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Intergroup contact reduces affective polarization but not among strong party identifiers

Jens Peter Frølund Thomsen | **Anna Håland Thomsen**

Department of Political Science, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

Correspondence: Jens Peter Frølund Thomsen, Department of Political Science, Aarhus University, 8000 Aarhus, Denmark. Email: froelund@ps.au.dk

Abstract

Previous studies have assumed that the relationship between intergroup contact and affective polarization is uniform across political predispositions. We argue instead that party identification serves as a boundary condition for the intergroup contact–affective polarization relationship. Our findings suggest that: (1) intergroup contact between "in-party" and "out-party" supporters reduces affective polarization among nonidentifiers, weak, and moderate party identifiers, and (2) intergroup contact remains unrelated to affective polarization among strong party identifiers. These findings apply to high- and low-quality contact measures alike, meaning that party identification strength is an essential boundary condition capable of obstructing the impact of contact on affective polarization. Analyses were performed on a new sample among Danish citizens. The survey was fielded in 2021 ($n = 3638$). The findings contribute to both intergroup contact research and to the study of the sources of affective polarization. In terms of broader implications, our study suggests that aside from true partisans, intergroup contact stimulates democratic behavior.

KEYWORDS

affective polarization, boundary condition, intergroup contact, party identification strength

INTRODUCTION

Intergroup hostility occurs in all societies. To prevent such hostility from turning into threatening instability, however, democratic societies must have factors that create harmony. Intergroup contact is one such factor. Meta-analyses and longitudinal studies support the so-called intergroup contact hypothesis (e.g., Lemmer & Wagner, 2015; Miles & Crisp, 2014; Pettigrew &

Tropp, 2006; Swart et al., 2011; Vezzali et al., 2022). Likewise, meta-analyses conclude that intergroup contact reduces different types of antipathy (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2011).

Despite its impressive empirical foundation and social coverage, intergroup contact research has paid remarkably little attention to the political outcomes of face-to-face interaction. However, a few studies have addressed affective polarization. Affective polarization—or interparty animosity—means sympathy toward a preferred political party and its supporters combined with antipathy toward "out-party" supporters (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018). In terms of empirical evidence, Wojcieszak and Warner (2020) concluded that contact between in- and out-party supporters alleviates affective polarization, whereas unpleasant contact enhances it. Next, Warner and Villamil (2017) found that imagined contact also reduced affective polarization. Finally, Bond et al. (2018) reported that discussion between political opponents reduced their mutual hostility.

More generally, in an extensive review of affective polarization studies, Iyengar et al. (2019, p. 141) have emphasized the need for additional studies investigating the ability of intergroup contact to reduce "partisan animus." Most important for our purposes, Wojcieszak and Warner (2020, p. 803) added that future studies on factors capable of reducing affective polarization should identify the boundary conditions under which contact is most likely to succeed or fail. Considering the importance of this call, it is surprising that no one has provided insight into how party identification influences the relationship between intergroup contact and affective polarization.

To close this gap, we examine the strength of party identification as a boundary condition for the intergroup contact–affective polarization relationship. The individual's party identification is worth introducing in the context of intergroup contact and affective polarization due to its distinctive properties. Scholars agree that party identification constitutes an affect-based loyalty to a person's preferred political party (Campbell et al., 1960; Huddy et al., 2015; Iyengar et al., 2019). Even more, the affective tie between individual and political party prompts value defense mechanisms and prejudices toward political opponents (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Because of their commitments, strong party identifiers are unlikely to interact with their political opponents with an open mind. Even more, due to in-party loyalties, so-called "strong identifiers" may not generalize their positive contact experiences to noncontacted out-party supporters.

To contribute to both intergroup contact research and the debate about the sources of affective polarization, we present two hypotheses: first, intergroup (i.e., interparty) contact reduces affective polarization among nonidentifiers and those with only a weak or moderate party identification (H_1); second, intergroup contact has no impact on affective polarization among strong party identifiers (H_2). A strong party identification is an *essential* boundary condition

due to its capacity to obstruct the otherwise positive outcomes of contact between in-party and out-party supporters. As all previous studies of the contact–affective polarization association relate specifically to the US context, we expand the empirical scope of existing research by performing analyses on a rich sample from Denmark collected in 2021 ($N = 3638$). Danish political culture is much less "antagonistic" than US politics and has developed around a multiparty system. Despite these features, our findings are consistent with previous studies and expand them by providing support for the partisan constraint hypothesis H_2. More generally, the present study broadens our understanding of intergroup contact as a micro-social phenomenon embedded in political conflicts as well as collective, political identities.

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION AND INTERGROUP CONTACT

Affective polarization has two interrelated components: It denotes a person's sympathy toward a preferred political party and its supporters but also includes antipathy toward other political parties and their supporters (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Druckman et al., 2021; Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018; Iyengar et al., 2019). Building on key elements of social identity theory, the affective polarization approach describes conscious divisions between "in-party" and "out-party" supporters (also Carlin & Love, 2016; Greene, 2004). Previous studies suggest that affective polarization is more expressive than instrumental (Iyengar et al., 2012; Knudsen, 2020). Consistent with this claim, studies show that affective polarization relates strongly to social distancing and the negative stereotyping of out-party supporters (Druckman et al., 2021; Green et al., 2002). More generally, affective polarization appears to cover some of the emotional components of political conflict in contemporary societies (see Webster & Abramowitz, 2017).

For our purposes, the issue is this: What factors are capable of reducing affective polarization? Building on previous research, face-to-face contact between different partisans appears to reduce their mutual hostility (Bond et al., 2018; Warner & Villamil, 2017; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). This calls for the so-called intergroup contact hypothesis, which has developed into a more elaborated theory in recent decades (Hamberger & Hewstone, 1997; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011; Pettigrew et al., 2011). Contemporary intergroup contact theory posits that intimate, face-to-face interaction produces positive outcomes due to affective ties and cognitive learning processes.

