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Institutional design and polarization. Do consensus democracies fare better in fighting polarization than majoritarian democracies?

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ABSTRACT

It is often claimed that we are living in an age of increasing polarization. Political views, opinions, and worldviews become increasingly irreconcilable (*idea-based polarization*), while at the same time society appears to be getting fractured in antagonistic, opposing camps (*identity-based polarization*). However, a closer look at international datasets reveals that these forms of polarization do not affect all democracies to the same extent. Levels of identity-based and idea-based polarization strongly vary across countries. The question then becomes what can explain these diverging levels of polarization. In this paper, we hypothesize that the institutional design of a country impacts polarization, and that consensus democracies would display lower levels of polarization. Based on a quantitative analysis of the *Comparative Political Dataset* and *Varieties of Democracy* data in 36 countries over time (2000–2019), our results show that institutions did matter to a great extent, and in the hypothesized direction. Countries with consensus institutions, and more in particular PR electoral systems, multiparty coalitions, and federalism did exhibit lower levels of both issue-based and identity-based polarization, thereby confirming our expectations. Moreover, we found that consensus democracies tend to be better at coping with identity-based polarization, while the effect on idea-based polarization is smaller.

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1. Introduction

In today's political and social climate, polarization has become ubiquitous. First, it seems that individuals' opinions, attitudes or mutual perceptions become ever more distant from each other,¹ second, groups feel increasingly isolated from each other through mutually negative affect,² and third, politicians increasingly fail to see eye to eye on a variety of issues.³ While such increasing structural or affective distance between different actors on a variety of dimensions and levels, often referred to as

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polarization, can be positive for broader society by increasing engagement with politics,⁴ bringing out unheard voices⁵ or by sparking social change necessary to implement democratic ideals,⁶ it is now considered as one of the most significant challenges to democracy.⁷

Even though polarization affects democracies on a global scale, internationally comparative data show that polarization does not affect all democracies to the same extent. Previous research on the causes of polarization lists a variety of explanations for these cross-national variations, including but not limited to the effect of media and other forms of political communication,⁸ economic inequality,⁹ the increase of online and offline homogeneous networks,¹⁰ the absence of social norms which suppress polarization between individuals,¹¹ variations in social cohesion and institutional trust,¹² or the role of globalization in driving a wedge between its winners and losers.¹³

However, among the myriad of causes, institutional variables have only received scant attention. This is somewhat surprising since democracies come in many shapes. Some democracies foster the search for consensus across a wide variety of groups, whereas others empower only those who won the elections. Some democratic systems are open to all societal interests, whereas others offer fewer opportunities for groups to voice their grievances. These variations, and many more, in the constitutional and institutional architecture of democracies could impact how democracies deal with polarization.¹⁴ In response, this paper adopts an institutional perspective on the potential causes of polarization. Our aim is to determine to which extent differences in the intensity of polarization between countries result from the institutional characteristics of their political systems. In other words: to what extent, and in what way does institutional design affect the level of polarization in a country?

Based on a comparative study in 36 countries over time (2000–2019),¹⁵ we argue that institutions are significantly related to two sub-types of polarization. More specifically, we find that the institutional set-up of consensus democracies (oversized coalitions, proportional electoral systems, and federalism) is associated with lower levels of polarization than the institutions of their majoritarian counterpart. Moreover, our results suggest that institutions are more strongly related to identity-based polarization than issue-based polarization. Put differently: in countries with consensual institutions, affective tensions between political camps are weaker than internal tensions based on diverging ideas about key political issues.

In the remainder of this paper, we first discuss the concept of polarization, and the differences between various types of polarization. We subsequently link these insights to the institutional set-up of democracy. Afterwards, we will test our hypotheses, interpret our results, and draw conclusions on the relevance of institutional design for polarization.

2. The multiple meanings of polarization: ideas vs. identity

Even though scholarly and public interest in the phenomenon has skyrocketed in recent years, polarization is an essentially contested concept with many possible meanings and conceptualisations.¹⁶ Apart from the common understanding that it is a major source of conflict in contemporary societies,¹⁷ the meaning and intensity of polarization remains subject of debate among academics and the public. However, we conceptualize polarization as a macro-level process in which actors¹⁸ develop increasingly distant social relations and/or become more distant in how they feel

towards each other. This might result in political conflict or struggle with each other.¹⁹ In contrast to the concept of “fractionalisation”²⁰ or “conflict,” polarization is defined by an *increasing and irreconcilable distance* between actors, and in contrast to the concept of “division,” polarization does not require *multiple overlapping identities* or fault lines.²¹

This definition allows for multiple sub-types of polarization, depending (amongst others) on the root of the conflict. Although a myriad of types of polarization exist, we distinguish two recurring and broadly shared types of polarization emerging from prior research: idea-based and identity-based polarization. *Idea-based polarization* is the process through which different groups develop an irreconcilable disagreement on certain ideas. The conflict driving the distant groups in this process of polarization is thus based on differing conceptualisations of social and political reality, being specific policy ideas, standpoints, worldviews, or moral frameworks. This form of polarization can express itself through ideological or attitudinal distance between actors, but also through increasing distance between groups that are based on their inherent opinions.²²

However, polarization need not be limited to idea-based disagreement over certain policies or standpoints alone. Polarization spans into the subjective and emotional realm as well.²³ A relatively new strand of the literature draws attention towards a second type: *identity-based polarization*. Here, groups do not necessarily conflict on certain ideas, but clash with each other because of the other’s identity. The conflict is thus not related to the ideas of the groups, but rather to who they are, i.e. how they interpret and perceive themselves and others.²⁴ Importantly, the interaction between the polarized groups in this case is mostly affective. In contrast to idea-based polarization, where the conflict is mostly expressed through reasoned argumentation, identity-based polarization focuses on intergroup dislike and conflict²⁵ and related feelings of identity, in which the interaction between groups is much more emotional in nature.²⁶ This form of polarization is mostly expressed through affective distance between groups that either see others negatively or feel negatively towards them.

