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To cite this article: Astrid Barrio & Juan Rodríguez-Teruel (2017) Reducing the gap between leaders and voters? Elite polarization, outbidding competition, and the rise of secessionism in Catalonia, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40:10, 1776-1794, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2016.1213400](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1213400)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1213400>



Published online: 27 Jul 2016.



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Reducing the gap between leaders and voters? Elite polarization, outbidding competition, and the rise of secessionism in Catalonia

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ABSTRACT


The ethnic outbidding thesis explains party polarization as a consequence of political changes amongst voters. We argued instead that party elites' extreme position on the national identity cleavage can help polarizing strategies to prevail over moderate strategies in a context of increasing political uncertainty, without previous voters' polarization. We test successfully this hypothesis in Catalonia by analysing the polarization of political parties and people's demands for self-government in Catalonia since the early 2000s. We also find that the result of this outbidding pattern of competition was a reduction in the gap between elites' and voters' views on national identity. The analysis employs a set of unique data on party elites and activists' national identity, from several surveys conducted on the delegates at party conferences of the main Catalan parties between 1996 and 2012. Our data provide empirical support for the argument that ethnic polarization is mainly an elite-driven process.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 11 April 2015; Accepted 6 July 2016

KEYWORDS Political elites; political parties; nationalism; decentralization; secessionism; Spain

Introduction

The rise of support for secessionism in Catalonia since 2011 challenges some ideas and interpretations about the accommodation of ethnic nationalisms in multinational states and suggests new avenues with respect to how these nationalisms evolve and the reasons behind it. The sudden shift towards secessionism amongst parties and voters may have different and complementary explanations, both rooted on demand-side and supply-side explanations. Recent studies analysing the rise of secessionism in Catalonia focus on short-term changes in public opinion (Serrano 2013; Muñoz and Tormos 2015), which allows the main factors affecting individual attitudes to be detected, although it cannot cope with the long-term influence of parties and leaders in shaping the political context. Following this demand-side approach, the

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predominant view amongst commentators and some scholars stresses the idea that polarization in Catalonia is explained by the people's reaction to the final outcome of the 2006 reform of the Statute of Autonomy, and a response to a more general failure of Spanish political institutions to assimilate national minorities within a multinational state (Guibernau 2013).

However, this interpretation alone is hardly consistent with the evolution of Catalan politics since the end of the 1990s. While changes in public opinion attitudes with respect to the national question have not been really significant until very recently, political parties and the party system have experienced relevant changes during the last decade (Barrio and Rodríguez-Teruel 2014). Indeed, several indicators suggest that party polarization happened before the voters gave expression to a similar trend in their political views. For this reason, the Catalan case would seem to challenge supply-side-only approaches, and would seem to favour those explanations of national and ethnic polarization based on elite-driven motivations.

In this vein, many scholars have already noted that the explanatory direction of the relationship between political parties and public opinion is highly controverted (Jensen and Thomsen 2013). While pluralists and rational choice authors tend to employ a bottom-up approach, for which political parties have a rather small influence on the shape of the public opinion, democratic elitism defends the utility of a top-down model (Lewis 2001; Higley and Burton 2006). Indeed, for some scholars, political parties are key actors in the setting of the agenda and are agents of political mobilization, as citizens tend to adopt the messages and opinions of their preferred political parties (Cohen 2003; Bullock 2011). This gives them a substantial influence that can polarize public opinion with their political strategies (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). The role of parties in sustaining and expanding ideological divisions was outlined by Lipset and Rokkan (1967), who argued that political parties not only represented already existing political cleavages in the society but also fed them, as an electoral strategy to maximize support. From a rational choice theory point of view, Riker (1986) argued that political parties attempt to manipulate voters through heresthetic strategies. From a different perspective, some scholars have discussed the shape and the relevance of the differences between party leaders' opinions in comparison to the views of party activists and voters, which may affect the ideological conflict (May 1973). Regarding the Catalan case, scholars have suggested that there is a substantial gap between the political preferences of significant segments of Catalan voters and the political preferences of their representatives (Miley 2007, 2013; Martínez Herrera and Miley 2010).

