

Living in a Bubble: Students’ Experiences of Affective Polarization

A Two-Case Interview Study of Students in
Lund and Freiburg



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Abstract

In recent years, affective polarization has become an increasingly prominent topic in political science research due to growing interest in the emotional dimensions of political division and their implications for democracies. Affective polarization refers to a form of political polarization, where individuals feel positively toward their own political group and negatively toward the opposing political group. Despite growing research on affective polarization, qualitative research on its manifestation within multiparty contexts remains limited. This thesis is a qualitative two-case study based on semi-structured interviews with higher education students in Freiburg and Lund, examining how they experience affective polarization in everyday life. The theoretical framework draws on middle-range theoretical insights from affective polarization, negative partisanship, social sorting, and moral division. Our findings suggest that higher education students in Lund and Freiburg experience AP in interpersonal relationships through a politically homogeneous social environment, setting boundaries toward the out-group, and using apolitical cues to infer political affiliation in everyday life.

Key words: Affective Polarization, Multiparty Systems, Higher Education Students, Sweden, Germany

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1 Introduction

Affective polarization (AP) has increasingly attracted scholarly attention, due to its implications for democratic stability. In particular, it leads to reduced trust in democratic institutions, increases the risk of political violence, and weakens democratic and electoral accountability (Bakker & Lelkes, 2024; Iyengar et al., 2012). By conceptualizing AP Iyengar et al. (2012) introduced an alternative way to understanding political polarization, which has mainly been understood through ideological polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012; Reiljan, 2020). In contrast, AP refers to the phenomenon in which partisans feel positive affect toward their own political affiliation (in-group favourism), while simultaneously feeling negative affect toward individuals outside their own political affiliation (out-group animus) (Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar & Wagner, 2025; Wagner, 2021). In-group refers to the party or camp and its supporters an individual identifies with, whereas out-group refers to the party or camp and its supporters an individual does not identify with (Iyengar et al., 2012; Wagner, 2021). Rooted in Social Identity Theory, political affiliation can become part of individuals' social identity, leading people to evaluate their own political group more positively and the opposing group more negatively (Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Turner, 1999).

Furthermore, academic literature has mainly focused on studying AP within the context of the United States (U.S.) (e.g. Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2016). However, academic research suggests that the U.S. is not unique in its levels of AP compared to some European countries and other multiparty democracies (Gidron et al., 2020; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021). Nevertheless, literature on AP in multiparty systems and how it functions outside a two-party context remains limited. This research gap is further reinforced by the limited research exploring AP through qualitative methodologies.

1.1 Research Aim & Research Question

Our research aims to explore how AP is experienced in everyday life through a qualitative two-case study, based on semi-structured interviews with higher education students in Lund, Sweden and Freiburg, Germany. This study departs from an international development approach, which focuses primarily on the Global South. Instead, it adopts a global development approach that conceptualizes development through universal issues related to the Sustainable Development Goals (Horner & Hulme, 2019).

AP has a harmful impact on democratic stability, as it influences interpersonal relations in ways that may foster social division. Furthermore, AP can undermine social cohesion by reducing trust between citizens and limiting political conversations across political divides (Torcal et al., 2025). Additionally, AP reduces trust in democratic institutions and weakens democratic and electoral accountability (Bakker & Lelkes, 2024; Iyengar et al., 2012). Therefore, AP poses a challenge to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (SDG 16), as it threatens both formal and informal democratic institutions. By focusing on how AP is experienced in interpersonal relations, this study contributes to global development studies.

Filling this research gap could add knowledge to how individuals experience AP in everyday life in multiparty countries, specifically by addressing an empirical gap through a comparative study of Germany and Sweden. Given the harmful impact of AP on democracies and social cohesion, understanding how AP is experienced becomes highly important, as it may generate new ways of understanding this phenomenon and deepen knowledge on how people construct meaning around politics (Röllicke, 2025). These insights could offer new ways of approaching AP, enabling multiparty systems to reach SDG 16. Therefore, the research question is the following:

How do students enrolled in higher education in Lund and Freiburg experience affective polarization in their everyday life?

1.2 Roadmap

The first chapter introduces the setting of our cases: Lund and Freiburg. It then reviews previous research on AP, covering broader trends of AP and how political division is experienced in everyday life, followed by a review of the literature on AP in our two cases and a presentation of our contribution to the state of the art. The second chapter presents our theoretical framework, using AP as an overarching phenomenon, with negative partisanship, social sorting and moral divisions as key mechanisms. The third chapter outlines our interpretivist qualitative two-case study design, including the interview guide, data analysis, sample selection, and case justification, while also discussing limitations and ethical considerations. The fourth chapter presents our findings and compares them to previous literature. The findings are divided into three themes: political homogeneity in social environments, interpersonal boundaries toward the out-group, and politics in everyday life.

2 Background & Literature Review

The background chapter first outlines the setting of our cases, emphasizing voting statistics, location, and the university environment. The chapter then reviews prior research on AP, beginning with broader trends before moving to a discussion of how political division is experienced in everyday life. Finally, the chapter reviews the literature on AP in our two cases before presenting our contribution to the state of art.

2.1 Lund, Sweden

Lund is a university city located close to the border with Denmark, with a population of approximately 132, 000 inhabitants (in 2024) (Lunds kommun, 2025). Lund University, located in Lund, has around 46 000 students, of whom 31% are international students (Lund University, 2026a). Lund University offers some of the most competitive university programs in Sweden and is known for its large student social life (Universitets- och högskolerådet, 2025; Lund University, 2026b). Before the 2022 election, the student newspaper “Lundagård” conducted a voting survey among Swedish students at Lund University. The majority of students voted for red-green parties (63%) (Källström et al., 2022). Vänsterpartiet (the Left Party) was the largest party in the survey, receiving 23% of the votes. It is the furthest party to the left on the left-right scale.

2.2 Freiburg, Germany

Freiburg im Breisgau is one of the oldest university cities in Germany. It is located in the southwest of the country in the state of Baden-Württemberg, close

to the borders with France and Switzerland. The city has approximately 234,000 inhabitants, including around 33,000 students, of whom 15% are international students (Stadt Freiburg im Breisgau, 2024; Stadt Freiburg im Breisgau, n.d.a; Stadt Freiburg im Breisgau, n.d.b). Politically, Freiburg is considered a green, progressive city. In the 2021 federal election, the Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Green Party) received 36% of the vote, falling to 30.2% in the most recent federal election in 2025. Die Linke (The Left Party) saw the greatest increase in Freiburg, rising from 8.4% in 2021 to 16.9% in the 2025 federal election. The far-right Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany) also gained significant support in Freiburg, rising from 4.4% in 2021 to 8.8% in 2025. Yet, Freiburg's vote share remained below the nationwide result of 20.8% for the Alternative for Germany in the 2025 federal election (Haußmann et al., 2025).

2.3 Affective Polarization in Multiparty Systems

The phenomenon of AP emerged from research in the U.S. and has primarily been studied within the context of the U.S. two-party system e.g. (Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2016). Early research on AP primarily emphasized hostility toward the political out-group as the key dimension of polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar & Wagner, 2025). However, there is an ongoing debate in the literature on AP about whether out-group animosity is driven by positive partisanship (party identification), which has also contributed to the lack of a fully agreed conceptualization of AP. One strand of research argues that out-group animosity requires strong positive partisanship and a perceived threat to the in-group's status (e.g. Mason, 2018; Mason & Luca Versteegen, 2025). In this view, AP is rooted in strong in-group identification, which then generates negative evaluations of the political out-group. However, this assumption has been increasingly questioned. Several studies argue that strong positive partisanship is not a necessary condition for the emergence of out-group hostility (Abramowitz & Webster, 2018; Gidron et al., 2020; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Maes et al., 2024; Röllicke, 2023). This critique is particularly relevant in European multiparty systems. Research shows that positive

partisanship is generally weaker and has been declining across Europe, while negative partisanship (political identity rooted in opposition) is more widespread (Russo & Areal, 2025).

