

Partisan Primacy in Spain: Mapping Affective Polarization Across Social Identity Divides

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Abstract

Research increasingly characterises politics as a “mega-identity” capable of encapsulating other social divisions, yet empirical tests of how this identity meddles and absorbs other social cleavages remain rare, particularly in multiparty systems. This study addresses this challenge by developing a political Coherence Index, a continuous metric designed to quantify the structural alignment between a respondent’s attributes (across 12 social dimensions) and the prototypical values of their ideological group. Using data from a stratified national survey in Spain (June 2024, N = 3,015), we first confirm the “primacy of partyism”: political divides generate significantly larger affective gaps than any other social cleavage, including religion, gender, or region. Additionally, we also show that attitudes towards a varied range of 26 social groups cluster along ideological lines. Crucially, we then demonstrate that partisan feelings are driven by the consolidation of a political mega-identity. We find that as individuals become more “coherent”—meaning their social identities and values increasingly match their party’s prototype—their affective distance from outgroups widens. This effect is symmetrical across the ideological spectrum, operating with equal force for both left- and right-wing partisans. These findings suggest that affective polarisation is not merely a matter of partisan preference, but a product of how intensely partisan identity aligns with one’s attributes, values and social spheres.

Keywords: Affective polarization; Partisan identity; Spain; Social divides; Social sorting

Introduction

What is the relative status of partisan identity among the many social identities that structure political and social life? Has partisan identity become the dominant lens through which we view the rest of our social lives? Over the past decade, a rapidly expanding literature on affective polarization has converged on two central conclusions. First, a wide range of experimental and observational studies demonstrates that partisan identity is a particularly powerful basis for social evaluation, consistently generating strong ingroup favouritism and outgroup derogation (Carmines & Nassar, 2021; Cordell, 2025; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Norman & Green, 2025; Westwood et al., 2018). In many contexts, these affective responses rival or surpass those associated with other salient social identities such as class, religion, ethnicity, or gender. We refer to this pattern as the primacy of partyism: the tendency for partisan attachments to occupy a privileged position within individuals' social identity hierarchies (Lane et al., 2024). Second, partisan animus is not driven by party identity alone but is amplified when partisan divisions become aligned with other social identities. This process—commonly described as social sorting—binds political conflict to broader social cleavages, reinforcing affective polarization and deepening perceived social distance between partisan groups (Harteveld, 2021a; Mason, 2016; Mason & Kalmoe, 2021; Mason & Wronski, 2018).

Despite these advances, the literature is subject to several important limitations. First, empirical evidence on affective polarization remains heavily concentrated on the United States and its two-party system, raising questions about the generalizability of core findings to multiparty contexts (Reiljan, 2020). In fragmented party systems, citizens confront multiple potential political outgroups, complicating the binary ingroup–outgroup logic that underpins much U.S.-centric research. Harteveld (2021b) shows that Dutch citizens meaningfully differentiate between partisan groups, but that out-party hostility varies gradually with ideological distance rather than collapsing into a single undifferentiated outgroup. These findings suggest that multiparty competition reshapes the structure—though not the presence—of affective polarization.

Second, most studies assess the primacy of partisan identity by comparing it to a limited set of alternative social identities, typically ideology, race, or religion (Lane et al., 2024). As a result, it remains unclear how partisan attachments compare to a broader range of socially salient identities that structure everyday social evaluations. An important exception is Brensing and Sotoudeh (2022), who analyse affective evaluations toward

an unusually wide set of social groups and show that partisanship organizes attitudes far beyond the political domain, while also revealing substantial heterogeneity in how individuals structure their social worlds.

Finally, even when political identity is compared to other social identities, existing research rarely examines how affective evaluations across identities are interrelated. As a result, we know relatively little about whether and how partisan affect is embedded within broader patterns of social evaluation, or about the extent to which the alignment of attitudes across identity domains contributes to partisan affective polarization itself (Harteveld, 2021a).

To overcome these limitations, we pursue three complementary strategies. First, we examine affective polarization in Spain, an extreme multiparty system characterized by high party fragmentation and multiple, crosscutting axes of political conflict, including ideological, territorial, and cultural divisions (Galais & Balinhas, 2025). This context allows us to assess whether the primacy of partisan identity persists outside a two-party setting. Second, we broaden the scope of identities under study by analysing affective evaluations toward 26 political and non-political social groups, enabling a systematic comparison of partisan identity with a wide array of alternative social cleavages and identifying patterns of alignment in the attitudes towards different social groups. Third, we examine whether stronger alignment with one's political group attitudes and characteristics induces higher levels of affective polarisations, allowing us to assess how social sorting structures both social attitudes and partisan affective polarization.

We test these expectations using original survey data from Spain collected in June 2024. Our analysis relies on the NORPOL Survey, an online survey fielded on a stratified national sample of 3,015 adult respondents (Miller, Rodriguez & Castellanos, 2025). Affective evaluations are measured using a 0–100 feeling thermometer, in which respondents report how warmly or coldly they feel toward each of the 26 social and political groups. This commonly used instrument permits fine-grained comparisons across identity domains and situates partisan affect within a broader landscape of social group evaluations.

