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Strategic coherence and democratic stability in Europe: lessons from the Spanish case for political risk assessment (2012–2020)

Abstract

The emergence of challenger parties within the European political system has raised questions as to whether these parties contribute to strengthening democratic renewal or to increasing the fragmentation of the system. The existence of this problem makes it necessary to develop predictive tools to manage it on an ongoing basis. The impact on democracy is determined by the application of the 'dual innovation strategy' (combining political innovation and anti-establishment rhetoric) and is complemented by strategic coherence (a party's ability to demonstrate consistency in its political message, its policy proposals and its actions when adverse circumstances, such as crises, arise). Coherent parties manage to channel political discontent. However, inconsistent parties run the risk of failing to do so, and of anti-democratic parties exploiting this due to political disenchantment. In this study, we employ a comparative qualitative analysis of four key cases (Podemos, UPyD, Ciudadanos and Vox) during the period 2012–2020, using manifestos and survey data such as that from the CIS as evidence. Our framework provides observable indicators of the gap between discourse and action, which can be monitored for the ongoing assessment of political risk in European democracies facing similar pressures.

Keywords

Challenger parties, Political polarisation, Party systems, European democracy, Political entrepreneurship.

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1 Assessing democratic risk in the era of challenger parties: the need for predictive frameworks

Challenger parties are those that compete against the dominant parties in the system, which have historically governed and have more experience in public administration. To this end, challenger parties seek to introduce new issues or discursive frameworks in an attempt to attract new voters, some of whom do not feel represented by the dominant parties, or to introduce new issues into the political debate. This definition is based on the work of Hobolt and De Vries (2020), who argue that these challenger parties are characterised by a lack of prior government experience and by targeting their strategy precisely at the vulnerabilities of established parties.

The proliferation of challenger parties in Europe since 2008 has significantly transformed political systems, with the emergence of Podemos and Vox in Spain, La France Insoumise and the National Rally in France, Syriza in Greece and the Five Star Movement in Italy. This shows us that this is not a temporary or country-specific trend, but rather a widespread trend in southern Europe that has persisted over time. The consequences have been significant, as several parties have managed to govern or form part of governments, changing legislation and exerting influence. These new actors have successfully capitalised on public discontent stemming from the 2008 economic crisis and the incessant cases of corruption, establishing themselves as political alternatives. However, their differing trajectories raise questions as to whether, ultimately, they have contributed to democratic renewal or to greater fragmentation, which has direct implications for European democratic resilience.

Challenger parties employ a 'dual innovation strategy' according to Hobolt and de Vries (2020). This combines two complementary mechanisms: on the one hand, political innovation, which is based on introducing controversial or alternative issues to those of the dominant parties, such as rethinking the European Union (EU), the environment or corruption. On the other hand, through rhetorical innovation, it seeks to divide society between a ruling elite perceived as corrupt, represented by the dominant parties, and a populace that the challenger party seeks to represent. Both mechanisms act in unison, as they aim to create a new political space and discredit the adversary, thereby creating new political opportunities. This combination will be explored in depth within the theoretical framework of this study.

This article argues that, whilst the use of the 'dual innovation strategy' (Hobolt and De Vries, 2020) is fundamental to understanding the initial rise of emerging parties, it is not sufficient to explain the various long-term divergences. The key variable, according to this study, is 'strategic coherence over time', defined as the sustained consistency between a party's discourse, its key strategic actions (such as pacts and vetoes) and its policy proposals. Such inconsistency erodes credibility, which is detrimental to the reputation of an emerging party. The analysis of the Spanish case, and in particular the comparison between Vox and Ciudadanos, shows us that not only is it necessary to employ a dual innovation strategy to enter the market, but that consistency is vital for maintaining it in the long term.

This study aims to contribute to the existing literature by addressing a comparative dimension that has been little explored in Spain. Various previous studies have focused on Spanish challenger parties, analysing Podemos and Ciudadanos (Orriols and Cordero, 2016) and Vox (Rama *et al.*, 2021); however, few studies have focused on comparing these three parties with UPyD to understand why their strategies worked or failed. Furthermore, from the perspective of the 'dual innovation strategy' (Hobolt and De Vries, 2020), we offer a more up-to-date view of emerging and dominant parties, taking into account controversial issues, anti-establishment rhetoric, control of the political market, and experience or lack thereof in public administration. These studies focused on 2014–2015 or on the emergence and growth of Vox, but not on the long-term evolution of several of these parties, including the collapse of some of them such as UPyD or Ciudadanos.

Furthermore, to understand the reasons why parties become incoherent, our article combines the theory of Hobolt and De Vries with the theory of party change (Harmel and Janda, 1994), focusing on how external crises interact with the parties' core objectives. This analysis is situated within the broader context of the crisis of representation (Mair, 2006; Kriesi *et al.*, 2008).

Furthermore, pernicious polarisation can lead to an 'us versus them' conflict, turning political adversaries into enemies, and fuels trends towards the decline of liberal democracy, benefiting radical political actors (Somer *et al.*, 2021: 877). It is precisely within this context of pernicious polarisation that the strategic incoherence of challenger parties proves most damaging to democratic stability.

This analysis contributes to the growing literature on democratic resilience (Merkel and Lührmann, 2021) and democratic backsliding (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018), by examining how the consistency of challenger parties' behaviour affects stability at the system level. Whilst structural factors, such as economic development and institutional constraints, are well-established predictors of democratic durability, less attention has been paid to how the strategic consistency of political actors mediates between opportunities for crisis and democratic outcomes. Finally, by introducing a multi-causal approach, we move beyond monocausal views that focus solely on the economy or discourse.

The article is structured as follows: first, the theoretical framework is presented, culminating in two testable hypotheses. Second, the qualitative comparative methodology is outlined. Third, the empirical analysis is presented through two comparative 'battles': Podemos versus UPyD and Vox versus Ciudadanos. Finally, the European implications of the results and conclusions are analysed.

2 From dual innovation to strategic coherence: a framework for assessing long-term stability

Major transformations in Europe have created fertile ground for challenger parties. Globalisation has created 'winners and losers', generating a new structural conflict with economic, cultural and political consequences that has given rise to the 'division

through denationalisation', which emerging parties exploit effectively (Kriesi *et al.*, 2008, p. 233). Their success is explained by the structural transformations of European societies, and not merely by their experience in government.

This pressure crystallises in specific crises, such as a territorial crisis, which forces parties to act and put their model to the test (Harmel and Janda, 1994). The response to this crisis is the party's 'primary objective' (maximising votes, positions, policy or internal democracy). Inconsistency often arises when a crisis forces a party to change or to act contrary to its primary objective, as perceived by the electorate.

The key strategy that challenger parties pose to dominant parties is political entrepreneurship. The 'dual innovation strategy' operates through two complementary mechanisms. These exploit the different vulnerabilities of dominant parties. Firstly, political innovation operates by introducing controversial issues—cross-cutting or divisive matters that force dominant parties to adopt uncomfortable positions. This situation arises because they may alienate others whilst appealing to a segment of the electorate. The second part is 'anti-establishment' rhetoric, which undermines the credibility advantages of the dominant parties. Challenging parties achieve this by portraying the dominant parties as 'elites' who do not represent the 'people' and are disconnected from everyday problems. The key to this combination lies in broadening the thematic space and delegitimising their adversaries. This combination creates dual pressure on the dominant parties. This framework is fundamental to understanding how challengers actively seek to capitalise on the structural opportunities described (Hobolt and De Vries, 2020: 6).

