

Affective polarization and democratic identity: a comparison of Italy and Norway

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Abstract On the one hand, political polarization is necessary for a plural democracy, which must never be satisfied with a permanent lack of alternatives regarding its central principles and values. On the other hand, polarization can become dysfunctional for democracy when the absoluteness of the rejection of political opponents leads to the endorsement of anti-democratic attitudes and measures, when politics is seen as a zero-sum game and the diversity of legitimate opinions, attitudes, and identities is neglected. The identity of democracy is to prevent this in the long run and to balance competing elements instead. Based on this premise, the article aims to explain why the extent of affective polarization in established democracies varies greatly, using Norway and Italy as two case studies according to the *most similar case design*. Accordingly, it argues for a holistic view of a country's political culture that takes into account historical path dependencies and upheavals and thereby reveals whether a democratic society is more or less willing to accept and balance competing conceptions of democracy.

Keywords Democratic identity · Italy · Norway · Pluralism · Affective polarization

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Affektive Polarisierung und demokratische Identität: Italien und Norwegen im Vergleich

Zusammenfassung Politische Polarisierung ist einerseits notwendig für eine plurale Demokratie, die sich niemals mit dauerhafter Alternativlosigkeit hinsichtlich ihrer zentralen Prinzipien und Werte zufriedengeben darf. Andererseits kann Polarisierung dann für die Demokratie dysfunktional werden, wenn die Absolutheit der Ablehnung politischer Gegner in der Befürwortung antidemokratischer Einstellungen und Maßnahmen mündet, wenn Politik als Nullsummenspiel gesehen wird und die Vielfalt legitimer Meinungen, Einstellungen und Identitäten ausgeblendet wird. Die Identität der Demokratie ist es, dies auf Dauer zu verhindern und stattdessen konkurrierende Elemente auszubalancieren. Ausgehend von dieser Prämisse will der Artikel anhand der zwei Fallbeispiele Norwegen und Italien nach dem *most similar case design* erklären, warum das Ausmaß affektiver Polarisierung in den etablierten Demokratien starke Unterschiede aufweist. Dementsprechend wird für einen ganzheitlichen Blick in die politische Kultur eines Landes plädiert, der historische Pfadabhängigkeiten und Umbrüche berücksichtigt und dadurch zeigt, ob eine demokratische Gesellschaft mehr oder weniger zu Akzeptanz und Ausgleich konkurrierender Vorstellungen von Demokratie bereit ist.

Schlüsselwörter Demokratische Identität · Italien · Norwegen · Pluralismus · Affektive Polarisierung

1 Introduction

Research on the crisis of democracy is in relative agreement that Western democracies found themselves in an age of populism and polarization (Arbatli and Rosenberg 2021; Bernhard 2020; Schäfer and Zürn 2021; Svulik 2019). Affective polarization can be defined as “the extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked out-group” (Iyengar et al. 2012, p. 406). Affective polarization is thus related to issue-based (cognitive) polarization, but it is not the same thing (Bernaerts et al. 2023, p. 159). Wagner specifies affective polarization in this sense: “More specifically, the term captures the distance between the sympathy individuals hold towards their in-party and the animosity they hold towards out-parties” (2024, p. 379). Affective polarization is increasing in nearly all democratic societies (see Fig. 1).

However, there are also considerable differences between the individual democracies (see Fig. 2). Regarding twenty-two selected cases from Europe, Northern America and Asia, Slovenia has the highest affective polarization. Italy and France are ranking next with still a noticeable level of polarization. In Norway, affective polarization is very low and can be classified as predominantly absent for the year 2023. To sum up, there are strong differences and by no means all established democracies presented here are equally affected by the phenomenon of polarization. How can we explain these differences?

Polarization is not a new phenomenon for democracies and, from a pluralist or agonist perspective, is even a necessary component of democratic competition

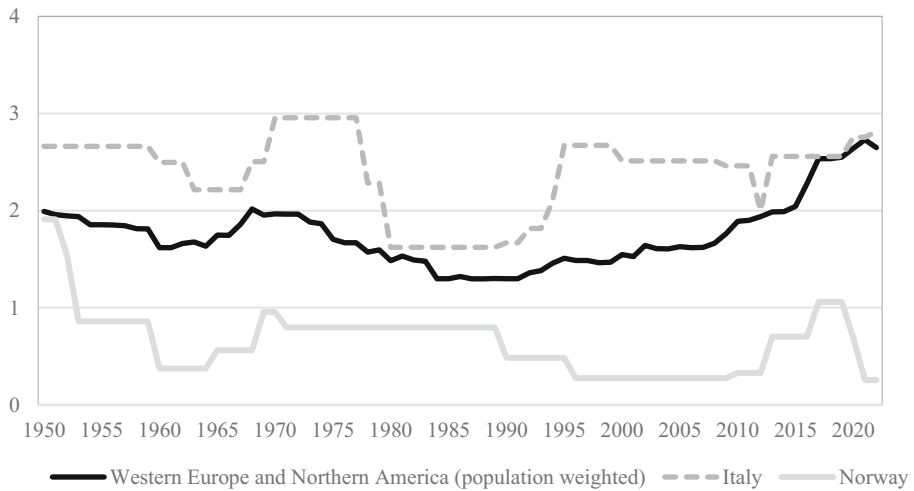


Fig. 1 Affective polarization in Western democracies since 1950. Source: V-Dem, *Political polarization* (v2cacamps). Question: *Is society polarized into antagonistic, political camps?* Variable type: Original scale (0–4). Higher values indicate higher polarization. Own illustration

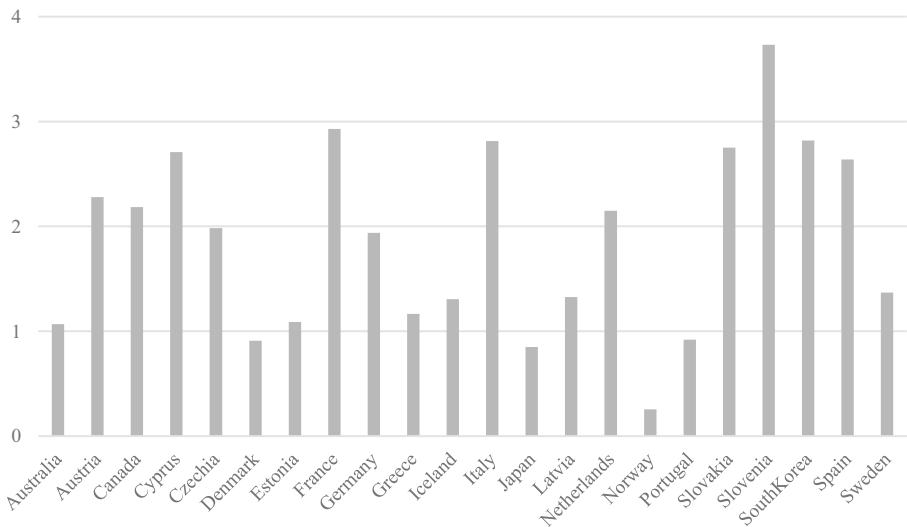


Fig. 2 Affective polarization in selected democracies in 2023. Source: V-Dem, *Political polarization* (v2cacamps). Question: *Is society polarized into antagonistic, political camps?* Variable type: Original scale (0–4). Higher values indicate a higher polarization. Own illustration

(Fraenkel 2011; Mouffe 2005). It has also recently been pointed out that the problem is not the competition between political or other social group identities as such (Gutmann 2003; Schubert and Schwiertz 2021). By establishing links to political parties and supporting organizations, collective identities have always been a necessary component of social groups and milieus in the political system (Mair 2006). The emancipatory identity politics of the 1960s also show that marginalized

groups and poorly represented interests can make legitimate demands for participation (Sussemichel and Kastner 2018).

