

The Moderating Role of Affective Polarization on Party Cues: The Case of the Prostitution Ban

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Abstract

Affective polarization is a recent yet widespread phenomenon in democracies that significantly impacts various aspects of politics. In this paper, we argue that it can also shape citizens' political beliefs through party cues. Using a panel survey experiment in Spain, we examine the extent to which partisan signals influence citizens' attitudes toward a *non-party branded* issue, specifically the ban of prostitution, and how affective polarization moderates this effect. Our results underscore the role of affective polarization in moderating the influence of partisan cues, particularly among highly polarized individuals. These findings highlight the capacity of affective polarization not only to deepen political divisions, but also to expand the scope of partisan influence to non-politicized and neutral issues, offering new insights into its potential impact on attitude formation and decision-making.

Key words: affective polarization, party cues, ban of prostitution, Spain

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Introduction

Extensive research has warned about the devastating consequences of affective polarization on democracy. Specifically, it has been associated with the erosion of democratic norms (Gidron et al., 2019; Iyengar et al., 2019), the establishment of obstacles to further consensus building (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Levendusky, 2018; Torcal & Thomson, 2023), the increasing difficulty for citizens to correctly perceive political reality and make rational decisions (Iyengar et al., 2012) and the decrease in accountability of politicians (Graham & Svobik, 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019). Another risk of affective polarization that has been highlighted is that it reinforces a type of partisanship that makes citizens more sectarian when evaluating policy proposals, leading them to uncritically accept what their party advocates and reject what opponents propose (Druckman et al., 2021a; Iyengar et al., 2019). In other words, the rise of affective polarization might have extended the reach of party cues, i.e. the 'signals' or informational shortcuts used by citizens to develop their position on political issues (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Nicholson, 2012). If this is the case, we should expect that the most affectively polarized citizens would also be the most likely to follow their party's line on issues.

We posit that those who are more affectively polarized respond more strongly to the party cue than those who are less affectively polarized. This relationship emphasizes the link between emotional partisanship and responsiveness to cues. Consequently, affective polarization amplifies and strengthens partisan loyalty, but also infuses an emotionally charged component to individuals' orientation towards political issues (Huddy et al., 2015; Mason, 2018).

We analyze through a panel survey experiment conducted in Spain the extent to which citizens' attitudes towards an issue are affected by partisan cues and whether

affective polarization has a moderating effect on this impact.¹ The Spanish political context, marked by the rise of new political forces, the fragmentation of the traditional party system and the increased in polarization, is ideally suited to evaluate the interaction between affective polarization and partisan signals. In the experiment, we show the effect of partisan cues on a specific issue: the policy of banning prostitution. This is a *non-party branded* issue, in which there has been no unanimous position in party stances, nor has it generated a division between the left and the right. This makes it a perfect object of study to estimate the impact of partisan cues, and to examine how this impact varies according to the levels of affective polarization.

The results show that affective polarization has the expected effect: it strengthens the effect of party cues among those who show higher levels of affective polarization. These findings allow us to extend our understanding of the effects of affective polarization, in this case by moderating partisan cues on an issue that was a priori not politicized. In short, it allows us to glimpse the potential power of affective polarization to activate and politicize issues via party cues. The inclusion of this article in a special issue on consensus building in parliaments is highly relevant because of the significant relationship between public opinion and parliamentary behavior. When citizens heavily rely on party cues there is an incentive for political elites to adopt confrontational rather than cooperative strategies (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). This dynamic can intensify polarization and hinder legislators' ability to reach a consensus.

Below, we review the literature on affective polarization and present the theoretical expectations regarding their moderation effect on party cues. Next, we describe the case and the characteristics of the issue, followed by an explanation of the data and methods. Finally, we conclude by discussing the main findings and their implications.

