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A tale of two crises: affective polarization in Greece

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Affective polarization, the strong feeling of animosity toward the supporters of the opposite party is rising in Europe. Several studies have examined the impact of ideological extremity and partisanship as a social identity on the rise of affective polarization. However, the impact of policy preferences on affective polarization remains relatively unexplored. I am at filling this gap by examining how preferences towards measures taken at addressing both the economic and the health crises impact affective polarization. Using newly collected data from Greece, a country with historically high levels of affective polarization, the analysis reveals that both policies have an impact of affective polarization but there are asymmetries on how policy preferences influence it. For the supporters of the governing conservative party, affective polarization appears to be policy-driven, whereas for the supporters of the opposition, the populist left-wing party SYRIZA, it is predominantly ideology-driven. Interestingly, the supporters of the governing party continue to align with the pro-memorandum stance even in the absence of an actual memorandum.

KEYWORDS

affective polarization, societal divides, political attitudes and behavior, public policies, economic crisis and austerity, pandemic (COVID-19), Greece

Introduction

Throughout the past fifteen years Europeans have endured a persistent series of economic and health crises. As the economic crisis came to an end the world faced yet another crisis this time triggered by a pandemic. While distinctly different in their nature both the crises shared a common element, they have both stirred deep divisions within European societies. In both cases, the divisions emerged from citizens' responses to their governments' policy proposals aimed at tackling these challenges (Tsatsanis et al., 2017). Alongside these crises, many voters now appear to have developed strong feelings of animosity toward the supporters of the political party they oppose (Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019). This emotional reaction, known as affective polarization, has emerged as a prominent characteristic of most consolidated western democracies.

During the economic crisis, public opinion was divided on the implementation of austerity measures—with some citizens being in favor of the reforms and others vehemently against them (Gemenis and Nezi, 2015; Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou, 2015). Similarly, during the health crisis, debates centered around the necessity of mandatory health policies like vaccinations (Carpiano et al., 2023). Notably, during the health crisis two out of three citizens believed that the pandemic divided their country (Silver and Connaughton, 2022). But these were not the only division documented. Scholars who are interested in analyzing trends in public opinion, have also documented deep social divisions in societies along partisan lines (Iyengar et al., 2019; Reiljan, 2020).

The scholarly debate on affective polarization identifies its root causes on partisan affiliations which have evolved to incorporate a broad array of social dimensions – ranging from ethnicity to gender and religion. This expansion has shifted political alignment toward more identity-driven criteria, resulting to political sorting which is less about core political ideologies and more about the social and identity-related dimensions of partisanship (Mason, 2013; Mason and Wronski, 2018). Another strand of research attributes the rise of affective polarization to ideological extremity, where distinct

ideological positions at the elite level lead to more polarized perceptions among citizens, facilitating a sorting process that intensifies polarization (Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016; Stefanelli, 2023). My study contributes to the study of affective polarization by exploring the impact of policy preferences on affective polarization. While existing research has examined the effects of conflicts arising from the pandemic on affective polarization, my analysis broadens the analysis to include the impact of attitudes toward economic-related policies as well.

Addressing the impact of attitudes toward the policies implemented to overcome the economic and the health crises requires two elements. First, one needs to focus on a political system that has faced an economic and a health crisis. Second, this system should also show evidence of significant societal divisions arising from these crises. The Greek political system provides a case that meets these criteria. The austerity measures have led to the emergence of a new societal cleavage known as the pro-anti memorandum divide while the health crisis manifested division over the vaccinations policies implemented by the government.

In my study I analyze data from a recent survey conducted in Greece in December 2022. Having laid out the rationale for this research, the subsequent sections are organized as follows. The next section offers a comprehensive review of the literature on affective polarization. Following that, the second section details the data sources and methodology employed in this study. Subsequently, the paper presents the analysis and the results in the third section. Finally, the paper concludes by summarizing key insights and implications drawn from the study.

Affective polarization: concepts and underlying causes

Affective polarization occurs when voters establish strong emotional ties with their own political party but most importantly they harbor profound negative sentiments and animosity toward the supporters of competing parties (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). Comparative data suggests that today partisans are increasingly prone into expressing strong feelings of animosity toward the supporters of the party they oppose and this phenomenon is more prominent in some European regions such as Portugal, Greece, Bulgaria, and Albania where the level of affective polarization is just as high as in the United States—if not higher (Wagner, 2021). Political scientists have raised concerns about the risks this phenomenon poses to democratic processes (Iyengar et al., 2019) but also to our daily lives such as reluctance in forming personal relationships (Huber and Malhotra, 2017) or professional connections (Gift and Gift, 2015) with the supporters of the opposing party. In fact, affectively polarized citizens may even choose to harm their own group rather than offer support to their out-group when faced with such a situation (Gershon and Fridman, 2022).

