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Polarization on Social Media and Beyond: A Comparative Study of how Social Media Influence Inter-Group Attitudes

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To my parents, whose support gave me the courage to start a PhD and to my grandmother, who inadvertently explained in-group favoritism to me by asking "which ones are ours" [sic] all the time I was watching a football match on TV.

Abstract

Digital media have changed the way we think about politics. The social media age has brought a new understanding of political participation: individuals now engage in politics by receiving, sharing, interacting with, and commenting on online political information. It has demonstrated beneficial consequences: broader accessibility of political participation, easiness of staying up to date about political developments, and facilitated interpersonal communication. However, the division into groups of like-minded individuals has been regarded as one of the risks of online communication. Receiving and sharing political information in such groups can be associated with a growing polarization of the public. Against this background, we also observe that the electorate has increasingly sorted itself along the party lines by other, presumably non-political characteristics, such as ethnicity.

This dissertation explores whether using social media is associated with changes in polarization, controlling for confounding factors such as the frequency of cross-cutting discussions, contact with out-groups, political ideology, and demographic indicators. Building upon the logic of group identity, it draws parallels between affective polarization and ethnic polarization, or ethnocentrism. Employing Gordon Allport's contact theory as the main framework, the dissertation argues that more frequent contact between political and ethnic in-groups and out-groups is associated with improved attitudes or lower polarization. By focusing on the cases of the United States, Germany, and Georgia, it also attempts to pave the way for future research to explore country-level differences despite significant hurdles associated with data availability and comparability.

Kurzfassung

Digitale Medien haben unser Denken über Politik verändert. Das Zeitalter der sozialen Medien hat ein neues Verständnis von politischer Partizipation hervorgebracht: Einzelpersonen engagieren sich jetzt in der Politik, indem sie politische Online-Informationen empfangen, teilen, mit ihnen interagieren und sie kommentieren. Diese Entwicklung hat positive Auswirkungen gezeigt: breitere Zugänglichkeit der politischen Partizipation, einfache Möglichkeit, sich über politische Entwicklungen auf dem Laufenden zu halten und erleichterte zwischenmenschliche Kommunikation. Allerdings gilt die Aufteilung in Gruppen von Gleichgesinnten als eines der Risiken der Online-Kommunikation. Das Empfangen und Teilen politischer Informationen in solchen Gruppen können mit einer wachsenden Polarisierung der Öffentlichkeit einhergehen. Vor diesem Hintergrund beobachten wir auch eine soziale Sortierung der Wählerschaft zunehmend nach anderen, vermutlich unpolitischen Merkmalen wie der ethnischen Zugehörigkeit.

Diese Dissertation untersucht, ob die Nutzung sozialer Medien mit Veränderungen der Polarisierung verbunden ist. Insbesondere Störfaktoren wie die Häufigkeit von Querschnittsdiskussionen, Kontakt mit Fremdgruppen, politische Ideologie und demografische Indikatoren werden berücksichtigt. Aufbauend auf der Logik der Gruppenidentität zieht diese Arbeit Parallelen zwischen affektiver Polarisierung und ethnischer Polarisierung bzw. Ethnozentrismus. Die Kontakttheorie nach Gordon Allport bildet den Hauptrahmen der Dissertation. Nach dieser Argumentation ist ein häufigerer Kontakt zwischen politischen und ethnischen Eigen- und Fremdgruppen mit positiveren Einstellungen bzw. geringerer Polarisierung verbunden. Die empirischen Untersuchungen fokussieren sich auf die Fälle der Vereinigten Staaten, Deutschland und Georgien. Dieses Vorgehen verfolgt das Ziel, den Weg für zukünftige Forschungen zu ebnen, um Unterschiede auf Länderebene trotz erheblicher Hürden im Zusammenhang mit der Verfügbarkeit und Vergleichbarkeit von Daten zu untersuchen.

Contents

1. Introduction

Aristotle suggested that many minds working together would benefit body politics, as each individual brings their share of goodness and moral prudence (Aristotle, 1905). Jürgen Habermas pointed out that a public, inclusive, and sincere rational discourse, which ensures equal communication rights for participants, should result in a deliberative space where better arguments persist (Habermas, 2015). Healthy political deliberation is a cornerstone of democracy. But what happens when the strength of arguments faces the hurdle of group identity?

A society is composed of numerous cross-cutting identities, with personal characteristics and political preferences varying greatly on an individual level, so it is only natural to expect disagreements between individuals and between groups. However, due to the emotional underpinnings of group identities, the expectation that inter-group discussion (under the optimal conditions pointed out by Habermas) brings one closer to the truth must be questioned. One would probably be familiar with the difficulty of maintaining the conditions such as inclusiveness and sincerity (at times, even rationality) if they have observed or taken part in political discussions on social media.

In its 2022 report about freedom in the world titled "The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule," Freedom House notes that the share of the world's population living in free environments has fallen as authoritarian practices proliferate. The share of people living in free environments has continuously declined from 46% in 2005 to 20.3% in 2021 (Freedom House, 2022). Against this background, the proportion of those who use social media for news has been increasing at least over the past seven years.

Digital media, such as social media and online media, have often become scapegoats regarding the challenges in deliberative democracies, broadly, and to the political polarization of the voters, particularly. The argument against digital media is that they make it easier to isolate oneself from diverging political opinions, thereby weakening our ability to argue with people that disagree with us. The main characteristic of social media or social networking sites is that they allow politically like-minded individuals to find one another. In this environment, citizens are only exposed to information that reinforces their political views and remain isolated from other individuals with opposing views, partly due to the filtering effects of ranking algorithms that generate so-called filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2018). Such filtering has paved the way to affective polarization, a group identity-based sub-type of polarization, which is defined as the tendency of people identifying themselves with one or the other party to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

Political polarization can create challenges for democratic states: it may lead to a democratic

breakdown, corruption, and even economic decline (Brown, Touchton, & Whitford, 2011; Frye, 2002). Despite the positive political consequences of exposure to the same kind of information that matches one's beliefs, such as enhancing attitude strength and mobilizing citizens in political activities, avoiding political differences and ignoring opinion-challenging information may hurt democracy. Suppose individuals expose themselves only to similar points of view and avoid contrasting information and perspectives. In that case, they are less likely to be tolerant of challenging viewpoints (Mutz, 2002), which may ultimately increase the fragmentation and polarization of the society (Kim, 2011; Sunstein, 2007). Confirmation bias and belief perseverance help protect the consistency of thought and reduce the vulnerability towards errors (Nickerson, 1998), but they may have adverse effects on the state of democracy.

On the other hand, digital media provide a hitherto unprecedented window of opportunity for healthy political deliberation. A systematic review of the literature on digital media and democracy showed both beneficial and detrimental effects of the former. While digital media use was associated with declining political trust, increasing populism, and growing polarization, it also correlated with higher political participation and information consumption (Lorenz-Spreen, Oswald, Lewandowsky, & Hertwig, 2022). Digital media (especially social media) create an entirely new, online level of political participation, which implies that citizens both receive and provide political information through online political activities and discussions (Theocharis, 2015). Provided that the discussants, as well as the observers or readers, show respect towards each other and offer genuine, rational arguments, social media should be the primary means of strengthening deliberative democracy. Digital media lower the costs of exchanging messages, making it easier for everyone to participate in politics with simply an electronic device with an Internet connection.

Any form of group membership triggers positive feelings for the in-group and negative out-group evaluations (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). For example, when we identify with a political party, we instinctively divide the world into an in-group (our party) and an out-group (the opposing party or out-party). While this description applies to affective polarization, the same goes for another type of polarization, which has longer roots than the political one. I refer to it as ethnic polarization and define it as the disposition of humans to associate themselves with those people who are ethnically similar to them. Ethnic polarization is based on ethnocentrism: a generalized negative predisposition towards ethnic out-groups and a positive predisposition towards ethnic in-group (Hooghe, 2008).

According to sociopsychological belief congruence theory, there is "a natural tendency for people to associate with, socialize with and be more comfortable with others having similar belief systems" (Delhey & Newton, 2005). Individuals high in ethnocentrism tend to derogate any out-group regardless of contact and in the absence of group competition (Hartley, 1946). While it is not as widely discussed as political polarization, the destructive potential of inter-ethnic conflicts can go way beyond that of political polarization. Political polarization exists mainly in the realm of parliamentary politics. It only recently came under scrutiny in the context of affective polarization of the two opposing political camps, political elites and voters

alike. Ethnic polarization, on the other hand, can be rooted in the mentality of individuals: in prejudices, stereotypes, and implicit or explicit behaviors.

Some of the most widely used explanations of political polarization include party positions (König, Marbach, & Osnabrügge, 2013), populism (Schulze, Mauk, & Linde, 2020), economy (Barber & McCarty, 2015), and media (Prior, 2013). Ethnic polarization or ethnocentrism, on the other hand, is usually associated with an authoritarian personality type (Perreault & Bourhis, 1999), conservatism (Cunningham, Nezlek, & Banaji, 2004), and religion (Altemeyer, 1998). Since the emergence of Web 2.0, research interest in how social media could affect political processes has started to grow. While the role of social media on political/affective polarization has received much attention, a similar approach has only found limited use for ethnic polarization. Both of these phenomena are, in principle, based on favoring the in-group and excluding the out-group. Therefore, the following question arises. Could social media use exacerbate the polarization process by facilitating the creation of like-minded (affective polarization) or ethnically homogeneous (ethnic polarization) groups of individuals, or do they possess potential to bridge the existing cleavages by simplifying communication and making it more accessible? A research question, if worded as in the previous sentence, would require experimental evidence to establish causality. Due to only having access to survey data, this dissertation intends to shed light on this puzzle by showing statistical correlations.

Extant literature has been devoted to the challenges posed by social media use to the civility of political communication (Theocharis, Barberá, Fazekas, & Popa, 2020), inter-group attitudes of political groups (Bail, Argyle, Brown, et al., 2018), or even real-life violent attacks (Müller & Schwarz, 2018). However, there is still no agreement on whether using social media harbors better or worse attitudes towards political out-groups, and even less is known about the effect of social media on the attitudes towards ethnic out-groups. While this is not the first study that looks at this topic, it is, to my knowledge, the first one to employ the same approach for both political and ethnic polarization. Therefore, the research question is formulated as follows:

Is there more polarization on or outside of social media?

Based on diverse survey data, the given dissertation investigates the correlation between social media use and (affective and ethnic) polarization levels. Bearing in mind that polarization is a phenomenon usually studied in the context of consolidated democracies, in general, and the United States, in particular, I embark on a comparative approach to test whether social media users are more/less polarized in three countries: the United States (a two-party democracy), Germany (a multi-party democracy), and Georgia (a hybrid regime). Applying the U.S.-tested theory to two other countries requires contextual knowledge, which I attempt to demonstrate in the data and theory sections and subsequent country-specific empirical chapters. Due to how understudied the Georgian case is and how different the German case is from the American one, I do not aim to conduct a full-fledged comparative analysis. Instead, I apply the same research design to the three cases and explore them as individual case studies. In doing so, I have

three objectives: (1) test the established theories that have been developed in a U.S.-centric research field on a multi-party democracy and a hybrid regime, (2) create a soil for future research on the similarities between affective and ethnic polarization, as well as (3) contribute to further research of a significantly understudied Georgian case by showing that reliable data are available.

The results show a different picture in the three countries regarding the effect of social media on political polarization, with significantly lower levels of polarization on Twitter in the United States, compared to Facebook. In addition, some important findings are made pertaining the role of partisan media, as having biased media diet correlated with higher polarization in countries with highly polarized media systems: the United States and Georgia. Finally, contact with ethnic out-groups is correlated with better out-group attitudes in all three countries, lending support to contact theory.

2. Literature review

2.1. Political polarization

In the last decade, political polarization emerged as a pressing issue in many democratic countries. Anti-system, radical, and often populist parties, both from left and right, have received considerable attention in the United Kingdom (Evans & Mellon, 2019), Germany (Berbuir, Lewandowsky, & Siri, 2015), France (Stockemer, 2017), Italy, Spain, and Greece (Segatti & Capuzzi, 2016). Anti-system parties in the above countries are splitting the public across various dimensions. Still, the most notable dimensions include immigration (National Rally, UKIP, AfD), economy (Podemos, Syriza), or elites (Five Star Movement). Such divisive parties have had success not just in the Western European democracies, but in post-socialist countries, such as Hungary (Vegetti, 2019), Poland (Tworzecki, 2019), the Czech Republic (Vachudova, 2019), and Georgia (Gilbreath & Turmanidze, 2020), with the emphasis on communist past being a notable difference from the Western European democracies (Baylis, 2012).

In the United States, Democrats are aligned with identities such as liberal, secular, urban, low-income, Hispanic, and black. At the same time, Republicans are usually conservative, middle-class or wealthy, rural, churchgoing, and white. These identities are increasingly aligned so that fewer identities affiliated with either party are also associated with the other side, unlike anytime else in the post-WW2 history (Mason, 2018). This process of social sorting in the United States is closely connected to political polarization and has strong affective rather than ideological origins.

Political polarization in the United States between 1974 and 2004 has encompassed six main points of divergence between the Republican and Democratic parties: health insurance, defense spending, guaranteed jobs, government aid to minorities, government spending and services, and abortion (Levendusky, 2009). In Western Europe, polarization has occurred on issues such as immigration (Holzberg, Kolbe, & Zaborowski, 2018), redistribution of income (Winkler, 2019), and European integration (Wendler, 2014). However, due to the predominance of multi-party systems and proportional representation, polarization has been less pronounced there than in the United States (Bernabel, 2015; Urman & Katz, 2020). In former Eastern Bloc countries, polarization patterns resemble those of the Western democracies, with a particular emphasis on winners and losers of the post-socialist shift to a market economy (Newton & van Deth, 2016, p. 183). Differences between the Western and Eastern European democracies are more pronounced in terms of ethnic polarization or attitudes towards minority

rights (Evans & Need, 2002).

Political polarization is an elusive concept to define. Its overhasty acceptance by news media and academics has contributed to considerable carelessness in applying this concept (Esteban & Schneider, 2008). Searching for the roots of the concept, one might argue that Benjamin Disraeli, who coined the term "two nations" to describe the English social structure of his time, came closest to describing the modern type of political polarization (Disraeli, 2017). Morton Deutsch's account of the Marxian theory is one of the earliest mentions of the term polarization in a political context:

> "As the struggle proceeds, 'the whole society breaks up more and more into two hostile camps, two great, directly antagonistic classes: bourgeoisie and proletariat.' The classes polarize, so that they become internally more homogeneous and more and more sharply distinguished from one another in wealth and power" (Deutsch, 1971).

The most widely accepted academic definition of political polarization was formulated in 1990s. Esteban and Ray (1994) define polarization as clustering of individuals into similar groups so that the different groups have very dissimilar attributes. It results from a within-group identity and across-group alienation. The authors define three main features of a polarized distribution:

1. There must be a high degree of homogeneity within each group

2. There must be a high degree of heterogeneity across groups

3. There must be a small number of significantly sized groups. In particular, groups of insignificant size (e.g., isolated individuals) carry little weight.

A two-party system with two relatively equal poles with very similar attitudes within poles and very dissimilar attitudes across poles is a perfect example of polarization. Any imbalance in positions or sizes of the poles could increase or decrease polarization, and result in a more complex, ambiguous picture, such as in multi-party systems.

While the definition of political polarization has been pinned down to a certain extent, it is more difficult to come up with a valid measurement. Explaining polarization in a comparative perspective is the easiest way of measuring it. If one were to say which division would be more polarized (the one with two opposing camps that hold opposite opinions or with the opinions distributed more evenly among the population), it would be easy enough to indicate that the first scenario describes a more polarized environment than the latter. However, political polarization does not have a single quantifiable measure precisely because of the diversity of party systems or regime types. This diversity should be elaborated upon, not discarded.

A taxonomic problem while measuring political polarization is faced once an attempt to differentiate party polarization from voter polarization is made. Political polarization is a term

that should be, at least semantically, a combination of party and voter polarization because politics in democracies is not "created" only by political parties, but by the electorate as well (De Mesquita, Smith, Morrow, & Siverson, 2005). In one of the earliest pieces on polarization, Alan Abramowitz argued that the electorate in the United States was polarized and that this polarization was shaped by American policy attitudes, as well as political interest and participation, with the latter two facilitating the mass polarization (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008). Scholars critical of Ambramowitz's view argued that the polarization of the electorate was simply shaped by the polarization of the elite, while the electorate sorted itself along the lines of party politics (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). It is yet to be established whether the origins of political polarization lie merely in elites or the voters are inherently polarized, but both sides have evidence from real world. The recent literature in political communication, however, shows that polarization is usually understood as a combination of the two. Hence, where political parties and the relative distances between their policy positions are concerned, political communication scholarship uses terms such as elite/party polarization. Similar measure for the electorate has been labeled mass/voter polarization. Political polarization serves as an umbrella term for the two above. A more recent trend regarding mass polarization involves studying the role of group identity and measuring not what voters believe or stand for but how they *feel* towards their own and the opposing party. This has been labeled *affective polarization*. In what follows, I first discuss elite polarization before moving to affective polarization, which will be the primary dependent variable for the subsequent political polarization analysis.

2.1.1. Elite polarization

Before moving to affective polarization, it is crucial to point out the role of elite polarization. While the existence of different opinions in public is a norm, politics, in general, and political polarization of the elites (politicians, parties, legislators) adds another layer of disagreement, which is purely party identity-based. Rich evidence of group polarization based on party identity (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2016; S. W. Webster & Abramowitz, 2017) indicates that elite polarization may translate to individual affective polarization. This can happen via substantive arguments or partisan cues (J. N. Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013). Substantive arguments, which I interpret as ideological beliefs about public policy issues, have been found to have a direct impact on affective polarization. More ideological divergence is associated with a higher affective polarization on an individual level (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016) and with a higher out-group dislike (Bougher, 2017). Partisan cues, such as the signals indicating that someone you are interacting with is an out-party supporter, have also been found to aggravate affective polarization (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, et al., 2019). Longitudinal analysis of survey data has also showed that partisans respond to increasing levels of elite polarization by expressing higher levels of affective polarization (Banda & Cluverius, 2018).

The conventional definition of elite polarization includes two components: the ideological

distance between the parties and the ideological homogeneity of each party. The higher the distance between (Levendusky, 2010) and the homogeneity within the parties (Rehm & Reilly, 2010), the higher the polarization. Unlike mass polarization, ideological positions play a more crucial role in evaluating the relative positions of elected officials than individual features such as race, education, or religious affiliation.

The most reliable measurement is mapping the actions of elected officials. Network maps are one of the most popular ways of visualizing elite polarization. In the context of U.S. politics, such network maps are based on congressional voting records, in which House representatives are the nodes and shared roll call votes between pairs of representatives are the edges (Figure 2.1) (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). The single most known academic standard of measuring party positions is DW-NOMINATE (also known as Voteview) which leverages the voting behavior of members of U.S. Congress to quantitatively estimate their locations on the political spectrum between -1 and 1, where the former means an extremely liberal position and the latter stands for an extremely conservative one (Knoedler, 2008). Such a measure of polarization has demonstrated an increasing gap between the Democrats and the Republicans since 1967 (Figure 2.2).

Another measure of ideological polarization among the elites is the left-right ideological positioning of the parties and their members. It aligns with the expectations that party politics are structured along a left-right ideological dimension (Downs, 1957). Evidence of an ideological divide was found in the United States Congress already in the 1990s, with roots going back to the early 1980s (Abramowitz & Saunders, 1998). Manifesto Project, which provides parties' positions on various dimensions derived from a content analysis of parties' electoral manifestos from 1945 onward, is the most used resource in this regard. In addition, Dalton developed a unique formula for calculating political polarization across different political systems and independent of how many parties are in the legislative body. It has a value of zero when all parties occupy the same position on the left-right scale and ten when all the parties are split between the two extremes of the scale (Dalton, 2008). Other attempts to measure elite polarization across different countries and periods also adopt the left-right ideological positioning from Manifesto Project as a universal measure but warn about country-specific biases, such as parties appearing less/more extreme than they are (Franzmann & Kaiser, 2006; König, Marbach, & Osnabrügge, 2013). Manifesto Project also allows for measuring polarization around various issues, but the polarization on the left-right spectrum is an aggregate measure combining parties' stances on the said issues.

A similar but methodologically distinct measurement is the perceived elite polarization, which measures the position of parties and their supporters on a left-right or any other issue-based scale, such as liberal and conservative, pro-abortion and anti-abortion, etc. *according to the voters* (Lelkes, 2016). These perceptions have essential influences on emotional evaluations of the parties (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016a) and on people's motivation to exaggerate their perception of party differences for reasons related to identity affirmation (Ahler, 2014; Bullock, Gerber, Hill, & Huber, 2015; Prior, Sood, & Khanna, 2015). Settle combines per-
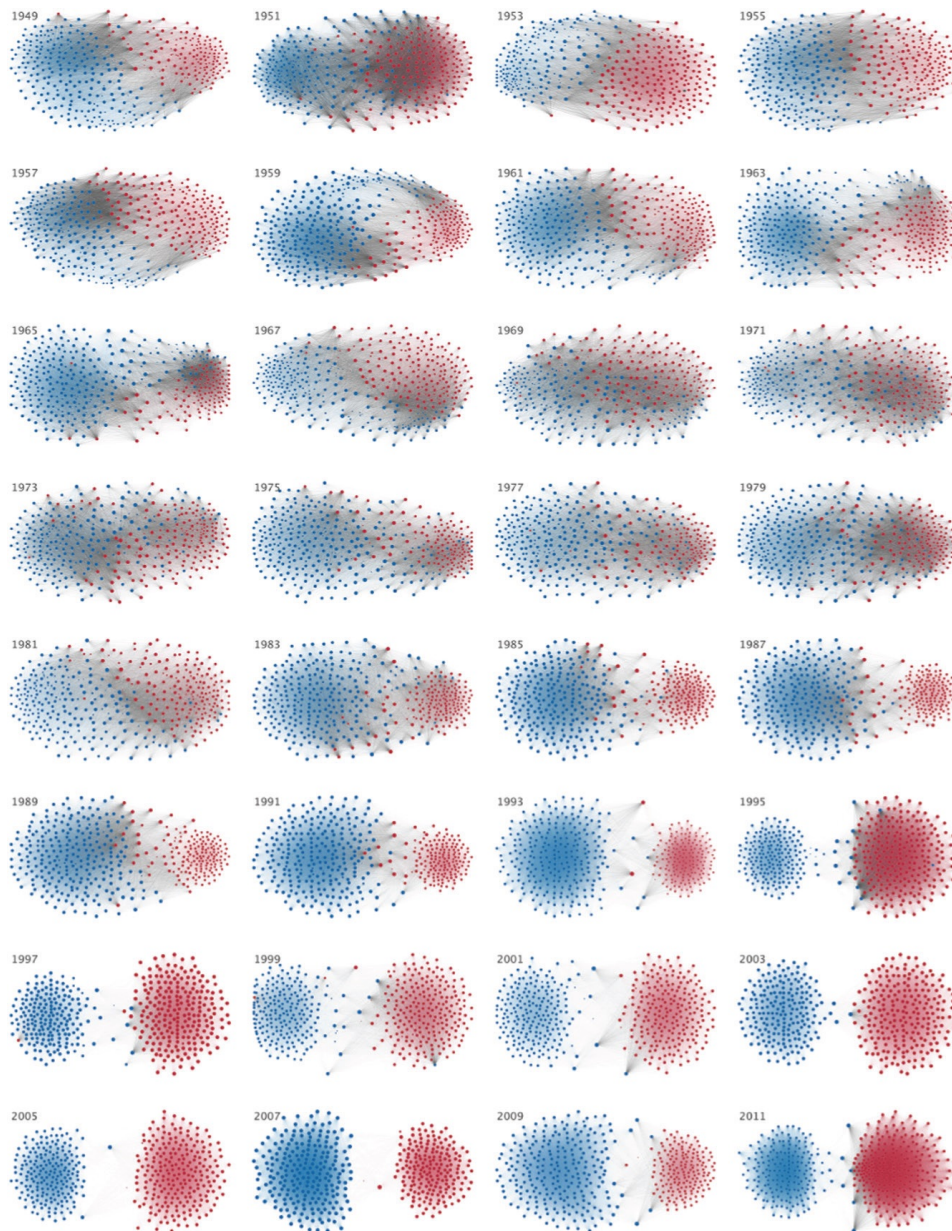
Figure 2.1.: Partisanship in voting patterns in the U.S. House of Representatives, 1949–2011 (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018)
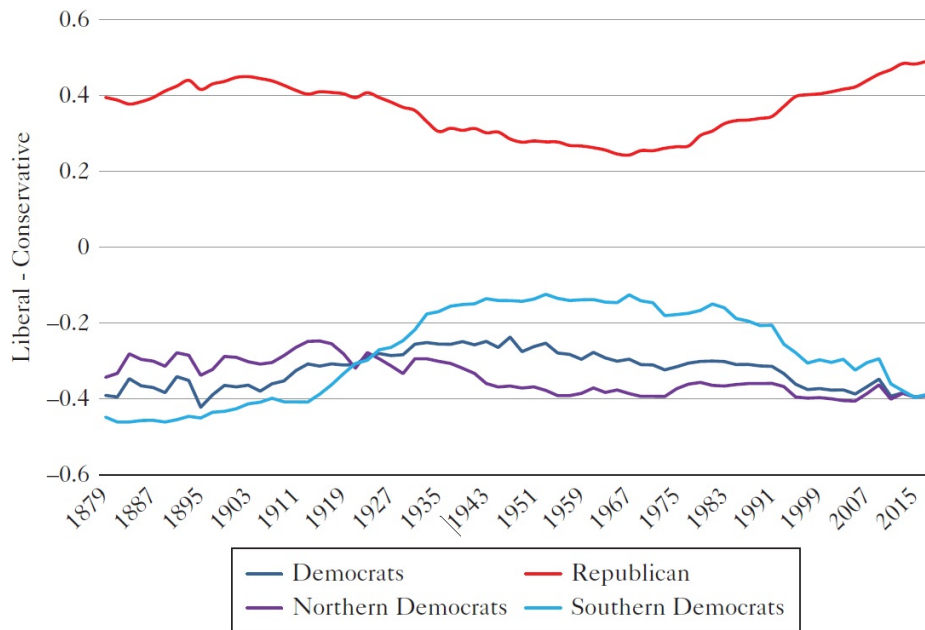
Figure 2.2.: Polarization in the U.S. Congress by party, 1879–2015 (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018)

ceived polarization and affective polarization (discussed below) under an umbrella term, psychological polarization. She also adds that perceived polarization is often based on Americans having an exaggerated perception of the distance between Democrats and Republicans on any issue, while they are not that far apart (Settle, 2018).

2.1.2. Affective polarization

Many discussions are focused on understanding the causes and consequences of elite polarization, with considerable attention paid to whether the citizens have polarized, too. Political communication scholars have found overwhelming evidence that elite polarization positively affects mass polarization (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Hetherington, 2001). However, more recent evidence indicates that the mechanism behind mass polarization is more psychological than ideological. While ideological differences between individuals exist, and there is a certain extent of polarization along the ideological lines, a more pronounced and problematic type of polarization is an affective one. Due to motivated reasoning, partisan individuals tend to follow their in-party with confidence, notwithstanding the strength of the argument that their or their opposing party makes (J. N. Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). In so doing, the partisan individuals meet the second trait of polarization by Esteban and Ray, the degree of homogeneity within each group.

Empirical evidence shows that the polarization in the United States has not been restricted to elites only. The electorate has seen an increasing polarization (Figure 2.3). However, the number of independents has also increased. The increasing negative polarization can explain this. Partisan identities have become more closely aligned with social, cultural and ideological divisions in American society. Party supporters including leaning independents have developed increasingly negative feelings about the opposing party and its candidates (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016). This process has been abated in the 2010s by the increased access to the Internet and social media, which facilitates homophily, as it allows people to consume information and affiliate themselves with others based on shared values and views and exclude those who do not agree to their opinions (Kelly, Fisher, & Smith, 2005).

Democrats and Republicans More Ideologically Divided than in the Past
Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values

Source: 2014 Political Polarization in the American Public
Notes: Ideological consistency based on a scale of 10 political values questions (see Appendix A). The blue area in this chart represents the ideological distribution of Democrats; the red area of Republicans. The overlap of these two distributions is shaded purple. Republicans include Republican-leaning independents; Democrats include Democratic-leaning independents (see Appendix B).
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 2.3.: Distribution of Democrats and Republicans on a 10-item scale of political values

The origin of the current sorting of the American electorate across party lines can be dated back to the gradual process of re-mapping the electoral map, underpinned by political discord on issues of race and segregation. The process began with the 13th amendment, continued with the New Deal, initiated by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933, and ended with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Following these gradual transformations, most of the southern states, also known as the Deep South, abandoned the Democratic Party and gradually switched their support to the Republican Party. In contrast, the Democrat support shifted to the northern states and the black voters. The emergence of the political polarization narrative in the American public can already be seen in the early 1990s. It coincided with the Democratic Party losing control of the House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years, the emergence of a cluster of economically insecure "angry white males" who voiced their protest against the recent developments concerning abortion, affirmative action, gay rights, gun control, and other cultural develop-

ments that, according to other groups within society, progressives, were undergoing progress in line with their modern, secular, relativistic view of morality (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). The polarization of the public closely coincided with the ongoing social sorting. It became even more evident after the 2000 and 2004 election cycles, when certain political commentators labeled the blue and red states on the presidential election results map as "the United States of Canada", as democrat-voting states were jokingly merged with Canada to symbolize the secularity and progressiveness, and "Jesusland", referring to the high rate of religiousness in the republican-voting states (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). Since then, the American public has been divided mainly along the conservative-progressive lines, with each new election demonstrating these differences and reaffirming the increasing gap between a median democrat and a median republican (Pew Research Center, 2014). One of the most notable recent examples of evident mass polarization is the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, the outcome of which demonstrated the division along the lines of the following identities: (1) white, working class, masculinist, and conservative residents in primarily rural areas that support a nativist version of Americanism and reject globalization and (2) the rest, seen by the former as a group of urban, educated people, politicians, and business elites (Oberhauser, Krier, & Kusow, 2019). While the two groups were not mutually exclusive, the general picture resembled a bipolar distribution, with the first group supporting the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, and the second group supporting the Democrat candidate, Hillary Clinton (Smith & Hanley, 2018).

Taking into account the sorting of American voters across racial, religious, and other group identities in the last 50 years (Levendusky, 2009), the phenomenon of increasing animosity between partisan groups has been referred to as affective polarization (J. N. Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Mason, 2016). While the most accepted way of measuring elite polarization is comparing issue positions and mapping them on a left-right or any other spectrum, mass polarization has recently been studied more as an emotional phenomenon rather than a rational one. Notwithstanding the citizens' issue positions, party identification per se can drive angry and enthusiastic responses to political messages (Huddy, Mason, & Aarøe, 2015). Anger, in turn, can be a strong motivator for political action (Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, et al., 2011), as well as enthusiasm (Groenendyk & Banks, 2014). The prevalence of these two emotions in recent political developments has led to increased affective polarization in the American public, especially among those with strong partisan identities (Mason, 2016).

Self-report measures demonstrate that affective polarization in the United States increased between 1990 and 2016 (Figure 2.4) (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, et al., 2019). Moreover, a comparative analysis of nine OECD countries reviewing the most recent trends in affective polarization shows that affective polarization is still growing in the United States, both for the elites and the voters. Overall, the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Switzerland had an increase, while Australia, the United Kingdom, Norway, Sweden, and (West) Germany experienced a decrease in affective polarization between 1980 and 2019 (Boxell, Gentzkow, & Shapiro, 2020).

In the context of elite polarization, roll-call records in legislative bodies, as well as quan-
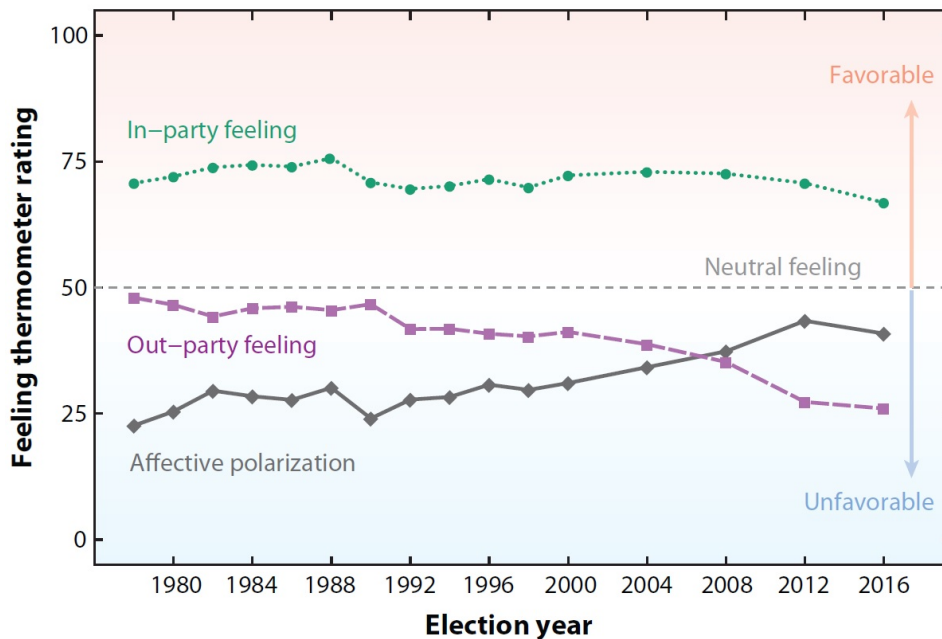
Figure 2.4.: Affective polarization in the United States (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, et al., 2019)

tified measurements such as Manifesto Project and DW-Nominate make it easier to compare positions of parties on different levels of cleavage, be it liberal-conservative, left-right, or any issue-based scale. However, the measurement is more complicated for affective polarization. Three of the most popular methods include (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, et al., 2019):

- **Self-report measures.** The most prominent example of a self-report measurement is a feeling thermometer. Measured on a 0-100 scale, where 0 indicates no sympathy whatsoever and 100 indicates the most positive attitude, it provides data on how positive one's attitudes towards a party, a candidate, or an idea are. Feeling thermometer scores from surveys are used in the given dissertation for the operationalization of affective polarization. Alternative measurements include trait ratings of party supporters, where the respondents are asked to characterize the members of their in-group and out-group with adjectives (Levendusky, 2018; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016b). A less obtrusive method is to ask respondents how comfortable they would feel together with members of the out-group in different social situations, such as their progeny marrying a member of the out-group (J. N. Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012) and selecting candidates for college scholarship (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

- **Implicit Association Test.** Building upon the criticism of the survey-based methods that are "reactive and susceptible to intentional exaggeration/suppression based on normative pressures", Iyengar and Westwood (2015) provide an alternative measure which, through

a series of tests, measures unconscious partisan bias. Their results showed that implicit bias is ingrained; approximately 70% of Democrats and Republicans show a bias in favor of their party.

- **Behavioral measures.** Behavioral experiments, such as the trust game or the dictator game demonstrated favorability towards co-partisans as compared to the members of the opposite group (Carlin & Love, 2013; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

While in two-party systems such as the United States, affective polarization is usually operationalized as the difference between respondent's scores given to the Democrat and Republican party on the 0-100 feeling thermometer (J. N. Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Phillips, 2022), measuring polarization in multi-party systems faces several pitfalls. Clear-cut division along ideological or any other lines only rarely takes place. Against this background, closeness to the party on a left-right political spectrum has traditionally been the main cue for European voters to determine the most preferred party, which can be motivated by economic considerations, identity/culture-based choice, or religion (Mair, 2009). Therefore, one way to measure mass ideological polarization in multi-party democracies would be to observe the difference between the voter placements on the left-right political spectrum. This would hint at the generalized level of mass polarization. On an individual level, a widely used proxy of polarization is political extremism, measured as the distance between the center of the political spectrum and the individual's self-placement (Barberá, 2014; Van Boven, Judd, & Sherman, 2012).

