BEYOND IDEOLOGY: THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA DIET ON AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION IN SPAIN

MÁS ALLÁ DE LA IDEOLOGÍA: LA INFLUENCIA DE LA DIETA MEDIÁTICA EN LA POLARIZACIÓN AFECTIVA EN ESPAÑA

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Resumen

Esta investigación busca comprobar si la dieta mediática de un individuo influye en sus niveles de polarización afectiva, valorando, no la cantidad de medios consumidos, sino la variedad –en términos ideológicos– de los mismos. Se analiza la campaña del 23J en España, a partir de los datos de la III Encuesta Nacional de Polarización Política del CEMOP. Previamente, se presenta un análisis descriptivo de la polarización de las audiencias, concluyendo que los periódicos y la televisión presentan altos niveles de polarización afectiva. Por otro lado, los resultados de la regresión lineal realizada para contrastar nuestro objetivo apuntan a que la no diversidad en la dieta mediática de la televisión y de la prensa supone unos mayores niveles de polarización afectiva individual. Por último, se constata que el consumo de *La Sexta* tiene influencia en el aumento de la polarización afectiva entre las audiencias.

Palabras clave

polarización afectiva; dieta mediática; televisión; prensa; emociones.

Abstract

The aim of this research is to determine whether an individual's media diet influences their affective polarization levels by evaluating the variety of media consumed in ideological terms rather than quantity. The Spanish election campaign of 23 July, 2023 (23J), has been analyzed based on data from the Third National Survey on Political Polarization in Spain conducted by *CEMOP* (the Murcia Centre for Studies on Public Opinion). A descriptive analysis of audience polarization is presented first, concluding that newspapers and television display high levels of affective polarization. The results of the linear regression performed for the purpose of testing our main objective show that a lack of diversity in television and newspaper consumption leads to higher levels of individual affective polarization. Moreover, it has been observed that consuming content on the television channel *La Sexta* increases affective polarization among audiences.

Keywords

affective polarization; media diet; television; newspapers; emotions.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, affective polarization has become an important risk factor for the health of democracies (Carothers and O'Donohue 2019; Schuliaquer and Vommaro 2020). An example of this is the United States, where increasingly frequent clashes between Republicans and Democrats have led to episodes of political violence. Another is the growing conflict in the United Kingdom due to the difficulties involved in the Brexit transition (Freidin, Moro and Silenzi 2022). Furthermore, these paradigms are evidence of a general trend in most democratic systems.

Several studies have found a close relationship between affective polarization, ideological polarization perceived in the elite, and the ideological extremism of the general public (Torcal and Comellas 2022). The main variable that has identified attitudinal trends in Spain, and which has been used to explain electoral behaviour, is a structural variable (Pallarés, Riba and Fraile 2007). Therefore, assuming there is a relationship between ideological and affective polarization (Hernández, Anduiza and Rico 2021; Mason 2014; Orriols and León 2021), the main objective of this study is to analyze the possible influence of media diet as a variable that might impact and even intensify affective polarization under certain conditions, even if this is not structural. In other words, if we accept the role played by ideology, it is worth questioning whether the type of media diet consumed might contribute to individual affective polarization, based on the assumption that cognitive reinforcement dynamics generated by a more restricted media diet, or by less varied consumption of information sources, could exacerbate inter-group conflict by strengthening group identities and biases (Kubin and von Sikorski 2023). Consequently, the audience's media diet of television and newspapers during the Spanish election campaign of 23 July, 2023 (23J), has been analyzed based on data from the Third National Survey on Political Polarization in Spain, conducted by *CEMOP* (the Murcia Centre for Studies on Public Opinion). The results appear to indicate a diverse media diet in television and newspaper consumption, although to a greater extent in the former.

Based on these premises, this article starts by analyzing the level of polarization in the Spanish media system, including the print media and television subsystems. This is expected to shed light on the impact of the ecosystem, which is assumed to have a degree of influence over people's affective attitudes.

Secondly, the role played by a diverse media diet in individual affective polarization levels is examined. In other words, two questions are addressed: To what extent is the exposure to various points of view related to less emotional distancing from out-groups? Do certain media outlets influence affective polarization? Most studies have found that exposure to like-minded media increases polarization. For example, Lu and Lee (2019) found evidence of a rise in affective polarization among Americans who consume partisan television content. However, in the case of Spain, the effect of exposure to more diverse media consumption is still being debated (Padró-Solanet and Balcells 2022) and more evidence is needed. This paper goes beyond a merely quantitative view of media diet to focus on the aspect of ideological plurality, and to provide specific evidence of how certain media outlets in Spain influence the affective polarization level of their audiences.

Affective polarization

Affective polarization is the emotional distance between positive feelings toward people who sympathize with our political ideas, and the rejection of those who have different opinions (Orriols 2021). Therefore, it refers to an emotional separation that appeals to the feelings aroused in people rather than reason (Miller 2021). Academic consideration of polarization has too often been limited to aspects such as ideology or the political party system, neglecting the study of the affective or socio-emotional features of this behaviour (Shereikis 2020). However, the latter are currently seen as fundamental aspects, especially considering recent polarizing trends in which the crossover between political identity and social identity has gradually increased. The result is a hostile and fragmented electorate that huddles together in radicalised parties, or at opposite extremes of the ideological scale (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2013).