Since polarization is conceptually multifaceted, this distinction merits nuance. First, both types are strongly interlinked, as ideas might lead to identities, and identities have the power to influence ideas. Second, there is also a difference between the levels and dimensions in which polarization occurs, as polarization between individuals will differ from polarization between elite actors and/or groups and increasing distance between issue positions about elements such as the future of democracy will differ from the affective distance between how certain groups perceive others. Nevertheless, we chose to stick to these ideal-types because of their wide use and high operationalizable potential in the field, and because of their general recognition within the scholarly community and broader society.

Furthermore, acknowledging conceptual diffuseness about polarization is crucial, as the answer to the question whether polarization has increased in recent years depends in no small part on the type of polarization under consideration.²⁷ Idea-based polarization in which groups clash over specific political or social issues, is generally seen as the most documented and best-known sub-form of polarization. Its rise is therefore also most strongly debated. On one side, some scholars argue that only certain issues and/or only the political elites polarize,²⁸ or that, contrary to popular belief, people around the world have strikingly *similar* views of society.²⁹ This is confirmed by the

finding that (American) citizens believe that others around them are much more polarized than they actually are.³⁰ Others, however, claim that the public too has become increasingly polarized, with a specific emphasis on (American) partisan citizens.³¹ The debate seems unlikely to be resolved soon, as the lack of a clear definition of polarization causes the debate to centre around fundamentally different understandings of the concept.³²

Scholars focusing on identity-based polarization argue that a narrow focus on ideational disagreement simply does not suffice to evaluate whether polarization has increased.³³ Citizens can disagree on policy issues, but they inevitably also develop emotional and affective reactions towards the groups with which they disagree. Even more so, it has been found that citizens might have moderate, non-polarized opinions, while simultaneously seeing others as their disliked out-group.³⁴ As such, affective polarization – as the most prominent type of identity-based polarization – is gaining ground.³⁵ This form of polarization has increased sharply in recent years in the US,³⁶ in Europe³⁷ and in the world.³⁸ Its increase has even been so substantial that in the US, discrimination based on party affiliation is now arguably stronger than racism.³⁹

Although little is known about its exact mechanisms,⁴⁰ social sorting seems to be key in understanding identity-based forms of polarization. This is the process through which individuals increasingly cluster in homogeneous political groups which align their partisan sub-identities on one overarching identity.⁴¹ When identity-based polarization is considered "pernicious", this mechanism is shown in more detail as it refers to polarization as a process in which the normal plurality of political identities is simplified into one overarching axis in which the two opposing groups develop a strong, we-versus-them thinking.⁴²

Regardless of the type of polarization under scrutiny, however, the evidence points out that polarization has indeed increased in the latest decade.⁴³ This evolution is worrisome given some of its detrimental effects on democracy.⁴⁴ For example, more undemocratic forms of polarization⁴⁵ have been found to decrease political stability, democratic legitimacy and social cohesion,⁴⁶ increase democratic dysfunction and democratic resentment,⁴⁷ increase out-group discrimination,⁴⁸ decrease social and institutional trust and satisfaction with democracy⁴⁹ and in extreme cases even an increased reliance on violence.⁵⁰ Furthermore, recent findings show that pernicious forms of polarization negatively affect liberal democracy,⁵¹ while political polarization directly erodes democracies through government intimidation.⁵² Polarization in its multiple forms also tends to erode the belief and acceptance of the democratic system and makes peaceful coexistence between various groups very difficult.⁵³ That is where political institutions become interesting, given that they are designed (in a specific way) to deal with political differences.

3. Institutional variation and polarization

The argument that rising levels of polarization are challenging democracies, has received ample support. However, it does not do justice to the institutional diversity among democracies. After all, democracies come in many shapes, and in some countries democratic institutions have even been historically adopted with the specific aim of containing societal conflict. This is especially true for those types of institutions that are specifically tailored to prevent and manage societal conflict,

such as the institutions of consensus democracies. These institutions have historically proven capable of turning deep conflicts into overarching cooperation,⁵⁴ and while institutions cannot hinder the emergence of polarization, they have been found to have an impact on its intensity.⁵⁵

Despite the overwhelming evidence that institutional design can lead to peaceful coexistence in divided and severely fractured countries,⁵⁶ surprisingly little research has hitherto been devoted to the effect of political institutions on processes of idea – and identity-based polarization. Most prior research on the effect of political institutions focuses on civil conflict and war in which polarization – in these studies seen more broadly as societal segmentation – is based on ascribed identities such as ethnic, religious, or geographical differences. This strand of the literature shows that more inclusive systems – i.e. political institutions that include, rather than exclude all societal groups – tend to reduce the potential for civil wars and domestic violent conflict.⁵⁷

This is where Arend Lijphart's typology of democracies gains relevance.⁵⁸ In his seminal work, he distinguishes two ideal-types of democracies based on their institutional set-up, namely consensus and majoritarian democracies. Consensus democracies are characterized by the inclusion of all societal groups through horizontal (oversized coalitions, multiparty systems, corporatism, and proportional electoral systems) and vertical power-sharing (federalism and bicameralism). In contrast, majoritarian democracies value the idea of majority rule (minimal-winning coalitions, two-party systems, pluralism, and majoritarian electoral systems) and the principle of concentrated political power (unitarism or centralization, and unicameralism).

