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Polarising alone? The relationship between social contact and affective polarisation in Belgium and the UK

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Abstract

How does everyday social contact shape affective polarisation? Drawing on original survey data in Belgium and the United Kingdom (N = 2.000), we explore how different degrees and kinds of social contact relate to affective polarisation. While some consider social contact as a driver of polarisation others consider it to be a remedy. Our results provide evidence for the former argument: individuals who are less lonely, more engaged in their communities, and more socially connected tend to be more affectively polarised. However, our results also suggest that the kind of social contact matters. In the UK, we find that bridging ties - contact with people of a different background - are associated with lower levels of affective polarisation once the overall degree of social contact is controlled for. Nevertheless, the general finding remains: polarisation is higher among those with more frequent social contacts, irrespective of the nature of those connections. This indicates that the degree and kind of social contact have an independent, additive effect on affective polarisation. They do not condition one another but rather operate through different social mechanisms.

1 Introduction

Affective polarisation, the distance between affective attitudes towards various political actors such as political parties, has become a central topic of study in political science (Iyengar et al., 2019; Reiljan, 2020; Somer & McCoy, 2025; Wagner, 2021). Its rise has sparked intense debate: while some scholars warn that affective polarisation erodes democratic norms and institutional trust (Finkel et al., 2023; Graham & Svolik, 2020; Kingzette et al., 2021; McCoy & Somer, 2019), others suggest its effects on actual democratic stability may be overstated(Broockman et al., 2023; Voelkel et al., 2022) Irrespective of the outcome of that debate, the potential for destabilizing democracies(Hutter et al., 2025) has inspired a search for its most important determinants, including individual attitudes, personal characteristics, social identity factors, and socio-political institutions (Bernaerts et al., 2023; Harteveld, 2021a; Iyengar et al., 2019; Lüders & Carpentras, 2022; Vanagt & Kollberg, 2025).

In this paper, we contribute to this research by studying the relationship between affective polarisation and social contact. How can we expect social contacts to relate to affective polarisation? Drawing on social capital theory, regular face-to-face interaction and strong community embeddedness are often argued to foster generalized trust and social cohesion, potentially buffering against affective polarisation (Hutter et al., 2025; Putnam, 2000). Empirical evidence from the United States supports this view, suggesting that greater degree of social contact and more frequent contact with politically dissimilar others are associated with lower affective polarisation (Campbell, 2023; Dillion et al., 2025; McMurtrie et al., 2025; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). At the same time, other scholars argue that social contact can also heighten affective polarisation by reinforcing in-group bias, generating echo chambers, and increasing hostility toward outgroups (Isenberg, 1986; Lamm & Myers, 1978; Sunstein, 2002). Thurner and colleagues (2025) argue that increased connectivity exacerbate these trends.

We contribute to this extant literature by examining this relationship beyond the United States by drawing on novel survey data in Belgium and the UK (N = 2000). We explore how affective polarisation amongst individuals can be explained by both the *degree* and the *kind of* self-reported social contact they have. Our results show that a higher degree of social contact relates to *more* affective polarisation. These findings provide evidence for the argument that social contact can intensify polarisation rather than for the argument that it alleviates it. However, we refine this conclusion by showing that the kind of contact matters in the UK context: consistent with contact theories (Allport, 1954; Putnam, 2000) we find that, once the overal degree of social contact is controlled for, bridging ties are linked to lower affective polarisation. Nevertheless, the general finding remains: polarisation is higher among those with more frequent social contacts, irrespective of the nature of those connections. This indicates that the degree and kind of social contact have an independent, additive effect on affective polarisation. They do not condition one another but rather operate through different social mechanisms.

2 Social contact and affective polarisation

The degree and kind of social contact people have is essential for how they perceive others in politics (Allport, 1954; Tajfel & turner, 1979). Given that affective polarisation is about the difference between in-group affect and out-group affect towards political parties (Iyengar et al., 2012; Wagner, 2024), it is implied that affective polarisation can only be fully understood if we examine the social contacts that might influence these affects (Harteveld, 2021b). In that regard, we argue that individuals' "personal experiences with concrete people" is linked to how they feel towards their political in- and out-groups (Dillion et al., 2025, p. 3).

Scholars proposed several mechanisms driving this relationship. First, having a dense network might generate a perception of unity and commonality, which might in turn lower negative affect towards out-groups (Dillion et al., 2025; McMurtrie et al., 2025). Second, the social networks and related social ties people have, directly structure their perspectives on the political world by exposing them to particular political information and related political discussion, which possibly also affects how they feel (Iversen & Soskice, 2015). Third, the lack of a strong network might also generate heightened anxiety about the social world which strongly affects both how people engage with and feel towards political actors (Langenkamp, 2021; Langenkamp et al., 2025). Finally, having cross-cutting relations improves one's perception of out-groups, which in turn also reduces affective polarisation (Campbell, 2023; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). This idea is based on the influential contact theory (Allport, 1954).

Linking these elements with the current trends of social isolation, alienation and deinstitutionalized membership (Putnam et al., 2005; Van Biezen et al., 2012), one might expect (the lack of) social contacts to contribute to the current rise in affective polarisation (Iyengar et al., 2019; Putnam, 2000; Wagner, 2024). After all, as we will show below, it can be expected that having a lower degree of social contact fosters out-group animosity. Alternatively, some scholars contend that *more* social contact may intensify affective polarisation by strengthening in-group favoritism, fostering echo chambers, and amplifying

antagonism toward out-groups (Isenberg, 1986; Lamm & Myers, 1978; Sunstein, 2002; Thurner et al., 2025).

