Social trust and affective polarization in Spain (2014–19)

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A B S T R A C T

One overlooked aspect of the rising levels of affective polarization is its effect on general social trust. In the present article, we analyze the relationship between affective polarization and various measures of social trust using two separate panel surveys that were implemented in Spain in two different political periods (2014–2015 and 2018–2019), in order to assess whether the individual variations in the levels of affective polarization may affect people's trust in other members of society. Our findings suggest that affective polarization towards out-party members has a mutually reinforcing negative relationship with general social trust, generating a pervasive equilibrium of social and political deterioration that might contribute to worsening democratic quality. This effect is not compensated by any significant bonding effect resulting from in-partisan identification, whose effects seem to be restricted just to the very closest inner-circle individuals.

1. Introduction

There is a heightened general perception among experts and pundits that current democratic politics is taking an increasingly emotional turn. The argument is that emotional attachment to certain political identities and the basic emotions they provoke are becoming the dominant "mode of reasoning" among citizens in contemporary politics (Fukuyama 2018; Klar 2018; Klein 2020; Mason 2018). This process, known as *affective polarization* (Hetherington 2009; Hetherington et al. 2016; McCoy et al. 2018), increasingly divides the world into in-partisan groups and out-partisan groups, transforming and reducing complex societal issues into a single dimension of "Us" versus "Them" (McCoy et al. 2018, p. 18). The intensity of citizens' ensuing inter-identity prejudices exceeds that of conflicts emerging from a more traditional ideological polarization (Lauka et al. 2018; Ward and Tavits 2019), limiting citizens' ability to find "common ground" and "areas of dialogue" in order to constructively and consensually address mutual challenges. This process has also been linked to many contemporary illnesses of democracy, such as incivility, support for outright violence among citizens, the deterioration of democratic quality and accountability during elections, democratic malfunctioning, support for new illiberal parties, and ultimately democratic backsliding (Kalmoe and Mason 2019; Kingzette et al. 2021;

MacKuen et al. 2010; McCoy & Somer 2018, 2021; Svolik 2019).[1] However, an overlooked consequence of affective polarization is its capacity to erode the trust between citizens, increasing the potential to undermine relatively stable levels of general social trust – seen as indispensable to ensure collaboration among the members of a society, which is necessary for any democracy to function well and prosper (Newton et al. 2018). This is because sentiments activated by partisan social identities fundamentally change the way people view those outside their inner groups by over-simplifying complex social relations and distorting perceptions of "others" in general, so that conflicts between partisan groups may lead to trusting biases based on the reductive and exclusionary *Us* vs. *Them* logic.

There is some evidence, collected by the application of some trust games, that certain partisan cues may negatively influence respondents' behavior in situations that require some (mutual) level of trust in unknown players in order for each to benefit from the exchange (Carlin and Love 2018; Carlin et al. 2019; Criado et al. 2018; Westwood et al. 2018). This article introduces the idea that, rather than remaining a problem only for the relations between specific groups of voters, affective polarization may have negative consequences for the way society, as a whole, functions, with prominent intergroup conflicts finding their way into the collective imaginary. More concretely, it will seek to lay out the

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relationship between affective polarization and social trust, with particular interest in generalized trust – that is, the trust individuals have in other members of society they do not know outside their inner social networks, sometimes referred to as *unknown others*.[2]

To this end, we will be employing two unique online panel datasets designed to allow us to explore this relationship in Spain. This is a case with increasing levels of affective polarization (Torcal and Comellas 2022) which occurred during two distinctive periods: one linked to the emergence of a new radical left-wing populist party (2014–2015), Podemos (We can); and the second, linked to the irruption of a radical right-wing party (2018–2019), VOX. The emergence of these two radical parties, on each side of the ideological spectrum and catering to two opposing political identities, provides a unique opportunity to study affective polarization as it was developing: it reflects a change in voters' attitudes (from voting for more traditional parties to supporting challenger parties from this point onwards), which suggests rising levels of affective polarization at these times. Having two original survey panel datasets that coincide with these two different political periods is therefore an additional asset of this study, and the fact that these new parties belong to opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, with each one holding a different stance on social cohesion, will provide information about the nature of radical parties, be they left- or right-leaning. One of the datasets is the CIUPANEL dataset (Torcal et al. 2016),[3] which was collected coinciding with the first period of increasing polarization. The second, the E-DEM survey panel (Torcal et al. 2020),[4] was conducted more recently, during a period that saw the irruption of VOX (see Table 1A in the Online Appendix for detailed information about the dates and duration of the fieldwork).[5] These datasets provide various individual measures of affective and ideological polarization and political and social trust repeated across different waves, allowing us to test the consistency of these relationships in the same institutional context, with the arrival of two new challenger parties whose ideological profiles and discourses differ. An added issue in this study concerns the interconnected nature of our variables of interest. Because we are dealing with group dynamics, one group's actions (e.g., out-group biases) are likely to cause a reaction in the receiving group (e.g., distrust towards the offending group). There is then a potential for this situation to spiral, in turn causing more biases and more distrust. Disentangling which phenomenon causes the other is particularly difficult; to attempt to solve this issue, we use longitudinal data, so that we can test the effect of one variable on the other over time.