According to this theory, consensus democracies are better at managing and overcoming conflicts because of four different reasons. First of all, consensus institutions foster social consciousness and connectedness between political groups in society, and this in turn can reduce conflict potential. After all, the more competing groups are included in the process leading up to political decisions, the less likely they are to turn to (physical) violence or protest as a means of political action when they feel like their opinions and interests are not properly considered.⁵⁹ Consensual institutions can thus foster centripetalism among conflicting groups.

Secondly, consensual democracies have been found to nurture broader institutional support. Citizens in consensus democracies are generally more satisfied with democracy⁶⁰ and, importantly, the satisfaction with the democratic system is more equally divided between the electoral winners and losers.⁶¹ Majoritarian democracies, on the other hand, give disproportionate power to ruling majorities. Affected minorities and electoral losers are thus not included in decision-making, and this spurs conflict and disagreement by the minorities, who will vehemently contest government policies.⁶²

Thirdly, consensus democracies disincentivize party political bloc formation. Their proportional electoral systems allow even the smallest of societal segments to gain representation in parliament. As such, there is no formal incentive for even small political parties to join forces and form political blocs. Majoritarian systems, in contrast, disadvantage smaller parties and therefore produce strong incentives for party blocs to attack rival blocs for electoral gain,⁶³ thereby fuelling the flames of polarization.

Finally, consensus democracies tend to have more parties and a better representation of all types of identities and groups in society, thus fostering cross-cutting identities which hinder the process of social sorting.⁶⁴ In other words, consensual

institutions lower the risk of pernicious polarization because the institutional protection of multiple cleavages and identities in society obstructs the creation of one overarching axis of polarization that pulls broader society in dangerous, we-versus-them narratives.⁶⁵ As a result, it was found that democracies with majoritarian institutions seem to suffer more from so-called pernicious polarization's democracy-eroding effects, than consensual ones.⁶⁶

Building on these four theoretical mechanisms and previous findings that consensus democracies better represent the variety of identities in a democracy and thereby reduce polarization, we hypothesize the following:

H1: Democratic institutions exhibiting high levels of political inclusion, i.e. the institutions of consensus democracies (oversized governments, PR electoral systems, corporatism, multiparty systems, federal systems) will exhibit lower levels of polarisation than majoritarian institutions.

However, the integrative and conflict-reducing qualities of consensus democracies are contested. Some authors⁶⁷ claim that consensus institutions entrench ethnic, religious, and political identities by recognizing them to be a valid basis for political action.⁶⁸ The so-called paradox of federalism is particularly relevant in this regard.⁶⁹ After all, granting autonomy to political subgroups through federalism has previously been found to increase, rather than decrease, conflict. Through federalism, consensus democracies institutionalize existing cleavages and reproduce the ascribed identities, and therefore cannot be expected to pacify societal conflict.⁷⁰ The more identity-based cues citizens receive for their political behaviour, the more we can expect conflicts to spiral and polarization to increase. Moreover, because of their federal (or strongly decentralized) nature consensus democracies suffer from institutional complexity and fragmented authority. The need to include all groups comes at the expense of transparency, accountability, and responsiveness.⁷¹ By including all groups in broad consensus-seeking coalitions, each groups' interests are watered down, so that no group feels represented by the final outcomes. Consensus democracies are therefore more sensitive to the success of populist parties,⁷² which thrive on a strategy of polarization.

Our counterhypothesis, building on these conflicting findings in the literature, is therefore:

H2: Democratic institutions exhibiting high levels of political inclusion, i.e. the institutions of consensus democracies, will exhibit higher levels of polarisation than majoritarian institutions.

4. Methodology

To assess the impact of political institutions on the degree of polarization, this research merges variables from two datasets: the *Varieties of Democracy*⁷³ dataset and the *Comparative Political Data Set*.⁷⁴ Both datasets contain cross-national, longitudinal data.⁷⁵ V-DEM is a large and wide-ranging database measuring various dimensions and aspects of democracy⁷⁶ and contains two variables on polarization, one on idea-based and one on identity-based polarization, used in our analysis. For that reason, it is important to note that they are expert-based interpretations of the amount of polarization in the countries at hand – in contrast to data driven directly by surveys or interviews of the citizens of those countries. CPDS as our second dataset contains a large and detailed collection of political and institutional data. As with V-DEM,

the data are based on expert ratings. From this dataset, specific variables on political institutions are used (as explained further below).

