Culture Wars: The Impact of Affective Polarization

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Inherent in all democratic systems is the constant threat that the group conflicts which are democracy's lifeblood may solidify to the point where they threaten to disintegrate society.

Seymour Martin Lipset (1959, 83)

Affective Polarisation: Definition

In their seminal work Iyengar et al. (2012; 2019) developed their argument on affective polarisation - "the tendency of people identifying as Republicans or Democrats to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively" (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015: p. 691).

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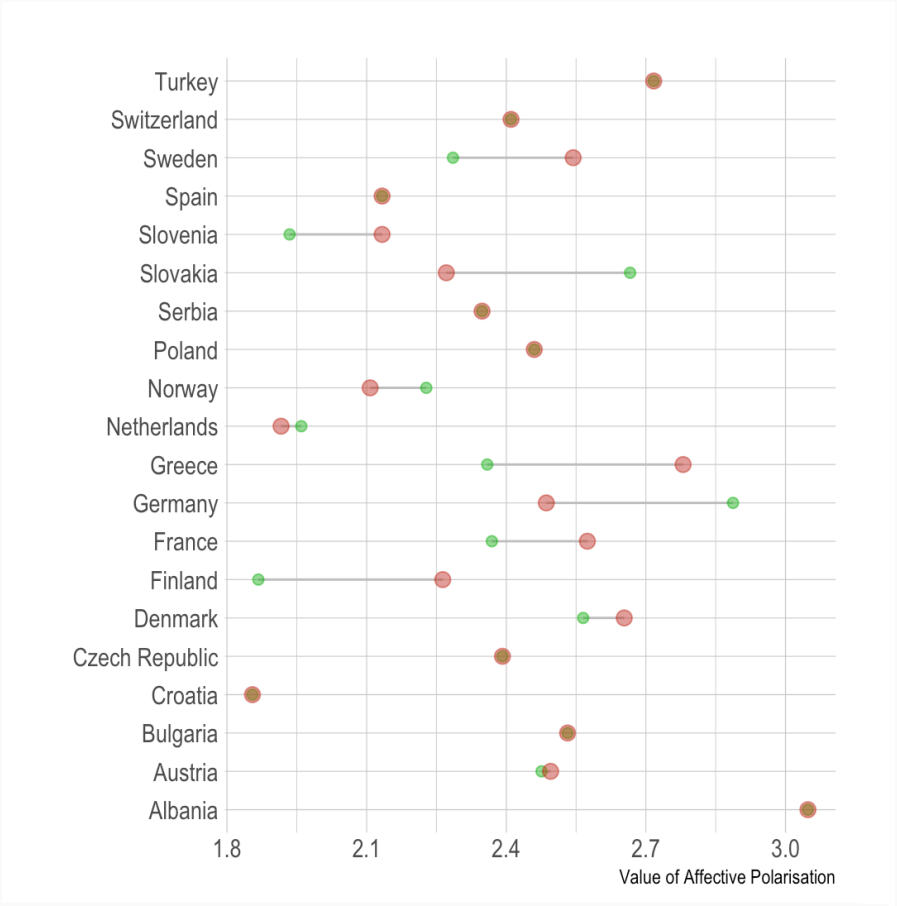
In the case of affective polarisation the common characteristic is ***partisanship***.

Affective Polarisation as a Group Identity

Opposition to the out-group is a central characteristic of affective polarisation (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). As a concept affective polarisation is encompassing citizens' **negative emotional reaction to an out-group** on the basis of the party they support.

