

Selective exposure and audience polarization. An analysis through the accumulated consumption of political information in Spain

Exposición selectiva y polarización de audiencias. Un análisis a través del consumo acumulado de información política en España

Exposição seletiva e polarização de audiência. Uma análise através do consumo acumulado de informação política na Espanha

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ABSTRACT | Many studies have shown how the increasing polarization processes shape our societies and the relationship between citizens, institutions and media. This study aims to focus on the so-called polarization the audience, understood as a consequence of the progressive selective exposure –ideological, in this case– that reduces the amount of information and contexts to which they are willing to be exposed. To evaluate this phenomenon in Spain, we conducted a quantitative analysis through the post-election survey for November 2019 general elections of the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS) by means of a scale of accumulated consumption, the results of which warn of the profile of the subjects most polarized by the media: men, people of a higher age, with higher income, politically interested, and electorally activated. This concept allows us to better study the processes of political and affective polarization, as well to open new research lines on the generation of identities (ideological, partisan...), and on their effects on the greater radicality in the phenomenon of polarization.

KEYWORDS: polarization; media; public opinion; audiences; selective exposure; Spain.

HOW TO CITE

Ramírez-Dueñas, J.M. & Humanes, M.L. (2023). Exposición selectiva y polarización de audiencias. Un análisis a través del consumo acumulado de información política en España. *Cuadernos.info*, (56), NNN-NNN. <https://doi.org/10.7764/cdi.55.59797>

RESUMEN | *Diferentes investigaciones han puesto de manifiesto cómo los crecientes procesos de polarización están configurando nuestras sociedades y la relación entre ciudadanos, instituciones y medios de comunicación. Este estudio busca enfocarse en la llamada polarización de audiencias, entendida como una consecuencia de la progresiva exposición selectiva –ideológica, en este caso– que reduce la cantidad de informaciones y contextos a los que están dispuestos a exponerse. Para evaluar este fenómeno en España, se ha realizado un análisis cuantitativo a través de la encuesta postelectoral de las elecciones generales de noviembre de 2019 del Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas mediante una escala de consumo acumulado, en cuyos resultados se advierte del perfil de los sujetos más polarizados mediáticamente: hombres, personas de mayor edad, con más ingresos económicos, interesados por la política y activados electoralmente. Este concepto permite estudiar mejor los procesos de polarización política y afectiva y abre nuevas líneas de investigación sobre la generación de identidades (ideológicas, partidistas...) y sobre sus efectos en la mayor radicalidad en el fenómeno de la polarización.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: polarización; medios de comunicación; opinión pública; audiencias; exposición selectiva; España.

RESUMO | *Diferentes pesquisas têm revelado como os crescentes processos de polarização estão moldando nossas sociedades e a relação entre cidadãos, instituições e mídia. Este estudo visa focar a chamada polarização de audiências, entendida como consequência da progressiva exposição seletiva -ideológica, neste caso, que reduz a quantidade de informações e contextos aos quais eles estão dispostos a se expor. Para avaliar esse fenômeno na Espanha, foi realizada uma análise quantitativa por meio da pesquisa pós-eleitoral das eleições gerais de novembro de 2019 do Centro de Pesquisa Sociológica usando uma escala de consumo acumulado, cujos resultados mostram o perfil da mídia mais polarizada: homens, pessoas mais velhas, com maior renda econômica, interessados em política e engajados eleitoralmente. Esse conceito permite estudar melhor os processos de polarização política e afetiva, além de abrir novas linhas de pesquisa sobre a geração de identidades (ideológicas, partidárias...) e sobre seus efeitos sobre os mais radicais no fenômeno da polarização.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: polarização; mídia; opinião pública; audiência; exposição seletiva; Espanha.

INTRODUCTION

Several studies have highlighted the significant increase in ideological, partisan and affective polarization in recent decades, both in the international and Spanish contexts (Fiorina et al., 2005; Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016; Miller, 2020). Some research have inquired why citizens find themselves in more divergent and conflicting positions as a result of the consumption of political information, especially at specific junctures (such as in electoral campaigns). This paper seeks to focus on audience polarization, one of the consequences of increased consumption of media aligned with citizens' ideology or partisan identification (Ksiazek, 2016; Fletcher et al., 2019). This approach is strongly related to the concept of political and informative parallelism, especially in polarized pluralistic countries, such as Spain, where the close relationship between media and political parties ends up configuring informative environments where editorial lines are coupled to the political narratives and ideas of the parties (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). This theory approaches polarization not only from an individual point of view, i.e., based on the causes that determine individual informational behaviors, but also at a macro level, presupposing that such personal behaviors are social in themselves, a consequence of political information consumption logics in highly selective media environments (Casero-Ripollés, 2012; Van Aelst et al., 2017).

