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Corporate activism in conflict escalation: The strategy of discursive mediation☆

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ABSTRACT

Side-taking, a much-studied form of corporate sociopolitical activism, can help organizations align with their stakeholders but also fuel polarization, a pressing risk that can destabilize their operating environments. How can organizations thus respond to their stakeholders' pressures to take a position on sociopolitical issues while simultaneously addressing this risk? We conceptualize an alternative strategy, discursive mediation, which differs from side-taking and peace brand activism in terms of how, when, and why it is carried out. We find evidence of this strategy by conducting a historical case study of the conflict over Catalan independence. We show that employer organizations strategically positioned themselves as mediators with explicit calls for negotiation and with discourse that changed the hostile representation of factions and that proposed solutions that could de-escalate the mounting tensions. These strategies set the stage for a rapprochement of the factions while protecting organizational interests.

1. Introduction

Companies are increasingly expected to participate in controversial conversations about sociopolitical issues (Hurst, 2023; Nalick et al., 2016). This practice is called corporate social activism (hereafter, CSA) (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Companies that take a side may elevate their position with a portion of their stakeholders (Pimentel et al., 2024), but this strategy has been criticized for its potential to ignite polarization (Neureiter and Bhattacharya, 2021; Ulver, 2022).

Polarization erodes the environment in which companies operate (Ulver, 2022) and threatens legal uncertainty, resulting in increasingly serious business risks (PwC, 2022; World Economic Forum, 2024). These risks are more evident during conflict escalation as the likelihood of fracturing institutional systems increases (Kriesberg, 2012; Zartman and Touval, 1985). Past work has found that the potential benefits for an organization aligning itself with the values of core stakeholders by engaging in side-taking outweigh the risks of igniting further polarization (Bhagwat et al., 2020) when looking at early-stage conflicts. Other work that has examined CSA in the final stage of conflict evolution, when hostilities break out, have found organizations engaging in peace brand activism, advocating for dialog and the cessation of violence (Melin et al., 2025; Tsougkou et al., 2025). However, in the intermediate stage of conflict escalation, organizations face a conundrum: they are increasingly expected to voice their position (thus removing the option of remaining silent), but taking a side further increases polarization, aggravating the political and economic risks that would inevitably affect them. A third approach may allow organizations to strategically manage this conundrum by adopting other CSA strategies that protect their interests without increasing polarization (Reeves et al., 2021). This study aims to theorize how organizations strategically deploy CSA in conflict escalation.

To answer this question, we carried out a historical case study (Eisenhardt, 1989) of the conflict over independence in Catalonia between 2014 and 2017 (hereafter, the *procés*). The *procés* confronted defenders of independence (hereafter, secessionists) and defenders of the current status quo (hereafter, antisecessionists) (Tamames, 2014; Wagner, 2018), each accounting for roughly half of the Catalan population (Elliott, 2018; El País, 2022). The *procés* is an adequate case study for addressing our question because it went through the three phases (confrontation, escalation, and destruction) of the evolution of sociopolitical conflicts: it started with a confrontation over a political issue that was addressed mainly through political parties dynamics within the

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existing legal framework; it escalated in 2015 with increased polarization permeating all levels of Catalan society and threatening to fracture the institutional system (Elliott, 2018; Tamames, 2014); a fracture that eventually took place (albeit in a limited way) in 2017 and was met with the use of force and the suspension of Catalan autonomy after an illegal referendum for independence on October 1, 2017. The actors we analyze in this paper are employer organizations (EOs hereafter). EOs are collective associations of employers of waged labor whose traditional function is to coordinate members' actions in collective bargaining with labor unions (Barry and Wilkinson, 2011). In Spain and other countries (Demougin et al., 2019; Gooberman et al., 2019), EOs are institutionalized social agents that channel the views of their members on a wide range of political issues. In the conflict studied, most firms were reluctant to take a public position and conveyed their stance through EOs instead (Basta, 2020). EOs were among the primary audiences of opposing factions because of their political influence (El País, 2 14 2014; Tamames, 2014) and were pressured to publicly engage in the conflict because of their institutional role (Basta, 2020; Rim et al., 2020).

Due to the discursive nature of CSA (Nalick et al., 2016; Vredenburg et al., 2020), our analysis examined the positioning texts of the three leading Catalan EOs (Foment del Treball, Cecot, and PIMEC) (i.e., tweets, press releases, speeches, and media interviews between 2014 and 2017). We also examined the discourse employed by the media more closely aligned with each of the factions (e.g., ARA, PuntAvui, or ABC) and by two grassroots organizations (Assemblea Nacional Catalana and Cercle Català de Negocis) focused on mobilizing businesses for independence. These polar cases (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007) provide a crucial context for addressing intertextuality (Fairclough, 2003). We used critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) to respond to our research question since (de)polarizing dynamics are sustained by language (Hartman et al., 2022), and critical discourse analysis is especially suitable for studying "controversial social or societal issues" (Vaara and Tienari, 2008: 986).

We find that, in this conflict, EOs communicated their strategic position via two discursive approaches. They explicitly called for dialog and negotiation, similar to peace brand activism (Melin et al., 2025; Tsougkou et al., 2025). In addition to these explicit calls, they attempted to foster a climate of rapprochement among factions by deconstructing the hostile representation of the opponents and proposing solutions that could stall the mounting tension and be acceptable to both parties. We thus conceptualize a new CSA strategy called discursive mediation, which is enacted by producing texts that employ depolarizing language, discursively redress the bases of polarization, and strategically intend to move opponents toward a negotiated solution. We explain how discursive mediation serves organizational interests and why it differs from other CSA strategies and other accounts of mediation undertaken by business organizations.

Our work makes two contributions. First, it contributes to the CSA literature (Nalick et al., 2016; Vredenburg et al., 2020) by revealing a third way of addressing emerging sociopolitical conflicts beyond side-taking or silence. We also offer evidence against the claim that CSA may inevitably be conflictual and fuel polarization (Neureiter and Bhattacharya, 2021; Ulver, 2022) or that only when hostilities erupt do organizations turn to peace activism (Tsougkou et al., 2025). Instead, our findings show that organizations may use their positioning texts to forestall the escalation of conflicts. By showing how organizations can use discursive strategies to protect their interests while reducing the risk of institutional fracture, we open new avenues for understanding the role of organizations in highly polarized contexts, going beyond the prevailing assumption that CSA accommodates conflicts (Hurst, 2023). Second, our study contributes to the corporate political action (CPA) literature (Hillman and Hitt, 1999) by revealing a new role for organizations engaged in collective political action in which they reinvent themselves as mediators to create space for dialog and negotiation. We also expand the known collective political capabilities of EOs (Choi et al., 2020) by uncovering sociopolitical positioning as the distinct capability to address divisive contexts collectively, a task that may be significantly more challenging for individual firms.

2. Conceptual background

Corporate sociopolitical activism (CSA) consists of "taking public stances on social or political issues" (Vredenburg et al., 2020, 444) that are often unrelated to a company's core operations (Dodd and Supa, 2014). CSA is characterized by its focus on divisive, controversial, or polarized issues (Nalick et al., 2016; Vredenburg et al., 2020). CSA is a discursive strategy performed mostly through public statements (Vredenburg et al., 2020), although it may also include other actions such as donations and sponsorship (Nalick et al., 2016).

