



Scientific report

Impact of legal punishment of nationalist political leaders on social polarization

A longitudinal study on the effects of the Oct 14th court ruling against Catalan Independentist leaders

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Table of contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
Methods	5
Design.....	5
Sample.....	5
Procedure.....	5
Analyses	7
Results.....	8
Assessment of the court ruling.....	8
Support for independence and Sacred Values	10
Social closeness, essentialism and identity fusion measures	10
Action measures.....	11
Measures that did not change in time	12
Factors boosting the increase in action measures	14
Factors boosting the drop in social closeness	15
Effect of the experimental condition.....	16
Discussion	17
References	18

Executive Summary

The conflict over Catalan independence in Spain has a long history dating back to the 19th century. However, political events in recent years have built momentum, culminating in the October 1st referendum on Catalan independence in 2017 where over 2 million people participated. This referendum was in violation of the Spanish constitution, leading to arrests of Independentist politicians. After a long trial, a court ruling was announced in October 14th, 2019 sentencing 9 independentist leaders held responsible for the vote, each receiving 9 to 13 years in prison. Catalan independentist organizations called for protests during several days, which included 8000 people occupying the airport for more than 8 hours.

Here we present the results of a longitudinal study measuring social fragmentation and radicalism in a representative sample of 808 Catalan respondents before and after the announcement of the court ruling. In addition, a cross-sectional condition was added in the baseline measure, with half of participants completing a “parochial threat” condition, involving non-violent images on the conflict over Catalan sovereignty and the other half undergoing a “universal threat” condition, including images relating to climate change.

An increase in social polarization was found between Catalans and the rest of Spaniards, partly driven by perceived threat posed by the Spanish government, regardless of the political position on Catalan independence. In addition, independence supporters perceived increasing social polarization within Catalonia, increasing the distance between independence supporters and non-supporters. Moreover, the number of Catalans who considered independence sacred increased after the court ruling was announced. This came hand in hand with increased behavioral intentions to engage in violent and non-violent political action, which was influenced independently by increased value sacredness of Catalan independence, exposure to police violence, involvement in activism and participation in the Oct 1st, 2017 illegal referendum. In addition, we found a trend replicating the longitudinal findings (before and after the court ruling) cross-sectionally by comparing the “parochial threat” and “universal threat” conditions.

These findings contribute to understanding of how perceived threat to national identity by means of legal punishment leads to social fragmentation and polarization of political positions in the context of an ongoing conflict.

Introduction

The Catalan independence movement in Spain dates back to the 19th century, with modest but fluctuating support depending on the economic and political circumstances. Over the last decade, in parallel to the 2008 economic crisis, support for Catalan independence has increased dramatically, from 12.9% in 2005 to 57% at its highest in 2012, stabilizing around 43% in the last years (Baròmetre d'Opinió Pública, Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió). Many attribute this increase to the rejection of the approved statute of autonomy (in essence, a Catalan constitution) by the Spanish Constitutional Court after an appeal of the Conservative Party in 2010 (Ruiz Valdivia, 2016), an event that was followed by annual massive pro-Independence protests. These events culminated in the October 1st referendum on Catalan independence in 2017, which was deemed illegal by the Spanish Constitutional Court. Over two million Catalans voted that day, though not without facing the consequences: 10.000 national security agents were deployed in Catalonia in order to prevent the referendum (García, 2017) resulting in more than a thousand injured civilians (Benito, 2017). Due to the unconstitutional nature of the referendum, the independentist political leaders in the Catalan government were prosecuted for rebellion and sedition. The court ruling was announced in October 14th, 2019 sentencing 7 independentist political leaders and 2 activist leaders to between 9 and 13 years each in prison and general disqualification for sedition and embezzlement. Catalan independentist organizations, including *Tsunami Democràtic* and the CDRs (*Comitès de Defensa de la República*) called for protests on several days which included the occupation of the airport for over 10 hours by more than 8000 people and the shutdown of the border crossing to France.

A longitudinal study was conducted on social fragmentation and polarization in a representative sample of Catalan respondents before and after the announcement of the October 14th court ruling that sentenced Independentist leaders to prison. In addition, a cross-sectional condition was added in the baseline survey, with half of participants being exposed to non-violent images on the conflict over Catalan independence (“parochial threat”) and the other half exposed to unrelated threatening images, for instance relating to climate change (“universal threat”).

We expected an increase social polarization between Catalans and the rest of Spain, as well as between Catalan independence supporters and non-supporters after the court ruling. In addition, we predicted intentions to take part in violent (radicalism) and non-violent (activism) political action as well as support for self-organized civil disobedience to increase, especially in independence supporters. Finally, we expected to replicate the longitudinal effects (before and

after the court ruling) cross-sectionally by comparing the “parochial threat” versus the “universal threat” experimental condition, with less pronounced effect sizes.

Methods

Design

The present longitudinal experimental design includes two waves of surveys administered online before and after the announcement of the Oct 14th, 2019 court ruling sentencing 9 Catalan Independentist political and activist leaders to 9 to 13 years in prison for the events occurred during the illegal Oct 1st vote in 2017. Wave 1 was conducted between October 1st and October 7th, and Wave 2 was launched on October 14th, several hours after the announcement of the court ruling, and it remained open until October 21st. A cross-sectional experimental condition was added in Wave 1, with half of the sample being presented a “Parochial threat” condition and the other half a “Universal threat” condition.

