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Measuring Identity Polarisation in Spain. Comparative Analysis of Pluralist and Peripheral Approaches

La medición de la polarización identitaria en España. Análisis comparativo de los enfoques pluralista y periférico

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the measurement of identity-based polarisation in Spain and evaluates the validity of the methods employed to study this phenomenon. Through an analysis of individual-level survey data from the CIS, CEO, ICPS and Euskobarómetro (Basque barometer), which explore citizens' definition of identity, the study concludes that of the two primary approaches to measuring identity-based polarisation—pluralist or bipolar and peripheral or unipolar—the former provides a more accurate representation of regions experiencing centre-periphery tensions. The bipolar approach more effectively captures the positioning of Spanish-identifying and dual identities, which are not solely characterised by their rejection of peripheral nationalism. This research offers greater insight into identity dynamics in Spain and contributes to the advancement of discussions on identity-based polarisation measurement methods.

KEYWORDS: centre-periphery; measurement; identity-based polarisation; national identity; nationalism; Spanish nationalism; Spain.

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RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza cómo se mide la polarización identitaria en España y evalúa la validez de los métodos de medición empleados para estudiar este tipo de polarización. A través del análisis de datos individuales de encuesta del CIS, el CEO, el ICPS y el Eus-kobarómetro que tratan la definición identitaria de los ciudadanos, se concluye que de las dos formas de medir la polarización identitaria, la pluralista o bipolar y la periférica o unipolar, la que mejor se aproxima a la realidad de regiones con tensiones centro-periferia es la primera, al captar mejor el posicionamiento de las identidades españolistas y duales, que no se definen únicamente por su rechazo al nacionalismo periférico. La investigación tiene relevancia para una mejor comprensión del fenómeno identitario en España y supone un avance en la discusión de los métodos de medición de la polarización identitaria.

PALABRAS CLAVE: centro-periferia; medición; polarización identitaria; identidad nacional; nacionalismo; españolismo; España.

1. Introduction

Identity-based polarisation, also known as the centre-periphery *cleavage*, is a form of social division rooted in membership of ethnic, cultural or subnational groups. It differs from other types of polarisation, such as ideological or cultural polarisation, in its emphasis on group identity and a sense of belonging to a specific community. Alongside the traditional left-right divide, it constitutes one of the primary axes of political segmentation in societies with two distinct national identities (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), as seen in the Catalan, Basque and Galician contexts (Canal, 2018; Leonisio and Strijbis, 2011; Pallarés, Montero and Llera, 1998; Rivera, 2018).

Since the late 19th century, these regions have experienced the coexistence of three forms of patriotism—local, regional or provincial, and national—which, depending on the institution, organisation or individual, may either cooperate, fostering dual identities, or enter into conflict (Linz, 1973; Pallarés, Montero and Llera, 1998). In recent years, within the context of a dual socio-economic and political-institutional crisis, identity-based polarisation has intensified, driven by the Catalan independence movement (2010–2017) and the electoral rise of nationalist parties in the Basque Country and Galicia following the restructuring of the Spanish party system at both national and regional levels.

Identity-based polarisation is particularly relevant as it can contribute to citizens' rejection of out-groups. While group affiliation is fundamental to shaping an individual's social identity (Tajfel *et al.*, 1971), it can also lead to the formation of closed communities and increased distrust towards out-groups (Mason, 2018), potentially undermining political stability. In Spain, identity-based polarisation is evident in the tension between regional and national identities (Linz, 1973). The subnational-national divide has thus become a major source of political con-

flict (Rodríguez, Santamaría and Miller, 2022; Torcal and Comellas, 2022) and has contributed to making Spain one of the most affectively polarised societies in Europe (Gidron, Adams and Horne, 2020).

The aim of this article is to describe, analyse and compare methods for measuring identity-based polarisation in Spain and to assess their validity. The article is structured as follows: first, it presents a theoretical framework that defines identity-based polarisation, reviews existing literature and examines the Catalan, Basque and Galician cases. It then explores the measurement approaches used by the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS), the Catalan Centre for Opinion Studies (CEO), the Institute of Political and Social Sciences (ICPS) and the Euskobarómetro (Basque barometer). Next, the results of these surveys are compared in the Catalan and Basque cases —where both unipolar and bipolar measurement approaches are available— using bivariate and multivariate statistical methods to identify patterns and trends in identity-based polarisation in Spain. Finally, the validity of these measurement methods is evaluated, along with the methodological implications of the findings.

2. The centre-periphery conflict, national identity and nationalist movements in Spain

2.1. The centre-periphery tension

The centre-periphery *cleavage* has been recognised as a key factor in shaping the nature of political systems (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Rovny, 2015). This tension arises between pro-centre positions, which advocate for maintaining national unity and, at times, promoting national sentiment, and pro-periphery positions, which encompass institutional rules, beliefs and collective behaviours that assert and reinforce the notions of uniqueness, autonomy and self-government for certain territories. For peripheral nationalism to achieve political articulation, it requires the presence of a national-regional consciousness, a centre-periphery conflict —whether cultural, economic and/or political— and social mobilisation alongside relevant political organisations (Moreno and Giner, 1990).

The defence of uniqueness and self-government stems from the concept of the nation, which, for nationalism, is pre-political. The nation is understood as a social construct or an imagined community, shaped by cultural symbols, languages, histories and traditions that contribute to the mental construction of a shared identity (Anderson, 1991) and the division between “us” and “them” (Llera, 2002). This perspective helps explain the mistaken assumption that sharing common characteristics —such as ancestry, language, religion and/or culture— necessarily implies the existence of a shared national identity and/or a desire for independence (Linz, 1999). Indeed, in many cases, either a majority or significant minorities express dual identities (Linz, 1985a, 1986, 1999; Llera, 2002).

In Spain, the origins of the centre–periphery debate are linked to the loss of the empire, the discrediting of the liberal–centrist state and the failures of the Industrial Revolution (Linz, 1993; Moreno and Giner, 1990). Historically, peripheral demands have been driven by “the loss or defence of privileges or the traditional status of certain local power elites, who find in identity construction the most effective means of rallying support in their struggle against the interests promoted by the modernising convergence of centralism and constitutional liberalism” (Llera, 2020, p. 187 [translation]).

