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Regular Article

The balcony peer effect in urban political expression: A comparative two-case study from a Spanish context

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ABSTRACT

Balconies have not been fully conceptualized and analyzed as a specific political scene with their singular scope and significance and governed by their own rationale. A recent effort to reverse this abandonment has insisted on their positive contribution to free political expression and to an urban version of deliberative democracy. This article identifies the "balcony peer effect": an endogenous mechanism whereby eye-level visibility across neighboring building façades synchronizes political signaling. This effect complicates the idea that balcony displays are purely individual acts of conviction.

We argue that, in contexts marked by political polarization and a cultural preference for conflict avoidance, decisions to express (or not express) political views from one's balcony are shaped by the micro-politics of visibility among neighboring residents. Individual expression appears subject to normative pressures rooted in the anticipated judgment of "balcony peers," with whom a minimal outward harmony is socially desirable.

While our data are correlational and do not establish causality, they suggest that public expression is not solely the result of internal belief, but also a socially embedded practice. Empirically, we draw on two survey-based case studies in Madrid, Spain. The first was conducted during the 2017 Catalan crisis, when Spanish flags appeared on balconies; the second during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, when nightly balcony applause for healthcare workers became widespread. Our results confirm that balcony peers spur imitation in political displays, and this influence is strongest when the act contradicts the individual's own ideology.

1. Introduction

Despite their prevalence in urban life, balconies have seldom been recognized and explored as specific political stages within political science, not only as metaphors or media tropes, but as concrete, spatially embedded settings for visible political expression. Balconies simultaneously contrast with barricades and with mere passive political interest. Unlike contentious street activism, the balcony epitomizes half-hearted, rearguard political commitment (Corrigall-Brown, 2012; Roberts & Kloss, 1979). Displaying a flag or expressing solidarity with a cause from a balcony constitutes a passive political act according to the traditional typology (Conway, 2000), because it reflects symbolic support without active engagement in political processes or direct attempts to influence decision-making. Yet, it also contrasts with full disengagement or even more passive forms of political participation, like mere informative engagement or "attention to news" (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013).

By the generic term "balcony," we mean any space from which an urban dweller can lean out and engage in verbal, gestural, or symbolic expression that is directed outward and visible to neighbors standing on their balconies, at their windows, or in their doorways. These spaces enable an expressive form of participation, analogous to wearing a badge, tweeting, or displaying a symbol of solidarity on an Instagram feed or as a Facebook profile picture. While each platform has its own specificity, balconies remain strikingly understudied in the expressive politics literature, with almost no mention of balconies or windows as political settings across major references on repertoires of political expression (Endersby & Towle, 1996; Hamlin & Jennings, 2011; Scheufele & Eveland, 2001; Stanyer, 2005). Balconies are frontiers with the street and serve as steady standpoints for exhibition and mutual

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observation among immediate neighbors, involving questions of daily civil peace and local participatory democracy. Hence, we believe their study is especially relevant in countries like Spain, where political culture is shaped by the still vivid memory of the civil war (Balcells, 2012) and by ongoing debates on neighboring and local participatory processes (Font et al., 2014; Jerrems, 2020). Beyond Spain, recent global events, such as pandemic lockdowns and rising polarization, have turned balconies into mediatized stages for solidarity, protest, and political signaling. While our empirical focus is Madrid, similar expressive uses of balcony-like spaces have been observed in Buenos Aires (cacerolazo protests), Milan (lockdown concerts), and New York (fire-escape flag displays). Situating our study within this emerging comparative corpus underscores its potential to inform a broader research agenda on micro-urban public spheres.