However, under certain conditions, polarization becomes a danger for democracy:

“When politics becomes an identity-based struggle against depraved opponents—when ideals and policies matter less than dominating foes—the government becomes dysfunctional. Viable political strategies focus less on policy-based arguments and more on marginalizing the opposition, with false smears and antidemocratic tactics if necessary” (Finkel et al. 2020, p. 536).

Henceforth, many authors have pointed out major negative consequences of certain forms of affective polarization for the functioning of democracy. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018), for instance, show how the exaggeration of political conflicts and the violation of generally valid and long standing democratic rules can even lead to the ‘death’ of democratic orders. Arbatli and Rosenberg (2021, p. 288) figure out that polarization leads to intimidation and rejection of the government by the opposition, which in turn causes greater tolerance of electoral manipulation and the violations of political and civil rights and liberties for the sake of short term political success. In summary, the connection between polarization and endangered democracies exists when political conflicts are played out as a zero-sum game, when political majorities in favor of another political camp are seen as an existential threat rather than as the democratic norm and when conflict thus becomes an end in itself (McCoy et al. 2018, p. 26).

Identity-based affective polarization is thus linked to the loss of democratic quality and dysfunctional democratic decision-making mechanism (Somer et al. 2021). The decisive factor here is the shift from a democratic orientation toward compromise, both among citizens and the political elite, to a *perception of threat* and a view of political dispute as a zero-sum game (McCoy et al. 2018, p. 25). I thus argue that a main topic of affective polarization recently is the controversial nature of the concept of democracy itself.

There are different ideas about what constitutes democracy and how a democratic political order should be organized (Gagnon 2018; Held 1987; Osterberg-Kaufmann et al. 2023). This can first be noted as a fundamental characteristic of a pluralistic democracy: Ernst Fraenkel (2011), among others, has pointed out that in a free society there can never be a homogeneity of interests between the people and their representatives. However, the more recent phenomenon of political polarization is often attributed precisely to this: In democracy, groups, and milieus, who understand democracy to mean different things, are increasingly confronting each other. “With the increase in the polarization of a society even in seemingly consolidated democracies [...] it is reasonable to assume that these different groups also differ substantially in their ideas of democracy” (Osterberg-Kaufmann 2023, p. 314).

But this overlooks, first, the fact that these different conceptions of democracy have always existed and, second, that the extent of political polarization varies greatly in democracies. So, the question is *under which conditions different conceptions of democracy lead to an unhealthy, dysfunctional form of affective polarization* and under which conditions, in contrast, this diversity can be transformed into a functional form of balance. It is precisely this process of balancing, of simultaneously

enabling *and* keeping under control competing conceptions of democracy and their political implications, that can be called the identity of democracy (Hidalgo 2020) or democratic identity (Bein 2022b, 2023).

This article aims to contribute to answering this question by first presenting the premise of a democratic identity theoretically and integrating it into the context of the polarization literature. Subsequently, the empirical section aims at testing the postulated connection between political polarization and democratic identity on the basis of two selected case studies. For this purpose, insights into the case-specific conditions of both selected democracies follow: Italy with high polarization rates and Norway as democratic society with very low polarization rates. Finally, we conclude with some theoretical implications for the causes and consequences of dysfunctional polarization in established democracies.

2 Polarization and democratic identity

2.1 Explaining polarization in the literature

McCoy et al. define polarization as “a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become instead reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’” (2018, p. 18). Affective polarization occurs when group affiliations and emotional devaluations are constructed based on political preferences in everyday life and in situations that are actually nonpolitical. Family members, neighbors or work colleagues are no longer perceived as such but are instead seen as either the ‘enemy’ or ‘one of us’ according to their political convictions and partisan sympathies: “Rather than simply disagreeing over policy outcomes, we are increasingly blind to our commonalities, seeing each other only as two teams fighting for a trophy” (Mason 2018, p. 4). The absoluteness of the respective differences makes democratic debates difficult. In such a debate, one would ideally recognize that sometimes one side wins, sometimes the other, and that the interplay of electoral victory and defeat is part of the competition (Przeworski 2020). In times of high affective and dysfunctional polarization, both sides declare the other as the true ‘enemies of democracy’ and thus justify demands for exclusion (Schedler 2023).

The literature suggests diverging and multiple explanations for increasing and hostile affective polarization (Roose and Steinhilper 2022; Wagner 2024). *Social causes* are primarily about the distribution and hardening of lines of conflict, so-called cleavages. This causes not only an increasing polarization of party systems (Dalton and Berning 2022) but also a relevant amount of social fragmentation. This, in turn, strengthens hostile attitudes toward political opponents (Klein 2021; Mason 2016). In a study for Germany, for example, it was shown that supporters of the Greens and the *Alternative für Deutschland*—both parties are often treated as poles of the new cultural cleavage—have very homogeneous circles of friends (Teichler et al. 2023, p. 32). This consolidates their own opinions and viewpoints, while at the same time, ignorance and hostility toward the other camp grow. Earlier sociological

studies have already identified the lack of cross-cutting memberships as a reason for social polarization and the hardening of conflicts (Eckstein 1966; Lazarsfeld et al. 1968).

In terms of *institutional causes*, there is no clear scientific evidence of correlations with greater polarization. Many studies focus exclusively on the USA, and cross-national analyses are much rarer. In a study of 40 democracies, however, it was found that affective polarization toward parties is greater than that toward individual members of the political elite: “Even if levels of partisan identification and party membership have dropped, parties still invoke stronger feelings among voters than leaders” (Reiljan et al. 2023, p. 14). However, the effect shifts toward a stronger polarization concerning political leaders if the regime has performance problems in the output area, particularly in terms of effectiveness. A growing number of studies point in particular to the increasing influence of populist parties (McCoy and Somer 2019; Svoblik 2019).

In addition, the media is also said to have a relevant influence on polarization, as it specifically reinforces the affiliation of social identities and the demarcation from others (Eilders et al. 2022) because “as people spend more time online and on social network sites, they are more likely to be inadvertently exposed to polarizing content by others in their network” (Iyengar et al. 2019, p. 135).

Furthermore, other research has shown that consensus democracies, especially democracies with proportional representation, exhibit lower polarization and thus advise policy-makers “to create institutions that foster social connectedness, inclusive decision-making, substantive and descriptive representation of and legitimacy for all societal groups” (Bernaerts et al. 2023, pp. 163–164).

The *interaction between elite polarization and social polarization* is also examined. We can describe this as a top-down-effect of affective polarization. Polarization within the political elite can reinforce political polarization within society, as numerous studies from the American context but also from European democracies such as Sweden show (Bäck et al. 2023; Skytte 2021; Zingher and Flynn 2018). Huddy and Yair (2021), for example, found in an experiment that affective polarization on the part of voters can be reduced through more friendly and less hostile interactions between politicians in political conflicts. Skytte (2021) shows how uncivilized and hostile interactions between political elites have a negative impact on political trust. To the contrary, the extent of substantive policy-differences between political actors has no clear effect on the affective polarization of voters:

“The fact that citizens can cope with strong political disagreement without losing faith in their elected politicians is good news for those who believe that issue polarization is a valuable good in a democracy, and for those trying to improve the level of civility in public debate” (Skytte 2021, p. 1473).