CSA is considered a strategic action aimed at achieving goals such as expressing corporate values (Pimentel et al., 2024; Wettstein and Baur, 2016), improving an organization's relationship with core stakeholders (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hurst, 2023; Nalick et al., 2016), increasing a company's customer base (Hydock et al., 2020), or encouraging sociopolitical change commensurate with the organization's views, values, or interests (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, CSA is also a risky practice. It may attract backlash from dissenting stakeholders (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Pasirayi et al., 2023) or those who perceive the organization's stance as inauthentic (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Furthermore, CSA has been criticized for its potential to ignite polarization (Ashby-King, 2023; Neureiter and Bhattacharya, 2021; Ulver, 2022). Polarization is a salient and worrying business risk (PwC, 2022; World Economic Forum, 2024) because it potentially creates a more challenging institutional context for all organizations, even those that support the "winning side.".

This criticism stems in part from equating CSA to side-taking. It is the act of taking a side in a conflict that increases polarization because it encourages the ideological sorting of stakeholders with respect to matching firms (Mohliver and Hawn, 2019) and triggers animosity from misaligned stakeholders (Neureiter and Bhattacharya, 2021). Because organizations are split in their support for antagonistic factions (Mohliver et al., 2023), CSA-as-side-taking may contribute to polarizing dynamics (Pierson and Schickler, 2020). However, the alternative strategy (silence) may not preclude polarization, since stakeholders attribute a stance to silent firms and respond accordingly (Jung and Mittal, 2020; Reeves et al., 2021). Nevertheless, recent work has begun expanding the arsenal of sociopolitical positioning strategies available to organizations beyond the binary alternative of taking sides or remaining silent (Hurst, 2023). An analysis of CSA in relation to the Russia–Ukraine war showed that organizations may also engage in peace brand activism by publicizing peace-oriented statements and advocating dialog and violence cessation (Tsougkou et al., 2025). This example shows that CSA may also be oriented to de-escalating conflicts.

Sociopolitical conflicts unfold in three main phases (Allwood and Ahlsén, 2015; Jones and Metzger, 2018): confrontation, escalation, and destruction. In the early stages, factions voice grievances, mobilize supporters, and engage in minor confrontations inside existing institutional frameworks. If the conflict remains unresolved, confrontation evolves into escalation: the intensity of disagreement accelerates, factions orient toward winning rather than resolution, entrenching in nonyielding positions. At the final stage (destruction), hostilities increase and factions orient toward annihilation with discursive or physical violence (Glasl, 1982).

Polarization is a social process underpinning conflict escalation and destruction (Allwood and Ahlsén, 2015). It collapses the manifold differences among individuals into a single divide of *Us vs. Them* (McCoy et al., 2018), accompanied by the construction of the opponent as hostile or even, at the extreme, an enemy to be annihilated (McCoy and Somer, 2019). These two dimensions constitute the ideological and affective bases of polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019). Polarization enables conflict escalation because it precludes negotiation (McCoy et al., 2018). With inhibited dialog, the risk of fracturing institutions becomes clear

(Kriesberg, 2012; McCoy et al., 2018; Zartman and Touval, 1985). Thus, conflicts at this stage are characterized by their destructive potential.

A closer analysis of past studies shows that CSA strategies have been primarily examined in the early and late stages of conflict evolution. Side-taking has been identified in early stages, when ideological and affective lines emerge but institutional fracture is less visible (Iyengar et al., 2019), especially around issues such as LGBTQ + rights, gun control, or immigration (Sterbenk et al., 2022). At the other end, peace-brand activism has been observed in contexts of large-scale destruction, such as the Ukraine–Russia war (Tsougkou et al., 2025). Although some research has been carried out in highly polarized contexts, such as the US (e.g. Pimentel et al., 2024), existing studies have not focused on the distinct challenges of conflict escalation and have not explored how organizations can navigate deeply polarized but not fully destructive conflicts. Conflict escalation is especially precarious for organizations because it threatens legal certainty and risks erosion of the environment in which they operate (Ulver, 2022), resulting in increasingly significant business risks (PwC, 2022; World Economic Forum, 2024). Assuming organizations do not want to contribute to igniting institutional fracture and instability that, in turn, accrue business risks, we pose the following question: How do organizations strategically deploy sociopolitical positioning strategies at conflict escalation? Answering this question requires a closer look at the discourse employed in positioning texts during conflict escalation since the discursive strategies employed shape subject positions, orient the interpretation of entire issues, endorse certain solutions over others, and forge relationships with audiences (Li et al., 2018). With these texts, organizations may thus contribute to increasing or reducing polarization and, consequently, the risks of institutional fracture characteristic of conflict escalation.

3. Method

3.1. Context

The Catalan process over independence (the *procés*) is a suitable context for examining our research question because it experienced all three stages of conflict evolution over the period under study (Fig. 1). The confrontation phase of the conflict emerged due to the perception of unfairness in the economic system that finances Catalonia (the so-called *greuges* or grievances). Although Catalonia had achieved the highest level of autonomy in Spain, with its own Parliament and executive branch, its financing was primarily due to transfers from the central government, which levies the main taxes (Colino, 2020). This perception of unfairness was exacerbated by the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent sovereign debt crisis of 2011 (Tamames, 2014). A sentiment of outrage was both reflected in and fed by the motto "Espanya ens roba" ("Spain is robbing us") used by many Catalan representatives (Wagner, 2018). Importantly, factions in the Catalonian conflict do not entirely reproduce the traditional liberal–conservative divide of other sociopolitical issues examined in past work (Neureiter and Bhattacharya, 2021): the secessionist movement was sustained by Catalan political parties of all political sensitivities and by grassroots organizations such as the Assemblea Nacional Catalana (ANC) (Mauri-Ríos et al., 2020). The ANC specialized in business mobilization to support independence, notably through its economic chapter (ANC Economistes, hereafter ANCE) and the business association Cercle Català de Negocis (Cercle hereafter).

Confrontation hardened as agency shifted away from institutional mechanisms and toward civil society. The political deadlock that followed the Constitutional Court's 2012 ruling on Catalonia's competences redirected the momentum of the independence movement from institutional to grassroots actors. In that year, the Court significantly curtailed the distribution of powers between the national and Catalan governments, a decision that angered a large segment of the Catalan citizenry (Micó and Carbonell, 2017). Grassroots movements and political parties framed secession as "the only way out" (Martí and Cetrà, 2016), even though alternative solutions formally existed. Nevertheless, the required broad parliamentary support, which was unattainable under the conservative Popular Party's majority between 2011 and 2018, remained firmly opposed to granting Catalonia greater autonomy.