Affective polarisation in a comparative perspective

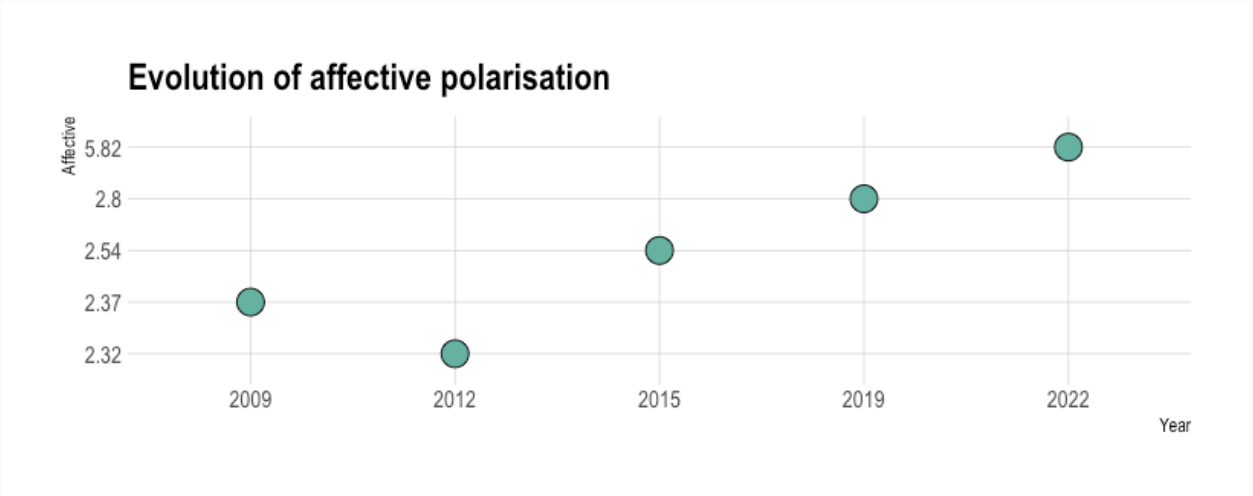
"I'd like to know what you think about each of our political parties. After I read the name of a political party, please rate it on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you strongly dislike that party and 10 means that you strongly like that party. (CSES Study)"

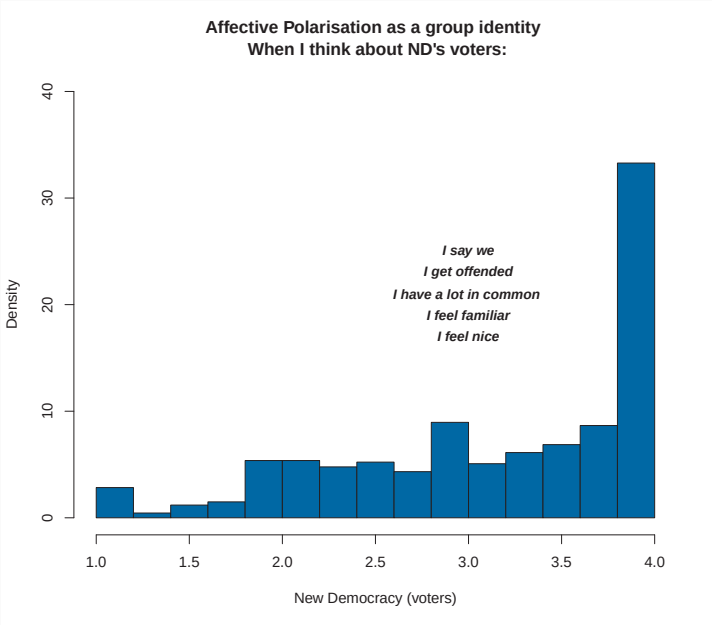


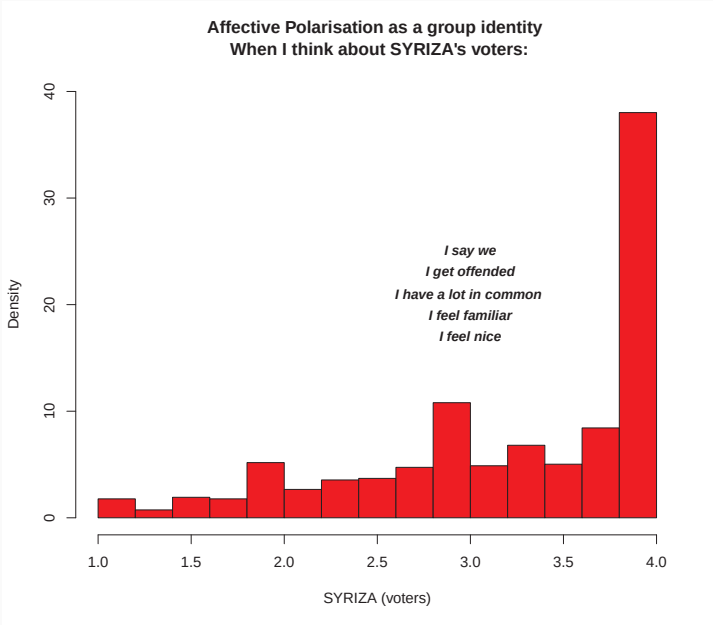
Affective polarisation in Europe

Studies on affective polarisation outside of the USA and in multiparty systems are still scarce, but they all agree that affective polarisation is a feature of several contemporary European countries with Southern European countries (Greece, Spain, Italy, and Turkey) being among the most affectively polarised societies (Orriols and León, 2020; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021).

