

MEXICO DIVIDED? THE ROLE OF IDEOLOGY, SOCIAL SORTING AND POPULIST ATTITUDES ON AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

¿México dividido? El rol de la ideología, la clasificación social y las actitudes populistas en la polarización afectiva

México dividido? O papel da ideologia, da classificação social e das atitudes populistas na polarização afetiva

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Abstract

Affective polarization –or the tendency to dislike supporters of out-parties– has been persistent in Mexico since the 2006 presidential election. Yet, studies that analyze its causes are scarce. This is surprising given that scholars have already argued that elevated levels of affective polarization can threaten the consolidation and survival of democracy. This paper fills such lacuna by exploring the role of ideology, social sorting and populist attitudes on affective polarization in the country using data from the 2018 Mexican Election Study. In line with extant research on multi-party democracies, the results presented here indicate that Mexican voters form affective blocs on ideological and social –as opposed to partisan– blocs. But it is populist attitudes that produce the most important change in levels of affective polarization. As such this study has implications for extant literature on political polarization, political behavior, and populism.

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Palabras clave:

polarización
afectiva; ideología
simbólica;
clasificación
social; populismo,
AMLO; México

Resumen

La polarización afectiva –o la tendencia a sentir desagrado por votantes de otros partidos– es un fenómeno persistente en México desde las elecciones presidenciales de 2006. Sin embargo, los estudios que analizan sus causas son escasos. Esto es sorprendente porque varios autores han argumentado que niveles elevados de polarización afectiva amenaza la consolidación y supervivencia de la democracia. Este artículo llena esa laguna explorando el papel de la ideología, la clasificación social y las actitudes populistas en la polarización afectiva usando datos del Estudio Electoral Mexicano de 2018. En línea con las investigaciones existentes en democracias multipartidistas, los resultados presentados aquí indican que los votantes mexicanos forman bloques afectivos sobre bloques ideológicos y sociales, en contraposición a bloques partidistas. Pero son las actitudes populistas las que producen el cambio más importante en los niveles de polarización afectiva. Como tal, este estudio tiene implicaciones para la literatura existente sobre polarización política, comportamiento político y populismo.

Palavras-chave:

polarização
afetiva; ideologia
simbólica;
classificação
social; populismo,
AMLO; México

Resumo

A polarização afetiva – ou a tendência para não gostar dos eleitores de outros partidos – é um fenómeno persistente no México desde as eleições presidenciais de 2006. No entanto, os estudos que analisam as suas causas são escassos. Isto é surpreendente porque vários autores argumentaram que elevados níveis de polarização afetiva ameaçam a consolidação e a sobrevivência da democracia. Este artigo preenche essa lacuna ao explorar o papel da ideologia, da classificação social e das atitudes populistas na polarização afetiva utilizando dados do Estudo Eleitoral Mexicano de 2018. Em linha com a investigação existente em democracias multipartidárias, os resultados aqui apresentados indicam que os eleitores mexicanos formam blocos afetivos sobre blocos ideológicos e sociais, em oposição a blocos partidários. Mas são as atitudes populistas que produzem a mudança mais importante nos níveis de polarização afetiva. Como tal, este estudo tem implicações para a literatura existente sobre polarização política, comportamento político e populismo.

1. INTRODUCCIÓN

Affective polarization, defined as the partisans' tendency to dislike and distrust those from the other party (Iyengar *et al.*, 2012), is one of the most striking features of twenty-first century politics, and such animosity can have important negative consequences for democracy and society alike. Scholars have, for example, found that partisans of opposite bands routinely discriminate against each other in economic (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; McConnell *et al.*, 2018; Amira *et al.*, 2021) and social settings (Lelkes & Westwood, 2017; Shafranek, 2021). Disliking those of the out-group has also been linked with lower levels of institutional and social trust (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2020; Torcal & Thomson, 2023; Torcal & Carty, 2022).

While extant studies have documented increasing levels of political polarization at the elite level in Mexico (Bruhn & Greene, 2007; Bruhn, 2012), others suggest that such polarization is also present among citizens. As Aparicio & Castro Cornejo (2020, p. 7) –referring to the 2018 Presidential election– put it: «...voters in Mexico do not dislike all parties, they dislike all parties-except theirs.» Although scholars have documented the existence of affective polarization among Mexican voters, we know little about its causes. This research thus seeks to answer the following research question: what factors explain levels of affective polarization in Mexico?

Figure 1 below plots the levels of weighted partisan affective polarization (PAP) in Mexico from 1997 to 2018 –on a scale from 0 to 10–.¹ We learn two intriguing yet interesting facts from the figure. First, affective polarization is hardly a new phenomenon in Mexican politics. But there is variation in levels of party animosity across time. On average, levels of affective polarization are lower in legislative than presidential election years.² Further, while, on average, levels of partisan animosity in Mexico from 1997 to 2018 are not substantially high, Figure 1 also reveals that the highest levels of affective polarization since Mexico's transition to democracy were in the 2006 and 2018 presidential elections. Both contests not only featured deep divisions between the main parties and candidates but were also characterized by López Obrador's political rhetoric which blamed the political establishment –*mafia del poder*– for impoverishing the masses using neoliberal policies and widespread corruption (Castro Cornejo, 2024).

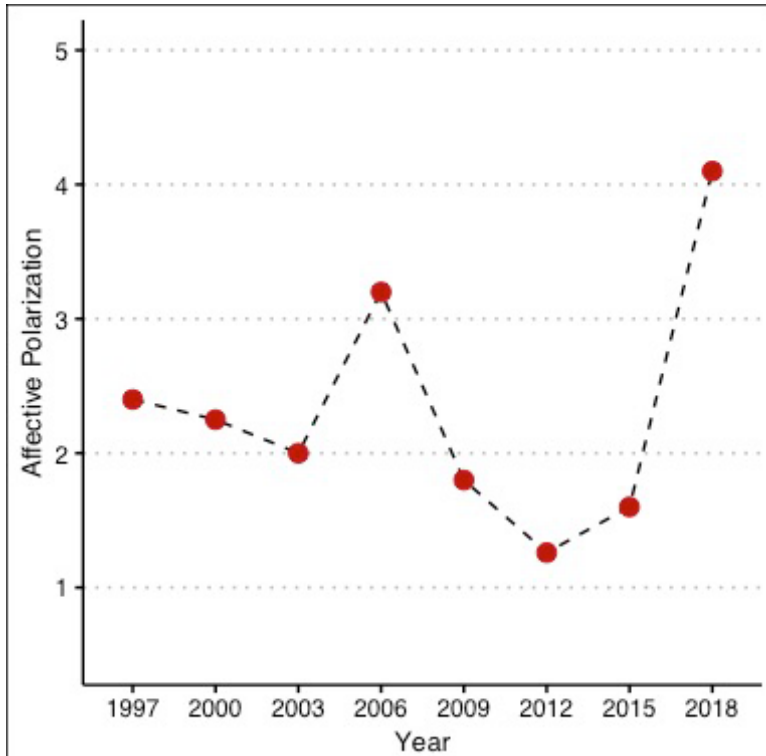
The marked increase in the level of affective polarization in Mexico in 2018 is interesting and intriguing in at least two different ways. First, it coincides with the beginning of a complete reconfiguration of the Mexican party system in which the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) obtained 53% of the popular vote (Greene & Sánchez-Talanquer, 2018), relegating the two most traditional parties in the country (PAN and PRI) to second and third place, respectively.³ Second, AMLO's populist rhetoric was efficient enough to divide the Mexican society into two mutually antagonistic camps –the «good» people vs. the «corrupt» elite–, resulting in an emotionally charged electoral process that not only dominated the structure of political competition but also affected the behavior of the masses and political elite.

