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## “Democracy is an ideology of opposition”

Affective polarization within the political elite in Sweden

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**Abstract:**

Polarization as a phenomenon has during recent years attracted increased interest, which is noticeable in research, where the literature on the subject is rapidly growing. One of the main reasons for this increased interest is the close relationship between polarization and democratic backsliding. Sweden is no exception and is today considered to be one of the most affectively polarized countries in Europe. Research on affective polarization in Sweden is, however, still rather limited and the focus has mainly been on the electorate, not if the political elite is affectively polarized. In this study, I will contribute to this field of research by analyzing party leader debates within the Swedish Riksdag every election year since 1973. The study has three main results in relation to previous research: 1) it highlights the importance of differentiating between affective and ideological polarization and develops a framework to be applied in studies based on textual data; 2) it shows that ideological polarization dominates the political debate in Sweden throughout the time period, while the level of affective polarization has changed over time with four peaks (in 1985, 1994, 2006, 2018), showing that although affective polarization has increased in the 2010s, it does not stand out in a historical perspective; and 3) it discerns four central driving forces for affective polarization: the role of populist parties, party leaders, political issues, and the idea of consensus, where the first three primarily risks increasing affective polarization, while the last can reduce polarization and calls for cooperation across party and bloc borders. In conclusion, the study shows that there has been a decline in affective polarization during the 2022 debate, related to the war in Ukraine, but further research is needed to investigate whether this is a continuing trend, or merely a contextual trend break.

**Key words:** affective polarization, ideological polarization, opposition, political elite, party politics, legislative debates.

**Table 1. Parties in the Swedish Riksdag 1973-2022.**

<b>Party Name</b>	<b>Swedish</b>	<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Previous name</b>	<b>Time in parliament</b>
Social Democrats	Socialdemokratiska arbetarpartiet	S		1973-2022
The Moderate Party <sup>1</sup>	Moderata samlingspartiet	M		1973-2022
The Center Party	Centerpartiet	C		1973-2022
The Liberal Party	Liberalerna	L	Folkpartiet Liberalerna (Fp) 1973-2015	1973-2022
The Left Party	Vänsterpartiet	V	Vänsterpartiet kommunisterna (Vpk) 1973-1990	1973-2022
The Green Party	Miljöpartiet de gröna	MP		1988-1991 1994-2022
The Christian Democrats	Kristdemokraterna	KD	Kristdemokratiska Samhällspartiet (KdS) 1991-1996	1991-2022
New Democracy	Ny demokrati	NYD		1991-1994
The Sweden Democrats	Sverigedemokraterna	SD		2010-2022

*Please note that this table only takes into account the parties during the period 1973-2022 and the years they sat in the parliament. The party names before 1973, or before the party entered the parliament, are therefore excluded.*

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<sup>1</sup> In previous literature there is a disagreement about how "Moderaterna" should be translated into English, where previous research largely used "the Conservative Party", but where current research uses "The Moderate Party" (see e.g., Leander 2022:327). I will follow in line with contemporary research and use "the Moderate Party" as the English translation.

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## 1. Introduction

Polarization as a phenomenon has during recent years attracted increased interest, which is noticeable in research, where the literature on the subject is rapidly growing (Oscarsson et al. 2021:11; Wagner 2024:379). One of the main reasons for this, is the close relationship between polarization and democratic backsliding or autocratization (Little & Meng 2024:1; Knutsen & Skaaning 2022:29-39). During the past decade, a growing number of countries have retreated from democracy. According to the 2024 democracy report from V-Dem institute (2024:6), 42 countries are currently experiencing ongoing processes of autocratization, including some well-established democracies (Haggard & Kaufman 2021:27). In these processes, polarization is often conceived as a crucial factor and is found present in almost all cases of democratic backsliding. Polarization is thus mainly viewed as problematic for democracies.

It is, however, important to emphasize that some level of political polarization is necessary and beneficial to democracy in terms of strengthening political parties, mobilizing supporters and providing programmatic choices for the electorate (McCoy et al. 2018:18). Therefore, recent research has differentiated between two forms of polarization: ideological and affective. Ideological polarization, to some extent, is most often considered decisive for a democracy as it indicates that voters have a meaningful choice between alternating parties and that there exists viable opposition to the government in office (see, e.g., Dahl 1966; Karlsson & Persson 2022). As Ian Shapiro (1996:51) argues: “Democracy is an ideology of opposition as much as it is one of government.” Affective polarization is, however, unequivocally considered to be a dangerous and negative phenomenon, since it among other things decreases political trust, hinders cooperation among party elites, delegitimizes political decisions, and may even lead to political violence (see, e.g., Iyengar 2012:428; Reiljan 2020:376-377; Bettarelli et al. 2023:645). The political elites have an important role here, since they can increase affective polarization by reinforcing existing group identities, and democracies only backslide or collapse if leading actors deliberately tear them apart (Bermeo 2003:5-6, 229-235; Oscarsson et al. 2021:171).

Sweden has during recent years been pictured as an increasingly conflict-filled and fiery society, where the electorate has become much more divided, specifically on “cultural issues” such as immigration (Bäck et al. 2023:3; Möller 2023:312-318). This, in turn, is often perceived as directly related to the Sweden Democrats (SD) entry into the parliament in 2010. SD’s early history, with openly racist values, has been controversial and the party has for a long time been regarded as a so-called pariah party (Leander 2022:327). SD’s entry has had extensive consequences: new lines of conflict have emerged and the bloc policy along the left-right

dimension that has characterized Swedish politics has lost its absolute dominance (Oscarsson et al. 2021:25-26; Möller 2023:11). In this way, Sweden could be seen as typical for many advanced democracies with multi-party systems, in which polarization of group identities relates primarily to cultural issues, which in turn is linked to affective polarization (Ryan 2023:58-59; Bäck et al 2023:3).

The relatively limited research on affective polarization in Sweden so far is, however, ambiguous about what the development actually looks like and how it should be interpreted. Some studies suggest that Sweden today is one of the most affectively polarized countries in Europe and that the development risks leading to serious consequences (Ryan 2023:69; Bäck et al. 2023:1-2; Bettarelli et al. 2023:654), while other argues that even if affective polarization has increased during recent years, it is not a “national record” and fully comparable with previous polarized periods (Oscarsson et al. 2021:159). In line with most studies on affective polarization, the focus in the Swedish context has been on the electorate, not if the political elite – like the political parties – is affectively polarized or mainly fulfil its role as representing different ideologies or values. Recent work has therefore identified a need to better understand affective polarization among the political elite – both in general and in Sweden – and its potential consequences for the future development of democracy (Røed et al 2023:1; Fernandes et al. 2021:1039).

In this study, I will contribute to this field of research by analyzing party leader debates within the Swedish *Riksdag* every election year since 1973. By focusing on the political elite, the study provides valuable insights into the behavior of key actors who may influence policymaking and drive mass affective polarization (cf. Røed et al. 2023:8). Moreover, by clearly distinguishing between ideological and affective polarization, this study may also show if today’s political polarization differs from previous periods of political strife in Sweden and, thus, if the debate climate today is an imminent threat to Swedish democracy, for instance, in terms of political trust or hinders cooperation among the party elites.

### **1.1 The aim and questions**

The aim of this study is to analyze ideological and affective polarization within the political elite in Sweden in a longitudinal perspective – focusing on the political debate in the legislature (the *Riksdag*) – during each election year since 1973 until the latest election 2022 (15 election years in total). Three main questions will guide my analysis:

- How could ideological and affective polarization within the political elite be distinguished and measured in a qualitative way?
- How has the political debate changed in Swedish politics over time in terms of polarization?
- What drivers contribute to an increase or decrease in affective polarization?

## **1.2 Limitations**

Polarization within the political elite over a historical period in Sweden is an enormous field of research, which necessitates several limitations. One is the limitation in time, where I only analyze the time period after the unicameral parliament was established in 1970 (Oscarsson et al. 2021:67). The debates before took place in a bicameral parliament, which would make comparison over time more difficult. A further important limitation is the focus on the political elite in Sweden solely in the form of party leader debates within the parliamentary arena, and in addition, only the last party leader debate before elections is included. This implies that other debates between party leaders on, for example, particular and potentially polarizing issues, as energy policy, are excluded, but also debate posts by other parliamentarians. This restriction is motivated on the basis that party leaders are the most important representatives of their parties, and during party leader debates, the issues parties find most important are primarily raised (Oscarsson et al. 2021:76). Furthermore, the choice of the material also leaves out other ways the elite may contribute to affective polarization, for instance, through social or traditional media (see e.g. Iyengar 2012 406-407; Bäck et al. 2023:7). There are, however, two good reasons for this limitation: first, it makes my comparison over time more reliable since the debates have been conducted in a similar way during the whole time-period; second, in the parliamentary arena, the construction and reinforcement of group identities is particularly visible and important (Røed et al. 2023:2).

## **1.3 Background: Swedish politics**

This background draws attention to parts in Swedish political history that are essential for the understanding of this study. First, Sweden is a proportional multiparty system, that historically has been characterized by a consensus-oriented political culture, where traditional parties have formed agreements on major issues (e.g., foreign policy, pensions, and energy) that have held after a change of government (Stjernquist 1966:138; Möller 2023:12; Öhberg & Cassel 2023:228). Fundamental in relation to the party system is the role of the Social Democrats (S),

where they between 1932-2022 held government responsibility for 73 out of 90 years (Möller 2023:308). Their dominant position has, among other things, affected the role of the center-right opposition, as they historically developed a strategy of collaborating with the S government to influence the political decisions as much as possible (Stjernquist 1966:116, 137). A turning point in Swedish political history is, therefore, the change of government in 1976, when the center-right parties formed a coalition government, ending 44-years of uninterrupted power for S (Möller 2023:10).

Second, the Swedish party system has been regarded as one of the most stable party systems in the world. For a long period after the introduction of universal suffrage in 1921, Sweden had a multiparty system consisting of the same five parties (see Table 1), still represented in the parliament today (although the names of the parties have changed): the Social Democrats (S), the Moderate Party (M), the Liberal Party (L), the Center Party (C) and the Left Party (V) (Stjernquist 1966:121; Möller 2023:291). The most prominent change within the party system since 1970 has therefore been the increase of parties represented in the parliament. Four new parties have since 1988 entered the parliament: the Green Party (MP), the Christian Democrats (KD), New Democracy (NYD) (1991-1994), and the Sweden Democrats (SD). The entry of these parties has undermined the former parliamentary stability and made the formation of government more difficult, especially since Swedish elections rarely produce clear winners, and typically result in a minority or coalition government consisting of two or more parties on the same side of the left-right political spectrum (Oscarsson et al. 2021:67; Möller 2023:314).

Third, within Swedish politics, the left-right dimension is the backbone of the party system (Öhberg & Cassel 2023:228), and there has historically been an obvious correlation between party affiliation, occupational group and socioeconomic status (Stjernquist 1966:126). This prominent ideological basis, together with the dominant position of S, led during the 1970s to an emerging bloc politics, where two clear government alternatives stood against each other, the left versus the right (Möller 2023:322). Following the left-right divide, the dominant party conflicts have revolved around issues such as taxation, public spending (mainly on welfare), government intervention in business and labor law (Oscarsson 2017:424; Oscarsson et al. 2021:25-26). However, during certain periods, other ideological dimensions have become topical, for example, the recurrent debate on energy and nuclear power, membership in the European Union (EU) and immigration, which has challenged party cohesion and had consequences for parliamentary life.

Fourth, the Swedish party system today is considered to be more divided than before, with a hardening of the tone in the political debate, not least demonstrated by the fact that from the

2010s more votes of no-confidence than ever before has taken place (Lindvall 2024:113), and researchers argue that affective polarization has increased. This is often perceived as directly related to SD entering the parliament in 2010 (Möller 2023:317-320; Reiljan & Ryan 2021; Leander 2022:327). According to contemporary studies, it thus seems as if Sweden could be seen as a typical case of affective polarization (Bäck et al 2023:3).

## **2. Previous research**

During the last decade, there has been an explosion of studies regarding polarization (see, e.g., Torcal & Harteveld 2024; Wagner 2024), and a literature review can therefore not do justice to the entire field. In relation to the study's main aim, however, I believe that there are three ways to describe the previous research in general terms: through the methods used (quantitative studies vs. qualitative studies), the focus (on the electorate or the political elite) and studies on Sweden. Evidently, some studies fall into all categories, but by sorting previous research in this way the contributions of this paper become more specified. Moreover, much of this literature also returns when I develop my theoretical and analytical framework.

### **2.1 Polarization analyzed through different methods**

#### **2.1.1 *Quantitative studies***

In studies on polarization, quantitative studies dominate. In a historical perspective, polarization was analyzed only in terms of ideological polarization, most often by using individual level survey data on items such as the degree of party identification and positions on specific political issues. The latter has also been used to identify ideological distance between parties (Oscarsson et al. 2021:28). In contemporary research, however, polarization is also (and mainly) measured in terms of affective polarization using data from national and cross-national surveys asking respondents (partisans) to rate their feelings toward parties/party supporters where the respondents indicate to what degree they like/dislike specific parties or how they rate different groups on a thermometer scale ranging from “cold” to “warm” (see, e.g., Iyengar et al. 2012:408-410; Renström et al. 2020:430; Wagner 2024:380).<sup>2</sup> Another way to operationalize affective polarization has been to let respondents choose among specific trait terms to describe different groups or their supporters, including positive or negative words like “patriotic”, “intelligent”, and “selfish”, or through survey experiments using an implicit association test

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<sup>2</sup> In the Swedish context, the SOM-institute has such a question in their recurrent survey among the electorate, where the respondents are asked how much they like/dislike the different political parties on a scale from -5 to +5 (see e.g., Oscarsson 2017:413).

with a set of good stimuli (Wonderful, Best, Superb, Excellent) and of bad stimuli (Terrible, Awful, Worst, Horrible) to get respondents' reactions on images referring to the Democratic and Republican parties (Iyengar et al. 2012:411-412; Iyengar & Westwood 2015:693).

In a multiparty context, however, strict competition, as in the US, is unlikely, unless one party itself can form a majority (Dahl 1966:337). Voters can instead simultaneously like or dislike more than one party, making it significantly more complicated to grasp the degree of affective polarization on party level (Wagner 2024:380; Bettarelli et al. 2023:647; Öhberg & Cassel 2023:223). Therefore, research from multiparty contexts suggests that bloc identification is important at the expense of party identification. In a 2020 article by Reiljan, he introduced the "Affective Polarisation Index" (API), to measure and compare levels of affective polarization in multiparty systems, with the aim to study the concept of affective polarization in European party systems (Reiljan 2020:376). Still using questions on like/dislike of parties, the API indicates the average divergence of partisan affective evaluations between in-party and out-parties, weighted by the electoral size (vote share) of the parties. The index uses different variables to measure both ideological and affective polarization, for example, party identification and positions on specific political issues (ideological), and how favorable partisans are towards their own party in relation to how negative they are towards competing parties (affective) (Reiljan 2020:378-380).

