Social Inclusion
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10248
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10248

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Open Access Journal

Associations Between Perceived Societal Polarisation and (Extreme) Non-Normative Attitudes and Behaviour

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Submitted: 14 February 2025 **Accepted:** 14 May 2025 **Published:** 14 July 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "The Impact of Social Norms on Cohesion and (De)Polarization" edited by Miranda Lubbers (Autonomous University of Barcelona), Marcin Bukowski (Jagiellonian University), Oliver Christ (FernUniversität in Hagen), Eva Jaspers (University of Utrecht), and Maarten van Zalk (University of Osnabrück), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i438

Abstract

Perceptions of societal polarisation in a country may influence individuals' willingness to engage in non(normative) collective action. In the present research, we test the hypothesis that perceived societal polarisation reduces trust in the government, particularly when the government is perceived as posing a threat to the own social group. In turn, we expect increased willingness to engage in collective action on behalf of the ingroup. To test our predictions, we used a 2 (no threat versus threat) × 2 (no polarisation versus polarisation) experimental design. In the paradigm, participants are citizens in a fictitious country called "Bovenland." Participants read three newspaper articles about political issues targeted at their ingroup "the Southerners." After each newspaper article, participants indicated their intention to engage in collective action as well as their trust in the Bovenland government. A pilot study (N = 42) suggested that our experimental manipulation of perceived threat and perception of polarisation was effective. Our (preregistered) main study (N = 982) gathered through Prolific, found that perceived threat, but not polarisation, resulted in significantly more collective action intentions (normative, non-normative, and extreme non-normative). Under threat (but not under polarisation) significantly more (non)normative action intentions emerged. Bootstrapping analyses supported our finding that there was no direct effect of polarisation on collective action intentions. However, in the no-threat condition, polarisation increased trust in the Bovenland government, which predicted less collective action intentions (normative, non-normative, and extreme non-normative). The implications of these findings will be discussed.

Keywords

collective action intentions; normative behaviour; perceived threat; polarisation; political trust

1. Introduction

In recent years, increased protests and other forms of collective action directed against governments and other authorities emerged in Western democracies. For example, the "yellow vests" protests emerged after proposed increases to gas prices and developed into a wider protest against the government (Breeden & Specia, 2019; Jetten et al., 2020). In other countries, both climate protesters (Schuetze, 2023) and farmers ("Boeren dumpen puin," 2024a) blocked highways as a means of protest against government actions. Other protests included violent elements, such as pro-Palestine protesters on campuses in the US and Europe ("Politie: niet-vreedzame," 2024b; "Scenes from the student protests," 2024) or far-right rioters in the UK attacking the police ("110 police officers injured," 2024). While these protests differ in their underlying motivation, they are a form of collective action in response to perceived threats. Specifically, a reaction to the feeling that their group is being disadvantaged by the government or that the government is unable to deal with a threat. This implies how people perceive the society and world they live in shapes their response to perceived threats including the emergence of collective action. But what shapes people's perception of the government and its actions?

People perceive today's societies as dominated by extreme and polarised views (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016) combined with a lack of shared values (Ahler, 2014). This is not surprising given that news coverage—which is a key information source for citizens (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2022; Tung Lai et al., 2015)—frequently focuses on the ever-increasing polarisation of societies. Moreover, the news is dominated by the threats the world is facing, like wars, climate crises, and economic recessions, and governments' reactions to threats. Thus, people are constantly exposed to information about threats, societal polarisation, and government actions. The overarching question of the present article is how perceived threat and information about societal polarisation shape people's intention for collective action against the government. We explore whether perceptions of polarisation and perceived threat in combination increase (extreme) non-normative collective action intentions. We further examine trust in the government as a mediator. We test whether perceived threat and polarisation jointly lower political trust which, in turn, could enhance willingness to engage in (extreme) non-normative collective action.

1.1. Collective Action

Collective action describes any kind of activity that groups and individuals engage in to achieve a common goal. This happens usually in response to perceived injustice and aims to promote social change, to protect or enhance the status of the ingroup (Becker, 2012; Wright et al., 1990). Collective action can take many different forms, including, but not limited to, strikes, protests, and petitions. These actions include legal as well as illegal behaviour and can be categorised as normative collective action, non-normative collective action, or extreme non-normative collective action (Tausch et al., 2011). In most Western countries, non-violent forms of action are considered normative; however, social norms and context further influence what constitutes normative behaviour (Louis et al., 2005; Tausch et al., 2011). Non-normative actions contrast with societal norms like damage of personal property or disturbing society (Schuetze, 2023). Extreme non-normative collective action usually includes an element of violence directed against others (e.g., suicide bombings; Tausch et al., 2011). Additionally, being part of a radical or extremist group can be seen as a non-normative or even extreme non-normative action. Research on collective action also emphasises the role of antecedent factors such as social norms for collective action (van Zomeren et al.,

2008). Specifically, there exists now a growing body of empirical work that focuses on the psychological variables that precede extreme non-normative action (for a review see Feddes et al., 2023). For example, work by Doosje et al. (2012, 2013) showed that intergroup threat perceptions and perceived illegitimacy of authorities were related to more support for extreme, non-normative actions.

Collective action has a close but complex connection to political trust. Studies found that political trust increases political participation including normative collective action (Bäck & Christensen, 2016; Gulevich & Osin, 2023). In contrast, other studies found that trust is associated with less collective action (Bekmagambetov et al., 2018; Corcoran et al., 2011). Further, findings showed that lower trust was associated with increased likeliness to engage in non-normative action (Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Šerek & Macek, 2014), while higher trust was associated with higher compliance to governmental demands (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Combined, these findings demonstrate that collective action is closely linked to political trust, but the relationship depends on contextual factors. Here we focus on two contextual factors—perceived threat and polarisation—that might shape citizens' level of trust and in turn their willingness to engage in collective action.