Sample

Thousand and seventy participants were interviewed by means of an online survey, of which N = 808 completed the second wave survey. The sample was representative of the Catalan population in terms of age, gender and province. 34% of the sample were Catalan independence supporters, 21% supported federalism, 27% agreed with the status quo (“Comunidad Autónoma”, here: Autonomous Community) and 11% wished Catalonia to become a centralized Spanish region. These percentages closely reflect those in other national polls (Baròmetre. Centre d’Estudis d’Opinió, 2019).

Procedure

All participants provided written informed consent before taking part in the study. At the start of Wave 1 half of the sample was presented a “Parochial threat” condition: three pictures relating to events where the Spanish government intervened in political activity in Catalonia either using force or legal procedures, against the popular will of Catalans. These consisted of Franco’s forces taking former Catalan president Lluís Companys to be executed in 1940, the removal of ballot boxes by police during the October 1st referendum for Independence in 2017, and the (then ongoing) trial against the 9 independentist political and activist leaders. The other half of the sample was exposed to a “Universal threat” manipulation, consisting of pictures of environmental pollution, desertification, and climate-action protest (specifically, the *Fridays for Future* protest). None of the

pictures showed any violence in order to prevent confounding of our dependent measures related to violent intent. The experimental conditions were assigned randomly. After seeing the three pictures, participants were asked to identify what the pictures have in common. They also indicated to what extent they found those pictures concerning.

The following measures were used longitudinally as part of both Wave 1 and Wave 2 surveys. Participants were asked about their preference on Catalonia's relationship with Spain ("Region of Spain", "Autonomous community," "Federal state," or "Independent state"). For those who supported Catalan independence, two tradeoff questions were asked in order to identify whether Catalan independence was held as a sacred value: "Would you be willing to compromise on independence if all the economic grievances of Catalonia against the Spanish government were met?" and "Would you be willing to compromise on independence if there was a great benefit to all Catalans (e.g. economic growth, more jobs, better schools and infrastructure)?" Catalan independence was considered sacred if participants refused both tradeoffs.

A series of social closeness measures followed based on two circles of equal size with varying degrees of overlap (1 to 5 scale), including social closeness between Catalans and the rest of Spaniards, and between Catalan supporters and non-supporters of independence. Identity fusion with Europe was also measured by means of a small circle representing the self and a big circle representing Europe, with varying degrees of overlap (1 to 5 scale) (Gómez et al., 2011).

Perceived group norms were assessed by asking to what extent did participants believe Catalans would approve of a person risking losing their job, going to prison and fighting and dying for Catalans' legal and political rights (1 to 5 scale) (Sheikh et al., *in preparation*). The three items were averaged into a composite score of "Community Approval" (Cronbach's alpha = 0.84). Participants' own feelings and perceived Catalans' feelings towards the rest of Spaniards were measured from "Very warm or favorable feelings" up to "Very cold or unfavorable feelings" (1 to 5 scale).

Intention to engage in political action was assessed using the Activism and Radicalism Intention scale (ARIS) (Moskalenko and McCauley, 2009) adapted to the Catalan population, including questions such as "I would join an organization that fights for Catalan political and legal rights" up to "I would attack police or security forces if I saw them beating a Catalan" (1 to 5 scale). In addition, a specific question on support for CDRs ("Comités de Defensa de la República"), civil platforms that emerged in 2017 in order to push for the creation of an independent Catalan republic by means of civil disobedience, was added ("I will support CDRs resistance if Spain refuses to negotiate with Catalonia."). As expected, an explorative factor analysis of the ARIS scale revealed two factors, explaining 75% of the variance: items involving non-violent actions (Cronbach's alpha = 0.94) and

items involving violence (Cronbach's alpha = 0.84). Thus, two composite scores were created by averaging the respective items ("Activism" and "Radicalism").

Perceived group threat was measured by means of four items ("I believe that Spain forcibly occupies Catalonia", "Spain exploits Catalunya for money", "The survival of the Catalan culture is under constant threat by Spain", and "Catalunya cannot trust Spain, history bears witness", scales from 1 to 5), which were combined into a single "Perceived threat" measure (Cronbach's alpha = 0.94).

Involvement in activism in support of Catalan political and legal rights was measured by means of two items ("Have you participated in demonstrations in support of Catalan political and legal rights?" and "Are you a member of any organization that fights for Catalan political and legal rights?", responded with Yes/No), combined within an Involvement in Activism categorical variable with three levels (0 = "Non-activist", 1 = "Protester" and 2 = "Activist group member"). Past participation in the Oct 1st, 2017 illegal referendum was also registered.

Exposure to police violence was measured with two items ("Have you directly experienced/witnessed police violence while participating in demonstrations or events in support for Catalan political and legal rights?", responded with Yes/No), combined within an Exposure to police violence categorical variable with three levels (0 = "Non-exposed", 1 = "Witnessed violence" and 2 = "Experienced violence").

Finally, three single-item measures were added at the end of the survey, including Essentialism ("Being Catalan is something very fundamental that cannot be acquired.", 1 to 5 agreement scale), change in judgement in the face of evidence of pro-Independence fake news ("My support for an independent Catalonia would lessen if there were clear evidence that Russia was actively spreading false information in support of independence, including on matters I believed in, in order to help break up the EU", 1 to 5 agreement scale) and support for other independence movements across Europe ("I believe that other independence movements in Europe should be able to break free of the nations that contain them, such as the Basque separatist movement in Spain and France, the Flemish and Walloon nationalist movements in Belgium, and the Padanian (Northern League) separatist movement in Italy", 1 to 5 agreement scale).

Analyses

A series of linear mixed-effects models were conducted to test the effect of time (before and after the court ruling) on social closeness measures (between Catalans and rest of Spaniards, and between Catalan independence supporters and non-supporters), identity fusion with Europe,

essentialism, perceived threat, social approval of enduring personal costs, feelings towards the rest of Spaniards, change in judgement in response to pro-independence fake news and support for other European independence movements, and controlling for desired relationship with Spain and experimental condition.

