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Cool Citizens? How Affectively *Un*polarized Citizens View and Participate in Democracy

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Abstract

Does affective polarization change how citizens view and participate in democracy? We posit that the answer to this crucial question depends on how affectively *un*polarized citizens view and participate in democracy. Yet, the most common operationalization of affective polarization—measuring sympathy ratings for one party *relative* to another—does not differentiate between people's *absolute* sympathy ratings for the parties, which may mask essential heterogeneity among unpolarized citizens. This paper theorizes the methodological origin of this heterogeneity, describes it, and highlights its implications. Cluster analyses and regressions from three nationally representative surveys in the US provide three conclusions. First, substantial shares of the US population are affectively *un*polarized. Second, unpolarized citizens cluster into two groups: one feeling lukewarm and one feeling cold toward both parties. Third, these unpolarized groups report diverging democratic attitudes and participation patterns. We discuss the methodological implications and the need for future research on affectively unpolarized citizens.

Keywords Affective polarization · Political trust · Democratic norms · Interpartisan attitudes · Political participation

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Affective polarization describes a citizen's strong sympathy for one party relative to another. Often, researchers derive an individual's affective polarization score from calculating the difference in someone's sympathy for two (or multiple) parties (Iyengar et al. 2019). This efficient operationalization reveals that growing shares of citizens in many Western democracies are affectively polarized (Iyengar et al. 2012; Garzia et al. 2023), spurring vast attention to this group. However, this focus may have led citizens, journalists, and researchers to overestimate the prevalence of affective polarization (Druckman et al. 2022). In fact, affective polarization is high primarily among politically involved citizens, while a large group of less involved, unpolarized citizens risks being neglected (Krupnikov and Ryan 2022).

We aim to extend the focus to this overlooked, *un*polarized segment of the citizenry. Our central claim is that there is not just one but several distinct groups of affectively unpolarized citizens. While the most common operationalization of affective polarization—measuring sympathy ratings for one party *relative* to another—efficiently distinguishes between citizens who *are* and who are *not* polarized, it does not differentiate *within* the latter: Someone feeling warm toward one party (say, 90 on a 0–100 scale) but cold toward another (e.g., 10), for example, receives an affective polarization score of 80, denoting high polarization. In contrast, someone feeling indifferent toward both parties (e.g., 60–50) receives a low score of 10. However, people also receive a low score when feeling cold (e.g., 20–10), warm (e.g., 80–70), or mixed toward both parties (e.g., 40–30). While no research explicitly assumes homogeneity among the unpolarized, we argue that the lack of differentiation among low scores means to implicitly consider them alike. We identify this theoretical constraint and empirically describe the heterogeneity between groups of unpolarized citizens to highlight the implications for research on the potential consequences of affective polarization.

Since its inception, researchers have discussed the effects of affective polarization on various aspects of democracy, including citizens' trust, support for democratic norms, inter-partisan behaviors, and political participation (e.g., Finkel et al. 2020; Iyengar et al. 2019). Until now, the evidence remains mixed. For example, some papers show that affective polarization undermines norms (e.g., Kingzette et al. 2021), whereas others find no such effects (e.g., Broockman et al. 2023). Consequently, theories on this link get increasingly nuanced (e.g., Janssen and Turkenburg 2024). However, these theories may require even further nuance if there is not one but several groups of unpolarized citizens with diverging views on democracy.

We have two inductive aims. First, we aim to take a person-centered approach to explore the relevant *combinations* (e.g., 60–50, 20–10, etc.) that group affective polarization scores. Second, we aim to assess the extent to which individuals in those groups agree on key aspects of democracy, such as trust, democratic norms, inter-partisan attitudes, and political participation. To pursue our aims, we analyze three cross-sectional surveys from the US (ANES 2016, ANES 2020, YouGov 2024). We focus on the US as its two-party system makes operationalizing affective polarization comparatively simple, thus allowing us to illustrate the intuition behind our argument. Yet, the need to consider unpolarized citizens' heterogeneous views applies to any Western democracy. Research on affective polarization in multi-party systems

proliferates (e.g., Röllicke 2023; Wagner 2021, 2024), and we hope our study inspires scholars to expand the focus to unpolarized citizens in various party systems.

To pursue our aims, we conduct cluster analyses to identify the combinations of in-party and out-party feelings. In contrast to the usual focus on the *difference* in sympathy between the two parties, cluster analyses map the most relevant *combinations* of these variables. This person-centered approach is well-suited to map different subtypes of unpolarized Americans. Next, we examine how the relevant groups compare in their views on democracy.

We find that substantial shares of respondents report only small differences in how much they like the two parties. This is not to say that affective polarization is rare, but given that most debates focus on polarized citizens (Krupnikov and Ryan 2022), it is worth noting. Specifically, and generalizing the representative surveys to the US population, our results suggest that 34–46% of Americans are *not* affectively polarized. *Within* the unpolarized, we find two groups: one group feels lukewarm toward both parties (26–34% of the respondents), and another feels cold toward both (8–15%, cf., Abramowitz and Webster 2018). While those feeling lukewarm (whom we call *Unpolarized Supporters*) overrepresent demographically marginalized or resource-deprived groups, those feeling cold toward the parties (*Unpolarized Skeptics*) are relatively educated and wealthy. As these demographic differences go beyond the divide in political involvement separating polarized and unpolarized Americans (Krupnikov and Ryan 2022), they corroborate the need to examine heterogeneity *within* unpolarized citizens. Reflecting the increase in affective polarization in the US (Iyengar et al. 2012), the share of the unpolarized clusters decreases from 2016 (46%) to 2020 (34%). Yet, its share increases again in 2024 (41%), which is driven by an increase of *Unpolarized Skeptics.*

Regression analyses show that differentiating within the unpolarized helps understand how affective polarization relates to democratic views and participation. While *Unpolarized Supporters* are as trusting as *Polarized Democrats* (those feeling warm toward Democrats but cold toward Republicans), *Unpolarized Skeptics* distrust as much as *Polarized Republicans* (those feeling warm toward Republicans but cold toward Democrats). However, the camps realign when considering democratic norms, where *Polarized Democrats* are most supportive, followed by the two unpolarized groups and less committed *Polarized Republicans*. While no group consistently has the most friendly inter-partisan attitudes, the two polarized groups tend to align with *Unpolarized Skeptics*, setting them apart from *Unpolarized Supporters*. Finally, *Unpolarized Supporters* are consistently the least likely to participate.

Together, these analyses provide an encompassing understanding of how people with different levels of sympathy for the parties view democracy. They contribute to recent studies showing that affectively polarized individuals are not per se less democratic (Broockman et al. 2023; Harteveld et al. 2022 Harteveld et al. 2022; Janssen and Turkenburg 2024; Kalmoe and Mason 2022), adding that not even affectively unpolarized individuals necessarily agree on all aspects of democracy. As such, our findings respond to Krupnikov and Ryan's (2022) call to pay more attention to this group and connect it to discussions about how normatively problematic affective polarization actually is (e.g., Westphal 2024). If normative theory envisions citizens to be trusting, supportive of norms, respectful, and politically active, we do not find

this group: While no group behaves consistently "better" than the others, citizens in each group contribute different elements to democracy (also see Dalton 2004; Norris 1999).

Methodologically, our results imply that scholars should use caution when estimating the effects of affective polarization based on citizens with low affective polarization scores. Current research does not necessarily misestimate the effects of affective polarization, and we do not expect all future work to cluster their respondents. However, if certain unpolarized groups violate norms themselves or are widely active, the theoretical and normative meaning of comparisons to affectively polarized groups changes. Moreover, our results suggest that certain conclusions would change depending on the relative size of specific clusters within the unpolarized baseline.

More practically, our results imply that citizens, journalists, and scholars should broaden their discussions to how unpolarized citizens view and participate in democracy. Unpolarized citizens need attention because close elections often rely on their mobilization and because their views matter for democracy. As different groups of polarized and unpolarized citizens contribute and withhold different ingredients to the democratic recipe (e.g., some trust, others participate), neither polarization nor its absence is necessarily better for democracy.

