



PERFORMATIVE CONTINGENCY AND AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

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Original scientific paper – Received: 30/09/2025 Accepted: 23/04/2026

This paper is part of a book symposium on Manuel Almagro's *The Rise of Polarization: Affects, Politics, and Philosophy* guest edited by Miguel Núñez de Prado Gordillo (University of Granada) and Manuel Almagro (University of Valencia)

ABSTRACT

Recent philosophical approaches to affective polarization have moved beyond purely identitarian and emotivist frameworks, emphasizing instead its multi-dimensional structure. In *The Rise of Polarization* (2025), Manuel Almagro identifies five core dimensions—identity, emotion, narrative, credence, and linguistic expression—and argues that political attitudes are shaped not only by ideological commitments but also by life-course contingencies, including socio-economic trajectories and biographical exposures that influence partisan attachments.

This paper builds on Almagro's analysis while introducing performative contingency as an additional and analytically distinct dimension of affective polarization. Drawing on Greg Myers' work (2004), we argue that political opinions should not be understood solely as relatively stable attitudes articulated through linguistic practices, but also as socially enacted within specific discursive contexts that shape whether, where, and how political views are expressed. While Almagro explicitly recognizes the context-sensitivity of political utterances, our contribution consists in making this performative dimension analytically explicit as a distinct aspect of affective polarization.

Integrating performative contingency refines the philosophical understanding of affective polarization by highlighting the synchronic contingencies of opinion expression alongside the diachronic contingencies of socialization emphasized in existing accounts. As discussed by Myers (2004), measuring polarization solely through survey responses or public statements risks conflating stable partisan commitments with context-driven performances. Likewise, interventions aimed at mitigating polarization must address not only belief revision and emotional regulation but also the institutional and discursive formats—media architectures, debate structures, and civic forums—that shape the public enactment of political opinion.

While performative contingency may not always be the primary driver of polarization, we argue that it constitutes a pervasive and analytically indispensable dimension of the phenomenon.

Keywords: affective polarization; opinion expression; performative contingency.

1. Introduction

Philosophical analyses of political polarization have, in recent years, increasingly recognized the limits of purely ideological or belief-centered models (Talisso 2021). The phenomenon known as affective polarization—broadly defined as the moralization tendency for individuals to experience negative emotions, othering, and aversion towards members of opposing political groups—has become central in this reconceptualization and empirical research (Campos and Federico 2025; Druckman et al. 2021; Iyengar, Leikes, and Levendusky 2019; Iyengar, Sood, and Leikes 2012; Webster and Abramowitz 2017; Westwood et al. 2019). Unlike ideological polarization, which concerns the divergence of policy positions or doctrinal commitments, affective polarization primarily concerns the social distance between political groups and the affective alignments that structure partisan identities. It concerns the attachments individuals form to political in-groups, and the corresponding aversion or animosity they feel towards out-groups (Tappin and McKay 2019). This distinction, first systematically developed in political science by scholars such as Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Leikes (2012), has been further elaborated in philosophical work aimed at exploring its epistemological, social, legal and normative implications (Broncano-Berrocal and Carter 2021; Garrett and Bankert 2020; Kingzette et al. 2021; Lavorerio 2023; Sunstein 2002).

A particularly significant contribution to this evolving debate is offered by Manuel Almagro's recent book, *The Rise of Polarization* (2025), which articulates what he terms a "multi-dimensional" account of affective polarization (Almagro 2025, 58). Almagro's model rejects the now-familiar "two-dimensional" view—focused narrowly on identity and emotion—and identifies instead additional constitutive dimensions: narrative, credence, and linguistic expression (Almagro 2025, Ch. 3). Political identities, Almagro argues, are inseparable from the narratives through which partisan groups frame social and political issues; from the credence structures that determine how strongly individuals hold these narratives to be true; and from the linguistic practices through which these attachments are articulated and reinforced in public discourse.

What makes Almagro's account particularly relevant for philosophical reflection is the attention he gives to the role of contingency in the formation of partisan commitments. Where one lives, what one is exposed to, and which experiences one undergoes—all these factors can tilt the balance toward one political identity or another. In this sense, affective polarization is not simply the expression of commitments that arise independently of such factors; rather, many of our partisan attachments

themselves emerge through the contingent circumstances of social environments and biographical trajectories. Almagro repeatedly emphasizes how exposure to particular social contexts, narratives, and material conditions can shape the identities and commitments through which individuals come to interpret political reality (Almagro 2025, 7, 79–80, 88–89). However, while his multidimensional model marks an important advance, the role of contingency in the expression of political opinions is not explicitly theorized as a distinct dimension within the framework. Although Almagro acknowledges that the meaning and force of political utterances may vary across contexts of use (Almagro 2025, 64, 127–129), the situational conditions under which opinions are expressed are not systematically integrated into the model as an analytically distinct component.

We thus argue that a further form of contingency merits explicit philosophical articulation: the performative contingency involved in the expression of political opinions, which brings into view the situational conditions under which partisan commitments are publicly enacted. Drawing on Greg Myers' work in *Matters of Opinion* (2004), we invite reflection on the fact that opinions should not be understood as static mental states or pre-formed beliefs that individuals simply carry around. Rather, opinions are often performed, enacted, and pragmatically shaped within specific discursive contexts—such as focus groups, radio phone-ins, vox pop interviews, and everyday conversations. The expression of opinion is, in this sense, a fundamentally social and situated activity, governed by interactional scripts, institutional formats, and rhetorical conventions.