In addition, further linear mixed-effects models were run to assess the effect of time (before and after the court ruling) on action measures such as radicalism, activism, support for CDRs, controlling for desired relationship with Spain, experimental condition, previous involvement in activism, exposure to police violence, gender and age.

In order to evaluate the effect of time (before and after the court ruling) on independence as a sacred value, a generalized linear mixed-effects model was fitted controlling for the effects of desired relationship with Spain and experimental condition.

The interaction effect of time (before and after the court ruling) and, respectively, independence as a sacred value, exposure to police violence, previous involvement on activism and participation on the October 1st vote was assessed both on radicalism and activism by means of further linear mixed-effects models, in order to identify which factors contributed to change in these variables. These analyses accounted for the covariance of desired relationship with Spain, experimental condition, previous involvement in activism, gender and age.

Finally, a series of linear mixed-effects model was conducted assessing the interaction between time and the experimental condition on radicalism, activism and social closeness measures controlling for desired relationship with Spain, gender and age.

Results

Assessment of the court ruling

The court ruling sentenced 7 independentist political leaders and 2 activist leaders to 9 to 13 years in prison for sedition and embezzlement in relationship to the October 1st, 2017 illegal vote for Independence, a ruling that was considered fair by only 13% of the sample. More than half of the sample (52%) - and almost all participants (96%) supporting Catalan independence - thought that independentists leaders should be set free, 19% that the sentence should have been softer, and 12% that it should have been harder or much harder. There was a relationship between participants' opinion on the court ruling and their desired relationship with Spain (χ^2 (df = 20) = 585.5, $p < .001$, see Figure 1A). In addition, there was an effect of positive and negative emotions

on participant's opinion on the court ruling (Positive emotions: $B = -0.31$, $SE = 0.03$, $t(719) = -9.52$, $p < .001$; Negative emotions: $B = 0.15$, $SE = 0.03$, $t(719) = 4.71$, $p < .001$), even after controlling for relationship with Spain (see Figure 1B).



Figure 1. Assessment of the court ruling: (A) relationship between participants' opinion on the court ruling and their desired relationship with Spain, **(B)** relationship between positive and negative emotion scores and opinion on court ruling.

Support for independence and Sacred Values

Positions regarding Catalonia’s relationship with Spain did not change before and after the court ruling. However, Catalonia’s independence as a Sacred value (resistance to material trade-offs) was more frequent after the court ruling, increasing from 16% to 21%, even after controlling for participants’ desired relationship with Spain ($B = 0.72$, $SE = 0.26$, $Z = 2.79$, $p = 0.005$, see Figure 2).

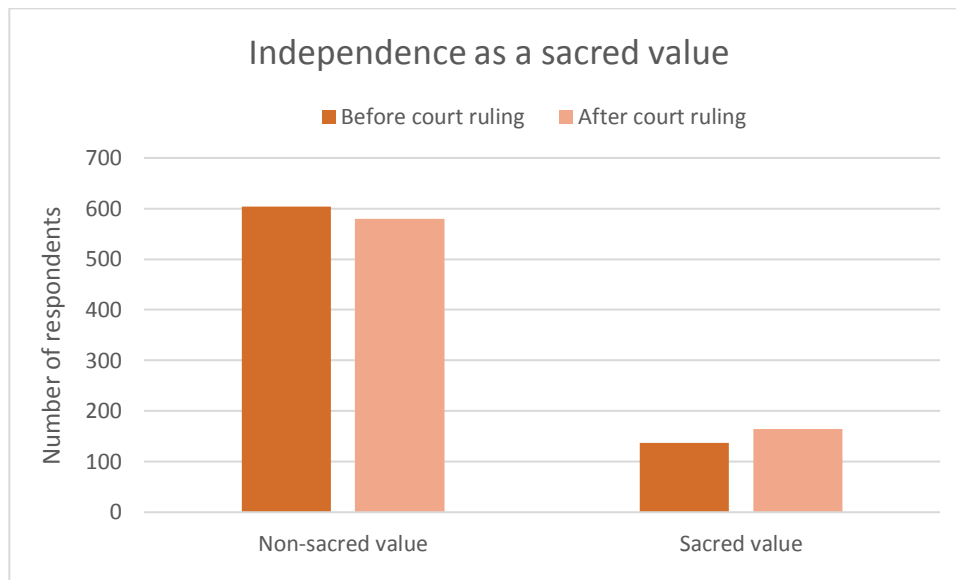


Figure 2. Changes in independence as a sacred value: Participants holding Independence as a sacred value increased after the court ruling.

Social closeness, essentialism and identity fusion measures

Social closeness between Catalans and Spaniards dropped after the court ruling ($B = -0.13$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = -3.01$, $p < 0.01$, see Figure 3A), even after controlling for desired relationship with Spain and experimental condition. Moreover, social closeness between Catalan independence supporters and non-supporters increased after the court ruling ($B = 0.42$, $SE = 0.14$, $t = 3.04$, $p < 0.01$), with supporters of the current Autonomous Community status experiencing a lower increase ($B = -0.34$, $SE = 0.16$, $t = -2.08$, $p < 0.05$) and independence supporters experiencing an actual decrease compared to other groups ($B = -0.50$, $SE = 0.15$, $t = -3.27$, $p < 0.001$, see Figure 3B). In addition, identity fusion with Europe showed a decrease in independence supporters after the court ruling ($B = -0.27$, $SE = 0.16$, $t = -1.66$, $p < 0.05$, see Figure 3C). Finally, essentialism decreased across groups ($B = -0.12$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = -2.41$, $p < 0.01$), with independence supporters and federalism supporters experiencing milder decreases (Indep.: $B = 0.77$, $SE = 0.13$, $t = 5.95$, $p < 0.001$; Federal.: $B = 0.30$, $SE = 0.13$, $t = 2.26$, $p < 0.05$, see Figure 3D).

