

Dynamics of intergroup conflict and attitudes towards outgroup members: Evidence from terrorist and secession conflicts

Daniel Albalade, Germà Bel & Ferran A. Mazaira-Font

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Abstract:

Territorial conflicts are a significant feature of politics in Spain. The two most recent such processes are the cessation of violence by the terrorist group ETA, and the pro-independence process in Catalonia. Both processes are likely to have affected the perception of intergroup threats, thus influencing the dynamics of intergroup conflict. This article embeds intergroup phenomena in a real context and applies theory to factual conflicts. Using data from two countrywide surveys run in 1994 and 2019, and by means of multivariate regression models, we analyze the role of socio-demographic, political, and cultural factors in the change of intergroup attitudes in Spain. Furthermore, we isolate non-political changes in society by matching between the populations of both surveys. We find that attitudes between the Basque national minority and the rest of Spain improved after the end of terrorism. Attitudes towards Catalonia do not show an association with the surge of the pro-independence movement, but attitudes from Catalans towards the rest of Spain worsened.

Keywords: intergroup conflict; terrorism; secession; territorial policy; Catalonia; Basque Country

Daniel Albalade. Department of Econometrics, Statistics and Applied Economics. Universitat de Barcelona, Spain. John Keynes 1-11, 08034 Barcelona, Spain. Email: albalade@ub.edu

Germà Bel. Department of Econometrics, Statistics and Applied Economics. Universitat de Barcelona, Spain. John Keynes 1-11, 08034 Barcelona, Spain. Email: gbel@ub.edu

Ferran A. Mazaira-Font. Department of Econometrics, Statistics and Applied Economics. Universitat de Barcelona, Spain. John Keynes 1-11, 08034 Barcelona, Spain. Email: ferranmazaira@gmail.com

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Introduction

There have been significant conflicts in territorial politics in Spain in recent decades. The Basque Country and Catalonia are the two most prominent national minorities in Spain (Guibernau, 2000), and the political dynamics in these two regions have fluctuated between accommodation and sovereignty (Gillespie, 2015). Within this context, two political processes have come to prominence over the last decade, with a huge impact both within Spain and abroad. First, the cessation of violent activity by the terrorist

organization *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA). Second, the rise of pro-independence support in Catalonia and its translation into political conflict, having been and remaining a major focus of the regional political dynamics and political tension in Spain.

Terrorism in the Basque Country and the independence of Catalonia are the only regional issues that Spanish citizens have considered to be among the top three principal problems facing the country since 1985. According to the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research (CIS, hereinafter), Basque terrorism was a top three problem for an average of 36.1% of people in Spain from 1994 to 2010, but by February 2019 it was no longer rated as such by any respondents. The independence of Catalonia first appeared among the top problems in February 2016. Since then, it has appeared in all the opinion polls, coming to a head in October 2017 at the time of the Independence Referendum, when it ranked second (after unemployment) with a score of 29.0%.

The territorial issue has often been used in recent decades by Spanish parties for electoral reasons (Verge, 2013; Gillespie, 2015). This is important, because political parties and electoral rhetoric may serve as a set of principles driving a wide range of attitudes and behaviors” (Martini and Torcal, 2019; Matos and Miller, 2021). Intergroup conflict influences attitudes towards the outgroup. Rydell and McConnell (2006) and Rydell et al. (2007) suggest that explicit intergroup attitudes towards the outgroup change rapidly. Intergroup threats intensify conflict and are a primary factor affecting the attitudes towards outgroups (Riek et al., 2006), which has been widely documented in the literature (Wilson, 2001; Canetti et al., 2008).

The political processes in the Basque Country and Catalonia are precisely the kind of events expected to affect the perception of threats within groups. For instance, the termination of ETA’s terrorist activity has likely reduced the threats perceived by the Spanish national majority and, consequently, it is expected to have reduced the intensity

of the conflict with the Basque national minority; and vice versa, because the end of terrorism has diminished polarization in the Basque Country (Kerr, 2019). In contrast, the pro-independence process in Catalonia has likely been perceived as a threat by the Spanish national majority and has intensified intergroup conflict with the Catalan national minority. Furthermore, the conspicuous use of territorial politics by statewide parties for electoral purposes at the time of the independence process (Rodon, 2020: 1493) may well have hardened attitudes among Catalans towards the rest of Spain. Based on these hypotheses, the research question we address in this article is whether and how these dynamics of intergroup conflict have affected intergroup attitudes in each case.

We use the two last countrywide Spanish surveys on regional identities, attitudes, and stereotypes: (1) the first conducted in 1994 by the CIS, which reports to the Spanish Government; and (2) a survey that copied the design of the 1994 CIS survey, conducted in 2019 by the *Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió* (hereinafter, “CEO”), which reports to the Government of Catalonia. We model the drivers of interregional attitudes using data from both surveys with linear multivariate econometric models and matching techniques. We analyze the factors that explain interregional attitudes, and the differences between the two surveys. In this way, our research contributes to the literature by showing empirically how the dynamics of interterritorial political conflicts affect intergroup conflict, and how this translates into changes in intergroup attitudes.

Intergroup conflict, intergroup threat, and attitudes: Theoretical Background

Intergroup conflict can be defined as some type of incompatibility with respect to goals, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. There are three variables with respect to this kind of conflict: non shared decision-making, diverging goals, and different perceptions of reality (March and Simon, 1958). Intergroup conflicts, particularly when they explicitly

focus on the groups' interests, result in intensification of differences between groups and aggravation of attitudes towards other groups, leading to antagonistic intergroup relations (Tajfel and Turner, 1986).

Intergroup conflict influences attitudes towards the outgroup, which are not static in nature. Rydell and McConnell (2006) and Rydell et al. (2007) suggested that, while changes in implicit attitudes require large amounts of information counterbalancing previous information, explicit attitudes change more rapidly. Quick changes of outgroup attitudes following new information have been confirmed in studies by Mann and Ferguson (2015, 2017), and Cone and Ferguson (2017).

A primary factor that affects intergroup attitudes is intergroup threats (Campbell, 1965; Sherif and Sherif, 1969; Riek et al., 2006; Rothschild, 2022), which convey new information about the outgroup. An intergroup threat can be conceptualized as the perception that an outgroup is detrimental to one's own ingroup (Schmid and Muldoon, 2014). With their Integrated Threat Theory (ITT), Stephan and Stephan (1996, 2000) classified threats into four types: realistic, symbolic, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotypes. These four types have since been condensed into two basic types: realistic and symbolic threats (Stephan and Renfro, 2002; Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison, 2009). Evidence is provided in the literature showing that threat perceptions influence intergroup conflict and affects attitudes towards outgroups (Wilson, 2001; Canetti et al., 2008).

This theoretical framework provides useful grounding and insights for the empirical modelling and implementation that we later develop. We use attitudes (as in Iyengar et al., 2012, for instance) to evaluate the responses to changes in intergroup threats. While metrics of attitudes can be seen as somewhat rough, they provide valuable insights (Howat, 2021).