Affective polarization and party cues

Affective polarization can be defined as the presence of negative feelings and hostility towards opposing political parties and positive feelings and affinity towards one's own party (Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). When sentiments are averse to other parties (as well as groups/leaders/partisans of other parties) we refer to it as inter-party (outgroup) polarization, whereas favorable sentiments towards one's own party (group/leader/fellow partisans) are labeled as intra-party (ingroup) polarization. This phenomenon, initially analyzed in the United States (US) and often associated with two-party confrontation, is a prominent feature in many societies, also with multi-party systems.

Two leading theories explain the rise of affective polarization (Gidron et al., 2023; Dias & Lelkes, 2022). The first emphasizes growing policy divergences between parties, which give rise to affective rejection of 'out-partisans' who are farther away from them ideologically (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). The second theory associates this phenomenon with the idea of partisanship as a social identity (Harteveld, 2021; Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2018). According to this approach, group membership is not necessarily associated with political preferences, but with a social identity, defined "as a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership in it" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979: 283). Social identities might be a polarizing factor when they give rise to group biases and prejudices and produce emotional reactions that focus on defending the group and attacking opponents (McCoy et al., 2018).

In this context, citizens do not choose their party based only on their political opinions or public policy preferences. Instead, they mold their opinions to reflect the positions of the party they identify with, incorporating a strong emotional component associated with collective identities (Achen & Bartels, 2016). Therefore, affective polarization triggers intense emotional reactions and favor voters' alignment with their preferred party's positions. Moreover, more affectively polarized people may consider that the opposing party cue represents a social-identity threat (Banda & Cluverius, 2018).

In this regard, substantial literature in recent decades has shown the relevance of party cues in shaping public opinion. Two main theoretical approaches explain these effects: dual-process models and motivated reasoning. Dual-process models suggest that individuals process party cues heuristically when they lack motivation or capacity to evaluate political messages in detail (Bullock, 2019; Kam, 2005). Conversely, motivated reasoning posits that individuals process information in a biased manner to align with their pre-existing beliefs, particularly when these beliefs are emotionally charged and tied to their partisan identity (Bullock, 2019; Druckman et al., 2013). This reasoning leads individuals to accept or reject information in favor of their party, regardless of the information's substantive content.

There is evidence that partisans align their preferences with their party's positions (Brader & Tucker, 2013; Cohen, 2003; Zaller, 1992) and that individuals who follow their party's signals may adopt beliefs incongruent with their own (Achen & Bartels, 2016; Cohen, 2003; Iyengar et al., 2012). Similarly, under certain circumstances party cues may moderate extreme policy demands, even when these cues conflict with self-interest (Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2021). This research provides empirical evidence that partisan signals play a crucial role in shaping citizens' opinions in

different partisan environments, including political systems marked by significant volatility and the emergence of new political parties (Brader et al., 2020), as well as in contexts characterized by intense elite polarization (Druckman et al., 2013).

Additionally, recent findings suggest that both partisan identification and perceived party reputations are relevant in moderating the effects of partisan signals on policy positions, with variations observed among mainstream and challenger party voters (Torcal et al. 2024).

The accumulated findings in recent years suggest the presence of various individual and contextual moderators that influence the effects of party cues on public opinion. The former include an individual's level of cognitive sophistication (Kam, 2005; Zaller, 1992) and the degree of partisan identification (Azrout & De Vreese, 2018). Among the latter, research has shown that the effects of party cues depend on the level of information about the policy and its salience (Bullock, 2011; Bullock, 2019; Merolla et al., 2016). Recently, it has been suggested that the salience of an issue can have asymmetric effects: when partisan cues are coherent with the party's ideology, the salience of the issue intensifies the effect of the cue. By contrast, when signals diverge from the party's ideology, issue salience attenuates their impact (Barber & Pope, 2024).