To test our hypotheses we constructed a cross-sectional dataset in 36 OECD countries⁷⁷ over time (2000–2019). We decided to start our analysis from the year of 2000 for two reasons. On the one hand, the V-DEM data on idea-based polarization are only available from 2000, and on the other hand the presumed increase of and societal worry about polarization is claimed to have started around the turn of the century.⁷⁸

The unit of analysis for our study is “country_year.” Such hierarchically structured data over time are rife with methodological problems,⁷⁹ which is why we performed multivariate OLS regressions including time fixed effects. However, we do not expect institutions to have a temporally immediate effect on polarization since polarization is a dynamic phenomenon. Rather, we expect institutions to be associated with polarization levels in a lagged manner, i.e. over the course of several years. Moreover, we expect that current levels of polarization are heavily influenced by past levels. This is why we included a five-year lagged dependent variable in our analysis.⁸⁰ Because lagged dependent variables reduce the overall variance of the model and offer a conservative estimate of effect size,⁸¹ the institutional factors that remain significant will prove to be more robust estimates. This strategy to some extent rules out potential endogeneity problems, but given the correlational nature of the data, we cannot be entirely sure whether the effect of institutions on polarization is one-way.⁸²

We include two dependent variables in our analysis to examine the degree of polarization. Both are interval-scale variables which have undergone intercoder normalization and coder confidence weighing. The first dependent variable, labelled “v2cacamps” in the V-DEM dataset, refers to how political differences generate mutually opposing camps in society which spill over in other social interactions. In other words, high political polarization means that citizens cluster in antagonistic camps which structure broader societal relations through hostile interaction between the groups. This is in line with the literature on social sorting and affective polarization as a form of conflictual group formation in which the conflict depends on the identity of the groups and in which the interaction between the groups is highly emotional, as shown above. It, therefore, measures *identity-based polarization*.⁸³ The specific wording of the variable is: “Is society polarised into antagonistic, political camps?”⁸⁴ This variable, ranging from –3.69 to 2.91, contains 701 valid cases and 19 missing values.⁸⁵

The second dependent variable, labelled “v2smpolsoc” in the V-DEM dataset, examines to what extent citizens are divided on major political issues.⁸⁶ High values of this variable⁸⁷ indicate that citizens generally are in deep disagreement about the broader goals and political direction of society. Here, strong links can be found with forms of *idea-based polarization* in previous research, as the conflict is based on ideas and perspectives about society, measured by the coders based on the differences of opinions on major political issues in society. This variable, ranging from –3.00 to 3.00, contains 720 valid cases.

Even though these indicators have recently been used in other studies,⁸⁸ we decided to conduct an additional validity check to verify whether these expert assessments of polarization actually correspond to genuine underlying trends among the population. To do so, we followed Lindqvist & Östling (2010) and Arbatli & Rosenberg’s (2021) suggestion to correlate the standard deviation of individuals’ responses on the left-

right self-placement scale per country-year.⁸⁹ The underlying idea is that increasing standard deviations indicate that societal groups are moving apart, thus increasing the levels of (idea-based) polarization. More specifically, we aggregated the standard deviations on left-right self-placement scale in all available countries in all European Social Survey and World Values Survey waves. This gave us 228 data points to compare scores since the ESS and WVS data are not available in all 36 OECD countries in every year from 2000 to 2019.

Our validity check shows that there is a very strong correlation (Pearson $r = .634$; $p < .000$) between the idea-based polarization scale and the standard deviation on the left-right self-placement scale per country-year. More specifically, higher levels of idea-based polarization as reported by the V-DEM experts, reflect higher levels of polarization among the population as reported in the ESS and WVS. The overall correlation with the identity-based polarization variable is weaker ($r = .494$; $p < .000$), but it is still strong. This makes sense, given that identity-based polarization only partly overlaps with idea-based polarization.⁹⁰ We, therefore, believe that the V-DEM polarization variables do operationalize underlying polarization processes.

The main explanatory variables are largely based on the institutional variation identified by Lijphart.⁹¹ These allow us to distinguish between consensus democracies and majoritarian democracies. Federalism, executive-legislative relations, bicameralism, and government type are categorical variables that we have transformed into binary variables with the majoritarian categories as reference category.⁹² Electoral proportionality and the effective number of parties on the seats level are both scale variables. The former is reverse-coded from the Gallagher index of disproportionality,⁹³ so that higher scores indicate a more consensus-oriented electoral system; the latter is calculated using the Laakso and Taagepera (1979) formula.⁹⁴

5. Analysis

To what extent do institutions affect the degree of polarization? Before analysing the direct relationship, it is interesting to see in [Figure 1](#) that the data confirm that both

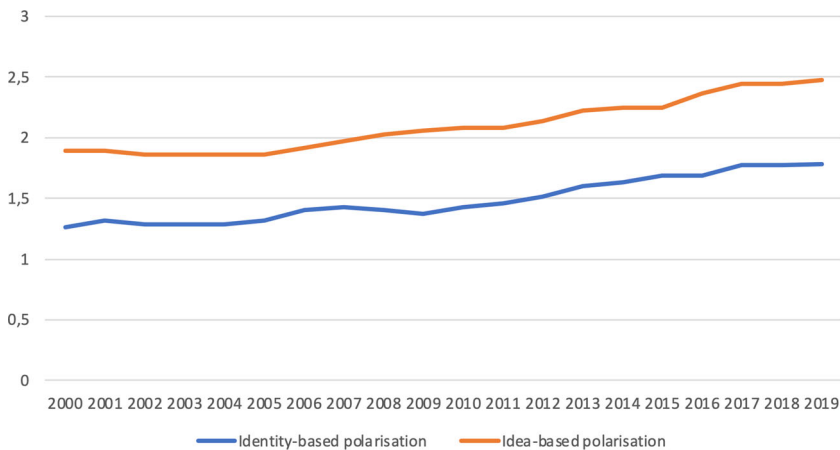


Figure 1. Evolution types of polarization over time. Source: own calculation based on the Varieties of Democracy dataset.¹⁰³

