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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Ingroup and outgroup effects on party placement perceptions

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Abstract

How do identities affect our political perceptions? Drawing on the social identity theory, we offer a new notion and empirical modeling strategy to study divergence in party placement perceptions. Our framework builds on the idea that membership in social groups has the potential to act as a social identity by systematically structuring perceptual divergence among groups. We conceptualize two consequences of social identity formation, ingroup favoritism and outgroup hostility: an ingroup effect brings a party closer to the preferred policy of the group; an outgroup effect pushes the party away. The approach permits detecting these effects and pinpoints the group-based characteristics producing perceptual polarization in multiparty systems using standard public opinion survey data. An application to the Basque region of Spain shows that over two decades, social identities around national sentiments and religion have produced the most perceptual divergence and polarization, whereas gender or social class do not structure party perceptions in the region.

Keywords: Social identities; identity politics; perceptions; ingroup-outgroup; divergence

Introduction

Different citizens perceive and interpret political parties, candidates, messages, or phenomena differently (see, e.g., Krishnarajan, 2023; Muraoka and Rosas, 2021; Vliegenthart et al., 2024; Ward and Tavits, 2019). Where does this perceptual heterogeneity come from? We offer a new perspective to this question by bringing back the group aspect of political thinking (Campbell et al., 1960; Conover, 1984; Miller, Wlezien and Hildreth, 1991). We propose an analytical framework that links multiple group identifications, resulting from social profiles, ideological or cultural divides, to heterogeneity in platform perceptions. For example, a conservative citizen may perceive politics differently than one with liberal preferences, a Catholic may not interpret conservative parties like a non-Catholic, or the political views of territorial-rooted citizens may differ from globally-minded ones.

Our analytical framework draws on the well-established social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981), which has been used to comprehend preferences, values, beliefs, trust and movements (Egan, 2020; Gustavsson and Stendahl, 2020; Klandermans, 2014; Shayo, 2009; Verhaegen, Hooghe and Quintelier, 2017; Zapryanova and Surzhko-Harned, 2016), campaigning, voting behavior and party strategies (Ansolabehere and Puy, 2016; Bornschier et al., 2021; Sides, Tesler and Vavreck, 2019; Tavits and Potter, 2015), or partisan affect and polarization (e.g., van Erkel and Turkenburg, 2022; Huddy, Mason and Aaroe, 2015; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012; Iyengar et al., 2019; Levendusky, 2018; Wagner, 2024; West and Iyengar, 2022). We contribute to this literature by

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bringing identity-based reasoning into the study of party placement perceptions, where the key result is that citizens have no common perceptions (e.g., Aldrich et al., 2018; Dahlberg, 2013; Meyer and Wagner, 2020; Potter and Dunaway, 2017; Somer-Topcu, 2015; Ward and Tavits, 2019).

Our approach is based on the idea that membership in social groups has the potential to act as a social identity by systematically structuring divergence in political perceptions. The novel aspect of our framework is conceptualizing two manifestations of perceptual divergences among groups: ingroup and outgroup effects. We argue that a group membership translates into a group identity when citizens pull party placements to the preferred policy of the group they belong to (*ingroup effect*) or push them away (*outgroup effect*). Our main contribution lies in providing an empirical strategy to detect the group characteristics that divide citizens into identity groups, producing ingroups and outgroups. The framework comes with several advantages. It considers the directional perspective of group-based perceptual effects and their strengths, which permits uncovering what party activates what social identity to what extent. It allows the analysis of a wide range of group characteristics related to cultural, ideological, or socioeconomic aspects. It can be applied to multiparty systems using standard mass public opinion survey data and uncover the identity groups that produce perceptual polarization. We believe that conceptualizing group-based perceptual effects along with an empirical modeling strategy are crucial steps toward gaining a deeper understanding of how groups are tied to parties in perceiving and interpreting the political landscape.

We empirically apply our framework to the Basque region of Spain, exploring party placement perceptions in regional elections from 2009 to 2020. The Basque Country serves as a notable example of how national identities have created social divisions in recent decades (e.g., Arenas, 2021; McNeill, 2000). We focus on this case because, in addition to traditional societal divides based on class, religion, or ideology, the Basque Country also encompasses distinct national sentiments that contribute to social fragmentation. This case is not unique; similar nationalist sentiments can be found in other regions of Spain, such as Catalonia or Galicia, and in other countries, such as Belgium, Canada, Denmark, India, Italy, Pakistan, or the UK (e.g., Brancati, 2006; Hobsbawm and Kertzer, 1992; Sniderman, 2002). The Basque region demonstrates the insights that our analytical framework can obtain, as we expect the national component to yield divergent party placement perceptions. We study the perceptions of parties competing in the entire Spain and regional pro-independence parties, and investigate social groups related to national ideological and socioeconomic aspects.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section Linking Social Identity with Party Perceptions reviews previous research and outlines our contribution. Section Group-based Divergence and Perceptual Effects presents the analytical framework. Section Empirical Application provides the empirical application. Section Discussion provides a discussion, and Section Conclusion concludes.

Linking social identity with party perceptions

Understanding how citizens perceive party positions is an important aspect in the study of public opinion and representative democracies. While the literature agrees that citizens differ in their perceptions, it is still an open question how different groups are tied to parties in perceiving and interpreting the political landscape. There is also no consensus among existing studies on how to characterize and interpret this heterogeneity, yielding several notions with different implications. In the following, we review these studies and outline how our analytical framework on social identity theorizing contributes to understanding the link between social groups and political perceptions, which allows for uncovering the direction of perceptual effects toward parties in multiparty systems where citizens may not identify with a single party but with various parties to different degrees.

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Some studies characterize heterogeneity in party platform perceptions as *perceptual variability* across citizens, based on measures of dispersion or concentration (e.g., Dahlberg, 2009; Somer-Topcu, 2015, 2017). We also understand it as variability but pay specific attention to the direction of such variations (e.g., to the left or the right). Other research refers to *disagreement* among citizens. When the individual perceptions deviate from some average perception, citizens are said to disagree on where to place parties (e.g., Dahlberg, 2013). *Misperception* is yet another notion linking it to an inability to locate parties accurately, understood as a perceptual bias that hampers political representation (e.g., Aldrich et al.,2018; Muraoka and Rosas, 2021; Potter and Dunaway, 2017). When individuals deviate from expert locations, they are assumed to misperceive the party position. In contrast to these studies, we do not rely on a true or objective party position. Instead, we evaluate whether distinct groups differ in their perceptions to understand the diversity in interpreting politics.

Another prominent notion in the context of spatial voting (e.g., Calvo, Chang and Hellwig, 2014; Drummond, 2011; Merrill, Grofman and Adams, 2001) is *misestimation* that comes in two forms: assimilation and contrast. They are projection effects that describe cognitive efforts voters employ to resolve inconsistencies between their ideological self-placements and the placement of the party they support.[1] Based on vote choices (or voting intentions), voters are grouped into supporters and non-supporters of each party. Assimilation is the tendency to overestimate the ideological similarity to the voted party. Contrast is the tendency to overestimate the ideological distance to non-voted parties. These effects account for the direction of variation but limit it to only two groups: party supporters and non-supporters. We build on the same idea of considering groups of citizens and generalize it to various group identifications that may not manifest in voting for the same party.

Unlike previous contributions, we use the classic notion of social groupings as lenses through which citizens perceive and interpret politics (Campbell et al., 1960; Conover, 1984; Miller, Wlezien and Hildreth, 1991), connect perceptual divergence among multiple groups with political parties and incorporate a directional perspective, helping to understand their manifold links. To do so, we draw on the social identity theory, where similarity in perceptions among group members and differences across groups are core theoretical components (e.g., Tajfel et al., 1979; Tajfel, 1981; Turner et al., 1987).[2]

The basic idea is that many social groups have the potential to act as organizing cues that function as anchor points for interpreting the political world and, therefore, coloring party perceptions. We argue that group membership translates into a group identity when different perceptions surround different groups. The perceptual divergence among groups activates the group identity by establishing an affect between specific parties and groups, which can be positive or negative. A positive affect is expressed by pulling a party to the preferred group policy, and a negative affect by pushing away a party, defining what we call ingroup and outgroup effects. This conceptualization allows disentangling the potential of different social groupings to produce such directional effects toward several parties.