Studies from Italy and Germany show that negative partisanship is a stronger driver of AP than positive partisanship (Russo & Areal, 2025). Simultaneously, there is strong and stable hostility toward certain political out-groups, particularly radical right parties (Iyengar & Wagner, 2025). Consequently, some research on multiparty systems focuses primarily on out-group animosity as the key indicator of AP, rather than relying on a balance between positive and negative evaluations (Gidron et al., 2020; Röllicke, 2023). Some scholars further highlight that political identity in Europe cannot be reduced to partisanship alone. Instead, partisan identity is intertwined with ideological orientation, such as left-right or progressive-conservative divides (Bankert & Stone, 2025; Russo & Areal, 2025). Accordingly, voters in multiparty systems may hold positive evaluations of multiple ideologically proximate parties while expressing more negative affect toward ideologically distant ones (Turkenburg & Van Erkel, 2025; Wagner 2021). Across multiple European cases, studies consistently find that out-party evaluations become more negative as ideological distance increases, while closer parties are evaluated more neutrally or positively (Harteveld, 2021; Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Reiljan & Ryan, 2021; Van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022). Building on this, Wagner (2021) conceptualizes AP in multiparty systems in terms of two opposing camps or ideological blocs, each consisting of one or more parties.

Importantly, comparative research further shows that AP is not unique to the U.S. but also widespread across Europe. However, in comparison to the U.S., research on AP in European multiparty systems remains limited. Yet, existing studies find that many European countries exhibit higher levels of AP than the U.S. (Gidron et al., 2020; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021). Although Gidron et al. (2020) note that the U.S. has experienced a more rapid increase in partisan animosity than most other Western democracies. At the same time, empirical evidence consistently confirms the presence of AP across Europe, while also highlighting cross-national variation in its intensity (Reiljan, 2020, 2025).

2.4 Experience of Political Division in Everyday life

There is limited research on how AP impacts the nonpolitical sphere in multiparty systems. Therefore, this section addresses how political affiliation and identity influence non-political decisions and spheres in everyday life. The section first explores how AP impacts interpersonal relationships in the U.S. and multiparty systems, before ending with a discussion on apolitical cues.

Iyengar et al (2019) argue that partisanship increasingly signals core values and worldviews in the U.S. and is used to screen for long-term romantic partners. Additionally, Americans showed marked reluctance toward having cross-partisan friendships or children-in-law (Iyengar et al., 2012). To determine whether these findings were indicative of behavior beyond the study, Huber and Malhotra (2017) expanded on this research and found that political sorting occurs in early stages of online dating, meaning that political choice homophily (“a preference for those who are politically similar”) is a source of political homogeneity in romantic relationships (Huber & Malhotra, 2017, p.269). These findings align with previous research arguing that people choose to have politically similar relationships, rather becoming politically similar over time (Alford et al., 2011; Klofstad et al., 2013). Furthermore, Orth & Joyner (2025) argue that unmarried young adults between the ages 18 and 35 in the U.S. prefer future romantic partners who share their political identity and attitudes, this was particularly tied to negative partisanship.

Lee (2025) demonstrates that in multiparty contexts such as Canada, Germany, and the UK, ideological distance functions as a moderator for the likelihood of supporters from different political parties becoming friends. Lee (2025) found that supporters of ideologically close parties are more likely to become friends than supporters of ideologically distant parties. The study concludes that individuals’ political beliefs and affective responses are closely tied to ideological proximity when evaluating potential relationships with cross-partisan supporters (Lee, 2025). Additionally, Mepham et al. (2025) argue that Swiss university students

choose friends with similar political attitudes, suggesting that political similarity is a result of selection rather than socialization.

Political affiliation is not always visible (Lee, 2021a). Consequently, people use apolitical visible cues such as lifestyle preferences, consumption patterns, and dining habits to infer others' partisanship or ideological beliefs. This everyday stereotyping influences who individuals interact with, causing limited cross-party contact (Lee, 2021a). The empirical evidence for this is strongest in the case of the U.S. (Hiaeshutter-Rice et al., 2023; Lee, 2021a; Lyons & Utych, 2022). However, some scholars also provide evidence that apolitical cues are used in multiparty countries to categorize individuals according to partisanship (Ouellet & Tremblay-Antoine, 2024; Scaduto & Negri, 2024). Scaduto & Negri (2024) found that in Italy food is associated with political identities. Additionally, people who tie apolitical visible cues to political affiliation were more likely to interact with people perceived as being part of their political in-group. Lastly, similar findings were identified in Canada, where lifestyle characteristics such as cars or hobbies are associated with different political parties (Ouellet & Tremblay-Antoine, 2024).

2.5 Affective Polarization in Sweden and Germany

The literature presents mixed findings regarding the level of AP in Sweden and Germany, partly due to differences in measurement and operationalization. Reiljan (2020) describes both Sweden and Germany as comparatively low affectively polarized cases within Europe. In contrast, Garzia et al. (2023), analyzing data from the 1960s onwards and including the entire electorate in unified Germany, identify a noticeable rise in AP in Germany. Additionally, studies including all political parties found that Sweden has the highest score of AP among all Nordic countries (Reiljan, 2020; Ryan, 2023). Notably, Ryan (2023) argues that Sweden is one of the countries with the highest AP globally.

There is more extensive and richer academic literature on AP in Sweden than in Germany. However, the rise of the right-wing populist parties in both countries has contributed to shaping the landscape of AP. In a study considering only feelings toward the most and least liked parties, Sweden and Germany displayed high levels of AP compared to other European countries. These high levels of AP were driven by the dislike toward the right-wing populist parties (Reiljan, 2025). In sum, when the dislike toward right-wing populist parties is taken into account, Sweden and Germany exhibit high levels of AP. Furthermore, Reiljan and Ryan (2021) argue that Sweden has a tripolar political landscape consisting of two mainstream blocs (center-left and center-right) that experience moderate polarization toward each other. The third bloc receives the strongest dislike and consists of one populist right-wing party, the Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats). However, this relationship is asymmetric, the animosity from the Sweden Democrats toward the two mainstream blocs is only moderate (Reiljan & Ryan, 2021). Consequently, Sweden's high levels of AP stem from the animosity of the two mainstream blocs toward the Sweden Democrats (Ryan, 2023).

AP in Germany is shaped by several divisions within the political landscape rather than one single “us versus them” divide (Rothers, 2025, p. 1). Rothers (2025) finds that individuals in Germany “are polarized in opposing camps along three different divides: between Left and Right, between Mainstream and Rightwing Populists, and between Center and Extreme” (Rothers, 2025, p.1)

Furthermore, to the best of our knowledge, all research on AP in Sweden and Germany has been conducted quantitatively and has mostly relied on surveys. Röllicke (2023) stresses that qualitative research on AP in multiparty systems remains limited, with only 2 of 78 studies using qualitative methods by 2022. By 2025, only “less than a handful” of additional qualitative contributions have been published (Röllicke, 2025, p. 89). Qualitative research could make meaningful contributions, such as Maes et al. (2024), who found that participants expressed mixed emotions toward the out-group, including positivity, rather than simple hostility. This heavy reliance on quantitative methodologies and self-reported surveys has resulted in a gap in literature exploring how AP is experienced (Bakker & Lelkes, 2024; Röllicke, 2025). Our study would contribute to the field

of AP by addressing the research gap on AP in multiparty contexts through qualitative research, particularly regarding how political affiliation influences the non-political sphere in everyday life outside the U.S.

3 Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically informed by the literature on AP. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, existing research on AP in European multiparty systems increasingly highlights the importance of out-group animosity, rather than strong attachment to a single party, in shaping political divisions. Related research further indicates that political affiliation influences the formation of close relationships, as well as social interactions outside formal political settings. To analyze how AP is experienced in everyday life, this study understands AP as an overarching phenomenon that is explained through a set of middle-range theoretical insights in political science. We use negative partisanship, social sorting, and moral division as its main mechanisms. Middle-range theory refers to a theory that explains a specific social phenomenon (Cartwright, 2020), leaving space for future research to build on the theory (Lee, 2021b).

