

Party polarization and spatial voting

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Abstract

In this article, we examine which political issues are considered as the most important ones by the Spanish electorate when they cast their vote. Although there are a broad variety of potential relevant political issues, Spanish voters are forced to summarize them in just one vote. Thus, they need to prioritize some issues over others. The aim of this article is precisely to study which issues end up to be more important when the Spanish electorate decide their vote and why some issues become more influential than others. Our hypothesis is that voters weight more those issues in which parties are more polarized. On the one hand, alternatives are clearer to voters in these cases, as parties are more easily distinguished from each other. On the other hand, when parties do not differ much in some issue, it is somehow deactivated from the voter's range of choice. This hypothesis is tested at the individual and at the aggregate level. We combine survey data with data from the Comparative Party Manifesto project. We compare results in the Basque Country, Catalonia and the rest of Spain.

Introduction

When voting, citizens can only cast one vote to express their preferences over a great variety of political issues. As a consequence, voters are inevitably forced to prioritize some issues over others. This poses the question about how voters make up their mind when they face the decision to rank the importance of all relevant political issues. Surely, this may largely depend on the tastes of each individual, but there may also be some important contextual factors that may account for it. The aim of this paper is precisely to study how the Spanish electorate weights the different political issues when they decide their vote. The aim is twofold: on the one side, we study which political issues end up to be the most important ones for the Spanish electorate and, on the other, we examine whether issue importance on voting behavior is partly conditioned by how political parties are polarized over this issue. In sum, using the spatial modeling perspective, this article focuses on one key contextual factor that may account for the relative importance of policies on vote choice: party system polarization.

The question about issue importance and party polarization has recently gained the attention of academics, and it has been explored in the recent scholarly literature on voting behavior and spatial models (Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Ensley 2007; Lachat 2008; de Vries 2010). Yet, we address it in a novel way: while most authors have focused on the role of ideological positions on ideological vote, we address other issue dimensions -not ideology, which tends to summarize positions on a range of issues. We hypothesize on the determinants of the variation in the weight of each of these dimensions on the voting decision. We test the hypotheses with data from a recent survey in Spain (CIS 2799), which –due to the inclusion of measures of spatial utility for several issue positions- provides us with a lot of leverage to test them.¹

We consider that voters should give more weight to issues the greater the differences between parties on these issues (Alvarez and Nagler 2004:47). The idea underlying this hypothesis is that voters are, above all, interested in policy outcomes or results. The more clear-cut are the different platforms made by parties, the better they can compute their relative benefits of the vote

¹ Empirically, it is difficult to find political issues that are potentially equally relevant in different contexts and that are measured in a comparable way (Lachat 2008: 690).

connected to the outcomes of policies. Indeed, in an “issue voting” model (Meier and Campbell 1979),² the bigger the differences, the more we should expect this issue to be important for electoral choice, precisely because alternatives on this issue are clearer.

In short, our article puts emphasis on the role of context —and, in particular, of party polarization— on issue voting in Spain. We study it in two different ways: on the one hand, from an individual-level perspective, we analyze how the subjective perception of context (i.e. distances between political parties) affects voting behavior. Even if there are distances between parties, if the electorate does not perceive them, these will be meaningless. Thus, looking at how individuals perceive party positions is relevant in order to understand how individuals vote. We believe that this approach constitutes an added value of our work, vis-à-vis other works that focus on party polarization but that do not consider the subjective values of party positions (Lachat 2008).³ On the other hand, from an aggregate level perspective, we analyze the effect of context with both subjective and objective measures of party distances. The former is measured using the average survey respondents’ perceived distances between the main parties and the latter is using data from the Comparative Party Manifesto project (Volkens et al. 2010) (hereafter, also CPM) and will provide us with unbiased measures of these distances, a real snapshot of the context (i.e. not mediated through the lens of the electorate).

Theoretical Framework

The idea that party system polarization is an important factor in issue voting is not new; it was already present in the early investigations of the Michigan School scholars in the 1960s (Butler and Stokes 1969, Campbell *et al.* 1960). In particular, Campbell and his colleagues suggested three necessary conditions for issues to become influential in people’s vote choice: first, voters must be aware of the existence of the issue and must have an opinion about it; second, the issue

² In an issue vote model, we assume rational and sophisticated voters, who are free from constraints driven from their position on the socioeconomic scale or their party identification, and who are able to compare their political preferences with party positions (Downs 1957; Dalton 2006). Meier and Campbell argue that six conditions must be met for issue voting to exist, the first of them being “candidates must take different positions on the issues of the day” (1979: 21).

³ As we will explain, this can carry methodological problems of endogeneity (i.e. individuals perceiving greater differences in those dimensions to which they give more weight), but —above all— we believe that looking at what individuals perceive about party positions, as compared to what is perceived by experts or what is stated in electoral programs, is important in itself.

must be sufficiently salient among the electorate; and, third, voters must be able to perceive differences between parties or candidates. Thus, according to the Michigan School, the importance of issue voting depends on how different candidates or parties' policy alternatives are perceived by the electorate.⁴

While most research since then has been focused on studying the first and second condition,⁵ the importance of the third condition has only started to be seriously studied in recent times. Recent investigations have corroborated the relevance of party polarization for policy voting. For instance, in a comparative study of five European countries (Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden), Knutsen and Kumlin (2005), provided with some evidence that "perceived party polarisation between major left-side and right-side parties can account for a significant amount of the domestic and transnational variation of values" (p.159).⁶ They argued, for example, that the smaller impact of ideology in the UK compared to other European countries is partly explained by the diminishing ideological differences between the Labour Party and the Conservative Party. The British case has been more deeply studied by Green and Hobolt (2008), who also convincingly showed that the electoral impact of ideology (and, more specifically, ideological closeness) had been decreasing in UK during the last 20 years in parallel with the reduction of the ideological polarization between British political parties.