By investigating perceptual patterns and group attachments to multiple identity-based (e.g., van Erkel and Turkenburg, 2022; Greene, 2004; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012; Iyengar and Westwood, 2015; Iyengar et al., 2019; Levendusky, 2018; Wagner, 2021; West and Iyengar, 2022). The rationale of these studies is that individuals identify with a political party, and the identification causes ingroup favoritism and outgroup animosity. The preferred party and its fellows form the ingroup toward which they hold a positive affect; the other parties are the outgroups associated with a negative affect. Citizens are very likely to interpret the political landscape as more diverse than by ideological labels, and partisanship can reflect other group

[1]These projection effects can be associated with the directional voting model by Rabinowitz and Macdonald (1989).
[2]For a review on social identity theorizing in political science, see Kalin and Sambanis (2018).

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identities related to several socio-political or ideological cleavages, which becomes especially relevant in multiparty systems with coalition governments (see Bankert and Huddy Rosema, 2017; Garry, 2007; Gonzalez et al., 2008; Hagevi, 2015). In such contexts, citizens may not identify with one single party but with various. Depending on the specific group membership, based on cultural, socioeconomic, or ideological labels, these identifications can be conflicting, point in different directions, or differ in degree. We introduce a framework that permits studying the potential of these multiple groups, where ideological labels are one of them, to produce affects toward several parties by investigating perceptual patterns and how they differ across parties and social groups in direction and intensity.

Our approach is embedded in the likeability heuristic by Brady and Sniderman (1985) who propose a "model of attitude attribution explaining how citizens draw an accurate map of politics by relying on their political affects, their likes and dislikes of politically strategic groups" (1061); see also Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock (1991). The perceived issue positions of a group (party placements in our setting) are deduced as a function of personal beliefs and feelings, where observable individual characteristics determine these beliefs and feelings. Our theory perfectly fits into their model by emphasizing the group affect aspect as a determinant of party placement perceptions. Unlike Brady and Sniderman (1985), we empirically test our framework by identifying which groups are salient and impact political perceptions.[3]

Our framework is based on a cross-sectional observational design, which is very general and straightforward to apply to multiparty settings. It does not impose any restriction on the number of identity-based attributes or competing parties. At the same time, it is parsimonious. It only requires individual self-classifications (or self-reports) in mutually exclusive groups on potentially salient identity attributes and an ideological dimension (or specific policy issues) where the individuals place themselves and the parties, information that standard electoral survey data contains. Thus, the implementation is in line with existing studies on social identities that use standard survey data to categorize individuals along identity-based features (e.g., Egan, 2020; Ward and Tavits, 2019). It does not tap directly into the emotional elements of group attachments but indirectly deduces them from group-based divergences and the direction of the resulting perceptual effects. Earlier work in social psychology simultaneously considered cognitive or evaluative aspects (e.g., commitment and self-esteem, see Stets and Burke, 2000). Our approach follows more recent work that separates these components.[4] It also cannot establish the direction of the causal relationship between social identity groups and party placement perceptions, as it does not incorporate a temporal (or experimental) dimension. We could argue that group membership shapes the nature of perceptual patterns as many identity categories are impossible or hard to change (e.g., race, gender, ethnicity) or only slowly change (e.g., social class, religion, language). However, other identities might be more easily changed (e.g., ideological preferences) so that reversed or reciprocal causation is reasonable as well. Technically, such causal issues can only be addressed by a panel or experimental design.

[3]Their empirical testing requires reported group affects, which are not typically included in election studies or standard mass survey data.

[4]Some studies collect special data to capture the cognitive and evaluative elements of social identities (e.g., Bornschier et al., 2021; Stubager, 2009). Different methods are also used to measure partisanship as a social identity. Relying on the 'Identification with a Psychological Group' (IDPG) scale, based on a 10-item battery, e.g., Greene (1999, 2004) measures the emotional association with the group, or Bankert, Huddy and Rosema (2017) use item response theoretical models. Standard mass public opinion survey data does not contain questions on the psychological attachment to groups, such as the traditional 7-point party identification scale or feeling thermometer scores (on how warm or cold respondents feel toward parties, partisans, ideological groups) and their differences (e.g., Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012; Iyengar et al., 2019). Other nonstandard survey instruments are ratings on positive and negative traits such as honesty or selfishness, social-distance measures (e.g., the comfort level of outparty marriage or neighbors), or psychological survey experiments (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015).

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Group-based divergence and perceptual effects

The social psychology literature (e.g., Tajfel et al., 1979; Tajfel, 1981) coined the term social identity to refer to the individuals' sense of who they are based on membership in social groups or categories. Our analytical framework operates within the terminology of social identity theory, where the group is the base of identity and not the role as in identity theory. However, we are aware of the significant overlaps and similarities between both theories (see, e.g., Stets and Burke, 2000). The formation of social identities is the result of two processes: self-categorization and social comparison. Self-categorization means that individuals can classify themselves in relation to other social groups. Social comparison produces ingroups and outgroups: individuals categorize others who are similar to them as the ingroup and those who are different as the outgroup. Self-categorization causes accentuation of the perceived similarity to members of the ingroup and the perceived difference to members of the outgroup. Social comparison causes to evaluate the ingroup positively and the outgroup negatively.

In the following, we outline how our framework on group-based perceptual divergence incorporates social identity theorizing into the study of political perceptions. It enables the detection of which social comparisons produce ingroups, outgroups, or neither. The proposed framework does not require coherent groups as a precondition; rather, the empirical modeling strategy detects group coherence.[5] We draw on the traditional left-right dimension, which is analyzed in the vast majority of existing research (e.g., Aldrich et al., 2018; Dahlberg, 2009, 2013; Merrill, Grofman and Adams, 2001; Meyer and Wagner, 2020; Muraoka and Rosas, 2021; Somer-Topcu, 2015). However, it can be easily applied and extended to several ideological dimensions or specific issues (e.g., Adams, Merrill III and Grofman, 2005; Mauerer, Thurner and Debus, 2015; Mauerer and Schneider, 2019).

The mere self-categorization into groups is a necessary but insufficient condition for activating social identities in our conceptualization. The rationale is that group membership translates into a group identity when it systematically structures party perceptions so that there is similarity in perceptions among group members and heterogeneity across groups, which is in line with social identity reasoning: "In general, we find uniformity of perceptions and action among persons when they take on a group-based identity" (Stets and Burke, 2000, 226). Based on pairwise group comparisons, distinct groups and their perceptions act as anchor points to define the perceptual effects. It requires the ingredients we describe next.

Group Membership. Each individual $i \in \{1, \ldots, n\}$ can be characterized by a set of potentially salient group-based attributes, such as gender, religion, or ideological cleavages. On each attribute, the individual self-categorizes itself into one group in relation to other groups. Following the social identity theory, we assume that only categorical attributes permit self-categorization and, thus, can induce group-based perceptual effects.[6] On each attribute, the groups are mutually exclusive (i.e., self-categorizing in one group implies not being in another group that belongs to the same attribute). However, individuals can have multiple group memberships on many different identity-based features. For example, they can classify themselves as Catholic (attribute: religion), female (attribute: gender), and ideologically Liberal (attribute: ideology).

Pairwise Group Comparisons. Each group $g \in \{1, \ldots, G\}$ is compared to a reference group, denoted by g_0. Consider the attribute religion and suppose a simple binary self-categorization yielding two groups: Catholics and non-Catholics. We use the terms *group* (e.g., Catholics) and *reference group* (e.g., non-Catholics) to indicate a pair, which helps to highlight the pairwise comparisons aspect of our analytical framework, where distinct groups and their perceptions are the anchor points to define perceptual effects.

[5]By coherence, we refer to the high degree of alignment in perceptions within a group, distinct from the perceptions of another group.

[6]By contrast, continuous attributes blur group formation as they do not provide a concrete division into different groups. However, we will include continuous attributes in the empirical modeling to avoid overestimating the group effects.