With the globalisation and Europeanisation of societies, recent decades have witnessed a resurgence of nationalist movements (Agnew, 2000; Keating, 2004). Although Spain’s socio-economic transformation—marked by democratic consolidation, integration into the European Union and the long process of regional devolution—brought nationalist movements into the framework of national governance (Liebert, 1990), economic fragility, weak national leadership, political corruption and the fragmentation of the national party system have further polarised pro-periphery positions, particularly in Catalonia. However, this does not invalidate the thesis of the limitations of peripheral nationalism, which arise from its retreat into a linguistic-territorial community, the persistence of dual identities and the impact of immigration (Linz, 1993).

Identity-based polarisation has significant implications for politics and social cohesion. As with ideological and cultural polarisation, extreme alignment around exclusive group identities—whether ethnic, cultural and/or subnational—not only fosters animosity towards the “other” (Mason, 2018) but also contributes to government instability, difficulties in forming majorities, a decline in democratic quality and institutional trust and, ultimately, the systemic collapse of democratic regimes (Casal, 2019; McCoy, Rahman and Somer, 2018). In Spain, identity-based polarisation has played a crucial role in processes such as the Ibarretxe Plan (2001–2005) (Llera, 2005) and the Catalan independence challenge (2010–2017), significantly impacting social polarisation, governance and democratic quality (Milián, 2021).

2.2. The Catalan, Basque and Galician cases

In Catalonia, politics is structured around both socio-economic and centre–periphery divisions. The emergence of Catalan nationalism is linked to the early development of indigenous capitalism and industrialisation (Llera, 2020; Moreno and Giner, 1990). As Díez (1999) notes, Catalonia’s economic development was endogenous, rooted in capital accumulated from agriculture, which was later invested in industry, particularly in the textile sector. Catalonia’s economy, benefiting from its peripheral location (Llera, 2020), became closely tied to the production of consumer goods, fostering the growth of a substantial bourgeois class engaged in commercial and industrial activities while integrating pre-industrial classes into this development.

Although dual forms of national identification have predominated since the establishment of democracy (Llera, 2020), the nationalising efforts led by the bourgeoisie that embraced

Catalan nationalism (Barrio, Barberá and Rodríguez, 2018) have been effective. Since the late 1990s, the centre–periphery divide has deepened (Barrio, Barberá and Rodríguez, 2018), and the proportion of the population identifying exclusively as Catalan has steadily increased (Quiroga and Molina, 2020). Indeed, nationalist–led regional governments have leveraged their influence and bargaining power (Llera, 2020) to advance a nationalisation project. This effort, which remained largely uncontested by non–nationalist actors until the emergence of the independence challenge (*ibid.*), has drawn on regional media, institutionalised collective memory, language policy and a reconstructed nationalist rhetoric centred on the narrative of “Catalonia’s plundering” (Quiroga and Molina, 2020).

With the Great Recession of 2008, and particularly from 2010 onwards, support for independence rose significantly. This can be attributed, first, to the role of nationalist political elites and their strategies for fostering polarisation (Jaráiz, Lagares and Barreiro, 2017; Lagares, Máiz and Rivera, 2022; Llera, 2020). Second, the economic crisis and its adverse effects may have reinforced the narrative of Catalonia’s dispossession (Barrio, Barberá and Rodríguez, 2018; Quiroga and Molina, 2020; Llera, 2020). Another contributing factor was the 2010 ruling by the Constitutional Court, which declared parts of the reformed Statute of Autonomy unconstitutional, an outcome widely perceived as an affront (Barrio, Barberá and Rodríguez, 2018; Burg, 2015; Llera, 2020). The rejection of negotiations over an economic agreement by the national government led by the Partido Popular (2011–2018) (Llera, 2020) may have further exacerbated tensions. Finally, political corruption scandals were leveraged as a source of grievance against the central government (Barrio, Barberá and Rodríguez, 2018; Quiroga and Molina, 2020; Llera, 2020).

As in Catalonia, the emergence of Basque nationalism is linked to the early development of ways of life distinct from the traditional rural economy (Moreno and Giner, 1990). In this case, economic development was “combined”, featuring both an emerging Basque industrial sector, centred on mining and steel production, and a more traditional economic structure. Unlike in Catalonia, the Basque bourgeoisie originated from the traditional landowning aristocracy (Llera, 2020), which was smaller, more powerful and more closely connected to and dependent on the Spanish national elite. This combined model contributed to the emergence of an industrial and suburban proletariat (*ibid.*), leading a segment of society to embrace an independence–driven and anti–capitalist discourse during the late Francoist period.

The Basque nationalism–Spanish nationalism axis has dominated the polarised pluralism of the Basque political system (Llera, 2016), shaping competition along the ideological left–right spectrum (Leonisio, 2016). The heightened polarisation along this axis has been largely driven by the presence of anti–system factions, rooted in a subculture of violence, that have endorsed terrorism and political violence (Llera, 2002, 2003). ETA terrorism has played a role in the ethnic cleansing of distinct social and political groups and in fostering a spiral of silence (Llera, 2020; Llera, García and León–Ranero, 2022).

A dual Basque–Spanish identity has remained predominant, though pure Spanish nationalism is more marginal than Basque nationalism (Llera, 2020; Rivera, 2018). For this reason, despite being a nationalist party, the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) has positioned

itself at the centre of political competition, maintaining a relatively ambiguous stance on identity, except during the period of the Lizarra Pact (Llera, Leonisio, García and Pérez, 2014). Nonetheless, Basque citizens generally support the governance and vision of Basque nationalism, as well as its distinct policies. It can thus be said that “the Basque Country is (predominantly) a nationalist society, but one of (mostly) non-nationalist citizens” (Rivera, 2018, p. 135 [translation]). This predominance has facilitated the implementation of a Basque nation-building process or the territorialisation of autonomy, despite its evident limitations (Rivera, 2018). Such a process complicates coexistence in the region for those who do not see the need to adopt an exclusive national identity (Lamo de Espinosa, 2007).

Lastly, Galician electoral behaviour and the region’s party system follow, as in other areas, the eccentric model (Vallès, 1991), in which a non-negligible segment of the electorate supports pro-periphery forces. However, unlike in other regions with centre-periphery conflicts, the predominance of nationally oriented right-, centre- and left-wing parties—which remain competitive among segments with Galicianist and dual identities (Ares and Rama, 2019)—has resulted in the marginalisation of Galician regionalist and nationalist parties (PANE). Indeed, the paradoxical weakness of Galician nationalism (Linz, 1993) explains why the process of regional autonomy has lacked both strategies of influence over the political centre and leverage tactics, with the only nationalist party having participated in the regional government on just one occasion.

