

Do Affective Polarization and Populism Affect the Support for Holding Referendums?

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Submitted: 30 April 2024 **Accepted:** 5 August 2024 **Published:** 17 October 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Challenging Democracy: How Do Ideas of Populists and Disenchanted Citizens Align?” edited by Reinhard Heinisch (University of Salzburg) and Oscar Mazzoleni (University of Lausanne), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i385>

Abstract

What populism and polarization have in common is that their relationship with democracy is an ambiguous one. Studies have found that certain degrees of polarization can be helpful for citizens to make up their minds about their choices and because of that encourage them to democratic participation. Similarly, populism can help increase participation by, for example, presenting policies in a simpler language. Citizens with less political interest and political knowledge might be incited to participate in elections and democratic politics in general. However, high levels of polarization lead to the irreconcilability of factions and thereby to gridlock. Democracy can be regarded as incapable of solving citizens’ problems. Likewise, populism can be destructive to democracy when occurring in certain forms and degrees. While populism is not per se antidemocratic, populist parties and leaders, when in power, repeatedly challenge democratic elements. To disentangle how polarization and populism affect democracy, I focus on certain specifics of these three concepts (democracy, populism, and polarization). Namely, I analyze how affective polarization and individual-level populism affect the support for the direct democratic instrument of holding referendums. Drawing on survey data from Austria and Germany, I find that being affectively polarized has a positive effect on the support for holding referendums. However, this effect is moderated by citizens’ individual-level populism. Thus, this study provides insights into citizens’ preferences for democratic decision-making, dependent on their levels of affective polarization and populism.

Keywords

affective polarization; democracy; populism; referendums

1. Introduction

The phenomena of populism and polarization are intertwined. Populism promotes societal polarization by its worldview that divides society into two homogeneous groups: the good and the evil. Furthermore, populism

and polarization share an ambivalent relationship to democracy. Populism is not inherently antidemocratic. Under certain circumstances, the emergence of populist parties and populist sentiments among citizens have been shown to stimulate democratic behavior (Canovan, 1999; Zaslove et al., 2021). However, various forms of populism explicitly call for changes in how representative democracy functions. Some forms advocate for more direct democratic instruments (Mohrenberg et al., 2021), while others call for strong leaders to make policy decisions (Donovan, 2021).

Similarly, polarization is a double-edged sword. It can be both a consequence of and a catalyst for populism, as seen in the United States and it may pose dangers to democracy (Finkel et al., 2020; McCoy et al., 2018). On the other hand, scholars have argued that polarization can enhance democratic knowledge and participation (Jost et al., 2022). Heltzel and Laurin (2020) argue that the effect of polarization is ambiguous. Intensified policy positions might provide clearer information, particularly for citizens with lower political interest and political knowledge. In consequence, politics might become more tangible for these citizens and thus foster political engagement. While some degree of polarization can mobilize the public for specific policies, excessive polarization can hinder the coordination of collective actions, such as climate change measures (Vasconcelos et al., 2021). Polarization was also found to affect voting behavior, with scholars divided over its consequences. On one hand, polarization might lead to more accurate voting, with citizens choosing parties that align closely with their policy attitudes (Pierce & Lau, 2019). On the other hand, Druckman et al. (2013) find that in highly polarized settings, voters rely more on cues and shortcuts, such as partisanship, and invest less effort in understanding policy content.

Given the ambivalence of both populism and polarization's effects on democracy, research on these relationships remains limited (but see Voelkel et al., 2023). In this article, I analyze the effect of affective polarization, as a specific form of polarization, on attitudes towards democracy, particularly the support for holding referendums. I also examine how this effect differs between populist and non-populist citizens.

Analyzing the effects of populism and polarization on support for direct democracy and, more specifically, for holding referendums provides insights into citizens' varying notions of democracy. Studies consistently find that nearly all citizens in democracies, but also autocracies, consider democracy the best form of governance. In European countries, almost 100% of citizens believe democracy is a very good or fairly good way to govern their country (Inglehart, 2003). Nevertheless, citizens differ widely in their preferred conceptions of democracy (Bryan, 2023). In other words, while there is consensus on democracy being the best political system, preferences for its specific configurations vary. These configurations include preferences for more referendums over parliamentary decisions and support for populist parties, provided they are not genuinely anti-democratic. Extremist and antidemocratic citizens are not the focus of this article. However, populist citizens challenge liberal democratic principles without rejecting democracy itself (Wegscheider et al., 2023).

