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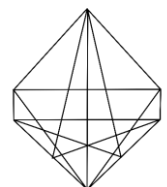
HOW UNIQUE IS THE AMERICAN SITUATION?

Comparing Affective Polarization Across
Party Systems Through the Inter-party
Marriage Measure

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How Unique is the American Situation? Comparing Affective Polarization Across Party
Systems Through the Inter-party Marriage Measure

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Short Working Paper — All comments are welcome

Abstract

Prior research has demonstrated that Americans are increasingly affectively polarized: viewing opposing partisans negatively and copartisans positively. While the literature has thus far provided mixed results to whether the U.S. situation is one-of-a-kind, we lack comparative evidence that takes into account that multiparty systems have multiple political parties. Without accounting for such differences, we risk exaggerating the uniqueness of the U.S. situation. To accommodate this concern, I test an experimental strategy for comparing affective polarization in a two-party setting (the U.S.) with a multiparty setting (Norway) through the inter-party marriage measure. The findings provide evidence to suggest that there are no observable differences in terms of partisan affective polarization in Norway and the U.S., indicating that the U.S. situation is not unique.

How Unique is the American Situation? Comparing Affective Polarization Across Party Systems Through the Inter-party Marriage Measure

Prior research has demonstrated that Americans dislike opposing partisans to the extent that they would be unhappy if their son or daughter married someone voting for the other party (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). While scholars disagree on how divided Americans are on political issues (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2008; Mason, 2015), scholars largely agree that "affective" polarization is on the rise. That is to say, to "view opposing partisans negatively and copartisans positively" (p. 691 Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

In a recent review of the literature on affective polarization, Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, and Westwood (2018) recommend future research to build bridges between Americanists and comparativists research on affective polarization. While some prior studies (i.e., Carlin & Love, 2016; Iyengar et al., 2012; Westwood et al., 2018) have looked beyond the U.S. context, the literature has thus far provided mixed results in regards to whether the U.S. situation is unique.

An important obstacle for comparing affective polarization in the American two-party system with multiparty systems, is that no single comparative study exists which take into account that multiparty systems have multiple, not only two or a few major, political parties across the political spectrum. If we do not take such differences into account, we risk overestimating how different the U.S. case is compared to democratic societies with more than two parties. To that end, this study compares affective polarization in a two-party context (the U.S.) with a multiparty context (Norway) and empirically demonstrate that, in multiparty systems, it is not necessarily sufficient to restrict the analysis to the major parties. Accordingly, I suggest and test an approach to accommodate this concern and compare affective polarization across countries and political systems.

I develop an experimental strategy that is tailor made to handle both two-party systems and a large amount of parties, and study to what degree Americans, compared to Norwegians—a country with nine political parties in parliament—are affectively polarized. I fielded two preregistered experiments (Knudsen, 2018) customized for comparing multiparty settings and two-party settings. I focus on a measure of affective polarization that asks people

how they feel about their child marrying a copartisan or an opposing partisan. The findings will be of interest to future comparative studies of affective polarization, as this study suggests that affective polarization can easily be studied across countries in comparative surveys. The results suggests that Norwegians are just as likely as Americans to discriminate against partisans voting for a different party, indicating that the U.S. situation, in terms of affective polarization, is far from unique.

The Inter-party Marriage Measure of Affective Polarization

Affective polarization is measured through a range of different measures (for a review see Iyengar et al., 2018), and a key unobtrusive measure to track the development of partisan affect over time is social distance: the degree to which people feel discomfort or comfort when interacting with partisans who identify with an opposing party.

This inter-party marriage measure is based on the Social Distance Scale (Bogardus, 1947). The scale initially included seven items, such as willingness to have a particular group member as a close personal friend or as a close relative by marriage. The latter measurement was developed by Almond and Verba (2015) to measure the social distance between people's political party preferences. By drawing on this measure as an unobtrusive measure of affective polarization, Iyengar et al. (2012) has been able to show the increase of affective polarization over time.

However, Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan (2018) provide a valuable nuance and suggest that studies that use the inter-party marriage measurement conflates people's dislike for the outparty and people's dislike for partisanship in general. Through an experiment in the U.S., they show that the opposition to inter-party marriage is mainly restricted to strong partisans, and that negative affect toward the other political side is, first and foremost, negative affect toward partisans who discuss politics frequently rather than rarely.

