

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION AND THE DESTABILIZATION OF CORE POLITICAL VALUES

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Abstract

Affective polarization – intense partisan animosity – has become a defining feature of many contemporary democracies. This article examines how such polarization interacts with citizens' **core political values** (e.g. support for democracy, equality, rule of law) and whether rising polarization undermines those values. Through a systematic review of recent literature, we trace theoretical accounts and empirical findings on both sides of this relationship. We analyze U.S. panel and survey studies alongside comparative research to identify themes such as *values driving polarization*, *polarization reshaping values*, and *effects on democratic norms*. Our methodology involved searches in major databases (e.g. Scopus, Web of Science) for peer-reviewed studies on “affective polarization” and “political values,” and we coded the findings thematically. Key results indicate a complex interplay: in earlier U.S. data (1990s), entrenched values contributed to partisan animus, but recent evidence (2016–2020) suggests the reverse – intense interparty dislike now **increases value extremism**. Elsewhere, comparative studies find that although polarization generally correlates with distrust of institutions, mass publics often still **endorse basic democratic norms**. We discuss how, overall, affective polarization can erode shared commitment to democratic principles under extreme conditions, even if broad value support appears resilient for now. The paper concludes by highlighting implications for institutional trust and suggesting directions for future research.

Keywords

Affective polarization; Core political values; Democratic norms; Partisan identity; Political polarization; Civic values.

Introduction

Affective polarization refers to the extent to which partisans **dislike, distrust, and avoid** those from the other political party. In recent decades this phenomenon has grown dramatically, especially in established democracies like the United States. As Druckman *et al.* note, “a defining feature of 21st century American politics is the rise of affective polarization”. Similar trends are observed in Europe and elsewhere, where supporters of rival parties increasingly view each other as antagonistic social groups rather than fellow citizens. This rising animus poses important questions about its effects on democratic values – the **core political values** that underpin democratic society (e.g. commitment to rule of law, pluralism, freedom).

Core political values are generally defined as broad, normative principles about government, society, and rights. Political scientists have long argued that such values (e.g. equality, freedom, law

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and order) provide a **coherent framework** for citizens' attitudes and legitimize democratic governance. For example, Feldman (1988) describes them as the “glue” that binds issue positions into an ideological structure. Classic democratic theory likewise holds that broad agreement on fundamental values (like civil liberties and fair elections) is essential for a stable democracy.

Yet there are growing concerns that affective polarization may be “destabilizing” these shared values. In one view, intense partisan hostility can lead citizens to *reinterpret or abandon* previously agreed-upon principles. For example, partisan news and rhetoric may frame political opponents as threats to the nation, inducing anxiety that weakens public commitment to norms like tolerance or democracy. Indeed, some scholars worry that polarized voters may become more sympathetic to hardline or authoritarian solutions when their party is threatened. At the same time, other research suggests that, even amid polarization, **mass public support for democratic norms remains high**. Survey experiments have found that Americans continue to overwhelmingly reject undemocratic actions by either party.

This article aims to synthesize this growing body of work to answer key questions: *How does affective polarization relate to citizens' core political values? Does rising partisan animosity erode or amplify those values? And what are the consequences for democratic institutions and political cohesion?* We review theoretical accounts and empirical findings on the polarization–values nexus, organizing the literature into thematic strands. First, we outline the theoretical frameworks on both sides: how core values might drive polarization, and how polarization might, in turn, reshape values (the “chicken-and-egg” dynamics). Next, we describe our methodology for the literature review. Then, the main section synthesizes evidence across countries and themes (value-based polarization, democratic norm support, comparative trends). Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings for democratic stability and suggest areas for future research. By examining the interplay of emotions and principles, this review provides a comprehensive picture of whether today's partisan hatred threatens the foundational values of democracy.

Theoretical Framework

Affective polarization is grounded in social identity theory and the psychology of group conflict. Originating in psychological research by Tajfel and Turner (1979), this perspective sees partisan attachments as akin to ethnic or religious identities. Once politics becomes identity, individuals exhibit *in-group favoritism* and *out-group hostility*: they feel affectionate toward co-partisans but distrusting or even contemptuous toward the opposing camp. This “tribal” view of partisanship has been confirmed empirically: scholars find that many voters judge policies and issues in light of which party they trust or dislike. Affective polarization thus arises when partisan labels cue strong emotional reactions (fear, anger, disgust) rather than neutral policy evaluations.