We hope this article will contribute to the literature on affective polarization by showing how negative out-group partisan sentiments (i. e., towards the voters of other parties) might negatively impact individual trust towards unknown members of our societies. This initial process might contribute to a non-recursive dynamic in which lower levels of social trust might also exacerbate negative out-party sentiments creating a pervasive equilibrium of social and political deterioration. Although inter-partisan conflicts may lead to decreased intergroup trust, it is likely that trust in those closest inner family or social circles will

tend to increase, although to a much lesser degree, when in-party affinity grows. Overall, the combined effects of in-party and out-party sentiments on individuals' trust towards other members of society result in a widespread deterioration of general social trust in democratic settings together with increased bonding within individuals' small inner circles due to in-party strengthening.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Social trust refers to the confidence that exists between the individuals and groups that make up a society regarding their wellbeing in the hands of others (Knight 2001, p. 354). It may be categorized according to many different labels; for the purpose of this study, we will mainly consider *personalized trust* (i.e., trust in people individuals know personally) and *generalized trust* (i.e., trust in other unknown people with whom individuals share a society) – sometimes simply equated to trust in unknown individuals or strangers (Delhey et al. 2011, p. 792).[6] Together they constitute what has been dubbed the "radius of trust", which describes an individual's capacity to trust people at different degrees of closeness and acquaintance. Most of the scholarly opinion appears to agree that trust in known individuals (i.e., *personalized trust*) may vary substantially as a result of the dynamics of personal relationships, whereas generalized trust is considered to be fairly stable over time (Uslaner 2008, p. 726; Uslaner 2008, p. 4).

In comparing these types of trust, a number of authors assert that generalized trust is the more important indicator of a society's civic behavior (Nannestad 2008, p. 415); and although high levels of personalized trust are not problematic by themselves, they can become a threat when paired with decreasing generalized trust (Warren 2018, p. 85). Indeed, generalized trust has been considered one of the main pillars in the theory of social capital, crucial to ensure that individuals unknown to one another are able to overcome collective action problems in a satisfactory manner (Rothstein and Stolle 2008, p. 441; Nannestad 2008, p. 415), and is "the basis of reciprocity, social connectedness, peaceful collective action, inclusiveness, tolerance, gender equality, confidence in institutions, and democracy itself" (Delhey et al. 2011, p. 787).

Finally, we should stress that, for the most part, trust in "general others" is associated with trust in unknown individuals; this allows us to see generalized trust as complementary to personalized trust (Delhey et al. 2011, p. 786; Ermisch and Gambetta 2010, pp. 365–366; Uslaner 2008, p. 4), since all humans are "conditional trusters" and rarely do we cease to trust all people completely (Messick and Kramer 2001, p. 98; Uslaner 1999, p. 123). Thus, people in high-risk polarized societies may firstly equate partisan out-groups to "all others"; then, because people tend to think of themselves as trustworthy (Kipnis 1996, p. 40), by a process of association with the in-group, they may ultimately compensate the imbalance in generalized trust with a higher degree of personalized trust, thereby increasing the level of bonding among inner-circle individuals (Messick and Kramer 2001, pp. 100–102; Putnam 2000, p. 22; Yamagishi 2001, p. 125).

2.1. The role of group bias in affective polarization and social (dis)trust

A key feature of affective polarization is a simplification of "the normal complexity of politics and social relations" (Somer and McCoy 2018a, p. 5). Reflecting this simplification, terminology associated with affective polarization is usually made relative to the subject in question, with the "in-party" group referring to the party supporters with whom a specific individual identifies (*Us*), and the "out-party" group signifying all those beyond the in-group's supporters (*Them*). A society, then, may be considered affectively polarized when its constituting party groups

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[2] Although the affective polarization and social identity theory literatures use the term "other" to express those belonging to an out-group that has been made salient on some dimension, to avoid confusion with the term from the trust literature, which simply refers to people in general, we use the term "out-group member" (or "out-party member") to denote to the former.

[3] The project title is: "Crisis and challenges in Spain: attitudes and political behavior during the economic and the political representation crisis (CIUPANEL)". Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (CSO 2013-47071-R, 2014–2016.

[4] The project title is: "Participación y deliberación política online en una democracia en crisis: una aproximación metodológica nueva (E-DEM)" (2017–2020), Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (Ref.: CSO 2016-79772-P).

[5] Data and scripts to reproduce this analysis are located at OSF: https://osf. io/bsfnr/.

[6] Definitions of the categories of social trust may differ. We adopt those definitions put forth by Delhey et al. (2011).

"become internally homogeneous and more sharply distinguished from one another" (Deutsch 1971, p. 44) and individuals are grouped into clusters with similar attitudes and opinions on the basis of their *party preferences*, with each cluster manifesting dissimilar party preferences (Mason 2018, p. 45). Affective polarization therefore fundamentally stems from group-based biases, described by Brewer as two separate phenomena (Brewer 1999, p. 430): *hostility* (or *discrimination*) against partisan out-groups, and in-group partisan *affinity* (or *favoritism*) (Newton et al., 2018, p. 54). Under affective polarization, individuals tend to categorize and characterize others more strictly on the basis of partisan labels. Such fraught social dynamics stand to increase levels of affective polarization, and support Somer's prediction that polarization can cascade and become self-reinforcing (Somer 2001, p. 129), as polarized individuals back political actors who disregard the value of partisan compromise and protect the in-group's interests above (and sometimes even against) those of the rest of society (Brewer 2017, p. 91; Carlin and Love 2018, p. 118; Hetherington and Rudolph 2018, p. 580; Hoerner and Hobolt 2020, pp. 1843–1844).