### ***2.1.2 Qualitative studies***

Within previous research on affective polarization, qualitative approaches have remained absent (Röllicke 2024:129). However, a few studies adopting a qualitative method are to be found, for example, one study in the Swedish context analyzed parliamentary debates over time to see whether the debates have changed. It analyzed patterns of contact, i.e., who is debating against and fighting with whom, and how the debate is conducted in terms of confrontation and opposition. Two main categories were used in the analysis: (1) how the parties relate to each other, and (2) how the distance between the parties is constructed. In sum, the study showed that the party leader debates have become more direct and the criticism sharper in recent times, coinciding with the entry of SD (Oscarsson et al. 2021:75-77, 94). Another study, have used in-depth interviews to shed light on affective polarization in regard to the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany. The research identified two clear camps, with different views of the containment policies during the pandemic, but found that in-group identities played a smaller role than previous research on affective polarization has emphasized (Röllicke 2024:131).

## 2.2. The focus of the study

### 2.2.1. *The electorate*

The focus of contemporary studies has primarily been on the electorate (see e.g., Renström et al. 2020:427; Bettarelli et al. 2023:646). In the US, for instance, several studies show that American partisans are highly polarized in their feelings about each other, and that the polarization has increased dramatically during recent years (see e.g., Iyengar et al. 2012:412-413, 421; Iyengar & Westwood 2015:690). In a series of articles, Iyengar and colleagues have compared party affiliation with other prominent social cleavages in the US as bases for affective polarization and found that the negative affect for the out-group is greater or at least as great, when a group identity is defined in terms of partisanship, rather than racial or religious division (Iyengar et al. 2012:409-415; Iyengar and Westwood 2015:690-691). More generally, the results from these studies show that party identification in the US is more of an affective character than an instrumental or ideological bond, and the extent of affective polarization appears uniform across parties. Furthermore, sentiments toward co-partisans have remained relatively stable, whereas negative sentiments toward opposing partisans have increased dramatically (Iyengar & Westwood 2015:702-705).

In relation to the US, studies on the electorate in European multi-party systems highlight the importance of right-wing populist parties for polarization, and that affective polarization has increased in most European countries during recent years.<sup>3</sup> Partisan like-dislike matrices have demonstrated that these parties stand out and are most intensely disliked by supporters of other parties (Wagner 2024:382; Reiljan 2020:392; Oscarson et al. 2021:173). Traditionally, however, European politics have been structured by deep underlying cleavages, making ideology important to both elites and partisans (see, e.g., Lipset & Rokkan 1967). The political ideologies based on the left-right divide is therefore much stronger than in the US, and ideological polarization within the party system plays an important role, since when it is higher – the more distant parties are from each other on the left-right dimension – it results, on average, in higher partisan affective polarization (Reiljan 2020:382-383). Like in the US, cross-national variation in the level of affective polarization is in Europe primarily driven by increasing out-party hostility, rather than by positive in-party feelings (see e.g., Öhberg & Cassel 2023).

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<sup>3</sup> New studies also analyze affective polarization in Latin America, where partisan institutions tend to be weak, and in East Asia, where many democracies have faced strong threats from neighboring countries, such as China and North Korea (see, e.g., Moraes & Béjar 2024; Hsiao & Yu 2024). However, these cases of affective polarization differ significantly from that of Europe (and Sweden) in both history and context and will therefore not be further discussed within the framework of this study.

### ***2.2.2. The political elite***

Studies on the political elite primarily emphasize how the elite affects polarization among the electorate. A prominent example is, for instance, studies on the presidential system in the US, which have shown to increase affective polarization, especially when partisans become exposed to presidential campaigns (Iyengar et al. 2012:407, 415). The American electorate is regularly exposed to rhetoric from their leaders conveying open hostility toward political opponents and the out-group, which reinforces partisans' biased views of their opponents (Iyengar et al. 2012:405-408; Iyengar & Westwood 2015:696-704). Especially, the role of Donald Trump has been highlighted (see e.g., Dawkins & Hanson 2024). In another study, using social media, individuals received fictional "tweets" from different political representatives focusing on potential "cultural threats" to Sweden related to, for example, immigration. The political elite was found to play a crucial role in influencing affective polarization by reinforcing existing group identities, since individuals interpret messages from their in- or out-groups as reinforcing their partisan identity even when the messages do not explicitly advocate a specific political stance (Bäck et al. 2023).

Even though the elite is found to play a huge part in polarizing the electorate, the overall knowledge on affective polarization at the elite level remains limited (Öhberg & Cassel 2023:320). This is largely a consequence of the fact that many methods used on the electorate, like surveys, cannot as easily be implemented at an elite level (Røed et al. 2023:4). One study, based on panel data in three waves, examined the existence of changes in partisan in-group favoritism and partisan out-group hostility among the political elite in Sweden (Öhberg & Cassel 2023). It was conducted in conjunction to the 2014 parliamentary election in Sweden and the results revealed that politicians' emotions toward other parties are affective and increases, as in the US, during election campaigns. A similar result was found in the Norwegian parliament, where members of parliament (MPs) during election campaigns, tend to attack other parties and their candidates to a greater extent (Røed et al. 2023:8).

### **2.3. Polarization in Sweden**

Studies on Sweden have, in line with findings in other contemporary democracies, shown an increase in affective polarization during recent years, as mentioned in the background, and there is a consensus among scholars that SD is the key driver (Oscarsson et al. 2021:13; Bäck et al. 2023:3; Öhberg & Cassel 2023:230; Reiljan & Ryan 2021:194). In fact, some studies on the electorate have found Sweden to be one of the most affectively polarized countries in Europe and that Sweden, together with Italy, has had the largest increase in affective polarization during

recent years (see e.g., Reiljan 2020:389; Bettarelli et al. 2023:652-654; Bäck et al. 2023:1-2). Moreover, Sweden is considered to have common features with other advanced democracies, where topics such as immigration are a typical basis for a cultural division that increases affective polarization (Reiljan & Ryan 2021:194), and elections seem to play an important role in driving polarization (Öhberg & Cassel 2023:221-222). In sum, Swedish politics has entered a new and more affectively polarized age.

These findings are confirmed in longitudinal studies: there is an increase in affective polarization in Sweden today mainly along the cultural value dimension. This could potentially have serious effects on the parliamentary situation, exemplified by the messy situation after the election 2018 with a record-long government formation process and a unique coalition agreement (“Januariavtalet”) (Oscarsson et al. 2021:9-12; Möller 2023:312-318). However, these studies also show there have been small changes in Sweden’s strongly polarized party-system in left-right terms, and that that the contemporary situation is comparable to other previous periods of polarization (Öhberg & Cassel 2023:220; Oscarsson et al. 2021:161). Sweden has been, and still is, a country with primarily a strikingly high degree of ideological polarization.

## **2.4 Previous research and the thesis contribution to the field of research**

There are several findings in previous research of importance to my analysis. First, the literature review has shown that ideological and affective polarization are two distinct aspects of polarization that ought to be measured with different variables (although high ideological polarization may increase affective polarization). Second, most studies indicate that affective polarization has increased over time and that it is primarily driven by increased hostility towards the out-group. Third, right-wing populist parties are particular drivers for polarization in Europe, especially as they put “cultural issues” on the political agenda, which adds a new ideological dimension to the traditional left-right divide. Fourth, the political elite may function as drivers of polarization, which puts elections and election campaigns in focus, since these tend to increase hostility towards the political opponents. Finally, most studies are based on quantitative methods where affective polarization is mainly analyzed in terms of self-reported negative and positive feelings towards the in- or out-group (like/dislike), and when operationalized these feelings are described with a set of negative or positive words, traits or stimuli.

In relation to previous research, my study’s main contributions are three. First, as shown in the literature review, most of the literature on polarization has been focusing on the electorate

using quantitative methods, and very limited attention has been given polarization expressed in legislative speeches. There is thus a gap to fill, whereas I will analyze affective polarization within the political elite through speeches within the parliamentary arena.

Second, there is in previous studies often a lack of a clear differentiation between ideological and affective polarization, as well as how they can be measured in relation to each other. In quantitative studies on the elite using text data, the focus is mainly on the use of negative words, without differentiating these from negative words used within the ideological dimension (see e.g., Røed et al. 2023; Bäck et al. 2023). This study therefore contributes to the field by a qualitative text analytic study that distinguishes affective polarization from ideological polarization in a clear way.

Third, this study will also make an empirical contribution to the research field on affective polarization in Sweden, for instance, if it has increased over time within the political elite (especially since almost nothing has been done regarding the 2022 election) and what the drivers of affective polarization among the elite may be.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

In this section, the study's theoretical approach is presented, which primarily consists of the concept of polarization. To fundamentally understand ideological polarization and ideological or interest-based critic – something usually considered fundamental in a democracy – democratic theory and the role of the opposition will be my starting-point.

#### **3.1 Democratic theory and the role of the opposition**

In all modern models of democracy, some form of opposition – and thus polarization – is presupposed to exist (see, e.g., Held 1990), so also in the most well-elaborated elitist theories of democracy (Schumpeter 1976:427; Brennan 2017:282). Thus, within democratic theory, pluralism is considered a fundamental condition for democracy, in that all citizens ought to have the right to form independent associations or organizations. This is closely related to political equality as best understood in terms of equality of opportunity to participate politically (Dahl 1982:11; Müller 2021:90). Full freedom for political organizations, such as independent political parties – associational autonomy – is therefore viewed as one of four essential political institutions for a representative democracy (Dahl 2006:80).

In a modern democracy, the political parties enable citizens to coordinate their actions in order to elect their preferred candidates. Without them, the basic criteriums of voting equality and effective participation, would be violated (Dahl 1982:36). The parties are crucial as

manifestations of major cleavages emerging from historical social divisions among the population, and the parliament should be a place where all parties or opinions in the country can muster strength, and where all people can find someone who speaks their mind, equally well or better than they could themselves (Helms 2008:13; Müller 2021:95). This stands, of course, in stark contrast to early democratic theory in which political “factions” were seen as a danger to be avoided (see e.g., Rousseau 1968:59-60).

In this capacity, political parties play a fundamental role within the democratic system when it comes to (legitimate) opposition, as a political party is its most visible manifestation and one of the most effective forms of opposition in a democracy (Dahl 1966:333; Sjöblom 1968:251). The rights of an organized legitimate opposition to seek votes against the incumbent government is – together with the right to vote and the right to be represented – regarded as one of the greatest milestones in the development of democratic institutions, and what is setting it apart from non-democratic regimes (Dahl 1966:xiii, 1982:37; Shapiro 1999:39). An effective opposition is therefore considered as important as an effective government, and “there can be no real democracy without opposition” (Helms 2008:6). The institutions of opposition perform the functional role of providing sites for potential alternative leadership, and they help stabilize democracy by attracting social dissent within the regime, without endangering the democratic order’s legitimacy (Shapiro 1996:51). Moreover, opposition institutions serve the public interest by ensuring that there are groups and individuals who have incentives to ask awkward questions and expose abuses of power. Criticism provides a valuable and necessary brake on the government, with the ultimate weapon to voice dissent for the parliamentary opposition being the vote of no-confidence (Shapiro 1999:39; Helms 2008:11-12).

Based on democratic theory’s fundamental emphasis on the importance of the opposition, we can see the significance of political conflicts within a democracy, and thereby a degree of polarization. But where can the line be drawn between “normal” or necessary polarization and polarization as a threat against democracy? The next part will further explore the concept of polarization and how it can be divided into necessary and dangerous.

### **3.2 Polarization**

Polarization is a phenomenon that is hard to define but is usually conceived of as a process rather than a situation, through which political elites and publics become increasingly divided over public policy and ideology (Haggard & Kaufman 2021:29-30). In a broad sense, polarization can be defined as a clustering in a society that divides the population into sizeable groups on opposite sides (Reiljan 2020:377). In politics of extreme polarization, the core is the

idea of an existential struggle between “friends” and “enemies”, and the need to protect one’s own way of life from “the enemy”. The normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly aligns along a single dimension, where cross-cutting differences become reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of “us” versus “them” (Iyengar et al. 2012:421; McCoy et al 2018:18-23).

### ***3.2.1 Ideological vs. affective polarization***

Polarization has previously mainly concerned ideological polarization, and the term “affective polarization” had been sparsely used until the seminal article by Iyengar et al. (2012). Since then, however, both the importance of affective polarization and to differentiate between ideological and affective polarization have been emphasized (Iyengar et al. 2012:405; Reiljan 2020:377-380).

Following the role of the opposition within democratic theory, pluralism or ideological polarization is mainly viewed as necessary for a vital democracy, and a democracy should be able to withstand strong ideological polarization. In a representative democracy, the level of polarization among elite actors should ideally reflect the polarization in society (see, e.g., Dahl 1966; Oscarsson et al. 2021:14). A high level of ideological polarization does therefore not, necessarily signify animosity between the polarized parties, but can form the basis for it, and a warning indicator is when there is increased hostility between political actors. Another indicator of when the level of political polarization becomes harmful to democracy is when it results in partisan battles over the infrastructure, foundations, outcomes and rules of the game of a representative democracy (Reiljan 2020:380; Oscarsson et al. 2021:170). This occurs when political actors actively politicize the existence and way of functioning of democratic arenas, such as the parliament or constitutionally protected rights.

Affective polarization is conceived of as a different form of polarization. What distinguishes it from ideological polarization “is the eroding effects of identity-driven attitudes, rather than radicalization around a certain set of issues” (Torcal & Harteveld 2024:8). It is based on the classic concept of social distance and is a tendency among party supporters (partisans) to view other party/parties as a disliked out-group(s), while holding positive in-group feelings for one’s own party. Groups maintain their distinctiveness from other groups to sustain their identity and cohesion (Iyengar et al. 2012:405; Reiljan 2020:376). Democratic societies faced with heightened levels of affective polarization is characterized by a significant degree of intergroup distancing between one’s own political party and their supporters. This affective separation is a result of classifying opposing partisans as members of an out-group and co-partisans as

members of an in-group, and where the out-group usually is ascribed undesirable or inappropriate traits (Iyengar & Westwood 2015:691; Bettarelli et al. 2023:645; Røed et al. 2023:2).

In conclusion, in theories on democracy ideological polarization is needed in a well-functioning democracy, while affective polarization is conceived of as a dangerous phenomenon. Therefore, we should desire a party system where parties and partisans diverge on ideological grounds to some extent, but it should not be accompanied by intense inter-party animosity.

### ***3.2.2 Polarization and its (potential) consequences***

The consequences of polarization in a society – and especially affective polarization – are several and take place on three closely interconnected levels: on the mass, elite and institutional level. Affective polarization on the mass level can create negative consequences both within the political sphere and in other contexts. A polarized mass can become a force that boosts conflict on the elite level (even if the initial polarizing messages oriented from the elite itself). Furthermore, the more negative feelings partisans have towards an out-group, the more reluctant they are to support any policies initiated by that out-group, or to find its politics legitimate (Iyengar et al. 2012:428). Intense partisan feelings also tend to go further than the political sphere and divide the whole society into antagonistic groups who perceive each other as enemies, with a direct effect on peoples' daily lives, for instance, by inducing discrimination in other parts of society such as the job market, and it might even condone violence against the out-group (Reiljan 2020:379; Bettarelli et al. 2023:645).

