

How does selective exposure affect to partisan polarization? Media consumption on electoral campaigns.

Ramírez-Dueñas, José María^a * and Vinuesa-Tejero, María Lourdes^b

^a *Department of Applied Sociology, Complutense University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain*

josemara@ucm.es

Associate Professor of the Department of Applied Sociology (Political Communication and Electoral Behaviour) of the Complutense University of Madrid. His main research topics are focused within the study of Public Opinion and Electoral Campaigns: political and media polarization, electoral campaigns and voting-decision processes, effects of polls on public opinion or analysis in multi-level elections in Spain.

^b *Department of Applied Sociology, Complutense University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain*

mlvinuesa@ucm.es

Coordinator of the Advanced Studies Postgraduate Course in Political Communication and Full Professor of Public Opinion and Political Effects of the Media in the Department of Applied Sociology of the Faculty of Information Sciences of the Complutense University of Madrid.

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Abstract

Internationally-recognized studies have identified the effects of selective exposure to the media and its implications for proper functioning of democratic systems. The theory of cognitive dissonance, by which citizens decide to expose to those related contents and reject inconsistent those with their ideology or values, allows us in this article to test their possible effects on voting and partisan polarization increasingly in west European political systems. In order to carry out it, through a sample of 5,943 citizens (from the post-electoral survey of the 2019 General Elections of the Spanish national center for sociological analysis), we have analyzed how exposure to media affects vote choice, party affiliation and reject other parties. Through several statistical analysis models, outcomes demonstrate media consumption effects on partisan polarization in electoral campaigns, especially in populist parties. In this sense, this article provides empirical evidence that ideological affiliation to this type of party is highly influenced by a restrictive media diet (exposure to a very limited number of media, even a just only one) with high-polarized content.

Keywords: selective exposure; vote; polarization; partisanship; populism.

Introduction

Academic interest in effects of political information consumption by voters has grown considerably in recent decades. Since the early studies of Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944), the so-called *Partisan Selective Exposure Theory* (PSE) has been widely studied from political psychology as well as studies in communication and sociology. Since Festinger (1957), Freedman and Sears (1967), Chaffee and Miyo (1983), Iyengar and Hahn (2009) or Knobloch-Westerwick (2014), among others, have developed the pillars of this communication theory that affects in the proper functioning of the democracies of West Europe. A greater relationship between interest in public affairs and consumption of the media (Delli Carpini, 2004) has the consequence that

citizens are more informed, but also that they are proactive in their exposure to contents that is more related or close to their opinions according to media diet consumption.

The partisan selective exposure theory consider that citizens are more predisposed to expose to those messages and media more similar to their ideological approaches, establishing psychological filters that bring them closer to rejecting the consumption of content contrary to their ideas. This cognitive dissonance has its origin in the human behavior to avoid inconsistent information with our own opinions and thoughts. This pattern is reinforced in electoral campaigns where citizens receive a multitude of messages from different actors (political parties, candidates, media, opinion leaders, etc.) where the public sphere is formed. These partisan filters begin from the ideology of each person as an indicator to evaluate the affirmation or cognitive dissonance in political messages in the media (Rinke and Lück, 2010, pp. 228; Vraga, 2015) on different platforms: from traditional media (press, television ...) to digital platforms, as social media: Twitter and Facebook especially (Bou-Hamad and Yehya, 2016; Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017; Bright, 2018).

The contents selectivity, enunciated by Freedman and Sears (1967) and later developed by other authors (Graf and Aday, 2008; Iyengar and Hahn, 2009), focuses on the active and selective role of the voters. It is they who choose the information and the news media to which it is exposed, with voters predicting that messages and the media will be more in consonance with their political and ideological affinity and, therefore, spend more time reading coherent information than whose is dissonant with his opinions.

The priming theory political effects, where citizens with less interest and knowledge of political events ignore realities that are not narrated by the media when establishing the terms and judgments about political leaders (Iyengar, Peters and

Kinder, 1982; Krosnick and Kinder, 1990), has been a research framework within the theory of selective exposure. Selective exposure to political information (that activates individuals' pre-existing cognitive judgments) is connected to personal political attitudes (Roskon-Ewoldsen, Roskon-Ewoldsen and Carpentier: 2009: 82; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012: 630).

This confirmation bias has three applied consequences: first, reducing citizens' political tolerance who see less content contrary to their opinions; second, it limits the political information received so decreasing the capacity for contrast and error; and, finally, to produce a greater polarization of citizens in public policies and issues on the public agenda (Stroud, 2008, 2010; Garrett, 2009; Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012).

That is absolutely crucial since contents selectivity produces polarization. If the citizens only expose themselves to the contents that interest them... would these contents increase the public opinion polarization? The following research tries to analyze the effect of selective exposure to informative contents and its influence on partisan polarization. How does media consumption affect citizens' attitudes towards different parties? Are they part of stronger endorsements and more intense rejections towards the different parties? We argue that selective exposure to news content influences voting as well as political polarization. For the defense of this assumption, we will proceed, in the first epigraph we will define the relationship between media consumption and partisan polarization, where the hypotheses are built that will guide the article. Then, we have proceeded to frame the Spanish media model (cataloged within the polarized system of Hallin and Mancini, 2004) as well as the characteristics of its party system and territorial organization, key to understanding the processes of political polarization in the last years. The methodology presents the set of variables for

the analysis model, using the post-electoral survey for the General Elections of April 2019 in Spain where it measures the consumption of different media in the electoral campaign. The results present the political and electoral consequences of the consumption of specific media affect political polarization. Finally, in the final section we will report the conclusions and consequences in public opinion as well as some limitations and implications for next studies.

Partisan polarization and selective exposure

Selective exposure to content, as we have previously mentioned, has attempted to analyze how citizens adhere to specific media and content that are compatible with their personal filters, especially ideological: citizens limit the diversity of news by limiting only those aligned with their political beliefs and their party affiliation. In this sense, attitudes at the individual level generate movements at the aggregate level, leading the generation of polarized partisan audiences, whose consumption is surrounded by a media diet (Ksiazek, 2016: 216-217). The configuration of “red and blue audiences” due to an increase in the partisan polarization of each of the parties (republican and democrat) is a consequence of a greater isolationism of the voters to read like-minded content (Rodriguez et al., 2017.) This political polarization growth has been widely studied in the USA (Layman, Carsey & Horowitz, 2006; Hollander, 2008; Stroud, 2008).

Politically polarized consumers are motivated to exercise greater selectivity in their news options. Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) further argue that the more interested and informative citizens demonstrate more polarized views. As audiences become more polarized, especially in matters of political information, the media participate with greater biases in an attempt to gain market share and satisfy its consumer base (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009).

The tendency of citizens to seek media content closer to their positions forces the political polarization of the media (newspapers, televisions...) in consonance. Partisan polarization and selective exposure are generating "a less tolerant and more fragmented public" (Bou-Hamad and Yehya, 2016) who are willing to consume information adverse to their positions because they further reinforce their opinions (Stroud, 2010: 569-570).

Recent scholarly arguments that polarization is not issue-based only on specific policies, but that it contains an affective component of rejection or aversion to specific positions or posed by opposing parties (Iyengar, Sood and Leskes, 2012; Mason, 2012; Levendusky and Malhotra, 2016: 284). Ahler (2014) also shows that voters on both sides (liberal and conservative) perceive the opposition's positions as more extreme than they really are. Citizens seem to consider the positions of their peers in public debate when they form their own opinions and, as a consequence, adopt slightly more extreme positions.