1.2. Perceived Threat and Collective Action

Threats refer to the perception that any real or possible change in personal circumstances or social standing of one's group might result in negative consequences (Fritsche et al., 2011). They are associated with a wide range of social attitudes and behaviour like explicit and implicit prejudice (Aberson & Gaffney, 2009), right-wing mindset (Jost et al., 2017; Onraet et al., 2013, 2014), and identification with the ingroup (Wilson & Hugenberg, 2010). Threat perceptions play a crucial role in political behaviour, like citizens' voting behaviour and support for political policies (Brandt & Bakker, 2022). For example, experiencing relative group deprivation was associated with support for Donald Trump in the 2016 US election (Major et al., 2018), for Marine Le Pen in the 2012 French election (Urbanska & Guimond, 2018), and for Brexit (Macdougall et al., 2020). Holman et al. (2016) found that perceived terrorist threat reduced the support of a Democratic female leader in the US and a conservative female leader in the UK. People who experience personal economic hardship are less trustful of the government and less willing to adhere to government guidelines (Lobera et al., 2024).

Further, higher levels of perceived symbolic and realistic threat were associated with higher collective action intentions (Ayanian & Tausch, 2016; Ayanian et al., 2020), for example in the conflict between Turks and Kurds (Çakal et al., 2016) and pro-environmental behaviour in the face of climate threat (Stollberg & Jonas, 2021). In the context of Hong Kong, perceiving symbolic threat increased support and willingness to engage in normative and violent collective action (Chan et al., 2023; Cheung et al., 2022; Gulliver et al., 2023). More generally, threat perceptions increased pro-group behaviour and collective thinking (Çakal et al., 2016; Fritsche et al., 2017; Yustisia et al., 2020), which in turn might increase willingness to engage in collective action. In sum, these findings highlight the role of threats in political behaviour, which are associated with normative and non-normative collective action as a means to mitigate threats.

1.3. Perceived Polarisation and Collective Action

Threat perceptions do not take place in isolation but rather they interact with other factors related to the societal climate. A united and well-functioning society might be well-equipped to handle threats adequately, while a divided society might struggle to ward off threats. Thus, threat perceptions might differ depending on the levels of polarisation within societies and they might reinforce each other. For example, realistic threats like resource competition are associated with increased prejudice and outgroup hostility (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). This might lead to increased polarisation in society regarding issues like welfare benefits and migration policy. Indeed, events like financial, environmental, and refugee crises, which all can pose threats to the status quo, co-occur with rising levels of polarisation in Western societies.

Polarisation research distinguishes between different types of polarisation like actual versus perceived polarisation or affective versus issue polarisation. According to Lees and Cikara (2021), actual polarisation refers to the objective distance between individuals or groups, while perceived polarisation captures the subjectively perceived distance between individuals or groups. Thus, it focuses on the estimated difference between groups and captures a subjective experience of polarisation (Ahler, 2014; Keltner & Robinson, 1993; Lees & Cikara, 2021; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016; Westfall et al., 2015). Further, affective polarisation captures the emotional component of polarisation. (i.e., how individuals feel about others in society), while issue polarisation captures the cognitive component of polarisation (i.e., how people feel about the issue). All these types of polarisation have been linked to political behaviour. Polarised citizens report more distrust and less political participation than non-polarised citizens (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Layman et al., 2006). Polarisation has been predominantly associated with negative outcomes like lower voter turnout, increased outgroup hostility, lower trust, and lower cooperative behaviour (Enders & Armaly, 2019; Lee, 2022). Yet, contrasting these assumptions, Smith et al. (2024) argued that polarisation can foster political engagement "which is itself critical for pluralistic societies in general, and democracies in particular" (p. 1). They postulated that polarisation could bring like-minded people together to challenge existing inequalities and advocate for positive social changes. As such, polarisation processes can be the underlying mechanism of collective action. The emerging form of collective action (normative versus non-normative) depends on the social contexts and its prevailing norms.

Most polarisation studies rely on measurements of polarisation, while the manipulation of polarisation has been less studied. Crimston et al. (2022) manipulated polarisation using a 60-second video about a fictional society which either highlighted consensus (low polarisation) or dissent (high polarisation) on societal issues. Across their studies they found that high polarisation was linked to perceptions of anomie and support of strong leaders. Anomie describes the perceived breakdown of social norms and rules, which might indicate that in a polarised society, people perceive norms as less valid. Similarly, Lee (2022) manipulated polarisation using fake newspaper articles that included information about the level of polarisation within society. They found that, in the low polarisation condition, cooperative behaviour and social trust were higher. There was no difference between the high polarisation and control condition without polarisation information. In combination, the findings indicate that information about polarisation on a societal level impacts individuals' behaviour and attitudes. We build on these findings by implementing a polarisation manipulation to explore its impact on trust in governments and (non-)normative collective action intentions.

1.4. The Current Research

The current research uses an experimental approach to test the joint effect of polarisation and threat on collective action intentions. We examine whether willingness to engage in (extreme) non-normative collective action is higher when societies are framed as being polarised. Thus, we manipulate the information participants receive about the level of societal polarisation on an issue. We further test how this relationship is impacted by repeated exposure to realistic threats. In this study, we manipulate the level of perceived realistic threat, i.e., perceived threats to a group's material well-being, such as threats to safety, resources, or jobs (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). In addition, the threat originates from the governing institution, resulting in a combination of realistic threat and political threat, i.e., the feeling that one's political power is undermined. We test three main hypotheses. First, building on the findings that in polarised environments norms are perceived as less valid and outgroup hostility is higher, we assume that (extreme) non-normative collective action intentions are higher in polarised climates:

> H1a: In a polarised society, inaction and normative collective action intentions are lower than in a non-polarised society.

> H1b: In a polarised society, non-normative collective action intentions are higher than in a non-polarised society.

Second, polarisation has been linked to lower trust, which in turn can increase collective action intentions, especially non-normative intentions. Thus, we assume that political trust mediates the relationship between polarisation and collective action:

> H2: In a polarised society, compared to a non-polarised society, trust in government is reduced, which in turn increases non-normative collective action intentions.