The present study builds on the insights provided by Klar et al. (2018) by randomly assigning the hypothetical in-law's frequency of political talk in the vignette. Accordingly, I expect (H1) respondents to be less happy with their son or daughter marrying a person that talks frequently, rather than seldom, about politics. This hypothesis was preregistered for both

countries as there are no prior evidence to assume substantial country differences in this respect.

Affective Polarization in Two-party and Multiparty Settings

Although affective polarization has been compared across countries and cultures, the inter-party marriage measure has only been tested in two-party settings. Certainly, Iyengar et al. (2012) compare changes in happiness with inter-party marriage in the American and the British setting over time, comparing a two-party system (U.S.) with a two-party system that has developed into a multiparty system (U.K.). They show that Americans, but not British citizens, are increasingly unhappy with an in-law from the opposing party. While this finding suggests that the American situation is unique, it is important to note that their analyses are restricted to two parties from each country. Thus, although this is an important starting point for comparing affective polarization across countries, it does not account for the fact that multiparty systems have multiple, and not only two, political parties.

A similar concern is true for a study that investigated, through classic trust games as a measure, affective polarization in the United States, Spain, Belgium, and Great Britain Westwood et al. (2018). While their design cleverly enables a comparison between partisan discrimination and other crucial social cleavages, they acknowledge that their analyses are limited to the major parties in each nation. Thus, although affective polarization has been studied in multiparty settings, research has yet to account for the full range of multiple parties in multiparty settings. A likely reason is that the number of parties in a multiparty system drastically increases the amount of questions in the survey or treatment groups in the experiment, which again can influence statistical power.

The present article proposes a straightforward strategy to accommodate this concern and I test this approach in the U.S. and in Norway—a country with nine parties represented in the parliament across the political spectrum. The preregistered expectation was that both Americans and Norwegians would (H2) be less happy with their son or daughter marrying a person that votes for a different party than themselves. This expectation build on the study by Westwood et al. (2018), providing evidence that citizens, in multiparty settings and two-party

settings alike, are more trusting of co-partisans and less trusting of opposing partisans, and that partisan prejudice dominates other forms of out-group discrimination. Although their study does not account for all the multiple parties in the multiparty settings, their evidence strongly suggests that affective polarization can be prevalent in multiparty systems as well as two-party systems. Importantly, they also note that, although the evidence provided by Iyengar et al. (2012) indicate that "relative to the U.S. the sense of party affiliation does not excite strong feelings among party supporters" in Britain, Westwood et al. (2018, p.10), they do not identify any differences in the extent of partisan divide across the countries examined, including Great Britain and the U.S., suggesting that the American affective polarization situation is not unique.

Westwood et al. (2018) also show that the ideological proximity (on the left/right ideological spectrum) matter. Thus, I also break the results down by ideology, assuming that the further the respondents place themselves from the in-law's party on the left/right scale, the more likely they will be to be unhappy with the in-law. Figure 1 gives an illustration of how voters of the nine Norwegian parties (organized from the left (bottom) to the right (top) of the left/right political spectrum) in the Norwegian parliament place themselves on the left/right ideological scale.