Following this previous findings, the goal of this article is to assess to what extent the outbidding competition between the main Catalan parties during the 2000s was driven by changes in voters' attitudes or, instead, by prior elite partisan polarization. In contrast to the "outbidding model" of ethnic party

competition, which predicts that ethnic parties¹ will simply tend to outbid each other as an electoral reaction to changes in people's demands, we argue that party elites' attitudes with respect to the national cleavage may have played a relevant role in shaping new party strategies. Indeed, since the 1990s Catalan party elites have permanently had more radical views on their national identity than on their voters and even their party activists (Baras et al. 2015). Under specific circumstances (government instability, party leadership changes, and intense party competition), this party's structure of opinions played a role in the configuration of the party position towards a more radical approach to the territorial cleavage, which eventually helped – combined with other exogenous factors – to fuel polarization in people's demands, bringing them closer to the party elites' original positions. The final result leads paradoxically to a narrower gap between the nationalist attitudes of party elites and their voters.

To sustain our argument, the analysis employs a set of unique data on party elites and activists' subjective national attitudes, from several surveys conducted to the attendants of party conferences of the main Catalan parties between 1996 and 2012. They contribute to showing the long-term preferences of political elites on the issue of national identity, and show how these attitudes may have paved the way for the polarization of the political parties.

Why do nationalist parties polarize? The roots of the outbidding competition

Party polarization is one of the ways political parties may change their ideological position. Traditionally, scholars have analysed party ideology changes through the spatial theory of competition, assuming that the mean voter drives party changes (Schumacher, De Vries, and Vis 2013; Fagerholm 2015). The major effort to explain why ethnic and nationalist parties do polarize comes from the outbidding model of ethnic politics. Based on Rabushka and Shepsle's seminal work (1972), this model predicts that ethnic parties will adopt more polarized strategies in order to maximize the support of voters belonging to their own ethnic group. Its main assumption is that in ethnically segmented societies, ethnic groups compete with the other groups and are organized separately (Mitchell 1995). The origin of ethnic parties in those societies is based on ethnic identities, where all the members of each ethnic group share homogeneous political preferences that are mutually exclusive to other group's preferences. Only one ethnic party represents each ethnic group, and consequently electoral competition happens only at the intra-ethnic level and when a new competing ethnic party appears within this ethnic group. New ethnic parties emerge as a reaction to situations where the existing ethnic party is considered to have become excessively moderate and its ability to represent the group's interests comes under

challenge. The response of the existing party to these new challenges will be to move away from a position of moderation and to increase the political demands on the state. Hence, new parties will set outbidding strategies that will foster polarization and fragmentation in the party system. In sum, the outbidding model predicts that party competition in ethnically segmented societies, in the long term, will tend to be polarized and involve outbidding strategies, which will eventually favour party polarization and will permanently jeopardize political stability (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972).

The main features of the outbidding model make it a useful framework to explain the ideological changes of many Catalan parties regarding ethnic accommodation in Spain. However, the Catalan case suggests two key elements that may be improved in this theoretical framework.

On the one hand, the classic outbidding argument is that any change in party competition will be the result of a previous change in voters' preferences, since parties try to maximize their electoral support. Indeed, political parties will adjust their preferences to the changes made by other competitors within the same ideological family as a reaction to shifts in the mean voter's preferences (Adams et al. 2004). This view assumes that party elites are going to be much closer to the mean voter than to the mean party activist – what has been called the “curvilinear structure of internal disparity” amongst party members (May 1973; Norris 1995).

However, we can also expect party elites to drive polarization in a context of multiparty competition and political instability, when the competition is uncertain and party leaders must cope with trade-offs and strategic dilemmas. In such a context of uncertainty, outbidding competition with respect to the ethnic/territorial cleavage can be an ideological and strategic choice for those partisan elites that had previously given more saliency and intensity to their national identities and their opinions about territorial politics than their own voters, under certain circumstances, such as leadership instability, electoral volatility, and risk of electoral defeat for the main parties. As Müller and Strøm (1999) explained, party elites may occasionally behave in ways that are motivated by ideological purposes rather than expected short-term electoral results. In this respect, the role of party elites as agents of change to party values has already been suggested in previous works (Sarrow 1994), although the constraints with respect to collecting accurate data to test this hypothesis have meant that there has been a lack of empirical evidence to sustain it. A recent study evaluated the effects of changes in party members in the ideological transformations of political parties on the left–right axis (Rohlfing 2015), although much more evidence needs to be obtained through case studies. Rabushka and Shepsle (1971, 465) already acknowledged the relevance of party elites in the process of ethnic polarization when they stated that “the successful political entrepreneur then is

the person who manipulates natural social cleavages, who makes those of certain cleavages politically salient”.