The mass media reinforce the predispositions of individuals as audiences become subsets (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008, pp. 720; Tsfaty, Stroud, & Chotiner, 2014). This approach suggests the media have started a trend to further mark their partisan and editorial positions to retain their voters (audiences). As a consequence of the greater predisposition to consume content consistent with our opinions, citizens are more polarized and less informed (Stroud, 2010; Levendusky, 2013; Prior, 2013), especially when the media cover with controversial issues (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009).

One of the explanations for political polarization is that political elites tend to polarize their political views and behaviors, leading mass polarization (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008; Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus, 2013; Rodriguez et al). Media and opinion leaders who work in different newspapers participate in this extreme opinion,

although this position is not unanimous: Fiorina, Abrams and Pope (2005) consider that partisan elites politics polarization in the US do not interfere with American public opinion. They consider the average voter in the US in the middle of the 20th century to be not well informed about politics, and therefore, do not replicate the views of their representatives (2005:19).

Grechyna (2016) has referred to the media, in general, as one of the dynamics which favour political polarization. The break-up between ideological media poles avoids disapproval positions of those who are ideologically close and maximizes criticism of opponents, as well as new commercial logics and permanent search to maximize audiences seem to be favouring political polarization in various countries (Prior, 2013; Baum and Groeling, 2008). By contrast, Melki and Pickering (2014:39) resolve that a greater consumption of information promotes greater political agreement in public opinion.

Recent studies (Fletcher et al, 2020) focus on fundamental aspects have been overlooked in the discussion about affective polarization: the percentage differences between Western democracies worsen in presidential systems and bipartisan systems, and they intensify both through traditional (press and radio) and digital media, especially in countries with a strong tradition of partisan publishing companies or with government-dependent public media.

Regarding the findings about social media and the internet selective exposure, scholars conclude in the same sense: exposure to contrary opinions on social networks increases political polarization or radicalization of political positions (Bail et al, 2018; Koehler 2014). The theory of "echo chambers" (networks of interconnected users that repeat and amplify messages) has been particularly successful, since, according to these authors, echo chambers exploits the confirmation bias and cognitive dissonance:

“people tend to discuss politics and public affairs with likeminded other” (Lee et al., 2014:716; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). In this sense, social networks provide access to sources of information that represent opinions and points of view concordant of them, increasing the polarization and isolation of certain social and political groups (Sunstein, 2007; Iyengar & Kahn, 2009).

Although there are scholars who find these positions as problematic. Barberá (2015) argue social media platforms facilitate likely exposure to information that individuals would not be exposed otherwise through personal interactions: users of these networks are exposed to more heterogeneous contents, so it could facilitate more moderate positions (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2004).

The Spanish media system as a polarized pluralist in continuous change

The Spanish media system, defined as polarized pluralist by Hallin and Mancini (2004) as other southern European countries such as France, Greece or Italy, has undergone notable transformations since the outbreak of the economic crisis and the fragmentation of the party system occurred in the country since the 2014 European Elections. Following on this idea, the previous characteristics that made up the political information model were shaped by the predominance of television in the news diet, especially in the media (being complemented by the consumption of the press and television); the social stratification of the media (traditional press has been a tool more oriented to the urban elite and well educated, while television was relegated to the large audiences and less educated working classes) and, above all, the partisan alignment of the media (Casero-Ripollés & Rabadán, 2016). This partisan nature (political parallelism) of the media permeated political journalism in Spain, generating a strong polarization of contents, a partisan and ideological bipolarization (around the two

mainstream hegemonic parties, conservatives and social democrats), cataloged by some authors as an 'antagonist', and offering a statements journalism where candidates and parties placed the political and media agenda and the creation of narratives and speeches in the public opinion (Casero-Ripollés, 2012).

However, as we have mentioned, the economic crisis in 2011 caused several changes in various spheres (political, social, and therefore also the media) in Spain. This crisis disrupted the main communication groups in the country, which saw their already large debts increased (contracted in the previous stage of great economic expansion) and their sales of the printed press fell; but also, the arrival of the digital press (and the technical transformation that it implies) forced them to transform their business in a hurried way. During the past decade, numerous digital media were born in Spain, which gradually took away many of the readers and, especially, the younger and urban ones, more linked to contents that these new media provided. But also, the consolidation of television system into three-operators-market, with two groups of private televisions, after the fusion of several business groups into two large corporations (Atresmedia and Mediaset Spain, group controlled by Fininvest -propriety of the Italian leader Silvio Berlusconi-); and a public radio and television broadcasting, increasingly depleted of national funding after the reform that made it impossible to depend by advertising (López-García & Valera-Ordaz, 2017; Feenstra et al., 2017).

These changes happen at the time of maximum transformation of the electorates in Spain with the arrival of the 2014-2016 electoral cycle, where in these three years the bipartisanship has broken into four-party system, with two of them (Podemos and Ciudadanos) who have better connected with the new informational logics that the digital press and social networks favour (Sampedro & Mosca, 2018; Sampedro & Martínez-Avidad, 2018). The 15M Movement generated new informative logics where

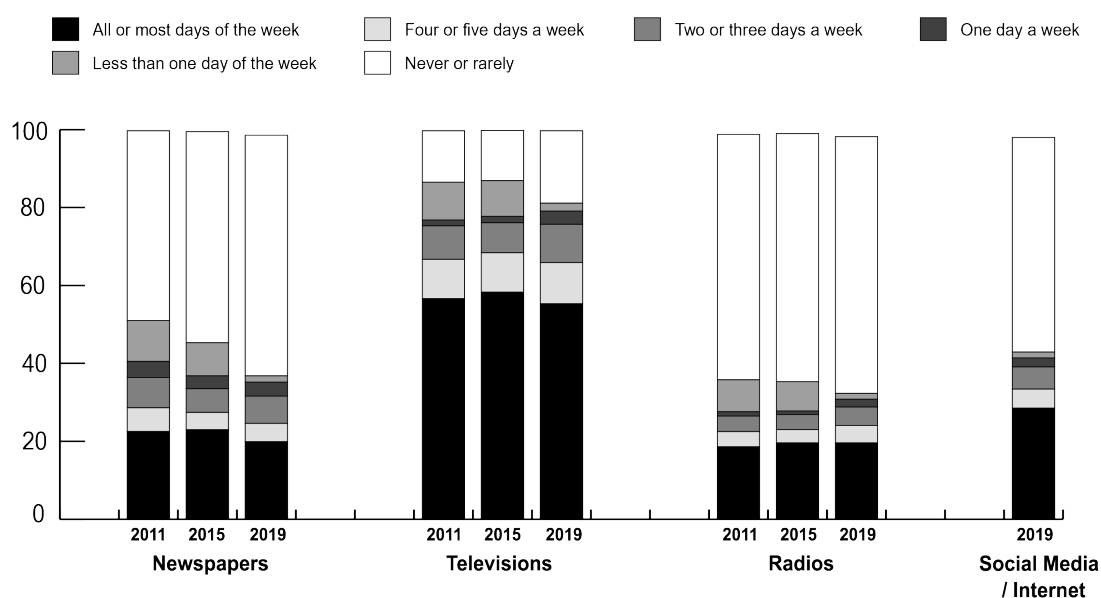
citizens find out without needing journalists or the media through digital media, as shown the fact that in the last decade Spanish citizens have spent less time consuming traditional media (Micó & Casero-Ripollés, 2014; Lobera, 2015; Rodríguez -Virgili & Serrano-Puche, 2019). The transformation of the logic of traditional media to the digital environment has affected political communication in Spain: in the 2015 General Election, it was the first electoral campaign where digital media surpassed media and radio as a source of political information of voters (Lobera & Sampedro, 2018).