Aronis has taken a pioneering step in conceptualizing balcony expression as a specific form of political communication. Drawing on anthropological and spatial theory, she identifies balconies and porches as "liminal urban architecture", ambiguous zones between public and private life that enable performative, creative, and often playful political acts (Aronis, 2020b). Relying on phenomenological and visual analyses of urban scenes, she aligns balcony expressions with platforms like Twitter, emphasizing its spontaneity and potential for confrontational conversation and deliberative democracy (Aronis, 2020a). Her work rightly reclaims balconies as overlooked political spaces, framing them as open-ended, expressive arenas largely unconstrained by social norms, and thus contributing to the public sphere as defined by Habermas (1991).

While we share Aronis's view of balconies as meaningful arenas for political expression, our analysis brings a complementary perspective. Rather than emphasizing only their emancipatory potential, we investigate how neighbor visibility, weak ties, and informal rules of cohabitation structure the likelihood and content of balcony-based political acts. In particular, we examine how mutual monitoring and the desire for neighborhood civility can act as informal constraints on expression dynamics. Thus, our analysis builds on Aronis (2020a, 2020b) by adding a micro-sociological lens on normative influence and peer conformity. Our aim is not to reject the balcony's expressive potential but to situate it more squarely within the social psychology and micro-politics of urban life.

This article asks whether mutual visibility among balcony neighbors shapes individual engagement in public political expression. It pursues three objectives: (i) to estimate the magnitude of the balcony peer effect in two contrasting expressive acts; (ii) to examine how that effect varies with the performative nature of the act, the degree of perceived anonymity, and ideological incongruence; and (iii) to clarify the implications of these dynamics for theories of peer influence and micro-urban public spheres. These goals lead to four hypotheses (H1-H4) developed in the following section:

H1. The higher the proportion of ego's balcony neighbors performing a given political act, the higher the probability of ego performing it as well.

H2. The balcony peer effect is stronger for body-performed acts (e.g., collective applause) than for artifact-mediated displays (e.g., flags or placards).

H3. The larger the group of balcony neighbors, the lesser the peer effect's impact.

H4. Balcony peer effect amplifies when the political act is not congruent with the self-assessed individual's political side.

Our empirical research is grounded in the rich tapestry of Spanish balcony politics, and more particularly in the Madrid urban area. We examine two contexts and forms of balcony expression: the display of national flags in the immediate aftermaths of the Catalonian crisis (Moreno-Luzón, 2017), and the solidarity applause performed during the COVID-19 lockdown (Aramayona & Nofre, 2021; Calvo & Bejarano, 2020).

These two case studies were selected not only for their historical salience but because they offer contrasting yet symmetrical opportunities to explore our core research question regarding balcony peer effects. Both involve citizen-led expressive actions from balconies in a politically polarized urban setting, where mutual visibility among neighbors makes social influence particularly salient. However, they differ in three theoretically meaningful ways: the performative nature of the act (symbolic versus bodily), their ideological connotation (right-leaning versus left-leaning), and the mode of expression (static display versus ritualistic coordination). This contrast allows us to establish the robustness of the balcony peer effect and to examine how its intensity and direction vary across dimensions of political signaling, anonymity, and expressive embodiment.

2. Theoretical foundations

2.1. Expressive politics, public opinion, and liminal urban architecture

Political participation often incorporates an expressive form, even in seemingly instrumental acts like voting (Hamlin & Jennings, 2011). Political symbols, such as flags or badges, represent identity, showcasing beliefs about political matters (Hillman, 2010; Laband et al., 2009). Local political characteristics can influence expressive acts like U.S. yard sign display (Makse & Sokhey, 2014). Like balcony expression, U.S. yard signs serve as spatially anchored political symbols, yet they are shaped more by campaign dynamics and indirect peer influence than by real-time mutual visibility. Balcony displays differ because they are event-driven and immediately observed, making them especially sensitive to normative pressure among neighbors.

Public opinion shapes individuals' willingness to express political views (Scheufele & Eveland, 2001). An individual evaluates society's approval of their opinions, influencing their expression on an issue (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). This paper focuses on how potential balcony audiences affect one's willingness to express. While urban balconies' audiences include passers-by and broader neighborhoods, our research emphasizes the specific influence of balcony neighbors: those who can witness your political expression from their own balcony.

