

Far away? How misperceived polarization fuels affective polarization in Spain

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Abstract

Spain is marked by high levels of affective polarization. Some studies argue that this is the result of increased ideological polarization, while others note the effect of certain issues, as well as the influence of social media, elites, and changes in party supply. In this article we propose another explanation based on the effect of (mis)perceptions. Firstly, we show that individuals with a more unrealistic perception of a party's ideological position will also develop stronger feelings of antipathy toward that party. Secondly, we show that perceived polarization increases individual affective polarization. Attitudes are influenced by judgments about political reality, which in turn are influenced (and biased) by group identities. Finally, we construct an indicator of false polarization to see to what extent the difference between perceived polarization and actual polarization of the party system informs higher individual levels of affective polarization. We also confirm with this strategy that, as the sense of false polarization grows, so does the dispersion of affect across party groups. In short, this article explores the influence of perceptions on citizens' attitudes. These perceptions often tend to artificially exaggerate differences with outgroups, which can lead individuals to mistakenly think they have little in common.

Keywords: affective polarization; group bias; misperceptions; false polarization

Resumen. *¿Demasiado lejos? Cómo la polarización mal percibida alimenta la polarización afectiva en España*

España es un país con altos niveles de polarización afectiva. Algunos estudios sostienen que esto es consecuencia de un aumento de la polarización ideológica, mientras que otros destacan el efecto de ciertos temas, así como la influencia de las redes sociales, las élites y los cambios en la oferta partidista. En este artículo proponemos otra explicación basada en el efecto de las percepciones erróneas. En primer lugar, mostramos que los individuos que tienen una percepción más irrealista de la posición ideológica de un partido tienden a desarrollar también mayores sentimientos de antipatía hacia dicho partido. En segundo lugar, demostramos que la polarización percibida incrementa la polarización afectiva individual. Nuestras actitudes están influenciadas por los juicios que hacemos sobre la realidad política, los cuales, a su vez, están condicionados (y sesgados) por nuestras identidades grupales. Finalmente, construimos un indicador de falsa polarización para analizar en qué medida la diferencia entre la polarización percibida y la polarización real del sistema de partidos se asocia con niveles individuales más altos de polarización afectiva. Con esta estrategia también confirmamos que, a medida que aumenta la percepción de falsa polarización, lo hace también la dispersión del afecto entre los distintos grupos partidistas. En resumen, este artículo explora la influencia de las percepciones sobre las actitudes ciudadanas. Estas percepciones tienden con frecuencia a exagerar artificialmente las diferencias con los grupos externos, lo que puede llevarnos erróneamente a pensar que tenemos poco en común.

Palabras clave: polarización afectiva; sesgo grupal; percepciones erróneas; polarización falsa.

Summary

- | | |
|--|---------------------|
| 1. Introduction | 4. Data and methods |
| 2. Perception biases in the context of partisan intergroup relations: Differentiating the perceived polarization effect from the false polarization effect | 5. Results |
| 3. Hypotheses | 6. Conclusions |
| | Acknowledgements |
| | Funding |
| | References |

1. Introduction

The 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer ranked Spain—based on citizens' self-reported perception of the level of political division—in the group of severely polarized countries (along with Argentina, Sweden, and the United States). Similarly, in their comparative study of twenty democracies, Gidron et al. (2020) identified Spain as the most affectively polarized country.¹ Adding historical depth to this picture, Torcal and Comellas (2022) highlight two key moments of heightened affective polarization in Spain between 1993 and 2019 based on evaluations of political leaders: during the 2008 and 2015 general elections. This evidence supports the general impression that Spain is a strongly polarized society, having moved from the ordinary political disagree-

1. The data employed by the authors refer to the Spanish general elections of 1996, 2000, 2004, and 2008, suggesting that affective polarization in Spain is not a recent phenomenon.

ments to an affective gap between the various partisan groups (Crespo et al., 2021a). However, affective polarization in this context may have been driven by mistaken assumptions that lead us to overestimate the extent of actual disagreement with our rivals.

This is a remarkable paradox that has received almost no attention in studies on affective polarization in Spain: we become individually polarized in response to an exaggerated perception of actual polarization levels in the political system (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2013). In view of the performative effect of this paradox, this article aims to demonstrate the impact on affective polarization of three closely related concepts. First, we will discuss how artificially amplifying the ideological distance between an individual and a party intensifies negative feelings toward that party. This could be the starting point for the current climate of intergroup hostility. Subsequently, we will demonstrate how individual affective polarization increases the more polarization is perceived in the party system. We will focus, therefore, not on genuine ideological differences or on the attitudes of citizens or elites, but on personal impressions of the political reality (impressions generally mediated by identity-driven cognitive biases). Finally, we will address the false polarization effect comparing actual levels of polarization in the party system with perceived levels of polarization. As will be discussed below, it is important to differentiate false polarization from perceived polarization (Kenyon, 2014; Blatz & Mercier, 2018; Lees & Cikara, 2021; Nijs, 2025). Hence, we work simultaneously with these two ideas but construct independent indicators.

Verifying these relationships will help expand the hitherto dominant explanations of affective polarization by showing how exaggerated impressions make individuals feel there are certain threats, tensions, or conflicts with no basis in fact. Our mind plays a trick on us by distorting reality, leading us to develop attitudes that further reinforce group preferences and biases. As in Nickelback's song, many citizens end up feeling (mistakenly) far away from voters of other parties.

Before delving into the issue of misperceptions and false polarization, we must conceptually delineate what we mean by affective polarization. Studies on affective polarization have repeatedly explored why our feelings of antipathy, distrust, and antagonism toward those who do not share our political identity have increased (Iyengar et al., 2019). Intensified bias and hostility toward outgroups is evidence that political conflict has deepened; although we no longer disagree exclusively in our preferences on how best to solve social problems, our opponents' positions lead to considerable animosity and we tend to consider them illegitimate and morally reprehensible (Tappin & McKay, 2019). This generates a Manichean conception of politics as a permanent zero-sum game (Piazza, 2023).

Based on this diagnosis, Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory (SIT) has been commonly used to explain affective polarization. The claim that partisanship acts as a mega-identity creating a tendency to favor the ingroup and discriminate against the outgroup is based on two premises: a) the grow-

ing sorting of social identities and ideological positions within party groups, which reduces cross-cutting identities, increases intragroup homogeneity, and exacerbates the sensation of intergroup estrangement (Mason, 2018; Hartevelde, 2021); b) partisan identity has a strong influence on self-concept and generates homophily in social relationships, that is, a preference for those who are politically similar (Huber & Malhotra, 2017). In short, partisanship becomes a source of social segregation, extends beyond policy preferences to influence the field of emotions, acts in an expressive and non-instrumental way by influencing our personal identity and, finally, is a great shortcut for building judgments and making decisions (Huddy & Bankert, 2017; Goldenberg et al., 2023).

