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Article

Is Protest Only Negative? Examining the Effect of Emotions and Affective Polarization on Protest Behaviour

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Abstract
This contribution sheds light on the link between affect and protest behaviors. Using data from a voter survey conducted around the 2019 elections in Belgium, we examine two dimensions of affect: a vertical one, i.e., negative and positive emotions towards politics in general, and a horizontal one, i.e., affective polarization towards fellow citizens. Our findings make three important contributions. First, we identify five distinct classes of respondents depending on their emotions towards politics (apathetic, angry, hopeful, highly emotional, and average). Second, we demonstrate that the combination of both anger and hope is more strongly associated with protest action than anger alone. By contrast, apathy, characterized by an absence of emotions towards politics, is negatively related to protest behavior. Third, we show that affective polarization is a key driver of protest behavior per se. We also show that the two dimensions of affect have distinctive effects. Yet they interact: Affective polarization towards political opponents compensates for the absence of emotions towards politics in general.

Keywords
affective polarization; Belgium; emotions; protest

Issue
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1. Introduction

Contemporary politics has been increasingly characterized by its affective character (Webster & Albertson, 2022). At the same time, conventional forms of political participation are losing ground, and social uprisings which challenge the established political order are on the rise. In this context, better understanding the affective drivers of protest behaviors appears crucial. This article explores the connection between affect and protest participation.

More specifically, we examine the role of two dimensions of affect on individual protest behaviors: specific, discrete emotions towards politics in general (vertical dimension) and affective polarization towards other party supporters (horizontal dimension). On the one hand, we consider the combined role of specific, discrete negative and positive emotions towards politics in general, tapping into citizens' emotions towards elites and institutions (Capelos & Demertzis, 2018; Vasilopoulou & Wagner, 2017). On the other hand, we look at the horizontal dimension of affect by investigating the role of affective polarization, that is, the tendency among party supporters (the in-party group) to increasingly dislike or resent supporters of other parties (the out-party group), tapping into citizen's feelings towards other fellow citizens (Iyengar et al., 2019; Wagner, 2021; Ward & Tavits, 2019). In addition, we further investigate the

simultaneous effect of emotions and affective polarization and their interactions. We test these expectations by looking at the case of Belgium, using the 2019 RepResent Panel Voter Survey.

Theoretically, we bridge the literature from social movement studies that look at the role of emotions and affective group ties to the process of identity building and collective protest action (Jasper, 1998; Melucci, 1995, p. 45; Polletta & Jasper, 2001), to individual-level research from social and political psychology that investigates the influence of discrete emotions on how citizens process information, evaluate politics, and shape their political preferences and their decision to take part in political processes, in both the electoral and non-electoral arenas (Altomonte et al., 2019; Close & van Haute, 2020; Marcus, 2000). We also go one step further by not only considering the effect of discrete emotions separately but also how the *combination* of various emotions can affect individual protest behaviors.

Our findings make three important empirical contributions. First, at the descriptive level, a latent class analysis (LCA) shows that respondents display different "clusters" of emotions, and we identify five classes of respondents depending on their emotions towards politics: apathetic, angry, hopeful, highly emotional, and average. Second, we show that the vertical and horizontal dimensions of affect are distinctly related to protest behaviors. On the vertical dimension, we demonstrate that the combination of both anger and hope is more strongly associated with protest action than anger alone. By contrast, apathy, characterized by an absence of emotions towards politics, is negatively related to protest behaviors. On the horizontal dimension, we show that affective polarization is significantly related to protest behaviors. We also demonstrate that the two dimensions of affect interact with each other, with high levels of affective polarization compensating for the lack of emotion towards politics, thus pushing apathetic individuals to participate in protest behaviors.

2. Negative Affect and Protest

2.1. Emotions and Protest

We first investigate the vertical dimension of affect on protest behavior. Political psychology has examined the interplay between discrete emotions and individual protest behaviors (Marcus, 2000), such as signing a petition, demonstrating, boycotting (Capelos & Demertzis, 2018), or voting for protest parties (Altomonte et al., 2019; Marcus et al., 2019; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019). Anger was pinpointed as a crucial driver of protest action (Gaffney et al., 2018; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019), as it closely relates to feelings of frustration, indignation (Jasper, 2014b), or ressentiment (Capelos & Demertzis, 2018). By contrast, studies emphasized that fear and anxiety deter individuals from engaging in protest, particularly in autocratic contexts, where the risk of repression and violence is high (Dornschneider, 2020; Nikolayenko, 2022). In democratic contexts, Capelos and Demertzis (2018) show that, during periods of crisis in Greece, anxious people reported a low political activity while those who were angry reported a high degree of participation, especially in violent actions. Looking at voting behavior in the Brexit referendum, Vasilopoulou and Wagner (2017) show that, while anger was positively associated with support for the leave option, fear prompted greater moderation. According to the appraisal-tendency framework (Lerner & Keltner, 2001), fear would enhance individuals' reliance on the evaluation of the situation and would trigger pessimistic risk estimates and risk-averse choices (Valentino et al., 2008), whereas anger would trigger optimistic risk estimates and risk-seeking choices (Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Individual protest behavior is also associated with positive emotions. Capelos and Demertzis (2018) again show that during periods of crisis in Greece, not only angry but also hopeful people reported a high level of engagement in legal and illegal actions. Their findings echo those of Lerner and Keltner (2001), who show that discrete emotions having a dissimilar valence (positive vs. negative), such as anger and hope, or anger and happiness, can lead to similar risk appraisal, i.e., optimistic risk appraisal. Hence, they show that both anger and hope can be associated with goal-oriented behavior. By contrast, some emotions sharing a similar valence, such as anger and fear, can lead to opposite risk appraisals—then, fear and anger would have opposite effects on protest action.