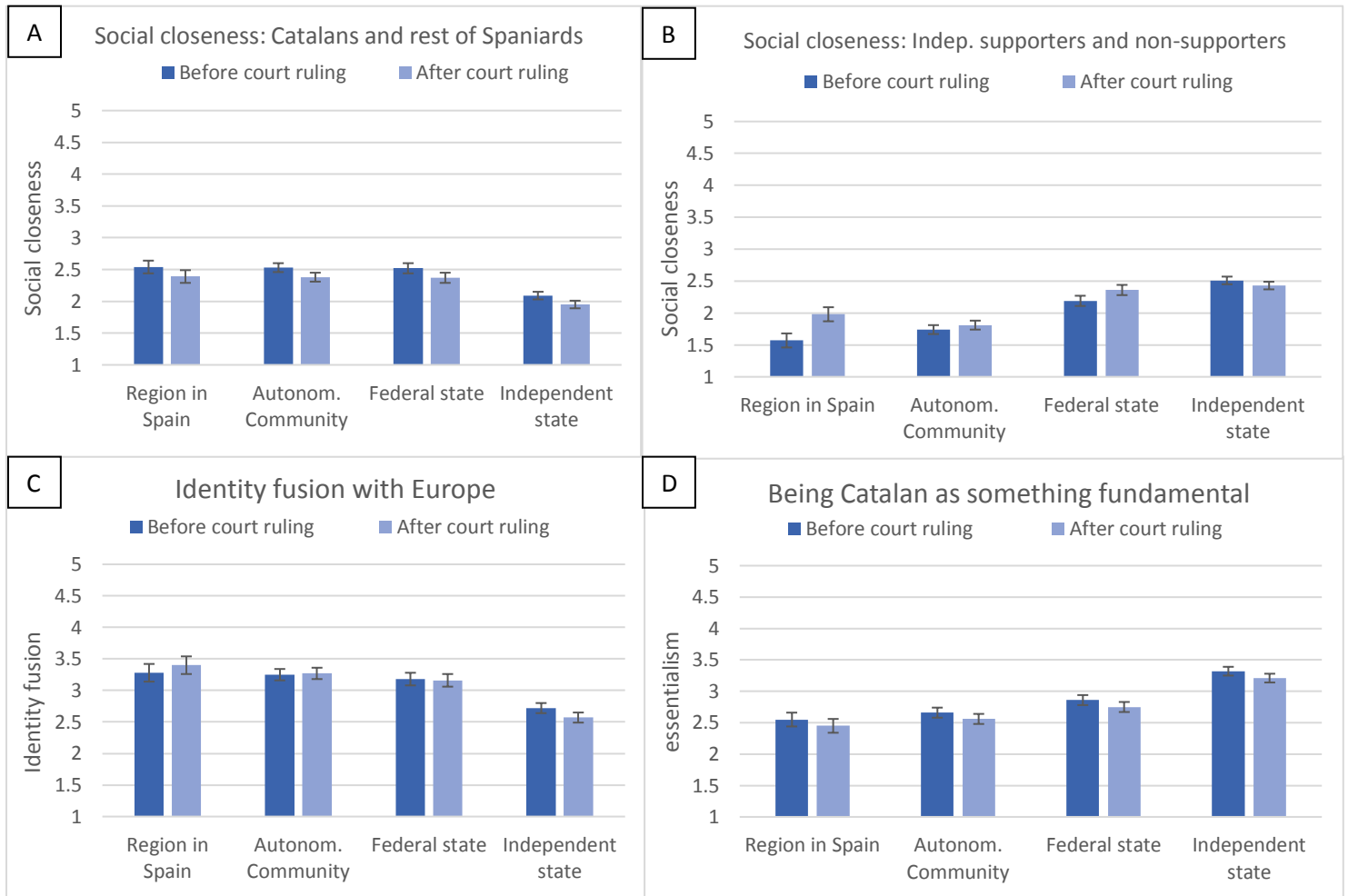


Figure 3. Changes in social closeness and identity fusion measures: (A) Social closeness between Catalans and the rest of Spaniards decreased across groups after the court ruling, **(B)** social closeness between independence supporters and non-supporters increased across groups except from independence supporters, who showed a decrease in this measure, **(C)** a trend towards significance was found in the identity fusion with Europe measure, with independence supporters experiencing a decrease compared to the rest of the groups, **(D)** essentialism dropped after the court ruling, with milder decreases in independence and federalism supporters.

Action measures

Radicalism increased across groups ($B = 0.12$, $SE = 0.03$, $t = 3.70$, $p < 0.001$), while it was overall higher in independence supporters ($B = 0.70$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = 7.22$, $p < 0.001$, see Figure 4A). Activism increased across groups ($B = 0.08$, $SE = 0.03$, $t = 2.48$, $p < 0.01$) and was overall higher in independence supporters ($B = 1.52$, $SE = 0.10$, t value = 15.45, $p < 0.001$), and federalism supporters ($B = 0.42$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = 4.23$, $p < 0.001$, see Figure 4B). Finally, support for CDRs increased across groups ($B = 0.08$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 2.21$, $p < 0.05$), and was overall higher in independence supporters

($B = 1.79$, $SE = 0.11$, $t = 16.32$, $p < 0.001$, see Figure 4C). All the action measures' analyses controlled for age, gender, experimental condition and past exposure to violence.