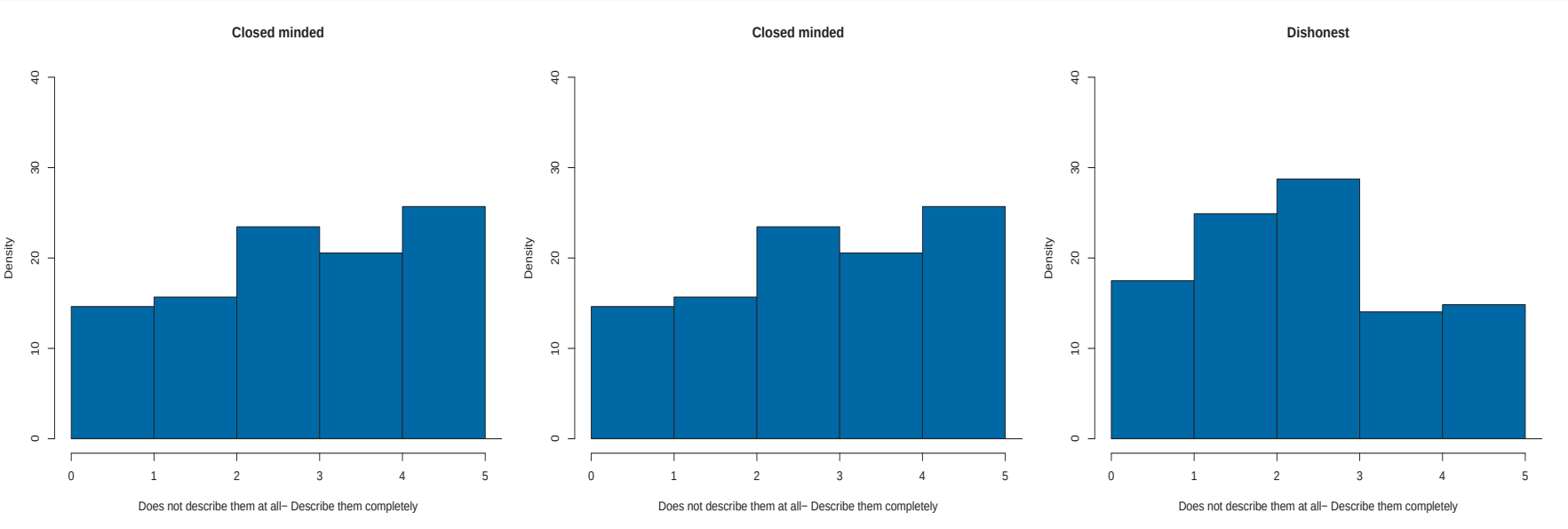
Affective polarisation in Greece: New evidence