Another major recent contribution in the field is Lachat's (2008) analysis of the 1999 European elections in 15 countries, including Spain. The author also finds that the level of polarization of the party system matters for explaining ideological voting but that such effect is conditioned by party identification and political expertise (694). He also finds that "the gap between political novices and political experts grows larger as the polarization of the party system increases" (695).

⁴ These authors considered that most of these conditions were generally not met: most American voters did not fulfil all these three conditions and, thus, they considered issue voting was unlikely to take place. They were particularly critical with the fulfilment of the first condition. Their investigations showed that most Americans did not cognitively understand political issues: they failed to show a clear and meaningful understanding of most issues. (i.e. Converse 1969)

⁵ See for instance, Converse (1964, 1970), Tilley and Wlezien (2008) RePass (1971), Krosnick (1990), Franklin and Wlezien (1997), Fournier et al (2003)

⁶ See also Van der Eijk et al. (2005)

Similar results have been found outside Europe. For the American case, authors such as Wright and Berkman (1986) and Ensley (2007) also found that elections with more polarized candidates generate more ideological voters and results. Ensley (using data on elections to US Senate from 1988 to 1992) finds that the importance of candidates' ideological divergence is especially intense among the most educated voters, as well as among more extreme voters as compared to more moderate ones. He argues that this is the case because policy positions and ideological orientations are diagnostic information, used when candidates are motivated and able.

Yet, why should party system polarization be important for voters? The most obvious explanation is that divergent party platforms increase voters' perception of what is at stake in the elections. Indeed, party polarization should be a major concern among those voters who care about the policy implications of their electoral choices. Those implications are marginal when parties adopt similar policy positions: policies outcomes will not vary much regardless of who wins the election. Hence in those settings, policy attitudes shall become less relevant in citizens' vote choices. There are also some more psychological or cognitive factors to account for the importance of party system polarization. High levels of party policy dispersion help citizens vote on the basis of policies. In particular, contexts where parties present clear, coherent and differentiated policy packages foster voters' awareness of the existing policy alternatives and allow voters to also adopt clear and coherent positions (Knutsen and Kumlin 2005). Also, party polarization is an informational cue (Zaller 1992): it helps voters to relate their preferences to parties' messages and the policy positions (Lachat 2008).

The literature has studied the importance of party system polarization from different approaches. Most of them use the left-right ideological scale. A remarkable exception is DeVries (2010) who studies the level of polarization on the support for European integration in different EU-member states. Most investigations take countries or elections as their unit of analysis when measuring party polarization and try to account for either cross-country variations or temporal variations within a country. This literature analyzes the effect of polarization by combining individual and aggregate-level information. When sufficient level-two units are available, researchers use multilevel, hierarchical models (e.g. Ensley 2007). A frequent alternative strategy for investigations with small aggregate-level units is to use a two-step methodology: using

individual surveys, they first calculate the effect of issues or policies (normally ideology) on vote choice for each country or election. Once they have an estimator (it may be the coefficient or the R-squared), they correlate it with the aggregate measure of party system polarization (e.g. Lachat 2008, Knutsen and Kumlin 2005).

The above methodological strategies are reasonable since party system polarization has a contextual nature. However, these procedures overlook the possibility that individuals may differ in how they perceive such context. And, surely, voters' decisions are more conditioned by subjective perceptions than by objective conditions. Hence, an alternative strategy is to study it from an individual perspective by considering perceptions of each individual instead of an aggregate measure of party polarization. As we explain later, in this article, we contribute to fill this gap by studying the effect of polarization using both aggregate measures and individual perceptions.

On the aggregate level, the standard procedure is to measure party polarization by using the average of individuals' perceived party locations. Yet, some authors such as Lachat (2008) or DeVries (2010) warn against the potential risk of spurious relationship when using subjective measures of party polarization.⁷ Indeed, the influence of polarization on policy voting may simply reflect the fact that those voters more interested in a policy tend to have more incentives to gather information about this policy and, thus, hold more accurate perceptions of party positions. This may imply that both vote choice and polarization is dependent on a third factor: individuals' interest on this issue. Accordingly, these authors rely on objective measures of party polarization by either using expert surveys or party manifestos' content analysis.⁸

⁷ Lachat signals that the different sources of bias in the link between polarization and ideological voting are: 1) voters' perception of party polarization; 2) role of party identification: policy voting may be a product of a rationalization process since voters' party attachments may affect their attitudes and perceptions; 3) specification of the model of voting choice. Most studies take the proximity model of the vote (and ignore the directional models). Yet, Lachat argues that it is possible that polarization may lead voters to switch from proximity to directional models. Thus, in order to avoid inaccurate conclusions, it is recommendable to study both directional and proximity models (Lachat 2008: 689).

⁸ For instance, Lachat (2008) and DeVries (2010) measure polarization relying on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey Series (CHESS). The survey is based in experts' evaluations of political parties positioning on different issues in Europe.

In sum, the strategy used to measure party polarization is not innocuous. A clear example of this is van der Eijk et al. (2005), who found important differences depending on the measure of left-right polarization being used. When this was based on voters' perceptions, they found a clear relationship between polarization and issue voting. Yet, they failed to find any systematic correlation when objective measures were used (i.e. based on party manifestos). But contrary to Lachat and DeVries perspective, these researchers defended the validity of subjective measures by arguing that: "When investigating the association between voters' behaviour and ideological orientations, however, it seems plausible that polarization as perceived by voters is more consequential than polarization as derived from information that is not directly available to most voters" (van der Eijk et al. 2005:184). In these pages we primarily rely on subjective measures of party locations, although we also use objective measures in order to make our results more robust to potential confounds explaining both perceived polarization and party choice.