Lastly, we expect that perceived threat moderates the relationship between polarisation and trust. Realistic threat is associated with reduced trust in government. We assume that this link is even stronger in a polarised society compared to a non-polarised society:

> H3: The association between polarisation and trust in the government is stronger under threat.

2. Methodology

2.1. Pilot Study

To validate and choose the vignettes for the main study, we piloted 16 vignettes. We used a 2 × 2 repeated-measure design. The sample consisted of 48 student participants who received course credits for their participation. We excluded two participants who did not pass the attention check and four participants who spent significantly longer than average on the survey. The final sample consisted of 42 students (89.6% female; M_{age} = 20). After giving informed consent, each participant was randomly assigned to a threat (no threat vs threat) and a polarisation (no polarisation vs polarisation) condition. Each participant saw eight vignettes in randomised order and rated them on perceived level of threat and polarisation. The results

indicated that participants in the threat condition ($M = 5.79$, $SD = 0.54$) perceived significantly more threat than individuals in the no threat condition ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.19$; $t = -9.38$, $p < .001$). Participants in the polarisation condition ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.6$) perceived significantly more polarisation than individuals in the no polarisation condition ($M = 5.95$, $SD = 0.8$; $t = -6.59$, $p < .001$). There was no significant difference in perceived polarisation between the threat conditions ($M_{\text{no threat}} = 4.4$, $SD_{\text{no threat}} = 1.64$; $M_{\text{threat}} = 4.91$, $SD_{\text{threat}} = 1.95$; $t = -.912$, $p = .37$). There was no significant difference in perceived threat between the polarisation conditions ($M_{\text{no polarisation}} = 4.56$, $SD_{\text{no polarisation}} = 1.61$; $M_{\text{polarisation}} = 4.3$, $SD_{\text{polarisation}} = 1.82$; $t = 0.504$, $p = .617$). Based on the pilot we chose three vignettes for the main study. The three chosen vignettes capture realistic threat related to economic hardship (i.e., higher energy, lack of governmental support, and investment in the region), and showed on average a three-point difference between the threat and no threat condition. Detailed information about the pilot is displayed in the Supplementary File (Table S1 and S2).

2.2. Main Study

2.2.1. Sample and Design

We collected 1,004 UK participants via Prolific. As preregistered, we excluded one participant who did not consent, three participants who failed the attention checks, 15 participants who completed the study in less than five minutes, and three participants who took more than 60 minutes to complete the study. The average completion time was 13.29 minutes. In total, 21 participants were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 982 UK participants (485 women, 488 men, 8 non-binary, 1 other; $M_{\text{age}} = 44.58$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 14.62$). 43.08% ($N = 423$) did not have a university degree and 56.92% ($N = 559$) had an undergraduate degree or higher. We implemented a 2 × 2 repeated-measure design. Each participant was randomly allocated to a threat condition (no threat: $N = 482$ vs threat: $N = 491$) and a polarisation condition (no polarisation: $N = 486$ vs polarisation: $N = 487$).

After giving informed consent, participants were introduced to the fictitious country Bovenland (Feddes et al., 2024). They were informed that they would become citizens of Bovenland, either as Southerners or Northerners, and that Southerners have lower job opportunities, lower income, and less access to healthcare compared to Northerners. Using a mock minimal group task, all participants were assigned as Southerners. A manipulation check ensured that participants were able to remember which group they were assigned to (which was always the "Southerners"). To further engage them with the scenario, participants read Bovenland's constitution and indicated which laws they deemed most important. Then, participants were introduced to the vignette tasks with a practice task to familiarise themselves with the answering format. They were presented with three vignettes containing newspaper articles and indicated their response after each vignette. After completing the vignette tasks, participants filled out multiple questionnaires about their social and political attitudes, followed by demographics and full disclosure. All materials are displayed in the Supplementary Files.

2.2.2. Instruments

To manipulate perception of threat and polarisation, participants read newspaper articles in the *Bovenland Daily* about a situation that impacts them as a Southerner and the government's reaction to it. Depending on

the condition, the article included a realistic threat to their ingroup (to Southerners) or not. All participants saw the vignettes in the same order, starting with the least threatening to the most threatening according to the pilot study. The first vignette reported a new energy bill, which was rejected (no threat) or passed (threat). The second vignette reported a referendum related to governmental infrastructure investment. The referendum was either ignored, resulting in no governmental investment (threat), or it was taken into account, resulting in governmental investment (no threat). The third vignette reported a bill about releasing emergency funds, which was either passed (no threat) or rejected (threat). Additionally, the news article contained polls of the public opinion regarding the issue discussed. These polls either showed a divided society with extreme opinions on both ends of the distribution (polarised condition) or a society with normally distributed opinions (no polarisation condition).

To assess *collective action intentions*, participants responded to each of the three news scenarios by distributing 100 points across four different action options, ranging from inaction to extreme non-normative action. For example, the first threatening scenario negatively affected Southerners due to a new policy regarding energy costs. Using their 100 points, participants responded how likely they would be to either (a) do nothing and move on with their day, (b) sign a petition against the new policy, (c) block the entrance of a big energy producer, or (d) call for violently demonstrating in front of the members of parliament private homes. These answer options reflect the collective action strategies: (a) inaction, (b) normative action, (c) non-normative action, and (d) extreme non-normative action, respectively. The wording of the items was based on previous work by Tausch et al. (2011) where the different forms of collective action were described and measured. For the present purpose, we adapted the questions about collective action intentions to the specific context. The allocated points to each option were used as dependent variables ranging from 0 to 100 possible allocated points.

Trust in the government and the people in Bovenland was measured after the last vignette using two items adapted from the European Social Survey (Curtice & Bryson, 2001). Participants responded on a scale from 0 (*you can't be too careful*) to 10 (*most people can be trusted*). The items read: "As a Southerner living in Bovenland, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" and "As a Southerner living in Bovenland, to what extent would you trust the government of Bovenland?" The items were highly correlated ($r = .51$, $p < .001$).

