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ON POLITICAL POLARIZATION: CONCEPTUALIZING AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION AND EXPLORING ITS CAUSES FROM A MULTI-METHOD APPROACH

PhD Thesis

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que desafortunadamente non me puideron ver rematar esta tese.*

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Abstract

This PhD dissertation aims to contribute theoretically and empirically to the study of political polarization, with a special focus on its affective expression: affective polarization (AP). Theoretically, the thesis provides a novel dialogue between collective action studies, the intergroup relations literature and the affective polarization literature, resulting in different theoretical insights that are important when trying to grasp affective polarization dynamics in context, and when thinking about depolarization interventions. Empirically, taking Spain as a case study, and adopting a mixed-methods approach, this dissertation provides extensive descriptive -cross-sectional and longitudinal- evidence on the evolution of political polarization indicators and their relationships over a period of more than a decade (2010-2023), to subsequently explore some of the long-term and short-term causes of AP in the multidimensional Spanish political system. In this sense, one of the empirical chapters of this PhD dissertation uses panel data to analyze the relationship between perceived ideological polarization on the two main axes of political competition in Spain (the left-right and territorial dimensions) and AP. The chapter reveals that this relationship is conditioned by individuals' self-reported ideology, meaning that perceptions of polarization on the territorial axis are clearly more positively related to AP levels among right-wing individuals in comparison to left-wing individuals, whereas perceptions of polarization on the left-right axis are somewhat more related to AP among left-wing individuals. The analyses also reveal that the relationship between perceived territorial polarization and AP varies with time, in relation to the salience of the territorial conflict dimension. This chapter underlines the importance of multidimensionality and of individuals' values, in this case their ideology, when studying affective polarization. This PhD dissertation also contributes to the literature on the short-term causes of affective (de)polarization, by means of another chapter that examines, also using panel data, if and how the COVID-19 conjuncture fostered affective polarization dynamics. The findings indicate that, at an individual level, there were participants that increased their levels of AP during the pandemic. In a different vein, we found that aggregate levels of AP decreased when de-escalation policies, which ended the strict lockdowns and were highly popular, consensual and designed by the government in collaboration with health experts, were implemented. Another chapter of the PhD dissertation, analyzing language and interaction in focus group data, digs deep into how political polarization manifests itself within lay citizens' talk and interactions, thereby providing insights into how polarized and even prejudiced accounts of political adversaries are collectively constructed from a rhetorical position of reasonableness. This chapter shows that the intragroup context is a setting in which very polarized versions of *the others* are reproduced and kept alive, and thereby constitute contexts in which these representations might also be challenged. Taken together, the chapters of this PhD

dissertation help to broaden the scope of political polarization and depolarization studies and to fill some important gaps left by previous literature.

Resumen

La presente tesis doctoral tiene como objetivo contribuir teórica y empíricamente al estudio de la polarización política, con especial énfasis en su expresión afectiva: la polarización afectiva. Teóricamente, la tesis elabora un nuevo diálogo entre la literatura de relaciones intergrupales, los estudios de acción colectiva y la literatura de polarización afectiva, proporcionando así perspectivas teóricas que son importantes para tratar de comprender las dinámicas de la polarización afectiva de manera contextualizada y para reflexionar acerca de las intervenciones de despolarización. Empíricamente, tomando a España como caso de estudio y adoptando un enfoque de métodos mixtos, la presente tesis proporciona evidencia descriptiva extensa, tanto transversal como longitudinal, sobre la evolución de los indicadores de polarización política y su relación a lo largo de un período de más de una década (2010-2023). Seguidamente, el capítulo explora algunas de las causas a largo y corto plazo de la polarización afectiva en el sistema político multidimensional español. En este sentido, uno de los capítulos empíricos de esta tesis doctoral, utilizando datos de panel, analiza la relación entre la percepción de la polarización ideológica en los dos ejes principales de competición política en España (las dimensiones izquierda-derecha y territorial) y la polarización afectiva. El capítulo revela que esta relación está condicionada por la ideología de los individuos, lo que significa que las percepciones de la polarización en el eje territorial están claramente más relacionadas positivamente con los niveles de polarización afectiva entre los individuos de derecha en comparación con los individuos de izquierda, mientras que las percepciones de polarización en el eje izquierda-derecha están ligeramente más relacionadas con la polarización afectiva entre los individuos de izquierda. Los análisis también revelan que la relación entre las percepciones de la polarización territorial y la polarización afectiva varían con el tiempo, en relación con la *saliencia* de la dimensión del conflicto territorial. Este capítulo subraya la importancia de la multidimensionalidad y de los valores de los individuos -en este caso, su ideología- a la hora de estudiar la polarización afectiva. Esta tesis doctoral, asimismo, contribuye a la literatura sobre las causas a corto plazo de la (des)polarización, a través de otro capítulo que examina, también mediante la utilización de datos de panel, si la coyuntura de la COVID-19 fomentó las dinámicas de polarización afectiva y cómo lo hizo. Los resultados indican que, a nivel individual, hubo participantes que aumentaron sus niveles de polarización afectiva durante la pandemia. De manera complementaria, encontramos que los niveles agregados de polarización afectiva disminuyeron cuando se implementaron políticas de desescalada, altamente populares, consensuales y diseñadas por el gobierno en colaboración con expertos en sanidad, y que pusieron fin a los estrictos confinamientos. Otro capítulo de la tesis doctoral, analizando el lenguaje y la interacción en datos de grupos focales, profundiza en cómo se manifiesta la polarización política en el discurso y en las interacciones de los ciudadanos, proporcionando así conocimientos sobre cómo se construyen

colectivamente relatos polarizados e incluso prejuiciosos sobre los adversarios políticos desde una posición retórica de razonabilidad. Este capítulo muestra que el contexto intragrupo es un entorno en el que se reproducen y mantienen versiones muy polarizadas de *los otros*, y por lo tanto constituyen contextos en los que estas representaciones también pueden ser desafiadas. En conjunto, los capítulos de esta tesis de doctorado ayudan a ampliar el enfoque de los estudios sobre polarización y despolarización política y a desarrollar aspectos que no han sido previamente tratados por la literatura.

Resum

Aquesta tesi doctoral té com a objectiu contribuir teòrica i empíricament a l'estudi de la polarització política, amb especial èmfasi en la seva expressió afectiva: la polarització afectiva. Teòricament, la tesi elabora un nou diàleg entre la literatura de relacions intergrupals, els estudis d'acció col·lectiva i la literatura de polarització afectiva, proporcionant així perspectives teòriques que són importants per a tractar de comprendre les dinàmiques de la polarització afectiva de manera contextualitzada i per a reflexionar sobre les intervencions de despolarització. Empíricament, prenent a Espanya com a cas d'estudi i adoptant un enfocament de mètodes mixtos, la present tesi proporciona evidència descriptiva extensa, tant transversal com longitudinal, sobre l'evolució dels indicadors de polarització política i la seva relació al llarg d'un període de més d'una dècada (2010-2023). Seguidament, el capítol explora algunes de les causes a llarg i curt termini de la polarització afectiva en el sistema polític multidimensional espanyol. En aquest sentit, un dels capítols empírics d'aquesta tesi doctoral, utilitzant dades de panell, analitza la relació entre la percepció de la polarització ideològica en els dos eixos principals de competició política a Espanya (les dimensions esquerra-dreta i territorial) i la polarització afectiva. El capítol revela que aquesta relació està condicionada per la ideologia dels individus, de manera que les percepcions de la polarització en l'eix territorial estan clarament més relacionades positivament amb els nivells de polarització afectiva entre els individus de dreta en comparació amb els individus d'esquerra, mentre que les percepcions de polarització en l'eix esquerra-dreta estan lleugerament més relacionades amb la polarització afectiva entre els individus d'esquerra. Les anàlisis també revelen que la relació entre les percepcions de la polarització territorial i la polarització afectiva varien amb el temps, en relació amb la *saliencia* de la dimensió del conflicte territorial. Aquest capítol subratlla la importància de la multidimensionalitat i dels valors dels individus -en aquest cas la seva ideologia- a l'hora d'estudiar la polarització afectiva. Un altre capítol de la present tesi, contribuint a la literatura sobre les causes a curt termini de la (des)polarització afectiva, examina també, utilitzant dades de panell, si la conjuntura de la COVID-19 va fomentar les dinàmiques de polarització afectiva i com ho va fer, trobant que, a nivell individual, va haver-hi participants que van augmentar els seus nivells de polarització afectiva durant la pandèmia. De manera complementària, trobem que els nivells agregats de polarització afectiva van disminuir quan es van implementar polítiques de desescalada, dissenyades pel govern en col·laboració amb experts en sanitat, i que van posar fi als estrictes confinaments. Un altre capítol de la tesi doctoral, analitzant el llenguatge i la interacció en dades de grups focals, aprofundeix en com es manifesta la polarització política en el discurs i en les interaccions dels ciutadans, proporcionant així coneixements sobre com es construeixen col·lectivament relats polaritzats i fins i tot prejudicis sobre els adversaris polítics des d'una posició retòrica de raonabilitat. Aquest capítol mostra que el context intragrup és un entorn

en el qual es reproduïxen i mantenen versions molt polaritzades *dels altres*, i per tant constitueixen contextos en els quals aquestes representacions també poden ser desafiades. En conjunt, els capítols d'aquesta tesi doctoral ajuden a ampliar l'enfocament dels estudis sobre polarització i despolarització política i a desenvolupar aspectes que no han estat prèviament tractats per la literatura.

Resumo

Esta tese de doutoramento ten como obxectivo contribuír teórica e empiricamente ao estudo da polarización política, con especial énfase na súa expresión afectiva: a polarización afectiva. Teoricamente, a tese elabora un novo diálogo entre a literatura de relacións intergrupales, os estudos de acción colectiva e a literatura de polarización afectiva, proporcionando así perspectivas teóricas que son importantes para tratar de comprender as dinámicas da polarización afectiva de maneira contextualizada e para reflexionar acerca das intervencións de despolarización. Empiricamente, tomando a España como caso de estudo e adoptando un enfoque de métodos mixtos, a presente tese proporciona evidencia descritiva extensa, tanto transversal como lonxitudinal, sobre a evolución dos indicadores de polarización política e a súa relación ao longo dun período de máis dunha década (2010-2023), para logo explorar algunhas das causas a longo e curto prazo da polarización afectiva no sistema político multidimensional español. Neste sentido, un dos capítulos empíricos desta tese de doutoramento, utilizando datos de panel, analiza a relación entre a percepción da polarización ideolóxica nos dous eixos principais de competición política en España (as dimensións esquerda-dereita e territorial) e a polarización afectiva. O capítulo revela que esta relación está condicionada pola ideoloxía dos individuos, o que significa que as percepcións da polarización no eixo territorial están claramente máis relacionadas positivamente cos niveis de polarización afectiva entre os individuos de dereita en comparación cos individuos de esquerda, mentres que as percepcións de polarización no eixo esquerda-dereita están lixeiramente máis relacionadas coa polarización afectiva entre os individuos de esquerda. As análises tamén revelan que a relación entre as percepcións da polarización territorial e a polarización afectiva varían co tempo, en relación coa saliencia da dimensión do conflito territorial. Este capítulo subliña a importancia da multidimensionalidade e dos valores dos individuos, neste caso, a súa ideoloxía, ao estudar a polarización afectiva. Outro capítulo da presente tese, contribuíndo á literatura sobre as causas a curto prazo da (deas)polarización afectiva, examina tamén, utilizando datos de panel, se e como a conxuntura da COVID-19 fomentou as dinámicas de polarización afectiva, atopando que, a nivel individual, houbo participantes que aumentaron os seus niveis de polarización afectiva durante a pandemia. Nunha liña diferente, atopamos que os niveis agregados de polarización afectiva diminuíron cando se implementaron políticas de desescalada, deseñadas polo goberno en colaboración con expertos en sanidade, e que puxeron fin aos estritos confinamentos. Outro capítulo da tese de doutoramento, analizando a linguaxe e a interacción en datos de grupos focais, afonda en como se manifesta a polarización política no discurso e nas interaccións dos cidadáns, proporcionando así ideas sobre como se constrúen colectivamente relatos polarizados e mesmo prexuciosos sobre os adversarios políticos desde unha posición retórica de razoabilidade. Este capítulo mostra que o contexto intragrupo é unha esfera na

que se reproducen e manteñen versións moi polarizadas *dos outros*, e por tanto constitúen contextos nos que estas representacións tamén poden ser desafiadas. En conxunto, os capítulos desta tese de doutoramento axudan a ampliar o enfoque dos estudos sobre polarización e despolarización política e a desenvolver aspectos que non foron tratados previamente pola literatura.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Over the last years, political polarization has become one of the main tropes within Western democracies. Journalists, pundits, and academics have engaged in debating and analyzing a phenomenon that is frequently seen as worrisome. After extensive academic exchanges, debates, and controversies initially based in the US (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Iyengar et al., 2012; Layman & Carsey, 2002; Lelkes, 2016; Mason, 2015) but more recently discussed in a great array of political systems (Comellas & Torcal, 2023; Gidron et al., 2020; Hartevelt, 2021; McCoy et al., 2018; Reiljan, 2020; Segovia, 2022; Simon et al., 2019; Wagner, 2021), there is an agreement on the multidimensional nature of political polarization. Political polarization, then, will be used in this thesis as an umbrella term that comprises all the other, more specific, types of polarization.¹

The type of polarization that is going to be thoroughly examined in this PhD dissertation is affective polarization (henceforth, AP), which has been defined as the emotional distance between citizens' feelings towards their in-party or parties and their feelings towards their out-party or parties (Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019; Wagner, 2021). In addition, left-right perceived polarization (henceforth, left-right polarization) and perceived territorial polarization (henceforth, territorial polarization)² will also be explored and analyzed as important correlates of AP. Left-right polarization refers to citizens' perceived distance between the different parties of a given party system in the left-right continuum, whereas territorial polarization refers to perceived parties' distance in the territorial dimension of competition. As many more sorts of polarization have been conceptualized and explored in the previous literature, the reader can find a useful initial overview or map of the main different types of polarization in table 1.1, which was inspired by the contribution of Lees and Cikara (2021). The appendix includes a more detailed explanation of the table.

¹ Another general term would be mass polarization (Lelkes, 2016), although this term is only circumscribed to the polarization between citizens, excluding, for instance, elite polarization.

² The territorial dimension has to do with the accommodation, in terms of national/cultural identities and power sharing, of territorial minorities in a state. This is an issue in multinational states such as Spain, the UK, Belgium, or Canada. The territorial model in a state is the way in which territorial differences, asymmetries, and relations between the national majorities and minorities are institutionalized. Authors tend to speak of territorial conflict/challenge or territorial crisis when the territorial model of a state becomes questioned (see Anderson, 2020; Dowling, 2017). This has recently been the case in Catalonia and Scotland, evinced by both stateless nations pushing to become independent from their respective central states.

Table 1.1: Main types of political polarization

	Actual (Real)	Perceived
Ideological/attitudinal polarization	Distance between political groups' actual distributions of 1) left-right self-identification (known as left-right polarization) and 2) political issue preferences (usually known as issue-based polarization).	Perceived distributions of 1) left-right self-identification and/or political preferences attributed to political ingroups and outgroups (How citizens think members of the outgroup and ingroup are. And 2) Meta-perceptions: how citizens think that members of the outgroup would locate members of the ingroup on the left-right scale and scales of different political attitudes (i.e., "how I think they see us").
Affective polarization (AP)	Actual distributions of positive and negative feelings towards in-parties and out-parties and their supporters or other social/political groups. AP tends to be operationalized as the gap between in-(party/group) feelings and out-(party/group) feelings or the sum of the squared distances between the parties or political groups rated by citizens, if we assume that identification with more than one political group is likely.	1) Perceived AP: How we think ingroup members feel about members of the outgroups and about members of the ingroup. 2) Meta-perceptions: how citizens think that members of the outgroup feel about members of the ingroup (i.e., citizens' perceptions or beliefs about the outgroup's feelings towards the ingroup. "How I think they feel about us".)
Elite ideological/attitudinal polarization	Objective measures, through expert ratings or through the analysis of party manifestos used to estimate the real differences between the party elites' programs.	Citizens' perceptions of where the elites are situated on left-right scales, as well as on scales of political issues/attitudes. The perceived distance between the elites would be the extent of perceived elite polarization. Note that this would include perceived distance on scales that measure the territorial dimension.
False Polarization	This is calculated as the gap between actual and perceived polarization, or actual and meta-perceived polarization.	

The different dimensions or types of political polarization are related, and the type of causal relationship between them has also been a matter of academic debate. Lately the affective expression of the political polarization phenomena (AP) is the dimension that has increasingly attracted academic attention and debate, since the seminal work of Iyengar and colleagues (2012). At the core of the comprehensive academic debate are the sense and the intuition, along with some new tentative evidence (not without controversy) that this phenomenon might produce pernicious consequences for intergroup relations as well as weakening key aspects related to the correct functioning of liberal democracies such as political accountability, democratic norms, checks and balances, or the necessary “losers’ consent” when the preferred party cannot obtain a majority to govern (Kingzette et al., 2021; Martherus et al., 2021; Ward & Tavits, 2019).

In a nutshell, AP could be one of the linchpins behind the support for illiberal political practices, processes of progressive autocratization, and democratic backsliding (Orhan, 2022; Somer et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the connection between affective polarization and anti-democratic attitudes is far from clear, as demonstrated by the very compelling results obtained by Broockman et al. (2023) and Voelkel et al. (2023). The first work found no effects of AP in democratic norms and accountability and the second identified that while some depolarization interventions effectively reduced AP, they did not have any effect on a set of anti-democratic attitudes. Complementarily, Berntzen et al. (2023), have found that the capacity of affective polarization, measured through feeling thermometers, to explain severe inter-citizen consequences (such as intolerance or support for political violence) is very limited.

But despite previous mixed results, it is from this concern about the relationship of AP with democratic backsliding where literature on affective polarization takes its starting point, implicitly or explicitly. Affective polarization may have played a role in events such as Brexit, citizens’ reactions towards political measures to combat the spread of COVID-19, the electoral performance of radical parties, citizens’ responses to the so-called refugee crisis or the spike of ethnonational conflicts in multi-national democracies, among many others. These concerns also show that this topic goes far beyond theoretical questions, which are, of course, also important. The study of societal and political conflict then makes practical and applied questions emerge, something that has become palpable in recent academic efforts that propose depolarization interventions (see Hartman et al., 2022; Levendusky, 2018).

For all these reasons, carefully conceptualizing AP and understanding what elements are at the root of it constitute an essential academic effort with theoretical and practical implications. This PhD dissertation was guided by two general questions. In this sense, in this work, I reflect on how AP and

some of its correlates evolve through time in multidimensional political contexts that have undertaken a process of party-system transformation and what some of AP's short-term and long-term causes are. A second question departs from the observation of a previous lack of critical-theoretical reviews in the current approaches to polarization and its consequences, as well as scant efforts to examine polarization beyond survey and experimental research. As a result, this PhD dissertation also reflects on what the main theoretical, conceptual, and practical omissions are in the previous literature on polarization and depolarization, and if and how in-depth approaches that pay close attention to people's everyday interactions can help address these omissions and thus complement and enrich political polarization literature.

1.1 The Emotional Expression of Political Polarization: Affective Polarization

Following classical approaches (Sartori, 1976), what comes to mind when thinking about polarization would be a state and a process of separation and further differentiation of different clusters (social or political groups) regarding some aspect of the sociopolitical reality. That is, political polarization would be the process through which the opinions and attitudes of different groups are concentrated (or become progressively more concentrated) around the opposite extremes (poles) of a continuum. In this sense, polarization, classically defined, would be the ideological distance between different opinion groups. A wider 'gap' would imply more polarization and a narrower gap would imply less polarization. This notion of polarization as the bimodality of public opinion is present in the seminal works on polarization (Sartori, 1976; Sani & Sartori, 1983) and nowadays has been labeled ideological or issue-based polarization.

Iyengar and colleagues (2012) in the US observed that, quite independently of ideological or policy-based disagreements, Democrats and Republicans increasingly manifested dislike towards the opposing party. Therefore, whereas it remained disputed whether US citizens had become polarized in ideological terms, they have clearly become polarized in terms of affect (Iyengar et al., 2012, p.407). Thus, from this seminal work onwards, AP constituted the emotional dimension of the political polarization phenomena; following a similar rationale to the ideological and issue-based indicators of polarization, it measures the 'gap' in affect -i.e., positivity and negativity- between citizens' evaluations of their in-party and their out-party.

Although AP studies started in the US, they spread to other countries, showing that AP was a phenomenon that could be observed in many other political realities. AP has been defined as the gap between individuals' feelings towards in-parties and their feelings towards out-parties (Iyengar et al.,

2012; Wagner, 2021). That said, two clarifications need to be made. On the one hand, AP has been measured both through feelings towards parties and feelings towards party supporters. Even though they are correlated, this correlation is far from perfect, and people tend to show more negative feelings towards out-parties than towards out-party supporters (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). Indeed, recent research has explored the factors that make some individuals generalize their feelings towards parties to feelings towards supporters (Comellas, 2022). On the other hand, although AP has been mainly conceptualized and measured in relation to party identities, it is a phenomenon that could occur around any highly politicized political identities (Simon et al., 2019). Examples of this can be found in Hobolt, Tiley and Leeper (2021), that document AP between Pro and Anti-Brexit groups, in different works exploring affective polarization between different ethnonational or territorial groups (Balcells & Kuo, 2023; Garmendia-Madariaga & Riera, 2022; Rodon, 2022), or in other works exploring conflict between socio-political groups and broader political camps -such as universalism and particularism- (Bantel, 2023; Dassonneville et al., 2023; Zollinger, 2022).

1.2 Measurement(s)

The main correlates of affective polarization that are examined in this PhD dissertation (left-right and territorial polarization's indexes), following previous insights (Dalton, 2008; Hernández et al., 2021), are constructed from batteries that ask respondents to locate the different parties on specific scales. For left-right polarization, this scale is the conventional 11-point ideological scale, whereas for territorial polarization, respondents are asked to locate the different parties on an 11-point scale that captures levels of Spanish patriotism or attachment to the nation (see Muñoz, 2009)³. The specific wording can be found in the appendix of this chapter.

The most common -and minimal- way to quantitatively measure affective polarization has been through instruments that ask about individuals' degree of positivity or negativity towards political ingroups and outgroups (normally parties). In this sense, the feeling thermometers and like-dislike scales, or proxies such as the probability to vote for a party (PTV) -when dealing with polarization towards parties- have been the most commonly used instruments to capture the 'gap' between in and out-party feelings. Chapters 4, 5, and 7 of this dissertation use this way of measuring AP. In chapter 4, I use both like-dislike scales and PTVs to measure AP, whereas in chapters 5 and 7 I only use the latter.

³ It should be noted that, for established nations, the difference between patriotism and nationalism (the latter being conceptualized with a minimal definition, stripped of normative connotations) is often blurry (Núñez-Seixas, 2004).

In its appendix, chapter 5 provides a correlation analysis between like-dislike scales and PTV scales that shows that PTV is a good proxy to measure affect towards parties.

Apart from this, there are different aspects worth considering when using these kinds of instruments to measure AP. First, while the operationalization of the 'gap' is very straightforward in two-party systems, as it is the case for the US, the operationalization in multiparty systems where individuals might feel either positively or negatively towards several parties raises the question of how we measure AP. Extensive academic efforts have been put into the operationalization of AP in multi-party systems, and currently we have Wagner's (2021) spread and distance indexes (weighted and unweighted), Reiljan's (2020) index and some other ways to measure AP based on party blocks or party dyads (Gidron et al., 2022; Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021). In this sense, all these measures have various advantages and disadvantages, so choosing between them should depend on the research interests and questions.

Second, independently of the specific operationalization of AP, we can assess horizontal AP -between different party supporters or members of different sociopolitical groups- or vertical AP -that is, towards party elites or party leaders- (see Harteveld, 2021). The correlations between these measures are substantial but far from perfect, so although horizontal and vertical AP are clearly related, researchers should consider this vertical/horizontal distinction, mainly when discussing the consequences of AP.

Third, whilst the vast majority of the AP literature has dealt with either horizontal or vertical AP as it manifests between different party identities, AP is a phenomenon that can occur between any other politicized identities. In this sense, national and territorial identities, class, rural-urban, pro and anti-COVID-19 vaccination, pro and anti-Brexit or feminist-antifeminist identities have been central in nowadays' political struggles. While these identities sometimes align with the party attachments, there is no doubt that conflict around these politicized social identities exceeds party politics.

In this PhD dissertation, vertical measures based on positivity and negativity towards parties are used in chapters 4, 5 and 7, and have been operationalized using Wagner's spread index (distance in chapter 7), that allows us to not circumscribe our findings to those participants reporting a party identity. In the descriptive part of the thesis (chapter 4), which aims to provide an overview of affect towards political parties but also towards different sociopolitical groups in Spain, I also use measures that more resemble horizontal ones, capturing to what extent each individual likes or dislikes a set of sociopolitical groups. As we know little about affect towards social and political groups other than parties -one of the reasons being lack of data-, using this descriptive evidence is important.

It is worth noting at this point that measures capturing ingroup liking and ‘mere’ outgroup dislike have some limitations (Berntzen et al., 2023), and that more measures of AP have been used to capture this complex phenomenon. Some studies make use of social distance measures or trait ratings of party supporters. Implicit measures and a different set of behavioral measures have also been used in scholarly works. In addition, trust games have been designed that aim to capture AP. However, the use of these other ways of measuring AP goes beyond the scope of this PhD dissertation.

Apart from these above-mentioned ways of assessing AP and related constructs -such as partisan/political prejudice and/or partyism (Westwood et al., 2018)- there have been few attempts to measure them within individuals’ language and language practices, an aspect that is surprising given the centrality of language and symbolic interaction in the realm of politics. In some previous studies focused on language and polarization -or related issues-, the approaches to language have been mainly quantitative (Marchal, 2022; Yarchi et al., 2021; Zollinger, 2022). Others, however, have put their focus on qualitatively analyzing polarization in online discussions on social media (Pettersson & Sakki, 2023; Schmid et al., 2023), conducting content analyses about opposing opinions on how to contain COVID-19 (Schieferdecker, 2021), or analyzing echo-chamber discussions in a Facebook group (Harel et al., 2020). Similarly, Rovamo et al. (2023), analyzing individual interviews conducted in Finland, have put the AP concept into dialogue with some other concepts from discourse studies and have also looked at how AP develops through the mutual reinforcement of opposing discourses. In a complementary way, there has been recent discursive research using focus groups in the context of Brexit that analyzes how polarized accounts of outgroups are accomplished interactionally by lay thinkers when arguing about the dichotomy between prejudice and tolerance (Andreouli et al., 2020) and how meta-perceptions are used in everyday constructions by those who think and have voted differently (Obradović & Draper, 2022).

Drawing insights from these limited but emerging qualitative approaches to political and affective polarization and considering the limits of survey measures based only on positivity and negativity (see chapter 2), this PhD aims at further developing a way to examine the expression of polarized and polarizing attitudes and opinions about ideological antagonists and the adjacent phenomena of political and partisan prejudice as -collective- rhetorical accomplishments. In this way, chapter 6 constitutes an attempt to qualitatively capture and examine AP in people’s everyday interactions, given that this construct has almost exclusively been measured quantitatively in the vast majority of previous research.⁴ Along these lines, in chapter 6 we also put our focus on how people express partisan/political prejudice and legitimize the use of illiberal political measures against partisan

⁴ Röllicke (2023), through a systematic, critical literature review of 78 articles dealing with affective polarization in multiparty systems, identified only 2 articles (2.9%) that used a qualitative measurement approach.

antagonists. Both aspects might well be showing how what previous research has called “pernicious polarization” (McCoy et al., 2018) finds its way into citizens discursive practices. This attempt to measure AP and related concepts in everyday political argumentation complements the quantitative measures explained above and can certainly help us to capture and discover nuances and aspects of AP and some of its alleged consequences (such as partisan prejudice) that might not be accessible through closed-ended survey questions.

Thus, overall, in this PhD dissertation AP is explored, in consonance with a great deal of previous research, through a quantitative measure of positivity and negativity towards parties (i.e., vertical), in the spirit of like-dislike scales and feeling thermometers, that is, through PTV scales. In a similar way, some descriptive evidence contained in this dissertation uses like-dislike scales towards social groups, a horizontal measure⁵ (see Harteveld, 2021) of AP. Lastly, this PhD dissertation also explores and re-specifies AP in discursive terms, thereby providing a way to approach the political polarization phenomena qualitatively, focusing on people’s language use and interactions.

1.3 Causes of Affective Polarization

So far, different causes of AP have been posited and explored. Beyond the ubiquitous debate on the ideological or policy-based versus the identity-based and identity-alignment hypotheses (Costa, 2021; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Lelkes, 2016, 2021; Mason, 2013; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017) different branches of the literature have focused on distinct potential contributors to AP. Among them, some focus on structural causes, such as inequality, unemployment, or the type of electoral system (see Bernaerts et al., 2022; Gidron et al., 2020) . Others have explored the role of the media landscape, social media interactions, and the associated hypothesis of echo chambers (Barberá, 2020; Bliuc et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2022; Yarchi et al., 2021). Related to party elites and party competition, previous literature has explored the relationship between elite communication (Bäck et al., 2023), ideological polarization (Banda & Cluverius, 2018; Gidron et al., 2020), the style of interactions between party leaders (Huddy & Yair, 2021) or the formation of government coalitions (Bassan-Nygate & Weiss, 2022; Gidron et al., 2022; Wagner & Praprotnik, 2023) and AP. Along these lines, also related to party competition -and cooperation-, but focusing more on short-term causes of AP, previous research has

⁵ It is not clear which sort of prototypes individuals recall when they are asked about a specific sociopolitical group, such as for instance, ‘the feminists’. They might be thinking of everyday supporters of feminism, everyday participants in feminist groups or about some sort of image of ‘the feminists’ fostered by specific media outlets. However, they might also be thinking about elite-level figures they perceive as representing feminism. While I recognize this might happen, it seems clear that asking people how they feel towards specific sociopolitical groups seems closer to a ‘horizontal’ affect measure than asking about specific organizations such as parties or party leaders.

explored the polarizing role of political campaigns (Iyengar et al., 2019; Rodríguez et al., 2022; Sood & Iyengar, 2016), and of imminent elections (Hernández et al., 2021).

At an individual level, a related branch of literature focuses on the role of citizens' perceptions of the polarization of elites (Enders & Armaly, 2019) and also on the extent to which citizens (over)estimate polarization (Fernbach & Van Boven, 2022; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016) or the importance of perceptions and stereotypes of party supporters and meta-perceptions (Ahler & Sood, 2018; Moore-Berg et al., 2020). In a more specific way, the conjuncture provoked by the COVID-19 health crisis has also motivated a few attempts to explore how this unprecedented situation has influenced affective polarization (Boxell et al., 2020; Schmid et al., 2023).

Some of the chapters in the dissertation contribute to further developing certain of the abovementioned branches of literature on the causes of AP. Chapter 5 engages with the literature on perceptions of elite polarization as a potential source of AP and longitudinally investigates if and how perceptions of elite polarization in the left-right and the territorial dimensions of competition relate to individual AP levels. Furthermore, it explores if the relative influence of perceptions of polarization on each of the axes is differently related to AP for citizens with different ideologies. Chapter 7, contributing to previous works exploring the short-term causes of AP explores the pandemic as a focusing event, and empirically tests if this unprecedented event has altered AP.

Since the literature on AP and its causes has grown and diversified enormously, the focus needs to be narrowed down. In this sense, the next sections underline the main findings regarding perceived ideological polarization, a commonly explored cause behind AP, and possible short-term dynamics that might alter AP levels, which remain relatively unexplored. These aspects are discussed and explored in chapters 5 and 7, and their contributions are better understood from the basis of an examination of previous insights and general gaps.

1.3.1 Perceived ideological polarization

Recent literature has directed considerable attention to perceptions and meta-perceptions about political ingroups and outgroups to both explain affective polarization and also to foster depolarization (Druckman et al., 2022; Hartman et al., 2022; Moore-Berg et al., 2020). While chapter 2 develops general arguments regarding some of the shortcomings of focusing exclusively on individuals' perceptions and meta-perceptions for the conceptualization of AP and its causes, as well as the design of depolarization interventions, chapter 5 engages with individuals' perceptions of parties' - ideological- polarization along the classical left-right continuum but also in terms of the territorial dimension. Thus, this section focuses on previous insights regarding citizens' perceptions of parties'

ideological -i.e., left-right- polarization, that some previous research has just labeled as “ideological polarization”, “perceived ideological/left-right polarization”, or “party-system polarization” (Dalton, 2008; Hernández et al., 2021; Wagner, 2021; Ward & Tavits, 2019).

Perceptions of polarization have important effects on political behavior, as they are positively related to ideological voting (Lachat, 2008), turnout (Dalton, 2008; Orriols & Balcells, 2014) or the propensity to be politically active (Westfall et al., 2015). Additionally, researchers on polarization have found that ideological differences between parties and candidates impacts citizens’ affect towards them, so a higher ideological or policy-based gap between them translates into a wider emotional gap (Lelkes, 2021; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016). Departing from these insights, it is to be expected that ideological polarization between parties -as perceived by citizens- is associated with overall positivity and negativity towards these parties (Reiljan, 2020; Hernández et al., 2021). In a similar sense but using a slightly different operationalization of perceived ideological polarization, Enders & Armaly (2019) found that individual-level perceptions of polarization regarding some policy preferences and the liberal-conservative divide in the US constitute an important factor in explaining affective polarization.

Whereas the existence of a correlation between ideological polarization and affective polarization is rarely questioned, different questions remain about the direction of this relationship, as well as others regarding the different aspects that might make this relationship weaker or stronger in particular sociohistorical contexts and/or for different groups of people. In terms of the direction of the relationship, some articles -often with nuances- presume that the direction of the relationship would more likely go from ideological polarization -either perceived or measured through objective measures- to affective polarization (Banda & Cluverius, 2018; Gidron et al., 2020; Riera & Garmendia-Madariaga, 2023; Torcal & Comellas, 2022; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017), whereas others test AP as a factor that fosters ideologically polarized perceptions of political actors (Armaly & Enders, 2021; Ward & Tavits, 2019).

The first stance tends to take as its starting point the observation that levels of conflict and affective polarization coincide with an increase in ideological polarization between the elites (Banda & Cluverius, 2018) and that citizens tend to perceive and be responsive to this elite polarization and cues (Hetherington, 2001; Jones, 2015; Zingher & Flynn, 2018). Ideological differences between parties and/or their candidates will lead voters to perceive that there is more at stake in elections, as these differences might imply antagonistic and incompatible political agendas (Banda & Cluverius, 2018; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). Similarly, elites’ extreme positions or the alignment between different political issues and ideologies or party identities might also fuel affective polarization (Bougher, 2017).

The rationale behind the opposite stance (from affective polarization to ideological polarization) draws insights from the concept of expressive partisanship (Bankert et al., 2017) along with some insights from Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identities -such as partisanship- would themselves influence how individuals think and act politically (Armaly & Enders, 2021; Campbell et al., 1960). In this sense, as Ward and Tavits (2019) contend, expressive partisanship, i.e., the emotional attachment to a party -in contrast with the instrumental component of a party identity- would lead group members to be more likely to manifest a set of attitudes related to political behavior. In this sense, positive affect towards an in-party or a set of in-parties and negative affect towards an out-party or a set of them would lead individuals to maximize the ideological differences between the political ingroups and outgroups, as a way to positively differentiate the ingroup(s) from the outgroup(s), thereby augmenting the perceived ideological polarization. Additionally, affectively polarized individuals would be more concerned with the ingroup's status and more committed to the accomplishment of the ingroups objectives, two aspects that, in electoral politics, would translate into individuals' attributing more importance to the act of voting as well as the logical behavioral consequence of this cognition; that is, being more likely to vote than non-affectively polarized individuals (Harteveld & Wagner, 2023; Wagner, 2021). In sum, the proponents of this direction of causality stress the role of previous affective attachments in coloring how individuals perceive the sociopolitical arena and thus, the extent to which they perceive ideological polarization. That is, they stress that the greater the affective gap between ingroup(s) and outgroup(s) the more ideological distance they will perceive between these groups (see Granberg & Brown, 1992).

All in all, these two opposed causal arguments are related to distinct theoretical positions. One of them contends that affective polarization stems from mainly rational, ideologically grounded disagreement, either between the elites and/or between the public. The other stresses the 'tribal', emotionally driven component that leads people to defend ingroup(s) and derogate outgroup(s) despite low levels of ideological disagreement. However important these theoretical stances and models might be, what is clear is that both explanations need not be incompatible. Merely observing contemporary political struggles against austerity measures after the great recession, the struggles for equality of historically unprivileged groups, such as feminist movements or movements for racial equality (e.g., Black Lives Matter), movements demanding urgent measures to cope with the environmental crisis, or struggles to guarantee the right to housing makes difficult to argue that people are 'fighting over nothing' and just defending a party or a political group in a tribal manner. Besides, it is difficult to imagine a party identity or political identity that is completely absent of some -even very basic- ideological and rational content. A wide gap between ideological and affective polarization might also be a product of our measurement, in which we might not be asking about some

issues that some citizens perceive as polarized and central to their political views. Lastly, if tribalism was the central aspect behind AP, it would be difficult to find the association between -either socioeconomic, cultural, territorial- ideological distance and emotional distance that various previous research has found (Gidron et al., 2020; Reiljan & Ryan, 2021; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017).

On the other hand, claiming that political identities and emotions can merely be explained by the degree of ideological disagreements surely downplays the role of emotions in political perceptions and thinking. In this sense, aspects such as the sometimes (a)critical following of party cues, the legitimization of otherwise unacceptable behaviors on the part of ingroup politicians -such as corruption- (see Anduiza et al., 2013; Bisgaard & Slothuus, 2018) or the relationship between exaggerated perceptions -and meta-perceptions- about party supporters and AP dynamics (Ahler, 2014; Ahler & Sood, 2018; Iyengar et al., 2019) would be hard to explain from a strictly rational and instrumental perspective.

Thus, both kinds of explanations and causal directions might be plausible, and both can be complementary. For instance, the ingroup and outgroup differentiations explained by SIT and that are at the core of the concept of AP, as well as intergroup conflict, might be exacerbated both by notable ideological differences and also by processes of identity-alignment, sorting and the motivation to stress intergroup differences. Thus, AP might be explained both by a clash between different, and even at some point antagonistic -ideological- collective narratives, that lead people to see the adversaries as advocating for a very different society that threatens their core principles -core principles that might be central to a political identity-, as well as by a process of alignment of social and political identities along party lines that often might lead to levels of AP that are difficult to explain purely by -a set of- ideological differences.

The search for one-sided explanations and universal causal forces in the arduously complex terrain of polarization might not be the most productive way forward, since determining which sort of explanations can better explain AP dynamics certainly might vary depending on time, place, and context (Remiro, 2023; Riera & Garmendia-Madariaga, 2023; Somer & McCoy, 2018). This aspect has been considered in chapter 5 of the thesis, in which I longitudinally test the relationship between perceived ideological polarization and AP, an aspect that has been identified by recent previous research as an important “future direction” in AP literature (see Wagner, 2021).

Another existing debate and important question to disentangle is the importance of different ideological motives behind AP. Reiljan and Ryan (2021), in Sweden, have found that while ideological disagreements around socioeconomic issues are more important for explaining AP between center-left and center-right blocks, ideological disagreements over migration are more relevant for explaining

AP between the mainstream parties and the far-right. Gidron, Adams & Horne (2020), using comparative evidence, found that elite ideological polarization in cultural issues -such as migration and national identity- is more strongly correlated with AP than elite polarization over socioeconomic issues. Furthermore, although traditional left-right, economic-welfare issues are also associated with AP (Webster & Abramowitz, 2017), it seems that cultural issues have been gaining more importance in recent years (Gidron et al., 2022; Harteveld, 2021; Kawecki, 2022).

All these works seem to indicate the importance of heterogeneity, since some issues might polarize citizens more than others. Besides, the ideological reasons behind polarization towards one political party or block might be different from the reasons behind polarization towards other political parties or block(s). Additionally, recent insights have underlined that the connection between ideological differences and AP particularly holds for individuals who have higher levels of interest in politics and individuals with extreme political views (van Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022). All these works open up new avenues to think about important questions regarding how AP is configured in multi-dimensional political systems. Besides, they raise questions regarding if and how different values and predispositions of citizens relate to AP, and if and how the latter is related to existing social cleavages (Westwood et al., 2018). For instance, in the Spanish context, some previous research such as Torcal & Comellas (2022), Garmendia-Madariaga and Riera (2022), Simón (2020), and Lorenzo-Rodríguez and Torcal (2022) have argued the importance of the territorial conflict dimension in understanding polarization dynamics. This conflict cannot be reduced to the left-right dimension. Similarly, in the UK context, previous research has explored pro and anti-Brexit identities as sources of political confrontation and polarization (Andreouli et al., 2020; Hobolt et al., 2021). In this sense, exploring how different sources of heterogeneity might shape the relationship between perceived ideological polarization -along different axes of competition- and AP is a pending task for future research.

1.3.2 Short-term causes of AP

Another relevant, although relatively unexplored avenue that can be fruitful for understanding AP dynamics is to explain short-term changes in AP (Wagner, 2021). Previous important insights have documented the importance of contextual, short-term factors that can influence AP levels, such as electoral campaigns and negative advertising (Lau et al., 2017; Sood & Iyengar, 2016) or the proximity of elections (Hernández et al., 2021). Hernández et al. (2021) show that elections are a contextual moment in which the incentives to stress party differences and conflicts over different issues are high. Consequently, the higher the salience of elections the higher the AP levels, since this relationship is moderated by perceived ideological (left-right) polarization between the parties. The importance of

contextual aspects in why AP levels rise or fall is indicated by the fact that as elections lose salience, AP rapidly decreases.

Relatedly, Torcal and Comellas (2022) have added more evidence that is worth considering regarding the short-term contextual causes of AP. This work explores the relationship between a far-right party's emergence and AP. Their results add a necessary layer of complexity, as they find evidence that show the importance of previous AP levels as a cause that has made the appearance of Vox more likely in the first instance, but also show that the emergence of this far-right party subsequently increased general AP levels. This increase was fostered by the higher ingroup liking of those who become Vox's supporters and the higher AP of left-wing supporters that perceive the far-right as a threat. In a similar vein, Bischof & Wagner (2019) have shown, longitudinally in the Netherlands and comparatively, that citizens' ideological positions polarize when a far-right party emerges in the political arena. In addition, Garmendia-Madariaga and Riera (2022) analyzed that the electoral breakthrough of the parties Podemos and Vox in Spain implied higher polarization of people's positions regarding the territorial dimension of competition.

In addition to the factors previously underlined that might act as contextual instigators -or reducers- of AP, scholars have studied if the conjuncture propitiated by the worldwide COVID-19 health crisis, with diverging identities generated around citizens supporting social distance measures and vaccination and those opposing them, and various policies implemented by the different governments that were aimed at tackling and managing the crisis had an impact on AP or related concepts, such as political trust (Neumann et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022; Schieferdecker, 2021; Wagner & Eberl, 2022). Again here, although it is probably a consequence of the different national contexts and the distinct measures used to tap the phenomena under study and the periods contemplated in the different studies, the evidence is mixed. Some works find that previous levels of AP and partisanship conditioned people's acceptance of social distancing measures or that the pandemic had no effect on AP levels (Druckman et al., 2021), while others, in the German context, find that the COVID-19 conjuncture favored an increase of divisions and affective polarization (Schmid, Treib & Eckardt, 2023). But what seems to be clear is that unprecedented events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, since it was characterized by different crucial moments or focusing events, as well as by an unusual continuous production and mobilization of emotions (Sabucedo et al., 2020) and the unprecedented implementation of completely new policies -i.e., lockdowns, vaccination drives, and overall regulation of everyday life- provide researchers with an opportunity to test if different contextual events might either increase or decrease affective polarization.

1.4 Objectives, Research Questions, and Structure of the PhD Dissertation

This thesis, from this introduction itself until the conclusions, integrates previous quantitative and qualitative insights from the literature on political polarization and intergroup conflict. Different questions are formulated and answered from different methodologies in order to provide a holistic picture of a complex phenomenon and its manifestations: affective polarization. Table 1.2 summarizes and dissects the objectives, main research questions and methodologies used in each of the chapters.

Table 1.2: Main objectives, RQs and methodologies

Chapter	Objectives	Research questions	Methodology
2	<p>Underlining the main gaps in AP literature and sketching a new framework that helps to fill them.</p> <p>Applying essential insights drawn from critical social psychological research to the AP phenomenon.</p> <p>Highlighting the ideological implications that may stem from an ahistorical study of intergroup conflict.</p>	<p>What are the main gaps in AP literature?</p> <p>What are the future research questions that the literature on political polarization needs to tackle?</p> <p>How can a broader perspective that incorporates critical reflections on the contact hypothesis help to design, if necessary, depolarization interventions?</p>	<p>Critical review</p> <p>Critical Discursive Psychology</p>
4	<p>Providing a descriptive overview of the political polarization indicators over time and examining intra and intergroup variation.</p> <p>Examining the bivariate relationships between each of the indicators related to perceptions of party competition - left-right polarization and territorial polarization- and AP over time.</p> <p>Presenting some preliminary descriptive data on the configuration of affect towards social groups.</p>	<p>How have the different indicators of political polarization evolved over time and what are the different expected trajectories of polarization among different sociodemographic groups (gender and cohort) and attitudinal profiles (ideology and political interest)?</p> <p>What are the aggregate mean levels of affect towards social groups by different groups defined by gender, ideology and their preferred political party?</p>	<p>Univariate, bivariate and multivariate descriptive statistics</p> <p>Multilevel Growth Curves</p>
5	<p>Analyzing if and how perceptions of elite polarization on two axes of political competition are related to AP over time.</p> <p>Exploring the role of the salience of the territorial dimension in explaining associations between perceived polarization on this axis and AP.</p> <p>Uncovering the role of individuals' ideologies in the associations between perceived polarization on each of the axes of political competition and AP.</p>	<p>Do perceptions of polarization on the territorial axis of competition relate to AP levels?</p> <p>Is ideology a moderator between perceptions of polarization and AP?</p> <p>Is the salience of the territorial dimension related to the degree of association of perceptions of polarization on this axis and AP?</p>	<p>Quantitative: Panel Data Analysis- Panel linear regressions with Fixed Effects and interactions</p> <p>Cross-lagged panel models</p>

6	<p>Analyzing how participants co-produce polarized and polarizing accounts of the outgroups.</p> <p>Investigating how participants collectively manage to defend illiberal measures against the partisan antagonists from a rhetorical position of reasonableness.</p> <p>Providing an in-depth interactional analysis that aims to show how political/partisan prejudice is collectively accomplished and (re)produced through people's everyday communicative practices.</p>	<p>How do AP and adjacent -related but distinct- concepts of political and partisan prejudice manifest in people's everyday interactions and how are they expressed and (re)produced while dodging the identity of prejudice?</p> <p>How are illiberal measures against outgroups legitimized and defended as a rational and reasonable course of action?</p> <p>How do participants in the focus groups navigate the prejudice-tolerance dilemma when talking about salient political issues and partisan politics?</p>	<p>Qualitative: Discourse analysis using Critical Discursive Psychology</p>
7	<p>Analyzing some short-term causes of AP during the unprecedented pandemic context.</p> <p>Examining if and to what extent perceptions of the pandemic, its management, and the different threats that it might have supposed relate to AP levels.</p> <p>Evaluating if the application of a popular policy implemented in consensus with health authorities has a de-polarizing effect.</p>	<p>Are AP levels responsive to some short-term dynamics fostered by the unprecedented conjuncture of the COVID-19 pandemic?</p> <p>Are citizens' perceptions of the pandemic and its management related to AP?</p> <p>Do individuals who were personally affected by the pandemic increase their AP levels?</p> <p>Are individuals' AP levels reactive to short-term changes, such as those fostered by the implementation of a policy?</p>	<p>Quantitative- Panel Data: Static score models</p> <p>Quasi- experimental design with observational data: Differences in differences</p>

Chapter 2 constitutes a theoretically grounded analysis of the main shortcomings of previous work on affective polarization as well as proposals for depolarization. It also integrates literatures between which the dialogue has so far been scant: the literatures on intergroup relations, collective action and social change and literature on affective polarization. After this critical-theoretical review, chapter 3 presents an overview of the methods used. It should be noted that this transcends just the specific techniques of data analysis and comprise important sections on the ontological and epistemological positions as well as an explanation of the logics behind a mixed-methods approach.

Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 constitute the empirical chapters of this PhD dissertation. Chapter 4, using *The Spanish Political Attitudes Panel Dataset (POLAT)* and a Polarization survey fielded in 2022⁶ presents descriptive evidence regarding affective polarization, left-right polarization, and territorial polarization, during the turbulent period undergone by Spanish politics between 2010 and 2023 (see Simón, 2020). Chapter 5, using the POLAT dataset, longitudinally explores the individual-level

⁶ Both datasets have been developed by the Democracy, Elections and Citizenship research group at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. A more detailed description of all the datasets used in this PhD thesis can be found in chapter 3.

associations between perceived elite ideological polarization on the left-right and on the territorial axes of competition in Spain and AP. In addition, it explores individuals' self-reported ideology as a source of heterogeneity -a moderator- that influences the degree to which perceived ideological polarization on each of the axes is associated to AP. Given the importance of the territorial axis of political competition in the Spanish context, chapter 6 analyzes political polarization in people's everyday discourse around the territorial question in Catalonia. This chapter, using focus group data from the CIS (Spanish Poll Institute), qualitatively explores the affective polarization phenomenon and the related concepts of political and partisan prejudice as they manifest in everyday people's talk and interactions. The last empirical chapter, chapter 7, also using data from the POLAT, constitutes a close examination of contextual and short-term changes in AP during the COVID-19 health crisis. It examines if the pandemic and the political management of it had some impact on affective polarization. A last chapter -chapter 8- elaborates on the conclusions drawn from all the previous chapters, highlights the dissertation's limitations and points to different aspects that need further elaboration and clarification in future research.

Summarizing, based on manifold previous contributions, this PhD dissertation addresses different important questions. Chapter 2 touches upon theoretical questions, measurement issues and the practical part of polarization studies: depolarization interventions. Chapter 6 also contributes to measurement, as it explores AP and adjacent phenomena -often envisaged as consequences of AP- from a discursive perspective; it also digs deep into how 'polarizing' and even prejudiced accounts of partisan antagonists are collectively managed and accomplished in everyday interactions. Chapter 4 provides a descriptive overview of the different polarization dimensions and gives us an idea about if and how their levels change over time. Chapters 5 and 7, for their part, analyze and further develop current scholarly debates on the causes of AP. The conclusions chapter integrates all these insights and highlights how they advance our knowledge of political polarization dynamics, as well as how this dissertation helps to formulate different questions for future inquiry. In the next section, the last in this introductory chapter, I underline the different contributions of the present work to the interdisciplinary field of political polarization studies.

1.5 Contributions of the PhD Dissertation

Some of the aspects examined in this PhD dissertation remain notably underdeveloped whereas others have generated a great deal of evidence and have advanced notably in the last few years. In

relation to the former, this work aims at providing a broader framework for examining the political polarization phenomenon, its conceptualization, measurement, causes and consequences, as well as the need -or not- for interventions. Regarding the latter, more explored facets of affective polarization and its causes, this PhD dissertation tries to constitute a step forward in order to delve deeper into debates that the previous literature has been thoroughly expanding.

Chapters 2 and 6 constitute a first step in prompting future meaningful research agendas regarding aspects that have not been frequently discussed. In this sense, as far as I am concerned, this dissertation is the first one to date that applies relevant social-psychological knowledge, such as previous critical reflections on the contact hypothesis and prejudice reduction strategies to the field of political polarization -and particularly, AP-. Drawing on this literature, a theoretically grounded analysis of the main shortcomings of previous work on affective polarization as well as proposals for depolarization have been made (chapter 2). While simple contact and de-biasing -the latter being the correction of people's (mis)perceptions or meta-perceptions about those in the opposite ideological camp- are clearly the dominant approaches to depolarization, this thesis opens up new avenues for thinking more broadly about the causes behind affective polarization, and thereby about possible strategies for depolarization. In this sense, the reflections and recommendations in chapter 2 can constitute a useful tool for researchers to analyze and incorporate the history of intergroup relations, issues of power, and a careful analysis of individual-level, group-level, and social factors into their analyses of AP, as a way to maximize the chances of success of specific contact experiences.

Additionally, the chapter also encourages researchers to think, if necessary, beyond contact, given that an unconditional reification of intergroup and/or social harmony might play the role of reinforcing and legitimizing -a starkly unfair- status quo. These aspects bring to light the pressing need for the affective polarization literature to forge a dialogue with collective action and social movement studies and incorporate some elements underlined therein; these have shown us that negative emotions are also an important ingredient behind protest (Alzate & Rico, 2009; Gómez-Román, 2017), and that the latter has been a way for historically unprivileged groups to advance towards less discriminatory -and thus, more cohesive- societies. Many different political expressions can 'polarize' the social debate and people's affect towards different sides or positions. But the fact that a political movement polarizes, in itself, does not tell us much about it having the potential to deepen democracy or to take it into a path towards illiberalism. This paper underlines that, as has happened with other concepts in the social sciences -i.e., populism-, polarization can be used to label expressions both on the far-right

and on the far-left (or indeed, the neo-reformist left⁷) as equally dangerous for liberal democracy, and thus for important aspects such as tolerance and prejudice, when there is plenty of historical and empirical evidence of the contrary in western Europe and the US (Badaan & Jost, 2020). This symmetry of intolerance thesis, together with polarization envisaged as always a problem in itself, becomes more plausible when issues of power and inequality, which are central to politics and the political, are analytically ignored (Kreiss & McGregor, 2023).

This PhD dissertation also contributes a first step towards the analysis of political polarization, from a different angle: that is, within people's linguistic practices, interactions, and everyday discourses (chapter 6). To date, there have been few attempts to analyze the affective polarization phenomenon and the related concepts of political and partisan prejudice as they manifest in everyday people's talk and interactions. Stereotypes -and prejudice- have long been conceptualized by many academics as context-dependent, as collective tools or representations that are (re)produced by everyday material and dialogical practices (Augoustinos & Walker, 1998; Condor, 2006; Dixon, 2017; Durrheim, 2021; Haslam et al., 2002). Importantly, these representations go beyond perceptive matters, being not just perceptions of how a social group is, but also sociohistorical constructions of how members of a particular group are and how they should be treated (Reicher, 2012; Tileagă, 2014). In addition, these social representations of groups are situated within the flow of history, implying at least two essential things. First, they tend to incorporate the history of intergroup relations as well as the histories and legacies of intergroup oppression and subjugation. Second, the expression of negative stereotypes, and thereby negative opinions and prejudices held about social or political groups, adapts to changes in the social norms of our societies, making them slippery, difficult to analyze, and hard to capture with traditional survey methodologies.

Through an in-depth qualitative analysis of people's interactions, this PhD dissertation sheds some light on how the everyday expression of negative stereotypes and partisan prejudice is collectively managed and rhetorically accomplished by lay thinkers in a particular sociohistorical context and time. This analysis shows some of the nuanced, complex, and heterogeneous ways in which collective expressions of political prejudice, including even the legitimation of illiberal measures against political adversaries, are defended and justified from a rhetorical position of reasonableness. This analysis complements and augments previous insights within political polarization studies by analyzing what some authors have been calling partisan prejudice or "pernicious polarization" within people's discursive and interactional practices, within a setting that prioritizes ecological validity.