Empirics

We use data in the CIS 2799 survey (April 2009), which is representative of the population of Spain.⁹ This survey was seminal in its inclusion of 10-point scale questions relative to six policy dimensions (e.g. crime, ecology, taxes, immigration, religion, nationalism), which allow measuring spatial utility on these issues. This permits us to test the hypothesis of the relative importance of each issue conditional on the distance between political parties. We test the hypotheses from two different perspectives: 1) **Individual**: we test the relative weight of each of the issues on individual vote conditional on perceived distances of parties.¹⁰ 2) **Aggregated**, at the level of political parties: for this purpose, we use the average values of the perceived party positions in the survey, on the one hand, and data from CPM, on the other.¹¹ Also, for this analysis, we use data from the two regions that were over-weighted in the CIS sample (Catalonia, Basque Country), which we treat as independent units. We do this in order to multiply the number of cases in the aggregate analyses (going from 6 to 18).

⁹ The sample has a total of 3,255 cases. It overrepresented two territories: the Basque Country and Catalonia, with 798 and 902 cases respectively. The analyses for the whole sample take this into account (i.e. using weights).

¹⁰ At the individual level, we focus on the perceived distance of the two main parties in the Spanish party system, namely Partido Popular (PP) and Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE).

¹¹ As we will explain, we use as proxies different measures of the CPM that, while not matching the subjective measures in the survey (i.e. they are not displayed in a 0-10 scale), are quite useful in order to obtain "objective" indicators of the relative distance of political parties.

In the individual-level analyses, we use a ‘stacked’ data matrix, in which “each respondent is represented as many times as the number of parties for which he or she indicated a probability to vote” (Lachat 2008:690). Our dependent variable does not follow the conventional procedure of treating party support as a categorical variable using vote recall or intention. Instead of focusing in actual choices, we rely on continuous-like variables that measure propensities to support each party. In fact, it has been argued that this latter measure better captures the reasoning behind spatial modeling (van der Burg et al. 2007).¹² We regress the propensity to vote a political party on spatial utilities (both directional and proximity), perceived distances between parties (i.e. PP and PSOE), as well as on a set of control variables. We run a set of general models, and a set of interactive models, which estimate interactive coefficients of spatial utility on an issue*party polarization on a given issue. This interactive coefficient allows us to capture the extent to which a policy dimension matters in explaining vote as polarization in this dimension increases.

In the aggregate analyses, we focus on the coefficients obtained for each of the dimensions in the individual level analysis (in the general model with no interactions), and we correlate them to different measures of party system polarization (objective, from CPM, and subjective, from the average values in the sample), as well as to party system compactness –which is a slightly refined measure of party system polarization (see below). Thus, the dependent variable in the aggregate analyses consists of the coefficients obtained in a set of conditional linear regressions of spatial distances on “electoral utilities”, run at the individual level.

In the individual level regressions, we focus on the propensity to vote the two main parties in Spain, PP and PSOE, which represent 75% of the vote in the sample. We operationalize the main independent variables in these regression models with the 11-point scale questions where individuals locate themselves, and thus display spatial utilities.¹³ At the individual level we estimate polarization with absolute perceived distance between PP and PSOE, because this is

¹² This measure is taken from a survey question that asks individuals the probability by which they are likely to *ever* vote for a political party and goes from 0 to 10. This question is asked for each of the main parties in competition: 0 stands for “I would surely never vote it”, and 10 stands for “I would surely always vote it”.

¹³ In the main analyses, we do not use the projection effect correction model (Merrill and Groffman 1999) in order to minimize the bias that can be given by the fact that people project their own positions on party positions –i.e. approaching parties to their own positions. In a set of robustness checks, we do include this projection effect, and the results are consistent.

more intuitive than using a measure of party system polarization.¹⁴ We compute spatial utilities following two different spatial models: 1) proximity model (Downs 1957), in which the utility increases as distance between individual i and party j decreases;¹⁵ 2) directional model (Rabinowitz and MacDonald 1989), in which utility increases as distance between individual i and party j increases; the utility is positive if they are both at the same side of the *status quo*, sq , and negative if they are in different sides regarding the *status quo*.¹⁶

We include a set of control variables in the individual level regression models: several measures of political sophistication, following both Ensley (2007) and Lachat (2008), in order to control for the fact that the perception of party polarization can be correlated with this, and that the impact of party polarization on vote can vary along different levels of political information or sophistication. Instead of using an index of political sophistication, as these authors do, we include separately Level of education (in a 6-point scale measuring the highest level of education achieved by the respondent), Political Information (an 3-point index built from two questions testing for objective political information of individuals), and TV (a 4-point measure of how often the interviewee follows political information on TV). We also include usual controls in voting models such as age (in years) and gender (a dummy variable with value 0 for men and 1 for women). We neither include party proximity or ideological position for this would trump all the analyses insofar as these indicators capture positions on issues.

In the aggregate analyses, we use two different measures of party system polarization. First, we use measures based on subjective perceptions of party locations in each dimension: (i) The average absolute perceived distances between PP and PSOE; and (ii) party system compactness following Alvarez and Nagler (2004). Compactness measures the degree of dispersion of party positions in relation to the degree of dispersion of voters; the greater the compactness, the lesser the dispersion of an issue.¹⁷

¹⁴ Yet, results do not change with other discrete measures of polarization which take into account other parties and the relative size of all parties in the system (Colomer, 2009).

¹⁵ In the proximity model, $U(ij) = -(v_i - v_j)^2$

¹⁶ In the directional model, $U(ij) = (v_i - sq) * (v_j - sq)$. We take the median value of the scale as the sq (status quo)

¹⁷ Alvarez and Nagler argue that highly compact issues ought to not be strong predictors of voter decision-making (2004: 60), and this is consistent with our framework given that greater compactness implies lesser polarization. Thus, the inclusion of this measure should allow us to test the robustness of the results.

Secondly, we also measure polarization using objective information from the Comparative Party Manifesto. The CPM gives values from 0 to 100 on all items, depending on how much these issues are extant in the party manifestos. Some of the proxies of the CPM are more suitable than others, but we find them overall helpful at providing with a objective measure of distances.¹⁸ We compute an index of dispersion between the main parties (weighted standard deviation) in each of the regions,¹⁹ for each of the issues; in other words we use a simple measure of party system polarization (Colomer 2009).