We will contribute to these debates by employing a more nuanced measurement of social contact, combining two related dimensions of individual-level social relationships. First, like other related studies (Dillion et al., 2025; McMurtrie et al., 2024) we focus on the general degree of self-reported (subjective) social contact: the frequency of how often people meet with their network, how often they feel lonely and whether are they member of a certain community. Second, we combine this with a distinction between the kinds of social contacts they experience to have (Campbell, 2024). Following the approach by Putnam (2000) and combining that with group polarisation (Lamm & Myers, 1978; Myers & Lamm, 1976; Sunstein, 2002), we focus on *bonding relations* as the relations with people similar to oneself, and *bridging relations* as the relations with different people. This distinction is crucial for differentiating between social contact which bridges divides and fosters mutual understanding – thereby potentially correlating with less affective polarisation – and social contact which strengthens polarisation and stereotypes about the out-group – potentially correlating with more affective polarisation.

2.1 The degree of social contact

The degree of social contact is about how frequent one interacts with others. Can affective polarisation be explained by such interactions? Existing theory allows for two competing hypotheses: affective polarisation could either be linked with a low degree (H1a) or a high degree of social contact (H1b).

One the one hand, it can be expected that having a low degree of social contacts fuels affective polarisation. Having few social relations, characterized by experiencing a low number of encounters with others, might foster the emergence of out-party hostility characterizing affective polarisation. Less embedded people might be more likely to have a limited social circle that is confined to the safe views they can identify with. With less social contacts overall, people with low social support are less likely to also have ties across political lines (Jin et al., 2025; Mason, 2016; Mutz, 2002). In short, not being in contact with a broader social circle of citizens with diverging views can be expected to raise the chance that people will shelter within a homogeneous ingroup. When people have less relations, they also tend to have less contact with other-minded individuals, which might increase their negative affect and stereotypes about other political groups (reversed contact theory). This has already been shown by prior research, who claim that in general, people with less social support report higher levels of affective polarisation (McMurtrie et al., 2025) or that smaller networks and thus less social contact in general leads to more affective polarisation (Dillion et al., 2025).

We can expect these effects to be particularly potent when focusing on loneliness. Loneliness is related to but conceptually distinct from not having much social contact. Whereas one's degree of social contact is an objective fact that can be externally measured, loneliness is a subjective self-perceived feeling of insufficient qualitative social contact (Langenkamp et al., 2025). Indeed, in some cases

loneliness may even be strongly felt among people that are regularly interacting with others. That is why we take into account both factors when assessing the degree of social contact (see below).

The heightened sensitivity to threat often observed in lonely individuals (Langenkamp et al., 2025) and their tendency to black-and white thinking patterns (Baek et al., 2023) may dramatically increase their susceptibility of outgroups. Research showed that lonely people are more likely to vote for right-wing populists who offer an image of strong ethnically defined ingroups and portray outgroups as existential threats to ordinary people (Peterson et al., 2025). This dynamic can, in turn, be expected to raise affective polarisation because it increases the distance between in-and outgroups. Taken together, we expect that having a low degree of social contact will be related to higher levels of AP:

H1a: individuals reporting a low degree of social contact are more likely to report higher levels of affective polarisation.

On the other hand, plausible argumentation can be formulated for the reversed hypothesis as well: affective polarisation can also be explained by *more* social contact. The main idea here is that affective polarisation relies heavily on social identity attachment. People who strongly identify with their partisan group tend to view out-group members not just as politically different but as socially distant (Iyengar et al., 2019). This intensification of negative affect toward the "other side" emerges from the need to affirm in-group belonging and status. Relatedly, the vast literature on the Michigan model in the United States claims that much of citizens' political behavior and attitudes are driven by the desire to fit in and signal their group membership (Campbell et al., 1960; Lewis-Beck et al., 2013).

Having a high degree of social contact might therefore ameliorate processes of in-group identification. Because social contact reflects strong meaningful (perceived) social connection (Langenkamp et al., 2025; Peterson et al., 2025), it also strengthens the subjective importance of group memberships. If individuals do feel embedded in their in-group, the emotional charge that fuels hostility toward the out-group is likely to increase. This is also what we observe in reverse with the lower political participation of lonely and less social people (Langenkamp, 2021), which is known to foster affective polarisation (Harteveld & Wagner, 2023; Kołczyńska, 2025).

In other words, when the "we" of partisan identity feels more salient, the "they" of the opposing camp feels more threatening, especially in societies that are increasingly polarized. The result is an increase in affective polarisation: individuals with a strong social network may not only hold political preferences, but they are also more motivated to convert these preferences into affective biases against others. These feelings are likely to be even stronger in the case of (the lack of) loneliness rather than just having objectively more contacts than others. We know that lonely people are less politically engaged (Langenkamp, 2021; Peterson et al., 2025), meaning that a lack of loneliness might also increase engagement and thus affective polarisation.

H1b: individuals reporting a high degree of social contact are more likely to report higher levels of affective polarisation.

