

# **Reigniting Enthusiasm: Polarization and Political Participation in the U.S**

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## **Abstract**

Although there is clear evidence that ideological polarization between the Democratic and Republican parties has intensified, scholarly consensus remains elusive regarding its effects on political participation. Drawing on McAdam's Political Process Model, this study proposes a theoretical framework to explain how political polarization influences voter engagement. Utilizing data from U.S. national elections between 2020 and 2024, the analysis investigates how ideological distances between candidates, as well as between candidates and voters, shape individuals' decisions to participate in electoral voting. Empirical findings suggest that political polarization enhances voters' propensity to turn out. Both ideological congruence with one's affiliated party and rejection of the opposing party's policy positions significantly increase the likelihood of political participation. Taken together, the results indicate that polarization has not discouraged potential voters but rather mobilizes them by clarifying what they support and oppose. These findings offer novel insights into the mechanisms driving voter engagement.

**Key words:** Political Polarization, Political Participation, Policy Position Divergence

## **1. Introduction**

Following a decades-long decline since the 1960s, voter turnout in U.S. presidential and midterm elections experienced a significant reversal beginning in 2018. The national elections held in 2018, 2020, and 2022 marked the highest voter turnout rates in their respective categories in several decades. Approximately 66% of eligible voters participated in the 2020 presidential election—the highest turnout for a national election since 1900. The 2018 midterm election saw a 49% turnout rate, the highest for any

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midterm election since 1914. Even the 2022 election, with a slightly lower turnout of 46%, exceeded that of all midterms since 1970. In contrast, electoral participation in Europe has continued to decline. In the United Kingdom, general election turnout has fallen to its second-lowest level since 1918, particularly in the post-Brexit period. France has also witnessed a noticeable downward trend in voter turnout. Despite the economic and democratic similarities between the United States and Europe, the two regions have exhibited sharply divergent trajectories in political participation.

Against this backdrop, understanding the factors driving American voters from political apathy to active engagement has become a central topic in academic research. Existing theoretical explanations for political participation primarily follow two main approaches: the populist political mobilization framework and the organizational mechanisms enabled by digital media. However, both approaches face limitations in terms of explanatory scope and theoretical robustness. As a result, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the unique explanatory value of political polarization. Over the past fifty years, a significant shift has occurred in the attitudes of American voters: individuals who identify with either the Republican or Democratic Party have developed increasingly negative views toward the opposing party, evolving from mild sympathy to intensifying animosity (Iyengar et al., 2012). Moreover, related research has emphasized that voters' negative attitudes toward the opposing party serve as a crucial lens for understanding their broader political attitudes and behaviors (Mayer 2017).

This gives rise to a central research question: **Does the elite-driven partisan polarization in the United States substantively influence institutionalized political participation among voters?** Existing scholarship presents conflicting perspectives on this issue. Some scholars argue that the political polarization of parties and their candidates has served as a mobilizing force for voter turnout (Han 2011; Hetherington 2008). A common theoretical explanation is that a competitive system offering distinct choices should encourage greater political engagement. In contrast, Rogowski, drawing on theories of alienation and conflict aversion, contends that polarization suppresses voter participation.

Furthermore, existing research has predominantly focused on providing empirical evidence regarding the effects of political polarization on elections and other forms of political participation, while paying relatively limited attention to the underlying theoretical mechanisms. In response, this study adopts McAdam's political process theory as its conceptual foundation and, drawing on the structural characteristics of political polarization in the United States, proposes an explanatory framework for the shift among American voters from political apathy to active political engagement—namely, that political polarization constitutes a key variable in driving such transformation. Based on this premise, the study utilizes data from the Cooperative Election Study (CES) covering the 2020–2024 electoral cycles to construct a model assessing the impact of partisan polarization on voter turnout intention, thereby offering empirical validation of the proposed mechanism.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 The populist explanation of political participation**

Scholars who support the populist explanation argue that populism constitutes both a threat to democracy and, paradoxically, a corrective to it (Mudde 2012). Populism is often linked to the redemptive dimensions of democracy, grounded in the belief that “power should reside with the people.” (Canovan 1999) . According to this view, the people ought to shape their own future by directly expressing their collective will. Extending this perspective to the study of civic political behavior, scholars generally posit that the presence of populist sentiments among citizens tends to encourage political participation. K. Jacobs emphasizes that contemporary politics operates “in an age of discontent,” in which public discourse frequently attributes widespread dissatisfaction to the rise of populism(K. Jacobs 2018). In this sense, populism functions as an “agent of discontent.” Such dissatisfaction, in turn, becomes a catalyst for political engagement. Huber further argues that populist citizens are more likely to participate in politics precisely because their disaffection with political elites serves as a powerful motivator for action(Huber 2024).