From this, the following research question arises:

RQ: How do affective polarization and populist attitudes affect the support for referendums?

2. Theoretical Considerations

In this article, I focus on the individual-level aspects of populism and polarization, commonly operationalized as affective polarization and populist attitudes. Affective polarization is conceptualized as the ratio between the propensity to vote for one's preferred party and the dislike of other parties. In other words, citizens are more affectively polarized when there is a significant gap between their support for their in-party and their animosity towards out-parties (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Wagner, 2024). Populism at the individual level is operationalized through populist attitudes, drawing on the conceptualization of populism as a set of ideas forming a thin ideology (Hawkins et al., 2018; Mudde, 2017).

Citizens differ in their preferences for specific configurations of democratic decision-making (Bengtsson, 2012; Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020; Hibbing, 2001). Thus, I analyze the support for holding referendums as one specific characteristic of citizens' preferred conception of democracy. There are many reasons why citizens prefer referendums to decide on various policies (Beiser-McGrath et al., 2022; Fölsch et al., 2024; Schuck & De Vreese, 2015). Overall, the support for referendums in Europe is high. Rose and Weßels (2021) claim that a majority of citizens in 14 out of 17 European countries analyzed, including Germany and Austria, agree or strongly agree that referendums are a good way to decide important political questions. Although the use of referendums is increasing in Europe, I argue that electing representatives remains the norm and the implicit reference point for citizens when asked if they prefer holding referendums (Rose & Weßels, 2021).

In Sections 2.1 and 2.2, I explain why the support for holding referendums is influenced by affective polarization and how this mechanism differs between populist and non-populist citizens.

2.1. *Affective Polarization and Referendum Support*

In the literature, affective polarization refers to the gap between individuals' sympathy for their preferred party and their animosity towards other parties (Iyengar et al., 2012). This concept differs from party system polarization, which measures the gap between party positions in a political system (Taylor & Herman, 1971). When measured on the individual level, affective polarization draws on social identity theory, which contrasts in-group support with out-group opposition (Lelkes, 2018). Being affectively polarized thus means strongly supporting one's own party (the in-group) while strongly opposing other parties (the out-group). For example, a person who does not have strong opinions about any party would score at a medium level for all parties on a like-dislike scale.

Research has shown that levels of affective polarization affect citizens' attitudes towards various aspects of democracy. Wagner (2021) found that higher levels of affective polarization are associated with lower levels of satisfaction with democracy. This suggests that strongly affectively polarized citizens prefer alternative concepts of democracy to the current parliamentary decision-making process. However, Broockman et al. (2023) found that higher levels of affective polarization do not lead citizens to oppose democratic norms, such as justifying violence. Combined, the findings by Broockman et al. (2023) and Wagner (2021) suggest that while affectively polarized citizens may not reject democratic norms, they may support democratic instruments other than parliamentary decision-making. Similarly, Ouattara and Van der Meer (2023) found that citizens with low political trust are more likely to support direct democratic instruments but are not more supportive of authoritarianism.

I argue that there are several reasons why referendums are key tools used by affectively polarized citizens: First, they may perceive parliamentary decisions as biased towards the out-group and thus unrepresentative. Not only have affectively polarized citizens been found to be less satisfied with how democracy works, but they also exhibit lower levels of institutional trust (Reiljan & Ryan, 2021). The argument here is that institutional trust reflects the overall political culture. When polarized, personal and institutional distrust can interplay, as Christensen and Lægreid (2005) point out. Citizens might distrust institutions when they have encountered negative experiences with representatives of the government and actors of the public sector, for example. In affectively polarized citizens, this effect may form even more.

Second, and related, because affective polarization can also manifest itself in party system polarization (Reiljan, 2020), situations of political gridlock can arise, which may lead to frustration among affectively polarized citizens. Referendums can overcome such deadlock situations because their outcomes are binary and avoid the prolonged negotiations necessary for parliamentary decisions. This efficiency can appeal to emotionally polarized citizens who feel an urgency to express their political views and prefer timely decisions. Also, compromise might be disdained by these citizens altogether (McCoy et al., 2018).

Based on these theoretical considerations, my first hypothesis is:

H1: Being affectively polarized increases the probability to support holding referendums.