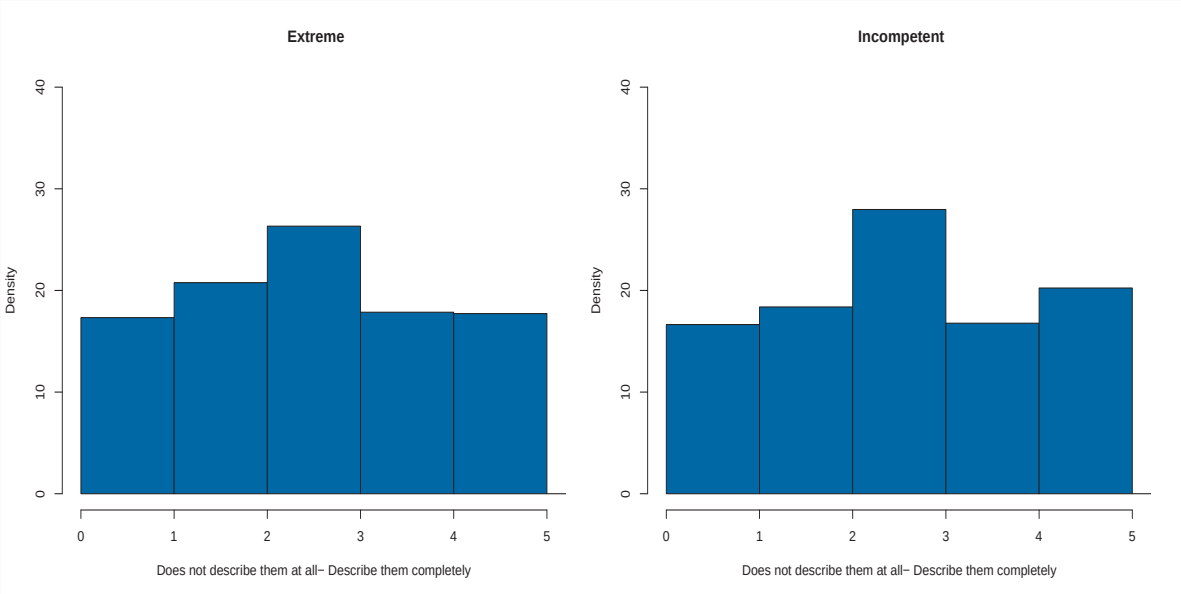






Affective polarisation: Out-group animosity Syriza –> ND





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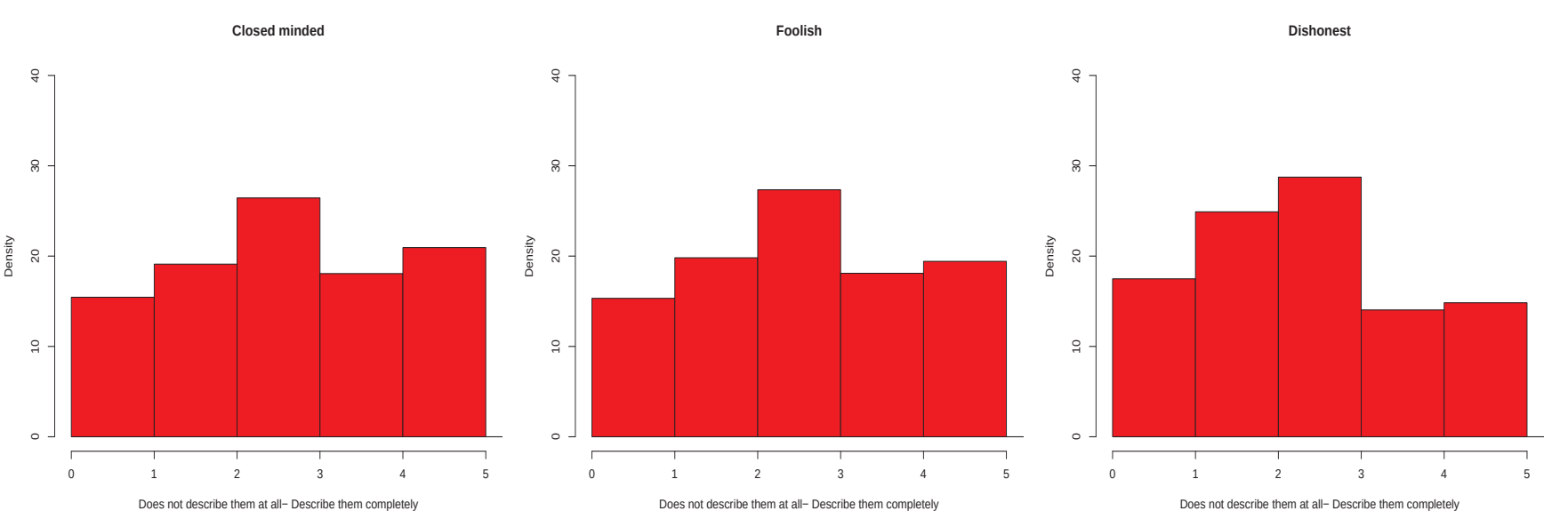
