Party system polarization and individual perceptions of party differences: Two divergent effects on turnout

We show that party system polarization and subjective perceptions of ideological party differences are conceptually and empirically distinct phenomena which impact differently on individual electoral participation. Party polarization understood as a system trait, depresses turnout because many potential voters are put off by extreme party positions. By contrast, the individual ability to perceive differences between political parties increases turnout because more citizens find a party which is close to their own ideological position and other parties which are far away from a voter’s ideological position. The weak and partly contradictory findings typical for previous research on polarization’s impact on turnout are due to a conceptual and empirical blurring of two essentially different aspects: party system polarization that depresses turnout among citizens with moderate views and non-partisans and individual perceptions of party differences which increase electoral participation among all types of citizens alike.