (relatively) low levels of dislike towards the mainstream blocks.

Second, we examine to what extent dislike differentiation arises across countries by looking at how average affect differs towards each ideological camp. Results are presented in Figure 2. In-party negative affect unsurprisingly stays within the low range of 0.10 to 0.25. Affective dislike towards center-left parties is high but does not vary immensely across countries (0.69 in Flanders to 0.90 in Spain). Conversely, affect towards center-right parties differs substantially, ranging from 0.39 in Italy to 0.81 in France. For reference, in our full datasets which include mainstream party supporters, we find that dislike from mainstream party supporters towards the radical-right ranges from 0.73 (Flanders) to 0.88 (Germany). As such, the radical-right seems to receive similar levels of negative affect from the mainstream as they radiate towards the center-left.

A pattern thus emerges: radical-right supporters clearly differ across countries in the extent to which they differentiate between the center-left and center-right. We can use these country-level patterns to distinguish between two overall patterns of affective dislike. If dislike differentiation is low, then the system can be characterized as tripolar, with radical-right holding an exceptional place by radiating high levels of

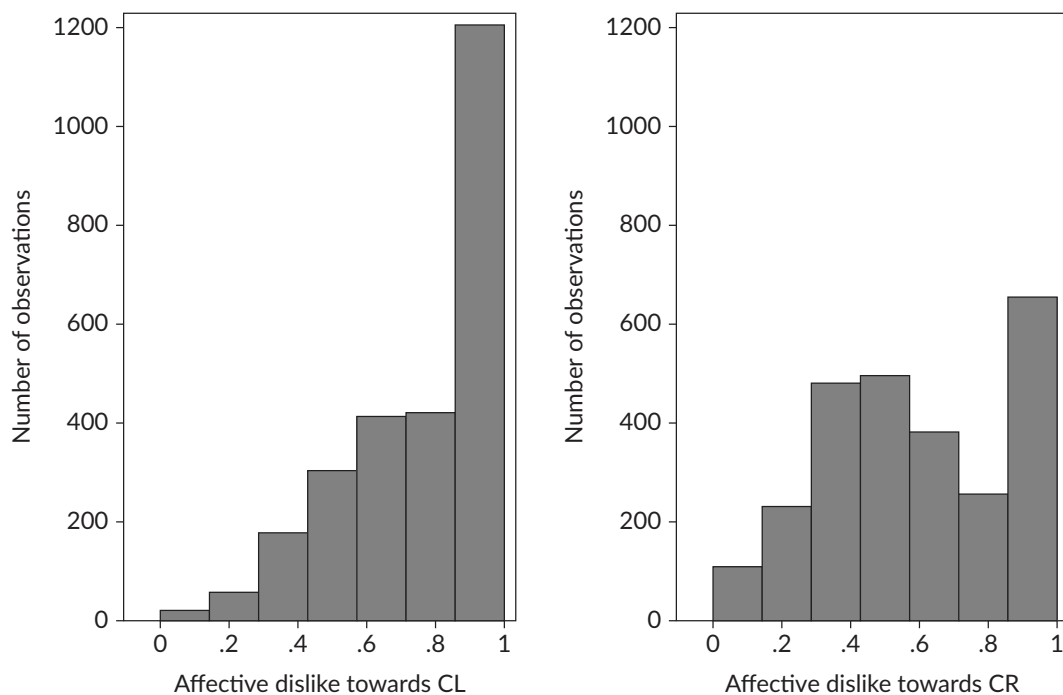


Figure 1. Attitudes of radical-right supporters towards the center-left and center-right. Notes: CL = center-left party; CR = center-right party.