In 2014, the conflict entered the escalation stage. Independentists

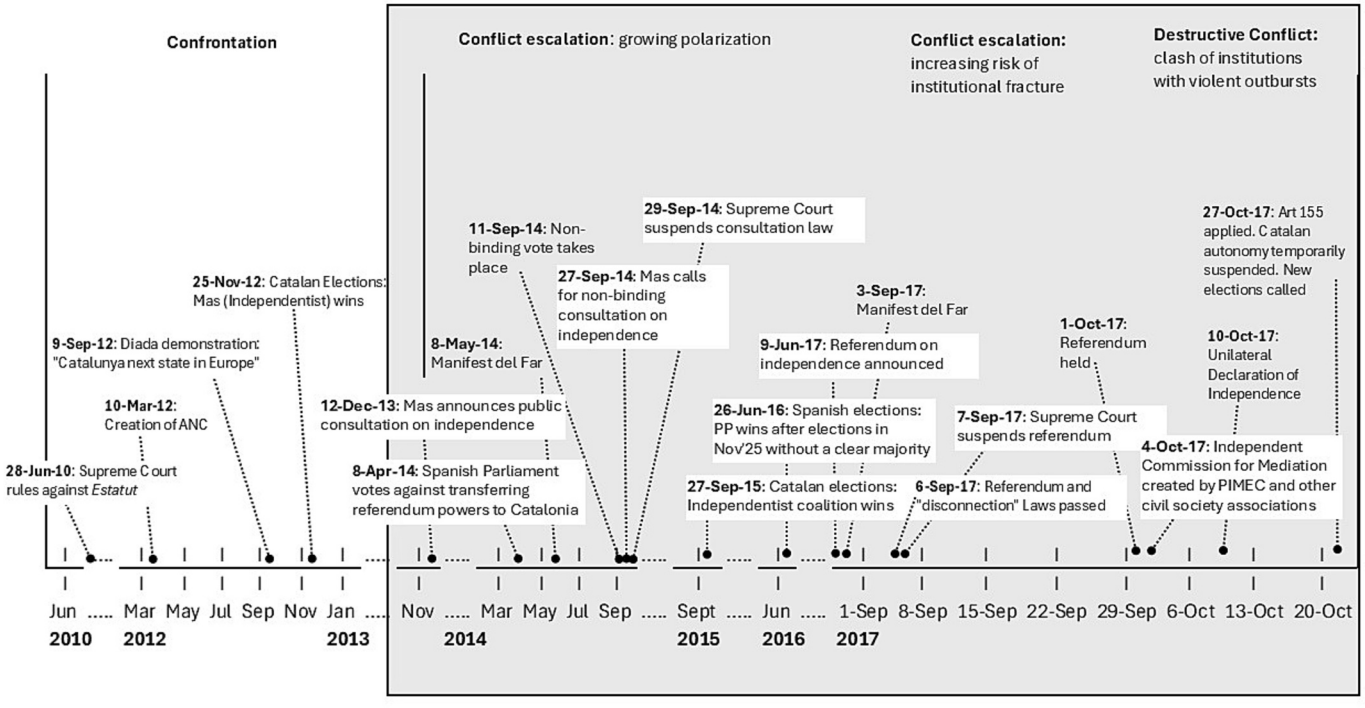

Fig. 1. Timeline of events during the *procés*.

pushed for a non-binding consultation on self-determination (that included independence as just one of its options) and argued that Catalans had a "right to decide" in a bid to widen the coalition of supporters. These efforts were deemed illegal by the Supreme Court. As time passed, Catalan institutions took increasingly more drastic steps that could severely affect the legal environment, but were repeatedly blocked by the Supreme Court.

During this phase, ideological and affective polarization grew: the initial conflict over the fiscal regime extended to other issues and both factions constructed a hostile view of opponents that justified entrenchment in radical, nonyielding positions (Iyengar et al., 2019; Iyengar et al., 2012). Secessionists built their narrative on a Manichean *Us vs. Them* line (McCoy et al., 2018), helped by the transversal nature (both right and left) of political support for independence: the victimization of the Catalan people and the villainization of the Spanish state. Their narrative focused on the unfair treatment by the Spanish state, which had stifled its economic and social development (Elliott, 2018). Catalonia was depicted as an engine of the Spanish economy and a subsidizer of public expenditures mismanaged by the Spanish state owing to corruption and incompetence ("Spain is a model of crony capitalism," ANCE 2 20 2014; "The Spanish institutional framework enables widespread corruption. Transparency International confirms it", ANCE 2 6 2015). Not only did the region lack the freedom to use tax revenues for its citizens' benefit (the much-reiterated "fiscal pillage"), but it was also repeatedly denied strategic infrastructure investments from the central government, stalling its development ("Spanish policies punish the Catalan economy and its firms. Catalan entrepreneurs escape to France", ANCE tweet 4 16 2015; "Being Spanish is costing us dearly," Cercle tweet 7 29 2015). This was a fundamental argument for secessionism: the Spanish state intentionally inflicted harmful policies on Catalonia (Tamames, 2014). Catalonia's situation was depicted as a form of tyrannical oppression with nefarious consequences for its citizens ("The [Spanish] state abandons its citizens, especially the most vulnerable, by cutting the budget for Catalonia," ANC tweet 7 14 2015; "We do not grow because we do not have a state that defends our interests," Cercle tweet 3 2 2015). As Spain was depicted as a hostile—even villainous—entity ruling against the interests of the Catalan people, independence was defended as the only possible course of action: "[i]t is impossible to find a political solution for Catalonia within Spain (…) The only solution is an independence referendum" (ANC press release 11 24 2014; ANCE 2 6 2015). Furthermore, businesses and EOs were constantly being called on to support this position: "It is time for businesspeople to talk about [Catalonia as a] Country, don't let Foment or PIMEC hide the truth, support Cercle" (Cercle tweet 2 18 2014).

The antisecessionist narrative also created a Manichean line by portraying supporters of the referendum as rebellious ("the defiant independentists," El Mundo 9 30 2017), "fanatics" (El Mundo 10 11 2017), the main "problem of Spain" (ABC Sevilla 4 8 2014), or "totalitarians" ("Authoritarian delusions will never defeat the state," President of Spain in ABC 7 6 2017). Support for the referendum was interpreted as "a *coup d'état* to democracy and the Spanish nation" (Sociedad Civil Catalana website; ABC 9 22 2017). However, this interpretation of the referendum differed from surveys showing that 85 % of Catalans supported the referendum, but fewer than half endorsed secessionism (The Guardian, 9 21 2017). As an editorial published in ABC (8 4 2014), one of the leading antisecessionist newspapers, phrased it, "Is it possible to negotiate with the most obstinate enemies of our country, those threatening our wellbeing and our lifestyle? Of course, it is not". This construction of secessionists as villains was invoked to justify the denial of negotiations not only on independence but also on a renewed status for Catalonia that could address the grievances that sparked the conflict. Moreover, these grievances were represented either as "fabrications" or as "extortion" (ABC 11 8 2015) to support secessionism (ABC 9 7 2014; ABC 9 27 2015).

In 2017, the conflict further escalated approaching the destruction stage. The risk of institutional rupture was imminent, with the Catalan Parliament issuing legislation to support a binding referendum for independence. This move troubled international organizations, notably the European Union, which publicly declared that Catalonia would not be recognized as an independent state (European Commission, 2017), concerned about the institutional risk posed by secessionism, because the referendum was considered unconstitutional and illegal. Regional economic indicators also reflected the risk. The progressive deterioration of the Catalan debt outlook from Moody's Ba2 positive in 2014 to Ba3 negative in 2016, and foreign divestitures (Álvarez-Díaz et al., 2019). Furthermore, to avoid being left out of the European Union, more than 2,500 firms moved their legal headquarters outside Catalonia (Colegio de Registradores de España, 2018), including the two leading Catalan banks (CaixaBank and Bank of Sabadell). Nevertheless, despite the deployment of the police operation to prevent it, the referendum was held on October 1, 2017, yielding a simple majority favoring secession. On October 24, 2017, unexpectedly, the president of the Catalan Parliament announced a unilateral declaration of independence. As a result, the Catalan Parliament was dissolved, promoters of the referendum were charged with crimes of sedition and then imprisoned, and new elections were called for in December 2017.

3.2. Data sources

We conducted a historical case study (Eisenhardt, 1989) using archival data between 2014 and 2017, the years demarcating the escalation of the conflict. We focused our analysis on the positioning texts produced and distributed by EOs (Dodd and Supa, 2014), as they were the principal organizations that channeled the sociopolitical positioning of businesses. Factions in the conflict also recognized this key role of EOs and frequently asked them to position themselves in the *procés* (Cercle tweet 7 19 2014; Gubern, 2015).

