Perception of polarization among political representatives

Louise Skoog, PhD Public administration
David Karlsson, Professor Public administration
University of Gothenburg

Paper presented at ECPR General Conference, 30 Aug-3 Sept 2021

Panel: Destructive or deliberative? Deliberation among the political elite

1. Introduction

Party polarization[1] is discussed and problematized worldwide (c.f Abramowitz and Saunders 2008). While parties standing for distinct political alternatives are a prerequisite for a functioning representative democracy, parties standing too far apart and unwilling to compromise may bring democratic work to an unacceptable standstill. However, it has proven to be surprisingly difficult to determine the scope of party polarization, and to which degree it changes over time. One reason for this, pointed out by earlier studies, is that there is often a gap between *actual* polarization (based on objective measures) and *perceived* polarization (measured as attitudes). And as perceived polarization among people and political elites fosters a negative view of, or even animosity towards, political opponents (i.e. affective polarization) (Abramowitz and Webster 2018; Hetherington 2009; Mason 2015; Iyengar et al 2012; Westfall et al 2014; Riek et al 2006), perceptions of polarization is just as important – if not more – as actual polarization for forming peoples' behaviour (Enders and Miles 2019) and attitudes.

In order to establish respectful political deliberations in polarized situations, some measure of political empathy is needed among political actors for understanding how their opponents perceive the situation and how and why their perceptions might differ from your own (compare Batson and Ahmad 2009). However, findings unhelpfully suggest that experiences of empathy are biased towards one's in-group, i.e. those who are like us, and empathy may contra intuitively exacerbate political polarization (Simas et al 2020), creating an "empathy

[1] Polarization sometimes refers to state and distance between parties at a certain time, and sometimes to a process where this distance increases over time (compare DiMaggio, Evans och Bryson 1996). We focus here on polarization in the former sense.

gap" (Gutsell and Inzlicht 2012) toward political opponents. The driving force behind such empathy gaps is often party partisanship.

Partisanship is related to polarization (Carlin and Love 2018), but where the former refers to people's *affiliation with* specific parties the latter refers to the perceived *distance between* parties. Effects of partisanship are thusly tied to peoples' social identity or group identification (Conover 1984), especially top parties and coalitions in terms of political winners or losers, (Bowler et al 2006; Gilljam and Karlsson 2015). Partisanship can also affect people's trust in public authorities, their satisfaction with democracy or the economy, etc, where political winners are normally more content and losers more dissatisfied (e.g. Esaiasson et al 2013; Hooghe and Okolikj 2020). Earlier studies clearly link partisanship to peoples' political perceptions and in this paper we will take the analysis further and investigate whether partisanship also is a force behind perception of polarization.

Most studies on perception of polarization and partisanship have focused on citizens and their views on the society they live in. However, for political elites – especially elected political representatives – perceptions of polarization and partisanship are not just a general reflection on the state of society, it concerns their everyday life and their deliberations and relations with colleagues in an elected assembly. The need for more knowledge on political representatives relations is underscored by findings from earlier studies, noting that the greatest variation in perceptions of party polarization among representatives lies among individuals *within* the same elected assembly, rather than *between* different assemblies (Skoog and Karlsson 2018). Politicians within the same elected assembly may apparently perceive the level of polarization very differently.

Furthermore, we know from earlier studies that both partisanship and polarization are tied to *trust* (Carlin and Love 2018). Trust is a trait of indivdiuals' characteristics that affects their dispositions and perceptions (Newton 2007), aspects that are crucial for initiating, establishing, and maintaining social relations (Balliet and Van Lange 2012). Carlin and Love (2018) argues that partisanship and trust are closely related, as partisanship tends to cause trust gaps in relation to opponents. And they also show that such trust gaps are associated with how political polarization is perceived.

Earlier studies have thusly suggested that perceived political polarization is associated with partisanship and trust as well as with antagonistic behaviour among political actors. Causal relationships between these phenomena are tricky to establish, but we would argue that partisanship is a driving force, in the sense that your perceptions and behaviour are more

likely the result of you being a winner or loser in previous election, rather than the other way around.

In this paper, we analyse why politicians perceive political polarization differently and test the effects of two factors that previous scholars have suggested to be important for shaping how people experience social situations: partisanship and trust. We will also investigate whether perceptions of polarization are related to antagonistic behaviour among political actors in the political work.

A study of perceptions of polarization among politicians places major demands on the data. For such a study, we would ideally need as many units of analysis (individual politicians) as possible, clustered in numerous different contexts (elected assemblies) with valid and identical indicators of different forms of party conflicts as well as information on the parliamentary situation in terms of governing coalitions and oppositions as well as experience of trust. A comparative local government approach is therefore an ideal research design. The analysis in this study is based on data from a survey conducted in 2012–2013 among all the local councillors (9,725 responding councillors, i.e. a 79 percent response rate) in Sweden's 290 municipalities (Karlsson and Gilljam 2014). Using this design, our research questions are*:*

- *To what extent do partisanship and levels of trust affect perceptions of political polarization among local councillors in Sweden?*
- *To what extent do perceived political polarization explain antagonistic behaviour among local councillors in Sweden?*

This paper is structured as follows: In section 2 we discuss what perception of political polarization is and how partisanship and trust can be expected to affect it. And in turn, how political polarization is related to antagonistic behaviour. In section 3 we present our case and discuss the methodological aspects and sources of data, as well as the indicators for the dependent and independent variables. In section 4 we present our findings, and in section 5 we discuss how partisanship and trust affect perceptions of political polarization and what implications this might have for strengthening democratic practices.

2. Effects of partisanship and trust on perceived polarization and antagonistic behaviour

Polarization is the distance between opposing opinions and interests, i.e. degree of dissent between political parties. Differing opinions and interests are a key mechanism for a

functional democracy. Political parties are created to represent different social groups, political ideas and programs. Tensions between parties often concern disagreements over political principles and issues. Parties may disagree on political objectives or on what constitutes a good society, and when parties have similar objectives, they may differ on how these should be pursued (DiMaggio et al 1996; Bakker et al 2012). A high degree of political dissent between parties means that they have positions on political issues that are a long way apart; whereas a low degree means that their positions are more similar. Earlier studies have also found that political dissent is of great relevance to the parliamentary arena (Lantto 2005; Skoog 2019).