To understand the complexities of these partisan conflicts, research on affective polarization draws heavily on well-established theoretical frameworks initially developed to analyze the dynamics among different social groups (Tajfel et al., 1971). The mechanisms of affective polarization are rooted in Tajfel's social identity theory

which suggests that the groups we associate with play a crucial role in shaping our identity and, more importantly, in fulfilling our psychological need for self-esteem and a sense of belonging (Tajfel et al., 1979; Rosenberg et al., 1995).

To account for the rise of affective polarization, scholars including Mason and Wronski (2018) and West and Iyengar (2022) have emphasized on the increasing role of partisanship in shaping social identities. These researchers argue that partisanship now transcends the traditional political alignment with a political party by embedding deeply within the individual's self-conception and sense of belonging to a group. For example, identifying as a Democrat or as a Republican today extends mere political affiliations as it becomes integral part of an individual's identity. The notion that partisanship is a form of social identity has long been acknowledged by scholars such as Greene (1999) and Green et al. (2002) and has been recognized in the seminal book on party identification by Campbell et al. (1960). What distinguishes the present era is the increased alignment or sorting of partisan identities with other identities, including ethnicity, gender, or religion. As discussed by Mason and Wronski (2018), this phenomenon has led to political parties becoming more homogeneous in terms of the social groups they represent. Consequently, the absence of identities that transcend party lines has made partisans biased and antagonistic toward the opposing party while becoming more attached to their own identities (Mason, 2016). As a consequence, sorting is not inherently based on fundamental political disagreements but rather on the social and identity-driven aspects of partisanship (Mason, 2013).

In the same school of thought emphasizing on the role of identities one may also include a group of researchers suggesting that ideology is also a type of social identity. Research in this area places particular emphasis on the “symbolic” dimension of ideology – in contrast to issue positions– where political concepts like left and right also symbolize group affiliations to which voters develop a sense of belonging (Popp and Rudolph, 2011; Claassen et al., 2015; Vegetti and Širinić, 2019). For instance, both conservatism or liberalism encompass a wide array of identities, including concepts like capitalism, foreign policy, or law and order, associated with the conservative identity (Malka and Lelkes, 2010). Consequently, our ideological identifications are not influenced solely by our stance on specific issues but also by the social groups with which we associate these ideologies, as originally observed by Klingemann (1979). This perspective is further elaborated by Mason (2015), who argues that the emotional sense of attachment to our partisanship and to our ideology can drive social polarization even when issue positions are held constant. When individuals ideological and party lines are “shorted”, then their group attachment intensifies and their antagonism toward opposing groups increases (Iyengar et al., 2012).

The second strand of research explaining the rise of affective polarization highlights the impact of ideological extremity. It suggests that as parties become more ideologically divergent, citizens tend to develop more polarized views of the political parties they support (Banda and Cluverius, 2018; Stefanelli, 2023). Consequently, this dynamic creates incentives for candidates and parties to further widen their ideological differences, and potentially leading them to adopt or maintain ideologically extreme

positions (Layman et al., 2006). In this case, the mechanism driving affective polarization and the ideological extremity of the elites is straightforward. In polarized party systems, voters can more easily identify the positions of various parties when they hold divergent and extreme positions. Additionally, they can more readily identify which parties closely align with their own views. Such a process facilitates sorting, which, in turn, further exacerbates polarization (Zingher and Flynn, 2018). Having ideologically extreme politicians or parties represented in the parliament will drive up partisan animosity (Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016; Webster and Abramowitz, 2017; Banda and Cluverius, 2018). Within the European context, a driving force of ideological extremity is the presence of radical right populist parties in the party system. Negativism and populism do increase affective polarization (Harteveld, 2021).

A newly emerging third strand of research, to which this study contributes, is examining the influence of policy preferences on affective polarization. It is widely acknowledged that programmatic conflict is a fundamental cause of affective polarization (Zingher and Flynn, 2019) but the impact of political beliefs remains unexplored. Researchers agree that economic related issues do have an impact on affective polarization while at the same time they acknowledge the increasing impact of cultural issues on the rise of affective polarization over time (Orr and Huber, 2020; Gidron et al., 2023).

Studies have also examined the reversed relationship; the impact of affective polarization on issue position such the formation of policy positions on policies related to the COVID-19 pandemic and they have found that there is a strong association between citizens levels of partisan animosity and their attitudes about the pandemic (Druckman et al., 2021).