Our main hypothesis is that increasing (decreasing) perception of intergroup threat -either realistic and/or symbolic- results in worsening (improving) attitudes towards the outgroup perceived as threatening. Here, we study the dynamics of intergroup political conflict and attitudes towards outgroup members, and check this hypothesis with two political processes in Spain, both of which have undergone a change in terms of the level of perceived intergroup threats and conflict: the end of terrorism in the Basque Country and the surge of the pro-independence movement in Catalonia. Next, we provide some information and analysis on both processes.

Dynamics of intergroup conflicts in Spain: The Basque Country and Catalonia

The two most prominent national minorities in Spain are the Basque Country and Catalonia (Guibernau, 2000; Gillespie, 2015). These were the only two regions that had regional parliaments established and operating during the Second Spanish Republic (1931-1939). The Catalans' and Basques' status as national minorities is reflected in all three countrywide Spanish surveys on regional identities, attitudes and stereotypes conducted to date.

In the empirical sections we provide more details on the two twin surveys of 1994 and 2019 and analyze whether the dynamics of the intergroup conflict had any relationship with changing regional attitudes between the two surveys.

End of the terrorist conflict in the Basque Country

The modern violent conflict between the Spanish State and ETA began under Franco's dictatorship in 1958. The first assassination took place in 1968 and terrorist action lasted until its definitive cease-fire in 2011 and ETA's complete dissolution in 2018. The end of ETA did not involve any splits and was not the result of any pact or concession. It is

considered one of the longest violent conflicts in modern Europe, and ETA became the last group waging sustained terrorist activity (Woodworth, 2001).

ETA killed 864 people (mostly policemen and military personnel) in about 3,000 attacks, and there were more than 7,000 injured. Furthermore, ETA practiced extortion on businessmen, and promoted low intensity street violence, which created an atmosphere of unprecedented polarization in Basque society (Woodworth, 2001). While most deaths were caused by ETA, the Spanish State was also responsible for human rights abuses and assassinations in the Basque Country, both in the dictatorship, and under the democratic regime (Etxeberria et al., 2017).

An in-depth analysis of the terrorist process and its cessation in the Basque Country is beyond the scope of our research, and it is available in the literature from a variety of methodological approaches and diverse views (e.g. Zulaika and Murua, 2017; Álvarez Berastegi and Hearty, 2019; Tellidis, 2020). What is relevant for the purposes of our research is that the Basque conflict was perceived in the rest of Spain both as a realistic threat and a symbolic threat. This may have worsened attitudes toward the Basque Country. Conversely, we expect that following the cessation of the terrorist activity and the consequent reduction of the perceived threat to the own group, negative attitudes in the rest of Spain toward the outgroup would diminish. Furthermore, as the political polarization in the Basque Country decreased (Kerr, 2019), we expect a reduction in the negative attitudes in the Basque Country towards the rest of Spain. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis, keeping in mind that change in attitudes is not considered in absolute terms, but rather in relation with the other regions' changes:

H1: Attitudes of Spaniards towards the Basque Country improved between 1994 and 2019

H2: Attitudes of the residents of Basque Country towards the rest of Spain improved between 1994 and 2019

Surge of pro-independence support in Catalonia

After Franco's death in 1975, Spain began a transition to democracy. Most social and territorial groups shared the consolidation of the democracy and the country's incorporation to the European institutions as superordinate goals. Cooperation toward achieving these two goals was prevalent (Bel, 2015), and they were accomplished over the course of the 1980s. However, cooperation for superordinate goals did not decrease intergroup differentiation, as shown by surveys on regional identities and attitudes in Spain (Sangrador García, 1996). Unresolved intergroup conflicts reemerged in the 1990s, and the dispute with respect to the territorial organization of power was a key point of contention.

By the mid-1990s, a new agenda for recentralization was pushed forward, which particularly affected the regions that had achieved a higher degree of autonomy, and especially Catalonia (as tax powers of the Basque Country were protected in the Constitution). The recentralization dynamic was confronted from Catalonia with a proposal passed in 2005 to reform its regional constitution (*Estatut d'Autonomia*) aimed to increase the protection of its powers and prevent interference from central institutions. After being trimmed, the reform was passed by the Spanish Parliament on May 2006, and on June 2006 it was approved in a referendum held in Catalonia. In June 2010, the Spanish Constitutional Court made additional cuts to the reformed regional constitution. The process was plagued with interterritorial grievances and conflicts, and it triggered a sharp increase in support for independence in Catalonia (Colomer, 2017).

From that point onwards, the dynamics of political conflict accelerated, and a pro-independence government organized an independence referendum, held on 1 October 2017. The referendum was illegal under the Spanish law, and the voters faced harsh

repression from the police forces at the command of the central government. The turnout was 43%, and 90.2% of the votes were cast in favor for independence. After a highly politically unstable month, a declaration of independence was issued on 27 October 2017, and the central government immediately took over the Catalan government and dissolved the Catalan Parliament, calling for a new regional election. This election was held on 21 December 2017, and the pro-independence parties won again an absolute majority in Parliament. Institutional conflict remained high when the 2019 Survey was conducted (Rodon, 2020).

As in the case of the Basque Country, an in-depth analysis of this political process is beyond the scope of our research, and it is already available in the literature (e.g., Colomer, 2017; Rodon and Guinjoan, 2018; Cuadras-Morató and Rodon, 2019; Balcells et al., 2020; Rodon, 2020; Ferreira, 2021). What is relevant here is that this process exacerbated intergroup conflict. Outside Catalonia it was perceived as a threat: both realistic and symbolic. Based on the previously established theoretical framework, we expect that attitudes in the rest of Spain towards Catalans deteriorated due to increased intergroup conflict. Moreover, due to the repressive reaction of the Spanish government and the main political parties, we expect to find this deterioration in the opposite direction as well. With this in mind, we formulate our second hypothesis (recall that, as in H1 and H2, change in attitudes is not considered in absolute terms, but rather in relation with the other regions' changes):

H3: Attitudes of Spaniards towards Catalonia worsened between 1994 and 2019

H4: Attitudes of the residents of Catalonia towards the rest of Spain worsened between 1994 and 2019

Empirical strategy

Data, sources, and variables

We draw on two public countrywide surveys conducted in Spain in 1994 (CIS, 1994; “Regional Stereotypes”), and 2019 (CEO, 2019: “Perceptions of the territorial debate in Spain”). Their main purpose was to study regional stereotypes in Spain and attitudes towards the different groups, with these groups being the citizens living in different regions. The country is divided in 17 Autonomous regions, which were considered as the units of analysis in both surveys. A total of 2,993 and 3,600 people participated in the first and second surveys, respectively. Data were weighted proportionally to each region’s relative weight with respect to the overall population in Spain. However, in both surveys Catalonia and the Basque Country were overrepresented in terms of respondents.