Political science has long examined the embeddedness of political behavior in multiple microsocial contexts, including neighborhoods (Huckfeldt et al., 1993), with local social capital playing a pivotal role (Johnston et al., 2005), and has highlighted the multiplicative role of social influence in electoral choice (Canache et al., 1994). We propose a more immediate, visually mediated peer effect. This effect shapes individual political expression through same-block and at-sight dynamics.

Some symbolic political expressions, like yard signs or window posters, reflect "basking in reflected glory" (Boen et al., 2002), often peaking after elections or in strongly partisan contexts (Bernhardt et al., 2014). In contrast, balcony expression is driven less by retrospective affiliation and more by real-time conformity pressures promoted by permanent bilateral visibility.

The urban built environment shapes political expression by structuring visibility and interpersonal exposure (van Leeuwen, 2021; Zacka, 2020). Like the voting booth once did (Crook & Crook, 2007; Garrigou, 1988), balconies embody the spatial mediation of political expression, though without guaranteed privacy. As "liminal urban architecture" (Aronis 2020b), they blur public and private, creating ambiguous zones for symbolic display. While Aronis usefully aligns balconies with Twitter in their expressive potential, we emphasize a key divergence: unlike digital platforms, balconies impose constant physical mutuality. One cannot curate or conceal their audience as in online contexts (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013), and peer control becomes both spatial and relational. Political expression through bumper stickers, for instance, has been studied as a form of mobile, individualized signaling, typically free from interpersonal constraint (Bloch, 2000). In contrast, balcony displays are

fixed, mutually visible, and embedded in neighborhood dynamics, where stronger normative pressures may foster conformity and conflict-avoidance.

2.2. Endogenous peer effects

Peer effects occur when individuals' thoughts or decisions change due to social interactions with similar individuals, such as friends, acquaintances, or wider reference groups (Haller & Woelfel, 1972). In politics, these effects manifest in diverse ways, for example, through the influence of classmates on teenagers' political involvement (Bergan et al., 2022; Campbell, 2008), or through the sway of Twitter followers on the support for a cause (Coppock et al., 2016).

Most research on peer effects concentrates on political discussions within social networks or conformity to social norms (Suhay, 2015). As voting is a private, non-observable behavior, extant explanations of peer effects on voting refer to interactions in the form of political discussion and exchange of information among individuals, whether in the same household (Nickerson, 2008) or in the same network (Bond et al., 2012). However, political behaviors such as public demonstrations can be influenced by mere mutual observation, suggesting peer effects can also arise independently of explicit idea exchange (Books & Prysby, 1988; Cho & Rudolph, 2008).

Measuring peer effects is fraught with potential biases, including selection bias and the "reflection problem" (Manski, 1993). For instance, individuals often group with like-minded individuals, leading to selection bias (Hillman, 2010). The "reflection problem" raises the question of whether group behavior reflects a peer effect or simply represents average group behavior resulting from members influencing each other. Manski (1993) differentiates peer effects into endogenous, exogenous, and correlated types. Endogenous effects occur when an individual's behavior or attitude varies in accordance with the behavior of the group, by imitation or conformity. In contrast, exogenous and correlated peer effects respectively reflect the influence of shared individual characteristics or of a shared environment.

The "balcony peer effect" proposed in this paper is an endogenous effect, with peers being the balcony neighbors. Our study design aims to control selection bias and exogenous and correlated effects.

2.3. Balcony neighborliness

Social pressure can manifest as "informational influence" and "normative influence" (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Price et al., 2006). We emphasize the latter as central to the balcony peer effect, in which expression is shaped by perceived judgment from nearby observers. Research on urban sociability supports this: neighbors often navigate daily life through stylized performances of civility and "fake familiarity" (Goffman, 1971; Milgram, 2010). These interactions are governed by implicit norms aimed at preserving peace (Felder, 2021). Liminal balcony spaces reinforce these dynamics by encouraging controlled visibility and enabling mutual accommodation, both symbolically (e.g. plants as soft barriers) and socially (Stender & Jepsen, 2021). Even architectural discourse recognizes balconies as curated thresholds for identity and lifestyle signaling (Smektała & Baborska-Narożny, 2022).

