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End of consensus? Ideology, partisan identity, and affective polarization in Finland 2003–2019

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Abstract

Finland is traditionally associated with a consensus-like political culture and low partisan hostility. Despite this, concerns about political polarization have become widespread. A possible explanation is that affective polarization, a phenomenon characterized by increasing emotional distances between political groups, is increasing. This article examines trends and individual-level predictors of affective polarization in the Finnish electorate between 2003 and 2019, using survey data from five national election studies. Additionally, it contributes to the theoretical understanding of affective polarization in multiparty settings by introducing a measure based on the absence of neutrality towards parties. This measure focuses on individual-level polarization, thus allowing comparisons between groups of voters. The results show a general increase in affective polarization over the period. Ideological extremity is identified as the main predictor of the phenomenon. Left-right extremity was the strongest predictor at the beginning of the period, whereas GAL-TAN extremity became increasingly important over time. After 2011, the effects of ideological extremity became asymmetrical: extreme left and TAN positions predicted higher levels than their ideological opposites. Feeling close to a party had a mostly consistent effect on affective polarization, albeit not as large as ideological extremity. Increasing affective polarization might undermine the prevailing consensus culture in Finnish politics. However, it might also have positive effects as a corrective to voter apathy, leading to increased participation. This makes Finland an interesting case for further studies of the causes, effects, and dynamics of affective polarization.

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INTRODUCTION

Concerns about political polarization have become widespread in Finland during the latest decade, yet studies show only minor increases in left–right polarization among voters (Isotalo et al., 2020) and no substantial changes along the most important issue dimensions among political candidates (Fornaro, 2021). Meanwhile, recent research has argued that political polarization is better conceptualized as emotional, rather than ideological, distance between groups; a phenomenon known as affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012). This suggests that the concerns could be a reflection of increasing affective polarization (henceforth referred to as AP), rather than increasing ideological divides. A recent study by Kekkonen and Ylä-Anttila (2021) provides initial evidence that AP is indeed increasing between Finnish parties. Even so, little is known about this phenomenon in Finland, especially its foundations. The aim of this study is thus to examine the long-term development of AP in Finland, focusing especially on identifying the driving forces of the phenomenon.

Since the 1980s, partisan relations in Finland have been characterized by consensus politics and low levels of conflict. This has been regularly manifested through the formation of oversized governing coalitions across traditional ideological divides. Consequently, parties have been reluctant to make strong pledges and to criticize each other too harshly during election campaigns, as this could disadvantage them in the subsequent cabinet forming negotiations. (Karvonen, 2014; pp. 73–106) While these observations concern the parties themselves rather than party supporters, comparative studies (Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021) show that affective polarization among Finnish voters is indeed low compared to other European countries. Finland thus presents itself as a case where high levels of affective polarization should be difficult to find.

At the same time, the traditionally low level of partisan hostility in Finland can be interpreted as fertile ground for increased polarization. Finland has experienced similar changes as many other countries: the politicization of sociocultural issues (Westinen et al., 2016) and the breakthrough of the country's right-wing populist party in 2011. The government formations following the latest two elections indicate a growing divide between parties on the left/GAL-side and the right/TAN-side of the political compass. If these developments are reflected in growing affective divides between supporters of different parties, it could possibly spell the end of the prevailing consensus-oriented political culture.

This study is structured around the broad aim to understand the foundations and long-term development of AP among voters in Finland. Following in the footsteps of previous research, I focus on ideological extremity and on partisanship as a social identity as possible explanations of AP. In addition, the study contributes to the general understanding of the foundations

of AP in European democracies in two ways. First, the case of Finland provides insights into the polarization process of countries with previously low hostility levels. Second, the study advances the theoretical understanding of AP in multiparty systems by addressing the theoretical and practical question of how attitudes towards multiple parties should be summarized. Building on approaches in previous research, I propose an interpretation of AP as absence of neutrality towards parties.

The aim of the study can be broken down into four research questions, each addressing specific aspects of the long term-development and foundations of affective polarization in Finland. First, I seek to confirm previous results of affective polarization in Finland and ask *whether the general level of AP has increased in Finland since the turn of the millennium (RQ1)*. Next, I break down the general trend and ask *whether AP has increased broadly in the electorate, or if the development differs between groups of voters based on ideological direction and partisan identity (RQ2)*. Third, I examine *to what extent ideological extremity and partisan social identity can explain differences in affective polarization among voters (RQ3)*. Lastly, I ask *if the relative importance of different ideological positions and of having a partisan social identity have shifted over time (RQ4)*. The answers to these questions allow for the drawing of general conclusions about the phenomenon.

The study is based on data from the Finnish national election studies (FNES) covering five national elections from 2003 to 2019. The next section elaborates on the concept of affective polarization with special attention given to the problem of summarizing partisan attitudes at the voter level, followed by a closer presentation of the Finnish political context. Thereafter, I present the data and variable operationalizations, before proceeding to the analysis and discussion of the results.

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

When Iyengar et al. (2012) introduced the concept of affective polarization, they leaned on social identity theory, according to which a group identity manifests in the individual as an emotional attachment to the group one identifies with. This attachment creates a cognitive bias in favor of one's own group, known as the *ingroup*, and gives rise to suspicion and animosity towards rivaling groups, the *outgroups* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Thus, according to Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012), the emotional distance between parties is a result of both positive sentiment towards the ingroup and hostility towards the outgroup. This means that AP can increase both as a consequence of higher ingroup favoritism and of greater outgroup animosity.

Several studies of affective polarization in the US context show a substantial increase in especially negative affect between the Democrats and Republicans since the start of the new millennium (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018; Iyengar &

Westwood, 2015; Iyengar et al., 2012, 2018). During recent years, studies of the phenomenon have also emerged in the European multiparty context (Harteveld, 2021; Hernández et al., 2019; Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Railo & Ruohonen, 2016, 2020; Reiljan & Ryan, 2021; Wagner, 2021; Ward & Tavits, 2019), showing that the phenomenon is in no way unique to the United States.

The research on the foundations of affective polarization has mainly followed two broad approaches: identity and ideology. The identity approach, already outlined above, sees partisanship as a social identity and likens partisan behavior to that of sports fans (Huddy et al., 2015; Mason, 2015), where supporting one's own team is the central aspect. In their pioneering study, Iyengar et al. (2012) found a consistent association of strong partisan identity with higher levels of affective polarization, as predicted by social identity theory. This association has been further confirmed by subsequent research, not least in the Swedish setting (Reiljan & Ryan 2021; Renström et al., 2020) which closely resembles the Finnish case. The effect of partisan identity is further compounded when it aligns with ideological and other social identities (Mason, 2015, 2016).

