

Electoral participation and partisan affective polarisation: A two-wave panel study of the association between out-group animosity and propensity to vote in Spain

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Do affectively polarised people vote or stay at home on Election Day? Although plenty of studies have analysed the origins and foundations of partisan affective polarisation, little is known about its impact on individuals' decision to vote. This article takes a closer look at the relationship between propensity to vote and partisan affective polarisation in Spain. This topic is especially interesting in the Spanish context, given the country's recent change from a two-party to a multiparty system and the increasing out-group animosity among Spaniards. The results show that polarised people are more likely to vote in elections than those with a more neutral posture. Nevertheless, such relationship is not lineal but rather curvilinear: while too much and too little polarisation decrease the chances of casting a vote, medium levels of polarisation contribute to an increase in an individual's likelihood to go to the polls on Election Day as a way to express their support for their own preferred party. These arguments will be tested by relying on a cross-lagged structural equation model, which has been performed on a two-wave panel study conducted in Spain between April and May 2019.

Keywords: Partisan affective polarisation, voting behaviour, panel data, Spain, propensity to voting

Introduction

In the literature on public opinion, political polarisation has been mostly framed by ideological considerations (see Dalton 2008; Downs 1957). By relying on this association, it has been shown that high levels of ideological polarisation are detrimental to the stability of the political system (see Hetherington 2009). However, under certain circumstances, polarisation may also be beneficial for the quality of democracy. More precisely, ideological polarisation clarifies voters' choices (Lachat 2008) and raises the individual likelihood to cast a ballot (Abramowitz & Stone 2006; Przeworsky 2019; Wessels & Schmitt 2008).

While these studies have certainly emphasised the importance of political polarisation on political systems, we should highlight that the focus on ideology is misleading when endeavouring for a more exhaustive understanding of the issue, as 'people polarise along non-ideological issues or they may be polarised along ideology without necessarily knowing deeply about it' (Lauka, MCoy & Firat 2018, p. 109). In this regard, the recent concept of 'partisan affective polarisation' (people's affinity towards a given political party and repulsion towards all other parties) has increasingly acquired relevance in academia (Iyengar *et al.* 2012; Wagner 2020).

With that in mind, previous studies on ideological polarisation may serve to analyse the extent to which, and under which, conditions partisan affective polarisation is related with the individual propensity to vote. In fact, we can extend the aforementioned mechanisms to the notion of partisan affective polarisation, as ideological and partisan affective polarisation are closely related and reinforce each other (Huddy, Mason & Aarøe 2015; Rogowsky & Sutherland

2016; Ward & Tavits 2019). While ideological polarisation fuels partisan affective polarisation (Rogoswky & Sutherland 2016), Ward and Tavits (2019) posit that (affectively) polarised people are more likely to perceive the party system as being ideologically polarised.

Therefore, the question persists: how do polarised people behave in the electoral arena? Much ink has been spilled on the operationalisation of partisan affective polarisation (see Reiljan 2020), its origins (Iyengar *et al.* 2019), and the relationship between partisanship, ideological and partisan affective polarisation (Lupu 2015; Rogowsky & Sutherland 2016; Ward & Tavits 2019), but much less is known about the relationship between partisan affective polarisation and propensity to vote.

As in the case of ideological polarisation, the increasing heatedness of public debate in most countries showed the negative consequences of a conflictive climate in the public opinion (see Ward & Tavits 2019 for a recent review). In particular, high levels of partisan affective polarisation ‘preclude the compromise, communication, and cooperation necessary for successful government in any democracy’ (Ward & Tavits 2019, p. 1). At the same time, partisan affective polarisation may encourage people’s electoral participation (Abramowitz & Stone 2006; Ward & Tavits 2019). Unlike individuals with more neutral attitudes (or a general sentiment of acquiescence towards all parties competing for the vote), those that hold positive sentiments towards their own party and negative sentiments towards all other parties perceive the ‘victory’ of their preferred party as a personal triumph (Huddy, Mason & Aarøe 2015) and therefore have much more at stake when it comes to voting.

Then, is the relationship between partisan affective polarisation and propensity to vote lineal, or rather is there any other kind of association? Abramowitz and Stone (2006) found a positive lineal relationship between polarisation and propensity to vote, but other studies on ideological (Schmitt & Freire 2012; Torcal & Magalhães 2020) and affective (Ward & Tavits 2019) polarisation and the perception of the quality of democracy found a curvilinear relationship between the variables. In other words, while ‘too much’ or ‘too little’ polarisation may be similar in terms of effects, a ‘middle of the road’ degree of polarisation may follow a very different pattern. In light of the above, much more research is needed in this direction.