Participants indicated their *political orientation* on a 11-point scale from −5 (*progressive*) to 5 (*conservative*) regarding economic and cultural issues separately (Choma et al., 2009). The items were highly correlated ($r = .65$, $p < .001$) and combined into one score ($M = -0.87$, $SD = 2.23$).

At the end of the survey, participants reported their gender, age, and education level.

2.2.3. Data Availability

All confirmatory hypotheses and analyses for this project were pre-registered on AsPredicted; data and syntax are available online (https://osf.io/q9n5z/?view_only=8dbc5411f2c34ca1abe48919f6feae39)

2.2.4. Sample Size

A priori sample size calculation using GPower for a repeated measurement design with a between factor interaction indicated that 952 participants are required to find a small interaction effect (f = 0.1) with a power of .90, alpha = .05 and correlation of $r = .5$ between repeated measures. To account for individuals who fail attention checks, we aimed to collect 1000 participants.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptives

To obtain a first impression of our data, we explored the means of the different collective action intentions and trust per time point (Table 1). The mean points assigned to extreme non-normative action intention were very low. Extreme non-normative action intentions and non-normative action intention correlated positively ($r = .21$, $p < .001$) and thus we combined them into one composite score. Political trust was positively associated with inaction ($r = .21$, $p < .001$) and negatively with all forms of collective action intentions, especially strong with non-normative action intentions ($r = -.26$, $p < .001$). Societal trust showed the same pattern, but the correlations were weaker and, in the case of normative action, non-significant. Women and older participants were more likely to indicate normative action intentions and men and younger participants more likely to indicate non-normative action intentions (respectively $r = .16$, $p < .001$ and $r = .08$, $p < .05$).

Table 1. Descriptive.

Variable	mean	sd	median	min	max	skew	kurtosis	se
Inaction Mean	39.41	26.41	33.67	0	100	0.40	−0.63	0.84
Inaction M1	36.37	36.89	22.00	0	100	0.61	−1.14	1.18
Inaction M2	62.98	37.54	75.00	0	100	−0.48	−1.32	1.20
Inaction M3	18.87	27.69	5.00	0	100	1.62	1.72	0.88
Normative Action Mean	44.32	21.26	44.50	0	100	−0.07	−0.40	0.68
Normative Action M1	54.47	34.81	59.00	0	100	−0.22	−1.26	1.11
Normative Action M2	26.36	29.97	16.00	0	100	0.92	−0.27	0.96
Normative Action M3	52.13	29.22	50.00	0	100	−0.06	−0.80	0.93
Non-Normative Action Mean	12.78	13.37	9.50	0	66.67	1.17	1.04	0.43
Non-Normative Action M1	5.88	13.01	0.00	0	100	2.76	8.35	0.42
Non-Normative Action M2	6.50	14.63	0.00	0	100	3.15	11.92	0.47
Non-Normative Action M3	25.97	25.91	20.00	0	100	0.87	0.09	0.83
Extreme Non-Normative Action Mean	3.49	8.43	0.00	0	74.67	3.71	17.97	0.27
Extreme Non-Normative Action M1	3.29	9.78	0.00	0	77	3.87	16.34	0.31
Extreme Non-Normative Action M2	4.16	12.68	0.00	0	100	4.36	22.68	0.40
Extreme Non-Normative Action M3	3.03	10.99	0.00	0	100	5.34	34.10	0.35
Political Trust	2.97	2.43	2.00	0	10	0.69	−0.50	0.08
Societal Trust	4.63	2.45	5.00	0	10	0.00	−0.85	0.08

3.2. Hypotheses 1a and 1b

3.2.1. Preregistered Repeated Measurement ANOVA

In the experiment, participants' collective action intentions were measured three times, i.e., after each vignette. Therefore, we preregistered a two-factorial repeated-measure ANOVA to explore the effect on repeated exposure to threat and polarisation on collective action intentions. Focusing on inaction as the dependent variable, we found a significant main effect for threat ($F(1,969) = 65.90$, $p < .001$, generalised $\eta^2 = .04$) and measurement point ($F(2,1938) = 697.52$, $p < .001$, generalised $\eta^2 = .23$) as well as significant interactions between polarisation and measurement point ($F(2,1938) = 8.28$, $p < .001$, generalised $\eta^2 = .003$), threat and measurement point ($F(2,1938) = 25.63$, $p < .001$, generalised $\eta^2 = .02$), and a significant three-way interaction ($F(2,1938) = 4.13$, $p = .015$, generalised $\eta^2 = .001$). The difference between points allocated to inaction between measurement was larger in the no threat condition compared to the threat condition. The same pattern emerged for polarisation; there were larger differences in the no polarisation compared to the polarisation condition. The effect of measurement point is not linear, that is the likelihood of inaction does not show a linear change. Rather it seems like interactions with measurement point were driven by Vignette 2. The results for normative and non-normative action intentions showed a similar pattern. Detailed description in the Supplementary Files. In sum, the results indicated that Vignette 2 had a different effect on collective action intentions than Vignette 1 and Vignette 3. Therefore, in the following analyses, we decided to average the collective action intentions across the three measurement points. We discuss the implications of the different responses to the vignettes in the general discussion.

3.2.2. Two-Way Factorial ANOVA

To further test our first hypotheses (H1a and H1b), we conducted three separate two-way factorial ANOVAs with inaction, normative, and non-normative collective action intentions (including extreme non-normative collective action intentions) averaged across the two measurement points as dependent variables while controlling for gender, age, and political orientation. Detailed results are in the Supplementary Files.

For inaction as the dependent variable, we found a significant main effect of threat ($F(1,962) = 34.90$, $p > .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$), but no main effect of polarisation and no interaction effect between threat and polarisation. The results indicated that under threat ($M = 32.76$, $SD = 25.89$) compared to no threat ($M = 46.19$, $SD = 25.21$), participants moved away from inaction to any other form of action.