Experimental research on low-salience issues -characterized by the lack of firmly entrenched opinions among individuals- has shown that they are more likely to be influenced by party cues. There is evidence that cues particularly activate partisan biases in the context of non-politicized issues (Druckman et al., 2021b; Kam, 2005), whereas the effect of the party cue tends to be smaller when the issue has a clear ideological structure and is unambiguously identified with a political party (Bullock, 2011; Chong & Mullinix, 2019). Thus, unlike party-branded issues (Dias & Lelkes,

2022), where positions are clearly delineated along party lines, non-partisan issues are not easily identifiable with party identity or platform.

Following social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), we assume that the interpretation of party cues is undertaken from the perspective of ingroups and outgroups. If a policy position on an issue is associated with a party, citizens close to that party will tend to support that position or modify their own position to follow their party (Brader & Tucker, 2013; Cohen, 2003). On the contrary, voters will distance themselves from a position supported by an opposing party (out-party) (Nicholson, 2012).

In this regard, we can anticipate that the effect of party cues may depend on the extent to which an individual is affectively polarized. However, few studies have investigated whether affective polarization would reinforce or diminish the effects of party cues and, to date, there has been no conclusive evidence on this moderating effect. On the one hand, there is research that indicates that affective polarization can lead citizens to become more supportive of proposals from their own parties. For example, using a two-way panel that spans the outbreak of COVID-19 in the US, Druckman et al., (2021b) found a strong association between citizens' levels of partisan animosity and their attitudes about the pandemic and the policies enacted in response to it. However, on the other hand, Broockman et al. (2021) did not find a significant relationship between high affective polarization and party-consistent issue preferences, using data from an experimental study. Moreover, Pierce and Lau (2019) study have shown that affective polarization might have a positive effect on voters' ability to differentiate a party's positions on policies and correctly choose the one that best aligns with their own preferences.

Accordingly, we can expect affective polarization to influence citizens' political beliefs when it influences how they evaluate a seemingly neutral issue through a partisan lens. However, this process may be more complex in countries with multi-party systems than in a two-party model such as the US, where competition exists between parties that are ideologically close. Research shows that citizens tend to perceive similarities with parties from their own ideological camp and to emphasize differences with parties from the opposite ideological camp (Harteveld, 2021; Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021). This is particularly true when ideological labels serve as symbolic identifiers for political groups, resulting in homogeneity within each ideological group and accentuating the differences or “hatred” between them (Azrout & De Vreese, 2018; Bantel, 2023). This is the case in Spain, where there are two major parties, the PP (Partido Popular, right-wing) and the PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español; left-wing), which have alternated in power for decades and constitute the essential reference of the party system, but where the left-right ideological blocs are a dominant source of affective polarization (Bosco & Verney, 2020; Torcal, 2023).

Our paper investigates, via a survey experiment, the impact of affective polarization on the reception of party messages. As said, it focuses on a previously non-party branded issue: the banning of prostitution. Specifically, our research seeks to clarify whether affective polarization moderates the influence of these partisan signals, leading individuals to adopt positions that reflect party guidelines, if the party is in their ideological realm, regardless of their previous political positions. Accordingly, we formulate the following research hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): People will respond to the party cue on the prostitution ban by expressing greater agreement with the proposal if it originates from a party from their ideological camp.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Individuals with higher levels of affective polarization will show stronger support for a proposal to ban prostitution put forth by a party from their ideological camp, compared to those with lower levels of affective polarization.

Spain as a country with affective polarization

Spain exhibits considerable affective polarization due to the strong polarization among its political elites (Bosco & Verney, 2020). This phenomenon was reinforced by the breakdown of the party system following the severe economic and institutional crisis that Spain experienced from 2008 onwards (Torcal & Comellas, 2022). Until 2015, Spain could be characterized as a moderate multi-party system, with a number of small parties (most of them regionalists/nationalists) and two major parties: one on the center-right (the PP) and one on the center-left (the PSOE), which had alternated in power for 30 years. Since then, new parties have emerged (Podemos on the left, Ciudadanos in the center and Vox on the right), which have transformed Spanish politics into a polarized multi-party system. These ideologically extremes have gained significant electoral weight and hold positions in national and regional governments.

