

THE RISE OF POLARIZATION REVISITED: REPLY TO THE CONTRIBUTORS

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides responses to some of the many interesting points raised by the five contributions to this book symposium on my book *The Rise of Polarization*. These contributions are authored by Michael P. Lynch (“Political Narratives and Concrete Democratic Hope”), Neftalí Villanueva (“A Plea for Neutrality”), Aarón Álvarez-González and Aida Roige (“Conceptual Foundations of Affective Polarization: Two Notions of Affect”), Jason Tosta (“Constructing and Invoking Partisan Identities Through Narratives”), and Patrizia Pedrini and Jacopo Marchetti (“Performative Contingency and Affective Polarization”).

Keywords: affective polarization; political narrative; political identity; political affect.

Introduction

I am grateful to the *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy* for hosting this symposium on my book *The Rise of Polarization*. I am also grateful to the contributors for the generosity and philosophical seriousness with which they have engaged with my book. Their contributions offer excellent insights, discussions, and developments of the ideas explored in the book, raise challenging and fruitful criticisms, and open up new directions for thinking about affective polarization, political narratives, political identity, political affect, intervention, and the possibility of democratic life under polarized conditions more generally. I have enjoyed reading them immensely, and I have learned a great deal from them.

In what follows, I discuss these contributions. I won't address all of their interesting observations and suggestions, even though I regard them all as relevant and worthy of attention. Rather, I focus on a selection of them in an attempt to further clarify some aspects of the book's proposal.

In Section 1, I address Michael P. Lynch's contribution, focusing in particular on two challenges concerning the book's conception of political narratives and the underlying notion of rationality. In Section 2, I explore some ways to avoid the powerful challenge raised by Neftalí Villanueva's contribution. In Section 3, I discuss the main criticism raised by Aarón Álvarez-González and Aida Roige's contribution, according to which any approach to affective polarization that does not assume either a functionalist or a phenomenological notion of affect is problematic, since these two notions are well-established in the cognitive science literature on emotions. In Section 4, I comment on Jason Tosta's contribution, which deepens the discussion of the construction of political identities and also raises a possible limitation of my proposal. Finally, I discuss Patrizia Pedrini and Jacopo Marchetti's contribution, which proposes to complement the multidimensional account of affective polarization by adding a new dimension: the performative dimension of opinion expression.

1. Narratives, Beliefs, and Rationality

Lynch's "Political Narratives and Concrete Democratic Hope" raises two concerns about the role of political narratives in my book's proposal. Lynch's first concern is that there may be a tension between the Wittgensteinian account of narratives sketched in the book and the idea that people believe certain political narratives or, more specifically, the

idea that affective polarization is characterized by an increase in people's credence in certain narratives (Lynch 2026, 2-6).

The book claims that people can have more or less credence in a narrative, and that they can take a narrative to be true or false. But how? As Lynch puts it, "I can no more believe [narratives], therefore, than I can believe a sunset. I can appreciate them, I can act in accordance with them, I can turn away from them. But I can't believe them" (Lynch 2026, 4). He continues: "if narratives aren't what is said—aren't propositional—then how can we think of them as propositions we can evaluate as probably true?" (Lynch 2026, 5). One can appreciate a narrative or act in accordance with it, but belief, Lynch says, is an attitude toward a proposition taken to be true, and narratives aren't propositional.

To address this problem, the first thing to note is that the book's comparison between narratives and what cannot be said in the *Tractatus* is meant only to emphasize that narratives do not (only) represent states of affairs. Rather, they offer a way of looking at the facts: a perspective-bound framework through which we understand and make sense of the issue at hand. Different narratives about the same facts may highlight or downplay different aspects of them, thereby expressing and promoting different ways of seeing the matter. It is true that, according to the *Tractatus*, what cannot be said is not, strictly speaking, propositional, and is neither true nor false, insofar as it does not represent states of affairs. In that respect, Lynch is technically right. But this is not the main point of the comparison I make in the book, nor is it the only way to understand the distinction drawn in the *Tractatus*.

One way to read the distinction between what can be said and what can only be shown is as just marking an important difference between descriptive and non-descriptive uses of language. The point, then, is not that our claims about ethics, philosophy, or anything else on the side of what cannot be said are meaningless, or that they cannot be true or false in any sense. Rather, the point is that they function differently from claims about states of affairs. Their meaning is not reducible to a combination of objects. They don't belong to that conceptual category. But just that.

With that said, let's return to narratives. The comparison with some of Wittgenstein's ideas in the *Tractatus* need not commit us to the view that narratives are not truth-apt, that they are not propositional, or that they cannot be believed. After all, we do say things such as "Right-wing partisans believe that the narrative according to which freedom of expression is under threat is true." We also naturally say that a certain narrative is true. We can think about its truth, and we can disagree about

which narrative is the right one. So we don't need to reject that narratives can be true and believed. The question here is what exactly we are doing when we say these things.

What might it mean for a person to believe that a certain narrative is true? Lynch claims that, on the Wittgensteinian approach, we can act in accordance with a narrative, but we cannot believe it. Drawing on a certain interpretation of Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-following and dispositional mental states (see section 3 for more on this), I would rather say that acting in accordance with a narrative, much like acting in accordance with a proposition, amounts to believing it, with the important qualification that ascribing beliefs is an evaluative, rather than descriptive activity (Almagro and Fernández-Castro 2019; Fernández-Castro 2023, 2024; Frápolli and Villanueva 2012; Núñez de Prado-Gordillo 2022, 2024; Pinedo 2020). Conceptually, to believe something is to take it as true, and to take it as true is, at least in part, to act in accordance with it, in a non-factual way (more on this below).

Let's consider this idea first in relation to propositions. Certainly, there are cases in which one can act, at least in some respects, in accordance with a proposition without endorsing its truth. As Lynch notes, we can stand for a proposition we do not believe, which suggests that standing for a proposition and believing it are not the same thing (Lynch 2025, Ch. 2). But we have to be careful here. The possibility of saying that someone stands for a proposition they do not believe is available only because, in some relevant contexts, that person is not disposed to act in accordance with its truth. In other words, we can say that someone acts in accordance with a proposition they do not believe only because, in other contexts, they fail to act in accordance with it. So whether a person acts in accordance with a proposition is crucial to whether we ascribe the corresponding belief to them.

Of course, no one can be fully coherent with everything that follows from the truth of a proposition, and yet we all have beliefs. So the point of this way of understanding belief is not that, in order to believe that *p*, I must be maximally coherent with everything that follows from *p* in every context. Rather, to believe that *p* is to act in accordance with the truth of *p* in *some relevant contexts*. Crucially, to ascribe to someone the belief that *p* is to make an evaluative judgment: it is to consider some features and contexts, rather than others, as the relevant ones to determine whether that person believes that *p* or not.