In the light of this reasoning, recent studies understandably conclude that intergroup contact reduces affective polarization (Bond et al., 2018; Warner & Villamil, 2017; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). Political opponents are likely to advance incorrect perceptions of each other. Indeed, fabricating negative stereotypes of political opponents is integral to politics. Likewise, political

opponents intuitively have negative feelings about each other, whereas supporters of the same party share positive feelings. Sympathy and antipathy are inherently linked to political phenomena. However, high-quality contact appears to have the capacity to modify incorrect perceptions and weaken negative feelings, including antipathy (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011).

Strong party identification stimulates loyalty and biases

Party identification—often referred to as partisanship—is a key variable in public opinion research (Campbell et al., 1960). Our focus is on the strong identifiers who tend to vote for their preferred party irrespective of its actual performance. Strong party identification means loyalty (Bankert, 2021; Bartels, 2010). While this does not make strong party identifiers entirely irrational, it does mean that their motivation differs from instrumentalism or narrow self-interest. Strong party identification constitutes an affective attachment to a political party and its social base of fellow partisans.

Obviously, the party identification concept has many similarities with the claims made in social identity theory (Greene, 2004; Huddy et al., 2015). Strong partisans intensify their collective identity by differentiating themselves from other parties and their supporters. Such "negational identity" formation often activates conflict and polarization around "us-vs-them" rhetoric (Lelkes & Westwood, 2016). Iyengar and Westwood (2015) also found that strong party identification is conducive to acceptance of discrimination toward political opponents. This feature suggests that the party identification concept relates closely to the notion of affective polarization.

Scholars have continued to advance insights into the psychology of partisanship. Specifically, Taber and Lodge (2006) drew on the theory of motivated reasoning to identify some of its components. According to Kunda (1990), the theory of motivated reasoning claims that directional goals govern the average individual when handling information about the social world. This means that the individual is predisposed to accept only information that supports their prior beliefs, disregarding facts that contradict them; either way, the conclusion is predetermined. Partisans readily draw conclusions that are empirically incorrect and yet psychologically convenient (Taber & Lodge, 2006).

A theoretical synthesis: Deriving two hypotheses

In his pioneering contribution, Allport ([1954] 1979, p. 279) claimed that "certain personalities resist the influences of contact." Recent studies consistently support the view that individuals do not step into contact situations with a clean slate (Frølund Thomsen & Rafiqi, 2019; Homola & Tavits, 2018). Unsurprisingly, they also show that individuals differ in terms of

disposition; in our case, some participants are strong party identifiers while others are not. Because of emotional ties and social learning processes, it seems likely that intergroup contact arrangements will reduce affective polarization among those participants who do not identify strongly with a political party. In-party loyalties are less influential among nonidentifiers, weak, or moderate party identifiers, which in turn leave them more open-minded as well as inclined to generalize their pleasant contact experiences to noncontacted out-party supporters. This provides the rationale for our first hypothesis:

> *The power of contact hypothesis* (H_1): Intergroup contact has the capacity to reduce affective polarization among nonidentifiers and among individuals with a weak to a moderate party identification.

To specify Allport's claim, however, intergroup contact may work differently among participants who are strong party identifiers. Partisans step into contact situations with a psychological mindset that might be biased against pleasant face-to-face experiences with their political opponents. Such a mindset includes an in-party loyalty that may relate intimately to two potentially "obstructing" components: First, being highly selective in terms of information seeking, strong party identifiers are likely to be disproportionally attentive to unpleasant contact experiences with out-party supporters ("the negativity bias component"). Second, to defend their prior attitudes and negative stereotypes of political opponents, strong party identifiers may resort to subtyping heuristics ("the subtyping component"). Subtyping implies that partisan, in-party participants deliberately classify their pleasant contact experiences as exceptions to the rule.

The two components of party loyalty possibly prevent in-party supporters from generalizing their direct and pleasant contact experiences with political opponents to the entire out-party group. Strong party identifiers maintain their self-image and negative stereotypical perception of out-party supporters: "They resist the [positive] influences of contact." From this theoretical reasoning, we derive the following hypothesis:

> *The Partisan Constraint Hypothesis* (H_2): Intergroup contact has no impact on affective polarization among strong party identifiers.

DATA AND MEASURES

To examine our hypothesis, we fielded a cross-sectional survey (using SurveyXact) in the period March 7–15, 2021. The questionnaire was distributed by sharing links via Facebook; using a list of the 98 municipalities in Denmark, we identified the municipalities' largest Facebook groups. Based on this

information, the questionnaire was distributed to (and accepted by) 64 local Facebook groups. In the specified period, 4847 individuals responded to the questionnaire. Respondents who had not completed the entire questionnaire were deleted, after which 3638 respondents remained. Table 1A (online appendix) shows its demographic representativity; the sample includes fewer males and lower-educated individuals than the population at large. Likewise, individuals in the 45–49 age category are overrepresented, while the other age categories approximate the true population parameter. The best match appears on geographic location, where only minor differences between the sample and population are observed. Equally important, Figure 1A (online appendix) shows that the sample is close to being representative in terms of party choice. Figure 1A shows only minor differences, while there is no systematic pattern of particular parties being underrepresented (or the opposite). In sum, the quality of this convenience (nonprobability) sample is acceptable with respect to testing an interactive relationship.[1]

To measure affective polarization, we follow Druckman and Levendusky (2019, p. 115) by applying the feeling thermometer ratings (also Wagner, 2021). On a 0–100 scale, the respondents were asked to express their cold or warm feelings toward political party supporters (lower values indicating cold feelings and vice versa). In 2021, 12 different political parties were registered for election to the Danish national parliament. Reflecting this feature, all respondents were introduced to 12 slides (i.e., one for each party) calling for their feelings toward party supporters. More specifically, the item was introduced as follows: "On the next page, I will ask you to express your feelings toward different groups of voters. To accomplish this task, you will need to apply a so-called 'feeling thermometer,' ranging from 0 to 100. Greater values on the thermometer indicate that you have warm feelings toward a group of voters, whereas smaller values indicate that you have cold feelings toward a group of voters. If you have neither warm nor cold feelings toward a group, you can give the slide the value 50."[2]