Both surveys asked respondents to score from 0 (very unfriendly) to 10 (very friendly) their attitude towards people from other regions and their own region. Table 1 (left section) displays the overall attitude of the citizens of each region, given by the citizens of the other regions (weighted by population), and the relative difference between the attitudes in 1994 and 2019 ($\text{Attitude 2019}/\text{Attitude 1994} - 1$). The highest score (best attitude, maximum friendliness) a region can receive is 10, and the lowest is 0. Positive changes between 1994 and 2019 imply attitude improvements. All regions experience an increase in the attitude between 1994 and 2019, but two regions show a marked larger relative increase. These are, precisely, the Basque Country and Catalonia (16.5% and 16.0%, respectively). Note that they received the lowest scores in 1994 (5.8 and 4.9, respectively), and maintained these lagging relative positions in 2019.

(Insert Table 1)

Table 1 (right section) shows the average attitude (weighted by population) that citizens of each region give to citizens of other regions, as well as the relative difference between the attitudes in 1994 and 2019. For instance, people from Andalusia showed a level of friendliness to people from other regions of 6.3 in 1994, and 6.9 in 2019. All regions exhibit a positive relative difference between both surveys with the only exception of Catalonia, whose citizens decreased by 2.2% their attitude towards the citizens of the rest of regions. Remarkably, the Basque Country ranks among the regions that show a larger, positive relative difference (+10%).

Both surveys also collected socio-demographic and economic data on respondents and data on their political and religious affiliations. Sociodemographic data collected and then used in the analysis included *age* and *gender*, and also *level of education* recorded as an ordinal variable from 0 - 3: 0 (illiterate), 1 (primary school completed), 2 (secondary school completed) and 3 (university graduate). These variables capture how individuals' demographic characteristics could influence their attitudes. We have no such expectations regarding the influence of *age* and *gender*. Based on the findings that education promotes tolerance more generally (Bobo and Licari, 1989; Marcus et al., 1995), we expect more educated respondents to exhibit more positive attitudes towards outgroups and a more balanced opinion overall.

Respondents were asked about two main political aspects: firstly, their declared ideology and, secondly, their opinion regarding the political decentralization of Spain. Ideology is reflected on a scale of 0 and 10, where 0 represents the extreme left and 10 the extreme right. Decentralization preferences are captured using an ordinal variable between 0 and 4, where 0 reflects zero support for decentralization (a fully centralized political regime) and 4 indicates total support. We expect ideology and preference for decentralization to play a significant role in the formation of stereotypes. Research on

group dynamics has often focused on policy preferences with group-based implications (e.g., Brandt and Reyna 2012; Davidov et al., 2008; Kinder and Winter, 2001). As Huddy et al. (2015) and Mason (2015) point out, the relationships and divisions that politicized identities foster may extend beyond the realm of politics into all manner of social domains. Political opinions are expected to affect how individuals view their own group but especially other groups. Ganzach and Schul (2021) find that liberals are more tolerant than conservatives; in our setting, traditionally the left has been more ready to accept and support political and cultural diversity within Spain, so we expect “being left-wing” to be associated with more positive attitudes towards outgroups. In contrast, the Spanish right-wing has traditionally been associated with a more unifying and homogenizing idea of Spain.

The third set of characteristics relevant to our research relates to the linguistic and cultural features of regions. By identifying the region where the respondent lives, we can also establish whether the region is officially bilingual (with co-official languages). This information is reflected in the variable *Bilingual Region*, which takes the value 1 if the region has co-official languages and 0 otherwise. Given the importance of languages in the creation of national identity (Chhim and Bélanger, 2017; Blanc and Kubo, 2021), it is reasonable to think that these variables may play a role in the attitudes towards Catalans and Basques.

However, it is unclear what to expect from variables that account for the bilingual profile of the region where respondents live. On the one hand, living in regions with co-official languages implies being in contact with cultural diversity, which may facilitate favorable opinions towards different identities and social groups. On the other hand, this may be the case only for the same language and culture, and not necessarily for others. For this reason, we also considered the variables *Catalan Language Region* or *Euskara*

Language Region, given that these may isolate the influence of bilingual regions that share the same co-official language. In this latter case, however, it is unclear what to expect. Despite sharing the same language and culture, which might approximate the other region's individuals to the outgroup and thus have a positive impact on attitudes, it is difficult to anticipate how individuals in these regions react to the political processes and events that take place in the Basque Country and Catalonia.

Table 2 shows the definitions and descriptive statistics of the variables available in the surveys that we use in our analysis as sources of information, directly as our variables, or to build our own variables and models for the purposes of our analysis.

(Insert Table 2)

Methods

Due to the 25-year gap between the two surveys, no causal link can be established between the end of terrorism in the Basque Country and the independence process in Catalonia on the one hand and the evolution of interregional attitudes on the other. However, as stated above, these are the only regional events listed among the top three priorities by Spaniards in the quarterly tracking conducted by the CIS since 1984. Hence, there is sound evidence to conclude that, although we can only test correlations, interregional attitudes are very likely to have been influenced by these two events.

To assess their impact, we first test whether the evolution of the Basque Country and Catalonia is significantly different from that of the other regions, both in terms of the attitudes they give and receive. Secondly, we will analyze whether socio-demographic, political or regional factors influence these attitudes at an individual-level. This analysis is performed with three aims. The first is to check that political factors do affect attitudes, and therefore, that there might be a relationship between the events (the end of terrorism

and the pro-independence surge) and the evolution of attitudes. The second is to understand whether there were major changes in attitudes of certain groups in terms of statistical significance and sign. And the third is to test whether the evolution of the attitudes received by the Basque Country and Catalonia are significantly different from those of the other regions, once adjusted by the non-political factors affecting the society during the period of analysis. In other words, to test whether the difference is due to a non-political change to the society (e.g., increase in the level of education), or due to political changes resulting from the political conflict.

The Basque Country and Catalonia were the two regions given the lowest ratings from the rest of Spain in 1994 and 2019, but also the regions in which these attitudes Spain improved the most (See Table 1). However, it is not clear whether these increases are significantly higher than those for other regions, since the correlation between the original attitude and the relative increase is -0.864. Regions with lower initial attitudes from others relatively had these attitudes increased more than the others. Hence, to test the significance of the increase, we build a conditional convergence model of the attitude in 2019 with respect to 1994. We estimate the following equation:

$$\frac{Attitude2019_i}{Attitude1994_i} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Attitude1994_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where sub index i = Catalonia, Basque Country.

Moreover, Table 2 shows that all regions, but Catalonia, improved their attitudes towards the other regions. The average attitude increased by 7.4%, from 6.3 in 1994 to 6.7 in 2019. From Catalonia, it decreased by 2.2%, while from the Basque Country it increased by 10.0%, slightly above the average. While it is clear that Catalonia represents an outlier, we will test whether the attitude increase from the Basque Country is statistically higher than expected.