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Group Preferences and Group Party Placement Perceptions. Each group can be characterized by a preferred policy on the left-right scale that acts as an anchor point and is defined by some average preference across group members. Let $\overline{x}_g$ denote the average preferred policy of group g. Consider a political party that stands for a policy position on the left-right scale. We also take average perceptions as anchor points, where $\overline{y}_g$ and $\overline{y}_{g_0}$ denote them for group g and reference group g_0, respectively.

Perceptual Group Divergence. We say there is *perceptual group divergence* when party placement perceptions differ across groups, $\overline{y}_g \neq \overline{y}_{g_0}$. To ascertain perceptual group divergence, we perform multivariate linear regressions. This type of regression is an extension of the standard linear regression that allows studying multiple parties simultaneously.[7] Let $y_{i1}, \ldots, y_{iq}$ be a q-dimensional vector that contains where individual $i \in \{1, \ldots, n\}$ perceives each party $j \in \{1, \ldots, q\}$ on the left-right scale. The party placement perceptions are a function of multiple group memberships on different attributes

$$E\left[y_{ij} \middle| g, z_i\right] = \beta_{0(j)} + \sum_{g=1}^{G} \mathbb{I}_g \beta_{g(j)} + z_i^T \beta_{(j)}, \tag{1}$$

where $\beta_{0(j)}$ are intercepts, $\beta_{g(j)}$ are group-specific parameters, and the indicator functions $\mathbb{I}_g$ define group membership

$$\mathbb{I}_g = \begin{cases} 1 \text{ if individual i belongs to group g} \\ 0 \text{ if individual i does not belong to group g.} \end{cases}$$

Thus, all group-specific parameters are estimated in one single model that considers all party perceptions simultaneously.[8] We include continuous attributes, collected in $\mathbf{z}_i$, to avoid overestimating group effects. One group serves as the reference group g_0 by imposing the restriction $\beta_{g_0} = 0$ for all j, and any group can be selected as the reference. The particular selection determines the pairwise group comparisons. Since the parameters $\beta_{g(j)}$ indicate divergence between group g and reference group g_0 in perceiving party j, we detect perceptual group divergence when $\beta_{g(j)} \neq 0$ at conventional significance levels (5 percent or less). The parameter sign indicates the direction of divergence. If $\beta_{g(j)} > 0$, group g perceives party j more to the right than reference group g_0, implying $\overline{y}_{g(j)} > \overline{y}_{g_0(j)}$; if $\beta_{g(j)} < 0$, group g perceives the party more to the left than reference group g_0, i.e., $\overline{y}_{g(j)} < \overline{y}_{g_0(j)}$, ceteris paribus.

Perceptual Effects: Ingroup and Outgroup Effects. Once the existence and direction of group-based perceptual divergence is evaluated, the next step is to assess the distances between group preferences and party placement perceptions to determine the perceptual effects. For simplicity, we suppress the party subindex j in the following and consider one party only.

An *ingroup effect* brings a party closer to the preferred policy of the group. Consider the Catholic versus non-Catholic example again. If the Catholics pull or align the party to their preferred policy, they exhibit an ingroup effect. The left panel in Figure 1 illustrates such an effect. The average group preferred policy $\overline{x}_g$ is closer to the average group party placement $\overline{y}_g$ than to the

[7]We emphasize that the multivariate structure refers to the dependent variable, not multiple explanatory variables: q dependent variables are modeled at the same time. The advantage of the multivariate consideration over separate regressions (i.e., one regression per party) is that it models the impact of the explanatory variables on the entire vector y_{ij}, thereby taking into account that the party placement perceptions are correlated. The multivariate consideration involves the estimation of the covariance, which can be used in test statistics and permits examining whether estimates differ across parties. Parameter interpretation is the same as in the standard linear regression. The difference here is that the estimates are specific to each party perception, so each party j comes with its own parameter vector. Online Appendix C details parameter and covariance estimation. Anderson (2003) provides a detailed discussion of the model.

[8]By contrast, Brady and Sniderman (1985) run separate regressions for each group position (e.g., one for Democrats and another for Republicans).

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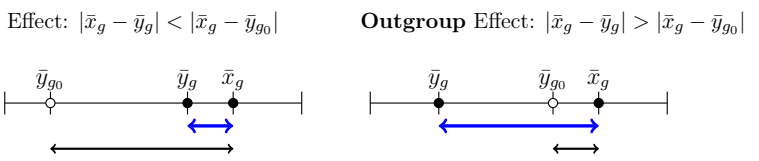


Figure 1. Illustration of Ingroup and Outgroup Effects for Group g.
Note: $\bar{x}_g$ is the average preferred policy of group g. $\bar{y}_g$ and $\bar{y}_{g_0}$ are the average party placement of group g and reference group g_0. Thick arrows give the distance $|\bar{x}_g - \bar{y}_g|$, thin arrows the distance $|\bar{x}_g - \bar{y}_{g_0}|$.

average party placement of the reference group $\bar{y}_{g_0}$. Hence, group g exhibits an ingroup effect when $\bar{x}_g$ is closer to $\bar{y}_g$ than $\bar{y}_{g_0}$. Analytically, $|\bar{x}_g - \bar{y}_g| < |\bar{x}_g - \bar{y}_{g_0}|$, using the arithmetic mean to define the average and the absolute value to measure distance.[9]

The reversed rationale applies for an *outgroup effect*. When the Catholic group pushes the party away from its preferred policy, it exhibits an outgroup effect, requiring that the Catholics perceive the party more distant than non-Catholics, as the right panel in Figure 1 illustrates. Here, the preferred average group policy $\bar{x}_g$ is closer to $\bar{y}_{g_0}$ than $\bar{y}_g$. Thus, group g exhibits an outgroup effect when $\bar{x}_g$ is more distant to $\bar{y}_g$ than $\bar{y}_{g_0}$. Analytically, $|\bar{x}_g - \bar{y}_g| > |\bar{x}_g - \bar{y}_{g_0}|$. In case of equal distance, $|\bar{x}_g - \bar{y}_g| = |\bar{x}_g - \bar{y}_{g_0}|$, we say that there is neither ingroup nor outgroup effect.

Since the framework is based on pairwise group comparisons, the same logic applies to reference group g_0. The anchor point is then the average preferred policy of the reference group, $\bar{x}_{g_0}$. Thus, when perceptual divergence between two groups is observed, there are two group effects, one for group g and one for reference group g_0. These effects may not be symmetric; for instance, if Catholics exhibit an ingroup effect, non-Catholics can exhibit as well an ingroup effect if both groups pull the same party to their average preferred policies $\bar{x}_g$ and $\bar{x}_{g_0}$, respectively. Furthermore, the perceptual effects are not mutually exclusive conditions, an assumption that is reasonable in multiparty systems. For example, when Catholics align with a party, this does not necessarily imply that they push away all the remaining parties. In addition, several groups can exhibit ingroup or outgroup effects for the same party. For example, Catholics and females might exhibit ingroup effects for the same party but to different degrees in each case. The framework allows studying such perceptual patterns and how they differ across parties. It also permits pinpointing the groups that produce perceptual polarization, understood as pushing parties to the ideological extremes.

Empirical Application

We apply our analytical framework to the *Basque Country* to explore how social groupings influence political perceptions and manifest themselves in ingroup and outgroup effects. The Basque Country presents an insightful setting for several reasons. First, it demonstrates the applicability of our approach to multiparty systems, moving beyond the predominantly studied US two-party system. Second, it allows for emphasizing the importance of context in shaping social group formation. A profound divide exists in Basque politics as the Spanish nation struggles to integrate diverse regional cultures within a single country. This feature has defined distinct national groups around the Basque flag in opposition to the Spanish flag (Olivieri, 2015), and separatist movements in the region have cultivated strong regional identities (Conversi, 1997; Díez Medrano, Dez Medrano, 1995). Third, several other ideological and socioeconomic divisions (along religion, gender, or social class) can also act as social identities that our approach can explore. Thus, many group attributes have the potential to act as social identities by systematically structuring party placement perceptions in the Basque Country.