Consequently, in a context with the relevant trade-offs and political challenges – as the Catalan party system had at the end of the 1990s –, political elites and especially the new party leaders that came to the top of their organizations by that time were likely to outbid their adversaries in the territorial cleavage. Hence, Catalan political parties changed their positions on the territorial policies because their members, and particularly their leaders, *but not their voters*, were already polarized in terms of their views on national identity (hypothesis 1).

On the other hand, the classic outbidding model predicts conflict, fragmentation, and ethnic polarization as an inevitable outcome. This successful argument has been highly controversial (Ishiyama 2009, 57). Recent studies show that while party polarization is the inherent result of the life cycle of ethnic party competition, the extent of this fragmentation will depend also on the structure of incentives of the political system (Coakley 2008). Moderation on the part of ethnic parties is only possible when ethnicity is not salient (Horowitz 1985). On the contrary, when strategies of “mobilizing the faithful” prevail, moderate parties are unprotected against more extreme rivals (Mitchell 1995, 74). Although the authors are drawing on different theoretical approaches, they share a similar view of party competition, with very similar results in their predictions (Chandra 2005). Yet this outcome is not inevitable, since some specific contexts, like power-sharing institutions, may encourage ethnic parties to embrace moderation and pragmatism (Coakley 2008; Mitchell, Evans, and O’Leary 2009; Zuber 2013).

Nonetheless, another outcome of this outbidding competition may paradoxically be a reduction of this gap between elites and voters. If this outbidding competition is successful and elites foster the polarization of a relevant group of voters in a context where leaders are already polarized, we may, consequently, find that voters’ attitudes will move closer to the original partisan elites’ position with respect to national identity and territorial preferences (hypothesis 2). Hence, the reduction of the gap between elites and voters can be interpreted as part of an elite-driven process of ethnic polarization. Certainly, the dynamics of party competition should not be isolated from other political features of the context that may have contributed to reinforcing the influence of the outbidding on people’s attitudes. Amongst them, we should mention the heresthetic strategy followed by partisan elites through their public statements; the manipulation of government media to promote regional demands of self-government; or the reluctance from the main Spanish institutions to respond to these demands (especially after the PP (Partido Popular – People Party) coming to power). Pressures from civil society groups may have also played a role. In addition, exogenous factors must necessarily be considered in this model, such as the political costs

and the expansion of critical attitudes as a result of the economic crisis across Southern Europe (Bosco and Verney 2012).

Case selection, method, and data

To test the outbidding hypothesis, Catalonia offers a good case for analysis. While some conditions had weakened ethnic conflict since the return of democracy in 1977 – such as the access of minorities to parliamentary representation (Cohen 1997; Alonso and Ruiz-Rufino 2007) and power-sharing institutions –, in the last decade Catalan political parties have fuelled an outbidding competition around territorial issues by giving more saliency to identity politics. Certainly, the application of the outbidding model to this case needs to address some peculiarities.

In Catalonia, national identities have historically been fluid, with most people displaying dual – both Catalan and Spanish to different degrees – national identities, even though the differences amongst identity groups had remained stable during the 1980s and the 1990s. Actually, the fact that ethnic identities may vary (especially when they are not based on race or other structural features) is one of the main criticisms levelled at the outbidding model and its assumption of strong static ethnic identities. This is why the definition of ethnic (or national) groups might be problematic in Catalonia because these ethnic groups are neither homogenous nor exclusive. They do not confront each other, nor are organized separately. The predominance of dual identities reduces the controversial ethnic nature of the national groups, which makes the Catalan landscape an imperfectly segmented electoral market. While the original model assumed that ethnic groups tended to be represented by only one ethnic party, Catalonia has developed a multiparty system with “nested competition” (Zuber 2012). Hence, some Catalan ethnic parties compete on the identity/territorial cleavage while other parties have generally downplayed ethnic considerations in their ideological discourse and political practice. Far from being an obstacle for our analysis, the existence of multiparty competition can actually be seen as one of the factors – not considered by the original model – that opens the door for outbidding strategies started by elites rather than by voters.

In addition, our argument also assumes that political preferences in terms of territorial politics may be inferred from the ethnic identities in Catalonia. This is a common strategy traditionally adopted by scholars on nationalism, based on the assumption of congruency between both indicators. From this, we may interpret that dual identities entail moderate preferences on territorial accommodation policies, while exclusive identities entail more radical policy positions. The rationale behind this congruency suggests that identities and political preferences on territorial policies are mostly the product of a process of ethno-cultural reproduction (Miley 2007). However, some scholars

reject the automatic inference of preferences from identities (Giuliano 2000; Hale 2008). In this sense, some authors have suggested that, while identity accounts for most of the support to secession in recent Catalan polls, this relationship is neither linear nor exclusive since other factors – such as economic expectations and preferences, or party cues – may have also be having a minor but significant effect (Serrano 2013; Muñoz and Tormos 2015), although in the end conditioned by national identity.