This is linked to the crisis of representation (Mair, 2006), which reflects a more polarised society, in which challenger parties can achieve success through a strategy that goes beyond the left-right axis, introducing new divisive issues that appeal to disenchanted or unrepresented voters.

Whilst this framework emphasises strategic choice, it also recognises that success depends on favourable structural opportunities, determined by socio-economic conditions and patterns of voter loyalty. Consequently, challenger parties are more likely to succeed during periods of severe socio-economic hardship, as these conditions create fertile ground for challenging the dominant parties. Similarly, challenger parties are more likely to succeed when there is greater misalignment with the dominant parties and institutional distrust, as this creates a pool of available voters.

However, whilst this article posits that these conditions are necessary, they are not sufficient to explain the divergent trajectories of challenger parties. The crucial variable, this article argues, is the consistent and skilful application of the dual innovation strategy.

'Strategic coherence' and the 'dual innovation strategy' are not a magic formula, as their success depends on other factors. The success of controversial issues depends on whether the party achieves issue ownership (Meguid, 2005; Williams and Hunger, 2022) and on how the dominant parties react (Abou-Chadi, 2016). Therefore, one way of measuring success could be the ability to incorporate specific issues raised by challenger parties and how mainstream parties adapt or adopt them.

Several authors confirm that mainstream parties adapt their political profiles based on challenger parties (van Spanje, 2010; Schumacher and van Kersbergen, 2014). This example shows us that the ability to set the agenda is a key indicator for measuring the actual success of challenger parties, demonstrating that they change the terms of the political debate, even if they are not in power. Niche parties (which overlap with challenger parties) compete strategically on issues that mainstream (dominant) parties prefer to ignore or treat as secondary, forcing mainstream parties to react and take a stance on the issue raised by the challengers (Meguid, 2005).

This dynamic shows us that challenger parties can increase media attention on an issue, connecting with voters who may have unmet demands. This situation allows them to build their brand, thus linking to the theory of political entrepreneurship (Hobolt and De Vries, 2020). Finally, the dynamics of competition also play a role, as the reaction of mainstream parties is not uniform.

In an analysis of 17 Western European countries (including Spain) between 1970 and 2011, it was found that mainstream parties adopted anti-immigration policies in response to the success of right-wing parties. However, contrary to what might be expected, they tend to downplay environmental issues when green parties gain support, precisely because these parties are perceived as 'owners' of the issue (Abou-Chadi, 2016). This underscores the importance of the type of rival and the nature of the 'issue' when analysing competitive dynamics.

Beyond discursive strategy, a strong internal organisation is a key factor in understanding why some political parties achieve success, which may explain why some rivals consolidate their position whilst others disappear after initial success. Parties with strong organisations are more likely to achieve electoral success and survive as significant players, as they can attract and mobilise voters more effectively than parties with weak organisations (Tavits, 2013: 7).

Thus, a party with a strong and cohesive organisation has a greater capacity to deal with a crisis in a unified manner and maintain a strategic line. Party organisation is important for the party's cohesion, which affects its legitimacy and stability. Among the various sources of vulnerability that can lead to disintegration is the refusal to build a party organisation (Bolleyer, 2013). This organisation is essential, as it provides greater resources and the capacity to reach voters and members, which fosters greater legitimacy and stability and prevents disintegration. Thus, a party with a weak organisation or internal strife is more fragile; a crisis can fracture it, leading to erratic and incoherent situations. This can be illustrated, among other factors, by the internal rifts within UPyD or the subsequent defections within Ciudadanos, which reflect symptoms of organisational weakness rather than direct causes of their decline.

There are other factors that define the window of opportunity. According to Hellwig and Dodez (2026), as the ruling executive survives consecutive elections, this memory of the past begins to fade and voters return to the more experienced opposition parties, demonstrating the resilience of the dominant parties. This explanation shows us that rival parties have a window of opportunity: when crises occur, such as economic ones, they can make headway; once this has passed, the dominant parties can reassert their

dominance and win back lost voters. Rival parties may not succeed when they are marginalised, particularly in the case of rival communist parties such as Izquierda Unida (IU). The parrot effect only applies when a rival party is consistently and simultaneously marginalised. This type of marginalisation occurs frequently. 'Perhaps access to the media is crucial for marginalised parties' (Van Spanje and Graaf, 2017: 17–18). This explanation shows that ostracism by the parties can lead to less public attention and poorer electoral results for certain types of political parties, particularly left-wing parties. These factors help explain why 'double innovation' is not a magic formula and why some parties, despite a sound initial strategy, fail. These factors (strategic nuances, organisational capacity and contextual constraints) do not, taken together, determine the fate of a political party, but rather the high-stakes scenario in which 'strategic coherence' becomes the truly decisive variable.

2.1 The mediating role of strategic coherence

Strategic coherence is defined as the sustained consistency between a party's rhetoric, its policy proposals and its key strategic actions—such as pacts, vetoes or alliances—particularly when external circumstances, such as economic or territorial crises, demand a response that tests its founding identity. In such situations, strategic coherence shapes a party's identity in the face of various challenges, and influences how voters perceive these parties' responses to them.

This coherence is particularly important for challenger parties, as their main asset in the eyes of the electorate is presenting themselves as a genuine and reliable alternative to the dominant parties, which possess a track record and governmental experience that the challengers lack. Therefore, a breach of coherence for these new challenger parties not only constitutes a credibility error but also erodes the party's brand in the face of the dominant parties they criticise. As Hobolt and De Vries (2020: 186) point out, one way for parties to protect their brand is by ensuring that voters perceive the issues they champion as the most important.

This argument ties in directly with the concept of issue ownership proposed by Petrocik (1996). According to this author, voters form parties' reputations based on the issues they consider most important and which the parties consistently champion over time. Therefore, maintaining consistency on divisive issues reinforces not only the party's identity and brand, but also strengthens its position as the owner of these issues in the political marketplace, making it difficult for dominant parties to challenge or appropriate them.

The consequences of this variable are significant; they are not limited to the electoral sphere but are reflected in the stability of the system. A consistent challenger party can channel the aspirations of a section of the discontented public through institutional mechanisms, resulting in democratic renewal. Conversely, if an inconsistent challenger party fails to deliver on its original proposals, this can lead to system volatility, greater distrust of political parties, or create disillusionment, failing to meet the expectations of voters who were already disaffected. This distinction

forms the basis of our second hypothesis, which will be empirically tested throughout our analysis.

Based on this, we propose two hypotheses: H1 and H2 (Entry and Consolidation Hypotheses):

H1 (Entry Hypothesis): Challenging parties that effectively implement the 'dual innovation strategy' (Hobolt and De Vries, 2020) are more likely to achieve significant electoral gains.

H2 (Consolidation Hypothesis): Among rival parties that manage to break through, those demonstrating greater 'strategic consistency over time' between their rhetoric and their actions are more likely to consolidate their electoral support in the long term, whilst inconsistency is associated with collapse.