This performative dimension introduces a distinctive type of contingency. Unlike the life-course contingency emphasized by Almagro—which concerns how past experiences and social positions shape one's stable political attachments—performative contingency concerns the here-and-now conditions under which opinions are expressed, framed, and possibly polarized. The same individual, with the same underlying political beliefs, may express these beliefs in strikingly different ways depending on whether they are speaking in a private conversation, responding to a survey, participating in a televised debate, or being interviewed in the street. These differences are not merely superficial; they can materially affect how polarized public discourse appears, how individuals self-identify politically, and how affective attachments to in-groups and out-groups are reinforced.

Thus, our central thesis is that affective polarization cannot be fully understood without taking into account the performative contingencies of

opinion expression. While this dimension intersects with the linguistic aspects already identified by Almagro, it adds a further layer that warrants independent philosophical attention. Specifically, performative contingency concerns not merely the expressive forms through which identities and narratives are linguistically articulated, but the situational and interactional dynamics that condition whether, how, and to what degree such expressions occur. These dynamics include the format of the discursive setting, the roles assumed by speakers, audience expectations, and institutional framings. As we will argue, treating performative contingency as an analytically distinct dimension allows for a more comprehensive and pragmatically grounded account of affective polarization—one that is sensitive to both the diachronic contingencies of socialization and the synchronic contingencies of interaction. While Almagro acknowledges that the meaning and force of political utterances vary across contexts of use (Almagro 2025, 127–129), the situational dynamics governing how opinions are enacted in specific discursive settings are not explicitly theorized as a distinct dimension of affective polarization. Our aim is therefore not to challenge Almagro’s framework, but to make explicit a performative dimension that is already compatible with his account, yet remains comparatively underdeveloped in his discussion.

The paper unfolds as follows. In §2, we provide a brief reconstruction of the existing philosophical and political-theoretical debate on affective polarization, with particular attention to Almagro’s multidimensional model. In §3, we introduce the notion of performative contingency in detail, drawing on Myers’s work as well as broader philosophical considerations regarding speech acts, social identity, and public discourse, and we articulate our positive proposal: a refined multi-dimensional model of affective polarization that explicitly incorporates performative contingency as a cross-cutting (but independent) dimension. In §4, we discuss the normative and epistemological implications of this expanded model, focusing on issues of measurement, intervention, and public reason. Finally, in the conclusion (§5), we recapitulate our main arguments and suggest directions for future research.

2. From Two-Dimensional to Multi-Dimensional Accounts of Affective Polarization

The philosophical and political-theoretical discussion on polarization over the past fifteen years has reached a broad consensus that politics is becoming increasingly divisive in many modern democracies (Carothers and O’Donohue 2019; Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Hetherington and Weiler

2009; Mason 2013; Sides and Hopkins 2015). However, understanding what polarization consists of and what drives it remains a challenge (Bramson et al. 2017; McCarty 2019). The taxonomy of polarization is complicated by the fact that, at times, the same concept appears under different names, while in other cases, different concepts are referred to by the same name. Almagro captures these difficulties when he refers to the “labyrinth of polarization” (2025, Ch. 2). However, it also increasingly recognized the insufficiency of framing political division purely in terms of ideological content (Rekker 2022). Whereas earlier models emphasized belief divergence (Lord, Ross, and Lepper 1979), or policy preference gaps between political groups (Moscovici and Zavalloni 1969; Myers and Lamm 1979; see also Broncano-Berrocal and Carter 2021; Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006) empirical research across political science and political psychology has shown that ideological polarization often fails to capture what is most distinctive—and most normatively troubling—about contemporary democratic divisions. This shift in focus has been encapsulated in the now widely accepted distinction between ideological polarization and affective polarization (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012).

Ideological polarization, classically defined, refers to the growing distance between political groups in their positions on policy preferences, values, or belief systems. In this sense, polarization concerns the substantive content of political disagreement—namely, how far apart individuals or parties stand on specific issues—rather than the manner in which those disagreements are expressed or the affective relations between political groups (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996). On this view, polarization is measured by mapping where individuals or parties stand on a set of issues and assessing the extent to which these positions cluster toward opposing poles on an ideological spectrum. Such a model was predominant throughout much of the twentieth century, particularly in studies of American political behavior (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Fiorina 2017). Scholars such as Alan Abramowitz and Kyle Saunders (2008), however, have argued that there is little or no indication of increased ideological polarization in American society over the past two to three decades: for large segments of the electorate, issue positions remain centrist or internally inconsistent, even as partisan conflict intensifies.

Affective polarization, by contrast, shifts analytical attention from belief content to social identity and emotional disposition. As formulated by Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012), affective polarization captures the extent to which individuals experience in-group favoritism and out-group animosity vis-à-vis political identities. It is not primarily about what people believe in policy terms, but about whom they like and whom they dislike. This perspective draws on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 2004)

in psychology and emphasizes the deep-seated human tendency to form allegiances and antagonisms based on group membership, even when group distinctions are minimal or arbitrary. Empirical studies have thoroughly investigated affective polarization (Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2024). At the same time, while it offers a more accurate lens for interpreting much of contemporary political behavior, it suffers from conceptual narrowness, and its study remains fraught with theoretical, empirical, and methodological challenges (Torcal and Hartevelde 2025).