Yet few of these studies look at the combination or simultaneous effect of positive and negative emotions (for exceptions, see Dornschneider, 2020; Landmann & Rohmann, 2020; Nikolayenko, 2022). One has to look at social movement theories to find studies dealing with sets of emotions as crucial elements in the process of collective identity building and as potential drivers of collective action (Jasper, 1998; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Jasper (2014a, p. 211) refers to protest as being the result of "pairs of positive and negative emotions," such as outrage and hope (Castells, 2012); or as the result of sequences of emotions, such as shame turning into pride through anger in groups sharing a stigmatized identity (Britt & Heise, 2000). This literature points to the role of sets of emotions in creating, nurturing, and potentially breaking a collective movement.

Taking stock of this research, we test how different types of emotional clusters that respondents disclose relate to their level of protest participation. Among the range of emotions, we focus on anger and hope, as they were shown as central factors for mobilization in previous studies. We argue that it is the combination of anger and hope that is the most likely to prompt participation. In other words, being only angry would be less powerful than being angry and hopeful. Hope—the belief that things may change—is also necessary. The underlying mechanism is that because anger and hope have similar

appraisal themes (Lerner & Keltner, 2001), their effects on behavior reinforce each other. Note that we distance ourselves from most studies that look at respondents' emotions towards a specific event. Rather, we measure respondents' level of emotion when they think about politics in general, which is connected to the concept of political resentment vis-à-vis the political elites and institutions (Capelos & Demertzis, 2018). Consequently, we expect that:

> H1: Respondents displaying a combination of high hope and high anger ("highly emotional" respondents) will report a higher level of protest participation, while respondents displaying low levels of both hope and anger (apathy) will report a lower level of protest participation.

2.2. Affective Polarization and Protest

Next to the vertical dimension of emotions towards politics, we focus on a second, horizontal dimension of affect: affective polarization. Initially introduced by Iyengar et al. (2012), affective polarization refers to the tendency among party supporters (the in-party group) to increasingly dislike or resent supporters of other parties (the out-party group). The fast-growing literature has mainly focused on measuring, assessing, and explaining levels of affective polarization across democracies and over time (see, among others, Bettarelli et al., 2022; Bettarelli & Van Haute, 2022b; Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Gidron et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021).

Much less is known about the consequences of affective polarization. Iyengar et al. (2019) summarize congruent findings that show that it has negative non-political consequences, as it damages social relations and negatively affects economic behaviors. However, the evidence is more mixed regarding political consequences. Ward and Tavits (2019) demonstrated that higher levels of affective polarization create biases in the perception of party competition, with voters viewing other parties as more extreme. Furthermore, Hetherington and Rudolph (2015) emphasized that it decreases trust among voters. Affective polarization is also associated with resistance to compromise, intolerance, and advancement of their own group over the collective good (Mason, 2018). More worryingly, Kingzette et al. (2021) show how affective polarization in the US undermines support for democratic norms. On the other hand, there is also evidence of the mobilizing power of affective polarization. Ward and Tavits (2019) showed that it enhances the perception that politics has high stakes and that electoral outcomes and success are highly important. Consequently, they show that high levels of affective polarization also lead voters to perceive that participation is crucial, and to higher levels of turnout (see also Harteveld & Wagner, 2022; Wagner, 2021). Others have shown similar dynamics for ideological polarization, which is associated with higher levels of political interest, political information, and electoral participation (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Dalton, 2008). However, these studies focus on electoral participation. What remains unexplored is whether these findings also apply to other forms of participation and if affective polarization has the same mobilizing power on non-institutional participation, especially protest. We expect that it is the case, and we put forward two types of explanations. First, as suggested above, affective polarization is connected to a sense that "something is at stake" and that participating is important. Second, in line with the affective approach to social movements, affective polarization could involve negative affect (fear, hate, anger, outrage) towards political opponents or other societal groups, which, when shared within the group, can have a mobilizing effect (Jasper, 2014a, p. 209). At the same time, positive affect towards other group members (love, compassion, respect, pride) can help create solidarity, keep the group together, and promote participation. We formulate the following hypothesis:

> H2: Respondents displaying high levels of affective polarization will report a higher level of protest participation, while respondents displaying low levels of affective polarization will report a lower level of protest participation.

In the analysis, we will also consider the combined and interactive effect of the horizontal and vertical dimensions of affect, given that the interaction between these two dimensions remains largely unexplored.

3. Data and Methods

3.1. Case Selection

In this article, we focus on Belgium as negative affect and its political consequences remain understudied in this setting (with a few exceptions, see Bettarelli & Van Haute, 2022a, 2022b; Close & van Haute, 2020; van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2020). It is surprising, as Belgium is an ideal case to better understand the role of emotions and affective polarization in multiparty settings.