However, the relationship between the populist wave and voter turnout lacks robust

empirical support. Existing studies that examine the influence of populism on political participation—especially non-electoral forms of engagement—tend to focus on two specific dimensions: first, the effects observed within particular social groups; and second, the influence manifested under specific contextual conditions, such as in highly polarized systems (Marx et al., 2018; Immerzeel et al., 2015). Moreover, populism not only fails to mobilize greater electoral participation but may in fact significantly reduce voter turnout in certain European countries (Anduiza et al., 2019).

From a real-world perspective, the so-called “populist wave” in Europe has not translated into a measurable increase in electoral participation. For instance, in the case of the French presidential elections, the second-round turnout declined from 80.3% in 2012 to 63.2% in 2022—a record drop in the history of the Fifth Republic. This decline in institutionalized participation presents a structural paradox when juxtaposed with the rising vote share of populist parties. Even in Italy, where the Brothers of Italy party secured victory in 2022 largely through populist rhetoric, the national turnout rate (63.8%) remained below the country’s average since 1994.

In sum, attributing changes in U.S. political participation to populist mobilization overlooks important explanatory limitations.

## **2.2 The Internet-Based Explanation of Political Participation**

Existing research has extensively examined the organizational role of digital media in shaping voters’ political participation, particularly in relation to electoral behavior. Some scholars argue that using the Internet and accessing online political information can significantly enhance voters’ understanding of candidates and elections, thereby stimulating greater interest and civic engagement (Tolbert et al., 2001). This effect is particularly pronounced among younger voters, who are more likely to seek political information online and consequently demonstrate higher potential for participation (Livingstone et al., 2005). Empirical studies have also shown a positive correlation between voters’ online news consumption, incidental exposure to political content, and their likelihood of political engagement (Kim et al., 2013; Nanz et al., 2022). Additionally, some researchers have found that political advertisements disseminated through digital platforms can effectively mobilize voters (Lee Kaid et al., 2007). For

instance, Haenschen and colleagues, in their study of millennial voters, found that a combination of mobilization messages and vote reminder ads delivered online had a significant effect on turnout—comparable to traditional phone banking—but this effect was limited to voters in competitive electoral contexts(Haenschen et al.,2019).Finally, the political use of the Internet has been shown to foster greater perceptions of political interest, trust, and efficacy, all of which increase the likelihood of individuals engaging in campaigns and political activities(Wang 2007).

However, a growing body of research suggests that Internet usage may also exert negative effects on voter turnout. Digital technologies increase access to entertainment content, which may crowd out citizens' exposure to news and political information, thereby diminishing their propensity to vote(Oliver Falck et al.,2014). Similarly, Tolbert points out that the Internet is more likely to enhance political participation among individuals who are already predisposed to vote—particularly those with higher socioeconomic status—thus exacerbating existing inequalities in political representation(Tolbert et al.,2001).

Taken together, these findings indicate that while the Internet plays a crucial role in organizing political participation, its specific effects remain contested. Notably, major social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook were domestically available in the United States as early as 2006. Yet throughout the following decade, voter turnout remained stagnant, hovering around the 60% benchmark. It was not until 2018 that a marked shift in political engagement occurred. As such, Internet usage should be conceptualized as a foundational constant that supports participation, rather than a dynamic explanatory variable capable of accounting for recent surges in voter mobilization.

### **2.3 The Political Polarization Explanation of Political Participation**

While political polarization is typically regarded as detrimental to the proper functioning of democratic institutions, one of its notable effects may be the elevation of perceived political stakes, which in turn encourages greater political participation. Existing research has already drawn attention to the impact of polarization on voter engagement. Over half a century ago, a report by the American Political Science

Association argued that a polarized party system, by offering clear choices between competing programs and principles, could stimulate broader citizen involvement (Levy 1952). Dalton further found that citizens' perceptions of party polarization serve as a reliable indicator of party competition and a strong predictor of political participation (Dalton 2008). As political polarization has intensified across numerous democracies, a growing body of evidence suggests that perceptions of partisan polarization are positively correlated with political engagement, especially in the form of electoral turnout.

Taken together, these findings provide a solid theoretical foundation for viewing political polarization as a key variable influencing the shift of American voters from political apathy to renewed political participation. Moreover, while much of the existing literature has focused on providing empirical evidence of polarization's effects, few studies have explored the theoretical mechanisms behind the sharp rise in U.S. electoral participation since 2018. This study therefore aims to offer an integrated explanation that combines both theoretical modeling and empirical analysis of the upward trend in voter turnout in recent American elections.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

Both theoretical and empirical research suggest that political candidates are generally expected to adopt moderate positions in order to maximize electoral gains. According to the median voter theorem, if two political parties seek to maximize their chances of winning, they will strategically shift their positions toward the preferences of the median voter. Existing studies have shown that voters tend to value proximity in political positions during elections and are generally reluctant to support parties or candidates whose ideological stances are perceived as too extreme (Simas 2013). Furthermore, if voters believe that moderate candidates are more likely to win, even those with more ideologically extreme preferences may be inclined to support the moderate option (Simas 2017). Even in rare instances when extremist candidates manage to win elections, empirical patterns indicate that they tend to perform worse overall in general elections compared to more moderate candidates from their own

parties. Over time, this may contribute to the erosion of electoral support for the party as a whole(Hall 2015).