2.2 The kind of social contact

Contact theory shows that not only the degree of contact but also the kind of contact matters for political attitudes and behavior (Nathan & Sands, 2023). We therefore distinguish between the kinds of social contacts individuals have with each other. As stated in the introduction, to explain affective polarisation it might be important to distinguish between having relations with people that have similar political viewpoints or not. Broadly following the distinction of Putnam (2001), we focus on bridging social contacts as the within-group bonds people develop with similar people, and on the bridging social contacts as the between-group bonds people develop with different people. This is a crucial distinction, as both kinds of social contacts can be expected to relate in the opposite direction to affective polarisation.

Bridging social contacts, are expected to relate with lower affective polarisation since the extensive research on social sorting shows that the lack of cross-cutting identities relate with more affective polarisation (Harteveld, 2021b; Lipset, 1960; Mason, 2013, 2015). After all, connections between heterogeneous groups are the classic antidote to prejudice. Intergroup contact theory posits that positive interaction with out-group members reduces anxiety and hostility (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew et al., 2011). When people have a large number of cross-cutting relations, social identity theory expects that there would be a lesser need for them to differentiate themselves from others – which is core to affective polarisation (Brewer, 2001; Mason, 2018).

Furthermore, studies on cross-cuttingness find that such relationships generally foster tolerance and understanding (Mutz, 2002) which can in turn lower affective polarisation. When individuals have bridging ties, they also cannot easily dehumanize the opposition because the opposition includes their friends or neighbors (Levendusky, 2018). The fact that cross-cutting ties reduce affective polarisation has been shown by prior research (Jin et al., 2025). As a result, we also expect that having more relations with different people than oneself relates to less affective polarisation.

In our study, individuals who report more frequent contact with people with a different social background are likely to span opposing sides of fundamental political and societal cleavages on which parties mobilise (Lipset, 1960). Consequently, contacts with such differing social circles and the potential different political views linked to that, can be expected to translate into lower levels of affective polarisation toward political parties.

H2: individuals reporting more bridging social contacts are more likely to report lower levels of affective polarisation.

Bonding social contacts, on the other hand, might relate with more affective polarisation because of phenomena of echo chambers and the reinforcing of in-group identities and stereotypes about the other (Mason & Wronski, 2018). When predominantly confronted with people similar to oneself in social and political background, this might on the one hand confirm pre-existing beliefs (group polarisation, see below) and on the other hand strengthen one's own identity at the expense of out-groups – thereby

fueling affective polarisation dynamics. Furthermore, we know from prior research that affective polarisation relates with homophily, the tendency of people to choose relationship with similar people: people with high affective polarisation generally choose to have a politically homogeneous network (Iyengar et al., 2019; McMurtrie et al., 2025). Also, although the relationship is not necessarily one-directional, social sorting is also linked with higher affective polarisation (Harteveld, 2021b; Mason, 2016).

Furthermore, also within polarisation literature there is strong evidence for the idea that when confronted with similar people, one's initial standpoint polarizes, as posited in the law of group polarisation: when discussing or interacting with like-minded people, initial standpoints become more extreme (Isenberg, 1986; Lamm & Myers, 1978; Myers & Lamm, 1976; Sunstein, 2002). This is mostly related to ideological polarisation, but the same holds for affective polarisation; in-group biases and affect will only increase when there is no or limited contact with different political groups. Drawing on literature on group stereotyping, it has been shown that initial negative affect and stereotyping towards the out-group(s) will strengthen when there is no out-group member to contradict those negative attitudes (Brauer et al., 2001). In other words, having more social contact – but only with similar people which potentially strengthens pre-existing beliefs and attitudes about the out-group – might therefore foster instead of dampen affective polarisation.

Individuals who report more frequent contact with people holding similar views are likely to be embedded within socially and politically homogeneous networks structured along the same fundamental political and societal cleavages on which parties mobilise (Lipset, 1960). Consequently, contacts with people with a similar social background (who often also have similar political views) can be expected to reinforce in-group identification and negative out-group affect, translating into higher levels of affective polarisation toward political parties.

H3: individuals reporting more bonding social contacts are more likely to report higher levels of affective polarisation.

3 Methodology

To test these hypotheses, we study the relation between different kinds and degrees of social contact and affective polarisation using a survey in Belgium and the UK.

3.1 Data and sample

Data collection took place between June 27 and July 18, 2023, yielding parallel, nationally representative samples from both Belgium and the United Kingdom (N = 1,000 per country). Fieldwork was executed by an external agency utilizing stratified quota sampling based on gender, age, and region, with participation limited to adult citizens (≥ 18 years). Detailed statistics regarding population and sample characteristics are provided in **Online Appendix Section 1.1**. Metrics on participant engagement indicated satisfactory investment, evidenced by a median duration of 10.37 minutes and a mean completion rate of 66.32%.

This cross-national study purposefully selected these two nations to go beyond the US case which has been central in prior studies on the relationship between social contact and affective polarisation; and to investigate polarisation dynamics within contrasting institutional frameworks and sociopolitical histories. Although both are established Western European democracies featuring multi-level governance, they occupy opposite ends of Lijphart's (2012) consensus-majoritarian spectrum: Belgium serves as the archetype of consensus democracy, whereas the United Kingdom stands as a majoritarian democracy. This institutional contrast offers a rigorous basis for comparative analysis, particularly as existing literature suggests that such systemic variations fundamentally shape polarisation trajectories (Bernaerts et al., 2023). This approach ensures that findings extend beyond national idiosyncrasies, thereby facilitating deeper theoretical insights into the mechanisms of polarisation across distinct institutional landscapes.