Building on this design, we report three main sets of results. First, we find clear evidence of the primacy of partyism in Spain: affective polarization between partisan groups exceeds that observed for any other social identity. Among non-political identities, the strongest affective divides emerge around environmental attitudes, followed by religion

and gender-related groups, indicating that cultural and value-based cleavages also structure affective evaluations, albeit to a lesser extent than partisanship. Second, we show that affective evaluations across identities are systematically related, consistent with theories of social sorting. In particular, positive affect toward left-wing parties is strongly associated with warmer evaluations of social minorities, environmentalists, feminists, and atheists, revealing a coherent alignment between partisan attachments and broader social attitudes. Third, we demonstrate that the strength of this cross-identity alignment is itself a powerful predictor of partisan affective polarization: individuals whose social identities are more tightly sorted along partisan lines exhibit substantially higher levels of partisan ingroup favouritism and outgroup hostility.

Taken together, these findings speak directly to the limitations identified in the existing literature. By documenting the primacy of partyism in Spain, we show that strong partisan affect is not confined to two-party systems but also characterizes highly fragmented multiparty contexts. By comparing partisan affect to evaluations across a broad and diverse set of political and non-political identities, we demonstrate that party identity remains dominant even when situated within a much wider social identity landscape than is typical in prior work. Finally, by showing that affective evaluations across identities are systematically aligned, and that the strength of this alignment predicts partisan affective polarization, we highlight social sorting as a central mechanism linking political conflict to broader patterns of social evaluation.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. We first describe the research design, data, and analytical strategy. We then present the main results, focusing on the relative strength of partisan affect, the structure of affective evaluations across social identities, and the relationship between social sorting and partisan affective polarization. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for theories of affective polarization in multiparty systems and outlining directions for future research.

Methods

The NORPOL Survey

The empirical analysis draws on the NORPOL Survey, an original online survey fielded in Spain in June 2024. The survey was administered to a stratified national sample of 3,015 adult respondents, with quota targets designed to approximate the Spanish population in terms of gender, age, educational attainment, town size, and region of

residence. Data collection was conducted by the survey firm Netquest using its online panel. The resulting dataset is publicly available (Miller, Rodriguez and Castellanos, 2025), facilitating transparency and replication. The study received ethical approval from the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), and all respondents provided informed consent prior to participation.

As with most web-based surveys, this design entails well-known limitations. Online panels rely on nonprobability sampling and may suffer from coverage and self-selection biases, including the underrepresentation of individuals with limited digital access or skills and the overrepresentation of politically interested respondents. Although stratified quotas mitigate some of these concerns, online samples may still differ from the general population on unobserved characteristics. Prior research suggests that such samples can yield higher absolute levels of ideological consistency and affective polarization, even when relative comparisons across groups remain reliable. These limitations should therefore be borne in mind when interpreting the magnitude of affective evaluations reported in this study (Simmons & Bobo, 2015). Importantly, while our design does not aim to produce precise population estimates, it is well-suited to assessing relationships between variables: the large size and sociodemographic heterogeneity of the sample provide substantial leverage for internal validity and ensure that the associations we examine are estimated across a broad cross-section of the Spanish electorate.

The questionnaire combined original items with batteries adapted from established international and Spanish surveys, including the *World Values Survey*, the *German Longitudinal Election Study*, and the *Spanish Centre for Sociological Research (CIS)* barometers. This strategy ensures comparability with prior research while maintaining high construct validity. The survey instrument was organized into six thematic blocs covering leisure practices, mobility, personal and relational values, moral and political attitudes, political behaviour and orientations, and sociodemographic characteristics. Because the present study focuses on affective evaluations across social groups, we describe that component in detail below; the remaining sections are not discussed further, as they are not directly relevant to the analyses presented here.¹

¹ A comprehensive discussion of the survey design, fieldwork, and measurement strategy is provided in Miller (2025).

Feeling Thermometer Measure

Affective evaluations were measured using a 0–100 feeling thermometer, a widely used instrument in research on affective polarization and intergroup attitudes (Gidron et al., 2022). Respondents were asked to indicate how warmly or coldly they felt toward each of 26 social and political groups, where 0 represents “very cold or negative feelings” and 100 represents “very warm or positive feelings.” This scale allows for fine-grained comparisons both within and across identity domains.

The 26 target groups span a broad range of politically and socially salient identities in contemporary Spain. Specifically, the battery includes:

- (1) immigrants from Eastern Europe, Africa, and Latin America;
- (2) religious groups (Catholics, Muslims, Jews, atheists);
- (3) sexual orientation and gender identity groups (LGTBI+ individuals and heterosexuals);
- (4) ethnic minorities (Roma/Gitanos);
- (5) partisan and political groups (voters of PSOE, PP, Podemos–Sumar, Vox, separatist or independence parties, and abstentionists);
- (6) issue-based and ideological groups (climate change deniers, environmentalists, feminists, and people with traditional views of women);
- (7) regional and national identities (Spaniards and respondents’ own autonomous community); and
- (8) lifestyle and status groups (supporters of Real Madrid and FC Barcelona, people with university education, and people with low levels of education).

