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Cultural Divides and Affective Polarisation

Research Paper

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Culture wars? Assessing the impact of affective polarisation on cultural battles

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Abstract

How does division in society along cultural issues influence affective polarisation? The concept of affective polarisation has a central role in American Politics but there is evidence suggesting that affective polarisation is prominent in EU countries as well, especially in Southern Europe - the European region hit the most by the economic recession. This paper argues that affective polarisation expressed as a group identity beyond partisanship can enforce inter-group conflicts on cultural issues. In our study we employ data from more than a million citizens living in Europe from the late 1980s until 2020 before we focus on the case of Greece. Our analysis suggests that cultural issues reinforced divides and inter-group conflicts. Our findings have implications for understanding how affective polarisation can be conditional on views towards cultural issues.

Keywords— Affective polarisation, austerity, cultural issues

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Introduction

What underlying factors have contributed to the surge of affective polarization in Greece, positioning it as one of Europe's most polarized societies? In recent years mass polarisation expressed by voters as animosity towards the supporters of the political party they oppose builds up across Europe (Iyengar et al. 2012, 2019). For scholars who are interested in analysing trends in public opinion and attitudes, therefore, it is important to understand the possible causes of partisan animosity and divisions in European societies today. Thus far, possible explanations for the rise of affective polarisation include the salience of the elections (Hernandez et al. 2021), social and territorial cleavages (Torcal & Comellas 2022, Westwood et al. 2018), ideological polarisation (Webster & Abramowitz 2017) and elite conflicts on economic issues reflecting economic disputes, especially during the Great Recession in Europe (Gidron et al. Forthcoming). While cultural and societal issues such as immigration, abortion, LGBT rights, and the environment are becoming more salient we do not know how these forces variously influence affective polarisation.

During the past decade, economic and socio-political changes have been transforming the cultures of the countries affected by the economic crisis in profoundly important ways. There is a consensus among scholars that the economic crisis accentuated deep divides in European politics. Examples are the lower levels of support towards democracy Foa & Mounk (2016), strong Eurosceptic and populist attitudes Vasilopoulou (2018), and the emergence of two opposing camps in societies such as the “remainers” and the “leavers” in the UK Hobolt (2019) and the those opposing or supporting the bailout agreements in the South of Europe Katsanidou & Otjes (2016).

This polarisation based on social identities is gradually absorbed by partisanship and has become the primary source of social polarisation in many European societies. This mass polarisation called affective polarisation is now dividing citizens to a greater extent than other salient issues (Robison & Moskowitz 2019, Westwood et al. 2018). This article aims at analysing the impact of cultural issues on affective polarisation in Greece, the country with the highest levels of affective polarisation in Europe. But also the country suffered financially during the recent European economic crisis (Katsanidou & Lefkofridi 2020).

Having laid out the rationale for this research, the rest of this paper proceeds as follows. First,

we begin in the next section with a review of the literature on affective polarisation. Then in the second section we outline the data used in this study. After presenting the outcome of the analysis while the final section concludes.

In this article, we argue that affective polarisation is not limited to partisanship, as typically expressed in the United States, but it can also emerge along the lines of group and cultural identities. Building on the theory of affective polarisation and of group identities, we argue that cultural and austerity issues generate affective polarisation. They did so through the formation of groups on the basis of common views about austerity and moral values.

We study this phenomenon using recently collected data (2022) in Greece. Our analysis suggests that affective polarisation, as a phenomenon, does not only materialise on partisanship but it is a by-product of economic and cultural divides cutting across partisan lines.

Our findings suggest that cultural group identities, along with economic issues associated in peoples' minds with the implementation of austerity, trigger strong feelings of animosity. We also show how affective polarisation shapes vote choice.

In the section that follows, we provide an overview of the theory of group identities and affective polarisation. We continue by introducing our data and method of analysis. In the fourth section, we present our empirical results, while in the final section we discuss the implications of our findings.