If we assume that partisanship acts as a powerful social identity, we should pay attention to how categorization and intergroup comparison processes affect the way we perceive the world. The reinforcement of intergroup differentiation results in a cognitive gap, so partisans see themselves differently from how other partisans perceive them. Although our perception of the degree of differentiation is usually biased and responds to the need to consolidate group boundaries, human beings are convinced the world is as they think it is. Throughout this article we will demonstrate the existence of a false perception of polarization derived from the attribution of hyperbolic extreme positions to opponents and how this affects citizens' attitudes.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the main theories in the psycho-sociological literature that allow us to explain the problem of perception bias and the false polarization effect. Section 3 and 4 present the research hypotheses to be tested and the data and methods to be used. Section 5 contains the main findings of the multiple linear regression models (OLS) used. The article concludes with Section 6 in which we propose how correcting misperceptions and false polarization can be an effective mechanism for reducing partisan hostility levels in Spain.

2. Perception biases in the context of partisan intergroup relations: Differentiating the perceived polarization effect from the false polarization effect

Identities have cognitive effects (Allport, 1954). In particular, they influence the perception of facts, and, based on this perception, intergroup relations develop (Xiao et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2023). Perception as a psychological process is conditioned by identity categorization and, in turn, mediates the influence of identity on attitudes and behaviors by activating stereotypes (Xiao et al., 2016). One of the most common perceptual biases caused by identity is the exaggeration of differences between groups, a phenomenon known as “intergroup accentuation,” which has traditionally been explained in social psychology by the need for positive distinctiveness (Rothermund & Deutsch, 2024). This process of intergroup accentuation, by which perceived similarities within groups and differences between them become exaggerated, has been experimentally demonstrated to be a robust consequence of categorization, especially when group labels are sali-

ent and congruent with ideological content (McGarty & Turner, 1992). Social judgments are therefore determined by group-based categories.

By highlighting differences with rivals, there is also an implicit enhancement of ingroup status and a reinforcement of group ties as shared characteristics with outgroups are reduced (McGarty & Penny, 1988). Thinking that outgroups are highly extremist assigns them an undesirable characteristic and points to the moral superiority of the ingroup (Rojo-Martínez et al., 2023). Consequently, false polarization could be interpreted as a product of ingroup favoritism bias (Dimdins, 2003). Other theories add that accentuating differences is not only prompted by a desire for ingroup distinction but is the result of memory problems that make us more prone to remembering a group's extreme prototype and leads to overgeneralizations (Rothermund & Deutsch, 2024). Through a representativeness heuristic, we infer that the most extreme positions of some members of a group are, in fact, the group's most common traits (Ahler & Sood, 2023). The misestimation of the extremism of rival groups via stereotypical generalization is accompanied by a tendency to hyper-represent outgroup homogeneity (Ostrom & Sedikides, 1992). The attribution of positions to the outgroup (i.e., first-order beliefs²) seeks to maximize contrasts, but also to reduce accepted levels of diversity and variability in the perception of its members. This leads to the assumption that all individuals in the outgroup share the same type of position. Misunderstanding and misattribution are reinforced by naïve realism: people believe their opinions are objective and that those of rival groups are unfounded and based on a very simplistic, manipulated, and uninformed view, which makes them more extreme and less sensitive to recognizing nuances (Keltner & Robinson, 1993; Dimdins, 2003; Blatz, 2023). As Bursztyń and Yang (2022) argue, misperceptions about others are not measurement errors but structured distortions shaped by identity and motivated reasoning. These types of misperceptions respond to two widespread cognitive mechanisms: categorical thinking and simplification (Fernbach & Van Boven, 2022).

In recent years, particularly in the United States, these theories have been increasingly applied to the study of perception bias as a driver of affective polarization. The partisan gap in factual beliefs creates parallel realities that hinder minimal agreement on objectively verifiable information. According to Bullock et al. (2015), even beliefs about measurable political and economic indicators can reflect partisan bias. There is no longer a debate on how to deal with the problems, but on whether they exist (Lees et al., 2021; Fernbach & Van Boven, 2022). As Druckman et al. (2022) demonstrate, when people evaluate rival parties, they think of those groups' most extreme ideological positions. In addition, the more intense the sense of ideological divergence, the greater the antipathy toward the outgroups (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016).

2. First-order beliefs refer to individuals' perceptions of others' attitudes, traits, or behaviors, while second-order beliefs (or meta-perceptions) refer to what individuals believe others think about them (Lees & Cikara, 2021).

As other research has shown, such as Levendusky and Malhotra (2016:384), American citizens estimate that U.S. parties are 20% further apart than they actually are. The authors calculate the level of false polarization as the difference between the actual distance on several issues (based on self-reported attitudes) and the perceived distance (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016: 386). In 2019, a report published by More in Common reinforced the findings of Levendusky and Malhotra (2016) by detecting that the true percentage of Republicans holding extreme views was 19 points lower than the estimate for the Democrats. Conversely, the perception gap was somewhat higher (27 points) (Yudkin et al., 2019). Previously, Westfall et al. (2015) found that the size of actual polarization in the U.S. was medium, but the perceived polarization exceeded it by a factor of two.

According to the results of Westfall et al. (2015:149–151), categorization emphasizes perceived differences between parties (i.e., the opposing group's position is always exaggerated more than the ingroup's position³) and perceived polarization predicts political engagement. A more distorted view of the political arena may encourage the mobilization (not only behavioral, but also attitudinal) of individuals who feel that political competition will imply significantly greater changes and a notable risk to their interests. In contrast, if antagonism were scarce, political conflict would not have too many practical consequences and emotional prevalence and personal involvement would then be reduced. The erroneous beliefs that occur in our mind when thinking about other partisan tribes are not caused by information problems but respond to a context of competition (Lees & Cikara, 2021). This creates a vicious circle: the more erroneously we perceive others' positions (i.e., by attributing to them inaccurate and extreme beliefs), the more heightened our sense of competition and zero-sum logic becomes. This subsequently triggers a defensive response that strengthens ingroup ties, further intensifying social categorization and identity salience, which in turn reinforces the erroneous beliefs. In short, this process amplifies the outgroup's prejudices and negative evaluations, hinders compromise, and can even lead to an atmosphere of greater distrust in political institutions (Moore-Berg et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2020; Farjam & Bravo, 2024).