Our measure of affective polarization taps into feelings toward party supporters rather than toward the political parties themselves. According to previous studies, this means recognizing that sympathies toward party supporters and political parties are not necessarily on the same level (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Iyengar et al., 2012). For example, Iyengar et al. (2012) found that sympathies are often greater toward party supporters than toward political parties. In effect, we overestimate respondents' sympathies (so-called person-positivity bias). Scholars approach the measurement issue differently, but we paid particular attention to Druckman and Levendusky (2019), who concluded that most citizens usually think about political elites when asked about their sympathies toward political parties. This is an important finding for our purposes, because we wish to examine the outcomes of cross-party contact among ordinary citizens in civil society.

To calculate each respondent's affective polarization score, it is necessary to define their in- and out-party groups. This in turn requires the verification of the respondents' exact party identification, as it constitutes their in-party and out-party groups. Establishing the respondent's exact party identification involved five interrelated steps: Respondents were first asked if they considered themselves to be supporters of any political party.[3] If they answered affirmatively, they were asked which party they supported;[4] if they answered negatively (or "don't know"), we asked whether they felt closer to one of the parties than the others.[5] If the respondent did not feel close to any party, we used their vote intention.[6] If the respondent did not intend to vote, we used an alternative measure of the respondent's proximity to a particular party.[7] Respondents who answered negatively ("don't know") to all measures (i.e., party identification, vote intention, and party proximity) were excluded from the analysis. This caused a sample loss of 3.4% (164 respondents). Had we not used the vote intention measure, the sample loss would have been considerably greater (i.e., a loss of 389 respondents). To maintain representativity, we apply this measure, which is consistent with previous research (see Westwood et al., 2018).

Calculating affective polarization is complicated in nations with numerous political parties (see Reiljan, 2020). In multiparty systems, many voters sympathize with more than one political party—and they may dislike two or three political parties because of their ideological similarities; the greater the number of political parties in a political system, the more likely it is to observe clusters on the left–right continuum. Considering this feature and following previous studies (Huddy et al., 2018; Knudsen, 2020), we recoded affective polarization as sympathy and antipathy toward the "red" and "blue" blocs, referring to the conventional labels in Danish politics for left-wing ("red") and right-wing ("blue") political parties and supporters.[8] To illustrate, persons identifying with the Conservative Party belong to the in-group of "blue" parties and their supporters, while their out-group includes all "red" party supporters. By implication, affective polarization equals a person's average sympathy toward their in-party group of supporters minus their average sympathy toward supporters of their out-party group. For example, Respondent #5 reported that he votes for the Conservative Party (i.e., blue bloc). His average sympathy score for blue bloc supporters is scored at 70, whereas his average sympathy score for red bloc supporters is 20. This results in a relatively high polarization score of 50.

Figure 2A (online appendix) illustrates the average sympathies among red and blue bloc supporters. Irrespective of group belonging (red or blue), respondents have greater sympathy toward their in-party supporters than toward out-party supporters. The final affective polarization index varies from −55 to 85 (M = 23.58; SD = 20.41), as reported in Figure 3A (online appendix).[9]

To measure intergroup contact, we follow the recommendations of leading social psychologists who emphasize the importance of cross-group friendship (Dovidio et al., 2003; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). Our friendship measure ensures some in-depth communication (self-disclosure) and strong intimacy. The contact item is worded as follows: "How many of your close friends vote for a political party from [blue/red] bloc? I know that this can be difficult to say, but please make your best guess."[10] The response categories were: "all," "by far the most," "about half," "a few," "none," and "don't know" (which was excluded).[11] The respondent was informed about which parties belong to each bloc.[12] Whether or not the contact item referred to the blue or red bloc would depend on the respondent's reported vote intention.[13] A respondent intending to vote for a blue party was asked about the number of close friends from the red bloc (and vice versa). We are interested in both the intimacy and frequency of contact with out-party supporters. The cross-group (i.e., cross-party) friendship item was treated as a metric variable and finally rescaled to vary from 0 to 1, higher values indicating greater out-party contact.

Finally, to provide an important robustness check, we apply another, less intimate contact measure. The wording of this item was as follows: "How many of those you talk to on a regular basis vote for a political party from [red/blue] bloc?" (five response categories: "all," "by far the most," "about half," "a few," "none," and "don't know," which was excluded). Although less intimate, the measure does ensure meaningful communication and self-disclosure. This item was also treated as a metric variable, rescaled to vary from 0 to 1, higher values indicating more superficial contact.

The additional contact measure relates to the important issue of self-selection bias (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). The theory proposes that contact governs attitudes—and not the other way around. In our case: Do persons identifying with the red bloc systematically avoid contact with blue bloc supporters? In other words, do they only associate with red bloc supporters? On the one hand, our analysis cannot exclude biased estimates because of self-selection mechanisms; only experimental data and involuntary contact measures can eliminate self-selection. On the other hand, there are distinct grounds for arguing that the incidence of self-selection may be limited in our study. First, studies find that some people actively seek out those with whom they disagree on political issues (Lee, 2021). Second, party identification and/or vote intention are often hidden identities, first disclosed long after initial contact (Mutz, 2006, p. 65). In any event, self-selection mechanisms can also be examined to some extent. Was the incidence of self-selection high in our data, we would expect those identifying with the blue/red bloc to have very limited numbers of friends among their out-party group. However, Figure 4A (online appendix) shows that cross-party friendships certainly exist inasmuch as around 36% reported about half of their closest friends being from the opposite bloc.

Only 8% reported having no close friends from the opposite bloc. Moreover, Figure 5A (online appendix) shows that around 56% of the respondents speak regularly with persons who vote for the opposite bloc. Likewise, very few have reported that none of those with whom they speak belong to the opposite bloc (1.5%). Cross-party interaction (both intimate and less intimate) is common.[14] We will return to the self-selection issue in the robustness section.

