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Party Polarisation and Spatial Voting in Spain

Lluis Orriols and Laia Balcells

In this article, we examine which political issues are considered most important by the Spanish electorate. Although a variety of potentially relevant issues are available, voters are forced to summarise them in just one vote. Thus, they need to prioritise some issues over others. This article analyses which issues end up being the most important for the Spanish electorate when they decide their vote, and why some issues become more influential than others. Our hypothesis is that voters give more weight to issues that polarise the parties. The hypothesis is tested at the individual and at the aggregate level.

Keywords: Party Polarisation; Issue Voting; Spatial Voting; Spain

Citizens can only cast one vote to express their preferences about a great variety of political issues when voting. As a consequence, voters are inevitably forced to prioritise some issues over others. This poses the question about how voters make up their mind when they face the decision of ranking relevant political issues in importance. It is clear that this largely depends on the tastes of each individual, but contextual factors may also play a key role. The aim of this paper is to study in detail how the Spanish electorate weighs up various political issues when they decide their vote. The aim is twofold: on the one hand, we study which political issues end up being the most significant for the Spanish electorate and, on the other, we examine whether the relative importance of an issue is partly conditioned by how political parties are polarised over this issue. In sum, by employing the spatial modelling perspective, this article focuses on one key contextual factor that may account for the relative importance of policies on vote choice: party system polarisation.

The question about issue importance and party polarisation has recently become popular among academics, a fact that is particularly reflected in the growth in literature on voting behaviour and spatial models (Alvarez & Nagler 2004; Ensley 2007; Lachat 2008; DeVries 2010). However, we address this issue in a novel way: while most authors have focused on the role of ideological positions in ideological voting, we explore other issue dimensions and specifically exclude ideology because it tends to summarise
positions on a range of issues. We hypothesise on the variation in the weight of each of these dimensions on the voting decision. We test the hypotheses with data from a recent survey in Spain (Centre for Sociological Research (CIS) 2799), which due to the inclusion of measures of spatial utility on several issue positions provides us with a lot of leverage to test them.\(^1\)

We argue that the greater the differences between parties on a particular issue, the more weight voters will give to this issue (Alvarez & Nagler 2004, p. 47). The idea underlying this hypothesis is that voters are, above all, interested in policy outcomes or results. The more clear-cut the various party platforms, the better they can compute the utility from their vote. Indeed, in an ‘issue voting’ model (Meier & Campbell 1979), the bigger the differences the more we expect an issue to be important for electoral choice, precisely because the alternatives on this issue are clearer.

This article emphasises the role of context—and, in particular, of party system polarisation—on issue voting in Spain. We approach this point in two different ways. On the one hand, from an individual-level perspective, we analyse how the subjective perception of context (i.e. distances between political parties) affects voting behaviour. Even if there are distances between parties, if the electorate does not perceive them they will be meaningless; thus, looking at how individuals perceive party positions is relevant in order to understand how individuals vote. We believe that this approach constitutes an added value of our work, vis-à-vis other works that focus on party polarisation but that do not consider the subjective values of party positions (Lachat 2008).\(^2\) On the other hand, from an aggregate level perspective, we analyse the effect of context with both subjective and objective measures of party distances. The former is measured using the average survey respondents’ perceived distances between the main parties; the latter by drawing on data from the Comparative Party Manifesto (CPM) project (Volkens et al. 2010). This process provides us with unbiased measures of these distances and a reasonably accurate snapshot of the context.

**Theoretical Framework**

The idea that party system polarisation is an important factor in issue voting is not new; in fact it was already present in the early investigations of the Michigan School scholars in the 1960s (Butler & Stokes 1969; Campbell et al. 1960). In particular, Campbell and his colleagues suggested three necessary conditions for issues to become influential in people’s vote choice: first, voters must be aware of the existence of the issue and must have an opinion about it; second, the issue must be sufficiently salient among the electorate; and, third, voters must be able to perceive differences between parties or candidates. Thus, according to the Michigan School, the importance of issue voting depends on how different candidates or parties’ policy alternatives are perceived to be by the electorate.\(^3\)