Belgium is a highly fragmented multiparty system. Since the split of traditional party families along the French–Dutch linguistic divide, Belgium is characterized by two-party systems operating separately (Table 1): Flemish parties compete in Flanders (north of the country), whereas Francophone parties compete in Wallonia (south of the country). We exclude Brussels from our analysis due to its complexity (parties from the two language groups compete on its territory) and data availability (we do not have data about affective polarization for respondents from Brussels).

Furthermore, the relationship dynamics between parties have changed over the last decades. Belgium has long been labeled as a typical consociational democracy

Table 1. List of parties with representation in the federal parliament, 2014–2019 and 2019–present.

Party Family	Flanders	Wallonia
Christian Democrats	CD&V	CDH
Greens	Groen	Ecolo
Regionalists	N-VA	DéFI
Liberals	OpenVLD	MR
Social Democrats	sp.a	PS
Radical Right	VB	PP
Radical Left	PVDA	PTB

with deep social divisions mediated by consensus at the elite level. However, the capacity of the elite of the two main linguistic groups (French and Dutch speakers) to reach agreements has been challenged in recent years, as indicated by the length of government formation at the federal level (De Winter, 2019). This translated into polarizing trends in the ballot box. The 2019 elections saw substantial shifts in party preferences and the rise of the radical left (PVDA-PTB, 12 seats in the Lower Chamber, +10) and radical right parties (VB, which became the second party in Flanders with 18 seats in the Lower Chamber, +15) and the continuing decline of the center, Christian Democratic parties (CD&V, CDH, DéFI). These trends show how Belgium incarnates the understudied and complex character of polarization in multiparty settings.

3.2. Data

Our main data source is the RepResent Panel Voter Survey 2019, conducted by the Excellence of Science consortium of five research teams at the University of Antwerp, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, KU Leuven, Université Libre de Bruxelles, and UCLouvain. It is a rich and original dataset that includes multiple waves (more details in Pilet et al., 2020; Walgrave et al., 2022). We are interested in the first pre-electoral wave of the survey that was conducted from 5 April to 21 May since this wave included questions on protest participation. A total of 7,617 individuals were interviewed. The survey was conducted using computer-assisted web interviewing questionnaires and was distributed by Kantar TNS to their own online panel. Panel participants were selected using a quota sample based on gender, age, education, and region of residency. The final samples slightly differ from the target population, with an overrepresentation of higher educated respondents and the 45–65 age group. Therefore, when we compute variables using the RepResent dataset, we use weights for age, gender, and education.

3.3. Dependent Variable

To grasp respondents' reported participation in protest actions, we make use of the following question: "There are different ways to improve things in Belgium or to be more politically active. How often did you take part in any of the following actions in the past 12 months?" (1 = *never*, 2 = *seldom*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*). Nine types of political action were offered, out of which we focus on four: (a) signing petitions, (b) participating in protest or demonstration, (c) boycotting products, and (d) breaking rules for political reasons. Tables 2 and 3 report descriptive statistics for the above items and the correlation matrix, respectively.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of items of protest participation.

Variable	Obs	Mean	SD	Min	Max
(a) Petitions	7,539	1.99	0.987	1	4
(b) Protest	7,536	1.486	0.8	1	4
(c) Boycotting	7,539	1.997	1.101	1	4
(d) Breaking rules	7,539	1.383	0.728	1	4

Table 3. Correlations matrix among items of protest participation.

Variables	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
(a) Petitions	1.000	—	—	—
(b) Protest	0.515	1.000	—	—
(c) Boycotting	0.532	0.453	1.000	—
(d) Breaking rules	0.396	0.512	0.408	1.000

Operationally, we assemble an additive index that sums the four items (Cronbach's alpha is equal to 0.8) to collapse them into a unique indicator of protest. The resulting variable varies from 4 to 16; the higher the index, the more often respondents engage in protest action.

3.4. Independent Variables

3.4.1. Emotions

Our measure of respondents' emotions towards politics is captured by thermometer ratings. While other measurement strategies exist, such as facial or text/sentiment analysis, or physiological responses (Schumacher et al., 2022), ratings are best suited for large survey designs. Furthermore, it matches our choice of measurement of our second independent variable, affective polarization (see Section 3.4.2). Using thermometer ratings for our two independent variables enhances consistency and comparability, especially since we are interested in the combination of the two. We used the following question: "When you think of Belgian politics in general, to what extent do you feel each of the following emotions?" Respondents were offered eight emotions (anger, bitterness, anxiety, fear, hope, relief, happiness, and satisfaction), and a scale ranging from zero (*not at all*) to 10 (*to a great extent*). As previous research pointed to the crucial role of two emotions, one negative (anger) and one positive (hope), in mobilizing protesters, we focus on these two specific emotions. We computed a similar classification of respondents using all emotions. The number and nature of the groupings are very similar, although the distinction between categories is less clear-cut. Regression results are also highly similar to the ones presented in this analysis. As previous studies showed that fear can be negatively correlated to protest, we ran additional regression models with fear as a discrete emotion. Adding fear did not alter our findings. Note that anger and hope are weakly correlated (−0.2). We make use of the LCA to locate respondents into emotional groups. In such a model, a categorical latent (unobserved) variable is used to identify the probability of each individual belonging to a specific emotional category by means of a generalized structural equation model. We obtain the best fit when our sample is split into five emotional groups (see Figure 1). In light of these results, we define Group 1 as average, when respondents register average scores for both hope and anger; Group 2 as apathy, indicating individuals with low scores in each emotion category; Groups 3 and 4 as hopeful and angry, respectively, where the former includes people with high rates of hope and low rates of anger, while the latter is the other way round; Group 5 as highly emotional, which includes individuals showing high rates of both anger and hope. In the empirical analysis, the average will represent the baseline category.

