

Affective polarization and consensus building among parliamentary elites

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Abstract

This article presents evidence that political representatives in Spain exhibit significant levels of affective polarization, drawing on data from a 2022-23 survey of Spanish MPs in the national and regional parliaments. These attitudes, measured by affective social distance from supporters of other parties, hinder parliamentary agreements but only in regional parliaments, a tendency that is especially visible among leftist and nationalist representatives towards supporters of the new radical right-wing party (VOX). By contrast, there is no evidence that affective social affinity is associated with less consensual attitudes. Given the absence of studies on affective polarization among political elites, these findings are important because they suggest that, although elites might contribute to the growing trends of pernicious polarization among their supporters and may deteriorate compromise at the regional level, this kind of polarization does not necessarily preclude consensus and agreement in national politics.

Key words: affective polarization, consensus, parliament, MPs, Spain

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Introduction

Affective polarization, defined as the extent of antipathy and distrust between supporters of different political parties (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Iyengar et al., 2019), is increasingly recognized as a critical concern in contemporary democracies due to its potential to undermine social cohesion (Torcal & Thomson, 2023); damage democracy (Somer et al., 2021) and its basic norms (Kingzette et al., 2021); and accelerate democratic backsliding (Orhan, 2022). The importance of affective polarization gained prominence through the seminal work of Iyengar et al. (2012), which documented a widening gap between the feelings of in-party loyalty and out-party disdain in the United States (U.S.), primarily driven by an escalation in out-party animosity. The notion that group identities and affiliations are central to U.S. politics, as discussed by Achen and Bartels (2017), further propelled the investigation into the dynamics of partisan social identities, inter-party hostilities, and the phenomena of negative partisan identification. Notably, as Wagner (2024) has recently documented, there is a growing comparative analysis, particularly in Europe, that has contributed to the study of this phenomenon, despite some significant limitations. Nonetheless, the extent to which affective polarization manifests among political elites remains an area of contention and uncertainty.

Furthermore, there is ongoing debate over whether political elites' ideological extremism contributes to citizens' affective polarization, a topic that has garnered both support (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016; Banda & Cluverius, 2018; Lelkes, 2021; Gidron et al., 2023; Torcal, 2023) and opposition (Broockman et al., 2023; Jang et al., 2024; Skytte, 2021; Voelkel et al., 2023). However, less attention has been paid to the extent of affective polarization within parliamentary elites themselves and its subsequent impact on their behavior. This gap in the literature might stem from the prevailing assumption that polarization among political elites is primarily ideological and issue-based, attributed to their

substantial cognitive resources (Enders, 2021). Conversely, affective polarization is perceived as more common among the public, who often engage with politics on a more emotional level (Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2013, 2015). Additionally, uncivil and aggressive tactics used by political elites are seen as strategic efforts to enhance message resonance and mobilize voters (Diermeier & Li 2019, 2023; Ballard et al., 2023).

Both lines of thought suggest that legislators use polarizing rhetoric and escalate conflicts to gain strategic advantage, such as stirring enthusiasm and engagement among their most partisan supporters. However, current research reveals little evidence of affective polarization having clear behavioral effects in terms of negotiations and agreements among the elites. This raises some critical empirical questions: are parliamentary representatives truly devoid of affective and emotional attitudes that lead to behavioral consequences? Is this consistently true across all elites, regardless of their party affiliation? These questions are particularly pertinent to the Spanish case, which combines three important empirical observations. Spain has seen significant increases in affective polarization since 2008 (Torcal, 2023). This has been accompanied by rising levels of elite confrontation, a dynamic described as the ‘theatricalization of politics’, which seems to incrementally deteriorate the previously collaborative legislative process (Coller, 2024). Finally, all of this occurs in the context of the emergence of new challenging parties and increasing party system fragmentation that has produced the emergence and consolidation of a radical right-wing party (RRP), Vox.

In the ensuing sections, we aim to respond to these questions by analyzing data from a survey of Spanish parliamentarians conducted between 2022 and 2023. We demonstrate that political elites may harbor high levels of affective polarization and that their strongly-held views can affect their willingness to build consensus. However, we will show that not all

emotional attitudes affect consensus equally. Social distance towards the supporters of the other parties, rather than group cohesion, is the factor that hinders agreement.

The potential behavioral consequences of affective polarization in political elites

There is extensive research revealing that ideological polarization in political elites -what might also be called extremism- has a negative impact on political consensus (McCarty et al., 2016; Mann & Ornstein, 2012; Lee 2015; Bäck & Carroll, 2018). The argument is that as parties become more ideologically polarized, it becomes increasingly difficult to reach political agreements and pass legislation, leading to legislative deadlocks and inefficiencies in the governmental process. The evidence is that more extreme parliamentarians show less willingness for consensus, as they perceive their adversaries at a great ideological distance from themselves. Mann and Ornstein (2012) argue that this growing ideological polarization among US political elites, especially in Congress, has led to unprecedented gridlock in the legislative process and a decline in cooperation and political compromise.

However, the possible impact of affective polarization of parliamentary elites on their attitudes towards consensus is still unknown. The reason lies in the scarce number of studies on affective polarization in elites. There is great interest in this theme in today's democracies, but nearly all studies have focused on citizens, with very few exceptions. Among them, there is the study by Enders (2021: 1876), which finds that elites in the U.S. are more affectively than ideologically polarized, while their affective polarization is higher than in the masses, using data from Convention Delegate Studies. Another exception is the work of Lucas & Sheffer (2024:8), who also detect affective polarization in Canadian office-holders at the local level, although in this case at relatively low levels. Finally, Druckman and colleagues (2023) have also shown that when legislators receive accurate information about the political views of voters of the opposite party and reduce their misperceptions, they significantly lower

partisan animosity toward the other party. This suggests that legislators not only present some levels of partisan hostility but also their democratic attitudes are causally linked to their perceptions of other-party voters' democratic attitudes.