3.2 Variables

Although the field is currently debating the specific measurements of affective polarisation (and indeed, the specific types of polarisation as well), in this paper we stick to the classical spread of dislike scores towards in- and out-parties following the approach by Reiljan (2020) in which the spread between the most liked ("in-party") and all other parties ("out-parties") is used. This index ranges from 0 (no distance between preferred party and other parties) to 10 (maximal distance between preferred party and other parties). Essentially, it measures the degree to which respondents' like towards the party they like most differs with their scores towards all other political parties. Higher scores reflect greater difference between the most liked party (which serves as a proxy for the in-party) and dislike scores towards all other parties. To enhance the robustness of our results we also use alternative measures of affective polarisation shown in **Online Appendix 2.2**. First, we simply calculate the the spread of like-scores between the party respondents voted for ("in-party") and all other parties ("out-parties"). Second, we calculate affective polarisation as the spread in like-scores between all parties in the party system (Wagner, 2021). These various approaches to studying affective polarisation did not affect the results.

This approach to studying affective polarisation can be criticized because it only takes into account political parties (Hahm et al., 2024; Hobolt et al., 2021; Maes et al., 2024), but also because it only focuses on dislike (Röllicke, 2023). Yet, following the broad tradition in the field nowadays and considering affective polarisation as a general spread of affect towards different political groups in society in general, we still see it fit as a general measure of affective polarisation for the purpose of this study.

The distribution of this measure is shown in Fig. 1. It suggests that levels of affective polarisation in Belgium and the United Kingdom are quite similar, but that affective polarisation is a bit higher among Belgian (M = 3.54, SD = 2.14) respondents than among UK respondents (M = 3.13, SD = 1.96). This small difference is statistically significant, $t(1870.30) = 4.34$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.22, 0.60]. Note that whereas the theoretical range of our measurement is from 0 to 10, the actual range of polarisation score in our data ranges from 0–8 for the UK and from 0-8.57 for Belgium.

Turning to the operationalisation of our independent variables, we have two sets of variables to test our hypotheses related to the degree and the kinds of social contacts respectively. First, to test whether a low degree of social contacts is related to higher or lower levels of affective polarisation we ask respondents “How often have you felt lonely during the past week?” This was measured on a five-point scale ranging from “never” to “constantly”. As a second measurement of the degree of social contacts, we asked respondents “How often do you meet with friends, relatives, or colleagues in your free time?” measured on a five-point scale ranging from “never” to “daily”. Finally, as a third measurement of the degree of social contacts, we ask whether respondents are “a member of community groups, political parties, pressure groups, trade unions, profesional societies, sport clubs, cultural organizations, religious organizations, or anything of the sort?” This measure is coded as a dummy variable (0 = no community member, 1 = community member).

A second set of indepentend variables is operationalized to test hypotheses related to the kinds of social contacts people have. We measure bonding social contacts by asking “How often do you meet with people that are of a similar social background to your own in your free time”, which is measured on a five-point scale ranging from “never” to “daily”. And we measure bridging social contacts by asking “How often do you meet with people that are of another social background than your own in your free time?”, which is also measured on the same five-point scale.

Based on previous research (Grechyna, 2016; Guedes-Neto, 2022), we added controls for age (in years), gender (0 = female, 1 = male), education level (primary, secondary, higher, or no education), and political interest (11-point scale ranging from not at all interested to very interested).

4 Analysis

To test our main expectations, we look how both the degree of social contacts (measured by the frequency respondents meet with their network and the frequency they feel lonely, whether they are members of a community) and the kind of social contacts (do they meet similar or different people) relates to affective polarisation.

4.1 Degree of social contact

We start by considering the effect of the degree of social contact on affective polarisation first. We discussed how there are two plausible ways to think about this issue from a theoretical perspective. There are good reasons to expect that a lower degree of social contact can lead to more affective polarisation but there are also arguments for the opposite idea. A higher degree of social contact could also lead to more affective polarisation.

Figure 2 displays the results of linear regression models predicting affective polarisation in the United Kingdom (upper pane) and Belgium (lower pane). We show both the direct effect of the social contact degree independent variables of interest, and the same effects after adding controls. Overall, the evidence seems to suggest that a higher degree of social contact leads to higher levels of affective

polarisation (robustness checks with other measurements of affective polarisation confirm this, see **Online Appendix Section 4.1.2**).

In the United Kingdom meeting friends is positively associated with affective polarisation ($\beta = 0.15$, $p < .001$, after adding controls $\beta = 0.11$, $p < .001$). All else equal, a one standard deviation increase in meeting people more often corresponds to a 0.11 standard deviation increase in affective polarisation. Still in the UK, the effect of being a community member goes in a similar direction — more contact leading to more affective polarisation — (uncontrolled effect $\beta = 0.13$) but this bivariate effect is no longer significant after controling for meeting people often, political interest, gender, and age ($\beta = 0.03$, $p = .27$). Our measurment for loneliness shows that the logical opposite for the degree of experienced contact to lead to more affective polarisation also finds confirmation in the data. The lonelier people in the UK are, the less affectively polarised they are ($\beta = -0.16$, $p < .001$, after adding controls $\beta = -0.08$, $p < .05$).