By analysing the association between partisan affective polarisation and propensity to vote in Spain between April and May 2019, we will show in this paper that there is a significant association between the two variables, and such relationship is curvilinear. While people who score very high or very low on the polarisation scale are less likely to cast their vote on Election Day, those who are ‘in the middle’ characterise themselves as being more prone to participate in elections. In order to reach these conclusions, we performed a cross-lagged structural equation model with panel data, which is one of the best techniques to analyse in detail the association between two variables (see Finkel 1995). Unlike traditional ordinary least squares models with cross-sectional data, this method allows us to estimate simultaneous equations to model current perceived partisan affective polarisation and current perceived propensity to vote as functions of prior polarisation and prior probability to cast a ballot.

Our study makes several contributions to the study of affective polarisation. First, such a topic has been primarily studied in the stable two-party system of the U.S. (see Iyengar *et al.*

2019). With panel evidence from Spain, we increase the empirical breadth of this line of research. Focusing on a multiparty system also advances our theoretical and empirical understanding of affective polarisation, especially regarding its relationship with voting behaviour. Second, our study expands the scope of the literature on affective polarisation, by analysing how it has an impact on people's likelihood to vote, a factor that has been hitherto largely omitted. Furthermore, while much of the literature conceives (affective) polarisation as a threat to democracy, this paper speaks in favour of this attitude, by showing that some degree of affective polarisation may be beneficial for the legitimacy of representative democracies. Last, but not least, we contribute to the study of affective polarisation by employing a sophisticated statistical technique and making use of panel data, which allow us to draw more rigorous conclusions about the association between the variables.

Theoretical Arguments

In the literature on partisan affective polarisation, all the research starts with the premise of the social identity theory to associate polarisation with partisanship (see Iyengar *et al.* 2012; Lupu 2015; Reiljan 2020; Wagner 2019; Ward & Tavits 2019). Following this association, polarisation is 'a natural offshoot of the sense of partisan group identity' (Iyengar *et al.* 2019, p. 130).

In this sense, partisan affective polarisation characterises itself according to two elements. First, it is conceived as a specific kind of expressive partisanship, which is an emotional, affect-based attachment to a party that resembles a stable social identity (see Huddy, Mason & Aarøe 2015). Second, (and even more importantly), affective polarisation is based on a

clear dichotomy between the in-group and the out-group identity, as it measures the extent to which citizens develop strong affective ties towards their own preferred party (the in-group) while holding at the same time strong negative sentiments (or even hostility) towards all other parties (the out-group) (Reiljan 2020; Wagner 2020; Ward & Tavits 2019).

As for partisanship and ideological polarisation, partisan affective polarisation has a direct impact on citizens' perception of the most relevant political issues, as well as their propensity to participate in the electoral competition. On the one hand, it has been shown that partisan affective polarisation tends to drive people towards a biased perception of the ideological position adopted by political parties along the left-right scale. As Ward & Tavits (2019) demonstrate, affectively polarised people tend to exaggerate the ideological purity of their own party as a mechanism to positively distinguish the superiority of the in-group over its competitors. In spatial terms, such a mechanism is reflected 'in perceiving the party as ideologically extreme in the partisan's preferred direction' (Ward & Tavits 2019, p. 2). At the same time, people tend to negatively distinguish the out-group, which in a multiparty setup is represented by all the other parties. As for the positive distinction of the in-group, in this case the negative side of polarisation is reflected in positioning all the other parties at the exact opposite direction of the partisan's preferred position.

On the other hand, affective polarisation leads to the internalisation of an individual's own group failures and successes as personal (Huddy, Mason & Aarøe 2015). In the context of electoral competition, such a mechanism results in a higher likelihood to participate at the elections. For affectively polarised individuals, elections matter the most and there is much more

at stake, as their party is perceived to be constantly threatened and its survival in the party system is jeopardised by all the other parties, which are perceived as enemies. As Abramowitz & Stone state, ‘The larger the difference voters perceive between the candidates and the parties, the greater their stake in the election outcome, and the more engaged in an election they are likely to be’ (Abramowitz & Stone 2006, p. 146). Conversely, ‘if nothing is in stake, if policies remain the same regardless of who wins, people observe that they voted in election after election, governments changed, and their lives remained the same. They may conclude that elections have no consequences and lose incentives to participate’ (Przeworski 2019, p. 162). Therefore, affectively polarised people will be motivated to cast a vote for their preferred party as a mechanism to make its victory possible. The preceding arguments lead to the formulation of the first hypothesis:

- (1) H₁: High levels of partisan affective polarisation are significantly associated with a higher propensity to vote

Nevertheless, the association between affective polarisation and propensity to vote may not be lineal but rather curvilineal. In order to better understand such a relationship, we should refer to the literature on spatial voting, which poses a strong positive association between voters’ perceptions of the differentiation of the party supply (in terms of their position adopted along the left-right scale and voter turnout) (Downs 1957; Hobolt & Hoerner 2020).

