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Affective polarization and habits of political participation

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ABSTRACT

Affective polarization, or relative dislike of opposing partisans, is associated with several negative outcomes for democracy. However, a number of studies argue that affective polarization has one positive democratic consequence: it spurs political participation. However, political participation, especially voting, is habitual, and the factors that spur people to start participating are not the same as those that sustain participation once it is initiated. Existing work does not address this distinction. Leveraging large-scale survey data linked to validated measures of turnout as well as panel data, this paper shows that affective polarization mainly serves to sustain existing habits of turnout. In contrast, there is little evidence that affective polarization motivates people who did not previously participate to begin doing so. These results indicate that instead of improving democratic outcomes, affective polarization exacerbates existing inequities in political participation.

1. Introduction

Affective polarization, or relative dislike of opposing partisans (Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason 2015), is a growing concern to democratic health worldwide (Gidron et al., 2020). Affectively polarized partisans often discriminate against out-partisans in both political and non-political contexts (Amira et al., 2021; Engelhardt and Utych 2020; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Lelkes and Westwood 2017; McConnell et al., 2018; Nicholson et al., 2016; Shafranek 2021). They also may support anti-democratic rules to prevent out-partisans from winning elections (Bergan and Newman 2022; Graham and Svolik 2020; Kalmoe and Mason 2022; Orhan 2022; Ridge, 2022; though see Broockman et al., 2023). In extreme cases, this spills over into condoning political violence against out-partisans (Kalmoe and Mason 2022).

Researchers also argue, however, that affective polarization positively impacts democracy through motivating voter turnout (Bankert 2021; Harteveld and Wagner 2023; Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018; Wagner 2021; Ward and Tavits 2019, though see Ahn and Mutz 2023) and acts beyond voting (Mason 2018; Miller and Conover, 2015; Nelson 2022). Participation affirms existing in-party ties (Groenendyk and Banks 2014; Huddy et al., 2015) and counteracts a threatening opposition (Abramowitz and Webster 2018; Huddy and Yair 2021; McLaughlin et al., 2020; Orhan 2022; Ridge 2022). As a result, affectively polarized partisans will be particularly motivated to participate.

While most analyses demonstrate a positive association affective polarization and political participation, it is unclear which citizens affective polarization may mobilize. According to theories of habitual voting, most who participate (abstain) in one election tend to participate (abstain) in the next (Fowler 2006). To transition from abstention to participating for the first time, people have to pay a number of start-up costs (Downs, 1957), but they need not pay these costs to continue participating. As a result, it is easier to participate again. A similar logic exists for acts of participation beyond voting, though these acts tend to be less habitual (Dinas 2012).

One implication of these theories is that affective polarization can do at least one of two things. First, it can bring new people into the electorate via kickstarting new habits of participation. Second, it can stabilizes the composition of the electorate by reducing the extent to which people exit the electorate. While the same factors can perform both functions, they often do not. For example, education, considered pivotal to participation, (Verba et al., 1995), mainly facilitates first-time participation (Plutzer 2002), with lingering effects statistically accounted for thereafter via past participation.

It is not clear, then, a priori, which function affective polarization serves. Does it serve to kickstart new habits of participation, reinforce existing habits, both, or neither? This paper tests these two possibilities regarding affective polarization's effects on both voting and non-voting forms of political participation. Using survey data linked with validated turnout information, this paper shows that affective polarization is associated with a higher likelihood of turnout, but only among those who have previously voted. Similarly, panel data from a nationally representative sample of Americans indicates that affective polarization is linked with higher participation beyond voting, but only among those who have previously participated to a high degree. These effects are

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mostly driven by in-party warmth rather than out-party dislike. These results indicate that affective polarization's mobilizing effects are confined to those who already participate, rather than bringing new people into the political process.