On the other hand, even though parliamentary elites might display strong partisan identities, they also have more significant interpersonal contact with opponents than ordinary citizens, as they see and debate each other on a daily basis and must negotiate and cooperate with them to achieve their political goals (Sheffer et al., 2023; Lucas & Sheffer, 2024), which may lead to fluid interpersonal relationships despite their differences (Caldeira & Patterson, 1987; Harward & Moffett, 2010). Parliamentary experience should be a factor limiting the proliferation of negative emotions toward political rivals since, as has been studied for the mass public, meaningful contact with partisan rivals leads to less mutual hostility (Kalla & Broockman, 2022). A similar argument is presented in Putnam's classic study of political elites, when he claimed that, despite their ideological differences, politicians had shared values of tolerance, respect for civil rights, and commitment to the rules of the democratic game (Putnam, 1976: 115-120). Moreover, the very institutions in which parliamentary elites operate foster collective experiences and norms of cooperation among them (Best & Vogel, 2014; Lucas & Sheffer, 2024).

Despite these considerations, there are compelling reasons to believe that legislators might exhibit affective polarization. Political elites are polarized ideologically, and, although it has been disputed (Iyengar et al., 2012), several studies indicate a strong correlation between extremism and affective polarization (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016; Lucas & Sheffer, 2024). Additionally, legislators are highly interested and knowledgeable about politics, which are factors typically correlated with increased affective polarization (Mason, 2015; Kingzette et al., 2021; Lucas & Sheffer, 2024). If parliamentary elites may harbor significant affective polarization, how might this affect their disposition toward consensual

legislative outcomes? Since there are no previous studies on this question in relation to political elites, we can turn to the existing literature on the general public.

There is previous work showing that affective polarization of citizens is an element that impairs consensus and the ability to reach agreements (Hetherington, 2015; Levendusky, 2018; Gervais, 2019; Skytte, 2021), although there is also no unanimity among authors (Broockman et al., 2023). Affective polarization reduces trust in government and in institutions of representation (Torcal & Carty, 2022), especially when it is the opposing party in power (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015). Further, opposition party voter mistrust does not encourage leaders to reach agreements with the party in power, making political deadlock more likely (Levendusky, 2018: 60). With more affectively polarized voters, parties have less incentive to seek agreements, so gridlock may become the new "normal" (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016: 22). Or, as put by Finkel and others (2020: 533), contempt for adversaries hinders the search for consensual solutions that might be beneficial for both parties. In this sense, as happens among citizens, the question arises as to whether affective polarization among politicians might lead to less willingness to reach agreement among them. Legislators who express a greater rejection of their rivals would have less confidence in them and be less disposed to reach consensus.

Additionally, affective partisanship encompasses two critical dimensions: (1) emotional attachment of citizens to the in-group party and its leaders, and (2) hostility directed toward the out-group. Most of the scholarly literature on affective polarization merges in- and out-party affect to compute the individuals' overall degree of polarization, considering all the (main) parties within the polity that obtain some national parliamentary representation. While these measures are useful in many contexts, research suggests that attitudes of affinity to the in-party and hostility towards the out-party might not always be correlated as being an expression of different identities, partisanship and negative

partisanship (Bankert 2021, 2023; McGregor et al., 2015; Medeiros and Noël, 2014, Reiljan et al., 2023), potentially indicating different patterns and relationships with other attitudes and behavior. Assessing the contribution of party hostility among citizens is particularly relevant in cases where they may have neither a party identification nor even a specific affinity for a party, but a particular aversion to one or more of them (Bolsen and Thornton, 2021). Likewise, in the context of political elites, we think that it is also valuable to distinguish between out-party hostility and in-party affinity, assuming that hostility towards opposing parties may exert a more negative influence on the propensity to compromise. In contrast, affinity towards one's own party may foster cohesion but might not necessarily impede compromise with rivals.

Most comparative studies use standard 0–10 like–dislike questions to measure affective polarization, where respondents are asked to state how much they like or dislike parties. This scale is the equivalent of the 0–100 warm–cold feeling thermometer used in the U.S., most notably in the American National Election Study. The responses to this question provide information on how each individual relates to the party system, as respondents vary in how polarized their personal pattern of affectivity towards parties is. Aggregated to a higher level, these questions provide information on the mean level of affective polarization in a larger group – often the country (Reiljan, 2020). However, in this study, we instead decided to use an alternative measure based on social distance questions (Bogardus, 1933). These allow respondents to state whether they would be happy or unhappy to have party supporters as their colleagues, neighbors or relatives (Helbling & Jungkunz, 2020; Knudsen, 2021; Gidron et al., 2022). Certainly, this measure of affective polarization captures behavioral intentions rather than attitudes (Röllicke, 2023) and results in consistently lower levels than simple out-party dislike (Kekkonen et al., 2022). Responses to these items might also reflect personality characteristics or tendencies towards conflict avoidance (Ulbig &

Funk, 1999). Moreover, many people simply dislike those who talk about politics, irrespective of the views they hold or the party they support (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Druckman et al., 2022; Krupnikov & Ryan, 2022). Nonetheless, we believe that these social distance questions tell us not only about affectivity towards parties, but also about the disposition of those elites to interact with other elite members whom they dislike, which is an essential feature of high-level negotiations. This variable can be viewed as a direct behavioral outcome resulting from the level of partisan social identities.