Audience polarization can be framed from different perspectives. The most classical approaches understand the configuration of audiences within theories of selective exposure (e.g., Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Chaffee & Miyo, 1983; Stroud, 2017) or Zaller's (1992) RAS (Receive, Accept, Sample) model; however, more recent contributions, focused on the analysis of the logics of political information consumption in digital environments, such as the echo chamber theory, can complement explanations on why citizens select those messages that correspond to their way of thinking, generating an isolation effect (Barberá et al., 2015).

This paper adds to work conducted in Spain (Gunther et al., 2000; Martín-Llaguno & Berganza, 2001; Humanes, 2014; Ramírez-Dueñas & VinuesaTejero, 2020, 2021; Valera-Ordaz, 2018, 2022; Valera-Ordaz & Humanes, 2022, among others) on the informative logics of content selection and incorporates a methodology to measure citizens' selectivity (Sears & Freedman, 1967; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). The scale of accumulated information consumption incorporated –through one of the historical series of the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS) on the use of the different media during electoral campaigns– assesses and quantifies the degree of media simultaneity that citizens have in their routines of access to political information. Therefore, our aim has been to advance in

the better definition of the so-called more polarized audiences through their sociodemographic and electoral components. Likewise, this contribution to the formula for measuring the degree of information polarization of citizens broadens the possibilities for developing longitudinal comparative studies between different time periods.

Selective exposure and audience polarization

Different research has shed light on the relationship between polarization processes and selective exposure to political content through which voters inform themselves (Prior, 2013; Skovsgaard et al., 2016; Stroud, 2017). There have been mainly two classical approaches to address this selectivity and its possible effects have been: first, within Zaller's (1992) ZAS method, selectivity would be explained through their ethical, political or partisan predispositions, to the extent that they will only accept those contents closest to their frames of interpretation or cognitive judgments. In second place is the theory of selective exposure, considered to be the most widespread theoretical framework for studying this phenomenon, which explains that voters are predisposed to be exposed to those information contents that are closest to their ideological approaches: a series of psychological filters are generated that bring them closer to consuming contents close to their ideas. These cognitive judgments are connected to the political attitudes of individuals, who evaluate the media messages in order to accept the content (Chaffee & Miyo, 1983; Stroud, 2008; 2011; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012; Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013). Within this approach, selectivity is especially relevant, as it allows us to understand how these frames of interpretation work: it is related to their expectations, insofar as citizens expect the contents consumed to reflect their ideological values (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). Prospectively, individuals exercise a confirmation bias by selecting not only the media but also the specific content closest to their ideological or partisan focus (Levendusky, 2013); although this bias could increase citizens' resistance to accept content contrary to their political attitudes, selective avoidance does not yet find a broad consensus (Prior, 2013; Garrett et al., 2013; Ksiazek, 2016).

This article aims to further analyze the relationship between selective exposure and audience polarization, following some recent research (Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2012; Ksiazek, 2016). If citizens select content and media according to their ideological or political predispositions, there is a gradual configuration of a process of polarized audiences and fragmentation of audiences. Thus, both processes (selective exposure and audience polarization) are two joint and simultaneous phenomena, since the individual selection of content has an impact,

at a macro level, on the formation of these antagonistic audiences (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2011; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017).