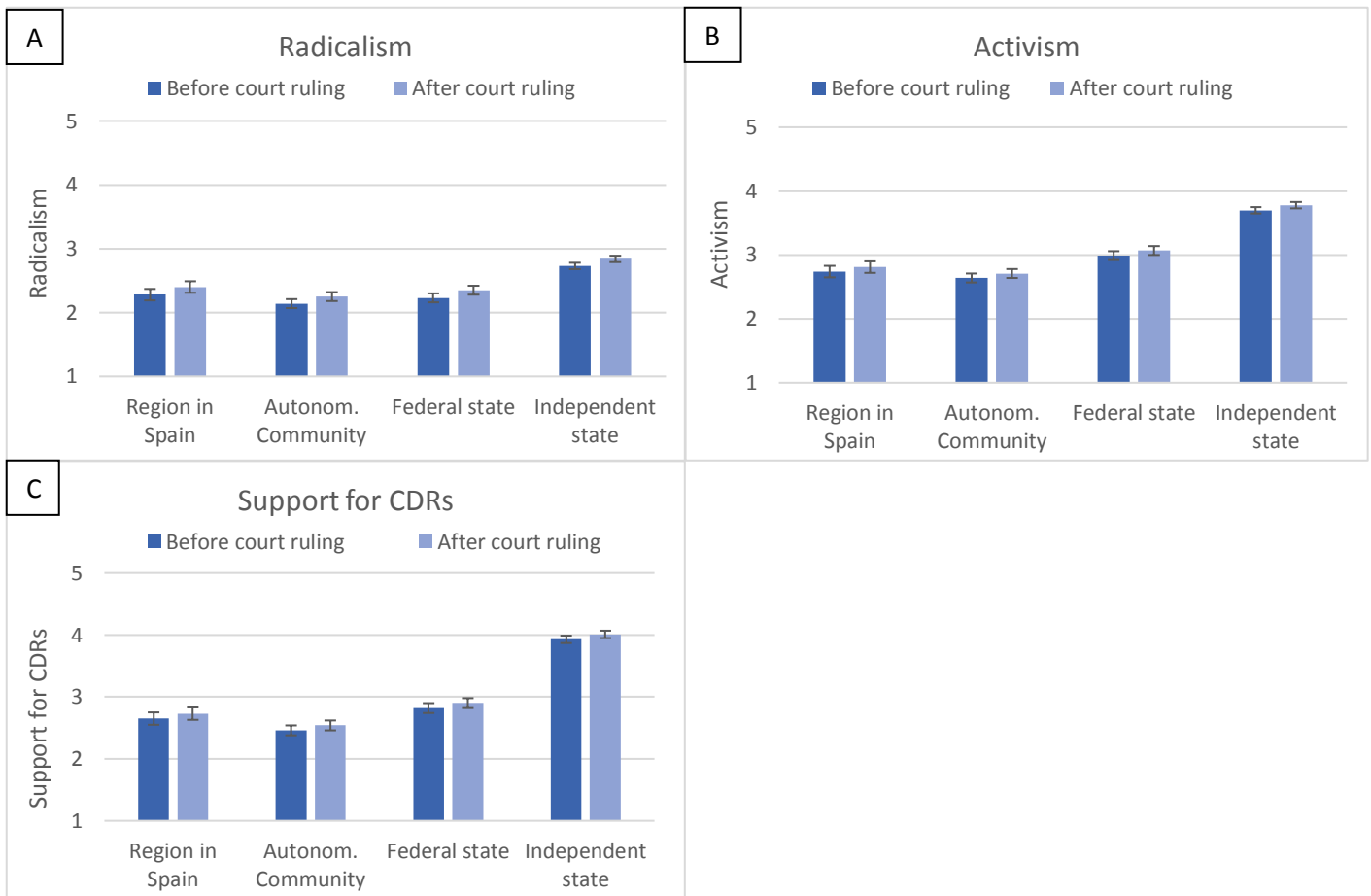


Figure 4. Changes in action measures: (A) Radicalism showed an increase in across groups after the court ruling and was overall higher in independence supporters, (B) activism increased across groups after the court ruling and was overall higher for independence supporters and federalism supporters, (C) support for CDRs increased across groups after the court ruling and was overall higher for independence supporters.

Measures that did not change in time

A series of other measures did not change in time, although they showed interesting differences between groups defined by desired relationship with Spain (see Figure 5A-E). For instance, one's own favorable feelings towards Spaniards were lower in independence supporters ($B = -0.96$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = -9.32$, $p < 0.001$) and federalism supporters ($B = -0.32$, $SE = 0.12$, $t = -2.98$, $p < 0.01$), while Catalans' favorable feelings towards Spaniards were estimated to be higher in the same groups (Indep: $B = 0.30$, $SE = 0.11$, $t = 2.77$, $p < 0.01$; Feder: $B = 0.23$, $SE = 0.11$, $t = 2.06$, $p < 0.05$). Similarly, social approval of enduring personal costs in defense of Catalans' legal and political rights was higher in independence supporters ($B = 0.26$, $SE = 0.11$, $t = 2.32$, $p < 0.05$), perceived threat by

Spain was higher both in independence supporters ($B = 1.68$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = 18.96$, $p < 0.001$) and federalism supporters ($B = 0.53$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = 5.89$, $p < 0.001$), change in judgement in the face evidence on pro-Independence fake news was higher in federalism supporters ($B = 0.29$, $SE = 0.12$, $t = 2.36$, $p < 0.01$), and support for other independence movements across Europe was higher in independence supporters ($B = 2.13$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = 20.63$, $p < 0.001$) and federalism supporters ($B = 0.98$, $SE = 0.11$, $t = 9.08$, $p < 0.001$).

