Affective Polarization during a Secessionist Push
- Research Note -
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Introduction

On October 1st, 2017, the Catalan regional government held a referendum on independence from Spain. The referendum had been organized contravening a decision of the Spanish Constitutional Court that deemed the referendum illegal and circumventing the Spanish government's attempts to halt its organization. On that day, voters were met with a violent response from the Spanish police at the ballot stations. After negotiations between the Catalan and Spanish governments failed, the Catalan Parliament voted in favor of the independence of Catalonia on October 27th, 2017. This was the penultimate episode of a secessionist push initiated in 2012 by a highly mobilized pro-independence movement. After the declaration of independence, the Spanish government dissolved the regional parliament, took over the regional government's responsibilities, and called for early elections.

The push for independence and the response of the Spanish institutions had important consequences on the society animus, and on individuals' attitudes towards those who held different views on the issue. In Catalonia, pro-independence individuals developed a strong and lasting dislike for anti-independence individuals and vice-versa (Balcells and Kuo 2023). While not empirically documented, the political confrontation heightened the existing dislike between citizens from other parts of Spain and Catalans.[1]

In this research note, we focus on this form of affective polarization that emanates from an antagonistic understanding of what one's community of national belonging is and where the territorial boundaries of that nation should be. This divide predisposes individuals against out-group members and in favor of in-group members. Rooted in processes of categorization and social identification (Tajfel and Turner 2004), this form of affective polarization has been referred to as social group polarization (Robison and Moskowitz 2019), inter-group hostility (Craig and Richeson 2014), identity hardening (Eifert, Miguel, and Posner 2010; Fearon and Laitin 2000) and identity polarization (Hierro and Gallego 2018) and has been extensively documented in situations of violent conflict (Fearon and Laitin 2000; Horowitz c1985; Rohner, Thoenig, and Zilibotti 2013; Sambanis and Shayo 2013). However, with some exceptions, non-partisan forms of affective polarization have merited much less

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[1] Affective polarization between citizens in Catalonia and other regions of Spain is not a recent phenomenon and it can be track it back in time using survey data from *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* (1996). We conjecture that affective polarization heightened, for example, during the negotiation of the Statute of Autonomy in Catalonia (2004-2006), and during the Spanish Constitutional Court deliberation on the constitutionality of said Statute (2006-2010). The Amnesty Law the Spain's Socialists negotiated with Catalan pro-independence parties in November 2023 to secure the formation of a progressive central government has fueled a divisive campaign led by Spanish conservative parties with potential consequences for people's attitudes.

attention across non-violent democratic contexts (see Balcells & Kuo, 2023; Craig & Richeson, 2014; Hierro & Gallego, 2018).

This note contributes to existing research on affective polarization in two ways. First, we show that direct social distance measures infra-estimate the dislike towards the outgroup. We evidence the bias by comparing a measure asking how much respondents care about having a close relative marry an out-group and an indirect behavioral measurement of affective polarization. We attribute differences between the two indicators to the existence of social norms and, specifically, to social desirability and political correctness. Our indicator dodges these social desirability problems that cause a downward bias in our measurement of inter-group affective polarization. Second, our findings confirm that non-partisan affective polarization has pervasive consequences, modifying altruist behavior towards third parties, i.e., people not directly involved in the conflict. This finding adds to existing research that has unraveled the effects of partisan affective polarization on trust (Rudolph and Hetherington 2021), the labor market (McConnell et al. 2018), interpersonal relations (Broockman, Kalla, and Westwood 2023; Huber and Malhotra 2017), and democracy (Milačić 2022; Svolik 2020).

Affective polarization, measurement, and social desirability

In the last decade, research on polarization has turned its attention from elites (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008) to citizens (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Fiorina 2017) and from ideological to affective polarization (Druckman et al. 2022; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Robison and Moskowitz 2019). While the US is over-represented among studies that examine the topic, an increasing number of scholarship has paid attention to multiparty contexts (Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2022; Garzia, Ferreira Da Silva, and Maye 2023; Reiljan et al. 2023; Torcal and Comellas 2022; Wagner 2021). Outside the American context, affective polarization often occurs across ideological cleavages (Kekkonen and Ylä-Anttila 2021). Party competition contributes to reproducing and crystallizing group identities on the two sides of the ideological cleavage (Boxell et al., 2022; Lipset, 1967). However, depending on the strategies parties adopt in two-dimensional spaces (Elias, Szöcsik, and Zuber 2015), affective polarization can manifest along more than one dimension.

