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Erstveröffentlichung / Primary Publication

Arbeitspapier / working paper

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Neumann, R. (2025). *The Role of Identity in Affective Polarization*. (Political Communication Report, 32). <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-106551-2>

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Political Communication Report
Winter 2025 - Issue 32
“The Identity Role in Political Communication”

The Role of Identity in Affective Polarization¹

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Affective polarization has emerged as a defining force in contemporary societies, reshaping not only politics but everyday social life. What now drives division is less disagreement over ideology or policy, but the emotional charge attached to political identities, manifesting in distrust, moral disdain, and hostility toward outgroups. Rather than polarization as merely ideological distance, it is the affective dimension — who we fear, resent, or refuse to engage with — that is reshaping sociopolitical dynamics. Such developments create fertile ground for the normalization of illiberalism and democratic erosion (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024; Kingzette et al., 2021; McCoy & Somer, 2021). These concerns are not abstract: The January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol, similarly motivated attacks in Brasilia on January 8, 2023, the rise of far-right parties across Europe, and the global backlash against immigration illustrate how emotionally fueled identities can mobilize conflict and destabilize democratic norms. Recent scholarship advances this discussion by conceptualizing destructive polarization, which is characterized by the breakdown of communication, discrediting information, and exclusion through emotions, among others (Esau et al., 2025). Recognizing affective polarization as part of this broader disruptive dynamic underscores the need for more precise and critical scholarship in this area.

Against this backdrop, identity becomes key to understanding affective polarization. Indeed, the field of political communication should (and is well-equipped to) center the communicative aspects of identity, particularly social identity, in the study of affective polarization. The role of identity in political communication has already been addressed in the preceding essay of this edition and in recent scholarly exchanges, including a noteworthy contribution in *Communication Monographs* (McGregor et al., 2025). Terms like “identity politics” and “culture wars” now permeate public discourse on democratic decline, social fragmentation, and political extremism. Their invocations often overlook how social identities

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are communicated – unintentionally invoked or strategically leveraged – in both mediated and everyday contexts. While identity vis-a-vis polarization can be studied from myriad angles, approaching affective polarization through the communicative lens of social identity opens new directions for political communication research. The objective of this essay is thus to introduce conceptual linkages across disciplines, subfields, and bodies of literature, and to organize them around three thematic areas: (1) conceptual clarity, (2) multi-level perspectives, and (3) key actors in identity mobilization. This is by no means an exhaustive endeavor, but a set of modest prompts for better understanding the connection between social identity and affective polarization.

Upholding Conceptual Precision

Few concepts in the social sciences are as ubiquitous—or elastic—as *identity* and *polarization*. In everyday discourse, identity is often equated with personal uniqueness, lifestyle, or self-expression. Especially in Western contexts shaped by individualization, identity tends to be framed as something internal and private. Personal identity, however, never exists in isolation. Individuals are embedded in relational networks and social categories that provide belonging and meaning. Social identities, such as those tied to nationality, religion, partisanship, gender, or region, form integral components of the self-concept. These identities are not merely “held” but shaped in manifold ways via social interactions. The desire to maintain a positive social identity is closely linked to social identification and comparison processes, which can foster ingroup favoritism (Harwood, 2020). When such “positive distinctiveness” comes at the expense of an outgroup, derogation and distrust may follow—and affective polarization can take root. Moreover, while a single social identity can already motivate such polarization, multiple overlapping identities may either reinforce or temper intergroup hostility depending on the perceived overlap (Roccas & Brewer, 2002).

Affective polarization, then, is best understood as an expression of identity-based boundary-making. Political communication research has typically examined it through partisan or political group identities, drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987; see also Oakes et al., 1994), and intergroup emotions theory (Mackie et al., 2008). Affective polarization is often defined as “the extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked out-group” (Iyengar et al., 2012, p. 406). However, political parties are only one of many possible identity anchors: outgroup animosity may also emerge along other lines. Identification with broader opinion camps (e.g., pro-Palestinian, MAGA) or policy stances (e.g., anti-immigration, anti-vaccination) often blends ideological disagreement with intergroup emotions and identity signaling (e.g., Gianolla, 2025; Kim et al., 2024). Nearly one-third of publications on affective polarization extends the concept beyond partisan divides to racial, territorial, religious, or opinion-based identities (Shoai, 2025), reflecting a shift toward understanding affective polarization through identity affiliations alongside political fault lines.