Suppose that, when you speak with me, you defend *p*, but when you speak with other people, you defend not-*p*. In that case, I have reason to suspect

that perhaps you do not really believe that *p*. Or suppose that a politician publicly stands for a proposition *p*, but tells us in private that they do not actually believe it. Since this self-ascription is itself a way of failing to act in accordance with *p*, we may conclude that the politician does not believe *p*, because the private context seems, in this case, to be the relevant one. But after that, suppose that the same politician, in a different private context, behaves in accordance with *p*. If we learn this, we will again have reason to question whether the politician believes *p* or not. Which context is most relevant for deciding who believes what will depend, at least in part, on the perspective of the person making the attribution. Some perspectives may, of course, be better than others for determining whether someone believes that *p*, depending on the specific aim at hand. But deciding which perspective is relevant is itself a normative issue.

Something similar can be said about narratives. To believe that a certain narrative is true is to act in accordance with it. For example, to believe the narrative according to which the right to freedom of expression is under threat is to be disposed to deploy this narrative, together with some of its details, in the relevant contexts. It may also involve feeling sympathy for the political parties that endorse this narrative, or being disposed to give reasons for why the narrative is true. And to have a high credence in the truth of such a narrative might mean, for instance, that this narrative plays a central role in one's decision to vote for one political party rather than another, or that one has become unwilling to listen to those who reject it.

An important point of the book is that, in polarized contexts, citizens often embrace certain political narratives *only in the abstract*. That is, they adopt these narratives with a high degree of confidence, even though the narratives are not reflected in some of their more concrete judgments and behaviors. This does not mean that they do not believe the narratives. Rather, on the book's proposal, it means that they believe them only in the abstract, which manifests just in certain courses of actions and not in others (see Almagro 2025, 102-108). This is one of the defining features of political polarization according to the book.

Lynch's second concern revolves around the notion of rationality at work in the book (Lynch 2026, 6-10). Lynch agrees that people can be *subjectively* rational in endorsing conflicting political narratives, since what seems credible to them depends on their identities, experiences, background beliefs, and the evidence available to them as they understand it. In this sense, two individuals may be equally justified, from their own perspectives, in endorsing incompatible narratives. However, Lynch insists that this subjective sense of rationality must be distinguished from a more *objective* epistemic assessment: the question of whether a narrative

is supported by reliable, truth-conducive methods of inquiry. Political narratives can be subjectively rational for those who endorse them while still being epistemically defective in this more objective sense.

It is true that we sometimes say that a particular narrative is rational or reasonable from a subject's perspective, while also saying that, objectively speaking, the narrative is neither rational nor reasonable. But what exactly do we mean by this kind of claim? One way to address the question is to ask what "objective" and "subjective" mean here. Alice Crary (2019) has argued that, contrary to what is often assumed, the objective and the subjective are not in opposition. The opposite of the objective, she argues, is not the subjective, but the non-objective. There can be objectivity within subjectivity.

How is this possible? The basic idea is that the subjective is simply what is relative to subjects. But, as standpoint epistemologists have convincingly shown, some objective issues can be known only from particular socio-normative positions. In other words, there is objective knowledge that depends on subjects. Recognizing a given action as sexual harassment, for instance, is something that can be properly recognized and known only from a certain perspective. The fact that some knowledge is perspective-dependent, or partial, does not imply that it is not objective. We come to know objectively how things are from our perspective as subjects situated within a particular socio-normative network and shaped by specific experiences and forms of life (see Pinedo and Villanueva 2022, ms; Pinedo ms). By contrast, when we defend a notion of neutral objectivity, we often end up presenting a particular perspective, typically a privileged and hegemonic one, as if it were the view from nowhere (see Villanueva 2026 and section 2 for further discussion of this).

When we claim that a certain narrative is rational or reasonable for a given subject from their perspective but not rational or reasonable objectively speaking, what we are really saying, on my reading, is that we do not take that person's perspective to be the appropriate one. Crucially, the fact that objectivity and knowledge depend on perspective does not commit us to a naive relativism. As Hartry Field (2009) has emphasized, some perspectives are epistemically better than others for particular purposes. The point is simply that determining which perspective is better is itself a normative matter, and so it is possible that no purely factual consideration will settle the issue.

So I agree with Lynch that some methods of inquiry are objectively better than others, and that some of them support certain narratives rather than others. In this sense, some narratives are closer to the truth than others because they are supported by more reliable methods. The crucial point,

however, is that these observations are still “subjective” in the sense that they depend on perspectives: different perspectives may regard different methods as more reliable and different narratives as true. Again, this does not imply that all perspectives are equally good, or that there are no grounds for preferring some perspectives over others. It means only that the dispute is ultimately normative in character: judgments of epistemic justification are evaluative in nature.

Finally, Lynch makes an important qualification about responsibility for polarization, one that I fully take on board. He points out that individual epistemic blame is context-sensitive. In ordinary cases of polarization, it may be wrong to blame individuals simply for being caught up in unreliable or distorted epistemic environments. But this does not apply equally to everyone. Individuals who occupy positions of significant institutional power—such as a government official responsible for public health—can and should be held morally and epistemically responsible when they rely on, promote, or institutionalize irresponsible epistemic practices (Lynch 2026, 9). Although the book argues that the rise of polarization is not epistemic in nature, insofar as it does not stem from defective epistemic processes on the part of ordinary citizens, I fully agree that some agents actively promote epistemically irresponsible practices. I also agree that, when we ascribe responsibility, those who occupy positions of institutional power, as well as those who have greater social power more generally, deserve special attention. On these issues, Lynch’s work (Lynch 2019, 2021, 2022, 2025) is especially important and highly recommended.

2. The Potential Benefits of Neutrality

Villanueva’s “A Plea for Neutrality” is a brilliant and extremely interesting contribution that develops, from a different angle, some worries also raised in Lynch’s essay. Villanueva presents a serious challenge to my proposal. One important claim of my book is that polarized individuals are not irrational, and that the epistemic and cognitive mechanisms that contribute to polarization are ordinary ones. Villanueva first notes that this very thesis is currently being used by those who foster polarization for political gain in order to justify authoritarianism. This has been made explicit by Martin Gurri, who links Hugo Mercier’s work to J. D. Vance’s defense of authoritarian regimes on the basis of unrestricted freedom of expression (Villanueva 2026, 3-4). Mercier’s work provides important support for some of my book’s central claims, so, in this sense, my book’s proposal may be doing the enemy’s work.