The study of inter-group affective polarization has also raised important questions regarding measurement (Druckman et al. 2022; Druckman and Levendusky 2019). Druckman and Levendusky (2019) have emphasized the importance of differentiating between attitudes towards parties or party elites and attitudes towards voters from those parties (i.e., social distance). A different issue that has received less attention is how social norms, e.g., social desirability or political correctness, impact respondents' answers to direct measures of social distance or *feeling thermometers*, affecting the validity of our measurements. Social norms can work in both directions. Partisans can view polarization as socially desirable (Connors 2023), but social norms can also moderate expressions of dislike for entire groups. Ultimately, "people behave "morally" even in anonymous, one-shot interactions" (Bénabou and Tirole 2011). The social desirability problem might be accentuated when the study of affective polarization focuses on social groups defined by race, language, or territorial origin. Reporting dislike

for voters of other parties might carry a smaller stigmatization than reporting dislike for, for example, territorially concentrated voters with differentiated ethnocultural traits.

Still, affective polarization may come to light in critical moments, such as elections (Hernández, Anduiza, and Rico 2021) or conflict. Heightened conflicts can change social desirability and political correctness norms and, consequently, individuals' willingness to reveal their sincere attitudes toward the out-group. Relatedly, Bursztyn, Egorov, and Fiorin (2020) have shown that individuals' readiness to express anti-immigrant attitudes and the social acceptability of such expressions increased after Trump's victory.

This discussion guides the empirical expectations for our case study. On the one hand, social desirability and political correctness considerations may lead individuals to conceal their dislike towards territorialized minorities. Accordingly, we expect respondents to be reluctant to dislike abstract categories of out-group individuals (e.g., Catalans). On the other hand, political conflicts, even if nonviolent, can make individuals feel less compelled to conform to previously accepted social norms, making respondents less likely to conceal dislike. To test these expectations, we should ideally compare levels of polarization before and after a conflict emerges. Lacking this data, we propose to compare the results of two measurements of affective polarization: a classical instrument of social distance and a behavioral experiment addressing the desirability problem. If the two instruments report equivalent results, our findings will suggest social desirability problems decrease in the presence of heightened conflicts. If results differ, our findings will highlight the need to use instruments that tackle the social desirability problem of social distance measures.

Design

On the eve of the December 2017 snap elections in Catalonia, we conducted two parallel online surveys, one in Catalonia and the other in the rest of Spain. Netquest, a leading Spanish survey company, implemented the surveys. 2,115 were completed in Catalonia and 2,374 in Spain. Respondents were recruited using age, gender, and education quotas. The questionnaire retrieved detailed socio-demographic information from respondents and asked respondents in Catalonia for their preferences for secession, and respondents in all other regions of Spain for their willingness to support an official referendum on independence.

The two questionnaires included two questions that aimed to gauge affective polarization between citizens in Catalonia and the rest of Spain. Specifically, we embedded an experiment at the beginning of the survey where we informed respondents that after fieldwork finished, we would raffle off one €100-Amazon gift card among all respondents in the survey.[2] Would they win, respondents were offered the opportunity to donate the raffle prize or part of it to a non-profit organization. We chose two organizations, one based in Madrid, *Solidarios para el Desarrollo,* and the other in Catalonia, *Proactiva*

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[2] The panelist that won the raffle was contacted several times via email. The respondent never got back to Netquest to collect her gift card.

- *Open Arms*.[3] We randomized the organizations and the information regarding the location of the non-profits. Half of the sample received information on where the organization was based the other half did not see this information. This experiment addresses social desirability concerns as we did not ask directly for feelings towards the out-group. Instead, we offered them the opportunity to give away all or part of the raffle prize to an organization operating in Madrid/Catalonia. To reduce the social desirability problem, we chose a non-profit that worked with a population not directly involved in the conflict. See the Wording of the Experiment in the Appendix.