1. Weighted affective polarization calculated using Wagner's (2021) formula (see empirical section for more details). Larger values indicate higher levels of affective polarization.

2. Careful analysis of 2018 data further indicates that there is also variation in levels of affective polarization at the individual level in the 2018 election.

3. AN = National Action Party; PRI = Institutional Revolutionary Party. AN = National Action Party; PRI = Institutional Revolutionary Party.

Figure 1. Affective Polarization in Mexico, 1997-2018



Source: Author's calculation with data from CIDE-ENEP survey (1997-2018).

In contrast with existing research that either explores the effects of media bias (Tong *et al.*, 2021) or the relationship between López Obrador's rhetoric (Sarsfield, 2023; Sarsfield & Abuchanab, 2024) and affective polarization in Mexico, I build on existing research on the determinants of affective polarization in multiparty democracies as well as on recent research in Mexican politics to test three hypothesis that explore the relationship between (i) symbolic ideology, (ii) social sorting, and (iii) populist attitudes and affective polarization in the 2018 presidential election in Mexico.

Specifically, using insights from Vegetti & Siriníc (2019) and Comellas & Torcal (2023), I first argue that amid a changing party system, symbolic ideology –or left-right ideological labels– provides citizens with information cues that allow them not only to distinguish and organize different policy concepts, but also to qualify themselves and others as a part of a given group. As individuals have a stronger sense of belonging to a specific group, I expect them to have higher levels of animosity towards parties and citizens of the opposing political side. Because a main

feature of López Obrador's rhetoric relied on exacerbating divisions in Mexican society, I then build on extant research showing that social divisions can also affect levels of affective polarization in multiparty systems (see, for e.g., Hartevelde, 2021b; Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Huddy *et al.*, 2018) to hypothesize that higher levels of social sorting increase affective polarization.

Scholars have documented that voters' dissatisfaction with the country's situation allowed AMLO's populist rhetoric to successfully make such grievances salient and activate populist attitudes among the Mexican electorate (Castro Cornejo *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, building on studies which suggest that populist attitudes have an effect not only on the support for populist parties (see, for e.g., Akkerman *et al.*, 2014; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018; Ivarsflaten, 2008), but also generate a sense of identification and belonging with the «pure» or «good» people, I further suggest that such sense of belonging will increase positive feelings towards members of their own group and increasingly negative feelings towards the out-group, increasing affective polarization.

Exploring such hypotheses in Mexico is relevant for at least two reasons. To begin with, as mentioned earlier, the winner of the 2018 presidential election (i.e. AMLO) used a heavy anti-establishment platform which did not allow his party –MORENA– to claim a landslide victory, but also effectively divided the Mexican electorate into antagonistic camps, increasing polarization. But the substantial increase in polarization coincided with a deep reconfiguration of the Mexican party system. To date, we do not know much about the factors that triggered individuals to mutually dislike opposite political camps in the aforementioned election. As such, the Mexican case offers a good opportunity to study the determinants of affective polarization in an election where about half of the electorate did not identify with any political party (Beltrán *et al.*, 2020).

Second, extant research has shown that it can have important political consequences. For example, Castro Cornejo (2023) suggests that affective polarization contributed significantly to AMLO's victory. More recently, Castro Cornejo (2024) finds that voters with higher levels of affective polarization are more likely to engage in conspiratorial thinking which prompts them to question the integrity of democratic institutions (i.e. elections). An affectively polarized electorate fueled AMLO's political dominance and extended his honeymoon as he maintained an approval rating of at least 60% throughout his presidency, making the left-wing populist one of the most popular leaders in the world and allowing him to engage in multiple democratic transgressions and power grabs which eroded democracy in the country. High levels of affective polarization can potentially lead to erode democracy as hardened identities lead citizens to accept political extremism, which not only makes compromise more difficult but can also lead to political violence (Berntzen *et al.*, 2024). Given the negative consequences, it is pressing to better understand the factors that are behind such phenomenon.

This study makes several contributions. First, anecdotal and empirical evidence (Aparicio & Castro Cornejo, 2020; Moreno *et al.*, 2024) indicate that affective polarization has been a persistent phenomenon with important behavioral and electoral consequences in the country (Castro Cornejo, 2023; Castro Cornejo, 2024). Yet, studies on its causes do not abound.⁴ By testing the hypotheses described above, this paper contributes to an emerging body of literature in Mexico and other multiparty democracies seeking to understand the factors that fuel antagonistic feelings between members of different political camps. Second, the results reported here indicate that ideology and social sorting influence out-party animosity in Mexico, which is in line with extant research in other multi-party democracies. But populist attitudes –as opposed to ideology and social sorting– produces the larger predicted change in affective polarization. As such this work speaks with recent studies not only on the activation of populist attitudes (Castro Cornejo *et al.*, 2020), but also on the relationship between populism and polarization (Wiesehomeier *et al.*, 2021; Davis *et al.*, 2024) which find that populism increases polarization.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 briefly reviews the extant literature and presents the testable hypothesis. I then outline the empirical strategy, results, and robustness tests. The conclusion discusses the implications of this study and potential avenues for future research.

2. POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS OF AP IN MEXICO

Research on the determinants of affective polarization in Mexico is scarce. In this regard, Tong *et al.* (2021) find that there is a positive relationship between perceptions of media bias and levels of affective polarization. Other scholars have more recently analyzed the relationship between AMLO's populist rhetoric and affective polarization (Sarsfield, 2023; Sarsfield & Abuchanab, 2024). Interestingly, their results not only indicate that the populist narratives used by the elite (i.e. AMLO) drive negative affective polarization in Mexico,⁵ but also that different stories generate different types of such phenomenon. These studies are very insightful, but they provide an incomplete assessment of the determinants of affective polarization in the country for at least two reasons.

First, the most widely accepted definition of affective polarization assumes that individuals tend to view favorably others that belong to their group (or party)

4. A few exceptions include Tong *et al.* (2021); Sarsfield (2023); Sarsfield & Abuchanab (2024).

5. These results are in line with extant literature in developed democracies (Druckman *et al.* (2021) and Lau *et al.* (2017)).

and negatively those who do not (Iyengar *et al.*, 2012; Iyengar *et al.*, 2019; Mason & Wronski, 2018). While studying how partisanship affects this type of polarization is straightforward in two-party systems, such analysis is more complex in a multiparty system like Mexico. Yet, extant research has shown that voters in multiparty democracies also form affective blocs, but they do so in terms of ideological and social –as opposed to partisan– divisions (Comellas & Torcal, 2023; Huddy *et al.*, 2018; Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021). Considering those findings, it is valid to ask whether and how variables like ideology and/or social cleavages help explain affective polarization in a multiparty democracy like Mexico, which to the best of my knowledge has not yet been studied.