While some degree of in-group favoritism is considered by many scholars to be a somewhat standard form of behavior (Brewer 2017, p. 91), individuals' strict preference for interacting with known individuals and in-party members, together with their prejudice against out-party members (partisan hostility) may stand in the way of important societal interactions such as bridging (connecting "dissimilar" types of individuals and groups), which are considered to be highly desirable for pluralist democratic societies (Rothstein and Stolle 2008, p. 442; see also Putnam 2000, pp. 22–23). Perhaps more importantly, such biases can drive groups to "view the other as an existential threat to [...] their way of life" (Somer and McCoy 2018b, p. 9).[7]

Inasmuch as this phenomenon occurs at the societal level and can (and often does) lead individuals to modify their attitudes according to the environment, affective polarization may be one political condition that has the potential to destabilize people's individual circumstances, such as their levels of generalized trust (Newton et al. 2018, p. 41). Thus, in reducing social relations to a single dimension of *Us* and *Them*, affective polarization may cause individuals to seek to minimize the risk involved in trusting "general others" as a result of increasing out-party hostility. The opposition of social and partisan groups involved in this process thus has a "powerful effect on [individuals'] attitudes and behaviour" (Newton et al. 2018, p. 54), and therefore has the potential to reinforce social conflicts, prejudices and biases when intergroup relations are tense, leaving a lasting impression on individuals' levels of generalized trust, as intergroup relations may color their views and perceptions of society as a whole (Sztompka 1998, pp. 22–23). Contrary to racial, religious and gender identities, "partisan discrimination has no norms to regulate it, allowing it to permeate social ties" (Bougher 2017, pp. 731–732), thereby spilling over into a number of non-political attitudes, including both professional and personal relationships, and "driving ordinary citizens to reward co-partisans and penalize opposing partisans" (Iyengar et al. 2019, pp. 133–134). This suggests that polarization based on partisan identities may reinforce group-based bias more strongly than any other identities which are moderated by social norms (Westwood et al. 2018, p. 4). When individuals' impression of the rest of society is heavily influenced by intergroup partisan conflicts, we should also expect an increase in personalized trust reflecting in-party favoritism, contributing to the reproduction across society of the *Us* and *Them* logic typical of partisan affective polarization (Van Dijk 2013, p. 178). This preceding discussion, then, leaves us with the following two hypotheses.

H1. An increase in individual levels of negative out-party sentiments

over time results in an individual reduction in generalized social trust.

H2. An increase in individual levels of positive in-party sentiments over time results in an individual increase in personalized trust.

It has been observed that group relations, such as might be affective polarization, often create environments in which the elements at play in these social dynamics feed back into each other as a result of continual interaction between the groups (Somer 2001, p. 129; Somer and McCoy 2018a, p. 6; Tajfel 1970, p. 96; Tajfel and Turner 1979, p. 46). In this respect, in situations of low general trust, people might tend to prefer to interact with in-party members and categorically trust them more than members of an out-party. This potentially means that distrust towards general others, which fosters out-group behavioral biases, might in turn cause an additional increase in that out-group's partisan negative sentiments towards the offending partisans (inter-group hostility). At the same time, individuals' propensity to place trust only in members of their close social circles (personalized trust) might contribute to increased positive bias (i.e., favoritism) towards the in-party group.[8] According to this logic, we suggest two additional hypotheses, referring to the non-recursive (or reciprocal) relationship between affective polarization and distrust.

H3. An increase in individual levels of generalized distrust over time results in an increase in individual levels of out-party hostility.

H4. An increase in individual levels of personalized trust over time results in an increase in individual levels of in-party affinity.

3. The data and model

Our data comes from two different online survey panels. The first one is the CIUPANEL dataset (Torcal et al. 2016), integrated by a total of 3686 panelists who completed six waves conducted during 2014 and 2015 using a non-probabilistic sample of citizens aged 18 and above from an online panel.[9] Unfortunately, we could only use two of the waves given the variables needed for this analysis, which were only present in the third (December 2014/January 2015) and fifth (October 2015) waves. The second dataset, E-DEM (Torcal et al. 2020), comprises an online panel survey of the Spanish voting-age population of a total of 1484 panelists who completed all four waves between October 2018 and May 2019 (for information on response rates and panel mortality, see Table 2A of the Online Appendix). This allowed us to study the effect of polarization on social trust with a repeated measures design and to estimate the within-individual changes, in two contexts where a populist challenger party had recently come to the fore – in the first case the radical-left party Podemos, a proponent of social cohesion, and in the second case the radical-right party VOX, which is the least inclusive party in Spain. Initially, to observe the significance and sign of the relationship between the two types of social trust and in-group and out-group sentiments (hypotheses H1 and H2), we modelled an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) two-way fixed effects (individual and wave)

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[7] In Somer and McCoy (2018b), "other" refers to competing out-group individuals and is different from general "others" mentioned in the trust literature.

[8] A lack of generalized trust is usually compensated by personalized trust, meaning that the intergroup discrimination described above could also have implications for the way in which people relate to others within their own group. Also, as we discuss in the theoretical framework, partisan hostility may be accompanied by in-group preference, although this is not always the case given that the two phenomena are known to occur separately.

[9] Although this is not a probability sample, the distribution of basic sociodemographic variables and of other partisan and ideological characteristics in our sample approximates the same parameters obtained by the Spanish National Centre for Sociological Research (CIS) during these years. In our sample, we only find a lower propensity to declare an intention to vote for the more traditional parties before the general election in 2015. In addition, our sample is skewed towards the more educated than the general population (National Institute of Statistics – INE – Census data 2014–2015) (for more details, see Table 2A of section A of the Online Appendix).

model, adding other time-variant control variables.[10] Additionally, to make the causal inferences between trust and affective polarization implied in the four hypotheses, we estimated autoregressive cross-lagged structural survey panel equation models (CLPM), which allow us to assess non-recursive causality between generalized social trust and personalized trust with out-party and in-party sentiments, respectively.

3.1. Measuring social trust

To measure generalized social trust, we used a set of three individual questions as the dependent variables. More concretely, for the 2018–2019 dataset we have a very complete set of items. First, we used three indicators measuring generalized trust on a scale from 0 to 10: "trust in people", "trust in the honesty of people", and "trust in neighbors". For personalized trust we employed another two indicators using the same scale: "trust in family members", and "trust in people I know". Unfortunately, the 2014–2015 dataset only has two indicators of general trust: "trust in people" and "trust in the honesty of people" (for the exact wording of these questions see section B of the Online Appendix). Despite being more limited, the dataset for the first period of study might allow us to test whether general social trust is affected by the within-variation of individual polarization using a different survey panel and for a period in which polarization was connected with the electoral irruption of a radical left-wing populist party, Podemos. Even though Podemos has since moderated its earlier discourses, it was certainly a radical populist party at that time (Orriols and Cordero 2016; Ramiro and Gomez 2017).

