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Culture Wars, GAL/TAN Positioning and Affective Polarisation in Spain

Batallas culturales, posicionamientos GAL/TAN y polarización afectiva en España

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the GAL/TAN dimension (*Green-Alternative-Libertarian vs Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist*) and its implications for sociocultural polarisation and emerging political agendas. Using a strictly quantitative approach based on survey data from Spanish voters, the study analyses positions on key issues such as feminism, environmentalism, immigration and gender-based violence. The objective is to identify the variables that shape these positions and to assess their impact on levels of affective polarisation. The findings indicate that issues linked to the GAL/TAN axis exacerbate socio-cultural divisions and heighten hostility between partisan groups. Moreover, the role of age and gender in GAL/TAN positioning underscores how culture wars primarily manifest as generational and gender-based conflicts. This study contributes to the broader debate on the GAL/TAN dimension, offering empirical evidence from the Spanish context and highlighting how the growing salience of these issues intensifies political and social divisions.

KEYWORDS: affective polarisation; GAL/TAN; ideology; post-materialism; culture wars; issue-based polarisation.

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RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la dimensión GAL/TAN (*Green-Alternative-Libertarian vs. Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist*) y sus implicaciones para la polarización sociocultural y las nuevas agendas políticas. Con un enfoque estrictamente cuantitativo, basado en datos de encuestas realizadas a electores españoles, se examinan los posicionamientos en temas como feminismo, ecologismo, inmigración y violencia de género. El objetivo es identificar las variables que influyen en estos posicionamientos y su impacto en los niveles de polarización afectiva. Los resultados indican que los temas vinculados al eje GAL/TAN potencian las divisiones socioculturales y favorecen un aumento de la hostilidad entre grupos partidistas. Por otro lado, la influencia de la edad y del sexo en los posicionamientos GAL/TAN muestra cómo las batallas culturales se configuran esencialmente como conflictos generacionales y de género. Este trabajo contribuye al debate general sobre la dimensión GAL/TAN, aportando evidencia empírica para el caso español y destacando cómo estos asuntos, al ganar protagonismo, intensifican la división política y social.

PALABRAS CLAVE: polarización afectiva; GAL/TAN; ideología; posmaterialismo; batallas culturales; polarización temática.

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, the processes of differentiation and contrast between political parties in major Western democracies have increasingly incorporated post-materialist elements¹, giving rise to cultural and identity-based conflicts in response to a new order of values (Inglehart and Abramson, 1999; Guth and Nelsen, 2021; Blumberg, 2024). In contexts of prosperity and high levels of development, the likelihood of major programmatic conflicts in the economic sphere diminishes, as these issues become less pressing—or no longer an urgent necessity—for a working class that is increasingly fragmented in terms of both status and interests. Likewise, the widespread coverage of basic needs brings new non-material concerns to the public agenda—particularly during periods of economic prosperity—while economic debates increasingly revolve around complex and technical issues inherent to financial capitalism, which acquire an ideologically ambiguous significance. It is often difficult to establish identity-symbolic distinctions around certain economic decisions or positions, whereas it is far easier to delineate left and right in cultural issues. Economic policy has reached a high level of sophistication, whereas cultural issues are more readily processed and allow for simpler responses, in which various cognitive shortcuts of group or moral origin can operate with greater clarity (Johnston and Wronski, 2015).

In this context, alongside the traditional labour and conservative parties—reflecting the capital/labour conflict—new political formations have emerged, with varying degrees of success. These include green and new left parties, inspired by the post-Marxist positions of the Frankfurt School, as well as authoritarian movements ranging from post-fascism to the radical right, which react against the progress of feminism, multiculturalism and the rights of the LGBTQI+ community (Kitschelt, 1988; Weeks and Allen, 2023). As a result, party competition in post-industrial

societies has moved away from the unidimensionality associated with economic-distributive logic, making it necessary to consider positions on emerging post-materialist cultural values as a decisive factor in ideological classification (Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2019). This shift has given rise to a new transnational cleavage centred on two culturally based positions: the TAN pole—traditionalist, authoritarian and nationalist—and the GAL pole—green, alternative and libertarian (Bayerlein, 2021; Crulli, 2023). Some scholars argue that in more developed economies, GAL/TAN values, within the logic of post-materialist (GAL) and materialist (TAN) orientations, already play a crucial role in explaining political behaviour (Henn, Oldfield and Hart, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

However, it is not only that cultural issues are increasingly shaping the political agenda or that they are highly relevant for understanding the contemporary operational meaning of the terms left and right (Smith and Boas, 2024; Kriesi *et al.*, 2006). They are also exerting a significant influence on the climate of affective polarisation. Recent research on the causes of growing affective polarisation in democratic societies repeatedly raises the question of the extent to which certain issues or policies contribute most decisively to increasing interparty hostility (Han, 2023). This concern has been addressed with broad consensus, highlighting how culturally based issues, which carry significant moral and identity-related connotations, tend to provoke greater affective tensions (Harteveld, 2021; Gidron, Adams and Horne, 2023). Unlike economic issues, cultural topics tap into the deeply held convictions of specific groups, imbued with strong symbolic significance (Ryan, 2023). By challenging deeply rooted values or lifestyles, these issues strike at the core of personal identity and foster greater emotional engagement among citizens in the political struggle, which is framed as a moralised defence of in-group beliefs (D'Amore, Van Zomeren and Koudenburg, 2022). When addressing economic problems, voters tend to adopt a more pragmatic and rational approach, seeking their own benefit. In contrast, cultural conflicts generate more irreconcilable differences, stemming from incompatible world views, which affect both the in-group's position and individual self-esteem (Han, 2023).

