
15. Affective polarization around issues

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INTRODUCTION

Research on affective polarization has largely focused on partisanship as the key social identity. Yet while partisanship is normally the most salient political divide in Western democracies, it is far from the only political identity. In this chapter, we examine affective polarization rooted in political identities defined by shared opinions on specific political issues: issue-based affective polarization. While Chapter 14 in this *Handbook* examined affective polarization between groups based on long-standing ideological identities, we focus here on specific issues, which are often, although not always, particular to a time and place.

Building on theories of social identity and inter-group comparison from social psychology, we conceptualize issue-based social identities as opinion-based groups. People with issue-based identities define themselves in terms of their opinion group membership just as they do for any other meaningful social group (Bliuc et al., 2007; Musgrove & McGarty, 2008; McGarty et al., 2009). When these issues are salient and politicized, the consequence is often affective polarization between opinion-based groups. Recent examples of such issues include Catalan independence (Burg, 2015; Balcells & Kuo, 2023; Rodon, 2022; Torcal & Comellas, 2022), Brexit (Bentall et al., 2024; Hobolt et al., 2021; Hobolt & Tilley, 2021; Kenny et al., 2023; Murray et al., 2017; Tilley & Hobolt, 2023), gun ownership (Kleck et al., 2009; Lacombe, 2019; Lacombe et al., 2019) and COVID-19 vaccination programs (Bor et al., 2023; Henkel et al., 2023; Wagner & Eberl, forthcoming). Whether the opinion was about Catalan independence, Brexit, or vaccines, distinct social identities emerged on the basis of those shared opinions. These in-group identities bring with them, in turn, out-group hostility towards people on the other side of the argument.

To explain this phenomenon, we first define issue-based identities and set out a theory of issue-based affective polarization. Second, we discuss the conditions under which opinion-based groups emerge and affective polarization develops beyond the partisan context. We focus on three factors that facilitate issue-based affective polarization: the degree of contestation and existing inter-group conflict associated with the issue (*issue contestation*); the level of individual expressive action and behavioural engagement (*issue expression*); and the degree to which the issue aligns or cuts across partisan identities (*issue alignment*).

Third, we discuss some recent examples of issue-based affective polarization. These include issue-based identities rooted in long-standing prior social identities, such as the increasing salience of territorial divides in Catalonia, as well as issue-based identities that have emerged in response to individual behavioral choices in high-salience contexts, such as gun ownership and mass vaccination.

Finally, we conclude with a discussion of how issue-based polarization interacts with partisan affective polarization. This is important as issue-based identities have the potential to shape and, crucially, be absorbed by existing partisan divisions. We also reflect on the

potential for greater issue-based affective polarization, not least in contexts where partisan attachments are weak or weakening.

ISSUE-BASED IDENTITIES

The starting point for any theory of issue-based affective polarization is psychological research on social identity by Henri Tajfel (Tajfel, 1970; 1979; 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and on self-categorization theory by John Turner and associates (Turner, 1978; 1982; Turner et al., 1987). Chapter 10 of this *Handbook* explains this in more detail, but the core idea behind both is that group membership is an important source of pride and self-esteem. The mechanics of the social identity approach are based on three elements of group belonging. First, there is the definition of the group (group awareness); second, a positive attitude towards the group (in-group affect); and, third, a description and prescription of group membership (group norms). These processes give each of us a sense of social identity, yet also imply that our sense of self-worth is heightened by discriminating against and holding prejudiced views of the out-group (Tajfel, 1970; 1979).

What shapes these social identities? According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), there are three mental processes involved: social categorization, in which we distinguish between ‘us’ and ‘them’; social identification, in which we adopt the identity of the group to which we have categorized ourselves as belonging; and social comparison, in which we compare our own group favorably to others. This desire to compare oneself with an out-group often, although not always, creates competitive and antagonistic intergroup relations, which then serves to further heighten identification with the in-group.

The focus of social identity theory has typically been on ‘objective’ social categories, such as race or gender, and the most obvious political identity: partisanship. Thus, according to Turner, ‘a social group can be defined as two or more individuals who share a common social identification of themselves or, which is nearly the same thing, perceive themselves to be *members of the same social category*’ (Turner, 1982; p. 15, emphasis added). Yet, in this chapter, we focus on social identities based on ‘issues’, rather than more objective social categories.