Second, empirical evidence suggests that both the existence and type of AMLO's rhetoric influences levels of affective polarization in Mexico (Sarsfield, 2023; Sarsfield & Abuchanab, 2024). This indicates that, as suggested by Bäck *et al.* (2023), elite communication is likely to be an important explanatory factor of partisan animosity in the country. While the samples in such studies only include post-election social media messages, AMLO's 2018 presidential campaign included messages that aimed at dividing the Mexican electorate into two antagonistic camps, which potentially polarized social identities and increased affective polarization. Yet, we do not have a thorough understanding of the individual-level mechanisms that explain the relationship.

The arguments and hypotheses developed in the following pages link ideology, social sorting, and populist attitudes with affective polarization in Mexico, seeking to extend our understanding of the causes of such phenomenon. To do so, I not only build on extant literature on the determinants of affective polarization in multiparty democracies, but also on existing research on Mexican politics to provide context and support of the importance of such hypotheses in the Mexican case.

2.1. The Role of Identity-based or Symbolic Ideology

Ideology is a «system of beliefs» or a collection of ideas and attitudes which are connected by function (Converse, 1964), and scholars often use the left-right ideological spectrum to describe voters' substantive political orientations. While ideology and party identification are often used indistinctively, these two concepts are fundamentally different as ideology emphasizes, at least implicitly, cognitive-based instrumental modes of electoral behavior, whereas party identification stresses affect with political parties rather than instrumentality (Van der Eijk *et al.*, 2005, p. 166). Scholars have found that the left-right orientation of citizens not only allows them to form political perceptions and policy positions (Van der Eijk *et al.*, 2005), but also serves as a shortcut to organize party groupings which guide voters' expectations regarding the likelihood of political alliances (Fortunato *et al.*, 2016).

In general, the left-right ideological spectrum represents a group of principles which are about the best way to organize society in order for people to thrive. In countries like the United States, a two-party system, left-right ideological self-placements strongly predicts issue-based voting, especially among individuals with higher levels of political knowledge (Freder *et al.*, 2019). But other scholars have also found that «issue-based» ideology is an important determinant of voters' political orientations and vote choice in several Western European multiparty systems (Van der Eijk *et al.*, 2005; De Vries *et al.*, 2013). The idea that ideology is only a set of substantive policy preferences, however, has been challenged by a few scholars who argue that the voters' political behavior and attitudes can also be influenced by their attachment to and identification with members of their respective ideological groups (Conover & Feldman, 1981; Devine, 2015; Mason, 2018). Thus, ideology can either be conceptualized as a coherent set of issue positions (i.e. «issue-based») or as a symbolic attachment to a particular ideological group (i.e. «symbolic» or «identity-based»).

The idea that ideology can be conceptualized as a social identity finds its roots on the self-categorization theory, which posits that individuals can cut information costs by *categorizing* objects into different groups according to salient characteristics (Turner *et al.*, 1987). Different from heuristics, categorization is a cognitive process that allows individuals to deal intuitively with new stimuli without examining every detail (Murphy, 2004), and to make inferences about individual objects based on the category that they belong (McGarty & Penny, 1988). Social psychologists have argued that in social contexts people use categories to make judgements about others based on whether they belong to their group –in-group– or not –out-group– (Allport, 1954; Tajfel, 1981). In the realm of politics, extant work suggests that the labels «left» and «right» allow citizens to distinguish who is «us» and who is «them» (Devine, 2015; Mason, 2018).⁶

Studies on ideological group attachment have traditionally focused on the American two-party system, where partisanship usually coincides with the ideological orientation of voters (Levendusky, 2009).⁷ In that context, partisanship is likely the main force that influences political behavior and attitudes. Recently, however, some scholars have argued that ideological attachments –and not partisanship– anchor vote decisions and political perceptions in contexts where partisanship and party systems are weaker or unstable (Rahat *et al.*, 2016; Oshri *et al.*, 2022; Comellas & Torcal, 2023; Segovia, 2022; Torcal & Carty, 2023). Indeed, as Comellas & Torcal (2023, p. 3) cogently put it: «...in multiparty systems, the same ideology usually encompasses different partisan categories and some people may

6. That is, people categorize others as in-groups and out-groups according to their ideology.

7. This means that Democrats usually have a liberal ideology while Republicans tend to identify themselves as conservative.

not identify as much with a particular party as with an ideological label, constituting a supra-partisan identity...».

The creation of López Obrador's party (MORENA) in 2015 started a process of change that quickly altered partisan identities and the stability of the Mexican party system. Fueled by numerous corruption scandals and an overwhelming negative voters' perception of the state of the country and political parties, AMLO's third run at the presidency was able to secure the support of a broad coalition which included voters and social groups that did not support him in 2006 and 2012. While aggregate levels of partisan identification in the 2018 election resemble those of previous presidential election, Aparicio & Castro Cornejo (2020) report that a substantial number of voters switched party allegiances. The authors specifically note that MORENA supporters (i.e. Morenistas) became the largest group of party identifiers (thirty percent), matching the percentage of independent voters in the Mexican electorate.⁸ The swift change in partisan loyalties suggests that party ID can only partially explain voter's behavior and attitudes in the aforementioned election, which is in line with previous findings in multiparty systems.

Moreno (2018) finds that while partisan identification was declining, voters' ideological attachments became stronger as leftist parties increasingly attempted to differentiate themselves from competitors since the Mexican transition to democracy. Such ideological differentiation in turn created a growing influence of ideological identities on political behavior.⁹ Aparicio & Castro Cornejo (2020) further argue that while issue-based ideology in the country is weak, symbolic ideology experienced substantial growth. Indeed, they document the percentage of voters that self-identify with the left increased by twenty-five percent while the percentage of those who identify with the right decreased by thirty-nine percent, which explains AMLO's victory (Aparicio & Castro Cornejo, 2020, p. 10). Since research on Mexican politics posits that symbolic ideology affects political behavior like vote choice, a natural question is whether voters' self-placement on the left-right continuum affects other political phenomena like affective polarization.

As mentioned above, scholars have applied categorization theory to politics. Building on Devine (2015) and Mason (2015), self-placements on the left-right ideological spectrum allows individuals to classify people into two different ideological blocs: in-group (those who belong to their own bloc) and out-group (those who belong to the opposite ideological bloc). Such categorization also allows citizens to perceive parties belonging to their ideological camp to be closer (in-group parties)

8. Priistas (sixteen percent), panistas (fifteen percent), and perredistas (four percent) to second, third, and fourth place, respectively.

9. More specifically, vote choice [see also, Moreno (2015)]. Moreno's (2018) finding coincides with earlier research which suggests that the 2006 presidential election started a trend marked by clear issue differences between parties and candidates (Bruhn & Greene, 2007).

to them, and those that do not belong to their camp (out-group parties) to be further away than they really are (Vegetti & Siriníc, 2019). Therefore, identity-based or symbolic ideology is likely to create higher levels of animosity between party supporters of the left and right ideological blocs (Comellas & Torcal, 2023). This leads to the following hypothesis.