Research examining the impact of perceptions on polarization has often employed some of the concepts mentioned here interchangeably, such as false polarization, misperceptions, or (mis)perceived polarization (Lees & Cikara, 2021). It has been emphasized that the influence of individuals' positions is not the same as the influence of their perceptions on the positions of outgroups. However, distinguishing between perceived polarization (how I perceive the distribution of ideological positions across parties), which may involve varying degrees of inaccuracy, and false polarization (the difference between others'

3. Despite this general trend, Ahler (2014) highlights that there is also a propensity to exaggerate ingroup extremism, and this can have equally important consequences by promoting attitudes of conformity that shift individuals' views toward the extremes to better align with their group norms.

actual positions and the way those positions are perceived) is important. This last concept encompasses the first but goes a step further. Analyzing how our impressions about polarization levels generate a self-fulfilling prophecy (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2013) does not suffice. In so doing, the extent to which the individual is distanced from reality is not really known, i.e., there may be a great deal of perceived polarization corresponding to a truthful situation of a particular political system. The false polarization concept further refines the analysis by allowing us to confront real aggregate data with individual perceptions.

Although this entire topic is widely researched on the other side of the Atlantic—largely because it is understood that correcting these misperceptions is a depolarizing mechanism (De Jong, 2024)—concern about perceived polarization and false polarization in Spain has been scarce. Research by Crespo et al. (2021b) and Rojo Martínez et al. (2023) has opened this debate in Spain with some promising results. Crespo et al. (2021b:83) show that the perception gap on levels of systemic ideological polarization is between 16 and 17 points higher between the Partido Popular (PP) party (center-right, conservative) and Vox party (radical-right) voters and between 23 and 28 percentage points between the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) party (center-left, social democratic) and Unidas Podemos (UP) party (radical-left) voters. Rojo Martínez et al. (2023), on the other hand, focus on misperceptions in culture war issues, such as gender violence and national symbols. In their article, the authors point out that, when an issue is an important identity marker for a group, that group distorts the policy position of its rivals to maintain a criterion of positive distinction. More recently, Torcal (2023) analyzed the importance of the perception of partisan supply to understand affective polarization. Despite these initial approaches, the effects of false polarization have yet to be demonstrated in detail. More specifically, it remains unclear whether these perceptual biases do indeed contribute to affective polarization. This paper will address this issue in the sections that follow.

3. Hypotheses

Our first hypothesis seeks to test the extent to which the unrealistic sense of ideological distancing from a party fosters negative feelings toward it. This hypothesis combines findings indicating that more ideological distance from a candidate or party increases affective polarization (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016; Harteveld, 2021; Ryan, 2023) with research on partisan bias since the ideological distance is perceived and not actual in this case.

Hypothesis 1. The (misperceived) distance effect. The greater the distance between a party's perceived ideological position and its actual position, the greater the feelings of antipathy toward that party. Individuals who have a more unrealistic perception of a party will also develop more feelings of dislike toward that party.

The above hypothesis does not capture the effect of either perceived polarization or false polarization, since the concept of polarization always implies a distribution of several evaluations. This first hypothesis only allows us to assess the impact that distorted ideological distancing has on feelings toward a single party. Therefore, we need to delve deeper and determine whether the exaggerated perception of systemic polarization increases individual affective polarization levels, as Moore-Berg et al. (2020) or Wilson et al. (2020) predicted for the U.S. If this hypothesis is confirmed, we would contribute a relevant element to the research on affective polarization in Spain: paying attention to identification alone does not suffice, as the effects it produces on our cognitive processing must also be studied. Political sociology must provide evidence that allows us to understand the extent to which identities distort our judgments and make us believe we live in an extraordinarily divided society, which in turn arouses unfounded reactions based on fear, threat, and anger. This is a relevant task since, in view of the revised literature, we conclude that perceived polarization influences negative evaluations of opposing parties more than actual polarization, although we almost always focus on the latter (Enders & Armaly, 2019).

Hypothesis 2. The perceived polarization effect. The more polarization an individual perceives in the party system, the greater their level of affective polarization.

Hypothesis 3. The false polarization effect. The greater the difference between the actual level of polarization and the polarization perceived by an individual, the greater their level of affective polarization.

4. Data and methods

We use data from the First National Survey of Political Polarization in Spain conducted by the Center of Public Opinion Studies of the University of Murcia (CEMOP, 2021). The survey was administered to a representative sample of the Spanish population aged 18 years and older with a total of 1,236 cases. Stratified multistage sampling was the procedure used, with the application of gender and age quotas and construction of strata by crossing the autonomous community of residence and habitat size.

The following variables are considered in the research:

- *Dependent variable (H1):* feeling thermometer (FT) toward a party. Scale 0–10, where 0 is total “antipathy and rejection” and 10 is total “sympathy and adhesion”.
- *Dependent variable (H2):* individual affective polarization calculated using Wagner’s (2021) spread formula for multiparty systems (not weighted). This formula measures the dispersion in the feelings expressed toward the four main Spanish parties: PSOE PP, Vox, and UP. The indicator range

is 0–5, with higher values being symptomatic of greater individual affective polarization. To measure the spread of affects, the formula subtracts the score given on a feeling thermometer to one party from the score given to each of the other parties ($like_{ip} - like_i$). All differences are squared and aggregated into a sum that is later divided by the number of parties considered (n_p).

$$(1) \text{ Spread } (i) = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{p=1}^p (like_{ip} - \overline{like}_i)^2}{n_p}}$$

- *Main independent variable (H1)*: absolute difference between the actual ideological position of a party j (ISP_j), calculated from the average ideological self-placement of its voters and sympathizers, and the perceived ideological position of that party j by an individual i ($(\widehat{p})IP_{ij}$). The operation of this formula is straightforward: if citizens who report voting for or sympathizing with party j have an average of 6 points on the ideological self-placement scale (1–10) and an individual i perceives that party's position as being at 8 points, the misperceived distance for i is 2 points.

$$(2) \text{ Misperceived distance}_{ij} = | \overline{ISP}_j - (\widehat{p})IP_{ij} |$$

- *Main independent variable (H2 and H3)*: using the partisan polarization index of Sani and Sartori (1983) and the approach proposed by Levendusky and Malhotra (2016), we establish the level of actual (or observed) polarization—based on voters' ideological self-placement—as well as perceived polarization in the party system, and the gap between both (i.e., false polarization). According to Sani and Sartori, polarization is calculated as the (absolute) difference between the self-placement ($\overline{ISP}$) of voters of the most extreme relevant party on the left (UP) and the self-placement of voters of the most extreme relevant party on the right (Vox), divided by the maximum theoretical range of the scale (9).⁴ The index ranges from 0 (minimum polarization) to 1 (maximum polarization). To calculate the actual polarization (3.1) we used the means on the ideological self-placement scale for each partisan group. For the calculation of perceived polarization (3.2), we used each individual's score in the perception question on the location of each party ($(\widehat{p})IP$) considering the same extremes. Finally,