How do we define issue-based social identities? Our definition recognizes that while social identities can be related to objective characteristics – such as race, class, or gender – they are inherently subjective as they rely on self-categorization (Turner, 1982; McGarty et al., 2009). By definition, all identity groups are thus subjective to some extent. According to Turner’s social categorization theory, a group can be formed: ‘to the degree that two or more people come to perceive and define themselves in terms of some shared ingroup-outgroup categorization’ (Turner et al., 1987, p. 51). Issue-based identities are therefore less distinct from more traditional social identities than they may initially seem. In fact, we can simply define them as social identities based on a sense of belonging to a group based on shared opinions on a specific political issue and differentiated from others who hold different opinions on that issue. Hence, the emphasis is not on membership of an objective social category, but rather a subjective dynamic self-perception that explains how people come to identify with a group in a meaningful way (McGarty et al., 2009). Ultimately, opinion-based groups are simply rooted in shared opinions on a salient issue. They are social groups in the sense used by Turner (1982), but have a social identity defined by a shared opinion on an issue (Bliuc et al., 2007; Musgrove & McGarty, 2008; McGarty et al., 2009).

To illustrate the distinction between a social identity based on an objective social category and one based on an opinion-based group, think of the difference between being a ‘woman’ and being a ‘feminist’. Girls and women are aware that they belong to the female social category, and depending on the context, this may or may not be a politically salient category. Some women (and men) will also identify as ‘feminists’ based on a shared advocacy for women’s rights. In most contexts, this will simply be part of someone’s political attitudes and outlook that they share with others. But in some circumstances, for example, immediately prior to women’s suffrage, this could develop into a stronger politically salient identity and conflict between feminists and anti-feminists (see Huddy, 1997). This example illustrates that the objective social category (‘female’) and the issue-based self-identification (‘feminism’) do not necessarily perfectly overlap, as both women and men can identify as feminists and anti-feminists. Moreover, it shows how people can hold multiple cross-cutting identities (e.g., a female anti-feminist). Finally, it exemplifies that in certain circumstances the issue-based identity may be more strongly held or politically salient than the identity based on an objective social category (Huddy, 2001).

What issues form the basis of such issue-based identities? In theory, there is no limit to the type of issue that may form the basis of an opinion-based group. Existing political science scholarship has shown that a wide variety of issues, from gun ownership to regional secession, can form the basis of political identities. Below, we distinguish between those issues that are rooted in long-standing social identities and social categories (e.g., separatism, feminism) and those that are less directly linked to pre-existing social identities. This linkage (or lack thereof) is likely to alter the strength and nature of the new identity. Yet, regardless of existing social ties, merely holding the same opinion as others on an issue is not sufficient for such a social identity to exist. Rather, the issue needs to become part of how people come to perceive and define themselves in terms of their opinion group membership in the same way as they would with any other psychologically meaningful social group (Tajfel, 1970). This in-group identification is accompanied by differentiation from the out-group, as people favorably compare their own group with the out-group and seek to behave in line with the norms of that group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

ISSUE-BASED AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

When are issue divisions likely to produce issue-based identities and affective polarization between those identities? While social identity theory explains the nature and significance of group identities, it has less to say about why certain group identities become more salient and politically polarized (Huddy, 2001).¹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the lab-based experimental paradigm, the literature largely ignores the social and political context within which social identities emerge. Yet, this context is crucial if we are to understand issue-based affective polarization. We argue that there are three contextual factors that are important: inter-group conflict and contestation (*issue contestation*); individual expressive behavior related to the issue (*issue expression*); and the degree to which the issue cuts across existing partisan identities (*issue alignment*).

Issue contestation is perhaps the most obvious. Opinion-based groups often develop in the context of inter-group comparisons (Bliuc et al., 2007; Musgrove & McGarty, 2008; McGarty et al., 2009) and greater differentiation from the out-group signals clear group boundaries and

provides in-groups with a more intense identity and sense of meaning (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Huddy, 2001). In other words, the more starkly defined the issue boundaries, the stronger the sense of in-group affinity and out-group animosity. Here it is important to separate issue salience from group conflict. A group of people may have strong views on an issue (e.g., reducing CO₂ emissions by limiting car use), but it is the conflict with an opposing group of people (e.g., those who are against policies to limit cars) that creates politicized social identities around the issue. Nonetheless, issue salience is clearly an important part of contestation. According to self-categorization theory, the situational salience of group membership is key to the role of social identities in explaining behaviour (Turner et al., 1987). When people feel that the stakes are high, there will be more conflict.