In this sense, a voter turnout is ‘a rough, though consequential indicator of whether voters perceive elections and the available choices to be meaningful’ (Wessels & Schmitt 2008, p. 21).

In spatial terms, what contributes to the meaningfulness of the available choices is not the raw number of parties competing in the electoral arena, but rather their capacity to distinguish themselves from their competitors in terms of policy proposals or their position on the left-right scale (Downs 1957; Hobolt & Hoerner 2020; Przeworski 2019; Wessels & Schmitt 2008).

Following this argument, voters are rational individuals who aim to maximise their utility when evaluating the decision to vote or not. If the utility derived from supporting an existing party overcomes the costs, people will vote; otherwise, people will stay at home on Election Day (Downs 1957). As a consequence, in a purely rational context, people will compare all positions adopted by existing parties in the policy or ideological space with their own position on the same scale and, subsequently, they will vote for the party which maximises their own utility. Otherwise, if no party is aligned with a person's position, the chances of abstention increase (Downs 1957; Hobolt & Hoerner 2020).

The latter scenario gives rise to an 'indifference' situation, which results from the absence of differentiation between the parties that make up the political supply (Plane & Gershtenson 2004). In fact, if existing parties are perceived to be too much alike, they fail to present voters with a platform that distinguishes their different positions. In the absence of party differentiation, the whole party system undergoes an *indifference* problem, which means that 'there is no meaningful distinction between the locations of the candidates, even though both may be close to the citizen' (Plane & Gershtenson 2004, p. 71). In this sense, a polarised party system has more intense partisan competition and produces clearer and more party choices. This stimulates participation by helping people find the closest party to their position and improves

representation. Furthermore, it motivates people to inform themselves, as the different policy proposals expressed by parties and their candidates are clearer, easily recognisable and much more distinguishable among themselves (Lachat 2008). As a result, voters make more informed voting decisions, since their vote is not based on prejudices or sympathies, but rather the result of a conscious and detailed process of information gathering (Dalton 2008). Conversely, in a less polarised party system, the political actors fail to present voters with an identity that distinguishes them from the other competitors. Therefore, voters are not able to appreciate the difference between them, which makes the whole party system much less varied and representative (Dalton 2008). If parties are not able to distinguish themselves from their competitors in the political arena, the options available for the voters in a given election are scarce, even if the raw number of parties standing for election is high. Under these conditions, indifference-based abstention is a likely outcome (Plane & Gershtenson 2004).

In terms of partisan affective polarisation, we argue that the aforementioned mechanisms may arise in two scenarios: people either like or dislike all parties the same. In both cases, there is no most-liked party, which implies that people do not perceive a polarisation of the party system.

The opposite situation may also pose a challenge: people may refrain from voting if they are ‘too polarised’, i.e. if they strongly like their own party and they strongly dislike all the other parties. Under such conditions, affectively polarised people will perceive the whole party system as extremely fragmented, while fuelling hateful sentiments towards all other parties. As in the case of ‘too little’ polarisation, too much polarisation is also detrimental for the stability of the

party system (Schmitt & Freire 2012; Przeworsky 2019; Torcal & Magalhães 2020) and may have negative consequences on the individual decision to vote. In particular, an excessively polarised system normalises in the public opinion political conflict and animosity, legitimises in mass media radical and anti-system opinions, eases the rise and establishment of extreme parties and promotes a centrifugal party competition (Sartori 1976). Following this argument, ‘when conflicts are intense and a society is highly polarised, finding policies acceptable to all major parties is difficult and may be impossible; miscalculations lead to institutional breakdown’ (Przeworsky 2019, p. 170).

Certainly, these mechanisms represent ‘the dark side of polarisation’, which has been traditionally demonised by many scholars (see Hetherington 2009). Ultimately, high levels of (ideological) polarisation have a direct negative impact on the quality of democracy (Schmitt & Freire 2012; Torcal & Magalhães 2020). Under such circumstances, people may be discouraged from voting, as they may feel alienated from the party system and perceive too much hostility from society. More precisely, too much polarisation discourages people’s participation by jeopardising the function of elections as a means of peacefully processing conflict within society. In fact, ‘when too much is at stake, so that they see their losses as permanent or at least long-lasting. When incumbent make it next to impossible for the opposition to win elections, the opposition has no choice but to turn away from elections (Przeworski 2019, p. 162). All in all, despite the presence of their preferred party, the utility of voting for that party may not be sufficiently high enough to justify the decision of voting at all.

In brief, while too much and too little polarisation discourages people from voting, a median degree of polarisation may increase the individual likelihood to participate in elections (see Dalton 2008; Przeworki 2019; Schmitt & Freire 2012; Wessels & Schmitt 2008). In particular, acceptable levels of polarisation contribute to make electoral choices more meaningful and the whole party supply more varied. Likewise, some degree of polarisation helps people find the party that best represents their interests, which in turn make easier for citizens to find and support their preferred party. In other words, ‘democracy works when something is at stake in elections but not too much is at stake’ (Przeworki 2019, p.8). Therefore:

- (2) H₂: There is a quadratic relationship between partisan affective polarisation and propensity to vote. While too much and too little partisan affective polarisation depresses the individual propensity to vote, medium levels of affective polarisation increase the propensity to vote.

