

**Understanding polarization between left- and right-sided activists:
A qualitative review of their thoughts and beliefs**

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Abstract

This study examines the values, thoughts, beliefs, and motivations of left-sided and right-sided activists. Additionally, this research focuses on political polarization between these two opposing ideologies. To investigate these constructs, a total of eight semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews showed that both groups are strongly motivated by actively standing up for their own values and beliefs, even if their actions do not directly result in their desired political and/or societal change. For right-sided activists in this study, environmental influences such as their family, their colleagues, or their friends, play a bigger role in their motivation to participate in activism movements, than they do for left-sided activists. Motivation typically begins as extrinsic and, over time, becomes intrinsic, where activists are driven by strong, deeply held values.

Polarization refers to a difference in values like equality, social justice, and economics. This difference is not as evident in this study as it is perceived in society. The values of the left and right-sided activists in this study do not differ that much. However, there is a perception that this is the case, resulting in the avoidance of dialogue and more division in society. So, activists do not want polarization and division, but this perception is the real problem. Interviewees felt that the perception of polarization is created by external factors, such as the media, language use of politicians and other activists, extremeness of the actions, and ignorance. Furthermore, activists recognize the importance of maintaining dialogue with opposing groups, to reduce societal tensions and conflicts.

Overall, this research provides new insights into the thoughts and beliefs of left- and right-sided activists and enhances our understanding of today's political polarization. Future research should further elaborate on differences within the left and the right, because there is significant variation within these two ideologies. Polarization can also occur within these political ideologies.

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Introduction

Polarization is pulling different ideologies into opposing orbits like a strong magnetic force, leading to a difficult landscape of societal tension where opposing viewpoints collide more than ever. In recent years, there has been an increase in the popularity of right-wing politics in Europe (Mamonova & Franquesa, 2019). Especially populist parties, parties that consider society to be separated into 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite' (Mudde, 2004), have been popular across European elections between 1 January 1989 until 31 December 2022 (Rooduijn et al., 2023). Countries like Poland, Hungary, Sweden, and Italy are all governed by populist parties whose platforms are on the right side of the political spectrum. The Netherlands is no exception, with a rise of (populist) radical right parties since 2002, predominantly the parties formed by Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders (Silva, 2017). In the Dutch elections of 2017, the Forum for Democracy (FVD), led by Thierry Baudet, and the Freedom Party (PVV), led by Geert Wilders, both populist parties, won seats in the Dutch parliament (Otjes, 2020).

On the opposing side of the political spectrum, left-wing political movements have not been silent either. In the Netherlands for example, in earlier mentioned elections of 2017 where populist right-wing parties PVV and FVD gained seats, voters have been pulled to the left side as well (Voorn, 2020). Dutch municipalities also voted more progressively than in the elections of 2017, according to Voorn (2020). Examples of left-wing parties in The Netherlands are 'GroenLinks', 'Partij voor de Dieren', 'Bij1', 'SP', 'PvdA', and 'Denk'.

The rise of interest in populist movements can partly be explained by global changes such as the COVID-19 pandemic, or changes in (social) media (Vissing, 2022). The trust in the Dutch government decreased during the COVID-19 lockdowns for example (Schraff, 2020). Global changes or occurrences can influence people's thoughts, so it is important to take this into account. In March 2023, Extinction Rebellion activists started with blocking a

Dutch highway as a form of protest, which is an example of an occurrence that could draw aversion towards left-wing movements. In addition to that, there are also examples of right-wing protest actions that could cause aversion towards right-wing movements. This aversion is part of the political polarization that society currently experiences.

The distinction between left wing and right wing is generally classified as a difference in beliefs and values. Left-wing politics is characterized by policies that prioritize social justice, equality, and collective responsibility (Falciola, 2017). Where right-wing politics is characterized by policies that prioritizes individualism, free-market capitalism, and nationalism (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022). Left-wing politics favors a progressive approach, whereas right-wing politics favors a more conservative approach, keeping traditions and older values intact.

Important subjects for left-oriented organizations and people are, among others, climate change, social justice, economic equality, gender equality, and inclusive immigration policies. With the earlier mentioned more conservative approach of right-wing ideologies, they fight for free-market capitalism, a limited government, traditional values, and energy independence (McClosky & Chong, 1985). This clash of beliefs leads to a mutual misunderstanding, and hatred across both groups. This clash of beliefs and aversion leads to activism (Harteveld, 2021).

Whenever political decisions are perceived as wrong, harmful, or discriminatory to certain groups or society, they can trigger the feelings for activism. Governmental decisions that go against climate change, gender equality, or economic equality, are expected to prompt a reaction from left-oriented people. And governmental decisions that support climate change, and economic equality, for example, are expected to prompt a reaction from right-oriented people. The form of these reactions determines if it is activism. The definition that is used for

activism in this study is; “action taken challenging those in power to bring about change in society and benefit the greater good” (Brooks, 2023).

Political polarization, as briefly mentioned before, has significantly increased over recent years (Torcal & Magalhães, 2022). This growing divide has led to more intense and frequent clashes between politicians. For example, Geert Wilders, the leader of the before mentioned PVV, telling Mark Rutte, the (then) prime minister of The Netherlands, to “just act normal man”. Or Mark Rutte telling another politician to “get lost”. But these clashes are not only between politicians, left-sided and right-sided activists are also more at odds with each other (Falkenberg et al., 2022).

Existing literature about this subject have given valuable insights about the thoughts and beliefs of right-sided and left-sided voters, however a lot of these studies specifically targeted only one side of the political spectrum (Down & Han, 2020; Muis et al., 2021; Vasilopoulou & Zur, 2022). Studying the motivations and beliefs of both extremes, and their thoughts about the opposing side might capture valuable insights into the thoughts that create this extremist worldview, and the additional polarization towards the opposing worldview.

Also, a significant amount of existing literature has relied on survey methods (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020; Erişen & Vasilopoulou, 2022). This might not capture the deep-lying motivations, thoughts, and beliefs of the population, or ways to reconcile opposing sides. conducting a study that relies on semi-structured interviews gives the possibility to explore the depth of human experiences and behaviors. This approach leads to the following research question: .

“What motivates people to take part in political activism, do these motivations differ between left- and right-sided activists, and how does this contribute to political polarization?”

Getting a deeper understanding about people's worldviews and how these thoughts result in the movement towards activism, holds significant relevance in times of heightened political tension and social division. The qualitative approach in this study zooms in on the deepest motivations and feelings of individuals, to understand these in a deeper way than previous quantitative studies. This study examines the driving factors behind these thoughts of extremism, offering valuable insights for scientists, policymakers, and society. It provides a foundation for further elaboration, offering opportunities for scientists to investigate and expand understanding even more. Policymakers can profit from this research study, by gaining a deeper understanding of the root causes of disunity in society, resulting in a more concrete plan of funding to create social cohesion. Furthermore, this research can contribute to a more peaceful society, by developing an understanding of the thoughts and beliefs of the opposing groups. Discussion between both opposing groups could evolve into more constructive consultation due to this understanding.

Theoretical framework

The difference between ‘left’ and ‘right’

The political left and right represent different ideologies with differing approaches towards subjects like governance, societal issues, and economics. Left-sided politics advocates for greater government intervention in the economy, an aggressive approach towards climate change, and social equality (Jungkunz, 2018). In contrast, right-sided politics emphasizes free-market capitalism, limited government intervention, and economic freedom (Pickard et al., 2022). On social issues, left-sided politics tends to support progressive policies such as gender equality, and LGBTQIA+ rights, while the right often upholds traditional values and emphasizes law and order (Simpson & Laham, 2014). Furthermore, the left prioritizes environmental protection and sustainability, whereas the right focuses more on economic growth and energy independence (Kauder et al., 2018). Right-sided politics sometimes expresses skepticism about the extent of human impact on climate change (Forchtner, 2019).