2.1 Effects of partisanship and trust

Perceptions of polarization are likely to be affected by many different aspects. Among earlier studies, two interrelated factors stand out in particular: *partisanship* and *trust*, these are – on the one hand – distinct social qualities that are based in how we perceive ourselves, our relationships and political institutions in general. On the other hand, earlier studies have shown that the factors also may be dependent on one another, as partisanship is associated with trust gaps (Carlin and Love 2018). Therefore, a study where the effect of one of the factors is estimated, the effect of the other must be controlled for.

There is no polarization between opponents without combatants, and in a parliamentary democracy those are political teams in the form of parties or coalitions of parties. Belonging to a political coalition or party and being its representative constitutes more than adherence to an ideology upon which political programs are built. It is also about being a member of a group – how one identifies (see ex de Vries and van Kersbergen 2007). Social identity entails the incorporation of group membership into the self-concept (Conover 1984, 761; Huddy 2003). From this perspective, being a member of a party or coalition is not simply about a set of shared beliefs or values, but also feelings of a psychological attachment to a political group (Campbell et al 1960; Green et al 2002; Mason 2015). Earlier scholars have found evidence that social identity foster partisanship (Greene 2004), which in turn have significant effects on both behaviour and perceptions. Demonstrating that rooting for a team may alter one's perception of events. In terms of basic psychological effects of social identity and partisanship, there are similarities between politics and sports. Earlier scholars have studied the reactions of people to their sporting team being defeated. Loyalty to a group involves emotional reactions, a shared pride in victory and bitterness in defeat. It also involves

mechanisms of rationalizations in which defeat is attributed to external factors or foul play by the opposing team. This functions to protect the group's standing and by extension ones own sense of pride (Mann 1974).

From this perspective, affiliation with a political team could influence an actor's perceptions of polarization and antagonistic behaviour – especially if their team is in a winning or losing position. Such positions are determined by electoral results that shape the composition of governments, positions of those elected, and who has influence over the political agenda. The winner/loser assignments have crucial effects for the positions of political actors in the battles to come, with each new debate or decision-making situation constituting a new fight to be fought which renews the sense of winning or losing.

Earlier scholars of political behaviour have demonstrated several vital effects of being a political winner or loser. For example, there is a tendency to prefer practices that are beneficial for the party and to interpret situations in a way that puts the party in a favourable light, i.e. the home team effect (Gilljam and Karlsson 2015; Holmberg 1999). We also know that candidates who have won an election are less supportive of proposals to change institutions, while those who have lost an election are more encouraging of such changes (Bowler et al 2006). These results could be interpreted as the result of an effect of self-interest. But winning is also associated with a greater democratic content (Blais and Gelinau 2007), perceptions of electoral fairness (Kernell and Mullinix 2019), and winners are more inclined to give positive evaluations of leaders, policies, and economic conditions (Anderson and Tverdova 2001; Ginsberg and Weissberg 1978). Thus, winning seems to put many things in a more positive light.

Being a political winner or loser is not solely about identity – they also generate objectively different experiences, as being a winner is associated with being in power. When the influence of individual political actors varies, the resistance they experience from their opponents will also differ. And when actors who are on the winning side of politics regularly overcome all resistance in political processes, it is likely that their perception of polarization is lower. Conversely, political actors on the losing side are more likely to experience obstacles in their efforts; they have to work harder to achieve their political goals. Those most deprived of influence may even perceive their political work as a perpetual struggle against invincible opponents.

Being a political winner or loser is thus a fundamental distinction between different political actors, with mechanisms such as social identity, partisanship and differing experience of political work all affecting the actors' perception of conflict in the same direction:

> *H1. Representatives of parties in the ruling majority ("the winners") perceive polarization between political opponents as being of a lower magnitude than representatives of parties in opposition ("the losers")*

Trust can refer to specific political institutions and actors (i.e. political trust; Newton 2007) as well as institutions and people in general. *Generalized* trust builds heavily on trust in strangers (Uslaner 2002) and is an intrinsic part of personality characteristics. Where individuals' displaying high levels of generalized trust are more prone to have a confident, optimistic, and cooperative disposition (Allport 1961; Uslaner 2000, 2002), and to be more open-minded and tolerant (Norén Bretzer 2005). This means that trust is part of one's worldview, establishing a basic framework for how we assess events and situations. People with low levels of generalized trust have a critical view of the world and its people, and tend to perceive the behaviour of others as contrarian and disingenuous. Broken trust may also end social relations (Lewicki and Bunker 1996; Robinson 1996). Conversely, increased trust encourages initiation of cooperation (Deutsch 1958; McKnight et al 1998), in part by strengthening norms that favour cooperation and behaviour that is inclusive towards new members (Balliet and Van Lange 2013; Fukuyama 1995; La Porta et al 1997; Putnam 1993), and those with high-levels of generalized trust tend to have a more understanding view of others' intentions. People's perceptions of polarization are therefore likely to be negatively correlated with their level of generalized trust.

However, trust is not restricted to being a part of personal dispositions and characteristics, it is also dependent on life experiences. The degrees to which actors have been personally involved in a situation or event have a major influence over a person's perceptions of the world (Jervis 2017). Political representatives are not merely observers; they have actively participated in political processes that have formed their impressions of actors and institutions. They have experiences that are likely to shape their trust in the specific local actors and institutions they have faced. This means that we can expect polarization to be perceived as having a lesser magnitude among those with a high level of specified trust in local actors and institutions. Two parallel hypotheses relating to generalized and specified trust emerge from this reasoning:

> *H2a. Representatives with high levels of general trust perceive polarization between political*

opponents as having a lower magnitude than representatives with low levels of general trust

H2b. Representatives with high levels of specified local trust perceive polarization between political opponents as having a lower magnitude than representatives with low levels of specified trust