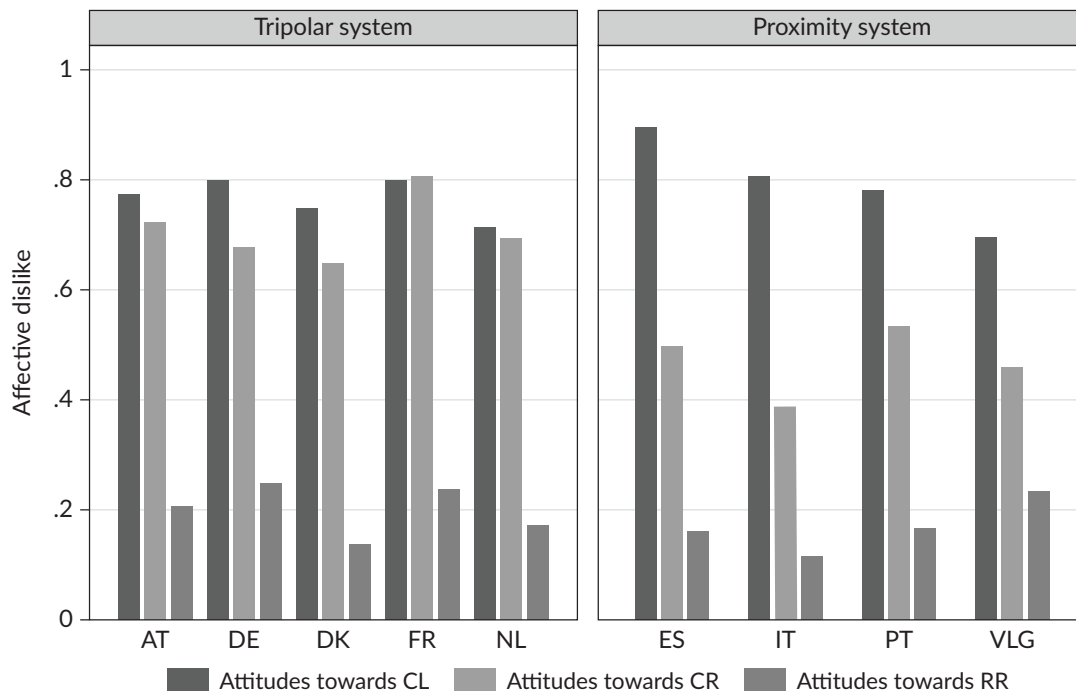


Figure 2. Attitudes of radical-right supporters towards the center-left, center-right, and radical-right ideological blocks. Notes: CL = center-left party; CR = center-right party; RR = radical-right party/parties.

dislike towards both mainstream blocks (Bantel, 2023; Reiljan & Ryan, 2021). France and the Netherlands fit this pattern well. In contrast, if dislike differentiation is high, there is a more typical, proximity-based pattern of political competition, where dislike increases with increased ideological distance (van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022). Spain and Italy, for example, follow such a pattern. Similar patterns are found if we disaggregate the two samples (Appendix A.7 in the Supplementary File) or analyze CSES data (Appendix A.8 in the Supplementary File).

5.2. Explaining Dislike Differentiation

Next, we examine whether radical-right supporters differentiate more: when they show greater sympathy towards their in-party, voted for a radical-right party in the previous election, and exhibit stronger negative partisan identities; when they place a higher salience on politics or are more politically involved; and when they are more ideologically extreme.

Figure 3 shows the results for the predictors available in both samples. More strongly liking one's in-party is associated with significantly and substantially more dislike differentiation ($\beta = 0.14$; $p < 0.001$). Political salience and ideological extremism are also statistically significantly associated with higher dislike differentiation ($\beta = 0.06$ – 0.08 ; $p < 0.01$). Political involvement, on the other hand, is not statistically significantly associated with dislike differentiation ($p > 0.05$).

For the predictors of previous vote choice and negative partisanship, we only examine data from the first (larger) survey. Results are displayed in Figure 4. A respondent who voted for the center-right party in the last elections differentiates significantly more between the mainstream parties compared to one who previously