In accordance with the above, we focus on three initial research questions.

RQ1: What is the level of partisan social distance among Spanish Parliamentary elites?

RQ2: What is the relationship between a representative's party social distance and their propensity to support consensual legislative behavior?

RQ3: Is the effect of partisan social distance on consensus stronger than the effect of issue-based ideological extremism?

As documented by Helbling & Jungkunz (2020), affective polarization appears to be intensified by the emergence of RRP, largely due to their combination of nativism and populism, which categorizes the population into binary groups: 'natives' versus 'non-natives' or the 'elite' versus the 'people' (Harteveld et al., 2022; Reiljan & Ryan, 2021). According to Gidron and colleagues (2023), radical-right dislike exceeds what their ideological distance and absence from government roles would suggest, resulting in what they call 'ostracism' towards the radical right-wing parties. By contrast, this level of disdain does not extend to the radical left, which is generally more accepted within the broader left-wing camp (Bantel, 2023). This phenomenon has also been observed among Italian political elites (Bordignon, 2020).

Does this pattern of RRP 'ostracism' hold true for Spanish parliamentary elites? Do they support strategies such as implementing a "cordon-sanitaire" against VOX in legislative

processes? Prior evidence suggests this may not be the case, at least among the general public (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2024), but there is the possibility that less consensual behavior is associated to legislators that express greater hostility to VOX -basically among those in leftist parties and also Basque and Catalan nationalists. Thus, we propose the following question.

RQ 4: Is partisan social distance towards RRP's related to non-consensual legislative tendencies among leftist and nationalist representatives?

Spain is an interesting case to analyze this problem, as it has significant levels of affective polarization, with substantive ideological distance between political parties and citizens who hold negative feelings towards voters of other parties. However, the literature is undecided about whether the country is among the most affectively polarized democracies in Europe (Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021) or in an intermediate position, although with an increasing trend since 2018 (Torcal & Comellas, 2022). Various contextual factors have been proposed to explain this shift, including the enduring impact of the economic crisis (Gidron et al., 2020), austerity measures and social inequality (Torcal, 2023), and the escalation of the center-periphery territorial conflict, particularly the Catalan secessionist challenge (Orriols & León, 2021; Rodon, 2022). Indeed, there has been evidence of ideological radicalization among Spanish parliamentary elites since 2008 (Sánchez-Ferrer & Domínguez, 2021).

Moreover, scholars have highlighted the role of political elites in exacerbating polarization through increasingly aggressive rhetoric, often targeted more at inciting emotional reactions than appealing to rational voters (Bosco & Verney, 2020; Torcal, 2023). As discussed in other articles within this issue, Spanish political debate is strident and often offensive, designed to elicit emotional responses from partisans. While this aggressiveness may possess a performative and theatrical quality (Coller, 2024), further analysis is necessary to assess the extent to which provocative parliamentary elites are genuinely affectively

distanced from each other (a good behavioral consequence of affective polarization) and its potential behavioral consensual consequences when it comes to the legislative process.

Data and models

To assess the effects of affective polarization on attitudes towards consensus we used data from a survey of Spanish parliamentarians conducted between 2022 and 2023, as part of the project *The Social Construction of Consensus in Multiparty Political Contexts*¹, within the framework of the joint multi-national project *Comparative Candidates Survey III*. The survey was conducted anonymously, using both online and postal questionnaires distributed among parliamentarians in all legislative bodies in Spain, including the two national chambers (Congress and Senate) and the 17 regional parliaments. A total of 547 responses were received, which represent a response rate of 30% of the total number of legislators (1,828). The sample obtained was calibrated to reflect the size of parties and the gender composition of parliaments. Additional technical details of the survey methodology are provided in the introductory article of this issue and the full questionnaire with the original Spanish wording is available in a Zenodo repository (Coller et al., 2023).

The dependent variable of our models, which we term *Consensual*, captures the propensity of parliamentarians to reach agreements with political rivals. This is a factor scoring variable, constructed from the three following questions of the questionnaire:

(1) Degree of agreement (measured on a scale 0-10) with the following sentence: ‘In politics, it is desirable to reach agreements with political rivals, even if they are ideologically distant.’

(2) Degree of agreement (measured on a scale 0-10) with the following sentence: ‘Reaching agreements with rivals means betraying the electoral program.’

(3) Choose one of the following options: a) ‘A law that fully reflects my ideas but is rejected by other parties’ or b) ‘A law on which we have had to compromise on some substantial aspects, but which is approved without the rejection of other parties.’

Through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA),² we verified the strong loading of these items on one latent concept which represents the overall individual propensity to consensus.³ To ensure consistency, the scale of item (2) was inverted and aligned in the same direction as the others. Consequently, higher values on this latent factor (variable) indicates a greater propensity of the parliamentarian to engage in agreement, while lower values mean a reduced inclination towards consensus-building.

The most important independent variable for our argument is *Affective Social Distance*. Specifically, we have constructed a cumulative scale of affective social distance based on three questions, where parliamentarians indicate (on a scale from 0 to 10) whether they would like each of the following situations: 'That your son or daughter maintain a partner relationship with a person who votes for the party that you consider more ideologically distant from yours;' 'To hire for work or have a professional relationship with a person who votes for the party that you consider more ideologically distant from yours;' 'That a friend tells you that s/he is going to vote for a party that you consider ideologically distant from yours.' The variable is computed as the average of the answers to these three questions. Our aim is to assess the levels of social distance among Spanish representatives and ascertain its impact on their attitudes and behaviors.