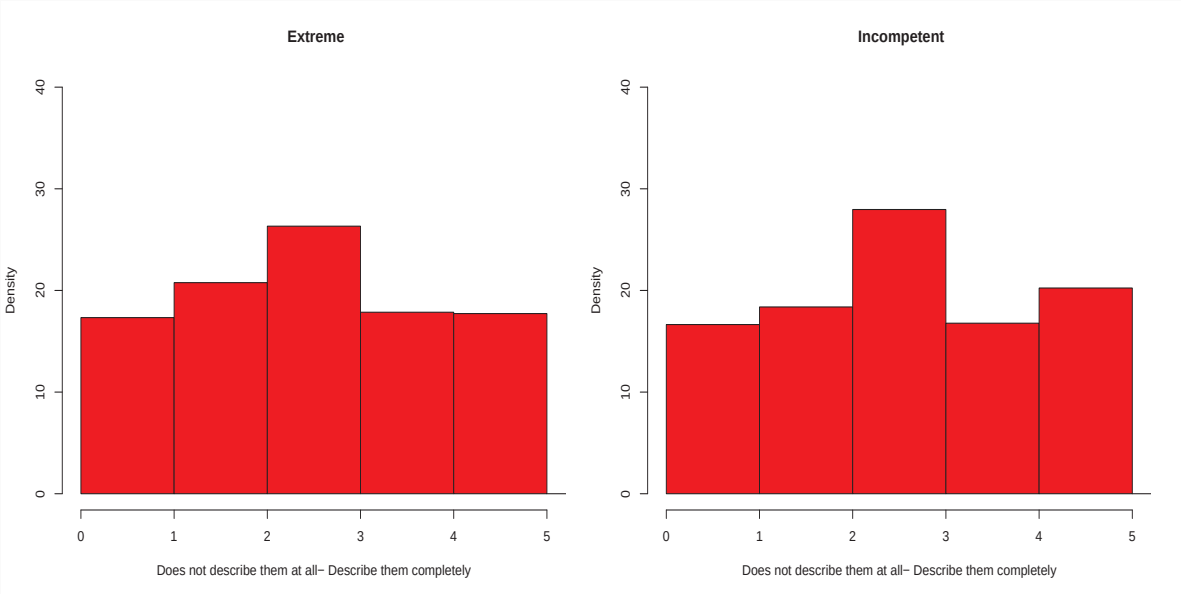
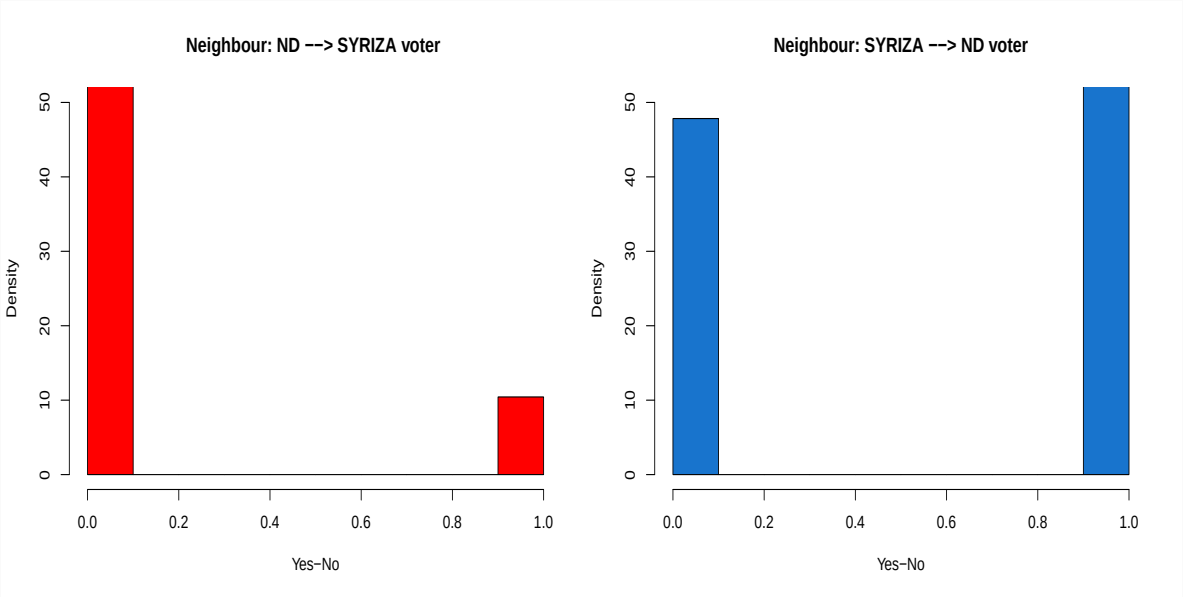




Affective polarisation: Out-group animosity living next to



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But, why this is important?