Three main self-report measures are used to gauge affective polarization in multi-party systems: two-party affective polarization (TPAP), weighted affective polarization (WAP), and an unweighted measure of affective polarization that I refer to as multi-party affective polarization (MPAP).

- **TPAP.** In multi-party systems, Guedes-Neto (2022) recommends taking the distance between the affect towards the two parties with the highest vote share. This is a straightforward measure that corresponds to the difference between the in-party and out-party affects.

$$TPAP_i = like_{ip} - like_{i\neg p} \qquad (2.1)$$

- **WAP.** While TPAP is a good fit for a two-party system or multi-party systems with two dominant parties, WAP and MPAP are better tailored to multi-party systems with more than two large parties. To calculate WAP, mean affect towards all parties has to be measured first (Equation 2.2). Then, the difference between the most-preferred party affect ($like_{ip}$) and mean affect ($\overline{like_i}$) is calculated using the Equation 2.3, by accounting for the vote share (v_p) of each party (Curini & Hino, 2012; Ezrow, 2007; M. Wagner, 2021).

$$\overline{like_i} = \sum_{p=1}^{p} (v_p \times like_{ip}) \tag{2.2}$$

$$WAP_i = \sqrt{\sum_{p=1}^{p} v_p \left(like_{ip} - \overline{like_i} \right)^2} \tag{2.3}$$

- **MPAP** approach entails measuring the respondent's in-party affect (the party with the highest score) and calculating the difference from mean affect, i.e., affect towards all other parties. A larger difference corresponds to a higher polarization (Hansen & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2017; Renström, Bäck, & Carroll, 2021). Compared to WAP, this measure captures the affect more precisely, as it does not place an outsize emphasis on the vote share of the party, which, under multi-party regimes, can be quite volatile.

$$MPAP_i = \sum_{p=1}^{p} \left(like_{ip} - \overline{like_{i\neg p}} \right) \tag{2.4}$$

As the measurement shows too, affective polarization emphasizes in-group/out-group division, in a particularly Manichean manner, implying that the in-group is usually preferred to the out-group; the question is just how much. This is mainly due to the preference for being closer to similar, not dissimilar individuals. The same logic can be applied to loyalty towards one's ethnic group. Again, the principle is the same: as ethnic in-group is more similar than other ethnic groups, the former is preferred to the latter, with the question once again being how much.

2.2. Ethnic polarization

Attitudes towards immigrants and ethnic out-groups have received increasing attention in many Western countries in recent years. In Europe, the inflow of refugees due to the Syrian Civil War reinvigorated immigration-related debates. In the United States, the decision to build the wall on the border with Mexico and the temporary ban on travelers from many Muslim countries was met critically by many Americans.

The immigration-related debates were preceded by years of growing ethnic diversity within Western countries. As the immigrants successfully integrated with the Western countries, it affected the public attitudes towards immigration as well. In the United States, the difference between those who think that immigration should be decreased and those who think it should be increased was 59% in the mid-1990s. Since then, the gap has been closing, and in 2020, the share of those who think immigration should be increased overtook the percentage of those

who believe it should be decreased. As of 2022, the share of people who think that immigration should be increased (27%) trails the percentage of those who believe it should be decreased (38%), but the gap is nowhere near the size it used to be 30 or even 10 years ago (The Gallup Organization, 2022).

While affective polarization has been on the rise in the United States and on the decline in Germany, ethnic polarization has been increasing since 1973 in both countries (Boxell, Gentzkow, & Shapiro, 2020). In Germany, pro- and anti-immigration mobilization is an example of ethnic polarization. Approximately half of the German respondents think that they cannot express their opinion freely on the issue of refugees (Köcher, 2016); more people express xenophobic attitudes than before (Decker, Kiess, Schuler, et al., 2020; Hinger, Daphi, & Stern, 2019); and the share of respondents who are "nationally oriented" (25%) and "globally oriented" (26%) is approximately the same (Faus & Storks, 2019). Finally, in Georgia, the attitudes towards many ethnic out-groups, such as Russians, Arabs, or Iranians, are split equally between those with favorable and unfavorable attitudes (CRRC Georgia, 2017).

Studies of immigration and ethnicity have traditionally used the ethnic threat perspective to explain how negative attitudes toward immigration take shape (Blumer, 1958; Farris & Silber Mohamed, 2018; LeVine & Campbell, 1972; Scheepers, Gijsberts, & Coenders, 2002). Such polarization of opinions around the issue of immigration can be labeled as ethnic polarization. Ethnic polarization and negative attitudes towards immigration have a common denominator: ethnocentrism. A generalized predisposition towards ethnic out-groups, i.e., ethnocentrism, among U.S. whites strongly predicts the attitudes towards immigration (Kinder & Kam, 2010). Attitudes towards Hispanic immigrants became more negative in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, suggesting that generalized ethnocentrism, not Muslim-specific affect, is the key predictor of immigration attitudes.

The term ethnocentrism was first introduced by an American sociologist William Graham Sumner:

> "Ethnocentrism is the technical name for this view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it" (Sumner, 1906).

Roots of ethnocentrism research go back to Gumplowicz's "natural theory of State", where the author characterizes it as a sociopsychological syndrome based on the assumption that heterogeneous groups would expose patterns of enmity (Gumplowicz, 1883). It has been referred to as a nearly universal syndrome of discriminatory attitudes and behaviors concerning other ethnic groups (LeVine & Campbell, 1972; Sumner, 1906). Humans have a long history of having close ties with similar others. While there are many ways of defining similarity, the evidence suggests that humans tend to bond with those who are in the same ethnic group and use derogative terms towards outsiders. In Euripide's tragedy, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, Iphigenia says that it is fitting that Greeks should rule over barbarians, but not contrariwise, because

Greeks are free, and barbarians are enslaved people. The Jews have used the term Gentile to differentiate all humankind from them. Arabs regarded themselves as the noblest nation, while considering all else more or less barbarous (von Kremer, 1966). All of the above are manifestations of ethnocentrism, a belief that assigns a central role to ethnic in-group and derogates the out-groups (Sumner, 1906).

The primary necessity of human existence, after physiological needs, is the need for safety (Maslow, 1962). Achieving personal safety and security is closely associated with being a member of a group of people of one's own kind, that of kinship. People are more inclined to favor those who are more like them over those who are not. The closeness of similar people to each other and their relationships create a sense of cohesion. Humans tend to understand the world through categorizing. Once we feel that we are a part of a group, we obtain the feeling of safety and understand the world through the same prism as other members (Mihalyi, 1984). In addition, we derive the sense of well-being and emotional connection from other members of the group (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). We have two competing needs: the one to identify with a specific group and the other to differentiate those who are unlike us. Creating clear borders between the in-group and out-groups meets both needs: it gives an individual identity within a group and excludes outsiders. That is, humans are motivated to create groups with those similar to them and to create exclusive groups they would tie their identities with to exclude "the others" (Brewer, 1991).

There exists a vast amount of evidence of individuals prioritizing their in-group over an out-group. In an experiment by Henry Tajfel and colleagues, participants, who had not known each other, were sorted into two groups based on whether they (1) underestimated or overestimated the number of dots they were shown on a screen and (2) preferred the paintings by Klee or Kandinsky. The researchers found out that over- and underestimators, as well as Kandinsky and Klee admirers, tended to form a group identity; the participants preferred to reward their group with more money than the other group, even though the alternative option included giving both groups a more considerable amount (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). In East African tribes, individuals and ethnic groups tend to favor the members of their group to outsiders, with similarity and familiarity playing the central role (Brewer & Campbell, 1976). In a survey of 14 ethnic groups carried out in Canada, members of ethnic groups rated other members of their groups more highly than the out-groups (Kalin & Berry, 1996). In austere environments with no strict rules (state of nature), in-group favoritism seems to be the only plausible strategy (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000). Agent-based computer simulations, where agents choose between cooperation and non-cooperation based on group affiliation, also point at ethnocentrism being the preferred strategy under the state of nature. By learning to discriminate, each group promotes intra-group cooperation and accumulates social capital (Hammond & Axelrod, 2006; Shultz & Hartshorn, 2009).

According to social identity theory, shared in-group identities shape social perceptions, attitudes, and behavior, which leads to in-group favoritism (Tajfel, 1978). The members of the in-group tend to: (1) magnify differences between themselves and a psychologically relevant

out-group, (2) exhibit favoritism towards in-group members, and (3) perceive the out-group as undifferentiated, dissimilar, and inferior (Carlin & Love, 2013). Studies on individual trust show that there are two main potential sources of bias for determining the trust level towards another individual: personal attributes such as race (Burns, 2006; Wilson & Eckel, 2006) and social distance across ethnolinguistic, religious, and class lines (Cárdenas, Chong, & Ñopo, 2009; Johansson-Stenman, Mahmud, & Martinsson, 2009). Higher trust between the members of similar groups tends to have a hunkering-down effect on the populations in ethnically diverse neighborhoods: trust in out-groups is lower, altruism and community cooperation rarer, friends fewer (Putnam, 2007). Trust is a critical element of social capital (Hooghe, Reeskens, & Stolle, 2007), therefore, it is closely associated with the creation of in-group identity based on ethnic background.

Ethnocentrism differs from nationalism. While both invoke positive attitudes towards the in-group and negative attitudes towards the out-groups, they do not overlap completely. The first implies a particular allegiance to a perceived political entity (Rosenblatt, 1964). However, humankind existed long before nations (Mihalyi, 1984). On the other hand, ethnocentrism is a more natural feature of humanity that exists independent of political circumstances at any given time. The fundamental biological unit for the survival and propagation of an animal species is the group composed of the same species. In this regard, Mihalyi suggests that we differentiate ethnocentrism as "a normal, integral, essential and inevitable part of individual and group existence" from aggressive manifestations of ethnic exclusion, such as ethnic or racial discrimination (Mihalyi, 1984). While the earlier works remained predominantly theoretical and lacked empirical evidence, research on group stereotyping demonstrated that under natural circumstances, there is no known group that does not use negative stereotypes against the out-group (D. Katz & Braly, 1933; Lambert & Klineberg, 1959). Ethnocentric responses helped aborigine tribes in Australia become sufficiently apparent from the other tribes (Gregor, 1963). Finally, a survey of 36 ethnic groups demonstrated that 35 of them manifested ethnocentrism (Campbell & Levine, 1961).

According to socio-psychological belief congruence theory, there is "a natural tendency for people to associate, socialize and be more comfortable with others who have similar belief systems" (Delhey & Newton, 2005; Klineberg & Rokeach, 1961). Individuals high in ethnocentrism will derogate any out-group regardless of contact and in the absence of group competition (Hartley, 1946). Subsequent research showed that the definition holds true not only on an individual, but on a country level, too. In a similar analysis involving nations as a level of analysis, Daniel Druckman found support for the concomitance of in-group amity and out-group enmity (D. Druckman, 1968). Hostile feelings towards out-groups are ingrained or automatic, and affective polarization based on a party identity is at least as intense as polarization based on race (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

This leads us to the conclusion that ethnocentrism is a group-based affect, underpinned by in-group favorability and out-group exclusion. Therefore, I assume that the mechanism behind affective and ethnic polarization is the same. Accordingly, if a single variable is associated with

a decrease/increase in ethnocentrism, it should also be associated with a decrease/increase in affective polarization and vice versa. At the end of this chapter, I will explore the literature on the potential of inter-group contact via social media to decrease both types of polarization. However, it is necessary first to examine the role of media to precisely understand the affordances provided by social media.

2.3. Role of media in polarization

Western society has undergone such crucial changes since the third industrial revolution that they now bear conceptual importance for ethnocentrism theories. In 2012, there were 2 billion Internet users around the world. In 2016, the number reached 3.4 billion, while in 2020 the number was at 4.5 billion. Similarly, the number of active social media users has also been on the rise, with the figure going from 1.5 to 2.3 to 3.8 billion in 2012, 2016, and 2020, respectively. Technological innovations of the 20th century facilitated an exponential growth in the amount of information we produce: in 2016-2018 alone, 90 percent of the data existing in the world by then was generated (Mar, 2018).

As a result of the ever-increasing flow of information, the West has been going through the process of mediatization, "a long-term process through which the importance and influence of media and their spill-over effects on political processes and over political institutions, organizations, and actors have increased" (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). In contemporary democracies, due to the mediatization of politics, citizens increasingly rely on information, attitudes, and cues received not directly through real-life political deliberation with other individuals but from newspapers, television, the Internet, and social media (de Vreese, 2014; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). As a result, perceptions about political or ethnic out-groups are shaped not only based on real-life socialization but also on the information or opinions one receives via media.

2.3.1. Media and political polarization

The growing influence of mass media raised questions regarding their effect on democracy before the emergence of social media as a source of political information (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999). The transition from a low-choice to a high-choice media environment meant that citizens were facing a higher selection of political information (van Aelst, Strömbäck, Aalberg, et al., 2017), borders between media and their genres were being blurred (Chadwick, 2013), and the risk of enclave communication was on the rise. A wider selection of media exacerbated tensions between citizens' immediate gratifications and the health of the political system they live in (Prior, 2007). Finally, as an increasing number of people received political information from the Internet, selective exposure could have been aggravated due to higher choice offered by the Internet, leading to the balkanization of society (Sunstein, 2007, 2018).

In the twentieth century, social psychologist Leon Festinger developed the notion of cognitive dissonance: a tendency of humans to seek out attitude-conforming information (Festinger, 1957). According to the cognitive dissonance theory, humans tend to act to justify their beliefs instead of challenging them. In 1980s, an extension of cognitive dissonance theory was developed, called theory of motivated reasoning. This theory claims that the reasoning process (information selection and evaluation, memory encoding, attitude formation, judgment, and decision-making) are goal-oriented as individuals strive towards achieving a certain cognitive end state (Kunda, 1990; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Tetlock & Levi, 1982). Building up on this logic, a large strand of literature has focused on individual media choices as the determinant of individual-level polarization, which paved the way to the emergence of the term which is widely used in contemporary research: selective exposure.

Those interested in politics and who frequently engage in political discussions prefer to follow a set of media outlets that are more aligned with their views rather than deliberately expose themselves to the information that challenges their prior beliefs (Kelly Garrett, Gvirsman, Johnson, et al., 2014; Levendusky, 2011; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Such behavior sometimes results in a creation of echo chambers with every new iteration of news re-affirming the prior beliefs via hyperpartisan, intentionally misleading or even disinformative news (Bastos & Mercea, 2019; Faris, Roberts, Etling, et al., 2017). Early evidence points at a strong correlation between selective exposure and polarization (Stroud, 2007, 2010). Expectations on the polarizing effect of selective exposure, which relied on the prior literature on cognitive dissonance and motivated reasoning, found empirical support in the studies of different media systems worldwide. In the United States, the content in traditional media has been increasingly polarized along partisan lines in the twenty-first century (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). Experimental evidence shows that media users encounter polarizing articles "all the time" (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016a). In German media, it is not unusual to have a slight bias against the ruling coalition, the so-called government malus (Dewenter, Dulleck, & Thomas, 2016). In contrast, in Georgia, the media polarization has followed the footsteps of extreme elite polarization (Kavtaradze, 2021). Even the type of media that one chooses to receive news from affects the level of polarization, as those who combine online media with traditional media are expected to be more polarized that those who do not (Nie, Miller, Golde, et al., 2010).

As mentioned above, such "enclave communication" can lead to the creation of echo chambers or ideological camps, which hardly leave any space for dialogue and compromise. The most pessimistic expectations flowing from the said process included polarization of the elites and the public (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Sunstein, 2007). American voters, for example, tend to "tune out" cross-cutting messages, except when they deliberately check the cross-cutting media outlets or think of them as highly credible (Levendusky, 2011; Mutz, 2002). Experimental research shows analogous results: when samples of Democrat and Republican voters were exposed to the Twitter bot re-posting cross-cutting tweets from the Twitter accounts of the opposing camp, as Democrats showed a slight increase in liberal attitudes, while Republicans became substantially more conservative (Bail, Argyle, Brown, et al., 2018).

While selective exposure can lead to polarization in some cases, most individuals who embark on one-sided media consumption do not completely mute out the cross-cutting information (Ksiazek, 2016). A balanced media exposure does not necessarily depolarize, however. Engaging with pro- and counter-attitudinal websites has been found to be positively correlated with in-group favorability, even more positively than exposure to exclusively pro-attitudinal websites (Kelly Garrett, Gvirsman, Johnson, et al., 2014). Incidental exposure to cross-cutting political information can work in tandem with selective exposure to strengthen engagement in cross-cutting discussions, but only until a certain point, after which the likelihood of engaging in cross-cutting discussions diminishes as the incidental and selective exposure increase (Kwak, Lane, Weeks, et al., 2022).

Selective exposure is more likely to contain partisan cues, almost by definition. When one chooses to follow only a specific subset of media selectively, it often matches the partisan lines due to the similarity of those media outlets. Partisan cues have an effect insofar as the readers know that the source of political information they read has the same partisan slant as they do (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Internet does not change the overall picture in this case, as there is only weak evidence for partisan selectivity in online media use (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Messing & Westwood, 2014). Moreover, the majority of media outlets are closer to the center (Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, Johnson, et al., 2015; LaCour, 2015) and are less polarized than political elites (Groseclose & Milyo, 2005). As partisan individuals pursue more selective exposure, they are usually not wholly muting out the other side. Even strong partisans willingly subject themselves to cross-cutting exposure, although they allocate less time to the latter than to the former (LaCour, 2015). Those few individuals who choose to follow only attitude-reaffirming political news are expected to be more affectively polarized. This is likely due to the high concentration of outrage, hate, manipulation, disinformation, and outright propaganda in the highly partisan media (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Faris, Roberts, Etling, et al., 2017). The above-mentioned brings us to the question of how much the media themselves are polarized.

Media play a significant role in the process of polarization. The sources that liberals and conservatives follow and trust for news and political information are very different (Spohr, 2017). The lack of the shared base of information between the two political groups has led to "citizens developing highly polarized attitudes towards political matters." Therefore, different groups of individuals have different news exposure patterns that may ultimately lead to people having significantly diverging opinions on what is happening in the world (Stroud, 2008). The situation is further aggravated by the fact that media outlets prefer to cater to the prejudices of their readers or viewers, as they specialize in reaching a specific part of the public that becomes their "core audience" due to their partisan affiliation (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005).

Empirical evidence suggests that media reflect elite polarization, which then translates into public one (Dancey & Goren, 2010; J. N. Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013; Lupu, 2015). Although media, based on journalistic ethics, are obliged to cover all sides equally when covering politics, this is often not the case. Early research showed that in liberal media systems

such as the United States, media hardly achieve high accuracy of reporting (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), as they continuously deploy a slight slant that readers expect them to have (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005). The outcome is the polarization of the media landscape itself, with media outlets covering the polarized political scene from one side only or favoring one side over the other. An experimental approach has shown that only covering one pole in a polarized environment strengthens support within the poles (Levendusky, 2011). Mutz describes Americans as "unusually adept" at avoiding cross-cutting political conversations (Mutz & Mondak, 2006), while cable news and newspapers have been found to have a strong potential for selective exposure (Stroud, 2008). Cable news and the Internet have weaker economic incentives to aim for a politically moderate median user (Prior, 2013).

While social media provide unprecedented possibilities to engage with others from any corner of the country or the world and hear their opinions, traditional media is a more one-sided means of communication. The readers or viewers are provided with content, in this case, political information, and they choose whether to consume it. The diversity of choice has dramatically increased since the early years of television and has resulted in the emergence of a high-choice media environment. Van Aelst et al. (2017) propose a conceptualization of *political information environments*, where supply and demand of political information are inextricably linked. However, the market-like logic may not be so optimal for political communication. Many have voiced their fears of audience balkanization due to the extremely high number of niche media outlets (Prior, 2007; Stroud, 2011; Sunstein, 2009). Due to the structure of the media business, apart from the primary goal of informing its readers or viewers, media outlets have to remain profitable. Therefore, unbiased coverage and fair airtime distribution is often a sub-optimal goal for media outlets, as they specialize on a specific part of the public that becomes their "core audience" due to their partisan affiliation (Baum & Groeling, 2008; Groeling, 2008). Such a relationship between the media and their viewers creates echo chambers. Consequently, these echo chambers are hard to penetrate from the outside because both the supply and the demand sides are satisfied with the status-quo.

Others propose a more optimistic view by suggesting that people do not self-select into niche audiences and still expose themselves to cross-cutting political information against the background of the high-choice media environment (Kelly Garrett, 2009; J. G. Webster, 2014). While it is likely true that most media consumers do not intentionally block all cross-cutting political information (Jang, 2014; LaCour, 2015), those who do are more likely to be affectively polarized (Kim, 2015; Stroud, 2010).

2.3.2. Media and ethnic polarization

An important line of research into ethnocentrism has examined the influence of media. Ethnocentrism and attitudes towards immigration, as mentioned earlier, often go hand in hand. This can be interpreted as one of the signs of media priming the image of immigrants as ethnically or racially distinct. In reality, the situation is different. In Germany, approximately 80% of all

immigrants in 2020 came from European countries (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2021). Even in 2015, when the flow of refugees from Syria was at its peak, immigrants from Syria only accounted for 15% of all immigration that year, while 70% of immigration fell to EU countries (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2016). In the United States, the immigration debate mostly focuses on Hispanics and some media disseminate Hispanic threat narrative (Valentino, Brader, & Jardina, 2013). In reality Hispanic people are not the largest immigrant group, as they fall behind Asians (Budiman, 2020). Moreover, the crime rate among undocumented immigrants is considerably lower than among legal immigrants and the native population, and there is no evidence that undocumented criminality has increased in recent years (Light, He, & Robey, 2020). Finally, in Georgia, the lion's share of aggression towards immigrants has fallen on immigrants from Muslim countries (Sahgal, Cooperman, Gardner, et al., 2018; Sartania, 2017). In fact, they only accounted for approximately 30% of the immigration, with hardly any change in the number over the last years (State Commission on Migration Issues, 2015, 2019).

Ethnocentric attitudes are shaped by news coverage more than by the realities of immigration (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). Frequency (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009) and tone (van Klingeren, Boomgaarden, Vliegenthart, & de Vreese, 2015) of news substantially affect attitudes towards immigration. Considering this, it is not surprising to see the divergence between the perceptions created by media and reality. Media reporting, in general, is not so close to reality due to a lack of newsworthiness in ordinary events and figures that do not stand out from prevailing trends. Once an outlier event happens and the media cover it, the public perception of the importance of the given event is exaggerated (Vliegenthart & Boomgaarden, 2007). This process has been explained by the fact that the media and journalists do not recount, but reconstruct reality (Bentele, 1992).

Positive coverage of immigration decreases negative attitudes toward immigrants, and negative coverage does the opposite. In Europe (van Klingeren, Boomgaarden, Vliegenthart, & de Vreese, 2015) and the United States (Valentino, Brader, & Jardina, 2013), although airtime devoted to immigration is associated with actual rates of immigration, race cues in media coverage can nevertheless prime racial attitudes and stereotypes (Schemer, 2012; Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002). News coverage can distort perceptions of immigrant demographics and often involves a "threat" frame and narrative (Farris & Silber Mohamed, 2018). Several studies show that ethnocultural concerns are more critical to attitudes about immigration than economic concerns (Citrin, Green, Muste, & Wong, 1997; Sides & Citrin, 2007).

Since the effect of media on immigration attitudes suffers from the effect of technological features of traditional media, such as one-way flow of information, lack of feedback, sensationalism, and bias, it is worth exploring whether social media have offered any remedy. Social networking sites provide the opportunity of two-way communication between information disseminators and recipients. Therefore, the likelihood of deliberation is higher as the users of such sites can enter discussions with the sources of their political information, other political information recipients, and most importantly, people of different political opinions. In the fol-

lowing chapter, I will explore how the technological affordances of social networking sites have opened up new possibilities for political communication and what consequences this has on political and ethnic polarization.

2.4. Role of social media in polarization

Since the emergence of Web 2.0 on the brink of the millennium and the increase in the political use of social media, the scientific community has been embroiled in debates concerning the Internet (and specifically social media) and how it affects political communication. The answer is increasingly difficult to be discerned against the background of rapidly improving technology, the emergence of new means of communication, and, especially, the changing behavior of information consumers. In parallel with the popularization of digital technology and increased volume of user-generated content comes the expansion of online media outlets whose contents are widely shared via websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and numerous messaging apps. This development affects a broad audience around the world. Facebook, for instance, encompassed about 3 billion monthly active users worldwide as of 2022. What makes social media platforms like Facebook distinct is that they are integrated platforms that combine many media, information, and communication technologies: webpage, webmail, digital image, digital video, discussion groups, connection lists, or search engines (Trottier & Fuchs, 2014).

An increasing number of people resort to the Internet as their primary source of news, with social media being in third place after the Internet and TV in terms of the main source of news (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, et al., 2022). Not only have social media become the main source of information for many, but they have also provided an opportunity to share personal political opinions with others, allowing users to engage in a political discourse instead of merely being passive receivers of news. This process exemplifies a shift from a one-way to a two-way information flow. As a result, online political participation has become a new level of political participation (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). It has a particular importance for political communication scholars because it provides an unprecedented amount of data about election candidates, political events, attitudes within the electorate, and politics, in general. Something that had earlier only been discussed with people one knows in real life, i.e., friends, family members, and colleagues, has now become more public.

2.4.1. Social media and political polarization

The increasing avenues for political participation brought by the digital era have shown that political polarization is not unusual under virtual circumstances either. The analysis of online political participation data has found extreme levels of politics-related incivility on social media websites both in (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014) and outside of the United States (Theocharis, Barberá, Fazekas, et al., 2016). High levels of political polarization among the users corre-

spond to the levels of polarization outside the Internet (Morales, Borondo, Losada, & Benito, 2015). Twitter analysis from as early as the first half of the 2010s reveals that the users are exposed to both like-minded people and those with cross-cutting views (Conover, Ratkiewicz, Francisco, et al., 2011; Yardi & Boyd, 2010), but the exposure to different opinions does not cause change in the positions of committed partisans (Borondo, Morales, Losada, & Benito, 2012; Gruzd & Roy, 2014). This evidence indicates that Twitter, at the very least, does not depolarize its partisan users, suggesting that the contact between those with different opinions is mostly uncivil and unproductive. Evidence from the United States supports this view, as there is a 10-20% average increase in content polarization on Twitter per electoral cycle in the United States (Garimella, 2018).

Classical works of Aristotle, John Stuart Mill, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Jürgen Habermas have emphasized the role of healthy political deliberation in democracy. While real-world interactions often force us to deal with diverse political opinions, could the virtual world be more homogeneous? A plethora of arguments has been put forward as to which negative or positive consequences the rise of the political use of social media could have for democracies, ranging from the emergence of like-minded communities (Sunstein, 2018) and algorithmically curated echo chambers (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2007, 2018) to slacktivism (exaggerating the political efficacy of social media activism) (Morozov, 2009).

In an attempt to find the driving force behind the polarization patterns on social media, several authors have suggested a view of so-called "echo chambers." According to this belief, as polarization in the American public has spilled over to nearly all spheres of daily life, a significant number of like-minded individuals has entered a "self-perpetuating, self-reinforcing social division" where the individual opinion gives way to group thinking (Bishop, 2009). This, supposedly, results in a less productive public discussion and a pattern of holding an increasingly positive attitude toward the in-group while holding an increasingly negative position toward the out-group (Gentzkow, 2016). In addition, cross-cutting arguments are easier to be ignored in echo chambers (Spohr, 2017), and voting becomes more an affirmation of the group than an expression of civic opinion (Bishop, 2009).

Pariser (2011) describes Google and Facebook algorithmic curation filters as "prediction engines, constantly creating and refining a theory of who you are and what you'll do and want next. Together, these engines create a unique universe of information for each of us [...] which fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information." This approach shifts the responsibility for a polarized online environment from the users to the algorithms of social media websites that effectively place us in "filter bubbles", where every new iteration of news re-affirms the prior beliefs via hyperpartisan, at times misleading or even disinformative news (Bail, Argyle, Brown, et al., 2018; Bastos & Mercea, 2019; Faris, Roberts, Etling, et al., 2017; Gillani, Yuan, Saveski, et al., 2018; Pariser, 2011; Rader & Gray, 2015). Social media also create a "news-finds-me perception" that decreases the necessity to seek out news and makes an individual subject to the influence of the reinforcing spiral of news. This spiral is proliferated in their online social network, sometimes by accounts with no track record,

reputation, fact-checking, or editorial mechanism in place (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017). It has been found that social media have, directly or indirectly, helped cultivate support for populist candidates or causes in the United States (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), the United Kingdom (Gorodnichenko, Pham, & Talavera, 2021), and elsewhere in the EU (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017). However, the mechanism at work is likely far from being the "echo chamber", as different types of social media use (active, passive, and uncivil) were related to an increased likelihood of network heterogeneity both online and offline, while the "echo chamber" theory would expect the polarization to be the highest among the most active and uncivil users (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; J. L. Nelson, 2017).

Selective exposure

Political communication literature includes diverse evidence of polarized media environments paving the way to selective exposure. Concerns have been expressed that given the abundant media choice, partisan individuals would self-select into gated media communities, thereby avoiding cross-cutting opinions (Bishop, 2009). Having origins in media psychology (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948b) and social psychology (Tajfel, Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 1979), these concerns are based on the evidence of people actively selecting information which is consistent with their prior beliefs (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). Engaging in political discussions only with like-minded individuals causes further polarization as liberals become more liberal and conservatives become more conservative (Schkade, Sunstein, & Hastie, 2007).

There are mixed findings regarding such "enclave communication" on social networking sites. One strand of political communication research focusing on social media argues that the main feature of social networking sites is that they allow us to find like-minded individuals. The caveat of this in terms of political communication would be that the citizens would only get exposed to information that would reinforce their political views. Hence, they would remain isolated from other individuals with opposing views, partly due to the filtering effects of ranking algorithms that generate "filter bubbles" (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2018).

Evidence supports the above-mentioned expectations about the effects of social media: close to 75% of retweets on political topics take place between users of similar ideological views (Barberá, 2014). The most potent social cue for clicking through and reading stories on social media is a recommendation by friends or family, which are likelier to be ideologically congruent (Messing & Westwood, 2014).

The propensity of individuals to cluster based on shared traits, such as political ideology, can threaten the process of deliberation: the homogeneity of the group restricts the size of the argument pool, and individuals embedded in such groups are more likely to voice a popular opinion within the group to obtain the approval of as many members as possible. Nevertheless, the heterogeneity is not a panacea either. No less than like-minded groups, mixed groups can polarize (Sunstein, 2007).

Cross-cutting exposure

It would, however, be incorrect to put too much emphasis on social media when it comes to politically homogeneous groups, as tendencies towards community homogeneity long predate the Internet (Putnam, 2000). Although individuals increasingly spend their time in communities of like-minded individuals online, this does not necessarily result in avoidance of attitude-inconsistent information. While it is true that most social media interactions take place between like-minded individuals, cross-cutting exposure is more widespread than commonly believed (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, et al., 2015). Evidence from the United States (Kim, 2011; J. K. Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014) and Europe (Barberá, 2014) shows that social networking sites facilitate exposure to cross-cutting information and hence, may serve as a correlate of lower polarization. Moreover, polarization has increased the most among the groups least likely to use the Internet, suggesting that online political participation might be less polarizing than offline one (Boxell, Gentzkow, & Shapiro, 2017). However, using the Internet or social media does not guarantee a cross-cutting exposure per se. As Mutz (2007) has shown, several factors determine whether we expose ourselves to cross-cutting information - these include, but are not limited to, political knowledge and interest, ideological self-placement, and the frequency of political discussions.

Combined with the aforementioned offline traits, the exposure to cross-cutting exposure on social media largely depends on the social networks of individuals. The more politically diverse the online connections network, the higher such exposure. Social media use has a more negligible effect on the overall heterogeneity of discussion networks among conservatives than liberals (Kim, Hsu, & de Zúñiga, 2013). In the American context, liberals tend to be connected to fewer friends on Facebook who share conservative content than vice-versa (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). Therefore, individual choices rather than social networking sites' algorithms limit exposure to attitude-challenging content.

It should, however, also be mentioned that the diversity of political opinions in a user's online social network is not necessarily associated with lower polarization either. In fact, opinion polarization increases as the frequency of participating in online political discussions increases. This can be attributed to the theory of motivated reasoning, as the users who often discuss politics on social media are more used to defending their opinions and being subject to more scrutiny from their peers. This experience results in them paying more attention to supportive information than information that challenges their views (J. K. Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014). There is a vast difference between non-polarized and polarized environments, as in the former one individuals' opinions tend to be driven by the strength of arguments, whereas in the latter, the foremost goal becomes to defend one's position and persuade others. This means they are less likely to consider alternative positions and more likely to take action based on their ex-post expectations (J. N. Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013; F. L. Lee, 2016).

Exposure to cross-cutting views can also drive polarization, with increased awareness of political identities on social media being a critical factor in increasing affective polarization

(Bail, Argyle, Brown, et al., 2018). With this in mind, it is incorrect to assume that exposure to diverse political attitudes will lead to a decreased affective polarization through the political deliberation mechanism or "hearing the other side." Some evidence does point to lower levels of ideological polarization among those who engage in cross-cutting discussions on Facebook (Lu & Lee, 2019b) and those who are embedded in more ideologically diverse Twitter networks (Barberá, 2014). However, this is contrasted by other findings, showing that social media use increases the perceived differences between individuals' position and where they perceive the out-group to be, makes political and social identities more correlated, and contributes to the stereotyping and negative evaluations of the out-group (Settle, 2018). Selective exposure behavior and confirmation bias make us more likely to interact with content that strengthens our preexisting views (Fischer, Jonas, Frey, & Kastenmüller, 2008; Liao & Fu, 2013; Stroud, 2008) and are the more likely triggers of ideological polarization.

Incidental exposure

Internet and social media provide a high-choice media environment in which the users can explore a plethora of media outlets with diverse political opinions and are incidentally exposed to cross-cutting information even if they have not signed up for it (Kim, 2011; Lu & Lee, 2019b). American political news sites comprise an ideologically diverse readership, and most of the audience navigates to those sites via Facebook (J. L. Nelson, 2017), hinting that Internet and Facebook use facilitate not enclave communication but rather (incidental) cross-cutting exposure. Such exposure offline was associated with less polarization already in the 1940 U.S. Presidential Elections (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948a). Newer evidence from the United States and Israel also shows that while pro-attitudinal online news exposure correlates with increased support for the preferred candidate, exposure to counter-attitudinal news decreases the support, subsequently reducing polarization (Kelly Garrett, Gvirsman, Johnson, et al., 2014).

The main difference between social media and mass media such as printed press, radio, and television is the fact that users not only personalize their experience but are also exposed to the information shared by their friends or the actors they follow, who may not by essence be media actors, hence do not have an agenda aimed at reaching a core audience by means of sustained publishing of the content that they know audience enjoys. Indeed, in the case of person-to-person communication on social media, there is, at times, no expectation from the audience to like the content. Some users specifically share (cross-cutting) information to add a critical comment to it and provoke a debate (Gorkovenko & Taylor, 2017). Overall, however, social media users are exposed to more diverse news than non-users, which may result in a less polarized stance of the users due to the supposed deliberation resulting from hearing the other side (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018).

On social media, not just information but the circle of individuals with whom a user interacts (as in, at least seeing their posts or shared content; not necessarily a direct interaction) is

wider than offline. Facebook serves as a strong means of bridging social capital with weak ties (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Gil De Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011). While debating politics with those individuals that have different or opposing opinions (out-group) might be too stressful offline, social media provide a much "cheaper" way of such cross-cutting interaction (Barberá, 2014; Eveland & Hively, 2009). Such interaction is more expressive but less confrontational online (Min & Wohn, 2018).