Audience polarization should be interpreted under two frameworks or logics. From a demand or media consumption point of view (user-centric), it constitutes a set of individual behaviors that select political information according to their cognitive filters. These preferences shape the selective exposure that determines consumption in a rational way in the sense of their psychological predispositions (Hollander, 2008; Webster & Ksiasek, 2012). From a supply-side (media-centric) point of view, nevertheless, there has been a considerable increase in the number of media (offline and online) that makes such selectivity and fragmentation of audiences possible. Thus, there is a match between an audience increasingly inclined towards partisan media and a media structure that allows the proliferation of niches and opportunities for selective exposure (Sunstein, 2007; Stroud, 2011; Skovsgaard et al., 2016). The proliferation of digital press, social networks and other political information platforms on the Internet has not only not reduced this phenomenon, but has increased trends towards the creation of resonance chambers –echo chambers or epistemic bubbles–and processes of informational isolation (Pariser, 2011; Barberá et al., 2015; Dubois & Blank, 2018; Bright, 2018; Nguyen, 2020). Concerning this idea, some research on social networks and selective exposure on the Internet has shown (through the theory of echo chambers, where certain discourses and messages are repeated and amplified) the radicalization of political positions (Koehler, 2014; Cardenal et al., 2019). Other authors consider that these platforms allow access to political information to which these citizens would not be freely exposed, thus increasing their information diet, not only from the point of view of the amount of media or content but also the ideological range of their information sources (Barberá, 2015). It should also be considered that social networks are tools that are not generalized across the population as a whole, so their effects should be contextualized according to their range of coverage (Bail et al., 2018).

The polarized audiences' phenomenon has been extensively studied in two-party systems with a single axis of political competition and a wide degree of informational partisanship, but there is increasing research focused on other multiparty (moderate or polarized) parliamentary systems in Western Europe, where ideological and partisan affiliation is related to audience polarization (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Skovsgaard et al., 2016; Fletcher et al., 2019), as is the case of Spain.

Selective exposure and audience polarization in Spain

Spain has been deemed as a country with a high degree of political parallelism between parties and media (Humanes et al., 2013; Valera Ordaz & Humanes, 2022), thus being categorized as a polarized pluralistic media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) combining a high degree of political parallelism with a less professional journalism and an underinclusive press market. Despite the thesis of convergence towards the authors' liberal model, other literature has subsequently questioned it, either to reject such Americanization of European media systems (Nielsen, 2013) or to put forward more differentiated alternative models, for example, Brüggermann and colleagues, 2014, which considers that the features defined by Hallin and Mancini have been reinforced in Spain along with other southern countries, such as Italy, Greece and France.

Political parallelism is evident through political-oriented consumption of news, entrenching the politicization of information and ideological allegiances (González & Novo, 2011; Fletcher et al., 2019). Research conducted in Spain points in this direction (Humanes, 2014, 2020; Ramírez Dueñas & Vinuesa-Tejero, 2020; 2021; Valera-Ordaz, 2018): the existing audience polarization is not only based on selective exposure by ideological identification, but also on the combination of electoral axes of left-right and center-periphery competition in the political arena, which ends up complicating the study of the polarization of these audiences. For example, in regions with a high voting pattern for nationalist or pro-independence parties, such as Catalonia (Valera-Ordaz, 2018, 2022), there is a higher correlation of their voters to be exposed to regional media, while those opposed to independence or with a strong Spanish identity are informed through national media. Padró-Solanet and Balcells (2022) also offer a more panoramic view, since informational heterogeneity in those contexts of territorial conflict (i.e., a greater number of media in the media diet of citizens) could increase affective polarization.

This study aims to answer the question of who are the most polarized subjects and whether there are certain sociodemographic or political characteristics that could explain more politically restrictive informational diets of citizens. Three hypotheses are to be tested:

H1. Citizens with more ideologically restrictive information diets will have different sociodemographic traits.

H2. Users with more restrictive information diets, i.e., those with a stronger consumption of ideologically related media, will be those more ideologically oriented to the left-right axis.

H3. The most polarized citizens are those who are more active electorally and have a greater interest in consuming political information.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We developed an analysis model using the CIS post-election survey for the 2019 general election (N= 4804). It is a statistical study of the citizens' informative media diet, quantity, and heterogeneity of sources (Dubois & Blank, 2018; Padró-Solanet & Balcells, 2022). This method allows to establish a conformation of audiences through individual behaviors (user-centric), where the behavior of citizens – according to their selection of political information– ends up shaping the different audiences of the different media (Websters & Ksiasek, 2012). Therefore, and in line with other analyses on information diets and selective exposure in Spain, we used a post-electoral survey, considering that it is during electoral campaigns when a more specific consumption of political information is perceived (citizens, predictably, are more predisposed to select information, given that they have to inform themselves about the different electoral options); in addition, these 2019 elections are especially relevant to establish a longitudinal analysis with the rest of studies that conduct research on previous elections (Humanes, 2014; Ramírez-Dueñas & Vinuesa-Tejero, 2021; Valera-Ordaz, 2018).