H₁: Higher symbolic ideology leads to higher levels of affective polarization.

2.2. Social Sorting

In contrast with theories assuming that in-group relations can be simplified to a single in-group / out-group categorization, Roccas & Brewer (2002) pioneered the concept of social identity complexity which posits that individuals subjectively represent relationships among their multiple in-group memberships, and such representation is based on the actual complexity of the experienced social environment. Specifically, individuals with low social identity complexity see their different in-groups as highly overlapping and convergent, whereas those with high complexity see their different in-groups as distinct and cross-cutting membership groups. When individuals perceive a high overlap (low complexity) between them and their in-group members, they tend to be less tolerant and accepting of out-group members in general. Conversely, individuals that perceive a low overlap (high complexity) are more likely to be tolerant and accepting of non-group members.

As mentioned earlier, existing research has shown that, in addition to ideology, voters in multiparty democracies can also form affective blocs in terms of social divisions (Comellas & Torcal, 2023; Hartevelt, 2021b; Huddy *et al.*, 2018; Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021). Such works build on Mason (2016) and Mason & Wronski (2018), two influential studies on the determinants of affective polarization in the United States, which argue that the increasing level of partisan animosity in the American electorate cannot be explained by partisanship or ideological differences alone. Rather, they suggest, voters become more emotionally engaged when their social identities line up behind their partisan and/or ideological identities, which offsets the moderating effect that cross-cutting cleavages have on the voters' emotional responses to messages emitted by political elites. Specifically, Mason (2016) posits that the effect of a sorted set of social and partisan and/or ideological identities increases the volatility of emotional responses to partisan messaging, reinforcing the affective aspect of polarization (Mason, 2016, p. 352).

Social sorting, in other words, implies that existing divisions in society are capable of exacerbating political divisions. In a sorted context, a political group will be consciously or sub-consciously associated with non-political groups (Hartevelt, 2021b, p. 3). Prejudice and bias towards non-political groups (based, for example,

on competing values, lifestyle or interests) can in turn amplify political emotions of anger or antipathy. While such dislike is not necessarily political, it can have political consequences. Indeed, the prediction –that socially sorted individuals are more affectively polarized than those who are not– has found empirical support in a number of contexts, including the United States (Mason, 2016; Mason & Wronski, 2018) and other developed countries (Harteveld, 2021b; Comellas & Torcal, 2023). These studies suggest that the alignment of political with social or any other type of identities is not an exclusive feature of U.S. politics as any type of political conflict finds its roots in structural divisions. The lines below explain the potential relevance of social sorting as a determinant of levels affective polarization in the 2018 Mexican presidential election.

As mentioned earlier, the overwhelming victory of a new political party (MORENA) created important changes in the Mexican party system. Such changes, in turn, transformed party identification in an important segment of the electorate (Aparicio & Castro Cornejo, 2020, p. 7). Common wisdom suggests that the process of party identification acquisition develops and stays in the long-run (Campbell, 1980; Green *et al.*, 2004; Lewis-Beck *et al.*, 2009). Yet recent scholarship finds that the Mexican electorate is composed of both long and short-term partisans (Aparicio & Castro Cornejo, 2020; Castro Cornejo, 2021), and this implies that some –but not all– voters in Mexico can quickly develop a new partisan ID. Indeed, (Aparicio & Castro Cornejo, 2020) find that sixty-five per cent of individuals identified themselves with a specific political party in the 2018 election, which is not substantially different from previous democratic presidential elections in the country.

Interestingly, thirty percent of individuals identified themselves with López Obrador's new party (MORENA), suggesting that a substantial number of voters in Mexico were able to quickly transit to a new partisan ID label (i.e. MORENISTAS). Moreover, Barrera *et al.* (2021) find that seventy-four percent of the indigenous population, seventy-one percent of farmers, and a sizable portion of younger voters –born after Mexico's transition to democracy– voted for AMLO's party. Admittedly, the introduction of new parties into the system (i.e. MORENA) in 2018 makes it challenging to claim that social identities grew increasingly aligned with partisanship as indigenous and rural citizens, for example, were traditionally PRI partisans. Yet, the data described above indicates that voters of some social groups quickly updated their preferences, which explains the alignment between certain social groups and electoral support for AMLO and MORENA.

Extant research has shown that in Latin America, where alignments are weaker but not absent, some political parties have capitalized on structural division of society (i.e. religion, education, or indigenous vs. non-indigenous) to mobilize voters (see, e.g., Carlin *et al.*, 2015; Layton *et al.*, 2021). More recently, Bäck *et al.* (2023) build on the theory of optimal distinctiveness to argue that partisan source cues influence affective polarization because individuals will interpret messages from

their in or out-groups in a way that reinforces the sense of in-group distinctiveness relative to the out-group (Bäck *et al.*, 2023, p.).

In Mexico, Castro Cornejo (2023) argues that the «Pact for Mexico» signed in 2012 by three of the major political parties in the country (PRI, PAN, and PRD) triggered grievances within the electorate,¹⁰ which were then used by AMLO to build a broad coalition of voters against the PRI and the PAN –or the PRIAN, as AMLO calls them–. The 2018 presidential campaign, indeed, featured a constant attack of AMLO not only towards the aforementioned political parties, but also made emphasis in exacerbating divisions in Mexican society along political, economic, and social lines. His phrase «For the good of everyone, the poor comes first» («Por el bien de todos, primero los pobres» in Spanish) is a prime example of such strategy. In all, AMLO's emphasis in amplifying the differences between different societal groups increased out-group animus, which fosters affective polarization. The preceding discussion leads to the following hypothesis.

H₂: Higher levels of social sorting lead to higher levels of affective polarization.

2.3. Populist Attitudes

The rise and electoral success of populist parties has accelerated in the last two decades around the world. Such success has prompted scholars not only to increasingly study the supply-side of populism (Hawkins, 2009; Rooduijn, 2014), but also has generated important debates about the conceptual meaning of populism. While some scholars define populism in terms of structural, institutional, and strategic approaches (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Oxhorn, 1998; Weyland, 2001; Dornbusch & Edwards, 1990), others argue that the ideas and discourse used by populist leaders better serve to explain why populist movements and parties have gained momentum in both developed and developing democracies (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Hawkins *et al.*, 2018).

Scholars who adhere to the ideational approach believe that populism sees politics as a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of a knowing, diabolical evil (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 515). The dualistic nature of ideational populism implies that populists use their ideas or discourse to divide society into two antagonistic groups: the «*good people*» and the «*evil elite*.» In contrast with other approaches to populism (i.e. structural, institutional, or strategic), ideational populism puts special emphasis in the role of ideas, high- lighting not only the

10. The «Pact for Mexico» resulted in AMLO's break with the PRD and the subsequent creation of MORENA.

existence of a popular identity, but also the hostility between a vilified elite and the people.¹¹ Indeed, Castro Cornejo *et al.* (2020) suggest that the use of the ideational approach to study this phenomenon is advantageous as it allows to identify (i) the populist elements present in the discourse and attitudes of political leaders, and (ii) their manifestation and prevalence among the electorate (Castro Cornejo *et al.*, 2020, p. 4).