For the second analysis, we focus on whether there was a change in the socio-demographic, regional or political factors determining attitudes, between 1994 and 2019. Specifically, we test whether age, gender, education, linguistic/cultural factors, political ideology, and preferences towards decentralization are relevant in explaining the difference in attitudes expressed towards the Basque Country and Catalonia from other regions, with respect to the weighted average (by population) attitude expressed towards the rest of regions. To do so, we use the data provided by the surveys and construct 4 sets of regressors: sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents (age, gender, and education), political ideology, preferences regarding decentralization, and the linguistic/cultural variable.

With all these sets of regressors, we estimate linear multivariate econometric models for both surveys in the following form:

$$\begin{aligned}
& \text{Attitude1994}_{i,j} - \text{AverageAttitude1994}_{-i,j} \\
&= \delta_{0i} + \delta_{1i}\text{Age}_j + \delta_{2i}\text{Gender}_j + \delta_{3i}\text{Education}_j \\
&+ \delta_{4i}\text{Ideology}_j + \delta_{5i}\text{Decentralization}_j \\
&+ \delta_{6i}\text{Bilingual_Region}_j + \delta_{7i}\text{SameLanguage_Region}_j + \varepsilon_{i,j}
\end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

$$\begin{aligned}
& \text{Attitude2019}_{i,j} - \text{AverageAttitude2019}_{-i,j} \\
&= \delta_{0i} + \delta_{1i}\text{Age}_j + \delta_{2i}\text{Gender}_j + \delta_{3i}\text{Education}_j \\
&+ \delta_{4i}\text{Ideology}_j + \delta_{5i}\text{Decentralization}_j \\
&+ \delta_{6i}\text{Bilingual_Region}_j + \delta_{7i}\text{SameLanguage_Region}_j + \varepsilon_{i,j}
\end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

where sub index $i = \{\text{Catalonia, Basque Country}\}$ and $-i = \{\text{all the regions except the } i \text{ region}\}$, and j represents the respondents.

The reciprocal analysis is carried out using the same methodology. We test whether the attitude in the Basque Country and Catalonia towards the rest of Spain is influenced by the same factors, by building econometric models in the form of (2) and

(3) but restricted to respondents from either Catalonia or the Basque Country and targeting the difference in attitude towards other regions with respect to the region where the respondent lives.

Finally, we run two robustness checks. We test whether the change in the attitudes towards Catalans and Basques is significantly different when adjusted by non-political changes in Spanish society, we use a matching on covariates method. Due to the 25-year gap, it is impossible to account for all non-political factors. However, the matching does ensure that at least both populations are similarly representative of Spanish society in terms of age, gender, education and bilingualism (See the appendix for the technical details of the strategy). Our second robustness consists of testing to what extent the change in attitudes respond to increased polarization more than a general change.

Results

Evolution of Spanish attitudes towards Catalans and Basques, and of Catalan and Basque attitudes towards Spaniards

The conditional convergence parameter for model (1) is strongly significant, as shown in Table 4. Notice that this implies that regions with lower attitudes in 1994 presented greater increases. Hence, it may be that the striking increase observed for the Basque Country (Table 1) was not striking at all, but just a trend towards convergence experienced by all the regions; for its part, the increase for Catalonia (Table 1) was lower than expected, providing support for hypothesis 3 (Attitudes of Spaniards towards Catalonia worsened between 1994 and 2019). According to the convergence parameter of model (1), the confidence interval at 95% for the increase in attitudes towards the Basque Country is (10.1%, 13.9%), while, for Catalonia, it is (14.8%, 22.4%). Hence, the null hypothesis that the increases might be subject to a convergence outcome is rejected

in the case of the Basque Country, whose increase is 16.5%, 2.6 percentage points higher than the upper limit of the confidence interval at 95%, while cannot be rejected for Catalonia, whose increase (16.0%) lies within the confidence interval. Thus, we find support for hypothesis 1 (Attitudes of Spaniards towards the Basque Country improved between 1994 and 2019), on the improvement of attitudes towards the Basque Country after the end of terrorism, while we do not find support for hypothesis 3, which states that attitudes towards Catalans have worsened between 1994 and 2019.

(Insert table3)

Recall that Catalonia was the only region where the attitude towards the rest of Spain decreased (-2.2%), consistent with our hypothesis 4 (Attitudes of the residents of Catalonia towards the rest of Spain worsened between 1994 and 2019). In the case of the Basque Country, this is the region with the fourth highest increase: 10.0% vs 7.3%, on average for the other regions. Although there is some conditional convergence (negative correlation between initial attitude and relative increase of -42.7%), the relationship is not strong enough and its significance in a model is higher than 10% (*p-value* of the convergence parameter is 0.40). Hence, to test whether the increase of the attitude expressed by the Basque Country inhabitants is significantly higher than average, we perform a test against the average increase of the attitudes expressed by the rest of the regions. The confidence interval at 95% is (4.7%, 10.0%). Thus, the increase is statistically higher than the average of the other regions, precisely at a significance level of 5%, which is consistent with our hypothesis 2 (Attitudes of the residents of Basque Country towards the rest of Spain improved between 1994 and 2019).

Individual-level analysis of the main factors influencing Spanish attitudes towards the Basque Country and Catalonia, and Basque and Catalan attitudes towards Spaniards

Our main results for the models of attitudes towards the Basque Country are shown in Figure 1. All sets of regressors seem to matter in the attitude and they are comparable between 1994 and 2019, with only slight differences. Moreover, there is no problem of multicollinearity, since the average Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) for the 1994 is 1.15 and the maximum is 1.33, while for the estimates in 2019 the average is 1.12 and the maximum 1.18. Tables SM1, SM2, SM3, and SM4 (supplementary materials, online appendix) display the numerical results corresponding to Figures 1 to 4.

(Insert Figure 1)

Sociodemographic variables provide statistically significant results. Gender (women) and the level of education have coefficients attached that are statistically significant across all models, the former with a negative sign and the latter indicating a positive impact. However, age is only significant in the 2019 survey, and the sign obtained is positive.

With respect to political variables, we find that all coefficients are highly statistically significant across all models with the expected signs. Notice that the negative sign for *Ideology* implies that a right-wing ideology is negatively associated with attitudes, as opposed to left-wing. Thus, respondents report lower attitude the higher values they declared on the ideology scale. Moreover, our results show that individuals with preferences for higher decentralization tend to express more favorable attitude towards the citizens of the Basque Country in both surveys.

The third set of regressors also provides interesting insights: respondents in bilingual regions (with co-official languages) are positively correlated with attitudes, as well as those living in regions where Euskara is co-official.

(Insert Figure 2)

The same analysis is performed now on the attitudes towards Catalans. The maximum VIF of the variables involved in the two analysis is 1.39.

Our results shown in Figure 2 are less consistent across surveys. Unlike in the case of the Basque Country, gender is never associated with a statistically significant coefficient, and age and level of education are only associated in one of the two surveys, both showing positive statistically significant correlations. Most notably, ideology is only statistically significant in the most recent survey, in contrast to what happened to the Basque Country analysis. Attitudes decrease in the 2019 survey with the ideology score, which means relatively lower attitudes are expressed by right-wing individuals and higher attitudes are declared by left-wing respondents.