While most research since then has been focused on studying the first and second conditions,\(^4\) the importance of the third condition has only started to be seriously studied in recent times. Recent investigations have corroborated the relevance of party
polarisation for policy voting. For instance, in a comparative study of five European countries (Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden), Knutsen and Kumlin (2005) provided us with some evidence that ‘perceived party polarisation between major left-side and right-side parties can account for a significant amount of the domestic and transnational variation of values’ (p. 159).\(^5\) They argued, for example, that the smaller impact of ideology in the United Kingdom (UK) compared with other European countries is partly explained by diminishing ideological differences between the Labour Party and the Conservative Party. The British case has been more closely studied by Green and Hobolt (2008), who also convincingly showed that the electoral impact of ideology (and, more specifically, ideological closeness) had been decreasing in the UK during the last 20 years in parallel with the reduction of the ideological polarisation between British political parties.

Another major recent contribution in the field is Lachat’s (2008) analysis of the 1999 European elections in 15 countries, including Spain. The author also finds that the level of polarisation of the party system matters for explaining ideological voting but that such an effect is conditioned by party identification and political expertise. He also finds that ‘the gap between political novices and political experts grows larger as the polarisation of the party system increases’ (p. 695).

Similar results have been found outside Europe. For the American case, authors such as Wright and Berkman (1986) and Ensley (2007) also found that elections with more polarised candidates generate more ideological voters and results. Ensley (using data on elections to the United States [US] Senate from 1988 to 1992) finds that the importance of candidates’ ideological divergence is especially intense among the most educated voters, as well as among more extreme voters as compared with more moderate ones. He argues that this is the case because policy positions and ideological orientations are diagnostic information that can be employed when voters are motivated and sophisticated.

However, why should party system polarisation be important for voters? The most obvious explanation is that divergent party platforms increase voters’ perception of what is at stake in the elections. Indeed, party polarisation should be a major concern among those voters who care about the policy implications of their electoral choices. Those implications are marginal when parties adopt similar policy positions: the outcomes of these policies will not vary much regardless of who wins the election. Hence in those settings policy attitudes shall become less relevant in citizens’ vote choices. There are also further psychological or cognitive factors that account for the importance of party system polarisation. High levels of party policy dispersion, for example, help citizens vote on the basis of policies. In particular, contexts where parties present clear, coherent, and differentiated policy packages foster voters’ awareness of the existing policy alternatives and allow voters to also adopt clear and coherent positions (Knutse & Kumlin 2005). Furthermore, party polarisation is an informational cue (Zaller 1992) because it helps voters to relate their preferences to parties’ messages and policy positions (Lachat 2008).

Academics have studied the importance of party system polarisation from different approaches. Most of them use the left–right ideological scale. A remarkable exception is DeVries (2010), who studies the level of polarisation over European integration
support, in different European Union (EU) member states. Most researchers take countries or elections as their unit of analysis when measuring party polarisation, and then try to account for either cross-country variations or temporal variations within a country. The literature analyses the effect of polarisation by combining individual and aggregate-level information. When sufficient level-two units are available, researchers use multilevel, hierarchical models (e.g. Ensley 2007). A frequent alternative strategy for researchers with small aggregate-level units is to use a two-step methodology: using individual surveys, they first calculate the effect of issues or policies (normally ideology) on vote choice for each country or election. Once they have an estimator (it may be the coefficient or the $R^2$), they correlate it with the aggregate measure of party system polarisation (e.g. Lachat 2008; Knutsen & Kumlin 2005).

The above methodological strategies are reasonable, since party system polarisation has a contextual nature. However, these procedures overlook the possibility that individuals may differ in how they perceive such context. And, surely, voters’ decisions are more conditioned by subjective perceptions than by objective conditions. Hence, an alternative strategy is to study the effect of party polarisation from an individual perspective by considering the perceptions of each individual, instead of an aggregate measure of party polarisation. As we explain later in this article, we have contributed to the filling of this gap by studying the effect of polarisation using both aggregate measures and individual perceptions.

