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Divided Opinion: The Interactional Accomplishment of Ideological Antagonism

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Supplementary Materials: Materials [see Index of Supplementary Materials]

Abstract

This paper analyzes the public expression of ideological antagonism as an interactional accomplishment with reference to one of Spain's most polarized contemporary issues: Catalan independence. Using Discursive Psychology, we analyze seven focus groups (N = 49) with lay citizens holding different political stances on Catalan self-determination. Our analysis investigates how participants collaboratively assign blame for polarization and manage highly critical views of outgroups within a rhetorical stance of reasonableness. Through the mobilization of competing notions of national citizenship and democracy, participants argue for the (i)legitimacy of distinct national projects. We also examine how some participants, within this highly conflictual atmosphere, collectively legitimize and defend illiberal measures against ideological antagonists as a rational and reasonable course of action. Issues of nationhood and citizenship are negotiated through varied interpretative repertoires, enabling participants to contrast commonsense rationality with perceived biases of political antagonists. This study contributes to the literature on citizenship and political polarization by emphasizing the interactional construction of polarized views, shifting focus from cognitive processes to the rhetorical enactment of ideological antagonism in everyday argumentation.

Keywords

political polarization, citizenship, affective polarization, discursive psychology, nationalism

Non-Technical Summary

Background

Growing levels of political antagonism have been observed in many Western democracies. Previous research, drawing upon concepts such as political and affective polarization, partisan prejudice, or more generally, political prejudice, has been focused on understanding the origins and consequences of increasing levels of political polarization, mainly using public opinion surveys and experimental designs.

Why was this study done?

Despite the growing academic interest in political polarization, there is still a paucity of social-psychological investigations aiming to understand how ideological antagonism is constructed in everyday political interactions between lay citizens. We construct a case for the importance of communication and interaction as foundations of political thinking, emotions, and moral

frames, used to make sense of the sociopolitical landscape. We carried out an in-depth discourse analysis, using Discursive Psychology, in order to reveal how lay citizens co-construct polarized and polarizing pictures of political allies and adversaries in multi-party conversations.

What did the researchers do and find?
In our study, we analyzed focus group conversations involving citizens with different views on Catalan independence. We found that people collectively generate accounts of the political situation that blame their ideological antagonists for causing polarization, frequently constructing the outgroups and their political demands as biased or even undemocratic. Those opposing Catalan independence often portray independence demands as elite-driven, with supporters of independence constructed as lacking agency and acting irrationally. On the other hand, pro-independence participants highlight Spain's authoritarian past, framing the opposition to self-determination as a continuation of a legacy of authoritarianism and undemocratic practices. Throughout, participants navigate concerns of accountability, striving to present themselves as good citizens while engaging in intense political disagreements or even defending illiberal measures against groups described as ideological antagonists. These dynamics show how shared historical and symbolic references shape perceptions of political allies and opponents through the mobilization of competing notions of national citizenship.

What do these findings mean?
Our findings indicate that polarization extends beyond individual attitudes. It is a collectively produced phenomenon that is maintained through shared interpretations of history, democracy, and citizenship. In our article, we show that the public expression of ideological antagonism is a collective accomplishment, a product of interaction and joint actions between citizens that can be (re)produced in intra-group settings.

Many democracies are facing a wave of escalating political conflict, heightened confrontations, and deepening social divisions. Typically, but not exclusively, scholars have studied these phenomena under the headings of political polarization, and more recently with a focus on the notion of affective polarization (henceforth, AP). AP tends to be conceptualized and interpreted in the light of the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and is commonly defined as the emotional 'gap' between supporters of different parties or political groups, i.e., the difference between positive feelings towards political ingroups and negative feelings towards political outgroups (Iyengar et al., 2012; Wagner, 2021).

AP and adjacent phenomena are generating increasing interest in the social and political psychology of political antagonism. Concepts such as tribalism, partyism (Westwood et al., 2018), or the more generic notions of partisan prejudice, political intolerance, political sectarianism, or partisan animosity, are routinely drawn upon to describe dynamics of political antagonism. Although conceptual distinctions are not always clear cut (i.e., Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Rudolph & Hetherington, 2021), AP and the constellation of related terms have fuelled new developments in our understanding of factors influencing the deterioration of inter-group relations, democratic norms, and the acceptance of illiberal political practices (Orhan, 2022). Despite several advances in our understanding of the extent and evolution of partisan – ideological and affective – polarization in different countries, its foundations (e.g., Hübscher et al., 2023), consequences (e.g., Voelkel et al., 2023), and strategies for depolarization (Hartman et al., 2022; Jost et al., 2022), there have been scant academic efforts to analyze how citizens themselves think and argue politically in the context of polarized political dynamics (though see Maes et al., 2024; Röllicke, 2024, for notable exceptions).

Notably, the discursive dynamics by which lay citizens position themselves and their ingroups, while rhetorically managing to express strongly negative – i.e., polarized – opinions about the outgroups—yet still maintaining positive self and group identities as 'good' democratic citizens—remains largely overlooked in the rapidly growing literature on political polarization. We illustrate these dynamics with a dataset drawn from focus groups where everyday citizens and a moderator engage in a conversation about one of the most polarized conflicts in Spanish democratic history since 1975: the push for self-determination and independence of a significant part of the Catalan society.

The Re-Activation of the National/Territorial Conflict in Spain

As is often the case with nations and nationalisms, the origins of the Spanish and Catalan nations remain a contested issue, continuing to fuel lively political debates today. What seems to be clear is that in the 19th Century, different nation-building processes co-existed within the Spanish geography. Spanish nationalism co-existed with other nationalisms, such as the well-known cases of three peripheral territories: Catalonia, the Basque Country, and Galicia. The center-periphery cleavage, or the "territorial conflict", as it tends to be often named, has been a key feature of Spanish politics ever since.

In Catalonia's case, this territorial conflict has involved repeated cycles of centralizing efforts from the Spanish state and pushes for decentralization, autonomy, or independence from Catalonia. This conflict also interacts with the classic left-right political divide, with left-wing Spanish parties typically supporting more autonomy for peripheral regions, while right-wing parties tend to favor (re)centralization. To understand the significance of this conflict, it is important to note that Franco's 'crusade' and the crude repression of the Spanish dictatorship was not only against "the left" but also targeted peripheral nationalists, seen as threats to Spanish unity (Taibo, 2007). Indeed, during the dictatorship, the languages and cultures of non-Spanish speaking regions were repressed. After the end of the dictatorship in 1975, Spanish nationalism lost legitimacy, while peripheral nationalisms gained democratic credibility due to their opposition to the dictatorship.

The democratic transition, in a country in which the military often played an active role in Spanish politics (Preston, 2019), took place in a very tense atmosphere, and culminated in the 1978 Constitution, which stated the indissoluble unity of Spain, whilst depicting the regions that approved their Statutes of Autonomy during the Second Republic (Catalonia, the Basque Country, and Galicia) as "historical nationalities". Despite the absence of transitional justice and the Spanish right being reluctant to subscribe to an anti-fascist consensus as the foundation of the newly democratic Spain (Núñez-Seixas, 2018), Spain's transition from dictatorship to a consolidated democracy was widely regarded as a success (Encarnación, 2008).

However, the territorial model in Catalonia started again to be questioned more intensely from September 2012 onwards, amidst Spain's severe economic downturn. A large demonstration was held with the slogan "Catalonia, new state in Europe". This marked the beginning of *El Procés*, which is how the Catalan 'route' to independence was popularly known. At this time, the Catalan right-wing government Convergencia I Unió, which had previously not supported independence, shifted its stance and began challenging the central government. The conservative Partido Popular (Popular Party) was in power at the time, promoting re-centralization (Anderson, 2020) and rejecting calls for a legal referendum on self-determination. A set of factors, from the severity of the economic crisis and the political dissatisfaction this created, the ability of Catalan nationalist parties to blame the Spanish State for the latter, the re-centralizing agenda of the Popular Party, and the long-lasting tradition of the Catalan national identity might have all contributed to the rise of the independence movement (Dowling, 2017; Muñoz & Tormos, 2015).