3 From theory to practice: a methodological approach to assessing strategic coherence

The emergence of several challenger parties across the ideological spectrum during periods of converging crises (economic, social and territorial) created controlled conditions for establishing how varying levels of 'strategic coherence' among emerging parties affected the stability of the system, allowing lessons to be drawn for other southern European countries facing similar challenges. Our aim in this article is not only to describe the specific case, but also to identify transferable causal mechanisms to understand how strategic coherence can affect democratic stability. Spain met several conditions that make it particularly suitable: it suffered multiple crises, both economic and social, simultaneously; it also experienced the creation of new parties across different ideological spectra, undergoing increasing polarisation, all within a previously stable political system.

Our analysis is based on pairs of contests. The comparison between Podemos and UPyD serves as a 'natural experiment' to test the importance of strategic agency. Both parties faced the same structural opportunity (economic crisis and discontent channelled by the 15-M movement). However, their ability to effectively implement 'double innovation' was completely different. Thanks to this pairing, we can isolate the impact of strategy (independent variable) on electoral success (dependent variable), whilst holding the context constant. Vox and Ciudadanos competed, albeit from different ideological positions, to attract voters disenchanted with PP in the centre-right and right of the political spectrum; however, their trajectories diverged due to strategic coherence and growing polarisation.

This study will be based on a qualitative and deductive approach and on a comparative analysis within each case. We will use a design based on more similar systems. This is because we will be comparing parties operating within the same political system and during the same period. Our longitudinal approach from 2012 to 2020 is crucial not only for analysing the emergence of challenger parties, but also their evolution, consolidation or decline, by analysing their 'strategic coherence' over time.

The utility of this framework can be replicated in other contexts and applied prospectively to assess political risks. In this way, countries facing similar challenges, such as Portugal, France, Italy or Greece, can use this framework to respond in a more informed manner.

The criteria we used to select UPyD, Ciudadanos, Podemos and Vox were several:

1. Parties founded after 2006.
2. They obtained more than 3% of the vote in at least one general election.
3. They represent different ideological positions (left, centre and right).
4. Data is available (manifestos and CIS polls).

The data we obtain from the election manifestos will be used to analyse policy proposals and identify contentious issues, examining the periods 2015 and 2019. Furthermore, we will use CIS surveys to measure institutional trust—Spain's main problem—and loyalty to political parties. We will also use public statements and debates to analyse anti-establishment rhetoric. Divisive issues were analysed by reading the pages describing each section (e.g. economy, regeneration). Furthermore, keywords such as 'PP', 'PSOE', 'established parties', etc. were searched for. We have sought to be both qualitative, for example, 'Vox' and 'impunity', and quantitative (based on the number of occurrences). We have also analysed the most important election debates, such as those on Atresmedia and RTVE, as well as statements made by leaders at crucial moments, such as Ciudadanos' veto of PSOE.

We used several indicators to implement political discourse strategies:

Emphasis on political innovation (controversial issues): Political innovation, in particular the emphasis on controversial issues (corruption or the EU), was identified through a qualitative analysis of the electoral manifestos, highlighting their presence and strategic articulation to differentiate themselves from the dominant parties. This analysis informs the political innovation component of the dual innovation strategy.

Anti-establishment rhetoric: we identified this rhetoric qualitatively through the analysis of election manifestos, public statements, debates, statements by political leaders and media coverage (CIS for perceived discourse surveys and secondary analysis of debates). We analysed key terms such as 'caste', 'elites', 'old parties' and 'the people', as well as criticisms of the system.

Application of the dual innovation strategy: this was analysed for each opposition party in each electoral period, combining the evidence from indicators 1 and 2.

To test our second hypothesis (H2), strategic coherence was measured across three dimensions over time:

1. Discursive coherence: assessed by comparing the party's central framing (reformist versus conservative, for example) and key messages across manifestos and televised debates in 2015 and 2019. We also tracked whether the central narrative had remained consistent or changed significantly.
2. Consistency of action: examined by analysing key strategic decisions, primarily through post-election pacts and vetoes. We assessed whether these actions were in line with the party's discourse and policy promises or whether they

contradicted them. For example, Ciudadanos' shift in alliances from PSOE to PP is an example of inconsistent action.

3. Programmatic consistency: assessed by tracking the evolution of key policies in the party's election manifestos. We determine whether the proposals evolve logically or whether there are sudden shifts on key issues that contradict previous positions.

To translate the theoretical concepts presented here into concrete empirical measures, we have developed a system of specific indicators which enable us to systematically assess each dimension of strategic coherence. The table below shows the operational structure of our analytical framework (see Table I), specifying how each conceptual dimension translates into measurable indicators and specific evaluation criteria.

TABLE I. OPERATIONAL INDICATORS FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF STRATEGIC COHERENCE

Operacionalización de conceptos clave

	CONCEPTO	DIMENSIÓN	INDICADORES / FUENTE DE DATOS
CONCEPTO 1	Estrategia de innovación dual	1. Innovación política	• Énfasis en temas divisivos (p. ej., corrupción, UE) en los manifiestos de los partidos.
		2. Innovación retórica	• Uso de términos antisistema ("casta", "élites", "viejos partidos") en manifiestos y debates televisados. • Críticas al sistema político y llamamientos al "pueblo".
CONCEPTO 2	Coherencia estratégica	1. Coherencia discursiva	• Coherencia del encuadre central y los mensajes entre los manifiestos/debates de 2015 y 2019.
		2. Coherencia de acción	• Análisis de pactos y vetos postelectorales. • Coherencia entre el discurso (p. ej., "regeneración") y las acciones (p. ej., bloquear la formación de gobierno).
		3. Coherencia programática	• Evolución lógica de las políticas centrales en los manifiestos frente a cambios repentinos y contradictorios.

4 Empirical analysis: two comparative battles

4.1 Podemos and UPyD: strategic innovation and structural opportunity

4.1.1 The crisis as a catalyst: structural conditions for the emergence of challenger parties (2012–2015)

The structure of political opportunities for challenger parties between 2012 and 2015 was characterised by a profound dual crisis. In the economic sphere, Spain was facing the serious consequences of the 2008 economic crisis, as well as a rise in institutional mistrust, with ongoing corruption scandals (Gürtel, ERE), which accounted for 50.8% of the population's main concerns according to CIS 3057. All this reveals a dramatic economic and social situation in Spain, demonstrating that the traditional parties (PP and PSOE) were unable to tackle the economic crisis. Due to this crisis and the visible rise in mistrust among citizens, the 15-M Movement (Los Indignados) was formed. Its main slogan was 'They do not represent us', which was a direct criticism of the party system.

This movement enjoyed widespread support, with over 70% of voters giving it a positive rating according to the CIS 2905 survey. This refusal to support the traditional parties created 'political opportunitieso for new parties capable of articulating citizens' demands. The crisis was not merely economic; there was also a growing partisan imbalance, with loyalty to PSOE falling below 70% according to the CIS 7715 survey, whilst Podemos reached 80.6%. This created a large pool of undecided voters for the new parties.

During this same period, Ciudadanos was establishing itself in Catalonia as a moderate, centrist alternative to the two-party system and the nationalist parties, whilst Vox still had only marginal representation, having been founded in 2014 and securing fewer than 250,000 votes and no MEPs in the 2014 European elections (Ministerio de Interior, 2014). Both cases will be analysed in detail in the following section.

