

Assessing Media Polarization in Spain During a Highly Polarized Electoral Cycle (2015–2019): Increasing Effects of Vote and Ideology on News Media Consumption

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Selective exposure studies rarely analyze the temporal evolution of politically oriented media preferences, and they generally overlook the role of political context. This study seeks to address that gap by focusing on Spain, which has a polarized pluralistic media system alongside a highly polarized political context. Using 4 postelectoral surveys covering a 5-year period (2015–2019), which coincides with the transformation of the Spanish party system, we analyze whether political attitudes become stronger predictors of radio, television, and newspaper consumption over time. The results indicate an intensification of selective exposure effects in radio and newspaper consumption, and, to a lesser extent, in television. Furthermore, we propose a definition of media polarization that emphasizes its longitudinal nature: as a process of intensifying political selective exposure effects within a specific media environment over time.

Keywords: political selective exposure, media polarization, partisanship, ideology, polarized pluralism, news consumption

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Date submitted: 2025-05-10

¹ This research was funded by grant CIGE/2024/001, awarded by the Department of Education, Culture, Universities, and Employment of the Valencian Regional Government, for the research project “Ecologies of Media Consumption and News Avoidance in Spain: Practices, Attitudes, and Discourses” (2025–2027), directed by Lidia Valera-Ordaz.

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There is robust evidence that news consumption is influenced by citizens' political attitudes (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014; Stroud, 2008, 2011) and that politically oriented media consumption results in audiences' ideological segmentation (Ksiazek, 2016; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). In recent years, studies have focused on whether selective exposure increases in environments that have a vast media offering, which allows for more atomized and selective consumption (Dahlgren, Shehata, & Strömbäck, 2019).

However, few longitudinal studies have dealt with selective exposure, and the time factor has scarcely been analyzed as an explanatory variable. The present study seeks to fill that gap: We aim to observe whether the effects of selective exposure intensify over time using Spain as a case study. To achieve this, we analyzed selective exposure of Spanish citizens to three types of media (radio, newspapers, and television) over a highly exceptional and transitional period of five years (2015–2019), during which the Spanish party system transformed into a fragmented multiparty model (Rodríguez-Teruel, Barberà, Barrio, & Casal-Bértoa, 2019; Simón, 2020), and both political and affective polarization significantly increased (Miller, 2020; Rodríguez, Santamaría, & Miller, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

Selective Exposure and Political Identity

There is abundant evidence on how individual predispositions govern information selection (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014; Stroud, 2008, 2011), and numerous studies have analyzed how citizens choose media content based on political attitudes (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012). Over the past decades, the expansion of media offerings has created new opportunity structures for selective exposure (Skovsgaard, Shehata, & Strömbäck, 2016; Stroud, 2008). Studies have examined the role of media systems (Goldman & Mutz, 2011), political information environments (Esser et al., 2012), and how changes in media environments enable individuals to selectively expose themselves to proattitudinal information (Dahlgren et al., 2019). Generally, they show that the greater the political parallelism in a media system and the more fragmented the media offerings, the greater the extent of selective exposure (Goldman & Mutz, 2011; Steppat, Castro-Herrero, & Esser, 2022).

The Spanish media system is a paradigmatic case of polarized pluralism with high political parallelism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), which recently experienced the expansion of digital news media, and the consolidation of social media platforms. Along with the increase in media offerings, a high degree of political parallelism persists among Spanish journalists (Brüggemann, Engesser, Büchel, Humprecht, & Castro, 2014). Moreover, many studies have highlighted the ability of media consumption to activate and reinforce social and political identity (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011). Selective exposure to the news media is in fact a behavior aimed at reinforcing individuals' social and political identities (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2017, 2019). Furthermore, the reinforcing spirals model asserts that politically oriented media consumption polarizes attitudes, intensifying social and political identities (Slater, 2007; Stroud, 2010; Wojcieszak & Garrett, 2018). Additionally, high-choice media environments and the creation of hyperpartisan news outlets facilitate the activation of super-partisan identities (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood, 2019; Torcal, 2023).

Multiple works have analyzed the relationship between media consumption and affective polarization (Levendusky, 2013; Torcal, 2023), showing that the greater the generalized consumption of proattitudinal information, the greater the increase in affective polarization, and the more cross-cutting exposure there is, the more the animosity between groups decreases (Garrett et al., 2014). Indeed, having a varied media diet has a depolarizing effect on individuals (Padró-Solanet & Balcells, 2022), so that cross-cutting exposure is associated with less hostility among groups (Willnat, Ogan, & Shi, 2023).

In this sense, the case of Spain is particularly relevant because it encompasses two simultaneous processes of polarization. On the one hand, the fragmentation of the party system after the 2014 European elections, which saw the emergence of two new parties (Podemos and Ciudadanos), led to significant political polarization within the ideological spheres of both the left and the right, with increased electoral competition between, as well as within, ideological blocs (Rodríguez-Teruel et al., 2019; Simón, 2020). In addition, the Catalan independence crisis, Pedro Sánchez's 2018 no-confidence motion, and the emergence of the populist far-right party (VOX) significantly increased affective polarization (Miller, 2020; Rodríguez et al., 2022).

This audience segmentation is further exacerbated by identity fractures in regions where individuals exhibit strong national identity sentiments. In Catalonia, for instance, selective exposure is mainly influenced by individuals' preferences along the center-periphery axis and their national identities (Sintes-Olivella, Fondevila-Gascón, & Berbel-Giménez, 2023; Valera-Ordaz, 2023a).

However, political selective exposure should not be understood from a merely individual-centered perspective, since multiple individual decisions generate, at the macro level, the ideological segmentation of audiences, including decreased exposure to diversity, reduced political tolerance, or polarization of attitudes (Mutz, 2002; Stroud, 2010).

This audience segmentation into compact ideological spheres has commonly been described as audience polarization (Fletcher, Cornia, & Nielsen, 2020; Ksiazek, 2016) or audience fragmentation (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). All such approaches focus on understanding the consequences of selective exposure at the aggregate level.