3.1 Affective Polarization as an Overarching Phenomenon

AP, negative partisanship, and social sorting rely on the assumption from Social Identity Theory that individuals have a psychological motivation to form groups due to social cohesion and the need to (un)consciously categorize people (Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2018; Russo & Areal, 2025; Turner, 1999). This categorization helps humans to make sense of their social environment, themselves, and the world. Being part of a group enables individuals to define themselves in relation to others and experience well-being when interacting with members of their in-group. The need for categorization drives humans to create boundaries between their in-group and those outside it, as these boundaries satisfy the need for both the creation of inclusion and exclusion. Hence, identity in

comparison to party affiliation or attitudes, has a special impact on behavior (Mason, 2018).

AP refers to a form of political polarization in which individuals feel strong positive emotions toward their in-group and strong negative emotions toward the out-group (Iyengar et al., 2012). In the field of AP, the in-group refers to the political group an individual identifies with, typically the supporters of their preferred party or camp, while the out-group refers to supporters of the opposing party or camp (Iyengar et al., 2012; Wagner, 2021). Based on the assumption that individuals have a need to identify with a group, political parties can function as such a group, meaning that partisanship becomes a form of social identity tied to political identity, rather than only a set of policy preferences (Bankert & Stone, 2025; Iyengar et al., 2012; Wagner, 2021). As individuals become emotionally attached to these groups and see them as part of their identity, they tend to develop positive feelings for their own group and negative feelings for the out-group (Iyengar et al., 2012).

AP also manifests in social distance, where people are less willing to form close relationships across party lines (Iyengar et al., 2012). Furthermore, AP shapes social perception, as individuals tend to attribute positive traits such as intelligence or generosity to in-group members, while assigning more negative traits such as selfishness or hypocrisy to out-group members. Hence, in affectively polarized contexts, political identity shapes everyday social perceptions and interactions (Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar & Wagner, 2025).

Furthermore, engaging in like-minded conversations tends to make people think about themselves as partisans, thereby making partisanship a larger part of their identity. This, in turn, increases AP by making people think about politics as a zero-sum game between the in-group and out-group (Amsalem, 2025).

3.2 Key Mechanisms of Affective Polarization

Negative partisanship is one of the key mechanisms used in this study to explain AP. While AP describes the emotional division between political groups, negative partisanship helps explain why these divisions increasingly center around hostility toward political opponents. The literature defines negative partisanship as a form of partisan identity rooted primarily in rejection of an opposing party and the values, worldview, and supporters associated with that party (Russo & Areal, 2025). Negative partisanship contributes specifically to the out-group hostility that characterizes AP, as hostility toward the out-group can become stronger in driving AP than attachment to the in-group (Iyengar et al., 2012; Russo & Areal, 2025). Negative partisanship is driven by the need to distinguish oneself from a disliked political out-group (Bankert, 2023; Russo & Areal, 2025). Political identity is therefore increasingly shaped by “who one is not” rather than by support for one’s preferred party alone (Russo & Areal, 2025, p.184).

Another key mechanism of AP is social sorting, a process in which “individuals’ social identities grow increasingly aligned with a partisan identity” (Mason & Wronski, 2018, p. 257). In other words, partisan identity becomes tied to demographic, ideological, racial and religious identities, through the mechanism of “sorting”. Social sorting reinforces AP, as partisans increasingly perceive their opponents as an existential threat. As a consequence of social sorting, individuals surround themselves with people who are politically and socially similar to them, which paradoxically makes politics a welcomed topic due to the limited exposure to the out-group. Additionally, social sorting decreases social cross-cutting cleavages, which refer to attitudes and identities that push people to negotiate between different interests of political and social groups (Mason, 2018). In other words, cross-cutting identities emerge when an individual has multiple social identities associated with different political parties. This forces individuals to think more carefully about decisions, rather than relying on partisan identity as a cue, thereby minimizing partisan bias. Cross-cutting cleavages function as a buffer against social polarization, which refers to the increasing societal divisions between groups based on identity and emotions (Mason & Wronski, 2018).

The last key mechanism introduced in our theoretical framework is moral convictions, defined as “perceptions that the parties and their affiliates are moral concerns” (Garrett & Bankert, 2020, p. 622). Morally convicted attitudes are unique from other attitudes because individuals experience them as objective and universal. Additionally, they are strongly tied to emotions and independent of external influences. Therefore, individuals who moralize politics tend to respond in a more polarized way, since one’s preferred party is viewed as good and the other as evil. Consequently, partisan moral convictions heighten AP (Garrett & Bankert, 2020). Garrett and Bankert (2020) argue that there is a difference in levels of AP between those who moralize politics and those who do not. Concluding that even if a person’s moral convictions are separate from their political identity, it can strengthen out-group dislike.

4 Methodology

The following chapter introduces the methodology of this study. It first explains our research design, data collection, interview guide, and data analysis. Subsequently, it discusses our case selection and sample selection. Finally, it discusses reflexivity, ethical considerations, and limitations. This methodology is based on Apeloig's (2026) methodology, with some revisions adopted to a two-case study and online interviews.

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, interpretivist, two-case study design to explore how students in Germany and Sweden experience affective polarization (AP). On the positivity-interpretivist continuum, this study leans toward the interpretivist approach, as it aims to understand the meaning of behavior (Kułakowska, 2020; Rocha, 2021). Within an interpretivist approach, knowledge is considered co-constructed by participants and interviewers based on the interactive nature of interviews, where the interviewer may shape participants responses through questioning, rapport, and by introducing topics they may not have previously considered (Rocha, 2021). Since AP involves understanding emotional responses and identity-related perceptions, a two-case study design allows for an in-depth analysis of how these are experienced and expressed in everyday interactions, focusing on depth rather than generalization (Simons, 2014; George, 2005). Additionally, this study follows an informant-centered approach, meaning the participants are treated as experts on their experiences, while we, as researchers, take on the role of learners (Roberts, 2020).

4.2 Data Collection

The primary data for this research was collected through qualitative, in-depth, individual semi-structured interviews (Rocha, 2021). This method is suitable as it enables exploration of non-observable aspects such as emotions and thoughts, as well as the broader social context (Rocha, 2021; Röllicke, 2025). Ethnographic research methods could partly observe the experience of AP, however, leaving out internal experience (Heyl, 2001). Additionally, since our study does not investigate group dynamics, focus group interviews are not suitable (Rocha, 2021).

The interviews were conducted using open-ended questions, which provide both structure and flexibility (Rocha, 2021). A key strength of semi-structured interviews is that they can reveal how participants justify their attitudes and behavior (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014). For the Swedish case, interviews were conducted in person in reserved rooms at Lund University. This setting provided a quiet and confidential environment, allowing the participants to speak openly. Interviews for the German case were conducted online via Zoom. This format was chosen for practical reasons, as it allowed us to reach participants more easily and to schedule interviews flexibly without the need for travel (Khan & MacEachen, 2022). Zoom is a widely used platform and can be accessed easily via a password-protected link, making it convenient for participants to join (Olliffe et al., 2021). The platform also allows interviews to be recorded directly, which supports subsequent transcription and analysis (Archibald et al., 2019). All interviews were recorded, if informed consent was obtained, as note-taking during the interview may affect the data. The duration of the interviews varied according to the participants' talkativeness, but lasted approximately 45 minutes on average. The interviews were conducted between 9th of and 29th April in 2026.

Participants were selected using a snowball sampling strategy, a non-probabilistic purposive sampling method (Punch, 2014; Rocha, 2021). The participants were initially recruited through our personal networks and extended contacts, primarily via digital communication platforms. Initial contacts were approached directly and

were then asked to suggest further potential participants, thereby enabling the snowball sampling process.

4.2.1 Interview Guide

To guide the interviews, we used a semi-structured interview guide that provided shared structure across all interviews (see appendix 9.1, 9.2, 9.3). This ensured that the main topics were consistently addressed and allowed for comparison between participants and across the two cases. At the same time, the guide remained flexible, giving participants the space to talk freely and in detail about their experiences (Roberts, 2020). Follow-up questions were used where needed to explore participants' responses more deeply, which is essential for capturing the nuances of AP (Panke, 2018; Rocha, 2021).

The first draft of the interview guide was in English, then Apeloig translated it to Swedish and Fellert into German. The interview guide started by asking warm-up questions, which were designed to put the interviewee at ease, build trust, and help the interviewer frame the next part of the interview (Bearman, 2019). The rest of the interview guide was structured according to key themes and topics, to ensure that all aspects of the experience of AP were addressed. The questions moved from easier to more difficult ones. The ending questions were designed to make the participants feel empowered, while also giving them the possibility to add additional thoughts (Bearman, 2019; Brailas, 2025).