General political issues often pose a risk for personal relationships: an attitude of "political avoidance" is common (Eliasoph, 1998), both in family contexts (Chen & Rohla, 2018) and in more public ones (Wyatt et al., 2000). Individuals might prefer to avoid political confrontations they consider divisive, choosing instead to engage online or offline in deliberations with like-minded people (Kruse et al., 2018; Levinsen & Yndigegn, 2015; Matthes et al., 2021; Mutz, 2006). Political conflict avoidance outside safe bubbles of preselected like-minded peers tends to be stronger with weak ties than with strong ones (Matthes et al., 2021; Morey et al., 2012). Therefore, we expect conflict avoidance to be particularly common among neighbors in direct mutual view. Neighbors often emphasize outward similarity and cordiality to preserve daily harmony. This tendency is even stronger among co-owners of the same building or residence, where shared common areas and responsibilities increase potential conflict.

Sharing political engagement or simply recognizing like-mindedness enhances relationship quality (Kruse et al., 2018; Levinsen & Yndigegn, 2015; Sumaktoyo, 2021). In a conservative neighborhood, I may fear being seen as a "SJW" (social justice warrior); in a liberal one, as "the fash." This fear might prompt me to signal political congruence opportunistically. People routinely infer others' leanings from expressive behavior or appearance (Deichert, M.A. (2019); Talhelm et al., 2015). The desire to maintain good relations with cross-cutting contacts, especially in weak-tie contexts like the workplace, fosters tolerance and strategic displays of alignment (Mutz & Mondak, 2006). Thus, displaying conformity through balcony gestures can be a tempting strategy to prevent misperceptions.

2.4. Conceptualizing the balcony peer effect

The "balcony peer effect" builds on existing theories of political expression under social constraint while adding a specific spatial dimension. In contrast to media-based perceptions (Noelle-Neumann, 1993) or discursive avoidance (Mutz, 2006), it highlights how direct visual exposure to neighbors conditions public expression in everyday urban settings. Our notion of endogenous peer influence draws from the tradition of neighborhood effects and political discussion (e.g., Huckfeldt et al., 1993; Nickerson, 2008), but extends it to visually-mediated, non-verbal signaling in liminal spaces. This captures a type of social pressure that standard models of peer effects rarely address. We conceptualize the balcony peer effect as an endogenous mechanism by which an individual's political expression is conditioned by the proportion and behavior of visually accessible neighbors.

This model allows us to differentiate endogenous peer effects from correlated or exogenous influences by emphasizing both real-time mutual observability and the ambiguous status of balconies as semi-private, semi-public spaces. We argue that visibility structures social incentives for normative conformity. These incentives are particularly strong when political expressions are physically demonstrative or when the individual perceives ideological incongruence with their neighbors. This framework leads to the following four hypotheses.

Our primary hypothesis concerns a balcony peer effect, that is, the influence of a peer group defined egocentrically by neighbors in direct, mutual visual contact from balconies. Building on classic social network studies that reconceptualized community as "personal communities" or "ego networks" (Fischer, 1982; Wellman and Potter, 1999), we test for this effect by measuring, for each survey respondent, the proportion of balcony neighbors engaging in political expressions. We then examine whether this proportion positively and significantly correlates with the respondent's own expression, ceteris paribus.

H1. The higher the proportion of ego's balcony neighbors performing a given political act, the higher the probability of ego performing it as well.