Our research design will proceed as follows. First, we will show an overview of the evolution of party competition, in order to detect outbidding paths of competition, considering other factors already mentioned that might have contributed along with elite outbidding in influencing people's attitudes. Then we will turn to the individual attitudes of party leaders and voters. From a long-term cross-time perspective, we will check for stability and changes in party members' opinions, distinguishing between leaders and non-leaders. The goal of the empirical analysis will be to identify if there are patterns of change in national attitudes amongst voters and party elites. We will analyse only those parties that were actively implicated in the process of reform of Catalan self-government. To confirm hypothesis 1, we should expect that this outbidding competition should be preceded by elite polarization in national terms, but not by voters. Then, to test hypothesis 2, we should observe a change in voters' attitudes, but not in elites' identity, once the outbidding competition has already started. Consequently, we must find a reduction in the gap between elites and voters in identity terms at the end of the period.

To observe the polarization of attitudes concerning national identity amongst party elites, activists, and voters, our paper will employ two sets of data: on the one hand, data coming from the opinion polls conducted by the *Institut de Ciències Polítiques i Socials* (ICPS) since the end of the 1980s; on the other hand, data on party delegates collected by the Research Group on Political Elites and Political Parties (GREP) from different surveys conducted to the attendants of all party conferences in Catalonia between 1996 and 2012. This unique collection of data on party activists allows us to have an overview of the main features of the party activists and leaders of Catalan political parties.

The delegates at party conferences are not representative of the mean party member; instead, their profiles are close to the more active members of the organization, especially at the territorial level. This is why scholars used to consider them as party "middle-level elites" (Reif, Cayrol, and Niedermayer 1980). The analysis of the data on party delegates provides relevant information about party members that is not possible to obtain through other techniques, even though the collection of such data entails some methodological challenges, dealing with the actual statistic representation of the respondents, the reliability of the collected questionnaires, and the

comparison of the final data. For the purposes of this research, we have analysed the national subjective identity of the conference attendants of the five main parties that may be classified broadly as ethnic or “Catalanist” parties. We have also included data from their youth political organizations from the year 2000. This means a total of 34 party conferences and more than 11,000 cases over a period of 18 years. While the amount of cases per conference is 380 on average, the collection of responses fluctuated between twenty and eighty per cent of the total attendants at each conference.

Outbidding competition in Catalan politics, 2000–14

This section will introduce the main political facts that have marked the evolution of Catalan politics since the end of the 1990s. The aim is to identify how party politics produced outbidding patterns of competition through changes in the party position regarding Catalan self-government. The evolution of Catalan politics remained remarkably stable until 1999 in terms of party competition and parliamentary balance between parties. The Catalan party system was dominated by the unchallenged predominance of CiU (Convergència i Unió – Convergence and Union), the ruling party coalition since 1980. The main opposition party was the PSC (Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya – Socialists’ Party of Catalonia), the PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, Spanish Socialist Worker’s Party) Catalan “brother party”. Yet, at the end of the 1990s, the Catalan party system evolved towards a more open situation with increasing political uncertainty, captured by some indicators: higher electoral volatility in the regional elections, leadership instability (almost all Catalan parties changed their party chairmen between 1998 and 2000), and the increasing likelihood of a party change in the regional government (Barrio and Rodríguez-Teruel 2014).

In this context of increasing political uncertainty, the first stage of the outbidding developed between 2000 and 2004. Following a strategy of political triangulation, in 2000 the PSC launched a proposal to reform the Statute of Autonomy, overcoming the traditional reluctance of the mainstream parties to open this debate. The goal was to reinforce the political collaboration with the secessionist ERC (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya – Republican Left of Catalonia) (also in the opposition) as much as to feed the contradictions within CiU regarding its parliamentary support to the PP’s national government headed by J.M. Aznar since 1996. As a reaction to PSC’s proposal, CiU accepted the challenge and proposed a larger reform for a completely new Statute. Indeed, the 2003 regional election was centred on the reform of Catalan self-government, and led to a change of government for the first time since 1980. The main issue of the coalition agreement between left parties was the project of a new Statute of Autonomy. The victory of the PSOE in the 2004 general election paved the way for the reform.