The political landscape of The Netherlands households a diverse multi-party system. This multi-party system is characterized by a dynamic interplay between left-wing and right-wing political ideologies. On the left side of the political spectrum, parties as ‘GroenLinks-PvdA’, and ‘Partij voor de Dieren’ advocate for the earlier mentioned progressive values, and on the right side of the political spectrum, parties as the ‘PVV’, and the ‘FVD’ advocate for the earlier mentioned conservative values (Harteveld, 2021). The Dutch electoral system ensures that multiple parties can gain representation in the parliament based on their share of votes. Fostering a political landscape where coalition governments are common. This necessitates negotiation and compromise across ideological lines (Van Putten, 2013).

Polarization

Polarization can be defined as a state or process of differences in opinion that are based on perceived or actual inequalities (Pausch, 2021). Political polarization is the type of polarization that is focused on in this research. This concerns the aversion towards people with other political stances (Levin et al., 2021). As stated earlier, in the current societal, and political landscape, polarization is increasing at a remarkably high pace. Specifically in Europe, polarization has seen an exponential increase in the last decade (Torcal & Magalhães, 2022). This is apparent from the votes for anti-political establishments, like populist parties (Rooduijn et al., 2023), anti-system parties (Zulianello, 2019), and protest parties (Morlino & Raniolo, 2017).

The before-mentioned increase in votes for ‘radical’ parties can be explained by the finding that ‘radical’ parties tend to succeed under conditions of mass polarization (Silva, 2017). These conditions of mass polarization result in the “empty center phenomenon”, which represents the perceived lack of strong representation or leadership for centrist political viewpoints (Zur, 2019). This phenomenon results in a lack of trust in centrist parties, and the veering to the left and right side.

Conflicts between opposing groups are likely to be more intense within a highly polarized society (Hegre, 2008). The clash of beliefs between left-wing and right-wing politics is no exception to this rule. For example, in 2023, politically motivated crime reached the highest level in Germany since they started counting over 20 years ago, increasing by 23% relative to 2022, with the politically motivated criminality almost doubling in the last 10 years (Gurwitt, 2024). Also in the United States, political violence is at its worst since the 1970s, counting 213 cases of political violence since Trump-supporters attacked the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 (Parker & Eisler, 2023). On May 15th, 2024, right-oriented Prime Minister Robert Fico of Slovakia was shot. Officials say it was a politically motivated assassination

attempt. The missile attack on flight MH17 on 17 July 2024 was also motivated by the Russia vs. Ukraine conflict (Aggelaki, 2020).

Understanding the role polarization plays in these conflicts, and how these can be avoided is important for a peaceful society. This understanding allows to grasp underlying factors for division in society, and therefore tensions in society (Jost et al., 2022). By recognizing the roots of polarization, society can strive to bridge ideological gaps and maintain dialogue, rather than conflict. A successful managing of polarization helps minimizing the risk of societal conflicts and fragmentation (Schedler, 2023). Furthermore, the understanding of polarization helps policymakers in implementing inclusive policies and meet societal needs.

Partisanship

The preference for a certain ideology can radicalize into partisanship, which can be defined as a set of beliefs and feelings that culminate in a sense of “psychological attachment” to a political party (Bankert, 2021). Partisanship influences the way in which people interpret information, and how they form their opinions. Engaging in discourse and their views on policies can also be influenced by this psychological attachment to their preferred political establishment (Klar, 2014).

Partisanship has evolved significantly over the past decades (Önnudóttir & Harðarson, 2020), influenced by increasing ideological polarization. Political parties have become more ideologically homogeneous (Castanheira & Crutzen, 2023), and individuals align more strictly with the party that reflects their views. Social media and targeted news sources amplify this partisanship by creating echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs (Navarrete, 2020).

Partisanship happens on both sides of the political spectrum. Partisanship in left-sided politics is motivated by a strong commitment towards progressive values like social justice and environmental sustainability, whereas partisanship in right-sided politics is motivated by a dedication to conservative values like free-market and traditional norms.

Partisanship is intricately connected to polarization, because strong party-loyalty can result in individuals being categorized in groups, and a strong case of us-versus-them-thinking (West & Iyengar, 2020). The heightened partisanship can result in reduced willingness to compromise, further entrenching polarized attitudes towards opposing ideologies.

Group-belonging

The concept of group-belonging plays a crucial role in shaping individual behavior, this brings meaning, identity, relevance, and satisfaction in life (Allen, 2020). A group refers to a collection of individuals who share common interests, beliefs, or characteristics, they often work together to achieve goals (Day, 2011). An individual, in this context, can be defined as a single person with their own unique perspectives and experiences, this individual can however be influenced by the collective beliefs of the group they identify with (Spears, 2021). Group identity is the sense of belonging and emotional connection that individuals feel towards a particular group, which can significantly impact their political attitudes and actions (Wojcieszak et al., 2021)

This feeling of group-belonging significantly contributes to an individual's identity, by providing a sense of connection and shared values. It helps people to get to know who they are in relation to other group members, and they can subsequently understand their place in society (Hogg et al., 2008). Belonging to a group also provides a feeling of safety by creating an environment of shared beliefs and emotional support (Cramer & Pawsey, 2023). Group

members can usually rely on each other in desperate times, therefore reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation (Allen, 2020).

Activism

Specific meanings about what makes someone an activist vary, but this research focuses on the following definition: “a collective identity linked to participation in a social movement/collective action” (Bobel, 2007). Activists typically associate themselves with the thought that collective action against collective disadvantage is one of the major pathways to social change (Van Zomeren et al., 2011). Collective action starts with identification, it is required that individuals self-categorize as a member of a certain group, which not only makes it their individual identity, but also their social identity (Van Zomeren & Spears, 2009). Social identity can be defined as the way people see themselves based on the groups they belong to (Hogg, 2016). An example of this could be that someone is part of a group and feels proud of that, and therefore this individual might act in ways that fit with the club’s values. This connection to a group can affect people’s behavior and feelings (Charness & Chen, 2020). Existing literature defines social identity as a psychological basis for collective action (e.g., Van Zomeren et al., 2008; Rosenmann et al., 2016; Thomas & Louis, 2013; Drury & Reicher, 2000).

It is historically evident that collective action contributes to social change, Bamberg et al. (2015) even define it as a ‘motor of social transformation’. The civil rights movement is an example where persistent collective action achieved important social change, such as the outlaw of discrimination, voting rights for African Americans, and desegregation of schools (Olzak & Ryo, 2007).

Collectivity is an important part of activism, collectivity refers to the state of being collective, where individuals unite and function as a group. This state involves a sense of

shared identity, mutual interests, common goals, and collaborative actions (Charness & Chen, 2020). Collectivity emphasizes the importance of group cohesion and collaboration to achieve goals that would be difficult to achieve individually (Charness & Chen, 2020).

There are different forms of activism, each having their own characteristics. The most well-known one is ‘protests & demonstrations’, as this type is prominently visible in real life, the media, and online. Protests & demonstrations strive to achieve political change by publicly expressing collective discontent, and putting pressure on policymakers (Chenoweth et al., 2022). Protests and demonstrations are often motivated by social injustice, political oppression, economic inequality, environmental issues, and human rights violations (Earl et al., 2022). The impact that activists aim for usually take the form of legislative changes, policy reforms, or raising public awareness (Helander, 2016). In the past, protests & demonstrations have proven to be effective tools for achieving these goals. The earlier described Civil Rights Movement is an example of this, but also the feminism movement, which has significantly advanced gender equality by protesting against gender inequality and advocating for women’s rights and challenging social norms (Mendes, 2015). In The Netherlands, farmers staged large-scale protests against government plans to reduce nitrogen emissions, fearing harm to their profession (Bosma & Peeren, 2021). Climate activists in The Netherlands have also been highly active in organizing demonstrations to demand more aggressive action on climate change. Blocking the A12-highway 35 times to force political change is a notable example of this (Extinction Rebellion NL, 2024).

