

Does social capital reduce affective polarization?

Julian Erhardt, Annika Schuster (University of Salzburg),
Maximilian Filsinger (Catholic University of Lille)

Aarauer Demokratietage, Aarau, 12.03.2026,

Panel 1:

Politicization and Polarization of Non-Political Institutions (courts, schools, police)



- Affective polarization is on the rise in Western democracies:
People supporting opposing parties not only disagree with each other, but actively dislike the opposing camp
(e.g., Westwood et al. 2018, Iyengar et al. 2019, Helbling/Jungkunz 2020, Wagner 2021)
- Research has studied various explanations for this increase
(e.g., Levendusky 2009, Gimpel/Hui 2015, Rogowski/Sutherland 2016, Lelkes et al. 2017)
 - Increase in partisanship and polarization
 - Partisan media outlets
 - Social media echo chambers
 - Less diverse social networks
- Our contribution: Testing social capital as a potential explanation
 - Has been argued to be crucial for the functioning of democracy by laying the foundations for a strong civil society and active citizenship
(e.g., Putnam 1993, 2000, Newton 1997)
 - May counteract less diverse social networks and echo chambers

Theoretical argument

Social capital & Affective polarization

- Social capital: “networks, norms and trust that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 1993: 35)
 - Networks: being active in associations, voluntary work, informal social contacts
 - Norms: reciprocity, tolerance
 - Trust: trust in other people – trust in strangers, trust in people you know
- Affective polarization: “strong positive feelings towards one’s in-party as well as strong negative feelings towards out-parties” (Harteveld/Wagner 2023: 737)
 - vs. ideological polarization as the difference between the policy positions
 - Social identity theory: in-group/out-group distinctions trigger positive feelings for the in-group and negative evaluations for the outgroup
 - Partisanship as a salient and powerful form of identification

Theoretical argument

Argument

- Social capital promotes an inclusive outlook on society
 - increases contact with different parts of society
 - promotes pluralism, acceptance of different worldviews
 - motivates generous and altruistic behavior
 - Increases cooperation
 - strengthens political discourse
 - voluntary associations act as schools of democracy

H_1 : *A higher level of social capital is negatively related to affective polarization.*

Data & Methods

Data

- Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social sciences (LISS) Panel
 - representative online household panel survey in the Netherlands
 - waves 1–17 (2007/8–2023/4), \approx 6.000 respondents per wave
- Panel analysis

Data & Methods

Affective polarization

- DV: Affective polarization

“How sympathetic do you find the political parties? What do you think of the ...?”

Very unsympathetic (0) – Very sympathetic (10)

– how much the feeling thermometer scores vary between parties (Wagner 2021)

- a) All parties: include all parties in the survey
- b) Main parties: exclude smaller parties
- c) Non-extreme main parties: exclude smaller parties, exclude far-left and far-right major parties

- IV: Social capital

“We now list a number of organizations that you are free to join. Can you indicate, for each of the organizations listed, what applies to you at this moment or has applied to you over the past 12 months?”

- *a sports club*
- *a cultural association or hobby club*
- ...

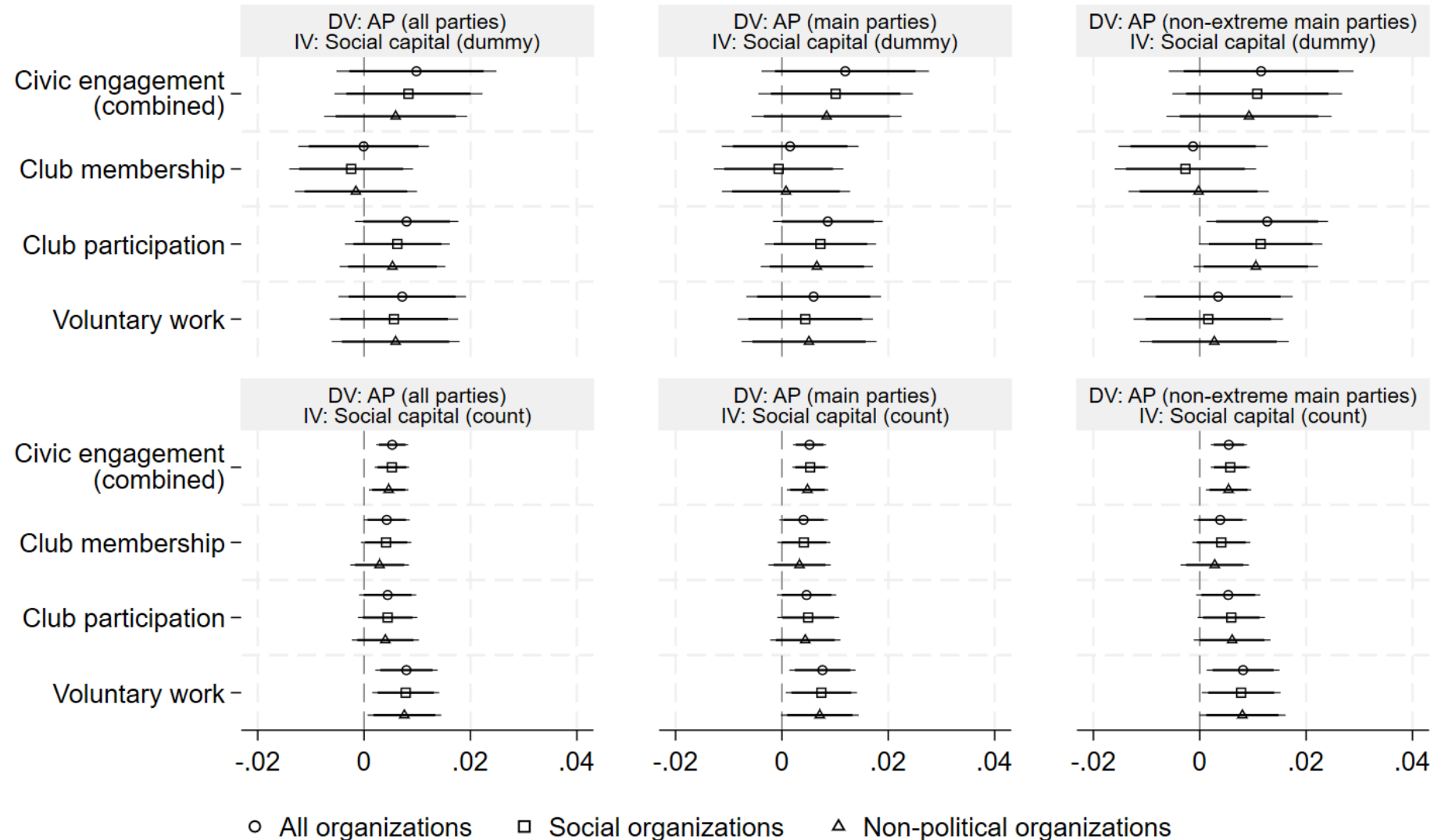
a) Member, b) Participated in an activity, c) Performed voluntary work

No (0), Yes (1)

- We combine the different organizations to create variables for club membership, club participation, voluntary work and civic engagement (all forms combined)
- Yes/No (yes for at least one organization vs. no for all organizations),
Count (sum of yes across organizations)
- All organizations, social organizations (exclude business), non-political organizations (exclude anything related to politics)