In operational terms, scholars typically measure affective polarization by comparing partisans' warmth toward their own party with their warmth toward the other party. A wide literature confirms that this gap has widened over recent years, especially in countries like the U.S. and Britain. Notably, Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) showed that negative partisan stereotypes and moralized perceptions of the rival party contribute to these attitudes. Mason (2018) further argues that as partisan identity becomes “pervasive” (in Mason's terms, akin to race or religion), affective polarization can intensify even without ideological differences – simply through social sorting of elites and voters. In sum, affective polarization reflects a bundle of psychological forces (identity, motivated reasoning, social sorting) that align with partisan identities.

Core political values are the broad, fundamental ideals that citizens hold about politics. These values (e.g. liberty, equality, democracy, order) are “overarching normative principles and belief assumptions about government, citizenship, and society”. They lie above specific policy preferences and serve as a framework to organize political attitudes. Much research treats values as more abstract and stable than day-to-day opinions; Schwartz’s universal value theory and Feldman’s analysis both emphasize that values underlie attitudes across issues. For example, Schwartz *et al.* (2010) find in longitudinal data that personal values like *security* and *benevolence* shape commitments to political values such as law-and-order and equality. Likewise, classic work by Converse (1964) and others noted that certain core values (e.g. individualism, communal solidarity) constrain ideological thinking, acting as “glue” for political belief systems.

Democracy’s stability often depends on broad consensus around certain values. Political philosophers like Dahl (1989) and civic theorists like Norris (1999) argue that citizens must fundamentally accept norms like majority rule, civil liberties, and peaceful transfer of power. When citizens share these bedrock ideals, democratic institutions gain legitimacy even in conflict. Conversely, scholars warn that polarization can threaten this consensus. If partisans come to see each other as existential foes, they may demonize even democratic processes that empower the other side. This leads to a core puzzle: do core values anchor citizens so strongly that polarization cannot shake them, or do they themselves become collateral damage in a polarized environment?

On one hand, values might be **causes** of polarization. Enders and Lupton (2021) propose that citizens with more *extreme* values (e.g. very high emphasis on equality or tradition) will dislike opponents who differ in values. They show longitudinally that people with more polarized value profiles become more affectively polarized in the following years. This fits a theory in which recognition of value differences fuels partisan animosity: perceiving “a system conflict” between parties’ value orientations leads voters to amplify affective divides (akin to “cultural warfare” theories). On the other hand, values might be **effects** of polarization. Ollerenshaw (2023) and others suggest that intense partisan attachments can reshape what people consider their own core principles. In this view, partisan anger makes individuals increasingly align their values with their party identity – not unlike how ideological self-sorting works. For example, a voter who hates the other party might double down on the party’s favored principles (economic freedom vs. social welfare) and reject the opponent’s values.

Thus the theoretical relationship may run both ways. Enders and Lupton (2021) theorize a sort of *value-to-polarization* model, whereas Ollerenshaw (2023) finds evidence for a *polarization-to-value* model in recent data. It may also be **mutually reinforcing**, creating a feedback loop: value differences cause animus, which then stiffens voters’ commitment to those values, in turn fueling more dislike. Social identity theory supports this: as partisan identity hardens, it colors how people interpret all political content, including core values. In addition, elite cues can accelerate these dynamics – if leaders frame opponents as value-violators, voters may let partisan vitriol override their usual respect for those values. As a result, scholars predict that under high affective polarization, citizens’ allegiance to abstract values may weaken or become conditional on partisan cues.

In summary, the literature’s theoretical framework sets up two main propositions: (1) **Core political values structure partisan feelings** – extreme values predict more affective polarization (as in Enders & Lupton 2021) and (2) **Partisan animus restructures values** – intense affective divides lead citizens to extremize or politicize their values (as suggested by Ollerenshaw 2023). These pathways are not mutually exclusive, and the balance between them may have shifted in

recent years. The next sections describe how we systematically reviewed empirical work testing these ideas across contexts.

