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Mass polarisation: identification with parliamentary discourses and psychological factors

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ABSTRACT

Ideological polarisation research has gained prominence due to its growing presence in established democracies and its associated negative consequences. This study aimed to explore the identification with polarised parliamentary discourses in a Portuguese sample and its relationship with psychological factors. Results revealed the absence of mass ideological polarisation and a greater leftist identification. Participants who identified more with the right-wing evidenced greater identity fusion with the country and dogmatism, and less tendency to ruminate and to be verbally aggressive. Participants who identified more with the left-wing showed less identity fusion with the country, less dogmatism and greater capacity for empathy, rumination, tolerance to ambiguity, and verbal aggression. Innovative results were also found on the relationship between greater left-wing identification, identity fusion with the country and verbal aggression.

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Introduction

The phenomenon of ideological polarisation has attracted more scholarly attention in recent years, amid the rise of political populism and extremist behaviour in established democracies. In Europe, radical and/or extremist parties have seen a significant increase in votes over the last decade (Casal Bértoa & Rama, 2021), with Southern far-right parties gaining prominence: the party Brothers of Italy won the last legislative elections, and CHEGA and Vox became the third force in parliament in Portugal and Spain, respectively (see Dennison & Mendes, 2019; Mendes & Dennison, 2021). The European Parliament has also seen Eurosceptic and right-wing political parties garner more votes in recent elections (Petri & Biedenkopf, 2021). Polarised political discourse is also on the rise in several countries, including Portugal, with the most outspoken politicians and activists clustering around the extremes of a given issue (BPI Research, 2019; Lauka et al., 2018; Mclay & Ramos, 2021). This phenomenon is also well documented in the United States of America (US), with studies showing that elected representatives have taken more polarised positions in recent years (Bauer, 2019).

Despite its potential negative consequences for democracy and its association with intergroup hostilities, violence and hate crimes (e.g. Williams & Tzani, 2024), no consensus has been reached regarding polarisation in the general public and how to measure it. Most studies on this topic have been carried out in the US, characterised by a bipartisan system, entailing specific methodological choices for the European multiparty system (Bosco & Verney, 2020; Fischer & Mattson, 2009; Lelkes 2016). Additionally, there has been growing interest in the association between ideological polarisation and individual factors (Eibach, 2021; Jost et al., 2022).

This study aims to assess the degree of identification with polarised parliamentary discourses in a Portuguese sample and to explore the relationship between this degree of identification and psychological factors, specifically emotional regulation (rumination, expressive suppression, cognitive revaluation, aggressivity, tolerance to ambiguity and dogmatism) and perspective-taking (empathy and identity fusion). Given the exploratory nature of this research, our approach was designed to generate initial insights and hypotheses rather than apply or confirm a pre-established model or measure. The Identification with Polarised Parliamentary Discourses Instrument (IPPD) developed in this study was based on an extensive literature review and initial item design aimed at capturing various dimensions of identification. Qualitative utilisation of the IPPDI enabled us to gather rich, in-depth data, revealing patterns and themes in individuals' engagement with polarised discourses. This qualitative exploration provided valuable insights, laying the groundwork for future research and the potential development of a quantitatively validated measure. By exploring the intricate relationship between identification with polarised parliamentary discourses and psychological factors, this study lays the foundation for further investigation.

In the following pages, we begin by situating this study in the relevant literature regarding ideological polarisation and its psychological correlates. We subsequently outline the materials and methods applied in this study and present the results. In the discussion and conclusion that follow, we frame the results in the specific context of the sample and discuss, in the light of relevant literature, the differences found in the psychological factors of individuals who identified more with the polarised right-wing vs. left-wing discourse. We equally present recommendations for future studies that will allow confirming the results of this exploratory study and defining procedures that can be further replicated.

Political ideology and ideological polarisation

Ideology, as a 'set of beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved' (Krouwel et al., 2017, p. 437), tends to regulate a wide range of societal norms and societies' functioning, by relying on assumptions about human relations, historical events and present and future time. Within this broader concept, political ideology can be defined as a common belief and values system related to how individuals and groups interact in their socio-political context that attempts to justify, explain, contest, or change social and/or economic arrangements and policies of a political community (Alves & Porto, 2022; Krouwel et al., 2017).

Political ideology has traditionally been operationalised as a unidimensional variable, along a spectrum that ranges from left- to right-wing or from liberal to conservative,

although several studies have recently argued that measuring political ideology by asking participants to place themselves on this spectrum can be counterproductive if we want to explore individual perspectives (Alves & Porto, 2022; Feldman & Johnston, 2014; Johnston & Ollerenshaw, 2020). The main criticism concerns the fact that it often results in considerable in-group variation since the labels used do not have the same meaning for all individuals. They may represent the current policies defended by the parties, the symbolism associated with the parties or just personal opinions. This approach also disregards the heterogeneity in 'how citizens understand political conflict' (Feldman & Johnston, 2014, p. 2) and its consequences for public policies, especially when referring to social and economic dimensions, which are associated with different motivations, values, and personality traits (Alves & Porto, 2022; Crawford et al., 2017; Feldman & Johnston, 2014). A single left-right dimension may be preferable for studying elites since only sophisticated partisans have the required drive and awareness to align their views with those of political parties (Alves & Porto, 2022; Feldman & Johnston, 2014).