Parties and television no longer monopolize electoral communication and public opinion has been fragmented into various increasingly polarized and partisan media sub-spheres with characteristics of each media consumption (Lobera & Sampedro, 2018). Despite this, television continues to enjoy a predominant power to impose the public agenda and the discussion topics of the citizens, since much more than in the press, public debate has focused on television. This media has also undergone notable changes with new formats for political information (entertainment, fiction, etc.) and a personalization of electoral campaigns, generating leadership in the new (but also in the old) parties thanks to the loudspeaker that television supposes (López-García & Valera-Ordaz, 2017).

The translation of the trends mentioned here can be seen reflected with the data on the consumption of political information in electoral campaigns in Spain during the last decade: hegemony of television, consumed by more than 80% of the country's citizens; of the press, with around 40% of media consumption and, finally, of the radio, more than 30%¹. The changes described above can be corroborated in figure 1: the decline of the press as a source of political information, as well as the arrival of social

¹ Data offered by post-electoral surveys of the Center for Sociological Research for 2011 (n° 2920), 2015 (n° 3126), 2016 (n° 3145) y 2019 (N° 3248) General Elections.

networks and the Internet as an aggregator of information. During the last campaign (April 2019), the consumption of political information on the internet, social networks and digital media has increased considerably: 28.5% of citizens are informed every day through, plus another 15% who are reported in this way at some point in the campaign².



Graph 1: Media consumption in Spain in the last three General Elections (2011-2019).
 Source: CIS surveys for General Elections (n° 2920), 2015 (n° 3126), 2016 (n° 3145) y 2019 (N° 3248).

The studies on selective exposure carried out in Spain have shown several headings. Firstly, the high partisanship of the mass media in Spain (especially in the coverage of political news in the published press), which responds to the increase in political polarization and the ideological alignment of citizens³: voters of conservative parties have shown media preferences for media of the same tendency (*ABC, La Razón*

² Question 14, post-electoral surveys of the Center for Sociological Research for April 2019

General Elections (n° 3248).

³

...), while social democratic and left-wing parties voters prefer more progressive newspapers, radio and televisions (*El País*, *Cadena Ser* or digital press), especially since the 1993 General Elections. This relation between political orientations and selective media consumption has been maintained until the 2015 and 2016 Elections (Martín-Llaguno and Berganza, 1996; Gunther, Moreno & Wert, 1999; Humanes, 2014; Ramírez-Dueñas and Vinuesa-Tejero, 2020). It is remarkable to observe that, as Humanes points out, such a degree of selectivity entails hostile effects: warn that individuals change their source of information when they detect the editorial line of the media has been modified (2014: 795). Likewise, greater political effects were also seen, in terms of selective exposure, with the consumption of the press, and smaller ratio, the radio, than in television, where catch-all character and massive audiences demand a lesser editorial line from head managers (Humanes, 2020). In the same line as Goldman & Mutz (2011), although their cross-cutting study in Spain shows lower media polarization ratios than in other countries of the same polarized pluralist system as Spain, such as Italy or Greece, and it could be close to U.S.

Secondly, the relevance of the center-periphery cleavage in the media exposure, especially when the issue of Catalan independence remains on the public agenda (Valera-Ordaz, 2018; Ramírez-Dueñas and Vinuesa-Tejero, 2020). Although the contents exposition on the left-right axis in Spain is highly strong (Fraile and Meilán, 2009), the data show media polarization in a second axis, the territorial, especially in the case of Catalonia: voters with nationalist or pro-independence inclinations are more exposed to regional or local media, while the so-called “unionists” do so in national television or press. National identity is the most relevant factor to explain selective exposure to regional media. (Valera-Ordaz, 2018: 149). Therefore, in Spain there is a favorable scenario for a partisan competition with different axes of competition that are

extrapolated to the selective exposure that voters make to inform themselves; Spanish media system can assert the existence of several cleavages also in the voters selectivity (news and media), and more specifically, in electoral campaigns.

The center-periphery cleavage in electoral narratives has been especially relevant to the political and media polarization in last years. Both the territorial configuration of Spain (decentralized) and the 2012' process of independence (Catalonia) have even polarized the electorates and their positions in the public debate, distancing the audiences from both electorates. Although it has been preferred not to include in this analysis the voters of regionalist and pro-independence parties, the above-mentioned studies have observed the relevance of the regional media in the configuration of the political identity and the partisan alienations of their voters, the latter being more predisposed to an informative diet of their own media and rejecting those coming from Madrid, where most of the media are published, being the capital and also the political and administrative center of the country.

Thirdly, studies have shown that in Spain the relevance of voting for a political party is an indicator for the process of selective exposure (Humanes, 2020: 175), corroborating the approach described in Hallin's polarized pluralist media system and Mancini: Spain is a country with very partisan audiences and media, indicators of the selective exposure process tend towards a high-polarized society. These processes have accelerated with the highest utilization of online news, where echo-chambers produce greater polarization as consumption and interest in content increases. (Cardenal et al., 2019).

Finally, the last shaping component of the political and media polarization of the country has been the relevance of the populist attitudes present in its voters, especially in the new parties (Marcos-Marne, Plaza-Colodro & Freyburg, 2020; Marcos-Marne,

Plaza-Colodro & Hawkins, 2020), with Spain being one of the countries of the European Union with the highest percentage of "populist voters" (shown in Table 1, based on data from the Pew Research Center, 2018). The different analyses have taken into account a greater propensity of populist voters to more affective polarized positions. Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley (2018) associate these psychological patterns with the so-called social identity theory: identification of populist voters as a group based on shared opinions, alienation of the "other" in negative terms, and the generation of confirmation biases with respect to inconsistent information. Populism therefore requires a media system loyal to its political vision and content tailored to its identity interests and values (Prior, 2007), appealing to "extremist affective narratives on issues that divide and deepen divisions such as the rights of immigrants, women, minorities, the LGBTQ community and others" (Waisbord, 2020:261-262).

	Left populist	Left Mainstream	Center Populist	Center Mainstream	Right Populist	Right Mainstream	Unaligned
Denmark	6	20	8	19	9	31	7
France	11	13	12	21	12	18	13
Germany	5	17	14	37	6	14	7
Italy	8	14	12	17	18	16	17
Netherlands	5	19	7	23	12	30	5
Spain	13	11	17	21	11	18	9
Sweden	2	20	4	25	4	37	8
United Kindom	9	16	13	19	10	24	9

Table 1: Group composition within European countries (represented coefficients, %).
Source: Pew Research Center (2018).