Taken together, these developments illustrate why *social identity* and *affective polarization* remain conceptually diffuse (e.g., Bakker & Lelkes, 2024). The term polarization often describes a trajectory—a dynamic process that involves social sorting (i.e., the alignment of political and other social identities; see Mason & Versteegen, 2025) and emotional hardening—rather than a fixed state. This raises questions about when we are observing affective polarization specifically or instead describing social fragmentation, alienation, or disengagement. Clarifying what is being polarized, along which identity dimensions and through what communicative processes, creates ample room for more cumulative and comparative research. At the same time, research linking identity and polarization must also attend to questions of status, hierarchy, and power relations between social groups, including their discursive manifestations, since these dynamics fundamentally shape how identities are experienced and contested (Balinhas, 2023). One fruitful development has been to use the social identity approach as a communicative framework that shapes language, belonging, and emotional attachment to groups (Harwood, 2006; Hogg & Tindale, 2005).

Advancing Micro- and Meso-Level Perspectives on Identity

The study of social identity and affective polarization would benefit from more scholarship at multiple levels of analysis. In multiparty systems, coalition politics can blur or sharpen boundaries between groups, challenging assumptions largely derived from US-centric, two-party models. Comparisons should also account for variation in civil liberties, civil-society strength, and people’s understandings of democracy, all of which can shape whether and how identities become politically salient. While important comparative work has illuminated how social identity and affective polarization unfold across political systems and societies (e.g., Bantel, 2023; Hartevelde, 2021; Park & Warner, 2024; Reiljan et al., 2024), the following emphasizes the micro- and meso-level dynamics underlying these processes.

At the individual level, social identity conditions how people attend to and interpret identity-relevant political information. Social identification provides cognitive shortcuts for navigating complex environments but also fosters selective exposure and motivated reasoning. Individuals are more likely to seek and trust content that reinforces existing identities, while dismissing or counterarguing dissonant cues (e.g., downplaying scientific facts from a distrusted outgroup). These confirmatory biases serve core identity functions, specifically social identity motivations. People seek to gratify underlying needs through political communication, particularly social enhancement and social uncertainty reduction (Joyce & Harwood, 2020).

As identity-based motivations and needs intensify, information processing can become more defensive and affectively charged, especially when identities are perceived as threatened or contested. In these situations, individuals often distance themselves from supporters of rival groups and respond with anger when their ingroup feels threatened (Renström et al., 2023). The result is not just preference alignment but identity-congruent affective filtering. The dynamic at play reverses the spirit of the familiar warning “don’t shoot the messenger”; that is,

rather than separating message from messenger, people tend to evaluate the content through the lens of who delivers it. The identity of the communicator then becomes a heuristic for whether a message is trustworthy and status-enhancing—or identity-threatening. Even ideas consistent with one’s values may be dismissed if voiced by an ideological rival. Such moments of ambivalence are psychologically difficult to manage, as accepting the message may feel like disloyalty toward one’s ingroup while rejecting it may conflict with one’s principles. In such cases, the message source is marked as an outgroup and messages are filtered not on their substantive merits but on the perceived identity implications of accepting them. Judgments thus become identity-based rather than issue-based, fueling affective polarization.

At the meso level, identity is reinforced through interactions within socially sorted networks. People do not assemble randomly into communities; they cluster with those who share salient identities, especially when politics becomes a site of boundary-making and boundary-defense. Social homophily (e.g., in neighborhoods, on digital platforms) concentrates communication among like-minded others, increasing in-group cohesion while limiting cross-cutting contact. These group settings amplify identity salience by offering continuous cues about “us” and “them,” and normalizing corresponding emotional and discursive repertoires (e.g., members of far-right online communities using contempt or defiant humor not just as rhetorical devices but as shared modes of expression that signal belonging and loyalty). However, within these cohesive spaces, intragroup polarization can also emerge, as members navigate pressures toward conformity alongside motivations for distinctiveness, sometimes motivating like-minded groups to adopt more extreme positions through internal discussions (Harel et al., 2025).