Affective polarisation

In their seminal work Iyengar et al. (2012, 2019) developed their argument on affective polarisation - “the tendency of people identifying as Republicans or Democrats to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively” (Iyengar & Westwood 2015, p. 691). What this definition implies is that affective polarisation is assessed on the basis of partisanship (Iyengar et al. 2019). Studies on affective polarisation outside of the USA and in multiparty systems are still scarce, but they all agree that affective polarisation is a feature of several contemporary European countries with Southern European countries (Greece, Spain, Italy, and Turkey) being among the most affectively polarised societies (Orriols & León 2020, Reiljan 2020, Wagner 2021). Affective polarisation, even when it is based on policy disagreement, refers to hostility towards

out-groups (Iyengar et al. 2012) - a concept of social polarisation based on theories of social identity, group membership, and intergroup relations. To provide an example, in the U.S. context the divide between Democrats and Republicans is not only a disagreement overview regarding major cultural issues but also an “identity divide” characterised by increasing inter-group hostility and distrust.

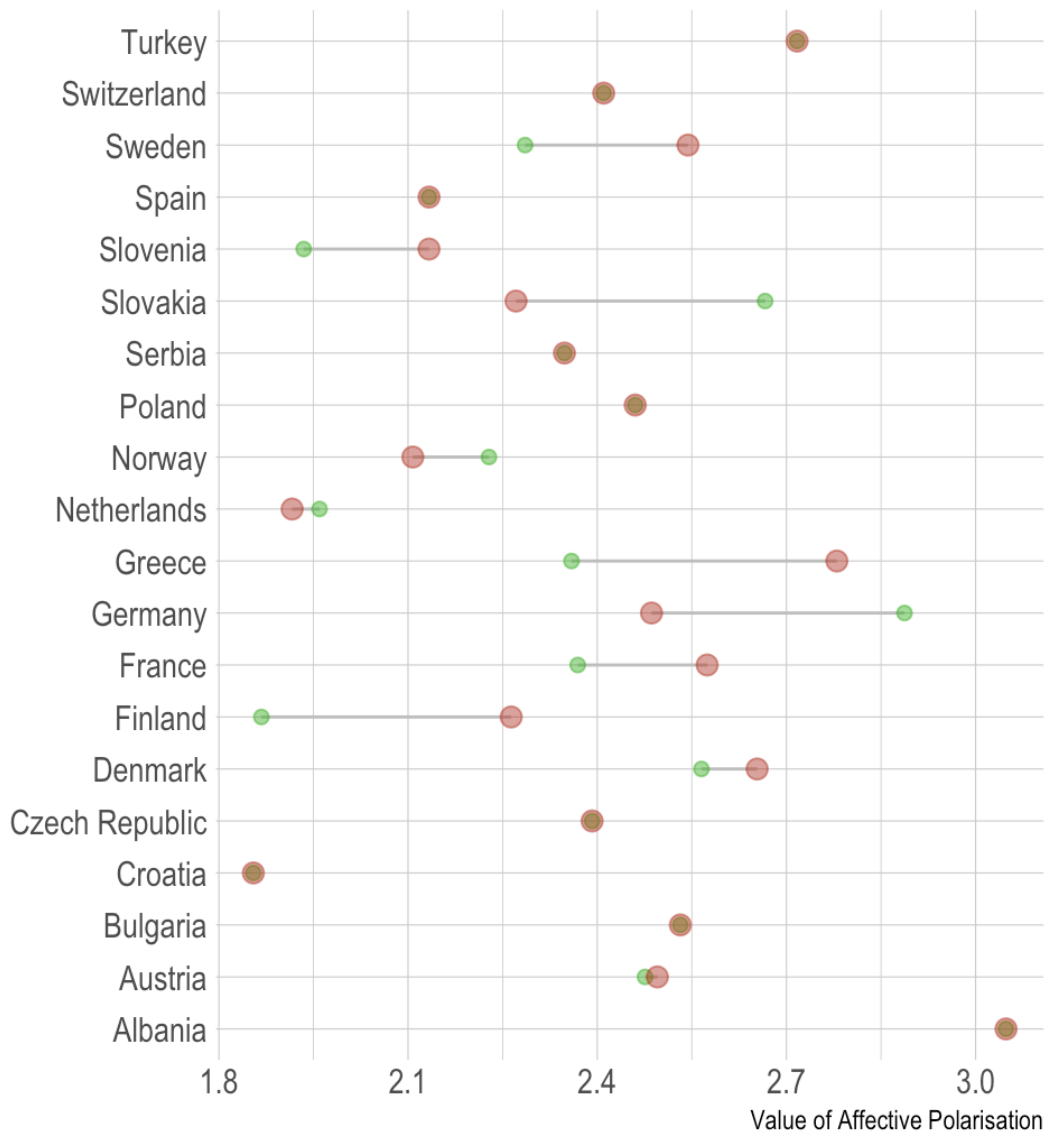
The conceptualisation of affective polarisation reflects the process of intergroup conflict influenced by the theory of social identity originally developed by Tajfel et al. (1979) who argues that individuals form social groups on the basis of some common characteristics. Individuals identify as members of a social group from which, they derive self-esteem and their sense of identity (Tajfel 1981). Group identity will turn to social identity separating “us” the in-group from “them” the out-group. The central finding of the theory of social identity (Tajfel et al. 1971, Tajfel 1982) suggests that group membership creates group cohesion in ways that favour the in-group and oppose the out-group (Tajfel et al. 1971). Opposition to the out-group is a central characteristic of affective polarisation (Iyengar & Westwood 2015).