2. Affective Polarization's possible effects on participation

2.1. Kickstarting new habits of participation

According to theories of habitual political participation, one possible effect of affective polarization is that it can lead people who previously abstained to begin participating in politics. Political participation comes with startup costs (Downs 1957; Plutzer 2002), namely navigating administrative processes involved in registering to vote and casting one's ballot. Resources such as having politically involved parents make it easier to become informed on navigating these processes. Motivational factors such as political interest (Prior 2010) enhance citizens' willingness to read up on the issues of the day, understand the stakes of a given election, and navigate administrative processes.

There are several reasons to expect that affective polarization can spur new participatory habits. First, affective polarization develops quite early in the lifespan (Tyler and Iyengar, 2023; Lay et al., 2023; Phillips 2022), well before citizens are eligible to vote or drive themselves to campaign rallies. It is present even before people have long-standing partisan identities they can draw on (Phillips 2022). Second, affective polarization does not require a deep understanding of the party system. Therefore, it can be present even among people fairly uninterested in politics. A simple distaste for the opposition relative to one's own party can motivate people to pay the initial startup costs of participation. If affective polarization starts new habits of participation, then the following will be observed:

Kickstarter Hypothesis: Among those who have not participated in prior election cycles, affective polarization is associated with a higher likelihood of political participation.

2.2. Sustaining existing habits

According to theories of habitual political participation, once people make the transition from abstention to participation, they will generally continue to participate thereafter (Plutzer 2002). Once citizens pay the initial costs of participation, under most circumstances, these costs do not need to be paid again.

However, citizens who participated before are not certain to participate again. Citizens have different latent propensities to vote (Arceneaux and Nickerson 2009). Life events such as widowhood (Hobbs et al., 2014; Plutzer 2002) can reduce the motivation to participate. Other events, such as incarceration (White 2022), can force people to pay the costs of registration all over again. Election-level characteristics such as their scope (local vs. national) and competitiveness can make some elections more attractive to participate in than others (Arceneaux and Nickerson 2009). Motivational forces can keep people participating who might otherwise fall out of the electorate. Affective polarization, whether it kickstarts new habits of participation or not, can provide such motivation. If so, then the following will be observed:

Sustainer Hypothesis: Among those who have participated in prior election cycles, affective polarization is associated with a higher likelihood of continuing to politically participate.

2.3. Voting vs. non-voting participation

Up to this point, the discussion of affective polarization's participatory effects has not distinguished voting from other forms of participation. This paper considers whether affective polarization has similar effects for each kind of participation. Each form of participation has distinct startup costs (Fowler 2006; Plutzer 2002). While affective polarization may motivate people to overcome such costs, citizens might not be willing to pay all costs for all forms of participation. Indeed, most people only vote and do not attend rallies or join groups (Verba et al., 1995). Additionally, non-voting forms of participation involve greater costs for continued participation than voting, and as a result are less habitual (Dinas, 2012) Presuming one does not move, a citizen needs to register to vote only one time. By contrast, knowing which political cause to donate to in one year might not provide guidance on which causes to donate to in another.

In other words, there are fewer habits of participation beyond voting to kickstart than there are habits of voting. This suggests that affective polarization may have less room to affect initial habits for non-voting forms of participation. However, habits of other forms of participation require paying more continual costs. Therefore, anything that motives people to pay those costs can still work both to begin and sustain habits of participation. Hence, this paper makes no strong predictions about how affective polarization affects voting vs. non-voting forms of participation.

2.4. Is in-party or out-party warmth doing the work?

Another open research question is whether affective polarization kickstarts or sustains participation because of in-party or out-party warmth. Affective polarization, by definition, is a relative judgment of the opposing party relative to one's own. Higher levels of affective polarization may kickstart or sustain habits of participation because such people display high levels of support for their own party. Through participating politically, partisans can affirm their existing partisan ties (Groenendyk and Banks 2014; Huddy et al., 2015). At the same time, it could be that as partisans experience greater fear and loathing towards the opposition (Abramowitz and Webster 2018; Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018; Ridge 2022), they become more motivated to participate to counteract the opposition. It is also possible that both in-party and out-party affect both work simultaneously to shape participatory habits. This paper hence leaves this topic as an open research question.