The shock produced by the recession, together with the rise of the Catalan secessionist movement, contributed to Spain's political-institutional crisis and led to the emergence of populist parties and more polarization (Cordero & Simón, 2016; Méndez Lago, 2020). Increasing ideological extremism has run in parallel to more affective polarization, with severe consequences for social and institutional trust (Rodríguez et al., 2022; Torcal, 2023). Therefore, we might expect that affective polarization would affect political attitudes, particularly regarding citizens' willingness to conform to their preferred party's policy positions.

It is difficult to identify issues that are not party-driven or politicized, particularly in Spain, but prostitution has been one of them, until very recently.² This theme has scarcely been examined at the level of public opinion, as it is far removed

from public debates and the political agenda, so empirical knowledge of the positioning of the parties and their voters is limited (Bonache et al., 2021). In one of the few studies on this subject, Valiente (2004) shed light on the stance of the women's movement towards prostitution, revealing it as a low-priority issue with considerable internal divisions—some factions advocate for prohibition, others for abolitionism, while others lean towards legalization or decriminalization.³ In this sense, the feminist movement's low impact was to be understood "in the context of the marked absence of public discussion within the political debate" (Valiente, 2004: 222-223). It seems that there is no clear ideological divide in the policy approaches towards prostitution, while there tends to be a division between men and women (Fernández-Cornejo et al., 2020); moreover, it has been found that men and atheists tend not to support criminalization (Jonsson, & Kakobsson, 2017). Neither has research addressing the relationship between attitudes towards prostitution and political parties identified a clear linkage, although there is a greater tendency among conservative and more religious individuals to be against its legalization (Calvo & Penadés, 2015).

Research Design

A panel of Spanish citizens was interviewed twice with an interval of three weeks between the two waves. The surveys were conducted with an online questionnaire that was accessed by invitation to Internet panelists.⁴ In the first wave interviewees were asked about their attitudes towards the banning of prostitution, using the following question: "Now we would like to know more about a specific issue. In the case of prostitution, to what extent do you agree with a ban on prostitution?" Use the following scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means 'strongly disagree' and 10 means 'strongly agree'.

Our data show that within the parties there is a wide range in attitudes on prostitution. We found that the distributions of positions were very similar for people close to each of the four main parties (PSOE, PP, Unidas Podemos and Vox). In the case of *Unidas Podemos* there were more supporters of the ban, whereas among the supporters of Vox more people were opposed to the ban, but without very marked differences, which confirms that this is not a particularly politicized issue. As said, this makes it highly suitable for analyzing the effect of party cues and affective polarization. Consequently, we expect that, regarding this issue, citizens will follow the position of the party camp that is ideologically closest.

The experiment was carried out in the second wave of the survey.⁵ The participants received a treatment consisting of listening to a short fictitious news podcast announcing the proposition of a political party to initiate a process to ban prostitution throughout the country. One half of the sample received the news that the proposing party was the right-wing Popular Party (PP), another part that the proposing party was the left-wing Socialist Party (PSOE).

The treatment (the fictitious news podcast) had the following script: “Turning now to national news, this information comes from the annual meeting of the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces (FEMP). In this forum, a well-known mayor of the Partido Popular (PP) / Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) has defended his plan to ban prostitution in municipalities across the country, specifically targeting prostitution clients. This proposal, explained the Popular/Socialist) politician, means removing prostitution from our streets once and for all and putting an end to an illegal, harmful, and dangerous activity.” After the experimental stimuli, the respondents were asked: “To what extent do you agree with the proposal advocated in the video [prostitution ban]?” Use the following scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means ‘strongly

disagree' and 10 means 'strongly agree'. This became our dependent variable. We believe that this design allowed us to assess whether the party of the politician influenced the willingness to concur with his proposal. Because we obtained the participants' previous positions on the issue, this effect is an indicator of party cueing.