The second stage took place between 2004 and 2006 with the making of the new Statute. From the beginning, CiU opted for an outbidding strategy that aimed to introduce tensions and contradictions amongst the members of the coalition, while not getting isolated from the centre of the scene (Keating and Wilson 2009; Orte and Wilson 2009). In order not to be overcome by CiU, ERC responded with higher demands regarding self-government. Hence, the bargaining of the reform turned into an auction between CiU and ERC, who were bidding to become the champion of the process. Several consequences arose from this situation. At the regional level, PSC lost control of the process and was forced to accept a level of demands higher compared to the constitutional standards that the PSOE expected. At the national level, the PP declined to participate in the process, in an attempt to erode the legitimacy of the reform and jeopardize the stability of the national government. The final approval vote at the referendum had much lower support than the previous 1979 statute.

The third stage of this process of polarization started in 2008. After failing in its new attempt to coming to power after the 2006 regional election, CDC (Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya – Democratic Convergence of Catalonia) – the main member of CiU – adopted a more radical platform with respect to the national issue, moving away from its traditional pragmatic approach towards territorial accommodation in Spain. By that time, a new generation of young leaders had come to the top of the party. Most of them came from the party youth organization and had participated during the 1990s in linguistic and nationalistic actions. Some contextual factors also had an influence on this transformation of the party position towards non-explicit secessionism. Firstly, following an appeal of unconstitutionality presented by the PP in 2006, the Constitutional Court finally issued a ruling regarding the new Statute, in July 2010, declaring some articles to be unconstitutional. Secondly, the financial crisis finally forced Spanish institutions to implement serious cuts to public spending, bringing economic and social issues to the forefront of the public debate. This raised the political dissatisfaction amongst left-wing voters and dramatically eroded the electoral support of the ruling Catalan parties. In the end, this helped CiU to win the 2010 November regional election and to form a new minority government. It might be seen as a paradox that this victory was mainly rooted in the relevance of economic issues rather than in the national one. One year later, the overwhelming victory of Mariano Rajoy in November 2011 gave the Spanish conservatives a big majority in the national parliament. The new executive took a tough position against regional governments and launched a number of political attempts to recentralize political power.

In this context, CiU's minority government confronted a very unstable parliamentary scenario. While the Catalan prime minister liked to introduce his new cabinet as a "business-friendly" executive branch, the deep economic

restrictions imposed by the context of crisis prompted a gradual return to the national issue. During 2012, opinion polls showed increasing dissatisfaction and criticism against mainstream parties and institutions. Simultaneously, new interest groups from civil society promoted critical attitudes against the political status quo and defended secessionism as a fast way of leaving the economic crisis and the austerity policies behind. Indeed, the successful secessionist demonstration in September 2012, organized by these interest groups (such as the Catalan National Assembly or *Omnium Cultural*), raised positive electoral prospects for CiU, persuading Mas to call for an early election. His main electoral promise was to call for an independence vote in the next term. However, the election resulted in an important loss of seats for CiU and a great electoral recovery for ERC. In the new parliament, Mas agreed to form a parliamentary coalition with ERC based on an agreement to call for a referendum on independence during the term. After 2012, the call for independence became the central issue on the Catalan political agenda and popular support for independence grew to around fifty per cent of the electorate.

In sum, this section has showed three relevant elements for our analysis: first, after 2001 party competition in Catalonia has followed an outbidding pattern around identity politics and the request for more self-government (mainly through a reform of the Statute of Autonomy); second, most Catalan parties participated in this outbidding process (with the exception of the PP), although the competition was mainly driven by the two main Catalan nationalist parties (CiU and ERC); finally, in the final stage of the outbidding process, some critical events together had the effect of causing increased political dissatisfaction (the Constitutional Court's ruling, the outbreak of the austerity policies, and the arrival of the PP to national government, with a tough position against regional governments).

Party elites and voters' subjective sense of national identity

According to the outbidding model introduced in the theoretical framework, this ethnic polarization should have originated in changes in voters' opinions and identities. However, we have hypothesized that, under the given conditions of political uncertainty, this polarization might be created by political elites rather than by people (H1), while the subsequent voters' polarization may have reduced the gap between elites and voters (H2). To check the first hypothesis, we should compare the party elites and the voters' position regarding the ethnic conflict, measured with indicators of national identity, at the beginning of the outbidding process.