4.1.2 Testing hypothesis H1: how strategic innovation determines electoral success

To understand the divergences in the trajectories of Podemos and UPyD, we must first analyse the 15-M movement, which played a crucial role in Spanish politics in the 2010s. The 15-M movement was created in the wake of the cuts imposed by the Zapatero government and public discontent with the corruption scandals facing PP and PSOE. Its slogan, 'They don't represent us', sought to convey the image that Spain's traditional political system was out of step with the concerns of citizens, who were demanding new proposals and political alternatives. Over 70% of citizens viewed it positively, although it garnered more support among left-wing voters and young people (Calvo *et al.*, 2011, CIS 2905). Furthermore, almost 80% of Spaniards believed that this social movement's demands were justified, and three out of four Spaniards believed that it was a 'source of democratic renewal' (Metroscopia, 2011). All this data shows us that this movement enjoyed broad support among the public and that there were issues on which they agreed regardless of their ideology, such as corruption, the economic crisis and democratic renewal.

Podemos employed a two-pronged approach. Firstly, it strategically mobilised key issues such as democratic renewal and corruption, whilst also connecting with the former 15-M Movement, which had rejected the traditional parties (including UPyD). Its focus on these issues was particularly effective given the context in which events such as the Púnica scandal (PP), PSOE (the ERE and Formación cases) and the Gürtel scandal (PP) were unfolding. These cases fostered a widespread perception of political corruption among the public, making its approach timely and effective against the traditional parties, presenting a fresh and alternative image. Secondly, he made strategic use of anti-establishment rhetoric; thus, his most frequently used terms were 'the caste', 'the people' and 'the elites', seeking to create an image of division between the people, whom it represented, and the elites, represented by the traditional parties. They employed a combined strategy of economic radicalism. They focused on the 'right to decide' and an 'increase in the minimum wage' (Podemos Party Manifesto, 2015: 34 and 58). Furthermore, they harshly criticised PSOE and PP.

Podemos' strategic positioning aligns with the concept of populism (Mudde, 2004), according to which the ideology divides society between the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite'. Furthermore, a large proportion of the electorate was familiar with the Podemos candidate (Pablo Iglesias) through his participation in televised debates, which contributed to his increased popularity. Most voters were familiar with Pablo Iglesias, highlighting the importance of leaders in the success of challenger parties (Torcal *et al.*, 2024). Podemos' voter loyalty rate stood at 80.6% (CIS 7715), a figure higher than that of PP (77.6%) and PSOE (69.4%), demonstrating that this party not only managed to attract voters but also to rapidly build a loyal and committed base, something that other left-wing parties such as IU failed to achieve (49.7%).

In Podemos's election manifesto for the 2015 general election, the term 'people' is mentioned up to fifteen times, using expressions such as 'contract with the people' and 'the audacity of a few and the pain of many', seeking to create a direct connection with the public and to divide society between the elite and the people. In this way, they sought to divide society between the elite, who did not represent the public, and Podemos, who did, in a clear allusion to populism (Mudde, 2004). Furthermore, they spoke of a 'recall referendum', thereby demonstrating their rhetoric and that power lies with the people, not with politicians.

All this linked Podemos to the ideas of the 15-M movement and its slogan 'They do not represent us'. Furthermore, their controversial issues revolve around regeneration and the fight against corruption, proposing to 'guarantee an end to impunity for the corrupt' and to change the functioning of the justice system. The timing of these proposals coincided with data from the CIS, which showed that in March 2015 corruption was the second most important issue for Spaniards (CIS Study 3057).

Podemos's discourse went beyond criticising PP and PSOE, extending to economic, media and institutional powers (Rama *et al.*, 2021). This had a strong impact on disaffected voters, who saw the political class as incapable of managing the consequences of the economic and social crisis (Torreblanca, 2015). The timing was perfect, as trust in political parties had reached critical levels between 2013 and 2014.

Podemos drew on left-wing voters with low levels of satisfaction with democracy and trust in institutions (Cordero and Montero, 2015). The extensive media presence of its leader, Pablo Iglesias, contributed to its popularity (Torreblanca, 2015).

The issues raised by Podemos (corruption and democratic renewal) were far more urgent and important to the public in 2015, making the party more attractive to disenchanted voters and successfully mobilising 16.6% of those who had not previously voted, as documented by Orriols and Cordero (2016).

Finally, and seeking to strengthen its anti-austerity stance, Podemos adopted a socio-economic focus, proposing to enshrine social rights such as housing and employment in the Spanish Constitution of 1987 (Podemos Electoral Manifesto, 2015: 9–13,). All these divisive issues sought to undermine the policy proposals and consensus of PP and PSOE and to attack their weak points, which at that time were under siege from multiple corruption scandals such as the Púnica affair, the ERE scandal and the training course scandal. Podemos's polarising and populist rhetoric created a climate of institutional mistrust, in which the public had a minimal level of trust in political parties, standing at an average of 3.19 out of 10 in 2016 (CIS Study 3126).

UPyD focused on proposals for state reform and a single fiscal framework. In doing so, it sought to establish itself as an alternative to PP and PSOE, but not as a replacement, which is why its anti-establishment rhetoric was more limited. With its liberal and progressive policies, it sought to attract moderate voters, predominantly from PP and PSOE. The case of Francisco Sosa Wagner had detrimental effects on UPyD (Arregui, 2014). When the vote was held in the European Parliament to elect Juncker as president, UPyD supported abstention, but Sosa and another MEP voted in favour. Furthermore, Sosa wrote an article in El Mundo in 2014 in which he mentioned that UpyD should free itself from the authoritarian practices that lurk within it and advocated an alliance with Ciudadanos (Sosa Wagner, 2014).

Parties with more robust organisational structures were more effective at mobilising voters and surviving over time (Tavits, 2013). Furthermore, the lack of a cohesive organisation is a vulnerability that can lead to the party's disintegration (Bolleyer, 2013). The Sosa case shows us that UPyD was experiencing serious internal organisational problems, with two MEPs refusing to follow orders from the national leadership—something that did not happen, for example, in PSOE and PP—projecting an image of division and conflict to the electorate, which could reduce its appeal.

UPyD's 2015 Election Manifesto contrasts with that of Podemos. Its tone is not one of 'rupture', but of 'reform' and 'regeneration'. The slogan on its front cover reads: 'Don't ask what will happen, but what you can do'. This appeals to individual responsibility, an approach very different from that of the 'people' in Podemos. One of its main topics of debate is State Reform, proposing: 'UpyD's territorial model is a cooperative federal state. This would involve the decentralisation of powers, the merger of municipalities, a rational funding system and the abolition of the Basque and Navarrese tax agreements' (UPyD Election Manifesto, 2015). In its section on Transparency and the Fight against Corruption, UPyD adopted an institutional and

legalistic approach, without resorting to the emotional language of the 'people' or linking its proposals to the 'pain' of citizens. They do so from an institutional and legalistic perspective, without attempting to connect it to the 'pain' of the public or to the idea that 'a few' have caused most of the problems.