The ideology approach does not have an equally well-defined theoretical foundation, resting instead on the concept of “principled dislike” of outgroups based on their opinions (Iyengar et al., 2012) and the assumption that ideological divergence raises the stakes and provokes emotions (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016). Bougher (2017) suggests belief congruence theory as a supplement to social identity theory, arguing that while inparty sympathy is best explained by social identity theory, outparty animosity is driven by systematic differences in beliefs rather than the distances between issue positions. Several studies have shown a link between ideological polarization/extremity and affective polarization (Reiljan, 2020; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016). Research on affective polarization in Sweden by Renström et al. (2020) and Reiljan and Ryan (2021) further confirms this association.

Previous research has also identified contextual, agentic, and institutional factors associated with affective polarization. Election campaigns, especially heated ones, drive affective polarization to higher levels (Hansen & Kosiara-Pedersen, 2017; Hernández et al., 2019; Iyengar et al., 2012). This tendency is clearly visible in yearly Swedish affective polarization measurements that peak during each election year (Ryan & Reiljan, 2018). Another line of contextual research suggests that media coverage of political polarization might increase affective polarization by driving more negative partisan attitudes (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016). McCoy and Somer (2019) discuss the agentic role of political elites in opting for strategies and discourse that drives polarization, and Gidron et al. (2020) demonstrate that affective polarization is generally higher in countries with majoritarian political institutions. Overall, these contributions

show that affective polarization is driven by a complex mix of factors at multiple levels of analysis.

Affective polarization in multiparty systems

Affective polarization is intuitively understandable in an American two-party setting, while the multiparty settings common in Europe provide additional conceptual challenges. In a two-party setting, the polarization between both parties equals that of the party system, whereas a multiparty setting consists of a patchwork of polarized party-to-party relations. In practical terms, the researcher must define how to meaningfully summarize and interpret the feelings of voters towards a multitude of parties. As Wagner (2021) observes, such summaries can refer either to the individual configurations of feelings towards parties, or to how these configurations add up to macro-level polarization.

Previous studies (Lauka et al., 2018; Reiljan, 2016, 2020; Wagner, 2021) have mainly focused on the macro-level with the aim of comparing countries. In doing so, they have also taken the vote shares of parties into account, deeming in line with Dalton (2008) that polarization between large parties is more important from a system perspective than polarization between small parties. However, when studying the phenomena over time within a single country, the macro-level approach has two drawbacks. First, taking party size into account makes it difficult to determine whether change is driven by shifting party support or shifting feelings towards parties. Second, the understanding of the phenomena within a single country benefits from contrasting voter groups against each other—something that requires an individual rather than a system-level focus. For this reason, I adopt an understanding of affective polarization as a voter-level characteristic that describes to what extent a voter has a polarized configuration of feelings towards parties. An affectively polarized group—or indeed an electorate—thus consists of voters who have polarized feelings, regardless of the macro-level patterns resulting from these feelings.

Wagner (2021), although mainly aiming at the macro-level, identifies two approaches for summarizing partisan attitudes at the individual level. The “mean distance” approach uses the degree of sympathy towards the voters “own” party as an anchor point for measuring the distances to the similar evaluations of every other party. This is congruent with the original social identity-based approach to affective polarization, where the voter is assumed to identify with a single party and view all other parties as competing outgroups. A highly polarized voter thus feels strong sympathy towards a single party and strong animosity towards every other party. On the macro-level, this would translate into a fractionalized party system where each party is maximally distant from every other party. The same underlying logic is used by Reiljan

(2020), and Lauka et al. (2018) when designing measures of party system affective polarization.

However, Wagner (2021) rightly notes that the mean distance approach doesn't capture the political reality in many countries where voters can identify with several parties (Garry, 2007), and where bloc identities could be replacing specific partisan identities as the primary political identity (Hagevi, 2015). Inspired by Ward and Tavits (2019), he proposes an alternative conceptualization of affective polarization as the extent to which the voter perceives the parties as being divided into opposing blocs. He refers to this approach as the "spread-of-scores," as it is based on how individual feelings are spread out between a group of liked parties and a group of disliked parties. By introducing the spread-of-scores approach, Wagner admittedly deviates from the social identity foundation of affective polarization laid out by Iyengar et al. (2012). Instead of focusing on exclusive partisan identities, he uses the characteristics of macro-level bipolarization as a benchmark for assessing the extent to which individual feelings are polarized, and then aggregates individual level polarization levels into a country average. In contrast to the mean distance approach, this aggregation method does not necessarily translate into any particular macro-level pattern as the 'blocs' perceived by individual voters could differ from each other.

The drawback of the spread-of-scores approach lies in its attempt to emulate party system bipolarization at the individual level. This results in the assumption – contrary to the mean distance approach – that polarization peaks when the clusters on the positive and the negative sides are equally large. Wagner (2021) nonetheless demonstrates that when applied to voter data, the results of both approaches are highly correlated. He thus concludes that the choice between them is mainly a matter of theoretical choice.

This theoretical choice is, however, not without consequence when interpreting and communicating results. Adopting one of these approaches always brings a lingering suspicion that the results misrepresent voters who might be deemed more polarized by using the other summarizing method. This points to the question of whether a voter who strongly sympathizes with a single party and dislikes all other parties is more polarized than a voter who strongly sympathizes with a cluster of several parties and strongly dislikes the rest of them?

The dilemma can be resolved by relaxing the assumption of an equal amount of parties in the spread-of-scores approach and instead focusing on the empty middle, resulting from feelings clustering around two poles. This property emerges regardless of whether these poles contain one or many parties, and it can be interpreted as *absence of neutrality* in the individual voter's attitudes towards the parties. Focusing on this characteristic rather than on the distribution of parties at each end of the scale makes it possible to regard both types of feeling configurations as equally polarized, and thus to overcome the

risk of possible misrepresentation. Furthermore, this approach disentangles the individual level from any inferences about patterns of macro-level polarization, stating simply that a polarized society is a society where voters' feelings towards parties are split between a positive and a negative side, with no party being perceived neutrally.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

Finland was not always a country characterized by consensus and broad cooperation. Having suffered a civil war at the beginning of its slightly more than 100 years of independence, the country is no stranger to the consequences of societal divisions running amok. These wounds healed slowly, and in the decades after the Second World War, Finland was still characterized by deep divisions, culminating in the 1960s and 1970s when ideological differences between parties peaked (Karvonen, 2014; pp. 24, 49). Nonetheless, dissolving collective class identities ultimately lead to the end of “the era of political camps” in Finland (Mickelsson, 2015). A series of comprehensive Incomes Policy Agreements that decreased industrial disputes, and the rise of the oversized coalition as the norm for cabinet formation rapidly resulted in consensus becoming the overarching principle of Finnish political culture (Karvonen, 2014; pp. 24, 38–40).