2.2. Effect of Populist Attitudes

As previously mentioned, affective polarization and populism at the individual level are intertwined due to their shared notion of a divided society. In conceptualizations of populism, society is characterized as consisting of two poles, the good and pure people on the one side and the evil and corrupt elite on the other (Mudde, 2017). Similarly, affective polarization involves strong positive feelings towards an in-group and negative emotions towards out-groups (Lelkes, 2018). Put differently, populism sees society divided into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, the people and the elite, calling for politics to be retrieved from the elite and returned to the people, following the homogenous *volonté générale* of the people. Affective polarization is conceptualized by citizens holding a strong positive affect towards their in-group while harboring a strong negative affect towards out-groups. Clearly, these two concepts are intertwined, but research on their relationship is still limited, especially regarding their phenomena at the individual level (Pérez-Rajó, 2024).

2.3. Populism and Polarization

I argue that the effect of being affectively polarized on the support for holding a referendum is stronger for citizens holding populist attitudes than for those who do not for the following reasons: First, populist attitudes may reinforce the belief of affectively polarized citizens that holding a referendum is an effective way to avoid the perceived biases of parliamentary decision-making processes (for the populists, these are elitist processes). In general, populist citizens prefer a decision-making process that resides with the people, rather than with the elite (Jacobs et al., 2018; Wegscheider et al., 2023). People-centrism, a sub-dimension of populism, reflects this desire to regain power for the people. Second, populist attitudes exacerbate the suspicion among affectively polarized citizens that representative democracy may not truly represent the interests of the electorate. Referendums would help populist citizens, who are affectively polarized, bypass

the process of finding compromises that they believe might weaken the interests of the people. And third, the salience of political identities is important for a populist mindset. The narrative of a society that allegedly follows “us-versus-them” dynamics relies on a strong identity of both the in-group and the out-group. Affective polarization reinforces this identity by emphasizing positive emotional attachments to the own political group and negative emotional attachments to the other pole (Müller, 2016).

Based on these considerations, I hypothesize:

H2: The increase in the probability to support holding referendums when being affectively polarized is larger for citizens holding populist attitudes than for those who do not.

Although I analyze both populist attitudes and affective polarization as factors at the individual level, it is important to note that the levels of both populism and polarization differ between supporters of different parties. In Figures A3 and A4 in the Supplementary File, I plot the means of affective polarization and populism, respectively, for those with a propensity to vote six and higher for a given party. The supporters of FPÖ and AfD (followed by SPÖ and SPD) exhibit the highest means of affective polarization, while the supporters of MFG and AfD (followed by FPÖ and Die Linke) exhibit the highest means of populist attitudes in Austria and Germany, respectively.

3. Data and Methods

In this section, I present the operationalizations of the key variables and the methods. Subsequently, I will describe in detail the data used to empirically answer the research question. To test the two hypotheses empirically, I draw on survey data from Austria and Germany, collected by the Austrian survey company Market, with a targeted sample size of 1,100 respondents for each country, collected at the end of May 2022. The sample is representative of eligible voters by gender, age, region, and education. Descriptive statistics can be found in Table A1 of the Supplementary File.

I consider Austria and Germany to be good cases for two reasons: While they are similar in most traits, they vary to a certain degree in their experience with holding referendums and the manifestation of populism. Arguably, Austria has more experience with more far-reaching referendums, as binding and non-binding referendums are technically possible at the federal level. In Germany, only referendums on a sub-national level are possible. However, the experience with far-reaching referendums is also rather limited in Austria, where only three national referendums have been held so far. However, I assume that citizens in both Austria and Germany have an understanding of and an attitude towards referendums for two reasons: First, the proximity to Switzerland means that Austrian and German citizens have a reference point for how instruments of direct democracy work (Hobolt, 2005). Second, a large number of citizens have experience with voting in referendums or plebiscites at the sub-national level, which provides citizens with a sense of what are referendums (Bowler & Donovan, 2019; Scarrow, 1999)—Trüdinger and Bächtiger (2023) show that 40% of Germans have participated in a referendum or plebiscite.

The differences in populism between Austria and Germany are more pronounced. Austria has an established radical right populist party, FPÖ, while Germany’s radical right populist party, AfD, was founded only in 2013 and has not yet been part of the federal-level governments. However, Germany has also a left-wing populist

party, Die Linke (with a tradition dating back to reunification), which has been part of state governments in Berlin, Brandenburg, and Thuringia. Austria lacks a successful left-wing populist party at the state and federal levels. This divide can be traced back to the different ways the two countries processed their roles in World War II in public and political debates in the post-war period. Far-right parties have never been absent in the post-war era of both countries. In Germany, these parties have long been predominantly extreme right parties, with REP, DVU, and NPD being especially successful in the 1990s and 2000s. The AfD has arguably benefited from the decline of the NPD, following the party's financial problems, bans in the Bundesrat, and turmoil around the party's leader (Backes, 2018).

