

# Report

# 2025:1

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Swedish National Election Studies

Department of Political Science  
University of Gothenburg

2025.02.17

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**The electoral rise of affective polarization:  
also in European Parliament elections?**

**Cecilia Axelsson**



UNIVERSITY OF  
GOTHENBURG

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### Party abbreviations

	Left Party (V)
	Social Democratic Party (S)
	Green Party (MP)
	Center Party (C)
	The Liberals (L)
	Conservative Party (M)
	Christian Democratic Party (KD)
	Sweden Democrats (SD)

### Citation:

Axelsson, Cecilia (2025). 'The electoral rise of affective polarization: also in European Parliament elections?' *Swedish National Election Studies Working Paper Series 2025:1*. University of Gothenburg: Department of Political Science.

### Editor of the Report Series:

Maria Solevid



# The electoral rise of affective polarization: also in European Parliament elections?

**CECILIA AXELSSON**

Department of Political Science  
University of Gothenburg

## Sammanfattning

Affektiv polarisering har blivit ett populärt forskningsfält under de senaste åren, särskilt motiverat av en oro för negativa konsekvenser av ökande animositet baserat på individers politiska tillhörighet. Under val, när den politiska temperaturen höjs, blir sådana känslor föremål för kortsiktiga svängningar. Tidigare forskning har visat att val tenderar att öka graden av affektiv polarisering på kort sikt, men gäller detta för alla former av val? I enlighet med teorin om andra rangens val bör graden av affektiv polarisering vara lägre i samband med Europaparlamentsval jämfört med nationella val. Syftet med denna rapport är därför att utforska valcykeleffekten i samband med de svenska riksdags- och Europaparlamentsvalen från 1994 till 2024. I motsats till de teoretiska förväntningarna är graden av affektiv polarisering överlag inte lägre under Europaparlamentsval jämfört med riksdagsval. Däremot visar ytterligare analyser att Europaparlamentsval främst höjer känslorna bland de som röstar, medan motsvarande känslöshöjning inte återfinns bland icke-röstare. Generellt syns en relativt stabil trend med en svag ökning i grad av affektiv polarisering under de senaste 30 åren.

## Summary

Affective polarization has become a popular research field in recent years, particularly motivated by concerns about the detrimental effects of increasing animosity based on individuals' political affiliations. During election periods, which heighten the political temperature, such emotions are subject to short-term fluctuations. While previous research has established that elections tend to increase the degree of affective polarization in the short-term, does this effect hold for all types of elections? Based on second order elections theory, European Parliament elections should be associated with a lower degree of affective polarization compared to national elections. The purpose of this report is therefore to explore the electoral cycle effect in the context of the Swedish national and European Parliament elections from 1994 to 2024. Contrary to theoretical expectations, the degree of affective polarization is not generally lower during European Parliament elections compared to national elections. However, extending the analyses to include respondents who did not vote in European Parliament elections reveal that European Parliament elections primarily heighten emotions among voters. Generally, there is a relatively stable trend with a slight increase in the degree of affective polarization over the past 30 years.

## Introduction

The prevalence of *affective polarization* has gained increasing scholarly attention in recent years. Broadly, affective polarization can be defined as “the extent to which citizens feel sympathy towards partisan in-groups and antagonism towards partisan out-groups” (Wagner, 2021, 1). In particular, concerns have been raised that strong positive and negative feelings towards parties and their supporters leads to animosity and prejudice towards other voters based on their political affiliations, extending beyond the political sphere (Iyengar et al., 2019). While the research field originated in the U.S. the prevalence, causes and consequences of affective polarization are also increasingly studied in multi-party systems including Sweden (e.g. Oscarsson et al., 2021; Renström et al., 2020; Reiljan & Ryan, 2021). Over time, trends in affective polarization vary both within and between countries. There are also short-term fluctuations in the degree of affective polarization (Bar-On et al., 2024).

Previous studies have shown that levels of affective polarization tend to peak during election periods (e.g. Hernández et al., 2021; Oscarsson et al., 2021). This is arguably unsurprising since elections are characterized by campaigning and increased media coverage of politics, which clarifies (actual and/or perceived) ideological differences between parties (Hernández et al., 2021) and makes partisanship more salient (Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2020; Michelitch & Utych, 2018). These mechanisms are all associated with affective polarization (Hernández et al., 2021; Reiljan, 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019). In sum, affective polarization relates to individuals’ emotional attachment to parties and partisans, and elections heighten such emotions (Huddy et al., 2015).

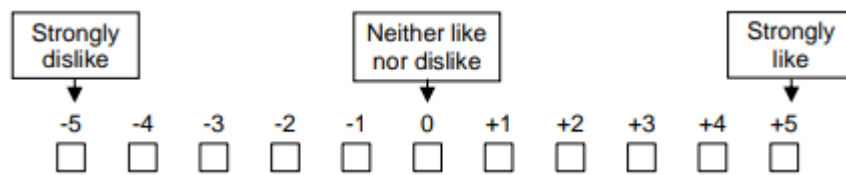
However, it is not yet known whether the electoral rise of affective polarization also holds for the European Parliament elections. Elections to the European Parliament are often described as *second order elections* (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). Generally, less is perceived to be at stake in European Parliament elections for voters, politicians and the media. European Parliament elections therefore tend to be characterized by shorter campaigns, less interest, and lower turnout (Berg, 2019). Put simply, the political temperature tends to be lower during European Parliament election campaigns (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2010, 19). The theory of second order elections therefore provides a somewhat competing account to the electoral cycle effect, suggesting that the effect of European Parliament elections on affective polarization is likely weaker compared to national elections.