On the aggregate level, the standard procedure is to measure party polarisation by using the average of individuals’ perceived party locations. Yet, some authors such as Lachat (2008) or DeVries (2010) warn against the potential risk of spurious relationships when using subjective measures of party polarisation. Indeed, the influence of polarisation on policy voting may simply reflect the fact that those voters who are more interested in a policy tend to have more incentives to gather information about this policy and, thus, hold more accurate perceptions of party positions. This may imply that both vote choice and polarisation are dependent on a third factor: individuals’ interest in this issue. Accordingly, these authors rely on objective measures of party polarisation by using either expert surveys or party manifesto content analysis. For instance, Lachat (2008) and DeVries (2010) measure polarisation by relying on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey Series (CHESS). The survey is based on experts’ evaluations of political parties positioning on different issues in Europe.

In sum, the strategy used to measure party polarisation is not innocuous. A clear example of this has been provided by van der Eijk, Schmitt, and Binder (2005), who found significant differences depending on which measure of left–right polarisation was employed. When the measure was based on voters’ perceptions, they found a clear relationship between polarisation and issue voting. However, they failed to find any systematic correlation when objective measures were used (i.e. based on party manifestos). Contrary to Lachat’s and DeVries’s perspective, these researchers defended the validity of subjective measures by arguing that ‘When investigating the association between voters’ behaviour and ideological orientations, however, it seems plausible that polarisation as perceived by voters is more consequential than
polarisation as derived from information that is not directly available to most voters’ (van der Eijk, Schmitt & Binder 2005, p. 184). In this paper, we primarily rely on subjective measures of party locations, although we also draw on objective measures in order to make our results more robust.

Empirics

We employ data from the CIS 2799 survey (April 2009), which is representative of the population of Spain. The sample has a total of 3,255 cases. While it overrepresents two territories—the Basque Country and Catalonia, with 798 and 902 cases, respectively—the analyses for the whole sample take this into account (i.e. by using weights). This survey was seminal because of its inclusion of 11-point scale measures related to six policy dimensions (i.e. crime, ecology, taxes, immigration, religion, and nationalism), which allow these issues to be measured on spatial utility. We test the hypotheses on the relative importance of each issue conditional on the distance between political parties from two different perspectives: (1) Individual: we test the relative weight of each of the issues on individual vote conditional on perceived distances between parties. (2) Aggregated, at the level of political parties: for this purpose, we use the average values of the perceived party positions in the survey, on the one hand, and data from CPM, on the other. Also, for this analysis, we use data from the two regions that were overrepresented in the CIS sample (Catalonia, Basque Country), which we treat as independent units. We do this in order to multiply the number of cases in the aggregate analyses (which increases from six to 18).

In the individual-level analyses, we use a ‘stacked’ data matrix, in which ‘each respondent is represented as many times as the number of parties for which he or she indicated a probability to vote’ (Lachat 2008, p. 690). Our dependent variable does not follow the conventional procedure of treating party support as a categorical variable using vote recall or intention. Instead of focusing on actual choices, we rely on continuous-like variables that measure propensities to vote for each party. This measure is taken from a survey question that asks individuals the probability (from 0 to 10) of them ever being likely to vote for each of the main political parties, where 0 stands for ‘I would certainly never vote for it’, and 10 stands for ‘I would certainly always vote it’. In fact, it has been argued that individuals’ propensities to vote for each party better capture the reasoning behind spatial modelling than actual vote choice (e.g. van der Burg, van der Eijk & Franklin 2007).

We regress the propensity to vote for a political party on spatial utilities (both directional and proximity), and on the perceived party polarisation on each issue, as well as on a set of control variables. We run a set of general models, and a set of models in which we estimate coefficients relating spatial utility on a particular issue to party polarisation on this issue. This interactive coefficient allows us to capture the extent to which an issue matters in explaining vote as polarisation (on this issue) increases.

In the aggregate analyses, we focus on the coefficients obtained for each of the dimensions in the individual-level analysis (in the general model with no
interactions), and we correlate them to different measures of party system polarisation (objective, from CPM, and subjective, from the average values in the sample), as well as to party system compactness—which is a slightly refined measure of party system polarisation (see below). Thus, the dependent variable in the aggregate analyses consists of the coefficients obtained in a set of conditional linear regressions of spatial distances on ‘electoral utilities’, which are run at the individual level.