3.1. *Dependent Variable: Support for Holding Referendums*

The dependent variable (i.e., *the respondents' support for holding referendums*) is measured using a survey item that reads: "Citizens should have the final say in important political decisions by voting on them directly in referendums." Respondents could answer: "do not agree at all," "agree a little," "neither nor," "pretty much agree," and "fully agree." The generic wording of the question is advantageous because respondents are less likely to conflate the procedural question of supporting referendums with substantial attitudes towards specific policies (Rose & Weßels, 2021). This survey item was tested in a very similar form in the International Social Survey Programme (Scholz et al., 2017).

3.2. *Independent Variable: Affective Polarization*

Affective polarization is defined as the distribution of the scores for *likes* and *dislikes* expressed by an individual for a given party. Wagner (2021) recommends measuring this with a feeling thermometer indicating how much individuals *like* a given party. Each respondent can give scores between 0 and 10 where 0 means they *strongly dislike* and 10 means they *strongly like* that party. As most datasets lack this survey item, researchers have relied on proxies instead. Especially the probability to vote (PTV) for a given party intuitively seems to tap into a similar concept. Orriols and León (2022) and Pérez-Rajó (2024) successfully applied PTV measures to capture affective polarization. The PTV question measures the spread between liking and disliking a party by asking how likely it is that the respondent would ever vote for that party. Affective polarization based on this measure is thus the difference between the score assigned to the party for which the respondent is most likely to vote and the scores assigned to the other parties. Respondents get the chance to reflect freely on their preferences for all parties in a system and assign their scores accordingly. For this reason, I argue that PTV scores measure a concept very similar to a feeling thermometer for parties.

I measure the PTV on an eleven-point scale from 0 (*very unlikely*) to 10 (*very likely*) for the question of how likely it is that the respondent will ever vote for a given party. I analyze six parties in each of the two countries: SPÖ, ÖVP, FPÖ, Grüne, NEOS, and MFG (Austria); and SPD, CDU/CSU, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, FDP, AfD, and Die Linke (Germany). Figures A1 and A2 in the Supplementary File show the distributions of the propensities to vote for each party in each country.

Except for using PTV instead of a like-dislike thermometer, I follow the recommendation of Wagner (2021) in calculating the individual affective polarization scores (see also Pérez-Rajó, 2024). I compute affective polarization as the average absolute difference in voting propensities relative to the individual's assigned average propensity. In this way, I obtain the spread of affective polarization (where p is the party, i is the

individual respondent, and PTV_{ip} is the assigned propensity to vote for each party by each individual):

$$\text{Spread}(AP)_i = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{p=1}^p (PTV_{ip} - \overline{PTV}_i)^2}{n_p}}$$

3.3. Independent Variable: Populist Attitudes

To test my second hypothesis and see if populism reinforces the relationship between affective polarization and support for referendums, I measure respondents' populist attitudes using the established scale developed by Castanho Silva et al. (2018). Respondents are asked to rate themselves on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) on nine items, three for each of the sub-dimensions of populism, namely people-centrism, anti-elitism, and Manichean worldview. As suggested by Castanho Silva et al. (2018), I use a simple factor analysis to calculate the level of individuals' populism. The items load on two different factors. I multiply the values of the two factors and divide the variable with the mean being the threshold. I consider those scoring above the mean as populist citizens and those at the mean or below as non-populist citizens. In Austria, 544 respondents (49.28%) are classified as populist citizens and, in Germany, 503 respondents (45.44%) are classified as populist citizens.

4. Results

First, I empirically test the first hypothesis H1 by using an ordered logistic regression. The dependent variable is the support for holding referendums, measured as previously described. The main independent variables are affective polarization and populist attitudes. I control for the following demographic and political variables that have been found to affect at least one of the dependent and independent variables: gender, education, age, political interest, left-right self-placement, and political extremism. The results of the ordered logistic regression models for both Austria and Germany are shown in Table 1. Model (2) shows the results for H1 for Austria and Model (8) shows the results for Germany. In Austria, the coefficient of the main independent variable affective polarization is positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). In Germany, the coefficient is positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). This means that individuals who are affectively polarized according to the conceptualization explained above are more likely to support the holding of referendums in both Austria and Germany.