Other methods than LCA could have been used to assess the combined and isolated effect of discrete emotions, such as interaction effect or principal component analysis (PCA). By using the interaction effect between anger and hope, we would capture the "mediating" effect of one emotion on the other, but we would not actually catch the effect of having both emotions at the same time. Interaction tells us if, e.g., the effect of anger towards politics on protest participation is higher when the degree of hope increases—which is not our argument. Besides, interaction would have implied treating the two emotions, not as continuous but as discrete variables, and then checking all possible combinations of anger and hope. This latter exercise makes the presentation of results much more complex. In the end, the conclusions are highly similar to those when using LCA.

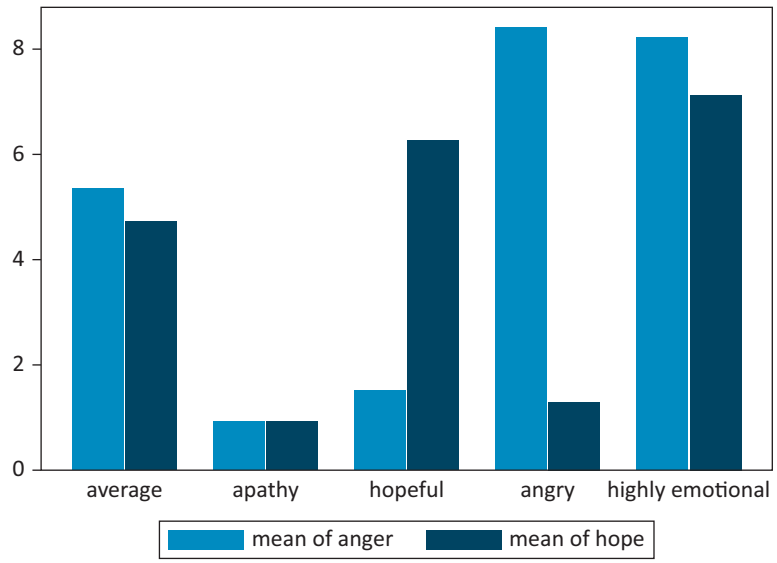

Figure 1. Distribution of anger and hope across groups (LCA).

We also ran a PCA that highlighted two components: one that negatively correlates anger and hope and one that positively correlates the two, each explaining approximately half of the variation in the data. Each component explains half of the scenarios resulting from the LCA: The component that positively correlates the two emotions would contrast the "highly emotional" scenario with the "apathy" one. As a result, we should have used both in the same regression, making results qualitatively similar to LCA but more complex to interpret.

We have explored these possibilities, but LCA offers the best tool to explore our research question and test our hypothesis, both in terms of conceptual message and clarity of presentation of results. LCA groups observations based on a data-driven process. As a result, it creates clear-cut categories that classify respondents based on their emotional states and allows them to then link them to participation in protest action. Conceptually, categorization by means of LCA allows one to clearly disentangle the propensity to participate in protests of different categories of individuals, defined according to their political emotions, with a particular focus on highly emotional people, i.e., those who display high levels of both anger and hope.

In terms of size (Table 4), two groups (average and negative) account for over 70% of the respondents. Nevertheless, no group contains less than 500 individuals. Note that the overall standard deviation of each emotion is consistently larger than that within each group, thus further supporting our modeling choice.

Table 5 reports the distribution of protest participation by group. It indicates that protest participation is significantly lower in the apathy group, and larger in the negative and (mostly) the highly emotional groups, compared to the average. By contrast, no significant differences emerge between the average and positive groups.

3.4.2. Affective Polarization

Contrary to our measurement of discrete emotions, affective polarization does not take into account different feelings towards politics (political elites and

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of anger and hope across groups.

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Overall					
Anger	7,471	5.94	2.69	0	10
Hope	7,469	3.84	2.56	0	10
Average					
Anger	3,408	5.35	1.31	2	9
Hope	3,409	4.99	1.18	3	8
Apathy					
Anger	523	0.93	1.14	0	4
Hope	523	0.91	1.10	0	3
Hopeful					
Anger	612	1.50	1.14	0	4
Hope	612	6.25	1.10	4	10
Angry					
Anger	2,019	8.41	1.43	4	10
Hope	2,017	1.28	1.36	0	3
Highly Emotional					
Anger	699	8.22	1.19	4	10
Hope	699	7.12	1.58	6	10

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of protest participation split by groups.