For normative collective action intentions, we found a significant main effect of threat ($F(1,962) = 10.86$, $p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$) and a significant main effect of polarisation ($F(1,962) = 4.31$, $p = .038$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$). We found no interaction effect between threat and polarisation. The results showed that under threat ($M = 47.29$, $SD = 20.83$) or if society is perceived to be polarised ($M = 46.01$, $SD = 21.34$), participants were more likely to engage in normative action compared to no threat ($M = 41.29$, $SD = 21.29$) or in a cohesive society ($M = 42.62$, $SD = 21.07$).

We found a main effect of threat ($F(1,962) = 24.21$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$), but no main effect of polarisation and no interaction effect. In the threat condition, participants reported significantly more intention of non-normative and extreme non-normative action ($M = 14.07$, $SD = 13.49$) compared to the no threat condition ($M = 11.51$, $SD = 13.13$).

Taken together, it seems that threat primarily drives people to move toward collective action and also to (extreme) non-normative forms of collective action. Polarisation did not have a consistent effect on collective action intentions. Based on these results, we reject H1a and H1b. We did not find a main effect of polarisation for inaction and non-normative action intentions, and for normative action intentions we found the reversed pattern. Normative action intentions were higher in the polarised climate than in the non-polarised climate. Further, the results indicate that threat is a driver for normative and non-normative behaviour independent of the level of polarisation.

3.3. Hypotheses 2: Mediation Analyses

Next, to explore whether polarisation impacts collective action intentions indirectly through reducing trust in governments, we conducted mediation analyses with trust in the government as a mediator between polarisation and inaction (model 1), normative (model 2) and non-normative collective action intentions (model 3; see Figure 1). We controlled for gender, age, and political orientation. Detailed results are in the Supplementary Files. We found that polarisation increased trust in governments. For inaction (model 1) there was no significant indirect effect of polarisation on inaction via trust in government. For normative action (model 2) we found a significant indirect effect of polarisation on normative action intentions partially mediated through trust in the government. It was a suppression effect, indicating that after controlling for trust, the effect of polarisation on normative action was stronger than without controlling for trust. For non-normative action intentions (model 3), we found a significant indirect effect of polarisation on non-normative action intentions partially mediated through trust in the government. In a polarised climate, trust in government increases, which in turn reduces non-normative action intentions. Based on the results, we reject H2. While political trust mediates the link between polarisation and collective action intentions, the link between polarisation and trust was opposed to our assumption. Polarisation increased political trust, instead of decreasing it. We additionally explored societal trust as a mediator. Polarisation was not associated with societal trust and thus there was no indirect effect on collective action intentions mediated through societal trust. Potential reasons are discussed in the general discussion section.

3.4. Hypotheses 3: Moderated Mediation Analyses

Next, we included threat and the interaction between polarisation and threat in the models (models 4–6, Figures 2–4). We controlled for gender, age, and political orientation. Detailed results are in the Supplementary Files. For inaction (model 4), we found a direct effect of polarisation and threat. There was a significant effect of threat on trust in government: Trust in the government was higher in the no threat condition compared to the threat condition. There was also a significant direct effect of polarisation on trust. That is, in the polarisation condition, trust in government was higher than in the no polarisation condition. There was a significant interaction between polarisation and threat on trust. Simple effects indicated that polarisation only impacted trust in the no-threat condition. This also impacted the indirect effect. That is, in the no-threat condition, polarisation increased trust in government which in turn reduced collective action intentions.

For normative action intentions (model 5), we found a direct effect of polarisation and threat on normative action, but no significant interaction between polarisation and threat on collective action intentions. For both threat and polarisation there was an indirect effect on normative action intentions, but in opposing directions.