Although the debate on the impact of culture wars on political competition in post-industrial economies remains intense, relatively little evidence exists on this phenomenon in Spain. The country's persistent economic challenges—including severe recessions with significant consequences for the labour market—may have tempered the prominence of post-materialist debates. Notwithstanding this, in this article, we analyse Spanish voters' positions on various issues—feminism, environmentalism, immigration and gender-based violence—linked to the GAL/TAN axis, exploring the variables that influence these positions and how they may shape levels of affective polarisation. Taken together, we provide an overview of some of the key culture wars shaping Spain's political agenda and their contribution to the climate of division between different partisan groups.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. On the GAL/TAN dimension and its implications: socio-cultural polarisation and emerging agendas

The ideological dimension of GAL/TAN was first introduced in the early 21st century by scholars such as Hooghe *et al.* (2002) to explain public opinion on European integration. These authors observed that scores on the GAL/TAN scale were more relevant in predicting variations in opinions on European integration than left-right positioning, thereby paving the way for new analytical models. It subsequently became evident that the GAL/TAN ideological divide was deeply linked to the process of globalisation, as it not only set libertarians against traditionalists but also cosmopolitans against communitarians (Bornschier, 2010; Wagner *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, a new dimension of political competition emerged, associated with issues such as environmentalism, cultural diversity, immigration and lifestyle choices.

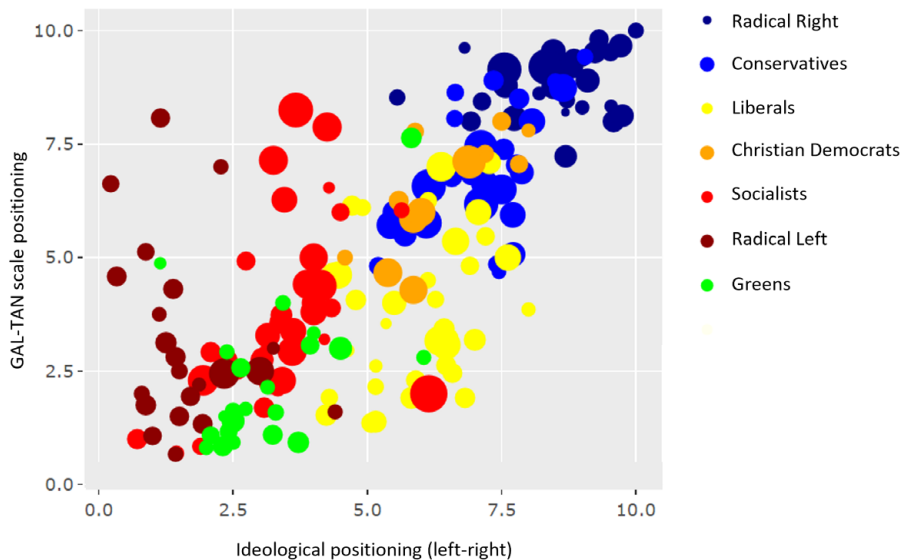
This conflict between post-materialists and materialists was clearly reflected in the opposition between progressive projects and the nationalist traditionalism of the radical right at the TAN pole, which frequently also embraced populist positions (Charron, Lapuente and Rodríguez-Pose, 2022). Consequently, the ideological scale constructed around the GAL/TAN poles was designed to represent a socio-cultural conflict that does not necessarily align with individuals' economic values. For this reason, the preferred indicators for measuring this dimension include attitudes towards immigration, sexual minorities, environmental protection and religious values (Kekkonen, Kaweckí and Himmelroos, 2024). The positioning on these issues reflects a new cleavage driven by socio-demographic changes that have reshaped the composition of political communities. Among the most notable factors are the intensification of migration flows and the resulting increase in ethnic diversity, rising levels of education and the widening of generational contrasts, as people of increasingly different ages coexist within the same space (Ford and Jennings, 2020). Particular emphasis has been placed on the impact of educational attainment on socio-cultural divisions, as evidence suggests that voters with more post-materialist or pro-GAL views generally have higher levels of education than pro-TAN voters (Hooghe, Marks and Kamphorst, 2024). Other studies indicate that LGBTQI+ individuals, young people and women are more inclined towards cosmopolitan values and GAL-aligned positions (Montero and Torcal, 1995; Hooghe and Marks, 2022).

Building on this debate, scholars have proposed the concepts of the cultural left (represented by the GAL pole) and the cultural right (represented by the TAN pole), thereby moving beyond the traditional left-right framework, which is more commonly associated with economic issues (Rovny *et al.*, 2022). This perspective introduces a new two-dimensional reality, in which individuals may strongly support state regulation of the economy or the provision of basic goods by the state while simultaneously rejecting multiculturalism, the erosion of national

sovereignty or feminist claims, among other issues. Since these voters would be—using common terminology—“socially conservative but economically left-wing”, it becomes necessary to consider new axes of ideological classification². However, the limitations of this argument must also be acknowledged—namely, the evidence suggesting that individuals positioned on the cultural right are generally also aligned with the economic right, calling into question the validity of the bidimensionality hypothesis. As noted by García Sanz, Llamazares and Manrique García (2018, pp. 3–4), the correlation between party positions on the GAL/TAN dimension, the economic dimension and their overall left-right placement is 0.89 in Spain and even higher in other European countries such as France and Italy. This argument is further supported by Graphs 1 and 2, based on data from the *Chapel Hill Expert Survey* (CHES), which encompass both Spain and a significant number of European Union countries. In contrast, this pattern does not hold in Scandinavian democracies, where the correlation between left-right positioning and the GAL/TAN dimension is significantly lower, remaining below 0.30 (Polk *et al.*, 2017). This may help explain why academic interest in the impact of the GAL/TAN dimension has been particularly strong in these countries, which are also characterised by high levels of wealth and social welfare.

Graph 1

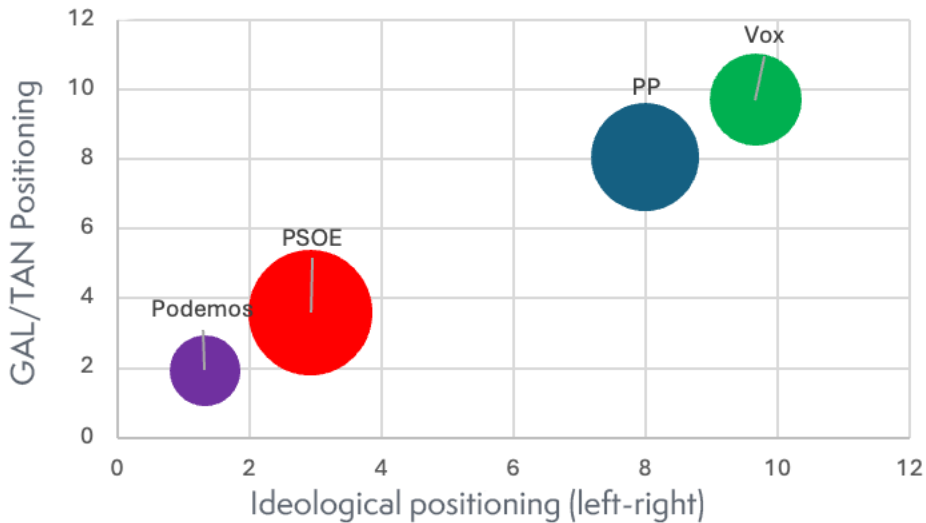
Positioning of political families on the GAL/TAN and left-right ideological scales (2019)



Note: The graph includes all political parties from EU member states in 2019, along with Norway, Switzerland and Turkey.
Source: CHES, 2019.