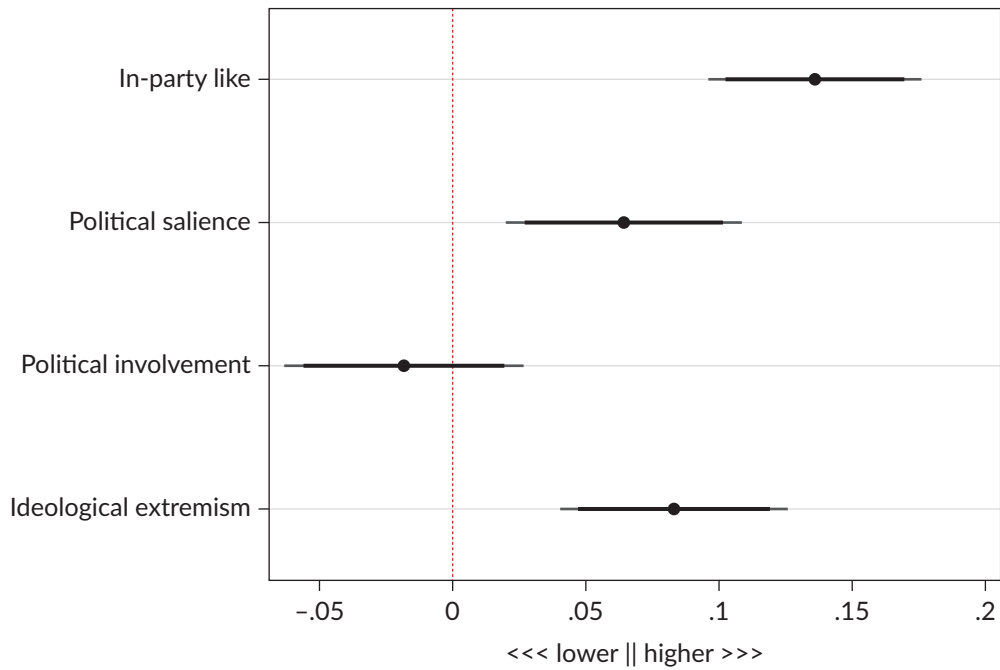


Figure 3. Dislike differentiation: Predictors in the full sample. Notes: Linear regressions include standardized coefficients with sample fixed effects and robust standard errors; full regression results can be found in Table A7 in Appendix A.9 of the Supplementary File.

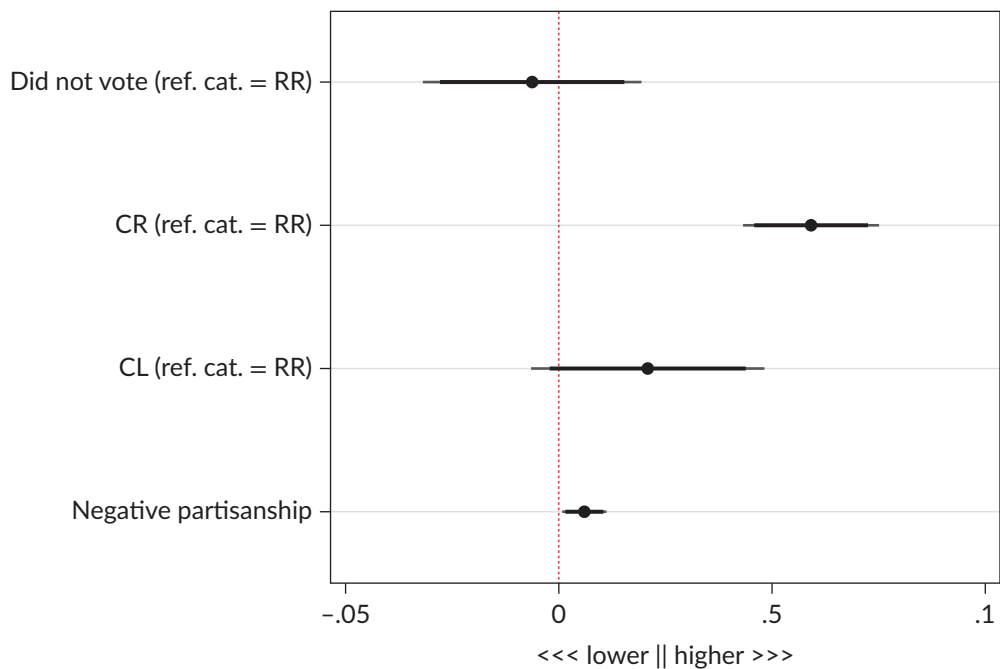


Figure 4. Dislike differentiation: Predictors in the large sample. Notes: Linear regressions include standardized coefficients with sample fixed effects and robust standard errors; full regression results can be found in Table A8 in Appendix A.9 in the Supplementary File; CL = center-left party; CR = center-right party; RR = radical-right party/parties.

voted for the radical-right ($p < 0.001$), with a difference of 0.59 standard deviations (SD). This suggests that more entrenched radical-right supporters will spread their dislike more diffusely. Conversely, respondents who previously abstained from voting or voted for the center-left do not significantly differ from those who voted for the radical-right ($p > 0.05$). In line with in-party-like, higher levels of negative partisanship correspond to higher levels of dislike differentiation ($\beta = 0.06$; $p < 0.05$).