Feldman and Johnston (2014) address these limitations by proposing a model of political ideology in the mass public comprising two dimensions: (1) socio-cultural, concerning state boundaries, traditional values, minority rights issues, social equity; (2) economic, regarding government intervention, redistribution, regulation, wages, and social insurance. This model has been used as a theoretical framework for developing attitudinal ideological measures towards socio-political issues, with results showing that it is more suitable to explain political views in developed countries, including electoral polarisation (Alves & Porto, 2022; Crawford et al., 2017). A two-dimensional model further allows the differentiation of sociodemographic and psychological variables, since both correlates have a distinct impact on economic and sociocultural ideals (Crawford et al., 2017; Feldman & Johnston, 2014; Johnston & Ollerenshaw, 2020).

Polarisation refers to the formation of clusters within society that divide the population into sizeable groups on opposing sides, with the degree of polarisation being measured by the distance, homogeneity, and size of these groups (Reiljan, 2020). Ideological polarisation is one specific dimension of this concept and can be described 'as the extent to which opinions on issues are opposed in relation to some theoretical maximum' (Rekker, 2021, p. 353), resulting in a divergence of political attitudes towards political extremes. Ideological polarisation is researched from different perspectives: elite polarisation, mass ideological polarisation, partisan sorting, affective polarisation, and perceived polarisation (McLay & Ramos, 2021).

Despite the consensus regarding an increase in elite polarisation, the evidence behind a similar development in mass ideological polarisation – i.e. when the public has divergent opinions on ideological matters – is mixed (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; McLay & Ramos, 2021). Elite polarisation occurs when political parties become polarised, which is associated with increasing homogeneity in the political positions taken by partisans (Kubin & von Sikorski 2021; McLay & Ramos, 2021). Elite polarisation may lead to a phenomenon called partisan sorting, which happens through two processes: individuals adjust their views to align with their preferred party's positions or partisans change their party affiliation in response to policy shifts (Adams et al., 2012; McLay & Ramos, 2021). Increased elite polarisation and partisan sorting may contribute to a perceived growth in mass ideological polarisation, even though people's ideological positions have not changed (Lelkes, 2016; McLay & Ramos, 2021). However, it is acknowledged that even if

party supporters/public have not yet moved into polarised extremes their views are becoming less centrist, which seems to indicate a degree of polarisation (Hare & Poole, 2014; McLay & Ramos, 2021).

Most measures of mass ideological polarisation include Likert scales to assess the extent to which people identify as leftists/rightists or their degree of agreement with political issues. Both scenarios are well established since they allow the measurement of ideological distance, cluster analyses and group comparisons. However, positioning on a left-right spectrum is different from positioning on a specific issue, since a person may hold extreme positions in a party system without being ideologically polarised on specific topics, as previously mentioned. Accordingly, direct comparisons between these two types of measures should be cautious (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Torcal & Magalhães, 2022).

Psychological correlates of ideological polarisation

In the context of psychological factors predisposing individuals to extreme ideologies, two hypotheses propose that cognitive rigidity is closely linked to strict adherence to a political ideology. The first hypothesis is the ‘rigidity-of-the-right hypothesis’ (RRH) (Jost et al., 2003), which considers political conservatism a belief system with two central components, resistance to change and opposition to equality (Jost et al., 2007). As a result, people who gravitate towards right-wing/conservative ideologies tend to: (1) be less tolerant of ambiguity, (2) have a greater personal need for order, structure, and closure; (3) see the world as more dangerous; and (4) exhibit a more dogmatic way of thinking (Carney et al., 2008; Jost, Glaser, et al., 2003; Jost, Napier, et al., 2007; Roccato & Russo, 2017). These features are mainly associated with socio-cultural conservatism, with results showing that economic conservatism is not related to the need for structure and dogmatic aggression (Crowson, 2009).

The other hypothesis is the ‘ideological extremity hypothesis’ (IEH) (Greenberg & Jonas, 2003), which postulates that individuals on both political extremes are cognitively more rigid, possess similar levels of dogmatic thinking, prejudice, intolerance to ambiguity, are resistant to change, authoritarian and have a greater fear of uncertainty compared to moderates (Greenberg & Jonas, 2003; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019; Zmigrod, 2019). This hypothesis is complementary to the RRH, since feelings of uncertainty and fear may be greater on the far-right compared to the far-left (van Prooijen et al., 2015). According to IEH, extremists also tend to feel superior about their beliefs, view societal and political issues simplistically, avoid exposure to other opinions and show more distrust towards governmental institutions. Extremists tend to receive selected information from their partisan leaders about socio-political issues, which often leads to the rejection of external information and greater conviction in conspiracy theories (Krouwel et al., 2017; Rekker, 2021; van Prooijen et al., 2018; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). Right-wing extremists are often considered as being more discriminatory towards minorities, but in line with IEH, several studies have shown that both left- and right-wing extremists discriminate against groups ideologically distant from theirs (Brandt et al., 2014; Van Prooijen et al., 2015; Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019; Wetherell, Brandt, & Reyna, 2013). Accordingly, extremists eventually make their environment more ideologically homogeneous leading to a form of group bonding, called identity fusion, a ‘viscerally experienced sense of

shared oneness with a group of individuals who share the same group identity' (Kapitány et al., 2020, p. 3). One consequence of identity fusion is a greater willingness to commit extreme pro-group action, including self-sacrifice (Kapitány et al., 2020; Swann Jr. & Buhrmester, 2015; Weber & Klar, 2019).

