1 Introduction

American academics and political commentators express increasing concern about political polarization, especially polarization rooted in distrust, dislike, and contempt between ordinary people across party lines. Americans display growing hostility toward political opponents: in a recent poll, 40 percent of those who self-identify as Democrats or Republicans agreed with the proposition that those in the opposing party "are not just worse for politics – they are downright evil" (Kalmoe and Mason 2019). Americans also display growing unwillingness to form close relationships with people from across the partisan divide: "In 1960, only about 5 percent of partisans reported displeasure at the prospect of interparty marriage; by 2010, that number had increased tenfold, to about 50 percent" (Lelkes 2016, 402). Americans' current levels of distrust and hostility toward partisan opponents have prompted one prominent scholar to argue that "partyism [prejudice toward partisan opponents] is now worse than racism" (Sunstein 2015, 2). This hostility toward partisan opponents, coupled with attachments to their own preferred party, is commonly labeled *affective polarization* (e.g., Hetherington et al. 2016; Iyengar et al. 2012; Mason 2015).

Because scholarly studies of affective polarization overwhelmingly highlight the United States, one might infer that Americans display exceptionally intense hostility and distrust toward political opponents. Yet concerns about partisan animosity extend across Western democracies. Britain has been roiled for the past several years by bitter political divisions over the process of Brexit, the country's historic departure from the European Union (Bale et al. 2019; Hobolt et al. 2020). Many European countries have seen the rise of radical right parties which express contempt for establishment politics, and which in turn prompt intense dislike from establishment opponents (Gidron et al. 2019a, 2019b; Helbling and Jungkunz 2020; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018). France, for instance, features widespread support for the National Front, a radical right party that strongly opposes multiculturalism and immigration, and which many believe promotes racism and intolerance. Italian politics has been destabilized by the (Northern) League Party and its charismatic Federal Secretary, Matteo Salvini, a hard-line Eurosceptic politician who expresses contempt for established political parties while promoting a nativist message emphasizing opposition to globalization, to illegal immigration, and to the European Union's handling of the foreign refugee crisis. German politics has likewise been destabilized by the rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), a populist, radical right party that conjures up uneasy memories of Germany's National Socialist (Nazi) past. Spain, the United

Kingdom, and Canada feature political parties promoting regional independence movements that seek to – literally – split their countries apart. While much has been written about America's affective polarization, we know relatively little about how the US case compares with affective polarization in those countries.

The urgent need to assess America's current democratic challenges has recently prompted engagement between American and comparative politics scholars interested in radicalism, populism, and democratic erosion (e.g., Bonikowski 2017; Hawkins and Littvay 2019; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).[1] We extend this Americanist-comparativist conversation to analyze affective polarization, with its pernicious implications for Western democracies' social fabrics. Broadening the scope of polarization research can identify the conditions that intensify partisan animosity, and may highlight factors that can help temper it. As Iyengar et al. (2019, 143) note in a recent review of affective polarization research, "more work is needed to build bridges between Americanists and comparativists interested in these topics."

Our Element provides a bird's-eye view of affective polarization in the United States compared to other Western democracies, and considers political, economic, and institutional factors that help explain differences in affective polarization levels and trends across Western publics. By cross-nationally analyzing Western democracies, we address several pressing questions about American politics, including: Is the US public more affectively polarized than other Western publics? Is America's intensifying affective polarization unusual, or is it part of a general increase across Western democracies? And: What do the cross-national and temporal patterns we identify imply about the predictors of affective polarization, in the United States and abroad?

To answer these questions, we analyze country-level variations in affective polarization and explore how economic, political, and institutional factors shape the emotional climate of politics. More specifically, we analyze whether affective polarization across different Western publics – and also within these publics over time since the 1990s – is related to three structural factors: policy disagreements that divide political elites, economic conditions, and political institutions. While scholars have highlighted each of these factors (along with several others), we cannot easily parse out how they relate to affective polarization in analyses limited to the United States; this single case is over-determined. Our analyses across twenty Western

[1] See also Norris and Inglehart 2019; Kuo 2019; Lieberman et al. 2019; McCoy and Somer 2019; Westwood et al. 2018; Weyland and Madrid 2019.

publics enhance our leverage in sorting out how each factor relates to affective polarization *levels* across different Western publics, and, over time, how changes in these factors are related to affective polarization *changes* within these publics. We describe, theorize and investigate how American affective polarization compares to what we find abroad – a stepping-stone for scholars who seek to unravel this causal story.