Participant assignment to alternative versions of the experimental treatment was made using stratified randomization.⁶ The strata were constructed using the ideological self-placement of participants, classifying them as left, center or right. Individuals had equal probability of assignment to treatments within each stratum. Ideological self-placement was measured in the first wave of the survey using the following question: "When people talk about politics, they often talk about the left and the right. With 0 being left and 10 being right, on a scale of 0 to 10, where would you place yourself?" Based on this variable, respondents who had answered 0-4 were identified as being on the left, those who had answered 5 in the center and those who chose 6-10 as being on the right.

To measure the effect of party cues we used the experimental treatment groups and created a dichotomous variable, called 'Compatible', with the following two categories.⁷ The first one (zero) consists of those people who listened to a podcast where the broadcaster belongs to a party with the opposite ideology to that of the receiver (i.e. left-wingers (0-4) who watched the PP video and right-wingers (6-10) who watched the PSOE video). The second category (one) corresponds to people who listened to a podcast where the broadcaster belongs to the party that matches the ideology of the receiver (i.e., right-wingers (6-10) who watched the PP video and left-wingers (0-4) who watched the PSOE video).

Affective polarization was measured using the indicators proposed by Wagner (2021): *Spread* and *Distance*. Both indicators are based on the so-called 'thermometers',

which are formulated with the degree of affection-disaffection or ‘like-dislike’ of the parties, leaders, or party voters (Iyengar et al. 2019). The first measure, *Spread*, estimates the degree of dispersion between the citizen's positive and negative party evaluations, weighted by the parties' electoral support. Thus, an individual with a low affective polarization score has similar levels of affection for all parties, whether positive or negative. Conversely, an individual with a high level of polarization has different levels of affection for different parties. The *Distance* measure captures the extent to which an individual on average dislikes other parties compared to 'their party', weighted by the relative electoral support of each party.

The formula of the *Spread* and the *Distance* indicators are (Wagner, 2021):

$$Spread = \sqrt{\sum_{p=1}^p v_p * (Like_{ip} - \overline{Like}_i)^2}$$

$$Distance = \sqrt{\sum_{p=1}^p v_p * (Like_{ip} - Like_{max,i})^2}$$

In our survey the 'thermometer' question had the following phrasing: “On a scale of 0 ('I don't like it at all') to 10 ('I like it a lot') can you tell me how much you like each of the following parties: PP, PSOE, UP, Vox.”.

Table 1. Variables included in the models

Variable	Description	Scale
Agree with message	Where 0 is strongly disagree and 10 is strongly agree.	0-10
Treatment	0, People who listened to a podcast where the broadcaster belongs to a party with the opposite ideology to that of the receiver. 1, People who listened to a podcast where the broadcaster belongs to the party that matches the ideology of the receiver.	0-1
Affective polarization	Formula of Spread (Wagner 2021) “On a scale of 0 ('I don't like it at all') to 10 ('I like it a lot') can you tell me how much you like each of the following parties: PP, PSOE, UP, Vox	0-5
Affective polarization	Formula of Distance (Wagner 2021) “On a scale of 0 ('I don't like it at all') to 10 ('I like it a lot') can you tell me how much you like each of the following parties: PP, PSOE, UP, Vox.	0-10
Ban of prostitution	Level of agreement with the banning of prostitution from 0 to 10 (wave 1).	0-10
Sex	0 male, 1 female	0-1
Age	Age of the respondent (years)	
Education	Level of formal education, from 1 (no formal education) to 8 (doctorate degree).	1-8

We also included a set of control variables in the regression models.⁸ The first is the wave one agreement, with the banning of prostitution, which was described above. The other ones are sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents: sex, age, education and social class (self-assessment). Table 1 presents the operationalization of all these variables.