After years of intense political competition on the territorial axis, one of the most polarized periods in Spain since 1975 began in 2017, a year marked by a series of unprecedented events that led to the country's greatest constitutional crisis. On October 1, 2017, Catalonia held a controversial independence referendum, despite being declared illegal by Spanish authorities. The vote took place amid significant tension and police repression, with security forces attempting to suppress the referendum by seizing ballots and closing polling stations.

Subsequently, on October 27, the Catalan Parliament declared independence, sparking a major constitutional crisis. In response, the Spanish government invoked Article 155 of the Constitution, suspending Catalonia's autonomy and assuming direct rule. Several Catalan leaders (politicians and activists) were arrested in the wake of these events, intensifying the conflict. This marked one of the most significant political crises in modern Spanish history (see Simón, 2020), whose significance extends to the present day, by shaping political discourse, influencing elections, and generating ongoing debate about the future of Spain's territorial model.

Ideological Antagonism in Everyday Political Reasoning

The Catalan *Procés* and the constitutional crisis provide a rich context for examining how lay citizens make sense of such complex and emotionally charged political phenomena in their daily lives. Everyday interactions constitute the terrain in which collective constructions of self and others are worked up and disputed, and where broader ideological divisions are reproduced, challenged, or softened, revealing the discursive strategies people use to position themselves and their political rivals within polarized societies.

Despite growing academic interest in political polarization, the paucity of social-psychological investigations aiming to understand how ideological antagonism is constructed in everyday political interactions is puzzling. The bulk of previous research tends to adopt an underpinning epistemology that places the onus on individual attitudes and emotions and on universal cognitive mechanisms (see Fernbach & Van Boven, 2022), and downplays the essential part played by communication and interaction as the foundations of political thinking, emotions, and moral frames that citizens use to make sense of ideological allies and antagonists (Tileagă, 2015). The case for studying everyday political reasoning to understand complex political phenomena has been convincingly made by several political psychologists (e.g., Andreouli & Nicholson, 2018; Di Masso et al., 2014; Durrheim et al., 2016; Figgou & Condor, 2006). Thus, to fully grasp how AP and support for illiberal politics (Mondon & Winter, 2020) unfold in people's everyday interactions, we should carefully study how ideological antagonism is constructed by citizens themselves. This article analyzes how perspectives on polarization, ideological antagonism, and orientations to it are collectively produced, managed, and mobilized in the context of one of the most polarized conflicts in contemporary Spain: the national or territorial conflict (Simón, 2020).

Our analysis advances both the growing body of social-psychological research on citizenship and the limited discursive studies on political polarization (Balinhas, 2023; Rovamo et al., 2024). We do this by examining three interrelated aspects of how ideological antagonism surrounding a secessionist conflict led to competing notions of national citizenship. First, we show how participants co-produce accounts of the conflicting political situation by placing the blame for conflict and 'polarization' elsewhere, usually with political antagonists. Second, we show how individuals collectively produce situated understandings of rationality vs bias, rhetorically contrasting the supposedly rational outlook of ingroup(s) with the irrational and biased actions of outgroup(s). Here, what is depicted as (un)reasonable is mapped onto notions of citizenship that provide the symbolic terrain to label certain civic practices as rights or conversely, as illegitimate demands. Finally, we consider how claims of in-group virtue amount, in certain circumstances, to a rhetorical defense of illiberal political measures against people and groups described as ideological antagonists.

The Social Psychology of Citizenship

Social psychology research shows that contemporary ideological conflicts and antagonisms are oftentimes articulated as struggles over the meaning and boundaries of citizenship (Andreouli, 2019; Stevenson et al., 2015). Previous research has conceptualized and explored citizenship beyond its legalistic meaning, understood not just as a fixed legal status but as a fluid and contested set of everyday discourses and practices that guides people's experiences and understandings of their place in the community and/or society (Condor, 2011; Sapountzis & Xenitidou, 2018). In this sense, shared understandings of citizenship are actively constructed by people in interaction when they engage in everyday public matters, or, in other words, in the micropolitics of everyday life. Thus, 'citizenship' serves as a powerful symbolic tool through which we shape identities, assert rights, and define both symbolic and material forms of belonging and exclusion (Di Masso, 2015).

Previous social-psychological research, particularly within the traditions of Discursive Psychology and Social Representations, analyzes the function of citizenship discourses in people's lay representations of ethnic prejudice and the (re)production of exclusionary practices against unprivileged group members, particularly migrants (Figgou, 2016; Gibson & Booth, 2018; Kadianaki & Andreouli, 2017). But recently, the relevance of citizenship as a central category of contemporary political meaning-making has also been explored around the (il)legitimate uses of public space in Barcelona (Di Masso, 2015), or government constructions of the 'good citizen' during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic (Andreouli & Brice, 2022). Other research avenues consider the different understandings of citizenship that

underpin mutual aid by mutual aid groups in the UK during post-pandemic times (O'Dwyer et al., 2022). Citizenship has also been used as an important category in the analysis of constructions of LGBTQI+ rights and entitlement claims (Michos et al., 2021). This diversification of the social-psychological scholarly work on citizenship shows indeed that different contemporary political conflicts are articulated as struggles over the meaning and boundaries of citizenship.

Disputing Nationhood in Liberal Democracies Through Co-Constructed Enactments of Citizenship

The importance of everyday citizenship discourses and rights-claiming practices in recent secessionist conflicts, where notions of citizenship are often central to discussions of nation and national identity, cannot be overstated. Various political actors often invoke different concepts of citizenship in debates about the nation (Paul, 2020). The construction of rhetorical contrasts between different notions of citizenship has been explored in the contexts of the SNP (Scottish National Party) in Scotland and Plaid Cymru discourses in Wales (Massetti, 2018). For instance, the SNP contrasts Scotland's social-democratic, redistributive character with England's neoliberal and Thatcherist orientation, framing independence as a means to preserve Scotland's social-democratic consensus (Paul, 2020). Here, articulations of virtuous citizenship play a nation-claiming function by constructing contrasts between national identities (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001), positioning independence as the most reasonable course of action. In the Catalan context, Pradillo-Caimari et al. (2023), using interview data, similarly show how both pro and anti-independence supporters ground their demands in terms of rights and citizenship.

Thus, different enactments of citizenship are crucial in territorial conflicts, as defending or challenging the national status quo – and supporting particular national(ist) projects – can be rhetorically accomplished not only by discussing the nation but also through debates on left-right ideology and democratic citizenship. Political conflicts over self-determination challenge established sociopolitical structures, opening up opportunities for defending, reformulating, disputing and/or changing citizenship's hegemonic meanings and social representations (Andreouli & Brice, 2022).

Collective Understandings of Political Conflict, Polarization, and the Good Citizen

In the context of polarized territorial conflicts, conditions for the societal debate on the nature of virtuous democratic citizenship open, so different versions of citizenship are collectively discussed and mobilized by political actors. In this process, the political struggle over rights and entitlements is primarily a discursive and collective achievement, where individuals engage in joint action to present themselves and their in-group(s) as virtuous exponents of the ideals of good civic practice vis-a-vis the outgroups (Condor et al., 2006).