The aim of this report is therefore to compare the degree of affective polarization during national elections and European Parliament elections, in a Swedish context. Primarily, data from the Swedish National Election Studies (1994-2022) and the Swedish European Parliament Election Studies (1995-2024) will be used. The report will therefore explore the dynamics of affective polarization in two different types of elections over a 30-year period. This will add to our understanding of electoral fluctuations in the degree of affective polarization in the context of two different types of elections, while also nuancing our previous understanding of trends of affective polarization in Sweden.

In Sweden, there has been a slight increase in affective polarization the past years and a record high level was documented in 2022 (Oscarsson et al., 2024), since the first measurement in 1968. However, the increase has not been dramatic, and similar levels were reached in the late 1970s (Oscarsson et al., 2021). In a comparative perspective, Sweden tends to be placed in the mid-range of affective polarization (Gidron et al., 2020; Reiljan, 2024; Wagner, 2021). Among the Nordic countries, Sweden and Denmark are somewhat more affectively polarized (Ryan, 2023). Bearing this in mind, Sweden provides a particularly excellent context to study the electoral cycle effect of national and European Parliament elections. The data collected by the Swedish National Election Studies Program (SNES) in connection with the elections enables affective polarization to be measured over time. The following section will outline in more detail how affective polarization will be operationalized for the purpose of this report.

### Measuring affective polarization

In this report, affective polarization is operationalized using the dislike-like scale towards political parties. Survey respondents are asked to place each party on an 11-point scale ranging from -5 (strongly dislike) to +5 (strongly like). Similar survey instruments, for example the feelings thermometer included in the American National Election Study, are currently the most common way to operationalize affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019). An important strength, for the purpose of this report, is that the measure has been included in the Swedish National Election Studies for each election since 1979 and all European Parliament Election Studies. For a list of parties included in each study and year, see appendix (Table 2 and Table 3). While the question wording has varied slightly (see appendix Figure 4), the response scale in the election surveys looks as follows:



Several scholars have highlighted the importance of making a distinction between a vertical and horizontal dimension of affective polarization (e.g. Areal & Hartevelde, 2024; Hartevelde, 2021; Röllicke, 2023). The dislike-like scale towards political parties used in this report can be categorized as a measure of *vertical* affective polarization, meaning that it primarily captures individuals' feelings towards political elites (Röllicke, 2023). In contrast, *horizontal* affective polarization refers to individuals' feelings towards other parties' supporters. While affective polarization as a phenomenon arguably includes both dimensions, horizontal affective polarization has been the primary focus and concern of the research field. This means that the utilization of the dislike-like scale or similar survey items for measurements of affective polarization is not without criticism (Röllicke, 2023).

Building on the dislike-like scales, the degree of affective polarization will in this report be measured as the *unweighted spread of scores* introduced by Wagner (2021). This is one of the most common measurements in the research field. It is also particularly suitable in multi-party systems where voters might not have *one* strong in-party liking but may also have positive or negative feelings for parties within a block (Torcal & Cormellas, 2024, 108). The measure is an index capturing affective polarization at the individual level and is calculated as “the average absolute party like-dislike difference relative to each respondent’s average party like-dislike score” (Wagner, 2021, 4) for all respondents that rate their feelings towards at least two parties. This is then aggregated to a country level as the average of all individual scores, for each year. The index ranges from zero to five, where a higher score indicates a higher degree of affective polarization.

In short, a greater spread of like-dislike scores (i.e. more “extreme” values towards the endpoints of the scale) for an individual thus indicates a higher degree of affective polarization. A low degree of affective polarization means that feelings towards different parties are more similar. However, it is important to note that a higher degree of affective polarization does not necessarily imply more animosity, as it could also imply strong warm feelings. Thus, one of the downsides of Wagner’s index is that whether scores are characterized by more dislike or like is not clarified. However, we know from previously that political parties in Sweden tend to generate stronger positive rather than negative feelings compared to other countries (Oscarsson et al., 2024), particularly in the context of elections (Holmberg, 1994; Reiljan & Ryan, 2021).

### Why elections heighten affective polarization

Before exploring the potential differences in electoral cycle effects between national and European Parliament elections in Sweden, it is important to first have a broad

understanding of the mechanisms explaining why elections heighten affective polarization. Elections constitute an arena for political competition. As aptly stated by Strömbäck and Johansson (2007, 82), “the political temperature rises during election years”. During election periods, particularly in the context of political campaigns, conflicts between parties are highlighted and tensions between partisans are heightened (Iyengar et al., 2019).

Broadly, scholars tend to highlight two main drivers of affective polarization: partisanship and ideological polarization. Building on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, referenced in Iyengar et al., 2019), partisanship is posited to function as a social identity leading to the sorting into in- and outgroups based on party identification. Social identification tends to lead to positive feelings towards one’s ingroup and risk leading to negative feelings towards the outgroup (Renström et al., 2020). Strong partisans are often more affectively polarized (Wagner, 2021). Secondly, while affective polarization is theoretically and conceptually distinct from ideological polarization, the two phenomena are related (Iyengar et al., 2019). While ideological polarization is a likely driver of affective polarization, a high degree of affective polarization may also lead to a perception of greater ideological polarization (Iyengar et al, 2012; Reiljan, 2024). This brief background is important because partisanship and ideological polarization are two mechanisms associated with elections and affective polarization, as will be described below.