Platform-specific affordances

Social media apps vary in how they promote cross-cutting interactions and exposure to diverse views. Mainly Facebook, but also Twitter has an essential influence on political attitudes as they are the most widely used social networking apps that fit the Cambridge Dictionary definition of "a website that is designed to help people communicate and share information, photographs, etc. with a group." This definition would include Instagram, but the research has so far studied Twitter more than Instagram from the perspective of their effect on political attitudes, including polarization. YouTube, which is another vital source of news (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, et al., 2022), does not fit the definition of the social networking site, as it is a streaming service and has only limited capacity for social networking.

Facebook's primary affordance is symmetrical network of users. Both parties must consent to a relationship, resulting in a tendency toward communication with people in the context of comparatively strong ties (Valenzuela, Correa, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2018). Users take more time to read elaborated posts or comments on Facebook, as they are usually written by people they know relatively well. This facilitates affinity and more frequent interaction (Koroleva & Kane, 2017). A high degree of political and ethnic homogeneity should be expected in Facebook networks because these are based on friendship and acquaintance ties that are typically extant outside of Facebook (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021).

In reality, the evidence regarding the effect of Facebook use on polarization is mixed. An examination of 10.1 million Facebook user news feeds in the United States shows that while most Facebook friendships are ideologically congruent, 19% do cut across ideological lines and likely expose users to diverse news and opinions (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). Bakshy et al. also find that Facebook use contributes to a slight reduction in cross-cutting information exposure. Using Facebook increases perceived differences between the individual's position and the position of their out-group makes political and social identities more correlated and contributes to stereotyping of the out-group (Settle, 2018). Based on an experimental evidence, leaving Facebook results in a depolarizing effect, although in parallel with a decrease in political knowledge (Allcott, Braghieri, Eichmeyer, & Gentzkow, 2020). However, Facebook use is also correlated with seeing both pro- and counter-attitudinal news and a small depolarizing effect (Beam, Hutchens, & Hmielowski, 2018). A cross-platform, over-time analysis of social media concludes that Facebook has the lowest tendency towards homophily compared to Twitter and WhatsApp (Yarchi, Baden, & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021).

Twitter is different because its central affordance is asymmetric networks. Users are not directed into two-way connections, and weak ties are oriented toward interests rather than relationships. The non-reciprocal follower-followee structure facilitates more diverse flows of information, more novel interactions, and a lower ratio of familiar to unfamiliar contacts (Valenzuela, Correa, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2018). Compared to Facebook, this means a higher likelihood of cross-cutting interactions and more exposure to diverse news. Nevertheless, while such exposure could theoretically take place more often, the total population of Twitter, at least in the United States, leans towards the left (unlike Facebook, where Republicans and Democrats are nearly equally represented) (Vogels, Auxier, & Anderson, 2021). As a possible outcome of such unequal distribution, communication on Twitter has been found to be more homophilic than on Facebook (Yarchi, Baden, & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021).

Communication on Facebook has been found to have a higher potential of being deliberative: people were more deliberative on Facebook than on Twitter when responding to the posts by the official page of the White House (Oz, Zheng, & Chen, 2018). This can be attributed to Twitter's 280-character (140 characters until November 2017) limit on posts and comments, which could potentially restrict the ability of users to provide exhaustive arguments (Nahon, 2015).

Similarities between Twitter and Facebook exist too. While Twitter has a higher potential of exposing its users to weak tie networks, both platforms include homogeneous communities, especially in terms of political ideology (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, et al., 2015). In addition, algorithms on both social networking sites tend to privilege emotional content (Tucker, Guess, Barberá, et al., 2018).

To sum up, the evidence on inter-platform differences between Facebook and Twitter in terms of potential for (de)polarization is mixed. Considering the cross-platform differences, it is essential to control for different platforms whenever possible instead of using an aggregate social media use measure.

2.4.2. Social media and ethnic polarization

Ethnocentrism literature has traditionally studied inter-ethnic polarization from the perspective of contact. Largely building up on Allport's (1954) optimal inter-group contact theory, several authors have shown that positive contact improves tolerance towards the out-group (Cehajic, Brown, & Castano, 2008; J. Dixon, Durrheim, Tredoux, et al., 2010; Semyonov & Glikman, 2009). While the survey approach may suffer from reporting bias, experimental evidence has also demonstrated the effectiveness of optimal inter-ethnic contact on an observable decrease in discrimination (Carrell, Hoekstra, & West, 2015).

Besides direct inter-ethnic contact, indirect inter-ethnic contact, such as receiving information and cues about each other, can take place via mass media. Unfortunately, as outlined earlier in this chapter, coverage of issues such as immigration or ethnic minorities usually follows a prejudice-increasing pattern. As van Dijk (2015) put it:

"The main conclusions of more than two decades of research on the relations between the Press and ethnic minority groups or immigrants are hardly ambiguous or contradictory. Most blatantly in the past and usually more subtly today, the Press has indeed been a main 'foe' of black and other minorities."

In contrast to what is known about ethnocentrism and mass media, relatively little is known about how social media affects the relations between different ethnic groups. Although virtual, it is nevertheless a public space where communication takes place. Conditions on social media may vary; in some cases, some provide more opportunity for cross-cutting information or individual exposure, while others offer more frequent contact with those one knows in real life (Gil De Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011). These conditions are very distinct from real-life interactions, so it would be wrong to perceive communication on social media as a mere extension of real-life communication. In light of how different the affordances of social media are compared with those of mass media, an important question emerges: do social media matter for ethnocentrism also, and if so, how?

While the ways that news media affect ethnocentrism mainly involve agenda and framing effects, the ways that social media may do so are likely to be through mechanisms associated with social networks. The extent of ethnic homogeneity that people experience in their social networks is significant. Offline social networks are often highly homogeneous and even more prone to the "echo chamber" effect than social media (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Guess, Nyhan, Lyons, & Reifler, 2018). As offline ethnic homogeneity is associated with increased discrimination towards out-groups (Scacco & Warren, 2018), the literature on ethnocentrism has long emphasized the possibly depolarizing effects of exposure to ethnic out-groups on inter-ethnic attitudes. A considerable body of research finds that more frequent contact with an ethnic out-group tends to reinforce in-group identity and reduce trust in the out-group (Fossett & Kiecolt, 1989; Quillian, 1995). Ethnic heterogeneity in working and home environments has been found to be associated with lower cohesion, lower satisfaction, and higher workplace turnover (Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Jackson, Brett, Sessa, et al., 1991; Keller, 2001). It may also lead to lower social trust (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2002; Delhey & Newton, 2005), lower cooperation levels, and fewer manifestations of altruism towards out-groups than in-groups (Putnam, 2007). These findings on ethnicity extend the original work in social psychology on in-group favoritism following out-group contact (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971).

As social media use exposes people to political content both intentionally and inadvertently (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021), it could lead to attitude-reinforcing or attitude-challenging information exposure as well as direct contact with out-groups (Silver, Huang, & Taylor, 2019). Social media use supports both strong and weak social ties (Sajuria, VanHeerde-Hudson, Hudson, et al., 2015). However, Twitter has an edge over Facebook in terms of exposure to weak ties (Valenzuela, Correa, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2018). Moreover, deactivating Facebook is associated with improved attitudes towards an ethnic out-group under the conditions of a conflict-ridden past (Asimovic, Nagler, Bonneau, & Tucker, 2021).

Weak tie exposure is more likely to be with ethnically diverse others, as people of similar backgrounds tend to stick together (Brewer, 1991; Mihalyi, 1984; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Therefore, even though there is hardly any evidence either confirming or rejecting it, social media exposure to weak ties can be tied to individual-level ethnocentrism. The direction of the effect is hard to predict, however. Several studies point out that when groups with different racial, ethnic, and cultural characteristics interact, this results in ethnocentrism, discrimination, and racism (Banks, 2008, 2012). Ethnically diverse neighborhoods are associated with a "hunkering down" effect, meaning members of similar ethnic groups tend to stick together (Putnam, 2007). Therefore, the degree to which social networking sites facilitate positive inter-ethnic contact may have a decisive importance for potential depolarization.

The effect of traditional and social media on ethnic polarization has mainly been studied using content analysis methods, including the analysis of newspaper articles (Vliegenthart & Boomgaarden, 2007), images in news magazines (Farris & Silber Mohamed, 2018), or even right-wing violence events (Benček & Strasheim, 2016). When individual-level ethnocentrism is measured, primarily survey data are used.

3. Theoretical framework

According to deliberative democracy theory, a public, inclusive, and sincere rational discourse, which ensures equal communication rights for participants, should result in a deliberative space where better arguments persist (Habermas, 2015). In Gordon Allport's (1954) classic work, exposure to out-groups can reduce prejudice and promote political tolerance when four conditions are met: support from authority exists, there are common goals, opportunities for inter-group cooperation are present, and groups enjoy equal status in the context of the interaction. Both face-to-face and online experiences are too heterogeneous to permit a precise or consistent mapping of these conditions, especially if one only has self-reported data available. However, social media-facilitated contact can fulfill some of the optimal communication criteria in certain circumstances, especially among those who are more open toward deliberation and revision of prior attitudes.

If one were to assume that social networking sites facilitate contact between people with diverging opinions, they might promote public deliberation. This can, in turn, be a conductor of low polarization provided that the discourse is inclusive, sincere, and equal communication rights are ensured (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Habermas, 2015). Those who are more frequently exposed to cross-cutting information and opinions are more likely to perceive diverging opinions as normal. Per similar logic, more frequent contact with people with different attitudes towards ethnicity or immigration or with people from ethnic out-groups may be associated with better attitudes towards ethnic out-groups. Keeping the above-mentioned theoretical framework in mind, the foundation of this dissertation rests upon the expectation of direct or indirect contact via social media being correlated with lower affective and ethnic polarization.

Affective polarization is defined as increasing animosity between partisan political groups, measured as the difference between the feeling thermometer scores of the in-group and the out-group(s). The value of self-reported affected polarization will therefore be higher for those individuals who feel a strong positive affect towards their favorite party and a strong negative affect towards their opponents (J. N. Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Mason, 2016; M. Wagner, 2021). The reason I focus on affective polarization instead of ideological polarization (i.e. between the left and the right) is the decreasing number of policy areas necessary to explain polarization (Lewis, Poole, Rosenthal, et al., 2021), the gradual shift towards a more group-identity-based instead of ideology-based polarization (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, et al., 2019), and the comparability of affective polarization with another type of group-identity-based polarization, ethnic polarization. The factors above suggest that the theoretical mecha-

Table 3.1.: Allport's optimal inter-group contact conditions on social media

Allport's four conditions for optimal inter-group contact	Conditions on social media platforms
Equal group status within the situation	Non-discriminatory approach from the administration, voluntary anonymity
Common goals	Entertainment, information-seeking, socializing, establishing status.
Inter-group cooperation	Higher likelihood of inter-group communication (incidental exposure)
Authority support	Terms and conditions of social media platforms, internet culture

nism is likely to be similar for both types of polarization.

I define ethnic polarization as the degree of individual self-reported ethnocentrism. The lower the general level of ethnocentrism in society, the lower the ethnic polarization between majority and minority ethnic groups. As mentioned in the previous chapter, from the perspective of the contact theory, attitudes towards out-groups turn more positive when there is more contact under optimal conditions (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Indirect contact through traditional means of media has been found to have a negative effect on attitudes towards ethnic minorities, as migrants are often portrayed in a negative light, increasing the feeling of threat from and prejudices towards the latter (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009; Pettigrew, Wagner, & Christ, 2010; Schlueter & Davidov, 2013; Vergeer, Lubbers, & Scheepers, 2000). However, unlike traditional media, which assume a passive role of the viewer/reader, social media offer more interactive features to their users. If polarization of attitudes is imagined as a one-dimensional line, where the right end corresponds to full in-group favoritism/out-group animosity, and the left end corresponds to equal affect towards both in-group and out-group, then once those at the right end get exposed to challenging, cross-cutting information from the other side during online political discussions, they will revise their attitudes through deliberative thinking and move their opinion or affect to the left. As social media offer a relatively even "playing ground" to the users to exchange information and opinions, shared rules in the form of the terms and conditions of the social media platform, and even a shared culture (Sharbaugh & Nguyen, 2014), it is more likely to meet the optimal inter-group contact requirements. As Table 3.1 shows, the aforementioned affordances of social networking sites are similar in their essence to the four conditions for optimal inter-group contact laid out by Allport (1954).

3.1. Political polarization on social media

Social media can facilitate exposure to cross-cutting information and attitudes shared by weak ties. These contacts are likely to be more diverse and to include political out-groups (Granovetter, 1973). In line with contact theory, the more a person encounters the opinions of weak ties under the optimal inter-group contact conditions (which social media mostly meet per Table 3.1), the more likely they will be less extreme in their positions. Social media create a favorable environment for cross-cutting exposure (Barberá, 2014). Unlike real-life interactions, which mostly take place with strong ties (Gil De Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011), the opinions of the weak-tie circle will be more heterogeneous and, therefore, challenging. Exposure to more heterogeneous information will provide necessary pre-requisites for an individual to go through the process of deliberation, which involves a certain level of understanding, sometimes even compromise towards the out-group.

The fact that social media users are not readers of a specific online media outlet or close friends with the person that often appears on their news feed through shares/retweets, comments, or user reactions, yet they receive information from them, means that there is a higher likelihood that their knowledge, beliefs, and values will be challenged, possibly provoking a debate and, in certain cases, a re-assessment of prior beliefs (Weeks & Holbert, 2013). Facebook news usage has been linked to viewing both pro- and counter-attitudinal news and subsequent depolarization between the strong supporters of the Republican and Democratic parties (Beam, Hutchens, & Hmielowski, 2018). Regardless of whether the exposure to "non-subscribed" information sparks a deliberative process, it is already a basis for challenging one's views. Social media users who see cross-cutting information or opinion on social media have the advantage over similar experiences offline. They are not subject to social pressures while processing this information and are not expected to reply or defend their point of view, unless they are engaged in a public online debate. Therefore, I expect that the difference between how much one likes in-party and how much they dislike the out-party (affective polarization) will be lower for social media users that use them for political information, i.e., political users, than non-political users, as the former are more understanding and possibly sympathetic towards the out-party due to frequent cross-cutting exposure and interaction.

> H1.1: *Political users of social media are affectively less polarized than non-political users and non-users.*

Extant literature has already shown that higher ideological partisanship is associated with higher affective polarization. Moreover, there is some evidence that the interaction of partisanship and social media effects leads to further polarization. Exposure to weak ties and cross-cutting information may further aggravate the attitudes of social media users. For example, Democrats who were exposed to a Twitter bot, posting conservative messages, as well as Republicans who were exposed to a Twitter bot, posting liberal messages, became more liberal and more conservative, respectively (Bail, Argyle, Brown, et al., 2018). Relatively more

heterogeneous online networks are indeed correlated with lower polarization, but this applies only to moderate individuals, as strongly partisan individuals remain partisan even under heterogeneous conditions (Borondo, Morales, Losada, & Benito, 2012; Gruzd & Roy, 2014). It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that the strength of partisanship may hinder the depolarizing effect (if it exists) of cross-cutting exposure on political polarization, as it is unlikely that the partisan individuals would reassess their prior beliefs after such exposure. Therefore, partisan social media users are likely more polarized than non-partisan social media users. Based on the premise that social media facilitate cross-cutting exposure and considering the evidence related to highly partisan individuals, I argue that:

> H1.2: *The more partisan a political user of social media, the higher their affective polarization.*

3.1.1. Other explanatory factors

As discussed in the previous chapter, there are mixed findings pertaining to the role of media in affective polarization. While it is true that most of the democratic world nowadays lives in a high-choice media environment, there is evidence for both like-minded and cross-cutting exposure: some selectively consume like-minded information, some intentionally read, watch, or listen to different political opinions, and most of the people do both of those to a certain degree. Nevertheless, those who avoid cross-cutting information are more affectively polarized (Kim, 2015; Levendusky, 2011; Lu & Lee, 2019a; Stroud, 2010). The argument against the rationality of the previous hypothesis could highlight the fact that partisan media consumers include mainly niche audiences who are not representative of the general population. Nevertheless, even though the audience of partisan media is significantly smaller than that of the mainstream media (LaCour, 2015), these partisan individuals are highly interested and engaged in politics, meaning that they can potentially have an outsize influence on politics, while those who follow mainstream media would not participate in politics as much. Therefore, while I expect that partisan media would polarize the audience, it is important to control for individual-level partisanship and interest in politics to capture the effect that partisan respondents may have on the analysis.

> H1.3: *The higher the exposure to more partisan media, the higher the affective polarization.*

In terms of ideological extremity, the effect is more straightforward. The connection between individuals' left-right self-placement and their electoral choice is more robust in Latin American polarized party systems (Singer, 2016). In the U.S. context, citizens with consistent liberal or conservative views are more polarized (Carmines, Ensley, & Wagner, 2012). It is, therefore, to be expected that (especially in countries with highly polarized party systems)

stronger identification with either left or right will be associated with stronger affective polarization.

> H1.4: *The higher the ideological radicalism of an individual, the higher the affective polarization.*

According to Mutz (2007), several other factors determine whether individuals expose themselves to cross-cutting information:

- **Political knowledge and interest.** The higher both the knowledge and the interest, the lower the exposure to cross-cutting information.

- **Ideological placement.** The more moderate an individual, the higher the exposure to cross-cutting information.

- The more **associations** an individual belongs to, the lower the exposure to cross-cutting information.

It is unclear whether the decline in cross-cutting exposure generated by political knowledge and interest results in higher or lower affective polarization. High political interest can strengthen the effect of right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation, which are correlates of affective polarization (Carrus, Panno, & Leone, 2018). High political knowledge tends to positively affect the individual-level extremity (Herne, Christensen, & Grönlund, 2019). More recent evidence hints at a diverging effect for knowledge and interest, as those who engage in partisan politics in a vibrant yet uninformed way are more affectively polarized (Guedes-Neto, 2022). In terms of political knowledge, the effect may vary, but with regard to political interest:

> H1.5: *The higher the interest in politics, the higher the affective polarization.*

Finally, Mutz (2007) outlines association membership as one of the predictors of cross-cutting exposure. While Mutz found that cross-cutting exposure suffers from the increase in association memberships, her theory is based on the assumption that by interacting with more people in more associations, one gets exposed to a more diverse selection of views. Building up on this theory requires another important assumption: that political conversation is deliberative. Such conversations are characterized by norm-governedness and civility (Schudson, 1997). The conversation should be focused on common issues, and there should be a mutual commitment and responsiveness, a genuine interest in listening to the other participants, which is in line with how Habermas (2015) defines healthy deliberation. Assuming that offline political talk with people of different political views mostly meets the said criteria, I expect that:

> H1.6: *The higher the frequency of political discussions with people of different political views, the lower the affective polarization.*

Aside from the individual-level variables, such as the frequency of cross-cutting discussions or social media use, the level of affective polarization is determined by external factors. People used to be polarized even before the Internet, television, or newspapers. Even then, their political attitudes were not shaped entirely on the individual level. The political processes in the country partially determine the level of polarization of citizens. While democracy implies that elected officials represent their constituents, it is a two-way process in the sense that elected officials also shape public opinion by providing partisan cues (J. N. Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013; Goren, Federico, & Kittilson, 2009). The emergence of digital media has amplified the opportunities for sending partisan cues. Therefore, elites are increasingly affecting public opinion. The more partisan the elites, the more partisan their cues and messages communicated via traditional or social media. Therefore, one could speak of a certain "spill-over" of polarization from elites to the public. This process of individual and country-level variables that shape affective polarization is illustrated in Figure 3.1.
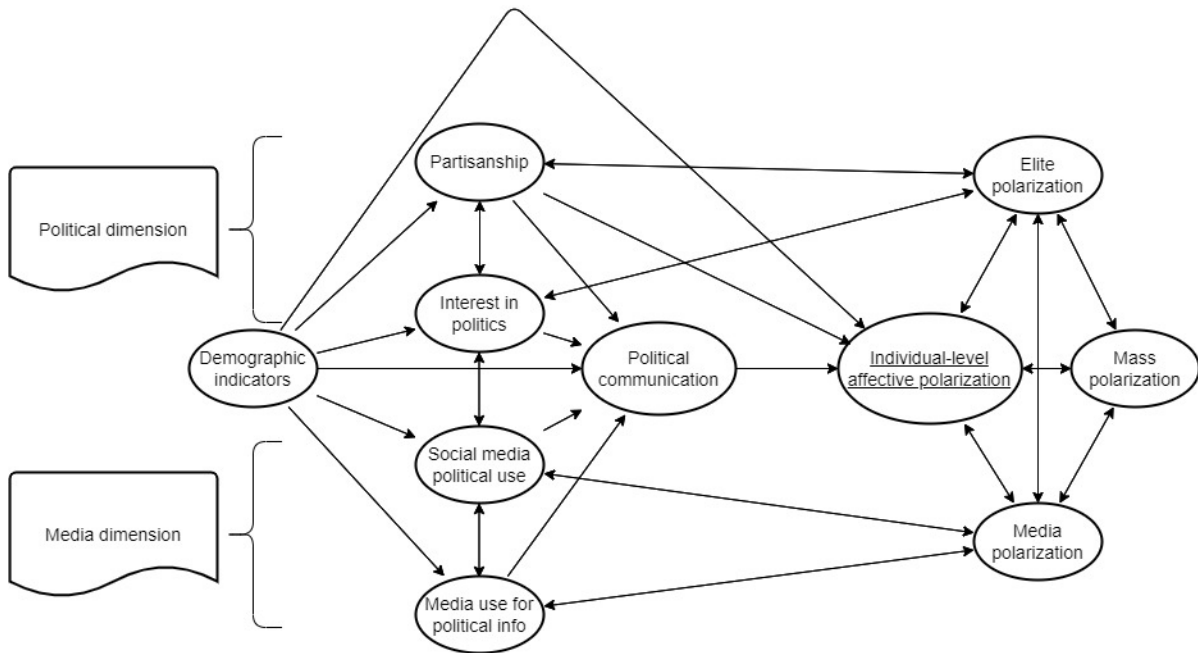
Figure 3.1.: Theoretical flowchart for political polarization

The central line of argument is that individual political communication affects the polarization level. Deliberation between ordinary citizens influences political attitudes and affective polarization (Fishkin, Siu, Diamond, & Bradburn, 2021; Stasavage, 2007). I argue that only diverse, cross-cutting political communication can promote deliberation, which in turn would lead to a decrease in polarization on an individual level. Whether the information one receives is diverse and cross-cutting is determined by partisanship, interest in politics, and information retrieval patterns, which includes the use of traditional, social media, and political communi-

cation (offline or online). These five elements are affected by a set of demographic variables I discuss in the next sub-chapter. Partisanship has a special role in this process, as due to the identity-based nature of affective polarization, it can directly influence the latter while influencing media consumption patterns too.

The final step of the theoretical framework, namely the influence of political communication on affective polarization, would have looked different in the dependent variable were ideological polarization. If this were the case, it would have been reasonable to assume that political communication is followed by the next logical step: deliberation. However, as affective polarization is based on in-group identity, the role of deliberation is weaker. Therefore, I assume that the deliberation process is included in the political communication step. Still, instead of having a separate effect on the dependent variable, it gives way to partisanship as a more important factor that determines the affective polarization level.

Finally, demographic indicators could also have a direct effect on individual-level affective polarization. As citizens in countries like the United States (Mason, 2018) or Germany (Krause & Gagné, 2019) have exhibited some level of social sorting, I expect the individuals in these countries to be more likely to have higher affective enmity towards political opponents simply because they belong to a certain demographic group such as rural residents, believers, black people, people with a higher level of education etc.

3.1.2. Control variables

Age positively correlates with affective polarization. As people age, in-party favorability increases, while out-party favorability remains essentially the same. Over time, observed affective polarization increases because both in-party and out-party favorability decrease, but the decrease in out-party favorability is more dramatic (Phillips, 2022). In addition, studies looking at affective polarization as a dependent variable that controlled for age find a positive effect (Kwak, Lane, Weeks, et al., 2022; van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022). Finally, older people are more prone to engage with fake news, which are in many cases polarizing (Grinberg, Joseph, Friedland, et al., 2019).

Education can mitigate the effect of partisanship on affective polarization (Klar, Krupnikov, & Ryan, 2018). Both in the United States (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) and the United Kingdom (Alabrese, Becker, Fetzer, & Novy, 2018; Hobolt, 2016; Hobolt, Leeper, & Tilley, 2021), less educated people tended to vote in favor of politically more extreme candidates, who based their campaign on fear-mongering the public and smearing their opponents. Less education was also associated with higher vulnerability to fake news and disinformation in Germany (Reuter, Hartwig, Kirchner, & Schlegel, 2019).

Based on ANES 2016 data, women are more affectively polarized than men (Ondercin & Lizotte, 2021). Women also show more affective polarization towards elites, notwithstanding which chamber of Congress is concerned (Banda & Cluverius, 2018). The mechanism through which sex can influence affective polarization can be rooted in the strength of political opin-

ions on various issues. The actualization of topics such as abortion or equal pay could have contributed to stronger opinions among women.

Finally, higher income has been linked with lower polarization (Banda & Cluverius, 2018). Poor economic conditions beget negative emotions and are socially divisive, as the poor feel envy towards those who are rich, while the latter feel scorn towards those who are poor (Hitlin & Harkness, 2018). Some have suggested that reducing economic inequality could decrease affective polarization (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

3.2. Ethnic polarization on social media

Existing evidence on inter-group contact on social media has mixed implications for the attitudes towards ethnic out-groups. On the one hand, social media use might exacerbate ethnocentrism by facilitating people's in-group interactions and occasionally bringing people into polarizing communication with out-groups. On the other hand, the literature shows that there is likely more to the theoretical picture. Suppose we were to assume that contact with out-groups is not predominantly aversive. In that case, inter-ethnic interaction may result in eroding the perceived distinctions between the in-group and out-group and accumulating bridging social capital per the contact theory (Allport, 1954; Hamberger & Hewstone, 1997; Laurence, Schmid, & Hewstone, 2018; Pettigrew, 1998; Putnam, 2007). Under Allport's optimal inter-group contact theory, exposure to out-groups can reduce prejudice and promote political tolerance when four conditions are met: support from authority exists, there are common goals, opportunities for inter-group cooperation occur, and groups enjoy equal status in the context of the interaction (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Social media experiences are too heterogeneous to permit a precise or consistent mapping of these conditions. Still, I argue that, on the whole, social media can fulfill some of Allport's criteria under certain circumstances.

Mainstream social networking sites generally impose terms of service that include rules about hostility, racism, and threats. These are enforced by a credible threat of expulsion from the social media app, although a range of hostility, racism, and threats survive. Terms of service can represent support from authority for pro-social attitudes and behavior toward out-groups. A peripheral market of social media platforms such as Gab and 8kun exists precisely for people who have been expelled from Facebook, Twitter, and other commercially successful social media tools over terms of service violations. Peripheral social media tools explicitly tolerate ethnocentrism and related attitudes, which illustrates that some degree of support from authority for political tolerance and pro-social communication exists on mainstream social media.

The extent to which common goals exist among social media users is less clear. Without question, entertainment, social interaction, and information-seeking dominate most people's purposes for using social media, but each of these categories is imprecise. The more ubiquitous social media have become in people's lives, the more their use has come to reflect the full range

of human goals and activities. Users of some social media sites, such as Twitter, likely have few or no goals in common. Other sites, such as Reddit, are organized around common themes and interests, so goal-sharing is probably higher. Forums, where people share advice or interests in activities may also feature some degree of common goals. Facebook can be considered a middle ground, where a widely shared goal is maintaining ties of friendship among known others but where groups of various kinds may be organized explicitly around common interests or goals.

Where inter-group cooperation is concerned, social media use is related to higher heterogeneity in social connections (J. K. Lee, Choi, Kim, & Kim, 2014), in discussion networks, and in civic engagement (Kim, Hsu, & de Zúñiga, 2013). In addition, social media provide necessary tools (e.g., groups, chats, events) for creating cooperation, which may be aimed at addressing a plethora of issues starting from job-related tasks to political protests. While social media tools are often infamous for uncivil and uncooperative behavior, they can also facilitate cooperation.

The fourth Allport criterion, formal equality, is intriguing in social media. Social media apps are generally free for people who have born the cost of a phone or mobile device, which are nearly ubiquitous. Income-dependent or education-dependent status signals or communication opportunities are generally not present: anyone can engage with social media. No formal tiers of membership or status distinctions are built into tools such as Facebook and Twitter. The opportunity to use pseudonyms and conceal appearance can provide an equalizing influence by removing status cues (Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006). To be sure, not all people enjoy an equal treatment by others or are free of the inhibiting and harmful effects of racism, sexism, and other forms of social bias, including ethnocentrism. However, social media provide opportunities for a degree of equality that matches or exceeds many face-to-face contexts.

In addition to optimal inter-group contact conditions laid out by Allport, deliberative democracy theory expects a political discussion to be public, inclusive, and sincere, as well as to ensure equal communication rights for participants for healthy deliberation to occur (Habermas, 2015). As inter-group contact would likely imply communication with weak ties, the publicity of discussions can be taken for granted. Social media users are unlikely to communicate with people that disagree with them privately regularly. Therefore, most of the inter-group contact probably occurs in comments sections or group discussions, either completely public (page comments) or partially public (closed/private group discussion comments).

Inclusiveness and sincerity cannot be assumed, especially considering the literature on incivility on social media (Hwang, Kim, & Huh, 2014; Theocharis, Barberá, Fazekas, & Popa, 2020; Theocharis, Barberá, Fazekas, et al., 2016). Therefore, it is important to control for other factors that may serve as proxies for inclusiveness and sincerity, such as partisanship level and education.

The last criterion of Habermas' definition of healthy political deliberation stands for equal communication rights for participants. This can be conceptualized identically to formal equality within an inter-group contact, the fourth Allport criterion.

The proposition that social media use can, under the right circumstances, facilitate tolerance toward out-groups is supported by research showing that users who are exposed to cross-cutting information are less likely to derogate outsiders (Mutz, 2007; Parsons, 2010; Sheagley, 2019). This can be attributed to the fact that exposure to out-groups occurs under conditions meeting some of the Allport criteria (Bodrunova, Blekanov, Smoliarova, & Litvinenko, 2019). In contact theory, exposure is a necessary prerequisite for improving inter-ethnic attitudes. Social media also facilitate ties with people who are geographically or culturally distant (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Gil De Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011) and have been shown to contribute to the accumulation of social capital (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). Despite early speculative concerns with 'echo chambers' as well as the existence of extremist venues online, research shows that in general social media afford the large majority of people a substantial degree of cross-cutting exposure, often inadvertent in nature (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Matassi, 2017; Boulianne, Koc-Michalska, & Bimber, 2020; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017, 2018; Lu & Lee, 2019b; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). This suggests that to the extent social media use facilitates cross-cutting interactions (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, et al., 2015) and exposure to diverse news (Silver, Huang, & Taylor, 2019) it can reduce ethnocentrism. Especially in light of the empirical debunking of the 'echo-chamber' theory, I expect that the social media use effect tends to work towards a decrease in ethnocentrism. I state this expectation of a net effect in terms of differences between people who do and do not use social media. The given expectation rests on the important assumption that the reasons people adopt social media are unrelated to pre-existing ethnocentric attitudes.

H2.1: *Social media users are less ethnocentric than non-social media users.*

3.2.1. Other explanatory factors

Media reports about ethnically distinct immigrants tend to prime racial attitudes among Americans (Valentino, Brader, & Jardina, 2013; van Klingeren, Boomgaarden, Vliegenthart, & de Vreese, 2015). Considering the salience of immigration in recent years in Europe (Hinger, Daphi, & Stern, 2019; Lewandowsky, Schwanholz, Leonhardt, & Blätte, 2022) and the salience of racial injustice in the United States (P. J. Dixon & Dundes, 2020), it is likely that the media reports would have activated racial and possibly ethnocentric attitudes in the period where the data analyzed in this dissertation were collected (2017-2018). The existing literature points to the tone of reporting about immigration as one of the main factors which moderate the effect of media use on ethnocentric attitudes. Nevertheless, although the tone of reporting may vary longitudinally within countries and cross-sectionally between countries, the salience of immigration can activate more hostile attitudes towards ethnic out-groups (Boer & van Tubergen, 2019; Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009; Czymara & Dochow, 2018).

Outside of social media, i.e., newspapers (offline and online) and TV, priming of readers' or viewers' attitudes is more likely, as additional social cues are rarely involved. In contrast,

while getting news from social media, the information is more likely to have passed through the "filter" of social cues, exemplified by a caption, comment, or a reaction by some other known social media user. Therefore, I expect racial and ethnocentric attitudes to get activated only when traditional media (TV, news- papers, and online news websites) are concerned.

H2.2: *The higher the traditional media use, the higher the ethnocentrism.*

While the section above described the potential of social networking sites to generate more tolerant attitudes towards ethnic out-groups via facilitating inter-group contact between ethnic groups, it is also important to control for direct inter-ethnic contact. Such contact, under optimal circumstances, can decrease prejudices and pave the way to more tolerant attitudes towards out-groups (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). As mentioned earlier, Allport's theory of optimal inter-group contact is based on four conditions: support from an authority, common goals, opportunities for inter-group cooperation, and equal status of groups. It is noteworthy that possibilities of inter-ethnic contact have significantly increased since the optimal inter-group contact theory first emerged. Nowadays, it is rather a rule than an exception if two different ethnic groups in a democratic society come in contact with equal status, common goals (i.e., at work), and support from authority (equality under the law). For the reasons outlined above, such contact would be another predictor of lower ethnocentrism, and it would be a more direct contact than the one that could take place on social networking sites.

H2.3: *The higher the frequency of direct contact with other ethnic groups, the lower the ethnocentrism.*

The interpersonal and media dimensions of the theoretical framework need to be separated to differentiate the effect of real-life contact from the indirect contact via media (Figure 3.2). The latter, due to media framing, would almost certainly imply a particular bias. Therefore it is qualitatively different from the inter-personal contact. Nevertheless, they work together in shaping the attitudes about ethnic out-group. Social media combine the two types of contact in that they also serve as means of interpersonal communication while exposing users to media content as well.

The three sources of receiving information about ethnic out-groups determine the overall picture, i.e., the way an individual sees ethnic out-groups. Unlike the political polarization theoretical mechanism, which also implies elite polarization to affect the level of affective polarization, I omit this factor for ethnic polarization as there can be no hierarchy between the ethnic "elites" and "non-elites." Nevertheless, the remaining two external factors such as mass inter-ethnic polarization (analogous to mass polarization) and ethnic polarization in media play a role in defining the context in which the level of ethnocentrism is shaped. Environments/-countries with a higher level of inter-ethnic enmity would harbor a higher level of individual ethnocentrism. In addition, ethnically polarized media environment, in which there is a higher degree of external pluralism in terms of ethnic attitudes, the individuals exposed directly or

indirectly to such media environment would tend to think of inter-ethnic enmity as being normal.