Finally, on the economy, UPyD proposed''Reducing debt, a sustainable model of government. Superfluous spending will be cut at different levels of government: merging town councils, abolishing provincial councils, eliminating regional and municipal bodies' or 'Limiting official cars, representation allowances and mobile phones applicable to the State, the autonomous communities and local authorities'. This approach was intended to be much more technical and less radical than that of Podemos, which, for example, spoke of an increase in the minimum wage or a reduction in the working week. This approach by UPyD, more focused on state reform, may not have aligned with CIS data, which showed that unemployment was consistently one of the main concerns of Spaniards (over 80%) and corruption (around 50%), whilst territorial issues were mentioned less frequently (CIS Studies 2905 and 3057).

UPyD's discourse, which focused more on technical issues and moderation, was less likely to resonate with voters aligned with PP and PSOE. This agenda, centred on democratic renewal, sought to connect with the public's main concerns, as they felt they lacked satisfactory political alternatives. UPyD sought a different approach, adopting a more moderate tone in its discourse, focusing on the reform of the State. It also spoke of democratic regeneration. However, it sought to use descriptive adjectives, without referring to 'pain' or blaming a select few. They sought to reform the system with a more institutional discourse.

With this, we can confirm our H1: rival parties employing the dual strategy of innovation (the use of divisive issues and anti-establishment rhetoric) achieve greater success. UPyD introduced divisive issues such as democratic regeneration, but, as we have seen, it sought to avoid the use of anti-establishment rhetoric.

4.2 Vox and Ciudadanos: strategic coherence and polarisation (2016–2020)

4.2.1 Polarisation and external shocks: The context for the strategic coherence test (2016-2020)

In December 2017, Ciudadanos emerged victorious in the Catalan regional elections; however, this was not enough for the Catalan nationalists to secure an absolute majority. This positioned Ciudadanos as the main constitutionalist party in opposition to the independence movement. In June 2018, a motion of no confidence brought by PSOE against PP (due to the Gürtel ruling) made PSOE's general secretary, Pedro Sánchez, Prime Minister, with the support of Unidas Podemos, nationalist parties and pro-independence parties.

In February 2019, the 'Colón Photo' took place, in which the leaders of PP, Ciudadanos, Vox and UPyD demonstrated together against Pedro Sánchez's policies, particularly in Catalonia, and his policy on pardons. This cemented the image of

these parties as a 'right-wing bloc', which the left derisively referred to as the 'Colón Trio'. This led to greater polarisation and division between the two blocs. By 2019, the context had changed. The key factor was no longer just the economic crisis, but intense polarisation that divided the country into two opposing blocs (left versus right). Furthermore, the Catalan question had become a major divisive issue.

During this same period, Podemos was undergoing its first experience of providing parliamentary support to PSOE, whilst UPyD had drastically reduced its electoral support following its electoral collapse in 2015, when it went from over one million votes (Congreso de los Diputados, 2011) to just over 150,000 votes (Ministerio de Interior, 2015).

4.2.2 Testing H2: Strategic coherence as a predictor of long-term survival

Vox's 2015 election manifesto, entitled 'Your Voice in Parliament', adopts a more moderate and measured tone than that of 2019, yet it remains striking. Thus, on page 5, they state: 'The political regime of the 1978 State of the Autonomies is moribund and obsolete, and has fallen into widespread corruption due to its lack of values, whilst also demonstrating an unacceptable inability to resolve the current problems of an increasingly mature and demanding civil society'. They also state: 'It will tackle widespread corruption and the malfeasance of extractive oligarchies'. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that other measures were more general in nature, such as the references to national sovereignty. Furthermore, on page 10, they even mention the 15-M movement, speaking of a new electoral system: 'Blame for the enormous disconnect between the public and Parliament, publicly expressed through the phrase "they do not represent us" '.

Vox's manifesto for the 2019 general election, entitled '100 Measures for a Vibrant Spain', sought to convey clarity and resolve. By speaking of a 'Vibrant Spain', it sought to connect with a broad section of the public. In its section on Spain, Unity and Sovereignty, it mentions the 'Suspension of Catalan autonomy until the definitive defeat of the coup plotters and the clarification of civil and criminal liabilities' or 'Increased penalties for offences and insults against Spain and its symbols or emblems. No affront to them must go unpunished'. By using the words 'coup plotter' or 'unpunished', it seeks to connect emotionally with voters, attempting to portray a situation of state weakness that must be remedied. Furthermore, it mentions the 'transformation of the autonomous state into a unitary state governed by the rule of law that promotes equality and solidarity rather than privileges and division'.

The language used by Vox is reminiscent of that proposed by Podemos, in the sense of the elites who hold the privileges, whilst Vox defends equality and solidarity, that is to say, the majority. Finally, they propose a different vision of the EU, considering the suspension of the Schengen Area, something contrary to what the traditional parties propose, who advocate 'Suspending the Schengen Area until there is a European guarantee that criminals will not use it to evade justice (as the separatist coup plotters have done)' (Vox Election Manifesto, pages 2 and 3, 2019).

Data from the European Social Survey (González Enríquez and Rinken, 2021) confirmed that Vox had carved out a distinct niche: its voters were ideologically further to the right (an average of 7.15 on a scale of 10) than those of PP (6.58) and were the least supportive of immigration and the EU, demonstrating the effectiveness of its divisive themes. Vox's rhetoric, using words such as 'coup plotters', sought to generate an emotional impact on voters, attempting to project an image of a current system that is unaccountable and ineffective. This contrasts with the more technocratic and moderate rhetoric of the dominant parties, or even Ciudadanos, on these issues.

The divisive issues raised by Vox (the suspension of Catalan autonomy or the Schengen Area) were of vital importance, as they forced PP to reposition itself, presenting itself as a 'soft' party in comparison to Vox, given its more centrist stances on immigration. This helped Vox to attract voters who felt under-represented or disenchanted. Overall, the rhetoric ('enemies of Spain') and the proposed restrictions presented an image of strategic coherence.

Thanks to the role Vox played in relation to the leaders of the independence movement in Catalonia, the party achieved significant media coverage and managed to forge an image as a defender of Spain against the separatists. However, whilst Podemos advocated a federal state and Ciudadanos defended the autonomous regions, Vox promoted their dissolution and sought to consolidate the role of the national state as the governing authority (Rama *et al.*, 2021). Thus, according to CIS 2019a and CIS 2019b, Vox voters stated that the Catalan issue had been the most decisive factor in their voting decision (54.4% and 58.8%), whilst Ciudadanos voters ranked second (36.4% and 44.8%). In this way, the shift in Ciudadanos' rhetoric is reflected in the concerns of its electorate. In contrast, Vox had been advocating for the abolition of autonomy since 2015, so its stance had not changed. Not only that, but Vox spoke of a 'progressive dictatorship' (Ribera Payá and Díaz Martínez, 2020: 15), which helped to create an image of itself as a victim and that the system was against it. Thus, over time, Vox managed to shed its stigma and its image as an outcast, thanks to its prominence in the Catalan issue, which provided it with a 'reputational shield' (Rama *et al.*, 2021, p. 10).

