Times of Crises: Ideology and Party System Transformations in Spain

ABSTRACT: The Spanish party system has recently undergone profound changes, marked by the rapid rise and decline of several political actors, such as *Podemos* and *Ciudadanos*, who challenged the imperfect two-party system that had characterised Spain since transition. This article examines how three major crises, the global financial crisis, the Catalan secessionist challenge, and the COVID19 pandemic, have impacted the social imaginary and created opportunities for new framing and electoral competition strategies. Our research reconstructs changes in the Spanish ideological landscape and the relative salience of political cleavages in each of these crises. We argue that they had asymmetric impacts on party politics. Anti-establishment and nationalist populist discourses were effectively used to harness and redirect public discontent against political opponents. Political parties adapted their ideology strategically. Although initially outsider parties took advantage of the drop of trust in public institutions, in the long run, the mainstreaming of populist interpretative frames, paradoxically, ended up consolidating two antagonistic blocs and enabled the resurgence of the two major parties, the PP and PSOE, as undisputed leaders of each of them.

KEYWORDS: *crises, framing, ideological conflicts, parties, populism*

1. Introduction

From the late 1970s to the economic crisis of 2008, the cartelisation of party systems and a centrist shift in party dynamics, coupled with the waning influence of mass parties and overarching narratives (Mair 2016) bolstered the narrative of ideological decline and the vilification of the very concept. Likewise, certain leaders and parties explicitly have advocated for the transcendence of ideologies and the abandonment of traditional distinctions between right and left, or for the depoliticization of specific decision-making processes (De Nardis 2017). However, spanning from the 2008 economic crisis to the present, there has been a noticeable diversification of the public sphere, a proliferation of actors, and an upsurge in radical discourses, rekindling scholarly interest in the symbolic dimension of politics that suggest a more complex picture. Despite their growing emphasis on electoral strategies and agility, political parties remain distinguished by a foundational ideology that serves as the symbolic framework for providing coherent and effective explanations during crises.

There is a discernible dearth of contributions that delve into the examination of party system transformations resulting from the ideological interplay amidst crises, political parties, and movements, disrupting the prevailing political equilibrium. We witnessed the emergence of new parties, escalating polarisation, and mounting challenges in the formation of governing bodies over several years. The metamorphosis of party systems derives from the ability of political actors to comprehend and ideologically structure the demands emanating from civil society and movements during phases of societal upheaval that upset established equilibriums.
 These actors compete to impose dominant interpretations of crisis and policy solutions. The struggles at an ideational level to frame in a particular way a crisis may generate new cleavages within political systems. The perceived relevance of a crisis often emerges as a direct outcome of the ideological,

political, and communicative investments made by various political actors. They attempt to foreground some aspects of a crisis while underplaying others to generate and take advantage of symbolic and political opportunities. Parties and movements play a pivotal role in altering symbolic landscapes and ideologies that end up contributing to transformative shifts in party systems.

Spain is a relevant case study to understand the interplay between crises and ideological standpoints among political players. This country was one of the hardest hit countries by both the Great Recession and the COVID19 pandemic and has suffered a secessionist crisis in Catalonia within a short period of time. Spain illustrate how newly founded parties, such as *Ciudadanos* (2006), Vox (2013) and *Podemos* (2014), challenged and contested the supremacy of the two major ones that have ruled Spain since 1982, the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE) and the *Partido Popular* (PP).This article analyses Spanish political dynamics focusing on how the three crises (the global financial crisis, the territorial crisis in Catalonia and the COVID19 health crisis) impacted the ideological stance and strategy of Spanish parties and how they competed to frame these crises and impose dominant interpretations that would allow them to steer public attitudes and mobilisations in their favour.

2. Ideology, frames, and parties

Scholarly debates on the definition, functions and changing nature of ideology are far from over (Eagleton 1993; Barisione 2021; Anselmi 2023). In the early Marxist tradition or critical approach (Thompson, 1990), ideology is conceptualised as a "false consciousness". This viewpoint suggests that ideology serves the purpose of concealing reality and upholding asymmetrical power relations (Thompson, 1984). However, other authors consider ideology as a "system of thought" or a "worldview" (Thompson 1990); as a driving force for political action and contributing to the interpretation of reality (Ostrowski, 2022); or as a "set of ideas and values concerning the political order, with the function of guiding collective behaviour" (Bobbio, Matteucci e Pasquino 2004, 169). Following a similar approach, Freeden (1996; 2008) argues that ideology constitutes a sophisticated and nuanced interpretative framework for the existing reality. He defines ideology as "a set of ideas, beliefs, opinions, and values that present a recurring pattern, are supported by relevant groups, compete with each other to provide and control public policy programs…" (Freeden, 2008, 42). Freeden posits that the various interpretations of a given concept within society and the social imaginary find a defining context in ideology. Ideology serves to demarcate the spectrum of possible interpretations, giving a specific meaning to concepts by vying for "control over political language as well as over public policy projects; indeed, their competition over public policy projects takes place primarily through that over the control of political language" (Freeden, 2008, 68-69). In essence, ideology becomes a crucial battleground for shaping both language and public policy projects, reflecting the dynamic and competitive nature of political discourse.

The author embraces a morphological approach that presents ideology as a structured relationship among various concepts, organised into central and peripheral areas. Freeden (1996, 485-550) also introduces the concept of "thin-centred ideology" to refer to that ideology whose morphology is insufficient to provide comprehensive solutions for the full spectrum of socio-political problems, as traditional full-fledged or "thick" ideologies did. The size of this structure, whether larger or smaller, defines the thickness or thinness of the ideology, as articulated by Freeden. Core concepts within each ideology are surrounded by adjacent or peripheral concepts The dynamic interaction between both, elucidates the intrinsic openness of ideologies to the incorporation of novel concepts, thereby

elucidating the evolutionary and adaptive nature inherent in ideological structures (Freeden 2008, 77).