In the individual-level regressions, we focus on the propensity to vote for the three main parties in Spain: Partido Popular (PP), Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), and Izquierda Unida (IU), which together represented almost 90 per cent of the vote share in the 2008 general elections. We operationalise the main independent variables in these regression models with the 11-point scale questions where individuals locate themselves, and thus display spatial utilities. At the individual level, we estimate polarisation with a discrete measure of party system polarisation, which takes into account the distances and the relative sizes of the three main parties in the system (Colomer 2009). We compute spatial utilities following two different spatial models: (1) the proximity model (Downs 1957), in which the utility increases as distance between individual i and party j decreases; and (2) the directional model (Rabinowitz & MacDonald 1989), in which utility increases as distance between individual i and party j increases; the utility is positive if they are both on the same side of the status quo, SQ, and negative if they are on different sides of the status quo.7

We include a set of control variables in the individual-level regression models: several measures of political sophistication, following both Ensley (2007) and Lachat (2008), in order to control for the fact that the perception of party polarisation can be correlated with this, and that the impact of party polarisation on vote can vary along different levels of political information or sophistication. Instead of using an index of political sophistication, as these authors do, we separately include Level of Education (on a six-point scale measuring the highest level of education achieved by the respondent), Political Information (a three-point index built from two questions that test the objective political knowledge of individuals), and TV Exposure (a four-point measure of how often the interviewee follows political information on TV). We also include the usual controls in voting models such as age (in years) and gender (a dummy variable with value 0 for men and 1 for women). We do not include party proximity or ideological position because these indicators capture positions on issues.

In the aggregate analyses, we use two different measures of party system polarisation. First, we use measures based on subjective perceptions of party locations on each dimension: (i) a discrete index of polarisation, which accounts for the size of parties and their dispersion (Colomer 2009), and (ii) party system compactness following Alvarez and Nagler (2004). Compactness measures the degree of dispersion of party positions in relation to the degree of dispersion of voters; thus, the greater the compactness the lesser the dispersion of an issue.8

Secondly, we also measure polarisation using objective information from the CPM. The CPM gives values from 0 to 100 on all items, depending on how much these issues are extant in the party manifestos. Some of the proxies of the CPM are more suitable
than others, but overall we find them helpful in providing us with an objective measure of distances. We again compute a simple measure of party system polarisation, for each of the regions.

Results

Individual Level Analyses

In Figure 1, we can see the sample average values of the perceived positions of the three main parties in the Spanish political system (PP, PSOE, and IU). We can observe that there are significant differences in the distances between these parties, on each of these dimensions. In some of them (i.e. Taxes, Crime) the differences are not as important as with other issues (i.e. Religion, Immigration, or Nationalism). The Spanish electorate does not perceive many differences between the main parties on the fiscal dimension: differences between the two main parties (i.e. PP and PSOE) are small, and there are no differences between the two left-wing parties (i.e. PSOE and IU). This may seem counterintuitive, since this dimension is usually considered to be very controversial in most democracies. However, this finding is analogous with the fact that in Spain left- and right-wing voters have similar preferences on public spending and taxation (Leon & Orriols 2011). Hence, it seems that both voters and the main parties do not differ on this policy dimension.

Following our framework, we would expect spatial regression coefficients to be larger for the issues in which distances between parties are greater (in this case, Religion,

![Figure 1 Perceived Differences between PP, PSOE, and IU on Different Policy Dimensions.](image-url)
In Table 1, we display the main results of the proximity models (the full models are included in Table A1 of the Online Appendix). This table depicts the values of the coefficients for each of the issues of a general model, on the one hand, and the coefficients of interactive models (both the main and the interaction effects), on the other. In order to be able to compare the relative weight of each issue on vote choice, we have standardised all the distance variables. This allows us to obtain standardised coefficients for each of the issues (in this way, the relative size of the coefficient will not be affected by the variation of the variable within the sample).