Table 1 contains the average within-individual changes of these five social trust indicators during the period covered by these two separate studies. There does not appear to be any substantial change at the individual level over the period of time covered by these two studies, confirming that generalized social trust is for the most part a stable attitude, although with some degree of change on average. For the first period, which covered a little less than a year (December 2014/January 2015 to October 2015), we observed increases in general trust, with a significant 0.48 average increase in the "trust in people" indicator, and a much more reduced 0.19 increase in the "honesty of people" indicator. For the second period under study (October 2018 to May 2019), the major variation on average took place with regard to the indicator "trust in neighbors". Observing the changes between each wave, the largest increase occurred between the first and second waves (October 2018 to February 2019), which was the period of greatest electoral growth of the radical right-wing party VOX, and the highest aggregate increase in the levels of partisan affective polarization (Torcal 2021). In contrast, between the third and fourth waves (beginning in April and until May 2019) we can observe a very small but general decrease in social trust, supporting the theory that polarizing political actors may negatively disrupt levels of generalized trust, even if only gradually. Although this individual-level change in generalized trust seems small on aggregate, it is of great importance given both its magnitude and variance over a short period of time (one year for the first period, and five months for the second) and the nature of these attitudes, which tend to be remarkably stable. Note, finally, that this same table also shows a small decrease in personalized trust for the entire second period under study, but with some important time variation depending on the wave: a significant increase in the first period, but incremental decreases in the subsequent ones. These average within-variations and variances could also be considered remarkable taking into account the theoretical corpus which describes this is as a highly stable attitude.

Table 1
Average individual within-change in social trust in Spain[a].

	Trust People	Honesty People	Neighbors	Family	Trust people you know
CIUPANEL Panel Survey					
December 2014–December 2015	0.48 (2.33)	0.19 (2.36)	Not included	Not included	Not included
E-DEM Panel Survey					
Total Average	0.06 (2.34)	0.07 (2.07)	0.08 (2.13)	−0.02 (1.82)	−0.04 (1.98)
By waves					
October 2018–February 2019	0.33 (2.49)	0.27 (2.22)	0.39 (2.20)	0.14 (1.81)	0.19 (2.01)
February 2019–April 2019	−0.12 (2.31)	−0.03 (2.01)	−0.04 (2.15)	−0.04 (1.82)	−0.15 (1.93)
April 2019–May 2019	−0.03 (2.18)	−0.02 (1.97)	−0.11 (1.98)	−0.16 (1.83)	−0.17 (1.99)

[a] Standard deviations in parentheses.
Source: CIUPANEL (Torcal et al. 2016) and E-DEM (Torcal et al. 2020) panel datasets.

3.2. Measuring partisan affective polarization

As discussed above, the topic of affective polarization has been primarily studied in the United States (Iyengar et al. 2019), which is marked by the dynamics of a two-party system, and which presents some measurement challenges when similar methods are applied to multi-party settings (Gidron et al. 2020; Hetherington 2009; Wagner 2020). With that in mind, we propose two different indices to measure in-party and out-party sentiments using thermometer feelings, which seems to be a very valid measure of partisan sentiments (Gidron et al. 2022) (for the exact wording of these thermometer feelings, see Section B of the Online Appendix). *In-partisan sentiments* are measured using thermometer feelings towards partisans of the most-liked party. *Out-partisan sentiments*, on the other hand, captures how much an individual on average dislikes other parties' supporters compared to his/her favored voters' group, and it represents the weighted mean distance from the most-liked voters' group, weighted by the electoral share of each party (for a detailed discussion of these two formulas, see section B of the Online Appendix). However, both measures require positive identification with one specific group of supporters. Wagner (2020) recommends selecting an individual's most-liked party as a proxy for their preferred in-party group. However, there are some respondents who assign their highest score to more than one supporters' group. For these cases, and given that the index requires each respondent to be closer to a specific group, we can assign the preferred supporters' group to these respondents based first on party identification; then, for those who do not identify with any of these parties to which they assign the highest score, we use vote choice: in the first two waves, we assign the preferred group to these respondents based on their reported vote choice in the last general election (when possible), or individuals' vote intention in the next election. Finally, for those who do not report having participated in the last election, we employ a survey question that asks respondents which party they would have voted for in the last general election had they participated in it (this measures propensity to vote, or PTV). All respondents to whom, despite all these efforts, we were not able to attribute a specific preferred group were discarded from the calculation of this index.

Therefore, to compute these two indices we only use the feeling thermometers towards partisan supporters. Although we will not delve into the methodological or theoretical criteria which justify this selection, recent studies sustain that thermometer feelings towards leaders and parties result in an over-estimation of affective polarization (for a comparative study, see Kingzette 2021), since, on average, people

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[10] This model, beyond merely establishing the correlation between our variables, is useful in showing the sign of each individual variation according to different indicators.

Table 2
Average individual within-change in polarization in Spain[a].