The problem is that excessive polarization can directly impact our social behaviour as well as our political attitudes (Shereikis 2020); this is because simply believing that we belong to a specific group, or identifying with it, necessarily involves distancing ourselves from another group (Huddy, Mason and Aarøe 2015), and adversaries are then considered the enemy. Thus, growing polarization in the electoral scenario has led to a two-fold conflict: the electorate's rejection of voters of the opposing party; and a far more negative view of the situation when their party is not in power (Crespo Martínez, Rojo Martínez and Mora Rodríguez 2021). However, depending on the society under analysis, this statement needs to be qualified (García-Marín, Luengo and de Blasio 2021), since the impact of affective polarization will not be the same across all party systems, and multi-party contexts have only been addressed in the last decade (Gidron, Adams and Horne 2020). Such contexts involving multiple parties often include problematic factors such as party hooliganism and possibly even the confusion of affective polarization with negative partisanship (Crespo Martínez, Mora Rodríguez and Rojo Martínez 2024).

The theoretical underpinnings of this type of polarization stem from social identity theories (Iyengar et

al. 2012) based on a psychosocial process in which reality is reduced to two conflicting and exclusionary ways of thinking, and the stances of groups to which one does not belong are considered harmful (Villa Gómez et al. 2020). Consequently, positive bias is prevalent toward the in-group, and negative bias is directed at the out-group (McCoy, Rahman and Somer 2018), which arouses tribalistic dynamics (Torcal 2023). This situation is nothing less than the consequence of attempting to change the collective vision by using specific practices and communication techniques in an attempt to standardize citizens' perspectives on public matters so that their viewpoint is in line with that of the dominant elite (Silva 2004).

Polarization and the media

In examining the reasons for this rise in socio-emotional polarization, research by several authors (Iyengar et al. 2012; Levendusky 2013; Prior 2007) has shown that the media contributes to this increase in polarization. In fact, the question has been raised as to whether consumption from certain media outlets fuels this phenomenon within a political context where extreme opinions seem to garner more attention. Many theorists posit that voters who share journalists' political leanings are increasingly attracted to ideological content that consolidates their partisan stance, thereby contributing to affective polarization (Prior 2013).

The current proliferation of new media and the growing number of platforms give people the chance to exert more control over their media diet, generally speaking, and more ways of avoiding counter-attitudinal messages (Festinger 1957; Sears and Freedman 1967; Frey 1986). Some experiments, such as those conducted by Johnson and Arceneaux (2013), have proven that media with specific ideologies polarize attitudes significantly more when survey respondents are forcibly exposed to them (Tsfati and Nir 2017). Additionally, partisan media is more frequently consumed by audiences with an affinity for either end of the ideological spectrum. Levendusky (2013) discovered that consuming like-minded media consolidates attitudes and radicalizes audiences. Even when people do consume media with opposing ideas, it does not usually alter their point of view. This is mainly due to the fact that when an audience is exposed to media of various stances, it tends to ignore the information presented and its source, yet by contrast, exposure to like-minded media strengthens listener confidence in their own values and political beliefs. This phenomenon is directly linked to affective polarization, since the ability to interact selectively with like-minded media enables consumers to self-validate, often at the expense of political figures or partisans they dislike (Shereikis 2020). This could even result in erroneous perceptions of these adversaries (Levendusky 2013; Yudkin, Hawkins and Dixon 2019).

Diversity of media diet

The schism that defines Spain's left–right and centre–periphery politics and media exposure to like-minded viewpoints, or in other words, a non-diverse media diet, tends to polarize individuals, as these factors reinforce intergroup identity (Remiro 2021). At the same time, individuals tend to consume information in line with their own political preferences (Iyengar and Hahn 2009). However, studies on the centre–periphery division indicate that this particular discord might exacerbate affective polarization, which underscores the role played by identifying with a certain group as a potential source of this type of polarization (Padró-Solanet and Balcells 2022).

Guess (2021) reached a similar conclusion, given that most US individuals restrict their media diet within the broad ideological spectrum, which increases affective polarization of audiences. He also found an overlap of nearly 65% between the media diet of Democrats and Republicans in 2015, and around 50% in 2016. Other authors have also found a significant relationship between both variables. For example, Browning and Sweetser (2020) revealed that a more diverse media diet leads to less political polarization in individuals.

In addition to the influence of ideological biases, audience segmentation or segregation can also affect the consumption of political content (Berrocal Gonzalo, Waisbord and Gómez García 2023). This division of audiences with similar traits into groups can create an "echo chamber" effect and an increase in affective polarization (Pariser 2011). It is common practice among audiences to receive their information from news sources that broadcast ideas similar to their own (Perryman 2017).

One sociodemographic variable that might have a significant impact on affective polarization to a greater or lesser extent is gender, given that women display a higher level of polarization than men. This gender gap (Gillion, Ladd and Meredith 2020; Ondercin and Lizotte 2021) could be the result of different ideological positions and/or opinions about certain issues (Mayordomo 2021). Affective polarization also seems to decrease as academic levels increase (Clavero Mira, Ortiz García and Olaz Capitán 2023). The reason is that people who have pursued higher education can more easily understand arguments for and against issues compared to individuals with lower educational levels (Abramowitz 2010), as the latter take a more emotional approach based on identifying with their own group's position (Pérez Zafrilla 2023). Moreover, some studies on the situation in Spain suggest that greater interest in public affairs might go hand-in-hand with a rise in the consumption of channels such as *La Sexta*, regardless of people's ideological position. In short, the level of interest in politics could be a determining factor in the choice of media (Valera-Ordaz 2023).