[9]Alternative definitions of anchor points, such as the median, can be used to define the average and other metrics to measure distance.

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Since the approval of the 1978 Spanish Constitution, various national and regional parties with considerable ideological variation have competed there. National parties run throughout Spain and oppose the decentralization of power to the Basque Country, whereas regional parties compete in the Basque Country only and are pro-independence. We study the perceptions of three national and two regional parties and consider social groups related to national, ideological, and socioeconomic aspects.

Two divided national identities coexist in the region, Basque and Spanish, supporting different cultures, languages, and symbolism.[10] Since the Basques aspire further decentralization of power to the region, we hypothesize that they exhibit outgroup effects on national parties, which are against further decentralization, and ingroup effects on regional pro-independence parties. For the Spanish group, we expect the opposite pattern.

The ideological groups we study include Nationalists and Conservatives, among others. Conservatives, in contrast to Nationalists, defend the integrity of Spain. Therefore, we expect large perceptual divergences among these groups, with the Conservatives exhibiting outgroup effects on regional parties while the Nationalists align with these parties.

The socioeconomic groups are based on gender, social class, or Catholic denomination. Given the combined Catholic tradition and incipient secularization of the region (Molina, 2011), we expect the Catholics to be a crucial social group in producing perceptual divergence and aligning with historically dominant parties in the region. Next, we describe the data we use to implement the framework and test these hypotheses.

Data

The implementation does not require specific survey item batteries but only self-categorizations (or self-reports) on potentially salient identity features along with party placement perceptions. We use cross-sectional survey data on the four recent Basque regional elections (2020, 2016, 2012, 2009) from the Spanish Center for Sociological Research (CIS); study numbers: 3293, 3154, 2964, 2795. We opt not to pool the data across election cycles to examine whether persistent relationships exist between social identities and placement perceptions.[11] We base our analysis on roughly 5,000 interviewed citizens distributed across four post-electoral surveys. Drawing on the three types of social groups related to national, ideological, and socioeconomic aspects, we investigate ten pairwise group comparisons and their perceptual effects on five parties, yielding a total of 50 group-by-party perception comparisons. To avoid overestimating group effects, we also consider continuous attributes such as Basque language usage or left-right self-placement.

Our dependent variables are individual party placement perceptions on a 10-point left-right scale (1 extreme left, 10 extreme right). We study the parties gaining 95 percent of the votes in the Basque Country over the last two decades: three *national* parties that compete throughout Spain (social-democratic *PSE* with an average vote share of 20%, right-wing *PP* with 14%, and left-wing popular *Podemos* with 10%) and two *regional* pro-independence parties running in the Basque Country only (*PNV* with 38% and *EH-Bildu* with 13%). The parties show considerable left-right divisions that are stable over time. Figure 2 depicts the mean placement perceptions for the 2020 election (Online Appendix B reports the values for all years). On average, Podemos and EH-Bildu are viewed as left-wing, PP as right-wing, and the two dominant parties in the region, PSE and PNV, as moderate, with PSE tending to the left and PNV to the right.

[10]The origins of the Spanish-Basque division can be explained by the intense mining and industrialization of the Basque region, which started at the end of the nineteenth century and lasted until 1980. It produced waves of Spanish immigration to the Basque Country. By 1986, about 30 percent of the Basque population came from other Spanish regions (Zabalo, Mateos and Iraola, 2013).

[11]Given our data is cross-sectional, using a separate data set for each election year helps to avoid averaging out effects across years with different individuals and sample sizes (see Online Appendix A for details).

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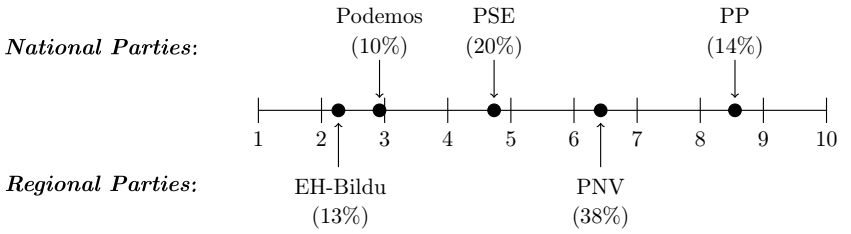


Figure 2. Mean Party Placement Perceptions, 2020 Election.
Note: Left-right divisions of the political landscape (1 left, 10 right). Average vote shares in parentheses.

As explanatory variables, we study group-based attributes related to national, ideological, and socioeconomic features that individuals self-categorize into.

National Groups. We operationalize national groups by national sentiments, which tap into the subjective aspect of national identities (Ansolabehere and Puy, 2016, 2023). Based on self-reports, we establish three groups we label *Spanish*, *Basque*, and *Neutral*. The Spanish group includes respondents who "feel only Spanish" or "feel more Spanish than Basque". The Basque group consists of respondents who "feel only Basque" or "feel more Basque than Spanish". The Neutral group comprises those who "feel equally Spanish and Basque", and serves as the reference group, allowing us to study how Spanish and Basque differ from this group in their perceptions.[12] Over the last two decades, about 50 percent feel Basque, 10 percent Spanish, and 40 percent feel equally Spanish and Basque.

Ideological Groups. We define ideological groups based on divisions produced by traditional ideological preferences (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2006; Bougher, 2017; Devine, 2015; Egan, 2020; Mason, 2018). Drawing on self-categorizations, we consider membership in five main ideological groups: *Conservative*, *Socialist*, *Feminist/Ecologist*, *Liberal*, and *Nationalist*.[13] Across our analysis period, about 20 to 40 percent of the population self-categorizes as Nationalist, 30 to 45 percent as Socialist, and the three remaining categories capture about 10 percent each. The Nationalist group serves as the reference group, providing meaningful comparisons with the other non-Nationalist groups in our empirical context.

Socioeconomic Groups. Many socioeconomic attributes can affect party placement perceptions (e.g., Aldrich.et al., 2018, Bornschier.et al., 2021, Conover, 1984, Dahlberg, 2013, Helbling. and Jungkunz, 2020, Muraoka. and Rosas, 2021, Westheuser and Zollinger, 2024). Based on self-reports, we study three socioeconomic groups and their potential to act as social identities: *Catholics* (reference group: non-Catholic), *gender* (females, reference group: males), and *social class* (low, high; reference group: middle). Catholics encompass about 50 percent of the population in the studied period.[14] The share of females and males is also about 50 percent. The majority reported as belonging to the middle class, a moderate number to the low class, and a small number to the high class.[15]

[12]Echeverria (2003, 367) shows that "Basque-schooled students typically identify as 'Basques' and linked that identity to Euskera, whereas Spanish-schooled students typically identified 'as equally Basque and Spanish' and rooted that identity in birthplace".

[13]We merged the categories Feminist and Ecologist to avoid few observations in each. The merging appears appropriate since both categories reflect similar left-wing political issues in Spain that are hard to separate. We note that the Nationalist ideological group is empirically different from the Basque national group (Cramer's V=0.309), which mainly classifies as Socialist (37.65%), followed by Nationalist (34.81%) and Feminist/Ecologist (15.83%). The values are from the 2020 election.

[14]Catholicism is the only religion in the Basque Country with a rich tradition rooted in the Jesuits and its founder, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, who was born there. The central role of Catholicism in the Basque Country is also reflected in the corresponding survey question, which explicitly asks only for Catholics and summarizes all remaining religious groups as 'believers of another religion'; approximately 3 percent of the respondents fall into this latter response category. About 15 to 20 percent classify themselves as non-believers and atheists. As reported in Table 1, the non-Catholic group is more cohesive (it shows a smaller spread in the self-placements).

[15]We are aware that education is another important group identity (Stubager, 2009; Traber, Stoetzer and Burri, 2023). However, our data do not contain comparable information on it.