Empirical Strategy

Data and variables

As previously discussed, our theoretical argument posits a relationship between partisan affective polarisation and propensity to vote. To conduct an in-depth analysis of such association, in this paper we will test the key implications of our argument using data from the E-DEM dataset (see Torcal *et al.* 2020). More precisely, the empirical analysis makes use of the third (1,659

observations) and fourth (2,059) wave of the panel study. While the third wave was conducted between 23 April, 2019 and 26 April, 2019, the fieldwork of the fourth wave took place one month after the third wave.

The E-DEM dataset is ideal for our analysis for two reasons. First, it is a panel study, which – despite the relatively short timeframe between the two waves – allows us to draw more rigorous conclusions about the association between the variables of interest, and to perform more sophisticated statistical analyses (Finkel 1995). Furthermore, relying on the previous levels of partisan affective polarisation and propensity to vote (measured at time $t-1$) in order to study the same variables measured at the time t for the same individuals solves (or, at least, reduces) the traditional problems derived from analysing two variables measured at the same time. Among them, it is worth mentioning the ‘reverse causal direction and the feedback loop’ between the variables involved (see Lupu 2015, p. 358). Second, the E-DEM dataset includes all relevant questions that are crucial for our theoretical argument as this dataset it measures the two main indicators of interest. Unlike in the first and the second waves, all questions included in the empirical model have been asked in the third and the fourth wave.

In this paper, we are thus interested in measuring two key concepts: propensity to vote and partisan affective polarisation. The former measures the electoral utility of the act of voting (as opposed to the alternative of abstaining) based on the individuals’ calculus of the expected utility of going to the polls and casting a vote (van der Eijk *et al.* 2006). In other words, propensity to vote relies on strategic and psychological considerations and assumes that the contribution of all relevant factors to the overall attractiveness of the alternative are considered

when making the final decision (Downs 1957). This indicator has been measured as follows: ‘Now, we would like you to tell us what is the probability that you will vote in the next parliamentary election, using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you will definitely not vote and 10 means you will definitely vote’.

Regarding partisan affective polarisation, in this paper we base our operationalisation on traditional like-dislike scores (see Reiljan 2020), more precisely on the Wagner’s (2020; see also Torcal & Comellas 2020) mean distance from the most-liked party, which gauges how much lower individual’s affect is for other parties (excluding the most-liked one). In the E-DEM dataset, the statement is worded as follows: ‘I would now like to ask you what you think of the **political parties** that have the most electoral support. Please rate each of them on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means that you don't like the party at all and 10 means that you like it very much’. Unlike other measures of affective polarisation (like territorial polarisation), this variable was constructed by exclusively considering respondents’ sentiments towards the main political parties that currently configure the traditional political offer. The parties analysed are the conservative *Popular Party*, the socialist party, the far-left *United We Can*, the liberal *Citizens* and the new far-right populist party *Voice*. The raw mean distance from the most-liked party has been successively weighted by the percentage of votes gained by the party at the latest parliamentary elections.

Added to the models are the most relevant predictors of the individual-level decision to vote (see Anduiza Perea 2002; Vidal 2018). The first is self-reported placement on the left-right scale, which is one of the strongest predictors of voting behaviour in Spain despite the rise of

new contenders (Vidal 2018). Political interest is the second relevant variable, which is considered one of the strongest individual incentives to cast a vote, as well as the most reliable measure of citizens' involvement in public affairs (Anduiza Perea 2002). Moreover, there is a need to control for the potential negative effects of the Great Recession, which may have reduced individual resources by making people less interested in participating in politics and more worried about their own situation. To capture these effects at the individual-level, we include an index of personal economic uncertainty. The index (Cronbach's Alpha: 0.8) is on a 0-4-point scale and uses four items to measuring respondents' concerns with: paying bills, quality of life, job losses and paying the rent. Additionally, we are interested in observing the impact of sociotropic evaluations of the economy. The impact of this variable on voting behaviour should be more accentuated in the aftermath of the Great Recession, when the severity of the economic downturn provoked the traditional sanctioning mechanism to go beyond the incumbent and extend to all those parties that traditionally govern (Vidal 2018). Finally, all the models include controls for the main socio-demographic variables, such as gender, age, education level and working status.

