Veronika Patkós

THE EMERGENCE OF PARTISAN POLARISATION: IS IT AN ABSTRACT SOCIAL DEFENCE REACTION TO COLLECTIVE CHRONIC THREATS?

HUN-REN Centre for Social Sciences, Institute for Political Science, Budapest

What is partisan polarisation?

- Partisan polarisation indicates the extent to which the political life of a community can be described as a battle between two partisan sides.

- It has a strong bimodal aspect
- It simplifies political conflict to a battle of 'Us' and 'Them', good and evil
- Partisan identities increasingly act as a social identity
- Competing sides see the other party as one threatening their values, lifestyle or existence
- Elections are high-stake occasions, where majority rules
- Results are highly consequential, as winners can fit the country to their taste with no compromise.
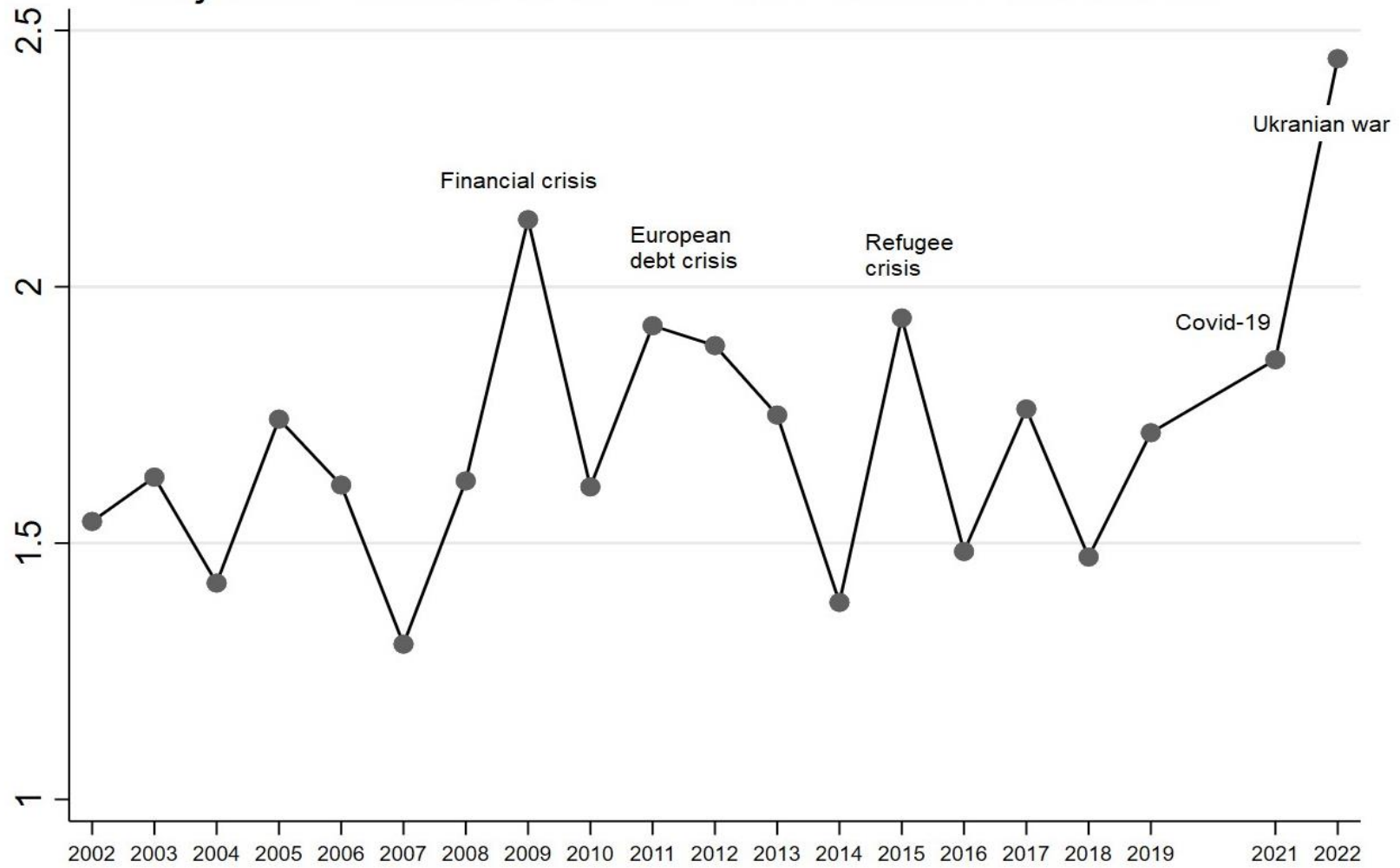
Patkós, V. Measuring partisan polarization with partisan differences in satisfaction with the government: the introduction of a new comparative approach. *Quality & Quantity* **57**, 39–57 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-022-01350-8