As in Catalonia and the Basque Country, dual Spanish-Galician identification is predominant in the region (Moreno and Giner, 1990), while the segment of the population identifying exclusively as Spanish remains marginal. This “diffuse sense of a distinct people” (Máiz, 1996, p. 69 [translation]) is rooted in the ethno-linguistic differences of part of the population compared to other regions. The recognition of this reality by nationally oriented parties has led to the only explicitly peripheral political offering combining left-wing extremism—of communist origins—with a peripheral, working-class nationalism closely tied to the linguistic issue (Gómez-Reino and Marcos-Marne, 2022).

3. Methods for measuring identity-based polarisation

Various methodologies have been developed to analyse and measure identity-based polarisation. Among studies that approach nationalism “from below” (Hobsbawm, 1991), opinion surveys are commonly used, as they enable the assessment of citizens’ perceptions and preferences regarding national identity, attitudes towards other autonomous communities and views on independence or autonomy (Centre for Opinion Studies, 2024; Centre for Sociological Research, 2024; Euskobarómetro, 2024; Institute of Political and Social Sciences, 2024).

These studies were early adopters of the indicator introduced by Juan J. Linz (Linz, 1985b; Linz *et al.*, 1981, 1986), which consists of five bipolar categories reflecting varying intensities of national identification: Spanish only, more Spanish than (demonym), as (demonym) as Spanish, more (demonym) than Spanish and (demonym) only. Additionally, identity-based polarisation has been measured using two further

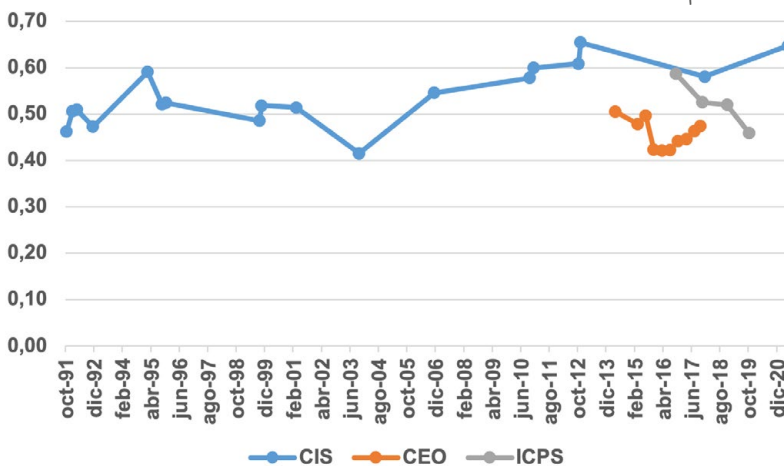
approaches, which we will refer to as the *peripheral* or *unipolar*¹ model and the *pluralist* or *bipolar*² model. The former assesses respondents' self-perception as more or less aligned with peripheral nationalism (Kasianenko, 2020), while the latter establishes a dialectical relationship between nationalist and Spanish-identifying positions within the centre-periphery *cleavage* (Rokkan, 1967). Of the four public opinion institutes that have applied these methods in Spain, the CIS (Centre for Sociological Research) and the ICPS (Institute of Political and Social Sciences) have used only the *unipolar* approach, while the CEO (Centre for Opinion Studies) and the Eusko-barómetro (Basque barometer) have exclusively employed the *bipolar* method.

3.1. Catalonia

In Catalonia, three public opinion institutes have sought to measure identity-based polarisation (see Figure 1). The longest-running effort is that of the CIS, which, as in other regions with identity-related tensions, has applied the Minimum–Maximum Nationalism Scale, ranging from 1 to 10, since 1991 (Centre for Sociological Research, 2024). More recent are the measurements conducted by the CEO, which operates under the Catalan regional government, and the ICPS, affiliated with the Autonomous University of Barcelona. The CEO has used the Spanish Nationalism–Catalan Nationalism Scale, ranging from 0 to 10, from 2014 to 2017 (Centre for Opinion Studies, 2024), while the ICPS has applied the Minimum–Maximum Catalan Nationalist Sentiment Scale, also ranging from 1 to 10³, from 2015 to 2019 (Institute of Political and Social Sciences, 2024).

Figure 1

Evolution of polarisation in the CIS Minimum-Maximum Catalan Nationalism Scale (1991-2021), the CEO Catalan Nationalism-Spanish Nationalism Scale (2014-2017) and the ICPS Minimum-Maximum Catalan Nationalist Sentiment Scale (2016-2019)



Note: in the case of the ICPS, additional data from 2008 has been excluded due to the use of a 0–10 scale, as well as data from 2016 [see Note 2].

Source: own research based on data from the CIS, CEO and ICPS.

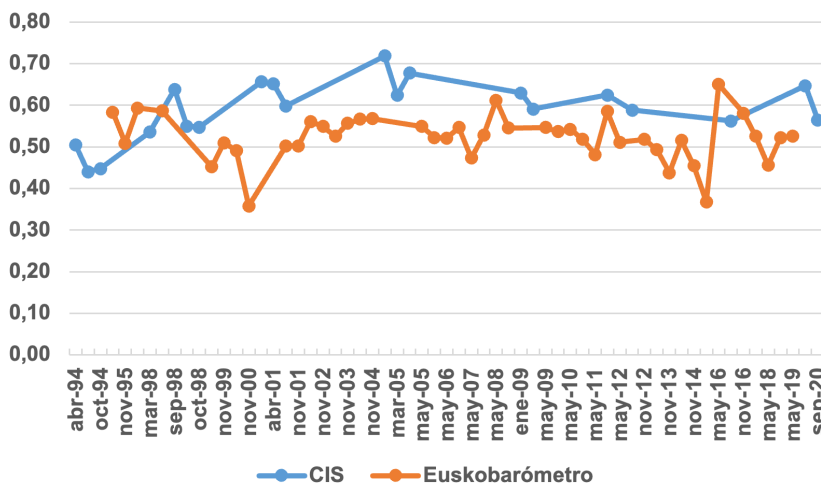
The polarisation level on the Minimum–Maximum Nationalism Scale averages 0.54 over the entire period. This indicator rises from a historic low of 0.43 in 2003 to a historic high of 0.65 in both 2012 and 2021, reflecting the prolonged period of the independence challenge (2010–2017). By contrast, the CEO scale records a slightly lower mean polarisation of 0.46 for the period 2014–2017, a difference that may stem from the distinct nature of the two scales. Meanwhile, the ICPS scale places mean polarisation at 0.52 between 2016 and 2019. The evolution of these last two indicators shows an increase in polarisation from 2015 to 2017 (rising from 0.42 to 0.47) followed by a decline after the unilateral declaration of independence, from 0.59 in 2016 to 0.46 in 2019.