Categories	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	p(x,y)
Average	3,405	6.68	2.69	4	16	—
Apathy	521	5.86	2.41	4	15	0.00
Hopeful	610	6.74	2.54	4	16	0.76
Angry	2,093	6.95	2.82	4	16	0.03
Highly emotional	694	8.05	3.41	4	16	0.00

Note: p(x,y) in the last column is the t-test of equality of means across the baseline category *average* (x) and other categories (y), under the assumption of equal variances.

institutions); it is rather a general measurement of negative affect towards other partisan groups. To measure affective polarization for each respondent, we also use thermometer ratings, the most common strategy in the literature (Iyengar et al., 2019). We make use of the following question from the RepResent dataset: "Could you use the scale below to indicate how you feel about the following groups?" (scale ranging from 0 to 100, 0 to 49 = *not very favorable*; 50 = *neutral*; 51 to 100 = *favorable*). The higher the score, the higher the sympathy towards partisans of the party. Following the distinct party offer, respondents in Flanders had to indicate their feelings towards supporters of the seven Dutch-speaking parties listed in Table 1, and respondents in Wallonia had to do the same with the seven French-speaking parties listed in Table 1. We make use of the spread-of-score method proposed by Wagner (2021). The index is computed based on the following equation:

$$\text{Spread}_i = \sqrt{\sum_{p=1}^{P} \left(\text{like}_{ip} - \overline{\text{like}}_i\right)^2}$$

where subscripts *i* and *p* indicate each survey respondent and each French- or Dutch-speaking party, respectively; "like" signifies the like–dislike evaluation towards a party on a scale from 0 to 100; and "$\overline{\text{like}}$" is the average like–dislike score of respondent *i*. The higher the index, the higher the degree of affective polarization. Note that we do not weigh the index for the electoral size of each party, for two reasons. First, as we use Wave 1 (pre-electoral) of the RepResent dataset, we do not have a good reference time point to weigh each party's size. Second, we argue that the weighting strategy is appropriate when using a territorial approach, as the social consequences of disliking supporters of small or large parties may differ significantly; however, it is not essential for individual-level analyses.

The average level of affective polarization among our population is 19.5, ranging from 0 to 49. In Table 6, we describe the average level of protest participation for different intensities of affective polarization (split in percentiles, from <20th to >80th). Results show that participation in protest action significantly increases across percentiles, thus indicating a positive correlation between affective polarization and protest.

3.4.3. Controls

We include standard individual-level socio-demographic variables (gender, age, education) that contribute to determining political engagement (Brady et al., 1995; Marien et al., 2010). Gender is a dummy equal to one for female. Age ("What is your age?") is a continuous variable, while education is a five-category variable, ranging from *none or elementary* to *university degree*. Income is measured by the following question: "To what extent are you satisfied with your family's total income?" (0–10 scale, with 0 = *very unsatisfied* and 10 = *very satisfied*).

We also control for political attitudes. First, we control for respondents' left–right self-placement for two reasons: It allows us to further establish that affective polarization and ideological positions are two distinct phenomena. Second, it allows us to control for the specific dynamics of protest in Belgium under the 2014–2019 legislature. The coalition government that came out of the 2014 elections was exceptional, as it only included (center-)right parties (N-VA, CD&V, OpenVLD, and MR). Therefore, one can expect that protests were initiated by the left-wing opposition. Second, we control for the degree of ideological extremeness of respondents, computed as the difference in absolute value between the score on the left–right scale of each respondent and the average score across our sample. The higher the score; the more ideologically extreme the respondent. Third, we control for respondents' satisfaction with democracy to further establish that emotions towards politics are distinct from evaluations of the political system. We use the following question: "In politics, people often talk of 'left' or 'right.' Can you place your own opinions on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 meaning *left*, 5 the *centre*, and 10 the *right*?" "Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy is working in Belgium?" (1 = *very satisfied*; 5 = *very unsatisfied*). Fourth, we include a variable measuring the respondents' degree of interest in politics on a scale of 0–10, ranging from 0 = *not interested at all* to 10 = *extremely interested*.

Finally, we control for the place of residence of each respondent, as there may exist habits of protest participation linked to territories. To do so, we use NUTS-3 fixed effects in our regression model.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics of protest participation split by percentiles of affective polarization.

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
AffPol < 20	6.36	2.82	4	16
20 < AffPol < 40	6.57	2.63	4	16
40 < AffPol < 60	6.60	2.59	4	16
60 < AffPol < 80	6.88	2.63	4	16
Affpol > 80	7.33	3.01	4	16

Note: The first column indicates the group under analysis with respect to percentiles of the affective polarization distribution, i.e., 20th, 40th, 60th, and 80th.

3.4.4. Modelling Strategy

In our regression analyses, continuous variables were standardized using the z-score, i.e., mean equal to zero and standard deviation equal to one, to ease the interpretation of coefficients among variables computed at different scales. Coefficients were computed using OLS models, with NUTS-3 fixed effects. The dependent variable in the models is the additive index of protest, as discussed above. We checked the presence of potential collinearity issues using the Variance Inflation Factor test and registered a value below two in all models.