The process of "decontestation" of key political concepts emerges as a pivotal element in the landscape of ideological political competition (Laycock 2014). Political actors contend with the challenge of ascribing "uncontested" meanings or "frames" to concepts that may possess contingent or ambiguous interpretations (Freeden 2013, 23), thereby exerting influence on the perception of reality. Through the imposition of a hegemonic or dominant interpretation of a specific issue or crisis, political parties not only guide policy and political debates in their favour (Ranciere 1995: 11) but also have the capacity to (re)create or promote certain political identities (Freeden 1996: 78). The deliberate emphasis on, or concealment of, information aspects holds significant sway over individuals' values and policy choices and can influence sentiments as well as the significance attributed to specific group attitudes (Nelson and Kinder 1996, 1073). In essence, the process of decontestation becomes a strategic tool for political actors to shape public narratives, influence policy discussions, and meld the political landscape to their advantage. Framing is a key element in this endeavour. Framing can be defined as "the appeal in perceiving, thinking, and communicating, to structured ways of interpreting experiences" (Fillmore 1976, 20) or as "the process by which a communication source constructs and defines a social or political issue for the audience" (Nelson et al., 1997: 221). In this context, words and expressions become associated in people's minds with frames that activate specific schemata — conceptual frameworks or cognitive structures representing generic knowledge (Lakoff 1988).

Framing involves the selective emphasis on certain aspects or dimensions of an issue and the attribution of salience (Entman 1993, 52). It is inherently competitive, as different political actors vie to impose their own frames regarding significant phenomena. In essence, framing becomes a battleground where political entities seek to shape public perceptions and understanding in alignment with their ideological orientation and strategic goals.

Indeed, ideology cannot be divorced from a certain degree of isomorphism with the prevailing social structures and cultural representations at a specific historical moment. This is why ideology is viewed as a product of the 'temporality' and 'spatiality' in which it develops or asserts itself (Anselmi 2023). For ideology to effectively and credibly represent reality, it must take into account the interpretation of the most relevant social phenomena of the historical phase in which it develops, as well as the characteristics of the political system in which it operates. In achieving this, ideology draws upon, reorders, and establishes connections between concepts present in the social imaginary and respecific socio-political context. The social imaginary is a collection of unordered symbolic and cultural representations and values (Castoriadis 1987; Taylor 2004) that serves as a "grammar" that provides key elements for the articulation of narratives and discourses about society and the relationships between its constituent parts (Blokker 2022).
Ideology weaves itself into the fabric of the social imaginary, drawing on its rich tapestry to construct a coherent and meaningful representation of the world.Through framing, political actors extract elements from the social imaginary and craft new narratives and political interpretations., They seek to influence collective perceptions and in an attempt to advance their ideological preferences and contend for power. Ideologies, therefore, help organising and rendering coherent the symbolic and cultural representations and values of the social imaginary, serving as a sort of historical anchor.

Nevertheless, during "exceptional" moments of crisis, radical alterations in the ideological landscape and social imaginary often take place.

Additionally, within political systems, ideologies serve to define the social divides and key issues that will act as central conduits for party competition and will acquire special symbolic relevance for political identification purposes.The concept of "cleavage" (Lipset and Rokkan 1967) denotes a social conflict that holds particular significance in a given political context due to its ability to mobilise participation and consensus resources through the 'politicisation' of specific actors and the degree of social division it generates. Cleavages are socially (re)constructed thanks to the action of a variety of political actors who compete in the framing of the historical context, decontestation of key socio-political concepts and dissemination (and adaptation) of ideologies. Likewise, during moments of crisis, the ideological structure of a given context can undergo transformation through the emergence, decline, and alteration of specific cleavages, again influenced by the actions of political actors at both the material and ideational realms.

2. Populism, crises, and ideological conflicts

The populist momentum or *zeitgeist* (Mudde 2004) illustrates this complex interplay between crisis, ideologies and party systems that hasled to transformations in the symbolic and ideological landscape that have brought about profound alterations in party dynamics across the world. The concept of populism is subject to extensive and contested debates, with various characterizations, including a personalist strategy of mobilisation (Weyland 2001), an appeal to the 'people' against the establishment and dominant ideas (Canovan 1999), a political performative style (Ostiguy Moffitt 2021), a thin-centred ideology (Mudde 2004), or a discursive logic articulating social, political, or ideological content (Laclau 2005). Yet there is academic agreement on associating the populist worldview with a dichotomous depiction of society, that emphases the division between a virtuous 'people' and a corrupt elite, while advocating for the restoration of popular sovereignty by the people.

Populists tend to emerge and thrive in the context of crises of political representation (Laclau 2005; Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Kioupkiolis, Nikisianis, Siomos 2018). Political, social, economic and health crises tend to erode trust in political representatives, feed grievances, and serve populists as justifications for their radical policy proposals (Roberts 2015). They pay particular attention to the framing of crises as these are perceived as a key source of legitimacy for their claims as an opportunity to demonise ruling elites and institutions who they blame and aspire to replace. Populist leaders not only take advantage of existing crises but also fuel these crises even further existing ones (Moffitt 2015; Kriesi and Pappas 2015; Author 2021). They exploit 'populist cleavages' this is, conditions facilitating the proliferation and effectiveness of populist actors, leaderships, and discourse that arise from transformations in the socio-economic context, democratic challenges and the mediatisation of politics (Mazzoleni 2014; Author and Author 2021) .