The dominant view, what Almagro terms the “two-dimensional” account (2025, 45), conceived affective polarization as reducible to two factors: identity and emotion. Individuals, so the account holds, develop polarized affective dispositions as a direct consequence of their identification with partisan groups and the emotional attachments this identification entails. On this model, polarization is driven by social-psychological mechanisms such as motivated reasoning, in-group loyalty, and out-group prejudice (Kahan 2013, 2017; Kelly 2008; Stanovich 2021; Van Baar and FeldmanHall 2022). Social identity becomes increasingly salient, as party affiliation can reveal not only our positions on a range of political issues but also our preferences in non-political domains, such as moral concerns. Lilliana Mason describes this phenomenon as the formation of “mega-identities, with all the psychological and behavioral magnifications that implies” (2018, 14).

Almagro’s intervention in *The Rise of Polarization* (2025) is significant precisely because it expands this conceptual picture. Building on both philosophical and empirical literatures, Almagro argues (Ch. 5) that affective polarization is in fact a multi-dimensional phenomenon. It is not solely a matter of partisan identity and emotional response, but also involves at least three additional dimensions: narrative, credence, and linguistic expression. These additional dimensions enrich the analytical framework and help account for the complexity of real-world polarization processes.

The narrative dimension refers to the discursive structures through which political identities are articulated and sustained (see Almagro 2025, Ch. 4). According to Almagro, polarized societies are characterized not merely by conflicting identities, but by competing political narratives that organize public discourse around divisive issues. These narratives are not just rhetorical devices; they serve as epistemic frameworks that shape how individuals interpret facts, evaluate arguments, and construct political meaning. Polarization, in this sense, is inseparable from the proliferation of mutually exclusive storylines regarding topics such as immigration (Ollershaw and Jardina 2023), trust in science (O’Connor and

Weatherall 2018), climate change (Kahan et al. 2012; Falkenberg et al. 2022) extremism and freedom of speech (Sunstein 2009).

The credence dimension complements the narrative dimension by focusing on the strength of individuals' commitment to these narratives. Almagro emphasizes that polarization is not simply a matter of endorsing a given narrative, but also of believing it with varying degrees of confidence.¹ The more credence individuals invest in a particular partisan narrative, the more impervious they become to countervailing evidence or opposing viewpoints. This dimension helps explain why affectively polarized individuals often exhibit what David Bordonaba and Neftalí Villanueva (2018) have termed “impervious reasoning”—a form of epistemic closure that resists correction even in the face of factual refutation.

Finally, the linguistic dimension concerns how affective attachments and partisan identifications are publicly expressed and enacted through language. For Almagro, affective polarization is not confined to internal states² or private beliefs; it manifests publicly through the way individuals speak, write, and articulate judgments about political matters. This includes not only explicit declarations of partisan allegiance, but also the evaluative framing (Almagro 2025, Ch. 6). Of course, language also plays an important role in other dimensions of polarization—for instance in the narrative construction of political identities—but the linguistic dimension specifically concerns the discursive practices through which partisan attachments are expressed and enacted in public contexts. In this sense, it is closely tied to questions of political epistemology and social ontology: how political realities are constructed and maintained through communicative practices.

¹ One issue that deserves further analysis is the relationship between narratives as epistemic devices and the degrees of credence with which they are endorsed. Narratives may function as interpretive tools that structure political understanding, yet their epistemic force—their capacity to orient reasoning, to resist counter-evidence, and to sustain affective investment—varies with the strength of credence attached to them. This suggests that the explanatory role of narratives cannot be fully separated from the gradational dimension of belief (cf. Moon and Jackson 2020; see also Lynch 2026, in this issue, for a similar point).

² A point already underscored in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (2001 [1953], §243ff.) is that beliefs, like other mental states, cannot be conceived as wholly private in the sense of being in principle inaccessible to public criteria of use and recognition. For the purposes of the present discussion, however, we employ a more intuitive and heuristic notion of a belief's “privacy”: namely, the idea that beliefs can be conceived as relatively independent from the immediate dynamics of social interaction, as if they were fully formed mental states that exist prior to and independently of their public articulation. The notion is therefore not meant to deny the social embeddedness of belief, but simply to capture the common assumption that opinions can be held privately and subsequently expressed in discourse.

Importantly, Almagro situates these three dimensions alongside identity and emotion as co-constitutive of affective polarization. He argues that they are not independent variables that merely correlate with polarization, but rather “constitutive dimensions of it” (Almagro 2025, 8). Affective polarization, on his view, is necessarily multi-dimensional; it cannot be adequately analyzed or addressed without reference to the full array of identity, emotional, narrative, credence, and linguistic factors.

One of Almagro’s distinctive contributions is his emphasis on the role of contingency in shaping affective polarization. Through both autobiographical narrative and philosophical argument, he illustrates how life trajectories, socio-economic contexts, and differential exposure to political events contribute to the formation of specific partisan identities and narratives (Almagro 2025, Ch. 4). For instance, Almagro’s account of returning to his hometown and discovering his family’s political transformation exemplifies how contingent life events can trigger shifts in political orientation. Elsewhere in the book, he clarifies that political identities are not formed through conscious choices, and he asserts that “a significant part of our beliefs and values is determined by contingent facts such as the culture and material conditions in which we were raised”, adding that “many of our identities, including political ones, are determined by contingent matters” (Almagro 2025, 79). This emphasis on contingency marks a significant philosophical advance over more static, essentialist models of identity and belief.