Another type of activism is online activism. Online activism uses the power of social media and other digital platforms to spread awareness about societal issues, allowing activists to share information, and organize events, reaching a big audience (Lewis et al., 2014). Online activism began to take shape in the 1990’s, simultaneously with the establishment of the internet, early types of online activism include e-mail campaigns, and online forums to

mobilize support for injustices (Ghobadi & Clegg, 2015). The rise of social media in the 2000's significantly amplified online activism, allowing for more organized advocacy efforts (Murthy, 2018)

The third type of activism that this research focuses on is 'artistic activism', this method uses creative expression such as music, arts, theater, and literature to spread awareness and inspire societal/political change by appealing to imagination and emotion (Duncombe & Lambert, 2018). Artistic activists are often aiming to provoke thought with their work, but also inspire individuals to taking action. Street art and graffiti are often used to highlight social injustices and draw attention to marginalized communities (Duncombe, 2016). The strength of artistic activism is the ability to engage people on an emotional level, it might reach audiences who are normally not receptive towards certain types of activism (McPherson & Mazza, 2014). An example of an artist that continuously engages in artistic activism is Banksy. Banksy uses public spaces to create thought-provoking pieces that address social, political, and economic issues. His work often centers around war, consumerism, corruption, and environmental destruction (Sauda et al., 2021). In The Netherlands, street art serves as a prominent form of artistic activism that is highly visible within urban environments. Graffiti, in particular, is prevalent in a high number of urban areas, functioning as a medium for social and political expression (Vanderveen & Van Eijk, 2015).

Additionally, another type of activism is 'community activism', focusing on taking matters into our own hands and creating a better world through small initiatives like volunteering at a food bank and cleaning the neighborhood (Budziszewska & Głód, 2021). Community activism is often motivated by a strong connection towards the community an individual belongs to (Mihaylov & Perkins, 2015). Important goals of community activism include empowering residents of the community, advocating for policies, and achieving sustainable improvements for the community to enhance the quality of live within this

community (Boyd & Nowell, 2020). An example of community activism in The Netherlands is 'The Kolenkitbuurt Initiative', where residents of this neighborhood in Amsterdam engaged in community activities to improve living conditions and social cohesion (Bektaş & Taşan-Kok, 2020). Volunteering can also be a type of community activism, because it involves actively working on solving social, environmental, or community issues. Volunteers often advocate for minorities, and raise awareness about important causes, contributing to social justice and equality (Henriksen & Svedberg, 2010).

Lastly, another type of activism is 'legal activism', this involves using the judicial system to challenge laws and advocate for policy changes by filing lawsuits and providing legal representation (Purvis, 2008). Where other types of activism sometimes teeter on the edge, or cross the line of illegality, legal activism operates within the boundaries of the law.

The before mentioned increase in polarization can also lead to the feeling of being obliged to resort to activism. Polarization has heightened tensions between ideologies and deepened division in society (Levin et al., 2021). Whenever political issues become more polarized, individuals might perceive activism as a necessary response to defend their personal values and beliefs (Levin et al., 2021). This moral obligation to advocate for change, combined with a sense of urgency, can result in one of the five described types of activism.

Moreover, discourse and communication can also become more polarized, and individuals can feel insufficiently represented by politicians, media representation, or other channels of influence (Dovi, 2018). Therefore, activism becomes a means to amplify voices and fill the void that these representation channels leave open (Dovi, 2018). The increase in polarization can motivate individuals to participate in activism as an initiative-taking way to influence societal norms and policies.

Resistance

Activism touches subjects that are contested and threaten the ‘status quo’, topics that evoke strong emotions, controversy, or discomfort. These subjects often involve personal values, beliefs, or ethical considerations that individuals might experience as difficult to discuss openly (Mallon & Elliott, 2020). Subjects like discrimination, gender equality, climate change, immigrant rights, and so forth, are considered sensitive subjects. Opinions about these sensitive subjects vary, so there will always be supporters and opponents for every opinion (Baliatti et al., 2021).

This variation in opinions causes the presence of resistance by a personal environment like your family, friends, and colleagues, who do not understand your worldview. Governmental resistance can also be encountered while participating in activism movements, by the police for example. Protest groups opposing the ideologies of the protesting group can also organize a counter-protest, showing their resistance.

Activists are advocates of their personal values and ideals and are mostly open and confident about these values (Delmestri, 2022). Activists are known for being persistent, defending and taking a stand for their values, despite potentially experiencing resistance or being in a minority (Bendo et al., 2022).

Environmental influences

Environmental influences are influences that are extrinsically motivated, because the shaping of individuals’ behaviors and attitudes is based on societal norms, peer pressure, and potentially economic incentives. These influences can drive individuals to perform certain actions or behave in a certain manner to meet societal expectations (Johnson, 2007). The political preference of individuals is also influenced by environmental factors (Federico & Malka, 2018).

The environment in which people find themselves plays a significant role in the shaping of their political opinions. Growing up in a diverse environment with a variation of cultural, economic, educational, and similar aspects can lead to the development of multifaceted political viewpoints. On the opposing side, individuals growing up in a more homogeneous environment may be exposed to less varying political viewpoints, potentially limiting their political understanding. It is important to take these influences into account because they partially explain how people acquire their political preferences and behavior. The most important (for this study) examples of environmental influences are listed below:

I. Economic influences;

- a. Financial conditions that shape people's opportunities and behaviors. These influences include factors as income level, employment status, education, and access to resources and services. These factors can influence an individual's political preferences (Banfield & Wilson, 2017).

II. Peer and family influences;

- a. Influences that are encountered in a personal environment, such as someone's family and friends. These influences play a role in someone's development, beliefs, values, and behaviors. These influences include parenting style, cultural traditions, and dynamics of an individual's personal environment (Jennings et al., 2009).

III. Geographical influences.

- a. The influence of location-specific factors on an individual's political preferences includes climate, dominant religion, and community dynamics. These factors can shape political preferences through cultural and social norms (G. Gimpel & Reeves, 2022)

Motivation

Motivations to participate in activism activities can vary a lot between certain groups, but also interpersonal, which makes it important to take these into account and assess how these motivations play a role in the polarization between left-sided and right-sided activist groups. Motivation can be described as the reasons that underlie behavior (Lai, 2011). Due to these reasons, a person is moved to do something.

Motivation can be divided into two types: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is related to activities that are done for people's inherent interest and enjoyment. Explorational activities and curiosity spawned activities strongly exemplify intrinsically motivated behaviors because these actions are not dependent on incentives or pressure from the outside, but rather provide their own satisfaction. Extrinsic motivation concerns behavior that is not driven by inherent interests, but rather by external rewards and/or punishments (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The 'Self-Determination Theory' by Ryan and Deci (2000b), which captures extrinsic, and intrinsic motivation, and the process of extrinsic motivation becoming intrinsic motivation. This process is important to understand, as numerous individuals' motivations start with extrinsic motivation or experiences in their environment (Morris et al., 2022). Investigating this process for left- and right-sided activists can reveal whether there are differences in the reasons both ideologies resort to activism to advocate for their values.

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is an approach that starts with an investigation of people's inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs that form the basis for their self-motivation and personality integration. The SDT categorizes three psychological needs: the need for competence, the need for autonomy, and the need for relatedness. The SDT divides, as stated earlier, motivation into extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, but it also divides extrinsic motivation into autonomous and controlled extrinsic motivation.

Grounded theory and sensitizing concepts

The theory that is used for the analysis of the data for this study, is grounded theory and sensitizing concepts by Bowen (2006). Grounded theory is a research method that centers inductive coding and involves generating theories through systematic collection and analysis of data. This theory involves an iterative process of data collection and analysis, which means that these constructs happen simultaneously. This allows the theory to emerge from the data itself, rather than being imposed beforehand. Grounded theory is particularly useful for exploring complex social processes and understanding the viewpoints of individuals.

This theory is helpful for researching activism motivations and polarization, because it allows for development of theories directly from participants' thoughts and beliefs. This approach ensures that the theories are valid for the real-world context of activism. Activism motivations and polarization are multifaceted and complex phenomena, by continuously iterating between data collection and analysis, this approach helps to uncover underlying patterns and dynamics that might not be apparent through other more rigid methodologies (Bowen, 2006).

Bowen also includes sensitizing concept in his theory, which can be defined as a concept that lacks specification of attributes or benchmarks. Sensitizing concepts do not let the user directly identify or understand specific instances and their details. Instead, it provides a general idea or direction to help the user approach and understand real-world examples.