In Belgium we find some modest evidence for similar patterns regarding being a community member. We also find the same pattern as in the UK regarding loneliness. A one standard deviation increase in loneliness leads to a 0.16 standard deviation decrease in affective polarisation ($p<.001$). However, note that this effect is no longer significant after adding controls ($\beta = -0.05$, $p = .11$).

Hence, the general picture emerging from our data is that more contact whether it is in terms of regularly meeting people or being a community member leads to more affective polarisation, whereas loneliness leads to less affective polarisation. Nevertheless, it deserves emphasis that this overall pattern is not entirely consistent. The effect of meeting people is insignificant in Belgium, and several effects reported above are no longer significant after adding control variables. We therefore find more evidence for hypothesis H1b predicting that a high degree of social contact is linked with high affective polarisation than for hypothesis H1a, which predicted that a high degree of social contact would be linked with low affective polarisation.

4.2 Kind of social contact

In the previous section we found that the *degree* of social contact seems to matter. This raises the question about whether the *kind* of social contact also matters. We theorized that bonding social contact, when people interact with people of a similar background, will lead to higher affective polarisation. And that bridging social contact, when people interact with people of a different social background, will lead to lower affective polarisation. Figure 3 displays the results of linear regression models predicting affective polarisation in the United Kingdom (upper pane) and Belgium (lower pane).

At first glance, we find some support for the idea that bridging social contact is related to lower affective polarisation. This is the case in the UK, in which all else equal, one standard deviation increase in the frequency of interactions with people from a different social background leads to a 0.09 standard deviations decrease in affective polarisation ($p < .01$; the bivariate effect is $\beta = -0.10$, $p < .01$). In Belgium the coefficients go in the same direction but do not reach the threshold for statistical significance

(bivariate − 0.06, p = .125; -0.07 after control, p = .07). In summary, the effect of bridging social relations on affective polarisation seems mostly limited to the UK (robustness checks with additional measurements of affective polarisation show that when operationalized as the spread between the party respondents voted for and all other parties, the negative relation between bridging social relations and affective polarisation appears in Belgium as well; see **Online Appendix Section 4.2**).

Our results do not offer any evidence for hypothesis 3. The idea that bonding social contact lead to higher affective polarisation is not confirmed by our data, as none of our estimates is significant. It does not seem the case that bonding relations affect polarisation through mechanisms of group polarisation or in-group favoritism.

As the findings of the degree of social contact (more social contact relates to *higher* affective polarisation) and the kind of social contact (bridging relations relate with *lower* affective polarisation in the UK) seem te be contradictory, we also modelled an interaction between both. Including the same controls as in the abovementioned models, we modelled an interaction between the degree of social contact and a) bonding social relations and b) bridging social relations to explain levels of affective polarisation. The results from this analysis can be found in model tables in **Online Appendix Section 4.3**, including robustness checks with other measures of affective polarisation.

They show that, across countries and the two kinds of social relations, the interaction terms are insignificant[1]. Having more bonding relations does not alter the relationship between meeting with other people and affective polarisation ($\beta = 0.01$, $p > .05$ for Belgium and $\beta = -0.02$, $p > .05$ for the UK); nor does having more bridging relationships ($\beta = 0.01$, $p > .05$ for Belgium and $\beta = -0.02$, $p > .05$ for the UK). Overall, these results suggest that, at least in the UK, the positive relationship between degree of social contact and affective polarisation is not contingent on the kind of contact one has.

5 Conclusion

The past three decades are characterized by eroding social capital, loneliness and deinstitutionalization, spurring concern about the wellbeing of our social and political cohesion (Langenkamp et al., 2025; Putnam et al., 2005; Putnam, 2000; Van Biezen et al., 2012). At the same time, scholars and pundits openly worry about rising levels of affective polarisation and its potential threat to democracy it brings (Iyengar et al., 2012; Kingzette et al., 2021; Orhan, 2022; Wagner, 2024). In this paper, we aimed to contribute to explaining what drives affective polarisation by looking at the degree (how often do people meet with others, how often do they feel lonely and are they member of a community) and kind (do they meet with similar of different people) of social contact in Belgium and the UK.

Regarding the relationship between the degree of social contact and affective polarisation, we started from two competing explanations in the literature. One line of work argues that frequent face-to-face interaction and community embeddedness foster generalized trust and social cohesion, thereby reducing affective polarisation (H1a) (Campbell, 2023; Dillion et al., 2025; McMurtrie et al., 2025;

Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). In contrast, other scholars contend that social contact can intensify affective polarisation by strengthening in-group bias, reinforcing echo chambers, and increasing hostility toward outgroups (H1b) (Isenberg, 1986; Lamm & Myers, 1978; Sunstein, 2002; Thurner et al. 2025). We find correlational evidence for the latter argument. If anything, social contact is linked with *more* affective polarisation as both being member of a community and meeting with other people were positively related to affective polarisation, while feeling lonely was related with lower affective polarisation. We therefore reject H1a and confirm H1b.