The analysis model is based on the observation of the relationships of the different independent variables that we have applied to our dependent variable, the selectivity of political information (polarization, at the individual level), through a new scale of accumulated consumption. The research strategy used to observe which of all the variables has the greatest effect on the dependent variable is the formulation of a linear regression, through which we will observe which of them has the greatest influence on the dependent variable by obtaining the average marginal effects (AME).

The dependent variable –the degree of selectivity of each respondent among the different media to obtain information during the electoral campaign, according to the ideological tendency of the media– has been operationalized through a new variable, measuring the accumulation of sources (heterogeneous or homogeneous, from an ideological point of view) in the access of citizens to campaign information.

This scale has a range of nine values, from -4 (high consumption of progressive information) to +4 (high consumption of conservative information), where 0 represents a balanced consumption of information media or no consumption of political information.

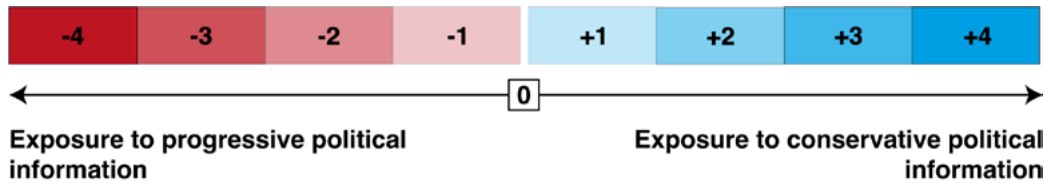


Figure 1. Proposed media polarization scale

Source: Own elaboration.

For this purpose, and based on the question on the consumption of political information in the CIS during the electoral campaign¹, we have classified the different media in Spain. The consumption of each media (press, radio, television, and digital press) has been re-coded by ideological tendency (i.e. progressive press/conservative press; progressive radio/conservative radio, ditto for the rest), according to the average ideological self-placement of the audience of each of the most consumed media in Spain, with the following values: progressive (-1), if the average is between 1 and 4.49; neutral (0), if the average is between 4.5 to 5.5, and conservative (1), more than 5.51 up to 10. Several regional media have been left out, since it would be complex to infer the ideological line of each one because in many cases there is a shortage of cases (n) to obtain statistical validity.

With these recodings, we proceeded to construct the dependent variable (media diet), the result of the sum of the four previous variables: printed press, radio, television, and digital press: $\text{Media diet} = V_{\text{press}} + V_{\text{radio}} + V_{\text{television}} + V_{\text{prensadigital}}$. Respondents will be positioned on an axis in which we observe those individuals with an information diet made up of progressive media (-4) to those with a conservative media consumption (4).

¹. In the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas' post-electoral surveys, citizens are asked about the most used media to get information during the electoral campaign: "Which newspaper have you followed the most to get information during the electoral campaign? And which digital newspaper? And which radio? And which television network?". This question allows us to observe from which media the political information that each interviewee has consumed during the electoral campaign comes from, at least partially (the main one of each type); it is assumed, however, the impossibility of obtaining a complete image or radiography of the outlets that compose the interviewee's media diet as a limitation (not exclusive to this article) of this research given the question available in the CIS.

Outlets	Ideology *	Users**	Type	Value
<i>El País</i>	3.81 (1.51)	3.3	Printed press	-1
<i>El Mundo</i>	6.2 (1.95)	1.4	Printed press	1
<i>ABC</i>	7.17 (2.01)	0.9	Printed press	1
<i>La Razón</i>	6.66 (2.06)	0.5	Printed press	1
<i>Elpais.com</i>	3.87 (1.60)	6.9	Digital press	-1
<i>elmundo.es</i>	5.78 (1.86)	2.4	Digital press	1
<i>abc.es</i>	6.32 (1.93)	1	Digital press	1
<i>larazon.es</i>	5.88 (2.13)	0.3	Digital press	1
<i>publico.es</i>	2.85 (1.76)	0.7	Digital press	-1
<i>eldiario.es</i>	2.73 (2.73)	0.8	Digital press	-1
<i>okdiario.es</i>	6.13 (1.95)	0.3	Digital press	1
<i>Cadena SER</i>	3.75 (1.59)	6.7	Radio	-1
<i>Cadena Cope</i>	6.59 (1.82)	4.1	Radio	1
<i>Onda Cero</i>	5.37 (1.61)	3.1	Radio	1
<i>RNE</i>	4.68 (2.16)	2.6	Radio	0
<i>Es Radio</i>	6.85 (1.92)	0.4	Radio	1
<i>TVE</i>	5.14 (1.88)	18.5	Television	0
<i>Antena 3</i>	5.33 (1.97)	14	Television	1
<i>Cuatro</i>	5.02 (1.83)	1.4	Television	0
<i>Telecinco</i>	4.98 (1.84)	9.5	Television	0
<i>La Sexta</i>	3.73 (1.72)	15.5	Television	-1

