Ideological identity, issue-based ideology and bipolar affective polarization in multiparty systems: The cases of Argentina, Chile, Italy, Portugal and Spain

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A B S T R A C T

In multiparty contexts, we know that affective polarization tends to cluster in ideological blocs, although the factors driving this process are still quite unexplored. In this paper, we contribute to filling this gap in the literature by exploring the capacity of ideological identity vis-à-vis issue-based ideology to polarize sentiments towards party voters into two opposing left-right blocs. Specifically, we provide empirical evidence that affective attachments to ideological labels increase the affective distance between ideological blocs to a greater extent than issue extremity and issue consistency. These bipolarizing effects of ideological identity persist even when the identity is inconsistent with issue-based ideology. Additionally, we show that bipolar affective polarization exerts little reverse influence on ideological identity. We support these arguments using an original survey from the TRI-POL project carried out in five multiparty systems: Argentina, Chile, Italy, Portugal and Spain.

1. Introduction

Affective polarization broadly refers to the tendency to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively (Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2016). This type of polarization has mainly been studied in the Unites States (US) context (Iyengar et al., 2019), characterized by the existence of a two-party system with two ideologically diverging parties. Most of the literature exploring the nature of the antipathy between Democrats and Republicans focuses on determining whether this type of polarization is mainly caused by the increasing salience of partisan social identities (e.g. Dias and Lelkes 2022; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason, 2018a) or the increasingly stark policy and/or issue positioning disagreements (e.g. Bougher 2017; Lelkes 2021; Webster and Abramowitz 2017). In recent years, a growing number of studies have explored affective polarization in multiparty systems around the globe (e.g. Boxell et al., 2022; Garzia, Ferreira da Silva and Maye 2023; Gidron, Adams & Horne 2020; Guedes-Neto 2022; Reiljan 2020; Torcal and Comellas 2022; Wagner 2021). Some of the studies on this topic show that, in multiparty contexts, citizens usually display positive feelings towards several parties and animosity towards another set of parties, conforming different affective blocs that tend to be related to

ideological and social cleavages (e.g. Huddy et al., 2018; Kekkonen and Ylä-Anttila 2021; Kekkonen et al., 2022; Reiljan and Ryan 2021). However, our understanding of the factors and dynamics that drive this tendency of affective polarization to cluster in ideological blocs in multiparty settings is still scarce, missing the opportunity to disentangle the relationship between affective polarization and ideology.

In this paper, we contribute to the study of affective polarization in multiparty systems by focusing on the role of ideology in polarizing sentiments towards party voters into two opposing left-right blocs, but distinguishing between ideology understood as a belief system (i.e., issue-based ideology) and ideology understood as an affective attachment to ideological labels (i.e., identity-based ideology). The literature shows that ideological identity contributes to accentuate perceptions of elite ideological polarization (Vegetti and Širinić 2019), fuels political engagement (Oshri et al., 2021) and, in the US context, is more strongly associated with the affective distance between liberals and conservatives than issue-based ideology (Mason 2018a, 2018b). However, the literature exploring affective polarization in multiparty systems has not distinguished between these two different types of ideology. While in the US two-party system partisan and ideological identities largely overlap, in multiparty contexts the same ideological identity is usually

shared by different political parties (Garry 2007; Wagner 2021), so that ideology constitutes a supra-partisan identity with the potential to exert its own particular effect on perceptions and affective evaluations of political objects, including party supporters.

In the following pages, we argue that the left-right ideological labels work in many multi-party systems as group identifiers, so that citizens tend to perceive parties and partisans of their own ideological bloc as in-groups and those of the other ideological bloc as out-groups while, at the same time, emphasizing the differences between partisans belonging to these two ideological blocs (Vegetti and Širinić 2019). As a result, ideological identity leads to the development of a bipolar type of affective polarization characterized by a strong animosity between the party supporters who, respectively, belong to the left and right blocs. By contrast, issue-based ideology is expected to contribute significantly less to this bipolar affective polarization. In addition, identity-based ideology is not necessarily the product of a coherent set of political beliefs, so its bipolarizing effects may be present even among citizens with centrist positions on salient policy-issues or those with ideologically inconsistent beliefs on different issues. Finally, we also explore whether bipolar affective polarization exerts significant reverse effects on identity-based ideology.

We test these expectations in the multiparty systems of Argentina, Chile, Italy, Portugal and Spain by using an original survey from the TRI-POL project (Torcal et al., 2023). The dataset includes, for each selected country, feelings scales towards voters of the main parties, identification scales towards ideological labels and policy-issue positions, as well as some relevant control variables. The selection of countries allows us to explore the relationship between ideological identity, issues and affective polarization in some rather different institutional and political contexts.

This paper contributes to the literature that studies affective polarization in multiparty systems by showing that ideological identity shapes affective polarization into two opposing ideological poles and that this effect is not conditioned by issue-based ideology. This constitutes a pernicious form of polarization that, despite the presence of multiple parties, divides societies into 'Us vs. Them' camps resulting in a single dimension that overshadows all others (McCoy and Somer 2019). Furthermore, the results show that bipolar affective polarization exerts little and inconsistent reverse effects on ideological identity, reinforcing the idea that identity-based ideology leads to, rather than follows, the affective distance between ideological blocs.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Issue-based vs. identity-based ideology

Ideology has been traditionally conceptualized as a 'belief system': 'a configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional interdependence' (Converse 2006: 3). This type of ideology is based on principled beliefs and convictions about the proper role of government, constitutes a guide to interpret and respond to aspects of the political and social environments, and has been shown to be a good predictor of individuals' issue positioning (Popp and Rudolph 2011). Generally, people on the left (or liberals, in the US) support redistributive social policies and adopt progressive stances in cultural issues, while people on the right (or conservatives) are more reluctant to endorse government-based solutions to socio-economic problems and hold more traditional cultural views. This ideology type has been referred in the literature mainly as 'operational ideology' (Free and Cantril 1967) or 'issue-based ideology' (Mason 2018a, 2018b). The operationalization of this type of ideology requires measures of opinions and stances towards different salient policy-issues. It can be conceptualized and measured in two different ways. On the one hand, issue-based ideology is usually understood as the extent to which citizens hold extreme opinions on a given set of issues (issue extremity). On the other hand, it is also measured as the extent to

which individuals are ideologically consistent in a battery of different issues (issue consistency).

However, ideology can also be understood as a social and political identity, not necessarily rooted in a coherent set of opinions on different concrete issues (Conover and Feldman 1981; Levitin and Miller 1979). This identity-based type of ideology is defined as individuals' affective attachments to ideological labels and to the people and symbols associated with those labels. It has been primarily attributed to the influence of social groups (e.g. Popp and Rudolph 2011). Symbolic attachments to any of the ideological groups significantly influences policy preferences and political behavior, although their effects depend on the existence of some social psychological and emotional ties with one of the ideological groups' members (e.g. Devine 2014; Malka and Lelkes 2010; Popp and Rudolph 2011). This type of ideology has received different names in the literature, such as 'symbolic ideology' (Ellis and Stimson 2009), 'ideological social identity' (Devine 2014), 'ideological identity' (Malka and Lelkes 2010), or 'identity-based ideology' (Mason 2018a, 2018b). Sometimes it is measured using the traditional left-right self-placement scale, although it is preferable to use survey items that ask about the degree of identification with specific ideological labels (Mason 2018a).