This model also includes other important control variables. Firstly, there is an indicator of *Affective Social Proximity*, which mirrors the construction of *Social Distance*. In this case this is the cumulative scale built upon the three equivalent three questions but alluding to the legislator's own party.

Secondly, we introduce the variable *Extremism*, which captures the distance of the parliamentarian's ideological self-placement on the left-right scale (ranging from 0 to 10) with respect to the central position. In the literature, both a central measure of the population distribution (as in Bischof & Wagner, 2019) and the midpoint of the scale itself (as in Wagner, 2021) have been used as the central position. We have opted for the latter, since parliamentarians, as individuals with significant cognitive resources on political matters, possess a thorough understanding of the scale's significance and the implications of their positioning. Thus, *Extremism* is computed as the absolute difference between the parliamentarian's position and the midpoint value of 5 on the scale.

Additionally, we have created two dummy variables for the ideology of parliamentarians: *Left* includes those who are positioned in values ranging from 0 to 3 on the ideological scale, while *Right* includes those who place themselves from 7 to 10, leaving as a reference category those who are in central positions (from 4 to 6). We have also introduced *Gender* and *Age* variables. Regarding age, the original survey data was categorized in intervals, so we treated as a factor variable with the following categories: *Born in the period 1961-1980* and *Born in 1981 and after*, leaving those born in 1960 and before as the reference category.

With these variables we have estimated Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regular models for two groups of parliamentarians. The first group includes legislators from the national chambers (Congress and Senate, comprising 171 respondents), while the second comprises representatives of regional parliaments (totaling 376 cases). In the initial model (Model 1), we include *Extremism*, *Gender*, *Age*, the ideological variables, *Left* and *Right*, and, within the national parliamentarians, the type of chamber (*Senate*). To this model, we have added the interaction of *Extremism* with the dummies measuring if these representatives belong to the *Left* or *Right* of the ideological spectrum (Model 2). Next, in Model 3, we have incorporated

the main variable of interest, *Social Distance*, together with the other affective polarization variable, *Social Proximity*. Model 4 examines the impact of social distance by left-wing and nationalist representatives towards Vox voters on their attitudes towards consensual legislative behavior. This model does not specify the party, as it simply measures the social distance towards the voters of the party that respondents dislike the most. However, our survey indicates that nearly all left-wing and nationalist representatives express their animosity towards supporters of Vox (over 97% of those who express animosity for a party).

Results

Descriptives

Table 1 presents the indicators of affective polarization and propensity to agreement among Spanish parliamentarians, disaggregated by political party, type of parliament, gender, and age, utilizing the variables outlined in the previous section. As expected, the inclination for consensus is greater within mainstream parties and among small nationalist parties that have a long record of supporting different governments at different times, even if they were not part of those governments, such as the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV). Conversely, it is lower among the more extremist parties, such as Vox and Podemos, as well as among those that have radicalized in recent years, such as the Catalan nationalists since the initiation of the independence challenge.

Table 1. Affective polarization, extremism and propensity to reach agreements of Spanish legislators

	<i>Social Distance</i>	<i>Social Proximity</i>	<i>Extremism</i>	<i>Consensual</i>	<i>(N)</i>
<i>Party</i>					
PSOE	6.4	7.3	2.8	0.041	(177)
PP	6.2	7.0	1.6	0.158	(150)
Podemos	6.9	7.1	3.5	-0.413	(36)
Cs	5.8	6.4	0.9	0.022	(33)
Vox	6.8	6.9	2.6	-0.387	(38)
ERC	7.3	6.4	3.1	-0.172	(18)
JxCAT	8.0	7.6	1.4	-0.396	(14)
PNV	6.5	7.3	1.1	0.549	(14)
Other Left	7.7	7.7	3.5	-0.181	(49)
Other Right	6.3	6.6	0.7	0.232	(18)
<i>Parliament</i>					
Regional	6.6	7.1	2.3	-0,012	(383)
National	6.6	7.2	2.3	0,010	(164)
<i>Gender</i>					
Women	6.7	7.6	2.8	-0,121	(237)
Men	6.5	6.7	2.0	0,083	(310)
<i>Age</i>					
Born b. 1960	6.4	7.0	2.4	0,071	(74)
1961-1980	6.6	7.1	2.3	-0,009	(395)
1981 and later	6.5	7.4	2.4	-0,061	(94)
Total	6.6	7.1	2.3	-0.006	(547)

Source: CONSENSO Project.

Note: The figures are the averages of each group. The sample has been calibrated to reflect the size of parties and the gender composition of parliaments, as described in the introductory article of this issue. The variables are explained in the text.

Parties: PSOE=Socialist Party (mainstream left); PP= Popular Party (mainstream right); Podemos (populist radical left); Cs= Ciudadanos (center right); Vox (populist radical right); ERC=Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (left Catalan nationalist); JxCAT=Junts per Catalunya (center of right Catalan nationalist); PNV: Basque Nationalist Party (center right).

However, the most noteworthy revelation relates to the level of animosity hostility towards the out-party, quantified as the social distance observed towards supporters of the party that is most distant from the parliamentarian in ideological terms. On a scale from 0 to 10, legislators stand at an average of 6.6, indicating a notable inclination towards social exclusion rather than acceptance. Again, there are differences: the most extremists and the Catalan nationalists exhibit greater social distance, while mainstream and centrist parties are slightly more willing to accept their opponents. Nevertheless, as a collective body,

parliamentarians manifest a considerable degree of estrangement from ideologically distant counterparts, surpassing the levels typically observed among Spanish citizens when faced with similar questions (Torcal, 2023: 59-61). Consequently, we can answer RQ1 by saying that the level of out-party hostility is certainly high among Spanish parliamentarians.