This design enables direct comparison between partisan affective divides and affective evaluations rooted in other social identities, such as religion, migration, gender norms, education, or regional belonging. Unlike many studies that focus exclusively on political parties or ideological camps, the NORPOL feeling thermometer situates partisan identities within a broader landscape of social group evaluations, making it possible to assess the relative intensity of political versus non-political cleavages.²

² A full English translation of the questionnaire, including the complete wording of the feeling thermometer items is provided in the Supplementary Materials, Appendix A.

Analytical strategy

The empirical analyses proceed in three steps, each designed to capture a distinct aspect of affective polarization across political and non-political identities. These approaches allow us to compare the extent of affective differentiation, the structure of affective alignments, and the individual-level foundations of these patterns.

In the first step, we assess the relative magnitude of affective distance across political and social identity dimensions using feeling thermometer ratings. For each identity dimension included in the NORPOL Survey, respondents evaluated multiple groups on a 0–100 scale. We summarize these evaluations using three metrics: (a) the mean rating of the most positively evaluated group within a dimension (ingroup), (b) the mean rating across all non-ingroup categories, when there is more than one, and (c) the mean rating of the least positively evaluated group (extreme outgroup).³

Affective distance or range is operationalized descriptively as the difference between ingroup and outgroup evaluations within each identity dimension. This approach allows for direct comparison of affective polarization across domains that differ in the number and type of groups they contain. To facilitate interpretation, identity dimensions are ordered by the size of the ingroup–outgroup gap, such that dimensions associated with larger affective distances appear first. This analysis focuses on relative differences across domains rather than on absolute levels of affect, and it is intended to establish a descriptive hierarchy of affective divisiveness across political and non-political identities.

In the second step, we examine how affective evaluations of different groups are related to one another across respondents. Rather than focusing on levels of affect, this analysis captures the structure of affective alignments by estimating pairwise Spearman rank correlations between all feeling thermometer variables. Spearman correlations are based on ranks rather than raw values and therefore independent of which builds specific values of the scale, measuring instead shared affective ordering: whether respondents who

³ Ingroup membership is assigned at the individual level using the most direct and objective indicators available in the questionnaire. For example, religious ingroup identity is determined based on respondents' self-placement in response to the question "How do you define yourself in religious terms?". Similarly, football ingroup identity is assigned using respondents' stated team preference in response to the question "In a match between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona, which team would you support?". For the environmentalism and gender values domains, where no direct self-identification is available, ingroup assignment follows the closest behavioural or attitudinal indicator measured in the survey.

evaluate one group relatively positively also tend to evaluate another group relatively positively (or negatively).

These correlations are visualized in a heatmap accompanied by a hierarchical clustering dendrogram. The clustering is based on similarity in correlation profiles and is used to identify higher-order groupings of identities that tend to be evaluated in a coordinated manner. Interpretation of this analysis centres on patterns of alignment and opposition across groups, not on the magnitude of affective differences. In particular, the analysis allows us to assess whether political, cultural, and social identities form coherent affective blocs, and whether affective polarization extends across domains rather than being confined to explicitly political objects.

In the third step, we move from descriptive patterns to individual-level inference by examining whether the coherence of citizens' political and social identities is associated with partisan affective polarization. To do so, we estimate regression models in which individual-level partisan affective polarization serves as the dependent variable and identity coherence (or ideological sorting) as the main explanatory variable.

Partisan affective polarization is measured at the individual level using a dispersion-based indicator that captures the extent to which respondents differentiate affectively between political parties. Following Wagner (2021), we compute a *partisan affective polarization* (*PAP*) score based on feeling thermometer ratings toward supporters of the main political groups in Spain: PP, PSOE, Vox, Sumar, and a combined category of regional parties advocating secession from Spain. This measure captures polarization as the intra-individual spread of evaluations rather than just hostility toward a specific outparty.

Formally, the *PAP* score is calculated as the quadratic mean of the deviations between respondent i 's feeling thermometer rating toward party p and their average rating across all partisan groups:

$$PAP_i = \sqrt{\sum_{p=1}^P (Feelings_{ip} - \overline{PFeelings_i})^2 / 5} \quad (1)$$

The measure ranges from 0 to 50. A value of 0 indicates that the respondent assigns identical evaluations to all partisan groups and thus expresses no partisan affective

polarization. Higher values indicate greater dispersion in affective evaluations, reflecting stronger affective differentiation between political parties.