When discussing citizenship in polarized societies, a frequent bone of contention forms around the question of who incarnates the 'real' principles of liberal democracy, who belongs to the moral community of the tolerant and unprejudiced, or who is to blame for perceived high levels of conflict and political polarization (Pettersson & Sakki, 2023). When nationhood is discussed explicitly, fundamental arguments about democracy itself and what it means to be a good democratic citizen can be heard. We contend that these disputes can only be fully understood by combining a close analysis of the historical-political roots of inter-group conflict (Tileagă et al., 2022), with a focus on how people co-produce everyday meanings and orientations to – national – citizenship (Condor et al., 2006).

The controversy behind different versions of national citizenship is often framed and disputed in terms of the rhetorical dialectic that draws upon the opposing duality of rationality vs bias (Demasi, 2016; Gibson, 2020). The negotiation and contestation of these specific constructions draws attention to the dialogical character of argumentation and thus, constitutes a product of the joint action of different social actors (Condor et al., 2006). In this vein, Andreouli and Nicholson (2018) used rhetorical psychology to examine how everyday interactions around Brexit reveal constructions of reason and bias as multifaceted symbolic tools that individuals employ to position themselves and others within a divided and dividing political landscape. Similarly, recent focus group research on Brexit explores how metaperceptions are used in everyday constructions of political opponents (Obradović & Draper, 2022).

In this paper, we aim to provide a deeper understanding of lay citizens' collective constructions of ideological antagonism, through the rhetorical mobilization of particular citizenship notions. In doing so, we aim to extend

social-psychological perspectives on everyday political reasoning in polarized times, by looking at how participants position themselves, their ingroups, and antagonists in highly conflictual periods when the very boundaries of the nation are disputed and different notions of democracy are pitted against each other.

Method

Data Collection

Data for this paper comes from six publicly available focus groups along with an additional focus group organized and moderated by the first author (N = 7). Participants in all the focus groups were citizens living in the province of Barcelona, the Catalan capital (N = 49). The intention was to ensure that different understandings and living experiences of Catalan independence and the secessionist conflict were represented (Levitt, 2021). The various groups represented different positions towards Catalan independence (groups of pro-independence citizens, pro-unity citizens, and groups of citizens without a clear position on Catalan self-determination), age, and gender, including both mixed groups (5 out of 7) and non-mixed groups, one with only male participants and one only with female participants. Each of the seven focus groups is ideologically congruent in terms of their position towards independence, meaning that participants within the same group share the same stance, and individuals with different positions towards Catalan independence are not grouped together.

Six of the focus groups took place in November 2018 and one of them in December 2022. They lasted between 1 hour 39 minutes and 2 hours and 15 minutes. The six focus groups in 2018 are part of a study (Study number 3251) conducted by the Spanish Poll Institute (CIS) where participants were recruited following the specified sampling criteria. Participants in each of the groups in 2018 did not know each other previously. The Spanish Poll Institute makes all its data accessible online for research purposes. Furthermore, the additional focus group conducted in 2022 was moderated, recorded, and then transcribed by the first author and is part of a broader dataset within a project on political and affective polarization. The latter provides us with some additional variability regarding two questions. First, in terms of time, this focus group revolves around the politics of *El Procés* but with more temporal distance from the moments of highest tension in 2017. Second, participants here are part of a pre-existent group that campaigns against Catalan nationalism and independence. The semi-structured questions used for this additional focus group were modeled on questions asked in the CIS corpus and can be found in the Online Appendix (see Supplementary Materials). The transcripts of CIS focus groups can be found in the CIS bank of data. All the 7 focus groups revolve around perceptions of ideological antagonism and of a conflicting political landscape within Catalonia as a consequence of the exacerbation of the national/territorial conflict. Additionally, participants from the 7 focus groups were asked to reflect on the perceived repercussions of this political conflict on their everyday lives. These focus groups provide a context in which participants and a moderator engage in a joint conversation about the politics of the *Procés* in Catalonia.

The sample contains a great degree of variability in terms of political positions – which is the main grouping variable –, gender and age. Likewise, the variation within the sample (e.g., time frame, familiarity between participants) further strengthens the quality of our sample in order to understand in depth people's everyday collective constructions of ideological antagonism in the polarized territorial conflict within Catalonia.

The 7 focus groups are transcribed and analyzed verbatim. Participants have been given pseudonyms and the moderator appears as "M" in the transcripts. All of them have been analyzed in the original language (Spanish and/or Catalan) and the selected extracts have been translated into English. Extract selection has followed the criteria of illustration of the most common patterns of joint meaning-making that we found in the broader dataset. The characteristics of all the focus groups are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Characteristics of the Focus Groups

Focus group	No of participants	Gender	Age group	Position towards Catalan's independence
1	7	7F	30-45	Undecided
2	7	4F 3M	20-29	Pro-unity
3	8	4F 4M	46-60	Pro-independence
4	7	4F 3M	46-60	Pro-unity
5	8	4F 4M	20-29	Pro-independence
6	8	8M	30-45	Undecided
7	4	1F 3M	18-35	Pro-unity

Analytical Approach

This article constitutes a continuation of a tradition of critical discursive work in social and political psychology that examines the historically-situated features of everyday political reasoning and the specific rhetorical constructions that emerge in the context of sociopolitical divisions (Andreouli & Nicholson, 2018; Xenitidou & Sapountzis, 2018). The Critical Discursive Psychology (CDP) framework allows us to examine both the proximal functions of everyday interactions in terms of individual and group self-presentation or the management of accountability while stressing how what is being said here and now connects with the history of inter-group relations in this part of the world (Billig, 1991; Tileagă, 2015).

After careful reading of all the empirical material, analysis concentrated on three recurrent and interrelated sets of joint meaning-making practices and interpretative repertoires that participants use to construct notions of citizenship – often drawing on competing interpretations of *civic duty*, *national identity*, and *democratic legitimacy* – that present the ingroups stances, and often strongly polarized opinions, as reasonable. Citizenship, in this context, was used not just as a legal category but as a moral and ideological position to define who counts as a "good" or "democratic" citizen.

Subheadings reflect the different understandings of antagonism expressed in participants' interactions, from common sense blame to outright exclusionary discourse that marks the ground for the defense of illiberal policies as a rational and reasonable course of action.

The first set of discursive practices illustrates how participants work up accounts through which they blame the outgroups for current high levels of polarization. The second analytic set illustrates how reason vs bias are pitted against each other to legitimize the ingroup's national(ist) project while undermining the outgroup's project. The third set of collective meaning-making practices shows how constructing the outgroup as an inductor and a source of conflict and polarization, and their demands as irrationally biased, can create a breeding ground for stark exclusionary discourse.

Extracts selected are illustrative of a series of features. First, they are illustrative of discursive dynamics in a context where showing a bias or expressing unreserved nationalist pride may be seen as problematic. Second, they are illustrative of sequences of multi-party interaction, as our focus is on how everyday citizens jointly manage to accomplish the 'reasonable' expression of ideological antagonism in the context of the territorial conflict in Catalonia. Strategies of denial, or mitigation of excessively strong opinions towards ideological antagonists, are not simply used by speakers to construct an identity as a good democratic citizen but to construct a positive group identity and/or to 'protect' dialogical partners from possible accusations of intolerance or undemocratic behavior.

Finally, we were particularly attuned to identity management in interaction, especially how issues of stake and responsibility (Edwards & Potter, 1992) are managed in situ, and the ideological functions accomplished through dialogic practices by which people co-produce collective understandings of contested political meanings (Condor et al., 2006). The crux of talking about ideological antagonism depends on the complex positioning of the self and others, which, as our analysis reveals, is mobilized in the form of multiple rhetorical trajectories (cf. Wetherell & Potter 1992; Augoustinos et al., 2002).

Analysis

Who Is to Blame?

Whenever participants were talking about polarization, they were also talking about an asymmetry between actors perceived as ideologically-aligned and those perceived as rivals. The question of 'who is to blame' for current levels of conflict and political polarization came up repeatedly, both spontaneously and when the moderators asked about Catalan independence.