Graph 2

Positioning of the four main political parties in Spain on the GAL/TAN and left-right ideological scales (2019)



Source: own research based on CHES, 2019.

Beyond the debate on the bidimensionality of the ideological axis, there is broader consensus on the capacity of issues related to culture wars and post-materialist values—those situated within the GAL/TAN tension—to drive higher levels of polarisation. Even if we accept that positioning on these issues reflects the classic left-right conflict rather than a new competitive order, it remains evident that when such topics dominate the agenda, levels of tension and confrontation are higher than in economic debates. For instance, Kawecki (2022) demonstrates how affective polarisation increased in Finland as the GAL/TAN dimension gained greater prominence in the political agenda. Similarly, Kekkonen, Kawecki and Himmelroos (2024) find that extreme positions on the GAL/TAN axis have been as strong a predictor of affective polarisation as ideological extremism measured through the left-right dichotomy, but only in the past decade. Likewise, Björkstéd and Herne (2023) argue that voters who support parties positioned at the extremes of the GAL/TAN axis exhibit distinct personality traits and psychological profiles, further intensifying polarisation between them. More recently, Dassonneville *et al.* (2024) identified a stark divide between TAN parties and all other parties in Western Europe, as well as particularly pronounced polarisation between these parties and green formations.

The recognition of the GAL/TAN axis as a predictor of affective polarisation has gained increasing relevance in academic literature, particularly based on evidence from European democracies (Kekkonen and Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Vachudova, 2021). Reactionary cultural discourses seek to challenge the hegemony of progressive forces, which advocate for changes in various aspects of life, including diet, gender roles, family structures, secularisation and refugee reception. Both sides perceive their opponents as a threat in a debate that tends towards abstraction and the opposition of largely non-negotiable values. These debates ultimately give rise to a broader reflection on the desired model of society—that is, on who we are or who we aspire to be—as well as on the lifestyles and behaviours that should be regarded as socially acceptable. This ontological dilemma fosters affective hostility towards out-groups, which are becoming increasingly distanced from one another in terms of lifestyles, preferences and normative worldviews (Ollroge and Sawert, 2022). Politics thus becomes a reflection of broader trends in social segregation, further reinforcing the existence of opposing cognitive frameworks. Ultimately, politics is exerting an ever-greater influence on the personal sphere and on individuals' most deeply held beliefs, sidelining less emotionally charged or more technical policy matters (Rojo and Crespo, 2023).

2.2. Culture wars in contemporary Spain

In 1991, James Hunter published *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, which became the seminal study in the field of cultural conflict. This book, grounded in a Gramscian framework, meticulously examines how the moral opposition between orthodoxy and progressivism was emerging as the primary axis of socio-political division in the United States. This overarching conflict took shape in debates over issues such as abortion, the content of school curricula and conceptions of authority. When analysing the positions of Spaniards on various issues situated along the GAL/TAN axis or reflecting emerging post-materialist values, it is essential to first briefly consider the scope of culture wars in Spain. In the Spanish context, discussions of cultural conflict inevitably lead to key historical moments marked by a clash between radically different world views—modernity versus tradition—such as the Spanish Civil War (Bericat Alastuey, 2003). Throughout these periods, opposing positions on religion, civil rights and plurinationality have remained central—issues that continue to be relevant today alongside others that have emerged as a result of globalisation and new social movements (NSMs).

By the late 20th century, Montero and Torcal (1995) had already identified the cultural shift underway in Spain, marked by a significant decline in materialist profiles and the channelling of post-materialist values among younger cohorts through the Izquierda Unida coalition. This coalition gradually evolved from its roots in traditional, materialist communist leftism into a new discourse that was more pacifist, eco-socialist and eco-feminist—cosmopolitan in its defence of multiculturalism while also critical of European (economic) integration. Since the 1990s, cultural conflicts in Spain have been steadily reactivated, with the first term of Prime Minister Rodríguez Zapatero (2004–2008) being particularly intense in this

regard. This period saw the passage of the Historical Memory Law, the Organic Law for the Effective Equality of Women and Men and the legal recognition of same-sex marriage, as well as reforms in education policy and abortion regulation (Álvarez-Benavides and Jiménez Aguilar, 2021). Similarly, in 2005, Spain undertook a large-scale regularisation of immigrants, followed a year later by the reform of the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia. The backlash against this progressive agenda from the most conservative sectors of the Spanish right—including the Episcopal Conference and other ultra-Catholic groups such as HazteOír—laid the groundwork for the counter-revolutionary programme of Vox. The party emerged in response to what it perceived as cultural assimilation imposed on a mainstream right that, in its view, had been excessively lenient towards Rodríguez Zapatero's transformative project (Álvarez-Benavides and Jiménez Aguilar, 2021). Consequently, the departure of Vox's leaders from the Partido Popular stemmed from disagreements over the party's strategy on moral and cultural issues—a reaction against the rise of *anti-Spanish* movements and the perceived passivity of Mariano Rajoy—though no incompatibility with economic programmes was ever expressed (Garrido Rubia, Martínez Rodríguez and Mora Rodríguez, 2022). The emergence of Vox resembled a spiritual quest to reclaim the lost essence of the Spanish right.