The key independent variable is an index of identity coherence, intended to capture the degree to which individuals' political attitudes and social identities are consistently aligned with their self-declared ideological position. The construction of this index, which builds on and expands the index proposed by Mason (2018), proceeds as follows.

First, we identify a set of attitudinal, issue-based, and identity-related variables that meaningfully discriminate between the ideological left and right. Inclusion is based on four criteria: (1) statistically significant differences in average responses between left-wing and right-wing respondents; (2) clear clustering of responses by partisan bloc, such that PSOE and Sumar supporters align with one another and are distinct from PP and Vox supporters, and vice versa; (3) statistically significant differences across all major parties, including between PSOE and PP; and (4) for the more restrictive version of the index, majority agreement (above 50 percent) in one and only one ideological bloc, ensuring that the issue meaningfully divides the electorate along ideological lines.

Based on these criteria, we construct two versions of the coherence index. A broader index includes twelve variables spanning policy attitudes (e.g. immigration, climate taxation, defence), value-based issues (e.g. feminism, abortion, gay adoption), economic trade-offs, and social identities (e.g. religion, regionalism). A more restrictive index includes five variables that most sharply distinguish ideological blocs in Spain.

Second, for each selected variable, we identify the ideological “prototype”—that is, which position is empirically associated with the left or the right ideological bloc. Third, we compare each respondent's position on each variable to their self-declared ideological orientation. Fourth, we aggregate across all selected variables the number of instances in which a respondent's position aligns with their ideological group. The resulting index captures the extent to which individuals hold internally consistent, ideologically sorted positions across multiple domains.

To estimate the association between identity coherence and partisan affective polarization, we fit ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models with robust standard errors. The dependent variable is the individual-level PAP score, and the main independent variable is the coherence index. Additional model specifications introduce controls and alternative operationalisations of coherence to assess robustness. The

modelling strategy allows us to test whether individuals whose political attitudes and identities are more coherently aligned along ideological lines also exhibit higher levels of partisan affective polarization.

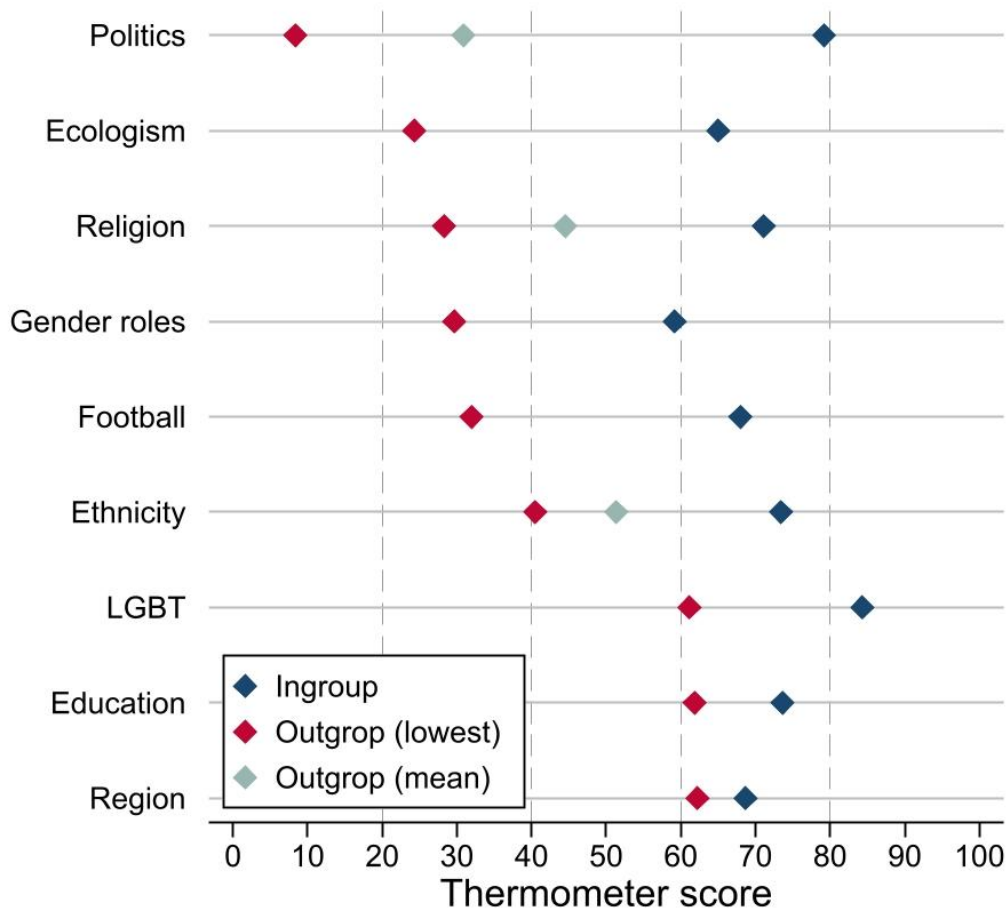
Results

Affective Distance across Political and Social Groups

To assess the relative magnitude of affective polarization across political and non-political identity dimensions, Figure 1 maps average feeling thermometer ratings toward ingroups and outgroups for a broad set of social categories. For each dimension, the figure displays three quantities: the mean rating of the most positively evaluated group (ingroup), the mean rating across all non-ingroup categories, and the lowest-rated outgroup. The identity dimensions are ordered by the size of the ingroup–outgroup affective gap, with larger distances indicating more affectively divisive cleavages.