Citizens in Democracies and Affective Polarization in Citizens

Soon after the first description of rising affective polarization in the US (Iyengar et al. 2012), scholars debated whether this development may change how citizens view and participate in democracy. The discussed consequences are wide-ranging, including, for example, trust (e.g., Enders and Armaly 2019), support for democratic norms (e.g., Graham and Svolik 2020),[1] views on how opposing partisans should be treated (e.g., willingness to respect and interact with opponents, dehumanization, violence; e.g., Berntzen et al. 2023; Kubin et al. 2021), and political participation (e.g., Phillips 2024). All these aspects are vital for democratic functioning, such that democracies rely on citizens' trust (e.g., Marien and Hooghe 2011), adherence to norms and respectful demeanor (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2023), and participation (Dahl 1989; Lutz and Marsh 2007).

The primary theory underlying much of the research on affective polarization effects is that it changes citizens' incentives in democracy. Harteveld and Wagner (2023), for example, argue that stronger affective polarization raises the stakes of an election and, therefore, incentivizes turnout. Similarly, hot antipathy toward an outparty may incentivize citizens to violate norms to benefit their own party (e.g., Finkel et al. 2020; Iyengar et al. 2019). While this general argument is compelling, it is important to note that different aspects of democracy are, of course, distinct and complex concepts (e.g., norms differ from trust, and trust in politicians differs from trust

[1] While the understanding of *democratic norms* is broad (Braley et al. 2023), we understand it as widely shared agreements on how politicians and citizens should behave. Democratic norms include, for example, the willingness to compromise or let opponents participate in elections (Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood 2023).

in procedures). Hence, affective polarization may not necessarily affect all aspects equally. Moreover, Broockman et al. (2023) warn that the theories linking affective polarization and political attitudes remain generally underdeveloped.

Perhaps as a consequence, the evidence on the effects of affective polarization is mixed. While several studies find that affective polarization weakens various forms of trust (e.g., Enders and Armaly 2019; Torcal and Thomson 2023; Whitt et al. 2021), the evidence is less clear for democratic norms. Some studies show that partisan interests drive support for undemocratic practices (e.g., Graham and Svolik 2020; Kingzette et al. 2021), but others find little evidence of corroding effects (e.g., Broockman et al. 2023; Voelkel et al. 2023). Likewise, affective polarization does not correlate with the presumably most aggressive form of inter-partisan attitudes, citizens' readiness to justify political violence (Kalmoe and Mason 2022). Finally, some studies show positive effects of affective polarization on turnout (e.g., Harteveld and Wagner 2023; Graham and Svolik 2020; see Sulmont and Incio 2024 for a review), whereas Phillips (2024) finds that effects on (various forms of) political participation mainly show among habitual voters.

Therefore, researchers develop increasingly nuanced arguments on the relationship between affective polarization and citizens' views on and participation in democracy. Janssen and Turkenburg (2024), for example, posit that the incentive to accept democratic norms may be highest among the *moderately* polarized. Modeling a curvilinear effect on comparative data, they show that moderately polarized citizens are indeed less likely to violate norms than those with low or high affective polarization scores. Relatedly, Krupnikov and Ryan's (2022) work on *the other divide* identifies political involvement as the primary rift at least in the US. They find that public debates overestimate the prevalence of affective polarization because observers tend to focus on highly politically involved Americans. In the next section, we aim to contribute to these theoretical developments, arguing that the affectively unpolarized are not just a neglected group but, in fact, several groups with possibly diverging views.

Why Affectively Unpolarized Citizens May Disagree on Democracy

We situate our argument in a larger literature that develops the operationalization of affective polarization. While one proliferate line of work develops operationalizations in multi-party systems (e.g., Reiljan 2020; Wagner 2021; Boxell et al. 2024; Gidron et al. 2020), another tries to move beyond the informative but crude operationalization of affective polarization as the distance (or spread; Wagner 2021) between two (or more) parties. Finkel and colleagues (2020), for example, revise the original approach with a polarity score that compares the relative intensity of in-party and out-party affect, respectively, showing that the latter has more weight in affective polarization (Garzia and Ferreira da Silva (2025) apply this to multi-party systems). Eroglu (2025) measures relative hostility toward a system's parties, subtracting a respondent's mean affect for parties they feel cold toward (i.e., below the scale's midpoint) from their mean affect for the parties they feel warm toward (i.e., above the midpoint). Finally, Campos and Federico (2025) introduce a 9-item scale that carefully differentiates how respondents see and treat the political camps. While these

developments help scholars understand the polarization phenomenon, the advantage of the original like-dislike differential (in two-party and multi-party systems) is that it directly reflects the intuition behind affective polarization. Yet, a key limitation of this measure is how it treats unpolarized citizens. Therefore, our aims are, despite their motivation in measurement, substantive: to identify and explore heterogeneity among the affectively unpolarized.

We theorize that affectively unpolarized citizens represent a large share of society with possibly heterogeneous views on democracy. While no research, to our knowledge, explicitly suggests that unpolarized citizens would think and act alike, we argue that the most common operationalization of affective polarization is prone to making this assumption implicitly. As the operationalization derives a person's affective polarization score from their indicated *difference* in sympathy toward two (or more) parties, it estimates the *extent* to which a citizen is polarized (i.e., "low" to "high"). Yet, it provides no information about their absolute sympathy for the parties. This is unproblematic for citizens with high scores, which reflect the strong preference for one party relative to another. Low scores, however, do not tell whether a citizen is unpolarized because they feel equal sympathy, indifference, or equal antipathy toward the parties. Hence, the difference score is informative for many research questions (e.g., did affective polarization increase over time?) but may be too crude for others (e.g., how do citizens with high vs. low scores think about democracy?).

Given the properties of the difference score, we argue that we may currently miss crucial heterogeneity among the affectively unpolarized. While we agree with Krupnikov and Ryan (2022) that this (presumably) large share of society deserves more attention in its own right, our theory—that they comprise not one but several distinct groups—underscores the need to unpack the score. Hence, we aim to identify the relevant combinations of citizens' feelings toward the parties. If we find more groups than the three discussed in the literature (i.e., polarized Republicans, polarized Democrats, and unpolarized citizens), this likely reflects distinct groups among the unpolarized.

Identifying these groups of unpolarized citizens matters for two reasons. First, there may be different theoretical reasons for *why* a citizen is unpolarized. To illustrate, consider two individuals choosing between two meals. Person A reports liking both options, while Person B reports disliking both. The *difference* in preference is the same, but divergent preferences, backgrounds, dietary considerations, or temporary needs likely explain their different *absolute* evaluations. By analogy, distinguishing between different groups of unpolarized citizens may reveal meaningful variation in demographic backgrounds or motivations.

Second, we may develop different theories about how various groups of unpolarized citizens view and participate in democracy. Reconsidering the meal metaphor, we would expect Person A to view the chef offering the meals differently than Person B, and it seems intuitive that A starts eating while B may walk away. By analogy, different groups of unpolarized citizens likely have different incentives to trust, adhere to democratic norms, engage with opponents, or participate in democracy.

Together, we theorize that the unpolarized comprise not one but several distinct groups with distinct backgrounds and heterogeneous views on and participation in

democracy.[2] As we have no a priori predictions on the number of unpolarized groups, we avoid any post hoc theorizing on why specific unpolarized groups think or act the way they do (Nature Human Behavior Editorial 2020). Instead, we take an explicitly exploratory, data-driven approach to facilitate future theoretical developments on the diverging incentives of unpolarized groups.

Data and Methods

We analyze data from the 2016 and 2020 surveys of the American National Election Studies (henceforth: ANES 2016, ANES 2020) and novel data from YouGov, collected in June 2024. The recruitment strategy aims for samples representative of the US population. The two ANES surveys have larger sample sizes, while the YouGov data includes more detailed and extensive outcome measures of interest. While the three cross-sectional surveys do not allow for systematic analyses of change over time, they offer a combination of comparable and unique measures, thus allowing us to evaluate the robustness of our findings. Our novel YouGov survey was approved by one of the authors' responsible IRB prior to data collection and complies with the *Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research* of the American Political Science Association (SI1 in the Supplementary Information discusses ethical considerations). SI2 provides sample statistics, and SI3 gives an overview of the exact question wording of all items described below.