Results

Individual Level Analyses

In Figure 1, we can see the sample average values of the perceived positions of the two main parties in the Spanish political system (PP and PSOE)²⁰. We can observe that there are significant differences in the distances between the two main parties on each of these dimensions. In some of them (i.e. Taxes, Crime) the differences are not as important as in other issues (i.e. Religion, Immigration or Nationalism). Thus, the CIS survey indicates that the Spanish electorate does not perceive many differences between the two main Spanish parties on the fiscal dimension. This may seem a counterintuitive finding since this dimension is usually considered one of the most controversial ones in most democracies. Yet, this finding is

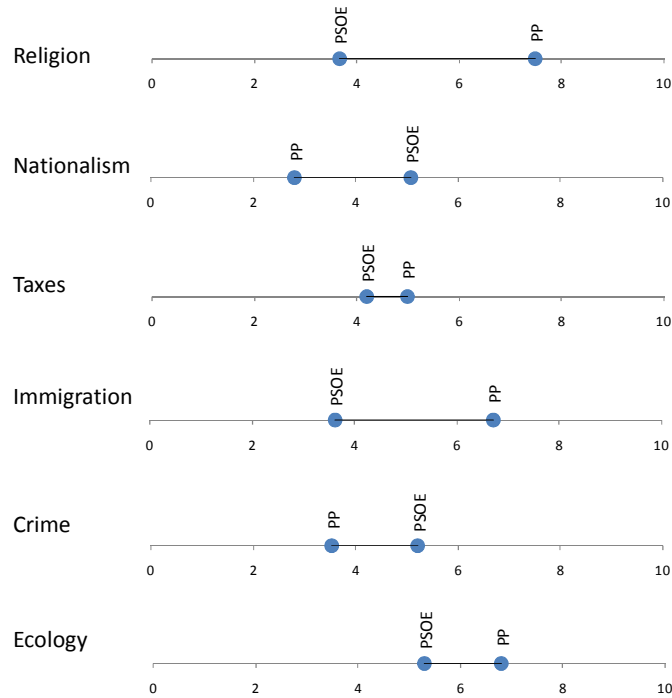
¹⁸ The CMP items used for each dimension are the following: Nationalism: Per301-*Decentralisation*. Support for federalism or devolution; more regional autonomy for policy or economy; support for keeping up local and regional customs and symbols; favorable mentions of special consideration for local areas; deference to local expertise; favorable mentions of the territorial subsidiary principle. Ecology: Per501-*Environmental Protection*. Preservation of countryside, forests, etc.; general preservation of natural resources against selfish interests; proper use of national parks; soil banks, etc.; environmental improvement. Taxes: Per504-*Welfare State Expansion*. Favorable mentions of need to introduce, maintain or expand any social service or social security scheme; support for social services such as health service or social housing. Note: This category excludes education. Religion: Per603-*Traditional Morality: Positive*. Favorable mentions of traditional moral values; prohibition, censorship and suppression of immorality and unseemly behavior; maintenance and stability of family; religion. Crime: Per605-*Law and Order*. Enforcement of all laws; actions against crime; support and resources for police; tougher attitudes in courts; importance of internal security. Immigration: Per607-*Multiculturalism: Positive*. Cultural diversity, communalism, cultural plurality and polarization; preservation of autonomy of religious, linguistic heritages within the country including special educational provisions.

¹⁹ The parties included are: PP, PSOE and IU in Spain, PP, PSOE and PNV in Basque Country and PP, PSOE, CiU and ERC in Catalonia.

²⁰ The figures show the average perceived differences between the two main parties using the whole sample (including Catalonia and Basque Country).

analogous with the fact that in Spain both left and right-wing voters have similar preferences on public spending and taxation (Leon and Orriols 2011). Hence, both voters and the two main parties do not differ in this policy dimension.

Figure 1. Perceived differences between PP and PSOE in different policy dimensions



Following our framework, we would expect spatial regression coefficients to be larger for the issues in which distances between parties are greater (i.e. religion, immigration and nationalism). In Table 1, we display the main results of the proximity models (the full models are included in Table A1 of the Appendix). This table depicts the values of the coefficients for each of the issues of a general model, on the one hand, and the coefficients of interactive models (both the main and the interaction effects), on the other. In order to be able to compare the relative weight of each issue on vote choice, we have standardized all the issue distance variables. This allows us to

obtain standardized coefficients, for each of the issues (in this way, the relative size of the coefficient will not be affected by the variation of the variable within the sample).²¹

In table 1 we can observe that, except for Crime, all coefficients in the general model are significant; these coefficients are substantially greater for Nationalism, Immigration and Religion, as compared to Taxes, Crime and Ecology. Those three were the issues in which the main parties displayed greater distances, so this is consistent with our hypotheses. With regard to the interactive models, most of them are also coherent with our hypotheses: the coefficients of the main effects are negative and only significant for Nationalism, Religion and Ecology; for the remaining variables, they are undistinguishable from 0.²² The coefficients of the interaction terms are significant for Nationalism, Immigration, and Religion, –those issues where groups display the greater distances-, Taxes and Crime (although the latter is only significant at the 10% level). Ecology does not show a significant coefficient but it takes the expected sign. These interactive coefficients, which take negative signs, indicate that the weight of these issues increases as the distance between PP and PSOE are perceived to increase.²³

²¹ We have also run the regressions with non-standardized variables, and the results (available upon request) are consistent with the ones presented here.

²² In the analyses with the non-standardized variables, none of the issue proximity main effects is distinguishable from 0. This means that when voters perceive that all candidates have the same ideological position, policies or issues are irrelevant for the vote. This is coherent with a rationalist framework: if there are no differences in positions, whoever wins will not imply differences regarding policy outcomes.