However, as far as I can see, there is no empirical study that specifically explains political polarization in terms of crucial differences in balancing democracy conceptions and its path dependencies in a country’s political culture. This seems to be a central research gap, as path dependencies are already inherent in every political culture (Wiarda 2014), which makes it possible to balance different democratic

principles (e.g. freedom and equality, individual rights and collective cohesion) in a tolerant way.

2.2 Affective polarization and democratic identity between liberalism and republicanism

In general, polarization describes the nature and extent of major political conflicts in a society (Bein 2023, p. 102). The distribution of political attitudes as an object of polarization can be described as a form of distribution that erodes in the center and concentrates toward the ends. According to Eckstein (1966, p. 38), “[t]he most stable democracy is one in which men disagree, without intensity and within a narrow range, on specific issues, widely share basic orientations, and have politically weak segmental identifications”. Conflicts of interest that clash in the sense of pluralist democratic theory and are cushioned by the democratic competition are accordingly to be understood as a normal or healthy form of polarization. The condition for this is that there is mutual recognition of the plurality and legitimacy of interests and ideas, and that there is fundamental agreement on the manner in which the conflict is to be carried out.

This requires the ability to compromise across political camps and the recognition of multiple and ambiguous identity claims. Identity-political disputes beyond factual issues can therefore have dysfunctional consequences for democracy if polarization becomes an end in itself and open political debates that ultimately lead to binding and well-accepted decisions are prevented.

In this respect, Ernst Fraenkel’s pluralist theory of democracy explicitly opposes the anti-pluralist and identitarian constructions of democracy by Schmitt and Rousseau (Bergem 2019, p. 257). Rather, in pluralist democracy, the common good is to be achieved *a posteriori* through the rationality of procedures and the recognition of the diversity of interests. But:

“The characteristic notion of pluralism, that the common good can be realized only if taking into account the fundamental regulative ideas of justice and equity, enabling groups to participate in the process of will formation, makes sense only if the procedural and substantive norms called upon to regulate this will formation are unbreakably respected” (Fraenkel 2011, p. 279).

Agonistic theories then also characterize the transition from collective ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ conflicts out of an antagonistic attitude of hostility into conflict situations that fundamentally recognize the plurality of a democratic society and the legitimacy of the other identities and conceptions of democracy: “Whereas antagonism is an us-them relationship in which enemies face each other without any common ground, agonism is an us-them relationship in which the conflicting parties recognize the legitimacy of their opponents even though they realize that there is no rational solution to the conflict” (Mouffe 2010, p. 30).

If we break down competing deductive models of democracy such as liberalism and republicanism, we find, for example, different starting points from which a democratic community can be conceived and legitimized (Osterberg-Kaufmann et al. 2023, p. 78). *Republicanism*, for instance, enforces a democratic model that

puts positive freedom, active participation, and the community of the citizens in the center. Since political participation in republicanism represents a necessary “basic activity” (Arendt 2021, pp. 24–26) of human life, people must also be given the preconditions to participate actively and effectively. Hence, in republicanism, an understanding of democracy stems from the creation of social equality and the generation of preconditions for positive freedom (Bein 2023, p. 179).¹

The *liberal* ideal, instead, thus contains a normative limitation to the negative freedom and autonomy of the individual. The autonomous individual, who is equal to all others in his goals and desires and must therefore also enjoy the freedom to develop according to his own ideas, is at the center of the theoretical concepts of liberalism (Bein 2023, p. 148; Rawls 1979; Sandel 1993). In particular, the concepts of privacy and neutrality are elementary components of the liberal state in this context. Thus, Rawls’ goal is explicitly to design a conception of justice that is acceptable and just for all, but independent of certain moral, philosophical or religious doctrines (Rawls 2003, p. 67).

Osterberg-Kaufmann et al. (2023) try to retrieve different *configurations* of democracy from these democratic theories in the sense of climbing down the ladder of abstraction. Liberalism then emphasizes a democratic process, where interests are seen as competing goals and the competition has to be regulated by institutions. Republicanism, on the contrary, requires stronger social equalities in order to guarantee extensive participation and a strong civil society. “Whereas liberalism achieves the common good through the implementation of particular interests capable of gaining a majority, republicanism presupposes the existence of a common good to which all citizens voluntarily subordinate their particular interests” (Osterberg-Kaufmann et al. 2023, p. 84).

Democracy as a whole, when these ideas and conceptions confront each other within it, must be permanently open to balance them (Przeworski 2020, p. 174). It cannot, for example, legitimately make itself only a liberal democracy without simultaneously neglecting the republican idea or implement only conservative claims without missing the possibility of dynamic, progressive adaptation to environmental changes. Moreover, equal recognition and balancing of these configurations of democracy foster awareness among citizens that the dominance of one model is short-lived and that constructive participation in political competition allows for incremental successes (Mouffe 2018, p. 106).

Here, the crucial argument is made that forms of dysfunctional affective polarization can be seen as a consequence of weak *democratic identity*. I want to follow mainly the arguments of Mouffe (2015, 2018), Hidalgo (2019, 2020) and, further elaborated, Bein (2023): Accordingly, democracy, as a collective organizational form of political decision-making, has its own identity, namely that of balancing and toler-

¹ Being aware of the rich discussion on communitarianism as a pole of the new populist cleavage (Wilde et al. 2019), I here refer to the term republicanism. The description of the line of conflict between cosmopolitans and communitarians must firstly be distinguished from the democratic-theoretical and philosophical discussion on communitarianism. Secondly, although the conceptions of democracy there are based on a return to strong and limited political communities, they also have authoritarian, anti-pluralist and partly nativist traits (Schäfer and Zürn 2021). Republicanism therefore remains the point of reference for democratic theory here.

ating insoluble but legitimate tensions. These tensions then include specific conflicts over what values and principles characterize the democratic order, to what extent the state should intervene, or how inclusive or exclusive access to citizenship can be.

Democratic identity is thus not primarily a form of identity that emanates bottom-up from a particular social group or individual and brings its demands to bear on the political system. Rather, it is the form of an identity necessarily inherent in democratic orders, which is then optimally internalized and adopted by a large proportion of its citizens. Democracy must preserve this diversity of legitimate positions, especially in questions regarding political integration and citizenship (Bein 2022a) or the distribution of resources, freedoms and rights, and transfer it into a political debate. Hidalgo emphasizes this characteristic with focus on the classic left-right-divide:

“[The] identity of democracy itself is therefore only preserved if both left-wing and right-wing identity politics achieve at best partial successes, stage victories and/or temporary gains. The contradiction itself, the opposing political identities, which in different ways emphasize the ‘same’ and ‘different’ that exist simultaneously in democracy, must remain intact” (Hidalgo 2020, p. 22).

According to agonistic theory then, the limits of pluralism lie in the distinction between political demands that are based on the recognition of the other and merely constitute a political opposition, and such demands that question the constitutive institutions of the democratic community and justify exclusion morally and in absolute terms. Mouffe further points out that the *permanent* establishment of consensus *cannot* be the goal, because this would suppress and exclude the legitimate political points of contention (2018, p. 106). Instead, the long-term and systematic balancing of legitimate political identities, democratic understandings and conflicting principles as freedom and equality or particularism and universalism must be achieved. The *central thesis* of this paper assumes *that affective polarization takes on a dysfunctional form when equal balancing of different democratic principles and conceptions is absent*.