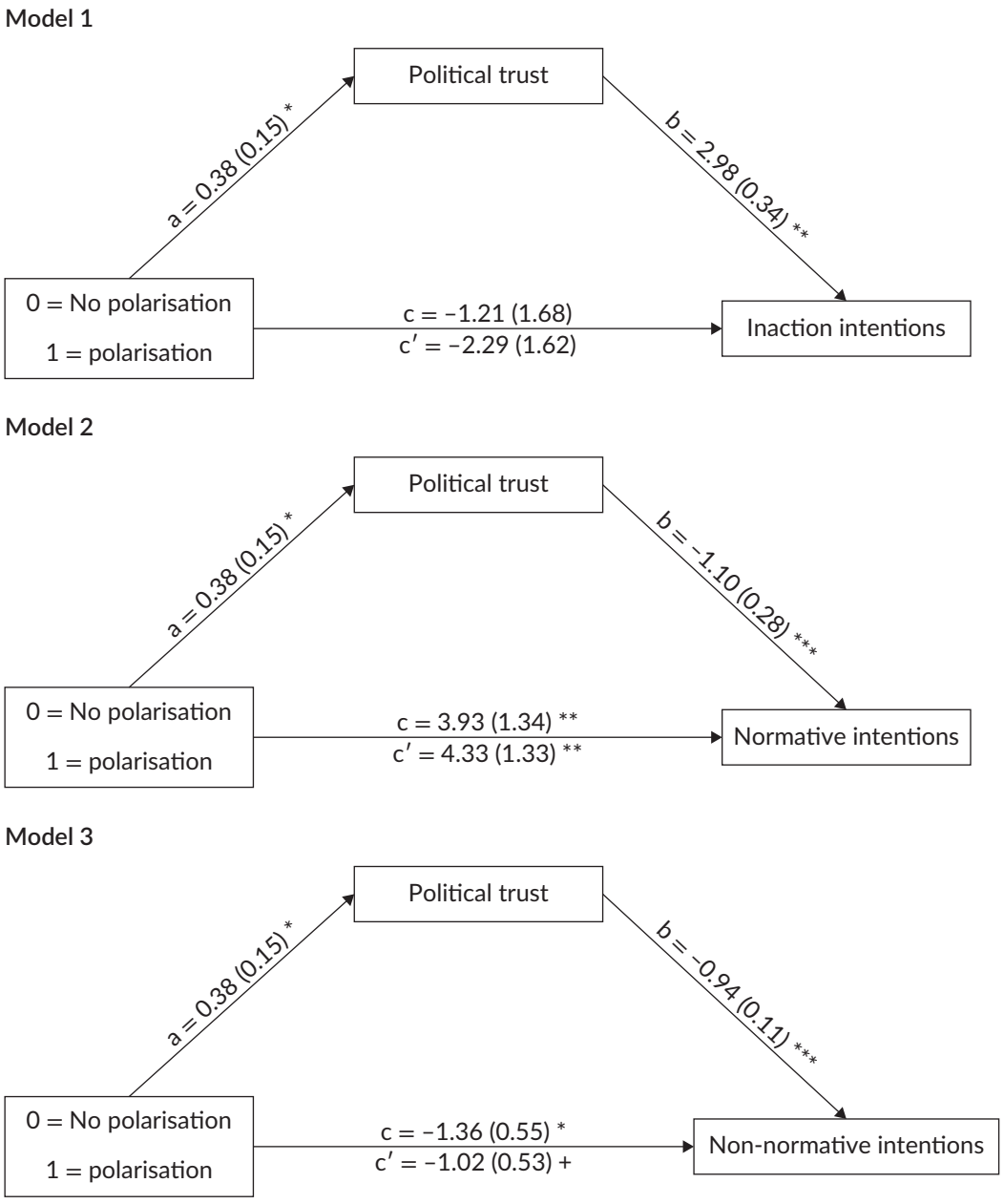

Figure 1. Mediation model for inaction, normative action, and non-normative action.

That is, for threat, the link with normative action intentions got weaker after including trust, but for polarisation the link got stronger. For non-normative action intentions (model 6), we found a direct effect of threat, but no direct effect of polarisation and no significant interaction between polarisation and threat. There was an indirect effect of threat on non-normative action intentions. That is, in the threat condition trust in government decreased which in turn increased non-normative action intentions.

In a nutshell, the results suggest a positive indirect effect: Polarisation increases trust in government, and this is related to more inaction, and less normative action intentions, but only in the low-threat condition. In the high-threat condition, there was no significant indirect effect.

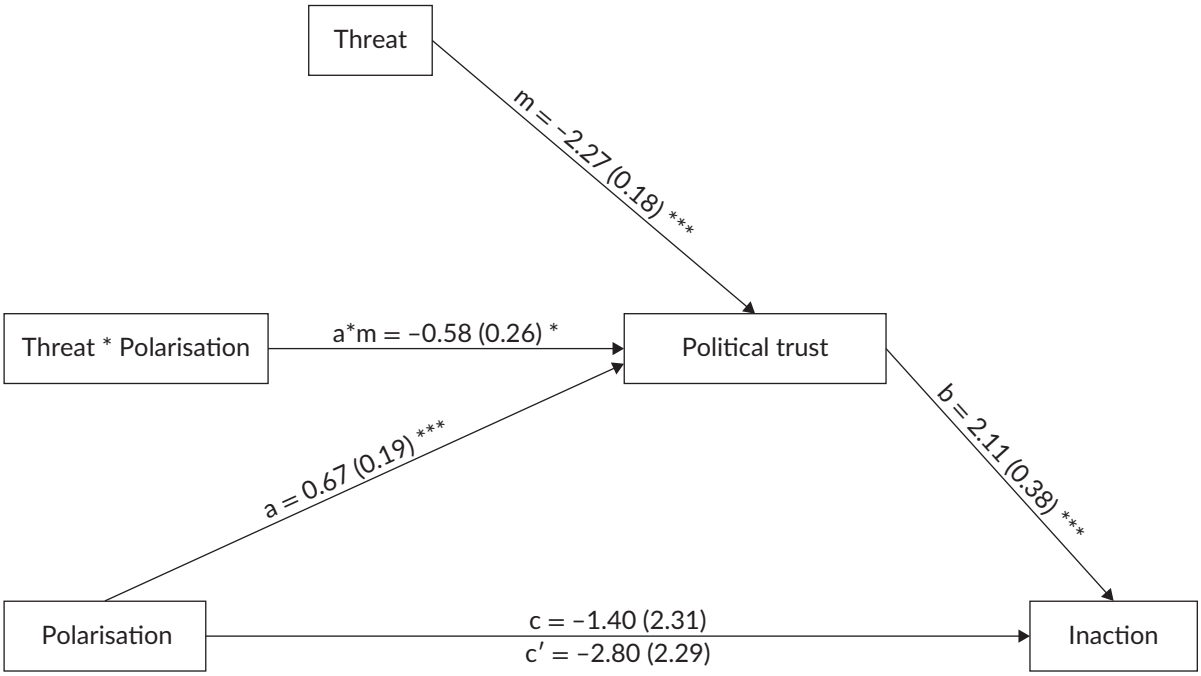

Figure 2. Moderated mediation for inaction as dependent variable (model 4).