Independent Variables

Across the three surveys, we operationalize warmth toward the two political parties with two feeling thermometers. These items are the ones typically used when operationalizing affective polarization as distance (Iyengar et al. 2019; or spread; Wagner 2021). They ask respondents to indicate their warmth toward the Republican and Democratic party, respectively (ranging from 0 (very cold) – 100 (very warm)). Importantly, the items assess warmth toward the party, not their voters or elites. This distinction matters because people tend to feel colder toward opposing elites than voters, even if feelings toward a party, its elites, and its voters are highly correlated (Druckman and Levendusky 2019; Kingzette et al. 2021). Furthermore, this research suggests that citizens tend to think about elites, not voters, when asked about a party in general. Hence, as the ANES items ask about feelings toward the *party*, they may prompt respondents to think of elites and thus overestimate affective polarization. While feelings toward voters are not available in the two ANES surveys analyzed, we added feeling thermometers toward Republican and Democratic voters to our YouGov survey. We find that neither the results of the cluster nor the regression analyses

[2] Note that our argument is different from the idea of *ambivalent partisans* (Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012), who are individuals whose policy preferences conflict with their partisanship (e.g., they identify as Democrat but oppose gun regulation). We instead identify different combinations of how much an individual likes the parties. Future research may want to examine the correlations between ambivalent partisans and clusters of unpolarized citizens.

differ substantively when using these other items (SI11), suggesting that our results are robust to the measure used.

Dependent Variables

Our dependent variables are grouped into four sets of outcomes: trust, support for democratic norms, inter-partisan attitudes (i.e., views on opponents and how they should be treated), and political participation. We measure trust in politicians in 2016 and 2020, using one item stating, "Most politicians are trustworthy" (1 (Disagree strongly) – 5 (Agree strongly)). In 2024, we measure procedural trust with an index of five items ($\alpha = 0.77$), such as "When it comes to the 2024 presidential elections, how much confidence do you have that…all votes will be counted accurately? " (1 (No confidence at all) – 4 (Very much confidence)). As politicians and political procedures are different targets of trust, consistent findings across these measures will increase confidence in the robustness of our results.

For democratic norms, the ANES has appropriate items only in 2020. We create an index of eight items ($\alpha = 0.79$) assessing how much respondents value, for example, the separation of power, free media, or the punishment of misconduct. An example item reads, "How important is it that the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government keep one another from having too much power?" (all 1 (Not important at all) – 5 (Extremely important)). In 2024, we create an index of two items ($\alpha = 0.64$) asking if respondents would support or oppose laws ensuring equal treatment and inclusive access to voting (both 1 (Strongly oppose) – 5 (Strongly support)).

For inter-partisan attitudes, we measure the justification of violence to reach political goals in 2016 and 2020 ("How much do you feel it is justified for people to use violence to pursue their political goals in this country?" (1 (Not at all) – 5 (A great deal)). We extend our measures in 2024 and measure *the justification of threats* with a two-item index ($\alpha = 0.81$), using items like, "When, if ever, is it OK for an ordinary [in-party voter] in the public to harass ordinary [out-party] voters on the internet, in a way that makes the targets feel frightened?" (1 (Never) – 4 (Always)). Further, the 2024 survey differentiates the justification of violence into two items: One is phrased similarly to the ANES ones ("How much do you feel it is justified for [in-party] to use violence in advancing their political goals these days?"), enabling comparison. The other asks, "What if [out-party] engage in violence first? How much do you feel violence by [in-party] would be justified then?" (1 (Not at all) – 5 (A great deal)). The 2024 data also include a 3-item index ($\alpha = 0.75$) of respondents' readiness to morally disengage opponents. Moral disengagement means to consider opposing partisans as unworthy of one's moral concern, enabling the justification of violence (Kalmoe and Mason 2022). An example item reads, "Agree or disagree? [Out-party] are not just worse for politics—they are downright evil" (1 (Strongly disagree) – 5 (Strongly agree)). The 2024 data additionally assesses respondents' willingness to respect ("How willing are you to respect the viewpoint from a voter of the [out-party]?") and interact with opponents ("How willing are you to have a general discussion with a voter of the [out-party]?", both 1 (Very unwilling) – 5 (Very willing)).

For political participation, we use five items asking whether respondents have marched, signed petitions, donated, posted online, or contacted a politician in the

last 12 months (0 (Have not done this) vs. 1 (Have done this)). A sixth item assesses respondents' intention to vote in the upcoming election (1 (Not likely at all) – 5 (Extremely likely)). These items are available only in the two ANES surveys.

Having different outcome measures across the three surveys has pros and cons. On the one hand, different measures imply that the relationships between the clusters and the dependent variables are not comparable over time. On the other hand, the different outcomes and different item wordings for similar outcomes allow for an externally valid evaluation of how Americans and their unpolarized members view democracy.

Analysis

For each wave separately, we conduct a k-means cluster analysis (Everitt et al. 2011) to group individuals based on their self-reported warmth toward the Republican and Democratic party. This method allows us to examine whether Americans cluster in groups of substantial size (e.g., highly affectively polarized Republicans, highly affectively polarized Democrats, affectively unpolarized individuals, and possibly groups within the latter). Thus, it provides a categorical output in direct response to our first aim, which intends to explore the relevant *combinations* of affect toward the parties. Specifically, cluster analyses provide the most common combinations of two (or more) variables, in our case, the thermometers toward the two parties. This makes it superior to alternatives like interaction analyses, which would only test the effects of warmth toward one party conditional on the warmth toward the other.

To determine the best number of clusters, we aim for solutions that a.) minimize within-cluster variation, b.) maximize between-cluster distance in means, c.) are parsimonious, and d.) are theoretically meaningful (Everitt et al. 2011). We evaluate these solutions based on visual heuristics (i.e., elbow plot, silhouette plot), explained within-cluster variance, and a series of thirty fit statistics provided by the R-package *nbclust* (Charrad et al. 2014). As the decision for the best number of clusters often differs depending on the criterion used, researchers must evaluate them in total, including theoretical considerations.

In the second step, we regress our outcomes on these clusters (using OLS and logit regressions, depending on the outcome). We recode all continuous outcomes to range from 0 to 1 to facilitate interpretation. Each regression model accounts for gender, age, race, education, occupation status, income,[3] religiosity, and partisanship (1 (Strong Democrat) – 7 (Strong Republican).[4] The covariates reduce the risk that significant associations between clusters and outcomes arise primarily because a cluster overrepresents a demographic group with a specific democratic attitude. Nevertheless, our design is correlational and descriptive. Specifically, it combines *typological description* (identifying clusters of polarized and unpolarized citizens) with *associa-*

[3] We consider family income a more meaningful measure than individual income. However, as the ANES 2016 measured family income only among web respondents, we control for individual income in the 2016 regressions to avoid bias.

[4] Controlling for partisanship does not change the results substantially.

tive description (documenting how these clusters differ in democratic attitudes and behaviors), in line with Gerring's (2012) taxonomy of descriptive research.

Results

How Many Like Whom?

In SI4, we elaborate on the rationale behind cluster analyses, explain how we identified the best number of clusters, and present fit statistics for each survey. As mentioned above, identifying the best-fitting cluster solution requires some subjective judgment, but it can be guided by fit statistics, visual heuristics, parsimony, and theoretical considerations. The goal is to identify a necessary and sufficient number of clusters to substantially reduce within-cluster variation and maximize between-cluster distance in the given data. For the three surveys we analyzed, $k=4$ clusters appear as the best solution.

Table 1 summarizes these clusters. Three observations are noteworthy. First, and consistent with prevailing concerns about an affectively polarized society, substantial shares of each.