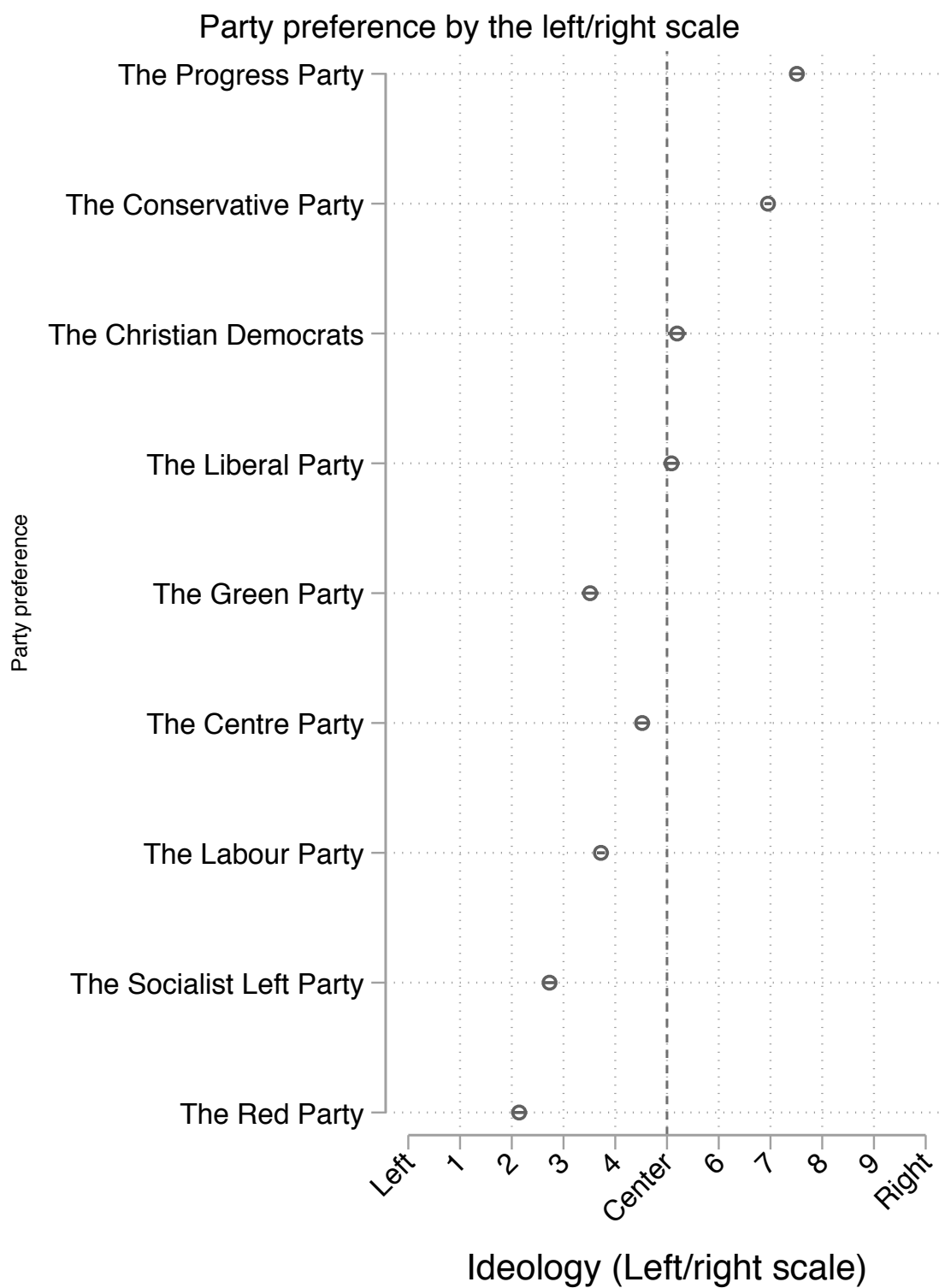


Figure 1. Party preference (organized from the left (bottom) to the right (top)) by ideology (the left/right scale) in Norway. (Predictive margins, with 95 % confidence intervals).

Experimental Design, Data, Measurement, and Analysis

This experiment is a partial replication of the study by Klar et al. (2018) conducted in Norway in the Norwegian Citizen Panel (NCP) and in the U.S. on Amazon Mechanical Turk. The preregistered pre-analysis plans for the two studies can be retrieved from Knudsen (2018). I fielded the exact same experiment in both countries, asking: “How happy or unhappy would you feel if you had a son or daughter who married a person who votes for [lparty] [lfrequency] talks about politics?”. The treatment “lparty” randomly varied between the Democratic party and the Republican party in the U.S. survey, and between the nine different political parties in the Norwegian parliament in the Norwegian survey. The treatment “lfrequency” varied between “but who rarely” and “and who often”. Following the standard scale of the NCP, I used a seven-point scale ranging from “very unhappy” to “very happy” as the dependent variable in both countries. This design allows the researcher to randomly include a party and information about a person’s frequency of political talk in the vignette.