Firstly, the degree of affective polarization is likely higher during election periods since elections increase the salience of partisanship. Elections constitute a form of intergroup competition between groups based on a sense of political belonging (Bassan-Nygate & Weiss, 2022). Generally, competition between social groups can foster increased negative affect towards outgroups and positive affect towards one’s ingroup, which also holds for partisan competition (Bassan-Nygate & Weiss, 2022). Previous studies have shown that partisanship tends to be stronger closer to elections (e.g. Michelitch & Utych, 2018; Singh & Thronton, 2024), indicating an electoral cycle effect. While the level of party identification has been declining among voters in Sweden over time, this also holds in a Swedish context where partisanship has been shown to increase during national election years (Holmberg & Oscarsson, 2020, 22; Strömbäck & Johansson, 2007). Hernández et al. (2021) also show that when more time has passed since elections, individuals’ positive affect towards their preferred party and negative affect towards out-parties decreases, since elections lose salience. In sum, elections activate individuals’ partisan identification, which should in turn increase the general degree of affective polarization.

Secondly, elections can clarify the actual as well as the perceived ideological differences between parties, which is positively associated with affective polarization (Hernández et al, 2021). This is because elections increase the amount of political information voters are exposed to (Bassan-Nygate & Weiss, 2022). Voters are exposed to political competition through traditional and social media platforms as well as in (social) interactions in their daily life (Lau et al, 2017). While this can clarify individuals’ own opinions on policies, political information is not only provided in a neutral way during elections. Thus, campaigning and increased media coverage affect voters’ understanding of ideological polarization, likely also heightening affective polarization.

### Are European Parliament elections less emotional?

As outlined initially, it is not yet known whether the short-term electoral fluctuations in affective polarization also hold for European Parliament elections, which are often characterized as *second order elections* (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). In second order elections, less is perceived to be at stake from the perspective of politicians, voters and the media. This is not altogether surprising since governmental power is not at stake. Therefore, European Parliament elections are generally characterized by less heightened emotions, shorter campaigns, less media and general interest as well as lower voter turnout (Berg, 2019; Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2010). In sum, the electoral cycle effect should therefore not be as prominent during European election years, compared to national election years.

Whether European Parliament elections should still be considered second order is somewhat contested. Over time, the perception that European Parliament elections are important has increased in Sweden (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2010, 20). Voters do also increasingly care about EU issues (Berg, 2019) and different issues are often prominent during European Parliament elections compared to national elections (Berg & Oscarsson, 2015). Nevertheless, it still tends to matter more for Swedish voters who wins/loses in national compared to European parliament elections (e.g. Berg & Oscarsson, 2015). Other factors such as lower turnout rates as well as lower general interest from politicians, voters and the media still indicate that European Parliament elections are second order. This should therefore also be reflected in the general degree of affective polarization during European Parliament elections compared to national elections.

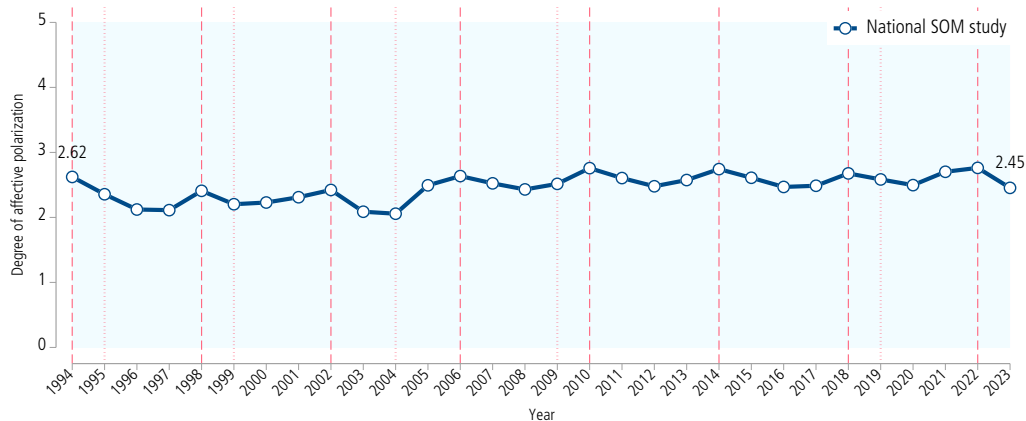
As a first test, the degree of affective polarization in Sweden over the full election cycle, that is both election and non-election years, is illustrated using data from the SOM Institute (see Figure 1). Like the SNES studies, the National SOM survey includes the dislike-like scales for political parties.

Figure 1 displays the general degree of affective polarization in Sweden for the years 1994 to 2023. The red dashed line marks national election years, while the red dotted lines marks European Parliament election years. In 2014, both European parliament and national elections were held. Firstly, as previously established by Reijlän and Ryan (2021) and Oscarsson et al. (2021), it is possible to see an electoral cycle effect during national election years in Sweden. In 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2014, 2018 and 2022, the degree of affective polarization peaks slightly compared to the adjacent years.

The same electoral cycle effect does not seem to hold for European Parliament election years over time. As a first test, these results shown in Figure 1 thus seem to confirm the notion that European Parliament elections do not have the same effect on levels of affective polarization as national elections. However, the timing of the survey fieldwork is also important to consider. The National SOM survey fieldwork period begins in September (SOM, 2024). Except for the first Swedish European Parliament election in 1995, European Parliament elections have always been held in May or June in Sweden. National elections are always held in September. This means that for each survey year displayed in Figure 1, the electoral salience is lower during the European parliament election years since a longer period of time has passed since the European elections when the SOM survey data is fielded. In other words, the proximity to the elections differs compared to the national election years.