2.2. Towards bipolar affective polarization

Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), on which most of the affective polarization literature is based, constitutes a comprehensive and integrated analysis of the relationship between self-concept and group and intergroup behavior. According to this theory, the origins of social identity are driven by both motivational and cognitive factors (Huddy 2001: 132). More concretely, this theory defends that people have a natural inclination to divide the world into in-groups and out-groups and are motivated to positively distinguish their group from others, leading to the development of in-group bias, even in the most basic definition of a group (Tajfel et al., 1971).

By contrast, the so-called self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), which derives from the classic social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), is basically focused on the cognitive roots of social identity. Categorization is the cognitive process by which people classify objects into groups to make sense of the world (e.g. Allport 1954) through discrimination and generalization (Wedell et al., 2007). Discrimination facilitates treating objects from different categories differently, whereas generalization allows predicting information of an individual object based on other objects sharing a category. This leads, thus, to two possible effects of categorization on perceptions and judgements of objects: differences between objects that belong in different categories tend to be accentuated (inter-category effect), while differences between objects that belong to the same category tend to be overlooked (intra-category effect) (e.g. Goldstone and Hendrickson 2010). These two categorization effects are not always found together, and in most cases one effect predominates over the other (e.g. McGarty and Tuner 1992).

The principles driving the categorization of objects can be extended to explain the categorization of people, including oneself, into social grouping (e.g. Huddy 2001). Given a certain social categorization, people would tend to accentuate the perceived differences between themselves and members of the out-group as well as to increase the perceived similarity with members of the in-group. The extent to which a specific social categorization (and associated identity) serves as the basis for self-conception and for the perception of others is determined by the salience of the category in a given context (Turner et al., 1987), which, in turn, rests on the notions of accessibility and fit (e.g. (Hogg and Smith 2007). That is, people rely on categorizations that are valued, important and frequently employed and, consequently, use them to investigate how well the categorization fits the observed similarities and differences among people.

There are two main political categories to which people develop affective attachments helping them to organize and understand their

political environment: partisanship and ideology (Vegetti and Širinić 2019). In the context of the US two-party system, partisan and ideological identities overlap to a great extent: being a Democrat is practically synonymous with being a liberal, while being a Republican is almost equivalent to being a conservative (Levendusky 2009). This way, partisan identity tends to be the main factor influencing political perceptions and behaviors (Heit and Nicholson 2010). However, in multiparty systems, the same ideology usually encompasses different partisan categories and some people may not identify as much with a particular party as with an ideological label (e.g. Garry 2007), constituting a supra-partisan identity. In fact, it has been traditionally argued that ideology is the main driver of party voters' preferences and behavior in many contemporary democracies, leading to a bipolarization of the political conflict in those left-right ideological terms (Thomassen 2005; Oshri et al., 2021).

Individuals identified with the 'left' or 'right' labels may tend to categorize people as in-groups and out-groups based on their ideological adscription. Moreover, they may accentuate similarities between voters belonging to the same ideological bloc and differences between supporters of different ones. As Vegetti and Širinić (2019) have recently showed, when the left-right distinction has a strong identity component in a given political environment, individuals are better equipped to discriminate between parties belonging to different ideological blocs and tend to perceive parties belonging to the opposite ideological group as more distant from themselves than they actually are. By contrast, citizens do not tend to perceive parties within ideological blocs as more uniform. Following these previous results, we expect that individuals with high levels of ideological identity tend to express much more polarized sentiments towards voters of left-wing parties and supporters of right-wing ones than those with low levels of ideological identity (or without any); that is, identity-based ideology increases the affective distance between the supporters of both ideological blocs, leading to the conformation of a bipolar type of affective polarization. The first hypothesis, hence, is as follows:

H1. Ideological identity is positively associated with the affective distance between ideological blocs

Taking extreme positions on salient policy-issues, and/or holding ideologically consistent positions on a range of different issues, may also be associated with bipolar affective polarization. We know that extreme attitudes towards salient policy issues and/or extreme positions on the left-right scale are positively associated with animosity between ideological blocs in multiparty systems (e.g. Huddy et al., 2018; Reiljan and Ryan 2021; Wagner 2021). However, we expect this relationship to be significantly weaker than with ideological identity, because issue-based ideology lacks the component of psychological and emotional attachments that allows citizens to classify different objects into clearly defined groups and accentuate differences between them. Recent studies in fragmented party systems show that citizens' evaluation of out-parties and their supporters become gradually cooler as the ideological distance to a partisan group grows, suggesting that ideology understood as a belief system tends to push citizens to evaluate partisans not so much based on ideological blocs, but rather on the extent to which they agree on specific issues (Harteveld 2021; Van Erkel and Turkenburg 2022). Following this argument, for example, a Social Democrat would express high levels of disgust towards supporters of the radical right, while also exhibiting mildly cold sentiments towards voters on the radical left and center-right. Only if this Social Democrat had a strong affective attachment to the left, would he express warmer feelings towards radical-left voters than towards center-right ones, and the affective distance between blocs would increase. Therefore, the second hypothesis is as follows:

H2. Ideological identity is more strongly associated with the affective distance between ideological blocs than issue-based ideology.

Identity and issue-based ideology are two conceptually different and

empirically distinguishable concepts, with the positive correlation between the two measures being quite weak (see, for example, Mason 2018b for the US, and Oshri et al., 2021 for Israel). There is, accordingly, the existence of 'ideologues without issues': people who identify strongly with an ideological label but hold moderate stances on salient issues and/or ideologically incongruent positions on some of these issues. Interestingly, ideological identity tends to generate political attitudes and behaviors purely on the basis of group reasoning. In the bipartisan US context, Mason (2018b) empirically showed that identity-based ideology is associated with affective polarization between liberals and conservatives even when issue-based ideology is weak or conflicting with ideological identity; that is, ideological identities drive polarization even among those individuals who identify as conservatives but are left-leaning in their policy-issue positions – and vice versa. We expect to find the same result for multiparty systems, so the third hypothesis is the following:

H3. Ideological identity is associated with the affective distance between ideological blocs even when it is inconsistent with issue-based ideology.

2.3. Reverse effects

So far, we have assumed that ideological identity fuels a bipolar type of affective polarization between left and right blocs. This is congruent with social identity theory: the mere identification with an in-group leads individuals to positively distinguish their group from others; and, the greater the partisan identity, the stronger the antipathy towards the members of the out-group(s) (Huddy 2001; Tajfel and Turner 1979). However, the affective distance between ideological blocs may also exert reverse effects on identity-based ideology, such that ideological identity and bipolar affective polarization reinforce each other over time. This is a relevant question that has been insufficiently explored in the literature and even then, as far as we know, only for issue-based ideology. Specifically, in the US context, Lelkes (2018) explored the possible two-way relationship between issue consistency and affective polarization, showing that there is a reciprocal, albeit weak, relationship. Since identity-based ideology is grounded in the notion that individuals develop affective ties to ideological labels, we expect that the reverse effects of bipolar affective polarization on ideological identity are significant and substantive. Therefore, the last hypothesis is the following:

H4. The affective distance between ideological blocs exerts positive reverse effects on ideological identity.