The effectiveness of the elite's ideas and discourse, however, is conditional on their ability to mobilize voters by activating their populist attitudes, and this is not achieved in all contexts. Extant research posits that two conditions are necessary to activate populist attitudes in the electorate. For one, political elites need to be aware and take advantage of significant representation and valence deficits in society which create dissatisfaction and anger among voters (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Castro Cornejo *et al.*, 2020). Further, such elites must use rhetoric capable of making such issues salient in the eyes of the electorate. According to the ideational approach of populism, such rhetoric not only must cultivate a common in-group identity that makes citizens feel part of the «good» people who are the victims of the «evil» elite (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), but it also needs to frame ideas and messages in a common and credible way (Hawkins *et al.*, 2018; Castanho Silva, 2018).

In Mexico, Castro Cornejo *et al.* (2020) cogently demonstrate that AMLO's rhetoric during the 2018 campaign activated the populist attitudes of the electorate in a way that is consistent with ideational populism. It is worth mentioning that such activation did not occur overnight. Rather, it was the byproduct of a process that started soon after López Obrador lost the 2006 presidential election by a very tight margin (.58 percent). Unwilling to accept his defeat, AMLO claimed that the corrupt elite –formed by the traditional political parties PAN and PRI as well as by members of powerful economic and business groups– orchestrated a plan to corrupt the election and steal the presidency from him. According to him, such corrupt elite (or «power mafia» as he calls it) was also responsible for all the ailments of the poor and working classes in the country («the people») because they conspired together to adopt endless neoliberal policies. López Obrador had another unsuccessful bid for the presidency in 2012 as he continued to accuse the «power mafia» of conspiring and abusing the «good people.»

But a series of corruption scandals during Enrique Peña Nieto's presidency (2012-2016) allowed AMLO to add an additional component to his populist rhetoric as such events were framed as the proof of the existence of the corrupt elite that had robbed the country for decades. Castro Cornejo *et al.* (2020) report that

11. Scholars in Latin American politics increasingly use an ideational approach to study populism (see, e.g., Hawkins, 2009; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014, among others).

almost seventy per cent of voter believed that it was «very true» or «somewhat true» that a «power mafia» existed in the country.¹² A recent study by Sarsfield & Abuchanab (2024) further demonstrates that AMLO's storytelling is consistent with the ideational approach to populism. These authors find –through a careful exploration of over 3,000 tweets from AMLO's account– that the most frequent words used to communicate with his followers were «people», «mafia», «conservatives», «corruption», and «PRIAN» while re- sponses from his supporters often mentioned the word «corruption,» which suggests that his rhetoric effectively resonated with his supporters.

An emerging body of literature argues that the activation of populist attitudes influences political behavior (Akkerman *et al.*, 2014; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018; Geurkink *et al.*, 2020; Christner, 2022; Piazza, 2024).¹³ With respect to vote choice, it is important to note that several studies find a positive relationship between populist attitudes and support of right-wing populist parties (Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018; Ivarsflaten, 2008; Van der Brug *et al.*, 2000). Right-wing populist parties, however, activate such preferences using messages in which «the people» is defined in exclusivist racial, ethnic, religious, or cultural terms that exclude minorities, foreign-born citizens, and cosmopolitans (Kriesi, 2017), which is different from the dichotomous division of society –the good or non-corrupt people vs. the corrupt elite– that AMLO employed to appeal to his supporters.

Since populist attitudes affect different forms of political behavior, it is thus feasible to argue that individuals with more pronounced populist attitudes are also more likely to have affectively motivated judgements of those outside their own group. Taggart (2018), for example, posits that populist attitudes relate to an antagonistic but mutually reinforcing distinction between the pure people and the corrupt elite, placing an important emphasis in people-centered political representation, which in turn implies that populism generates deep feelings of discontent with politics and societal life in general. The division of society into two different (antagonistic) groups assigns, as suggested by Mudde (2004), a moral component which individuals internalize making them more likely to identify with one (i.e. the pure people) or another (the corrupt elite) group. Therefore, the sense of «belonging» created by populism can be seen as an example of the in-group vs. out-group thinking that characterizes affective polarization (Harteveld *et al.*, 2022, p. 4).

12. Castro Cornejo *et al.* (2020) reach their conclusion using data from the CIDE-CSES, 2018 National Electoral Study which is also used in the empirical section of this study.

13. Akkerman *et al.* (2014) and Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel (2018) find that populist attitudes affect vote choice and policy preferences, while Geurkink *et al.* (2020), Christner (2022), and Piazza (2024) analyze the effects of populist attitudes on political efficacy, conspiracy beliefs, and tolerance towards the use of political violence to achieve political goals, respectively.

In a way, the division described above (i.e. the people vs. the elite) splits society into two different categories. Since individuals, as mentioned earlier, internalize a sense of belonging to any of those categories, one can expect that they will develop increasing positive feelings towards the members of their own group and more negative feelings toward the out-group (Pérez-Rajó, 2024). Further, the division of society into two antagonist groups is also likely to increase antagonistic (or negative) feelings towards members of the opposing camp. An increase in positive feelings towards the in-group coupled with an increase in antagonist feelings toward members of the opposing group widens the affective gap at the individual level. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H₃: The stronger the populist attitudes of an individual, the more likely they are to have a higher level of affective polarization.

3. EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

I test the hypotheses outlined above using data from the 2018 Mexican Election Study (Beltrán *et al.*, 2020). It is a national representative survey that was conducted by the polling firm IPSOS, Mexico. While the Mexican Election Study is a four-wave panel, the main variables used here come from its third wave, which was conducted from July 12th-18th, 2018. All interviews were face-to-face, and the survey used a multistage stratified area probability sample of the Mexican population 18 years and older in possession of a valid voting identification card. In the third wave of the survey, voters could place up to nine political parties.

3.1. Dependent Variable

Scholarly research on the causes and consequences of affective polarization often relies on Iyengar *et al.*'s (2012) definition to conceptualize such phenomenon as «the extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked out-group.» (Iyengar *et al.*, 2012, p. 406). While such concept is universally accepted, the way to measure it remains contested. Extant research primarily used three different instruments to measure affective polarization: feeling thermometers, social distance, and trait attributions. Because of data availability, the main dependent variable –described below– used here is operationalized with a feeling thermometer that asks respondents to rate how «cold» or «warm» they are with respect to a specific political party. Feeling thermometers are central in public opinion research, but their use to measure affective polarization has generated an ongoing debate regarding who is the target of the affect (i.e. elites or voters) expressed by respondents.

In an experimental study, Druckman & Levendusky (2019) analyze whether Americans think of the party as voters, elites, or a combination of vote. Their findings suggests that individuals in the U.S. express more negative views towards out-party elites than out-party voters, which may generate a bias in the score of affective polarization. A key question, however, is whether scholars can rely on a feeling thermometer to study affective polarization. Recently, Gidron *et al.* (2022) use data from a seven-wave panel in Israel to show that the feeling thermometer is not only associated (albeit imperfectly) with affect toward partisans, but also captures affect toward partisan blocs. Such results, therefore, allow them to conclude that the feeling thermometer is a useful proxy for partisan affect outside the U.S., which supports the use of the variable described below.