Longitudinal Approaches to Selective Exposure

Different studies have indicated that the higher the media supply is, the more the news outlets are likely to slant their reporting style to attract niche audiences (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Van Aelst et al., 2017), and multiple comparative works have confirmed the ideological segmentation of audiences. For instance, Fletcher et al. (2020) studied "the extent to which countries are home to large news outlets with both strongly left and strongly right-leaning audiences" (p. 170) and concluded that news audience polarization was higher in media systems with higher political parallelism. But they adopted a cross-sectional point of view that failed to analyze the evolution of news audience polarization over time. Steppat, Castro-Herrero, and Esser (2020) and Steppat et al. (2022) showed that the more fragmented and polarized the media environment is, the more selective the exposure to the news media is.

Although comparative studies are frequent, very few longitudinal studies have addressed continuities or changes over time in the consumption of political information through different media types (Karlsen, Beyer, & Steen-Johnsen, 2020). Most of such studies have captured only the phenomenon of selective exposure at a given moment in time (Goldman & Mutz, 2011; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2012). At the aggregate level, studies have accounted for news audience polarization at a given moment in time (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Fletcher et al., 2020; Ksiazek, 2016) but have rarely explored how it transforms.

Although some authors have indicated an increase in ideologically driven news consumption (Nechushtai, 2018), few studies have introduced time as an explanatory variable to observe selective exposure over time. This is because most studies have relied on cross-sectional surveys (Garrett, 2009; Goldman & Mutz, 2011) or experiments (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2019; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009), which are not suitable for understanding the mutual influence between news consumption and political attitudes over time. However, some studies have employed a longitudinal approach using two-wave panel surveys (Dahlgren et al., 2019; Steppat et al., 2020)—albeit limited to a brief time frame—to observe whether media consumption leads to attitude polarization (Stroud, 2010) or reinforcing spirals (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2017).

Only a handful of studies have explored selective exposure over longer time frames. Garrett, Carnahan, and Lynch (2011) showed that the use of attitude-consistent news sources correlated with using counterattitudinal information sources over a four-year period. Rodríguez, Moskowitz, Salem, and Ditto (2017) analyzed the evolution of selective exposure over 12 years and observed “a general and sustained increase in political selective exposure across ideological groups over time” (p. 254). Dahlgren et al. (2019) analyzed a 39-year period (1986–2015) to determine which political preferences—ideology, partisanship, or political interest—drove selective exposure toward the Swedish public media. However, their analyses did not consider time as an independent variable. Studies have shown that selective exposure to the news media is a stable behavior among Spanish audiences (Humanes, 2014; Moreno & Sanjurjo, 2020). Furthermore, party identification is the most significant predictor of media consumption in Spain (Humanes & Valera-Ordaz, 2023), with more ideologically polarized citizens exhibiting a greater tendency to selective exposure (Ramírez-Dueñas & Humanes, 2023).

Context has been notably overlooked in selective exposure studies, too. Despite many authors acknowledging that contextual conditions can decisively affect media choices (Feldman, Stroud, Bimber, & Wojcieszak, 2013; Van Aelst et al., 2017), most studies have limited themselves to analyzing how the structure of the media offer affects audience behavior (Garrett et al., 2011; Goldman & Mutz, 2011; Steppat et al., 2020). Indeed, comparative studies in political communication recognize that contexts are crucial to understanding audience behavior (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Fletcher et al., 2020; Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020), but political context has received little attention in the analysis of selective exposure, except for election campaigns (Knobloch-Westerwick, Liu, Hino, Westerwick, & Johnson, 2019).

Spain constitutes a particularly relevant case study for examining selective exposure over time, especially during an exceptional period marked by political fragmentation, increasing political and affective polarization, and a growing tendency of the media toward editorializing and opinion-based reporting. Our

goal is therefore to analyze whether media consumption driven by political attitudes becomes more pronounced over such a highly polarizing political period.

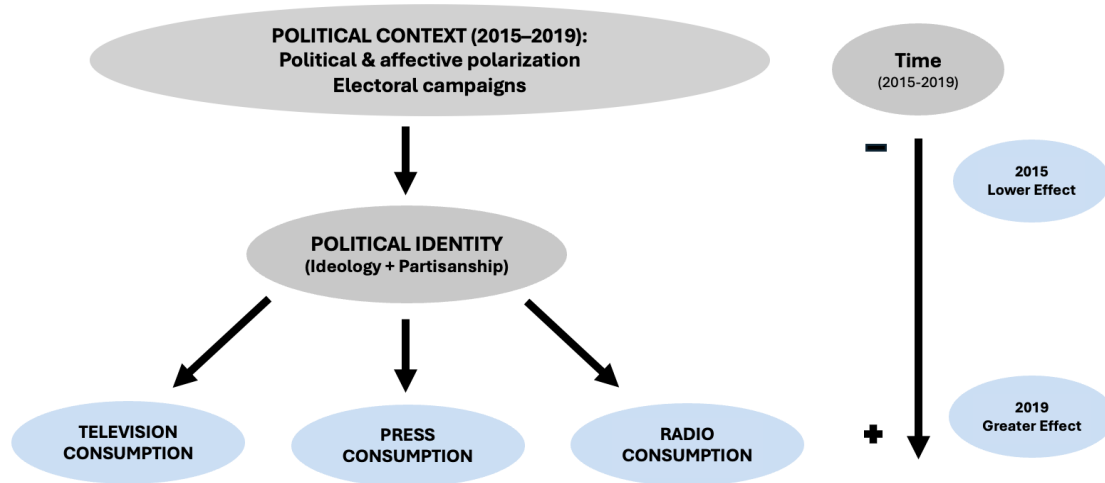


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

Taken together, we contend that individual political identities (ideology and partisanship) should gain explanatory weight in shaping media choices as polarization and successive electoral campaigns heighten their salience over time (2015–2019). Given Spain’s high political parallelism and the fragmentation of the press and radio markets—together with a more concentrated, though still politically aligned, television sector—we expect an increase in the explanatory weight of ideology and partisanship across all three news media markets (Figure 1). More specifically, we expect the following hypotheses to be true:

- H1: Political attitudes (ideology and partisanship) will increase their explanatory weight over time as drivers of news media exposure for newspaper choices.*
- H2: Political attitudes (ideology and partisanship) will increase their explanatory weight over time as drivers of news media exposure for radio stations.*
- H3: Political attitudes (ideology and partisanship) will increase their explanatory weight over time as drivers of news media exposure for television channels.*

Methods

Time Frame

This study covers a five-year period (2015–2019) and encompasses four general elections and the transformation of the Spanish political party system from an imperfect two-party system to a fragmented

multiparty system, bringing about greater governance challenges (Blanco-Valdés, 2017). The 2014 European Parliament elections marked the decline of the two parties that had historically dominated the Spanish party system—the Socialist Party (PSOE) and the People’s Party (PP). In the 2015 elections, the PP and PSOE captured just 50% of the votes, whereas two emergent forces achieved unexpected success: Podemos, a far-left party born out of the 15-M protests, and Ciudadanos, a center-liberal party. The rise of these parties led to a significant realignment of votes both within and between ideological blocs (Medina & Correa, 2016).

The selected period thus covers a highly polarized political context marked by significant electoral volatility, while allowing for comparability² as it encompasses the stable presence of the four major political forces, rendering it ideal for a medium-term longitudinal study.

The time frame was also chosen for methodological reasons. The study relies on CIS postelectoral surveys, which provide consistent and comparable data between 2015 and 2019. Extending the time frame was not feasible: Earlier surveys lacked party continuity, and the 2023 study did not include media consumption variables. Thus, the 2015–2019 window offered the most robust and coherent conditions for longitudinal analysis.

Data Sources

This study uses postelection survey data from the Sociological Research Center (CIS) for the four general elections within the timeframe: December 2015 ($N = 7715$), June 2016 ($N = 3145$), April 2019 ($N = 3248$), and November 2019 ($N = 3269$). All are based on large and representative samples of the Spanish population (Table 1). Unfortunately, the CIS 2023 postelection survey did not include questions about news media preferences, so it was impossible to extend the analyses beyond 2019.

Methodological Design

A multivariate methodological design is proposed, based on the technique of multinomial logistic regression, which isolates the explanatory weight of various factors on media selection while controlling for the effect of other variables. As dependent variables, we use questions on news preferences for three media types (*Which television channel/newspaper/radio station do you prefer for following political and electoral information during the campaign?*). Since the logistic regression technique requires a large sample size for each predictor variable to specify the regression coefficients (Cea D’Ancona, 2004), we have limited the analysis to the four most populated categories of analysis for each medium. For television, this meant Antena 3, La Sexta, Telecinco, and the public network TVE1. For radio, the most popular stations were COPE, Onda Cero, SER, and the public broadcaster RNE. However, in the case of newspapers, only three newspapers—*El País*, *El Mundo*, and *La Vanguardia*—have been included to avoid a structural problem of zero cells, given

² However, the same is not true for the general election in June 2023: Ciudadanos opted out of the race after a significant decline in votes in regional elections, and Unidas Podemos integrated itself within the Sumar coalition, led by Yolanda Díaz, after a complex negotiation process. By then, the far-right party Vox had already emerged with considerable strength.

that there was no cross-tabulation between voting for Unidas Podemos and the fourth most read newspaper (ABC).³ Appendix 1 contains a description of the news media outlets analyzed.

Table 1. Variables.

| Concepts | Measures | Variables and categories |
|------------------------------|---|---|
| DEPENDENT VARIABLE | | |
| Media consumption preference | Preferred news outlet to follow political and electoral information during the campaign | 1. Newspaper (<i>El País</i> , <i>El Mundo</i> , and <i>La Vanguardia</i>) 2. Radio station (COPE, SER, Onda Cero, and RNE) 3. Television network (Antena 3, La Sexta, Telecinco, and TVE1) |
| INDEPENDENT VARIABLES | | |
| Partisanship | Vote in the last general election | People's Party (PP) Socialist Party (PSOE) Ciudadanos (Cs) Unidas Podemos (UP) |
| Ideology | Self-placement ideological scale (1–10) | Left (1–4) Center (5–6) Right (7–10) |
| Time | Months | Continuous variable |
| CONTROL VARIABLES | | |
| Age | Age | Continuous variable |
| Social class | Subjective social class | Upper class Middle class Lower class |
| Education | Level of education | Primary education Secondary education Higher education |
| Gender | Gender | Female |

As independent variables, we included the party voted for in the last general election as a proxy of partisanship, ideology, and time (Table 1). As the goal was to observe whether ideology and partisanship increased their influence as drivers of media consumption over time, we included two interactions (time x voting and time x ideology). This allows us to observe whether the effect of voting

³ Alternative modeling strategies were tested in consultation with statistical experts, but none offered a viable solution to the structural zero issue without compromising model stability or comparability. A sensitivity analysis was also conducted using *El Mundo* as the reference category—instead of *El País*—to assess the robustness of the results.

and ideology increased or decreased over time. In addition, control variables related to news media consumption were included: age, gender, level of education, and social class. The regression model can be expressed as follows:

Model: $y \sim 1 \mid \text{Vote} + \text{Ideology} + \text{Time} + \text{Gender} + \text{Age} + \text{Education} + \text{Social class} + \text{Ideology} \times \text{time} + \text{Vote} \times \text{time}$

Multinomial logistic regression analysis involves leaving out a reference category that serves as a reference group, against which the effects of the variables are interpreted. To avoid overestimating the effects, the criterion for choosing the reference category of the dependent variables has been to select a central category, so that over time, variations in the weight of ideology and voting can be observed with respect to media outlets close to the ideological center. Bivariate inspection has enabled us to identify RNE, Telecinco, and *El País* as appropriate reference categories for each news media type. The same logic applies to the independent and control variables. Furthermore, it is important to note that we conducted a sensitivity analysis using regression models with only one interaction (vote x time and ideology x time) to check the robustness of the results.

Results

The results of the multinomial logistic regression models for each media type are shown in tables that include coefficients, odds ratios, standard errors, and *p*-values. For clarity, we shall focus on the odds ratios, which indicate an increase in the probability of the event when the value is greater than 1, and a decrease when it is less than 1.