3. Case selection, data and methods

3.1. Selected countries and parties

We test the different expectations in five multiparty systems of Southern Europe and Latin America with quite different institutional settings: Argentina, Chile, Italy, Portugal and Spain. Previous studies have shown that Southern Europe is a region that contains some of the most polarized Western countries, both in ideological and in affective terms. In a recent study, Dalton (2021) empirically showed that Italy, Spain and Portugal have, respectively, the 3rd, 4th and 7th most polarized party systems along the left-right ideological divide out of a total of 21 Western countries. Congruent with this classification, Gidron et al. (2020) found that Southern Europe is the most affectively polarized region in the Western world, and Reiljan (2020) showed that it is the region presenting the highest levels of partisan antipathy in Europe along with Central and Eastern Europe.

Regarding Latin America, most studies argued that parties tend not to differentiate themselves from their rivals in ideological and programmatic terms, so that voters choose parties and candidates more on the basis of their personal characteristics than on ideology and issues (e.

g. Mainwaring and Torcal 2006; Roberts 2002). However, the levels of party system ideological polarization, and the extent to which voters' ideological positioning predicts their electoral choices, differ across Latin American countries and within them over time (Moraes 2015; Singer 2016). These analyses reveal that, during the period 1995–2010, Chile was among the group of countries in the region with middle-to-high levels of both elite ideological polarization and left-right voting, while Argentina was among countries with middle-to-low levels in both measures. Some studies show that, congruent with the low levels of elite ideological polarization, the meaning attributed to the left and right labels by people in Argentina is quite heterogeneous, poorly linked to the main parties and not very politically relevant (e.g. Brussino et al., 2016; Zechmeister 2006; Zechmeister and Corral 2013), which suggests that the saliency of left and right categories (i.e. the extent to which this categorization serves as the basis for self-conception and for the perception of parties and their voters) may be particularly weak in this country compared to the others selected (Hogg and Smith 2007).

In each country, we have selected the main political parties for our empirical analysis. They are classified as being in the 'left' or 'right' ideological blocs according to their average ideological position given by the respondents of the survey used in this paper (see Figure A1-A5 in the online Appendix), as well as according to specialized literature cited in the following paragraphs. Table A1 in the online Appendix lists the selected political parties in each country and their location in the left and right blocs.

The Argentinian party system is currently dominated by two large electoral alliances that took most of the support in the last presidential and legislative elections: *Frente de Todos* (FdT) and *Juntos por el Cambio* (JxC). The former brings together different currents of Peronism and is generally associated with a centre-left position, while the latter represents the alliance between traditional radicalism and different liberal sectors and is located on the centre-right (Sendra and Ortiz 2022). To the left of the FdT is the coalition of socialist and Trotskyist parties *Frente de Izquierda y de Trabajadores* (FIT). At the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, we have the newly founded *La Libertad Avanza* (LA), a libertarian and conservative party that some analysts place close to the radical right (Cruz Olmeda and Soto Licea 2021).

In Chile, the party system was structured along four main poles in the 2021 presidential and legislative elections. First, there were the two traditional coalitions: a centre-left bloc formed by the *Partido Demócrata Cristiano* (PDC), the *Partido Socialista* (PS), the *Partido por la Democracia* (PPD) and the *Partido Radical* (PR); and a rightist bloc mainly composed by the *Renovación Nacional* (RN), the *Unión Demócrata Independiente* (UDI) and the *Evolución Política* (Evópoli) (e.g. Alemán et al., 2021; Torcal and Mainwaring 2003). To the left and to the right of these traditional blocs were, first, a left-wing coalition formed by the parties and movements of the *Frente Amplio* (FA) and the *Partido Comunista* (PC), among others; and, second, the new radical-right *Partido Republicano* (PLR) (Somma and Donoso 2022).

Italy has suffered a continuous transformation of its party system during this last decade (Emanuele and Chiaramonte 2020). The major party on the left continues to be the centre-left *Partito Democratico* (PD). To the left of the PD, the most relevant party that gained representation in the 2018 legislative elections was the left-wing *Liberi e Uguali* (LeU). To the right of the political spectrum, the traditional centre-right party, *Forza Italia* (FI), was relegated to a secondary position in the 2018 elections by the radical-right *Lega*. Another radical-right party, *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI), has progressively gained relevance until winning the recent 2022 elections. Two other relevant political parties present an ambiguous ideological position: the populist catch-all party *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S) and the socio-liberal *Italia Viva* (IV) (Berlucchi 2021). Both parties have been classified in the left bloc following the average perception of survey respondents.

Spain has also completed a deep transformation of its party system during the last decade, from an imperfect bipartisanship dominated by the centre-left *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE) and the centre-

right *Partido Popular* (PP), to the current multiparty system with the presence of the radical-left party *Podemos*, the centre-right party *Ciudadanos* (Cs) and the radical-right *Vox* (Rama et al. 2021). This transformation has resulted in an inter-bloc ideological confrontation between two major groups at the national level: the left, formed by Podemos and PSOE, and the right, formed by Cs, PP and Vox (Orriols and León 2020; Simón 2020).

Finally, Portugal has experienced more modest changes in its party system (Lisi et al., 2020). The two major traditional parties, the centre-left *Partido Socialista* (PS) and the centre-right *Patido Social Democrata* (PSD), continue to gather the majority of support. To the left of the PS are two main parties: the communist *Coligação Democrática Unitária* (CDU) and the radical left *Bloco de Esquerda* (BE). Two small progressive green parties are also considered in our analysis as belonging to the left bloc: *Pessoas-Animais-Natureza* (PAN) and *Livre*. To the right of the PSD, we find its traditional conservative partner, the *Centro Democrático e Social-Partido Popular* (CDS-PP). Moreover, two small right-wing parties surged in the 2019 legislative elections and increased their support in the recent 2022 elections: the libertarian *Iniciativa Liberal* (IL) and the radical-right *Chega* (Lopes 2023).

3.2. Data and operationalization

The TRI-POL dataset comprises a three-wave online panel survey conducted in Argentina, Chile, Italy, Portugal and Spain among their respective voting age population (Torcal et al., 2023). A non-probability quota sampling method was applied, ensuring that the sample reflects the characteristics of the general population in terms of region of residency, gender and age. To test H1, H2 and H3, we used the first wave of the panel, which is the one containing all respondents. In the case of Argentina, however, the first wave does not include the feeling thermometer scale towards the voters of a relevant right-wing party that emerged very recently (*La Libertad Avanza*) and, hence, we chose to use the third wave.[12] To test H4, we take advantage of the panel structure of the data and used all three waves. The first wave was carried out between late September and mid November 2021; the second between early December 2021 and early January 2022; and the third between late March and late April 2022.[3]

To test the different hypotheses, we must first classify the respondents into left and right ideological blocs. We did this using the classic eleven-point ideological self-placement scale, where 0 means extreme left and 10 means extreme right. In particular, those respondents who fall between points 0 and 4 were classified in the left bloc and those who fall between points 6 and 10 were classified in the right bloc. To limit the missing data, respondents who are located right in the center (i.e., in point 5) were classified in one of the blocs according to, first, the ideological position of the party with which they identify and, second, the ideological affiliation of the party for which they express the intention to vote in the next general elections. The respondents who are located right in the ideological center and who do not express any identification or intention to vote for one of the main parties selected in

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[1] We do not use the second wave because it does not contain policy-issue positions.

[2] The number of completed interviews in the first wave is of 1337 for Chile, 1231 for Italy, 1028 for Portugal and 1289 for Spain; in Argentina, 979 respondents completed the third wave.