5.3. Consequences of Dislike Differentiation and Out-Party Dislike

We now turn to the consequences of dislike differentiation. Whereas previous research has solely focused on out-party dislike, we posit that to understand affective polarization for radical-right supporters, one also needs to examine to what extent these supporters differentiate in their dislike towards mainstream parties. Hence, we combine our measure of dislike differentiation with out-party dislike to create a 2×2 typology for high and low levels of each variable. The correlation between dislike differentiation (absolute score) and out-party dislike towards mainstream parties is not very high at $r = 0.29$ ($p < 0.001$). To provide meaningful names to each of the four categories of our typology, we replicate our predictor analyses for out-party dislike, presented in Appendix A.10 (in the Supplementary File). Table 1 presents an overview of the results of our main predictors on both out-party dislike and dislike differentiation.

High out-party dislike and high dislike differentiation are predicted by high levels of party attachment and ideological extremism. These supporters likely are the most typical group that is associated with the radical-right, which we term the extreme ideologues. High out-party dislike and low dislike differentiation, on the other hand, are predicted by low political engagement and having previously voted for the radical-right. Therefore, we believe this group is best characterized as anti-system, in that they are disconnected from the rest of the political system. Low out-party dislike and high dislike differentiation are interestingly predicted by high levels of political salience and/or involvement and having previously voted for a mainstream party, particularly for the center-right. These radical-right supporters may thus be newer voters of the radical-right and, importantly, highly value politics and are strongly engaged. Whereas previous literature has found that political engagement leads to higher levels of affective polarization for mainstream party supporters, the opposite seems to be true for the radical-right. Hence, we term them the moderate ideologues. Finally, low dislike and low differentiation are associated with low alignment with the radical-right party and low ideological extremism, which is why we term this group the non-committed. This leads us to formulate the typology shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Predictors of out-party dislike and dislike differentiation.

	Average out-party dislike	Dislike differentiation
In-party like	+	+
Negative partisanship	+	+
Voted for radical-right	+	-
Voted for central-right	-	+
Political salience	-	+
Political involvement	-	n.s.
Ideological extremism	+	+

Notes: (+) indicates that the results for the predictor were significantly and positively associated with the outcome variable; (-) indicates a significant, but negative association; whereas (n.s.) indicates a result that is not statistically significant.

Table 2. Radical-right supporters: 2 × 2 typology.

		Dislike differentiation	
		Low	High
Average out-party dislike	Low	non-committed	moderate ideologues
	High	anti-system	extreme ideologues

We regress our typology on three key facets of democratic support: satisfaction with democracy, political trust, and political tolerance. We do not compute linear interaction terms as our models would suffer from severe interpolation, as there are relatively few observations with both low levels of out-party dislike and high levels of dislike differentiation. This leads to areas without or with limited common support, which in turn leads to misspecification and estimates that are “model dependent and fragile” (Hainmueller et al., 2019, p. 181). Instead, we differentiate between high and low levels of dislike differentiation and out-party dislike by cutting out-party dislike at the middle value of 0.5 and dislike differentiation at the value of 0.2. This value of 0.2 corresponds to differentiating between the two mainstream ideological blocks by 2 points on an 11-point Likert scale, which we deem a sensible cut-off point to distinguish between low and high levels of differentiation. We also test alternative cut-off values by cutting at the mean, which for out-party dislike leads to a cut-off value of 0.7, and the same cut-off value of 0.2 for dislike differentiation. Doing so yields similar results (see Appendix A.12 in the Supplementary File).