The main dependent variable is *Weighted Affective Polarization* at the individual level. Measuring affective polarization in a multiparty system such as Mexico is not straightforward as this phenomenon goes beyond estimating the difference between the in-party and out-party feelings.¹⁴ I overcome this hurdle by using Wagner (2021)'s weighted sympathy' measure to calculate each individual's sympathy scores towards all parties in the system.¹⁵ Specifically, *Weighted Affective Polarization* is calculated by using an eleven-point like-dislike scale ranging from «I don't like it at all» to «I like it very much». The respondent's score towards each party is then subtracted from the weighted average like-dislike score towards all parties, and its absolute value is then multiplied by size of each party. The weighted score of *Affective Polarization* thus ranges from 0 to 10 with larger scores indicating a higher level of individual affective polarization, and it includes favorability scores for the nine political parties that competed in the 2018 presidential election (MORENA, PAN, PRI, PRD, PT, PVEM, NA, PT, and PES).¹⁶

Operationalizing affective polarization using Formula 1 is advantageous for at least two reasons. First, extant research in developing democracies suggests that levels of party attachments vary substantially (Lupu, 2015). In the 2018 Mexican Election Study data, for example, thirty-one percent of respondents declared that they do not have any attachment to a political party. But the lack of identification with a party does not mean that voters cannot develop sentiments towards the parties that compete in the system. In that sense, the measure of affective polarization proposed by Wagner (2021) allows us to capture in detail the feelings of

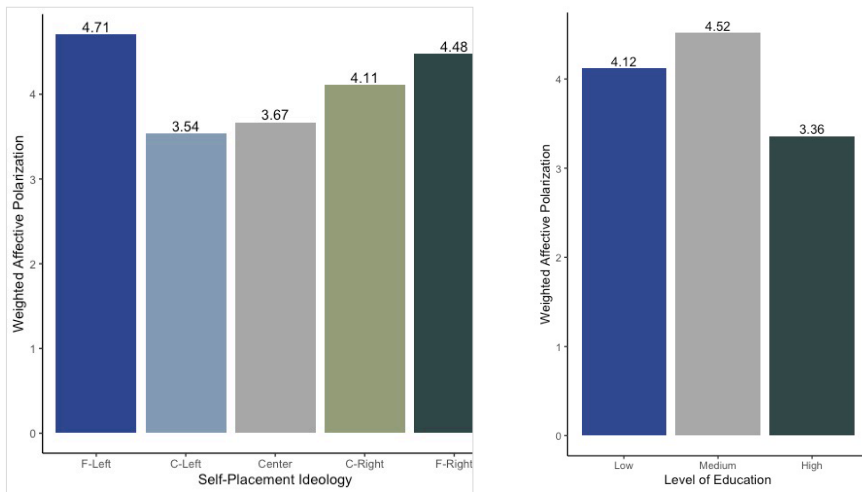
14. Garrido & Freidenberg (2020) report that the effective number of legislative parties after the 2018 election in Mexico was 3.25.

15. The score of affective polarization proposed by Wagner (2021) is similar to the one proposed by Reiljan (2020), and it has been used subsequently in other studies that analyze the determinants of affective polarization in multiparty systems, for e.g. Harteveld (2021a) and Torcal & Comellas (2022).

16. MORENA = National Regeneration Movement; PAN = National Action Party; PRI = Institutional Revolutionary Party; PRD = Democratic Revolution Party; PVEM = Green Party; NA = New Alliance; PT = Workers' Party; PES = Social Encounter Party.

like-dislike that voters have towards all parties in a multi-party system. In addition, Wagner's index of affective polarization acknowledges that the size of parties is likely to affect the levels of affective polarization as individuals are likely to be more polarized if they have negative feelings towards a large party than if they dislike a small party.

Figure 2. Levels of Weighted Affective Polarization



(a) Ideological Groups; (b) Education Level

Source: Author's calculation with data from CIDE-ENEP survey (2018).

Careful examination of the main independent variable indicates that there is substantial variation in levels of affective polarization across individuals. The mean score of *Weighted Affective Polarization* is 4.10. Figure 2 depicts levels of weighted affective polarization by different groups of respondents. The illustration reveals some interesting trends in the main dependent variables. From Figure 2(a), for example, we learn that respondents in both far-left and far-right ideological groups have higher levels of affective polarization than respondents who self-allocated themselves in the middle of the left-right ideological scale. An additional exercise, illustrated in Figure 2(b), shows that respondents with higher levels of education (i.e. college degree or higher) have lower levels of affective polarization than those with lower levels of education.

While I am confident that my main dependent (described above) is accurately capturing levels of affective polarization at the individual level, I use two alternative measures to check the robustness of my results. My first alternative dependent variable follows Castro Cornejo (2023) who operationalizes

affective polarization as the mean difference of favorability scores of individuals towards four political parties that dominate the electoral landscape in Mexico (MORENA, PAN, PRI, and PRD). My second alternative dependent variable follows Formula 1 described above, but only includes favorability scores for MORENA, PAN, PRI and PRD. Results of specifications that use the two alternative dependent variables are described in the Robustness Section below.

3.2. Independent and Control Variables

I need three main independent variables to test the predictions of *hypothesis 1* (symbolic or identity-based ideology), *hypothesis 2* (social Sorting), and *hypothesis 3* (populist attitudes). The first main independent variable, labeled as *symbolic ideology*, is operationalized using the traditional 11-point scale that measures the left-right dimension (Inglehart & Klingemann, 1976). Survey data on the left-right dimension and its functional equivalences have proven to be valuable sources to study a variety of political phenomena including, among others, party formation, policy representation, opinion change, and affective polarization. Since *hypothesis 1* predicts that higher levels of symbolic ideology are associated with higher levels of affective polarization, I use the self-placement scores to create five dummy variables that reflect different levels of symbolic ideology: *far-left*, *center-left*, *center*, *center-right*, and *far-right*. Specifically, the variable *far-left* takes the value of 1 when a respondent has a score of 0, 1 or 2 in the left-right dimension and zero otherwise. *center-left* equals 1 when the ideology score equals 3 or 4, and otherwise, while *center-right* and *far-right* equal 1 when the scores are 7-8 and 9-10, respectively, and 0 otherwise. Following the prediction of *hypothesis 1*, I thus expect the variables *far-left* and *far-right* to have a stronger influence on the main dependent variable *weighted affective polarization* when compared to the variables *center-left*, *center-right*, and *center*.

The second main independent variable in this analysis is *social sorting*. Measuring social sorting in multi-party systems is cumbersome as it is difficult to identify if an individual is sorted given that not all identities are equally relevant in predicting each party (Harteveld, 2021a, p. 7-8). This issue is exacerbated in the Mexican case because the party system, as mentioned earlier, suffered a profound transformation starting in the 2018 election. Such change resulted, for example, in a substantial shift in electoral support for the Mexican left. As (Barrera *et al.*, 2021) document, the left (i.e. MORENA) has been able to attract (and gain support from) electoral constituencies that historically support the PRI (rural areas and voters in North and South Mexico) and the PAN (younger voters). The changing landscape of electoral competition in the country further complicates the estimation of sorting. Moreover, available data for the Mexican case makes it difficult to estimate the level of social sorting using the method pioneered by Mason & Wronski (2018).