[3] For more information about the dataset, see https://www.upf.edu/web/tri-pol/documentation-and-data.

the study are not considered in the present analysis.[4]

3.2.1. Affective distance between ideological blocs

The dependent variable, affective distance between ideological blocs (ADBB), is built based on feeling thermometer scales towards the voters of the main parties in each country, which range from 0 (negative sentiments) to 100 (positive sentiments). The use of feeling scales towards voters constitutes a relevant improvement from the most of the comparative literature that employs feelings towards parties. As has been shown, the polarization of sentiments towards parties tends to overestimate the levels of antipathy between ordinary partisans (e.g. Druckman and Levendusky 2019; Knudsen 2021), which is central to the definition of affective polarization. The ADBB was obtained by calculating, first, the mean sentiments towards voters of parties belonging to the left bloc and the right bloc, respectively. Then, we calculated the distance between the mean sentiments towards the voters of their own ideological bloc and the mean sentiments towards the voters of the other bloc. The resulting variable can range from −100 to 100. The positive values mean that respondents give better evaluations to the voters of parties belonging to their own ideological bloc than to the voters of parties of the other bloc, while negative values mean that respondents have colder feelings towards supporters of their own bloc than towards supporters of the opposed one. Tables A2-A6 in the online Appendix provide actual examples of the ADBB caculculation in each selected country.

Figures A6-A10 in the online Appendix display the distribution, mean and standard deviation of our dependent variable in each selected country. Spain is the country that presents the highest average ADBB (30.94), closely followed by Argentina (29.45). By contrast, the country that clearly presents the lowest mean levels of bipolar polarization is Portugal (12.35).

3.2.2. Ideological identity

Ideological identity is sometimes simply captured using the traditional self-identification scale, although this measure is quite ambiguous because it may also partially contain issue positioning and other instrumental components (Mason 2018a). Therefore, ideological identity is best measured using survey scales that ask about the level of attachment to specific ideological labels. In our case, we use two survey questions that ask respondents their level of identification with the ideological labels 'left' and 'right'. Specifically, the question is as follows: 'How much do you identify with the following political/ideological labels [Left/Right]?'. Respondents had four response options: 'not at all', 'a little', 'somewhat' and 'very much'. We calculated the difference between identification with the label of one's own ideological bloc and identification with the label of the other bloc. The logic behind this operationalization is that the ideological identity strength of a respondent who uniquely identifies with her ideological label is stronger than the identity strength of a respondent who also exhibits some degree of identification with the opposite label.[5]

The resulting variable, therefore, ranges from −3 to 3, where positive values mean that respondents identify more with the ideological label of

their bloc than with the label of the other bloc; zero signifies that respondents do not identify with either ideological label, or identify equally with both; and negative values mean that respondents are more attached to the ideological label of the opposed bloc than to that of their own bloc.

Figures A11-A15 display the distribution, mean and standard deviation of our key independent variable in each selected country. Spain is, again, the country that presents the highest average level of ideological identity (1.60). By contrast, Argentina is the country with the weakest mean ideological identity (1.07), which seems congruent with previous studies. It should be noted that the number of observations with negative values in this variable is very low, ranging between 2.14% (Chile) and 4.38% (Portugal) of the total number of respondents.

3.2.3. Issue-based ideology

Issue-based ideology is conceptualized and operationalized in two different ways: issue extremity and issue consistency (e.g. Mason 2018a, 2018b). We take advantage of the fact that the TRI-POL dataset includes opinion scales on six salient policy issues: state intervention in the economy, provision of public services, cultural assimilation of migrants, desired immigration level, same-sex marriage and abortion rights (see exact wording in the online Appendix). Table A7 in the online Appendix shows bivariate correlations between each opinion scale and ideological self-placement, confirming that issues are related to the left-right dimension in the same direction (although with some differences regarding the strength of the relationship) across our selected countries: being favorable to state intervention, public services, immigration and multiculturalism, and defending abortion and same sex marriage is linked to the left side of the ideological spectrum, and vice-versa.

On the one hand, we constructed the issue extremity variable by combining the six policy-issue scales into a composite scale that goes from the most left-wing average positions (0) to the most right-wing average positions (10) for those respondents who belong to the right bloc, and from the most right-wing positions (0) to the most left-wing (10) for those who were classified in the left bloc. That is, the higher the values of this variable, the more extreme are the respondents' average positions towards the direction of their bloc on the selected issues.

On the other hand, we created each country's issue consistency variable by, first, calculating the number of issue items that were answered on the left-leaning end of the spectrum and those on the right-leaning end. Then, we calculated the difference between the number of left-leaning issues and right-leaning issues for those respondents classified according to each ideological bloc. The resulting variable can vary from −6 to 6; that is, from those who maintain inconsistent positions in relation to their ideological bloc on all six issues (−6) – e.g. an individual who self-places on the right but holds left-leaning positions on all six issues – to those who express a position on all issues that is consistent with their ideological bloc (6) – e.g. an individual who self-places on the right and holds right-leaning positions on all issues –, through those who hold a centrist position on all issues or the same number of left and right-leaning issues (0).

Figures A16-A25 in the online Appendix show the distribution, mean and standard deviation of issue extremity and issue consistency in each country. Spain is once again the country with the highest average levels of issue extremity/consistency (6.23/1.67), while Portugal registers the lowest levels (5.52/0.74). Finally, tables A8-A12 display, for each selected country, a correlation matrix between ideological identity, issue extremity and issue consistency. The correlation coefficients between ideological identity and the two issue-based variables range from weak to moderate and never exceed the value of 0.5, which seems to empirically confirm, in line with previous literature, the distinction between identity-based and issue-based ideology. The correlation between issue extremity and issue consistency, by contrast, is very strong in all countries (between 0.92 and 0.95).

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[4] The percentage of respondents located in the center among those who answered the ideological self-placement question is 33.8% in Argentina, 31.6% in Chile, 20.1% in Italy, 29.7% in Portugal and 23.7% in Spain. Once we classify these respondents in one of the blocs according to their party identification and vote intention, the percentage of discarded respondents without ideology is substantially reduced: 15.2% in Argentina, 19.5% in Chile, 10.5% in Italy, 12.8% in Portugal and 14.8% in Spain.

[5] For example, a respondent who places herself on the left and claims to identify 'somewhat' with the left and, at the same time, 'a little' with the right, is considered to have a more blurred and weaker identification with her bloc than another respondent who shows the same identification strength with the left but without any attachment to the right.

3.2.4. Control variables

We have also selected some basic control variables: partisan identification, gender, age, education level and subjective income (see the online Appendix for a detailed description of these variables).

3.3. Methods

To test H1, H2 and H3, we implemented two different analyses in each selected country: one with issue extremity as the variable measuring issue-based ideology and the other with issue consistency. In particular, we perform linear regression models with ADBB as the dependent variable and, as independent variables, ideological identity, issue extremity/issue consistency and the aforementioned control variables. All variables are standardized except gender and education levels. As indicated above, these linear regression models were performed in the first panel wave, with the exception of Argentina, where we used the third wave.