Figure 1 The degree of affective polarization in Sweden (1994-2023).



Source: The National SOM Survey 1994-2023.

**Comment:** The figure displays the general degree of affective polarization in Sweden from 1994-2023 based on Wagner's (2021) unweighted spread of scores measure. See the section on measuring affective polarization for more details. The question that the index is based on reads: "This question applies to how you in general like or dislike the political parties. Where would you personally place the different parties on the scale below?". The parties included are the Left Party (1994-2023), the Social Democratic Party (1994-2023), the Green Party (1994-2023), the Center Party (1994-2023), the Liberals (1994-2023), the Christian Democrats (1994-2023), the Conservative Party (1994-2023), the Sweden Democrats (2006-2023), New Democracy (1994), the Pirate Party (2009-2013), the June List Party (2006), Feminist Initiative (2006-2010, 2013-2018). The Swedish Pensioners' Party was only included in the 2006 SOM survey and is excluded from the results. The response options range from Strongly dislike (-5) to Strongly like (+5). The results are not weighted by official election results.

### Comparing the Swedish National and European Parliament Election Studies

As previously mentioned, the Swedish National Election Study and the European Parliament Election Study are conducted by SNES in connection to the Swedish elections. This enables comparisons over time and between the elections. That the fieldwork is conducted closer to the European Parliament election period is particularly relevant for the purpose of this report. To increase comparability, the results only include respondents that answered the post-election surveys (for the full sample of the National Election Study, see Figure 5 in the appendix).<sup>1</sup>

Figure 2 displays the average degree of affective polarization in the National Election and European Parliament Election Studies, respectively, for each election year since 1994 until 2024 (see also table 4 in the appendix). Contrary to the theoretical expectations and the results based on the National SOM Survey (Figure 1), this figure shows that there appear to be no major differences in the degree of affective polarization during the European Parliament elections compared to the national elections. While the degree of affective polarization is slightly lower in 1995, 2004 and 2009 compared to the most proximate national election year, the opposite is true for the European Parliament election years in 1999, 2014, 2019 and 2024. Exploring trends over time therefore reveal no clear differences between the two election types.

Considering specific election years, 2014 constitutes a somewhat special case since it was a "super election year" when the European Parliament elections were held the same year as the other general elections in Sweden (Berg & Oscarsson, 2015). The 2019 European Parliament elections were also held following somewhat special circumstances, since the results of the national elections in 2018 lead to an unusually long government formation process (Johansson, 2024). The highest recorded degree of affective polarization in Sweden was during the European Parliament elections in 2019 (2,99).

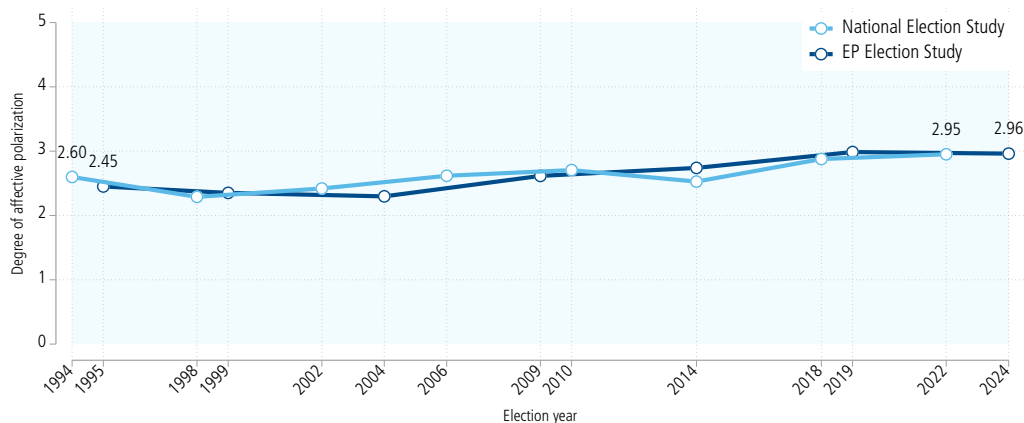
<sup>1</sup> Since the 2014 European Parliament Election Study included two waves (one of which was part of the National Election Study post-election survey), only respondents who answered the post-election May survey are included in the European Parliament 2014 sample in this report.



What constitutes a large or small difference in the degree of affective polarization? That is partly open to interpretation. Based on Wagner's weighted spread of scores measure, Rejlan's (2024) results show that for the 32 European countries included, the average affective polarization scores are between 2 to 3 (on the scale from 0 to 5). Arguably, this could suggest that what is seemingly a small shift (such as 0,1) does constitute a meaningful difference. What constitutes a small or large difference deserves further attention in future research.

Overall, Figure 2 illustrates a stable trend with a slight increase in the degree of affective polarization in Sweden over the past 30 years. Do these results imply that the three most recent European Parliament elections raise the perceived stakes to the same extent as national elections? Interestingly, this would be contrary to the theoretical expectations in line with second order elections theory. However, there may be other relevant explanations to consider. In the following section, an alternative specification will be tested to discern how certain measurement choices might affect our understanding of the relationship between the two election (studies) and affective polarization.