⁷ Bortun (2023), through a content analysis of party and governmental documents, has found that the proposed socio-economic policies of two of the best-known examples of radical left parties -SYRIZA and Podemos- fall short of the label of "radical left", with a more appropriate label being "neo-reformist left" within the broader social-democratic party family.

Furthermore, the analysis of people's everyday talk about polarized political conflicts shows that the dichotomies we frequently use (i.e., liberal-illiberal; rational-irrational; prejudiced-unprejudiced) are divided by a permeable and moving line. This aspect calls our attention to the political struggle over the nature of prejudice, and also to the very nature of some of the most important political signifiers (i.e., freedom, equality, sovereignty) that are nowadays in dispute. Interestingly, the analysis shows that classical liberal tropes and interpretative repertoires are collectively mobilized to frame and depict the application of illiberal political practices -even the outlawing of political parties- as a reasonable and rational course of action. We also show that participants manage to express 'polarized', 'polarizing', and even prejudiced attitudes from a rhetorical position that stresses rationality and minimizes the speakers' emotional involvement. Furthermore, the analysis studies ideologically-aligned individuals and puts emphasis on the interactional component. By doing so, the analysis shows the importance that intragroup settings have in the (re)production and contestation of stereotyped, polarized, and polarizing representations of political adversaries.

Apart from prompting a new research agenda on these topics, this thesis contributes to further advancing debates and questions that have been widely discussed by previous research. I present descriptive evidence regarding affective polarization, left-right polarization, and territorial polarization. Chapter 4 contributes to existing literature by providing an in-depth descriptive overview of political polarization in the Spanish context over time, offering a holistic analysis of political polarization indicators that leverages the lack of space constraints. It links changes in the main political polarization indicators with the main events that took place in Spanish politics over a 13-year timespan, thereby uncovering the periods of higher and lower polarization in the Spanish political arena and the reasons behind these changing levels. This examination, on the one hand, has allowed me to analyze the relationship between each of the two types of ideological polarization considered (left-right and territorial polarization) and changes in AP over time. On the other hand, it has allowed me to explore how this relationship varies depending on individuals' ideological preferences. These insights constitute preliminary evidence that is further tested inferentially in chapter 5. Furthermore, this descriptive chapter of the dissertation offers a visualization of measures of affect towards sociopolitical groups, thereby overcoming a frequent limitation of AP studies. It shows that considering affect beyond parties is relevant to understanding the nature of today's different political conflicts, and expands previous insights regarding the place that far-right parties (or Populist Radical Right parties-PRR) occupy within the affective landscape (Harteveld, 2021; Harteveld et al., 2022). While I show descriptive evidence congruent with what has been called PRR exceptionalism, with Vox being the far-right party that receives the most negative affect among a representative Spanish sample, thereby pointing to what some previous literature called asymmetric polarization (Reiljan &

Ryan, 2021), I also find some complementary compelling evidence. In this sense, sympathizers of the far-right party Vox are the ones that express higher levels of negative affect towards a set of historically disadvantaged groups such as feminists or immigrants, so their dislike of some sociopolitical groups other than parties is higher than that shown by sympathizers of any other political party.

For their part, chapters 5 and 7 speak to some of the main debates in AP literature underlined in previous sections. In the first one, similarly to Reiljan & Ryan (2021) or Gidron et al. (2020, 2022), the multidimensionality of the political competition is acknowledged and empirically explored. This previous research demonstrates, on the one hand, that there are different ideological motives that configure AP dynamics between different blocks of parties. On the other hand, that elite polarization on the economic left-right axis and on the cultural axis both impact AP, but the levels of association change through time. In many countries, elite differences on the cultural axis seem to be increasingly linked to AP.

In this thesis, I explore the associations of perceived elite ideological polarization on the left-right and on the territorial axes of competition in Spain and AP, an aspect which complements previous insights by adding another source of heterogeneity that might make individuals more likely to translate perceived ideological polarization into AP: individuals' self-reported ideology. I find that, similarly to Gidron et al., (2020, 2022) and Kawecki (2022), perceived left-right polarization and perceived territorial polarization -as is the case with the economic and cultural dimensions of political competition- both contribute independently to AP, but their contribution to the emotional gap between in-parties and out-parties is moderated by individuals' ideological worldviews. In this sense, the association of perceived territorial polarization and AP is stronger for right-wing individuals, in comparison to centrist individuals and especially, left-wing individuals. In contrast, perceptions of elite polarization on the left-right dimension are slightly more associated with AP among left-wing individuals vis-à-vis their right-wing counterparts.

These previous insights make two clear contributions to previous academic works, one regarding the political relevance of the territorial axis, and the other regarding the importance of ideological identification to explain individual-level AP dynamics. Regarding the latter, while associations between ideological polarization -either on the left-right or the cultural axis- have been mainly examined without considering any moderators or mediators, these findings reveal the importance of individuals' self-reported ideology as a moderator of this relationship. Ideological identification influences which groups of citizens are prone to feel threatened by particular issues or societal challenges, and perceptions of intergroup threats correlate with AP (Renström et al., 2021). Further developing these

findings on what the role of ideology on how AP takes shape in multi-party contexts is, this dissertation finds that it influences the degree to which perceived ideological polarization levels translate into affective polarization levels or, in other words, to what extent ideological and affective polarization overlap (Riera & Garmendia-Madariaga, 2023).

This dissertation analyzes the importance of the territorial axis of competition, which is particularly important in Spain, but also in other multinational democracies -such as Belgium, Canada, or the UK. The territorial dimension is related to what Gidron et al. (2020) call the 'cultural dimension', so findings regarding the moderating role of individuals' ideology on the relationship between perceived polarization on the different axes of political competition and AP might be further tested in other countries and/or comparatively. This dissertation constitutes, to the best of my knowledge, the first to explore how citizens' perceived polarization on the territorial axis relates to AP, while it is also the first piece of research to explore ideology as a source of heterogeneity that influences to what extent perceptions of polarization in each of the dimensions is associated to AP dynamics.

Another contribution of the thesis is that, while a great deal of previous research circumscribes its analyses to partisans –with individuals classified into ideological blocks or party families, using party identification as a grouping variable- the different findings in this thesis go beyond them. Thanks to the use of Wagner's (2021) operationalization of AP (spread and distance measures) and to the data of the focus groups analyzed -that is not circumscribed to citizens with a party identity- the results in the different chapters of the thesis are applicable also to individuals that do not report a party identity, who tend to be a considerable portion of the samples used in analyses of public opinion.

While not the primary focus of the dissertation, chapter 5 also contributes to debates on the causal chain connecting perceptions of polarization and affective polarization. (Armaly & Enders, 2021; Enders & Armaly, 2019, Ward & Tavits, 2019). Through a detailed analysis of the context and the use of dynamic panel models, I find that, in contrast to Armaly and Enders (2021) in the US context, causality seems to be reciprocal. Moreover, the relative influence of one variable -territorial polarization- on the other -AP- and vice versa seems to be influenced by the context, in this case by the salience of the territorial conflict dimension. This evidence complements that found by Armaly and Enders (2021) and the differences between both pieces of research might be due to very acute differences between the cases under study, the notably different time gaps between waves (one year between waves in chapter 5 and four years in Armaly and Enders' (2021) first cross-lagged model from 1992 to 1996 and one year in the second one from 2008 to 2009) and/or the number of consecutive waves in each of the studies. What the findings in chapter 5 underline is the need for a close

examination of the context when looking at the levels of association between different dimensions of perceived ideological polarization and AP.

It is precisely this close examination of context and short-term changes in AP another contribution that can be seen in chapter 7. Wagner (2021, p.11) highlights the importance of future attempts digging deeper into “how does affective polarization rise and fall depending on context conditions”. Considering this and leveraging the POLAT dataset and its wave 12 fieldwork -which captures Spanish citizens’ attitudes before and after the COVID-19 de-escalation measures- this thesis analyzes two aspects. First, if the conjuncture propitiated by the COVID-19 health crisis increased AP and second, if AP is reactive to a government’s specific policy in the pandemic context characterized by uncertainty.

Researchers have recently started to study short-term contextual effects on AP, mainly related to elections, political campaigns, and elite coalitional behavior. In this sense, previous findings point to campaigns and elections as moments in time in which ideological conflicts between parties are made public and more salient, providing a breeding ground for affective polarization. Along these lines, soon after elections take place and consequently, the emphasis on ideological differences decreases, AP tends to go down (Hernández et al., 2021).

In multiparty systems, once elections take place, the search for coalition agreements is often required, and thus the emphasis on ideological similarities and the search for common ground between different parties tend to be very common. Taking these insights into consideration, experimental and comparative research on elite-level party coalitions has found that the formation of coalitions or their hypothetical formation (Bassan-Nygate & Weiss, 2022; Gidron et al., 2022) foster depolarization dynamics. However, at least two aspects remain unclear: first, the specific mechanism behind this depolarization effect (Huddy & Yair, 2021; Wagner & Praprotnik, 2023). Second, whether specific agreements between the elites, or between the elites and other key social actors -such as experts-, might also have the capacity to depolarize the electorate. This second aspect is precisely the one addressed in this dissertation, and the evidence generated contributes to short-term dynamics in AP levels.

We study the effect of a policy -whose application was gradual and asymmetric- on AP during the COVID-19 pandemic (chapter 7). This policy was implemented by the Spanish coalition government, hand in hand with health experts. As its application was gradual and asymmetric, our analysis allows us to test its effect on AP levels in the part of the country in which this policy was first implemented in comparison with the part that kept the main restrictions stemming from the lockdown. The evidence suggests, advancing previous knowledge on the short-term causes of AP and the effects of coalitional behavior, that specific policies might also foster affective depolarization. In particular,

policies implemented with a considerable level of consensus might help to depolarize the citizenry. In the case of the COVID-19 conjuncture, governments designed policies in close collaboration with scientists and health experts, an aspect that surely downplays the salience of ideological differences between government and opposition and stresses the superordinate societal goal of coping with the pandemic. Along these lines, policies that are adopted following scientific evidence are more difficult to be branded as 'partisan'. Thus, this evidence suggests that not just inter-party agreements might depolarize the electorate, but also agreements made by a party or a coalition of parties with other actors within society, in this case, scientists and health experts.

Apart from this contribution, the analyses on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on AP (chapter 7) also complement two branches of previous literature. On the one hand, evidence in the US that analyzed that AP and partisanship conditioned people's beliefs about the country's response to the pandemic and the compliance with social distance measures designed to contain the spread of the virus (Allcott et al., 2020; Cornelson & Miloucheva, 2020; Druckman et al., 2021). These works, all of them in the US, found that Republicans tended to comply less with social distancing measures whilst Democrats tended to comply more (Allcott et al., 2020) and that those more affectively polarized were more likely to not distinguish between the US response to the pandemic from the government's response to the pandemic (Druckman et al., 2021). On the other hand, considerable evidence, mainly from Germany, shows that the COVID-19 conjuncture and vaccination mandates fostered polarization between those in favor of the health measures and those against them (Schmid et al., 2023; Wagner & Eberl, 2022) and some other evidence found no effects of the pandemic on AP (see Boxell et al., 2020 in the US) or effects consisting in a heightened generalized support of the incumbent parties (Bol et al., 2021), an aspect that theoretically should be negatively related to affective polarization. Through a longitudinal analysis of AP levels at the height of the pandemic crisis, results point to an existing but limited capacity of the pandemic to increase -the already high- AP levels. At an individual level, for those citizens that perceived that the pandemic was a threat to the country's economy and for those who were more positive about the government's management of the pandemic, levels of AP increased.

Previous mixed findings could be due to the cross-sectional nature of the majority of previous studies. In consonance with previous literature on the importance of elites' cooperative/competitive behavior and coalitional-oppositional dynamics, the COVID conjuncture might have exerted a heterogeneous effect over time. That is, in countries and moments in time in which elite -or citizens'- disagreements regarding COVID-related issues were emphasized, there may have been increasing AP levels, whereas in countries and moments in time in which elite-level cooperation -between parties, or between parties and other important social actors, such as scientists- were more salient, AP levels might well have been reduced. These findings contribute to show to what extent individual AP levels are reactive

to citizens' perceptions of the political management of an unprecedented health crisis, on one side, as well as the capacity of a policy to alter aggregate levels of AP, on the other.

All in all, the chapters in this thesis advance our knowledge about affective polarization by broadening current understandings of this phenomenon and bringing forth pressing questions that should be explored by future enquiry, by advancing our knowledge on some of the causes of AP through incorporating layers of complexity -e.g., multidimensionality- into the analyses, and by constituting one of the first attempts to look at the collective expression of polarized views in natural, everyday settings. This new knowledge contributes to previous academic efforts to better understand AP, but the implications go beyond academic matters. The findings in this PhD thesis, might help us in the task of designing depolarization interventions, or more broadly, interventions aiming at fostering positive social change (Alzate & Dono, 2017; Campbell & Murray, 2004; Dixon & McKeown, 2021) that can be implemented both by researchers in academia but also by practitioners working in different organizations (e.g., NGOs) outside academia.

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1.7 Appendix

Detailed explanation of table 1.1:

Table 1.1, based on how the different dimensions have been used in the previous literature, establishes different types of polarization, something that has made literature on political polarization confusing and difficult to review. A similar table, which has served as an inspiration, can be found in Lees & Cikara (2021). All polarization measures assess a gap, a distance, or the sum of the squared distances between ingroups and outgroups regarding ideology and issue positions (ideological polarization), feelings towards ingroup(s) and outgroup(s) (affective polarization), or between the elites (elite polarization). Another line of distinction is usually drawn between actual levels of polarization and perceived (first-order beliefs) or meta-perceived (second-order beliefs) polarization. Actual levels of polarization are conceptualized as the difference between in-party and out-party ideology/issue positions/feelings, and this necessarily constitutes an aggregate measure (see Ahler, 2014). Perceived levels of polarization have to do with individuals' perceptions of how members of the ingroups and outgroups think. This measure can tell us to what extent each individual overestimates polarization and how a group (i.e., Democrats in the US) might underestimate or overestimate polarization, in comparison with actual levels. Regarding meta-perceptions, meta-perceived polarization has to do with what individuals think the outgroup members think/feel about these individuals' ingroup. The gap between "actual" levels and perceptions, and the gap between actual levels and meta-perceptions has been named false polarization and, more recently, misperceived polarization.

This is easier to grasp if we use an example. For simplicity's sake, we take Democrats and Republicans in the US context as our political groups. If we think about Affective Polarization, the dimensions would be the following:

Actual Affective Polarization: how Democrats and Republicans each feel about themselves and about the outgroup. That is, how Democrats feel about Democrats and how they feel about Republicans, and vice versa. Actual levels of polarization would be obtained by calculating the mean levels of AP for Democrats and Republicans.

Perceived Affective Polarization: Democrats' perceptions about how they think people identified as Democrats feel towards Democrats and Republicans and vice versa.

Meta-perceived Affective Polarization: Democrats' perceptions of what people identified as Republicans feel about Democrats and vice versa.

Misperceived/False Affective Polarization: The difference between Democrats' and Republicans' actual levels of AP and the levels of AP perceived by Democrats and Republicans.

More types of polarization have been conceptualized (i.e., moral polarization) but they are not that frequent and are beyond the scope of the scrutiny here. The three types of actual and perceived polarization are theoretically and empirically related, and the nature of these relationships is an object of dispute in the political polarization literature.

Wording of Items to Build the Political Polarization Variables

Affective polarization

PTV scales (POLAT): "As you know, in Spain there are different parties that you can vote for. What is the probability that you will vote for each of the following parties? To answer, use a scale where 0 means "No chance, I would never vote for him" and 10 means "Every chance, I would certainly vote for him."

Like-dislike scales (Polarization survey): "We would like to know what you think about the following [political parties/groups]. Please use this scale where 0 means that you don't like the [party/group] at all and 10 means that you like it a lot."

Left right polarization (POLAT)

Individuals are first asked about their ideological self-identification, to being subsequently asked about how they would locate the parties on the same scale. The measure of left-right polarization is constructed considering individuals' perceptions of parties.

"In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself? Responses range from 0- extreme left position to 10- extreme right.

Where would you locate [name of the party] in the same scale?

Territorial polarization (POLAT)

Individuals are first asked about their levels of identification with Spain, to being subsequently asked about how they would locate the parties on the same scale. The measure of territorial polarization is constructed considering individuals' perceptions of parties.

"The next scale measures Spanish sentiment. Where would you locate yourself? Responses range from 0- minimum level of Spanish identity to 10-Maximum level of Spanish identity.

Where would you locate [name of the party] in the same scale?

Chapter 2: Bringing Critical Social Psychology to the Study of Political Polarization

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Abstract

The study of political polarization, in both its ideological and its affective expressions, has garnered significantly more interest over the last years. But despite recent research on the conceptualization, measurement, causes, and consequences of this socio-political phenomenon, and some tentative interventions to mitigate it, relevant new avenues remain surprisingly underdeveloped. Indeed, scholarship in the field of political polarization, mainly in the case of affective polarization, frequently uses cognitivist approaches to make sense of the growing antipathy between different social and political groups. However, the bulk of this work seems to overlook valuable insights into the psychology of intergroup conflict, stereotyping, prejudice reduction, and discourse studies. The aim of this paper is to underline the main gaps in the political polarization literature, to subsequently argue how knowledge linked to the tradition of critical social psychology can help in filling them. Ultimately, the article aims to contribute to the psychosocial study of political polarization and to the design, if necessary, of interventions to counter its detrimental consequences.

Keywords: political polarization, affective polarization, prejudice, depolarization interventions, intergroup relations, critical social psychology.

2.1 Introduction

Political polarization is currently one of the main concerns in the field of social and behavioral sciences. Whipped up by certain members of their respective political elites (Somer, McCoy & Luke, 2021), different societies worldwide seem to have undertaken a path of political conflict recrudescence, intergroup ideological distance, and growing intergroup animus. There is a fear on the part of pundits and scholars that the dynamics of polarization lead societies to legitimize politicians' illiberal tendencies, support autocratic leaders, and/or break down certain democratic norms, procedures, and checks and balances (Finkel et al., 2020; Kingzette et al., 2021). This fear is justified by recent events such as Brexit, the assault on the US Capitol, the growing support garnered by far-right parties worldwide, or the reaction of some citizens against immigration and the reception of refugees in the EU.

The growing literature on political polarization stems explicitly or implicitly from this preoccupation, as can be seen in recent contributions on "depolarization interventions" (e.g., Levendusky, 2018). This means that ultimately, the *raison d'être* of studying political polarization today is the aspiration to counter the current trends of tribalism, high levels of distrust, loathing, and confrontation between sociopolitical groups.

Stating the potential applications of this scholarship on polarization helps us better grasp the strengths and weaknesses of the field. This paper proposes that insights from critical social psychology can help address different shortcomings in the literature and delineate a richer framework for the study of political polarization. The paper first argues that the limits of the extensive literature on polarization stem from its exclusive adherence to (orthodox) cognitive psychology. Second, although Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) is widely used as a framework, some aspects of this integrative theory receive undue attention, whilst others are systematically overlooked. And third, the polarization literature has not considered further advances in the psychology of prejudice or made critical reflections on the contact hypothesis.

Throughout the article, it is shown that these three shortcomings work together, producing different consequences mainly related to the measurement, causes and consequences of polarization, and also to interventions that aim to foster social change. Moreover, mainstream approaches to political polarization, by trying to be neutral and value-free and by avoiding the study of meaning-making

processes, might carry ideological implications such as the defense of the Ideological Symmetry Thesis,⁸ on the one hand, and the legitimization of a highly unequal status quo, on the other.

2.1.1 Measurement

Political polarization is an umbrella concept, which comprises growing ideological and policy-based differences between political groups and the affective distance between them (i.e., affective polarization, hereafter AP). Table 1.1, in the first chapter of this dissertation, shows the different dimensions of polarization (see also Lees & Cikara, 2021). The possible causal relationships between them are part of an open debate that has generated mixed evidence (Lelkes, 2021; Mason, 2018; Wagner, 2021; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). What seems clearer is that the different dimensions are indeed related (Reiljan & Ryan, 2021) and that AP might potentially have detrimental consequences on intergroup relations and political tolerance (Martherus et al., 2019).

AP has been defined as the emotional gap between what individuals consider to be their in-party or parties and what they consider to be their out-party or parties (Iyengar et al., 2012). More recently, AP has also been conceptualized between different party supporters, social groups, and opinion-based groups (Harteveld, 2021; Hobolt et al., 2021; Simon et al., 2019). The most frequently used tools to measure it are like-dislike scales and feeling thermometers (see appendix).

Measuring dislike between political groups and its evolution provides us with valuable information. Nevertheless, like and dislike constitute a broad-brush assessment of intergroup relations and conflict. In fact, doubts about the measures, on one hand, and the consequences of this “dislike”, on the other, are increasingly frequent (Broockman et al., 2022; Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). Because of this, refining the quantitative measures of AP to disentangle “like” and “dislike” from stronger emotions such as fear, disgust or hate would arguably be an important addition to the literature. But generally, treating dislike or negative emotions as synonyms of prejudice without interest in their meaning (what does it mean to feel dislike/fear a concrete group in a particular context?) constitutes a shortcoming of current approaches to polarization.

Along with these measurement issues, the causes posited for AP frequently stem from an adherence to orthodox cognitive psychology and a lack of importance attributed to the context and history of intergroup relations. The next section presents the causes of AP that are often mentioned when approaching the phenomenon from a cognitivist perspective.

⁸ This thesis posits, in a nutshell, that left and right-wing people are equally prejudiced, but towards different groups.

2.1.2 Causes

Table 2.1 offers different examples, from leading journals in both psychology and political science, which show that AP tends to be rooted in universal perceptual limitations and/or the perceptive biases coming from individuals' identification with a political party or group, leading citizens to motivated reasoning.

Table 2.1: Conceptions of the drivers and necessary interventions to ameliorate Affective Polarization

Fernbach & Van Boven (2022)	"A major challenge is that several basic cognitive and affective processes push toward polarization, and people are unaware of how these unwanted processes shape their own views. Behavioral science has an important role to play in diagnosing and addressing the underlying mechanisms." (p. 1)
Ahler & Sood (2018)	"Republicans, Democrats, and independents, all overestimate the share of party-stereotypical groups in both the major parties. Partisan differences, although statistically significant, are relatively small compared to the overall magnitude of these misperceptions." (p. 979)
Iyengar et al. (2019)	"What, if anything, can be done to ameliorate affective polarization? While efforts here are at best nascent, several approaches have shown promise. All of them work to reduce the biases generated by partisanship's division of the world into an in group and an out group." (p.139)
Lees & Cikara (2020)	"Our findings highlight a consistent, pernicious inaccuracy in social perception, along with how these inaccurate perceptions relate to negative attributions towards outgroups (...) This suggests that there may be many domains of intergroup interaction where inaccurate group meta-perceptions could potentially diminish the likelihood of cooperation and, instead,

exacerbate the possibility of conflict. However, our findings also highlight a straightforward manner in which simply informing individuals of their inaccurate beliefs can reduce these negative attributions.” (p.285)

Within this view, group stereotypes are envisaged as “pictures in our heads” (Lipmann, 1922), and prejudice is envisaged as unjustified (that is, not grounded in evidence) negative pictures of a given social group or, in Allport’s (1954) words, “thinking ill of others without sufficient warrant” (p.6). This tradition conceptualizes prejudice as a phenomenon that has to do with the way individuals process information that comes from the *real world*. People receive an overwhelming amount of daily information which is impossible to process in all its complexity, so they need to rely on heuristics and processes of information reduction such as categorization. In other words, humans are “cognitive misers” (Fiske & Taylor, 1984) who cannot deal with the complex nature of the social world, so we (over)simplify and distort information about the world and the different social groups that inhabit it.

In this way, individuals do not perceive the outside social world *as it really is* but filtered through these limitations, which might eventually lead them to misperceive the attributes of social categories. Thus, the gap between what the biased perceiver thinks about an outgroup and the outgroup’s *real* characteristics would be the magnitude of the bias. Following this rationale, cognitivist approaches locate the causes of polarization in automatic, inherent, and inescapable perceptive biases that are accentuated by a division of the political camp between political ingroups and outgroups. Parties, ideologies, or opinion groups can act as social groups which provide citizens with a lens through which they approach reality, triggering ingroup favoritism and intergroup bias (Tajfel et al., 1971).

2.1.3 Beyond biases and dislike: the social aspects of stereotypes and prejudice

A powerful critique of the conceptualization of prejudice made above has recently (re)gained relevance: this is the kernel-of-truth approach (Jussim et al., 2009). It states that far from (mis)perceiving other groups’ attributes, people often hold stereotypes about them that correspond to how these groups *really* are. This research highlights the limitations of the theoretical apparatus of the previous tradition, using its own terminology. Nevertheless, this approach suffers from the same shortcomings: the epistemological issue of how we can objectively define what group members are like in reality, along with the ethical issue of assuming that there are group stereotypes that might be

“true” (Stangor, 1995). Both approaches, in trying to see the level of correspondence between the stereotypes in people’s minds and reality, overlook the social origins of stereotypes, their contextual and contested nature, as well as their situated consequences and their relationships to wider power structures (Dixon, 2017). As classic social psychological theories started to outline, stereotypes are much more than pictures in our heads.

Sherif and colleagues’ work (1961) illustrated that the context of competition (or cooperation) between groups conditions how the groups perceive, feel, and think about each other, whereas Tajfel’s added cognitive and motivational factors explained some blind spots in Sherif’s Realistic Conflict Theory. The SIT aimed at understanding why different groups in positions of clear subordination usually have positive attitudes towards the privileged outgroup, tend to derogate their own group, and why they do not always opt for challenging group inequalities.

The polarization literature conceptualizes prejudice as negativity towards the outgroup, which comes from biased stereotypic views of the opponents (fostered by party elites, the media, and informational bubbles) and which arises between “equal status groups”⁹ (Moore-Berg et al., 2020). Consequently, polarization research tends to use the SIT framework, but stripped of its several caveats on social change and social mobility. Here we develop these points more thoroughly:

Status and power relations: SIT recognizes the existence of differences in power and status between social groups. The theory focuses closely on historically disadvantaged groups’ search for a positive social identity, as well as the different strategies that individuals, as group members, can follow to challenge their social position with respect to privileged groups (Billig, 2002). In this sense, SIT explains different ways in which individuals that belong to (disadvantaged) social groups can accept living with differences in social status, as well as when the circumstances foster the desire of these groups to revert this unequal status through social competition. Indeed, in a context of an intergroup struggle for status, when part of a dominant group perceives its superiority as legitimate, its members will act in a discriminatory manner if the subordinate group makes attempts to change intergroup relations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Conversely, when the status differences are seen by both groups as legitimate, previous studies have found evidence of positive evaluations made by subordinate group members when they consider privileged groups and vice versa.¹⁰

⁹ Party supporters (e.g., supporters of the Democratic Party or the Republican Party) are conceptualized as equal-status groups. An objection to this is that supporters also have other social (those based on race, gender, class) and political identities (e.g., feminist/anti-feminist) that are characterized by asymmetries in power and status, and that are surely at play in political polarization dynamics.

¹⁰ Durrheim et al. (2014), in South Africa, found that positive interactions between black domestic laborers and their white bosses served to reproduce power differences between them.

Prejudice does not necessarily stem from negativity: Accepting status differences as legitimate is common in contexts characterized by long-term inequality and power differences between groups, where warm and paternalistic attitudes make relationships based on the transfer of resources from subordinate to dominant groups more acceptable and sustainable for the latter (Jackman, 1994). In these cases, the absence of conflict or group polarization might lead to social harmony, while maintaining an unequal society (Reicher, 2012). That is, positivity here would be hiding and sweetening relations of domination and undermining the willingness of subordinate groups to fight against group-based inequality (Wright & Lubensky, 2009), evincing that the relationship between positivity/harmony and negativity/polarization is complex. This association between negativity and prejudice also falls apart when we observe the case of modern, more subtle forms of sexism (Glick & Fiske, 2001) in which ambivalence or overall positivity operates to fuel and sustain group prejudice.

Polarization/conflict with privileged outgroups is a means to subvert power relations: The way we think of intergroup relations and like-dislike dynamics is inextricably linked to the history of intergroup relations, the actual context of competition, and the dynamics of power preservation on the part of historically privileged groups. Indeed, SIT establishes that one of the possible ways for subordinate groups to subvert status differences is through engaging in social competition; that is, confrontation with the high-status group, which might lead to conflict and antagonism between the dominant and the unprivileged groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p.44). This aspect implies the need to avoid seeing polarization as necessarily pernicious in itself; literature on collective action actually underlines the role played by negative emotions such as anger in fostering disadvantaged groups' democratic struggles for equality and recognition (Simon, 2020; Van Zomeren et al., 2008).

Polarization research tends to consider that negative feelings are the result of irrational and biased perceptions, which consequently, must be alleviated to restore consensus, compromise, and ultimately, to end the conflicts. Congruent with this reification of harmony, depolarization interventions tend to be based on de-biasing individuals' perceptions and meta-perceptions, providing citizens with *truthful* information about others, as well as fostering positive contact between group members. Building on these three points, the next section reviews the consequences of these systematic flaws.

2.1.4 Consequences of current theoretical assumptions

Theorizing polarization as a phenomenon that takes place between equal-status groups favors adhering to perspectives that try to explain political conflict without reference to the history of intergroup relations. From this perspective, claims about the Ideological Symmetry Thesis become

plausible, theoretically developed, and empirically tested. This thesis often arrives at (arduously difficult to defend) conclusions such as the following, as described by van Prooijen (2021, p.7):

“Research (...) has revealed that the high levels of prejudice commonly observed at the political right towards a range of societal subgroups (e.g., Muslims; ethnic minorities; feminists) is associated with the belief that these groups largely vote left-wing. This line of research also has revealed high levels of prejudice at the political left, however, specifically towards societal groups commonly assumed to vote right-wing (e.g., Christians; business people; the military; for an overview, see Brandt et al., 2014).”

Badaan & Jost (2020) have contested this thesis. They offer data on hate crimes in the US, showing that the crimes perpetrated by members of privileged groups against disadvantaged groups are vastly greater in number than crimes perpetrated by the latter against the former. If hate crimes are envisaged as expressions of (extreme) prejudice, measures based purely on negativity are not capturing what is essential. Data based on like-dislike scales seem to lead us to overrate the symmetry of prejudice and depart from the real-world dynamics of conflict.

Secondly, equating prejudice with negativity also has conceptual and ideological consequences. On the one hand, we overlook that we can find manifestations of dislike or disapproval, which cannot be considered prejudice (Verkuyten et al., 2019). Similarly, we de-problematize relations of inequality and domination between groups if they are characterized by warm feelings. On the other, it is worth noting that the acritical search for social harmony, and the conceptualization of polarization as intrinsically negative, might play the role of sustaining and legitimizing the status quo. Conflict can indeed pave the way for pernicious dynamics, the tribalization of political identities, and even violence. But by exclusively underlining the destructive side of polarization, an unconditional search for social harmony may actually hamper positive social change towards more egalitarian and inclusive societies. Conflict can also fuel positive social change, along with the development of more just and—consequently—more stable societies (Mouffe, 2005; Simon, 2020; Stavrakakis, 2018; Wright and Baray, 2012). New developments in critical social psychology open up promising avenues for addressing the different shortcomings that have been underlined so far.

2.2 Critical Developments in Group Stereotypes and Prejudice: Towards a Broader Conceptualization of Political Polarization

Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) (Turner et al., 1987) states that stereotyping is not just a cognitive process, but also a sociopolitical one (Oakes et al., 1994). Stereotyping would be a context-sensitive collective and collaborative process that, at a particular time and place, informs us about the current state of a group's life within an evolving system of intergroup relations and that can be used either to (re)produce social inequality and legitimize it or to problematize it and contest it (Condor, 2006; Haslam et al, 2002).

Stereotypes are shared collective constructions embedded in a context, which carry a history of intergroup relations, and at the same time are collective tools used to mobilize particular versions of how a group is, and how its members ought to be treated (Tileagă, 2014). These insights remove stereotyping and prejudice from individuals' heads and locate these phenomena in the terrain of motivation, ideology, power, and language. Likewise, they spring directly towards conceptions of attitudes not as fixed mental identities, but as everyday descriptions of an attitudinal object (in which individuals elaborate questions of blame, accountability, fact construction, and agency) which can be examined through text and talk, as theorized by discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1993).

This conception leads us to reformulate some assumptions about the individual perceiver. As Billig has argued (1987), individuals are not just irrational beings that uncritically and thoughtlessly process all the information they receive, and always act as victims of their limitations, which are marked by processes of categorization and generalization. In Billig's view, individuals think and argue with ideology, and they are just as capable of particularizing as of generalizing, as well as being able to adapt their discourses to avoid being labeled as prejudiced and use common sense arguments to both legitimize and oppose relations of power and dominance.

Stereotypes take part in wider belief systems that update through time depending on sociopolitical conjunctures. The ways of legitimizing a group's low status have changed substantially. Nowadays, explanations based on biology, genes, or nature are socially unacceptable for most people in western societies; instead, the use of the liberal tenets of equality, freedom, or arguments based on hard work and meritocracy to sustain (prejudiced) beliefs hampering the designing of policies to redress inequality is common (Gibson & Booth, 2018). In fact, prejudiced accounts of racialized and impoverished people are often carefully crafted by people and policymakers as part of broader discourses of citizenship, and particular versions of place attachment (Di Mazzo, 2012; Di Mazzo et al.,

2014) that might be used to legitimize some ideological and material practices, such as the spatial relocation and social exclusion of certain groups (Manzo, 2014).

This continuous updating points to the slippery nature of stereotypes, and to the public debate on the shifting boundaries differentiating the prejudiced from the unprejudiced (Durrheim, 2022; Goodman & Burke, 2010), and evinces that prejudice, far from being a clear and static concept within psychology, constitutes a political judgment (Drury, 2012). This partially explains the growing acceptability of far-right discourses, as they usually re-draw the boundary between what is prejudiced and what is not, even trying to depict themselves as victims of prejudice and of the tyranny of political correctness (Balinhas, 2020; Schröter, 2019).

Thus, it would be difficult to define polarization as merely a consequence of flawed perceptions, leading to biased mental representations of outgroup members. Polarization, in fact, constitutes the very struggle for constructing and fixing a hegemonic version of how a concrete group really is, and how this group should be treated. Therefore, drawing a static red line between the prejudiced and the unprejudiced and between accurate and biased perceptions does not do justice either to the malleability of stereotypes or to the way individuals argue, contest, and discursively elaborate truth claims (Burke & Demasi, 2019) about what being prejudiced means. Rather than choosing to ignore this complexity, researchers should try to unravel it (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

2.2.1 Contributions of a critical social-psychological approach to the study of political polarization

The proposal to broaden the scope of work on political polarization implies some core assumptions: First, we should assume that the processes of stereotype formation are not just matters of perception but are also means for political action. Individuals do not perceive social reality as an object that is totally independent of the perceiver; instead, they interpret and actively construct this reality through rhetorical and dialogical processes, creating identity versions of “myself”, “us” and “them” that favor some political narratives and undermine others.

This first assumption points to the importance of studying language and meaning-making processes. Trying to grasp “partisan prejudice”, political polarization, and the implications of dislike and negative emotions between groups requires collecting people’s opinions about political groups, in order to delve into what these affective evaluations mean for them. People’s “descriptions” about certain controversial matters will bring to the fore questions of blame, accountability, and identity-construction processes (Wetherell & Potter, 1993). As people talk about political others, we can observe a picture of the ongoing dialogical process of stereotype formation and (re)production, as

well as the ideological consequences of particular group descriptions and how they fit with wider patterns of beliefs and ideological traditions.

Finally, as the applied consequence of a critical turn in the way we approach polarization, researchers may find it useful to think beyond contact, de-biasing, and the promotion of superordinate identities, since these sorts of interventions, when applied indiscriminately to all kinds of intergroup conflicts, might actually have negative consequences (see Mckeown & Dixon, 2017) that will be depicted in the next section. Subsequently, to illustrate these three points, the reader is provided with a contextualized, real-world example.

2.3 Thinking Beyond Contact as a Depolarization Strategy

Promoting superordinate identities (Levendusky, 2018), providing citizens with “truthful” information about the outgroups (Druckman et al., 2022) or inter-party contact (Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020) have all proved to be successful ways of reducing levels of AP. These contributions expand the considerable evidence that supports contact as an effective means of reducing prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Nevertheless, literature on depolarization strategies has not addressed the potential negative effects of these sorts of interventions. In this sense, research has underlined the paradoxical effects that contact interventions can have on subordinate groups – sometimes actually weakening these groups’ willingness to combat group-based inequalities – (Çakal et al., 2011). In addition, intergroup contact does not always turn out to be positive, as the prevalence of everyday negative contact experiences shows (Dixon & McKeown, 2021).

To tackle these concerns, polarization scholarship might benefit from considering insights from the literature that has examined under what circumstances, and through which mechanisms contact interventions do tend to work and succeed in increasing privileged groups’ support for equality without decreasing unprivileged groups’ desire to foster social change (Hässler et al., 2021). That is, the literature has reported benefits of intergroup contact in which participants talk about their status differences, rather than contact in which they talk about group similarities or differences in culture (Hasan Ashli et al., 2019; Tropp et al., 2021).

As the Integrated Contact-Collective Action Model (ICCAM) (Hässler et al., 2021) has contended, different conditions might maximize or minimize the compatibility of contact with collective action. In a similar vein, previous research has found that, whilst promoting ingroup identification and pride may be positive for unprivileged groups (Leach & Bou Zeineddine, 2022), strong identification with a

privileged ingroup might lead people to act collectively to improve the status of the advantaged (Hasbún-López et al., 2019). But generally, the positive effects of contact have systematically been clearer for privileged groups and have remained unclear for subaltern groups (Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005), an aspect that should lead us to think beyond interventions based only on intergroup contact.

In conflicts sustained by long-term inequalities, a collective action model of social change that tries to foster unprivileged groups' fights for equality can be effective. Different historical examples, such as the abolition of New World slavery, civil rights reforms in the US, and the end of apartheid in South Africa, have taught us the essential role played by the mobilization of subordinate groups to move toward more egalitarian societies (Dixon et al., 2012). Contact and de-biasing might also not be the most adequate way to deal with conflicts that involve groups with scarcely compatible moral values and worldviews (Verkuyten et al., 2019); at times, it might be more useful to attempt to foster acceptance of other people's way of life according to their worldviews and values, even if we do not like them, since dislike or disapproval cannot be equated with prejudice.

Researchers can examine general, structural measures in form of socioeconomic and integration policies which have been shown to reduce prejudice (Kende et al., 2022). Similarly, as economic inequality and unemployment might be causes of AP (Gidrom, Adams & Horne, 2020), these sorts of interventions might well reduce it. Nonetheless, context-situated and tailor-made responses to the idiosyncratic aspects of each political conflict are necessary, since the context and the characteristics of the targets of each intervention play an essential role in how effective an intervention will be (Bartal & Hameiri, 2020; Dixon & Levine, 2012).

2.3.1 Example – Polarization between the feminist movement and Vox, the main far-right party in Spain

The following two extracts are taken from a Vox rally in Madrid, on March 8, 2020 (International Women's Day). They illustrate the conflict between the Spanish feminist movement and the party. The event (Vistalegre III) represented an attempt to offer an alternative to the yearly demonstrations led by feminist organizations.

Extract 1:

"Spaniards: what used to be a right has today become an obligation (...) In the face of the social and national emergency that Spain is suffering, in the face of the attack on the family and on life, dissent from the policies that have dragged us here is the only alternative, it is the only option.

Spaniards, the progre¹¹ consensus, would like us, 'the women of the alternative', not to be here. They would want us to be at their demonstration (...) That would be their great victory. Silencing the brave ones who stand up to their steamroller like... well... as they have managed to with all the other parties. (...) Because radical feminism wants us, yes, but it wants us to be submissive to their ideological agenda. It wants us, yes. But it wants us to support totalitarian laws that separate us from men and break the fundamental principle of constitutional equality. They want us, yes, but in silence. Silent in the face of sexist discrimination in other cultures, such as Islam! (...) Because what radical feminism wants, ultimately, is to take away our freedom to think, the freedom to act autonomously. Take away our freedom to be the women we want to be. With no impositions, no quotas, in total equality to men." (Rocío Monasterio-Vistalegre III)

Extract 2:

"Men do not rape, that's what rapists do. Men do not kill, that's what murderers do. Men do not mistreat others, that's what abusers do. And men do not humiliate others, that's what cowards do! And today we are here, on March 8, alone, the only alternative, to say loud and clear: the rapist is not you because you are a man." (Macarena Olona-Vistalegre III)

Monasterio and Olona's arguments are constructed in rhetorical opposition to the discourses of both the feminist movement and some left-wing parties. The speaker, in the first extract, rhetorically constructs herself and her supporters as the only ones who resist, whilst all the other political parties have conformed to the "progre(ssive) consensus". In contrast, she depicts "radical feminism" as a totalitarian movement aimed at stealing women's freedom, forcing them to submit, silencing "us" and demanding support for totalitarian laws. Through this rhetorical move, the speaker locates the ingroup as the underdogs, those fighting against the status quo, the victims of authoritarianist forces that impose a concrete way of thinking which stops the ingroup from being "the women we want to be".

Monasterio's intervention constructs a particular understanding of the terms "equality" and "freedom". Freedom appears in the text as the absence of coercion (to think, to act autonomously, to be the women they want to be) exercised by institutions and law (without impositions, without quotas). This conception of freedom is akin to neoliberal formulations of this principle, by which freedom would mean the absence of state/institutional coercion in individuals' initiatives and thoughts, meaning that any legislation that tries to regulate aspects of social (or economic) life is often seen as tyrannical, caricatured as "political correctness", and aims to grant some form of advantage

¹¹ This constitutes a mocking way in which Vox designates the consensus around some issues, such as gender issues, in which progressive policies tend to generate high levels of support throughout the political spectrum.

to the undeserving (Brown, 2019). Consequently, equality is a principle that is taken up and brandished against policies that are actually designed to redress inequality.

The second extract constitutes a rhetorical piece that individualizes and particularizes (Billig, 1991) violence against women, negating the sociohistorical, material, ideological, and institutionalized practices through which women have systematically been put in a subaltern position with respect to men. This element (re)produces the narratives of Hayekian and Thatcherian neoliberalism, according to which “the social”¹² does not even exist. The discursive eradication of the social allows the far right to neglect the influence of exploitation, colonialism, and patriarchy in producing inequalities that persist in the current arrangements of power, status, and access to material resources. Olona’s words then situate the cause of gender-based violence in the individual predispositions of deviant individuals, and counter-argue feminist accounts that depict gender-based violence as a social problem with historical roots that extend to the present. Importantly, this interpretative repertoire might be applied to almost any emancipatory project which theorizes power beyond “coercion” and tries to grasp the different social powers producing inequality and subjugation. The extract ends with a statement that again individualizes the problem of gender-based violence, while closing the door to men questioning their position of privilege.

The extracts illustrate how political actors construct identities, social relations, group life, subjectivities, and other people (Wetherell, 2015, p.316). These aspects have been exemplified in two pieces of elite discourse, but they can also be found in the mass media and in citizens' reasoning. In fact, everyday conflicts at university campuses or different places of social life revolve around similar issues.

The speakers’ utterances hardly resemble the living image of a bigot, two irrational prejudiced minds whose biases lead them to misperceive feminists’ *real* characteristics. On the contrary, they diffuse carefully crafted opinions about feminists and feminism within a rhetorical context characterized by two related phenomena: the Spanish institutions becoming increasingly more attuned to women’s rights, and the consolidation of the Spanish feminist movement as one of the most vigorous in Europe, as the recent massive feminist mobilizations have shown. In this sense, Monasterio and Olona are not explicitly arguing for inequality. Quite the opposite: they portray themselves as the ones defending

¹² In Wendy Brown’s words (2019, p.27) the social is “situated conceptually and practically between state and personal life” and is the space “where citizens of vastly unequal backgrounds and resources are potentially brought together and thought together. It is where we are politically enfranchised and gathered (not merely cared for) through provision of public goods and where historically produced inequalities are made manifest as differentiated political access, voice, and treatment, as well as where these inequalities may be partially redressed.”

“real” equality. They elaborate on the idea that feminists' demands have gone too far, a common argument in “modern” forms of sexism (Swim et al., 1995).

These discourses constitute a form of social action, which justify Vox’s opposition to supporting the yearly institutional acts on November 25th, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and question a law that has generated a consensus over the years (the Integrated Law Against Gender-Based Violence), to subsequently propose terms such as Intra-familial violence, alienating gender-based violence as a specific social phenomenon to dilute it into another nonspecific form of violence. Besides, rhetorically constructing laws to prevent gender-based violence as being totalitarian, and to claim that feminism is a movement that is trying to curtail freedom and criminalize men allows Vox’s representatives to put themselves in the subject position (Parker, 2002) of dissidents, as anti-status quo, and as the victims of prejudice.

It is worth noting that Vox’s discursive actions play the role of reinforcing or even turning the subject position of victims into a reality. And here is where more blatantly prejudiced utterances, different from those in the extracts, play a key role, evincing that political actors tend to mix hostile and benevolent forms of prejudice (Glick & Fiske, 2012). That is, some of Vox’s discursive practices are what often produce the material reality of Vox members being publicly reprimanded, and some citizens often trying to dynamite public events in which Vox representatives are participating. An example is when some people impeded the regional parliamentary member Alicia Rubio’s participation in an event in Madrid, days after she said, among other things, that “feminism is cancer”. Similarly, citizens from Barcelona’s “El Raval” neighborhood protested against the presence of two well-known figures of the party after one of them compared their neighborhood to a “multicultural dunghill”. In these cases, Vox’s discourse-as-action (namely offering highly prejudiced accounts of unprivileged social groups) is what leads political groups to organize material/spatialized collective responses (which are sometimes even violent), that are subsequently framed by the party as examples of lack of political tolerance and illegitimate limitations of free speech (Durrheim, 2020).

This very brief analysis offers a more nuanced picture of political polarization than cognitivist attempts, which tend to locate partisan polarization inside the heads of citizens and within their perceptive and meta-perceptive biases. Furthermore, the analysis warns us of the perils of taking debates on free speech or censorship as examples that confirm the Ideological Symmetry Thesis, since these debates are often raised by political actors whose aim is to deny group-based inequality. If scholars accept the “non-ideological” idea that intolerance is symmetrical, we would, in part, be accepting a conception of free speech, freedom, and prejudice stripped of a conceptualization of the social, partially aligning our views of these concepts with those of political actors firmly committed to

the legitimation of inequality and exclusion. We would also be accepting a way of building a social psychology that separates the psychological from the social, which omits studying the social and ideological processes by which subjects, their positions, status, and identities are constituted (Hook, 2004).

Based on our example, different depolarization interventions beyond simple contact can be proposed, considering the characteristics of the conflict, the targets of the intervention, and the context and history of intergroup relations.¹³ First, interventions that work with the concepts of hegemonic and new masculinities as a way to engage men in building gender equity (Jewkes et al., 2015) might be useful. A focus on the uneasy demands that gender roles also place on men might be useful for people who are particularly reluctant to talk about gender inequalities. This intervention could be a first step to take before initiating interventions based on contact to talk about group differences in power, or trying more confrontational models (Maoz, 2012). Among them, a softer version would be narrative-storytelling interventions aimed at visualizing the experiences of conflict, in this case, of men and women, as a means to favor empathy, but without ignoring power asymmetries. Less soft versions of the confrontational models would lead us to interventions that foster intergroup contact in order to discuss and challenge group inequality, as well as interventions with the unprivileged group aimed at group empowerment. Lastly, as a general approach for conceptualizing and challenging privilege around gender issues and beyond them, there are examples of Participatory Action Research that connect inequality to circles of dispossession and privilege, with the aim of engaging relatively privileged people to act against inequality (Stoudt, Fox and Fine, 2012).

2.5 Conclusion and Future Directions

Critical psychology is concerned with uncovering the ways in which psychological knowledge can contribute to generating and extending existing power relations (Parker, 1990). This article has argued how knowledge generated on the topic of political polarization has been characterized by psychological reductionism, that conceptualizes prejudice as a matter of (mis)perceptions, and consequently, as an internal phenomenon stripped of the sociopolitical circumstances that gave rise to it. Besides, polarization is usually envisaged in a way that fosters understandings of conflict and harmony that might favor the maintenance of a highly unequal status quo. Building on this

¹³ The appendix includes a rough example of how cognitivist approaches often frame depolarization interventions in a hypothetical situation, compared to the critical-psychological approach.

problematization of some of the underlying assumptions of mainstream approaches to polarization, some conceptual implications, as well as data-collection recommendations, can be drawn. To conclude, new avenues for future research can be outlined.

Firstly, trying to minimize group “biases”, albeit an important task, should not be the priority of the polarization field. Research would do well to focus on promoting positive social change by understanding the functioning of systems of oppression in order to deconstruct and challenge them (Tileagă et al., 2022). At an applied level, researchers should consider interventions beyond simple contact, as contact interventions tend to underline the psychological and perceptive causes of the problem, at the expense of the cultural and historical legacies of discrimination that have crystalized in structural and institutional everyday practices of re-production of inequalities (Greenland, 2022). The individualization of this problem facilitates members of privileged groups to construct discrimination as something from the past (Andreouli et al., 2016), whereas believing in the structural nature of discrimination makes people more likely to address group-based inequality (Rucker & Richeson, 2022). This points to the importance of avoiding methodological individualism and theorizing about structural causes fostering group inequality, confrontation, and polarization.

Regarding data collection, a critical-psychological approach might include an assessment of collective action intentions and policy change, along with the usual polarization measures. Moreover, including measures of identification with sociopolitical groups beyond parties would provide researchers with a more nuanced picture of mass polarization and would make it easier to identify status differences between groups and how they relate to support for different parties, as well as to partisan polarization.

To conclude, some future avenues to be explored can be sketched out. In general, there is a need for situated studies aimed at analyzing the meaning behind overall cognitive and affective evaluations, so we can grasp if a conflict might escalate into pernicious forms of polarization or, conversely, might be a part of a creative tension, which might lead us to more inclusive and egalitarian societies. Similarly, by adopting a meaning-focused approach, researchers can investigate if the growing “partisan prejudice” is just another updated version of classical prejudices, in which expressing dislike towards parties and supporters of egalitarian principles is a more socially acceptable way of expressing class/race/gender-based prejudice, or if it constitutes a different phenomenon.

Political polarization is becoming intensified at a time when a backlash is occurring against the progressive incorporation of different historically disadvantaged groups into public life (Lisnek et al., 2022; Mudde, 2019). Thus, future endeavors might find it useful to discern between political conflicts stemming from dynamics of polarization, and conflicts stemming from the resistance, on the part of

unprivileged groups, to a conservative backlash, as the causes, consequences, and interventions that would arise from these different conceptualizations will be different. In fact, the lack of recognition of group inequalities or high levels of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) and Right-wing Authoritarianism (RWA) on the part of dominant groups are factors that hamper the success of contact experiences (Hässler et al., 2021). Research on cognitive liberalization, which has reported that contact reduces RDA, SDO, and consequently, prejudice (Hodson et al., 2018), might be a promising area to explore for tackling these issues.

From a discursive perspective, analyzing the uses of the term “polarization”- on the part of experts, the media, and the people- is relevant. What identity-related, rhetorical, and ideological functions might the use of this term and the depiction of a political conflict as “polarized” have? Are there situations in which the use of a “rhetoric of polarization” and the subsequent creation of a sense of urgency to end some political conflicts might justify and legitimize a highly unequal status quo?

Lastly, since the social construction of some groups as a threat might have real-world consequences, future research should consider if and how trends in political polarization translate into the everyday, material, and spatialized experiences of citizens, as some recent research in historically divided societies has been doing (see Dixon et al., 2020). That is, are current trends of political polarization fostering narrower notions of citizenship, further segregation, the securitization of public spaces, and exclusionary dynamics in our communities? Critical Psychology has much to contribute to these questions and to the political polarization field.

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2.7 Appendix

Examples of feeling thermometers and like-dislike scales

Feeling thermometer (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019)

We'd like you to rate how you feel towards Republican and Democratic voters on a scale of 0 to 100, which we call a "feeling thermometer". On this feeling thermometer scale, ratings between 0 and 49 degrees mean that you feel unfavorable and cold (with 0 being the most unfavorable/coldest). Ratings between 51 and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm (with 100 being the most favorable/warmest). A rating of 50 means you have no feelings one way or the other. How would you rate your feeling toward Republican and Democratic party voters?

Like-dislike scale (CSES)

I'd like to know what you think about each of our political parties. After I read the name of a political party, please rate it on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you strongly dislike that party and 10 means that you strongly like that party. If I come to a party you haven't heard of or you feel you do not know enough about, just say so.

The first party is [PARTY A]

Using the same scale, where would you place, [PARTY B]?

Using the same scale, where would you place, [PARTY C]?

Using the same scale, where would you place, [PARTY D]?

Hypothetical proposed intervention to ameliorate intergroup conflict and its assumptions

Imagine a plausible psychological research project: feminists and right and far-right supporters rate each other regarding what they think the opinions of the other group are, and to what extent they like each other. This could take place in any country in which far-right parties argue that they are fighting against "gender ideology". Both groups provide a "distorted" image of the other (in the sense that there is a gap between how they imagine the opinions of the others and how the others portray themselves). Besides, the magnitude of this distortion correlates with the negative emotions they

report toward each other. A researcher that adhered exclusively to the cognitivist approach and reductionist versions of SIT might conclude that the feminists are biased in their judgment about how right and far-right supporters *really* think, since far right-supporters consider themselves (on average) more open-minded and respectful of diversity. Let's say that the same degree of *distortion* happens the other way around. The immediate solution would be, then, an intervention to correct these biases and discover that in reality, these groups are not that different, consequently alleviating their mutual animosity and democratic tensions. Similar arguments are made for alleviating the partisan divide by correcting meta-perceptions (see Moore-Berg et al., 2020). A researcher subscribing this view will be reinforcing the conception that feminists are polarized against the far-right voters because they, through a process of irrational judgment, misperceive them.

The researchers performing these studies consider *reality* as the way individuals present themselves regarding different issues and how they report to feel about different social groups in survey questions. But unlike the researchers, some respondents might base their judgments of a political group on the discourses and policies they legitimize with their votes; that is, the *reality of how far-right voters are* for them might be inferred by the support they give to policies that deny that sexism is an ongoing problem in our societies. Is this version of far-right voters true? This cannot be answered. But what is clear is that this version is as equally valid and plausible as the one arrived at by the researcher. Considering one version or the other does not depend on a strictly scientific criterion but is something that is more located in a moral and political plane. However, sticking to and defending one of the approaches over the other has radically different consequences. Envisaging the above example as AP coming from different perceptive biases about how we perceive the outgroups lead us to frame the problem as if a symmetric process were occurring, in this case, between a left-leaning social group and far-right voters, leading us to conclusions similar to the Ideological Symmetry thesis. That is, feminists are (on average) similarly affectively polarized towards far-right voters, just as the latter are polarized towards feminists, and that this would be a consequence of both groups' faulty generalizations and exaggerations of the others' characteristics (that is, the outgroup's attributed thoughts, values, and/or emotions).