To test H4, we estimated a three-wave cross-lagged structural equation model to check reciprocal relationships between ADBB and ideological identity (Finkel 2008). This model specifies a lagged effect from each variable on itself over time (autoregressive effects), and cross-lagged effects of bipolar affective polarization and identity-based ideology. Given that there are three panel waves, we can relax constraints regarding error co-variances between the two analyzed variables in each wave. We have also included the lagged effects of each variable at t-2 for two main reasons: first, controlling for any possible lingering effects and, second, obtaining an acceptable model fit. This could make it more difficult to find significant and substantive cross-lagged effects between the second and the third waves than between the first and the second, since lingering effects are controlled for. Finally, we also added in the models issue extremity/issue consistency and the rest of control variables measured in the first wave. We have standardized the variables. For a graphical representation of the model, see Fig. 1. This model is estimated in Chile, Italy, Portugal and Spain. Unfortunately, we cannot perform this analysis in Argentina due to the data limitations described above.

Cross-lagged models are estimated as in any structural equation model, with the variances and co-variances between observed variables expressed in terms of the unknown parameters. Under the assumption of multivariate normality of the observed variables, the maximum likelihood method is used to estimate the model parameters. Given that the models are over-identified, we can assess how well the model fits the data as a whole. With the goal of testing model fit, different measures are used: the Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA), the Comparative Fix Index (CFI), the Tucker and Lewis Index (TLI), and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR).

4. Results

Fig. 2 displays the main results of the linear regression models with ADBB as the dependent variable and ideological identity and issue extremity as key explanatory factors (see linear regressions in Model 1 of Tables A13-A17 in the online Appendix). As can be appreciated in the graphs, H1 is confirmed in all five countries: ideological identity is positively and significantly associated with bipolar affective polarization, controlling for all the other factors. Specifically, ideological identity increases by one standard deviation the affective distance between the own ideological bloc and the other by 0.44 standard deviations in Spain, 0.42 in Portugal, 0.38 in Chile, 0.37 in Italy and 0.24 in Argentina.

Our second hypothesis (H2) is supported by the results in Chile, Italy, Portugal and Spain: although issue extremity is positively associated with ADBB, its bipolarizing effects are significantly weaker than those exerted by ideological identity. The difference in the effect strength between both variables is especially large in Spain, where the effect of issue-based ideology is the weakest in all five countries: increasing the average position on the selected issues by one standard deviation towards the direction of respondents' ideological bloc fuels the affective distance between the own bloc and the other by only 0.12 standard deviations. The results in Argentina, however, do not support H2, given that the effect of issue extremity is not significantly different from the one exerted by identity-based ideology. This finding is congruent with the low levels of elite ideological polarization found in Argentina according to Singer (2016: 181), together with the fact that the popular meaning of left-right label has been found to be quite incongruent and not often linked to party labels (e.g. Zechmeister 2006). It is also congruent with a recent study showing that the main drivers of affective polarization in Argentina are the feelings towards "justicialismo" responding more to the populist/anti-populists conflict (Torcal and Carty 2023).

Concerning the control variables, partisan identification is positively associated with bipolar affective polarization in all countries, its effect being clearly weaker than that exerted by ideological identity (with the exception of Argentina, where the effect strength of the two variables is not significantly different). Women tend to be less polarized by ideological blocs than men in Portugal and Spain; age is positively associated with polarization (except in the case of Spain); and education level exerts positive effects in Chile and Portugal, where subjective income is negatively related to our dependent variable.

If we use issue consistency instead of issue extremity to measure issue-based ideology, the results are the same as those described above (see Model 2 of Tables A13-A17 and Figure A26). If anything, the effects of issue consistency on ADBB are slightly weaker than those exerted by
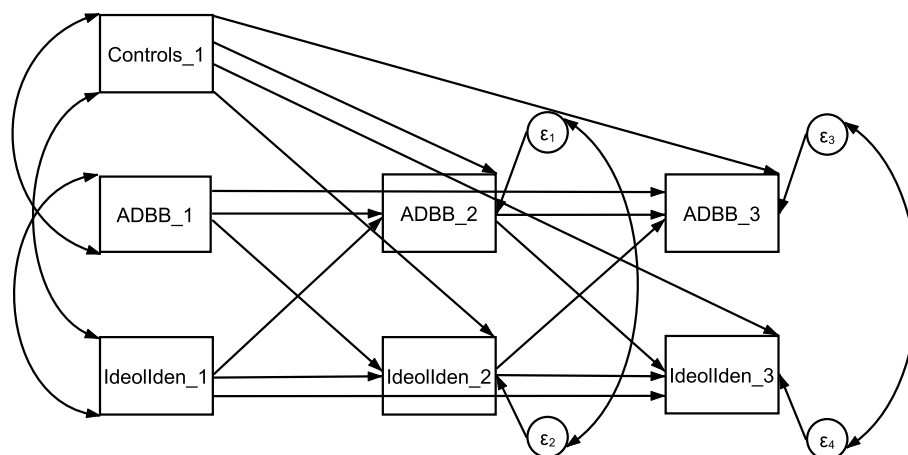

Fig. 1. Cross-lagged structural equation model, 3 waves. Notes: Variables are standardized. ADBB = Affective distance between blocs; IdeoIden = Ideological identity. Control variables are: issue extremity/issue consistency, partisan identity, gender, age, education level and subjective income.
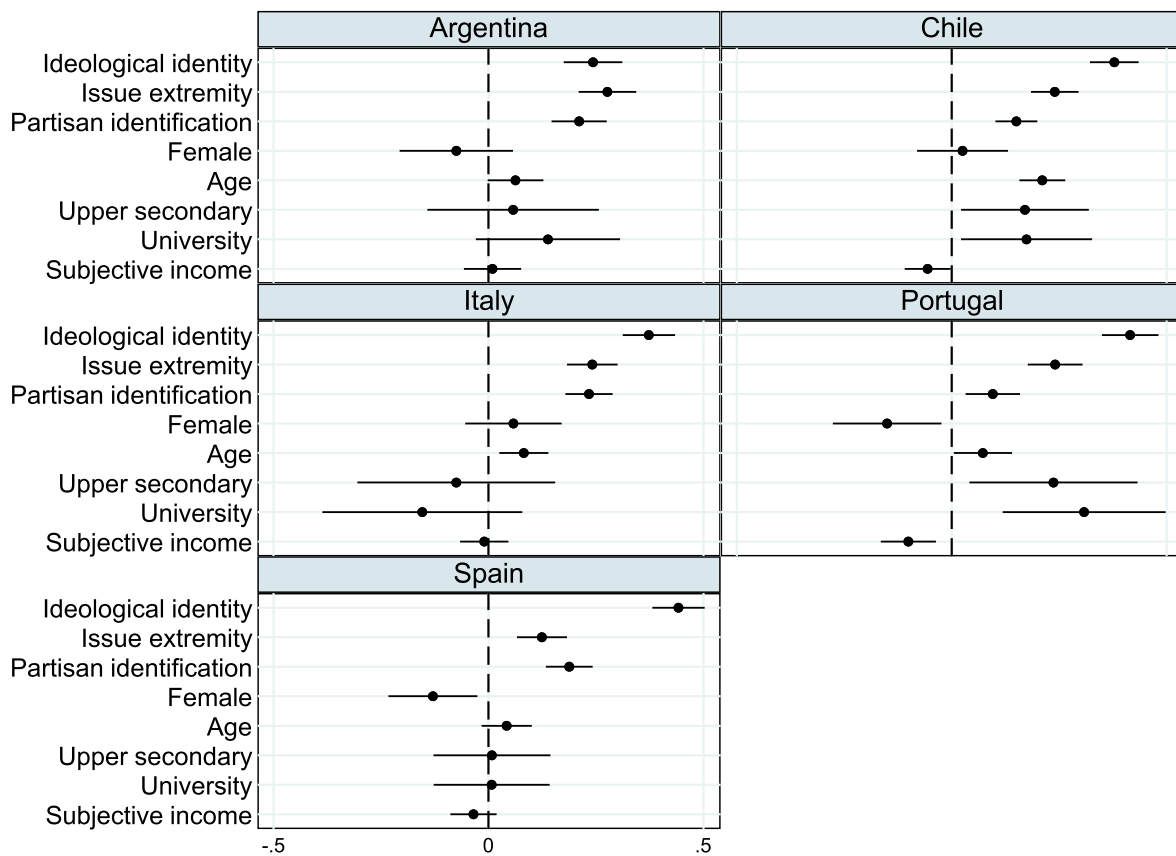
Fig. 2. Linear regression models. Affective distance between ideological blocs as dependent variable. Argentina, Chile, Italy, Portugal and Spain. Notes: 95% confidence intervals. All variables except gender and education level are standardized. Source: TRI-POL, wave 1 (wave 3 for Argentina).