The findings show that radio consumption in Spain became polarized over time, with partisanship and ideology not only driving the choice of preferred station but also growing in their effect (Table 2). Holding right-wing positions multiplies the likelihood of preferring COPE (vs. RNE) by 2.4, while UP voters exhibited a decreasing probability of tuning into COPE over the study period. In the case of SER, PP and Cs voters initially had a lower probability of listening to it (vs. RNE), and right-wing ideology increasingly drove SER avoidance. Tuning into Onda Cero was not initially linked to ideology or partisanship; however, voting for Unidas Podemos eventually became a significant driver of avoiding it.

Taken together, the results show that radio exposure became significantly polarized over time, as the effects of ideology and voting on news consumption intensified. This indicates that overall cross-cutting exposure to radio decreased from 2015 to 2019. Moreover, media polarization was marked by a declining probability of certain ideological groups using uncongenial media.

Table 2. Effects of Vote and Ideology on Radio Preferences Over Time (ref. cat. RNE).

| | COPE | | | ONDA CERO | | | SER | | |
|-----------------------|---------------|-------------|-----------|--------------|-------------|-----------|---------------|-------------|-----------|
| | <i>B</i> | <i>Odds</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>Odds</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>Odds</i> | <i>SE</i> |
| (Intercept) | 1.069 + | 2.911 | 0.626 | 1.608 ** | 4.995 | 0.580 | 2.629 *** | 13.866 | 0.501 |
| Age | -0.021 *** | 0.979 | .005 | -0.017 ** | 0.983 | 0.005 | -0.018 *** | 0.982 | 0.005 |
| Lower class | 0.165 | 1.179 | 0.163 | -0.021 | 0.980 | 0.169 | -0.197 | 0.821 | 0.141 |
| Upper class | 0.075 | 1.078 | 0.208 | -0.092 | 0.912 | 0.216 | -0.365 + | 0.694 | 0.203 |
| Left | -0.638 | 0.528 | 0.553 | -0.577 | 0.561 | 0.516 | 0.430 | 1.538 | 0.441 |
| Right | 0.880 * | 2.410 | 0.431 | 0.504 | 1.656 | 0.473 | 1.020 * | 2.774 | 0.511 |
| Female | -0.334 * | 0.716 | 0.136 | -0.251 + | 0.778 | 0.141 | -0.105 | 0.900 | 0.121 |
| Primary educ. | 0.409 + | 1.505 | 0.209 | -0.349 | 0.706 | 0.239 | 0.141 | 1.152 | 0.192 |
| High educ. | -0.317 * | 0.728 | 0.160 | -0.039 | 0.961 | 0.161 | -0.202 | 0.817 | 0.142 |
| Cs vote | 0.683 | 1.979 | 0.619 | 0.044 | 1.045 | 0.571 | -1.313 * | 0.269 | 0.516 |
| PP vote | 0.694 | 2.003 | 0.642 | -0.326 | 0.722 | 0.613 | -2.032 *** | 0.131 | 0.577 |
| UP vote | 0.957 | 2.604 | 0.621 | 0.434 | 1.544 | 0.552 | 0.537 | 1.710 | 0.413 |
| Time | -0.051 | 0.950 | 0.229 | -0.018 | 0.982 | 0.204 | 0.000 | 1.000 | 0.175 |
| Time x Left | 0.147 | 1.158 | 0.231 | -0.001 | 0.999 | 0.214 | -0.010 | 0.990 | 0.180 |
| Time x Right | -0.108 | 0.898 | 0.182 | -0.220 | 0.803 | 0.202 | -0.452 * | 0.636 | 0.219 |
| Time x Cs vote | 0.078 | 1.081 | 0.253 | 0.062 | 1.064 | 0.233 | 0.059 | 1.060 | 0.213 |
| Time x PP vote | 0.331 | 1.393 | 0.263 | 0.146 | 1.158 | 0.253 | 0.272 | 1.313 | 0.239 |
| Time x UP vote | -0.544 * | 0.580 | 0.261 | -0.392 + | 0.676 | 0.229 | -0.275 + | 0.759 | 0.162 |

Note. $N = 2970$; $McFadden R^2 = 0.175$. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; + $p < 0.1$.

In the case of newspapers, the findings also point to a process of media polarization, although only for *La Vanguardia* (vs. *El País*), but not in the case of *El Mundo* (Table 3). Thus, Cs and PP voters were between six and nine times more likely to prefer *El Mundo* (vs. *El País*) throughout the entire period of analysis, but these effects did not vary over time. Conversely, in the case of *La Vanguardia*, the situation varied over time. Despite the probability of preferring that newspaper increasing over time for the entire population, the likelihood of PP and Cs voters reading that newspaper (vs. *El País*) significantly decreased during the same period. It should also be noted that the conservative newspaper *ABC* could not be included in the analyses because it did not intersect with voting for the left-wing party Unidas Podemos. Considering that *ABC* is ideologically very distant from *La Vanguardia* and *El País*, its exclusion likely results in an underestimation of press market polarization.

Table 3. Effects of Vote and Ideology on Newspaper Preferences Over Time (ref. cat. El País).