Figure 2. Affective polarization during national and European Parliament elections



**Source:** The Swedish National Election Study 1994-2022, the Swedish European Parliament Election Study 1995-2024.

**Comment:** The figure displays the general degree of affective polarization in Sweden for each survey/election year, based on Wagner's (2021) unweighted spread of scores measure. For more details, see section on measuring affective polarization. The question that the measure of affective polarization is based on reads: "Where would you like to place the following parties on the scale below?" See Table 3 and Table 4 in the appendix for parties included each year. The response options range from "Strongly dislike (-5)", "Neither like nor dislike" to "Strongly like (+5)". In the CSES module of the National Election Survey, the response options range from "Strongly dislike (0) to "Strongly like (10)". The number of respondents varies between approximately 620 to 6 600 for the survey years. Results are weighted by official election results.

### Considering non-voters

One factor that could affect how the results are interpreted is the share of survey respondents in the election surveys who actually voted. We know from previously that respondents who voted tend to answer election surveys to a greater extent (e.g. Oleskog Tryggvason & Hedberg, 2015).

In line with the theory of second order elections, turnout has historically been considerably lower in European Parliament elections compared to national elections in Sweden (Statistics Sweden, 2022; Statistics Sweden, 2024). As previously established, higher turnout can be seen as an expression of greater interest and engagement among individuals. Affective polarization is also positively associated with political interest and a higher propensity to vote (e.g. Hartevelde & Wagner, 2022; Phillips, 2024). Since a larger share of respondents that vote answer the surveys compared to the population overall, there is a risk that the degree of affective polarization is overestimated. While

this holds for both surveys/election types, this is particularly a concern in the EP election survey considering the low voter turnout in European Parliament elections. For the presented results from the European Election Study to be more representative of the Swedish populations' general degree of affective polarization during European Parliament elections, it thus matters how many non-voters answer the survey and whether they are included in the measure.

Table 1 shows the share of respondents who voted in each election survey and year, compared to the actual voter turnout in the respective election. The sample displayed here is also restricted to those respondents that declared their like-dislike for at least two parties in the survey, i.e. can be included in Wagner's index. The column furthest to the right shows the difference between the actual turnout versus the turnout rate among the respondents.. The difference in the share of voters included in the National Election Study sample compared to the actual turnout varies from about 5 percent to 12 percent (survey overrepresentation). In the European Parliament Election Study, the overrepresentation of voters among the respondents varies from about 10 percent to 26 percent.

Table 1 Share of voters per study and election turnout (percent).

Year	Election Study	N	Share voters (survey)	Turnout (actual)	Difference
1994	National	1 132	91,61	86,80	4,81
1995	EP	1 585	52,56	41,60	10,96
1998	National	1 185	88,95	81,40	7,58
1999	EP	1 256	52,47	38,80	13,67
2002	National	1 215	88,85	80,11	8,74
2004	EP	1 307	47,44	37,90	9,54
2006	National	1 191	90,25	81,99	8,26
2009	EP	1 293	59,55	45,53	14,02
2010	National	1 058	93,95	84,63	9,32
2014	EP	2 013	73,08	51,07	22,01
2014	National	821	95,24	85,81	9,43
2018	National	7 364	97,07	87,18	9,89
2019	EP	3 959	80,39	55,27	25,66
2022	National	7 165	96,60	84,21	12,39
2024	EP	4 467	75,2*	53,39	21,81

**Source:** Swedish National Election Study 1994-2022, Swedish European Parliament Election Study 1995-2024, the Swedish Election Authority, Statistics Sweden (SCB)

**Comment:** Share voters in survey includes respondents that actually voted and ranked at least two parties on the dislike-like scale in the post-election surveys, i.e. could be included in the measure of affective polarization. Actual sample sizes when including weights, see appendix table 5 and table 6. Whether respondents voted or not has been validated according to register data, except for the European Parliament Election Study in 2024 marked with an asterisk. The balance measure shows the share of voters in the survey minus the actual election turnout according to official results from the Swedish Election Authority and SCB.

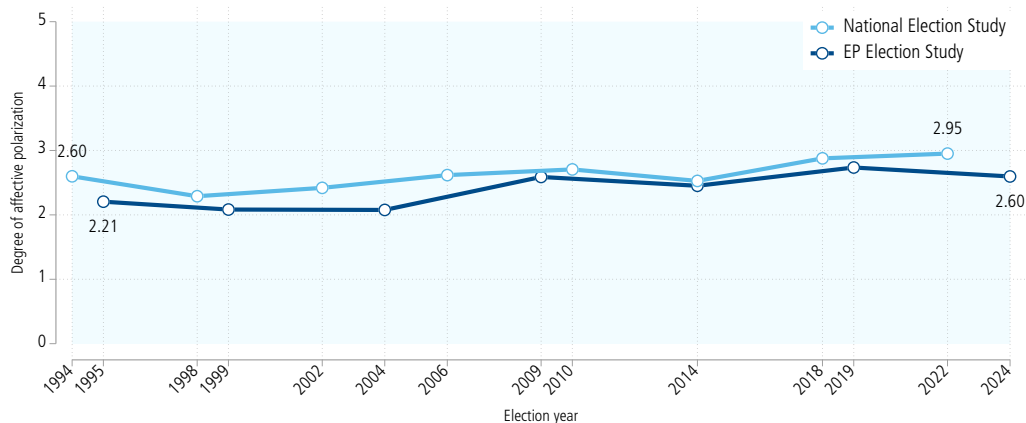
What is particularly interesting to note is the shift over time in the decreasing share of non-voters who respond in the European Parliament Election Studies. It is especially clear that there is a higher share of voters compared to the turnout rate in the three most recent studies, compared to earlier European Parliament Election studies. While Table 1 merely provides an overview, it nevertheless suggests that if individuals who vote in European Parliament elections are more affectively polarized this will also be reflected

in the general degree of affective polarization. Therefore, the risk of overestimating the effect of the European Parliament electoral cycle is higher when voters are overrepresented compared to the distribution of European Parliament election voters in the population. In other words, the degree of affective polarization may not be higher in 2019 election compared to in 2018 election. Instead, it may simply be that respondents in the European Parliament Election Study are more politically engaged, interested etc. (i.e. also tend to be more polarized) than the general public in Sweden.