Nevertheless, if we consider these feelings within the context and the history of intergroup relations, the researchers will probably frame feminists' "biases" and AP as a reaction against a conservative backlash, which is a process that has been documented and that is causing center-right parties to also turn to the right as a consequence of the electoral success of far-right parties (Mudde, 2019). Then, following this position, simple contact or de-biasing would not be the panacea, since we know that these interventions could reinforce the dynamics of domination and hamper individuals' motivation to push for social change (McKeown & Dixon, 2017; Wright and Baray, 2012). The first position would

consider that polarization itself is the problem that needs to be solved, and that getting along well with the other and re-establishing consensus would be the solution. The second approach would instead examine how political groups mainly composed of historically advantaged groups have managed to adopt the language and rhetoric of unprivileged groups and their fights for equality and use them to depict themselves as victims of discrimination. As for the intervention needed, this conception would probably propose a collective action model of social change instead of fostering contact (see Dixon et al., 2012).

Chapter 3: Methods

3.1 Ontological and Epistemological Positioning

Though it is quite uncommon to discuss the -generally underlying- philosophical positions that underpin the way in which we, social and behavioral scientists conduct our studies, our research designs entail implicit or explicit assumptions about the nature of the 'social reality' (ontology), that lead us to a particular way of trying to generate knowledge about its elements (epistemology). Thus, whether it is explicitly acknowledged or not, every piece of research engages with an ontology and an epistemology and situates itself in some location of the continuum formed by different scientific paradigms, the latter being a set of beliefs comprising our views of reality and the way in which we seek to measure it (Brand, 2009). Instead of paradigms, some authors prefer to speak about stances (Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2010) or perspectives (Shannon-Baker, 2016) while others argue that these stances are constructed entities that are fluid (Freshwater & Cahill, 2013). Although encapsulating our research in an ideal type might be reductionistic (Maxwell, 2011), broadly situating our research in the wide landscape of paradigms or scientific stances forces us into a necessary exercise of reflexivity, and thus leads us to consider the strengths and limitations of our work more effectively. Likewise, it makes our methodological decisions more informed.

In this thesis, congruently with previous insights (Biesta, 2010; Greene & Hall, 2010), quantitative and qualitative are not seen as paradigms, but as approaches to data collection-generation, and methods. Indeed, although some paradigms are more associated with quantitative or qualitative methods, as is the case of positivism and quantitative methods and interpretivism and qualitative ones, there are some paradigms or perspectives that are not tied to a particular approach to data, such as for instance, pragmatism or critical realism (Shannon-Baker, 2016).

There are undeniable ontological differences between quantitative and qualitative methods in social science research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Nevertheless, it is also undeniable that the different paradigms, ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies that stem from them all have strengths and weaknesses, as it is acknowledged, to a greater or lesser extent, in a great variety of academic literature. By this token, this thesis adheres to the core conception, common in mixed-methods perspectives, that the limitations of a singular approaches can be better overcome by using a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches (Morgan, 2007; Power et al., 2018). Complementarily, to understand complex and multi-layered sociopolitical phenomena such as the topic of this thesis, a combination of methods gives us a more complete picture, as qualitative inquiry

provides us with insights that cannot be obtained through quantitative methods and vice versa. Then, mixed-methods approaches tend to be based on the conception that the gains in terms of the potential for theory-building, the creation of more ecologically-valid and nuanced research findings in practice are greater than the drawbacks that stem from not following the deep-rooted ontological reasons for a separation in qualitative and quantitative methods in a canonical fashion (Power et al., 2018).

This thesis is composed of different chapters that aim at looking at a complex phenomenon -affective polarization- from different angles, as a way of providing the most complete insights on it. Some chapters, on one side, look quantitatively, using descriptive statistics (chapter 4) or panel data analysis, at the relationship between citizens' perceived polarization on the two main axes of political competition and individual-level affective polarization in Spain (chapter 5) or the effects of the pandemic conjuncture, and the political de-escalation measures on the same dependent variable (chapter 7). On the other side, chapter 2 elaborates a critical review of the existing literature on political polarization and depolarization, drawing on compelling -mainly social constructionist- theories about the social (re)production and contestation of group stereotypes along with insights on status and power relations between groups, collective action, and social change. This chapter also briefly illustrates the potential of Critical Discursive Psychology (CDP) to broaden our knowledge of polarization. This potential is fully shown in chapter 6, which uses focus group data to examine citizens' discursive and interactional practices as a terrain in which 'polarization' and partisan/ideological prejudice can be analyzed fruitfully.

Chapters 5 and 7 use a considerable N and statistical panel data techniques to delve into issues of statistical relations between variables and sometimes engage in implicit or explicit discussions about causality (when using cross-lagged panel models or when using the technique of Difference in Differences). Chapter 6, for its part, has a notably different focus. Here, the aim is the in-depth analysis of focus group data with a smaller N, in which sampling is principally theoretical, in order to provide an in-depth analysis of how our phenomenon of interest manifests in the field and in participants' own terms, focusing mainly on the analysis of people's everyday talk and interactions. In addition, the empirical qualitative analysis in chapter 6 incorporates a thorough analysis of the role of the researcher-moderator -i.e., reflexivity- in the data generation and analysis, as this exercise is an important quality criterion when conducting research based on focus groups and/or interactional data (Barbour, 2007).

As the reader might have noticed, the thesis thus employs a mixed-methods approach with very different designs and methodologies and is then hard to encapsulate it into a single paradigm or

perspective without resorting to some sort of shortcut or simplification. In this sense, the current thesis adopts a principally critical-realist paradigm that also incorporates some aspects that tend to be more stressed in interpretive paradigms. Critical realism envisages reality as a complex, multilayered and stratified hierarchy of open systems whose existence is real and independent of our perceptions and ideas about it, and as such we can generate knowledge about it, even though this knowledge might certainly be imperfect, contextual, and contingent (see Brunson et al., 2023). This thesis would 'fit' into the critical-realist perspective for different reasons: first, critical-realist perspectives are compatible with both quantitative and qualitative methods. Second, critical-realist perspectives allow us to talk about causality and aim at the transferability of knowledge, but the conception of causality is different from positivism. Critical realism highlights the search for context-based causality above the search for general rules that are independent of the context (Maxwell & Mittapali, 2010), an aspect that stems from a constructivist epistemology and the recognition that knowledge is socially produced: an ongoing social activity that is continually transforming itself as new insights and perspectives emerge (Bhaskar, 1975). In this sense, critical realism envisages events as caused by manifold social powers in interaction whose combination is contingent on different contexts, times, and places, a fact that makes the creation of universal and exceptionless regularities very unlikely, thereby distancing it from the way in which empiricist and positivist approaches conceive causality (see Elder-Vass, 2012). Lastly, critical realism in social sciences acknowledges what Ignacio Martín-Baró (2006) underlined as one of the main fundamental problems of positivism, which is that by "not recognizing more than what is given [positivism] leads to ignoring what existing reality denies, that is, what does not exist but would be historically possible if other conditions were present" (p.9). In this sense, critical realism highlights that social science knowledge has the power to reveal possibilities for social transformation (Morrow & Brown, 1994).

The quantitative chapters in this thesis consider the context not as something that needs to be controlled or discounted, but as an essential component of the 'causal' relationships that are tested. In the case of chapter 7, the immediate and sociohistorical context is also an essential aspect that needs to be understood and acknowledged by the researchers. All the quantitative, qualitative, and critical-theoretical parts of the thesis, in consonance with critical realism, stress that the ideas, relations, and social-psychological and political processes that are analyzed in the different chapters might constitute useful insights that can be transferable to other contexts and help other researchers in their process of sensitization (Sullivan, 2020) within their investigations.

In summary, this thesis will fall under the paradigmatic umbrella of critical realism because of its vision that consists of the overcoming of the everlasting controversies between quantitative-qualitative; it embraces a vision in which both approaches can be used to address their respective limitations,

because of its conception of causality and its recognition of knowledge as socially constructed. However, it aims to generate theories and knowledge that -although always imperfect and contingent- allow us to better comprehend reality. In a nutshell, this thesis would be closer to a realist ontology and a social constructionist epistemology. Additionally, although the ontological and epistemological basis underpinning our analysis based on critical discursive psychology takes the same paradigmatic assumptions as a starting point, chapters 2 and 6 incorporate some essential and compelling insights and criticism of realism from previous work that takes a relativist position (see Edwards et al., 1995; Parker, 2002). Likewise, social constructionism constitutes a mainstay on which the critical theoretical review and chapter 6 are built, as well as the study of subjectivities in its own right (García-Romero, 2019), which is an aspect underlined by the interpretivist tradition. However, despite these two aspects, language is viewed as constructing social realities, but with an acknowledgment that these constructions are constrained by material conditions. Thus, this PhD thesis is broadly compatible with critical-realist positions (Locke & Budds, 2020). Dixon (2017) perfectly explains the basic idea of social constructionism and clears away some misconceptions about it:

“The meanings we attribute to the social world cannot be reduced to a matter of personal perception in which individuals’ thoughts either match or fail to match the independent properties of that world. Rather, such meanings are actively created, reproduced, and transformed via the social practices through which we, together, make sense of the social world. This does not imply that nothing exists except social practices, that individuals or groups have no material reality, that there is nothing in the world but texts, or any such similar misconception” (p.17).

Indeed, this kind of social constructionism is perfectly compatible with critical realism (Elder-Vass, 2012) and in fact, various different articles that use Discursive Psychology and similar social constructionist perspectives make explicit references and/or analyze the ‘structural’ and the ‘material’ (Di Masso et al., 2020; Di Masso & Dixon, 2015; Dixon & Durrheim, 2003; Popoviciu & Tileaga, 2021).

Having explained the ontological and epistemological foundations of the present thesis, the next subsections describe the Spanish case and the different data sources used. Lastly, the final section explains the advantages of following a methodological approach based on a combination of different methods and techniques for data analysis.

3.2 The Spanish Case Study (2010-2023)

This thesis uses the Spanish case to explore political polarization dynamics. Whilst pre-2008 Spain was characterized by a notable degree of stability around an imperfect bipartisan system, the interrelated

economic, political, and territorial crises have brought about high levels of uncertainty, volatility, polarization, and transformation in Spanish politics. Along with this, the COVID-19 health crisis that kept the world on tenterhooks constituted another shock in an already polarized political landscape. Post-2008 Spain, as Vidal and Sánchez-Vítóres (2019) state quoting Polanyi (1944), constitutes a period in which time expanded, giving way to different unprecedented events in Spanish politics that have led to a change in the party system. This political conjuncture provides us with different elements whose analysis can shed light into different aspects related to political polarization dynamics.

The period analyzed (2010-2023) was characterized by the manifold responses to the 2008 economic and political crises, a huge cycle of protest, the emergence of new political parties and their incidence in government formation, the recrudescence of the territorial conflict in Catalonia and all the events that followed Catalonia's push for independence, the first successful vote of no-confidence in post-1975 Spain, the end of the Iberian exceptionalism with regards to the absence of an electorally-relevant far-right party and also the formation of the first-ever coalition governments in 2020 and 2023. I am going to sketch a brief chronological overview of the most important events of this period. Needed to say, this brief summary will be incomplete, as mentioning all the relevant events with their multiple nuances in this highly condensed period exceeds the aims and capacity of this summary. For instance, very important events such as the recent unprecedented levels of feminist mobilizations (Anduiza & Rico, 2023), the corruption scandals involving the former King Juan Carlos I, his abdication and the proclamation of his son, Felipe VI as the new king of Spain, or the relocation of the dictator Francisco Franco's body from the *Valle de los Caídos* –'The valley of the fallen'–, among many others, were important events that are not going to be developed in this PhD dissertation. To have a more complete overview of this period within Spanish politics, the reader can refer to broader explanations of the different events and turning points that occurred over the last decade (Muro & Lago, 2020; Orriols & Cordero, 2016; Ortiz, 2022; Rodon, 2020; Romanos & Sádaba, 2016) .

The first few years of the second decade of the 21st century were characterized by particularly acute levels of unemployment, and by the austerity measures put in place during Zapatero's second government (2008-2011) and drastically implemented from 2011 onwards by Mariano Rajoy's government, making the economy central in the Spanish political arena. These harsh austerity measures and citizens' perceptions of the incapacity of the Spanish mainstream parties to contain the pernicious effects of the crisis, along with some corruption scandals, contributed to the unfolding of a political crisis (Anduiza et al., 2014), in which the already low levels of trust in institutions and the established parties plummeted (Torcal, 2014). These grievances, along with perceptions of a democratic deficit within national and supranational institutions that became salient with the neoliberal management of the 2008 crisis through austerity, were central to the cycle of protest

marked by the Spanish Indignados and the 15M movement, that took part in an international cycle of protests that demanded 'Real Democracy Now', such as the Greek *aganaktismeni*, The Arab Spring or Occupy Wall Street (Castells, 2012; Kioupiolis & Katsambekis, 2018).

Many of the demands of the 15-M movement resonated widely within Spanish society, and different parties and grassroots citizens' groups formed political alternatives that dramatically changed the Spanish political landscape. The most successful political party that incorporated some of the 15M's demands was Podemos, whose first electoral success was in the 2014 European elections. By this time, Ciudadanos, an already existing center-right centralist party that was born in Catalonia, had started a national expansion to stand in the very important national elections in December, 2015. Podemos and Ciudadanos, both stressing a discourse of political renewal and anti-corruption that took the form of 'new' versus 'old' politics (Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020), obtained 20.7%¹⁴ and 13.9% of the vote respectively, and the national bipartisan system gave way to a multi-party system. From then until now, the end of 2023, no absolute majority has again been won by any party in the national arena, even though this had been common in pre-crisis Spain. The December 2015 elections resulted in the lowest vote share for the mainstream parties that had dominated the Spanish national institutions: the center-left PSOE and the center-right PP. After these national elections and a repeat election in 2016 -yielding very similar results- Mariano Rajoy (PP) again became prime minister in 2016 with the key support of Ciudadanos and the abstention of many PSOE MPs.

Somewhat in parallel to the events mentioned above, the interaction between the economic and political crises also nurtured another social movement during the cycle of protest: the Catalan pro-independence movement, that organized massive yearly demonstrations on the National Day of Catalonia -popularly known as the *Diada*-, and that from 2012 onwards became particularly massive, with hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets to demonstrate, or in 2014 to vote in the first unofficial independence consultation in a massive unofficial voting performance (Della Porta & Portos, 2021). This unofficial consultation with no legal status was a result of a re-branding of what had aimed to be a proper referendum but had been rejected by The Spanish Constitutional Court in 2014. The Catalan push for independence is popularly known in Spain as *El Procés*. Within the frame of the Procés, some unprecedented events took place in Spain and Catalonia.

After the consultation at the end of 2014 organized by Catalonia's president Artur Mas, the issue of Catalan independence became a recurrent one, not only in Catalonia but also in the national arena in 2015 and in the 2015 national elections (Vidal & Sánchez-Vítores, 2019). In 2016, after the formation

¹⁴ Note that this 20.7% of the vote includes Podemos and some regional coalitions in Catalonia, Galicia and Valencia (the so-called 'confluences') that went together to elections (see Orriols & Cordero, 2016).

of a pro-independence majority in Catalonia -formed by left and right-wing pro-independence parties- under the presidency of Carles Puigdemont, political tension rose and reached its climax in 2017, with the organization of a unilateral independence referendum on October 1, 2017, declared illegal by the Spanish institutions, at a time in which Mariano Rajoy (PP) was governing with the support of Ciudadanos and the abstention of some PSOE MPs. The October 1 referendum, in contrast to the 2014 consultation, took place under a climate of tension and harsh police repression (Balcells et al., 2021; Rodon, 2020). The referendum organized by the Catalan government took place despite having been prohibited and despite the Spanish government's use of the police. This was thanks to thousands of activists that managed to hide the ballot boxes and to open the polling stations. However, the day was marked by the pacific resistance of people that wanted to vote and the frequent use of violence against non-violent protesters by police forces that tried to impede the referendum (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Despite the very unusual climate for a referendum, different unprecedented events unfolded from this day onwards. Puigdemont made a unilateral declaration of independence (DUI) based on the referendum's results but suspended it a few seconds later; various Catalan leaders were imprisoned and others -Puigdemont included- fled to other European countries; the Spanish King Felipe VI made a speech on October 3, 2017, and more massive demonstrations took place. Catalan autonomy was suspended by Mariano Rajoy's government through the application of the article 155 of the Spanish constitution, with the key support of Ciudadanos and the PSOE. This lasted from the end of October 2017 to June 2, 2018. This time-point constituted the highest point of tension on the territorial axis, and the salience of this dimension of political competition reached unprecedented levels. Thus, the referendum, the DUI and the imprisonment of Catalan leaders were events that supposed a turning point in Spanish politics, and which put the territorial conflict in the spotlight. The Catalan leaders' subsequent trials in 2019 (popularly known as the Procés Trials) were at the forefront of Spanish national politics and were televised and highly debated, maintaining the high levels of salience of the Catalan independence question and Spanish unity.

However, the series of events did not stop there. In June 2018, Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) became the new Spanish prime minister after a no-confidence vote against Mariano Rajoy, unleashed by the first time a court pronounced a sentence that found the Popular Party guilty, as a political organization, of corruption (Simón, 2020). The motion was supported by Podemos and its regional coalitions, along with left-wing and right-wing Catalan and Basque nationalists and Nueva Canarias. This was the first successful motion of no-confidence in post-1975 Spain.

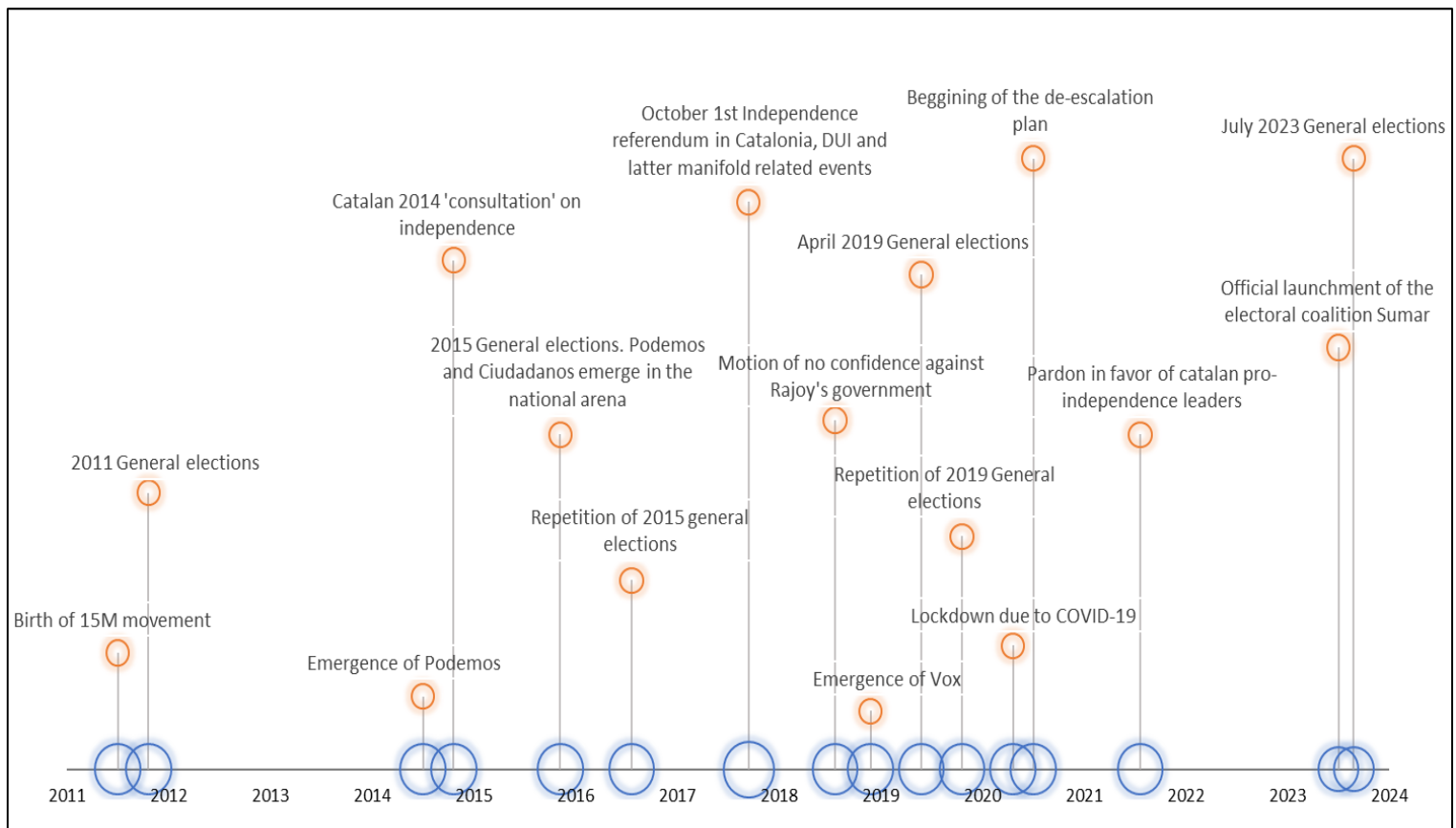
In the midst of all these unprecedented events taking part in Spain, the elections in December 2018 in Andalusia saw the first electoral breakthrough of Vox, a far-right party, ending “the Iberian exceptionalism” (Balinhas, 2020; Mendes & Dennison, 2021). The territorial dimension and the salience of the *Procés* in Catalonia were essential factors in this electoral breakthrough (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019). After this, national elections took place in April and December 2019 (because no successful government was formed after April elections). PSOE and Unidas Podemos garnered the necessary support to form a coalition government after the December 2019 elections, and Vox went on to become an important political force at the national level in the two national elections in 2019 and also in 2023. Besides, Vox also took part in some coalition governments with the PP in some Spanish regions, such as Andalucía or Castilla y León.

From 2019 to 2023, the executive was in the hands of the first coalition government in post-1975 Spain, made up of the PSOE and Podemos, with Pedro Sánchez as prime minister. This coalition government was supported by Basque right-wing nationalists (PNV), Galician left-wing nationalists (BNG) and other regional parties. The left-wing Catalan (ERC) and Basque (EH Bildu) nationalist parties abstained, leading to a tight majority. Interestingly, between 2015 and 2018, the relationships between Podemos and PSOE were characterized by conflict, manifested in high levels of intra-left block affective polarization. From 2018 onwards, intra-left-block AP decreased due to cooperation between the left-wing parties and the subsequent formation of a government coalition, and inter-block (left vs right) AP increased as a consequence of the increasing rejection of Vox and Ciudadanos among leftists (Orriols & León, 2020).

During this PSOE and Unidas Podemos government, a pardon was issued for the Catalan pro-independence leaders in prison (who had been sentenced to between 9 and 13 years of prison). This pardon allowed these leaders to have their sentences reduced and be released from prison in June 2021, after three and a half years. Although the COVID-19 health crisis monopolized public discussions and political efforts in 2020 and part of 2021, the territorial dimension came back to the forefront of Spanish politics again when the government issued this pardon, that generated controversy and the state-wide right-wing parties' clear opposition to it. The stark opposition of these right-wing parties, which advocated for very punitive sentences, and their Spanish nationalist discourse has been conditioning coalitional dynamics. While in the past, the center-right party PP had the support of right-wing Catalan and Basque nationalists to stay in government, nowadays the territorial dimension of competition, along with PP's regional coalitions with the far-right makes the PSOE a preferable option both for right-wing and left-wing peripheral nationalist parties.

This last aspect was essential in 2023. The 2023 general elections again resulted in a very fragmented parliament. Most of the polls predicted a tight right-wing victory with the possibility of government formation between the center-right PP and the far-right party Vox. However, the result of these two parties fell short and despite the considerably better results obtained by the PP (that gained 47 more MPs than in 2019) with respect to 2019, the also considerable drop in popular support for Vox and the results of the state wide left-wing parties (PSOE and Sumar¹⁵) allowed the latter the possibility of forming a government coalition again with the key support of right-wing and left-wing nationalist parties in the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia, as well as the support of the center-right regionalist party Coalición Canaria. The most important events outlined in this section are represented in form of a timeline in figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1: Timeline of relevant political events in Spanish politics (2011-2023)



¹⁵ Sumar was a platform formed by the former minister of Unidas Podemos, Yolanda Díaz, comprising many other left-wing organizations, including Unidas Podemos itself.

3.3 Data Sources

This PhD dissertation uses three datasets. The main dataset, used in the descriptive section of this chapter, as well as chapters 5 and 7, is the ‘Spanish Political Attitudes Panel Dataset’ (POLAT) (see Hernández et al., 2021), which is an online panel dataset designed and coordinated by the Democracy, Elections and Citizenship (DEC) group at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. The first four waves of the panel were carried out in collaboration with the Spanish Poll Institute (CIS) and the fieldwork was completed by Millward Brown (MB), whilst the following waves were entirely coordinated by the DEC and the fieldwork was conducted by Netquest.

The first wave of this database was fielded in 2010 and has now accumulated 15 waves, something that makes POLAT the longest-running panel dataset on political attitudes in Spain. Participants are invited to take part in each round/wave of the study, regardless of whether they participated in the previous round. To address issues related to the representativeness of the sample and sample size due to people dropping out, additional samples have been introduced at certain points in time (i.e., refreshments), as is common in large timespan panel datasets. Table 3 summarizes the dates of the fieldwork and the sample size for each wave.

Table 3.1: POLAT dates of fieldwork and sample

Wave	N	Fieldwork
1	2,100	November 17 – December 10, 2010
2	2,433	May 11 – 25, 2011
3	1,979	November 9 – 18, 2011
4	1,717	May 11 – 30, 2012
5	912	May 17 – June 4, 2013
5B	845	October 16 – 27, 2013
6	1,071	May 5 – 12, 2014

7	1,014	April 27 – May 8, 2015
8	1,040	May 4 – 17, 2016
9	1,990	May 29 – June 15, 2017
10	2,128	May 9 – June 9, 2018
11	1,748	May 31 – June 11, 2019
12	2,013	May 7 – 18, 2020
13	2,112	May 12 – June 4, 2021
14	1,712	June 9 – 21, 2022
15	2,013	June 14-23, 2023

The POLAT fieldwork has been carried out yearly since 2010 -except for waves 2 and 3, whose fieldwork took place in May and November 2011- and thereby covers more than a decade. The dataset uses quotas based on gender, age, education, region, and municipality size to ensure that it represents the Spanish adult population fairly, covering people aged 18 to 56.

The purpose of the POLAT panel dataset is to measure and explain changes in people’s political attitudes and behaviors. The panel structure of the data allows for the measurement of changes in attitudes within the same individuals over time. In this sense, in line with the variables of interest in this dissertation, over time this dataset repeatedly measures individuals’ perceptions of parties regarding the left-right and the territorial dimensions, their levels of affect towards the main state-wide parties in Spain (through PTV scales), as well as many other different relevant political-attitudinal variables such as ideology or political interest. This longitudinal data allows us to explore both the general aggregate trends and individual changes in these variables.

In addition to the undoubtable advantages of this panel dataset when it comes to measuring intra-individual changes, the panel timespan covers the period during which all the relevant social and political events underlined in the previous section took place. This makes the POLAT dataset an enormously valuable tool that can help us to better understand AP dynamics and contribute to the field by answering many of the central questions in this dissertation.

As some of the questions of this dissertation are qualitative in nature and chapter 6 implies an in-depth exploration of participants' talk and interactions when discussing politics, this chapter leverages seven focus groups, of which one was conducted by the author and six by the Spanish poll institute (CIS, study 3251). All of them were fielded in Catalonia and have the territorial conflict -i.e., the conflict around Catalonia's independence- as a central concern around which the discussions took place.

The seven focus groups underlined the repercussions of this political issue in people's everyday lives and relationships with others who think differently, the perceptions of those who have different political stances and their beliefs and emotions towards them and the political situation. The focus groups also allow us to see if and how different real (i.e., the suspension of Catalan autonomy in 2017, some Catalan leaders being imprisoned) or hypothetical (i.e., the outlawing of pro-independence parties) political and/or judicial measures that are usually a matter of public debate are perceived and actively legitimized or contested by lay thinkers in interaction. Thus, they allow us to conduct an in-depth analysis of lay thinkers' discursive and rhetorical constructions of one of the most polarized issues of our time in Spain (Dono et al., 2021; Simón, 2020) as well as the social and political actors involved. Importantly, the focus groups covered citizens with different political positions, ages, genders, and occupational status. For more information about the composition of the focus groups, readers can go to chapter 6.

Lastly, this PhD dissertation uses a representative survey fielded in Spain in April 2022, which was also designed by the Democracy, Elections and Citizenship Group and completed by Netquest. This survey was mainly used in chapter 4, given that it contains like-dislike scales not only towards political parties but also towards a range of sociopolitical groups. In addition, this representative survey was used to validate the use of the Probability to Vote (PTV) scales as a proxy for measuring AP. The very high correlations between both measures can be seen in the appendix of chapter 4.

3.4 Mixed Methods: Different Questions, Different Data, and Different Methodologies

While the specific research techniques that are used in each of the chapters of this PhD dissertation, and those that have been outlined in table 1.2 are described and carefully explained in each of the chapters, the rationale behind the use of mixed methods in this thesis needs to be explained. Indeed, there are different rationales behind the use of mixed methods, which are briefly explained in Table 3.2, borrowed from Doyle et al. (2016). Following the table in a heuristic way, along with the insights provided by Bryman (2006) and Power et al. (2018), the current research is compatible with the logic

of expansion, completeness, offsetting weaknesses, and different research questions. These different rationales that guide my approach to mixed methods are marked with an asterisk.

Table 3.2: Rationales for Mixed Methods Research. Original source: Doyle et al. (2016). Asterisks are added to signal the logics of research in this PhD dissertation.

Triangulation (convergence)	Using quantitative and qualitative methods so that findings may be mutually corroborated.
	This may also be an unanticipated outcome of the study where a mixed methods study was undertaken for another reason, but convergence was evident.
Expansion	The first phase has findings that require explanation qualitatively.
	Unexpected findings that need to be explained.
Exploration	An initial phase is required to develop an instrument or intervention, identify variables to study or develop a hypothesis that requires testing.
Completeness*	Provides a more comprehensive account of phenomena under study
Offset witnesses*	Ensures that weaknesses of each method are minimized (Creswell, 2015a).
	Caution is required when identifying this as a primary rationale as each method should be sufficiently rigorous in its own right (O’Cathain, 2010).
Different research questions*	Both quantitative and qualitative questions may be posed at the beginning of the study in addition to mixed methods questions (Creswell, 2015b).
Illustration	Qualitative data are used to illuminate quantitative findings.
	Putting ‘meat on the bones’ of dry quantitative data (Bryman, (2006).

It has been commonly stated that the use of either quantitative or qualitative methods implies a different way of knowing social reality and thus, a way of answering different types of research questions (Corbetta, 2003; Mendizábal, 2006). In this spirit, the use of mixed methods implies, at the very least, that we can observe, interrogate, and analyze a research object from different perspectives, thereby laying the ground for two of the other logics: the outweighing of weaknesses and completeness. In this sense, using both quantitative and qualitative methods allows us to draw on the

strengths of both (Bryman, 2006). The capacity to answer different types of questions through methods that put the focus on different edges of a multifaceted phenomenon provides a more comprehensive, complete, and holistic account of that phenomenon. Lastly, the use of qualitative methods, in chapter 6, responds first to a logic of expansion, or, in terms of Power et al. (2018), an augmentative logic. This means that qualitative insights might provide a thick description that can explain and expand on quantitative findings.

The above-explained rationales that are behind the use of mixed methods in this thesis are comprehended within what previous specialized research has named an explanatory sequential design (see Creswell, 2015), which is normally based on the collection and analysis of quantitative data to subsequently explain in-depth this analysis through the collection and analysis of qualitative data. In this dissertation, as underlined earlier, this latter analysis will not just aim at explicating quantitative findings, but at augmenting them, thus providing a richer description of a phenomenon (affective polarization) that is rarely explored as it unfolds people's talk and interactions. Furthermore, the qualitative part of the thesis, as well as the quantitative, is valuable in itself, as it constitutes an essential study of participants' meaning-making processes that is not possible through other methods of inquiry (see Wetherell, 2015). Overall, leveraging the advantages of both types of inquiry, and through the necessary process of integration (Creswell, 2015), the mixed-methods approach that is followed in this dissertation also helps to generate new questions and lines of research that might be answered by future -quantitative, qualitative, or mixed- research (Power et al., 2018) on political psychology and the broader field of social and behavioral sciences.

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Chapter 4: A Descriptive Overview of the Different Dimensions of Political Polarization Over Time (2020-2023)

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide a visual overview of the main quantitative indicators used in this PhD dissertation. This will give us an idea of the state of Spanish public opinion regarding political polarization at different points in time as well as its evolution. This descriptive endeavor will help us to explore various relevant aspects whose development and analysis is relevant.

While some scholarly work has provided very interesting comparative and single-country descriptive evidence (i.e. Comellas & Torcal, 2023; Reiljan et al., 2023; Rojo-Martínez et al., 2023), this chapter contributes to the literature on AP by providing the evolution of different political polarization indicators and the relationship between them, considering the multidimensionality of political competition of the Spanish party system and a long timespan of more than a decade. Thus, this chapter constitutes a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of different aspects that are essential to political polarization dynamics. In addition, since the lack of space concerns allow it here, the patterns are also related to some of the different main events that happened between 2010 and 2023 (see figure 3.1). The visual statistics over such a long timespan provide different cues on some of the main contextual inductors and correlates of the different political polarization components, as well as which of them are more subjected to change and/or stability.

Additionally, this chapter will include data of affect towards a set of sociopolitical groups. This data is also linked to political orientations and party identities, thereby providing evidence on aspects that have been less developed in comparison to AP towards parties and party supporters. Along these lines, the purpose of this chapter is to present some helpful data to clarify and provide initial evidence regarding five important questions:

- What has been the evolution of Spanish citizens' perceptions of parties positioning regarding the two main axes of political competition (i.e., left-right and territorial axes)?

- What has been the evolution in citizens' affect towards the different parties in the rapidly changing Spanish political landscape?
- What about the evolution of left-right, territorial, and affective polarization? Which type of polarization presents higher/lower levels of stability over time?
- What has been the evolution of the relationship between the two types of perceived ideological polarization (i.e., left-right and territorial) and AP? Has this relationship become weaker/stronger?
- What are the affective dynamics beyond political parties? What levels of affect towards a set of sociopolitical groups characterize Spanish citizens? What are the variations by ideological leanings and party identities?

4.2 Citizens' Perceptions of Parties' Positions and Affect Towards Them Over Time

Leveraging the POLAT database, which contains data on perceptions of the main Spanish parties' positions in the two main dimensions of competition -the left-right and the territorial divides- allows us to explore aggregate-level changes. Although aggregate-level changes might obscure individual-level changes and heterogeneity, they are certainly informative of general tendencies. Thus, I am going to explore if there have been significant changes in Spaniards' perceptions of the political elites as well as changes in their feelings towards them. All these components are important for constructing the different political polarization indexes (see Dalton, 2008, 2021; Hernández et al., 2021; Wagner, 2021), so analyzing its evolution constitutes an important endeavor, and gives us an additional picture to the one provided by aggregated polarization indexes.

To do this, I am going to begin by providing an overview of basic univariate statistics of central tendencies (mean levels) of the main variables of interest over time. The timespan covered is from 2010 to 2023, so I present information on the political opinions of Spanish citizens over more than a decade. Figures 4.1 and 4.2 show how Spanish citizens locate themselves and the parties on the left-right scale and a scale of Spanish patriotism/nationalism. Figure 4.3 shows the mean affect towards the same state-wide parties. All three graphs contain a solid grey line marking the years 2015, 2019 and 2023, and they signal the years in which the database included new political parties that had recently emerged in the Spanish political arena.

Figure 4.1: Mean perception of parties' left-right positions over time¹⁶

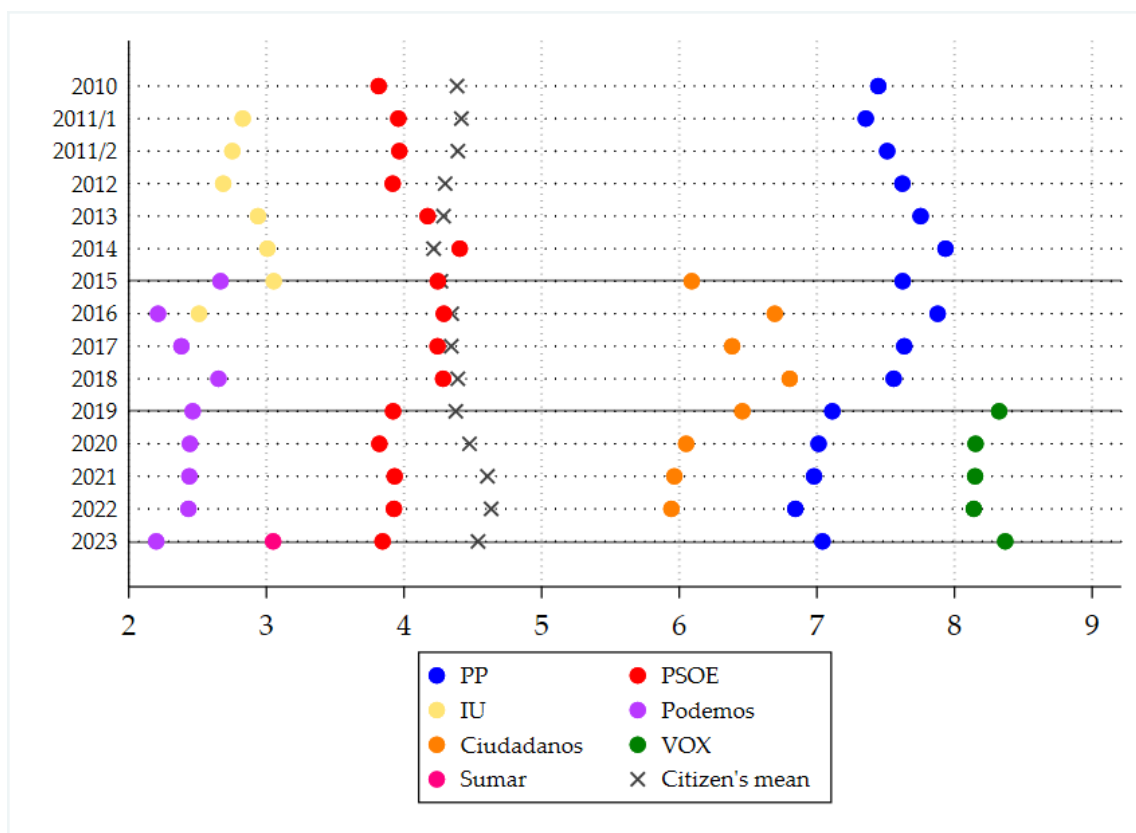


Figure 4.1 shows that there is a great deal of variability in how citizens have been perceiving parties' positions in the left-right dimension. Interestingly, mean levels of citizens' ideological self-identification show considerable stability, always moving in a range between 4.22 (in 2015) and 4.63 (in 2022). This means that in a timespan of 13 years, Spanish citizens moved in a range of values that is lower than 0.5 out of 10. This reflects quite a stable aggregate mean position concentrated around the center-left, as previous studies have also found using other surveys, such as the ESS (see Medina, 2015b). Also interesting is the fact that PSOE, with some small variations, is the party whose aggregate perceived left-right position is the one closest to citizens' mean position.

When it comes to the mean perceptions of party positions, the picture is quite different. The mean positioning of parties on the left-right scale undergoes different changes. Some of the changes coincide with the emergence of new political parties and the change of the Spanish party system from

¹⁶ In figures 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3, time is located in the Y axis and the variables of perceptions of parties' positions on the left-right axis (figure 4.1), perceptions of parties' positions on the territorial axis (figure 4.2) and affect towards parties (figure 4.3) are graphed in the X axis.

an imperfect bipartisan system to a multi-party system (Vidal & Sánchez-Vítores, 2019). But of course, substantial changes also occurred in years in which no new political party had appeared. Hereafter, I am going to provide an overview of the main changes chronologically.

In the initial period from 2010 to 2014, a stable trend can be observed in 2010 and the two waves fielded in 2011. From 2012 to 2015, a time in which austerity measures were being applied by Mariano Rajoy's center-right government, we can observe that citizens increasingly perceived the PP as leaning more towards the right. Moreover, in 2013 and 2014, before the rise of Podemos, citizens perceived both United Left (IU) and the center-left party PSOE as also moving to the right. This is relevant as citizens in 2014 located the PSOE closer to the center and the PP in its most right-wing position than at any other time point in the survey. This means that in 2013 and 2014, when the 15M movement's cultural and political influence was high, citizens perceived a slight rightward shift in all the political parties, at a time in which people's aggregate position was experiencing a slight shift towards the left. It is worth mentioning that by the time of 2014 fieldwork, Podemos had been created and was about to stand for elections for the first time (elections to the European parliament).

In 2015, when Podemos and Ciudadanos first entered the political scene, the left-wing party IU (United Left) and the center-left party PSOE were located in practically the same ideological place as in 2014, while the center-right Popular Party was perceived as somewhat less right-wing. Podemos' and Ciudadanos' mean left-right position in 2015 was 2.67 and 6.1 respectively, the former being perceived as clearly the most leftist party in the Spanish system -on the left of both IU and PSOE- and the latter was perceived as center-right (on the left of the PP). So, although Podemos started out by trying to occupy the 'centrality' of the political space and distance themselves from the left-right dichotomy (Rendueles & Sola, 2015), they were perceived by the electorate as clearly left-wing; however, it is also truth that in the following years the electorate started to perceive this party as even more left-wing.

In wave 8 (that is, in 2016) we can observe a dramatic change in citizens' aggregate ideological positioning of parties. In May 2016 the country witnessed a failed investiture as a result of the December 2015 elections and as a result, new elections were scheduled to take place in June 2016. The December elections and negotiations to form a government probably clarified parties' ideological positions. The vigorous competition between Podemos (along with its confluences) and the PSOE for the hegemony of the left-wing space (see Orriols and León, 2021), along with Podemos refusing to give its support to a coalition between PSOE and Ciudadanos probably contributed to citizens' perceptions of the party as more left-wing than in 2015. Furthermore, the agreement with the classic left-wing party IU to stand together for the 2016 general elections might also have contributed to this

perception. Interestingly, IU's agreement with Podemos also coincided with citizens perceiving the former as more left-wing than ever in our dataset's timespan. Ciudadanos, a party whose political positions gained visibility in that period, with their previous regional political activity in Catalonia becoming better-known, was also perceived as more right-wing than in 2015, in consonance with the CIS descriptive data analyzed by Rodríguez-Teruel (2020). Likewise, the PP was also perceived as more right wing than a year earlier. As can be seen, in this period between the December 2015 General elections and the elections being repeated at the end of June, 2016, the aggregate mean ideological positions of parties acquired one of the most polarized conformations in the whole timespan.

For its part, in 2017, a time in which Mariano Rajoy was governing with the support of Ciudadanos, the positions of Podemos, Ciudadanos and PP experienced small but noticeable changes towards the center, displaying a slight depolarizing trend that -except for Ciudadanos- continued in 2018. Ciudadanos' rightward shift again in 2018 coincides with their defense of Spanish nationalist and centralist positions regarding the territorial conflict, whose Zenith was from October 2017 onwards.

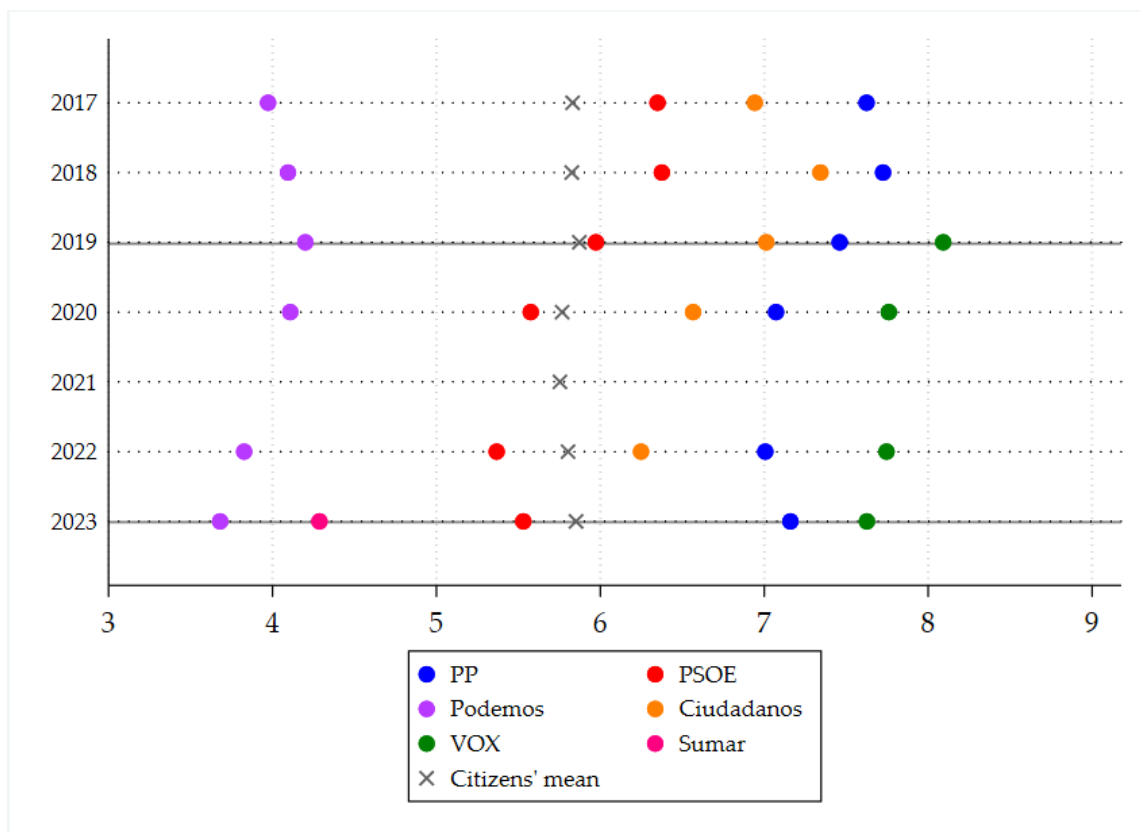
In 2018, the first successful no-confidence vote against Mariano Rajoy's government took place as a consequence of a court sentence that condemned the Popular Party for corruption. This event is probably not properly reflected in the aggregate indicators, as the no-confidence votes took place on May 31 and June 1 2018, and the fieldwork went from May 9 to June 9, so it was almost already completed when the vote of no-confidence succeeded. 2018 also supposed a turning point in the relationship between Podemos and the PSOE. Podemos was one of the key supporters of the vote of no-confidence led by the PSOE, and the relationship between the two parties became less explicitly conflictual (Orriols & León, 2021).

Some dramatic changes can be observed in the 2019 data. The panel's 2019 wave captures the recent emergence of the far-right party Vox, and thereby the end of Spanish exceptionalism (Marcos-Marne et al., 2021), in the December 2018 elections in Andalucía. The emergence of Vox coincided with the year in which perceptions of all the parties moved substantially towards the left. In 2019, citizens' perceptions of PSOE locate this party at similar levels to the pre-2012 period. To understand the magnitude of this change, it would be enough to say that this is the biggest change seen between one year and the next in the whole 13-year timespan. Likewise, the appearance of Vox coincided with the highest change in people's perceptions of the PP's location in the ideological continuum, going from a mean aggregate position of 7.56 to 7.11. This is surprising given that the PP, under the new leadership of Pablo Casado, was actually stressing a more conservative profile (Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020). Citizens perceived Ciudadanos as slightly less right-wing too, whilst perceptions of Podemos had a slighter change towards the left. Vox, for its part, had been perceived since its emergence as the

party furthest to the right in the Spanish system, with mean ratings over of 8 out of 10 on the left-right scale.

Stability was the norm from 2019 onwards, and people’s perceptions of the parties remained very similar until 2023, while citizens themselves were experiencing a slight gradual aggregate change towards the right in terms of their ideological self-identification, a trend that was interrupted in 2023. In this last year of the dataset timespan, we can observe that Sumar, the new left-wing coalition led by Podemos’ former minister Yolanda Díaz, is perceived as more ideologically moderate than Podemos has ever been. In 2023, the panel survey did not ask people’s perceptions or affect towards Ciudadanos,¹⁷ making 2023 appear quite polarized between the left-wing and the right-wing blocks.

Figure 4.2: Mean perception of parties’ positions on the territorial dimension over time



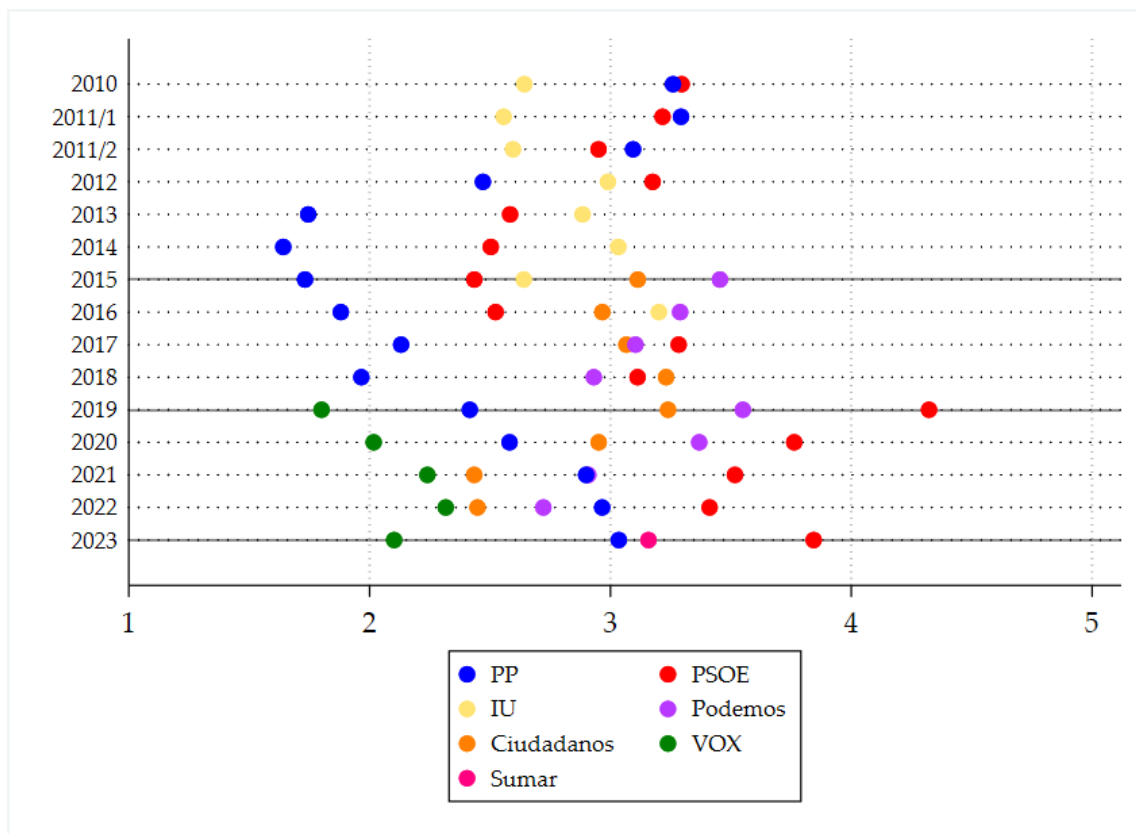
Regarding aggregate means of territorial polarization, about which the POLAT database only has data from 2017 onwards, we can also observe some interesting shifts. First, as was the case with left-right

¹⁷ After Ciudadanos’ November 2019 electoral debacle, in which they obtained just 6.8% of the vote, the party underwent a huge crisis. This, along with the very poor results predicted by the electoral polls, led them eventually to not stand for the 2023 general elections.

positions, the citizens' aggregate mean position shows a clear stable trend. Also, as with the left-right positions, the party that citizens locate, in the aggregate, as closer to their own position is the PSOE. In 2017 and 2018, citizens' perceived positions of parties in the territorial dimension remained quite stable, with the exception of perceptions of Ciudadanos, which citizens perceived as substantially more patriotic in 2018 than in 2017. Citizens' perceptions of Ciudadanos' position on the territorial axis became very close to that of the PP and might be connected to Ciudadanos' emphasis on this dimension of competition and them underlining a Spanish nationalist profile (Rodon, 2020; Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020).

After that, in 2019, with Vox already on the scene, citizens' perceptions of the political chessboard changed substantially. People established Vox as the most Spanish nationalist/patriotic party, while perceptions about PP, PSOE, and Ciudadanos changed in the same direction: with Vox in the system for the first time, citizens perceived these three parties as notably less patriotic, especially the PSOE. In contrast, perceptions about Podemos seem to remain unaffected. In 2020, the year of the COVID-19 health crisis, the aggregate levels of perceived Spanish patriotism of all the parties experienced a downward trend, in the sense that all of them, especially again, the PP, the PSOE, Ciudadanos, and Vox are all perceived as less patriotic, at a time in which precisely the salience of the territorial conflict decreased (see chapter 5). We have no data for parties' positions in 2021, and in 2022 the picture is similar to that in 2020 when it comes to the PP's and Vox's perceived positions. However, the left-wing block, which had been in government from the end of 2019, was perceived as less patriotic than in 2020. The pardon, issued in 2021, in favor of the Catalan pro-independence leaders that were imprisoned at the end of 2017 or the collaboration between the government and the left-wing peripheral nationalists to pass some laws (i.e., raising the minimum wage, the housing law...) might well be related to these perceptions. For its part, Ciudadanos, whose electoral relevance was very small, and whose public salience abruptly decreased after the elections of November 2019, was also perceived as less patriotic, at a time in which their new leaders tried to again stress a more moderate profile. Lastly, in 2023, once again an electoral year, the tendency of citizens to perceive the PSOE as less patriotic each year was halted, whilst they perceived Vox as slightly less patriotic than in 2022 and the PP slightly more patriotic than in 2022, so the distance between the right-wing parties shrank, to the narrowest in all the timespan. The new party Sumar is perceived as having similar levels of Spanish patriotism to Podemos in 2018, 2019 and 2020. In this sense, the aggregate perceptions of Podemos and Sumar in the territorial dimension are more similar than the ones in the left-right dimension. While Sumar was clearly perceived as being closer to PSOE as well as to center-left positions than Podemos, the territorial positions of the two parties are perceived as very similar. However, in 2023, where the survey asks about the two parties, Podemos was perceived as slightly less patriotic.

Figure 4.3: Mean levels of affect (probability to vote) towards parties over time



Once mean perceptions of parties' positions on the two main axes of political competition in the Spanish state have been shown and commented on, I turn to the mean levels of affect¹⁸ towards the main Spanish state-wide parties over time. Figure 4.3 shows these levels. At first glance, the clear difference between mean levels of affect and parties' mean perceived positions has to do with stability. Levels of affect towards the different parties undergo notable changes over time, that seem to be greater than those of perceptions of parties' left-right positions and especially than those of perceptions of positions on the territorial dimension. Many interesting patterns and changes can be observed, so I am going to underline the main ones.

First, the mean levels of affect are overall very low. In no wave in thirteen years does any party reach the mean point of the scale. Only the PSOE manages a score above 4 and thereby gets close to the mean point in wave 11 (2019). This said, for the whole electorate, the PSOE is the least disliked party in the party system in eight of the fifteen waves. In consonance with the average citizen feeling closer

¹⁸ It should be remembered that affect is measured through a proxy, which is PTV scales for the different parties. Correlation tables between like-dislike scales and PTV scales can be found in the appendix to chapter 5.

to this party's positions in both the left-right and territorial dimensions, overall citizens feel somewhat warmer towards the PSOE than to the other parties.