Two patterns stand out. First, political identities are associated with the largest affective distances. In the political domain, respondents express very warm feelings toward their ingroup (around 80 points on the 0–100 scale), while the most negatively evaluated political outgroup receives substantially lower scores, close to 20. Even when considering the average evaluation of all political outgroups, affect remains markedly colder than in any non-political domain. This gap between ingroup warmth and outgroup coldness is larger for politics than for any other identity dimension included in the survey.

Figure 1. Affective evaluations of ingroups and outgroups across political and social identity dimensions



Note: The figure displays mean feeling thermometer scores (0–100) for a range of political and non-political identity dimensions. For each dimension, the dark blue marker indicates the average evaluation of the most positively rated group (ingroup), the light blue marker indicates the mean evaluation across all non-ingroup categories, and the red marker indicates the lowest-rated outgroup. Identity dimensions are ordered by the minimum outgroup score, from most to least affectively divisive. Data source: NORPOL Survey (Spain, June 2024).

Second, while non-political identities also generate meaningful affective differentiation, the magnitude of these divisions is generally smaller. Religion and environmentalism stand out among non-political dimensions as comparatively divisive, with low minimum outgroup ratings and sizeable distances between ingroup and outgroup evaluations. By contrast, identities related to education, sexual orientation, and region display much narrower affective gaps: ingroup evaluations are high, but even the least liked outgroups are rated relatively warmly, often above the midpoint of the scale. These patterns suggest that, in contemporary Spain, affective boundaries based on socio-demographic characteristics are present but substantially less polarized than those rooted in politics.

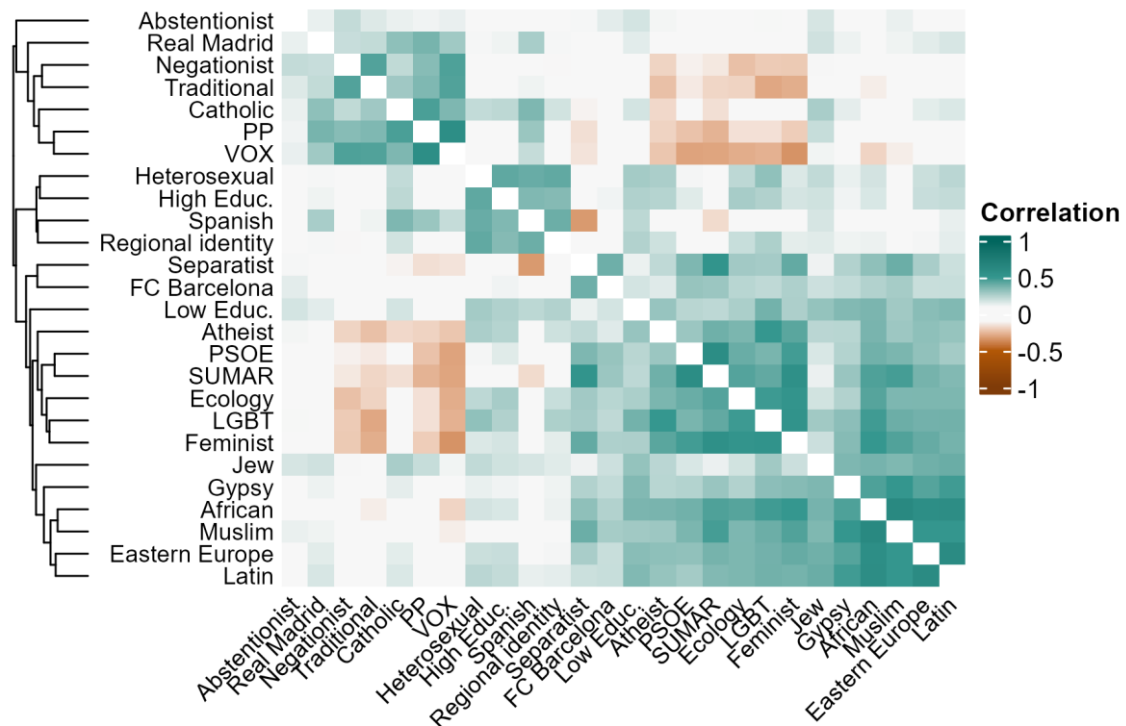
To validate these descriptive patterns at the individual level, we additionally estimate the affective range (defined as the difference between a respondent's ingroup rating and their lowest outgroup rating) as a function of the identity domains (see Supplementary Materials, Appendix B). Using *politics* as the reference category, the results confirm the statistical significance of the primacy of partisan affect: coefficients for all non-political domains are negative and significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the affective gap generated by politics is systematically larger than that of any other social cleavage. Consistent with the hierarchy observed in Figure 1, *religion* (-28.5) and *environmentalism* (-31.1) exhibit the smallest deviations from the political baseline, confirming them as the most divisive non-political identities. Conversely, the largest reductions in affective polarization are found in the domains of *education* (-65.3) and *sexual orientation* (-60.1), statistically corroborating that these social divides generate the least intense intergroup hostility compared to the political sphere.