Since 2018, Spain's political landscape has included Vox, a nationalist and traditionalist radical right party firmly positioned within the TAN pole (see Graph 2). However, a major green party as a direct cultural counterweight has yet to emerge. At its inception, Podemos sought to transcend “class-based material interests” to construct a popular and cross-cutting hegemonic subject (Franzé, 2017), though its discourse also reflected the economic discontent generated by the financial crisis. Over time, the left-wing grouping that emerged from the 15-M anti-austerity movement abandoned populism and returned to the left-right axis, shifting its focus to post-materialist issues such as feminism and minority rights. Simultaneously, Vox positioned itself as an alternative to *woke* culture—a term originally used by the *Black Lives Matter* movement but later co-opted pejoratively by the radical right to criticise so-called “cultural Marxist” movements advocating for greater representation and protection of racial and sexual minorities (López Bunyasi and Watts Smith, 2019; Davies and MacRae, 2023)—and to political correctness, in response to the growing influence of GAL values in the struggle for social hegemony (Galais and Pérez-Rajó, 2023).

Anti-feminism, criticism of so-called “gender ideology”, nativism, opposition to separatism and the defence of Catholicism as the core of national identity have become central tenets of the conservative reaction against the cultural advance of the New Left in Spain. These elements are key in today's culture wars, expressed in dichotomies such as “communism vs freedom” (popularised by Isabel Díaz Ayuso during the 2021 Madrid regional elections) or through figures such as Argentine President Javier Milei. In both cases, there is a notable intertwining of ultra-liberal economic programmes with ultra-conservative cultural agendas, reinforcing initial scepticism regarding the bidimensionality of the ideological axis in Southern European countries.

3. Hypotheses and objectives

Having established the context and theoretical framework, the primary objective of this study is to analyse how Spaniards position themselves on key issues associated with the GAL/TAN dimension and to identify the variables that shape these positions. Additionally, this research aims to understand how these positions influence levels of affective polarisation towards political parties.

First, a general overview will be provided of how Spaniards position themselves on key issues linked to the GAL/TAN dimension, based on data from the survey used in this study. The topics examined include perspectives on feminist policies, environmentalism, immigration and gender-based violence. The goal is to describe these positions both in aggregate terms and across different respondent groups, considering socio-demographic variables such as gender, age, employment status and educational attainment, as well as political predispositions such as ideology and party affiliation or voting preferences. Second, the study will seek to identify which variables significantly influence respondents' positions on the GAL/TAN axis. Finally, an analysis will be conducted to determine which issues within the GAL/TAN framework have the greatest impact on individual affective polarisation.

In line with these objectives, the following hypotheses are proposed for validation:

H1: Positions on issues associated with the GAL/TAN dimension vary significantly depending on an individual's self-placement on the left-right ideological scale and their party affiliation or voting preference.

H2: A significant divide exists in GAL/TAN positions based on gender and age groups. Women and younger individuals tend to adopt more progressive (GAL) stances, while men and older individuals are more likely to lean towards conservative (TAN) positions.

H3: Extreme positions on the GAL/TAN dimension have a significant impact on partisan-based affective polarisation. Among the issues analysed, polarised attitudes towards feminism and immigration are expected to contribute most to intensifying affective polarisation, whereas positions on environmentalism and gender-based violence—due to their greater potential for social consensus—are anticipated to have a lesser impact.

4. Methodology

The data source for this study is the Second National Survey on Political Polarisation, conducted by the CEMOP Special Research Group at the University of Murcia. A total of 1,236 interviews³ were conducted using the CATI system between 25 April and 18 May 2022, targeting a representative sample of the Spanish population aged 18 and over.

Given the nature of the data source, this study follows a strictly quantitative approach. It begins with a brief descriptive analysis outlining the distribution of the key variables used, followed by bivariate and multivariate analyses to achieve the defined objectives and test the proposed hypotheses. More specifically, the study applies binary logistic regression and multiple linear regression techniques.

Binary logistic regression is employed to explain the factors that influence or promote TAN positions relative to those that could be classified as GAL, based on a series of independent variables such as self-placement on the ideological scale (measured from 1, “left”, to 10, “right”), voting intention or party affiliation (PP, PSOE, Unidas Podemos or Vox), recoded age groups (18–30, 31–44, 45–64, 65+), gender, educational attainment (ordinal) and employment status (employed vs all other categories). Regarding the dependent variable, an aggregate index was constructed from the four analysed topics. As the four positioning variables were measured on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 represents a fully progressive (GAL) stance and 10 a fully conservative (TAN) stance, the first step was to calculate the average score before binarising the results. For this, a value of 0 was assigned to individuals with a composite scale score of 5 or lower, and a value of 1 was assigned to individuals scoring between 5.1 and 10. The remaining cases were excluded from the analysis. Although this recoding allows for a clear distinction between individuals positioned on both dimensions, it inevitably results in a loss of information regarding the intensity of these positions. While our objective is not to differentiate individuals with more moderate positions from those with more extreme positions on both dimensions—thus making it impractical to retain the original scale—it is important to note that the presented results stem from grouping individuals with varying attitudinal intensities within the same category. This approach prioritises distinguishing them based on their general dimensional positioning rather than estimating the degree of extremism in their views.

Regarding multiple linear regression, the scale variables related to GAL/TAN topics are included as independent explanatory variables, introduced into the model as *dummy* variables (assigned a value of 1 when the respondent holds extreme positions, i.e., 0–2 or 8–10, and 0 in all other cases within the aggregate index). As control variables, the model incorporates self-placement on the ideological scale and feelings towards the four main parties, measured using a thermometer scale ranging from 0 (“rejection”) to 10 (“support”). The dependent variable represents the level of affective polarisation, using political parties as

the reference point. It is calculated using the DIPA formula (Crespo, Mora and Rojo, 2024), where individuals are first assigned to a partisan group based on their voting intention or party affiliation. The DIPA score is then derived by summing the absolute differences between the rating assigned to their in-group party and those assigned to all out-group parties on the feeling thermometer. Given the definition of this indicator, the regression analysis is conducted only for voters who express voting intention or affinity towards the PSOE, PP, Unidas Podemos or Vox.