Affective polarisation: Culture wars

Research suggests that **social polarisation and party preferences can reinforce ideological distinctions** in society along cultural issues such as abortion, gay rights, and climate change (Druckman et al., 2021; Alwin and Tufiș, 2016; Jacoby, 2014).

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This **polarisation based on social identities and existing social cleavages**, is gradually **absorbed by partisanship**, and has become the **primary cleavage diving citizens** to a greater extent than other salient issues (Robison and Moskowitz, 2019; Westwood et al., 2018).

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For example, *why do many voters for far-right parties also embrace climate change skepticism or opposition to homosexual marriage?*

Affective polarisation: Culture wars

A synoptic answer to this question is related to the **polarisation of cultural issues** that are **increasingly aligned with a partisan identity** (Mason and Wronski, 2018) to a degree that they **divide the new left and far right voters** and into "**Us-versus-Them tribes**".

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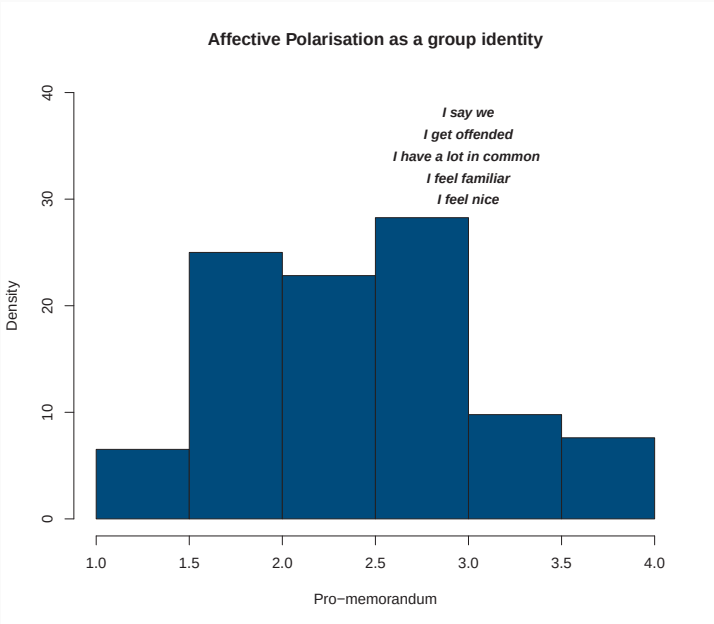
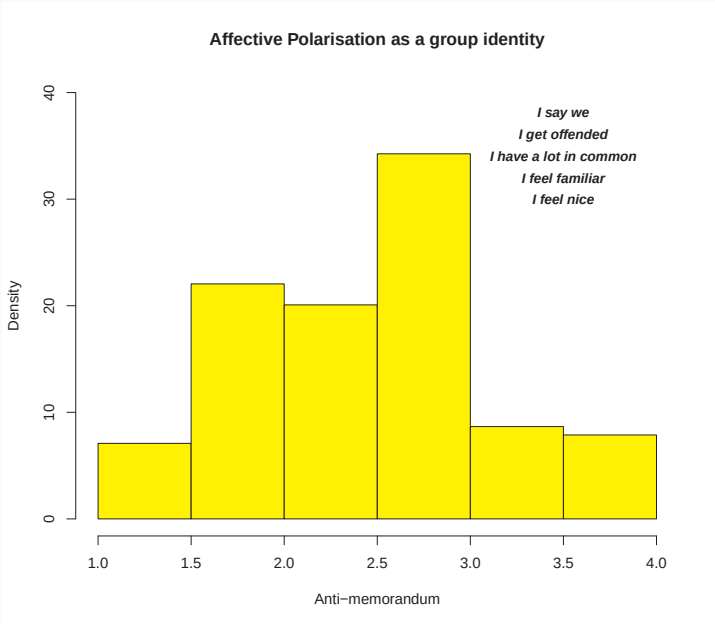
What this suggests is that **cultural issues may generate tensions and negative emotions among the public**.

Affective polarisation: Memorandum





Affective polarisation: Culture wars

These cultural identities align with the "**culture war**" first described by James Davison Hunter (1992) - a powerful metaphoric conception, first applied in the United States, of **opposing cultural forces on issues ranging from the death penalty, to abortion, to gay rights, to the role of women in society or protection of the environment**.