The Finnish party system never developed in the same bipolarized direction as in many of the neighboring Nordic countries. This could mainly be explained by the rivalry between the Social Democratic Party and the far left, preventing the formation of a ruling left coalition and instead forcing the Social Democrats to seek cooperation with one of the two other main parties (Karvonen, 2014; pp. 146–147), the agrarian Centre Party and the conservative National Coalition Party. The regular formation of oversized ruling coalitions, rather than minority governments, can further be explained by both constitutional factors that made it advantageous to secure a two-thirds majority in parliament, as legislation could otherwise be delayed by the opposition, and by active presidential influence encouraging cooperation (Karvonen, 2014; p. 80). This norm has prevailed even though the constitutional rule that gave rise to it has been long abolished, leading Jungar (2002; p. 78) to conclude that compromise and cooperation has become virtues in Finnish political culture.

How does such a political culture reflect on the mass level? Karvonen (2014; p. 150) notes that the backside of consensus and cooperation is that voters find it difficult to know “whom to thank and whom to punish in elections” and that the multilayered institutional setting including parliament, president, and the EU compounds the problem even more, creating an “impenetrable veil between citizens and the governing elite.”

The parties currently available to the Finnish voter represent both the classical political divides and the post-materialist questions that arose during

the second half of the 20th century. The traditional three major parties represent the social democratic, conservative and agrarian party families; The Social Democratic Party (SDP), The National Coalition Party (KOK), and The Centre Party (KESK). Since 2011, the right-wing populist (True)¹ Finns Party (PS) is counted as a fourth major party. Furthermore, Finland has a left-wing party, a green party, and a christian democrat party: The Left Alliance (VAS), The Green Party (VIHR), and The Christian Democrats (KD). However, the country currently does not have a classical liberal party of significant size. Despite several attempts at maintaining and reviving such parties, they have largely disappeared from the political scene, being replaced by the green party as the main alternative for urban liberals (Karvonen, 2014; pp. 19, 24).

The Finnish party system is also characterized by a historical language divide between the Finnish-speaking majority and the Swedish-speaking minority, where a majority of the latter supports The Swedish People's party (RKP). While created to politically represent the Swedish-speaking population, this party has increasingly identified itself as liberal in both the cultural and economic sense during the 2000s (Mickelsson, 2015; p. 304).

The two latest decades have been characterized by the increased importance of new conflict dimensions; the EU-dimension became more relevant simultaneously with the politicization of issues on the socio-cultural dimension, such as immigration, diversity, and the conflict between liberal and traditional values (Westinen et al., 2016). The 2003 election was the first to take place after the adoption of a new constitution three years earlier. According to the new provisions, the parliament appoints the prime minister. The larger parties thus saw the 2003 election as not only a party election, but also as a prime minister election. The election campaign was, however, characterized by a cautious attitude, similar platforms, and no far-reaching pledges (Pesonen & Borg, 2005). The following election in 2007 saw increased use of digital communication tools such as websites and social media tools (Borg & Paloheimo, 2009). Parties used more funds than before on campaigns and advertising, in what has been seen as a “mediatization” of politics (Moring & Mykkänen, 2009).

The 2011 election saw the unexpected success of the right-wing populist Finns Party. The party can trace its roots back to rural populist movements of previous decades (Karvonen, 2014; p. 22). At the beginning of the 2000s, the Finns Party was nevertheless small with only a few seats in parliament. The election success in 2011 made it one of the largest parties in parliament, thereby changing the balance of power. The reasons for this success were manifold, and include the rising importance of questions pertaining to the new sociocultural conflict dimension such as immigration, in combination with a yearning for political change in general (Borg, 2012).

The 2015 election was preceded by shifts in the leadership of several of the major parties and by two of the coalition partners leaving the government over policy issues (Hämäläinen, 2016). The 2015 election itself did not lead to any

dramatic changes in party support (Grönlund, 2016) and most of the public attention was directed at labor market and economic policy, and foreign policy (Railo & Ruohonen, 2016).

The 2019 elections were preceded by debates about immigration, European integration, the climate crisis, and ongoing health, social services, and regional government reform, as well as economic policy and elderly care. Strandberg and Borg (2020) find that the importance of the internet and social media strongly increased compared to previous elections, and Borg et al. (2020) further talk about a “political climate change” associated with growing discontent and distrust of both politics and the political system. At the onset of the 2020 s, the Finnish electorate appears fragmented into multiple loosely delimited blocs with similar and partly overlapping partisan attitudes (Im et al., 2019; Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Westinen & Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2015).

DATA AND MEASUREMENTS

I use data from the Finnish National Election Study (FNES)². The study has been conducted after the five latest national elections in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019 through face-to-face interviews and a self-administered drop-off questionnaire. The data contains sociodemographic background variables as well as items related to political attitudes, voting choice, party identification, and party sympathies. Furthermore, the data contains two sets of sample weights: one for the full sample and one for the subsample that answered the drop-off questionnaire. In total, the FNES data contains 7175 respondents divided between five elections (see Appendix A).

Dependent variable: Affective polarization

Affective polarization, the dependent variable, is calculated based on attitudes towards parties measured on an 11-point like-dislike scale. The FNES question is worded: “What do you think about the following political parties on a scale 0–10, where 0 means 'strongly dislike' and 10 means 'strongly like'?” The like-dislike scale is one of the most readily available tools for measuring affect towards parties as broad objects. This item is the basis for both Wagner's (2021) and Reiljan's (2020) measures of affective polarization. A similar item, although based on a 0–100 thermometer scale, is used in the bulk of the US-focused research.

As discussed in the theory section, approaching affective polarization as the absence of neutrality towards parties requires that a voter who sympathizes strongly with a single party and dislikes all the other parties is deemed as equally polarized as a voter who sympathizes with a bloc of parties and dislikes the rest of the parties. This could be achieved by measuring the standard deviation from the absolute middle of the scale, rather than around the mean

value of the scores as in Wagner's spread measure. However, in a methodological evaluation of thermometer scales Winter and Berinsky (1999) caution against using fixed neutral points, as individuals may interpret the scale differently and anchor their evaluations in different points. When applicable, they propose that the researcher focuses on bias between groups, i.e. the difference in scores between the ingroup and the outgroup, rather than the absolute scores for each group.