However, recent studies suggest that the electoral advantage traditionally enjoyed by moderate candidates has declined amid increasing polarization among the American electorate over the past few decades(Utych 2020). As voters' ideological preferences and policy positions have shifted from a unimodal to a bimodal distribution, political parties aiming to maximize their electoral success are incentivized to adopt more differentiated and ideologically distinct policy platforms. This strategic divergence often entails embracing more extreme ideological positions in order to appeal to voters located at the ideological "peaks" on both the left and right. Moderate candidates are increasingly likely to be excluded from congressional candidate slates(Thomsen 2014), while challengers adopting more extreme positions have been found to attract greater electoral support(Stone et al.,2010). Collectively, these findings suggest that the trend toward candidate polarization observed in both midterm and presidential elections in the United States is likely to persist.

Against this backdrop, previously marginalized or politically disengaged groups have gradually become key targets of mobilization, thereby encouraging broader societal participation in political activities. Notably, political polarization itself can serve as a catalyst for increased political engagement. As voters are more likely to harbor contempt and animosity toward rival parties and their candidates, they also tend to experience heightened emotional responses when engaging in political activities. The growing ideological divide among candidates in U.S. elections further energizes the electorate, strengthening their motivation to participate. This emotional activation often intensifies hostility toward political opponents and prompts individuals to more openly express their political views. Consequently, it leads to immediate action, including electoral participation, aimed at securing victory for one's own party.

In summary, this study focuses on the phenomenon of political polarization in the United States and employs McAdam's framework of political mobilization to investigate the deeper mechanisms through which voters transition from political apathy to active participation. The findings suggest that intensifying political conflict

within American society not only reshapes electoral dynamics but also constitutes a central mechanism for mobilizing public engagement. Specifically, as ideological divisions between the left and right become more pronounced, political parties are compelled to adopt more distinctive and polarized positions in order to secure electoral support. This manifests both in the deepening ideological divide between conservatives and liberals and in candidates strategically presenting divergent policy stances to appeal to particular voter blocs.

This structural transformation generates a dual mobilization effect: on one hand, previously disengaged or neutral citizens are drawn into the political process, expanding the electorate; on the other hand, heightened antagonism between partisan camps—particularly the strong aversion supporters feel toward opposing parties—serves as a powerful motivational force driving voters to the polls. Importantly, this antagonism-driven participation further reinforces political polarization, creating a mutually reinforcing feedback loop. Ultimately, the interaction of these factors has led to a new level of intensity in collective voter engagement, as ordinary Americans increasingly turn to the ballot box to assert their political positions.

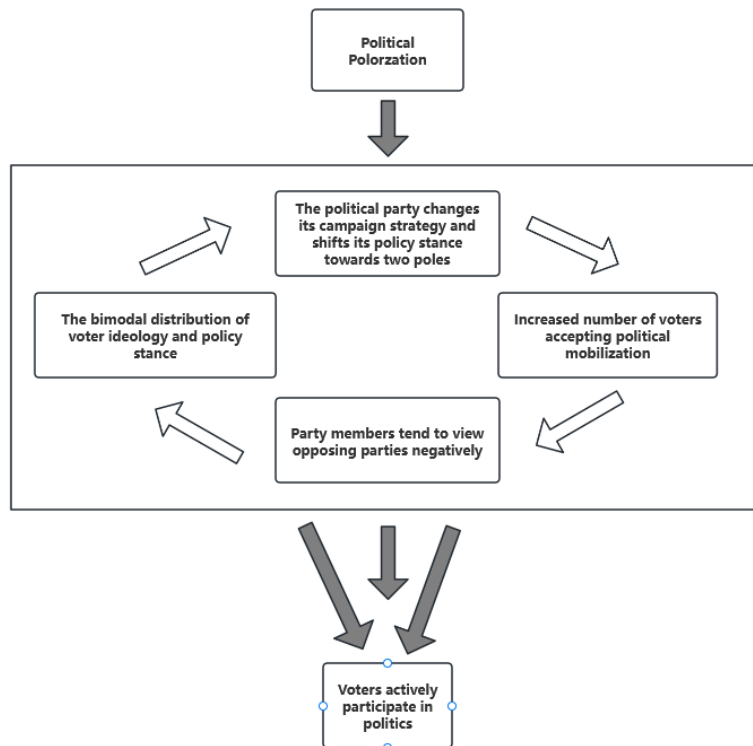


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

#### **4. Research Hypotheses**

There are two key components in the theoretical interpretation of how voters' ideological polarization influences their political participation. The first concerns the ideological distance and policy divergence between two candidates or political parties. Mobilization theory posits that such differences highlight the contrast between electoral options, thereby encouraging individuals to vote for the candidate or party they find more appealing. Overall, existing studies have generally concluded that "the greater the perceived difference between candidates and parties, the more is at stake for voters in the outcome of the election, and thus the more likely they are to participate."