4. The decision to analyze party system polarization based on voters' ideological self-placement is a generally accepted approach (Sartori, 1976; Sani & Sartori, 1983), though it is not without limitations. These include susceptibility to measurement error, temporal instability, and potential bias in self-reporting—issues that will be discussed in the conclusions. While some studies assess party system polarization using data from electoral manifestos or based on elite positioning, relying on citizens' self-placement and perceptions remains a valid reference point. This is particularly justified given that affective polarization is typically measured at the mass level and its consequences often manifest in interpersonal dynamics.

false polarization (3.3) is calculated as the difference between the polarization index (actual) and the perceived polarization of each individual.

$$(3.1) \text{ Party system polarization (actual, mass-level)} = \frac{|\overline{\text{ISP}}_{UP} - \overline{\text{ISP}}_{Vox}|}{9}$$

$$(3.2) \text{ Party system polarization (perceived)}_i = \frac{|(\widehat{p})\widehat{\text{IP}}_{iUP} - (\widehat{p})\widehat{\text{IP}}_{iVox}|}{9}$$

$$(3.3) \text{ False polarization}_i = \left| \frac{|\overline{\text{ISP}}_{UP} - \overline{\text{ISP}}_{Vox}|}{9} - \frac{|(\widehat{p})\widehat{\text{IP}}_{iUP} - (\widehat{p})\widehat{\text{IP}}_{iVox}|}{9} \right|$$

- *Control variables (sociodemographic)*: gender (dummy: 0 representing men; 1 representing women), age, education (dummy: 0 without university studies; 1 with university studies), religion (dummy: 0 non-Catholic, including atheists, agnostics and other religions; 1: Catholic, including practicing and non-practicing), and territorial identity (adaptation of the Linz-Moreno scale, where 1 is “I feel only Spanish” and 10 is “I feel exclusively identified with my autonomous community”). All the selected control variables have been highlighted by previous studies as sociodemographic characteristics or cleavages influencing affective polarization. Gender differences in affective polarization have been reported in Ondercin and Lizotte (2021) and Renström et al. (2021). Although their findings are not entirely consistent, both studies show significant differences. Age has also been frequently incorporated into explanatory models of individual affective polarization, with evidence suggesting that older people are more prone to polarized attitudes (Boxell et al., 2017; Ali & Altawil, 2023). As regards the impact of education, Han (2022) shows that higher educational attainment does not mitigate affective polarization. Similarly, Banda and Cluverius (2018) included educational attainment as a control variable in their research on the effect of elite polarization on affective polarization. Lastly, religious and territorial cleavages have been a common source of conflict in European multiparty systems.
- *Control variables (political)*. H1: ideological self-placement (scale 1–10: 1 extreme left; 10 extreme right). H2: ideological extremism (dummy: 0 not being at either of the two poles (1–3 + 8–10) of the ideological self-placement scale; 1 being at either of the two poles); use of Facebook for political information, use of Twitter, and use of online news sites (dummy: 0 not use; 1 use). Differentiating ideological self-placement from extremism in each of the hypotheses is necessary. An individual’s ideology may be aligned with their partisan identity (Medeiros & Noël, 2014; Mason, 2018; Wagner, 2021). However, it makes no sense to argue that affective polarization depends on whether a person is located more to the right or to

Table 1. Descriptive statistics (metric variables)

Variable name	Valid N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
FT PSOE	1232	0	10	3.89	2.76
FT PP	1232	0	10	3.37	2.81
FT VOX	1228	0	10	2.24	2.93
FT UP	1228	0	10	2.78	2.92
Affective polarization	1225	0	5	2.18	1.20
Actual ideological position PSOE	308	1	10	4.12	1.55
Actual ideological position PP	211	1	10	6.55	1.74
Actual ideological position Vox	134	1	10	7.21	1.93
Actual ideological position UP	147	1	10	2.70	1.61
Perceived ideological position PSOE	1213	1	10	3.81	1.81
Perceived ideological position PP	1216	1	10	7.18	1.90
Perceived ideological position Vox	1194	1	10	8.69	2.11
Perceived ideological position UP	1200	1	10	2.31	2.00
Misperceived distance PSOE	1213	0.12	5.88	1.43	1.15
Misperceived distance PP	1216	0.45	5.55	1.62	1.18
Misperceived distance Vox	1194	0.21	6.21	2.32	1.11
Misperceived distance UP	1200	0.30	7.30	1.44	1.70
Party system polarization (perceived)	1181	0	1	0.73	0.25
False polarization	1181	0.05	.51	0.31	0.16
Age	1236	18	94	50.23	16.91
Territorial identity	1128	1	10	4.22	2.73
Ideological self-placement	1206	1	10	4.86	2.14
Party system polarization (actual)	ABS(7.12–2.70)/9 = 0.49				

Source: Own elaboration using the CEMOP I National Survey of Political Polarization dataset.

the left. In this case, differentiating individuals holding extreme attitudes (of both ideologies) from those who do not is appropriate, as Brown and Hohman (2022) demonstrated. Likewise, research on false polarization has pointed to the role of mass media and social networks in spreading stereotypes and prejudices about opponents (Yudkin et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2020). Hence, the proposed relationship in our H2 is controlled based on the use of Facebook, Twitter, and online news sites.

The wording of all survey questions and the complete dataset are available on the CEMOP website.⁵ Table 1 (metric variables) and Table 2 (nominal variable) show the descriptive statistics for all the variables considered in the study. Since the dependent variable is metric (both in the case of H1 and H2), we developed multiple OLS linear regression models ($y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \dots + \beta_p x_p + \epsilon$) to test the proposed relationship. Some bivariate analyses were previously conducted to understand the subsequent regression results better.