This phenomenon is currently being discussed for liberalism in particular: Since the 1970s, the spread of liberalism as the basis of political, social and economic relations has produced a dominant political paradigm centered on individual autonomy and freedom rights, global capitalist economic structures and national deregulation (Reckwitz 2019). Just as Charles Taylor predicted a “problem of viability” (1993, p. 110) of liberal societies in the 1990s, other authors increasingly criticized the one-sidedness of the liberal paradigm: in addition to the negative effects of neoliberalism on social inequality and on the ability of nation-state governments to act, the atomization and singularization of societies is driven forward (Fukuyama 2018; Lilla 2016; Müller 2021). As Schäfer and Zürn (2021) argue, the dominance of ‘liberal globalists’ and the corresponding political identity in the institutions of democracy only logically give rise to a reaction in the form of authoritarian populism. This populism focuses more strongly on the responsiveness of national communities and has an authoritarian understanding of democracy that is geared toward exclusive identity, a homogeneous will of the people and direct popular sovereignty. These

political actors can increasingly be seen as *polarization entrepreneurs* (Mau et al. 2023), and their anti-pluralism is a driving force of democratic erosion (Selk 2023, p. 19). Polarization then no longer appears in its healthy form of democratic competition but becomes dysfunctional and increasingly prevents a solution-oriented compromise (Bein 2022b).

Due to the longstanding dominance of one side, the expectation is that the other side has been neglected and that anomic radicalization can be explained. Temporary marginalization threatens not only radicalization and the emergence of counter-movements but also a delay in functional problem-solving skills at the policy level. A permanent deregulation of the financial markets in line with the liberal paradigm or an equally extended neglect of climate protection in Western industrial policy can be seen as the reason why these political issues today are often fought out in the zero-sum rhetoric described above. The climate protests of the Last Generation group, for example, have sparked such a dilemma: Western countries have neglected the climate issue for so long and only marginally made it the subject of serious and balanced political debates that the topic is now omnipresent. The scientific forecasts are clear, and the *Last Generation* group wants to draw attention to the immediate need for action with no alternative (Jansma et al. 2022). The radicalism with which the topic is presented also generates corresponding counterreactions and polarization, which, however, is not helpful for functional decision-making.

Bein (2023, p. 113) points out that this conception of democratic identity is then not only evident at the macro level through the forms of balancing described but is also related to concrete patterns of attitudes in the population. We already know from many sociological studies that so-called cross-cutting memberships and overlapping social roles or political identities have a conflict-moderating effect:

“The evidence available suggests that the chances for stable democracy are enhanced to the extent that social strata, groups and individuals have a number of cross-cutting politically relevant affiliations. To the degree that a significant proportion of the population is pulled among conflicting forces, such groups and individuals have an interest in reducing the intensity of political conflict” (Lipset 1959, p. 97).

Actors are less inclined to radicalize political views and actions if they have contacts with people with other political views in their social environment (Kaube and Kieserling 2022; Mason 2018).

In other words, thinking of democracy more in terms of community and collective solidarity as well as certain civic traditions and virtues is a legitimate attitude pattern within the “essentially contested concept” (Gallie 1955) of democracy. However, if, for a certain period of time, democracy is only thought of against the background of the paradigms of liberalization, individualization and universalization, one’s own identity corset may fall into a spiral of radicalization. Thus, the desired basis for integration is not only a republican ethos and understanding of citizenship but also the desire for the restoration of national, homogeneous communities. Prejudices against minorities and certain social groups are strengthened in the following (Pickel and Pickel 2023). Authoritarian right-wing populism, which subsequently instrumentalizes the right-wing populist countertendency to liberalism, symbolizes the radical-

ized and backward-looking striving for simplicity, homogeneous community and clarity within closed borders (Kemmerzell and Selk 2024).

Of course, there will always be trade-offs between democratic principles. A core attitude of democratic principles like freedom or equality is that they can never be fully fulfilled at the same time (Hidalgo 2019; Lauth 2016). Nevertheless, if different models of democracy, political identities and competing principles are already anchored in a country's political culture *not* as mutually exclusive antipoles, dysfunctional polarization processes can be prevented. This can be recognized, on the one hand, as path dependency in political culture in the sense of collective characteristics and identity patterns, or, on the other hand, in the form of strong cross-cutting identities.

3 Affective polarization and democratic identity in Italy and Norway

Empirical studies on this consequently will have to *focus on three aspects*: (1) What democratic principles characterize the *cleavage structure* and political culture of a country? (2) How strong do social and political groups oppose each other at the input level, preventing or enabling a balance? This refers to the concept of democratic identity at the *level of citizens* (3) To what extent is the balancing of these principles promoted or not at the *policy level* (output)? This illustrates the requirements of democratic identity at the output-level.

This is where the sticking point of causality arises in many social science questions. How are the explanatory factors discussed here interrelated? Are these independent explanatory factors to the amount of dysfunctional polarization really independent?² Social divisions, intergroup relations and political trust, and the balancing of democratic principles are, of course, not independent aspects. My argument is that dysfunctional polarization can be prevented or reduced to a functional level by balancing different democratic principles. The nature of social divisions is a crucial contextual factor that needs to be taken into account. Thus, we have multiple causal factors, and it is difficult to define a starting point in terms of time and content. The image of a cycle is more appropriate.³ Ideally, my argument claims that cross-cutting memberships in the cleavage structure and the balancing of democratic principles in the output reduce polarization and keep it functional. At the same time, a high degree of polarization, once it shapes the political culture, undermines these preconditions of democratic identity.

To examine this in exemplary fashion, the main argument will be pursued in greater detail for two selected democracies: Italy as case with high polarization, Norway as case with low polarization. Table 1 illustrates the structure of the *comparative case study*. The dependent variable to explain is the different degree of affective polarization which has been illustrated above. According to a case selection following the most similar case design, Italy and Norway show some crucial

² I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer of the ZfVP for pointing this out more clearly.

³ For further studies on a larger scale, the research design of a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) should be applied here.

Table 1 Comparing Italy and Norway (Most Similar Case Design)

	Italy	Norway
<i>Dependent variable</i>		
Affective polarization	High level of affective polarization	Low level of affective polarization
<i>Independent variables</i>		
Concurring democratic principles	Polarization between conflicting democratic principles (socialism/communism vs. conservatism, particularism vs. universalism)	Balancing between conflicting democratic principles (freedom vs. equality, individualism vs. collectivism)
Cross-cutting memberships	Tradition of ideological subcultures, but organizational integration loosens and hostility increases	Tradition of existing cross-cutting memberships and less social sorting in society
Balanced policy outputs	Strong ingroup-outgroup demarcation in main policy-fields fosters affective polarization	Strong welfare state ('Volkshheim') supports the balancing of contrasting democratic principles
<i>Context factors</i>		
Democracy type	Functioning liberal democracy, consensus democracy on the executive-party-dimension	Functioning liberal democracy, consensus democracy on the executive-party-dimension
Party system	Highly fractionalized multiparty system with a high number of effective parties	Highly fractionalized multiparty system with a high number of effective parties
Populism	Strong right-wing populism, recent government participation of right-wing populist parties	Moderate right-wing populism, recent government participation of right-wing populist parties

Own illustration

similarities in the political context: Both are established and high quality liberal democracies in the *Regimes of the world* (RoW) data by V-Dem (Coppedge et al. 2024). In 2023, Norway scores 0.84 at the Liberal Democracy Index, Italy's score is slightly lower at 0.76. In comparison, the population-weighted score of all countries worldwide is 0.29. Additionally, both political systems can be classified as *consensus democracies*, at least on the executive-party-dimension according to Lijphart (2012, p. 244). That means, the political system is characterized by strong institutional power constraints and consensus mechanisms: "instead of being satisfied with narrow decision-making majorities, it seeks to maximize the size of these majorities. Its rules and institutions aim at broad participation in government and broad agreement on the policies that the government should pursue" (Lijphart 2012, p. 2).