Moreover, political decentralization preferences are indeed very relevant also in the case of the attitude expressed towards Catalans. This variable's coefficients are highly statistically significant and positive in all models, as expected.

Finally, the bilingual status of regions is highly statistically significant across models and surveys. Respondents living in regions where there are two co-official languages tend to value Catalans with higher scores in both surveys, as was the case for the Basque country. However, there is a surprising result for the specific case of respondents living in regions with the same co-official language (Catalan) as our results indicate a positive correlation with attitude in 1994 and, in contrast, this becomes negative in 2019. This means that individuals living in regions with Catalan as a co-official language (Valencia and the Balearic Islands), have significantly changed their view on Catalans.

So far, we have focused on the determinants of the attitudes towards the Basque Country and Catalonia. Now, we describe our results for the models on the attitudes by the respondents of these two regions towards the rest of the regions (as a group).

Figure 3 shows our results for the Basque Country. As in the other estimations, there is no problem of multicollinearity (maximum VIF is 1.72.) In 1994, their attitudes were led by just one variable: whether the respondent was born in the Basque Country. In 2019, the estimates differ significantly from the 1994 survey. Firstly, we find that the variable that was statistically significant in 1994 loses its significance, with the region of birth no longer mattering. Secondly, sociodemographic variables guided attitudes in 2019, even though they did not report the highest significance levels. In this respect, age, the percentage of women and higher levels of education are associated with more positive attitudes at 5% levels. Ideology is also found to be statistically significant.

(Insert Figure 3)

The same analysis is performed for the respondents living in Catalonia (See Figure 4). Political preferences for decentralization are, together with age and the region of birth, the only determinants that are highly statistically significant across surveys. Again, higher decentralization preferences are associated with more negative attitudes towards citizens from other regions. Moreover, age and being born in Catalonia are negatively associated with the attitude towards other regions.

Interestingly, the ideology of respondents, which was statistically significant in 1994 with the expected association with attitudes, loses its explanatory power in 2019. In contrast, female respondents are the only positive contributing characteristic that favors attitudes. This last result might be consistent with the fact that support for Catalan

independence tended to be lower among women than among men (Verge, Guinjoan and Rodon, 2015), although the gender gap in favor of independence tended to lose statistical significance as the salience of the independence debate increased.

(Insert Figure 4)

Robustness check: evolution of attitudes towards Catalans and Basques, matching populations by non-political factors

Based on the analysis of the determinants of attitudes towards other groups, we can test our hypothesis with a homogeneous comparable sample in terms of non-political characteristics –by means of matching on covariates procedure-. We obtain that differences in the evolution of attitudes due to non-political factors account for less than 1 percentage point of the change. Hence, the increase in attitudes for Catalonia lies within the 95% confidence interval (built using a conditional convergence model) even when adjusting for non-political factors, and is higher than expected for the Basque Country. See the appendix for more detailed information and results.

Robustness check: Polarization as alternative explanation of change in attitudes

An alternative explanation of the change of attitudes towards Catalans and Basques might be the presence of increased polarization. That is, the possibility that a relatively large group of people significantly improved their attitudes, but another smaller group followed the opposite trend.¹ We analyzed the change in the distribution of attitudes towards the two regions between 1994 and 2019, and we could not identify any substantial evidence of a large increase in polarization. The frequency histograms on attitudes values (see

¹ We owe this suggestion to an anonymous referee.

figure 5) are shifted to the right, so 'lower than 5' attitudes decreased while those attitudes '5 or more' increased.

(Insert figure 5)

To summarize, the conditional convergence model showed that attitudes towards the Basque Country improved more than those of other regions at the same starting point in 1994, while attitudes towards Catalonia increased in the same way as other regions would have increased had they started at the same point. Additionally, we found that Basques improved their attitudes towards the rest of Spaniards, while Catalans hardened theirs. The individual-level factor analysis showed that political factors were highly relevant, but that socio-demographic and education factors also played a role. With this in mind, the matching of the 1994 and 2019 populations in terms of relevant non-political factors served as a robustness check, and the polarization analysis showed that the improvement was not a result of extreme valuations.

Discussion and conclusion

In this research, we used raw data from the last two countrywide studies on regional attitudes in Spain. By means of linear regressions and matching techniques, we analyzed the drivers of attitudes towards the two most prominent territorial outgroups (the Basque Country and Catalonia, respectively), and from these two groups towards the rest of Spain.

Attitudes toward all regions improved between 1994 and 2019. This might be explained by the overall better wellbeing of the Spanish population in 2019 (as compared to 1994). In 1994, Spain was in the middle of an economic recession, and in an extremely

tense political situation, including 13 murders by ETA in that year. In contrast, in 2019 the economy was in expansion. Furthermore, the political situation was far less tense overall, with the Catalan independence process as the sole focus of high tension.

Our first research question, summarized in hypotheses 1 and 2, was whether the cessation of violent activity by ETA has reduced the scale of intergroup conflict between the Basque Country and the rest of Spain. Our main finding is that attitudes towards the Basque Country from the rest of Spain improved significantly more than the overall improvement change. The same happens with attitudes towards the rest of Spain from the Basque Country. The end of terrorist violence and the associated reduction of state repression in the Basque Country had healing results on both the Spanish and the Basque population. With respect to the controls we use, we confirm associations well established in the literature relating more tolerance with higher education (Bobo and Licari, 1989; Marcus et al., 1995), and progressive ideology (Ganzach and Schul, 2021) apply in this case as expected.

Our second (parallel) research question, summarized in hypotheses 3 and 4, was whether the pro-independence process in Catalonia is associated with an increase in the scale of intergroup conflict between Catalonia and the rest of Spain. Our main finding is that attitudes toward Catalonia from the rest of Spain improved in line with the overall improvement of interregional attitudes in Spain. Thus, we do not find empirical support for the hypothesis that the recent political process in Catalonia towards self-determination has worsened the attitude towards Catalans from individuals in the rest of Spain. One likely explanation is that only a small minority of the Spanish population perceived the independence of Catalonia as a likely result of the process, and this might have decreased the perceived threats.

In contrast, attitudes from Catalonia towards the rest of Spain worsened. This change is consistent with our fourth hypothesis. Our findings are also consistent with those in Balcells et al. (2020). They analyzed the consequence of state repression on the nonviolent pro-independence movement in Catalonia and found that repression heightened animosity towards actors perceived to be related with the Spanish state. When the CEO survey was conducted (9 September-17 October 2019), several former Catalan ministers had already been in jail for two years and, on 14 October 2019, the Spanish Supreme Court issued harsh imprisonment sentences for them. The former regional president and two former ministers were in exile (and still are), acting as Members of the European Parliament. Furthermore, over 3,000 individuals had been subject -in different ways- to judicial proceedings related to nonviolent reaction to the state repression. Therefore, repression against pro-independence politicians and activists has likely been a driver of the intensification of the intergroup conflict, which is reflected in the worsening of the attitudes from Catalans towards the rest of Spain.