According to our theoretical arguments, we expose the following hypothesis to test in the models that we will describe in the following lines:

- **Hypothesis 1:** There will be a correlation between citizens' vote choice regarding their media diet (media consumption during the electoral campaign)

- **Hypothesis 1.1:** The high degree of partisanship in the press will make this media the one that obtains superior statistical correlations.
- **Hypothesis 1.2.:** In line with previous analyzes carried out in Spain, the high polarization of the media and the high degree of journalism of the readers will affect the vote with high correlations with consumption of non-related media.
- **Hypothesis 2:** Regarding political polarization, it will be influenced by selective exposure to related media, especially in the press.
 - **Hypothesis 2.1:** There are greater effects in the partisan polarization of the voters of populist parties.
 - **Hypothesis 2.2.:** As a consequence of the previous one, the effects of selective exposure on political polarization will be less reduced in voters of less ideological or centrist parties.

Data and method

With the aim of verifying the adequacy to the established hypotheses, we have carried out a study with various statistical models to test, through logistic regressions⁴, their veracity. For that purpose, and with the data provided by the Spanish Sociological Studies Center (CIS), we have used as a sample the data provided by the post-electoral survey of the April 2019 General Elections. Its sample, designed from 6,000 interviews,

⁴ Given the fragmentation of the Spanish party system (regional and/or peripheral parties), we have preferred to test the different analysis groups (voters) separately by means of binary logistic regressions versus multinomial models. We assume that this model may be less systematic, but more focused conceptually, given that it is not an individual-level voting study, but rather an investigation of effects of exposure to media on their decision-making process and political polarization.

with 509 sampling points (municipalities), is distributed in the 50 provinces of the Spanish territory, through a personal interview system and geographical distribution by size of habitat. The interviews were conducted between 20 days to 35 days after the elections were held.

These surveys have allowed us to evaluate the impact of media consumption and the monitoring of political content through the different media during the electoral campaign of those elections (in Spain, according to the electoral law, the campaign begins fifteen days before, establishing a reflection day for the citizens, in which the parties cannot ask for the vote).

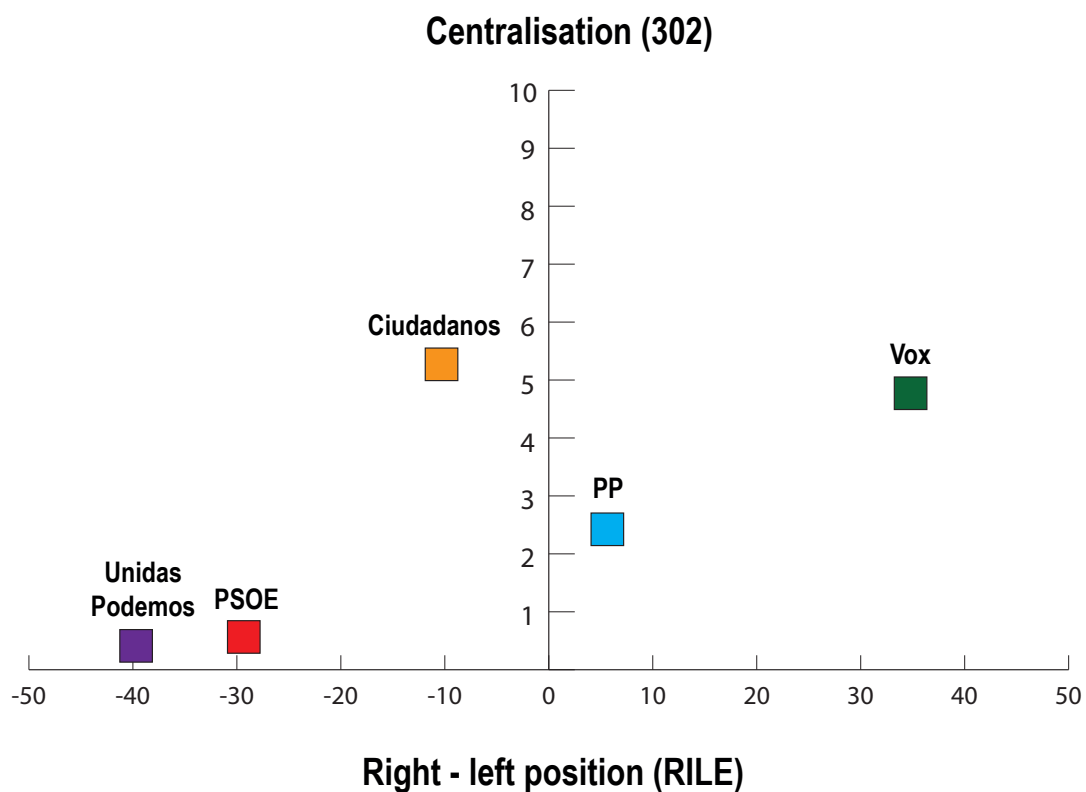
The dependent variables used for this study were two: 1) the last vote choice, established dichotomously (1-Vote , 0-No), as stated by the interviewees⁵; and 2) the probability of voting for the different parties⁶, measured from 0- I would never vote to 10- I would always vote. With these two variables they will allow us to analyze the influence of media consumption both on the vote and on the partisan polarization.

The study's statistical regressions have been carried out for the five main parties in Spain present at national level in the April 2019 General Elections: 1) *Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, PSOE, a social democratic party, winner of the April 2019 elections (28.67% of the votes); 2) *Partido Popular*, PP, Christian-democrats and conservative formation (16.69%); 3) *Ciudadanos*, moderate and liberal party (15.89%); and two so-called populist parties (Fernández-García and Luengo, 2018; Rama and

⁵ Question 36: Could you tell me if you feel close to or close to any party or political coalition?

⁶ Question nº 40: what is the probability that you will vote for each of the parties that I am going to mention, using a scale from 0 to 10, knowing that 0 means that “surely, I would never vote ” and the 10 “ in all certainty, I would always vote for it ”.

Santana, 2018): *Unidas Podemos / Podemos*, UP, a left-wing populist party, LWPP (14.32%); and 5) and *VOX*, a radical right-wing populist party, RWPP (10.26%)⁷. We have preferred to leave out the analysis of media exposure effects on territorial and partisan identity in regions with independence tendencies, which although previous research has already ascertained the relevance of this issue (Valera-Ordaz, 2018; Ramírez-Dueñas & Vinuesa-Tejero, 2020), to focus on processes of political and ideological polarization at the national level.



Graph 2: Ideological positions of the established parties on national level in Spain. Right – left position (RILE) and centralization (302). Source: Manifiesto Project Data for 2019 General Elections.

To test the influence of the media, we have introduced the consumption of different media if the voter has received political information during the electoral

⁷ Spanish Ministry of the Interior Data.

campaign. We have taken the four most read newspapers: one of a progressive characteristics, *El País* (23.1%, of all those who read the press), and three conservatives, from least to most ideologically: *El Mundo* (8.6%), *ABC* (4.5%) and *La Razón* (2.4%); the five most watched television: the national public television, *TVE* (22.4%); *Antena 3* (21.1%); *Cuatro* (2.7%); *Telecinco* (13.9%) and *La Sexta* (22%); and four radio: *Cadena Ser* (33.8%), *Cadena COPE* (18.8%), national public radio broadcasting, *Radio Nacional de España, RNE* (9.6%) and *EsRadio* (2.1%).