With regard to this advice, I calculate each respondent's neutral point as the midrange value of the distribution of scores, using the most liked and the most disliked party as the de facto anchor points that represent the respondent's understanding of the scale. I then calculate the standard deviation of all party scores around this point using the formula below. At least two like-dislike scores are required for the formula, which due to missing data results in 6870 out of the 7175 respondents having a valid affective polarization score.

$$\text{Affective polarization (ABON)}_i = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{p=1}^P (\text{like}_{ip} - \frac{\text{like}_{\max,i} + \text{like}_{\min,i}}{2})^2}{n_p}}$$

In the above formula for AP as absence of neutrality (abon). n_p is the number of parties, like_{ip} is the like score of the individual respondent (i) towards each party (p). $\text{like}_{\max,i}$ is the highest like score of the individual respondent and $\text{like}_{\min,i}$ is the lowest score, and the division with 2 results in the midrange value.

The maximum polarization score is 5, given a like-dislike scale of 0–10. This requires that at least one party is maximally liked (a score of 10) and at least one is maximally disliked (a score of 0), resulting in a midrange value of 5. The rest of the parties must be scored at the maximum distance from this value, that is, as either 0 or 10.

For a robustness check and closer comparison of this measure with Wagner's mean distance and spread-of-scores approaches, I refer to Online Supporting Information: Appendix D. When applied to the data used in this study, all three measures are highly correlated ($r > 0.9$), show the same trend over time, and perform similarly in regression analysis.

Independent variables

The independent variables capture respondents' positions on the left–right and GAL–TAN dimensions, and measure whether respondents have a partisan identity.

Left–right position

Ideological left–right position is determined by each respondent's self-placement on a 10-point scale, where 0 means left and 10 means right. The scale was converted to 0–1.

GAL–TAN position

The sociocultural conflict dimension is regularly represented by the GAL–TAN scale, referring to *Green*, *Alternative* and *Libertarian* values against *Traditional*, *Authoritarian* and *Nationalist* values (Hooghe et al., 2002). The FNES dataset has no self-placement item for this dimension. Instead, respondents' positions have been calculated as an index (scale 0–1) across several items. Out of multiple possible items, three were chosen to represent this dimension: attitudes towards ethnic minorities, sexual minorities and immigration. These issues were found to yield acceptable Cronbach's alpha values above 0.7 (0.76–0.78) for the last three election years. When other topics were included, such as attitudes towards EU, crime and environmental policy, these values decreased. Low Cronbach's alpha values in 2003 (0.33) and 2007 (0.58) indicate that the issues had not yet aligned themselves along sociocultural lines at the time, which calls for a cautious interpretation of results. The full list of questions can be found in Online Supporting Information: Appendix C. Note that for the years 2003–2011, the GAL–TAN items were placed in the drop-off questionnaire, meaning that the subsample who answered this questionnaire will be used for regression models and calculations involving ideological positions.

Party closeness

The variable measures whether the respondent has a partisan social identity or not by asking if he or she feels close to any particular party. Those who answer yes to this question are categorized as feeling close to a party. No further grading of party closeness is used.

Control variables

Following similar studies (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016; Wagner, 2021), I control for standard sociodemographic variables (age, gender, education level, residential area)³. *Age* is operationalized as a categorical variable for multiple intervals, as its relationship with the variables of interest is not necessarily linear. Level of education is divided in three levels: low (elementary school only), medium (everything between elementary school and a university degree), and high (university degree or equivalent). Furthermore, *Residential area* refers to whether the respondents lives in the countryside, in a population centre or in

an urban setting (suburb or city). Since Finland is bilingual, I also control for *language group* by using the question about native language to differentiate between Swedish-speakers and Finnish speakers. Lastly, I control for political interest, which is coded as a four-step interval scale with values between 0 and 1.

RESULTS

The first question formulated in the introduction asked whether the general level of AP has increased in Finland since the turn of the millennium. The development shown in Figure 1 confirms that the feelings of the average Finnish voter towards the political parties have become markedly more polarized during the examined period from 2003 to 2019, resulting in a 26% increase in AP (from a mean of 1.96 to a mean of 2.47).

The second research question asked whether AP has increased broadly in the electorate, or if the development differs between groups of voters based on ideological direction and partisan identity. The distributions in Figure 1 reveal that AP scores are roughly normally distributed around the mean value of each election year. This shows that the increase in affective polarization represents a general shift in the population, rather than the emergence of a smaller group of

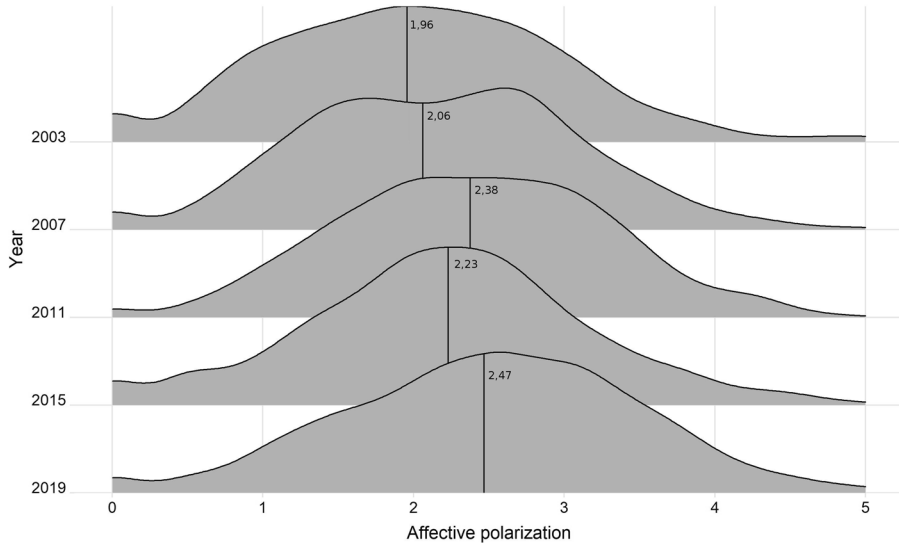


FIGURE 1 Mean values and distributions of affective polarization scores 2003–2019. A score of 0 means that every voter (dis)likes every party equally, while a score of 5 means that every voter considers every party to be either maximally disliked or maximally liked. The mean scores are calculated on the full sample using sample weights. Differences between subsequent years are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$.

highly polarized voters. The figure also shows that the largest change occurred between 2007 and 2011; the latter year marked by the dramatic electoral success of the right wing populist Finns Party. In the subsequent election year, AP returned to somewhat lower levels, but then increased again in 2019.