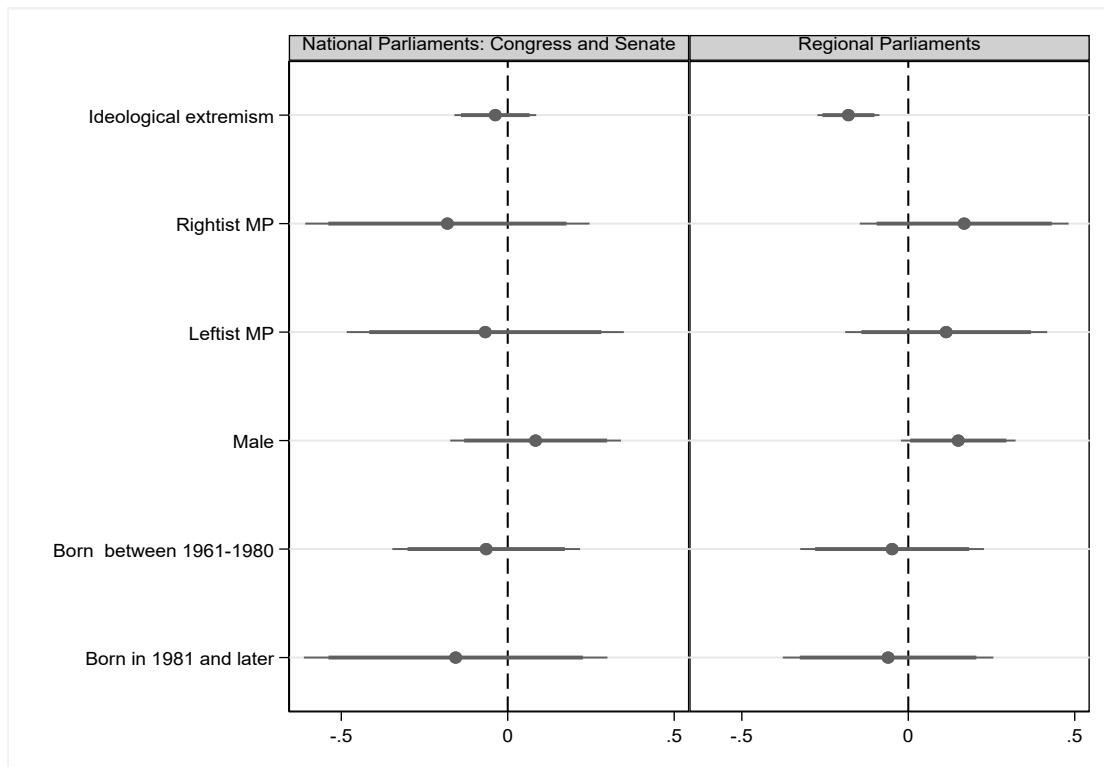
Furthermore, the indicator of social proximity among parliamentarians is also elevated. In this case, however, the differences across party lines are less pronounced. Legislators from all parties appear to exhibit robust group cohesion, extending to interpersonal relationships.

Regressions

Figure 1 presents the results of Model 1, with separate estimations for the national and regional parliaments. The analysis reveals that within the national parliament, none of the variables show statistically significant coefficients. Ideological extremism, Left and Right ideologies, Gender, or Age fail to demonstrate significant relationships with the consensual attitudes of national parliamentarians. Conversely, within regional parliaments, we observe a significant negative relationship with extremism, showing that the more extremist the regional parliamentarians, the lower their inclination for political agreement, with a reduction in the probability of supporting consensus of 0.18 for each unit of extremism. To confirm the difference in the relationship between ideological extremism and our dependent variable in the regional and national parliaments, we have repeated the estimation of the model with all parliamentarians (regional and national), including a dummy variable to capture membership in each type of parliament, as well as ideological extremism (complete results not shown). In this model, the coefficient of the interaction term is -0.16, significant at $p < 0.000$, confirming that the relationship between these variables is significantly negative in regional parliaments, while it is null in the national parliament. Additionally, the coefficient for male

parliamentarians suggests a marginally significant positive association between being male and consensual behavior (at $p < 0.06$). This result, although conflicting with the extensive literature that establishes women's tendency to adopt consensual attitudes (Kalaf-Hughes et al., 2022), is consistent with previous studies indicating that women do not exhibit a more consensual style than men among Spanish parliamentary elites (Verge et al., 2018). None of the other variables yield significant coefficients.

Figure 1: The effects of extremism on legislative consensual behavior for the national and regional Parliaments in Spain (Model 1)