On the other hand, some scholars challenge this mobilization argument, suggesting that as people become more aware of the distinctions between political actors, they also become more cognizant of the underlying conflict. Citizens, however, often dislike political confrontation, and increasing polarization among political elites tends to undermine public trust in politics (Mutz et al., 2005). In practice, the growing policy divergence between the Democratic and Republican parties has significantly contributed to rising negative sentiments toward politics among the public. For instance, Bowler and Donovan find that American voters living in more competitive districts are more likely to express dissatisfaction with the electoral choices presented to them (Bowler et al., 2011). This sense of frustration is not limited to elite politics, but also stems from widespread partisan conflict. As a result, such polarization may alienate citizens from the political process. Severe political polarization can thus be perceived as repellent and may lead to lower levels of voter turnout and political engagement.

Although the argument that polarization hinders political participation is compelling, this study contends that the ideological distance between a candidate and the opposing party does not necessarily exert a negative impact on voter engagement. First, a range of empirical studies conducted across different electoral contexts largely supports the mobilization thesis—namely, that party polarization (the ideological distance between the most left- and right-wing parties) significantly boosts voter turnout. Moral attribute this effect to the rise of post-materialist parties at both ends of

the ideological spectrum, which offer more representative choices on key issues such as environmental protection, gender equality, and immigration(Moral 2017). In multiparty systems, both perceived and actual polarization are associated with higher turnout among both high- and low-sophistication voters.

Thus, by offering starkly differentiated policy alternatives, polarized parties and their ideological distance may increase political enthusiasm among voters, making them feel that the stakes are sufficiently high or the choices sufficiently appealing to compel participation. Moreover, in the United States, public attitudes toward partisan conflict are complex. While citizens often claim to prefer compromise over confrontation, research shows that individuals with strong partisan attachments actually favor politicians who engage in politics in a distinctly partisan manner(Harbridge et al.,2011). This is largely because party affiliation and ideology have become important dimensions of social identity in contemporary American society. As candidates and parties become more polarized, individuals may perceive the opposing party as a threat to their identity. In the context of elections—political events that inevitably produce winners and losers—such perceived threat can trigger emotional responses. Partisan supporters may respond by exhibiting increased enthusiasm and pride toward their own party and candidates, while directing anger and hostility toward the opposition, ultimately fostering action-oriented emotions that motivate political participation.

Therefore, although conflict may be undesirable in principle, there exists a psychological need to ensure that one's group remains superior to the out-group, thereby encouraging individual-level engagement in politics. Based on this logic, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

**H1: Political polarization leads to higher levels of political participation, as reflected in increased voter turnout.**

This study further argues that voters' perception of political polarization is not only reflected in the ideological divergence between two parties or candidates, but is more fundamentally manifested in the perceived distinction between “us” and “them” in terms of policy attitudes. In other words, individuals' perceptions of polarization are shaped not only by the objective ideological divergence among political elites, but also

by voters' subjective judgments regarding their alignment or opposition with specific party policy positions. This subjective understanding may take the form of strong alignment with the platform of one's preferred party, or a pronounced rejection of the opposing party's stance. Together, these perceptions define where individuals place themselves on the political spectrum and ultimately drive political engagement.

Especially in the current context of heightened partisan identification and rising "negative partisanship," perceptions of political polarization have become increasingly affective and relational in nature. Voters are not only motivated by "who they support," but even more strongly by "who they oppose." Clarifying the micro-level pathways through which polarization manifests is therefore essential to understanding how it translates into individual political behavior—particularly the core act of participation: voting.

On one hand, when voters perceive a high degree of policy congruence between their own preferences and those of their favored party, this alignment strengthens political identification, enhances their sense of belonging to the party, and increases their motivation to act. This process may be understood as a "policy congruence mobilization" mechanism, wherein the emphasis lies in the perceived compatibility between self-identity and partisan position. Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

**H2: The greater the policy congruence between a voter and their preferred political party, the more likely the voter is to participate in elections.**

On the other hand, beyond the positive mechanism of identity-based mobilization, polarization may also operate through a negative mobilization pathway. In recent years, the phenomenon of *negative partisanship* has become increasingly prominent in the U.S. electoral context. Even when voters feel limited enthusiasm for the policy agenda of their own party, they may nonetheless be motivated to participate due to strong opposition to the policy positions of the rival party. As ideological distances continue to widen, the perceived *threat* posed by the opposing party to a voter's identity can further intensify their willingness to act. This mechanism can be described as "oppositional rejection mobilization." Accordingly, the following hypothesis is

proposed:

**H3: The more strongly a voter opposes the policy positions of the opposing political party, the more likely they are to participate in elections.**

Finally, this study seeks to examine the interaction between these two mechanisms. In a highly polarized political environment, voters may simultaneously identify with their own party's platform and harbor strong rejection toward the rival party. This psychological state not only reinforces political identity but also enhances the directionality and motivation of political behavior. Simply put, the attitude of “I support us” combined with “I oppose them even more” may constitute a stronger incentive for political engagement. Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that these two mechanisms may interact synergistically, rather than cancel each other out or function independently. Based on this reasoning, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

**H4: There is a positive interaction between voters' policy congruence with their own party and rejection of the opposing party**

## **5. Measuring polarization**

This study focuses on the mechanisms through which political polarization influenced voter participation in the U.S. presidential and congressional midterm elections between 2020 and 2024. Although the degree of partisan polarization fluctuates across years, substantial regional variation provides ample empirical leverage for testing diversity and robustness across different contexts.

To address **Hypothesis 1 (H1)**, this paper constructs a *Candidate Ideological Polarization Index* as the core explanatory variable, designed to capture the ideological distance between the two main candidates (typically the Democratic and Republican nominees) faced by voters. This index reflects the degree of institutional polarization in the voter's political environment, highlighting the divergence between candidates in terms of ideological or policy positions. According to polarization-mobilization theory, a higher index score indicates greater candidate differentiation, which enhances voters' perception of electoral stakes and thereby increases their likelihood of turning out to vote.

To analyze polarization at the individual level, the study further distinguishes between two cognitive pathways of perceived polarization—positive identification with one's preferred party and negative rejection of the opposing party—corresponding to Hypotheses 2 and 3 (H2 and H3). The study constructs two key explanatory variables: the *Policy Congruence Index* (com\_index) and the *Opposition Rejection Index* (anti\_com\_index). The former measures the degree of alignment between a voter's stances on several salient policy issues (e.g., abortion, gun control, immigration) and the official policy positions of the party they support. This variable reflects voters' positive identification with their party's platform and sense of partisan belonging, serving as the operational indicator of the policy congruence mobilization mechanism. The latter captures the extent to which a voter's positions on the same issues diverge from those of the opposing party. This variable reflects voters' hostility and alienation toward the rival party, thereby measuring the increasingly salient negative partisanship mechanism observed in recent U.S. elections.

Empirically, the analysis draws on three waves of survey data from the **Cooperative Election Study (CES)** between 2020 and 2024. The CES asked respondents to rate candidates' ideological positions on a 1–7 scale (with 1 indicating liberal and 7 conservative), and to state their own policy preferences on selected key issues. Following measurement strategies developed by scholars such as Adams and Simas, the study aggregates these scores at the district level to approximate candidates' ideological positions and to construct a spatial map of voter-candidate alignment (Adam et al., 2006; Simas et al., 2021).

To assess the level of partisan polarization, the study computes the *Candidate Ideological Polarization Index* as the absolute distance between the average ideological scores of Democratic and Republican candidates. To measure individual-level perceptions, the study calculates the absolute distance between a voter's policy score and (a) the official position of their preferred party (com\_index), and (b) the opposing party (anti\_com\_index).

All variables were integrated into a merged dataset containing approximately **80,000 observations**. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the main variables.

Note that sample sizes vary across the three core explanatory variables due to the exclusion of self-identified independents from the analyses for Hypotheses 2 and 3. This is because these hypotheses are grounded in a partisan framework and presume some form of party affiliation; therefore, respondents who did not report any party identification were removed when calculating the policy congruence and opposition rejection indices.

**Table 1 Descriptive statistics of variables**

Variables	Obs	Mean	Std.ver	Min	Max
Dem ideology	79,632	2.670297	.4623792	1.732057	6.189624
Rep ideology	79,632	6.253748	.0975307	5.808333	6.662921
Ideological differences	79,632	3.583451	.4573617	.0161004	4.333333
Voter Policy Consistency Index	79,632	.7462671	.1975841	0	1
Opposing party policy rejection index	79,632	.6612558	.1680887	0	1

Furthermore, Figure 2 presents a kernel density plot based on the difference between voters' alignment with the two major parties' policy positions, as measured by the indicator. The x-axis represents the degree of relative support for Democratic policy positions, while the y-axis shows the estimated density. The results reveal a clear bimodal distribution: distinct peaks appear at both extremes of support for the Republican and Democratic parties, respectively, while the center—representing voters with no clear preference for either party's policy positions—exhibits a notable trough.

This pattern indicates that voter polarization along policy dimensions has become structurally pronounced in the contemporary American electorate. This finding lays a conceptual foundation for the empirical investigation of the dual mobilization mechanisms—positive identification with one's own party and rejection of the opposing party. It is precisely because of this policy-based polarization that voters may exhibit two distinct but complementary logics in political behavior: one driven by affinity, the other by antagonism.

Moreover, the distributional patterns observed in Figure 2 offer descriptive support for the broader political science proposition that perceived inter-party differentiation

can serve as a behavioral motivator. That is, only when voters perceive substantial differences between the parties are they more likely to engage in politics based on policy alignment.

Taken together, these trends suggest that polarization in policy preferences is not only a defining feature of recent U.S. electoral politics but also a structural starting point for understanding how partisan polarization translates into individual-level voting behavior. Building on this polarized landscape, the subsequent empirical analyses will assess how the identification-based and rejection-based mobilization mechanisms differentially affect voter participation.

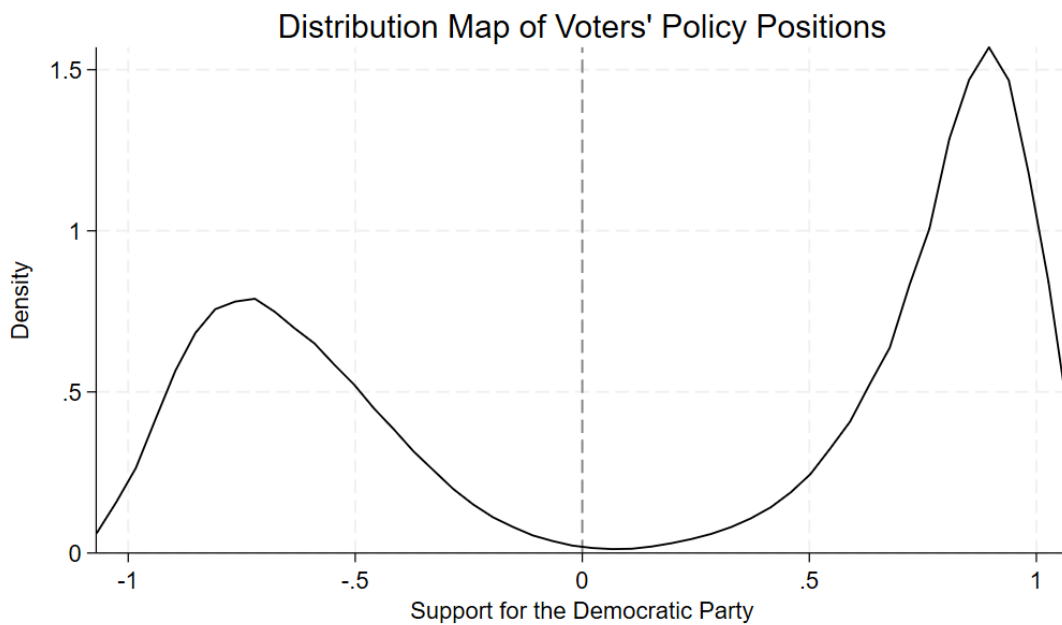


Figure 2 Distribution Map of Voters' Policy Positions

## 6. Method

This study treats the three national elections held between 2020 and 2024 as a quasi-natural experiment to examine the relationship between political polarization and voters' institutional political participation. Drawing on existing scholarly approaches, we construct a logistic regression model to estimate the effect of political polarization on electoral participation.

The dependent variable in this analysis is whether a respondent voted in any of the three national elections during the 2020–2024 period. To enhance the accuracy of

measurement, we adopt the validated vote indicator provided in the Cooperative Election Study (CES) dataset. A respondent is coded as a voter only if their voting status can be confirmed through public records. This validated measure addresses a critical limitation of relying on self-reported voting behavior, which tends to be prone to overreporting due to social desirability bias.

To mitigate potential endogeneity concerns, the model includes a comprehensive set of control variables: age, educational attainment, household income, race/ethnicity (including White, Black, Asian, Hispanic, and other minorities), and gender. Standard errors are clustered at the state level, and both state and year fixed effects are incorporated to account for unobserved heterogeneity across geographic and temporal contexts.

## **7. Analyses: Polarization in candidates**

We begin our empirical investigation by examining the most common and direct measure of ideological polarization—the ideological distance between the two major candidates in a given electoral district. If polarization is understood as the widening ideological gap between candidates, then this measure should, theoretically, be positively associated with voters' likelihood of electoral participation.

To test this, we construct two sets of models: Model 1 includes all respondents in the sample, while Model 2 restricts the analysis to individuals with strong partisan identification. While Hall (2015) argues that the latter group offers more valid estimates when analyzing partisan voting behavior, we report results from both model specifications to provide robust empirical evidence.

As shown in Table 2, the coefficient for candidate ideological distance in Model 1 (full sample) is 0.089—positive but not statistically significant. This suggests that for the general electorate, the policy divergence between candidates is not, in itself, a sufficient factor to significantly alter voting behavior.

However, in Model 2, where the analysis is limited to voters with strong partisan attachments, the coefficient increases to 0.173 and reaches conventional levels of statistical significance. This finding indicates that among partisans, greater ideological

differentiation between candidates significantly increases the likelihood of voting. In other words, when voters already possess clear partisan identities, more distinct ideological choices between candidates amplify the perceived stakes of the election, thereby enhancing their motivation to participate.