Other psychological correlates associated with extreme political ideology are psychological distress and anxiety, with studies showing that negative emotions are present among extremists and that depressive symptoms are associated with authoritarianism – a characteristic shared by extremists –, and that people adopt more extreme ideologies to find a sense of belonging which can mitigate psychological distress (Alizadeh et al., 2019; van Prooijen et al., 2015). Research has also shown that tendencies towards extreme political behaviour are positively associated with a greater need for intense emotional experiences, higher levels of stimulation, impulsivity, and emotional reactivity (Zmigrod & Goldenberg, 2021). Empathy and perspective-taking have also been studied, as they promote more positive interactions between political divides and are negatively correlated with radicalisation (Feddes et al., 2015).

Materials and methods

Participants

Recruitment was carried out via institutional e-mails and social networking sites (e.g. Instagram, Facebook). Data was collected from 212 Portuguese participants ($M_{age} = 31.89$; $SD = 12.94$, see Table 1).

Materials

Sociodemographic questionnaire

The sociodemographic questionnaire included the information strictly necessary – sex, age, region of residence, level of education, and professional activity. Also included was the Graffar Index, an international social ranking based on five criteria – two regarding the family member with the higher salary (profession, level of education) and three about the family's sources of income, housing characteristics, and neighbourhood features. Each criterion is assigned a score, and the sum results in a final score corresponding to the family's social class: class I (high class, between 5 and 9 points); class II (upper middle class, between 10 and 13 points); class III (middle class, between 14 and 17 points); class IV (lower middle class, between 18 and 21 points); class V (lower class, between 22 and 25 points).

Identification with Polarised Parliamentary Discourse Inventory (IPPD)

The degree of identification with excerpts of ideologically polarised parliamentary discourses was assessed through the IPPDI (available upon request), which was created in the context of this exploratory study (its detailed characterisation appears below in the results section). This self-report questionnaire was with 10 items, assessed on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). Participants were instructed to express their agreement level with the entire sentence. The option 'I don't know/I don't have a definite idea' was available (coded as null). Items 2, 4, 5, 7 and 8 were

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the sample.

	Sample (N = 212)	N	%
Sex	Male	90	(42.45)
	Female	122	(57.55)
Age group	18–25	101	(47.64)
	26–35	35	(16.51)
	36–45	34	(16.04)
	46–55	29	(13.68)
	56–65	11	(5.19)
	66–75	2	(0.94)
Level of Education	<9th	2	(0.94)
	12th	65	(30.66)
	Bachelor's degree	1	(0.47)
	Undergraduate degree	79	(37.26)
	Master's degree	54	(25.47)
	Doctorate	11	(5.19)
Region of residence	North	40	(18.89)
	Centre	82	(38.68)
	Metropolitan Area of Lisbon (MLA)	34	(16.04)
	Alentejo	7	(3.30)
	Algarve	8	(3.77)
	Autonomous Region of Madeira (ARM)	4	(1.89)
Professional activity	Autonomous Region of Azores (ARA)	37	(17.45)
	No profession	30	(14.15)
	In formation	54	(25.47)
	Part-time job	11	(5.19)
	Full time job	109	(51.42)
	Unemployed	3	(1.42)
Type of professional activity	Retired	2	(0.94)
	Other	3	(1.42)
	Operative	3	(1.42)
	Artisan/ Merchant	4	(1.89)
	Office worker	52	(24.53)
	Hired/ Liberal profession	61	(28.77)
Social class	Student	89	(17.38)
	Other	3	(1.42)
	High class	80	(37.74)
	High middle class	91	(42.92)
	Middle class	37	(17.45)
	Low middle class	4	(1.89)
	Low class	0	0

based on right-wing parliamentary discourses and items 1, 3, 6, 9 and 10 were based on left-wing parliamentary discourses.

Ruminative Responses Scale (RRS-10)

The RRS-10 (Treyner et al., 2003; Portuguese version by Dinis et al., 2011) is a self-report questionnaire composed of 10 items, assessed on a 4-point Likert scale, varying from 0 (almost never) to 3 (almost always), grouped into two five-items subscales: reflection subscale (cut-off: $M = 2.10$; $SD = 0.61$) and brooding subscale (cut-off point: $M = 2.26$; $SD = 0.61$). Higher scores indicate a stronger tendency to ruminate.

Multiple Stimulus Types Ambiguity Tolerance (MSTAT-I)

The MSTAT-I (McLain, 1993; Portuguese translation by Magalhães, 2017) is a self-report questionnaire that assesses the ability to tolerate ambiguity and includes 22 items

answered on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). Higher scores indicate higher ability to tolerate ambiguity.

Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ)

The ERQ (Gross & John, 2003; Portuguese Version by Vaz et al., 2008), a self-report questionnaire that includes 10 items evaluated on a 7-point Likert scale varying from 1 (Totally disagree) to 7 (Totally agree), provides scores on two dimensions of emotion regulation: cognitive reappraisal (6 items) and expressive suppression (4 items). High scores on each subscale indicate a greater tendency to use that specific emotion regulation strategy.