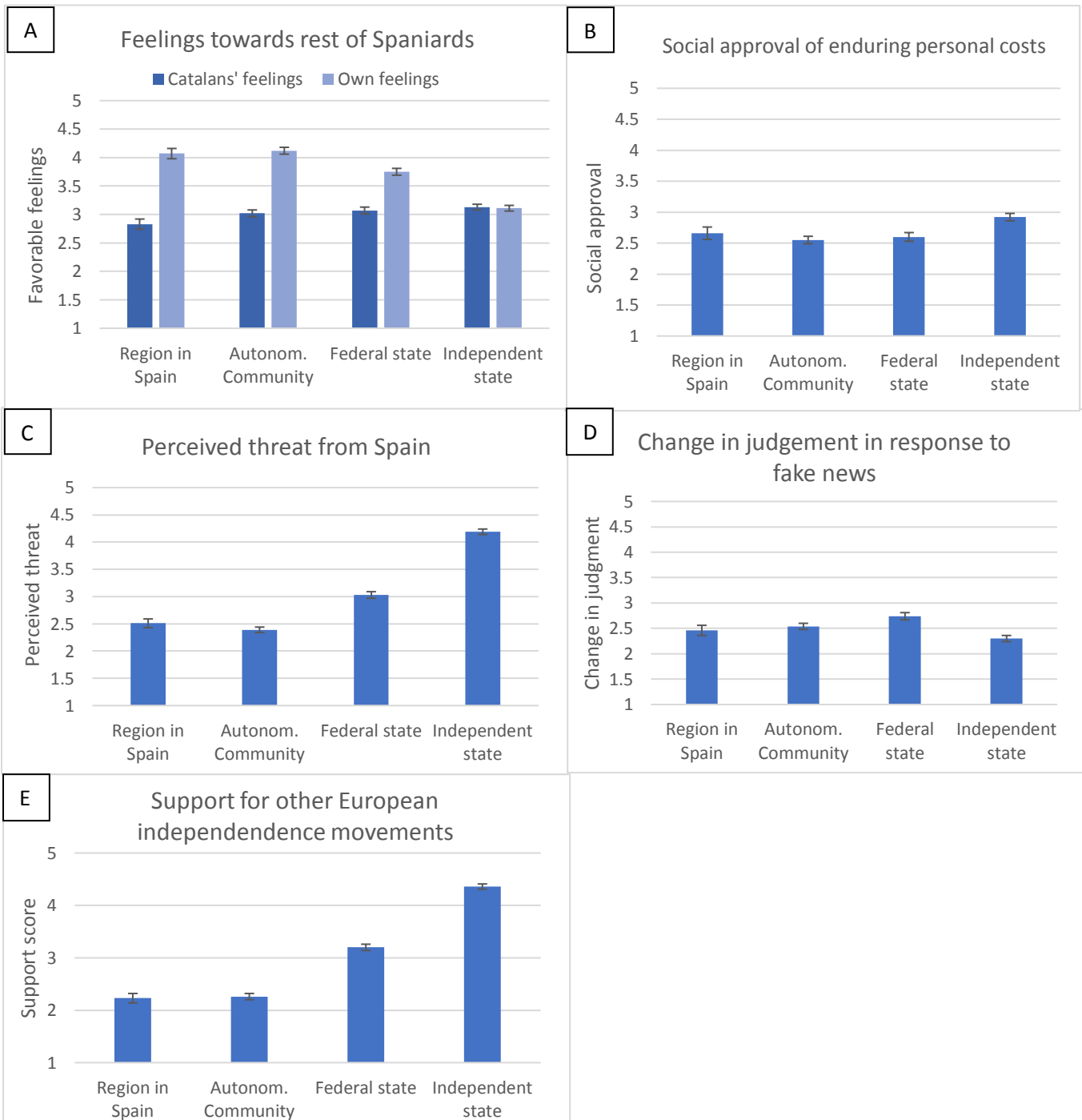


Figure 5. Measures that did not change in time: Own favorable feelings towards Spaniards and Catalans' estimated feelings towards Spaniards did not change in time, although they showed differences across groups **(A)**, a similar pattern was found for other variables such as social approval of enduring personal costs in defense of Catalans' legal and political rights **(B)**, perceived threat by Spain **(C)**, change in judgement in the face of evidence on pro-Independence fake news **(D)**, and support for other independence movements in Europe **(E)**.

Factors boosting the increase in action measures

The most relevant factors boosting an increase in action measures after the court ruling were holding independence as a sacred value and exposure to police violence, even after controlling for age, gender, experimental condition, desired relationship with Spain and involvement in activism. Specifically, both independence as a sacred value ($B = 0.29$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = 3.49$, $p < 0.001$, also controlling for exposure to violence) and having directly experienced police violence ($B = 0.33$, $SE = 0.15$, $t = 2.29$, $p < 0.05$) showed a moderate interaction effect with time on radicalism, but no interaction effect on activism (see Figure 6A and B).

In addition, involvement in activism also showed an interaction effect with time led by participation in demonstrations ($B = 0.22$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 3.01$, $p < 0.01$) on radicalism (see Figure 6C), but again no interaction effect on activism, after controlling for age, gender, experimental condition, desired relationship with Spain and exposure to police violence. Past participation on the Oct 1st, 2017 vote, also showed an interaction effect with time for both radicalism ($B = 0.16$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = 2.62$, $p < 0.01$) and activism ($B = 0.21$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 3.13$, $p < 0.001$), even after controlling for age, gender, experimental condition, desired relationship with Spain, exposure to police violence and activism (see Figure 6D).