These experiments opened our surveys and hence could not be influenced by any posterior instruments in the questionnaire. To complement the experiment, we included a variant of the classical indicator measuring discomfort with having a relative from an out-group. In this case, we asked respondents how much they care about having a close relative marrying a member of an out-group. Respondents in Catalonia were randomized into three treatment groups, i.e., Spanish nationalists, people from Madrid, and Muslim people. Respondents in Spain were also randomized into three groups, i.e., independentists, people from Catalonia, and Muslim people. The answer consisted of a 0 to 7 scale, where 0 meant "I would not care at all" and 7 "I care a lot".

Results

We examine affective polarization using a conventional instrument of social distance first. To anchor our comparison, we include information on an out-group for Spanish and Catalans alike: Muslim people.[4] Respondents from the two samples feel equally uncomfortable with a close relative marrying a Muslim person. Responses from the Catalan and the rest of Spain samples increase when we focus on regional out-groups. Generally, Spanish people care more about having an independentist in the family [mean value: 1.93], than Catalan people care about having a Spanish nationalist [mean value: 3.46].[5]

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[3] *Proactiva Open Arms* is an organization dedicated to search and rescue at sea, it was founded in 2015. *Solidarios para el Desarrollo* is a volunteer-led organization that fights social exclusión, discrimination and solitude. Solidarios was founded in 1997. The selection of the two nonprofits was strictly motivated by their local origins. Many nonprofits operating in Spain do not have local, but a national or international nature. Over the years, *Proactiva Open Arms* gained public notoriety due to the magnitude of the migrant crises in the Mediterranean, and the conflicts between Southern European governments and search and rescue organizations to manage the crisis. Differences in the information shock across groups should not be relevant unless respondents knew that *Proactiva Open Arms* is an organization based in Catalonia. If any, this pre-treatment effect would play against our hypothesis as respondents from other regions of Spain in the control group would be willing to give less money to *Proactiva* to start with, and we should observe no differences between the treatment and control group.

[4] To the best of our knowledge, there are no surveys in Spain that inquire about people attitudes towards the Muslim minority. Survey attitudinal questions ask about immigrants, as a generic collective. Still, existent data suggests that Muslims and Moroccans, together with Roma people, are the minorities that experience higher levels of discrimination in Spain. See, for example, Aparicio Gómez, Rosa. 2020. *Resultados Encuesta sobre Intolerancia y Discriminación hacia las personas musulmanas en España*. Observatorio Español de Racismo y Xenofobia. Madrid. While our indicator gauges "dislike" towards Muslims in Spain, it is very likely that social desirability produces a downward bias in our measurement.

[5] These differences are likely related with the heterogeneity of the Catalan population. An important share of the population in Catalonia was born in other regions of Spain and migrated to Catalonia between the mid-forties and the mid-seventies. We will get back to this later.