Finally, regarding the operationalisation of GAL/TAN-related issues, the issue-based positioning scales included in the reference survey were formulated as follows:

- On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means “women continue to face discrimination, and it is therefore necessary to continue promoting feminist policies that favour women”, and 10 means “feminism, rather than defending equality, seeks to attack men”, where would you place yourself on this scale?
- On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means “priority should be given to environmental protection, even if it leads to slower economic growth and some job losses”, and 10 means “economic growth and job creation should take precedence, even if it results in some environmental damage”, where would you place yourself?
- On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means “the state should allow unrestricted immigration into the country”, and 10 means “the state should close its borders and prohibit all immigration”, where would you place yourself?
- On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means “gender-based violence is a very serious problem, and the state must allocate all necessary resources to combat it”, and 10 means “gender-based violence does not exist, and the state should focus on other, more pressing issues”, where would you place yourself?

As observed, although the operationalisation is limited to a small number of specific topics, it covers—at least partially—the key axes of socio-cultural conflict that have emerged in Spain in recent years. These issues have played a significant role in structuring political competition and have been central in shaping preferences for emerging political parties.

5. Results

5.1. How do Spaniards position themselves on the GAL/TAN dimension?

Table 1 presents a descriptive analysis of how Spaniards position themselves on various issues associated with the GAL/TAN axis, displaying the mean, standard deviation and number of valid responses for each evaluated question. The results indicate that, on average, positions tend to lean slightly towards the GAL pole, though in some cases, a high standard deviation suggests a wide dispersion in responses, leading to a relative balance between progressive and traditionalist positions. Specifically, the mean score of 4.57 on the feminist policy scale, which measures perceptions of the need for policies addressing persistent gender inequality, suggests a slight inclination towards recognising the necessity of such policies. However, the high standard deviation (3.10) highlights considerable divergence on this issue. Similarly, the mean score of 4.56 on the immigration policy scale suggests that Spaniards are moderately divided between more open and restrictive stances on immigration. Regarding environmental protection versus economic needs, the mean score of 4.24 indicates a somewhat stronger tendency towards GAL or post-materialist views compared to the previous issues. Finally, on the gender-based violence scale, which assesses the perception of its importance as a public issue, the mean score of 1.74 and the low standard deviation indicate a clear inclination towards recognising gender-based violence as a serious problem requiring state intervention. This suggests a stronger consensus on this issue compared to the other three topics. Unlike other areas of debate, this issue does not appear to be highly divisive, as there is a broadly shared understanding across diverse segments of society.

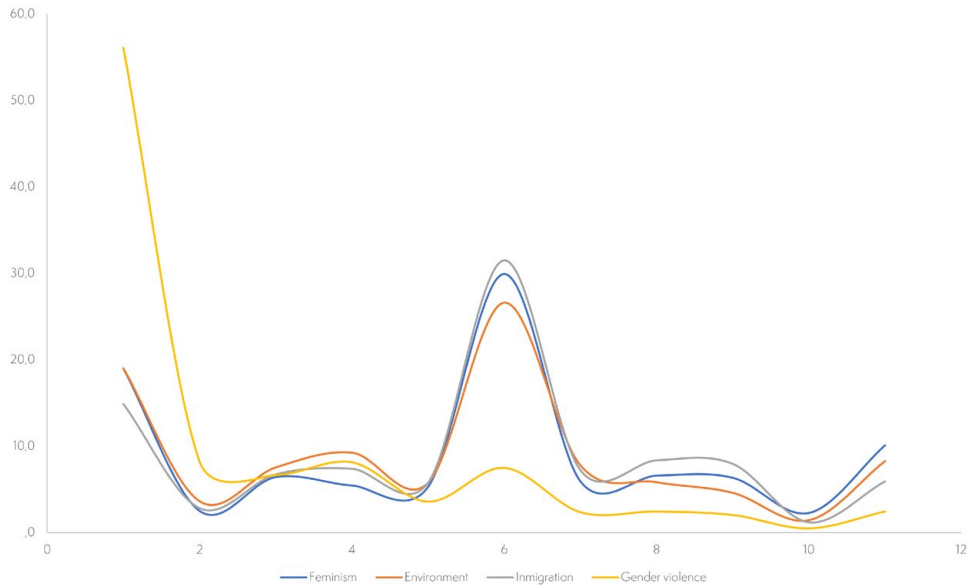
Table 1
Positioning of Spaniards on the GAL/TAN dimensions

	Mean	Standard deviation	Valid N
Need for feminist policies	4.57	3.10	1,226
Environmental protection	4.24	2.99	1,229
Immigration policy	4.56	2.79	1,228
Importance of gender-based violence	1.74	2.59	1,228

Source: own research based on data from the Second National Survey on Political Polarisation, conducted by the CEMOP Research Group (2022).

Graph 3

Representation of the distribution of responses (%) across the 0-10 scale for each analysed issue



Source: own research based on data from the Second National Survey on Political Polarisation, conducted by the CEMOP Research Group (2022).

Additionally, Table 2 shows that Spaniards' positioning on the GAL/TAN dimensions is significantly associated with gender, age, voting intention or party affiliation, and self-placement on the left-right ideological axis. These findings highlight notable socio-political divisions, which are consistent with previous theoretical research. Regarding education level, a greater tendency towards the GAL pole is observed as educational attainment increases, except in matters of immigration and gender-based violence, where no significant differences are found. In terms of employment status, differences between categories are less pronounced and appear to be mediated by age.

The sharpest contrasts emerge between ideological extremes and among voters of Vox and Unidas Podemos, with statistically significant differences at a 99% confidence level. Women, young people, PSOE and Unidas Podemos supporters, and those who identify ideologically with the left tend to position themselves firmly at the GAL extreme, expressing stronger support for feminist policies, environmental protection, open immigration policies and the recognition of gender-based violence as a priority issue. In contrast, men, older individuals, PP and Vox voters, and those with a conservative ideological orientation are more aligned with the TAN extreme,

exhibiting markedly more traditionalist, materialist and non-libertarian positions on all these issues. Among political affiliations, Unidas Podemos voters and those identified with the far left (positions 1–2 on the ideological scale) are the most likely to position themselves at the GAL extreme, while Vox voters and those identifying with the far right (positions 9–10) show a clear tendency towards the TAN extreme. These results confirm that new political parties most distinctly reflect the socio-cultural cleavage, which allows them to differentiate themselves within their respective ideological blocs and lends coherence to their political platforms.