Generally, participants did not dispute the idea that the territorial conflict has brought about polarization. What people give are accounts whose primary function is to distance the self and the ingroup from responsibility for current levels of conflictual opinion, while elaborating descriptions that present ideological antagonists as the "origin" of polarized opinion.

Extract 1

Focus Group 5: Pro-Independence

1	**Albert:**	It is not from *Polònia*, but it is when Dani Mateo blew his nose
2		with the Spanish flag, it is quite recent, I have it quite recent.
3	**Pol:**	Then they did a program, the one they make of a news program that is
4		hosted by Toni Soler, where they blew their nose with the Senyera,
5		and all that, and it was funny.
6	**Albert:**	Those of "Esta passant"...
7	**Pol:**	He takes out like a Kleenex with the flag and starts blowing his nose,
8		nonsense. Like if you burn the flag, I don't mind.
9	**Albert:**	In Polònia, to joke around that of Dani Mateo, they dressed up like
10		various European leaders, and blew their noses with European flags.
11	**Pol:**	You have to open your mind a little, I think. If you burn an *Estelada*
12		or a flag of Catalonia, it doesn't matter to me, but if I burn a
13		Spanish one they will put me in, the face needs to be covered, if not
14		they make you testify. It's a cloth, that's nothing else.
15	**Josep:**	The obsolescence of these laws is, like a long time ago, I don't
16		know if you heard it, they did I don't know what with a virgin, they
17		had her... I don't know if they beatified her or a weird story, and
18		as if it were that... I don't know where it was going...
19	**Pol:**	A procession...
20	**Albert:**	The procession of the sacred pussy or I don't know what...

Extract 1 shows Albert recounting a story that occurred during a famous broadcast, where a presenter blew his nose using the Spanish flag. The 'flags issue' is picked by Pol, who presents a similar case, but with the *Senyera*, the Catalan flag (Lines 3-5). In Lines 7-18, participants work up a version of the 'reasonable' ingroup, by rhetorically opposing commonsense open-mindedness to nationalist close-mindedness. A feature of talk that helps participants to do 'reasonableness' on behalf of the ingroup is the stake inoculation (Potter, 1996) by Pol (Line 8, Lines 12-14). Pol downplays his investment in the issue by stating twice that he does not care if somebody even burns a flag, and by saying that the flag 'it's a cloth, nothing else'. Pol avoids the adoption of an explicit national footing or overt display of a sense of patriotic regional pride (see Condor, 2000). Josep deepens the image of nationalist close-mindedness elaborated by co-participants, by qualifying laws about offense to national symbols as obsolete (Line 15). He narrates a story about religious devotion in a systematically vague way (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Sapountzis & Xenitidou, 2018) thus positioning himself as somebody who is completely alien to religious orthodoxies and thereby secular, and open-minded. Albert ends this sequence by mocking religious orthodoxy and further distancing himself from these

controversial aspects, that have been associated by implication to those – irrationally – defending Spanish national symbols.

In this sequence, group members avoid the adoption of an explicit national footing rhetorically co-producing an in-group (re)presentation of open-mindedness opposed to the nationalist close-mindedness of ideological opponents (Billig, 1995). Nationalist close-mindedness is described by an obsession with national symbols, religious orthodoxy, and devotion. These features are all potentially hearable as symptomatic of the 'typical' nationalist and religious rigidity, here incarnated by Spanish nationalists. The rhetorical opposition between commonsensical open-mindedness and nationalistic close-mindedness accomplishes to construct a narrative where Spanish nationalists, supported by the legal system, are portrayed as overly sensitive and proto-authoritarian (see also Extract 6), disproportionately criminalizing actions that could be considered expressions of free speech. By highlighting the differential treatment of symbols (Catalan versus Spanish flags), Pol (Lines 11-14) positions Spanish nationalism and its judiciary as excessively punitive and, therefore, accountable for exacerbating political tensions and polarization.

The criticism of the Spanish judicial system and its close alignment with Spanish nationalist – and mainly right-wing – causes constitutes a common interpretative repertoire (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) for those taking pro-independence positions[1]. Although participants seem to embrace relatively strong views about ideological antagonists, there is also a sense that displaying unreserved national pride or adopting an unqualified Catalan nationalist stance is a 'delicate' matter (cf. Condor, 2000).

Extract 2

Focus Group 4: Pro-Unity Group

1	**M:**	How did you experience it? Did you attend these demonstrations? Or
2		did you not? []
3	**Isabel:**	The demonstrations that you went through above, which I suppose are
4		the ones what she was referring, the Diadas, the only thing I have
5		experienced from this is that before, when I was young, I went out,
6		like on a party day, like El Pilar or November 1st. As long as it was
7		a holiday I didn't care. Not now, on the day of the Diada I stay at
8		home, it makes me sick... The word is disgust.
9	**Marta:**	I also stay at home [...] and I didn't know whether to go to the
10		baturra mass down here because I can found all the big Spanish flags.
11		The extremes are always bad.
12	**Isabel:**	I was born here, I was raised here.
13	**Marta:**	Me too.
14	**Isabel:**	I'm disgusted to see all of that.
15	**Marta:**	There are two sides, we are facing each other.
16	**Isabel:**	It has been my experience of the demonstrations.
17	**Carles:**	It is as much one extreme as another.
18	**Isabel:**	I don't have any flag. I don't imply anything.
19	**Carles:**	Now they are fighting in the news to dig up Franco. To see who digs
20		him up and where they bury him again.
21	**Lucas:**	And who remembered Franco?
22	**Michael:**	It was undignified to have a dictator there.
23	**Lucas:**	Nobody remembered.
24	**M:**	We leave Franco.

1) This interpretative repertoire was normally used in interactions to undermine the legitimacy of court decisions at a time in which the territorial conflict, as a political conflict, was being 'judicialized', and different Catalan pro-independence leaders were imprisoned and waiting for a trial (Simón, 2020).

Extract 2 opens with a series of questions from the moderator (Lines 1-2) about the massive pro-independence demonstrations (see della Porta & Portos, 2021) that took place during the high points of the push for Catalan self-determination every September 11th (the *Diada*, National Day of Catalonia). The task of formulating an account of the *Diada* shows speakers attending to issues of self-positioning in relation to political (mis)use of traditions that explicitly index Catalan independence. Isabel expresses her "disgust" at the politicization of the *Diada* (Lines 7-8), while reflecting on the shifting political meaning of the latter.

At Lines 9-11, Marta, interestingly, provides neither a positive reaction, a continuation, nor a direct contestation of Isabel's assessment of the *Diada*. Marta is thus resisting using an affective-discursive construction (McConville et al., 2020) of the *Diada* as an object deserving disgust (Ahmed, 2004). Instead, she provides an example of the politicization of another tradition, the Baturra mass, but in this case, a traditional mass that, according to her, is being appropriated by Spanish nationalists. 'All the big Spanish flags' depicts the presence of flags as excessive; this rhetorically brings to the front the potentially exclusionary nature of both the Diada and the Baturra Mass. However, whilst her position might imply open criticism, Marta softens her stance by introducing what is akin to an idiomatic self-sufficient argument (Augoustinos et al., 2002) ("the extremes are always bad").

It is at this point that Isabel restates her position, emphasizing her stake in the issue by stating, "I was born here, I was raised here" (Line 12). This positions her previous observations (Lines 3-8) as a legitimate critique within the wider debate about Catalan representation. She works up a category entitlement: as a 'born and raised' Catalan, she provides a critique 'from the inside' of how the Diada has changed over time. That is, as a Catalan citizen, who claims knowledge about how the *Diada* was in the past (Demasi, 2016), she implicitly constructs the current political use of the *Diada* as something that excludes her from participating. The National Day is thus claimed to represent just pro-independence Catalans, and thereby she is drawing attention to a difference in the right to use the public space between Catalan independentists and non-independentists. Catalan independentism is constructed as – illegitimately – appropriating public space, an aspect that warrants an openly affective-discursive reaction.