Data and operasionalisation

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Research Design

Data: Like-dislike measures and cultural issues

Drivers of Affective polarisation

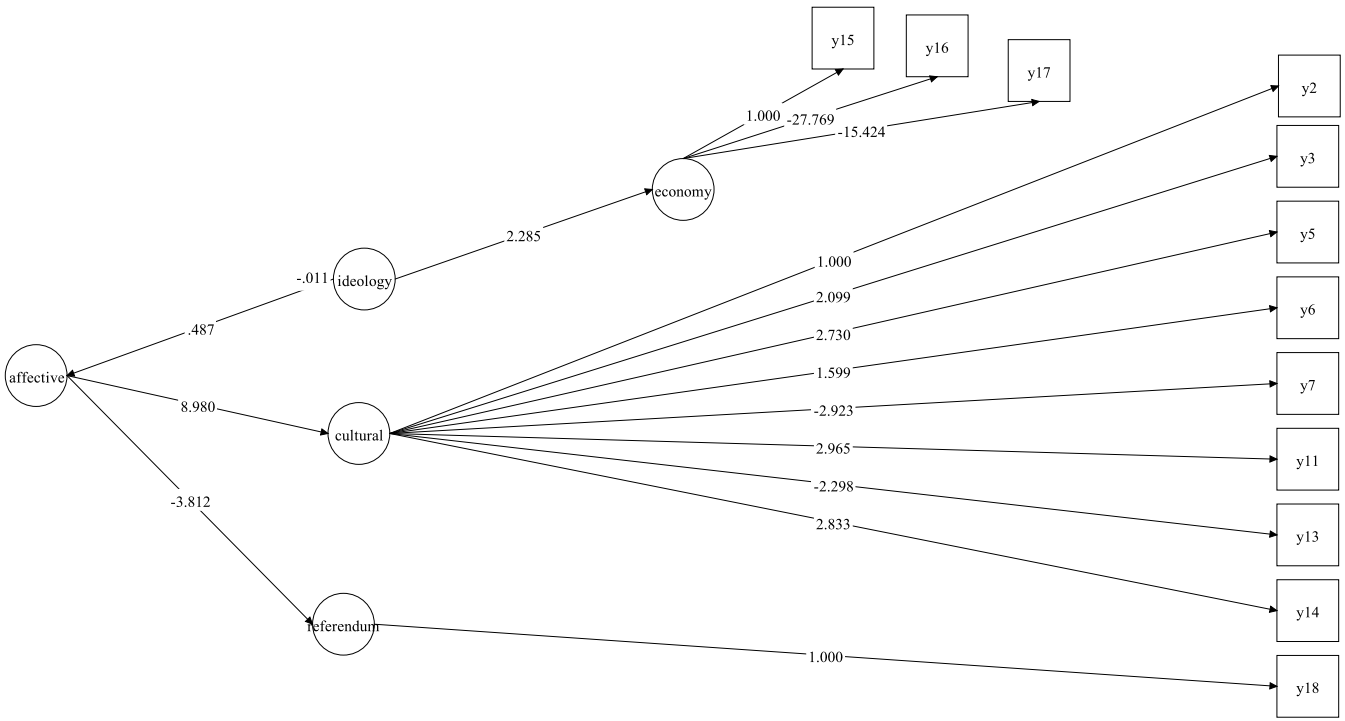
Cultural issues: LGBT, environment, immigration, women position in the society

Economy: Attitudes towards the economy, memorandum

Ideology: Left-Right self-placement

DV:**Affective polarisation**

Affective Polarisation: Culture Wars



Results: Affective polarisation and the culture wars

We hypothesised that divisions around cultural issues will reinforce affective polarisation.

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First of all, **divisions around cultural battles have a significant effect on affective polarisation** – we conducted a similar analysis in six other countries and we have found similar results.

The economy, has an impact on affective polarisation but only through ideology.

The referendum still divides the electorate, in the same way that it divides those living in the UK.

Next steps

We have recently been awarded a BA grant to study the impact of cultural divisions on polarisation in Italy our survey includes many more questions on affective polarisation and survey experiments – if you have any interesting ideas please let us know!

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Thank you!

Thank you for your attention!

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