Table 1. Ordered logistic regression results for H1.

	(1) (Austria) without controls support for holding referendums	(2) (Austria) with controls support for holding referendums	(3) (Austria) with populism and interactions (dummy) support for holding referendums	(4) (Austria) with populism and interactions (people- centrism) support for holding referendums	(5) (Austria) with populism and interactions (anti- elitism) support for holding referendums	(6) (Austria) with populism and interactions (Manichean Outlook) support for holding referendums	(7) (Germany) without controls support for holding referendums	(8) (Germany) with controls support for holding referendums	(9) (Germany) with populism and interactions (dummy) support for holding referendums	(10) (Germany) with populism and interactions (people- centrism) support for holding referendums	(11) (Germany) with populism and interactions (anti- elitism) support for holding referendums	(12) (Germany) with populism and interactions (manichean outlook) support for holding referendums
Affective polarization	0.821*** (0.245)	0.530* (0.262)	-0.471 (0.370)	-2.845 (1.453)	-2.087 (1.235)	0.536 (0.658)	0.858*** (0.198)	0.843*** (0.205)	0.313 (0.275)	-1.907* (0.963)	-1.613 (0.901)	1.242* (0.610)
Populism (Dummy)			0.396 (0.281)						0.990*** (0.210)			
People-centrism				0.711*** (0.201)						0.514*** (0.137)		
Anti-elitism					0.650*** (0.194)						0.727*** (0.159)	
Manichean Outlook						0.0847 (0.142)						0.315** (0.113)
Populism (Dummy)			1.553** (0.507)						0.812* (0.400)			
#Affective polarization												
People-centrism #Affective polarization				0.724* (0.354)						0.580* (0.252)		
Anti-Elitism #Affective Polarization					0.621 (0.330)						0.557* (0.263)	

Table 1. (Cont.) Ordered logistic regression results for H1.

	(1) (Austria) without controls support for holding referendums	(2) (Austria) with controls support for holding referendums	(3) (Austria) with populism and interactions (dummy) support for holding referendums	(4) (Austria) with populism and interactions (people- centrism) support for holding referendums	(5) (Austria) with populism and interactions (anti- elitism) support for holding referendums	(6) (Austria) with populism and interactions (Manichean Outlook) support for holding referendums	(7) (Germany) without controls support for holding referendums	(8) (Germany) with controls support for holding referendums	(9) (Germany) with populism and interactions (dummy) support for holding referendums	(10) (Germany) with populism and interactions (people- centrism) support for holding referendums	(11) (Germany) with populism and interactions (anti- elitism) support for holding referendums	(12) (Germany) with populism and interactions (manichean outlook) support for holding referendums
Manichean Outlook						0.00557 (0.256)						-0.0696 (0.214)
#Affective Polarization												
Male		-0.168 (0.117)	-0.107 (0.119)	-0.0943 (0.119)	-0.0795 (0.120)	-0.167 (0.117)		0.0104 (0.113)	0.0419 (0.114)	0.116 (0.115)	0.0413 (0.115)	-0.0122 (0.113)
Higher education		-0.128 (0.113)	-0.103 (0.115)	-0.140 (0.115)	-0.157 (0.115)	-0.116 (0.114)		-0.103 (0.117)	-0.196 (0.119)	-0.212 (0.119)	-0.264* (0.120)	-0.0503 (0.118)
Age		0.0103** (0.00339)	0.0115*** (0.00345)	0.00478 (0.00349)	0.0126*** (0.00347)	0.0105** (0.00340)		-0.00339 (0.00365)	-0.00331 (0.00370)	-0.00944* (0.00376)	-0.00368 (0.00372)	-0.00148 (0.00369)
Political interest		-0.192** (0.0643)	-0.173** (0.0653)	-0.210** (0.0655)	-0.135* (0.0661)	-0.190** (0.0644)		0.141* (0.0561)	0.104 (0.0564)	0.0936 (0.0566)	0.155** (0.0569)	0.137* (0.0564)
Left-Right		0.0382 (0.121)	0.136 (0.124)	-0.114 (0.125)	0.0754 (0.126)	0.0616 (0.122)		-0.176 (0.102)	-0.168 (0.104)	-0.218* (0.104)	-0.232* (0.106)	-0.119 (0.103)
Extremism (Left-Right ²)		0.0169 (0.0106)	0.00786 (0.0110)	0.0286* (0.0111)	0.0118 (0.0111)	0.0148 (0.0108)		0.0198* (0.00861)	0.0173* (0.00881)	0.0241** (0.00880)	0.0203* (0.00896)	0.0141 (0.00875)
N	1069	1069	1069	1069	1069	1069	1064	1064	1064	1064	1064	1064
Pseudo R ²	0.00383	0.0314	0.0691	0.0747	0.0871	0.0320	0.00625	0.0119	0.0562	0.0469	0.0697	0.0182