...and how to measure partisan polarisation?

- By using satisfaction with the government (ESS, 0-10 scale)

- Dividing government partisans' mean satisfaction with the government by opposition partisans' mean satisfaction with the government

ESS 10	Gov partisans' satisfaction (0-10)	Opp partisans' satisfaction (0-10)	Partisan polarisation index
Poland	7.41	1.06	7.41/1.06=6.99
Germany	4.76	4.39	4.76/4.39=1.08

Adjusted linear predictions of year dummies for partisan polarisation (ESS 1-10; 32 countries)

How do people react to threat? The General Process Model (Jonas et al. 2014)

- When encountering threat, people first exibit *proximal defenses*
  - Intensified vigilance for novel elements in the environment
  - Distracting efforts which distance us from the source of the anxiety

- ..than they flip to *distal defenses* to soothe anxiety
  - Approach-oriented actions
    - Often involve „eager and unequivocal engagement with an incentive or commitment"
    - Often occur in domains that are radically different from that of the threat

Categories of distal defense reactions
(Jonas et al. 2014)

	Concrete	*Abstract*
Personal	Heightened commitment to being pleasantly stimulated. Consumptive behavior: eating, drinking, alcohol or drug use. Materialism. Displaying power or aggression.	An inclination toward more positive self-views, the promotion of personal goals and values, ideals of power, status, or esteem. A tendency to describe opinions and personal projects in life as being more certain, value congruent, identity-relevant, important, and meaningful.
Social	Seeking affiliation, attachment, closeness.	Increased devotion to in-groups, identities, increased religious or ideological conviction. Derogation, hostility, and aggression toward out-groups. Increased devotion to *any* salient value and identity.

Can different political systems channel threat reactions to inclusive/exclusive identities?

- ## Two types of democracy, Lijphart (1984)
  - ### Majoritarian systems
    - The core idea of democracy is majority rule, it is based on the will of the majority
  - ### Consensus systems
    - The core idea of democracy is representation and it is based on sharing, dispersing and limiting power
    - It ensures that all significant segments of the society are represented

- ## The style of political leadership
  - ### Populist/non-populist leaders

Hypotheses

H1) *The „threats strengthen values" hypothesis*

More threatened societies are more...

- partisan-polarised
- ideologically polarised
- strongly attached to parties
- religious

H2) *The „channeling" hypothesis*

- Majoritarian institutional features facilitate polarisation
- The presence of a populist chief executive facilitates polarisation

How to measure threat?

- Personal/existential:
  - Economic (Subjective household income, ESS)
  - Mortality/Morbidity (Subjective health, ESS)

- Social/environmental:
  - Trustworthiness of the social environment (Most people can be trusted or you can't be too careful?, ESS)
  - Political (Political stability and absence of violence, WBD GI)