Data and Sample

The data for the Norwegian study (N=1350) were collected from a probability-based online national survey conducted by the Norwegian Citizen Panel (NCP) in June 2018. For details about response rates or other methodological matters, I refer to the NCP methodology report (Skjervheim & Høgestøl, 2018). The data is available free of cost for scholars via the Norwegian Social Science Data Archive.

The data from the U.S. (N=500) were collected through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (Mturk) in October 2018. Eligibility to take the survey was restricted to U.S.-based MTurk Workers and participants was paid 0.36 \$ for three minutes of their time. While MTurk samples are quite diverse, they are not representative of the American population as a whole.

Measurement and Analysis

To estimate the effects of each treatment, I regressed people’s happiness with the in-law on treatment conditions (see Online Appendix for the regression tables of these models). I explore the results for all conditions by comparing liberals and conservatives (originally

measured from 1 “Extremely liberal” to 7 “Extremely conservative”) in the U.S, as well as voters on the left and voters on the right of the political spectrum, using self-placement on the left-right ideological scale (1 "Left", 2 "Center", and 3 "Right", originally measured on a scale from 0 “Left” to 10 “Right”) in Norway.

As a second step, I match the party shown in the vignette with a measure of party preference: "If a national election was held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?" (Norway) and “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, or an independent?” (the U.S.). I code the matched variable "Voted for party", "Not" Knudsen and Johannesson (or a similar approach for conjoint analyses see 2018).

Findings

Figure 2 shows the results in Norway and the U.S. from a regression model with the happiness with in-law as the dependent variable and the treatment group with the political parties (organized from the left to the right of the political spectrum) as the independent variables, by (a) ideology, and (b) effects of the major parties in Norway and the U.S. by their voters. The effects are illustrated as the predicted marginal mean effects on the seven-point scale of the dependent variable, happiness with in-law, with 95 % confidence intervals. These treatment effects are marginal effect of one attribute (the political parties) averaged over the joint distribution of the other attribute in the design (frequency of political talk).