About the model

Regarding the empirical model, one should bear in mind two considerations. First, panel surveys have the advantage of permitting us to test whether perceptions of affective polarisation have an impact on propensity to vote within the same individuals over time, which permits a more rigorous analysis of the relationship between the two variables (Finkel 1995; Lupu 2015). One of the most important drawbacks here is that this approach requires a focus on a specific country,

by limiting the generalizability of the findings. However, what we lose in terms of generalizability we gain in terms of confidence in the causal interpretation of the results, especially because we keep into account the previous levels of affective polarisation and propensity to vote when estimating the association between the variables measured at the time t .

Previous studies have shown that cross-lagged structural equation models are one of the most reliable techniques for analysing this kind of data (Finkel 1995). This method estimates simultaneous equations to model current affective polarisation and propensity to vote as functions of prior polarisation and prior propensity to vote, measured at the previous wave for the same individuals. As Finkel states, ‘The logic behind cross-lagged causality is that a variable X is said to cause another variable Y if prior observations of X are associated with current observations of Y, holding constant prior observations of Y’ (Finkel 1995, pp. 25-26).

Second, our expectation is that the relationship between affective polarisation and propensity to vote is curvilinear: while ‘too much’ and ‘too little’ polarisation should discourage people from voting, a median level of polarisation should encourage Spaniards to vote. Therefore, the best way to test such a relationship is by including affective polarisation and its squared term in the model. The formal model is as follows:

$$\begin{cases} PTV_{i,t} = \alpha_1 + \beta_1 PTV_{i,t-1} + \gamma_1 Partypolarization_{i,t-1} + \delta_1 Partypolarization_{i,t-1}^2 + \theta_1 Controls_{i,t-1} + \varepsilon_1 \\ Partypolarization_{i,t} = \alpha_2 + \beta_2 PTV_{i,t-1} + \gamma_2 Partypolarization_{i,t-1} + \delta_2 Partypolarization_{i,t-1}^2 + \theta_2 Controls_{i,t-1} + \varepsilon_2 \end{cases}$$

Results

Table 1 displays the results of the cross-lagged model. While the model on the left side of the table deals with the propensity to vote (measured at time t) as a dependent variable, the coefficients on the right are related with partisan affective polarisation as a dependent variable. To begin, it is worth mentioning that the estimated model fits the data quite well. In fact, as can be observed, the main parameters that have been traditionally used to assess the quality of the fit in this kind of approach (see Finkel 1995; Lupu 2015) meet the requirements.

[Table 1 here]

Focusing now on the key association of our argument, the results displayed on the left side of Table 1 confirm our hypotheses: there is a strong and significant association between polarisation and propensity to vote, but such association is curvilinear rather than lineal. In fact, while the effect of partisan affective polarisation is positive, the effect of its squared measure is negative. Both coefficients are significant at 99%. As we discussed, the mechanisms behind the association between too much and too little affective polarisation and propensity to vote are very different, but they lead to the same outcome: in both cases, people prefer staying at home rather than voting. In the case of too little affective polarisation, people perceive the competing parties to be essentially the same. Such perceptions reduce incentives for voting, as an individual's utility gained from voting is substantially negligible – or very close to zero (Downs 1957; Wessels & Schmitt 2008).

On the other hand, the fact that people are too polarised means that there is one party that they like the most and one or more parties that they strongly dislike. Under such conditions, the crispatation and the inter-party hostility may throw people out of politics, by increasing mass disengagement, provoking a sense of alienation towards the whole party system and, ultimately, discouraging people from voting (see Hetherington 2009). As in the case of too little partisan affective polarisation, also too much polarisation strongly reduces the individual utility gained from voting for a party (even the most-liked party).

The situation is very different in the ‘middle of the road’ levels of affective polarisation. In this case, people may be encouraged to cast a ballot for their most-liked party. In fact, as highlighted by many scholars (Dalton 2008; Lachat 2008; Lupu 2015; Ward & Tavits 2019), some degree of polarisation is beneficial for the whole party system and citizens’ general involvement in the public affairs, as it raises awareness and interest in knowing the differences between parties, it encourages people to become more informed about the policy proposals of the political parties and, above all, it makes all the existing party choices clearly distinguishable and more different among themselves (Downs 1957; Lupu 2015; Ward & Tavits 2019; Wessels & Schmitt 2008). The latter aspect is crucial to consider, as it greatly increases the individual utility gained from voting for the most-liked party (Downs 1957).

In order to better understand the aforementioned association, Figure 1 visualises the relationship between partisan affective polarisation and propensity to vote estimated in Model 1. We plot expected values of Spaniards’ likelihood to vote across the entire range of affective polarisation, holding all controls constant at their dataset mean.

[Figure 1 here]

Considering these expected values in detail, we can observe that when partisan affective polarisation is too little, the expected level of propensity to vote also reaches its lowest level, which means that it is very unlikely that the individual will cast a ballot. As polarisation increases, so too does the propensity to vote, meaning that when people have moderate levels of positive / negative sentiments for the parties they are more likely to cast a vote.