3. Research design

3.1. Data

This study uses data from the 2016 American National Election Study (ANES). This ANES is particularly useful because validated turnout data are available for most respondents (verified by a voter file), which is more accurate than self-reported turnout. People are prone to misremembering and overreporting turnout (Karp and Brockington 2005), often due to factors related to affective polarization. Political sophisticates tend to be to be stronger partisans (Miller 2011) and display higher anger and enthusiasm during campaign seasons (Phillips and Plutzer 2023). As a result, they may feel particularly ashamed of abstaining, and may be particularly motivated to conceal non-voting. This would bias the relationship between affective polarization and voter turnout upwards. Using validated turnout circumvents these issues.

To assess the relationship between affective polarization and non-voting participation, this study utilizes the 1992-94-96 ANES Panel. This dataset is particularly useful for studying the determinants of participation beyond voting for two reasons. First, standalone ANES's tend only to measure political participation beyond voting once in the post-election wave. This makes it impossible to condition affective polarization's effects on prior electoral participation. The panel measures such participation three times. Second, measures of non-voting participation ask about respondents' activities either during the campaign season or in the past year. As a result, within the confines of a typical ANES survey, measured pre-election affective polarization may not be temporally prior to acts the participation items reference. In the 1992-96 panel, waves are 2 years apart, ensuring that affective polarization in one wave is temporally prior to reported political activity in the next.

3.2. Measuring political participation

3.2.1. Voter Turnout

Responses in the 2016 ANES were merged with the national voter file using a probabilistic method (see Enamorado and Imai 2019). This merge resulted in the creation of a binary variable that takes on a value of 1 if the respondent was recorded as having voted in the 2016 election and 0 if not.

3.2.2. Non-Voting Participation

The 1992-96 ANES Panel survey asked respondents about their participation in various political activities in each wave. These activities included attempting to persuade others, displaying campaign materials, attending political events, and engaging in campaign-related work. Respondents were also asked about their financial contributions to candidates, parties, and political causes separately. To reduce the impact of donations on the overall scale of participation, these donation activities were combined into a single variable that takes on a value of 1 if respondents donated in any capacity.

These items were combined into an index in two ways. The first was a simple additive index of activities (range: 0–5). However, these participatory activities vary greatly in how costly they are (Valentino et al., 2011), and are thus not equally informative of the extent to which a respondent participates in politics. Therefore, I also employed a 2-parameter IRT approach in which each item of participation in each year can take on a different weight (see Tables A10-A12 for item discrimination and difficulty). These items display excellent fit to the data (1992: RMSEA = 0.000 [95% CI: 0.000, 0.031], SRMR = 0.019, CFI = 1.00; 1994: RMSEA = 0.000 [95% CI: 0.000, 0.022], SRMR = 0.014, CFI = 1; 1996: RMSEA = 0.000 [95% CI: 0.000, 0.030], SRMR = 0.017, CFI = 1.00). Analyses using the additive index are presented in the main text, but analyses using the IRT index have substantively identical results (see Tables A13-A15 and Fig. 1 in the Appendix).

3.3. Measuring affective polarization

All analyses use common method of measuring affective polarization: a difference score reflecting net in-party warmth (in-party warmth – out-party warmth, see Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar et al., 2019; Mason 2015, 2018). Respondents gave ratings of warmth for the Democratic Party and Republican Party on scales from 0 (cold) to 100 (warm). The full scale spans from −100 (minimum warmth towards in-party, maximum warmth towards out-party) to +100 (maximum warmth towards in-party, minimum warmth towards out-party). Most partisans display positive scores (see Figure A1 in the Appendix).