| | <i>EL MUNDO</i> | | | <i>LA VANGUARDIA</i> | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------|-------------|-----------|----------------------|-------------|-----------|
| | <i>B</i> | <i>Odds</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>Odds</i> | <i>SE</i> |
| (Intercept) | -1.578 ** | 0.206 | 0.562 | -2.407 ** | 0.090 | 0.738 |
| Age | 0.000 | 1.000 | 0.005 | -0.006 | 0.994 | 0.007 |
| Lower class | -0.241 | 0.786 | 0.180 | -0.083 | 0.921 | 0.217 |
| Upper class | 0.278 | 1.321 | 0.186 | 0.062 | 1.063 | 0.319 |
| Left | -0.588 | 0.556 | 0.501 | -0.418 | 0.658 | 0.697 |
| Right | 0.615 | 1.849 | 0.501 | -0.144 | 0.866 | 1.026 |
| Female | -0.283 * | 0.753 | 0.138 | -0.048 | 0.953 | 0.191 |
| Primary educ. | 0.224 | 1.251 | 0.298 | 0.925 ** | 2.523 | 0.319 |
| High educ. | 0.028 | 1.028 | 0.149 | -0.650 ** | 0.522 | 0.215 |
| Cs vote | 1.893 ** | 6.636 | 0.554 | 1.369 + | 3.932 | 0.830 |
| PP vote | 2.217 *** | 9.184 | 0.622 | 1.282 | 3.605 | 1.148 |
| UP vote | -0.034 | 0.967 | 0.571 | 0.744 | 2.104 | 0.629 |
| Time | 0.101 | 1.106 | 0.212 | 0.511 * | 1.666 | 0.256 |
| Time x Left | -0.130 | 0.878 | 0.218 | -0.107 | 0.898 | 0.272 |
| Time x Right | -0.133 | 0.876 | 0.234 | 0.445 | 1.561 | 0.458 |
| Time x Cs vote | -0.184 | 0.832 | 0.235 | -0.591 + | 0.554 | 0.347 |
| Time x PP vote | -0.001 | 0.999 | 0.275 | -0.919 + | 0.399 | 0.536 |
| Time x UP vote | 0.093 | 1.097 | 0.245 | -0.182 | 0.834 | 0.249 |

Note. $N = 1666$; McFadden $R^2 = 0.202$. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; + $p < 0.1$.

The specific case of *La Vanguardia* can be explained because it is published in Barcelona, historically linked to Catalan nationalism, and it played a significant role in covering the conflict surrounding Catalonia's independence. Hence, voters of PP and Cs, two parties opposed to independence, showed a decreased likelihood of reading it as time progressed.

Finally, Table 4 shows that television consumption in Spain did not become fully polarized over time. Instead, polarization occurred with La Sexta, and depolarization with Antena 3. PP voters had a significantly lower probability of tuning into La Sexta (vs. Telecinco), while UP voters were almost four times more likely to watch it. Additionally, having a left-wing position became a significant predictor of watching La Sexta over the five-year period, intensifying selective exposure. The opposite was observed with Antena 3: having left-wing positions significantly reduced the likelihood of watching it (vs. Telecinco), but the effect weakened over time. In other words, though Antena 3 saw an increase in cross-cutting exposure—as the effect of ideology decreased from 2015 to 2019—selective exposure to La Sexta intensified during the same period.

The case of the public television channel warrants separate discussion. Voting for the PP tripled the probability of preferring TVE1 (vs. Telecinco), with no significant changes being recorded over time, according to conventional levels of statistical significance. However, the results suggest—at the 87% confidence level—that UP voters gradually acquired a slightly higher probability of tuning into the public network, and that the effect of voting for the PP declined over time (at the 88% confidence level). Although

these confidence levels fall below conventional standards, it seems that the public network has experienced an increase in cross-cutting exposure over time, similar to that of Antena 3. This is confirmed by the regression models specified with a single interaction (time x vote, on the one hand, and time x ideology, on the other). In both cases, the results indicate that voting for the PP lost importance as a predictor of watching TVE1 over time (with a 99% confidence level), and that having left-wing positions became a significant predictor of exposure (with a 90% confidence level).

Table 4. Effects of Vote and Ideology on Television Consumption Over Time (ref. cat. Telecinco).

| | ANTENA 3 | | | LA SEXTA | | | TVE 1 | | |
|-----------------------|---------------|-------------|-----------|---------------|-------------|-----------|---------------------|-------------|-----------|
| | <i>B</i> | <i>Odds</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>Odds</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>Odds</i> | <i>SE</i> |
| (Intercept) | 0.855 ** | 2.351 | 0.283 | -0.555 + | 0.574 | 0.288 | -0.865 ** | 0.421 | 0.287 |
| Age | 0.002 | 1.002 | 0.003 | 0.022 *** | 1.022 | 0.003 | 0.022 *** | 1.022 | 0.003 |
| Lower class | -0.087 | 0.916 | 0.083 | 0.018 | 1.018 | 0.082 | 0.013 | 1.013 | 0.080 |
| Upper class | 0.176 | 1.193 | 0.178 | 0.419 * | 1.520 | 0.183 | 0.623 *** | 1.865 | 0.172 |
| Left | -0.856 ** | 0.425 | 0.265 | 0.064 | 1.066 | 0.259 | -0.298 | 0.742 | 0.269 |
| Right | 0.290 | 1.337 | 0.280 | -0.062 | 0.939 | 0.391 | 0.205 | 1.228 | 0.277 |
| Female | -0.733 *** | 0.480 | 0.077 | -1.014 *** | 0.363 | 0.078 | -0.674 *** | 0.510 | 0.076 |
| Primary educ. | -0.547 *** | 0.579 | 0.109 | -0.589 *** | 0.555 | 0.109 | -0.202 * | 0.817 | 0.101 |
| High educ. | 0.743 *** | 2.103 | 0.105 | 1.260 *** | 3.527 | 0.105 | 0.883 *** | 2.418 | 0.106 |
| Cs vote | 0.214 | 1.239 | 0.312 | 0.195 | 1.215 | 0.329 | 0.189 | 1.208 | 0.322 |
| PP vote | 0.252 | 1.286 | 0.326 | -1.562 *** | 0.210 | 0.407 | 1.104 ** | 3.016 | 0.324 |
| UP vote | 0.018 | 1.018 | 0.288 | 1.345 *** | 3.839 | 0.245 | -0.349 | 0.705 | 0.298 |
| Time | -0.189 * | 0.828 | 0.096 | -0.057 | 0.945 | 0.095 | 0.079 | 1.082 | 0.093 |
| Time x Left | 0.283 ** | 1.327 | 0.104 | 0.190 + | 1.209 | 0.101 | 0.107 | 1.113 | 0.101 |
| Time x Right | -0.074 | 0.929 | 0.114 | -0.015 | 0.985 | 0.154 | -0.067 | 0.935 | 0.112 |
| Time x Cs vote | 0.190 | 1.209 | 0.124 | -0.140 | 0.869 | 0.134 | 0.070 | 1.073 | 0.125 |
| Time x PP vote | 0.155 | 1.168 | 0.129 | 0.227 | 1.255 | 0.157 | -0.195 ⁴ | 0.823 | 0.125 |
| Time x UP vote | 0.099 | 1.104 | 0.123 | 0.021 | 1.021 | 0.105 | 0.189 ⁵ | 1.208 | 0.123 |

Note. $N = 7547$; $McFadden R^2 = 0.126$. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; + $p < 0.1$.