To measure our moderator (strength of party identification), we used an item with the following wording: "How close do you feel to [name of a specific political party]? The response categories were: "very close," "quite close," "not particularly close," and "don't know."[15] Prior to this item, respondents were asked whether they usually think of themselves as close to any particular party (and to state which). The measure of party identification is treated as a categorical variable to which we added a fourth response category: "not at all close." The additional category includes those respondents who reported on previous items that they did not identify with any political party. We relabeled the four categories "strong identifier," "moderate identifier," "weak identifier," and "nonidentifier." Figure 6A presents details about the party identification measure (also Table 2A online appendix).

To reduce the risk of spurious associations between intergroup contact and affective polarization, a series of controls was included: (1) gender, (2) ethnic background, (3) age, (4) education, (5) labor market status, (6) urbanization, (7) personal political ideology, (8) political interest, and (9) frequency of interpersonal conversation about political issues (labeled political conversation).[16]

The ordinary least squares regression model (henceforth: OLS regression) serves as the methodological approach. The OLS regression model rests on specific assumptions that we evaluated prior to reporting the main results. We include a series of potential confounders in order to meet the assumption that the error term should not correlate with the measure of contact (the independent variable). An acpr-plot revealed a linear relationship between contact and affective polarization. However, analyses revealed that the interaction term did not meet the linearity assumption, which explains why we treat the strength of party identification as a categorical variable. Additional analyses of residuals showed that the sample included around 159–174 influential observations related to the key relationships. Excluding these did not alter the substantial conclusions. There were no indications of multicollinearity. Finally, White's Test indicated problems with heteroscedasticity. To cope with this potential problem, all of the analyses reported below apply robust standard errors.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents different models to inform about the full characteristics of the contact–affective polarization relationship, although Model 3 reports the key interactive relationship. Model 1 includes no controls. Moreover, Table 1,

TABLE 1 The relationship between intergroup contact and affective polarization, conditional on strength of party identification

	Model I		Model II		Model III	
Intergroup contact	–21.562***	(1.217)	–19.128***	(1.324)	–21.700***	(1.699)
Strength of PID			***		**	
Weak identifiers			–0.007	(1.157)	–5.139*	(2.609)
Moderate identifiers			4.623***	(0.777)	3.687*	(1.613)
Strong identifiers			7.850***	(1.380)	0.489	(2.723)
Contact × strength of PID						
Weak identifiers					10.595*	(4.828)
Moderate identifiers					1.789	(3.081)
Strong identifiers					16.289**	(5.389)
Political ideology			–9.144***	(1.202)	–9.004***	(1.199)
Political interest			9.605***	(1.809)	9.518***	(1.805)
Political conversation			–0.082	(1.826)	–0.052	(1.819)
Education			(ns)		(ns)	
Vocational training			3.172	(1.843)	3.156	(1.847)
High school			4.219*	(2.009)	4.214*	(2.016)
Short-term tertiary			2.566	(1.905)	2.697	(1.911)
Medium-term tertiary			3.755*	(1.745)	3.789*	(1.752)
Bachelor			3.796*	(1.840)	3.747*	(1.847)
Long-term tertiary			2.499	(1.847)	2.479	(1.853)
Labor market status			(ns)		(ns)	
Employer			0.502	(1.656)	0.463	(1.655)
Employee			0.333	(0.834)	0.427	(0.835)
Student			–1.526	(1.710)	–1.308	(1.705)
Gender			–0.436	(0.777)	–0.407	(0.778)
Ethnic background			1.123	(2.172)	1.336	(2.167)
Residence			*		*	
Aarhus/Aalborg/ Odense			0.093	(1.262)	1.143	(1.261)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Model I		Model II		Model III	
>20,000 inhabitants			0.628	(0.952)	0.613	(0.953)
3000–19,999 inhabitants			–1.319	(1.055)	–1.307	(1.055)
<3000 inhabitants			2.549*	(1.159)	2.553*	(1.156)
Age			**		**	
25–34 years			–1.435	(1.939)	–1.469	(1.930)
35–44 years			–3.479	(2.074)	–3.389	(2.065)
45–59 years			–5.093**	(1.925)	–5.014**	(1.914)
60+ years			–5.227**	(1.972)	–5.123**	(1.963)
Intercept	33.905***	(0.654)	28.752***	(4.034)	29.592***	(4.037)
R^2	0.068		0.129		0.133	
N	3638		3638		3638	

Note: Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. Significance for full categorical variables is based on the F-test (ns = nonsignificant). PID = party identification. Reference categories: Strength of party identification = nonidentifier; education = primary school only; labor market status = temporarily or permanently outside the labor market; gender = male; ethic background = ethnic Dane; residence = Copenhagen/Greater Area of Copenhagen; age = 18–24 years.

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$ (two-tailed).

Model 1, reveals how intergroup contact relates negatively to affective polarization, and the relationship is statistically significant at conventional levels. When shifting from minimal contact (no friends from the other bloc) to maximum contact (almost all friends from the opposite bloc), affective polarization is reduced by 21.562 points on a scale ranging from −55 to 85. The effect is substantial and certainly nontrivial. Likewise, this finding fully resonates with previous empirical studies (Bond et al., 2018; Warner & Villamil, 2017; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020).

Model 2 includes numerous controls aimed at reducing self-selection and spurious effects. While the controls have a minor impact on the key relationship, intergroup contact still reduces affective polarization by 19.128 scale points. In other words, the impact of contact on affective polarization is nontrivial and statistically significant. Model 2 presents additional relevant information. The effects of intergroup contact and strength of party identification have opposite signs, and both are statistically significant. When shifting from nonidentifiers (the reference group) to strong identifiers, affective polarization increases by 7.850 scale points. When shifting from nonidentifiers to moderate identifiers, the effect is 4.623. This appears to support the

theoretical expectation that strong party identification is particularly conducive to affective polarization due to loyalty mechanisms.