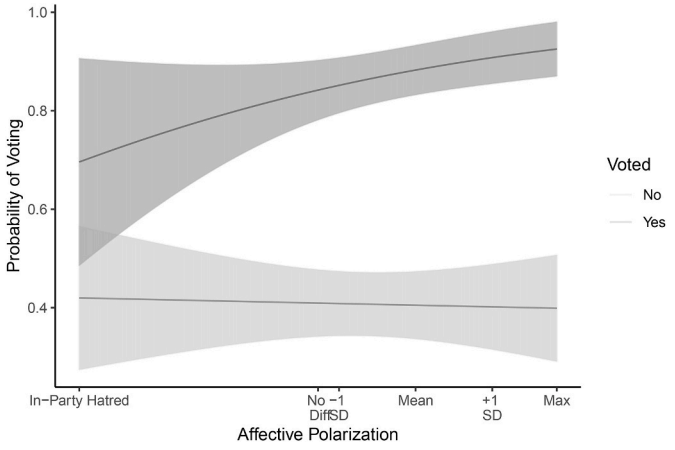

Fig. 1. Predicted probability of turnout by levels of affective polarization among prior non-voters (dark gray) and voters (light gray). Derived from model containing full sample with the affective polarization x prior turnout interaction.

This measure has two useful properties. First, it provides continuity with most literature on affective polarization using the same measure (Iyengar et al., 2019). Second, it circumvents issues of heterogeneity in response style with feeling thermometer items that interferes with comparing resposnes (Wilcox et al., 1989). Because a participant's response style is the same for both items, any difference in warmth between two groups is analytically meaningful. The first is that a difference does not recover whether respondents generally like or dislike both parties (Abramowitz and Webster 2018; Bankert 2021; Caruana et al. 2015; Mayer 2015; Ridge 2022; Forthcoming). One way to address this is to adjust for the mean feeling thermometer score respondents give both parties while estimating the effect of affective polarization. Supplemental analyses also estimate separate effects of in-party and out-party feeling thermometers (see Tables A5-A6, A16-A21, and A23 in the Appendix).

The second drawback is that a raw difference score reflects some unknown combination of group-based affect towards the parties and mere preferences for one party's candidate or policies over another's. Prior to their use in affective polarization research, party feeling thermometers were used as indicators of electoral preferences in Downsian examinations of turnout (Cain 1978). To address this issue, the analysis accounted for a difference score in candidate warmth (in-party candidate feeling thermometer – out-party candidate feeling thermometer). This also presents a hard test for affective polarization, as affective polarization and relative candidate preference are fairly highly correlated ($rs \geq .63$, $ps < .001$). The analysis also accounted for strength of partisan and ideological identities (see which are also concomitant with strong candidate and policy preferences.

3.4. Covariates

Both sets of analyses include several covariates in addition to those measured above (see Tables A1 and A2 in the Appendix for measurement). I account for education and income (with a quadratic term for the latter to account for diminishing returns) because higher socioeconomic status is associated with stronger political preferences (Luttig 2017, though see Mason and Wronski 2018), as well as heightened participatory resources (Verba et al., 1995). I include linear and quadratic terms for age because both affective polarization (Phillips 2022) and turnout (Verba et al., 1995) display increases with age that level off in one's senior years. I account for race/ethnicity because Democrats of color are highly socially sorted, display higher levels of affective polarization (Mason and Wronski 2018), and participate more all else equal (Verba et al., 1995). I account for gender as women display both heightened affective polarization (Ondercin and Lizotte, 2021) and a greater propensity to vote (Verba et al., 1995). People who are married and have children experience more changes in civic resources that affect the extent to which participation in one cycle affects participation in another (Plutzer 2002; Verba et al., 1995), so the analysis accounts for marital and parental status. Finally, the analysis accounts for perceived political competition in 1992 at both the national and state level, as it stimulates both a sense of out-party threat that precipitates affective polarization (Marshall 2019; Miller and Conover, 2015) and increases the perception that one's participation matters (Downs 1957; Pacheco 2008).