On the elite level, affective polarization has clear implications for the political process. First, harsh rhetoric between party elites can have undesirable effects on how citizens engage with each other and contribute to increasing affective polarization among voters (Iyengar & Westwood 2015:705). Second, if the willingness to work across party lines decreases, it may lead to legislative gridlocks, affecting the ability to form a stable and functional government that can meet the policy demands of the public. This is particularly problematic in multiparty systems, where parties usually need to form coalitions to assemble governments, as it tends to undermine inter-party cooperation and policy compromise (Martin & Vanberg 2008:502; Røed et al. 2023:1).

On the institutional level, affective polarization poses a threat to democracy itself, as difficulties of implementing politics – legislative gridlocks and unwillingness to compromise – can decrease trust towards institutions and the satisfaction with democracy among voters

(Bettarelli et al. 2023:645). Dissatisfaction with policy outcomes and democratic institutions can escalate into mass protest and in some cases to acts of violence, which is regarded as one of the big dangers for a democracy in relation to processes of democratic backsliding (Bermeo 2003:239). When social and political polarization contribute to state dysfunction and lack of trust in institutions, it also increases the risk that parties will go to extremes or that new anti-system parties will gain traction. This has made affective polarization topical in contemporary research, since democratic backsliding is defined as the incremental erosion of institutions, rules, and norms that result from the actions of duly elected governments (see e.g., Bermeo 2003:234-235; McCoy et al. 2018:17).

### **3.3 Main analytical concepts: a summary**

In conclusion, based on these theories on democracy and polarization, we can understand the important aspects of democracy as an institution and the damage affective polarization may pose on it. Fundamental to democracy is pluralism and opposition, which implies that there must be different political parties who compete for government and that give voice to different parts of society. The role of the opposition is fundamental for democracy to function, especially in voicing criticism toward the government. Furthermore, this links closely to the importance of there being an ideological (or interest-based) polarization in a society, so that voters have different meaningful political options to choose from. However, when affective polarization increases, it can have negative consequences on the institutions of democracy, which interacts on several closely connected levels. As affective polarization increases in a society, it creates an “us” versus “them” image, leading to stronger intergroup conflicts between “in-groups” and “out-groups”, problems to form effective and stable governments, and a loss of trust in democratic institutions.

In my analysis, therefore, the main analytical concepts are obviously ideological and affective polarization. The former may in parliamentary debates be divided into statements clarifying the party’s ideological position and statements of ideological critic against other parties’ policy proposals (Karlsson & Persson 2022); the latter, affective polarization, may be divided into affective statements about the in-group and the out-group, and statements criticizing the foundations of the democratic institutions. The operationalization of these concepts will be developed further below.

## **4. Method and material**

This study takes the shape of a case study with focus on Sweden, which can be considered a typical case of affective polarization within contemporary well-established democracies with multi-party systems (see, e.g., Bäck et al. 2023). Sweden as a case can thereby provide several important insights which can be transferred to other cases of polarization (Toshkov 2018:234), for example in terms of how ideological and affective polarization should be differentiated, and in what factors that may drive polarization.

### **4.1 Method**

The method consists of a qualitative content analysis using manual coding. A qualitative approach is preferred as it “can broaden our perspective on affective polarization, generating insights into the wider phenomenon, adopting a context-sensitive account and taking a more critical, reflexive stance” (Röllicke 2024:129). The content analysis further adopts a deductive approach, since it is better suited for topics already thoroughly explored (Lune & Berg 2017:188), which polarization could be conceived as being. A purely inductive analysis would further be impossible, as there is no way of interpreting different policy positions without imposing at least some a priori assumptions (Laver et al. 2003:313), especially since the study of legislative debates requires in-depth knowledge on the case (Fernandes et al. 2021:1038; Laver et al. 2003:327). The creation of the analytical framework is therefore based on theories and previous research on democracy and polarization.

Systematic analysis of political text today, where vast volumes are easily accessed and available, has the potential to be immensely liberating for the researcher. The big obstacle is, however, that systematic text analysis is very resource intensive (Laver et al. 2003:311). Therefore, when analyzing sentiments in political applications, where context is important, machine learning using human-coded subsets are often used regarding affective polarization. This is done by identifying speeches mentioning another party, a specific bloc or the government and opposition parties. Thereafter, the researcher selects common words with negative and positive valence, for example, negative words like bad and wrong. Furthermore, in multiparty systems, operationalization of out-parties is usually based on parties’ left-right position. For example, for parties and blocs on the left, the parties and blocs on the right are coded as their out-parties, and vice versa (Røed et al. 2023:4-5).

There are two main problems concerning the methods used in previous research. First, there is a lack of operationalization in differentiating between ideological and affective polarization. Where and when does the political debate cross over from one form of polarization to another?

As noted above, many studies focus solely on affective polarization and the use of negative words, without differentiating them from words used within the ideological dimension (see e.g., Bäck et al. 2023; Røed et al. 2023). This implies that they do not take into account the fundamental role of the opposition within the democratic system, to be critical of the government (see e.g., Shapiro 1996:51). By using selected words, one misses the political context, since negative words such as “bad” could just as easily be used by the opposition in an ideological critique of the government, as it could be an expression of affective polarization. These methods are therefore not sufficient to differentiate between affective and ideological polarization. Computer coding in machine-learning methods, furthermore, only follows programmed rules and therefore does not recognize ambiguities or problems as an attentive human coder would (Nacos et al. 2009:252).

Second, another problem with longitudinal studies is when operationalization of out-parties is done solely by where they stand on the ideological scale, since their loyalty may change over time. This is important since analyses of political competition requires systematic information about the key political actors, here the parties (Laver et al. 2003:311). Where the parties are positioned on an ideological scale, do therefore not always speak for whom they currently consider an in- or out-group. However, the ideological scale can of course give a basic understanding of how the parties view each other and if they can govern together. The context where the debates take place is therefore important and cannot be reduced to predetermined words or “enemies” in the form of other parties.

Due to the problems just mentioned, these methods cannot give an accurate picture of affective polarization in the Swedish system over time. Even within ideological polarization there are harsh and negative words used, without being of an affective nature. This study therefore applies a manual and qualitative coding to create a greater understanding of the context in which these words are spoken. In addition, the above-mentioned coding schemes also risk missing irony and sarcasm as indicators of affective polarization. The decision to employ a manual approach to text analysis derives from established practices in political science. To uncover the rhetoric dynamics that define parliamentary discussion, a qualitative approach is often viewed as required, since automated analysis in comparison to human coder has been found to underperform (Nacos et al. 2009:246; Casiraghi & Bordignon 2023:180). The entire material will thus be coded manually to assess whether the party leaders express ideological or affective polarization and to see who they are targeting. Furthermore, the context also provides important indications of why polarization occur.

### 4.1.2 Coding frame

The coding frame is the heart of the method and consists of main categories and subcategories, where the main categories are those aspects of the material about which more information is wanted, and the subcategories specifies what is said in the material (Schreier 2013:175). Ideological polarization, necessary to make party competition function, will be differentiated from affective polarization, which is considered dangerous for a democratic society (see Table 2). However, a third main category is added – what I call “against polarization” – a category with its foundation in the Swedish context, historically characterized by a culture of consensus and cooperation (Stjernquist 1966:138; Möller 2023:12). The relevance of this category was further reinforced during my pilot study of the empirical material.

**Table 2. Coding frame**

<b>Ideological polarization</b>	<i>Ideological statements</i>	
	<i>Ideological critic</i>	
<b>Affective polarization</b>	<i>Positive statements about the in-group</i>	<i>Positive about their own party</i>
		<i>Positive about other parties</i>
	<i>Negative statements about the out-group</i>	<i>Negative about other parties</i>
		<i>Personal attacks</i>
		<i>Sarcasm</i>
	<i>Anti-establishment</i>	
<b>Against polarization</b>	<i>Confronting polarizing rhetoric</i>	
	<i>Calls for cooperation</i>	

My first main category, **ideological polarization**, can be understood as necessary or “normal” political conflict (Helms 2008:13; Müller 2021:95). Here my subcategories are “ideological statements” and “ideological critic”, (cf. Karlsson & Persson 2022:290). **Ideological statements** are considered statements that express the party’s own ideology and/or

proposals for measures applicable to various substantive political issues. A clear example of the expression of ideology is Bo Lundgren's (M) (2002 stmt. 1, p. 3) statement that "[e]veryone who can work should be able to have a job. The tax must be so low that anyone who has a job can live on their salary."<sup>4</sup>

**Ideological criticism** is an expression of ideology showing the ideological differences the criticism is based on. This relates closely to the role of political parties and the parliamentary opposition within representative democracies: the government and the opposition should be critical of each other (see e.g., Dahl 1966:333; Shapiro 1999:39; Karlsson & Persson 2022). Ideological criticism therefore plays a fundamental role in the ideological polarization necessary in a democracy and presents different options for the electorate to choose from. If there are no differences between the parties, and thus no ideological criticism, the voters have no real alternatives. An example of ideological criticism in my material comes from Lars Ohly (V) (2010, stmt. 6 reply, p. 6) directed against the center-right Alliance government: "But the richest one percent has received as much in tax cuts as the quarter that earns the least."

The second main category is **affective polarization**, where the foundational part is the creation of an "us" versus "them" (McCoy et al. 2018:28-31). In the context of this study the main "us" versus "them" will be regarding who the party leaders view as either in- or out-group. The subcategories therefore are: "**positive statements about the in-group**" and "negative statements about the out-group". The former subcategory is further broken down into two categories: "**positive statements about their own party**" and "**positive statements about other parties**". This is made to differentiate between when a party leader express positive words simply about their own party or towards other parties or bloc of parties. Most common is when party leaders describe their own party and its success in positive words, but for example, during the time of the "Alliance for Sweden" (2006-2014), the parties only expressed positive words about the parties within their bloc. However, sometimes parties also express positive words about party leaders or parties on the other side of the ideological dimension.

When it comes to the second subcategory "**negative statements about the out-party**", this category is broken down into three different categories: "negative about another party", "personal attacks" and "sarcasm". These different categories are made to differentiate between different forms of negative speech against the out-party. In the category "**negative about another party**" I include affective polarization against a different party, as in this speech by

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<sup>4</sup> To promote the readability of the text, quotations from the party leader debates will only include the year, the number of the statement, if it is a reply and the page in the parliamentary protocols. The full reference to the parliamentary protocol for each year is to be found under references.

Jimmie Åkesson (SD) (2018, stmt. 3, p. 4) describing the incumbent government's work as a "complete failure of a historically weak and historically wretched minority government."

**Personal attacks** include statements when a party leader personally targets another party leader or other politicians negatively. A clear example comes from the Prime Minister Olof Palme (S) during the 1985 election (stmt. 6, p. 35) against the leader of Fp: "Bengt Westerberg, who was Secretary of State during those years, ought on the whole to be forbidden to talk about finances for ten years, after such an incompetent stewardship." The third sub-category is "**sarcasm**", used to express negative sentiments about a person or party, like in the following quote by Palme (S) in 1976 (stmt. p. 56) when he states that "Mr Bohman also said that by rights all employees would be Moderates if they were not blindsided by malicious agitators. It was almost so that you could see Gunnar Sträng [a prominent Social Democratic politician] in slouch hat and a dagger in his hand sneaking behind the corner of the house and stir up people". This statement also highlights the importance of context during coding, without in-depth knowledge about the political context, a strong statement like this would be missed.

The final subcategory of affective polarization is **anti-establishment** expressions. Anti-establishment is a view or belief that stands in opposition to the conventional social, political, and economic principles of a society (Leander 2022:330-331). By coding anti-establishment sentiments, it becomes clear which parties' express criticism of the democratic system itself. A prominent example of this is given by Harriet Colliander (NYD) (1994, stmt. 73, p. 91): "New Democracy has made significant contributions in politics by going against the immorality of the establishment, how people favor each other."

The third main category, "**against polarization**" is, as mentioned above, based on the Swedish context where collaboration and consensus in solving different substantial issues with broad parliamentary support has been characteristic (see e.g., Möller 2023:12). The name of this category originates precisely in the willingness to cooperate and the importance of consensus within the political elite, which could be considered as a form of resistance to polarization, both ideological and affective, and stands in stark contrast to divisive polarization. This category is also divided into two subcategories: firstly "**calls for cooperation**", when the party leaders call for broad cooperation across block boundaries in an attempt to gather and unite the parties in the *Riksdag*. Calls for cooperation, however, excludes when party leaders seek support within their own party group or bloc, since they are regarded as "in-group". The second subcategory within the main category against polarization is "**confronting polarizing rhetoric**" and includes statements to lower the conflictual tone in the debate and give way for constructive discussions about substantial issues.

### *4.1.3 Some caveats with the method and coding frame*

There are several problems or caveats that I will try to handle in the analysis: First, regarding the coding framework there are problems of how certain aspects of the material should be coded. The party leader's statements can sometimes appear to belong to more than one coding category, like within the main category ideological polarization, and the two subcategories ideological statements and ideological criticism. The context is here crucial in my categorization, and to illustrate my coding, I use an example of coding a statement as ideological criticism. It comes from Gudrun Schyman (V) (1994, stmt. 54 reply, p. 65) when she states that: "Individual countries cannot have higher requirements and stricter rules if it can be perceived as contrary to the EU's current rules or as a trade barrier." This quote could have been considered an ideological statement when it comes to V's opposition to EU-membership, but in this context, however, it is meant as critic, on ideological ground, towards C who are in favor of EU membership. However, how to categorize my material is most often quite obvious, for example, in the categories positive about in-group, personal attacks and anti-establishment. Of course, for all categories, one sentence (as here and in my many examples in the empirical analysis) is not enough to categorize a statement, it can only be done by reading the whole debate (including both statements and replies), i.e., to understand the context.

Second, by analyzing only transcripts of the debates, I miss the tonality in terms of how things are presented, such as voice, body language, etc. For example, sarcasm or irony can be difficult to interpret in text alone, and I would probably see more of these kinds of statement if I also had analyzed other aspects of the speech. Third, a predetermined (political) perception on the part of the coder may run the risk of looking for certain expressions to a greater extent in specific parties. If New Democracy or the Sweden Democrats, for example, in advance are defined as populist parties, the coder may more actively be looking for expressions of anti-establishment in their party leaders' speeches. An inductive approach, with no priori assumptions is however impossible in this context (Lavar et al. 2003:313). It has therefore been important to code each sentence, and word, carefully and based on context, and to double-check in case of doubtful statements so that something is not missed or coded incorrectly due to preconceived notions.

Finally, analyzing debates over time is difficult as language usage changes (see e.g., Fernandes et al. 2021:1038). Words that were perceived as value-laden, offensive or fiery in the past may not have the same charge today, or vice versa. There is also no comprehensive systematic research on the change of language within the Swedish parliament (Oscarsson et al.

