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Polarization and coexistence in Spain 2021

The role of the territories

ICIP-EsadeEcPol 2021 survey

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Research line

POLARIZATION

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Executive summary

In public debate, polarization is usually presented as inevitable, extreme and omnipresent, in the territorial sphere as well as in the spheres of ideology and identity. Nevertheless, the results of the ICIP-EsadeEcPol survey – conducted in 2021, presented here, and aimed at analyzing the nature and measuring the severity of polarization in Spain – show a much more nuanced and complex picture. Although the high levels of tension in politics seem to be the reflection of a socially fractured country, in fact, the results of the survey indicate that there does not seem to be a problem of coexistence.

The main **focus of affective polarization** (that which is defined by the distance between the feelings we have towards the group we identify with and those we express towards others) are political parties, since the degree of affection for the voters of certain parties is less than 20 points out of 100 (where 100 is the maximum degree of affection). In contrast, the degree of affection of the citizens of each autonomous community towards the other territories is not particularly unfavorable: **affective polarization is centered on the political parties, rather than on the territories.**

In **polarization**, with regard to specific **ideological** issues:

- **There are broad crosscutting consensuses on gender equality:** both in Spain as a whole, as well as in all the autonomous communities, approximately 75% of citizens agree, for example, on sanctioning companies that pay less to women for the same work, or promoting workplaces without gender discrimination.
- The issues that produce **the greatest polarization** are the evaluation of the Transition and **territorial organization:** the inhabitants of Catalonia and the Basque Country are more opposed to recentralization and more in favor of decentralization than the rest; they are also more opposed to transfers to other territories.
- On the other hand, **agreement on redistribution by means of taxes and monetary transfers from richer to poorer households is much broader.** Similarly, the **preference for better services, even if this entails higher taxes,** generates more consensus than disagreement.

The survey has also conducted a detailed analysis of the **identity dimension of polarization** (that which is related to the way we define our own identity as opposed to that of others):

- The most polarizing issues in the public debate (autonomous community, social class and gender) emerge as scarcely defining personal identity: they are “not at all” or only “somewhat” important for the identity of over 70% of the Spanish population.
- Language, the aspect most closely related to personal identity is “quite” or “very” important for only 35% of the Spanish population. This figure hardly varies among autonomous communities.
- Dual territorial identity (Spanish-autonomous community) is more frequent than the extremes and, despite the differences between autonomous communities, in no case do they exceed the intermediate positions.
- Family context affects territorial identity: when one of your parents is from a community that is different from yours, the likelihood of identifying with this community decreases significantly. In contrast, the broader context (the popularity/frequency of one’s own identity in the local environment) does not seem to have an impact.

All this takes place in a **context of a positive evaluation of coexistence**, with a high level of trust among citizens. Coexistence, however, is valued more highly in smaller places, immediate surroundings, and in some communities more than in others (especially in Catalonia).

On the other hand, **trust in institutions** is generally low: no government administration (local, regional, central or European) receives a passing grade in Spain.

In conclusion, the degree of ideological, identity and affective polarization with territorial roots features expected but moderate points of tension with respect to the perception that could be derived from public and political debate. In contrast, polarization occurs through institutions: the lack of trust in them, together with a strong rejection of political parties other than one’s own, and the specific capacity that institutions in charge of coordinating territorial organization have to create tension. It is this polarization through institutions that poses the greatest risk to the stability of the democratic process.

Key facts

TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS

On average, none of the government administrations receives a passing grade in citizen trust.

Local governments and the European Union tend to have a better rating than the central government or the autonomous governments, and the central government is usually the one that receives the lowest ratings from citizens. In fact, the central government is the only level of administration that gets a failing grade in all the autonomous communities included in the survey.

Catalonia stands out as the territory with the lowest trust in institutions at all levels of government administration (local, autonomous, central and European).

Regarding autonomous governments, Catalonia is the lowest, with a 4.1, and the Basque Country is the highest, with a 5.37.

On a socio-demographic level, the older the person, the greater the trust in any of the institutions analyzed.

INTERPERSONAL TRUST

Citizens tend to trust other people, and both Spain as a whole, as well as the analyzed communities, received a passing grade.

Here, too, age correlates positively with interpersonal trust.

COEXISTENCE

Generally speaking, coexistence is positively valued in all dimensions and territories. However, there are significant differences depending on the level: 7.22 in the case of municipalities/neighborhoods and 7.02 in the case of autonomous communities, but only 5.85 in Spain as a whole.

There is an inverse correlation between the size of the municipality and the evaluation of both local and autonomous community coexistence: in less populated municipalities both are generally higher, but this is not the case with the evaluation of coexistence in Spain.

The territory where the evaluation of coexistence is lowest in the three dimensions (local, regional and state) is Catalonia, although the differences are relatively small with respect to the Spanish average: 6.67 in the case of municipalities/neighborhoods, 6.2 in the case of the autonomous community, and 5.10 in Spain. At the other extreme is the Basque Country, with the highest levels of evaluation of coexistence of the samples studied.

IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION

More than three out of four citizens agree on sanctioning companies that pay less to women for the same work. These percentages are valid for all autonomous communities. The level of support is even slightly higher than the idea of promoting jobs without gender discrimination.

However, it is striking that younger people (18-24 years old) are the ones who are less in favor of both measures.

Citizens are also mostly in favor of allowing transgender people to change their gender identity on their identity cards. On the other hand, the degree of agreement is lower with respect to guaranteeing surgery in the public health system to people who dress and live according to a gender different from the one they were born with: almost 25% are strongly against it, but more than 60% support it to a greater or lesser degree.

In this case, age does play a key role: older people are less likely to approve of the two measures.

In contrast, the greatest disagreement is found in the transition to democracy: while in Catalonia almost half of the population totally disagrees with the notion that it is a source of pride (average rating: 3.75), in Madrid, half of the population totally agrees (average rating: 6.45). Once again, age is a determining factor: the average ratings range from 4.17 among the youngest people to 6.77 among the oldest.

Territorial redistribution comes in second place in the polarization ranking: while in Catalonia, 33% of the population totally disagrees with the idea of taxing the richer regions to transfer to the poorer ones, in Extremadura, 55% totally agree.

On the other hand, redistribution among individuals does receive across-the-board support: in all the autonomous communities, public opinion is in favor (with a rating of more than 5) of transfers from rich to poor households, although around one in four citizens (except in Galicia) disagrees with the redistributive role of taxes.

Furthermore, the majority of the population prefers to improve services, even if taxes increase (average of 6.21), rather than pay less taxes and have reduced public services.

Similarly, almost half of the population (45.6%) believes that the management of health care by public administrations is better than that of companies.

In the two autonomous communities where there is more trust in institutions –Galicia and the Basque Country – public opinion is also more favorable to taxes and public management of health care than in the other territories.

Finally, in Spain as a whole, there is no consensus on the evolution of the model of territorial organization since 37% of the population would prefer to recentralize it while 30% would prefer more decentralization.

While in Catalonia and the Basque Country there are large majorities in favor of a more decentralized model, in Madrid, the majority prefers recentralization. In Andalusia, the Valencian Community, Extremadura and Galicia, the percentages of support for greater recentralization are somewhat higher than those for more decentralized options.

TERRITORIAL IDENTITY

Citizens attach little importance to the characteristics presented in the survey to define identity. Furthermore, gender, the autonomous community or social class emerge as the three characteristics least associated with identity: they are “quite” or “very” important for only 20% of the population.

Language is the most significant characteristic in the definition of personal identity, but even this aspect is considered of high or considerable importance for only about 35% of the population. This number hardly varies between autonomous communities: in regions where there are co-official languages there is no higher association of language with identity.

Similarly, dual territorial identity (Spanish-autonomous community) is the most frequent, although here there are greater differences between autonomous communities: in Catalonia, exclusive identification with the community is highest (21%), while in the Valencian Community it is exclusive Spanish identification (31%) that is highest. However, in neither case do they exceed the intermediate positions.

Where there is more variation is in the intensities of the importance of territorial identity: the majority of citizens who feel more identified with their region feel connected to the people who share their identity, say that they feel good when they refer to their group, take any criticism of their identity as an insult, or refer to their group using the first person plural (“we”). On the other hand, individuals who feel more Spanish than from their autonomous community do not share, for the most part, any of the questions raised in relation to their identity. When the same analysis is made for each of the autonomous communities in the sample, the results remain along these lines.

Citizens who have a family link with territories other than the one in which they reside (through the origin of one of their parents) tend to have a more Spanish identity than those who do not have any direct family link with another community. On the other hand, individuals whose parents were born in the community where they reside have an identity that is slightly skewed towards their community.

In contrast, the popularity of one’s own identity in the immediate environment does not seem to influence this identity: citizens do not adapt their sense of identification according to how common it is around them.

TERRITORIAL AND PARTY-BASED AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

Attitudes towards rival political parties are extraordinarily negative and there are practically no exceptions: in most cases, voters of rival political parties are rated below 20 points out of 100.

There are, however, differences between territories: the autonomous communities with the highest party-based polarization according to the weighted index are Madrid, Extremadura and Andalusia. The regions where party polarization is lowest are, in order, the Basque Country, Catalonia and the Valencian Community.

On the other hand, the attitudes of the citizens of each autonomous community towards the rest are not particularly extreme or unfavorable, since most of them oscillate, on average, between moderate positions (40-60 points).

This territorial affective polarization is higher in regions where the distance between the preferred region and the least preferred region is greater, and this is especially true in Extremadura, Andalusia and Galicia. But the differences between territories in terms of the degree of affective polarization are small.

There is a slightly greater difference in opinions about certain autonomous communities: Catalonia is the one that generates less positive feelings on average, but also without major differences.

These attitudes towards the other group (territorial or party-based) do not improve significantly when presented with positive similarities between the two groups.

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