Data and methodology

The aim of this research is to discover how diversity in an individual's media diet, as well as the consumption of certain media, influences affective polarization. The analysis focuses specifically on the media diet of the survey respondents during the national election campaign in Spain on 23 July, 2023 (23J). Given that the objective was to analyze the media used rather than how often the information was consumed, the main Spanish television news channels and digital newspapers were examined.[1] A general analysis of polarization and ideological segregation levels in the Spanish media system has also been conducted.

Considering the main objective, the research questions to be addressed are as follows:

Q1. Are Spanish television and newspaper audiences ideologically segregated and polarized? In which media is this segregation and polarization most evident?

Q2. Does media diet influence affective polarization to a greater or lesser extent? In other words, is there less affective polarization when media intake is more diverse? Does the consumption of certain information channels that are further from the centre have an influence on affective polarization?

The hypotheses to be verified are as follows:

H1a. There are significant differences in the ideological self-placement of the audiences of diverse media.

H1b. The ideological polarization of television and newspaper audiences is high (> 0.5 based on the Sani and Sartori index).

H2. Less diversity in media diet leads to higher individual affective polarization levels.

H3. The consumption of media that is more distant from the centre of the ideological scale (based on the audience's average self-placement) increases individual affective polarization, even when this hypothesis is controlled for the effect of media diet diversity.

To address the first research question regarding the general analysis of media subsystems, data was taken from the Pre-Electoral Study No. 3411 on the 2023 General Elections by the Centre for Sociological Research (*CIS*), completed from 8 to 27 June, 2023. As this study has a large sample size (29,201 survey respondents) and includes relevant variables, it was used as a reference source to gain a more precise understanding of the diverse and fragmented media situation. Using this data, an ANOVA test was conducted to calculate the ideological segregation of the H1a audiences. The results show statistically significant differences in the ideological self-placement of audiences of different media (see Tables 2 and 4).

An additional aim was to clarify the influence of a diverse media diet. Therefore, to address the main objective of this research, data was obtained from the Third National Survey on Political Polarization in Spain, conducted by *CEMOP* (the Murcia Centre for Studies on Public Opinion), between 10 and 21 July, 2023.[2] This survey provided further insight into which media each respondent relied on for information about the campaign. It also includes a question (the feeling thermometer), used to calculate the dependent variable (individual affective polarization), which was not possible with the *CIS* study.

To measure the present study's dependent variable (individual affective polarization), the unweighted version of the formula proposed by Wagner (2021) was used to estimate the spread in the scores assigned by the feeling thermometer to the four main political parties of the Spanish system: PP, PSOE, Sumar and Vox. The elements of the Wagner formula are as follows: p is for the party, i is for the voter, and $like_{ip}$ is for the like-dislike score that the individual assigns to each party. The Wagner formula proposed is as follows:

$$\sqrt{\frac{\sum_{p=1}^{P}(like_{ip} - \overline{like_i})^2}{n_p}}$$

Next, the following question was taken from the Third National Survey on Political Polarization in Spain by *CEMOP* (2023), which was used to apply the formula to the research: "In Spain, there are several political parties or coalitions representing the population's various leanings. On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means having feelings of 'antipathy and rejection' toward this party or coalition, and 10 means having feelings of 'sympathy and adherence', how do you feel about the following political parties or coalitions that I am going to name?"

Finally, to calculate diversity in an individual's media diet, Questions 1 and 2 of the aforementioned *CEMOP* survey were used: Firstly, "Which television channel or channels do you use to follow the election

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[1]   As radio was not addressed in the Third National Survey on Political Polarization in Spain by *CEMOP*, its analysis has been excluded from this media research, although it is relevant as an agenda-setting mechanism and polarizing agent. Nevertheless, descriptive data related to radio taken from the Pre-Electoral Survey No. 3411 by the *CIS* (Centre for Sociological Research) can be found in Appendix 2.

[2]   The survey was administered over the telephone (CATI) to a representative sample of the Spanish population of both genders, aged 18 and over, with a total of 1,223 cases. The sampling error is ±2.8% for the entire sample with a confidence level of 95.5% (two sigmas) and P = Q. The sampling procedure was multi-stage stratified, selecting individuals by applying gender and age quotas based on strata created by cross-referencing the 17 autonomous regions and two autonomous cities with the size of habitat, divided into seven categories. (https://www.cemopmurcia.es/estudios/iii-encuesta-nacional-de-polarizacion-politica-2023/).

news?" Secondly, "Which newspaper or newspapers, either in paper or digital format, do you use to obtain news on the elections?" These questions were used to reveal the television channels and newspapers that the respondents claimed to rely on for obtaining news about the 23J elections. Construction of the variable followed the logical order below:

i) Each media was classified into a space (left, right, or centre) based on their audience's ideological position, which were assigned according to the analysis of the *CIS* data in Study No. 3411. To that end, a bivariate cross-tabulation was conducted using question 3aR ("Which print or digital newspaper do you read the most to follow political and electoral information?"), question 3bR ("Which television channel do you watch the most to obtain political and electoral information?"), and the individual ideological self-placement scale of Pre-Electoral Study No. 3411 of the 2023 general elections.