Figure 1. Social Distance Direct Measure
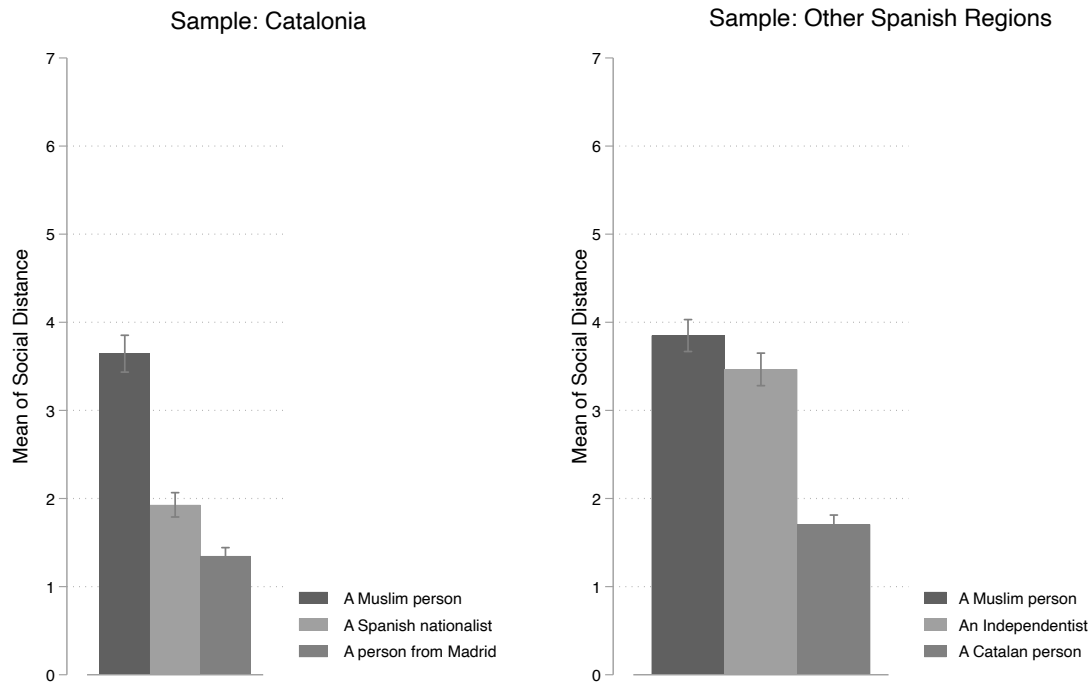
Note: The figure displays respondents' concern with having a close relative marry an out-group member. The larger the value, the more concern respondents display.

Now, respondents from Catalonia do not seem to show the same discomfort about having a relative from Madrid [mean value: 1.70], nor do people from other regions of Spain regarding Catalans [mean value: 1.35]. Values are very close, although the difference are statistically significant. In any case, can we take these responses at face value? If social desirability and political correctness play a role here, respondents from the rest of Spain might feel compelled to conceal their general dislike for Catalan people, and vice-versa.

To examine whether social desirability plays a role in Figure 1's responses, we turn to our experimental instrument of affective polarization. Table 1 reports the proportion of respondents in both samples willing to share part of the raffle prize with a non-profit. These percentages are virtually equal across the two groups.

**Table 1. Willingness to donate a share of the raffle in case Respondent wins.**

	Catalonia	Spain
Yes	34.53	33.44
No	65.47	66.56
Total	2,104	2,361

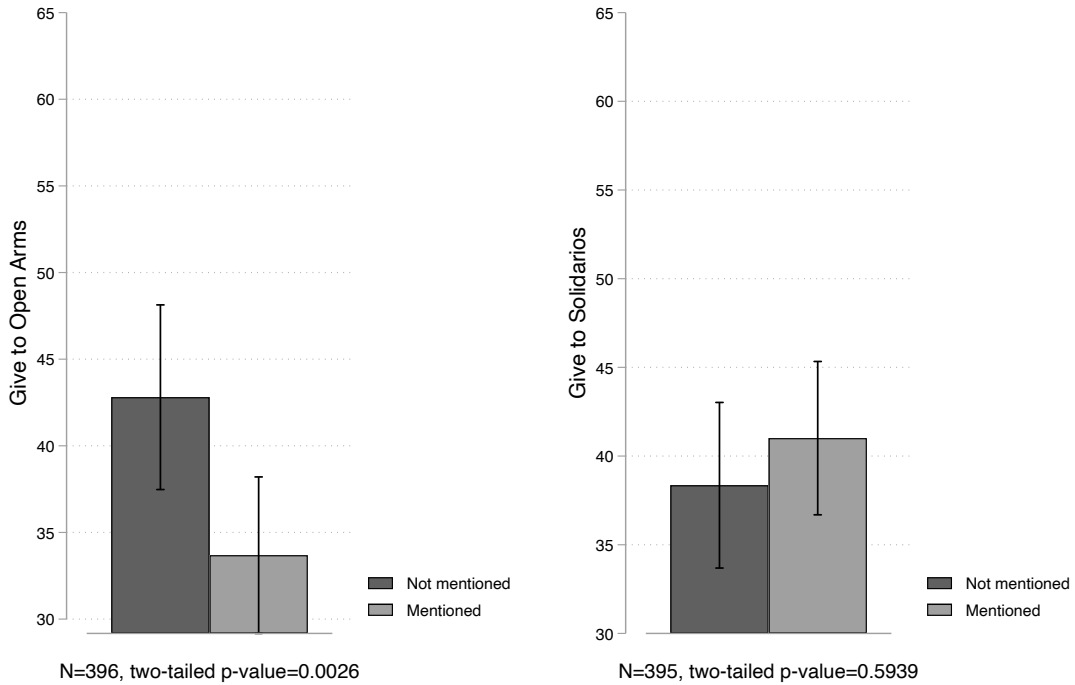Note: Entropy weighting applied to match voter population.