Political actors have a role in increasing the saliency and contestation of an issue (Huddy, 2001), but politicized issue-based identities are also likely to emerge in response to events that are naturally salient, such as wars, pandemics, or man-made disasters (McGarty et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2015). They can also originate from politically-engineered events, such as referendums that heighten the salience of specific political issues. For example, secessionist referendums, including those in Scotland and Catalonia, facilitated the strengthening of issue-based identities. These electoral contests do not just raise the stakes due to their often zero-sum nature (secession will or will not happen); they also create unmistakable in-groups and out-groups. After all, a binary choice in which one is either for or against an issue clearly delineates both an in-group and an out-group. This process is likely to depend on the referendum context as well. Close referendum results that create two relatively even-sized groups will strengthen this delineation. Frequent referendums on a wide range of issues, such as in Switzerland, will weaken this depiction of an in-group and an out-group because the groups are constantly changing. Nonetheless, referendums provide an example of a context in which issue contestation is elevated: issue salience is raised and clearly defined in- and out-groups are normally created. Examples include the Scottish independence referendum in 2014 that divided the population into those who were ‘pro-independence’ and those who were ‘pro-Union’ or the 1995 referendum on the secession of Quebec that divided the nation into ‘federalists’ and ‘sovereignists’ (Lecours, 2018; Fieldhouse & Prosser, 2018). Indeed, the emergence of labels in the context of such referendums also serves as an informational shortcut since people can more easily sort others into ‘them’ vs ‘us.’ This labeling of inter-group conflict can further fuel affective polarization.

The second factor that we expect to influence the intensity of issue-based identities is *issue expression*: behavior associated with the issue. Membership of issue-based groups is not as fixed or well-established compared to social identities based on objective social categories such as nationality and race (Huddy, 2001). Social identity theory suggests that people must internalize their group membership as an aspect of their concept of self (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 41). It is not sufficient that someone shares an opinion with others, or that others define them as a member of a group – they must choose to see the shared opinion as part of their own identity and be able to differentiate their in-group from other people who do not share the opinion. Behavioral commitment to a group is a way of strengthening both belonging to an in-group and difference from the out-group. Activism also promotes a shared consciousness based on shared grievances (Bliuc et al., 2007; McGarty et al., 2009). When people engage in group-based actions, such as protests or other forms of expressive political participation, this strengthens their sense of in-group affinity and out-group animosity.

Often, this expressive behavior can be costly. Think of people who join issue-based groups, whether environmentalists who engage in disruptive civil disobedience or feminists who go on marches for women's rights. Nonetheless, many forms of behavioral engagement are much less costly. Even political actions such as voting in a referendum can reinforce an issue-based identity. Why? Because it compels people to take a side, and thus a clear stance, on an issue by acting. This is similar to how voting for a political party bolsters party identification (Bølstad et al., 2013; Dinas, 2014; Schulte-Cloos, 2019). In a referendum, the act of voting involves a voluntary self-categorization which is part of the identity-forming process (Mousa, 2020; Sherif, 1988). Without the vote, people do not have to pick a side and stick with it; thus, the action of entering the polling booth serves to make group boundaries clearer by compelling people to choose a camp. Research on the 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK has shown that the act of choosing to vote 'Remain' or 'Leave' led to the emergence of new identities on the basis of this choice (Hobolt et al., 2021; Hobolt & Tilley, 2021; Tilley & Hobolt, 2023) as well as a strengthening of existing European identities (Sczepanski, 2023).

The third contextual factor is that of *issue alignment*. Most issue-based conflicts are absorbed by partisanship. If an issue fits neatly with existing patterns of partisan identification, there is less need for people to form a separate identity based on that issue. Instead, a salient issue conflict can intensify partisan affective polarization. Hence, the final factor that shapes the degree of issue-based affective polarization is issue alignment with existing partisan identities. Issues that cannot be neatly absorbed into existing partisan identities are more likely to bring about issue-based affective polarization. These are unlikely to be issues that align with the dominant left-right dimension of contestation (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). For example, take social class identities and the associated inter-class conflict over redistribution. This could form the basis of a salient political identity as it involves high issue contestation (a salient issue and clearly defined groups) and individual expressive behavior to some extent (perhaps via unions or small business associations). Yet, this issue was absorbed within the existing political party system, and even helped create the current party system, many years ago. Of course, in contexts where there are high levels of partisan affective polarization – such as between Democrats and Republicans in the US (Iyengar et al., 2019) – partisans are also likely to be highly polarized on particular issues. In the American case, those issues include abortion, immigration, and climate change, which are salient and highly contested. Yet, as long as these issues broadly align with the partisan divide and identity, they are more likely to strengthen existing partisan affective polarization rather than be the source of entirely separate issue-based identities and affective polarization.