As a concept, affective polarisation is encompassing citizens’ negative emotional reactions to an out-group on the basis of the party they support. In two-party systems like the USA partisanship is defined by a clear dichotomy - Democrats versus the Republicans. In multiparty systems partisanship is often conceptualised and operationalised differently (Thomassen 1999, Thomassen & Schmitt 1997) - in multiparty systems in Europe partisanship is seen as a physiological concept of attitudes, as a social identity often expanding to include parties belonging to the same ideological block. As it is the case with all social identities’ citizens hold strong emotional and psychological attachments to their in-group- in this case, those belonging to the same ideological block.

Affective polarisation is rising not only in the United States but also in Europe (Figure 1) with citizens being prone to expressing feelings of animosity towards the parties, the leaders, and the supporters of the parties they do not identify with (Torcal & Comellas 2022, Harteveld 2021).

As Figure 1 demonstrates during this period (1998-2019) affective polarisation increased in most European countries and decreased in three countries, while nine showed no change. Affective polarisation increased by more than one unit in Greece, Slovakia, and Finland with Germany being the country with the highest drop in the level of affective polarisation.

Figure 1: Affective polarisation in Europe: 1998–2019



Trends on the level of affective polarisation from 1998 until 2019. Calculations are based on Wagner (2021) index with the use of the CSES data.

The drivers and the consequences of affective partisanship

The scholarly debate on affective polarisation initially sought to discuss trends of affective polarisation in the European context and emphasised on how affective polarisation can be accurately measured in multiparty systems - in contrast to the American two-party system (Wagner 2021, Reiljan 2020). Currently, researchers have increasingly started discussing the causes of affective polarisation and its consequences for Western democracies. In the European context studies focused primarily on the salience of the elections (Hernandez et al. 2021), social and territorial cleavages (Torcal & Comellas 2022, Westwood et al. 2018), and elite conflicts on economic issues (Gidron et al. Forthcoming).