Table 1 Cluster means

ANES 2016				
Republicans Thermometer	Democrats Thermometer	Affective Polarization score	Cluster name	Cluster size (%)
73.69	13.74	59.95	*Polarized Republicans*	1,005 (24.07)
15.71	78.30	62.59	*Polarized Democrats*	1,250 (29.94)
54.81	56.79	1.98	*Unpolarized Supporters*	1,419 (33.99)
20.21	16.91	3.3	*Unpolarized Skeptics*	501 (12.00)
ANES 2020				
Republicans Thermometer	Democrats Thermometer	Affective Polarization score	Cluster name	Cluster size (%)
79.38	9.24	70.14	*Polarized Republicans*	2,641 (32.54)
9.48	76.98	67.5	*Polarized Democrats*	2,689 (33.13)
51.90	58.52	6.62	*Unpolarized Supporters*	2,104 (25.92)
16.47	19.65	3.18	*Unpolarized Skeptics*	682 (8.40)
YouGov 2024				
Republicans Thermometer	Democrats Thermometer	Affective Polarization score	Cluster name	Cluster size (%)
78.04	10.71	67.33	*Polarized Republicans*	518 (28.38)
9.79	79.57	69.78	*Polarized Democrats*	557 (30.52)
62.16	61.95	0.21	*Unpolarized Supporters*	479 (26.25)
15.45	13.34	2.11	*Unpolarized Skeptics*	271 (14.85)

sample *are* affectively polarized. In each survey, we identify a group of people who feel warm toward one party but cold toward the other, respectively. These two clusters—which we name *Polarized Republicans* and *Polarized Democrats*—represent the many individuals that scholars consider affectively polarized. Figure 1 plots the sympathy ratings per cluster and survey.

Second, we identify two groups of people who are affectively *un*polarized. One group, which we call *Unpolarized Supporters*, feels lukewarm toward both parties. Individuals in this group may still feel somewhat warmer toward one party than the other but do not have a strong preference.[5] The second unpolarized group, which we call *Unpolarized Skeptics*, feels relatively cold toward the two parties (cf., Abramowitz and Webster 2018). Individuals in this.

group may prefer one party over the other, but they are not enthused by either option. The group of *Unpolarized Skeptics* is smaller than the others but still represents a substantial share of the population. However, that they represent only 8 to 15% of the population suggests that most Americans experience at least some warmth toward at least one of the two main options. At least for the data we analyzed, four clusters seem to substantively summarize the variation in the thermometers, meaning that additional unpolarized clusters beyond *Unpolarized Supporters* and *Unpolarized Skeptics* would add only limited information in the present analysis. That those two

[5] As we discuss later, we conduct extensive tests in SI10 to ensure that the clusters, especially *Unpolarized Supporters*, are not just a result of survey straightlining.

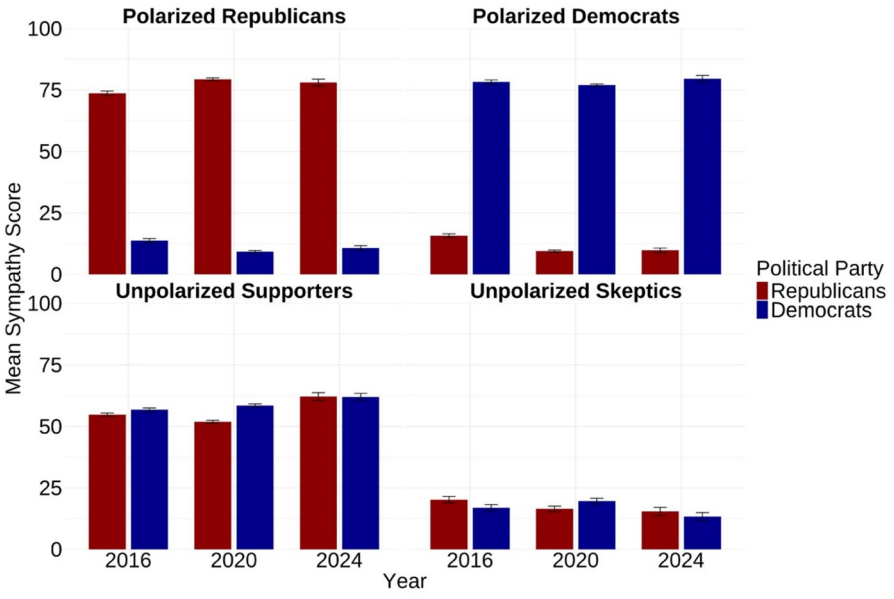

Fig. 1 Distribution of the clusters

groups add up to more than one-third of the population (from 34% in 2020 to 46% in 2016) suggests that they are a politically meaningful share of the population.

Third, we observe changes in cluster size. While our cross-sectional surveys do not allow us to trace whether individuals moved clusters over time, aggregate trends provide a validation of the clustering method. *Polarized Republicans* and *Polarized Democrats* grow from 2016 to 2020, which reflects growing affective polarization in the US (Garzia et al. 2023). A decrease in both groups' size in 2024 may reflect the historically low favorability ratings of the two presidential candidates (Gracia and Copeland 2024), at that point Donald Trump and Joe Biden. The fact that the group of *Unpolarized Skeptics* has grown by 2024, while *Unpolarized Supporters* remain equal in size compared to 2020, corroborates this reasoning.[6] Besides, *Polarized Republicans* tend to become warmer toward their party and colder toward the opposing party over time, whereas *Polarized Democrats* become primarily colder toward opponents. In contrast, warmth toward both parties increases among *Unpolarized Supporters*, whereas it decreases toward both parties among *Unpolarized Skeptics*.

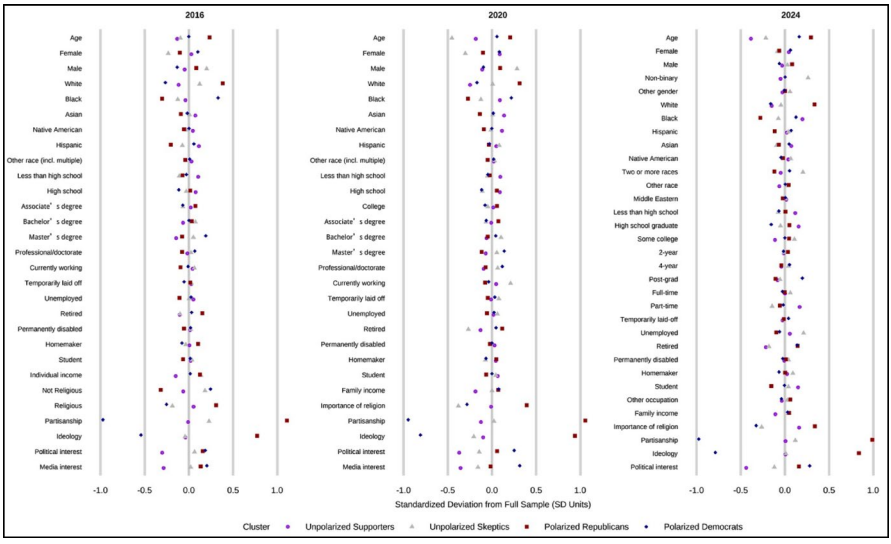

Fig. 2 Standardized means and proportions in demographic cluster composition Standardized mean differences (numeric variables) and standardized differences in proportions (categorical variables) relative to the full sample. SI5 shows detailed summary statistics. ***Note***. Standardized mean differences (numeric variables) and standardized differences in proportions (categorical variables) relative to the full sample. SI5 shows detailed summary statistics.

[6] The time of data collection is an alternative explanation for the decline in 2024. Affective polarization increases around elections (Hernández, Anduiza, and Rico 2021), and as the ANES data were collected closer to elections than the YouGov 2024 data (collected in June), they may overestimate respondents' polarization.

Who is in the Clusters?