Model 3 tests our partisan constraint hypothesis. Accordingly, it includes the interaction term (contact × strength of party identification), its constitutive terms (contact and strength of party identification), and numerous controls. For this model, it is important to realize that the contact–affective polarization relationship is specified as a mathematical function of the moderator strength of party identification (see Berry et al., 2012). This means that the effect of intergroup contact is tied to the minimum value of the strength of party identification. Similarly, the effect of strength of party identification is tied to the minimum value of intergroup contact. Model 3 shows that intergroup contact reduces affective polarization by 21.7 scale points among nonidentifiers. The strength of the party identification variable has small and diverse effects among those with no contact to out-party supporters.

The coefficient of the multiplicative term informs how much the contact effect changes when different "identifiers" are compared with the reference group (nonidentifiers). Overall, Model 3 shows that the coefficient of intergroup contact is negative in sign, whereas the interaction coefficients are positive in sign. In substantial terms, this means that the moderator (strength of party identification) makes the coefficient of intergroup contact "less negative." To exemplify by the relevant coefficients: The effect of contact on affective polarization is −21.700 among nonidentifiers. The contact effect among weak identifiers is thus −11.105 (−21.700 + 10.595), and the contact effect among strong party identifiers appears to be −5.41. This means that the intergroup contact effect is reduced by 75% when shifting from the category of nonidentifiers to the strong identifier category.[17] The impact of intergroup contact on affective polarization is clearly not uniform across the party identification categories.

Interaction coefficients are notoriously difficult to interpret, and Model 3 does not inform whether the contact effects among each party identification category are statistically significant. To make the analyses more easily accessible and detailed, we present the marginal effects of intergroup contact in Figure 1. The *y*-axis shows effect sizes, while the *x*-axis indicates specific moderator values, referring to the strength of party identification (as a categorical variable). Each estimate has a 95% confidence interval. The effect of contact on affective polarization is −21.700 among nonidentifiers, the contact effect among weak identifiers is −11.105, and the contact effect among moderate identifiers is −19.911. These results strongly support H_1 (the power of contact hypothesis).

The contact effect among strong identifiers is −5.410. The effect among strong identifiers is particularly interesting because it is not statistically significant, as the confidence intervals overlap with the horizontal zero-line. This provides strong support for H_2 (i.e., the partisan constraint hypothesis).

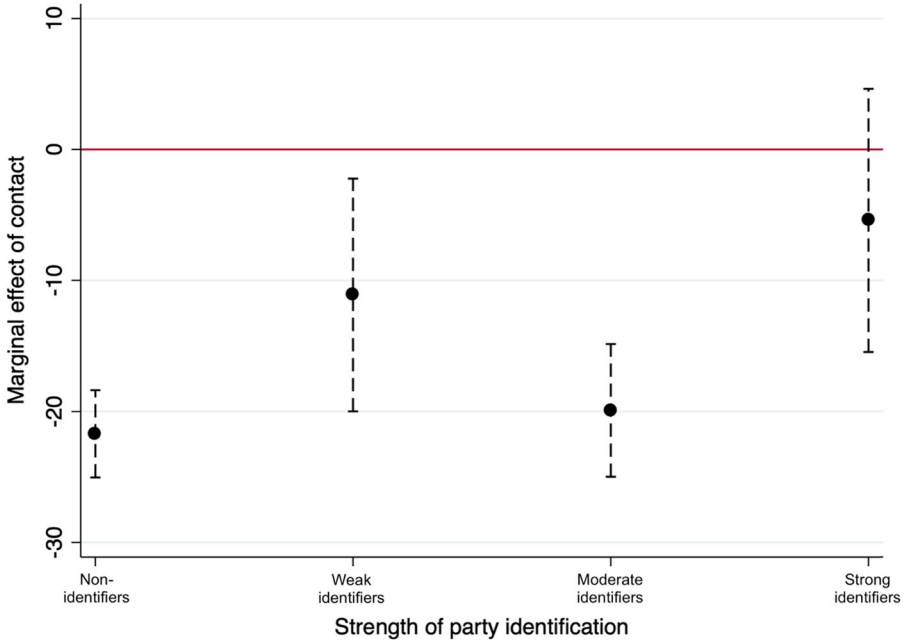

FIGURE 1 The marginal effect of intergroup contact on affective polarization, conditional on party identification. The *y*-axis shows the marginal effect of intergroup contact on affective polarization among four categories of party identification (shown on the *x*-axis). Each dot represents the estimated coefficient, and the dotted lines around them represent 95% confidence intervals. The horizontal line represents the 0-line. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

An alternative to marginal effect analysis is to present the predicted relationships where it is easier to identify effect sizes, because the *y*-axis shows the actual values of the dependent variable (affective polarization). Figure 2 shows the predicted relationships between intergroup contact (*x*-axis) and affective polarization (*y*-axis) stratified according to the four categories of the moderator (strength of party identification).

Figure 2 confirms the existing pattern but also adds new information. Obviously, we have four different relationships between intergroup contact and affective polarization. The green line shows the effect of intergroup contact on affective polarization among nonidentifiers (gradient = −21.700). The red line shows the intergroup contact effect among weak identifiers (gradient = −11.105). The blue line shows the intergroup contact effect among moderate identifiers (gradient = −19.911). The yellow line shows the intergroup contact effect among strong identifiers (gradient = −5.41). Polarization is clearly influenced in very different ways when intergroup contact shifts from its