Newspaper	Ideological Orientation	Ideological average of the users ⁸	Television	Ideological Trend	Ideological average of the users	Radio	Ideological Orientation	Ideological average of the users
<i>El País</i>	Progressive	3,74	<i>TVE</i>	Public television	4,95	<i>RNE</i>	Public Radio	4,21
<i>El Mundo</i>	Conservative	5,35	<i>Antena 3</i>	Conservative	5,22	<i>Cadena Ser</i>	Progressive	3,61
<i>ABC</i>	Conservative	6,39	<i>Cuatro</i>	Progressive	4,35	<i>Cadena COPE</i>	Conservative	6,24
<i>La Razón</i>	Conservative	6,34	<i>T5</i>	Progressive (moderate)	4,83	<i>EsRadio</i>	Conservative	6,42
			<i>La Sexta</i>	Progressive	3,45			

Table 2: List of media (newspapers, radios and televisions) in the model analysis.

On them, we have interfered with the set of control variables. Firstly, those of a sociodemographic nature and political attitudes: sex (1 / man - 0 / woman), age and studies (1 / No studies; 2 / primary; 3 / secondary; and 4 / tertiary education). Furthermore, we have included a series of political-ideological variables, such as interest in politics (1 / Nothing– 4 / Much); interest in the electoral campaign (1 / Nothing of interest - 4 / Much interest); sympathy for a party (1-Yes, 0-No), the ideological self-location of each respondent (1-Left, 10-Right) and the assessment of the leaders of each of the parties.

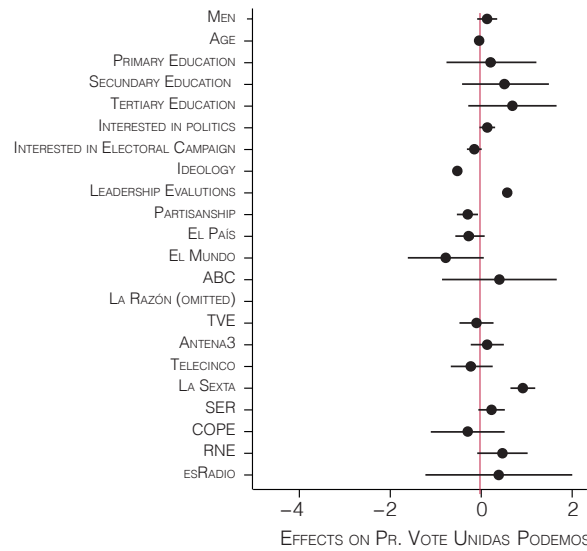
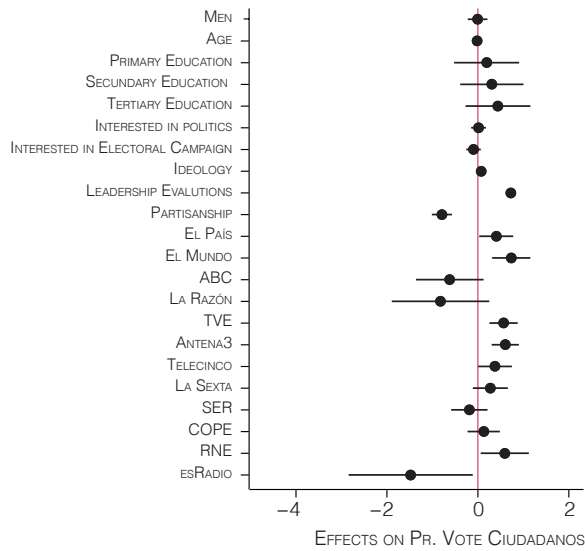
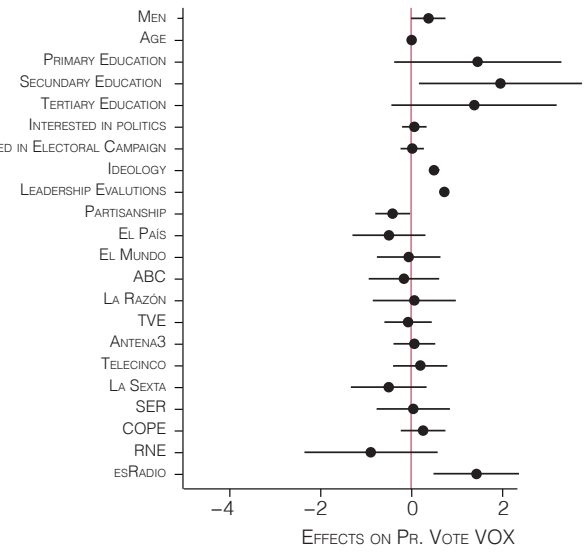
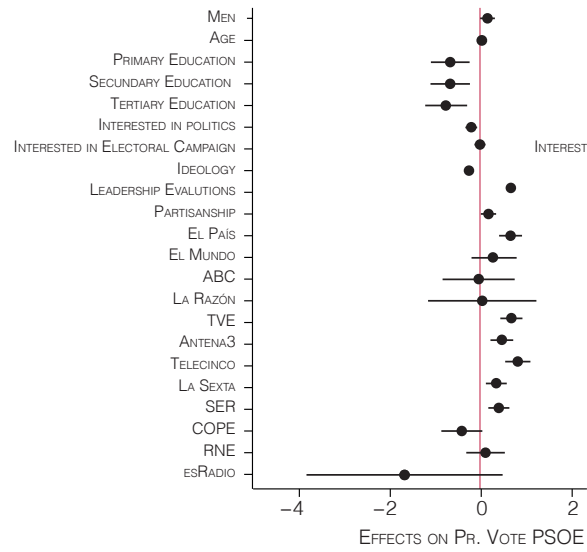
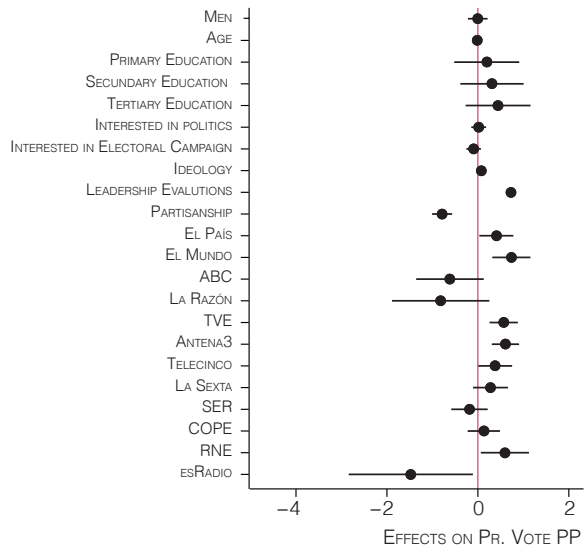
⁸ Average ideological self-location of the audience of each of the media. Source: CIS

postelectoral survey for General Elections 2019 (Nº 3248)

Results

Firstly, to test the first hypothesis regarding the effects of media consumption on voting, we have carried out an analysis model according to last vote choice for the case study elections. The results are reflected in graph nº 3 (the data are collected in table nº I of the appendix), which confirm how the effects of the media are more influential than the rest of the independent variables of the model. Initially, there are several classic voting explanation variables that continue to infer statistical relationships (such as, for example, partisan identification, partisanship; leadership evaluations by the voters or ideology). More specifically, we can observe a generation gap between the two systemic parties (PP and PSOE) compared to the three new newly consolidated formations (VOX, *Unidas Podemos* and *Ciudadanos*, with national presence from 2014). But also, two very significant elements: partisanship seems especially noteworthy in systemic parties, as well as does the role of leadership, especially in the case of the right-wing populist party (VOX) and *Ciudadanos*, both driven by two very strong hyper-leaderships.