3.5. Analytic strategy

Analyses on voting participation employ logistic regression, as the dependent variable is binary. Analyses on non-voting participation use either a count of participatory acts or an IRT-weighted index of participatory acts and therefore use separate liner regression models, one for each year combination (1992-94, 1994-96, 1992-96). To ensure that results are not driven by respondents particularly likely to respond, all analyses use the ANES's weighting scheme. Additionally, key variables

were scaled from 0 to 1 for simplicity of interpretation.

Additionally, in the panel analyses, where possible, predictors were measured in waves prior to the dependent variable to ensure they are not subject to post-treatment bias. This includes relative candidate affect, which was measured in 1992 for all analyses. Using 1996 candidate affect, while most pertinent for analyses examining 1996 participation, would have been empirically problematic since the participation items ask about acts as far back as 1995. However, there are exceptions due to data availability issues. In all analyses, parental status was measured in 1994. In the 1994-96 analyses, race/ethnicity and perceptions of national and state electoral closeness were measured in 1996. Tables A22 and A23 depict models estimated without this covariate. Results are substantively identical.

4. Results

4.1. Voting participation

Table 1 reports the estimated effect of affective polarization on validated turnout, accounting for past validated turnout and other covariates (see Table A3 for the full model). In contrast to prior studies that show a strong relationship between affective polarization and turnout, there is no clear relationship between affective polarization and validated voter turnout in the full sample ($p = 0.424$). However, these results are in line with Ahn and Mutz (2023), who were also unable to find such a relationship using validated turnout data from the 2016 ANES.

The result for the full sample, however, obscures important heterogeneity by prior turnout. The second model adds an affective polarization x prior turnout interaction term. This interaction is both positive and statistically significant ($p = 0.006$), indicating that the effect of affective polarization is stronger at higher levels of turnout. The third and fourth models estimate the effect of affective polarization among prior non-voters and voters, respectively, to unpack this conditional effect. Affective polarization has no detectable relationship with voter turnout among those who had not previously voted ($p = 0.850$). However, the relationship is positive and statistically significant among those who have previously voted ($p = 0.033$).

To examine whether this interaction is robust to other common specifications of the relationship between affective polarization and turnout, the same analysis was done omitting the covariate for relative candidate preference (see Table A4 in the Appendix). The effect of affective polarization in the pooled sample becomes positive and significant after omitting this covariate ($p = 0.005$). This suggests that effects of affective polarization on participation among the whole electorate are sensitive to the decision to partial out strong candidate preferences. However, the general pattern of effects remains the same, as affective polarization only appears to motivate turnout among prior voters.

To examine whether in-party or out-party warmth is behind observed effects, supplemental analyses were estimated separating the in-party and out-party feeling thermometers (see Tables A5-A6 in the Appendix). Observed effects are driven almost entirely by in-party warmth. The in-party warmth x past turnout interaction was statistically significant ($p = 0.017$), while an analogous interaction for out-party warmth was not ($p = 0.193$). In-party warmth was associated with a higher likelihood of turnout only among those who previously voted, and only marginally so ($p = 0.071$). Out-party warmth had no effect regardless of past turnout ($ps \geq .160$).

To decompose the relationship further, predicted probabilities of voting are depicted in Fig. 1 above. Among prior non-voters, moving from 1SD below the mean of affective polarization (~9 point difference) to 1 SD above the mean (~73 point difference, see Figure A2 of the Appendix for the distribution of affective polarization) is associated with a slight decrease in one's probability of voting (41% vs 40%, respectively). In contrast, among people who previously voted, that same movement in affective polarization is associated with a ~6 percentage point increase in the probability of voting (85% vs. 91%).

4.2. Non-voting participation

In the full sample, there is no detectable relationship between affective polarization and political participation beyond voting ($ps \geq .259$, see Table A8 in the Appendix for the full models). Even when removing relative candidate preference, the relationship between affective polarization and participation in the full sample is not consistent (1992-94: $\beta = 0.192$, $p = 0.442$; 1994-96: $\beta = 0.544$, $p = 0.022$; 1992-96: $\beta = 0.640$, $p = 0.040$, see Table A9 in the Appendix for the full models). Just as with voting participation, however, overall effects obscure substantively important heterogeneity. The interactions between affective polarization and prior participation were positive and significant ($ps \leq .042$) in the 1992-94 and 1994-96 models, and marginally significant in the 1992-96 model ($p = 0.072$).