Figure 1 indicates a clear hierarchy of affective divisions. Political identities occupy the top of this hierarchy, producing stronger negative affect toward outgroups than any other social cleavage examined. Cultural and value-based identities such as religion, environmentalism, and gender roles occupy an intermediate position, while more descriptive social categories—such as education, region, or sexual orientation—are associated with comparatively low levels of affective distance. This descriptive evidence supports the notion that political identities constitute a particularly salient and emotionally charged basis of social evaluation, even when placed alongside a wide array of non-political group distinctions.

Structure of Affective Alignments Across Groups

While the previous section focused on the level of affect directed toward different groups, Figure 2 examines how these evaluations are related to one another across respondents. The figure displays pairwise Spearman correlations between feeling thermometer ratings toward all groups included in the survey, alongside a hierarchical clustering dendrogram. Because Spearman correlations are based on ranks rather than absolute values, the figure captures shared affective ordering—that is, whether respondents who feel relatively warm toward one group also tend to feel relatively warm (or cold) toward another—rather than shared intensity of affect.

Figure 2. Correlations and clustering of affective evaluations across political and social groups



Note: The figure displays pairwise Spearman rank correlations between feeling thermometer ratings (0–100) for all groups included in the NORPOL Survey. Positive correlations indicate that respondents who rank one group relatively warmly also tend to rank the other group relatively warmly, whereas negative correlations indicate opposing affective rankings. Correlations capture shared affective ordering rather than shared intensity of affect. The accompanying dendrogram shows hierarchical clustering of groups based on their correlation profiles, illustrating higher-order affective alignments across political, cultural, and social identities. Data source: NORPOL Survey (Spain, June 2024).

The heatmap reveals a clear and interpretable structure. In the upper-left portion of the figure, a cluster of conservative identities and positions exhibits moderate to strong positive correlations. This cluster includes supporters of right-wing parties (Vox and PP), traditional views on gender roles, Catholic identity, climate change denial, and support for Real Madrid. Respondents who rank these groups relatively positively tend to do so consistently across this set, indicating a coherent affective alignment among culturally and politically conservative reference groups.

A contrasting cluster appears in the lower-right portion of the heatmap, where progressive political actors and socially inclusive identities are positively correlated with one another. This cluster includes supporters of left-wing parties (PSOE and Sumar), feminist and LGBT groups, environmentalists, atheists, and a range of minority and migrant categories. As in the conservative cluster, these correlations indicate that respondents who

evaluate one of these groups more favourably than others tend to extend similar relative warmth across the broader progressive constellation.

Importantly, correlations between these two clusters are generally negative, though typically of low to moderate strength. This pattern suggests systematic affective opposition: respondents who rank conservative groups more positively tend to rank progressive groups more negatively, and vice versa. At the same time, the absence of uniformly strong negative correlations cautions against interpreting this structure as a single, perfectly bipolar dimension. Rather, the data point to a patterned—but not absolute—alignment of affective evaluations along a broad ideological divide.

The clustering visible in the dendrogram supports this interpretation. The groups are not randomly associated, but instead organise into higher-order bundles that closely mirror the well-established political and cultural divisions in Spanish society. Political parties, issue positions and social identities are interwoven within these clusters, indicating that emotional evaluations are structured across domains rather than being confined to political issues alone. The higher-order separation distinguishes between two clusters of identities: one more conservative and the other more progressive. Respondents typically value all groups within a cluster in the same way, and inversely for the identity groups in the other cluster. The progressive-aligned cluster quickly splits into two, revealing a group of common, lower-stakes identities (high education, Spanish and regional identities, and heterosexuality) that do not always move in sync with the other, more politicised identity groups.

An examination of the specific coefficients underlying Figure 2 (see Supplementary Materials, Appendix C) further aligns with this conclusion: affective alignment within ideological blocs is significantly more intense than the affective distance between them. The highest positive correlations are found among political allies, with ratings for the two main left-wing parties (PSOE and Sumar) correlated at 0.60, and that between the main right-wing parties (PP and Vox) reaching 0.59. This political cohesion extends powerfully into the social sphere: warmth toward Sumar correlates strongly with positive feelings toward feminists (0.57), while support for Vox is tightly linked to climate change denialism (0.46) and traditional views on women (0.45). By contrast, the negative correlations driving the heatmap's negative zones are notably weaker in magnitude. The sharpest antagonisms—such as that between Vox voters and feminists (-0.35) or between separatists and those identifying with Spain (-0.33)—rarely exceed a coefficient of -0.40.