We specifically focused on Foment del Treball, Cecot, and PIMEC for three reasons. First, they are the three main Catalan EOs (El Mundo, 9 10 2017); all other EOs in Catalonia are affiliated with Foment or PIMEC, which act as their representatives in economic and political bargaining processes. Second, they produced a sufficient number of statements to conduct discourse analysis. The number of statements about the *procés* of the other 34 business associations and Chambers of Commerce was too limited for meaningful analysis. Third, these three EOs constitute a theoretically representative sample (Eisenhardt, 1989) because their relationships with key stakeholders in the conflict spanned the entire gamut of possibilities. Foment was more closely aligned with the national government, while Cecot maintained stronger ties with the Catalan government (Minefee and Yue, 2025). Their memberships also reflected distinct political orientations: most of Foment's associates opposed the referendum, whereas associates of Cecot and the third EO were more internally divided (Hambrick and Wowak, 2021) (see Table 1). This variation ensured that our sample captured organizations embedded in different stakeholder environments. Consequently, the convergence we observed in their positioning strategies cannot be explained by shared stakeholder pressures or by the political leanings of their associates but rather reflects patterns that span the conceptual range of the phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 1989).

For each of the three EOs under study, we examined three strategic communication channels (Dodd and Supa, 2014) (Table 2.): X (formerly Twitter), websites, and interviews published in the media. Tweets and retweets from the official accounts of the three EOs were extracted via the Twitter API Full Archive Academic Search (posted between January 1, 2014, and January 1, 2018) (n = 17,848). Tweets that included announcements, economic news, or information for associates with no bearing on the *procés* were excluded, producing a dataset of 707 tweets. We downloaded all 761 press releases and position documents from EO websites, screening those that had a bearing on the *procés* (n = 127). We used the Wayback Machine to retrieve the documents when they were unavailable on these websites. Videos or media interviews referenced in their threads and other interviews that we located in the media (n = 54)

Table 1
Description of employer organizations.

	CECOT	PIMEC	Foment del Treball
No. of member firms	Over 7,500	128,000	Over 230,000
Size of member firms	Mostly SMEs	SMEs exclusively	Almost all large Catalan companies and many SMEs
Geographical area of operation	Valles region originally expanded to all of Catalonia	Catalonia	Catalonia
Embeddedness with Catalan institutions	Moderate (adhered to Foment del Treball)	Strong (favored by the Catalan government, collective bargaining)	Strong (Port of Barcelona, Mobile World, Zona Franca, collective bargaining)
Linkages with National institutions	Weak	Weak (member of the SME national association)	Strong (member of the national business association: CEOE)
Views on Catalan independence of member firms	Plurality of political positions. 98 % unsatisfied with the status of Catalonia (press release, 9 3 2015)	67 % of members favor an independent Catalan State, and 82 % consider it economically viable (PIMEC, 2017)	Historically opposed to Catalan independence, with some dissenting members
Advocacy Focus	Interests of the business community expanded local reach	Interests of SMEs exclusively, collective bargaining	Interests of the business community and collective bargaining (takes part in 90 % of all agreements)

Table 2
Data sources.

Panel (a). Sociopolitical positioning of organizations	**CECOT**	**PIMEC**	**FOMENT**	**TOTAL**
All tweets	1.714	8.233	1.141	11.088
All retweets	2.641	2.025	2.094	6.760
Total	4.355	10.258	3.235	17.848
Relevant tweets	153	217	63	433
Relevant retweets	181	39	54	274
Total relevant	334	256	117	707
All press releases	66	285	410	761
Relevant press releases	34	28	65	127
Personal interviews	1	2	1	9
All documents	**4.422**	**10.545**	**3.646**	**18.618**
of which, relevant	**369**	**286**	**183**	**843**
	Stance of the source towards independence			
Panel (b). Context in which the positioning takes place	**Pro**	**Neutral**	**Anti**	**TOTAL**
Media interviews or speeches	30	21	3	**54**
EO news referenced in tweets	28	27	13	**68**
EO Factiva news (*)	39	43	69	**151**
EO news from other sources (*)	16	15	60	**91**
Total EO news	**83**	**85**	**142**	**310**
Other relevant news (**)	37	–	43	80
Total news	**120**	**85**	**185**	**390**
All tweets by ANC, ANC Economistes and Cercle	**15.806**			**15.806**
Relevant tweets	*4.118*			*4.118*
All documents	**34.868**	**106**	**188**	**35.162**
of which, relevant	***5.405***	***106***	***188***	***5.699***

(*) Totals may not add up because several organizations are referenced in the same article.

were downloaded.

Because texts are produced in specific contexts and should be interpreted in relation to the context in which they are produced (Fairclough, 2003) and examining both the text and the context better equips researchers to theorize the performativities of texts (Hardy, 2001), we used three other sources to better understand the context in which these positioning texts were produced.

First, to identify the chronology of events and the discourses used by both factions, we started by reading books written by politicians and journalists (Borrell and Llorach, 2015; Elliott, 2018; March Ledesema 2018; Paluzie, 2014; Tamames, 2014) (n = 5); scholarly journal articles and dissertations (e.g., Clua i Fainé, 2014; Gili-Ferré, 2017; Mauri-Ríos et al., 2020; Wagner, 2018) (n = 4); reports by think tanks (Real Instituto Elcano, 2019); featured media stories (e.g., BBC news, 2022; El Punt Avui 2020; La Vanguardia, 2019;) (n = 12); and documentaries (e.g., Cirici and Passola, 2014).

Second, we analyzed the tweets and reports of the foremost prosecessionist organization, Assemblea Nacional Catalana (ANC), its chapter oriented to business (ANC Economistes, ANCE), and the leading prosecessionist business association Cercle Català de Negocis (Cercle) (n = 15,806, of which n = 4,118 were relevant). Cercle is not an employer organization like the ones under study, as it does not have an institutional role in collective bargaining.

Third, we analyzed how the general media reported the events of the conflict and their views on the positioning of the EOs under study. A total of 59,148 news articles in Catalan or Spanish published between January 1, 2014, and January 1, 2018, were downloaded from the Dow Jones Factiva Database based on the following criteria: (i) they included references to Catalonia and (ii) they mentioned "independentism," "sovereignty," "state," "procés" and "economics," "economists," "viability," or "solvency" (in any word form or spelling). Duplicates and letters to the editor were removed, yielding a final sample of 41,679 articles. We then screened news concerning the EOs under study, Cercle, and those configuring the main secessionist and antisecessionist narratives for a total of 390 articles. The initial pool of news articles included those from Spanish sources and newspapers in Latin America. However, only Spanish newspapers remained in the sample after identifying relevant news.

Finally, once the analysis of the archival data was completed, we carried out nine in-depth interviews: four with present or former board members of the three EOs, one with a firm member of one of them, one with the author of a popular book on the *procés*, and three with members of other Catalan economic or business-related organizations, such as the think tank Círculo de Economía. These interviews proved instrumental in theorizing the functions of the discursive strategies identified in the positioning texts.

3.3. Data analysis

We applied critical discourse analysis to analyze the compiled texts (Fairclough, 2003). Given that texts not only reflect but also shape social reality (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011), we take EOs' positioning as a form of social action and a barometer of social processes (Fairclough, 2003; Hardy, 2001). Since we aimed to understand how EOs take a position in this conflict, we specifically focused on how they represented the conflict, its actors, and potential solutions in their positioning texts (Hardy, 2001).

We adopted a meso level of engagement with texts (Phillips and Oswick, 2012) that is consistent with critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) that focused sequentially on three levels of analysis: the language used in texts; the discursive practice dimension (that is, the identification of the strategies leveraged by EOs during the *procés*); and the social practice dimension, the dialog between the text and the institutional context where it was produced, aiming to discern what role EOs adopted and what form of social practice their texts constituted. This approach is sensitive to the specific language used but aims to find broader patterns that can be generalized across contexts (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). Since any text is open to several interpretations (Phillips and Oswick, 2012), we focused on repetition (both within and

between EOs' positioning texts) and coherence in the system of texts to sustain a trustworthy interpretation (Fairclough, 2003; Phillips and Oswick, 2012). Following these tenets, the analysis was conducted in four steps, as summarized in Table 3. Table S1 in the supplementary material provides additional evidence of the coding process.