The party systems both show a high and similar *number of effective parties*. In 2022, according to the Comparative Political Data Set (Armingeon et al. 2024), Norway has an effective number of parties (on the votes level) of 6.4 and Italy of 6.8. Consequently, both party systems are highly fractionalized. Populist and extremist parties gain an increasing number of votes in recent elections in Italy as well as in Norway and the party competition is characterized by a significant ideological distance between the opposing blocs (Calossi and Pizzimenti 2024; Ryan 2023, p. 53). In both political systems, *right-wing populist parties* have been or are involved in government in recent years. In summary, it can be said that the two

countries are similar in some of the political context factors that are cited in the literature as explanations for polarization.

The main argument to explain the differences in polarization levels now involves the following dependent variables: cross-cutting memberships that foster a democratic identity on the individual level, balanced policy outputs reconciling opposing democratic principles and, thus, a different strength of democratic identity in the political culture of each case.

3.1 Norway

Norway is part of a group of Nordic countries called Scandinavia. Together with Sweden, Finland, Denmark (and sometimes Iceland), this group of established democracies is often seen as role model for democratic quality, social justice and well-functioning welfare states (Bruun 2018; Goul Andersen and Hoff 2002; Heintze 2005; Hilson 2008; Lundberg 2015). However, with regard to affective polarization, there can be seen some differences in the region. Affective polarization tends to be significant higher especially in Denmark and Sweden than in Norway, Finland or Iceland (Ryan 2023). Norway thus is a remarkable case with low polarization rates not only with regard to Western established democracies but even in comparison with its most similar neighbors in the Nordic region.

Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that Norway is not entirely spared from polarizing developments. Wollebæk et al. (2024), for instance, found out that migration has also become one of the most salient political issues with potential for conflict. Although polarization towards refugees has not increased in recent years, a certain sorting of political preferences around this topic has taken place and attitudes towards Islam in particular have become more polarized.

Concurring democratic principles In accordance with the theoretical premise that conflicts over democratic models and subordinate principles have to balance each other out in the sense of democratic identity to prevent dysfunctional polarization, the *connection between individualism and collectivism* respectively egalitarianism will now be discussed as the crucial concurring democratic principles in Norwegian democracy. Individualism, negative freedom and the willingness to take responsibility for one's own well-being are classic elements of liberal, atomistic conceptions of democracy. From a theoretical perspective, often they are seen as counterparts of republican elements like the common good, a holistic embeddedness of the individuals and the importance of positive freedom and social equality.

First and foremost, it is the distinct Norwegian welfare state that, on closer inspection, embodies this combination of individual freedom and state intervention, of negative and positive freedom. The findings of Hofstede (2001, p. 323) and Basáñez (2016, p. 48) already provide indications of this: In these studies, Scandinavian democracies often show aspects of a simultaneity of individualism and collectivism. An individual performance orientation then occurs in combination with a more “feminine” (Hofstede 2001, p. 323) consensus and compromise orientation and the prioritization of the principle “one works to live” instead of “one lives to work” (Basáñez 2016, p. 48).

The combination of individual performance *and* orientation toward a common good in Norway is thus rooted in a paradox of the Nordic ‘*Volksheim*’ ideal: A strong state that intervenes in the welfare state and guarantees comprehensive social security is intended to contribute to the individual autonomy and independence of its citizens. Thus, “the goal of the state was not [...] to shape society in a socialist manner or even to monitor the population—on the contrary, state intervention were to serve to make people more independent” (Alex 2019, p. 253).

Stråth (2018, p. 49) elaborates that the roots of these Nordic ‘*Volksheim*’ models have a long history and lie in the specific combination of freedom and (positive) equality that distinguishes the Nordic states from many other democracies in their “imagined” (Anderson 2006) community construction. In this context, farmers and peasants play a central role, not only being a fixed reference point of Nordic mythology, but also as important local political actors since the 19th century. As a “key figure in the symbolic representation of equality and freedom” (Stråth 2018, p. 49), the image of Nordic farmers stands for a specific way, compared to many other emerging nation-states in this period, of confronting the tensions between freedom and equality and transcending them in the ideal of a society of “free equals” (Stråth 2018, p. 48). This effect seems to be even stronger in Norway than in other Scandinavian states, as the country does not have historically strong aristocratic actors and a lower polarization of the social question with the onset of industrialization at the transition to the 20th century (Stråth 2018, p. 54).

However, the Nordic combination of individual freedom and a strong community is characterized not only by an explicitly positive understanding of freedom, but also by an educational element:

“The nordic peasants/farmers and workers were carriers not only of freedom and equality, but also of education which became a key tool in the struggle of the people’s movement to define the meaning of the concepts of equality and freedom” (Stråth 2018, p. 56).

In Norwegian, the term education (*dannelse*) refers to a high degree of personal responsibility. Therefore, the political movement of farmers and peasants is symbolic not only as a reference point for the simultaneity of (positive) freedom and equality, but also for the necessity of self-education as responsible citizens, as for example under the educational movement of the influential Protestant pastor Grundtvig from Denmark, who, among other things, became known through the founding of so-called folk high schools and strongly influenced Nordic thinking on freedom, equality and education (Stråth 2018, p. 57).

Stråth (2018, p. 49) therefore concludes that “the Nordic countries managed to keep the tension between freedom and equality under better control than elsewhere, which is something different from arguing about concepts like freedom and equality in absolute terms”. These historical connotations of freedom, which explicitly define social and political equality as a “political principle for equal rights and equal access to social and economic goods and services in society” (Bruun 2018, p. 135) can thus possibly explain why the normative ideas on democracy in Norway today still depend on a simultaneity of the individual idea of achievement and autonomy on the one

side and the strong orientation towards community and solidarity on the other side (Vike 2018, pp. 115–117).

Cross-cutting memberships Many studies on Norway point to the peculiarity that despite profound political conflicts and ideological differences, the consensual element in society has been preserved and has a conflict-mitigating effect. This is pointed out for example by Wollebæk et al. (2024, p. 232): “Compared to most other Western democracies, Norway is (still) relatively egalitarian and homogenous and has historically been characterized by a political consensus culture”. Norwegian society has already early been characterized by the fact that social relationships are not primarily defined in economic-instrumental terms, but by a high degree of “freely given respect, considerateness, love, helpfulness, sympathy, tolerance, and accommodation” (Eckstein 1966, p. 81). This is also reflected in the pronounced corporatism and compromise orientation of political actors and elites, although political conflict structures and profound cleavages, especially between urban and rural areas and between labor and capital or church and state, are certainly manifest in the political system. All of this raised the question for Eckstein (1966) of why Norway represents a stable political system with such pronounced solidarity and political community belief. The answer was: In Norway, despite pronounced competition and a strong political cleavage structure, first, the strong importance of local governments and local political actors became a central element securing democracy; second, no enduring radical movements challenged the legitimacy of the system; third, democratic ideas and norms were strongly embedded in everyday culture; and fourth, parties embodied political competition firmly tied to parliamentary conflict resolution patterns (Eckstein 1966, pp. 16–19).