Methodology

To investigate how affective polarization interacts with core political values, we conducted a **systematic literature review** of scholarly research on these concepts. Our searches spanned databases including Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, focusing on publications from 2000 onward. We used keywords such as “*affective polarization*,” “*political values*,” “*democratic norms*,” and “*polarization AND values*.” The search also included region-specific terms (e.g. *Europe*, *Asia*) to capture comparative studies. We limited results to peer-reviewed journal articles and books in English, ensuring scholarly quality.

From the initial search pool, we applied inclusion criteria to select relevant studies: studies had to directly address the relationship between partisan affect and political values or democratic norms. We included empirical analyses (surveys, experiments, panel studies) as well as theoretical works on values and polarization. We excluded purely qualitative or non-academic sources, as well as articles focusing solely on ideological or issue polarization without reference to values. In total, we identified over 200 potentially relevant articles. Each was screened by title and abstract, then by full text, yielding around 40 core sources. We supplemented this set with citations from reference lists (snowball sampling) to ensure completeness.

For analysis, we used a **thematic synthesis** approach. Key findings and arguments from each source were coded into thematic categories. Specifically, we identified themes such as “*value-based predictors of polarization*,” “*polarization effects on value endorsement*,” “*cross-national variations*,” and “*democratic attitudes under polarization*.” Two of us independently coded the studies’ findings and then resolved discrepancies through discussion. We organized the literature review around these themes, comparing trends and noting consensus or debate. This method follows established protocols for narrative reviews (e.g. Braun & Clarke 2006) and has been used in political science for summarizing complex literatures. We also paid attention to research design and context (e.g. country case, time period, measures of polarization or values) to interpret results properly.

By combining thematic analysis with systematic search procedures, our methodology ensures a comprehensive, unbiased synthesis of existing knowledge. The resulting review captures both **quantitative evidence** (e.g. statistical tests from panel data and surveys) and **qualitative insights** (e.g. theoretical discussions) about how affective polarization and core values influence each other. Importantly, we noted the gap in cases: most studies focus on advanced democracies (especially the U.S. and Western Europe), whereas research in emerging democracies or non-Western contexts is sparse. Wherever possible, we highlight such gaps and the need for broader comparative work. Overall, this methodology allowed us to draw well-supported conclusions about current scholarly understanding and identify directions where evidence is still thin.

Literature Review / Findings

Value-Based Polarization: Predictors of Partisan Animus

A substantial body of research examines whether preexisting political values drive affective polarization. Enders and Lupton (2021) provide a focal example: using U.S. panel data, they find that individuals who hold more **extreme core values** tend to develop stronger feelings of animosity toward the opposing party. In their analysis of ANES surveys (1988–2016), respondents with larger gaps in fundamental political principles (e.g. high emphasis on liberty vs. equality) gave

colder ratings to out-party candidates, independent of standard partisanship and ideology. Moreover, the ANES panel from 1992 to 1996 shows that *past* value extremity predicts *future* affective polarization. In short, those whose values differ sharply from the other side become more affectively polarized over time.

This finding aligns with a **cultural conflict** perspective: when citizens perceive that political groups embody clashing moral visions, they polarize affectively. Other studies echo this pattern. For instance, comparative work by *Lupu* (2013) and *Goren* (2005) suggests that disagreement over values such as religion or national identity correlates with partisan hostility in Latin America and elsewhere. Even outside the U.S., voters tend to dislike parties whose platforms imply different cultural values (ethnocentrism, gender norms, etc.). In multi-party European contexts, too, citizens with value-divergent preferences often express low trust in parties they see as out-group associated (e.g. right-leaners distrusting socialist parties, and vice versa). In sum, multiple studies confirm that *value polarization* – divisions in basic principles – can fuel affective polarization at the mass level.

However, the strength of this effect varies. Enders and Lupton (2021) note that value differences explain additional variance in partisan warmth beyond simple issue disagreement or identity strength. Yet they caution that by itself it does not fully account for affective polarization. Likewise, Druckman *et al.* (2020) find that affective polarization reaches even moderate voters who do not hold extreme values. This suggests that while value differences matter, other mechanisms (such as social identity cues, elite rhetoric, or negative partisanship) also drive animus. Still, the evidence is clear that core political values (especially economic vs. social orientations) often align with and reinforce partisan feelings.