Finally, social approval of enduring personal costs in defense of Catalans' legal and political rights had a small but significant interaction effect with time on radicalism ($B = 0.09$, $SE = 0.03$, $t = 3.29$, $p < 0.001$), and perceived threat posed by Spain had a small but significant interaction effect with time on radicalism ($B = 0.08$, $SE = 0.02$, $t = 3.75$, $p < 0.001$), even after controlling for age, gender, experimental condition, desired relationship with Spain, involvement in activism and exposure to police violence.

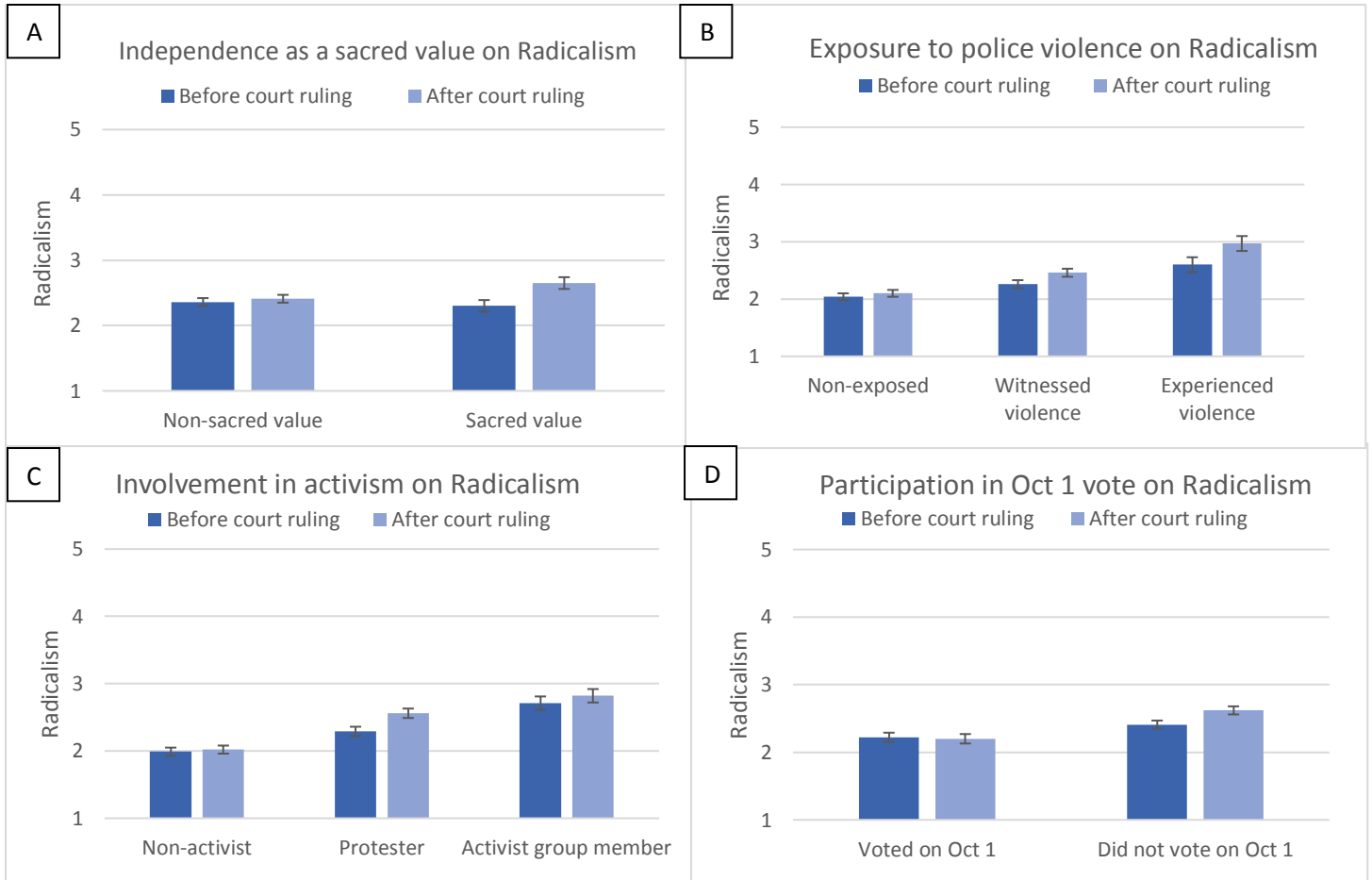


Figure 6. Factors boosting the increase in action measures: Independence as a sacred value showed an interaction with time, increasing radicalism (A). A similar pattern was observed for exposure to police violence (B), involvement in activism (C), and participation on the Oct 1st, 2017 vote (D), which affected both radicalism and activism in similar ways.

Factors boosting the drop in social closeness

The only factor contributing to a reduction on social closeness between Catalans and Spaniards after the court ruling was perceived threat by Spain ($B = 0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, $t = 1.79$, $p < 0.05$), although with a small effect, after controlling for desired relationship with Spain and experimental condition (see Figure 7A).

Holding independence as a sacred value has a main effect on social closeness ($B = -0.34$, $SE = 0.12$, $t = -2.83$, $p < 0.01$), although no interaction with time was observed, after controlling desired relationship with Spain and experimental condition (see Figure 7B).