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Table 1. Left-right self-placements by groups

			2020	2016	2012	2009
Left-Right		mean	3.609	3.821	3.790	4.062
		sd	2.003	1.802	1.670	1.637
National groups	Neutral	mean	4.025	4.269	4.148	4.243
	Spanish		4.699	5.179	4.864	4.533
	Basque		3.070	3.410	3.501	3.902
	Neutral	sd	1.905	1.748	1.619	1.566
	Spanish		2.402	2.117	2.018	1.811
	Basque		1.837	1.660	1.595	1.637
Ideological groups	Nationalist	mean	3.614	3.724	3.941	4.217
	Conservative		5.759	5.869	5.824	5.713
	Socialist		3.148	3.425	3.388	3.362
	Feminist/ecologist		2.883	3.086	3.317	3.652
	Liberal		4.690	3.776	3.646	4.031
	Nationalist	sd	2.016	1.643	1.577	1.636
	Conservative		1.957	1.731	2.094	1.561
	Socialist		1.631	1.481	1.351	1.212
	Feminist/Ecologist		1.816	1.508	1.465	1.474
	Liberal		1.829	1.943	1.732	1.547
Socioeconomic groups	Male	mean	3.677	3.745	3.723	3.975
	Female		3.537	3.913	3.875	4.172
	Male	sd	1.980	1.766	1.650	1.622
	Female		2.026	1.843	1.693	1.651
	Non-Catholic	mean	2.944	3.062	3.013	
	Catholic		4.386	4.453	4.377	
	Non-catholic	sd	1.675	1.546	1.333	
	Catholic		2.075	1.757	1.660	
	Social class: middle	mean	3.824	3.870	3.892	4.262
	Social class: high		4.263	3.972	3.550	3.905
	Social class: low		2.931	3.667	3.606	4.000
	Social class: middle	sd	1.972	1.798	1.672	1.661
	Social class: high		2.026	1.805	1.811	1.616
	Social class: low		1.886	1.797	1.630	1.620

Note: 10-point scale (1 extreme left, 10 extreme right). First row gives mean values across all groups, followed by standard deviations (sd). 2020–2009 Basque Regional Elections. We miss information on Catholics in 2009.

Table 1 reports mean left-right self-placements and standard deviations (as a measure of coherence) by groups. Regarding the national groups, the Basque is the most left-wing (around 3.5), and the Spanish is the most centrist (around 4.8). The corresponding standard deviations, which measure the spread or dispersion, indicate the lowest variability in the self-placements of the Basques and considerably higher variability in those of the Spanish group. Among the ideological groups, the Feminist/Ecologist and Socialist are the most left-wing, followed by the Nationalist and Liberal groups, with the Conservative group reporting more right-wing preferences (close to 6). The spreads around these mean values are very similar, with the Socialists showing the lowest variability. There are almost no differences between males and females. By contrast, Catholics report much more centrist preferences than non-Catholics, whose variability is considerably lower than that of Catholics. We also observe apparent differences between social classes in 2020, with the low social class being more leftist than the middle and high social classes; this difference is not present in the remaining years. The low social class has the smallest spread.

In addition to the group-based attributes, we include five continuous attributes to avoid overestimating group effects.

Continuous Attributes. The first is the Basque language usage, which encompasses more of an objective aspect of national identities (e.g., Clots-Figueras and Masella, 2013) and is operationalized by an additive index based on reports of understanding, speaking, reading, or writing the regional language Euskera. About 50 percent speak, understand, read, and write Euskera in our analysis period. The second is the left-right self-placement, which is a key

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explanatory variable in the study of assimilation and contrast effects (e.g., Calvo, Chang and Hellwig, 2014; Drummond, 2011; Merrill, Grofman and Adams, 2001); measured on the same scale as the party placement perceptions (1 extreme left, 10 extreme right). Finally, we account for divisions along the lines of age, urban-rural location, and the assessment of the economic situation in the Basque Country. The latter helps us to capture economic discontent in the economically strong autonomous community, which constitutes about six percent of the Spanish GDP and occupies the second position in per capita GDP after the community of Madrid.

Empirical results

We estimate the multivariate linear regression model in Equation (1) for each election year, which includes five parties, ten group-specific variables, and five continuous attributes. Thus, we simultaneously examine the impact of group-based and continuous attributes on the placement perceptions of all national and regional parties. The results discussion proceeds as follows. For each type of social groups (national, ideological, and socioeconomic), we first present the estimates for perceptual group divergences. Second, we discuss the associated ingroup and outgroup effects. We focus on persistent results, defined by significant estimates (at the 5 percent significance level or less) in three out of four elections.[16] Online Appendix D reports complete estimation tables.

Perceptual group divergences

We analyze ten pairwise group comparisons and the perception of five parties, yielding 50 group-by-party perception comparisons. Table 2 summarizes the persistent results. The estimates $\beta_{g(j)}$ give the divergence between group g and reference group g_0 in perceiving party j based on multivariate linear regressions. Positive (negative) estimates suggest that group g perceives party j more to the right (left) than reference group g_0, ceteris paribus. The vertical line separates national and regional parties, and subindexes refer to parties only. Panel (a) reports the perceptual divergences for the national groups, panel (b) for the ideological groups, and panel (c) for the socioeconomic groups.

Ten of the 50 group-by-party comparisons belong to the national groups (Basque–Neutral, Spanish–Neutral). Since strong national divisions characterize the Basque Country, we expect substantial perceptual divergences among the national groups. The Basque group favors further decentralizing power to the region, which national parties oppose. The Spanish group favors further centralization of power to the Spanish state, which regional parties oppose. As reported in panel (a), four of the ten group-by-party comparisons are persistent: three for the Basque–Neutral comparison and one for the Spanish–Neutral comparison. All these perceptual divergences are for national parties and none for regional parties. The positive estimates for the Basque–Neutral comparison indicate that the Basques place all three national parties more to the right than the Neutral group, and the largest divergence is observed for the social-democratic PSE. The Spanish–Neutral comparison yields weaker patterns in the opposite direction. The estimates are negative here, and there is only one persistent divergence in the placement of the national right-wing PP. As expected, national groups do structure placement perceptions. However, the results suggest that they only diverge in perceiving national parties that oppose further decentralization of power to the region. In addition, perceptual divergences are primarily observed for the Basques that push all national parties to the right. Thus, it appears the Basque group membership acts as a social identity when it comes to parties that represent the entire Spanish state. By contrast, group membership does not

[16]There are occasionally observed results that might also be interesting to understand specific elections but do not reflect time-consistent patterns. The 12-year time period we study may not be enough to detect identity switches (Bonomi, Gennaioli and Tabellini, 2021). Since we lack information on the Catholic denomination in 2009, persistent group divergence is defined here as occurring in two out of three elections.

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Table 2. Persistent perceptual group divergences

	National parties			Regional parties	
	Social-democratic	Right-wing	Left-wing popular	Right-wing	Left-wing
	PSE	*PP*	*Podemos*	*PNV*	*EH-Bildu*
			(a) National Groups		
Basque – Neutral comparison					
2020	$\beta_{PSE} = .625$	$\beta_{PP} = .311$	$\beta_{Podemos} = .419$		
2016	$\beta_{PSE} = .726$	$\beta_{PP} = .321$	$\beta_{Podemos} = .277$		
2012	$\beta_{PSE} = .594$	$\beta_{PP} = .363$			
2009	$\beta_{PSE} = .699$	$\beta_{PP} = .324$	$\beta_{Podemos} = .274$		
Spanish – Neutral comparison					
2020		$\beta_{PP} = -.474$			
2016		$\beta_{PP} = -.378$			
2012					
2009		$\beta_{PP} = -.447$			
			(b) Ideological Groups		
Conservative – Nationalist comparison					
2020			$\beta_{Podemos} = -.835$		
2016			$\beta_{Podemos} = -.480$	$\beta_{PNV} = .578$	
2012			$\beta_{Podemos} = -.486$	$\beta_{PNV} = .551$	
2009				$\beta_{PNV} = .729$	
Socialist – Nationalist comparison					
2020				$\beta_{PNV} = .302$	
2016				$\beta_{PNV} = .810$	
2012				$\beta_{PNV} = .695$	
2009				$\beta_{PNV} = 1.296$	
Liberal – Nationalist comparison					
2020		$\beta_{PP} = -.371$			
2016		$\beta_{PP} = -.621$			
2012					
2009		$\beta_{PP} = -.313$			
Feminist/Ecologist – Nationalist comparison					
2020					
2016				$\beta_{PNV} = .938$	
2012				$\beta_{PNV} = .637$	
2009				$\beta_{PNV} = .641$	
			(c) Socioeconomic Groups		
Catholic – Non-Catholic comparison					
2020	$\beta_{PSE} = -.350$			$\beta_{PNV} = -.456$	$\beta_{EH-Bildu} = -.276$
2016	$\beta_{PSE} = -.251$			$\beta_{PNV} = -.602$	
2012	$\beta_{PSE} = -.353$				$\beta_{EH-Bildu} = -.383$

Note: Dependent variables are party placement perceptions on the left-right scale. Entries report multivariate linear regression estimates that are significant in three out of four elections (p-val.<0.05), except for Catholic denomination (not available for 2009). No persistent divergences for gender and social class. See Online Appendix D for complete estimation tables.

systematically structure how they perceive pro-independence regional parties. Likewise, the Spanish group membership only translates into a group identity when placing the national right-wing PP, which takes the most rigid position against decentralization.