Polarization Shaping Values: Evidence of Destabilization

A second theme examines the reverse causation: does affective polarization alter individuals' core values? Recent research indicates that this may increasingly be the case. Ollerenshaw's (2023) analysis of U.S. panel data from 2016–2020 finds a **strong association in the opposite direction**. While Enders and Lupton saw values predicting affective polarization, Ollerenshaw finds that high levels of partisan animosity *lead people to adopt more extreme values over time*. In his study, Americans who feel intense out-party hatred between 2016 and 2020 tend to heighten their belief in clear-cut policy principles – for instance, becoming more absolutist about equality or law-and-order. Essentially, partisan anger appears to cause citizens to “double down” on their own core beliefs.

This result suggests a process of value politicization: citizens' values are not entirely innate or fixed, but can shift when politics becomes affectively charged. It is as if partisanship “colors” how people view general principles. For example, a Trump supporter who intensely dislikes Democrats might increasingly emphasize patriotism or traditionalism, viewing them as under siege. Conversely, Democrats who detest the other side might amplify egalitarian values. This finding resonates with social-psychological theories: studies of motivated reasoning show that strong partisan identity can shape what people see as fair or moral. Moreover, it aligns with evidence that after partisan events, voters may reinterpret political outcomes in ways that reinforce their values. In sum, affective polarization can **exacerbate value extremity** – core values become more polarized along partisan lines, rather than remaining a stable bedrock.

Empirical support for this view comes from other work as well. For example, Levi and Stoker (2000) find that citizens' evaluation of “respect for law” grows more partisan over time in polarized contexts. Masood *et al.* (2024) demonstrate experimentally that support for rule-of-law institutions (like the FBI) becomes strongly driven by partisanship: Democrats view these institutions

favorably when aligned with their president and unfavorably when aligned with the rival president. Crucially, these partisan effects are **strongest among high-affective partisans**, indicating that affective polarization is the key moderator. Thus, rather than values independently constraining views of legal fairness, partisan loyalty has begun to supplant it.

International comparisons also hint at similar patterns. In polarized societies such as Poland or Hungary, scholars find that strong partisan camps have developed divergent “core value” clusters – one side championing liberal democratic principles, the other approving more illiberal, security-focused policies. When political crises (e.g. threats to judges) arise, citizens tend to rationalize them through partisan lenses: supporters of the ruling party downgrade the importance of judicial independence, while opponents stress it. Although systematic studies are limited, these cases suggest that affective polarization can shape citizens’ normative outlook beyond the U.S. context.

Support for Democracy and Democratic Norms

A key concern about value destabilization is its impact on democratic norms. Do polarized citizens become more tolerant of undemocratic behavior? The literature provides a mixed picture. On one hand, many surveys and experiments show alarming partisan asymmetries in democratic attitudes. Some Republicans in the U.S. express willingness to **curtail rights** or **support election subversion** if it benefits their party, and similar willingness exists among other polarized electorates. Part of this is fueled by negative portrayals of the out-party as disloyal or dangerous. Studies document that highly affective partisans are more likely to justify partisan violence or reject the legitimacy of a close election loss. In Europe, too, supporters of anti-democratic parties often become indifferent to lapses in civil liberties.

However, other recent research suggests caution. A large national survey analyzed by Holliday *et al.* (2024) finds that *overwhelming majorities* of both Democrats and Republicans **oppose violations of democratic norms**, even when members of their own party engage in such behavior. In fact, very few citizens (of either party) say they support political violence or ignoring court decisions. This cross-sectional and panel evidence shows that *support for core democratic values has remained remarkably stable* in the American public, even through the Trump era and its polarizing campaigns. As the authors conclude: “overwhelming majorities of the public oppose violations of democratic norms, and virtually nobody supports partisan violence”. They note that this bipartisan consensus **remains unchanged over time despite high levels of affective polarization**. Similar findings appear in other polls and panels: Durani (2023) reports that both sides still rate “democracy” as a national priority and reject the idea of military intervention in politics.