In what I expect to be the same theoretical link as in the case of affective polarization, demographic indicators also influence ethnocentrism. However, as I demonstrate in the next sub-chapter, the link between demographic indicators and ethnic polarization is even more vivid than in the one between demographic indicators and affective polarization.
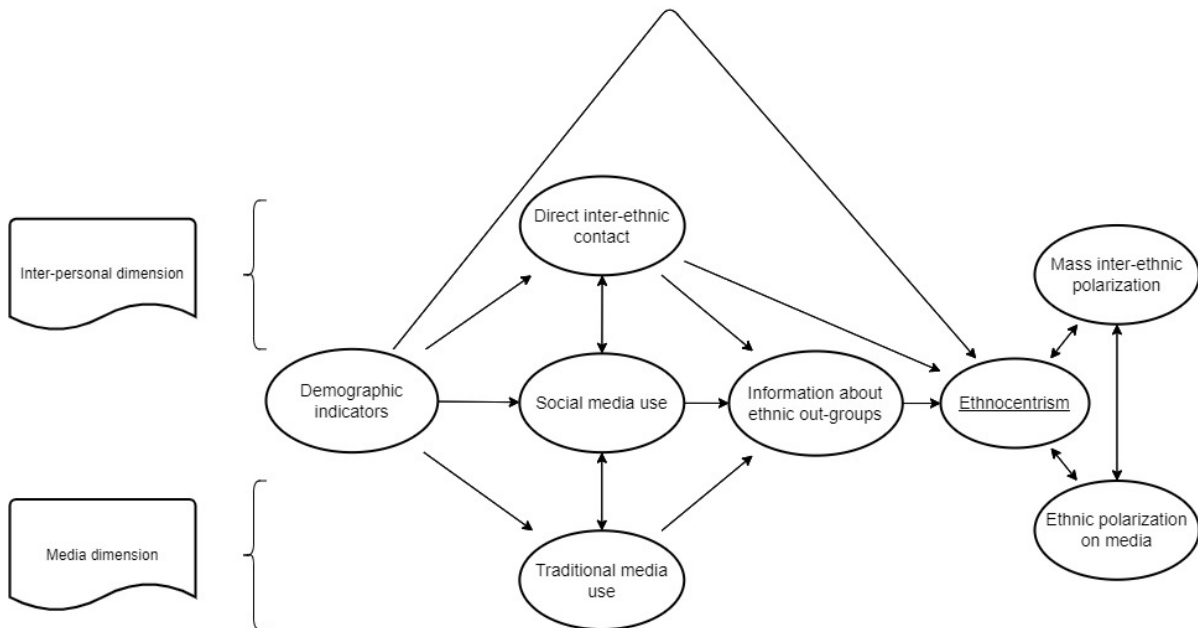

Figure 3.2.: Theoretical flowchart for ethnic polarization

3.2.2. Control variables

While assessing the role of (social) media requires having media-related variables in the analysis, it is important to control for the ethnic or racial identity of the respondent in the first place, as it may be decisive in determining their attitude towards the immigration and inter-ethnic relations issues. Respondents' race may also predict the difference between in-group and out-group evaluations. For example, in the United States, both White and Black respondents rate in-group members higher than out-group members, with the difference being more significant for Blacks (Ryan, Hunt, Weible, et al., 2007).

Religious upbringing (Altemeyer, 1998), protestant ethic (I. Katz & Hass, 1988), and education (Raden, 2003) are all correlated with ethnocentrism. Edgell and Tranby (2007) find that gender and education shape the effects of religious conservatism on attitudes toward racial inequality among whites. The effect of religion is, however, different for African Americans and Hispanic Americans than they are for whites. Finally, across all religious subcultures, the

authors find that the more religiously involved have less progressive views on racial equality than those less involved. Education is associated with lower support for racial inequality. At the same time, women are less supportive of it, except of conservative Protestant or orthodox women, who are more supportive of racial inequality. Therefore, religious belonging, gender, and education need to be controlled for in the analysis. One cannot, however, test the effect of religion without accounting for ethnicity, as there are varying effects even among evangelical Christians: White evangelicals demonstrate more conservative views than non-White (Wong, 2018).

Right-wing ideology has been linked to more negative attitudes toward various groups, such as foreigners (Altemeyer, 1996), and Black Americans and Jews (Horton, 2001). Several studies include other control variables such as age and income. Previous studies have shown that perceived out-group threat increases with age (Schlueter & Davidov, 2013; Vergeer, Lubbers, & Scheepers, 2000). Income, or concerns about economic conditions in the country, has traditionally been a weaker predictor of anti-immigrant attitudes compared to ethnocultural concerns (Citrin, Green, Muste, & Wong, 1997; Sides & Citrin, 2007). However it is nevertheless an important factor that needs to be accounted for. Finally, studies of consumer ethnocentrism show demographic correlates include gender as well, as females tend to rate foreign-made products more favorably than males (Good & Huddleston, 1995).

3.3. Research design

An important shortcoming in political polarization research is that most studies are based on evidence from the United States (Boulianne, 2019). In notable exceptions when comparative approach is used, the countries concerned are either in North America or in the EU. Similarities between the U.S. and the EU contexts exist. Left-right and liberal-conservative split can also be observed in the European Union countries (Barberá, 2015; Gschwend, Lo, & Proksch, 2010; Wendler, 2016). EU countries (especially Germany) are also divided on issues such as immigration and how a welfare state should address its challenges. However, comparative studies have also demonstrated numerous prospects for future research by revealing differences between countries or groups of countries. A multilevel analysis of representative surveys in 26 European countries showed that the partisan perception gap is larger in countries with more polarized media systems (Dalen, 2021). A 5% increase in exposure to diversity predicts a decrease in political extremism in the United States but not in Germany or Spain (Barberá, 2014). Other studies employing a comparative approach, with rare exceptions (Kelly Garrett, Gvirsman, Johnson, et al., 2014; M. Wagner, 2021), do not study the affective aspect of polarization, as in the European context researchers mostly focus on ideological polarization (Baylis, 2012; Crosson & Tsebelis, 2021; König, Marbach, & Osnabrügge, 2013; Melki & Pickering, 2014; Winkler, 2019). This provides a very narrow window for generalizing the findings on other countries with different party systems, cultures, social media use patterns, etc. There is rela-

tively limited evidence from European countries regarding political polarization and even less from non-Western countries, with most of the literature focusing on the American politics and the Democrat-Republican split.

Cross-country differences complicate the formulation of a solid theoretical statement. Such a statement cannot be based on evidence from only one country, especially from the United States, which has a different party system from most of the European countries. An improved approach would entail studying groups of countries with the similar party or media systems. To achieve this, one first needs to identify the groups of countries with similar properties by showing their apparent differences. Moreover, the diversity of media systems and social media use patterns should be utilized. Therefore, this study embarks on an exploratory study of inter-group attitudes and (social) media in three different country contexts:

- **United States**: a polarized two-party system. Part of the liberal media system, which also includes the United Kingdom, Canada, and Ireland (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

- **Germany**: a pluralist multi-party system. Part of the Democratic Corporatist model, which includes Nordic countries, Belgium, the Netherlands, and DACH countries (Germany, Austria, Switzerland) (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

- **Georgia**: a hybrid regime with a multi-party system but with signs of state capture (Pleines, 2019a). Similar to the Polarized Pluralist media system, which includes France, Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal (Kuprashvili, 2019).

Besides the differences in party and media systems, as well as social media use patterns, I also argue that cultural variables could contribute to the relationship between social media use and polarization. Social media use in consolidated democracies and hybrid regimes might have different effects, as consolidated democracies (United States, Germany) are more individualistic, which is associated with the widespread post-materialist values in the West. Higher individualism could facilitate openness to different opinions and social media create a favorable environment to that end. A fitting illustration of this is that individuals in individualistic countries do not avoid association memberships, public meetings etc., where they may also engage in deliberation and potentially alter their pre-existing opinion. On the other hand, in the countries of the South Caucasus, which are still undergoing the shift from materialist to post-materialist values (i.e., Georgia), the accumulation of such "bridging" social capital is undermined by informal practices (Aliyev, 2014, 2015; Hough, 2011) which results in high in-group favoritism, high out-group mistrust, and subsequently, lower cross-cutting everyday exposure. Therefore, lower individualism and the a priori mistrust towards out-groups could hinder the likelihood of revising one's attitudes, thereby making the networks on sites like Facebook more homogeneous for citizens in such countries, i.e., Georgia. An alternative assumption could be that people in Georgia, due to the limited opportunities offline, compensate for the lack of such cross-cutting exposure online, namely on social networking sites, where

political conversations are facilitated by more secure and equal conditions. This way, they would create a more fertile ground for deliberation for themselves, aware of the homogeneity of their surroundings. While the subsequent analysis will not be able to show whether such cross-country differences exist due to a lack of comparable data, these factors should be considered in any cross-country or cross-regional analysis. Such a comparative approach would shed more light on hitherto understudied geographic or cultural regions.

The situation is different in the case of ethnic polarization. While affective polarization has mainly been studied in the United States context, the studies of ethnic polarization, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism predominantly arose in European academia (Gumplowicz, 1883; Sumner, 1906). This has paved the way for the extant literature on ethnocentric attitudes in contemporary European socio-political research (Asimovic, Nagler, Bonneau, & Tucker, 2021; Bekhuis, Ruiter, & Coenders, 2013; Evans & Need, 2002), whereas the U.S. studies of ethnicity-based inter-group polarization predominantly focus on racial discrimination (Kinder & Kam, 2010; Tynes, Rose, & Markoe, 2013). The subsequent analysis will not directly compare the U.S. context with German or Georgian one. Instead, it will provide a clear outlook of how much the country's context can define the understanding of ethnicity, not just the effect of social media use on ethnic polarization. This exploratory aspect of this dissertation will hopefully serve as a prospect for future research, especially in the understudied regions of the world.

To conclude, this dissertation studies the effect of social media use on political (affective) and ethnic polarization in three countries that differ by political and media systems and social media use patterns. The empirical analysis will combine six exploratory case studies: three countries and two types of polarization each.

4. Case selection, data, and methodology

4.1. Case selection

This dissertation studies three countries: the United States, Germany, and Georgia. In all three cases the correlation between social media and political and ethnic polarization is studied. This results in a total of six case studies. The cases are selected based on the differences in political and ethnic polarization patterns, party systems, and media systems. The extensively studied American two-party democracy has been traditionally viewed as a highly polarized political system. The German multi-party system has contrasted this with a strong parliamentarian history. Against this background, the case of Georgia stands out as significantly less studied. It has a comparable political polarization level with the United States and is formally a multi-party democracy, even though it has been traditionally considered a hybrid regime (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021; Freedom House, 2022).

Contrary to the extant literature on the advantages of the multi-party regimes in avoiding political polarization, the three cases do not differ much by affective polarization level when the measure of affective polarization from the survey data is concerned. In the U.S. and Georgian cases, the right edges of the dependent variable distributions do not show a strong tendency towards a decrease, unlike the histogram on political polarization in Germany, which resembles normal distribution (Figure 4.1). Nevertheless, mean levels of standardized affective polarization are very close in the three cases. As mentioned earlier, to compare the means of three dependent variables from three different data sets, I normalized the values between zero and one. After normalization, the mean affective polarization level is 0.51 in the United States. In Germany, tbe mean MPAP is at 0.49, while in Georgia, it equals 0.53. Medians are at 0.55, 0.53, and 0.47, respectively. Skewness and kurtosis of the standardized measures of affective polarization are within normal boundaries in all three cases.

While descriptive statistics provide some information, they must be taken with great caution as survey questions are subject to social desirability bias, respondent bias, underreporting, and overreporting. Only a multifaceted approach could provide a complete picture.

Unlike political polarization, there are no comparable indices for ethnic polarization. Therefore, one can only speak of ethnicity or race issues within the countries without much room for comparison. Racial inequality in the United States, anti-refugee movements in Germany, and anti-immigrant protests in Georgia merely serve as indicators of some degree of ethnocentrism.

According to the survey data used for analysis in the given dissertation, Germany has the
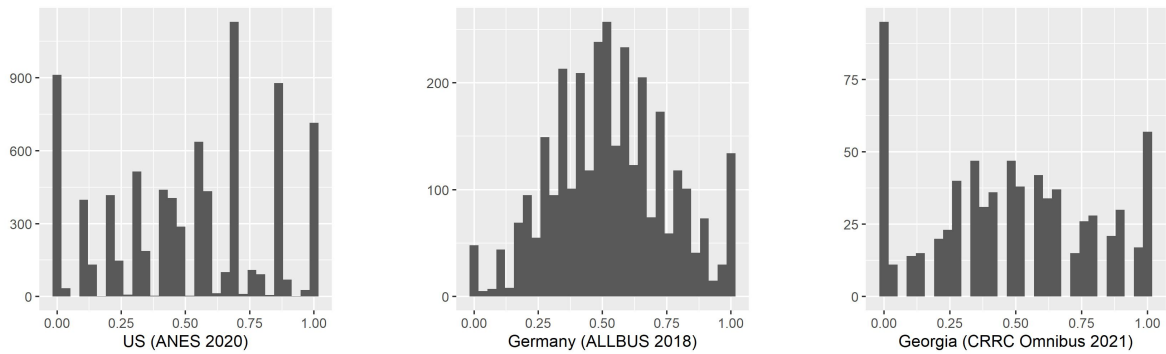
Figure 4.1.: Histograms of affective political polarization

highest level of ethnic polarization, corresponding to 0.48 on a standardized scale with a range from zero to one. Georgia comes second with a score of 0.46, followed by the United States with a score of 0.36. In terms of median, Germany and Georgia are at 0.50, while the United States is at 0.39. Skewness and kurtosis of the ethnic polarization variables are within normal boundaries as well.
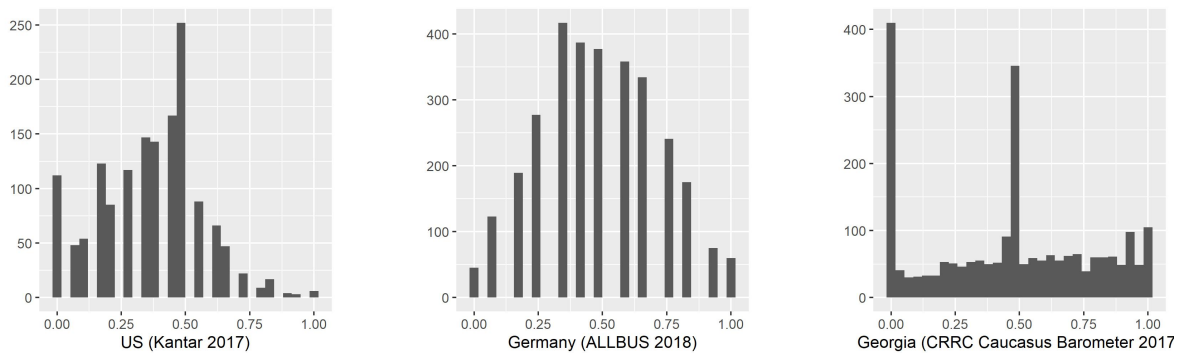
Figure 4.2.: Histograms of ethnic polarization

Here, too, one needs to be very careful in interpreting the numerical differences, as the biases outlined for political polarization are also present for ethnic polarization, even to a greater degree. While survey respondents may feel more comfortable voicing their honest position toward political opponents, the attitudes towards people of different ethnic background or race are subject to higher motivation to control prejudice (Chen, Moons, Gaither, et al., 2014; Steen-Johnsen & Winsvold, 2020).

4.1.1. United States

The United States is an extensively studied case of affective polarization. Compared with Germany and Georgia, it is a benchmark case as it is usually seen as a highly polarized country.

The partisan perception gap is larger in countries with more polarized media systems (Dalen, 2021), and more selective news repertoires are more prominent in countries characterized by higher levels of polarization (Tóth, Mihelj, Štětka, & Kondor, 2022). Therefore, despite the similarities mentioned above in the mean level of self-reported political polarization across the three countries of interest, the United States is widely seen as a highly polarized political system (Barber & McCarty, 2015). Whether this polarization is relayed to the electorate has been a matter of debate (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2010).

In polarized countries, hostility and partisanship undermine the benefits of political discussions by limiting personal freedoms and promoting stereotypes and disrespect for different opinions (Hwang, Kim, & Huh, 2014; Popan, Coursey, Acosta, & Kenworthy, 2019). While passionate disagreement is considered a deliberative opportunity for online communication, it is hostility, including anger, contempt, disgust, frustration, and hate, that violates the norms of deliberative conversations: something that frequently happens on the Internet and social media (Müller & Schwarz, 2018; Oz, Zheng, & Chen, 2018; Settle, 2018; Theocharis, Barberá, Fazekas, & Popa, 2020). In addition, the affective polarization scores of 20 Western polities between 1996 and 2015, calculated based on Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) data, show that the United States scores higher than Germany (Gidron, Adams, & Horne, 2019). The data analyzed in the dissertation has been collected after 2015, so it will complement the existing evidence with newer data.

There is a connection between political and ethnic polarization in the United States to a certain extent. The U.S. population has been increasingly sorting itself along party lines by various demographic indicators, including race and ethnicity (Mason, 2018). The results from the U.S. case and the other two cases can show whether one could view inter-ethnic conflict in a similar vein in different contexts, thereby creating a ground for comparative work. Lastly, due to the salience of race in the past and present of the United States, self-reported ethnic polarization could suffer from social desirability bias.

4.1.2. Germany

Political polarization in Germany has been studied quite extensively, too. However, these studies have been mainly linked to ideological polarization, not affective one. This can be attributed to a different process of social cleavage emergence in Germany and the United States. According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), in Germany (as well as in Austria and Scandinavian countries), partisanship has traditionally been linked to ideology and social class, more than to religion or ethnicity, hinting at low social sorting and that polarization may have less affective basis compared to the United States. Germany is thus referred to as a moderate case of "power-sharing" political systems, whereas the United States represents a "majoritarian" system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Wessler & Rinke, 2014). Nevertheless, these results must be taken with caution, as they come from the period when there was no popular openly far-right party in Germany. Since the emergence of AfD as a far-right party (2014) and its election

into the *Bundestag* (German parliament) for the first time (2017), negative sentiments of and towards AfD supporters could have contributed to an increase in affective polarization. Online experiments conducted as early as October 2017 show that the in-group/out-group attitudes are the most polarized in terms of party allegiance, while there is no evidence for ethnic polarization (Helbling & Jungkunz, 2020). Survey-based evidence also displays AfD-centered affective polarization, but Germany's overall affective polarization level remains low (Hudde, 2022).

Besides the differences in political systems, the United States and Germany also differ in their media systems, particularly in terms of broadcasting. Commercialized and decidedly slanted channels such as Fox News in the United States are in stark contrast to the European balanced public broadcasting that aims to provide a broad spectrum of political information and presents more diverse political viewpoints (Aalberg, Van Aelst, & Curran, 2010; Esser, De Vreese, Strömbäck, et al., 2012; Semetko, 1996; Wessler & Rinke, 2014). Although U.S. journalism is traditionally more associated with impartiality than German journalism (Donsbach, 2009; Esser & Umbricht, 2013; Hallin & Mancini, 2004), current American news media markets have become exceedingly competitive, motivating news media to cater to niche audiences through decidedly slanted coverage and commentary (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010). Contemporary German media is characterized by low partisan bias and pluralism. Media outlets' partisan bias is nearly equally distributed on both sides of the ideological center, with a slight right-wing skew (Dewenter, Dulleck, & Thomas, 2016). Hallin and Mancini (2004) explain low partisanship in the post-WW2 German media with Allies' attempts to "denazify" Germany by only issuing licenses to the newspapers linked to individuals with a clear anti-Nazi stance.

Finally, the social media environment in Germany is also less polarized in Germany than in the United States. Foremost, Germany is behind the United States in terms of Facebook and Twitter use, with only 31% of the population using Facebook and 9% using Twitter, as compared to 54% and 23% in the United States (Table 4.1). This could indicate that the subset of the German population which uses Facebook or Twitter is less polarized than the one in the United States, as the higher number of users could imply the existence of more diverse opinions. German online users resort to the less selective exposure and are subject to less confirmation bias than Americans (Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, Johnson, et al., 2015). Most German Facebook news pages are distributed around the ideological center (Garz, Sörensen, & Stone, 2020). German Twittersphere is less polarized than the American one (Urman, 2020). Twitter discussions of the 2015 Cologne New Year's Eve sexual assaults were a notable exception from this trend, as the German Twittersphere showed stark polarization around this issue, with users falling into the groups of nationalists and anti-nationalists (Bodrunova, Blekanov, Smoliarova, & Litvinenko, 2019).

The close connection of AfD and the issue of immigration raises the question: what determines the ethnocentric attitude towards ethnically distinct immigrants? Are these the same variables that predict affective polarization? Do the effects vary between the cases of Germany

Table 4.1.: Active Facebook/Twitter users as % of the population (We Are Social, 2022).

	Facebook	**Twitter**
United States	54%	23%
Germany	31%	9%
Georgia	68%	4%

and the United States?

4.1.3. Georgia

In contrast to the extensively studied cases of the United States and Germany, the case of Georgia offers the potential to apply the analysis results outside of the Western consolidated democracies. The effects of heterogeneity depend on the level of democracy. Ethnic heterogeneity, for instance, reduces interpersonal trust in established democracies, but it stimulates interest in and conversation about politics in weak democracies (Anderson & Paskeviciute, 2006). Due to the diverging effects of heterogeneity on political discussions, I assume that the effects of political social media use (a sign of increased political heterogeneity) will have stronger effect on political and ethnic polarization in Georgia (weak democracy) than in the United States or Germany (strong democracies). The effect's direction could be positive and negative depending on whether political discussions are deliberative and based on mutual respect, which is more likely to occur in weak communitarian democracies, as outlined in the previous section.

Another reason for including Georgia as a case is that its party system shares the features with the two-party systems, such as the United States, and the multi-party systems, such as Germany. The current convocation of the Parliament of Georgia is based on the outcome of the 2020 parliamentary election, which saw eight political parties get seats in the national legislative body. However, as of 2022, after the 2020-21 Georgian political crisis, there are only two political groups in the parliament that are big enough to be called factions: Georgian Dream (80 MPs) and (2) United National Movement - United Opposition Strength in Unity (28 MPs). The remaining members of the parliament either belong to *political groups* that vary from two to five MPs, or are independents who do not belong to any political group or faction (18 MPs, mostly former members of the ruling party or the opposition). Therefore, while Georgia is a multi-party system, as there are more than two parties in the parliament, it is effectively a two-party system (Gallagher, 2021). There is, however, a solid case for state capture in Georgia, as the ruling party is essentially a tool for its leader's pursuit of his personal goals (Transparency International Georgia, 2020). The state capture allows the oligarch Ivanishvili to prevent significant political changes by weakening the control and oversight of his (informal) rule (Pleines, 2019a). Fair elections, functional legislative and judiciary, and transparency cannot be taken for granted in the Georgian case. This puts the country in a stark contrast with

the United States and Germany (Chikhladze, Kakhidze, & Natroshvili, 2018; Transparency International Georgia, 2020).

Media in Georgia follow the bipartisan parliamentary divide and show strong signs of polarization (Kavtaradze, 2021). This is in line with the recent evidence from other Eastern European countries showing that more selective news repertoires are prominent in countries characterized by higher levels of polarization (Tóth, Mihelj, Štětka, & Kondor, 2022). Academic research about the effect of social networking sites on political (or ethnic) polarization in Georgia is practically non-existent. Nevertheless, it represents a distinct case which can shed light on the effect of social media in hybrid regimes/weak democracies. While the effect of social media in consolidated democracies as well as autocracies (Breuer, 2012; Kalathil & Boas, 2010; Ruijgrok, 2017; Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts, & Barberá, 2017; Weidmann & Rød, 2019) has been studied to a certain degree, the countries in the middle have largely been understudied. In terms of active social media use per capita, Georgia is ahead of the United States and Germany. Even though the United States has more Twitter users per capita than Georgia, a closer look at the data reveals that most of the Twitter users are users of both Facebook and Twitter, meaning that the share of people who use either Facebook or Twitter in Georgia is higher than in the United States with a very high degree of certainty. It is also likely that the social media environment is not immune from the omnipresent political polarization in Georgian society. For instance, a Georgian online discussion forum has demonstrated a high degree of toxicity (Lashkarashvili & Tsintsadze, 2022). Pre-election monitoring in 2020 also revealed an extensive use of manipulation, disinformation, and hate speech on Facebook, which mostly targeted the opposition and, to a lesser degree, the government (Kintsurashvili, 2020).

Georgia has experienced the rise of far-right in recent years (Gordon, 2020). The cornerstone of the Georgian far-right is conservative values, and protests against the freedom of expression of LGBTQ people are evidence of it (Geguchadze & Urushadze, 2021), but also xenophobic rhetoric towards immigrants from Turkey or the Middle East (Stephan, 2018). Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG), the first openly xenophobic party (at least since 1993), only emerged in the mid-2010s and entered the parliament for the first time after the 2016 parliamentary election, surpassing the minimal electoral threshold of 5% by 0.01%. The support of far-right attitudes in Georgia is not correlated with education or unemployment, contrary to the usual expectations, but anti-American and anti-NATO sentiments both correlate positively with the support for the APG (Stephan, 2018). These results need to be put into perspective. Similarities and differences need to be outlined. In what follows, I will discuss the political and ethnic polarization cases in each of the three countries. In the final chapter, however, I will point out the key findings within and between the studied cases.

4.2. Data

The subsequent analysis will test whether social media use can be associated with lower polarization both politically and ethnically. The study employs survey data from the three countries of interest. Six data sets (one per country and type of polarization) are analyzed using a linear regression approach. In some cases, different operationalizations of dependent or independent variables are used to test the robustness of the results.

Three data sets include a political polarization measure: American National Election Studies (ANES) 2020, German General Social Survey (ALLBUS) 2018, and Caucasus Research Resources Center (CRRC) Omnibus Survey 2021. In the German case, ALLBUS includes both political and ethnic polarization measures, but for checking the robustness of the political polarization model, the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) 2017 will also be used. The measures for affective polarization are given below:

- In the **United States** the dependent variable is measured as the absolute difference between the numeric responses of two feeling thermometer items: (1) How would you rate the Democratic Party? Enter number 0-100; (2) How would you rate the Republican Party? Enter the number from 0 to 100. On the scale, 0 corresponds to the most negative rating, while 100 corresponds to the most positive one.

- In **Germany**, the dependent variable, which I label as multi-party affective polarization (MPAP) is measured as the difference between the most preferred party score on a feeling thermometer and the average score of the remaining parties. The feeling thermometer items are as follows: "What do you think, in general, about the particular political parties? Please respond in accordance with the scale. -5 means that you do not like the party at all, +5 means that you like the party a lot. You can grade your opinion with the values in-between" (translated from German). The list of the parties included CDU, CSU, SPD, the Left, the Greens, FDP, and AfD. To test the robustness of the findings, alternative operationalization of affective polarization is also employed, namely two-party affective polarization (TPAP). This measure only considers the thermometer scores of the two largest parties when data were collected: CDU/CSU and SPD.

- In **Georgia**, the approach is identical to the one used in German case: the dependent variable is MPAP, and the alternative measure is TPAP. The item used to derive the measure is as follows: "What is your attitude towards the following political parties or unions? Do you strongly dislike, rather dislike, rather like, or strongly like them" (translated from Georgian)? The response options included eight parties. Only the scores of the two biggest parties, GD and UNM, are used to derive TPAP.

I chose in-party and out-party like-dislike scores as a measure of affective polarization due to their wide application, especially in cross-national comparative studies (Gidron, Adams, &

Horne, 2018; M. Wagner, 2021). Many studies use a weighted affective polarization measure, which accounts for the vote share of the party in the last election (Boxell, Gentzkow, & Shapiro, 2020; Reiljan, 2020). 2020). However, I did not find this measure precise enough due to placing too much emphasis on the vote share and downgrading the importance of out-party hate, especially for the supporters of big parties. Therefore, I use an unweighted affective polarization measure in accordance with Renström (2021): I take the respondent's score for their most preferred party (MPP), calculate the average like-score for the remaining parties (out-party affect), and code the difference between the two as the individual affective polarization measure. If the respondent gives two or more MPPs identical scores, only one is taken, and the other(s) ends up in the out-party affect. Finally, I normalize all three measures of affective polarization between zero and one using a min-max method (Equation 4.1). While this does not allow a direct comparison across the three cases due to different data sources, it brings the measurements to a standard scale and facilitates the interpretation of results.

$$x_{scaled} = \frac{x - x_{min}}{x_{max} - x_{min}} \tag{4.1}$$

The remaining three data sets include ethnocentrism items: Kantar Survey 2017 (United States), ALLBUS 2018 (same as the one used for political polarization in Germany), and CRRC Caucasus Barometer 2017 (Georgia). Both Kantar and ALLBUS data sets include three items measuring ethnocentrism, Caucasus Barometer only has two. The ethnocentrism measures for each case study are given below:

- In the case of **United States**, ethnocentrism is measured by taking the average from reversed scales of the following three items: (1) I would be very happy for a member of my family to marry a person from a different cultural or ethnic group; (2) Our cultural or ethnic group is not more deserving and valuable than others, and (3) I do not prefer members of my own cultural or ethnic group to others. The response options include numbers from 1 to 7, with higher numbers initially corresponding to a higher level of agreement with the statement. However, as I reversed the response scales, the higher value corresponds to higher ethnocentrism for all three items.

- In the case of **Germany**, ethnocentrism is measured via the following items: (1) Foreigners should always marry people from their own ethnic group; (2) Immigrants should be required to adapt to German customs and traditions; and (3) The influx of refugees to Germany should be stopped. The response options include numbers from -2 to 2, with the higher number corresponding to the higher level of ethnocentrism.

- In the case of **Georgia**, the data set includes two items measuring attitudes towards ethnic in-group and out-groups: (1) Would you approve or disapprove of people of your ethnicity doing business with [various ethnic groups] and (2) Would you approve or disapprove of women of your ethnicity marrying an [various ethnic groups]. Response

options included *no* and *yes*, which I re-coded to zero and one. Both items came with a list of 16 ethnic groups, so respondents had to assess their attitudes towards each ethnic group in the context of business and marriage. The list of ethnic groups also included ethnic in-groups, such as Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, etc. I matched each respondent's ethnic self-identification with their ethnic in-group score in both items and averaged them. Finally, to derive the ethnocentrism score, I averaged the attitudes towards the remaining groups (on business and marriage) and calculated the difference between the in-group and out-group average scores.

4.3. Methodology

As mentioned in the theoretical framework chapter, the lack of a single data set combining all three countries is a problem for comparability of the cases: the measures of affective and, especially, ethnic polarization vary greatly, and the data were collected in different years. Still, I approximated measures as much as possible. Comparisons across countries, if at all, can be done with caution and keeping the diverging measurements and data sources in mind. Depending on the results of the empirical analysis across three very different party systems, media systems, and social media use patterns, it would only lend preliminary support to the robustness of the theory. However, it will still need to be tested using a single data set, which would ideally combine all three countries and have identical measures for the dependent and independent variables. This is in line with a comparative research design suggested by Norris (2009), which focuses "in depth upon a few selected case studies, ideally illustrating broader theoretical frameworks and conceptual typologies".

The comparison in terms of political polarization is hindered by different political systems, in which polarization is challenging to measure similarly. In an attempt to approximate the measures as much as possible, besides standardizing the scale, I am also running an analysis in the multi-party systems (Germany, Georgia) using two-party affective polarization (TPAP) and multi-party affective polarization measures (MPAP). The former excludes all other parties except the two largest ones. In Georgia, TPAP is close to the real distribution of power among the political parties. However, in Germany, this measure potentially ignores at least 47% of votes received by other parties, as only the most preferred and the least preferred parties are considered. Therefore, TPAP should be understood as the primary (and the only) measure in the United States, MPAP in Germany, and rather MPAP in Georgia. This excludes any direct comparability, but it ensures minimal data loss and an accurate description of the country context.

Comparatively analyzing ethnic polarization is challenging not just due to inconsistent data but because the effect of social media on ethnocentrism has not been studied thoroughly enough to generate a strong theoretical framework based on the existing evidence. However, I assume that as both political and ethnic polarization are in-group/out-group cleavages, if social media

use is associated with lower polarization in one case, it could potentially do so in the other, provided the data were collected similarly in all countries of interest.

Therefore, an analysis of the three cases represents an exploratory study that seeks to find the effect of a common independent variable (social media use) under a new dependent variable. At the very least, the findings can pave the way to further research in this direction and motivate scholars to collect more cross-country data to carry out the further comparative analysis.

5. Case study 1. United States: Two-party democracy

5.1. Political polarization

5.1.1. Introduction

Expert assessments, voting data, and ideological positions of the two main parties on the left-right political spectrum highlight how political elites in the United States have polarized over the last decades. Does the increasing polarization among legislators and, more broadly, among politicians spill over the public? If one accepts this spill-over logic, the people would have to get information from politicians or about politics, in general, including the degree of polarization. While the public does rely on the cues provided by the politicians, these cues first pass through the lens of media before they reach ordinary voters. In the last two decades, the frequency of media discussions of political polarization has increased. News media mostly cover ideologically polarized politicians, which are given disproportionately large airtime (M. W. Wagner & Gruszczynski, 2018).

Based on the American National Election Studies 2020 survey data, this chapter argues that partisan identity, exacerbated by partisan media (online, TV, radio) use, activity on social media, and political discussions, are tied to more extreme political views. Media partisanship measurement is based on Ad Fontes Media and allsides.com media bias rankings. A total of 15 online news websites, 42 TV programs, and 14 radio programs are included in the analysis.

5.1.2. Country context

United States is a two-party system. Parties in its legislative body are of relatively equal size, creating a fertile ground for political polarization. Since the 1990s, both chambers of the United States Congress have polarized, meaning that there has been a decreasing number of cross-cutting identities, such as conservative Democrats or liberal Republicans. It has become increasingly easy to predict the positions of members from both parties on issues such as abortion, gun laws, and marriage equality (Barber & McCarty, 2015). Furthermore, both parties have fewer moderate politicians in their ranks, making extreme liberals and extreme conservatives more represented and the average positions of the Democrats and Republicans more separated than in the period before the 1990s. As the parties have become more internally

homogeneous and there is a high degree of ideological distinction between groups (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006), all four traits of the definition of polarization are matched (Esteban & Ray, 1994).

Political opinions among the public have also become increasingly predictable based on the issues such as ideology, government intervention, abortion, etc., with partisan cues often playing a more important role than substantive arguments (J. N. Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013). Partisan cues are, however, also disseminated by media, so one should keep in mind that the variance in the information sources of the ordinary citizens can be associated with the different levels of both individual-level affective polarization and perceived general level of polarization.Moreover, in light of the widespread social media use, social networking sites' affordances play a significant role in the everyday flow of political information and could potentially affect the extremity of political attitudes at an individual level.

There is a general agreement among informed observers that American political elites have polarized (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). Polarization has manifested itself in the voting behavior of the Congress members (Barber & McCarty, 2015), bringing the number of dimensions across which the Congress members' voting patterns can be explained to one (Lewis, Poole, Rosenthal, et al., 2021). While the exact division line is arbitrary and is sometimes referred to as a conservative-liberal or a left-right split, an increasing number of legislators in the United States fall on either side of the cleavage, making their voting behavior predictable. The two parties in Congress have anyway polarized on both the left-right and the conservative-liberal spectrum (Rehm & Reilly, 2010). Such a level of polarization may result in legislative gridlock and a decrease in legislative productivity. For example, the last successful legislation on immigration, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), was produced in 1986. Immigration is only one of the many issues that have become the bone of contention between Democrats and Republicans (Barber & McCarty, 2015).

Another consequence of the rising polarization is the increasing use of the filibuster in the United States Senate. Due to an even split of seats caused by close electoral races, neither of the two parties has managed to get a supermajority in the Senate (three-fifths of all seats) since the 95th Congress, which consisted of 61 Democratic and 38 Republican Senators. As a result, the ten least polarized terms produced almost 16 significant enactments per term, whereas the ten most polarized terms produced only slightly more than ten (McCarty, 2011).

5.1.3. Role of media

As mentioned in the introductory section of this chapter, the logic of polarization spillover from the elites to the electorate would imply the existence of some information channel through which polarization is implicitly conveyed. The public has two main sources of information to make sense of the political world: substantive arguments and partisan cues (J. N. Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013). Substantive arguments may be voiced in political discussions and are formulated based on the information at individuals' hands. In the absence of parti-

san cues, such arguments lead to informed position-taking, notwithstanding which party the position might favor (J. N. Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013). Therefore, substantive arguments, in the form of political information, could decrease the extremity of partisan identity and the distance from the position of the partisans on the opposite pole. Nevertheless, political discussions are rarely based merely on facts. For those who disagree on the fundamentals of issues such as climate change, abortion, and same-sex marriage, reaching an agreement will be difficult (Sunstein, 2018, p. 68). Those who believe that abortion means murder will hardly accept it under any circumstances, unless they discard the right to life for some other, more critical value. Similarly, those who believe that climate change is happening and that humans play a significant role in it will hardly ever accept the opposite.