In addition, we also looked at how the kind of contact affects AP. Following theories of intergroup contact (Allport, 1954; Putnam, 2000), we expected that having more contact with people of a different social background (bridging relations) should be linked with less affective polarisation (H2) while contacts with people of a similar social background (bonding relations) should be linked with more affective polarisation (H3). Here, interestingly, we found modest support for H2 in the UK, where bridging relations were indeed related with less affective polarisation; while we found no significant correlation in Belgium. Regarding bonding contact (H3), we found no effects in both countries – implying that in this sample having relations with similar people did not relate with affective polarisation at all. We therefore reject H3. Taken together, these findings tend to show that, while individuals with more *general* social ties are indeed more affectively polarized, individuals with more *bridging* ties are less polarized. This finding echoes results from contact theory, which clearly show that the attitudinal effects of contact are conditional on the kind of contact one has (Nathan & Sands, 2023).

Nevertheless, our interaction models showed that the overall positive relationship between social contact and affective polarisation holds in the UK, irrespective of the kind of social contact. This might be the result of two separate theoretical pathways that can coexist: quantity of contact and quality of contact may operate through fundamentally different mechanisms rather than conditioning each other. This maps onto Allport's (1954) classic insight that mere contact is insufficient to reduce intergroup hostility – the *conditions* of contact matter. In line with this, a higher degree of social contact may increase affective polarisation simply because greater social embeddedness exposes individuals to more political disagreement, heightening awareness of partisan divides (H1b). Bridging contact, by contrast, may reduce affective polarisation through a separate pathway – most likely by reducing perceived out-group threat through repeated exposure to dissimilar others (H2). Because these two processes possibly operate independently, they produce additive rather than interactive effects: one can simultaneously experience more contact overall (driving AP up) and more cross-cutting contact (driving AP down), without the effect of one depending on the level of the other. The absence of a significant interaction should therefore not necessarily be a contradiction but might be a theoretical finding in itself, suggesting that the quantity and quality of social contact are best understood as distinct and complementary dimensions of the social contact experience.

Interestingly, while the results did go in the same direction in both countries, it is noteworthy that the relations were more profound (and proved more robust) in the British case. While we do not know why this is the case, based on prior work regarding the importance of a country's institutional design where

polarisation can be expected to be lower in consensus-systems like Belgium because of the multiparty system (Bernaerts et al., 2023; Bernaerts & Caluwaerts, 2025); we suggest that it is exactly the presence of multiple parties and the consequent lack of one clear out-party which might have dampened the relationships between social contact and affective polarisation in Belgium. After all, while in the UK being in contact with people from the other party might affect how people look at that specific out-party, this effect might be much smaller in Belgium because there are simply too many parties for such out-party contact to become consequential. Yet, future research should investigate this empirically.

Our work is not without limitations. Importantly, in this paper we started from the assumption that social relations impact polarisation. Yet, it could also be that affective polarisation causes the degree and kind of social relations, rather than the other way around. We acknowledge this potential for bidirectionality. While this cannot be ruled out by our correlational study, we believe that there is some value in the direction of social contacts shaping affective polarisation that we chose, because sociological evidence suggests that social embeddedness is often structurally determined by life cycle stages, geography, and personality, predating specific political attitudes such as affect towards political parties (e.g., Jennings et al., 2009). Nevertheless, there is clearly a bidirectional effect. After one has been socialized in a certain way one is more likely to get in contact with similar minded people than with others (Mcpherson et al., 2001). Future research, however, should explore this in more detail. In addition to that, our paper was also limited to the UK and Belgian cases. The fact that our findings differ from studies in the US context (Campbell, 2023; Dillion et al., 2025; McMurtrie et al., 2025; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020), which form the bulk of studies examining the relationship between social contact and affective polarisation, emphasizes the need for more comparative research. Finally, our design does not allow to make strong causal inferences. Our results should be interpreted as correlational evidence for one out of two mutually exclusive arguments, i.e., social contact leads to less or more affective polarisation.

Nevertheless, the general finding that having more social relations links with more affective polarisation opens interesting lines for future research that could additionally contribute to understanding what drives affective polarisation in these darkening times for the global state of democracy.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Author 1 collected the data used for the reported research. Both authors contributed to the writing, analysis and review of the final manuscript.

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Data Availability

The survey experiment data that support the findings of this study are available at the VUB data repository, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which are still under embargo. The data are, however, available upon request. See https://researchportal.vub.be/en/datasets/state-of-the-unions-survey-experiment-on-various-forms-of-polaris/.

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Footnotes

1. One exception emerges in the robustness check using vote choice-based affective polarisation, where the interaction between degree of contact and bonding relations ($\beta = 0.07$, $p < .05$) and bridging relations ($\beta = 0.09$, $p < 0.05$) reach significance in Belgium. Though this finding does not replicate across the other operationalisations of affective polarisation and should be interpreted with caution.