5. <https://www.cemopmurcia.es/estudios/polarizacion-politica/>

Table 2. Descriptive statistics (nominal variables)

Variable	Valid N	Categories and frequencies (%)
Religion	1,236	0: Non-Catholic, 40.2 1: Catholic, 59.8
Gender	1,236	0: Men, 48.3 1: Women, 51.7
Education	1,236	0: Without university studies, 53.6 1: With university studies, 46.4
Facebook use	1,232	0: not use, 73.3% 1: Use, 26.7%
Twitter use	1,231	0: Not use, 76.7% 1: Use, 23.3%
Online news sites use	1,233	0: Not use, 46.1% 1: Use, 53.9%

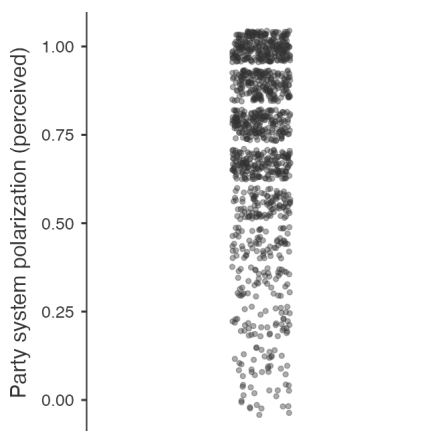
Source: Own elaboration using the CEMOP I National Survey of Political Polarization dataset.

5. Results

The data in Table 1 indicate a gap of 0.24 points between actual polarization (0.49) and the average perceived polarization (0.73) reported by respondents. This implies that perceived polarization exceeds the actual level by approximately 49% (calculated as the relative difference). This percentage highlights the significant presence of cognitive biases among Spaniards, which contribute to a distorted perception of the level of ideological disagreement between parties. As shown in Figure 1, most respondents perceive a higher level of polarization than the actual level. Notably, 24% of the respondents score 1 on the perceived polarization indicator, which suggests that they view the two most ideologically distant parties as being completely opposed.

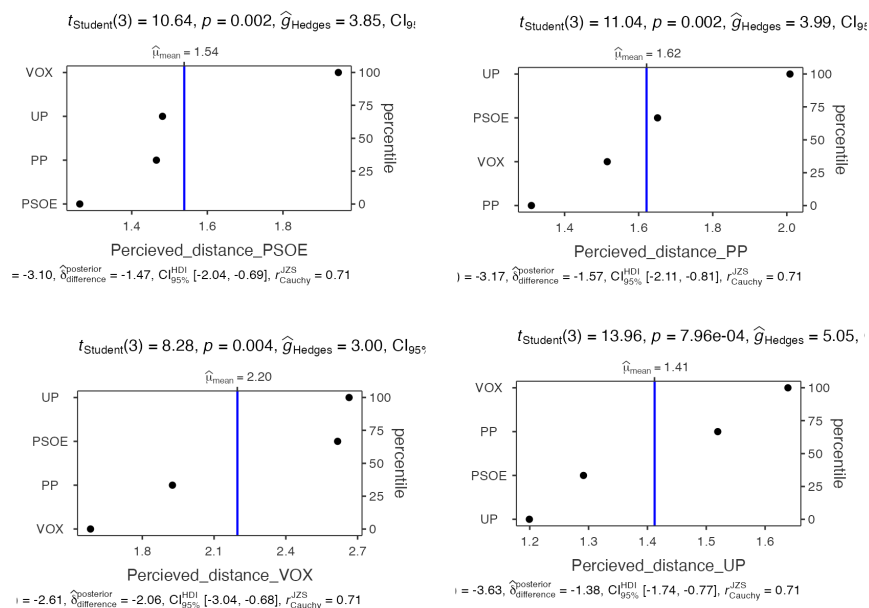
Spaniards tend to exaggerate the level of polarization within the political system, but to what extent are these perceptual biases rooted in partisan bias? Figure 2 shows that the misperceived distance is always higher among individuals who vote for rival parties. According to SIT, the tendency to accentuate intergroup differences fosters misperceptions about outgroups, leading individuals to perceive opposing parties as more ideologically distant from our way of thinking. This can heighten a sense of conflict and misgivings between groups, causing a problem of biased perceptions to be misrepresented as ideologically based. In turn, and as expected, ingroup members always have the lowest level of misperceived distance. The social projections of outgroups are made by exaggerating the traits we consider potentially negative or those justifying dislike. Consequently, projection and perception are examples of motivated reasoning. The ingroup's projection is more accurate and avoids conveying a controversial image, as, in this case, it could be excessive ideological extremism.

Figure 1. Descriptive graph (diagram with fuzzy data) for the variable “Party system polarization (perceived)”



Source: Own elaboration using Jamovi software.

Figure 2. Differences in misperceived distance depending on the respondent's vote+sympathy



ANOVA test for difference of means significant in all cases. F (perceived distance PSOE) = 11.6, $p < 0.01$; F (perceived distance PP) = 11.5, $p < 0.01$; F (perceived distance Vox) = 47.6, $p < 0.01$; F (perceived distance UP) = 14.6, $p < 0.01$.

Source: Own elaboration using Jamovi software.

Of the results shown in Figure 2, the case of Vox stands out. The level of deviation of PSOE and UP voters from Vox's position is singularly high. The distance misperceived by PP voters from Vox is 1.93 (SD = 1.31), 2.62 (SD = .03) for PSOE voters, and 2.66 (SD = .50) for UP voters. Left-wing party voters are noted for their singularly exaggerated perception of their level of ideological distance from the radical right; a situation that could trigger the intense emotional reactions this party provokes among left-wing voters in Spain. In addition, as shown in Table 1, Vox is the party associated with the highest level of misperceived ideological distance. A significant cognitive gap exists between how Vox voters perceive themselves and how they are perceived by their rivals.

Having presented these initial data, we can now address H1: the (misperceived) distance effect. This hypothesis states that the greater the distance between a party's perceived ideological position and its actual position, the greater the feelings of antipathy toward that party. Investigating the elements explaining negative feelings toward parties is relevant because affective polarization is more likely to increase because dislike toward the outgroup (negative partisanship) intensifies than because attachment to the ingroup improves (Iyengar et al., 2019).

The model equation is as follows:

$$Y_i(\text{FT}_{\text{Party}_j}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Perceived distance}_{\text{Party}_j}) + \beta_2(\text{Ideological self-placement}) + \beta_3(\text{Territorial identity}) + \beta_4(\text{Gender}) + \beta_5(\text{Age}) + \beta_6(\text{Education}) + \beta_7(\text{Religion}) + \varepsilon$$

In the first case analyzed (Table 3), we find that gender, age, and ideology have a significant influence on feelings toward the PSOE. Being female and older are both associated with greater sympathy toward this party. However, the influence of gender and age is much lower than that of misperceived ideological distance from the PSOE party ($\beta = -.228, p < 0.01$), which has an explanatory power similar to that of ideological self-placement ($\beta = -.296, p < 0.01$). The impact of misperceived distance was as expected in our H1. The greater the misperceived distance from a party, the stronger the dislike shown toward the party that is the object of the misperception (see Figure 3). Ideology alone is insufficient to explain the reasons we dislike a given party; we have to pay attention to other cognitive-psychological factors.