We conducted four pilot-tests with people similar to our sample group, two for the Swedish and two for the German case. The pilot-tests were essential since they allowed us to realize that some questions were too difficult to answer and included academic jargon. Therefore, we revised the wording of the questions to enhance clarity and repeated the process of pilot testing (Bearman, 2019; Morris, 2015).

4.3 Data Analysis

This study employs a thematic analysis, which aims to identify and interpret patterns in the dataset, following an inductive logic of inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We used Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework which includes 6 phases. First, we transcribed the recordings using Sunet Scribe and familiarized ourselves with the data. Second, we created a shared codebook and coded our respective transcripts individually using the coding software NVivo. We began with detailed, specific codes that were meaningful to our research question. Third, we merged our coding projects and grouped the codes into broader themes, aiming to capture underlying patterns that tell a story about the dataset. Fourth, we reviewed the themes to ensure that the data was accurately represented, while also ensuring coherence within and between themes. Fifth, we finalized the themes by defining and naming them, ensuring that all themes address the research question. Lastly, we wrote the findings chapter by synthesizing the themes and presenting illustrative quotes. We translated all quotations into English, relying on our C1-level proficiency in English. To ensure accuracy, Apeloig reviewed the Swedish translations and Fellert reviewed the German translations (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.4 Case Justification

Our case selection is based on five practical reasons. First, we are students at Lund University, which gives us both access to and understanding of the field we are studying. Second, Fellert grew up in Freiburg and therefore has access to students in higher education in the city. Third, Apeloig's native language is Swedish and Fellert's mother tongue is German, enabling us to conduct interviews in the participants' native languages. Fourth, studying students allows for comparability, as they are of a similar age and embedded in comparable institutional environments. We selected participants aged 18 to 31 to ensure they

belong to the same generation and to minimize generational differences. Fifth, Lund and Freiburg are similarly sized university cities with large student populations and similar ideological voting patterns, which further allows for comparability. Lastly, Sweden and Germany are stable democracies, which allows the impact of weak democratic practices on the experience of AP to be largely ruled out (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025).

4.4.1 Sample Selection

The primary data consisted of 20 Interviews with higher education students from Lund and Freiburg, 10 Interviews for each case. According to Rocha (2021) there is no ideal number of participants, however, our sample size was adjusted to the research scope, the complexity of AP, and ensuring feasibility (Rocha, 2021). The first selection criteria was that participants had to be legally allowed to vote in national elections in Sweden or Germany, since voter enfranchisement increases political interest (Scartascini & Vlaicu, 2018). Second, participants needed to be enrolled in higher education in Lund or Freiburg. Instead of “university students”, the term “higher education students” is used throughout the thesis, as the Freiburg case includes different higher education institutions alongside the University of Freiburg. All higher education institutions in Baden-Württemberg have been integrated into the Bologna Process and follow a comparable Bachelor’s and Master’s degree structure, which supports the comparability of the selected participants (MWK Baden-Württemberg, n.d.).

We picked students that were not all part of the same friend group. Our sample consisted of 10 men, 9 women, and 1 non-binary person. Additionally, ages varied between 20 to 31 years old. Participants were from different fields of study: Political Science, Strategic Communication, Teaching, Russian, French, Sociology, Medicine, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Economics, Social work, German Linguistics and Literature, and Science of Midwifery. Bakker and Lelkes (2024) highlight that individuals who express strong political affect are not always affectively polarized, therefore, we selected participants with different

political engagement. Interviews were conducted until no substantially new themes emerged, indicating that a sufficient level of thematic saturation has been reached (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). We conducted the interviews in the participants' native language - German or Swedish - to capture their experiences more accurately and reduce potential language barriers. Apeloig conducted all interviews for the Swedish case and Fellert conducted all interviews for the German case.

4.5 Reflexivity

As qualitative research involves greater subjectivity during data analysis and collection (Röllicke, 2025), positionality must be considered (Sultana, 2007). Positioned within an interpretivist approach, this study addresses the inevitable interviewer effect through reflexivity and research design (Rocha, 2021). Interviewer effect refers to how the interviewer's presence, behavior, and language influences the data collection (Rocha, 2021). This varies across the cases, as interviews are conducted separately by two researchers and in different languages. To ensure a consistent interviewing approach, we jointly practiced and discussed the interview process in advance. This included aligning on interviewing style, such as timing of questions, follow-up questions, body language, and information given to the participants prior to the interview. Furthermore, we are aware that the participants may have had assumptions about our political beliefs, based on our gender, age, and research interest, which could risk social desirability bias, meaning that participants may provide answers they believe the researcher expects (Röllicke, 2025). This may have led them to moderate their answers in order to avoid seeming intolerant and prejudiced, or to avoid certain topics due to presumptions about our political beliefs. Additionally, being part of the same institution as the Swedish participants may limit our objectivity. Moreover, our own political identities and beliefs about AP can produce unconscious biases and risk impacting question phrasing, probing, and interpretation. To avoid these unconscious biases, we incorporated strategies such as imagining the world from another point of view (Winter & Hoffman, 2024).

Additionally, emphasis was placed on open-ended questions with neutral wording, using follow-up questions (Rocha, 2021).

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Given that our study touches on personal experiences and political views, we remained attentive to participants' comfort during the interview. The interview guide therefore avoided overly sensitive questions, and the semi-structured and open format allows flexibility to adapt or skip questions if they cause discomfort (Rocha, 2021). Furthermore, it allows the participants to discuss what is preferred (Versteegen, 2024).

All participants received a project summary and consent form in their native language (see appendix 9.4). These explain the purpose of the study, what participation involves, that the interview will be recorded, and how the data will be used and stored (Panke, 2018). Consent was obtained prior to the interview and confirmed again verbally at the beginning of the recording. Participants were reminded that participation is voluntary and they are free to leave at any point (Rocha, 2021).

Full anonymity was ensured by removing any direct or indirect identifying information from quotes included in the thesis. This includes anonymizing the participants' names. In the findings chapter, Swedish participants are referred to as 'PS' and German participants as 'PG'. The number assigned to each participant was determined randomly. While contextual information such as field of study or place of residence carry analytical value, these details carry the risk of identification (Panke, 2018). The interviews for the Swedish case were conducted in a private room with no possibility for anyone to overhear the conversation, to ensure privacy and anonymity.

All data collected in this study was managed and stored securely, on a password protected university cloud service. The data is restricted to only the researchers. After the thesis is approved all data will be deleted.

4.7 Limitations

Given that snowball sampling relies on personal networks, many participants were known to the researchers. This can increase social desirability bias during the interview. Both face-to-face and online interviews carry the risk of social desirability bias (Röllicke, 2025). Following Bergen and Labonte (2020), this bias will be identified through indicators such as vague responses, nervous body language or facial expressions, and inconsistent use of language. To mitigate this, we emphasized that there are no incorrect answers, asked follow-up questions, and encouraged participants to provide concrete examples from real-life situations.

This study is informed by the risk of attitudinal fallacy, understood as the assumption that verbal accounts reflect actual behavior (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014). Therefore, our aim is not to determine whether reported experiences correspond to participants' actions, but to understand how participants perceive and interpret their social environment. Finally, a key limitation of this study is that interviews were conducted using different formats (online and face-to-face), which may influence the interview dynamics and affect the comparability between the German and Swedish cases.

4.7.1 Limitations Conducting Online Interviews

Conducting the online interviews for the German case introduces additional limitations compared to the in-person interviews conducted for the Swedish case. One challenge specific to online interviews is the risk of technical issues, such as unstable internet connections, audio delays, or interruptions (Khan & MacEachen, 2022). These issues can disrupt the flow of the conversation and make the

interaction feel less natural. Additionally, Zoom is a third-party platform, which means that data is processed through external systems and vulnerable to hacking (Khan & MacEachen, 2022).