Figures

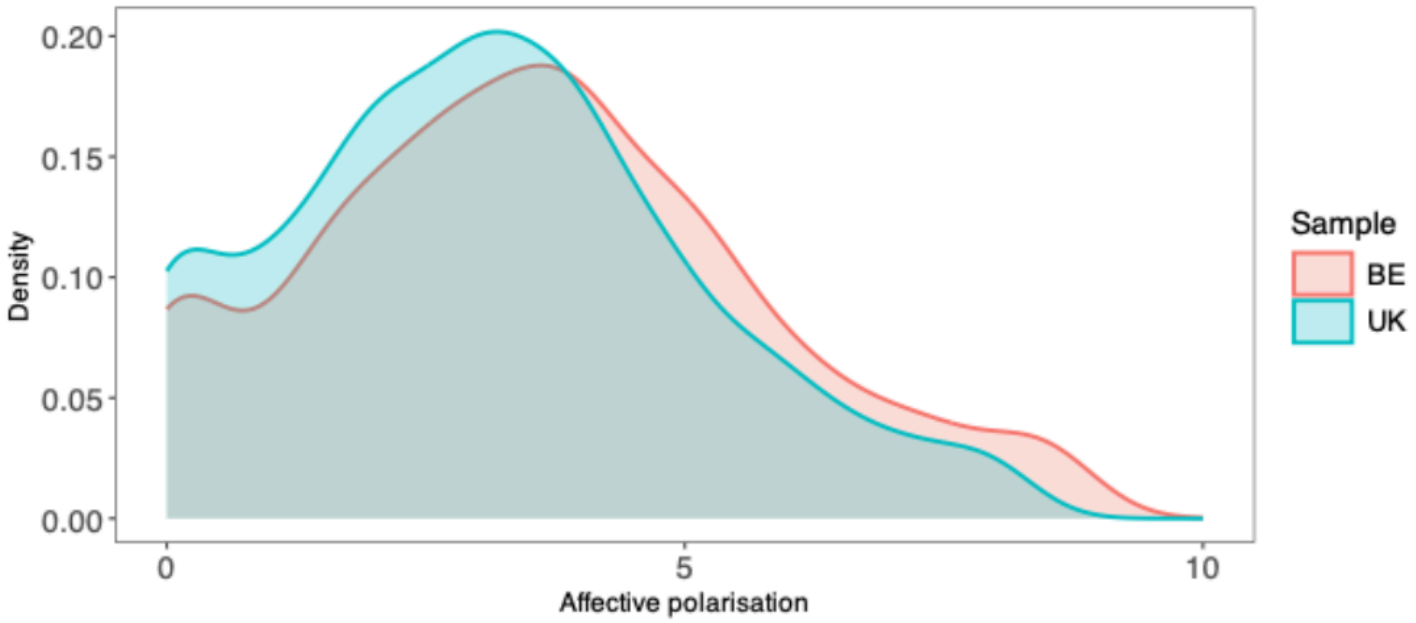


Figure 1

Distribution of affective polarisation in the UK (N = 949) and Belgium (N = 941)