Figure 2 zooms in on respondents willing to share their prize with a non-profit: Panel A1-A2 for Catalonia's sample and Panel B1-B2 for the rest of Spain's sample. The figure plots the results for the two experimental groups. Panels A1 and B1 compare the control (location not mentioned) and treatment (location mentioned) responses for the *Open Arms* group in the Catalan and rest-of-Spain samples. Panels A2 and B2 show the mirror image of the *Solidarios* group.

Generally, respondents are willing to donate more to *Proactiva - Open Arms* than to *Solidarios*, which is likely explained by the fact that the former non-profit was more popular at the time the survey was conducted. This, however, does not interfere with our experiment as our comparison of reference is the within *Proactiva - Open Arms* and the within *Solidarios* comparison. Results show there are no significant differences in donations in the Catalan sample. In contrast, respondents in the rest-of-Spain sample are sensitive to the information on the non-profit's location. On average, they are willing to donate 25 percent less (9.70€) when they learn that Open Arms is based in Catalonia (this difference being statistically different from zero). The opposite trend can be observed for *Solidarios*, although the differences here are not statistically significant. This result suggests that affective polarization is asymmetric, being less pronounced in Catalonia than in the rest of Spain.

Figure 2. Share of the Prize to be Donated to a Non-Profit by Location
Panel (A) Respondents from Catalonia

N=363, two-tailed p-value=0.7940

N=363, two-tailed p-value=0.2419
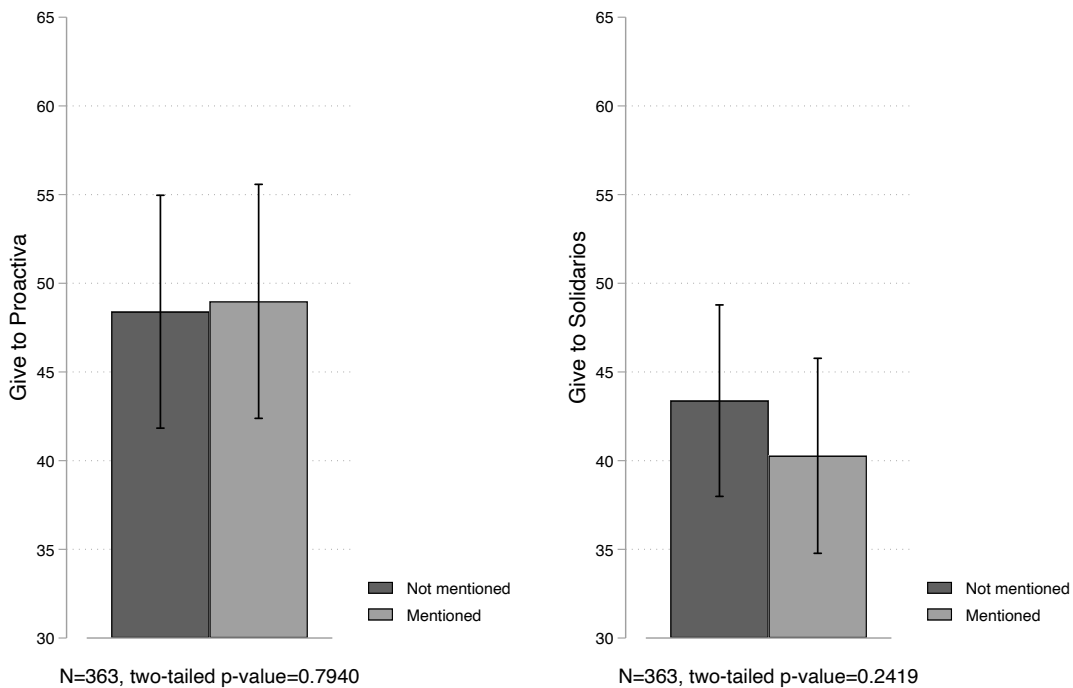
Panel (B) Respondents from other regions of Spain