1.1 Theoretical Debates in the Study of Affective Polarization

Recent years have witnessed a burgeoning body of scholarship on American mass-level polarization (Hetherington 2009; Lelkes 2016). At first, this research emphasized ideological polarization, which pertains to citizens' tendencies to hold extreme positions on the conservative–liberal dimension and on specific issues such as economic policy or immigration, and explores whether citizens hold coherent attitudes across different issues (e.g., Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Fiorina et al. 2005; Hetherington 2009). Another form of polarization is partisan sorting, or the degree to which citizens' partisan identities align with ideology, as when liberals gravitate toward the Democratic Party and conservatives toward the Republican Party (Levendusky 2009), or with social identities such as religion (Mason 2018).

More recently, scholars have emphasized *affective* polarization, focusing on citizens' *feelings* and emotional responses toward political parties (see Iyengar et al. 2019 for a comprehensive review). A mass public's degree of affective polarization is defined by *how strongly the party identifiers in the public prefer their own party to its opponent(s)*, based on their expressed feelings toward the parties. In the American case, this is a measure of how strongly Democratic partisans prefer their party and how strongly they dislike the Republican Party, and vice versa. (As discussed in Section 2, matters are more complicated in other Western democracies, which typically feature several major parties.) Affective polarization thus has two components: how strongly partisans *dislike* other parties, and how strongly they *like* their own party.[2]

Understanding affective polarization is important because it erodes democratic norms and institutions, and diminishes trust in government – especially among partisans of parties that are currently out of power (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, 220) observe that "the fundamental problem facing American democracy remains extreme partisan division – one fueled not just by policy differences but by deeper

[2] Note that this definition of affective polarization prioritizes *party identifiers'* feelings toward political parties, without considering independents. We will discuss this issue in Section 2.

sources of resentment." Along similar lines, McCoy and Somer (2019, 258) observe that affective polarization "contributes to a growing perception among citizens that the opposing party and their policies pose a threat to the nation or an individual's way of life. Most dangerously for democracy, these perceptions of threat open the door to undemocratic behavior by an incumbent and his/her supporters to stay in power." In this regard, many Americans fear the possible consequences of affective polarization: a recent Rasmussen survey found that 31 percent of Americans agreed with the proposition that the United States will descend into civil war within five years[3] – apprehensions that are likely fueled by the spectacle of cross-party distrust and hostility.

Beyond its threat to democratic norms and institutions, there are reasons to worry about the social, economic, and political implications of affective polarization. Intense partisan animosity prompts preferential treatment of co-partisans (Lelkes and Westwood 2017), and polarized partisans are more likely to discriminate against partisan opponents in economic transactions (Carlin and Love 2018; McConnell et al. 2018). There is also contemporary evidence that affective polarization and partisan divisions have shaped Americans' perceptions of how the Trump administration responded to the coronavirus outbreak (Druckman et al. 2020), that it has prompted a partisan divide over the health benefits of face masks and social distancing, and even about the severity of this health crisis.[4] However, while there is a consensus that American affective polarization has intensified over the past decades, we know less about the factors that drive this process.

Scholars' explanations for America's intensifying affective polarization reflect the lenses through which they analyze this phenomenon. Political psychology research, and specifically social identity theory, emphasizes peoples' tendencies to form groups and then protect their group's status, with partisanship being a crucial group identity in contemporary politics (Huddy et al. 2015). This approach suggests that partisans are like sports fans, cheering for their team and against its opponents (Mason 2018; Miller and Conover 2015). From this perspective, growing attachment to partisan identities, rather than ideological worldviews or specific issue positions, drives American affective polarization.