Verbal Fusion Scale (VFS)

VFS (Gómez et al., 2011; Portuguese translation by Silva et al., 2020) assesses feelings of attachment to a group and reciprocal strength theoretically associated with fusion with one's country, through seven items evaluated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate a greater tendency to have high levels of fusion.

Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI)

IRI (Davis, 1983; Portuguese version by Limpo et al., 2010) evaluates the cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy. It comprises 24 items, assessed on a Likert scale ranging from 0 (doesn't describe me well) to 4 (describes me very well), divided in four subscales, each containing six items: perspective-taking, empathic concern, personal distress, and fantasy. The cognitive dimension of empathy is evaluated by the perspective-taking subscale, the remaining subscales assess the affective dimension. Higher scores indicate higher levels of empathy.

Dogmatism Scale (DOGS)

The DOGS (Altemeyer, 2002; Portuguese translation by Magalhães, 2017) is a measure of general dogmatism composed of 22 items (two are practice items), answered on a Stapel Scale ranging from -4 (totally disagree) to +4 (totally agree). A higher global score indicates a higher level of dogmatism.

Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire-Short Form (BPAQ-SF)

The BPAQ-SF (Bryant, & Smith, 2001; Portuguese Version by Cunha et al., 2022) is a self-report questionnaire that measures aggression, where participants indicate the frequency of occurrence of each of the 12 items using a 5-point ordinal Likert scale ranging from 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (always or almost always). The BPAQ-SF is organised into four scales: physical aggression and verbal aggression, which represent; anger and hostility. A higher score on each scale indicates a higher level of each form of aggression.

Procedure

Publicly available transcripts of the Portuguese parliament (Assembleia da República, n.d.) were used to extract highly polarised expressions. The nine parties represented in Portuguese parliament for the XIV legislature (PS, PSD, BE, PCP, CDS- PP, PAN, PEV, CHEGA, IL) were considered, and the sorting into right- and left-wing ideologies followed both the

literature (Guedes, 2016) and parties' vision in their official websites. Transcripts from independent politicians were not considered.

The approach for measuring political polarisation in parliamentary discourses was based on a quantitative text analysis model, tested in parliament discourse analysis for partisanship and political polarisation (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010; Gentzkow et al., 2019; Jensen et al., 2012), with careful validation and testing in google books data. This model followed three steps: (1) data processing involved transforming words into trigrams using the stemming porter technique, which uses the words' root (e.g. 'capit; instead of 'capitalism' or 'capitalist'), taking into account the order in which each term appears (e.g. 'reduc.tax.people'); (2) partisanship and polarisation measurements were taken from word frequency (we looked for terms that were only mentioned by the right and not the left, and vice-versa, as this model assumes that polarisation happens when a topic is not discussed by both ideological fronts), using the Maximum Likelihood Estimation (MLE) to estimate both measurements and by adopting a Poisson distribution of words to avoid the bias in finite samples MLE can have; (3) 200 trigrams with maximum and 200 trigrams with minimum values of polarisation were extracted, creating the final database of the 400 most mentioned polarised expressions in the right (maximum) and left (minimum) poles.

Within the 200 expressions belonging to each pole, those repeated more than three times were analysed. The parliamentary sessions in which they were included were read in full to decide their suitability and relevance. The final set of polarised expressions was chosen and organised according to relevant national and international literature. Other sources that informed our final set of items included a questionnaire used in a similar study, which also considered sociocultural and economic dimensions (McLay & Ramos, 2021), and a selection made by the national newspaper Público regarding salient polarised ideological themes in the context of the Portuguese legislative elections of 2022 (Barros et al., 2022). The final 10 excerpts included in the inventory – five from the right pole and five from the left pole – cover a broad range of salient socio-cultural and economic political issues such as euthanasia, access to health care, state intervention, minimum wage, European Union, bullfighting, support for the welfare state and education.

Data was collected through the University of Aveiro's online platform between July 1 and September 26, 2022. Participants accessed the link, and if they met the inclusion criteria – (a) age over 18 years old, (b) Portuguese nationality, and (c) Portuguese as their native language – they signed the informed consent and completed the research protocol. This study was approved by the Ethics and Deontology Council of the University of Aveiro (reference number 36-CED/2022).

Results

Descriptive statistics of IPPDI items

Item number one had the highest level of agreement (97.7%, composed of 68.9% of participants who totally agreed and 28.8% who agreed). Item number seven was the one with the higher degree of disagreement (67.9%, 45.3% totally disagreed and 22.6% disagreed). Item number two was the one with the higher level of uncertainty (19.8%