Austerity as a driver of affective polarisation

Polarisation is not a new phenomenon in Greece - the country experienced periods of high levels of polarisation and societal divisions well before the economic crisis. The memories from the civil wars continued to shape vote choice and fuelled ideological identities on the left-right spectrum between the main political parties, PASOK now called KINAL, and New Democracy (Tsatsanis et al. 2020). During the economic crisis the high levels of attachment to the two main parties, PASOK and ND, were transformed into negative partisanship mainly targeting PASOK the party in government during the first years of the economic crisis. Existing comparative studies have demonstrated how affective polarisation both at the party and at the leader level and negative voting have a strong impact on vote choice (Garzia & Ferreira da Silva 2022). Greece serves as a case study in this paper since the country suffered financially during the recent European economic crisis (Katsanidou & Lefkofridi 2020). During the economic crisis years, the country received three bailout packages from the European Central Bank (ECB), the Commission, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In return, the Greek state agreed on implementing a series of austerity policies and reforms in the country. As a reaction to strict austerity policies, public protests, and rising political discontent emerged. From this perspective, it is worth focusing on the case of Greece to test our hypotheses since it is the country with the highest increase at the level of affective polarisation in Europe as evident from Figure 1.

At the beginning of the European Sovereign Debt Crisis, the eurozone governments and the IMF agreed upon providing temporary financial bailout assistance to the three-member states

mainly hit by the crisis - Greece, Ireland, and Portugal. Soon after the first rescue package and amidst fear that the debt crisis will spread to other EU member states in debt, the financial ministers funded the European Stability Mechanism (ESM)¹. From a political perspective Greece's bankruptcy, the first country to receive financial support, would have been interpreted as the European Union's inability to protect one of its oldest member states, and from this perspective, it would have been a hit to the process of European Integration (Ozturk & Sozdemir 2015). The main aim of the bailout agreements between the European institutions (the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund - known as the troika) and the national governments was to reduce the debt of the countries hit by the crisis - this was primarily done by promoting a series of austerity measures such as reducing governments spending, an increase in direct and indirect taxes, and property taxation (Nezi & Katsanidou 2014). At the European level, the memorandum intended to prevent the Eurozone from collapsing when Europe's sovereign debt crisis started in 2008.

Since the beginning of the economic crisis, the political discourse was dominated by accusations of who is responsible for the economic crisis and which party is responsible for signing yet another bailout agreement. During that period two antagonistic groups emerged in the political arena; those who regarded the memorandum as a necessity in order to overcome the crisis and those who regarded it as the reason why the crisis has been deep and prolonged. At the time, it was clear that the austerity measures created deep divisions in the Greek society and it has done so by polarising citizens to an extent that it was challenging the national and the European unity.

The conflictual nature of the issue of austerity politics intensified the partisan environment in Southern Europe and in Greece in particular, gradually leading to shifts in the ideological groups forming coalitions. At the party level, radical parties from the left (Syriza) and the right (Independent Greeks) of the ideological spectrum formed coalition governments based on the issue of anti-austerity politics. Divisions along the fiscal austerity reinforced cooperation but also elite conflicts with members of the national parliaments being ousted from their party for not following the party line during parliamentary debates on the issue of austerity (Gemenis & Nezi 2012).

¹The ESM is a financial institution funded by contributions from other euro area member states to support other eurozone countries in severe financial distress.

H1: Affective polarisation is driven by austerity politics.

Austerity and the culture wars effect

To our knowledge, few studies have examined the linkage between cultural and economic issues as potential drivers of affective polarisation. In this study, we focus on the causal effect of cultural battles - the culture wars effect - and austerity on affective polarisation, and on the direct effect of affective polarisation on vote choice.

During the economic recession, polarisation including social polarisation increased in all European countries (Hutter & Kriesi 2019). In Southern Europe, the four decades of rapid economic growth after the transition to democracy in the mid-1970s was followed by an unexpected - among the general public- deep economic crisis. This combination of polarisation and harsh austerity measures lead to radicalisation and the transformation of cultural values, which then resulted in the eradication of moderate positions and the development of two extreme poles in society - those supporting the austerity measures and those opposing them (Karyotis & Rüdig 2015). This new cleavage reflected partisanship effects with the social unrest and discontent by the austerity measures being capitalised by new protest populist parties located at the fringe of the ideological spectrum (Lefkofridi & Nezi 2020, Vasilopoulou 2018, Morlino & Raniolo 2017).