Finally, in the 2018 Andalusian elections, they ended up backing PP against PSOE to ensure a government led by the Popular Party's leader, Juan Manuel Moreno Bonilla. Furthermore, this investiture was backed by Vox, which managed to enter a regional parliament for the first time. This led to Ciudadanos being viewed as a right-wing party. This culminated in the 'Colón photo', where Ciudadanos, Vox and PP appeared at the same event opposing Pedro Sánchez's (PSOE) government. This demonstration in February 2019 consolidated the perception of a 'right-wing bloc' and weakened Ciudadanos' image as a key party between PP and PSOE.

The Ciudadanos 2015 Election Manifesto (pages 3–4) discusses 'The reasons why the 1978 Constitution was a success', stating that 'Spain has never made such progress in civic coexistence, social welfare and openness to the world'. These words sought moderation and understanding, not populist confrontation. 'It is not a question of changing the system, but of improving how it works'. This clashes radically with the

rhetoric of Podemos and Vox, who speak of elites oppressing citizens, which is why they are at odds with the system.

However, Ciudadanos proposes reforms, not its dismantling. Its first section was entitled 'Democratic and Institutional Regeneration', which demonstrates its centrality. In its economic section, on page 23, it states: 'It is about change, about reforms. We have suffered from corruption for too many years. But it is about doing so sensibly'. In this way, it seeks to avoid populist rhetoric, appealing to moderation and a regenerative discourse. Even so, on page 58, it uses anti-establishment rhetoric: 'Ciudadanos rejects both the defeatist immobility of the right and the dirigisme of the left'. Ciudadanos voters were closer to the centre (Rama *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, they exhibited higher levels of perceived political corruption and lower levels of trust in politics than traditional PP voters (Orriols and Cordero, 2016).

This contrasts with what happened following the April 2019 elections, when Ciudadanos imposed a cordon sanitaire on PSOE and opted to govern in a majority coalition with PP, positioning it as the preferred partner for electoral pacts. For example, in Madrid (both the city and the autonomous community), Murcia and Castile and León, this left PSOE dependent on Podemos and IU, unlike, for instance, in Andalusia in 2015, where PSOE formed a pact with Ciudadanos to avoid any alliance with those affected by its identity, a decision that proved fatal. This resulted in its transformation from a key party into one aligned with PP, a move evident at the Colón demonstration. This created an inconsistency in its rhetoric, as it criticised the 'old parties', refused to facilitate a new government and competed directly with PP. Furthermore, Ciudadanos sought to be an alternative to PP and PSOE, but PP positioned itself as a more viable alternative among voters, and Vox as a more radical platform (McGovern, 2025). Furthermore, in an increasingly polarised context, its centrist and reformist rhetoric clashed with the more inflammatory rhetoric of parties such as Vox, which used stronger terms such as 'enemies of Spain' or represented the 'Spain that gets up early'. This caused deep divisions within the party, leading to the departure of Toni Roldán, Francisco de la Torre and Javier Nart (although the latter remained as an MEP). This left the progressive wing of the party feeling marginalised, and in the repeat elections of 2019, Ciudadanos plummeted from 57 seats to 10.

In Ciudadanos' election manifesto of 28 April 2019, on the front page, Article 1 adopts an aggressive tone, stating: 'We cannot continue to tolerate Torra (former president of Catalonia) and the separatists using public institutions to sow hatred and conflict amongst Catalans. We will therefore immediately propose the application of Article 155'. And it continues in Article 2: 'We will improve the instruments to protect Spaniards from *coups d'état* in the 21st century. Not a single euro of public money will be used to fund any activity linked to the separatist process'. And it continues in Article 3: 'It is unacceptable that public money should be used to fund separatist propaganda and the expenses of Puigdemont and the other ministers who have fled abroad to evade justice'. On page 2, Article 6, they continue: 'We will put an end to nationalist indoctrination in schools'. In Article 9, they state: 'We will reform the Electoral Law to make it fairer and more equitable, so that Spain does not depend on those who wish to break it up'. These proposals stand in stark contrast to Ciudadanos in 2015, when we

saw a more moderate and technocratic tone. In 2019, with the Catalan independence crisis, we see how Ciudadanos has become more radical in its rhetoric.

In November 2019, Ciudadanos' manifesto maintained a tone similar to that of April, confirming that the most significant shift in discourse occurred between 2015 and 2019, not within the election year itself. In Article 221, they propose something similar to that of April: 'We will apply Article 155 until the restoration of the Constitution in Catalonia is guaranteed, to ensure security and peaceful coexistence among all Catalans, as well as respect for the law and court rulings. We cannot continue to tolerate Torra and the separatists using public institutions to sow hatred and confrontation amongst Catalans. We will immediately re-establish control over the Generalitat's accounts. We will ensure that not a single euro of public money is used to fund any activity linked to the separatist process'. And in Article 222, 'We will improve the instruments to protect Spaniards from coup d'états in the 21st century'. As we can see, the tone and form between April and November 2019 are similar in state measures, indicating that the most significant change occurred in comparison with 2015, not in 2019.

In Ciudadanos's election manifesto, we find proposal number 25: 'Greater police presence on the streets to combat rising insecurity', number 27: 'Repeat offenders will go to prison' and, finally, number 35: 'A single education system, not 17'. However, we observe substantial differences in tone and style between Ciudadanos and Vox. The latter party used terms that resonated emotionally with the electorate, such as 'unpunished' or 'criminals'. We see that Ciudadanos adopts a more moderate tone and puts forward more moderate proposals. These are the proposals of a traditional governing party, not of an opposition party seeking to break with the system.

Whilst Ciudadanos sent mixed signals to the electorate—such as vetoing PSOE and proclaiming itself a regenerative force, whilst simultaneously blocking the formation of a new government—Vox sent a clearer and more radical message. This message resonated with an increasingly polarised electorate that valued real alternatives to traditional parties. Thus, within the context of left- and right-wing blocs, a party that neither defined itself nor was seen as a viable option

viable option among voters was perceived as unreliable and irrelevant. This comparison highlights the importance of employing not only a dual innovation strategy, but also maintaining strategic consistency.

To test our H2, we will present our empirical evidence. In its 2015 manifesto, Vox described the '1978 autonomous regional political regime' as 'moribund and obsolete'. It pledged to tackle the 'widespread corruption and embezzlement of funds by extractive oligarchies'. In its 2019 manifesto, which it repeated in both elections, Vox proposed the 'suspension of Catalan autonomy until the coup d'état is decisively defeated'. Furthermore, as a divisive issue, it proposed the 'suspension of the Schengen Area' until it is guaranteed that it will not be used 'by criminals to evade justice (as the separatist coup plotters have done)'. Furthermore, the European Social Survey placed its voters further to the right, with an average of 7.15 out of 10, with its voters being the least supportive of immigration and the EU. In this way, they maintained

consistency between the divisive issues they raised and the demands of their voters. Not only that, but since the inauguration of PP leader in Andalusia in 2018, Juan Manuel Moreno Bonilla, they have systematically supported PP and Ciudadanos governments in Madrid, Castile and León, and Murcia through pacts and alliances, demonstrating their resounding rejection of the left.