For a more detailed understanding of “who” has become more polarized, I examine AP subtrends according to direction on each of the ideological dimensions (Figures 2 and 3), and show histograms of how the ideological configuration of the electorate has changed over time (Figures 4 and 5). Together, these plots allow for more precise observations about how changing polarization levels interact with shifts in the ideological composition of the electorate, and to what extent the general trend observed in Figure 1 can be attributed to these changes.

The plots in Figures 2 and 3 show that voters with an ideological direction are on average more polarized than centrist voters. However, these differences are relatively small when grouping voters according to GAL–TAN direction. It also appears as if both GAL, TAN, and centrist voters closely follow the main trend. The differences between centrists and voters with an ideological left–right direction are, on the other hand, substantially larger. Left-leaning voters are on average more polarized than right-leaning voters, and in the period following the 2011 election, left-wing polarization has increased more steeply than among

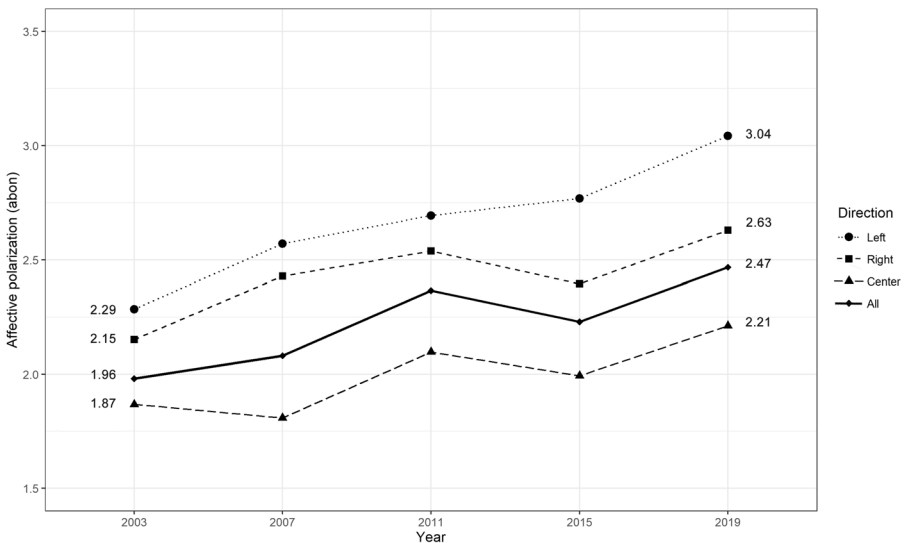


FIGURE 2 Mean affective polarization by left–right direction 2003–2019. Values are calculated using the drop-off questionnaire subsample for the years 2003–2011. The center category comprise of respondents who score > 0.4 and < 0.6 on ideological placement.

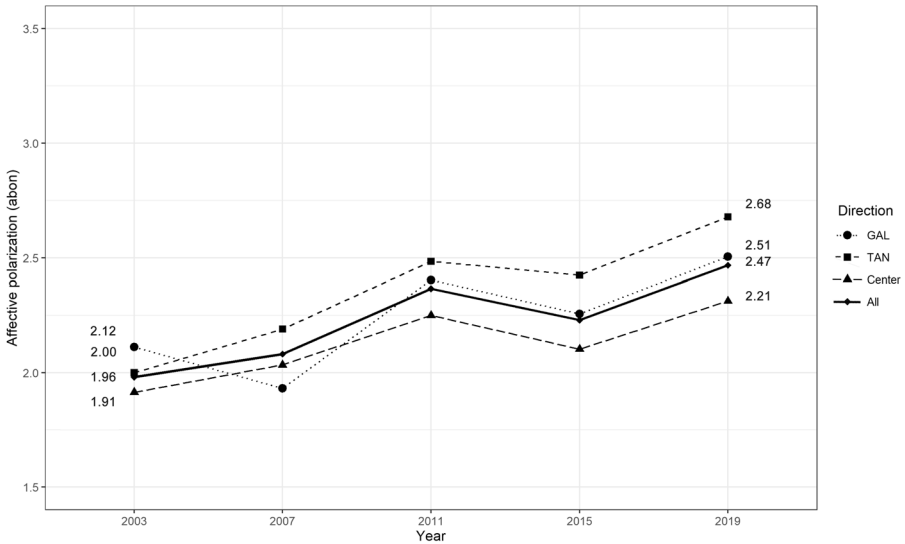


FIGURE 3 Mean affective polarization by GAL–TAN direction 2003–2019. Values are calculated using the drop-off questionnaire subsample for the years 2003–2011. The center category comprise of respondents who score >0.4 and <0.6 on ideological placement.

the right and the centrists. The latter two groups even became temporarily less polarized in 2015.

Figure 4 shows an electorate that is initially slightly right-leaning due to a large proportion of voters placing themselves as moderate right. Over time, the balance has shifted towards the left, with a clear increase in voters strongly to the left. It thus appears as if some of the increase in the main trend can be attributed to changes in the Left, which has both polarized more steeply than the right and increased somewhat in size over time. The temporary general decrease in 2015, in turn, can be attributed to the large groups of centre and right-wing voters who de-polarized at the time, and then re-polarized in 2019, bringing the trend back on track again.

Figure 5 shows a clear shift in the distribution along the GAL–TAN dimension: from a generally TAN-oriented electorate in 2003 to a substantially more GAL oriented in 2019. The voters who hold strong TAN opinions in 2015 and 2019 have found themselves to be an increasingly marginalized minority as societal norm move in the other direction. In addition, although TAN voters are more polarized than GAL and center voters, the decreasing size of this group after 2011 means that they contribute to the general increase only to a lesser degree. Nonetheless, the fact remains that polarization has taken place in all political camps⁴ to varying degrees, including the center.

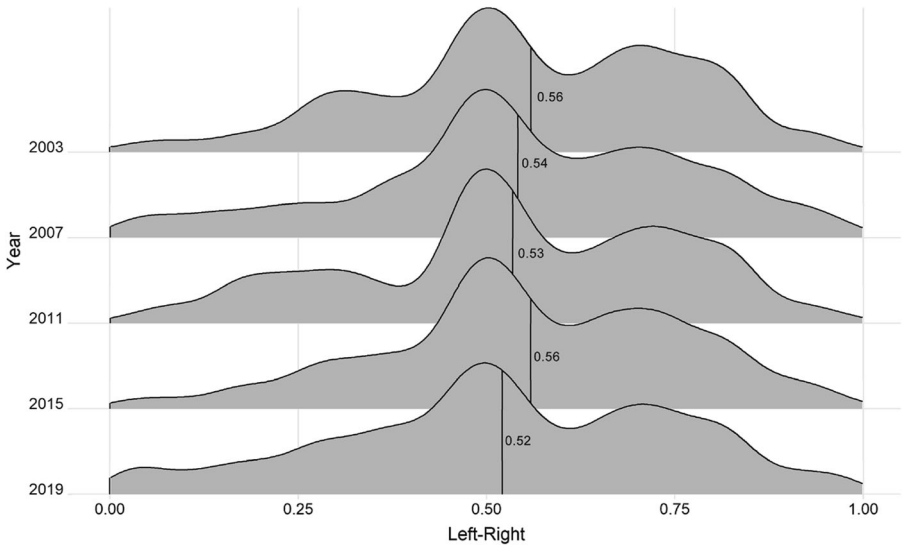


FIGURE 4 Mean values and distributions of left-right positions 2003–2019.