It is worth noting that our exercise has several limitations. The most important is that our empirical exercise does not allow us to test causality. In the 25-year gap between the two surveys there were many relevant political, economic, and social events in Spain, such as the entry to the Eurozone in 1998 or the terrorist attack by Al-Qaeda in 2004. Events at regional level included the reform of the Statutes of Autonomy in several regions between 2004 and 2008. Nonetheless, the termination of terrorism in the Basque Country has often been labeled the greatest achievement of Spanish democracy,² while

² (<https://elpais.com/espana/2021-10-17/zapatero-el-atentado-causo-un-cisma-fue-clave-mantener-un-contacto-indirecto.html>)

the surge of support for independence in Catalonia is seen as its greatest challenge, according to the main Spanish media groups and political and economic leaders.³

In their analysis of the 1994 CIS Survey, Sangrador-Garcia (1996: 125) concluded that intergroup conflict between Catalans and the rest of Spain "configures a problematic panorama, to say the least, regarding the adequate insertion of the Catalan people within the context of the Spanish State". 25 years later, the dynamics of the pro-independence process in Catalonia and the repression unleashed by the state as a reaction paint an even grimmer picture. Thus, intergroup conflict is not likely to diminish unless the political tension decreases. However, the changes required in that respect have neither a clear prospect nor a clear agenda.

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Appendix

Technical details of the matching strategy

We characterize each individual by the z-score of the statistically relevant independent variables, according to equations (2) and (3). The z-score of a variable X is defined as

$z_X = \frac{X - \text{mean}(X)}{\text{stdev}(X)}$, where the mean and the standard deviation correspond to the initial

period, which is the reference for matching. Given a respondent $i = (z_1^i, \dots, z_k^i)$ from 1994, and a respondent $j = (z_1^j, \dots, z_k^j)$ from 2019, where $z_m^{i,j}$ represent the z-scores of the relevant non-political variables, we define a distance between the two individuals as:

$$d(i, j) = \frac{\sqrt{\sum_{m=1}^k (z_m^i - z_m^j)^2}}{m} \quad (\text{A1})$$

Then, each individual in 1994 is matched with the most similar individual in 2019, according to (A1). If two or more candidates are at the minimum distance, we choose between them randomly. We consider two approaches. First, we apply perfect matching, in which an individual is only considered only if they are matched without error ($d(i, j) = 0$). For age, a match is considered perfect if there are less than 5 years difference between the two individuals. Second, we relax the condition for the match, and allow individuals to be a distance of at most 0.5. In both cases, we discard individuals from 1994 that cannot be matched. Each individual in 2019 can only be matched to one respondent from 1994, coming from the same region. The matching procedure is iterated 10 times to avoid any potential bias that may arise from the random selection between individuals at minimum distance.

Results of the matching strategy

As seen in Figure 3, all independent variables (age, education, gender and regional factors) are significant for the Basque Country, while all but gender are also significant for Catalonia (see Figure 4). Hence, we consider all the independent variables for the matching procedure described in the previous section.

Table A1 shows the average values of the independent variables for the matched samples, both using the perfect matching (no difference between matched individuals, with the exception of age, which can differ by 5 years) and relaxed matching (a maximum distance of 0.5 standard deviations). As can be observed, both samples are more similar than the original ones (see Table 2).

(Insert Table A1)

The average increase in the attitudes estimated with the perfect matching procedure are 15.1% for Catalonia and 16.7% for the Basque Country. Meanwhile, with the relaxed matching, the attitudes increased by 15.6% and 16.7%, respectively. In all cases, the increase lies within the 95% confidence interval (built using a conditional convergence model) for Catalonia and is higher for the Basque Country. Hence, even adjusting for other factors, the hypothesis that the increases are the result of a convergence result is again rejected for the Basque Country, while it cannot be rejected for Catalonia.

Table 1: Attitude towards citizens of each Spanish region and towards citizens of the rest of Spanish regions. (0="very unfriendly"; 10="very friendly"), weighted by population

Region	Towards each region, from other regions			Towards the rest regions, from each region		
	CIS 1994	CEO 2019	Relative difference	CIS 1994	CEO 2019	Relative difference
Andalusia	7.066	7.231	0.023	6.278	6.866	0.094
Aragon	6.817	7.053	0.035	6.199	7.018	0.132
Asturias	6.853	7.376	0.076	5.944	6.418	0.080
Balearic Islands	6.525	6.929	0.062	6.187	6.616	0.069
Basque Country	5.814	6.776	0.165	5.760	6.339	0.100
Canary Islands	6.847	7.213	0.053	5.641	5.883	0.043
Cantabria	6.497	7.123	0.096	5.921	6.200	0.047
Castilla la Mancha	6.796	6.972	0.026	6.889	7.556	0.097
Castilla León	6.835	7.046	0.031	6.366	6.795	0.067
Catalonia	4.856	5.634	0.160	6.747	6.601	-0.022
Extremadura	6.455	7.023	0.088	6.190	6.709	0.084
Galicia	6.630	7.223	0.090	5.972	6.587	0.103
La Rioja	6.578	6.997	0.064	6.299	6.337	0.006
Madrid	6.412	6.860	0.070	6.735	7.226	0.073
Murcia	6.315	6.870	0.088	7.078	7.438	0.051
Navarra	6.591	6.965	0.057	5.558	6.665	0.199
Valencia	6.425	6.840	0.064	6.555	6.939	0.058

NOTE: All differences are significant at 1%, except for La Rioja in the right section (not significant).

Table 2: Description of respondent's data in the surveys.

Variable	CIS 1994		CEO 2019	
	Mean	Std. Dev	Mean	Std. Dev
Age	42.8	17.3	50.1	17.5
Gender (%Women)	47.9	50.0	51.4	50.0
Education (0=no education, 1=primary, 2=secondary, 3=tertiary)	1.8	0.9	3.3	0.7
Ideology (0=extreme left, 10=extreme right)	4.7	2.1	4.5	2.1
Decentralization (1=highly centralized, 4=highly decentralized)	2.4	0.9	2.8	1.4
Bilingual region	39.1%		40.8%	

^a For CIS, bilingual accounts for a person that can speak and/or write an additional language besides Spanish; for CEO, that considers as her primary language at least one language other than Spanish

Table 3: Conditional convergence model (OLS)

Variable	Estimate	Std. Error	Pr(> t)
Constant	0.52044***	0.06815	1.52e-06
Attitude 1994 (conditional convergence parameter)	-0.06889***	0.01047	8.77e-06
Residual standard error: 0.02125 on 15 degrees of freedom			
Multiple R-squared: 0.7425, Adjusted R-squared: 0.7254			
F-statistic: 43.26 on 1 and 15 DF, p-value: 8.771e-06			

Significance codes: ***: p<0.01; **: p<0.05; *: p<0.1

NOTE: As a robustness check we re-estimated the model without considering one region at a time. In all cases the conditional convergence parameter is significant at <0.01, and its value lays between -0.0999 and 0.0599. In all cases, the increase in Catalonia is in the expected range (CI-95) while that of the Basque Country is above expected.