In the following sections I explore how individual attitudes toward policies related to the economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on affective polarization. The subsequent sections provide an overview of existing historical evidence on partisan animosity in Greece and examines the extent to which individual attitudes have intensified, or not, societal conflicts.

Divisive politics and the early signs of affective polarization

Affective polarization has manifested in many Western democracies across the world, and although it has gathered force only recently, a deeper exploration may indicate that for some societies it is not a new occurrence. Greece is a notable example of this trend. In the period following the restoration of democracy (1974) after seven full years of military rule Greeks were polarized by an identity driven “us” versus “them” divide similar to the ones we observed during the economic crisis and during the pandemic. This division termed in the bibliography as the “Right—Anti-Right cleavage” has its origins in two historical events: firstly, the legacy of the civil war between communists and nationalists, which started during the Nazi occupation and persisted until 1949; and secondly, the military coup of 1967 (Marantzidis, 2013). The Right—Anti-Right cleavage represented deep ideological division between those who supported the Communists during

the Civil War and the Right representing the authoritarian rule an amalgamation of anti-Communism and the promotion of Christian nationalist agenda (Marantzidis, 2013; Lagos, 2021). The Right—Anti-right cleavage exhibited the defining characteristics of affective polarization such as group identities on the basis of partisanship and expression of high levels of animosity toward the supporters of the opposing party.

The two anti-Right parties, the at the time left-wing and later social-democratic party of the Panhellenic Social Movement (PASOK) and the communist party (KKE) shared a common electoral base with common negative values toward the experience of the post-Civil war era that was dominated by the Right and the absolute rejection of the right-wing party of New Democracy as the main representative of the junta and of the nationalists in modern Greece (Nicolacopoulos, 2005). The two poles represented two incompatible political camps and parties falling into each one of the two sides made conscious and strategic efforts to undermine one another’s political legitimacy.

Social divisions stemming from the Right—Anti-Right divide were so deep to the extent that towns had what were known as “green” and “blue” kafenia (cafes), representing the two extreme poles of the party system (Pappas, 2017). The “green” kafenia were inspired by the left, catering to supporters of the Communist Party and the center left PASOK, while the “blue” kafenia represented the right-wing supporters typically represented by New Democracy. The enduring presence of such strong and long-standing divisions underscores that affective polarization in Greece has deep historical roots that have endured through time.

In the years before the 2008 economic crisis voters started to realign from the traditional Right-Anti-Right cleavage toward issue voting, replicating patterns of re-alignment evident in other European societies.

This trend continued until the disruptive impact of the 2009 economic crisis (Nezi, 2012; Nezi and Katsanidou, 2014). The economic crisis gave rise to a new cleavage centered on views regarding the austerity measures: one group of citizens was in favor of the austerity measures while a second group was against them (Lialiouti, 2017).

The “us or them” type of polarization resulting from high levels of affective polarization continues to shape Greece’s modern political landscape. It is manifested in debates over austerity measures, expressed as support or opposition to Memorandum agreements (Katsanidou and Otjes, 2016; Vasilopoulou, 2018; Katsanidou and Lefkofridi, 2020), and in responses to public health challenges, where individuals take stances as proponents or opponents of pandemic-related measures (Chatzopoulou and Exadaktylos, 2021).

Austerity politics

At the beginning of the economic crisis in 2009, eurozone governments and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), provided temporary financial assistance to the member states most affected by the crisis and with the weakest economies—namely Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, and Spain. In an attempt to overcome the crisis and to minimize its impact on other EU

countries the finance ministers established the so called *Troika* consisting of the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), one of the first mechanisms to overcome the financial crisis. The troika suggested a series of bailout packages to the countries affected by the crisis. The first bailout package was announced shortly after the establishment of the Troika and was accompanied by a series of proposals and austerity measures such as pension cuts and reduced public services that at the time become known as the *Memorandum*. The economic reforms lead to widespread protests, demonstrations, on-going strikes, and social unrest (Vogiatzoglou, 2017).

The protests against austerity found their electoral voice in the populist left party of SYRIZA, which emerged as the main political challenger for both governing parties: PASOK and New Democracy (Karyotis and Rüdig, 2018). During the first years of the crisis SYRIZA ascended from a marginal left-wing party, securing merely four percent of the popular vote in 2009, to becoming the main opposition by the 2012 national elections, and eventually, the ruling party in 2015. This was primarily the result of the 2012 “earthquake elections” leading to PASOK’s stark electoral decline, positioning it from the party that govern Greece for more than two decades to a small party at the center of the ideological spectrum (Teperoglou and Tsatsanis, 2014).