These results are consistent with polarization-based mobilization theory, which posits that the participatory effects of political polarization are not uniform across the electorate. Instead, such effects are more pronounced among those with higher levels of political identification, ideological commitment, or interest in politics. In summary, Hypothesis 1 receives partial empirical support.

Table 2 Association between candidate polarization from respondents and voting

	Model 1	Model 2
Distance from Candidate	0.089 (0.076)	0.173** (0.074)
Gender	-0.177*** (0.052)	-0.054 (0.039)
Age	0.038*** (0.002)	0.036*** (0.003)
Educ	0.317*** (0.024)	0.308*** (0.038)
Black	-0.292*** (0.086)	-0.398*** (0.096)
Asina	-0.553*** (0.134)	-0.473* (0.242)
Hispanic	-0.410** (0.193)	-0.443** (0.180)
Other_race	-0.044 (0.141)	-0.157 (0.240)
Income	0.145*** (0.007)	0.165*** (0.013)
Constant	-0.976*** (0.317)	-0.926*** (0.321)
Observations	79,632	43,611

Entries are logistic regression coefficient estimates with standard errors that are clustered by region. State and year fixed effects are also estimated.

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

## 8. Analyses: Policy Congruence and Opposition

We employ the same modeling approach to examine how the ideological distance between voters and their preferred party, as well as the distance from the opposing party, affects political participation. As previously noted, because Hypotheses 2 and 3 are grounded in a partisan framework, individuals who self-identify as strictly nonpartisan are excluded from the analysis.

To evaluate the effects of policy congruence and divergence on voter turnout, we estimate three logistic regression models. Model 1 and Model 2 separately assess the impact of a voter's policy alignment with their affiliated party and their opposition to the rival party's platform. Recognizing that both identification with one's own party and rejection of the opposing party may jointly influence voting decisions, Model 3 incorporates an interaction term to capture the combined effect. Table 2 presents the results of these models.

The findings indicate that both the *Policy Congruence Index* (*com\_index*) and the *Opposition Rejection Index* (*anti\_com\_index*) have significant and positive effects when entered independently. The coefficient for *com\_index* is 2.190 ( $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that the closer a voter's policy preferences align with their party's platform, the more likely they are to vote. Similarly, the coefficient for *anti\_com\_index* is 2.262 ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that stronger opposition to the rival party's platform also increases the probability of voting. These results consistently affirm that political polarization—whether expressed through alignment or aversion—is positively associated with voter turnout.

More importantly, in the full specification that includes both indices and their interaction, all three variables remain statistically significant. The coefficients for *com\_index* and *anti\_com\_index* are 0.967 and -1.355, respectively, while the interaction term yields a coefficient of 2.280 ( $p < 0.001$ ). This suggests that while the isolated effects of identification or rejection may weaken when their interdependence is accounted for, their joint presence significantly amplifies political mobilization.

In other words, voter turnout is most strongly elevated when individuals both

strongly identify with their party's platform and simultaneously reject the opposing party's positions. When either mechanism operates in isolation, its mobilizing effect appears to be more limited without the reinforcement of the other.

These empirical findings offer important insights into how voters' polarized attitudes are translated into political behavior. First, the results lend strong support to Hypothesis 2, confirming the existence of a "policy congruence mobilization" mechanism. When voters perceive high alignment with their preferred party on key policy issues, they are more likely to develop a sense of identity, trust, and belonging, which in turn enhances their motivation to participate. This internally driven pathway reflects a direct correspondence between voters' self-positioning and their party's policy orientation.

Second, Hypothesis 3 is also robustly supported. The effect of the "oppositional rejection mobilization" mechanism appears even stronger than that of policy congruence. In highly polarized political contexts, voters tend to interpret the opposing party's policy positions as threats to their core values. The negative emotions evoked by such perceived threats—such as anger, anxiety, and hostility—often serve as more powerful motivators for participation than positive identification. Even in the absence of strong enthusiasm for their own party, voters may still be mobilized by the imperative to prevent the opposing side from winning.

Most importantly, Hypothesis 4 receives empirical confirmation in Model 3. The significant positive interaction effect indicates that when both psychological mechanisms—identification with one's own party and rejection of the opposing party—operate simultaneously, the resulting mobilization effect is substantially greater than the effect of either mechanism alone. This finding aligns with the contemporary trend of voters being increasingly motivated by opposition, and it highlights the importance of considering how "positive mobilization" and "negative mobilization" interact to shape the full logic of participatory decision-making.

In addition, these findings carry significant implications for party strategies. In a context where the voter base is increasingly polarized, political parties must not only offer a sense of identification to their supporters but also highlight their differences

from opponents in order to stimulate oppositional awareness and mobilization. However, such a strategy is not without risks: emphasizing partisan divides too strongly may deepen political animosity and exacerbate societal fragmentation. Thus, striking a balance between fostering “positive identification” and encouraging “rational rejection” emerges as a central challenge for future campaign strategies.