The more specific worry raised by Villanueva's contribution is "whether there's something Mercier could do to avoid playing a role in the defense of authoritarianism" (Villanueva 2026, 5). If repeated enough, Villanueva notes, this association may establish a connection between Mercier's ideas and the MAGA worldview. "How could Mercier resist this fate? How could he reclaim for himself the position of the scientist, rather than that of a MAGA apologist?" (Villanueva 2026, 5). Likewise, what can a climate scientist who claims that climate change is real do to ensure that her statements are received in a nonpartisan way, rather than perceived as "playing politics"?

To resist this fate, we may need to vindicate the neutrality of Mercier's and the climate scientist's claims, since these claims result from their work as scientists, not from an attempt to promote a particular ideology. As Villanueva puts it,

Difficult as this may be, it is precisely what we need in order to secure the public support required when evidence-based policies are at stake. Without such support, these policies will never get off the ground. (Villanueva 2026, 6)

This poses a problem for my proposal. The problem arises from a tension among three of the book's commitments: the distinction between descriptive and evaluative uses of language, the rejection of the myth of neutrality, and the political turn in analytic philosophy. If I accept all three, I cannot straightforwardly vindicate neutrality, since I have rejected it as a myth. But in vindicating the political turn, I might be forced to defend neutrality if that's the only way to resist an injustice. My proposal is thus at an impasse: it may need what it also needs to reject. This is a powerful challenge.

I love the framing of Villanueva's contribution, especially its emphasis on taking seriously a point made by people I love, admire, and respect, and who, despite sharing our political heart, hold different views on the topics discussed in the book. I take this to be a manifestation of the beautiful metaphor mentioned in the contribution, borrowed from Michael Lynch, of "locking arms and walking together". This will also be the spirit of my response. There is a lesson I learned from Villanueva very early on: in this business, we discuss ideas, not people. I have repeated this to myself many times, especially during my most formative years. Villanueva is right, and he was right from the beginning, as usual. If we discuss ideas rather than people, and if we lock arms and walk together even when we do not hold the same views, then ideas must be separable from people. The rejection of neutrality stands in some tension with this.

Let's discuss the challenge. A first route we might take is to separate meaning from truth, as David Beaver and Jason Stanley do in their last book *The Politics of Language*. As they put it,

Every claim is ideologically relative, and claims about the weather are no exception, but that does not preclude there being a fact of the matter as to whether a claim made by a member of a specific community of practice on a particular occasion is true or not. (Beaver and Stanley 2023, 323)

According to their semantic theory, meaning is always relative to an ideology, or to a perspective, but truth can be relative to how things are, rather than to perspectives. Certain claims attune us with reality. Thus, even if a claim such as "Climate change is real" is perspective-dependent with respect to its meaning, and is therefore linked to certain ideologies, its truth-value might still be just world-dependent. This route may commit us to some form of neutrality, but maybe only in a minimal sense.

We do not need to take that route, though. One of the ways to address the challenge I find most convincing is to say that what we need to vindicate is not the neutrality of Mercier's and the climate scientist's claims, but rather their *descriptive* nature. The distinction between descriptive and evaluative judgments, as Villanueva notes, is not only compatible with rejecting the myth of neutrality; rejecting neutrality actually helps explain why propagandistic moves that present as descriptive what is in fact evaluative are so persuasive and dangerous. The upshot of holding both commitments is that the descriptive, while distinct from the evaluative, is not characterized by neutrality.

Descriptive claims are also perspective-dependent, perhaps in a more general, stable, and widely shared way. But they are still different from evaluative judgments. The fact that many apparently descriptive judgments are sometimes actually evaluative does not imply that all descriptive judgments are always evaluative. The distinction between the descriptive and the evaluative is orthogonal to the distinction between neutrality and non-neutrality. Certainly, a discussion about whether a given judgment is descriptive or evaluative will be normative, that is, there won't be neutral facts that settle the issue, and then our discussion will depend, one way or another, on perspectives. Still, this does not mean that there is no objective or rational way to discuss the matter (see section 1).

Of course, this strategy would predictably be ineffective in polarized scenarios, and might even make the situation worse. But in polarized settings, almost any intervention coming from "the other side" is unlikely

to help, whether it proceeds by vindicating neutrality or by some other route. Any explicit confrontation, whether argumentative or otherwise, would predictably have the same result in polarized scenarios. This, in fact, suggests that the real problem regarding polarization is not epistemic, or at least not primarily about what is true or false in a neutral or non-neutral sense. It is something else: how we embrace certain divisive narratives, and why.

If the climate issue were not polarized, there would not be so much resistance to accepting that climate change is real and that it is a consequence of human activity, regardless of whether the claim is non-neutral. So, concerning the observation that “If truth is always perspective-dependent, and there’s no way to distinguish among different kinds of truths, then climate science, to name one particularly sensitive case, is doomed to be bound to one political perspective rather than others” (Villanueva 2026, 13), one question worth asking is whether polarization has to do with the truth or neutrality of our claims in any relevant sense. The narratives we endorse with a very high level of credence are not usually endorsed because they are presented as neutral (see Almagro 2023).

It could be objected that Villanueva’s concern is not about the rise of polarization, but how to intervene in particular cases. Still, if these cases involve polarized settings, then we may wonder whether vindicating neutrality will help.

This leads us to consider another route for addressing the challenge: to emphasize that when thinking about intervention, we need to proceed case by case, and that vindicating neutrality is not necessarily the only available strategy. On the one hand, one might argue that Mercier’s case is not, in some important respects, like the climate scientist’s case. In Mercier’s case, we may argue that the connection with the MAGA worldview and with a certain defense of authoritarianism rests on a misunderstanding of his work. That is, what they say about Mercier’s work is false. Mercier does not defend the idea that people are smart and know what they need, as Vance’s argument seems to suggest. Mercier’s work suggests that people who become polarized do not do so because their cognitive mechanisms are defective. That’s all. Being smart is not the same as not being irrational. So they are misreading Mercier’s work. Rejecting neutrality does not prevent us from pointing out that some interpretations and claims are incorrect and false. Vance has admitted that he invents stories and says false things in order to attract attention (Helmores 2024). So we might emphasize that to resist the associations between Mercier’s work and the MAGA worldview.

In the climate scientist's case, it could be useful to note that a genuinely descriptive claim, when true, can still be partisan but only in a very particular sense. A claim can be partisan either because it is meant to advance a political ideology or because it becomes connected to partisan politics as a consequence. A claim such as "Abortion should always be legal," for instance, is partisan in its aim, insofar as it is tied to an ideology in its origin. A claim such as "Abortion is legal in this country," by contrast, if true, could be partisan as a consequence, insofar as its connection with ideology is subsequent to how things in fact are. Thus, the idea would be that the claim "Climate change is real" is a genuine, descriptive judgment that is connected with a certain ideology only as a consequence. If this makes sense, then what we should do in these cases is to insist that the climate scientist's claim is a description, a true one.