Of course, we cannot know for certain how affectively polarized non-voting non-voters are during elections. Similarly to using party weights to adjust for official election results (as in Figure 2), I use weights for the share of non-voters to account for the survey underrepresentation of non-voters. Figure 3 below illustrates the same overall measure of affective polarization as Figure 2 but includes weights which consider both election results for the political parties and the share of non-voters in the European Parliament Election Study 1994-2024 (further details are available in Table 5 in the appendix).

Figure 3 shows that when including the non-voter weight, the general degree of affective polarization is generally lower in all European Parliament election years. There is some variation in how large the difference is compared to national elections, with particularly small differences in the years 2009-2019. Nevertheless, these results are more aligned with the hypotheses that second order elections have a weaker electoral cycle effect on affective polarization compared to national elections. Since turnout is generally lower in European Parliament elections, it could thus be argued that this figure is more representative of the electoral cycle effect on the Swedish voting age population as a whole. In other words, only comparing respondents who vote in national and European Parliament elections risks overestimating the general degree of affective polarization, particularly during European Parliament elections. Still, the question could again be posed what constitutes a large difference, particularly considering the relatively small differences between 2009-2019.

Figure 3. Affective polarization during elections: including European Parliament non-voters



**Source:** Swedish National Election Study 1994-2022, Swedish European Parliament Election Study 1995-2024

**Comment:** The figure displays the general degree of affective polarization in Sweden for each survey/election year, based on Wagner's (2021) unweighted spread of scores measure. For more details, see section on measuring affective polarization. The EP election studies in Figure 3 includes respondents that did not vote in the European Parliament election, which has been validated according to register data except for the study in 2024. Results are weighted by official election results in each respective election and are also weighted by the share of non-voters for the European Parliament elections. The number of respondents varies between approximately 760 to 6 600 for the survey years.

### Concluding remarks

This report has explored the degree of affective polarization during the national and European Parliament elections in Sweden from 1994 until 2024. While previous research

has established that there is an electoral cycle effect on affective polarization, the political temperature tends to be lower during European Parliament elections. Building on the theory of second order elections, this report posited that the general degree of affective polarization should be lower during European Parliament elections compared to national elections.

Several interesting, yet somewhat inconclusive, findings emerge from this report. Over the past 30 years, there is a relatively stable trend with a slight increase in the degree of affective polarization. Using data from SNES to explore trends over time reveal no clear differences between the two election types. The degree of affective polarization is not generally lower for voters during European Parliament elections compared to national elections. However, when also considering individuals who do not vote in European Parliament elections, the results show that levels of affective polarization have been slightly higher during national elections since 1994 and onwards. Perhaps unsurprisingly, European Parliament elections may not be perceived as second order to the same extent for individuals that are engaged enough to vote (and respond to election surveys). The results thus provide nuance to the theory of European Parliament elections as second order.

Overall, this report merely provides a broad picture and leaves several interesting questions open for future research. For instance, while affect towards parties and party leaders tends to be correlated, we also know that candidates are more important for vote choice in European Parliament elections compared to national elections in Sweden (Berg & Oscarsson, 2015). Election may also have differential effects on affective polarization towards candidates or parties (Singh & Thornton, 2024). Since SNES' surveys also include dislike-like scales for party leaders and leading candidates in European Parliament elections, the correlation between different measures of vertical affective polarization could be tested in the context of the two types of elections.

In sum, the results presented in this report furthers our understanding of the electoral fluctuations of affective polarization over time, in a Swedish context. While the prevalence of affective polarization is often portrayed as concerning, it is once again important to note that an increased degree of affective polarization during elections is not necessarily indicative of increased animosity. In Sweden, political parties tend to generate stronger positive rather than negative feelings in the context of elections (Holmberg, 1994; Oscarsson et al., 2024). A limitation of this report is that it is not possible to distinguish whether higher degrees of affective polarization indicate more positive or negative feelings. Continuing to untangle the dynamics of affect towards different parties, comparing national and European Parliament elections, constitutes a fruitful avenue for future work.

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## Appendix

Table 2. Parties included in the dislike-like scale: Swedish National Election Studies

	V	S	MP	C	L	KD	M	SD	JL	PP	FI	NyD	Total
1994	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	X	8
1998	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	7
2002	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	-	7
2006	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	11
2010	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	-	10
2014	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	X	-	9
2018	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	X	-	9
2022	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	8

**Source:** Swedish National Election Study 1994-2022

**Comment:** The party abbreviations are: the Left Party (V), the Social Democratic Party (S), the Green Party (MP), the Center Party (C), the Liberals (L), the Christian Democrats (KD), the Conservative Party (M), the Sweden Democrats (SD), the June List Party (JL), the Pirate Party (PP), the Feminist Initiative (FI) and New Democracy (NyD).