ii) Next, by applying logical operators using the *CEMOP* database, we classified each individual's media diet in order to confirm the hypotheses. If an individual consumes information from media in only one ideological space, there is no diversity. If an individual consumes media in several spaces (left/right; right/centre; left/centre; left/right/centre), diversity is present. In this way, we obtained a dummy variable that could be included in a regression model. If media is consumed in several ideological spaces (left/right; right/centre; left/centre; left/right/centre), or if these media are not used to obtain news about the campaign, the result is 0. Once again, a dummy variable was obtained that could be included in a regression model, making it possible to compare the effect of a non-diverse media diet with one that is varied, or one in which there is no media consumption. Linear regression can predict the behaviour of a dependent variable based on an independent variable. Although assumptions are involved, such as the linearity of the relationship, normality, randomness of the sample, and the homogeneity of variances, it does not prove causality.

The coding of the dummy variables[3] in the linear regression is as follows (CV denotes a control variable and IV indicates an independent variable)[4]:

- Diversity of the TV diet (IV): either diverse, or this media is not used to follow news about the campaign: 0; non-diverse: 1.

- Diversity of the newspaper diet (IV): either diverse, or this media is not used to follow news about the campaign: 0; non-diverse: 1.

- *La Sexta* consumption (IV): no consumption of *La Sexta*: 0; consumption of *La Sexta*: 1.

- *Antena 3* consumption (IV): no consumption of *Antena 3*: 0; consumption of *Antena 3*: 1.

- *ABC* consumption (IV): no consumption of *ABC*: 0; consumption of *ABC*: 1.

- *El País* consumption (IV): no consumption of *El País*: 0; consumption of *El País*: 1.

- *TVE 1* consumption (CV): no consumption of *TVE 1*: 0; consumption of *TVE 1*: 1.

- *Telecinco* consumption (CV): no consumption of *Telecinco*: 0; consumption of *Telecinco*: 1.

- *El Mundo* consumption (CV): no consumption of *El Mundo*: 0; consumption of *El Mundo*: 1.

- Ideological extremism (CV): not present at either end of the scale: 0; present at one end of the scale (left 1–2 or right 8–10): 1.

- Gender (CV): male: 0; female: 1.

- Educational level (CV): non-university: 0; university: 1.

The reason why the media mentioned above were chosen over others is mainly due to these channels and newspapers being further away from the centre on the ideological scale, as detailed in the results section, considering the average self-placement of the audiences. As such, these media were selected based on their status as influential actors in the Spanish media system. Media diets from other channels and newspapers with audiences closer to central positions were also taken into account in order to control this effect.

Structure of the media system in Spain: a brief contextualisation

Media outlets in Spain mostly consist of private business groups. However, there are state-owned audio-visual corporations and news agencies as well, with the foremost being Radiotelevisión Española (RTVE), the main public broadcaster at a national level. The historic justification for the presence of a public station is the social value of some of the roles performed by public media in providing information, as well as educational and cultural broadcasting, yet it is obvious that these initiatives coexist with political communication, and even propaganda, by those in authority (Pérez García 2023).

The Spanish media system mainly consists of large groups. The most prominent are the following: Grupo Planeta (press: *La Razón* and shareholders of Atresmedia); Atresmedia (TV: *Antena 3*, *La Sexta*); Grupo Prisa (Press: *El País*); Mediaset (TV: *Telecinco*, *Cua-*

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3   The sociodemographic variables were coded as dummy variables mainly due to the sample size. Therefore, a recode was performed. Another reason for this decision was the level of sophistication of the information required by the model.

4   Appendix 1 contains the descriptive statistics of all the variables used in this research.

tro); Vocento (Press: *ABC*, *La Verdad*, *Las Provincias*, etc.); Unidad Editorial (Press: *El Mundo*); Grupo Godó (Press: *La Vanguardia*, TV: *8TV*); and finally, Prensa Ibérica (Regional Press). In addition to the evolution of pre-existing media and the fact that they have joined the Internet, specific digital media have also been founded. The main ones in Spain are *El Confidencial*, *El Español*, *elDiario.es*, *Okdiario* and *Libertad Digital* (Pérez García 2023).

Regarding the relationship between the media and those in authority, a classic study by Mancini and Hallin (2004) describes Spain as having a "polarized pluralism" model, which is a system that includes certain common interests between political parties and the media. The main feature of this model is the relationship between the political system and the media which, being a close association, results in highly partisan media outlets.

RESULTS

Polarization of the media system in Spain

Below are details of the Pre-Electoral Survey No. 3411, carried out by *CIS*, which was used to determine the political positions of the various media according to the ideological profile of the citizens who consume their content. Establishing a self-placement mean among the consumers of each media outlet has allowed us to discover the average political position of each media's consumers, thereby enabling an analysis of the polarization of the system as a whole.

The selection criterion for television and newspapers outlets is based on media audience ratings, according to the 2023 General Media Framework Study by the Association for Media Research (*AIMC* 2023). In that study, the most recent of its kind, the press and television media with the largest cumulative audiences were chosen due to their status as the most prominent media in Spain. The other selection criterion is based on sample size. Consequently, the selected media are those with a larger total number (N); this ruled out those with a smaller sample size, as this could have distorted the central position measurements.