Next, we describe the clusters' demographic composition to better understand the character of these groups. Figure 2 displays the standardized differences in means and proportions of demographic variables by clusters (SI5 provides means and proportions for all variables and tests whether a cluster's composition differs from that of *Unpolarized Supporters*). Across the three surveys, *Polarized Republicans* (i.e., those feeling warm toward Republicans but cold toward Democrats) tend to be older, more male and white, more religious, and their overall educational attainment skews lower. Unsurprisingly, they report the most conservative ideology and the strongest Republican partisanship. *Polarized Democrats* (i.e., those feeling warm toward Democrats but cold toward Republicans) are more racially diverse than *Unpolarized Supporters*, more educated, and less religious. They show the highest interest in politics and political media of all four groups. As one may expect, they also report the most liberal ideology and the strongest Democratic partisanship.

Across the surveys, the unpolarized groups are consistently younger than the polarized ones. *Unpolarized Supporters* overrepresent women, racial minorities, and less educated citizens. Their income is the lowest of all clusters in all three surveys. Compared to *Unpolarized Supporters*, *Unpolarized Skeptics* (i.e., those feeling cold toward the two parties) are more male, less religious, more educated, and report higher income. In line with Krupnikov and Ryan (2022), both unpolarized groups are consistently less interested in politics and political media than the polarized ones. Importantly, though, the large group of *Unpolarized Supporters* is still consistently *less* interested than the smaller group of *Unpolarized Skeptics*. Finally, *Unpolarized Skeptics* lean more Republican than *Unpolarized Supporters* in all surveys, but they do not differ systematically in ideological self-placement.

Together, these demographic differences corroborate our argument that possible variation across the large share of unpolarized Americans is worth exploring. The demographic setup of the approximately 30% of Americans who cluster as *Unpolarized Supporters* suggests they may lack the resources to engage (cf., Brady et al. 1995), such that this group is often younger, female, less educated, and from a racial minority background. *Unpolarized Skeptics* are fundamentally different, such that they are relatively educated, wealthy, and overrepresenting historically powerful groups (i.e., male and white Americans). And while *Unpolarized Skeptics* are somewhat less politically interested and less likely to follow political news than the two polarized groups, they demonstrate more involvement than *Unpolarized Supporters*. Next, we investigate whether the clusters—and particularly the unpolarized groups—differ in their views on and participation in democracy.

How Do the Clusters Differ in Democratic Attitudes and Participation?

Before we formally test differences between the clusters, we describe the groups' overall level of democratic attitudes and participation in the samples. The raw means plotted in Fig. 3 reveal five patterns: First, while trust in *politicians* (measured in 2016 and 2020) is muted in all clusters, trust in *procedures* (measured in 2024) is somewhat higher and more dispersed. Here, *Polarized Democrats* and *Unpolarized*

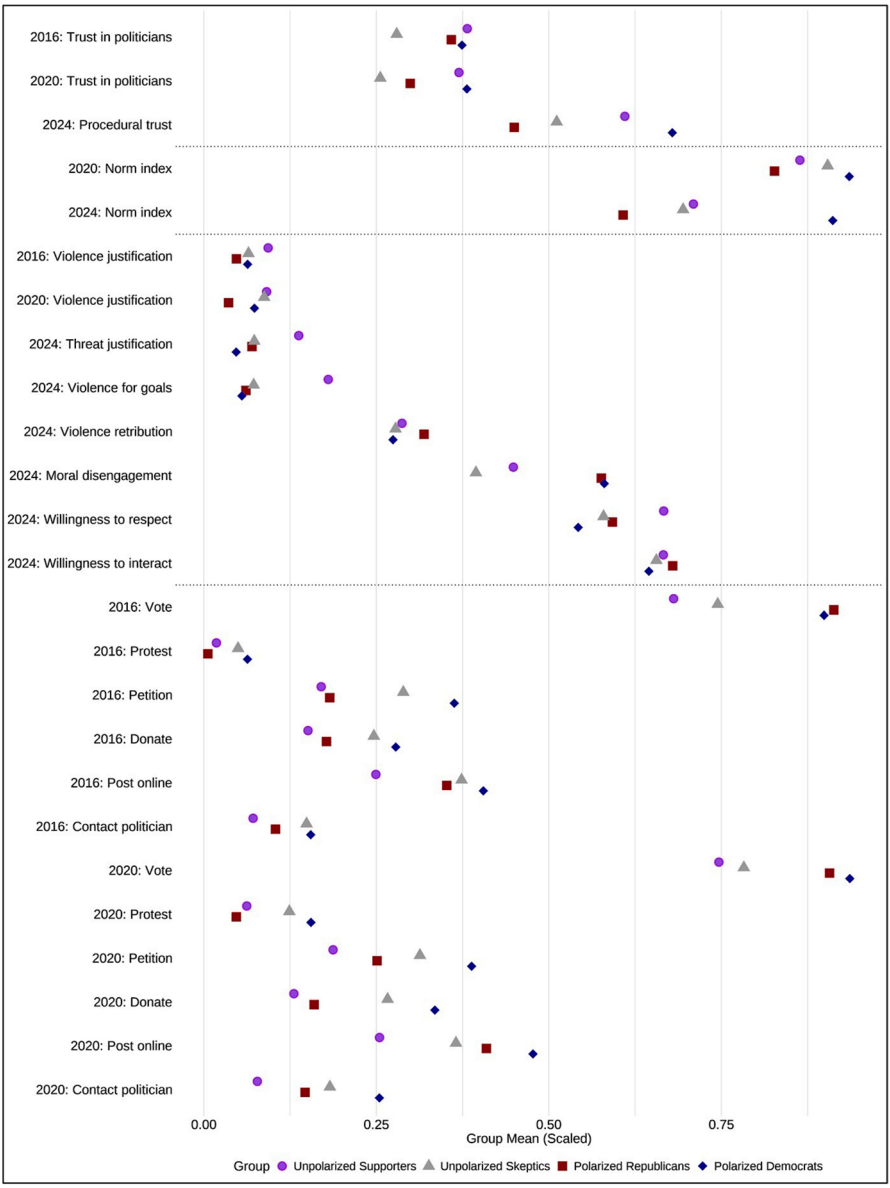

Fig. 3 Raw means in democratic attitudes

Supporters are the most trustful, whereas *Unpolarized Skeptics* and *Polarized Republicans* fall behind. Second, adherence to democratic norms, at least based on our indices measuring self-reported support for principles (Graham and Svolik 2020), is relatively high. While there is more dispersion in the 2024 index, we stress that the two indices measure different norms. Hence, differences between the waves do not necessarily reflect temporal change but agreement with the specific items asked in the

cross- sectional samples. Third, and consistent with the prevailing literature (Kalmoe and Mason 2022; Westwood et al. 2022), most respondents condemn violence and threats. While this applies to all clusters, it is noteworthy that people become more willing to justify retributing.

violence if the outgroup behaved violently first. This may reflect the erosion of norms under partisan pressure observed in previous research (e.g., Graham and Svolik 2020). Fourth, and despite all discussed animosity in the US, respondents of all clusters continue to say that they want to respect and interact with opponents. Nevertheless, members of the two polarized clusters are somewhat morally disengaged from outgroup members. Fifth, respondents in all clusters report being likely to vote, possibly reflecting the strong citizen norm to vote (e.g., Phillips 2024). Engagement in the other forms of participation is more dispersed across the groups, with *Polarized Democrats* consistently reporting to be the most active.

Together, the description of the raw means demonstrates some agreement and variation between the clusters, also between the two *unpolarized* groups. However, as raw means may partly reflect the clusters' distinct demographic compositions, we estimate cross-sectional regressions that hold constant gender, age, race, education, occupation status, income, religiosity, and partisanship. This approach enables us to assess whether levels of affective polarization—and, in particular, different kinds of low polarization—relate to democratic attitudes beyond differences in cluster backgrounds. Cross-sectional regressions do not intend to provide causal explanations but to explore if the clusters differ on the outcomes. As our primary interest lies in identifying diverging views among the unpolarized, we use *Unpolarized Supporters* (i.e., those feeling lukewarm toward both parties) as a reference category.