The contrasts presented in Table 2 underscore the polarisation surrounding these issues in Spain and highlight the crucial role of political identity and socio-demographic characteristics in shaping citizens' attitudes on the GAL/TAN dimension. In this regard, it is important to emphasise the divergences between younger and older individuals, pointing to a generational divide that may have implications for consensus-building and the legitimacy of certain public policies. This intergenerational conflict, as a foundation of culture wars and cultural backlash, was already identified by scholars such as Norris and Inglehart (2019), demonstrating how generational replacement fosters the adoption of new values, while earlier cohorts, less attuned to these shifts, continue to coexist. The coexistence of cohorts educated and socialised under divergent moral frameworks further exacerbates perceptions of polarisation.

Table 2

Positioning of Spaniards on the GAL/TAN dimensions by gender, age, voting intention or party affiliation, ideology, education and employment status

		Need for feminist policies due to persistent gender inequality			Environmental protection vs economy			Unrestricted immigration policy vs closed borders			Importance of gender-based violence as a public issue vs denial of gender-based violence		
		Mean	SD	SS	Mean	SD	SS	Mean	SD	SS	Mean	SD	SS
Gender	Male	4.71	3.07	N.s.	4.13	2.99	N.s.	4.78	2.80	***	2.34	2.83	***
	Female	4.45	3.13		4.34	2.98		4.36	2.76		1.19	2.21	
Age	18–30	4.12	3.04	***	3.67	2.62	***	3.54	2.56	***	1.51	2.18	N.s.
	31–44	4.17	2.98		3.88	2.75		4.65	2.54		1.77	2.42	
	45–64	4.92	3.13		4.20	3.05		4.84	2.79		1.76	2.65	
	65 and over	4.70	3.14		4.94	3.18		4.64	2.99		1.82	2.85	
	PP	5.62	2.71	***	5.05	2.69	***	5.61	2.36	***	2.31	2.84	***
Voting intention or party affiliation	PSOE	3.90	2.73		4.01	3.00		3.81	2.64		1.14	2.12	
	Vox	7.13	3.14		5.41	2.91		6.96	2.41		3.59	3.28	
	Unidas Podemos (includes IU)	2.71	2.88		2.68	2.80		2.57	2.26		.75	1.43	
Ideology	Left	2.86	3.09	***	3.10	3.22	***	2.84	2.75	***	.57	1.49	***
	Centre Left	3.57	2.64		3.57	2.51		3.66	2.27		1.17	1.80	
	Centre	5.05	2.74		4.39	2.74		4.98	2.52		1.77	2.48	
	Centre Right	6.13	2.82		5.32	2.62		6.20	2.28		3.23	3.05	
	Right	6.21	3.48		6.01	3.53		6.21	3.12		3.18	3.73	
Education	No formal education	5.44	3.36	***	7.56	3.88	**	4.88	4.02	N.s.	1.33	2.83	N.s.
	Primary education	5.14	3.16		4.62	3.17		4.98	3.13		1.69	2.72	
	Secondary education (completed compulsory sec. ed.)	5.10	3.31		4.51	3.52		4.85	3.26		1.57	2.75	
	Secondary education (completed <i>bachillerato</i> [A-level equiv.])	4.96	3.03		4.19	2.94		4.60	2.76		1.91	2.61	
	Vocational training	4.76	2.86		4.14	2.75		4.67	2.74		1.74	2.50	
	University studies	4.07	3.14		4.14	2.98		4.33	2.62		1.72	2.57	
	Employment status	4.55	3.11	N.s.	4.02	2.84	***	4.54	2.73	N.s.	1.75	2.53	N.s.
	Other	4.61	3.09		4.54	3.16		4.58	2.86		1.74	2.66	

SS: Statistical significance

Note 1: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; N.s.: Not significant. Note 2: For bivariate contrasts, a t -test was used when the independent variable was dichotomous, and ANOVA when it was multicategorical.

Source: own research based on data from the Second National Survey on Political Polarisation, conducted by the CEMOP Research Group (2022).

The bivariate correlation analysis in Table 3 aligns with previous findings on “voting intention + party affinity” within the GAL/TAN dimension, confirming polarisation among supporters of different parties. Vox supporters are positioned at the TAN extreme, with strong associations particularly in immigration policy and feminism,

key issues for the party. Conversely, supporters of Unidas Podemos and PSOE align with the GAL extreme, with Unidas Podemos showing the highest intensity and both parties registering statistically significant negative correlations on the same issues.

Table 3
Correlation between party affinity and GAL/TAN dimensions

		Need for feminist policies due to persistent gender inequality	Environmental protection vs economy	Unrestricted immigration policy vs closed borders	Importance of gender-based violence as a public issue vs denial of gender-based violence
PSOE	Pearson correlation	-.269	-.095	-.260	-.186
	Sig. (bilateral)	.000	.001	.000	.000
	N	1203	1205	1203	1203
PP	Pearson correlation	.210	.204	.236	.177
	Sig. (bilateral)	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	1205	1206	1205	1205
Vox	Pearson correlation	.379	.241	.423	.327
	Sig. (bilateral)	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	1204	1206	1204	1204
Unidas Podemos	Pearson correlation	-.384	-.248	-.364	-.216
	Sig. (bilateral)	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	1200	1202	1200	1200

Note 1: Party affinity is measured on a thermometer scale from 0 (“rejection and antipathy”) to 10 (“sympathy and support”).
Source: own research based on data from the Second National Survey on Political Polarisation, conducted by the CEMOP Research Group (2022).

Those who identify with the PP also tend to lean towards the TAN extreme, albeit less strongly than Vox supporters. In summary, these findings further illustrate how the GAL/TAN axis serves as a key battleground for new political parties, which, within their respective ideological blocs, represent more alternative or socially disruptive positions in relation to hegemonic narratives. Meanwhile, traditional parties exhibit a weaker association with the GAL/TAN divide. However, this does not prevent them from aligning clearly along the axis according to their left-right ideological positioning. Finally, the salience of feminism and immigration underscores their polarising potential, in contrast to the more limited impact of environmentalism—which in Spain remains less politicised and does not provoke significant confrontations—and gender-based violence, which, despite being a subset of feminist discourse, appears to command broader societal consensus.