Actors in Identity Mobilization

A major strand of polarization research examines how elite actors are perceived as key sources of division (Ploger, 2024; Seimel, 2024). With their institutional powers and agenda-setting capacities, political elites are seen as primary drivers of affective polarization. Their combative rhetoric often resonates with highly motivated voters, creating reciprocal incentives for continued polarization. The concept of issue entrepreneurship (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020) explains how elites strategically make certain issues more salient to reap electoral benefits—a logic extended to *polarization entrepreneurs* (Jeziarska et al., 2024; Mau et al., 2023) and *identity entrepreneurs*, who deliberately activate or weaponize social identities (e.g., by attacking pluralism) to mobilize supporters and shape public sentiment (Scacco & Coe, 2021, p.136). The concept of *identity ownership*, building on the more familiar notion of issue ownership, follows the same line of thinking (Kreiss et al., 2020).

A meso-level, actor-focused perspective shifts analytical attention to organizational actors embedded in civil-society networks. Both reactionary groups (e.g., anti-immigrant, nationalist groups) and progressive groups (e.g., climate justice or refugee solidarity networks) strategically employ identity markers to foster ingroup cohesion and mobilize collective action around shared visions, goals, and emotions. In such contexts, groups often operate as ‘affective

publics' (Papacharissi, 2016) or 'emotional communities' (Koschut, 2024), where collective emotions such as outrage or hope are cultivated and amplified through digital platforms.

An often-discussed corrective to polarization is to elevate superordinate identities that cut across factional boundaries. Under favorable conditions, invoking broader categories can encourage cross-group communication and dampen outgroup animosity. For example, "rally-round-the-flag" effects show how national identity can temporarily supersede partisan divides (Kizilova & Norris, 2024). While often arising in threat-based context, such an identity may also revolve around the idea of civic or constitutional loyalty as a unifying element. Similarly, climate justice movements may appeal to a common human (or global) identity that emphasizes shared responsibility for humanity and future generations (Pong et al., 2023). These appeals aim to bridge divides, though they are often constrained by individual lifestyle preferences and macroeconomic interests.

Such efforts illustrate how elites and activists alike can deploy identity-enhancing strategies to cultivate intergroup solidarity. However, the integrative power of superordinate identities is highly contingent: Where common ground erodes, shared labels lose their ability to mobilize. Appeals to U.S. national identity, for example, no longer reliably encourage intergroup contact in certain situations, presumably because individuals no longer perceive the nation as a 'jointly owned' or equally representative enterprise (Neumann, 2021). When social sorting is profound, the promise of an inclusive identity clashes with the reality of an already deeply affectively polarized public (Dawkins & Hanson, 2024). Conversely, identity-threatening strategies weaponize symbolic and social boundaries to provoke outrage, resentment, and outgroup hostility, even violence. Anti-immigration rallies, for instance, portray migrants as threats to national culture or welfare systems, using emotionally charged claims and symbols (e.g., flags, heritage markers, memes, hashtags) to mobilize fear and reinforce exclusionary identities (Ekman, 2019). Thus, depending on actors' goals and contextual conditions, the same identity frame may be invoked and reinforced to justify restrictive immigration policies or to promote civic solidarity in humanitarian crises.

Concluding Remarks

Affective polarization warrants sustained attention because it erodes trust and norms on which democracy depends. In today's dissonant public spheres, shaped by complex digital environments and fragmented information flows (Pfetsch et al., 2023), identity-centered discourses intensify as emotions are amplified online. When citizens view political disagreement not as a contest of ideas but as conflict between groups—and 'the other side' as an existential threat—the social fabric disintegrates. Understanding this identity-polarization nexus is therefore crucial, as belonging and boundary-making, not merely ideological divergence, fuel political conflict. Examining identity-centered communication is thus key to understanding how affective polarization takes root and how it might be mitigated. Political communication scholarship has much to contribute to this endeavor by illuminating how communicative processes sustain and transform these divides.

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