Another difference is that videoconference interviews provide fewer non-verbal cues compared to face-to-face interactions. While facial expressions can still be observed, it is more difficult to capture body language, gestures, and subtle reactions (Khan & MacEachen, 2022; Oliffe et al., 2021). This may limit the ability to fully interpret participants' emotional responses, which is particularly relevant given the study's focus on personal experiences.

In addition, there is more limited control over the interview setting in online interviews compared to in-person interviews, where privacy and minimal distractions can be ensured in a private, quiet room. In online interviews, participants may join from environments that include distractions, such as background noise or interruptions, which can affect both their concentration and the quality of their responses (Khan & MacEachen, 2022). Participants are therefore encouraged to join the interview from a private and quiet space where they feel comfortable speaking openly.

5 Findings

In order to understand how students enrolled in higher education in Lund and Freiburg experience AP in their everyday life, we interviewed 20 students, with 10 participants from each case. The findings chapter is divided into three themes, each representing a pattern of experiences. We identified three main themes: how students experience politically homogenous social environments, how they set interpersonal boundaries toward the out-group, and how politics influence everyday life.

5.1 Political Homogeneity in Everyday Life

This first theme explores how participants experienced political homogeneity within their social environments and interactions with politically similar others in their everyday lives. It highlights how political similarity shaped social relations, political conversations, and emotional experiences.

5.1.1 Politically Homogenous Environments

The majority of participants in both countries described their social environments as politically homogeneous, meaning that the people surrounding them in everyday life share similar political views and opinions. One participant explained that “all my relationships, all my friendships, no matter how casual, tend to be with people I know share my political views” (PG6). This illustrates that political similarity shapes not only friendships, but also participants’ wider social environments. Several participants also described this homogeneity as living in a “bubble” (PG8) in which opposing political views became less visible in everyday life.

“Most people I surround myself with ... have similar views on things. And that’s why it can be so incredibly hard to even imagine that there’s actually a large part of the population that disagrees. It becomes a kind of bubble, not just in your own social circle but also on the internet, in what you read, and what you’re exposed to.” (PS2)

Similarly, another participant notes that “you hardly ever notice or see people who support a party that's completely different from your own” (PG10).

This demonstrates how participants experience political homogeneity not only within their immediate social relationships, but also through online and informational environments. Political similarity was therefore described as shaping both social interaction and everyday exposure to political perspectives. This pattern is consistent with research on political homophily in social networks, which shows that friendships and relationships are characterized by political similarity (Klofstad et al., 2013; Mephram et al., 2025).

5.1.2 Political Talk with Politically Similar Others

Among participants in both countries, political conversations were primarily situated within the politically similar social environment participants described in their everyday lives. Participants stated that they have political conversations “very often” (PS1) or even “daily” (PG5). Participants further explained that they mainly discussed politics with people “where you know you think alike” (PS4). Discussions about politics were commonly connected to existing relationships: “My boyfriend, my friends, and a lot with my mom ... because in many cases we have similar views.” (PS10). This illustrates that political conversations are embedded in social environments in which political similarity was already present and expected by the participants. In these contexts, political conversations with like-minded others were generally experienced positively and without perceived tension. Participants described them as “very comfortable” (PS10), “harmonious” (PG4), “very relaxed” (PG5), “spontaneous, informal, and calm” (PS4). These

descriptions suggest that shared political views were linked to a sense of ease within political conversations. At the same time, political conversations with like-minded others were often described as involving shared frustration, while also providing emotional support. One participant explained: “it’s mostly about getting upset together and offering each other some comfort ... being frustrated together and letting it out somehow.” (PG10). This suggests that conversations about politics were experienced not only as exchanges of opinions, but also as opportunities to collectively vent frustrations and seek reassurance from others who share similar views.

Both Swedish and German participants also frequently noted that conversations with like-minded others reinforced their existing political views. As one participant explained: “When I interact with someone that ... has the same opinions as me ... it reinforces and confirms my own opinions.” (PS10). This demonstrates that interactions with politically similar others are experienced as validating.

5.1.3 Emotional Experience with Politically Similar Others

Participants in both countries generally struggled to identify strongly with a specific political party, reflecting findings on weaker partisan attachment among European voters (Russo & Areal, 2025). Several participants explicitly distanced themselves from party identification, stating: “I don’t exactly identify with one particular party” (PG6). Instead, participants often referred to broader political alignments, talking about politics in terms of “groups” (PS7) and “political sides” (PS1). Some participants described themselves as being part of a “political spectrum” (PG6). These descriptions align with Wagner’s (2021) argument that political identification increasingly operates through political camps rather than attachment to individual parties.

A majority of both German and Swedish participants described politically similar social environments as emotionally comforting and safe. Being surrounded by people with similar political views was associated with feelings of “security”

(PS10), “familiarity” (PG5), “calmness” (PG3), and being “connected” (PS5). Several participants further explained that these environments reduce the need to justify their views. One participant described this experience as: “a sense of security and ... comfort that comes from not having to defend myself all the time” (PG4). This suggests that emotional wellbeing is linked to feeling accepted in one’s political views. At the same time, participants also emphasized that these environments created a sense of mutual understanding. One participant described how “it gives us a sense of solidarity and also the feeling that we’re not alone with these problems and ... worries” (PG2). Another highlighted that “you can comfort each other” because “you can understand how the other person feels and thinks” (PG10). These accounts show that politically similar environments are experienced as emotionally supportive spaces shaped both by perceived agreement and by shared understanding of similar concerns.

5.2 Interpersonal Boundaries toward Out-group

This theme will present how students set emotional and social boundaries toward their out-group, how out-group dislike shaped closeness in relationships and conversations, and how conversations with the out-group were perceived differently across the two cases.

5.2.1 Drawing a Line

Participants did not experience strong affect toward all political differences. However, most participants identified a party, political camp or side they strongly disliked. This strongly disliked group will be referred to as the out-group. This aligns with Wagner’s (2021) argument that the out-group can consist of more than one party. For example, one participant expressed:

“Some of my friends do not agree with me politically. But there is a limit. When it goes too far to the other extreme direction, then I also pull away.” (PS8)

This reflects how participants described experiencing different degrees of dislike. Similarly, another participant explained that “there are bad and then there are pretty much unacceptable. (PS1)”. Additionally, seeing the political out-group in the news evoked “anger” (PS5). Walking past a demonstration involving the out-group was described as evoking “irritation and sadness” (PS10). Some participants expressed that they have no close relationships with individuals who support parties that are far from themselves, based on the assumption they could not share the same values. One participant expressed:

“Especially parties that are very far from myself, I don’t have any in my close relationships and I suppose that’s a clear sign that it matters. (...) I might have a hard time really meeting and taking people in, when we view fundamental values so differently” (PS4)

This reflects one of our strongest findings: the party a person sympathizes with was perceived as reflecting their values, linking voting choice not only to policy preferences, but also to fundamental values. In consequence, many participants felt reluctant toward having a close relationship with someone from the out-group based on the belief that they have different fundamental values. Some participants also tied their own values to parties, stating that “a party that symbolizes or embodies the values I hold” makes them “feel more drawn to it” (PG10).

Both the quotes from PS4 and PS8 reflect Lee’s (2025) argument that the affective responses are tied to ideological proximity. Participants contended that political differences alone were not necessarily perceived as a barrier to relationships. However, references to “parties very far away” (PS4) or “too much to the other extreme direction” indicated a distance toward people perceived as ideologically far away. Participants described how they “took some distance” (PS1) from individuals associated with the out-group or expressed reluctance toward forming relationships with them, stating that they “could never imagine having a relationship with them” (PS10).

5.2.2 Interpersonal Closeness

A few participants, both Swedish and German, described already having established relationships with individuals from their out-group. Although participants defined close relationships differently, they experienced that out-group dislike strains the closeness of these relationships. One participant reflected their friendship with someone from their political out-group:

“I think if it had been more like having a lot of deep conversations, and the friendship had been based more on dialogue being the main focus, I think maybe I wouldn’t have felt quite as comfortable.” (PG4)

This reflects that participants have relationships with people holding different political opinions, but without deeper emotional connection. The majority of participants described their close relationships in terms of how others make them feel, describing that you “never feel scared of what they will think or think about you” in a close relationship. A deeper emotional connection therefore appears to be central to forming a closer relationship and out-group dislike could constrain such closeness. Furthermore, when participants have a relationship with or meet individuals from their out-group, many described that conversations did not include talking “about politics” (PS4) or that they were “very conscious of leaving certain topics out of the conversation” (PG9). This reflects a form of self-censorship among participants, in which certain topics were intentionally avoided depending on who they were speaking to. A few participants also described that their mood influences how they interact in conversations with the out-group, since “sometimes you just don’t have the energy” (PS10).