3.2. Basque Country

In the Basque Country, two⁴ public opinion institutes have measured identity-based polarisation (see Figure 2). Once again, the CIS has applied the Minimum–Maximum Nationalism Scale, ranging from 1 to 10, from 1994 to 2020 (Centre for Sociological Research, 2024). Notably, this scale was not continued in the most recent 2024 regional elections. Additionally, the Euskobarómetro, a research group led by Professor Francisco J. Llera at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), conducted a biannual barometer between 1995 and 2019⁵, using the Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale, also measured on a scale from 1 to 10 (Euskobarómetro, 2024; Llera, Leonisio, García and Pérez, 2014). This *bipolar* scale, parallel to the ideological scale, was used exclusively by this research group for more than twenty years until its later adoption in Catalonia by the CEO. It remains distinct from the *unipolar* scale.

Figure 2

Evolution of polarisation in the CIS Minimum-Maximum Basque Nationalism Scale (1994-2020) and the Euskobarómetro Nationalism-Spanish Nationalism Scale (1995-2019)



Source: own research based on data from the CIS and Euskobarómetro.

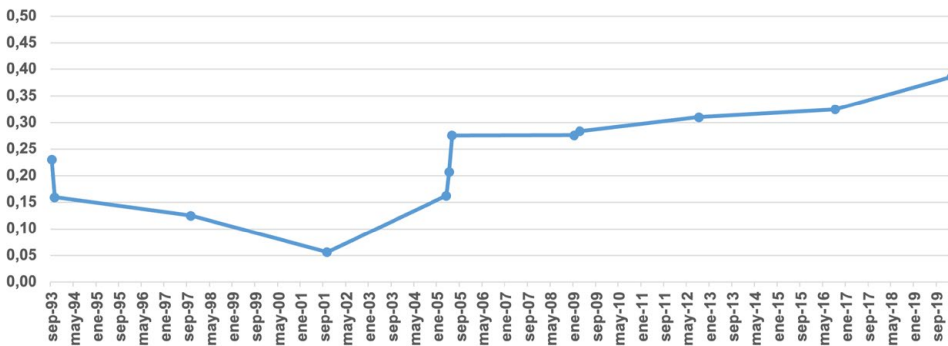
The mean polarisation level on the CIS scale from 1994 to 2020 is relatively high, standing at 0.59. This indicator increased from 0.44 in 1994 to 0.72 in 2005, reflecting the shift in Basque nationalist political strategies following the Estella Pact (1998) and the Ibarretxe Plan (2001–2005). A similar trend is observed in the Euskobarómetro indicator, which rose from 0.45 in 1999 to 0.55 in 2004. Other notable increases in identity-based polarisation occurred in 2008, towards the end of Ibarretxe’s government period, in 2011, coinciding with López’s administration and in 2016, during Urkullu’s tenure. The mean polarisation level on the *bipolar* scale is 0.52, slightly lower than that of the CIS scale, mirroring the pattern observed in Catalonia.

3.3. Galicia

In Galicia, only one public opinion institute has attempted to measure identity-based polarisation. As in Catalonia and the Basque Country, this has been conducted by the CIS, which has applied the Minimum–Maximum Nationalism Scale, ranging from 1 to 10, from 1993 to the present (Centre for Sociological Research, 2024).

Figure 3

Evolution of polarisation in the CIS Minimum-Maximum Galician Nationalism Scale (1993-2020)



Source: own research based on data from the CIS.

The mean polarisation level on this axis for the period 1993–2020 stands at 0.23, indicating significantly lower identity-based tensions in Galicia compared to Catalonia and the Basque Country. This is largely attributable to the Galicianist strategy of the Partido Popular (PP) in the region, which has helped mitigate polarisation despite the radical stance of the Galician Nationalist Bloc (BNG) on this axis. However, a gradual increase in polarisation is evident, rising from a low of 0.1 in 2001 to a high of 0.39 in 2020, a trend largely driven by the Galician PP’s shift towards minimal nationalism. Finally, despite the significance of the Galician case, it will be excluded from the comparative analysis of measurement methods, which is the primary focus of this article, as only *unipolar* measurements of identity-based polarisation are available for this region.

4. Data and measurement

To identify the tools used to measure identity-based polarisation in Spain and assess which is most valid for analysing the identity structure of regions with two national identities, five databases were constructed. Three were based on CIS regional studies in Catalonia (1991–2021)⁶, the Basque Country (1994–2020)⁷ and Galicia (1992–2019)⁸, one was derived from CEO studies (2014–2017)⁹ and another from Euskobarómetro studies (1995–2019)¹⁰. Additionally, the integrated database provided by the ICPS (2015–2019) was utilised¹¹. The selection criterion for the databases was to maximise the number of cases included: any regional study containing at least one of the scales under analysis was incorporated, i.e., the Minimum–Maximum Nationalism Scale or Nationalist Sentiment Scale, the Catalan Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale and the (Basque) Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale.

Once the databases were constructed, the order of the scales was adjusted to facilitate the interpretation of results as follows: Minimum–Maximum Nationalism Scale, Catalan Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale and Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale. In all cases, the scales were standardised to a 1–10 format. For the CEO Catalan Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale, originally ranging from 0–10, the data was adjusted to a 1–10 scale to ensure consistency across measurements¹².

In addition to the aforementioned scale variables, the following variables were collected when available¹³, with their categories presented in the exact order in which they were recorded or recategorised: *Subjective national identity* (Spanish only, more Spanish than Catalan/Basque, as Catalan/Basque as Spanish, more Catalan/Basque than Spanish and Catalan/Basque only), *Nationalist sentiment* (yes/no), *Vote recall* (non-nationalist right, PSE-EE/PSC, PNV/CiU¹⁴, left-wing Basque nationalist / ERC and others), *Gender* (male/female), *Age* (numeric), *Educational attainment* (no formal education, primary education, secondary education, vocational training and higher education) and *Province* (Barcelona, Girona, Lleida and Tarragona / Álava, Biscay and Gipuzkoa).