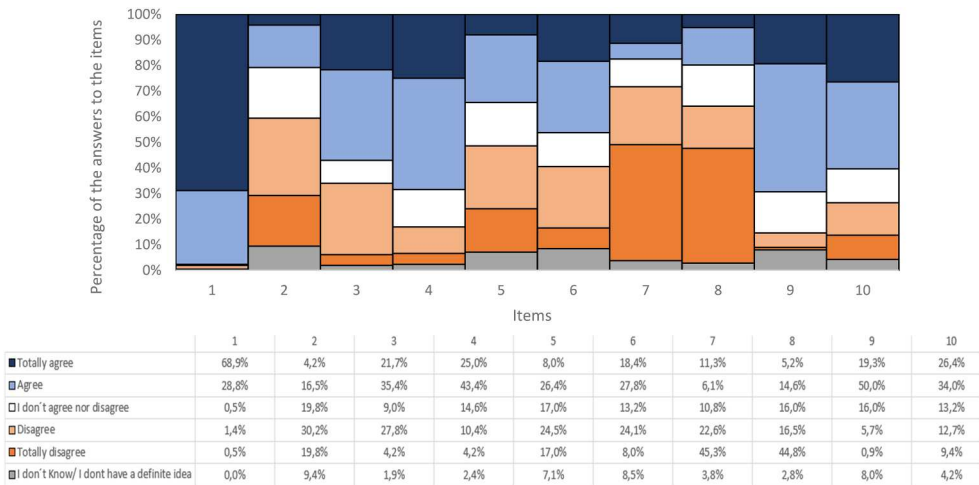


Figure 1. Frequencies of the answers to each item.

opted for 'I don't know/I don't have a definite idea', and 9.4% for 'I don't agree nor disagree') (see [Figure 1](#)).

Factorial structure of IPPDI

The exploratory analysis revealed the emergence of four factors (Table 2): factor 1 grouped three items corresponding to an identification with right-wing ideology; factor 2 grouped two items corresponding to an identification with left-wing ideology; factor 3 grouped three items considered more disruptive in the sphere of political discussion and their positioning will be more related to personal experience and values rather than just political ideology; only item included in factor 4 can be related to a more centrist ideological position. These results indicate that a left- and right-wing score could not be reliably measured by the sum of the items representing right (2, 4, 5, 7, 8) or left (1, 3, 6, 9, 10) ideology or that the scale could be divided in right and left.

IPPDl scales: left and right identification scales

Given the results of the factor structure analysis and the conceptual definition of political polarisation considered for this study, two scales were calculated: 'Left Identification Scale' (LeftIS) and 'Right Identification Scale' (RightIS). The LeftIS includes the 'extreme polarisation to the Left' and the 'moderate polarisation to the Left' subscales. The RightIS includes the 'extreme polarisation to the Right' and 'moderate polarisation to

Table 2. Exploratory factor analysis.

[illegible]

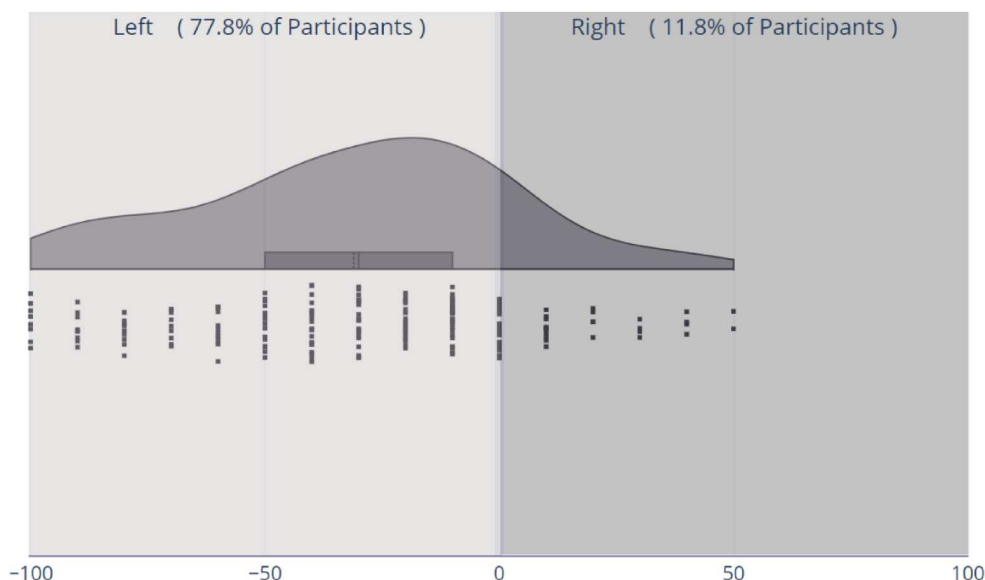


Figure 2. Distribution of scores from the ‘Political Identification Distribution’.

the Right’ subscales. To calculate the score for the LeftIS, the following steps were performed: (1) each answer 5 (‘totally agree’) to the items regarding left-wing was coded as 1 and any other response was coded as 0, and each answer 1 (‘totally disagree’) to the items regarding right-wing was coded as 1 and any other response was coded as 0 (these answers correspond to the ‘extreme polarisation to the Left’ subscale); (2) each answer 4 (‘agree’) to the items regarding left-wing, and each answer 2 (‘disagree’) to the items regarding right-wing were coded as 1, and any other response was coded as 0 (these answers correspond to the ‘moderate polarisation to the Left’ subscale); (3) all scores were added up, and the final result was multiplied by 10 and divided by 100. As a result, the LeftIS represents the proportion of affirmations in which the participant identified with the left-wing ideology. The same procedure was applied in reverse to calculate the score for the RightIS.

To explore the general trend of the sample regarding ideological polarisation, the RightIS was subtracted from the LeftIS to obtain the ‘Political Identification Distribution’ (PID) (Figure 2). The sample mean was -31 , indicating a left-wing tendency. The scores presented a left-skewed normal distribution since the distribution is not centred around the mid-point.