In Table 1 we can observe that all coefficients in the general model are significant at the 95 per cent level; these coefficients are substantially greater for Nationalism, Immigration, and Religion, as compared with Taxes, Crime, and Ecology. Those three former issues were the ones on which the main parties displayed the greatest distances, so this is consistent with our hypotheses. Most of the interactive models are also coherent with our hypotheses: the coefficients of the main effects are negative and significant for Nationalism, Immigration, Religion, Crime, and Ecology; for the variable Taxes this is undistinguishable from 0. The coefficients of the interaction terms are significant for Nationalism, Immigration, and Religion—those issues where groups display the greater distances—but also for Taxes (at the 95 per cent level). These interactive coefficients, which also take negative sign, indicate that the weight of these issues increases as party polarisation is perceived to increase.

Table 2 depicts the coefficients of directional voting models—again with standardised variables (the full models are included in Table A1 of the Online Appendix). This table displays less clear results. The coefficients of the general model are all significant, and they are again substantially greater for those dimensions on which parties display greater subjective distances, namely Religion, Nationalism, and Immigration. In the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>General Model</th>
<th>Ppl effect</th>
<th>Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nationalism</td>
<td>-0.60**</td>
<td>-0.57**</td>
<td>-0.023*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
<td>(0.011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration</td>
<td>-0.56**</td>
<td>-0.44**</td>
<td>-0.022**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>(0.009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>-0.59**</td>
<td>-0.49**</td>
<td>-0.022**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
<td>(0.009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>-0.14**</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-0.020*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>-0.12*</td>
<td>-0.20**</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>(0.012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecology</td>
<td>-0.23**</td>
<td>-0.17*</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>(0.015)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The table only shows the relevant coefficients. See Table A1 of the Online Appendix for the remaining coefficients of the model. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) standardised estimates. Standard errors in parenthesis * significant at $p < 0.05$, ** significant at $p < 0.001$. Immigration, and Nationalism). In Table 1, we display the main results of the proximity models (the full models are included in Table A1 of the Online Appendix). This table depicts the values of the coefficients for each of the issues of a general model, on the one hand, and the coefficients of interactive models (both the main and the interaction effects), on the other. In order to be able to compare the relative weight of each issue on vote choice, we have standardised all the distance variables. This allows us to obtain standardised coefficients for each of the issues (in this way, the relative size of the coefficient will not be affected by the variation of the variable within the sample).
interactive models, the main effects are statistically significant on all dimensions—thus, there is an effect of these dimensions on vote even when distances between main parties are not perceived. However, the interaction terms are only statistically significant (implying that these effects grow as distances increase) for Nationalism (at the 95 per cent level), Immigration, and Ecology (but only at the 90 per cent level). Unexpectedly, the interactive coefficient for Crime takes a negative sign.\(^{13}\) Although the results of our directional models are thus not as neat as the proximity ones, they seem to rule out Lachat’s suggestion that polarisation may lead individuals to switch their ‘voting decision rule’ from directional to proximity (2008). If this were correct, we should have observed that the effect of polarisation on directional models is the opposite to its effect on proximity ones; but this is not the case on most issues. Our results indicate that polarisation increases the importance of the dimension especially in proximity, but that it has a coherent (although less clear) effect on directional models.

In short, the findings in Tables 1 and 2 indicate that the Spanish electorate gives more weight to the religious, nationalist, and immigration issues than to taxes, crime, and ecology. This is partly explained by the fact that the main parties in the system are more polarised on the former issues than on the latter. Some of the findings in this section are not fully in line with the Spanish literature. This is particularly the case of the religious dimension. Political parties are highly polarised on this issue. However, the cumulative evidence in the Spanish literature on voting behaviour shows that the influence of religiosity on vote choice is rather modest when it is measured using individuals’ religious practice (i.e. church attendance) (Montero 1994; Montero & Calvo 2000). However, our results indicate that when we measure religiosity with individuals’ preferences about church–state relations it turns out to be the most (or one of the most) important issues.