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; standard errors in parentheses; high education is operationalized as *Berufsbildende mittlere Schule* (e.g., *Handelsschule*) or higher in Austria, and *Realschule* or higher in Germany.

Turning to H2, I add populism to the equation. In this step, I want to find out whether it makes a difference if the respondents are populist citizens or non-populist citizens when it comes to the effect of being affectively polarized on the support for referendums. To analyze this, I again apply ordered logistic regressions and include an interaction of affective polarization and individual-level populism, measured with populist attitudes as explained in Section 3.3. In Table 1, Model (3) shows the regression results including the interaction for Austria and Model (9) for Germany. For both countries, the effect of the interaction is positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$ for Austria and $p < 0.05$ for Germany). The direct effect of affective polarization though is no longer statistically significant when adding populism and the interaction of both independent variables to the model. The direct effect of populism as the second main independent variable, in contrast, is positive and statistically significant in Germany ($p < 0.001$), but not in Austria. I interpret the differences between the countries in Section 4.2. The positive effects of interactions of populism and affective polarization indicate that the effect of affective polarization on support for referendums depends on the level of populist attitudes of the respondents. In other words, the effect of affective polarization on support for referendums is moderated by the level of populism. In summary, as the interaction term becomes significant, the direct effect of affective polarization disappears in both Austria and Germany and the direct effect of populism disappears in Austria.

To further illustrate the findings, Figures 1 and 2 show the marginal effects of the interaction terms for both Austria and Germany. The effect of populism increases with an increasing individual affective polarization for those who *fully agree* that important decisions should be made via referendums in both Austria and Germany. Based on this, H2 can be accepted.

4.1. Dimensions of Populist Attitudes

Since the measure of populist attitudes is a summary variable that conceptually consists of the three sub-dimensions of people-centrism, anti-elitism, and Manichean outlook, I calculate the effects of each sub-dimension on the support for holding referendums as well as the interaction effects for each of the sub-dimensions with affective polarization. The results are shown in Table 1. Models 4–6 show the results for Austria and Models 10–12 for Germany. For Austria, the direct effects of people-centrism and anti-elitism are positive and significant ($p < 0.001$), while the effect of the Manichean outlook on support for holding a referendum is insignificant. For Germany, the direct effects of all three sub-dimensions are positive and significant ($p < 0.001$ for people-centrism and anti-elitism; $p < 0.01$ for Manichean outlook). By calculating the interaction effects for each sub-dimension separately I analyze which of the dimensions of populism drives the interaction effect. In Austria, only the interaction effect between people-centrism and affective polarization is positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). In Germany, the interactions of affective polarization with both people-centrism and anti-elitism are positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). This means that the sub-dimension Manichean outlook does not drive the interaction effect.

4.2. How Is Austria Different From Germany?

The results suggest that even though the main effects are the same for both Austria and Germany, there are relevant differences that are worth addressing. First, I find that in Germany, when integrating the interaction term of affective polarization and populism (Model 9), the direct effect of populism stays significant. This is not the case in Austria (Model 3). I interpret this as a closer connection between populism and affective

polarization in Austria, whereas in Germany, these phenomena seem to be more separate from each other. To support this interpretation, I analyze the effect of affective polarization on populist attitudes in a separate model. The results are shown in Table A2 in the Supplementary File. In Austria, the effect of affective polarization on populist attitudes is larger, which supports this interpretation.