Yet, as we shall argue, even Almagro’s expanded model leaves room for further clarification regarding the role of situational contingency in the expression of political opinions. While his analysis recognises that linguistic uses are context-sensitive, the performative conditions under which political opinions are expressed in particular discursive settings are not systematically articulated as an independent dimension within the framework. It overall remains “an underlying philosophical issue throughout the book” (Almagro 2025, 79) and for that reason it merits more attention. While his focus on life-course and biographical contingency is undoubtedly important, there remains a dimension that has not yet been explicitly theorized as an independent component of affective polarization: the contingency introduced by the *performative, situated* nature of opinion expression in highly *dynamic social contexts*. Building on Greg Myers’ work (2004), we argue that political opinions should not be understood solely as relatively stable attitudes susceptible to measurement, but also as socially enacted within discursive contexts that shape how such attitudes are publicly articulated. Rather, insofar as they are socially situated performances, their form and expression are shaped by the discursive contexts in which they are articulated. This performative contingency does

not replace the life-course contingencies emphasized by Almagro (2025, 7, 79–80), but highlights a complementary, synchronic dimension of opinion expression that operates within specific interactional contexts. While its significance should not be overstated in a way that would render it a universally dominant factor, acknowledging performative contingency as a pervasive and consequential feature is crucial for developing a fully adequate account of affective polarization.

The task, therefore, is not simply to acknowledge that affective polarization is multi-dimensional, but to refine and expand the multi-dimensional framework so that it explicitly incorporates the performative dynamics of opinion expression. In the following section, we develop this argument in detail, articulating the concept of performative contingency and situating it within the broader philosophical landscape.

3. Performative Contingency in Opinion Expression: Toward an Expanded Multi-Dimensional Model

Existing multidimensional models of affective polarization, such as Almagro's, account for the phenomenon primarily by reference to relatively stable attitudes, partisan identities, narrative commitments, belief structures, and the linguistic practices through which these are expressed. Although Almagro acknowledges that the meaning of political expressions is shaped by their social contexts of use, the form of contingency he principally foregrounds concerns long-term processes—namely, the ways in which life trajectories, social environments, and personal experiences gradually shape political identities and belief systems over time.

Against this background, the present section introduces a distinct and under-theorized form of contingency: performative contingency in the expression of political opinions. This notion refers to the way in which the articulation of political opinions is shaped by the specific discursive contexts in which they are expressed. Distinguishing this dimension from the long-term contingencies emphasized by Almagro allows us to foreground the performative dimension of polarization as an analytically distinct, yet closely interwoven, aspect of the phenomenon. Drawing on Greg Myers's approach in *Matters of Opinion* (2004), we argue that opinions are not only stable attitudes but also enactments situated in specific discursive contexts. This performative perspective builds on Almagro's emphasis on linguistic practices by showing how the situational conditions of discourse shape the expression of opinion. It highlights a

synchronic form of contingency that complements the diachronic life-course contingencies emphasized by Almagro.

To understand this point, we must begin with Myers's central insight: opinions are not fixed mental contents awaiting measurement, but social performances embedded in interaction. As Myers puts it (2004, Ch. 4), public opinion is not simply a matter of aggregated private beliefs but is constituted through institutional and everyday practices—focus groups, phone-ins, vox pops, and media interviews—structured by recognizable genres, roles, and rhetorical expectations. Participants in these forums navigate social roles, alignments, and institutional constraints that shape how opinions are expressed and, in some cases, may also influence the ways in which those attitudes are formed, stabilized, or transformed over time (Ch. 2, 34 ff.).

Consider, for instance, a focus group organized to discuss immigration policy (see Myers 2004, 12). A participant's contribution to such a discussion is shaped not only by their private beliefs or stable partisan identity but also by their perception of the forum: whether it is a formal or informal setting, how the moderator frames the questions, the presence of recording devices, the anticipated audience of researchers or media consumers. These factors influence not only the participant's willingness to express a given opinion but also the manner in which they formulate it—whether with hesitation, confidence, aggression, or irony. A participant might express an extreme anti-immigration stance in a focus group while moderating that same stance in a private conversation, not because their underlying belief has changed, but because the performative context elicits different forms of expression.

Myers's analysis identifies several dimensions along which this performative contingency operates (2004, 49). First, there is the distinction between marked and unmarked settings: a formal debate or recorded interview imposes different interactional constraints than a casual conversation at home. Second, participants navigate complex role structures: they may speak as private individuals, as representatives of a group, as hypothetical others, or as imagined audiences. Third, the sequential and pragmatic structure of talk—such as turn-taking, adjacency pairs, and politeness strategies—shapes how agreement and disagreement are expressed, how topics are introduced and closed, and how opinions are attributed or disowned.

At this point, it becomes essential to address a conceptual challenge that might be raised against our proposal. One could argue that Almagro's linguistic dimension already captures the performative aspects of opinion

expression, making our addition redundant. After all, if affective polarization involves linguistic expression as one of its core dimensions, why should performative contingency be treated as analytically distinct?