issue extremity.

Are the bipolarizing effects of ideological identity conditioned by issue-based ideology? To test H3, we have included in the previous models an interaction term between ideological identity and issue extremity. Fig. 3 displays, for all five countries, the marginal effects of identity-based ideology on ADBB by levels of issue extremity (see Model 3 of Tables A13-A17). The interaction effects are not singificant at any conventional level, which means that respondents with high levels of ideological identity are more biased in favor of their ideological bloc's voters than those with low levels of identity even when their average positions on the selected six policy-issues are moderate or ideologically inconsistent. Only for the case of Spain is the interaction term significant at a confidence level of 90% and, here, the direction is surprisingly negative: that is, ideological identity seems to have a slightly stronger bipolarizing effect when it is inconsisent with issues.

If we perform an interaction effect between ideological identity and issue consistency, the results remain quite the same (see Model 4 of Tables A13-A17 and Figure A27). The main difference is that the negative interaction term found in Spain in the previous model now appears significant at a 95% confidence level, although the strength of the moderating effect is quite weak: the marginal effect of identity-based ideology on bipolar affective polarization is predicted to be 0.51 standard deviations when issue consistency is of −2 (i.e. respondents maintain two more issues that are inconsistent with their ideological bloc than consistent with it, representing the 10th percentile of the variable), while the marginal effect is still 0.38 standard deviations when issue consistency is of +5 (i.e. respondents hold five more issues that are consistent with their ideological bloc than inconsistent with it, being the 90th percentile of the variable).

All in all, the results are in line with H3: the capacity of ideological identity to polarize sentiments towards party voters into two opposing

left-right blocs appears to have little or nothing to do with issue-based ideology.

Finally, we explore whether bipolar affective polarization in turn feeds back into ideological identity. Fig. 4 shows the main results of the three-wave cross-lagged structural equation models that test H4 in Chile, Italy, Portugal and Spain. They include issue extremity and the rest of the control variables measured in the first wave. The fit of the models is good (see Table A18): the RMSEA is below the standard threshold of 0.10; the requirement that the CFI and the TLI are greater than 0.90 is met in all countries; finally, the SRMR should not be above 0.08 for model acceptability, a requirement that all our models meet.

For H4 to be supported, we need to observe not only that ideological identity feeds subsequent levels of ADBB, but also that bipolar affective polarization reinforces psychological ties to one's own ideological label over time. First, as is observed in Fig. 4, an increase in ideological identity in a given wave leads to an increase in ADBB in the sebsequent wave. Although these cross-lagged effects seem weak, especially between the second and third waves, they are substantial when taking into account the reduced time interval between the waves, which only allows a modest variation of the considered variable over time. Nevertheless, bipolar affective polarization has a much less consistent relationship with later ideological identity. The lagged effects of polarization on identity are significant and quite substantive between the first two waves (although they are weaker than the cross-lagged effects exerted by ideological identity in Chile and Italy). These effects, however, are only statistically significant at the 95% confidence level between the second and third waves – when we control for lingering effects – in one country: Portugal. Specifically, increasing bipolar affective polarization by one standard deviation in the second wave leads to an increase of 0.09 standard deviations on ideological identity in the third wave. The cross-lagged effects of polarization between the last two waves are
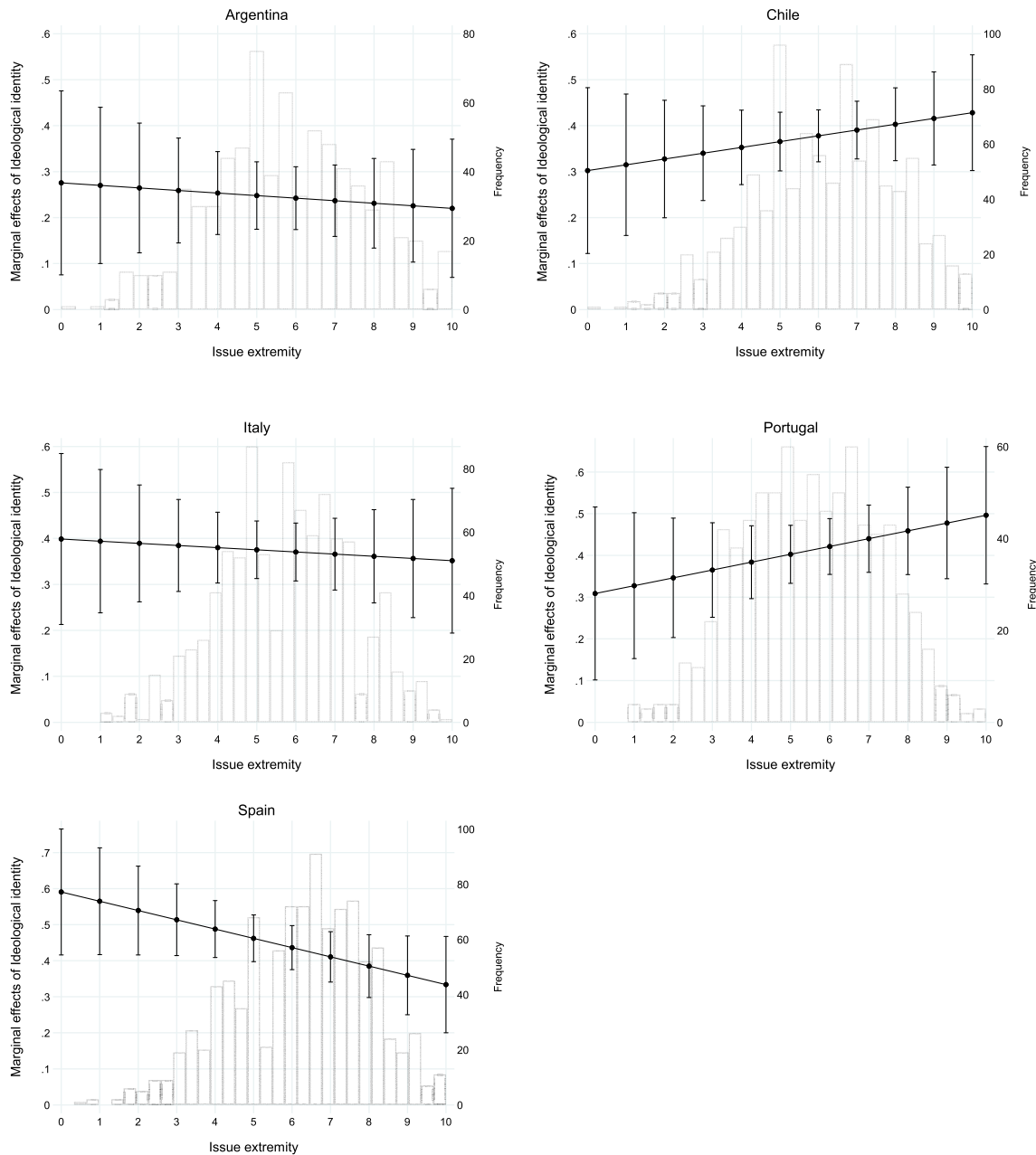
Fig. 3. Marginal effects of ideological identity on the affective distance between ideological blocs by levels of issue extremity. Argentina, Chile, Italy, Portugal and Spain Notes: 95% confidence intervals. Standardized coefficients. Source: TRI-POL, wave 1 (wave 3 for Argentina).