[3] Rasmussen Report. "31% Think U.S. Civil War Likely Soon." www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/general_politics/june_2018/31_think_u_s_civil_war_likely_soon

[4] "Republicans, Democrats Move Even Further Apart in Coronavirus Concerns." www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/06/25/republicans-democrats-move-even-further-apart-in-coronavirus-concerns/

Social identity theory rests on universal assumptions regarding people's underlying motivations: it takes as its starting point the notion that "*Homo sapiens* is a social species; group affiliation is essential to our sense of self" (Iyengar et al. 2019, 130). Yet notwithstanding its broad assumptions on human behavior, this approach has illuminated academic and public debates focused on specifically *American* politics (Klein 2020; for a comparative application, see Huddy et al. 2018). As noted, we know less about how American affective polarization compares to what we find in other countries.

We adopt a complementary perspective that shifts the focus from universal psychological features to contextual determinants of affective polarization. Building on American and comparative politics research, we emphasize three structural factors that may drive differences over time and space in affective polarization: the intensity and nature of policy-based disagreements that characterize a country's party system; national economic conditions, specifically income inequality and unemployment; and electoral institutions, notably the voting systems countries use to select representatives to their national legislatures.[5]

With respect to policy disputes, there is an ongoing debate about how the widening ideological divide between American political elites relates to intensifying affective polarization in the mass public. Some scholars argue that mass-level affective polarization is linked specifically with elite disputes over cultural issues such as multiculturalism and national identity, which fuel stronger emotions than do economic debates (Hetherington et al. 2016; Sides et al. 2018); others, however, link American affective polarization to economic disagreements (Abramowitz and Webster 2017; Iyengar et al. 2012). Yet this question is not easily settled by analyzing American politics in isolation, which is why we extend our analyses across Western democracies. As we write this in August 2020, at the outset of America's general presidential election campaign, this issue of cultural disagreements appears highly pertinent in light of the ongoing nation-wide protests in support of racial justice and the Black Lives Matter movement, which has sparked a wider cultural debate over questions relating to race, police funding and broader questions over interpretations of America's history. In a July 4th speech delivered at Mt. Rushmore, President Trump starkly framed these types of "cultural war" debates as a defining political and social divide in America, asserting that "Our nation is witnessing a merciless campaign to wipe out our history, defame our heroes, erase our values and indoctrinate our children . . .

[5] There are additional structural factors that may influence affective polarization, such as media markets (Lelkes et al. 2017). We discuss these issues, and how they open more avenues for comparative polarization research, in the Conclusions section.

Angry mobs are trying to tear down statues of our founders, deface our most sacred memorials and unleash a wave of violent crime in our cities."[6] To the extent that such cultural issues feature prominently in the 2020 presidential election campaign, it is important to understand whether such cultural debates fuel mass-level partisan hostility and distrust. If the answer is "yes" – which is the empirical pattern we document in this Element – we might expect the 2020 presidential election campaign to further intensify American affective polarization, all else being equal.

With respect to the effects of economic conditions, scholars argue that America's growing income inequality drives affective polarization in the mass public (Stewart et al. 2020), while comparative politics research suggests that economic downturns – such as the global economic recession that began in 2008 – incite more adversarial political interactions, independently of the effects of income inequality (Kriesi and Hutter 2019). While economic conditions have not been extensively studied in the affective polarization literature so far, we present evidence that they are closely linked with partisan affective evaluations. This finding, too, is relevant to contemporary Western politics given that the COVID-19 pandemic has plunged much of the world – including the United States – into a recession, which some economists project could last for several years.

With respect to political institutions, scholars argue that America's majoritarian political system – which is sustained in part by a single-winner, plurality-based voting system to elect public officials – encourages partisans to view politics as a zero-sum struggle, prompting them to despise opponents who (they fear) will take all if their own party is defeated (Drutman 2019). In the American context, this belief led to the coining of the term "the Flight 93 election," which compared the potential presidential election of Hillary Clinton in 2016 to the high-jacking of an airplane, in which Republicans needed to "Charge the cockpit or die" (Anton 2016). By contrast, institutions that support many parties and encourage political compromise – notably proportional representation voting systems – may promote what Arend Lijphart (2010) labels "kinder, gentler" politics, that defuse tensions between opponents. Since electoral institutions are practically constant over time in most countries (including in the United States), we evaluate these arguments by comparing affective polarization levels between countries that feature different voting systems.