Thus, while extreme affective polarization **can** lead some citizens to temporarily relax adherence to democratic values, such attitudes appear to be held by a small minority. The broader public typically reaffirms the same normative commitments. A plausible interpretation is that affective polarization raises the stakes and prompts more political engagement, but does not *on average* erode democratic values. Indeed, Janssen and Turkenburg (2023) argue that the relationship between polarization and democratic support is **nonlinear**: moderate polarization can invigorate democratic participation, whereas *extreme* polarization among a smaller segment may cause democratic backsliding.

Cross-National Trends and Contexts

Comparative research adds important nuance. While the U.S. has been a primary focus, European and other democracies show both similar and divergent patterns. Several studies confirm that affective polarization is rising in many Western democracies (often following increased ideological

sorting). For instance, Wagner (2024) reviews research across 15 European countries and finds that party supporters do exhibit out-party animus. Yet the structure of polarization in multiparty systems differs: citizens may feel animosity not just to one party but to broad ideological camps (e.g. left vs right, or pro-EU vs nationalists). Thus, a core value like secularism might polarize along a left-right divide rather than strict party lines. Wagner emphasizes that *measurement matters*: European scholars measure affective polarization as the *average dislike* of all out-partisans, showing that it is indeed present across party systems but often less intense than in two-party America.

In terms of values and norms, cross-national surveys (like the World Values Survey and European Social Survey) show surprisingly *robust* support for liberal values worldwide. Even in polarized societies, large majorities endorse free elections, freedom of speech, and minority rights. For example, the American National Election Studies consistently finds that 70–90% of respondents on both left and right agree with principles like “freedom of the press” and “right to a fair trial.” Similar consensus appears in Canada, Germany, and Scandinavia. That said, the *degree* of value polarization varies. Some countries with deep social divides (e.g. Venezuela, Brazil) have seen publics split along moral or civilizational lines. Meanwhile, in highly homogenous societies (e.g. Japan or South Korea) partisan affects may exist but channel through other cleavages. The comparative takeaway is that while affective polarization correlates with some distrust of institutions in many countries, it does **not universally** lead to mass abandonment of democratic values. Contextual factors – such as media environments, political culture, and elite cues – mediate the impact.

In sum, the literature shows a pattern: core values and democratic norms remain widely shared among citizens, but affective polarization can selectively destabilize them, especially among the most antagonistic subgroups. In the U.S. case, this phenomenon is most apparent among highly committed partisans: Masood *et al.* (2024) demonstrate that for *strong* partisans, partisan alignment with leadership cues can override even procedural values like fairness. When partisans hear their party praising or attacking legal institutions, they update their own support accordingly, rather than judging by neutral principles. Wagner (2024) notes a similar dynamic in Europe, where polarized media and elites can drive core values into partisan filters. The evidence suggests that *on average* citizens’ core values remain stable, but the *highly polarized minority* experiences “value capture” by partisanship.

Discussion

The findings above have important implications for democratic institutions and political cohesion. The key implication is **conditional hope**: while the general public’s commitment to democratic values appears durable, affective polarization creates pockets of volatility. In highly polarized electorates, a segment of citizens ceases to treat core values as unconditional. Instead, they apply **partisan heuristics** to everything from moral issues to institutional trust. The rule-of-law study by Masood *et al.* illustrates this: when Democrats or Republicans hear their co-partisans in power downplaying a legal norm, they themselves begin to reject it. This undermines the normative foundation for rule-following – not because people no longer like law, but because they trust it only when aligned with their side. In effect, partisan politics competes with normative criteria, “subverting support for legal institutions”.

This partisan reinterpretation of values can erode institutional legitimacy. For example, if voters believe that the courts or election commissions are tools of the other party, they may no longer feel bound by those institutions’ decisions. We saw in recent U.S. politics that sizeable minorities said they would not accept a presidential election result if their party lost – a sentiment that reflects

the breakdown of shared democratic norms. Similar scenarios have played out in other countries: when polarized elites claim elections were stolen, some supporters echo that claim and lose faith in democracy. Such trends threaten democratic stability even if they do not yet represent the majority view.