Figure 5 presents predicted values for our outcome variables for each group in the typology, based on a series of linear regression models. Non-committed radical-right supporters are clearly the most supportive of democracy, whereas moderate ideologues are significantly less satisfied with democracy and exhibit less political trust ($p < 0.05$). Political tolerance towards the mainstream as a whole and the center-left does not differ between moderate ideologues and the non-committed ($p > 0.05$), but moderate ideologues display significantly higher levels of political tolerance towards the center-right ($p < 0.05$), which might be explained by the fact that they are more likely to have voted for the radical-right in the past. The results for the gap in political tolerance also uncover an interesting pattern. The anti-system radical-right supporters have a significantly larger gap in their political tolerance compared to the moderate and extreme ideologues and the non-committed ($p < 0.05$). That is, they are—relatively speaking—less tolerant towards both mainstream parties vis-à-vis their in-party than all other radical-right supporters.

While moderate ideologues and the non-committed are thus relatively similar, the level of democratic support held by anti-system and extreme ideological radical-right supporters deviate substantially from both these groups, with anti-system supporters standing out in particular. Compared to the non-committed, falling into the anti-system group is associated with a 0.89 SD decrease in satisfaction with democracy, 0.95 SD decrease in political trust, and 0.53–0.61 SD decrease in political tolerance ($p < 0.001$), as well as a 0.59–0.76 SD increase in the gap in political tolerance. Extreme ideologues exhibit significantly lower levels of satisfaction with democracy and political trust than the non-committed ($p < 0.001$), but their absolute political tolerance towards the center-right is not significantly different ($p > 0.05$). Absolute political tolerance towards the center-left aside, the anti-system group differs significantly from the extreme ideologues across all our outcome variables ($p < 0.05$): they are less satisfied with democracy and show lower levels of political trust and political tolerance, as well as increased levels of political intolerance towards both mainstream parties vis-à-vis their in-party. Radical-right supporters in the anti-system category, therefore, seem to hold attitudes that are consistently detrimental to democracy and are geared