Figure 4 plots the regression coefficients for trust, democratic norms, inter-partisan attitudes, and electoral participation. Figure 5 plots odds ratios for the non-electoral forms of the political participation outcomes (see SI6.1–6.2 for regression tables including all covariates). Compared to *Unpolarized Supporters*, and holding demographic differences constant, *Unpolarized Skeptics* (i.e., those feeling cold toward the two parties) are less trusting. The results are remarkably consistent across the years, even though the first two surveys measure trust toward politicians and the 2024 survey measures procedural trust. This is a first.

indicator of systematic heterogeneity among the unpolarized: when it comes to trust, *Unpolarized Supporters* look like *Polarized Democrats,* whereas *Unpolarized Skeptics* look more like *Polarized Republicans*.

However, when considering democratic norms and inter-partisan attitudes, further nuance is warranted. Compared to *Unpolarized Supporters*, *Unpolarized Skeptics* are *more* affirmative of the 8-item norm index measured in 2020 and similarly supportive of the 2-item index used in 2024. Given the different items used, we, again, caution against interpreting the differences between the two surveys as temporal changes in attitudes. In fact, the two items in 2024—assessing respondents' support for equal treatment and inclusive access to voting—have a slight liberal leaning. As *Unpolarized Skeptics* report more Republican partisanship than *Unpolarized Supporters* (see Fig. 2), this may explain this finding in 2024.

The findings for inter-partisan attitudes are mixed: On the one hand, *Unpolarized Skeptics* are similarly (un)likely to justify *using* (2016 and 2020) or *retaliating*

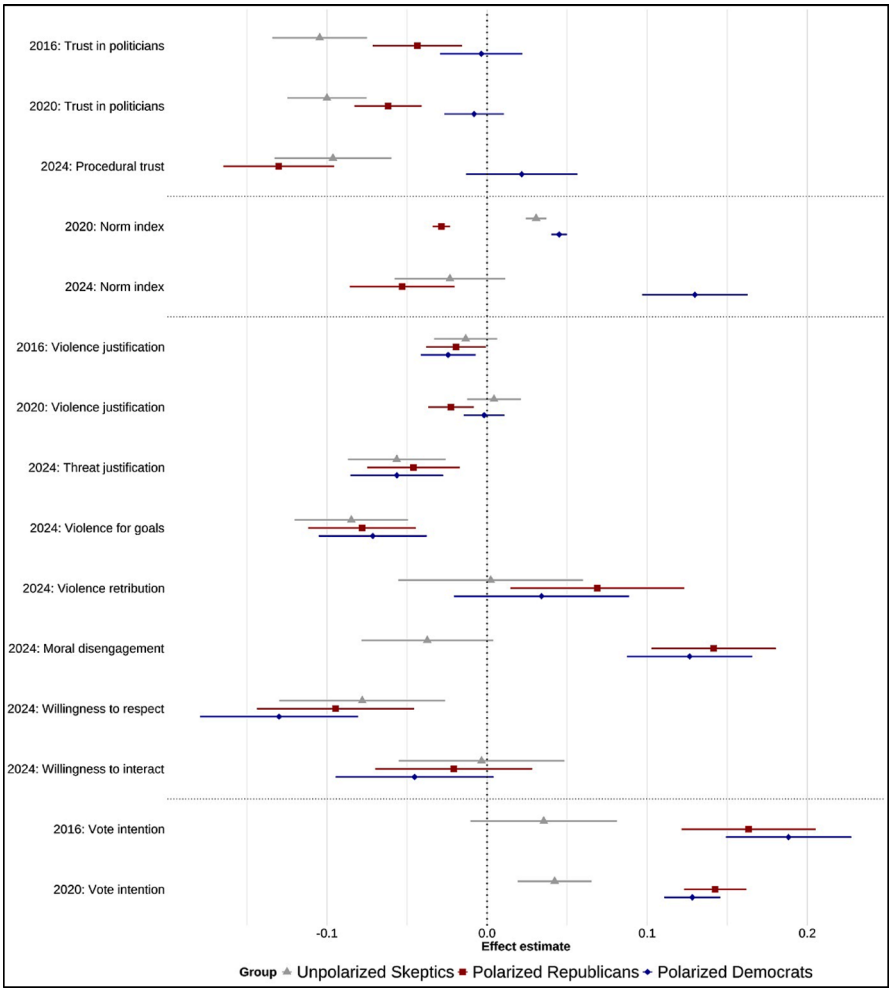

Fig. 4 Regression results trust, norms, inter-partisan attitudes, and voting estimates with 95% confidence intervals. reference category: *unpolarized supporters*. table si6.1. shows the regression table including all covariates. ***Note.*** Estimates with 95% confidence intervals. Reference category: Unpolarized Supporters. Table SI6.1. shows the regression table including all covariates.

violence (2024) than *Unpolarized Supporters* and do not differ in their willingness to interact with political opponents. Moreover, *Unpolarized Skeptics* are less willing to respect opponents. On the other hand, however, *Unpolarized Skeptics* are even *less* likely to justify threats or violence in 2024, and they tend to be particularly unwilling to morally disengage opponents. Moreover, they are *more* likely to vote and, as shown in Fig. 5, *more* engaged in all forms of non-electoral participation.

How do the two polarized groups compare to *Unpolarized Supporters*? While this paper focuses on exploring heterogeneous views among unpolarized citizens, it is instructive to also describe the differences between polarized and unpolarized ones. Again using the larger unpolarized group, *Unpolarized Supporters*, as the reference

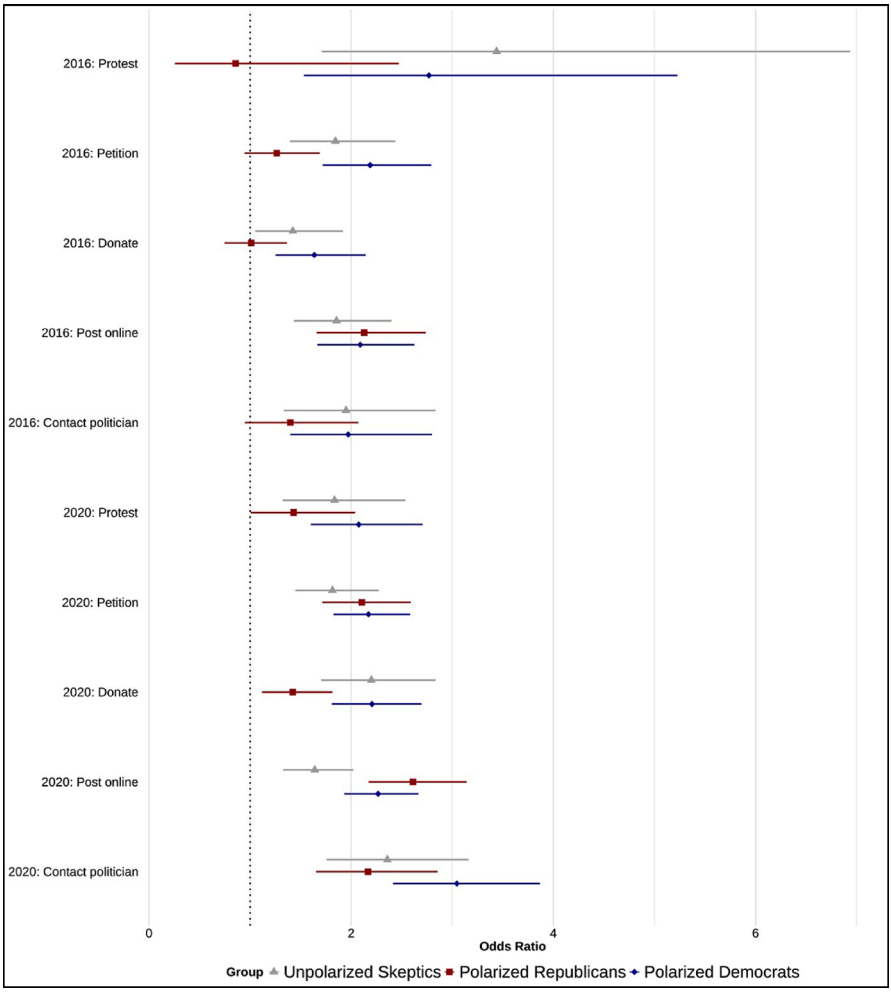

Fig. 5 Regression results non-electoral participation odds ratios (from logistic regressions) with 95% confidence intervals. reference category: *unpolarized supporters*. table si6.2. shows the regression table including all covariates. ***Note.*** Odds ratios (from logistic regressions) with 95% confidence intervals. Reference category: Unpolarized Supporters. Table SI6.2. shows the regression table including all covariates.