Fig. 2 depicts the marginal effect of affective polarization across different levels of prior participation. The substantive interpretation of each model is largely the same. Among those in the sample with zero prior acts of prior participation (38% in 1992, 66% in 1994), there is no observed effect of affective polarization on subsequent political participation ($ps \geq .154$). 1992 levels of affective polarization only begin to have a positive and significant association with 1994 and 1996 political participation among those who engaged in 3 or more prior acts (~8% of the sample). 1994 levels of affective polarization are associated with significantly higher political participation among those who engaged in at least one prior act (~33% of the sample).

To examine whether results are driven by in-party or out-party warmth, models separating the effects of in-party and out-party feeling thermometers were estimated (see Tables A16-A21 in the Appendix). Findings are somewhat mixed. The effect of in-party warmth tends to be negative or non-significant on participation among those who did not engage in any participatory act beyond voting, and positive and significant among those who previously engaged in participatory acts. The in-party warmth x past participation interaction was significant for the 1992-94 and 1992-96 analyses, but not the 1994-96 analyses. For the 1994-96 analyses exclusively, lower warmth towards the out-party was associated with a higher likelihood of future participation, but only among people who previously participated.

In sum, as with voter turnout, affective polarization does appear to mobilize political participation beyond voting, but only among partisans who have engaged in a sufficiently high level of political activity previously. In other words, it appears to only sustain habits of participation for those who are the most prone to it in the first place, without the

Table 1
Logit models of observed effects of affective polarization on turnout, 2016 ANES. Covariates in model, but not shown. Full model shown in Table A3 of the Appendix.

	Dependent variable:			
	Validated Turnout			
	All	All	Prior Non-Voters	Prior Voters
Affective Polarization	0.315	−0.182	−0.087	1.689**
	(0.394)	(0.433)	(0.459)	(0.793)
Affective Polarization * Prior Turnout		1.777***		
		(0.651)		
Prior Validated Turnout	2.620***	1.400***		
	(0.116)	(0.455)		
Constant	−1.997***	−1.627***	−1.744***	−0.195
	(0.383)	(0.403)	(0.454)	(0.736)
Observations	3295	3295	1293	2002
Covariates	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Log Likelihood	−1355.109	−1352.245	−890.852	−438.614

Note: *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.005.