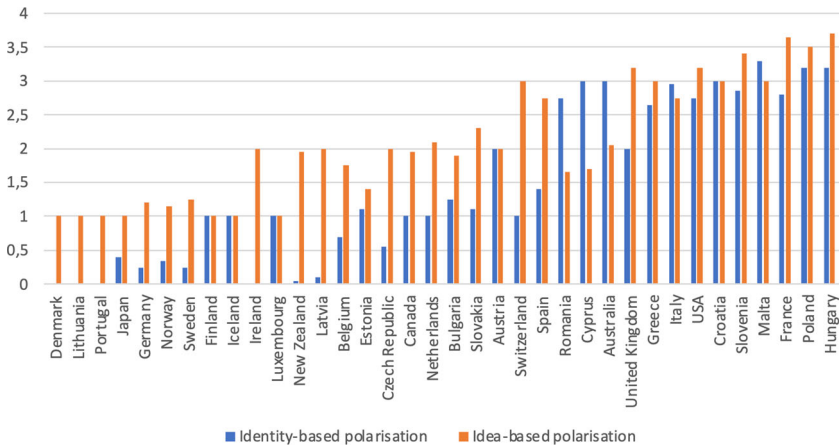


Figure 2. Average strength of polarization by type and country (2000–2019). Source: own calculation based on the Varieties of Democracy dataset.¹⁰⁴

types of polarization have indeed been steadily increasing since 2000, as generally claimed in the literature.⁹⁵ Furthermore, Figure 2 paints an interesting (although descriptive) picture about the cross-national variation in idea-based and identity-based polarization.⁹⁶ First of all, every country included in the dataset does exhibit some level of idea-based polarization, but this is only moderately paralleled by the level of identity-based polarization ($r = .654$). In other words: every country witnesses some level of substantive disagreement among its citizens on political issues, but this does not have to be directly linked to identity-based or affective polarization between political camps and parties. This finding replicates the broader finding that affective polarization (as a form of identity-based polarization) is linked to, but not completely explained by issue-based polarization.⁹⁷

Secondly, some countries seem to be able to offer a better buffer against (one of) the two types of polarization than others. If we look at the mean scores for all countries, four out of the ten countries with the lowest amounts of polarization are occupied by Scandinavian countries, all sharing consensus-oriented institutions (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland). In contrast, some of the ideal-typical majoritarian democracies (France, Malta, the USA, Greece and the United Kingdom) seem to score much higher both in terms of identity-based and idea-based polarization. This lends some preliminary – albeit limited – support to the assumption underlying this paper that the institutional setup of a country could be related to how the country copes with polarization.

In order to test this empirically, we ran a multivariate OLS regression analysis predicting levels of idea-based and identity-based polarization based on the main institutional characteristics of a country including five-year lagged dependent variables.⁹⁸ The results are reported in Table 1.

A first and obvious finding is that institutions matter for polarization, and do so strongly. Even though most of the explanatory power of the models (85.7% and 82.5% for identity and idea-based polarization respectively) can of course be attributed to the autocorrelation of the lagged polarization variables, the institutional variables alone accounted for well over 25% of the R-squared. The institutional design of a

Table 1. OLS regressions predicting levels of issue-based and identity-based polarization in 36 countries over time (2000–2019).

	Identity-based polarization		Idea-based polarization	
	B (SE)	Sign.	B (SE)	Sign.
Constant	.292 (.078)	.000	.359 (.112)	.000
Electoral proportionality	-.037 (.015)	.018	-.010 (.002)	.051
Effective number of parties on the seats level	-.003 (.004)	.473	.003 (.020)	.875
Executive-legislative relations <i>Presidential or semi-presidential system (REF) Parliamentary system</i>	-.004 (.037)	.919	-.063 (.046)	.175
Government type <i>Single-party or minimal winning cabinet (REF) Multiparty coalition cabinet</i>	-.138 (.051)	.031	-.112 (.065)	.103
Federalism <i>No or weak federalism (REF) Strong federalism</i>	-.161 (.059)	.006	-.242 (.076)	.001
Bicameralism <i>Unicameralism or weak bicameralism (REF) Medium or strong bicameralism</i>	.000 (.069)	.995	-.037 (.088)	.676
Identity-based polarization (T-5)	1.006 (.015)	.000		
Idea-based polarization (T-5)			.969 (.023)	.000
Adjusted R ²	85.7%		82.5%	
N obs	515		532	
N countries	36		36	

5- year lagged dependent variable. Clustered robust standard errors in parentheses. Year dummies included in both models (not shown).

country is thus significantly and strongly related to how a country copes with polarization.

Additionally, Table 1 also shows that institutions matter more for identity-based than for idea-based polarization. Institutions thus seem more capable of regulating or preventing the rise of hostile political or social camps than of impacting the existence of issue-based disagreements in society. This makes sense since political institutions might mediate the translation of idea-based disagreement into political, partisan, and identity-based conflict. In every country, there is inevitably disagreement about the substance of political decisions, but this does not always have to lead to hostile attitudes between the groups. In some countries with certain institutional designs, disagreement on the issues does lead to identity-based polarization, but in others it does not. Put differently: institutions seem to be successful in functioning as a political pressure release valve for affective conflicts between the various groups in society, but less so in preventing polarized disagreement on key political issues.

The third, and most important finding from Table 1 is that several of the key institutional variations in democracies are significantly related to levels of both types of polarization. The electoral system and federalism by and large confirm the first hypothesis: the institutions of consensus democracies (high electoral proportionality and high levels of segmental autonomy) are all associated with lower levels of idea-based and identity-based polarization, even when taking into account past levels of polarization. The government type is also associated with identity-based polarization, with single-party or minimal winning cabinet systems displaying higher levels of identity-based conflict, but only at the $p = .10$ level for idea-based polarization. The search for consensus at the institutional level, therefore, seems to trickle down to the societal level, and consensus institutions are related to lower levels of idea-based and identity-based polarization in a country.