However, as ordinary voters have little understanding of politics, they must rely on elites to make sense of the political world (Zaller, 1992). Political elites provide partisan cues to the voters, which signals the latter the direction of policy action and reinforces the partisan identity of already partisan individuals. They frame issues in a way that meets the party agenda, with frames being "alternative conceptualizations of an issue or an event" (J. N. Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013). An oft-cited example is that if a speaker describes a hate group rally in terms of free speech, then the audience will subsequently base its opinions on free speech considerations and support the right to rally. In contrast, if the speaker uses a public safety frame, the audience will base its opinions on public safety considerations and oppose the rally (T. E. Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997). Such partisan cues, often manifested in issue framing, can strengthen partisan identity, thereby increasing the extremity of views, i.e., distance between the two poles.

The rise of the high-choice media environment in the West coincided with an increase in outrage disseminated by the American media. Since the abolition of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, the media landscape in the United States has become more polarized, as broadcasters were not bound to the balancing norm anymore, and companies were allowed to own any number of stations. This allowed the broadcasters to target niche audiences with cherry-picked political content, creating an echo chamber among the conservatives who felt more embattled and were approving of the Republican propaganda. Commentators such as Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity helped spread Republican outrage (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014). Consequently, in the last two decades, the frequency of media discussions of political polarization has increased. News media a disproportionately large amount of airtime to ideologically slanted politicians (M. W. Wagner & Gruszczynski, 2018). Even presidential candidates spend more time attacking their opponents than promoting themselves (Geer, 2010). Moreover, there are many overtly partisan and misleading media outlets. Therefore, partisans can follow the media, which cover their preferred side in a positive light, while abstaining from cross-cutting exposure (Mason, 2018, p. 32). Even inadvertent exposure to such media can facilitate polarization (J. N. Druckman, Levendusky, & McLain, 2018).

5.1.4. Role of social media

Social media have features that make them different from traditional media. Due to platform-specific affordances, such as supporting the exposure to political opinions shared by people one might not know in real life, individuals might be more exposed to different views than via traditional media. In such heterogeneous online circumstances, the potential for cross-cutting exposure and witnessing or participating in political disagreement is higher as well. Other features, like promoting the type of content one frequently interacts with, raises the question of whether social media may aggravate political polarization by facilitating the creation of "filter bubbles" of like-minded individuals. This has been found to be the case on Twitter, where users create homogeneous ties, meaning they are unlikely to be exposed to cross-cutting political information (Himelboim, McCreery, & Smith, 2013). Most tweets about the 2012 U.S. Presidential Elections were produced by clusters of like-minded politically active individuals, with those on the right side of the political spectrum accounting for an outsize share of the public debate (Barberá, 2015). Discussions of the Newton shootings in 2012 initially started as a nationwide conversation on Twitter but ended up as a polarized exchange (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, et al., 2015). Compared to offline settings, Facebook and Twitter users encounter more political disagreement, especially among news users (Barnidge, 2017), which may facilitate the extremity of views per group polarization pattern (Sunstein, 2018, p. 76-78). Lastly, deactivating Facebook has been found to have a depolarizing effect (Allcott, Braghieri, Eichmeyer, & Gentzkow, 2020). However, the thrust towards extremity on social media is not uniform for all users. Liberals are more likely to engage in cross-ideological interactions on Twitter (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, et al., 2015) and are less likely to become more polarized due to such interaction (Bail, Argyle, Brown, et al., 2018).

5.1.5. Data and methods

Survey responses from the American National Election Studies (ANES) 2020 Time Series Study are used to run multivariate linear regression models. The ANES 2020 Time Series Study is a part of the series of election studies conducted since 1948 to support the analysis of public opinion and voting behavior in U.S. presidential elections. All respondents were assigned to interview by one of three mode groups: web, video, or telephone. The sample used in the analysis has a total of 1377 respondents.

Dependent variable

I am using two-party affective polarization (TPAP) measure as the dependent variable. TPAP as a measure emerged after the scientific debates between Abramowitz and Saunders (2008), on the one hand, and Fiorina and Abrams (2008), on the other hand. As the debates on policy preferences did not produce a clear answer to the question of whether the American public has been polarized, Iyengar (2012) proposed to measure voter affect, not ideology. Affective

polarization is measured by taking the difference between the survey items asking respondents how much they like the two parties on a 0-100 scale and taking the difference between the two values. To standardize the scales and simplify visualization of the dependent variable, the affective polarization scores were standardized to a 0-1 scale.

Independent variables

Frequency of getting political information from social media is operationalized as the number of days spent in a week using Twitter or Facebook to learn about the presidential election (M=3.87, SD=3.06). This measure ensures that only political use of social media is considered, excluding those who use it for non-political purposes, such as entertainment or communication. Furthermore, the measure in the main regression model stands for a generalized political posting on either Facebook or Twitter. In contrast, the robustness model includes an expanded list, i.e., political posting on Facebook, on Twitter, and both. Additionally, to further corroborate the robustness of findings, the non-political use of social media (Facebook, Twitter, and both) is also used as an alternative operationalization dependent variable. The results of the latter analysis are given in appendix A.

Media bias stands for the average partisan slant of all online news websites used by the respondents. The score was derived from two sources. The first source, Ad Fontes Media, employs a team of analysts who rate news content from various media outlets based on how much partisan slant they have. They classify media outlets as *the most extreme left/right*, *hyper-partisan left/right*, *skews left/right*, and *middle or balanced news*. The list of all 71 media outlets mentioned in the ANES did not include any programs that fall under *most extreme left/right*. Therefore, the programs or media outlets were given a score of +2/-2 if they were labeled *hyper-partisan left/right*, +1/-1 if they were labeled *skews left/right*, and zero if they were labeled *middle or balanced news* by Ad Fontes Media. The second source was used for programs or media outlets that were not included in the Ad Fontes Media database: allsides.com. *Allsides* uses a patented bias rating system to classify news sources as *left*, *left-leaning*, *center*, *right-leaning*, or *right*. Numerical values were assigned using the same logic as with Ad Fontes Media. Scores for all media outlets that respondents watched/read/listened to were averaged, and an absolute value was taken. This way, zero corresponds to no bias in the media diet, while two corresponds to the highest possible left/right bias.

Partisan identity strength is measured on a scale from zero to three, where zero means independent, one means *independent-Republican/Democrat*, two means *not very strong Republican/Democrat*, and three stands for *strong Republican/Democrat*. An interaction term between political posting on social media and partisan identity strength is included in the analysis to test H1.2.

Left-right political orientation is measured on a scale from zero to ten, where zero corresponds to the extreme left, five corresponds to the ideological center, and ten stands for the extreme right.
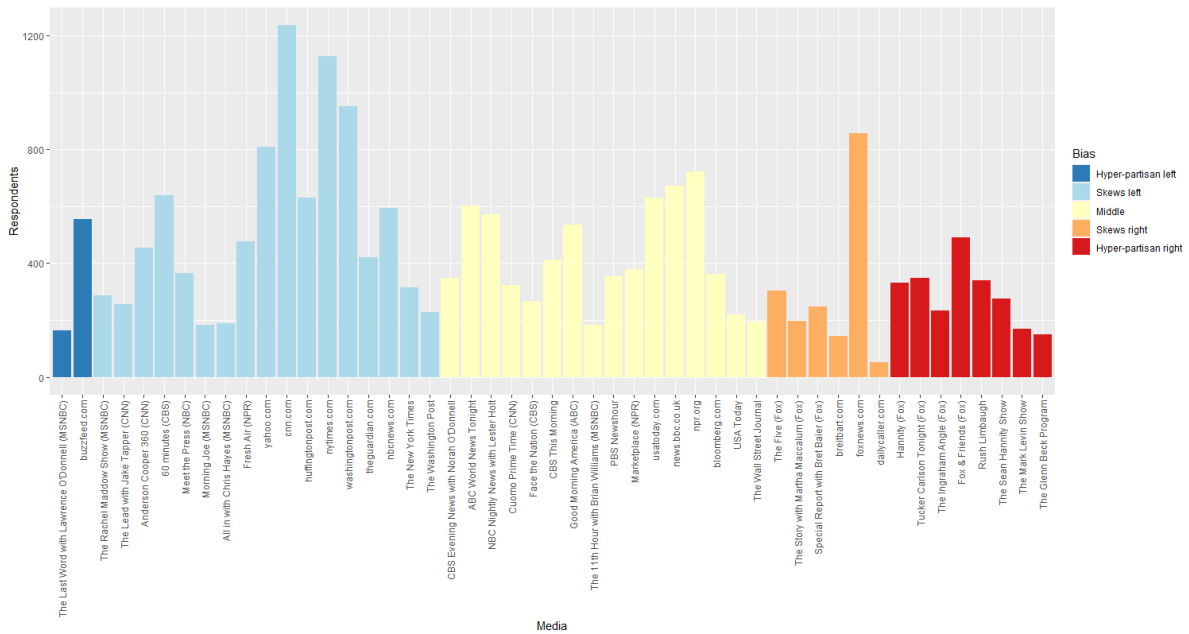
Figure 5.1.: News sources by the size of the audience (ANES 2020)

The following independent variables are also included to account for the factors outlined by Mutz (2007):

Political interest is operationalized as the number of days spent in a week watching/reading/listening to news on TV, radio, printed newspapers, or the Internet, not including sports (M=5.54, SD=1.96).

Political discussions are operationalized as the number of days spent in a week discussing politics with family or friends (M=4.00, SD=2.37). As there is no specific item measuring political discussions with people of different political attitudes, this measure does not allow for testing H1.6. Nevertheless, as political discussions always imply a certain degree of disagreement, I deemed it important to include this independent variable in the model too.

Before moving on to the results of the analysis, here is the recap of all six hypotheses on political polarization:

- H1.1: *Political users of social media are affectively less polarized than non-political users and non-users.*

- H1.2: *The more partisan a political user of social media, the higher their affective polarization.*

- H1.3: *The higher the exposure to more partisan traditional media, the higher the affective polarization.*

- H1.4: *The higher the ideological radicalism of an individual, the higher the affective polarization.*

- H1.5: *The higher the interest in politics, the higher the affective polarization.*

- H1.6: *The higher the frequency of political discussions with people of different political views, the lower the affective polarization.*

As the ANES data do not include a measure of political discussions with people of different political views, H1.6 cannot be tested.

5.1.6. Results

Table 5.1 shows the results of the OLS regression. The political use of social media is positively correlated with affective polarization, contrary to H1.1. The interaction term between political posting on social media and the ideological extremity or partisanship strength does not achieve statistical significance. Therefore, H1.2 does not find support. The lack of effect can be seen in Figure 5.2, where the level of affective polarization increases independent of whether the respondent posts about politics on social media.

Being exposed to more partisan/biased media is associated with an increased affective polarization, so H1.3 is supported. As expected, the effect of partisanship strength is positive and significant, meaning that H1.4 is supported. The effects of political interest and the frequency of discussions are positive and significant. H1.5 finds support, but H1.6 cannot be tested due to the lack of a precise measure.

Robustness check

The robustness check model (Table 5.1, model 2) includes a different operationalization of the main independent variable. The generalized political use of social media is substituted with a more specific measure, namely whether the respondents post political content on Facebook, Twitter, or both. The alternative operationalization is more informative with regard to platform-specific effects. Indeed, a platform-specific difference is found in the robustness check model. Political use of Facebook, unlike Twitter, is statistically significantly associated with a higher level of political polarization (compared to those who do not post political content on Facebook). Other measures, such as media bias or partisanship strength, remain statistically significant and positive.

However, if the social media use is operationalized in a more general way, i.e., using Facebook, Twitter, or both for any purposes, the social media use, as well as platform-specific independent variables, lose statistical significance (Appendix A.1), outlining the difference between the political and non-political use of social media. As in the previous robustness check model, other main predictors (media bias, partisanship) maintain the direction and the significance of the effect.

Table 5.1.: Political polarization in the United States (ANES 2020)

	Dependent variable:	
	TPAP	
	(1)	(2)
Political posting on SM	0.074** (0.024)	
Facebook pol. user only		0.073** (0.028)
Twitter pol. user only		−0.038 (0.059)
Facebook and Twitter pol. user		0.152** (0.049)
Partisan media exposure	0.063*** (0.007)	0.063*** (0.007)
Partisanship strength	0.135*** (0.004)	0.135*** (0.004)
Left-right political orientation	0.005*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)
Political interest	0.037*** (0.005)	0.037*** (0.005)
Political discussions frequency	0.006*** (0.002)	0.006*** (0.002)
Sex: Female	0.009 (0.007)	0.008 (0.007)
Age	0.002*** (0.0002)	0.002*** (0.0002)
Education	−0.007 (0.004)	−0.007 (0.004)
Income	0.00004 (0.001)	0.00003 (0.001)
Political posting on SM * Partisanship strength	−0.008 (0.007)	
Facebook pol. user only * Partisanship strength		−0.008 (0.008)
Twitter pol. user only * Partisanship strength		0.025 (0.018)
Facebook and Twitter pol. user * Partisanship strength		−0.027 (0.015)
Constant	−0.203*** (0.025)	−0.204*** (0.025)
Observations	4,406	4,406
R^2	0.339	0.340
Adjusted R^2	0.338	0.338
Residual Std. Error	0.233 (df = 4394)	0.233 (df = 4390)
F Statistic	205.015*** (df = 11; 4394)	150.919*** (df = 15; 4390)

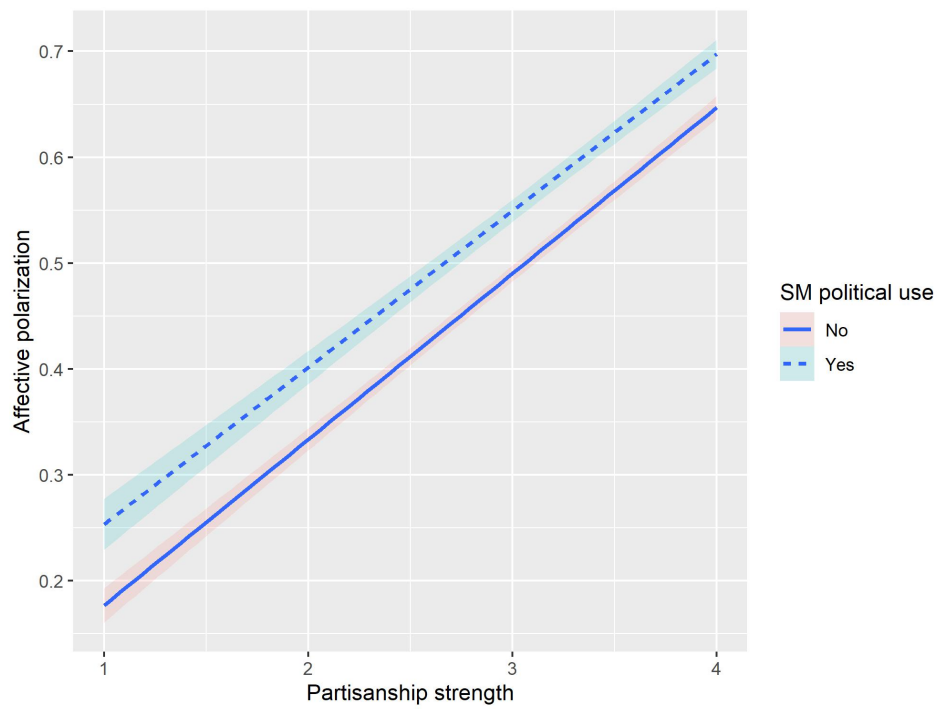*Note:* *p$<$0.05; **p$<$0.01; ***p$<$0.001

Figure 5.2.: Predicted values of affective polarization by level of partisanship strength for those who post political content on social media and who do not

5.1.7. Conclusion

Despite theoretical expectations, political use of social media is not associated with lower polarization among U.S. citizens. Instead, the opposite is the case. Interestingly, the effect of social media is lower in magnitude than biased media exposure or partisanship. This may indicate that while political use of social media is correlated with higher polarization in the general public, it is not associated with the polarization of moderate users, and it certainly is not correlated with the polarization of partisan individuals.

The role of partisan media in the U.S. political polarization has been discussed for more than a decade (Dilliplane, 2011; Ladd, 2011; Levendusky, 2011, 2013; Stroud, 2010). Following biased media can be associated with polarization, as they are likely to exacerbate the existing partisan sentiments among the viewers. Therefore, it is important to study both the providers and the recipients of political news. From the recipients' point of view, the present study found that partisanship strength, political interest, and political discussions are associated with a higher affective polarization, meaning that individuals with said features tend to like their party and dislike the opposing party more strongly. On the providers' side, media bias has been found to be associated with a higher affective extremity among individuals with no regard for whether left or right-wing bias is concerned.

Overall, this sub-chapter supports the earlier literature about the role of social media in the polarization of the public, even though the effect magnitude is smaller than that of biased media exposure or partisanship. The causality cannot be derived from the cross-sectional data, but the analysis results have not shown any potential for social media to depolarize the general public. However, as mentioned above, the effect of cross-cutting information exposure among highly partisan individuals deserves interest and should be explored further.

5.2. Ethnic polarization

5.2.1. Introduction

Ethno-racial diversity has been a recurring and an increasingly actual topic in the United States. Official figures show that the share of immigrants in the U.S. has been on the rise since World War II. While it is true that not all immigrants are ethnically or racially distinct, the ethnic fractionalization index has also been on a steady rise (Drazanova, 2019).

The rise in the share of ethnically distinct population implies an increase in the likelihood of inter-ethnic contact. The effect of such contact on inter-group attitudes can be two-fold. On the one hand, more frequent contact with people of different ethnic backgrounds can facilitate inter-ethnic tolerance and social solidarity. But on the other hand, social cohesion can be higher among the members of the same racial group, resulting in a greater exclusion of people of different ethnic backgrounds.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the distinct role of race in the United States. I

proceed by reviewing the role of traditional and social media use on inter-ethnic attitudes. Afterward, I explain the method I used to derive the ethnic polarization measure. I conclude by investigating the effect of social media, traditional media, and inter-ethnic contact on attitudes towards ethnic out-groups.

5.2.2. Country context

The issue of race has been ignored in bulk of political science literature, as much as it has gone through several waves of re-thinking broadly in American scholarship (Tate, 2001). Despite American society being historically multi-ethnic, the "white and non-white" perception of race has dominated the public sphere, partly due to the human nature of using a simplistic construct as a heuristic for complex situations (Castaneda, Broadbent, & Coleman, 2010; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The inter-racial differences are reflected in real-life socio-economic indicators, too. For example, among African-Americans, poverty is at 20%, while for whites, it is at 10% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). In 2019, while the attainment of a bachelor's degree or higher was at 35% for whites, the same indicator was at 21% for blacks and 15% for Hispanic adults (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

Racial discrimination has remained a problem, especially for Black Americans, but also for Asian, Hispanic, and Native Americans regardless of their socio-economic status (R. T. Lee, Perez, Malik Boykin, & Mendoza-Denton, 2019; Waters & Eschbach, 1995). In parallel with the current racial discrimination of racial minorities, the "victim ideology" among whites has been rising. The adherents of this ideology lament the alleged "White sacrifice", which, according to them, is the price for non-White success (Berbrier, 2000; Gökariksel & Smith, 2018; Hughey, 2014). The rise of the victim ideology among the Whites also serves as a reminder that there is a long way to racial equality. For example, as the number of inter-racial marriages between Whites and Blacks has increased throughout the last decades, they still account for fewer than 20% of all marriages that Whites enter and 25% of the marriages that Blacks enter. White-Black marriages constitute only a small fraction of all marriages in the United States (Torche & Rich, 2017). Finally, the in-group favorability and out-group exclusion is also reflected in vote choices. In trying to alleviate the damage from deindustrialization and preserve racial hierarchy, Whites are more likely to vote for the Republican party, whereas Black U.S. Americans vote predominantly Democrat, based on the data from the last three presidential elections (Baccini & Weymouth, 2021).

Measuring racism via interviews is cumbersome. Race, gender, and other socially divisive issues are subject to intentional exaggeration or suppression based on normative pressures (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, et al., 2019). In the context of US surveys, ethnocentrism items, despite being focused more on ethnic and cultural rather than racial attitudes, could serve as a proxy measure for racism for a number of reasons. Banks defines ethnocentrism as "a colonial perspective in which European values are seen as culturally centric heritages, histories, and cultures of European descendants who live in the United States and elsewhere" (Banks, 2008).

As racism in the United States is an attribute of the White population of European ancestry (Perry, 2007), ethnocentric attitudes among the U.S. Whites can have many common points with the exclusion of non-Whites. In addition, both racism and ethnocentrism are based on prejudices. Winthrop Jordan notes that prejudice and racial slavery likely have generated each other (Jordan, 2013). Individuals high in ethnocentrism tend to derogate any ethnic out-group regardless of contact and in the absence of group competition (Hartley, 1946), while racists derogate racial out-groups. The derogation of ethnic out-groups and racism are closely associated. Deeply rooted personality traits determine prejudices, and those who bear this trait have been referred to as "the authoritarian type of man," as their negative attitudes, expressed toward a certain out-group, spill over to their attitudes on other out-groups, which creates an overall "us-them" division. Early findings show that being prejudiced against one ethnic minority significantly correlated with prejudices against other minorities, meaning that those who were prejudiced against Blacks also held negative prejudices against Jews and Catholics (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Gerhardt, 2019; Sumner, 1906). Although these findings were later challenged (Doob, 1964; Heaven, Rajab, & Ray, 1985; Ray, 1974), Donald Trump's presidential rule in the context of White counter-revolutionary politics and the subsequent rise of Trumpism adjusted the direction of out-group derogation by Whites. Trump more overtly derogates other non-White groups, such as Mexicans and Muslims (Inwood, 2019), lending support to the assumption that racism and ethnocentrism are aligned. As there is enough evidence to assume that the respondents who score high on ethnocentrism would score high on racism as well, this chapter uses survey items that ask respondents about the attitudes towards other ethnic groups. It assumes that when asked, the respondents think of race as much as they think of ethnicity.

5.2.3. Role of media

While racial discrimination and ethnocentrism are often present on an individual level inherently, exogenous variables such as exposure to political information via media can affect attitudes towards ethnic out-groups as well. U.S. American popular culture, including literature, screenplay, and advertising, was dominated by racist views for the most part of the 19-20th century and either excluded non-White groups such as Blacks, Asians, and Native Americans, or portrayed them in a negative light (Behnken & Smithers, 2015), as well as low-skill labor (Shuey, King, & Griffith, 1953). Black Americans were pictured more frequently in high-status positions since then, possibly indicating that the stereotype of Black as servants was on the decline(K. K. Cox, 1969). However, a later examination of newspapers showed that the stereotypical coverage was abundant in the printed press (Martindale, 1986).

Despite the progress made in racial equality, the U.S. Whites remain sensitive to implicit racial cues. For example, seeing a minority suspect feature in crime news primed the respondents to think of minorities as a threat and increased their support towards the presidential candidate who was harsher towards minorities, i.e., a Republican candidate (Valentino, 1999).

Racial priming theory suggests that even subtle negative group cues in the traditional news media (i.e., television) can activate racial attitudes (Mendelberg, 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002). In the light of examining the coverage of race in Newsweek, Kellstedt offers a view that media influence racial policy preferences more through the tenor of coverage rather than its volume (Kellstedt, 2003). Visual representation of race in the news media also plays a significant role. When White undergraduate students were shown news about sociopolitical problems, they showed a stronger association of Blacks with social issues addressed in the stories provided the story came with photographs of Blacks (Abraham & Appiah, 2006).

News media appear to play an important role in activating racial and anti-immigration attitudes among the locals. Increased coverage of Latinos in the context of immigration legislation was associated with an increase in anti-immigration attitudes, and so was ethnocentrism (Valentino, Brader, & Jardina, 2013). While the said study examines ethnocentrism and immigration opposition among Whites, evidence exists that a Black-Latino conflict frame dominated Latino and African-American papers in the United States in the aftermath of race and ethnic statistics release in 2003 by the United States Census Bureau, which claimed that Hispanics had become "the nation's largest minority" (Rodríguez, 2007).

5.2.4. Role of social media

Literature on how social media platforms affect racial or ethnic attitudes is exceptionally scarce. It can be attributed to various reasons, including the difficulty of establishing a feasible connection between the two variables, data availability issues, and control of public image by the platforms. The existing evidence shows that the population of Facebook (Ribeiro, Benevenuto, & Zagheni, 2020) and Twitter (S. Wojcik & Hughes, 2019) users is quite representative of the general racial composition of the United States. At an early stage of Twitter, when Black users were slightly over-represented compared to White users, Blacks used the platform in tight network clusters, sharing culturally specific ideas and constructing Black digital identity (Florini, 2014). Social media use was associated among African-Americans with race-related stress, although perceived racism and everyday discrimination moderated the relationship (Maxwell, 2016). Finally, race differences were found on Facebook in the attitudes towards the Black Lives Matter movement in the aftermath of George Floyd's death, with White males being critical of BLM and Black individuals considering the case as consistent with a longstanding pattern of racial injustice (P. J. Dixon & Dundes, 2020).

In line with the theoretical framework of this dissertation, I expect the contact on social media to correlate with better attitudes towards ethnic out-groups. Furthermore, as the data set includes an item about the frequency of having a political talk with people of different ethnicity or race, it would be logical to expect that those who more frequently discuss politics with people of different ethnicity or race would have lower ethnocentrism levels. Finally, as Twitter is a conductor of weak ties, it is expected to provide increased cross-cutting exposure to diverse content and users, including those from ethnic and racial out-groups, compared to

Facebook.

5.2.5. Data and methods

This chapter employs a survey administered by Lightspeed Kantar Group to an online panel in 2017 in the United States on June 9–30. The sample includes 1510 respondents. The quota design in the online panel was balanced on gender, age, and education against census data for each country. Below are the dependent, independent and control variables used for the multiple linear regression analysis.

Dependent variable

Ethnocentrism. To measure ethnocentrism (ethnic polarization), I follow the existing scale by Bizumic et al. (2009). Originally, this measure was based on five items that distinguished hard and soft ethnocentrism. However, since soft ethnocentrism only focuses on in-group attitudes, it does not fully match the definition of ethnocentrism, which emphasizes the role of out-group exclusion as much as in-group favoritism. Therefore, the respondents are asked the following question: "How much do you favor or oppose each idea below by selecting a number from 1 to 7 (where 1 corresponds to 'strongly oppose', 4 is 'neutral', and 7 means 'strongly favor')." The battery included three statements:

- I would be very happy for a member of my family to marry a person from a different cultural or ethnic group (response scale reversed);

- Our cultural or ethnic group is not more deserving and valuable than others (response scale reversed);

- I do not prefer members of my own cultural or ethnic group to others (response scale reversed)

Independent variables

Social media use. Respondents were asked whether they had accounts on Facebook and Twitter. Out of 1375 respondents, 652 have a Facebook account only, 22 have a Twitter account only, 422 have both Facebook and Twitter accounts, and 279 have neither. In the robustness model, this variable is operationalized as political activity frequency on Facebook, Twitter, and both.

    Political discussions with people of different race or ethnicity via social media were measured via the following item: "In the past 12 months, how often have you talked about politics with People of a different race or ethnicity via social media?" Response options included *never*, *rarely*, *from time to time*, and *often*, which correspond to values from 1 to 4,

respectively (M=1.64, SD=0.97). For analysis, the respondents who did not have social media accounts were re-coded together with those who answered *never*.

Sources of news. As news consumers are expected to have activated racial cues, four items on news consumption were included in the multiple regression. Respondents were asked, "Among the following sources of political information online, how often do you use the following:" (1) Traditional media in online version (newspapers, television, radio), (2) Independent online information sources or blogs (like HuffingtonPost, Drudge Report, Buzzfeed), (3) General information portals (like Yahoo News, Google), (4) Friends on social media (Facebook or Twitter). Response options included *never*, *rarely*, *from time to time*, and *often*, which correspond to values from 1 to 4, respectively.

Previous research on ethnocentrism has revealed that a number of attitudes and characteristics may affect ethnocentrism. Right-wing ideology has been linked to more negative attitudes toward foreigners (Altemeyer, 1996), as well as Black Americans and Jews (Horton, 2001). **Ideological self-placement on left-right spectrum** is measured on a scale from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right) (M=6.48, SD=2.50).

Protestant ethic has been found to be associated with anti-black sentiments (I. Katz & Hass, 1988), and religious upbringing and growing up in a religious environment are associated with ethnocentrism (Altemeyer, 1998). **Religion** includes three categories: Christian (67% of respondents), non-Christian religious (10%), and Atheist (23%).

Finally, respondents' race may predict the difference between in-group and out-group evaluations. For example, in the United States, both White and Black respondents rate in-group members higher than out-group members, with the difference being larger for Blacks (Ryan, Hunt, Weible, et al., 2007). Moreover, feeling racial injustice as an ethnic minority member could also trigger negative attitudes toward the dominant ethnic group (Block, 2011), thereby resulting in higher ethnocentrism among the ethnic minorities. **Ethnic background** is distributed in the data set as follows: out of 1375 respondents, 1120 identify as Caucasian, 100 identify as Hispanic or Latin American, 93 identify as African, and the remaining 91 have a different ethnic background. To relatively balance the numbers, I created a dummy variable with just Caucasian and non-Caucasian.

Several other demographic indicators are associated with ethnocentrism. Men in the United States have been found to be more ethnocentric (Neuliep, Chaudoir, & McCroskey, 2001). Some evidence suggests that higher education leads to less ethnocentric attitudes (Raden, 2003), while studies of consumer ethnocentrism show demographic correlates include age and gender (Gerritsen & Lubbers, 2010; Good & Huddleston, 1995; Nguyen, Nguyen, & Barrett, 2008), although these relationships vary by country (Upadhyay & Singh, 2006). These demographic control variables are measured as follows:

Gender. Males and Females are distributed evenly in the sample. In the analysis, the male is the reference category.

Age is a continuous variable with M=46.94 and SD=17.56.

The **education** variable has five levels: grade school or some high school education (4%

of all respondents), Graduated High School or GED (28%), Graduated College - Associate's degree, Technical School or Vocational Training (21%), Graduated College - Bachelor's degree (33%), and Advanced degree / Postgraduate or Doctoral Degree (M.A., PhD, etc.) (14%).

I run multiple linear regression with all the above-mentioned variables. To test the robustness of the social networking platform effect, i.e., Twitter vs. Facebook, an additional t-test is conducted among those respondents who use only Twitter and only Facebook. Finally, robustness check is conducted with an alternative operationalization of social media use.

Before moving on to the results of the analysis, here is the recap of all three hypotheses on ethnic polarization:

- H2.1: *Social media users are less ethnocentric than non-social media users.*

- H2.2: *The higher the traditional media use, the higher the ethnocentrism.*

- H2.3: *The higher the frequency of direct contact with other ethnic groups, the lower the ethnocentrism.*

5.2.6. Results

Being a social media user is only partially correlated with ethnocentrism. There is no effect when it comes to Facebook use only, but we see a significant and negative effect of (1) Twitter use and (2) the use of both Facebook and Twitter. In addition, I ran a t-test comparing the effect of only using Facebook and only using Twitter, which supported ($p < 0.01$) the finding from the multiple regression analysis, as Twitter users (0.24) displayed a lower normalized ethnocentrism score than Facebook users (0.38). H2.1 mostly finds support.

In what seems to go against the expectations that news media activate racial cues among the viewers, the effect of traditional, independent, and general media are all not positive. The more frequently one follows news via independent media (such as HuffingtonPost, Drudge report, or Buzzfeed), the lower their ethnocentrism. As a result, H2.2 does not find support.

More frequent political talk with people of different ethnic or racial background online correlates with a decreased level of ethnocentrism, but such contact offline does not affect the dependent variable with a statistical significance. H2.3 finds partial support. More right-wing ideological self-placement correlated with higher ethnocentrism. Being female or atheist was associated with lower ethnic polarization.

Robustness check

The alternative operationalization of social media use has the same structure as the generalized use. It is also split into three variables: the frequency of political activity on Facebook only, on Twitter only, and on both. The results of the robustness check largely repeat those from the main model, with the only difference being the effect of online political talk with the people of different ethnic background, which loses statistical significance.

Table 5.2.: Ethnic polarization in the United States (Kantar 2017)

	Dependent variable:
	Ethnocentrism
Facebook only	−0.018 (0.016)
Twitter only	−0.118** (0.044)
Both FB and TW	−0.041* (0.019)
News source: traditional media	−0.004 (0.006)
News source: independent media	−0.018** (0.006)
News source: general media	−0.0003 (0.007)
News source: friends on social media	0.008 (0.006)
Online pol. talk with diff. ethn.	−0.028*** (0.007)
Offline pol. talk with diff. ethn.	−0.019 (0.012)
Left-right political orientation	0.010*** (0.002)
Ethnic background: non-Caucasian (ref.Caucasian)	−0.009 (0.014)
Gender: Female	−0.034** (0.011)
Age	−0.0001 (0.0004)
Education	−0.007 (0.005)
Income	−0.001 (0.002)
Religion: non-Christian (ref.Christian)	0.028 (0.017)
Religion: Atheist (ref. Christian)	−0.037** (0.013)
Constant	0.478*** (0.038)
Observations	1,375
R^2	0.102
Adjusted R^2	0.091
Residual Std. Error	0.192 (df = 1357)
F Statistic	9.075*** (df = 17; 1357)

Note: $^*p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$

5.2.7. Conclusion

This sub-chapter aimed to examine the relationship between social media use and ethnocentric attitudes or ethnic polarization in the United States. While the use of Facebook is not correlated with ethnic polarization, the use of Twitter correlates with a lower level of ethnic polarization. It should be mentioned that the correlation between the generalized social media use and ethnic polarization is also driven by the use of Twitter. This finding is in line with the existing evidence showing that the types of networks facilitated by Twitter are conducive to the kind of cross-cutting exposure than can lead to lower ethnocentrism. Twitter is a facilitator of weak tie contacts, likely increasing the chances of interacting with other ethnic groups, which could potentially result in more tolerant attitudes towards the latter under the conditions of optimal inter-group contact.

Against this background, traditional media did not demonstrate the expected positive effect on ethnocentrism, hinting that the capacity of the media to activate ethnocentrism among the viewers could be not as strong as initially thought. The negative effect of independent media (i.e. HuffingtonPost, Drudge Report, Buzzfeed) poses another question, as it goes against the conventional knowledge about private TV devoting disproportionately long airtime to illegal immigration (Waldman, Ventura, Savillo, et al., 2008). It should also be noted that the measure for media use was far from ideal, as it only accounted for a generalized news exposure, not the particular TV channels or programs. If the Kantar data set had the necessary items to derive the media bias measure similar to the one used for political polarization regression, I expect that the followers of more right-wing channels and programs would have demonstrated a higher level of ethnocentrism. I base this assumption on the fact that more right-wing ideological self-placement is associated with higher ethnocentrism (Altemeyer, 1996).

Another noteworthy finding is the negative correlation between political talk with people of different ethnic background online and the level of ethnocentrism. More precisely, the absence of a similar negative correlation in the case of offline discussions with people of different ethnic background raises the question of whether the Internet and social media create a more favorable environment for an inter-ethnic dialogue.

Future research on ethnocentrism in the United States will benefit from including the role of social media in the theoretical framework, especially against the extant focus on traditional media. Another critical factor is the measurement of ethnocentrism: while measuring ethnocentrism, both in-group favoritism and out-group exclusion should feature, not just one of them. Finally, although understudied compared to ethnocentrism, it is not less important to study xenocentrism, i.e., the admiration or preference of a specific cultural out-group or out-groups over the cultural in-group to which one belongs. Being a country with a high number of immigrants, the United States could potentially harbor a large number of people who are disillusioned with the country they live in and have a cultural or emotional attachment to their ancestral lands, which is one of the key elements of xenocentrism (Kent & Burnight, 1951). The declining confidence in public institutions, distrust of government, and the lack of public

trust seen in the United States (Pharr & Putnam, 2000), disillusionment with racial progress (Block, 2011), social sorting of the electorate (Mason, 2018), and the more recent cultural backlash (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), are all factors that could contribute to either ethnocentrism or xenocentrism, depending on how one sees the solution of the problem.