5.2.3 Political Talk with Out-group

Some participants explained that the political out-group evokes negative emotions in conversations, especially when there is no open dialogue and “you cannot see others opinions” (PS9). In discussion with the political out-group participants expressed feelings of “frustration” (PS10) and feeling “unsafe” (PS10).

Participants described feeling “uncomfortable” (PS4) when meeting individuals from their out-group, especially when discussions with the out-group became heated. However, there was a difference between the two cases. All Swedish participants expressed some sense of “curiosity” (PS5) toward other people’s opinions, even those they disagree with. Swedish participants expressed that such conversations can be “fun” (PS4) and stated that it is “important to hear what other people have to say” (PS9). This builds upon Maes et al. 's (2024) findings that individuals do not only express hostility toward their out-group, but can also feel mixed emotions. In contrast, many German participants perceived political conversations with the out-group as ineffective in changing the out-group’s opinions. Participant PG6 expressed: “your opinions just aren’t going to get through, you might as well just leave it”. Participant PG7 expressed:

“I’ve already talked to them about it, but somehow you can’t really change their opinion, so I’d say there’s not much point in talking about it any further.” (PG7)

This reflects how many German participants experienced talking to people holding different political views as ineffective, since such conversations were perceived as unlikely to change political views. Participants expressed that “I don’t think I can really influence their political views that much” (PG6) when talking to the out-group. A few German participants nevertheless expressed that they were “open-minded” (PG1) to “talk to them” (PG10), although not out of curiosity.

5.3 Politics in Everyday Life

The last theme explains how participants use apolitical cues to infer an individual’s political orientation and how participants reflect upon their lifestyle choices.

5.3.1 Apolitical Cues

Besides using political cues to categorize individuals according to political orientation or affiliation, participants from both countries also described using apolitical cues to infer which party people around them sympathize with or what political opinions they hold. One participant said:

“I also know that if someone is walking around in a suit, they probably don’t have the same political opinion as me.” (PG10)

Another participant described a similar pattern, but tied it directly to parties:

“I definitely have a bias toward people who study economics and law, because I imagine they tend to vote for slightly different parties.” (PG6)

This aligns with previous literature arguing that individuals in multiparty countries interpret apolitical cues as indicators for political opinions or party sympathy (Ouellet & Tremblay-Antoine, 2024; Scaduto et al., 2025). These apolitical cues function as shortcuts through which assumptions about people’s political affiliation or orientation are made. It allows participants to categorize people into groups, without explicitly needing to ask what political affiliation someone belongs to (Lee, 2021a). Additionally, previous literature has paid limited attention to how political affiliation is inferred through verbal communication. Our findings suggest that participants use language to understand political orientation. PS4 described that “jargon or certain word choices or what you joke about” can indicate which party a person sympathizes with, without any explicit mention of “party politics” (PS4). Additionally, PS2 described that it can be the “overall feeling of a person sometimes”.

5.3.2 Lifestyle Choices

Furthermore, participants described this categorization or politics as generally not strongly influencing their life choices. However, some participants explained that

politics influenced what they eat or buy, such as choosing to “boycott certain brands” (PG4) or “eat a lot of vegetarian food” (PS2) for political reasons. During the interviews participants struggled to answer questions related to life decisions, frequently responding after long pauses. Some stated that it had no impact on their decisions, while others answered that it did, but without being able to give examples. This suggests that such decisions were not actively made for political reasons, but rather that participants were aware that their choices can be political. One German participant explained:

“I mean, I don’t know, like, I’m not studying business administration because of my political views, but more because of my norms and values, since money isn’t that important to me, (..) You could definitely say that everything is political in a way, but at the same time, you could also say that a lot of it is just based on norms that people have developed over the years.” (PG10)

The quote showcases the participant’s awareness of life decisions being tied to politics, however, expressing that it is not something actively or consciously done for political reasons. This suggests that actions perceived as apolitical in themselves can still carry political meaning. Instead, participants emphasized values as the most important aspect, with participants from both cases repeatedly indicating that the party a person votes for says something about their values.

6 Discussion

The findings suggest that in both cases, AP is experienced as a process of social and emotional boundary drawing between politically similar and dissimilar others. The participants did not describe political similarity and difference as neutral characteristics of others, but as distinctions that shaped how comfortable, close, or distant they felt toward others. The difference in emotions can be understood through the identity-based group logic underlying AP. Because political affiliation is part of individuals' political identity, attachment to political groups is experienced emotionally, leading to positive feelings toward the in-group and negative feelings toward the out-group (Bankert & Stone, 2025; Iyengar et al., 2012; Wagner, 2021).

These distinct emotional experiences help explain why participants drew boundaries around interpersonal closeness. The participants' reluctance to form close relationships with individuals associated with their out-group reflects social distance, which is understood as a behavioral manifestation of out-group dislike (Iyengar et al., 2012). The findings therefore suggest that negative emotions toward the political out-group shape how participants experience the possibility of closeness with others. Thus, social distancing can be understood as a consequence of AP, in which political differences influence decisions about whom to form close relationships with.

Participants described experiencing a politically homogeneous social environment, which can be explained as a product of social sorting, referring to the process through which political identities become aligned with other social identities. Social sorting, in turn, produces social polarization, meaning that society becomes divided along identity lines. As social sorting increases, cross-cutting cleavages decline. These identities normally act as a buffer for social polarization by forcing people to interact with different people and political

opponents (Mason, 2018). Consequently, participants experience their social environment as politically similar and rarely encounter political opponents, due to the lack of cross-cutting cleavages. Moreover, participants experience their family and friends as political similarly and describe political talk as frequent and relaxed. Thus, even if politics is considered a sensitive topic, it is not experienced as such in everyday life, since most conversations take place within the in-group.

Furthermore, the use of apolitical cues to infer individuals' political affiliation can be explained through the process of social sorting. As political identities become aligned with other social identities, non-political characteristics become increasingly associated with political affiliations. Consequently, participants may interpret apolitical cues such as clothing and lifestyle as indicators of political affiliation (Mason, 2018). AP may explain why participants use apolitical cues, as negative feelings toward the political out-group motivate individuals to socially distance themselves from the out-group and self-censor in conversations with them (Iyengar et al., 2012).

Participants frequently describe reluctance to having close relationships with individuals from their out-group, based on the perception that their fundamental values do not align. This perception of conflicting values can be understood through moral convictions, as these unique attitudes are experienced as objective, universal, and strongly tied to emotions. Consequently, moral convictions can create perceptions of political conflict centered around morally right and wrong. Individuals who view politics through a strong moral lens are more likely to be affectively polarized, which may explain the social distance described by participants. Even if personal moral convictions are separate from political identity, they can intensify out-group dislike. In sum, political conflict becomes centered around right and wrong, which is deeply tied to morally convicted attitudes (Garrett & Bankert, 2020).

The participants' lack of party identification, while still drawing clear boundaries between themselves and the out-group, can be explained through the mechanism of negative partisanship. Participants found it easy to identify individuals they would not want to date or be friends with, since negative partisanship is an

identity structured around “who one is not” (Russo & Areal, 2025, p. 184). This may also explain the lack of party identification among participants, as who you identify with is not as important as who you do not identify with. The strongest reason for rejecting the out-group was related to perceived differences in values. This rejection is based on the assumption that political opponents hold different fundamental values, which indicates negative partisanship (Iyengar et al., 2012; Russo & Areal, 2025).