N=396, two-tailed p-value=0.0026   N=395, two-tailed p-value=0.5939

Note: Entropy weighting applied, 95% interval confidence. The figure provides information regarding how much money a respondent wants to give to a non-profit in case they win the raffle. Respondents are randomly assigned to a different treatment, "Give to *Proactiva Open Arms*" or "Give to *Solidarios*". A random sample within these groups received information regarding the location of the non-profit they were assigned to.

What does explain the apparent asymmetry in affective polarization across regions? We conjecture that this is a consequence of pooling heterogeneous views on Catalan independence in the Catalan sample. That is, the mean donation in the Catalan sample is the average of two different worlds: those who favor independence and those who oppose it. To test for this, we examine the potential presence of heterogenous effects in Figure 3. [6]

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[6] We tested for possible heterogeneous effects across different groups based on respondents' and their parents' origins. Differences were not significant across these groups.

Figure 3. Share of the Prize to be Donated by Support for Independence. Catalonia.
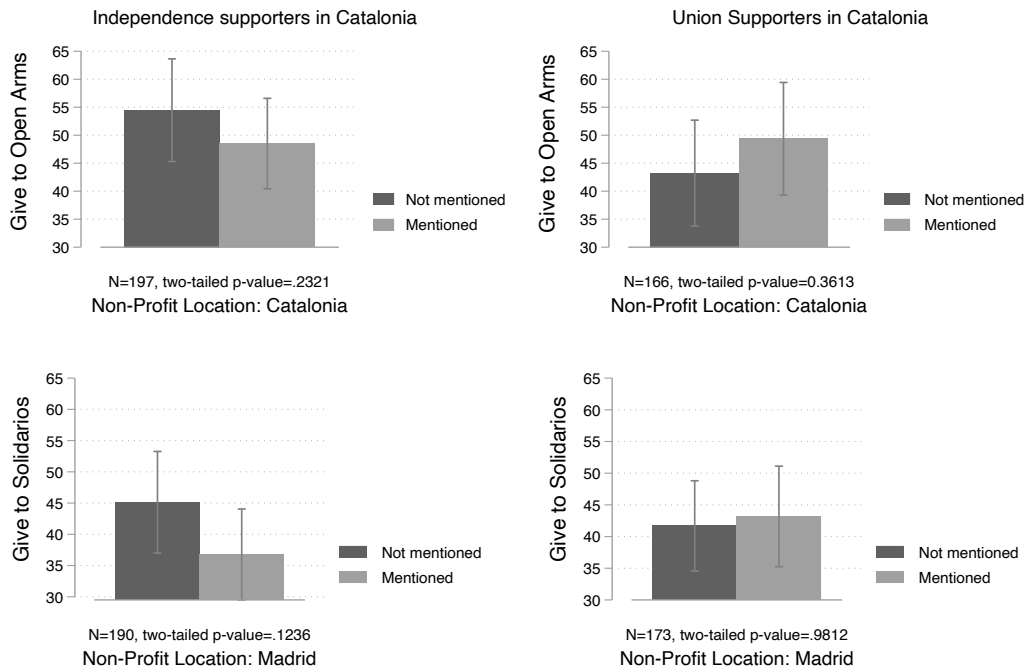
Note: See note for Figure 2.