4. Findings

In this section, we present the three strategies employed by EOs to achieve rapprochement among the factions: (1) explicit calls for dialog; (2) deconstructing the hostile portrayal of factions, stalling the demonizing construction of factions, and sanctioning who is entitled to be heard; and (3) broadening solutions by proposing which courses of action should be included in negotiation or abandoned. The three discursive strategies shared a similar goal: rapprochement. Although their intention to bring factions closer to each other was more apparent in the explicit calls for dialog, we argue that the other two strategies identified also constitute a form of mediation: they prepare the stage for a rapprochement of the factions by undoing the Manichean division that underlies polarization and by focusing the agenda on issues susceptible of being resolved through negotiation. These strategies attacked the ideological and affective bases of polarization and facilitated a suitable climate for compromise by representing factions as valid interlocutors, ruling out courses of action tainted with authoritarianism and encouraging factions to discuss moderate solutions that do not involve institutional fracture. The language employed conveys an agonistic but not antagonistic stance, expressing dissent and disagreement but refusing to demonize the target of criticism.

These strategies coalesce in a sociopolitical positioning strategy aimed at deterring polarizing dynamics and moving factions to reach compromises (Fig. 2). Whereas extant literature has focused on sidetaking or silence as dominant positioning strategies over controversial issues, we argue that mediation may be seen as a "third path" in conflict escalation. Mediation can be formally defined as a CSA strategy enacted by producing texts characterized by (i) the use of depolarizing language, (ii) discursive strategies that counteract the affective and ideological bases of polarization, and (iii) the strategic intention for rapprochement among opponents toward a negotiated solution to the conflict. Although the content of these strategies will probably be adapted to the particularities of the context, these three characteristics will be part of any discursive mediation strategy. Next, we explain each of the strategies and the functions of discursive mediation (see a summary in Fig. 2).

4.1. Explicit calls for dialog

The analysis revealed that the EOs did not take a side or remain silent. Instead, they made explicit calls for dialog and a negotiated solution. Since the beginning of the conflict, EOs' texts have explicitly called on factions to find a negotiated solution and de-escalate the mounting tension. Tweets produced by the EOs support this observation. Foment, for example, repeatedly asked political parties to agree on an institutional pact about the status of Catalonia in Spain (e.g., tweets 2 17 2014; 9 3 2015; 1 11 2016; 3 7 2017). Similar texts were issued by Cecot (press releases 9 14 2015; tweet 2 2 2016; 12 13 2016), and PIMEC (e.g., "we demand caution, dialog, and legal compliance," tweet 2 1 2016).

4.2. Deconstructing the hostile portrayal of factions

With their texts, EOs address the affective basis of polarization, deconstructing the hostile, Manichean representations of factions explained in Section 3.1. EOs employed blame suspension in their claims and criticisms to (i) avoid demonizing the Spanish state as a whole and recast the referendum as a legitimate democratic device to (ii) deconstruct the portrayal of supporters as antidemocratic.

Deconstructing the hostile portrayal of the Spanish state. Secessionists depicted Spain as a villain, conveying its irremediable, corrupt, and

Table 3
Steps in the analysis.

Step	Analytical tasks	Outcome of the analysis
1. Mapping the positioning texts in their context	• The tweets, press releases, and interviews of each EO were read to select statements that referred to the *procés* or the situation of Catalonia. • News and texts produced by the secessionist (e.g., Cercle or *Avui*) and antisecessionist (e.g., *ABC* or *El Mundo*) actors before and after each positioning episode were analyzed to understand the positioning context.	A chronology of sociopolitical positioning episodes for each EO and the context in which it was produced.
2. First-order coding: analysis of meanings and stylistic elements in the positioning texts	• **Semantic analysis**: We coded excerpts with claims addressed to the National or Catalan government; mentions of the right to decide, referendum, or consultation; mentions of the suppression of the autonomous status of Catalonia; mentions of democracy, negotiation, or commitment; mentions of the conflict; with depictions of the consequences of the conflict (coding what consequences and for whom). • **Stylistic analysis**: We coded the use of impersonal or passive voice, the plural "you," allusions, and the specific nouns employed to refer to the grievances or the actors. • The syntactic construction of sentences was often odd or not entirely correct; these odd constructions were employed when formulating political criticisms or judgments. The translation of quotes intends to be faithful to the original construction so that readers can recognize this stylistic regularity in EO texts.	Identification of first-order codes in the positioning texts
3. Second-order codes: identification of discursive strategies	• After several iterations, the first-order codes were classified into three discursive strategies: (1) calls for dialog and negotiation, (2) deconstructing hostile representations of the parties, and (3) broadening solutions. • To better delineate the strategies, they were contrasted with the polarizing discourse employed by the factions.	Identification of three discursive strategies

(*continued on next page*)

Table 3 (*continued*)

Step	Analytical tasks	Outcome of the analysis
4. Integrated explanation of the strategies	• Examination of the role that EOs self-adjudicate, type of social practice enacted, and possible aims. • Triangulation of interpretation with interviews with current or former Board members of the EOs. • Theorization of EO discourse as a form of mediation.	Theorization of discursive mediation as a CSA strategy and its goals

tyrannical nature. EOs, in contrast, employed blame suspension or the formulation of dissent over national policies that do not demonize the other party.

This portrayal was accomplished through two stylistic strategies: centering EOs' criticisms on the harm and not the harmer by using a passive or impersonal voice to obscure agency, or by concretizing the target of criticism in a specific political party or deputy and not the Spanish state as a whole. The following are examples of the first strategy:

We are still waiting for the fiscal reform (Cecot tweet 6 13 2014).

There is an important deficit of investments in Catalonia (Foment tweet 6 10 2015).

Investments in infrastructure should be greater in Catalonia (PIMEC tweet 2 5 2016).

An example of an attempt to concretize criticism is when the president of PIMEC said he was "profoundly disappointed with the infrastructure policy of Rajoy's government in Catalonia" (tweet 1 31 2015). His allusion to the leader of the right-wing People's Party, at the time President of Spain, displaced blame from the Spanish nation to a particular individual and political party, one with a notorious centralist stance. The implication was that other policies could be enacted with a different party at the helm of the Spanish government. This implication is consistent with the history preceding the *procés*, when movements toward further self-government of Catalonia that started under the rule of the Socialist Party were thwarted when the conservative People's Party (Rajoy's party) came into power in December 2011. This concretization of the target of criticism contrasts with the totalizing blame attribution of the secessionist narrative that blames "the state" or "the nation" (e.g., Cercle tweet 1 13 2014).

Halting the hostile portrayal of Catalan society. Antisecessionists portrayed the other faction as unlawful radicals and a threat to social stability (ABC 4 8 2014; El Mundo 9 11 2015). In contrast, EOs recast the referendum as a legitimate democratic device. In their texts, the term "referendum" was not employed; instead, they used less conflictive words such as "consultation," "decision-making," or "dialog." Moreover, these consultations were presented as habitual, regular practices.

For example, the president of Cecot placed the words "consultation" next to "dialogs," "pacts," or "negotiations," which were said to constitute the "usual way of doing business" (speech 11 3 2014; 11 9 2015) or "practices that firms follow every day" (speech 10 20 2016) (similarly, see President of Foment TV3 interview 4 28 2014; President of PIMEC speech 9 3 2015). Their texts conveyed the idea that consultations should not be interpreted as an attack or defiance; if they were customarily used, they could not be disruptive to democracies, and their supporters were not, by extension, antidemocratic.