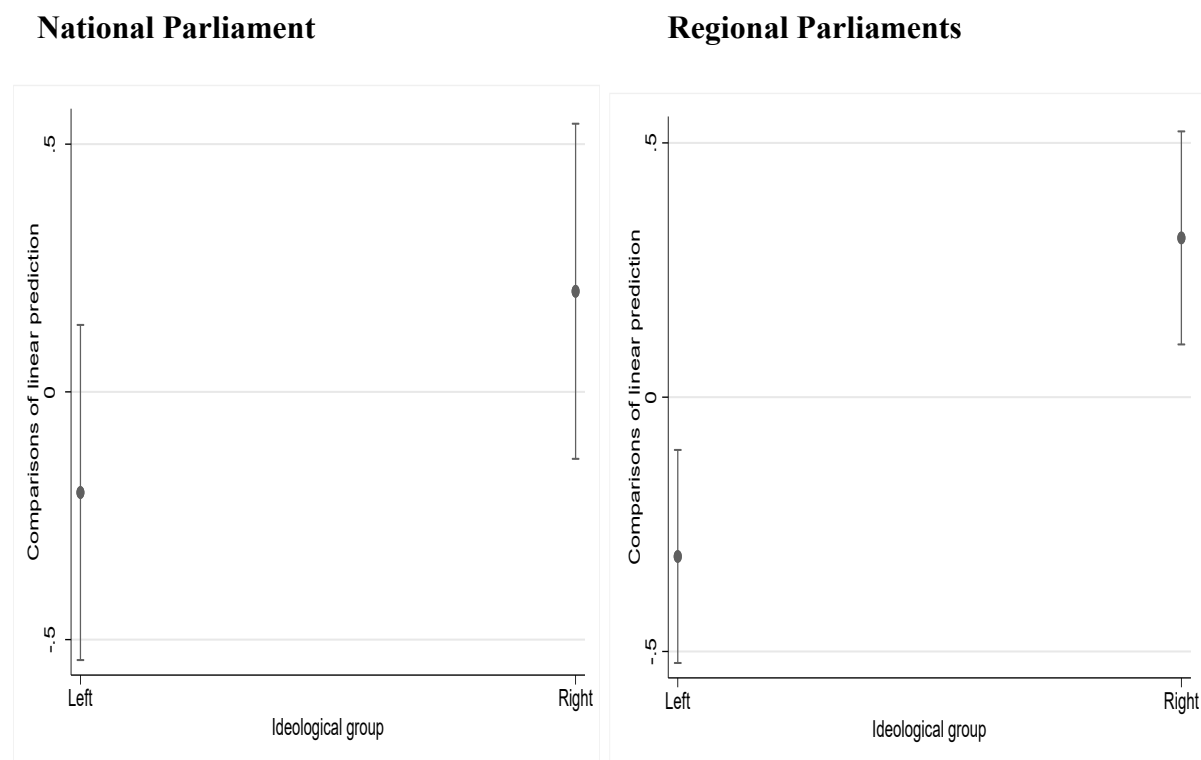
Note: Number of observations: 154 (National) and 356 (Regional), R^2 : 0.03 and 0.11, respectively; Confidence intervals at 90% and 95%.

Source: CONSENSO Project.

As anticipated, in Model 2 we included all previously mentioned variables, along with an interaction term between *Extremism* and the ideological orientation of parliamentarians, categorized as either *Left* or *Right*. We calculated the marginal effects of *Extremism* at these distinct ideological locations. Figure 2 illustrates the average marginal effects of MPs'

ideological extremism on consensus-building across both ideological positions (left and right) in both national and regional parliaments. Once again, the model results for the national chambers do not reach statistical significance—the marginal effects are inconclusive (close to zero), and similarly, no significant difference is observed between these effects. However, the scenario differs in regional parliaments, where the marginal effects are not only significant on both sides of the ideological spectrum but also show a noteworthy difference in the impact of *Extremism* on consensual behavior. Specifically, the impact of ideological extremism on willing to reach parliamentarism among right-wing representatives is substantially higher (probability of 0.31) than that of their left-wing counterparts.

Figure 2. Marginal effects of legislator’s ideological extremism by ideological groups on legislative consensual behavior

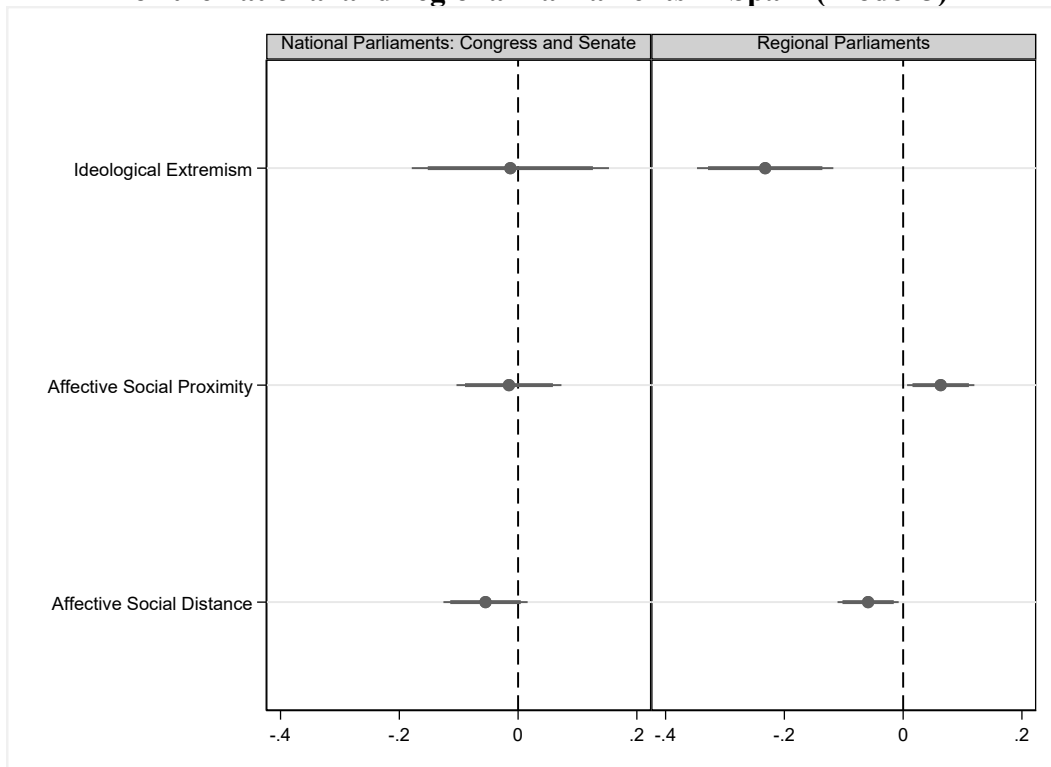


Note: Number of observations: 154 (National) and 356 (Regional), R^2 : 0.04 and 0.11, respectively; confidence intervals at 90% and 95%.