The results for the ideological groups are contained in panel (b). We analyze four group comparisons (Conservative–Nationalist, Socialist–Nationalist, Liberal–Nationalist, Feminist/

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Table 3. Summary of obtained perceptual group effects and null effects

Comparisons	National parties			Regional parties	
	PSE	*PP*	*Podemos*	*PNV*	*EH-Bildu*
(a) national groups					
Basque – neutral	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Spanish – neutral	No	Yes	No	No	No
(b) ideological groups					
Conservative – nationalist	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Socialist – nationalist	No	No	No	Yes	No
Liberal – nationalist	No	Yes	No	No	No
Feminist/ecologist – nationalist	No	No	No	Yes	No
(c) socioeconomic groups					
Catholic – non-catholic	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Female – male	No	No	No	No	No
Social class: low – middle	No	No	No	No	No
Social class: high – middle	No	No	No	No	No

Note: 'Yes' means that multivariate linear regression estimates are significant in at least three out of four elections (p-val.$<$0.05), or in at least two out of three elections for Catholic denomination (not available for 2009). 'No' means that group membership does not structure perceptual divergence among the compared groups. See Online Appendix D for complete estimation tables.

Ecologist–Nationalist), resulting in twenty group-by-party perception comparisons. We mainly expect perceptual divergences between Conservatives and Nationalists because Conservatives, in contrast to Nationalists, defend the integrity of Spain. Five group-by-party comparisons show persistent perceptual divergences: two for the Conservative–Nationalist, one for the Socialist–Nationalist, one for the Liberal–Nationalist, and one for the Ecologist/Feminist–Nationalist comparisons. The estimates are negative for two national parties (Podemos and PP) and positive for one regional party (PNV). Thus, non-Nationalist groups tend to locate the national parties more to the left and the regional party PNV more to the right than the Nationalists. In line with our expectation, the major ideological division seems to be between Conservatives and Nationalists, for whom we observe large perceptual divergences. The results also suggest that the ideological groups mainly differ in how they perceive the largest party in the region, the pro-independence PNV.

The results for the socioeconomic groups with four pairwise comparisons (between Catholics and non-Catholics, females and males, and three social classes) are reported in panel (c). Thus, we also study twenty group-by-party perception comparisons here. Since a strong Catholic tradition characterizes the Basque Country, we expect particularly the Catholics to be a crucial social group in producing perceptual divergences. Indeed, the results suggest that the Catholics are the only socioeconomic group yielding persistent perceptual divergences, and they do so for three out of five parties: the national social-democratic PSE and both regional parties (PNV, EH-Bildu). As the negative estimates indicate, Catholics perceive these parties as taking more leftist stances than non-Catholics. This finding supports our expectation that religion is a crucial divide in the Basque Country. By contrast, divisions along the lines of gender or social status do not systemically structure party perceptions in the region. Only religion appears to act as a social identity by producing perceptual divergence among the three largest parties in the region.

Table 3 completes the results presented in Table 2 by summarizing all comparisons: the obtained perceptual group effects and the null effects. When two groups perceive the parties as divergent in opposed directions, we write "Yes," meaning that group membership has become a social identity in shaping political perceptions. Otherwise, we write "No," referring to null effects. It reports that national, ideological, and socioeconomic groups act as identity groups, albeit with some differences. National sentiments structure how individuals interpret national politics. The stronger the Basque sentiment contrasts with those who feel equally Spanish and Basque or more

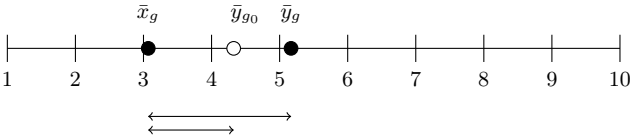
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Spanish than Basque, the more the party placement perceptions diverge. The table also shows subtle divergent perceptions among ideological groups; those identifying as Nationalists perceive the regional PNV differently from those with other ideological categories. Finally, socioeconomic characteristics barely manifest as social identity; only religious identification produces distinct perceptions of the regional parties and the Socialist party. Interestingly, social class and gender do not induce distinct perceptions of party placement in the Basque region. These social divides do not structure how citizens interpret the political landscape. While Basques, Socialists, non-Catholics and the low social class show small dispersion in self-placements (see Table 1), which can indicate group coherence, we find that only the first three of these groups exhibit perceptual divergence and social class does not. Thus, group coherence appears to be related to group effects, see (Douglas, 1970).

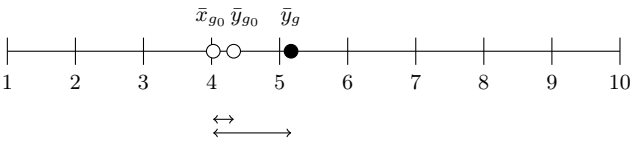
Ingroup and outgroup effects

Next, we discuss ingroup and outgroup effects for the persistent group divergences (reported in Tables 2 and 3) by comparing the distances between group preferences and party placement perceptions. Figure 3 displays for each pairwise comparison the mean group preferences ($\overline{x}_g$ and $\overline{x}_{g_0}$) and party placement perceptions ($\overline{y}_g$ and $\overline{y}_{g_0}$). Black circles refer to group g, white circles to reference group g_0. For the sake of illustration, we use the mean values from the 2020 election (Online Appendix B reports values for all years).

Take the Basque–Neutral comparison and the perception of the PSE to see how to read Figure 3. Since the framework is based on pairwise group comparisons, there are two perceptual effects: one for the Basques (group g) and one for the Neutrals (reference group g_0). Consider first the Basque group g with left-wing preferences ($\overline{x}_g = 3.07$). Combining this group self-placement with the party placements ($\overline{y}_g$ and $\overline{y}_{g_0}$) and evaluating their distances determines the perceptual effects. The Basques perceive the PSE ($\overline{y}_g = 5.17$) more to the right than the Neutrals ($\overline{y}_{g_0} = 4.33$). Thus, the Basques exhibit an outgroup effect on the PSE because $\overline{x}_g$ is more distant to $\overline{y}_g$ than to $\overline{y}_{g_0}$, that is, $|\overline{x}_g - \overline{y}_g| > |\overline{x}_g - \overline{y}_{g_0}|$.



Next, consider the perceptual effect for the Neutrals g_0, who are more centrist ($\overline{x}_{g_0} = 4.03$) than the Basques. They perceive the PSE closer to them ($\overline{y}_{g_0} = 4.33$) than the Basques do ($\overline{y}_g = 5.17$), reflecting an ingroup effect, $|\overline{x}_{g_0} - \overline{y}_{g_0}| < |\overline{x}_{g_0} - \overline{y}_g|$.