One of the main implications of the economic crisis was that materialist concerns and the defense of national economic privileges and welfare dominated the public discourse especially among the populist left, such as SYRIZA (Kriesi, 2014). Subsequently, the center-left party of PASOK, and SYRIZA once in power, faced a profound crisis of responsiveness. These parties encountered a dilemma, having to adopt neoliberal economic policies required by the bailout agreements—policies that contradicted their foundational principles (Lefkofridi and Nezi, 2020).

At the early years of the economic crisis a “for vs. against” division on the issue of the austerity measures become clear. The implementation of the austerity measures marked the rise of two distinct and polarized factions within the political sphere: those who considered the memorandum a necessary evil to combat the fiscal crisis, and those who saw it as a catalyst, worsening the crisis’s severity and longevity (Nezi, 2023). SYRIZA was the main political representative of the anti-austerity camp attracting voters who not only opposed the austerity measures but also the old political establishment represented by PASOK and New Democracy (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014). This was partially explained by the fact that both mainstream parties PASOK and ND were the main representatives of the pro-austerity camp while the anti-austerity camp was represented by SYRIZA and a number of anti-establishment parties belonging ideologically both to the radical left and the extreme right of the ideological spectrum (Gemenis and Nezi, 2015). This new divide transcended the traditional left-right cleavage, as parties of both the left and the right oppose the bailout (Gemenis and Nezi, 2012). From 2012 onward attitudes toward the memorandum would determine party choice in Greece (Nezi and Katsanidou, 2014).

H_1 : Affective polarization is driven by policy preferences related to austerity.

Pandemic politics

After ten turbulent years marked by massive protests, a significant decline in living standards, and a realignment of the political landscape, by the end of 2019 Greece was finally navigating its way out of the economic crisis, but only to be confronted with yet another crisis. This time the health crisis caused by the pandemic.

For almost all countries in the world, the main defense policy against the spread of the virus was to implement lockdowns followed by, in many cases, mandatory vaccinations. In Greece, the first lockdown and movement restrictions were imposed quite early in the pandemic in March 2020. Greece response to the pandemic followed the same path as the majority of the other EU member states. However, a significant distinction existed: the Greek economy was still recovering from a ten-year-long economic crisis.

Compared to countries such as the United Kingdom, Greece introduced relatively strict measures to control the spread of COVID-19. Social movement was closely monitored, and individuals were required to carry a form stating the purpose of their travel outside home. The Greek government also imposed a curfew and prohibited gatherings of more than a certain number of people, including in private homes. Additionally, wearing masks in public places was made mandatory.

The COVID-19 vaccination campaign in Greece began at the end of December 2020, with the first doses being administered to healthcare workers and vulnerable populations such as the elderly and those with underlying health conditions. The Greek government has prioritized vaccinations for healthcare workers such as doctors and nurses as well as vulnerable groups such as older members of the society in an effort to control the spread of the virus. During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was widespread opposition to the vaccines in Greece, with many citizens expressing scepticism toward both the vaccines and the origins of the virus (Gemenis, 2021; Tsamakidis et al., 2022).

The discourse surrounding vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic was highly polarized in Greece, as it was the case in many countries around the world. The main debate during the pandemic was between those who were in favor and those who were against the vaccinations. Even when not compulsory—as it was the case in Greece for older segments of the population and for those working on health related jobs—vaccinations related policies created mass waves of demonstrations.

Public opinion research suggested that individuals who express similar views about vaccines, whether positive or negative, tend to form “epistemic echo chambers” where they rarely interact with those who hold opposing views (Mønsted and Lehmann, 2022). In a similar way as those who express high levels of affective polarization. This assumption has been confirmed by research. Klymak and Vlandas (2022) demonstrated a strong link between partisan polarization during the pandemic and attitudes toward vaccinations. For example, in the USA, individuals with less favorable attitudes toward COVID-19 vaccines were predominantly aligned with the Republican party (Fridman et al., 2021). US data suggests that partisan polarization extended not only to attitudes toward the vaccine, but also to social distancing policies or lockdowns the second main measure to overcome the pandemic (Gollwitzer et al., 2020).

H_2 : Affective polarization is driven by policy preferences related to the pandemic.

Materials and methods

To assess the extent to which policy preferences toward the economic and health crises influenced partisan animosity in Greece, I employed survey data collected in late 2022. The survey is representative of the Greek population across gender, age, geographic region, and voting choice.