4. Results

Table 7 presents the results of our regression analyses. First, we introduce the groups of respondents by type of emotion (Column 1). Coefficients associated with these groups must be interpreted as differences with respect to the baseline group (average anger and hope). Results provide very interesting and novel insights. Protest participation, as expected, is significantly lower in the apathy group compared to the average category. In fact, a switch from the latter to the former increases protest participation by over one point. When we consider the hopeful group, we see that the coefficient is not statistically significant. This denotes that being hopeful when thinking about politics does not represent a sufficient condition per se to increase participation in protest action. However, as shown in Figure 1, this could also result from the fact that levels of hope do not diverge so much between the average and hopeful groups. Turning towards the angry group, we see a positive coefficient, even if it is not statistically significant at any conventional

Table 7. Regression results.

	(1) Protest	(2) Protest	(3) Protest	(4) Protest
Affpol (std)		0.362*** (0.042)	0.353*** (0.043)	0.085* (0.045)
Groups (Emotions)				
Average (baseline)				
Apathy	−1.142*** (0.136)		−1.04*** (0.146)	−0.528*** (0.139)
Hopeful	−0.128 (0.127)		−.316** (0.133)	−0.319** (0.133)
Angry	0.043 (0.09)		−0.042 (0.094)	0.171* (0.097)
Highly emotional	1.363*** (0.173)		1.016*** (0.175)	0.828*** (0.153)
Gender				−0.13 (0.079)
Age (std)				−0.39*** (0.041)
Education (std)				0.113*** (0.04)
Income (std)				−0.078* (0.042)
Left_right (std)				−0.254*** (0.042)
Extremeness (std)				0.227*** (0.045)
Satisfaction with democracy (std)				−0.044 (0.048)
Political interest (std)				0.836*** (0.045)
Observations	6,894	5,990	5,829	5,753
R^2	0.073	0.049	0.072	0.192
NUTS-3 dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

level. These results indicate that positive or negative emotions alone do not contribute to increasing the propensity to engage in protest action. Protest participation is significantly larger than in the average group only for the highly emotional group, with a value of the coefficient much larger than any other category. In fact, the difference between apathetic and highly emotional respondents, those registering the lowest and highest probability of protest participation, respectively, is over two points. These results provide a relevant message: Protest participation is connected to the joint action of positive (hope) and negative (anger) emotions towards politics, thus supporting H1. In other words, those who participate in protest action most frequently feel angry yet hopeful and may believe that political conditions are likely to improve thanks to collective action. Similar findings were uncovered using other statistical methods (interaction effect between discrete emotions and PCA): (a) Anger per se matters more than hope; (b) the interaction between the two has a positive and significant effect; (c) protest participation is particularly high among individuals that show high values of both hope and anger. In addition, if we used LCA categorization based on all emotions available (listed in Section 3.1.1), again, the findings are similar.

In Columns 3 and 4, we introduce the affective polarization index, without and with the groups of emotions, respectively. We do so to test the stability of the coefficient associated with affective polarization when included simultaneously with other political and emotional states. Results reassure us of the independent relationship between affective polarization, as its coefficient does not vary much between the two models. As indicated by Column 3, all else equal, affective polarization positively correlates with participation in protest action (H2 supported). Note that the coefficient associated with the hopeful group becomes significant (with a negative sign). This indicates that, even if positive feelings towards national politics are broadly related to a lower propensity to protest, there may be a subset of politically hopeful respondents who engage in protest action because they dislike (some of) supporters of other parties, thus partially biasing results in Column 1.

Finally, in Column 4, we test if previous results are robust to the inclusion of the set of controls introduced in Section 3.3.3. Before commenting on our main explanatory variables (i.e., emotional groups and affective polarization), we observe the behavior of the controls. The sign and significance level of coefficients denote that participation in protest action is not linked to the gender of respondents, while it is higher among younger respondents with a higher level of education. Moreover, it is lower among well-off people. If we switch the attention to political-related controls, we note that participation in protest action is also higher among respondents who position themselves to the left of the ideological spectrum, or among those who hold more extreme political views. Finally, the degree of satisfaction with democracy does not report a significant coefficient; contrarily, the degree of interest in politics of respondents turns out to be positively correlated to protest participation, thus indicating that the more the respondents are interested in politics, the higher the frequency with which they participate in protest action.

As expected, both the magnitude and significance level of coefficients associated with our variables of interest have changed due to the introduction of the control variables. However, the overall message we can draw from the analysis remains qualitatively similar. As far as the emotional groups are concerned, we can observe that protest participation is significantly larger in the highly emotional group than in any other category, although the size of the coefficient is partially reduced. The apathy group is still characterized by its lower propensity to protest, even if its associated coefficient reduces in magnitude with respect to Column 3. Finally, if the hopeful group behaves consistently with previous findings, the angry one is now significantly correlated with protest participation, even if the magnitude and significance level of the coefficient are somewhat weak. However, what changes the most if compared to previous results is the effect of the affective polarization index, which is now one-fourth of that in Column 3. This is due to the fact that affective polarization captured the effect of some of our controls. In order to fully understand the mechanisms driving this result, we re-estimated the model in Column 3 by adding one control at a time. We do not report the results of this exercise in this article for the sake of brevity, but they are available upon request. We find that only the degree of extremeness and interest in politics affect our findings regarding affective polarization. When we include the degree of extremeness, the coefficient of affective polarization reduces from 0.353 (Column 3) to 0.228 (p-value 0.00). This (partial) reduction can be explained by the fact that extreme voters may have more extreme (negative) feelings towards supporters of other parties. However, as shown in Bettarelli and Van Haute (2022a), affective polarization also operates from moderate to extreme voters, thus leaving room for an independent effect of the affective polarization index. Contrarily, when Polint is included, the coefficient of affective polarization drops from 0.353 (column 3) to 0.102 (p-value 0.18), signaling on one side that people who show high levels of affective polarization are those who care the most about politics and, on the other side, that affective polarization is not only related to affect but is also greatly connected to cognitive processes.