	In-group Sentiments towards Supporters	Out-group Sentiments towards Supporters
CIUPANEL Panel Survey		
December 2014–December 2015	−0.60 (2.07)	0.03 (1.71)
E-DEM Panel Survey		
Total Average	0.13 (1.96)	- 0.05 (1.59)
By waves		
October 2018–February 2019	−0.65 (1.97)	0.11 (1.66)
February 2019–April 2019	0.53 (2.00)	−0.35 (1.58)
April 2019–May 2019	−0.05 (1.83)	0.05 (1.47)

[a] Standard deviations in parentheses.
Source: CIUPANEL (Torcal et al. 2016) and E-DEM (Torcal et al. 2020) panel datasets.

dislike leaders more than voters (for a study on this topic in the US, see Bolsen and Thornton 2021). This is especially true in societies that traditionally have low levels of partisanship and/or high levels of electoral volatility, thereby undermining the validity of comparative studies of affective polarization across different countries (Rudolph and Hetherington 2021). In fact, when affective polarization in the US is observed through some measure of social distance (e.g., rejecting the idea of one's child marrying somebody with a different partisan identity), levels of affective polarization are substantially lower than those obtained through traditional studies which employ individuals' level of affect towards political leaders (Klar et al. 2018).

Table 2 displays the average change of these two polarization indices during the two time periods under study. During the first, there is a significant decrease in positive in-party sentiments, while the out-partisan sentiments seem to be stable on average. Changes during the second period under scrutiny are also small, although in this period there was a low average increase of in-partisan sentiments. In general, we can say that the average change in individual-level polarization during these time periods has been small (although with significant variance), but still remarkable, given the short periods of time covered and the stability that these attitudes tend to show.[11]

3.3. The models

To test our hypotheses, we estimated a longitudinal model with individual and time (two-way) fixed effects for each panel survey. Additionally, in our models we estimate the relationship of within-individual variation of two other controlling variables: the evaluation of the country's economic situation and perceptions of corruption, which could potentially account for the changes in social trust (Newton et al. 2018, p. 41). To test the potential effects of changes in one's economic and social contexts, we included in the model individual variation on an index of economic uncertainty and subjective wellbeing (only available for the 2018–2019 panel). Finally, we added other control variables such as political interest, and positions on some salient political and social issues in Spain (this was not available for the 2014–2015 panel; instead, we used respondents' overall evaluation of the government). With the inclusion of these variables, we attained a very complete and reliable model to estimate the relationship between the individual variations of those variables and social trust over time during two recent but separate political periods in Spain.

With the preceding model, we test the presence and sign of the relationship; however, the model does not imply any statistical inference. In order to test the potential non-recursive nature of these

relationships we estimated autoregressive cross-lagged structural survey panel equation models (CLPM), using age, gender, and education as exogenous control variables. Fig. 1 represents the structure of the models we have estimated. For the CIUPANEL dataset (2014–2015) we only have two waves, so we fix the covariance of the measures of $t+1$ as zero, in order to avoid having a fully saturated model.

4. Results

Table 3 contains the results of the estimation with the indicators of general social trust for each period (panel) under study. As we can see, negative out-group partisan sentiments tend on average to have a significant negative relationship with the levels of general trust consistently for both periods, regardless of the indicators used. Note that one unit of increase of out-group sentiments on a scale from 0 to 10 results in a decrease in "trust in people" of over 0.10 (for 2014–2015) and 0.12 (for 2018–2019) on average. However, in-group partisan sentiment has no discernible relationship with general social trust, except for trust in neighbors (with only a minor positive increase of 0.05). So, as predicted in H1, it is the dynamics produced by out-group hostility that tend to decrease general social trust; this suggests that individuals' impression of the rest of society and their desire to cooperate with others is negatively related to partisan intergroup conflicts, partisan out-group prejudices, and/or marked by a sense of partisan out-group threat. This is also true for the negative relationship between out-group sentiments and trust in neighbors, an indicator of a more personalized social trust, showing that the damage of partisan hostility is not only present with regard to "general others" but also for the trust citizens place in the members of their small social and political communities.

However, it is important to consider the direction of this relationship. As we state in H3, the relationship could very well be non-recursive (or reciprocal). For this part of the analysis, we have decided to create a composite (additive) measure of general ("Trust People", "Honesty People", and "Neighbors") and personalized ("Family", "People I Know") social trust. Fig. 2 presents the results of the autoregressive cross-lagged survey model for the 2014–2015 time period with satisfactory goodness of fit results displayed at the bottom (RMSEA = 0.081, p = 0.01). As we can see in the two cross-lagged estimators, all the reciprocal effects are statistically significant and negative. This means that increasing partisan hostility has a negative effect on individual levels of general trust (Out-Party Hostility$_1$→General Trust$_2$: 0.114, p < 0.01), and that decreasing levels of general trust favor an increase in individual levels of partisan hostility (General Trust$_1$ →Out-Party Hostility$_2$: 0.044, p < 0.01).

This pattern is not only confirmed with the results obtained in Fig. 3, estimated with a different dataset collected during the whole period of its study (October 2018–May 2019), but also for the four consecutive waves within it, with different time intervals. Fig. 3 also provides an acceptable fitted model (RMSEA = 0.150, p = 0.00),[12] confirming that the negative effect of partisan hostility on generalized trust (Out-Party Hostility$_t$→General Trust$_{t+1}$) is consistently negative and significant. Lastly, this figure also confirms that a decline in individual generalized trust feeds increasing levels of partisan hostility (General Trust$_1$→Out-Party Hostility$_{t+1}$) consistently over time, with the exception of the first time period. These results thus confirm hypothesis H3.

Table 4, by contrast, presents the results of in-party affinity and out-party hostility on personalized social trust (2018–2019 dataset). As we can see, the results in this table confirm that only in-group sentiment contributes to increasing trust among the members of the inner circles; we observe no similar effect of out-group sentiments on trust in inner-circle individuals. These findings confirm hypothesis H2.

Once again, we test the reciprocal relationship among the two main

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[11] Also worth noting is the very low correlation among these polarization indices: 0.02 for the 2014–2015 period; and −0.17 for the 2018–2019 period.