Comparison with political polarization analysis

The effect of social media starkly diverged across the political and ethnic polarization cases in the United States. While the cross-sectional data do not allow to make any conclusions on how much social media use contributes to the process of polarization, future studies will benefit from accounting for this important factor, as the effect of using both Facebook and Twitter showed statistical significance for both political and ethnic polarization. The difference was in the direction of the effect, which was positive in the first case and negative in the second one.

Media play a more decisive role in shaping the political attitudes of the audience. However, the role of media is weaker for the attitudes towards ethnic out-groups. Although the effect of media salience and journalistic framing has long been blamed for inciting ethnocentric attitudes among viewers, the volume of political polarization coverage and mentions of the term alone is experiencing a steady increase.

Discussions seem to be more associated with lower ethnocentrism. Even though such discussions with people of different ethnic background taking place offline do not show a significant effect, they do so when the discussions take place online. The limitation of the latter finding is that in political polarization analysis, political conversations could take place with like-minded people, as the item measuring political discussions does not specify the attitude of the interlocutor, while in the ethnic polarization analysis, it does.

There are more differences between political and ethnic polarization than similarities. This finding can be interpreted as a sign that the theoretical mechanisms behind the two processes are different. However, future research can attempt to converge the measurements of the two types of polarization by using the same questions and scales. Until then, this within-country comparison's results remain mostly exploratory.

6. Case study 2. Germany: Multi-party democracy

6.1. Political polarization

6.1.1. Introduction

The difficulty of having Germany as a case in a study on polarization is its multi-party system, which is by definition less prone to polarization than two-party systems, as polarization reaches the maximum when the number of poles is at its lowest. According to the Election Indices data set, in 2017, the effective number of parties in Bundestag was 5.58, which comes in stark contrast to 2.0 for the House of Representatives and 1.96 for the Presidential Electoral College, observed in the United States and 2.37 in Georgia (Gallagher, 2021). Moreover, while partisanship strength in the United States is associated with negative assessments of the opposing party supporters (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, et al., 2019; Kalmoe & Mason, 2022), there is no evidence to support such bi-polar animosity in Germany.

Instead, as Westheuser (Westheuser, 2022) proposes, "instead of a split in society, it is more likely that [Germany experiences] a split of a small, dissatisfied minority that has found a political home in right-wing populism." Indeed, while polarization is at times mentioned in German context as well, the issues that allegedly polarize the public are usually taken up by the right-wing populists and framed in an antagonistic, anti-elite manner. The examples include the COVID pandemic (Jungkunz, 2021), immigration (Bodrunova, Blekanov, Smoliarova, & Litvinenko, 2019), or relations with Russia (Wood, 2021). Recent survey-based evidence has shown that the individual affective polarization level in Germany is low, bar *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), which draws negative feelings towards itself (Hudde, 2022).

While calling German voters polarized is likely an overstatement, social sorting is not unheard of, as voters cluster themselves into two relatively equal groups with similar features within those groups: "explorers" and "defenders," who account for approximately one-third of voters, whereas the remaining two-thirds are close to the political/ideological center (Back, Echterhoff, Müller, et al., n.d.). Another study identifies six segments in society, out of which two of the most radical ones are labeled "the open" and "the angry." The former tend to be younger, more left-wing, and more educated, whereas the latter are mostly older, conservative, and right-wing (Krause & Gagné, 2019).

Overall, the existing evidence from Germany points to the necessity of looking beyond the traditional features of polarization, such as party identity-based animosity and investigating the social sorting to a larger degree. It is noteworthy, however, that the social sorting in the United States largely passes through the same lines, such as "the open" vs. "the angry."

6.1.2. Country context

Since the German re-unification in 1990, the country has had six different coalitions in the government, which included all parliamentary parties except *die Linke* and AfD. The absence of the latter two parties is not surprising. Both are relatively new. *Die Linke* was created in 2007 as a merger of PDS and WASG. AfD was created in 2013. In addition, the two parties mostly represent radical left and radical right voters, respectively. The parties in the government coalitions represented both left (1998-2005, 2021-present), right (1990-1998, 2009-2013), and left *and* right ideological positions (2005-2009, 2013-2021). The diversity of coalition partners and the experience with coalitions that cross-cut the left-right dimension are classic features of multi-party systems, which can also be observed in other EU (Netherlands, Denmark) and non-EU (Serbia, Ukraine) multi-party democracies.

Based on Esteban and Ray's (1994) definition of polarization, multi-party systems tend to be less polarized, as the number of poles is higher than two, and the size of poles may vary. Multiple votes and proportional representation facilitate a centripetal movement, shifting the voting preferences towards the center (G. W. Cox, 1990). However, polarization, both affective (Dekeyser & Roose, 2021; Johnston, 2019; Renström, Bäck, & Carroll, 2021) and ideological (Fazekas & Méder, 2013; van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022), exists in multi-party systems nevertheless. While parties closer to the ideological center dominate German politics, in the German political system, the party clusters on either side of the political spectrum are relatively far from each other, creating two loose clusters on the left (*Die Linke*, SPD, Greens) and right (CDU/CSU, FDP, AfD), thereby weakening the "depolarizing" effect of a multi-party system and decreasing the likelihood of a vote that would cut across the ideological lines (Crosson & Tsebelis, 2021).

There are at least three policy areas in which the polarization has increased since the re-unification: immigration, environment, and the welfare state (Lewandowsky, Schwanholz, Leonhardt, & Blätte, 2022). Polarization around these areas was shaped in different waves and was accompanied by an entry of a new party into the state legislature. The earliest of them was the environmental divide that took place in the 1980s. Polarization on environmental issues increased when the Alliance 90/The Greens entered Bundestag in 1983 and represented the "new values", such as environmentalism, pacifism, and feminism, reflecting the shift of the younger generations to post-material values (Crepaz, 1990). This was followed by a polarization on the welfare state, facilitated by the entry of the Eastern German Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) into the Bundestag after the re-unification. When PDS joined with the Labor and Social Justice — the Electoral Alternative (WASG) in 2004 to form the party that is

now called *die Linke*, the polarization on the welfare issue reached a new high (Lewandowsky, Schwanholz, Leonhardt, & Blätte, 2022).

The so-called "European refugee crisis", marked by a large wave of refugees fleeing from the Syrian Civil War, has contributed to the salience of immigration in German politics. Immigration was a salient issue in the 18th legislative period (2013-2017), with the government and opposition both being rather accommodating to the refugees. In the next legislative period, due to the anti-immigration AfD's entry into Bundestag, the polarization around the issue increased, but the salience decreased due to the Syrian Civil War moving to a less intensive phase. AfD, a party created in 2013 by three former members of the ruling CDU as well as university professors, entrepreneurs, managers, and a former state party chair of the FDP, established itself as a far-right, anti-immigration, Eurosceptic, and populist party and became a member of Bundestag in 2017. Its success comes in contrast with the historically pro-European and integrationist political parties and the lack of electoral success of far-right parties in Germany in recent decades (Arzheimer, 2015).

6.1.3. Role of media

German media system belongs to the Democratic Corporatist media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). It is characterized by strong public broadcasting, diverse reporting, low polarization (Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, Johnson, et al., 2015) and low fragmentation (Wessler & Rinke, 2014). Some media outlets have a more pronounced, although modest, left or right-wing bias. The German media landscape also shows a tendency towards "government malus", meaning that most broadcasters are more critical of the government than of the opposition, notwithstanding the ruling coalition. Media coverage strongly affects short-term voting intentions: the more positive the coverage, the higher the likelihood of voting for that party (Dewenter, Linder, & Thomas, 2019).

While covering the so-called refugee crisis, part of German media, i.e., *Der Spiegel* or *Focus*, emphasized the narrative of economic opportunities from migration, setting clear lines between well-integrated and not-well-integrated Muslims, as well as framing the crisis from the perspective of women and children fleeing the war-torn regions. Others, such as *Die Welt*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, but also the above-mentioned *Focus*, at times, framed the crisis from a perspective of economic challenges brought by immigration and the "culture of violence" introduced by newcomer refugees. Nevertheless, both center-left, center-right, and centrist media agreed on the negative effects of 2016 New Year's Eve sexual assaults in Cologne (Holzberg, Kolbe, & Zaborowski, 2018).

Most German media outlets are close to the ideological center with a slight right-wing bias. However, if a left-wing coalition is in the government, reporting becomes more right-wing and vice-versa (Dewenter, Dulleck, & Thomas, 2016). Negative news on salient issues such as unemployment are more likely to make headlines than positive ones on the one hand, due to sensationalism, and on the other hand, due to the political orientation of the outlets (Garz, 2014).

While most media outlets are located close to the center, tabloids such as *Bild* are outliers, as they often engage in strong language and are likely more biased than more neutral media outlets (Spinde, Hamborg, & Gipp, 2020). Bild has often been accused of using sensationalism to increase profit (Meiseberg, Lengers, & Ehrmann, 2016).

6.1.4. Role of social media

Television used to be the most widely used medium for getting news in Germany. Throughout the last decade, the difference between online news and the TV as the primary source of news has been shrinking. As of 2021, more or less an equal number (69% of the adult population) of Germans received news from TV or the Internet (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, et al., 2021). When Germans use the Internet for getting news, they do not tend to self-select into echo chambers, as the analysis of German Google News showed that even if user personality types are tweaked, the Google algorithm does not offer them only one-sided coverage. It should also be noted, that like in traditional media, there is a slight right-wing bias in online news too (Haim, Graefe, & Brosius, 2018).

Against this background, only 31% of adult Germans use social media as the primary source of news (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, et al., 2021). The gap between social media and TV can be attributed to various factors, including the preference for time-tested traditional media and concerns about data protection. Political discussions in German media outlets' comments section on Facebook are balanced and contain a low level of hostility (Humprecht, Hellmueller, & Lischka, 2020).

There is more evidence of an ideological slant on social media than traditional media. An analysis of 84 German news outlets showed that (1) most of the exposure on Facebook is selective and congenial, and (2) Facebook pages of smaller media outlets are more ideologically extreme (Garz, Sörensen, & Stone, 2020).

German political Twittersphere is moderately integrated, with one isolated node (AfD supporters) standing out due to its distinct ideological position (Urman, 2020). However, this is not to say that Germans cannot get polarized on Twitter. For example, mass harassment and rape of females on 2016 New Year's Eve in Cologne followed by high polarization on Twitter regarding attitudes towards Merkel, immigrants, police authority, and nationalism. Network analysis discovered two distinct clusters: nationalists and anti-nationalists, and a neutral third cluster, labeled "news disseminators" (Bodrunova, Blekanov, Smoliarova, & Litvinenko, 2019). It should also be noted, however, that the 2016 New Year's Eve events in Cologne polarized not just the Twittersphere but political elites too and had real-life consequences on the political mobilization of previously peaceful communities (Frey, 2020). German far-right groups have extensively used social media and the Internet ever since (Haller & Holt, 2019), so it is reasonable to assume that Internet and social media users would be exposed to polarizing content with a higher likelihood.

6.1.5. Data and methods

I analyze survey data collected under ALLBUS 2018. ALLBUS (German: *Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften*, English: German General Social Survey) is a biennial trend survey based on random samples of the German population. Established in 1980, its mission is to monitor attitudes, behavior, and social change in Germany. ALLBUS 2018 was conducted as a computer-assisted-personal-interview (CAPI) between April and September 2018. The universe of respondents included all residents (German and non-German) living in private households in the Federal Republic of Germany born before 1 January 2000. Two stage disproportionate random sampling was used in western Germany (incl. West Berlin) and eastern Germany (incl. East Berlin). The analysis includes 2422 respondents.

Dependent variable

A dual approach is used for measuring affective polarization in Germany. The primary measure is **multi-party affective polarization (MPAP)**, which is calculated in accordance with Wagner's (2021) method. The distribution of MPAP is shown in Figure 6.1. The following steps were taken to derive it:

1. Feeling thermometer items (-5 to +5 scale) were identified. The wording of the items was as follows: What do you think, in general, about the particular political parties? Please respond in accordance with the scale. -5 means that you do not like the party at all, +5 means that you like the party a lot. You can grade your opinion with the values in between (translated from German). The list of the parties included CDU, CSU, SPD, the Left, the Greens, FDP, and AfD.

2. CDU and CSU measures were combined by averaging.

3. To calculate MPAP, the highest feeling thermometer score was taken, and the difference between it and the mean affect towards the remaining parties was calculated. If more than one party received the maximum score on the feeling thermometer, only one was considered the most-preferred party, while the other score(s) were assigned to the out-party affect.

The second measure is **two-party affective polarization (TPAP)**. This measure only considers the two biggest parties (CDU/CSU and SPD). For each respondent, TPAP is equal to the absolute difference between the thermometer scores they gave to CDU/CSU and SPD. Both MPAP and TPAP were standardized to a 0-1 scale. Their histograms are given in Figure 6.1.

Independent variables

The item, asking respondents whether they have expressed their opinion on political issues on Facebook, Twitter, or other social networking sites, is used to operationalize the **use of social**
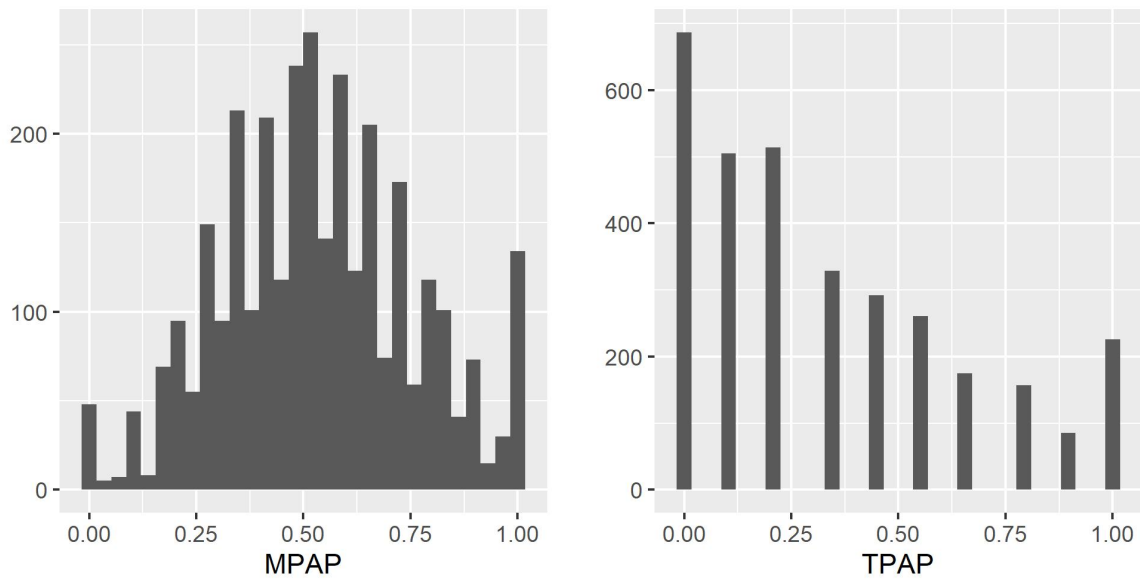
Figure 6.1.: Histograms of affective polarization in Germany

media for news.

While the measure for partisan media is missing from the data set, **media types** are included: private TV, public TV, Internet, and newspapers. Out of these four types, public TV and newspapers are expected to be less partisan in accordance with the existing literature. Internet use, due to the far-right's recent online activities, could potentially be connected to the increased MPAP. There are no other partisan media measures either in ALLBUS or GLES, leaving no other choice but to interpret partisan media exposure extremely broadly, in terms of media types listed above. Finally, private TV, unlike the United States, are either moderate or largely entertainment-oriented. Therefore, they are expected to have no significant effect on MPAP.

Deliberative discussions with people of different political opinions have been found to have a depolarizing effect (Parsons, 2010). Such discussions, however, only depolarize if deliberative norms, such as inclusion, equality of discussion, reciprocity, reasoned justifications, reflection, sincerity, and respect are followed (Strandberg, Himmelroos, & Grönlund, 2019). Considering the low level of polarization in Germany, deliberative norms are likely present in political discussions. Therefore, **discussions with people who have different political opinions are** expected to be associated with lower affective polarization. **Political extremism**, however, limits deliberative discussions and provokes higher levels of hostile emotions (Humprecht, Hellmueller, & Lischka, 2020), so it is also important to include it as a control. The measure for political discussions with people of different political views is derived from two items, asking respondents about the two individuals they discussed parties or the upcoming federal election with the most. The respondents were then asked to state how often the opinion of the said two individuals differed from theirs: *never, rarely, sometimes*, or *often*. In the end, the

two items were averaged to derive the variable for political discussions with people of different political views.

Besides the political discussions variable, the **left-right self-placement** is included as another independent variable. The re-coded version of the latter variable, in which the closer the respondents are placing themselves to the ideological center, the less extreme their views are, is also taken in interaction with the political use of social media. This interaction term will test H1.2. Before moving on to the results of the analysis, here is the recap of all six hypotheses on political polarization:

- H1.1: *Political users of social media are affectively less polarized than non-political users and non-users.*

- H1.2: *The more partisan a political user of social media, the higher their affective polarization.*

- H1.3: *The higher the exposure to more partisan traditional media, the higher the affective polarization.*

- H1.4: *The higher the ideological radicalism of an individual, the higher the affective polarization.*

- H1.5: *The higher the interest in politics, the higher the affective polarization.*

- H1.6: *The higher the frequency of political discussions with people of different political views, the lower the affective polarization.*

6.1.6. Results

Table 6.1 shows that expressing political opinions on Facebook or Twitter is uncorrelated with affective polarization, lending no support to H1.1. This finding is in line with the literature arguing that the German social media environment is integrated and less polarized, at least compared to the United States (Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, Johnson, et al., 2015; Urman, 2020). Interaction effect is also statistically insignificant, meaning that ideological radicalism predicts affective polarization regardless of whether the respondent expresses political opinions on social media, something that Figure 6.2 also illustrates. Therefore, H1.2 does not find support either.

Following public or private TV, newspapers, or the Internet is not correlated with affective polarization. There is no evidence to support H1.3. Higher ideological radicalism and political interest positively predict MPAP, lending support both to H1.4 and H1.5. Finally, having discussions with people that have different political opinions is uncorrelated with MPAP, lending no support to 1.6.

Table 6.1.: Political polarization in Germany (ALLBUS 2018)

	Dependent variable:	
	MPAP	TPAP
	(1)	(2)
Expresses pol. opinion on FB/TW	−0.008 (0.032)	−0.003 (0.046)
Source of political info: public TV	−0.0001 (0.002)	0.004 (0.002)
Source of political info: private TV	−0.002 (0.002)	−0.002 (0.002)
Source of political info: internet	0.001 (0.003)	−0.001 (0.004)
Source of political info: newspapers	0.0001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.002)
Ideological radicalism	0.037*** (0.005)	0.026*** (0.006)
Left-right political orientation	0.018*** (0.003)	−0.001 (0.004)
Political interest	0.027*** (0.006)	0.030*** (0.008)
Discussing pol. with diff. views	−0.003 (0.007)	−0.001 (0.010)
Sex: Female	0.031*** (0.009)	0.016 (0.013)
Age	0.003*** (0.0003)	0.003*** (0.0005)
Education	−0.001 (0.003)	−0.005 (0.004)
Income	−0.00001 (0.0001)	0.0001 (0.0001)
Lives in East Germany	−0.014 (0.009)	−0.050*** (0.013)
Grew up outside Germany	−0.055** (0.018)	−0.053* (0.026)
Expr. pol. opinion on FB/TW * Ideol. Radicalism	0.013 (0.013)	0.009 (0.019)
Constant	0.205*** (0.034)	0.076 (0.048)
Observations	2,422	2,422
R^2	0.101	0.076
Adjusted R^2	0.096	0.070
Residual Std. Error (df = 2405)	0.207	0.296
F Statistic (df = 16; 2405)	16.979***	12.409***

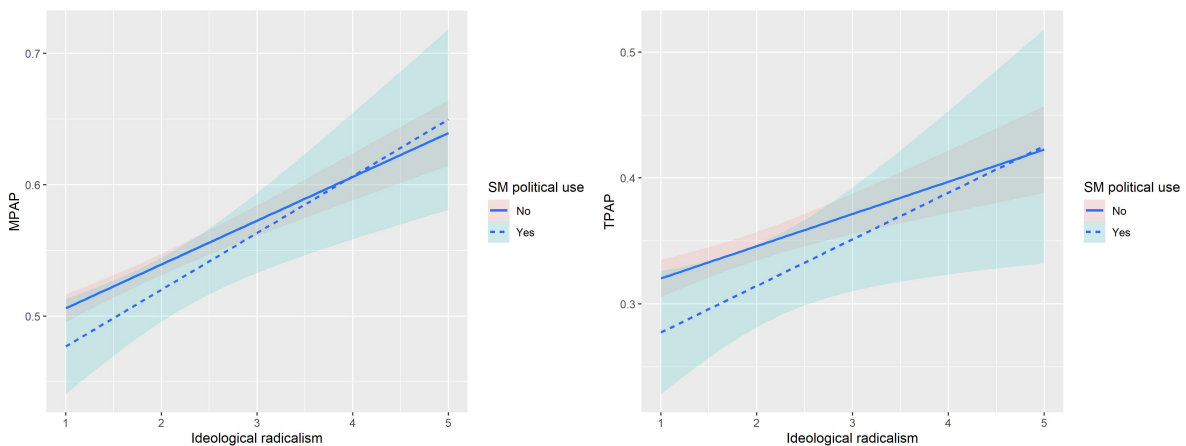*Note:* $^*p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$

Figure 6.2.: Predicted values of affective polarization by ideological radicalism and political use of social media

Robustness check

I ran a similar model using GLES 2017 data by GESIS. The GLES is the largest and national election study held in Germany. The survey was conducted by Kantar Public Germany in the run-up to 2017 German federal election, using Computer Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI) method. The population comprises all people with German citizenship, residing in the Federal Republic of Germany, who had a minimum age of 16 years and lived in private households at the time the survey was being conducted. The selection was based on random sampling on the basis of local population registers. In East Germany, the population was oversampled.

The main independent variables in the robustness model differ from the ones in the main model on two levels. First, instead of a generalized variable for expressing a political opinion on Facebook or Twitter, the GLES data set includes separate measures for Facebook and Twitter, but instead of expressing opinions, GLES data set measures whether the respondents receive political information from those two social networking sites. Another difference is in the variable measuring whether respondents follow media for news. While the main model has different types of media (i.e., TV, Internet, newspaper), the robustness model, due to lack of the latter measure, includes an item where respondents say how many days they use various German newspapers as a source of political news. The list included *Bild, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), *Die Welt, Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), *Frankfurter Rundschau* (FR), and *die tageszeitung* (taz).

The results of the analysis (Appendix A.3.) demonstrate that the social media effect remains statistically insignificant, and so do the effects of separate media outlets except Bild, which is correlated with higher MPAP. This is in line with the evidence pointing at low level of polarization in Germany. The effects of ideological radicalism and more right-wing political orientation maintain the significance and the direction of the effect. Interestingly, discussing politics with people that have different views is positively correlated with MPAP in the robustness check, whereas political interest is negatively correlated. Finally, the effect of growing up outside Germany loses significance in the robustness check.

6.1.7. Conclusion

Social media use does not seem to affect individual-level affective polarization in Germany. The lack of significant effects related to social media in Germany could be interpreted as the relative irrelevance of social media for politics, as well as the low level of Twitter use: only 9% of the population uses it actively (We Are Social, 2022).

Following news media or the Internet for news did not display any statistically significant effects either, suggesting that the media environment in Germany does not polarize the public. This reaffirms the prior evidence pointing out that most of the German media outlets, as well as political news pages on Facebook are aligned very close to the ideological center (Garz, Sörensen, & Stone, 2020). The robustness check showed that even if one looks at specific

news outlets, reading or following them online does not affect the level of affective polarization. There is only one exception: the effect of following Bild for news does correlate with a higher level of affective polarization. This comes in with the literature arguing that Bild, or at least individual journalists working at Bild, resorts to sensationalism for monetary or non-monetary motivations (Meiseberg, Lengers, & Ehrmann, 2016).

Overall, there is no evidence that either social or traditional media are tied to affective polarization in Germany. The next chapter explores whether the same applies to ethnic polarization.

6.2. Ethnic polarization

6.2.1. Introduction

Many issues have divided the German public throughout the past decades. Lewandowsky et al. (2022) point out four main polarizing topics in the last four decades in Germany: environment, German re-unification, the welfare state, and immigration. One might add the most recent polarization between the supporters and opponents of lockdown measures during the COVID-19 pandemic as well. Even though the authors point at the polarization about environmental issues and welfare state as the most divisive ones, it is difficult to downplay the issue of immigration, namely refugees, as one of the most affectively polarizing issues in the recent history of the country, which might not have polarized the parties to the same degree as other issues, but resulted in more violence, including physical. In light of the so-called refugee crisis, the German public was split along the pro-/anti-refugee sentiments (Bodrunova, Blekanov, Smoliarova, & Litvinenko, 2019), and the use of force by locals against refugees was not uncommon (Frey, 2020; Müller & Schwarz, 2018).

6.2.2. Country context

Polarization around the issue of handling the increased immigration to Germany could already be seen in the German public in the 1970s, in the light of the arrival of the so-called "guest workers" from Turkey. While more right-wing parties such as CDU/CSU and FDP were opponents of such mass immigration due to their support of a homogeneous state, more left-wing parties such as the Greens and SPD recognized the role of immigrants in the multicultural German society (Tietze, 2008). Since then, the German public went through several waves of immigration caused by major events such as the reunification of Germany, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the Yugoslav Wars. However, none of the said events reached the magnitude of immigration caused by the Civil War in Syria, either in terms of total immigration or asylum applications (Hinger, Daphi, & Stern, 2019).

Throughout the last five decades, there has been both pro- and anti-immigration mobilization. Early pro-immigration initiatives (in the 20th century) that defended the rights of refugees

included Refugee Councils (*Flüchtlingsräte*), Pro Asyl, and "no one is illegal." Those organizations that supported the refugees during the so-called refugee crisis included Refugee Law Clinics and *Medibüros*, who have been providing legal consulting to the newcomers. The rise of anti-immigration movements paralleled the rise in the pro-immigration movements. At the same time, several far-right groups were created in the 1980s, including the Republicans (*Die Republikaner*), the German People's Union (*Deutsche Volksunion*), a right-wing newspaper *Junge Freiheit* was founded. In the early 1990s, far-right groups committed several attacks on immigrants: there were 2582 attacks on immigrants and immigrant housing in 1992 alone. In the subsequent period, this was followed by a decline in the frequency of such acts, only to be reinvigorated by the refugee crisis in 2014-2015. Xenophobia, having decreased between 2002 and 2014 from 27% to 14%, reached 20% in 2016 (Decker, Kiess, Schuler, et al., 2020; Hinger, Daphi, & Stern, 2019). A new anti-immigration and Islamophobic organization, Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamicisation of the Occident) was created in late 2014. In 2015, after relatively liberal members left the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, it became the key political party advocating for restricting immigration, particularly from Muslim countries. Following the radicalization of hitherto economy-oriented AfD, the party lifted the ban on cooperation with Pegida (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019), which openly called for violence against refugees (Vorländer, Herold, & Schäller, 2018).

One of the key events that led to the rise in inter-ethnic violence was the 2015-16 New Year's Eve (NYE) events in Cologne, which saw increased levels of violence against refugees from January 2016 (Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, 2020; Frey, 2020). Even several months after Cologne events, already when the number of asylum applications began to drastically decrease, the level of xenophobia and chauvinism kept increasing until 2018, only to drop in 2020 (Decker, Kiess, Schuler, et al., 2020).

The rising polarization of the public around the issue of immigration can also be observed in public opinion polls. The number of people agreeing with the statement "I feel like one is not allowed to freely express her/his opinion about the refugee situation, one has to be careful what he/she says" increased from 45% in 2015 to 52% in 2016 (Köcher, 2016). The feeling of polarization does not apply only to immigration, however. It results in a generalized perception that the public has polarized. In 2016, 60% of the respondents agreed with the statement that political attitudes divide and differentiate people in German society, whereas only 36% agreed to this statement in 2011 and 30% agreed in 2009 (*ibid*). Considering the unprecedented mobilization of both pro- and anti-immigration actors, the increase in the assaults against refugees, the election of the first openly far-right political party in the Bundestag in the 2017 federal election with 12.6%, and finally, the increased perception of German society being polarized about the topic of refugees, the following question arises: what is the reason for such a high degree of xenophobia and ethnic polarization?

6.2.3. Role of media

German print media were divided on some aspects of the refugee crisis but united on others. The most divisive aspect was the economic consequences: while center-right media emphasized the economic burden from the increasing number of refugees, more center-left media pushed the economic opportunities narrative through. Media were more united on the issues such as security and gender, as media all over the ideological spectrum agreed on the negative effects of the NYE events in Cologne. Overall, male refugees were framed negatively and contrasted by the images of children and women fleeing the war. This difference became all the more pronounced after two-year-old Alan Kurdi drowned while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea with his mother and brother. It should be noted, however, that both center-left and center-right media attempted to differentiate the integrated German Muslims from those who "import the culture of violence" (Holzberg, Kolbe, & Zaborowski, 2018).

Mainstream newspapers and public TV channels were criticized for delayed reporting of the NYE incidents and for covering up that the majority of the offenders were refugees (Braun-Klöpper, 2016). This paved the way for the renewed use of the term "lying press" (*Lügenpresse*), which was frequently used by Joseph Goebbels to denounce his critics. Far-right activists, but also others, adopted the term as critical of the mainstream media, alleging that the latter were lying to the readers (Koliska & Assmann, 2021).

Considering the high degree of consensus, hence low partisanship, in the German media regarding immigration (at least in terms of security and gender), it is expected that followers of traditional media such as public TV or newspapers would be less polarized and, therefore, less xenophobic. Those who use the Internet or private TV for news are more likely to be polarized and xenophobic. Internet and social media have been used by the German far-right more extensively than other types of media (Haller & Holt, 2019; Maurer, Jost, Schaaf, et al., 2022), whereas cable news viewership (although in the U.S. context) has been found to be associated with more selective exposure than the Internet (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011).

6.2.4. Role of social media

Far-right has taken advantage of the Internet and social media in Germany and beyond (Fielitz & Marcks, 2019; Klein & Muis, 2019; Törnberg & Nissen, 2022; Urman & Katz, 2020). The communication style of far-right populist actors matched perfectly the algorithms of social media platforms that prioritize high user engagement over more abstract notions such as democracy (Maurer, Jost, Schaaf, et al., 2022), good governance, or even factual accuracy. Although, the situation has improved since 2015 as social networking services started banning far-right actors that called for violence, incited hatred, or disseminated disinformation. The far-right actors were very popular on social media before the "deplatforming." In February 2015, for example, the Facebook page of Pegida had 150,000 likes, which was more than the Facebook page of the Christian Democratic Union (Haller & Holt, 2019). The page, which by then

had 200,000 likes already, was deleted by Facebook in July 2016 for hate speech (Sächsische Zeitung, 2016).

In light of increasing criticism of the mainstream media by the far-right, the anti-refugee activists switched to the Internet and social media as their main source of news (Braun-Klöpper, 2016). Following the NYE events, social media were particularly flooded with anti-immigration, xenophobic, and racist messages (Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018). Facebook use was correlated with violent hate crime incidents in Germany by acting as a propagation mechanism (Müller & Schwarz, 2018). As the number of Facebook posts by AfD increased/decreased, so did the number of attacks on refugees. Moreover, those counties which had Internet outages in the observation period reported a lower frequency of attacks on refugees. Finally, during the refugee crisis, social media served both as a mobilizer and a polarizer. Debates on the refugee crisis on German Twittersphere were more polarized than analogous, refugee- or race-related debates in Russia and the United States (Bodrunova, Blekanov, Smoliarova, & Litvinenko, 2019). Considering the above-mentioned evidence, it is likely that those who use social media for political information expression or reception would be more polarized and, therefore, ethnocentric.

6.2.5. Data and methods

OLS multiple regression analysis of ALLBUS 2018 survey data is carried out to find the predictors of ethnocentrism. It is the same data set that was used in the subchapter exploring political polarization in Germany.

Dependent variable

Ethnocentrism is measured by averaging across three items. The respondents were asked to assess how much they agreed with the following statements:

- The influx of refugees to Germany should be stopped.

- Immigrants should be required to adapt to German customs and traditions.

- Foreigners should always marry people from their own ethnic group.

The response options included *do not agree at all*, *tend not to agree*, *neither agree nor disagree*, *tend to agree*, *completely agree*. The responses were converted to numeric representations and standardized on a scale from zero to one using the min-max method.

Independent variables

While the theoretical framework of this dissertation expects that contact on social media would facilitate improved attitudes towards ethnic out-groups, the ALLBUS 2018 data set does not have items specifically inquiring about contact. Therefore, the following item is used as a

proxy for social media use: "Which of these things have you actually already done, what have you already taken part in? *Express your opinion on political issues on Facebook, Twitter, or in other social networks.*" While this item does not imply any contact with ethnic out-groups, it serves as an indicator of the **political use of social media**. As social media are one of the most widely used means of communication for the far-right in Germany, including social media use in the model is essential.

Media use is operationalized as the frequency of receiving political information from public TV, private TV, the Internet, and newspapers. The measurement starts at *never*, followed by *less often*, *one day a week*, *twice a week*, etc.

To test H2.3, the **frequency of discussing politics with people of different views** is included in the model as another independent variable. This measure is an average of four items measuring the frequency (*never (0), seldom (1), sometimes (2), often (3), very often (4)*) of political discussions with the family, friends, acquaintances, and people one does not know. It is expected that heterogeneous discussions would facilitate more tolerant and deliberative political attitudes, including about ethnic out-groups.

Control variables include left-right orientation and ideological radicalism. Demographic control variables are sex, age, education, income, religion, living in East Germany, and having grown up outside Germany.

Before moving on to the results of the analysis, here is the recap of all three hypotheses on ethnic polarization:

- H2.1: *Social media users are less ethnocentric than non-social media users.*

- H2.2: *The higher the traditional media use, the higher the ethnocentrism.*

- H2.3: *The higher the frequency of direct contact with other ethnic groups, the lower the ethnocentrism.*

6.2.6. Results

Expressing political opinions on Facebook or Twitter is uncorrelated with the dependent variable, lending no support to H2.1. Receiving political information from private TV is associated with higher ethnocentrism, while the effect of receiving news from any other sources is statistically insignificant. This lends only very limited support to H2.2. Finally, discussing politics with people of different views is negatively correlated with ethnocentrism, so H2.3 is supported.

The effects of other control variables are as follows: being more right-wing, more ideologically radical, older, and from East Germany are predictors of higher hard ethnocentrism. Being female, more educated, and having higher income are associated with lower hard ethnocentrism. The variables for religious belonging or having grown up outside Germany do not have a significant effect.