²³ One critique that can be made to individual level analyses is that the coefficients for distances between parties are significant for the only reason that when there are no distances between parties (that is, when voters perceive no distances between parties), there is no effect of distance whatsoever. Thus, an increase in distance necessarily brings an increase in relevance of the issue dimension. Yet, we have taken out all the cases of individuals with 0 distances in the issues and we observe that conclusions do not substantially change in the unstandardized variable models. In the standardized variable models, only the interactions of Taxes and Crime become non-significant. An alternative strategy to avoid this potential problem without reducing the available number of observations is to recode the variable “perceived differences between parties” into broader categories (i.e. those who perceive a small or no differences in party positions compared to those who perceive big differences). The conclusions of these new models are consistent with the ones presented here. All these models are available upon request.

Table 1. The effect of policies (proximity models)

	General	Interactive models	
	Model	Ppl effect	interaction
Nationalism	-0.654** (0.067)	-0.489** (0.097)	-0.068** (0.021)
Immigration	-0.511** (0.063)	-0.159 (0.101)	-0.092** (0.019)
Religion	-0.618** (0.060)	-0.362** (0.118)	-0.072** (0.019)
Taxes	-0.166** (0.056)	-0.116 (0.088)	-0.035* (0.018)
Crime	-0.095 (0.065)	-0.041 (0.090)	-0.034' (0.020)
Ecology	-0.263** (0.061)	-0.227** (0.084)	-0.033 (0.022)

OLS standardized estimates. Standard errors in parenthesis *significant at $p < 0.05$ **significant at $p < 0.001$
Note: The table only shows the relevant coefficients. See Table A1 of the appendix for the remaining coefficients of the model.

Table 2 depicts the coefficients of directional voting models –again, with standardized variables (the full models are included in Table A2 of the Appendix). This table displays less clear results, but they generally consistent with those in Table 1. The coefficients of the general model are all significant, and they are again substantially greater for those dimensions in which parties display greater subjective distances, namely Religion, Nationalism and Immigration. In the interactive models, the main effects are statistically significant in all dimensions—thus, there is an effect of these dimensions on vote even when distances between main parties are not perceived. Yet, the interaction terms are statistically significant, implying that these effects grow as distances increase, for Religion (at the 99% level), Immigration (at the 95% level), and Ecology (at the 90% level). The results of our directional models are thus not as neat as the proximity ones. Yet, when the interactions are significant they are consistent with the results of our proximity models. This seems to rule out Lachat’s suggestion that polarization may lead individuals to switch their voting decision rule from directional to proximity (2008); if this were correct, we should have

observed that the effect of polarization in directional models were the opposite than its effect on proximity ones. Our results indicate that polarization increase the importance of the dimension in both proximity and directional models.

Table 2. The effect of policies (directional models)

	General	Interactive models	
	Model	Ppl effect	interaction
Nationalism	0.684** (0.060)	0.66** (0.023)	0.007 (0.019)
Immigration	0.480** (0.059)	0.201* (0.025)	0.06** (0.019)
Religion	0.770** (0.064)	0.552** (0.022)	0.04* (0.020)
Taxes	0.232** (0.055)	0.197** (0.026)	0.007 (0.018)
Crime	0.230** (0.059)	0.215** (0.026)	0.002 (0.019)
Ecology	0.344** (0.060)	0.244** (0.028)	0.037' (0.021)

OLS standardized estimates. Standard errors in parenthesis

*significant at $p < 0.05$ **significant at $p < 0.001$

Note: The table only shows the relevant coefficients. See Table A2 of the appendix for the remaining coefficients of the models

The findings in table 1 and 2 indicate that the Spanish electorate gives more weight to the religious, nationalist and immigration issues over taxes, crime and ecology. This is partly explained by the fact that the two main parties (PP and PSOE) are more polarized on the former issues than the latter. Some of the findings in this section are not fully in the line of the Spanish literature. This is particularly the case of the religious dimension. The cumulative evidence in the Spanish literature on voting behavior shows that the influence of religiosity on vote choice is rather modest when it is measured using individuals' religious practice (i.e. church attendance) (Montero 1993, Montero and Calvo 2000). However, our results indicate that when we measure

religiosity with individuals' preferences about the church and state relations it turns out to be the most (or one of the most) important issues.

In summary, the results of the individual-level analyses are generally supportive of our hypotheses: most of them indicate that the weight of the issue dimensions boosts as individuals perceive increased differences between the main parties, PP and PSOE.²⁴ These results confirm that it is necessary to take into consideration the polarization of parties (and, particularly, perceived polarization), when studying the importance of the different dimensions on individual voting decisions.

Aggregate Analyses

In this section, we proceed at taking the coefficients obtained in the individual-level regressions and correlate them with subjective and objective measures of party distances. As said, we use sub-national areas of Spain —the Basque Country, Catalonia and Spain (without Basque Country and Catalonia)- as units of analysis, so that we can have 18 cases in this aggregate analysis.²⁵

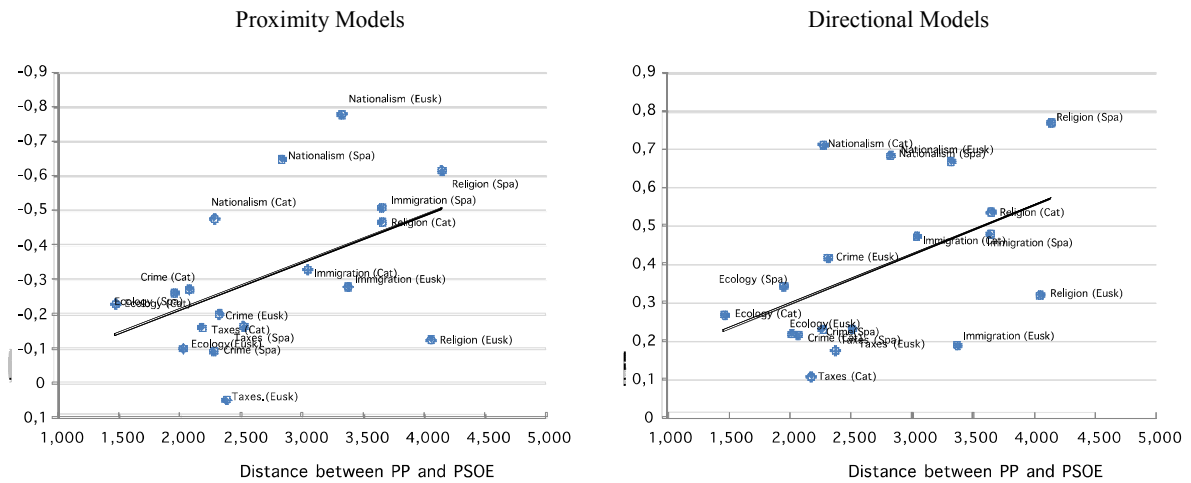
In figure 3 we can see a scatter plot with the average perceived distances between PP and PSOE, for each of the regions and issues, on the one hand, and the individual-level coefficients (both for the proximity and directional models), on the other.²⁶