This objection merits careful consideration. Indeed, Almagro's linguistic dimension does acknowledge that political identities and affective attachments are articulated through language, encompassing the evaluative uses of language. However, the scope and focus of the linguistic dimension, as Almagro develops it, differ crucially from what we intend by performative contingency. The linguistic dimension, as framed in *The Rise of Polarization*, primarily concerns the content and stylistic features of political discourse: the semantic and pragmatic forms through which polarized identities are expressed. It is closely tied to narrative structures, belief framing, and the construction of shared partisan meaning in line with Wittgenstein's approach to mental states (Wittgenstein 2001 [1953]: see Almagro 2025, 69 ff.). The expressive dimension of what we articulate through language—one that encompasses non-semantic features elicited by the act of performing within a given context—has been highlighted in different ways by Austin's (1962) theory of speech acts, by Goffman's (1959) analysis of interactional framing, and by Butler's (1997) account of performativity.

Yet Almagro's linguistic dimension does not systematically account for the *situational* dynamics that determine when, where, and how linguistic expressions of political identity and emotion occur. In other words, Almagro's account presupposes a relatively stable backdrop of expression, focusing on *what* is said rather than on *whether* or *how much* is said under varying discursive conditions. The idea is that

[I]n polarized scenarios, people tend to self-identify with certain identities only in their abstract discourse, that is, in the judgments they make about what they think they believe and are committed to. (Almagro 2025, 80)

Performative contingency, in contrast, shifts the analytical focus from content to *enactment*. It is concerned not with the internal structure of political utterances but with the *interactive, situational* parameters that govern their occurrence. This includes the institutional formats of discourse (e.g., televised debates, surveys, informal conversations), the roles and expectations attached to speakers, and the affordances and constraints imposed by different communicative settings. To draw a parallel from philosophy of language (see Wolf 2006): while Almagro's linguistic dimension corresponds roughly to the study of locutionary and illocutionary acts—the meaning and function of what is said—

performative contingency relates to the perlocutionary and contextual conditions that make certain speech acts felicitous or even possible in the first place. It concerns the *social ecology* of opinion expression, rather than its semantic architecture.

This distinction becomes clearer if we consider empirical examples. Imagine two individuals who share the same partisan identity, narrative commitments, and credence structures. In a private conversation, both might downplay their political views, preferring to maintain social harmony. In a media debate, however, one might adopt a radically polarized stance while the other remains reserved or silent. Such divergences cannot be explained by differences in identity, emotion, narrative, credence, or linguistic repertoire alone. They hinge on performative contingency, i.e., the situational pressures and interactional scripts that shape what gets expressed, by whom, and with what intensity.

Recognizing this distinction is not merely a matter of analytical tidiness. It has substantive philosophical implications. Without treating performative contingency as an additional dimension, one risks conflating two analytically separable aspects of affective polarization: the *expressive content* of polarized discourse and the *conditions of its enactment*. This conflation can lead to misunderstandings both in empirical measurement (overestimating polarization based on surface expressions) and in normative theorizing (failing to distinguish between deeply internalized narrative commitments and expressions that are primarily shaped by the situational incentives of particular discursive contexts). For this reason, while acknowledging the close interconnectedness between the linguistic dimension and performative contingency—and their compatibility with Almagro’s framework—we maintain that the latter merits explicit philosophical elaboration. Its importance does not derive from being universally dominant or always decisive; rather, it lies in its pervasive presence across democratic discursive contexts, where political opinion is enacted through situated interaction as much as it is believed or narratively articulated.

We thus wish to integrate this insight into an expanded philosophical model of affective polarization. We propose that performative contingency should be treated as an additional, independent dimension alongside identity, emotion, narrative, credence, and linguistic expression. By doing so, we aim to offer a more comprehensive account of polarization that captures both its diachronic and synchronic complexities. Our next task is to articulate how this dimension can be systematically integrated into the philosophical framework of affective polarization. Specifically, we aim to build on Almagro’s already multi-dimensional model by explicitly

introducing performative contingency as an independent, cross-cutting dimension, one that shapes and interacts with identity, emotion, and context in dynamic ways. Having established the importance of performative contingency as a distinct form of social and discursive variability in opinion expression, we now propose performative contingency as a sixth, cross-cutting dimension that interacts dynamically with identity, emotion, and context. Rather than rejecting Almagro's five dimensions—identity, emotion, narrative, credence, and linguistic expression—we argue that performative contingency intersects with each while remaining analytically distinct. It is precisely in relation to this last dimension of Almagro's blueprint—the linguistic—that performative contingency demands careful philosophical articulation. Although Almagro's linguistic dimension accounts for the content and stylistic features through which partisan identities and emotional attachments are conveyed, it does not fully address the situational variability that affects *whether, how, and in what measure* such expressions emerge in different discursive contexts.

This reframing encourages us to view affective polarization not as a static set of attributes, but as a dynamic process enacted within discursive environments. Rather than introducing a transversal axis distinct from Almagro's framework, we propose to treat performative contingency as an additional dimension that intersects with the five dimensions he identifies. This allows the analysis of how diachronic biographical influences and synchronic contextual pressures jointly shape both the content of partisan commitments and the ways in which those commitments are publicly enacted.