5.2. What factors influence positioning on the GAL/TAN axis?

The binary logistic regression conducted—whose results are presented in Table 4—confirms that positioning on the GAL/TAN dimension among Spaniards is significantly influenced by various socio-demographic and political variables. In particular, the variables “Voting intention + party affinity”, self-placement on the ideological scale and gender carry the greatest weight in determining positioning at either end of this axis. Cultural conflict both reflects and aligns with other political and social cleavages, while also potentially deepening them.

As anticipated in previous bivariate analyses, Vox voters tend to strongly align with the TAN extreme, while Unidas Podemos and PSOE voters position themselves significantly closer to the GAL extreme compared to PP voters. Additionally, political ideology exhibits a clear impact: those on the left tend to position themselves closer to the GAL extreme, whereas those who identify with the right are more likely to align with the TAN extreme. The GAL/TAN positions are deeply intertwined with the broader left-right ideological spectrum, such that left-right semantics effectively capture the GAL/TAN divide—which is not a separate or superior dimension, but rather a complementary or evolving framework. This finding may be explained by two possibilities: individuals may prioritise moral and cultural issues when defining their ideological identity, and, as highlighted by García Sanz, Llamazares and Manrique García (2018), the general ideological dimension, economic views and cultural positions are highly correlated in Spain, with only a small proportion of individuals displaying non-aligned bidimensional positions.

As previously mentioned, gender is a key factor in predicting opinions on the GAL/TAN axis, with women being less likely than men to align with the TAN extreme. Given that feminism is one of the most divisive partisan issues, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that gender is becoming an increasingly influential variable in shaping political attitudes and could even be considered a new political cleavage. Age also plays a role, as individuals over 65 tend to lean more towards the TAN extreme. By contrast, educational attainment and employment status do not exert a significant influence on this dimension. The limited impact of education represents a notable departure from the prevailing academic consensus. In the Spanish context, citizens’ values on culturally driven issues do not appear to be shaped by higher levels of education, sophistication or social status. Instead, they seem to be primarily influenced by the period in which individuals underwent political socialisation and their gender identity. At least, this is what the results indicate when the effect of educational attainment is controlled for other variables. The culture war in Spain can be effectively analysed within the classic ideological framework, with the two challenger parties serving as the clearest representatives of the competing moral paradigms. Moreover, gender and the contrast between older and younger generations emerge as significant predictors of individuals’ values on these issues. However, the overall explanatory power of the model is 32.7%, suggesting that additional variables not considered in this analysis may further clarify individual positioning on the GAL/TAN dimension. Future research should seek to complete these preliminary models to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Table 4

Factors influencing positioning on the GAL/TAN dimension

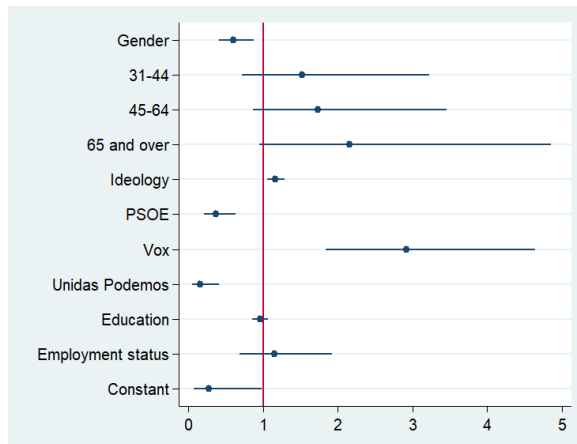
	B	SE and sig.	Exp(B)
Gender	-0.509	(0.192) ***	0.601
Age		N.s.	
31–44	0.416	(0.384) N.s.	1.516
45–64	0.546	(0.654) N.s.	1.727
65 and over	0.766	(0.415) *	2.152
Ideology	0.150	(0.051) ***	1.162
Voting intention + party affinity		***	
PSOE	-1.011	(.285) ***	0.364
Vox	1.071	(.237) ***	2.917
Unidas Podemos	-1.893	(.514) ***	0.151
Education	-0.043	(0.056) N.s.	0.958
Employment status	0.135	(0.264) N.s.	1.145
Constant	-1.347	(0.666) **	0.267
Nagelkerke R-squared	0.327		
Chi-squared	197.188 ***		
Overall predicted %	78		

Note 1: *** Significant at the 99% level; ** Significant at the 95% level; * Significant at the 90% level; N.s.: Not significant.
Note 2: In Voting intention + party affinity, the reference category is PP, and in Age, the reference category is 18–30 years.

Source: own research based on data from the Second National Survey on Political Polarisation, conducted by the CEMOP Research Group (2022).

Graph 4

Coefficient plot of the binary logistic regression model on the factors influencing positioning on the GAL/TAN dimension



Note: Odds Ratios with Confidence Intervals based on the results from Table 4. The reference category for age is 18–30 years, compared to 31–44 (2), 45–64 (3) and 65+ (4). The reference category for Voting intention + party affinity is PP, compared to PSOE (2), Vox (3) and Unidas Podemos (4).

Source: own research based on data from the Second National Survey on Political Polarisation, conducted by the CEMOP Research Group (2022).

5.3. Does positioning on the GAL/TAN dimensions influence affective polarisation among Spaniards?

Having established the factors that shape positioning on the GAL/TAN axis, it is important to take the analysis a step further to assess whether, as other scholars have suggested, these cultural issues also have a direct impact on levels of affective polarisation. The multiple linear regression analysis presented in Table 5 indicates that extreme positioning on GAL/TAN-related topics—particularly feminism and immigration—contributes to explaining affective polarisation towards political parties in Spain (H3). This effect persists even when controlling for political predispositions (party affiliation/rejection and ideological self-placement), which, as expected, play a crucial role in explaining the phenomenon.