The decline of the traditional cleavages and the process of realignment in combination with the social unrest and discontent have been capitalised by new protest populist parties located at the fringe of the ideological spectrum (Lefkofridi & Nezi 2020, Vasilopoulou 2018, Morlino & Raniolo 2017). Most importantly, for many European countries, a direct effect of the economic recession was the sharp decline in real income and the rise of economic inequality. The recession and the refugee crisis produced strong periodical effects generating a backlash against cultural changes linked with the rise of liberal values and a widespread anxiety that these cultural changes and the influx of foreigners are eroding the way of life as it used to be (Inglehart 2018, Mudde 2007, Kitschelt & McGann 1997).

In a comparative perspective, Norris & Inglehart (2019, pp.54) observe that cultural issues and the politicisation of social identities divide societies into “Us-versus-Them tribes”. What this thesis suggests is that cultural issues may generate tensions and negative emotions among the public. On the contrary, Abramowitz & Webster (2018) suggest that in the USA negative

affect is linked with economic issues, such as welfare attitudes, than to cultural divisions such as abortion and gay rights. The dominance of economic over cultural issues in the USA is consistent with Iyengar et al. (2012) findings. In Europe, and by using the case of The Netherlands as an example Harteveld (2021), suggests that affective polarisation is strong among those who express disagreement on cultural issues.

H2: Affective polarisation is driven by cultural divisions.

Data and operationalisation

In December 2022, we conducted a public opinion survey in Greece to gauge citizens' attitudes and beliefs regarding various political issues. The survey included questions on topics such as politicians, vaccination policies, and austerity measures. To assess affective polarization, the survey employed multiple questions, including the commonly used like-dislike question that measures attitudes towards specific political parties and the standard question on affective polarization used in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). Additionally, questions were included that measured affective polarization in terms of group identity, asking individuals to express negative emotions and stereotypical behaviours towards the out-group. The survey aimed to be representative of the entire Greek population, taking into account their sociodemographic characteristics and voting preferences.

One way affective polarization was measured in the survey was through the commonly used like-dislike question that measures individuals' attitudes towards specific political parties. This is the typical question to measure affective polarisation used in many surveys including the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). In our survey we also used questions that measured affective polarization in the form of group identity. These additional questions aimed to assess individuals' expressions of stereotypical behaviours towards the out-group, as well as their feelings of pride and self-esteem derived from their in-group identity.

The group identity scale is an adaptation of the social identity scale originally developed by Brown et al. (1986), and examines voters' attachment to their in-group by asking questions about whether they feel like members of the group, share common characteristics with other members of the group, feel familiar and positive towards the group, or get offended when someone criticizes the group. In our analysis we focused on the two main parties in the Greek party system: the

conservative right-wing party of New Democracy and the populist left-wing party of SYRIZA.