On the individual level, in his classic study Eckstein saw the specific pattern of “balanced personalities” as the reason for moderate polarization and balanced conflicts between individualism and collectivism: Cohesion in Norwegian society arose from overlapping identities and social memberships of individual citizens across the political cleavage structures. The pronounced sense of community and strong solidarity does not preclude strong individualism (Eckstein 1966, p. 88). It has already been pointed out on a normative level that the ideal of the strong welfare state here also embodies the ideal of strengthening the autonomy of individuals through its strong emphasis on positive freedom and equality.

Due to the established structures of political camps, embedded in the institutions of political consensus, there is currently not as great a danger of social sorting as in the USA, for example. “While ideological ‘sorting’ of voters is now increasingly taking place in the US, in the Norwegian multi-party system, which reflects century-old political cleavages resulting from critical junctures in history, voters have already been ‘sorted’ by their geographical, cultural, and economic positions” (Wollebæk et al. 2024, p. 232). Even today, Norwegian society can be said to have strongly overlapping cross-cutting memberships and high social and political trust (Bein 2023, p. 405). Ryans results to explain differences in affective polarization between Nordic countries for example suggest that the long-term ideological distance between ideological blocs on the left and the right matters. Interestingly, Norway has a history of strongly pronounced bloc politics between the left and right camps with few cross-

party governing coalitions. Nevertheless, unlike in Sweden or Denmark, for example, voters in Norway do not have such a strong correspondence between ideological distance to a party and their negative affective evaluation of it. According to Ryan, this may also be linked to the moderate and more centrist position of the major parties to the right and left of center (2023, p. 69).

Social anchoring in stable organizational structures is also a sign of higher social capital and a lower risk of affective polarization. In Norway, this shows the combination of political conflict and corresponding civil society mobilization, with strong solidarity throughout society at the same time (Jochem 2012, p. 113). Goul Andersen and Hoff write with regard to that: “Few other countries have seen such high levels of political mobilization in mass parties, in trade unions and farmers’ associations, and in leisure, cultural and religious associations” (2002, p. 251). In the V-Dem measures of civil society strength and participation, Norway regularly tends to have the highest scores (Coppedge et al. 2024).

Besides this strong relationship between civil society and political environment, political parties are crucial. Above all, the dissolving of voter loyalty and the stable political integration of social groups into the political process open up windows of opportunity for polarizing actors. Therefore, the literature also discusses a connection between electoral volatility, fragmentation of party systems and populist polarization (Møller and Skaaning 2024, p. 269; Moraes and Béjar 2023). Although volatility is increasing in Norway in line with the overall trend, it is not nearly as strong as in other democracies. Recently, the value has even decreased again and is at the level of the 1980s (Detterbeck 2021, p. 38).

Finally, there are relevant signs that Norwegian society shows a certain path dependency of cross-cutting memberships and that this mitigates the affective polarization that still exists today. This is reflected in a greater tolerance of ideological differences between left and right as well as in a strong civil society participation and social trust. At the same time, people are also used to rule-based conflict resolution through organizational integration. Although it cannot be denied that further empirical studies in this area would be necessary.

Balanced policy outputs The Norwegian welfare state and its function to balance the competing democratic principles between individual freedom and collective solidarity, between individualism and collectivism or between negative and positive freedom becomes evident in some main aspects of Norway’s policy profile. As mentioned above, Norway has not only one of the highest values of liberal democratic quality worldwide. At the same time, egalitarian and participatory elements of democracy are also very pronounced, as the multiple democracy indices of V-dem can show (Coppedge et al. 2024). The Sustainable Governance Indicators (SGI) are suitable for taking a closer look at policy outputs in this respect (Bertelsmann-Stiftung 2022): Do social policies facilitate an equal and fair society? The Social Policies Index examines this in numerous policy areas and Norway is in the top group almost everywhere. The Norway report summarizes this as follows, referring to the link between social security and liberal freedom (both in political and economic terms):

“Combined with progressive taxation, social class inequalities are moderate and general levels of trust are very high. Nevertheless, with the exception of a protected agricultural sector, the country has remained open to globalization and free trade” (Hagen et al. 2022, p. 3).

To take another example from the SGI’s Norway report: Norway receives 9 out of 10 points for the Global Inequalities indicator. The country is one of the most active players in bilateral and multilateral activities to reduce social and economic inequalities worldwide and is nevertheless committed to free markets and low trade barriers. At the same time, there is a strong state influence on the economy and protectionist measures in some areas: “In general, Norway favors global free trade arrangements, but still maintains a high level of protectionism with respect to importing agricultural products” (Hagen et al. 2022, p. 15).

At the attitudinal level, it is also evident that the simultaneity of these democratic principles is anchored in the political culture: as can be seen from the World Values Survey data, liberal principles such as individual freedom or a cosmopolitan affinity with the world are supported just as much as republican or egalitarian aspects of collective local patriotism, state redistribution and community solidarity (Bein 2023, pp. 317–333). To pick one example: In the last three waves of the WVS, the highest level of agreement in Norway compared to many other established democracies was that people feel connected to the world and at the same time to their own region or municipality (Bein 2023, p. 324). In Norway, there is also strong support for political goals that are geared towards the common good, such as environmental protection, and at the same time many people feel that their individual responsibility for your own well-being is important (Bein 2023, p. 321). The policy output and the attitude level thus coincide here and create the basis for a pronounced democratic identity in the sense theoretically postulated above.

Gulbrandsen attributes the continuity and functionality of the Nordic model in Norway to key enabling factors that still exist:

“A strong labor movement, a unique system of wage determination, institutional complementarity between this system and welfare state services and benefits, an influential profession of economists, a historically uncorrupt and efficient civil service, a strong rural counter-culture which is easily mobilized for ‘economic nationalism’, and widespread egalitarian values” (2018, p. 137).

It should also be noted, however, that growing distribution conflicts over access to welfare state benefits have considerable polarization potential (Alex 2019; Brochmann and Hagelund 2015; Manow 2018, p. 107), which cannot be considered here in greater detail. All in all, the case shows how the combination of low levels of social sorting, balanced policy outputs, and the corresponding balance between competing democratic principles creates a political culture that is less susceptible to affective polarization and dysfunctional consequences (Hagen et al. 2022, p. 5).

3.2 Italy

Italy has a strong tradition of political polarization and ideological distance between separated political subcultures (Comellas and Torcal 2023). The example of Italy also illustrates how strong polarization, zero-sum rhetoric and decision-making blockades pose problems for democratic governance and are rooted in a lack of a political culture of balancing concurring principles. The so-called First Republic until 1992 was virtually blocked by an ideological polarization between communism and anticommunism or Christian Democracy, which was, however, circumvented by a comprehensive consensual division of benefices on the part of the party elite. The result has been a blocked mechanism of electoral alternance and high levels of political corruption (Pasquino 2020, pp. 211–212).