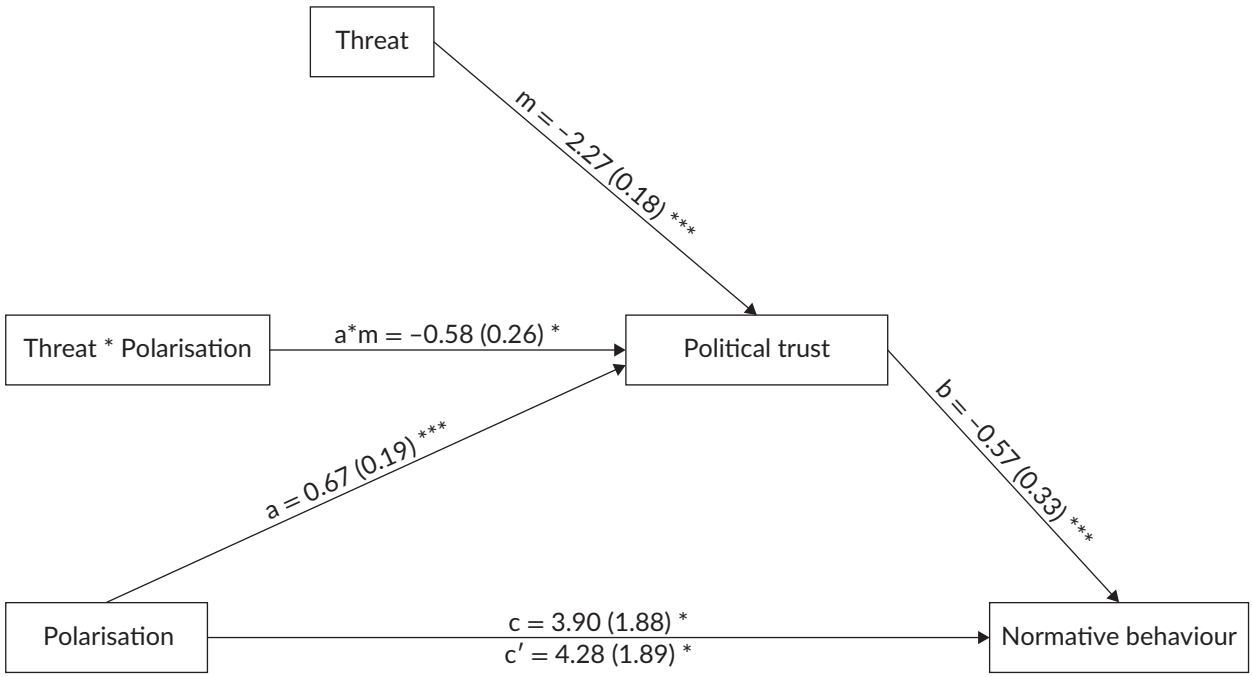

Figure 3. Moderated mediation for normative action as dependent variable (model 5).

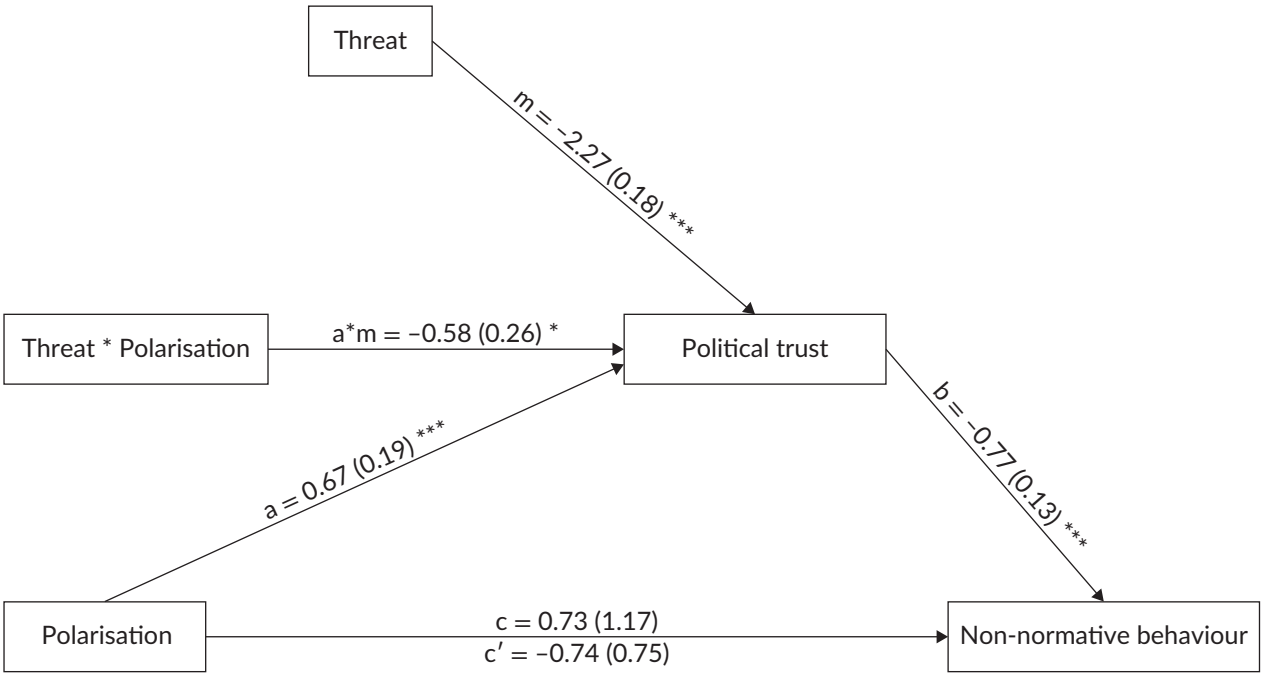

Figure 4. Moderated mediation for non-normative action as dependent variable (model 6).

4. General Discussion

Collective action emerges as a reaction to perceived threats including perceived disadvantaged based on one's own group membership. The nature of collective action (e.g., normative or non-normative behaviour) depends on the societal climate. It serves as a benchmark to evaluate what is acceptable and desirable within a society (Chiu et al., 2010). This article explores two factors that could impact the perception of the societal climate: perceived polarisation (i.e., the extent to which society is polarised about an issue) and perceived threat.

We found that collective action intentions were predominately driven by threat perceptions. Under threat (here realistic threat to the ingroup) participants engaged in more collective action in general, including (extreme) non-normative action. This aligns with research exploring the impact of economic inequality at a societal level on people's behaviour. When economic inequality at a societal level is low, people tend to be more cooperative and benevolent. When inequality is high, people act more aggressively and individualistically towards those who are better off (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019). Sanchez-Rodrigues and colleagues proposed that a shift in social norms postulates that what is acceptable in an *unequal* context is not acceptable in an *equal* context. In line with this, we found that under conditions of threat to the ingroup, (extreme) non-normative collective action responses became more acceptable to our participants.