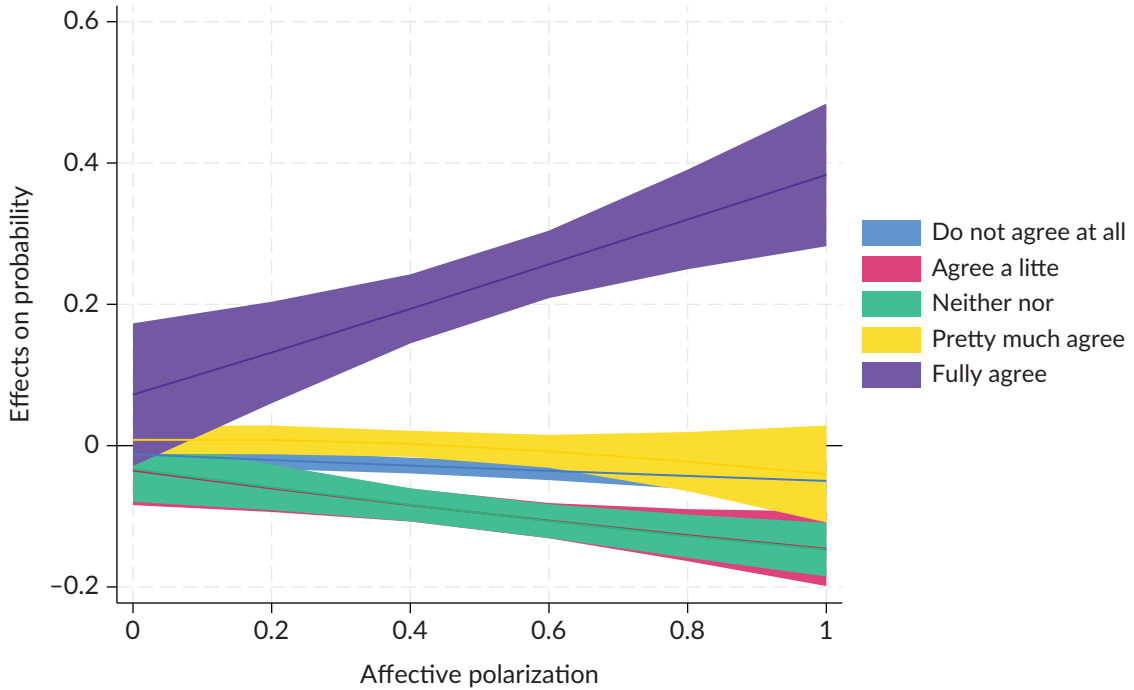


Figure 1. Marginal effects of the interaction model of affective polarization*populism (Austria).

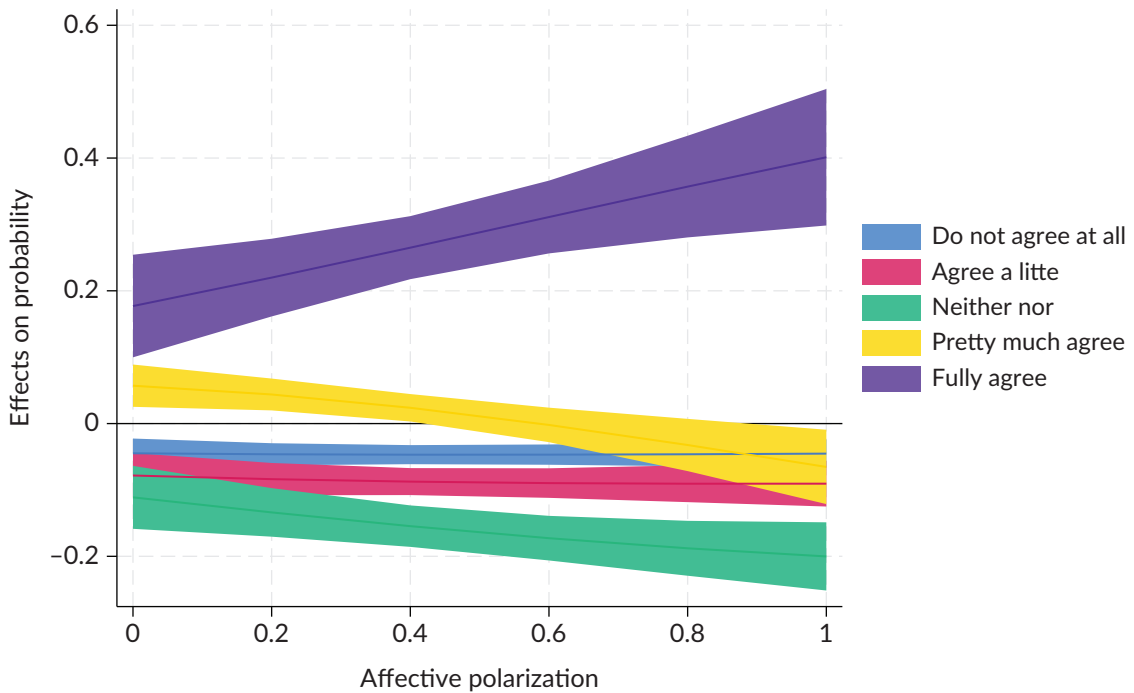


Figure 2. Marginal effects of the interaction model of affective polarization*populism (Germany).