After calculating identity-based polarisation¹⁵, the study focused on comparing *unipolar* (CIS) and *bipolar* (CEO and Euskobarómetro) measurements in the Catalan and Basque cases. The Galician case was thus excluded due to the availability of only *unipolar* measurement from the CIS. First, a comparison of means was conducted for the subgroups of *Subjective national identity*, *Nationalist sentiment* and *Vote recall* in both territories (excluding the second variable in the Catalan case, as it was unavailable), along with *post-hoc* indicator calculations. Second, two pairs of linear regression models were constructed—one for the Catalan case¹⁶ and another for the Basque case—to analyse the determinants of the *unipolar* and *bipolar*¹⁷ scales. In these models, the dependent variables were the scales, introduced as previously described. The key independent variables were the *dummy* categories for *Subjective national identity*: “Spanish only”, “more Spanish than Catalan/Basque”, “as Catalan/Basque as Spanish”, “more Catalan/Basque than Spanish”, with “Catalan/Basque only” as the reference category. Potential collinearity between *Subjective national identity* and

the Scales was analysed (see Note 2 in Tables 2 and 3). Additional independent variables included *Vote recall*, *Gender*, *Age* (numeric), *Educational attainment* and *Province*, all introduced as previously described, with the last category serving as the reference.

5. Results

5.1. Bivariate analysis

Table 1 presents the mean values on the Minimum–Maximum Nationalism Scale and the Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale, disaggregated by *Subjective national identity*, *Nationalist sentiment* and *Vote recall*. The data for Catalonia and the Basque Country are detailed, along with differences in means obtained from different surveys (CIS, CEO and Euskobarómetro).

Table 1

Mean scores on the Minimum-Maximum Nationalism and Nationalism-Spanish Nationalism Scales by Subjective national identity, Nationalist sentiment and Vote recall

	Catalonia			Basque Country		
	CIS	CEO	Diff.	CIS	Euskobarómetro	Diff.
Subjective national identity						
I feel only Spanish	9	7.7	1.3	8.8	7.1	1.7
I feel more Spanish than Catalan/Basque	8.7	7.1	1.6	8.4	6.5	1.9
I feel as Catalan/Basque as Spanish	6.9	5.6	1.3	6.9	5.1	1.8
I feel more Catalan/Basque than Spanish	3.8	3.6	0.2	4.5	3.6	0.9
I feel only Catalan/Basque	2.3	2.1	0.2	2.9	2.4	0.5
N	11,423	15,868	-	30,122	49,163	-
Nationalist sentiment						
Yes	-	-	-	3.3	2.8	0.5
No	-	-	-	8.1	5.4	2.7
N	-	-	-	16,990	47,897	-
Vote recall						
Non-nationalist right	8.3	6.6	1.7	8.3	6.8	1.5
PSC/PSE-EE	7	5.7	1.3	7.5	5.7	1.8
CiU/PNV	3.4	3.1	0.3	4	3.3	0.7
ERC/IA	2.7	2.4	0.3	2.9	2.1	0.8
Other	5.6	4.3	1.3	5.9	4	1.9
N	8,931	14,547	-	25,042	32,159	-

Note: One-way ANOVA tests were conducted to examine the relationships between the three independent variables and the scales. The results indicate that the differences are highly significant across groups for *Vote recall* ($p < 0.001$), *Nationalist sentiment* ($p < 0.001$) and *Subjective national identity* ($p < 0.001$), suggesting a strong association between these independent variables and positioning on the Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism and Minimum–Maximum Nationalism scales. Scheffé tests confirm that differences between all pairs of groups are statistically significant.

Source: own research based on data from the CIS, CEO and Euskobarómetro.

In Catalonia, the mean positions of *Subjective national identity* subgroups vary significantly between scales. While the Spanish-identifying and dual-identity groups score substantially higher on the Minimum–Maximum Nationalism Scale than on the Catalan Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale (with differences ranging from 1.3 to 1.6 points in favour of the former), Catalan-identifying subgroups exhibit very similar mean scores on both scales, with minimal differences of 0.2 points.

Regarding *Vote recall*, the mean positions of different electorates also differ. Voters of the non-nationalist right, the PSC and other parties score significantly higher on the CIS Minimum–Maximum Nationalism Scale compared to the Catalan Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale (with differences ranging from 1.3 to 1.7 points in favour of the former). In contrast, centre-right Catalan nationalist and ERC voters display very similar mean scores on both scales, with minimal differences of 0.3 points.

In the Basque Country, the mean positions of *Subjective national identity* subgroups also differ across scales. While the Spanish-identifying and dual-identity groups score significantly higher on the Minimum–Maximum Nationalism Scale than on the Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale (with differences ranging from 1.7 to 1.9 points in favour of the former), Basque-identifying subgroups exhibit very similar scores on both scales, with minimal differences ranging from 0.5 to 0.9 points. A similar pattern is observed in relation to *Nationalist sentiment*. While nationalists maintain comparable positions on both scales (difference of 0.5 points), non-nationalists position themselves differently, exhibiting greater polarisation on the Minimum–Maximum Nationalism Scale compared to the Euskobarómetro Scale (with a difference of 2.7 points).

Regarding *Vote recall*, the mean positions of electorates also vary. Voters of the non-nationalist right, the PSE-EE and other parties score notably higher on the Minimum–Maximum Nationalism Scale than on the Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale (with differences ranging from 1.5 to 1.9 points in favour of the former). In contrast, voters of the nationalist centre-right and IA register very similar mean scores on both scales, with minimal differences of 0.7 to 0.8 points.

5.2. Multivariate analysis

Table 2 presents the linear regression models for the Catalonia scales (CIS and CEO). In the Minimum–Maximum Nationalism Scale model, the R^2 coefficient is 0.565, while in the Catalan Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale model, it is 0.498. This indicates that the CIS and CEO models explain 56.5% and 49.8% of the variability in the dependent variable, respectively. Both models therefore exhibit good levels of fit.