category, *Polarized Republicans* are less trusting and less supportive of democratic norms. However, they are *less* willing to justify threats and violence, even though they are more willing to engage in counter-attacks if their opponents behave violently first. As noted above, this aligns with research suggesting that partisans may loosen their principles when they feel that their partisan interests are threatened (Graham and Svolik 2020). *Polarized Republicans* are also more likely to morally disengage.

and disrespect opponents, and they are more likely to politically participate than *Unpolarized Supporters*. In contrast, *Polarized Democrats* are just as trusting as *Unpolarized Supporters*, more supportive of democratic norms, and far more politi-

cally active. Regarding inter-partisan attitudes, they align with *Polarized Republicans*, such that they tend to be, compared to *Unpolarized Supporters*, similarly less likely to justify violence and threats unless they get attacked themselves, but they are more morally disengaging, disrespectful, and unwilling to interact with opponents.

Together, our analyses provide three main results. First, three cross-sectional, nationally representative surveys show that large shares of the American public are affectively *un*polarized. Second, we provide novel evidence characterizing the demographic profiles of the unpolarized, showing that *Unpolarized Supporters* and *Unpolarized Skeptics* represent distinct demographic groups. Third, we show that the four groups—and, crucially, the unpolarized groups between each other—differ in trust, democratic norms, inter-partisan attitudes, and political participation. Before we discuss the implications of these results for future polarization research and democracy, we probe the theoretical foundation and robustness of our results.

Extension 1: The Theoretical Foundation of *Unpolarized Skeptics*

We consider the relative lack of resources the most likely explanation for the emergence of the *Unpolarized Supporters* cluster. Why, however, do *Unpolarized Skeptics*—who overrepresent educated, wealthy, and not particularly disinterested individuals—remain unpolarized in the country's highly polarized environment? We conduct additional tests to probe possible theoretical explanations.

First, unpolarized citizens, and especially *Unpolarized Skeptics*, may primarily represent citizens widely known as independents. In SI7, however, we show that both clusters scatter across the ideological and partisan spectrum. This suggests that the clusters derived from thermometer scores reflect more than ideological centrism or lacking partisanship.

Second, we find that *Unpolarized Skeptics* are not more likely to sympathize with a libertarian candidate, suggesting that they are not just libertarians (SI8). This test corroborates SI7 in showing that the cluster of *Unpolarized Skeptics* is not just an artifact of a certain ideology.

Third, we test whether a lack of political knowledge can explain the emergence of *Unpolarized Skeptics* (SI9). While our demographic analyses above show that this cluster tends to be relatively educated and resourced, citizens in this cluster tend to be less interested than those in the polarized clusters. However, regressions show that *Unpolarized Skeptics* are more knowledgeable than *Unpolarized Supporters* and *Polarized Republicans* in 2016, more knowledgeable than *Unpolarized Supporters* in 2020, and not less knowledgeable than any cluster. Hence, this group is not just generally educated but also politically informed.

Fourth, another reason for the emergence of *Unpolarized Skeptics* may be how they view people generally. If *Unpolarized Supporters* generally like others and *Unpolarized Skeptics* generally dislike others, the clusters would reflect personality types rather than political or sociological differences. Hence, we compare the clusters' views on groups and actors that are less explicitly political (SI10). While racial, gender, or religious groups are associated with one of the two parties, the ANES thermometer battery also includes targets less directly affiliated with them (e.g., the Pope, the Police, the FBI). If the clusters primarily reflect people's general views of others,

Unpolarized Skeptics should feel consistently cold toward even relatively unpolitical targets, whereas *Unpolarized Supporters* should feel consistently warm. This, however, is not the case. *Unpolarized Skeptics* feel much colder toward the parties than the other clusters, but they feel warmer toward, for example, the police, the rich, and scientists than other clusters. Likewise, many ratings of *Unpolarized Supporters* are between those of other clusters, suggesting that this group does not just feel particularly warmly toward any target.

Together, this extension indicates that unpolarized Americans do not necessarily represent disengaged, marginalized strata of society. While these factors likely contribute to the emergence of *Unpolarized Supporters*, *Unpolarized Skeptics* represent informed, political citizens who are just *not* affectively polarized. This distinction between ideological and affective concerns mirrors Iyengar et al.' (2012) original idea of affective polarization as an alternative to ideological polarization. Hence, the clusters result from a unique combination of sympathy toward the two parties.

Extension 2: Robustness Tests

Besides this theoretical exploration, we rule out that our results just reflect methodological artifacts with two final robustness checks. First, we rule out that the unpolarized clusters primarily represent individuals speeding or straightlining through the survey. If respondents do not differentiate between the parties and tick the midpoint of the scale, for example, a cluster of lukewarm respondents may emerge. However, based on five empirical tests reported in SI10, we find no evidence that the unpolarized clusters are disproportionately prone to straightline or that response behaviors may explain the results of the cluster analyses.

Second, we evaluate whether our results generalize to feeling thermometers toward voters. Our cluster results are consistent across the three surveys, but they are all derived from feelings toward parties, not voters. As researchers study the effects of affective polarization with both targets, our findings would be less relevant if the clusters within or heterogeneous views among the unpolarized existed only for the party target. Thus, we rerun all analyses using clusters based on respondents' sentiments toward voters (SI11). The thermometers toward a party and its voters are highly correlated (Republicans: $r=0.84$; Democrats: $r=0.86$, $ps<0.001$). We find that $k=4$ clusters are again the best cluster solution for our data and that the regressions are highly consistent across the two measures. Hence, for the data analyzed, the unpolarized differentiate into two clusters with diverging democratic attitudes, regardless of the affective polarization target operationalized.

Discussion and Conclusion

Affective polarization has increased in many Western societies (Garzia et al. 2023), and understandably, people want to know what this implies for democracy. To better understand the effects of "high affective polarization," however, we may first need to clarify what "low affective polarization" means. Yet, the most common operationalization of affective polarization—assessing the warmth toward one party relative

to one (or several) others—tells little about unpolarized citizens. We argue that this operationalization creates an assumption of unpolarized citizens holding homogeneous views on democracy, regardless of how they feel toward the options available. Hence, when researchers, journalists, and politicians discuss the effects of affective polarization, they seem to primarily see the divide between polarized and unpolarized citizens.

Three main results from our exploratory approach imply that we need to widen this perspective. First, cluster analyses of three nationally representative surveys in the US show that unpolarized citizens form not just a large share of US society but two distinct groups. *Unpolarized Supporters* feel lukewarm toward the two parties, whereas *Unpolarized Skeptics* feel rather cold toward them (cf., Abramowitz and Webster 2018). While there may be many reasonable gradings creating low affective polarization scores (e.g., 80–70, 60–50, 40–30, 20–10, etc.), our data-driven approach finds two substantially meaningful groups of unpolarized Americans in the present data. We urge readers not to interpret the four-cluster cluster solution as set in stone—the solutions may differ across samples, measures, and contexts. Rather than adjudicating on one number of clusters, our paper reveals the risk of neglecting heterogeneity among the unpolarized and provides a foundation for a future research agenda. That said, it is reassuring that only 8–15% of Americans in our data cluster as *Unpolarized Skeptics* (between 24% (2020) and 36% (2024) of the unpolarized), as this tells us that only relatively few Americans dislike *both* parties. The two unpolarized groups represent between 34% (in 2020) and 46% (in 2016) of the US population. This is not to deny that many are affectively polarized. However, as observers tend to overestimate polarization (e.g., Druckman et al. 2022), it is worth remembering.