In the following sections, we document affective polarization levels and trends in the United States and nineteen other Western democracies. We will

[6] "Trump Uses Mount Rushmore Speech to Deliver Divisive Culture War Message." *New York Times*, July 5, 2020. www.nytimes.com/2020/07/03/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-mount-rushmore.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage

then examine how the three structural factors discussed – elite-level policy disputes, national economic conditions, and electoral laws – can help explain which countries display more versus less intense affective polarization levels, and also how affective polarization fluctuates within countries over time. Before we move to the empirical analyses, we briefly preview our key findings.

1.2 Plan of the Element, and our Key Findings

1.2.1 Situating America's Afective Polarization in Comparative Perspective

Our Element's first part, which analyzes affective polarization levels and trends across twenty Western publics over the past twenty-five years, situates the American public in comparative perspective, in an effort to answer two questions: How affectively polarized is the United States compared to other Western democracies? And: Is America's intensifying affective polarization unusual, or is it part of a general increase across Western publics? To address these questions, we analyze over eighty national election surveys across twenty Western publics between 1996 and 2017, which include common questions eliciting respondents' party identifications along with the warmth of their feelings toward each major party in their country, which respondents rate on a "feeling thermometer scale." We use these survey responses to compute an overall *affective polarization score* for the respondents in each election survey, which is our measure of the intensity of affective polarization in that country in that election year. By analyzing these scores across countries, we can compare the *levels* (intensity) of affective polarization across different Western publics; by comparing these scores across different survey years in the same country, we can track over-time *trends* in affective polarization for each public in our study. We are particularly interested in comparing affective polarization levels and trends in the United States with those in the other nineteen countries in our study, which bear on the questions posed. These analyses support the following conclusions.

Affective polarization in the United States is not unduly intense compared with other Western publics. While America's current affective polarization level is somewhat more intense than the average (and the median) level across our twenty Western publics, it is neither at nor near the top. In fact, the US public appears significantly *less* affectively polarized than the Greek, Portuguese, and Spanish publics; *about as* polarized as the publics in Australia, Britain, France, and New Zealand; but substantially *more* affectively polarized than the Dutch public along with most of the Scandinavian

publics. Although most affective polarization research analyzes the United States, the American public is not an outlier among Western democracies (see also Lauka et al. 2018; Wagner 2020; Reiljan 2020).

Since the mid 1990s, affective polarization has intensified more sharply in the United States than in most other Western publics. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Boxell et al. 2020; Iyengar et al. 2019), we find that American affective polarization has intensified over time, and moreover, that this rise is driven by Americans' growing dislike of partisan opponents, rather than by warming attachments to their own party. Furthermore, our comparative analyses suggest that America's intensifying affective polarization is *not* part of a cross-national trend: instead we find that affective polarization in other Western publics has remained steady (on average) across this period, intensifying in some publics (notably Greece and Portugal), diminishing in others (including Canada), and remaining stable in most.

Compared with other Western publics, American partisans tend to dislike other parties more intensely and like their own parties less. Because affective polarization represents the difference between partisans' feelings for their own party versus its opponent(s), American partisans' comparatively intense dislike of opponents *intensifies* affective polarization, while their comparative lack of enthusiasm for their own party *defuses* affective polarization. We find that the US public is unusual both in partisans' intense hostility toward opponents and in their lukewarm feelings for their own party, but that the American public is *not* unusual in terms of the difference between their in-party liking and their out-party dislike – that is, America's overall level of affective polarization is not an outlier among Western publics. Section 2 reports the analyses that support these conclusions, and delineates some important caveats relating to questions about whether our survey-based measures of affective polarization levels are cross-nationally and temporally comparable.

Taken together, our analyses suggest that when considering affective polarization in comparative perspective, America's glass is less than half full. The good news is that, compared to other Western publics, the United States is not excessively polarized, being only slightly more affectively polarized than the median public in our twenty-country study. The bad news is, first, that over the past twenty-plus years affective polarization has intensified more sharply in the United States than in most other Western publics; second, that this trend reflects American partisans' increasing hostility toward opponents, rather than growing warmth toward their own party. Intuitively, affective polarization fueled by partisans' intense dislike (even

hatred) of opponents seems to pose greater political and social risks than do stronger attachments to one's own side.