A more detailed look at the results in Table 1, also reveals that federalism is by far the strongest predictor of the level of polarization. Political systems with strong federalism tend to exhibit much lower levels of identity and idea-based polarization.

Contrary to previous research on the paradox of federalism stating that granting autonomy to identity-based groups can lead to the institutionalization of ethnic identities and to increasing hostilities and identity-based conflict,⁹⁹ our findings suggest that federalism can act as a buffer against hostile relations between distant groups in society. In contrast, bicameralism which is usually closely related to federalism, is not significantly related to the level of polarization. This result is in line with Lijphart¹⁰⁰ who finds bicameralism to be only weakly related to other socio-economic variables.

The other institutional factors also confirm hypothesis 1. Electoral proportionality and the type of government coalition are significantly related to levels of polarization, albeit that the effects are more modest. Somewhat surprisingly, the executive-legislative relations do not significantly affect identity-based nor idea-based polarization. Bivariate correlations (not shown here) did indicate that parliamentary systems were less vulnerable to polarization, but the statistical effect was absorbed by the electoral proportionality in the multivariate analyses.

All in all, our findings suggest that both the horizontal (PR electoral system, effective number of parties and government type) and vertical (federalism) acknowledgement of different groups in the institutions of a country are related to less polarized friction between those groups.

6. Conclusion

This paper started from the emerging consensus in the literature that polarization is on the rise, and that it is increasingly challenging democracies across the world. However, contrary to previous research, this paper asks to what extent the intensity of polarization in a country is linked to that country's political institutions. After all, a simple cross-national comparison showed that not all countries are equally susceptible to polarization, which begged the question whether some institutions could be more effective than others in countering polarization.

Based on the literature review, we expected that institutions could at least partly explain variations in polarization. More specifically, we hypothesized that the institutional characteristics of consensus democracies (PR electoral systems, oversized coalition governments, multiparty systems, federalism, and bicameralism) would be better suited to deal with polarization than majoritarian institutions. Based on an analysis of the levels of idea-based and identity-based polarization in 36 countries over time, our results showed that institutions did matter, and in the hypothesized direction. Countries with consensus institutions, and more in particular PR electoral systems, multiparty coalitions, and federalism, are related to lower levels of both issue-based and identity-based polarization, thereby largely confirming our expectations. Moreover, we found that consensus democracies tend to be better at coping with identity-based polarization, while the association between institutions and idea-based polarization is weaker. Inclusive institutions might thus play a particularly important role in this “age of anger.”¹⁰¹

These findings are of great importance because they show that polarization is to some extent a malleable phenomenon. If we consider polarization a threat to democracy, creating the “right” institutional conditions, might lead to a significant reduction in the level of polarization. The general advice we would offer institutional engineers concerned with rising levels of polarization, would therefore be to create institutions

that foster social connectedness, inclusive decision-making, substantive and descriptive representation of and legitimacy for all societal groups. This can be done through long-term constitutional engineering, but a more short-term and realistic option might also be to introduce democratic innovations, which are increasingly advocated as potential solutions for polarization.¹⁰²

However, despite the clear-cut findings, our research does have some limitations. Our dependent variables measure expert assessments of rather crudely defined types of polarization. As such, the potentially mediating effect of institutions on affective, or other more nuanced forms of polarization, could not be assessed here because the dependent variables lacked such finesse. This is therefore an important limitation of our research. The literature distinguishes many nuanced types of polarization, divided amongst others by the type of conflict. In contrast, the V-DEM variables that were closest to idea-based and identity-based polarization, although being perfectly functional for a cross-national comparative study, were quite crude. The expert coding of the variables certainly did not offer much conceptual sophistication. Future research might do good to further refine the polarization variables. Instead of relying on expert assessments, one could imagine identifying levels of polarization over time in large population surveys (such as the European Social Survey, World Values Survey or the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems) through correlational class analyses and linking these to macro-level institutional variables. That might further refine this paper's findings.

Furthermore, despite the rich theoretical framework of possible mechanisms operating in consensus democracies which diminish or suppress the amount of polarization in society, this paper could not distinguish which specific mechanisms were empirically successful in doing so. Further research might want to study a specific case, including non-institutional variables such as identity salience, to untangle these mechanisms with more precision. This might enhance further understanding of why certain countries were successful in diminishing polarization, while others were not.

Despite these limitations, however, this paper did convincingly show that formal political institutions should not be disregarded when studying polarization. After all, even the most fundamental constitutional rules determining the distribution of political power between groups are already related to the level of polarization within democratic societies.