[12] Although the RMSEA value is slightly above conventional thresholds, this model has a very high Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0.937).
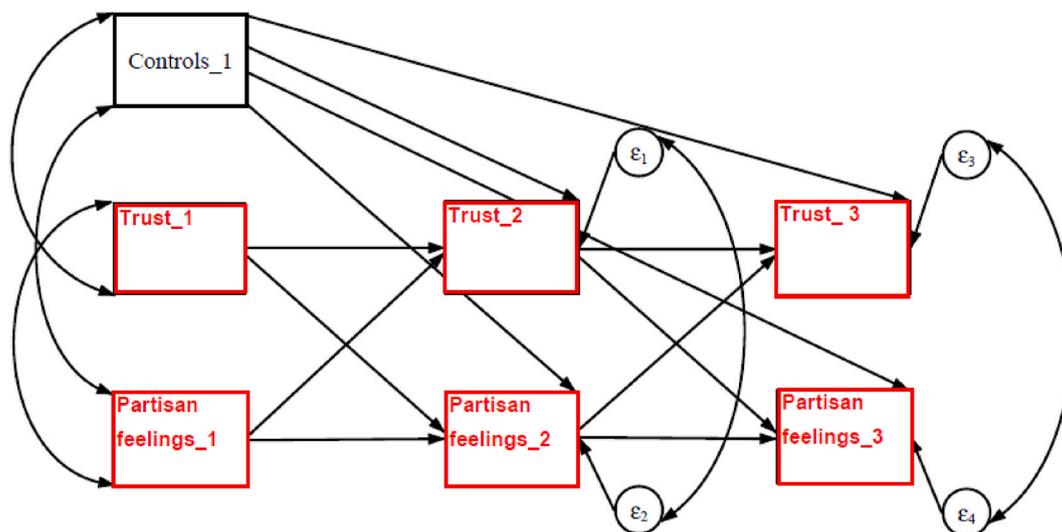
Fig. 1. Autoregressive cross-lagged panel survey model between general social trust and out-party hostility.
Source: Own elaboration.

Table 3
In-party and out-party sentiments and their effects on general trust in 2014–2015 (two waves) and 2018–2019 (four waves) (Two-Way Fixed Effects).

	2014–2015		2018–2019		
	Trust People	**Honesty of people**	**Trust People**	**Honesty of people**	**Neighbors**
In-party affinity	0.010(0.032)	0.069**(0.032)	−0.006(0.018)	0.013(0.016)	0.049***(0.016)
Out-party hostility	−0.104*** (0.038)	−0.102*** (0.038)	−0.118*** (0.022)	−0.087*** (0.020)	−0.081*** (0.020)
Political interest	0.116(0.108)	−0.028(0.107)	−0.022(0.065)	0.028(0.058)	−0.142**(0.057)
Satisfaction with the economy	−0.107* (0.057)	−0.083 (0.057)	0.036* (0.019)	0.044*** (0.016)	0.009 (0.016)
Evaluation of corruption in the country	0.018 (0.103)	0.063 (0.102)	0.032* (0.019)	0.007 (0.017)	0.002 (0.017)
Evaluation of government	0.020(0.093)	0.014(0.092)	Not included	Not included	Not included
Evaluation of situation of unemployment in the country	Not included	Not included	0.024 (0.020)	0.022 (0.018)	0.013 (0.018)
Evaluation of situation with immigrants in the country	Not included	Not included	0.116*** (0.021)	0.063*** (0.018)	0.036** (0.018)
Index of personal well-being	−0.068 (0.110)	−0.146 (0.110)	−0.001 (0.035)	−0.021 (0.031)	0.013 (0.030)
Waves					
1st	Not included	Not included	ref	ref	ref
2nd	Not included	Not included	0.256***(0.060)	0.271***(0.053)	0.369***(0.053)
3rd	ref	ref	0.085(0.067)	0.177***(0.059)	0.255***(0.059)
4th	Not included	Not included	0.117*(0.064)	0.196***(0.056)	0.130**(0.056)
5th	−0.508***(0.075)	−0.204***(0.074)	–	–	–
Intercept	5.789***(0.649)	5.404***(0.643)	4.969***(0.299)	4.812***(0.264)	6.099***(0.264)
R^2 within	0.06	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02
R^2 between	0.08	0.02	0.19	0.16	0.11
R^2 overall	0.06	0.02	0.14	0.11	0.08
sigma_u	2.00	1.99	2.00	1.90	1.81
sigma_e	1.58	1.57	1.68	1.49	1.48
Rho	0.61	0.62	0.58	0.62	0.60
N	3686	3686	6757	6757	6757

Standard errors in parentheses.
*$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.
Source: CIUPANEL (Torcal et al. 2016) and E-DEM (Torcal et al. 2020) panel datasets.

variables included in the very last model. More specifically, we want to see if the observed positive relationship between in-party affinity and an index of personalized trust goes in both directions. Fig. 4 presents the results of the autoregressive cross-lagged survey model between in-party sentiments and personalized trust with acceptable goodness of fit (RMSEA = 0.132, p = 0.00).[13] As we can see in the cross-lagged estimators, the reciprocal effects are also statistically significant consistently across waves. The reciprocal effects of personalized trust on in-group sentiments (Personalized Trust$_t$ →In-party affinity$_{t+1}$) are positive and significant, leading us to accept H4. Thus, the combination of the consistent and reinforcing negative effect of partisan hostility and

social trust, together with the consistent and reinforcing positive effect of in-party affinity on personalized trust, constitute a perversive dynamic that paves the way for the deterioration of the social fabric on which individual interactions are based and an increase in in-party affinity and out-party hostility, potentially resulting in a fraught social and political context that may damage the quality of our democracies.