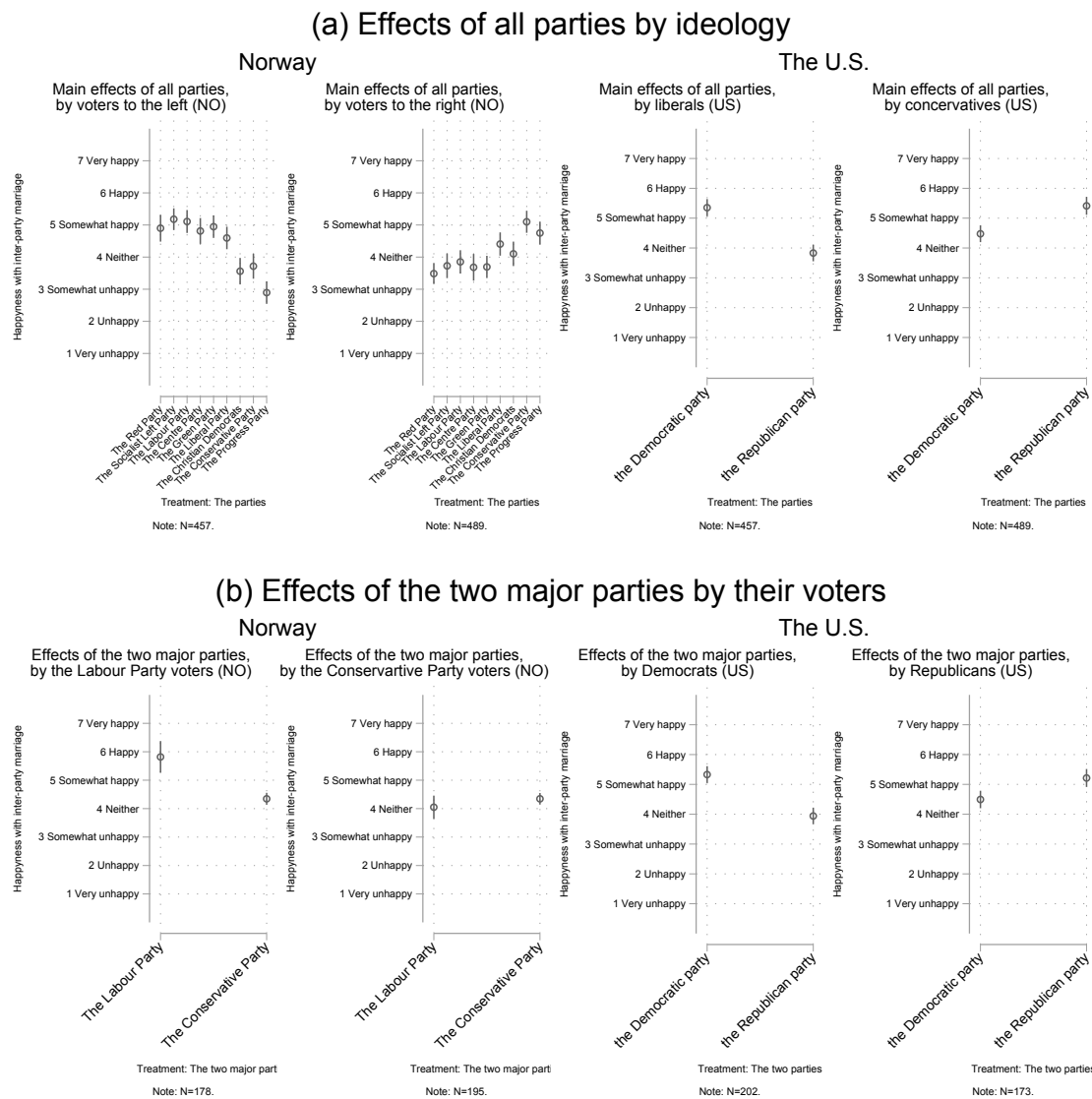


Figure 2. Measuring respondent unhappiness/happiness with their child marrying someone from a political party, by subgroups (Predictive margins). The bars show 95 percent confidence intervals.

Figure 2a shows that, there are clear observable effects of the party treatment. In both countries, we observe a striking left-right divide when the effects of these parties are distributed by liberals and conservatives (the U.S.), and the left or the right of the political spectrum (Norway). Notably, voters on the left (right) are clearly more happy with their hypothetical in-law voting for parties on the left (right), and more unhappy with the parties further to the right (left). We observe the same pattern for liberals and conservatives in the

U.S.

Figure 2b further demonstrates a substantial divide between Republicans and Democrats in the U.S., as partisans from each party are more likely to be happy with an in-law voting from the in-party than the out-party. However, this pattern is quite different if we, as prior studies of the inter-party marriage measure in multiparty systems have done, restrict the analysis in a multiparty system (Norway) to the voters of the two major Norwegian parties, the Labour Party and the Conservative Party. While there is a clear difference between the effects of the two parties among Labour Party voters, the differences among Conservative Party voters are small and statistically insignificant ($p=.2$). This suggests that, in multiparty systems, it is not necessarily sufficient to restrict the data collection and analysis to the major parties.

Effects of Party preference on unhappiness with in-law

As a second step in the analysis, I use the matched party variables—measuring the respondents' preferences towards the parties in the party treatment, for both Norwegians and Americans. Figure 3 shows the results from a logistic regression model with (1) the matched political party treatment and (2) how often the in-law talks politics, as the independent variables, and a dummy variable showing unhappiness with the in-law as the dependent variable. I expected the respondents to be more likely to be unhappy with with their son or daughter marrying a person that voted for a party they did not prefer rather than preferred (H2), and these results confirm this expectation. Respondents was more inclined to be unhappy when they did not prefer the party mentioned in the vignette. This result is remarkably similar in Norway and the U.S., suggesting that there are small or no differences between the two countries.