- Each variable standardized to range between 0 to 100 and than averaged to create a cumulated „Amount of threat" index
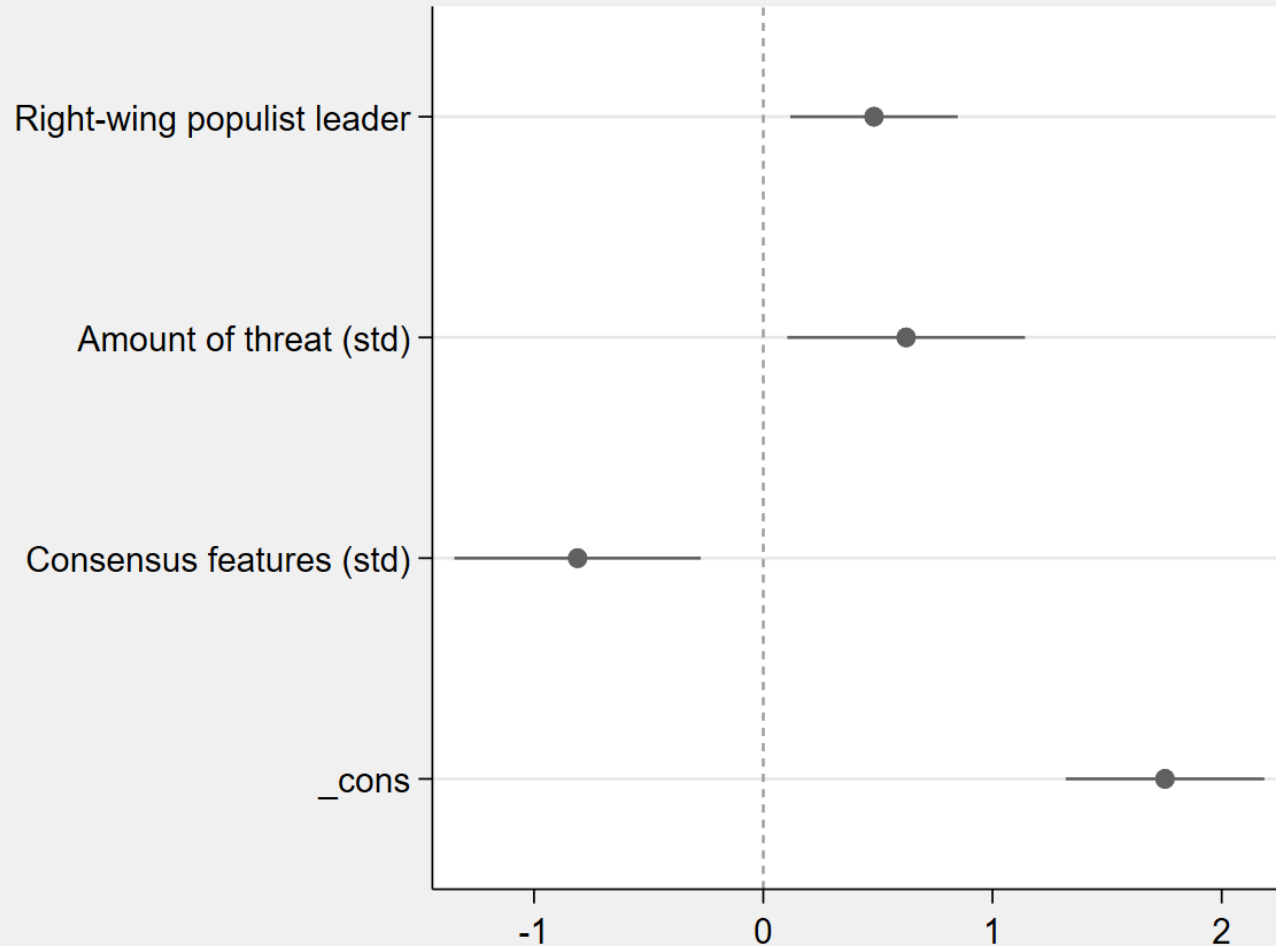- Ranges from 8,7 to 80 on the 0 to 100 scale

Links between values, identifications and threat

- More threatened societies are more partisan-polarised
- More threatened societies are more ideologically polarised
- More threatened societies are more religious
- People in more threatened societies feels closer to their preferred parties

Pairwise correlations	*Health threat*	*Economic threat*	*Social threat*	*Political threat*	*Cumulated threat*
Partisan polarisation (R)	0.171***	0.346***	0.446***	0.239***	**0.388***
Ideological polarisation (R)	0.099	0.325***	0.412***	0.352***	**0.368***
Religiosity	-0.030	0.298***	0.422***	0.123*	**0.261***
Distance from preferred party	0.158**	-0.237***	-0.104	-0.202***	**-0.141**