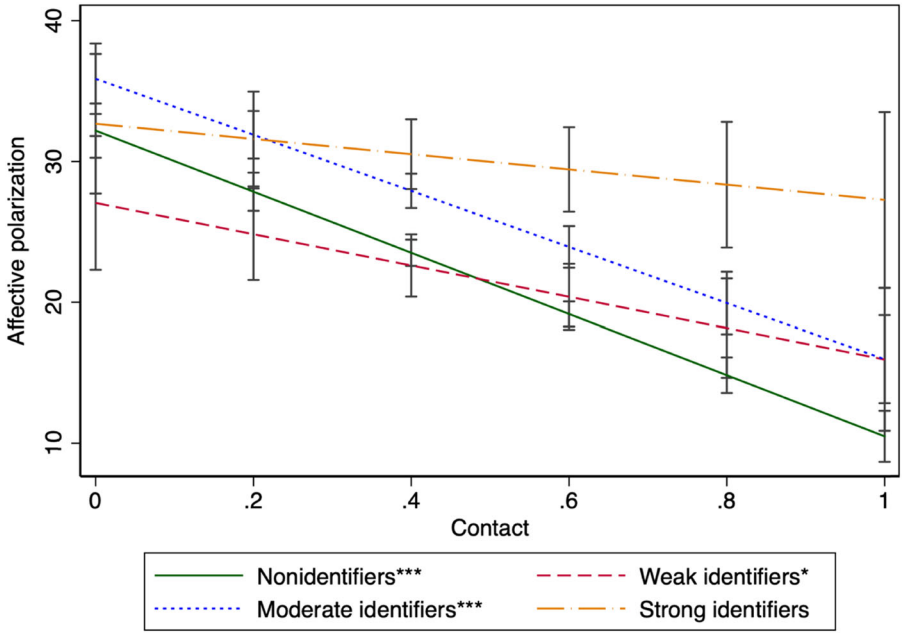

FIGURE 2 The predicted relationship between intergroup contact and affective polarization among four categories of party identifiers. The four lines show the predicted relationship between intergroup contact (*x*-axis) and affective polarization (*y*-axis) among four categories of party identification (nonidentifiers, weak identifiers, moderate identifiers, and strong identifiers). The vertical lines around the values of the contact variable represent 95% confidence intervals. $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$ (two-tailed). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

minimum to its maximum. Substantially, the frequency of intergroup contact makes no difference among strong identifiers, whereas the effect among nonidentifiers is considerable.

Figure 2 offers additional information regarding the interaction effect that represents our research object. Figure 2 shows how the distance between the lines widens when moving from the left to the right side of the figure. Indeed, the confidence intervals overlap at the minimum value of intergroup contact, and the different party identifiers appear much alike in terms of hostility when intergroup contact is absent. At the other end of the figure, however, the distance between strong identifiers (yellow line) and nonidentifiers (green line) is considerable. What does this "widening gap" indicate? Recognizing that interaction terms are symmetrical (Berry et al., 2012), Figure 2 reveals how strength of party identification is most influential among those who have many out-party supporters as friends. In contrast, party identification makes no

difference among those who have no out-party supporters among their close friends. This evidence may suggest that intergroup contact is a trigger that stimulates loyalty and hostility among strong party identifiers. In sum, the analysis supports the power of contact hypothesis and the partisan constraint hypothesis; in fact, party identification strength has the capacity to obstruct the ability of intergroup contact to reduce affective polarization.

Robustness checks

At this stage, we must demonstrate the ability of our results to pass various robustness checks. First, the relationship between party identification strength and intergroup contact is weak. The tau-b coefficient = −0.104 ($p < 0.001$, two-tailed), suggesting that strong party identification only has a weak capacity to sort people into and out of contact situations. Second, two different categories were merged on the contact variable (the two highest frequency categories on the raw variable). We reran the analysis with the original categories, and the relationship between intergroup contact and affective polarization became slightly stronger (−25.21). The interaction coefficient remained almost unaffected, confirming that the intergroup contact effect disappears among strong identifiers. Third, we focused especially on those who had negative values on the dependent variable, indicating that these respondents have greater sympathy toward out-party supporters than toward their own in-party supporters. After rerunning the analyses without these respondents, the substantial conclusions remained unaffected.

We return to the self-selection issue referred to earlier. The issue is this: Are the present conclusions only valid for very intimate measures of contact that may be infected by self-selection biases? Moreover, intimate measures of contact (e.g., cross-group friendship) have limited social coverage (Frølund Thomsen, 2012). For both methodological and substantial reasons, it is important to clarify whether our conclusions generalize to other types of social interaction than cross-group friendship. Accordingly, we reran the analysis with an alternative indicator, measuring the frequency of cross-group conversation between in- and out-party supporters. Cross-group conversation is less intimate (because of weaker affective ties), less voluntary (i.e., more accidental), and it has much greater social coverage than cross-group friendship. Table 3A (online appendix) shows how the effect of intergroup (conversational) contact on affective polarization is significant both statistically and substantially. When including controls, the effect of intergroup contact is −15.72, which is about three scale points weaker than in the original analysis. The interaction affect has the same characteristics. Most importantly, Figure 3 shows that interparty conversation reduces affective polarization—but not among strong identifiers. In all likelihood, the strength of party identification is an essential boundary condition.