²⁴ In fact, in the proximity model with non-standardized coefficients, at the extreme, when no differences are perceived, no dimension is relevant; these only start having an impact on the vote when voters perceive that PP and PSOE have different positions.²⁵ The number of observations is still very limited, so the inferences are here less robust than in the individual level analyses above.

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²⁶ In these analyses, we have kept the models in Tables A1 and A2, thus only with PP and PSOE. Yet, we have run the individual-level regressions for each of the regions separately.

Figure 3. Party polarization (subjective measures) and issue importance



As expected, we observe a strong and positive linear relationship between the subjective distances between parties and the spatial regression coefficients, both for the proximity and the directional models. At the top right end we find polarized issues such as Nationalism in the Basque Country, Religion (in Spain); at the lower left end we find less polarized issues such as Ecology (in Basque Country), Taxes (in Catalonia) or Ecology (in Catalonia). Importantly, the correlation between subjective distances and the regression coefficients is significant at the 95% level, both for the directional and the proximity models.²⁷

In figure 4, we display the correlation between the individual-level regression coefficients (again, for both the proximity and directional models) and compactness of the party system on these dimensions.²⁸

²⁷ We test this by running a linear regression of the coefficients on the subjective distances, with all these 18 cases.

²⁸ Because we are considering party-system compactness, in the individual regressions here we include not only PP and PSOE, but also smaller (but relevant) parties in each of the sub-systems considered: IU in Spain; CiU and ERC in Catalonia; PNV in the Basque Country.

Figure 4. Compactness and issue importance

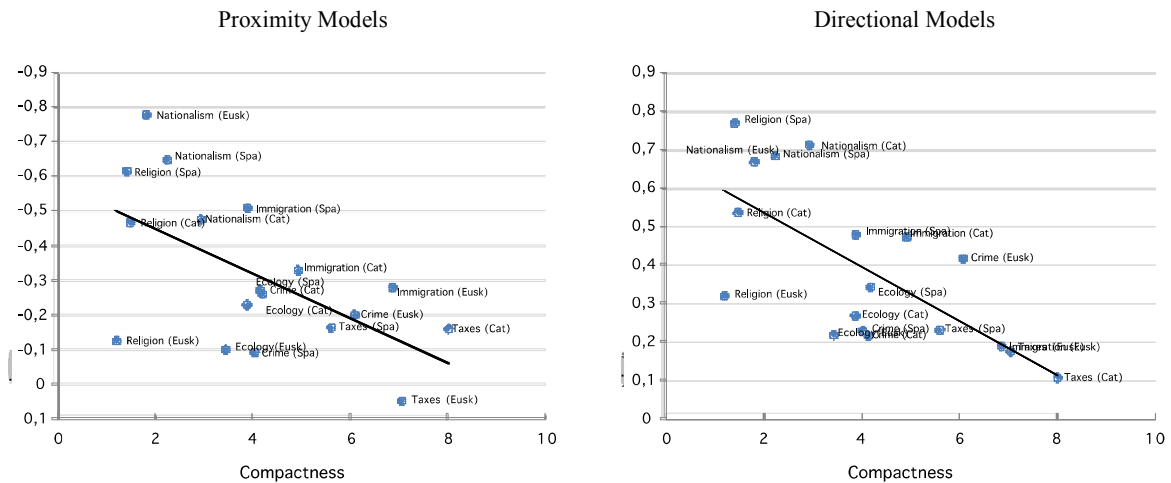
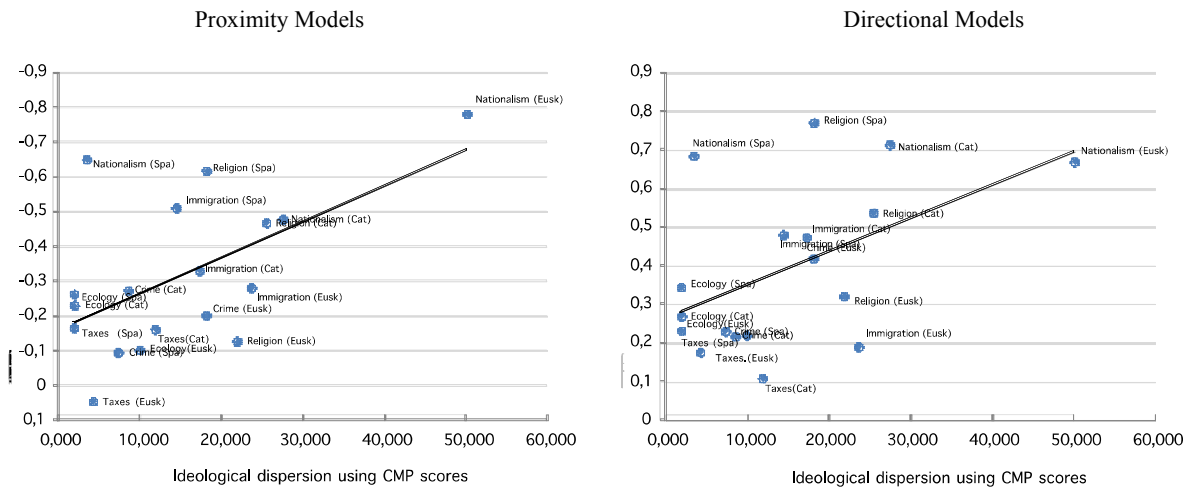


Figure 4 shows a negative relationship between compactness and the regression coefficient corresponding to the issues, also following our predictions: the greater the compactness of the party system on a dimension (and thus the lesser the polarization) the smaller the effect of the dimension on vote. These correlations —both for proximity and directional models— are statistically significant at the 99% level.