In any case, the results of the regressions of the study model show us how the variables referring to the informational diet in electoral campaigns are statistically highly relevant. In the first hypothesis (nº 1), we proposed that the effects of selective exposure to different media would be strong, due to the high degree of polarization by the national media. In this sense, the results allow us to assert an answer according this regard: the vote for the different parties in the analysis are closely related to the specific media consumption during the electoral campaign. This shows the intensity of the influence of selective exposure to political information and editorial lines by the respondents.



Graph 3: Effects of media consumption on last vote choice. Regression coefficients and confidence intervals (95%).

As a general explanation, we observe that the press, despite being more politicized and with more editorial content than the rest (radio or television), data does not show major effects on the vote; instead, the most politicized radio (*EsRadio*) and the most ideologically television (*La Sexta*) do show the greatest effects. In this sense, hypothesis 1.1. would be rejected: in most parties, the probability of voting is more explained by television (*Ciudadanos* or PSOE) and the press only explains a very specific case (*La Razón* with the PP or *El País* with PSOE)

Beyond the media type citizens use to inform, the analysis model shows a strong correlation between political information consumption in the electoral campaign between the most polarized media (as we have already mentioned) and parties of character populist, either the LWPP *Unidas Podemos* or the RWPP VOX, while parties more focused on the ideological axis (the conservative PP, the social democratic party PSOE and the liberal *Ciudadanos* parties) show effects with a greater diversity of media and less ideological line.

Firstly, the vote probability for *Unidas Podemos* is explained by the consumption of the progressive television *La Sexta*. It is the independent variable with the highest explanatory value, above leadership (despite the hyper leadership of the candidate in his party). In line with this event, voters of the radical right-wing populist party, VOX, show a greater predisposition for *EsRadio*, with a very pronounced conservative position, with *EsRadio* being the media with the voters located more to the right on the ideological axis⁹.

⁹ According to the General Media Survey (EGM), in its different analysis waves for 2019, the *EsRadio* network has increased audiences by 24.2% compared to the previous year, with the morning program of the anchor Federico Jiménez-Los Santos, who obtains the best audience data, doubling its radio listeners from 2016-2019, surpassing half a million.

Both voters are only influenced by just one media (*La Sexta / Es Radio*) that shows the leading role of the information received by their voters, and above all, the degree of selective exposure of these individuals who do not show consumption towards another not-consistent political information with his political ideology or attitudes.

The other three parties in the study show more diverse effects. *Partido Popular* voters show effects with the consumption of a conservative media (*ABC*) and with public radio (*RNE*), but above all, the consumption of *EsRadio* (which influences *VOX* voters, and by both its closest electoral competitor), is negative with respect to the vote for the *PP*, which details the effect of the media on the dual competition of these two political parties.

With respect to the social democratic party, we observe that their voters show effects on the vote with the consumption of the two classic progressive media (*Cadena SER* and *El País*) and above all, with television. Undoubtedly, this is related to their electorate (it is the party with less educated and older voters), but also because television shows the information less biased and polarized. Finally, *Ciudadanos* voters show very disparate and dual information consumption: conservative and progressive contents. The explanatory values with the two main newspapers (*El País* and *El Mundo*) are strong, but also with the consumption of television (*TVE*) and public radio (*RNE*).

In addition, and together with the *PP* voter, *Ciudadanos* voters show rejection with the consumption of *EsRadio* (the one consumed by *VOX* voters), being in these two the only cases where we can ratify hypothesis 1.2. (cognitive dissonance to be exposed to contrary media will affect the vote).

To test the second round of hypotheses referring to the effects of media consumption on political polarization, we have applied the previous study model to the other dependent variable, referred to the probability of voting for different parties, or

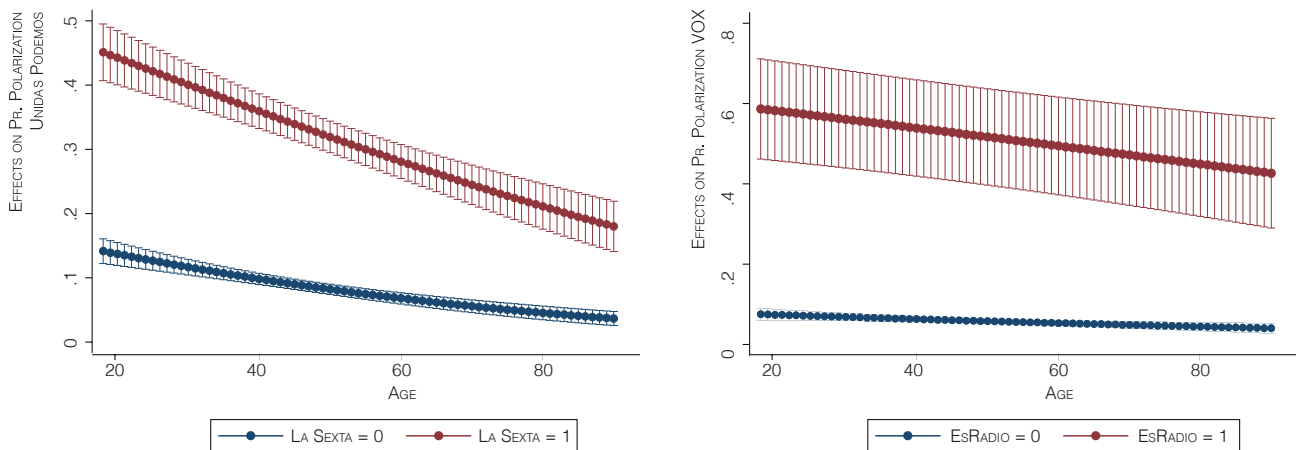
seen differently, the voter rejection by parties. Our approach was a close relationship between the consumption of specific media (or the rejection of others) with the degree of partisan polarization and, in this sense, the data provide us with conclusions that seem to confirm our hypothesis.

We appreciate a slow displacement of explanations in the vote from socio-economic variables to the media, these being more explanatory than sex, age or studies (in some cases, especially those new parties, more focused on post-material issues or more focused on the GAL-TAN axis).

Contrary to what happened with the vote choice, partisan polarization is closely related not only with the consumption of the media, but with the refusal to receive content contrary to their political beliefs. These media are the most ideologically polarized (*El Mundo*, *EsRadio*, *ABC* and *Cadena Ser*); more specifically, the press and radio, two media with a greater tendency to editorialize and a greater position on public affairs. Televisions do not show negative correlations with political polarization, we believe, precisely in this regard. However, it seems the most influential way: its coverage (more than 85% of the population used this way to get information during the electoral campaign) but also because of its capillarity, since it is the majority way to get information especially from citizens over 30 years of age.

More specifically, regarding the two sub-hypotheses about new parties and parties. The first we related about the possibility of partisan polarization about populist parties being related to media consumption, which should not be interpreted in this way, although we do appreciate some kind of content like this. We appreciate that the polarization towards the two populist parties (*Unidas Podemos* and *VOX*) is related to fewer communication media (that is, there are fewer media with positive and negative correlations) than in the other parties; correlations are stronger and are from media with

a strong ideological line. *Unidas Podemos* shows positive correlations with *La Sexta*, but rejections from one of the most ideologically media, *El Mundo*. On the contrary, *VOX* shows positive correlations with *Cadena COPE* but above all *Es Radio*, just as it happened with the vote.