2.2 Effects on antagonistic behaviour in the political work

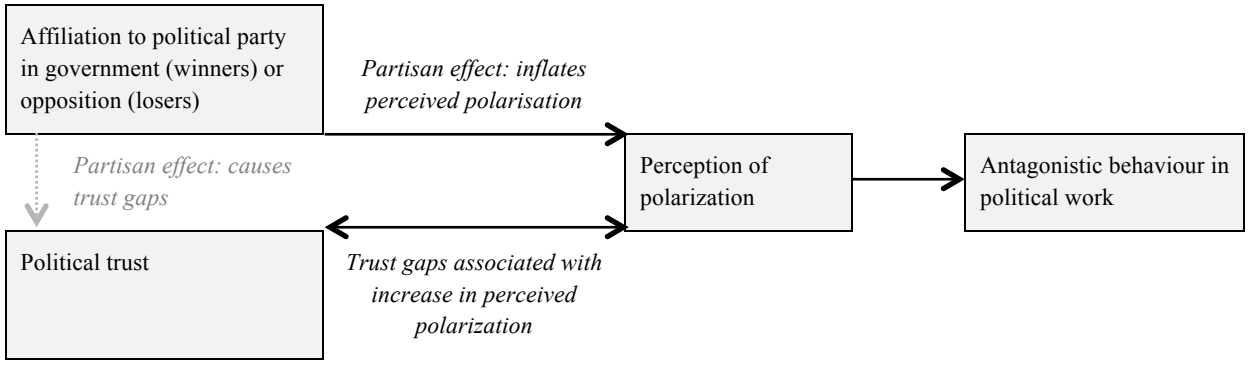
Perceptions of polarization between political opponents may also have consequences for the quality of the relationship between actors. Earlier studies also teach us that the distance between interests and opinions in elected assemblies may have an effect on the political climate and how political actors behave towards each other. *Antagonistic behaviour* is a concept that refers to acts of open critique of other political parties and disrespectful strategic actions in order to stop other actors from exerting political influence (Lantto 2005; Skoog 2019). And in contrast, cooperative behaviour means that the parties downplay existing party differences and strive towards agreement across party lines. From studies on coalition formation we learn that there is a greater likelihood of cooperation between parties with similar positions on political issues while parties that are further apart will have trouble cooperating (Adams and Merrill 2009; De Swaan and Rapoport 1973). This illustrates that there is a relationship between how far apart – or close together – the political positions are and how they behave towards each other. But the dimension of antagonistic behaviour is a wider phenomenon than what is discussed in literature on coalition formation: comprising the relationship between all parties, not just the partners within a coalition. Where high levels of polarization may foster a negative view of political opponents (so called affective polarization) (Abramowitz and Webster 2018; Hetherington 2009; Mason 2015; Iyengar et al 2012; Westfall et al 2014; Riek et al 2006), and lead to increases in antagonistic behaviour in the political work (Skoog and Karlsson 2018). In light of earlier studies, we expect heightened levels of perceived political polarization among political actors to be accompanied by increased antagonistic behaviour in the political work.

H3: Heightened levels of perceived political polarization among political actors will have a positive effect on antagonistic behaviour in the political work

As causality over time may change direction it is a challenge to establish causal relations between partisanship, trust and perceived polarization. But at a given date, it is not unreasonable to assume that being a winner or loser in previous election affects perceptions of

trust and polarization in the present rather than the other way around. The relation between trust (gaps) and perceived polarization is harder to pin down. Figure 1 summarizes the relations between these four phenomena as postulated in our hypotheses.

Figure 1. Postulated relationships between partisanship, trust, perceptions of polarization and antagonistic behaviour in political work



Not. The partisan effect (in grey) is controlled for in the analysis, but is not the main focus for this study.

3. Methodology

3.1 The Swedish case

These hypotheses will be tested in relation to data from Swedish local governments. Sweden is a decentralized unitary state, where the degree of ideological polarization in Sweden has remained high over a long period of time (Oscarsson et al 2021) and where political parties are represented at all tiers of government. There is also a high level of party politicization in Swedish local politics (Klok and Denters 2013) and the system is based on parliamentary principles (Bäck 2003).

It is often claimed that one difference between politics at local and national level is that politics at the national level is characterized to a greater extent by polarization and party conflicts between political parties. However, while earlier studies have described Swedish local politics as being dominated by consensual democracy until the 1950s and 1960s, there has been an increase in party polarization in subsequent decades. In addition, even though norms of consensual democracy are still present in the discourse surrounding Swedish local democracy, this trend has led to a more conflict-oriented approach in the municipalities, with local politics evolving towards majority rule and away from the traditional ideals of unity government (Lantto 2005; Skoog 2019). Compared to other countries, Sweden has large municipalities with extensive political organizations. The local level deals with issues across the entire political spectrum, from land allocation to childcare services (Hesse and Sharpe

1991; Hendriks et al 2010). In summary, being a party-based political system based on parliamentary principles where political conflicts potentially focus on a wide array of issues makes Swedish local government an excellent choice for our study.

3.2 The Survey

The data used in this study derives from a unique survey of all local councillors in the 290 municipalities in Sweden: the KOLFU survey that was carried out in 2012-2013. Depending on the size of the municipality, a local council in 2012 consisted of 31 to 101 councillors, who are elected on party lists in general elections every four years. The survey accumulated 9,725 responses, which is a response rate of 79%. The response rate was over 60% in 85% of the 290 municipalities. Overall, there are no major differences between the response rates of representatives from different political parties (Karlsson and Gilljam 2014).

3.3 Dependent variables: perceived polarization and antagonistic behaviour in the political work

The key dependent variable in the analysis is the indicator for perception of polarization refers to the positions that political actors take on political issues. It is measured as follows:

In the KOLFU survey, the councillors were asked to consider the statement: "There are major *policy differences* between the ruling majority and the opposition". The councillors responded on an eleven-point scale from "the statement is absolutely wrong" to "the statement is absolutely correct". In this study, this indicator is coded 0–10 when used as a dependent variable (and 0–1 when used as an independent variable). The mean value among all councillors on the 0–10 scale is 5.7 and the municipalities with the highest and lowest perceived degree of political dissent were Stockholm (7.7) and Tibro (1.7).

We know from earlier studies that the distance between political actors opinions and interests have major consequences for levels of *antagonistic behaviour*. This refers to the climate in which politicians interact and practice their roles as representatives. In the KOLFU survey, the councillors were asked: "Is the *political work* [in your municipality] primarily characterized by consensus or party conflicts?". The councillors responded on an eleven-point scale and the answers are coded on a scale from 0 (primarily consensus) to 10 (primarily party conflicts). The mean value among all councillors in Sweden was 4.4 and the municipalities

with the highest and lowest perceived antagonistic behaviour were Landskrona (8.4) and Tibro (1.1).