The examination of the interplay between symbolic and ideological contexts during crises, facilitated by the actions of collective actors, represents a crucial variable for understanding the competitive dynamics within political systems. Ideologies, ideas and frames, as well as those who champion them are not in the vacuum. Crises can act as critical junctures and set into motion changes at the ideational context (Author *et al.* 2023). A vast body of literature has demonstrated how external shocks can disrupt the political status quo, impacting the electoral fortunes of political forces and, consequently,

the structure and mechanics of party systems (Hernández and Kriesi, 2016; Bedock and Vasilopolous, 2015), the stability of governments, and even the organisational, strategic, and identity transformations of parties (Harmel and Janda, 1994).

The term "crisis" is essentially a label, as "facts never speak for themselves" but "always await the assignment of meaning" (Spector 2020, 306). Crisis communication consequently involves "shaping how people perceive the crisis" (Coman, Dalia, Miloš, Darren and Edoardo 2021, 2) and defining the nature, causes, extent, and protagonists of the specific threat (Boin, Kuipers, and 't Hart, 2018). The political acknowledgment of crises leads to public awareness, allows the issue to enter the institutional and systemic agenda, facilitating the achievement of a collective response . Crises, therefore, encompass "multiple levels of conflict" in which a cognitive clash unfolds between different groups regarding the framing of the problem ('t Hart 1993, 39). This conflict revolves around the interpretation of the crisis, its causes, culprits and potential policy solutions. As such, crises become transformative moments, not only shaping the immediate political and social landscape but also setting the stage for the evolution of ideological frameworks and the emergence of novel political actors.

Historically, parties have played a crucial role as organised social groups supporting specific ideologies, representing one of the main vectors of ideological competition aimed at shaping government action (Freeden, 1998). The decline of mass parties in favour of voter-oriented and issue parties has facilitated a greater plurality of ideological references. Through a process of "politicisation" (Freeden 2008), parties transfer certain material experiences into the public sphere, articulating and conceptualising them in a broader schematization corresponding to the reference ideology (Stanley 2008). Parties adopt and rework an ideological vision for their primary objectives (votes, office, policy), where the competition for electoral consensus is crucial, as well as for organisational and ideological goals (Raniolo 2013). Often, the development of effective frames in the face of crisis necessitates the revision of one's ideology, creating tension between preserving community identity and the need to adapt to societal transformations and social imagination. Similarly, through their framing or counter-framing actions (Castells 2012), social movements actively contribute to altering the overarching ideological landscape. They challenge, integrate, or oppose specific aspects of existing party ideologies and, depending on the diffusion of conflict, reshape the dominant interpretations of social phenomena and crises.

The actions of social movements thus catalyse the modification of the symbolic and ideological opportunities within a political system. They impact the visibility and popularity of certain ideas (Caiani 2023), facilitating the linkage of their frames by party actors (Snow, Rochford, Worden e Benford 1986). The evolving relationship between social movements and party actors underscores the dynamic nature of the ideological field during periods of crisis, with both contributing to the reconfiguration of the broader political landscape. In response to these contextual transformations, parties try to quickly adapt and harness changes in public perceptions to their advantage. They achieve this by incorporating new concepts, and revisiting extant ones, in the peripheral and central areas of the morphological structure of their ideologies. Consequently, there can be an alignment of frames between certain parties and movements through an adjustment and rejuvenation of their ideological identity. Meanwhile new political actors, often with a lighter ideological baggage, may emerge and skillfully adopt the frames and interpretations generated by mobilisations. In some instances, the crisis itself may be a result of the adeptness of specific party and political entrepreneurs in imposing panic

or outrage-inducing frames that become dominant or hegemonic thereby influencing the collective imaginary (e.g., Brexit, migration crises, etc.). The dynamic interplay between existing and new party actors underscores the multifaceted ways in which the ideological field evolves in response to crises.

3.Case study and approach

The Spanish party system has been historically structured around two cleavages : the Right/Left and the centre/periphery divides (Vampa 2020). The Spanish quasi-federal multi-level governance system and Spanish electoral laws have given rise to a territorial party subsystem that features strong regional and local political actors empowered certain regional parties to play a notable role in shaping the national government. Between the 1990s and the 2008 economic crisis, the Spanish party system stabilised around an imperfect bipartisanship with two major national parties the PSOE and PP and a myriad of smaller parties. Among those the most influential were the Catalan and Basque nationalist parties, both right-wing and left-wing leaning, and radical left *Izquierda Unida* (IU). In the absence of an absolute majority by either of the two major parties (PP and PSOE), governability was often ensured through agreements with moderate right-wing regionalist parties: *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (PNV) and *Convergencia i Unió* (CiU).

Since 2008 we have witnessed a radical transformation of the Spanish party system characterised decline in the relative support of the two big parties PSOE and PP; the rapid rise of new parties, such as left-wing populist Podemos and centre-right Ciudadanos and radical-right Vox; the adoption of an openly secessionist stance by CiU, now rebranded as *Junts per Catalonia* (JxCat), and the growth of left-leaning pro-independence *Esquerra Republicana de Cataluyna* (ERC). These transformations within the party system can be understood as outcomes of diverse interactions between ideologies and the social imaginary, as well as between parties and movements, set against the backdrop of at least three crises. This study aims to analyse and compare the effects of these crises at the level of framing, ideological competition and electoral outcomes. The post-2008 period in Spain has been characterised by three distinct yet interconnected crises, each with its own consequences on the political landscape:

1. **Economic crisis (2011-2015)**: The delayed and yet heightened domestic social consequences of the Global Financial Crisis and austerity policies in Spain paved the way to a period in which populist anti-establishment discourses became dominant.
2. **Territorial crisis (2012-2020)**: The secessionist challenge in Catalonia brought to the fore some structural weaknesses of the Spanish institutional structure and triggered a period of populist discourses built on the ground of national identification.
3. **Pandemic crisis (2020-2023)**: The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic added another layer of complexity to the existing challenges, including attempts to instrumentalise the crisis via populist discourses and a political realignment into two blocs.