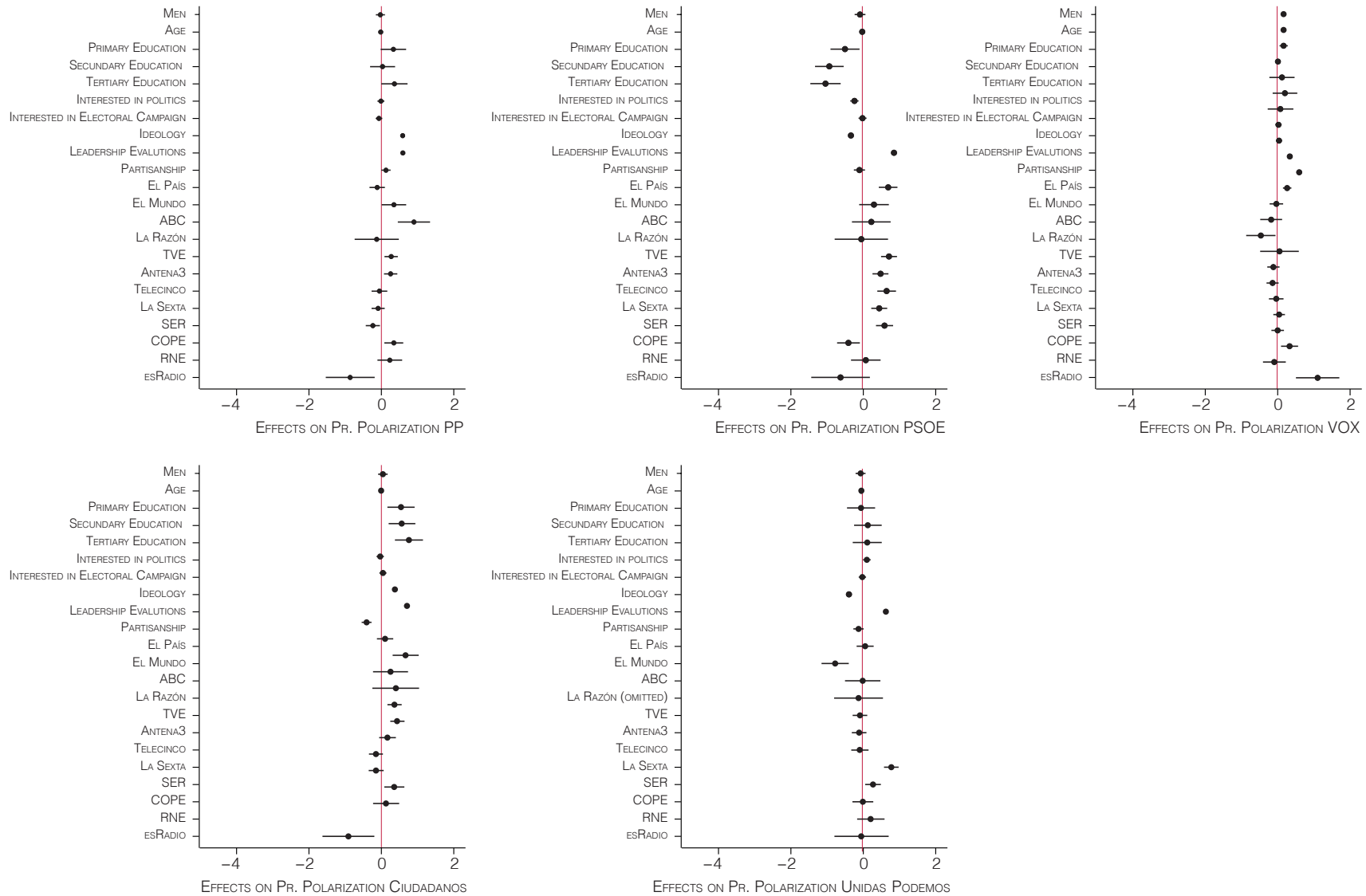
Graft 4: Marginal effect of media selective exposition for the probability in polarized vote for populist parties (*Unidas Podemos*, on the left; and *VOX*, on the right), controlling by age.

Furthermore, the differences by age groups are very relevant and denote the possible future political polarization in the coming years. The political affiliation for *Unidas Podemos* triples in the youngest voters who have consumed this television (*La Sexta*), while this probability is halved in the elderly, especially from the age of 50. In the case of voters of the right-wing populist party, the probability of voting for *VOX* is multiplied by five among the youngest voters who have been exposed to the media of the analysis (*EsRadio*), reduced to four among the oldest citizens.

The second hypothesis responds to the political polarization with more political-moderate parties, it does not seem to respond to the data. If the populist parties, and

certainly more heightened on the left-right axis, the more focused parties show similar or even greater statistical correlations with respect to media consumption. In a very similar way to the vote, PP is the party with the greatest diversity: the polarization of the respondents is highly influenced by the consumption of conservative press (*ABC* and *El Mundo*), conservative television (*Antena 3*) and catholic radio (*Cadena COPE*). For the polarization or rejection of the PSOE, television consumption and the progressive press and radio (*El Pais* and *Cadena Ser*) have a special influence.

In the case of *Ciudadanos*, it is influenced by the consumption of two conservative media (*El Mundo* and *Cadena COPE*) and shows rejection of ABC or *EsRadio*.



Graph 5: Effects of media consumption on party polarization. Regression coefficients and confidence intervals (95%).

Discussion and implications

This study aims to show the political consequences of the information diet and selective exposure, specifically, in citizens' vote choice and audiences' partisan polarization. The voter confirmation bias we have shown has consequences for the health and strength of democracies: voter tolerance for adverse content is reduced, including rejection of specific content from particular editorial lines. In addition, and according with the research presented about political polarization (Stroud, 2008, 2010; Garrett, 2009; Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012), the effects of media consumption on the rejection or partisanship of citizens are strong and, in many cases, more relevant than party ideology or sympathy.

The selectivity of the contents, in the sense that citizens decide only to expose themselves to specific information, or even, the creation of political and partisan identities from the rejection of particular contents, we have tested in the vote and the party adherence to populist parties, that show very strong correlations with an only media network with a strong ideological line. But we are also observing the tension between European conservative parties and radical right-wing parties (RWPP), translated into media consumption: the consumption of one specific media is very significant in VOX generates aversion in the voters of the other two non-populist right-wing parties (PP and *Ciudadanos*).

We cannot consider the creation of "bipolarized" audiences (red / blue audiences) in the terms proposed by some authors (Ksiassek, 2016 or Rodriguez et al, 2017), especially since Europe (except in specific cases, such as the United Kingdom) has multiparty systems that prevent this polarization; but we do show a segmentation of audiences in ideological terms (selective exposure to progressive media of those individuals who locate themselves on the left), but also specific information diets for each of the parties. In this sense, the creation of differentiated political identities is constructed under the orbit of the informative contents of related media.