4.1. Robustness checks

All of the preceding results for levels of social trust appear to be very solid and, what is more, are consistent across different periods. To confirm the preceding results, we have estimated the same models from Tables 2 and 3 for the 2018–2019 period (E-DEM dataset, see Torcal et al. 2020), including ideological variables such as ideological

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[13] This RMSEA value is also compensated by a very high CFI (0.934).
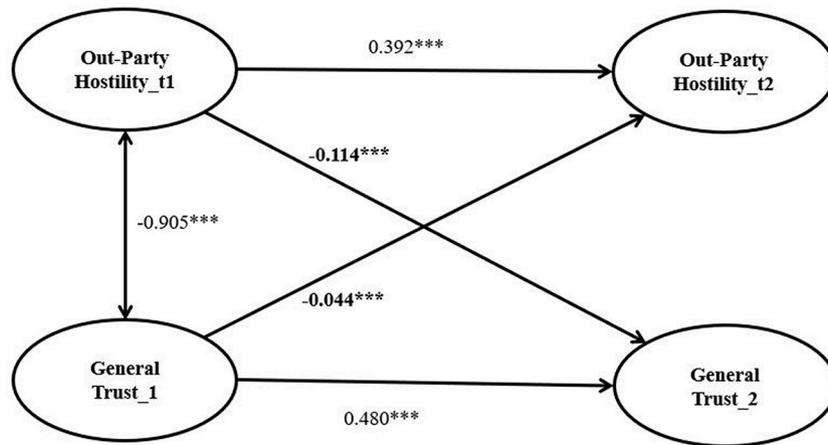
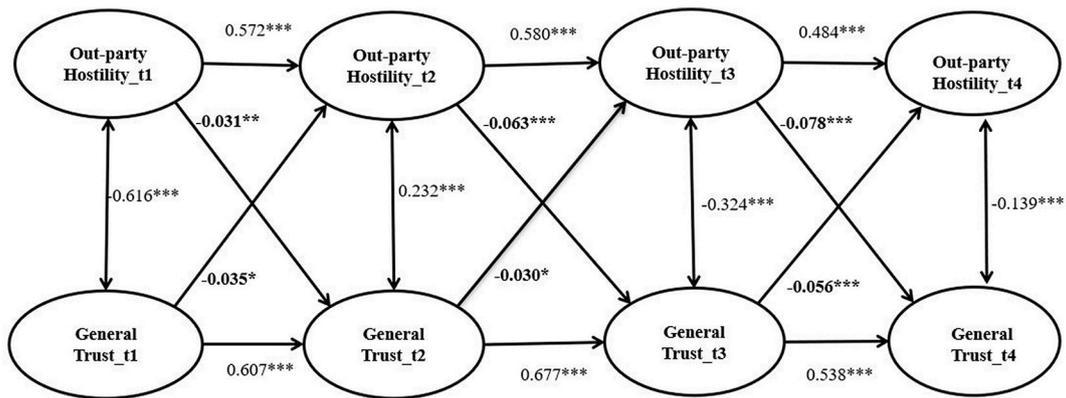**Fig. 2.** Autoregressive cross-lagged panel survey estimators between general social trust and out-party hostility, Spain (2014–2015)
Note: Standardized coefficients.
Source: CIUPANEL (Torcal et al. 2016) panel dataset, waves 3 (December 2014/January 2015) and 5 (October 2015).

Fig. 3. Autoregressive cross-lagged panel survey estimators between general social trust and out-party hostility, Spain (2018–2019)
Note: Standardized coefficients.
Source: E-DEM, waves 1 (October 2018), 2 (February 2019), 3 (April 2019), and 4 (May 2019).

polarization and ideological extremism. This model allowed us to test the relationship of within-individual variation in partisan affective polarization on social trust, both for the in-party and the out-party, controlled by two measures of ideological polarization (ideological extremism and perceived ideological polarization), which have reportedly been related to affective polarization (Reiljan 2019; Ward and Tavits 2019). This means dropping the observations of the fourth panel, which does not include the ideological variables. Results of these estimations are in Tables 11A (with generalized trust as the dependent variable) and 12A (with personalized trust as the dependent variable) in section C of the Online Appendix. These models obtain the same results with the decrease in the number of observations after dropping the

Table 4

In-party and out-party sentiments and their effects on trust in most familiar social circles (four waves) (Two-Way Fixed Effects).

	Family	People you know
In-party affinity	**0.082*****	**0.068*****
	(0.014)	**(0.016)**
Out-party hostility	**−0.008**	**−0.040****
	(0.017)	**(0.019)**
Political interest	−0.038(0.048)	−0.095*(0.055)
Satisfaction with the economy	−0.007	−0.013 (0.016)
	(0.014)	
Evaluation of corruption in the country	0.000 (0.014)	−0.025 (0.016)
Evaluation of situation of unemployment in the country	−0.019 (0.015)	−0.004 (0.017)
Evaluation of situation with immigrants in the country	−0.003 (0.015)	−0.012 (0.018)
Index of personal well-being	−0.015 (0.026)	−0.006 (0.029)
Waves		
1st	ref	ref
2nd	0.198***	0.253***
	(0.045)	(0.051)
3rd	0.100**	0.097*(0.057)
	(0.050)	
4th	0.018(0.047)	−0.020(0.054)
Intercept	8.068***	7.480***
	(0.223)	(0.254)
R^2 within	0.02	0.02
R^2 between	0.03	0.02
R^2 overall	0.02	0.02
sigma_u	1.61	1.53
sigma_e	1.25	1.43
Rho	0.62	0.53
N	6759	6765

Standard errors in parentheses.

*p < 0.10, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01.