Source: CONSENSO Project

Figure 3 displays the coefficients for Model 3, which incorporates *Affective Social Distance* and *Affective Social Proximity*, alongside with the preceding variables included in Model 2. Once more, the model for national parliamentarians fails to produce statistically significant coefficients for any variable. However, consistent with previous models, the findings for regional parliaments reveal a strong negative association between extremism and the rejection of agreements (with a reduction in the probability of 0.33). More importantly for our argument, affective social distance also shows a clear and significant negative effect on the propensity to reach consensus despite the effects of ideological extremism (probability reduction of 0.06). To confirm the differences of the coefficients in the relationship between social distance and our dependent variable with these two separate samples, we combined them and computed an interactive term with a dummy variable for regional and national parliaments. The interactive term again confirms this distinction with a negative coefficient of -0.06 and $p < 0.03$. Social proximity, on the other hand, not only lacks this negative implication, but is even associated with a greater inclination to build agreements (probability of 0.06). These findings suggest that while hostility towards the supporters of other parties diminishes the willingness to reach consensus, a sense of belonging and closeness to one's own group, may instead foster consensual behavior. This last result highlights that the propensity to move, in line with party strategies, towards consensual behavior seems to be greater among those representatives who have stronger social affinity with their party colleagues.

Figure 3. The effects of social distance and proximity on legislative consensual behavior for the national and regional Parliaments in Spain (Model 3)



Note: Number of observations: 152 (National) and 349 (Regional), R^2 : 0.06 and 0.14, respectively; confidence intervals at 90% and 95%.

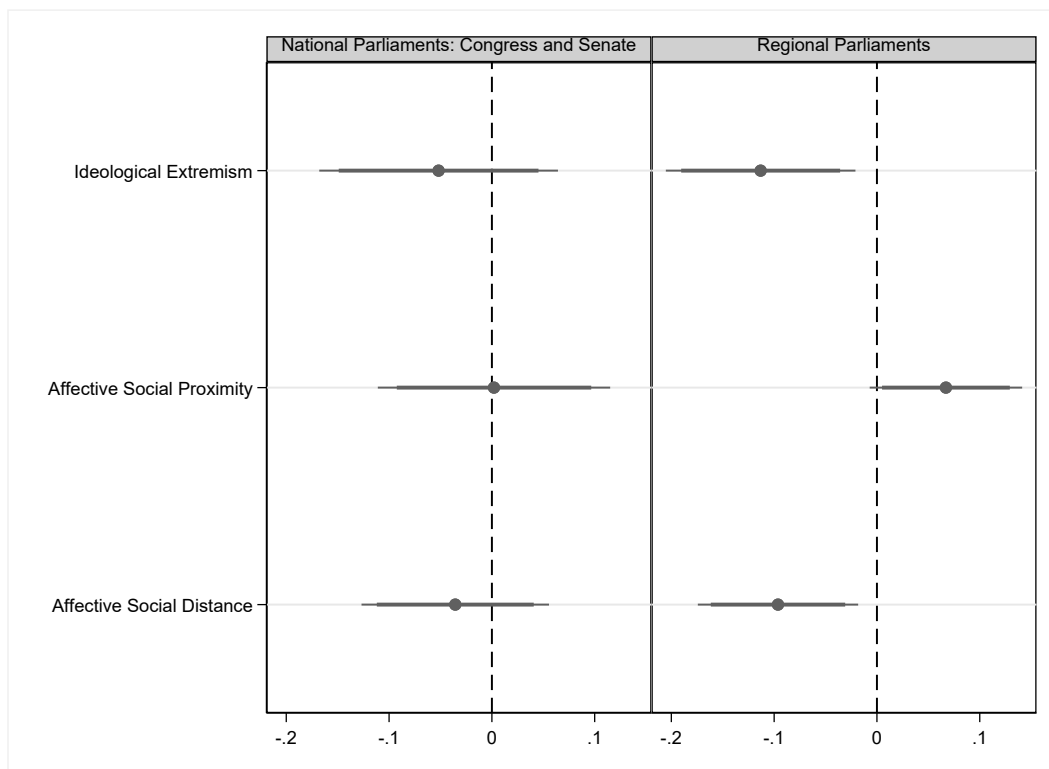
Source: CONSENSO Project

Addressing Research Question 2 (RQ2), we can conclude that parliamentarians' social distance towards voters of other parties correlates with a reduced inclination towards consensus, but this effect is significant only among representatives of regional parliaments. Regarding Research Question 3 (RQ3), the findings suggest that ideological extremism has greater explanatory power than partisan hostility in explaining parliamentarians' less consensual attitudes. An area for further exploration is to determine the extent to which ideological extremism mediates the relationship between social distance and consensual attitudes among parliamentarians.

Turning to Research Question 4 (RQ4), the results from Model 4, depicted in Figure 4, indicate a strong negative relationship between the social distance expressed by representatives of left and nationalist parties towards PP and Vox (mostly) and their consensual attitudes (reduction in probability of 0.10), but only in the regional parliament. To

confirm the differences in the relationship by type of Parliament (regional vs. national), we combined once again the samples and compute the interactive term with the dummy variable for the regional or national parliaments. The interactive term confirms once more this distinction with a negative coefficient of -0.09 and $p < 0.023$. In other words, these representatives demonstrate a tendency towards less consensual behavior with the RRP party due to their levels of social distance, but only in regional parliaments.