Positions on feminism exhibit the highest coefficient, establishing it as one of the epicentres of affective-cultural tensions in Spain. Extreme attitudes on this issue significantly heighten affective partisan polarisation. Both feminism and immigration are highly divisive topics, fostering conflict and interparty hostility while opposing distinct moral frameworks. Regarding the control variables, affinity with Vox and PSOE emerges as a decisive factor, particularly in the case of Vox. The stronger the attachment to the radical right, the greater the level of affective polarisation. Partisan identity within the radical right reinforces in-group favouritism and out-group rejection biases. Moreover, the further right an individual positions themselves on the ideological spectrum, the higher their level of affective polarisation—a trend consistent with the coefficient observed in the feeling thermometer towards Vox.

However, the model accounts for only 10.7% of the variability in the DIPA indicator of affective polarisation, suggesting that additional factors not considered in this analysis also contribute significantly to the phenomenon. Nevertheless, these findings underscore the central role of the culture war over feminism and immigration, as well as the impact of extreme positions on the GAL/TAN axis in these issues. Even when controlling for political predispositions, these factors remain decisive in understanding the intensification of partisan-based affective polarisation. These results not only expand the available evidence on the impact of cultural issues on polarisation dynamics but also raise the question of whether the increasing prominence of these topics on the political agenda could further heighten affective polarisation. Conversely, if the objective is depolarisation and a reduction in emotional tensions, political parties should avoid making these demonstrably sensitive issues a permanent axis of confrontation. Along the same lines, one might hypothesise to what extent the current climate of hostility stems from an overemphasis on these types of issues. Agendas and issues matter. When their nature is predominantly moral, symbolic or identity-based, they are more likely to exacerbate intergroup conflict.

Table 5
Influence of GAL/TAN issues on affective polarisation towards political parties

	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	Sig.
	B	Standard error	Beta	
Need for feminist policies due to persistent gender inequality	1.915	.503	.136	***
Environmental protection vs economy	.606	.509	.043	N.s.
Unrestricted immigration policy vs closed borders	1.209	.520	.084	**
Importance of gender-based violence as a public issue vs denial of gender-based violence	.659	.586	.041	N.s.
PSOE affinity/rejection	.337	.105	.150	***
PP affinity/rejection	.002	.101	.001	N.s.
Vox affinity/rejection	.449	.098	.225	***
Unidas Podemos affinity/rejection	.063	.109	.028	N.s.
Ideology	.378	.136	.141	***
(Constant)	6.766	1.043		***
R-squared	.107			
ANOVA	F = 10.478***			

Note: *** Significant at the 99% level; ** Significant at the 95% level; N.s.: Not significant.
Source: own research based on data from the Second National Survey on Political Polarisation, conducted by the CEMOP Research Group (2022).

6. Conclusions

This study has examined the variables shaping citizens’ positioning on the GAL/TAN dimension in Spain. Partisan identity and self-placement on the left-right ideological spectrum have been confirmed as key predictors, leading to the conclusion that cultural issue positioning aligns consistently with the traditional ideological scale, thereby challenging the bidimensional analytical perspective. A defining characteristic of polarised societies is the alignment of multiple identities into a single mega-identity, eliminating contradictions or cross-loyalties that might otherwise diminish intergroup contrast (Torcal, 2023). Moreover, the importance of age and gender invites reflection on the extent to which culture wars in Spain manifest primarily as generational and gender-based conflicts. Notably, the association between women and the GAL pole suggests the emergence of a political cleavage based on gender identity, further reinforced by the centrality of feminism in structuring partisan affect.

Finally, this study confirms that extreme attitudes towards feminism and immigration significantly contribute to affective polarisation. Issues matter. Specifically, positioning at the extremes of the GAL/TAN scale on these two topics intensifies individual affective polarisation—a pattern not observed in environmental values or gender-based violence. While these latter two issues also fall within the GAL/TAN

divide, they appear to be more cross-cutting and less susceptible to emotionally charged politicisation. Although post-materialist debates have not been as central in Spain as in Scandinavian democracies or Germany, fully understanding the current political landscape requires incorporating the GAL/TAN axis into the analytical framework. Similarly, we can assert that the content of the political agenda is crucial to understanding the persistence of polarisation. A greater emphasis on feminist debates or the migration phenomenon is likely to deepen the climate of affective polarisation.

Future research should broaden the scope of issues considered in measuring the GAL/TAN dimension, incorporating topics such as historical memory, abortion, transgender rights, education models and animal rights, among others. Moreover, a comparative analysis of the effects of extreme attitudes in the economic sphere versus extreme attitudes in the cultural sphere remains a key area for further exploration. Such an analysis would help determine whether, when additional issues are considered, the autonomous impact of cultural issues on polarisation remains significant.

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Notes

1 The term post-materialism, originally coined by political scientist Ronald Inglehart in the 1970s, refers to new social values that emphasise issues beyond the economic and labour sphere, such as environmental concerns and minority rights. Additionally, post-materialism has been used to describe the positions represented by one of the poles of the GAL/TAN axis (specifically, the GAL pole), as indicated in the seminal work of Hooghe, Marks and Wilson (2002). The post-materialism vs traditionalism (or materialism) dichotomy generally applies to cultural issues that diverge from classic ideological-economic divisions, as evidenced by scholars such as Erzeel and Celis (2016) and Sandberg *et al.* (2019). Consequently, it is common to find interchangeable use of the terms GAL/TAN, post-materialism/materialism and culture wars (or battles).

2 The recent establishment of the BSW (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht – Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit) party in Germany provides a clear example of bidimensionality. This party holds left-wing economic positions while simultaneously adopting anti-immigration and anti-environmental policies.

3 The sampling design follows a stratified multi-stage strategy. Landline and mobile phone numbers were randomly selected within strata. The final selection of individuals was carried out using quotas based on gender and age. The strata were defined by cross-referencing Spain's 17 autonomous communities and two autonomous cities with number of inhabitants, classified into seven categories: less than or equal to 2,000 inhabitants; 2,001 to 10,000 inhabitants; 10,001 to 50,000 inhabitants; 50,001 to 100,000 inhabitants; 100,001 to 400,000 inhabitants; 400,001 to 1,000,000 inhabitants and more than 1,000,000 inhabitants. At a 95.5% confidence level (two sigmas) with $P = Q$, the actual margin of error for the full sample is $\pm 2.8\%$, assuming simple random sampling. The complete questionnaire, technical report, marginal data and microdata access are available at the following link: <https://www.cemopmurcia.es/estudios/polarizacion-politica/>.

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