Given Greece's multiparty system, affective polarization is quantified using (Wagner, 2021) index specifically designed for analyzing affective polarization in multiparty contexts. Wagner's index (Spread of like-dislike scores) measures the spread of voters' like-dislike score in relation to the respondent's mean score and offers the option to weight individual scores and account for the size of each party, offering a nuanced understanding of polarization dynamics. Greece has a multiparty system and as a result citizens are faced not only with more than one parties but also with governmental parties whose electoral support can differ dramatically between elections. For example, the incumbent party of New Democracy received about 28% of the popular vote in 2015 and in the next elections it raised its support by 10 points to almost 40%. The affective polarization index, the key concept in this study, is calculated using a 0–10 feeling thermometer asking respondents how much they like or dislike each one of the main parties in the Greek political system.¹ While this battery of questions is traditionally employed in political behavior research to gauge the likelihood of support for political parties (van der Eijk et al., 2006), it is also a prevalent measure of out-party animosity in affective polarization studies (Iyengar et al., 2019).

To measure the effect of policy preferences toward the memorandum—a policy representing the economic crisis—I employ a question measuring individual attitudes toward the memorandum. The question ranges from one (1), which means that respondents do not support austerity politics; two (2), which means that they neither support nor oppose austerity measures; and three (3), which means that respondents completely support austerity measures. Policy preferences toward the health crisis represent the main policy conflict: the implementation of compulsory vaccinations. This is a five-point scale variable ranging from “completely disagree” to “completely agree”. This variable has been recoded into a three-point scale to correspond to the measurement scale used for assessing attitudes toward the austerity measures. For this purpose, a value of one (1) indicates that respondents do not support the vaccination policies; a value of two (2) signifies neutrality, neither supporting nor opposing the policies; and a value of three (3) represents complete support for the vaccination policies.

As a first step, Figure 1 showcases the evolution of affective polarization in Greece over time. Simultaneously, it introduces a measure of affective polarization underpinning the concept of group identity, defined as membership within a specific group. The

lines represent levels of affective polarization from the onset of the economic crisis until the end of the COVID pandemic.² Except from 2022, all other surveys used are from national election studies conducted either just before or immediately after elections.

The graph shows a steady increase in affective polarization during the economic crisis, with a decrease of 0.6 points in 2022 (Nezi et al., 2023). This decline, however, might be attributed to the timing of the 2022 survey, while all other surveys are conducted right before or after the elections the most recent survey (2022) conducted in the period before announcing the upcoming national elections, which were held few months later in June 2023. Research suggests that affective polarization might increase at different moments in time. Specifically, affective polarization is expected to be higher at times when political conflicts are salient and around the time when the vote is cast (Hernández et al., 2021)—from this perspective post-election surveys might gauge higher levels of affective polarization.

The lower section of Figure 1 features a graph that visualizes the group identity aspect of affective polarization based on data collected in the 2022 survey. The group identity index is an adaptation of the scale originally developed by Brown et al. (1986), and examines voters' attachment to their in-group by asking questions about whether responders *feel like members of the group, share common characteristics with other members of the group, feel familiar and positive toward the group, or get offended when someone criticizes the group*. In the analysis I focused on the two main parties representing the two poles of polarization in the Greek party system as explained in the previous sections; the conservative right-wing party of New Democracy and the populist left-wing party of SYRIZA. Existing research has also demonstrated that the rising levels of affective polarization in Greece are contributed to polarization between these two parties (Tsatsanis et al., 2022). Each line represents the aggregated measure of the group identity questions discussed above for each one of the two parties.

As Figure 1 presents the center-right New Democracy (ND) and the populist center-left SYRIZA, each representing unique segments of Greek society. The figure shows that supporters of both New Democracy and SYRIZA have a significant emotional attachment to their respective groups similar to the one analyzed by Tajfel et al. (1979), a characteristic particularly prominent among New Democracy supporters.