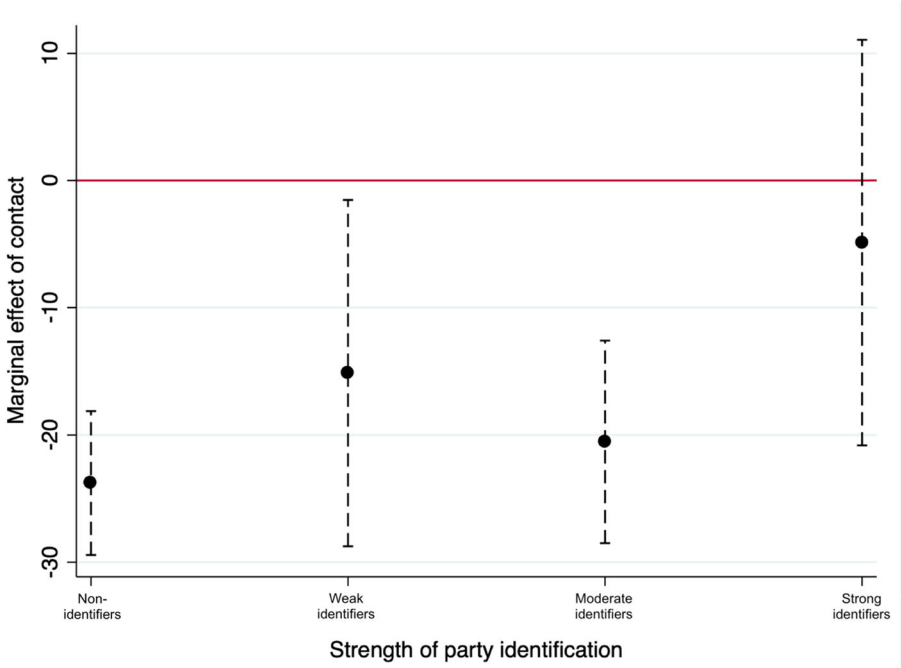

FIGURE 3 The marginal effect of intergroup contact on affective polarization among four categories of party identification. Alternate measure: intergroup/party conversation. The *y*-axis shows the marginal effect of intergroup contact on affective polarization among four categories of party identification (show on the *x*-axis). Each dot represents the estimated coefficient, and the dotted lines around these represent 95% confidence intervals. The horizontal line represents the 0-line. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Table 3A (online appendix) presents six additional interaction analyses. We focus on three moderators: political bloc (Models IV and V), political conversation (Models VI and VII), and political interest (Models VIII and IX). These variables were moderated on both cross-group friendship and cross-group conversation. Models IV and V show how the interaction terms between contact and political bloc (two values: red bloc = 0; blue bloc = 1) are nonsignificant; it makes no difference whether the party with which the respondent identifies belongs to the red or blue bloc. Models VI and VII show the interaction between intergroup contact and political conversation in the contact situation, where the interaction terms appear to be statistically nonsignificant. Frequency of political conversation in the contact situation does not influence the contact–affective polarization relationship. Models VIII and IX illustrate the interaction between contact and political interest, the interaction terms being statistically nonsignificant in both models; political

interest does not influence the impact of two different measures of intergroup contact on affective polarization.

CONCLUSION

Consistent with previous studies, the present study has shown that both cross-group friendship and cross-group conversation are able to reduce in-party supporters' hostility toward out-party supporters (H_1) (Bond et al., 2018; Warner & Villamil, 2017; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). However, intergroup contact has no impact among strong identifiers. Thus, strong party identification has the capacity to obstruct the positive outcomes of intergroup contact (H_2).

In view of the fact that affective polarization threatens the ability of citizens to come together and to be fair toward political opponents (see Dias & Lelkes, 2022), the confirmation of our hypotheses has two major democratic implications. First, intergroup contact helps to promote democratic conduct by reducing interpersonal animosity. Clearly, a well-functioning democratic polity requires that in-party favoritism and out-party animosity work within limits. Second, it also appears as though some hostility remains, because strong party identifiers resist the positive consequences of intergroup contact.

The present analysis contributes to the literature on the roots of affective polarization. Marchal (2022) concluded that conversations (with negative critique) and group context spur affective polarization. Lelkes (2021) reported that some scholars point to ideological values and elite messages as sources of affective polarization. Iyengar et al. (2019) argued in their extensive review of the literature that emotions and identity stimulate affective polarization. Our analysis also confirmed that strength of party identification relates positively to affective polarization, although the effect was modest. The present analysis, however, expands the list of origins, as it suggests that lack of contact between in- and out-party supporters most likely increases mutual hostility. In contrast, different types of intergroup contact contribute to political stability in a society. This is no trivial finding in an age where political "communication" increasingly occurs on social media, where intimate contact is a rarity. Social media users disclose their harsh opinions about political opponents they have never met. Without emotional intimacy, it is easier to use derogatory language and to preserve one's self-image. Future research will have to examine whether superficial social media contact nurtures affective polarization between partisans.

Our results also speak to a longstanding tradition of intergroup contact research. Utilizing affective polarization as a dependent measure is a relatively recent innovation compared to the traditional emphasis among social psychologists on prejudice. For decades, social psychologists have shown that intergroup contact improves intergroup relations (Barlow et al., 2009; Pettigrew

& Tropp, 2011); it fosters harmony between potentially hostile ethnic groups (Lemmer & Wagner, 2015; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). However, intergroup contact also has positive political outcomes: It reduces hostility between partisans.

More generally, however, we add to a recent debate about the boundary conditions of intergroup contact (see Adesokan et al., 2011; Asbrock et al., 2012; Frølund Thomsen & Rafiqi, 2019; Homola & Tavits, 2018; Turner et al., 2020). For both theoretical and practical purposes, it is important to identify the conditions under which intergroup contact fails. Our results suggest that strength of party identification is an essential boundary condition due to its ability to obstruct the positive outcomes of intergroup contact. Unfortunately, we were unable to show whether the obstructing capacity derived from the negativity bias component or the subtyping component. Moreover, our results may not generalize to other nations, because scholars usually classify Denmark as a so-called "consensus democracy," indicating smaller partisan divisions than in many other nations (Lijphart & Crepaz, 1991). However, this feature may also indicate that Denmark is a conservative test case. In any event, more studies are needed to determine whether the partisan constraint hypothesis generalizes across political systems.

While our study thus allows for a contribution to both the literatures on affective polarization and intergroup contact outcomes, it also has its limitations. First, the present study does not permit strong causal inferences, as it utilizes observational data. Still, it is noteworthy that our results regarding the contact–affective polarization association are consistent with previous studies, which have utilized experimental data to eliminate self-selection biases (see Bond et al., 2018; Warner & Villamil, 2017; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). Second, a more substantial limitation relates to the mass-level influence of political parties. Unfortunately, we did not examine the messages of political parties, although strong party identifiers may be very attentive to them. Political parties frequently air more or less hostile cues about their opponents. In effect, political party cues may amplify the ability of the individual party identification to produce animosity toward political opponents. Future research will have to examine these conjectures. Overall, the main takeaway message from our study is that intergroup contact has a remarkable capacity to reduce political hostility —but not among true partisans.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ORCID

Jens Peter Frølund Thomsen http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6013-783X

ENDNOTES

[1] Mullinix et al. (2015) conclude in their meta-analysis that convenience samples are usually reliable when testing relationships; they should not be used to predict specific values in the population (e.g., electoral support for particular political parties).