Table 2

Linear regression models for the CIS Minimum-Maximum Nationalism Scale and the CEO Catalan Nationalism-Spanish Nationalism Scale

	CIS		CEO	
	Beta	Standard error	Beta	Standard error
Subjective national identity				
Spanish only	5.635***	0.094	4.823***	0.068
More Spanish than Catalan	5.256***	0.100	4.348***	0.07
As Catalan as Spanish	3.758***	0.058	3.011***	0.039
More Catalan than Spanish (Ref.: Catalan only)	1.363***	0.055	1.395***	0.038
Vote recall				
Non-nationalist right	1.244***	0.066	0.912***	0.0544
PSC	0.360***	0.068	0.34***	0.049
CiU	-0.936***	0.054	-0.210***	0.047
ERC (Ref.: Other)	-1.052***	0.066	-0.449***	0.045
Gender (Ref.: Female)	-0.049	0.039	0.042	0.028
Age	-0.002	0.001	-0.002***	0.001
Educational attainment				
No formal education	0.338**	0.11	0.667***	0.191
Primary education	0.129*	0.064	0.150***	0.042
VT	-0.043	0.0539	-0.0475	0.038
Higher education (Ref.: Secondary education)	-0.009	0.0515	-0.1679***	0.036
Province				
Barcelona	0.272***	0.055	0.002	0.04
Girona	0.071	0.0654	-0.208***	0.051
Lleida (Ref.: Tarragona)	0.115	0.0655	-0.005	0.052
(Constant)	2.907***	0.107	2.356***	0.07
R ²	0.565		0.498	
N	11,401		16,159	

Note 1: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Note 2: Three diagnostic tools were applied to detect potential collinearity issues between Subjective national identity and identity scales. The Variance Inflation Factor was 1 in all cases, Tolerance was consistently 1 and correlations were always below 0.8, ruling out significant collinearity.

Note 3: The comparison between the CIS and CEO linear regression models is based on the premise that, while the datasets originate from different sources, both samples are comparable. The CIS sample (N = 11,401) was collected in person using proportional allocation sampling at the provincial level in Catalonia between 2012 and 2021, while the CEO sample (N = 16,159) was also collected in person, following the same proportional allocation sampling method at the provincial level in Catalonia between 2014 and 2017. Despite differences in sample size—both of which remain substantial—the time frame, geographical scope and distributions of age, vote recall, gender, educational attainment and province are similar across both datasets, allowing for a meaningful comparison of the models.

Source: own research based on data from the CIS and CEO.

In both models, the *Subjective national identity* variables are significant, and their directionality aligns with expectations. In the CIS model, individuals identifying as “Spanish only”, “more Spanish than Catalan” and “as Catalan as Spanish” score 5.635, 5.256 and 3.758 points higher, respectively, than those identifying as “Catalan only”. Similarly, in the CEO model, individuals in the same identity categories score 4.823, 4.348 and 3.011 points higher, respectively, than those identifying as “Catalan only”. However, while the CIS *unipolar* scale accentuates the difference between the most extreme national identities, the CEO *bipolar* scale leads to less pronounced polarisation between these positions.

An analysis of the other variables with significant effects reveals that voting for the non-nationalist right or the PSC, as well as not voting for the Convergence and Union/Post-Convergence and Union (CiU/post-CiU) bloc or ERC, leads to higher scores towards minimal nationalism and Spanish nationalism compared to voting for “Other” parties. While gender does not appear to have a significant influence, age plays a minor role in the CEO model, where younger individuals tend to position themselves more towards Spanish nationalism, though the effect is minimal. Education and geographic location also affect positioning on the scales. In the CIS model, having no formal education and being from Barcelona shifts positioning towards minimal nationalism. By contrast, in the CEO model, having no formal education, completing only primary education, lacking higher education and not being from Girona increases the likelihood of positioning towards Spanish nationalism, relative to those with secondary education and those from Tarragona.

Secondly, Table 3 presents the linear regression models for the Basque Country scales (CIS and Euskobarómetro). In the Minimum–Maximum Nationalism Scale model, the R^2 coefficient is 0.451, while in the Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale model, it is 0.582. This indicates that the CIS and Euskobarómetro models explain 45.1% and 58.2% of the variability in the dependent variable, respectively. Both models therefore exhibit good levels of fit.

Table 3

Linear regression models for the CIS Minimum-Maximum Nationalism Scale and the Euskobarómetro Nationalism-Spanish Nationalism Scale

	CIS		Euskobarómetro	
	Beta	Standard error	Beta	Standard error
Subjective national identity				
Spanish only	4.068***	0.057	3.727***	0.03
More Spanish than Basque	3.562***	0.061	3.196***	0.03
As Basque as Spanish	2.482***	0.028	2.114***	0.016
More Basque than Spanish (Ref.: Basque only)	0.716***	0.030	0.956***	0.017
Vote recall				
Non-nationalist right	1.1997***	0.055	1.220***	0.027
PSE-EE	0.76***	0.039	0.491***	0.02
PNV	-1.37***	0.028	-0.532***	0.015
IA (Ref.: Other)	-1.798***	0.039	-1.048***	0.022
Gender (Ref.: Female)	0.0317	0.022	0.050***	0.012
Age	-0.001	0.001	0.002***	0.000
Educational attainment				
No formal education	0.158**	0.061	0.0597	0.032
Primary education	-0.0413	0.033	.001	0.019
VT	-0.124***	0.032	-0.036*	0.017
Higher education (Ref.: Secondary education)	-0.103**	0.032	-0.034	0.017
Province				
Álava	0.21***	0.028	0.051***	0.015
Biscay (Ref.: Gipuzkoa)	0.155***	0.026	0.031*	0.014
(Constant)	4.416***	0.054	2.796***	0.024
R ²	0.451		0.582	
N	36,026		49,009	

Note 1: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Note 2: Three diagnostic tools were applied to detect potential collinearity issues between Subjective national identity and identity scales. The Variance Inflation Factor was 1 in all cases, Tolerance was consistently 1 and correlations were always below 0.8, ruling out significant collinearity.

Note 3: The comparison between the CIS and Euskobarómetro linear regression models is based on the premise that, although the datasets originate from different sources, the samples remain comparable. The CIS sample (N = 36,026) was collected in person using proportional allocation sampling at the provincial level in the Basque Autonomous Community (CAV) between 1994 and 2020, while the Euskobarómetro sample (N = 49,009) was also collected in person, following the same proportional allocation sampling method at the provincial level in the same territory between 1995 and 2019. Despite differences in sample size—N in both cases remains substantial—the time frame, geographical scope and distributions of age, vote recall, gender, educational attainment and province are similar across both datasets, allowing for a meaningful comparison of the models.

Source: own research based on data from the CIS and Euskobarómetro.