Fassin's case about children affected by inhaling lead particles Villanueva 2026, 8-10), on the other hand, is different from the previous two in that there is no attempt to politicize an issue in order to divide citizens and obtain political gain from that division. As Villanueva notes, this is a case in which we want to say that certain claims are not merely vehicles for racist attitudes, but false, and false in virtue of the facts. To the extent that this isn't a polarized issue, or doesn't involve polarized issues, reaching agreement on this—that is, deciding which perspective is the relevant one—might not be so difficult. But things are very different when the issue in question is polarized. And this, again, seems to suggest that the problem of polarization may not have so much to do with vindicating a given claim as false in virtue of neutral facts. In the case discussed by Fassin, attending to the right piece of information, to the right facts, depends on a perspective, even if we take our facts to be neutral. Raw, neutral information needs interpretation. That is, even if we assume that facts are neutral, not all facts are relevant for a certain goal. Discovering which facts are relevant in order to defend the claim that certain statements are factually false is something that depends on perspective, and it's subject to revision. In fact, we need it to be subjected to revision. This is incompatible with neutrality.

These responses are still only partly satisfying. Consider the powerful way in which Villanueva formulates the problem:

Being able to recognize instances in which ideology is promoted via seemingly descriptive statements requires more than noticing how often neutrality is invoked from a position of privilege. It also requires *acknowledging that factual discourse can be turned into something sinister when it becomes associated with certain forms of life*. Resisting this

may require vindicating the neutral status of our talking about facts. It's not only about spotting evaluative stains in our factual discourse, it's also a matter of defending the neutral, factual, nature of our statements when circumstances demand it. (Villanueva 2026, 15, my emphasis)

I agree. There is something liberating about claiming that a certain state of affairs is a fact, no matter the perspective from which it is approached. Here is a case in which I would not want to say that the matter is perspective-dependent. My father has told me many times that when he was five years old, his father told him to go and hoe some potatoes. While doing so, he found a tomato plant, and it occurred to him to pull it up and replant it somewhere else so that it could grow. When his father saw the tomato plant, he thought my father had stolen it from the neighbor's land, even though my father told him what had happened. My grandfather took a branch from a tree, struck my father on the head, and left him lying on the ground, bleeding and unconscious. My father, again, was five. On another occasion, while they were coming home, my grandfather told my father, who was still a seven-year-old child, to go over to the water tank near of them and pick up a tool my grandfather had left there soaking. The tool was not there. My father told him so, and, without getting down from his horse, my grandfather threw an axe at my father after warning him that if he moved, it would be worse. My father simply turned around to protect his head. He still has the mark of the axe blow on his back.

An aunt of mine, my father's younger sister, recently wrote a book about her life, and when she narrates her childhood, she says that back then there was education and respect, and that in her home there was a great deal of education. Nowadays there is no respect, she claims; back then, there was. I know that she is expressing her allegiance to the far-right narrative on this. Still, I want to say that this is not about ideology or perspective: striking your son with a branch and leaving him on the ground with his head bleeding, or throwing an axe at him because he cannot find a work tool, is not education or respect, whatever ideology or perspective one has. To claim otherwise is to say something false. And when I say this, I am not interested in considering or discussing the perspectives or ideologies that support my judgment or my aunt's judgment. I do not care how someone conceives of education, or how that conception relates to certain ideologies. I am simply not disposed to consider the possibility that it is not a fact that the way my grandfather treated my father was not a form of education. I want to claim that.

Still, I also wonder what exactly I want to claim when I make such a claim. After all, I am implying that any perspective compatible with saying that

the way my grandfather treated my father was a form of education is wrong and must be rejected. Regarding these behaviors as having nothing to do with education is something we can do from a certain perspective: the right one. Of course, I might not have had the good fortune of occupying the right perspective on this. But that's precisely why perspectives are necessary: they help us explain how we approach the world when we think about, for instance, whether education has anything to do with leaving one's son unconscious and bleeding. Perspectives are not necessarily prior to our situated judgments (Carmona and Villanueva 2023), but they are conceptually linked to them. Crucially, I suspect that if education were not a polarized issue, my aunt would agree with me. I suspect that she disagrees with me only in the abstract. After all, she did not educate her children like that.

A final comment. One central point of the book is that, in order to intervene in the current situation, we need to change the narratives. One persuasive way of doing this, especially in polarized settings, is by using non-confrontational narratives. Emphasizing the contingent nature of our political identities is just one way to proceed. And to do that, rejecting neutrality is, I think, useful. But for different intervention goals, things may be different. We might vindicate neutrality for a different intervention goal, and this would be compatible with the political turn assumed by the book. But perhaps that is not necessary. As it is often the case with Villanueva, his objections contain the inspiration to keep thinking about them. As he points out, resisting "may require vindicating the neutral status of *our talking about facts*" (ibid., 15, my emphasis). Perhaps what we need is only to vindicate *neutrality for the way we talk about facts*. That is, it may be useful to construct a neutral narrative, even if, theoretically, we still hold that there is no such thing as neutrality.

We can separate explanation from detection and intervention, as Villanueva usually recommends. The book rejects neutrality in order to illuminate the fact that the problem of polarization has not to do with the way people consume information, or their lack of critical thinking. But when our goal is to intervene in a particular case, or in public opinion more broadly, constructing a neutral narrative—that is, vindicating neutrality in the way we talk about the relevant facts—may be the most useful way to proceed. For that purpose, I fully see the potential benefits of vindicating neutrality.

3. The Concept of Affect

Álvarez-González and Roige's "Conceptual Foundations of Affective Polarization: Two Notions of Affect" offers an incisive and very welcome challenge to the conceptual foundations of my account. Their essay asks a question that is absolutely central: what exactly is affective about affective polarization? They claim that the cognitive science literature has converged on two distinct but equally important notions of affect. One is functional, while the other is phenomenological. This leads them to pose several objections to my social, non-individualistic approach to affective polarization. I will address some of them indirectly, through an observation about the research methodology they follow and how it differs from the one followed in the book.