On the one hand, to analyse the "subjective national identity" (SNI) of voters we employ the Moreno question, a traditional indicator used by scholars to analyse the national identity of individuals (Figure 1). Throughout the

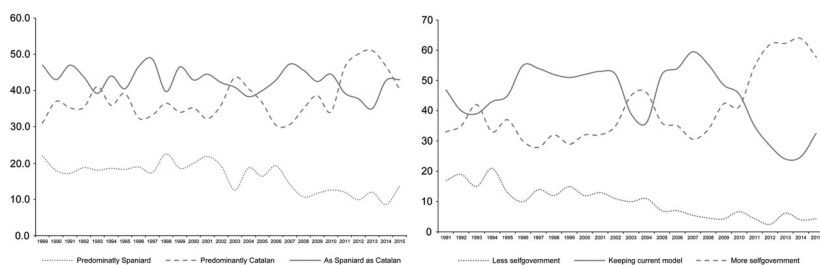


Figure 1. ‘SNI’ (left) and territorial preferences (right) in Catalonia (1989–2015)

1990s the evolution of the SNI looks broadly stable with minor short-term fluctuations. The central dual identity (those feeling as Spanish as Catalan) is the main category and fluctuates between thirty nine and forty nine. The other dual identity options (feeling more Catalan than Spanish, or more Spanish than Catalan) are much more stable. Two other indicators may provide supplementary information. First, the evolution of the opinions about which political status Catalonia should have was very stable over the course of the 1990s, when demands for stronger self-government were clearly weaker than support for the status quo in 2000 and in previous years. Similarly, explicit support for the idea of secession (not shown here) was even more stable during the 1990s and the 2000s.

On the other hand, there is a tremendous amount of stability in party leaders’ SNI.² As suggested by the mean values (Table 1), the frequencies (not included here) also reflect only small fluctuations for most of the parties between the “more Catalan” identity and the exclusive one. In particular, the exclusive Catalan identity (“I feel only Catalan”) is the most frequently repeated category amongst the leaders of ERC (almost 100 per cent), CDC (around per cent), and UDC (Unió Democràtica de Catalunya – Democratic Union of Catalonia) (around per cent), while dual identities are predominant amongst leaders in ICV (Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds – Initiative for Catalonia Greens) (around 50 per cent feel more Catalan than Spanish) and PSC (around 55 per cent feel as Spanish as Catalan). This portrait is similar for the whole group of delegates that attended the party conferences. However, surprisingly, party leaders are more likely to define themselves as more Catalan or only Catalan than their own activists. The SNI mean of party leaders is always above that of the activists, with the only exception being the PSC, where their leaders repeatedly define themselves more frequently as the central type of identity while activists were more likely to choose the dual Catalan type. In ERC, both leaders and activists tend to define themselves as only Catalan.

Given this tendency of party leaders to be more extreme in their SNI than their activists, it is not a surprise that these differences also remain when

Table 1. 'SNI' from party leaders, activists, and party voters.

		1996		2000		2004		2008		2012	
		Mean	Diff.	Mean	Diff.	Mean	Diff.	Mean	Diff.	Mean	Diff.
ERC	Leaders	4.96		4.96		4.95		4.92		4.95	
	Activists	4.93	−0.03	4.95	−0.01	4.90	−0.05	4.93	+0.01	4.94	−0.01
	Voters	4.20	−0.76	4.22	−0.74	4.22	−0.73	4.44	−0.48	4.43	−0.52
	Young	–	–	4.95	−0.01	–	–	–	–	–	–
CDC	Leaders	–	–	4.73		4.76		4.66		NA	–
	Activists	–	–	4.63	−0.10	4.61	−0.15	4.57	−0.09	NA	NA
	Voters	3.59	–	3.69	−1.04	3.54	−1.22	3.76	−0.90	4.22	NA
	Young	–	–	4.95	+0.22	–	–	–	–	–	–
UDC	Leaders	4.42		4.36		4.50		4.31		4.32	
	Activists	4.27	−0.15	4.24	−0.12	3.82	−0.68	4.35	+0.04	4.10	−0.22
	Voters	3.59	−0.83	3.69	−0.67	3.54	−0.96	3.76	−0.55	4.22	−0.10
	Young	–	–	4.56	+0.20	–	–	–	–	–	–
ICV	Leaders	4.16		3.88		3.93		4.21		4.35	
	Activists	4.05	−0.11	3.65	−0.23	3.91	−0.02	3.86	−0.35	4.21	−0.14
	Voters	3.04	−1.12	3.56	−0.32	3.26	−0.67	3.43	−0.78	3.43	−0.92
	Young	–	–	3.91	+0.03	–	–	–	–	–	–
PSC	Leaders	3.57		NA		3.33		3.39		3.36	
	Activists	3.93	+0.36	NA	NA	3.41	+0.08	3.50	+0.11	3.41	+0.05
	Voters	2.64	−0.93	2.79	NA	2.84	−0.49	3.08	−0.31	2.86	−0.50
	Young	–	–	3.19	–	–	–	–	–	–	–

Notes: Data show that mean values for SNI in every party group (leaders, activist and voters). Differences show the distance between voters/activists/young activists and party leaders.