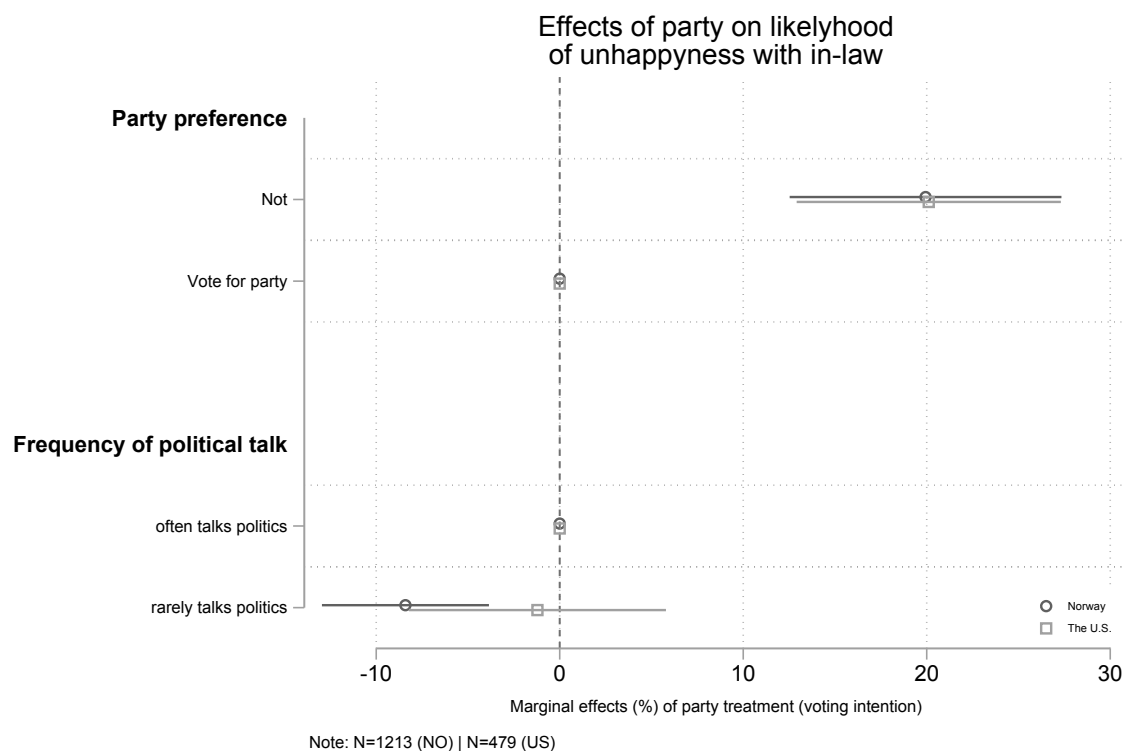
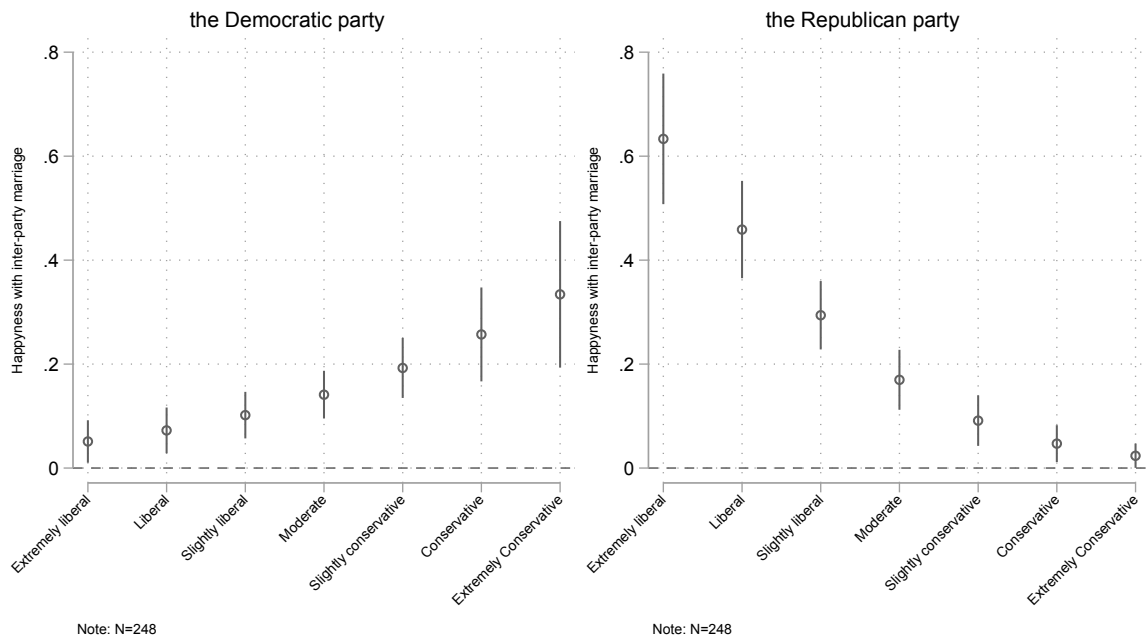


Figure 3. Probability of respondent being unhappy with in-law (logit models). The bars show 95 percent confidence intervals.