Panel (a) of Figure 3 visualizes all ingroup and outgroup effects for the national groups. We expect that the Basque group, which favors further decentralization of power to the region, exhibits outgroup effects on national parties, which oppose further decentralization. For the Spanish group, which favors further centralization of power to the Spanish state, we expect ingroup effects on national parties. The Basques push away the two largest national parties (the social-democratic PSE and the right-wing PP), reflecting an outgroup effect. However, the

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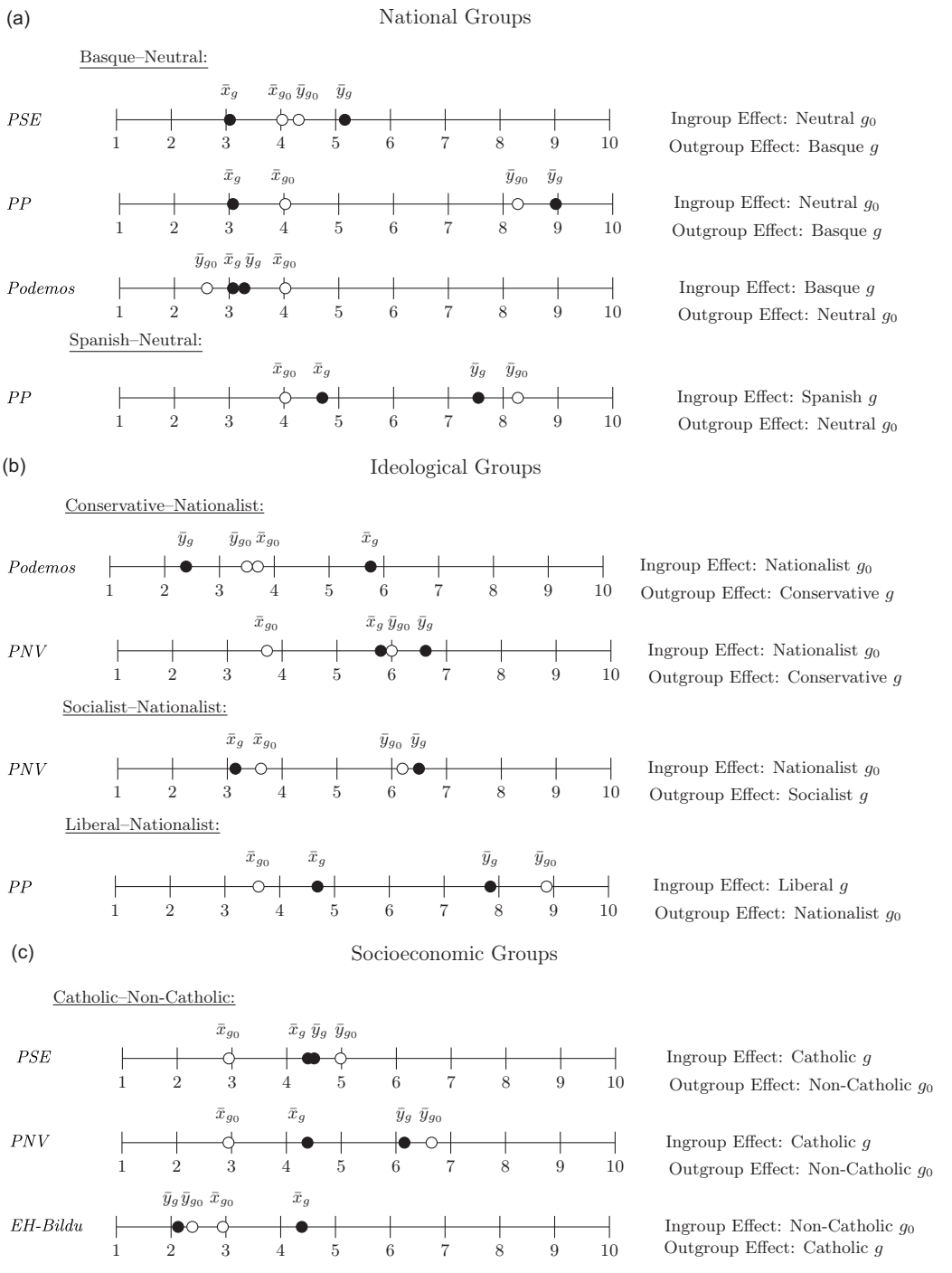


Figure 3. Ingroup and Outgroup Effects.
Note: Left-right scale (1 left, 10 right). Black circles refer to group g, white circles to reference group g_0. Mean group self-placements ($\bar{x}_g$ and $\bar{x}_{g_0}$) and mean group party placement perceptions ($\bar{y}_g$ and $\bar{y}_{g_0}$).

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Basques, which are the most left-wing, exhibit an ingroup effect on the national left-wing Podemos by placing the party very close to them. The Spanish group, reporting the most right preferences (close to 5), aligns with the national right-wing PP. The Neutral group shows the reversed effects.

The results fit our expectations to a large extent regarding the Basque group and national parties. National parties have yet to meet the Basques' aspirations for further decentralization of power to the region, indicated by the Basques pushing away two out of three national parties. By contrast, they do not align with any regional parties but the left-wing popular national party Podemos. It appears that only Podemos and the left parties included under this party label have successfully followed an inclusive strategy toward the regional traditions and culture. Likewise, the Spanish group does not push away any regional parties. It only aligns with the national right-wing PP, which puts the strongest emphasis on the Spanish flag and language symbols among the national parties.

Panel (b) displays the perceptual effects for the ideological groups. The Nationalist group is the reference group for which we expect ingroup effects on the pro-independence regional parties. The Conservatives defend the integrity of the Spanish state and are expected to align with the national parties that represent the entire Spanish state. We observe ingroup effects for the Nationalists (compared to Conservatives or Socialists) and the regional PNV. This result indicates a major schism between Nationalists and the two other major groups, Conservatives and Socialists, in perceiving the region's largest party, the pro-independence PNV. Nationalists with strong left-wing preferences ($\overline{x}_{g_0} = 3.61$) push away the national right-wing PP but align with the national left-wing popular Podemos. The Conservatives ($\overline{x}_g = 5.76$), which report the most right preferences, push away not only the regional pro-independence PNV but also the national left-wing popular Podemos. Similar to the Conservatives, the Socialists with left-wing preferences ($\overline{x}_g = 3.15$) exhibit an outgroup effect on the regional PNV, whereas the Liberals with centrist preferences ($\overline{x}_g = 4.69$) show an ingroup effect on the national right-wing PP.

Finally, panel (c) displays the perceptual effects of the Catholic–non-Catholic comparison, the only one among the socioeconomic groups producing persistent divergences. The Basque Country has a strong and longstanding Catholic tradition. Therefore, we expect that the Catholics align with the historically dominant parties in the region, PSE and PNV. The perceptual effects support this expectation. Catholics, with clear centrist preferences ($\overline{x}_g = 4.39$), place PSE close to them ($\overline{y}_g = 4.45$), reflecting an ingroup effect. They also perceive PNV closer to them than non-Catholics. These ingroup effects suggest both historically dominant parties succeeded in preserving the Catholic tradition in the Basque Country, whereas the regional extreme-left EH-Bildu did not, which Catholics perceive as even more extreme. By contrast, non-Catholics with way more left-wing preferences ($\overline{x}_{g_0} = 2.94$) than Catholics place EH-Bildu ($\overline{y}_{g_0} = 2.39$) very close to them and push away PNV and PSE.

For every comparison producing perceptual divergence, all effects are symmetric in our application: the groups forming a comparison never align with the same parties; when a group aligns with a party, the reference group pushes it away (and vice versa), suggesting pronounced perceptual polarization. Inspecting the two extreme parties, the left-wing EH-Bildu and the right-wing PP, we can determine what groups push these parties to the extremes. And once again, it is the Catholics and the Basques. Catholics perceive the regional EH-Bildu as more extreme left-wing, and the Basques perceive the national PP as more extreme right-wing (see Figure 3).[17]

Our approach detects which groups produce perceptual divergence and which do not. Thus, it provides an empirical strategy that tells when social identity theorizing applies to political perceptions and when it does not. We observe various identity groups that systematically produce

[17]The results do not confirm systematic skewness to the right. Broockman and Skovron (2018) or Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes (2019) show that elite perceptions are right-skewed in US politics. Multiparty systems are different (Kübler, 2024); Basques (compared to Neutrals) perceive national parties as further to their right, while Catholics (compared to non-Catholics) perceive regional parties as further to their left in our case study.