LeftIS vs. RightIS, and psychological factors

To assess the relationship between identification with polarised parliamentary discourses and psychological self-report measures, we decided to perform the analyses considering the LeftIS vs. RightIS. A significant correlation was found between Identity Fusion (VFS) and both the RightIS ($r = .184, p < .01$) and the LeftIS ($r = -.161, p < .05$). A significant positive correlation was also found between the Empathic Concern subscale (IRI) and the LeftIS ($r = .139, p < .05$). The Brooding and Reflection subscales (RRS-10) correlated

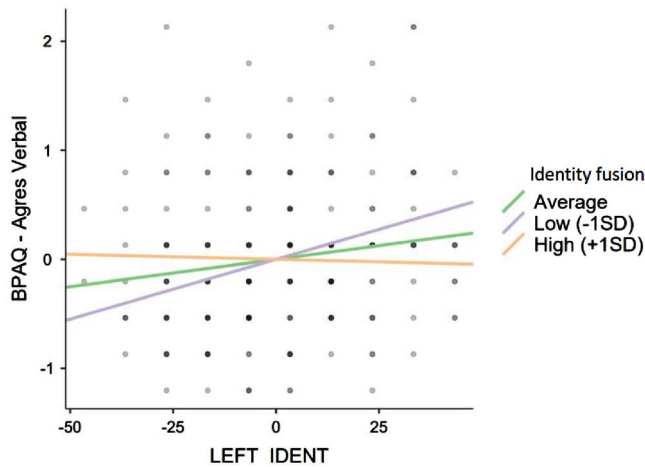


Figure 3. Schematic representation of the moderation analysis.

significantly with the LeftIS ($r = .0176, p = .01$; $r = .185, p < .01$, respectively), and in the opposite direction with the RightIS ($r = -.141, p < .05$; $r = -.179, p < .01$). A significant positive correlation was also found between the Tolerance to Ambiguity (MSTA-I) and the LeftIS ($r = .168, p < .05$). Dogmatism (DOGS) was significantly correlated with both LeftIS ($r = -.183, p < .01$) and RightIS ($r = .135, p < .05$). Finally, the results also showed a significant positive correlation between the Verbal aggression subscale and LeftIS ($r = .161, p < .05$) and a significant negative correlation with the RightIS ($r = -.173, p = .01$).

To further explore the unexpected result regarding the positive correlation between Verbal aggression and the LeftIS, we tested several moderators. Identity Fusion (VFS) was revealed to be a moderator of the relation between 'Verbal Aggression' (BPAQ-SF) and LIS scores ($b = -.005, z = -2.443, p = .015$). This result indicates that a decrease in Identity Fusion strengthens the relationship between 'Verbal aggression' and LeftIS scores (Figure 3).

Discussion

This study addressed the phenomenon of ideological polarisation in a Portuguese sample, introducing a new instrument of assessing the identification with polarised parliamentary discourse and explored its relationship with psychological factors. A close to normal left-skewed distribution of the scores of the IPPDI was obtained, rather than a bimodal one with clusters at the extremes that would imply ideological polarisation. This distribution may reflect Portugal's recent democratic history, which followed a long dictatorship (1926–1974) and only as recently as 2019 saw a far-right party, CHEGA, enter parliament. Furthermore, our sample's preference for left-wing ideals aligned with the then composition of Portugal's parliament, where PS – a left-centrist party – held an absolute majority, and left-wing parties retained most seats.

The analysis of the IPPDI items revealed that our sample is favourable towards equal healthcare access for immigrants and people in an irregular situation, and favoured euthanasia over palliative care (items with higher values). Democratic societies tend to be more

accepting and tolerant of immigrants, and despite Portugal being a relatively recent democracy, 75% of the Portuguese population believes that immigrants deserve the same rights as Portuguese people abroad (Lages et al., 2006; Nascimento, 2018). Furthermore, most people in this study were between 18 and 46, and younger people tend to be more tolerant, inclusive, and less discriminatory towards immigrants (Nascimento, 2018). Considering euthanasia, despite the history of disagreements, overall approval has been increasing, with most parties supporting its legalisation in Portugal (Santo, 2020). Additionally, people with higher levels of education tend to have more liberal opinions about sociocultural issues. Since most of our sample has, at least, a college degree, we would expect greater tolerance and acceptance of immigrants and support for the right to euthanasia (Barnett et al., 2020; Bulmer et al., 2017; Lages et al., 2006; Nascimento, 2018). The item in which participants revealed a greater lack of knowledge and/or uncertainty was related to the social housing system. In Portugal, housing policy has been a marginal issue in terms of the welfare system, which leads to reduced and irregular promotion of social housing, often restricted to the major cities (i.e. Lisbon and Porto) (Abreu, 2021). Furthermore, there was greater uncertainty in items related to the economic dimension, which is congruent with the fact that Portugal ranks last in financial literacy among the 19 Eurozone countries, indicating that investment in this area is essential (Lusa, 2022). Those who uphold a greater need for certainty and security tend to identify more with the right-wing, since it promises certainty in a way that the left-wing does not (Costello et al., 2022). The RRH emerges in this context, postulating the presence of a positive correlation between right-wing identification and psychological rigidity. Research has shown that people who endorse extreme right attitudes tend to be less tolerant to ambiguity and to rank higher on general dogmatism, suggesting a psychological disposition towards dogmatism or a motivation to perceive themselves as dogmatic, especially regarding socio-cultural issues (Costello & Bowes, 2023; Crownson, 2009; Van Hiel et al., 2016). Considering the positive significant correlation found between the MSTAT-I scores, the LIS scores, and the correlations between the 'Dogmatism Scale' and the LIS and RIS scores, our results seem to support the RRH. Although not significant, a negative correlation between RIS scores and MSTAT-I scores was found, further reinforcing the RRH. Our study used scales that align with the Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale (RWA) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), both common measures used in studies examining authoritarianism and ideological rigidity. These scales measure related constructs, such as a preference for hierarchical social systems (SDO) and a desire for social order (RWA). Both constructs are linked to psychological rigidity and intolerance for ambiguity and are well-established predictors of right-wing identification (Altemeyer, 2002; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), as we showed. Our results are in line with those found in studies in Eastern and Western European post-communist countries, which show that right-wing supporters often score higher on measures of dogmatism and authoritarianism (by using the Need for Closure Scale), reflecting a preference for social order and cognitive closure (Kossowska & Van Hiel, 2003). This parallels our findings of a positive correlation between right-wing identification and higher scores on the Dogmatism Scale.