2021:74-75). This further connects to the fact that word-specific meanings risks getting lost when translated into English, just a time-typical expressions giving “flesh and blood” to the context. To solve this problem, all quotations used in my analysis (as well as some more examples of my coding in the different categories) can be found in original language in Appendix B.<sup>5</sup>

## 4.2 Material

The material used in this study is closely related to its aim, namely, to analyze polarization within the political elite in Sweden in a longitudinal perspective and I have chosen to analyze the last party leader debate in the *Riksdag* before the elections from 1973-2022. The parliamentary arena is chosen, since legislative debates are among the most visible activities of MPs, and yet remain an understudied form of legislative behavior (Proksch & Slapin 2012:520; Fernandes et al. 2021:1032). Legislative debates are further regarded as one of the most reliable means to match a party’s rhetoric to a specific policy decision, as well as they provide a good picture of other rhetorical strategies, since debate behavior is likely to be highly correlated with other popular forms of communication, such as media interviews (Martin & Vanberg 2008:503). Moreover, since rhetorical contestation is a central part of politics, and democracy thrives through debate, the democratic parliaments provide an important forum for expressing different views (Proksch & Slapin 2012:520). These debates therefore serve both the purposes of position-taking and credit claiming for individual and collective actors in legislatures (Fernandes et al. 2021:1033).

The years of elections are chosen, since previous studies have shown that politicians have a greater tendency to express negative statements during election campaigns, and polarization should therefore rise (see e.g., Røed et al. 2023:6; Öhberg & Cassel 2023:219). When elections approach, politicians also tend to put more emphasis on symbolic and social issues in speeches (Proksch & Slapin 2012:521). In the Swedish *Riksdag*, there exists many different forms of debates, for example in connection with question times and interpellations, but one debate that has been of specific importance during the unicameral parliament is the one between the party leaders. This kind of debate has varied slightly in form and speaking order, but they are conducted between the leading representatives of the parties: the party leaders. The speaking time within these debates is also limited, which means that party leaders have to prioritize their battles (Oscarsson et al. 2021:75-76). This material is considered suitable since it covers parties’

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<sup>5</sup> Due to its length, Appendix B is not included in the manuscript but is available from the author after request.

unitary stances, it balances the various parties' opportunity to speak, and the debates are a regular phenomenon (Leander 2022:334).

Some important changes to notice are that between 1973 and 1988, the party leader debates were not held in June as in later years (and not three times a year), the equivalent of which was the "General Policy Debate", held in February or in the end of January. These debates start with a debate between the party leaders before other members of the parties are given the opportunity to speak. I have therefore delimited my analysis to the first part of the debate (between 55-59 pages), between the party leaders only. Furthermore, the length of the statements of the party leaders have varied over the years, as well as the debate order. For example, during the 1970s-1990s, the main opposition party started the debate, while from the 2000s it is the Prime Minister who is first in order. The party leader debates also vary in length, from the shortest 2022, with 46 pages, to the longest 1994, 97 pages. In total 916 pages of party leader debates were analyzed over 15 election years.

#### **4.3 Qualitative text analysis: a summary**

To sum up, my main goal is to find expressions of affective and ideological polarization in the party leader debates to see whether polarization has changed over time. This is done by analyzing all 15 debates based on the coding framework and, thanks to this manual coding, all aspects of the material can be handled. By having a basic picture of social development and important events during this period, the differentiation between ideological and affective polarization becomes clear.

Problems with the coding frame have already been brought up, but there are also risks that the qualitative text analysis risks missing some aspects. First, it is harder to measure more or less polarization in exact numbers in comparison to quantitative methods. This problem is tackled in two different ways: (1) by studying the debate as a whole, it is prominent whether the debates in the various years are generally characterized by a harsher tone where the party leaders take strong positions towards each other; and (2) since the affective dimension is the main focus, a general count of the affective statements mentioned in the debates take place, which gives a more comprehensive picture of the occurrence of affective statements in the debates. Through this, I can determine whether the affective polarization is more or less prevalent in the debates, even if the exact measure of ideological versus affective polarization is not calculated.

Second, the choice of method also means that the material becomes more limited, due to the time-consuming work with manual coding, and a quantitative method using computer coding

could have analyzed more material. However, this had been at the expense of the context. Third, the selection of these particular debates means that other aspects of the parliamentary conversations are excluded, for example, debates on specific substantive matters like nuclear power, which could have had an effect on the results at certain times. Fourth, the crucial role of the context in coding parliamentary speeches could be seen as problematic since it could eventually be hard for another researcher to carry out the study in the same way. However, I believe that by clearly describing the codes used and the rich number of examples of how the statements are coded (see Appendix B) give other researchers a good foundation.

## **5. Analysis: Polarization in the Swedish *Riksdag***

In the following, I will analyze polarization within the political elite in Sweden through party leader debates in the *Riksdag*. My analysis has two parts: in the first, I describe the polarization over time with a focus on affective polarization; in the second, I analyze four drivers of affective polarization identified in the analysis: (1) the parties present in the parliament, (2) party leaders present, (3) political issues and (4) the idea of consensus.<sup>6</sup>

### **5.1 The development of polarization over time**

The analysis over time is divided into five time periods or “waves” of affective polarization: 1973-1985, 1988-1994, 1998-2006, 2010-2018, and the last election, 2022. This division follows from the pattern of affective polarization in the party leader debates, where the first four periods have their most affective polarized elections in 1985, 1994, 2006 and 2018. The affective polarization then decreases in the first election in the next respective period. Ideological polarization dominates during all debates, so the main focus will be on the amount and what kind of affective polarization that is discernible in the debates.

#### **5.1.1 1973-1985: Strong ideological polarization and *Palme vs. Bohman***

The party leader debates of the 1970s and 1980s is strongly affected by the international context, for example the Cold War, the war in Vietnam, the communist and fascist dictatures in Europe, and the decolonialization process starting after WWII.<sup>7</sup> During the years 1973-1982, the ideological polarization is very evident, and the leaders clearly take a stand on different issues

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<sup>6</sup> The source references to quotes from the party leaders are based on how they have been written in the debate, for example some elections lack numbers on the statements, and in some elections, it is only a statement or a reply, not both, which are used in most elections.

<sup>7</sup> Further information about each election, such as who is in government/opposition, party leaders each election year and substantive issues can be found in Appendix A.

in relation to their ideology, often using particular catchwords and phrasings to show where they position themselves. Two obvious examples of this are, first, Gösta Bohman's (M) (1976, stmt. p. 129) harsh ideological critic towards S after more than 40 years of a social democratic government: "Our welfare should now be guaranteed by a strong planned economy. Business corporations and entire line of businesses shall be socialized, owned by the state – that has been decided by the Social Democratic party congress".<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein Olof Palme (S) (1982, stmt. 1, p. 5), criticizes the center-right parties, arguing that it "is the propertied and previously already privileged that have made the profits – the only profits – following the right-wing politics".

The strong ideological foundations of the parties are constantly expressed during the debates, both in relation to the substantive issues dominating the debates – social reforms in relation to welfare, and economics – as well as in relation to the other parties. A clear example of this is the statement made by the leader of the then Left Communist Party, Lars Werner (Vpk) (1976 stmt. p. 33), "Full employment requires a socialist planned economy". Similarly, Per Ahlmark (1976, stmt. p. 22), the leader of the Liberal Party (Fp), states what his party stands for, "social reforms without socialism".<sup>9</sup> The topical issue employee funds (*löntagarfonder*) goes right into this clear left-right divide, where S sees them as a way to grant the "employees a larger responsibility, to give them more influence, and to change the relation in working life towards increased democracy" (Palme, 1976, stmt. p. 37), while Bohman (M) (1979, stmt. p. 42), claims that employee funds would ruin badly needed new investments in society.<sup>10</sup> The party leaders' choice of words is thus often very ideologically loaded, such as "the propertied" and "already privileged", "planned economy", and "socialized". Even if the words in themselves are to be regarded as ideologically charged, the conscious choice to use such words could be considered to give ground for affective polarization.<sup>11</sup>

The new dimension of conflict, nuclear power, is of particular interest here, not only because it was preeminent as a conflictual issue in the political debate, but also since the parties on both sides were divided on this issue. On the left, Vpk was against, while S were in favor, since

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<sup>8</sup> All quotations are translated by the author.

<sup>9</sup> See also Hermansson (1973:73); Bohman (1976:13). To facilitate the reading, the references in the footnotes are to the party leader debates the year mentioned and to the page(s) in the parliamentary protocol the year of the debate.

<sup>10</sup> For other comments on the employee funds, see, e.g. Bohman (1982:19); Fälldin (1982:43); Westerberg (1985:26); Werner (1976:32)

<sup>11</sup> For similar speeches, see, e.g., Adelsohn (1985:6); Ahlmark (1976:47); Bohman (1973:44; 1976:13,17; 1979:43); Fälldin (1973:16; 1976:5,8; 1979:38; 1985:16); Helén (1973:33); Hermansson (1973:50); Palme (1973:5,12; 1976:39; 1979:18; 1982:9; 1985:57); Ullsten (1982:60); Werner (1976:29,35; 1979:56; 1982:30; 1985:30).

nuclear power was seen as “a decisive precondition” to “secure access to energy and especially electric power” (Palme 1976, stmt. p. 37). On the right, C was against, while both M and Fp were for. This divide within both sides might be one explanation why nuclear power never became the most topical issue within the party leader debates during this period, since both the left and the right were dependent on support from their “in-group” to form a government.<sup>12</sup> However, the diverging position on nuclear power made the first center-right government collapse in 1978 (Möller 2023:211).

Although the ideological dimension dominates the debates, a significant amount of affective polarization can be found, mainly in the form of negative statements about the out-group expressed in personal attacks. The affective polarization is, however, very much centered on the party leaders Palme (S) and Bohman (M), who expressed significant personal attacks against each other. For example, Palme’s (1979 reply, p. 49) attack on Bohman, describing him in terms of the “sick paleness of the afterthought, quite cowardly and quite pitiful, but the intentions are probably basically quite evil”, to which Bohman (1979, reply, p. 49) replied “Olof Palme really reads international press like s-tan reads the Bible”.<sup>13</sup> Almost as frequently occurring is affective polarization manifested in negativity against another party, the out-group,<sup>14</sup> but more rarely in the form of sarcasm.<sup>15</sup>

The direction of these negative statements towards the out-group follows the left-right divide, where the left express negativity towards the center-right parties and vice versa. However, in both 1979 and 1982, following the two collapses of the center-right coalition government (M, C, Fp), the three former coalition parties are in opposition against each other and do not view the other parties as part of a natural in-group. This is, for example, clear in Bohman’s (M) (1982, stmt. 10, reply, p. 40) critic of Fp and C, that they during the Fall repeatedly have accused M for “conducting a ‘preposterous campaign’, sometimes using very harsh words...” and when he in a personal attack calls the Prime Minister Ola Ullsten (Fp), “the mouse that roared” (1982, stmt. 15, reply, p. 49).

The affective polarization during this time-period escalates during the “General Policy Debate” in February 1985, due to the so-called “Bodström Affair”, which took place a few days before this debate. The Foreign Minister, Lennart Bodström, was accused of expressing

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<sup>12</sup> For other speeches on nuclear power, see e.g., Fälldin (1976:7,9,43; 1979:38); Palme (1976:37-38; 1982:9); Werner 1979:55).

<sup>13</sup> For similar personal attacks, see e.g., also Bohman (1973:41; 1976:45; 1979:23; 1982:11,49); Fälldin (1976:43); Helén (1973:24); Palme (1973:55,81; 1976:38,50-51; 1982:47); Ullsten (1979:30; 1982:68).

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Ahlmark (1976:24); Bohman (1973:37,71; 1976:12; 1979:40); Fälldin (1973:19); Hermansson (1973:51); Palme (1973:8,11,58; 1976:39-40; 1979:49); Werner (1976:55).

<sup>15</sup> But see, e.g., Bohman (1973:35); Fälldin (1982:52); Palme (1973:57; 1982:3).

opinions, during a dinner with several journalists, that were considered to go against Sweden's foreign and security policy, which led to a requested vote of no-confidence during the debate by Ulf Adelsohn (M) (1985, stmt. 12, reply, p. 5), in agreement with the other center-right parties. The tone in the debate was greatly affected by this event, where a lot of affective polarization emerges, particularly in the form of personal attacks against the Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Palme (S), from the center-right parties and these attacks were also met with strong counterattacks by Palme (S). Negative statements about the out-group were less frequent.<sup>16</sup> The personal attacks may be illustrated by Adelsohn (M) (1985, stmt. 2, p. 10) against Palme, when he states that "the Prime Minister – who obviously dislikes the message – in his well-known habitual manner has tried to cut off the head of the messengers."<sup>17</sup> Because of the attention given to the "Bodström Affair", substantial issues were in proportion discussed to a much lesser extent than in previous debates, which also means that the ideological dimension was less prominent. However, ideological statements and ideological criticism are, of course, still frequently occurring, for example, by Werner (Vpk) (1985, stmt. 5, p. 30) in his criticism of the center-right parties' "pure and simple class politics."<sup>18</sup>

It is, however, important to note in this context that despite these ideological conflicts and affective polarization, the Swedish tradition of consensus is prominent in recurrent calls for broader solutions across the left-right divide during the whole time-period. This is especially expressed regarding certain substantial issues, such as foreign and security policy, but also when it comes to major reforms (on the economy and welfare) so that they can be implemented and hold independently of a change in government. This call comes from all parties, for instance, from Fällidin (C) in 1985 (stmt. 3, p. 11): "The strength of Swedish foreign and security policy has for many decades been the fact that it has been conducted with consistency and that in all essentials it has been covered and supported by a united Riksdag and a united people." Other examples come from the two principal antagonists Bohman (M) and Palme (S), where the former calls for agreement on "taxes, savings, school, childcare and the family, and not least the basis for our economic policy in the future" (Bohman 1979, stmt. p. 44).<sup>19</sup> Moreover, even

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<sup>16</sup> But see, e.g., Fällidin (1985:18); Palme (1985:37,40-41); Werner (1985:26-27,31).

<sup>17</sup> See also, e.g., Adelsohn (1985:41-42); Fällidin (1985:12,43-45); Palme (1985:33,35,47,55-56); Westerberg (1985:23,25,53).

<sup>18</sup> See also, e.g., Adelsohn (1985:2,4,6-7); Fällidin (1985:14-16); Palme (1985:36-39,56-57); Werner (1985:29-33,46-47,55); Westerberg (1985:21-22,26).

<sup>19</sup> See also, e.g., Adelsohn (1985:11); Bohman (1973:34,38; 1976:11; 1979:44); Helén (1973:28-29); Hermansson (1973:49); Fällidin (1973:19; 1976:4; 1982:33-34; 1985:13); Palme (1973:4,6,55; 1976:36; 1982:48; 1985:40); Ullsten (1979:4,9-11).

with harshness in the debates there were also a few calls to counteract affective polarization and to reduce the heated debate atmosphere.<sup>20</sup>

### ***5.1.2 1988-1994: New parties entering the parliament***

The general policy debates during the election years 1988, 1991 and 1994, take place in an eventful time, both nationally and globally. Politically, Prime Minister Olof Palme was murdered in 1986, and replaced by Ingvar Carlsson as party leader for S, and three new parties entered the parliament: the Green Party (MP), the Christian Democrats (KdS) and the populist right-wing party New Democracy (NYD). Internationally, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s affected the parliamentary debates, as Prime Minister Carlsson (S) (1991 stmt. 45, p. 28) stated: “During the last three years, extremely positive things have occurred, events that will affect Europe for a long time to come. The communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe have fallen, one by one.”