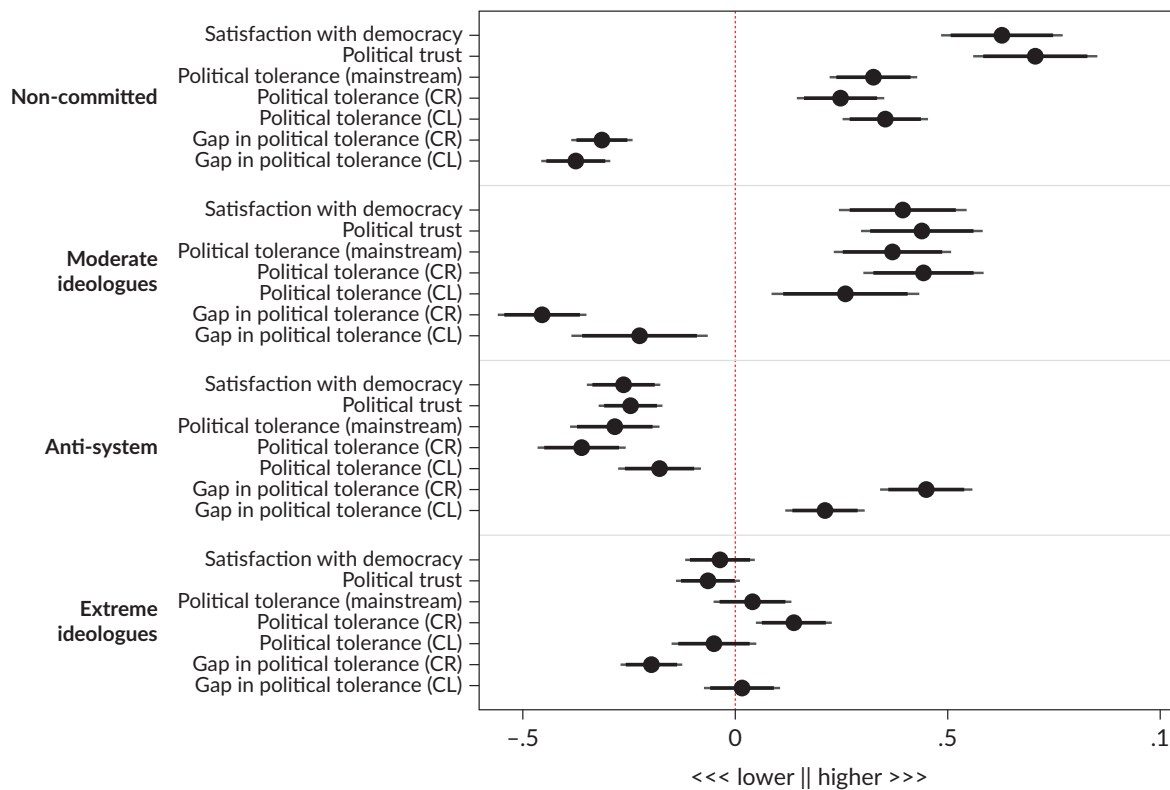


Figure 5. Consequences: 2 × 2 typology. Notes: Cut-off value for out-party dislike: > 0.50; cut-off value for dislike differentiation: > 0.2; linear regressions include standardized coefficients with sample fixed effects and robust standard errors; full regression results can be found in Tables A11, A12, A13, and A14 in Appendix A.11 in the Supplementary File; CL = center-left party; CR = center-right party; RR = radical-right party/parties.

towards the entire electorate, not just the ideologically distant. We also run models for both measures separately and report them in Appendix A.13 (in the Supplementary File), which reveals that high out-party dislike and low dislike differentiation are positively associated with these negative outcomes for democracy, even when they are included as separate measures.

Next, we examine the relationship between our novel 2x2 typology and populist attitudes. To measure populist attitudes, we use the item battery on attitudes towards elites available in Module 5 of the CSES ($N_{RR} = 2,780$), commonly employed in the literature on populism. However, we follow the recommendation by Castanho Silva et al. (2020) and drop the item on the desirability of having a strong leader in government. This leaves us with six items, which load well onto one latent construct ($\alpha = 0.73$). We transform these items into an additive index. As shown in Table 3, the non-committed and moderate ideologues hold the least populist attitudes.

Table 3. Populist attitudes: 2 × 2 typology.

	Mean	95%-CI
Non-committed	3.32	3.23–3.40
Moderate ideologues	3.37	3.30–3.43
Extreme ideologues	3.65	3.61–3.69
Anti-system	3.70	3.64–3.75

Note: Populist attitudes are measured using a six-item additive index, which ranges from 1 to 5, with 5 indicating a high level of populism.

Extreme ideologues are in comparison characterized by significantly stronger populist attitudes, as are the anti-system radical-right supporters ($p < 0.05$). The latter are even more populist than the former, although the difference is not statistically significant. Thus, our 2×2 typology also seems—at least in part—to tap into the intensity of populist attitudes held by these different groups of radical-right supporters.

To add greater external validity to our study, we replicate all our analyses for the predictors of dislike differentiation and consequences of our 2×2 typology using Modules 1–5 of the CSES ($N_{RR} = 7,479$). The results are consistent with our previous findings. More details are provided in Appendix A.14 in the Supplementary File.

5.4. Country Differences

When we break down our typology per country, we uncover several interesting patterns. Table 4 contains the proportion of each of the typology’s categories per country. It is important to remember that these frequencies are highly dependent on the chosen cut-off value and should therefore only be interpreted in relation to the other countries presented here.

Quite intuitively, almost all countries in which a higher share of radical-right supporters is anti-system are tripolar systems. In Austria, Germany, Denmark, France, and the Netherlands, the plurality of radical-right supporters are anti-system, while in Flanders, Spain, Italy, and Portugal, the plurality are extreme ideologues. Interestingly, except in Flanders, the second most numerous group in each country is the other group which radiates high levels of average out-party dislike. This is consistent with previous findings that the radical-right radiates the most dislike (Harteveld et al., 2022), independently of whether they differentiate or not.

The perceived ideological similarity of the mainstream parties may contribute to the relative prevalence of these categories in each country, which we can assess using parties’ perceived ideology as measured in our smaller dataset. Indeed, we find that the ideological gap between the two mainstream parties as perceived by radical-right supporters is on average much larger in proximity systems (0.36 in Flanders and 0.50 in Spain

Table 4. Proportions per country: 2×2 typology.