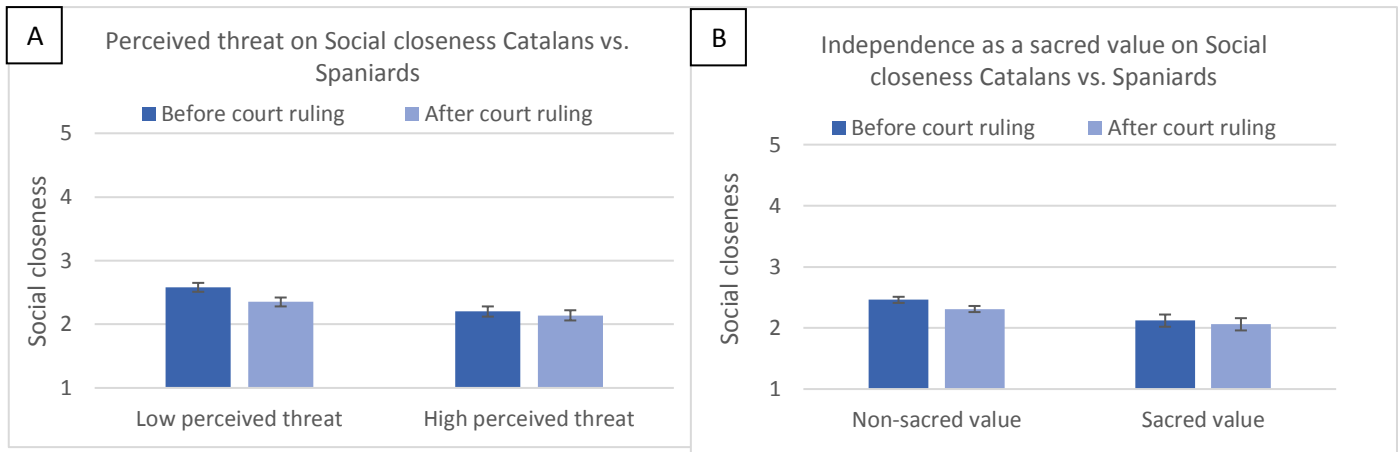


Figure 7. Factors boosting the decrease in social closeness: (A) perceived threat contributed to decrease social closeness between Catalans and Spaniards after the court ruling, **(B)** holding Catalan independence as a sacred value had a main effect on social closeness, although the interaction with time was not significant.

Effect of the experimental condition

A trend towards significance was observed in the interaction between the experimental condition and time on radicalism ($B = -0.08$, $SE = 0.06$, $t = -1.37$, n.s.), after controlling for age, gender and desired relationship with Spain (see Figure 8).

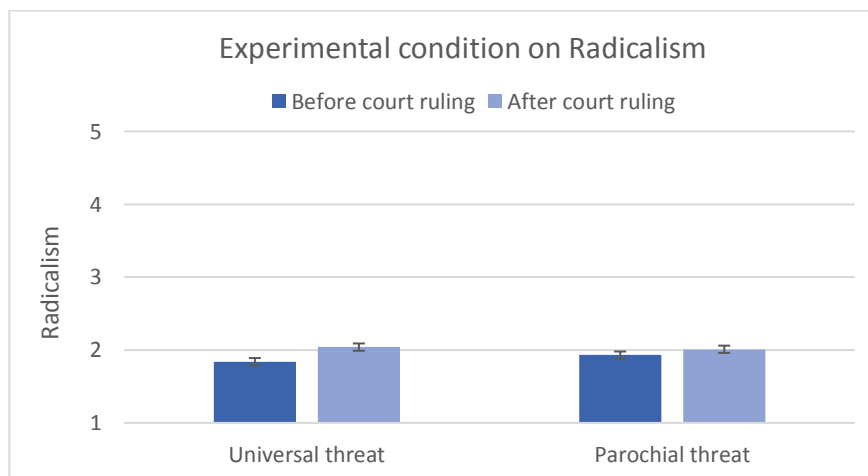


Figure 8. Effect of the experimental condition on radicalism.

Discussion

The present longitudinal study analyzed the changes in social cohesion, radicalism and activism in a sample representative of the Catalan population before and after the October 14th court ruling, which sentenced 9 independentist leaders to between 9 and 13 years in prison for the events surrounding the illegal referendum for independence celebrated in Catalonia on October 1st, 2017.

The data point to a generalized increase in social distance between Catalans and the rest of Spaniards, a change that can be observed across groups, regardless of their desired relationship with Spain. One of the contributors to such decrease appears to be perceived threat to the Catalan people posed by the Spanish government. Across the sample, an increase in social closeness between independence supporters and non-supporters is observed after the court ruling, a vision that does not seem to be shared by independence supporters, who report increased social distance between these two groups. In turn, a trend is revealed suggesting a decrease in identity fusion between independentism supporters and Europe after the court ruling.

In terms of action measures, radicalism and activism, as well as support for CDRs resistance to the Spanish government increases across groups, with independence supporters exhibiting overall higher scores in all the action measures. The main contributors to such change seem to be increased value sacredness of Catalan independence, exposure to police violence, involvement in activism and having participated on the Oct 1st illegal referendum, all of which remain significant after controlling for the rest of contributors.

The “Parochial threat” elicited some change (non-significant trend) in radicalism compared to the control condition in the same direction observed longitudinally after the court ruling. However, the experimental condition seems not to have been powerful enough: the three presented pictures might have been too subtle, at least in comparison to the expectation of the court ruling and the celebration of the two years of the illegal referendum on October 1st that was being lived on the streets at the time Wave 1 was launched. Nonetheless, considering that the time lapse between measurements was quite small (1 to 2 weeks) and the fact that the court ruling was, by far, the major event taking place in Catalonia during that time lapse, taking over most of the social debates and media attention, we have grounds to believe the changes observed were related to the court ruling.

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