EXAMPLES OF ISSUE-BASED AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

As discussed above, issue-based identities are social identities based on people belonging to a group who share opinions on a specific political issue. Issue-based affective polarization can occur when such identities are sufficiently salient and polarized that people develop a strong sense of both in-group affinity and out-group animosity. We argue that this is more likely when there are high levels of issue contestation, when there is issue expression via behavioral engagement, and when the issue is unaligned with partisanship. In this section, we discuss some recent examples that illustrate the influence of these three factors on issue-based

affective polarization. This is by no means an exhaustive list of issue-based affective polarization, but are examples for which there is a body of research.

We start with the issue of secessionism. This has often been associated with intense inter-group conflict, especially in the context of independence movements in Quebec, Scotland, and Catalonia. The issue of secession can effectively polarize along both policy and ethnic group lines, even in the case of non-violent disputes (Burg, 2015; Balcells & Kuo, 2023; Lecours, 2018; Rodon, 2022; Torcal & Comellas, 2022). Issues related to territorial demands are unsurprisingly ones that can generate strong in-group identities, as they are often rooted in pre-existing social categories (e.g., ethnicity and language) with relatively clear group-based boundaries (Huddy, 2001). Such disputes tend to have a zero-sum character (either the nation gains independence, or it does not), which adds to the intensity of the inter-group conflict. Contestation is thus often high. Moreover, political events – specifically referendums – have played an important role in crystallizing self-categorization into distinct political camps through the behavior of voting (Lecours, 2018; Fieldhouse & Prosser, 2018). Fieldhouse and Prosser (2018), for example, demonstrate how the Scottish independence referendum in 2014 was not only highly salient and socially significant, but also compelled self-categorization into Yes- or No-sayers. It also cut across existing partisan affiliations. This led Yes-voting Labour supporters to regard other Labour voters as the out-group (unionists) while SNP supporters were viewed as the in-group (nationalists). In other words, the referendum served to shift the primary social identity of voters from one defined by party (SNP versus Labour) to a new basis of self-categorization based on the issue of Scottish independence (nationalist versus unionist).

Rodon (2022) details a similar process in the case of Catalan independence. The 2017 Catalan referendum on independence polarized territorial identities, creating a dispute between those who wanted independence and those who opposed it. Again, this issue-based affective polarization cut across existing partisan divisions and resulted in high levels of affective polarization in Catalonia between pro- and anti-independence advocates (Rodon, 2022; Balcells & Kuo, 2023). Moreover, as Balcells and Kuo (2023, p. 616) point out, ‘affect and stereotyping based on territorial views remains greater than towards language groups.’ That is, when it comes to affective polarization, the new issue-based identities trump the older language-based groups.

The most prominent recent example of issue-based polarization linked to territorial conflict emerged in the context of the 2016 UK referendum on membership of the EU. New identities arose in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, as people began to identify as ‘Leavers’ and ‘Remainers’. Brexit identities fit the three classic elements of social identities: awareness, norms, and affect. There was group awareness as the Leave and Remain identities were highly prevalent and cut across traditional party lines (Bentall et al., 2024; Hobolt et al., 2021; Hobolt & Tilley, 2022; Kenny et al., 2023; Murray et al., 2017). There were also clear group norms: Tilley and Hobolt (2023) show that people perceive distinct norms around the two identity groups and, moreover, desire to fit their own views with those norms. Finally, there was positive affect towards the in-group. On average, people felt more strongly associated with their Brexit identity than they did with their partisan identity (Hobolt et al., 2021). Indeed, Brexit identities even predict emotional distress when people are confronted with events negative to their side (Bentall et al., 2024).

Ultimately, these Brexit identities generated substantial affective polarization with clear evidence of associated stereotyping, discrimination, and various evaluative biases. Hobolt et

al. (2021) show these effects clearly. Most Leavers and Remainers describe people on their own side as honest and intelligent, whereas they are more likely to describe people on the other side as selfish, hypocritical, and close-minded. Leavers and Remainers are also willing to discriminate when hypothetically choosing a lodger or deciding on a non-political appointment to the BBC. Perhaps most strikingly, Brexit identities form a lens through which people see the economic world. Mirroring the standard partisan biases that affect people's economic perceptions, Remainers are much more likely to think that the economy performed well compared to Leavers. In all three cases, these effects are as big, or bigger, than those for partisanship.