Each of these crises has spurred diverse forms of social mobilisation, ranging in intensity, and has prompted varied framing strategies. These dynamics, in turn, have contributed to reshaping the social imaginary and altering the political opportunities structure, thereby favouring different political parties in response to each crisis. The transformations observed in the competitive political landscape are a consequence of the varying capacities of political actors to integrate, represent, order, and at times, catalyse transformations within the social imaginary resulting from the three crises and subsequent mobilisations. Hence, the ascent and/or decline of specific political actors, can be

construed as driven by their varying capacities to interpret and ideologically articulate the social and symbolic transformations arising from the interaction between three key components:

Type of Crisis: Each mini-political cycle is distinguished by the heightened prominence of a specific crisis or conflict, representing the primary ideological and symbolic battleground for conflict among diverse social actors.

Social Mobilisations: The presence or absence of social mobilisations and the framing or counter-framing produced by movements play a pivotal role. They influence the specific structure of political opportunities and the dissemination of symbolic representations shaped by the actions of these movements.

Party Action: The efficacy of parties, whether renewed or newly established, in offering effective frames during the three crises is crucial. This can occur by aligning themselves with the dominant frames among social movements or by trying to shape them. In both cases their action may contribute to the transformation of the ideological landscape within the Spanish party system and the overall structure of party competition.

The first two dimensions delineate the contextual backdrop within which Spanish political parties operate, while the third dimension characterises their varying capacity to elaborate, encompass, and communicate the symbolic and political landscape resulting from the evolving context, offering a renewed and compelling ideological proposition. Our approach entails tracing and reconstructing the transformations within the Spanish ideological landscape and their consequences on the political system through a historical reconstruction of the three crises and an examination of the symbolic and ideological actions undertaken by key political actors.

4.The Economic crisis and the dominance of anti-establishment populist discourses

Although the effects of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis were not immediately visible in Spain, this country eventually became one of the hardest hit in Europe. In addition to the effects of neo-liberal policies, deregulation, and deficiencies in the European Monetary Union, Spain suffered domestic institutional problems, clientelism and a complacent elite. The adoption of austerity policies marked by radical cuts in social spending, amplifying social unrest (Royo, 2014; Muñoz et al., 2014). This context fostered a mass mobilisation integral to the transnational cycle of movements against austerity, epitomised by the 15-M, also kown as *Indignados* movement. This movement requested deep institutional changes to improve the quality of democracy and avenues to keep under control the extractive elites. In the organisation of the movement and its communication, social media play a fundamental role, with coordination and communication taking place through platforms such as Twitter and Facebook (Anduiza, Cristancho and Sabucedo 2014).

The 15-M identified Spanish two-party system, the European Union, and a representative democratic model as its primary adversaries. Embodying democratic and pragmatic ideologies with short- and long-term demands, the movement held "social democratic" and progressive content (Chaves Giraldo, 2012), grounded in a horizontal and direct conception of democracy (Della Porta, Fernández, Kouki and Mosca 2017) and explicitly opposed to traditional hierarchical politics (Prentoulis and Thomasse 2013). This movement has been considered a paradigmatic case of "personalization of

contentious politics" and "logic of connective action," in contrast with other social movements that rely on a more formal (usually hierarchical) form of organisation that reflect Olson's (1965) "logic of collective action" (Bennett and Segerberg 2012).

The movement's impact on the social imaginary was substantial, reshaping political and symbolic opportunities for actors in the field. Survey data indicates widespread public support for the movement's demands, transcending ideological lines (Serrano and Gracia 2015). Criticism towards established politics, exacerbated by cases of corruption within major parties (PSOE and PP), intensified the prevailing disillusionment with mainstream party actors (Lobera and Ferrándiz 2011). The 15-M movement generated a transversal demand for political renewal and against austerity policies, varying in intensity across different social sectors. Although formally non-partisan and transversal, the 15-M was mostly a progressive movement that requested policies to achieve a more participatory "real democracy", fight corruption, higher degree of transparency and accountability, new electoral laws and increased controls on political parties. Additionally, they also proposed social and economic policies related to the improvement of working conditions, public education and public health, banking regulation, affordable housing, and sustainable energy. The Spanish press helped the 15-M action and frames, adopting a rather positive tone in their reporting of the protests, incorporating voices of protesters and covering the festive aspects of the movement more than the violent incidents (Author and Author na 2017).

Left-wing parties and the largest trade unions approached them and expressed their support. However, the 15-M movement refused repeatedly to be co-opted by who they considered to be part of the establishment responsible for the situation and expelled politicians that tried to join their demonstrations. Precisely, the failure of political parties to capitalise on the movement and the self-proclaimed political independence of the indignados was welcomed by the media and the public. The growing popularity of this anti-establishment populist discourse and the transformations operated in the Spanish social imaginary brought three discernible effects on the party system:

In the initial phase, the critique directed at the traditional parties and the incumbent government fuelled an increase in abstention rates and contributed to the defeat of the socialist government in power. The 2011 elections witnessed a decline in voter participation compared to the 2008 elections. Notably, the PSOE experienced a substantial loss of 5 million votes, while the PP secured victory despite a drop of 500 thousand votes. The implementation of additional austerity measures by the PP government coincided with numerous corruption scandals, further intensifying public disillusionment with political processes. This discontent consolidated the "new vs old" political cleavage that transcended traditional right-left divisions, This ideational shift paved the way for a radical rejuvenation of political actors and structures, that manifested in the . The activity of 15-M started to dwindle in 2012 but their ideas remained well entrenched and popular in society. Two years after the inception of this movement 78% of Spaniards thought that the Indignados were right in their claims. The second effect manifests as the rise of new political parties, the most successful being Podemos and Ciudadanos, but they collaborated with many others which operated at a local level. The rhetoric employed by these nascent parties is notably less ideologically "thick" and focuses on drawing chains of equivalence and homogenising a myriad of grievances across the cleavages (internal frontiers) "gente" vs "casta" (people vs caste) as "new vs old", with a strong focus on renewal, direct democracy, and anti-corruption initiatives.