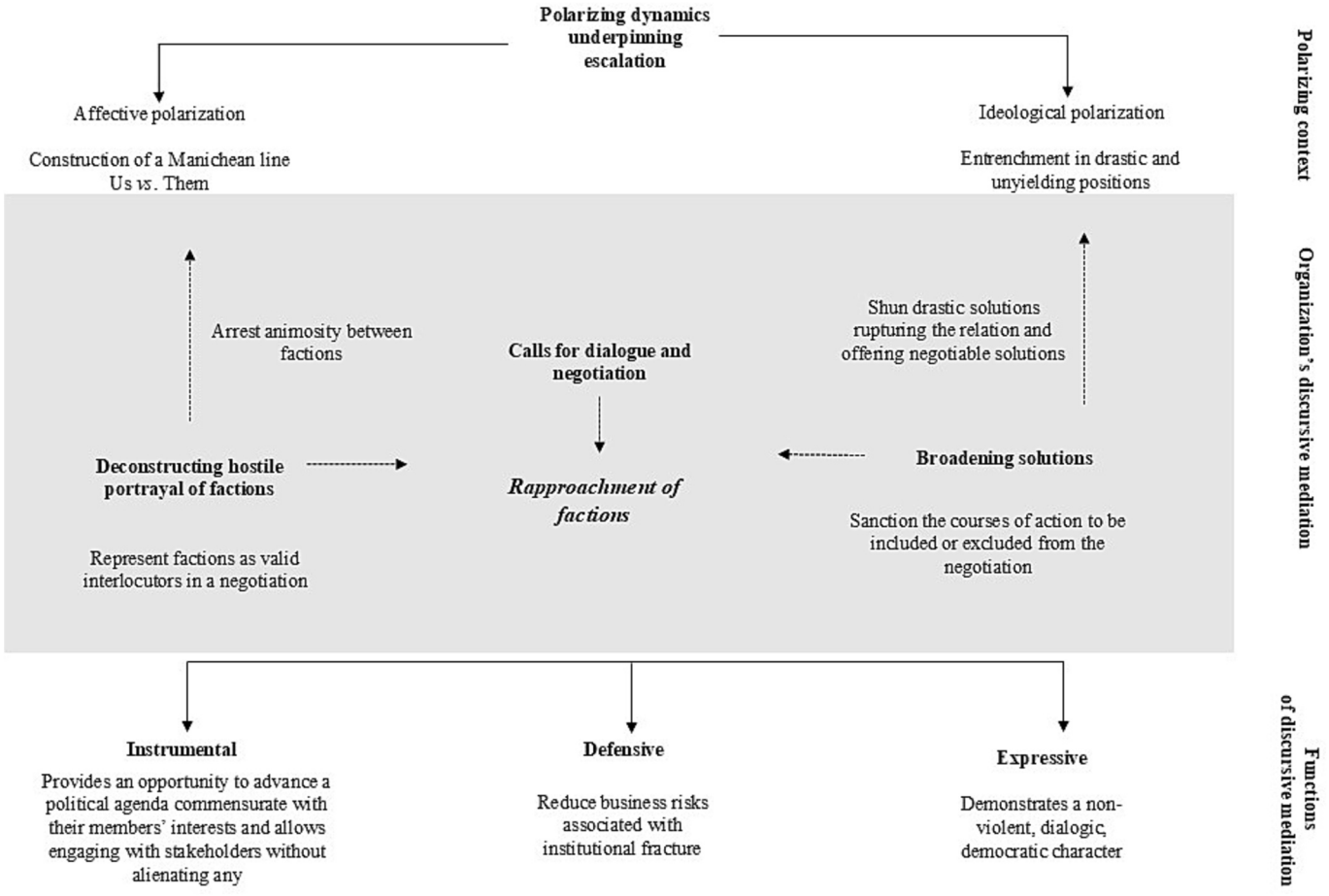

Fig. 2. Discursive mediation: strategies and functions.

4.3. Broadening solutions

This strategy focuses on mitigating ideological polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019), which entrenches factions in extreme, nonyielding positions, in our case, immobilism *vs.* secessionism. EOs achieved this goal by distancing themselves from radical positions and proposing alternative solutions (economic and political reforms) to address the grievances underlying the conflict. The proposed solutions attenuated this business risk, as they did not imply a radical regime change and created a better economic environment for businesses in the region.

Transcending immobilism. The antisecessionist narrative represented the referendum as totalitarian and antidemocratic, as it was not in compliance with the Constitution. By extension, any revision of the status of Catalonia within Spain was also cast as totalitarian and antidemocratic and thus not subject to consideration (El Mundo, 10 11 2017). This immobilism ruled out any possible negotiation with the region to deter the conflict. EOs transcended this immobilism by recognizing Catalans as right-bearer subjects with the capacity to decide the terms of their relationship with Spain.

In their tweets and press releases, Cecot and PIMEC expressed this recognition by defending the Catalans' "right to decide" or "right of consultation," albeit never clarifying what they could decide or what they could be consulted on (Cecot tweets 5 9 2014; press release 9 4 2015; PIMEC tweets 5 9 2014; President of PIMEC speech 9 3 2015). Foment, even while not explicitly endorsing the "right to decide", adhered to a representation of Catalans as right-bearer subjects, claiming the recognition of Catalonia as a nation ("When I spoke about the institutional pact, I said that a fiscal agreement was not enough (…) and that recognition of nationality, of nation, was needed," President of Foment speech 2 25 2016) or defending "the legitimate claim of Catalans to recognize their singularity" (Foment press release 7 27 2017).

Transcending secessionism. Secessionists treated grievances as irreconcilable differences that motivated separation from Spain. The presentation of grievances as rifts is one of the bases of polarization (McCoy et al., 2018). In contrast, EOs discursively treated grievances as necessary and achievable reforms rather than as unbridgeable chasms motivating separation from Spain. Like most Catalans, EOs acknowledged the underinvestment in public infrastructures in the region, yet this grievance was not presented as an unbridgeable rift but as a negotiable claim. This reconstruction of rifts was most apparent in two sociopolitical positioning episodes: the *Say Enough* campaign and the pleas for the Mediterranean railway.

PIMEC carried out the campaign *Diguem Prou* (*Say enough!*) in March 2014. A list of 200 measures intended to protect SMEs heavily affected by the recession (PIMEC news 43) was compiled by its members. Some of the *greuges* were included among the measures demanded, such as a revision of the fiscal balance and more significant infrastructure investments in Catalonia (PIMEC news 43; tweets 19 3 2014). The measures were ratified in a general assembly on March 19, 2014, before they were negotiated with the national and regional governments. Secessionists, however, recast the *Say enough!* campaign as a reason for independence, thus transforming the campaign's claims into a rift. Cercle tweeted, "Say enough to the Spanish state. We need independence!" or "Say enough to resignation; Spain will not save us. We need a new country!" (Cercle tweets 3 19 2014).

With these tweets, the secessionists construed Spain as beyond reform, justifying their opposition to any negotiation. In contrast, EOs upheld the position of the Spanish government by portraying the state as the addressee of their claims and by negotiating with the national government the implementation of the measures identified.

The second episode concerned the plea for a Mediterranean railway, a much-demanded infrastructure by several Mediterranean regions, including Catalonia. Repeatedly, EOs called for accelerating the railway as a vital infrastructure that would improve the competitiveness of the Catalan economy (Foment press release 1 20 2014; Foment's President speech 2 25 2016; 5 12 2016; 6 13 2017; PIMEC 3 2 2017). However, secessionists represented the claim as futile because the Spanish state would not provide this infrastructure to Catalonia, as can be seen in the following Cercle tweets: "We will not have the railway until we have our own state" (Cercle tweet 6 9 2014); "[t]he Spanish ruling elite has never been interested in progress but in getting rich" (tweet 4 26 2017).