Figure 4: The effects of social distance towards VOX voters from leftist and nationalist parliamentarians on legislative consensual behavior for the Spanish National Parliament (Model 4)



Note: Number of observations: 104 (National) and 210 (Regional), R^2 : 0.02 and 0.12, respectively; confidence intervals at 90% and 95%.
Source: CONSENSO Project

Conclusions

This article presents a novel study focused on political elites' polarization levels and its behavioral consequences. The main finding is that affective polarization is high among

parliamentarians and has a negative impact on their disposition to consensus, but only among regional legislators. Specifically, the study reveals that social distance from people perceived as ideologically distant from the legislator is associated with less consensual attitudes. However, this relationship is not uniform across all political groups. The effect is most evident among parliamentarians from left-wing and nationalist parties, where hostility towards the most distant party -in virtually all cases, VOX- is associated with less agreement. And again, this relationship is significant only for representatives of the regional parliaments. This suggests that the radical right-wing party is a key target of the animosity that leads to reduced chances of agreement, either because these parliamentarians are the object of hostility or because of the social distance they themselves exhibit. While hostility towards RRP parties has been documented for the general population in various countries (Helbling & Jungkunz, 2020; Gidron et al., 2023), our study shows that a similar pattern exists among Spanish parliamentary elites.

In contrast, affective social affinity does not give rise to this effect; instead, among regional parliamentarians, group cohesion is positively correlated with greater consensus. This finding highlights the importance of distinguishing between the different components of affective polarization, as they are clearly distinct in nature and have different consequences. In particular, the research makes clear that social distance towards adversaries, rather than affinity with one's own party, has a detrimental impact on consensus-building efforts. On the other hand, the article underscores the impact of ideological extremism on the lesser willingness to reach consensus among regional parliamentarians. This finding aligns with previous research (McCarty et al., 2016; Bäck & Carroll, 2018) and highlights the risk that, in scenarios of growing ideological confrontation, agreements may become increasingly difficult among political elites.

However, it is important to note that the association between social hostility and propensity for consensus is only present for regional parliaments. This raises a question: why do the findings diverge between regional and national parliaments? While our dataset provides insufficient evidence for a definitive explanation, we can provide tentative arguments to explore potential reasons for this discrepancy.

One possible explanation may stem from the distinct contexts of national and regional parliaments and particularly, the different degree of fragmentation within the legislatures. Fragmentation in national parliament is much higher than in any regional parliament. For example, in the Congress elected in November 2019, from which part of the data for this study is drawn, no less than 17 different political parties obtained representation.⁴ In this divided scenario, parties are used to negotiating with others that are ideologically very distant. Although there are many differences among regional parliaments in terms of their representative fragmentation, with very pluralistic parliaments and others with very few parties, none represents as many parties as the national parliament. Absolute majorities have been more common in the regional assemblies than in Congress, as well as prolonged periods of party hegemony, which may explain why in the former, legislators are less accustomed to negotiation and the search for agreement. This argument finds support in other articles in this special issue, particularly in the article by Benítez et al., as well as in Coller (2024:52-56), who observe that the more fragmented Spanish parliaments tended to exhibit more consensual behavior when passing legislation in the period 1977-2023.

Moreover, the national parliament serves as the main arena for political confrontation at the national and media level. This is the forum that reaches the population as a whole and where there is more performative politics, theatrics and ‘public opinion warfare’ in the eye of the media and social networks. The legislators elected to the national parliament are, in general, more experienced politicians, with more responsibilities within their parties,⁵ and

possess deeper insights into the intricacies of national politics. As indicated in Table 1, the level of extremism and social hostility is similar in both regional and national parliaments, but in the former these factors may not influence their attitudes toward consensus as much, since they recognize the pragmatic necessity of compromise in politics, even when dealing with antagonistic counterparts. On the other hand, regional parliamentarians often occupy less prominent roles within their party structures and possess comparatively limited experience in navigating the complexities of national-level ideological debates, since regional politics is more focused on the management of social policies and local issues. For this reason, extremism and hostility may have greater impact on their attitudes towards agreement, as they do not have the same ability as national deputies to distance themselves from conflicts and assume that agreements are necessary, even with detested parties. In other words, in regional parliaments, theatricalization is less pronounced, but when social hostility does arise, it is more likely to manifest itself in observable behavior.

We believe that our work, despite its limitations, opens interesting perspectives for future research. It is necessary to continue studying political elites to understand to what extent they not only foster partisan hostility in the citizens with their aggressive rhetoric, but how they themselves can also be affected by this pernicious polarization. More comparative studies are needed to determine under what circumstances elite polarization processes occur and how they impact political action. After all, elites are the main drivers of affective polarization among the public.

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² The correlation between these three items is 0.36, 0.24 and 0.17.

³ We estimated a model with the variance of the latent class set at 1. Standardized loadings were as follows: item (1) 0.51; (2) 0.71; and (3) 0.34. The Chi-squared of the model is 110.5 ($p < .000$), and the RMSEA is 0.000, which indicates a good fit. Other measurements of fitness are AIC 5080.9 and BIC 5119.3.

⁴ Obviously, most of those parties obtained very few seats, while the top five comprised 87 percent of the seats.

⁵ With notable exceptions, since in the nationalist parties the leaders are usually found in the regional parliament.

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