In general, the debates in 1988 and 1991 are still marked by a fundamental ideological conflict, while the affective polarization has radically decreased in comparison to the previous debates. Werner (Vpk) (1988, p. 43) even described the 1988 debate as “very quiet”.<sup>21</sup> There is also a lot of emphasis on cooperation between the political parties, mainly related to security and foreign policy, but also regarding taxes and the climate, where the party leaders try to find a national unity and lay weight on dialogue between the parties. Olof Johansson (C) (1988 stmt. 3, p. 22), expresses for example that an “upcoming tax reform must garner broad parliamentary support. Basic principles should apply for a longer period, regardless of political majority conditions.” The party leaders for S and M express similar calls for national unity, like the Prime Minister Carlsson (S) (1988 stmt. 5, p. 36) when he stated that for him, “it is important that there is broad support in Sweden’s Riksdag around the foreign policy line that the government represents”.<sup>22</sup>

The substantive policy issues concern mainly the welfare system in relation to the economy, unemployment, equality, healthcare but also issues such as nuclear power. The standpoint on these issues are clearly marked by the parties’ ideological position, as exemplified by Bildt (M) (1988 stmt. 1, p. 8) when he states that ”for us Moderates it is evident that what constitutes

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<sup>20</sup> See also, e.g., Adelson (1985:9,41); Bohman (1973:34); Fällidin (1985:52); Palme (1985:40).

<sup>21</sup> Actually, I only found two negative statements about other parties (Westerberg 1988:17; Carlsson 1988:44) and one personal attack (Johansson 1988:42).

<sup>22</sup> See also, e.g., Carlsson (1988:36); Johansson (1988:18); Werner (1988:28); Bildt (1988:4). Calls for cooperation also recurs in 1991 by the same party leaders, see, e.g., Carlsson (1991:29); Johansson (1991:13-14); Werner (1991:20), but mainly from Carlsson in 1994 (1994:3,12,48,69,81-82).

welfare for a person is best decided by that person himself”, and by Carlsson (S) (1988 stmt. 5, p. 36) expressing that without “justice, equality and solidarity, freedom of choice becomes an illusion for most people”.<sup>23</sup> In relation to the standpoints based on ideology, the debate is also characterized by ideological critic, like in Westerberg (Fp) (1988 stmt. 2, p. 16) critic against “the goal of transforming society in a socialist direction” which “runs like a red thread through the history of social democracy.”<sup>24</sup>

In 1994, the upcoming EU-referendum the same year, and the economic crisis during the early 1990s, where the interest rate one day rose to 500 percent, had an obvious effect on the debate. Topical in the debate was how the center-right government had handled the crisis, and the ideological conflict is obvious in relation to welfare issues such as taxes and unemployment. Strong ideological statements are made by the party leaders, exemplified by Prime Minister Bildt (M) (1994 stmt. 27, p. 25) underlining the importance “to carry out a freedom of choice revolution in welfare policy and ensure that individuals and families themselves, as far as possible, have the opportunity to choose school, to choose childcare, to choose healthcare and to choose care for the elderly.”<sup>25</sup> These strong ideological statements also leads to harsh ideological critic, for example by the party leader of the former Left Communist Party, now renamed the Left Party (V), Gudrun Schyman (1994 stmt. 36 reply, p. 38) towards the incumbent center-right government, stating that “[y]ou are very competent in carrying out what you want, namely restoring the Swedish class society”.<sup>26</sup>

The debate is further marked by the participation of the conservative, right-wing populist party NYD, which during the term of office had cooperated with the center-right government, an ideological choice Carlsson (S) strongly criticized (see e.g., 1994, stmt. 6, p. 3).<sup>27</sup> The presence of NYD also gave rise to an increasing affective polarization between all the parties.<sup>28</sup> The affective polarization takes primarily the form of negative statements directed towards NYD, not least for their “simplified messages – bordering to the outfields of hate” (Bildt 1994,

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<sup>23</sup> See also, e.g., Bildt (1988:3-4,9,47; 1991:4-5); Carlsson (1988:36-37; 1991:25,28); Johansson (1988:18,21,25,51; 1991:13,15,49); Werner (1988:26,30; 1991:17,51-52); Westerberg (1988:11,13-14; 1991:10).

<sup>24</sup> See also, e.g., Bildt (1988:5; 1991:1,5,32); Carlsson (1988:34,38,45,53; 1991:54); Johansson (1988:24); Roxbergh (1991:21-23); Werner (1988:29,31,52; 1991:18-19); Westerberg (1988:16; 1991:6).

<sup>25</sup> See also, e.g., Bildt (1994:25,41); Carlsson (1994:2-3,4-5,18); Colliander (1994:71, 87); Schyman (1994:95-96); Svensson (1994:76,78).

<sup>26</sup> See also, e.g., Svensson (1994:14).

<sup>27</sup> See also, e.g., Bildt (1994:27,33); Carlsson (1994:1,3,7,69); Schyman (1994:23,53,84,93-94); Svensson (1994:92). This kind of ideological critic was also presented by S before the election in 1991, accusing the center-right parties of not distancing themselves from New Democracy (Carlsson 1991:30,41,54).

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Bildt (1994:24,41, 46); Carlsson (1994:29,82); Colliander (1994:88); Johansson (1994:58,66); Svensson (1994:13).

stmt. 35, p. 37).<sup>29</sup> NYD, in turn, provides a strong criticism towards both the government and opposition parties, as well as anti-establishment views non-existing in the previous debates. For example, the party leader Harriet Colliander (NYD) (1994 stmt, 73, p. 87) statement that the “authoritarian society, socialism, demand machines and faceless bureaucracy cannot be accepted by modern people. Sweden needs a new model, and therefore new politicians are needed.”<sup>30</sup> In a similar vein, these statements are closely related to NYD’s frequent expressions of very positive feelings about their own party, the in-group, something that also stands out in comparison.<sup>31</sup>

The participation of NYD seems to trigger affective polarization among the other party leaders in the form of personal attacks, for example Carlsson (S) (1994, stmt. 32, reply, p. 34) on Prime Minister Bildt (M): “Otherwise, I can only state with regard to the areas that Carl Bildt evades that nowadays it is ‘making a Calle’ when you evade reality and describe it in your own way”. In a similar way, Westerberg (Fp) (1994 stmt. 50, reply, p. 56) expresses a sarcastic personal attack against Schyman (V), when he finds it “gratifying that an old communist like Gudrun Schyman has realized the value of freedom of expression”.<sup>32</sup> The entry of MP and KdS during this period, did, however, not have any effects on polarization similarly to NYD, neither ideological nor affective.

### ***5.1.3 1998- 2006: Crystallization of bloc politics***

The debates between 1998 and 2006 are, as before, characterized by the left-right dimension where the ideological polarization is prominent. In 1998, for instance, this is mainly expressed on the issues of membership in the European Monetary Union (EMU), the defense, welfare in relation to taxes, unemployment and care. For example, Bildt (M) (1998, stmt. 1, p. 3) gives a clear ideological statement: “We want lower taxes on work. We want to liberate the service sector. We want to deregulate the companies. We want to modernize the labor market. We want to prepare for the euro.” This is further repeated by his successor as party leader, Bo Lundgren (M) (2002 stmt. 9, reply, p. 7), emphasizing the importance of reduced taxes, which clearly contrasts with the ideological statement made by the Prime Minister Göran Persson (S) (2002, stmt. 56, p. 41), that “increased resources [...] are needed and they come before tax cuts.”

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<sup>29</sup> See also Carlsson (1994:18,20); Johansson (1994:57).

<sup>30</sup> See also, e.g., Colliander (1994:88).

<sup>31</sup> Colliander (1994:17,35,89-90)

<sup>32</sup> See also, e.g., Carlsson (1994:14,29,31,34); Schyman (1994:38); Svensson (1994:81,83); Westerberg (1994:51).

As in previous debates, the ideological standpoints create ground for ideological critic, something frequently occurring in the debate, for example, from Schyman (V) (1998, stmt. 10 reply, p. 5) against M asking if they “have a conception that people who are unemployed are generally lazy and need some kind of carrot or stick to get a job?”, and from Lars Leijonborg (Fp) (1998, stmt. 26, p. 15), against V: “The Left Party is filling in with higher employer contributions, higher corporation tax, even more double taxation of stocks than we already have and, just in case, a new additional company tax [*värnbolagsskatt*].”

The level of affective polarization is, in contrast, considerably lower in comparison to the debate in 1994, although a few occasional negative statements about out-parties exist,<sup>33</sup> as well as personal attacks, the latter exclusively directed towards V as an out-group, and the party is portrayed as populist and unreliable by the party leaders of the center-right parties.<sup>34</sup> Instead, the debate in 1998 is primarily marked by the fact that the party leader for the Center Party, Olof Johansson, had resigned as party leader (even though he is the one who participate in this debate), where the other party leaders, both left and right, thank him and express very positive words about him.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, there are several calls for cooperation, with maybe the strongest expressed by Prime Minister Persson (S) (1998 stmt. 64, p. 48) when he ends the 1998 debate by a “call from me to all of you [...] that we collectively, in the election campaign ahead of us, wherever we see tendencies towards racism, fascism, Nazism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, regardless of our background, speak out and make it clear that we all stand united in the fight against these disgusting expressions.”<sup>36</sup>

In this context, the debate in 2002 stands out as a year where the different parties really emphasize the importance of cooperation, before the upcoming referendum on EMU and in relation to the EU. For instance, the EU is to have a meeting in Seville where asylum and migration issues are to be discussed, with many countries wanting to greatly reduce the rights of refugees within the Union. In relation to this and the right-wing populism described in the debate as emerging in Europe, it is possible to distinguish a clear common position between the political parties, where all stand together against populism, racism and xenophobia. This was also clearly stated by Prime Minister Persson (S) (2002 stmt. 41, reply., p. 28), when he claims that “[w]e agree on that in Sweden”, and when Persson presented his position on the right to asylum to be stated on the upcoming EU meeting, it was explicitly acclaimed, for example, by

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<sup>33</sup> But see, e.g., Leijonborg (1998:14; 2002:16); Lundgren (2002:7).

<sup>34</sup> But see, e.g., Leijonborg (1998:18; 2002:16); Persson (1998:43); Schlaug (1998:16-17); Schyman (2002:8,13).

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Bildt (1998:1); Johansson (1998:6,47-48); Persson (1998:13,44).

<sup>36</sup> See also, e.g., Bildt (1998:2); Johansson (1998:7); Persson (1998:13,33,35).

Lars Leijonborg (Fp) (2002 stmt. 50 reply, p. 34): “If I hadn’t had papers in my hand, I would have liked to applaud too.”

This debate climate stands in stark contrast to the election debate in 2006, which is instead marked by affective polarization. This is partly due to the creation of a clear political bloc among the center-right parties, the “Alliance for Sweden” [*Alliansen för Sverige*], a collaboration between M, KD<sup>37</sup>, Fp and C. These parties presented a common political plan for the coming years, which they also highlight in the form of a lot of positive words about the parties within the in-group.<sup>38</sup> The center-right parties try to appear united in comparison with the three left parties, and they do not take replies on each other, which the left parties do. The debate in 2006 is, however, also characterized by the same basic ideological polarization as before, where the party leaders express ideological statements, for example on taxes in relation to welfare, as expressed by Leijonborg (Fp) (2006, stmt. 45, reply, p. 32) when he states that they (his in-group) only have one simple rule, namely that “anyone who is healthy and able to support himself must be given the opportunity to do so. No one should live on benefits that can support themselves.”<sup>39</sup> In a similar vein, the party leader for M, Fredrik Reinfeldt (2006, stmt. 26, p. 18) expresses ideological critic against S, that “in the Social Democratic Sweden, security is now to be provided through benefits, to be taken care of.” Ohly (V) (2006, stmt. 49, p. 37), in turn, criticizes M, claiming that their politics is based on “a contempt for weakness and a contempt for people who need other people’s support in difficult life situations.”<sup>40</sup>

In relation, affective polarization could be considered to be based on the ideological dimension as it is clearly characterized by the left-right divide, where the center-right parties express harsh words formulated both as negative statements towards the left-wing parties (their out-group) and vice versa, and in the form of personal attacks. This is exemplified, among other things, by the fact that the parties in the “Alliance for Sweden” refer to the three parties on the left as the “left-wing cartel” (see e.g., Hägglund (KD) 2006 stmt. 10, reply, p. 9) and the need “to brake with the hypocrisy that the Swedish left represents” (Reinfeldt (M) 2006, stmt. 32, reply, p. 24). On the left, Ohly (V) (2006, stmt. 40, p. 30) accuses Fp for “fishing in the murkiest waters”, to “talk about ‘us and them’”, to “paint immigrants as a problem [...] and to emphasize that immigrants have their own responsibility for the segregation that characterizes our

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<sup>37</sup> The Christian Democrats changed their name in 1996 and are now shortened KD instead of KdS.

<sup>38</sup> See e.g., Hägglund (2006:34).

<sup>39</sup> See also, e.g., Leijonborg (2006:29); Ohly (2006:31,38-40,42); Olofsson (2006:43); Persson (2006:2-3,8,22); Reinfeldt (2006:18,20); Wetterstrand (2006:17,48,50).

<sup>40</sup> See also, e.g., Leijonborg (2006:28-33); Ohly (2006:11,23,29-30,37-38); Olofsson (2006:43); Persson (2006:3,5-6,14,21); Reinfeldt (2006:22); Wetterstrand (2006:25).

society.”<sup>41</sup> In terms of personal attacks towards the party leaders in the out-group, Leijonborg (Fp), for example, is attacking Persson (S), and exclaims that “I think the real plug in this area is Göran Persson personally” (2006, stmt. 39, p. 28).<sup>42</sup> The hard tone in the debate is further exemplified when Persson (S) interrupts Reinfeldt (M) by saying “Bah!” in the middle of his speech.

#### ***5.1.4 2010-2018: the Sweden Democrats enters the parliament***

The 2010 election takes place in the wake of the global financial crisis, 2008-2010, and the subsequent recession, putting Sweden’s economy in focus, especially questions on taxes, unemployment, school and healthcare. The ideological dimension is, like during the 2006 election, very strongly emphasized in the debate with two political blocs facing each other, the center-right “Alliance for Sweden” and now also the “Redgreen” parties comprising S, MP and V. This could be exemplified by party leader of S, Mona Sahlin (2010, stmt. 14, p. 10), when she puts forward her ideological position, claiming that “the foundation for health care, school, and care is given by each according to ability and to each according to need, not according to the wallet.”<sup>43</sup> The ideological left-right dimension is not least evident when the parties from the same bloc choose not to take replies or criticize each other (the in-group), which is the first and only time the left-wing parties do not take replies against each other. The ideological conflict is, however, also manifested in the form of ideological critic following the traditional dividing lines, illustrated by Maria Wetterstrand’s (MP) (2010, stmt. 75, p. 50) critic of the government: “They have one solution to every political problem that comes up: to lower the taxes.”<sup>44</sup>

In relation to the ideological polarization, the affective polarization is very limited both in terms of negative statements about the out-group and in the form personal attacks.<sup>45</sup> This is also something Prime Minister Reinfeldt’s (M) (2010 stmt. 1, p. 1) initial speech in the debate may illustrate: “The starting point for us is to build on the forerunner country that we think Sweden is and for a long time has been. The Alliance is not solely responsible for this, not at all. Political ambitions over generations, in a country led by different governments of different party colors, have built a fine country – offering the people in this country what most people of our world

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<sup>41</sup> See also, e.g., Leijonborg (2006:27,31); (2006:18,21,24-25).

<sup>42</sup> See also, e.g., Persson (2006:6,21); Olofsson (2006:13,41); Ohly (2006:41).

<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., Hägglund (2010:18); Ohly (2010:44); Reinfeldt (2010:1,3); Sahlin (2010:5,10,13); Wetterstrand (2010:8-9); Olofsson (2010:21).

<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., Björklund (2010:17,30,32,34,47); Ohly (2010:6-7,25-26,44-45); Olofsson (2010:24); Reinfeldt (2010:2,4, 9,13,54); Wetterstrand (2010:50).

<sup>45</sup> But see, e.g., Sahlin (2010:15-16); Wetterstrand (2010:52).

lacks.” In contrast to the previous periods, there is an increase in positive statements about the own party blocs, the in-groups, showing that the parties actually form one bloc.<sup>46</sup>

The debates during 2014 and 2018 differs from 2010, since the Sweden Democrats (SD) has entered the parliament and their party leader, Jimmie Åkesson, expresses himself often and strongly on immigration, thus introducing a new ideological dimension on the political agenda. The debates take place with important international events in the background, especially Russia’s annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014, and the ongoing war in Syria, with the following refugee crisis in 2015 and sharp increase in the number of asylum seekers in Sweden. These events clearly affected the debates, where migration policy linked to refugees and the right to asylum, segregation, unemployment, and crime were in focus.

The ideological dimension is still fundamental, and considerably more pronounced than in 2010, with much ideological conflict over how to tackle unemployment, immigration and welfare. The dominant conflict pattern is still the left versus the right, where the left parties as a bloc stand against the center-right parties (their respective in- and out-group). SD, however, is considered an out-group both for the left and the right and receives criticism from and criticizes all the other parties. There are also several statements emphasizing the need to keep the SD away from influence, which could be conceived as polarization.<sup>47</sup>

The many ideological statements may be illustrated by Prime Minister Reinfeldt (M) (2014 stmt, 2, p. 3), when he claims that “[w]e need more free trade and an even better business climate”, or by Prime Minister Löfven’s (S) (2018 stmt. 54, p. 28) claim that he will “fight for the wage earners’ conditions”.<sup>48</sup> The ideological ground when it comes to substantial issues also raises ideological critic.<sup>49</sup> SD, in turn, are criticized by almost all other parties, like in Björklund’s (Fp) (2014, stmt. 67, reply p. 45) statement, that the solution is not “to close the borders and build walls around Sweden, Jimmie Åkesson”, and with strong ideological critic from Löfven (S) (2018, stmt. 15, reply, p. 14) when he replies to Åkesson’s (SD) (2018, stmt. 3, p. 5) claim that they want to “build the modern peoples’ home [folkhemmet]”: “Don’t come, Åkesson, and talk to me about Swedish welfare [...] you who will lower taxes, you who will

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<sup>46</sup> See e.g., Sahlin (2010:11).

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., Kristersson (2018:24).

<sup>48</sup> See also, e.g., Björklund (2014:37,44; 2018:53); Damberg (2014:13-14,17,23); Fridolin (2014:26,32); Reinfeldt (2014:6); Sjöstedt (2014:67-68; 2018:9); Åkesson (2014:10; 2018:5,14); Löfven (2018:2); Carlsson (2018:49); Kristersson (2018:3); Lövin (2018:36); Löf (2018:5,35); Sjöstedt (2014:68).

<sup>49</sup> See also, e.g., Björklund (2014:31,39; 2018:19); Damberg (2014:5,13,16,19,21); Fridolin (2014:27,33); Hägglund (2014:76); Reinfeldt (2014:7,15); Kristersson (2018:21,26); Löfven (2018:2,12,14,18,22); Sjöstedt (2014:11-12,47,54,65; 2018:31); Åkesson (2018:5,33).

ensure that the welfare companies should be allowed to extract as much profit as possible and you who give bigger tax cuts to the rich than to low-income earners.”<sup>50</sup>

During the 2014 debate, the affective polarization had increased, although only as occasional negative statements about the out-group, as well as through some personal attacks.<sup>51</sup> What stands out, however, is SD’s strong criticism of V, that could also be interpreted as an expression of anti-establishment sentiments. V is criticized for having acted illegally to counter SD’s election campaign during the EU election, and Åkesson (2014, stmt. 87, p. 58; , stmt. 115 reply, p. 73) states that ”I experienced myself on a number of occasions how fundamental democratic principles were put out of place ...” and you “disrupted a permitted demonstration, which is a violation of current legislation.” However, Sjöstedt (V) (2014, stmt. 114, reply, p. 73) did not hold back in his reply alluding to an incident involving an SD parliamentarian (later convicted) and expressed clear affective polarization stating that “Leftists don’t run around with iron pipes” and you “have the right to be seen and heard when demonstrating against racism [...]”

The tone, however, sharpens further in 2018 and the affective polarization augments. During this election, the number of party leaders expressing affective polarization in the form of negative statements about the out-group has increased.<sup>52</sup> SD and their party leader Åkesson is still the main target for the affective polarization. He also expresses a lot of negative sentiments about all the other parties but especially S and their party leader Löfven in the form of personal attacks, for example, as when he states that he is “extremely tired of hearing Stefan Löfven’s repeated lies in this chamber about our politics and the politics of other parties” (Åkesson 2018, stmt. 53 reply, p. 27). These personal attacks are returned by Löfven (S) (2018, stmt. 15 reply, p. 14), who says that “humanism; it’s a word that Åkesson has to google”, and Lööf (C) (2018 stmt. 62, reply, p. 30) accuses Åkesson of racism, asking if it is not “racism to incite against people of a different ethnicity, to treat people differently based on origin and religion?”<sup>53</sup>

In relation to SD’s presence, it is also worth noticing that there are repeated calls for cooperation in the fight against racism in both 2014 and 2018. For instance, Prime Minister Reinfeldt (M) (2014, anf 41, reply, p. 29) emphasizes that the “important thing is that we do it

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<sup>50</sup> See also, e.g., Björklund (2014:31,39); Fridolin (2014:58); Lööf (2014:60); Reinfeldt (2014:10); Sjöstedt (2014:63); Åkesson (2010:44,56,63).

<sup>51</sup> See, e.g., Reinfeldt (2014:6, 15, 17); Björklund (2014:19); Damberg (2014:5); Fridolin (2014:35-36); Sjöstedt (2014:73); Åkesson (2014:61).

<sup>52</sup> See, e.g., Björklund (2018:33); Carlson (2018:11-12); Kristersson (2018:22); Lööf (2018:46); Sjöstedt (2018:44-45, 49); Åkesson (2018:4-5, 32).

<sup>53</sup> See, e.g. Björklund (2018:33, 54); Carlson (2018:54); Löfven (2018:13); Lööf (2018:30); Sjöstedt (2018:48, 53); Åkesson (2018:5, 15).

across political boundaries and other types of boundaries in society”, and when Kristersson (M) in 2018 (stmt. 42 reply, p. 24) states that “I think that large parties that have roughly the same opinion and also – as in the case of the Moderate Party and the Social Democrats – a historical consensus on these issues, have somewhat of a special responsibility to seek compromises and form the basis for an agreement that an overwhelmingly large majority of the Swedish people could stand behind.”<sup>54</sup>

### ***5.1.5 2022: National unity in the wake of the war of Ukraine?***

In the party leader debate before the 2022 election, affective polarization appears to decrease again, although from a high level. In the debate, there are calls for cooperation across party and bloc lines (mainly from S and C), not too surprisingly bearing the historical-political context in mind with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in spring of 2022, the following Swedish application for membership in NATO and the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>55</sup> The dominant issues raised are in line with the international development, the current security situation in Europe, NATO-membership, gang crime, and economics. There are, however, huge differences in what the party leaders prioritize in the debate, where some promote their own politics and important substantial issues, while others, like SD, mostly use their time to hardly criticize the incumbent S-led government.

The main conflict dimension remains – like before – ideological, with many examples of ideological statements, for example, by Johan Persson (L)<sup>56</sup> (2022, stmt. 7, p. 10) stating that “we believe in individual freedom and we believe that people can make their own choices in life.” In relation to these statements, the ideological critic follows, like when Kristersson (M) against S (2022, stmt. 42, reply, p. 23) states that “[w]ell, you let people pile welfare payments on top of each other” and Nooshi Dadgostar (V) (2022, stmt. 91, reply, p. 40), in return claims that all “of this has been shattered by neoliberal and conservative politics.”

In relation to the calls for cooperation from the center-left bloc, it is mainly M and SD who express affective polarization in the form of negative statements towards S (as an out-group) in particular, but also in the form of personal attacks on the Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson (S), for example, by Åkesson (SD) (2022, stmt. 14, reply, p. 14) when he describes the results “of Magdalena Andersson’s priorities and ambitions [...] that we see today – rampant crime, riots, car fires, stone throwing, hard criminals go free on our streets, skyrocketing prices for

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<sup>54</sup> See also, e.g., Kristersson (2018:12-13, 23-24); Löfven (2018:13).

<sup>55</sup> See, e.g., Andersson (2022:13); Löf (2022:6).

<sup>56</sup> The Liberal Party changed name in 2015, and are now shortened L, see Table 1.

electricity and fuel, pensioners who are forced to move when they can't pay the bills and people who die waiting for the care they need. This is the result of eight years with Magdalena Andersson at the ultimate power." Åkesson, in turn, is accused of being "pro-Russia", "Kremlin friendly", and SD "Putin-loving party representatives" (Löf (C), stmt. 60, reply, p.29).<sup>57</sup>

## 5.2 Drivers of affective polarization

The historical analysis shows two important things: (i) the ideological polarization and the left-right divide clearly dominates the debates in the *Riksdag*; and (ii) the level of affective polarization varies over time where some election years – 1985, 1994, 2006, and 2018 – are characterized by an increase in affective polarization. What, then, are the drivers behind this increase in affective polarization?

### 5.2.1 Populist parties

Previous research has shown that affective polarization in legislative debates is affected by what kind of parties that have seats in the parliament. In my analysis, a clear pattern emerges, right-wing populist parties tend to trigger affective polarization. This applies both during New Democracy's appearance in the 1994 debate and the Sweden Democrats' during the 2014-2022 elections.

New Democracy, founded before the 1991 election, entered the *Riksdag* as a purely populist party, and their participation in the 1994 debate strongly influenced the tone and polarization of the debate. NYD expressed strong affective polarization, both in the form of positive statements about the in-group, their own party, as seen above, as well as negative statements towards other parties.<sup>58</sup> This, in turn, generates affective polarization against NYD, who was conceived of as an out-group by all other parties, for example, manifested in personal attacks towards NYD's party leader, like by Johansson (C) (1994 stmt. 61 reply p. 72) who states that "I don't know if I should take Harriet Colliander seriously." Most obvious, however, is NYD's expression of anti-establishment statements, something new in the debates, as noted above. The affective polarization during the 1994 debate is not exclusively centered around NYD; in general, all the party leaders express themselves significantly more negative about the out-group than in previous two election years, mainly in the form of personal attacks against other party leaders.

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<sup>57</sup> See also, e.g., Andersson (2022:15); Dadgostar (2022:8,35); Kristersson (2022:3,13); Löf (2022:23); Åkesson (2018:4,14-15,27,31).

<sup>58</sup> See e.g., Colliander (1994:88,90).

In relation to NYD's short period in the parliament (1991-1994), the Sweden Democrats entered the *Riksdag* in 2010 (and has since then had seats) as a nationalist populist right-wing party. However, there are several similarities in the debate, where the affective polarization seems to increase when SD is present, for example, in the form of negative statements about the out-group. SD is also met by strong negative statements and are, for instance, called racists by other party leaders, for example, by Sjöstedt (V) (2018, stmt. 102, p. 44): "...a racist party that always points out the others as the cause to all problems." The use of racism, which is a very loaded word, exemplifies the strong conflicts that prevail. Affective polarization, as during 1994, also seems to spread to the other party leaders, where a lot of negative statements about the out-group and personal attacks occur. This could indicate that the entry of a populist party increases the affective polarization in general in the debate. Moreover, like NYD in the 1994 debate, SD expresses anti-establishment statements, for example, in Åkesson's (SD) (2018, stmt 3, p. 4) claim that "the left-liberal establishment [...] for decades has pushed to split Swedish society, to create the parallel societies we see today and break down the societal community."

There is, however, a third party that could be considered an extreme-wing party, the Left (Communist) Party (V/Vpk). However, V stands out in relation to SD and NYD, since they have been a part of the parliament since the implementation of universal suffrage 1921 (Möller 2023:291). During history, and especially before the breakdown of the Soviet Union, when V stood for a communist ideology, they are to be considered an extreme-wing party, for example, in their argument for implementing a planned economy.<sup>59</sup> They were also the only party in the parliament that were not invited in the coalition government during the WWII (Stjernquist 1966:116), which reinforces the image of them as an extreme party. Their ideological position has led them to strongly criticize and attack the center-right parties, but their party leaders have also recurrently criticized S when they are considered to move too far to the right. V is, in turn, strongly criticized by the center-right parties, as in Bildt's (M) (1994, stmt. 39, reply, p. 41) statement after the end of the Cold War, using an in the context pejorative words like "communist" against the party. Moreover, the party is at times accused of being populist and promoting a populist agenda, evident among other things, when Leijonborg (Fp) (2002, stmt. 27, reply, p. 27) calls Schyman (V) a "populistic politician". However, since the left party has been in the parliament for so long, it seems as if the ideological dimension has been adopted based on their strong leftist position, even though they after 1990s not appear as extreme in the

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<sup>59</sup> See e.g., Werner (1976:33).

same way. Previous research has also shown that the radical left in general is not as disliked as the radical right but rather forms a part in the left camp (Wagner 2024:383).

A common point for all these three parties, NYD, SD and V, is that they despite their ideological ground on the right and left respectively, in most debates criticize both the parties they are closest to and furthest away from based on the ideological scale. This distinguishes them from the other traditional parties that mainly, and almost exclusively, criticize their ideological opponents along the left-right divide (their respective out-group). Of interest to note, and as mentioned above, the other “new parties” that established themselves after 1988, MP and KD, have not affected the debate in a similar way, maybe somewhat surprising – at least when it comes to MP (the Green Party) – that stands for a new ideological dimension besides the left-right divide.

### ***5.2.2 Party leaders***

The entry of populist parties into the parliament thus affects the legislative debate and plays a decisive role in increasing polarization, both ideological and affective. However, the particular party leaders also seem to play a pivotal role in the polarization of the debates. The foremost example in this context is probably Palme (S) and Bohman (M), who both were inspired by political confrontation (Möller 2023:201). During the period in which they both were party leaders, the debates were clearly characterized by the harsh rhetoric and affective polarization that occurred between the two of them. This triggered the political debate and generated more affective polarization because of how they treated and responded to each other. However, it is perhaps mainly Palme who stands out as the party leader who primarily expresses affective polarization. This appears to be the case in the majority of debates, where Palme in strong words expresses personal attacks and negative statements about other parties. In an attack against Fällin (C) and Ullsten (Fp), he likened them with “two mosquitoes, one more rural and one, let’s say, more well-tailored” (Palme 1982, stmt. 14 reply, p. 47), and Palme (1982 stmt. 5 reply, p. 23) states that M “is no longer a responsible and upright party. The Moderate Party are becoming more and more of an irresponsible and rather cowardly party of promises.” In turn, he is also the one leader most exposed to affective polarization, as Bohman (M) (1973, stmt. p. 40) states: “We know that at the same time as Prime Minister Olof Palme talks about solidarity in all contexts, across and within borders, it is precisely him who, more than any other Social Democratic Prime Minister, has opened the way for a politics of confrontation in our country.”

Other party leaders, such as Jimmie Åkesson (SD) and Harriet Colliander (NYD) also seem to be contributing to increased polarization. Here, however, the question is whether they as

individuals contribute to polarization, or whether it is the party itself and their ideological foundation. My analysis indicates that it is more the ideological position of these parties that drives affective polarization, i.e., their party's presence in the parliament, but this will have to be investigated further, for instance, through comparative studies of other parliaments where right-wing populist parties are represented.

### ***5.2.3 Political issues***

Another factor that emerges as important is the substantial issues on the political agenda in a specific debate, since the issues may increase both ideological and affective polarization. This is clearly evident during the 1970s and the ideological polarization that took place in relation to the questions of employee funds and nuclear power. The former can be seen as an example of ideological polarization, where S strongly pursued the issue, while the employee funds face opposition from all the other parties, both from the left and the right. In contrast, nuclear power puts another dimension, outside the ideological, on the political agenda, something that is most evident in the collapse of the center-right government in 1978, with C strongly pushing the issue of decommissioning, a view in opposition not only to their two partners within the coalition government, Fp and M, but also to S, and only supported by V. In 1976, Fälldin (C) (reply, p. 43) also bundles M and S together in the debate: "Mr. Palme does not need to go to Mr. Bohman, who is his partner in the world's most ambitious nuclear power program, to know when we want to stop the expansion of nuclear power." However, this issue, which caused strong polarization and the breakdown of a government, resulted in a referendum, which during the first half of the 1980s led to the disappearance of the issue's topicality (although it has returned on the agenda recurrently, not least in the contemporary debate).

During the years 1973-2022 there are, however, a number of different issues that have been a basis for polarization between parties, and most of the topical issues have been related to the left-right ideological dimension, like taxes, welfare and employment. There is one prominent example triggering affective polarization mentioned previously, the "Bodström Affair" in 1985 revolving around foreign and security policy, which caused other issues to be removed from the political agenda. Besides that, there is one substantial issue that, in accordance with previous studies, has influenced affective polarization: immigration (see e.g., Bäck et al. 2023). This is an issue primarily driven by the two right-wing populist parties in the parliament, NYD in the early 1990s and SD since 2010. Similar to nuclear power, immigration is not a traditional ideological left-right issue, which creates a different dynamic in the parliament. The affective polarization may also be triggered by the fact that SD is the party driving the question, which

leads to hard opposition between the parties, as shown both in Åkessons's (SD) ideological statements and critic, as well as in his negative statements about other parties and personal attacks, exemplified when he states that "the asylum and family immigration that we have today costs an enormous amount of money, and it pulls Swedish society apart and creates alienation" (2014, stmt. 93, reply, p. 61). SD is, in turn, harshly criticized by all other parties, and it is important to note that the two traditional opposition parties, M and S, both used to emphasize cooperation between them on this question.<sup>60</sup>

In line with previous research (see e.g. Reiljan 2020), there seems to be a connection between ideological and affective polarization. When the ideological polarization is strong, as during the 1970s and loaded ideological words were frequently used, affective polarization seems to increase. The same applies, for example, during the 2006 election where the crystallization of two blocs, founded on ideology, increases affective polarization.

#### ***5.2.4. The idea of consensus***

As well as the historical-political context can trigger affective polarization by raising new political issues on the agenda, it may also counteract polarization and instead generate a greater willingness of the parties to work together and to make agreements, in form of the idea of consensus. This is prominent throughout the historical period, especially in matters relating to foreign and security policy. On these issues, party leaders from different ideological backgrounds often express themselves very positively about the out-group. The importance of unity across ideological lines on these issues is expressed by most party leaders over the years, for example, by Bildt (M) (1998, stmt. 1, p. 2): "I hope and believe that on this important European peace issue it will be possible with broad cooperation".<sup>61</sup> The importance of unity on these questions is a consistent theme in the debate. It is perhaps particularly emphasized during the Cold War, but remains repeated today as in the debate in 2022, now with Russia's invasion of Ukraine as background, when Lööf (C) (2022, stmt. 76, p. 35) states that "we need to continue to gather across party lines, as we have been able to do in terms of a stronger defense, support to Ukraine and an application to NATO."

These calls for cooperation and agreement to negotiate across ideological boundaries are also present in several other crises, such as economic crises, but also during the implementation of major reforms. These are often issues that for a longer period of time have been regarded as

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<sup>60</sup> See, e.g., Kristersson (2018:12; Löfven (2018:13).

<sup>61</sup> See, e.g., Johansson (1985:11).

issues of contention, where the parties finally agree to solve issues and implement reforms backed by a broad majority, so that the basic principles of, for example, a tax reform could “apply for a longer period, regardless of political majority conditions” (Johansson (C) 1988, stmt. 3, p. 22). There is also pride among the party leaders for this consensus culture, as expressed for example by Prime Minister Persson (S) (2002, stmt. 48, reply, p. 34) when he states that “I’m proud that we have this political culture in Sweden.” Nevertheless, this is also expressed on particular issues during a specific period in time, like when it around the millennium was considered necessary to stand united against racism both in Europe and in Sweden, or on immigration issues in the 2010’s, as noted above. The latter may, however, also be interpreted as an augmentation in polarization, since it at the same time was a call for a common stand against the ideology of SD.

It thus becomes clear that the consensus culture that has been distinctive for Sweden remains and is very much alive. This is especially true in matters affecting the nation’s security and where the international context plays a major role in uniting the various parties to pursue a common policy. This also appears in other contexts, however, where the importance of unity and the importance of implementing policies that stand regardless of government is emphasized.

#### **5.4 Summary**

The analysis of the party leader debates between 1973-2022 certainly shows that affective polarization has increased during the 2010s with the entry of the Sweden Democrats into the *Riksdag*. However, from a historical perspective, the debates during this period cannot be considered more affectively polarized than during previously periods (1970-mid-1980’s) or specific election years (1985, 1994, 2006). However, it is clear that the affective polarization among the political elite has changed in character, during the 1970s, for example, the debates were characterized by very harsh personal attacks (between Palme and Bohman in particular), a form that cannot be found to that extent later, while there is a proportional increase in negative statements about the out-group during the last decade.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that the parties taking seats in the parliament as well as the party leaders representing the party matters. When the right-wing populist parties enter, polarization generally increases, as well as when party leaders can be considered particularly confrontational. The substantial issues and the idea of consensus in the debates have also been shown to play a decisive role, where certain issues generate a lot of polarization, both

ideologically and affectively, for instance, employee funds and immigration, while others create calls for cooperation and unity, especially on security and foreign policy.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study contributes to the field of research on polarization by demonstrating the importance of differentiating between ideological and affective polarization. With its starting-point in democratic theory and the centrality of a vivid and effective opposition, my study shows that it is not possible to measure affective polarization without considering what ideological polarization entails. That would run the risk of overlooking the fundamental function of an opposition in modern representative democracies – to be critical – without that being classified as affective.

Another contribution is that my study, through qualitative manual coding, goes through a text material over a long period of time, which generates an increased understanding of how political debates change over time in terms of both ideological and affective polarization. With its focus on the political elite, using rarely analyzed material (legislative speeches), my study also discerns different drivers of affective polarization as well as one driver that may decrease the level of polarization.

Finally, with its focus on Sweden, my study contributes to current empirical research on polarization in Sweden and complements previous studies primarily investigating affective polarization among the electorate.

### **6.1. Results and main conclusions**

Three main conclusions can be drawn based on my longitudinal study. First, ideological and affective polarization can be analytically differentiated from each other and measured in a qualitative way by putting the context of a statement (or a speech) in focus. The context is crucial in order to differentiate between legitimate ideological criticism from parliamentary opposition and affective expressions of polarization that may endanger democracy. As I have shown, this differentiation is determined mainly by what the criticism is based on, ideology or general disapproval of another group. Without context, ideological criticism can easily be mistaken for affective when only using single value-laden words (bad/good, right/wrong, like/dislike) as basis for a coding frame. Moreover, the importance of context is particularly evident in my main category, “against polarization”, based on the Swedish political culture of consensus and cooperation, which captures recurrent statements against polarization.

This finding is of importance in relation to previous studies analyzing text data, mainly conducted with quantitative methods or machine learning (see e.g., Bäck et al. 2023; Røed et al. 2023). If the purpose of an opposition within a democracy is disregarded – i.e., to be critical towards the government – it appears like all criticism is affective and the results become questionable. In a democratic system, it must be possible to express ideological criticism of the various parties (and their policies), and this must be distinguished from affective polarization.

Second, my study shows that the polarization in Sweden has changed over time, although ideological polarization dominates throughout the whole period, even if it is perhaps expressed most clearly, frequently and in strong value-laden ideological terms during the 1970s. This is supported by several studies regarding Sweden, which is considered to be a political landscape fundamentally marked by ideological contradictions (see e.g., Stjernquist 1966; Möller 2023). The ideological polarization has its basis in the left-right dimension, where the lines of conflict relate to traditionally divisive issues, like taxes, welfare and privatization (see e.g., Oscarsson et al. 2021).

The increase in affective polarization among the political elite between 2010-2018, that this study finds, is supported by several other contemporary studies, although they focus mainly on the electorate (Reiljan & Ryan 2021; Bettarelli et al. 2023; Bäck et al 2023; Ryan 2023:69). However, my longitudinal study also shows that affective polarization goes in “waves”, with periods of more affectively polarized debates and where four election years stand out, 1985, 1994, 2006, and 2018. The affective polarization during the last decade does not stand out in a historical perspective; rather, it is comparable to previous periods of increased affective polarization within Swedish political history, especially the 1970s and early 1980s, a finding supported by Oscarsson et al. (2021).

What my study further adds to this debate, is how the character of affective polarization among the party leaders has changed over time: during 1973-1985 affective polarization was mainly characterized by harsh personal attacks, while during the debates in 2014 and 2018, it is mainly expressed in the form of negative statements towards another party, even though personal attacks occur. Moreover, in relation to previous studies, my analysis also covers the party leader debate in 2022, which shows a decrease in affective polarization. The decrease in polarization during the last debate raises questions whether Sweden really is on the verge of a period of escalating affective polarization with dangerous implications for the democratic system (see e.g., Reiljan 2020; Bäck et al. 2023), or if we rather are entering a new period of less affective polarization among the political elite, as we have seen before during the last 50 years.

Third, my analysis discerns four main drivers behind an increase or decrease in affective polarization: the role of populist parties, party leaders, political issues, and the idea of consensus. Populist parties (here right-wing populist) tend to drive affective polarization, both in terms of how they express themselves about other parties, often in strong negative sentiments, and in terms of how other parties respond to them. They also give expressions of anti-establishment sentiments, and their presence in parliament seems to trigger the established parties to express themselves more affectively as well. The finding on the impact from right-wing populist parties in the parliament on the debate climate among the political elite is well in accordance with previous research focusing on the electorate in multi-party systems (see e.g., Reiljan 2020, Bäck et al. 2023; Öhberg & Cassel 2023).

It appears, moreover, as party leaders with a more confrontational rhetoric can contribute to an increase in affective polarization, since they seem to trigger the other party leaders to express themselves more affectively. Olof Palme, as mentioned above, is a clear example of this (Möller 2023:201), as he both gives expression for and receives multitudes of personal attacks from the other party leaders. As seen in other studies, the role of the party leaders (or presidential candidates) is often decisive (see e.g., Iyengar et al. 2012; McCoy et al. 2018; Dawkins & Hansson 2024), which demonstrates the elite's prominent role in increasing affective polarization within the electorate (see e.g., Bermeo 2003; Oscarsson et al. 2021).

The third driver influencing affective polarization is political issues outside of the classical left-right divide, such as immigration, often called a “culture war” issue in the literature (Bäck et al. 2023:3). This is of particular importance in the European multi-party system, where there historically has been a strong correlation between occupation, socioeconomic status and voting behavior (Stjernquist 1966:126; Lipset & Rokkan 1967). As these issues gain more space on the agenda, and especially in combination with populist parties that pursue these issues, affective polarization seems to increase, just as other studies have shown (Reiljan & Ryan 2021:194). However, my study also shows that potential challenges of a well-established policy, like the Swedish foreign and security policy in the “Bodström affair” in 1985, may dramatically increase affective polarization.

In addition to these drivers, I also found a driver that may decrease affective polarization, not mentioned in previous studies, and that may be of specific relevance in the consensus oriented Swedish context. It appears in relation to the historical-political context when the international development generates calls for national unity and consensus in times of potential security threats (which the invasion of Ukraine clearly demonstrates). However, there are also

recurrent calls for cooperation over party or bloc lines to get through other forms of crises and to pull through durable significant reforms (like major tax reforms).

## **6.2. Future research**

This study is limited in character, and my results show the importance of continued research on affective polarization. First, I believe that the analytical framework developed based on manual coding could form the base for computer coding and machine-learning through AI in order to differentiate between ideological and affective polarization. This would enable broader comparative studies, as well as further investigation of the drivers of affective polarization. The analytical framework could also be applied on different text data to broaden the analysis of affective polarization within the political elite, for instance, in analyses of social media or party programs.

There are also many aspects where more knowledge is needed to be able to strengthen the understanding of what drives polarization. As shown in previous research (see e.g., Fernandes et al 2021:1039), there is a lack of knowledge on how politicians' personal characteristics affect legislative speeches. Further research is also needed on how the established parties respond to the entry of populist right-wing parties: when and why do they, for example, change the way they express themselves towards the out-group, or increase the calls for cooperation (or both)? Moreover, it would be important to study the role of substantive political issues from a historical perspective in more detail. What differentiates, for instance, the contemporary debate on immigration from the debate on nuclear power during the 1970s in terms of affective polarization?

Of particular interest in relation to my study, is if the calls for consensus and cooperation across party or bloc lines – something that may decrease affective polarization – are as frequent in other multi-party systems, or if it is specific for countries that historically has been characterized by a strong consensus culture. In general, comparative studies would, naturally, strengthen the results in further research on all the identified drivers of affective polarization.

