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Perceived Ideological Polarization and Political Participation Intentions: The Moderating Role of Political Sophistication in a Three-Wave Panel Study

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between polarization and political participation remains theoretically contested and empirically inconsistent. This study examines how perceived ideological polarization (PIP)—operationalized as the absolute distance between individuals' ideological self-placement and their perception of the average voter's position—affects political participation intentions, and whether this relationship is moderated by political sophistication. Data from a nationally representative three-wave panel survey (N = 574) conducted in Slovenia between 2024 and 2025 are analyzed using a Random Intercept Cross-Lagged Panel Model (RI-CLPM). Political participation is measured across institutional forms (contacting officials, campaign donations) and non-institutional forms (protests, petitions, online activism). Political sophistication is assessed through self-reported political interest as an indicator of cognitive engagement and motivational investment in politics. Results demonstrate no significant cross-lagged associations between PIP and political participation intentions (e.g., $\beta = -0.001$, $p = 0.984$; $\beta = -0.032$, $p = 0.482$), nor in the reverse direction ($\beta = -0.062$, $p = 0.117$; $\beta = -0.029$, $p = 0.471$). Moreover, political sophistication did not significantly moderate these relationships (interaction effects: $\beta = 0.017$, $p = 0.550$; $\beta = 0.058$, $p = 0.182$). These findings suggest that, within the observed time frame and context, perceived ideological distance does not predict political participation, regardless of individuals' level of political interest. The study contributes to polarization literature by challenging assumptions about the mobilizing role of subjective ideological perceptions and the moderating influence of political sophistication. Implications for democratic theory and electoral participation are discussed.

Keywords: polarization, political participation, political sophistication, political interest, democratic engagement, panel data