In the case of the UP party (Table 4), religion and territorial identity (two classic cleavages) are found to be significant factors. However, gender ceases to be significant, despite the party's strong emphasis on feminist discourse. Additionally, ideological self-placement shows a higher standardized coefficient compared to the PSOE model, indicating a greater importance in predicting the dependent variable. Nevertheless, misperceived distance remains significant in the direction indicated by H1 ($\beta = -.122, p < 0.01$). These findings reinforce the idea that attitudinal or structural variables alone are insufficient to explain feelings toward a party, perceptual biases must also be taken into account.

Table 3. Linear regression model to explain feelings toward the PSOE party

	Model 1 B (E)	β	Model 2 B (E)	β
Misperceived distance PSOE	-.600*** (.067)	-.252	-.544*** (.064)	-.228***
Ideological self-placement			-.377*** (.037)	-.296***
Territorial identity			.010 (.028)	.010
Gender			.376** (.147)	.069**
Age			.021*** (.005)	.133***
Education			.275 (.150)	.050
Religion			-.043 (.171)	-.008
Constant	4.844*** (.123)		5.161*** (.346)	
Adjusted R ²	.063		.162	
N	1177		1177	

Notes: The reference level is always coded as 0. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Multicollinearity diagnostics performed with the VIF measure yielded no values greater than 3 for any variable. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$

Source: Own elaboration using the CEMOP I National Survey of Political Polarization dataset.

As for the two right-wing parties (PP and Vox), our H1 is reconfirmed. The influence of misperceived distance is especially prominent in the case of Vox, the party causing the greatest biases ($\beta = -.258$, $p < 0.01$). The fact that the relationship predicted in H1 is confirmed with all matches is evidence of the regularity of this effect and its relevance. Regarding the rest of the variables considered in the models, it should be noted that gender is a significant predictor variable only in the case of Vox (in the inverse sense to what happened with PSOE). It thus appears that the gender-based conflict is led by social democracy and the radical right in Spain. In turn, identification as a Catholic increases positive affection for both parties (somewhat more so for the PP). Meanwhile, territorial identity is significant in the Vox model, but not in the PP model. Here we observe the same pattern as among the left-wing parties. The territorial issue has a translation in terms of partisan affection only toward the system's extremes, which seem to capitalize more on the divisions concerning this issue.

The models developed to test H1 demonstrate that the problem of negativity toward rival parties is not only a reflection of certain social or ideological identities; rather the way we perceive plays a significant role in all cases

Table 4. Linear regression model to explain feelings toward the UP party

	Model 1 B (E)	β	Model 2 B (E)	β
Misperceived distance UP	-.568*** (.091)	-.181	-.383*** (.076)	-.122***
Ideological self-placement			-.614*** (.036)	-.448***
Territorial identity			.099*** (.027)	.092***
Gender			.205 (.141)	.035
Age			-.001 (.005)	-.004
Education			.279 (.143)	.047
Religion			-.886*** (.165)	-.148***
Constant	3.656*** (.155)		6.251*** (.332)	
Adjusted R ²	.032		.339	
N	1163		1163	

Notes: The reference level is always coded as 0. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Multicollinearity diagnostics performed with the VIF measure yielded no values greater than 3 for any variable. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$

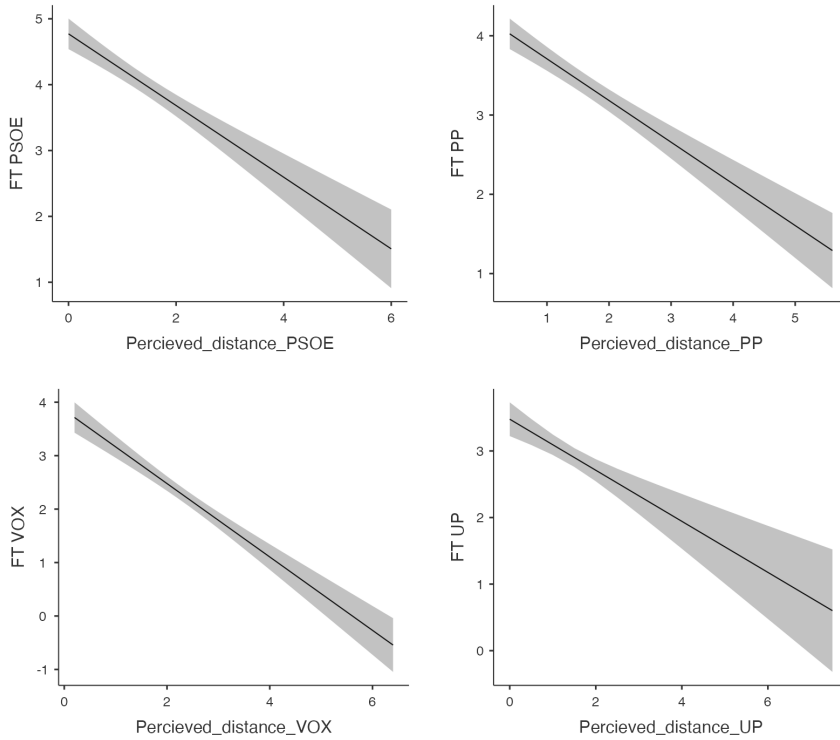
Source: Own elaboration using the CEMOP I National Survey of Political Polarization dataset.

(see Figure 3). Polarization, in this sense, can be understood as a kind of profound misunderstanding based on unrealistic feelings that predispose us to reject those who think differently. We often attribute evil motivations and ways of thinking to outgroup members. If negativity is the main driver of affective polarization, this phenomenon should not be understood without an in-depth discussion of the processes of social perception. Consequently, the explanatory framework of political science should include the influence that perceptual biases have on decision-making and the interpretations of reality.

Next, we address our H2: *The perceived polarization effect*. In this case, linear regression models will allow us to test whether, as an individual's perceived polarization in the party system increases, affective polarization also rises. The model equation is as follows:

$$Y_i (\text{Affective polarization}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Perceived party system polarization}) + \beta_2(\text{Ideological extremism}) + \beta_3(\text{Territorial identity}) + \beta_4(\text{Gender}) + \beta_5(\text{Age}) + \beta_6(\text{Education}) + \beta_7(\text{Religion}) + \beta_8(\text{Facebook use}) + \beta_9(\text{Twitter use}) + \beta_{10}(\text{Online news sites use}) + \varepsilon$$

Figure 3. Estimated marginal means. FT values toward the parties according to perceived distance



Note: Display with 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Own elaboration using Jamovi software.