Models and Results

We used regression models to assess the effect of the experimental treatment on level of agreement with the podcast's message (banning prostitution). The relevant estimand, the Average Treatment Effect (ATE), which is the average causal effect of the treatment, can be obtained with a difference in means test if there is random assignment to treatment groups (Imbens & Rubin, 2015). This is equivalent to a regression model using the treatment variable as a predictor, where the coefficient (β_1) for the treatment variable (T) represents the average difference in the outcome (Y) between the treatment and control groups (Gelman & Hill, 2007). The model has the following specification:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T + \epsilon$$

The moderating effect of affective polarization was specified using an interaction term, following standard practice (Hayes, 2022). This is included in the model as a multiplicative term between the treatment variable (T) and the moderating variable (X).

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T + \beta_2 X + \beta_3 (T \times X) + \beta_4 Z_1 + \beta_5 Z_2 + \dots + \epsilon$$

Therefore, the treatment effect is conditional on the moderating variable, and it corresponds to the term: $\beta_1 + \beta_3(X)$.⁹ The model also includes the control variables (Z_i) that were described in the previous section. According to Gelman, Hill & Vehtari

(2020), the inclusion of these pre-treatment covariates can help to adjust for random and systemic differences between the treatment and control groups. This is more relevant when there is not complete certainty that the treatment assignment was completely random. All the models were estimated using Bayesian methods.¹⁰

The results are presented in Table 2. The first model shows that the causal effect of the experimental treatment is 0.78, with this being the difference between the level of agreement between the two groups.¹¹ The credible interval points out that there is a 95% probability that the ATE is between 0.21 and 1.34 points. This result concurs with our first hypothesis. Participants expressed a higher level of agreement if they listened to a podcast where the politician belonged to a party that was on the same side of ideological spectrum. The intercept (5.12) represents the level of agreement for people who listened to a podcast where the politician belonged to a party from the opposite ideological camp.

Table 2. Regression models for the level of agreement with the podcast message

	Model 1 (ATE)	Model 2 (Moderation Spread)	Model 3 (Moderation Distance)
Intercept	5.119 [4.715, 5.524]	3.359 [1.458, 5.255]	3.379 [1.501, 5.262]
Compatible	0.780 [0.213, 1.343]	0.059 [-1.064, 1.188]	0.093 [-1.022, 1.212]
Affective Polarization (Spread)		0.152 [-0.116, 0.421]	
Compatible × Spread		0.261 [-0.116, 0.638]	
Affective Polarization (Distance)			0.073 [-0.066, 0.209]
Compatible × Distance			0.130 [-0.064, 0.325]
Ban of prostitution		0.447 [0.373, 0.521]	0.450 [0.375, 0.525]

	Model 1 (ATE)	Model 2 (Moderation Spread)	Model 3 (Moderation Distance)
Female		0.282 [-0.214, 0.774]	0.291 [-0.206, 0.789]
Age		-0.024 [-0.042, -0.006]	-0.024 [-0.042, -0.006]
Education		0.029 [-0.181, 0.241]	0.030 [-0.180, 0.238]
Class		-0.079 [-0.382, 0.225]	-0.080 [-0.384, 0.226]
Sigma	3.0 [2.845, 3.245]	2.6 [2.399, 2.740]	2.6 [2.401, 2.744]
Num.Obs.	446	446	446

Note: Median Estimate and 95% Credible Intervals between brackets.

Model 1: Average Treatment Effect of Party Cues. Model 2: Moderation Effect of Affective Polarization (Spread) on Party Cues. Model 3: Moderation Effect of Affective Polarization (Distance) on Party Cues.

The second model presents the moderation effect of affective polarization, measured using the Spread indicator, on the effect that the party cue has on Agreement.¹² Using the median estimates for the coefficients, this effect is $0.06 + 0.26 \cdot \text{Spread}$.¹³ Given the range of this variable (zero to five), the treatment effect ranges from 0.06 to 1.36 points. Figure 1 shows this result graphically. It concurs with our second hypothesis indicating that affective polarization strengthens the effect of party cues. The graph also includes a series of draws from the Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) simulations to show the uncertainty around the point estimate.