Source: E-DEM (Torcal et al. 2020) panel dataset.

fourth wave and including the two ideological polarization indices. The results appear to be very robust for both generalized and personalized social trust. The results of this model show that perceived ideological polarization has a negative relationship with personalized trust among the very closest inner circles, contrary to its relationship with the three indicators of generalized trust. Finally, to confirm these results, we ran an ancillary analysis using a first-difference regression model with the same 2018–2019 panel dataset. Results in these models are almost identical to those observed in Tables 2 and 3 for the 2018–2019 data (see Table 13A in section C of the Online Appendix).

5. Conclusion

Although a great deal of debate still exists surrounding the nature of trust between groups (for different stances see Uslaner 2008, chapters 3 and 8), there is consensus among most scholars that general social trust is mostly stable over time. Regardless of how slowly generalized trust evolves under normal circumstances, or how prone it is to change in the short-term, our findings suggest that out-party hostility and intergroup conflict do lead to decreased generalized trust: affective polarization towards individuals belonging to a different partisan group has visible consequences for different levels of general social trust, particularly for those people with whom there is no prior, significant relationship (first-time encounters, as opposed to family members and close friends) and even neighbors. These findings suggest that the increased out-party hostility in Spain might result in a decline in individual social trust towards *all* members of the political and social community (general social distrust), which plays an essential role in cementing and sustaining the proper functioning of our political, and even economic, systems. This deterioration of general social trust leads to an increase in partisan hostility, suggesting a perverse dynamic that leads to a context of general distrust and confrontation promoted by increasingly affective politics. At the same time, (in-partisan) groups' self-assertion might result in an increase only in (personalized) in-group bonding for the members of our inner-circle, without having visible bridging effects for the rest of society – even for our smaller social and political communities (e.g., neighbors). This combination could produce disastrous consequences as a result of partisan affective polarization, and might partially explain the general deterioration of general social trust and social capital in many societies.
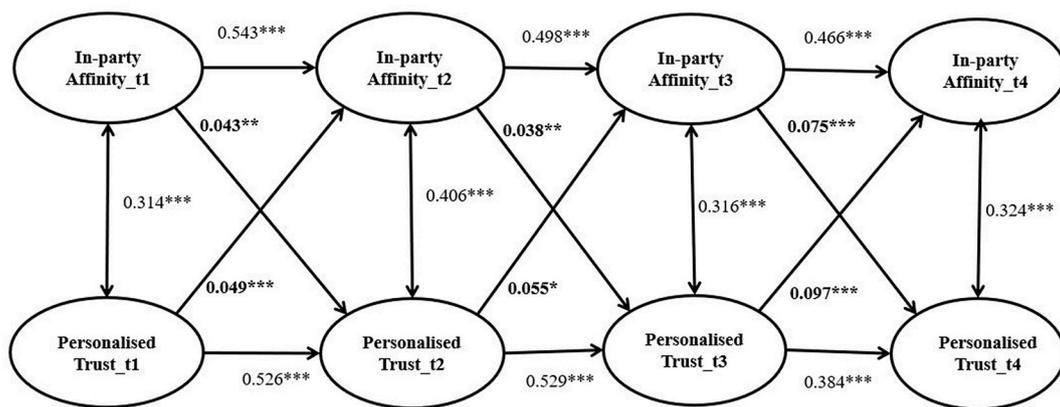
*p<0.1 ** p<0.5 *** p <0.01

N= 2501
RMSEA = 0.132 (p=0.00)
CFI = 0.934
AIC = 92548.1
Sample-size adjusted BIC = 92797.0

Time-invariant (exogenous): age, gender, education and index of personal well-being.

Fig. 4. Autoregressive cross-lagged panel survey estimators between personalized trust and in-party affinity, Spain (2018–2019)
Note: Standardized coefficients.
Source: E-DEM (Torcal et al. 2020), waves 1 (October 2018), 2 (February 2019), 3 (April 2019), and 4 (May 2019).

Finally, these findings have implications for the question of whether individuals' trust is endogenous or exogenous to the societal circumstances of their environment (Jackman and Miller 1998, p. 51) and whether social trust is a rational or a norm-driven phenomenon (Nannestad 2008, p. 414). In this article, we have added some evidence to the theory that certain political circumstances, such as an increase in partisan confrontation, may force a shock strong enough to destabilize people's generalized trust (Newton et al. 2018, p. 41), and that "societal events [can overwhelm] individual circumstances" (Delhey and Newton 2003, p. 114). Inasmuch as general social trust at the aggregate level is linked to a "culture of trust" (Sztompka 1998, p. 21), this agrees with Inglehart's assessment that "cultural characteristics tend to change slowly, [but] they can and do change" (Inglehart 1999, p. 103). In the present study, we show that increasing partisan affective polarization, no matter its cause, might consistently deteriorate the overall stability of general social trust on which democratic systems rely, and that it is self-reinforcing since a lack of general social trust, in turn, increases affective polarization. This is of particular importance, given that creating and sustaining general social trust is no easy task, and such a shift is likely to be much harder to reverse than it is to produce (Kramer 2018, p. 95).

The literature on affective polarization sustains that it has the potential to become self-reinforcing. In this paper we have added some evidence that helps support this theory. We have also provided one of many possible explanations as to how this may occur, by introducing social trust into the existing theory of affective polarization. Although we have only proven this connection in the case of Spain between 2014-2015 and 2018–2019, future case studies looking into the topic may allow us to better understand the nature of this relationship. We believe that a spiralling relationship between affective polarization and generalized and personalized trust could help settle the academic community's debate on whether or not affective polarization is a negative phenomenon: while voicing diverging opinions is an important element in any democracy, general social trust is essential to keep political power from being co-opted by factions incapable of trusting and working together with their opponents.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Data availability

In footnote 1: Data and scripts to reproduce this analysis are located at OSF: https://osf.io/bsfnr/

Acknowledgments

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102582.

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