Marta also states her 'native credentials' in Line 13, allowing Isabel to re-state her position at Line 14 that she feels disgusted to see 'all that'. None of the other speakers are aligning with Isabel's position. Marta's account in Line 15, combines personal positioning with an even-handed assessment of the political situation that includes both supporters as well as those opposing independence. In doing so, Marta portrays polarization as an everyday occurrence.

Whilst Carles aligns with Marta's polarization frame (Line 17), Isabel qualifies her assessment by adopting a position that minimizes her stake (Potter, 1996) and distances her from a potentially hearable position of a critic of the independence movement from a Spanish nationalist position ('I don't have any flag', Line 18). Carles, Lucas, and Michael shift the conversation to a debate about Franco and the legacy of the dictatorship. The debate about Franco's body relocation is seen, in Carles' and Lucas' accounts, as something that is an unnecessarily polarizing discussion. Throughout these accounts, there is an implicit attribution of blame by rhetorical implication (Durrheim et al., 2009) for conflict/polarization. The blame for polarization here is put on those sociopolitical actors aiming at relocating the dictator's body as part of their concern with doing historical memory of the dictatorship and the post-war repression. Some of the main advocates of historical memory – and the need for the dictator's body relocation – have been left-wing parties and organizations, along with peripheral nationalists.

Yet, Michael refuses to see this as an instance of confrontation and polarization – a discursive move that pushes against earlier conversational attempts to reinforce stereotypical views of the political adversaries (see Rovamo et al., 2024). In Spain, the need for the historical memory of the civil war, the dictatorship, and its crimes as well as reparation of the victims of the dictatorship's repression has implied acute differences between the Spanish right-wing parties, on the one side, and the Spanish left-wing parties and peripheral nationalists[2], on the other. The former have tended to downplay the need to do historical memory and victim reparation while stressing the need to 'look forward' and not bring about 'divisive issues' and re-opening 'old wounds' (see Encarnación, 2008). The latter have been more favorable to foster reparative justice for the families affected by the regime's repression. In the case of PSOE (Spanish Socialist

2) Note that differences between the different parties also exist here, but these differences were not about the need to foster a law of historical memory, but about whether the contents of the law were enough in terms of reparative justice, or whether the law should acknowledge (or not) the specificity of the Francoist repression in some regions (i.e Catalonia).

Party), this started to be explicitly the case from 2004 onwards, when this party tried to promote the Historical Memory Law, breaking "the pact of forgetting" (Davis, 2005). The debate over Franco's exhumation is emblematic of these ongoing struggles to address historical grievances and reckon with the past. Michael's response serves to challenge the notion that such historical reckonings are inherently divisive. By framing the exhumation as a necessary action rather than a source of polarization, he subtly resists the portrayal of historical memory debates as polarizing in themselves.

Reason vs Bias: Agency and National Citizenship

Extract 3

Focus Group 2: Pro-Unity Group

1	**M:**	Do you see this as politicians moving the masses?
2	**Lorena:**	I do!
3	**Rosa:**	Yes, a flock with its lambs.
4		(everyone speaks)
5	**M:**	But you started saying that it was the people who moved and then Artur
6		Mas came up
7	**Rosa:**	But the people were moved because they listened to their leader.
8	**M:**	But did Artur Mas join or did people follow Artur Mas?
9		(everyone speaks)
10	**Rosa:**	People began to mobilize because someone said the word independence
11		out loud.
12	**Patricia:**	I believe that Artur Mas began to mobilize.

When talking about themselves and political antagonists, the participants collaboratively articulated a version of the liberal opposition between reason and bias (Andreouli & Nicholson, 2018). On the pro-unity side, a common interpretative repertoire depicts Catalan citizens as uncritical followers of their political elites, as we can see in Extract 3.

In Extract 3 we see how presenting *the masses* as misguided is a culturally available repertoire that is being used to delegitimize a collective goal without focusing on the content of the demands but on the irrational nature of 'the mob'. Pro-unity speakers position supporters of independence as irreflexive followers, puppets of the pro-independence elites (e.g., Line 3), thereby denying them the basic psychological ability that accompanies reason: agency. Pro-independence supporters appear as a mere prolongation of the interests of the Catalan elites. This construction rhetorically facilitates the adoption of a political stance against self-determination whilst inoculating the speaker against more general accusations of anti-Catalan sentiment. Even though Rosa's interventions in Lines 7 and 10-11 constitute second assessments that slightly modify the vivid – and derogatory – image of pro-independence supporters as a 'flock' for less derogatory descriptions, agency and rationality are denied to the outgroup. Lines 7 and 10-11 make use of a rhetoric that presents pro-Catalan independence protesters as uncritically susceptible to the influence of demagogues (see Drury, 2002), specifically pro-independence politicians such as Artur Mas (Lines 5, 7, 8, 12). This connects with widespread explanations of the Catalan independentist movement that frame pro-independence sentiment as a result of 'indoctrination', whether through parental and formal education, or via the Catalan media (Almiron, 2018), a narrative that is fairly common in our data corpus. Altogether, pro-independence supporters are constructed as lacking the essential features of a 'good' citizen: agency and rationality.

Extract 4

Focus Group 3: Pro-Independence Group

1	**Nil:**	I think it would be the mobilization based on an awareness that could
2		be the crisis of the Statute. People mobilize and take the streets.
3	**Oriol:**	In September 2012 it was the largest demonstration.
4	**Nil:**	The one on the 'Via Catalana', right?
5	**Mónica:**	It wasn't the 12th, it was the...
6	**Oriol:**	For me it was a turning point, because the people decided, and the
7		politicians had no choice but to say that we had to go towards
8		independence.

As can be seen in Extract 4, the social representation of Catalan independentists as mere followers of pro-independence elites who lack agency, which was a common narrative in Spanish media (Almiron, 2018), is disputed with the help of counter-positions (Billig, 1991) that make use of a recurrent interpretative repertoire that constructs independence as a demand that comes from popular mobilization. Here, different words and expressions rhetorically work to present the – Catalan – 'people' as agentic. The people "mobilize", "take the streets" (Line 2), and "decided" (Line 6). Furthermore, these actions are constructed by Nil as coming from an "awareness". The use of awareness works up an understanding of the people's actions as conscious and not spontaneous political action, and thus presents the 'mobilized people' as thoughtful and reflective. The word awareness and the use of active verbs accomplishes to reinforce the narrative of the people as proactive and agentic shapers of their political destiny, and thereby the protagonists of the protests (Goodman et al., 2017).

In addition, this conscious action by the people is constructed as having accomplished an outstanding amount of mobilization. Oriol, through an extreme case formulation in Line 3 ('the largest demonstration') makes this exceptional capacity of mobilization explicit. This frame of exceptionality is further worked up by Oriol in Line 6, when the speaker depicts the events of the 2012 demonstrations as a turning point. In Oriol's accounts, the political actors positioned as lacking agency are precisely pro-independence politicians, who 'had no choice' (Line 7) but to commit to independence, whilst ordinary people showed the way.

Extract 5

Focus Group 1: Group With no Clear Position Towards Independence

1	**M:**	Has anyone written an idea with a more positive connotation?
2	**Laia:**	I have written epic related to October, 1st...
3	**Ana:**	Yes... Me too
4	**Laia:**	...Because it gives you goosebumps, with the organization, the ballot
5		boxes, the organization of the people, it is amazing. Whether you
6		agree or not, it seems very outstanding to me.
7	**Ana:**	For me it was also very exciting.
8	**M:**	Would it be for the people mainly?
9	**Laia:**	I'm talking about the people, yes, citizens, not those at the top,
10		no.