Country	Typology: Radical-right supporters			
	non-committed	moderate ideologues	anti-system	extreme ideologues
AT	11	7	52	31
DE	14	7	54	25
DK	16	7	41	36
ES	7	10	23	60
FR	6	5	65	24
IT	16	17	12	54
NL	13	14	47	26
PT	16	12	31	40
VLG	28	16	21	34
Total	14	10	39	37

Notes: Percentages reflect the proportion of each category within each country; cut-off value for out-party dislike: > 0.50 ; cut-off value for dislike differentiation: > 0.2 .

on a 0–1 scale) than in tripolar systems (0.17 in Germany and 0.26 for Austria). At the individual level, dislike differentiation is also strongly correlated with perceived ideological distance between mainstream parties ($r = 0.49, p < 0.001$). Citizens who differentiate more in terms of their dislike towards mainstream parties also differentiate more in terms of ideology, more closely aligning them with a proximity system. However, as the correlation is still far from perfect, other (contextual) factors play an important role as well.

We find that Flanders is the only proximity system that enforces a strict cordon sanitaire and is the only case in which the second largest portion of radical-right voters is non-committed. This could reflect the interplay between the party offer and voter perceptions. In Flanders, the radical-right party Vlaams Belang and the main right-wing party Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA) are the result of the split of Volksunie (Beyens et al., 2017). Hence, they are characterized by a certain permeability and shared goals (e.g., regarding immigration policies; Van Haute et al., 2018). It is reasonable to assume that voters switch from one party to another according to factors such as N-VA's government performance. This would explain not only the fact that Flanders falls into the proximity systems despite being a country enforcing a cordon sanitaire but also the particularly high share of non-committed radical-right supporters.

France, on the other hand, nicely fits the expectation of a country enforcing political exclusion on the radical-right (N. Mayer, 2018). It features the highest proportion of antisystem radical-right voters and the lowest share for the two categories of low out-party dislike (non-committed and moderate ideologues). Germany, which also systematically excludes the radical-right, follows a slightly milder, but quite similar pattern, with a higher share of non-committed voters. Austria is the country with the third-highest proportion of anti-system voters, which can be understood in the context of the FPÖ's successful populist communication strategy. The FPÖ strongly focuses on portraying the other parties as a unified bloc, which could have reasonably led to suppressing dislike differentiation among their supporters.

Denmark and the Netherlands are also typically tripolar despite not subjecting their radical-right parties to formal political exclusion. However, in both countries, mainstream-right parties dealt with the radical-right parties quite inconsistently, enforcing de facto political exclusion (see, e.g., Russo & Schulze Brock, 2024) that influenced the way radical-right voters perceive the mainstream right.

The two countries with the highest proportion of extreme ideologues are Spain and Italy. These countries are characterized by prominent divisions between clearly identifiable right and left ideological blocks, which could help radical-right voters differentiate between the mainstream parties. What sets Italy aside is its particularly low share of anti-system radical-right voters and the high share of moderate ideologues. This pattern could be reasonably ascribed to the highly mainstream nature of the radical-right in Italy (Custodi, 2023). Finally, Portugal is characterized by the highest share of antisystem radical-right supporters among the proximity system countries. As the radical-right party Chega is still relatively new (Carvalho, 2023), however, attitudes between voters and among the radical-right could still shift considerably in the future.

6. Conclusion

In the past few years, the scholarly interest generated by affective polarization in Europe has led to significant insights into the way partisan affect is articulated across different countries. One feature that characterizes affective polarization in multiparty systems is the important role that the radical-right plays in driving negative

affect (Harteveld et al., 2022). However, considering all radical-right supporters as a homogeneous block might hamper our understanding of affective polarization. In this article, we aimed to fill this gap by investigating the different shapes that affective polarization can take among radical-right supporters.

Our empirical results concerning affective polarization among radical-right supporters make two significant contributions that help tackle the challenges to liberal democracies discussed in the editorial of this thematic issue (Heinisch & Mazzoleni, 2024). First, many radical-right supporters do not uniformly dislike mainstream parties, instead, they differentiate between them. We call this phenomenon dislike differentiation. We find that radical-right supporters who are more politically engaged actually exhibit less out-party dislike and more dislike differentiation.