In addition to these analyses, we want to explore further how the two dimensions of affect relate to protest participation. We are interested in how the two dimensions interact, as their combined impact on protest participation may vary according to the specific combination of the two. The interaction between these two dimensions of affect remains largely unexplored, yet it could provide novel insight concerning the drivers of protest participation. For instance, affective polarization may

operate either as a substitute or a complement of emotions. In the former scenario, a high degree of affective polarization would compensate for the lack of emotion towards politics. Or, in other words, horizontal affects driving people to participate in protest action predominate over vertical. Contrarily, if the effect of affective polarization is stronger when emotions are high, it would signal that the horizontal and vertical dimensions reinforce each other.

To better investigate this interaction and to ease the interpretation of results, we collapse the categories of emotions into a unique continuous variable by means of a PCA involving individuals' self-reported degree of anger and hope. We consider the component that positively correlates the two emotions. The resulting variable, which we refer to as political feelings (pol_feel), ranges from ca. −2.6 to +2.7, with higher values corresponding to higher degrees of both hope and anger (i.e., the highly emotional category). Figure 2 below shows the mean of pol_feel by groups of emotions and further corroborates the validity of the PCA exercise.

Next, we run a regression model where we interact the two variables of interest, namely affective polarization and pol_feel, together with the standard set of controls as in Column 4 (Table 7). Figure 3 below plots the average marginal effects. Results suggest a substitution dynamic: The effect of affective polarization is large in magnitude and statistically significant for low levels of pol_feel (i.e., apathetic respondents). Contrarily, its impact drastically decreases as much as the pol_feel index increases, and it becomes not significant for the highly emotional respondents.

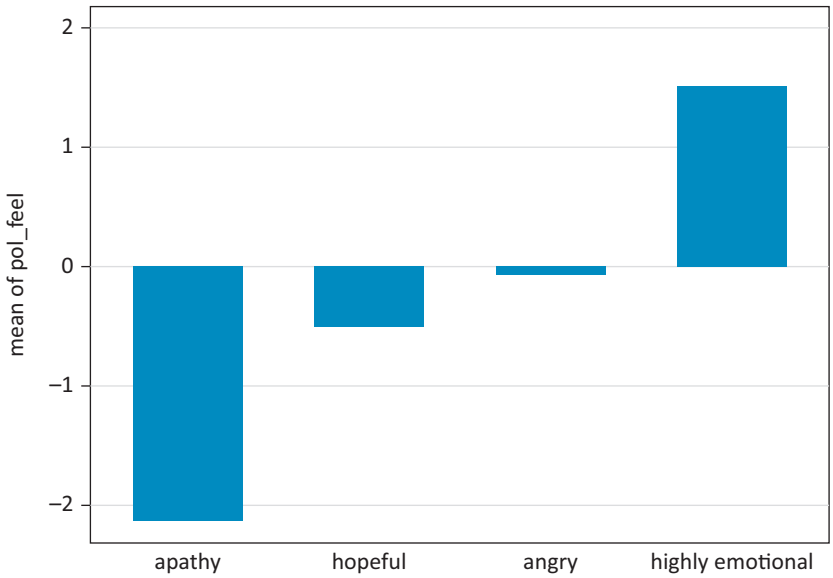

Figure 2. Mean of pol_feel, by groups.

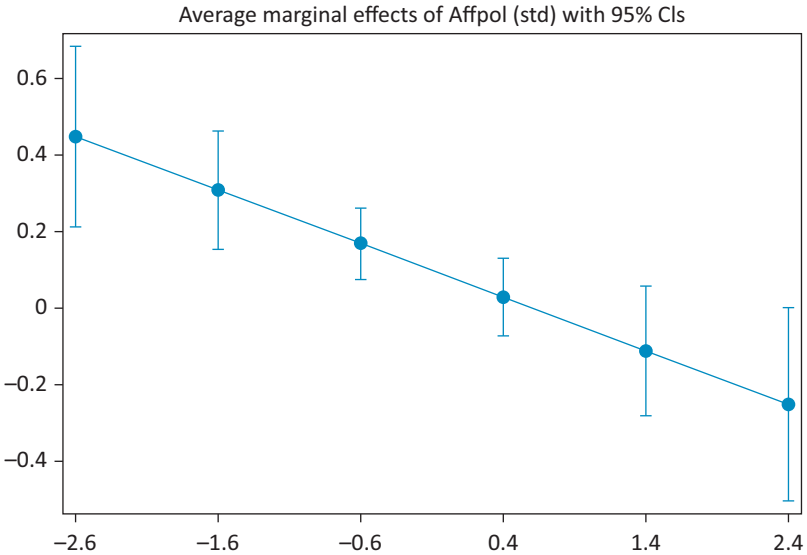

Figure 3. Average marginal effect of affective polarization on protest participation when pol_feel increases (i.e., from no emotions to high emotions). Note: CI stands for Confidence Interval.