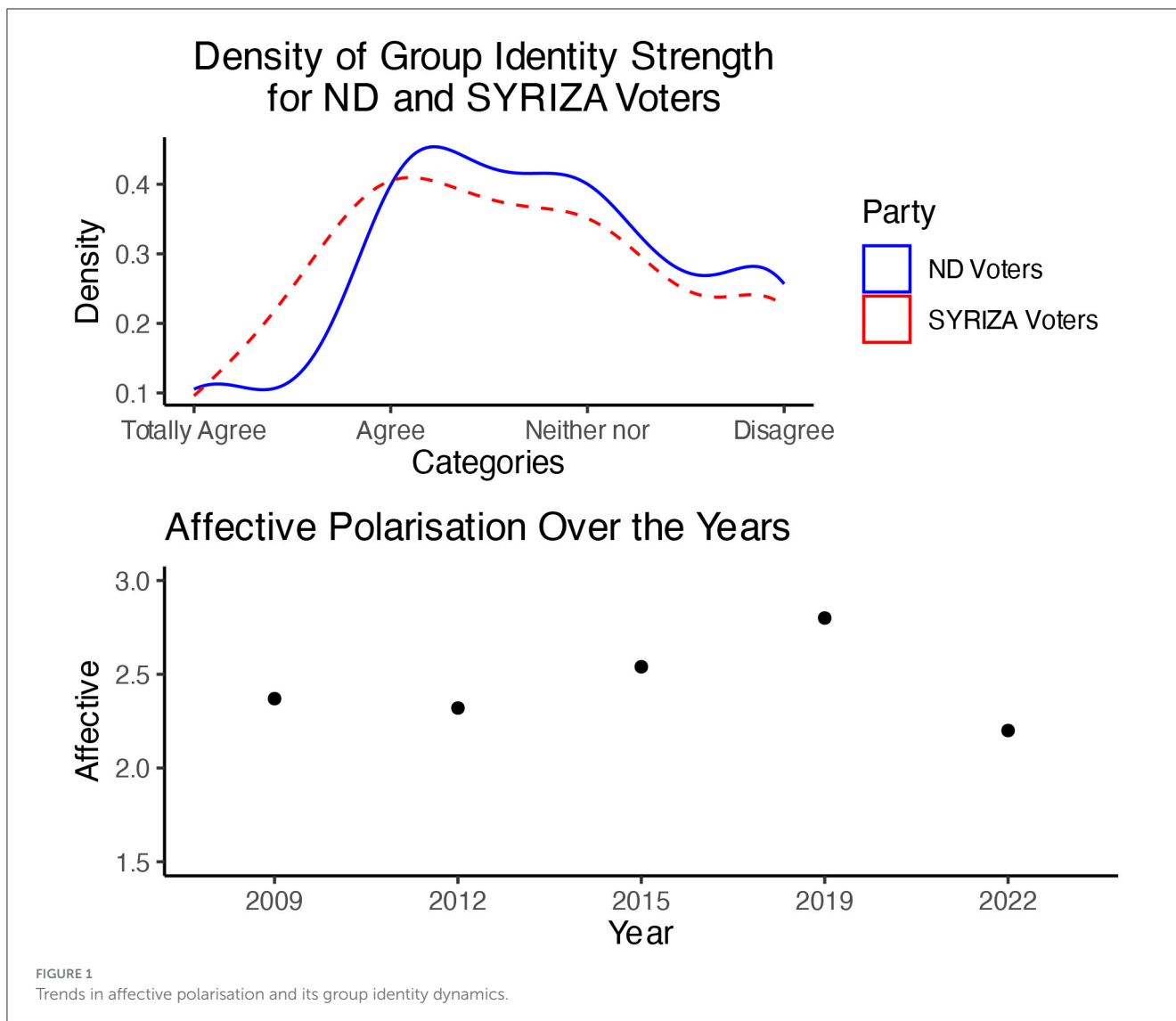
Results

Affective polarization over policy conflicts

Moving to the examination of the core argument of this article, the two graphs below (Figure 2) illustrate the direct influence of policy preferences related to the two crises on affective polarization. The graphs visualize the average level of affective polarization scores across different respondent groups, ranging from those supporting the policy to those opposing it. In addition to the visual representation, I performed ANOVA tests that confirmed that the

¹ The exact wording of the question asked was: On a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means strongly dislike and 10 strongly like how much do you like each one of the following parties.

² Unfortunately, the national election studies didn't include measures of policy preferences toward the memorandum or policy preferences about the COVID-19 pandemic and thus could not be included in the analysis.