* Average of its users. Standard error in parentheses. **% of the national total.

Table 1. Classification of the political media in Spain by ideological affiliation

Source: Own elaboration based on Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2019), n° 3126.

Finally, this variable has been positivized, so as to obtain a variable from 0 to 4, in which the ideological homogeneity or heterogeneity of the media used by each of the individuals interviewed is calculated to measure not only the mere selective accumulation of media related to the same ideological line of the voter, but also the cumulative process of selectivity of said media which is what finally configures in a macro way the so-called polarized audiences.

The analysis model has been constructed, incorporating independent (political) and control (sociodemographic) variables for its explanatory capacity:

- Gender (0=man, 1=woman).
- Age.
- Educational level (0=no education (ref.); 1=primary education; 2=secondary education; 3=higher education), in four dichotomous variables (0=no, 1=yes).
- Personal income² (1=no income; 2=less than or equal to 300€; 3=from 301 to 600€; 4=from 601 to 900€; 5=from 901 to 1,200€; 6=from 1,201 to 1,800€; 7=from 1,801 to 2,400€; 8=from 2,401 to 3,000€; 9=from 3,001 to 4,500€; 10=from 4,501 to 6,000€; 11=over 6,000€)
- Interest in politics (1=no interest; 2=some interest; 3=quite interested; 4=a lot of interest).
- Political party affiliation/membership (0=no, 1=yes).
- Ideology³ (ideological self-positioning) (0=not ascribed (ref.), 1=left, 2=center-left, 3=center, 4=center-right, 5=right)
- Voting recall (dichotomous) to the five national parties with abstention as a reference (PSOE, PP, Ciudadanos, Unidas Podemos, and VOX).

2. The variables of personal income as an interest in politics have been introduced in a continuous way, in the sense that they operate in a quantitative way or with an (ascending) order. I.e., the effects of having more income or a greater interest in politics are one degree in the explanation in the study variable.

3. In contrast, ideology, and unlike income or interest in politics, has been considered as a nominal qualitative variable, since each of the values that individuals can register do not embody degrees, but are independent characteristics.

Variables	Media diet	
Gender (ref. man)	-0.0819***	(0.0288)
Age	0.00238**	(0.000933)
Studies (ref. no studies)		
Primary	0.168**	(0.0665)
Secondary	0.308***	(0.0669)
Higher	0.424***	(0.0750)
Income	0.0358***	(0.00756)
Political interest	0.171***	(0.0168)
Affiliation	0.191**	(0.0811)
Ideology (Ref. DN/DA)		
Left	0.201***	(0.0678)
Center-left	0.155***	(0.0533)
Center	0.101*	(0.0530)
Center-right	0.132**	(0.0569)
Right	0.116*	(0.0645)
Vote recall (ref. did not vote)		
PSOE	0.185***	(0.0460)
PP	0.151***	(0.0535)
Unidas Podemos	0.210***	(0.0571)
Ciudadanos	0.217***	(0.0640)
Vox	0.116*	(0.0615)
Constant	-0.489***	(0.104)
Observations	2.621	
R2	0.185	

Regression coefficients (B) are shown. Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table 2. Study model of the dependent variable (media diet)