Against our expectation, figure 3 does not provide enough evidence to support this expectation. Pro-independence supporters give less when they learn about the location of the Madrid non-profit. Still, a similar trend can be observed when they learn about the location of the Catalan non-profit. While the differences between the control and treatment groups are important (6.78€ in the case of the Catalan non-profit and 7.39€ in the case of Madrid's non-profit), they are not statistically significant. On the other hand, Unionists tend to give more when they learn of the origin of the two non-profits, but, in this case, the differences are small and insignificant.[7]

Generally, our results speak about an asymmetric level of polarization, which is more pervasive among individuals from the rest of Spain, and it conditions their behavior toward third parties not involved in the country (the non-profits and their beneficiaries).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have embarked on an exercise with which we sought to examine the extent to which social norms bias our estimates of social distance. Although our exercise cannot estimate the magnitude of the social desirability and political correctness biases, it does evidence the existence of

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[7] Our results appear to challenge Balcells and Kuo's (2022) research, which has reported affective polarization among pro-independence and unionists in Catalonia and spillover effects for language groups. A possible interpretation of this apparent contradiction can be related to what pro-independence supporters expect regarding other in-group members, i.e., other Catalans, position on the issue.

this problem. When respondents in regions of Spain other than Catalonia are directly asked about people from Catalonia, they do not report explicit dislike. This dislike, however, is unraveled when we use an indirect social distance measurement. Our findings suggest that classical, direct instruments of affective polarization, such as feeling thermometers, can infra-estimate how much people dislike out-group members, even during heightened conflicts. Scholars working on affective polarization should acknowledge the role social norms play in our measurements and should aim to design instruments that circumvent this problem.

Substantively, our research has unraveled that affective polarization can modify altruism, and affect third parties, i.e., organizations and individuals who are not part of the conflict—the non-profits and their beneficiaries in this experiment. In our donation experiment, respondents from the Spanish sample cut their donations to non-profits by 25% when they learned that the non-profit is based in the out-group region.

Polarization intensifies when conflict heightens and can translate into negative behavior. In Spain, this polarization has been translated into boycotts of Catalan products (Cuadras-Morató & Raya, 2016). Asymmetric polarization can be problematic in secessionist conflicts. To start, any real-world penalization of the population in the center to the periphery harms pro-independence supporters—the out-group—and unionist individuals—the in-group alike. This behavior exacerbates the conflict, pushing unionists to the opposite camp. At the same time, asymmetric polarization complicates accommodation. When polarization is high, negotiation between the two sides of the conflict can produce a backlash among polarized voters in the center, putting off peaceful solutions to secessionist conflicts. The Spanish case offers, in this way, a cautionary tale for politicians in the center facing similar secessionist challenges.

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Supplemental Materials. Online Appendix.
Table 1. Experiment 1 Design and Wording

	Wording
All respondents	"After the fieldwork of the survey finishes, we will raffle a 100-euro Amazon gift card among all respondents in the survey. You can decide to donate this price, or part of it, to an NGO. If you win the raffle, your donation will be deducted from the 100-euro Amazon gift card. Would you like to donate a share of the prize?" 1 Yes 0 No
A randomized number of respondents was offered to donate to Open Arms. Among these, a group was randomized to receive the information on where the non-profit was based in. [Information is displayed in brackets].	The charity that will receive your donation is Proactiva Open Arms. Proactiva Open Arms is a non-governmental, non-profit organization [based in Badalona (Barcelona, Catalonia)] whose mission is to rescue refugees from the sea that arrive in Europe fleeing wars, persecution, or poverty. Please, choose the quantity you want to donate to Proactiva Open Arms. 0 5 … 95 100
A randomized number of respondents was offered to donate to Solidarios para el Desarrollo. Among these, a group was randomized to receive the information on where the non-profit was based. [Information is displayed in brackets].	The charity that will receive your donation is Solidarios para el Desarrollo. Solidarios para el Desarrollo is a non-governmental, non-profit organization [based in Madrid (Madrid, Spain)] whose main mission is to fight social exclusion, its causes, and consequences. Please, choose the quantity you want to donate to Solidarios para el Desarrollo. 0. 5 … 95 100