As can be appreciated in Figure 1, this relationship holds true until a median level of affective polarisation is observed. When polarisation keeps growing, individual propensity to vote decreases substantially, reaching, once again, its lowest level when affective polarisation reaches its highest point. All in all, the highest expected values of propensity to vote can be found at moderate levels of affective polarisation. The latter scenario corresponds to voters' perception that parties are 'sufficiently different' among themselves in terms of sentiments (which means that there is a specific party that people like the most, but they have a moderate level of affect / animosity towards all the other parties) but they are neither 'too different' nor 'too alike'. In brief, affect clearly plays an important yet non-linear role in explaining people's propensity to cast a ballot.

The relevance of these findings is accentuated by further assessing the other variables present in the empirical model that represent some of the most relevant alternative explanations to the individual propensity to vote. First, it is interesting that the likelihood to vote (measured at time $t-1$) is strongly associated with the same variable measured at time t (as can be observed, the

coefficient is positive and statistically significant at 99%) means that it was indeed necessary to control for the previous levels of propensity to vote in order to take into account potential ceiling effects when investigating its evolution over time. As expected, political interest (which is probably the strongest alternative explanation to individual turnout) is also strongly associated with the propensity to vote measured at time t . The sign is as theorised by the preceding literature: those who are more interested in politics are much more politically involved than those who do not care about political matters; therefore, they are much more likely to participate at the voting process. The retrospective economic evaluation also plays a role when explaining individual likelihood to vote: positive evaluation of the national economic situation is associated (at 90%) with a higher propensity to vote, which (among other potential explanations) can be interpreted as a way to express people's satisfaction with the incumbents' management of the economic situation, which in turn raises the likelihood to vote for the government parties as predicted by the traditional economic voting theory (see Vidal 2018). Conversely, personal economic distress does not play a role when explaining individual turnout. Finally, the results also reveal that voters' self-placement on the left-right scale plays a (very minor) role in explaining individual turnout. In fact, as can be observed by the coefficient of Model 1, left-wing people are (slightly) more motivated to participate in elections, compared with those with more conservative ideologies. Regarding the main socio-demographic variables, it is worth mentioning that, except for age (older people are more likely to vote than younger generations), all the other variables do not have explanatory power.

Focusing now on the right side of Model 1, the most important finding to assess is the lack of evidence of reverse causation, at least in the E-DEM dataset. In fact, as we can observe,

the propensity to vote (measured at time $t-1$) does not have a statistically significant effect on current perceptions of polarisations. This finding may suggest that, as far as this dataset shows, there should be little cause for concern that perceived affective polarisation is endogenous to people's PTV, at least in this context. Nevertheless, we can also observe that, as in the case of current propensity to vote, also in this case it was indeed necessary to control for the previous levels of affective polarisation, in order to take into account potential ceiling effects. In fact, as the right side of the model shows, current levels of polarisation are significantly and positively related with the subsequent change in polarisation levels. Nevertheless, there is no statistical evidence of a curvilinear relation between the current and the previous levels of partisan affective polarisation, as can be deduced by the fact that the squared term of polarisation term is not significant.

Turning the analysis on the other variables in the model, the only consideration that is worth mentioning is the fact that political interest is significantly (at 99%) and positively associated with current levels of perceived party polarisation, which means that people who are more interested in politics characterise themselves for displaying higher levels of out-party animosity, compared with those who are not interested in politics. With regard to the other variables, it seems that educational level and gender are the only relevant factors which are statistically associated with current levels of party affective polarisation.

Conclusions

In this paper, we conducted an in-depth analysis of the association between partisan affective

polarisation and propensity to vote in Spain. More specifically, we made use of an original online panel study conducted in Spain between November 2018 and May 2019 (although the empirical analysis of this paper relied upon the third and fourth wave of the survey) in order to evaluate the impact of previous polarisation on current levels of propensity to vote. Such an association has been analysed by performing a cross-lagged structural equation model, which is one of the most reliable approaches for these kinds of analyses (see Finkel 1995).

Three conclusions may be drawn from the empirical analysis. First, previous affective polarisation has a strong and significant impact on current propensity to vote. More specifically, the higher the levels of polarisation, the higher the individual likelihood to cast a vote. Unlike those with a more neutral attitude, for affectively polarised people there is much more at stake in the electoral competition, as they have a stronger affective attachment to their own party and similar negative sentiments towards all the other parties. Therefore, they are highly motivated to go to the polls and cast a vote to their preferred party as a way to show their commitment and support to their own party (Ward & Tavits 2019).