Notes

1. Bramson et al., "Social Polarization Concepts and Measures"; Tappin and McKay, "Moral Polarization in the US"; Abramowitz and Saunders, "Is Polarization a Myth?"
2. Enders and Armaly, "Actual and Perceived Polarization"; Hibbing, "Tribes and Proto-Tribes"; Lelkes, "Mass Polarization"; Iyengar et al., "A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization"; Iyengar et al. "Affective Polarization in the United States".
3. Barber and McCarty, "Causes and Consequences of Polarization"; Druckman et al., "Elite Partisan Polarization".
4. Abramowitz and Saunders, "Is Polarization a Myth?"; Barber and McCarty, "Causes and Consequences of Polarization".
5. Bogaards, Helms and Lijphart, "The Importance of Consociationalism".
6. Pausch, "The Future of Polarization in Europe".
7. McCoy and Somer, "Polarization Global Crisis of Democracy"; Somer and McCoy, "Polarization and Endangered Democracies"; Somer, McCoy and Luke, "Pernicious Polarization".
8. Barber and McCarty, "Causes and Consequences of Polarization"; Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro "Trends in Affective Polarization"; Dimaggio, Evans and Bryson "American's Social

- Attitudes”; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, “Social Identity Perspective Polarization”; Iyengar et al., “Affective Polarization in the US”.
9. Gidron, Adams and Horne, “Affective Polarization in Democratic Polities”.
 10. Iyengar et al., “Affective Polarization in the US”.
 11. Iyengar and Westwood, “Group Polarization”.
 12. Dimaggio, Evans and Bryson “American’s Social Attitudes”.
 13. Fang, Gozgor, and Cheng. “Does Globalisation Alleviate Polarisation?”; Kriesi et al., *West European Politics in the Age of Globalization*; Pausch, “The Future of Polarization in Europe”.
 14. Somer, McCoy and Luke, “Pernicious Polarization”.
 15. We hereby also react to the call of Gidron et al. (2019) for more comparative research on (affective) polarization.
 16. Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro “Trends in Affective Polarization”; Bramson et al., “Disambiguation of Social Polarization”; Druckman and Levendusky, “Measure Affective Polarization”; Fiorina and Abrams, “Political Polarization in the American Public”; Lelkes, “Mass Polarization”; McCoy and Somer, “Pernicious Polarization”.
 17. Esteban and Schneider, “Polarization and Conflict”.
 18. Those actors can be individuals, groups of individuals, and/or elites.
 19. Bramson et al., “Disambiguation of Social Polarization”; Esteban and Schneider, “Polarization and Conflict”; Mason, “Social and Issue Polarization”; McCoy, Rahman and Somer, “Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy”; Reiljan, “Affective Polarization”.
 20. Dalton, “Party System Polarization”.
 21. Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, “Combining Federalism with Consociationalism”.
 22. Hobolt and Hoerner, “Mobilizing Effect Political Choice”.
 23. Iyengar and Westwood, “Group Polarization”.
 24. Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond Identity”.
 25. Hereby strongly drawing upon social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, “An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict”).
 26. Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, “Social Identity Perspective Polarization”.
 27. Lelkes, “Mass Polarization”.
 28. Baldassarri and Bearman, “Dynamics of Political Polarization”; Druckman and Levendusky, “Measure Affective Polarization”; Fiorina and Abrams, “Political Polarization in the American public”; Rogowski and Sutherland, “How Ideology Fuels Affective Polarization”.
 29. Shakespeare and Rogers de Waal, “The World is not that Divided”.
 30. Levendusky and Malhotra, “Partisan Polarization”.
 31. Abramowitz and Saunders, “Is Polarization a Myth?”; Barber and McCarty, “Causes and Consequences of Polarization”; Lelkes, “Mass Polarization”; Rapp, “Moral Opinion Polarization”.
 32. Lelkes, “Mass Polarization”.
 33. Levendusky and Malhotra, “Partisan Polarization”; Somer and McCoy, “Polarization and Endangered Democracies”.
 34. Iyengar and Westwood, “Group Polarization”.
 35. Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, “Social Identity Perspective Polarization”; Iyengar et al., “Affective Polarization in the US”.
 36. Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro, “Affective Polarization”; Gidron, Adams and Horne, “Affective Polarization in Democratic Polities”; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, “Social Identity Perspective Polarization”; Iyengar et al., “Affective Polarization in the US”; Iyengar and Westwood, “Group Polarization”; Tappin and McKay, “Moral Polarization”.
 37. Reiljan, “Affective Polarization”.
 38. Arbatli and Rosenberg, “How Political Polarization Erodes Democracy”; Wagner, “Affective Polarization in Multiparty Systems”.
 39. Iyengar and Westwood, “Group Polarization”.
 40. Iyengar et al., “Affective Polarization in the US”.
 41. Hartevelde, “Affective Polarization”; Mason, “Social and Issue Polarization”.
 42. McCoy and Somer, “Pernicious Polarization”.
 43. Arbatli and Rosenberg, “How Political Polarization Erodes Democracy”; Somer and McCoy, “Polarization and Endangered Democracies”; Lelkes, “Mass Polarization”.
 44. Somer and McCoy, “Polarization and Endangered Democracies”.
 45. Pausch, “The Future of Polarization in Europe”.