(Figure 1 about here)

Figure 1. Treatment Effect with Moderation (Spread)

The third model includes affective polarization measured using the Distance indicator. This confirms the previous result, with affective polarization moderating the effect of party cues. In this case, the treatment effect is $0.09 + 0.130 \cdot \text{Distance}$.¹⁴ Since this variable has a range of 0 to 10, the treatment effect ranges from 0.09 to 1.39, which

is almost the same as the effect when affective polarization is measured with the Spread indicator. These results suggest that when people have higher levels of affective polarization, they are more willing to concur with the message sent by a politician from the same ideological camp. Figure 2 presents this result. The black line corresponds to the median estimate, and the grey lines are other draws from the MCMC simulations. The residual standard deviation declined from three in the first model to 2.6 in models 2 and 3. This denotes an increase in precision.

(Figure 2 about here)

Figure 2. Treatment Effect with Moderation (Distance)

The main results of these last two models concur with our research hypotheses, even after accounting for pre-treatment attitudes towards prostitution. From a statistical perspective, the inclusion of this predictor helped reduce variance and potential bias in the effects produced by our experiment (Gelman, Hill & Vehtari, 2020). As expected, those participants who expressed higher levels of agreement with the banning of prostitution in the first wave of the panel were more likely to concur with the message of the podcast, regardless of the mayor's party. The other covariates included in the models show that females and younger people were more willing to agree with the politicians' proposal. Furthermore, education and higher social class also seem to have a positive effect on the level of agreement with the message, although there is much more uncertainty around these coefficients.

Conclusions

Over the last decade, numerous studies have highlighted the rise of affective polarization within democracies and its association with severe political problems, but a

comprehensive understanding of its effects on citizens' political attitudes has remained limited. In this research, we have found evidence that affective polarization amplifies the influence of party cues as they not only reinforce partisan identities but also encourage citizens to be more uncritical and less rational in their policy evaluations. Considering that party identification "is also in the issues" when they align with party stances (Dias and Lelkes, 2022:776), we have estimated the effects of party cues on an unbranded issue: the banning of prostitution. Through an experimental panel survey conducted in Spain, we have identified the moderating effect of affective polarization on party cues on this non-salient issue, which was undefined by party lines.

The experiment involved participants listening to a fictional news podcast during the survey's second wave, where a proposal to ban prostitution nationwide was attributed to either the right-wing Popular Party (PP) or the left-wing Socialist Party (PSOE). Given the characteristics of the Spanish party system, which features two major parties in opposing ideological camps among various other parties, the assignment to treatment condition ensured participants were evenly distributed across the ideological spectrum. The results show the causal effect of the party cues: listening to the podcast from the compatible sender increased the probability of being in favor of banning prostitution. These findings align with previous studies that have highlighted the relevance of party signals in shaping public opinion (Bullock, 2019; Brader et al., 2020; Kam, 2005). The novelty of our research lies in the finding that affective polarization strengthens the influence of party cues, leading individuals to adopt positions that more closely reflect their ideology. This evidence suggests that affective polarization has a moderating effect on party cues. The results of the statistical analysis indicate that affective polarization significantly influences party cues when the sender is ideologically compatible. Both models, using the indicators of affective polarization

proposed by Wagner (2021), *Spread* and *Distance*, show equivalent results and underscore their reinforcing effect.

These results contribute to the study of political behavior in polarized societies, highlighting the complexity of the relationship between affective polarization, partisanship, and party cues. Our research also provides evidence on the relevance of affective polarization by offering new perspectives on its consequences, echoing the foundational studies that demonstrated its effects in the context of the United States (Druckman et al., 2021b). Affective polarization not only reinforces existing political divisions but also has the potential to politicize new and neutral issues, thus broadening the scope of partisan influence. We show that affective polarization moderates the alignment of individuals with the position of the parties from their ideological camp, thereby increasing the politicization of issues that fall outside traditional party lines.