This suggests that the structure of polarization in Spain is driven primarily by the consolidation of deep, overlapping networks of intra-group affection, rather than by absolute, unbridled hostility.

Figure 2 shows that affective polarization in Spain is not merely a matter of isolated dislikes or isolated party-based antipathy. Instead, feelings toward political, cultural, and social groups are systematically aligned, forming coherent affective blocs that cut across multiple identity domains. This structure helps explain why political affective polarization may spill over into evaluations of ostensibly non-political groups, a dynamic explored further in the analyses that follow.

Identity Coherence and Individual-Level Partisan Affective Polarization

In order to examine the relationship between social sorting and polarisation, we first constructed an Identity Coherence Index. This index measures the extent to which an individual's social identities and policy attitudes align with the prototypical values of their ideological group. Two versions of this metric were calculated: a comprehensive index comprising twelve dimensions to maximise granularity and a restricted version based on five core categories. Although both indices are normalised to a 0–1 scale, the subsequent analysis focuses on the comprehensive 12-dimension index to capture the multifaceted nature of alignment, while the restricted version is used for robustness checks. The distribution of these scores (see Supplementary Material, Appendix D) shows that, although 'perfect' sorting is rare, moderate alignment is widespread. Only 2% of the sample has a coherence score of 1, meaning their attitudes and characteristics perfectly match their ideological group's prototype, whereas 30% have a coherence score of 0, representing individuals who either do not identify with an ideological group or whose attributes diverge completely from their group's prototype. Nevertheless, over half of the sample (53.1%) has a coherence value of 0.5 or higher, suggesting a significant level of structural alignment between citizens' social attitudes, characteristics and political identification.

This section examines whether the coherence of individuals' political and social identities is associated with higher levels of partisan affective polarization. Table 1 reports a series of OLS regression models in which individual-level partisan affective polarization is regressed on alternative measures of identity coherence, with and without ideological interactions and sociodemographic controls.

Table 1. Identity coherence and partisan affective polarization

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Partisan affective polarisation				
Coherence (12-INDEX)	15.008*** (0.688)	11.865*** (2.018)		12.114*** (1.384)	
Coherence (5-INDEX)			12.654*** (0.605)		8.644*** (1.064)
Left		-0.213 (1.679)		0.469 (0.55)	0.876 (0.538)
Left*Coherence12		0.748 (2.576)			
Gender				-0.212 (0.541)	-0.527 (0.544)
Age				0.083*** (0.015)	0.082*** (0.015)
Type of habitat				-0.058 (0.145)	-0.004 (0.145)
Education				-0.458 (0.359)	-0.45 (0.364)
Income				-0.001 (0.176)	0.031 (0.176)
_cons	19.5*** (0.412)	21.435*** (1.248)	20.029*** (0.399)	18.541*** (1.723)	20.084*** (1.667)
Observations	2551	1915	2551	1609	1609
R-squared	0.162	0.053	0.151	0.078	0.069

Note: Entries are OLS regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is individual-level partisan affective polarization, measured as the dispersion of feeling thermometer ratings toward supporters of PP, PSOE, Vox, Sumar, and pro-secession regional parties (see Equation 1). Identity coherence is measured using two alternative indices: a 12-item index and a more restrictive 5-item index capturing alignment between respondents' issue positions, social identities, and self-declared ideological orientation. Models progressively include ideological self-placement, an interaction between ideology and coherence, and sociodemographic controls (gender, age, education, income, and type of habitat). *** p < .01, ** p < .05, * p < .10.

Across all model specifications, identity coherence is strongly and positively associated with partisan affective polarization. Model (1) shows that the broader coherence index (12-item) is a powerful predictor of affective polarization: individuals whose attitudes and identities are more consistently aligned with their ideological self-placement exhibit substantially greater dispersion in their affective evaluations of political parties. This association remains statistically significant and substantively large when ideological self-

placement is included (Model 2), indicating that coherence captures more than simply being left- or right-wing.

Model (2) further tests whether the relationship between coherence and affective polarization differs across ideological blocs by including an interaction between coherence and left-wing self-identification. The interaction term is not statistically significant, suggesting that the association between coherence and affective polarization is similar among left- and right-leaning respondents. In other words, ideological sorting appears to intensify partisan affective polarization symmetrically across the ideological spectrum rather than being concentrated on one side.

Models (3) and (4) replicate the analysis using the more restrictive five-item coherence index. The results closely mirror those obtained with the broader index: higher coherence is again associated with significantly higher levels of partisan affective polarization. Although the magnitude of the coefficient is somewhat smaller, the relationship remains robust, indicating that even a narrow set of sharply divisive issues is sufficient to generate meaningful affective differentiation between parties at the individual level.