An interesting trend is the one followed by citizens' affect towards the PP. In the two measures that the survey provides for 2011 (May and November 2011) the PP is the most liked party, and indeed, in those elections the PP obtained the only absolute majority that occurred throughout the survey timespan. The 2008's drastic economic downturn and growing political discontent expressed through higher numbers of strikes and demonstrations (Medina, 2015a) made the former prime minister Zapatero (PSOE) call for an early election, whose result was a clear PP majority. But interestingly, feelings towards PP rapidly decreased from 2012, to subsequently plummet in 2013 to reach their lowest point in 2014 – 1.64 out of 10-. This is consistent with previous evidence that shows that Rajoy, after just one year in office, became the most unpopular Spanish prime minister until then (Orriols & Cordero, 2016). It is worth noting that these very low levels of affect in 2014 are the lowest that any party has received from citizens in our survey, including, surprisingly, the far-right party Vox, that, as is usual in many European systems, arouses very low levels of positive affect. However, the minimum levels of affect towards Vox were those seen in 2019 (1.8). This gives us an idea of the very high levels of mean discontent of the Spanish citizenry towards the PP at a time in which the 15M movement was taking the streets, austerity measures were being implemented by the PP government and the new parties were soon to emerge. It is not until the emergence of Vox in 2019 that the PP substantially started to revert this trend. Citizens' affect towards this party started to become warmer and increased gradually from 2019 onwards. In this sense, by 2023, the mean levels of affect towards the PP returned to levels that were similar to -although still lower than- those in 2011.

Many aggregate changes can be observed in people's affect towards the PSOE. The PSOE's level of affect, after an initially stable trend around values ranging between 2.95 and 3.3, suffered a notable drop in 2013 and remained at similarly low levels until 2017, when levels of affect returned to levels similar to those of the first time periods. Note that the mean positivity towards the main parties in 2014 (the PP and the PSOE) was the lowest, announcing what was going to happen shortly: the appearance of two new challenger parties -Podemos and Ciudadanos- and a notable change in the party system.

The greatest change in aggregate levels of affect towards the socialist party occurred in 2019, also coinciding with the emergence of Vox. Affect towards PSOE went from a mean level of 3.11 to a mean level of 4.32, supposing an increase of 1.21, the highest aggregate change registered between two contiguous waves in the three variables described. The increase in warmth towards Podemos is also remarkable, reaching an aggregate mean of 3.55, similar to the mean levels of affect that the party

aroused in 2015 (3.45). For Podemos, this also meant a reversal of a negative tendency towards lower levels of affect that had been occurring from 2016 to 2018, both included. This boost in aggregate levels of affect towards both left-wing parties is consistent with what previous research has explained as a mobilization against the far-right (Rodon, 2022).

While in government, from 2019 to 2023, levels of affect towards PSOE notably decreased again from 2019 to 2022, the highest decrease being from 2019 to 2020, coinciding with the COVID-19 conjuncture and the absence of any elections, which are events that tend to mobilize affect (Hernández et al., 2021). In fact, in 2023, close to the 2023 general elections, citizens' affect towards the PSOE increased once again.

For its part, in 2015 and 2016 Podemos began to be the party that evoked the highest levels of warm feelings of all the parties, in a context of generalized negative feelings, however. Nevertheless, with the exception of 2019, which has already been mentioned, citizens' aggregate affect towards Podemos experienced a downward trend until 2022, which was the last year in which the survey asked about feelings towards this party. This clear downward trend was an aspect that fostered the creation of the new left-wing party Sumar. Ciudadanos was the second party that evoked warmer feelings in 2016; affect towards this party followed a quite stable trend until the 2020 wave, to subsequently suffer a dramatic drop in 2021 and 2022, years in which the party lost almost all its electoral relevance.

Vox, since its inception, arose very negative levels of affect, similar to those of the PP's worst days. From 2019 to 2022, people's aggregate affect towards Vox followed a smooth upward trend that stopped in 2023. Lastly, IU followed, along with Vox, one of the most stable trends. After being stable in the two first waves, affect towards IU increased in 2012, when the PP's levels of affect started to decrease notably. IU's affect levels remained stable in 2013 and 2014, to subsequently suffer a sharp drop coinciding with the emergence of Podemos, when they ran in the elections separately, to then experience a notable rise in 2016 reaching their highest levels of warmth, a year in which they ran in the 2016 elections together with Podemos.

4.3 Evolution of Political Polarization: Affective Polarization, Left-Right and Territorial Polarization

In this and the following sections, based on measurements of AP and party system or ideological polarization in multi-party systems (see Dalton, 2008; Wagner, 2021), I show the evolution of affective polarization and perceived left-right polarization over a period of more than ten years, and also the

evolution of perceived territorial polarization from 2017 to 2023¹⁹. I will first show aggregate trends through the whole timespan of the panel survey. Second, I will zoom in on the 2018-2023 period and present some graphs of predicted group evolution in these indicators, obtained through multilevel growth curve modelling, leveraging the panel structure of the data. Third and last, I present graphs of bivariate correlations between the two forms of ideological polarization (left-right and territorial) and AP through time.

Figure 4.4: Aggregate evolution of the different types of political polarization over time

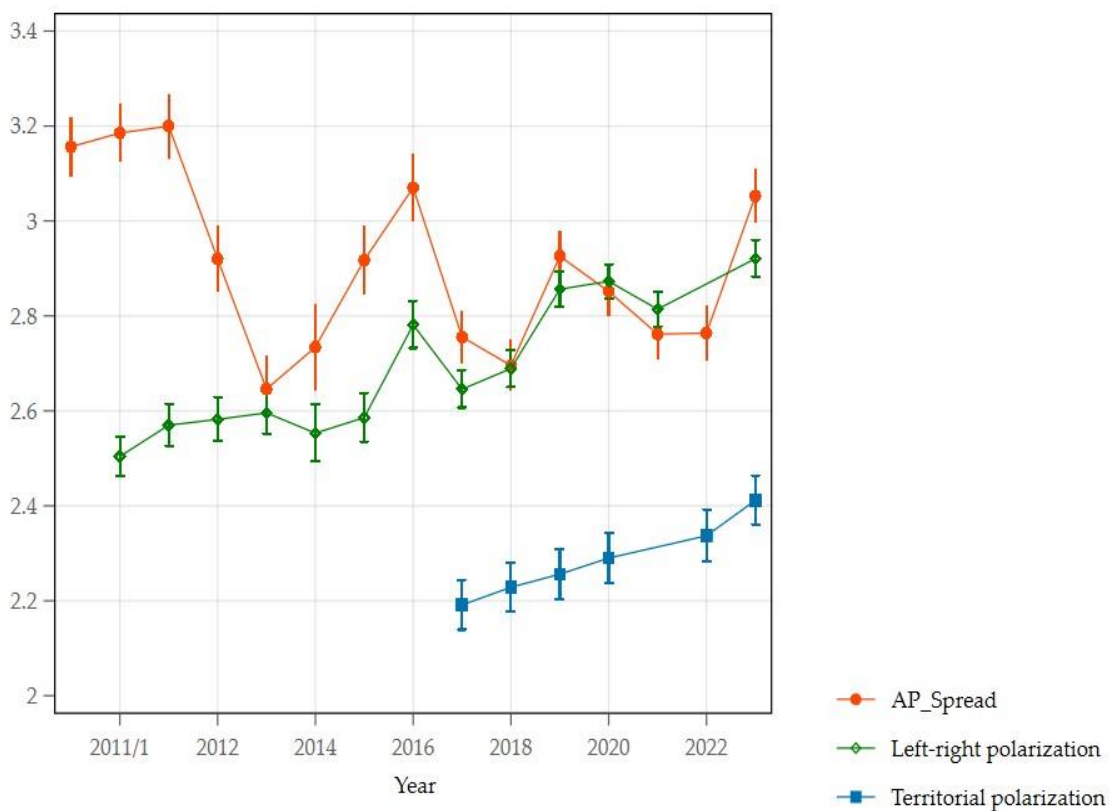


Figure 4.4 shows that, of the three variables, AP -measured through the unweighted spread indicator (Wagner, 2021)- is the one that is clearly more unstable, and aggregate mean values have experienced different drops and rises. Levels of AP were high at the beginning of our panel survey coinciding with the second Zapatero government and the onset of the 2008 economic downturn (years 2010 and 2011). This was followed by AP levels seeing a dramatic drop in 2012 and 2013, during the first term of Rajoy’s government (Torcal & Comellas, 2022), with 2013 being the year in which aggregate AP

¹⁹ Operationalization of the polarization measures is covered in the methods sections of chapters 5 and 7. It follows the logic explained in Wagner (2021).

levels were the lowest in our database. This huge drop occurred at a time in which the consequences of the economic crisis were very harsh in terms of unemployment, and the 15M movement brought thousands of people to the streets to demand Real Democracy Now. The 15M movement also criticized political corruption and a bipartisan political system that had been clearly dominated by the PP and the PSOE. The movement advocated for more participatory forms of governance (Candón-Mena, 2013; Galais, 2014). This critique of the bipartisan system coincides with this drop in AP levels and seems to be mainly driven by a drop in positive affect towards the PP and the PSOE, as we can recall from figure 4.3. As we can see here, it is very relevant to interpret our data within the wider societal context. 2012 and 2013 are years with low levels of AP regarding parties because both the main parties that dominated the Spanish political scene were seen in a very negative light, thereby signaling that part of the Spanish citizenry was very dissatisfied with and alienated from the institutional arena, as a consequence of the main parties' consensus on the way to overcome the economic crisis: austerity. Although at that time, political elites prioritized this consensus, contentious politics were taking place on the streets with the Indignados movement, whose most popular mottos were, among others, that "the PSOE and the PP are the same", "we are not merchandise in the hands of politicians and bankers", 'they call it democracy and it is not' or "they do not represent us" (Galais, 2014; Kioupkiolis, 2019). Thus, the levels of AP in 2013 and 2014 signal a crisis of representation within a country that was hit very hard by the economic crisis of 2008.

A first set of clarifications needs to be made at this point, regarding measurement. What we see in the graph is AP operationalized following Wagner's (2021) unweighted spread measure for multi-party systems. Measures of left-right and territorial polarization are operationalized following the same logic. The evolution of the weighted indicators can be found in figure A1 in the appendix. The overall picture between the weighted and the unweighted measures is very similar. The only notable difference has to do with the polarization indicators in 2023, the last panel wave in which the indexes are constructed with the new party Sumar instead of Podemos.

Another measurement decision has to do with keeping (or not) individuals/cases that obtain index ratings of zero in our analyses, meaning that they have rated all the parties with a 0 in the AP measure. This fact might mean many things: lack of attention when completing the survey, lack of interest or knowledge in party politics, and/or a complete distrust in the system and in all the parties. As 'polarization' in the setting of partisan politics presupposes a gap between feelings towards the preferred party(ies) and feelings towards the opposed party(ies), the graphs shown in the main text show evidence from participants whose scores were greater than 0.

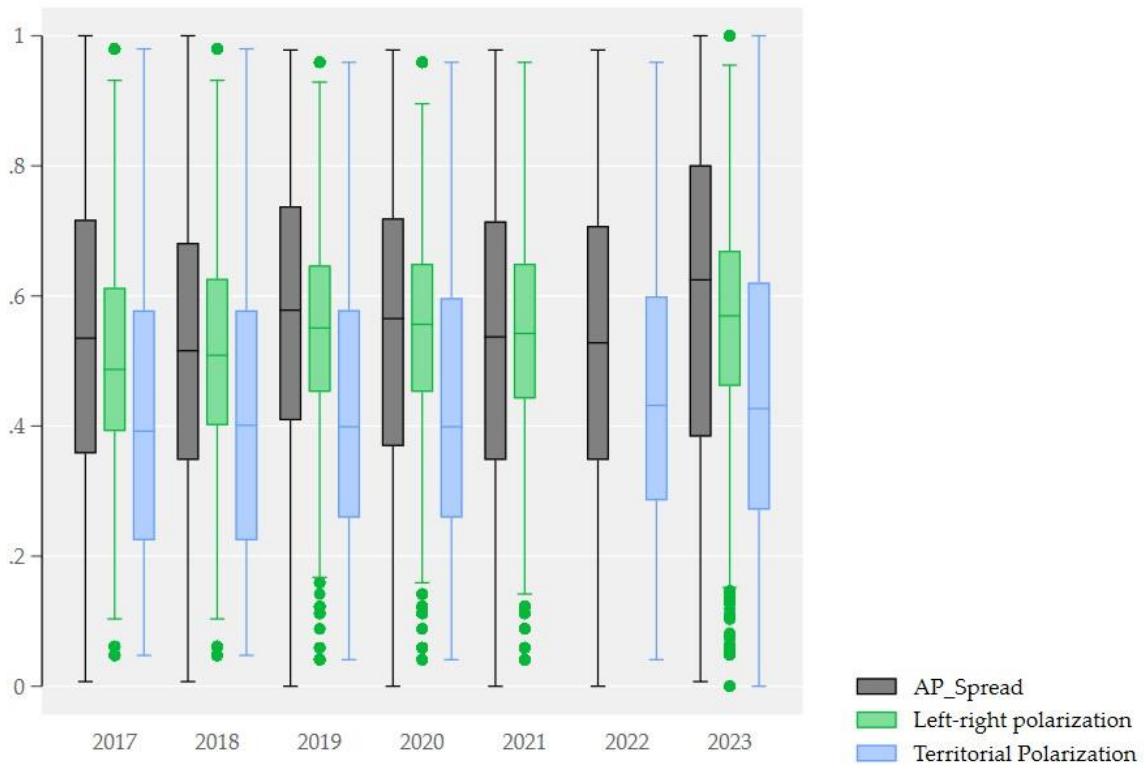
That said, figure A2 in the appendix shows the evolution of aggregate AP using unweighted measures of AP -spread and distance- with both keeping all the respondents -including those that give a rating of 0 to all the parties- and restricting the analyses to those scoring more than 0. Interestingly, the overall picture for all four options shows the same trends, no matter how AP is operationalized or whether the minority that scores 0 is included in the analyses or not. The four graphs show the first three waves (2010, May 2011, and November 2011) as presenting high levels of AP, a huge drop from 2012 to 2014, and a vigorous upward trend in 2015 and 2016 that is followed by depolarization in 2017 and 2018. After that, 2019 was again a year of growing AP that went down again slightly in 2020 to follow a stable pattern until 2023, where levels of AP went up again in this election year. While essentially the same story can be told by observing the 4 graphs, and clearly the most affectively polarized periods were 2010-2011, 2016-2017, 2019, and 2023, small differences can be found regarding which year Spain had the highest degree of AP. According to both spread and distance indexes excluding participants scoring 0, this time-point would be 2011, followed by 2016 -very closely in the case of the distance index- and according to the same indexes including participants who scored 0, it would be 2016, closely followed by the year 2019 in the case of the spread index and followed by 2011 in the case of the distance index. The reason behind these differences seems to be driven by the percentage of citizens that actually score 0, an aspect that does not seem to be random and/or time constant. Whereas variations in the number of people scoring 0 in left-right and territorial polarization do not vary notably, variations regarding AP do. For instance, in the two time-points in 2011 the percentage of participants scoring 0 was 23%, 28% in 2013 and 30% in 2014, while it was almost 17% in 2015 and 14% in 2016. This substantial reduction of respondents obtaining a score of 0 in the AP indexes, happening precisely when new parties emerge in a scenario previously characterized by disaffection, indicates that variations do not happen at random. That is why circumscribing the analysis for those who score higher than 0 slightly inflates the 2011 wave's scores while slightly shrinking scores of years 2015 and 2016. Consequently, the percentage of citizens scoring 0 in the AP index can be interpreted as a sign of a crisis of representation that had its climax in 2013 and 2014 and that was alleviated when new parties emerged in the political arena.

Going back to figure 4.4, another very interesting piece of information that can be extracted from it is that, at the beginning of the panel survey, from 2011 to 2014, levels of ideological polarization seem to be very disconnected from AP levels, and the huge drops in AP in 2012 and 2013 do not correspond with any visible changes in levels of ideological polarization. Interestingly, from 2015 onwards, a year in which Podemos and Ciudadanos gained public relevance and our survey includes these two parties, levels of AP rose considerably. Furthermore, it seems that left-right polarization levels began to be more connected to AP levels, and from 2016 onwards, both sorts of political polarization follow a

similar pattern. AP tends to spike when new parties enter the political arena, as we can see in 2015/2016 and 2019. In the case of left-right polarization, the indicator also seems responsive to the emergence of new political parties, although the rises seem to be generally smaller. Left-right polarization follows a fairly stable upward trend that indicates that the ideological evaluations of the elites have less variability over the years than the affective evaluations. An upward trend can also be seen when we look at territorial polarization, whose levels are lower than those of other types of polarization, but have been increasing from 2017 to 2023. The same substantive descriptive patterns are found when using the weighted spread index or the distance index, as can be seen in figures A2 and A3 of the appendix. Thus, although different indicators might yield slightly different tendencies, the overall pattern is very similar.

To complement this descriptive evidence about aggregate variability over time, figure 4.5 shows a boxplot of the three variables from 2017 to 2023, which are the years for which the three measures of political polarization are available. In the figure, we can see and compare the variability of each of the three variables at the different waves. The tendencies that could be inferred from the previous figure can be confirmed by looking at the boxplots. As we can tell from the smaller interquartile range, the left-right polarization measures show that the middle values of these polarization indicators are clustered tightly compared to those of the other polarization measures. This, in addition to smaller whiskers, implies that the level of dispersion of responses when locating the parties on the left-right spectrum is lower than the levels of dispersion of both territorial polarization and AP.

Figure 4.5: Boxplots of the different types of political polarization from 2017 to 2023



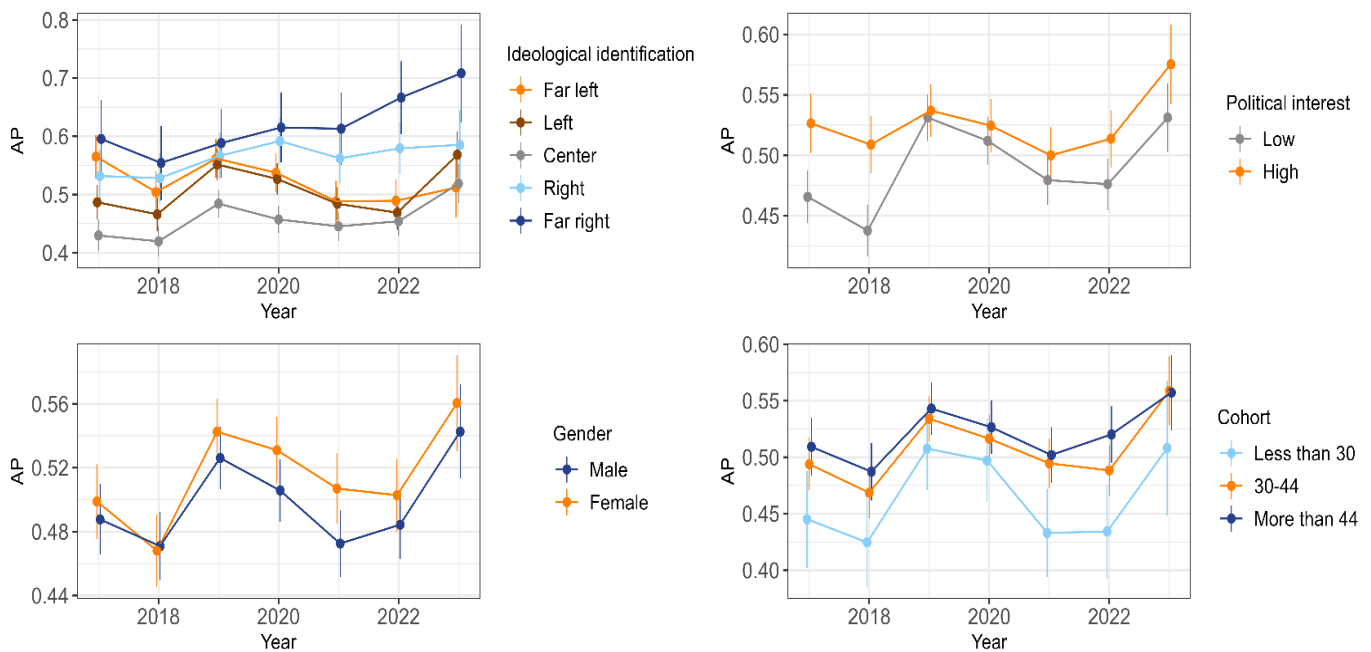
4.4 Estimating Trajectories

To better understand how individuals' levels of political polarization -that is, AP, left-right, and territorial polarization- changed over time, I use a statistical approach known as Multilevel Growth Curve Modeling. Growth Curve Modeling is an umbrella term to designate statistical approaches that tend to be used with repeated measures data, and that “attempt to estimate between-individual differences in within-individual change” (Curran et al., 2010, p.122). Here, I leverage the panel structure of the data, building different models that treat the observations made at different time points (level 1) as nested within individual respondents (level 2). I use the last 7 waves of the POLAT (from 2017) because all the polarization variables are available in those years (except for left-right polarization in 2022 and territorial polarization in 2021), and I follow the approach advanced by Anduiza and Rico (2023), which I am going to briefly outline below.

Using Multilevel Growth Curve Modeling, I built different random slope models for each of the political polarization indicators using time as a categorical predictor, and gender, cohort, interest in politics, and ideology as covariates. In this sense, the multilevel growth curve models allow us to explore within-individual patterns of longitudinal change in political polarization and explore how these

patterns differ in terms of individuals' ideology, levels of political interest, gender, and cohort. It is worth noting that the analyses focused on the respondents who participated in at least five out of seven data collection waves in the case of AP, and four out of six when it comes to left-right polarization and territorial polarization. The covariates are introduced in the models as time-constant, so they are fixed for each individual at the first time-point in which they participated in the panel survey. Therefore, what we see in figures 4.6, 4.7 and 4.8 is the estimated trajectories of the different political polarization indicators for each of the categories/groups included in the analysis (the covariates).

Figure 4.6: Multilevel growth curves predicting levels of AP from 2017 to 2023, by ideological groups, political interest, gender, and cohort



Starting from the evolution of AP among the different ideological groups, that we can see on the top left of figure 4.6, we observe a general rise in AP for all the ideological groups in 2019, which coincides with the recent emergence of the far-right party Vox. This rise, although common for all the ideological groups, seems to be especially pronounced among left-leaning and far-left individuals, whose fear of a cabinet formed by right-wing and far-right elites mobilized them (Rodon, 2022). Interestingly, centrist individuals also seem to be slightly more reactive to the rise of the far right in terms of their AP levels than right-leaning and far-right individuals. In the graph, we can also see that the only group of people that follows an unequivocally upward trend from 2018 onwards are those identifying themselves as far-right. In contrast, the most unstable trajectories are those identified as leftist and

far-left, especially the former. In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, far-left, left-wing and centrist individuals started a slight depolarization trend that deepened in 2021 for individuals within the left-block. However, right-wing, and far-right individuals are predicted by the multilevel growth curves to slightly increase their AP levels in 2020, showing that depolarization in times hit by COVID-19 did not occur for all the ideological groups. In 2021, within the right-wing block, AP levels are predicted to slightly go down for right-wing citizens and to remain at the same level among far-right citizens.

In all the four subgraphs of figure 4.6, we see that the 2019 election was highly mobilizing for different groups of people: people with different ideological leanings, genders, levels of political interest or cohorts. But the elections especially seem to have mobilized left-wing and centrist citizens, those with low levels of political interest and the younger cohort. It is noteworthy that, especially regarding the predicted evolution of AP levels among people with different ideological identifications, the different election periods (2019 and 2023) seem to foster different patterns of intragroup evolution. In fact, while left-wing or centrist citizens are predicted to substantially increase AP levels in both election periods, far-left individuals are predicted to have comparatively lower AP levels in 2023 than in 2019. On the one hand this might be the result of the limits of left-wing parties' campaigns that focused on mobilizing fear against a hypothetical executive with far-right participation for a second time -as it had also been a key strategy for mobilization in 2019-, and on the other, of the internal disputes that the alternative left was having at that time between different leaders, along with the strategy of moderation of the new party Sumar that was the political option that inherited Podemos' political space.

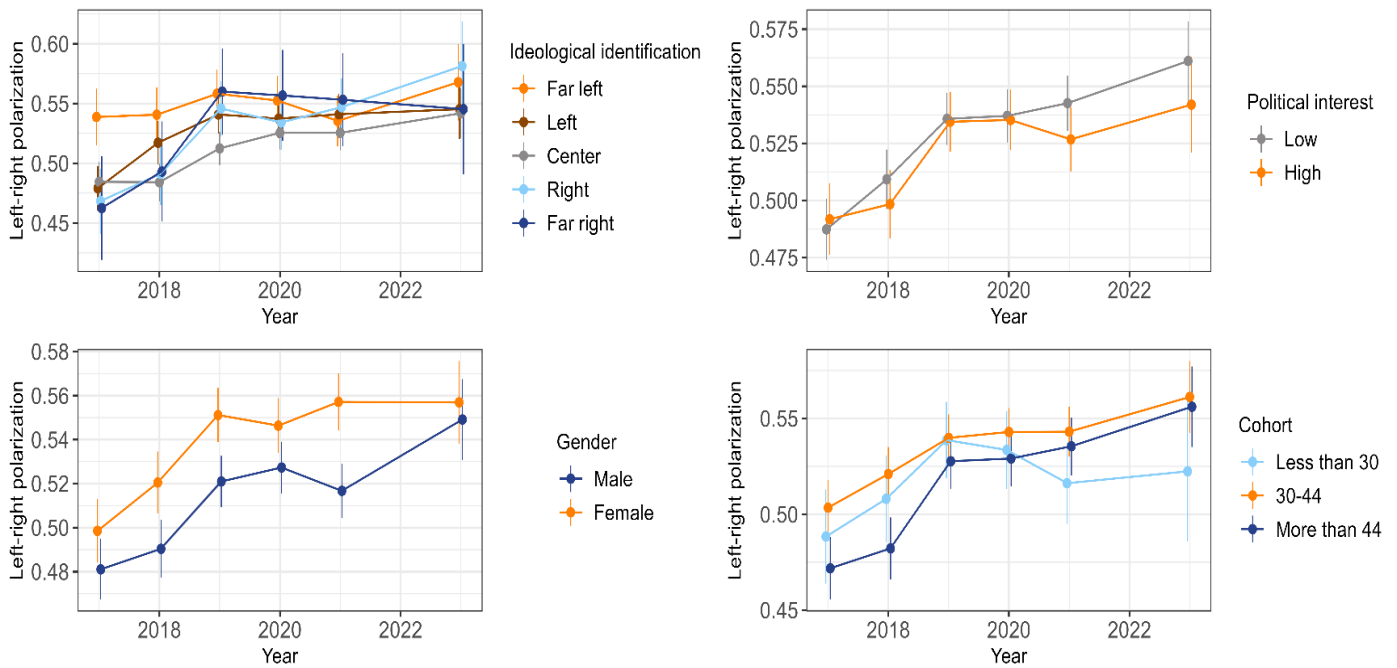
AP tends to be positively related to turnout (Harteveld & Wagner, 2023), so the eventual results of the 2023 elections, in which the left-wing parties obtained a better result than the majority of the polls had predicted, but with less support with respect to 2019, might be related to their capacity to mobilize political identities within some centrist individuals and left voters, and its difficulties doing the same with far-left individuals. At the same time, the overall predicted AP levels of right-wing and far-right voters were higher than in 2019, with far-right parties seeing a spike in 2023, and right-wing voters maintaining their already high but fairly stable AP levels. The fact that right-wing individuals were not predicted to increase their AP levels in the 2023 election year might indicate ceiling effects. At the same time, it is perhaps also related to a partial inefficacy of a campaign in which moderate right-wing voters were not effectively mobilized in the context of a PP that was forming coalitions with the far-right in some regions, and whose opposition to the left-wing government by the PP's new candidate (Alberto Núñez Feijóo), who despite having the reputation of being a moderate within the party, was loud and highly confrontational. Figure 4.3 shows that, while levels of positivity towards PP

were increasing from 2019, its levels in 2023 were lower than in the last time PP obtained a landslide victory in national elections (2011) and were lower than the ones towards Sumar and PSOE, especially the latter. Along these lines, while overall levels of positivity towards the PSOE significantly increased before 2023 elections, the increase for the PP was comparatively lower.

Regarding the evolution in AP for people with different levels of political interest, in the top-right graph in figure 4.6 we see that the predicted levels of AP of those with low levels of political interest are substantially lower than for their counterparts interested in politics in 2017 and 2018, and the trend that both groups are expected to follow is similar. However, the predicted levels of AP for those with low levels of interest undergo a much higher increase from 2018 to 2019, in comparison with more politically interested individuals. This prediction might be indicating the capacity of Vox to affectively activate those people who were not very much into politics, and thereby might be due to the normalization and backlash effects that tend to follow the good electoral performances of far-right parties (Bischof & Wagner, 2019; Mendes & Dennison, 2021).

As for the predicted evolution in AP for gender and age groups, there are not many remarkable differences. Both the predicted levels and patterns for AP for men and women evolve in parallel, whereas with regards to the evolution among the different cohorts, the only interesting intergroup difference has to do with the predicted evolution of the youngest cohort in 2021. The predicted decrease in AP levels from 2020 to 2021 is substantially higher for this age-group, suggesting a hypothetical higher depolarizing effect of post-pandemic times (2021 was the year of vaccinations) for this youngest cohort. In terms of the different groups' patterns, all the age groups followed an upward trend from 2018 to 2019, and with the exception of the aforementioned difference for the youngest cohort in post-pandemic times, no remarkable differences are worth reporting. What seems to be common in the evolution of the different groups in terms of ideology, gender, cohort, and political interest is a generalized upward trend from 2018 to 2019, although as we have seen, for some groups the predicted increase is higher than for others. In this sense, the groups whose predicted increase in AP is higher are left-wing individuals and politically uninterested people. These two groups have a predicted increase that is close to 0.1 points on a scale ranging from 0 to 1, thereby a notable boost in AP levels.

Figure 4.7: Multilevel growth curves predicting levels of left-right polarization from 2017 to 2023, by ideological groups, political interest, gender, and cohort



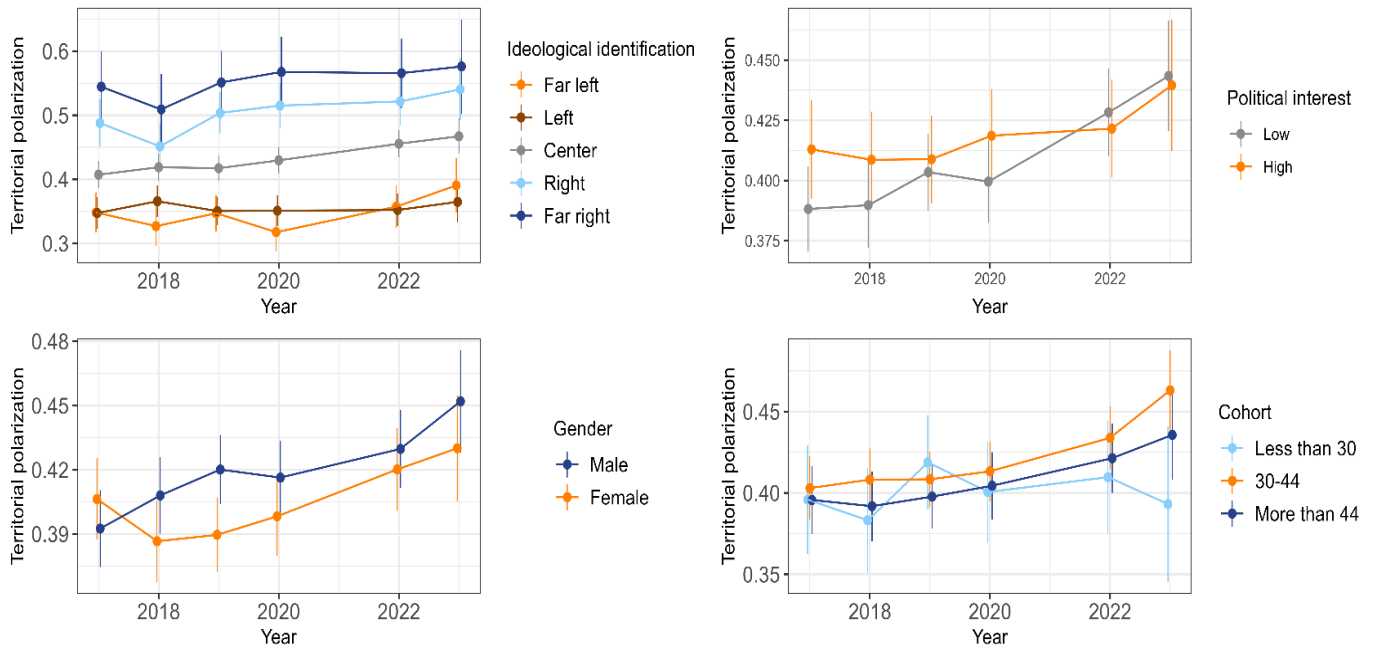
Overall, the evolution of left-right polarization, which can be seen in figure 4.7, seems quite stable, but still, we can see some aspects that are worth reporting. With regard to the evolution of the different ideological profiles, we observe lower overall intergroup differences, given that all the trajectories overlap and are clustered around similar predicted values. However, what can be appreciated are higher baseline levels among far-left identifiers in comparison with all the other ideological groups. Interestingly, these differences shrink from 2018 onwards. What can also be seen is that the predicted levels of left-right polarization show a general small upward trend, that is just interrupted in the case of far-left individuals from 2020 to 2021. A general upward trend from 2018 to 2019 also takes place here, and all ideological groups evolve towards higher predicted levels, although there seems to be some heterogeneity in the intensity of this trend. Far-right and right-wing identifiers experienced higher predicted increases. In the case of far-right individuals, the increase is slightly higher than 0.05. This increase, although lower than the ones we saw regarding AP, is still substantial. The 2023 general elections are not accompanied by a generalized predicted upward trend in left-right polarization, but just rather timid predicted increases among far-left and right-wing individuals.

With regards to the evolution of groups by their political interest, gender, and cohort, a general upward trend can be observed among all groups from 2018 to 2019. Apart from that, no remarkable evolution or intergroup differences can be found in people with different levels of political interest,

apart from a small but noticeable upward trend for both people with low and high political interest. As for cohort, apart from the general upward trend from 2018 to 2019, the only remarkable aspect would be a somewhat more unstable trajectory among the youngest cohort, which is the only one characterized by ups and downs. Intergroup differences between this youngest cohort and the other two older cohorts seem somewhat larger in 2023 than at any other time point. However, the large confidence intervals in the predicted trajectory of this youngest cohort do not allow us to be certain about this intergroup difference, so it should be taken with a pinch of salt.

Lastly, the bottom left sub-graph in figure 4.7 shows differences in predicted levels and trajectories between women and men. While the baseline levels in 2017 do not show substantial differences, the predicted levels for women go upwards from 2017 to 2018 and from 2018 to 2019. This upward trend is shared also by men, but for them the increases are smaller. From 2019 to 2020, gender differences shrink, to grow again from 2020 to 2021. Predicted levels of left-right polarization go slightly up in the case of women and slightly down in the case of men, something that might indicate that women are predicted to perceive higher levels of ideological confrontation throughout the pandemic. From 2021 to 2023, men show an upward trend while the evolution for women is characterized by stability. This aspect might indicate that perceptions of left-right polarization might have been more mobilized among men by the political pre-campaign before the 2023 elections. However, the size of the gender differences, as we can see in the graph, is quite small, as predicted AP levels move in a very small range of values.

Figure 4.8: Multilevel growth curves predicting levels of territorial polarization from 2017 to 2023, by ideological groups, political interest, gender, and cohort



Lastly, I turn to the multilevel growth curves that model the predicted evolution of territorial polarization. As shown in figure 4.8, the predicted evolution is fairly stable for all the groups. Nevertheless, interesting information can be extracted from the top left sub-graph in figure 4.8, which shows the predicted evolution of territorial polarization by each ideological group. First, the baseline levels in 2017 are substantially different, with the left block showing the lowest levels of territorial polarization (around 0.35 out of 1) and the right-wing block showing the highest (almost 0.5 for right-wing individuals and 0.55 for far-right individuals) -with centrist citizens in the middle-. These differences between groups observed in 2017 are stable and continue throughout the whole timespan. The only interruption in these clear intergroup differences is produced in 2018, where, due to a predicted drop of almost 0.05 in territorial polarization for both right-wing and far-right citizens, the predicted differences between them and centrist citizens shrunk.

The downward trend predicted for both right-wing and far-right citizens is interesting, as it coincides with the national-level consensus -with the exception of Podemos- reached in November 2017 between right-wing and center-right parties (PP and Ciudadanos) with the center-left Socialist Party with regard to the application of the article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, which gave the Spanish central government control of the Catalan regional institutions. This step taken by the PSOE as well as the enthusiastic support of Ciudadanos might have led some citizens to perceive both PSOE and Ciudadanos as more patriotic. Taking a look at the perceived mean positions of the parties on the

territorial axis in 2018, what can be observed is a slight increase in the perceived patriotism of the PSOE, but a higher increase in the case of Ciudadanos, which in 2018 was closer to the perceived position of the PP (see also Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020), an aspect that might certainly be important to consider when trying to understand the predicted trajectories in 2018 (see figure 4.2 in previous sections of this chapter).

From 2018 to 2019, a predicted upward trend can be observed among right-wing and far-right individuals that situate the predicted levels of both groups at a slightly higher level than in 2017. It is remarkable that after 2019, both groups follow a very stable trend, which if anything, shows a tiny upward trend. It is worth mentioning that, although the emergence of Vox coincides with a general upward trend regarding predicted AP levels and left-right polarization levels, this does not happen when it comes to territorial polarization. Regarding ideological groups, centrist citizens as well as citizens on the left-wing block are not predicted to perceive more territorial polarization after the emergence of the far-right party Vox. Interestingly, from 2019 onwards, centrist individuals experience a very smooth but noticeable upward trend that lasts until the last time point of our dataset (2023), substantially reducing intergroup differences between them and the right-wing block. As the graph shows, the differences between the centrist and the right-wing block seem to shrink from 2020 onwards, although significant differences between them remain, even in 2023.

Regarding trajectories in territorial polarization among people with different levels of political interest, similarly to what has been shown regarding predicted levels of left-right polarization, no within-group or between-group differences can be reported per different levels. The same is true for cohort groups and gender.

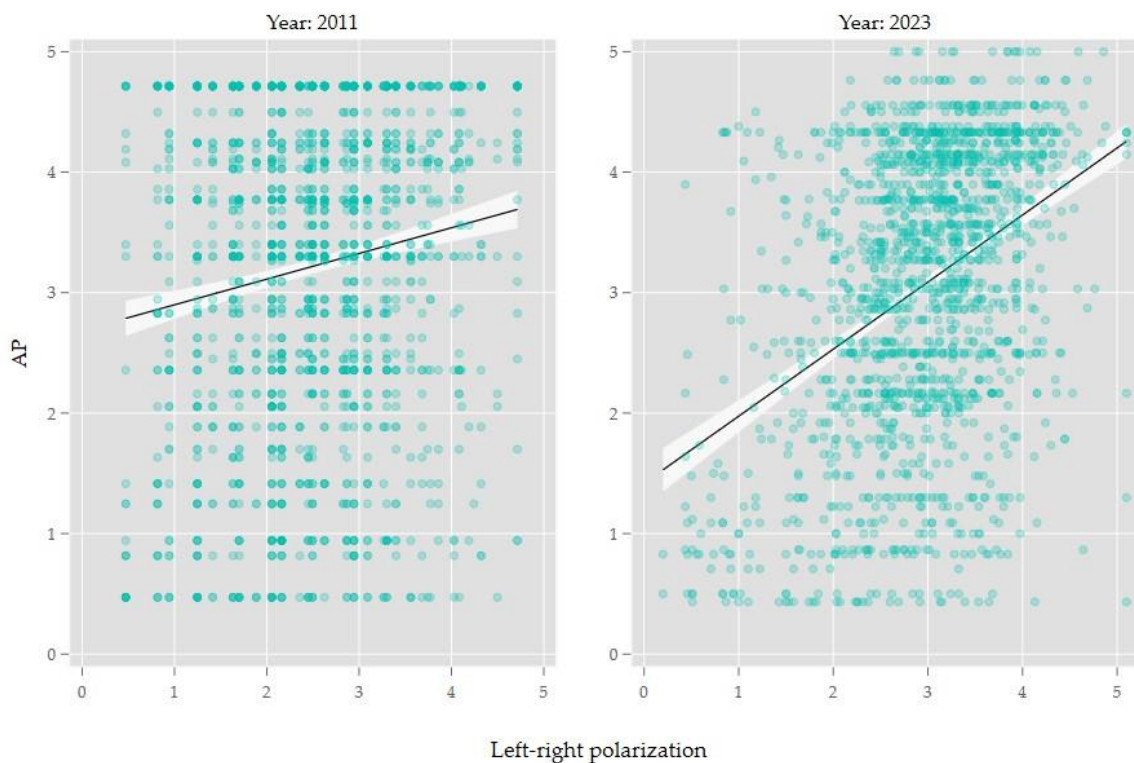
4.5 Bivariate Relationships Between Ideological and Affective Polarization

The graphs in section 4.3 show us the aggregate-level variations of our indicators of political polarization through time, providing us with a picture of the variability in each wave, while the graphs created through multilevel growth curve modelling in section 4.4 show us the predicted evolution of different groups (by ideology, political interest, gender, and cohort). In Figure 4.4, the aggregate patterns of three polarization measures can be compared, and it seems that approximately from 2015 onwards, left-right polarization has been following more similar trends to that of AP, compared to the first four time points, in which the trends seemed to be disconnected. This seems to be indicative of a strengthening of the relationship between these two variables over time.

In this section, I move into bivariate relationships to explain this further. Table A4.1 in the appendix adds further descriptive evidence for this strengthening of the relationship between left-right polarization and AP and the latter and territorial polarization. In this table, we can observe an overall pattern of growing association between left-right polarization and AP as time goes by. Since 2017, this pattern is also apparent regarding correlations between territorial polarization and AP. Left-right and AP correlation in 2011 was weak (0.15) and remains quite weak, but within an overall growing trend - interrupted just in 2016-, until 2018. In the meantime, in 2015 and 2018, the correlations can be considered almost as moderate, and from 2019 onwards, the coefficient has been above 0.3, indicating a moderate positive relationship. In 2020 and 2023 the coefficient is close to 0.4, thereby indicating a moderate-strong relationship. In the case of correlations between territorial polarization and AP, we also observe a general upward trend, whose highest degrees were reached in 2022 (0.41) and 2023 (0.37), indicating a moderate-strong relationship, which in 2017, before the October 1 referendum on Catalonia's independence, was 0.26.

Figure 4.9 plots the relationship between left-right polarization and AP in 2011 and the same relationship in 2023, the latter being one of the years in which the correlation coefficient is higher. The association became clearly stronger with time.

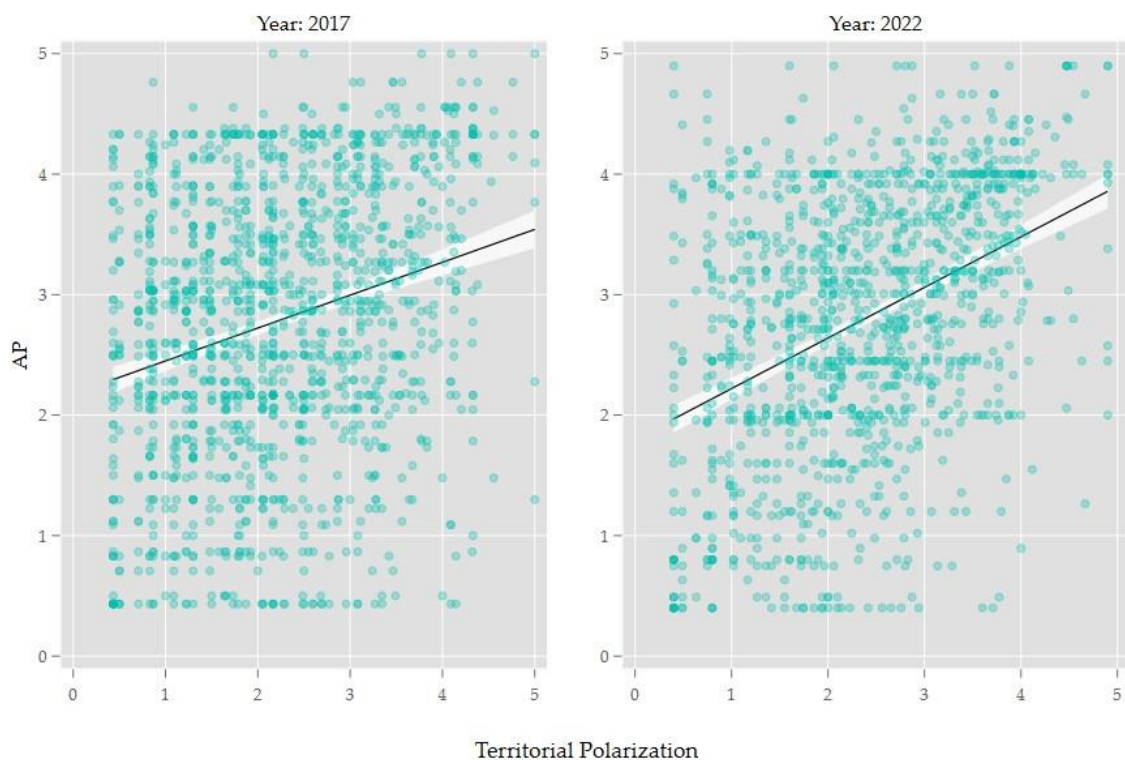
Figure 4.9: Bivariate relationship between left-right polarization and AP. Comparison 2011 vs 2023



Interestingly, and this is something that cannot be inferred from the previous univariate graphs, the association between AP and territorial polarization also has become stronger in the last years compared to 2017. We should note that territorial polarization in 2017 was measured before the October 2017 independence referendum in Catalonia, and the next measures were after this referendum took place. Thus, it seems plausible that this relationship became stronger after this event, the subsequent political crisis and the emergence of the far-right party Vox, which had an especially tough discourse on the territorial axis, initially advocating for measures such as the banning of political parties that undermine national unity, the protection of Spanish symbols, or measures aiming at promoting very high levels of re-centralization (Vampa, 2020). In figure 4.10 we can see this stronger association in the last years of the panel timespan through the comparison between the years 2017 and 2022, the latter being the time-point in which the correlation coefficient was higher.

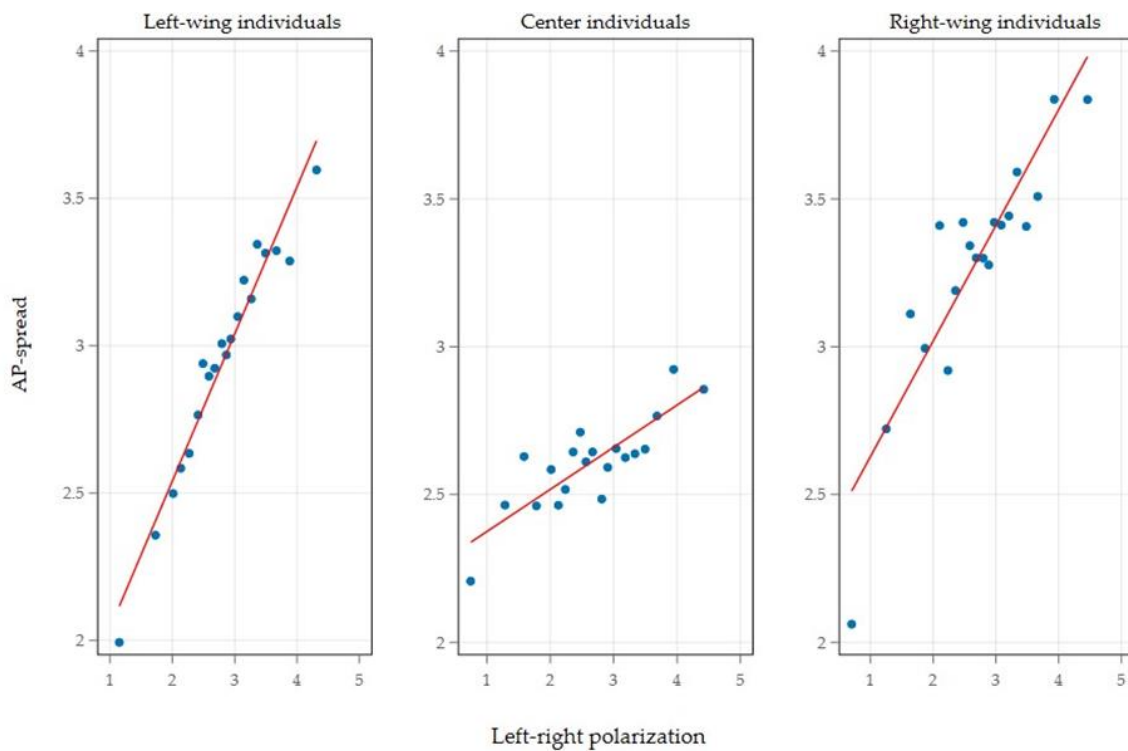
Riera and Garmendia-Madariaga (2023) explored the contextual aspects that can increase the association between ‘ideological extremism’ and AP (naming the simultaneous presence of both “overlapping polarization”). The evidence provided here complements their findings by providing descriptive evidence that shows that there are also substantial variations in the degree to which perceived ideological polarization on different axes of political competition and AP are associated, or, in their terms, to what extent these two types of polarization overlap.

Figure 4.10: Bivariate relationship between territorial polarization and AP. Comparison 2017 vs 2022



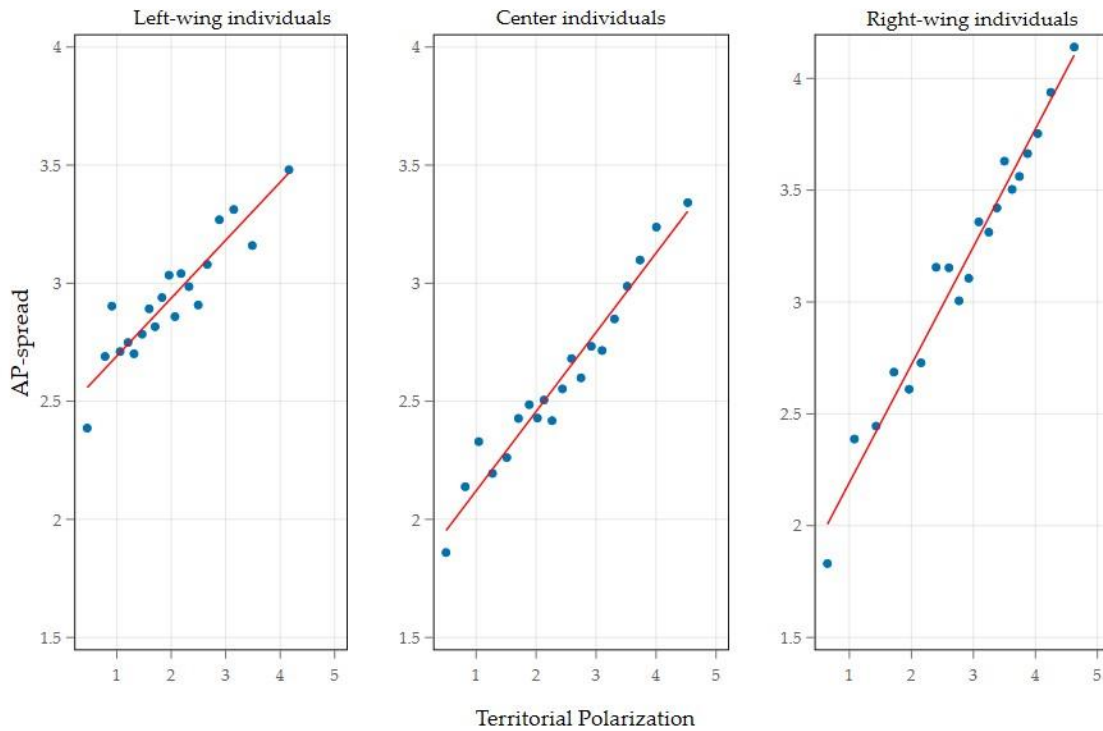
Once I have explored variability in the bivariate relationship between left-right, territorial polarization and AP, I am going to show how these bivariate relationships vary between ideological groups. Figure 4.11 plots the bivariate relationship between left-right polarization and AP grouped by citizens' ideological profiles, and Figure 4.12 does the same but with the relationship between territorial polarization and AP, both using all the time points available, that is, 13 waves for the relationship between left-right polarization and AP, and 6 waves for the one between territorial polarization and AP.²⁰

Figure 4.11: Bivariate relationship between left-right polarization and AP grouped by citizens' ideological self-identification



²⁰ Both figures are constructed using the `binscatter` command in Stata, as a conventional scatterplot with the very big N for each of the variables cannot produce a visual output. What the `binscatter` command does is group an X variable into equal-size bins and compute means for X and Y variables for each of the bins, to subsequently create a scatterplot that includes a plotted linear fit line using OLS.

Figure 4.12: Bivariate relationship between territorial polarization and AP, by citizens' ideological self-identification



The clearest difference that can be observed in figure 4.11 is that the relationship between left-right polarization and AP seems to be much weaker for centrist individuals compared with right-wing and left-wing citizens. Besides, the relationship is slightly stronger for left-wing people vis-à-vis right-wing people, although graphically, the slopes for left-wing and right-wing individuals look quite similar. However, the comparison of both correlation coefficients confirms that the relationship is slightly stronger for left-wing individuals. However, the clearest difference can be found between left-wing and right-wing citizens in figure 4.12, as for the latter, the relationship between territorial polarization and AP is notably stronger compared with those for left-wing and centrist individuals. Also relevant is the fact that for centrist individuals, the bivariate relationship between territorial polarization and AP is clearly stronger than the one between left-right polarization and AP.

4.6 Affect Towards Sociopolitical Groups and Main Political Parties in 2022

In this last part of the chapter, I am going to provide some basic univariate and bivariate statistics of affect towards a range of social and political groups. I will be using a survey conducted by the Democracy, Elections and Citizenship group in 2022, which contains like-dislike batteries towards a

range of sociopolitical groups, as well as towards what in 2022 were the four main Spanish state-wide political parties and also the main Catalan pro-independence party, Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (Republican Left of Catalonia, ERC).

Figure 4.13: Mean levels of affect towards different social and political groups, by individuals' self-reported ideology

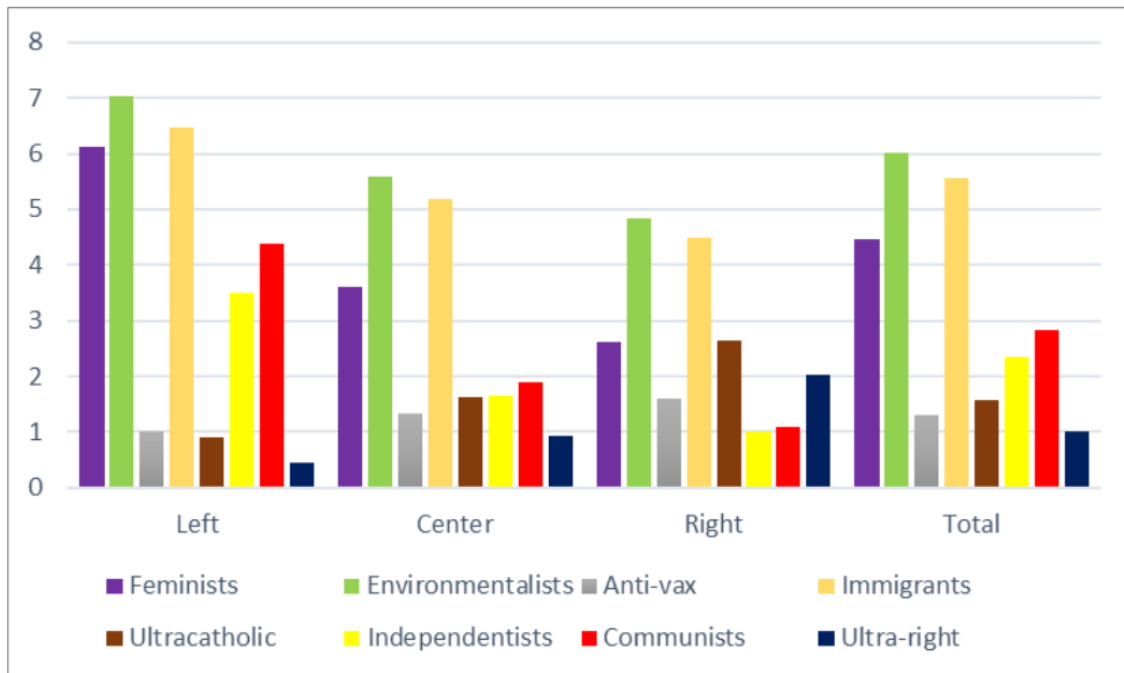


Figure 4.14: Differences in the evaluation of sociopolitical groups between left and right identifiers

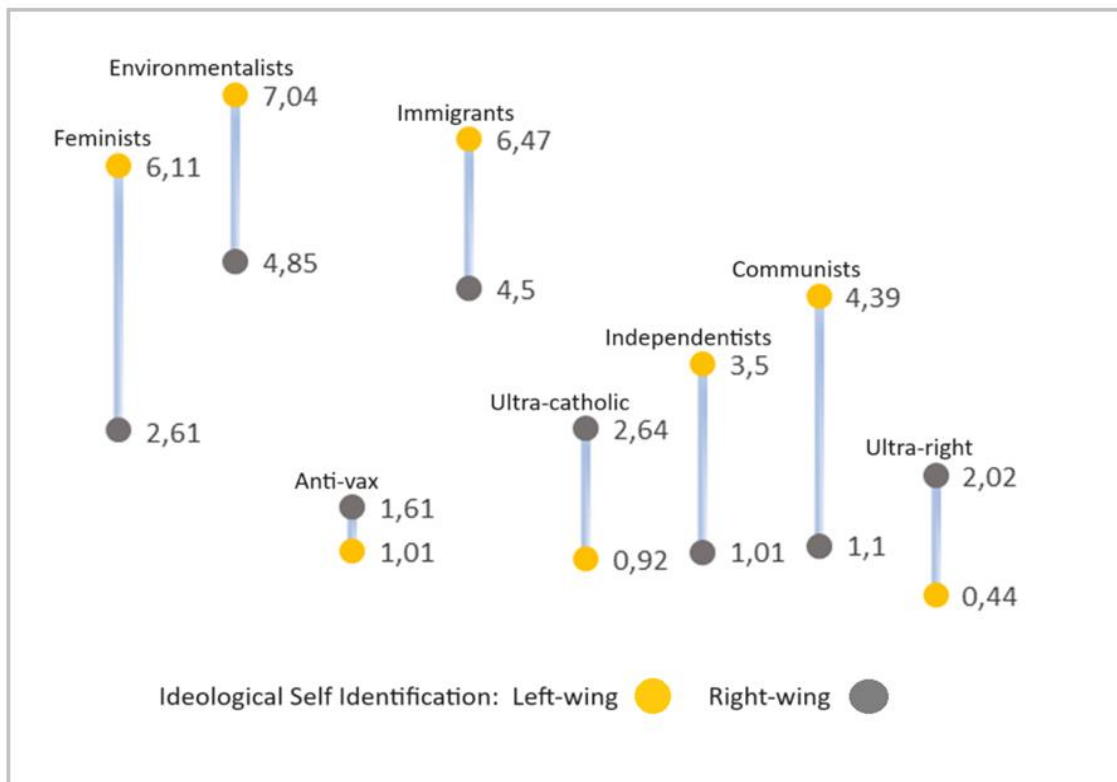


Figure 4.13 shows mean levels of affect towards different social and political groups, by individuals' self-reported ideology. On the right side of the graph, we can observe the mean levels for the whole sample. We observe that the most liked groups are environmentalists and immigrants, with respective mean levels of 6 and 5.5 out of 10. These two groups are the only ones whose mean ratings, considering all the sample, are above 5. Moreover, the most disliked groups, those whose mean ratings are lower than two, are ultra-rightists, individuals that are anti-vaccination and ultra-religious people, with mean ratings of 1, 1.32 and 1.57 respectively. There is no surprise regarding ultra-rightists and ultrareligious people, both because of the recent past in Spain (Franco's ultra-religious, National-Catholic dictatorship) and because of the very same formulation of the social group in the survey, preceded by the prefix 'ultra'. Nevertheless, and quite surprisingly, individuals that are anti-vaccination are the group that receives second most negative rating, ahead of ultra-religious people, independentists, and communists, all of which are groups that tend to generate high levels of negative affect. These data are consistent with research carried out mainly in Germany, that uncovered the importance of vaccination and anti-vaccination identities, as well as political identities generated during the COVID crisis as a source of political conflict (Schmid et al., 2023; Wagner & Eberl, 2022).

However, affect towards these sociopolitical groups varies depending on the ideological block with which individuals identify. Overall, affect towards environmentalists, feminists, and immigrants is higher as we move to the left side of the ideological scale. The same happens with independentists and communists, although these two groups do not reach the midpoint for any of the ideological groups, and the opposite happens with ultra-right, ultrareligious, and anti-vax groups, as negative affect towards them increase as we move to the left, although these groups are far from the midpoint for people identified with any of the ideological groups.

Left individuals manifest warm feelings towards the environmentalist political group and somewhat warm towards the political group of feminists and the social group of immigrants. In contrast, they manifest very high levels of negative affect towards ultra-right, ultra-religious, and anti-vax people. High levels of negative affect towards the latter is something that is shared by all the ideological groups. Indeed, affect towards anti-vax people shows almost no polarization in how left-wing and right-wing people feel towards them, as can also be seen in figure 4.14.

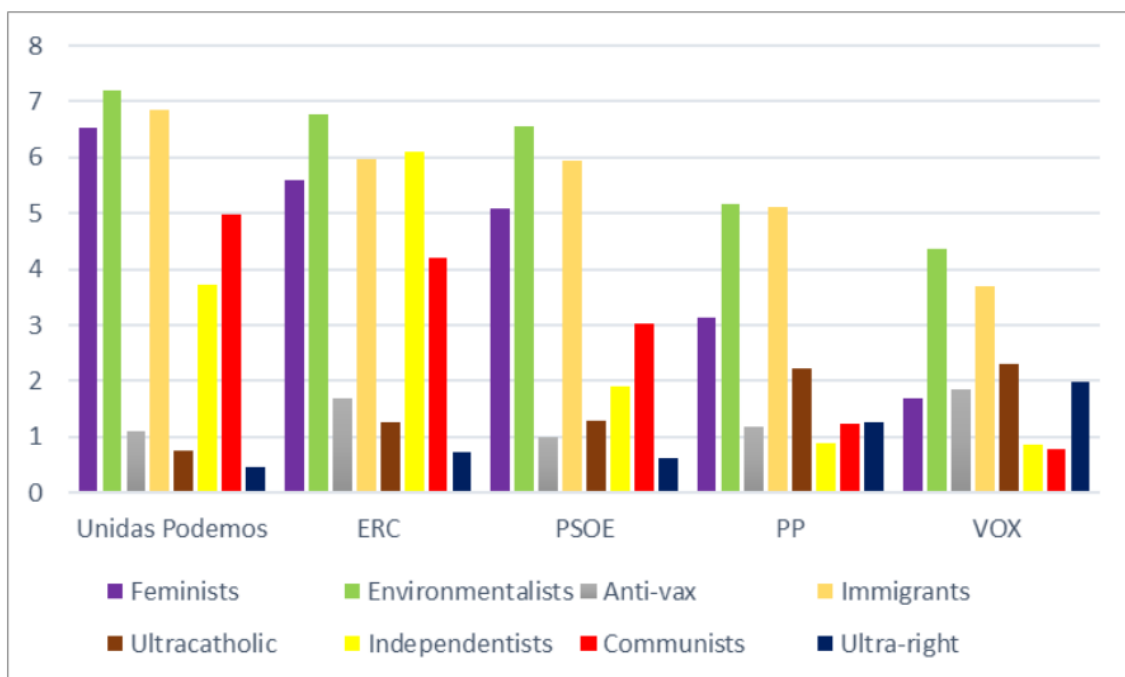
Those identified as centrists report positive mean feelings -slightly above the midpoint of the scale- also towards environmentalists and immigrants, and very negative feelings against ultra-right people. However, centrist citizens do not have comparable positive feelings towards feminists, and they rate this political group below 4. Regarding independentists and communists, there are also important differences compared with those considering themselves leftwing, and although the latter feel somewhat cold towards these groups, centrist individuals feel notably cold. Right-wing people, for their part, do not rate any sociopolitical group above the mid-point, although environmentalists come close. The most disliked people for those considering themselves right-wing are independentists and communists and thus, this is the only block for which ultra-right people are not the group attracting most negativity. Right-wing citizens feel somewhat less cold towards ultra-right, ultra-religious, and anti-vax groups and notably colder towards feminists, independentists, communists, immigrants, and environmentalists compared to centrist individuals.

Figure 4.14 shows that the sociopolitical group that generates the higher levels of polarization between left-wing and right-wing individuals is 'the feminists'. While there are also notable differences regarding, in descending order, communists, independentists and environmentalists, feminism seems to constitute a central point of conflict within today's Spanish society. That affect towards the feminists constitutes the most polarized in our sample is surprising. The reasons behind this might have to do, on the one hand, with context, as Spain was at that time being governed by a coalition government in which different key figures that considered themselves as feminists, and where the ministry of equality, led by Irene Montero, and its activities, had considerable media

visibility. On the other hand, this data cannot be separated from the international tendency in some sectors of society towards seeing feminism and advances on gender equality as a threat and the gender backlash that many countries are currently witnessing (Lisnek et al., 2022).

The also notable differences in affect towards the communists are very likely to be related to particularities in Spanish history, where the communists were one of the main targets of repression by National-Catholicism, and were important figures of anti-Francoist resistance (see Preston, 2011). As for ‘independentists’, the somewhat notable degree of polarization is produced because this is the least liked sociopolitical group for the right-wing block, whereas left-wing individuals are somewhat cold towards them. Despite there being considerable evidence of a relationship between left-right orientations and political positions towards territorial minorities and the territorial conflict, in the sense of left-wing identifiers being more pro-decentralization and right-wing identifiers more pro-centralization (Dinas, 2014; Liñeira et al., 2021), it seems that the territorial dimension has its own logics. The somewhat cold feelings towards independentists among the left-wing block as well as the somewhat cold feelings towards ERC among leftists that can be seen in figure 4.15, go in line with a relationship between both dimensions of political competition that is, however, far from perfect, indicating that the territorial conflict in Spain cannot be subsumed under the left-right cleavage.

Figure 4.15: Mean levels of affect towards the different groups, by party sympathy



In figure 4.15 we again see the configuration of affect towards the different groups, but in this case, by the level of sympathy towards the five parties included in the like-dislike scales. There are many things that could be inferred very easily by looking at the previous graphs, although this figure gives us some new information. Starting with the right-wing block, interesting differences can be observed between those closer to Vox and those closer to the PP. The latter feel warmer towards environmentalists and immigrants -the mean rate is about 5 out of 10- and slightly more negative about ultra-right people than the former. In fact, while the negativity of people closer to PP towards communists and ultra-right people is virtually the same, people closer to Vox report somewhat colder feelings towards communists, independentists, feminists, and anti-vax people than towards ultra-right groups. But the aspect in which citizens closer to Vox and PP still coincide, is in reporting very high levels of negative affect towards independentists, the latter being a group that receives the highest levels of negative affect for those closer to PP (0.88) and the second highest, almost tied with communists, for those closer to Vox (0.85).

Within the left block, figure 4.15 informs us about interesting differences, such as the fact that only among people closer to Unidas Podemos, mean affect towards the feminists is higher than 6, while in ERC it is about 5.6, and quite surprisingly, 5.1 for those identified with PSOE, indicating what seem somewhat higher levels of ambivalence towards feminists than identifiers of the other parties on the left, especially those of Unidas Podemos. Interestingly, if we divide people closer to PSOE in age groups, we find differences in their emotional positivity towards feminists. People under 35 years old -with a mean of 5.6- and people over 65 years old (5.2) show warmer mean feelings towards feminists, while people between 36 and 50 and between 51 and 65 show mean levels of affect of 4.85 and 4.71 respectively, indicating that age plays a role here. Regarding communists, people closer to Unidas Podemos situate this group slightly below the midpoint, and ERC and PSOE, especially the latter, feel colder towards them. The other interesting aspect that can be seen within the left block is a considerable difference in emotional positivity towards the independentists. Whereas, as it is logical, people close to ERC feel somewhat warm towards them, those close to PSOE and Unidas Podemos have mean ratings of 1.91 and 3.71 for this group, respectively.

Figure 4.16: Differences in affect towards parties between sympathizers and not sympathizers

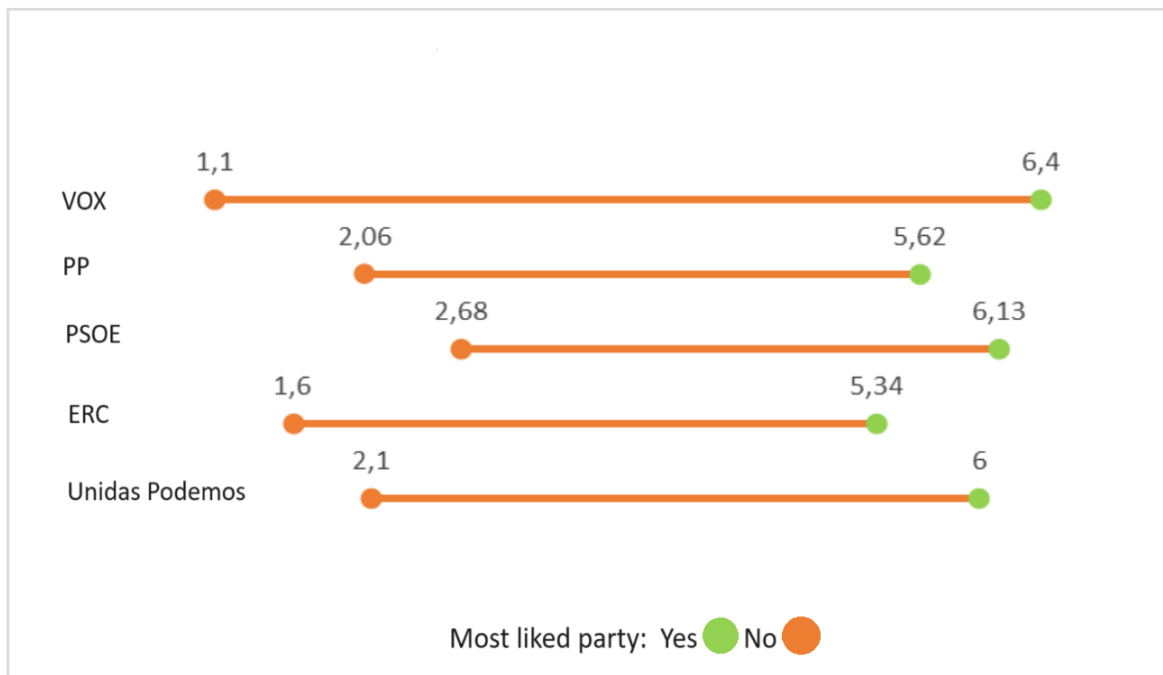


Figure 4.17: Mean affect towards political parties, by ideological groups

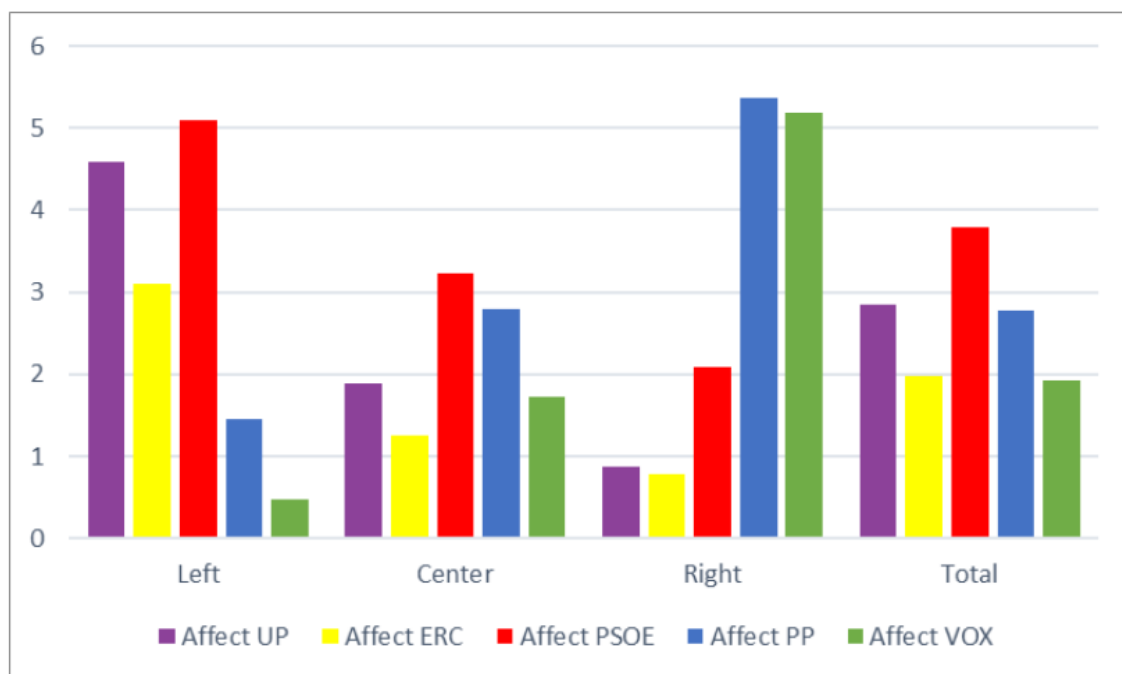


Figure 4.16 shows the mean emotional distance that sympathizers and non-sympathizers of each of the parties reported. That is, in figure 4.16 we see the levels of polarization in feelings towards these parties, between those closer to them and those closer to any other party. The gap between feelings

of their sympathizers and those who prefer other parties is lower for the PSOE and the PP, although PSOE sympathizers have more positive affect towards the party and non-sympathizers less negative affect than in the case of the PP. For its part, Vox is the party that generates the highest levels of negative affect from non-sympathizers, congruent with evidence regarding negative affect towards radical right parties in other countries (Harteveld et al., 2022; Reiljan & Ryan, 2021). Interestingly, Vox's sympathizers also present the highest levels of positive affect towards the in-party, showing the most polarizing tendency. ERC sympathizers are the ones whose evaluation of the in-party is colder, although the fact of the sample not being circumscribed to Catalonia surely plays a role.

In figure 4.17 we see the configuration of affect towards the political parties included in the survey by ideological groups. The PSOE, overall, is the party that generates less negative affect for left and centrist ideological groups. Besides, this party is the one that generates lower levels of negative affect if we consider the whole sample, as shown on the right part of the figure. In this sense, the PSOE's mean levels are 3.8 out of 10.

Figure 4.17 shows that in 2022, a time in which the incumbents were a left-wing coalition formed by PSOE and Unidas Podemos, the affective positivity of right-wing people towards the right-wing parties was slightly higher than left-wing people's mean affective positivity towards the left-wing block, probably indicating some attrition as a consequence of government. In this sense, the mean affect of right-wing people towards the right-wing block (PP and Vox) is 5.27, whereas the mean affect towards the left-wing block among leftists is 4.8, just below the mean point of the scale. Conversely, levels of negative affect towards the right-wing block are higher among leftists, whose mean rate of the right-wing block is 0.97, whereas the right-wing people's mean rate of the left-wing block is 1.48. This difference is due mainly to the lower emotional negativity of right-wing people towards the PSOE (2.09), compared to the affect that left-wing citizens show towards the PP (1.46). However, the higher levels of negative affect from right-wing identifiers are directed to ERC (0.79), very closely followed by those towards Unidas Podemos (0.87). This latter point is interesting because if we just consider the left-right dimension of competition, levels of negative affect of left-wing people towards the right-wing block are somewhat higher than those of right-wing people towards the left-wing block. Nevertheless, when considering the territorial dimension, right-wing people show higher levels of negative affect towards ERC and generally, towards the independentists (see figure 4.15) than left-wing parties do. This also happens when we consider, as we have previously seen, historically disadvantaged politicized groups, especially feminists, and historically unprivileged social groups such as immigrants.

Therefore, in Spain and elsewhere, to capture the affective political landscape, it seems important to consider social groups that go beyond partisan identities. In this sense, while previous research on polarization shows that the negative affect received by PRR parties and their supporters exceeds the negative affect they project towards the other parties and party supporters (see Reiljan & Ryan, 2021), this is likely something that holds when we circumscribe to party identities. Once we ask about historically unprivileged social groups, the picture changes. As we can see in Figure 4.15, people closer to Vox, the Spanish far-right, clearly show higher mean levels of affective negativity towards environmentalists, immigrants, and especially, feminists and independentists than people who feel close to any other party do.

The main database used in this dissertation does not contain data on affect towards social groups, and thereby I am going to partially replicate this limitation in different parts of the present thesis. However, chapters 2 and 7 overcome this limitation and explicitly analyze the political polarization phenomenon without circumscribing it to party identities.

4.7 Discussion of the Main Descriptive Findings

This chapter's aim was to provide a descriptive overview of the levels and evolution of the main political polarization indicators. In the introduction, I underlined different questions to which this descriptive overview can help provide preliminary answers, and thereby, to advance our understanding of political polarization and envision new avenues for future inquiry. Overall, the unfolding of a great deal of descriptive evidence on political polarization within the Spanish context over more than a decade allows us to better understand the dynamics, complexities, and nuances of the different dimensions of political polarization in a context characterized by periods of disaffection and distrust, but also by periods of vibrant political competition, contention, and high tension.

First, using the POLAT panel dataset, I showed the aggregate-level evolution of citizens' positioning of parties in the two main dimensions of political competition in Spain as well as the aggregate levels of affect towards the same parties. These three aspects are responsive to important changes and events happening in the sociopolitical arena, although the degree of their variation is notably different. In the different graphs displayed, I revealed that aggregate perceptions of parties' left-right and territorial positioning, as well as affect towards them, were responsive to the emergence of the far-right party Vox. I also revealed that perceptions of parties' positions on the left-right axis and affect towards the parties were responsive to the periods of consensus of the main center-left and center-right party

around austerity measures during Mariano Rajoy's government, and to the subsequent emergence of Podemos and Ciudadanos.

Similarly, I showed the aggregate evolution of the indexes of different types of perceived ideological polarization (left-right and territorial) and AP. The latter is clearly the one that presents more variation over time. In addition, the perceived territorial polarization index seems to follow a gentle upward trend, and left-right perceived polarization and AP seem to increase in waves that are closer to national elections (Hernández et al., 2021). Conversely, the lowest levels of AP in 2012 and 2013 coincide with a period of social and economic unrest, high political disaffection, and the Indignados movement's cultural and political influence. It is worth noting that these years of low AP coincide with very high levels of negative affect towards the mainstream parties of the Spanish political system: the PP and the PSOE. So, instead of interpreting these lower levels of AP as the amelioration of political conflict, it is more congruent to posit that the levels of conflict and politicization that manifested in the 15M period had no institutional translation, as the main antagonism at that time was precisely the one between 'the ordinary people' and the corrupt political and banking elites that supported the harsh austerity measures in southern European countries. It was not until the arrival to the Spanish party system of Podemos and other various citizens' electoral platforms -Podemos was the party that in 2015 and 2016 generated overall lower levels of negative affect- and the two election periods of 2015 and 2016 that AP levels notably rose again to a high point within the time-series. In this sense, Podemos and the different citizens' platforms that obtained electoral representation in 2015 and 2016 channeled some of the 15M's demands, thereby bringing back conflict into the institutional party system.

Regarding inter-individual variation, it seems that left-right polarization is the polarization measure that shows least variation, implying higher agreement about where the different parties are located ideologically. However, high levels of inter-individual variation can be found in perceptions of territorial polarization and of course, in AP levels. Interestingly, the evolution of the different polarization dimensions shows that left-right polarization and AP seem to be highly disconnected in the first years of our survey, to progressively become more associated. However, as expected, it is clearly affect towards the different parties that seems to be subjected to the most vigorous changes, compared to the other political polarization measures.

Some of these findings are also true beyond the aggregate level, when using methodological tools to exploit the panel structure of the data. Looking at group-level predicted trajectories among people with different ideological identifications, levels of political interest, gender and cohort, I found that expected increases in perceived left-right polarization and AP coincide with the appearance of Vox,

whilst levels of territorial polarization have had high intragroup stability but also high intergroup differences, at least for citizens with different ideologies. The predicted levels of territorial polarization are, from 2017 to 2023, notably higher for those with right-wing and far-right orientations, and somewhat higher for those with centrist orientations, in comparison with left and far-left individuals.

These latter findings relate to the descriptive bivariate evidence shown in the chapter. Perceptions of territorial polarization are indeed more correlated with AP among right-wing individuals in comparison with their centrist and left-wing counterparts. Perceptions of polarization regarding the left-right axis are more associated to AP among left-wing and right-wing citizens in comparison to their centrist counterparts. In addition to this intergroup variability in the associations of the two types of ideological polarization and AP, I find that there has been also variation through time. I have numerically and visually shown that levels of association between perceived left-right polarization and AP and between the latter and territorial polarization have been growing over time, from low correlations to moderate-high correlations. Held together, these findings indicate, in the same vein as chapter 5 of this thesis, that the degree of association between left-right and territorial polarization with AP varies over time and context.

Furthermore, the final objective of this chapter was to investigate affective dynamics beyond political parties and see how they relate to political orientations and party identities. A cross-sectional description of Spaniards' affect towards sociopolitical groups in 2022 shows a great deal of differences between ideologically different citizens, differences in line with those that one would expect based on which groups are considered right-leaning and left-leaning. The aggregate levels of affect towards some sociopolitical groups show that AP is far from being circumscribed to parties or party identities but is also something that characterizes other social and political identities. Indeed, the degree of polarization between right-wing and left-wing individuals in their attitudes toward feminists is quantitatively similar to the polarization observed among these ideologically diverse citizens when it comes to their feelings towards the different political parties. And this is the case even though I compared AP towards sociopolitical groups -which resembles more a horizontal AP measure- with a vertical measure of AP towards political parties. It is plausible that, if the comparison were made between levels of AP towards sociopolitical groups and levels of AP towards party supporters, the quantitative similarities might have been even greater, considering that citizens tend to have more positive feelings towards party supporters than towards parties themselves (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). Future research needs to provide more evidence on the comparison between AP towards parties and party supporters vis-à-vis AP towards other non-partisan social and political groups.

One last aspect emerging from the descriptive analysis of the affective landscape towards groups is a picture that adds a nuance to the affective asymmetries that previous research has found in relation to the radical right, specifically that these parties and their supporters receive more negative affect than they irradiate. What this chapter shows is that this also holds in the Spanish context when looking at state-wide parties, but it does not hold when asking about affect towards groups such as migrants, feminists or environmentalists, as actually, the participants that feel closer to Vox manifested the highest levels of negative affect towards these groups, compared to the supporters of all the other parties. This fact underlines the importance of studying the political-emotional dynamics beyond party identities and its societal implications.

All in all, this descriptive chapter is indicative of the evolution of an essential aspect of Spanish public opinion, that is, political polarization, with a special attention to its emotional component -AP- from 2010 to 2023. The chapter constitutes an extensive overview over time of three different political polarization indicators and some of their constitutive components -individuals' positioning of the parties on the territorial and left-right axes and their affect towards the different parties- as well as the associations of two ideological polarization indicators and AP over time. The systematization and rolling-out of these elements altogether, along with the analysis of the changing Spanish political context between 2010 and 2023, contributes to the study of Spanish public opinion, as well as to the political and affective polarization literature in Spain and beyond, by offering a wide array of evidence that helps to put the political polarization phenomenon in perspective and in context, and to visualize some aspects and patterns that were not sufficiently explored in previous literature. The chapter highlights the relevance of different contextual events, such as the economic and political crises and austerity measures, the emergence of new parties, electoral periods, multidimensionality, and of considering different social and political identities in addition to those related to political parties. Some literature has started to study related aspects, such as the relationship between austerity policies and AP (Hübscher et al., 2023) or the importance of multidimensionality to understand AP dynamics (Balinhas et al., Forthcoming), and the present PhD dissertation also contributes with its different chapters to developing these areas. However, more research is needed that disentangles these aspects comparatively and with in-depth contextualized analyses of single cases.

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4.9 Appendix

Figure A 4.1: Aggregate levels of the different types of political polarization (weighted indicators)

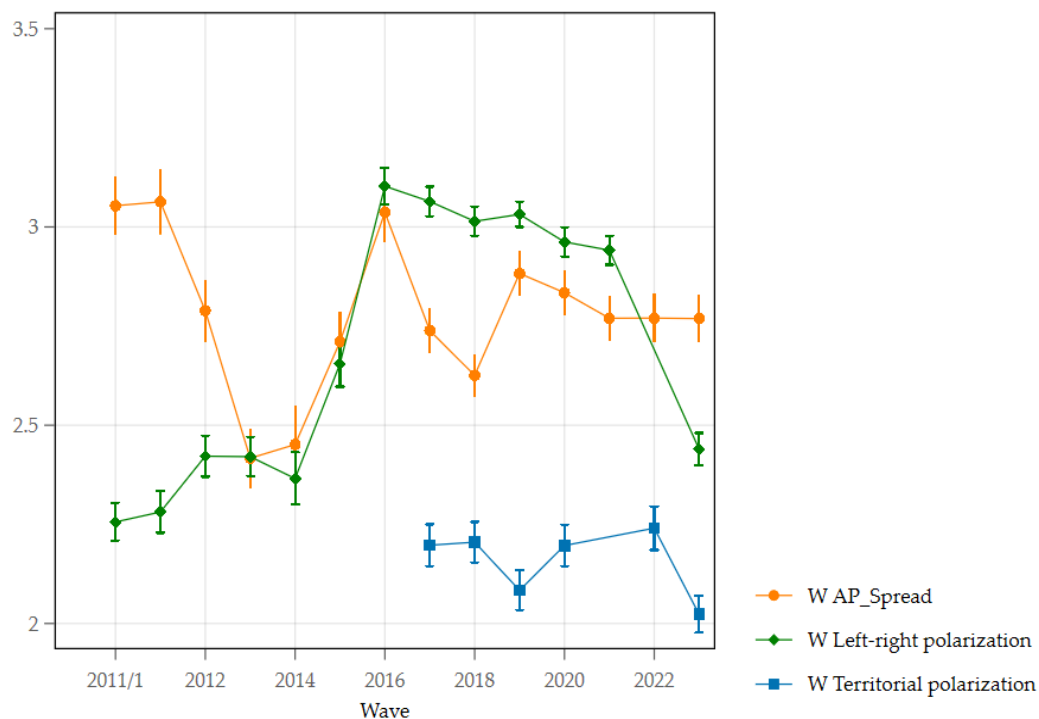


Figure A4.2: Evolution of AP indicators, spread and distance, including and excluding participants scoring 0.

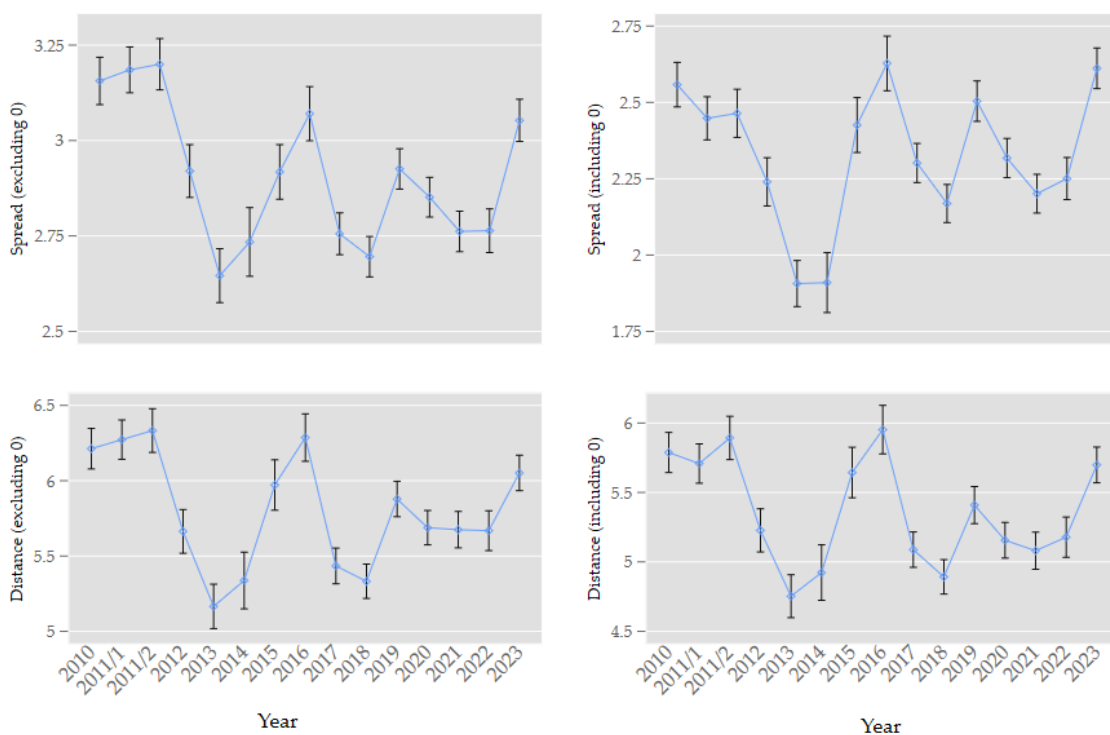


Table A 4.1: Correlations between the two types of ideological polarization (left-right and territorial) and AP over time

Year	Left-right polarization- AP	Territorial polarization- AP
2011/1	0.15	
2011/2	0.17	
2012	0.20	
2013	0.23	
2014	0.23	
2015	0.25	
2016	0.20	
2017	0.24	0.26
2018	0.26	0.27
2019	0.33	0.29
2020	0.37	0.32
2021	0.34	
2022		0.41
2023	0.37	0.37

Chapter 5: Examining The Territorial Dimension as a Source of Affective Polarization in the Spanish Multinational Democracy. A Longitudinal Analysis

Abstract

Research has found that citizens' perceptions of elites' left-right polarization are one of the causes behind affective polarization (AP). However, in many countries, political conflict and competition go well beyond this axis. Using an 11-wave panel dataset, this paper examines the relationship between perceived polarization along the two main axes of political competition in Spain (the left-right axis and the territorial one) and AP. I find evidence that the perceived territorial polarization can independently contribute to AP, and that the territorial conflict's salience shapes this relationship. Furthermore, the impact on AP of the perceived elite conflict on each of the axes differs depending on individuals' self-reported ideology: perceiving polarization on the territorial axis only leads to AP among right-wing individuals, whereas perceptions on the left-right axis mainly lead to AP among left-wing individuals. These results deepen our understanding of AP's causes in multinational democracies and might inform future depolarization interventions.

Keywords: Affective polarization, Territorial dimension, Ideological polarization, Panel data, Multidimensionality, Nationalism.

5.1 Introduction

Affective polarization, hereafter AP, constitutes one of the biggest concerns for social scientists, and might be a key factor behind the emergence and/or recrudescence of many current sociopolitical conflicts worldwide. AP can promote distrust and a lack of willingness to compromise between citizens that support opposed parties and increase perceptions of the illegitimacy of the opponents' positions, ultimately constituting a breeding ground for democratic backsliding (Iyengar et al., 2019; Kingzette et al., 2021). Among the causes of AP, scholars have suggested the effects of social media, inequality, unemployment, partisanship, misperceptions about outgroups, and ideological or opinion-based differences (Druckman et al., 2022; Gidron, Adams & Horne, 2020; Hobolt, Leeper & Tilley, 2021). However, less is known about its relationship with citizens' perceptions of elite polarization, especially along different historical lines of conflict. In fact, the few works that confirm the effect of perceived ideological polarization fuelling AP have shown inconsistent results (see Reiljan, 2020, Gidron et al., 2020) and have not considered other divides that can overlap or cut across citizens and parties.

This research addresses citizens' perceptions of elite polarization regarding the left-right and territorial dimensions – the main lines of political conflict in several Western countries – as possible causes of AP.²¹ This article argues that some of the inconsistencies in the previous literature might be due to three aspects being overlooked. First, not enough attention has been paid to the effect of time, and how variations in the salience of a dimension might affect its impact on AP. Second, heterogeneous effects have not been taken into consideration. That means considering the possibility that the two axes of elite conflict may exert an effect on AP that will depend on individuals' ideological predispositions and identities. And lastly, previous studies have normally looked at AP at an aggregate level.

Exploring how AP changes with time is relevant, as we know that polarization tends to go hand in hand with the politicization and the widening of some political divides. At the same time, looking at the heterogeneous effects conditioned by some demand-side factors (in this case, self-reported ideology), might enrich our understanding of AP, and most importantly, it might give us insight into why some depolarization interventions may be effective for some people but not for others. In this sense, the literature has studied ideologies as an underlying set of values that makes people prioritize particular aspects of their lives and certain values over others. So, it would be congruent to expect the effect

²¹ To avoid excessive repetitions, as I have been doing throughout the whole dissertation, I will use left-right polarization and territorial polarization to refer to citizens' perceived elite polarization on the left-right and the territorial axes. The reader should note that we are always referring to citizens' perceptions of elite conflict regarding both dimensions. A working definition of the different types of polarization measured can be found in table A 5.1 in the appendix.

caused by perceived polarization in each of the axes and AP to be different for left-wing and right-wing individuals. Finally, the fact that AP has been studied mainly at an aggregate level might have implied some losses in information and variability.

Consequently, this article's aim is threefold. First, I explore if individual changes in territorial polarization can explain individual changes in AP levels, controlling for ideological (left-right) polarization. I further look into this relationship by using dynamic panel models to explore the relationship between perceptions of polarization on the territorial axis and AP. Second, I explore whether variations in the salience of the territorial dimension produce an activation effect, strengthening the association between territorial polarization and AP. Third, this paper tests if either of the dimensions is more strongly related to AP depending on individuals' ideology, acknowledging the possibility that some attitudes might also be important to how individual-level AP takes shape and develops.

As a case study, I use Spain, where political conflict is mainly structured along an ideological (left-right) and a territorial (center/periphery) axis. I leverage an 11-wave panel dataset that provides us with longitudinal data throughout a period of turmoil, change, and volatility in the Spanish party system.

The results point to the importance of the perceptions of parties' stances, both in ideological and territorial terms, in explaining AP. But the capacity of neither of these dimensions is homogeneous, and individuals' ideology seems to act as a moderator of the relationship between perceived polarization in these dimensions and AP. Furthermore, our results also suggest contextual effects, so that when the territorial conflict gains more saliency, perceived territorial polarization has more weight when it comes to explaining AP.

5.1.1 Affective polarization, ideological polarization, and territorial polarization

Affective polarization, understood as the gap between individuals' feelings towards their in-parties and out-parties (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes, 2012) constitutes an essential concern among scholars, given that it is a phenomenon with predictably negative implications for intergroup relations. At high levels, it even seems to make the dehumanization of political opponents more likely (Martherus et al., 2019). Furthermore, AP seems to be at odds with democratic accountability and democratic norms (Kingzette et al., 2021; but see Broockman, Kalla & Westwood, 2023), to promote institutional gridlock and to decrease government's efficacy (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015).

Among the several causes of AP, scholars have linked elite ideological polarization (either in left-right, conservative-progressive, cultural, or policy-based terms) to mass-level affective polarization (Banda

& Cluverius, 2018; Lelkes, 2019; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). Indeed, within the European multi-party context, ideological polarization (along the left-right axis) has been used as an independent variable to explain AP.

In Reiljan's (2020) comparative work, left-right polarization correlates with mass AP at the aggregate level. By the same token, ideological polarization plays a role as a mediator of the relationship between AP and imminent elections (Hernández, Anduiza & Rico, 2021). That is, as elections approach, AP levels increase in part because there is also a growth in perceived ideological conflict. In a similar vein, Gidron et al.'s (2020) work has added a nuance when using left-right polarization. They separate the left-right cleavage into economic and cultural dimensions,²² finding that elite disagreements on the cultural dimension are more strongly correlated to AP, in comparison with elite disagreements on the economic dimension. Cultural issues have to do with minority rights, immigration, or national identity (Kriesi et al., 2008). This separation of the dimensions within the left-right divide raises some interesting questions that should be addressed by research on polarization. The fact that the economic and the cultural dimensions of the left-right divide, measured through party manifestos, seem to be related to AP in different ways raises the question of whether the left-right divide, ascertained via the left-right continuum, is fully capturing other lines of conflict.

Despite the documented capacity of the left-right continuum as a "super-issue" that is able to orient electoral competition and integrate new controversies and lines of conflict, such as material and post-material issues (Knutsen, 1990), some countries face other structural conflicts that also condition the development of the national polity, and which may not be fully integrated within left-right terms, such as territorial divides (Harguindéguy et al., 2023; Liñeira, Muñoz & Rico, 2021).

The interdependency of the left-right and territorial divides has been explored (Dinas, 2012; Erk, 2010) showing that both dimensions can be intertwined and may reinforce each other. Nevertheless, it is also frequent that political actors put more emphasis on and subsume one dimension under the other (Masseti & Schakel, 2015). Furthermore, previous research acknowledges that throughout recent history, the left-right super issue has had great difficulties summarizing positions on questions related to national identities and ethnicity (Albright, 2010), since a priori, a leftist or rightist position does not necessarily determine positions on the national/territorial conflict (Freedon, 1998). In this respect,

²² They measure cultural and economic elite polarization through an objective measure (built from a content analysis of parties' manifestos with data from the Comparative Manifesto Project), so strictly they are not measuring perceived ideological polarization but elite polarization. Hernández, Anduiza & Rico (2021) have measured left-right elite ideological polarization with people's positioning of parties in the left-right continuum, following the Dalton Index, while Reiljan (2020) did the same but also added the average left-right self-placements of party supporters.

there is a need for studies that aim to measure, in multi-dimensional political systems, if and to what extent the presence of a territorial conflict contributes to AP, independently of the left-right divide.

Indeed, territorial conflicts constitute a fundamental dimension of competition in multinational states, that is, states characterized by the existence of one or more national minorities coexisting with a national majority that has acted as the foundation of the state (Máiz, 1999). This heterogeneity frequently implies that citizens in regions with ethnonational diversity are exposed to different and often conflictive national identities; that is, citizens in multinational states experience and witness an elite struggle taking place between the central and the regional nation-building projects (Linz, 1973; Hierro, 2013). In multi-party and multinational contexts, where different ethnonational groups and nation-building projects coexist, national identity might arise as one of the most meaningful and enduring political identities (see Huddy, 2001).

The importance of the territorial conflict dimension becomes clearer in the light of the Social Identity Theory (SIT) framework (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the SIT terms (Tajfel & Turner, 1979: 43), ethnonational conflicts might lead to some groups perceiving that the ingroup does not have the status it deserves (low subjective status, as compared to the matrix state), or to feeling that the status associated with a (national) identity is threatened. In this sense, they are usually conflicts in which cultural or linguistic issues, which are central to some citizens' personal identities, are at stake and may be perceived as threatened. The capacity of ethnonational conflicts to tap into such deeply rooted identities means that these sorts of clashes, when they take place, are likely to become powerful instigators of intergroup conflict (Medeiros, 2019).

Despite this being known, the literature on AP has rarely addressed this issue directly, to explore if perceptions of territorial polarization can also be a cause of inter-party animus. Contrarily, priming national identity as a super-ordinate identity has been used as a means to reduce AP in the US context (Levendusky, 2018). However, in the European context and especially in multinational states, conflict around the territorial axis can be an important cause of AP.

5.1.2 How polarizing can a dimension become?

In multidimensional political systems, the dimension that is going to elicit more conflict and, eventually, higher levels of AP, will probably depend on different individual, sociopolitical, historical, and contextual aspects. In this sense, Lipset & Rokkan (1967) stated that there is a hierarchy of the main lines of conflict in a given society which can undergo changes that are contingent on the polity they take place within, and over time. In this section, I examine the political context and individuals'

self-reported ideology as plausible moderators of the relationship between perceived left-right and territorial polarization and AP. The former implies that the context of party competition and the occurrence of remarkable political events may affect how important a dimension is in triggering AP. The latter implies that the capacity of perceived polarization in each of the dimensions to lead to AP may also vary according to individuals' characteristics, such as ideology.

Starting with political context, research has shown that (ideological) polarization can rise substantially when important political events occur (Bischof & Wagner, 2019). Moreover, relevant political events related to one of the political dimensions can force the different parties to compete and position themselves on this dimension, irrespective of whether it is their principal or preferred one (Elias, Szöcsik & Zuber, 2015). In this sense, in multidimensional systems, if the territorial dimension gains considerable relevance in the regions where it is normally salient, even state-wide parties have to compete on this axis (Alonso et al., 2015).

From a cross-sectional comparative perspective, Bradley and Chauchard (2022) found that in countries where ethnic differences are politicized and become a relevant dimension of political competition, levels of AP were higher. This leads us to expect that, when the saliency of the territorial conflict is higher, territorial polarization and its association with AP will be stronger than in contexts where this dimension has low saliency.

In addition, as has been suggested earlier, I expect individuals' ideologies to moderate the relationship between our main variables. Ideological self-placement constitutes a powerful shaper of our political attitudes and is relatively stable over time (Gries, 2017). Individuals' ideologies can be envisaged as an "interconnected set of beliefs and attitudes that shape judgment" (Nosek, Banaji & Jost, 2009, p.2), that are related to basic psychological needs, such as order, security, or certainty. These attitudes tend to be related to normative beliefs, to what people see as morally right or wrong, and consequently, to their endorsement of or opposition to certain political views (Clifford, 2020).

In this sense, political conservatism and political liberalism are asymmetrically related to certain values and worldviews, such as conformity, loyalty, tradition, intolerance of ambiguity, and/or personal needs for order, structure, and closure, which are more related to right-wing ideologies (Jost, Federico & Napier, 2009). This underlying set of values might make right-wing individuals more concerned about territorial polarization, when the integrity of the nation-state, as a symbol of pride, stability, and certainty, is under threat by people from territories that defend more autonomy, decentralization, and even secession. Along these lines, Oesch (2008) found that in different countries, the defense of national identity against outsiders constitutes a better predictor of voting for right-wing populist

parties than economic grievances. Similarly, in Spain, the territorial crisis in 2017 was one of the main causes behind the emergence of the Spanish far right in 2018 (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019).

Additionally, left-wing and right-wing ideologies have historically been related to the idea of nation and nationalism in different ways. Even though this relationship has several nuances and varies across different contextual and historical conjunctures,²³ it is common to assert that, at least as far as western European countries are concerned, “insofar as nationalism can be defined as a political practice founded on ‘boundary building’, the right becomes the absolute master, the left a mere apprentice” (Conversi, 2020, p.41). That is, the right seems to have the “issue ownership” when it comes to preserving and defending the “true” nation, and when individuals feel that the nation is threatened, they tend to search for protection on the right side of the spectrum (Landau et al., 2004). Conversely, faced with the theoretical contradictions that internationalist socialism and nationalism might entail, the left has usually handled the national question in a vague and rather ambiguous way (see Hobsbawm, 1996; Ruiz-Jiménez et al., 2015).

These different ways of conceiving and prioritizing the question of the nation in relation to other issues that are more linked to the left-right dimension (such as equality, class, or public services) might have some consequences on the affective reactions of individuals when they are faced with elite polarization in both the territorial and the left-right dimensions. That is, previous ideological beliefs may act as moderators of the relationship between territorial polarization and AP, in a way that those who lean to the right will experience a stronger effect of their perceived levels of territorial polarization on their own levels of AP. In fact, very recent research (Rodon, 2022) has found, with AP (conceptualized both in left-right and territorial terms) as a predictor and vote choice as the outcome, that AP related to the territorial axis is mainly related to voting choice among right-wing citizens.

To sum up, the theoretical expectations of this research can be summarized as follows:

H1: Increased perceptions of territorial polarization cause an increase in affective polarization (AP), even when controlling for perceived left-right polarization.

H2A: The effect of perceived territorial polarization on AP increases in contexts that are characterized by a high saliency of the territorial conflict.

H2B: The territorial dimension is more strongly associated with AP for right-wing citizens.

²³ Nationalism has not always been a monopoly of the right. In fact, patriotism was progressively appropriated by the political right, promoted by the suspicion of nationalism of early Marxism, and most importantly the rise of authoritarian and fascist regimes during the inter-war period. But exceptions can be found in the rise of anti-colonialism, post-colonialism, and stateless nationalism, in which the left embraces pro-independence patriotism (see Conversi, 2020; Erk, 2010; Núñez-Seixas, 2018).

5.2 Research Design

5.2.1 The case of Spain

Spain constitutes a case of a multiparty system that, after the 2008 economic downturn, has been characterized by a deepening of both the left-right and the territorial conflicts. In addition, Spain constitutes a case of a multidimensional political space, including parties from the radical left to the radical right of the ideological axis, and parties that range from radical Spanish nationalist positions to pro-independence parties in some regions regarding the territorial axis. Besides, we can find several combinations of positions in both conflicts. This case will provide us with the variation necessary to assess the impact of perceived polarization regarding the left-right and territorial dimensions on AP.

Spanish politics has been recently characterized by high levels of conflict on both axes, with the push for independence in Catalonia, on the one hand, and the emergence of powerful and politically relevant parties on both the right and left of the political spectrum on the other. Previous research contends that the Catalan crisis might have contributed to AP towards party leaders (Torcal & Comellas, 2022). The Spanish party system has changed from an imperfect two-party system to a clear multiparty one in which, for the first time since 1975, and after four general elections occurring between 2015 and 2019, a left-wing coalition government was formed in 2019 with the support, among others, of the Catalan, Galician, and Basque nationalist parties. Before this coalition was formed, a referendum on independence (declared illegal by the Spanish authorities) was held in Catalonia in October 2017 in a climate of tension and harsh police repression. After that, the conflict between the Spanish and Catalan governments escalated, and various events unfolded in succession: a unilateral declaration of independence for a few seconds by the Catalan president (Carles Puigdemont), an institutional speech made by the Spanish King, and the central government taking control of the Catalan institutions. These events evinced that Spanish politics was witnessing unprecedented levels of conflict on the territorial dimension. These facts provoked the most severe constitutional crisis since the restoration of democracy after Franco's dictatorship. Spanish politics over the years following the events of October 2017 was heavily influenced by this national crisis.

5.2.2 Data

This paper leverages an 11-wave panel survey (POLAT) developed and conducted by the Democracy, Elections, and Citizenship research group from the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Hernández et al., 2021). The panel started in 2010 and has now accumulated 14 waves, with about 1000 subjects that have remained active since the beginning and a final sample (N=2,000) that, through quota

sampling and refreshments, is representative of the Spanish population between 18 and 54 years old. This panel survey was created with the aim of capturing changes in Spaniards' social and political attitudes, in a context marked by economic and political crises, unrest, and transformations in the Spanish political system.

In the survey, individuals were repeatedly asked about their perceptions of parties' left-right and territorial positions, as well as their probability of voting for a given party (PTV). This panel contains measures before and after the constitutional crisis that occurred due to the events that took place in Catalonia. Because of this, the POLAT panel is an extremely valuable tool for capturing intra-individual attitudinal change.

5.2.3 Variables

Affective polarization was calculated from a measure of probability to vote for a party (PTV) (0-No probability at all to 10-In all likelihood), which is used as a proxy to capture individuals' affinity towards the different Spanish political parties. This PTV measure is not the canonical like-dislike scale or a feeling thermometer, which are more frequently used, but it has recently been successfully used to capture AP (Orriols & León, 2021) and antipathy towards populist radical right parties (Meléndez & Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2021). More importantly, to see if PTVs can effectively capture individuals' affect towards parties, I run the correlations between both measures (like-dislike scales and PTVs) for the same parties in an additional representative survey on political polarization in Spain, conducted by the Democracy, Elections and Citizenship group. Correlations in like-dislike scales and PTVs for the four main Spanish parties range between 0.8 and 0.87, indicating a very high correlation between both measures. Regarding like-dislike scales and PTVs for ERC (Republican left of Catalonia), the correlation is also high (0.75), even though it is a regional party that only stands for election in Catalonia. The full correlation table, along with some descriptive statistics, can be found in the appendix, in Tables A 5.2 and A 5.3. The high correlations between both measures inform us that PTVs are a suitable measure to assess individuals' feelings towards parties.

PTV scales were employed for each of the nation-wide Spanish political parties to build the spread AP measure (Wagner, 2021). The spread measure tries to capture the distribution of affect towards the different political parties, assuming that an individual can have strongly positive (or negative) feelings for more than one party.

$$AP (Spread)_i = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{p=1}^P (like_{ip} + \overline{like}_i)^2}{n_p}}$$

Here, i designates an individual respondent and p a party, while $like_{ip}$ is the like-dislike score which is assigned by an individual (i) to a party (p). \overline{like}_i Designates the mean of affinity with the different parties. This index, as well as the indexes of ideological and territorial polarization have been weighted by party importance, using each party's vote share in the previous elections for the different waves. The weighted formula looks like this:

$$AP (Spread)_i = \sqrt{\sum_{p=1}^P v_p (like_{ip} - \overline{like}_i)^2}$$

Here, v_p is the vote share of each party, ranging from 0 to 1, and the mean affinity is also weighted by party size.

The main independent variables are built from two items that ask about perceived party positions on the classic left-right scale and on a scale of Spanish patriotism, which captures parties' positions regarding the territorial conflict. Polarization across this axis (territorial polarization) captures citizens' perceived levels of elite conflict regarding the territorial dimension. Participants, after reporting their personal opinions on both scales (left-right and Spanish patriotism), are asked about where they think the main political parties are located on those scales.

Following the same logic used in Dalton's (2008) work and also the construction of the spread indicator for AP, the two independent variables, ideological polarization and territorial polarization, are calculated using the weighted sum of the square distances between the positions attributed to each one of the parties, for both the left-right and the territorial dimensions. The higher the levels of polarization an individual perceives, the higher their score, in the same way as the AP spread index.

Besides these independent variables, I also use different control variables whose importance has been tested by previous literature. All this information can be found in the appendix, along with the description and operationalization of all variables.

5.2.4 Methods

To test hypothesis 1, I conduct three linear panel models with fixed effects. In the first model, AP is the dependent variable and left-right polarization is the main independent variable. In addition, as controls, the intensity of party identity, political knowledge, the evaluation of the government, individuals' levels of Spanish patriotism, and a quadratic term of ideology are included. The aim of the quadratic term is to control for ideological extremism (Westfall et al., 2015). Besides, following Hartevelde (2021), the model controls for the effective number of parties in each wave, as a means for absorbing the mechanical correlation that may exist between the main independent variables and the

outcome. Time invariant variables are not included, as the model already controls for them. The second model incorporates the same variables but substitutes left-right polarization with territorial polarization. The third model incorporates both main variables together with all the controls, to see if territorial polarization is still a significant predictor even when controlling for ideological polarization. Apart from this, the same panel fixed effects regressions are conducted with the unweighted spread AP index, thereby providing a robustness check of this hypothesis (see table A 5.6 in the appendix).

To further explore this relationship, I use a dynamic panel design. I conducted a 4-wave cross-lagged panel model to see the capacity of previous levels of territorial polarization to explain current levels of AP, as well as the capacity of previous levels of AP to explain current levels of territorial polarization. Through this model, it is possible to test if t-1 levels of territorial polarization explain t-levels of AP, as well as the opposite hypothesis. The covariance between the error terms is calculated and included in the model, and coefficients are standardized (Acock, 2013).

To test H2A, I run three cross-sectional linear regressions for different points in time (2017, 2018 and 2019), including the same controls as in the fixed-effects panel models. 2017 (before Catalonia's independence referendum in October) was a context of low saliency regarding the territorial conflict, and 2018 and 2019 were characterized by high saliency regarding this conflict, and this article tests if these variations in saliency have an activation effect and translate into a stronger relationship between territorial polarization and AP.

To test H2B, I add three additional models. The main one interacts territorial polarization with self-reported ideology (as a time-invariant attitude). A second model interacts ideological polarization with self-reported ideology, and a third includes both interactions. These two additional models aim to test the moderating role of individuals' self-reported ideology on the relationship between perceptions of polarization on the two axes of political competition and AP. The other controls are the same as for the other models. As panel fixed effects models do not allow for the inclusion of ideology as a time-invariant moderator, the latter is conceptualized and introduced in the model as a value or a stable attitude. Then, I performed a carry-forward strategy, selecting individuals' self-reported ideology in wave 9²⁴ (the first wave in which our panel contains indicators of territorial polarization) and carrying this value forward to waves 10, 11 and 12, so self-reported ideology is included in the model as a time-invariant moderator. This operation allows us to retain the individuals who participated in the four waves, maintaining their ideology as a time-invariant predictor, and enables us to run an interaction

²⁴ When carrying forward the value of self-reported ideology obtained in wave 8, the model loses many participants. Because of this, I decided to carry forward the value of this variable in wave 9, even though this variable and the others in the analysis are measured at the same time point. In any case, ideology can be conceptualized, as it has been done in this article, as a stable set of attitudes, and therefore, it theoretically precedes the main independent variables (based on perceptions of the elites) and the main dependent variable (AP).

within the fixed effects framework. Additionally, as another robustness check, figures A 5.3 and A 5.4 show the interactions' results using as dependent variable the unweighted spread AP index.

5.3 Results

5.3.1 The territorial conflict and its relationship with affective polarization

A graphical representation of the means and standard deviations of our main variables can be found in the appendix (see figures A 5.1 and A 5.2). Table 5.1 contains three models: in the first one, just one of the two main IVs is included (left-right polarization), the second one includes only territorial polarization, and the third includes both main independent variables. Controls are included in all models.

Table 5.1 shows that increased perceptions of ideological and territorial polarization correlate with increases in AP, and this effect is considerable and consistent across different ways of operationalizing the dependent variable.²⁵ In model 3, when both main independent variables are added, we see a slight decrease in the coefficient of territorial polarization, but without compromising the statistical significance at $p < 0.01$. This might indicate that, at the national level, the left-right dimension absorbs part of the territorial dimension (Galais & Serrano, 2019). Nevertheless, both predictors are statistically significant.

These results confirm hypothesis 1 in a robust manner. Increases in territorial polarization lead to increases in individual levels of AP, even controlling for left-right polarization. Polarization on both axes of conflict seems to influence AP, and neither of the dimensions seems to overshadow the other, underlining the importance of analyzing both dimensions separately when it comes to explaining affective dynamics.

Table 5.1: Linear panel regressions with fixed effects

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
W. Territorial polarization		0.180*** (0.175)	0.158*** (0.154)
W. Ideological polarization	0.182*** (0.125)		0.176*** (0.102)
Political knowledge	0.0654* (0.0141)	-0.0139 (-0.00329)	-0.00570 (-0.00135)

²⁵ Results are very similar picture when using the unweighted spread indicator (see Appendix).

Interest in politics	0.104*** (0.0565)	0.103*** (0.0661)	0.0964*** (0.0618)
Intensity of party ID	0.250*** (0.115)	0.136*** (0.0720)	0.133*** (0.0708)
Economic situation	-0.00890 (-0.00523)	0.0272 (0.0187)	0.0227 (0.0156)
Evaluation of the government	-0.00341 (-0.00267)	-0.0395*** (-0.0379)	-0.0491*** (-0.0472)
Self-reported ideology	-0.154*** (-0.215)	-0.121*** (-0.201)	-0.0925** (-0.154)
Self-reported ideology ²	0.0170*** (0.231)	0.00998*** (0.161)	0.00726** (0.117)
Number of parties	0.0447*** (0.0272)	0.113*** (0.0453)	0.107*** (0.0426)
Spanish patriotism	0.0478*** (0.104)	0.0418*** (0.108)	0.0386*** (0.0999)
Constant	1.443***	1.584***	1.132***
Observations	13,919	5,174	5,174

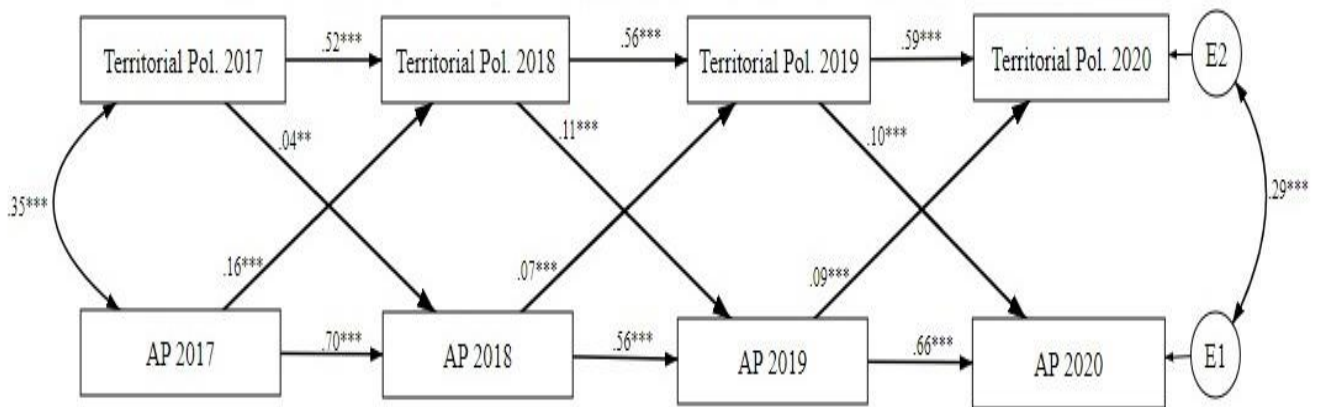
Normalized beta coefficients in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

To further develop these findings and exploit the panel structure of the data, figure 5.1 shows a cross-lagged panel model. This technique is suitable for identifying causal relationships between variables and allows us to test to what extent the t-1 levels of our independent variable explain the t-levels of the dependent variable and vice versa.

The picture shown by the model in figure 5.1 is complex. On the diagonal arrows, the coefficients at the top show the path from territorial polarization to AP, whereas the coefficients at the bottom show the inverse path. The figure shows reciprocal causality in all waves, but the capacity of each of the variables to predict the other seems to change over time. From 2017 to 2018, AP is a better predictor of territorial polarization than the other way around, but from 2018 to 2019 and from 2019 to 2020, territorial polarization becomes a better predictor of AP. These results expand on the ones obtained through the fixed effects panel models and offer us a more dynamic picture of the relationship between the main variables. The fact that the relationship changes over time points to the importance of contextual effects. The POLAT panel timespan captures differences in the salience of the territorial dimension, and thus it is plausible that changes in saliency might influence the degree of association between territorial polarization and AP.

Figure 5.1: Estimated model for Cross Lagged Panel relating Territorial Polarization and AP



5.3.2 Contextual effects: the salience of territorial conflict and AP

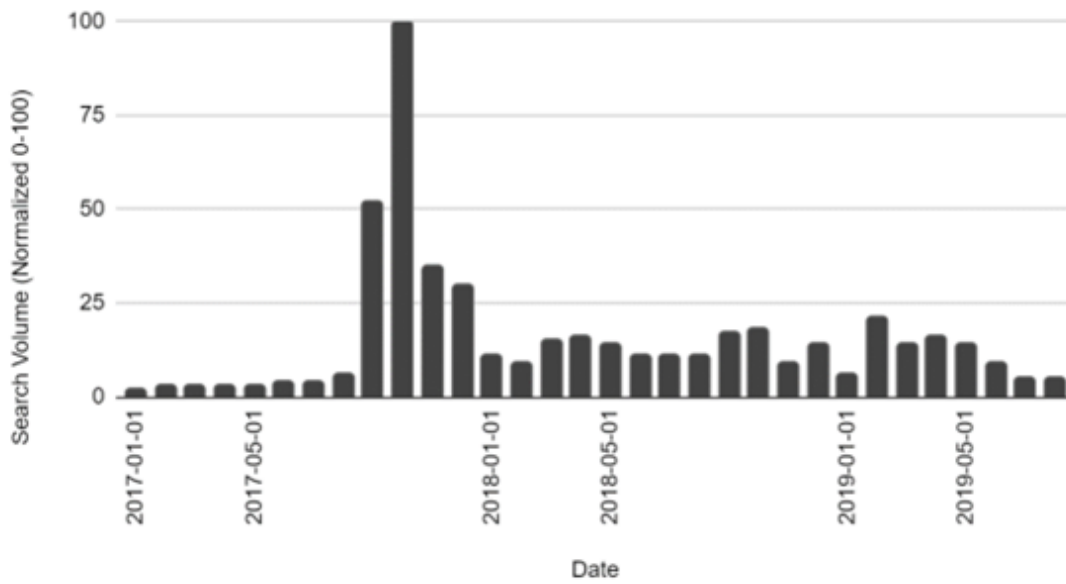
Figure 5.1 shows that, at the first time point (May/June 2017), before the Catalan referendum and the events that unfolded after it, the path from AP to territorial polarization is stronger than the other way around, even though both are significant. Nevertheless, these dynamic changes beginning in 2018, the first time point measuring both variables after the significant events that occurred in Catalonia. As we can see in CIS (Spanish poll institute) data, Spaniards were not very concerned about Catalan independence in the first months of 2017. In fact, when the 9th wave of the panel was fielded, the proportion of the Spanish population that considered Catalan independence or nationalism as an important problem was just 1.6% and 1.4%, respectively. However, this changed abruptly in September 2017 and reached a peak in October 2017 after the independence referendum was held. Then, 30% of Spanish citizens thought that territorial-related issues were the most important issues facing the country. In fact, these issues were the second biggest concern for Spaniards at the time, more than economic matters and healthcare.

The unprecedented events that took place at the end of 2017 constituted a turning point in the saliency of the territorial dimension. After these events, regional elections in Catalonia were called by the Spanish central government and were held on December 21, 2017, resulting in a tight majority for pro-independence parties. Ciudadanos (a party with a clear strong centralist, anti-independence and punitive profile regarding Catalan pro-independence leaders) was the winning party but did not have any real options to govern. In this way, 2018 began with this exceptional climate in Catalonia and the rest of the country, and the saliency of the territorial conflict remained high. A remarkable example of the magnitude of the territorial conflict at that time was that, in the Andalusian regional elections of December 2018, the far-right party Vox obtained almost 15% of the vote by prioritizing the territorial axis and making constant references to Catalonia and the defense of Spanish national unity.

This saliency remained high during 2019, for many reasons. The fieldwork for wave 11 (May 31, 2019-July 11, 2019) took place at a time when several relevant political events were unfolding. In April 2019 national elections were held and one of the central concerns of negotiations to form a new government was how to manage the territorial crisis. Besides, the far-right party Vox, months after emerging in the Andalusian parliament, also made it into the national parliament with a 10,3% of the vote rate. All parties had to position themselves regarding the imprisonment of some Catalan leaders, and in February 2019, the long trial against these leaders in the Spanish constitutional court began, becoming one of the most salient issues in the media. Besides, news about the leaders that had fled to other European countries (such as in Puigdemont's case) were also constantly in the news. Furthermore, one of the main red lines that many parties drew up at that time for giving their support to a party to form a government was that it should not negotiate with pro-independence parties or govern with the support of those parties. Competition on the territorial axis was the order of the day and it clearly conditioned any formation of a government.

In parallel, on May 26, regional, local, and European elections took place. Among them, elections for Barcelona city council and the subsequent negotiations to form a government, where the territorial dimension had high importance, were especially salient at a national level. All in all, both 2018 and 2019 were years in which the territorial dimension was salient and played a pivotal role in Spanish politics (Garmendia-Madariaga & Riera, 2022). The greater weight of the territorial dimension after October 2017 and its continuity through 2018 and 2019 can be observed if we analyze the search volume of a term like "independentists". In figure 5.2, generated with Google Trends, it can be observed that, after October, 1st 2017 the volume of searches of this territorial-related term grew and maintained through 2018 and 2019 at higher levels than before this event. This figure shows that the volume of searches is very low around May and June 2017 (wave 9's fieldwork) and is higher both in May/June 2018/2019 (wave 10 and 11's fieldwork). Most importantly, the volume of searches after September 2017 increased to maintain higher for several months during 2018 and 2019.

Figure 5.2: Search Volume of the term “independentists”



Generated with Google Trends

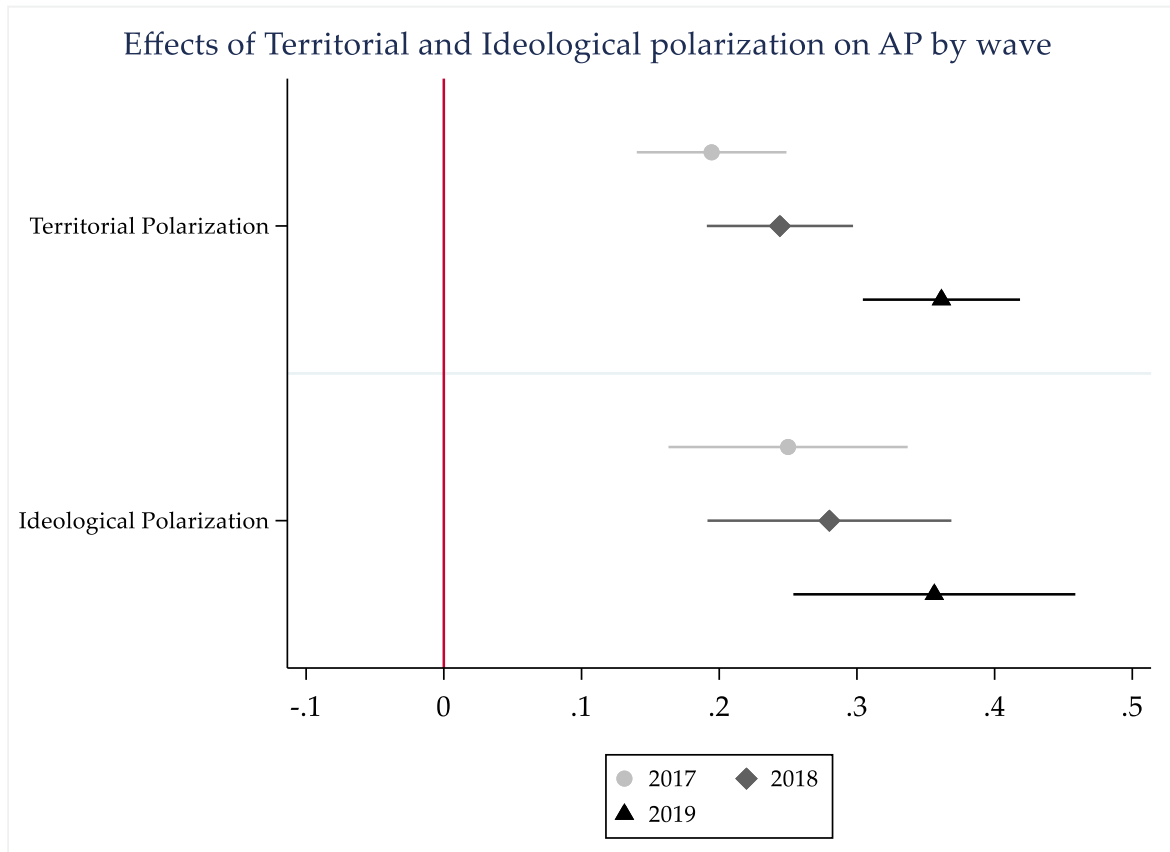
In May 2017, the panel survey’s fieldwork was carried out in the context of low saliency of this conflict, whereas the 2018 and 2019 fieldwork was performed in the context of high saliency. Consequently, I expect the influence of territorial polarization on AP to be higher in 2018 and 2019 than in 2017.

These expectations are tested in figure 5.3, which shows the results of 3 separate cross-sectional linear regressions for 2017, 2018, and 2019 (see table A 5.4 in the appendix for the full table). Controls are the same as in table 5.1. Figure 5.3 shows the coefficients of territorial polarization and ideological polarization as predictors of AP for each year. The expectations are that context might play an activation effect, leading perceptions of territorial polarization to better predict AP. And this is indeed what I find. The predictive capacity of territorial polarization goes up slightly from 2017 to 2018; and grows substantially in 2019, becoming an even stronger predictor than left-right polarization. The remarkable predictive capacity of territorial polarization in 2019 might also have to do with Vox’s entry in both Andalusian and general elections (the latter just a month before our 2019 fieldwork) and their Spanish nationalist discourse, accompanied by a harsh rhetoric against Catalan independentists.

These results, taken together with the results of the cross-lagged model, point to the relevance of contextual events to explain the relationship between territorial polarization and AP. Figure 5.1 indicates that before the peak in the saliency of the territorial dimension, AP seemed to predict the level of conflict that individuals perceived on the territorial axis, and the latter had a modest capacity to explain AP. But when the salience of the territorial question increased, the dynamics changed, and

perceived territorial polarization become a better predictor of AP. Likewise, figure 5.3 shows the association between the variables becomes stronger as the territorial dimension’s salience increased. Thus, as hypothesized, the impact of territorial polarization increases when the salience of the territorial dimension also rises.

Figure 5.3: Coefficient plot showing the association between Territorial/Left-right polarization and AP at 3 different time points (2017, 2018, 2019)



5.3.3 Heterogeneous effects of perceived polarization in the territorial and left-right dimensions

To measure if ideological identification moderates the relationship between territorial polarization and AP, we add three interactions to the model previously presented in table 5.1. The main one is between individuals’ self-reported ideology and territorial polarization. Secondly, I include an interaction between self-reported ideology and left-right polarization. I also run a third model that includes both interactions. Our models are presented in table 5.2. The interaction between territorial polarization and ideology is positive and significant. This means that people that have right-wing ideologies tend to become more affectively polarized when they perceive polarization on the territorial axis, whereas left-wing citizens remain less affected by this axis of conflict. The territorial

axis, as expected, seems to be more potentially polarizing for right-wing citizens. To see this more clearly, results when “ideology 9” (that is, self-reported ideology in wave 9) is included as a categorical variable can be found in table A 5.5 in the appendix. With the center as the reference category, left-wing citizens (located at 1, 3, and 4 of the scale) tend to have a negative interaction coefficient, with the difference with centrist citizens being significant for left-wingers located at number 4 of the scale at a 10% confidence interval. As for those located at numbers 0 and 2 of the scale, they have a positive but non-significant interaction coefficient. The results also thus point to a higher influence of the territorial axis for centrist individuals, but the results are modest.²⁶ A clearer picture emerges when comparing centrist and right-wing citizens, clearly showing that the territorial dimension is more important in explaining AP dynamics for right-wing citizens. These results are in line with our hypothesis H2B. The relationship between territorial polarization and AP is moderated by individuals’ self-reported ideology. This relationship is represented graphically in figure 5.4. It represents the average marginal effect of a 1-unit change in the predictor (perceived territorial polarization) on the dependent variable (AP) for each level of the moderator (self-reported ideology).

The interaction between self-reported ideology and ideological polarization is shown in model 5 (included alone) and model 6 (included together with the interaction between ideology and territorial polarization). The coefficient indicates that people with left-wing ideologies tend to become more affectively polarized when they perceive polarization in left-right terms. Nevertheless, this does not reach the threshold of statistical significance. But in model 6, when we add both interactions, the coefficient becomes significant, a fact that indicates that perceiving polarization on the left-right dimension is more polarizing for left-wing individuals, even though the magnitude of the effect is lower than the one shown in figure 5.4. I represent this relationship on a graph in figure 5.5.

Table 5.2: Fixed effects panel models with interactions between ideology and territorial polarization and controls

Variables	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
W. Territorial Polarization	0.0580 (0.0570)	0.154*** (0.151)	0.0336 (0.0330)
W. Territorial Pol. X Ideology	0.0227** (0.151)		0.0287*** (0.191)
W. Ideological Polarization	0.160*** (0.0923)	0.245*** (0.141)	0.297*** (0.171)
W. Ideological Polarization X Ideology		-0.0173 (-0.0961)	-0.0295** (-0.164)

²⁶ When conducting different fixed effects linear regressions for each of the ideological groups, with the rough categorization of (0-4= left) (5=center) (6-10=right), we see that territorial polarization is highly significant for right-wing citizens, significant for centrist citizens and non-significant for left-wing citizens.

Political Knowledge	0.0255 (0.00624)	0.0232 (0.00570)	0.0261 (0.00639)
Political Interest	0.0845** (0.0546)	0.0842** (0.0545)	0.0824** (0.0533)
Intensity of party ID	0.122*** (0.0648)	0.122*** (0.0649)	0.123*** (0.0653)
Economic situation	0.00562 (0.00385)	0.00785 (0.00537)	0.00682 (0.00467)
Self-reported ideology	-0.105** (-0.172)	-0.107*** (-0.177)	-0.104** (-0.171)
Self-reported ideology ²	0.00768* (0.122)	0.00844** (0.134)	0.00774* (0.123)
Government Evaluation	-0.0520*** (-0.0503)	-0.0526*** (-0.0508)	-0.0529*** (-0.0511)
Number of parties	0.0938*** (0.0375)	0.0975*** (0.0390)	0.0980*** (0.0392)
Spanish patriotism	0.0445*** (0.116)	0.0471*** (0.123)	0.0448*** (0.117)
Constant	1.365***	1.300***	1.293***
Observations	3,894	3,894	3,894

Normalized beta coefficients in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Figure 5.4: AMEs of Territorial Polarization on AP by ideological self-identification (95% CIs)

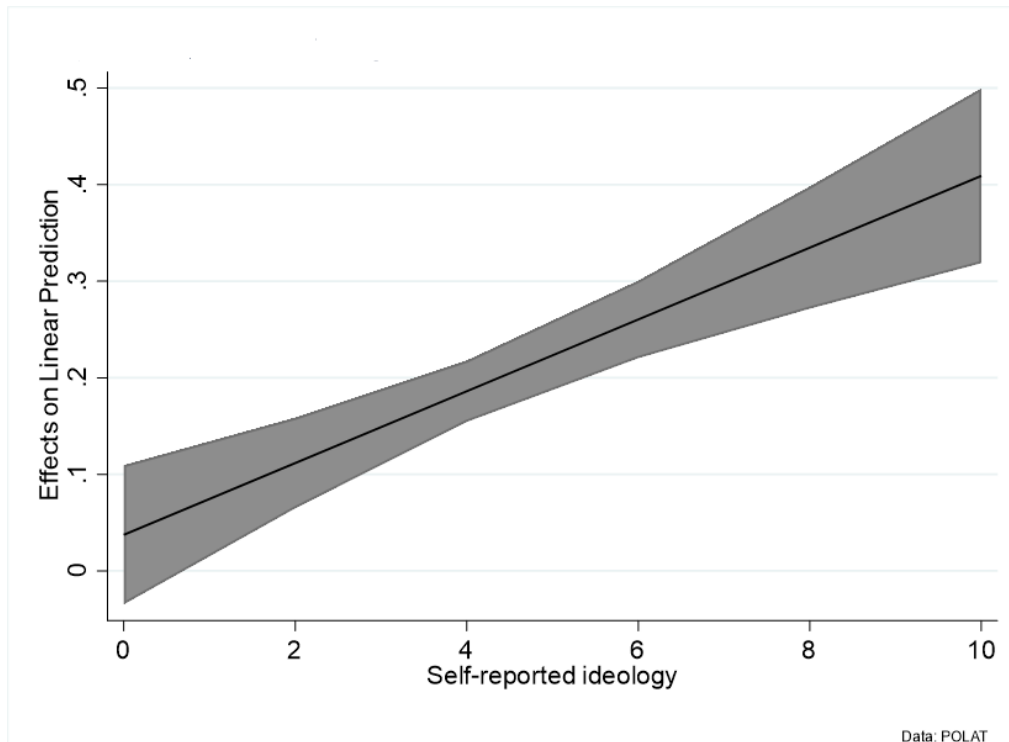
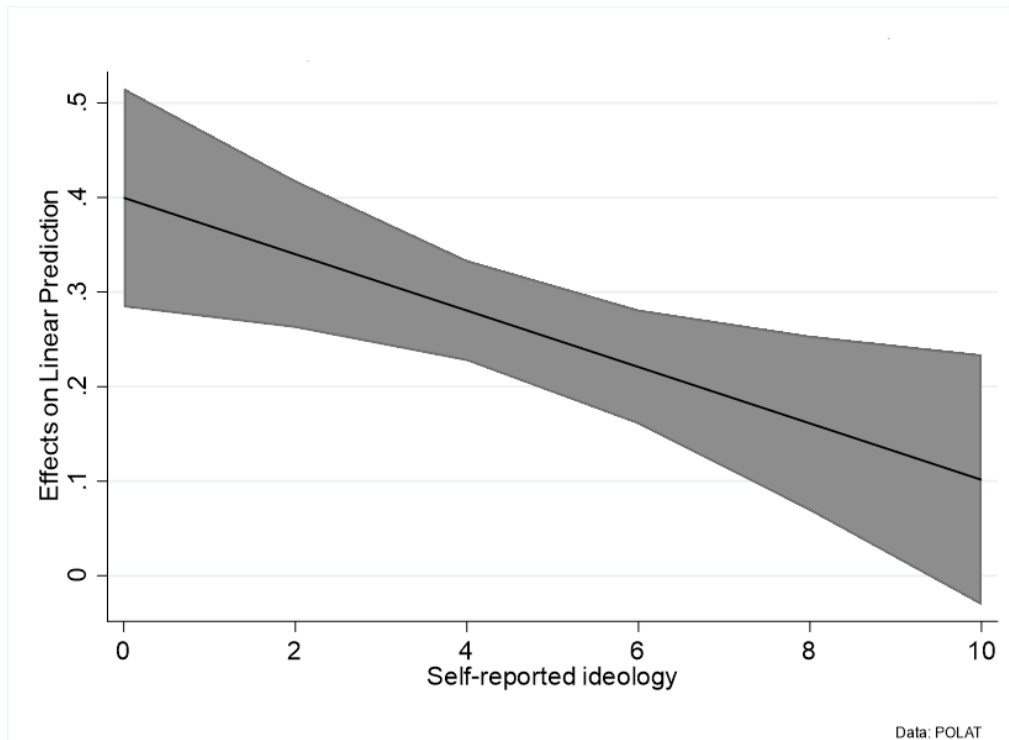


Figure 5.5: AMEs of Left-right Polarization on AP by ideological self-identification (95% CIs)



5.4 Conclusions

This article aims to deepen the understanding of how affective polarization is configured in multidimensional political spaces defined by left-right and territorial axes. Firstly, this paper posits that individuals' perceptions of parties' territorial polarization can be a predictor of AP. I find that this is indeed the case, even when the models control for perceived ideological polarization.

Hereafter, analyzing the importance of territorial polarization over time, I found that it varies along with significant political events which increase the level of conflict and salience in this dimension. This indicates the importance of considering the context when studying AP dynamics. Moreover, exploring self-reported ideology as a possible moderator of the above-mentioned relationship, I have found that perceived territorial polarization is fundamental for explaining AP among right-wing citizens and somewhat important for centrist people (compared to left-wing people), whereas perceptions of the left-right dimension are significantly important principally for left-wing citizens in explaining their affective dynamics.

These findings are relevant and complement previous research on this subject matter. In this sense, as Padró-Solanet and Balcells (2022) explored also in the Spanish context, this paper finds that the territorial dimension is a source of AP that cannot be encapsulated in the left-right cleavage, and adds

two important nuances regarding when the territorial dimension might be more likely to produce AP. The territorial dimension heightens its capacity to produce AP when the territorial conflict plays a pivotal role in the Spanish national arena, and it is particularly more relevant to explain within-individual changes in AP among right-wing citizens.

Furthermore, contrary to previous research looking at the relationship between perceived polarization and AP in the US context (Armaly & Enders, 2021), this paper does find evidence of reciprocal causality. That is, previously formed political identities and the difference in affect between in-parties and out-parties might exacerbate the degree to which citizens perceive these parties' elites to be divided, but citizens' perceived division between the elites can also fuel AP. This article shows a complex picture in which context is a key factor in explaining variations in the capacity of perceived territorial polarization to contribute to AP. Along these lines, the present article engages with previous research underlining the importance of elite behavior when thinking about political polarization and depolarization strategies (Barrio & Rodríguez-Teruel, 2016; Bassan Nygate and Weiss, 2022). In terms of the main debates taking place within AP literature, these results show that ideological aspects (being in left-right terms or territorial/ethnonational terms) matter when trying to explain AP. However, this is perfectly compatible with explanations based on the importance of social identities or social sorting (Comellas, 2022), and as the cross-lagged panel model shows, one-sided explanations might not be enough to explain the dynamic interplay between individual, group-level, and contextual factors contributing to AP.

Altogether, these findings are potentially applicable to countries in which left-right dynamics co-exist with ethnonational conflicts. Knowing that other cleavages beyond left-right matter as causes of AP, and that a conflict dimension's importance also depends on demand-side and time-varying and contextual factors improves our knowledge of the reasons behind this relevant sociopolitical phenomenon. At a practical level, researchers may find it useful to consider this heterogeneity when designing depolarizing interventions.

Despite these contributions, some of the evidence, such as the importance of the saliency of a dimension of political competition to explain AP, is still preliminary and needs to be complemented with cross-national evidence. Similarly, the possibility of generalizing the findings to other multinational democracies, although very likely, should be further tested. Nevertheless, our findings suppose a step forward towards the understanding of the complexity behind the dynamics of affective polarization.

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<https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691615569849>

5.6 Appendix

Wording of Control Variables

Political Knowledge: To assess it, in each wave an index is created from questions about well-known Spanish politicians or relevant events that had taken place that year.

Intensity of party identification: The survey asks people, after knowing the party they identify with, “How closer do you feel to that party?”. The possible answers are 3: “A bit” “Quite” and “very much”. I codified the first case as “weak partisans” and the next two as “Strong partisans”.

Political interest: this variable measures individuals’ level of self-reported interest in politics, ranging from 0-not interested at all to 4-great interest.

Individuals’ ideological extremism: This variable is important due to the tendency of people to project their own ideological extremism onto the others (Van Boven, Judd & Sherman, 2012), which implies that more ideologically extreme individuals would be more prone to perceive more ideological differences between the parties. This is important, because ideological distance between the parties is one of my main independent variables used to predict AP regarding hypothesis 2. To control for this, I Add in the linear panel models a quadratic term for individuals’ own ideology, to see if extremism is related to levels of AP, that is, if the relationship between extremism and AP follows an U-shaped line.

Individuals’ perceived country’s economic situation: “Regarding general Spanish economic situation, how would you rate it”. Responses ranged from 1- very good to 5- very bad.

Government assessment: “On the whole, how would you rate the (incumbent’s) government management?”

Spanish patriotism: “The next scale measures Spanish identity. Where would you locate yourself? Responses ranged from 0- No Spanish identity to 10-Maximum level of Spanish identity.

Figures and tables

Table A 5.1: Types of polarization conceptualized and measured

Type of polarization	Conceptualization
VD: Affective polarization	Through the measurement of the feelings of individuals towards the different parties, AP is calculated as the sum of squared distances

	between the feelings for the in-parties and the feelings for the out-parties.
VI: (perceived) left-right polarization	Measures individuals' perceived distances between the different parties in the 11-point left-right scale.
VI: (perceived) Territorial polarization	Measures individuals' perceived distances between the different parties in an 11-point scale of Spanish patriotism.

Figure A 5.1: Mean values of our variables of interest

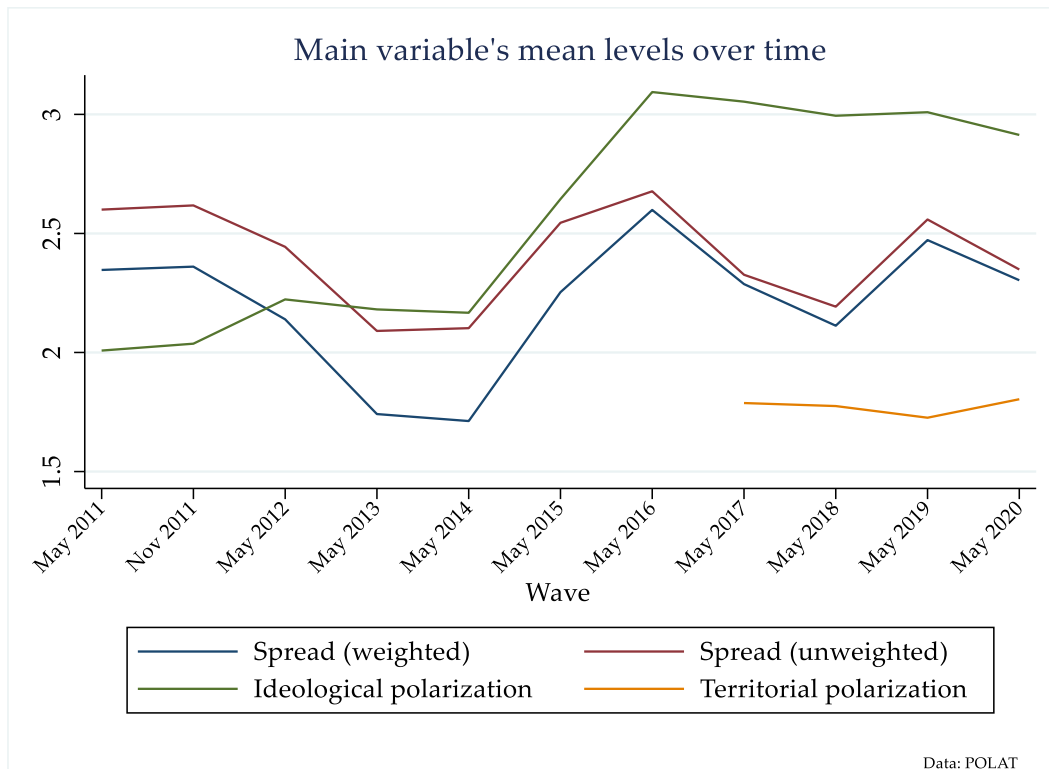


Figure A 5.2: Standard deviations of our variables of interest

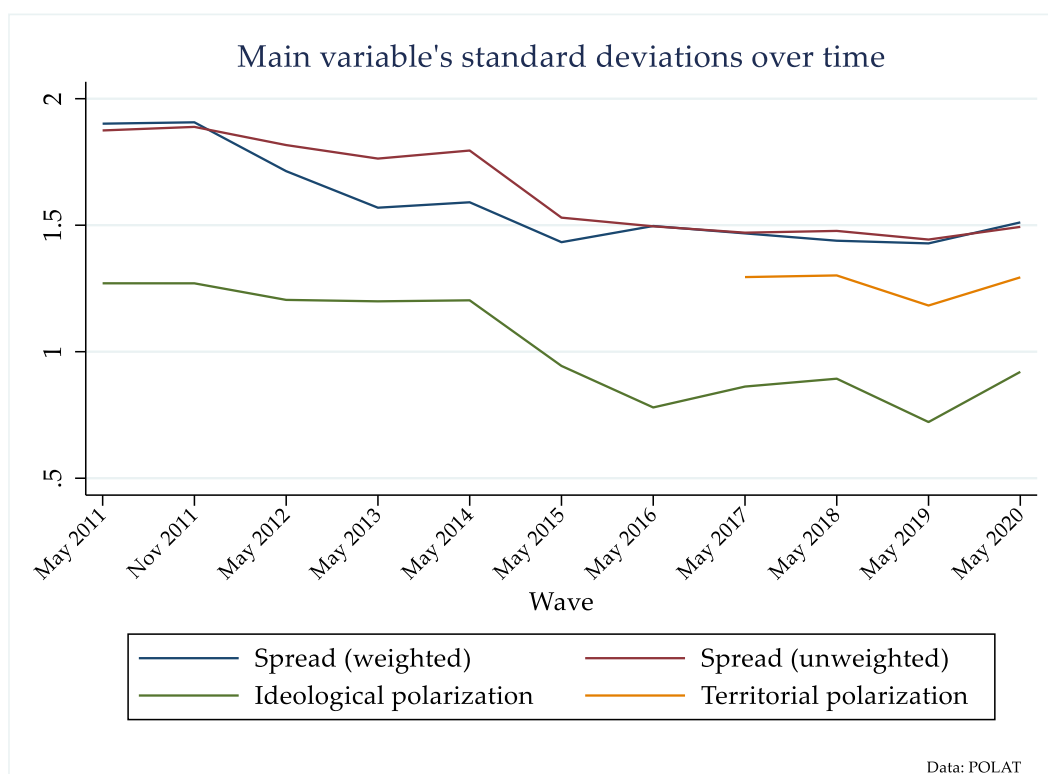


Table A 5.2: Correlation table: Like dislike and PTVs for each party

	Like-dislike PSOE	Like-dislike PP	Like-Dislike Podemos	Like-dislike Vox	Like-dislike ERC
PTV PSOE	0.8047	-0.1270	0.4359	-0.3154	0.2022
PTV PP	-0.2883	0.8040	-0.4067	0.5390	-0.2991
PTV Podemos	0.4769	-0.3138	0.8270	-0.3400	0.5107
PTV Vox	-0.3847	0.4430	-0.3631	0.8755	-0.2441
PTV ERC	0.2401	-0.2060	0.4626	-0.2002	0.7508

Source: Polarization Survey conducted by Democracy, Elections and Citizenship research group in March 2022

*All the correlations shown are significant, with p-values < 0.001

Table A 5.3: Means and Standard deviations PTVs and Like-dislike scales

Variable	Observations	Mean	Std. Dev
PTV PSOE	2342	3,35	3,44
PTV PP	2342	2,38	3,29
PTV UP	2342	2,58	3,31
PTV Vox	2342	1,43	2,53
PTV ERC	2342	1,66	3,06
Like-dislike PSOE	2473	3,79	2,96
Like-dislike PP	2473	2,78	2,79
Like-dislike UP	2473	2,85	2,97
Like-dislike Vox	2473	1,92	2,95
Like-dislike ERC	2473	1,98	2,56

Source: Polarization Survey conducted by Democracy, Elections and Citizenship research group in March 2022

Table A 5.4: Cross-sectional linear regressions by wave

Variables	May/June 2017	May/June 2018	May/June 2019
W. Territorial Polarization	0.194*** (0.197)	0.244*** (0.245)	0.361*** (0.339)
W. Ideological Polarization	0.250*** (0.154)	0.280*** (0.172)	0.356*** (0.182)
Political knowledge	0.0615 (0.0171)	-0.0569 (-0.0143)	0.429*** (0.0872)
Political interest	-0.0468 (-0.0299)	0.0512 (0.0337)	-0.0521 (-0.0340)
Intensity of party ID	0.315*** (0.169)	0.203*** (0.110)	0.166*** (0.0900)
Economic situation	0.00717 (0.00467)	-0.00187 (-0.00127)	-0.0129 (-0.00821)
Government evaluation	-0.0250 (-0.0227)	0.0122 (0.0110)	-0.272*** (-0.233)
Self-reported ideology	-0.172*** (-0.277)	-0.134** (-0.217)	-0.0715 (-0.126)
Self-reported ideology ²	0.0110* (0.163)	0.00338 (0.0530)	-0.000105 (-0.00179)
Spanish patriotism	0.0979*** (0.255)	0.0957*** (0.252)	0.0909*** (0.243)

Constant	1.246***	0.792**	1.445***
Observations	1,313	1,325	1,205
R-squared	0.178	0.198	0.287

Normalized beta coefficients in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table A 5.5: Interaction coefficients (ideology 9 as an 11-categories categorical variable. 5 as the reference category)

Variables	
Territorial Polarization	0.134*** (0.131)
Ideology9=0 x Territorial polarization	0.0640 (0.0195)
Ideology9=1 x Territorial polarization	-0.153 (-0.0406)
Ideology9=2 x Territorial polarization	0.0244 (0.0133)
Ideology9=3 x Territorial polarization	-0.0362 (-0.0217)
Ideology9=4 x Territorial polarization	-0.131* (-0.0701)
Ideology=5 (Reference category)	0 (0)
Ideology9=6 x Territorial polarization	0.126 (0.0744)
Ideology9=7 x Territorial polarization	0.214** (0.124)
Ideology9=8 x Territorial polarization	0.202* (0.0930)
Ideology9=9 x Territorial polarization	0.643*** (0.170)
Ideology9=10 x Territorial polarization	0.0661 (0.0187)
Ideological polarization	0.304*** (0.175)
Constant	1.359***
Observations	3,894

Normalized beta coefficients in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Robustness checks

Table A 5.6: Results with Unweighted spread indicator

Variables	Uspread1	Uspread2	Uspread3
W. Ideological Polarization	0.112*** (0.0786)		0.171*** (0.0994)
W. Territorial Polarization		0.182*** (0.179)	0.161*** (0.158)
Political Knowledge	0.0949** (0.0207)	-0.0402 (-0.00960)	-0.0322 (-0.00770)
Political Interest	0.120*** (0.0665)	0.0977*** (0.0632)	0.0912*** (0.0590)
Intensity of party ID	0.265*** (0.124)	0.140*** (0.0750)	0.138*** (0.0738)
Economic situation	0.00410 (0.00244)	0.0122 (0.00847)	0.00780 (0.00543)
Government evaluation	0.000227 (0.000180)	-0.0347** (-0.0337)	-0.0441*** (-0.0428)
Self-reported ideology	-0.192*** (-0.272)	-0.108*** (-0.182)	-0.0808** (-0.136)
Self-reported ideology ²	0.0190*** (0.261)	0.00892** (0.145)	0.00628* (0.102)
Number of parties	-0.0466*** (-0.0287)	0.123*** (0.0497)	0.117*** (0.0471)
Spanish patriotism	0.0428*** (0.0939)	0.0392*** (0.102)	0.0361*** (0.0942)
Constant	2.193***	1.648***	1.210***
Observations	13,919	5,174	5,174

Normalized beta coefficients in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Figure A 5.3: AMEs of Territorial Polarization on AP by ideological self-identification (95% CIs, unweighted spread indicator)

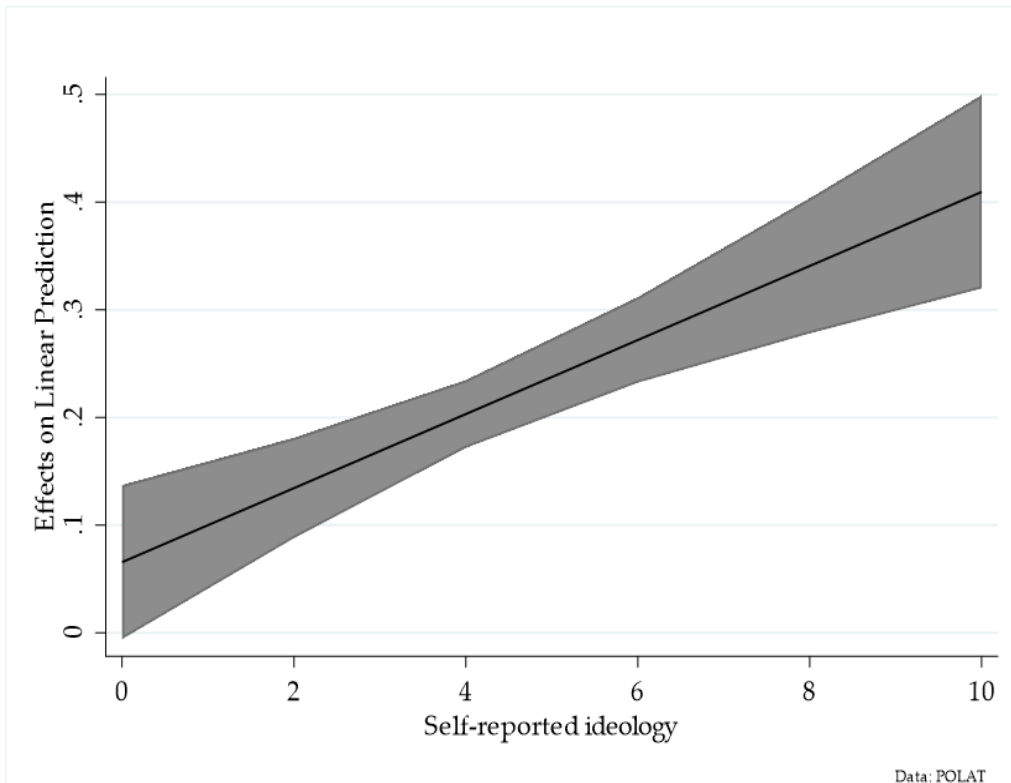
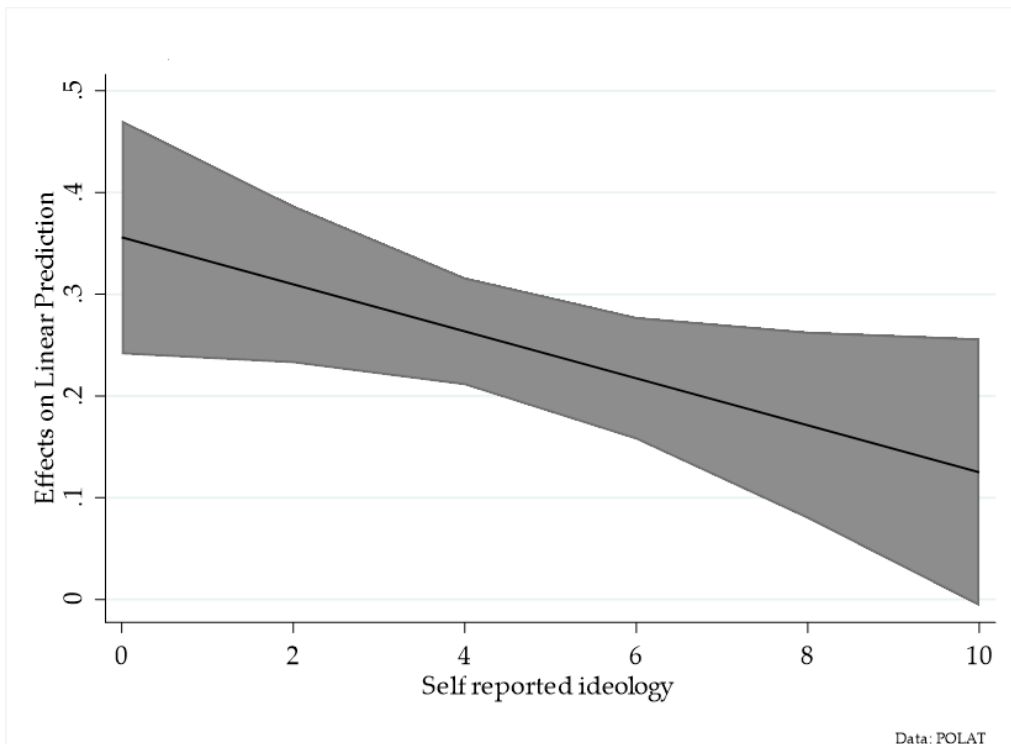


Figure A 5.4: AMEs of Left-right Polarization on AP by ideological self-identification (95% CIs, unweighted spread indicator)



Chapter 6: The Interactional Accomplishment of Ideological Antagonism: Discursive Dynamics of Partisan Prejudice*

Abstract

This paper explores the rhetoric of partisan prejudice in discussions about ideological antagonism. We use Discursive Psychology to analyze data from 7 focus groups (n=49) conducted with lay citizens with different political stances on the polarized secessionist conflict in the region of Catalonia, Spain. We illustrate how lay citizens manage political identities in the context of a highly polarized conflict. Our analysis provides an in-depth investigation of how participants co-produce accounts that assign blame for current polarization and how they collectively navigate the ideological dilemma of prejudice and tolerance when discussing the idea of self-determination. We also analyze how some participants defend the reasonableness of illiberal measures against political antagonists and their projects. We show how issues of partisanship and political prejudice are negotiated interactionally and through the use of varied interpretative repertoires as flexible ways of rhetorically contrasting commonsense rationality with ideological bias of antagonists. The paper contributes to literature on partisan prejudice and affective polarization by shifting the focus away from cognition onto the rhetorical mobilization of ideological antagonism in everyday political argumentation. The paper highlights the importance of interactional dynamics in the (re)production of partisan prejudice in the context of divided political opinion, opening potential new avenues for interventions aimed at depolarization.

Keywords: affective polarization, partisan prejudice, political prejudice, discursive psychology, depolarization.

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6.1 Introduction

Many democracies are witnessing increasing trends of political conflict recrudescence, confrontation, and antagonism. Typically, but not exclusively, scholars have studied these phenomena under the headings of political polarization, and more recently with a focus on the notion of affective polarization (henceforth, AP). AP is commonly conceptualized as the emotional ‘gap’ between supporters of different parties or political groups, i.e., the difference between positive feelings towards political ingroups and negative feelings towards political outgroups (Iyengar et al., 2012; Wagner, 2021).

Alongside AP, authors have been using other terms to capture the growing levels of political antagonism: tribalism, partyism (Westwood et al., 2018), or the more generic notions of partisan prejudice, political intolerance, political sectarianism, or partisan animosity. Indeed, the conceptual distinctions between some of these terms (i.e., partisan prejudice) and AP have not been clear (i.e., Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Rudolph & Hetherington, 2021).

There is a general concern in social and political psychology about AP and the constellation of related terms referred to above, as they might contribute to the deterioration of intergroup relations, democratic norms, and the acceptance of illiberal political practices, thereby possibly contributing to democratic backsliding (Orhan, 2022; Somer, McCoy & Luke, 2021). Scholars have examined AP’s foundations (i.e. Hübscher, Sattler & Wagner, 2021), consequences (i.e., Iyengar et al., 2019; Voelkel et al., 2023), and strategies for depolarization based mainly on de-biasing perceptions and metaperceptions about the outgroups and intergroup contact (Hartman et al., 2022; Jost, Baldassarri & Druckman, 2022; Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020).

6.1.1 Ideological antagonism in everyday political reasoning

Given the growing academic interest, what is surprising is the paucity of social-psychological investigations aiming to understand how ideological antagonism is constructed in everyday political interactions between lay citizens. The bulk of previous research tends to adopt an underpinning epistemology that places the onus on individual attitudes and emotions and on universal cognitive mechanisms (see Fernbach & van Boven, 2022). However, this focus limits the scope of alternative avenues of empirical enquiry (Balinhas, 2023; Figgou & Chrysochoou, 2019; Weltman & Billig, 2001). Importantly, it downplays the essential part played by communication and interaction as the foundations of political thinking, emotions, and moral frames that citizens use to make sense of

ideological allies and antagonists (Tileaga, 2015). The case for studying everyday political reasoning to understand complex political phenomena has been convincingly made by several political psychologists (e.g., Andreouli & Nicholson, 2018; Condor et al., 2006; Di Masso et al., 2014).

Thus, to fully grasp the more general dynamics of AP and support for illiberal politics (Mondon & Winter, 2020), we should carefully study how ideological antagonism is constructed by citizens themselves. Consequently, through an in-depth analysis of focus group data, this article analyzes how perspectives on polarization, ideological antagonism, and orientations to it are mobilized rhetorically in the context of one of the most polarized conflicts in contemporary Spain: the national or territorial conflict, lately manifested in the push for independence in Catalonia. Spain is a country that, according to recent research, is one of the most polarized of the various Western democracies (Gidron, Adams & Horne, 2020).

Our analysis contributes to the very scant corpus of discursive work on polarization (Rovamo et al., 2023) by analyzing three-related aspects of the everyday manifestations of partisan prejudice. First, we show how participants co-produce accounts of the conflicting political situation by placing the blame elsewhere, usually with political antagonists. Second, we show how individuals collectively produce situated understandings of rationality vs bias, rhetorically contrasting the supposedly rational outlook of ingroup(s) with the irrational and biased actions of outgroup(s). Finally, we consider how claims of ingroup virtue amount, in certain circumstances, to a rhetorical defense of illiberal political measures against people and groups described as ideological antagonists.

6.1.2 Everyday (un)prejudiced constructions of the political adversaries

When lay citizens actively discuss political polarization in everyday interactions notions of partisan prejudice and defense of illiberal political practices take on a different meaning. These are primarily discursive and collective achievements, where individuals engage in joint action to present their ingroup(s) as unbiased and unprejudiced (Condor et al., 2006).

The association between everyday political reasoning and prejudice is well documented, and includes, but is not limited to exploring the discursive repertoires by which people work up prejudiced versions of unprivileged groups (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Burke & Demasi, 2021), legitimize discriminatory practices without appearing prejudiced (Billig et al., 1988; Gibson & Booth, 2018), and/or how prejudiced repertoires legitimize material practices of exclusion and/or segregation (Di Masso, 2012). In this framework, prejudice and discrimination are not phenomena generated by and within

individuals' minds and cognition, but rather within everyday practices, which are re-signified and contested during everyday interactions with people who may hold contrasting political views.

The crux of understanding people's attempts to 'dodge the identity of prejudice' (Augoustinos et al., 2002) boils down to exploring how people themselves orient to social norms against the expression of prejudiced beliefs (Billig et al., 1988; Tileaga, 2005). In everyday terms, prejudice and tolerance are different sides of the same coin. Strategies of denial, suppression, or mitigation of prejudice in interactions (cf. Condor et al., 2006) provide fertile ground for the proliferation of ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988).

Negotiations and contestations of prejudice play an important role in party politics, social movements, and various other contemporary political struggles (Durrheim et al., 2018). A display of tolerance is an important aspect of managing the identity of prejudice, especially in contexts where people express strong views about political opponents, elites, or commentators who locate themselves differently on the ideological spectrum. In this line, Pradillo-Caimari et al., (2023), within the Spanish context, analyze how both pro-Catalan independence and anti-independence supporters ground national(ist) demands or positions in terms of rights and citizenship's entitlements, thereby mitigating potential accusations of prejudice. Relatedly, and constituting to our knowledge the only study to date aiming at exploring AP within everyday discourse, Rovamo et al. (2023) investigate how blame attributions give rise to affectively polarized viewpoints in casual discussions when Finns address the politically sensitive topic of immigration.

However, apart from the norm against prejudiced talk, researchers have also documented the emergence of a social norm against accusations of prejudice (Goodman & Burke, 2010). It is not uncommon to see political debates turn into cacophonies of accusations and counter-accusations of prejudice (Durrheim, 2020). Political actors and lay people alike engage in a constant struggle over the meaning of prejudice and tolerance (Figgou & Condor, 2006; Greenland et al., 2018). Durrheim et al., (2016) and Tileaga (2015) describe this struggle as a struggle over the nature of prejudice; that is, a collective dispute over the meaning that societies assign to the worth of people, including ideologically-misaligned citizens, politicians or members of political associations, among others. It is the political nature of prejudice (Dixon & Levine, 2012; Drury, 2012) that brings into view the historical and context-situated dynamic of partisan prejudice.

6.1.3 Collective understandings of partisan politics, polarization, and the nature of prejudice

In the context of today's political struggles in Europe and elsewhere, disputes about the nature of prejudice are debates that concern the worth of political actors who are seen as either ideologically aligned or ideological antagonists. Some essential points of conflict are the question of who belongs to the moral community of the tolerant, or who is to blame for political polarization (Pettersen & Sakki, 2022). We contend that these disputes can only be fully understood by combining a close analysis of the historical-political roots of political prejudice (Tileaga, Durrheim & Augoustinos, 2022), with a focus on how people co-produce everyday meanings and orientations to what we typically call 'partisanship' (Condor et al., 2006).

Whenever the issue of partisanship is alive for lay members of society and elites, we see at play a rhetorical dialectic that draws upon the opposing duality of tolerance vs prejudice and rationality vs bias (Demasi, 2016; Gibson, 2020). We take these matters to be essential matters of discursive negotiation and contestation in contexts where divisions along ideological lines are constantly drawn and supported by specific constructions and articulations of citizenship and nationhood (Pettersen & Sakki, 2022). The negotiation and contestation of these specific constructions draws attention to the dialogical character of argumentation (Shotter & Billig, 1998) and thus, a product of the joint action between different social actors (Condor et al., 2006). Taking seriously the dialogical character of everyday thinking implies that identity claims, accountability concerns, 'dodging the identity of prejudice' or defending political positions is something that happens between individuals in interaction within their immediate as well as the cultural and political context and not within individuals.

Considering these aspects, Andreouli and Nicholson (2018) and Andreouli et al. (2020) use critical discursive psychology to analyze everyday interactions around the issue of Brexit. These studies show how constructions of prejudice are used as multifaceted symbolic tools that individuals employ to position themselves and others within a divided and dividing political landscape. Complementarily, there has been recent discursive research using focus groups also in the context of Brexit that analyzes how metaperceptions are used in everyday constructions of those who think and have voted differently (Obradović & Draper, 2022).

This research, drawing insights from previous discursive work within political psychology, aims at providing a deeper understanding of lay citizens' collective constructions of ideological antagonism in the -polarized- context of the territorial conflict in Spain, and extend the social-psychological perspectives on these phenomena.

6.2 Method

6.2.1 Data collection

Data for this paper comes from focus groups (N=7) with Spanish citizens living in the province of Barcelona (n=49). Six of the focus groups took place in November 2018 and one of them in December 2022. They lasted between 1 hour 39 minutes and 2 hours and 15 minutes. The six focus groups in 2018 are part of a study (3251) conducted by the Spanish Poll Institute. The Spanish Poll Institute makes all its data accessible online for research purposes. The focus group conducted in December 2022, was moderated, recorded, and then transcribed by the first author and is part of a broader dataset within a project on political and affective polarization. These participants signed an informed consent in which the research was briefly explained, and which asked for consent to use the data for research purposes. All the 7 focus groups revolve around perceptions of ideological antagonism and of a conflicting political landscape within Catalonia as a consequence of the exacerbation of the national/territorial conflict. Besides, the 7 focus groups ask for the perceived repercussions of this political conflict in the participants' everyday lives. These focus groups provide a context in which participants and a moderator engage in a joint conversation about the politics of the *Procés*²⁸ in Catalonia.

The 7 focus groups are transcribed and analyzed verbatim. Participants have been given pseudonyms and the moderator appears as "M" in the transcripts. All of them have been analyzed in the original language (Spanish and/or Catalan) and the selected extracts have been translated into English. Extract selection has followed the criteria of illustration of the most common patterns of joint meaning-making that we found in the broader dataset. Our 7 Focus Groups comprise lay citizens from different age-groups and in terms of gender. Most importantly, groups with different positions were selected, so the sample comprises pro-independence citizens, pro-unity citizens and citizens without a clear position on Catalan independence, ensuring different understandings of Catalan independence (Levitt, 2021). The semi-structured set of questions used for this focus group can be found in the appendix. The transcripts of CIS focus groups can be found in the CIS bank of data²⁹. The characteristics of all the focus groups are presented in table 6.1:

²⁸ This is how the 'path towards Catalan self-determination' was popularly known. It comprises a set of events and a cycle of protest that happened in Catalonia from 2012 onwards.

²⁹ <https://www.cis.es/detalle-ficha-estudio?origen=estudio&idEstudio=14459>

Table 6.1: Characteristics of the focus groups

Focus group	No of participants	Gender	Age group	Position towards Catalan's independence
1	7	7F	30-45	Undecided
2	7	4F 3M	20-29	Pro-unity
3	8	4F 4M	46-60	Pro-independence
4	7	4F 3M	46-60	Pro-unity
5	8	4F 4M	20-29	Pro-independence
6	8	8H	30-45	Undecided
7	4	1F 3M	18-35	Pro-unity

Regarding the political context in Spain from 2017 onwards, it should be mentioned that the country has recently experienced unprecedented levels of confrontation along the two main historical conflict lines of the country: the left-right conflict and the national/territorial one (see Balinhas, 2022; Vampa, 2020). The latter, which is the one directly related to the present article, has to do with the push for independence in Catalonia and the institutional clash between the central government and the Catalan government that led the country to the greatest 'constitutional' crisis in post-1975 Spain. Some of the events that reflect an exceptionally conflictual political climate were the holding of a referendum on October 1st, 2017, which was declared illegal by the Spanish authorities and that took place under a climate of tension and police repression, the Spanish parliament's subsequent suspension of Catalan autonomy by the application of article 155 of the Constitution, and the imprisonment of several Catalan leaders (See Simón, 2020, for a broader contextualization).

6.2.3 Analytical approach

This article constitutes a continuation of a tradition of critical discursive work in social and political psychology that examines the historically-situated features of everyday political reasoning and the specific rhetorical constructions that emerge in the context of sociopolitical divisions (Andreouli et al., 2017; Billig, 1991; Xenitidou & Sapountzis, 2018).

We use critical discursive and rhetorical psychology (Tileaga, 2015; Gibson, 2020) to explore how group identities are managed when talking about ideological antagonists and how they are informed both by broader cultural tropes and by lay people's ideological creativity (Andreouli et al., 2020). We focus on participants' joint action, that is, how claims are understood and oriented to by co-interactants. Strategies of denial, or mitigation of prejudice towards ideological antagonists are not simply used by speakers to personally deny an identity of prejudice but to construct a positive group

identity and/or to 'protect' dialogical partners from possible accusations of intolerance. We were particularly attuned to identity management in interaction, issues of stake and responsibility (Edwards & Potter, 1993) and we analyze the ideological functions accomplished through dialogic practices in which people co-produce collective understandings of contested political meanings (Condor et al., 2006).

The views analyzed do not just portray ideological antagonism as a matter of "us" vs "them". The crux of talking about ideological antagonism depends on the complex positioning of the self and others, which is mobilized in the form of multiple rhetorical trajectories. As the analysis will hopefully reveal, participants draw upon a series of culturally relevant interpretative resources (cf. Wetherell & Potter 1992; Augoustinos et al., 2002) to construct ideological antagonism from a rhetorical position of reasonableness.

6.3 Analysis

6.3.1 *Who is to blame?*

Whenever participants were talking about polarization, they were also talking about an asymmetry between actors perceived as ideologically-aligned and those perceived as rivals. The question of 'who is to blame' for current levels of conflict and political polarization came up again and again, both spontaneously and when the moderators asked about Catalan independence.

Generally, participants³⁰ did not dispute the idea that the "territorial conflict" has brought about polarization. What people give are accounts whose primary function is to distance the self and the ingroup from responsibility for current levels of conflictual opinion, while elaborating descriptions that present ideological antagonists as the "origin" of polarized opinion.

Extract 1: Focus group 5. People for independence

- 1 **Albert:** It is not from Polònia, but it is when Dani Mateo blew his nose
2 with the Spanish flag, it is quite recent, I have it quite recent.
3 **Pol:** Then they did a program, the one they make of a news program that is
4 hosted by Toni Soler, where they blew their nose with the Senyera,
5 and all that, and it was funny.
6 **Albert:** Those of "Esta passant"...

³⁰ In the appendix, readers can find extracts 8 and 9 in which also people with no clear position towards independence, also co-construct accounts in which one 'side' appears as more unreasonable, thus suggesting a culprit behind polarization.

7 **Pol:** He takes out like a Kleenex with the flag and starts blowing his nose,
8 nonsense. Like if you burn the flag, I don't mind.
9 **Albert:** In Polònia, to joke around that of Dani Mateo, they dressed up like
10 various European leaders, and blew their noses with European flags.
11 **Pol:** You have to open your mind a little, I think. If you burn an estelada
12 or a flag of Catalonia, it doesn't matter to me, but if I burn a
13 Spanish one they will put me in, the face needs to be covered, if not
14 they make you testify. It's a cloth, that's nothing else.
15 **Josep:** The obsolescence of these laws is, like a long time ago, I don't
16 know if you heard it, they did I don't know what with a virgin, they
17 had her... I don't know if they beatified her or a weird story, and
18 as if it were that. .. I don't know where it was going...
19 **Pol:** A procession...
20 **Albert:** The procession of the sacred pussy or I don't know what...

Extract 1 shows Albert bringing forth a recent story that occurred during a famous broadcast tv program, where a presenter blew his nose on the Spanish flag. The 'flags issue' is picked by Pol, who presents a similar case, but with the Catalan flag. Pol states that he does not care if somebody even burns a flag, thus avoiding the adoption of an explicit national footing or display of a sense of patriotic regional pride (see Condor, 2000 for an illustration of these issues). Formulating an account in this context rhetorically opposes commonsense open-mindedness to nationalist close-mindedness, the latter being incarnated by the idea of Spanish justice (lines 12-14).

Josep deepens the image of nationalist close-mindedness elaborated by co-participants, by qualifying laws about offense to national symbols as obsolete (line 15). He narrates a story about religious devotion in a systematically vague way (Edwards & Potter, 1992) thus positioning himself as somebody who is completely alien to religious orthodoxies and thereby, secular, and open-minded. Albert ends this sequence by mocking religious orthodoxy and further distancing himself from these controversial aspects, that have been associated by implication to those -irrationally- defending Spanish national symbols.

In this sequence, group members avoid the adoption of an explicit national footing rhetorically co-producing an ingroup (re)presentation of open-mindedness opposed to the nationalist close-mindedness of ideological opponents (Billig, 1995). Nationalist close-mindedness is described by an obsession with national symbols, religious orthodoxy, and devotion. These features are all potentially hearable as symptomatic of the 'typical' Spanish nationalism that deepens polarization and divides opinion.

The criticism of the Spanish judicial system and its close alignment with Spanish nationalist -and mainly right-wing- causes constitutes a common interpretative repertoire (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) of those

taking pro-independence positions³¹. Although it seems that participants seem to embrace relatively strong views about ideological antagonists, there is also a sense that displaying unreserved national pride or adopting an unqualified Catalan nationalist stance is a 'delicate' matter' (cf. Condor, 2000).

Extract 2: Focus group 4. Pro unity group.

- 1 **M:** How did you experience it? Did you attend these demonstrations? Or
2 did you not? []
- 3 **Isabel:** The demonstrations that you went through above, which I suppose are
4 the ones what she was referring, the *Diadas*, the only thing I have
5 experienced from this is that before, when I was young, I went out,
6 like on a party day, like El Pilar or November 1st. As long as it was
7 a holiday I didn't care. Not now, on the day of the *Diada* I stay at
8 home, it makes me sick... The word is disgust.
- 9 **Marta:** I also stay at home [...] and I didn't know whether to go to the
10 baturra mass down here because I can found all the big Spanish flags.
11 The extremes are always bad.
- 12 **Isabel:** I was born here, I was raised here.
- 13 **Marta:** Me too.
- 14 **Isabel:** I'm disgusted to see all of that.
- 15 **Marta:** There are two sides, we are facing each other.
- 16 **Isabel:** It has been my experience of the demonstrations.
- 17 **Carles:** It is as much one extreme as another.
- 18 **Isabel:** I don't have any flag. I don't imply anything.
- 19 **Carles:** Now they are fighting in the news to dig up Franco. To see who digs
20 him up and where they bury him again.
- 21 **Lucas:** And who remembered Franco?
- 22 **Michael:** It was undignified to have a dictator there.
- 23 **Lucas:** Nobody remembered.
- 24 **M:** We leave Franco.

Extract 2 opens with a series of questions from the moderator about the massive pro-independence demonstrations (see Della Porta & Portos, 2021) that took place during the high points of the push for Catalan self-determination every September 11th (the *Diada*, National Day of Catalonia). The task of formulating an account of the *Diada* shows speakers attending to issues of self-positioning in relation to political (mis)use of traditions that explicitly index Catalan independence. Isabel expresses her disgust at the politicization of the *Diada*. She carefully builds up her entitlement by adopting an explicit footing that orients to both her personal and social/national identity: she was born and raised *here*, that is, in Catalonia. The presence of banal national referents (Billig, 1995) positions her discourse as legitimate critique within the wider debate about Catalan representation.

³¹ This interpretative repertoire was normally used in interactions to undermine the legitimacy of court decisions at a time in which the territorial conflict, as a political conflict, was being 'judicialized', and different Catalan pro-independence leaders were imprisoned and waiting for a trial (Simón, 2020).

At lines 9-11, Marta, interestingly, provides neither a positive reaction, a continuation, nor a direct contestation of Isabel's assessment of the *Diada*. Marta is thus resisting using an affective-discursive construction (McConeville et al., 2019) of the *Diada* as an object deserving disgust (Ahmed, 2004). Instead, she adopts an even-handed positioning by introducing what is akin to an idiomatic self-sufficient argument (Augoustinos, 2002) ("the extremes are always bad").

Marta states her 'native credentials' in line 13, allowing Isabel to re-state her position at line 14 that she feels disgusted to see 'all that'. None of the other speakers are aligning with her position. Marta's account in line 15, combines personal positioning with an even-handed assessment of the political situation that includes both supporters as well as those opposing independence. In doing so, she portrays polarization as an everyday occurrence.

Whilst Carles aligns with Marta's polarization frame, Isabel qualifies her assessment by adopting a position that minimizes her stake (Potter, 1996) and distances her from a potentially hearable position of a critic of the independence movement from a Spanish nationalist position ('I don't have a flag', line 18). Carles, Lucas, and Michael shift the conversation to a debate about Franco and the legacy of dictatorship. The debate about Franco's body relocation is seen, in Carles' and Lucas' accounts, as something that unnecessarily polarizes opinion. Throughout these accounts, there is an implicit attribution of blame by rhetorical implication (Durrheim et al., 2009) for conflict/polarization: those worried by Franco's body relocation and by fostering a historical memory of traumatic past events are left-wing parties and organizations, along with peripheral nationalists. Considering historical memory as unnecessary is a commonplace (Billig, 1991) in Spanish nationalist accounts. This construction is contested by Michael, who refuses to see this as an instance of confrontation and polarization - a discursive move that pushes against earlier conversational attempts to reinforce stereotypical views of the political adversaries, potentially (re)producing a polarized and polarizing picture about them and the policies they advocate for (see Rovamo et al., 2023). Expressing mild disagreement and challenging some argumentative partisan/ideological commonplaces might be especially useful when trying to foster depolarization in intragroup settings. We will develop this latter point in our discussion.

6.3.2 Constructing the biased and irrational others

Extract 3. Focus group 2: Pro-Unity group

- 1 **M:** Do you see this as politicians moving the masses?
- 2 **Lorena:** I do!
- 3 **Rosa:** Yes, a flock with its lambs.
- 4 (everyone speaks)

5 **M:** But you started saying that it was the people who moved and then Artur
6 Mas came up
7 **Rosa:** But the people were moved because they listened to their leader.
8 **M:** But did Artur Mas join or did people follow Artur Mas?
9 (everyone speaks)
10 **Rosa:** People began to mobilize because someone said the word independence
11 out loud.
12 **Patricia:** I believe that Artur Mas began to mobilize.

When talking about themselves and political antagonists, the participants collaboratively articulated a version of the liberal opposition between reason and bias (Andreouli and Nicholson, 2018). On the pro-unity side, a common interpretative repertoire³² depicts Catalan citizens as acritical followers of their political elites, as we can see in extract 3. The reason vs bias contrast takes a particular form in the ideological struggles that characterized the territorial conflict. Pro-unity speakers position supporters of independentism as irreflexive followers, puppets of the pro-independence elites, thereby denying them the basic psychological ability that accompanies reason: agency. Pro-independence supporters appear as a mere prolongation of the interests of the Catalan elites. Within this frame, a political stance against self-determination would not imply an opposition to a demand driven by significant sectors of Catalan society but rather to the interests of perceived self-centered Catalan pro-independence politicians.

Extract 4. Focus Group 3: Pro-independence group

1 **Nil:** I think it would be the mobilization based on an awareness that could
2 be the crisis of the Statute. People mobilize and take the streets.
3 **Oriol:** In September 2012 it was the largest demonstration.
4 **Nil:** The one on the 'Via Catalana', right?
5 **Mónica:** It wasn't the 12th, it was the...
6 **Oriol:** For me it was a turning point, because the people decided and the
7 politicians had no choice but to say that we had to go towards
8 independence.

As can be seen in extract 4, the social representation of Catalan independentists as mere followers of pro-independence elites who lack agency is disputed with the help of counter-positions (Billig, 1991) that make use of a recurrent interpretative repertoire that constructs independence as a demand that comes from 'popular mobilization'. The massive pro-independence demonstrations are usually

³² On the pro-unity side, another common interpretative repertoire is to construct Catalan pro-independence politicians and supporters as bearers of classical -often considered outdated and pernicious- traits of nationalists. In this sense, they are frequently depicted as obsessed and very emotionally invested in their cultural symbols, such as the Catalan language (see extract 10 in the appendix).

discussed as an illustration of the agency of everyday Catalan citizens. In these accounts, individuals positioned as lacking agency are precisely pro-independence politicians, that 'had no choice' (line 7) but to commit to independence, whilst ordinary people showed the way.

Extract 5. Focus Group 1: Group with no clear position towards independence

- 1 **M:** Has anyone written an idea with a more positive connotation?
2 **Laia:** I have written epic related to October, 1st...
3 **Ana:** Yes... Me too
4 **Laia:** ...Because it gives you goosebumps, with the organization, the ballot
5 boxes, the organization of the people, it is amazing. Whether you
6 agree or not, it seems very outstanding to me.
7 **Ana:** For me it was also very exciting.
8 **M:** ¿Would it be for the people mainly?
9 **Laia:** I'm talking about the people, yes, citizens, not those at the top,
10 no.

An event that some participants recurrently mention when arguing for the importance of ordinary people is the referendum of October 1st, where people all around Catalonia organized and participated in the opening of polling stations and the hiding of the ballot boxes from Spanish authorities, which declared the referendum illegal. The referendum day was characterized by a climate of harsh police repression and citizen's acts of pacific resistance, making the day also emotionally exceptional, as we can observe in extract 5. In contrast to extract 2 in which the affective-discursive construction was resisted by other participants, extract 5 shows a collective (re)production of a shared affective meaning of October 1st referendum (Condor et al., 2006) in which the emotional valence was co-constructed as extraordinarily intense (as something 'epic', that 'gives you goosebumps', 'very exciting').

This extract shows how the events that took place in October 2017 are framed as led by the people's emancipatory and democratic will against the state's oppression (Della Porta & Portos, 2021). This frame implies an overlap between taken-for-granted citizenship's rights, such as voting, and national(ist) demands. Indeed, through a rhetorical use of a metonymy, 'the people' often refers to those endorsing Catalan Self-determination, so references to 'the people' accomplish nation-claiming purposes, but avoiding potential criticism that might follow the explicit use of national categories (Di Masso et al., 2014; Pradillo-Caimari et al., 2023).³³

³³Another common interpretative repertoire used by pro-independence people to occupy the rhetorical high ground of reason (Demasi, 2016) consists of depicting the Spanish State and its judicial system as corrupt, conservative, and undemocratic. This perceived democratic deficit and the absence of an anti-fascist consensus during Spain's transition to

Extract 6: Focus Group 3. People for Independence.

- 1 **Mauro:** I have the feeling that Catalonia could advance much further
2 without stones being placed in our way. I have the feeling that they
3 always place obstacles at us, and having a clear, free path, we would
4 advance much further.
- 5 **M:** What does advance mean?
- 6 **Mauro:** Economically. It will be hard, but I think it will be beneficial in
7 general.
- 8 **Eduard:** Look, I am a philologist and I provide some data. The time in which
9 Catalonia has advanced the most, both politically and socially,
10 coincided with the time in which the Generalitat was recovered,
11 before the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera and after the dictatorship
12 of Primo de Rivera and before that of Franco. These two periods that
13 coincidentally coincided with modernism, expansion and so on, and
14 'novecentismo', the creation of the 'mancomunidad', schools, and so
15 on, like Ramon Llull's one, the two periods in which Catalonia has
16 been autonomous was when more things were done, such as the creation
17 of municipal libraries. The rest are always obstacles.
- 18 **Miriam:** Spain has been a burden and on top of that with the whip.

Extract 6 illustrates the discursive co-creation of a national contrast between two different national blocks that are constructed as internally homogeneous. On one side, Spain, characterized by Mauro and Eduard as 'putting obstacles in the path', holding back Catalan progress and advancement. Eduard starts his intervention with a knowledge claim (Heritage, 2013), thus positioning himself as somebody knowledgeable on the topic. Apart from legitimizing the 'historical data' that he is going to say, this claim can also be interpreted -in a social context in which independence, for both supporters and opposers, creates uncertainty- as an intervention to reduce this inherent uncertainty, which had been manifested by Mauro's previous intervention. Eduard's factual claim can be understood then, considering the proximal rhetorical context in which Mauro is indirectly expressing doubts and potential disadvantages of independence ('It is gonna be hard') and the more distal ideological context in which changing the national status quo and declare independence generates uncertainty, so present the pro-independence project as solid and leading to a future better society is essential for independence supporters.

Eduard contrasts periods of cultural and artistic zenith in Catalonia -lines 9/17 - and where more things were done, that coincide with Catalonia having its own institutions. In contrast, on the Spanish part, the two dictatorships as well as generally, 'the rest', are mentioned as periods of interruption of this social and cultural expansion. Miriam finally adds that Spain has been 'a burden' and that on top of

democracy (Núñez-Seixas, 2018) are frequently cited as key reasons for seeking independence. This is often rhetorically accomplished by describing recent or past instances of Spanish pro-unity citizens, politicians, or historical figures who personify the image of the ultraconservative, national-catholic, bigoted, and anti-democratic citizen/leader. Supporters of independence, in contrast, are rhetorically constructed as more rational, liberal, modern, and democratic.

that, a violent one. The use of extreme case formulations – ‘always’ in line 17- (Pomerantz, 1986) along with the adoption of a lexical style in which speakers use strong terms and expressions (Seu, 2010) such as ‘dictatorship’, a ‘burden’ with the ‘whip’, accomplishes to emphasize the collective representation of the Spanish state as systematically repressing all forms of emancipation.

A dichotomous vision of virtuous Catalonia vs repressive Spain is sourced up focusing on events that show the additional repression suffered by national minorities in Spain during Francoism, that contrast with the virtues of self-governance, which is depicted as the reason for social and cultural flourishing. This rhetorical contraposition obviates (Parker, 1992) that similar processes of sociocultural flourishing and subsequent decadence during the dictatorships might have occurred in other Spanish regions, though. Pro-independence participants, then, tend to co-construct a rhetorical contrast (Edwards, 1999), in which the signifiers ‘Catalonia’ and ‘Catalan Republic’ acquire their meaning based on a constitutive exterior, which is a Spanish state characterized as incarnating reactionary positions, exclusive nationalism, and resistance to full democratization and emancipation (Laclau, 2005).

6.3.3 Legitimizing intolerance: a collaborative accomplishment

Extracts 7.1 and 7.2 show participants arguing about the limits of legitimate versus illegitimate political projects. These extracts constitute an illustration of two aspects. First, how the mitigation of an initial utterance that could potentially be interpreted as a prejudiced claim is collectively managed and accomplished by co-interactants (see Condor et al., 2006). Second, they show how illiberal political measures are collectively legitimized from a rhetorical position of reasonableness

Extract 7.1: Focus group 7. Pro unity group

- 1 **M:** Are there some kind of political positions that perhaps should be
2 limited?
- 3 **Ken:** Well, I think that constitutionally the parties that want to
4 liquidate Spain, that want to separate and are contrary to the
5 Constitution should be totally prohibited.
- 6 **M:** the pro-independence parties?
- 7 **Ken:** Exactly indeed. Those who go against the constitution as they
8 themselves declare
- 9 **M:** Hm hm
- 10 **Juan:** this is objective data, it is not that it is our opinion. But that
11 any party that tries to denigrate the Constitution should have no
12 place in our institutions and in the sovereignty of the people,
13 right?
- 14 **Ken:** hmmm hmmm

15 **M:** would that imply for example that then they could not or should not be
16 able to stand in democratic elections. Neither regional nor national?
17 **Ken:** with agendas that are contrary to the Constitution no.
18 **Mia:** I mean I think that it is necessary to know in my opinion I think that
19 it is necessary to think about the rules of the game, that is to say
20 uuh if they want to, if they want to vote, they have to know that the
21 constitution has to be changed there has to be a a...two thirds right?
22 I think it is, two thirds of the Congress, right? I don't know if
23 there is a chamber instruction³⁴ ba ba ba ba. I don't know, there is a
24 process but knowing if it's at least two thirds so they have to know
25 that! promising people who want to achieve this and that they have to
26 be two thirds. If they explain it good like that, for me they don't
27 have this... I mean the important thing for me whether they are legal
28 or not is that they know the rules of the game. That they know that
29 to be independentist, I mean to be independent here in Catalonia and
30 that for there to be a consultation, there must be a change in the
31 legislation because the constitution itself does not allow it. So if
32 they know it and they transmit it to the people and everything, for
33 me no problem that they are there. I mean, obviously I would like
34 them not to be there, right? but I mean, I cannot prohibit another
35 person from thinking that in a democratic process, well, Catalonia
36 wants to stop being part of Spain.

In extract 7.1, Ken's straightforward response to the interviewer's questions (lines 3-5 and 17) generates collective accountability concerns, and Juan and Mia's interventions might have been facilitated by Ken's initial utterances, as a collective defensive identity claim (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975). There is a concern here with presenting the participants' group as tolerant while arguing against the initiatives of those perceived as ideological antagonists, such as a self-determination referendum. Juan starts mitigating Kevin's position by presenting their opinion as factual (see Demasi, 2019).

In response to the moderator's question, Ken re-states his initial position (line 17). By formulating this question, the interviewer, as one of the recipients of Ken and Juan's interventions, might be signaling trouble (Schegloff, 2000), suggesting that previous statements should be explained, and laying the ground for a sequence of other-initiated repair (Benjamin & Mazeland, 2013) that starts in line 18.

Repair starts when Mia appears back on the scene, and she rhetorically softens her co-interactants' previous arguments by articulating her argumentation into a commonplace (Billig, 1991). She states that every demand should follow a procedure, the rules of the game (lines 19, 28). To organize a referendum, the Constitution, as a legal frame, needs to be changed and to do so, a wide parliamentary majority is needed. She makes the point of the rules of the game but without invoking expert knowledge, thus in a vague way (lines 22, 23), a thing that accomplishes to lay out the commonsense argument but minimizes her stake and her chances of being wrong (Edwards & Potter,

³⁴ The original expression in Spanish is "instrucción de cámara", with the latter term making reference to either the Parliament or the Senate.

1992). Rhetorically, Mia's arguments accomplish to express essentially what Ken and Juan previously said, but with an important nuance that protects the group from being seen as intolerant. In this sense, Mia's repair work accomplishes a more positive collective presentation at a moment in which potentially problematic talk was produced by other group members (Condor et al., 2006).

Mia argues that in a 'democratic process' democracies permit the expression of ideas, and Catalan independentists could take part in the institutions, if they "follow the rules". Speaking about democracy brings forth the subject positions (Parker, 1992; Locke & Budds, 2020) of good vs bad democrats, which can be disputed and claimed when arguing about Catalonia's self-determination. Here, speakers define good democrats as people who abide by legal procedures and respect the Spanish Constitution, contrasting them with those who advocate for voting in an independence referendum, breaking legality.

Extract 7.2

- 1 **M:** So you M at an institutional level you're telling me that
2 **Mia:** At an institutional level
3 **M:** According to yourself yes, I mean, pro-independence parties could stand
4 for elections?
5 **Mia:** For the elections yes, but...
6 **M:** To the elections and to the regions
7 **Mia:** yes, yes but...Let it be known what are the...
8 **M:** With pro-independence agendas as the partners said
9 **Mia:** With pro-independence progr? I mean they...
10 **M:** I understand that the partners said that they cannot run for elections
11 as long as they defend the independence
12 **Ken:** Well, as long as they defend the current model which is an illegal
13 referendum
14 **Mia:** Sure!!
15 **M:** ok
16 **Ken:** [(inaudible)]
17 **Mia:** Sure this neither, so this neither right? Yes If I...what I ask of, I
18 mean what I would ask of them, no? From above, a real dissemination
19 is to be done. I mean from the government a real defense could be
20 made: of saying hey: "Some do whatever they do, I mean, say whatever
21 they say but the rules of the game are these and you have to comply
22 with them". If the government does this and says it with rotundity it
23 doesn't matter what an Esquerra pamphlet I mean, the Esquerra
24 pamphlet can say whatever it wants, that they will give you a million
25 euros if you vote for them. But in the end, if the one in charge and
26 the one who holds...defines with rotundity what the rules of the game
27 are. Well, let them have a voice. Because that's what democracy is
28 right? I mean...
29 **Ken:** No, but I totally agree with what he says that is if you present
30 yourself with a program that says "no I want to be independent and
31 for that I want to have a sufficient majority to modify the
32 constitution, to do this"
33 **Mia:** Sure
34 **Ken:** But they don't go there

Directly after Mia's intervention in extract 7.1, there is an exchange marked by the interviewer's questions, as well as Mia's disclaimers (lines 5,7 and 9) that take part in a sequence in which Mia is producing disagreement (Pomerantz, 1984). The 'yes, but' structures here are what Maynard (1985) termed 'hedged agreements', and here they play the function of signaling disagreement with the moderator's depiction of her previous intervention. These repeated structures indicate that the matter might be not as simple as suggested by the yes-no question posed by the moderator, as Mia seems to strive to return to previous points that she had made about the "rules of the game". In this case, the hedged agreements signal a mitigation of agreement, since agreement is conceded, then subsequently dismissed. This allows the speaker to show that her previous points still apply to the moderator's straightforward question, so they signal the persistence of her own subjectivity and then, a rejection of the terms used by the moderator in raising the question (see Billig, 1991).

The moderator recalls Ken and Juan's position (stated in lines 10-11), at a point in which the conversational structure demands some sort of answer (Sacks, 1992), and signals a potential disagreement between them and Mia. Ken, building on what Mia had said, thus adds a nuance to his initial position –i.e., he does some repair work– suggesting that it is not independence itself but "its current model", which is defending an illegal referendum. Mia explicitly expresses agreement and again re-states the commonsense argument of the rules of the game (line 26).

Extracts 7.1 and 7.2 show a discursive attempt to dodge the identity of prejudice that is a result of inter-subjective and dialogical practices, in which participants, in interaction with the moderator (see Barbour, 2007) try to mitigate potentially problematic utterances made by people other than themselves, transcending individual self-presentation concerns and trying to favor a positive collective, group-level presentation (Condor et al., 2006). Indeed, the repair sequence is initiated not by the trouble-source, but by another group member. In addition, the repair work is accomplished collectively between Ken and Mia (lines 12-34).

In the extracts, the desirability of limiting pro-independence projects is presented as necessary and unavoidable. The arguments suggest opposition to a self-determination referendum as a defense of (democratic) procedures whilst positioning Catalan pro-independence supporters as lawbreakers and political actors with dubious democratic credentials.³⁵ Following this, the agency for outlawing Catalan secessionist parties is attributed to these parties themselves (Edwards, 1997). Furthermore, the rules

³⁵ It should be noted that for a structural minority, such as any single region in the state, in order to change the Constitution and organize a referendum, they would have to obtain the overwhelming support of the national parties, a thing that in 2017 –and also today– would be impossible, as all the main state-wide parties are against a referendum. Thus, at a political level, offering the possibility of pursuing independence following the legal path implies the rhetorical use of an apparent concession (van Dijk, 1987) that plays the role of sustaining the (national) status quo whilst avoiding accusations of being Spanish nationalist and/or politically intolerant.

of the game argument acts as a metaphor (Wiggins, 2016). The rhetorical strategy of simplifying the Constitution as “the rules of the game” disregards the fact that the Constitution itself is a crucial matter of controversy when discussing self-determination. The metaphor, thus, constructs the Constitution as an unquestionable frame that clearly delimitates legitimate from illegitimate political projects.

Overall, the speakers draw upon civic nationalism as a rhetorical trope in making the case for the naturalization of the Spanish polis being the only source of political legitimacy (and not, for instance, the Catalan polis, whose political legitimacy is denied). This would be a way of banally taking a national category for granted and defending it without adopting an explicitly nationalist footing (Billig, 1995, Condor, 2000). The interactions shown, constitute an instance of a collaborative navigation through the sensitive terrain of defending Spanish nationalist claims and the highly controversial issue of limiting political antagonists’ rights (or not). They are also an instance of the accountability concerns that opposing a referendum (which in democratic imaginaries often acts as a tool that allows the will of the people to be heard) entails when trying to appear more tolerant and more democratic than one’s political opponents. The Spanish Constitution acts as a rhetorical construction that connects what at its core is a nationalist discourse (the Spanish nation being the only source of political legitimacy) with liberal-democratic narratives on the rule of law (see Mouffe, 2000), ultimately accomplishing a defense of an essentialized nation. This is to say, they accomplish a civic reformulation of nationalist claims (Pradillo-Caimari et al., 2023), allowing the limitation of self-determination initiatives to be seen as a reasonable course of action.

6.4 Discussion

In this paper, we analyzed the everyday rhetorical mobilization of ideological antagonism in focus group talk. We explored how individuals construct ideological antagonism when discussing recent polarized events around Catalan independence. First, our analysis shows that, generally, people with different ideological stances towards Catalan independence acknowledge that ‘polarization’ and ideological division are inescapable features of the ideological conflict over Catalan self-determination. Lay citizens with different ideological positions collectively generate accounts of the political situation that implicitly or explicitly blame partisan rivals for polarization. In these multi-party conversations, it was common for people to co-produce accounts that justified the ingroup’s actions as result of actions of other people or institutions described as ideological antagonists. In multi-party conversations, stereotypical, polarized, and polarizing pictures of political adversaries are jointly (re)produced. In this sense, when dealing with ideologically similar groups, the intragroup context

(Obradović & Draper, 2022) constitutes an everyday setting in which polarized representations of political antagonists are kept alive. These are sites in which polarized representations of antagonism and antagonists are not just reinforced, but also, occasionally, challenged and contested.

Second, we showed how the rhetorical contrasts between reason and bias (Andreouli & Nicholson, 2018) constituted a symbolic field within which individuals co-construct shared understandings of political allies and adversaries. Participants that argued against Catalan independence routinely worked up representations of independence demands as elite-driven, where supporters were seen as lacking agency and acting irrationally as the embodiment of their elites' interests. In pro-independence participants' accounts, the frequent references to the recent Spanish authoritarian past work rhetorically to picture the Spanish state's opposition to self-determination as a continuation of a history of non-democratic -and often violent- political practices against territorial minorities. The contrast is between the modern, liberal, and progressive Catalonia vis-à-vis the oppressive, close-minded, reactionary, and not-fully democratized Spanish State. Interestingly, analyses of both pro-independence and pro-unity accounts show that unjustified patriotic exaltation constitutes something that generates accountability concerns (Condor, 2000) for co-interactants around issues concerning potential accusations of prejudice or undemocratic behavior. Different mobilizations of citizenship categories (Stevenson et al., 2015) inoculate speakers against open criticisms of bias, prejudice, and nationalism. The adherence to Spanish constitution as the embodiment of the rule of law is rhetorically framed as an intrinsically democratic action by pro unity people, whereas the intrinsically democratic act of voting plays a similar role for pro-independence people.

Finally, we showed how illiberal political practices against ideological adversaries are defended both by attending to group-presentation concerns -that is, dodging the identity of prejudice- (Condor et al., 2006) and by using culturally available tropes (Billig, 1991). Participants manage to rhetorically (re)articulate civic-nationalist and liberal themes to provide rhetorical support for illiberal political practices, such as the outlawing of political parties, as a reasonable and rational course of action in certain circumstances.

This paper has highlighted the importance of interactional dynamics in the genesis of partisan prejudice in the context of divided political opinion. Partisan prejudice is a collective accomplishment, a product of interaction and joint actions between individuals across the ideological spectrum. Participants holding different ideological stances formulate accounts that blame ideological antagonists for polarization. However, accounting for ideological antagonism is not simply a matter of "us" vs "them". A subtle choreography of joint actions was used by participants to position themselves

within the conversational space jointly orienting to issues of accountability and using varied available cultural-ideological resources and context-specific constructions of ongoing sociopolitical disputes.

The findings in this paper provide us with insights for depolarization interventions as well. Our analysis emphasizes the role of the intragroup setting as a place where negative stereotypes and representations of others are often (re)produced and kept alive. Consequently, the intragroup setting might also be a key scenario where contestation of very negative representations and meta-representations of the outgroups can occasionally happen. This applies to intragroup interactions between lay citizens, but also to elite political rhetoric. In this line, counter-stereotypical elite individuals that refuse to always take the majoritarian positions within their parties in polarized times might provide citizens with culturally available tropes that can contain spirals of polarization. However, to date, most depolarization interventions are focused only on the intergroup setting. Future inquiry might find it useful to think not just on the intergroup, but also on the intragroup setting as a scenario where affective depolarization might be promoted.

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6.6 Appendix

Extract 8: Focus group 1. No clear position on independence

1 M: And what happens on 9N?
2 M7: The first consultation, right?
3 M4: A consultation, right? Or how did he say it? Participatory
4 consultation, it was legal, because it is in the statute.
5 M5: And what year was this...?
6 M7: 2015? 14? Over there...
7 M4: And of course all this with the exhaustion of "We want dialogue, we
8 want dialogue, we want dialogue", "No, no, no..." Every day, every
9 day, every day... And of course...
10 M: Were they asking for dialogue here?
11 M4: With Madrid, yes...

Extract 9. Focus group 6. No clear position on independence

1 M: Those of you who are more towards the 'no', why do you think some people
2 want independence?
3 H8: They are hypnotized
4 H2: They are what? Hypnotized or idiotized?
5 H8: Well, interpret this as you want.
6 (everyone laughs)
7 M: Why do you think they want independence?
8 H8: That's why, because 'the Messiah' tells them to do this, and everyone
9 goes there. It's true. On September 11th, everyone headed there. The
10 year of the prisoners, everyone there.

Extract 10. Focus group 7: Pro-unity group

1 **Mia:** (...) And besides a plus is that Catalan is disappearing because in the
2 end, although they want to impose it on us society is practical and
3 if one language takes you to a certain point no? is that you can't do
4 more right? That to speak it with the people who speak it but you're
5 not going to force a person from Madrid to have to speak Catalan if
6 you can communicate in Spanish right? Then well all this is an
7 emotional issue that hurts them and that for them, well, is very very
8 hard right? Change and reverse that thought.

Guidelines for the semi-structured questions used in the focus group in 2022

- **Block 1: Identification of ingroups and outgroups and their descriptions/stereotypes**

1. Allow participants to set the context – What do you think are the two most important political issues today?
2. What different groups/political positions can we find regarding [the issues they have identified above]? Or what are the different sides in these conflicts?
3. Do you identify with a group or groups/ideology/parties? Which side do you feel most identified with?
4. **Collaborative task** (requires time): How does society in general view the typical members of group X (people with whom **they do not** identify)?

How does society in general view the typical members of group Y (people with whom **they do** identify)?

- Possible questions to foster participation (if needed): Where do they live (rural-urban)? What do they do, how do they live? What social groups and parties do they support? And vice versa.

4.1 How do you view the [ingroups]?

4.2 How do you view the [outgroups]?

4.3 How do you think the members of the [outgroups] perceive you? What do they think of you, and how do they feel about you?

- **Block 2**

1. Do you know someone like this [outgroup] personally? What kind of relationship do you have with them?
2. Even if you disagree with [the outgroup's point of view], why do you think they think this way?
3. Do you think they should be allowed to express this point of view? If so, why? If not, why not?
4. It is said that the debate on [most controversial topic of the previous discussion] has become quite heated. How do you perceive this debate? Why do you think this is the case? How did we get to this point?
5. How do you think this conflict could be/should be solved?

Chapter 7: Affective Polarization in a Pandemic Context*

Abstract

Prior Affective Polarization (AP) research has overlooked short-term variations stemming from external shocks and crises. Addressing this gap, we examine AP dynamics during the 2020 pandemic in Spain. We argue the pandemic intensified AP among some individuals, acting as a focusing event prompting issue-evaluation processes. Additionally, we explore depolarizing effects of measures easing the May 2020 lockdown. Using three waves of a Spanish panel survey and static score models, we find support for our first expectation. Our Difference-in-Differences (DID) design reveals a significant six percentage points reduction in affective polarization during de-escalation. These findings underscore the importance of short-term dynamics, revealing the coexistence of aggregated depolarization with individual-level polarizing mechanisms and offering nuanced insights into the evolution of AP.

Keywords: affective polarization, depolarization, COVID-19, panel, differences-in-differences, public opinion.

* Chapter co-authored with Professor Carol Galais (Autonomous University of Barcelona).

7.1 Introduction

Escalating levels of sociopolitical confrontation worldwide have become a key concern in the social sciences. At the heart of this concern is Affective Polarization (AP), a concept that expresses the emotional distance between people's positive feelings towards the party or parties they identify with and their negative feelings towards perceived opponents (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes, 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Druckman and Levendusky, 2019; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021).³⁷ Affective polarization is believed to foster negative consequences, such as institutional gridlock (Levendusky, 2018; Iyengar & Krumpal, 2018), the erosion of political accountability, and diminished support for democratic norms (see Iyengar et al., 2019; Kingzette et al., 2021). AP is a usual suspect when it comes to explaining processes of growing incivility, confrontation, lack of accountability, and in general, democratic backsliding in some democracies (Orhan, 2022; Somer, McCoy & Luke, 2021).

While the existing literature has extensively examined various factors that contribute to affective polarization, both perceptual-psychological (Moore-Berg, Hamerini & Bruneau, 2020) and structural (Gidron, Adams & Horne, 2020), a significant gap remains in our understanding of its short-term dynamics. Most studies predominantly focus on the medium to long-term drivers of affective polarization, with only a handful exploring the potential impact of political events such as elections (Hernández, Anduiza & Rico, 2021), political campaigns (Iyengar et al., 2012), or the formation of coalitions (Horne et al., 2022). Notably, the extent and mechanisms through which these transient political conjunctures influence affective polarization and depolarization remain largely unexplored. To address this gap, we turn to a critical event that constituted an external shock that could alter affective polarization levels, both positively and negatively, at both the individual and aggregate levels: the COVID-19 pandemic.

More specifically, to explore the short-term dynamics of affective polarization, this paper relies on three waves of a panel survey conducted in Spain in 2019, 2020, and 2021. Firstly, our work extends previous AP literature by examining whether citizens' perceptions of the political management of

³⁷ It has also been conceptualized as the gap between positive feelings towards in-party(es) supporters and negative feelings towards out-party(es) supporters; the correlation between both measures is very high but far from perfect (see Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Comellas, 2022).

the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis influenced their levels of affective polarization. Secondly, drawing on the 2020 panel wave –which coincided with a significant de-escalation measure implemented by the Spanish government in specific areas– it contributes to the depolarization literature by assessing the impact of consensual and popular policies on aggregate levels of affective polarization beyond the initial stages of the pandemic.

Spain serves as a case study due to its elevated levels of AP (Gidron, Adams & Horne, 2020), making it a challenging context for mechanisms that increase affective polarization. Additionally, Spain had particularly restrictive lockdown measures, reaching 85.5 in the Oxford COVID-19 government response stringency index in April 2020, higher than most other western countries at the time (but see Italy, France, Ireland, or Israel).³⁸ This was eased from May 2020 onwards. The Spanish government’s de-escalation plan was gradual, asymmetric, and coordinated in four phases, thus allowing us to track the effect of the implementation of this policy on a sample of Spaniards, some treated and some untreated with a significant reduction in lockdown stringency. Specifically, we use a differences-in-differences analysis to identify the effect of the long-awaited and consensus-driven de-escalation measures implemented by the Spanish government on aggregate levels of AP.

The article is structured as follows: first, we connect the literature on the impact of crises on public opinion with insights from the literature on AP, conceptualizing the pandemic as a crisis marked by a set of different focusing events. After that, we explain our case and methodology, then examine our results, and last, we discuss how our findings contribute to a better understanding of the contextual effects that affect AP dynamics and enhance the previous literature examining the political consequences of the pandemic.

Our study concludes that while the pandemic's perception as a 'focusing event' increased citizens' affective polarization triggering evaluative processes, certain crisis episodes—specifically, de-escalation processes marked by technical and political consensus—successfully lowered AP levels. Our differences-in-differences analysis demonstrates that Spanish citizens treated the de-escalation protocol significantly reduced their affective polarization compared to those who remained under lockdown. Thus, our study delves into the interplay of micro and macro-level processes influencing short-term AP dynamics.

³⁸ <https://ig.ft.com/coronavirus-lockdowns/>

7.2 Theoretical Background

7.2.1 Affective Polarization Over Time

The existing body of literature on affective polarization has predominantly concentrated on understanding variations in this phenomenon among individuals and across different nations. Numerous studies have explored the individual-level determinants of affective polarization, such as partisan identification, ideology, and social identity (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Levendusky, 2018; Iyengar & Krupenkin, 2018; Druckman & Levendusky, 2019). Additionally, cross-national analyses have sought to identify patterns and disparities in affective polarization across diverse political landscapes (Iyengar et al., 2019; Reiljan, Garzia, Da Silva & Trechsel, 2023). However, there is a paucity of studies examining the evolution of AP over time. The limited research on this aspect has identified an upward trend in affective polarization in the United States (Boxell, Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2022; Garzia, Ferreira da Silva, Maye, 2023), which has been attributed to the influence of cable news networks and partisan ideological sorting (Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017; Fiorina, 2017). Nonetheless, these factors do not easily transfer outside the U.S. and fail to explain the short-term dynamics of AP.

Nevertheless, some works suggest that affective polarization is responsive to short-term explanatory factors. For instance, Iyengar et al. (2012) demonstrated that political campaigns can significantly impact affective polarization, emphasizing the need for a temporally nuanced perspective. Furthermore, research by Hernández, Anduiza, and Rico (2021) indicates that short-term events, such as economic crises, can influence citizens' affective polarization levels.

Considering all this, our study seeks to contribute to the AP literature by delving into its temporal dynamics, particularly by examining the influence of short-term political conjunctures to unravel the interplay between individual-level predispositions and contextual dynamics. To achieve this, our starting point is the well-documented capacity of external shocks and catastrophic events –along with their political management– to change political behavior and emotions. This leads us to consider the COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis that is potentially able to cause variations in levels of AP. We contend that over its duration, the pandemic triggered differing effects, which also varied

at the individual and aggregate level. To do so, we first need to characterize the peculiar context of the pandemic.

7.2.2 On Crises and Public Opinion: the Pandemic as a Focusing Event

The COVID-19 outbreak can be conceived as a ‘catastrophic event’, similar to terrorist attacks, nuclear accidents, or natural disasters, which are all proven to have effects on public opinion (Boomgaarden & de Vreese, 2007). A concept akin to ‘catastrophic event’ and ‘crisis’, borrowed from public policy studies, is ‘focusing event’ (Kingdon, 2010); this refers to sudden and harmful events that imply problems that will endure or worsen in the future, known to policymakers and the public simultaneously, and necessitating urgent government action. Environmental disasters are the epitome of such focusing events, given that they direct public attention towards a specific issue and cause changes in support for policies (Baumgartner and Jones, 1991; Page and Shapiro, 1992). The COVID-19 pandemic can be understood as a focusing event not only because of its sudden, unpredictable, and harmful nature but also because it required urgent government action, forcing governments –and challenger parties and candidates– to take up new stances on various matters.

Within this context, different works have addressed the initial effect of the pandemic on public opinion, finding a “rally around the flag” effect caused by the COVID-19 outbreak (but see Amat et al., 2020; Sosa-Villagarcia & Lozada, 2021 for different conclusions). That is, citizens gathered around their political institutions (governments, presidents) at the onset of the pandemic, as they had done so in previous international crises or in the aftermath of a terrorist attack (Hetherington & Nelson, 2003; Brody & Shapiro, 1989), resulting in widespread political support (Baekgaard et al., 2020; Schraff, 2020).

However, this literature focuses mostly on political support indicators at the onset of the pandemic (e.g., political trust, support, satisfaction) and not on affective polarization. Furthermore, the few studies tackling AP during the pandemic have tended to consider AP as an independent variable, not as the main research object (Druckman et al., 2020; Grossman, Kim, Rexer & Thirumurthy, 2020), finding mixed results. Indeed, Boxell and colleagues have shown that the onset of the crisis caused levels of affective polarization to significantly decrease in the US (2021). However, a study fielded in Germany suggests that affective polarization increased during the crisis, particularly among AfD voters (Jungkunz, 2021). Also in Germany, the context of uncertainty during the first stages of the

pandemic fostered AP between different ideological camps (Schmid, Treib & Eckardt, 2023), and COVID-specific anger increased affective polarization (Nguyen, Mayer and Veit, 2022). All in all, this highlights the necessity to examine, in other contexts, the heterogeneous and complex effects that the pandemic context had on affective polarization for different individuals over time.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments faced crucial decisions, some requiring trade-offs between health and wealth. Prioritizing lives often meant sacrificing economic growth through measures such as lockdowns and sector shutdowns (Oana, Pellegata & Wang, 2021). Government and opposition stances on pandemic policies highlighted key issues such as the economy and public health, prompting citizens to evaluate political actors based on these issues. Differences regarding these aspects might have contributed to AP, considering the well-known role of policy disagreements in fueling AP (Bougher, 2017; Lelkes, 2021; Orr & Huber, 2020; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). Indeed, Wagner & Eberl (2022) found that vaccination debates intensified identity-based polarization. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic might have had the potential to increase affective polarization among citizens who processed the pandemic as a focusing event, i.e., that assessed the government and the opposition in terms of their proposals for overcoming the crisis. Hence, we expect that:

H1) As a focusing event, the pandemic increased affective polarization among citizens that engaged in issue-based evaluations of political actors.

We acknowledge a potential alternative mechanism through which the pandemic impacted individuals' AP levels: their personal experience of the illness. According to the Terror Management Theory (TMT, see Greenberg, Pyszczynski & Solomon, 1986; Solomon, Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1991), the pandemic might have heightened mortality salience and risk perception. This could have intensified individuals' existing attitudes and worldviews, as a means of alleviating death-related anxiety (Burke, Martens & Faucher, 2010; Pyszczynski et al., 2020), potentially aligning individuals against those who oppose their worldviews, and escalating conflict (Arrowood et al., 2017; Greenberg & Kosloff, 2008; Kosloff, Greenberg, Weise, & Solomon, 2010; Rodriguez et al., 2022)³⁹.

³⁹ These expectations are congruent with the 'worldview defense hypothesis' (see Burke, Kosloff & Landau, 2013). These works confirm the effect of mortality salience on the polarization of attitudes (Horcajo et al., 2022). However, some evidence found that mortality salience might cause a generalized shift towards conservative values, regardless of preexisting ideology (Landau et al., 2004), leading to a reduction in the perceived distance between partisans.

7.2.3 Pandemic Policies and Their Influence on AP Dynamics

The pandemic can also be viewed as a series of focusing events continuing beyond its outbreak; these include the WHO's declaration of the outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (January 30th, 2020), the initiation of "states of emergency" in different countries, the enforcement (and easing) of various lockdown measures, and the implementation of vaccination campaigns.

A crucial event with significant attitude-changing potential was the relaxation, using specific policies, of strict lockdown conditions. While the affective polarization literature has not yet measured the effect of specific policies on this research object, it has generally examined the role of inter-party cooperation, particularly in the form of coalition behavior, on polarization dynamics. Comparative (Gidron et al., 2022) and experimental (Bassan-Nygate & Weiss, 2022; Huddy & Yair, 2021; Wagner & Praprotnik, 2023) evidence has highlighted the importance of inter-party cooperation and coalitions as significant sources of depolarization. Supporters of parties that are becoming part of a coalition tend to feel closer towards all the parties participating, and these effects persist well beyond the coalition ends (Horne et al., 2022). A similar, although weaker effect has also been observed with parties sharing the opposition (Gidron et al., 2022). Given these insights, it is plausible to expect that specific salient political measures can alter AP levels. Highly disputed policies might intensify polarization, while widely accepted policies might produce a depolarization effect.

De-escalation policies, long-awaited and popular during the pandemic lockdown, provided citizens with the opportunity to socialize again after a prolonged period of isolation. People found themselves once again engaging with colleagues, friends, and acquaintances outside the confines of their homes. This renewed social contact again exposed individuals to diverse perspectives and ideas, in the context of a shared and challenging experience, one that could have fostered a sense of empathy and mutual understanding. Moreover, the general sense of happiness stemming from the relaxation of restrictions could have contributed to a more positive mindset among citizens. Furthermore, satisfaction with these measures may have mitigated criticisms of the government among supporters of the non-incumbent parties. As a matter of fact, the dichotomy of health vs wealth, prominent during the early months of the pandemic, diminished as different economic

sectors were allowed to resume operations, taking a step toward a ‘new normality’.⁴⁰ Finally, de-escalation, supported by public opinion and experts globally, garnered more support when they were backed up by bipartisan coalitions and/or non-partisan experts (Flores et al., 2022).⁴¹ As such, de-escalation policies designed by incumbents in close cooperation with non-partisan health experts can be expected to have depolarizing effects. Therefore, we contend that:

H2) The termination of lockdown measures (de-escalation), as widely accepted and consensual policies, resulted in an overall reduction of affective polarization levels.

7.3 Research Design

7.3.1 The Spanish Context in Spring 2020 –The Asymmetrical De-Escalation Plan

In the months leading up to the pandemic, Spain had just experienced general elections in April 2019 and a repetition in November 2019, with no single party or coalition securing sufficient support to form a government. Following these elections, the center-left party PSOE (Socialist Party) and the left party Podemos (We Can) formed a coalition government. The political landscape had become polarized into two blocs, with PSOE and Podemos on one side and the right-wing block comprising Ciudadanos, PP and Vox on the other, influenced by the salience of the territorial conflict and the emergence of the radical right-wing party Vox (Simón, 2020). The PSOE-Podemos government was the first coalition government since the onset of the democratic period in 1975. It secured its investiture with the backing of non-national parties, including the right-wing Basque nationalists PNV, left-wing Galician nationalists BNG, and the abstention of left-wing Catalan and Basque nationalists (ERC and EH Bildu). This extraordinary and narrow majority, within an intensely polarized parliament, resulted in a relatively low baseline of popularity for the government compared to other Spanish administrations at the beginning of their mandates, such as those led by Aznar (PP) or Zapatero (PSOE) (Rubia et al., 2020).

⁴⁰ In fact, some works suggest short-term effects of the de-escalation on public opinion, with individuals being more positive about individual rights at this point than at the beginning of the pandemic, although this effect is moderated by individuals’ ideology (Bernacer et al., 2021).

⁴¹ Boin and Lodge (2021) describe how by the end of the “first wave”, western political leaders felt pressured to open up the economy fast, pushed by the polls, the approaching summer and declining patient numbers.

At the time of the COVID-19 outbreak, Spain was among the European countries most severely affected by the virus, becoming the first Western European country to surpass one million COVID-19 cases. To address the crisis, the Spanish Government declared a state of alarm on 14 March, 2020, which remained in effect until 21 June 2020, along with a strict lockdown, which ended on May 11. During this time, Spaniards had very little freedom of movement with limited exceptions for grocery shopping and working in activities deemed 'essential' by the government.

The political landscape was characterized by robust and critical opposition, with the government and opposing parties engaging in a blame game, attributing responsibility for the devastating consequences of the pandemic (Rubia et al., 2020). The state of emergency underwent six extensions in parliament, specifically on March 25, April 9, April 22, May 6, May 20, and June 3. The voting patterns underwent a shift, moving from a majority of parties supporting the lockdown and the state of emergency (15 out of 19 on March 25) to a clear minority supporting the government in the last extension, when only 9 out of 19 political forces backing the government in this regard (although the option supporting the extension secured 50.57% of the votes). An increasing desire for the end of the lockdown was also apparent among citizens. In May 2020, the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (Centre for Sociological Research, the Spanish public poll institute) asked a representative sample of Spaniards, "Personally, could you continue enduring isolation in your home with new extensions of the state of emergency?" Approximately 11% of respondents gave a negative answer. One month later, the percentage increased to 24%.⁴² This reflects a growing sentiment within the population and political circles that the lockdown measures needed to be eased.

In these circumstances, the government, in close collaboration with health experts, implemented a gradual and asymmetric de-escalation plan ("Plan for the transition towards a New Normality") starting from May 11.⁴³ On that day, twenty-eight provinces, along with some municipalities in the regions of Castilla and León and Comunitat Valenciana fulfilled the plan's criteria and entered phase 1. This meant that non-essential economic activities started up again, allowing people to gather (up to ten individuals at a time), and permitting outdoor activities within municipal limits, with

⁴² <https://www.cis.es/es/detalle-ficha-estudio?idEstudio=14510>

⁴³ The progress from phase 0 to phase 1 of the de-escalation process was based on a set of conditions. These conditions included the strategic capacities of the regional health systems, the epidemiological situation, the implementation of collective protection measures in places such as retail outlets, transport or workplaces, and mobility, along with socioeconomic variables.

mandatory adherence to social distancing and preventive measures. Simultaneously, the other half of the country maintained the existing restrictions, remaining in the preparatory phase (phase 0) for at least two additional weeks.⁴⁴ At this juncture, 51% of Spaniards progressed to phase 1, while the remaining 49% continued in phase 0. We capitalize on this asymmetry in the de-escalation plan to evaluate the effect on AP of a policy (the initiation of phase 1) that enjoyed widespread approval among citizens and exhibited a high degree of consensus among parties and health experts.

7.3.2 Data and Measures

In order to tap our main phenomena of interest, we use a Spanish panel survey, conducted yearly since 2010 by the Democracy, Elections and Citizenship research group (Hernández et al., 2021b). The goal of the study was to follow a representative sample of young and middle-aged internet users residing in Spain. The sample was selected from the online panel curated by Netquest, which actively recruits potential participants by using commercial online services and websites, and then sends potential respondents one-time personal invitations, thus reducing the risk of self-selection and duplication. Quotas were used to ensure a balanced representation of participants in terms of gender, education, size of home municipality, and region. Although the questionnaire includes a wide array of questions that tap political attitudes, the range of available data for our main variables is much more limited. Questions on individuals' personal experience and assessment of the pandemic are included in waves 12 (May 2020) and 13 (May 2021), which allows us to observe the short and long-time effects of the shocks related to the pandemic.

Our dependent variable (AP) is computed based on the respondents' reported probability of voting for a party (PTV) (0-No probability at all to 10-In all likelihood), which can capture individuals' affinity towards the different Spanish political parties. This measure has recently been used by different scholars to successfully capture affective polarization in Spain (Balinhas, 2022; Orriols & León, 2021; Pérez-Rajó, 2023) and negative affect towards Populist Radical Right Parties (Meléndez & Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2021). In addition, we show the correlations between like-dislike scales (the most common way to assess AP) and PTVs for the same parties in an ancillary representative survey on political polarization in Spain, conducted by the Democracy, Elections and Citizenship group (see

⁴⁴ The different regions and municipalities that went from phase 0 to 1 as well as the ones staying in phase 0 can be seen in the appendix.

Table A 5.2). Correlations in like-dislike scales and PTVs for the four main Spanish parties range between 0.80 and 0.87, indicating a very high association between the two measures, and making PTVs a suitable measure for assessing individuals' feelings towards parties. The operationalization of AP follows the logic of Wagner's (2021) distance measure of AP, as seen in (1):

$$AP (Distance)_i = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{p=1}^P (like_{ip} + like_{max,i})^2}{n_p}} \quad (1)$$

Here $like_{max,i}$ is the PTV assigned by an individual to her preferred party, and n is the number of parties apart from the most-liked party. This way of assessing affective polarization gives importance to an individual's identification with only one party. The distance score has a theoretical maximum value of 10, and a minimum of 0, although the actual maximum values are lower (see below). The higher an individual scores, the more polarized she is. We do not weight this measure by party importance, mainly because all five parties included in the like-dislike scales are necessary actors to form left-wing or right-wing coalitions, so despite the degree of their parliamentary representation, all of them are key actors in a highly fragmented and volatile party system (see Simón, 2020).

As for our main independent variables, we rely on several items that gauge to what extent an individual is aware of and concerned by the pandemic as an issue (Hypothesis 1). To begin with, we ask a question about how the government has been managing the country in general (five categories from "very bad" to "very good"). Next, we ask about the most important problem facing the country and selected those who answered "health" (value 1 versus the rest, 0). We also asked to what extent the pandemic is a "threat to the country's economy and the country's values", to which the respondents could answer by selecting one of five options, from "not at all" to "a lot". We will test the effect of these variables on our measure of AP (H1).

We will control these effects with the alternative explanation related to the salience of mortality. The survey included a question about the extent to which respondents felt that the pandemic threatened their health and their close ones' health (from "not at all" to "a lot"). We have calculated a more objective measure of mortality salience, which is based on the rate of infections (new cases over population) per province between January and April—covering the four months preceding the

fieldwork—for both 2020 and 2021⁴⁵. The provincial incidence rate is uniform for individuals residing in the same province, and there are a total of 52 provinces. Our models also consider various controls such as gender, age, and self-placement on the left-right scale. Lags of the dependent and main independent variables are also considered, to make sure that we are not observing long-term dynamics that are dependent on previous party identification. We direct the reader to Appendix 1 for more details about the wording and coding of the variables employed in subsequent analyses.

7.3.3 Methods

Given the nature of our dependent variable (a scale ranging between 0 and 1, after normalization), we employ Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions to estimate the effects of the pandemic.⁴⁶ Specifically, we use static score models (Finkel, 1995; Pop-Eleches, Robertson and Rosenfeld, 2022). In these models, the most recently measured dependent variable is regressed on a vector comprising a lagged dependent variable (measured at a previous time, in our case wave 11, June 2019) along with a vector of control variables also measured at the beginning of the timespan (Finkel, 1995).⁴⁷ The temporal dynamics of the relationships found in our main models will be examined for other waves, specifically measuring AP and the independent variables at the height of the 2020 pandemic lockdown (wave 12) and a year later (2021, wave 13). Comparing the effects of the “focusing event” indicators tapped in 2020 and 2021 on our measures of affective polarization will also shed light on the duration and evolution of the effects.⁴⁸

For clarification, equations (2) to (4) explicitly outline the estimation of our models. In all cases, a vector of controls (including a lagged version of the dependent variable) was measured at the earliest point available (2019). In the first estimation (Equation 2), all the relevant variables (dependent and main independents, except controls) were measured during the lockdown, i.e., in

⁴⁵ For more information, refer to the data available at this link:
<https://cnecovid.isciii.es/covid19/#documentaci%C3%B3n-y-datos>

⁴⁶ In the forthcoming analyses, all non-dichotomous variables have been rescaled to ensure that their values fall within the range of 0 and 1.

⁴⁷ Static score models are suitable for accounting for relevant differences between people that experienced the shocks of the pandemic, while addressing ceiling and floor effects.

⁴⁸ We refer the reader to Figure A 7.1 in the appendix for a depiction of the evolution of general AP levels over the course of the three years covered by our study. The overall conclusion is that there is no clear pattern, but clear variability (particularly during 2020, i.e., during the “first wave” of the pandemic).

2020. This will illustrate how perceptions of the events unfolding affected individuals' polarization at the height of the pandemic crisis. The second equation (3) measures the dependent variable at the most recent available moment in time (2021) to discern if perceptions of the political context and an individual's personal situation during the lockdown still affected AP one year later. The last equation (4) measures all the relevant variables (except the controls) at the most recent moment available (2021) to discern if the indicators referring to the pandemic as a focusing event or as an event that was able to boost mortality salience one year after the outbreak –when conditions had objectively improved– are still able to affect individuals' AP.

$$AP_{2020} = \beta_0 + AP_{2019} + Controls_{2019} + Focusing\ event_{2020} + Mortality\ salience_{2020} + \epsilon \quad (2)$$

$$AP_{2021} = \beta_0 + AP_{2019} + Controls_{2019} + Focusing\ event_{2020} + Mortality\ salience_{2020} + \epsilon \quad (3)$$

$$AP_{2021} = \beta_0 + AP_{2019} + Controls_{2019} + Focusing\ event_{2021} + Mortality\ salience_{2021} + \epsilon \quad (4)$$

As for the general effects of the de-escalation phase on the population, we employ a Differences-in-Differences (DID) strategy. This quasi-experimental design tracks, over time, a group that is treated with a policy or an event, along with an untreated (control) group, to estimate a causal effect. The goal is to analyze differences in outcomes across the treatment and control groups, which occur between pre-treatment and post-treatment periods. DID is typically used to estimate the effect of a non-randomized treatment by comparing the changes in outcomes between treated and untreated individuals (the control group) over time. The approach removes biases in post-intervention period comparisons between the treatment and control group that might have existed before the intervention. In our case, individuals in territories treated with de-escalation (onset of phase 1) on May 11 should experience a reduction in their levels of AP, when compared to individuals that remained in phase 0.

Our DID design estimates the average treatment effect for the treated, which is calculated as shown in (5):

$$\delta_{DD} = (\bar{Y}_{EG,t1} - \bar{Y}_{EG,t0}) - (\bar{Y}_{CG,t1} - \bar{Y}_{CG,t0}) \quad (5)$$

Following the classical notation, we first compute the difference in AP levels between the experimental group (EG) before the de-escalation was implemented (t0), and the AP levels after this policy was applied (t1), i.e., the first difference. Second, we compute the differences in AP levels between the same two time-periods for the control group (CG), i.e., for those individuals living in regions where de-escalation was not implemented (the second difference). Finally, we subtract the first difference from the second difference, obtaining the average treatment effect for those treated (Athey & Imbens, 2006). Thus, our DID design captures the treatment effect through the difference between the actual slope of the treatment group and the counterfactual treatment path, that is, the estimated slope that the treatment group would have followed if its growth rate was the same as that of the control group. If this last figure is significant, it indicates that the mean differences in the growth rates of the outcome between the treatment and the control group are due to an effect exerted by the treatment (the de-escalation), considering all the already-existing differences between both groups.⁴⁹ More specifically, we have manually estimated the results, introducing an interaction term between time (pre/post intervention) and treatment group dummy variables. A second model includes further controls, such as sex, age, education, local COVID-19 incidence rates and dummy variables for each day of the fieldwork before the treatment –except the first one, which serves as a reference– to account for potential pre-treatment biases.

7.4 Results

Table 7.1 displays the results of a series of OLS estimations that follow the static scores approach, one for each affective polarization indicator. The dependent variable in the first model is our AP indicator measured in May 2020 (wave 12). Two of the variables tapping the focusing event effect come out as significant, namely the assessment of the government’s performance and the perception that the pandemic is a threat for the economy. This means that perceptions of the pandemic being a threat in the midst of it (May 2020) and positive perceptions of governments’ management are positively related with the AP levels measured at the same time. If we move to

⁴⁹ Differences-in-Differences (DID) assumes that any other phenomena occurring at the same time or after the treatment will affect the outcomes of both the treated and untreated groups equally (“common shocks”), and that treatment and comparison groups may start at different levels of the outcome, but their trends will be the same before the treatment starts (parallel trends).

2021 (second model in Table 1), AP still has a strong partisan component, as those who uncritically supported the government’s management of the crisis the year before are those with higher scores of AP, even controlling for their previous levels of AP, ideology, or perceptions of the government. The rationale according to which the pandemic can be conceptualized as a focusing event that forces parties to reveal new policy positions and spurring issue-based evaluation (and further affective polarization) seems to hold. Explanations related to mortality salience do not exert any significant impact, with one exception: the provincial incidence rates measured in 2020 are positively and marginally significantly related to AP ($p < 0.1$), indicating that those living in worse-affected areas developed higher levels of affective polarization. Individuals’ perceptions about the pandemic measured the previous year as being a danger for the economy of the country and the evaluation of government’s performance are still positively related to the outcome.

Finally, the last model estimates AP at the last available moment, along with the main independent variables also measured in 2021 (wave 13). This is meant to capture if the rationales and associations between the key variables have changed over the course of a year. What we observe is that the two variables tapping the focusing event effect, which were significant in previous models, remain statistically significant. Moreover, their effects have somewhat increased. The only significant effect related to mortality salience suggests that subjective perceptions of the pandemic as a threat to one’s health or the health of loved ones fosters AP. It is worth considering that this effect could be a post-hoc rationalization influenced by partisanship.

Table 7.1: Static scores estimation of AP (distance)

	Distance main measured 2020	& Distance & IVs (2021) in IVs (2020)	Distance main measured 2021	& IVs in
Controls				
Distance (2019)	0.69** (0.02)	0.66** (0.03)	0.63** (0.03)	
Self-placement L-R (2019)	0.03 (0.03)	0.14* (0.04)	0.14** (0.04)	

Government eval. (2019)	-0.07*	-0.07*	-0.08*
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)
Age (2019)	0.02	0.07*	0.06*
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Woman (2019)	-0.01	-0.01	-0.02
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)

Focusing event variables

COVID-19 threat for country's economy	0.07*	0.08*	0.09*
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)
MIP: health	-0.02	0.02	0.02
	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Government eval.	0.10**	0.09*	0.12**
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)

Mortality salience variables

Provincial incidence rate (January - April)	-0.00	0.04*	0.01
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Pandemic threatens my health & close ones'	0.01	-0.04	0.09*
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)
Observations	1425	1197	1197
<i>R</i> ²	0.491	0.405	0.417

Standard errors in parentheses. *= $p < 0.10$ **= $p < 0.05$ ***= $p < 0.01$.

Supplementary analyses (see tables A 7.3 and A 7.4 of the appendix) that disaggregate the dependent variable (i.e., affective polarization) into its two constituent components –individuals' positive affect towards ideologically closer parties and negative affect towards ideologically farther parties– provide preliminary insights into the implied mechanisms. On one hand, the increase in positive affect towards ideologically closer parties is primarily attributed to favorable evaluations of the government during the height of the pandemic, an effect that is also significant in 2021. All else being equal, an individual endorsing the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis tends to

express greater positivity towards parties within their ideologically closer block, consequently contributing to the widening gap between in-block and out-block parties. On the other hand, the rise in negative affect towards out-parties is mainly associated with perceiving the pandemic as a threat to the country's economy, and this effect persists over time as well. Additionally, we note the positive effect of local COVID-19 incidence rates (both in 2020 and in 2021), implying that fear following a life-threatening event might strengthen people's existing worldviews, leading to higher levels of negativity towards the block of parties constituted by ideological adversaries.

Taken together, these results yield notable support for the focusing event hypothesis and also some support for the 'worldview defense hypothesis' and mortality salience, at least when it comes to out-party negative affect. Loyalty towards the government and fear –whether for the country or for loved ones– appear to be the primary causal mechanisms fueling in-parties' positive affect and out-parties' negative affect, respectively, both contributing to the escalation of affective polarization.

Finally, we move onto the last contextual effect related to the pandemic. In this case, we analyze the effect of easing the lockdown, by means of a differences-in-differences analyses. In order to do this, we put the respondents of our survey in two groups: treated and untreated with the easing of the lockdown (beginning of phase 1 of the de-escalation). Some regions passed into the 1st phase on May 11 in totality, while others (Castilla y León, Valencia region) only had parts that did so, or did not do so at all (e.g., Madrid). The regions left behind were re-evaluated again to see if they could enter phase 1, but this was after the end of our fieldwork. Figure 1 depicts the evolution of the levels of AP for both groups before and after the treatment (end of strict lockdown due to passing to phase 1). We observe a parallel evolution of both groups before the critical date (May 11) and, afterwards, a steady decline of the treated AP levels, which is not matched by the untreated group's levels. We also observe that most of the post-treatment differences are concentrated around the weekend (15-17 May), as citizens are likely to experience the benefits of de-escalation measures primarily during their leisure time, i.e., weekends.

Figure 7.1: Evolution of AP levels for those treated with phase 1 (easing of strict lockdown) and those untreated

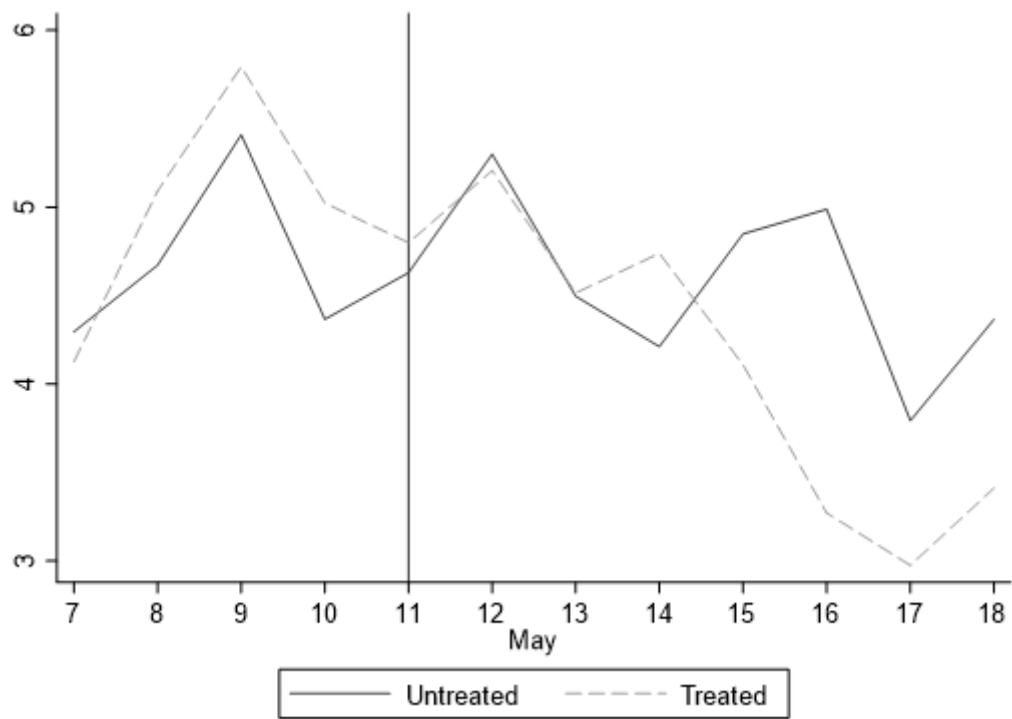


Table 2 presents the results of the DID analysis (uncontrolled, left column; controlled, right column). We observe that, before the treatment, the AP levels of those who were about to enter phase 1 of the de-escalation were, in fact, significantly higher than those who were not ($b=0.03$, $p<0.1$). After the treatment, the AP levels were 7 percentage points lower for those treated. The second model in Table 2 includes a series of relevant controls, such as the 2020 local incidence of the disease between the months of January and April. Importantly, we have included dummies per day for the pre-treatment period, excluding the first day of fieldwork for reference and to prevent perfect overlap with the “post -intervention” variable. This was done to ensure that both the treated and the untreated groups in our sample followed parallel trends before the intervention. The inclusion of controls variables has the effect of reducing the treatment’s estimated impact by one percentage point. Consequently, we conclude that the intervention had a substantial 6 percentage points effect in reducing levels of affective polarization, signifying a noteworthy average treatment effect for those who underwent the treatment.

Table 7.2: Diff-in-diff analysis for the effect of lockdown offset

	Affective polarization. Basic DID	Affective polarization. With controls
Treated	0.03 ⁺ (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
Post intervention	-0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.03)
Treated # post intervention	-0.07* (0.03)	-0.06* (0.03)
Self-placement L-R		-0.06 ⁺ (0.03)
Age		0.10** (0.03)
Woman		-0.01 (0.01)
Education		0.01** (0.00)
Provincial incidence (January- April)		-0.02 (0.02)
May 7 (ref.)		
May 8		0.06* (0.024)
May 9		0.13** (0.03)
May 10		0.05 (0.03)
Constant		.31*** (0.04)
Observations	2124	2072
R ²	0.006	0.026

All variables measured in wave 12 (2020)

Standard errors in parentheses. ⁺=p< 0.10 * =p< 0.05 **=p<0.01 ***=p<0.001.

In sum, AP levels are sensitive to government measures. The implementation of a public policy

that was highly consensual and positively regarded by citizens caused a decline in AP levels of those affected by this popular policy.

7.5 Conclusions

The sociopolitical landscape shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique opportunity to delve into the impact of exceptional events and specific political measures on one of the most pressing facets of contemporary public opinion: affective polarization. Past literature has primarily focused on the individual and institutional foundations of AP, often overlooking its temporal dynamics. While some studies have explored the medium to long-term drivers of AP, our study addresses a significant gap in understanding short-term dynamics, particularly in the context of external shocks and crises.

Building on existing literature and conceptualizing the pandemic as a focusing event, we explore how individual-level variables influenced the temporal dynamics of AP during March 2020. The pandemic compelled some citizens to engage in issue-evaluation processes, heightening their AP levels even a year after the COVID-19 outbreak. Additionally, we investigate the depolarizing effects of specific, consensual pandemic management measures, particularly the easing of the May 2020 lockdown.

Our study, utilizing three waves of a Spanish panel survey and static score models, provides nuanced insights into the temporal dynamics of AP. Specifically, we found that the pandemic, acting as a focusing event, widened the affective gap between in-parties and out-parties among citizens who held a more positive view of the government's management of the pandemic. Our results are consistent with recent literature suggesting that measures during the pandemic were more likely to be supported if they were proposed by an individual's in-party (Flores et al., 2022). Conversely, citizens who perceived the pandemic as a threat to the country's economy also experienced an increase in their levels of AP. Both results suggest that citizens who engaged in issue-evaluation processes—assessing the government's measures for coping with the crisis or evaluating the economic consequences of the pandemic—became more affectively polarized.

While our theoretical framework and data do not enable us to identify individuals more likely to engage in evaluative processes, our static score models account for previous individual levels of AP.

This effectively eliminates within-individual time-invariant factors (e.g., political sophistication or cognitive styles) that could otherwise confound our results. Consequently, we can attribute the observed effects to individuals' perceptions regarding the political management of the pandemic. Additional auxiliary analyses suggest that loyalty towards the government –perhaps reflecting a 'rally-round-the-flag' effect often described in the early stages of the pandemic– likely contributes to ingroup positive affect. Conversely, negative affect toward the outgroup is primarily associated with perceptions of the pandemic as an economic threat and actual incidence rates, potentially inducing fear.

In a novel contribution to the affective depolarization literature, we examined the impact of the de-escalation policy implemented by the Spanish government. Using a Differences-in-Differences design, we observed a significant six-point reduction in affective polarization associated with the easing of lockdown measures. This finding aligns with existing research indicating that policies supported by bipartisan coalitions or experts depolarize citizens' perceptions of specific COVID-19 policies (Flores et al., 2022). More specifically, our study extends this previous literature by finding that a similar reaction applies to citizens' affect. That is, policies sponsored by party elites and experts do not only foster more acceptance on the part of population, but they also boost affective depolarization, reducing the gap between citizens' affect towards their in-parties and out-parties. These findings highlight the role of elite-level political cooperation regarding affective depolarization (Gidron et al., 2020), and extends this effect to cooperation between partisan actors (the incumbents) and non-partisan ones (health experts).

Our results are based on a quasi-experimental technique combined with a large-N panel survey, offering high levels of external validity in a real-world situation, providing clues on when the causal mechanisms behind this relationship operate. Further research should delve into the duration and specific mechanisms behind the depolarization effect of elite-level cooperation, which remains unclear (Huddy & Yair, 2021; Wagner & Praprotnik, 2023).

Importantly, our study focuses on the Spanish case, characterized by elevated AP levels and stringent lockdown measures. This unique context allows us to explore mechanisms, both at the individual and aggregate levels, that simultaneously contribute to the increase and decrease of affective polarization simultaneously. Our findings contribute to the understanding of contextual effects that influence AP dynamics and offer valuable insights into the political consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. In conclusion, our study navigates the complex terrain of affective polarization

during the pandemic, shedding light on short-term dynamics and the interplay between micro and macro-level processes. In complementing previous research on public opinion during COVID-19, especially on affective polarization (Wagner & Eberl, 2022), we highlight the varying contextual effects of the health crisis and its political management on AP. By examining the temporal evolution of AP, our research offers a nuanced exploration of contextual effects during the pandemic and contributes to the broader literature on public opinion and the political implications of crises, particularly the COVID-19 crisis.

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7.7 Appendix

Wording of main variables:

Dependent Variable:

- Affective polarization: PTVs of the main parties

As you know, in Spain there are different parties that can be voted. To answer, use a scale where 0 means “No probability at all, I would never vote it” and 10 means “All the probability, I would vote it for sure” What is the probability that you vote for?

- PP
- PSOE
- Podemos
- Ciudadanos
- Vox

Independent variables:

- Focusing event:

- Government evaluation: Overall, how would you rate the management that the PSOE and Podemos’ government?

- Very good
- Good
- Neither good nor bad
- Bad
- Very bad

- COVID-19 as a threat to the country’s economy: In the future, to what extent do you consider that a pandemic as COVID-19 can be detrimental to the labor and economic perspectives of the country

- Very much
- Considerably
- A bit
- Nothing

- Most important problem: What is the most important problem currently in Spain? (randomized list of different problems, including the category of “other”)

- Personal affectation by COVID-19-Mortality salience variables:

- Personal affectation: Have some of these situations happened to you? (yes/no/I don't know)
 1. I have been diagnosed or I have had symptoms compatible with COVID-19
 2. A relative has had or I believe that has had COVID-19
- COVID-19 as a threat to one's own health and relatives' health: In the future, to what extent do you consider that a pandemic as COVID-19 can be detrimental to your health or the health of somebody close to you?
 - Very much
 - Considerably
 - A bit
 - Nothing

Tables and Graphs

Table A 7.1: Provinces and municipalities going from phase 0 to phase 1 on May 11 2020

Name	Type	Autonomous Community
Sevilla	Province	Andalucía
Cádiz		
Córdoba		
Jaén		
Huelva		
Almería		
Huesca		Aragón
Zaragoza		
Teruel		
Mallorca		
Menorca		
Ibiza		
La Palma	Canarias	
Lanzarote		
Fuerteventura		
Gran Canaria		
Tenerife		
Cantabria		Autonomous Community
Guadalajara	Province	Castilla La Mancha
Cuenca		
Cáceres		
Badajoz		Extremadura
A Coruña		
Lugo		

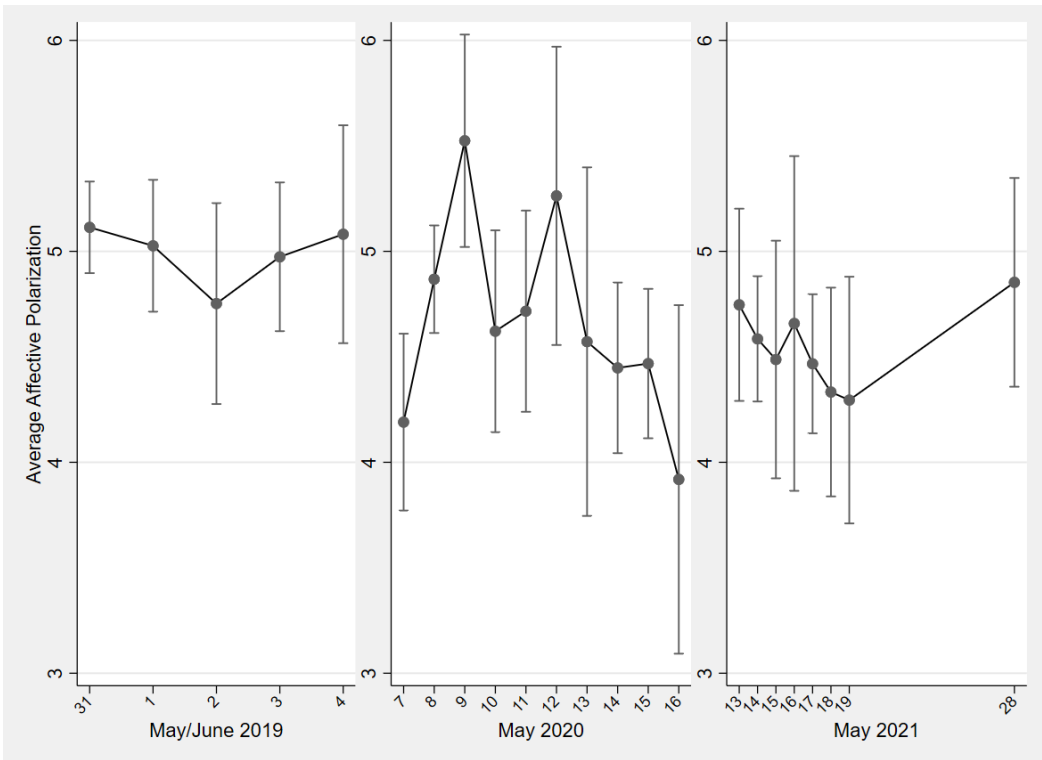
Ourense		
Pontevedra		
Navarra	Autonomous Community	Navarra
Vizcaya	Province	País Vasco
Guipúzcoa		
Álava		
Asturias	Autonomous Community	Asturias
Región de Murcia		Región de Murcia
La Rioja		La Rioja
Ceuta	Autonomous City	-
Melilla		-
Tarragona	Province	Catalunya
Requena, Xátiva-Ontinyent, Gandía, Alcoi, Denia, Marina Baixa, Elda, Orihuela, Torrevieja, Vinaròs	Municipality	Comunitat Valenciana
Muñicos, Sedano, Valle de Losa, Quintanar de la Sierra, Espinosa de los Monteros, Pampliega, Valle de Mena, Truchas, Matallana de Torío, Riaño, Torquemada, Robleda, Alaejos, Mayorga de Campos, Esguevillas de Esgueva, Alta Sanabria, Carbajales de Alba, Tábara, Santibáñez de Vidriales, Alcañices, Corrales del Vino, Villalpando, Aldeavila de la Ribera, Lumbrales, Miranda del Castañar, San Pedro Manrique	Municipality	Castilla y León

Table A 7.2: Provinces remaining in Phase 0 on May 11 2020

Name	Type	Autonomous Community
Málaga	Province	Andalucía
Granada		
Toledo	Province	Castilla La Mancha
Ciudad Real		
Albacete		
Ávila	Province	Castilla y León
Burgos		
León		
Palencia		

Salamanca		
Soria		
Zamora		
Segovia		
Valladolid		
Castellón	Province	Comunitat Valenciana
Valencia		
Alicante		
Comunidad de Madrid	Autonomous Community	Comunidad de Madrid
Girona	Province	Catalunya
Lleida		
Barcelona		

Figure A 7.1: Evolution of AP during the fieldwork. Means and 95% Confidence Intervals.



Note: Figure A 7.1 illustrates the progression of average Affective Polarization (AP) levels per fieldwork day, considering interviews with more than 50 respondents, across the three analyzed panel waves conducted in 2019, 2020, and 2021. Larger confidence intervals indicate days when

fewer individuals participated in the survey. Before the pandemic, the average AP remained relatively stable, hovering around 5. In May 2020, amid the pandemic, average levels exhibited increased variability during the fieldwork, starting at a relatively low level (4.3), experiencing an upward shift of more than one point in three days, and subsequently decreasing. AP levels in 2021 seem to fall midway between those of 2019 and 2020, showing a gradual downward trend that appears to reverse towards the end of the fieldwork. The graph does not reveal clear patterns except for variability during the pandemic.

Table A 7.3: Estimation of positive affect.

	In-block positive affect & main IVs measured in 2020	In-block positive affect (2021) main IVs (2020)	In-block positive affect & main IVs measured in 2021
Positive affect (2019)	0.59** (0.03)	0.52** (0.03)	0.51** (0.03)
Self placement L-R (2019)	0.18** (0.03)	0.18** (0.04)	0.20** (0.03)
Government eval. (2019)	0.01 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)
Age (2019)	0.02 (0.02)	0.03 (0.03)	0.01 (0.02)
Woman	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Focusing event variables			
COVID-19 threat for country's economy	0.03 (0.04)	-0.08* (0.04)	-0.02 (0.03)
MIP: health	0.00 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Government eval.	0.19** (0.03)	0.13** (0.03)	0.19** (0.03)
Mortality salience variables			
Provincial incidence rate (January - April)	0.00 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)
Pandemic threatens my health & close ones'	0.01 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	0.11** (0.03)

Observations	871	762	762
R2	0.443	0.400	0.424

Standard errors in parentheses

+ $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Note: During the time of COVID-19, Spanish politics was characterized by two affective blocs: the left-wing parties in government (PSOE and Podemos) and the right-wing parties in opposition (PP, Ciudadanos, and the far-right party Vox) (see Orriols and León, 2021). Following the framework of affective blocs (see Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021), we assign individuals to an in-block based on their self-reported ideology (left: 0 to 4, right: 6 to 10). For those situated at the midpoint of the ideological scale (5), we assign an in-block based on their reported vote intentions. Positive affect is determined by the average PTV rating of parties within an individual's own ideological block, while negative affect is determined by the average PTV rating of parties within the opposing ideological block.

Table A 7.4: Estimation of negative affect.

	Out-block negative affect & main IVs measured in 2020	Out-block negative affect (2021) main IVs (2020)	Out-block negative affect & main IVs measured in 2021
Negative affect (2019)	0.39** (0.03)	0.36** (0.03)	0.36** (0.03)
Self placement L-R (2019)	-0.07* (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.06+ (0.03)
Government eval. (2019)	-0.07* (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)
Age (2019)	0.04+ (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
Woman	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Focusing event variables			

COVID-19 threat for country's economy	0.13** (0.03)	0.12** (0.03)	0.14** (0.03)
MIP: health	-0.04* (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Government eval.	-0.04+ (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)
Mortality salience variables			
Provincial incidence rate (January - April)	0.03 (0.02)	0.05* (0.02)	0.02** (0.01)
Pandemic threatens my health & close ones'	0.02 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)
Observations	871	762	762
R2	0.443	0.400	0.424

Standard errors in parentheses

+ $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Chapter 8: Conclusions, Limitations, and Avenues for Future Research

Political polarization, and particularly its emotional expression, affective polarization, constitutes an important topic that has recently attracted the attention of pundits, journalists, scholars in the broad area of social sciences, and even practitioners in the field of (psycho)social intervention. Research on its measurement, causes, its relationship with other dimensions of political polarization and its consequences has been flourishing in the last years. Furthermore, as some previous literature has raised a number of concerns regarding the possible detrimental consequences of AP in terms of intergroup relations and different aspects of our societies' democratic functioning, research on depolarization has also grown vigorously.

This thesis, leveraging different datasets and through a multi-method approach, aimed to contribute to this multidisciplinary academic debate. It was guided specifically by two general sets of questions. First, as a way to explore AP trends and some of its main correlates, I examined how affective polarization and some of its correlates evolve through time in multidimensional contexts that have undertaken a process of party-system transformation, and what some of its short-term and long-term causes are. A second question took as its starting point the observation of a dearth of critical-theoretical reviews of current approaches to polarization and its consequences, as well as very limited efforts to examine polarization beyond survey and experimental research. As a result, this PhD dissertation also looked into the main theoretical, conceptual, and practical omissions of previous literature on polarization and depolarization and if and how approaches that pay close in-depth attention to people's everyday interactions can help to address these omissions and thus complement and enrich political polarization literature.

The different chapters of the present work have helped me to address this general set of questions and other more specific sub-questions and hypotheses. Chapter 2 developed a critical-theoretical review and discussed the implications of applying important psychosocial perspectives to political polarization. I discussed the importance of the historical context and power dynamics in the generation, (re)production, and consequences of intergroup stereotypes. I also argued, drawing on

previous critical reflections on the contact hypothesis that examined how simple contact -which is the most used tool to try to foster depolarization- can work to (re)produce the status quo by producing sedative effects on members of historically unprivileged groups (Hässler et al., 2021; McKeown & Dixon, 2017). The chapter thus provides different tools to understand the conceptual and practical consequences of ahistorical analyses (Balinhas, 2020) of polarized contexts, as well as a useful framework for future ideas for depolarization interventions that aspire to foster contact under the optimal conditions possible, while also underlining alternative paths towards positive social change beyond contact.

Chapter 2 is, to the best of my knowledge, the first academic piece discussing and elaborating on the applicability of these psychosocial perspectives within polarization studies. In addition, the chapter constitutes a starting point for the development of essential future lines for research. First, it calls for a dialogue between affective polarization research and collective action research. The latter has examined the important role of negative emotions in fostering different types of protest and collective mobilization (Sabucedo et al., 2017; Stewart et al., 2016), which we know are oftentimes essential components behind the universalization of social and political rights and, generally, behind positive social change (Dixon et al., 2012). While recent research on affective polarization has started to highlight some positive consequences of AP, such as an increase in citizens' levels of turnout (Harteveld & Wagner, 2023), the bulk of previous literature has focused on hypothesizing potential negative consequences. Nevertheless, there have been some exceptions, precisely the ones approaching the political polarization phenomenon from a collective action perspective, and underscoring that affective polarization is a consequence of politicization (Simon et al., 2019). If politicization constitutes a force behind polarization, this fact clearly has implications for the polarization literature. Politicization frequently comes from the generation of collective frames that interpret a given sociopolitical situation as unfair. In highly unequal or increasingly unequal societies -that is, societies with high or increasing 'polarization' in terms of economic situations, access to many assets and rights- inequality itself constitutes a structural situation that can provide a breeding ground for politicization. And politicization, for its part, can constitute a breeding ground for conflict and polarization. This means that sometimes the 'problem' might not be polarization, but some of the aspects that lead some social and political groups to politicize and try to promote social change. Let me proceed with an example.

Before feminism was a mass phenomenon with a wide capacity for mobilization and politicization, the politicization of gender issues, conflict, and thereby, mass polarization between feminists and non-feminists or supporters of the -patriarchal- status quo was a minority phenomenon, and gender-related social harmony based on a massively unquestioned dominance of one group over other was the predominant social formation. It is when a given social group politicizes⁵⁰ and challenges current power arrangements that fertile ground for both polarization and social change emerges. When a group or groups (i.e., feminists) try to change their minoritized status and unprivileged situation, the search for allies in the cause and the identification of those responsible for upholding an unfair status quo generates cognitive -ideological- and emotional proximity towards the allies and cognitive and emotional distance from the adversaries. Likewise, privileged groups, when they see their status threatened, will be likely to manifest these cognitive and emotional responses as well. Thus, it can be expected that feminists feel ideologically and emotionally far from those who are perceived as responsible for maintaining a patriarchal status quo or for the spreading of ideologies aiming at undermining recently acquired women's rights. It can also be expected that those blaming the feminists for what they perceive as an undesirable change in classic social structures such as the family, the gendered division of labor, etc., and whose social position and status is perceived as threatened, also react with ideological and emotional distancing, that can even eventually lead to collective action in order to preserve the status quo (Mikołajczak et al., 2022). Note that in the example, polarization and conflict are not necessarily the problem, but just a symptom that there is ongoing intergroup social and political conflict. The problem, in the example, would be the prevalence of a sustained inequality between men and women that has been denying women's recognition, equal rights, freedom, and their right to access, on equal terms with men, to labor and the material goods necessary for life. Thus, the social sciences should focus on trying to analyze and develop strategies to gradually tackle and try to solve the problem at its root.⁵¹

Stavrakakis (2018), in more general terms, wonders if we are sure that the causal chain starts with polarization and 'ends' with democratic erosion or a crisis of democracy, and not the other way

⁵⁰ With the expression 'politicize', I mean the act of giving a political dimension to a situation, to begin to understand situations or aspects labeled as 'problems' as something that needs to be dealt with collectively, and which requires a collective response in order to change it.

⁵¹ Note that here I am not arguing that effecting positive social changes needs to come necessarily from polarization. What I am arguing is that mass mobilization, in order to change gender-based (or race, class...) inequalities, often implies political conflict, and that seeing this conflict as the problem instead of pointing to its underlying structural causes might play a system-justification role.

around. In this sense, what if elite-driven erosion of some foundational principles of democracy, such as equality, is also a breeding ground for the emergence of political polarization? Some recent empirical evidence, in my view, speaks to this debate. Hübscher, Sattler and Wagner (2023) found that austerity measures increased abstention, voting for non-mainstream parties, and party system polarization, which is what in this dissertation has been called left-right polarization, a well-known element that fuels AP. Also, Gidron, Adams and Horne (2020) found cross-national correlations between countries' economic conditions -in terms of inequality and unemployment- and AP. These works constitute an empirical backing to the above-mentioned hypothesis and should lead further research to envisage the different polarization dimensions not just as a cause, but also as a consequence of democratic erosion. Future research, in fact, should add the politicization variable to their analyses, as it is not unlikely that findings about the relationship between macro-level objective economic conditions, such as inequality, and AP might actually be underestimated. Future research should look into whether economic inequality, when individuals perceive and interpret it as unfair -that is, when it is politicized- (see Power, 2018) leads to affective polarization and/or other types of polarization.

This is not to say that polarization cannot sometimes be or become the problem itself: it certainly can. It is not to deny that sometimes depolarization might be needed as a first stage towards positive social change. The point here is that systematically problematizing conflict and reifying harmony, whilst not paying careful attention to the history of intergroup relations, very likely leads to putting the knowledge of social and behavioral sciences to the service of the preservation of current power arrangements and the status quo. To solve and develop some of these concerns, a dialogue with collective action studies might be useful to theoretically develop a frame that helps us to distinguish between the polarization created by social movements aiming at equality -and thus, with a constructive potential to create more equal and thereby more stable and cohesive societies- and polarization created by a backlash against these movements (Aragón-Morales & Ruiz-Jiménez, 2023; Lisnek et al., 2022) and/or pernicious polarization.

Chapter 4 constitutes an effort to offer descriptive evidence on the state and evolution of quantitative political polarization indicators within the multidimensional Spanish political system. This overview is provided along with a brief commentary on key political events over a timespan of more than a decade that has coincided with changes in the different political polarization indicators. This descriptive evidence fosters our awareness of important aspects, such as intergroup differences

in their affect towards social groups, differences in the intensity of the relationship between left-right polarization and AP and the latter and territorial polarization, or in their predicted trajectories in these different types of polarization.

This chapter shows that previous findings about far-right supporters receiving more negative affect from supporters of other parties than the negative affect that far-right supporters irradiate towards them is something that is not translated when we ask about historically disadvantaged groups such as migrants or feminists. Far-right identifiers present higher levels of negative affect towards these groups compared to those who identify with all the other Spanish parties. This fact calls for the importance of further studying the configurations of affect towards different social and political groups, their causes as well as their consequences.

The last section of chapter 4 shows that the trajectories of different groups in the distinct dimensions of political polarization are expected to be affected by important events such as the emergence, for the first time, of a far-right party that runs in an election, or the conjuncture provoked by the worldwide COVID-19 health crisis. However, at the same time, the extent to which these aspects affect political polarization trajectories varies between groups. For instance, I found that coinciding with Vox's appearance, the predicted levels of AP were expected to rise for all the ideological groups. But this rise was higher among left-wing individuals. Interestingly, before the electoral breakthrough of Vox, predicted levels of AP among right and far-right individuals were already high, echoing and complementing what previous research in the Spanish context has found (Rodon, 2022; Torcal & Comellas, 2022). The variability in the predicted AP trajectories of individuals with different ideologies underlines that elements of intergroup heterogeneity need to be considered (Dono et al., 2021) when studying AP dynamics. Future scholarly work should conduct research on the role of important intergroup differences when trying to grasp AP dynamics and trajectories. In this sense, aspects such as the vulnerability of a given group, its majority-minority status or their degree of power and power asymmetries might be considered in future research.

The question of heterogeneity is considered and developed in chapter 5, which takes seriously the premise that there might be some differences between ideological groups in how perceptions of polarization on the left-right and territorial axes of competition relate to AP. I found that perceptions of polarization on the national/territorial axis relate to AP levels but that this is a relationship that holds for centrist and especially, right-wing individuals, whilst the relationship between perceived left-right polarization and AP is particularly strong for left-wing individuals. Chapter 5 also

underscores the importance of the salience of a dimension of political competition and how intensely it is associated with AP. Both aspects open up promising avenues for further research. In this sense, future experimental research can further test if manipulating the salience of a dimension of competition or a political issue, in general, makes it more likely for individuals to hold polarized perceptions, views, and affective reactions towards the different sides implicated. With regards to the heterogeneity aspect, considering the variability in the causes behind AP in different groups can lead future research to produce more nuanced outcomes than might also be useful for the design of depolarization interventions. Along these lines, future research can explore if and how tailored depolarization interventions work in contexts in which some of the causes behind AP varies for different ideological or sociodemographic groups.

The descriptive evidence in chapter 4 also points to AP as the polarization dimension that experiences more variation over time, implying that there might be many contextual factors that can either foster it or reduce it. This aspect is analyzed and developed in chapter 7, which examines if the conjuncture propitiated by COVID-19 altered AP dynamics. Professor Carol Galais and I found that despite an aggregate general reduction in AP levels, controlling for previous levels of AP, individuals with warmer evaluations of the government and individuals with higher perceptions of COVID-19 as a threat to the country's economy increased their AP levels. Additionally, leveraging an asymmetric process that led to an application of an important de-escalation policy in Spain (during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in the spring of 2020) only for citizens living in some areas, we test the depolarizing effect of the policy, finding that those exposed to it significantly decreased AP levels compared to those not exposed to the policy during our fieldwork. This chapter then, tests if and how AP is reactive to short-term dynamics propitiated in this case, for a traumatic and unprecedented event such as the COVID-19 health crisis. The results highlight, also in line with previous research, that what happens at the elite level matters (Bassan-Nygate & Weiss, 2022; Gidron et al., 2022; Wagner & Praprotnik, 2023). This previous research underlined the important role of coalitions between parties, that is, a form inter-party cooperation, in the affective reactions of supporters towards one another, proving that elite-level cooperation and coalitional behavior can reduce AP. We extend this knowledge by demonstrating that a specific policy, which at the time was highly popular and consensual, as well as implemented in cooperation and collaboration with health experts, can also depolarize. Along these lines, future academic inquiry can test the effects of different policies, in terms of content and the area of application -national, regional, or local level- on AP.

Chapter 6 of the PhD dissertation deals with political polarization as it normally manifests in everyday settings, that is, within language practices and interactions between people. The chapter, in collaboration with Professor Cristian Tileaga, shows the discursive strategies followed by different groups to collectively express and mobilize polarized and polarizing opinions about perceived outgroups within everyday interactions. Furthermore, the chapter shows how people re-articulate the ideological dilemma of prejudice and tolerance and how they collectively defend the application of illiberal policies against the outgroups from a rhetorical position of reasonableness. This approach to polarization compensates for the lack of qualitative, situated, and in-depth insights into the political polarization topic. But most importantly, we show different aspects that are relevant for advancing the social-psychological knowledge about this phenomenon, and to raise questions that future inquiry needs to tackle.

First, we show that individuals think and argue about polarization, and that who is to blame and to be held accountable for conflict and polarization is something that is a matter of dispute. In this sense, individuals tend to situate the outgroup's actions, attitudes, or their present and past behavior as the cause for intergroup confrontation, so one's own and the ingroup's actions are presented as something that needs to be understood as contextualized, responsive actions. Individuals tend to present themselves as rational and motivated by facts, whereas the outgroups and their political positions are presented as led by internal, psychological, and emotional motivations. That is, irrational forces are argued to be the causes behind the outgroup's political positions.

Examining these aspects within one of the most polarized conflicts in the Spanish sociopolitical context -the territorial conflict in Catalonia- we show that the ingroup-outgroup differentiation in polarized contexts goes beyond the image that is sometimes transmitted of partisans as cue-followers whose main motivation is for their in-party to win and/or their out-party to lose, no matter the circumstances. In our dataset, we observe a critical assessment of political elites, with participants tending to express concern about principles that go well beyond political parties, their performance, and the desirability of a certain party to reach power. Participants expressed concern about ideological principles such as equality, the right or not to self-determination, the management of the economy, or questions related to national sovereignty and the protection of minorities, showing that partisanship can be one explanatory factor behind polarization, but one of many. This aligns with very recent experimental evidence in the US that shows that AP is driven by policy

agreement much more than by partisan loyalty and that previous research that argued the importance of 'party over policy' probably overestimated the importance of partisanship, as when trying to manipulate only the latter, they probably manipulated beliefs about policy agreement as well (Orr et al., 2023). Along these lines, future research should try to analyze how everyday partisans argue about in-party and out-party party positions in relation to their values, goals, and their ideology, how this remains stable or changes over time and why. Additionally, future attempts that try to unravel if the importance of policy vis-à-vis partisanship when explaining AP varies depending on the structure of the party system and/or the type of electoral system.

Second, our focus on intragroup contexts provides an in-depth account of how stereotypical -and potentially prejudiced- social representations of outgroups are reproduced and kept alive by lay thinkers, but also how these representations might be challenged. Our work suggests that the intragroup context might be important when it comes to contesting very negative social representations of the political outgroups, and how counter-stereotypical but influential individuals who are willing to politely disagree about different things with members of the ingroup, both at an elite level and at the grassroots level, might help to contain and modify these representations. Along these lines, future research can investigate if the introduction of these counter-stereotypical individuals into group discussions leads to less polarized ingroup-outgroup representations vis-à-vis groups in which all individuals are highly stereotypical and very similar to the dominant group representation, meaning that their opinions are aligned with what is expected of them as members of a given political group.

Apart from a discussion of how this PhD dissertation contributes to and advances current understandings of political polarization, and what some future research avenues might be that the different contributions open up, the present thesis has different limitations; overcoming them might also constitute avenues for future inquiry.

First, while the results presented and discussed in this PhD dissertation can probably be applicable in other contexts and they might help researchers to raise questions and sensitize scholars about different issues regarding intergroup conflict and political polarization, they have been obtained in a context, the Spanish one, that has different particularities. This means that the capacity of these findings to travel to other places and to be useful in other settings is something that remains to be tested. Related to this point, while the territorial divide in the Spanish multinational democracy is a very important dimension of political competition, in other countries the GAL-TAN dimension, pro-

anti EU dimension, or the rural-urban divide might be more important in the configuration of political competition, so research should address how, among whom, and under what conditions conflict around these different dimensions might be associated to AP.

Second, in our findings about the depolarizing capacity of the de-escalation policy during the COVID-19 lockdowns in chapter 7, what still remains unclear, as is the case for inter-party coalition dynamics and its effect on AP, is the specific mechanism leading individuals to depolarize. In our particular case, the scientific endorsement of the policy provided by health experts might be behind this effect, but it could have been produced by other factors, such as less attention to -partisan-political information as a consequence of spending less time at home, the general positivity of the measure itself, or a return to face-to-face intergroup contact with supporters of other parties. Uncovering why some elite competition dynamics or specific policies depolarize citizens is an important step to understanding the reasons behind the success or failure of depolarization interventions, so this aspect clearly needs to inspire future attempts to disentangle the specific mechanism behind depolarizing experiences.

Third, although interest in the potential ways of promoting depolarization by encouraging the active participation of people with counter-stereotypical opinions in intragroup settings is promising, specific ways to do so have not been developed in this dissertation. Thus, how can we specifically design depolarization interventions within intragroup settings and what would be the advantages and disadvantages of these sorts of interventions for individual, intragroup, and eventually intergroup relations are important aspects for future theoretical and applied research.

Also needed to say, the present PhD dissertation leaves different aspects related to political polarization unexplored. I focus, in different chapters, on perceptions of the party system and party competition, and thereby the influence of 'objective' measures beyond individuals' perceptions about the different types of political polarization is not assessed. In this sense, although measuring perceptions has some advantages and some disadvantages vis-à-vis using objective aggregate-level indicators, the comparison and empirical analysis of the relationship between the two kinds of indicators, as well as their potentially different correlates (see Enders & Armaly, 2019) might provide the political polarization literature with important insights. Another limitation of this work is that the effects of different predictors on AP are tested, but I do not examine if these predictors are differently associated either with increases in ingroup(s) positive affect, increases in outgroup(s) negative affect (Mayer & Russo, 2023) or both -with the exception of some supplementary analyses

in chapter 7, in which we briefly tackle this question. This disaggregation of the two main components of affective polarization can, on some occasions, provide some more nuanced cues about the precise mechanism behind the effects found.

Despite these limitations, this PhD dissertation, in approaching the political polarization phenomenon from different angles and combining different quantitative-longitudinal methodologies, a quasi-experimental research design (DID), and an in-depth qualitative analysis of everyday citizens' meaning-making practices, provides several contributions that help the development of political polarization literature, especially regarding affective polarization. These contributions have been the result of an interdisciplinary effort to approach political (de)polarization from different perspectives drawn from disciplines such as social psychology, political science, sociology, communication, or history. In the same vein, this PhD dissertation aims to provide plural and transdisciplinary tools to think theoretically about political polarization in academia, but also to contribute to the generation of valuable knowledge that might be useful for professionals and practitioners working in the field of social intervention.

8.1 References

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