Put differently, 23 percent of the Norwegian respondents are "somewhat unhappy", "unhappy" or "very unhappy" if their child married a person voting for a different party than the respondent votes for. Conversely, 72 percent of the Norwegian respondents reported that they would be "somewhat happy", "happy", or "very happy" at the notion of their child marrying someone voting for the same party as the respondent votes for. In the U.S., 28 percent are unhappy with an in-law from the opposing party and 74 percent happy with an in-law voting for the in-party. In comparison, Klar et al. (2018) reported that slightly more Americans (≈ 30 percent) in 2017 was unhappy about their child marrying someone from the outparty, and considerably less Americans (≈ 40 percent) happy about their child marrying someone from the inparty.

Contrary the findings by (Klar et al., 2018), I only find support in Norway, and not in the U.S., for the expectation that people prefer in-laws who talk rarely, rather than often, about politics (H1).

(a) Effects of U.S. parties on likelihood of unhappiness with in-law by left-right scale



(b) Effects of Norwegian parties on likelihood of unhappiness with in-law by left-right scale

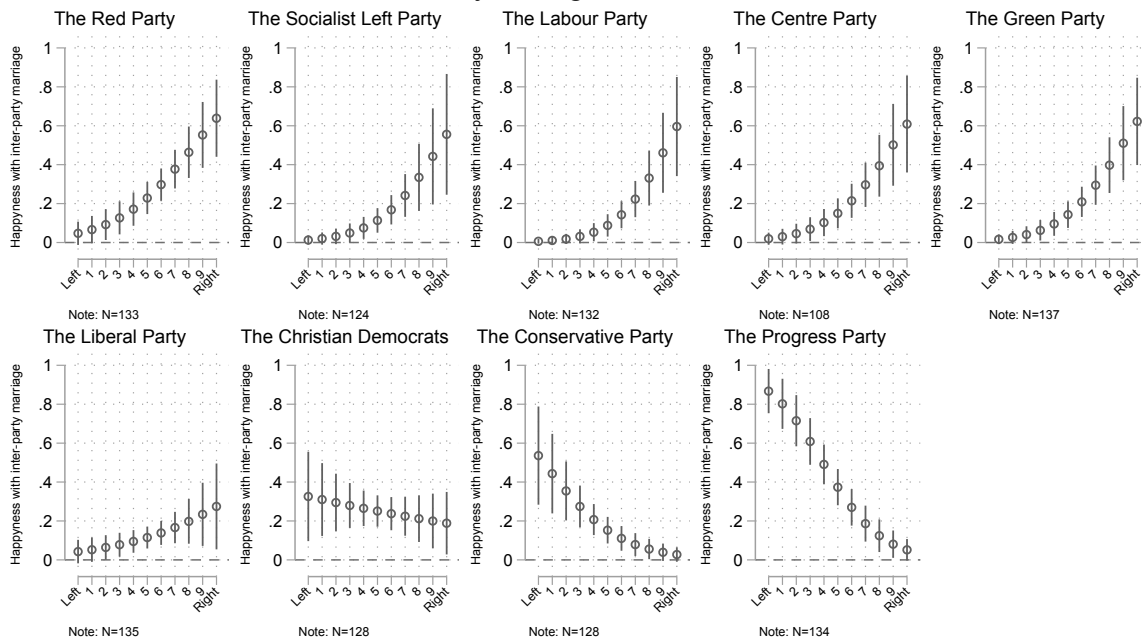


Figure 4. Probability of respondent being unhappy with in-law. The bars show 95 percent confidence intervals.

Although the results reported in Figure 3 point to striking similarities in affective polarization in the Norwegian and the U.S., the Norwegian data also enables a closer look at

the effects distributed by each of the nine parties in the Norwegian parliament and thus the opportunity to investigate some finer grained nuances of the results. Figure 4 shows the results in (a) the U.S. and (b) Norway from a logit model with the dummy variable of unhappiness with in-law as the dependent variable, and the treatment group with the political parties (organized from the left to the right of the political spectrum) as the independent variables by ideology (continuous variable). The likelihood of being unhappy with the in-law, are illustrated as marginal effects (from 0 to 1), with 95 % confidence intervals.