Integrating performative contingency in this way yields several conceptual benefits. First, it clarifies persistent ambiguities in the literature regarding the relationship between sincere belief and partisan signaling (Almagro 2023; Funkhouser 2022, 2023; Zhang and Rand 2023). First, as noted in §3, public expressions of political opinion often blur the boundary between genuine epistemic commitment and performative self-presentation. By treating performative contingency as an independent dimension, we can avoid reducing this complexity to a simple binary between truth-tracking belief and affective expression. Political utterances are not either purely sincere or purely strategic; rather, they occupy a spectrum shaped by context-dependent performative pressures.

Second, the expanded model provides a more adequate philosophical account of empirical phenomena that have challenged previous theories. On the one hand, recent empirical work suggests that politically knowledgeable individuals may display heightened affective polarization

toward the opposing party (Kim, Broussard, and Barnidge 2023; Li 2025; Suk et al. 2022). On the other hand, a distinct body of research in political psychology and communication has shown that the opinions individuals express can vary systematically across contexts as a function of framing, source cues, and interactional settings, even when underlying predispositions remain relatively stable (Goren, Federico, and Kittilson 2009; Druckman 2001; Myers 1998; Zaller and Feldman 1992). Traditional models struggle to reconcile these findings, as they tend either to treat expressed opinions as direct reflections of stable attitudes or to interpret contextual variation as evidence of weak or unstable preferences. By introducing performative contingency, however, we can explain how agents may retain relatively stable partisan identities and credence structures while modulating their public expression in response to situational cues.

Third, and critically, recognizing performative contingency prevents a conceptual elision that would otherwise obscure important normative questions. If linguistic expression is treated solely in terms of content—as in Almagro’s model—one might overlook how institutional formats, media structures, and social roles actively shape the conditions of expression. By explicitly integrating performative contingency, we foreground the fact that polarization is not only about *what* is said but about *where, how, and under what constraints* opinions are articulated. This has direct implications for both the epistemology and the political ethics of polarization, as we will explore in §4.

What we propose is then an *expanded*-dimensional matrix to represent the expanded model, with the original five dimensions (identity, emotion, narrative, credence, linguistic expression) on the content axis and performative contingency on the enactment axis. This structure captures polarization as a dynamic process shaped by both biographical and situational factors; for instance, individuals with similar content profiles may diverge based on the roles and forums in which they engage. Importantly, our proposal does not claim that performative contingency is always the decisive factor in every instance of affective polarization. Rather, we maintain that it is a pervasive and analytically indispensable feature of the phenomenon, whose presence must be accounted for in any comprehensive philosophical model. To ignore it would be to leave unexplained key aspects of how polarization manifests in public life, particularly in democratic societies characterized by complex media ecologies and diverse discursive spaces.

We proceed now to examine the normative and epistemological consequences of this expanded model, focusing on issues of measurement,

public reason, and institutional design. Our aim is to show that recognizing performative contingency is not merely a conceptual refinement but a philosophical necessity for addressing the challenges posed by affective polarization in contemporary democracies.

4. Normative and Epistemological Implications of Performative Contingency

The integration of performative contingency as a constitutive dimension of affective polarization is not merely a matter of conceptual elegance. It carries substantive normative and epistemological consequences for how we assess, interpret, and address polarization in democratic societies. In this section, we focus on two broad sets of implications: first, for the epistemology of political belief and public opinion; second, for normative interventions aimed at mitigating polarization's negative effects.

From an epistemological standpoint, the introduction of performative contingency challenges the prevalent assumption that political opinions can be cleanly separated into sincere beliefs and expressive acts devoid of cognitive content—a dichotomy that Almagro himself rejects (Almagro 2025, 64) in defending the rationality and contentfulness of polarized political expression. Much of the literature in political epistemology and political philosophy continues to rely on this dichotomy, implicitly or explicitly. Scholars debate whether individuals' political judgments are truth-tracking or merely expressive (see Sorensen, and Krämer 2024); whether voters are epistemically responsible or cognitively biased (see Jason 2025); whether public opinion is epistemically valid or hopelessly distorted by affective mechanisms (see Bakker and Lelkes 2024); whether disagreements have to do with their factual beliefs rather than values (Hannon 2021).

What individuals express in public forums often reflects a complex amalgam of stable partisan attachments, genuine epistemic commitments, and situationally induced performative pressures. To take a concrete example: an individual participating in a televised debate may express an uncompromising anti-immigration stance with full rhetorical force. Yet, the same individual, in a private conversation or in response to a confidential survey, may qualify their position, expressing ambivalence or nuance.

This insight connects directly to concerns raised in political philosophy about motivated reasoning and partisan epistemology (Millar 2025; Rini 2017). Authors such as Jason Brennan (2016) and Ilya Somin (2016) have

argued that voters often behave like political fans rather than rational truth-seekers, motivated more by identity affirmation than by epistemic responsibility. Citizens are motivated less by a search for truth than by a desire to belong, to confirm their existing beliefs, and to demonstrate loyalty to their group. Due to informational asymmetries and the low instrumental stakes of voting, they often make poor rational evaluators (Caplan 2007). This dynamic fosters distrust, narrows the scope for deliberative engagement, and leads voters to dismiss opposing information sources simply because they originate from the “other side”. In such conditions, policy debates become moralized, and even empirical questions—such as the effects of immigration or trade—are perceived through a lens of values, loyalty, and identity rather than through reasoned evaluation. This is where affective polarization fully takes hold. Moreover, affective polarization has significant normative consequences, especially when moral intuitions and evolutionary dispositions are a robust determinant of people’s political preferences (Haidt 2012; Petersen and Aarøe 2012; Sloman and Fernbach 2017), as they make factual knowledge partially irrelevant and also make people with different moral minds unable to understand the basis of reciprocal factual argumentations (Marchetti 2023).