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divergent perceptions, and we can also discard certain groups that do not produce any division. Investigating ten pairwise comparisons (related to national, ideological, and socioeconomic aspects) and five parties over two decades suggests that perceptual divergence is not omnipresent: only a subset of groups differs in perceiving a subset of parties. The results indicate that two attributes are key in forming social identities in the Basque Country: national sentiments and religion. These attributes give rise to divergent perceptions of the most influential parties in the region. Citizens who feel more Basque than Spanish tend to view all national parties as further to the right compared to those who feel equally Basque and Spanish. Additionally, Catholics regard regional parties as more left-leaning than their non-Catholic counterparts. This case study illustrates how the population in the region is divided and how different social groups hold divergent perceptions of the political landscape.

Regarding the continuous attributes (see Online Appendix D for tabled estimation results and coefficient plots), only two of the five variables systematically affect placement perceptions: the Basque language usage and left-right self-placements.[18] Basque language usage persistently influences how citizens perceive the national party PSE. This result aligns with the findings in Ullan de la Rosa (2022), who emphasizes that the Euskera language in the region has been used "as a symbolic instrument to construct a differential ideological identity" (234). We operationalize Basque language usage by an additive index, which does not allow for evaluating the presence of perceptual group effects. However, apart from the language aspect, our results show that the Basque national group, defined by national sentiments, is one of the most influential social groupings in shaping party placement perceptions.

Discussion

Our theoretical framework draws on social psychology and its development of the social identity theory (e.g., Tajfel et al., 1979; Tajfel, 1981), which is based on aspects of the individual self-concept influenced by socialization. We argue and demonstrate that social identities manifest themselves in ingroup and outgroup effects on party placement perceptions.

Our contribution emphasizes the specific role of context in shaping group identities. The range of social groups to be considered is context-specific. For instance, the distinction between Catholics and non-Catholics in the Basque Country effectively represents religious attributes. However, in contexts where significant portions of the population adhere to various non-Catholic religions, more groups may be necessary to capture the diversity of religious beliefs. Also, society is exposed to certain political or economic events that can trigger new social divisions along the lines of class, race, or other social factors. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement, which emerged in 2013 in the United States, highlighted racial issues, while the EU Migration Crisis brought cultural divisions to the forefront. Our empirical strategy detects whether group membership affects perceptions by assuming the presence of underlying social influence processes, such as sharing information sources or educational backgrounds, which we do not directly address.

The Basque region serves as a valuable case study for illustrating the applicability of our model. It can easily be applied to other contexts, provided there is a preexisting social structure with competing social groups that can be identified through specific survey questions. Our empirical strategy enables the detection of social divides that function as social identity groups by systematically shaping political thinking. We expect active identity groups to be more common in polarized societies; however, our approach systematically uncovers identity groups with divergent perceptions.

[18]The more Basque language usages are present, the more the dominant national party PSE is perceived to the right. Regarding the second, left-wing citizens tend to locate national parties (right-wing PP and social-democratic PSE) further to the right and the regional left-wing EH-Bildu to the left.

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Conclusion

We introduced an analytical framework on group-based perceptual divergence that integrates identity-based reasoning into the study of party placement perceptions by conceptualizing two group-based perceptual patterns, ingroup and outgroup effects. These effects reflect the alignment with or distance between group policy preferences and party placement perceptions, thereby accounting for a directional perspective on perceptual divergence. The framework allows uncovering what social groups structure party perceptions, classifies such perceptual divergences into ingroup or outgroup effects, and permits detecting the identity groups that produce the most perceptual polarization. Using standard survey data, it can be applied in multiparty systems and to a wide range of identity-related groups. An empirical application to the Basque region of Spain demonstrates the insights that our approach can obtain. The empirical results show which context-specific social groups act as social identities. Divisions along the lines of national sentiments and religion have produced the most perceptual divergence and polarization, whereas gender or social class do not structure party perceptions in the region.

The framework complements previous research that conceptualizes heterogeneity in perceptions as perceptual variability, disagreement across citizens, or misperceptions (e.g., Aldrich et al., 2018; Dahlberg, 2009, 2013; Muraoka and Rosas, 2021; Potter and Dunaway, 2017; Somer-Topcu, 2015, 2017). Unlike these contributions, we do not refer to misperception, perception error, or inaccurate perception. Instead, we argue that identity group membership leads to divergent perceptions. That is, identity-based reasoning modifies how we interpret politics, and we do not define a "correct" perception from which individuals deviate. Our contribution also offers a different and broader perspective than the projection (e.g., Calvo, Chang and Hellwig, 2014; Drummond, 2011; Merrill, Grofman and Adams, 2001) and affective polarization literature (e.g., Huddy, Mason and Aaroe, 2015; Levendusky, 2018; Wagner, 2021; West and Iyengar, 2022) by investigating party platform perceptions and considering multiple group characteristics that can produce affects that are not necessarily related to a single preferred party, which is typically the case in multiparty systems (e.g., Bankert, Huddy and Rosema, 2017; Garry, 2007; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012).

Our framework also relates to Brady and Sniderman (1985) who validate two theoretical implications: first, individual characteristics produce affects on groups; second, such affects shape group perceptions. We provide a shortcut to their theory by directly validating whether specific group characteristics shape policy perceptions. Unlike these authors, our framework is grounded in social identity theory, as it emphasizes the presence of social identity groups and offers two key aspects: the directional perspective (ingroup and outgroup effects) and the strength in perceptual divergences.[19]

The obtained results have relevant implications. The study of representative democracy relies on voting decisions, which are often determined by the ideological alignment of voters with the political parties. However, we showed that identitarian factors in divided societies also play a crucial role in shaping party placement perceptions. Traditionally, and starting with Downs (1957), models of electoral competition have not typically incorporated social identity factors, with few recent exceptions (Ansolabehere and Puy, 2016; Bonomi, Gennaioli and Tabellini, 2021; Gennaioli and Tabellini, 2024). Our findings suggest that social identity aspects influence the direction of aversion and favoritism toward specific political parties, which is essential for understanding voting behavior. Consequently, electorates are influenced by context-specific social

[19]In terms of implementation, Brady and Sniderman (1985) utilize reported group affects provided by the NES. Our approach permits uncovering group perceptual divergence even when no information on group feelings is available. There are two other differences. First, we include all the groups to which an individual belongs in a single regression model, while their approach only allows for the inclusion of affects for one group at a time. Second, as a result of this first difference, we need only one regression analysis to examine which groups show perceptual divergence since all groups are incorporated into that single regression.

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identities, making these identities important considerations when inferring voting decisions, party strategies and electoral campaigns (see, e.g., Lawall et al., 2025).

Our findings suggest avenues for future research. We do not explore the socialization channels through which groups develop shared feelings, preferences, or aversions toward one another. Aspects such as family interactions, peer relationships, education, and media consumption remain to be investigated as potential socialization channels.[20] Future studies should also move beyond cross-sectional designs. Panel designs allow for temporal and within-individual analysis, while experiments isolate causal mechanisms, which complement regression-based techniques. Hybrid approaches, such as panel experiments, could unpack the complex interplay between social identities and political perception.

Our approach demonstrates that social identities influence how we perceive political parties. We provide evidence showing that heterogeneity in citizens' identities can lead to feelings of favoritism and hostility, which serve as lenses through which we interpret the political landscape. We believe that further exploring how policy supply adjusts to these differing perceptions is essential for a comprehensive understanding of how identity factors shape election outcomes in modern democracies.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773925100234.

Data availability statement. The datasets analyzed, the code and documentation for the code are available in the Harvard Dataverse repository: Mauerer and Puy (2025). Replication data for: Ingroup and outgroup effects on party placement perceptions. https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PJBO5S, Harvard Dataverse, Version 1.0.

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[20]In line with Enos (2014), perceptual divergence results from interpersonal interactions among groups that do not share the same attribute.

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