Table A1: Description of respondents' data

Variable	Perfect matching		Relaxed matching	
	CIS 1994	CEO 2019	CIS 1994	CEO 2019
Age	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean
Age	42.6	42.7	42.7	42.8
Women (%)	47.0	47.0	47.4	47.4
Level of education (0=no education, 1=primary, 2=secondary, 3=tertiary)	2.0	2.0	1.9	2.0
Bilingual Region	38.2%	38.2%	38.4%	38.4%
Number of matched respondents	1603	1603	2389	2389

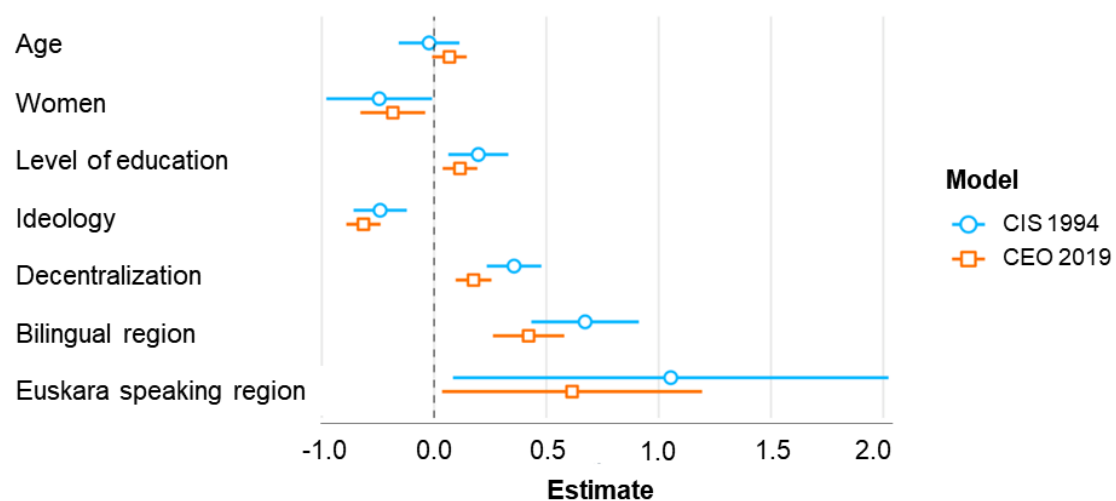


Figure 1. Model for attitudes towards the Basque Country (OLS). Standardized estimates (predictors mean-centered and scaled by 1 s.d.) with 95% confidence interval.

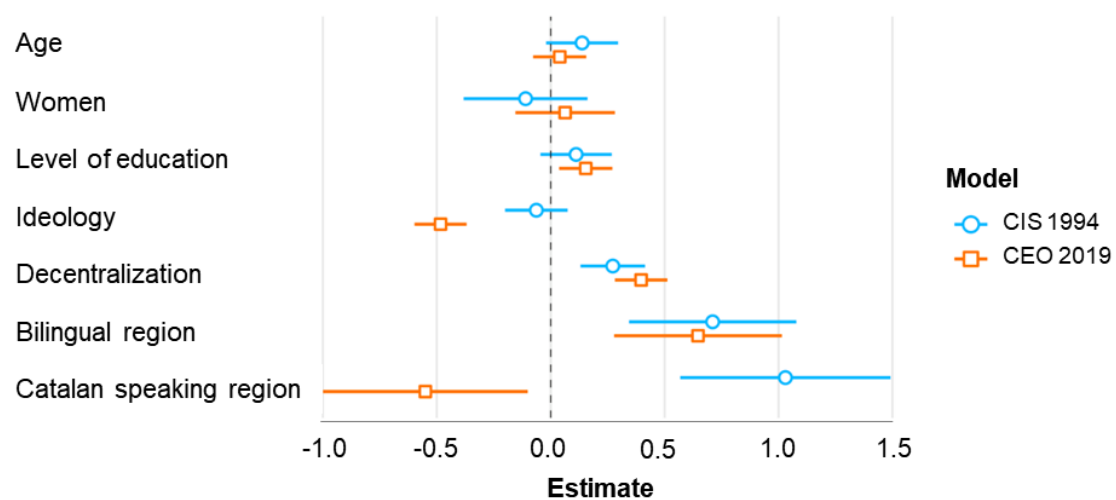


Figure 2. Model for attitudes towards Catalonia (OLS). Standardized estimates (predictors mean-centered and scaled by 1 s.d.) with 95% confidence interval.

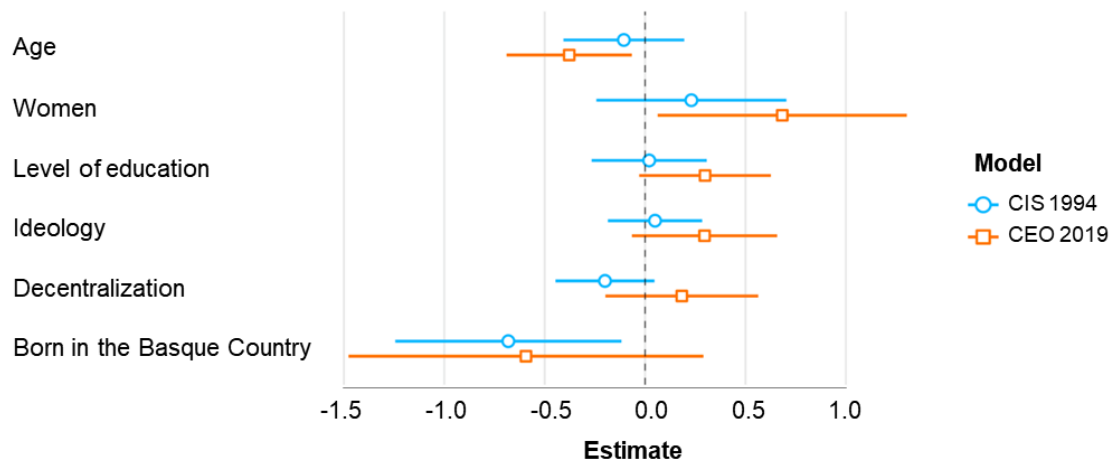


Figure 3. Model for attitudes towards the rest of Spain from citizens of the Basque Country (OLS). Standardized estimates (predictors mean-centered and scaled by 1 s.d.) with 95% confidence interval.