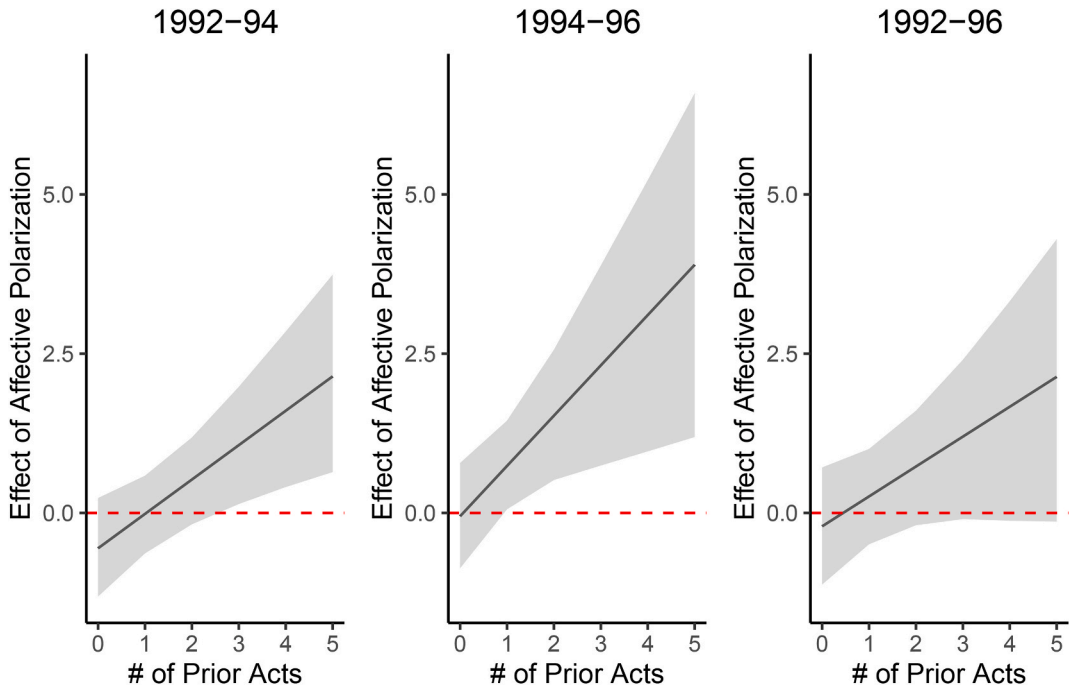

Fig. 2. Conditional effect of affective polarization on political participation by level of prior political participation, 1992-94-96 ANES Panel. Models used to produce table shown in Table A7 of the Appendix.

ability to kickstart or restart habits of participation.

5. Discussion/conclusion

Theories of affective polarization have long argued that relative dislike of the out-party spurs political participation. However, most work on the subject has examined whether affective polarization has had this effect among voting-eligible partisans generally. This paper expands on such work by elucidating the types of citizens who affective polarization might mobilize. With both voting and acts of participation beyond voting, the same pattern emerges. Among those who previously did not participate, affective polarization lacks any detectable relationship with subsequent political participation. However, among those who previously participated in politics, affective polarization appears to be effective at sustaining action. With some exceptions, these effects appear to be driven solely by in-party warmth. This suggests that to the extent affective polarization sustains participatory habits, it is because of partisans' enhanced warmth toward their own side, rather than hatred towards the opposition.

There are some key limitations to this study. First, the measures of affective polarization used in the 2016 ANES and the 1992-96 ANES panel do not effectively distinguish between affective polarization directed at elites as opposed to other voters (Druckman and Levendusky 2019). While those constructs are highly correlated, they represent distinct feelings in the American population with potentially different consequences. While accounting for relative dislike of out-party presidential candidates accounts for dislike of out-partisan elites, the remaining affective polarization measure likely still conflates elite and mass affective polarization to some degree.

Second, both sets of analyses only have information on participation in the prior election to proxy for prior participatory habits. It is likely that most people who did not participate in a prior election cycle tend to abstain in elections generally. However, such measures also likely include peripheral voters who participate in some elections but not others (Arceneaux and Nickerson 2009) and habitual voters who otherwise fail to participate in one election. Third, this study is limited to American samples. There is an advantage in examining this context, though. Unlike most other countries, affective polarization is growing in the United States (Gidron et al., 2020), meaning there is much inter-individual variation to analytically leverage. Additionally, the United States is one of a handful of countries in which administrative validation of turnout is possible. Still, future work should examine how far these findings travel elsewhere.

Nevertheless, these findings contribute both to our understanding of the consequences of affective polarization. By only stimulating continued participation among the existing electorate rather than bringing in new voters, affective polarization has limited effects on turnout in the aggregate and does little to bring new segments of voters into the electorate. Therefore, it may have positive democratic effects, but not among the full voting-eligible population. These findings also contribute to the habitual voting literature. Such work argues that factors thought to spur turnout (e.g. education) mostly affect the initial transition from non-voting to voting, and once this transition occurs, it is mainly past voting that predicts future voting (Plutzer 2002). This work illustrates that even factors that do not clearly affect the decision to participate for the first time can emerge as key predictors of whether someone continues to participate.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Joseph B. Phillips: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of the initial submission the author(s) used ChatGPT-3 in order to improve readability of the manuscript. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Declaration of competing interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102733.

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