Second, *Unpolarized Supporters* and *Unpolarized Skeptics* have distinct demographic profiles compared to the polarized clusters, such that particularly *Unpolarized Supporters* tend to be younger and less politically interested. *Unpolarized Supporters* overrepresent historically marginalized groups (i.e., racial minorities, women), as well as less educated and less wealthy groups. *Unpolarized Skeptics* overrepresent educated, wealthy, and secular Americans. That unpolarized citizens represent a large share and fundamentally diverse demographic segments of society highlights the need to scrutinize their democratic views in the future.

Indeed, our third result indicates that there is not *one* divide (polarized vs. unpolarized) or *the other divide* (involved vs. uninvolved; Krupnikov and Ryan 2022). Instead, we find *multiple* divides depending on the democratic attitude and behavior investigated: When studying trust, *Unpolarized Supporters* resemble *Polarized Democrats*, whereas *Unpolarized Skeptics* tend to distrust as much as *Polarized Republicans*. When studying democratic norms, however, the divide shifts. Whereas the two unpolarized groups tend to agree on democratic principles, *Polarized Democrats* are more and *Polarized Republicans* less committed. When studying inter-partisan attitudes, there is no group consistently least or most hostile toward opponents.[7] However, the views of the two polarized groups tend to align with *Unpolarized Skeptics*,

[7] Of course, the fact that there are no clear opponents for people who equally like or dislike the parties may contribute to this finding.

setting the three apart from *Unpolarized Supporters*. Finally, when studying political participation, the rift similarly lies between *Unpolarized Supporters* and the three other groups, such that *Unpolarized Supporters* are consistently the least involved.

Hence, comparisons between polarized and unpolarized citizens may not be the most important comparisons to make. While Krupnikov and Ryan's (2022) seminal work on political involvement as the primary divide points in that direction, our evidence suggests the need for even further nuance: it implies that unpolarized citizens are not necessarily less involved and that they are not necessarily more democratic. Instead, the unpolarized compose a heterogeneous share of the American society both demographically and politically. As such, our evidence corroborates recent results that low polarization does not per see guarantee democratic health (e.g., Broockman et al. 2023; Janssen and Turkenburg 2024). Instead, citizens at different levels of affect provide different elements to democracy: some trust, some promote democratic norms, and some participate. This relates to literature predating affective polarization, where Norris (1999) and Dalton (2004), for example, showed that citizens do not need to endorse *all* measures of democratic support to be democratic. For instance, *Unpolarized Skeptics* are "critical citizens" regarding politicians and procedures but their democratic commitment shows through participation and respect for opposing views.

Hence, we believe that the democratic views of the affectively unpolarized deserve further attention. In many democracies, election success means to sway voters who do not have a strong party sympathy. Campaigns must acknowledge that unpolarized voters have heterogeneous views not just on policies but on democracy itself. The 2024 US presidential election illustrates the relevance of this concern: The Democratic party attempted to sway unpolarized voters by highlighting the vulnerability of US democracy, but it overlooked the possibility that these voters may not prioritize democracy (see Hubler 2024) or, as our results suggest, that they may have prioritized different aspects of it.

Methodologically, our results imply that researchers may estimate different effects of affective polarization depending on how the unpolarized baseline feels about the parties. For example, scholars would find null effects of affective polarization on political participation if their reference category consisted mainly of *Unpolarized Skeptics* but positive effects if primarily *Unpolarized Supporters* formed their baseline. Likewise, affective polarization would not change citizens' readiness to threaten, harm, or respect compared to a baseline of *Unpolarized Skeptics*, but it would very much affect it compared to *Unpolarized Supporters*. If studies operationalize the unpolarized as a homogeneous reference, diverging conclusions will often remain hidden as they cancel out or favor comparisons to *Unpolarized Supporters*, who are the larger unpolarized group.

How can this bias be avoided? We do not think that researchers can or should conduct cluster analyses every time they test the effects of affective polarization. Instead, researchers should be theoretically clear about what they are comparing "high affective polarization" to. The appropriate baseline likely depends on the research question and theoretical interest. We propose three approaches to operationalize the

baseline. First, researchers may use the sympathy ratings as separate predictors.[8] In the common operationalization, it is the warmth toward one group *relative to the other* that masks variation among the unpolarized. Separate predictors allow disentangling absolute levels of warmth. However, they do not really reflect the concept's *polarization* element. Second, researchers may calculate the *mean* sympathy (rather than the *difference*). This approach reflects the ratio between the single ratings and provides an absolute score on the continuous sympathy measures. However, scholars may need to model curvilinear relationships to differentiate among the unpolarized, which Janssen and Turkenburg (2024) propose is necessary also for other theoretical reasons. Third, researchers may want to use alternative measures when testing the potential consequences of affective polarization. The difference score provides efficient assessments of trends and comparative differences, but other operationalizations provide more detailed insight into the components of affective polarization that may actually have an effect. If we expect that affective polarization promotes norm violations due to moralization or anger, for example, it seems useful to directly measure those concepts (e.g., Campos and Federico 2025; Versteegen 2024).

Notably, none of these suggestions will perfectly align with the results from our regression analyses, given that they take different approaches to account for heterogeneity among the unpolarized. Still, we think that these (and other) options can be developed and hope that researchers test what works best for their respective research questions.

Future research may want to pick up on our study's limitations. While it is always vital to establish generalizability across cases, we are curious to learn how scholars apply our argument especially to multi-party systems. Affective polarization matters in many cases (Garzia et al. 2023), and empirical and theoretical reasons suggest that our argument may be even more relevant in multi-party systems. Empirically, the neglect of voters' absolute feelings toward the parties is even more obviously problematic when an affective polarization is based on the difference between in-party and *average* out-party affect (i.e., Reiljan 2020) or the *spread* of all thermometers (i.e., Wagner 2021). Theoretically, unpolarized citizens who dislike not two but *any* option in their party system presumably play a different role in democracy than what we found for *Unpolarized Skeptics* in our two-party study. We spare readers from speculating about potential patterns in multi-party systems and hope that comparative evidence follows up soon. Moreover, we hope that future research considers contextual factors that may explain under what conditions various polarized and unpolarized groups of society think and act democratically. While our analyses contribute a general description, existing studies demonstrate that people's trust and support for norms may depend on, for example, whether their party is currently in power or not (e.g., Janssen 2024; Mazepus and Toshkov 2022; Werner et al. 2025). Our data did not allow us to systematically test such context dependencies, so we hope research addresses this gap soon. Finally, we emphasize that our evidence does not allow for any causal conclusions. Recent work shows that affective polarization can be reliably manipulated (Broockman et al. 2023), and such designs may also be used to

[8] Arguably, this approach seems unwieldy in multi-party systems.

vary levels of absolute sympathy, thus allowing for causal differentiation within the unpolarized.

To conclude, our descriptive approach highlights that affectively unpolarized citizens—a large share at least of US society—have diverging feelings toward the parties, distinct demographic profiles, and heterogeneous views on democracy. Depending on the democratic attitude or behavior studied, different groups of citizens agree or disagree with each other. While recent studies already demonstrate that affective polarization may not necessarily undermine democratic support per se, the shifting conflict lines we reveal corroborate and partly explain these findings. Admittedly, we may have hoped that unpolarized citizens would consistently turn out as reliable safeguards of a democracy that is, particularly in the US, under threat. Realizing this is not the case may be sobering at first, but knowing that different groups of society espouse different elements of democracy—allowing for shared responsibility and targeted interventions—is reassuring at second.

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Author Contribution P.L.V. developed the idea, conducted the analyses, and wrote the manuscript. J.B.P. revised the analyses and the manuscript. L.M. funded the data collection and revised the manuscript.

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Declarations

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) We declare that we have used ChatGPT (GPT-4) to enhance the presentation of some figures in this manuscript. AI was not used for any other aspect of the research, including the development of the research question, analysis, interpretation of results, or manuscript writing.

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