1.2.2 Explaining Variations in Affective Polarization

Section 2 documents relationships between affective polarization and three structural factors which scholars have theorized may correlate with affective polarization: *elite-level policy disagreements*, *national economic conditions, and electoral institutions*. We document the following relationships.

Affective polarization changes in mass publics are related to elite-level conflicts on cultural issues. In analyzing affective polarization trends within countries over time, we find that as party elites become more polarized over cultural issues such as immigration, race, and national identity, affective polarization tends to intensify, in analyses that hold economic conditions and electoral institutions constant. In particular, the Unites States, which displays the sharpest increase in elite cultural polarization across the period of our study, has also affectively polarized at the mass level. By contrast, we find no evidence that changes in elite economic polarization track changes in affective polarization.

Adverse economic conditions are linked with more intense affective polarization. We find, first, that affective polarization is more intense in countries with greater income inequality, in analyses that hold elite policy disputes and electoral institutions constant. The Western democracies with the highest income inequality levels include the United States (the most economically unequal country in our study), Portugal, Greece, Britain, and Australia, all of which display relatively intense affective polarization levels. By contrast, the most economically equal countries in our study include the Netherlands and Finland, which display comparatively mild affective polarization. This cross-national pattern resonates with US-based research showing that affective polarization correlates with economic inequality across the American states (Stewart et al. 2020).

Second, we find consistent evidence, in comparisons both between countries and within countries over time, that affective polarization intensifies with higher unemployment. The most affectively polarized countries in our study are Greece, Portugal, and Spain, which all featured comparatively high unemployment across the period of our study, while the Netherlands and Norway are among several countries in our study that featured comparatively low levels of unemployment and affective polarization. Moreover, affective polarization increased sharply across many Western democracies around the time of the global financial crisis, when unemployment spiked. These analyses again are robust to controls for electoral laws and the intensity of elite policy disputes.

Partisans residing in countries with majoritarian, single-winner voting systems tend to dislike opposition parties more intensely, and like their own party less, than do partisans in countries with proportional voting systems. We have already noted this pattern of partisans' diminished ratings for *all* parties (both their own party and its opponents) with respect to the United States, which employs the plurality voting system. We find that this pattern extends to all of the countries in our study that select their representatives via single-winner voting systems, namely Canada, the UK, France, and Australia, in addition to the United States. Moreover, we find a consistent cross-national relationship between electoral system proportionality and partisans' warmer feelings toward political parties (their own party and its opponents). These cross-national patterns are in line with Lijphart's (2010) arguments about the "kinder, gentler" politics that characterize the compromise-oriented, multiparty systems with proportional representation. As we noted previously, this general pattern need not affect the overall intensity of affective polarization, which depends on the *difference* between partisans' ratings of their own party versus its opponents – and in fact we detect no significant cross-national relationship between our overall, difference-based affective polarization measure and the proportionality of the voting system. However, to the extent that single-winner voting systems are associated with citizens' diminished liking and trust for political parties in general, this may be cause for concern.

1.3 A Note on Inference

Before turning to our substantive sections, we briefly address the types of inferences to be drawn from our research. For reasons discussed in the second half of this Element, we are cautious about inferring cause-and-effect relationships from the empirical patterns we document; that is, we do not claim to conclusively prove that variations in economic conditions, elite cultural polarization, and electoral laws *cause* affective polarization levels in Western publics to rise or fall. We refrain from inferring causation primarily because we cannot adequately account for several factors – beyond the structural influences we analyze – that may influence affective polarization. These potentially confounding factors include countries' democratic histories; political scandals; national media regimes; social, geographic, and linguistic cleavages; and differences across publics' levels of education and political interest. We do, however, believe that the relationships we identify represent an essential first step toward developing causal explanations, and that our findings mark out national economic conditions, elite cultural disputes, and electoral laws as "prime suspects" when investigating the causes of affective polarization.