[2] The exact wording of the item was: "People, who vote for [party name]," and the respondent placed the slide according to their sympathies.

[3] The exact wording of the item is: "Many Danes consider themselves to be supporters of a specific political party. There are also people who do not consider themselves to be supporters of a specific political party. Do you consider yourself to be, for instance, a Social Democrat, Conservative, Social Liberal, Liberal, Socialist, or something else? Or do you not consider yourself to be a supporter of a specific political party? The response categories were: "Yes, I consider myself to be a supporter of a specific political party," "No, I do not consider myself to be a supporter of a specific political party," and "Don't know."

[4] The wording was: "Please specify which party." Figure 1A in the online appendix shows the distribution of party choice in our sample compared to an average of three opinion polls (based on national probability samples). Our sample is not particularly skewed, since the differences between our sample and the three opinion polls range between 1 and 5 percentage points.

[5] The wording of the item was: "Even so, is there one political party you feel closer to than others?" The response categories differentiated between 12 different political parties running for parliament, including "Another party," "No, I do not feel closer to one party than others," and "Don't know/unwilling to inform."

[6] The exact wording of the vote intention item was: "If there were a general election held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?"

[7] The wording of the item was: "Even though you remain doubtful about which party you prefer to vote for, I would like to ask you if there is one political party you feel particularly close to."

[8] Red bloc includes: The Social Democrats, Socialist People's Party, Social Liberals, Red–Green Alliance, the Vegans, and the Alternative. Blue bloc includes: Venstre ("the Liberals"), The Conservative People's Party, Liberal Alliance, the New Right, Danish People's Party, and the Christian Democrats. One may ask whether this sorting is artificial: Do voters align around these blocs? The answer is definitely affirmative. Election scholars report that only around 8% of the voters shift between the blocs in general elections (Hansen & Stubager, 2017, p. 35). Moreover, journalists, commentators, and politicians constantly apply these labels in the national debate—the terminology is politically salient both at the mass and elite levels.

[9] The average of affective polarization is clearly smaller than the US equivalent. On average, American voters gave the opposite party a score of 25 while they gave their own party a score of 65 (see Iyengar et al., 2019). Figure 2A in the online appendix shows that Danes on average have somewhat greater sympathy toward their out-party group (33.5 for red bloc supporters, 33.1 for blue bloc supporters); and they combine this with lower sympathy toward their in-party group (59.2 for red bloc supporters, 53.5 for blue bloc supporters). While American politics is more polarized, polarization clearly exists in one of the most egalitarian nations in the world. See also Boxell et al. (2022) who conclude that Denmark has experienced a minor increase in affective polarization over the last four decades.

[10] Guessing about other people's political party preferences will involve some measurement error. However, the item emphasizes the notion of close friends and calls for a "broad" guess as it does not refer to a specific political party. Both features most likely reduce measurement error.

[11] Although ensuring considerable intimacy ("closeness"), our friendship measure taps into different forms of face-to-face interaction. Some friendships involve more verbal and nonverbal communication than others. While we are unable to measure this variability, the literature clearly concludes that higher intimacy is conducive to stronger contact effects (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011). In view of this observation, our analysis may be considered conservative.

[12] Five respondents reported that all of their friends voted for different parties than they did. This means that the response category "all" only includes five observations; it also means that the maximum value 1 only covers five observations. For methodological reasons, we merged the two upper categories of the contact measure ("all" plus "by far the most"), meaning that the maximum value (1) of the rescaled contact measure has 299 observations. Moreover, whether the respondent was asked about "blue" or "red" bloc also depended on their prior response to the vote intention item (see footnote 6 for exact wording). The merging procedure of the two upper categories was also applied to the other contact measure of conversation (see below).

[13] The exact wording of the vote intention item: "If a general election was held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?"

[14] Wojcieszak and Warner (2020, p. 792) suggest that in-group contact may be more frequent than out-party contact (for a similar proposition, see Marchal (2022, p. 7); both studies utilize American data). Our material does not fully confirm this claim; in particular, the superficial contact indicator is clearly skewed in favor of out-party contact (see Figure 5A online appendix).

[15] "Don't know" responses were excluded.

[16] Political ideology was measured using a conventional item: "In politics you often talk about left and right. Where would you place yourself on this scale?" The computer screen showed a scale ranging from 0 (meaning left-wing) to 10 (right-wing). The variable was subsequently rescaled to vary from 0–1, higher values indicating right-wing orientation ("don't know" responses were excluded). Political interest: "How interested are you in politics?" with five response categories: "very interested," "moderately interested," "only slightly interested," "not at all interested," "don't know" (which were excluded). The variable was rescaled to vary from 0–1, higher values indicating greater political interest. Political conversation was measured using the following item: "How often do you discuss politics when you interact with close friends?" The measure has five response categories: "always," "often," "now and then," "rarely," "never," and "don't know" (which were excluded). The measure was rescaled to vary from 0–1, higher values indicating greater frequency of conversation about political issues. Labor market status was recoded into four categories: "temporary or permanently outside the labor market" (reference category), "employer," "employee," and "student." Urbanization was recoded into five categories: "Copenhagen/Greater Copenhagen," "Aarhus/Aalborg/Odense," "a town with more than 20,000 inhabitants," "a town with 3000–19,999 inhabitants," and "a town with less than 3000 inhabitants."

[17] $(((-5.411) - (-21.700))/(-21.700) \times 100)$.

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