In conclusion, this study empirically verifies the multidimensional link between voters’ policy positions and their voting behavior. By clearly distinguishing and identifying two mobilization mechanisms—“policy congruence” and “oppositional rejection”—and revealing their synergistic effects through interaction models, this research extends the theoretical frontier of studies on political participation and polarization.

Figure 3 Association between Policy Congruence、Opposition and voting

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
com_index	2.190*** (0.125)		0.967** (0.449)
anti_com_index		2.262*** (0.169)	-1.355*** (0.510)
Inter			2.162** (0.883)
Gender	-0.157*** (0.045)	-0.144*** (0.047)	-0.159*** (0.045)
Age	0.039*** (0.002)	0.039*** (0.002)	0.039*** (0.002)
Educ	0.266*** (0.023)	0.289*** (0.023)	0.259*** (0.021)
Black	-0.255*** (0.084)	-0.198** (0.085)	-0.239*** (0.078)
Asina	-0.539*** (0.158)	-0.519*** (0.155)	-0.533*** (0.157)
Hispanic	-0.415* (0.212)	-0.375* (0.208)	-0.413** (0.209)
Other_race	-0.126 (0.134)	-0.089 (0.145)	-0.130 (0.135)
Income	0.144*** (0.006)	0.141*** (0.007)	0.143*** (0.006)
Constant	-2.149*** (0.301)	-2.021*** (0.304)	-1.401*** (0.308)

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## 9. Conclusion

As the ideological and policy divisions between the Democratic and Republican parties in the United States continue to widen, it becomes increasingly important to assess the impact of such polarization—and the extreme behaviors it may engender—on voter behavior. This study focuses on political participation under the context of growing partisan polarization among contemporary American voters, seeking to answer the question of what drives institutionalized political engagement. Centering on the widely discussed phenomenon of political polarization in recent years, the study aims to clarify its underlying mechanisms in shaping voter turnout. Drawing on multiple waves of national voter survey data from the United States, we construct and test a three-tiered empirical model by incorporating both institutional-level polarization and individual-level policy perception.

At the structural level, we develop a “Candidate Polarization Index” based on the ideological distance between the two major presidential candidates to capture the intensity of institutionalized partisan conflict. Regression results reveal a significant positive relationship between this index and voting behavior: when voters perceive a pronounced ideological gap between candidates, they are more likely to view the electoral outcome as consequential to their interests, thus increasing their willingness to vote.

Further, the study explores whether, in an increasingly polarized environment, it is identification with one’s own party or rejection of the opposing party that more effectively motivates voter participation. Building upon existing polarization and mobilization theories, the study distinguishes between two mechanisms: a “policy congruence mechanism” and an “oppositional rejection mechanism.” Accordingly, we construct two indices: the Policy Congruence Index (*com\_index*), measuring the alignment between voters’ views and their affiliated party’s policy positions; and the Oppositional Rejection Index (*anti\_com\_index*), measuring the divergence between

voters' views and the policy stances of the opposing party. Using a series of logistic regression models with voter turnout as the dependent variable, the study empirically tests these mechanisms.

The results demonstrate that both mechanisms significantly influence political participation. On one hand, voters who perceive stronger alignment with their party's policies are more likely to vote. On the other hand, even in the absence of strong in-party identification, voters who strongly reject the opposing party's positions are also highly motivated to participate. More importantly, interaction analysis indicates that the mobilizing effect of oppositional rejection is statistically stronger than that of policy congruence. This suggests that in the current climate of intensifying polarization, voters are more likely to be driven to vote by a perceived threat posed by the opposing party's platform. This finding not only affirms the central role of "negative partisanship" in contemporary elections but also echoes recent research highlighting the influence of identity politics and emotion-driven engagement on political participation.

Overall, this study advances our understanding of how political polarization translates into individual political action. It demonstrates that polarization does not necessarily lead to political disengagement; on the contrary, it may intensify participation by triggering oppositional sentiments. However, the emotional underpinnings of this form of engagement raise concerns: when political choices are driven more by rejection of "the other" than by trust in "one's own side," the quality of democratic politics may face new challenges. Future research should therefore investigate how negative mobilization influences political trust, the formation of policy preferences, and the long-term health of party systems, in order to comprehensively assess the institutional consequences of polarization.

The findings presented here reveal a critical logic of democratic political mobilization: voters are not necessarily driven by affirmation of democratic ideals or policy platforms, but are often mobilized through perceived threats posed by opposing parties. This insight carries important implications for democratic governance around the world. In an era marked by institutional distrust, weak policy responsiveness, and escalating identity-based conflicts, managing partisan divisions, reactivating civic

participation, and designing institutional mechanisms to prevent negative emotions from spiraling into systemic breakdown have become central challenges for contemporary democratic regimes.

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