Sensitizing concepts draw attention to prominent features of social interaction and provide guidelines for research in specific settings. They offer ways of seeing, organizing, and understanding experiences. These concepts are embedded in our disciplinary emphases and perspective proclivities. Although sensitizing concepts may deepen perception, they provide starting points for building analysis, not ending points for evading it (Bowen,2006). The

sensitizing concepts that are emphasized in this study, are activism motivations, and polarization.

Methods

The aim of this research is to obtain a deeper understanding of the upcoming polarization between activists, and to what extent motivations and environmental influences play a role in this. To answer this study's research questions, qualitative analysis was performed, in the form of semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted among individuals who identify themselves as activists, and all interviews were conducted in May and June 2024.

The qualitative method of semi-structured interviews was chosen, because it is of high importance to get familiar with the thoughts of the target group. Motivations can vary a lot between individuals, interviews are good to capture this information. In semi-structured interviews, there is room to explore additional topics or follow-up on responses, while maintaining an interview structure to make sure all questions are asked. This flexible structure creates a relaxed and trustworthy environment where participants can talk about their deep-lying thoughts.

Participants

A total of eight semi-structured interviews took place. The participants in this study were selected based on specific characteristics relevant to the research. Specifically, they are over the age of eighteen and identify as either left- or right-sided activists. Participants were found firstly, by looking at people within the researcher's social network that are willing to participate. Secondly, participants were found by contacting protest organizations like Extinction Rebellion (XR), and the Farmers Defence Force (FDF). XR is a left-wing protest organization that prioritizes climate change (Extinction Rebellion, 2024), and the FDF is a right-wing protest organization that prioritizes the rights of the farmers, and mostly protests against governmental measures to reduce carbon emissions (Farmers Defence Force, 2024).

These organizations participate in protests, and individuals can join these movements whenever they want to stand up for their beliefs. People who are associated with these organizations fit the criterium of being activists.

Procedure

Three interviews were conducted face-to-face, four were conducted through an online video connection, and one interview was answered over e-mail. The interviews were held in Dutch, the preferred language of the participants, which made it easier to express themselves. Quotations for this study are translated to English. The interviews had a duration between 35 and 75 minutes and were all recorded and transcribed. Before the start of each interview, participants were reminded of their rights throughout participating in this study, and the particularities of this study. These rights and particularities are listed below;

- I. The right to withdraw participation at any point.
- II. The right to request access to the transcript of the interview to rectify, erase, restrict, or object to the processing of personal data.
- III. Data will be completely anonymized.
- IV. The data will be stored until the end of this study.
- V. The right to ask questions about the study.
- VI. The interviewer is completely neutral in this process.

All participants gave their permission for this process. The interview started with demographic questions about their age, Nationality, education, and gender identity. Then it continued with questions about environmental influences, where questions were asked about the political preferences of their family, friends, and colleagues, also addressing the manner of communication about these preferences. The third part of the interview consisted of questions about the participants' activism activities, to understand in what types of activism the

participants are active in. The fourth part of the interview was about the motivations the activists had to participate in activism activities, aiming to understand why the participants consider it important to stand up for their beliefs. Finally, the last part of the interview was about political polarization, discussing the way activists see their politically opposing activists and ideologies. .

The goal of the interviews is to assess the relationship between people's motivations and behaviors, and whether there is a difference between left-sided and right-sided activists. To maintain the quality and consistency of all interviews, while maintaining flexibility to zoom in on responses, an interview guide was made. This interview guide can be found in appendix A.

Data collection & analysis

Collecting and processing data was done by a structured method, based on 'Grounded Theory and Sensitizing Concepts' (Bowen, 2006). Grounded theory is a qualitative approach that uses inductive coding as a technique. This technique calls for a continual interplay between data collection and analysis, to produce theories during the research process. The collection of data, analysis, and theory are in a reciprocal relationship with each other.

Sensitizing concepts lack precise specifications and do not allow the user to directly identify instances and their relevant content. Instead, sensitizing concepts offer a general sense of guidance for directions in which to look (Bowen, 2006). The sensitizing concepts that are used in this study are activism behavior, activism motivations, and political polarization.

Analyzing the data was done by inductive coding via Atlas TI. Firstly, data was gathered through the interviews, after reading the interviews, codes were developed. The coding scheme can be found in table 1.

Table 1, coding scheme

Code	Subcodes	Example
Activism Behavior	Art <i>A creative expression for social change</i>	“So, I began making my own posters with my own view on politics” (P6, Male, left-sided activist)
	Online <i>Online advocacy for societal issues</i>	“I want to confront people with reality by sharing what goes on in the world” (P1, Female, left-sided activist)
	Organizations <i>Aligned with an activism organization</i>	“I am associated to a few different groups within Extinction Rebellion” (P3, Female, left-sided activist)
	Protests & Demonstrations <i>Actively protesting for political change</i>	“I walked through Breda as part of an anti-corona protest.” (P5, Male, right-sided activist)
Activism motivations	Creating awareness <i>Creating societal awareness for issues</i>	“I aim to inspire other people, who might already have some activism in them to stand up for their opinion as well.” (P1, Female, left-sided activist)
	Making change <i>Actively changing policies or society</i>	“We are in close contact with the government and other experts, to actively achieve solutions that are

		suitable for farmers.” (P8, Organization, right-sided)
	Personal <i>A feeling of self-fulfillment through activism</i>	“I am doing it mainly for myself, standing up for my own ideals gives me the feeling that I am doing the right thing.” (P3, Female, left-sided activist)
Generally Interesting	-	“I sometimes feel a bit awkward to say that I do not eat meat.” (P1, Female, left-sided activist)
Polarization Causes	Actions / tone of voice opposition <i>Perception of political opposition’s behavior</i>	“Protest actions have become more and more extreme over the past years.” (P7, Female, left-sided activist)
	Avoiding dialogue <i>Not communicating constructively with opposing side</i>	“It is a very big problem that people do not talk to each other anymore.” (P5, Male, right-sided activist)
	Governmental Distrust <i>Distrust in governmental institutions and authorities</i>	“I experienced that the AIVD (Dutch general intelligence and security service) are monitoring everything.” (P5, Male, right-sided activist)
	Ignorance	“Ignorance is our biggest enemy, people do not know what happens

	<i>Lack of knowledge and awareness</i>	in the agricultural sector” (P8, Organization, right-sided)
	Media <i>Information dissemination through various channels</i>	“The media relishes extreme actions and reinforces division with sensation-seeking titles and stories.” (P7, Female, left-sided activist)
	Populism <i>Anti-established order ideology</i>	“I think language use and populism by politicians plays a role in dividing society” (P1, Female, left-sided activist)
Polarization experiences	Not understanding opposition <i>Impossibility to understand thoughts of opposition</i>	“I cannot really understand individuals who have done their research and still decide to vote for right-sided.” (P1, Female, left-sided activist)
	Understanding opposition <i>Possibility of understanding thoughts of opposition</i>	“If you can show empathy, you can understand everyone” (P6, Male, left-sided activist)
Resistance	Governmental resistance <i>Confrontations with authorities</i>	“The right for demonstration is getting restricted” (P7, Female, left-sided activist)
	Other protesters <i>Counter protests by political opposition</i>	“I always have a fear for counter protesters.” (P3, Female, left-sided activist)

	Personal environment resistance <i>Disagreement about actions with family and friends</i>	“My parents worry about my physical health and my future whenever I participate in activism”. (P7, Female, left-sided activist)
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In the semi-structured interviews, there is flexibility for the participants to express their feelings in a way they feel most comfortable with. However, it is expected that there will be subjects that occur more often than others. Firstly, it is expected that participants refer to the lack of clarity given by centrist parties, where radical parties profit from by being as clear as possible with their extremist views (Silva, 2017). Secondly, it is expected that participants refer to the language use of the media as a factor in polarization, because certain media tends to strive for sensational stories to attract viewers. This can lead to the framing of people to be more at odds with each other than they in reality are (Prior, 2013). Thirdly, it is expected that participants refer to the tone of voice of the opposing society group, because studies have found that language use plays a role in creating toxic or uncivil environments (Hiaeshutter-Rice & Hawkins, 2022). The semi-structured interviews will shed lights on these expectations.