These new political organisations, though exhibiting diverse and at times contradictory forms, encapsulated social demands in alignment with the principles of the 15-M movement. They advocated for a more horizontal model of democracy both internally and externally, albeit coexisting with robust personalist leadership structures. Podemos, founded in 2014, epitomises a left-wing populist party theoretically inspired by Laclau's theory. While aligning itself ideologically with the radical left through programmatic proposals, Podemos rhetorically preferred the dichotomy of "the people vs the caste" over the traditional "left vs right divide". It initially adopted a more horizontal organisational structure and advocated for radical measures in combating corruption, promoting redistribution, and reforming the Spanish democratic system. The party's leader, Pablo Iglesias, a young political scientist, gained prominence through appearances on various political talk shows, and the party's image became closely intertwined with his persona. Following a personalist populist strategy Podemos obtained 5 seats in 2014 European elections and participated in local and regional coalitions that achieved significant success in the 2015 municipal and regional elections. The 2016 general elections consolidated them as a major player.

Ciutadans de Catalunya, a small Catalan centrist party created as a reaction against Catalan nationalism in 2006 and led by the also young Albert Rivera, launched a strategy to become a national party in 2014 by establishing alliances with a variety of small independent and centrist parties. In 2014, already under the Spanish name Ciudadanos they obtained 2 seats in the European Elections and in 2015 they achieved considerable success in the local, regional and general elections in 2015. Ciudadanos also denounced corruption within established parties and advocated for the rejuvenation of politics through discourse grounded in market principles, meritocracy, and skills. While adhering to a rhetoric associated with progressive neoliberalism, Ciudadanos initially emphasised opposition to various regional parties, particularly those in Catalonia. Remarkably, Ciudadanos chose a pragmatic approach to alliances, securing agreements with both the PSOE and PP. These developments result in a temporary challenge to the dominance of major parties on both the left (Podemos) and the right (Ciudadanos), rendering them pivotal in the formation of governments at national, regional, and local levels. Podemos obtained support mainly from politically disaffected left-wing voters, while Ciudadanos attracted younger and ideologically moderate voters who had lower levels of political trust.

A third notable effect is the erosion of Spanish two-party system due to the loss of support of the two big parties that pushed them to adapt their party strategy and internal organisation. While in 2008, the PSOE and PP harvested 84% of the votes, in 2011 their combined support had dropped to 73%The downward trend continued. The 2015 general election, in which they received only 54% of the votes, was considered by many analysts as the end of the two-party system that had dominated Spanish politics since transition (Orriols and Cordero 2016). This trajectory facilitated a shift in the power balance within coalitions, fostering greater instability in governments and making electoral repetitions a new normal feature in the Spanish system. Moreover, the ascendancy of Podemos and Ciudadanos provoked a process of normative institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) among the two big parties. In the PSOE and PP, the concepts of direct democracy and rejuvenation prompted certain organisational changes albeit with different timelines and modalities. The PSOE, adopted primaries for the first time in 2017, with the triumph of Pedro Sanchez, an outsider candidate with a more left-wing orientation and who also used anti-establishment rhetoric. Following the fall of the Rajoy government, the PP also selected its general secretary through

primaries in 2018. This process culminated in the triumph of Pablo Casado, another young outsider candidate.

In sum, these "new vs old" cleavage and the ascendancy of new parties and leaderships with more radical proposals and stances on democracy, contributed to a new axis of polarisation of the party system that added to the traditional left-right divide. The adoption of a populist rhetoric helped these new actors exploit the extant social grievances, cross-cutting support for redistributive policies, and pervasive disaffection towards politics, enabling ideological transformations and a shift in the Spanish party system from a two-party to a multi-polar one. In this period the nationalist/territorial cleavages are less impactful in the development of political identities as regenerating the institutional system and displaying solidarity with the most vulnerable ones became dominant societal claims.

5.Territorial Crisis and rise of nationalist populism

In Catalonia, important segments of civil society and nationalist parties of both right and left-wing orientation have historically requested a higher degree of autonomy (some cases full independence), as well as economic and political prerogatives grounded on "historical rights". The abovementioned economic and social crisis created a crisis of trust on Spanish institutions, and opportunities for questioning their legitimacy and shifting blame regarding governance failures towards Madrid (Barrio e Rodríguez-Teruel, 2017; Della Porta e Portos 2021). In this context, many Catalan political and social entrepreneurs strategically radicalise the autonomist framework through a populist articulation that took advantage of many symbolic opportunities to build chains of equivalent grievances and narratives of victimhood.

Before this crisis support for the idea of outright independence had been limited. CiU, the most powerful nationalist party, had consistently advocated for greater administrative autonomy and developed a nation-building plan based on fostering a differentiated socio-linguistic Catalan identity. Yet, until the economic crises CiU had always rejected the notion of independence. Partly taking advantage of the unrest provoked by this crisis, and partly seeking to divert the attention away from emerging corruption scandals and the unpopular austerity policies its regional government had implemented, CiU made a radical change in its strategy and openly embraced secessionism. In December 2012 CiU signed a government agreement with ERC that included the binding commitment to celebrate a referendum of self-determination. This marks the inception of the so called "sovereignist process of Catalonia" or "procés". This change of stance by the biggest party in Catalonia turned an ideological position that was traditionally considered as radical (independence) into mainstream (Rico and Liñeira 2014).