Despite not being able to verify the theses of Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) about the greater polarization of active and interested citizens, we consider that the line of research that runs that the most polarized citizens are motivated to exert greater selectivity in their news consumption can be rethought in a different way: those citizens exposed to more polarized media are more ideologically radicalized, choosing by extreme parties and populist political options.

With data for a country considered as polarized pluralist, the data show us advances in the influence of the media on the partisan polarization of citizens; although there are still remnants of a certain optimism: the majority of citizens consume different media and the press, despite being the most editorializing media, does not show direct and unidirectional effects on the vote choice.

Limitations

The study of media exposure in the vote and, more specifically, in political polarization still has a great methodological development. In this text, we have provided a formula to test the effects of these phenomena on two specific variables (voting and rejection of political parties); however, the characteristics of the survey (cross-national level versus panel survey) make it difficult to obtain more consistent conclusions to be able to assert some of the conclusions. Furthermore, we do not rule out the possibility of a possible endogenic effect: if voters could adjust the information or media received once they have decided to support the party (offering a reverse causation); or even a feedback factor, both of which multiply and intensify both characteristics, political and media polarization. Both processes should be considered in future research projects.

Beyond these general limitations, we warn about three aspects the reader should take into consideration in the analysis. Three limitations must be contemplated in the following study. In the first place, it has not been possible to analyze the role of digital media (online press) in the electoral behavior of citizens, because the sociological analysis center did not include the main digital headers among the options of the question on consumption media in electoral campaign. Therefore, despite

the increasing importance of this type of media, especially among the younger voters, we cannot produce significant results in this field.

Secondly, we cannot measure the quantification of the degree of consumption of the various media and their influence on the polarization of citizens. We do not know how much citizens read a specific media or if they read more than one or what degree of both. Being the question posed in a binary way by the analysis center, it prevents making analysis about the depth in which citizens are immersed in the different media and how they end up affecting them in the vote.

Lastly, it is still too early to measure one of the distribution channels where political communication takes place: Whatsapp. The greater relevance of this application in the circulation of content and information is evident, including many fake news and untruthful information, but we cannot observe how it affects electoral behavior.

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APPENDIX

Variable	PP	PSOE	VOX	Ciudadanos	Unidas Podemos
Sex	.085	.134	.363	-.002	.148
Age	.024***	.007**	-.015*	-.016***	-.027***
Studies (Ref. No studies)					
Primary	.670*	-.691**	1.453	.195	.241
Secondary	.062	-.692**	1.951*	.310	.548
Superiors	.372	-.781***	1.370	.444	.699
Interest in politics					
Electoral Campaign Interest	-.004	-.226***	.056	.017	.150
Ideology	-.074	-.033	.011	-.093	-.133
Partisanship	.399***	-.276***	.495***	.077*	-.505***
Leadership	.304*	.155	-.420*	-.787***	-.283*
	.564***	.650***	.717***	.726***	.586***
Newspapers					
El País	-.256	.644***	-.502	.406*	-.227
El Mundo	.026	.279	-.068	.736***	-.755
ABC	1.057***	-.063	-.1724	-.614	.346
La Razón	-.041	.017	.056	-.818	(omitted)
Televisions					
TVE	.221	.662***	-.081	.569***	-.085
Antena3	.244	.450***	.057	.606***	.151
Telecinco	.001	.804***	.185	.381*	-.189
La Sexta	-.109	.329**	-.507	.277	.926***
Radios					
SER	-.183	.385**	.032	-.185	.244
COPE	.135	-.434	.249	.131	-.277
RNE	.731*	.091	-.896	.595*	.481
ES radio	-1.354**	-1.702	1.419**	-1.473*	.402
Constant	-8.968***	-3.224***	-10.890***	-5.844***	-2.981***
N	4602	4766	4115	4660	4643
Pseudo R2	0.447	0.352	0.563	0.328	0.406
Prob> Chi2	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

Table I. Effects of media consumption on the probability of last vote choice. Source: CIS 3248 survey for 20th April General Elections. Coef: Coefficients of the regressions. Level Statistical Significance Legend: * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001.

Variable	PP	PSOE	VOX	Ciudadanos	Unidas Podemos
Sex (Men)	-.007 (.063)	-.066 (.075)	.148** (.057)	.035 (.066)	-.041 (.068)
Age	.003 (.002)	-.005* (.002)	-.003 (.002)	-.011*** (.002)	-.024*** (.002)
Estudios (Ref. No studies)					
Primaries	.352* (.179)	-.477* (.202)	.102 (.173)	.531** (.189)	-.028 (.194)
Secondary Studies	.054 (.176)	-.905*** (.199)	.184 (.169)	.559** (.186)	.157 (.191)
Superiores	.380* (.185)	-1.010*** (.211)	.063 (.177)	.748*** (.195)	.139 (.200)
Interested in Politics	.008 (.049)	-.220*** (.058)	.009 (.043)	-.037 (.051)	.129* (.052)
Interested in Electoral Campaign	-.045 (.047)	.002 (.055)	.023 (.041)	.037 (.049)	.008 (.051)
Ideology	.610*** (.020)	-.316*** (.021)	.312*** (.017)	.365*** (.019)	-.356*** (.020)
Partisanship	.146** (.065)	-.083 (.077)	.243*** (.058)	-.409*** (.068)	-.097 (.070)
Leadership	.615*** (.016)	.861*** (.016)	.568*** (.013)	.698*** (.015)	.645*** (.016)
Newspapers					
El País	-.095 (.108)	.701*** (.130)	-.048 (.093)	.096 (.113)	.083 (.118)
El Mundo	.367* (.172)	.315 (.207)	-.189 (.151)	.659*** (.181)	-.731*** (.189)
ABC	.919*** (.227)	.241 (.270)	-.469* (.202)	.245 (.244)	.016 (.244)
La Razón	-.108 (.311)	-.030 (.372)	.035 (.267)	.387 (.325)	-.096 (.338)
Televisions					
TVE	.290** (.094)	.726*** (.110)	-.128 (.084)	.355*** (.099)	-.058 (.101)
Antena3	.277** (.094)	.492*** (.111)	-.151 (.083)	.433*** (.099)	-.080 (.101)
Telecinco	-.033 (.110)	.661*** (.130)	-.052 (.100)	.162 (.097)	-.059 (.119)
La Sexta	-.069 (.093)	.458*** (.111)	.025 (.087)	-.153 (.097)	.793*** (.101)
Radios					
SER	-.216** (.099)	.603*** (.119)	-.013 (.086)	-.147 (.104)	.296** (.108)
COPE	.363** (.133)	-.382* (.158)	.308** (.118)	.349** (.139)	.020 (.144)
RNE	.253 (.174)	.091 (.206)	-.102 (.157)	.124 (.182)	.237 (.190)
esRadio	-.840* (.345)	-.598 (.408)	1.067*** (.299)	-.907* (.362)	-.015 (.375)
Constant	-2.770*** (.255)	2.902*** (.316)	-1.985*** (.237)	-1.653*** (.270)	2.587*** (.293)
N	4401	4540	3926	4426	4462
Prob > F	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
R-squared	0.620	0.539	0.562	0.544	0.552
Adj R-squared	0.619	0.537	0.560	0.542	0.550

Table II. Effects of media consumption on probability (0-10) of vote choice. Source: CIS 3248 survey for 20th April General Elections. Coef: Coefficients of the regressions. Level Statistical Significance Legend: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.