Table 6.2.: Ethnic polarization in Germany (ALLBUS 2018)

	Dependent variable:
	Ethnocentrism
Expresses pol. opinion on FB/TW	−0.011 (0.013)
Source of political info: public TV	−0.005** (0.002)
Source of political info: private TV	0.011*** (0.001)
Source of political info: Internet	−0.011*** (0.003)
Source of political info: newspapers	−0.001 (0.001)
Discussing pol. with diff. views	−0.020** (0.006)
Political interest	−0.015** (0.005)
Left-right	0.043*** (0.003)
Ideological radicalism	0.011** (0.004)
Sex: Female	−0.017* (0.008)
Age	0.003*** (0.0003)
Education	−0.023*** (0.003)
Income	−0.0002*** (0.0001)
Religion: Protestant (Ref. No rel. affiliation)	−0.009 (0.010)
Religion: Roman Catholic	0.004 (0.011)
Religion: Protestant Free Church	0.037 (0.034)
Religion: Other Christ. denom.	0.051 (0.036)
Religion: non-Christ. rel.	−0.037 (0.033)
Lives in East Germany	0.094*** (0.010)
Grew up outside Germany	0.019 (0.022)
Constant	0.409*** (0.032)
Observations	2,304
R^2	0.364
Adjusted R^2	0.359
Residual Std. Error	0.183 (df = 2283)
F Statistic	65.445*** (df = 20; 2283)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

6.2.7. Conclusion

The absence of a significant effect for social media use in Germany does not come as a surprise, as Facebook use did not have any effect in the United States either; only Twitter did. In Germany, both Facebook and Twitter are used to a lesser degree. Even though there is some evidence that the German Twittersphere was polarized during the so-called refugee crisis (Bodrunova, Blekanov, Smoliarova, & Litvinenko, 2019; Urman, 2020), in 2018, when the immigration issue had already lost its salience in media, this does not seem to be the case anymore.

Results showing the positive effect of getting news from private TV on ethnocentrism can be explained by lower incentives to pursue the median, politically moderate audience, unlike public TV (Prior, 2013). As for the lack of any significant effect of the Internet, it may hint at possibly overblown consequences of the wide use of the Internet and social media by the far-right in Germany.

Comparison with political polarization analysis

Social media use is not correlated with political and ethnic polarization in Germany. If one were to argue that Germany is a less polarized country than the United States, for example, then it is worth remembering that both scored nearly the same in terms of affective polarization. It seems that social media are not used in Germany in a manner that would change the attitudes of their users. Germans are mindful of their privacy, so their self-disclosure on social media is low (Kalmer & Schultheiss, 2018).

The largely centrist media environment does nothing to predict political or ethnic polarization, except for Bild, which correlates with higher political polarization. Due to the lack of media outlet-level items in the ALLBUS data set, it is impossible to test whether getting news from Bild has the same effect on ethnic polarization.

Lastly, political discussions with people of different political views was uncorrelated with political, but negatively correlated with ethnic polarization. While this independent variable only served as a proxy in the ethnic polarization regression, it was a direct measure of out-group contact in the political polarization regression. Therefore, there is a reason to lend support to the inter-group contact theory in the context of ethnic, but not political, polarization.

7. Case study 3. Georgia: Hybrid regime

7.1. Political polarization

7.1.1. Introduction

Georgian political and media systems are polarized. The division is two-dimensional: political and cultural. Political division passes through the party lines: supporters of the ruling party Georgian Dream (GD) are antagonistic towards the former ruling party United National Movement (UNM) and vice-versa. Media, characterized by high political parallelism and instrumentalization, have largely mirrored this process of political polarization. The cultural divide, which partially follows the lines of political polarization, is based on the idea of integration with the West, which some perceive as a threat toward traditional values, while others (mostly the younger generation) believe it to be the only feasible way of developing the country and achieving peace and prosperity. It is close to the U.S. polarization between progressives and conservatives. However, in a way, Georgian party system is also similar to the German multi-party system, but it is a polar opposite in terms of political parallelism and trust toward media.

7.1.2. Country context

In 2012, Georgia experienced a first electoral transfer of power in the history of its independence after the ruling United National Movement (UNM) lost the parliamentary election to the newly established Georgian Dream (GD), a coalition of parties created by an oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili six months before the election. The next year also marked a transition from a presidential to a parliamentary system, thanks to former President Saakashvili's alleged plan to continue ruling as a Prime Minister even after the end of his presidential term: something he thought he ensured via 2010 constitutional amendments (Kakhishvili, 2020). The transfer of power was followed by a year of co-habitation when the Prime Minister (Bidzina Ivanishvili, GD) was from a different party than the President (Mikheil Saakashvili, UNM). While the UNM rule saw several mass protests, persecution of the opposition, and the media, the power was too concentrated in the hands of a single party for the political processes to be labeled as polarized. Since the transfer of power, two relatively equal forces have emerged in the Parliament of Georgia: the GD and the UNM. Although the UNM partially disintegrated due to the secession of several members to new parties such as the European Georgia —Movement for

Liberty, Girchi, and Third Power —Strategy Aghmashenebeli, they have stayed mostly united around the issue of opposing Ivanishvili. The opposition collectively renounced the seats they won in the 2020 parliamentary election, accusing the ruling party of election fraud and calling for snap elections. Only after the mediation of the EU it became possible to temporarily bring the two sides to a table and ensure the functioning of the legislative body (Samadashvili, 2022). The political processes since 2012 have shown a clear tendency toward affective polarization.

Media have been involved in the polarization process. In a manner characteristic of polarized democracies (or hybrid regimes), the Georgian media are split into factions that broadcast pro-government and pro-opposition narratives, respectively. Media polarization has been accelerated by TV channel *Rustavi 2* case, which saw the main pro-opposition channel handed over to a pro-governmental owner. Following the change of ownership, two new pro-opposition channels (*Mtavari* and *Formula*) were created, with the first one being arguably even more extremely biased towards the opposition than the formerly pro-opposition Rustavi 2. Another evidence of the polarization of the media environment can be found in the public opinion surveys by Caucasus Research Center. Since 2012, they have shown an extremely low trust towards media (20%), with only 25% thinking that Georgian mass media are free to express their opinion (International Republican Institute, 2022). In contrast, the same indicator is at 53% in Germany and at 29% in the United States (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, et al., 2021).

The high levels of media polarization also get relayed to the viewers. Against this background, it remains to be seen whether any means of communication could bring the polarized citizens together. Georgia has an extremely high level of Facebook use in everyday life. As of 2022, 68% of Georgians actively use Facebook (We Are Social, 2022). Could social media be a discussion platform where one is more frequently exposed to cross-cutting political opinions? If yes, is this exposure associated with a decrease or increase in polarization?

Interestingly, elite polarization is largely devoid of the political ideology dimension, as the two main parties advocate for diverse policies with the aim of accommodating as much voter preference as possible. A suitable illustration is the spatial visualization of the party placements on the left-right axis by the Manifesto Project: based on the 2012 parliamentary election manifestos, both the United National Movement (UNM) and the Georgian Dream (GD) were classified as left parties, with the former being more left-wing than the other, whereas by the next election cycle, the UNM got already classified as a center-right party, while GD became rather center-left. In the previous two election cycles, the UNM underwent the same fluctuation: in 2004, it was classified as center-left and in 2008 as right-wing (Volkens, Burst, Krause, et al., 2021). The inconsistency of policy attitudes highlights the catch-all, clientelist agenda of the GD and the UNM.

The inconsistency and the fluctuation between the left and right sides of the spectrum can be attributed to the lack of institutionalized cleavages. Being an approximately 30-year-old democracy, Georgia has not undergone the same critical junctures that institutionalized the cleavages in the modern Western European political systems. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the main line of cleavage in the post-Soviet countries was made up of the supporters

and opponents of democratic rule (Bornschier, 2009). Only in 2003, the country went through democratization (Mitchell, 2006), which was followed by little to no mobilization on socioeconomic issues, as issues such as corruption, restricting the freedom of speech, persecution of oppositional politicians, clientelism, and the consequences of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War dominated the political processes. This resulted in the elite-shaped Manichean cleavage, in which the ruling party features as the "defender of democracy," while the opponents are "Russian stooges" or "provokers" (Kobakhidze, 2021). This demonstrates that the original pro/anti-democracy cleavage has not undergone any significant realignment either from the elite's or the electorate's side. In an analysis of party programs, Barkaia and Kvashilava (2020) point out that many parties, including the GD and the UNM, support economic freedom, low taxes, and expensive social projects simultaneously, hinting at purposeful populism.

In Eastern European new democracies, the first divisions that emerged after the democratization largely shaped the subsequent formation of cleavages (Zielinski, 2002). No matter which point in history is taken as the moment of democratization of Georgia (becoming independent from the Soviet Union in 1991 or establishing the liberal democracy in 2003), the divisions were shaped by the elites, or rather by heads of state, than by the electorate (Karpovich, Nogmova, & Aleksanyan, 2019). Therefore, the aforementioned pro/anti-democracy cleavage has remained as the formal "rule of the game," imposed by the political elites. However, focusing on this cleavage would mean exaggerating its importance, as the informal practices have played a decisive role both during the UNM and the GD rule (Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2017), making the pro/anti-democratic cleavage a mere façade, covering the lack of programmatic electoral mobilization, and a reflection of extreme animosity between political elites, with two poles accusing each other of being the enemies of democracy or "Russian stooges."

The top-down manner of shaping cleavages and the absence of programmatic parties was not resolved by the first electoral transition of power either. The head of the newly elected government, Bidzina Ivanishvili, stepped down both from the Prime Minister and GD Chairman positions in an apparent maneuver to signal the depersonalization of Georgian politics, yet the shadow rule remained (Tsuladze, 2021). As it became evident, the 2012 election transformed an autocratic or coercive informal governance into a more pluralistic and less oppressive oligarchic or cooperative informal governance (Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2017).

From the electoral point of view, the playing field has become more even during the GD rule. The GD's main political "platform" became the prevention of the UNM's comeback to the government. The UNM, with Saakashvili still the Chairman of the party until 2019, has showcased the GD and Ivanishvili as "Russian stooges" and prioritized voting down the GD above any socioeconomic issue, thereby failing to mobilize its electorate (Lebanidze & Kakachia, 2017). The lack of compromise among the elites polarized the Georgian political arena and led to the 2020-2021 Georgian political crisis. The Georgian polarization should not be confused with the type of ideological polarization in consolidated democracies. As Kakachia points out, Western polarization is defined by socioeconomic and political features, while Georgian polarization is just political, mainly associated with charismatic leaders and

the lack of alternative options (Kavtaradze, 2019). The oligarchic rule has effectively put the democratic rule in Georgia under question, classifying it as a hybrid regime between competitive authoritarianism and an illiberal democracy (Pleines, 2019b). Therefore, merely looking at opinion polls, election results, and parliamentary votes and counting the votes on either side to measure political polarization disregards the informal practices that ensure the shadow rule and oversees the dominant position of Ivanishvili, an oligarch with no challenger or competitor (Konończuk, Cenușa, & Kakachia, 2017). This makes Georgian-style political polarization more affective than ideological.

7.1.3. Role of media

The animosity between the two main parties and the low degree of financial sustainability of Georgian media have resulted in a polarized media environment along the party lines. It should be noted that television is the most important source of news in Georgia (53%) by a wide margin over social media (21%) (CRRC Georgia, 2021). Although the country has recently liberalized broadcasting legislation by moving to digital broadcasting, this did not have a positive effect on the financial independence of broadcasters and did not result in de-politicization (Tsetskhladze, Gogiashvili, & Andguladze, 2018). The polarized media environment is evident when looking at the most watched Georgian broadcasters (TVMR GE: Nielsen Television Audience Measurement's official licensee, 2022). On the one side of the government-opposition spectrum, there are Imedi Media Holding channels (*Imedi, Maestro, GDS*), Rustavi 2, Georgian Public Broadcaster (GBP), and *Adjara TV*. Mirroring them on the pro-opposition side of the spectrum are Mtavari, Pirveli, and Formula (Kavtaradze, 2021).

Between the 2012 parliamentary election and the 2019 takeover of Rustavi 2 by its ex- shareholder based on a ruling by the Supreme Court of Georgia, which the European Court of Human Rights upheld, the media landscape was dominated by Imedi and Rustavi 2. Imedi, the most popular TV channel in Georgia as of 2021 (TVMR GE: Nielsen Television Audience Measurement's official licensee, 2022), has been a pro-government broadcaster since the transfer of power in 2012, while Rustavi 2 was critical of the government before the 2019 takeover. Data, collected by CRRC under NDI Public Attitudes in Georgia survey in April 2019 (before the Rustavi 2 takeover) showed a clear division between the viewership: 68% of the GD voters trusted Imedi, while only 6% trusted Rustavi 2. The picture is reversed for the UNM voters, with 70% trusting Rustavi 2 and 9% trusting Imedi (National Democratic Institute & CRRC Georgia, 2019). The same question asked in the latest survey by CRRC in December 2021 saw the GD supporters still trusting Imedi the most (50%), while the trust towards the main oppositional channel Mtavari, where the former Rustavi 2 Director General moved after the takeover, had only 3% trust among the GD supporters. Among the UNM supporters, the trust towards Mtavari is at 38%, while only 6% trust Imedi (CRRC Georgia, 2021). As can be seen from the distribution of viewership based on party support, Georgian media are composed of two opposed poles. The Georgian broadcasters do not have the financial means to serve as

independent actors and depend on the owners of TV companies in terms of editorial policy. The government uses various levers against the critical media to create additional financial problems for them (Tsetskhladze, Gogiashvili, & Andguladze, 2018).

Based on the evidence mentioned above, it can be assumed that exposure to partisan media would be strongly associated with affective polarization due to the high concentration of polarizing content on such TV channels. In addition, the fact that partisan media outlets tend to cater to the prejudices of their regular viewers (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005) likely aggravates the polarizing effect. Nevertheless, the evidence from the United States shows that audiences of partisan news outlets, while preferring pro-attitudinal broadcasters, generally do not avoid diverging news altogether (Ksiazek, 2016). This could be a silver lining, but if one looks at the media landscape of the United States and Georgia, it is easy to notice that in the former, most of the mainstream media outlets are moderate/centrist. In contrast, nearly all mainstream TV channels have "sorted" along the partisan lines in Georgia .

7.1.4. Role of social media

The level of Facebook penetration into the everyday life of Georgians is extremely high, with 68% of the population using this social networking site actively (We Are Social, 2022). Polarized media environment has often been tied to risks of selective exposure. Facebook is not immune from such risks. The affordances of Facebook include connecting users with those people they know in real life, i.e., strong ties. These strong ties are likely more homogeneous than, say, the users that these people would encounter on Twitter, which is a facilitator of weak ties. However, just under 4% of the population uses Twitter in Georgia, so the potential for incidental exposure is low. Evidence from the developing world supports this expectation, as partisan viewers in Lebanon embark upon selective exposure when receiving political information (Bou-Hamad & Yehya, 2020).

Another factor playing a role in countries of the South Caucasus, such as Georgia, is informal practices. Georgians are, a priori, less exposed to diversity in their everyday life due to tightly knit informal networks which are notorious for their "bonding" social capital. At the same time, they are low on "bridging" social capital (Aliyev, 2014, 2015; Hough, 2011). This state of affairs results in high in-group favoritism, high out-group mistrust, and lower cross-cutting everyday exposure. This could also mean that the citizens in such countries, due to the limited opportunities offline, compensate for the lack of such cross-cutting exposure online, namely on social networking sites, where political conversations are facilitated by more secure and equal conditions. Such use of social media could create a fertile ground for deliberation. Despite being the facilitator of strong ties, Facebook could still provide more cross-cutting exposure opportunities than TV channels due to the extreme political parallelism of the latter.

7.1.5. Data and methods

The data used in this chapter come from the CRRC Omnibus interviewer-administered phone survey conducted in September-October 2021 in Georgia. The sample includes 1219 completed interviews. The interview languages included Georgian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Russian. The results are weighted in accordance to the 2014 National Census data for controlling respondents' gender, age, ethnic identity, education, and residence.

Dependent variable

Georgia is formally a multi-party regime, but political decisions in the government are only made by the GD, while the opposition is overwhelmingly dominated by the UNM. These two parties are the only ones big enough to have their factions in the Parliament of Georgia. Therefore, I decide to pursue a dual approach. To this end, I recoded the original variable – attitudes towards political parties (*strongly dislike (0), rather dislike (1), rather like (2), strongly like (3)*) – to MPAP and TPAP.

The first measure is multi-party affective polarization (MPAP). Although Georgia is a parliamentary republic, where parliamentary election decides who can assemble the government, it has had no coalition governments in its history. One exception is the Georgian Dream coalition, but it was created in the run-up to the 2012 parliamentary election, so post-election coalition negotiations were not necessary. Nevertheless, smaller parties do exist and they divert voters from the two most popular parties. In the 2016 parliamentary election, they accounted for 24.22% of national votes; in 2020 it was 24.6%. In both cases, the aggregate vote share of the smaller parties fell approximately 3% behind the second most popular party, UNM. While it is unlikely that they would wield any significant power, mostly due to oligarchic rule (Pleines, 2019b), they may change the outline of affective polarization by attracting disillusioned voters. Moreover, certain respondents may have refused to express their position towards the two main parties due to high hostility among them, instead opting for the assessment of less important parties. In addition, as hybrid regimes combine elements of democracy and authoritarianism, "preference falsification" may play a role. This means that the trustworthiness of direct party feeling measures might not be reliable (Kuran, 1991; Schneider, 2017; Von Soest & Grauvogel, 2015). Therefore, it is essential to account for smaller parties when measuring affective polarization in Georgia. MPAP is calculated using the same method as in the case of political polarization in Germany: it is the difference between the thermometer score (0,1,2, or 3) of the most preferred party and the average thermometer scores (0 to 3) of the remaining parties. A total of eight parties are included in the feeling thermometer item: GD, UNM, Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, Georgian Labour Party, Strategy Aghmashenebeli, *Girchi*, *Sakartvelostvis*, and *Lelo*.

The second measure is **two-party affective polarization (TPAP)**, which only takes the top two parties in terms of vote share into account – GD and UNM. The absolute difference

between the feeling thermometer values for GD and UNM is taken as the TPAP measure.

Both dependent variables were normalized to a 0-1 scale using the following formula:

$$z_i = \frac{x_i - min(x)}{max(x) - min(x)}$$

where z_i stands for each standardized observations and x stands for the difference between the most preferred party and the rest (both for MPAP and TPAP). The maximum thermometer score for the most preferred party was 4 and the minimum averaged thermometer score for the remaining parties was 1. Due to a higher number of parties (eight), the normalized MPAP resulted in a more fine-grained scale. TPAP, as it was only based on the thermometer scores of two parties, only resulted in four levels after the normalization (0, 0.33, 0.66, and 1). The histograms of MPAP and TPAP are given in Figure 7.1.
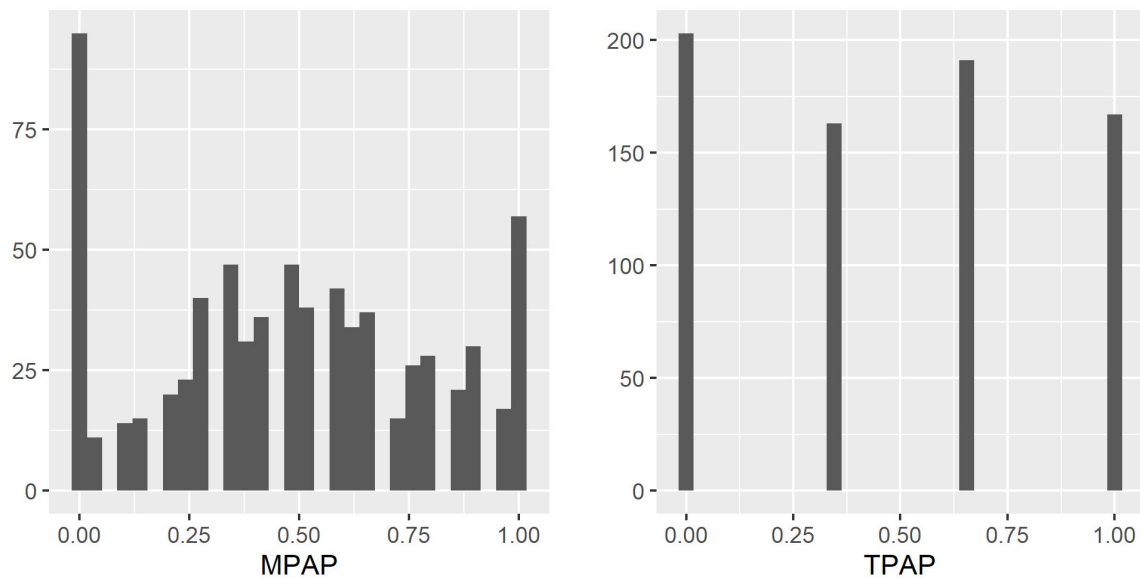

Figure 7.1.: Histograms of affective polarization in Georgia

Independent variables

Facebook use variable is based on an item, asking the respondents whether they use Facebook for getting information about politics and current events.

The subsequent independent variable, **partisan media exposure**, was compiled by classifying media outlets into biased and unbiased, based on Kavtaradze (2021). Respondents were asked which TV channel they trust the most for receiving trustworthy information on politics and current events. Response options included 15 TV channels. From the given 15 options,

Imedi, Mtavari, Formula, Rustavi 2, GPB, TV Pirveli, POSTV, and Maestro were coded as partisan (coded as "1"), and the rest was coded as non-partisan (coded as "0").

The frequency of watching the evening news on TV was used to operationalize **political interest**. Options included *every evening*, *several times a week but not every day*, *at least once a week*, *more rarely*, and *never*. These five response options were re-coded to 7, 4, 2, 0.5, and 0, respectively.

In addition, I decided to include several control variables for being **employed at the public sector**, which could serve as a proxy for having pro-governmental attitudes due to the history of misuse of administrative resources (Chikhladze, Kakhidze, & Natroshvili, 2018) and intimidation of public employees (OSCE ODIHR, 2019). Other relevant control variables include **age**, **sex**, and **education** (Stephan, 2018). Income was initially included as a control variable, but it was removed as it decreased the number of observations due to many missing values and was not statistically significant. Using the aforementioned two dependent variables (TPAP and MPAP), as well as other independent and control variables, I ran two OLS regressions. Before moving on to the results of the analysis, here is the recap of all six hypotheses on political polarization:

- H1.1: *Political users of social media are affectively less polarized than non-political users and non-users.*

- H1.2: *The more partisan a political user of social media, the higher their affective polarization.*

- H1.3: *The higher the exposure to more partisan traditional media, the higher the affective polarization.*

- H1.5: *The higher the interest in politics, the higher the affective polarization.*

Unfortunately, the CRRC Omnibus data set does not include measures of left-right political orientation, which would be used to derive ideological radicalism. The measure for political discussions (with people of different political views) is not available either, meaning that H1.4 and H1.6 cannot be tested.

7.1.6. Results

The results (Table 7.1) show that using Facebook for receiving political information is uncorrelated with affective polarization, and so is the interaction term between partisanship and political use of Facebook. This is also illustrated in the predicted values graph (Figure 7.2). H1.1 and H1.2 do not find support. If the respondent's most trusted TV channel is partisan, she/he is more affectively polarized, so H1.3 finds support. Finally, the proxy for political interest, frequency of watching news, is not statistically significant, so H1.5 is not supported.

Table 7.1.: Political polarization in Georgia (CRRC Omnibus 2021)

	Dependent variable:	
	MPAP	TPAP
	(1)	(2)
Facebook use for political info	−0.035 (0.034)	0.001 (0.040)
Partisan media exposure	0.018** (0.006)	0.037*** (0.007)
Employed in public sector	−0.043 (0.032)	0.037 (0.037)
Education	0.017 (0.009)	0.008 (0.010)
Age	−0.0004 (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)
Sex: Female	−0.032 (0.023)	−0.012 (0.026)
Political interest (freq. watching news)	0.003 (0.006)	0.002 (0.007)
Partisan media exposure * Facebook	0.002 (0.008)	−0.003 (0.009)
Constant	0.401*** (0.050)	0.219*** (0.058)
Observations	724	724
R^2	0.053	0.133
Adjusted R^2	0.042	0.123
Residual Std. Error (df = 715)	0.304	0.352
F Statistic (df = 8; 715)	4.958***	13.691***

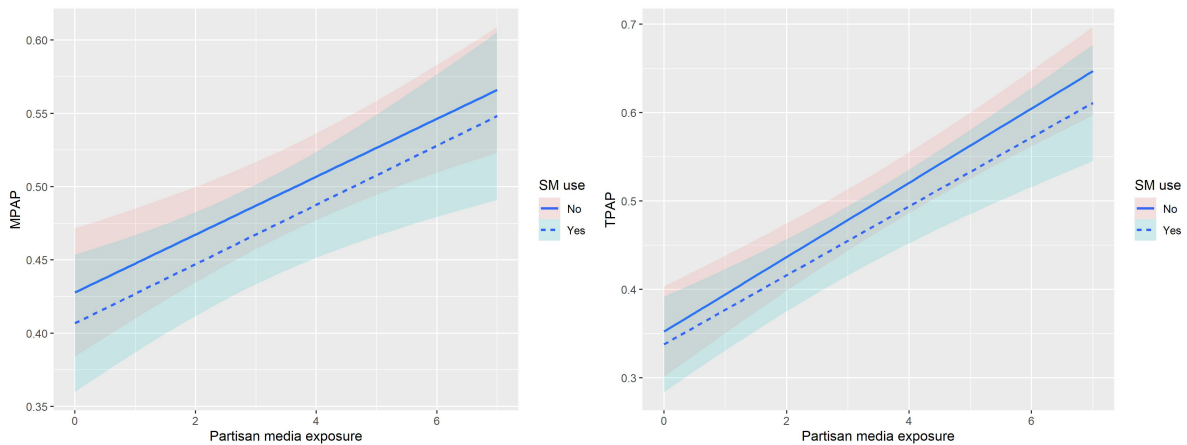*Note:* $^{*}p{<}0.05$; $^{**}p{<}0.01$; $^{***}p{<}0.001$

Figure 7.2.: Predicted values of affective polarization by partisan media exposure and political use of social media.

7.1.7. Conclusion

The main effect, which I was expecting to find in Georgia, namely that social media users are less polarized than non-users, did not materialize. Although, the opposite is not the case either, as the effect is statistically not significant. This comes in contrast with the effect of partisan media exposure, which is associated with higher affective polarization. The latter is in line with the literature on polarization in Georgian media (CRRC Georgia, 2021; Kavtaradze, 2021; Tsetskhladze, Gogiashvili, & Andguladze, 2018). This, however, raises the question: do the partisan media polarize their audiences, or do partisan individuals select partisan media? Unfortunately, it is not possible to respond to this question using cross-sectional data. Therefore, experimental and longitudinal data should be collected to improve the chances of finding causal relationships.

7.2. Ethnic polarization

7.2.1. Introduction

Unlike the German or the U.S. cases, Georgia has not experienced a single turning point that increased the salience of immigration. The anti-immigration sentiment unfolded slowly on the soil of anti-liberal groups initially protesting a peaceful rally organized by a Georgian NGO *Identoba*, whose mission is to promote and protect LGBT rights in Georgia (Tolkachev & Tolordava, 2020). The same far-right groups later organized the so-called "March of Georgians," invoking Georgian Orthodoxy as a force countering both the LGBT community and immigrants, with a particular emphasis on Arabs, Iranians, and Turks. Similar to the German far-right, the Georgian far-right groups have accused the mainstream Georgian media of lying (Stephan, 2018). The Georgian far-right's aggression towards immigrants was based on the perception that there were too many immigrants of non-European origin on the main streets in large cities of Georgia such as Tbilisi or Batumi, unconfirmed reports of violence committed by immigrants of non-European origin, and the fear that people from Iran were buying too much land in Georgia (Media Development Foundation, 2017). However, the Georgian far-right groups were largely parroting anti-immigration movements and parties in Europe, such as PEGIDA, PiS, AfD, *Lega Nord*, etc. One of the most active far-right groups that even has its TV channel, Alt-info, derives its name from the German AfD (Alternative for Germany) (Gordon, 2020).

While the far-right parties are far from having enough support to be represented in the Parliament of Georgia, the values they stand for have enjoyed increasing public support since 2016. The Alliance of Patriots of Georgia is the largest parliamentary party that stands closest to the said values. It is a conservative right-wing party, which barely reached enough share of votes to secure a place in the parliament following the 2016 parliamentary election (88,097 votes or 5.01% of all votes) and saw a decrease in both the number and the share of votes in

the 2020 parliamentary election (60,480 votes or 3.14% of all votes). It has gained popularity by xenophobic, anti-immigration rhetoric (Stephan, 2018). However, the party is disliked by other far-right groups and accused of being an artificial creation to sweep up votes from ultraconservative segments of the population (Gordon, 2020).

Other far-right actors include now inactive self-proclaimed fascist organization Georgian National Unity and Georgian March, an ultra-nationalist, nativist movement that became a political party in 2020 (0.25% in the 2020 parliamentary election). Both appeared in 2017 and organized far-right rallies calling for the deportation of illegal immigrants from the country, toughening the immigration law, imposing restrictions on granting residence permits to foreigners, and banning foreign funding to civil society organizations. In 2019, another influential ultraconservative group Alternative for Georgia was established, which not only mimics the name of the Alternative for Germany party, but communicates with several far-right groups in Europe too (Gordon, 2020). The recent rise of far-right actors hints at higher support towards far-right values than the observed vote share. Due to reasons which may vary from anti-democratic attitudes of the far-right supporters (resulting in not voting) to strategic voting and vote buying by the ruling party, the vote share of the far-right parties may be lower than the anti-immigrant attitudes in the general population.

7.2.2. Country context

Far-right is not a new phenomenon in Georgia. The Union of Orthodox Parents, an ultraconservative and anti-Darwinian NGO (Jones, 2013) established in 1995, has risen to prominence by protesting a ban on religious symbols in schools and dropping religion from public school curricula during Mikheil Saakashvili's rule in the mid-2000s. The group has also called to ban Harry Potter because it was "satanic", raided Halloween celebrations, and protested the coronavirus vaccinations. Priests often feature in anti-LGBT protests and have appeared beside the leaders of far-right organizations. Such tacit support from the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) to the far-right groups should not come as a surprise, as most of them are rooted in religious fanaticism, launching verbal or physical attacks against the perceived heretical elements of the society, including immigrants (Gordon, 2020). Orthodox Christian values are, as the evidence shows, well-adjusted with the national identity of Georgians, creating a sense of ethnonational exclusivism enhanced by traditionalist values fed by the Church.

According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, there were 89,996 immigrants in Georgia in 2020, a decrease compared to 92,458, the peak number reached in 2013. Based on the 2020 estimate, the population of Georgia was 3,716,900 people, so immigrants constituted approximately 2.4% of the entire population. Net migration has remained negative in Georgia since the country became independent from the Soviet Union, mainly at the expense of Georgians leaving the country. The country reached a positive net migration of 15,700 people in 2020 for the first time, but the effect of stricter travel requirements due to the COVID-19 pandemic should be considered as well. This, combined with the decreasing population, makes

Georgia a country with an emigrating population.

In 2015-2018, the number of residence cards issued to foreign citizens in Georgia increased by 22%, mainly at the expense of temporary residence cards. The number of permanent residence cards issued only increased by 6%. While the change in Georgia's visa regime only allows us to compare residence cards issued between 2015-2018, the number of foreign business founders increased by 58% between 2012 and 2018, while the number of registrations of the ownership right on the immovable property by foreigners increased 2.7 times in the same period. The number of asylum seekers increased from 599 in 2012 to 1,792 in 2014 but then experienced a decline and remained at approximately 950 applications in 2016-2018 (Figure 7.3). As of 2018, the five largest immigrant groups were from Russia (26%), Turkey (10%), Azerbaijan (9%), Iran (9%), and India (7%) (State Commission on Migration Issues, 2019). Georgian immigration regulation is quite liberal and allows citizens of more than 100 countries to stay visa-free for up to 12 months, upon the expiry of which they can leave the country and return on the next day to reset the 12-month-term (Mestvirishvili & Mestvirishvili, 2018).
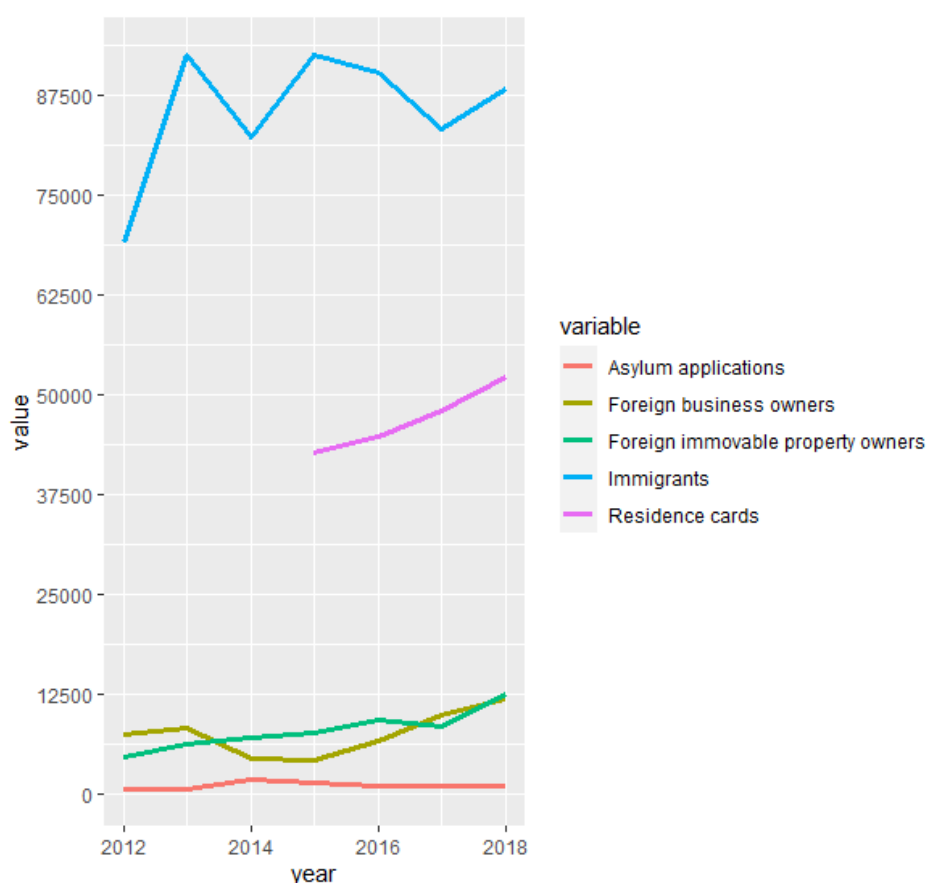

Figure 7.3.: Immigration statistics in Georgia (immigrant stock, residence cards, business, immovable property, asylums).

The share of immigrants in Georgia has not experienced significant changes throughout the past ten years, at least not to the extent that would alter a demographic picture of the nation. Nevertheless, only in the run-up to the 2020 parliamentary election in Georgia 87 xenophobic messages were disseminated by various political actors, such as parties and movements, including 59 Turkophobic statements, 12 statements targeting immigrants, six statements against the sale of land to foreigners, and five Armenophobic statements. Earlier, there were two ethnonationalist rallies organized by the National Unity of Georgia in 2018 and by the Georgian March in 2017. Could the ethnonationalist sentiments of the said actors have any support in the public?