Second, such association is curvilinear, which means that while too much and too little party polarisation depresses turnout, a ‘middle of the road’ level of polarisation motivates people to vote. As we previously discussed, the reasons why too much and too little polarisation demotivate people to vote are very different, but they lead to the same outcome. On the one hand, if people do not have a preferred party, they perceive all parties to be essentially the same and nothing is at stake, which in turn reduces the individual utility of voting for any of them (Downs 1957) and leads to an indifference-based abstention (see Plane & Gershtenson 2004). On

the other hand, if an individual has a very strong attachment to their own party and similar levels of hostility towards all the other parties, he/she is too polarised, which may lead to an alienated perception of the whole party system (Plane & Gershtenson 2004) and a more general opinion about the fact the politics is a conflictive and divisive matter which is better not to deal with (see Przeworki 2019). Even more importantly, when there is too much at stake, people may perceive an excessive repulsion against all the other political actors, which could in turn rule out compromise, normalise conflict, embolden extremists and legitimise in the party system the presence of radical or anti-system parties (Przeworki 2019). Under such conditions, affective party polarisation may discourage people's participation and, lastly, weaken democratic institutions.

Conversely, in a scenario in which there is some degree of party polarisation, people's likelihood to vote increases, as voters perceive the different policy platforms and political offers to be more meaningful and different amongst parties (Wessels & Schmitt 2008). This perception enhances individual capacity to recognise the dissimilarities between the parties and to find the party that best satisfies his/her demands and needs, which in turn makes the whole party system more representative and the political supply more assorted (Dalton 2008; Lachat 2008). Under these circumstances, when there is something at stake (which means neither too little nor too much), democracy and elections are expected to function properly as a mechanism to peacefully process conflicts (Przeworski 2019).

Finally, the cross-lagged model excluded the possibility of reverse causation between polarisation and propensity to vote, at least as far as this dataset is concerned. In this way, we can

be more rigorous when drawing conclusions about the impact of previous polarisation on current propensity to vote. In fact, it seems that the association between the two variables of interest is not contaminated by a feedback loop, which has been depicted as the more dangerous threat to validity by other scholars working on a different (but related) association (see Lupu 2015).

This study also made relevant contributions to the study of affective polarisation and electoral participation. First, although elections are considered a key topic in comparative politics (see Przeworsky 2019; Wessels & Schmitt 2008), and despite the massive amount of literature on the origins and the measurement of polarisation in two-party and multiparty systems (see Iyengar *et al.* 2019), much less is known about to what extent and under which conditions partisan affective polarisation has an impact on the individual decision to vote. Therefore, the goal of this paper has been to try to fill this gap.

Second, by providing new empirical evidence about the curvilinear relationship between affective polarisation and propensity to vote and shedding new light on the impact of affective polarisation on the decision to vote, this study also speaks in favour of a certain degree of polarisation in the societies. In fact, while there is consolidated evidence that affective polarisation is growing in almost all contemporary representative democracies (see Reiljan 2020 for a recent review), such an increase has been mostly depicted as a serious problem (see Iyengar *et al.* 2019). Nevertheless, as we have argued throughout this paper, the scenario is not so grim, and a certain level of affective polarisation (which means that it is neither too little nor too much) encourages people to participate in the electoral competition.

Obviously, this study is not exempted from limitations. To start, the empirical analysis covers a very reduced timespan (one month), which may represent a serious threat to the validity and successive interpretation of the results displayed in the empirical section. Nevertheless, in this paper we are not interested in explaining the over time changes in the levels of affective polarisation or propensity to vote. Instead, our main research interests rely upon the in-depth analysis of the association between these two variables and, more precisely, the impact of previous polarisation on the current levels of propensity to vote. In this sense, making use of panel data counterbalanced the main drawback of covering a limited time frame, as the analysis of panel data permitted us to perform more advanced statistical models. With that in mind, we cannot disregard that such analysis is based on a one-month difference between the two waves.

Secondly (and directly related with the latter), this paper represents a case study, which entails that the theoretical argument be tested in a specific country (in this case, Spain) in a very specific context (the Spanish parliamentary elections on the 28 April, 2019). This approach hinders the potentiality of generalising the results and applicable to other countries, contexts and situations, especially when addressing the problem of reverse causality between affective polarisation and propensity to vote. However, as Lupu (2015, p. 348) claims, this is ‘the price to pay’ if we want to draw more rigorous conclusions about the relationship between two variables, as cross-lagged structural equation models are not feasible in a cross-sectional large-N setup (Finkel 1995). Additionally, in this paper we are not interested in finding common patterns or making general conclusions about a given phenomenon or association, but rather we wanted to analyse in detail the impact of previous affective polarisation on current levels of propensity to vote. And, in order to achieve this goal, panel data are the best-suited datasets (Finkel 1995). In

other words, in this research we are more interested in the internal validity of the findings than their external validity. All in all, future panel studies should contemplate the possibility of extending the time coverage, by conducting more surveys over a longer time span or by making the panel studies biannually (if money is not an issue). In a similar way, much more research is needed in a comparative setup, which can be achieved by increasing the number of countries that participate in the panel project and, above all, by adopting the same questionnaire in all the countries which are part of the consortium. In this way, the findings observed will gain in terms of comparability and generalizability.