As shown in Table 1, the television channel whose viewers are furthest to the right is *Antena 3* (6.08), while the consumers of *Telecinco* (5.47) are in the centre of the ideological scale. By contrast, the channels to the left of the scale are *La Sexta* (3.58) and *TVE 1* (4.55). The channel from RTVE (*TVE 1*) is slightly to the left at the moment, while those of the Mediaset Group (*Cuatro*[5] and *Telecinco*) are mostly in the centre of the self-placement scale. The public channel studied (*TVE 1*) is presumably closer to the ideological position of its respective government.

As a result, it could be assumed that public channel viewers change depending on the "leanings" of whoever is in power.

Analysing the standard deviation of each media outlet is also relevant, as it provides information about whether the viewers have greater or lesser ideological homogeneity. This, in turn, highlights the media that have a more multi-party orientation that can be viewed by people with more diverse opinions, compared to those that lead to more closed communities. The viewers of *La Sexta* (sd=2.321) and *Antena 3* (sd=2.358) show less ideological diversity. By contrast, there is considerable diversity among individuals who consume *Telecinco* (sd=2.920) and *TVE 1* (sd=2.625). It would be reasonable to assume that the channels followed by people with a more similar ideology might coincide with more neutral communication strategies, which can rarely be consumed by people who are further away from these positions, as this would risk a high level of dissonance. Consequently, they would be communication channels that are more polarized and militant, or closer to an "echo chamber" than plurality, which could result in segregated environments.

Finally, people who read the newspapers *ABC* (7.05) and *El Mundo* (6.23) are clearly to the right on the ideological scale in the Spanish media system. Conversely, readers of *El País* (3.78) and *La Vanguardia* (4.34) are more to the left, on average, and are considered benchmark outlets for this group of people.

If we look at standard deviation, the two print media with the largest readership, *El Mundo* (1.937) and *El País* (2.032), display less ideological diversity among their readers, or in other words, they generate more segregated communities. These outlets have a strong feature of political symbolism, as well as an editorial and news position that is clearly significant for the public. In contrast, readers of *La Voz* de Galicia (2.586) and *El Correo* (2.311) are more ideologically diverse.

We conclude this section with a calculation of the polarization levels of each media subsystem. To this end, we have applied the classic formula of Sani and Sartori (1980), as their calculation can measure the distance between two groups located at opposite ends of a given scale. These authors only included prominent parties to calculate systemic polarization. In our case, we have applied this strategy by focusing on nationwide media with the highest market share. The Sani and Sartori formula provides an estimate of the elasticity of space between media extremes. It can be located close to 0 (i.e. there is limited or no distance or polarization between the groups at each extreme), or close to 1 (i.e. there is maximum polarization between the groups at each extreme) (Crespo, Rojo and Mora 2021: 82). In the case of television, if we consider the two opposite extremes of the Span-

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5   Although *Cuatro* does not have daily news programs and only broadcasts them at the weekend, it does have daily programs with political content.

Table 1.

*Television channel consumption during the 23J campaign and the
average ideological self-placement of the viewers.*

Preferred television channel for obtaining political information on 23J	Average ideological self-placement of viewers	N	Standard deviation
TVE 1	4.55	3,854	2.625
ANTENA 3	6.08	4,556	2.358
CUATRO	5.08	285	2.672
TELECINCO	5.47	1,364	2.920
LA SEXTA	3.58	3,055	2.321

Source: compiled by the authors based on the Pre-Electoral Survey No. 3411 of *CIS*.

Note: we have selected only the Spanish media with the largest cumulative audiences in the last study by the AIMC (2023).

Table 2.

ANOVA of television consumption based on the ideological self-placement scale – Hypothesis 1

Ideological self-placement scale (1–10)					
	Sum of squares	gl	Mean square	F	Sig.
Inter-group	12565.415	4	3141.354	502.345	.000
In-group	81975.598	13109	6.253		
Total	94541.013	13113			

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the Pre-Electoral Survey No. 3411 by the *CIS*.

Table 3.

*Newspaper consumption, print or digital, during the 23J campaign and
the average ideological self-placement of the readers.*

Preferred newspaper for obtaining political information on 23J	Average ideological self-placement of the readers	N	Standard deviation
El País	3.78	3436	2.032
El Mundo	6.23	1629	1.937
ABC	7.05	560	2.133
La Vanguardia	4.34	843	2.195
La Voz de Galicia	4.74	402	2.586
El Correo	4.35	272	2.311

Source: compiled by the authors based on the Pre-Electoral Survey No. 3411 of the *CIS*.

Note: we have selected only Spanish media with the largest cumulative audiences in the last study by the AIMC (2023).

Table 4.