As mentioned, Álvarez-González and Roige introduce two well-known notions of affect from the contemporary cognitive science literature in response to the metaphysical question of what affects are. They claim to be introducing "the notions of affect at stake in mainstream cognitive science and *analytic philosophy*" (Álvarez-González and Roige 2026, 4, my emphasis). Certainly, the functionalist and the phenomenologist traditions they mention are somehow related to analytic philosophy. "Analytic philosophy", however, can mean many things, and that's ok. But one could argue that these traditions, i.e., the functionalist and phenomenologist, are actually not analytic philosophy in a specific sense of the term. These traditions follow a methodological strategy that departs from the original strategy that gave rise to analytic philosophy. According to that original strategy, to investigate the nature of a phenomenon, we must first analyze how the language we use to talk about it works, with the aim of clearing up possible confusions that might otherwise mislead our substantive inquiry.

Thus, from this analytic philosophy point of view, if we want to investigate the nature of, say, numbers, existence, affect, or the mind, it is better to begin by examining the logico-semantic behavior of the relevant concepts within the relevant practices. This may lead us to realize that there is nothing to investigate in a substantive metaphysical sense, and that our inquiry was misguided from the start. Let's call this the *Analytic Philosophy Strategy*. So, for example, if we want to philosophically investigate what existence is, we should not simply take for granted some popular and unified view of existence that has emerged within a specific field. It is better to begin by examining the logic of the predicate "exists".

Frege, for example, showed that "exists" is a second-order predicate: it takes concepts, not objects, as its arguments (Frege 1884/1950, § 53). To

say that Fs exist is to say that the concept F is not empty. From this it follows that saying that something exists is not a matter of predicating a property of an object, as we do when we say that something is red. “The glass is red” and “The glass exists” may appear to have the same logico-semantic form, and this may lead us to think that both predicates attribute a property to an object: the property of being red and the property of existing. If so, we might want to investigate the nature of the property of existing. But this, early analytic philosophers would say, is the result of doing misguided philosophy. Once we realize that existence is predicated of concepts rather than objects, and that what we say when we claim, for instance, that ghosts do not exist is simply that no object falls under the concept of *ghost*, it becomes unclear what would be left to investigate in a substantive metaphysical sense. The metaphysical question of what existence is was misleading from the start. In this sense, the problem of the nature of existing disappears once we identify the proper logico-semantic category of the predicate.¹

Thus, from the beginning of the discipline, analytic philosophers have emphasized that language can mislead our investigations. The same expression can function very differently in different contexts, and for that reason we need to proceed carefully. Frege introduced the context principle, according to which, in order to understand the function of a given expression, we must consider the sentential context in which it appears. “Socrates” is a proper name, and it may seem natural to think that the logico-semantic function of proper names is, among other things, to refer to singular objects. However, “Socrates” does not behave as the name of an object in the sentence “Socrates exists,” since “exists” is a second-order predicate and can be predicated only of concepts. In such a sentence, Frege warns us, “Socrates” functions as a concept rather than as an object. What we say when we utter such a sentence is that the concept *being Socrates* is not empty: there is at least one object that falls under its extension. This is very different from saying that the object Socrates has the property of existing. So “Socrates” can serve very different functions, and display a very different logic, in different contexts.

What about mental states? Is the Analytic Philosophy Strategy useful for addressing the mental states relevant to political polarization? In the *Tractatus*, one of the landmarks of analytic philosophy, Wittgenstein notes that when we talk about certain mental states, we are not simply describing or representing states of affairs. A sentence of the form “A believes that p,” Wittgenstein says, is similar to the claim “‘p’ says p” (T § 5.542). This

¹ The same goes for the nature of numbers, for instance, as Frege showed (Frege 1884/1950, §§46, 53-68).

second sentence points to the internal relation that allows a sentence to represent a state of affairs; that is, it points to the internal relation between the sentence and what it represents. Crucially, this internal relation cannot itself be represented, since it is what makes representation possible in the first place (T § 2.172). When Wittgenstein says that “A believes that p” behaves like “‘p’ says p,” he is telling us that the sentences we use to ascribe beliefs do not have a straightforwardly descriptive function, just as “exists” does not. Their internal logic is not the logic of ordinary descriptive sentences, as is also the case with numbers and existence.

Later, Wittgenstein deepens this observation by drawing a conceptual distinction between what he calls “states of consciousness” and “dispositional states” (Kripke 1982). The language we use to make dispositional mental state attributions, including attributions of beliefs and some affects, does not serve a merely descriptive function. It does not belong to the descriptive category of language (see Villanueva 2019). Dispositional mental states are not interrupted when there is a “break in the stream” of consciousness, such as sleep or a sudden shift in what we are attending to. Nor can their presence be checked at a single moment, or their duration measured with a stopwatch. What is genuinely descriptive, Wittgenstein suggests, can be temporally measured. Dispositional mental states, however, do not have duration in that sense. I cannot time how long I have hated ultra-conservative ideas, or how long I have loved Wittgenstein’s work. My hatred of ultra-conservative ideas and my love of Wittgenstein’s work do not disappear when I sleep. They have neither spatiality nor temporality in the ordinary descriptive sense. The language we use to ascribe dispositional mental states does not represent a distribution of objects in space and time; these states do not have genuine duration, and they do not give rise to purely factual disagreements, among other things.

In contrast to the two conceptions of affect considered by Álvarez-González and Roige, it seems that ascribing certain dispositional affective states is not a matter of describing states in a substantive, metaphysical sense, as the Analytic Philosophy Strategy suggests. Both of the notions Álvarez-González and Roige discuss are at odds with the recommendations of the Analytic Philosophy Strategy. They miss the fact that, if certain affective ascriptions do not serve a descriptive function, then there may be nothing metaphysically substantive to investigate. These conceptions may be just the result of a conceptual confusion. Again, when we talk about people’s dispositional mental states, including affects, the language we use does not play a descriptive function. Rather, what we are doing is saying that someone is involved in a certain practice, which provides a frame of intelligibility. Thus, to believe that philosophy is worthwhile, for instance,

is to be involved in a practice that has to do with doing certain things and avoiding others. And the same goes for the attribution of some affective states. There is no gap between one's dispositional mental states and one's discursive commitments, contrary to what Álvarez-González and Roige suggest (Álvarez-González and Roige 2026, 16).

Let's say it again. These kinds of mental state ascriptions are not descriptive. They do not describe anything. They do not belong to that conceptual category. Metaphysically speaking, mental attitudes are not things, neither physical nor non-physical; they are not states of affair. Again, I can't time the exact period during which I have loved a particular philosophical position, or a particular political idea. Loving or hating a particular political position is not a matter of having something located somewhere, because political hate self-reports such as "I hate feminist ideas" don't serve a descriptive function in the relevant sense. Second-order predicates such as "exists," "believes," and at least certain uses of "hates" and other dispositional affective predicates do not describe anything, since they do not serve a descriptive function.