Our proposal does not dispute the critique of emotivist diagnoses of affective polarization; rather, it adds that even rational partisan commitments may be shaped by the performative contingencies of discursive environments, and it adds a layer of complexity: even when individuals are motivated reasoners, the way they express and enact their partisan attachments is shaped by the performative contingencies of discourse. This means that epistemic responsibility in the political sphere is not simply a matter of private belief formation, but also of public discourse navigation. Citizens’ epistemic duties include not only the obligation to form justified beliefs but also the obligation to participate in public discourse in ways that are sensitive to the performative dynamics that shape polarization.

Importantly, as clarified in §3, this performative dimension is conceptually distinct from the linguistic expression dimension emphasized by Almagro. While both concern political utterance, linguistic expression focuses on content and form—what is said and how it is structured—whereas performative contingency concerns the very conditions under which opinions are voiced or silenced, intensified or moderated. Normative theories that do not explicitly distinguish these dimensions risk conflating two distinct loci of epistemic responsibility: the responsibility to express oneself truthfully and clearly (linguistic ethics), and the responsibility to

manage one's participation in discursive settings in ways that avoid exacerbating polarization unnecessarily (performative ethics).

The normative implications of this point are significant. If affective polarization is co-constituted by performative contingency, then efforts to mitigate polarization cannot focus exclusively on changing private beliefs or emotional attachments. Traditional interventions in democratic theory—such as deliberative forums, civic education, or information provision—often assume that polarization is fundamentally a matter of mistaken belief or irrational affect. This view has been challenged by the growing recognition that polarization is not simply the result of such distortions (Almagro 2024; Dorst 2023; Jern, Chang, and Kemp 2014). But if, as we argue, polarization is not only resistant to belief revision but also shaped by the contingent dynamics of discursive environments, then regulatory interventions must address the institutional and interactional formats through which political opinions are expressed—a point that resonates with Almagro's emphasis on the role of social contexts in shaping the production and circulation of polarized political narratives.

For instance, focus groups, media debates, and social media platforms all structure political discourse in ways that can either exacerbate or attenuate polarization. As Myers shows (2004, 46), the framing of questions, the sequencing of topics, and the role of moderators all influence how polarized participants' expressed views appear. Similarly, on social media, platform architectures such as comment threads, retweet functions, and algorithmic amplification create performative incentives for extreme or polarized expression. Addressing affective polarization, therefore, requires not only epistemic reform at the level of belief formation but also structural reform at the level of discursive design—an emphasis that complements Almagro's own proposal to redirect attention from individual reasoning errors to the social contexts and narrative dynamics through which polarization is produced and sustained.

This insight dovetails with recent work in political philosophy and social epistemology on the role of epistemic institutions. Scholars such as José Medina (2013) and Miranda Fricker (2007) have emphasized that epistemic justice depends on designing institutional settings that foster not only fair belief formation but also equitable participation in public discourse. Our account adds that such institutional design must also be sensitive to the performative contingencies that shape political expression. This includes rethinking how public debates are structured, how media platforms incentivize speech, and how civic forums are moderated. Crucially, it requires distinguishing between interventions aimed at reforming linguistic content (such as promoting more respectful language)

and those aimed at modifying performative structures (such as redesigning debate formats or regulating algorithmic amplifiers).

A further epistemological implication concerns the measurement of affective polarization itself. Much empirical research in political science relies on surveys, experiments, and aggregate data to quantify levels of partisan animosity (Bullock and Lenz 2019; Gerber, Huber, and Washington 2010; Green and Platzman 2024; Yair and Huber 2020). Yet, as Myers's discourse-analytic approach reveals, such measurements often fail to capture the situational dynamics of opinion expression. Survey responses may understate or overstate polarization depending on how questions are framed, what forums are used, and what expectations participants bring to the interaction. Philosophers interested in the epistemology of public opinion should therefore be cautious in drawing normative conclusions from such data without attending to the performative structures in which it is produced.

Finally, there is a broader normative lesson. Recognizing performative contingency in affective polarization might be thought to encourage a more nuanced, less moralizing stance toward political adversaries, i.e., if individuals' expressed opinions are shaped not only by deep-seated partisan identities but also by discursive contingencies, then some degree of charity might seem to be warranted in interpreting others' political statements. For what appears as extreme or irrational polarization in one context may, upon closer inspection, should reveal itself to be a product of situated performance rather than of immutable belief. This perspective might then promote a form of epistemic humility that is arguably essential for sustaining democratic discourse in pluralistic societies (see Pritchard 2021). While we can certainly subscribe to the fact that, by knowing the cause of the phenomenon, an explanatory stance may be appropriate, we submit that such knowledge can also offer the normative basis to taking a moral stance towards ourselves and others when we fail to see that we have fallen prey to performative contingency and its polarising effect (see also Pedrini 2025). In the interest of space we cannot offer a comprehensive defence of such claim, and we must leave it aside for other discussions.