Fortunately, Harteveld (2021a) proposes a strategy that produces a reliable estimation of social sorting in multiparty systems. Given that such measure overcomes some of the issues discussed above, I calculate *Social Sorting* following Harteveld (2021a) and Bonsfills (2022).¹⁷ Specifically, my measure of *social sorting* calculates the extent to which an individual's party preference can be successfully predicted by socio-demographic variables (Harteveld, 2021a, p. 8). The procedure to estimate this variable is as follows. For each party, I first estimate a model in which vote choice is a function of economic uncertainty, involvement in labor unions, gender, age, education, and region.¹⁸ I then estimate the models' residuals for each individual. A larger residual indicates that the individual is less likely to fit the socio-demographic and identity profile of a party. The social sorting score is 1 minus the average absolute residual. A greater score indicates that the individual is more socially sorted.¹⁹

The operationalization of the third independent variable -*populist attitudes*- follows Castro Cornejo *et al.* (2020). These authors construct an additive index of populist attitudes after performing factor analysis on a battery of questions that ask respondents to evaluate a series of statements on populist attitudes that were part of the CIDE-CSES 2018 survey (Beltrán *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, the populism additive index is created with responses to the following questions: «Tell me if you totally agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree...»: (i) Most politicians don't care about the people, (ii) Politicians are the main problem in Mexico, (iii) The people, not the politicians, should make our most important policy decisions, and (iv) Most politicians only care about the interests of the rich and powerful. This variable ranges from 4 to 20 with higher values indicating stronger *Populist Attitudes*. Subsequently, the index was re-scaled from 0 to 10 to facilitate interpretation.

I also use a battery of variables that extant research has found to be plausibly correlated with partisan affective polarization in Latin America and elsewhere (Iyengar *et al.*, 2019; Wagner, 2021; Harteveld, 2021a; Segovia, 2022; Torcal & Comellas, 2022; Bonsfills, 2022). These variables are: (i) gender, which is a dummy variable coded as 1 when the respondent is female and 0 otherwise; (ii) education, an ordered variable that ranges from 1 (no education) to 9 (doctorate or equivalent); (iii) partisanship, coded as 1 if the respondent declared her/himself as a supporter of the political party;²⁰ (iv) interest in politics, which is an ordered variable

17. Harteveld (2021a) estimates social sorting in the Netherlands and Bonsfills (2022) in Spain.

18. The selection of variables mimics the «cleavages» described in Barrera *et al.* (2021). Income is not included in these models as there is a substantial proportion of missing data on such variable.

19. For a detailed description on the possible caveats of this measure see Bonsfills (2022).

20. Given the structure of the Mexican party system, I coded dummy variables for supporters of MORENA, PRI, PAN, PRD, and Independents.

ranging from 1 (no interest) to 4 (a lot of interest); and (v) age. I do not have any a-priori expectations regarding the relationship of the control variables with the main dependent variable.

4. RESULTS

Hypothesis 1 predicts that higher levels of perceived ideological polarization increase affective polarization. Model 1 in Table 1 presents the results of a model estimated via ordinary least squares (OLS) and robust standard errors. The specification includes the dummy variables that operationalize *symbolic ideology* and a reduced set of control variables. Model 3 was estimated using a full specification that includes the dummy variables *far-left*, *center-left*, *center-right*, and *far-right* –*center* is the reference category– and all the control variables presented in the previous section. Note that the coefficients on *far-left* and *center-right* are both positive and statistically significant at the 95 % confidence interval. We specifically learn from the results in model 3 that the level of affective polarization for individuals with a *far-left* ideology is 1.5 units higher with respect to individuals who self-identified themselves as having a centrist ideology. The positive and statistically significant coefficient on *center-right* indicates that individuals with this ideology have an affective polarization score which is .88 units higher than those with a centrist ideology, which is also consistent with the prediction of *hypothesis 1*. Yet, the coefficients on *center-left* and *far-right* are not statistically significant. These results thus provide only partial support for *hypothesis 1*.

Table 1. Regression Results. Dependent Variable: Weighted Affective Polarization

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
far-left	1.160**			1.149**			0.659**
	(0.268)			(0.270)			(0.292)
center-left	–0.210			–0.090			–0.103
	(0.247)			(0.259)			(0.295)
center-right	0.821***			0.884***			0.693***
	(0.194)			(0.200)			(0.220)
far-right	0.423			0.496			0.078

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	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	(0.302)			(0.307)			(0.334)
social sorting		0.191***			0.155***		0.117***
		(0.036)			(0.039)		(0.040)
populist attitudes			0.175***			0.169***	0.150***
			(0.024)			(0.025)	(0.028)
interest in politics				0.478***	0.478**	0.520***	0.410**
				(0.171)	(0.190)	(0.177)	(0.193)
gender	-0.279*	-0.412**	-0.201	-0.229	-0.356**	-0.167	-0.251
	(0.157)	(0.173)	(0.160)	(0.162)	(0.178)	(0.165)	(0.179)
age	0.006	0.006	0.006	0.007	0.008	0.004	0.005
	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
education	0.083*	0.062	0.081*	0.062	0.047	0.066	0.063
	(0.048)	(0.051)	(0.048)	(0.049)	(0.052)	(0.050)	(0.053)
constant	3.112***	2.190***	1.145**	2.787***	2.124***	0.942*	0.049
	(0.433)	(0.532)	(0.523)	(0.466)	(0.554)	(0.560)	(0.652)
Observations	634	533	583	593	505	551	462
R ²	0.066	0.065	0.096	0.078	0.068	0.102	0.149
Adjusted R ²	0.056	0.058	0.090	0.066	0.058	0.093	0.130

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

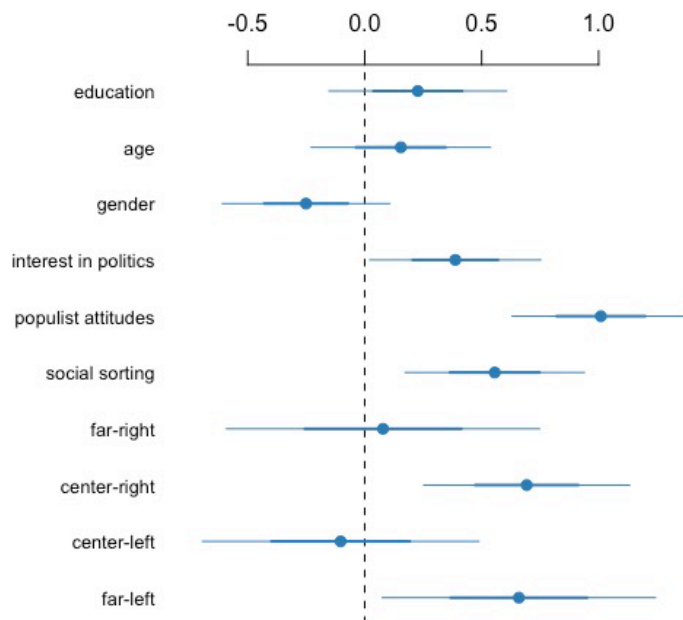
Source: Author's calculation with data from CIDE-ENEP survey (2018).