Finally, Model (5) introduces a full set of sociodemographic controls, including gender, age, education, income, and type of habitat. The coefficient for coherence remains positive and statistically significant, while most sociodemographic variables show weak or inconsistent associations with affective polarization. Age is the only control that exhibits a stable positive relationship, with older respondents expressing slightly higher levels of partisan affective polarization. The persistence of the coherence effect in these models suggests that ideological alignment across issues and identities is a central correlate of affective polarization, over and above standard demographic factors.

The results indicate that partisan affective polarization is not merely a function of ideological position or social background, but is strongly linked to the internal consistency of individuals' political and social identities. Citizens whose attitudes, values, and group attachments are more tightly aligned along ideological lines exhibit markedly greater affective differentiation between political parties. This finding complements the descriptive evidence presented earlier by showing that the structured affective blocs observed at the aggregate level are mirrored in individual-level patterns of ideological sorting.

Discussion

This study analyses the relative status of partisan identity within a broader landscape of social identities in a fragmented multiparty system and the relationship between cross-domain identity alignment and partisan affective polarization. The analysis yields three main findings.

First, we document clear evidence of the primacy of partisan identity in Spain. Affective distance between political ingroups and outgroups exceeds that observed for any other social or cultural cleavage included in the survey. Even when compared against a wide range of salient non-political identities—spanning religion, migration, gender norms, environmental attitudes, education, region, and lifestyle—partisan divisions generate the most extreme affective responses. Co-partisans are evaluated very warmly, while disliked parties elicit markedly cold affect. Non-political identities also structure social evaluations in systematic ways, particularly those linked to cultural and value-based conflicts such as religion, environmentalism, and gender roles, but the magnitude of these affective divides remains substantially smaller. These patterns point to a clear hierarchy of affective divisions in contemporary Spain, with politics occupying a dominant position.

Second, affective evaluations across political and non-political groups are not independent but instead exhibit a coherent underlying structure. The correlation and clustering analyses reveal that feelings toward parties, issue-based groups, and social identities align in patterned ways that closely mirror broader ideological and cultural cleavages. Progressive parties cluster with minorities, feminists, environmentalists, and secular identities, while conservative parties cluster with traditionalist, religious, and climate-sceptical groups. These alignments indicate that partisan affect is embedded within a wider system of social evaluation rather than operating in isolation. Political conflict, in this sense, is intertwined with how citizens perceive and evaluate a broad range of social groups.

Third, the strength of this cross-domain alignment—captured by individual-level identity coherence—is strongly associated with partisan affective polarization. Individuals whose issue positions, social identities, and values are more consistently sorted along ideological lines exhibit substantially higher levels of affective differentiation between political parties. This relationship holds across alternative measures of coherence, persists after

controlling for ideology and sociodemographic characteristics, and does not differ meaningfully between left- and right-wing respondents. These results suggest that social sorting is not merely a contextual feature of party systems but a key individual-level correlate of partisan affective polarization.

These findings speak directly to the three limitations identified in the existing literature. First, by focusing on Spain, we demonstrate that the primacy of partyism is not confined to two-party systems such as the United States. Despite high party fragmentation and multiple, cross-cutting political conflicts, partisan identity in Spain remains the most powerful basis of affective differentiation. This extends prior comparative work by showing that multiparty competition reshapes the configuration of partisan affect without displacing its centrality.

Second, by comparing partisan affect to evaluations across an unusually broad set of social identities, we move beyond the narrow identity contrasts that dominate much of the literature. The results show that party identity remains dominant even when situated within a much wider social identity landscape than is typical in prior research. While cultural and value-based identities do generate meaningful affective divides, they do not rival the intensity of partisan affect, underscoring the distinctive emotional weight of political attachments.

Third, by explicitly examining the relationships between affective evaluations across identity domains, we shed light on the social embedding of partisan affect. Rather than treating affective polarization as a domain-specific phenomenon confined to parties or ideologies, our findings highlight the role of coherent identity alignment in structuring affective responses more broadly. The strong association between identity coherence and partisan affective polarization suggests that partisan animus is reinforced when political conflict becomes integrated with wider patterns of social evaluation.

More broadly, these findings have implications for theories of affective polarization in contemporary democracies. They suggest that partisan conflict may serve as an organizing axis that amplifies and subsumes other social divides, even in contexts characterized by multiparty competition and cross-cutting cleavages. At the same time, the fact that non-political identities generate weaker affective distances cautions against interpreting polarization as a generalized breakdown of social tolerance. Instead, affective polarization appears highly structured, concentrated around politics, and closely linked to the ideological sorting of social identities.

Future research could build on these insights in several ways. Longitudinal data would be needed to assess the causal direction between identity coherence and affective polarization, and to examine whether increasing ideological sorting precedes or follows rising partisan animus. Comparative studies using similarly broad batteries of social groups could further clarify how institutional contexts condition the relationship between party systems, social sorting, and affective polarization. Together, such efforts would help refine our understanding of when and why partisan identity comes to dominate citizens' social worlds.

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