The Constitutional Court ruling against some articles of the new Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia in 2010, following an appeal by the PP, also helped nationalist parties to present Catalonia as victims of the Spanish system. This ruling marks a turning point in how nationalist politicians frame their relationship with Spain, many of whom argued that dealing with the Spanish state was impossible(Barrio e Rodríguez-Teruel 2017; Ruiz Casado 2020). This growing institutional territorial conflict reached its zenith during October 2017 when Catalan nationalist organisations celebrated an independence referendum, despite the explicit ban by Spanish Courts, and the President of Catalonia,Carles Puigdemont, declared independence. This was followed by the temporary suspension of autonomy and judicial prosecution of several of the key actors involved in the

organisation of the unilateral secession attempt, which in turn also generated outrage among Catalan nationalist and a new opportunity to present themselves as victims (Domènech, Moreno, Latorre and Rubiés 2020, 335–336).

The construction of nationalist/secessionist populist framing of the crisis by party elites and civil society was facilitated by an increasingly polarised interpretation of Catalan and Spanish identities (Tobeña 2021), now often construed as incompatible, as well as by the adaptation of the regeneration and direct democracy languages popularised by the 15-M movement to justify the need for a new different state (Ruiz Casado, 2020). Secessionists present their project as "inclusive" and transcending traditional "left-right" divides, and the independence referendum as an expression of a "right to decide" (*dret a decidir*), that acts as a "floating signifier" (Laclau 2005) transversally coalescing social discontent within Catalan society. They also successfully articulated "othering" discourses that combined welfare chauvinism elements ("Spain steal from us"), with ethnolinguistic grievances, and appeals to the will of the Catalan People (Barrio et al. 2020; Newth 2021). The creation of the *Junts pel Sí* coalition for the regional elections in 2015, uniting CiU and ERC, traditional rivals with ideological disparities, and the support of the nationalist anti-capitalist *Candidatura de Unidad Popular* (CUP) demonstrates that this sovereignist project was conceived as a hegemonic political project.

This crisis also entails several impacts at the level of party competition. The independence bloc secured a combined victory in both the 2015 and 2017 regional elections. ERC and CUP, both parties that had held secessionist positions, grew while CiU, PSOE and PP lost ground. Ciudadanos, credited as the principal opponent to the independence agenda, was the most voted party in 2017 regional elections, yet unable to form a government. The territorial cleavage intersected in Catalonia with the "new vs old" divide that dominated Spanish politics. Catalans voted differently in national and regional elections. The outcomes of general elections in 2015 and 2016 in Catalonia revealed *En Comú Podem*, a coalition that included Podemos and was led by Barcelona's mayor Ada Colau, as the leading force. The independence bloc that dominated regional elections only reached a third of the votes. The escalation of institutional conflict, marked by the 2017 referendum and subsequent mobilisations (for and against independence) amplifies the significance of the Catalan territorial issue beyond Catalonia, for instance by propelling support for Ciudadanos and Vox, a party that entered the Spanish parliament for the first time in 2019. These parties adopted a confrontational rhetoric against Catalan nationalists who they accused of being "coup plotters" (*golpistas*) while self-identifying as "constitutionalists". They also denounced and instrumentalised the growing social fracture, across linguistic and socio-economic lines between the two camps (Tobeña 2021). They collaborated with civil society organisations to provide a civic response to the very successful pro-independence mobilisations by organising anti-independence demonstrations.

During this period, populist othering discourses were no so much based on a vertical logic of exclusion ("the people vs the elites") as on a more horizontal one (national identification)(De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). Although there anti-elitist claims were not very infrequent, these were very selectively employed. Secessionists criticised Spanish elites and institutions, but did not question Catalan ones, which traditionally CiU epitomises. Conversely, Vox, Ciudadanos and unionist civil society organisations focused their attacks on secessionist elites and the institutions they controlled,and defended the part of the establishment targeted by Catalan nationalists (*"procesistas"*). The fall of Mariano Rajoy's PP government in a vote of no confidence, motivated

by a corruption scandal, helped to translate part of this territorial crisis to Madrid in 2018. Ever since, Pedro Sánchez's governments have necessitated the support from secessionist parties, opening a new opportunity for the utilisation of the territorial crisis as an ideological axis for polarisation. The successive negotiations between PSOE and nationalist parties in Catalonia and the Basque Country and the concessions in exchange for their votes have met with severe criticism by the PP, Ciudadanos and Vox. These parties continuously made calls for national unity and the defence of Spanish identity. They turned the fear of secession and the outrage against the privileges that these regions with strong nationalist parties enjoyed, into key elements in their ideological proposals and electoral toolkit.

6. Pandemic Crisis and the consolidation of antagonistic blocs

The pandemic spread out as a multi-faceted disaster, impacting economies, societies, and placing substantial strain on political structures. Spain emerged as one of the countries more negatively affected by the pandemic both economically and in public health terms. The outbreak of the pandemic coincided with the formation of Spain's first coalition government between the PSOE and *Unidas Podemos* (UP), that enjoyed parliamentary support from ERC, PNV and the Basque secessionist coalition Bildu. The arguments about the legitimacy of adopting extraordinary health and economic measures to combat the pandemic dominated much of the political narrative in 2020. Vox tried to exploit conspiracy thinking by and blaming China and the World Health Organisation for the spread of the disease. They also accused the Spanish government of criminal negligence and of "euthanising" thousands of people. Vox's strategy was to leverage the COVID19 crisis to position itself as the primary party-in- waiting in the right by establishing an increasingly antagonistic relationship with the left-wing government and distancing itself from PP (Zanotti and Turnbull-Dugarte 2022). Vox intensified its anti-immigration and anti-European discourses and organised anti-government protests during lockdown, for instance encouraging people to use their cars to circumvent lockdown rules and later called for a vote of no confidence.