46. Dalton, "Party System Polarization"; Dimaggio, Evans and Bryson "American's Social Attitudes"; Iyengar and Westwood, "Group Polarization"; Rapp, "Moral Opinion Polarization".
47. Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro, "Affective Polarization"; Gidron, Adams and Horne, "Affective Polarization in Democratic Politics"; Iyengar et al., "Affective Polarization in the US".
48. Dimant, "The Impact of Political Polarization"; Druckman and Levendusky, "Measure Affective Polarization"; Iyengar et al., "Affective Polarization in the US"; McCoy, Rahman and Somer, "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy"; Reiljan, "Affective Polarization".
49. Dimaggio, Evans and Bryson, "American's Social Attitudes"; Rapp, "Moral Opinion Polarization"; Kingzette et al., "Affective Polarization"; Wagner, "Affective Polarization in Multiparty Systems".
50. Hartevelde, "Affective Polarization"; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, "A Social Identity Perspective on polarization", Kleinfeld, "The Rise of Political Violence in the US".
51. Somer, McCoy and Luke, "Pernicious Polarization".
52. Arbatli and Rosenberg, "How Political Polarization Erodes Democracy".
53. McCoy, Rahman and Somer, "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy".
54. Bogaards, Helms and Lijphart, "The Importance of Consociationalism".
55. McCoy and Somer, "Pernicious Polarization"; Somer, McCoy and Luke, "Pernicious Polarization".
56. Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy*; Reilly, "Institutional Designs for Diverse Democracies".
57. Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy*; Reynal-Querol, "Does Democracy Preempt Civil Wars?"; Schneider and Wiesehomeier, "Political Institutions and the Diversity-Conflict Nexus".
58. Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy*.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
61. Anderson and Guillory, "Political Institutions and Satisfaction with Democracy".
62. McCoy et al., "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy".
63. Lijphart, *Power Sharing and Majority Rule*; McCoy and Somer, "Pernicious Polarization".
64. Mason, "Social and Issue Polarisation".
65. McCoy and Somer, "Pernicious Polarization".
66. Ibid.
67. See Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*; Jarstad, "The Prevalence of Power-Sharing"; Roeder and Rothchild, *Power and democracy after civil wars*.
68. Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, "Combining Federalism with Consociationalism"; Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, "Still Consociational? Belgian Democracy".
69. Erk and Anderson, *The Paradox of Federalism*; Tierney, "Federalism in a Unitary State".
70. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*; Jarstad, "The Prevalence of Power-Sharing"; Roeder and Rothchild, *Power and Democracy After Civil Wars*.
71. Andeweg, "The Cons of Consensus Democracy"; Papadopoulos, "Cooperative Forms of Governance"; Scharpf, "The Joint-Decision Trap".
72. Andeweg, "The Cons of Consensus Democracy"; Hakhverdian and Koop, "Consensus Democracy and Support for Populist Parties".
73. Coppedge et al., V-dem dataset v11.
74. Armingeon, Engler and Leemann, "Comparative Political Dataset".
75. Armingeon, Engler and Leemann, "Comparative Political Dataset"; Coppedge et al., V-dem dataset v11.
76. Coppedge et al., V-dem Methodology v11.1.
77. These countries are Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus (Greek part), Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and USA.
78. Abramowitz and Saunders, "Is Polarization a Myth?"; McCoy, Rahman and Somer, "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy".
79. Van Spanje and De Graaf, "How Established Parties Reduce Other Parties' Electoral Support".
80. Keele and Kelly, "Lagged Dependent Variables".

81. Wilkins, “To Lag or Not to Lag?”
82. Jackson, “Endogeneity and Structural Equation Estimation”; Schneider and Wiesehomeier, “Political Institutions and the Diversity-Conflict Nexus”.
83. There are some important differences between the way this variable is conceptualized and the exact definition of some forms of identity-based polarization (such as affective polarization). Nevertheless, as it is the closest indicator of identity-based polarization available, we chose to use it. Prior research has chosen a similar approach (Somer; McCoy and Luke, “Pernicious Polarization”).
84. Coppedge et al., V-dem Codebook v11; Pemstein et al., The V-dem Measurement Model.
85. In the case of Iceland, the data for issue-based polarization were only available for the year of 2019 in the dataset.
86. Coppedge et al., V-dem Codebook v11; Mechkova et al., “Measuring Internet Politics”; Pemstein et al., The V-dem Measurement Model.
87. We reverse-coded this variable so that a higher value was associated with a higher degree of polarization.
88. Somer, McCoy, and Luke, “Pernicious Polarization”; Fang, Gozgor, and Cheng. “Does Globalisation Alleviate Polarisation?”
89. Lindqvist and Östling, “Political Polarization and the Size of Government”; Arbatli and Rosenberg, “How Political Polarization Erodes Democracy”.
90. Reiljan, “Affective Polarization”.
91. Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy*.
92. For federalism 0 = “No or weak federalism” and 1 = “Strong federalism”, executive-legislative relations 0 = “Presidential or semi-presidential system” and 1 = “Parliamentary system”, bicameralism 0 = “Unicameralism or weak bicameralism” and 1 = “Medium or strong bicameralism”, government type 0 = “single-party or minimal winning cabinet” and 1 = “Multiparty coalition cabinet”.
93. Gallagher, “Proportionality, Disproportionality and Electoral Systems”.
94. Laakso and Taagepera, “Effective Numbers of Parties”.
95. Arbatli and Rosenberg, “How Political Polarization Erodes Democracy”; Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro, “Affective Polarization”; Somer et al., “Pernicious Polarization”; Tappin and McKay, “Moral Polarization”; Wagner, “Affective polarization in Multiparty Systems”.
96. Note that, for the sake of interpretation, this graph is built on the ordinal measurement type of the variables, instead of the scale type used in the analysis.
97. Reiljan, “Affective Polarization”.
98. The checks regarding the assumptions of OLS were satisfactory, and bootstrapping was performed.
99. Erk and Anderson, *The Paradox of Federalism*.
100. Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy*.
101. Mishra, *Age of Anger*.
102. Fishkin et al., “Antidote Extreme Partisan Polarization”; Lindell et al., “Polarisation and Moderation of Opinions?”; Pausch, “Democratic Innovations against Polarisation in Europe”.
103. Coppedge et al., V-dem Dataset v11.
104. Ibid.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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