These findings underscore the importance of affective polarization in activating topics that are neither party-branded issues nor clearly positioned by the citizens. Furthermore, our research reveals the pernicious effect of affective polarization when polarized citizens uncritically follow party cues, as the understanding of politics and the formation of attitudes are likely to become more biased. These results suggest that politicians may be motivated to adopt polarizing strategies, believing that supporters of their ideological camp are more likely to follow their cues. This dynamic can undermine efforts at consensus building and contribute to increased polarization within parliaments.

We consider that our work opens new paths for future research. For instance, applying a comparative approach to explore the impact of affective polarization across a variety of political issues and countries could produce valuable insights. By examining both salient issues and those with defined partisan divisions, we can deepen our

understanding of whether the observed effects are specific to politically ambiguous issues or extend to more clearly defined polarized contexts. Similarly, there is potential for future research to examine the characteristics of highly polarized individuals that lead them to align with their party and follow its cues, which could provide deeper insights into the mechanism of affective polarization and political attitudes.

¹ The literature on moderation defines this mechanism from a substantive and a statistical perspective. Regarding the former, Baron & Kenny (1986) argue that moderation is present when “the causal relation between two variables changes a function of the moderator variable” (pp. 1174). In the context of experimental studies, Sheagley & Clifford (2024) conceptualize moderation as variation in the magnitude of the treatment effect for different levels of the moderating variable. The statistical approach to moderation focuses on the statistical effect that a moderator variable has on the relationship between a dependent variable and an independent variable. Hayes (2020) points out that “the effect of X on some variable Y is moderated by W if its size, sign, or strength depends on W” (pp. 234). In this sense, moderation is equivalent to interaction in statistical models.

² In May 2022, just after the data collection work for this article, the government's Socialist Party tabled a bill to abolish ‘procurring’, but after several months of inaction by the parties and the government itself, the bill languished and failed. In this respect, prostitution in Spain continues to be in a state of “alegal” ambiguity as of August 2024, meaning it is neither formally prohibited nor regulated by law.

³ For an exploration of academic debates and regulatory approaches to prostitution see, among others, Bonache et al. (2021) and Skilbrei (2021).

⁴ Data were collected by the research firm 40dB (<https://40db.es/>). The first wave of the survey had a sample of 1,200 people and was undertaken between 3-16 February 2022. The sample was selected among residents in Spain (excluding Ceuta and Melilla) over 18 years of age and is representative of the Spanish population by sex, age, and region. The sampling error is $\pm 2.83\%$.

⁵ In the second wave, 600 respondents were re-contacted from those who had participated in the first phase and that expressed a position regarding the banning of prostitution. The survey took place between 17-24 March 2022. The sampling error is $\pm 4\%$.

⁶ In experimental research, stratified randomization is used to achieve a balanced treatment assignment with respect to a factor that influences the outcome. Moreover, it can help to prevent type I error and increase statistical power (Kernan et al. 1999).

⁷ The respondents who were classified as *center* according to their ideological self-location (position 5 on the 0-10 left-right scale) were excluded from the analysis (Bullock, 2011; Druckman et al. 2013).

⁸ See next section for a description of those models.

⁹ Brambor et al. (2006) state that this is the term of interest when a conditional hypothesis is included in a regression model via an interaction term.

¹⁰ See online Appendix for details regarding the models’ estimation. To assess if our results were driven by the estimation method, we re-estimated them using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS). The results were consistent, and they are available upon request from the authors.

¹¹ The main result of Bayesian estimation of regression models is a (posterior) distribution for each parameter. This value is the median of the distribution estimated for the coefficient of the treatment variable.

¹² We estimated separate models for Spread and Distance because of their very high correlation.

¹³ More than 90% of the mass of the posterior distribution for the interaction term (*compatibleXspread*) is in the region of values greater than zero; this means that there is a 91.24% probability that this coefficient is positive (see online Appendix).

¹⁴ There is a 90.61% probability that the coefficient for the interaction “*compatibleXdistance*” is positive (see online Appendix).

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