Second, this more nuanced way to examine partisan affect can be used to better understand the implications of affective polarization for contemporary democracies. By crossing dislike differentiation with out-party dislike, we propose a typology of radical-right supporters: non-committed; anti-system; and moderate and extreme ideologues. While non-committed and moderate ideologues seem to pose little threat to democracy, the other two types to a larger extent challenge at least two principles fundamental to democracy: a certain level of contentment with the system and the willingness to tolerate other political actors. The anti-system radical-right supporters, in particular, constitute a cause for concern, as they seem the most disillusioned with the political system. On top of showing all the characteristics of voters who differentiate less, they are substantially less satisfied with democracy and trustful of political institutions, display less political tolerance towards mainstream parties, and hold more populist attitudes than other radical-right supporters.

The internal composition of the radical-right supporters also varies considerably across country contexts. By examining dislike differentiation, we can assess whether a political system is tripolar (with three distinct ideological blocs and the radical-right holding a unique place) or proximity-based (with higher levels of dislike as ideological distance increases). In some countries, radical-right supporters dislike the mainstream ideological blocks equally, whereas in others they radiate less negative affect towards the center-right. Extreme ideologues constitute more than half of the radical-right supporters in Spain and Italy—two countries marked by the presence of two sharp ideological blocs, clearly inviting high levels of differentiation between left and right. Anti-system voters, on the other hand, are more prevalent in Austria, Germany, Denmark, France, and the Netherlands—five countries with strong and long-established radical-right parties, despite the differences between them in terms of cooperation with the mainstream right parties.

These cross-country differences raise the question of what generates a sizeable presence of non-differentiating radical-right supporters. The structure of political competition and the potential for normalization of radical actors may play a role here, namely through the prevailing democratic norms concerning coalition co-membership versus strict exclusion (Harteveld et al., 2022; Horne et al., 2023). Moreover, radical-right electoral success may potentially either dampen or deepen affective dislike between blocks (Bantel, 2023; Harteveld et al., 2022). Future research should explore which contextual factors create conditions under which affective polarization among radical-right supporters endangers democracy.

This study comes with a number of limitations. First, the three datasets which this study drew from were all cross-sectional. As such, this study uncovers certain patterns and associations that exist in the data. Future experimental research could look into examining these relationships causally and over time.

Second, future research could examine alternative senders and receivers of dislike. In terms of the receiver, we only focused on the main party within each ideological block. Future research could further expand the analysis to include other parties within each ideological block, such as the liberal and green parties. In terms of the sender, voters from other parties likely also differentiate in their out-group dislike. Our framework could also be applied to understand patterns of dislike differentiation among supporters of other parties.

Third, the forms of democratic support in this study did not include more diffuse measures of democratic support such as support for democratic ideals including freedom of expression and equality of participation. Future research could, therefore, explore additional aspects of democratic norms and attitudes and to what extent they are shaped by dislike differentiation.

Finally, surveys may fail to reach more moderate or discreet radical-right supporters, particularly in contexts where voting for the radical-right is viewed as socially undesirable. However, according to this logic, one would expect to find fewer non-committed and moderate ideologues in Germany and Flanders, two countries that enforce a strict cordon sanitaire, but this is not the case. Similarly, in Austria, France, and Spain, where either a large share of the electorate votes for the radical-right or the radical-right has been in local governments (or both), we should then expect to find many moderate radical-right supporters, but we do not. Thus, there are reasons to believe that this concern is at least partially unfounded here, which leaves us confident that our results also hold for the entire radical-right electorate.

In sum, we contribute to the scholarly debate on which kinds of radical-right supporters and which forms of affective polarization constitute a potential threat to contemporary democracies. Our findings show that radical-right supporters are far from being a monolithic homogeneous group. When out-party dislike is high, differentiating between more centrist opponents can partially mitigate the negative consequences brought forth by intense dislike. Conversely, when high out-party dislike is coupled with low dislike differentiation, we find that these radical-right supporters hold highly populist and anti-elitist attitudes, more so than other radical-right supporters. It is now of paramount importance to understand how these citizens can be involved in politics once again and how their democratic attitudes can be strengthened, especially in times when the electoral popularity of the radical-right is surging.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Replication files are available at: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/YK4N9>

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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