This doesn't mean that there are no descriptive uses of some affective vocabulary. Of course there are. Uses that belong to what Wittgenstein calls "states of consciousness" are closer to that. But the book argues that these are not the relevant affective states for understanding polarization. The kinds of mental states involved in affective polarization, such as disliking certain partisans or certain ideas, cannot be adequately assessed by looking only at how objects in the surrounding world are represented in space and time. Their assessment requires a different kind of consideration: one that is evaluative rather than merely descriptive. Such questions cannot be settled once and for all by appealing to a shared body of facts. They involve conflicts between standards of assessment. They do not involve objects or states that disappear when we sleep, nor do they have duration in the ordinary descriptive sense. These remarks proved to be highly useful for the book's purposes, regardless of how mainstream other conceptions of emotion are in certain literatures.

If functionalist and phenomenological approaches were right, then any disagreement about whether someone has a certain dispositional emotion would be settled by the facts. We would simply need to check whether the relevant functional or phenomenological state is present; that is, whether a certain process has been activated, something that should be empirically observable (at least by the subject via introspection). But this does not capture our intuitions in many cases of disagreement. How can we determine whether someone really loves philosophy? How do we determine whether someone really hates Muslim people? If you speak and

behave in a certain way about Muslim people in certain contexts, then I may say that you dislike or hate them, regardless of any process or empirically observable state, whether motor tendencies, bodily changes, or anything else. Crucially, you might disagree with me about which features are relevant for determining whether you dislike or hate Muslim people. And that disagreement will not necessarily be settled by any fact. Even if you show me that you do not undergo certain bodily changes, I may still coherently hold that you hate Muslims. This means that our attributions of dispositional mental states, including certain affects, are perspective-dependent: two people who belong to significantly different ideologies or forms of life will predictably disagree about the relevant criteria for determining whether someone has a given dispositional affective state. This is further evidence that dispositional mental vocabulary does not behave descriptively, and therefore that there is nothing to discover, either functionally or phenomenologically.

This does not mean that there is nothing relevant to investigate empirically about emotions from cognitive sciences, or that functionalist and phenomenological approaches are useless or fail to make important contributions for certain purposes. It only means that dispositional mental state ascriptions are normative in nature, which means that there's no fact of the matter to determine once and for all whether somebody has a certain dispositional mental state. We can always discover a new piece of information relevant to decide whether somebody really loved analytic philosophy, for instance. Imagine that we discover that cognitive science is not analytic philosophy. This new piece of information might lead us to think that someone we thought that loved analytic philosophy never really loved it after all. But another, new piece of information could change again our attribution. And the crucial point is that we could always discover a new piece of information relevant from a certain perspective to adjudicate.

As we have seen, the Analytic Philosophy Strategy for addressing philosophical issues involves rejecting, or at least approaching with great caution, questions about the nature of something. The concepts of affect mentioned by Álvarez-González and Roige are not the result of doing analytic philosophy in this sense (see Álvarez-González and Roige 2026, sections 2 and 3 for some proofs of it). They assume that all vocabulary we use to talk about affective states has a descriptive and referential function. On their view, there is something, metaphysically speaking, to which we refer when we talk about political affects. But not only that. They say that in the end I am also doing metaphysics:

Indeed, even though Almagro explicitly distances himself from taking a metaphysical stance, his position appears to

presuppose that affective polarization is not essentially an individual phenomenon but a collective one. But if this is correct, then Almagro is engaging in metaphysics after all: his expressivism appears to endorse or imply a negative metaphysical claim, i.e. that affective polarization is not essentially related to individual mental states. (Álvarez-González and Roige 2026, 21)

This is useful for making another clarification. When I claim that polarization is a social rather than an individual phenomenon, I am making a conceptual remark, not a metaphysical one. My claim is that the relevant use of “polarization” is incompatible with a situation in which there is only one polarized person. That way of talking would involve a different concept. In fact, it would not really be polarization, but perhaps extremism. One individual can be an extremist even if no one else is. But an individual cannot be polarized in isolation. This does not mean that we cannot attribute the predicate “polarized” to individuals, as Álvarez-González and Roige suggest (*ibid.*, 21). Rather, it means that we need to be careful when we do so, since polarization requires the presence of at least two groups. In this sense, individuals are polarized only derivatively. But again, these are conceptual observations about the relevant concepts of polarization and extremism.

To challenge this claim, they introduce what they call “the polarized brain in a vat” case. In particular, they introduce it to trigger the intuition that an individual in isolation can be polarized:

Amber was born as a brain in a vat. The machines feed her information about what seems to be the political structure of her world, which seems to be divided between Republicans and Democrats. As a result, Amber became highly involved in the Republican party and developed strong animosity towards what she thinks are the members of the Democrat party. Of course, there is nothing in reality that corresponds to Amber’s representations about the political structure of her world. (Álvarez-González and Roige 2026, 21-22)

As they predict, I do not share the intuition, and neither would one of the most important figures in the functionalist tradition, Hilary Putnam (1981, Ch. 1). I do not know how a brain called “Amber” could do any of the things described in the example.

They offer another case in order to press the point further, “the Republican who fell asleep before the apocalypse” case:

John the Republican falls asleep. A moment after John's falling asleep, the apocalypse occurs. All the inhabitants of the planet Earth die apart from John. When John wakes up he thinks about how much he hates Democrats and that he is going to start a campaign to damage the reputation of the Democrat leader. After thirty minutes of brushing his teeth, taking a shower, getting dressed, etc., John leaves his house and discovers the painful truth: everything is destroyed, not only Democrats, but also Republicans, his family, etc. (Álvarez-González and Roige 2026, 22)

They ask, "How should we describe John's state after the apocalypse when he still did not know that it had happened?" (ibid., 23). The question is a bit tricky. If there's nobody else in the Earth, then nobody would need to describe or explain John's state. This is not trivial, since any dispositional mental state attribution is made from somewhere. But let's try. My answer would be that if we somehow manage to coherently imagine this scenario, we may explain John's state by saying that John *believes* that he is polarized, which means that he has certain conceptual commitments linked to certain courses of action, such as speaking and thinking about how much he hates Democrats. But I do not have the intuition that he is polarized (assuming that the context from which I assess John's situation is one where Republicans and Democrats don't exist anymore), since the context has changed. And this is precisely what supports the social approach to polarization. John still hates Democrats, in the same way I may hate Socrates. But John is not polarized anymore. "Being polarized" is a predicate that depends on the state of public opinion. If the state of public opinion changes in a certain way, or if there is no public opinion at all, one cannot be polarized, even if one still holds one's previous political beliefs. That is why polarization is distinct from extremism.