Despite Vox's aggressive opposition during the lockdown, it failed to mobilise Spanish society as anticipated. However, it appears to have contributed to the spread of confrontational populist rhetoric (Author *et al*. 2023). On one hand, the PP, fearing Vox's growing visibility, began to adopt a more rigid stance against Sánchez's government. On the other hand, left-wing and peripheral nationalist parties also used hyperbolic accusations against Vox (Author and Author 2021). The central axis t of polarisation became support or opposition to the government's pandemic measures. The PP, while using a softer rhetoric than Vox, shifted from a more collaborative to adversarial stance with the government.

The leaders of the PSOE and UP, constructed a framing that legitimised the adoption of extraordinary measures as a safeguard for the vulnerable. They emphasised a social rhetoric, presenting the government's measures as a clear departure from those implemented by the PP whom they associated to austerity policies. UP, and to a lesser extent the PSOE, adopted an institutional discourse of support vis-a-vis the policies launched by the governments in which they were coalition partners (central and some regional governments), but also used a Manichean populist communicative strategy against the opposition parties and the regional governments they controlled. Meanwhile, Catalan nationalists continuously tried to differentiate as much as possible their pandemic policies from those of the central government and blamed Madrid for much of the mismanagement of the crisis.

Decentralisation and the complex multi-level governance in Spain provided an opportunity to all parties to modify their discourses strategically across different government levels, from supportive to antagonistic. Blame shifting strategies and growing polarisation resulted in a more prominent role of partisan cues in the attribution of responsibilities during this health crisis (León and Jurado 2021) and further fuelled populist simplistic frames and polarisation. The confrontational reactions and recriminations against populist leaders, in this case against Vox, may have contributed to make more pervasive populist frames and articulations (Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Kioupkiolis, Nikisianis e Siomos 2018) and create an opportunity for those leaders to instrumentalise narratives of victimhood (Homolar and Löflmann 2021).

In the post-pandemic electoral cycle, a new axis of polarisation crystallises around the struggle between two antagonistic blocs: the opposition forces, the PP and Vox, against the the PSOE, UP and the regional nationalist parties that support the government coalition. Populist rhetoric helped consolidate as hegemonic a dichotomous interpretation that presented voters with two choices: a PP coalition with the "extreme right," or a PSOE's government with "communists and separatists." Voters were primarily urged to vote against the rival bloc, rather than on programmatic considerations. Politicians in each of these emerging blocs accused each other of authoritarianism and of restricting individuals' liberties in the governments they lead. Policy areas such as LGBTQIA+ rights, gender violence, education and health policy become highly polarised.

In this context of fear against a political rival, the PSOE and PP benefit from the "rally around the flag" effect because their leaders are seen as those with the higher chances to defeat the "dreaded enemy". In the 2023 general elections, both parties performed better than in the 2019 elections. They were considered the most reliable choices to avert the dangers signalled by the dominant frames imposed in each of the two blocs. The PP became the most voted party but it was unable to secure enough support to rule. The fear of a government with Vox proved a key element in mobilising left-wing voters and enabled Sánchez to, against all odds, stay in office. During this period, Vox entered several regional governments as a junior coalition partner of the PP but overall Vox' popularity upward trend was truncated. Ciudadanos, the party ideologically closer to the centre of the left-right spectrum, almost completely disappeared after trying, and failing, to contest the PP's leading position in the right bloc. UP leaders, some of whom became ministers, gradually abandoned its anti-establishment discourse but their coalition experienced a significant decline at the local and regional level. After very disappointing results in the 2021 Regional Elections, Pablo Iglesias resigned as its leader. His successor, Labour Minister Yolanda Diaz, created a new coalition for the 2023 elections. Although obtaining fewer seats than UP did in 2020, Sumar became a junior partner in Sánchez's new government. As Podemos leaders were excluded from ministerial positions they quit Sumar soon after and adopted a confrontational stance against its former associates. Meanwhile, Catalan nationalists see their popularity and support for independence drop. Although they manage to secure the Catalan government after the 2021 regional elections, the *Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya* (PSC), the Catalan branch of PSOE, becomes the biggest party in terms of votes. The poor results achieved in Catalonia by ERC (fourth) and JxCat (fifth) in the 2023 general elections confirms this downward trend.

However, the dominance of the "two blocs" frame has contributed to a paradoxical situation. Despite their drop in popular support, secessionist parties have become more influential than ever because the left coalition needs them to stay in government. This dependence has pushed the PSOE and Sumar to

display a very friendly attitude towards the peripheral nationalist parties, including those on the right, such as PNV and JxCat, and to accept many of the policies requested by them. Some of these policies clash with the PSOE's electoral pledges and its traditional left ideology. These contradictions are currently utilised by PP and Vox who claim to be the sole parties that fight for the equality of citizens and Spain's unity. They accuse the PSOE and Sumar of accepting the territorially-bounded economic and identitarian privileges requested by Catalan and Basque nationalists.

In sum, this pandemic crisis period has seen a mainstreaming of populist rhetoric that has contributed to reify two political blocs and the fusion of the left-right and territorial axes of polarisation. The electoral results and interdependence between different players within each of the blocs have brought to the fore new adjustment in their ideological positions as means to justify political concessions to allies.