Our results also revealed that the more people identified with the left-wing, the more they experience feelings of compassion and concern for others' welfare, a key component of empathy (Morris, 2020). This coincides with widely replicated results that argue that an individual's ability to experience empathy correlates with their political ideology, with a

greater tendency for those who identify with a left-wing ideology to be more empathetic (Hill et al., 2022; Sidanius et al. 2013). Several aspects may contribute to this correlation. Leftists' policy preferences are motivated by the well-being of disadvantaged groups, with research showing that higher scores on the IRI correlate positively with support for government intervention in social welfare, after controlling for sociodemographic factors (Morris, 2020). Leftists tend to focus on the principles of equality and care and attribute external causes to people's social and economic situation, while right-wingers prioritise individual responsibility, attributing internal causes to people's difficulties (Hill et al., 2022; Morris, 2020). Moreover, our findings align with existing research that highlights differences in empathy levels between liberals and conservatives. Studies indicate that liberals generally report a stronger desire to experience empathy and tend to exhibit higher levels of it compared to conservatives. For instance, one study measuring empathy alongside other psychological variables found that liberals in the U.S., Germany, and Israel were more inclined to help others (Hasson et al., 2018). However, both liberals and conservatives demonstrated reduced empathy towards outgroup members compared to ingroup or ideologically neutral individuals, suggesting that empathy is influenced by group affiliations. Interestingly, despite these associations, behavioural patterns do not always align with empathetic tendencies. Research shows that right-leaning and religious individuals are more likely to donate a larger portion of their income to alleviate human suffering, particularly through efforts to reduce poverty. In contrast, liberals often extend their moral concerns beyond their immediate community, encompassing global issues, environmental concerns, future trends, and even historical injustices (al-Gharbi, 2023).

Differences were also found in using maladaptive emotion self-regulation strategies, namely rumination. Self-regulation corresponds to the ability to take self-corrective actions to adapt to the environment and to move towards a desired ending. Such ability is an important factor in an individual's subjective well-being. Rumination, specifically, can be described as a pathological mechanism of repetitive thinking centred on the causes and consequences of negative emotions, experiences, and mood (Aldao et al., 2010). In this study, leftists revealed a significantly greater tendency to ruminate. Previous studies have shown that right-wing ideological positioning is beneficial for a person's subjective wellbeing (Napier & Jost, 2008). Despite that in left-governed countries citizens usually have greater access to healthcare and social services, at a personal level those who identify with a right-wing ideology, score higher on measures of subjective well-being (Briki & Dagot, 2022). This can be because leftists are more likely to ruminate on social inequalities and this tendency to ruminate is positively associated with neuroticism and negative emotions, while right-wing supporters have a greater capability to adjust to their social environments and to rationalise inequality, protecting them from psychological distress (Briki & Dagot, 2022; Napier & Jost 2008). People who tend to ruminate often remain fixated on negative thoughts. Research consistently shows that individuals who identify with liberal ideologies are more likely to experience higher levels of depression, with rumination playing a significant role, as well as anxiety and neuroticism. Moreover, compared to conservatives, liberals are more likely to find meaning in life through political causes or activism, leading to greater political engagement as well as more rumination about these issues. However, closely following politics and regular involvement in political activism have

been linked to negative impacts on both mental and physical well-being (Napier & Jost, 2008; al-Gharbi, 2023). Nevertheless, it is important to mention that although our results seem to be in line with what has been mentioned in the literature, this study has a highly exploratory character, therefore several other factors could be explaining the greater tendency to ruminate or the results found in other psychological factors were not addressed.

A significant positive correlation between identity fusion and identification with the right-wing was found, and a significant negative correlation between identity fusion and identification with the left-wing. When a person is strongly fused to their group, there is greater proximity or overlap between their personal and social identity which is associated with pro-group action (Buhrmester et al., 2018). Identity fusion can happen concerning our nationality and lead to nationalism, playing an important role in voting choices and political engagement, which is based on strict ideas about what is part of a nation and its culture, reflecting the presence of cognitive rigidity and inflexibility, which is associated with right-wing ideology (Ding & Halvac, 2017; Santana, 2021). Our results seem to reinforce this link.