### Table 2: The Effect of Policies (directional models)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>General Model</th>
<th>Ppl effect</th>
<th>Interacción</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nationalism</td>
<td>0.64**</td>
<td>0.58**</td>
<td>0.017*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>(0.008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration</td>
<td>0.52**</td>
<td>0.42**</td>
<td>0.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>(0.009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>0.62**</td>
<td>0.46**</td>
<td>0.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
<td>0.17*</td>
<td>0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td>0.34**</td>
<td>-0.036**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecology</td>
<td>0.32**</td>
<td>0.29**</td>
<td>-0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.08)</td>
<td>(0.012)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The table only shows the relevant coefficients. See Table A2 of the Online Appendix for the remaining coefficients of the models. OLS standardised estimates. Standard errors in parenthesis:

* significant at \( p < 0.05 \), ** significant at \( p < 0.001 \).
In summary, the results of the individual-level analyses are generally supportive of our hypotheses: they indicate that the weight of the issue grows as individuals perceive increased polarisation between the main parties on this issue. These results confirm that it is necessary to take into consideration party polarisation (and, particularly, perceived polarisation) when studying the importance of the different dimensions on individual voting decisions.

Aggregate Analyses

In this section, we proceed to take the coefficients obtained in the individual-level regressions and correlate them with subjective and objective measures of party distances. As mentioned, we use sub-national areas of Spain—the Basque Country, Catalonia, and the rest of Spain—as units of analysis, so that we have 18 cases in this aggregate analysis. Note that the number of observations is still very limited, so the inferences are here less robust than in the individual-level analyses above.

Figure 2 displays a scatter plot with the average subjective party polarisation, for each of the regions and issues, on the one hand, and the individual-level coefficients (for both the proximity and directional models), on the other. As expected, we observe a strong and positive linear relationship between the subjective party polarisation and the spatial regression coefficients, for both the proximity and the directional models. At the top right end we find polarised issues such as Religion (in Spain or Catalonia) or Nationalism (in the Basque Country); at the lower left end we find less polarised issues such as Ecology (in the Basque Country) or Taxes (in Catalonia). It is worth emphasising that the correlation between subjective distances and the regression coefficients is significant at the 95 per cent level, for both the directional and the proximity models.

In Figure 3, we display the correlation between the individual-level regression coefficients (again for both the proximity and directional models) and compactness of the party system on these dimensions. Following our predictions, Figure 3 also shows a negative relationship between compactness and the regression coefficient corresponding to the issues: the greater the compactness of the party system on a dimension (and hence the lesser the polarisation) the smaller the effect of the issue on vote. These correlations—for both the proximity and directional models—are statistically significant at the 99 per cent level.

Finally, in Figure 4, we again look at party polarisation on each of the issues, but in this case we use objective measures of distances between the main political parties in a territory, computed with the CPM scores. The correlation between the coefficients and party system polarisation with the CMP measures is, as expected, positive and significant at the 95 per cent level for the proximity model, and at the 90 per cent level for the directional model. However, the results are considerably weaker, since they are driven by the scores on the nationalist issue in Catalonia and the Basque Country. Despite its weakness, the observed relationship is remarkable because the aggregate measures come from an objective source and thus cannot possibly suffer from projection bias.
Figure 2 Party Polarisation (subjective measures) and Issue Importance.
Part of the explanation of why subjective measures of polarisation perform better than the objective ones may be that perceptions are endogenous to issue importance. Indeed, voters may overestimate party differences on those issues which they are particularly concerned about. However, there is an alternative explanation: voters can
Figure 4 Party Polarisation (objective measures) and Issue Importance.
only be influenced by the context when they perceive it. From this perspective, it is not surprising that voters are more conditioned by subjective perceptions than by objective conditions. Unfortunately, it is difficult to disentangle which interpretation is correct using observational data. It is recommended that future research should focus on experiments in order to overcome these problems.

Conclusions
In this article, we have pursued two main objectives. On the one hand, we investigated which issues are more important for the Spanish electorate when they decide their vote. On the other, we examined the impact of party polarisation on issue voting. Regarding our first aim we have found that, according to both proximity and directional models, Spanish voters give more weight to issues such as religion, nationalism, and immigration than to issues such as taxes, crime, and ecology. There are some differences in Catalonia and the Basque Country which are worth highlighting. For instance, these two regions give less weight to immigration than the other Spanish regions. Similarly, the Basque Country also differs from the rest of Spain in the importance of the religious dimension: the electorate in the Basque country does not generally consider religion to be a prominent issue, as they do in other regions. The nationalist dimension is particularly salient in the Basque Country, is less relevant in Catalonia, but is more relevant in both these regions than in the rest of Spain.