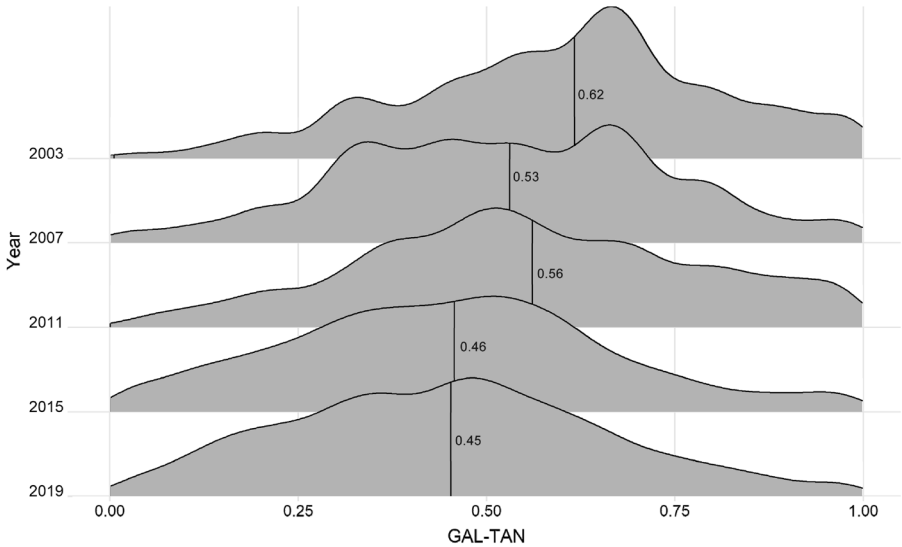


FIGURE 5 Mean values and distributions of GAL-TAN positions 2003–2019.

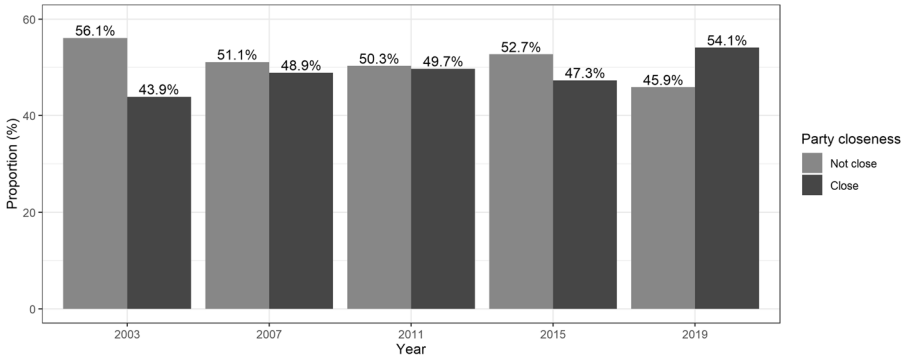


FIGURE 6 Party closeness 2003–2019.

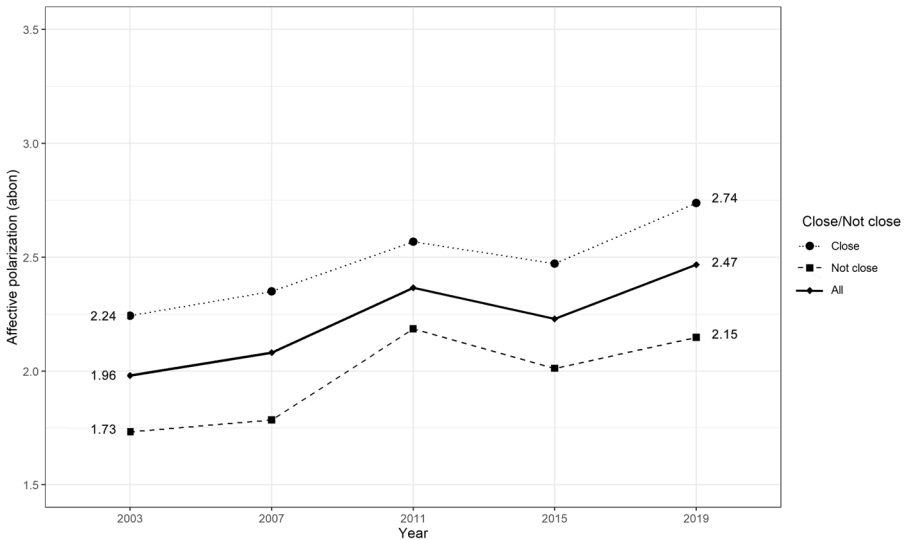


FIGURE 7 Mean affective polarization by party closeness 2003–2019.

Figures 6 and 7 similarly illustrate the role of partisan social identity. The proportion of the voters who report feeling close to a party was particularly low in 2003. In subsequent years, roughly half of the voters felt close to a party, and it appears as if this proportion took another small leap in 2019. There is a clear difference in polarization level between those who feel close to a party and those who do not. Both groups, however, polarize according to the main trend, showing that the increase over time is not restricted to merely dedicated partisans. Interestingly, the dramatic year of 2011 resulted in a steeper increase

in polarization among voters who don't feel close to a party, suggesting that non-partisans received a “wake-up call” to politics from the sudden breakthrough of the populist right this year.

The third research question asked to what extent ideological extremity and partisan identity can explain differences in affective polarization among Finnish voters, while the fourth asked whether the effects of the variables change over time. These questions are best answered in tandem. To unpack the effects of the different variables and analyse them over time, I run a separate regression analyses of the main variables on affective polarization for each election year. A closer examination of the ideological variables—Left–Right and GAL–TAN—reveals moderate correlation with *r*-values in the range of 0.13–0.27 across the years. The political right thus tends to favor TAN positions, and vice versa. Feeling close to a party, in turn, is only weakly correlated to ideology ($r < 0.1$)⁵.