A novel result was that the more participants identified with left-wing items, the higher their scores on the verbal aggression scale. Costello et al. (2022) argued that left-wing authoritarians who endorse the overthrow of conservative/ right-wing government and the submission to group or party leaders show a pervasive pattern of behavioural aggression. Additionally, in Southern European countries, left-wing citizens are more prone to protest, than right-wing citizens, which could also explain a higher level of verbal aggression (Borbáth & Gessler, 2020). There are several justifications for this phenomenon. First, the willingness to protest is positively associated with several personal aspects such as union membership, party identification, being male and younger, education, the size of the municipality, and right-wing governments. Since our sample is mostly constituted of younger and highly educated participants, demographic factors associated with a more leftist ideological positioning, a greater willingness to protest could be expected (Borbáth & Gessler, 2020). Second, sociocultural liberalism, which embraces issues such as civil rights and tolerance of minorities and values authority-challenging actions, associated with left-wing in Portugal, is conceptually linked to protesting (Kostelka & Rovny, 2019). Also, it has been shown that, in Europe, supporters of the left have greater affective polarisation than those on the right, which means that they are more prone to see their beliefs as indisputable and so more willing to defend them (Herold, et al. 2023). Finally, the exposure to right-wing authoritarianism in Southern Europe, exemplified by the dictatorial Estado Novo regime in Portugal, is linked to the mobilisation of protests, especially by the left-wing (da Silva & Ferreira, 2020).

Our moderation analyses revealed that a decrease in identity fusion towards the country strengthens the positive relation between verbal aggression and LeftIS scores. This is a curious result since stronger identity fusion is usually associated with radical and violent pro-group behaviour (Gómez et al., 2011). Notwithstanding, Kunst et al. (2018) using the VFS with the items changed so they were framed for oppressed out-groups, demonstrated that leftists are more likely to fuse with oppressed and maltreated out-groups and, in this context, are more prepared to participate in non-normative extreme protests.

Conclusion

Despite the growing presence of extreme views and polarised parliamentary discourse in Portugal, no evidence for mass ideological polarisation was found in our sample. Nevertheless, this study highlighted psychological differences between those who identify more with the left or with the right. The results reinforced the RRH approach and indicated that those who identify more with the left tend to be more emphatic and less fused with their country, in line with previous literature. The results showed an intriguing result concerning the interaction between identifying with the left, identity fusion and verbal aggression, indicating a greater propensity for leftists to identify with out-groups rather than their country.

This study has several limitations. Our sample was not only not representative of the broader Portuguese population, but it also had an unbalanced number of participants in several variables (e.g. region of residence, social class, professional activity). Recruitment through institutional emails and social media platforms may have introduced systematic biases, potentially skewing participant demographics and perspectives. Specifically, this method may overrepresent individuals with higher educational attainment and internet access, while underrepresenting those without such access. Future studies aimed at exploring the role of sociodemographic factors must achieve a more representative sample of the Portuguese population.

The instrument presented in this study to explore the degree of identification with polarised parliamentary discourses was developed using a quantitative text analysis model based on parliamentary discourse. This model allowed us to identify polarised expressions directly from parliamentary debates, which represent political actors' positions in the decision-making centre, minimising media distortion. We combined these expressions with key ideological themes from the Portuguese legislative elections, as highlighted in national media. This procedure serves as a robust and adaptable method, offering the flexibility to tailor the instrument to other cultural and linguistic contexts. The interesting results of this study seem to point to the potential of this instrument but a validation study is required to substantiate these preliminary findings.

Additionally, other factors of interest that may play an important role in the formation and experience of polarised political attitudes and extreme behaviour, such as religion, political involvement, personality factors, partisan identification, and social media's influence should be explored. While we did not focus specifically on affective or perceived polarisation, our findings seem to have potential implications for these dimensions.

Future research should explore the prevalence and correlates of affective polarisation (i.e. negative feelings towards the opposing side) and perceived polarisation (i.e. the extent to which people perceive society as polarised) and their interaction with mass ideological polarisation. Furthermore, this study was conducted solely in a small Portuguese sample, so the results can only claim to be valid in this context for the time being. Future research should aim to replicate and validate these findings in different cultural and political settings to establish their generalisability.

We consider that our findings can generate interest and discussion both among academics and practitioners. For academics, this study contributes to fostering greater discussion among researchers and deepening the understanding of how to conceptualise and measure ideological polarisation. Our findings encourage further investigation into

the psychological underpinnings of political ideology and their manifestations in different contexts. For practitioners, the results emphasise the importance of making polarised parliamentary discourse accessible to the public. This transparency could enhance self-reflection among individuals regarding their identification with such discourses, potentially fostering a more critical and introspective approach to political beliefs. Additionally, understanding the psychological factors that influence ideological adherence can inform the development and implementation of educational and community programmes aimed at reducing and preventing polarisation. These programmes could empower individuals and communities to recognise and mitigate the effects of polarised thinking and behaviour, promoting a more cohesive and tolerant society.

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