A negative value means that party leaders have a more polarized position.

Source: GREP (<http://elitesypartidos.uab.cat>).

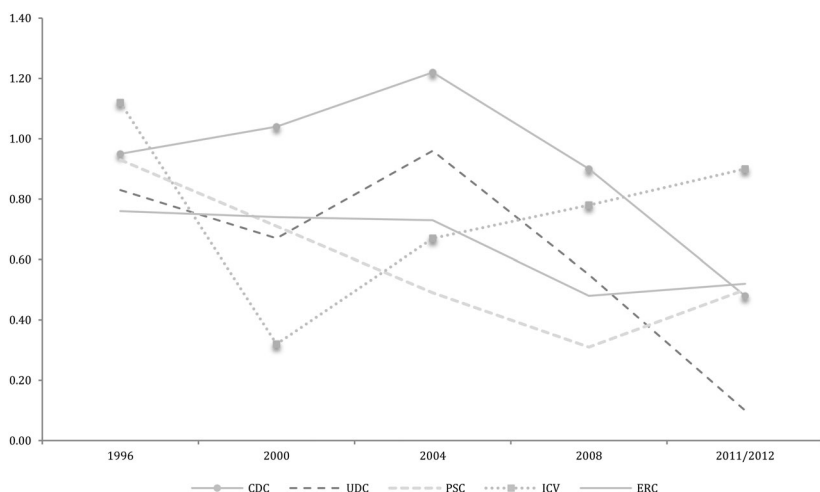


Figure 2. Structure of party opinion in 'SNI' in Catalonia (2000).

Notes: Data show differences between voters' and party leaders' mean values in SNI. All values are positive, meaning that party leaders have a more polarized position than voters.

compared to their voters, as is clearly observed in [Figure 2](#). The relevant feature here is the extent of disproportionality between party elites and voters in 2000, when the outbidding process began. In all cases, this difference is larger than 0.70, and in some cases it is close to one point, with CDC being the most relevant example. This means a distance of twenty-five per cent between party leaders and voters' positions (on a scale from 1 to 5 points, as the one employed here). Indeed, in 2000 almost seventy per cent of CDC party elites defined themselves as only Catalans and only four per cent as being as Spanish and Catalan, while only twenty-two per cent of their voters defined themselves as only Catalan and forty per cent of them opted for the central dual identity. These differences also existed in the other parties, although not to such an extent.

As mentioned in the previous section, some of the new CiU leaders that achieved the party leadership during the end of the 2000s and later (thus playing a relevant role in sustaining the outbidding process) were members of the youth party organization at the end of the 1990s. What was their position at that time? We have also included in [Table 1](#) the SNI of the delegates to the conferences of the youth organization that took place in 2000. The interest here is to observe the potential evolution of the SNI for the youngest members of the party. Interestingly, the young party activists were the more extreme group in 2000, more polarized than even the party leaders. The data show a decreasing trend of this polarization if we compare the youth's activists to the party elites, the party activists, and finally the voters,

the least polarized group in 2000 with respect to national identity. This structure of opinion differs from May's traditional expectations that we mentioned in the theoretical section. Again, the only exception to the overall situation was the PSC, where the differences adopted a more classic curvilinear disparity as May predicted.

In sum, data on people and elite's attitudes are not consistent with the traditional assumption of the outbidding model, which predicts that previous changes amongst voters will encourage parties to push for greater demands for self-government. Instead, the interesting point is the absence of relevant changes to public opinion by the year 2000 that may have justified why political parties started an outbidding competition. Consequently, it is hard to sustain the idea that the outbidding process was simply an electoral calculus of party elites at that time. Party leaders made an ideological choice regarding the national issue.