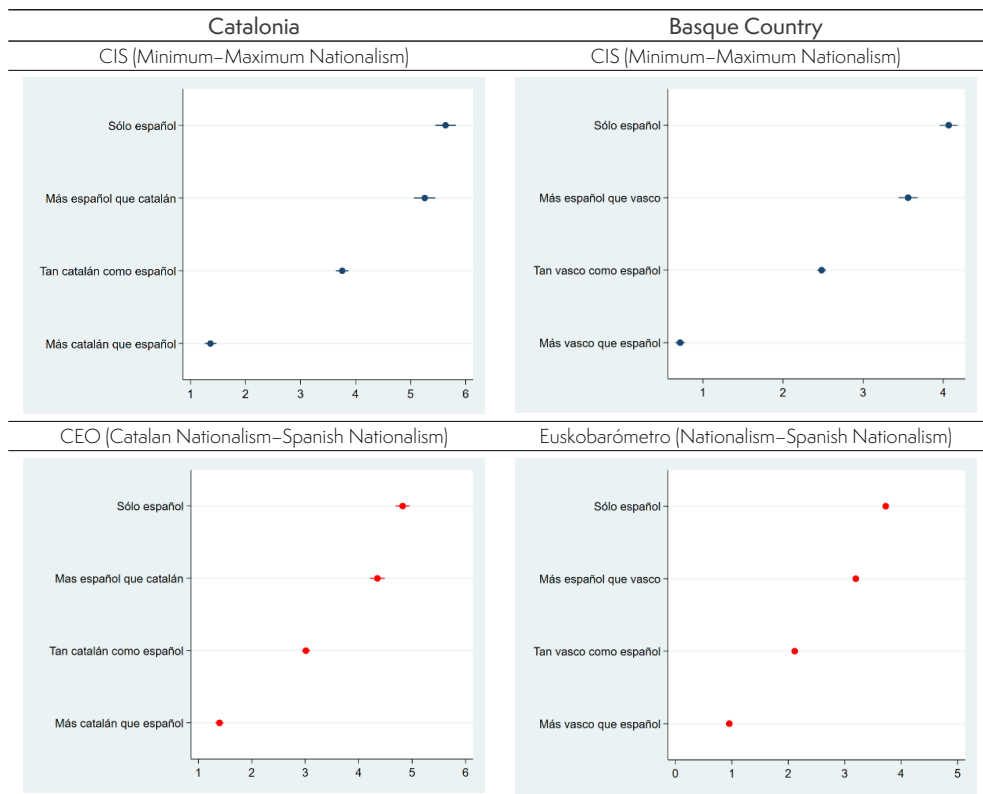
In both models, the *Subjective national identity* variables remain significant, and their directionality aligns with expectations. In the CIS model, individuals identifying as “Spanish only”, “more Spanish than Basque” and “as Basque as Spanish” score 4.068, 3.562 and 2.482 points higher, respectively, than those identifying as “Basque only”. Similarly, in the Euskobarómetro model, individuals in the same identity categories score 3.727, 3.196 and 2.114 points higher, respectively, than those who identify as “Basque only”. As in the Catalan case, the CIS *unipolar* scale accentuates the difference between the most extreme national identities, whereas the Euskobarómetro *bipolar* scale leads to less pronounced polarisation between these positions.

An analysis of the other variables with significant effects reveals that voting for the non-nationalist right or the PSE-EE, as well as not voting for the PNV or the IA, leads to higher scores towards minimal nationalism and Spanish nationalism, compared to voting for other options. While gender and age do not appear to have a significant influence, in the Euskobarómetro model, being male and older is associated with a slight shift towards Spanish nationalism, though the effect remains marginal. Educational attainment and geographic origin also influence positioning on the scales. In the CIS model, not having vocational training or higher education and being from Álava or Biscay increases alignment with minimal nationalism. In the Euskobarómetro model, not having vocational training and being from Álava or Biscay leads to greater alignment with Spanish nationalism, compared to those with secondary education and those from Gipuzkoa, respectively.

Finally, Figure 4 illustrates the effect of subjective national identity on the Minimum–Maximum Nationalism Scale and the Nationalism/Catalan Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale, based on the previous models. In Catalonia, the CIS scale tends to strongly polarise Spanish-identifying and dual identities. Individuals who identify as “Spanish only” or “more Spanish than Catalan” are positioned at the extremes, close to minimal nationalism, highlighting a clear separation from those who identify as “Catalan only”. Dual identities (“as Catalan as Spanish”) also tend to be positioned closer to the extremes, indicating a limited capacity to capture the nuances of these identities, which may reflect a more non-extreme sense of national belonging.

Figure 4

Effect of subjective national identity on the Minimum-Maximum Nationalism and Nationalism/Catalan Nationalism-Spanish Nationalism Scales



Source: own research based on data from the CIS, CEO and Euskobarómetro.

Unlike the CIS scale, the CEO scale offers a less polarised representation of Spanish-identifying and dual identities. While “Spanish only” and “more Spanish than Catalan” remain clearly differentiated, they are not as starkly polarised, allowing for a better understanding of national identity gradations. Dual identities (“as Catalan as Spanish”) are also represented in a less polarised manner on this scale, reflecting a more balanced coexistence of Catalan and Spanish identities.

In the Basque Country, a similar pattern emerges. The CIS scale tends to strongly polarise Spanish-identifying individuals, placing those who identify as “Spanish only” or “more Spanish than Basque” at the extremes of the Minimum-Maximum Nationalism Scale. Dual identities (“as Basque as Spanish”) are also pushed towards the extremes, highlighting the scale’s limited sensitivity in capturing identities that are neither exclusively Basque nor exclusively Spanish.

By contrast, the Euskobarómetro scale demonstrates a greater capacity to capture the nuances within Spanish-identifying and dual identities. The “Spanish only” and “more Spanish than Basque” categories appear less polarised, allowing for an interpretation that more accurately reflects the complex reality of identity in the Basque Country. Similarly, dual identities (“as Basque as Spanish”) are positioned in a less polarised manner, indicating a more balanced coexistence of Basque and Spanish identities.

6. Conclusions

This article has assessed the validity of measurement methods used to evaluate identity-based polarisation in regions marked by tensions along the centre-periphery axis. The methodological approach was based on a comparative analysis of Spain’s main public opinion surveys—CIS, CEO, ICPS and Euskobarómetro—which was followed by bivariate and multivariate analyses comparing the *pluralist* or *bipolar* and *peripheral* or *unipolar* methods for measuring identity-based polarisation.

The bivariate analysis revealed significant differences in how *Subjective national identity* and *Vote recall* subgroups position themselves on the Minimum–Maximum Nationalism Scale and the Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale. The findings indicate that individuals with dual or Spanish-identifying identities, as well as those who vote for non-nationalist parties, tend to adopt more extreme positions on the CIS Minimum–Maximum Nationalism Scale compared to the *bipolar* scales of the CEO and Euskobarómetro. Furthermore, in the Basque case, this same discrepancy is also evident in relation to *Nationalist sentiment*.