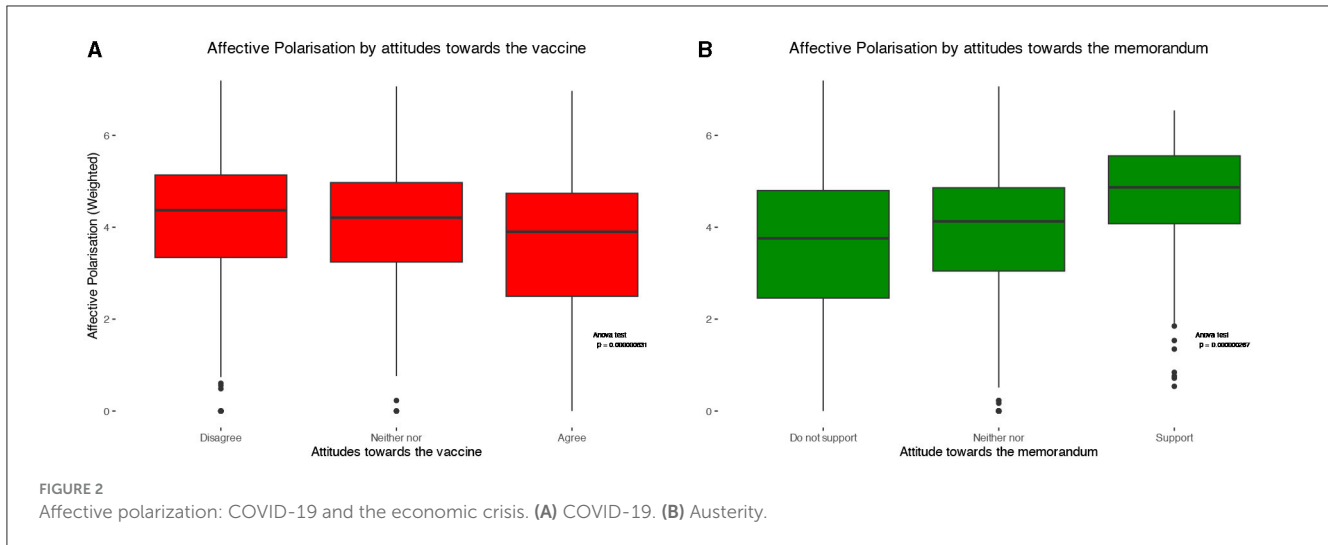
average level of affective polarization is different across the different levels of support for each policy. Since this measure doesn't include information regarding which groups are significantly different, and in order to be able to examine whether levels of polarization between those opposing and those supporting each policy are significantly different, I performed additional Tukey *post hoc* tests allowing to compare all possible group pairings. The statistical analysis suggests that levels of affective polarization differ among those who oppose or support the policies proposed to overcome each one of the two crises and as a result preferences about the austerity measures or the vaccines may have an impact on levels of animosity in society. In the [Appendix](#), I present both the output of the ANOVA and of the *post hoc* tests.

Multivariate analysis

To further evaluate my hypotheses, I am examining the impact of attitudes toward the two policies on affective polarization while considering additional variables that might contribute to its rise. In my analysis, the dependent variable is measuring

affective polarization as the spread of like-dislike scores for each respondent in the survey based on an index of affective polarization proposed by [Wagner \(2021\)](#) as before. I conducted an OLS regression analysis to examine the direct influence of policy preferences toward the austerity politics and the vaccine on affective polarization.

In addition to the two variables measuring attitudes toward the memorandum and the vaccine I have also included a variable measuring citizens ideological position an important variable explaining voting behavior in Greece which re-gain its importance toward the end of the economic crisis ([Tsatsanis et al., 2022](#)). Ideology is measured using a variable asking respondents to self-locate themselves on a scale of zero (0) to ten (10), where zero means extreme left and ten means extreme right. Additionally, I included variables that directly impact citizens' perspectives on politicians and the political system, namely "People in the Government do not understand the problems of common people like me" and "There are important differences between the two main political parties". These two measures capture populist attitudes among the electorate are included in the analysis to control for



the populist vs. anti-populist divide which according to [Stavrakakis and Katsambekis \(2019\)](#) is a prominent characteristic of Greece's party system.

In my analysis, I first present results for the entire electorate, followed by an examination of the differences between supporters of the two main political parties—New Democracy and SYRIZA. [Table 1](#) presents the results of the three regression models. The first model column (1) includes data across the entire electorate while columns (2) and (3) focus on the levels of affective polarization among the supporters of the two main poles of electoral competition, New Democracy and SYRIZA. Both parties had a substantial impact on the rise of affective polarization in Greece and their supporters are still among the most affectively polarized ones compared to the supporters of all other parties in the party system. For instance, the average level of affective polarization for the supporters of New Democracy is 4.54 while for the supporters of SYRIZA is 4.17.³

The multivariate analysis highlights two key findings: Firstly, policy preferences regarding the health and the economic crises significantly influence affective polarization. Secondly, even nearly three years post the economic crisis, attitudes toward austerity measures continue to significantly divide the population. This indicates a persistent influence of economic policy preferences on public sentiment.

More specifically, when it comes to preferences toward the vaccination policy citizens in agreement with mandatory vaccinations are more likely to experience decreased polarization compared to those who disagree. Models 2 and 3 provide an analysis of the impact of policies to overcome the health crisis on affective polarization separately for the New Democracy (ND) and SYRIZA camps. This separate analysis for each party reveals distinct polarization dynamics among the supporters of each party. Notably, while for New Democracy positive attitudes toward the vaccination policy decreases affective polarization, for the party of

³ [Supplementary Figure 1](#) included in the Appendix is presenting mean levels of affective polarization for each party and their respective confidence intervals.

SYRIZA, attitudes toward vaccine policies do not contribute toward affective polarization.