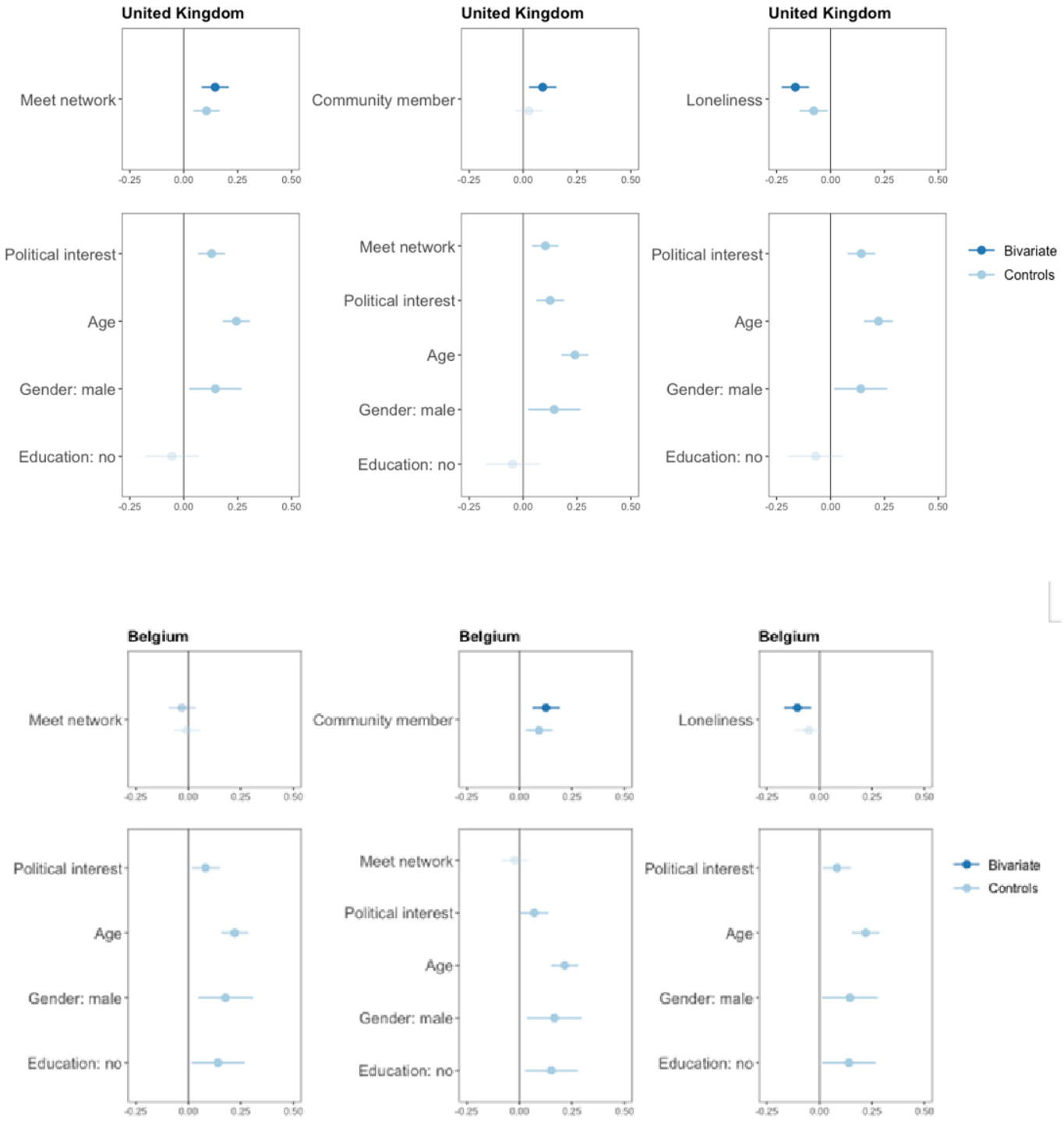


Figure 2

Effects of degree of social contact on affective polarisation

Note: Points represent standardized estimates from OLS regression models with 95% confidence intervals. Dark blue points represent the bivariate effects and light blue points represent the effects of

the models including control variables. The full models (including robustness checks) can be found in **Online Appendix Section 4.1**.

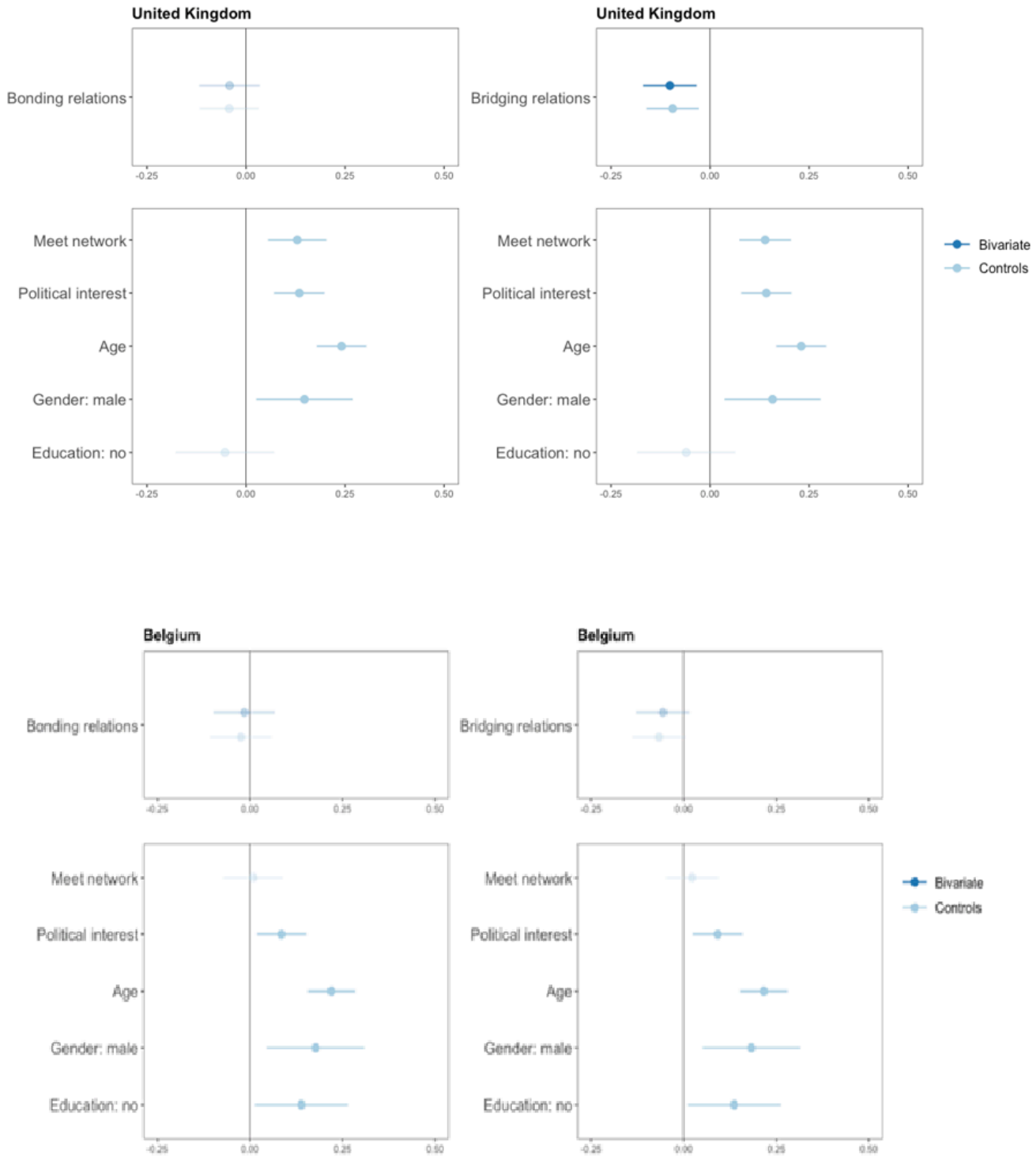


Figure 3

Effects of kinds of social contact on affective polarisation

Note: Points represent standardized estimates from OLS regression models with 95% confidence intervals. Dark blue points represent the bivariate effects and light blue points represent the effects of the models including control variables. The full models (including robustness checks) can be found in **Online Appendix Section 4.2**.

Supplementary Files

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- Supplementarymaterial.pdf