weaker and only significant at a 90% confidence level in Chile and Spain, while in Italy they are very weak and not significant at any conventional level.

If we control the three-wave cross-lagged models on the basis of issue consistency instead of issue extremity, the lagged effects of ADBB on ideological identity between the last two waves seem to be somewhat stronger and are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level in Chile and Spain, while they remain non-significant in Italy (see Figure A28 and Table A19). All in all, the inconsistency of the results (and their dependency on country, waves and model specification) does not support H4. The findings, hence, reinforce the expectation that could be derived from social identity theory that identity-based ideology precedes and stimulates the affective distance between one's own ideological bloc and the opposite, more than the other way around.

4.1. Robustness checks and extensions

Some robustness checks and additional analyses have been implemented. First, there is the possibility that the results obtained are mainly driven by sentiments towards supporters of small extreme parties. To test this possibility, we recalculated our measure of ADBB by weighting sentiments towards voters by the electoral size of their parties.[6] The

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[6] We obtained the electoral size of each party, in the cases of Italy, Portugal and Spain, by estimating the (weighted) mean voting intention based on all the electoral polls performed 90 days before the first day of the wave's fieldwork. For more information, see the Data Protocols of the TRI-POL project (https://www.upf.edu/web/tri-pol/data-protocols-panel-survey). In the cases of Argentina and Chile, we used the results of the most recent national election.
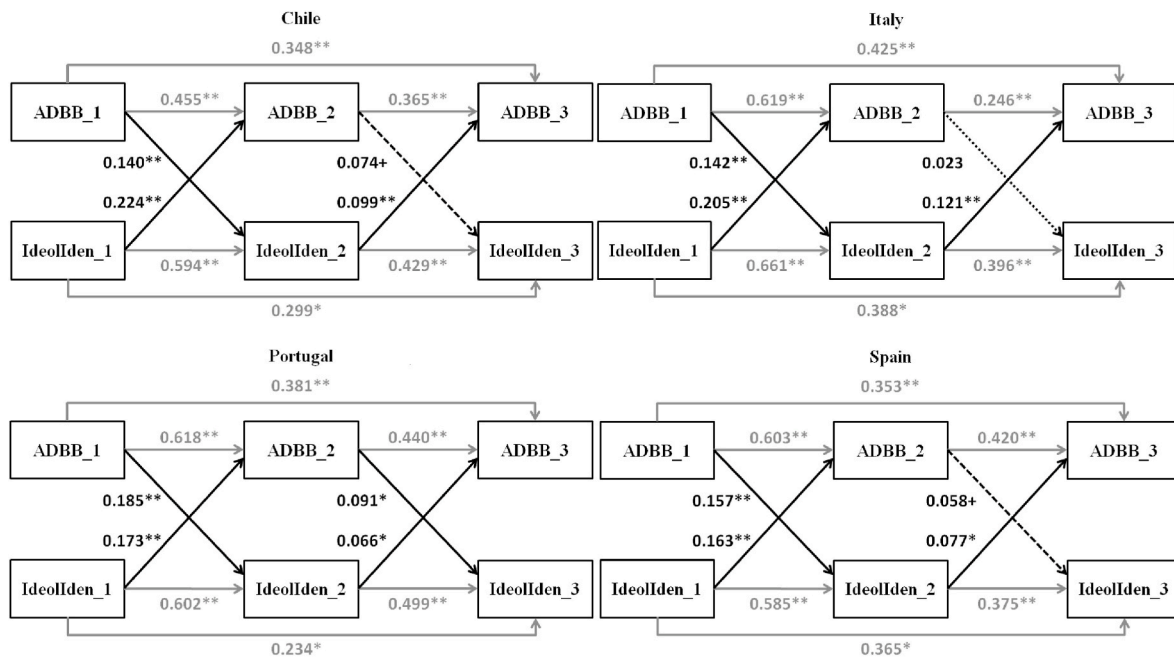
Fig. 4. Cross-lagged structural equation models between affective distance between ideological blocs (ADBB) and ideological identity (IdeolIden), 3 waves. Chile, Italy, Portugal and Spain. Notes: **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, + p < 0.1. Variables are standardized. ADBB = Affective distance between blocs; IdeolIden = Ideological identity. Control variables, means, variances and co-variances are not reported. Control variables are: issue extremity, partisan identity, gender, age, education level and subjective income. Source: TRI-POL, waves 1, 2 and 3.

results are quite similar to those of the main models and the fundamental conclusions hold (Tables A20-A26 and Figures A29-A34).[7]

Second, we also checked whether ideological identity and issue-based ideology has an equal impact on both in-bloc liking and out-bloc dislike components of ADBB or they are more strongly associated with one of them. The results show that ideological identity fuels both polarization components, although the impact tends to be stronger over out-group dislike, especially in Italy and Portugal. Issue-based ideology tends to be also associated with both components, but it has no significant effects on in-bloc liking in Italy and on out-bloc dislike in Portugal (Tables A27-A31 and Figures A35-A36).

Third, we checked the results when those respondents who self-placed themselves in the centre of the ideological scale (5) – but were classified in one of the ideological blocs based on their party identification or intention to vote – are not considered in the analyses. The new models exhibit very similar results to the main ones (Tables A32-A38 and Figures A37-A42).[8]

Fourth, we have operationalized ideological identity, in the main analyses, as the extent to which respondents identify solely with their ideological label. We have argued that this operationalization is convenient because, when an individual shows some degree of attachment towards the opposite label, her identification with the own bloc is more diffuse and, hence, weaker than that of another individual who only shows attachment towards her ideology. If this type of ideology, by contrast, is measured simply as the degree of identification with one's own label, one might expect it to have weaker bipolarizing effects, precisely because this measure is not capable of identifying those individuals with an ambiguous ideological identity. We checked that and the results confirm that ideological identity measured in this way has a

weaker effect on ADBB, similar in strength to that of issues (Tables A39-A45 and Figures A43-A48).[9]

Fifth, it is well known that, in most party systems, political conflict is structured in different dimensions. We conducted a principal component factor analysis with our six policy-issue variables (see the varimax rotated factor loadings in Tables A46 and A47), and the results show the presence of three different factors: one dimension is formed by the economic issues (state intervention and public services), other factor includes the immigration-related ones (immigration level and multi-culturalism), and the last the cultural issues (same-sex marriage and abortion).[10] We then created a composite index for each of these issue types and computed the respective extremity and consistency variables (Figures A49-A53 show box plots for each of these variables by country and ideological bloc). Finally, we tested the effect of each issue type on bipolar affective polarization. The results seem to confirm that, in all countries except Argentina, ideological identity exerts a greater effect than each of the different issues.[11] In Italy, immigration extremity has a strong impact on ADBB, being this effect only weaker than that of identity-based ideology at the 90% confidence level. This finding may reflect the significant strength of the radical right and its cultural agenda in this country (see Table A48-A52 and Figures A54-A55).