Whether Brexit or otherwise, these are all examples of identities that are rooted in existing territorial conflicts (between the state and sub-state nations, or between the nation and the supranational entity), but have gained increased salience, in part, due to political events.² In each of these cases, there are clear foundations to group membership that inform high levels of issue contestation, but many issue-based identities are not rooted in existing social categories. Rather, the identities are linked to more narrowly-based policy issues. These can still become the basis of a social identity, as long as contestation and expression create those groups and partisan alignment does not undermine them. One example of this is the issue of gun control in the US which has created social identities and affective polarization (Kleck et al., 2009; Lacombe, 2019; Lacombe et al., 2019). Lacombe (2019) argues that gun ownership has emerged as a social identity as a result of gun owners' political engagement via the National Rifle Association (NRA). Not surprisingly, this identity overlaps with partisan identities since gun owners are more likely to be Republican. However, Lacombe et al. (2019) show that a distinct social identity exists around gun ownership, even when accounting for partisan identity, which is related to behavioral engagement through participation in hunting and sport shooting.

Most recently, we saw issue-based affective polarization emerge during the COVID-19 pandemic. The debate surrounding COVID-19 vaccines provided the basis for identity-based affective polarization, with positive social identities and negative out-group stereotyping developing around support for, or opposition to, mass vaccination. There is good evidence for both the existence of these vaccination identities and the prevalence of discriminatory attitudes by the vaccinated towards the unvaccinated (Maciuszek et al., 2021; Graso et al., 2024; Bor et al., 2023). Henkel et al. (2023) also show high levels of polarization between the vaccinated and unvaccinated and argue that vaccination status explains polarizing attitudes and behaviors. Perhaps the most compelling evidence comes from Wagner and Eberl (forthcoming), who detail how vaccination identities, based on the issue of the mass vaccination program, led to the classic stereotyping and prejudice that we expect from affective polarization. This recent example of issue-based affective polarization demonstrates that the combination of clear inter-group comparisons and contestation (vaccinated vs. not vaccinated) in a high salience context (a global pandemic) and individual behavioral commitments (the choice to be vaccinated or not) can lead to issue-based affective polarization. In this case, the identities have been relatively short-lived as the salience has ebbed in response to the end of the pandemic and, in some countries such as the US, the way the issue has been absorbed into the party system.

These case studies illustrate that a wide range of issues can become the basis of affectively polarized identities. Yet, they also indicate the importance of the scope conditions outlined in the previous section to explain both the emergence and the (lack of) stability of such identity conflicts.

SUMMARY AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this chapter, we have focused on affective polarization that is rooted in political identities defined by shared opinions on a specific political issue: issue-based affective polarization. Building on social identity and self-categorization theory, we conceptualize issue-based social identities as ones where people define themselves in terms of their shared opinions. In some instances, such issue-based identities can also become affectively polarized. Although measurement of affective polarization in these circumstances can be more difficult, once people begin to label themselves, and others, we can use very similar concepts and measures developed in relation to partisanship. We argue that issue-based affective polarization is more likely to occur when inter-group comparisons are salient and highly contested, when people express their in-group membership via political participation linked to the cause, and when the issue is one that is not easily absorbed by partisanship. We show that issue-based identities can be rooted in existing social identities that are made politically salient through political events, such as referendums, or can emerge in response to individual decisions (e.g., to be inoculated) in the context of dramatic events (e.g., a global pandemic).

The examples of issue-based identities provided in this chapter illustrate the range of political topics that can potentially become affectively polarized, ranging from the personal (the decision to be inoculated or own a gun) to the collective (secessionism or Euroscepticism). As partisan identities weaken and party systems fragment across Western democracies, such issue-based affective polarization has the potential to become more prominent (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). Any issue can, in principle become the basis of issue-based affective polarization. However, one likely candidate for issue-based affective polarization is climate change. Climate change and associated policies are increasingly salient and may become more so if dramatic weather events become more frequent. It is also a high-stakes issue where those who favor radical solutions perceive it to be an existential matter and those on the other side oppose radical measures that affect current everyday life. This is fertile ground for inter-group conflict (Tyagi et al., 2020; Sprengholz et al., 2023). Nonetheless, the degree to which climate change becomes a distinct source of affective polarization will depend on whether it is absorbed by existing partisan identities. Ultimately, the potential for this issue or other issues to become affectively polarized thus still depends on the conditions outlined in this chapter: the degree of inter-group conflict stemming from issue contestation, individual behavioral expression related to the issue, and the degree of alignment with existing political identities.

NOTES

1. One related debate in the political science literature is whether economic or cultural issues are more likely to cause affective *partisan* polarization. For example, Gidron et al. (2020, p. 70) argue that ‘affective polarization intensifies within countries during periods when party elites clash more sharply over cultural debates ... while we detect no comparable relationship between affective polarization and elite economic disputes.’ This explanation is thus a form of context, but a context that is less related to individual issue-based identities.

2. In the case of Brexit, Hahm et al. (2023, p. 722) show that ‘while the impact of European identity does not compare with partisanship,’ there are important underlying social identities based on European integration in other EU countries.

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