Ethical considerations

Conducting a sensitive research like this one, where participants are asked to share their thoughts and beliefs, comes with ethical guidelines to consider. Firstly, all interviewed participants were asked to read a consent form prior to the interviews. When all was considered fine, they signed the consent form, and the interviews took place. The consent form can be found in appendix B. All answers that are given by the participants are kept completely confidential and anonymous by keeping the transcriptions only to the researcher,

on a password protected laptop. The demographic questions were reduced to only the necessary information, to optimize the anonymity of all participants. All interviews were transcribed, and the resulting data was preserved. The names of the participants were not written down, personal information is anonymized and only the researcher knows which answers were provided by which participants.

Results

This section aims to describe the findings of the semi-structured interviews with the activists from both sides of the political spectrum. These findings will contribute to answering the research question; *“What motivates people to take part in political activism, do these motivations differ between left-sided and right-sided activists, and how does this contribute to political polarization?”* The first part of the research question is about the motivations to participate in activism activities, and if there is a difference between left-sided and right-sided activists.

Motivations

The participants explained that their motivation to resort to activism starts with an extrinsic motivation and over time becomes an intrinsically motivated activity. Examples of these extrinsic motivations are willingness to belong to a social group, interests in certain subjects, and recognition. An example of this is that three of the participants who were interested in climate change stated that it all started with an interest in nature at a youthful age. This further developed into the feeling that the environment should be protected, and this results into an intrinsic motivation to protect nature and the environment with activism. The quote below shows this process;

“I have always been interested in nature, and from the moment I was in college and got lessons about climate change I really started worrying about climate change. This evolved in actively advocating for climate action.” (P3, left-sided activist)

This process of being extrinsically motivated over time changing to being intrinsically motivated is captured by the Self-Determination Theory by Ryan & Deci (2000). This study explains that the final stage of motivation includes deep-lying beliefs and values, and a strong feeling of advocating for these values. Activists in this study all stated that they are

intrinsically motivated, but always started with an extrinsic motivation. For the left-sided participants in this study, these extrinsic motivations are, for example, an interest in nature, or growing up in a less wealthy family. These extrinsic motivations over time transform into intrinsic motivations like a desire for equality and a passion for protecting the environment. Right-sided participants in this study were extrinsically motivated by, for example, unpleasant experiences with minorities, or a work-related concern. These extrinsic motivations transform over time into intrinsic motivations like Nationalism, economic conservatism, and personal responsibility.

Creating awareness

An important goal of the activists in this study is creating awareness. The participants aim to educate the public about social, environmental, and political issues which they find important. By sharing information that is not accessible for everyone, the participants strive to highlight injustices to a new audience to provoke critical thinking. Online activism plays a role in creating awareness, sharing informative social media posts or dates of protests & demonstrations can spark conversations. One left-sided activist even stated; *“If I can inspire only one person by sharing my thoughts and beliefs, I would be very happy”* (P1, left-sided activist). Also a part of creating awareness is confronting the public with what is happening in the world. For example, by sharing sometimes absurd videos of the way animals are treated, how climate change causes floods, how farmers are treated, activists strive to show people how important it is to make a change in society. *“It is my goal to confront people and show them what reality we live in, to create the feeling of wanting to do more. Sometimes this leads to big steps, but it always starts with small, feasible changes”* (P1, left-sided activist).

Creating awareness helps to ensure that people are conscious of the choices they make. Five out of the six Left-sided activists in this study (P1, P2, P3, P4, and P7) say that certain

habits, like eating meat, are harmful for the environment, but are normalized in society. Due to this normalization, people are not aware of the harm it does to society, the left-sided activists in this study aim to make people aware of this.

“I think people sometimes forget that small changes can make a huge difference, I try to make people aware of this” (P1, left-sided activist)

Right-sided activists are also active on social media, it seems however that this is more about sharing their thoughts and beliefs, and less about creating awareness. Only three comments about creating awareness were shared in the two interviews with right-sided participants. Two of these comments were about the COVID-19 regulations and the other one was about nitrogen reduction regulations from the Dutch governments, which were also the subjects for the farmers protests. See table 1 for an overview of the quotations for activism motivations.

Personal motivation

Another important motivation for activism is a personal motivation. The activists in this study have developed strong personal values and beliefs over time, and the act of advocating for these values provides a sense of fulfillment and authenticity. Interviewees explain that this drive creates a feeling of persistence and resilience, enabling them to face challenges and opposition with determination. Even without immediately achieving notable results through their activism, the personal feelings of courage to stand up for their own beliefs are empowering on a personal level. One activist stated in the interview;

“My most important motivation? If I am completely honest, I am doing it mainly for myself. Maybe that sounds crazy, but previously, I always felt powerless in this situation. I am really worried about the climate crisis, but sometimes I feel like I cannot do anything, because the actions do not make an immediate impact. However, these feelings exist, but I am still

convinced that I am doing the right things, even if it does not make any impact, I feel good. I think that is my most important motivation.” (P3, left-sided activist)

Table two provides an overview of the most important activism motivations that were stated in the interviews. The table also shows the difference in motivations for left- and right-sided activists, illustrating the number of quotations per ideology, and also the number of participants that mentioned this motivation in the interviews. Table two reveals that a personal motivation is the biggest motivator of the activists in this study. It also reveals that left-sided activists are more motivated by creating awareness than right-sided activists.

Table 2, quotations for activism motivations

Activism motivation	Transcript passages left	Transcript passages right	Total interviewees left	Total interviewees right
Making change	23	3	5	2
Creating awareness	26	2	6	2
Personal	49	7	5	2

Environmental influences

The environment in which a person grows up plays a role in shaping people’s political beliefs. In the interview with a member of the protest organization advocating for farmers justice, this member told me that concerns for farmers are motivated by personal connections with farmers, through family or friends. The perception that your loved ones are being restricted from doing what they love is a feeling that sparks a motivation to advocate against these restrictions. Additionally, a left-sided activist spoke about her discussions with her right-oriented uncle, who is a farmer. He expresses uncertainty about his future as a farmer, because

he felt like he was being oppressed to change his behavior in a way that was not possible for him. This also specifically applies for a motivation that influences someone's direct life.

“My uncle is right-oriented and also farmer, he is currently doubting his future as a farmer due to climate regulations, and I am protesting against this, those are sometimes heated discussions.” (P3, left-sided activist)

Resistance

Activists are bound to encounter resistance at various points in time. The left-sided activists experienced the most resistance through their personal environment. Four out of the six left-sided participants stated that they have a different political worldview than (one of) their parents, making it harder to justify their actions. One left-sided participant explained that her father is a Christian, resulting in the fact that they were completely at odds with each other about big subjects like climate change, and gender identification. This disagreement causes them not to talk much about politics together. One participant explained that she disagreed with her family about what is most important; *“My family sometimes thinks that our economy should be number one, and the human and environmental rights not, that is a discussion point, I sometimes experience this as very difficult.”* (P7, left-sided activist). Although there was a lot of disagreement with the participants and their parents, all of the participants explained that the disagreement is always spoken about with respect.

Resistance from friends does not bother the activists as much as the resistance from family does. Participants said that they surrounded themselves with like-minded people in a natural way. P1, P2, P4, and P7, all left-sided activists, stated this in roughly the same way; *“I am not really in contact with many political opponents, because I do not really engage in those circles. It is not particularly a conscious decision, but I think that always happens naturally”* (P3, left-sided activist).

The right-sided activists in this study experienced the most resistance from the government. Each of the two right-sided participants indicated that governmental instances were their biggest source of resistance. The police are an example of a governmental instance. A right-sided activist that participated in this study said that the police started filming the demonstrators when he first participated in a protest against Covid-19 regulations. This fed his already existing distrust in the government.

Perceptions of polarization

The second part of the research question for this study is about political polarization between left-sided, and right-sided activists. Polarization in the form of differentiating values is not present in this study, the participants from both side stated that they just want to create a better world, inspired by their own values, and that they believe that activists from the opposing ideology want the same thing. All activists in this study see the importance of maintaining dialogue between each other. All participants agree that it is of crucial value to foster mutual understanding and reduce the existing polarization. The theory of partisanship shows evidence of hatred between individuals based on a preference of ideology. The data in this study contradicts that claim.