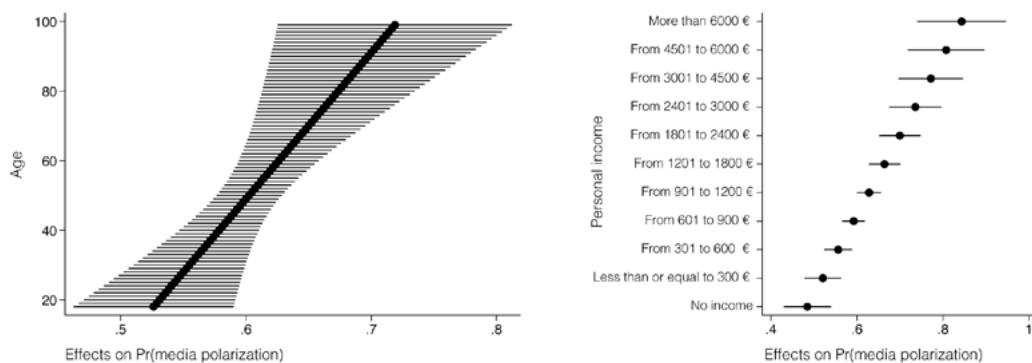
Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2019).

RESULTS

The results of the study model (table 2) show the variables that best explain the selectivity of citizens in the media diets.

Who could be the most polarized individuals? The model values have been complemented with average marginal effects (AME), which allow us to observe the impact of the study variable when the rest of the producing or explanatory variables remain stable, isolated. First, the marginal effects diagnose that men are more likely to exercise selectivity than women, as well as individuals with higher levels of education (figure 2). The probability of having a more selective or ideologically restrictive media diet by those citizens with higher education is over 40% compared to those with no education, or 20% over those with primary education. Likewise, figure 3 (left) presents the marginal effects for the probability of selecting media with respect to the age variable, showing significant differences between life stages. There is a greater probability of registering a more selective diet among older citizens than among young people.

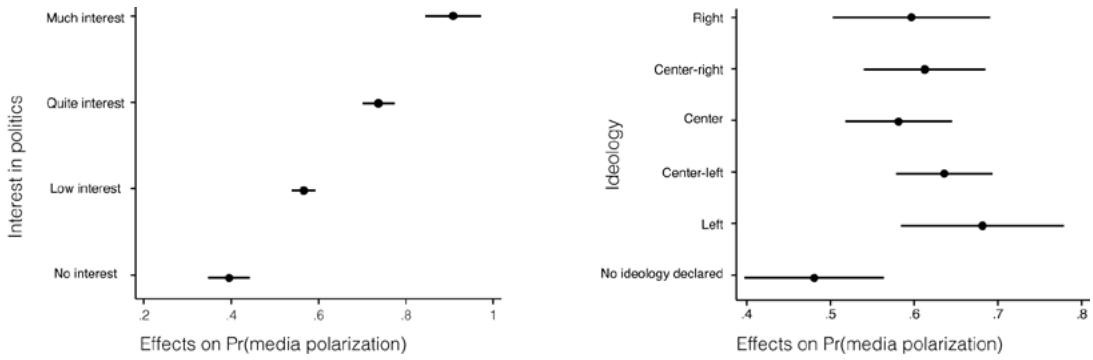
Some of these results were already perceived in previous research on selective exposure in Spain (Martín-Llaguno & Berganza, 2001; Humanes, 2014; 2020; Valera-Ordaz, 2018), but their confirmation is noted in the 2019 election campaign. The results also allow us to verify that the relationship between income level and selectivity is significant (Figure 3, right). It seems that content is selected more among citizens with higher incomes, a relatively little studied issue but which would be relevant to understand polarization processes from the sociology of inequality, since it would coincide with classical views in which social class is an explanatory factor to understand political behavior and, in this case, also media behavior.



Regression coefficients (B) and standard errors are shown as bars (CI=95%).

Figure 2. Average marginal effects (AME) for the media diet variable for the variables age and personal income

Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2019).



Regression coefficients (B) and standard errors are shown as bars (CI=95%).

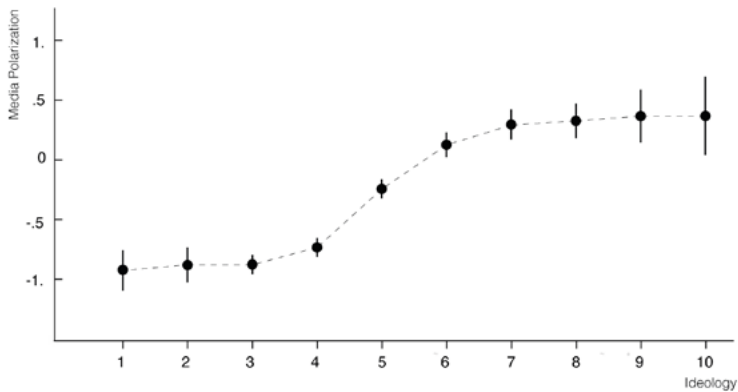
Figure 3. Average marginal effects (AME) for the media diet variable for the variables interest in politics and ideology

Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2019).