Participants often cite the October 1st, 2017 referendum to highlight the role of ordinary people. On that day, people across Catalonia organized to open polling stations and hide ballot boxes from the Spanish authorities, who had declared the referendum illegal. The referendum day was characterized by a climate of harsh police repression and citizens' acts of pacific resistance (Balcells et al., 2021), making the day also emotionally exceptional, as we can observe in Extract 5. In contrast to Extract 2, in which the affective-discursive construction was resisted by other participants, Extract 5 shows a collective (re)production of a shared affective meaning of the October 1st referendum, in which the

emotional valence was co-constructed as extraordinarily intense (as something 'epic', that 'gives you goosebumps', 'very exciting').

This extract shows how the events that took place in October 2017 are framed as led by the people's emancipatory and democratic will against the state's oppression (della Porta & Portos, 2021). This frame implies an overlap between taken-for-granted citizenship rights, such as voting, and national(ist) demands. Indeed, speakers often use the terms 'the people' (Lines 5 and 9) and 'citizens' (Line 9) metonymically to refer specifically to those participating in the October 1st referendum and thereby mainly to those supporting Catalan self-determination. This metonymical use achieves nation-claiming purposes while sidestepping potential criticism linked to overt nationalistic language (Di Masso et al., 2014; Pradillo-Caimari et al., 2023). In Extract 5, allusions to the civic virtue of the people who organized to vote, which is a quintessential citizenship right, overlap with self-determination demands. Furthermore, in consonance with the previous extract, the extraordinary event of October 1st, 2017 is described as led and organized by the agentic Catalan citizens (the people) and not by 'those on the top' (Lines 9-10).

Extract 6

Focus Group 3: People for Independence

1	**Mauro:**	I have the feeling that Catalonia could advance much further without
2		stones being placed in our way. I have the feeling that they always
3		place obstacles at us, and having a clear, free path, we would
4		advance much further.
5	**M:**	What does advance mean?
6	**Mauro:**	Economically. It will be hard, but I think it will be beneficial in
7		general.
8	**Eduard:**	Look, I am a philologist and I have a fact to share. The time in
9		which Catalonia has advanced the most, both politically and socially,
10		coincided with the time in which the Generalitat was recovered,
11		before the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera and after the dictatorship
12		of Primo de Rivera and before that of Franco. These two periods that
13		coincidentally coincided with modernism, expansion and so on, and
14		'novecentismo', the creation of the 'mancomunidad', schools, and so
15		on, like Ramon Llull's one, the two periods in which Catalonia has
16		been autonomous was when more things were done, such as the creation
17		of municipal libraries. The rest are always obstacles.
18	**Miriam:**	Spain has been a burden and on top of that with the whip.

Extract 6 illustrates the discursive co-construction of a national contrast between two different national blocs that are constructed as internally homogeneous. Spain is characterized by Mauro and Eduard as 'putting obstacles in the path', holding back Catalan progress and advancement. Eduard starts his intervention with a knowledge claim (Heritage, 2012), thus positioning himself as somebody knowledgeable on the topic and as an informed citizen by mentioning a membership category in Line 8 ('I am a Philologist', see Edwards & Potter, 1992). Eduard presents as a fact that periods of cultural and artistic zenith in Catalonia – Lines 8/17 – and where more things were done, coincide with Catalonia having its own institutions. In contrast, on the Spanish part, the two dictatorships as well as generally, 'the rest', are mentioned as periods of interruption of this social and cultural expansion. In a context where both supporters and opponents of independence might feel uncertain about the future, Eduard's statement constitutes a discursive attempt to qualify this uncertainty. Mauro's earlier intervention emphasized some of the challenges of independence (Lines 6-7). Eduard's factual assertion responds to these concerns by portraying the pro-independence project as solid. His intervention accomplishes to counteract the uncertainty – here explicitly expressed by Mauro – associated with changing the national status quo and declaring independence.

Miriam finally adds that Spain has been 'a burden' and that on top of that, a violent one. The use of extreme case formulations – 'always' in Line 17 – (Pomerantz, 1986) along with the adoption of a lexical style in which speakers use

strong terms and expressions (Seu, 2010) such as 'dictatorship', a 'burden' with the 'whip', accomplishes to emphasize a collective representation of the Spanish state as systematically repressing all forms of emancipation.

A dichotomous view of virtuous Catalonia versus the repressive Spanish state is often framed by highlighting events that show the additional repression suffered by national minorities in Spain during Francoism. This contrasts with the virtues of self-governance, which are depicted as the reason for social and cultural flourishing. This rhetorical counterposition papers over the idea that similar processes of sociocultural flourishing and subsequent decadence during the dictatorships might have occurred in other Spanish regions, though. Pro-independence participants, then, tend to co-construct a rhetorical contrast (Edwards, 1999), in which the signifiers 'Catalonia' and 'Catalan Republic' incarnate the opposite pole vis-à-vis a Spanish state characterized by exclusive nationalism, and resistance to full democratization and emancipation.

Constructing the Boundaries of Democratic Citizenship: A Collaborative Accomplishment

Extract 6 mobilizes the notion of a Spanish state as authoritarian, particularly contrasting the Spanish nationalist dictatorships to periods of progress when Catalonia had 'autonomy' (Lines 9-17 of Extract 6). In the context of a struggle over the rights associated with Spanish and Catalan citizenship(s), specifically about the 'right to decide'/self-determination, what is and what is not democracy is something that becomes contested, and what at its roots is a struggle about the boundaries of sovereignty becomes a situated struggle over the meaning of democracy.

Catalan nationalists, on one side, by referring to the past, and constructing a link between the past and the present, depict the Spanish state's negation of self-determination as a continuation of the Spanish authoritarian past, and thus reclaiming self-determination in the specific form of voting in a referendum is, by contrast, inherently democratic. In fact, the pro-independence campaign "crida per la democràcia" ("call for democracy") presents support for the celebration of a referendum as something that delimitates democratic from undemocratic citizenship, constructing those opposing the referendum as undermining a fundamental right of liberal-democratic citizenship: the right to vote and decide.

In contrast, Spanish nationalists define democratic citizenship by emphasizing respect for the rule of law and, consequently, adherence to the Spanish Constitution. As the latter contends the indissoluble unity of Spain in its Article 2, a referendum putting Spanish unity at stake is seen as both illegitimate and illegal. Thus, as the constitutional order plays in favor of the status quo (pro-unity positions), those endorsing Spanish unity and opposing a self-determination referendum in Catalonia tend to call themselves 'constitutionalists' and not 'unionists'. Note that both positions (pro-indepence and pro-union/constitutionalist) try to legitimate their respective national projects by appealing to principles of liberal citizenship (voting and people sovereignty vs the rule of law), something that evinces that conflict over Catalan secession often mobilizes competing notions of civic nationalism (see Carbonell, 2023).

Extracts 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3, in this context of the clash between different liberal-democratic principles, show pro-unity participants arguing about the limits of legitimate versus illegitimate political projects. These extracts constitute an illustration of two aspects. First, how the mitigation of an initial utterance that could potentially be interpreted as an undemocratic claim is collectively managed and accomplished by co-interactants (see Condor et al., 2006). Second, they show how illiberal political measures are collectively legitimized from a rhetorical position of reasonableness, by mobilizing the liberal principle of the rule of law.

