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# How Perceived Ideological Polarization Shapes Political Participation: the Role of Political Sophistication

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## Abstract

This study explores how perceived ideological polarization (PIP)—measured as the absolute distance between individuals' self-placement and their perception of the average voter on a left-right ideological scale—impacts political participation, and how this relationship is conditioned by political sophistication. While polarization is often linked to increased participation, findings remain inconsistent, suggesting that individual-level moderators may shape how polarization translates into action. Drawing on a nationally representative three-wave panel survey from Slovenia, we examine both institutional (e.g., contacting officials, donating money) and non-institutional (e.g., protests, petitions, online activism) participation intentions. Political sophistication is operationalized through self-reported political interest, reflecting individuals' attentiveness and motivational engagement with politics. We hypothesize that PIP is positively associated with participation primarily among those with higher levels of political interest, who are better equipped to perceive and act upon ideological distinctions. Conversely, those with low interest may remain disengaged despite perceiving polarization. By focusing on subjective ideological distance and the moderating role of sophistication, this study contributes to understanding the conditions under which polarization fosters or fails to foster democratic participation, offering new insights into the cognitive and motivational dynamics of political engagement in polarized societies.

**Keywords:** Perceived Ideological Polarization; Political Participation; Political Sophistication; Political Interest; Panel Survey