EOs did not use the repeated delays in constructing this infrastructure to create a rift. Even when they criticized the inaction of the national government, their discourse did not convey an intention to break the relationship with Spain. Instead, EOs' repeated pleas to the national government suggest they were willing to maintain the relationship, thereby distancing themselves from secessionism.

Another discursive move to transcend secessionism was the decoupling of consultation from secession. As discussed above, EOs acknowledged the right of Catalans to be heard and recognized as singular within Spain. However, their texts decoupled this claim from "secessionism." Their choice of words, such as "right to decide" as opposed to the "right to self-determination" used in the secessionist narrative (e.g., Cercle tweets 7 8 2015; 9 12 2015; 3 11 2016), was an example of how decoupling is deployed. Furthermore, when expressing their support for the right to decide, EOs introduced restrictions to clarify what their endorsement entailed. For example, PIMEC maintained that their support for the "right to decide" meant "strictly that and nothing beyond that" (President of PIMEC speech 9 3 2015, tweet 9 4 2015). Finally, decoupling was performed with allusions: for example, EOs placed near their mention of "the right to decide" references to "the rule of law" (PIMEC press release 9 13 2017), the Constitution (President of Foment interview TV3 4 28 201), or the "legal framework" (Foment tweet 9 3 2015; President of Foment speech 6 25 2016).

With these allusions, EOs restricted the courses of action that should be subject to negotiation, leaving secession off the bargaining table. Calls to dialog or responsibility carry a similar intention. For example, in an interview (Europa Press 7 27 2015), the president of Cecot noted that "if it is done by dialoging, this is one thing; if it is done from a radical stance, then it would make it difficult for everyone." Although the text did not clarify what "it" meant (in the previous paragraphs, there was no reference to consultation or secession), it can be interpreted as a reservation against non-negotiated independence. PIMEC also attempted to temper the extremity of the secessionist camp with allusions claiming that governments must exhibit "responsibility" (President of PIMEC speech 9 3 2015), make "legal decisions" (President of PIMEC TV3 interview 7 7 2014), or maintain "regulatory stability" (press release 9 13 2017). Foment used allusions to claim a nonradical stance from the regional government, stating the desirability of "ruling with ample majorities" and "being democratic" (Foment press releases 1 11 2016; 7 2 2017; 10 9 2017; 11 3 2017; 11 9 2017).

4.4. Functions of discursive mediation

Although mediation is oriented to the de-escalation of conflict, it is nonetheless a self-serving strategy for organizations, because it performs three functions: instrumental, defensive, and expressive.

First, discursive mediation has a twofold instrumental function. It provides firms with an opportunity to advance a political agenda commensurate with their interests and allows them to maintain their relationship with whomever "wins." Discursive mediation represents an attempt to shape the political agenda by proposing the terms of an eventual agreement. In our case, EOs' texts redefined the problem and advanced potential solutions, namely, an increase in fund allocation to Catalonia and the completion of much-demanded infrastructures in the region. With their texts, they attempted to settle the terms of an agreement, displacing the conflict from revolution to evolution. As one of the interviewees said, "We recognize there is a fiscal deficit toward Catalonia, but we think that nothing should be done *unilaterally and breaking the established legal system*. This would be bad for businesses" (emphasis added). Other interviewees recognized that the conflict provided an opportunity to redefine the status of Catalonia and obtain

greater power for the region. EOs seized this opportunity by drafting positioning texts that asked for financial and economic reforms to move anti-secessionists away from immobilism.

Additionally, their texts acknowledged the claims of both factions without explicitly aligning with any of them, engaging with multiple stakeholders without alienating any. This strategy allowed EOs to align with the prevailing side, thereby safeguarding their economic and political interests (Vaara and Tienari, 2008). When the resolution of a sociopolitical conflict is uncertain (Vredenburg et al., 2020), discursive mediation allows organizations to protect their interests by avoiding the risks associated with aligning closely with any party. As one of the interviewees recognized, at the time, the EO he represented was taking part in more than 500 rounds of labor negotiation, some with the national government and some with the Catalan government. Taking sides would have jeopardized their position in these collective bargaining processes and limited their ability to reach settlements aligned with their members' interests.

Second, discursive mediation is defensive. It aims to deter conflict escalation as potential institutional fracture threatens EO members' interests. In our case study, unilateral secessionism was increasingly seen as a business risk that created legal instability and negatively impinged upon EO members' operations, as reflected by worsening economic indicators (Álvarez-Díaz et al., 2019; Tamames, 2014). In such a context, discursive mediation, if effective, may mitigate business risk, thereby improving economic conditions for all firms (Benton et al., 2022). This function of discursive mediation was also acknowledged by the interviewees, who recognized the need for legal and political stability as a priority for business. One of them explained: "As we saw that no State would recognize an independent Catalonia, some organizations exited the region […] We expected a move, a concession from the national government, but it never arrived […] There was a need to find a compromise, to negotiate a solution, or it [secessionism] would have been catastrophic.".

Finally, discursive mediation can be seen as expressive CSA. As several interviewees explained, EOs are different from other business associations in their institutional role as social agents that, together with trade unions, are legitimized to negotiate social and economic policies. The interviewees explained that, because of this mandate, they could not adopt radical positions—as Cercle did—but understood that their role as negotiators had to be extended to this political conflict. One of the interviewees, a former member of one of the EOs' boards, explained, "Consistent with our role, we had to appease them [the opposing factions], especially as the conflict escalated." Thus, in our case study, adopting the stance of mediators serves to reinforce EOs' identity and maintain their legitimacy. Alignment between an organization's positioning, purpose, and values (Vredenburg et al., 2020) is likely to make discursive mediation appear more authentic. Indeed, both pro- and antisecessionist media reflected EOs' discursive mediation as authentic through the *procés*, praising their stance "in support of dialog" (Expansión 11 12 2014; 10 6 2017) or recognizing their proposal of a third path as a valid way to get involved in the conflict (El Diario 10 4 2017; Diari Ara 9 1 2015).

5. Discussion

This paper argues that the CSA strategies employed by organizations may change depending on the stage of conflict evolution. When conflicts escalate and polarization is so acute that it may risk fracturing the institutional system, organizations may choose positioning strategies other than side-taking or silence. Our examination of an escalating conflict led us to inductively unveil and theorize one of these strategies: discursive mediation. We conceptualize discursive mediation as an activist strategy for organizations to address polarized sociopolitical conflicts that imply a disruption of institutional stability.

Other work has examined the mediation of businesses in the latest stages of conflict evolution (destruction) (Iff and Alluri, 2016; Sguaitamatti et al., 2010); this business mediation is part of track-two diplomacy efforts, which are carried out by nonstate actors (Melin et al., 2025; Oetzel et al., 2009; Palmiano Federer, 2021). Our proposed notion of discursive mediation shares some commonalities with how business mediation has been described in these studies: it is carried out by business associations rather than by individual companies; it legitimizes negotiation; and it is facilitative but has no control over outcomes (Iff and Alluri, 2016; Palmiano Federer, 2021; Sguaitamatti et al., 2010; Wall and Dunne, 2012). However, discursive mediation has three differences from the traditional participation of businesses in track-two diplomacy; these differences concern where, how, and when business mediation is carried out.