In the so-called Second Republic, starting in 1994 with the rise of Berlusconi, and again at the latest in 2018 with the successes of the Lega and the Five Star Movement, growing affective polarization also showed dysfunctional consequences (Bordignon 2020; Bosco and Verney 2020). Today, Italy is one of the most polarized democracies in Europe (Herold et al. 2023). Matteo Salvini's Lega in particular, and later Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia, which has been the strongest party in a right-wing governing coalition since 2022, used the many crises to polarize numerous core populist issues. The economic crisis after 2008, the escalation of migration and in particular the situation in the Mediterranean, the Covid-pandemic as well as political shifts in the party system with the success of the Five Star Movement, have caused significant instability in recent years (Cotta et al. 2022, pp. 2–7; Di Mauro and Verzichelli 2019; Pasini et al. 2023). The breeding ground for high affective polarization and further increasing dysfunctional consequences for the quality of democracy is therefore evident.

Concurring democratic principles It is not easy to identify the competing democratic principles analogous to the Norwegian case in Italy. The cleavage structure after the end of the Second World War until the mid-1990s was characterized by the Cold War more than in any other Western European democracy. Only afterwards did the political landscape 'normalize' in this respect with a bipolar competition between alternating left-wing and right-wing parties or party lists. Nevertheless, the concurring democratic principles in the Italian cleavage structure proceed along a conflict between political and social conservatism and traditionalism on the one side and a political left on the other side (Ignazi 2023; Pasini et al. 2023).

The First Republic of Italy was ideologically polarized to a comprehensive degree by a communism-anticommunism-cleavage. The Italian Communist Party (PCI) was the second most powerful party after the Christian Democratic Party (DC) for several decades. Both parties dominated their respective 'red' and 'black' social camps, where the people were socialized early and comprehensively by the long arms of the party (unions, media, associations, etc.). Since the Communist Party was to be excluded from taking over the government by agreement of all other parties (except for the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano), the DC ruled as a quasi-state party in ever-changing power constellations throughout the whole period until 1994. The negative effects of this blocked democracy are well known and have

been widely discussed (Cerruto and Facello 2013; Guarnieri 2011, p. 44). This deadlock marks a political situation without any real prospect of a change of power, permeated by corruption and clientelism. This is what political scientists called the Italian ‘partyocracy’ (*partitocrazia*), defined as “a situation in which all parties collude in sharing available state resources and take hold of them for the benefit of their organizations, leaders, followers and voters” (Pasquino 2020, p. 49). Strict demarcation and ideological polarization in the public sphere on the one hand and compromise or mutual negotiation of benefices behind the scenes on the other hand was the central mechanism in the political contest in the First Republic of Italy.

But, contrary to Norway, the Italian political culture has then been exposed to major changes during the transition to the Second Republic, after the whole party system collapsed in the year 1992 as a consequence of the corruption scandals and the following judicial proceedings. At the latest with the collapse of the old party landscape and the entry of Silvio Berlusconi into the Italian political contest in 1994, a new phase of growing affective polarization began, which now actually also showed dysfunctional consequences. The blockade caused by the all-encompassing polarization between the Christian Democratic, ‘black’ camp and the Communist, ‘red’ camp has been successfully absorbed for decades by the strong institutionalized cleavage-structure and the political parties as gatekeepers (Morlino and Tarchi 1996, p. 45). The dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy, which is very pronounced in comparison with many other Western democracies, can thus be understood on the one hand only through the blockade of the two major subcultures, but on the other hand has not led to a general depoliticization. Quite the opposite: “Political subcultures may produce narrow-minded citizens, but they cannot produce alienated ones. [...] On the contrary, subcultures mobilize their respective members and bring them cohesively into the political process” (LaPalombara 1992, p. 394).

Affective polarization increased remarkably from that on the beginning of the 1990s and the *scendere in campo* of Berlusconi. A massive reform backlog and a dysfunctional shift of political disputes to the courts and the (social) media then characterized Berlusconi’s phases of government accordingly (Grasse et al. 2018, p. 4), which persisted in the logic of this revived left-right polarization:

“Heightened rivalry and head-on conflict, characterized by the demonisation of the opponent, marked every arena. In parliament, in the public squares, and on television, party representatives attacked their adversaries with a level of animosity and verbal aggression that made the usual interchange between government and opposition impossible” (Bosco and Verney 2020, p. 265).

Liberal entrepreneurship, free markets and little state interference are the principles that can explain Berlusconi’s success in a political culture of state detachment and anarchic individualism (Köppel 2007, pp. 38–39). Collective orientation towards the common good, inclusive political participation by means of the intermediary sector and redistribution in favor of the weaker have been lost sight of as democratic principles. The communism-anticommunism cleavage had long since lost its ideological significance but was rhetorically revived by Silvio Berlusconi and used specifically to mobilize his own voters. McCoy et al. (2018, p. 26) have already pointed out that this rhetorical instrumentalization of an ingroup-outgroup divide

promotes affective polarization and zero-sum political logic, as well as posing dangers to democratic functionality.

Cross-cutting memberships Nevertheless, these changes, which entailed the upheavals of the early 1990s and caused some of the most important features of Italian postwar democracy to disappear (*democrazia bloccata, partitocrazia*), can also be interpreted as signs of an eagerly awaited “normalization” of Italian democracy among other Western states (Piana and Raniolo 2013, p. 298). But the rise of Silvio Berlusconi and his post-democratic party Forza Italia (Crouch 2015, p. 96), supported by enormous private-sector resources, triggered a kind of cultural revolution and ‘Americanization’ of Italian politics. Previously divided and virtually segmented on the basis of political ideologies, it now became polarized by the person Berlusconi himself and his neo-populist political style in a way that also paralyzed the political decision-making system (Piana and Raniolo 2013, p. 298).

The importance of the media for political polarization processes should not be underestimated here: After the turmoil in the years after 1992 and Berlusconi’s victory in the 1994 parliamentary election, the problematic ownership structures and the special understanding of the relationship between politics and media become even more prominent: In particular, television, traditionally the favorite medium of Italians (Falanga 2016, p. 157), was almost synchronized under Berlusconi’s governments, with the public broadcaster RAI and the family-owned private broadcaster Mediaset achieving market shares of over 70% (Spalinger 2016). The most important newspapers are also dominated by influential private actors or families (Campus and Ciaglia 2013, p. 106). The media therefore contribute significantly to the social sorting of party supporters, and no one has known how to use this better than Berlusconi.

Recently, after Berlusconi’s demission as prime minister and party leader, spillover effects of the success of new populist parties such as the Five Star Movement, the Lega and the Brothers of Italy from Giorgia Meloni contribute to the high amount of affective polarization due to specific social media instrumentalization (Donà 2022; Stille 2018): After a phase of lower affective polarization following the end of the *ventennio Berlusconi* and the technocratic governments during the financial crisis, Bordignon (2020) notes a renewed rise of polarization with the 2018 election and the success of Matteo Salvini’s right-wing populist Lega. Once again, therefore, a connection between affective polarization and the targeted instrumentalization of political identities and opposing conceptions of democracy—in this case, in particular, the migration issue and the preservation of national and cultural identities—can be identified as the driving force (Di Mauro and Verzichelli 2019; Pasini et al. 2023). “The personal attributes of Salvini, his innovative use of the social media, dialectic ability and aggressive language polarized and divided the electorate as only Berlusconi had done in the past” (Bosco and Verney 2020, p. 275).