The model in Table 1 detected a quadratic relationship between ideological extremity and affective polarization, meaning that ideologically extreme voters can be expected to have exponentially higher polarization levels than leaners. This also confirms the role of ideological extremity as a predictor of affective polarization. Second, the effects of ideological extremity do indeed change from year to year, suggesting that the political context of each election year can either boost or diminish the impact of different ideological positions on AP. Similarly, the effect of feeling close to a party changes from election year to election year. The most notable instance of this is in 2011, when there is no statistically significant effect for this variable. Recalling previous observations, this year AP increased much more steeply among those who did not feel close to a party, which to some extent can explain the absence of statistical significance.

Next, I turn to a closer examination of the role of each ideological dimension. The combined effect of the quadratic and linear terms is illustrated in Figures 8 and 9, which show predicted values when one of the ideological dimensions is changed while the rest of the variables are held constant.

Two types of change are visible in the figures during the first 3 years. First, the center position of the curve changes, shifting the entire curve upwards and showing that the “centre voter” as well as the ideologically extreme voter has become somewhat more polarized from election to election. Second, as demonstrated by the increasingly U-shaped curves in 2011, the ideologically extreme voters became even more polarized relative to the center voters this year. This development is similar for both ideological dimensions up until 2011, but perhaps most noticeable in the GAL–TAN curve in Figure 9.

In 2015, the center depolarizes somewhat, which is a reflection of the main trend turning temporarily downwards this year. The extremes, however, remain highly polarized and start exhibiting asymmetries. On the left–right scale shown in Figure 8, this takes the shape of an extreme left that is more polarized than the extreme right. These predicted values for the extremes remain stationary as the center again becomes more polarized in 2019. On the GAL–TAN scale,

TABLE 1 Yearly effects of party closeness and ideological position on affective polarization

Predictors	2003		2007		2011		2015		2019	
	Estimates	Estimates	Estimates	Estimates	Estimates	Estimates	Estimates	Estimates	Estimates	Estimates
(Intercept)	1.57***	1.76***	1.82***	1.90***	2.12***					
Left-Right	-0.11	0.11	-0.07	-0.43***	-0.37***					
Left-Right (squared)	3.35***	3.47***	4.77***	5.34***	3.89***					
GAL-TAN	-0.14	0.20	0.01	0.46***	0.65***					
GAL-TAN (squared)	1.00*	1.38***	2.52***	2.42***	3.05***					
Feeling close to a party	0.17**	0.35***	0.08	0.23***	0.36***					
<i>Native language: Swedish</i>	-0.00	0.22*	-0.20*	0.14	0.31***					
<i>Residential area: Population Centre</i>	0.24*	-0.15	-0.01	-0.05	-0.22**					
<i>Residential area: City</i>	0.06	-0.20**	0.05	-0.14	-0.10					
<i>Education: Medium</i>	-0.14*	0.12*	-0.06	-0.14**	-0.29***					
<i>Education: High</i>	-0.10	0.06	-0.10	-0.13	-0.24***					
<i>Gender: Male</i>	-0.07	-0.11**	-0.07	-0.03	-0.20***					
<i>Age 30-45</i>	-0.17*	-0.16*	0.06	0.19**	0.13*					
<i>Age 46-60</i>	0.06	-0.09	0.05	0.04	0.18**					
<i>Age > 60</i>	-0.01	-0.14	-0.09	-0.05	-0.05					
<i>Political interest</i>	0.53***	0.32***	0.36***	0.17*	0.34***					

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Predictors	2003		2007		2011		2015		2019	
	Estimates		Estimates		Estimates		Estimates		Estimates	
Observations	673		952		749		1344		1304	
R^2/R^2 adjusted	0.133/0.114		0.173/0.160		0.195/0.178		0.190/0.181		0.277/0.269	

Note: The low number of observations in the first three years is caused by the GAL-TAN issues being placed in the drop-off questionnaire, which has a lower response rate. Separate weights that take this into account were used for these years. All control variables are dummies, except political interest which is a four-step interval scale ranging from 0 to 1. Ideological variables are centered around 0 and scaled from -0.5 to +0.5. The intercept thus represents a centrist voter who has no partisan social identity, is a young Finnish-speaking female, resides in the countryside, has a low level of education and is not interested in politics. The dependent variable, affective polarization, is scaled 0-5 as in previous figures. The model was tested for multicollinearity; variance inflation factors (VIF) where in the well acceptable range of 1.03-1.57. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

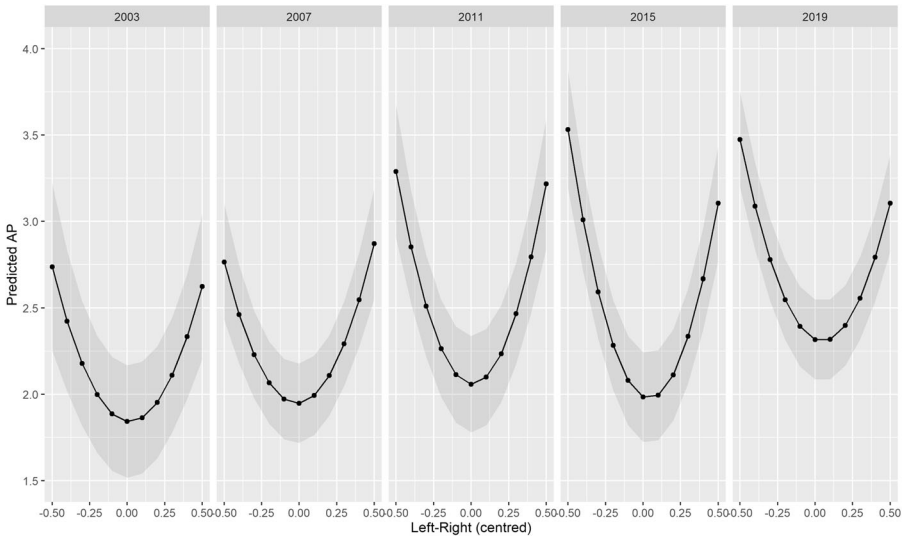


FIGURE 8 Predicted value of affective polarization when left–right position changes. GAL–TAN ideology and political interest are held constant at the mean value. Values for categorical variables correspond to the reference categories of the model in Table 1.