Second, the interaction effects are driven by different sub-dimensions of populism in Austria and Germany. In Austria, it is solely driven by the sub-dimension of people-centrism according to the results shown in Table 1, while in Germany, both people-centrism and anti-elitism drive the interaction effect. Interestingly, the sub-dimension of the Manichean outlook, the feeling that the world is ultimately divided into two irreconcilable parts, does not drive the interaction with affective polarization in either country.

While not the focus of this article, the control variables exhibit interesting differences between Austria and Germany, which future research should address in more detail. It is interesting to note that in Austria the effect of political interest on support for holding referendums over all models (2–6) is negative, which means that respondents are more likely to support holding referendums when they are less interested in politics. In Germany, the effect of political interest is positive in Models 8, 11, and 12, indicating that respondents with higher political interest are more likely to support holding referendums on important questions.

5. Conclusion

As stated before in this article, both populism and polarization have an ambiguous relationship with democracy. Certain levels of populism and polarization might indeed be conducive to democracy, but real-world evidence indicates that high levels of polarization and certain forms of populism conflict with democratic principles. Based on these claims, I investigated these relationships by focusing on specific aspects of each concept, namely populist attitudes, affective polarization, and direct democratic instruments, specifically referendums.

This study contributes to various strands of the literature as, by examining populist attitudes, it adds to the literature on the effects of populism at the individual level. Furthermore, it addresses the emerging field of affective polarization, particularly relevant in multiparty systems, exploring its causes and consequences. Finally, the study connects these concepts and adds to the academic and public debate on whether and how democracy is facing a variety of threats.

First, I analyzed how affective polarization influences support for holding referendums. The data show a positive and statistically significant effect in both Austria and Germany. Citizens who are more affectively polarized are more likely to support the holding of referendums.

To test the second hypothesis, I examined the effect of populism on the relationship between affective polarization and support for holding referendums. In both countries, I found statistically significant positive effects when affective polarization and populist attitudes interact. Additionally, the direct effect of populism on the support for holding referendums was positive and significant in Germany. The direct effect of affective polarization, as analyzed in Section 4, in turn, disappeared. Thus, this result suggests that the effect of affective polarization on the support for holding referendums is moderated by respondents' individual-level populism.

While I was able to give insight into the ambiguous relationships between populism, polarization, and forms of democracy several paths are worth further investigation: First, while integrating similar phenomena is beneficial for understanding their reciprocal associations, it inherently introduces the problem of endogeneity. Specifically, direct democracy is sometimes viewed as a factor of populist attitudes itself, as it is intuitively an instrument to reach higher levels of people-centrism and at the same time foster the

sentiment of anti-elitism. Therefore, it is impossible to rule out a degree of endogeneity between the dependent and the independent variables. Future studies should address this issue, potentially by drawing on experimental settings or qualitative studies. Second, I could only include cases where citizens have only limited experience with referendums. This context must be considered when interpreting the results. There is a chance that polarization and populist attitudes affect support for holding referendums differently or not at all in countries with more experience with referendums or with even more limited traditions of populist parties in governments and parliaments. Therefore, I encourage further research to test these findings for countries in which referendums are more common, such as, for example, Switzerland. Third, in this study, I did not include any political supply side factors, i.e., the parties' behavior. Future research should pay attention to the reciprocal reactions between voters and parties. For this topic, it would be particularly interesting to examine populist and extreme parties in terms of their contribution to macro-level polarization and populism. Finally, in this study, I rely on cross-sectional data only. It would be instructive to complement these data and my findings with experimental or panel data to establish causal effects empirically.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Julian Erhardt, Reinhard Heinisch, Robert Huber, and the three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments as well as to the editors of this volume.

Funding

Open access publication supported by the Paris Lodron University of Salzburg Publication Fund.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data is available upon request from the author.

Supplementary Material

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

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