The effects of *social sorting* are first presented in Models 2 and 5, Table 1. Specifically, I first regress my main dependent variable on a reduced set of variables which include *social sorting* (see Model 2). I then estimate a model that includes *social sorting* and the full set of control variables. Results from model 5 indicate that a one unit increase *social sorting* –holding all other variables constant– increases an

individual's score of affective polarization by 0.15 units. This result is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, providing statistical support for *hypothesis 2*. Regarding *hypothesis 3*, Models 3 and 6 in Table 1 present the results of OLS models where the main independent variable is *populist attitudes*. The coefficient on *populist attitudes* is positive and statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, providing statistical support for *hypothesis 3*.

Further, Model 7, Table 1, presents the results of a full specification that includes the independent variables—*symbolic ideology*, *social sorting*, and *populist attitudes* as well as all the control variables mentioned earlier. The coefficient on the variables *far-left*, *center-right*, *social sorting*, and *populist attitudes* remain positive and statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. To allow for a more nuanced interpretations of the results, Figure 3 plots the substantive effects of all the variables in the model using the results from Model 7 in Table 1. To make the substantive effects comparable, each continuous variable is increased by two standard deviations and each dichotomous variable is increased from 0 to 1. The markers show the predicted change in affective polarization and the lines show the 95% confidence interval. This exercise reveals important insights about the determinants of affective polarization in Mexico.

Figure 3. Predicted Change in Affective Polarization



Source: Author's calculation with data from results in Table 1.

First, please recall that this study builds on extant work on the determinants of affective polarization to explore three hypotheses that are relevant given the context of the 2018 presidential election in Mexico. Regarding symbolic ideology, scholars like Moreno (2018) and Aparicio & Castro Cornejo (2020) argued earlier that the ideological identity of voters affects their electoral behavior, primarily vote choice. The results presented here indicate that ideology –and not necessarily party ID– is an important determinant of other types of behavior like polarization at the individual level. But as Figure 3 indicates, individuals who self-identify themselves as «far-left», and, somewhat surprisingly, «center-right» individuals are more likely to be affectively polarized than those who identify as «centrist.» Castro Cornejo (2023) finds a positive relationship between affective polarization and vote for AMLO. But his votes did not only come from leftist individuals (Aparicio & Castro Cornejo (2020), but also from «centrist» and «center-right» individuals who were affectively polarized by his messages.

Second, the results also indicate that ideology is not the only driver of affective polarization in Mexico. Thus, we should not assume that Mexican voters are only divided along partisan or ideological lines, and that such divisions can explain their political behavior. Rather, as it is shown here, specific messages from parties and partisan elites can activate their sense of belonging to specific social groups which in turn affects their behavior-in this case disgust for the out-group or affective polarization. Third, and perhaps more importantly, Figure 3 reveals that *populist attitudes* is the stronger predictor of affective polarization in Mexico. Scholars have recently argued that populism increases polarization by playing in the minds of populist's opponents, and the groups that are targeted by the populist rhetoric often respond in kind (Wiesehomeier *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, the predicted change in affective polarization created by the variable *populist attitudes* indicates that AMLO's rhetoric had a wide effect activating the populist attitudes of many voters in Mexico, not only his core supporters.

CONCLUSION

The study of political polarization in Latin America has primarily focused on analyzing the causes and consequences of ideological or elite polarization (Singer, 2016; Béjar *et al.*, 2020; Moraes & Béjar, 2023; Gómez & Ochoa, 2021). This debate, however, does not provide any clues as to whether rising levels of ideological divergence among elites translate into rising levels of animosity between citizens and, if so, what determines voters' animosity towards others. Building mostly on scholarship that studies the determinants of affective polarization in multi-party democracies, this paper analyses the determinants of affective polarization in Mexico. The results indicate that more than one factor explains levels of out-group

animosity in the country. Among those factors (ideology, social sorting, and populist attitudes), populist attitudes generate the highest predicted change in affective polarization.

This paper makes a number of contributions. First, as mentioned earlier, affective polarization has been a persistent phenomenon in Mexico since the 2006 presidential election. Yet less than a handful of studies have analyzed the causes of such phenomenon in the country (Tong *et al.*, 2021; Sarsfield, 2023; Sarsfield & Abuchanab, 2024). Different from those studies, I analyze here three relevant hypotheses (given the context of the 2018 presidential election) which link ideology, social sorting, and populist attitudes with affective polarization. The arguments and results presented here thus contribute to an emerging body of literature that analyzes the determinants of the aforementioned phenomenon in Mexico (Tong *et al.*, 2021; Sarsfield, 2023; Sarsfield & Abuchanab, 2024) and other Latin American democracies (Torcal & Comellas, 2022; Segovia, 2022; Areal, 2022; Torcal & Carty, 2023), shining a light on a political phenomenon that can potentially accelerate democratic backsliding in the region.

The results presented in this paper also have important implications for discussions about the role of political elites on polarization in Mexico and Latin America, more generally. First, in line with extant research, I show here that Mexican voters form affective blocs in ideological divisions, which is in line with extant research in multi-party democracies (Comellas & Torcal, 2023; Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021). But the results also indicate that social divisions and populist attitudes also play an important role in explaining partisan animosity. As such, the Mexican case illustrates the effect that partisan elites can have as driving forces of polarization. The populist rhetoric employed by López Obrador since the 2006 election has provided voters with source cues that not only exacerbated societal divisions, but also activated their populist attitudes. Thus, this article speaks directly with an emerging body of literature which studies how and why party elites influence affective polarization (Bäck *et al.*, 2023).

Third, recall that among the factors analyzed here, populist attitudes produce the highest predicted change in affective polarization. As such, my study speaks not only with a growing body of literature that analyzes the effects of such variable on political behavior (for e.g., Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018; Christner, 2022; Piazza, 2024), but also with emerging research on the relationship between populism and polarization (Davis *et al.*, 2024). In line with the latter, the results presented here provide further evidence of the positive effect of populism on polarization.

This work can be extended in several ways. First, recall that the main hypotheses are tested with observational data. As such, it is impossible to make inferences that go beyond simple correlation between the main independent and dependent variables. One way to overcome this limitation is by designing experimental studies that allow us to tease out the mechanisms by which ideological polarization,

sorting and populism affect in-group affection and out-group rejection. We also need to analyze how affective polarization changes over time, and what factors explain such changes. This requires the design and deployment of panel surveys which tend to be costly but have the potential of providing us with information that will allow us to better understand the dynamics of affective polarization and its causes over time. Third, I only analyze here the determinants of party affective polarization (PAP). Recent scholarship, however, argues that recent developments that have been linked with affective polarization prime hostility at the candidate level (Reiljan, 2020; Reiljan *et al.*, 2023). So, studying the causes of leader affective polarization (LAP) – as opposed to party affective polarization (PAP) – is a natural extension of this work.

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MEXICO DIVIDED? THE ROLE OF IDEOLOGY, SOCIAL SORTING AND POPULIST ATTITUDES ON AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

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