⁴ P value = 0.119.

⁵ P value = 0.126.

Discussion

Overall, the findings depict a scenario of media polarization, at least during the electoral campaigns analyzed, when citizens seek more political information and partisan identities become more salient. Of the eight media outlets analyzed—excluding those acting as reference categories—five showed a significant intensification of selective exposure, while only two exhibited depolarization, and one showed no variations. Thus, the importance of ideology and partisanship as drivers of media consumption significantly increased between 2015 and 2019. Nevertheless, the size of the effects over time were limited, and the bulk of the explanatory weight was concentrated in partisanship and ideology without interaction. This is because of the high level of political parallelism in the Spanish media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), which results in audiences selectively exposing themselves to different types of media (Moreno & Sanjurjo, 2020). So how can we explain this intensification of the effects of selective exposure? We believe it to be related to the transformation of the party system and political polarization, since it coincided with the fragmentation of the Spanish party system (Rodríguez-Teruel et al., 2019). The period also included the independence crisis in Catalonia and the emergence of the far-right party VOX. The increase in electoral competition within and between ideological blocs (Simón, 2020) and in affective polarization (Rodríguez et al., 2022) likely activated the mega partisan identities of Spaniards (Torcal, 2023), making them more cognitively accessible (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011), thereby turning ideology and party identification into increasingly relevant drivers of media exposure.

Previous studies indicate that consuming congenial information enables individuals to reinforce their social and political identities (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2017, 2019; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014; Slater, 2015) and that selective exposure “also reflects a way to self-present one’s authentic views to audiences” (Hart, Richardson, Tortoriello, & Earl, 2020, p. 439). According to the motivated reasoning approach, people use selective exposure to defend existing beliefs and attitudes (Kunda, 1990), meaning perceived threats to group identity can drive audiences to extremes (Slater, 2007). It is therefore reasonable to expect audiences to increasingly use partisan identities as heuristics for news choices when faced with political and affective polarization, as feeling validated may become more crucial. Overall, studies on selective exposure have tended to overlook the influence of the political context on news choices (Feldman et al., 2013; Steppat et al., 2022; Stroud, 2011), focusing instead on the media supply structure—the type of media system (Goldman & Mutz, 2011), opportunities for political information (Esser et al., 2012), and opportunity structures for selective exposure (Skovsgaard et al., 2016). This is partly because of the predominance of cross-sectional approaches and experiments. Few studies have examined how the political context might influence selective exposure (Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2012; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2019), despite media and political systems being closely intertwined, with developments in one often affecting the other (Mancini, 2019, p. 157), particularly in environments with high political parallelism.

Considering that consuming congenial information polarizes political attitudes (Dahlgren et al., 2019; Stroud, 2010), our findings suggest a reinforcing spiral (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2017; Slater, 2015), whereby the politically fragmented and polarized context increased the cognitive accessibility of political attitudes, intensifying selective exposure to the news media (Steppat et al., 2022) and ultimately reinforcing citizens’ political identities (Torcal, 2023). Future studies using multiple cases will need to confirm that trend.

Nevertheless, our results underline the need for more longitudinal approaches to selective exposure to explore how different political contexts influence news consumption.

Upon comparing the different types of media, we can see that the radio market experienced the greatest polarization, thus confirming H2, since all the stations showed a significant reduction in cross-cutting exposure: UP voters were progressively less exposed to the stations that they perceived as conservative (COPE and Onda Cero) while those who declared right-wing positions were, over time, less likely to listen to the progressive station SER (Figure 2).

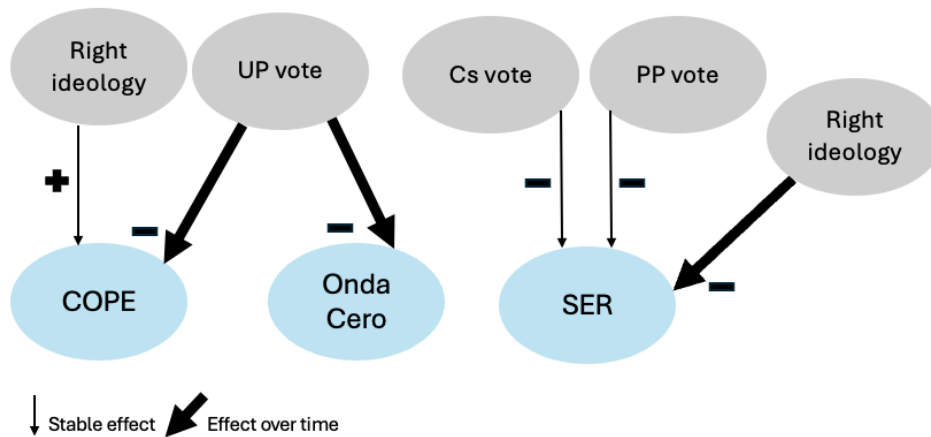


Figure 2. Effects of ideology and vote on radio choices (ref. cat. RNE).

The newspaper market also experienced certain intensification of selective exposure over time (Figure 3), confirming H1. PP voters increasingly avoided the newspaper *La Vanguardia* over time, which coincided with the conflict over Catalan independence. Unfortunately, it was not possible to analyze the fourth most important newspaper (ABC) because there was no intersection with the vote for Unidas Podemos.