*** p<0.01 **p<0.5 *p<0.1

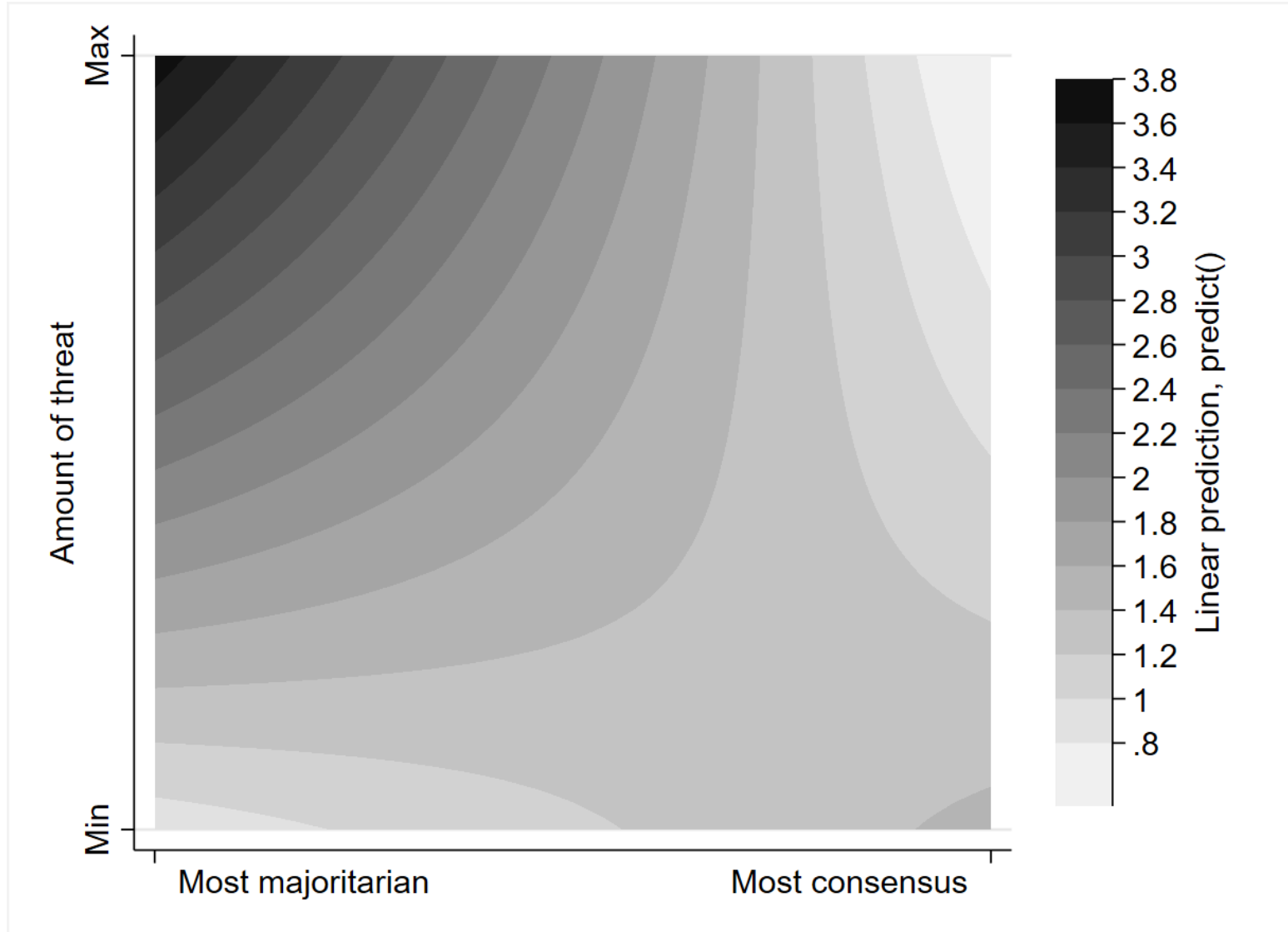# Predicting polarisation with