Egocentric publics, especially in digital contexts, have been identified as potential catalysts for political participation, primarily through cognitive processes involving perceptual biases between individual and broader media communication (Rojas et al., 2016). In contrast, we propose the existence of a normative process of mutual control enabled by the form of political performance. Physical acts like chanting or applauding require bodily presence and synchronous action. This creates stronger mutual control compared to symbol-mediated expressions, which allow for civil inattention.

H2. The balcony peer effect is stronger for body-performed acts (e.g., collective applause) than for artifact-mediated displays (e.g., flags or placards).

The perceived anonymity may also modulate peer effects. Individuals who feel identifiable are more likely to conform due to reputational concerns (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). By contrast, anonymity,

often linked to larger group size, can reduce social pressure (Hirsh et al., 2011; Joinson, 1999). Although early deindividuation theory suggested that anonymity lowers self-awareness and conformity within bigger crowds (Reicher, 2001), the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) argues that this impact depends on context and group salience (Spears, 2017, pp. 1–9).

In this study, we use the number of visible neighboring balconies as a proxy for perceived anonymity. When this number is small, individuals are more likely to feel observed and accountable, which increases normative conformity. By contrast, as the number of neighbors increases, the sense of mutual surveillance weakens, reducing reputational pressure and dampening peer influence. This interpretation aligns with empirical findings from social psychology (Joinson, 1999; Kugihara, 2001) and is consistent with the SIDE model, which emphasizes how group salience and visibility jointly shape the effects of anonymity on conformity.

H3. The larger the group of balcony neighbors, the lesser the peer effect's impact.

Symmetrically to voting, a deemed instrumental form of participation that is infused with self-expressive concerns, we expect political expression at a balcony to be infused by contextual and instrumental concerns: managing peaceful conviviality with the neighbors who can most easily observe one's private space. As a costly compliance with my political identity when voting provides mainly expressive advantages (Pickup et al., 2021), we can expect a political expression incurring costs in terms of cognitive dissonance to provide some instrumental benefit. Then, we might expect the temptation to demonstrate one's similarity with balcony peers to be stronger for those who might be suspected of being incongruent otherwise, as they have a higher strategic interest in seizing an opportunity to show off congruence.

H4. Balcony peer effects amplify when the political act is not congruent with the self-assessed individual's political side.

If, contrary to this assumption, the effect were stronger among individuals expressing views aligned with their political identity, this would suggest that the balcony peer effect functions primarily through an emancipatory mechanism, that is, individuals feel encouraged and validated to express their views when surrounded by like-minded neighbors. This logic echoes theories of identity reinforcement and expressive confidence under supportive conditions. However, we hypothesize that strategic conformity plays a stronger role: individuals are more likely to conform publicly when their personal views diverge from the dominant local norm, in order to avoid disapproval or social friction. In this case, the balcony functions less as a site of free self-expression than as a space of visible alignment shaped by peer pressure and the desire to maintain neighborhood civility. While both mechanisms may be at work, H4 anticipates that strategic conformity will be more pronounced when political expression runs counter to individual orientation.

Fig. 1 presents a conceptual framework of our model, summarizing the hypothesized relationships. The diagram highlights the core endogenous peer effect (H1), as well as the contextual factors through which we explore whether this effect varies (H2–H4). It also includes relevant individual and contextual control variables.

3. Empirical study

3.1. The urban Spanish context of Madrid

Throughout recent Spanish political history, balconies have been repeatedly and diversely seized upon by citizen initiatives. These initiatives have manifested as expressions of both support and opposition to local or national government, emanating from all sides of the structuring axes of the local political culture, whether left/right or center/periphery. At times, they have responded to one another. For example, the deployment of the official flag of Spain was a reaction to Catalan nationalist ones during the 2017 crisis. Similarly, the anti-government "cacerolada" (pot-banging protest) emerged as an alternative to the ritual of applause during the lockdown. Moreover, Spain is a highly polarized democracy in terms of left/right political identity cleavage. This creates a breeding ground for a persistent tension between identity affirmation and conflict avoidance. How does the Spanish citizen use (or refrain from using) the balcony when invited to join an expressive political movement in a potentially divisive context? How do daily civility concerns interfere with this political identity dilemma?