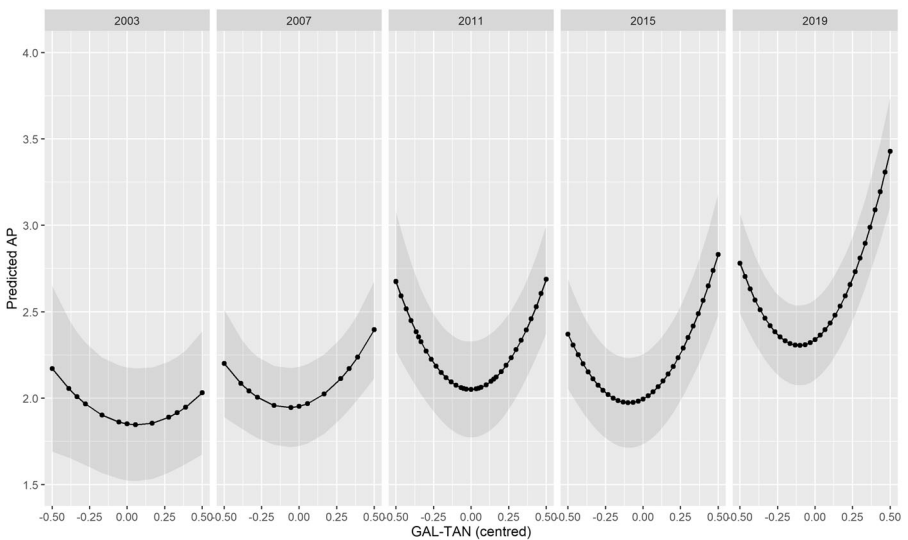


FIGURE 9 Predicted value of affective polarization when GAL–TAN position changes. Left–right ideology and political interest are held constant at the mean value. Values for categorical variables correspond to the reference categories of the model in Table 1.

shown in Figure 9, extreme TAN voters became substantially more polarized than their GAL counterparts in 2015. In 2019, the basic shape of the curve remains the same, but the baseline shifts upwards meaning that both center voters and extreme voters became more polarized.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This study originated from an identified research gap on affective polarization in Finland, a country that despite having a tradition of consensus-like politics is characterized by increasing worries about political polarization. I proposed that this could be explained by rising AP, and set out to examine whether the emotional distances between supporters of different parties have been increasing since the turn of the millennium. Furthermore, I examined how the development is associated with ideological positions on the socioeconomic (left–right) and sociocultural (GAL–TAN) dimensions, as well as with having a partisan social identity. I introduced a measure of AP that focuses on *absence of neutrality* towards parties, arguing that it offers improved conceptual validity and enables comparison between groups by focusing on individual configurations of partisan feelings, rather than the party system level.

The results revealed that AP increased in Finland over the period and that a tradition of consensus politics does not shield a country from the phenomena. The increase has occurred broadly in the electorate, among centrists and non-partisan voters as well as among the ideologically extreme and those who have partisan social identities. The year of 2011 stands out in this process as characterized by a sharp increase in affective polarization and by heightened importance of the GAL–TAN dimension as predictor of the phenomenon. Furthermore, voters on the extremes of both the left–right and GAL–TAN dimensions became substantially more polarized than centrist voters this year. However, no major ideological shifts had taken place in the electorate, which suggests that the break-through of The Finns Party in this election brought existing ideological divisions to a head and paved the way for the development seen in subsequent years.

The years following 2011 started with a temporary depolarization in 2015, which in 2019 turned into repolarization and even higher levels of AP than before. GAL–TAN extremity grew in importance as a predictor of AP and reached levels comparable to left–right extremity in 2019. However, the impact of ideological extremity became asymmetrical in 2015–2019 and the most polarized groups could be found on the extreme left and the extreme TAN ends of each dimension. The ideological landscape changed little on the left–right dimension during this time; only a small shift to the left could be detected. However, on the GAL–TAN dimension, a substantial shift towards GAL values could be detected in 2015. Of the two most polarized camps, the left thus

marginally increased in size, while the TAN side became smaller and more marginalized.

While ideological extremity plays an important role in predicting affective polarization, far from all of the increase in AP can be attributed to ideologically extreme voters. Equally important, if not more, in explaining the general trend of increasing AP, is that the centrist voter has also become more polarized over time. This development cannot be explained by increased ideological extremity and suggests that more attention needs to be directed at structural and contextual explanations that can either reinforce or diminish the effects of existing divisions.

The results furthermore showed that feeling close to a party also predicts affective polarization, albeit not nearly as strongly as ideological extremity. This is somewhat surprising, given the weight assigned to partisan identities in the literature. An interesting observation is that feeling close to a party failed to significantly predict higher AP in 2011, underscoring that this was an exceptional election year with heightened ideologically driven affective polarization at the expense of partisan social identities. Yet, the low impact of partisan identity does not necessarily mean that the role of social identities should be downplayed. Political identities can take on forms that transcend partisan identities, such as more diffuse bloc or ideological identities. It is thus possible that the impact of ideology can be attributed not only to 'principled dislike' of opposing opinions, but to some extent also to group hostility based on ideological identities (see for example Popp & Rudolph, 2011 on symbolic ideology). This calls for further research into the interplay and alignment between ideological beliefs, political identities, and polarization.

Lastly, it is important to remember that AP is increasing from a very low level in Finland. While polarization is often perceived as unpleasant, it might in this case also be viewed as a sign of increased engagement in politics; a corrective to the voter apathy resulting from political consensus culture. Nonetheless, on the micro level, increasing affective polarization might eventually lead to undesirable social behaviors such as discrimination and prejudice based on partisanship. At the macro level, it is likely that increased partisan animosity makes it more difficult for voters to accept that their preferred parties make compromises and enter into coalitions with disliked opponents. This might in turn reflect in the behavior of parties during and after elections, with the possible consequence of undermining the consensus culture in Finnish politics. Previous research (Im et al., 2019; Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Westinen & Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2015) already indicates the existence of multiple loose blocs defined by similar positive and negative attitudes towards parties and these blocs might further solidify if attitudes become more hostile. It is nonetheless premature to sound the alarm bells too loudly based on the current increase in AP. Rather, the development singles

Finland out as an important and interesting case for further studies of how affective polarization increases in a low-hostility context.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available in Finnish Social Science Data Archive at <https://services.fsd.tuni.fi/>, reference numbers FSD1260, FSD2269, FSD2653, FSD3067, and FSD3467.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The party name Perussuomalaiset was regularly translated as the “True Finns” until the party adopted “The Finns” as its official English name in 2011.
- ² Karvonen & Paloheimo, 2003; Paloheimo, 2007; Borg & Grönlund, 2011; Grönlund & Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2015; Grönlund & Borg, 2019.
- ³ Regression models with stepwise addition of controls are available in Online Supporting Information: Appendix F.
- ⁴ A full table of average polarization scores can be found in Online Supporting Information: Appendix A. Appendix B provides a further listing of polarization grouped by party.
- ⁵ When ideology is folded into an intensity scale, correlation with the left–right dimension increase to the range of 0.18–0.3.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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