The results in Table 7 show that as an individual's perception of polarization within the party system increases, so does their level of affective polarization ($\beta = .155, p < 0.01$). Hence, H2 is confirmed at a 99% significance level. Perceived polarization is a factor with greater explanatory weight than territorial identity, religion, or Twitter use; all of which are variables normally used to explain the political dynamics of European democracies and Spain in particular. Most notably, perceived polarization remains an important explanatory factor even when controlling for variables associated with affective polarization, such as ideological extremism, social media use, or online news consumption.

The estimation of marginal means (with a 95% confidence interval) allows us to project the following scenario (see Figure 4): when the mean of perceived polarization increase from 0.730^u to 0.982⁺, affective polarization will increase from 2.44 to 2.62 (recall that the statistical range of the indicator is 5). This example represents an estimated increase of 7.38% in the dependent variable.

Table 5. Linear regression model to explain feelings toward the PP party

	Model 1 B (E)	β	Model 2 B (E)	β
Misperceived distance PP	-.725*** (.066)	-.304	-.526*** (.058)	-.221***
Ideological self-placement			.565*** (.034)	.435***
Territorial identity			-.049 (.025)	-.048
Gender			.095 (.132)	.017
Age (squared)			.000*** (.000)	.086***
Education			.340** (.136)	.061**
Religion			.566*** (.154)	.099***
Constant	4.601*** (.132)		.836***	
Adjusted R ²		.092		.348
N	1180		1180	

Notes: The reference level is always coded as 0. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Multicollinearity diagnostics performed with the VIF measure yielded no values greater than 3. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$

Source: Own elaboration using the CEMOP I National Survey of Political Polarization dataset.

But why does perceiving greater polarization make us more polarized? We propose three possible interpretations in what follows.

First, the perception of greater polarization may trigger defensive responses to an (unreal) sense of threat. The greater the perceived distance between the system's extreme and relevant parties, the more significant the electoral outcome becomes—particularly regarding which party governs or shapes public policy. Individuals may come to feel that dangerous changes will develop depending on who wins or loses, which can even cause anxiety. In contexts of low polarization, partisan competition should not be a source of major disruption to everyday life. Furthermore, the perception of polarization could discourage agreements and compromises between parties. Second, the increased perception of polarization can strengthen partisan ties. Since we perceive there is a higher level of ideological divergence, this may increase both our interest in politics and engagement (precisely because of the above-explained sense that the stakes are higher). A sense of effervescence and excitement (due to the excessive perception of conflict) may occur. This can make us more attentive and involved in what is happening and, as other

Table 6. Linear regression model to explain feelings toward the Vox party

	Model 1 B (E)	β	Model 2 B (E)	β
Misperceived distance VOX	-1.022*** (.072)	-.384***	-.687*** (.061)	-.258***
Ideological self-placement			.691*** (.033)	.502***
Territorial identity			-.108*** (.025)	-.100***
Gender			-.292** (.131)	-.049**
Age			-.009** (.004)	-.050**
Education			.044 (.133)	.007
Religion			.435*** (.152)	.072***
Constant	4.664*** (.186)		1.328*** (.341)	
Adjusted R ²	.146		.442	
N	1158		1158	

Notes: The reference level is always coded as 0. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Multicollinearity diagnostics performed with the VIF measure yielded no values greater than 3 for any variable. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$.

Source: Own elaboration using the CEMOP I National Survey of Political Polarization dataset.

studies have shown, this is a polarizing factor (Suk et al., 2022). Finally, we argue that the effect of perceived polarization on affective polarization may play out through the framework of social norms (Connors, 2023; Lane et al., 2024). When the political system is perceived to be highly polarized, an extraordinary level of political confrontation may become normalized, and it may even be assumed that the acceptable behavior shared by the members of the different groups is the adoption of unmoderated attitudes and positions. Polarization would thus become a common and accepted way of developing political opinions and emotions.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, perceived polarization is not exactly a type of misperception. It is true that most of the individuals in the sample (see Figure 1) have levels of perceived polarization that are higher than the actual levels. However, what we measure with this concept is —only— the idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy (when you think that political reality is polarized, you also become polarized, which polarizes political reality), but not exactly the impact of false polarization. Consequently, H3 involved the construction of a false polarization indicator comparing actual aggregate

Table 7. Linear regression model to explain affective polarization based on perceived polarization

	Model 1 B (E)	β	Model 2 B (E)	β
Perceived party system polarization	.897*** (.136)	.190***	.735*** (.124)	.155***
Ideological extremism			.964*** (.065)	.809***
Territorial identity			-.027** (.012)	-.061**
Gender			.096 (.062)	.080
Age			.014*** (.002)	.198***
Education			.071 (.063)	.060
Religion			.177** (.069)	.149**
Facebook			.284*** (.072)	.239***
Twitter			.178*** (.077)	.149***
Online news sites			.190*** (.065)	.159***
Constant	1.556*** (.105)		.337** (.169)	
Adjusted R ²	.035		.246	
N	1163		1163	

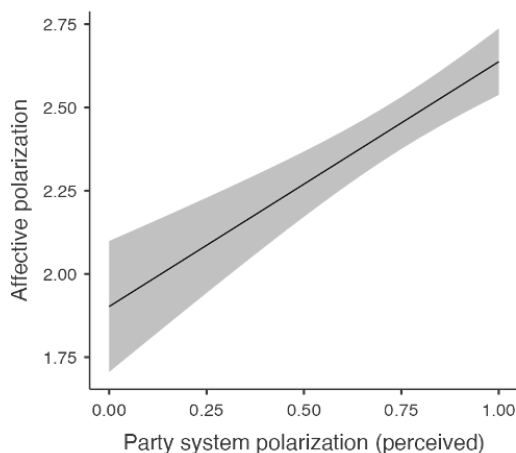
Notes: The reference level is always coded as 0. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Multicollinearity diagnostics performed with the VIF measure yielded no results greater than 3 for any variable. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$.

Source: Own elaboration using the CEMOP I National Survey of Political Polarization dataset.

polarization against each individual's perceived level of polarization.⁶ This is a way of directly knowing how far someone is from what we can empirically demonstrate as a fact. The model equation for H3 is:

$$Y_i (\text{Affective polarization}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{False polarization}) + \beta_2(\text{Ideological extremism}) + \beta_3(\text{Territorial identity}) + \beta_4(\text{Gender}) + \beta_5(\text{Age}) + \beta_6(\text{Education}) + \beta_7(\text{Religion}) + \beta_8(\text{Facebook use}) + \beta_9(\text{Twitter use}) + \beta_{10}(\text{Online news sites use}) + \varepsilon$$

6. In our sample, 43.1% of the individuals presented false polarization levels equal to or higher than 0.4 (the maximum being 0.51). In turn, only 18.4% have false polarization levels lower than 0.2.