threat, right-wing populist leadership and consensus features
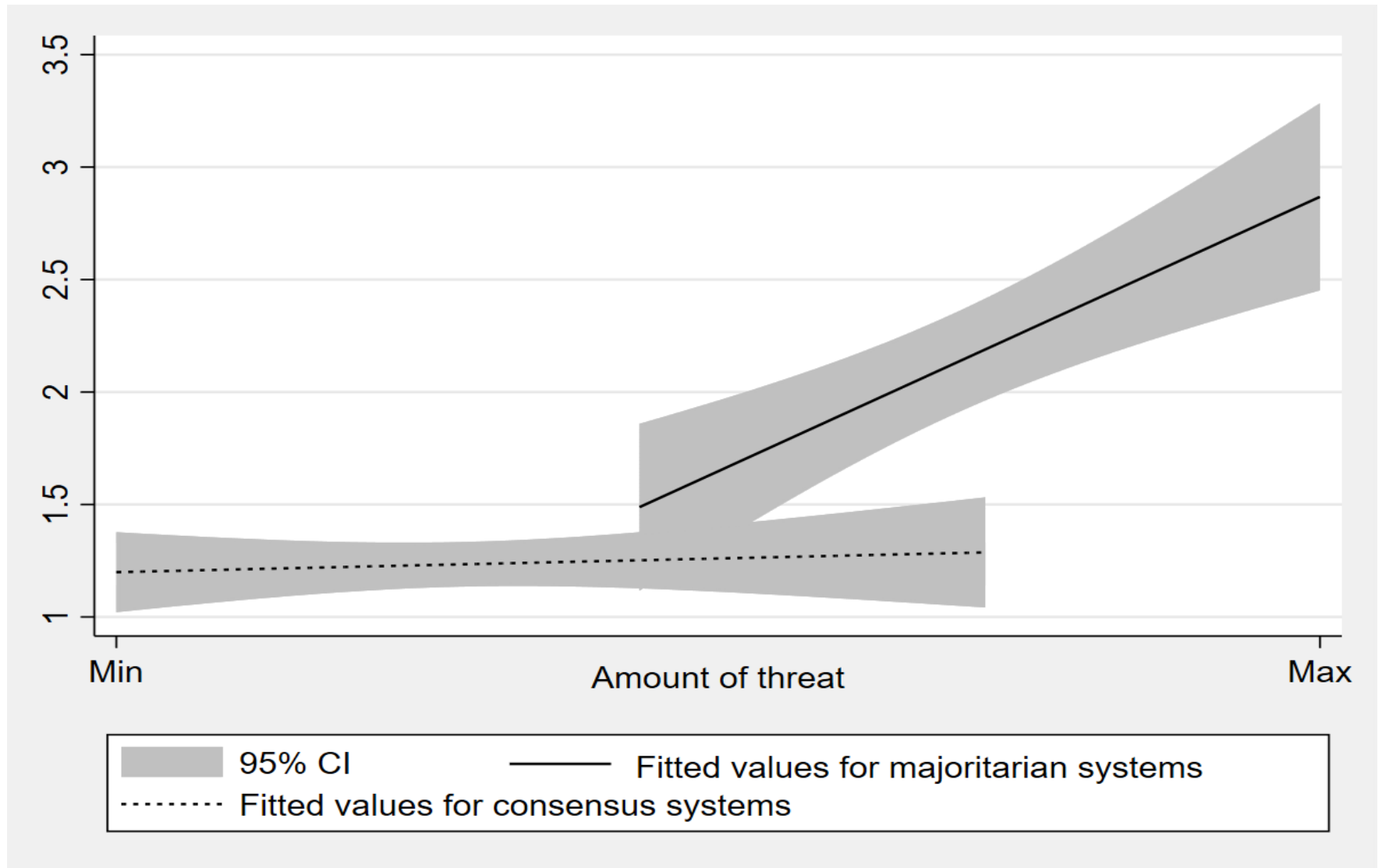