Our second hypothesis stated that the outbidding competition could eventually foster voter polarization, producing a reduction in the gap between leaders and voters in their views of the national question. With respect to this issue, the fluctuation of the voters' SNI increased significantly towards more polarization over the course of the 2000s, as the outbidding competition developed (Figure 1). More specifically, the increase in the strength of Catalan identity and of support for greater self-government seem to be located at the end of each period described in the previous section. Indeed, during the years preceding the debate around the reform of the self-government (2001–04), the central dual identity decreased steadily in favour of those feeling more Catalan than Spanish. In this first period, the debate about reforming Catalan autonomy was the central issue on the agenda, and the PSC advocated for a federal constitutional reform, as they expected to come to power in the next regional election. Later, between 2004 and 2006, the contested process of reform seemed to change the situation, reinforcing the central dual identity to the detriment of the dual and exclusive Catalan identity. However, since 2011, with the CiU's return to power combined with other contextual factors, we observe the lowest level of dual identity, while the exclusive Catalan identity attains the highest support, over twenty per cent.

Similarly, the debate prior to the reform fostered support for a federal solution amongst voters after 2001 and weakened the support for the status quo. Later, while the approval of the reform in 2006 delivered the peak in the support for the continuity of the current autonomous system (sixty per cent in 2007), the following years again showed a decline in support for this option. After the different stages of the evolution of the outbidding process, and the worsening of the political and economic situation, voters changed their position. As a result, the difference between party leaders and voters decreased substantially during the 2000s (Figure 2). There are some party differences that may be a response to the role of each party in

the process of outbidding competition. Thus, this reduction in the gap was particularly pronounced amongst CiU voters. Since CiU was the main driver of the outbidding process during the different stages explained in the previous section, this would suggest that its change of position regarding the Catalan question (evolving from moderate regionalism to secessionism) has been the main source of polarization in Catalonia over the course of the last few years. In sum, the outbidding competition – in combination with contextual factors described above – finally led to a reduction in the differences between party elites and voters, not thorough elite moderation but thorough voter polarization.

Conclusions: political elites and outbidding party competition

The evolution of Catalan politics during the last few years raises questions about the relationship between the elite and the masses in a context of ethnic territorial conflict. Our article shows that ethnic and nationalist parties may start an outbidding competition without previous significant changes in the opinions and attitudes of the electorate. In a context of political uncertainty and multiparty competition, the political elite's strong preferences and beliefs with respect to the national issue may play a relevant role. When confronted with the political dilemmas associated with party competition, party leaders may choose radical strategies because they believe in them and expect to maximize their electoral support by bringing voters closer to their position. This argument assumes that pursuing party polarization through an outbidding competition might be a rational choice since party leaders can attempt to make voters move to their position rather than follow the mean voter.

To test this argument, we have compared the political attitudes of party elites and voters regarding the national identity cleavage, at two different moments: when the outbidding process started and when it reached its peak one decade later. Our results may be summarized in two contributions. First, we have observed the evolution of national identity and political opinion on the national issue amongst the population; we have found that, in the Catalan case, changes in voters' identity and opinions follow party changes and elite decisions rather than precede them. We have interpreted this sequence (lack of previous relevant changes in voters' position) as a sign of an elite-driven change based partly on the ideological views of party leaders. Second, we have measured party elites' views on national identity and compared them to the views of their voters. Indeed, their attitudes on this issue look more stable and are much more extreme than the attitudes of their voters and even their own activists. At the end of the process, party elites have brought voters closer to their original positions on the national identity issue. The extent of the reduction in the gap between leaders and

voters might depend on how parties reacted to the evolution of the competition, although how this link actually works could not be clarified by our work.

The empirical findings of this paper not only shed new light on the Catalan case, but also point to important questions that are not completely answered in the text. For instance, while the article suggests a central role for party elites as the main drivers in the polarization around identity politics, that may also be the case with respect to other political issues. In the end, there seem to be reasons to believe that we may have underestimated the role of political elites in the making of people's beliefs. Likewise, new research has to keep addressing the causal mechanisms underlying the process by which elite values really do influence people's attitudes. Such long-term mechanisms raise theoretical and methodological challenges. Finally, the idea of an elite-driven process must control for the effect of other contextual political factors, as we have mentioned in our analysis. Still, political elites remain a central source for evolution of ethnic party competition.

Notes

1. We employ the term "ethnic parties" following the general pattern amongst the authors referenced in this paper. Chandra defines any ethnic party "as a party that is the champion of the particular interests of one ethnic category or set of categories" (Chandra 2011, 155).
2. Here party leaders are defined as those delegates with public offices (executive or parliamentary) and/or party offices at the regional or central level. Their proportion fluctuates from fifteen to twenty per cent to half of the respondents, which depends on the legal requirements to be a delegate in each party, but also on the particular bias in the collection of data.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to the reviewers and editors for their comments and suggestions, and also to our colleagues from the GREP research project.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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