Figure 4. Estimated marginal means of affective polarization according to perceived polarization

Note: Display with 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Own elaboration using Jamovi software.

According to the data in Table 8, we can also confirm H3: as false polarization grows, so does affective polarization; again, at a 99% significance level ($\beta = .077$, $p < 0.01$). Assuming a one-unit change in the level of false polarization, a .077 increase in individual affective polarization would be expected. As a result, there is a false polarization effect that shapes our attitudes and can be understood as an “overestimation of group differences” (Dimdins et al., 2003). However, this effect is not the main driver of affective polarization, but rather an adjuvant or amplifying element.

Like all other political attitudes, affective polarization is strongly influenced by preferences and identities. Alternative explanations beyond an individual’s cognitive anchors usually make a more modest contribution but are the most interesting because they offer a more nuanced understanding of the complex cognitive processes of human beings. Throughout this section we have shown that misperceived ideological distance from a party—alongside ideological self-placement—is the strongest predictor of feeling thermometer scores. Specifically, we have shown that misperceived distance fuels negative partisanship, which is the main constituent of affective polarization. If we look at an aggregate view, not specifying feelings toward each group, we have also found that perceived polarization in the system exacerbates polarization in the individual, and the same is true if we refer specifically to the concept of false polarization. We observed two clear effects of perceptions on polarization: a rejection effect on those we overestimate the furthest away (we dislike them because we think they think in a manner we dislike) and an affective dispersion effect that arises from inaccurate inference.

Table 8. Linear regression model to explain affective polarization according to false polarization

	Model 1 B (E)	β	Model 2 B (E)	β
False polarization	.770*** (.222)	.102***	.588*** (.199)	.077***
Ideological extremism			.988*** (.066)	.829***
Territorial identity			-.029** (.012)	-.067***
Gender			.106 (.062)	.088
Age			.013*** (.002)	.187***
Education			.092 (.064)	.077
Religion			.168** (.069)	.141**
Facebook			.284*** (.073)	.238***
Twitter			.196** (.078)	.165**
Online news sites			.214*** (.065)	.180***
Constant	1.971*** (.077)		.707*** (.157)	
Adjusted R ²	.010		.228	
N	1163		1163	

Notes: The reference level is always coded as 0. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Multicollinearity diagnostics performed with the VIF measure yielded no results greater than 3 for any variable. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$.

Source: Own elaboration using the CEMOP I National Survey of Political Polarization dataset.

6. Conclusions

Perception plays a central role in public opinion, as individuals respond less to objective political realities than to the meanings they construct through cognitive and emotional processing. Ultimately, people treat these perceptions as valid and real, shaping their attitudes accordingly—regardless of their accuracy. This article has shown the extent to which Spaniards exaggerate their ideological differences and perceive an unreal polarization in the political system. People's assumptions about party positions tend to be inaccurate, which explains the feelings of rejection toward those we perceive in a more distorted way. This article has also expanded upon theories used to explain affective polarization

in Spain beyond partisan identities and ideological extremism. Perceptions should be incorporated into any debate in sociology or political science on the attitudes of citizens, since what we think about others (including a reflection on their motivations, characteristics, and positions) or about reality can influence our judgments and behaviors just as our identity or our preferences do. The partisan divide in our country is, to a large extent, rooted in disagreements over facts, resulting in tribes that inhabit distinct cognitive realities.

Misperceptions about what our rivals think can be explained by three important cognitive mechanisms: the tendency to accentuate intergroup differences to reinforce ingroup status and the sense of belonging; naïve realism (which leads us to convince ourselves that we are capable of accurately knowing what others think, even better than they themselves can); and the use of stereotypes and simplifications to improve our understanding of political events and better process information. Accentuating differences and simplification are recurrent tools among political elites, especially during election campaigns, to make it easier for voters to better distinguish the partisan supply and to make a more direct choice. In the current model of political communication, the permanent negative campaign, the reductionist rhetoric, and the distortion of the opposite are continuous and facilitate this false sensation of division at the mass level. False polarization allows us to keep alive partisan links, mobilize the electorate, and avoid vote conversion processes. The media also participates in the exacerbated rhetoric that presents us with a far more desolate panorama than really exists, since it is evident that conflict and tension capture attention better than agreement.

In sum, this article presents an alternative interpretation of polarization in Spain and, far from catastrophic prophecies, we have shown that citizens are not as far away from each other as they might think. Evidencing the points citizens of the various parties have in common, the exaggeration of polarization levels, and the distances erroneously assumed constitute a counter-narrative with depolarizing power. Emphasizing what unites us or showing that it is not so much what differentiates us contributes to reducing affective hostilities.

To conclude, we point out the main limitations of this article and two lines of future research. First, it should be recalled that the perception calculations are based on the interviewees' self-reported positions. Members of a group, in expressing what they think, may be influenced by social desirability biases that lead them to place themselves in less extreme positions. Consequently, the level of perceptual deviation would not be produced by an error of rivals, but by modifying the real preferences of a group's members. Additionally, the study does not consider meta-perceptions, which can fuel reactive hostility, as the belief that others misjudge or reject one's group can trigger reciprocal negative attitudes. But especially deserving of further reflection is the question of causal direction: to what extent is misperceived polarization actually a consequence—not a driver—of affective polarization? In other words, it is plausible that highly polarized individuals alter their perceptions of ideological distance and political competition to justify or reinforce their existing partisan bias (Ward & Tavits, 2019; Wagner, 2021). This possibility points to a reverse

causal path that challenges the conventional view of misperceptions as a cause rather than a product of polarization.

As for future lines of work, available evidence on the origins of perceptual biases should be expanded. It would be valuable to test whether these biases are caused by group identity (as we can deduce from Figure 1). We recognize that identity may mediate and amplify misperceptions. Further research should explore the directionality and strength of this recursive relationship more explicitly. Likewise, it would be useful to know how the media, social networks, and political elites contribute to installing unrealistic images of partisan groups. The second and more promising line of work is linked to reducing polarization by correcting people's erroneous assumptions about other groups or about the state of politics in their country. Just three years ago, *Nature* published an article entitled "The general fault in our fault lines". Through a series of experiments in different countries, the team led by Professor Kai Ruggeri showed that informing individuals of their inaccurate beliefs can be beneficial for intergroup relations (Ruggeri et al., 2021). In short, addressing the challenge posed by polarization today involves further research into the power of perceptual biases to generate a false sense of antagonism and conflict.

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