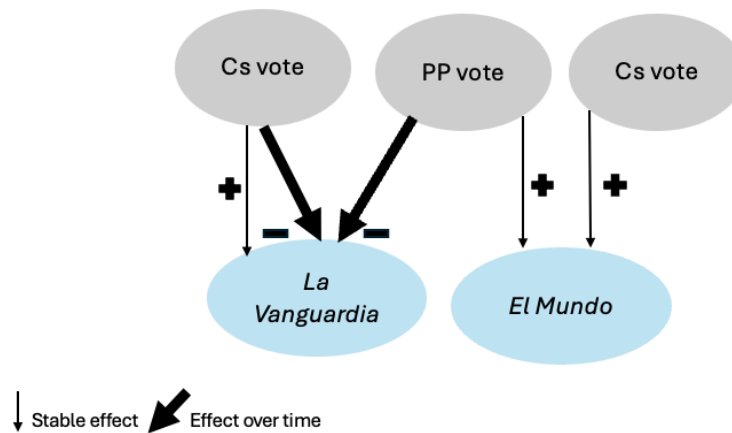


Figure 3. Effects of ideology and vote on newspaper choices (ref. cat. *El País*).

The case of television is more complex. On the one hand, selective exposure to La Sexta significantly intensified over time; it became the reference television network for UP voters and the left-wing sector. On the other hand, we observed depolarization in Antena 3 and the public network TVE1. In both instances, the initial effects of ideology and voting diminished over time, and both networks exhibited a broader cross-cutting audience at the end of the time frame (Figure 4), which leads us to reject H3. Given that television has historically been the medium with the largest audience in Spain (Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación, 2020), the results depict moderate media polarization, affecting mainly the radio and newspapers, and to a lesser extent, the television market.

The findings align with previous research. Crespo-Martínez, Melero-López, Mora-Rodríguez, and Rojo-Martínez (2024) report that media use and political polarization are primarily linked to social media and digital newspapers, rather than to television. Similarly, Melero-López, Quiles-Bailén, and López-Palazón (2024) find that television channels display greater ideological diversity among their audiences compared to newspapers, which they attribute to the limited choice within the television ecosystem. In Spain, the television market is controlled by two media groups and the public broadcaster, a concentration that drives competition for the broadest audience. The only exceptions are Antena 3 and La Sexta—both owned by Atresmedia—which have adopted a strategy of ideological segmentation within their media offerings.

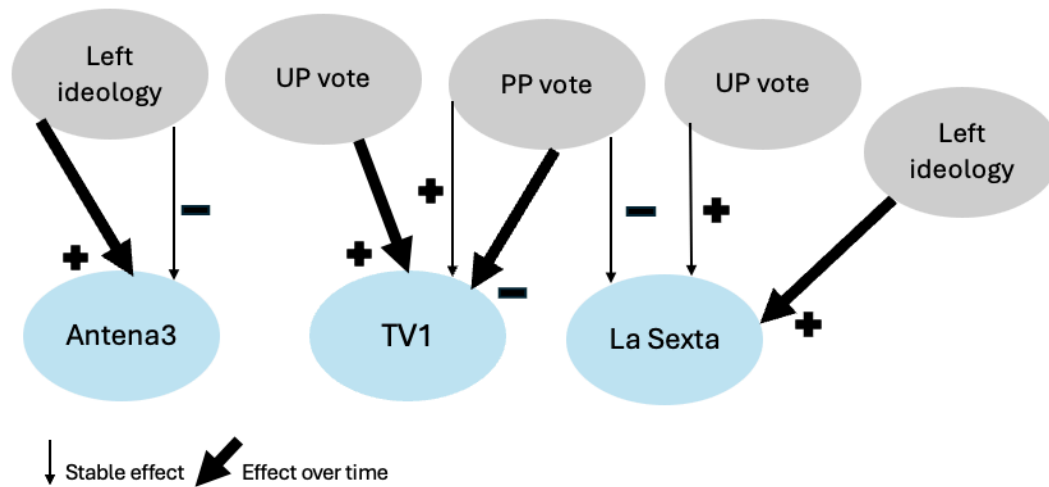


Figure 4. Effects of ideology and vote on television choices (ref. cat. Telecinco).

Thus, whereas media markets with historically more partisan audiences—the press and radio—show greater polarization (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Hallin & Mancini, 2004), television displays it only around La Sexta, offset by the depolarization of Antena 3 and TVE1. In the press market, a long tradition of political parallelism and greater market fragmentation encourage sharper audience segmentation. Radio, for its part, is dominated by personality-driven talk shows (e.g., COPE and SER) that cater to partisan audiences and therefore intensify selective exposure in a highly polarized political context.

Our findings also show that certain groups of voters increasingly distanced themselves from media outlets perceived as uncongenial. They do underscore the need to study selective avoidance in Spain, in line with previous research (Ramírez-Dueñas & Vinuesa-Tejero, 2020; Valera-Ordaz, 2023b). Ultimately, selective exposure does not always imply the systematic avoidance of uncongenial information (Garrett, 2009).

Finally, we propose defining media polarization as the intensification of selective exposure across a representative set of news media outlets in a given media context over a specific period, such that there are more news media outlets becoming polarized, as opposed to those that are depolarizing. Thus, when political attitudes such as partisanship, ideology, etc. become increasingly relevant drivers of media consumption over time (i.e., they gain explanatory weight), a process of media polarization is occurring. Conversely, if political attitudes lose explanatory weight as predictors of media use over a given period, then it is a process of media depolarization that is taking place.

This notion has the advantage of capturing the diachronic component inherent in any polarization process, as opposed to the static notions of media or news audience polarization that have dominated the literature to date (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Fletcher et al., 2020; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Ksiazek, 2016; Steppat et al., 2022). In fact, this notion acknowledges the constant transformation of media systems and allows for the analysis of news use through a longitudinal perspective, emphasizing that media preferences are far from immutable. Instead, they are deeply contextual (Feldman et al., 2013) and are

constantly transformed by technological, social, economic, and political forces (Fletcher et al., 2020). Put another way, conceiving media polarization diachronically underlines the need of studying news choices from a temporal perspective, thereby facilitating the analysis of citizens' tendency to select attitude-congruent content in the context of constant media transformations.