First, business mediation is usually carried out by enabling personal interactions among opponents or providing their expertise (Iff and Alluri, 2016; Sguaitamatti et al., 2010). These conversations are private and confidential. Business mediation is usually concealed because of the "reputational and security risks" involved (Sguaitamatti et al., 2010, 8), especially in the case of violent conflicts (Wall and Dunne, 2012). Discursive mediation is also relational. Its aim is the rapprochement of factions (Wall and Dunne, 2012). However, it does so publicly, using strategic communications to reconstruct and redress the portrayal of opponents fabricated by polarizing actors. Because discursive mediation is digitally mediated and public, it may have more influence on how factions view one another and the possible solutions to the conflict. Second, whereas in violent conflicts organizations assume the role of mediators in agreement with their opponents (Sguaitamatti et al., 2010), discursive mediation prompts them to assume a self-adjudicated role that may not respond to the will of the factions. This strategy may be less conducive to agreements because the parties may not accept organizational mediators. Third, business mediation is usually performed after hostilities break out (Oetzel et al., 2009; Palmiano Federer, 2021). In contrast, discursive mediation is preemptive; it is carried out before the onset of violence. Therefore, discursive mediation is a preventive diplomatic strategy, as it aims to avoid conflict escalation (Boutros-Ghali, 1992).

Our theorization of discursive mediation is subject to two boundary conditions. In our case study, this strategy was enacted by employer organizations. However, we argue that discursive mediation could be employed by other actors when there is consistency between mediation and the organization's values and purposes. We discussed how this strategy was attuned to the studied actors, as it is highly aligned with their ethos to represent and reach compromises among social actors (Barry and Wilkinson, 2011; Demougin et al., 2019). Extending this rationale, discursive mediation may likely be used by other organizations, e.g., consumer brands or industry associations that adopt a similar dialogic orientation (Wirtz and Zimbres, 2018), as discursive mediation would be perceived as authentic or aligned with their values and purpose (Vredenburg et al., 2020). It may also be an appropriate strategy for multinational firms to navigate the institutional complexity in host countries (Minefee and Yue, 2025). Discursive mediation allows organizations to participate in political debates while avoiding the risks of penalization by influential stakeholders. This point is consistent with studies on peace activism that have observed this strategy among multinational firms (Melin et al., 2025; Tsougkou et al., 2025). Second, although mediation was associated with a political conflict in this case study, it could also be employed to take stances on other divisive issues, such as climate change, immigration laws, or universal healthcare when polarized positions over these issues risk institutional fracture.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Our work makes theoretical contributions to different studies. First, it extends the literature on the arsenal of CSA strategies. Specifically, discursive mediation represents a third way of sociopolitical positioning employed in conflict escalation. Past studies have identified side-taking in earlier stages of conflict evolution, i.e., when societies divide around

certain issues, but this confrontation does not yet threaten the institutional system (Hurst, 2023). Peace brand activism has been observed in the destructive phase when hostilities among factions become violent (Tsougkou et al., 2025). Discursive mediation is observed when conflicts escalate, polarization becomes acute, and social antagonism threatens institutional stability, but before violence breaks out. This characteristic also distinguishes discursive mediation from other forms of business participation in diplomatic efforts (Iff and Alluri, 2016), which are usually enacted after the onset of violence. In contrast, discursive mediation emerges as a preventive diplomatic strategy (Boutros-Ghali, 1992).

Past work has also presented side-taking as an appropriate CSA strategy for encouraging social change, communicating organizational values, and improving relationships with core stakeholders (Nalick et al., 2016; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Wettstein and Baur, 2016). Our study shows that discursive mediation may also be instrumental in achieving these goals. It allows organizations to influence settlement terms in ways that align with their interests and express a dialogic orientation while avoiding entanglement with competing factions. In this regard, this strategy may provide a superior advantage to side-taking, as it reduces the risks of backlash from opposing stakeholders (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

Our work also provides a response to criticisms of CSA that claim it can widen sociopolitical conflicts (Neureiter and Bhattacharya, 2021; Ulver, 2022). We argue that this risk is associated with side-taking, a particular CSA strategy. In contrast, discursive mediation is oriented toward conflict de-escalation because of its specific discursive practices: its use of depolarizing language, the deconstruction of hostile representations of factions, and the proposal of solutions that can be negotiated. These practices make mediation a different CSA strategy from peace brand activism. As part of peace brand activism, organizations produce statements opposing violence or expressing solidarity with the victims of war (Tsougkou et al., 2025). Although explicit calls for dialog can also occur as part of discursive mediation, the latter is a preemptive diplomatic strategy that prepares the stage for a rapprochement among factions. This point explains why peace brand activism has not been linked with discursive strategies that aim to alter the bases of polarization, namely, the construction of the opposing faction as hostile or support for radical solutions. Whereas peace brand activism may also imply blaming a faction for the aggression and even threats of boycotts (Tsougkou et al., 2025), discursive mediation is characterized by blame suspension.

Second, we contribute to CPA research (Hillman and Hitt, 1999) by shifting the focus from the individual to the collective political capabilities of organizations (Choi et al., 2020). Collective political action, which is achieved mainly via the establishment of relationships with employers or industry associations, is an indirect form of CPA by firms (Bonardi et al., 2005; Hillman and Hitt, 1999) that can be linked with collective political capabilities (Choi et al., 2020). We elucidate discursive mediation as a distinctive capability of organizations, allowing them to coordinate collective action in complex political landscapes. This collective political action, often achieved through employer organizations, industry associations, or alliances, extends the CPA literature by highlighting how discourse can be a strategic tool for expressing corporate interests and engaging in broader societal debates. The literature on CPA recognizes the communicative function and nature of some corporate political actions, such as lobbying, and links them to firms' public relations with governments (Berg, 2009). As the essence of this communicative aspect lies in its aim to sway or alter perceptions (Milbrath, 1963: 32), this literature suggests that the goal of lobby discourse is to influence policies to obtain favorable outcomes for firms (Berg, 2009). Our work extends these motives for collective political action by suggesting that there could be a case of "lobbying for dialog" as an organizational strategy that may play a mediating role in depolarizing conflicts and fostering reconciliation. This novel perspective on CPAs demonstrates how EOs act not only to secure favorable policy outcomes but also to preserve democratic dialog and reduce polarization within industries and markets.

5.2. Limitations and future research directions

Although this study provides insights for organizations to manage acute polarizing contexts with a novel strategy, it has limitations associated with the method used. Namely, our theorization is grounded on a specific case study, which limits its generalizability. More importantly, we could not study the effects of this strategy on two important outcomes: conflict evolution and stakeholders' perceptions. Future work can examine this strategy's short- and long-term effects on conflicts and the conditions under which these texts shift polarizing dynamics and deter conflict escalation. Other work has demonstrated that organizations' calls for dialog may effectively encourage factions to reach peace agreements (Melin et al., 2025); yet, in our context, the ultimate stage of the conflict was determined by the national government exercising coercive power over the regional government. This is not different from other mediation processes: the effectiveness of mediation decreases when one of the parties retains more power and can impose their will on the other party (Pugh, 2009). This point suggests power asymmetries among factions as a boundary condition determining the effectiveness of this strategy. In addition to the effects on conflict evolution, we need evidence concerning stakeholders' reactions to discursive mediation, thus extending current studies on the effects of side-taking, silence, and neutrality on stakeholders (e.g., Pimentel et al., 2024). Specifically, future work should disambiguate under which conditions this strategy is perceived as commitment avoidance or as a genuine interest in forestalling polarization and avoiding institutional fracture, examining, for instance, the moderating role of perceived authenticity (Vredenburg et al., 2020) or receivers' ideological orientation (Bondi et al., 2025).

Focusing more on internal decision-making, future work should study how internal forces operate among organizational actors and how they shape their choice of sociopolitical positioning strategies. This inquiry should also extend to identifying under which conditions (be they related to the stage of conflict, sociopolitical context, or organizational characteristics) organizations' CSA strategies shift from side-taking to discursive mediation and to peace activism. Despite these limitations, this study reveals a third path that can help organizations address highly polarized contexts.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Carmen Valor: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Elisa Aracil:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis. **Carlos Bellón:** Writing – review & editing, Software, Data curation. **Laura Fernández-Méndez:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis.

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Appendix A. Supplementary material

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Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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