Figure 4a shows that the more conservative, the more likely the respondents are to report that they would be unhappy with an in-law voting for the Democratic party. We observe a similar converse patterns, with stronger effects, for the Republican party. Especially liberals and extremely liberals are likely to report unhappiness with the a Republican in-law, supporting prior studies that have found evidence to suggest that that ideological proximity matter for affective polarization in the U.S. (Klar et al., 2018; Westwood et al., 2018). The multiparty system case (Norway), however, provides some possibilities for exploring nuances in terms of ideological proximity that are harder to spot in two-party systems, because Norway has nine political parties distributed from the left to the right of the left-right political axis. In Norway, we observe that the party furthest to the the left (the Red Party: .64 among those furthest to the right) and the party furthest to the right (the Progress Party: .87 among those furthest to the left) produced the strongest effects on the unhappiness with the in-law, indeed indicating that the ideological proximity to the out-party are important for whether, and to what extent, affective polarization occurs. That said, all but the Liberal Party and Christian Democrats Party (located in the center of the left/right ideological spectrum, see Figure 1) show a clear left/right divide, and the effects among the parties to the left are quite similar. In fact, the only party that clearly stands out from the other parties is the Progress Party—the party that by far yielded the strongest effects.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes's 2012 use of the inter-party marriage measure of affective polarization can easily extend to multiparty systems. As we

lack evidence that accounts for all parties in a multiparty system, I develop a straightforward design that accounts for negative or positive affect towards political parties, and compare the U.S. two-party setting with the Norwegian multiparty setting.

The results from the U.S. are largely in line with those of previous studies, confirming that Americans are less happy with their son or daughter marrying a person that votes for a party they do not prefer rather than prefer. Strikingly, however, when comparing the pattern and effect sizes in Norway and the U.S., the results are close to identical in the two countries. Does this mean that the American affective polarization situation is not unique and that prior studies showing differences across party systems has merely been a construct of design choices? In terms of the likelihood of being negative towards an in-law that votes for a party one does not prefer, the findings from this study support a simple ‘Yes’ answer to some extent: the American situation does not seem to be unique and, in multiparty systems, it is not necessarily sufficient to restrict the analysis to the major parties. However, the Norwegian multiparty setting case also reveals some important nuances, showing that the parties furthest to the left and right yield stronger effects on affective polarization in Norway, and that ideological proximity matter for the extent of affective polarization. While this indicate possible differences in the affective polarization situation in the Norwegian multiparty system and the U.S. two party system, it is important to note that Klar et al. (2018) demonstrate that it is primarily strong partisans—one-third of Americans—that are affectively polarized in the U.S. Thus, in both countries, it seems that it is especially parties and partisans to the ideological extremes who are likely to be affectively polarized. It is, for instance, quite likely that we would find similar nuances in the U.S. if we explored affective polarization towards different factions of the two parties, such as the Tea Party Movement in the Republican party.

Given the similarities between the current U.S. study and the study by Klar et al. (2018) in terms of unhappiness with an out-party in-law, the (lack of) differences between Norway and the U.S. is likely to generalize to a national U.S. sample. That said, the generalisability of the results from the U.S. is subject to certain limitations as the sample is not from a national probability sample. With these limitation in mind, these findings have potential implications for future comparative studies of affective polarization, as they suggest that although the U.S.

political system and media system are vastly different from multiparty consensus democracies, citizens are not more likely to be affectively polarized in the U.S. than in Norway. Importantly, although these findings are limited to two very different countries, they demonstrate that the inter-party marriage measure of affective polarization can easily travel from two-party settings to multiparty settings. Therefore, I claim that it holds promise as a future measure of political affect in a comparative perspective. The experimental design in this article can easily be implemented in larger country comparative surveys that includes measures of partisan support in multiparty and two-party systems. This means that future research can follow affective polarization over time and across cultures, facilitating more comparativist studies and debates about affective polarization in the years to come.

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