5. Conclusions

In multiparty contexts, citizens usually express positive views

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[7] The main difference is that the lagged effect of ideological identity on (weighted) bipolar affective polarization loses significance between the second and the third waves in Portugal. However, the rest of cross-lagged effects exerted by ideological identity in all countries remain significant.

[8] The main difference is that the lagged effect of ideological identity on ADBB loses significance between the second and the third waves in Chile.

[9] Only in Spain is the effect of ideological identity stronger than that of issue-based ideology; in Chile, Italy and Portugal, identity and issues have the same impact; and in Argentina, issue-based ideology fuels polarization to a greater extent than ideological identity.

[10] The exception is Spain, where there are only two factors: the first mainly contains the immigration-related issues and the second the cultural (same-sex marriage and abortion) ones; the economic issues present moderate loadings in both factors.

[11] In the case of Argentina, the effect of ideological identity is weaker than that of economy extremity/consistency.

towards more than one party and its supporters as well as dislike towards several parties and their voters. However, many of them tend to end up in a two well confronted blocs (e.g. Kekkonen and Ylä-Anttila 2021; Reiljan and Ryan 2021). This paper contributes to the understanding of affective polarization in multiparty systems by exploring the extent to which ideological identity, a supra-partisan identity that is prominently relevant in most countries, has the capacity to polarize sentiments towards party voters into two opposing left-right blocs. Until now, different studies located in multiparty systems have explored the effect on affective polarization of extreme attitudes towards salient policy issues and/or extreme positions on the left-right scale (e.g. Guedes-Neto 2022; Harteveld 2021; Torcal and Comellas 2022; Wagner 2021), but without distinguishing between identity-based and issue-based components of ideology or comparing their ability to promote a bipolar form of polarization.

We show that, for the multiparty systems of Argentina, Chile, Italy, Portugal and Spain, identity-based ideology is significantly and strongly associated with the affective distance between ideological blocs, and that this association is stronger than those of ADBB with issue extremity or issue consistency. Furthermore, our analysis reveals that ideological identity increases bipolar affective polarization even when issue-based ideology is weak or inconsistent with respondents' ideology. Identifying with an ideological label, therefore, appears to be a crucial factor promoting a bipolar type of affective polarization that has usually been associated with rather negative social and political consequences (e.g. McCoy and Somer 2019). All these findings are in line with those found in the US context (Mason 2018b), and seem congruent with the capacity of ideological identity to promote political engagement in Israel's multiparty system (Oshri et al., 2021). The only partial exception is the case of Argentina, where the bipolarizing effects of ideological identity are weaker and similar to those exerted by issue-based ideology. These results can be explained by the lower political salience of left-right labels in this Latin American country (e.g. Brussino et al., 2016; Zechmeister 2006).

Finally, we also explore the possibility that the affective distance between ideological blocs in turn feeds back into ideological identity. The results of the implemented cross-lagged models are robust regarding the capacity of identity-based ideology to increase subsequent levels of bipolar affective polarization, but are more inconsistent in relation to the lagged effects of polarization on ideological identity. These findings reinforce the argument congruent with social identity theory that the direction of the explored relationship mainly goes from group identity to group bias or antipathy. Future research could test whether the reverse effects of affective polarization on ideological identity are conditioned by some contextual or individual-level factor. For example, a possible research hypothesis is that polarization fuels identity-based ideology over time only among those with high levels of education or political sophistication.

The main implication of the results presented in the paper is that the tendency of voters in multiparty systems to divide into two affective left-right blocs is not so much due to policy disagreements as it is a simple question of identity. Citizens who are strongly affectively attached to an ideological label tend to see themselves as belonging to delimited groups opposed to each other and, therefore, are less able to achieve stable compromises around policy agendas even if they do in fact agree on particular policy issues (e.g. Mason 2018b). This disturbing dynamic can represent a major obstacle to the implementation of policies necessary to face the great economic, social and environmental challenges that we face as human beings. We therefore need to continue exploring possible measures to attenuate this division based on affective ties with ideological blocs, such as placing greater emphasis on specific policy issues in the debates by political parties and the media (e.g. Miller 2020), or promoting consensual institutions that push parties to break political blocs and achieve broad agreements that include a greater number of actors (e.g. Bernaerts et al., 2022).

This study also presents some limitations. First, ideological identity

is operationalized using a survey question on the extent to which the respondent identifies with the 'Left' and 'Right' ideological labels. Although this is a much better measure than the classic ideological self-placement scale to capture ideological identity, it could be improved through the development of a multi-item scale similar to the one proposed by Huddy et al. (2015) for expressive partisanship (see the multi-item measure of identity-based ideology used by Oshri et al., 2021 in Israel). Second, we have shown that when ideological identity is measured simply as the degree of attachment to one's own label (without considering whether respondents also identify to some degree with the opposite label), it has a similar effect on ADBB to that of issues. Future research could further explore how respondents with an ambiguous ideological identity contribute to deflating the polarization between blocs. Third, we know from previous research that latent rightist respondents tend to avoid placing themselves on the ideological spectrum in countries characterized by the legacy of a right-wing dictatorship (e.g. Ames and Smith 2010). Since this legacy is present in our cases, we cannot completely rule out the possibility that this response bias in ideological self-placement could somehow affect our results, especially with regard to the right-wing bloc. Fourth, the paper does not go into assessing the possible impact of partisan identity on affective polarization compared to ideological identity, especially with regard to feelings towards voters of one's own bloc: while identity-based ideology may emphasize similarities between supporters of different parties belonging to the same bloc, partisan identity may fuel differences within the own bloc (e.g. Huddy et al., 2018). More research in this direction would be appropriate.

Fifth, different studies argue and provide empirical evidence that some European party systems are increasingly structured around three political spaces: the traditional left, the traditional right and a new populist or anti-establishment pole, which in Europe tends to be represented by the radical right (e.g. Kriesi et al., 2008). Future research could explore the extent to which individuals develop affective attachments towards this 'third' pole and how it, together with left and right identities, may impact the configuration of affective blocs in multiparty systems. And, finally, the Argentinian case reminds us that left and right labels do not always constitute the most adequate political identities in structuring party systems (Torcal and Carty 2023), especially outside the context of Western industrialized nations. In fact, we do not argue that the left-right identity conflict should be the main driver of affective polarization resulting in a two-bloc conflict in all democracies. There could be other alternative conflicts generating the same results, such as the populist/anti-populists one in countries in which one of the main parties is a promoter of a populist discourse.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

The TRI-POL dataset used in this paper is available at https://osf.io/3t7jz/. For more details on this dataset, see Torcal et al. (2023). Replication syntax for the analyses reported in the paper is available at osf.io/uqxtf. Further inquiries can be directed to the authors.

Acknowledgments

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102615.

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