Conclusion

The present study empirically confirms that selective exposure to the news media intensified in Spain between 2015 and 2019, coinciding with the fragmentation of the party system (Rodríguez-Teruel et al., 2019), the increase in electoral competition, and the highest affective polarization since 1996 (Rodríguez et al., 2022; Simón, 2020; Torcal, 2023). Furthermore, the results indicate that this process was particularly pronounced in the radio and newspaper markets, and considerably less so in the case of television.

On the one hand, our results suggest some audiences' responsiveness to the polarizing political context, manifesting as an intensification of selective exposure to the news media. This might be the result of the increase in political polarization inducing news media outlets to adopt more partisan content to attract specific audience segments (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Steppat et al., 2022), or the outcome of news consumers' desires to strengthen their political identities and feel validated in a highly polarized context (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2017; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012; Slater, 2015). It may even be a combination of both.

Nonetheless, our findings suggest that media polarization is not only affecting liberal systems (Nechushtai, 2018) but also taking place in highly politicized media systems such as in Spain (Brüggemann et al., 2014; Fletcher et al., 2020; Humanes & Valera-Ordaz, 2023). As Hallin and Mancini (2017) pointed out in their review of the validity of the convergence thesis, certain elements in media systems are quite resilient over time. In the Spanish case, polarization could be one such feature, as it not only failed to disappear—as predicted by convergence toward the liberal media system—but was notably reinforced because of intensifying political parallelism. Further studies should confirm whether other Southern European countries have experienced equivalent intensification of selective exposure.

Moreover, our findings highlight that the influence of the political context on news choices remains understudied and that researchers should pay greater attention to contextual factors when studying selective exposure (Feldman et al., 2013; Stroud, 2011). Studies emphasize that news choices are socially constructed (Palmer, Toff, & Nielsen, 2023), and that they reflect broader news consumption cultures (Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020, p. 367). Our findings indicate that news choices must also be conceived as situational, since certain real-world contexts inspire more selectivity than others, and lead audiences to either higher or lower intensity selective exposure. More specifically, our results show that a highly polarized political context intensifies the role of partisanship and ideology as drivers of news consumption.

However, it is important to note that the selected study period (2015–2019, which included four national elections) may limit the generalizability of our findings. Although this time frame coincided with a period of high electoral volatility and a deep transformation of the Spanish party system, offering a unique opportunity to analyze media polarization in a context of peak affective polarization, it also poses significant limitations when extrapolating results to the contemporary political landscape. The profound

transformations that have occurred since then in Spain's party system and media environment—particularly the rise of social media and digital platforms as news sources and the consolidation of two highly polarized political blocs—suggest that the dynamics observed in our study may not fully reflect current trends. Therefore, our findings should be interpreted within the context of this exceptional electoral cycle and may serve as a useful starting point for future comparative studies conducted during periods of greater electoral stability or in non-electoral contexts.

Furthermore, this work provides a theoretical contribution to the definition of media polarization. Although most studies to date have conceived media polarization either as the ideological extremity of news outlets (Steppat et al., 2020, 2022), or as the ideological segmentation of audiences at a single point in time (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Fletcher et al., 2020; Ksiazek, 2016), we argue that media polarization should be redefined from a temporal perspective, viewing it as an inherently diachronic phenomenon that unfolds over time. We define it as a process of intensification of selective exposure effects over time for a significant set of news outlets in a given media environment, so that a greater number of news media outlets become polarized than the number that become depolarized. This approach enables the evolution of media systems to be analyzed across different time periods and contexts.

The study has several strengths that should be highlighted. First, the four surveys employed are based on broadly representative samples of the Spanish population, thereby enhancing the generalizability of the results, in contrast to many studies that rely on populations of Internet users. Second, robustness checks based on sensitivity analyses—using regression models that included a single interaction: vote \times time on one hand, and ideology \times time on the other—provided additional robustness and corroborated the intensification of selective exposure effects. Third, this work examined three media markets (radio, newspapers, and television) simultaneously and focused on the most widely consumed news outlets; this affords a comprehensive and appropriate view of media polarization in Spain as a whole.

However, certain limitations warrant attention. First, our data corresponds only to electoral periods. These moments offer several advantages: citizens consume more political information, partisan attitudes are more easily activated, and selective-exposure behaviors—as well as the mechanisms of affective and cognitive polarization—tend to intensify (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012; Strömbäck & Kaid, 2009). However, the focus on campaigns excludes nonelectoral periods, which represents a limitation and may lead to an overestimation of the observed effects. It is therefore essential to interpret our results within this temporal framework, and we suggest that future research also examine nonelectoral periods to assess media polarization in more routine contexts.

Second, only widely consumed national news outlets were included, excluding native digital newspapers and local media because of the limitations of secondary data. Future studies should analyze a broader range of media.

Third, one important limitation of this study stems from its exclusive reliance on secondary data. Although the CIS postelectoral surveys offer advantages in terms of representativeness and longitudinal comparability, they also significantly constrain the scope of the analysis. Most notably, they do not include variables related to digital media, social media platforms, or messaging apps, which became increasingly

relevant as points of access for news during the period under study, particularly among younger audiences (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019). As a result, the study cannot fully account for the complexity of politically oriented news consumption in an increasingly fragmented, fast-evolving, and platform-dependent media ecosystem. It is possible that the observed intensification of selective exposure to traditional media may have been mitigated by cross-cutting—whether incidental or intentional—exposure through digital outlets, social media platforms, or messaging apps during the same period. Future research should address this gap by employing more comprehensive data sources that capture the full diversity of media formats and platforms shaping political information exposure and media polarization.

Fourth, we used the preferred news outlets of respondents as the dependent variable—which has the advantage of serving as an indicator of habitual consumption and increasing the generalizability of the results (Clay, Barber, & Shook, 2013; Stroud, 2008)—although we lack comprehensive data on individuals' complete media diets. This is a significant limitation, and future studies measuring complete media diets—using time-use surveys (Callejo, 2024) and/or web-tracking data—may provide deeper understanding of media polarization. In addition, our study relied on cross-sectional surveys, whereas causal relationships can be established only through experimental approaches. Finally, this is a case study that focused on Spain, and its findings may not necessarily be applicable to other contexts.

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