Finally, in Figure 5, we look again at party polarization in each of the issues, but in this case we use objective measures of distances between the main political parties in a territory, computed with the CPM scores. Specifically, we calculate the dispersion in the CPM scores, for the main parties in a region, obtaining an index of dispersion, or what can also be considered a measure of party system polarization (Colomer 2009).²⁹

²⁹ We have calculated these dispersion indexes weighting by the electoral importance of the party (i.e. using their electoral share in 2008 General Elections), which take different values in each of the regions. In Spain, we calculate them for PSOE, PP and IU; in the Basque Country, for PP, PSOE, and PNV; in Catalonia, for PP, PSOE, CiU, and ERC. As we did in Figure 4, we take regression coefficients from individual level analyses using all parties that are important in the region under consideration (i.e., not only PP and PSOE).

Figure 5. Party polarization (objective measures) and issue importance



When we look at party system polarization (Figure 5) with the CMP measures described above, we observe, again, a linear and strong relationship between polarization and issue salience in explaining vote. In this case, the results are particularly remarkable as the aggregate measures come from an objective source, and thus cannot possibly suffer from the systematic distortion of the subjective level of agreement between voters and parties as a result of projection bias. The correlation between the coefficients and distances is again significant at the 95% level, for both models.

In summary, the aggregate analyses confirm that those dimensions/issues in which political parties are more polarized (or there is lower compactness) have a greater influence on voting propensities of individuals. These results are particularly remarkable if looking at objective measures of party distances, which are robust to the results with subjective measures.

Conclusions

In this article, we have pursued two main objectives. On the one hand, we investigated which issues are more important for the Spanish electorate when they decide their vote. On the other, we have examined the impact of party polarization on issue voting. Regarding our first aim we

have found that, according to both proximity and directional models, Spanish voters give more weight to religion, nationalism and immigration than taxes, crime and ecology. Crime turns out to be irrelevant for voters in the proximity models. There are some differences in Catalonia and Basque Country worthy to point out. For instance, these two regions give less weight to immigration than the remaining Spanish regions. Similarly, Basque Country also differs from the rest of Spain in the importance of religious dimension: the Basque electorate does not generally consider it a prominent issue. The nationalist dimension is particularly salient in the Basque Country, but unexpectedly this dimension is less relevant in Catalonia than the rest of Spain.

The second aim of the paper is to account for this variance of issue importance. Following the existing literature, we have hypothesized that issues in which parties display more distinct positions are those that weight more on the final voting decision of individuals. We have tested our hypotheses with survey data from Spain, with analyses at the level of the individual and at the aggregate level (i.e. focusing on regions and issues), using two different estimation strategies. At the individual level, we find that the increase in the distance between parties makes a dimension to become relevant in explaining the voting decision of individuals (the impact of this distance increase is linear). At the aggregate level, we find that the regression coefficients (obtained with spatial analyses at the individual level) are significantly correlated to subjective measures of party distance and party system compactness on a dimension, as well as to objective measures of party polarization (i.e. dispersion in CMP scores). While we are using a small number of cases (i.e.18) these correlations are statistically significant; this is particularly striking in the case of objective distances, as it allows us to rule out the hypothesis that the sizes of the coefficient are endogenously related to the perceived importance of a dimension.

From a theoretical perspective, our findings confirm the role of context—and in particular, of party polarization—in explaining issue voting. Interestingly, the results indicate that the Downsian prediction of party convergence should make issues to become increasingly less relevant for voting.

A caveat: on the one hand, it could be argued that the perception of differences is a mere reflection of what dimension is important for voters. Indeed,, it could even be the case that

parties decide to differentiate themselves in those policy issues that individuals consider important. In other words, it could be that the direction of causality was the reverse. Without a temporal framework, we cannot test for this potential source of endogeneity (i.e. party movements). We do find, though, that at a particular moment of time, everything else equal, the issues in which parties are more differentiated are those that matter most for voting choice. And this is robust to individual and aggregate analyses, and to subjective and objective measures of party polarization.