ANOVA of newspaper consumption based on the ideological self-placement scale – Hypothesis 1

Ideological self-placement scale (1–10)					
	Sum of squares	gl	Mean square	F	Sig.
Inter-group	9974.161	5	1994.832	459.004	.000
In-group	31013.068	7136	4.346		
Total	40987.230	7141			

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the Pre-Electoral Survey No. 3411 by the *CIS*.

ish media subsystem, based on media outlets with the strongest impact (*La Sexta*, more to the left, and *Antena 3*, more to the right), we obtain a polarization level of 0.27.[6] For the print media, this rises to 0.36, considering *El País* to be more to the left and *ABC* more to the right.[7] The relationship between polarization and fragmentation cannot be overlooked in the case of newspapers. Diversity in the print media subsystem offering creates small business niches, which might foster reader loyalty through messages that are ideologically limited, but which are extremely emotional and satisfying for highly motivated audiences. This would not be feasible in ecosystems with a more reduced offering, or less spatial elasticity, such as television. Furthermore, the digitisation of print media has lowered barriers, which are still considerable in other ecosystems, thus making it easier for newcomers to enter the market. This has led to new, less mainstream voices competing directly with traditional broadsheets, thereby forcing the actors involved to reconsider whether centre-focused or catch-all strategies are a good idea.

We know that print media is a much more polarized media subsystem than television. However, are the media as a whole more polarized than the party system itself? Based on data from the aforementioned Pre-Electoral Survey No. 3411 of the *CIS*, we calculated the Sani and Sartori polarization index of the Spanish party system by using the parliamentary context after the elections of 23 July, 2023, as a reference. The aim was to compare this political polarization with the polarization of the various media subsystems. We calculated the average ideological self-placement of the multiple categories of the Vote+Sympathy variable. According to the results, the political party furthest to the left is EH Bildu (M=2.21, N=327, sd=1.723), and the party furthest to the right is Vox (M=7.59, N=2,617, sd=2.026). These parties were selected over others due to the fact that their average ideological self-placement was the closest possible to the extreme ends of the ideological scale. Furthermore, this choice was made according to the ideas of Sani and Sartori (1980), since both parties are open to coalition and blackmail, or in other words, they are either significant at a governmental level in the domain where coalitions are decided, or they offer serious competition to the opposition, or both. With regard to the party system overall, the polarization index is 0.60.[8] According to these data, we can conclude that both television and print media are less polarized than the party system itself. This finding is relevant, since the perception that the most prominent, nationwide media outlets are extremely influen-

tial actors that mobilize people with regard to public opinion (Innerarity Grau 1998) is a misconception, according to our research. Although their impact is still evident in the results of this study, this does not mean that their scope exceeds that of the Spanish party system. Nevertheless, the polarizing role of the media as a whole is noticeable, and the idea that they display a reality that is substantially different from the country's competing political parties deserves further study.

Media influence on affective polarization: the importance of media diet

After offering a general analysis of the Spanish media system, which forms the basis of how citizens stay informed, we have analyzed the features of this consumption, which might explain the reasons why affective polarization occurs. Firstly, we have addressed the influence of a diverse media diet, not merely as a numerical question, such as the number of media outlets, but as a substantive issue as well. In other words, we have explored whether or not individuals consume a variety of media with different ideological leanings. Secondly, we have also examined the specific influence of Spanish media at the extreme ends of the subsystems (see Table 1 and Table 2: *La Sexta* and *Antena 3*; *El País* and *ABC*).

Furthermore, we developed a linear regression model that includes the news diets of television and newspapers regarding the election campaign, as well as the consumption of certain channels or media outlets that cover election-related news, controlled by sociodemographic variables and ideological extremism, which has become one of the explanations for affective polarization for most academics (Rogowski and Sutherland 2016). Several authors have confirmed this trend, highlighting that the relationship between election campaigns and affective polarization is mostly linked to ideological polarization (Hernández, Anduiza and Rico 2021 Rojo and Crespo 2023).

Therefore, the model used is as follows:

Yi (Individual affective polarization) = $\beta 0$ + $\beta 1$(Age) + $\beta 2$(Gender) + $\beta 3$(Education) + $\beta 4$(Diversity of the TV diet) + $\beta 5$ (Diversity of the press diet) + $\beta 6$(Ideological extremism) + $\beta 7$(*La Sexta* consumption) + $\beta 8$(*Antena 3* consumption) + $\beta 9$(*TVE 1* consumption) + $\beta 10$(*Telecinco* consumption) + $\beta 11$(*ABC* consumption) +$\beta 12$(*El País* consumption) + $\beta 13$(*El Mundo* consumption) + ϵ

The results of the model (see Table 5) show that a diverse media diet has a significant influence on the level of affective polarization, which was expected (less diversity, more polarization). This effect appears in the media diets of both television and newspapers, even when controlling for ideological extrem-

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6   Sani and Sartori index, TV subsystem= |3.58–6.08|=2.5/9=0.27

7   Sani and Sartori index, print media subsystem= |3.78–7.05|=3.27/9=0.36

8   Sani and Sartori index, party system in Spain= |2.21–7.59|=5.38/9=0.60

ism ($\beta4$=.142, p<0.01; $\beta5$=.087, p<0.01). Furthermore, *La Sexta* is the only channel that clearly affects polarization levels, or in other words, consuming this channel is directly related to a sharp increase in the level of individual affective polarization. These results are consistent with those of Rojo, Crespo and Mora (2023), who confirmed that left-wing polarized people consumed content from *La Sexta* more than other channels, and the consumption of this channel, as seen in a discriminant analysis, was precisely one of the features that differentiated this group from right-wing polarized people.