According to the Caucasus Barometer 2017 data, 27% of Georgians have good or very good attitudes towards foreigners who come to Georgia and stay for longer than three months, whereas 18% have bad or very bad attitudes toward them. The results may vary by religious or ethnic groups, however. According to the Caucasus Barometer 2017 data, attitudes (doing business, getting married) toward Orthodox groups and Europeans are better than those towards non-Christian groups and especially towards Muslims (CRRC Georgia, 2017). Keeping in mind that immigrants from Muslim countries such as Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Iran account for at least 30% of immigrants, it should be noted that, in general, attitudes towards Muslims (or non-Christians) are worse in countries with Orthodox Christian majority as compared to Western European countries (Sahgal, Cooperman, Gardner, et al., 2018). In addition, more people in these countries believe that their culture is superior to others and that ancestry is important to the national identity. In Georgia, the number of people who are willing to accept Muslims as members of their family is 17%, while the support to the cultural superiority and ancestry statements is 85% and 90%, respectively (Sahgal, Cooperman, Gardner, et al., 2018). Being a foreigner, especially a Muslim, is equated with being non-Georgian (Sartania, 2017), which puts foreigners in an underprivileged position due to Georgian ethnonational exclusivism: 81% of Georgians believe that it is very or somewhat important to be an Orthodox Christian to to share their national identity truly and only 17% say they would be willing to accept Muslims as members of their family (Sahgal, Cooperman, Gardner, et al., 2018). Attitudes towards Turks and Chinese are often determined by the fears of economic expansion. Anti-Turkish attitudes are reinforced by the "historical enemy" argument (Sartania, 2017). The importance of religious differences can be seen when comparing Georgians' attitudes towards other ethnic groups. In a study conducted in three regions of Georgia (Tbilisi, Samegrelo, and Adjara), more than half of the respondents expressed positive attitudes towards Orthodox Abkhazians (63% on average) and Russians (62%), while the same indicator was lower than half for Turks (42%) and Chinese (34%) (Tughushi, Kachkachishvili, Gagua, et al., 2020). This raises questions pertaining to the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in shaping public opinion.

The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) enjoys wide support in Georgia, where 89% of the population is Orthodox Christian, and 99% of the population believes in God. Having support from nearly 80% of the population, it is the most trusted institution in the country, together with the army, far ahead of the government (45%), the parliament (42%), and courts (30%) (In-

ternational Republican Institute, 2022). The GOC has been at the center of Georgian national identity since the fall of the Soviet Union (Minesashvili, 2021). Due to its key role in the identity formation of the post-Soviet country and its extremely high rating, the GOC has been one of the main sources of legitimacy for every government since 1991, receiving preferential treatment, funding, and property in exchange (Metreveli, 2016). GOC rarely issues openly antagonistic statements toward other nations or confessions (Gordon, 2020). In Georgia, 89% of the population belongs to the GOC (International Republican Institute, 2022). Moreover, a study from three regions of Georgia (Tbilisi, Samegrelo, and Adjara) showed that Georgians consider themselves to be the most Orthodox Christian nation and have more favorable attitudes towards foreigners who are Orthodox Christians too. In voicing their attitudes towards various ethnic groups, only 38% of the respondents positively assessed Turks and Chinese, while 63% positively assessed Russians and Abkhazians (Tughushi, Kachkachishvili, Gagua, et al., 2020).

7.2.3. Role of media

The role of Georgian media in shaping the attitudes towards other ethnic groups has not been studied academically, making it difficult to draw any expectations about the effect of media use. Although there is generally a high level of polarization in Georgian media (Kavtaradze, 2021), this has traditionally been assessed with regard to the media outlets' coverage of parties' or politicians' activities. While most of the large TV companies reflect the positions of the government or the opposition, neither the first nor the second have resorted to any xenophobic, ethnocentric, or anti-immigrant rhetoric. While the far-right Alliance of Patriots of Georgia is associated with *TV Obiektivi*, specific TV channels are not included in the data set, and even if they were included, TV Obiektivi lags far behind the mainstream channels in terms of viewership. Therefore, the effect of following news in media is expected to be uncorrelated with ethnic polarization.

7.2.4. Role of social media

Far-right groups in Georgia have actively used Facebook to attack and defame the politicians that, according to them, serve a "liberal globalist" agenda (Kintsurashvili, 2020). This is in line with the conservative understanding of "Georgianness", with its focus on traditions and religion, as well as the feat of globalization and Westernization (Minesashvili, 2021). As the "great deplatforming" unfolded in the United States and Germany (Fielitz, Schwatz, & Hitziger, 2020), Georgian far-right saw many of its Facebook pages taken down for hate speech (Stephan, 2018). It is noteworthy, however, that the data analyzed in this sub-chapter were collected in 2017. Therefore, the effect of far-right Facebook pages should still be visible. Considering the fact that the direct contact with foreigners is also included in the analysis, it should be reasonable to expect that social media users would be more exposed to far-right content than

non-users. In addition, there is no variable for far-right orientation, meaning that it is not controlled for in the model, further increasing the likelihood that the social media use variable "absorbs" the far-right effect. Lastly, unlike Twitter, which has more progressive users, Facebook, especially in Georgia, is more eclectic", so there is no reason to expect the social media use to decrease ethnocentrism among Georgian users.

While Twitter was not even in the top 20 most visited websites in Georgia in 2017, two Russian social networking sites (ok.ru and vk.com) were in fourth and ninth places, respectively. The website hosting the third most popular Russian social networking site, mail.ru, was in 14th place. Against this background, Facebook was only in sixth place (We Are Social, 2018). In the CRRC 2017 data set, only 26% admit using ok.ru or any other social networking website besides Facebook, while 61% claim that they use Facebook. Despite the lower level of using other social networking sites, it is still important to account for them. Unfortunately, the data set lacks a detailed drop-down of which "other social networking site" is concerned, as the effect of using them could vary based on whether the site is Western or Russian. More liberal respondents would likely be drawn to Western social media, while Russian-speaking and conservative respondents would have been the more likely users of ok.ru, vk.com. However, as mentioned earlier, the Russian social networking sites had one of the most visitors in Georgia compared to other websites. Therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that those who admitted using "social networking site(s) other than Facebook (e.g., ok.ru or vk.com)" would likely be those exposed to Russian social media influence. Due to being controlled by the Russian state and being aligned with the Kremlin propaganda, the latter disseminates anti-liberal messages (Kintsurashvili, 2020; Stephan, 2018). Kremlin propaganda in the bordering countries, including Georgia, draws on aspects of those countries' shared legacy as post-Soviet states. This includes a common feeling that the West in the late 1990s betrayed them by failing to deliver on promises of prosperity, as well as the idea that Eurasian civilization is founded on traditional conservative values, such as family and Orthodox Christianity (Helmus, Bodine-Baron, Radin, et al., 2018).

7.2.5. Data and methods

This case study uses data from Caucasus Barometer 2017, which is a bi-annual household survey about social and economic issues and political attitudes conducted by Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC). The data set includes 2,379 respondents. The population includes adults (18 years old and over), excluding the populations living in territories affected by military conflict (self-proclaimed South Ossetia and Abkhazia). Sample design is multi-stage cluster sampling with preliminary stratification, and the survey is carried out via computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI).

Dependent variable

Attitudes towards ethnic out-groups is operationalized as the willingness to do business or the approval of marriage between women from the ethnic in-group with specific ethnic out-group members. The list includes 15 ethnic groups: American, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Italian, Arab, Georgian, Iranian, Jew, Kurd/Yezidi, Russian, Turk, Ukrainian, Abkhazian, Ossetian, Armenian living in Georgia, and Azerbaijani living in Georgia. There are only two response options: *approve* and *disapprove*. Those who approve of doing business and marriage with the listed ethnic groups get assigned a score of zero, and those who disapprove are given a score of one. The score for ethnic in-group is taken, the average score across all the remaining ethnic groups is subtracted from it, and the absolute difference is the ethnocentrism score for each respondent. In the case of Azerbaijanis and Armenians living in Georgia, the scores for other Azerbaijanis/Armenians living in Georgia and for Azerbaijanis/Armenians, in general, were averaged.

To test the robustness of findings, I also operationalize the dependent variable as attitudes towards foreigners who come to Georgia and stay for longer than three months, with *very bad*, *bad*, *neutral*, *good*, and *very good* as possible options. I reverse the response scale of this item to derive the variable *negative attitudes towards foreigners*. Very good is given a score of one, while very bad equals one (M=2.92, SD=0.84).

Independent variables

The main independent variable is **social media use**, which is operationalized in three different ways:

- Using Facebook mentioned in the top three activities when browsing the Internet (yes/no)

- Using social networking site(s) other than Facebook (e.g. Odnoklassniki, MySpace, Google+, etc.) mentioned in the top three activities when browsing the Internet (yes/no)

- Having made a political comment online (e.g. on Facebook or other social media platform) regarding an important issue in the last six months (yes/no)

According to the International Republican Institute's 2016 public opinion survey data, Facebook was the most popular social networking site, with 83% of the respondents using it, while Twitter was only used by 4% of Georgians. Against this background, 32% used the Russian social networking site Odnoklassniki (International Republican Institute, 2016). Therefore, the second measurement of social media use is very likely to be a proxy for the use of Odnoklassniki. Other platforms, such as MySpace or Google+ are unlikely to be relevant, as Facebook, Twitter, and Odnoklassniki were followed by Vkontakte (2%) and LinkedIn (1%) users in the aforementioned IRI survey data.

Traditional media use is operationalized as reading or watching the news (including online TV) apart from the news on social networking sites. Likewise, the options are *no* and *yes*.

The final independent variable is the **direct contact with foreigners.** Measured with an item "Have you had any contact with foreigners in Georgia who have stayed here for longer than three months?" The three response options include: *no, I've never been in contact with them* (75% of all responses), *yes, I've rarely been in contact with them* (19%), and *yes, I've often been in contact with them* (7%). While the main focus is on the role of social media, direct contact can potentially be more effective in harboring more tolerant attitudes towards other ethnic groups in accordance with Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis. Allport formulated four "positive factors" of inter-group contact that should facilitate the reduction of prejudice: (a) equal status between the groups, (b) common goals, (c) inter-group cooperation, and (d) the support of authorities, law, or custom (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005). It needs to be mentioned, however, that Allport formulated the four factors based on the evidence stemming from the United States before the civil rights movement, so in an environment characterized by high levels of segregation and racism. Therefore, equal status between the locals and foreigners and the support of authorities, law, or custom in Georgia in the 2010s should be considered more likely than in the United States in the first half of the 20th century, as the Constitution of Georgia does not discriminate based on nationality or ethnicity. It is hard to pin down to what extent the locals and foreigners have common goals or inter-group cooperation. Still, due to the recent increase in the number of issued residence cards and the number of foreign students in Georgian higher education institutions, as well as an increase of foreigners who do business in Georgia, it can be assumed that the contact between the locals and the foreigners is often of a cooperative nature, not confrontational.

Another measure for contact, which is not necessarily inter-ethnic, but can affect the level of ethnocentrism, is the frequency of discussing politics, which varies between zero and ten, where zero means *never* and ten means *always*.

As in many other countries that were late to modernize or were under colonial rule, Georgia saw ethnic nationalism develop during its post-1991 independence. Such type of nationalism is characterized by "us" vs. "them" division and considers the culture to be threatened by outsiders. It does not rely on political loyalty to the state but rather on ethnic, organic, and racial characteristics that make "us". Therefore, even if they commit to the civic state, immigrants cannot become "true" insiders (Metreveli, 2016). The GOC, taking advantage of the loyalty of the Georgian population to the above-mentioned values, has successfully established its claim to ethnonational exclusivism (Jones, 2013). While there is no wide consensus on the necessary prerequisites for someone to be considered a Georgian, two main factors besides being an Orthodox Christian are identifying oneself as a Georgian and having at least one Georgian parent (Tughushi, Kachkachishvili, Gagua, et al., 2020). This points to the necessity for including religion and ethnicity as control variables in the analysis.

Religion. Which religion or denomination, if any, do the respondents belong to. Re-coded to Orthodox and non-Orthodox.

Ethnicity. Which ethnic group do the respondents consider themselves a part of. Re-coded to Georgian and non-Georgian. The original version is used in an OLS model.

Other demographic control variables include sex, age, education, and income.

OLS regressions are run on the main and robustness models (Appendix A.4.). Results are interpreted below. Predicted values of ethnocentrism are plotted to demonstrate the differences between subgroups based on religion and ethnicity.

Before moving on to the results of the analysis, here is the recap of all three hypotheses on ethnic polarization:

- H2.1: *Social media users are less ethnocentric than non-social media users.*

- H2.2: *The higher the traditional media use, the higher the ethnocentrism.*

- H2.3: *The higher the frequency of direct contact with other ethnic groups, the lower the ethnocentrism.*

7.2.6. Results

Two out of three social media measures and the traditional media use measure do not have a statistically significant correlation with ethnocentrism. The only social media measure that reaches the significance level is *using other social networking sites such as Odnoklassniki, etc.*, and it is positively correlated with ethnocentrism. Therefore, H2.1 finds partial support, while H2.2 does not find support. A shift from never having contact with foreigners to rarely having one and a shift from never to often is associated with a lower level of ethnocentrism. This effect lends support to H2.3.

The more frequently one discusses politics, the lower the ethnocentrism. Being female, having more income, and ethnic self-identification of respondents do not affect ethnocentrism. Education is associated with a lower level of ethnocentrism. Finally, older and non-Orthodox respondents are more likely to have a higher level of ethnocentrism.

Therefore, except for age, which is a common correlate of ethnocentrism, the only two variables that are correlated with higher ethnocentrism are using other social media networking sites than Facebook and being non-Orthodox. The former is harder to interpret, as there is no detailed information on which social networking site the respondent meant when they responded positively to the question, as laid out in the previous subsection, Odnoklassniki most likely drives the results. The effect of being non-Orthodox provides an opportunity for further research. To better illustrate the effect of religion, predicted values of having no, rare or frequent contact with foreigners on attitudes towards them are plotted (Figure B.1. in the appendix). As can be seen in the left part of the figure, when it comes to general attitudes towards foreigners, having rare or frequent contact with them makes a statistically significant difference from not having contact only for Orthodox Georgians.

Table 7.2.: Ethnic polarization in Georgia (CRRC Caucasus Barometer 2017)

	Dependent variable:
	Ethnocentrism
Uses Facebook: Yes	−0.031 (0.021)
Uses other soc. media: Yes	0.066** (0.023)
Soc. media political comment: Yes	−0.014 (0.021)
Read/watch news except soc. media	0.039 (0.030)
Immigrant contact: Rarely (ref.: Never)	−0.089*** (0.023)
Immigrant contact: Often (ref.: Never)	−0.129*** (0.031)
Freq. discussing politics	−0.010** (0.004)
Sex: Female	−0.001 (0.020)
Age	0.003*** (0.001)
Education	−0.021** (0.007)
Income	0.004 (0.006)
Religion: non-Orthodox (Ref.: Orthodox)	0.103** (0.039)
Ethnicity: non-Georgian (Ref.: Georgian)	−0.007 (0.041)
Constant	0.475*** (0.051)
Observations	1,054
R^2	0.085
Adjusted R^2	0.073
Residual Std. Error	0.299 (df = 1040)
F Statistic	7.419*** (df = 13; 1040)

Note: $^*p<0.05; ^{**}p<0.01; ^{***}p<0.001$

7.2.7. Robustness test

The robustness test was run with a different operationalization of ethnocentrism: attitudes toward the foreigners who come to Georgia and stay there for longer than three months, with a higher value corresponding to more negative attitudes. The results (Table A.4. in the appendix) show the statistically insignificant measures of social media use remain insignificant, however the use of other social networking platforms, such as Odnoklassniki, changes its sign, i.e. it is associated with better attitudes towards foreigners who stay in Georgia for longer than 3 months. Contact with foreigners maintains the direction and the significance, likely through facilitating more positive attitudes towards foreigners.

The second positive correlate of ethnocentrism – being non-Orthodox – also changes its sign and is correlated with improved attitudes towards foreigners who come to Georgia for longer than three months in the robustness model. The findings, therefore, indicate the importance of clearly defining what ethnic polarization is. As vague as the concept is, it reminds us of the false equivalence between the attitudes towards ethnic out-groups and attitudes towards immigrants.

7.2.8. Conclusion

This sub-chapter looked at the attitudes towards foreigners and ethnic out-groups in Georgia. The results indicate that using social media and following traditional media for news do not

predict the level of ethnocentrism. However, contact with foreigners is a statistically significant predictor of a decrease in ethnocentrism.

An interesting divergence is found while comparing main and robustness models: non-Orthodox individuals are more ethnocentric but have more positive attitudes towards foreigners compared to Orthodox individuals. Such difference could be attributed to the fact that most of the non-Orthodox respondents in the data set are ethnically Azerbaijani or Armenians, who are not well-integrated with Georgian society. The knowledge of Georgian is low both among Armenians in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region (25%) and Azerbaijanis in the Kvemo Kartli region (17%). This is partially due to the Soviet past, when the *lingua franca* between Georgians, Armenians, and Azerbaijanis was Russian, which remains the most preferred language for Armenians living in Georgia (Kitiashvili, Abashidze, & Zhvania, 2016). Islam is the predominant religion of Azerbaijanis, while most Armenians in Georgia follow Armenian Apostolic Church, not the GOC. This makes it more difficult to overcome Georgian ethnonational exclusivism. Due to the low level of integration, the ethnic minorities may consider themselves as foreigners, which means that they may include themselves in the foreigners when it comes to the item about the attitudes towards foreigners who come to live in Georgia for more than three months. The main regression model is not subject to such bias and is, therefore, a more trustworthy measure for comparing the attitudes of Orthodox and non-Orthodox respondents.

The effect of contact with foreigners can be interpreted as supporting Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, as it is correlated with lower ethnocentrism. As mentioned earlier, conditions in Georgia for inter-ethnic contact are facilitated by equal status and common goals. It would be ideal to have the type of contact in a data set, specifying what relationship is concerned, i.e., business, friendship, education, etc. This is one of the aspects the data collection should focus in the future.

Due to the history of ethnic conflicts, the issue of attitudes toward other ethnic groups still remains a somewhat taboo issue for Georgians. Despite that, recent years have seen a rise in far-right and ultra-nationalist rallies, signaling that the problem may reappear and pose a threat to an already struggling Georgian democracy. Future research in this direction can benefit from a more in-depth, qualitative account of immigration attitudes in the general population. While the Caucasus Barometer data allowed for informative insights also, the explanatory power of survey data is limited. A more multifaceted approach is needed to shed more light on the precise processes behind the recent rise of the far-right in Georgia. Such an approach should look not only at immigration and ethnic group attitudes but also at other issues emphasized by the far-right. Only through such comparative analysis is it possible to determine the role of immigration and ethnic attitudes in the public support of the far-right.

Comparison with political polarization analysis

The effect of Facebook use is not associated with polarization in Georgia, be it in terms of political or ethnic polarization. In what can be perceived as a marginal difference, the Facebook

use effect at least is not correlated with increased ethnocentrism, unlike the use of other social networking sites. This once again emphasizes the importance of platform-level differences. A more detailed variable specifying which social networking site(s) the respondents refer to under *other* would have improved the quality of findings.

The polarized media landscape in Georgia is reflected in more affectively polarized individuals. Following news is not correlated with ethnic polarization, however. This indicates that the detrimental effect of Georgian media, while it does apply to political polarization, has only limited effect outside of the realm of everyday politics.

One of the strongest and the most stable effects was that of direct contact with foreigners. This points out the importance of face-to-face contact, especially in the Georgian context where informal practices matter. Unfortunately, due to the lack of an analogous measure in the CRRC Omnibus data set, it was impossible to compare whether political discussions or simply being friends with people of different political views also affect political polarization.

The Georgian case study suffered the most from the data availability issues. While the lack of a data set that would combine political and ethnic polarization measures was a problem for the U.S. case, too, in Georgia, the issues also included the lack of a left-right political orientation and a political discussions measure. Nevertheless, past research has shown that the left-right spectrum is understood in different terms in post-communist countries than in the rest of the world, with older and more educated people having a right-wing bias, instead of a left-wing one, which is widespread elsewhere in similar demographic groups (Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2010). In addition, it has been shown that the concept of left-right political auto-identification cannot be transferred mechanically between Eastern Europe and Western Europe (A. D. Wojcik, Cislak, & Schmidt, 2021), suggesting that a mechanistic inclusion of a left-right self-identification would have not been beneficial for the comparability of findings.

Deriving a more detailed (and verified) variable for media bias was not possible, as the studies of the Georgian media landscape are almost exclusively qualitative. Lastly, the measure of social media use for getting political information was a dummy variable. The frequency of social media use (for political purposes) would have been a better fit for my theoretical framework.

In the case of ethnic polarization analysis, the data-related challenges included the lack of standardized ethnocentrism measures. While calculating the difference between the in-group and the out-group favorability is a good approximation, less explicit but standard items using Likert scale would have allowed for a higher level of comparability across the cases.

To my knowledge, this is the first case study that investigates the effect of social media on political polarization in a post-Soviet country. This creates several opportunities for further research for political communication, digital media, and post-Soviet studies. It is also the first study, to my knowledge, that investigates the effect of social media on political and ethnic polarization using the same theoretical framework. Including Georgia in such a case study allows me to apply the theory, which has so far only been applied predominantly to the Western democracies, to a post-communist country. However, if using the same approach toward polit-

ical and ethnic polarization is to stay, it needs better data. Otherwise the room for comparative analysis between the two is limited.

8. Discussion and conclusion

8.1. Summary of results

The previous chapters presented six regression models for each of the three countries and two polarization types. In all six models, the variables passed the multicollinearity test, as the variance inflation factor (VIF) was lower than the accepted threshold of 2.5 in all six cases. The same holds true for the robustness test models in the Appendix. The main explanatory variable, social media use, only reached statistical significance in three models out of six: for affective and ethnic polarization in the United States and for ethnic polarization in Georgia. In the latter case, the significant effect was only observed for an explanatory variable operationalized as using social media other than Facebook, leaving limited room for interpretation. The United States case, however, showed a clear edge of Twitter over Facebook, as the effect of the former was statistically insignificant for political and negative for ethnic polarization. In the case of Facebook, the effects were positive and statistically insignificant, respectively. Comparing the analyses of affective and ethnic polarization in the United States case, the biggest difference from the affective polarization model is that in case of ethnic polarization model, social media use is operationalized as generalized, not necessarily political use. However, the results of the robustness check (Appendix A.2.), which include the alternative operationalization of social media use in terms of political activity, show nearly identical effects. In the German case, social media use demonstrated no statistically significant effects on either affective or ethnic polarization, even when social media use was operationalized differently (Appendix A.3.).

Partisan media exposure has more consistent effects on the dependent variable, as it is associated with higher affective polarization in the United States and Georgia. Ideological radicalism/partisanship strength and interest in politics were consistent predictors of affective polarization in the United States and Germany. In terms of ethnic polarization, direct contact with other ethnic groups was the strongest predictor of lower polarization. Consuming traditional media only affected ethnocentrism in Germany, but the effect was mixed. Out of demographic control variables, age was the most consistent, as it correlated with higher affective and ethnic polarization across all models except for the ethnic polarization model in the United States.

8.2. Limitations

An important limitation of the analysis conducted under the framework of this dissertation is that it is based on cross-sectional data. This means that the results suffer from the endogeneity problem, i.e., it is unclear whether social media use affects polarization or vice versa. However, the variance in the level of polarization is likely to be lower than media consumption habits, so it is unlikely that individuals would intentionally revamp their media diet because they like/dislike a party more than they did in the past. The theoretical foundation of partisan cues affecting the way individuals think and feel about politics is also more solid (J. N. Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013; Zaller, 1992) than an alternative which would argue that the change in political attitudes would result in changes in social media use patterns, but this is still theoretically plausible. Only experimental research can show whether such a causal link actually exists.

Moreover, the results can only be tentatively compared across countries, as the exploratory analysis with data from different years does not allow for direct comparison. Some demographic items were similarly operationalized in all datasets. In other cases (such as social media use, for example), I had to opt for the most similar operationalization. This is why, for instance, in the U.S. and German cases, social media use is operationalized as expressing a political opinion or posting about politics on Facebook or Twitter. In contrast, in the Georgian case, this variable is operationalized as using Facebook for getting political information.

8.3. Key findings and interpretations

The key finding of this dissertation is that platform-level differences in social media studies matter. The connection between social media use and polarization is not uniform across social media platforms. For example, in the United States, Twitter use is not associated with a statistically significant change in affective polarization, as opposed to Facebook use, which correlates with higher affective polarization. The same goes for ethnic polarization in the United States, as Twitter use correlates with a decrease, whereas Facebook use does not. In Georgia, Facebook use is uncorrelated with ethnic polarization, but using other social networking sites is correlated positively.

Twitter accounts for all the negative effect of social media on ethnocentrism in the United States, showing a clear distinction between the two platforms. Only Twitter users are less ethnocentric than non-users, while there is no difference between Facebook users and non-users. This can be explained by the fact that Facebook is a social networking site that connects people that know each other in real life, i.e., strong ties. Such people are more likely to be ethnically homogeneous. While there is no doubt that Facebook also allows its users to connect to weak ties or even strangers, Twitter exposes the users more efficiently to information and individuals they have not subscribed to by suggesting content based on past interactions and

users' interests. This could subsequently show itself in more tolerant attitudes toward people of different ethnic or racial background and is more plausible than less ethnocentric people self-selecting into Twitter user base.

Turning from the United States to the other two cases, one can identify another key finding: the necessity of having cross-country data sets for a full-fledged comparative analysis. As it stands, the three country-specific analyses with two sets of regressions can only be treated as isolated exploratory studies, with the ability to draw only tentative assumptions on cross-country differences. Such comparative data sets could open several avenues of research that could address several research questions, such as "what differentiates the United States from the other two cases" or "what determines the social media use patterns and how they vary across countries or regions?" While a comparative study of social media systems similar to that of Western media systems by Hallin and Mancini (2004) is non-existent, seeking answers to such questions could encourage the development of such taxonomy. Looking at the United States vs. Georgia comparison, one cannot oversee that both are polarized two-party systems. I argue that there are two main differences between the Georgian and American patterns of Facebook use that can explain the divergence in the effects.

First, the active use rate of Facebook in Georgia (68%) is slightly higher than in the United States (54%) (We Are Social, 2022), meaning that the audience on the given social networking site is likely more politically diverse in Georgia. Second, Georgia is culturally more traditional and survival-oriented, as opposed to the relatively secular and self-expression oriented United States (Inglehart, 2018). Communication patterns in Georgia are therefore facilitated by these values as well as the communitarian lifestyle and informal practices (Aliyev, 2015). Simply put, it is harder to create a homogeneous social network in Georgia based on political affiliation. The lack of politically homogeneous social networks in Georgia compared to the United States could also be associated with the low degree of social sorting based on race, income, or education in the former. While there are no data on how much percentage of Facebook friends have diverging political opinions in Georgia, this figure is at approximately 20% in the United States (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015), which means that a sizable share of the remaining 80% could be like-minded.

In Germany, where the tensions between the locals and ethnically distinct immigrants spiked in 2016 after the NYE sexual assaults, social media use (operationalized as political opinions on Facebook or Twitter for the lack of a more relevant item) does not show a correlation with affective polarization, with no difference between Facebook and Twitter effects either. This result again shows that the German social media environment, similar to the media environment, is characterized by a low level of polarization. Is it possible that the variance in polarization in Germany is mostly concentrated within the non-users of social media, not across the users and non-users? It is worth recalling that Germany has quite a low level of social media use, with Facebook use at 31%, and Twitter use at 9%. This also shows that unlike the case of Georgia, where Facebook penetration is very high, the German public is not that widely represented on social media. Therefore, the lack of significant effects of social media in Germany should

not discourage researchers from including it in their analysis. On the contrary, the divergence between the effects of social media use (statistically insignificant) and traditional media use (statistically significant) in Germany means that it is all the more important to control for social media use in studies of political or ethnic polarization in Germany, as the effects observed in the general population might not stand for the German social media users.

Comparing the U.S. and German case studies, similarities can be identified too. This includes the effect of partisanship strength/ideological radicalism. The measures differ as there is no partisanship strength item in the German survey, i.e., how strongly they identify with the party. This can be attributed to the fact that Germany has not experienced the emergence of the so-called "mega identities," such as liberal and conservative, that would automatically ascribe other features to people who identify as one or the other just because they belong to the group. The U-shaped left-right spectrum is an alternative I chose in Germany because both in the U.S. and German contexts, the higher level corresponds to higher radicalism, with the difference between partisan and ideological radicalism being irrelevant. Finally, in both cases, higher radicalism is associated with higher affective polarization, suggesting that affective polarization is mainly driven by partisan or radical individuals, with moderate voters having a lesser effect.

8.4. Future research

Based on the findings of the presented research, future research can focus on two main avenues of research: (1) social networking platform-level differences in terms of their effect on polarization and (2) finding similarities between groups of countries in terms of social media use patterns. On the one hand, the former can also serve as a valuable addition to the widely studied effects of social media use on Western democracies. On the other hand, the latter could present a significant enrichment of the theoretical picture, as it can facilitate the formation of a clear taxonomy of social media systems similar to that of Hallin and Mancini (2004) for media systems. Such taxonomy would create a better overview of the complete picture, including the role of political elites and the social media pages of media outlets.

Elites can play a significant role in spreading polarizing content, including through social media (Tucker, Guess, Barberá, et al., 2018). Politicians can intentionally sow distrust in established media outlets to help boost less credible, (possibly social media-based) sources (Ladd, 2011). In doing so, politicians can affect the quality of public policy and democracy. Considering that polarized environments tend to increase partisan-motivated reasoning at the expense of cool-headed reasoning, it is logical to assume that creating a polarized environment online can serve extremist or populist politicians' agendas, especially considering how easily they can fuel animosity among their followers by ostracizing their opponents. For instance, an analysis of the Twitter accounts of all members of the 111th U.S. House of Representatives revealed that both left- and right-wing extremists had a larger readership than their moderate peers, with results maintaining statistical significance on traditional media as well (Hong & Kim, 2016).

In Venezuela, a minority of elite users (0.02%), consisting of politicians, journalists, and mass media accounts, were able to influence the entire online social network, resulting in a highly polarized conversation (Morales, Borondo, Losada, & Benito, 2015). This may hint at the same predicament faced in traditional media: sensational content is more popular than factual reporting. The way traditional and alternative media outlets operate their social media pages deserves particular attention too. Even in Germany (Garz, Sörensen, & Stone, 2020), but also beyond (Marozzo & Bessi, 2018), some of such pages have demonstrated significant ideological radicalism.

There have been attempts in political communication to find ways of decreasing controversy and disagreement on social media. Musco et al. (2018) provide an optimal topology that minimizes polarization and disagreement under a popular opinion formation model using two real-world datasets from Twitter and Reddit. Others have suggested more obtrusive methods, such as an algorithm that balances the controversy on social media by offering cross-cutting information to the users (Garimella & Weber, 2017; Liao & Fu, 2014). However, such methods are still in development and require reconsidering the standard design agenda to decrease polarization on social media and the Internet (Nelimarkka, Laaksonen, & Semaan, 2018).

While future research will likely face the same obstacles that it does now in terms of lacking the understanding of individuals' political preferences and which factors affect them, the role of (social) media is unlikely to dissipate anytime soon. New methods like social media experiments could shed more light on hitherto unknown theoretical links. Such experiments have already shown that deactivating Facebook results in decreased polarization (Asimovic, Nagler, Bonneau, & Tucker, 2021) and that people are more deliberative on Facebook than on Twitter (Oz, Zheng, & Chen, 2018). Yet another way to improve the understanding of the partisan bias effect would be to measure the agreement between respondents' assessment of media bias and the expert assessments (i.e., Ad Fontes Media) to decipher the possible effect magnitude of not perceiving partisan bias in media.

A. Appendix: Robustness tests

Table A.1.: Robustness test of political polarization in the US with a generalized use of social media as the main independent variable (ANES 2020)

	Dependent variable:
	affpol
Facebook user only	−0.004 (0.026)
Twitter user only	0.008 (0.054)
Facebook and Twitter user	0.017 (0.036)
Partisan media exposure	0.065*** (0.007)
Partisanship strength	0.132*** (0.006)
Left-right political orientation	0.005*** (0.001)
Political interest	0.042*** (0.005)
Political discussions frequency	0.007*** (0.002)
Sex: Female	0.012 (0.007)
Age	0.002*** (0.0002)
Education	−0.008* (0.004)
Income	−0.0003 (0.001)
Facebook user only * Partisanship strength	0.003 (0.008)
Twitter user only * Partisanship strength	0.006 (0.017)
Facebook and Twitter user * Partisanship strength	−0.003 (0.011)
Constant	−0.190*** (0.030)
Observations	4,406
R^2	0.333
Adjusted R^2	0.331
Residual Std. Error	0.234 (df = 4390)
F Statistic	146.137*** (df = 15; 4390)
Note:	*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table A.2.: Robustness test of ethnic polarization in the United States with a political use of social media as the main independent variable (Kantar 2017)

	Dependent variable:
	Ethnocentrism
Facebook pol. activity only	−0.006 (0.010)
Twitter pol. activity only	−0.087** (0.030)
Both FB and TW pol. activity	−0.040*** (0.011)
News source: traditional media	−0.004 (0.006)
News source: independent media	−0.017** (0.006)
News source: general media	0.001 (0.007)
News source: friends on social media	0.007 (0.006)
Online pol. talk with diff. ethn.	−0.015 (0.009)
Offline pol. talk with diff. ethn.	−0.019 (0.012)
Left-right political orientation	0.011*** (0.002)
Ethnic background: non-Caucasian (ref.Caucasian)	−0.009 (0.014)
Gender: Female	−0.037*** (0.011)
Age	−0.0002 (0.0004)
Education	−0.007 (0.005)
Income	−0.0005 (0.002)
Religion: non-Christian (ref.Christian)	0.023 (0.017)
Religion: Atheist (ref. Christian)	−0.040** (0.013)
Constant	0.578*** (0.050)
Observations	1,375
R^2	0.111
Adjusted R^2	0.100
Residual Std. Error	0.191 (df = 1357)
F Statistic	9.949*** (df = 17; 1357)

Note: $^{*}p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$

Table A.3.: Robustness test for political polarization in Germany (GLES 2017)

	Dependent variable:
	MPAP
Source of political info: Facebook	0.010 (0.023)
Source of political info: Twitter	0.019 (0.028)
Source of political info: BILD	0.009*** (0.003)
Source of political info: FAZ	−0.002 (0.004)
Source of political info: Die Welt	0.006 (0.004)
Source of political info: SZ	0.002 (0.003)
Source of political info: FR	−0.007 (0.007)
Source of political info: taz	0.002 (0.006)
Ideological radicalism	0.018*** (0.003)
Left-right political orientation	0.006* (0.002)
Discussing pol. with diff. views	0.028*** (0.005)
Political interest	−0.010* (0.004)
Sex: Female	0.004 (0.008)
Age	0.001*** (0.0002)
Income	−0.001 (0.002)
Education	−0.004 (0.003)
Born in East Germany	−0.005 (0.009)
Grew up outside Germany	−0.023 (0.014)
Source: Facebook * Ideol. Radicalism	0.011 (0.008)
Constant	0.200*** (0.032)
Observations	1,501
R^2	0.078
Adjusted R^2	0.066
Residual Std. Error	0.147 (df = 1481)
F Statistic	6.613*** (df = 19; 1481)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table A.4.: Robustness test: OLS regression with negative attitudes towards foreigners as the dependent variable (CRRC Caucasus Barometer 2017)

	Dependent variable:
	Negative attitudes towards foreigners
Uses Facebook: Yes	−0.110 (0.056)
Uses other soc. media: Yes	−0.146* (0.061)
Soc. media political comment: Yes	0.056 (0.056)
Read/watch news except soc. media	0.149 (0.080)
Immigrant contact: Rarely (ref.: Never)	−0.330*** (0.060)
Immigrant contact: Often (ref.: Never)	−0.441*** (0.083)
Freq. discussing politics	0.005 (0.009)
Sex: Female	0.006 (0.054)
Age	0.001 (0.002)
Education	−0.028 (0.019)
Income	0.035* (0.016)
Religion: non-Orthodox (Ref.: Orthodox)	−0.377*** (0.103)
Ethnicity: non-Georgian (Ref.: Georgian)	−0.066 (0.106)
Constant	3.071*** (0.135)
Observations	1,063
R^2	0.092
Adjusted R^2	0.081
Residual Std. Error	0.801 (df = 1049)
F Statistic	8.161*** (df = 13; 1049)

Note:	**p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001*

B. Appendix: Figures

Figure B.1.: Predicted values of attitudes towards immigrants by religion and the frequency of contact with immigrants

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