Table 3. Parties included in the dislike-like scale: Swedish European Parliament Election Studies

	V	S	MP	C	L	KD	M	SD	JL	PP	FI	Total
1995	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	7
1999	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	-	7
2004	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	-	-	8
2009	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	11
2014	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	10
2019	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	X	9
2024	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	8

**Source:** Swedish European Parliament Election Study 1995-2024

**Comment:** The party abbreviations are: the Left Party (V), the Social Democratic Party (S), the Green Party (MP), the Center Party (C), the Liberals (L), the Christian Democrats (KD), the Conservative Party (M), the Sweden Democrats (SD), the June List Party (JL), the Pirate Party (PP) and the Feminist Initiative (FI).

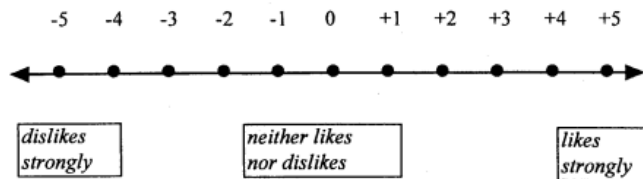
Figure 4. Example of question wording

**Question 9A**

On this card there is a kind of scale.

*SHOW CARD 9AC*

I would like you to use it to illustrate how much you like or dislike the different parties. Use 'plus' figures if you like the different parties. The more you like a party, the higher the 'plus' figure. The 'minus' figures are to be used for parties you dislike. The more you dislike a party, the higher the 'minus' figure. The zero point on the scale means that you neither like nor dislike a party.



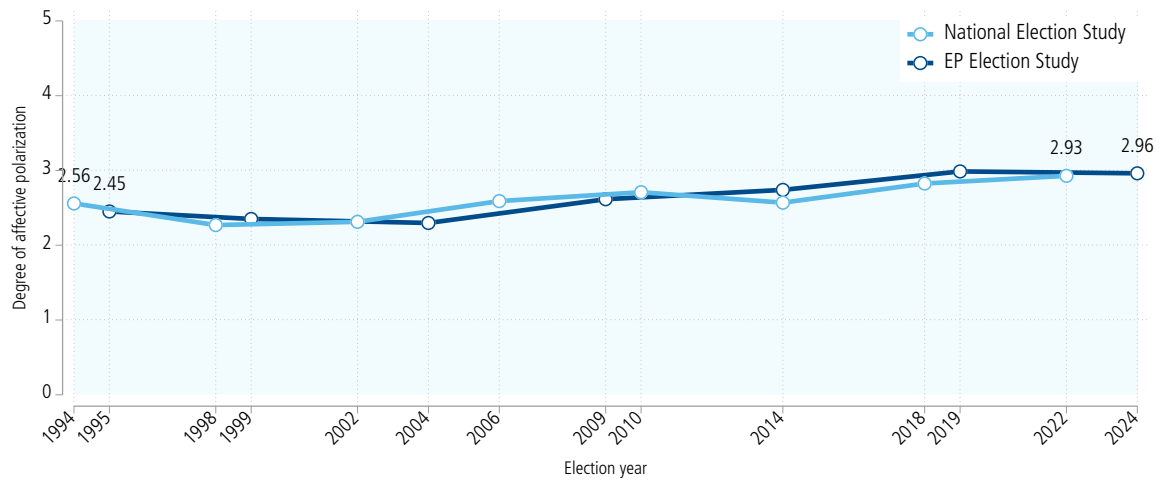
*READ OUT ONE PARTY AT A TIME AND ASK QUESTION BELOW.*  
*DK/REFUSAL=98*

Where would you like to place:

- A. *Centre Party?*
- B. *Moderate Party?*
- C. *Left Party?*
- D. *People's Party Liberals?*
- E. *Social Democrats?*
- F. *Green Party?*
- G. *Christian Democratic Party?*
- H. *New Democracy?*

**Comment:** An example of the survey question wording in the Swedish National Election Study 1994. For all surveys, see SNES webpage ([www.gu.se/en/swedish-national-election-studies](http://www.gu.se/en/swedish-national-election-studies)).

Figure 5 Degree of affective polarization: full sample for the National Election Studies



**Source:** The Swedish National Election Study 1994-2022, the Swedish European Parliament Election Study 1995-2024.

**Comment:** The figure displays the general degree of affective polarization in Sweden for each survey/election year, based on Wagner's (2021) unweighted spread of scores measure. Compared to Figure 2, this figure includes respondents that answered pre-election survey editions of the National Election Study. For more details, see section on measuring affective polarization. The question that the measure of affective polarization is based on reads: "Where would you like to place the following parties on the scale below?" See Table 3 and Table 4 in the appendix for parties included each year. The response options range from "Strongly dislike (-5)", "Neither like nor dislike" to "Strongly like (+5)". In the CSES module of the National Election Survey, the response options range from "Strongly dislike (0) to "Strongly like (10)". The number of respondents varies between approximately 620 to 6 600 for the survey years. Results are weighted by official election results.