Figure 2: Affective polarisation in Greece: New evidence

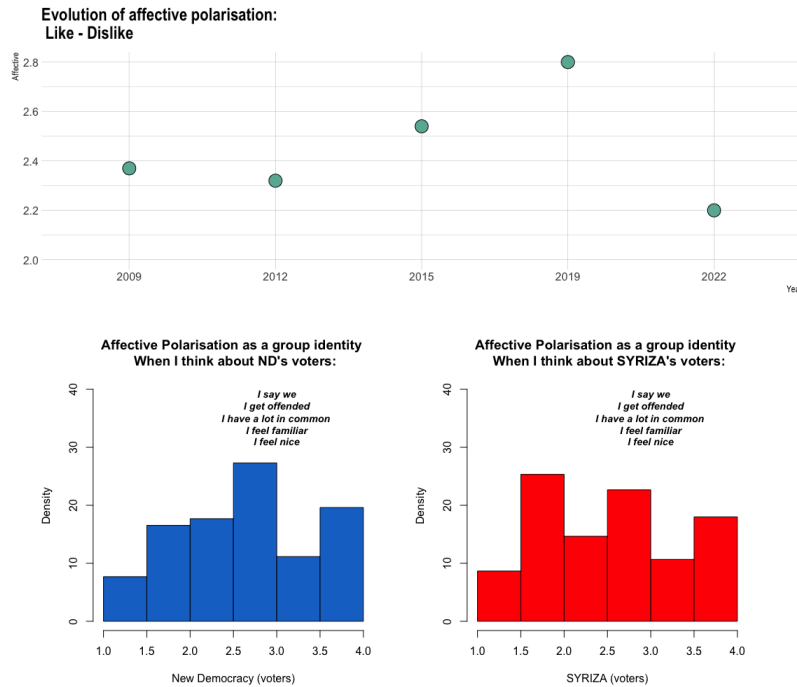


Table 2 presents trends in affective polarisation in Greece from 2009, the beginning of the economic crisis, until 2022, the end of the health crisis, using Wagner’s (2021) index. Calculations for 2009,2012,2015 and 2019 are based on post and pre–election studies while for 2022 on our public opinion study. On average AP in Greece is higher than 2.2 points. While it appears that the affective polarisation (AP) in 2022 recorded a modest decrease, it is worth noting that this observation may be attributed to the fact that data was not collected during the election period, unlike in all other years.

A closer examination of the data, specifically focusing on affective polarization as an integrated measure of social identity manifested at the emotional significance attached to group membership, reveals interesting insights. The analysis sheds light on the supporters of the two main parties, the center-right New Democracy (ND) and the populist center-left SYRIZA, representing distinct groups within society. The index reveals the significant impact of individuals’ emotional attachment to their group membership with both the supporters of New Democracy and the supporters of SYRIZA having a very strong emotional attachment to their group. (Tajfel et al. 1979, pp.63).

Figure 3 visualises the level of affective polarisation for all parties currently represented in the

Greek parliament. The black circles represent the weighted measure of affective polarisation, taking into account the size of each party, while the red circles represent the unweighted measure. The initial observation is that, except for the supporters of the newly established radical right party (Elliniki Lysi) that gained representation for the first time in the parliament in 2019, the average level of affective polarization among the supporters of other parties is relatively similar. The weighted measure of affective polarization reveals that the supporters of the governing party are marginally more affectively polarized compared to the supporters of all other parties. More interestingly, this difference appears to be statistically significant when compared to the supporters of SYRIZA.

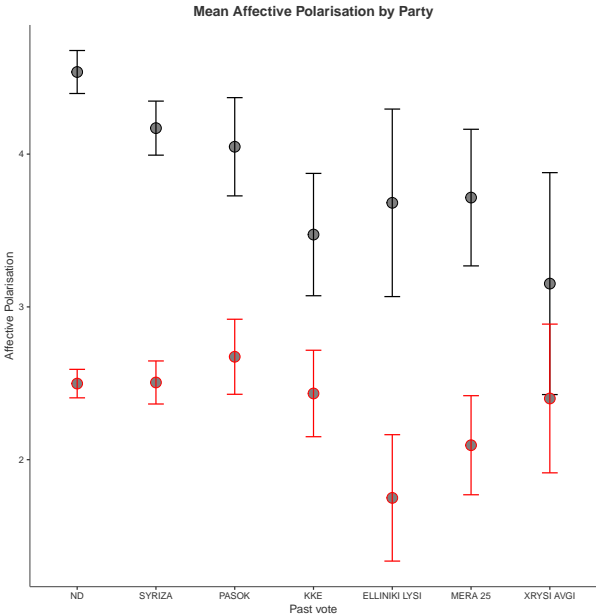


Figure 3: Affective Polarisation across parties in 2022

Our dependent variable is measuring affective polarisation for the whole electorate and for each one of the two main parties, the populist left party of Syriza, the right-wing conservative party of New Democracy. Affective polarisation, the key concept under investigation in this study is calculated using Wagner (2021)’s index. To measure the effect of the austerity on affective polarisation we utilise a question measuring individual attitudes towards economic austerity ranging from one (1) which means that respondents do not support with the austerity politics, two (2) that they neither support nor they oppose, while three (3) means that respondents completely support the austerity measures.