5. Conclusion: Rethinking Affective Polarization Through the Lens of Performative Contingency

In this paper, we have proposed an expanded philosophical account of affective polarization that explicitly incorporates the notion of performative contingency as a constitutive dimension. Our point of departure was the multidimensional model developed by Manuel Almagro

in *The Rise of Polarization* (2025), which identifies five key dimensions: identity, emotion, narrative, credence, and linguistic expression. While Almagro's model offers a strong framework for understanding polarization, it underdevelops the performative dimension of opinion expression. Although he acknowledges the context sensitivity of political language, he does not theorize its socially situated and interactional character as a distinct dimension.

We therefore introduce performative contingency as an additional dimension of polarization. Drawing on Greg Myers's work (2004), we introduced the concept of performative contingency to fill this gap. Unlike the life-course contingencies emphasized by Almagro—such as socio-economic positioning, biographical experience, and exposure to political events—performative contingency concerns the synchronic and situational dynamics of opinion enactment. It highlights the fact that political opinions are not merely private mental states awaiting expression, but are socially performed through discursive practices that vary across settings such as focus groups, media forums, and informal conversations.

A crucial philosophical clarification throughout our argument has been the distinction between performative contingency and the linguistic dimension already identified by Almagro. While both relate to the expressive modalities of political identity, they operate at different analytical levels: the linguistic dimension concerns the content and form of political utterances—i.e., the evaluative uses of language employed—whereas performative contingency addresses the conditions of possibility for such utterances to occur at all, as well as their modulation across contexts. By formalizing performative contingency as a sixth, transversal dimension, we have shown that it is neither redundant nor reducible to the linguistic dimension; rather, it complements and expands the multi-dimensional model, offering a more comprehensive and pragmatically attuned understanding of affective polarization.

This insight has both conceptual and normative implications. Conceptually, it demands a reconceptualization of affective polarization not as a static structure composed of stable psychological and ideological elements, but as a dynamic process shaped by both diachronic and synchronic factors. Politically relevant attitudes and emotional attachments may be shaped by the immediate contingencies of public performance. Performative contingency may operate at two levels. In some cases, it shapes how pre-existing attitudes are expressed within particular discursive settings; in others, repeated patterns of public articulation may contribute to the formation or stabilization of those attitudes themselves. Normatively, this expanded model implies that interventions aimed at

mitigating polarization cannot focus exclusively on belief revision, emotional de-escalation, or ideological realignment. They must also address the institutional and discursive contexts in which opinions are publicly expressed. Media formats, social media architectures, and civic debate forums all play a constitutive role in structuring political discourse, and they must be designed with an awareness of the performative incentives and constraints they create. This perspective does not trivialize polarization but situates it within a more complex social ontology, one that acknowledges both the sincerity of partisan attachments and the fluidity of their public manifestation.

Furthermore, recognizing performative contingency can foster an additional epistemic duty towards our own performances, while also providing the basis of an explanatory stance towards all those who fall prey to it. Performative contingency reminds us that public expressions of political animosity or extremity may not always reflect deeply held convictions; they may instead be situational enactments shaped by the rhetorical demands of a particular forum. At the same time, such phenomenon can provide the basis of an enhanced awareness and responsibility on the part of citizens.

Finally, we suggest that future research in both philosophy and political science should build on this expanded model in several directions. First, there is a need for more empirically informed philosophical work that directly engages with discourse-analytic data, integrating insights from Myers's tradition with normative theories of democracy, public reason, and deliberation. Second, methodological innovations are required to measure affective polarization in ways that capture its performative dimension, moving beyond survey instruments that treat opinions as isolated data points. Third, normative theory should further explore what forms of epistemic and civic responsibility arise from the recognition that public opinion is a performative as well as a cognitive phenomenon.

In sum, affective polarization is not only about who we are or what we believe; it is also about how, where, and in what manner we express these identities and beliefs. Political philosophy must therefore address polarization not merely as a psychological or ideological problem, but as a discursive and institutional one—one in which the contingent, situated nature of opinion expression plays a central and irreducible role.

Acknowledgments

Patrizia Pedrini is deeply grateful to Pierangelo Isernia for suggesting the reading of Greg Myers during the many exchanges she has had with him and the team of the PRIN project COUNTERCONS—Countering Conspiracy Beliefs: The Role of Prebunking Strategies (2022, Prot. 2022MK9SZ5). The central idea developed in this article emerged from reflections prompted by that reading, as well as from the experimental work conducted within the project at the University of Siena. Patrizia Pedrini is also deeply indebted to the University of Geneva for its support of her research. She wishes to express special thanks to Emanuela Ceva for the intellectual environment she generously provides to her collaborators, and for the valuable time it allows for individual research; to Francesco Chiesa for the many stimulating conversations we regularly have about ideas and ongoing papers; to the Department of Political Science and International Relations for including this paper in the Spring 2026 Series of the Staff Seminar, where it has been presented, and to Esma Baycan-Herzog and the audience for comments.

Jacopo Marchetti presented the paper at the International Conference “The Challenges of Hostile Epistemology: Democracy, Media, and Liberal Society”, held at the University of Rijeka on 18–19 June 2026. He is grateful for the insightful comments and suggestions received from the audience and would like to thank, in particular, Ivan Cerovac, Snježana Prijčić-Samaržija, Chris Ranalli, and Robert Talisse.

Author Contribution

Patrizia Pedrini conceived of the central idea and drafted the paper. Jacopo Marchetti contributed passages and relevant literature to Sections 1, 2, 4, and 5 during the writing process.

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