7. Conclusions

Crises have an asymmetric impact on political dynamics and can trigger different types of civil society mobilisations and reactions among political parties, as this article has shown. Firstly, the global financial crisis provoked in Spain the bottom-up spontaneous 15-M mass mobilisations that questioned the political and economic establishment and requested democratic reforms and public policies to protect the most vulnerable. Demands for democratic regeneration and greater social justice became dominant in society, turning the economic crisis in a crisis of representation. Outsider parties, such as Podemos and Ciudadanos, aligned themselves with these interpretative frames and entered the ideational competition to decontest the notion of democracy. They successfully employed, to varying extents, a populist rhetoric that victimised Spaniards and pointed at corrupt politicians of traditional parties as culprits. A "new vs old" divide partially replaced the "left vs right" cleavage as axis of political competition. The two largest parties, the PSOE and PP, try to respond and adapt to this shift in the social imaginary with organisational and leadership changes. However, elections in that period suggest the decline of the two-party system and the consolidation of Podemos and Ciudadanos as credible challengers.

Secondly, the Catalan territorial crisis presents an example of how some traditional parties modify their ideological standpoint to adapt and shape an impending crisis. CiU, the nationalist party that had dominated Catalan politics since transition, shifted its political strategy from autonomist into secessionist and adopted a populist rhetoric. This ideological and discursive change acted as catalyst, mainstreaming secessionism, and spurring mass mobilisations in favour of this cause. The new framing promoted by Catalan nationalist parties and civil society organisations, that presented the break-up with Spain as democratic and empowering endeavour ("the right to decide"), became dominant in Catalonia garnering wide support from social sectors previously indifferent to the issue and thereby enhancing the credibility of secession.

While Spanish traditional parties did not initially react to this secessionist challenge, Ciudadanos and Vox focused their discourses into raising awareness on the gravity of the threat for the integrity of Spain. They managed to gather significant support within and outside Catalonia by channelling apprehension towards Catalan independence. The territorial cleavage largely superseded the "left vs right" one as the primary battleground for party competition in Catalonia. Populist narratives competed to redefine the sovereign "people," seeking to homogenise groups, fueling antagonism, and

reimagining the nation. This was translated to the rest of Spain where the positions regarding centralisation-decentralisation became further polarised.

Thirdly, Vox attempted to instrumentalize the COVID-19 pandemic, transforming it into a political crisis through conspiratorial rhetoric and attempts to mobilise the citizenry. They exploited conspiratorial thinking and leveraged the disruptions caused by isolation and human tragedy. Although Vox did not succeed in gaining popular support or in overturning the government, their populist confrontational tone contributed to a polarisation spiral in which two political blocs have crystallised. While the PP, Vox, and Ciudadanos vehemently accused left and nationalist parties of the dismantling of Spain. the coalition supporting the government adopted antagonistic tones and claimed that the PP and Vox planned meant a return to right-wing authoritarianism. Spain's multilevel system enabled all parties to strategically shift discourses and blame rival players for the management of the pandemic across local, regional and national level. Other issues such as gender, education and climate change have also been polarised by the contending blocs.

During this period, there have also been notable changes at the ideological level. The territorial (centralisation-decentralisation) and left-right cleavages have merged, orthodox ideological stances have taken a back seat in political debate and policy proposals. Parties have prioritised the defeat of the rival bloc, which entailed concessions to allied parties, even to those with clearly discrepant ideological views. Paradoxically, it appears that the mainstreaming of populist rhetoric and the hegemonic antagonistic interpretation of politics as a two-blocs playfield developed since 2020, has prompted many Spaniards to vote for the two large parties: the PP and PSOE. In the absence of strong anti-establishment discourses such as those in the previous economic crisis, traditional parties are presented as the safest bet to defeat the feared and morally illegitimate enemy bloc. Therefore, the decline in support for some populist parties, can be construed as the product of their own success in imposing a populist framing of the political arena as a fight between two antagonistic and irreconcilable blocs.

We acknowledge some limitations in our analyses. The wide scope of this article, covering three different crises at both the ideational and electoral competition levels, has pushed us to prioritise certain dominant frames and overlook other important cleavages such as the gender rights. Further research should be devoted to shed light on the role of gender and other contentious policy and identity issues in the emergence and consolidation of these blocs and recent ideological transformations. Likewise, we have not sufficiently scrutinised more micro endogenous organisational factors or international political players which may have also impacted party dynamics and social mobilisations in Spain. We encourage a more in-depth exploration of these factors in future studies.

In sum, the three abovementioned crises and their impact on the Spanish polity help illustrate the complex interplay between critical events, social movements and political party strategies. Crisis are windows of opportunity for new and old political actors to gain support. Through different framing strategies they compete to impose a hegemonic interpretation of the crisis, attribute blame, and steer social discontent to their advantage. These manoeuvres can alter political dynamics by dispersing or concentrating the vote. They also set into motion ideational paths that can bring unintended consequences. Certainly, the promoters of 15-M were not expecting that the unrest and grievances they denounced would end-up being channelled in Catalonia by CiU, and probably the latter did not expect that parties that were initially very small in Catalonia, such as Ciudadanos and Vox, managed

to gather so much support in that region. The quick downfall of Ciudadanos and Podemos during the pandemic crises and the re-emergence of the PP and PSOE as undisputed bloc leaders are also events that not many predicted. This complex process of merging of the territorial and left-right axis of political competition has brought ambiguity in the ideological battlefront. Parties are trying to please political allies and justify vis-a-vis their voters programmatic changes and concessions, while they try to attract new voters and expose contradictions in their rivals.

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