As for the political variables, the model also allows us to observe some explanations of the profile of the more mediatically polarized voter. On the one hand, the relationship between affiliation to a political party or political formation and greater information selectivity is significant. In this regard, the group factor and conversations among peers could create a bubble, which would generate certain behaviors of loyalty or fidelity to consume and select certain media of the same ideological tendency (Barbera et al., 2015).

Significant differences can also be observed between the degree of interest in politics and its greater polarization in news selection. The marginal effects offer robust effects with differences of +0.2 points for an individual who shows no interest versus one who has little interest. Since the consumption of political information is one of the most conventional formulas for individual political action, the correlation between the two variables could lead us to think that this effect could be bilateral: the greater the interest, the greater the selectivity, and the greater the selectivity, the greater the interest (figure 3, left).

Nonetheless, ideology seems to be the most explanatory variable in determining the phenomenon of ideological selectivity. In this regard, the probability of obtaining a more ideologically restrictive diet is much higher among those who declare an ideology compared to those who are not self-placed within the axis of ideological competition (left - right). This profile of a voter with little ideology connects with the results of the previous variable, interest in politics: citizens with less attachment to politics and institutions would be less likely to select related media.



Average values and confidence coefficients (CI=95%) are shown.

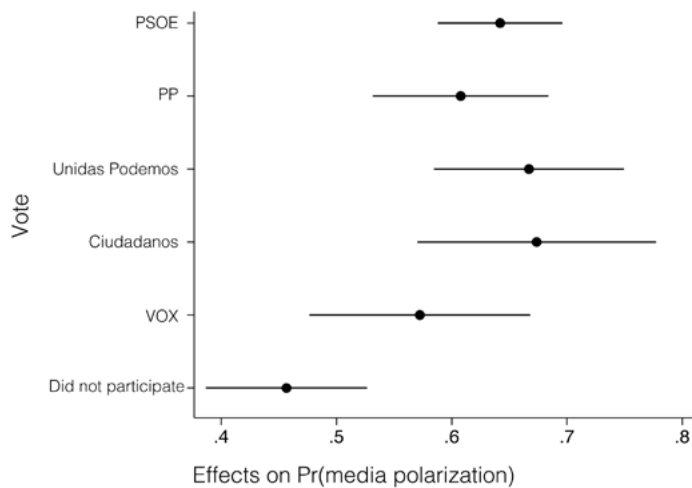
Figure 4. Average political polarization (y), by ideological self-positioning (x)

Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2019).

Consequently, it would seem that the relationship between ideology and selectivity in the media diet is quite consistent. It does not occur equally on both sides, but the marginal effects show a (slightly) greater difference between those with a center-left and left-wing ideology, although not with sufficient statistical robustness to observe a clear behavioral pattern. More work would be needed to delve deeper into the existence of significant differences between the two audiences, and whether citizens on either side of the axis show a greater probability or tendency to ideological news selection.

Although ideology is presented as an explanatory variable, the relationship between polarization and news selection should not be confused with what could be called ideological extremism, understood as a positioning on the ideological axis close to the two extremes (1/left and 10/right). The data would not confirm more polarized restrictive selection patterns among subjects who are ideologically more radicalized or located at the extremes of this axis, although the degree of political information of a single ideological line increases despite the fact that there is a more slanted position on the axis.

Therefore, there is no polarizing effect, i.e., a relationship between being more right-wing or left-wing and having a more intense media consumption of conservative or progressive media, but the existence of two media spheres configured by media consumption consistent with the personal predispositions of citizens does seem to have been established.



Regression coefficients (B) and standard errors are shown as bars (CI=95%).

Figure 5. Average marginal effects (AME) for the variable media polarization for the variable vote recall

Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2019).

In this regard, the relationship between media polarization and party voting is similar to the ideological variable. There is statistical strength to say that there is greater media polarization among those who did not vote versus those who did.