Moreover, the other results of the variables introduced into the model are consistent with the findings obtained from the existing literature, which are as follows: Women have higher polarization levels. Ideological polarization is a key explanatory factor of affective polarization. People with higher educational levels tend to have lower levels of affective polarization (Clavero Mira, Ortiz García and Olaz Capitán 2023).

As mentioned above, non-diversity in television consumption is essential for explaining affective polarization of individuals. The continual intake of media that is close to one's own position reinforces attitudes

Table 5.
Multiple linear regression analysis of the effect of media diet and media consumption on individual affective polarization.

	Model 1			Model 2		
	B (E)	β	p	B (E)	β	p
Age	.007 (002)	.102	***	.006 (.002)	.084	***
Gender (ref. male)	.223 (.064)	.096	***	.235 (.064)	.101	***
Education (ref. non-university)	-.188 (.065)	-.081	***	-.203 (.066)	-.087	***
Diversity of TV diet (ref. diverse and no consumption)	.347 (.067)	.142	***	.324 (.069)	.133	***
Diversity of newspaper diet (ref. diverse and no consumption)	.230 (.074)	.087	***	.216 (.076)	.081	***
Ideological extremism (ref.: not at either extreme of the scale)	.875 (.066)	.363	***	.871 (.067)	.361	***
La Sexta consumption (ref. no consumption)				.317 (.083)	.111	***
Antena 3 consumption (ref. no consumption)				.050 (.074)	.020	
TVE 1 consumption (ref. no consumption)				-.025 (.076)	-.009	
Telecinco consumption (ref. no consumption)				.113 (.104)	.031	
ABC consumption (ref. no consumption)				.066 (.130)	.015	
El País consumption (ref. no consumption)				-.050 (.091)	-.017	
El Mundo consumption (ref. no consumption)				.063 (.106)	.018	
Constant	1.877 (.120)		***	1.863 (.120)		***
R2	.200			.215		
Adjusted R2	.195			.200		

***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1 Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Results of ANOVA equation model 2: F=9.790 (p<0.001). Multicollinearity diagnostics applied to both models. N (both models)=1,087 cases.

that can exacerbate people's partisan biases. Moreover, this is even true when the influence of ideological polarization is considered. Conversely, however, non-exposure to this type of stimuli or exposure to diverse stimuli with counter-narratives can be a depolarizing mechanism. The influence of a non-diverse media diet is especially strong in television, which is still the main medium for understanding political operations in Western democracies. However, just how long this will last is an ongoing debate.

Nevertheless, regarding the calculation of ideological polarization, which is based on the ideas of Sani and Sartori (shown above), print media has a considerably higher polarization index than television. This leads us to consider factors that might cause this divergence between the two media, especially those related to the profile of their consumers. Television has been considered a persuasive tool for decades (Vázquez Toledo 2005), and despite the appearance of digital media and other new technology on the scene, television has continued to evolve, and its ability to influence has not abated (Campos Freire 2015). Unlike print media, television has one particular strength that continues to the present day – it is still the most powerful means of disseminating audio-visual messages. By enticing viewers with images, it manages to convey the idea that its broadcasts reflect reality, which is why it is so effective in shaping public opinion (Fernández Torres 2005).

While television seems more prone to generating affective polarization in audiences, the findings for newspaper consumption are similar, yet less intense. Newspapers have a smaller and more sophisticated audience, and they confirm what Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) stated about the effects of the media, generally speaking. According to these authors, the media foster the consolidation of individuals' prior preferences when people come into contact with their content. Therefore, it is quite possible that newspaper readers tend to choose the press outlets they plan to consult in advance, which means that merely reading these publications might indicate polarization in individuals even before they consult the political news therein. This could explain why non-diverse consumption of print media leads to affective polarization in the audience. Nevertheless, this polarization is lower than that of television.

CONCLUSIONS

The authors believe that several unknown aspects linked to the effect of a diverse media diet on affective polarization have been resolved through this research. However, the starting point assumes that this political phenomenon cannot be disassociated from classic structural variables, such as ideology, which are the cognitive anchors that people use to shape their opinions and attitudes. By accepting this explanation, the aim of this research is to delve deeper into this issue in order to find explanatory factors that are less structural and more contextual, such as those linked to the media, which can be easily modified. Given this context in which ideological polarization is a key factor in addressing individual affective polarization, this study has identified a non-diverse media diet on television as one of the factors that can explain a higher level of IAP.

One finding that can help in understanding the effect of television and newspapers on citizen attitudes is that exposure to content that consolidates individuals' political biases when consuming news can amplify the cognitive effects of identity reinforcement and media bias. Although the dependent variable of this research is the non-diversity of media diet, the results are consistent with those obtained by Padró-Solanet and Balcells (2022), who assert that more diverse media consumption generally tends to depolarize individuals. In conclusion, consuming like-minded political content exposes the audience to a limited range of communicative focuses and topics and, consequently, they consume less varied information, which results in their being limited to a certain approach or framework of specific media outlets.

The main findings of this research stand in contrast to those obtained by Masip, Suau and Ruiz-Caballero (2020), as our data show that there is less affective polarization in the media than in the political system. This confirms H1a, which states that there are significant differences between consuming certain media and individuals' ideology. Contrary to expectations, the impact of a diverse media diet is lower for newspapers than for television. Most newspaper consumers are selective when choosing which papers they read, since they are guided by their political preferences. They are also more interested in politics than audiences who consume other news media. This could explain why affective polarization is usually higher for television than for newspapers. These results have been confirmed by previous studies (Humanes 2016; Cardenal et al. 2019), which show that the media diet of Spanish people is influenced by their ideological positions.