Table 4. Affective polarization during national and European Parliament elections

Year	Degree of AP	Study	N
1994	2,6	National	992
1995	2,45	EP	811
1998	2,29	National	1 015
1999	2,35	EP	619
2002	2,42	National	1 038
2004	2,3	EP	586
2006	2,62	National	1 044
2009	2,62	EP	750
2010	2,71	National	963
2014	2,74	EP	1 364
2014	2,53	National	764
2018	2,88	National	6 578
2019	2,99	EP	2 896
2022	2,95	National	6 200
2024	2,96	EP	3 219

**Source:** The Swedish National Election Study 1994-2022, the Swedish European Parliament Election Study 1995-2024.

**Comment:** Corresponding to Figure 2, the table displays the general degree of affective polarization in Sweden for each survey/election year, based on Wagner's (2021) unweighted spread of scores measure. For more details, see section on measuring affective polarization. The question that the measure of affective polarization is based on reads: "Where would you like to place the following parties on the scale below?" See Table 3 and Table 4 in the appendix for parties included each year. The response options range from "Strongly dislike (-5)", "Neither like nor dislike" to "Strongly like (+5)". In the CSES module of the National Election Survey, the response options range from "Strongly dislike (0) to "Strongly like (10)". Results are weighted by official election results.

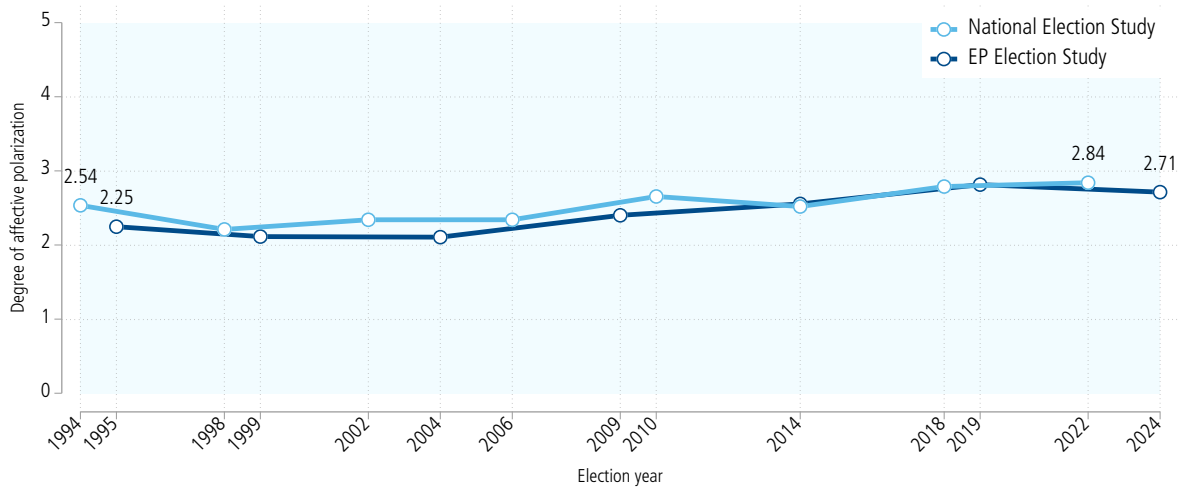
Table 5. Affective polarization during elections: including European Parliament non-voters

Year	Degree of		N
	AP	Study	
1994	2,6	National	992
1995	2,21	EP	1 563
1998	2,29	National	1 015
1999	2,08	EP	1 218
2002	2,42	National	1 038
2004	2,08	EP	1 273
2006	2,62	National	1 044
2009	2,59	EP	1 277
2010	2,71	National	963
2014	2,45	EP	1 906
2014	2,53	National	764
2018	2,88	National	6 578
2019	2,74	EP	3 589
2022	2,95	National	6 200
2024	2,6	EP	4 372

**Source:** The Swedish National Election Study 1994-2022, the Swedish European Parliament Election Study 1995-2024.

**Comment:** Corresponding to Figure 3, the table displays the general degree of affective polarization in Sweden for each survey/election year, based on Wagner's (2021) unweighted spread of scores measure. For more details, see section on measuring affective polarization. The EP election studies in Figure 3 includes respondents that did not vote in the European Parliament election, which has been validated according to register data except for the study in 2024. Results are weighted by official election results in each respective election and are also weighted by the share of non-voters for the European Parliament elections.

Figure 6. Affective polarization during national and European Parliament elections: not weighted by election results



**Source:** The Swedish National Election Study 1994-2022, the Swedish European Parliament Election Study 1995-2024.

**Comment:** The figure displays the general degree of affective polarization in Sweden for each survey/election year, based on Wagner's (2021) unweighted spread of scores measure. Compared to Figure 2, results in Figure 6 are not weighted by official election results. For more measurement details, see section on measuring affective polarization. The question that the measure of affective polarization is based on reads: "Where would you like to place the following parties on the scale below?" See Table 3 and Table 4 in the appendix for parties included each year. The response options range from "Strongly dislike (-5)", "Neither like nor dislike" to "Strongly like (+5)". In the CSES module of the National Election Survey, the response options range from "Strongly dislike (0) to "Strongly like (10)". The number of respondents varies between approximately 620 to 6 600 for the survey years.

**The Swedish National Election Studies Program** was established in 1954 by Jörgen Westerståhl and Bo Särnlvik and is today a high profile network of researchers at the Department of Political Science in Gothenburg. The Program serve as a collaborative platform for Swedish and international scholars interested in studies of electoral democracy, representative democracy, opinion formation, and voting behavior.

The aim of our research is among others to explain why people vote as they do and why an election ends in a particular way. We track and follow trends in the Swedish electoral democracy and make comparisons with other countries.

Professor Henrik Ekengren Oscarsson is the director of the Swedish Election Studies Program.