In 2015, Ciudadanos cited the 'reasons for the success of the 1978 Constitution' and sought a tone of 'moderation and understanding'. Their aim was to reform the system, not to abolish it. They therefore sought to be an alternative to PP and PSOE. In 2019, their tone changed: 'We will no longer tolerate public institutions being used to sow hatred' or 'Let's put an end to indoctrination'. This shift occurred mainly between 2015 and 2019, whilst the 2019 elections remained similar. This demonstrates an inconsistency in their actions. In 2015, Ciudadanos reached an agreement with PSOE to allow Susana Díaz to govern, but in 2019 it promoted a cordon sanitaire around PSOE and favoured PP as its preferred partner. Participation in the 'Colón demonstration' in February 2019 alongside Vox and PP cemented the perception of a right-wing bloc. This had organisational consequences, causing internal rifts and the resignations of Toni Roldán and Francisco de la Torre. Consequently, Ciudadanos went from 57 seats in April 2019 to 10 in November 2019. Vox, for its part, went from 24 to 52, achieving its best-ever result.

The difference between the trajectories of Vox and Ciudadanos between 2015 and 2019 shows how divergences in strategic coherence translate into different electoral results. To systematise this comparison and demonstrate the empirical power of our framework, we present below a structured analysis that evaluates both parties across the three dimensions of coherence (see Table II).

TABLE II: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF STRATEGIC COHERENCE EUROPEAN IMPLICATIONS AND TRANSNATIONAL LESSONS

Análisis comparativo de la coherencia estratégica (Vox vs. Ciudadanos, 2015-2019)

Dimensión	VOX	Ciudadanos
1. Coherencia discursiva	Alta: El discurso de 2019 es una radicalización consistente de la crítica antiautonómica ya presente en 2015.	Baja: Cambio radical de un discurso centrista y reformista ("mejorar el sistema") en 2015 a un discurso de bloque de derechas y confrontación en 2019.
2. Coherencia de acción	Alta: Rechazo consistente a los pactos con la izquierda y apoyo excluzivo a gobiernos de derecha desde su aparición.	Baja: Cambio en los socios preferidos, del pacto de 2015/16 con el PSOE al "cordon sanitario" de 2019 y la "foto de Colón" con la derecha.
3. Coherencia programática	Alto: Las propuestas clave sobre la unidad nacional, la inmigración y la UE en 2019 son una evolución lógica y más dura de su plataforma original.	Bajo: El enfoque de linea dura sobre Cataluña en el programa de 2019 contradice la imagen moderada y de "búsqueda de consenso" proyectada en 2015

5 European implications and transnational lessons

The dynamics of strategic coherence identified in the Spanish case are not unique to the Iberian Peninsula, but rather reflect broader patterns of behaviour among rival parties in European democracies facing similar structural pressures. The post-2008 crisis period generated similar opportunities for political entrepreneurship in southern Europe, providing multiple testing grounds for assessing how strategic coherence affects the long-term survival of parties and democratic stability. Syriza's trajectory in Greece offers a particularly illustrative contrast to the Spanish cases. Initially coherent in its anti-austerity message and consistent in its rejection of the Troika's policies, Syriza achieved spectacular electoral success. However, the impact of government forced the party into strategic incoherence as it had to implement the very austerity measures against which it had campaigned. This shift from coherent opposition to incoherent governance illustrates how external pressures can force rival parties to abandon their identity, which ultimately leads to electoral decline and democratic fragmentation. In this way, these parties lose their identity and may be challenged by dominant parties, which can argue that their opponents make mistakes and are not superior, seeking a position of equilibrium.

The pattern of strategic incoherence observed in rival parties in southern Europe has broader implications for democratic resilience. When rival parties lack strategic coherence, they become sources of systemic volatility rather than channels for democratic renewal. This creates a paradox: the very parties that emerge to address democratic deficits may exacerbate political instability through their inconsistent behaviour. This pattern can generate deep political disaffection across various sections of the electorate. For example, in the 2015 general election, Podemos secured a fifth of the votes that had been cast as abstentions in 2011 (Orriols and Cordero, 2016). However, since 2016, its share of the vote has repeatedly declined.

This may result in these parties failing to fully address democratic deficits and creating new challenges among voters due to instability and strategic inconsistency. There are several patterns of strategic incoherence to consider: discrepancies between the party's message and its actions, sudden shifts in messaging, unexpected changes in alliances, varying electoral pacts, and internal party fractures and divisions. These indicators could help identify when rival parties are shifting from being agents of democratic renewal to sources of systemic instability. The case of Podemos in government offers a particularly clear example of how external pressures can generate strategic incoherence. The upheaval of governing in a coalition created an irreconcilable tension between the party's original aim of representing anti-establishment sentiment and its new objective of maintaining a stable governing alliance.

6 From the lessons of the Spanish case to European applications: A set of predictive tools for political risk

The pattern of Ciudadanos (high coherence → incoherence → collapse) compared to Vox (sustained coherence → consolidation) allows us to establish that strategic

coherence predicts not only electoral survival, but also its impact on the stability of the system. The case of Ciudadanos was no coincidence, but a specific process: first, it achieved initial consistency (2015–2017), during which it established itself as a pivotal party between PSOE and PP, enabling it to make electoral gains. Subsequently, the shocking motion of no confidence (June 2018) → veto by PSOE → Andalusian elections (December 2018) → PP-Ciudadanos pact → 'Colón Photo' (February 2019) → electoral collapse (November 2019) forced it to make decisions that altered its original image, resulting in systemic incoherence that led to its electoral failure in November 2019.

The case of Ciudadanos allows us to create a predictive model: when rival parties face external shocks that force them to choose between their original image and their power objectives, strategic coherence predicts whether they will survive this tension. Vox strengthened its coherence due to the Catalan crisis, and PSOE government maintained its anti-establishment rhetoric against left-wing and pro-independence parties. Ciudadanos lost its original identity when it had to abandon its centrist stance and was forced to form a pact with PP.

This predictive capacity is valuable for assessing democratic risks, as it predicts not only electoral outcomes but also the risks to the democratic stability of the system. A distinction can be made between parties' temporary tactical adjustments and actions that do not entail a significant change from their original proposals. For example, Vox's abstention in votes on PP motions sends a message to its electorate that it does not always support the party, but rather represents a temporary shift in certain circumstances.

Democratic renewal refers to when rival parties channel discontent through institutional mechanisms, maintaining strategic coherence. Systemic fragmentation occurs when incoherent parties generate electoral volatility without offering stable alternatives. In this way, we can distinguish between contending parties that contribute to democratic renewal and those that generate fragmentation of the system. For example, Podemos (2014–2016) initially represented democratic renewal, channelling the discontent of the 15-M movement towards electoral participation, maintaining consistency in its anti-austerity discourse and finally entering into a coalition with PSOE in 2020. Ciudadanos (2018–2019) represented systemic fragmentation; its strategic inconsistency caused polarisation by failing to offer a stable alternative, which led to greater electoral volatility.

A party's strategic coherence becomes more predictive depending on its life cycle. During the initial phases of growth, structural factors such as economic or social crises may be more important than strategic coherence. Thus, rival parties find ways to penetrate the system through their message during times of structural crisis such as COVID-19 or the 2008 economic crisis. However, once rival parties have secured significant representation, strategic coherence becomes one of the key factors in understanding long-term survival. This threshold is reached when parties have secured national representation in two consecutive elections, demonstrating organisational consolidation and institutional integration.

There are operational indicators and implementation criteria.