Two further criticisms they raise are the following. The first is that, if our reports of affective attitudes in questionnaires were primarily performative commitments, we would expect a comparatively robust connection between the attitudes we self-attribute and our subsequent behavior. However, this is not the case (Álvarez-González and Roige 2026, 19). The second is that affective polarization extends beyond linguistic practice and also occurs in non-discursive behavior, such as choices in economic games or willingness to welcome certain individuals into one's family. Explaining this, they argue, requires appealing to affective states (ibid., 20).

With respect to the first criticism, once the dispositional affective states relevant to polarization are understood, in Wittgensteinian terms, as conceptual commitments linked to certain courses of action, it is no longer

puzzling that people do not always display the affective states they report having. As Wittgenstein argues (PI § 202), believing that one is following a rule is not the same as following a rule. Self-ascribing a dispositional emotion is not the same as having it. I might sincerely self-ascribe the affective state of loving a political idea and be the case that I don't really love such an idea. In such a case, the rules I sincerely think I follow are not the rules that I actually follow.

What is distinctive about polarization is that it intensifies this familiar mismatch. When a society is polarized, citizens tend to exhibit a greater mismatch between what they say in abstract discourse and their concrete judgments and behavior. People who endorse the narrative of their preferred political party in the abstract still behave in certain ways: they vote for that party, for instance. They may also stop spending time with those who endorse different narratives. The book simply points to the particular features of the practices in which these narratives are endorsed in polarized scenarios.

With respect to the second criticism, since dispositional affective states are sets of conceptual commitments linked to action, a linguistic manifestation is not required for someone to express, or manifest, a given dispositional mental state. These observations are therefore not genuine problems for the proposal.

4. Political Identities Construction

Tosta's "Constructing and Invoking Partisan Identities Through Narratives" provides a remarkably rich and philosophically sophisticated development of the construction of political identity. The paper contains many extremely interesting observations, but I will focus here on just a few of them.

Tosta raises an important question: "Do partisans construct their own identity by using narratives, or are identities constructed within the narratives of partisan discourse?" (Tosta 2026, 3). To address this question, he introduces a helpful distinction between the constitutive construction of narrator identities and the discursive construction of narrated identities. Political narratives can constitutively construct the identities of those who use them: partisans become certain kinds of political subjects by participating in narrative practices. In Tosta's words, "The narrator engages in political discourse in ways that construct their own identity" (Tosta 2026, 10). At the same time, political narratives can discursively construct identities within the narrated world. As Tosta puts it,

Discursive construction in this case takes the form of classifying and categorizing social identities within the narrative itself. In this way, certain identities are constructed by being narrated within the explicit content of narration; these are who the narrative is about. (Tosta 2026, 10)

This distinction is very illuminating. It shows that narratives do not merely express identities already in place; they help bring political identities into being. It is therefore extremely useful for understanding how narratives contribute to the construction of our political identities. People construct their own political identities as narrators by engaging with and adopting particular political narratives, such as, for example, the narrative that “illegals are committing violent crime across the nation’s cities” (ibid., 11). But narratives of this kind, as Tosta points out, also construct the identities of others: they ascribe identities to people and shape the way those people are treated and perceived. They are linked to harmful perspectives that are propagated, sometimes in covert ways.

In the book, Tosta notes, it is not clear which dimension in the construction of political narratives is the relevant one for understanding how affective polarization increases: the dimension of the narrator’s identity or the dimension of the narrated identity. As Tosta also observes, it seems that the former plays the more central role:

This is evidenced by the importance of the credence dimension of polarization, where the level of one’s credence given to a narrative indicates the degree of their partisan membership. Similarly, the partisan narrator ‘voices their attachments’ or expresses attitudes regarding ideologies and identities by using narratives. In both analyses, the identities within the content of narrative are not the essential element, but rather, it concerns how certain narratives are used with respect to the narrator’s own political identity and attitudes. (Tosta 2026, 12)

I think Tosta is right. The narratives around which processes of affective polarization revolve are divisive and confrontational narratives, and in that sense they always involve narrated identities that play an important role. Indeed, it makes a great deal of sense to think that the kind of identity being narrated significantly shapes the process of identity construction from the point of view of those who embrace the narrative. In this sense, I find the following remark by Tosta especially compelling: “ideologies and identities are not something possessed by a partisan; perhaps instead they possess the partisan” (Tosta 2026, 3).

This important observation, in addition to adding depth to the construction of political identities, highlights the socially constructed and non-internalized aspects of social identities and, in turn, of affective polarization. Social identities are not internal or psychological; they are deeply socially constructed. This point is crucial for one of Tosta's criticisms, which complements the challenges raised by Lynch's contribution. In Tosta's words:

Almagro's constructivist commitments betray part of his expressivist diagnosis of polarization. If identities are not simply forms of self-attribution, internal attitudes, or psychological states, then social identities are not expressible the way other mental phenomena are. In short, the expressivist model does not fit a constructivist view of identity. (Tosta 2026, 3)

The idea is that social identities are not the kinds of things that can be expressed. Expressivist approaches, Tosta says, generally presume that what we express are internal psychological things: our emotions, our attitudes, our experiences. Political identities, however, are socially constructed, and therefore they do not have the status something must have in order to be expressed. Since social identities are not simply internal psychological states, they are not expressed from the inside out. To avoid this problem and to complement my proposal, Tosta develops what he calls "the invocational model". According to this model, partisans invoke, rather than express, their identities through narrative construction.

I find Tosta's invocational theory of social identity participation very attractive. On his view, our political identities are invoked by participating in politically expressive activity. But I want to use this criticism to clarify the kind of expressivism adopted in the book: a non-internalist and non-psychologistic expressivism, which is in fact quite close to Tosta's proposal.

On my view, what we express through our statements is not anything internal. Following Wittgenstein, I take dispositional mental states and attitudes to be non-internal and non-psychological (see sections 1 and 3 above). Having a belief, for instance, involves having a set of conceptual commitments connected with certain courses of action, and these commitments depend on social practices. Expressing an attitude, then, is a matter of participating in a social practice. We express our engagement with certain social practices. For instance, by taking a colleague's point seriously, one expresses an attitude of respect. Another way to put it is this: by taking a colleague's point seriously, one manifests the practice in which one is engaged; that is, one shows oneself to be participating in a practice

of respect. In this sense, the attitude of respect need not be anything internal or psychological. To have an attitude of respect is to conform to certain norms and to participate in certain social practices. In this sense, our words and actions express attitudes, beliefs, affects, and other dispositional mental states.