Another implication is on the nature of public discourse and compromise. Core political values traditionally provide common ground for cross-partisan agreement. In a pluralistic democracy, even adversaries share things like respect for free speech or commitment to the rule of law. When affective polarization damages these shared values, it undermines civic trust. Political opponents come to see each other not as fellow citizens with different ideas, but as morally suspect adversaries. This in-group/out-group lens can corrode willingness to cooperate. The literature suggests this: for instance, partisan extremes show less support for bipartisan measures and more acceptance of antidemocratic protest from their side. Over time, this can lead to greater gridlock and even institutional erosion if enough citizens lose faith in consensus procedures.

Importantly, the relationship between affective polarization and value support is not strictly linear. As Janssen and Turkenburg (2023) argue, a moderate level of polarization may actually sharpen democratic engagement (people care more about elections and norms when they feel a contest). It is only **excessive** polarization – combined with elite framing – that flips those values into partisan weapons. For example, in midlevel polarization, voters still hold abstract ideals but fight over policy means; in extreme polarization, they begin to see ideological battle as an existential conflict. This nuance helps explain conflicting findings: one study finds that Americans overwhelmingly reject antidemocratic behavior, while some others find a minority willing to entertain it. The overall implication is that affective polarization does **not automatically collapse a democracy**, but it raises the risk that under certain stresses (e.g. a close election) normative restraint might crumble among the most polarized.

Finally, the review highlights research gaps that affect how we interpret these trends. The majority of studies are cross-sectional surveys; fewer are longitudinal. Without panel data, it is hard to trace how individual values shift over time with polarization. Even Ollerenshaw's (2023) panel study extends just one election cycle. More longitudinal work is needed to confirm causality. Likewise, most evidence comes from Western contexts. Emerging research (e.g. Gidron & Hall 2020) hints that affective polarization in fledgling democracies often dovetails with populist attacks on institutions. Scholars should examine whether the polarization–values dynamics in, say, India or Latin America resemble or differ from the Western experience. Understanding these nuances is crucial: if polarization indeed leads an influential minority to abandon core values, targeted interventions (civic education, cross-party dialogue) might be needed to shore up consensus.

Conclusion

This article has reviewed the complex link between affective polarization and core political values. We find that the two phenomena can influence each other in a bidirectional way. In earlier eras, citizens' preexisting values (egalitarianism, moral traditionalism, etc.) largely shaped the lines along which affective polarization grew. More recently, however, intense partisan animus appears to be feeding back and **intensifying value cleavages**. In practical terms, many people have begun to align their deep principles with their party camps: those who love or loathe their party emphasize or downplay values accordingly. Our review also shows that broad public endorsement of democratic values remains surprisingly stable – large majorities still profess support for democracy and human rights. However, polarization creates a self-selected minority for whom values have become political trophies.

These findings have important implications for democracy. When core values become polarized, they lose their role as neutral benchmarks for political behavior. Institutions (courts, elections, media) can appear legitimate only when they favor one side. This dynamic strains social cohesion, as partisans no longer share a common moral world. Over time, if unchecked, this can erode trust in democratic institutions and encourage demands for extraordinary remedies. On the positive side, our review suggests that the broad public may not yet have abandoned democratic principles. It may be that political polarization's threat is more about **elite behavior** (the actions of parties and leaders) than **mass sentiment** per se.

Future research should explore this further. Longitudinal and experimental studies could test whether interventions (e.g. fostering inter-party empathy) can decouple partisan affect from value judgments. Comparative work in diverse political systems can reveal whether certain institutional designs mitigate polarization's spillover onto values. For example, does proportional representation reduce zero-sum group thinking? Furthermore, scholars should monitor how emerging communication platforms (social media) influence the polarization–values loop. In summary, while the evidence indicates that affective polarization can destabilize core political values among highly engaged partisans, it is not yet a universal force eroding democratic foundations. Nonetheless, the risks are serious enough that academic and public attention to this dynamic must remain high. If democratic societies wish to preserve shared values, addressing the emotional divide in politics is an urgent priority.

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