This study has shown that consuming content from one television channel in particular, *La Sexta*, has a strong influence on affective polarization. This channel is located at one end of the ideological scale that is most distant from the centre (H2). Based on this finding, we can assert that a media outlet located at either end of the ideological scale increases the level of individual affective polarization, as has occurred in the United States with the Fox News channel (Badillo 2018). The data obtained concur with another study, which points out that left-wing polarized individuals in Spain consume content from *La Sexta* more than any other channel, and this strong consumption is causing a situation in which those at the extreme left

are much more polarized than those at the extreme right (Rojo, Crespo and Mora 2023). Furthermore, as shown in the research by Masip et al. (2020), the number of media at the centre of the ideological scale is small.

A potentially more ambitious objective of this research may have been to conduct an inferential analysis of the more influential media outlets in Spain, including radio. With regard to radio, one of the limitations of this study has been the lack of data available regarding radio media diet in the *CIS* survey, despite the high level of political content in radio programs, which exert considerable influence in Spain compared to other countries. Another limitation is the complex relationship between affective polarization and media diet due to the influence of cognitive biases, algorithms, and certain social dynamics. Likewise, it should be noted that the relationship between dependent variables and independent variables may have an endogenous nature. In other words, a study could also be carried out to determine whether affective polarization of audiences leads to consumption from specific media outlets.

Lastly, given that this study includes a detailed analysis of the media system in Spain, yet excludes an examination at the regional level due to the lack of a sufficiently broad sample, future lines of research might consider focusing on the impact of regional media on affective polarization as well. Therefore, we would recommend that subsequent studies analyze the effects of regional media, because although we have focused on the left-wing and right-wing ideological facets in this study, we cannot ignore the influence of nationalist independence movements on media diet in Spain. Likewise, the literature on this subject has observed some weaknesses concerning the presence of sociodemographic variables, with educational level being one of them. Including this variable could allow the profile of an individual to be described, which could be resolved in ongoing studies. Finally, another future line of research might involve exploring radio as a media subsystem involved in constructing the political agenda, which we have not been able to cover in this research, due to this medium not having been analyzed in the Third National Survey on Political Polarization in Spain.

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The authors of this article declare that they have no financial, professional or personal conflicts of interest that could have inappropriately influenced this work.

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Inmaculada Melero López: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review.

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APPENDIX 1

Table 6.
Summary of descriptive statistics of the variables in this study.

Sex	0 (male) = 598: 48.9% 1 (female) = 625: 51.1%
Age	Average = 50.42 (sd=16.294). Range = 76. Minimum = 18. Maximum = 94. N = 1,223.
Affective polarization, according to the Wagner formula (toward parties)	Average = 2.7704 (sd=1.1622). Range = 5. Minimum = 0. Maximum = 5. N = 1,087.
Ideological extremism	0 (no self-placement at the poles) = 788: 64.4% 1 (self-placement at one of the poles: 1–3+8–10) = 435: 35.6%
Educational level	0 (non-university) = 646: 52.8% 1 (university) = 577: 47.2%
Diversity of the TV diet	0 (diverse or this media is not used to follow news about the campaign) = 813: 66.50% 1 (not diverse) = 410: 33.5%
Diversity of the newspaper diet	0 (diverse or this media is not used to follow news about the campaign) = 919: 75.1% 1 (not diverse) = 304: 24.9%
Consumption of *La Sexta*	0 (no consumption) = 985: 80.5% 1 (consumption) = 238: 19.5%
Consumption of *Antena 3*	0 (no consumption) = 836: 68.4% 1 (consumption) = 387: 31.6%
Consumption of *TVE 1*	0 (no consumption) = 902: 73.8% 1 (consumption) = 321: 26.2%
Consumption of *Telecinco*	0 (no consumption) = 1,073: 87.7% 1 (consumption) = 150: 12.3%
Consumption of *El País*	0 (no consumption) = 985: 80.5% 1 (consumption) = 238: 19.5%
Consumption of *ABC*	0 (no consumption) = 1,012: 82.7% 1 (consumption) = 211: 17.3%
Consumption of *El Mundo*	0 (no consumption) = 1,072: 87.7% 1 (consumption) = 151: 12.3%

Source: Compiled by the authors.

APPENDIX 2

Table 7.

Consumption of radio channels during the 23J campaign and the average ideological self-placement of their listeners.

Preferred radio channel to follow political information on 23J	Average ideological self-placement of listeners	N	Standard deviation
Cadena Ser	3.34	2,895	2.028
Cadena COPE	7.01	1,800	1.988
Onda Cero	5.67	1,324	1.878
RNE	4.33	532	2.335
RNE-RADIO 5	4.26	65	2.811
ES RADIO	7.49	344	1.898
RAC1	3.60	439	1.906
CATALUNYA RADIO	3.25	179	1.938
Canal Sur Radio	4.72	73	2.774
RADIO EUSKADI	3.12	107	1.997

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the Pre-Electoral Survey No. 3411 by the *CIS*.

Note: only channels with an N equal to or greater than 60 in the bivariate cross-tabulation for ideological self-placement were selected.