Among the voters of the four main parties (PP, PSOE, Ciudadanos and Unidas Podemos) we observe similar effects, with hardly any significant differences among them (Figure 5). However, among the electorate of VOX, a radical right-wing populist party, we find slightly lower effects than among the other parties. Despite its ideological characteristics (one of the most conservative parties, even in terms of comparison with other European radical right parties) and as expected, its voters do not seem to be the most polarized.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has sought to deepen the study of audience polarization in Spain, offering a relationship between selective exposure and the political parallelism of the media and the phenomenon of audience polarization. In this regard, we offer a somewhat specific profile of the media polarized citizen. First, from a sociodemographic point of view -accepting the first hypothesis: men, older people, people with greater resources or economic income are more likely to consume more restricted diets in related contents-, but also from a political-ideological point

of view, since those interviewed who are more interested in politics, affiliated to parties or who participate electorally (vote) also demonstrate greater ideological selectivity in their information consumption (thus confirming the third hypothesis).

It seems more complex to confirm the validity of the second hypothesis (H2), which affirmed the relationship between ideological extremism (being self-placed at one end of the axis) and the polarization of their media diet, since the results of the analysis model do not allow us to confirm the alternative hypothesis. Therefore, causality between both phenomena should be discarded (accepting the possibility of the supposed null hypothesis, in which there is no probable relationship between both cognitive processes) and attributing the high selectivity of ideologically related content to other reasons. Some plausible causes –without being able to prove any of them, since the questionnaire does not allow submitting them to the statistical regression model– could be close to the transformation of the ideological lines of the editorial groups, the greater fragmentation of the audiences derived from the thematic nichification or, even, the appearance of extreme discourses in some media companies; in any case, their verification or verification is beyond the scope of this topic.

The main goal was to deepen our knowledge of audience polarization in Spain by means of a new methodological tool (a scale of accumulated information consumption, through the CIS question on the use of media during the electoral campaign) that provides a social-macro vision from an individual perspective from survey data. Nevertheless, these results are circumscribed within the electoral context: being data from campaign consumption, the records correspond to specific media uses. Individuals could consume different media during campaign and non-campaign periods. Beyond a possible limitation of the scale itself, the results could evidence the existence of polarization intervals (campaigns or specific media events), where citizens substantially modify their own information patterns.

In any case, this paper offers some conclusions on selective media consumption and polarization processes. Along with other research previously pointed out in the theoretical framework, it seems increasingly reasonable to warn about the existence of polarized audiences in Spain. Ksiaszek's (2016) conceptualization of red and blue audiences could be transferred with certain nuances to the Spanish scenario, which would delve into the characteristics of the polarized pluralistic media system proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), or in the critical reclassification of Brüggermann and colleagues. In a way, it is interesting to note that, although there is a decreasing number of citizens who declare mixed diets (composed of conservative or progressive media), a considerable proportion of the country's citizens are less ideologized, politically apathetic, or consume

regional media (especially print media) that offer less partisan content (Ramírez-Dueñas, 2021). Therefore, the existence of audience polarization in the country must be considered in context and historical evolution in a system of broad media offer (Van Aelst, 2017).

Likewise, applying the phenomenon of audience polarization to all selectivity processes presents some conceptual problems that are worth discussing. The body of academic work that has dealt with this polarization process has used different approaches: macro, analyzing the supply or media structure; meso, quantifying the set of subjects that make up a given audience of a specific media (called media-centric by Webster & Ksiassek, 2012) and, finally, micro, by studying individual media behaviors through their consumption of political information (the user-centric view).

Although these processes are closely related, it would be appropriate to reconsider the relevance of differentiating the so-called audience polarization (referring to issues of media supply or the study of different audiences) from the individual processes carried out by citizens when they selectively expose themselves to their media diet (the more micro vision); since there is a polarization in such selectivity in which citizens are increasingly restrictive when it comes to ideological choice of content. This phenomenon, therefore, should be considered as another type of polarization (which we would call media polarization here), which would allow the merging of processes that are required and occur simultaneously, but which are conceptually different. In this regard, distinguishing between audience polarization and media polarization opens up a new possibility to redefine a theoretical field that, in some questions, seems to respond in a weak manner (e.g., in understanding why some individuals do engage in selective avoidance and what their motivations might be).

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