Despite these caveats, we modestly think this study represents a small but significant step forward a better understanding of partisan affective polarisation, especially regarding its impact on the electoral competition and people's decision to participate in the national political activities.

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Table 1: Cross-lagged structural equation model analyzing the association between partisan affective polarization and propensity to vote.

Number of cases: 1233

Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA): 0.050 (≤ 0.05)

Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR): 0.029 (≤ 0.05)

Comparative Fit Index (CFI): 0.958 (≥ 0.95)

Dependent Variables

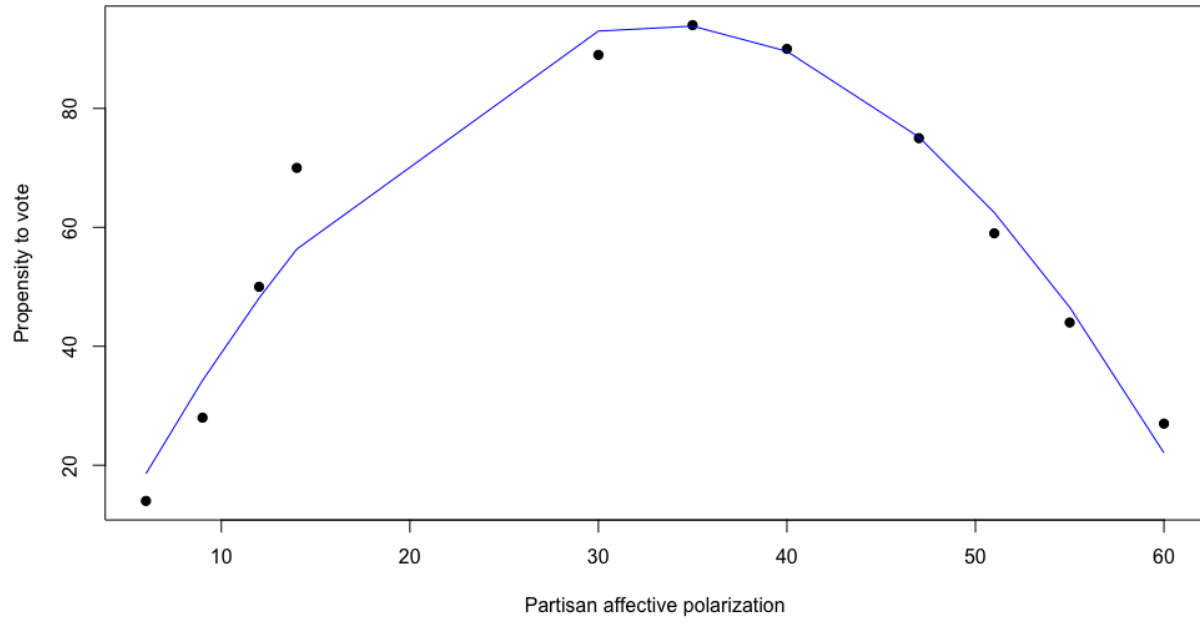
Covariates [t-1]	Propensity to vote Wave 4	Partisan affective polarization Wave 4
PTV	0.457*** (0.028)	0.175 (0.140)
Mean distance from the most-liked party [Partisan affective polarization]	0.158*** (0.032)	0.293*** (0.021)
Squared mean distance from the most-liked party [Partisan affective polarization]	-0.008*** (0.003)	0.036*** (0.002)
Retrospective economic evaluation	0.105*** (0.029)	0.002 (0.019)
Political interest	0.354*** (0.085)	0.146*** (0.056)
Ideology	-0.047* (0.023)	-0.032** (0.015)
Indicator of economic uncertainty	0.068 (0.084)	-0.072 (0.055)

Gender [Ref. Male]	0.111 (0.134)	0.212** (0.089)
Age	0.016*** (0.006)	0.006 (0.004)
Working status [Ref. Worker]		
Student	0.382 (0.287)	0.140 (0.148)
Unemployed	0.203 (0.201)	0.189 (0.241)
Retired	-0.180 (0.215)	0.195 (0.209)
Houseworks	0.235 (0.324)	0.629** (0.262)
Educational level [Ref. No studies]		
Primary education	-0.798 (1.162)	0.494 (0.769)
Secondary education	-0.329 (1.052)	0.182 (0.696)
University education	-0.180 (1.066)	0.186 (0.705)

Note: the dependent variables are current (*t*) Propensity to Vote (on the left) and current (*t*) partisan affective polarization (on the right). Cell entries represent unstandardized coefficient estimates with standard error in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Figure 1. Expected propensity to vote according to different values of partisan affective polarization



Source: Own elaboration.

Note: Solid blue line represents expected values of propensity to vote based on the left side of Model 1 in Table 1 with all control variables held constant at their mean.