Cross-cutting memberships are therefore not as strong in Italy, which traditionally has a comparatively low level of social capital along with other southern European countries (Kunz 2010). According to a More in Common study, Italian society is divided into seven segments, two of which have clearly more open or more closed opinions in relation to issues of identity, migration and democracy (Dixon et al. 2018,

p. 36). In addition, there are three segments with mixed attitude patterns between open and closed characteristics. Accordingly, 28% can be assigned to the rather open group and 24% to the rather closed group. These two segments, which play a key role in the affective polarization of these topics, have separate information channels and therefore have fewer points of reference in real life: “From this observation, we can conclude that they are exposed to conflicting narratives and different interpretations of current events” (Dixon et al. 2018, p. 47).

The political parties and other mass organizations that organized the cleavages in the First Republic and steered ideological competition in an orderly fashion have been weak ever since (Ignazi 2021). Following the collapse of the party system and the corruption scandals, Berlusconi and other populist parties and actors found fertile ground for targeted affective polarization through disappointment, dissatisfaction and mistrust of the parties and the political elite. The electoral volatility and personalization of politics increased rapidly (Detterbeck 2021, p. 38; Zucchini 2016), while substantive competition and the organizational anchoring of political parties in the population became a subordinate element of Italian politics. Pasquino even describes the lack of political culture in the parties of the Second Republic as one of the central criteria of the recent democratic instabilities in Italy (2020, p. 66).

Balanced policy outputs On the output side, too, the government and the Italian state have not contributed to the balancing of various democratic principles and the integration of a community-oriented traditionalism with more closed conceptions of democracy and the more leftist universalism. In the Sustainable Governance Indicators report some of the main problems are summarized:

“After 2008, Italy experienced one of its most serious economic crises, with negative effects on industrial performance, employment and government budgets. National and international confidence in the economy and in the ability of the Italian state to face big external shocks had been seriously damaged. Post-crisis recovery was slow. Illegal immigration, with thousands of refugees arriving across the Mediterranean Sea, added new challenges. This fostered a strong growth in populist and anti-establishment parties” (Cotta et al. 2022, p. 2).

The increasingly hostile polarization between the blocs makes it clear that there is no longer a political culture of consensus and exchange in which a balance between competing principles could be achieved. The structure of the Italian welfare state is based more strongly than in the Norwegian model on domestic demand and the differentiation between insiders and outsiders. This makes it equally susceptible to clientelistic structures and affective polarization in the public sector (Manow 2018, p. 117). This also becomes clear in the SGI report on Italy, where it is noted on labor market policy: “The labor market is still too polarized between protected and non-protected sectors of the population, and lacks the flexibility to adapt to rapid economic changes” (Cotta et al. 2022, p. 3). Reforms are necessary in almost all policy areas, where Italy actually has no effective capacity to act in any area, at least in comparison with many other liberal democracies in Europe.

Migration policy is currently the most important example of this. The division between insiders and outsiders is being further encouraged and not balanced in this

policy area (Cotta et al. 2022, p. 6), even though the majority of Italians regard migration as one of the most important political issues (Dixon et al. 2018, p. 73). Integration policy here remains very much in the field of preventing illegal migration, with integration concepts being given short shrift. As a result, social division is also being promoted in this area, immigrants have difficulty gaining access to the labor market and welfare state and there are high barriers to obtaining citizenship. Italian's integration policy score within the SGI report is then consequently only 6 (Norway in comparison has a value of 8) (Cotta et al. 2022, p. 18).

The dysfunctional consequences of this affective polarization are particularly evident when looking at the first purely populist coalition government of the Lega and the Five Star Movement. The Conte I cabinet held office in this form for a short 14 months between 2018 and 2019, but then broke apart due to excessive intra-coalition polarization. The strategic shift of political communication to social networks and the mobilization of their own parallel media worlds threaten to reinforce divisive tendencies (Bobba 2019), which increasingly questions an overall democratic public sphere. And this despite the fact that an until then unique declaration was signed at the beginning on how to balance the differences within the coalition (Conti et al. 2020). Bosco and Verney nevertheless emphasize the problems of a populist government in a polarized political landscape:

“the parties were unable to find effective mechanisms to defuse polarization and reduce distances in cabinet or parliament. The policy and competitive positions were too divergent to compromise and the authors show how a classic polarising dynamics took place in the cabinet, leading to its eventual split” (2020, p. 276).

While the ability to compromise, with all the negative concomitants of corruption and clientelism, still cushioned the ideological split of the First Republic, it is no longer present in the most recent phase of affective polarization in Italy. In addition, since the end of the First Republic, whose political parties institutionalized the strong ideological polarization of society, political parties have lost tremendously in social attachment and its binding forces.

4 Conclusion

This paper tried to explain affective political polarization, in its dysfunctional and endangering form, due to the amount of democratic identity in specific democracies. Describing and analyzing polarization recently gained much attention in political science literature. Main explanation factors are structures and institutions of the democratic order and their effects on polarization. Accordingly, for example multi-party rather than two-party systems and a strong and independent judiciary lead to lower polarization (Carothers and O'Donohue 2019, pp. 267–268). Populist actors also are seen as driving forces for polarization, benefiting from deepening divisions and therefore deliberately reinforcing them (Fielitz et al. 2018; Roose 2018; Svolik 2019). The same is analyzed for the influence of media actors and social media dynamics (Kubin and Sikorski 2021). Some studies also consider the extent of socio-economic inequality as an explanatory factor for political polarization (Gidron et al.

2020; Hetherington 2009). Polarization has thus far been attempted to be explained by various individual factors. In contrast, I argue that the context-specific view of political culture research helps to understand holistic differences between countries and also to explain the differences in the extent of polarization between initially quite similarly established democracies. However, the complete view into the path dependencies and contextual conditions of a country's political culture allows for a better understanding of the framework conditions of polarization that endanger democracy.

Polarization is not bad per se, but even necessary for a pluralistic democracy. The identity of a democracy (*democratic identity*) is to allow the pluralistic diversity of political identities and conceptions of democracy. Democracy as an essentially contested concept (Gallie 1955; Osterberg-Kaufmann et al. 2023) cannot permanently favor one or the other side of various antinomies, antipoles and political conceptions of identity. Democracy is not only individualism *or* collectivism, exclusive community *or* universal basic value. It must always be both and none of these too much in a pathological way (Sebaldt 2015). The observations on Norway and Italy have shown that an explanation of the divergent degrees of polarization requires a comprehensive look at the genesis, path dependencies and ruptures in political culture.

In Norway, it has become clear that the initially contradictory principles of negative freedom, social equality, individualism and collectivism have entered into a reciprocal relationship that is expressed in the strong welfare state. Redistribution and state intervention are not understood as a violation of individual freedom, but as a prerequisite for it.

In Italy, polarization is much more pronounced and brings with it dysfunctional potential for democratic decision-making mechanisms. To explain this, the historically strong cleavage between left and right, between communism and Christian democracy, has been described. In the phase of the First Republic, this cleavage found its institutional balance in the cooperative behavior of the political elite, which, however, was accompanied by considerable manifestations of clientelism and corruption. As a result of the upheavals of 1992, the loss of political party loyalty and the targeted instrumentalization as a political style since Berlusconi, the system seems to have slipped into a new phase of affective polarization that conceals the state's performance problems, which urgently need to be solved.

To understand polarization and its dangers for the stability of democracies, it is not enough to show current conflict constellations and contrast numerical patterns of collective attitudes. Rather, polarization can also be explained by profound path dependencies or ruptures in political culture. In terms of the theoretical concept of democratic identity, it has been argued that a political culture of balancing and embedding initially opposing political identities and understandings of democracy can prevent dysfunctional polarization. The case studies of Italy and Norway showed evidence for that, even if further elaboration sure is still necessary.

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