The second aim of the paper is to account for this variance of issue importance. Following the existing literature, we have hypothesised that issues in which parties display more distinct positions are those which have more weight in the final voting decision of individuals. We have tested our hypotheses with survey data from Spain, and with analyses at the individual and aggregate level (i.e. focusing on regions and issues), using two different estimation strategies. At the individual level, we found that perceived distances between parties are relevant in explaining the voting decisions of individuals. At the aggregate level, we found that the regression coefficients (obtained with analyses at the individual level) are significantly correlated to subjective measures of party distance and party system compactness on a dimension, as well as to objective measures of party polarisation (i.e. dispersion in CMP scores). Although we are using a small number of cases (18), these correlations are statistically significant.

From a theoretical perspective, our findings generally confirm the role of context—and, in particular, of party polarisation—in explaining issue voting. Interestingly, the results indicate that the Downsian prediction of party convergence should make issues increasingly less relevant for voting. A caveat: on the one hand, it could be argued that the perception of differences is a mere reflection of which particular dimension is important for voters. Indeed, it could be the case that parties decided to differentiate themselves on those policy issues which individuals considered to be most important. In other words, it could be that the direction of causality was the reverse. Without a temporal framework, we cannot test for this potential source of endogeneity.
(i.e. party movements). We have found, though, that at a particular moment of time, everything else being equal, the issues on which parties are most differentiated are those which matter most for voting choice. And this is robust to individual and aggregate analyses, and to subjective and objective measures of party polarisation.

Notes

[1] Empirically, it is difficult to find political issues that are potentially equally relevant in different contexts and that are measured in a comparable way (Lachat 2008, p. 690).

[2] As we will explain, this can carry methodological problems of endogeneity (i.e. individuals perceiving greater differences in those dimensions to which they give more weight). Nonetheless, we would argue that what individuals perceive about party positions (and not only what experts perceive, or what is stated in electoral programmes) is important in itself.

[3] These authors argued that most American voters did not fulfil all these three conditions. They were particularly critical about the fulfilment of the first condition: their investigations showed that most Americans did not cognitively political issues and that they failed to show a clear and meaningful understanding of most issues (see, for example, Converse 1964).


[5] See also van der Eijk, Schmitt, and Binder (2005)

[6] At the individual level, we focus on the perceived distance between the three main parties in the Spanish party system, namely PP, PSOE, and IU.

[7] In the proximity model, $U_{ij} = -(v_i - v_j)^2$. In the directional model, $U_{ij} = (v_i - sq) \times (v_j - sq)$, where $v_i$ is voter's ideological position, $v_j$, party's ideological position and $sq$ the status quo. We take the middle position on the scale as the status quo.

[8] Alvarez and Nagler argue that highly compact issues ought not be strong predictors of voter decision-making (2004, p. 60), and this is consistent with our framework given that greater compactness implies lesser polarisation. Thus, the inclusion of this measure should give robustness to the results.

[9] The CMP items used for each dimension are the following: Nationalism: Per301 (Decentralization)–Per302 (Centralization); Ecology: Per501 (Environmental Protection); Taxes: Per504 (Welfare State Expansion)–Per505 (Welfare State Limitation); Religion: Per603 (Traditional Morality: Positive)–Per604 (Traditional Morality: Negative); Crime: Per605 (Law and Order); Immigration: Per607 (Multiculturalism: Positive)–Per608 (Multiculturalism: Negative). For more detailed information on these items see: https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/

[10] The parties included are: the PP, PSOE, and IU in Spain, the PP, PSOE, and Basque National Party (PNV) in the Basque Country, and the PP, PSOE, Convergence and Union (CiU), and Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) in Catalonia.


[13] This result disappears if we run the interactive regressions separately, for each issue. These regressions are available upon request.

[14] Specifically, we calculate the dispersion in the CPM scores, for the main parties in a region, by obtaining an index of dispersion, or what can also be considered a measure of party system polarisation (Colomer 2009). As before, we take regression coefficients from individual-level analyses that include all leading parties in the region under consideration.
References


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