Extract 7.1

Focus Group 7: Pro Unity Group

1	**M:**	Are there certain political positions that should perhaps be limited?
2	**Ken:**	Well, I think that constitutionally the parties that want to
3		liquidate Spain, that want to separate and are contrary to the
4		Constitution should be totally prohibited.
5	**M:**	the pro-independence parties?
6	**Ken:**	Exactly indeed. Those who go against the constitution as they
7		themselves declare
8	**M:**	Hm hm
9	**Juan:**	This is objective data, it is not that it is our opinion. But that
10		any party that tries to denigrate the Constitution should have no
11		place in our institutions and in the sovereignty of the people,
12		right?
13	**Ken:**	hmm hmm
14	**M:**	Would that imply for example that then they could not or should not be
15		able to stand in democratic elections. Neither regional nor national?
16	**Ken:**	With agendas that are contrary to the Constitution no.
17	**Mia:**	I mean I think that it is necessary to know in my opinion I think that
18		it is necessary to think about the rules of the game, that is to say
19		uuh if they want to, if they want to vote, they have to know that the
20		constitution has to be changed there has to be a a…two thirds right?
21		I think it is, two thirds of the Congress, right? I don't know if
22		there is a chamber instruction[a] ba ba ba ba. I don't know, there is a
23		process but knowing if it's at least two thirds so they have to know
24		that! promising people who want to achieve this and that they have to
25		be two thirds. If they explain it good like that, for me they don't
26		have this… I mean the important thing for me whether they are legal
27		or not is that they know the rules of the game.

[a]The original expression in Spanish is "instrucción de cámara", with the latter term making reference to either the Parliament or the Senate.

In Extract 7.1, Ken's straightforward response to the interviewer's questions (Lines 2-6 and 16) generates collective accountability concerns, and Juan and Mia's interventions might have been facilitated by Ken's initial utterances, as a collective defensive identity claim (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975). There is a concern here with presenting the participants' group as good citizens while arguing against the initiatives of those perceived as ideological antagonists, such as a self-determination referendum. In Lines 2-4, Ken uses a metaphor that personifies the nation (Spain) as something that pro-independence parties want to 'liquidate', thus suggesting a violent or destructive intent, positioning Spain as being threatened and pro-independence parties as extreme, dangerous, and working towards an illegitimate end. In Lines 3-8, Ken also accomplishes to set a particular moral frame for the clash between Spanish and Catalan nationalists: he constructs this struggle as one between good citizens – those in favor of the constitution – and those against the constitution, the document that sets citizenship's rights and obligations. This interpretative framework resonates with culturally available hegemonic repertoires that use the word 'constitutionalist' instead of 'unionist' or pro-unity, as it would be the most common way to refer to those against the independence of Northern Ireland or Scotland in the UK, for example (see Pinho dos Santos, 2021).

Juan starts engaging with Ken's position by presenting their opinion as factual (see Demasi, 2019). In response to the moderator's question, Ken re-states his initial position (Line 16). By formulating this question, the interviewer, as one of the recipients of Ken's and Juan's interventions, might be signaling trouble (Schegloff, 2000), suggesting that previous statements should be explained, and laying the ground for a sequence of other-initiated repair (Benjamin & Mazeland, 2013) that starts in Line 17.

Repair starts when Mia rejoins the conversation, and she rhetorically softens her co-interactants' previous arguments by articulating her argumentation into a commonplace (Billig, 1991). She states that every demand should follow a procedure, the rules of the game (Lines 18, 27). To organize a referendum, the Constitution, as a legal frame, needs to be changed, and to do so, a wide parliamentary majority is needed. She makes the point of the rules of the game but without invoking expert knowledge, thus in a vague way (Lines 21, 22), a thing that accomplishes to lay out the commonsense argument but minimizes her stake and her chances of being wrong (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Rhetorically, Mia's arguments accomplish to express essentially what Ken and Juan previously said, but with an important nuance that protects the group from being seen as intolerant. In this sense, Mia's repair work accomplishes a more positive collective presentation at a moment in which potentially problematic talk was produced by other group members (Condor et al., 2006).

Extract 7.2

Focus Group 7: Pro Unity Group

1	**M:**	According to yourself yes, I mean, pro-independence parties could stand
2		for elections?
3	**Mia:**	For the elections yes, but…
4	**M:**	To the elections and to the regions
5	**Mia:**	yes, yes but…Let it be known what are the…
6	**M:**	With pro-independence agendas as the partners said
7	**Mia:**	With pro-independence progr? I mean they…
8	**M:**	I understand that the partners said that they cannot run for elections
9		as long as they defend the independence
10	**Ken:**	Well, as long as they defend the current model which is an illegal
11		referendum
12	**Mia:**	Sure!
13	**M:**	ok

After Mia's intervention in Extract 7.1, there is an exchange marked by the moderator's questions, as well as Mia's disclaimers (Lines 3, 5 and 7) that take part in a sequence in which Mia is producing disagreement (Pomerantz, 1984). The 'yes, but' structures here are what Maynard (1985) termed 'hedged agreements', and here they play the function of signaling disagreement with the moderator's depiction of her previous intervention. These repeated structures indicate that the matter might not be as simple as suggested by the yes-no question posed by the moderator. In this case, the hedged agreements signal a mitigation of agreement, since agreement is conceded, and then subsequently dismissed. This allows the speaker to show that her previous points still apply to the moderator's straightforward question, so they signal the persistence of her own subjectivity and then, a rejection of the terms used by the moderator in raising the question (see Billig, 1991).

The moderator recalls Ken's and Juan's position (stated in Lines 6-12 of Extract 7.1), at a point in which the conversational structure demands some sort of answer (Sacks, 1992), and signals a potential disagreement between them and Mia. Ken, building on what Mia had said (Lines 17-27 of Extract 7.1) adds a nuance to his initial position – i.e., he does some repair work – suggesting that it is not independence itself but "its current model", which is defending an illegal referendum. Ken's rhetorical move, in addition to repairing previous vehement statements about the outlawing of pro-independence parties, accomplishes to re-introduce the legal-procedural argument, by which he refuses that their issues are with 'defending independence' as such, as the moderator puts it (Lines 8-9), but about breaking legality (Lines 10-11). Mia explicitly agrees (Line 12), and further elaborates the legalistic 'rules of the game' argument, as the next Extract 7.3 shows.

Extract 7.3

Focus Group 7: Pro Unity Group

1	**Mia:**	I mean from the government a real defense could be made: of saying
2		hey: "Some do whatever they do, I mean, say whatever they say but the
3		rules of the game are these and you have to comply with them". If the
4		government does this and says it with firmness it doesn't matter what
5		an Esquerra pamphlet I mean, the Esquerra pamphlet can say whatever
6		it wants, that they will give you a million euros if you vote for
7		them. But in the end, if the one in charge and the one who
8		holds…defines with firmness what the rules of the game are. Well, let
9		them have a voice. Because that's what democracy is right? I mean…
10	**Ken:**	No, but I totally agree with what she says that is if you present
11		yourself with a program that says "no I want to be independent and
12		for that I want to have a sufficient majority to modify the
13		constitution, to do this"
14	**Mia:**	Sure
15	**Ken:**	But they don't go there.

Extract 7.3 shows how participants further work out a repair of statements made in Extract 7.1. Here, Mia re-states the 'rules of the game' argument (Lines 1-3). Interestingly, she reinforces the conception of good citizenship as compliance ('you have to comply with them') and points to the government as the one that needs to define (Line 8) the rules of the game. Mia also uses an extrematization ('they will give you a million Euros if you vote for them'), suggesting that no matter what a pro-independence party says, if it does not align with the rules of the game, it will have no legitimacy or validity, and therefore will be inconsequential. Apart from this, the use of 'with firmness' (Lines 4 and 8) two times in reference to the figure of maximum authority (the government), emphasizes steadfastness and decisiveness, implying that clarity and authority are required to maintain the current order of things, that is, to comply with the Constitution. Ken agrees (Lines 10-15) and states that the pro-independence parties could have run to elections with a reasonable program aiming at modifying the Constitution, but they are not doing it (Line 15). Catalan pro-independence parties are constructed as agentic – in contrast to Catalan people (see Extract 3) – and despite having the opportunity to respect the rules of the game, they have chosen to pursue an unreasonable, illegal path.