The activists in this study do not see their opposing activists as their enemy, but rather as individuals who also want the world to be a better place, with different methods to achieve that. There is respect for opposing activists, because they also have their own ideals and make a stand for them, it is no different than what they are doing themselves. One left-sided participant summarized this general feeling in the interview;

“Sometimes I ask myself, do we not want the exact same thing in essence? The way we look at it is very different, but everyone wants the world to be a better place. The right-sided

activists are not here to mess up our lives, they just have their own beliefs and make a stance for it, I cannot be mad at that.”

So, the activists in this study, on both sides of the political spectrum, do not want a polarized society, and think it is especially important to maintain communication and dialogue between both sides.

All activists in this study emphasize the importance of maintaining dialogue, but at the same time, there is a feeling that opposing activists are not interested or open for this dialogue. At the core, the participants are really open for this communication, but in society, the perception that this is not the case causes a polarized society where dialogue is avoided. A right-sided activist in this study stated this as follows; *“I could also try to convince you, Bas, and you could try to convince me, we all have arguments why we think certain things, and that is totally okay. It is however a big problem that people do not seem to listen to each other anymore, I think it is incredibly important to keep listening to each other”* (P5, right-sided activist).

This avoidance of dialogue is therefore both a result of this perception of polarization, and a causer of the perception of polarization. So, according to the interviewees, polarization itself is not the problem, but the perception of polarization is the problem.

The perception of polarization is not caused by left-sided and right-sided activists themselves, but by external factors. These external factors influence how individuals perceive and interpret social divisions. These factors also shape the manner in which issues are framed, which can therefore reinforce the feeling of being in conflict with the opposing ideology. As a result, the way people experience different viewpoints becomes more polarized. The external factors that were mentioned by the participants for creating the perception of polarization are the media, language use, extremeness of actions, and ignorance.

Media

One of these external factors that creates the perception of polarization is the media. In this study, all eight participants stated that the media plays a role in polarizing society. Over the eight interviews, the media was mentioned twenty-nine times as a cause of polarization. The participants express the feeling that activists are being framed as political enemies by the media through emphasizing their most extreme viewpoints, and portraying conflicts and differences. This emphasis creates division between the political left and right, according to all participants. Activists describe this feeling as follows; *“I think the media plays a huge role in polarization, because information is getting distorted for more views”* (P7, left-sided activist). And *“The media has a big influence on polarization, their language use reinforces populism, and they portray division between groups”* (P4, left-sided activist)

Another effect the media has on society, according to the participants, is the perception that you are forced to choose between left and right. This portrayal was outlined by a left-sided activist who did not like the division as being ‘left’ or ‘right’. This participant experienced this while she was protesting on the highway for Extinction Rebellion, and Farmers Defense Force was coincidentally protesting at the same time. The media immediately portrayed this as a rivalry, even though it was never confirmed that one of the protests was a counter protest.

In this study, a substantial difference between left-sided activists and right-sided activists regarding the media, is the trust in mainstream media. Left-sided activists generally trust mainstream media outlets, believing them to be credible sources of information. Alternatively, the right-sided activists in this study were skeptical towards mainstream media outlets. A right-sided activist in this study even said that all journalist students in the Netherlands are being educated as left-oriented “deugmensje”, which is an informal, semi-degrading name for individuals who consider themselves as morally upright. This

participant's perception that journalists are all educated from a left-sided perspective feeds this perception that the media is one-sided.

Language use

Combined with the actions of the opposing activists, it has been mentioned forty-one times that the tone of voice of the opposing side plays a role in polarizing society. Seven out of eight interviewees classified this as a polarization cause.

Language use plays a role in creating the perception of polarization, by reinforcing the already existing division in society. Emotionally charged language can escalate conflicts and deepen existing divides by framing issues in strong us-versus-them terms. The repetition of divisive rhetoric in everyday conversations reinforces group identities, resulting in the further entrenching of opposing viewpoints (Simchon et al., 2022). The language users this study refers to are politicians and activists themselves.

Participants state that the language used by politicians in political environments contributes to the avoidance of dialogue, a direct result of the perceived polarization. Politicians set a poor example in how they communicate with one another. Discussions are necessary in politics, nowadays, politicians insulting other politicians or another ideology in political discourse seems no exception however; *“The politicians in The Hague themselves set a poor example for the rest of society, they all call each other out and never let the other finish their story”* (P5, right-sided activist).

The language use of opposing activists and activist organizations is also an important cause for polarization, according to the interviewees. They explain that language use of activists from the other political ideology can drive activists towards a bigger feeling of aversion towards the other ideology. One participant expressed her fear towards counter protesters, because of their threatening tone; *“I am always slightly afraid of people who*

organize counter protests, because they always come across as very violent and threatening” (P7, left activist). This threatening tone drives ideologies further away from each other.

In the interviews that were conducted among right-sided activists, a different tone was observed in relation to the interviews with left-sided participants. Right-sided activists use more cynical labels for their political opponents than the left-sided do. In all interviews with left-sided activists, the opposition was never indicated with cynical labels. Examples of these labels that the right-sided participants used for the left-sided , are ‘deugmensjes (morally upright individuals, P5)’, left trolls (P5), and objects (P5). The idea that left-sided individuals are all petty, hypersensitive, or fragile is fixed in the mind of right-sided individuals, which is also evident from the interviews. The idea that left individuals are significantly more fragile than right-sided individuals, and the forthcoming cynical labels for this phenomenon, is an example of language use that drives individuals and ideologies further away from each other.

Actions

the protest actions and demonstrations of the opposing group also causes more aversion towards each other, because the actions have become more extreme. Blocking the highway for twelve days, Breaking into CEO meetings to ask about their climate plans, riding tractors onto the Malieveld in The Hague, all examples of extreme actions that can lead to reactions or irritations, because it interrupts people’s daily lives. One left-sided participant who claimed that the extremeness of the actions is a strong causer for polarization, stated; *“The Extinction Rebellion actions on the highway are a lot more serious than tying yourself to a tree with a little board. No, those are actions in which the police and even the military gets involved.”* (P7, left-sided activist). She gave the example of farmers riding their tractors into city halls; *“those are not peaceful protests, but vandalism. The state has to pay a lot of money,*

because activists take matters into their own hands. This causes polarization.” (P7, left-sided participant)

The activists in this study argue that the only way to achieve political change is extreme actions, and one can certainly make a claim for that. This study shows however, that it is a big cause for polarization. As mentioned, actions and language use by opposing ideologies were mentioned 41 times, 28 times by left-sided participants and 13 times by right-sided participants, in all left-sided interviews and one of the two right-sided interviews.

Ignorance

There is also a perception of ignorance from one side of the political spectrum to the other, as the participants mentioned. This divides the political landscape even further. Participants from the left side have this conviction that right-oriented people do not know what ideology they stand for when voting for right-oriented parties. Right-sided participants on the other hand, have a conviction that left-sided activists turn their back on certain parts of society, and have impossible goals when it comes to subjects like the environment, migration, and economy. The perception of ignorance is engraved in the minds of the participants, leading to closed and unconstructive conversations.

A left-sided activist stated; *“I am convinced that right-sided individuals would make a different choice if they were open-minded towards new information”* (P7, left activist). This implies that right-oriented individuals do not sufficiently support the ideology they identify with.

The member of the right-sided pro-farmers organization that participated in this study even says; *“Ignorance is our biggest opposition”* (P8, right-sided protest organization). In the interview, the member states that left-sided activists are completely ignorant, and that the organization feels powerless through that. The gap between the countryside and the city is

becoming bigger and bigger, resulting in more ignorance about farmers. The participant states that it is frightening how many children think that their milk comes from a factory, and not from a cow. Their goal is to close this gap and make people more aware of where their food comes from.