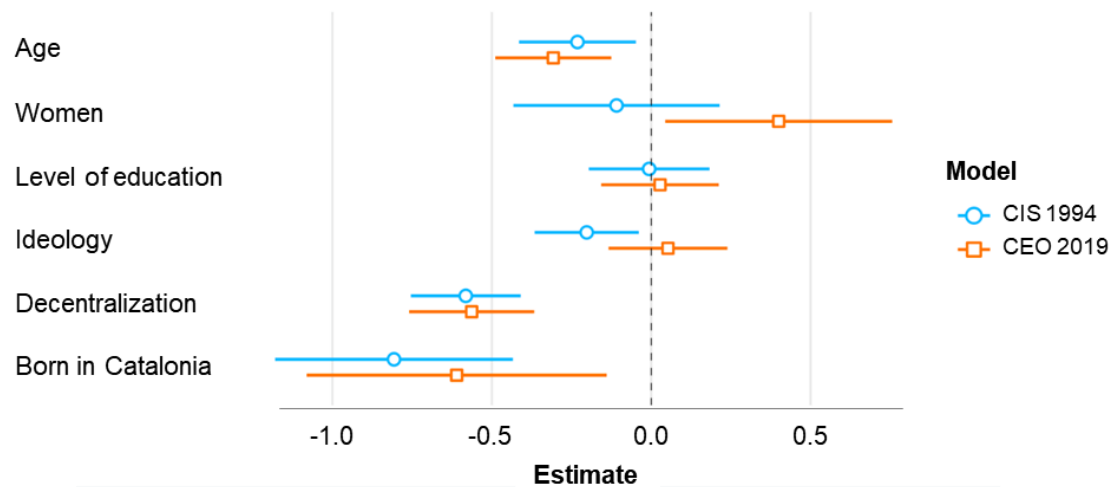


Figure 4. Model for attitudes towards the rest of Spain from citizens of Catalonia (OLS). Standardized estimates (predictors mean-centered and scaled by 1 s.d.) with 95% confidence interval.

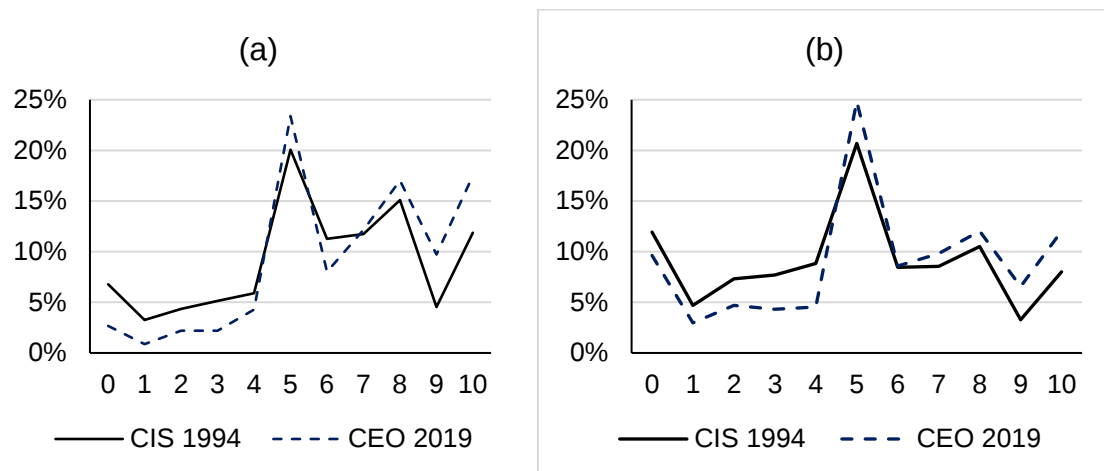


Figure 5. Histogram of the relative frequency of attitudes (0="very unfriendly"; 10="very friendly") in the surveys. (a) corresponds to the Basque Country; (b) to Catalonia.

Online Appendix

Table SM1: Model for the attitudes towards the Basque Country (OLS)

Variable	CIS 1994 (1)	CEO 2019 (2)
Constant	-1.7211*** (0.3509)	-0.4912* (0.2356)
Age	-0.0012 (0.0040)	0.0040 * (0.0023)
Female	-0.2440** (0.1202)	-0.1834** (0.0744)
Education	0.2198*** (0.0760)	0.1590*** (0.0541)
Ideology	-0.1143*** (0.0288)	-0.1499*** (0.0185)
Decentralization	0.4020*** (0.0701)	0.1343*** (0.0310)
Bilingual region	0.6725*** (0.1221)	0.4210*** (0.0811)
Euskara Language Region	1.0539** (0.4942)	0.6147** (0.2951)
R ²	0.0771	0.0842
F	19.533 ***	31.01 ***

Significance codes: ***: p< 0.01; **: p<0.05; *: p< 0.1.

Table SM2: Model for the attitudes towards Catalonia (OLS)

Variable	CIS 1994 (3)	CEO 2019 (4)
Constant	-3.5454*** (0.4151)	-1.8815*** (0.3586)
Age	0.0080* (0.0047)	0.0023 (0.0034)
Gender	-0.1102 (0.1389)	0.0633 (0.1114)
Education	0.1227 (0.0883)	0.2110*** (0.0818)
Ideology	-0.0297 (0.0330)	-0.2303*** (0.0277)
Decentralization	0.3061*** (0.0812)	0.3221*** (0.0477)
Bilingual region	0.7109*** (0.1872)	0.6467*** (0.1879)
Catalan Language Region	1.0302*** (0.2354)	-0.5502** (0.2292)
R ²	0.0671	0.0923
F	16.18***	28.40***

Significance codes: ***: p< 0.01; **: p<0.05; *: p< 0.1.

Table SM3: Model for the attitudes towards the rest of Spain from citizens of the Basque Country (OLS)

Variable	CIS 1994 (5)	CEO 2019 (6)
Constant	-2.0371** (0.8595)	-3.2168*** (1.058)
Age	-0.0065 (0.0095)	-0.0205** (0.0091)
Female	0.2306 (0.2405)	0.6220** (0.3075)
Education	0.0223 (0.1592)	0.5722** (0.2904)
Ideology	0.0289 (0.0697)	0.1725* (0.0946)
Decentralization	-0.2181 (0.1368)	0.1788 (0.1689)
Born in Basque Country	-0.6812** (0.2862)	-0.4679 (0.4153)
R ²	0.0412	0.1620
F	1.99**	3.25***

Significance codes: ***: p< 0.01; **: p<0.05; *: p< 0.1.

Table SM4: Model for the attitudes towards the rest of Spain by citizens from Catalonia (OLS)

Variable	CIS 1994 (7)	CEO 2019 (8)
Constant	1.2957*** (0.4726)	1.5123*** (0.6434)
Age	-0.0135** (0.0055)	-0.0181*** (0.0055)
Female	-0.1087 (0.1646)	0.4001** (0.1812)
Education	-0.0078 (0.1171)	0.0459 (0.1559)
Ideology	-0.1056** (0.0434)	0.0277 (0.0501)
Decentralization	-0.6267*** (0.0944)	-0.4633*** (0.0822)
Born in Catalonia	-0.8070*** (0.1898)	-0.6103*** (0.2395)
R ²	0.1942	0.1316
F	16.43***	12.80***

Significance codes: ***: p< 0.01; **: p<0.05; *: p< 0.1.