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APPENDIX: TABLES

Table A1. The effect of policies (proximity models)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	General	Immigration	Nationalism	Religion	Taxes	Crime	Ecology
Nationalism	-0.654** (0.067)	-0.647** (0.066)	-0.489** (0.097)	-0.664** (0.066)	-0.651** (0.067)	-0.652** (0.066)	-0.655** (0.066)
Immigration	-0.511** (0.063)	-0.159 (0.101)	-0.472** (0.063)	-0.489** (0.062)	-0.501** (0.063)	-0.499** (0.063)	-0.488** (0.063)
Religion	-0.618** (0.060)	-0.623** (0.060)	-0.621** (0.061)	-0.362** (0.118)	-0.654** (0.061)	-0.623** (0.060)	-0.629** (0.060)
Taxes	-0.166** (0.056)	-0.166** (0.056)	-0.186** (0.056)	-0.196** (0.056)	-0.116 (0.088)	-0.168** (0.056)	-0.190** (0.056)
Crime	-0.095 (0.065)	-0.099 (0.065)	-0.101 (0.065)	-0.086 (0.064)	-0.123 (0.065)	-0.041 (0.090)	-0.094 (0.065)
Ecology	-0.263** (0.061)	-0.271** (0.061)	-0.260** (0.061)	-0.245** (0.061)	-0.258** (0.061)	-0.262** (0.061)	-0.227** (0.084)
PP/PSOE distance (immigration)		0.148** (0.023)					
Immigration x PP/PSOE distance		-0.092** (0.019)					
PP/PSOE distance (nationalism)			0.166** (0.025)				
Nationalism x PP/PSOE distance			-0.068** (0.021)				
PP/PSOE distance (religion)				0.215** (0.023)			
Religion x PP/PSOE distance				-0.072** (0.019)			
PP/PSOE distance (taxes)					0.206** (0.027)		
Taxes x PP/PSOE distance					-0.035* (0.018)		
PP/PSOE distance (crime)						0.139** (0.027)	
Crime x PP/PSOE distance						-0.034' (0.020)	
PP/PSOE distance (ecology)							0.177** (0.030)
Ecology x PP/PSOE distance							-0.033 (0.022)
PSOE	0.935 (0.481)	0.950* (0.478)	1.029* (0.479)	1.073* (0.476)	1.020* (0.482)	0.968* (0.485)	1.061* (0.479)
Gender x PSOE	-0.194 (0.161)	-0.156 (0.160)	-0.245 (0.161)	-0.187 (0.159)	-0.143 (0.162)	-0.189 (0.162)	-0.237 (0.161)
Age x PSOE	-0.007 (0.005)	-0.007 (0.005)	-0.009 (0.005)	-0.007 (0.005)	-0.006 (0.005)	-0.007 (0.005)	-0.008 (0.005)
Education x PSOE	-0.204** (0.056)	-0.190** (0.055)	-0.209** (0.055)	-0.231** (0.055)	-0.224** (0.056)	-0.210** (0.056)	-0.209** (0.055)
TV x PSOE	0.048 (0.090)	0.033 (0.089)	0.037 (0.089)	0.014 (0.089)	-0.001 (0.089)	0.024 (0.090)	0.012 (0.089)
Pol. Information x PSOE	0.124 (0.113)	0.146 (0.112)	0.144 (0.113)	0.078 (0.112)	0.107 (0.114)	0.159 (0.113)	0.118 (0.113)
Constant	3.991** (0.084)	3.457** (0.119)	3.538** (0.110)	3.194** (0.123)	3.526** (0.104)	3.682** (0.104)	3.663** (0.099)
Observations	3017	3004	2982	2995	2947	2975	2997
R-squared	0.21	0.23	0.23	0.24	0.23	0.22	0.22

OLS estimates. Standard errors in parenthesis *significant at $p < 0.05$ **significant at $p < 0.001$

Table A2. The effect of policies (directional models)

	(1) General	(2) Immigration	(3) Nationalism	(4) Religion	(5) Taxes	(6) Crime	(7) Ecology
Nationalism	0.684** (0.060)	0.693** (0.060)	0.656** (0.096)	0.686** (0.060)	0.684** (0.061)	0.696** (0.061)	0.685** (0.060)
Immigration	0.480** (0.059)	0.201* (0.099)	0.460** (0.059)	0.473** (0.059)	0.477** (0.059)	0.473** (0.059)	0.479** (0.058)
Religion	0.770** (0.064)	0.764** (0.064)	0.766** (0.065)	0.552** (0.132)	0.773** (0.065)	0.766** (0.065)	0.766** (0.064)
Taxes	0.232** (0.055)	0.214** (0.055)	0.226** (0.056)	0.236** (0.056)	0.197* (0.088)	0.226** (0.056)	0.229** (0.056)
Crime	0.230** (0.059)	0.216** (0.059)	0.240** (0.059)	0.225** (0.059)	0.243** (0.060)	0.215* (0.085)	0.221** (0.059)
Ecology	0.344** (0.060)	0.343** (0.060)	0.338** (0.061)	0.331** (0.061)	0.362** (0.061)	0.340** (0.061)	0.244** (0.089)
PP/PSOE distance (immigration)		0.032 (0.023)					
immigration x PP/PSOE distance		0.060** (0.017)					
PP/PSOE distance (nationalism)			0.032 (0.025)				
Nationalism x x PP/PSOE distance			0.007 (0.019)				
PP/PSOE distance (religion)				0.081** (0.022)			
Religion x PP/PSOE distance				0.04* (0.020)			
PP/PSOE distance (taxes)					0.080** (0.026)		
Taxes x PP/PSOE distance					0.007 (0.018)		
PP/PSOE distance (crime)						0.04 (0.026)	
Crime x PP/PSOE distance						0.002 (0.019)	
PP/PSOE distance (ecology)							0.060* (0.028)
Ecology x x PP/PSOE distance							0.037* (0.021)
PSOE	0.996* (0.476)	0.946* (0.476)	1.039* (0.478)	1.086* (0.477)	0.984* (0.481)	0.984* (0.481)	1.064* (0.476)
Gender x PSOE	-0.291 (0.160)	-0.256 (0.160)	-0.314 (0.161)	-0.276 (0.160)	-0.252 (0.162)	-0.271 (0.161)	-0.313 (0.160)
Age x PSOE	-0.004 (0.005)	-0.004 (0.005)	-0.006 (0.005)	-0.004 (0.005)	-0.004 (0.005)	-0.004 (0.005)	-0.005 (0.005)
Education x PSOE	-0.205** (0.055)	-0.199** (0.055)	-0.205** (0.055)	-0.220** (0.055)	-0.208** (0.056)	-0.206** (0.055)	-0.209** (0.055)
TV x PSOE	0.047 (0.089)	0.048 (0.089)	0.056 (0.089)	0.03 (0.089)	0.024 (0.089)	0.039 (0.089)	0.034 (0.089)
Pol Information x PSOE	0.094 (0.112)	0.118 (0.112)	0.114 (0.113)	0.104 (0.113)	0.098 (0.114)	0.128 (0.113)	0.1 (0.112)
Constant	3.994** (0.086)	3.851** (0.119)	3.888** (0.112)	3.657** (0.127)	3.804** (0.106)	3.893** (0.105)	3.869** (0.102)
Observations	3017	3004	2982	2995	2947	2975	2997
R-squared	0.23	0.23	0.23	0.23	0.23	0.23	0.23

OLS estimates. Standard errors in parenthesis *significant at $p < 0.05$ **significant at $p < 0.001$