Thus, the main finding derived from the multivariate analysis is that, in both Catalonia and the Basque Country, the Catalan Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale (CEO) and the Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale (Euskobarómetro) exhibit greater sensitivity in capturing moderate positions within Spanish-identifying and dual identities, compared to the CIS Minimum–Maximum Nationalism Scale. As a result, these scales provide a more precise representation of the complexity of Catalan and Basque identity. While the *unipolar* design of the CIS effectively highlights the polarisation of national identity segments in terms of their acceptance or rejection of peripheral nationalism, *bipolar* designs, such as those employed by the CEO and Euskobarómetro, indicate that non-nationalists tend to be less polarised, as although they oppose peripheral nationalism, they do not necessarily adopt an equally extreme counter-position. This contrasts with the CIS scale, where its unidimensional approach may reduce the visibility of more moderate positions within these identities and fail to fully reflect the complex identity landscape of Catalonia and the Basque Country.

The asymmetry in positioning between the *bipolar* and *unipolar* scales may stem from complementary supply and demand factors. On one hand, peripheral nationalism aims to promote a distinct and exclusive identity, advocating for greater au-

tonomy or independence at the institutional level (Canal, 2018; De Pablo and Mees, 2005; Llera, 1999). Consequently, it naturally fosters greater polarisation, aligning with the “imperative of homogeneity” (Dekker *et al.*, 2003), among nationalists. This stands in contrast to the less conflictual and constitutionally integrated identity of dual-identifying and Spanish-identifying individuals, which is inherently more pluralistic. On the other hand, nationalist mobilisation is often driven by the perception—whether real or imagined—of a threat to one’s own identity (Canal, 2018; Juaristi, 1997; Schatz, Staub and Lavine, 1999). This contrasts with non-nationalists, whose identity has been marginalised in the Basque Country due to the impact of terrorism (Llera and Leonisio, 2017; Llera, García and León-Ranero, 2022) and weakened by the historical fragility of Spanish national identity (Álvarez, 2005; De Riquer, 2001). As a result, non-nationalists have struggled to develop a proactive, rather than reactive, political project to promote their identity in opposition to nationalism (Canal, 2018; León-Ranero, 2024).

This finding has important implications, as the choice of measurement tool can significantly influence how identity-based polarisation is understood. If inappropriate measurement tools are used in complex identity contexts, there is a risk of underestimating or misinterpreting the identity dynamics of regions experiencing centre-periphery tensions. Thus, while further validation is needed using individual-level survey data that integrate both scale designs, the findings of this approximate study suggest that *bipolar* scales, such as those employed by the CEO and Eusko-barómetro, may be better suited for analysing identity-based polarisation in Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia.

7. Bibliography

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Notes

- 1 This study adopts this term for the Minimum–Maximum Nationalism Scale.
- 2 This designation was previously used by Professor Francisco J. Llera (Llera, Leonisio, García and Pérez, 2014) for the Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale.
- 3 This Institute applied the 0–10 scale in 2008 and, from 2015 onwards, adopted the format mentioned. The 2015 data point has been excluded from the graph as it does not contain independent measurements for the ERC, since it was integrated into Junts pel Sí.
- 4 Additionally, the Basque Government’s Sociological Prospection Office has conducted Basque Sociometers since 1996. They also include the variable as applied by the CIS. However, these have been excluded from the analysis due to the unavailability of microdata. This lack of transparency in a public socio–political research institution is noteworthy.
- 5 With the exception of 1997, 1998, 2017 and 2019, when only one survey wave was conducted annually.
- 6 The following studies have been integrated: 1978, 1987, 1998, 2033, 2137, 2192, 2199, 2373, 2374, 2410, 2543, 2660, 2852, 2857, 2965, 2970, 3113, 3202 and 3314. For bivariate and multivariate analyses, and to enhance comparability with CEO data, only studies 2965, 2970, 3113, 3202 and 3314 were selected.
- 7 The following studies have been integrated: 2096, 2116, 2120, 2282, 2296, 2304, 2308, 2407, 2414, 2421, 2593, 2598, 2601, 2784, 2795, 2959, 2964, 3154, 3275 and 3293.
- 8 The following studies have been integrated: 2036, 2052, 2067, 2070, 2239, 2263, 2295, 2434, 2603, 2608, 2611, 2783, 2796, 2958, 2963, 3155 and 3276.
- 9 The following studies have been integrated: 746, 774, 795, 804, 816, 826, 835, 850, 857 and 863.
- 10 The following studies have been integrated: 1995–05, 1995–11, 1997, 1998, 1999–05, 1999–11, 2000–05, 2000–11, 2001–05, 2001–11, 2002–05, 2002–11, 2003–05, 2003–11, 2004–05, 2004–11, 2005–05, 2005–11, 2006–05, 2006–11, 2007–05, 2007–11, 2008–05, 2008–11, 2009–05, 2009–11, 2010–05, 2010–11, 2011–05, 2011–11, 2012–05, 2012–11, 2013–05, 2013–11, 2014–05, 2015, 2016–05, 2016–11, 2017, 2018–05, 2018–11 and 2019.
- 11 The integrated studies are: 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023.
- 12 Issues stemming from this change related to the interpretation, distribution and variations at extreme points should be noted. All results should be interpreted with these implications in mind.

- 13 The Galician case has been excluded due to the availability of only a unipolar measurement of identity-based polarisation.
- 14 The “CiU” category includes all successor political brands, such as Junts per Catalunya. Junts pel Sí, the coalition formed for the 2015 Catalan elections, has been excluded as it combined the post-Convergence space with ERC.
- 15 Sartori’s polarisation index (Ocaña and Oñate, 1999) has been applied, though its calculation has been limited to relevant parties within the system. In Catalonia, this includes the aggregated non-nationalist right and ERC; in the Basque Country, it includes the non-nationalist right and IA; and in Galicia, it includes the non-nationalist right and the BNG.
- 16 In the model based on the CIS Catalonia dataset and given that CEO data was only available from 2017 onwards, data prior to this date have been excluded to ensure a consistent temporal framework.
- 17 It is important to note that the bipolar scales used in Catalonia (Catalan Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale) and the Basque Country (Nationalism–Spanish Nationalism Scale) differ in how they label the peripheral identity. However, it is assumed that respondents interpret the scales in a comparable manner, as confirmed by the results.

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