Consequently, the desirability of limiting pro-independence projects is presented as necessary and unavoidable. The arguments suggest opposition to a self-determination referendum as a defense of (democratic) procedures whilst positioning Catalan pro-independence supporters as lawbreakers and political actors with dubious democratic credentials[3]. Following this, the action of outlawing Catalan secessionist parties is attributed to these parties themselves (Edwards, 1997). Furthermore, the rules of the game argument acts as a metaphor (Wiggins, 2016), that simplifies the Constitution, disregarding the fact that the latter itself is a crucial matter of controversy when discussing self-determination (Cetrà & Harvey, 2019). The metaphor, thus, constructs the Constitution as an unquestionable frame that clearly delimitates legitimate from illegitimate political projects. Interestingly, the Constitution in Extracts 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3 is constructed in an ahistorical way, as something timeless, obviating that the 1978 Constitution itself was a product of a specific correlation of forces written under exceptional circumstances when the Spanish transition to democracy was happening under a climate of tension and fear of – another – military intervention that was popularly called "ruído de sables" (saber-rattling), and precisely the influence of the military in the final redaction of the Article 2 has been documented and acknowledged (Bastida, 2007). Constructing the Constitution as ahistorical accomplishes to depoliticize it and strip

3) It should be noted that for a structural minority, such as any single region in the state, in order to change the Constitution and organize a referendum, they would have to obtain the overwhelming support of the national parties, a thing that in 2017 –and also today– would be impossible, as all the main state-wide parties are against a referendum. Thus, at a political level, offering the possibility of pursuing independence following the legal path implies the rhetorical use of an apparent concession (Van Dijk, 1987) that plays the role of sustaining the (national) status quo whilst avoiding accusations of being Spanish nationalist and/or politically intolerant.

away its very political foundation. By depoliticizing the constitution and particularly its Article 2, the discussion about the boundaries of the nation is constructed as 'above politics' (Pinho dos Santos, 2021).

Altogether, Extracts 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3 show a discursive attempt to express strong, polarized, and polarizing opinions about the partisan out-groups and even to advocate for illiberal measures against them, while trying to dodge the identity of the undemocratic citizen. This accomplishment is a result of inter-subjective and dialogical practices, in which participants, in interaction with the moderator, try to mitigate potentially problematic utterances made by people other than themselves, transcending individual self-presentation concerns and trying to favor a positive collective, group-level presentation (Condor et al., 2006). Indeed, the repair sequence is initiated not by the trouble-source, but by another group member.

The speakers draw upon civic nationalism and the Constitution as a rhetorical trope in making the case for the naturalization of the Spanish polis being the only source of political legitimacy (and not, for instance, the Catalan polis, whose political legitimacy is denied). This would be a way of banally taking a national category for granted and defending it without adopting an explicitly nationalist footing (Billig, 1995; Condor, 2000).

The interactions shown constitute an instance of a collaborative navigation through the sensitive terrain of defending Spanish nationalist claims and the highly controversial issue of limiting political antagonists' rights (or not). They are also an instance of the accountability concerns that opposing a referendum (which in democratic imaginaries often acts as a tool that allows the will of the people to be heard) entails when trying to appear as a good democratic citizen vis-a-vis one's political opponents[4].

Discussion

In this paper, we analyzed the everyday rhetorical mobilization of ideological antagonism in focus group discussions. We explored how individuals construct ideological antagonism when discussing recent polarized events around Catalan independence. First, our analysis shows that, generally, people with different ideological stances towards Catalan independence acknowledge that polarization and ideological division are inescapable features of the broader conflict over self-determination. Lay citizens with different ideological positions collectively generate accounts of the political situation that implicitly or explicitly blame partisan rivals for polarization. In these multi-party conversations, stereotypical, polarized, and polarizing depictions of political adversaries are jointly (re)produced. In this sense, in interactions among ideologically similar groups, the intra-group context (Obradović & Draper, 2022) constitutes an everyday setting in which representations of political antagonists are kept alive.

Second, we showed how the rhetorical contrasts between reason and bias (Andreouli & Nicholson, 2018) constitute a symbolic field within which individuals co-construct shared understandings of political allies and adversaries. Participants who argued against Catalan independence routinely worked up representations of independence demands as elite-driven, portraying pro-independence supporters as lacking agency and acting irrationally on behalf of their elites' interests. In pro-independence participants' accounts, the frequent references to the recent Spanish authoritarian past work rhetorically to picture the Spanish state's opposition to self-determination as a continuation of a history of non-democratic – and often violent – political practices against territorial minorities. Interestingly, analyses of both pro-independence and pro-unity accounts show that unjustified patriotic exaltation constitutes something that generates accountability concerns (Condor, 2000) for co-interactants around issues concerning potential accusations of unjustified patriotic exaltation or undemocratic behavior. Different mobilizations of citizenship categories (Stevenson et al., 2015) inoculate speakers against open criticisms of bias, irrationality, and nationalism. The adherence to the Spanish constitution as the embodiment of the rule of law is rhetorically framed as an intrinsically democratic action by pro-unity people, whereas the intrinsically democratic act of voting has a similar function for pro-independence people.

4) The Spanish Constitution acts as a rhetorical construction that connects what at its core is a nationalist discourse (the Spanish nation being the only source of political legitimacy) with liberal-democratic narratives on the rule of law (see Mouffe, 2000), ultimately accomplishing a defense of an essentialized nation. This is to say, they accomplish a civic reformulation of nationalist claims (Pradillo-Caimari et al., 2023), allowing the limitation of self-determination initiatives to be seen as a reasonable course of action.

Finally, we showed how illiberal political practices against ideological adversaries were defended both by attending to group presentation concerns (Condor et al., 2006) *and* by drawing on culturally available tropes (Billig, 1991). Along these lines, participants manage to rhetorically (re)articulate civic-nationalist and liberal themes to provide rhetorical support for illiberal political practices, such as the outlawing of political parties, as a reasonable and rational course of action in certain circumstances.

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of ideological antagonism, focusing on everyday interaction in intragroup settings. The article's main contribution is showing how individuals collectively produce complex and dynamic constructions of the political allies and antagonists by co-constructing competing notions of citizenship and mobilizing situated accounts of controversial matters. That is, how polarized, 'strong' opinions are not simply a matter of "us" vs "them". Contrarily, a subtle choreography of joint actions was used by participants to position themselves within the conversational space, jointly orienting to issues of accountability and using varied available cultural-ideological resources and context-specific constructions of ongoing sociopolitical disputes. Despite this contribution, some questions remain and constitute fruitful avenues for further research. While we have thoroughly analyzed how ideological antagonism is constructed and accomplished in intra-group interactions, this research does not explore how such antagonism unfolds in interactions between lay citizens with opposing political views.

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Data Availability: Six of the focus groups analyzed in this study are publicly available and can be found in the Spanish Poll Institute's (CIS) data bank (Study 3251). The additional focus group (Focus Group 7) is not publicly available due to the presence of sensitive content and the absence of participant consent for making the data public. However, data from this focus group can be shared upon request and in line with ethical guidelines.

Supplementary Materials

The Online Appendix shows the focus group guidelines used for Focus Group 7, conducted in 2022 (for access, see Balinhas & Tileaga, 2025S).

Index of Supplementary Materials

Balinhas, D., & Tileaga, C. (2025S). *Supplementary materials to "Divided opinion: The interactional accomplishment of ideological antagonism"* [Online appendix]. PsychOpen GOLD. https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.16352

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