The Swedish participants experienced a greater sense of curiosity in political talk with the political out-group than the German participants. Instead, the German participants perceived political discussions as ineffective due to the belief that their political opponents would not change their opinions. While our theoretical framework cannot fully explain this difference in attitudes, it may explain the perceived ineffectiveness among the German participants. AP increases perceptions of zero-sum thinking in political conflict. Consequently, when individuals from the out-group do not change their political views during discussions, these conversations may be perceived as ineffective and pointless due to the absence of a significant shift in opinion that could be considered a win (Amsalem, 2025). Nevertheless, it is important to consider alternative explanations for this difference between Swedish and German participants. As the German interviews were conducted online and the Swedish interviews face-to-face, and because the interviews were conducted separately, the observed difference may reflect methodological rather than substantive variation in how participants articulated and reflected upon their experiences in cross-partisan conversations.

There are two major limitations within this study. First, according to voting statistics, our sample leans more toward the left-green bloc, which statistically makes it less politically diverse. Future research should take this into consideration and seek to capture experiences of AP across a broader political spectrum (Haußmann et al, Lundagård, 2025). Second, participants were likely individuals who enjoy talking about politics or found the research topic interesting. Individuals who feel deeply uncomfortable talking about emotions or the political climate would presumably be less likely to participate. This may have

impacted the findings, capturing political talk as less sensitive than some perceive it to be.

7 Conclusion

This study sought to contribute to the research gap of exploring AP in a multiparty context through a qualitative method by conducting a two-case semi-structured interview study with students in higher education. We aimed to explain our findings by drawing on the middle-range theoretical insights from AP, negative partisanship, social sorting, and moral division (Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2018; Russo & Areal, 2025). Our main findings, answering our research question, show that higher education students in Lund and Freiburg experience AP in interpersonal relationships through a politically homogeneous social environment, boundary-setting toward the out-group, and the use of apolitical cues to infer political affiliation in everyday life. Our contribution to the field offers in-depth knowledge on how AP influences interpersonal relationships, which is essential to understanding the impact of AP on social division (Torcal et al., 2025). More specifically, the social distancing, resentment, and lack of close relationships with the out-group indicate weak social cohesion across the political spectrum, suggesting implications for democratic stability and the achievement of SDG 16. Additionally, this study found that participants linked voting choice to fundamental values, particularly when drawing boundaries between themselves and the out-group. Furthermore, participants did not express strong party identification but still experienced negative out-group affect and social distancing. Together, this suggests that research should consider the role of values and political identity beyond party identification to better understand the manifestation of AP in multiparty contexts. In conclusion, our findings demonstrate the importance of exploring how AP manifests in interpersonal relationships in everyday life and making qualitative contributions to the field of AP.

Having contributed to the gap of exploring AP in multiparty contexts through qualitative research, this study encourages future research to build on these findings. Additionally, future research should consider whether experiences of AP

differ across social groups, such as older generations. Our findings suggest that students navigate AP through social distancing and by avoiding close relationships with the out-group, indicating the need for future research on how AP is navigated in everyday life. Lastly, the differing findings regarding curiosity in political conversations between German and Swedish participants should be further explored to understand how political culture and history shape how individuals experience AP in everyday life.

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9 Appendix

9.1 Interview Guide in English

Background:

- Tell me a bit about yourself
- How old are you?
- What gender do you identify with?
- Which city or town are you from and where do you currently live?
- Where do you study and what do you study?

Warm-up:

- Are you part of or have been part of a political party?
- How would you describe your interest in politics, if you have any?
 - On a scale of 1-10 how interested?
 - Has that changed over time?
 - What stirs political engagement within you?
- When you think about conversations in your everyday life, which ones feel political to you?

Conversations:

- Tell me a bit about your political conversations you have in your everyday life.
 - How often do you talk about politics with others?
 - What kind of relationships do you have with those you talk about politics with?
 - Who do you tend not to talk about politics with?
 - Why do you think this is the case?
 - Can you give me an example of when a political conversation came up?
- How do political conversations usually arise?
 - Where? (public or private setting?)
 - How would you describe the atmosphere?
 - Does the atmosphere change depending who you talk to?
- What do you hope to achieve when you talk about politics, if there is anything?

- How do conversations change depending on the topic being discussed?

Emotions in political encounters:

- In Sweden / Germany, are there people or groups where you notice that you sympathize with the same party?
 - How do you notice that?
 - How do you feel when you think about them?
 - How do you feel when you are surrounded by these people?
- In Sweden / Germany, are there people or groups where you notice that they sympathize with completely opposing parties? /
 - How do you notice this?
 - How do you feel when you think about them?
 - How do you feel when you are surrounded by these people?
 - How do you feel when you get confronted with these people (online, in the news)?
- If you want to, can you describe an encounter with someone you perceive as politically different from you?
 - What happened?
 - What kind of relationship do you have with the people involved in this situation?
 - How did you feel in this situation?
- How, if at all, does other people's party affiliation influence what you choose to say or not say when talking to them?
 - Have you ever hidden your views or avoided someone because of what party they sympathize with?
- If you imagine yourself walking past a demonstration where many people support the same political party or parties as you, what feelings would you have?
 - Have you experienced something similar before?
 - If you imagine yourself walking past a demonstration where many people support the political party furthest from your own, what feelings would you have? How would you feel?
 - Have you experienced something similar before?
- Which meetings make you feel more confident about which political side you are on?

- How does it change depending on whether the encounter takes place online or in real life?

Consequences:

- What role, if any, does politics play in the choices you make?
 - For example: where you live, what you study.
 - Do politics influence what you eat, consume, buy, or where you travel?
 - Are there any choices that play a larger role?

Relationships:

- To you, what is the difference between a relationship and a close relationship?
- What role does it play in your relationships which political party someone sympathizes with?
 - Is it something you think about when you meet new people?
- Imagine your best friend dated someone who strongly supports a political party you dislike.
 - How would you feel?
 - How would that impact your relation with that friend and the person they date?
- How comfortable are you having a close relationship with someone who sympathizes with a party you oppose?
 - How does this differ between different parties?
 - Have you experienced this? Would you like to give an example?

Ending:

- How would you describe your feelings towards politics, based on what we've discussed?
- Is there anything more you like to add?

9.2 Interview Guide in Swedish

Bakgrund:

- Berätta lite om dig själv
 - Hur gammal är du? Vilket kön identifierar du dig med?
 - Var har du växt upp och var bor du just nu?
 - Vid vilket universitet studerar du och vad studerar du?

Uppvärmning:

- Är du eller har du varit en del av ett politiskt parti?
- Hur skulle du beskriva ditt intresse för politik, om du har något?
 - På en skala 1 till 10, hur intresserad är du?
 - Har det förändrats över tid?
 - Vad väcker politiskt engagemang inom dig?
- När du tänker på samtal du har i din vardag, vilka känns politiska enligt dig?

Konversationer:

- Kan du berätta om dina politiska konversationer som uppstår i din vardag.
 - Hur ofta upplever du att du pratar politik med andra?
 - Vilka sorts relationer har du till de du pratar politik med?
 - Varför tror du att det är så för dig?
 - Om du vill, hade du kunnat ge mig ett exempel på när en politisk konversation kom upp?
- Hur brukar politiska samtal uppstå?
 - Var? (på privata eller offentliga platser)
- Hur skulle du beskriva stämningen?
- Vad önskar du att uppnå när du pratar om politik, om det finns något?
- Hur förändras samtalen beroende på vilket politiskt ämne man pratar om?

Känslor i politiska möten:

- Finns det personer eller grupper i Sverige där du märker att ni sympatiserar med samma parti?
 - Hur märker du det?
 - Hur känner du när du tänker på dem?
 - Hur känner du dig när du är omgiven av dessa människor?

- Finns det personer eller grupper i Sverige där du märker att ni sympatiserar med motsatta partier eller väldigt olika partier?
 - Hur märker du det?
 - Hur känner du när du tänker på dem?
 - Hur känner du dig när du är omgiven av dessa människor?
 - Vilka känslor dyker upp när du stöter på de här personerna (på nätet eller i nyheterna)?

- Om du vill, kan du beskriva ett möte med någon som du uppfattar som politiskt olik dig?
 - Vad hände?
 - Hur kändes situationen och du?

- Hur, om alls, påverkar andra människors partitillhörighet vad du väljer att säga eller inte säga i samtal med dem?
 - Har du någonsin valt att inte dela dina åsikter eller undvikit någon på grund av vilket parti de sympatiserar med?