The two variables on political polarization and antagonistic behaviour correlate (Pearson's r = 0.22). This means that they are related phenomena, but only a limited part of the variation in one of the variables is potentially explained by the other.

3.4 Multi-level analysis

We know from earlier studies that the degree of polarization and political conflict at local level is related to structural factors at the municipal level such as size, demographic and economic situation, as well as factors relating to political contestation and party structure. However, in this paper we are not focusing on contextual and structural factors that may explain variation among municipalities. Instead, we are looking for factors at the individual level that explain why politicians in the same municipality perceive the degree of polarization differently. Fixed-effects linear multilevel regression models are therefore used in order to distinguish individual factors from factors at the municipal level. By using this method, it is possible to assess the proportion of variation between municipalities (the intra-class correlation) by estimating a random-intercept-only model (null model).

Results of a null model analysis (table 1) show that 8 percent of the variation in perceived political dissent is found among the 290 municipalities in which representatives are clustered, while 92 percent of the variation is found among individual representatives. About 21 percent variation in perceived antagonistic behaviour is found at the municipal level, while 79 percent is found among individual representatives. The variation among representatives within the municipalities is thus much greater than the variation between municipalities. It is this individual variation, where councillors in the same council disagree on the polarization levels, that is the focus of this paper.

(Table 1)

3.5 Main independent variables

The first hypothesis (H1) concerns the effects of being a political winner or loser. Here we will use two indicators: primarily *parliamentary position* (being part of the ruling majority or the opposition), and as a complement, *formal rank*.

After local elections, the winning parties form a ruling majority in all municipalities. The ruling coalitions, which may vary greatly in size and composition, normally govern the municipality throughout the entire election period (Bäck 2003). About 54 percent of Swedish local councillors represent parties that are part of the local ruling majority (or sometimes a ruling minority), and 46 percent are members of opposition parties.

However, being part of the majority or the opposition is not the only factor determining whether politicians are winners or losers. There is a clear hierarchy in each municipality, with councillors having a higher and lower formal rank, which also corresponds with their perceived influence over political affairs (Karlsson and Gilljam 2014). The experiences of a top-ranking opposition councillor may be more similar to a political winner than a marginalized backbencher from a party in the ruling majority. In this analysis, a formal rank index is used as indicator, with the most highly ranked offices, chairs of executive boards – "the mayors" – and chairs of councils, being given the value 1. The following ranks and their values are: deputy chair of the executive board, the council as well as chairs of council committees: 0.8; members of the executive board and deputy chairs of council committees: 0.6; members of council committees and deputy members of the executive board 0.4; deputy members of council committees 0.2; and councillors with no other assignments (i.e. backbenchers): 0.

As councillors in the ruling majority are more likely to be appointed a higher post, majority members have on average a higher value in the formal position index (0.53) than opposition members (0.43). By including both the formal rank indicator alongside the parliamentary position indicator (the prime indicator for winner/loser) in the models, the effect of parliamentary position will be controlled for spurious effects of formal position.

The second hypothesis (H2a) concerns the effects of *generalized trust*. Here we will use two indicators: General *democratic satisfaction* and *interpersonal trust*. The first indicator is based on the survey question "on the whole, how satisfied are you with how democracy works in Sweden", where responses were given on a four-point scale from great satisfaction (here: 1) to great dissatisfaction (0). The indicator for interpersonal trust is based on the question "In your opinion, to what extent is it possible to trust people in general?" where the responses were given on an eleven-point scale, from "it is not possible to trust people in general" (here: 0) to "it is possible to trust people in general" (1).

The third hypothesis (H2b) concerns the role of *specified local political trust* as an intermediary factor. Here we will use two indicators for this factor: Perception of the

responsiveness of the ruling majority and *trust in the Executive board*. The first indicator is based on the survey question "In your opinion, to what extent has the governing majority in your municipality attempted to satisfy the will of the people after the last election?" followed by an eleven-point response scale from "to a very little extent" (here: 0) to "to a very great extent" (1). The indicator for trust in the local Executive board is based on the question "How much trust do you have in the way the following institutions perform their work: [the Executive board in your municipality]?", where the responses were given on an eleven-point scale, from "very low" (here: 0) to "very high" level of trust (1).

Descriptive information regarding the dependent and independent variables used in this study are presented in Table 2, as well as bivariate correlations between the dependent and independent variables. Correlations among all independent variables, including control variables, are presented in Table 3.

(Table 2)

(Table 3)

3.6 Control variables

In order to check the effects of our main independent variables, three party political variables are included in the models. The first concerns potential effects of ideology. In collectivist ideologies such as socialism and feminism, individuals are seen as members of different social groups with diverging interests, giving rise to power struggles and conflicts between them (Liedman 2012). It is therefore conceivable for socialist politicians to interpret party relations as more conflictual than followers of more individualistic or conservative ideologies. We therefor check for ideology by including a control variable for councillors representing The Left Party and The Social Democrats, they are here classified as socialists (42 percent).

As representatives of the Sweden Democrats are in opposition everywhere, affiliation to this party is also checked to ensure that the effect of not belonging to a party in government is separate from the effect of being a Sweden Democrat. In addition, as earlier results indicate that the presence of a local (i.e. non-national) party could be a factor that enhances local conflicts (Skoog and Karlsson 2018), we also include membership of a local party as a control variable. About 3 percent of the respondents in KOLFU are Sweden Democrats and 3 percent represent local parties (both are somewhat underrepresented compared to other parties).

We also include demographic factors such as education level, gender and age as control variables. About 52 percent of the respondents in KOLFU have a university education, the respondents range in age from 18 (lowest = 0) to 89 (highest = 1), with a mean age of 53 (0.49), and 43 percent of the respondents are women.

Furthermore, we have also included a number of variables at the municipal level as control variables. One category is the structural variables relating to social fragmentation in the locality (income inequality/Gini-coefficient; ethnic heterogeneity/share of immigrants); center-periphery balance), size of the municipality, fiscal stress (economic growth; solvency of local authorities), party sizes, and several indicators of political contestation (party concentration; size of the ruling majority; broad ruling coalition; contestation based on sizes of political blocks; frequency of shifts of power). The effects of these municipal level context variables are analysed in an earlier study where the dependent variable was the conflict level at the municipal level (Skoog and Karlsson 2018). Another category is the aggregated versions of the individual independent variables (i.e. for gender, the proportion of women in the council, for socialist ideology, the proportion of socialists in the council, etc.).

3.7 Model strategy

The analysis is carried out in 5 multilevel regression models. In model 1 (table 4), the indicator for perception of political polarization is the dependent variable and the indicators for parliamentary position, formal rank, general democratic satisfaction, and interpersonal trust are included as independent variables along with all the control variables. In model 2, the indicators for local political trust (trust in the Executive board; perceived responsiveness of ruling majority) are added as independent variables. In models 3 and 4, the indicator for antagonistic behaviour is the dependent variable, and the independent variables are the same as in models 1 and 2 respectively.

The reason for adding the indicators of local political trust in a separate model relatively strong correlations between those indicators and antagonistic behaviour (see table 2). This model design enables us to keep the effects of local trust from corrupting the other results and to determine whether the effects of independent variables are direct effects or channelled through local political trust. Moreover, as we can not establish whether our interpretation of the correlation between the two is correct, a different causal relationship is possible. But if one relies in the hypothesis, then our interpretation is reasonable. In model 5 the indicator for

perceived polarization is introduced as an independent variable in relation to antagonistic behaviour in the political work.

If H1 is correct we would expect significant negative effects of being a member of a ruling majority and of having a higher value on the formal rank-index, i.e. political winners perceive conflict levels as of a lower magnitude than political losers. If H2a is correct we would expect a negative effect of having a high level of general democratic satisfaction and a negative effect of having high levels of interpersonal trust, i.e. representatives with a high degree of generalized trust perceive conflicts as lower. And if H2b is correct we would expect negative effects of perceiving the local governing majority as responsive and having high levels of trust in the Executive board, i.e. representatives with high levels of specified local trust perceive conflict levels as having a lower magnitude. If H3 is correct, we expect positive effects of perceived political polarization on antagonistic behaviour in the political work, i.e. an increased level of perceived political polarization lead to an increase in antagonistic behaviour in the political work.

In order to facilitate comparisons of the effects produced by the analysis, all independent variables are recoded in the models, so that 1 represents the maximum value and 0 the minimum value of each variable. In all analyses, the two dependent variables (political dissent and antagonistic behaviour) are coded as 0–10.

4. Results

The results of the multiple multilevel regression analyses are presented in table 4.

(Table 4)

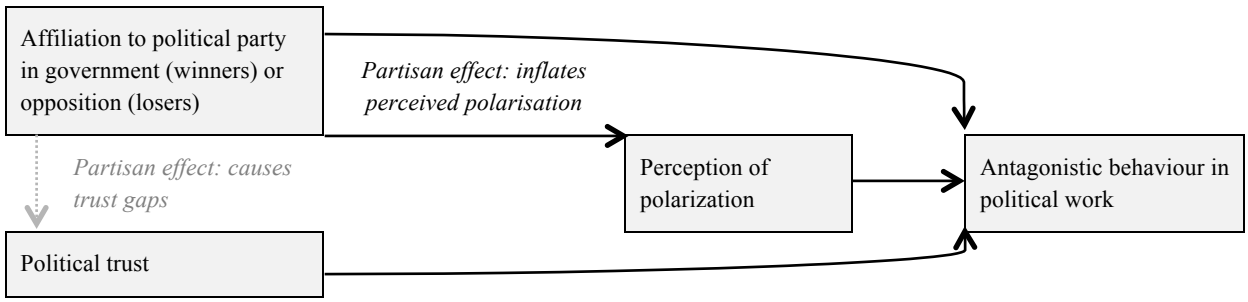
In models 1-2, being a member of the ruling majority has a negative effect on perception of polarization. This is in line with H1, i.e. that politicians on the winning side of politics perceive polarization as being of a lesser magnitude. The results of the other indicator of winner and loser, the formal rank index, also produce negative effects in all models that are in line with H1, but these results are not statistically significant. This means that formal position has no effect on perceived polarization. With regards to H1, this means that aspects of winner/loser related to party membership and partisanship are more relevant than individual positions and, given that caveat, H1 is confirmed.

Results from Models 1–2, where perceived polarization is the dependent variable, show that there are no effects of the indicators for generalized trust on perception of polarization, which goes against the assumption of H2a. Furthermore, results in model 2 indicate that none of the indicators of specified local trust have a statistically significant effect on perception of polarization – going against H2b. H2a and H2b are thus not confirmed.

Results of model 5, where antagonistic behaviour is the dependent variable, show that the indicator for perceived political polarization, i.e. political dissent, produce a statistically significant and positive effect that are in line with H3. This means that H3 is confirmed and that an increase in perceived polarization between the majority and opposition is accompanied by an increase in antagonistic behaviour in the political work. Results of model 3-5 also show that two indicators for winner and loser, i.e. being a member of the ruling majority and formal rank index, have a negative effect on antagonistic behaviour. But in model 5, the effect of the formal rank index is not statistically significant when both political dissent and local political trust is introduced in the model.

Furthermore, results from models 3–5 indicate that general democratic satisfaction is associated with antagonistic behaviour and that interpersonal trust has a weaker, but nevertheless significant, influence. A reasonable interpretation is that people who have more generalized trust tend to experience antagonistic behaviour as lower. Effects of both indicators are partly direct, partly channelled through local political trust. Specified local trust has negative effects on antagonistic behaviour, i.e. people who have higher trust in the Executive board and perceive the ruling majority as more responsive towards citizens also tend to experience antagonistic behaviour in political work as being of a lower magnitude.

Figure 2. Results on the relationship between partisanship, trust, perceived polarization and antagonistic behaviour



Not. The partisan effect (in grey) is controlled for, and confirmed, in a control analysis not presented in this paper.

Turning to results concerning control variables: the results from models 1 and 2 show that being a socialist has a substantial positive effect. In model 3, being a socialist also has a

positive effect – weaker than in models 1–2 but still significant. However, in model 5 where antagonistic behaviour is the dependent variable and perceived polarization is introduced as an independent variable, the positive effect of being a socialist is no longer significant. This means that being a socialist has a direct positive effect on the perception of polarization, but only a weaker and indirect effect on antagonistic behaviour – via political dissent. A plausible interpretation is that perception of political positions is affected by ideology while behaviour is not.

We also know from earlier studies that presence of local protest parties is associated with an increase in polarization and antagonistic behaviour (Skoog and Karlsson 2018). However, our results show that it is not the representatives of local protest parties that perceive political conflicts as greater. Instead it seems to be the other members of the assembly that experience an increased level of conflict when local protest parties enter into a parliamentary arena. Furthermore, previous results have indicated that the presence of the Sweden Democrats, despite being associated with party political turbulence at all tiers of government, does not affect the general level of conflict in local politics. The result of this study even suggests that Sweden Democratic representatives tend to perceive conflicts as lower than representatives of other parties. However, since both local party representatives and – especially – Sweden Democrats have lower levels of generalized trust, there are indirect effects on perception of polarization that point in the other direction than these direct effects.

Male representatives and representatives with a higher level of education tend to perceive political dissent as lower, but there is no effect of education and gender on perception of antagonistic behaviour. Results in all models indicate that older representatives tend to perceive both polarization and antagonistic behaviour as lower.

Overall it is notable that the explanatory powers of the models on the individual level are much stronger in relation to antagonistic behaviour than to perceived political polarization.

5. Let us agree to disagree!

Whereas earlier studies on what causes polarization have mainly focused on factors at structural level, this study has put the focus on individuals' perceptions of polarization. So what are the contributions of this study in relation to earlier research?

This study shows that there is a variation in individuals' perception of polarization that in part can be explained by partisanship. A main result is that we find support for our hypothesis that

political winners, i.e. members of the ruling majority, will perceive political polarization as being of a lesser magnitude. However, we found no support for our indicator on formal rank, meaning that aspects of winner/loser related to party membership and partisanship are more relevant than individual positions.

Earlier research has established that partisanship is associated with trust gaps (Carlin and Love 2018; Karlsson 2017). However, findings of this study contradict these results, as we found no effect of either general trust or local specific trust on perceived political polarization, which means that our analysis showed no support for a trust gap effect.

Another main finding is that our hypothesis that an increase in perceived political polarization is associated with an increase in antagonistic behaviour was supported. But we also made findings relating to antagonistic behaviour in the political work that we were not expecting. We found that high levels of general and local specific trust are correlated with antagonistic behaviour. This means could mean that high trust politicians are likely to perceive levels of antagonistic behaviour as being of a lesser magnitude.

Perhaps a reason that our results did not support the hypothesis that a trust gap will lead to an increase in perceived polarization and that we in its place found that high trusting politicians will experience antagonistic behaviour as lower, is that earlier scholars may have interpreted polarization and antagonistic behaviour as the same phenomenon. But even though both are founded on partisanship and have similarities, they are separate phenomenon with different characteristics that are caused by different factors.

It should perhaps not be surprising that politicians' trust in both political institutions and other people have stronger correlations with how they perceive their colleagues and their behaviour than with their perceptions of their colleagues' positions. The winner/loser-hypothesis – that politicians on the winning side of politics would perceive polarization levels as lower – was supported. However, with regard to antagonistic behaviour, the effects of being a winner or loser are closely related to effects of local trust.

Finally, this new knowledge regarding the importance of individual perception of polarization and the effects of perceived polarization on antagonistic behaviour – and which factors form such perceptions – offers new insights into how democratic work could be strengthened. Even though it is essential for a democracy that political representatives display their disagreements openly, there needs to be a balance between harmony and war for democracy to function. A healthy democracy demands that political actors display a certain degree of interpersonal

understanding of the perspectives of others – and that it is sometimes better to respectfully agree to disagree than to go to war. Hopefully, this study has contributed some new and useful tools that might assist politicians in assessing each other's positions and actions, and if this in turn could contribute to a more respectful communication of disagreements among political adversaries, a more inclusive and empathetic environment might be achieved.

Political empathy, not only for once in-group but – especially – for political opponents, is not only important for facilitating interactions and respectful deliberations between political actors; respectful manners may also foster a mutual trust. We know from earlier studies that individuals change their behaviour based on their trust in others (Balliet and Van Lange 2013) and findings from this study also specifically show that increased trust could lead a decrease in antagonistic behaviour in the political work. This means that mutual trust and political empathy for the situation of other political actors pave way for the focus to be placed on the different political positions and interests of political actors that is a necessity for vigorous democratic systems.

References

Abramowitz, A.I. and Saunders, K.L. 2008. ”Is Polarization a Myth?”, *The Journal of Politics*, 70(2): 542-555.

Abramowitz, A. I., and S. W. Webster. 2018. “Negative Partisanship: Why Americans Dislike Parties But Behave Like Rabid Partisans.” *Political psychology* 39 suppl. 1: 119-135.

Adams, J., & Merrill III, S. 2009. ”Policy-seeking parties in a parliamentary democracy with proportional representation: A valence-uncertainty model.” *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(3), 539-558.

Allport, G.W. 1961. *Pattern and growth in personality*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Anderson, C.J. and Tverdova, Y.V. 2001. “Winners, losers, and attitudes about government in contemporary democracies.” *International Political Science Review* 22(4): 321-338.

Bakker, R., De Vries, C., Edwards, E., Hooghe, L., Jolly, S., Marks, G., Polk, J., Rovny, J., Steenbergen, M. and Vachudova, M.A. 2015. “Measuring party positions in Europe The Chapel Hill expert survey trend file 1999–2010.” *Party Politics* 21(1): 143-152.

Balliet, D. and Van Lange, P.A.M. 2013. “Trust, conflict, and cooperation: A meta-analysis.” *Psychological Bulletin* 139(5): 1190-1112.

Blais, A. and Gélineau, F. 2007. “Winning, losing and satisfaction with democracy.” *Political Studies* 55(2): 425-441.

Bowler, S., Donovan, T. and Karp, J.A. 2006. “Why Politicians Like Electoral Institutions: Self – Interests, Values, or Ideology?” *The Journal of Politics* 68: 434-446.

Bäck, H. 2003. *Explaining Coalitions*. Uppsala: University of Uppsala.

Carlin, R.E. and Love, G.J. 2018. ”Political competition, partisanship and interpersonal trust in electoral democracies”, *British Journal of Political Science*, 48(1): 115-139.

Campbell, A., Converse, P.E., Miller, W.E. and Stokes, D.E. 1960. *The American Voter*. New York: Wiley.

Conover, P.J. 1984. “The influence of group identifications on political perception and evaluation.” *The Journal of Politics* 46(3): 760-785.

De Swaan, A. and Rapoport, A. 1973. *Coalition theories and cabinet formations*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Deutsch, M. 1958. “Trust and suspicion.” *Journal of conflict resolution* 2(4): 265-279.

de Vries, C. and van Kersbergen, K. 2007. “Interest, identity and political allegiance in the European Union.” *Acta Politica*, 42: 307-328.

DiMaggio, P., Evans, J. and Bryson, B. 1996. “Have Americans’ social attitudes become more polarized?” *American Journal of Sociology* 102(3): 690-755.

Enders, A.M. and Armaly, M.T. 2019. ”The differential effects of actual and perceived polarization”, *Political Behavior*, 41(3): 815-839.

Esaiasson, P., Gilljam, M. and Karlsson, D. 2013. ”Sources of Elite Democratic Satisfaction. How Elected Representatives Evaluate Their Political System”, i Dahlberg, S., Oscarsson, H, and Wängnerud, L. (eds), *Stepping Stones. Research on Political Representation, Voting Behvior, and Quality of Government*. Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, Department of Political Science.

Fukuyama, F. 1995. *Trust: The social virtues and the creation of prosperity*. New York: Free Press Paperbacks.

Gilljam, M. and Karlsson, D. 2015. ”Ruling Majority and Opposition: How Parliamentary Position Affects the Attitudes of Political Representatives”, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 68(3): 555-572.

Ginsberg, B. and Weissberg, R. 1978. “Elections and the mobilization of popular support.” *American Journal of Political Science* 22(1): 31-55.

Green, D.P., Palmquist, B. and Schickler, E. 2002. *Partisan hearts and minds*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Greene, S. 2004. “Social identity theory and political identification.” *Social Science Quarterly* 85(1): 138-153.

Hetherington, M.J. 2009. “Putting polarization in perspective.” *British Journal of Political Science* 39(2): 413-448.

Hesse, J.J. and Sharpe, L.J. (eds) 1991. *Local government and urban affairs in international perspective*. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

Holmberg, S. 1999. “Down and down we go: political trust in Sweden.” In Norris, P. (eds) *Critical Citizens*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 103-122

Huddy, L. 2003. “Group identity and political cohesion.” In Sears, D.O., Huddy, L. and Jervis R. (eds) *The Oxford handbook of political psychology*. Oxford: Oxford university press, pp. 511-558.

Iyengar, S., Sood, G. and Lelkes, Y. 2012. “Affect, not ideology: A social identity perspective on polarization.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76(3): 405–431.

Jervis, R. 2017. *Perception and misperception in international politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Karlsson, D. 2017. ”Inter-level Trust in a Multilevel Political System”, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 40(3): 289-311.

Karlsson, D. and Gilljam, M. 2014. *Svenska politiker: om de folkvalda i riksdag, landsting och kommun*. Stockholm: Santérus.

Kernell, G and Mullinix, K.J. 2019. “Winners, Losers, and Perceptions of Vote (Mis)Counting.” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*. 31(1): 1-24.

Klok, P-J. and Denters, B. 2013. “The roles councillors play.” In Egner, B., Sweeting, D. and Klok, P-J. (eds) *Local Councillors in Europe*. Wiesbaden: Springer, pp. 63-83.

Lantto, J. 2005 *Konflikt eller samförstånd? [Conflict or consensus?]* Stockholm: Akademitryck AB.

La Porta, R., Lopes-de Silanes, F., Shleifer, A. and Vishny, R.W. 1997. “Trust in large organizations.” *The American economic review* 87(2): 333-338.

Lewicki, R.J. and Bunker, B.B. 1996. “Developing and maintaining trust in work relationships.2 In Kramer, R.M. and Tyler, T.R. (eds) *Trust in organizations*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 114-139.

Liedman, S-E. 2012. *Från Platon till kriget mot terrorismen [From Plato to the war on terror]*. Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag.

Mann, L. 1974. “On being a sore loser: How fans react to their team's failure.” *Australian Journal of Psychology* 26(1): 37-47.

Mason, L. 2015. “’I disrespectfully agree’: The differential effects of partisan sorting on social and issue polarization.” *American Journal of Political Science* 59(1): 128-145.

McKnight, D.H., Cummings, L.L. and Chervany, N.L. 1998. “Initial trust formation in new organizational relationships.”*Academy of Management review* 23(3): 473-490.

Newton, K. 2007. “Social and political trust.” In Dalton, R.J.D. and Klingemann, H.D. (eds) *The Oxford handbook political behaviour*. Oxford: Oxford university press, pp. 342-369.

Norén Bretzer, Y. 2005. *Att förklara politiskt förtroende.* Göteborg: Grafikerna i Kungälv.

Hooghe, M. and Okolikj, M. 2020. “The long-term effects of the economic crisis on political trust in Europe: Is there a negativity bias in the relation between economic performance and political support?” *Comparative European Politics*, 18: 879-898.

Oscarsson, H., Bergman, T., Bergström, A., and Hellström, J. 2021. *Demokratirådets rapport 2021: polariseringen i Sverige.* SNS förlag.

Putnam, R. 1993. *Making democracy work*. Princeton: Princeton university press.

Riek, Blake M, Eric W Mania & Samuel L Gaertner. 2006. ”Intergroup threat and outgroup attitudes: A meta-analytic review”, *Personality and social psychology review*, 10(4): 336-353.

Robinson, S.L. 1996. “Trust and breach of the psychological contract.” *Administrative science quarterly* 41(4): 574-599.

Skoog, L. 2019. *Political conflicts - Dissent and antagonism among political parties in local government*. Göteborg: Brandfactory.

Skoog, L. and Karlsson, D. 2018. “Causes of party conflicts in local politics.” *Politics*, 38(2), 182-196.

Uslaner, E.M. 2000. “Producing and consuming trust.” *Political science quarterly* 115(4): 569-590.

Uslaner, E.M. 2002. *The Moral foundations of trust*. New York: Cambridge university press.

Westfall, J., et al.. 2015. ”Perceiving political polarization in the United States: Party identity strength and attitude extremity exacerbate the perceived partisan divide”, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10(2): 145-158.

Table 1: Perceived political polarization and antagonistic behaviour. Multilevel regression analysis – varying intercept only model

	Political dissent (maj-opp)	*Antagonistic behaviour*
Fixed part:		
Intercept	5.596***	4.324***
Random part:		
Municipality-level variance	0.566***	1.526***
Individual-level variance	6.898***	5.835***
Intra-class correlation (ML/(ML+IL)	.076	.207
Number of Regions/Municipalities	290	290
Number of Individuals	8,913	8,948
Bayesian Information Criterion	42,881	41,821

***p < .001

Table 2: The variables of the analyses (mean, standard deviation and number of cases)

	Statistics			Correlation with dependent variables (Pearson's r)	
	Mean	SD	N	Perceived political dissent	Antagonistic behaviour in political work
Dependent variables					
Political dissent	5.66	2.73	8.913	–	+.22***
Antagonistic behaviour	4.38	2.71	8.948	+.22***	–
Main independent variables (individual level)					
Formal rank (continuous index)	.48	.28	9.725	-.04**	-.13***
Mayor=1, Back bencher = 0					
Parliamentary position (categorical)	.54	.50	9.725	-.12***	-.29***
Majority=1, Opposition = 0					
General democratic satisfaction (continuous)	.57	.18	9.203	-.02*	-.25***
High = 1, Low = 0					
Interpersonal trust (continuous)	.75	.18	9.257	+.02*	-.08***
High = 1, Low = 0					
Perceived responsiveness of governing majority (continuous)	.54	.28	8.867	-.08***	-.36***
High = 1, Low = 0					
Trust in Local Executive board (continuous)	.66	.26	8.926	-.09***	-.41***
High = 1, Low = 0					
Control variables					
Socialist (categorical)	.42	.49	9.725	+.12***	-.00
Socialist party = 1, non-socialist = 0					
Sweden democrat = 1, Other = 0 (categorical)	.03	.18	9.724	-.02*	+.06**
Local party = 1, Other = 0 (categorical)	.04	.19	9.724	-.00	+.10***
Education (categorical)	.52	.50	9.680	-.02	+.03**
High = 1, Low = 0					
Gender (categorical)	.43	.49	9.724	+.07***	-.00
Woman = 1, Man = 0					
Age (continuous)	.49	.18	9.724	-.05***	-.06***
Oldest = 1, Youngest = 0					

Comments: The statistics of the main variables of the analyses are presented in the table, along with the correlation between independent and dependent variables. The statistics of control variables at the municipal level are presented in a table in a separate appendix available from the author on request.

Table 3: Correlation analysis (Pearson's r) among independent variables

	A	B	C	D	E	F
A Formal rank: *Mayor=1,*	–					
B Parliamentary position: *Majority=1*	+.19***	–				
C Gen. democratic satisfaction: *High=1*	+.19***	**+.26*** **	–			
D Interpersonal trust: *High=1*	+.13***	+.07***	**+.22*** **	–		
E Perc. responsiveness of maj.: *High=1*	+.19***	**+.64*** **	**+.36*** **	+.13***	–	
F Trust in Executive board: *High=1*	**+.26*** **	**+.49*** **	**+.45*** **	+.16***	**+.62*** **	–
Socialist: *Socialist party=1*	+.05***	+.05***	n.s	+.11***	+.04**	+.04***
Sweden democrat = *1*	-.18***	**-.20*** **	**-.25*** **	**-.21*** **	-.14***	-.14***
Local party: *=1*	-.09***	-.14***	-.16***	-.10***	-.16***	-.14***
Education: *High=1*	+.02*	n.s.	+.03**	+.08***	n.s.	-.02*
Gender: *Woman=1*	-.04***	+.03**	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	+.03**
Age: *Oldest=1*	+.05***	n.s.	+.03*	n.s.	n.s.	+.03**

Comments: Correlation values >+/- .20 are marked with bold letters. N.s.= not significant. P-values: ***<.001; **<.01; *<.05;

Table 4: Local councillors' perception of political polarization (political dissent) and antagonistic behaviour in the political work within their own municipality (multilevel regression analysis, two levels, estimates of fixed effects)

Dependent variable:	**Perceived Political Dissent**			**Antagonistic behaviour**	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model3**	**Model 4**	**Model 5**
Fixed part:					
Formal rank: *Mayor=1*	-.17	-.16	-.49***	-.19*	-.16
Parliamentary position: *Majority=1*	-.71***	-.70***	-1.24***	-.42***	-.34***
Gen. democratic satisfaction: *High=1*	-.05	+.22	-2.62***	-1.21***	-1.24***
Interpersonal trust: *High=1*	-.02	-.00	-.48**	-.23	-.23
Perc. responsiveness of maj.: *High=1*	n.i.	+.09	n.i.	-1.19***	-1.20***
Trust in Executive board: *High=1*	n.i.	-.27	n.i.	-2.22***	-2.19***
Perceived political dissent: *High=1*	n.i.	n.i.	n.i.	n.i.	+1.09***
Socialist ideology: *Socialist party=1*	+.61***	+.61***	+.12*	+.13*	+.07
Sweden democrat = *1*	-.50**	-.47**	-.71***	-.72***	-.46**
Local party: *=1*	-.05	-.02	+.23	+.20	+.11
Education: *High=1*	-.22***	-.24***	+.08	+.06	+.04
Gender: *Woman=1*	+.33***	+.36***	-.05	-.05	-.05
Age: *Oldest=1*	-.64***	-.60***	-.70***	-.66***	-.47**
Intercept	1.32	3.95	1.26	9.3	6.91
Random part:					
Municipality-level variance	.39	.36	1.21	.84	.61
[percent variance explained]	[31.1]	[36.6]	[.21]	[.45]	[.60]
Individual-level variance	6.63	6.60	4.99	4.67	4.59
[percent variance explained]	[3.9]	[4.3]	[14.5]	[20.0]	[21.3]
Number of Municipalities	290	290	290	290	290
Number of Individuals	8,913	8,637	8,948	8,642	8,592
Bayesian Information Criterion	41,899	41,038	39,871	38,333	37,948

Comments: All variance estimates are significant at the .001-level. N.i. = Not included. P-values: *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p < .001.