To sum up, affective polarization is positively related to protest participation. Moreover, it acts as a substitute for apathy and may stimulate protest participation among people who do not have strong emotions towards politics.

5. Discussion and Limitations

Our analysis has focused on the specific case of Belgium in the 2019 (pre-)electoral sequence. This raises the question of the generalisability of the findings.

Belgium is often described as a multipartisan consociational democracy characterized by a culture of political compromise and by social concertation (Delwit, 2022; Deschouwer, 2012). It has consequences on action repertoires. Protest action, especially in the form of mass demonstrations, is quite common and structured by civil society organizations such as unions. These organizations are linked to the state, which is relatively permeable and open to social movements. Demonstrations are usually peaceful and welcome a broad range of citizens—not exclusively the most extremist or desperate activists. In majoritarian democracies where social movements and the state operate in a more confrontational relationship (such as France or the US), one could expect a stronger and more isolated effect of anger and a lower effect of hope, as well as a stronger effect of affective polarization. Yet while the consociational nature of the Belgian political system usually produces broad coalition governments representing most segments of society, the 2014–2019 government leaned particularly towards the right end of the spectrum, affecting the capacity of left-wing movements (and especially workers' organizations) to influence government policies. This created a climate of social unrest. The relationship between left-wing self-placement and protest uncovered in the models partially reflects that context. Moreover, this context may have exacerbated the role of negative feelings between social groups, hence, affective polarization, as well as distrust and dissatisfaction towards the national government. This specific context tends to offset the specificities mentioned above and brings our findings closer to what one could expect in majoritarian democracies, enhancing the generalizability of our results to other settings.

In addition, 2019 was particularly marked by climate mobilizations, including school strikes and demonstrations (Wouters et al., 2022). Given the nature and objectives of these pro-environmental collective actions, our findings may overestimate the role of positive emotions such as hope (Landmann & Rohmann, 2020). However, our analyses focus on the general population and not the specific segment of climate activists. Wouters et al. (2022) also show that participants in climate mobilizations were younger and less politically experienced than typical demonstrators. This could partly explain the negative relationship we uncover between age and protest, although it is a common pattern in protest participation (Marien et al., 2010).

Our findings are also limited by the methodology adopted in the study. Given that all our measurements are from the same wave of the RepResent survey, the design prevents us from asserting any causal relationship between the variables, nor can we be sure about the direction of any such potential relationship. While theoretically, we could expect affect to influence political behavior, participation in protest action could also create or reinforce emotions towards politics, both negative and positive, as well as affective polarization. Social interactions with like-minded peers in collective action, for instance, could reinforce affective predispositions, which are *shared* within the group, as suggested by social movement theories. The roots of the emotional reactions investigated in this article would deserve specific attention.

Finally, our study does not examine the mechanisms linking affective states to protest action. Emotions may lead to (negative) evaluation or judgment about politics (see Webster, 2018), and this judgment would lead to action. In this case, emotions would *indirectly* influence protest behavior. But emotions could also derive from a cognitive appraisal of the situation and could work as a catalyst for engagement in protest behavior. Regarding affective polarization, we discussed two mechanisms in our theoretical section: One connects affective polarization to political interest and politicization; another connects affective polarization to in- and out-group identity-building dynamics. Yet our empirical strategy does not allow us to disentangle these underlying mechanisms, and further research is needed to provide greater insight in this regard. Our findings nevertheless contribute to stimulating the debate.

6. Conclusion

This article has sought to better understand the role of affect in protest behaviors. We investigate two dimensions of affect. On the vertical dimension, we go beyond the effect of one discrete emotion at a time. Our LCA distinguishes five categories of citizens based on their emotions towards politics: apathetic, angry, hopeful, highly emotional, and average. This is the first important contribution of the article: We show how sets of positive and negative emotions can combine simultaneously in diverse manners and "produce" types of citizens who respond emotionally to politics in very different ways. The behavioral consequences of these combinations deserve further attention. We demonstrate that protest behaviors are the highest among citizens displaying a combination of high anger and hope, and the lowest among apathetic citizens who display an absence of positive or negative emotions towards politics. This is the second important contribution of the article. We show that being angry can mobilize protesters but that the combination of anger and hope can be even more connected to protest action than anger alone. Hope—suggesting a positive or optimistic appraisal of the future—can be crucial

for political engagement. Yet hope alone does not seem to activate protest.

On the horizontal dimension, we show that protest behaviors are highest among citizens displaying higher levels of affective polarization, that is, higher levels of dislike of political opponents. In this case, negativity is key. Interestingly, we also show that the two dimensions are distinct drivers of protest. This is the third important contribution of the article: Affect is crucial to better understand protest behaviors and different dimensions of affect matter.

Lastly, we show that the two dimensions of affect interact. We knew from previous research that affective polarization has mobilization potential. We now better understand how this mobilization works: By appealing to a different dimension of affect, it can mobilize otherwise apathetic citizens. This is the fourth important contribution of the article. Nurturing a dislike of political opponents can make up for the absence of emotions towards politics. This could be a key to better understanding the dynamics of radical parties and leaders.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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