One might express an attitude one does not take oneself to have. But one cannot express an attitude one does not have, in the sense that one cannot both participate and fail to participate in a practice at the same time. We may fail to identify correctly the attitude expressed by someone. But it cannot be the case that an attitude is expressed by someone who does not have it. Of course, I might pretend to respect someone I do not really respect—for example, by taking one of their points seriously. But what could this mean? I think this remark simply means that I will be inclined not to engage, on other occasions, in the practices associated with showing respect to that person (see section 1). If, in other situations, I participate in practices of disrespecting or failing to respect this person, then perhaps we could say that I do not really respect my colleague. But when I take one of their points seriously, I am expressing an attitude of respect.

The same is true of a person's preferences and values. My position on this issue is that the personal is social, in the following sense: values and preferences are intelligible only within a context of social practices. A person's values and preferences are not internal matters; rather, they are socially constructed. In determining a person's values and preferences, a fundamental part of the matter has to do with the practices in which that person participates. If, in the relevant contexts, one participates in racist practices, then one cannot have anti-racist values and preferences, regardless of what one tells oneself.

5. Performing Political Opinions

Pedrinì and Marchetti's "Performative Contingency and Affective Polarization" is also a highly constructive and interesting contribution. They take the book's multidimensional account as a starting point and propose to refine it by adding what they call "performative contingency". They focus on the context-sensitivity of political utterances and argue that there are contingent synchronic aspects of opinion expression that can be understood as an additional dimension of affective polarization. In this sense, they deepen the discussion of the contingent role played by the expression of political opinions. In particular, they focus on "the performative contingency involved in the expression of political opinions, which brings into view the situational conditions under which partisan

commitments are publicly enacted” (Pedrini and Marchetti 2026, 4). As they specify,

[O]pinions 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. (Pedrini and Marchetti 2026, 4)

This performative dimension therefore concerns a different kind of contingency: the here-and-now conditions under which opinions are expressed, framed, and possibly polarized.

As they put it,

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. (Pedrini and Marchetti 2026, 4)

The issue, then, is not only that our claims can mean different things depending on context, as the book argues, but that one and the same position, one and the same idea, can be expressed in different ways depending on the kind of setting in which we find ourselves. If we fail to recognize this, we may end up misinterpreting the data we obtain through the tools used to measure affective polarization. In their words, “measuring polarization solely through survey responses or public statements risks conflating stable partisan commitments with context-driven performances” (Pedrini and Marchetti 2026, 1). Thus, the main claim of the contribution is that affective polarization cannot be fully understood without taking into account these kinds of performative contingencies in the expression of opinion:

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. (Pedrini and Marchetti 2026, 5)

To better understand the proposal, consider the following example they introduce:

Consider, for instance, a focus group organized to discuss immigration policy (cf. Meyers 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. (Pedrini and Marchetti 2026, 11).

One advantage of focusing on this performative dimension is that it helps reject one of the assumptions the book also rejects, namely, that political opinions can be cleanly separated into sincere beliefs and expressive acts devoid of cognitive content. Rational partisan commitments may be shaped by the performative contingencies of discursive environments, and so what may look like an irrational defense of a view may instead be the result of the performative contingencies of discourse.

Another advantage is that it adds complexity and encourages caution in interpreting data on polarization: "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" (Pedrini and Marchetti 2026, 13).

Their proposal therefore enriches the linguistic dimension of my account. It shows that it is not enough to ask which political narratives people endorse, or how strongly they adhere to them. We must also ask where, how, before whom, and under what discursive pressures these narratives are performed. This is especially important because political opinions are not expressed in a vacuum. A focus group, a television studio, a private dinner, a survey, and a social media platform are not neutral containers for

independently formed opinions. They are discursive environments with different norms, incentives, expectations, and possibilities for uptake. The expression of an opinion is partly shaped by these conditions.

I find this observation especially relevant. I would even be inclined to say that some of the performative differences between discursive contexts play a decisive role in determining the very opinion that is expressed. The situational and interactional features of a given discursive context—the roles speakers take on, the expectations of the audience, the institutional framing, the salience of certain categories, the vocabulary made available—are not merely external conditions that shape the presentation of an already fixed view. They may partly determine what the expressed opinion is. This is particularly important for the book's claim that, in polarized contexts, some political narratives are often embraced in the abstract. For such abstract endorsement to occur, it is essential that these narratives be closely tied to particular discursive formats and to certain synchronically salient features of the context. The abstract character of the endorsement is not detached from performance; it is often made possible by it.

That said, I would like to qualify the point in one respect. Some features of these discursive contexts seem to be more relevant than others for tracking the narratives people embrace. Of course, it matters whether someone expresses an opinion with confidence or hesitation, whether they are more extreme in one context and more moderate in another, etc. But in many cases, what is especially important for identifying the narrative endorsed in the abstract is whether the person deploys what Jason Tosta, in his contribution to this symposium, calls “narrative judgments”. These judgments function as framing devices of larger narratives. They do not merely state an isolated content, but locate it within a broader narrative structure. They present the matter at hand as part of a larger story about who “we” are, who “they” are, what has happened, who is to blame, and what must be done.

These judgments are especially revealing. They can help us identify both the narrative that is being endorsed and the degree of credence with which it is held. Thus, while performative contingency is crucial, not all performative variation is equally significant for every explanatory purpose.

Still, I very much agree with Pedrini and Marchetti that incorporating performative contingency as an additional dimension of affective polarization has important advantages. It is especially valuable for questions of measurement and detection. As they rightly point out, survey responses may understate or overstate polarization depending on how

questions are framed, which forums are used, and what expectations participants bring to the interaction. This is exactly the kind of phenomenon that a performative account helps us understand. The order of the questions, the use of abstract rather than concrete vocabulary, the presence or absence of shared concerns among participants, and the institutional framing of the interaction may all significantly affect people's responses. These effects are not mere methodological noise. They are part of the phenomenon itself, because opinions are expressed through situated practices.

The point also has important implications for intervention. If affective polarization is shaped not only by beliefs, emotions, identities, narratives, and credences, but also by the discursive environments in which political opinions are enacted, then interventions should not focus only on correcting beliefs or reducing animosity. They should also attend to the communicative settings in which political identities and narratives are performed. Changing the format of public discussion, the institutional design of civic forums, the structure of media exchanges, or the kinds of questions people are invited to answer may have a significant effect on how political opinions are expressed and reinforced. In this respect, Pedrini and Marchetti's contribution offers a valuable and promising extension of the book's proposal: it reminds us that polarization is not only something people carry with them into discourse; it is also something that discourse itself may help produce, intensify, or mitigate.

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