- Om du föreställer sig att du går förbi en demonstration där många stöttar samma parti som du, vilka känslor kommer upp då?
 - Har du upplevt något liknande tidigare?
 - Om du föreställer dig att du går förbi en demonstration där många stöttar det parti som står längst ifrån ditt eget, vilka känslor kommer upp då?

- Vilka möten stärker dina politiska övertygelser och värderingar?
 - Förändras detta om mötet sker digitalt eller i verkliga livet?

Konsekvenser:

- Vilken roll, om någon, spelar politik i de val du gör i din vardag?
 - Var du bor eller var du studerar? Vad du, konsumerar och köper? mat?
 - Är det några val där politik spelar en större roll?

Relationships:

- Vad är skillnaden mellan en relation och en nära relation för dig?
- Spelar det en roll vilket parti någon sympatiserar med för dina relationer?
 - Är det något du tänker på när du träffar nya människor?
- Föreställ dig att din bästa vän dejtade någon som starkt stöder ett politiskt parti som du ogillar.
 - Hur skulle det få dig att känna?
 - Hur skulle det påverka din relation till din vän och till personen din kompis dejtade?

- Hur bekväm är du med att ha en nära relation med någon som sympatiserar med ett parti du ogillar?
 - Om du vill berätta. Har du upplevt detta? Vill du ge ett exempel?

Ending:

- Utifrån det vi har pratat om, hur skulle du beskriva dina känslor inför politik?
- Är det något mer du vill tillägga?

9.3 Interview Guide in German

Hintergrund:

- Erzähl mir ein bisschen über dich
 - Wie alt bist du?
 - Welches Geschlecht hast du? / Welche Pronomen verwendest du?
 - Wo bist du aufgewachsen? Und wo lebst du jetzt?
 - An welcher Universität studierst du? Und was studierst du?

Warm-up:

- Bist du, oder warst du mal Mitglied einer politischen Partei?
- Wie würdest du dein Interesse an Politik beschreiben?
 - Auf einer Skala von 1-10, wie interessiert bist du?
 - Hat sich das über die Zeit verändert?
 - Was weckt in dir politisches Engagement?
- Wenn du an Gespräche in deinem Alltag denkst, welche fühlen sich für dich politisch an?

Gespräche:

- Erzähl mir ein bisschen was über die politischen Gespräche die du in deinem Alltag führst
 - Wie oft sprichst du mit anderen über politische Themen?
 - Welche Art von Beziehung hast du mit den Menschen, mit denen du über Politik sprichst?
 - Warum ist das so?
 - Wenn du möchtest, kannst du mir ein Beispiel nennen, wo ein politisches Gespräch aufkam?
- Wie kommen Gespräche über Politik in der Regel auf?
 - Wo? (in der Öffentlichkeit oder im privaten Raum?)
- Wie nimmst du die Stimmung in solchen Gesprächen wahr?
- Was, wenn überhaupt, möchtest du in Gesprächen über Politik erreichen?
- Wie, wenn überhaupt, verändern sich Gespräche je nach Thema?

Emotionen in politischen Begegnungen:

- Gibt es in Deutschland Menschen oder Gruppen, bei denen du feststellst, dass ihr mit derselben Partei oder Parteien sympathisiert?
 - Woran merkst du das?
 - Wie fühlst du dich, wenn du an sie denkst?
 - Wie fühlst du dich, wenn du von diesen Menschen umgeben bist?

- Gibt es in Deutschland Menschen oder Gruppen, bei denen du feststellst, dass ihr mit gegensätzlichen Parteien sympathisieren?
 - Woran merkst du das?
 - Wie fühlst du dich, wenn du an sie denkst?
 - Wie fühlst du dich, wenn du von diesen Menschen umgeben bist?
 - Wie fühlst du dich, wenn du mit diesen Menschen konfrontiert wirst (online, in den Nachrichten)?

- Wenn du möchtest, kannst du eine Begegnung mit jemandem beschreiben, den du als politisch anders wahrnimmst?
 - Was ist passiert?
 - Wie hast du dich in dieser Situation gefühlt?

- Inwiefern beeinflusst die Parteizugehörigkeit anderer Menschen – wenn überhaupt – deine Entscheidung, was du in Gesprächen mit ihnen sagst oder nicht sagst?
 - Hast du jemals deine Ansichten verheimlicht oder jemanden gemieden, weil er mit einer bestimmten Partei sympathisiert?

- Stell dir vor, du gehst an einer Demonstration vorbei, bei der viele Menschen sind, die dieselbe Partei unterstützen wie du. Welche Gefühle würde das in dir auslösen?
 - Hast du sowas ähnliches schonmal erlebt?
 - Stell dir nun das Gegenteil vor. Du gehst an einer Demonstration vorbei, bei der viele Menschen die politische Partei unterstützen, die von deiner eigenen am weitesten entfernt ist. Wie würdest du dich fühlen?
 - Hast du sowas ähnliches schonmal erlebt?

- Welche Begegnungen stärken deine politischen Überzeugungen und Werte?
 - Inwiefern unterscheidet sich das, je nachdem, ob die Begegnung online oder im realen Leben stattfindet?

Auswirkungen und Konsequenzen:

- Welche Rolle spielt Politik in den Entscheidungen, die du in deinem Alltag triffst?

- Zum Beispiel: wo du wohnst, was du studierst?
- Beeinflusst Politik was du isst, kaufst, konsumierst, wohin du reist?
- Sind bestimmte Entscheidungen stärker von Politik beeinflusst als andere?

Beziehungen:

- Was ist für dich der Unterschied zwischen einer Beziehung und einer engen Beziehung?
 - Ist das etwas, worüber du nachdenkst, wenn du neue Leute kennlernst?
- Spielt es in deinen Beziehungen eine Rolle, mit welcher Partei jemand sympathisiert?
 - Ist das etwas, worüber du nachdenkst, wenn du neue Leute kennlernst?
- Stell dir vor, dein bester Freund wäre mit jemandem zusammen, der eine politische Partei stark unterstützt, die du ablehnst.
 - Wie würdest du dich fühlen?
 - Wie würde sich das auf deine Beziehung zu diesem / dieser Freund*in und der Person auswirken, mit der er / sie zusammen ist?
- Wie wohl fühlst du dich dabei, eine enge Beziehung zu jemandem zu haben, der mit einer Partei sympathisiert, die du ablehnst?
 - Hast du das schon einmal erlebt? Möchtest du ein Beispiel nennen?

Schluss:

- Basierend darauf, worüber wir gesprochen haben, wie würdest du deine Gefühle zu Politik beschreiben?
- Gibt es etwas, was du noch hinzufügen möchtest?

9.4 Consent Form & Project Summary

Who are we and what is the propose of the interview?

We are two Development Studies students writing our bachelor thesis within the Department of Political Science. Our thesis aims to understand students' experiences of the political climate in their everyday lives. In other words, we aim to capture how students relate and feel about those who belong and do not belong to the same political affiliation. The thesis is a comparative study between Freiburg (Germany) and Lund (Sweden).

Who can participate?

We are looking for participants that are bachelor or master students in Lund or Freiburg. The required age is between 18 and 31 years old. Participants must be fluent in either Swedish or German and hold citizenship in one of the countries.

How will the interviews be conducted?

In Sweden:

The interviews will be conducted in Swedish, during week 15,16, and 17 There is an option to participate in an online interview if that is preferred. Otherwise, the interview will be conducted in person and last around 45 minutes. Both online and in-person interviews will be audio recorded.

In Germany:

The interviews will be conducted in German, during week 15,16, and 17. All interviews will be conducted online through Zoom. The interviews will be audio recorded.

How do we store your data?

The interviews are fully anonymous; no personal data will be traced back to you. The data will be securely stored and limited to the researchers and supervisor.

Project Title: Political Polarization In Sweden and Germany

Please initial the boxes below to confirm that you agree with each statement:

I confirm that I understand the purpose of the interview.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.

I agree for this interview to be recorded. I understand that the audio recording made of this interview will be used only for analysis and that extracts from the interview may be used in any conference presentation, blog post, report or journal article developed as a result of the research. I understand that no other use will be made of the recording without my written permission.

I agree to take part in this interview.

Name of Participant:

Date:

Signature: