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## Looking for Affective Polarisation in Spain: PSOE and Podemos from Conflict to Coalition

Lluís Orriols and Sandra León

### ABSTRACT

Voters in many advanced democracies increasingly dislike their political opponents, a phenomenon that is known as affective polarisation. The growing animosity between electorates is particularly challenging in multiparty systems, where ruling is more dependent on cross-party alliances. In this work, we examine the case of Spain, a multiparty democracy that exhibits one of the highest levels of affective polarisation among advanced democracies. Using public opinion databases as well as extensive qualitative evidence, we operationalise and explore the evolution of affective polarisation in the Spanish electorate and its main drivers, with a particular focus on the competition for the left-wing electorate between the PSOE and Podemos during the 2015–2020 period.

### KEYWORDS

Elections; socialist party; coalition government; radical left; ideology; Catalonia; left-wing parties; territorial cleavage

Voters in advanced democracies increasingly dislike each other. This phenomenon is known as affective polarisation and it captures the growing distance between the positive sentiment for one's party and the negative sentiment towards those identifying with opposing parties (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes 2012). Affective polarisation poses a fundamental challenge for democracy because it may weaken the role of elections in holding governments to account (Pierson & Schickler 2020; Iyengar & Krupenkin 2018), impair dialogue and cooperation (Valentino et al. 2008) and, in turn, lead to the erosion of trust in political institutions (Layman, Carsey & Horowitz 2006) and the legitimacy of elected representatives (Iyengar et al. 2019).

Spain is an interesting case study because it has been classified as one of the most polarised societies among advanced democracies (Reiljan 2020). Certainly, Spain has experienced one of the most turbulent political periods since the restoration of democracy in 1978. This period started in 2015 with the collapse of the traditional two-party system and spanned until the formation, at the beginning of 2020, of a minority coalition government between the PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español – The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) and UP (Unidas Podemos – Together We Can), a political force to its left.<sup>1</sup> Following

the collapse of Spanish bipartisan politics<sup>2</sup> in the 2015 election, the battle for the left-wing electorate had wrecked several attempts for these parties to become allies in national government. Yet confrontation finally gave way to the first national coalition government in Spain since the return to democracy. The minority coalition formed by UP and PSOE was exceptional also from a comparative perspective because left-wing parties have traditionally participated in coalition governments together with, at least, a centre or right-wing party and almost always in alliance with three or more parties in which the social democratic partner was the hinge party (Penadés 2019).

Although international commentators and observers are often taken aback by the caustic rhetoric of the polarised Spanish parliamentary debates, we actually know little about the drivers of affective polarisation in Spanish politics and its evolution since 2015 with the exception of Torcal et al. (2020). The classification of Spain as one of the most polarised societies (Gidron, Adams & Horne 2018; Reiljan 2020; Wagner 2020) is based on data previous to 2015, so there is still not much evidence on the evolution of affective polarisation after the collapse of bipartisan politics. This paper fills this literature gap by exploring the evolution of affective polarisation of the Spanish party system during the convoluted period that spans from the emergence of Podemos in 2014 to the coalition agreement between the PSOE and UP in 2020.

Our work contributes to a more nuanced understanding of affective polarisation in Spain in different ways. First, it explores overall levels of affective polarisation before and after the fragmentation of the party system in 2015 and how it relates with other forms of polarisation, such as ideological polarisation. Second, it differentiates between polarisation dynamics within the left-wing bloc (intra-left polarisation) and polarisation across ideological blocs (inter-bloc polarisation). We also complement the analysis of individual data with both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the most important events that drove confrontation and cooperation dynamics in the relationship between PSOE and Podemos. Finally, our empirical analysis on polarisation helps us to have a better understanding of why the dynamics of confrontation between UP and PSOE gave way to cooperation in the form of a minority coalition government.

The paper is organised as follows. In the next section, we provide a review of the literature on affective polarisation, with a particular focus on multiparty democracies, and also theorise about the specific drivers of polarisation in Spain. In the third section, we explain how we operationalise affective polarisation in the Spanish party system using individual data on probability to vote and leaders' evaluations. The fourth section uses different operationalisations of affective polarisation to show its evolution throughout the period 2015–2020. In the last two sections, we use both qualitative and quantitative data to analyse the drivers of polarisation in two different periods: a first phase characterised by high and stable intra-left polarisation (2015–2017) and a second period that exhibits lower levels of intra-

left polarisation and increasing levels of inter-bloc polarisation (2018–2020). In the last section, we summarise the main findings and contributions of the paper.

### Affective polarisation in multiparty systems

Political science studies of polarisation have been highly driven by the increasing levels of polarisation in American politics during the last decades (Fiorina, Abrams & Pope 2005; Abramowitz & Saunders 2008; Abramowitz 2010; Campbell 2018). More recently, the Trump era has resulted in a new wave of scholarly publications (see for instance, Abramowitz & McCoy 2019) that show that party affiliated Americans increasingly dislike each other. Both Democrats and Republicans regard the other party's members as 'hypocritical, selfish, and closed-minded, and they are unwilling to socialise across party lines, or even to partner with opponents in a variety of other activities' (Iyengar et al. 2019, p. 130). This animosity between partisans is known as 'affective polarisation' and it captures the tendency of people to hold positive views of their own party and co-partisans and negative views of the opposing party and their supporters (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes 2012; Iyengar & Westwood 2015). Affective polarisation is different from ideological polarisation. The latter captures 'the alignment of citizens with respect to a set of liberal and conservative poles on a left-right continuum' (Wood & Jordan 2011), whereas affective polarisation focuses on the *emotional* responses of voters towards other parties and their electorates.

The literature on affective polarisation complements previous research in the area by departing from the more traditional characterisation of polarisation, known as 'issue or ideological polarisation', which focuses on the distance in policy preferences among relevant political parties (and voters).<sup>3</sup> More recent studies approach the phenomenon of political polarisation from a more psychological perspective, focusing on the emotional responses that party labels generate to individuals. This approach is linked to identity group theory in social psychology (Tajfel & Turner 1979), which states that social prejudices and stereotypes are built in a three-fold process: first, the categorisation of the reality that surrounds us; second, self-identification with the category that the individual belongs to; and, finally, the comparison between categories, favouring the individual's in-group in order to protect self-esteem.<sup>4</sup> In other words, once the world is divided into different groups, individuals tend to hold positive views towards the group they identify with and negative views towards the other group. The literature on affective polarisation explores the role of political parties as one of the most important categories of individuals' group attachments. Thus, affective polarisation is intimately related to 'the power of partisanship as a social identity' (Iyengar et al. 2019; Helbling & Jungkunz 2020).

Although the study of affective polarisation has travelled further and faster in the context of the American two-party system (Rogowski & Sutherland 2016), recent contributions in the field have adopted a cross-country perspective

(Reiljan 2020; Wagner 2020; Gridon, Adams & Horne 2018). If the empirical analysis has struggled to travel beyond the US case, this is in part because in Europe identification with a single party has traditionally been considered to play a more modest role in explaining citizens' political behaviour. In European multi-party systems, individuals are expected to develop positive feelings towards several parties of the same ideological family rather than to one single party (Garry 2007), partially because fragmentation encourages the formation of coalition governments and other types of agreements between parties of the same ideological families. Scholars have accordingly concluded that rather than party identification, it is left-right ideology which has a stronger explanatory power concerning vote choice in European democracies (Van der Eijk, Schmitt & Binder 2005; Belgurnd, Holmberg & Schmitt 2005; Thomassen & Rosema 2009).

However, recent research has found that party attachment in Europe, measured as party identification, has a more important role in explaining individuals' political preferences than ideology. For instance, Torcal, Martini and Orriols (2018) found that in Spain, party identity is a more powerful heuristic than left-right ideology. Besides, the use of party identity as a shortcut does not depend on party age: the effect in the case of new parties such as Podemos and Ciudadanos (Citizens, Cs) is as strong as in the traditional mainstream parties. Similarly, Westwood et al. (2018) have shown that party identity should be considered an influential element in European politics, as it exerts a larger effect on interpersonal trust than traditional cleavages such as ethnicity or social class. Thus, affective polarisation is not only a two-party phenomenon, but also a characteristic of European multiparty democracies (Hansen & Kosiar-Pedersen 2017).<sup>5</sup>

The study of polarisation in multiparty systems has also concluded that some European countries exhibit high levels of affective polarisation. More specifically, Reiljan (2020), Wagner (2020) and Gridon, Adams and Horne (2018) show that negative feelings towards outgroup partisans are particularly intense in Spain, which stands out as one of the countries with the highest levels of affective polarisation (higher than in the US, France, Germany or Denmark). The data they use for Spain are previous to 2015, the year when the Spanish two-party system gave way to a multi-party system. This means that, to date, few analyses have explored the evolution of affective polarisation in Spain since the collapse of bipartisan politics (Torcal et al. 2020).

In order to fill this empirical gap and contribute to our understanding of affective polarisation in European multiparty systems, in the next pages we explore the evolution of polarisation in Spain before and after the emergence of a new party system in 2015, with a particular focus on the degree of animosity between the electorates of the two most important left-wing parties, Podemos and PSOE. We argue that changes in the levels of affective polarisation between these parties' voters have been mainly driven by three factors: electoral

competition, changes in the ideological leaning of the parties and the upsurge of the centre-periphery conflict.

First, for electoral competition, different analyses have shown that electoral campaigns may exacerbate political tensions (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes 2012). This might be particularly so in multiparty contexts, where political parties located in the same ideological space compete by stressing ideological differences (Downs 1957). Electoral campaigns also increase the probability of people feeling close to a political party (Michelitch & Utych 2018). It is the combination of ideological differentiation and more salient party identification which may explain why electoral campaigns may contribute to heighten partisan tensions and increase affective polarisation. In addition, polarisation operates as a self-reinforcing mechanism, because when individuals are polarised they are more likely to view politics 'as high stakes competition' (Hernandez et al 2021; Ward & Tavits 2019). In 2015–2020, four general elections took place in Spain (in December 2015, June 2016, April 2019 and November 2019) and we expect affective polarisation between Podemos and PSOE to increase in election periods.

Second, affective polarisation between Podemos and PSOE will vary as Podemos and PSOE's ideological positions converge or diverge over time. The mechanism that links affective polarisation with changes in political platforms is ideological polarisation: as changes in party programmatic preferences result in ideological divergence (or convergence), we expect left-wing voters to feel ideologically more distant from or closer to the other party. Following previous experimental evidence on the drivers of affective polarisation (Webster & Abramowitz 2017; Rogowski & Sutherland 2016), we argue that the perception that Podemos or PSOE has drifted towards the ideological centre or the left will have an impact on the emotional responses of each electorate towards the other party.

The association between ideological polarisation and affective polarisation is a debated issue in the literature. Some scholars argue that ideological polarisation is not a necessary condition for affective polarisation and both may vary independently (Iyengar et al. 2019; Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes 2012; Mason 2015; Gidron, Adams & Horne 2018). Yet other scholars show that the increase in affective polarisation in the US has entailed a concomitant increase in ideological polarisation (Webster & Abramowitz 2017); that in multiparty states the degree of mistrust between voters of different parties depends on ideological distance (Westwood et al. 2018) and that ideological polarisation has an impact, although limited, on affective polarisation (Reiljan 2020). In Spain, empirical evidence shows that ideological polarisation between political parties has increased over the last years (Simón 2020), yet the study of its specific drivers and how it relates to changes in levels of affective polarisation remains virtually unexplored.

Finally, we argue that the third driver of affective polarisation between the electorates of Podemos and PSOE is the centre-periphery cleavage which,

together with the ideological cleavage, structure electoral competition in the Spanish party system. In Spain, the centre-periphery and ideological cleavages are reinforcing each other, rather than cross-cutting (Lipjhart 1968; Westwood et al. 2018), as leftist state-wide parties have traditionally been more favourable to a decentralised form of the state than rightist parties (Garmendia & León 2020). Recent works suggest that ethnic divisions might represent sources of affective polarisation independent of ideological polarisation (Reiljan 2020). Yet in Spain ideological polarisation over the last decade is to a great extent explained by the increasing divisions regarding devolution and the territorial form of the state (Garmendia & León 2020). In turn, the evolution of the territorial cleavage in Spain represents a particular and prominent form of 'issue polarisation' that has dominated the Spanish political debate over the last years due to the secessionist conflict in Catalonia.

We argue that the impact of the territorial cleavage on the degree of affective polarisation between the electorates of Podemos and PSOE has an ambivalent nature. On the one hand, it pulls their electorates apart, as Podemos and PSOE hold different views towards devolution and the secessionist movement in Catalonia (Montesano & Morales-López 2019). On the other hand, it pulls them together because the territorial debate reinforces lines of ideological division between left-wing and right-wing parties, which contributes to deepen affective polarisation between voters of opposing ideological blocs.

### Measuring affective polarisation

The literature has usually operationalised affective polarisation through the traditional party feeling thermometer index, where survey respondents are asked to rate their feeling towards different parties on a scale either from 0 (cold) to 100 (warm), as in the American National Election Surveys (ANES) in the US, or from 0 (dislike) to 10 (like), as in the Comparative Study of Electoral System (CSES) (Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes 2012; Reiljan 2020). Yet affective polarisation has also been operationalised employing other proxies, such as evaluations of party leaders (Rogowski & Sutherland 2016), feelings towards in-group and out-group partisans (Druckman & Levenduski 2019), or by using direct and indirect measures of trust or stereotypes of fellow and opposing partisans (Iyengar & Westwood 2015; Westwood et al. 2018). These measures try to capture the tendency of individuals to hold positive views of the party they identify with and negative views of the opposing party.

To operationalise affective polarisation in Spain, we use individual data that are regularly included in surveys of the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research (CIS). CIS is a public research centre that periodically conducts nationwide electoral surveys (on a quarterly basis until September 2018 and monthly afterwards). This institution has the most complete survey catalogue for tracking political change within the Spanish electorate. Unfortunately, neither CIS nor

other relevant Spanish survey series include the classic party like/dislike thermometer, which is the most used measure of affective polarisation in the literature. However, CIS surveys offer alternative measures to capture individuals' affection towards their preferred party (the party they intend to vote for or 'in-group') and towards the rest of the parties ('out-groups'). In particular, we use the probability to vote (PTV) for a party (0–10 scale) and party leaders' evaluation (0–10 scale), two measures that are frequently included in the CIS surveys.<sup>6</sup> The higher the distance between the probability of voting for the preferred party or non-preferred parties (or between the leader evaluation of the preferred party and of non-preferred parties), the higher the level of affective polarisation. These measures help capture the logic behind affective polarisation: the dissonance between ingroup and outgroup affect, since they capture the differences between an individual's positive views of their own party and negative views of the opposing ones.<sup>7</sup>

Using PTVs and leaders' evaluations, we measure affective polarisation in three different ways. First, we calculate the overall affective polarisation in the Spanish party system during the last two decades following Reiljan's methodology (2020, p. 381). Reiljan's Affective Polarisation Index (API) summarises individuals' feelings towards *all* relevant out-parties of the system and measures 'the average divergence of partisan affective evaluations between in-party and out-parties, weighted by the electoral size (vote share) of the parties' (Reiljan 2020, p. 380). Reiljan's index is calculated in two steps. First, we calculate the affective polarisation score for each partisan group weighted by the vote share of each party. We include all nationwide parties with parliamentary representation. Formally:

$$AP_n = \sum_{\substack{m=1 \\ m \neq n}}^N \left[ (like_n - like_m) \times \left( \frac{voteshare_m}{1 - voteshare_n} \right) \right]$$

where 'like' is the average affect towards the in-party ('n') and out party ('m'). As we already mentioned, in this paper, we have two ways of measuring 'like': PTVs and leader evaluations. Each score is weighted by the vote share of party 'm' (but subtracting the percentage vote of the in-party so that the overall sum leads to 100 per cent).

The second step is to calculate the overall Affective Polarisation Index by summing all  $AP_n$  scores weighted by its vote share:

$$API = \sum_{n=1}^N (AP_n \times voteshare_n)$$

In this paper, we end up having two different API values, one where 'like' is measured using parties' PTVs ( $API_{ptv}$ ), and another where 'like' is measured by using leader evaluations ( $API_{leader}$ ).



Our second way of studying affective polarisation is focusing on the intra-left polarisation (PSOE vs Podemos) during the 2015–2019 period. We estimate it by calculating the difference between in-party feelings and out-party feelings, as the literature does in bipartisan systems such as the US (Iyengar 2019). In this case, intra-left affective polarisation will be formally:

$$IAP = \sum_{\substack{m=1 \\ m \neq n}}^N (like_n - like_m)$$

where ‘like’ is the average affection for in-party (n) and out-party (m) and we again use PTVs ( $IAP_{ptv}$ ) and leader evaluation ( $IAP_{leader}$ ) as proxies. Parties included in this index are only the two parties on the left: PSOE and Podemos, and therefore we do not need to weight them by their vote share.

Finally, to estimate the evolution of inter-bloc polarisation (left vs right parties) we show the average evaluations of left-wing voters towards the various right-wing parties. Yet we also opted for showing the individual Affective Polarisation scores for each pairwise of parties:  $AP_n(like_n - like_m)$ . This measure will help us to capture the evolution of polarisation of PSOE and Podemos separately for each party on the right, which will provide a more detailed account of the evolution of inter-bloc affective polarisation.

The data we use for measuring polarisation are CIS surveys (electoral surveys for the API and political barometers for the intra-left and inter-bloc polarisation). CIS surveys do not usually include any classic measures of party identification, so we estimate in-party and out-party individuals using individuals’ voting preferences expressed in the vote intention questions in a general election.<sup>8</sup>

## Affective polarisation in Spanish politics

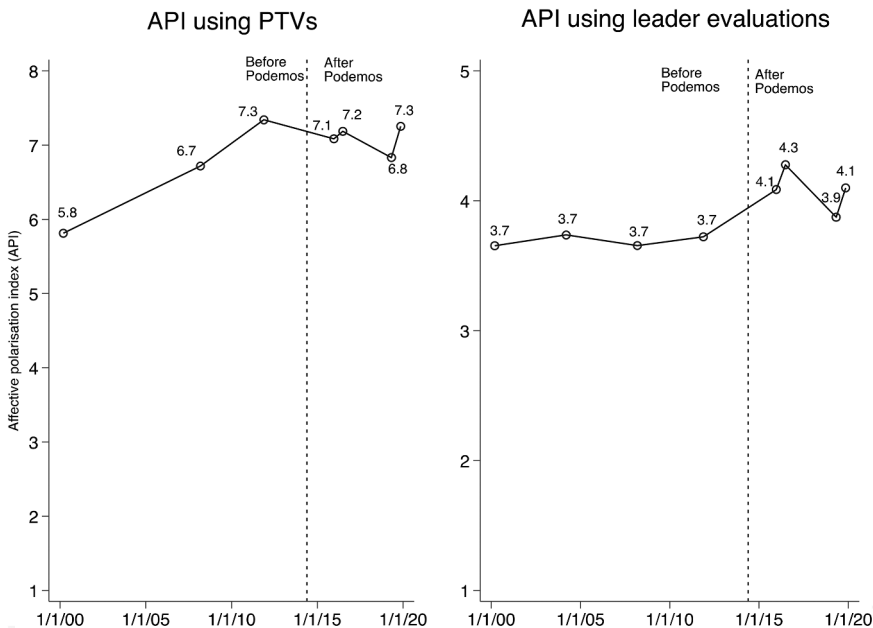
The period from the 2015 election until the formation of the PSOE-UP minority coalition government in January 2020 was characterised by high levels of political turmoil. During these years, there was a failed attempt to form a government in spring 2016; a repetition of elections in June 2016; the first vote of no confidence won by an opposition leader in June 2018; a snap election in April 2019; a new failed attempt to form a government and, finally, a repeat election in November 2019 that gave rise to the first coalition government in Spain after the transition to democracy (see Table 1). In addition, during this period both Podemos and PSOE experienced internal divisions and revolts that resulted in the resignation of some of their leaders and in changes in their programmatic orientation.

We next analyse changes in levels of affective polarisation before and after this convoluted period in Spanish politics, using Reiljan’s index (2020). The results are presented in Figure 1 and show that the overall affective polarisation

**Table 1.** Time–line of Spanish politics 2015–2020.

| DATE       | EVENT   |
|------------|---|
| 11/03/2014 | Podemos is formally registered as a political party.  |
| 25/05/2014 | European Parliament elections. Podemos gains 5 MEP and becomes the fourth political party in Spain.               |
| 20/12/2015 | General election. Podemos and Ciudadanos enter the Spanish national parliament for the first time.                |
| 04/03/2016 | Failed investiture vote for PSOE leader Pedro Sánchez (who had come to an investiture agreement with Ciudadanos). |
| 26/06/2016 | General election.   |
| 02/10/2016 | Pedro Sánchez resigns as PSOE Secretary General.  |
| 29/10/2016 | PP leader Mariano Rajoy invested as Prime Minister.   |
| 22/05/2017 | Pedro Sánchez wins PSOE's primaries.  |
| 01/10/2017 | Referendum on independence in Catalonia.  |
| 01/06/2018 | Vote of no-confidence. Pedro Sánchez invested as Prime Minister of minority PSOE government.                      |
| 28/04/2019 | General election.   |
| 26/05/2019 | Local elections, regional elections and European Parliament elections.  |
| 10/11/2019 | General election.   |
| 14/01/2020 | The first national coalition government between Podemos and PSOE is formed.                                       |

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

**Figure 1.** The evolution of the Affective Polarisation Index (API) in Spain, 2000–2019.

Source: Own elaboration using CIS electoral surveys. PTVs is propensity (or probability) to vote for different parties (from 0 to 10 scale). Figures show the Affective Polarisation Index (Reiljan 2020) using all nation-wide parties with parliamentary representation (regional parties are not included) which represent between the 84–90 per cent of the total vote share.

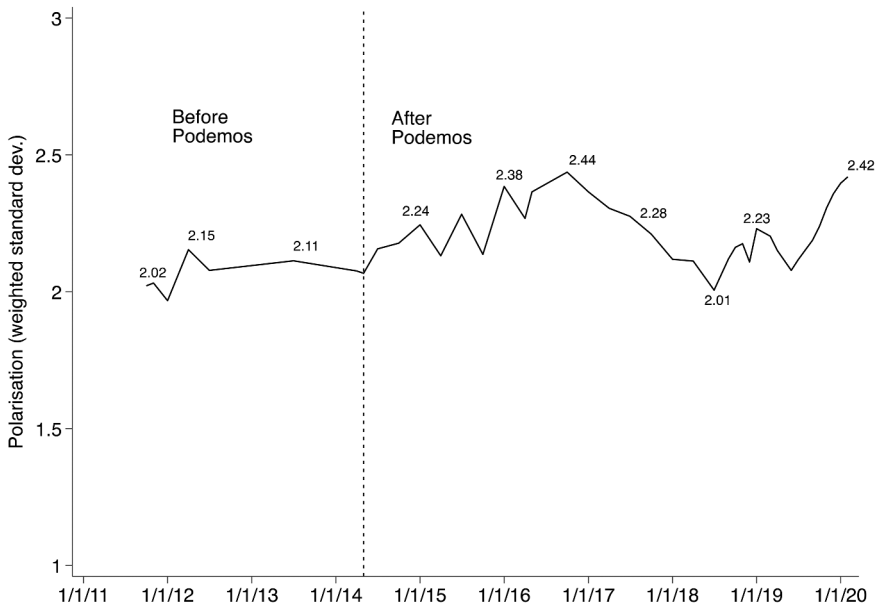
index (API)<sup>9</sup> between 2000 and 2019 increased. This index measures the average divergence between individuals' affective evaluations towards in-party and out-parties, weighted by the electoral size (vote share) of the parties. The starting

point of the increasing trend of the index varies, depending on which measure we use. If we focus on the index  $API_{ptv}$  that uses PTVs to measure in and out-group affection (left-hand side of Figure 1), polarisation does not seem to be confined to the current phase of Spanish politics, as the index rocketed between 2004 and 2008 and stayed at very high levels from then onwards, with a slight decrease between 2015 and the April 2019 election.<sup>10</sup> According to  $API_{ptv}$ , although Podemos was identified as an extreme left-wing party by the electorate,<sup>11</sup> its entry to the Spanish parliament after the 2015 election did not prompt an increase in general levels of affective polarisation. In 2015 polarisation was already very high, which may have contributed to curb the elasticity of polarisation levels in response to the entry of new political forces. However, if we focus on  $API_{leader}$  that uses leaders' evaluations (right-hand side of Figure 1), an increase of party polarisation coincides with the fragmentation of the party system due to the entry to parliament of new parties: Podemos and Cs (Ciudadanos – Citizens).

In sum, according to Figure 1, Spanish politics today are more polarised than two decades ago, but the end of bipartisan politics does not correlate with an increase in affective polarisation using PTVs (which peaked up well before, during the 2004–2008 parliament). In contrast, the API based on leaders' evaluation shows that the parliamentary breakthrough of Podemos and Ciudadanos does coincide with an increase in polarisation.

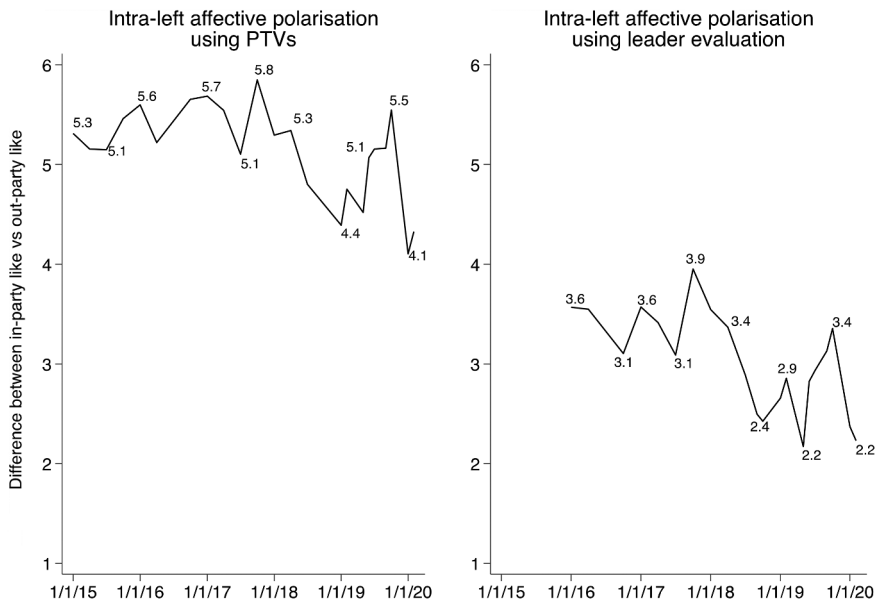
In Figure 2 we include the evolution of ideological (instead of affective) polarisation in the Spanish party system during the 2010–2019 period using voters' perceptions of party positions. Ideological polarisation over time exhibits a turning point that coincides with the arrival of Podemos in the national political arena in 2014, then a steady increase until early 2017 and a rapid decline until mid 2018. The increase in polarisation in 2019 coincides with the entry of an extreme-right party, Vox, into the national parliament. In sum, ideological polarisation exhibits a similar pattern as the  $API_{leader}$  and peaks after the end of the two-party system in 2015. Therefore, there is a consistent and parallel evolution of ideological and affective polarisation, when we measure the latter with leaders' evaluation.

Next, we show the evolution of intra-left and inter-bloc polarisation of the PSOE and Podemos electorates during the 2015–2019 period. The evolution of intra-left affective polarisation is shown in Figure 3. In the evolution of the index  $IAP_{ptv}$  based on PTVs (left-hand side graph) two periods can be clearly distinguished: one that runs from 2015 until the end of 2017 characterised by high and stable polarisation levels; and a second one that starts in 2018 and shows a steady decrease until the beginning of 2019, with a brief upturn between the two general elections called in April and November 2019. Interestingly, the index of affective polarisation  $IAP_{leader}$  based on leaders' evaluation exhibits a similar trend: a first period of stable polarisation, followed by a second period



**Figure 2.** The evolution of ideological polarisation in Spain, 2011–2019.

Source: CIS barometer surveys. The figure shows the weighted standard deviation of all survey respondents' perceptions of the ideological position of all nation-wide political parties with parliamentary representation.



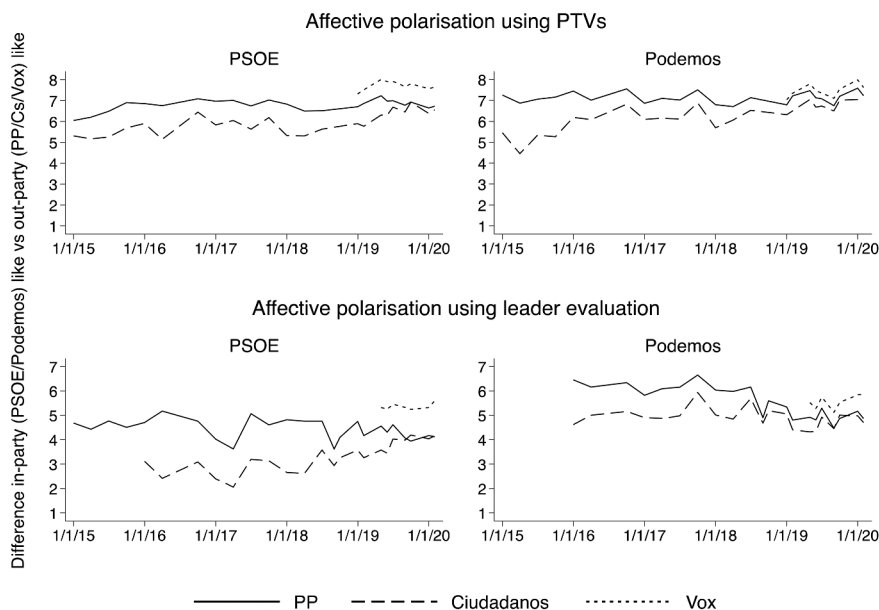
**Figure 3.** Intra-left polarisation: affective polarisation between PSOE and Podemos, 2015–2020.

Source: Authors' own elaboration using CIS barometers.  $IAP_{leader}$  starts later since CIS surveys do not include Pablo Iglesias' evaluations until January 2016. PTVs is propensity (or probability) to vote for different parties (from 0 to 10 scale).

characterised by a gradual decrease in polarisation, and a brief upturn in 2019 in the period between the two general elections when there was a failed attempt to form a coalition government.

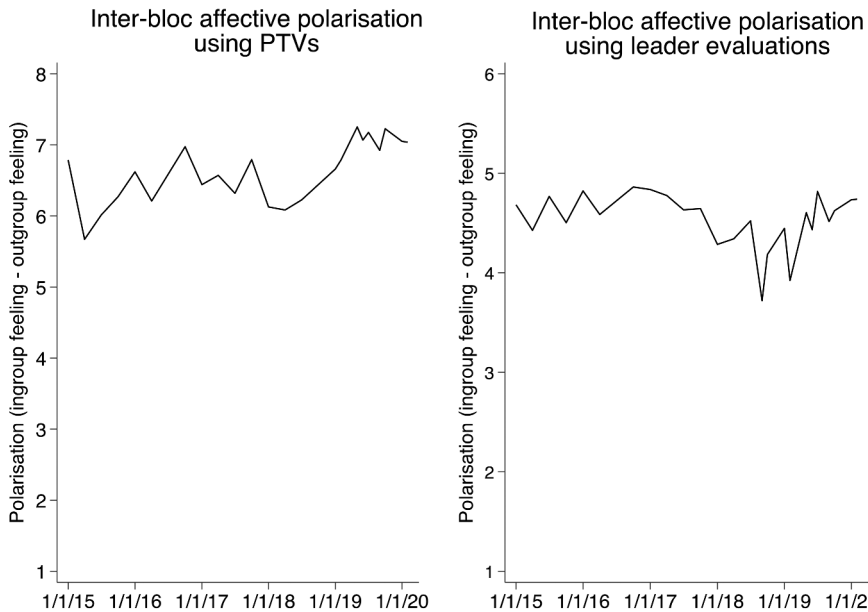
The evolution of inter-bloc affective polarisation is exhibited in Figures 4 and 5. If we focus on Figure 4, where we show the inter-bloc affective polarisation scores for each pairwise of parties, two periods can be distinguished, and 2018 stands out again as the turning point in polarisation dynamics. Before 2018, affective polarisation towards right-wing parties among Podemos' and PSOE's supporters is relatively stable. The climate of understanding between Ciudadanos and PSOE (they signed an investiture agreement in February 2016 but did not have the necessary parliamentary majority to approve it) kept inter-bloc polarisation towards Ciudadanos relatively low during this period (except in the case of Podemos' supporters, who showed increasing levels of animosity).

Yet after 2018, polarisation between ideological blocs rose due to two factors. First, the rejection of Ciudadanos increased among the leftist electorate. While Ciudadanos signed an investiture agreement with the Socialist party in 2016, the strategy of the party in 2018 radically changed since it pursued a confrontational position with PSOE in order to compete with PP as the dominant party on the right (Jurado & Riera 2019). The second factor that accounts for the increasing inter-bloc polarisation was the emergence in 2019



**Figure 4.** Inter-bloc polarisation: affective polarisation of the left-wing voters (PSOE and Podemos) towards right-wing parties (PP, Ciudadanos and Vox).

Source: own elaboration using CIS barometers. PTVs is propensity (or probability) to vote for different parties (from 0 to 10 scale). The figures show the difference between left-wing (PSOE and Podemos) voters' in-party like and the out-parties like (PP, Vox and Ciudadanos).



**Figure 5.** Inter-bloc polarisation in Spain: average affective polarisation of left-wing voters towards the right-wing parties (PP, Ciudadanos and Vox).

*Source:* Authors' own elaboration using CIS barometers. PTVs is propensity (or probability) to vote for different parties (from 0 to 10 scale). The figures show average affective polarisation of left-wing electorate (PSOE and Podemos) towards the right-wing parties (PP, Ciudadanos and Vox).

of Vox, a party with a radical right ideology (Ferreira 2019) that some scholars classify as populist (Turnbull-Dugarte, Rama & Santana 2020; Zanotti & Rama 2020). Polarisation measured as PTVs increases among Podemos and PSOE's voters, yet polarisation measured with leaders' evaluations increases only among PSOE's voters. In the case of Podemos' voters (lower right graph of Figure 4) polarisation remains relatively stable or even experiences a slight decrease towards the PP when Mariano Rajoy, the leader of the PP and Prime Minister from 2011 until 2018 is replaced by a new leader, Pablo Casado in 2018. The more stable evolution of affective polarisation of Podemos vs PP is explained by two factors: a) PP's new leader Pablo Casado was evaluated more favourably than his predecessor, Mariano Rajoy; and b) the evaluation of Pablo Iglesias, the leader of Podemos, experienced a downturn among his supporters (according to CIS, while Iglesias' popularity among his voters was 7.5 out of 10 in January 2016, this value dropped below 6 in January 2019).

In Figure 5, we aggregate inter-bloc polarisation by providing an (unweighted) affective polarisation of left-wing voters (PSOE and Unidas Podemos) towards the different parties of the right (PP, Ciudadanos and Vox). This figure shows that inter-bloc polarisation started to increase in 2018, when we measure polarisation using the PTVs. The difference between PTVs and leader evaluation measures is that, while the former remained essentially stable

during the 2017–2018 period, the latter decreased (especially due to the declining popularity of Pablo Iglesias among Unidas Podemos' supporters, as we just argued above).

Overall, our measures indicate that, in the evolution of affective polarisation, two different periods can be clearly distinguished. A first period characterised by high and stable intra-left polarisation, and a second period that exhibits lower levels of intra-left polarisation (with an upsurge between the two general elections in April and November 2019) and increasing levels of inter-bloc polarisation. We argue that changes in the levels of affective polarisation between the electorates of Podemos and PSOE were mainly driven by three factors: electoral competition, ideological distance and the centre-periphery conflict. In the next two sections we will analyse the polarisation drivers that characterise each period.

## **January 2015–December 2017: the time of high and stable intra-left polarisation**

### ***Electoral competition***

Since the emergence of Podemos in 2014 and until the end of 2017 the relationship between Podemos and the socialist party was a convoluted one and this was partially driven by the battle for the left-wing electorate in the run-up to the two general elections that took place in December 2015 and June 2016. Podemos' main goal since its emergence was to overtake PSOE and become the leading party on the left. In order to achieve this goal, Pablo Iglesias developed different competition strategies. In the beginning, his strategy consisted in moving party competition away from the traditional left-right cleavage in order to build a majoritarian coalition of voters who, regardless of their ideology, would find appealing the 'People-against-a-predatory elite' populist discourse (Ramiro & Gómez 2017; Fernández-Albertos 2015).

Through the adoption of the populist strategy, Iglesias succeeded in capitalising on the dissatisfaction with and rejection of mainstream parties among the left-wing electorate (Vidal 2018). For instance, in autumn 2014, Podemos was the favourite party not only among the extreme-left electorate, but also among the more moderate centrist voters.<sup>12</sup> Podemos gradually lost support among left-wing voters and, above all, among those who positioned themselves at the centre of the ideological spectrum. It failed to overtake PSOE in the December 2015 election, in which Podemos and its territorial allies won 20.7 per cent of the vote and 69 seats while PSOE won 22 per cent and 90 seats.

As a result of this electoral defeat, Podemos decided to emphasise its leftist credentials in order to clearly differentiate itself from the new centre-right party Ciudadanos (Iglesias 2015). In the run-up to the June 2016 general election, Podemos created the electoral coalition Unidos Podemos with IU, Equo (a green

party) and several other minor parties. The idea was to try to overtake the PSOE by pooling the votes that IU, the traditional competitor to the left of the PSOE, had obtained in the December elections (3.7 per cent of the vote share). The 2016 election was won by the PP, with 33 per cent of the votes, whereas PSOE scored its worst result in a national election since the transition to democracy (23 per cent). Despite the socialists' electoral decline, UP did not achieve the results expected by pre-election polls (Llaneras 2016): the coalition of Podemos and IU lost 3.2 percentage points in comparison with 2015 (although it obtained the same number of seats), thus failing to overtake PSOE (see Table 2).

As for the PSOE, its initial reaction to the emergence of Podemos focused on confronting its populist discourse. The socialist party leader, Pedro Sánchez, pledged in a 2014 interview that he would not reach any agreement 'not before, not now, not after'<sup>13</sup> with a populist party. Certainly, the challenge to the PSOE's hegemony among left-wing voters was real. When Podemos and PSOE faced each other again in the regional and local elections of May 2015, PSOE ran a negative electoral campaign focused on the idea of strategic voting to prevent the fragmentation of the left (Rodon & Hierro 2016).<sup>14</sup> When Podemos and Ciudadanos gained representation in Parliament after the 2015 general election, PSOE chose Ciudadanos as its potential government partner, agreeing on the formation of a coalition with Cs in February 2016 (Mateo 2016). However, the investiture vote failed, largely because Podemos voted against it, thus prompting the call for new elections in June 2016. After that election, which again failed to produce a parliamentary majority, Iglesias conveyed his willingness to participate in a coalition government together with the PSOE and IU, with the external support of some regional parties. Yet this proposal was turned down by the PSOE as the party's executive committee had vetoed any agreement with Podemos that would also involve support from Catalan pro-independence parties (Simón 2016).

### *Ideological distance*

The second driver of affective polarisation between Podemos and PSOE during this period was ideological polarisation caused by divergence in parties'

**Table 2.** Election results of the left-wing parties in Spain, 2015–2019 (vote per cent and seats won).

|                       | 2015      | 2016      | 2019 (April) | 2019 (Nov.) |
|-----------------------|-----------|-----------|--------------|-------------|
| PSOE                  | 22 (90)   | 22.6 (85) | 28.7 (123)   | 28 (120)    |
| IU                    | 3.7 (2)   |           |              |             |
| Podemos               | 20.7 (69) |           |              |             |
| Unidos/as Podemos     |           | 21.2 (71) | 14.3 (42)    | 12.9 (35)   |
| Más País <sup>a</sup> |           |           |              | 2.4 (3)     |

Source: Ministerio del Interior.

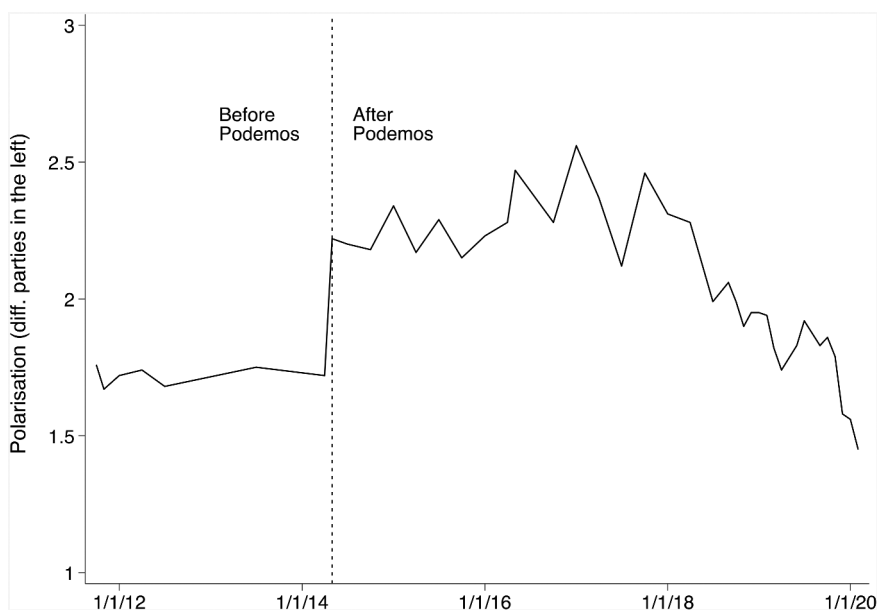
The percentages of Podemos, Unidos Podemos (the coalition between Podemos and IU) and Más País include their regional electoral partners. The table shows the number of seats in brackets.

<sup>a</sup>In the general election of November, a new party appeared on the left, Más País (More Country). This party was led by one of Podemos' most prominent founders, Iñigo Errejón, and contested the elections jointly with the green party Equo and some other regional parties. The party aimed to gain the vote of the left-wing electorate disaffected with the failure of the Podemos–PSOE agreement.

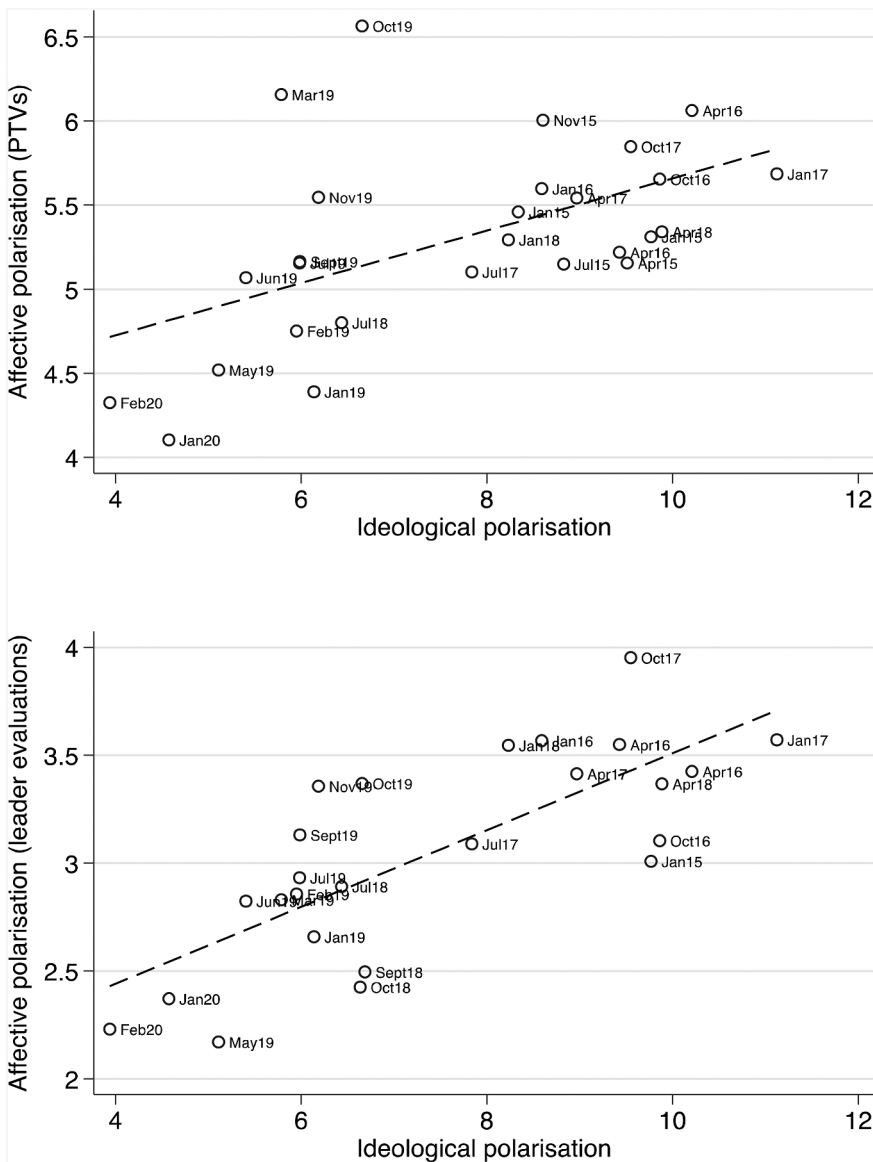


ideological leanings. According to CIS surveys, the perceived ideological distance between the two parties peaked after Sánchez resigned as PSOE secretary general and an interim management commission took over in October 2016 (see Figure 6). After the 2016 general election the PSOE was internally divided. On the one side, Sánchez refused to let PP take power, as he preferred to form a parliamentary majority with UP and regional nationalist parties. Yet several regional leaders together with some historical figures of the socialist party were against any alliance with UP and Catalan secessionist parties; they wanted the party to abstain in the investiture vote, allowing the formation of a minority PP government that would prevent a new deadlock and a third general election (Maraña 2017; Jones 2016). The latter faction won the internal battle, forcing the resignation of Sánchez in October 2016, and the party went under interim control until a primary election could be organised to choose the new secretary general.

The leadership vacuum was resolved in a very confrontational primary election in May 2017 (Romero 2017). Sánchez, who had promised to bring the party back to its leftist credentials (Díez 2017), won the primary election by a landslide. His return to the PSOE leadership opened up opportunities for cooperation with UP. In July 2017, Sánchez and Iglesias resumed talks and agreed to coordinate their opposition strategies to oust PP from power (Sanz & Carvajal 2017). Yet the unfolding events in Catalonia in autumn 2017 brought



**Figure 6.** The evolution of ideological polarisation between Podemos and PSOE 2010–2019. *Source:* CIS barometer surveys. The graph shows all survey respondents perceived ideological differences between the two main parties in the left: PSOE vs IU (until July 2014) and PSOE vs Podemos (after July 2014).



**Figure 7.** The correlation between intra-left affective polarisation and intra-left ideological polarisation. *Source:* Authors' own elaboration from CIS barometers 2015–2020. The figure shows the relation between intra-left affective polarisation and intra-left ideological polarisation (measured as the squared distance between the ideology assigned to PSOE and the ideology assigned to Podemos by Podemos and PSOE's voters).

these negotiations to a halt, as their different approaches to the territorial conflict became apparent.

Ideological distance between Podemos and PSOE during this period is illustrated in the increase of ideological polarisation, as exhibited in Figure 6. This figure shows how all survey respondents perceive the ideological distance

between the socialist party and the main rival party to its left: IU (until June 2014) and Podemos (afterwards). It shows that the emergence of Podemos widened the ideological distance between the PSOE and the main party to its left and that ideological polarisation peaked during the period in which the PSOE went under interim control.

Most importantly, Podemos and PSOE's voters perceived ideological leanings of the two parties correlate with levels of intra-left affective polarisation, which remained stable at high levels during this period. As [Figure 7](#) shows, the higher the ideological distance between PSOE and Podemos (as perceived by voters of the two parties), the higher the level of intra-left affective polarisation. Both graphs show strongly positive and statistically significant association between the two variables. At the individual level, the correlation between the perceived ideological distance and affective polarisation is 0.16 (using PTVs) and 0.19 (using leader evaluations), both statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ .

### *The territorial cleavage*

The third driver of polarisation between Podemos and PSOE between 2015 and 2017 was the territorial conflict. This conflict started in the aftermath of the economic crisis when the number of citizens willing to abolish devolved institutions doubled at the same time as support for secessionism in Catalonia rocketed (Rodon & Orriols [2014](#)). From 2012, Catalan politics had gradually polarised around the nationalist axis (Orriols [2019](#)), leading to a competition in outbidding among Catalan nationalist parties for hegemony over a unilateral secession plan commonly known as *proceso soberanista* (process towards independence). The outbidding strategy reached its climax with the organisation of a referendum in October 2017 (Garcia [2018](#); Vicens & Tedó [2017](#)), and the subsequent declaration of independence, both deemed illegal by the Spanish Constitutional Court.

PSOE and Podemos had very different programmatic approaches to the Catalan conflict. Podemos was in favour of the Catalans' right of self-determination and its party manifestos in 2015–2019 included references to the holding of a referendum in Catalonia. For instance, the 2015 manifesto included the following statement: '[we will] promote the calling of a referendum with guarantees in Catalonia so that its citizens can decide the type of territorial relationship they wish to establish with the rest of Spain' (Podemos [2015](#)). In contrast, PSOE never supported the organisation of a referendum and explicitly opposed Catalan independence (PSOE [2019](#), p. 148).

Following the referendum, UP and PSOE disagreed over the decision of the PP government to activate article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, allowing the central government temporarily to take over regional governments' competences. While PSOE approved the activation, UP decided to appeal against it to the Constitutional

Court. These divergent positions over the territorial issue contributed to delay the collaboration which the two left-wing parties had engaged in after Sánchez' victory in the socialist party primaries.

In summary, during the first analysed period (January 2015-December 2017), levels of intra-left affective polarisation between the electorates of UP and PSOE were high and stable. Affective polarisation was driven by the battle for the left-wing electorate in the run-up to the two general elections in 2015 and 2016 and by the divergence in parties' ideological leanings. In addition, the upsurge of the territorial conflict in Catalonia in autumn 2017 and the divergent positions that PSOE and Unidos Podemos held over the Catalan issue kept the two parties apart and ended the collaboration they had engaged in after Sánchez became the secretary general of the PSOE.

### January 2018-February 2020: intra-left polarisation decreases as inter-bloc polarisation peaks

#### *Ideological convergence*

As the year 2018 went by, the conflict in Catalonia receded from the frontline of the political debate. This allowed PSOE and UP to resume negotiations to oust the Rajoy government from power, thus resuming the collaboration they had started in July 2017 but which had then been blown off course by the upsurge in the Catalan conflict. The fundamental trigger of cooperation between PSOE and UP was the PP's conviction by the National High Court (*Audiencia Nacional*) as a direct beneficiary of illegal financing (the corruption scandal known as the *Gürtel* scheme<sup>15</sup>) in May 2018. Within days of the verdict, PSOE called a no-confidence vote against the PP government and UP supported it. The probability of success initially seemed low because under a constructive vote of no confidence, parliament can only oust a government from power if there is a majoritarian support for a prospective successor. In addition, hardly a week earlier, the minority PP government had managed to have its budget passed by parliament. The support of other parties<sup>16</sup> finally allowed for the first successful vote of no confidence of the democratic period and the formation of a minority government led by Sánchez.

UP did not participate in the government formed after the no-confidence vote, but it worked closely with PSOE on a new budget proposal, formally signed by the two parties in October 2018 and which stated: 'Last June's motion of censure proved that it was possible to remove the Popular Party from the Government and that there is a progressive majority in this country' (Gobierno de España & Unidas Podemos 2018). The PSOE-UP collaboration was not sufficient to pass the budget, which prompted the calling of a snap election in April 2019.

The collaboration that PSOE and UP started in mid-2018 to overthrow the PP government influenced citizens' perceptions of ideological distance between

the two parties. As shown by [Figure 6](#) above, from mid-2018 on, ideological polarisation on the left gradually decreased and in 2020 reached its lowest levels since the formation of Podemos.

### *Electoral competition*

The competition between PSOE and UP in the run-up to the April 2019 election put on hold the cooperative dynamics the two parties had engaged in after the June 2018 no-confidence vote. The PSOE won the election with 28.7 per cent of the votes, whereas UP gained 14.3 per cent. The PP scored its worst result in a national election since its re-foundation in 1989. Meanwhile, Ciudadanos' support increased to 15.8 per cent of the votes and Vox entered the national parliament for the first time with 10.2 per cent of the votes and 24 seats ([Table 2](#)). After the April 2019 elections, the PSOE and UP entered a negotiation to form a government. However, the negotiations between the two political forces failed and, as a result, a new election was called in November 2019. Such failure caused high levels of confrontation between the two parties.

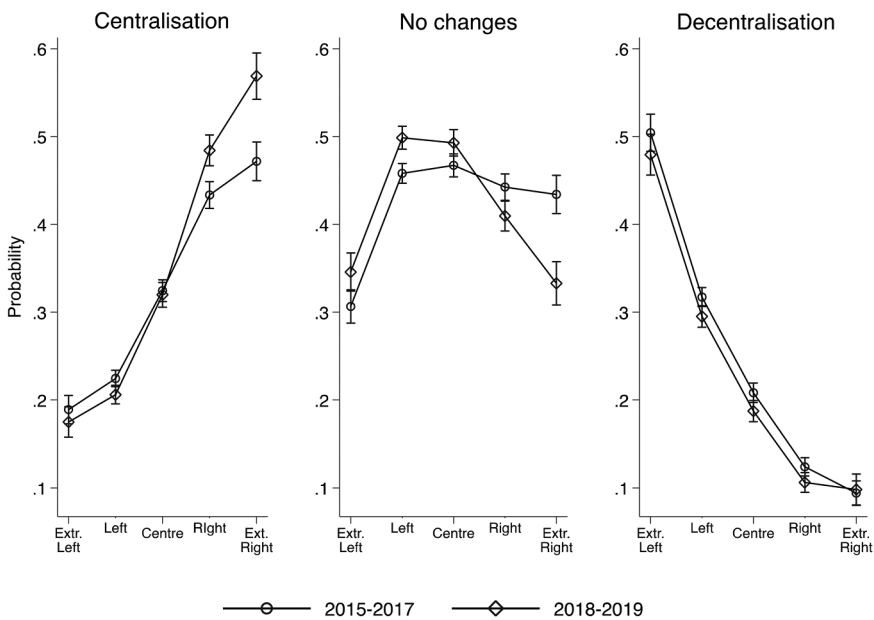
During the period between the election of April and November 2019, intra-left affective polarisation increased as expected, although it did not reach pre-2018 levels and confrontation was of a different nature. Disagreement between PSOE and UP during this period was not about whether, but how to collaborate. After the April 2019 election, Sánchez's preference was to form a minority government with external support from UP while Iglesias did not want to support the executive without being part of it and preferred to form a coalition government (Simón [2020](#)). Initially, Sánchez turned the coalition proposal down, arguing that Podemos was too 'inexperienced' a party to be in the executive, that the two parties had profound differences on important issues such as the territorial model, and that the coalition would still be short of a parliamentary majority (Díez [2019](#)). The day before the investiture session, Sanchez ended up offering UP a vice-presidency and two ministries – youth and housing – but Iglesias rejected the offer on the grounds the posts were void of executive power (Simón [2021](#)). After Sánchez's unsuccessful investiture vote in September 2019, a new election was called for November.

### *Territorial cleavage*

The Supreme Court sentence on the imprisoned Catalan separatists in October 2019 reactivated the territorial issue in the run-up to the November 2019 general election. As a result, the electoral campaign became dominated by the territorial debate. Podemos' criticism of the sentence was used by the PSOE to stress their different programmatic approach to the territorial question and justify the rejection of a coalition government with UP. Sánchez framed the election as an opportunity to strengthen the PSOE's

support and make it unnecessary for the party to rely on pro-independence parties to achieve legislative majorities, although opinion polls showed that scenario was highly unlikely (Llaneras 2019).

Yet the impact of the territorial conflict on the PSOE-Unidas Podemos relationship was double-edged. On the one hand, it hampered cooperation between the two parties, given their different approaches towards managing conflict in Catalonia, and it remained one of the points of highest friction between them during the campaign for the November election. On the other hand, public opinion towards the territorial model became more polarised (see Figure 8) as the discourse of the main centre-to-right wing parties (Ciudadanos and PP) radicalised with a more confrontational approach to the Catalan issue. Polarisation between the two ideological blocs (right-wing parties vs left-wing parties) deepened (Garmendia & León 2020), drawing UP and PSOE closer to



**Figure 8.** Territorial preferences by ideology, before and after the 2017 Catalan independence referendum. *Source:* Authors' own elaboration from CIS barometers 2015–2019. The figure divides the traditional CIS ten-point ideological scale (from 1 'left' to 10 'right') in five categories: Extreme left (values 1,2), Left (3, 4), Centre (5), Right (6, 7), Extreme Right (8, 9, 10). The figure's territorial preferences divides the CIS 5-point scale into three categories: Centralisation ('A State with a central government without autonomies' or 'A State in which the autonomous communities have less autonomy than now') No changes ('A State with autonomous communities as they are now') and Decentralisation ('A state in which the autonomous communities have more autonomy than now', or 'A State that recognises the right of the autonomous communities to become independent'). The figure shows the predicted probabilities from a logistic regression model where the dependent variable is territorial preferences and the main independent variable is ideology. We also include age, gender, national identity, and perceptions of the economic situation as control variables (see Table A1 of the Online Appendix).

each other. Inter-bloc affective polarisation peaked in 2019 as Vox made it to the national parliament (see [Figures 3 and 4](#) above). The emergence of Vox pushed PP further to the right in an attempt to hang on to voters.

The electoral results of the November 2019 elections contributed to deepen the ideological cleavage between the left- and right-wing parties. The results showed the collapse of Ciudadanos, which lost 9 percentage points, whereas the support of the extreme right-wing party Vox soared to 15 per cent and the PP improved its results, scoring 20.2 per cent. In addition, support for the left-wing parties fell. The PSOE won the election, but fell short of a majority, losing three seats and 0.6 percentage points of vote share. Unidas Podemos' electoral performance showed the party was on a steady electoral decline, losing seven seats and 1.4 percentage points of the total vote. All in all, the failure of PSOE's attempt to strengthen its support; Podemos' electoral decline; and the increasing polarisation between the two ideological blocs ridden by the territorial conflict and the success of Vox probably contributed to prompt the coalition agreement that PSOE and UP signed within less than 24 hours of the election.

In summary, 2018 represented a turning point in the evolution of affective polarisation in the Spanish party system. Two different trends emerged: on the one hand, intra-left affective polarisation gradually decreased, a change mostly driven by the softening of the territorial conflict that prompted Podemos and PSOE to resume collaboration to oust the PP from power in 2018. Cooperation reduced the perceived ideological distance between the two parties. In addition, although between the April and November elections in 2019 intra-left polarisation increased due to the electoral competition, confrontation was of a different nature, as disagreement between PSOE and UP during this period was not about whether, but *how* to collaborate. On the other hand, inter-bloc polarisation peaked, driven by a more radicalised territorial discourse of the main parties in centre-to-right wing space (Ciudadanos and PP) and the emergence of the radical right Vox, which deepened the cleavage between the two ideological party blocs.

## Conclusions

This article explored the evolution of affective polarisation between the electorates of Podemos and PSOE during the period that began with Podemos' entry into the Spanish parliament in 2015 and ended with the formation of the first coalition government in 2020, a period that represents one of the most turbulent and polarised times of Spain's recent history. The battle for the Spanish left-wing electorate between Podemos and PSOE lasted several years and blocked several attempts at left-wing cooperation in government formation. Yet after the November 2019 election, confrontation finally gave way to a coalition government that was exceptional both for its composition and also because it was forged after one of the most turbulent political periods of Spain's recent history.

Although Spanish politics since 2015 have been characterised as polarised and squabbling, so far the literature has barely explored the evolution of affective polarisation between electorates before and after the end of bipartisan politics in 2015. This article fills this literature gap by comparing general levels of affective polarisation between 2000 and 2020 and providing a theoretical and empirical account of the contextual variables that explain the evolution of affective polarisation between Podemos and PSOE during the 2015–2020 period. Using individual data on probability to vote and on leaders' evaluations to measure affective polarisation, our results show that, during the 2000–2020 period, affective polarisation based on leaders' evaluations significantly increased with the end of bipartisan politics in 2015.

Yet when we measure affective polarisation with PTVs we conclude that overall affective polarisation did not significantly increase after 2015, as it had peaked well before, in the 2004–2008 period, and remained stable at high levels ever since. In addition, the analysis of intra-left (among the parties of the left) and inter-bloc polarisation (between the left-wing and right-wing parties) exhibits two different phases. The first, from 2015 until the end of 2017, was characterised by high levels of intra-left polarisation. During the second, between 2018 and 2020, intra-left polarisation decreased whereas inter-bloc polarisation peaked due to increasing rejection of Cs and Vox among the left-wing electorate. Finally, we used both quantitative and qualitative data to illustrate that changes in affective polarisation between Podemos and PSOE during these two phases were driven by three factors: the electoral competition between them, the ideological distance in their programmatic orientation and the intensity of the centre-periphery conflict.

This article advances research in the area of polarisation in different ways. First, it contributes to the growing body of literature that studies affective polarisation in multiparty democracies by exploring the Spanish case. Second, it uses CIS public opinion data series to provide empirical evidence on the evolution of affective polarisation in Spain before and after the transformation of the party system in 2015. Third, it provides a better understanding of the adaptation of mainstream left-wing political parties to the emergence of new political forces by analysing the battle for the left-wing electorate between UP and PSOE during the 2015–2020 period. Finally, our empirical analysis sheds new light on the puzzling question of why confrontation and competition dynamics between Podemos and PSOE finally gave way to the first coalition government in Spain's post-1975 history.

## Notes

1. Podemos was created in January 2014 by some activists of far-left organisations (Rodríguez-Teruel, Barrio & Barberá 2016). The initial aim of this organisation was the creation of a coalition for the 2014 EP election that represented citizens' political disaffection and rejection of the PP-PSOE old bipartisan politics (Podemos 2014).



According to the literature the determinants of Podemos' voting have been the voters' populist attitudes (Anduiza, Guinjoan & Rico 2018); the perception of political corruption (Orriols & Cordero 2016); dissatisfaction with the political situation and mainstream parties (Ramiro & Gómez 2017). Unidos Podemos is an electoral coalition created in May 2016 between Podemos and the extreme-left Izquierda Unida (United Left, IU), a political force led by the Spanish communist party. The coalition was renamed as *Unidas Podemos* (using the feminine conjugation) in March 2019 as a way to connect with the feminist movement.

2. The traditional bipartisan politics in Spain previous to 2015 was based on two main parties – the PSOE and the conservative Partido Popular (Popular Party, PP) – a few minor state-wide parties and several regionalist and nationalist parties.
3. See Fiorina, Abrams and Pope (2005) on the ideological polarisation of the American voters and elites. Interestingly, ideological polarisation of political parties and its electoral consequences have also been studied outside the US (Knutsen 1998; Lachat 2008), including Spain (Orriols & Balcells 2012).
4. As McCoy, Rahman & Somer (2019, p. 23) suggest, 'The rhetoric and symbols used in the politics of polarisation create the sense of an "us" versus "them" conflict'.
5. Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley (2020) show that the emergence of affective polarisation may result from new lines of divisions that are not based on party ideologies but on new opinion-based groups (such as pro and anti-Brexit).
6. In leaders' evaluations, there is a break in the series from February 2019, when the CIS switched to a 1 to 10 scale.
7. In Figure A1 of the online Appendix we compare our affective polarisation measures using leader evaluations and PTVs with a measure that uses the like-dislike thermometer provided by the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). Unfortunately, CSES surveys only cover the 2000–2008 period and with only four data points. However, the evolution of affective polarisation using the like-dislike CSES thermometer shows a positive correlation with our PTVs measure, as both measures increase between 2000 and 2008. CSES surveys include both party like-dislike and leader evaluation (on an 11-point like-dislike scale). The correlation between the two former variables at the individual level is high: 0.85 for PSOE and 0.89 for PP.
8. We use vote intention in a general election and party preference ('simpatía') among undecided voters.
9. The overall Affective Polarisation Index (API) summarises individuals' feelings towards *all* relevant out-parties of the system and measures 'the average divergence of partisan affective evaluations between in-party and out-parties, weighted by the electoral size (vote share) of the parties' (Reiljan 2020, p. 380).
10. The first mandate of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (2004–2008) was marked by high levels of confrontation between government and opposition parties especially around the terrorist ETA peace agreement and the reform of the Catalan Autonomy Statute (Estefanía, 2008).
11. The average evaluation which individuals made of Podemos was 2.4 on the 1 to 10 left-right scale according to the CIS surveys. This value was similar to the position assigned to IU, a coalition that included the Spanish communist party.
12. In Figure A1 of the [online Appendix](#), we show the evolution of PSOE and Podemos vote intention in the 2014–2020 period among the extreme-left, centre-left and centrist electorates.
13. <https://www.europapress.es/nacional/noticia-sanchez-podemos-populismo-psoe-no-pactara-ellos-antes-despues-elecciones-20140912113909.html>.

14. Yet after the elections, cooperation prevailed, and Podemos helped PSOE win several regional governments that were previously in the hands of the PP (Correa, Barberá & Rodríguez-Teruel 2018).
15. The Gürtel case investigated several businessmen with close ties to the PP, who were accused of paying bribes to party officials between 1999 and 2006 in return for contracts to carry out public works and to organise events (Falcó-Gimeno 2018).
16. Some of the political parties that had supported Mariano Rajoy's budget a few days before the vote of no-confidence was presented – namely Partido Nacionalista Vasco (Basque Nationalist Party, PNV) and Nueva Canarias (New Canarian Islands, NC)– finally voted against the continuation of the government.

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