Table 3, quotations of polarization causes

Polarization cause	Transcript passages left-sided	Transcript passages right-sided	Total interviewees left-sided	Total interviewees right-sided
Avoiding dialogue	17	12	5	1
Media	18	9	5	2
Language use and extremeness of actions	28	13	6	1
Ignorance	29	7	6	2
Governmental distrust	9	16	2	1

Table three shows the number of quotations per polarization cause that were conducted from the interviews. It shows that language use and extremeness of actions, media, avoiding dialogue, and ignorance are all strong causers of polarization. It also shows that right-sided participants identify the media as a polarization cause more often than left-sided participants, relative to the research population.

Internal polarization

Polarization not only exists between opposing sides of the political spectrum, but also within both sides of the political spectrum. There are also significant differences within the groups.

One participant exemplified this phenomenon by identifying as left-sided, but participating in demonstrations against Covid-19 regulations, which were considered right-sided demonstrations. In his eyes, this image that these protests were right-sided was a misconception. Ideologies within the general left, namely Anarchists, organized counterprotests against the Covid-19 demonstrations. Anarchism is an ideology to which this participant feels strongly connected. During this counterprotest, the participant who protested against the Covid-19 regulations sparked up a conversation with these counter protesters and told them that he felt betrayed by them, because the anarchists said they were protesting against a right-sided protest, he obviously did not agree with that.

This shows that polarization can also occur within a side of the political spectrum, because the left-sided participant felt strong feelings of aversion towards an ideology to which he strongly feels connected.

Discussion

Conclusion

This study was conducted to answer the following research question; “What motivates people to take part in political activism, do these motivations differ between left-sided and right-sided activists, and how does this contribute to political polarization?” To investigate this question, semi-structured interviews were performed among left-sided, and right-sided activists. This research question can be divided into two main sections, motivations, and polarization.

The first part is about motivation, this study explains that left-sided and right-sided activists are often driven by similar underlying motivations. A personal motivation in the form of creating a sensation of self-fulfillment and authenticity through standing up for your own ideals and values is an important reason to keep on participating in activism movements. Left-sided activists tend to emphasize this self-fulfillment as a motivator a little more than the right-sided activists, because of more mentions in the interviews, even though the right-sided participants also feels like this is a huge motivator.

Another important motivation to participate in activism movements is creating awareness. The goal with creating awareness is educating people about societal and political issues. There is a general feeling among the participants of this study that a big part of society does not really care about these issues, because not all the facts are known to the public. By sharing these facts, more people can evolve their opinion and make a stance for it.

The process of motivation was also captured in this study. The process of getting into activism starts with extrinsic motivations like a general interest, or the sense of belonging to a group, and over time becomes an intrinsic motivation where the activism is motivated by

deep-rooted personal values and beliefs. The self-determination theory by Ryan and Deci (2000) captures this process of motivation.

Resistance is always encountered in activism, there will always be people who agree and people who disagree with your opinion. There will also be moments where people disagree with the actions that are participated in. Individuals in an activists' personal environment can be worried about the well-being of their loved one who participates in activism activities. They might think that their future or physical health is on the line. This type of resistance was mostly encountered by left-sided activists in this study. This personal environment mostly consisted of family and friends who were anxious for the consequences of activism of their loved one.

Governmental resistance also plays a part in activism, conflicts with the police while participating in activism movements is a part of governmental resistance. The Netherlands is blessed with a right of demonstration, and it is the police's task to protect activists who are demonstrating. Despite this right of demonstration, confrontations with the police occur frequently. Activists are persistent individuals and might not always listen to or cooperate with police officers. More extremely, protesters can get frustrated with police officers and start opposing the police, causing riots to unfold. Especially the protests against the Covid-19 regulations in The Netherlands showed this behavior. Right-sided activists reported experiencing more resistance by the government than left-sided activists, mostly in the form of confrontation with the police officers. There is also a perception that the police are considerably more friendly towards left-sided activists.

The second part of the research question is about political polarization between left-sided and right-sided activists. Polarization refers to the process or state where opinions, beliefs, or behaviors in a society or group become more extreme and divided into opposing camps. In short, a difference in values and beliefs. These values and beliefs result in a sense of

partisanship, where individuals feel a strong psychological connection towards a political party with a certain ideology. The theory of partisanship shows evidence of ideological differences leading to aversion towards the opposing ideology. The data in this study, however, contradicts that claim.

The values and beliefs of left-sided and right-sided activists in this study do not differ that much. Although it being in different ways, activists in this study want to create a better world. Activists in this study also see the importance of maintaining dialogue between opposing ideologies. According to the participants in this study, polarization in the form of differentiating values is not necessarily there. Which means that external factors create the perception that the values of these opposing groups differ and therefore reinforce political polarization.

Firstly, the media plays a role in polarizing society. Often using sensation-seeking stories, media outlets prioritize more engagement over supplying stories that are 100% true. Media outlets are extremely interested in framing opposing groups as enemies, to create sensational stories and generate engagement. This reinforces the feeling of being at odds with the political opposition. Also social media, where everything can be shared with a massive audience. Algorithms prioritize content that generates strong reactions, often using provocative posts to fuel these reactions and engagement. Misinformation is also rapidly spread through social media, because of the easiness of spreading all kinds of media. Social media can also be used to unify and mobilize activists to quickly set up a protest or demonstration. The anonymity of social media can also lead to more hostile behavior, therefore creating a larger division in society.

Additionally, language use by politicians and other activists plays a role in polarizing society. Politicians do not always give the right example when it comes to maintaining conversation and dialogue. Discussions are part of politics, personally attacking comments are

not necessarily a part of politics. However, these personally attacking comments are no rare sight in today's political environment. Almost everything in today's society is publicly available, so individuals can interpret these personal attacks as usual. So, politicians themselves also play a role in dividing society by the way they discuss political topics.

In the same way the language use of politicians divides society, the language use of opposing activists also divides society. The interviews showed that activists can get very irritated and frustrated by comments that the opposing side of the political spectrum makes. When activists use hostile language to describe their political opponents, they foster an environment of distrust and animosity. The use of this sort of language often exaggerates differences and stereotypes, creating an 'us vs. them' environment. Interviews showed that namely right-sided activists use degrading nicknames for left-sided activists on a frequent basis.

Today's demonstrations and protests can be very extreme, often including heightened levels of aggression and confrontation. This extremeness can result in clashes with authority and counterprotests. Leading to increased violence and damage. For example, the protests by Extinction Rebellion where a big highway in The Netherlands was blocked for twelve days straight, significantly interrupts people's daily lives. This triggers frustration and anger towards the protesters. Another extreme action was the protest by the farmers where they all parked their tractors in a big park in The Hague, actions like this are more extreme and cause stronger reactions, therefore dividing society heavily. Activists argue that this is the only way to achieve significant political change, and a claim can certainly be made for that, but that it reinforces polarization is also undeniably true.

Lastly, ignorance is a huge causer of polarization. Ignorance always plays a role in extremist worldviews, and politics is no exception. Left-sided activists have a general feeling that right-sided voters are not always aware of what ideology they are supporting with their

vote, which frustrates them. Right-sided individuals feel like left-sided protesters strive for unrealistic goals, and sometimes say they are lost in their fantasy world. On their turn, left-sided activists say that the right-sided closes their eyes for the climate crisis, and right-sided say that the left-sided closes their eyes for the agricultural sector. As said, ignorance is always there with extremist worldviews, and the perception that individuals on the opposing side of the political spectrum are ignorant towards subjects that are important to you, creates frustration, division, and polarization.

A conclusion that is not part of the answer to the research question, but is remarkably interesting nevertheless, is the finding that polarization also occurs within left-sided and right-sided. This study contained a left-sided individual that felt betrayed by certain groups within the general left, while the participant considers himself extremely left-oriented.

Misconceptions about the protests against Covid-19 regulations were the reason for this internal polarization. Anarchists, a left-oriented ideology to which the participant felt very connected to, classified the Covid-19 protests as a right-sided protest, to which the participant obviously did not agree. He even stated that they abandoned him and chose the side of the repressive government. This participant explained that he sometimes feels at odds with left-sided individuals or groups, because he entirely disagrees with them about certain topics. Right-sided participants in this study did not specify these feelings, there are a number of subgroups within the general right, so the assumption that internal polarization also occurs within the general right is valid.