Polarisation perceptions, however, did not consistently impact collective action. Instead, our findings indicate that societal polarisation is most impactful when no threat is present. In the no-threat condition, and in contrast to our hypotheses, polarisation even increased trust in government and reduced normative collective action intentions. These findings were surprising and counterintuitive. However, multiple plausible explanations exist.

First, unlike previous studies, we did not measure personal polarisation, but rather manipulated polarisation in the society. Therefore, it is conceivable that the perceived polarisation of the society acts differently than

individualised polarisation. While the latter might motivate collective action, a seemingly polarised society might lead people to shift their trust towards the government. As perceptions of polarisation increase and individuals' trust in others decreases, trust in the government might increase. In other words, polarisation might lead individuals to seek support beyond their peer-citizens, leading to increased trust in governing institutions. We find, however, that this only holds if the government is perceived to be a potential alternative to seek support from. In the threat condition, the government acts in opposition to the participants and this compensatory trust response to polarisation is not shown.

Secondly, the effect of threat in our experiment could have superseded any effects of the polarisation condition. In our study, we focused on one type of threat: realistic threat. Since the fabricated threats focused on unequal treatments resulting in economic hardship for one group, inducing threat might inevitably lead to increasing polarisation, even if not explicitly stated. That is, if two groups are competing against each other, one might automatically believe that society is polarised. We did not see an impact of threat manipulation on polarisation perception in our pilot study, which speaks against the notion that realistic threat automatically triggers polarisation. Nonetheless, in future studies, it would be interesting to see if external threats unrelated to intergroup relations, such as environmental catastrophes or internal threats like loss of control, would result in a different pattern.

Third, polarisation was manipulated by displaying societal attitudes using different distributions. We relied on people understanding the graphs, and while the pilot indicated that the polarisation manipulation worked, there is research highlighting individual differences in understanding graphs and interpreting them correctly (Garcia-Retamero & Galesic, 2010). Unlike previous work (Lee, 2022), we did not mention polarisation explicitly. Rather, the distribution was just part of the newspaper. As such, it might have been less focal to people's perception of the article, or its impact might be overshadowed by the threat manipulation. Future research could test different methods of presenting information about polarisation.

We exposed participants to three vignettes exploring whether collective action intentions increase over time. However, our results indicate that there was no linear increase, instead Vignette 2 seemed to trigger a different reaction. A potential reason for this is a difference in how threat was formulated in the different vignettes. In Vignette 1 and Vignette 3, the government introduced a bill that would disproportionally impact their group in the future. As such, participants might have opted for collective action to reverse the newly introduced bill and maintain the status quo. In Vignette 2 their group was already disadvantaged and the government rejected a bill that would reduce the disadvantage. Therefore, the starting points in the vignettes were different: an existing equality that is dismantled compared to an inequality that is maintained. A potential explanation could be system-justifying beliefs, which can result in disadvantaged groups supporting, or at least not challenging, unfair systems (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). Additionally, in Vignette 2, a referendum was explicitly ignored by the government. While all vignettes scored high on perceived threat in the pilot, the type of perceived threat might differ. Future studies are needed to understand the role of threat types and status quo (e.g., introducing vs maintaining an inequality) for collective action intentions.

Our results highlight the crucial role political trust plays in collective action intentions. If trust in government is low, non-normative and extreme collective action intention may be more likely to occur. Indeed, this is in line with previous work by Doosje et al. (2012, 2013) who found in a cross-sectional survey study that greater perceived legitimacy of the authorities, which included the government, is related to more support of

ideology-based violence by others, and stronger intentions to use ideology-based violence toward outgroup members. Importantly, in the present study, we did not find evidence that greater polarisation perceptions are related to greater distrust in authorities. In that sense, the present social context as introduced in the paradigm seems not to have created greater affective polarisation (Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018; Waldrop, 2021). Future studies could examine whether a social context where there are clear divisions between outgroups based on distrust would affect extreme non-normative collective action aimed at an outgroup.

One limitation of the current study is the use of a fictional society. Future studies could test the external validity by using, for example, experience sampling methods to explore how frequently people experience threats and polarisation in everyday life and how it relates to collective action behaviour. Moreover, this approach would allow testing the possible reinforcing relationship between polarisation, threat, and forms of collective action over time. For example, the visibility of non-normative collective actions might influence perceived polarisation which in turn might increase threat perception. Higher threat perception might result in more non-normative action, triggering a vicious circle that could destabilise society and democratic governance.

Besides the question of external validity, there is also the question of generalisability to the UK and beyond. We do not know which part of the UK people are from. It is probably predominately England, and potentially UK citizens from Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland would show a different pattern. Generalising the findings to other countries including Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, might be problematic. On the one hand, the paradigm is fictional and as such does not rely on a specific cultural aspect. On the other hand, the vignettes, behaviours, and underlying norms do refer to a Western cultural context. As mentioned in the introduction, what constitutes normative behaviour depends on the context. The same can be said for threat and polarisation perceptions. People from Northern Ireland, for example, with its history, might react differently to perceived threats and polarisation resulting than people from England. Therefore, whether the findings can be generalised to other contexts remains an open question to be explored in the future.

5. Conclusion

The present study suggests that under threat people are mobilised, resulting in higher normative and (extreme) non-normative collective action tendencies to improve their situation. Levels of polarisation within the society, however, do not consistently relate to collective action intentions. Rather, it seems that polarisation has a more nuanced impact: It matters in low-threat environments, but not when threat is high.

Funding

This research received funding from the University of Amsterdam RPA Polarisation Seed Funding Program 2023. Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between the University of Sussex and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data and syntax are available at: https://osf.io/q9n5z/?view_only=8dbc5411f2c34ca1abe48919f6feae39

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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