Results

Main findings



Results

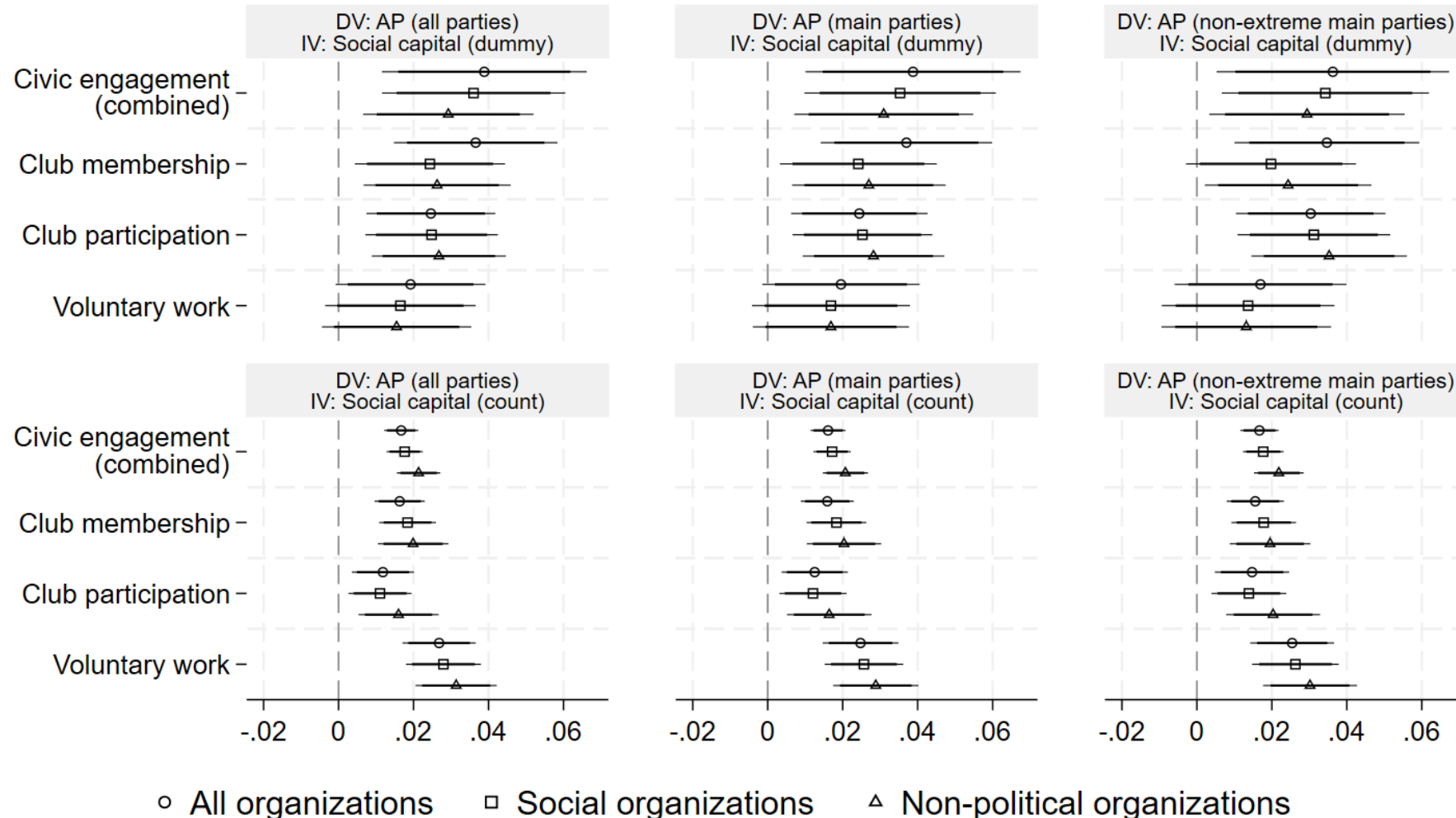
Main findings & extended analysis

- Surprising findings
 - Mostly no findings
 - A few results show positive effect
 - if anything, social capital seems to fuel affective polarization (however, only for count variables and voluntary work)
 - Size of the effect is very small
- Looking for explanations:
 - Do our results differ between respondent characteristics?
 - Surprisingly, fairly consistent differences in terms of ideology
 - Social capital particularly increases affective polarization among left-wing respondents

Results

Extended analysis

Marginal effect for left-wing respondents (2)



Conclusion

Summary & outlook

- Social capital only weakly related to affective polarization
- Surprisingly, if anything, it increases affective polarization, particularly on the left

- CentERdata (2025): Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social sciences (LISS) Panel, <https://www.lissdata.nl/> (24.09.25).
- Iyengar, Shanto/Lelkes, Yphtach/Levendusky, Matthew/Malhotra, Neil/Westwood, Sean J. (2019): The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22:1, 129–146.
- Gimpel, James G./Hui, Iris S. (2015): Seeking politically compatible neighbors? The role of neighborhood partisan composition in residential sorting, *Political Geography*, 48, 130–142.
- Harteveld, Eelco/Wagner, Markus (2023): Does affective polarisation increase turnout? Evidence from Germany, The Netherlands and Spain, *West European Politics*, 46:4, 732–759.
- Helbling, Marc/Jungkunz, Sebastian (2020): Social divides in the age of globalization, *West European Politics*, 43:6, 1187–1210.
- Lelkes, Yphtach/Sood, Gaurav/Iyengar, Shanto (2017): The Hostile Audience: The Effect of Access to Broadband Internet on Partisan Affect, *American Journal of Political Science*, 61:1, 5–20.
- Levendusky, Matthew (2009): *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans*, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr.
- Newton, Kenneth (1997): Social Capital and Democracy, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 40:5, 575–586.
- Putnam, Robert D. (1993): *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Pr.
- Putnam, Robert D. (2000): *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Rogowski, Jon C./Sutherland, Joseph L. (2016): How Ideology Fuels Affective Polarization, *Political Behavior*, 38:2, 485–508.
- Wagner, Markus (2021): Affective polarization in multiparty systems, *Electoral Studies*, 69, 102199.
- Westwood, Sean J./Iyengar, Shanto/Walgrave, Stefaan/Leonisio, Rafael/Miller, Luis/Strijbis, Oliver (2018): The tie that divides: Cross-national evidence of the primacy of partyism, *European Journal of Political Research*, 57:2, 333–354.