- Firstly, discursive coherence: establishing specific metrics to measure narrative coherence. For example, the frequency of references to 'elite vs. the people', the stability of key divisive issues, and consistency in the use of anti-establishment rhetoric across different electoral platforms. This can be observed with Vox between 2015 and 2019, where it systematically referred to 'coup plotters' and 'enemies of Spain', whilst Ciudadanos shifted from moderate rhetoric in 2015 to a more aggressive discourse in 2019. For example, when a party increases its anti-establishment references by more than 30% between consecutive electoral platforms, this may serve as an early warning sign. This figure indicates a significant change over a short period of time, which may signal a fundamental departure from the party's brand.
- Secondly, consistency of action: Developing criteria to assess the alignment between discourse and strategic decisions. The case of Ciudadanos offers an example of inconsistency of action. Its brand was based on maintaining an equal distance from PSOE and PP. If it took actions that contradicted this equidistance, this could constitute a potential inconsistency. The sequence veto→alliance→photo demonstrates how the accumulation of decisions can systematically undermine a party's founding identity. Changes in alliances that directly contradict founding positions are likely to carry more weight than political commitments within ideological boundaries. Furthermore, there is a timeframe of between 12 and 18 months, as observed in the case of Ciudadanos, which can be generalised as the minimum period required to suggest a contradiction.
- Thirdly, programmatic consistency: creating protocols to track the evolution of fundamental political proposals. Whilst Vox maintained consistent anti-establishment proposals between 2015 and 2019, Ciudadanos shifted from moderation to radicalisation, laying the groundwork for the creation of protocols. A right-wing party such as Vox has core issues centred on immigration or nationalism, very different from those raised by left-wing parties such as Podemos, which focuses more on economic and social discourse, such as the reduction of the working week. To distinguish between political evolution and contradictions that undermine fundamental positioning, it is established that changes to policy proposals should not exceed 25%.
- Fourthly, risk level typology: Develop a risk scale (low/moderate/high) based on the degrees of inconsistency observed. This allows for a systematic prospective assessment. Thus, for parties in a breakaway phase (0–2 national elections).

Based on the empirical analysis of the cases studied, we propose the following weightings:

- Discursive coherence: 50% (most visible to the electorate)
- Programmatic consistency: 35% (defines differentiation)
- Consistency of action: 15% (they have few opportunities to act)

For established parties (3 or more national elections):

- Consistency of action: 45% (their decisions have real consequences)

– Discursive coherence: 30% (they already have an established brand)
– Programmatic consistency: 25% (expected natural evolution)

Therefore, to calculate the final score across the three dimensions, we would use: Total strategic coherence = (Discourse coherence × weighting) + (Action coherence × weighting) + (Programmatic coherence × weighting). We present the example of Ciudadanos in July 2018: Discursive coherence: 0.7 (moderate changes), Action coherence: 0.5 (PSOE's veto contradicts the policy of neutrality), Programmatic coherence: 0.8 (few changes so far). Total score: 0.64 = Moderate risk.

The practical application of the proposed framework can be seen in the Democratic Risk Assessment Matrix (see Table III), which allows qualitative observations to be converted into quantitative scores. This matrix not only applies different weightings depending on the party's stage of development, but also establishes specific thresholds that enable crises of credibility to be anticipated with temporal precision.

TABLE III: LEVEL OF CONSISTENCY OF ACTION



Based on the patterns observed in the cases analysed, we will establish the following indicative thresholds:

Low Risk Level (Score 0.8–1.0): The party maintains consistency across all dimensions. Variations of less than 15% in discursive metrics, with no significant programmatic contradictions and consistency between discourse and actions.

Moderate Risk Level (Score 0.6–0.79): Inconsistencies appear in one dimension. For example, changes of 15–30% in anti-establishment references or initial decisions that contradict the founding discourse.

High Risk Level (Score 0.4–0.59): Systematic inconsistency across two dimensions. The case of Ciudadanos in June 2018 would be as follows: discursive shift + contradictory decisions.

Risk of Collapse (Score <0.4): Deterioration across all three dimensions simultaneously. Ciudadanos in February 2019 exemplifies this level.

Finally, we have the Operational Monitoring Protocol:

Critical assessment points: Immediately after elections, during major political crises, before forming coalitions, and every six months during periods of stability.

Trigger indicators: When a rival party changes allies, when there are significant deficiencies within the party, when positions on key issues shift, or when major external shocks occur.

The mechanisms described remain in force in various European countries. Our framework transcends European institutional differences and retains its predictive power. This is due to universal psychological and cognitive mechanisms that operate independently of the specific political context. Power is therefore based on three cognitive processes that operate regularly in European democracies.

Firstly, discursive coherence: Voters' processing of cognitive coherence. Human beings, regardless of their culture or beliefs, seek a psychological need for coherence. When a party promises a policy during a campaign but fails to deliver on it, it creates a cognitive debt with voters. This is independent of whether the electoral system is proportional or first-past-the-post, as coherence is reduced.

Secondly, consistency of action: The building of trust based on predictability. Voters develop trust in political parties based on their past actions. As Ciudadanos shifted from forming a pact with PSOE and PP to forming a pact with PP, the predictability of Ciudadanos' actions diminished. This works in the same way in other countries, as voters want to be able to predict what parties will do.

Thirdly, the perception of authenticity versus betrayal: Rival parties build their image by trying to be 'different' and 'authentic'.

When they fail to deliver on these promises, mechanisms of betrayal are triggered among voters, which may remind them that these parties are not so different from the traditional ones. This can be seen in the reaction of Syriza's Greek voters to the austerity measures imposed by their parties.

In systems with greater tolerance for political ambiguity, the thresholds are adjusted by multiplying them by a factor of 0.8.

In more confrontational cultures, the reference thresholds are maintained.

This allows threats to democratic stability to be identified and monitored in their early stages, when the capacity to prevent them is still effective. The transferability of this framework to different European institutional contexts makes it a standardised tool for comparative risk assessment, enabling a distinction to be drawn between normal electoral shifts and genuine systemic deterioration. In a European context

where rival parties are gaining increasing support and popularity, this framework provides the analytical basis necessary to distinguish agents of democratic renewal from potential sources of systemic fragmentation.

7 Conclusions

This article has analysed the different trajectories of four challenging Spanish parties between 2012 and 2020, identifying the factors that explain their divergent electoral results and their impact on democratic stability and the institutional system.

With regard to H1, the analysis of Podemos and UPyD confirms that parties which effectively apply the dual innovation strategy achieve significant electoral support. Podemos connected with citizens' main concerns, including the fight against corruption, mobilising abstentionist voters. UPyD opted for a more technical discourse, which garnered some support initially but did not resonate with the same intensity among a deeply disenchanted electorate.

Regarding H2, the comparison between Vox and Ciudadanos has shown that strategic consistency predicts long-term consolidation.

Vox maintained consistency between its discourse, proposals and alliances. Ciudadanos broke with its founding principles, shifting from centrism and political balance to an alignment closer to the right, which led to its electoral collapse between April and November 2019.

These results have implications beyond the specific Spanish case analysed. The proposed predictive framework, based on three dimensions of coherence and early warning thresholds, offers a replicable tool for assessing political risk in European democracies facing similar crises and pressures.

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