Moving to policy preferences related to the economic crisis the divide around the memorandum remains significant for the supporters of New Democracy. Those who supported the austerity measures show higher levels of affective polarization. For the supporters of SYRIZA, as it was the case with the health-related policies, the anti-memorandum agenda no longer contributes to their levels of animosity.

One possible explanation for this finding is SYRIZA's experience in government. During the economic crisis, the populist party of SYRIZA represented the anti-memorandum camp to an extent that during its first months in government the party initiated the 2015 memorandum against the austerity measures. Despite the outcome of the referendum which favored a “NO” vote against austerity, SYRIZA government implemented a third round of harsh austerity measures. After that the party couldn't maintain its anti-memorandum rhetoric. For the supporters of Syriza animosity is driven by ideology. As presented in [Table 1](#), the division between left and right suggests that ideology may be identity-based—a factor contributing to the rise of affective polarization previously discussed by researchers like [Mason and Wronski \(2018\)](#).

Discussion

While affective polarization has been on the rise in Greece since the beginning of the economic crisis in 2009, there remains a significant gap regarding the root causes of partisan animosity. Specifically, there is limited understanding of the extent to which policy preferences related to the main two crises the country experienced contribute to the rise of affective polarization.

In this study I have sought to overcome this gap in the literature by focusing on preferences toward policies implemented to overcome two polarizing crises, the economic and the health crises. To test my hypotheses, I am using data from a representative public opinion study conducted in Greece in December 2022. By using public opinion data, I have been able to audit key survey indicators and to provide provisional analysis of the

TABLE 1 Understanding the factors contributing to affective polarization.

	Dependent variable:		
	Affective polarization		
	Whole electorate (1)	New democracy (2)	SYRIZA (3)
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Vaccinations: disagree	−0.011 (0.130)	−0.140 (0.175)	0.140 (0.243)
Vaccinations: agree	−0.263** (0.121)	−0.388** (0.171)	0.221 (0.229)
Austerity politics: disagree	−0.032 (0.100)	−0.211 (0.161)	0.184 (0.171)
Austerity politics: agree	0.444*** (0.147)	0.482*** (0.181)	0.366 (0.338)
Left-right	0.107*** (0.019)	0.126*** (0.033)	−0.098** (0.045)
Politicians don't care about the common good	0.355*** (0.047)	0.319*** (0.064)	0.477*** (0.090)
Big differences among parties	−0.366*** (0.037)	−0.250*** (0.056)	−0.252*** (0.074)
Age	0.050 (0.036)	−0.036 (0.052)	0.084 (0.063)
Gender	−0.004 (0.092)	−0.052 (0.134)	−0.302* (0.166)
Constant	3.430*** (0.300)	3.986*** (0.460)	4.001*** (0.522)
Observations	844	279	161
R ²	0.245	0.310	0.287
Adjusted R ²	0.237	0.287	0.244

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

determinants of affective polarization in Greece. The results indicate that preferences regarding economic and health crises influence affective polarization in Greece. However, these effects are asymmetrical and are influenced by partisanship.

The findings suggest three key lessons. Firstly, the Greek society remains divided along party lines, with supporters of the right-wing conservative party of New Democracy, currently in government, exhibiting higher levels of group identity and a sense of belonging to the same social group. However, it should not be inferred that group identity is absent among the out-group, namely the party of SYRIZA. My findings indicate that supporters of SYRIZA also exhibit similar tendencies, albeit to a lesser degree, regarding feelings of belonging in the same social group. This finding indicates that both anti-SYRIZA and potentially anti-populist identities play a significant role in the party system.

Secondly, the analysis suggested that citizens with varying preferences toward the memorandum and vaccination policies display distinct and varying degrees of affective polarization. Citizens supporting the austerity policies exhibit higher levels of

affective polarization while those supporting the vaccines less. This is not surprising since both policies divided the Greek society and resulted to protests – even though to a lesser extent in the case of the vaccines compared to the memorandums as one would expect.

Lastly, my analysis revealed asymmetries in how preferences related to the two crises influence affective polarization, indicating that the effects of these policies on affective polarization differ significantly along party lines. More specifically, the supporters of New Democracy continue to represent the “pro-memorandum” camp, even in the absence of a memorandum. It appears as though the voters of New Democracy still carry an ongoing “trauma” stemming from the period when SYRIZA announced a referendum to determine the implementation or not of the third memorandum.

This pivotal event is ingrained in the collective memory, not only as a moment that jeopardized Greece's position in the European Union but also as a tipping point for severe financial turmoil that only started with the government having to close the banks and to impose restrictions on bank withdrawals.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

RN: Writing—original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2024.1256199/full#supplementary-material>

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