R²=0.354
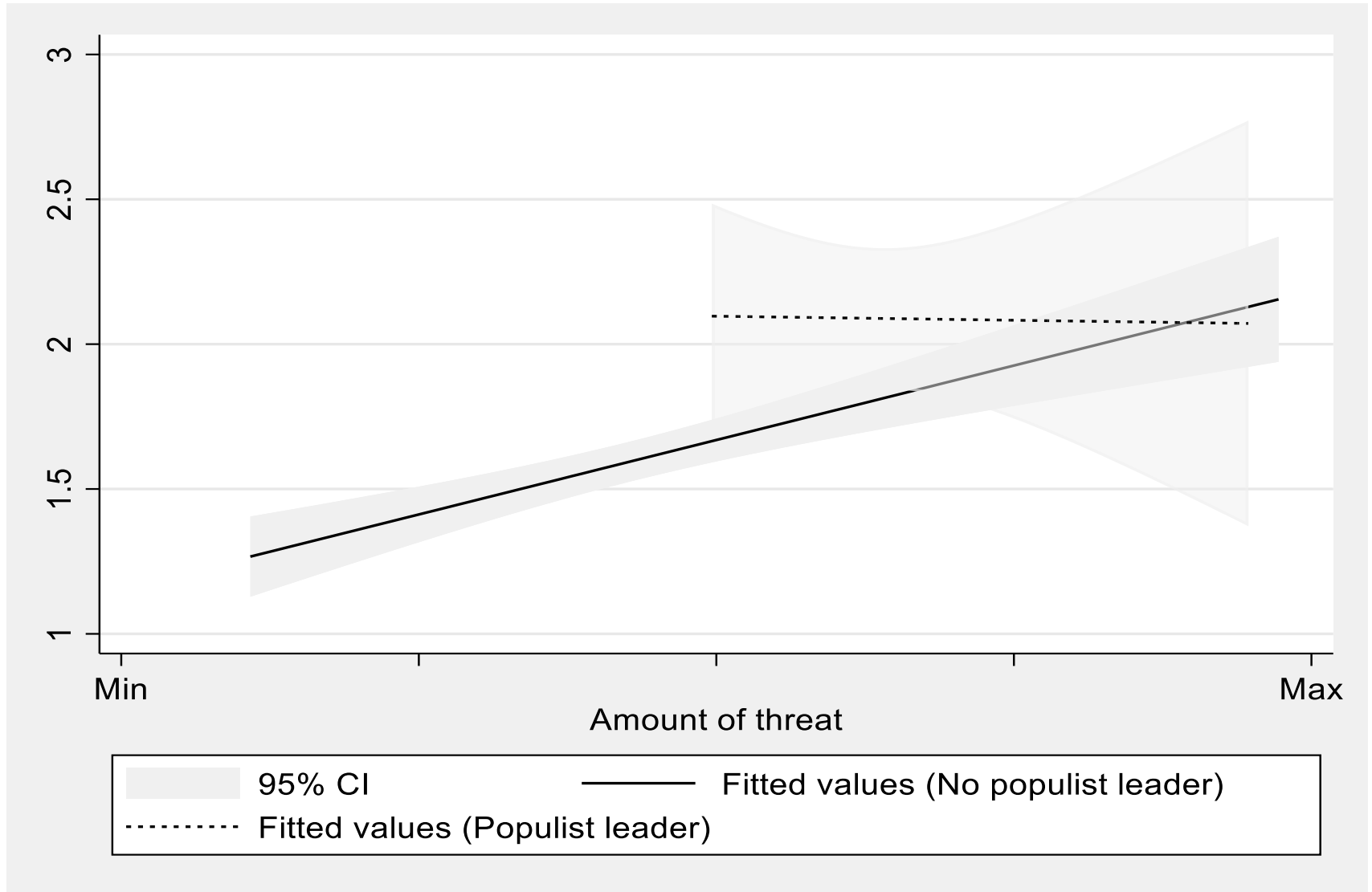
N=191

Mean DV=1.64

St. Errors
clustered
for countries

Linear predictions on partisan polarisation (Consensus features*Threat)

Linear predictions on partisan polarisation (Consensus features*Threat)

Linear predictions on partisan polarisation (Populist leader*Threat)

Legend:
- 95% CI
- Fitted values (No populist leader)
- Fitted values (Populist leader)

X-axis: Amount of threat (Min to Max)
Y-axis: 1, 1.5, 2, 2.5, 3

Conclusion

- More threatened societies display signs of abstract social defense reactions, as they are

  - More partisan-polarised
  - More ideologically polarised
  - Feel closer to preferred parties
  - Are more religious

- Political institutions and the style of political actors matter
- Threats, majoritarian traits and populist leadership style are significant predictors of partisan polarisation

→ Do polarisation, threats and majoritarian traits form a vicious circle?

Thank you for your attention!

patkos.veronika@tk.hu

tk.hu