Cultural battles are measured using three prominent in the bibliography cultural issues namely attitudes towards immigration measured by two variables operationalising the economic and the

social dimension of immigration; immigrants take jobs away and immigrants increase the crime rate. Both variables are measured on a five-point scale ranging from one, strongly agree to five (5) which equals to strongly disagree. We have also included a question measuring attitudes towards gay rights - same-sex marriages should be prohibited by law- measured on a five-point scale ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5), and finally a question measuring attitudes towards abortion where one means that the respondent strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5).

To test our hypotheses we employ linear regression models that allows us to examine the direct impact of ideology, cultural issues, and austerity politics on two types of affective polarisation, party and leaders, and simultaneously the direct impact of these three concepts on vote choice.

Affective polarisation is calculated following the index constructed by Wagner (2021). The measure represents the average absolute party-like-dislike difference relative to each respondent's average party-like-dislike score.

Results

In this section, we analyse the relationship between cultural divisions, austerity, and ideology on affective polarisation. The results of the analysis are presented in table 1.

Starting from the first part of the analysis, our models presents the impact of cultural divisions, immigration, LGBT rights, and attitudes towards abortion on affective polarisation. Our results suggest that for the whole electorate positive attitudes immigration, immigrants help Greece's economy, and positive attitudes towards abortion fuel affective polarisation. What this implies is that progressive attitudes reinforce affective polarisation.

A different pattern emerges if we examine affective polarisation across partisan lines. The second model is examining the impact of cultural issues and of austerity politics on affective polarisation among the supporters of New Democracy.

The results suggest that austerity politics is the most important issue causing higher levels of affective polarisation followed by positive attitudes towards abortion and negative attitudes towards same-sex marriage.

Among the supporters of Syriza affective polarisation is mainly driven from positive attitudes towards immigration on the basis of the economic impact of immigration in the economy.

Table 1 The impact of cultural issues on affective polarisation

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Affective Polarisation		
	Whole electorate	New Democracy	Syriza
Immigration: Crime	-0.071** (0.034)	0.020 (0.048)	-0.223*** (0.079)
Immigration: Jobs	0.052 (0.037)	0.016 (0.055)	0.043 (0.078)
Austerity Politics	-0.056 (0.054)	0.163** (0.079)	-0.178 (0.122)
Same sex marriage	-0.036 (0.030)	-0.100** (0.041)	-0.077 (0.079)
Abortion	0.097*** (0.030)	0.085** (0.041)	0.041 (0.080)
Constant	2.152*** (0.244)	2.091*** (0.373)	3.541*** (0.628)
Observations	909	288	168
R ²	0.017	0.037	0.065
Adjusted R ²	0.012	0.020	0.036
Residual Std. Error	1.047 (df = 903)	0.839 (df = 282)	0.949 (df = 162)
F Statistic	3.181*** (df = 5; 903)	2.156* (df = 5; 282)	2.238* (df = 5; 162)

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Conclusion

In this article aimed to examine the association between culture wars and austerity, on affective polarisation. To test our hypotheses we have used Greece as our case study. Greece is one of the countries that suffered financially during the recent European economic crisis and as a reaction to strict austerity policies, public protests, rising political discontent emerged along a new cleavage in society dividing citizens and parties along their preferences on issues related to

austerity. Greece is also the country with the highest levels of affective polarisation in Europe. The analysis has been carried out using the most recent data on affecting polarisation in Greece (2022), in a country which – due to the collapse of the traditional party system in 2012 and the emergence of new highly polarised cleavages around the issue of austerity – represents a favourable case to test the hypothesis of the drivers and of the impact of affective polarisation on voting choice. Overall our findings suggested that affective polarisation cultural issues such as immigration, LGBT issues and abortion have an impact of affective polarisation along partisan lines. Also, the economic issue of austerity politics is an additional driver of affective polarisation. Overall, our results indicate the importance of cultural issues on polarisation in the society along partisan lines. Most importantly, our findings specify the true nature of cultural issues within voters political reasoning. Our empirical findings confirm that cultural and economic issues are significant drivers of affective polarisation, which in turn as confirmed by our analysis is an important and relevant factor of the voting equation.

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