Limitations

This study experienced difficulties in finding right-sided activists willing to participate. Despite extensive efforts, only two right-sided activists were interviewed, opposed to six left-sided activists. Potentially affecting the balance and representativeness of the findings. The limited engagement from right-sided individuals was characterized by

skepticism towards the researcher and the University, highlighting their known skepticism towards academics (Staerklé et al., 2022). This skepticism was evident from the comments the researcher received, including questions about data use, pretending not to be connected to right-sided ideologies and skepticism about the recruitment process. Several protest organizations, including the JFVD, PVV Jongeren, JongJA21, BBBjong, Pegida, and Viruswaarheid were contacted for participation, but either declined or did not respond. Despite this, the researcher aimed to represent both sides fairly in the analysis.

Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data, which may be influenced by social desirability, especially because two interviewees were acquaintances of the interviewer. This could lead to under- or overreporting of certain beliefs and behaviors.

The interview with a member of a right-sided protest organization also posed a limitation. The organization initially declined due to time constraints. The researcher sent the interview questions via email and received extensive written answers. Although the answers were extensive, this is not comparable to an interview where deep-lying beliefs are discussed.

This study examines the differences in motivations and polarization between left- and right-sided activists, acknowledging significant variation within these groups. Internal polarization is briefly addressed in the results, showing that individuals within the same ideology do not necessarily agree with each other. Due to time constraints, this study could not comprehensively account for intra-group differences, but it is interesting to assess the differences between ideologies that are more intricately connected.

Applications for future research

The grounded theory, along with the sensitizing concepts serves as a great starting point for future research, because the findings of the sensitizing concepts are closely aligned with the participants' real-world experiences and perspectives. The researcher delved deeply

into these complex social phenomena, capturing the nuances and subtleties of individuals' motivations and view on polarization. This depth of understanding is valuable in sensitive areas like activism and polarization, where these motivations and influences are complex and multifaceted.

Future research should focus on gaining more trust from right-sided activists. This is crucial for open communication, and for recruiting participants. Establishing trust can lead to a more cooperative and engaged participant group. I suggest visiting protests by right-sided protest organizations, and speaking directly to the activists, due to time constraints, I was not able to do this.

Additionally, future research should consider including a bigger sample, to enhance the generalizability of the findings, and ensure that the results are applicable to a broader group of activists. This also reduces the margin of error and provides a more precise and reliable estimate of characteristics of activists. With this bigger sample, it is also possible to include variation within the subgroups left and right, so conclusions can also be drawn about ideologies that are more closely related.

Important takeaways

This study's activists' motivations to participate in activism often begin as extrinsic, but evolve into intrinsic over time. Left- and right-sided activists in this study gain a sense of fulfillment and authenticity by standing up for their personal values and beliefs, even if it does not lead to immediate political change. Another key-motivator for activists is creating awareness, particularly for the left-sides activists in this study. The participants in this study indicated that polarization is not their goal, they instead acknowledge the importance of maintaining dialogue and respect. Rather, a perception of polarization is created by external

factors such as media influence, language use by politicians and other activists, ignorance, and the extremity of actions.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Interview Guide

Thank you for participating in this interview. The insights that are gathered thanks to you are valuable to our understanding of people’s motivations for activism and the contribution to political polarization. This interview aims to gather perspectives on the thoughts and beliefs of individuals who identify themselves as activists.

By engaging in this interview, you are contributing to a deeper understanding of what drives individuals towards activist behavior and identification.

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary, and all the information that you give will be kept confidential and anonymous. You are free to withdraw your participation at any point in the interview whenever you feel uncomfortable or are willing to stop. If this is the case, you can let me know and we can pause or end the interview.

Before we start the interview, I would like to briefly outline the structure of this interview. I will start with some general questions to help establish context and background information. Secondly, I will ask more specific questions related to the environmental influences you experience, your activist activity, your motivations for activism, and the last part of the interview will be about political polarization between the opposing sides of the political spectrum.

Once again, thanks a lot for your participation, and I really look forward to our conversation.

1. Demographics
 - a. What is your age?
 - b. What is your gender identity?
 - c. What is your nationality?

d. What is your highest level of education completed?

2. Environmental influences

a. In what manner did you talk about politics and societal issues with your family back in the days?

b. Do you feel like most people around you growing up shared the same political opinions?

i. What did everyone agree on?

ii. What did everyone disagree on?

1. Can you tell me about a particular time people disagreed?

c. Do you talk about politics and societal issues at your work?

i. Do you agree or disagree with most of your colleagues?

d. How do you talk about politics and societal issues with your friends?

i. Do you agree or disagree with most of your friends?

3. Activist activity

a. Can you describe a particularly memorable experience you had taking political action? What motivated you to stand up in that particular situation?

b. What role do you think activism plays in achieving the political changes you would like to see?

c. Would you consider yourself an activist? Why/why not?

d. Have you ever felt oppression while engaging in activist movements? How did you respond to this, and what did you learn?

i. Who or what made you feel oppressed?

4. Motivations for activist activity

a. What is your most important motivation to resort to activism?

i. Where did this motivation come from? (E.g., a past experience or environment; extrinsic or intrinsic motivation)

b. How do you see your activism contributing to a positive change in society?

5. Polarization

a. Can you describe how you think about your political opposition? (left-sided and right-sided)

i. Do you feel like you could have a meaningful conversation with someone who felt that [respond to something they have noted as important to them]?

ii. Do you feel like the two sides could reach an agreement? Why/Why not?

b. What are key factors that contribute to polarization between left-sided and right-sided activist groups in your opinion?

That concludes the interview. Thanks once again for your time and contributions to this research study. Your perspective has provided important insights that will enrich our understanding of what motivates people towards activism behavior and political polarization. This contributes to the knowledge in this field.

Your participation is deeply appreciated, and your confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained throughout the duration of this study. If you have any questions or additional thoughts related to the research topic, please feel free to contact me!

Appendix B – Consent form



INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Motivations of left-sided and right-sided activists and polarization

Principle investigator

Dr. SM Laparle

Researcher

Bas Naalden - School of Humanities and Digital Sciences, Tilburg University

Project overview

In times of increasing polarization and division in society, it is important to understand where this comes from. This study focuses on the motivations of left-sided and right-sided activists if there is a difference between both ideologies and how this contributes to political polarization. For understanding polarization, it is important to keep communicating with both ideologies. This study seeks to contribute to this understanding by interviewing individuals that fit the description of left-sided or right-sided activist, about their values, beliefs, motivations, and thoughts about the opposing ideology.

This interview will take 30 to 60 minutes. The interview will be recorded, transcribed, and coded to gather important results. Obtained data will stay confidential and anonymized and will be kept until the end of this study. After completing the study, you have the right to rectify any information that you have given to the researcher. Access to the interview will be limited to the researcher, Bas Naalden, and the principle director, Dr. SM Laparle.

Signature

By signing this informed consent form, you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Signing this form does not interfere with your right to withdraw from this study at any time without an explanation.

By signing this informed consent form, I (the participant) confirm that I have read and understood the entire information letter and confirm that:

- I have read and understood the entire information letter that belongs to this study.
- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the study. and that these questions were answered to my complete satisfaction.
- I had sufficient time to decide whether I would participate or not.
- I know that participation is completely voluntary.
- I know that the duration of the study is 30 to 60 minutes.
- I know I can decide to withdraw from the study at any time, without any negative consequences and without providing any explanation.
- I know I have the right, in principle, to request access to and rectify, erase, restrict or object to the processing of my personal data.
- I know that my research data will be processed as described in the information letter and only the researcher team have access to this data.
- I give permission to use my research data for the purposes that are mentioned in the information letter that belongs to this study.
- I give permission to store my research data for the period of 10 years.

I hereby voluntarily agree to participate in the study:
Motivations of left-sided and right-sided activists and polarization

Name participant:

Signature:

Date : ____ / ____ / _____

To be completed by the researcher:

I hereby declare that I have fully informed the above-mentioned participant about this study.

Name researcher:

Signature:

Date : ____ / ____ / _____