## **6.3. Epilogue: democratic backsliding or normal politics?**

The increase of affective polarization today in Sweden is of course considered to be a negative development. Based on my findings, also pointed out in a previous study (Oscarsson et al. 2021:177-178), a development like the one seen in the US seems unlikely. Many of the circumstances that risk leading to a system-damaging polarization in Sweden are absent. This

especially because of three reasons: (1) Swedish politics has a foundational consensus-oriented political culture, which clearly emerge when Sweden faces various crises during my analyzed time period; (2) ideological polarization still dominates in Swedish politics and substantive and potentially divisive issues along cultural lines, like nuclear power, the climate and the environment, have so far not been able to challenge the well-established left-right dimension for longer periods of time (although migration might still do); and 3) the multi-party system can channel many different opinions, something crucial in a democracy as it grants a voice to many different groups in society and may in that way counteract affective polarization (see e.g., Helms 2008:13; Müller 2021:95).

In this perspective, Swedish politics today may therefore better be understood as “normal politics” rather than on its way towards democratic backsliding, although the temperature of the debate remains high despite the decrease during the debate in 2022. However, the fundamentals of how the political elite choose to act and what rhetoric they use appear to be of great importance for both parliamentary work and the general polarization in society. My study has also shown a change over time in how affective polarization mainly is expressed – from personal attacks to negative statements about the out-group – and together with the development the last decade with recurrent declarations of no-confidence, harsh criticism of other parties and party leaders, and a refusal to cooperate on substantive issues such as nuclear power, this could indicate a break with the traditional consensus culture (see, e.g., Oscarsson et al. 2021:9-12; Möller 2023:312-318). SD has been proven to play a huge part in this and how the party decides to act is of importance. We have during the analyzed period seen that new parties in the parliament, MP and KD, have conformed to prevailing norms within the parliamentary arena, and the question is whether SD, with greater influence today than before, will do the same. With a decrease in affective polarization in the party leader debate in 2022, the next election in 2026 may give some evidence to the direction in which the political elite in Sweden is moving.

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## Appendix A: Governments, party leaders and the debates

Table 3. Governments in Sweden 1969-2022<sup>62</sup>

Years	Government	Notes
1969-1976 <sup>63</sup>	Palme I - S	
1976-1978	Fälldin I –C+M+L	Broke down due to conflicts on nuclear power.
1978-1979	Ullsten - L	Minority government with only 19 seats in the parliament.
1979-1981	Fälldin II – C+M+L	Broke down due to cooperation with S.
1981-1982	Fälldin III – C+L	Government after the former broke down.
1982-1986	Palme II	Abrupted by the murder of Palme.
1986-1990	Carlsson I - S	The government resigned after the Riksdag voted no to the bill on wage freezes.
1990-1991	Carlsson II - S	New government after the previous resigned.
1991-1994	Bildt – M+L+C+KD	
1994-1996	Carlsson III - S	
1996-2006	Persson - S	New government after Carlsson resigned as party leader for S.
2006-2014	Reinfeldt – M+L+C+KD	Majority government during 2006-2010. (the Alliance for Sweden).
2014-2018	Löfven I – S+MP	
2019-2021	Löfven II – S +MP	Government resigned after losing a vote of no-confidence.
2021	Löfven III – S+MP	
2021-2022	Andersson – S	New government after Löfven resigned as party leader for S. MP did not want to participate in the government after the right-wing parties' budget was approved.
2022-	Kristersson – M+KD+L	Supported by SD, (“Tidöavtalet”).

<sup>62</sup> Riksdagen 2023.

<sup>63</sup> Government Palme from 1969 is included since they were in government during the first general policy debate studied.

**Table 4: Party leaders 1973-2022 (S, M, C, L, V)**

<b>Valår</b>	<b>S</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>V</b>
<b>1973</b>	Olof Palme	Gösta Bohman	Thorbjörn Fälldin	Gunnar Helén	Carl-Henrik (CH) Hermansson
<b>1976</b>	Olof Palme	Gösta Bohman	Thorbjörn Fälldin	Per Ahlmark	Lars Werner
<b>1979</b>	Olof Palme	Gösta Bohman	Thorbjörn Fälldin	Ola Ullsten	Lars Werner
<b>1982</b>	Olof Palme	Ulf Adelsohn	Thorbjörn Fälldin	Ola Ullsten	Lars Werner
<b>1985</b>	Olof Palme	Ulf Adelsohn	Thorbjörn Fälldin	Bengt Westerberg	Lars Werner
<b>1988</b>	Ingvar Carlsson	Carl Bildt	Olof Johansson	Bengt Westerberg	Lars Werner
<b>1991</b>	Ingvar Carlsson	Carl Bildt	Olof Johansson	Bengt Westerberg	Lars Werner
<b>1994</b>	Ingvar Carlsson	Carl Bildt	Olof Johansson	Bengt Westerberg	Gudrun Schyman
<b>1998</b>	Göran Persson	Carl Bildt	Lennart Daléus	Lars Leijonborg	Gudrun Schyman
<b>2002</b>	Göran Persson	Bo Lundgren	Maud Olofsson	Lars Leijonborg	Gudrun Schyman
<b>2006</b>	Göran Persson	Fredrik Reinfeldt	Maud Olofsson	Lars Leijonborg	Lars Ohly
<b>2010</b>	Mona Sahlin	Fredrik Reinfeldt	Maud Olofsson	Jan Björklund	Lars Ohly
<b>2014</b>	Stefan Löfven	Fredrik Reinfeldt	Annie Lööf	Jan Björklund	Jonas Sjöstedt
<b>2018</b>	Stefan Löfven	Ulf Kristersson	Annie Lööf	Jan Björklund	Jonas Sjöstedt
<b>2022</b>	Magdalena Andersson	Ulf Kristersson	Annie Lööf	Johan Pehrson	Nooshi Dadgostar

*This table consist of the party leaders during the election years, for the five parties in the parliament throughout the studied time period. Please not that other party leaders, who did not sit during the election year therefore are excluded.*

**Table 5: Party leaders 1991-2022, (MP, KD, NYD, SD).**

<b>Valår</b>	<b>MP</b>	<b>KD</b>	<b>NYD</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>1991</b>	Eva Goës Birger Schlaug	-	-	-
<b>1994</b>	-	Alf Svensson	Harriet Colliander	-
<b>1998</b>	Marianne Samuelsson Birger Schlaug	Alf Svensson	-	-
<b>2002</b>	Maria Wetterstrand Peter Eriksson	Alf Svensson	-	-
<b>2006</b>	Maria Wetterstrand Peter Eriksson	Göran Hägglund	-	-
<b>2010</b>	Maria Wetterstrand Peter Eriksson	Göran Hägglund	-	-
<b>2014</b>	Gustav Fridolin Åsa Romson	Göran Hägglund	-	Jimmie Åkesson
<b>2018</b>	Gustav Fridolin Isabella Lövin	Ebba Busch	-	Jimmie Åkesson
<b>2022</b>	Per Bolund Märta Stenevi	Ebba Busch	-	Jimmie Åkesson

*Please note that this table only take in to account the party leaders at the time for the election. Party leaders in between elections are not accounted for, or when the parties are not in the parliament.*

**Table 6. Summary of the context of the debates 1973-2022.**

<b>Election Years</b>	<b>Historical-political background</b>	<b>Central substantive issues</b>	<b>Dominant conflict patterns</b>	<b>Tone</b>	<b>Overall pattern</b>
<b>1973</b>	Peace agreement regarding Vietnam, the Cold War, imperialism, the volcanic eruption on Island and Prime Minister Olof Palme's Christmas speech.	Taxes, unemployment, pensions, equality, Sweden's policy of neutrality.	Right versus left parties, based on ideology. But also a lot of consensus in relation to the situation in the world.	The tone is mostly very formal, but personal attacks and irony in regard to other party leaders occur.	The overall pattern is greatly affected by the situation in Vietnam and Iceland. It makes for agreement between parties, but the pattern is also very ideological, with the right parties versus the left. However. Fp take many shots at S.
<b>1976</b>	The oil crisis and the following international economic crisis, the equilibrium situation in the parliament, and the Cold War.	Economy in relation to: unemployment, labor market, pensioners, childcare and healthcare. Nuclear power and equality.	The center-right parties versus S, and the Vpk against both the center-right parties and S.	A very formal tone is dominant in the debate, but with personal attacks occurring.	The overall pattern is clearly based on the right-left dimension with typical ideological statements in regard to economic issues.
<b>1979</b>	The Cold War, the 1978 government crisis, the	Economy, taxes, employee	The right versus left, but where the center-right parties	The tone is formal and is characterized by	The debate is characterized by a clear

	economy and nuclear power.	funds, nuclear power.	are divided on many issues. Vpk is especially critical towards the right but also towards S.	response to substantial issues.	left-right dimension which is highlighted in the importance of economic issues. The affective polarization that occurs is mainly limited to personal attacks between Olof Palme and Gösta Bohman.
<b>1982</b>	The Cold War, the 1981 military coup in Poland, the 1981 government crisis and the bad economy.	Economy, taxes, cuts in social welfare, employee funds ( <i>löntagarfonder</i> ), defense and nuclear weapons.	The government against the opposition, and M versus S who both are in opposition at the time.	The tone is formal and matter-of-fact, with few inflections and the use of full names or “sir” in front of surname. Full names of parties are used, with the exception of Vpk called Vpk.	The debate is characterized by classic left-right substantive issues and, following, an ideological polarization. However, the pattern looks a little different due to M being in opposition against two other center-right parties.
<b>1985</b>	“The Bodström Affair”, the Cold War, the good	Sweden’s principle of neutrality, the	The conflict patterns during this election follows	The tone in itself is formal, with “sir” being used	The debate stands out with the

	economy and the inflation.	welfare system, “folkhemmet”, unemployment and taxes.	from the “Bodström Affair”, where all the center-right parties’ express hard words against S, and receives it back, while Vpk is taking stand against the right.	to a great extent. However, the rhetoric is also very hard.	ongoing “Bodström Affair”, with a clear affective pattern between S and the three centre-right parties. The ideological dimension is not as visible.
<b>1988</b>	The murder of Prime Minister Olof Palme 1986, the ongoing Cold War, HIV-epidemic, the economic crisis in the US.	The central issues are closely related to the historical-political background and are: membership in ECC, defense, neutrality, economy, taxes and unemployment.	The opposition, in form of the right-wing parties and Vpk against S.	The tone is mostly polite, with full name and full party names mainly used. Some abbreviations for parties are used.	The overall pattern is clearly ideological with the center-right parties versus S.
<b>1991</b>	The collapse of the Soviet Union, the start of the financial crisis, the formation of the party “New Democracy”	Globalization in regard to ECC, the economic crisis in relation to unemployment, taxes and healthcare, as well as nuclear power.	Ideological conflict between the center-right parties and S, and between Vpk and the S.	The tone in the debate is mostly polite and formal, with primarily use of full names and full party names, all though some surnames and abbreviations occur.	There is a clear left-right ideological conflict. Very little affective polarization.
<b>1994</b>	The ongoing financial crisis in Sweden, membership in the	Globalization in regard to EU, the economic crisis related to	Ideological conflict between the four center-right parties in government	The tone in the debate is mostly polite, with reference to	Clear right-left ideological conflict, but

	EU, New Democracy (NYD) in the parliament.	welfare, taxes and unemployment, as well as nuclear power.	against the biggest opposition party, S. Strong attacks against the right-wing populist party NYD from both left and right.	party leaders by their position in Government. Abbreviations are used for the Christian Democrats.	that is blurred out a bit by NYD, who expresses anti-establishment sentiments and both give and are exposed to affective polarization.
<b>1998</b>	The ongoing globalization with Sweden joining EU in 1995, the war in Kosovo and the economic crisis in the beginning of the 1990s.	Globalization in regard to EU and EMU, the national defense, welfare in relation to taxes, unemployment and healthcare.	There is a clear ideological conflict between the left and the right. However, C has been cooperating with S, and V gives ideological critic to S.	The tone in the debate is more informal, with party leaders mentioned by full name, surname, first name and abbreviations. A lot of positive words about and from the party leader of C.	A clear ideological conflict, but that is not as clear left and right since C, is cooperating with S. A lot of calls for cooperation are made, but with some affective polarization.
<b>2002</b>	The aftermath of 9/11, the enlargement of NATO, the growth of right-wing populism in Europe and the harder migration policy proposal from the EU.	Globalization in the form of membership in NATO, membership in EU, and the welfare system.	There is a clear ideological conflict between the left and right. But also between S and V, and the right parties especially against V.	The tone in the debate is polite, with full name used, with one exception for the party leader for MP who is called by first name.	This debate is characterized by a shared view of the importance of standing up against right-wing populism and the value of democracy. Clear ideological

					dimension with affective polarization only visible towards and from V.
<b>2006</b>	The flourishing of the economy in the early 2000s, and the murder of Foreign Minister Anna Lindh in 2003.	Issues closely related to welfare: work, unemployment, pensioners, school. But also energy policy, the climate, crime and EU membership.	There is a clear conflict pattern between “Alliance for Sweden”, with M, FP, KD and C, against the left parties: S, V and MP.	The tone during this debate is very hard, with many personal attacks.	Ideological conflict with the right versus the left and also prominent affective polarization between the two “blocs”.
<b>2010</b>	The aftermath of the global financial crisis and the period of recession that followed in the world.	The economic issue is the base of the debate, closely connected with issues of welfare, taxes, unemployment and school. Defense is discussed by Fp.	“Alliance for Sweden” versus the “Redgreen” (right versus left).	Use of full names, except for the party leaders of V and C, as well as the “Alliance for Sweden” and the “Redgreen”, and party names.	Right versus left, where the two sides stand against each other. This also means that the parties within each block do not criticize each other.
<b>2014</b>	The aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007-2010, Russia’s annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014, and the war in Syria.	Migration policy, the economic situation, globalization connected to international security and the energy issue.	“Alliance for Sweden” versus the three left parties, S, V and MP. SD against everyone and everyone against them. Especially V versus SD.	A harder tone is prevailing, government versus opposition. Party leaders in government are referenced to by their position.	All parties against SD, and SD expresses to anti-establishment statements. Ideological dimension dominates.
<b>2018</b>	The refugee crisis 2015 and Brexit.	Migration policy, the welfare	S and MP versus “Alliance for	The tone is hard, with a lot of	Clear ideological

		system, globalization and gang crime.	Sweden". SD is supporting the center-right parties but get criticized from parties both on the left and right.	negative statements about the out-group.	left-right dimension on substantive issues. Calls for cooperation between the two main parties M and S. Clear affective polarization primarily towards and from SD, mainly towards the Prime Minister (S).
<b>2022</b>	Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Sweden's application to NATO, the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the economic situation.	The security situation in Europe, membership in NATO, gang crime, economy.	S versus the four center-right parties: M, KD, SD and L. MP mainly addresses the climate, and V is critical of all the center-right parties, but C in particular.	The debate has several calls for cooperation and to confront polarizing rhetoric. Otherwise the debate is characterized by the left versus right, with SD supporting the center-right parties.	Clear ideological left-right dimension on substantive issues. Affective polarization above all from SD, but also M, towards S. At the same time, many calls for cooperation from especially S and C.

*This table presents a broader context for each election year.*