Indeed, among the advanced democracies, the Spanish society has been pointed as one of the most polarized ones (Reiljan, 2020). Left-right affective polarization increases in hot political contexts in Spain in a largely symmetrical way. This is mainly driven by an increase in positive sentiments toward the in-group, as recently shown during electoral periods. An increase in negative sentiment toward the out-group has also been observed, though to a lesser extent. This polarization has especially increased with the end of bipartidism and the emergence of political parties challenging both sides (Orriols & León, 2022).

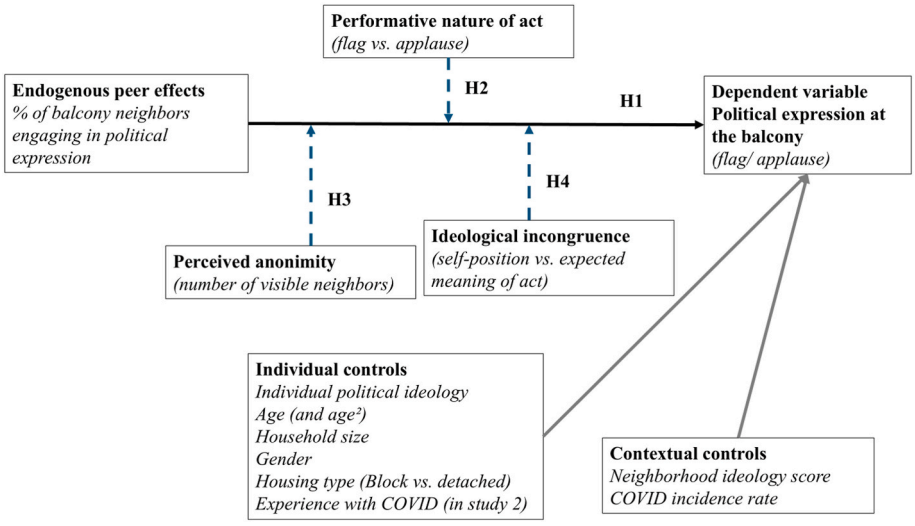

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of the balcony peer effect model
Note: Solid arrows represent direct effects included in the statistical models. Dashed arrows indicate dimensions along which we explore heterogeneity in the balcony peer effect through subgroup analyses (H2–H4).

Affective polarization is expressed through various platforms, such as television media (Goyanes et al., 2023; Pérez-Escoda et al., 2023) or online social media like Twitter. On these platforms, high levels of hate have been documented, particularly through memes. Any current affair can become an excuse to convey ideological positions, disqualify adversaries, and empathize with the like-minded peer in a merely emotional mode (Paz et al., 2021).

Polarization is a touchy issue for democracy because it correlates with a risk of desertion from the public sphere and a decline in civil debate. This, in turn, gives way to more hateful, confrontational relations (Paz et al., 2021), or to political avoidance marked by low political interest and reduced institutional trust, particularly in the media (Goyanes et al., 2023).

In Spain, this issue is heightened by the memory of violent partisan confrontations during the Civil War and the subsequent dictatorship. A strong rejection of political adversaries, perceived as perpetrators of violence, has been passed down through generations (Balcells, 2012). While political disinterest or disengagement has not been observed among heirs of this transgenerational victimization, the long-term impact of political violence on attitudes and the potential development of a culture of civil conflict avoidance remains a plausible hypothesis (Oto-Peralías, 2015).

Contentious politics at the neighborhood level has been a sporadic, microlocal phenomenon in highly vulnerable districts in recent Spanish political history (Blanco & León, 2017). While these instances may connect to broader social movements, they do not signify a cultural shift at the national or even city-wide level. In fact, Spain is known for neighborhoods that foster social interactions, support networks, and emotional connections, even in urban settings. Madrid, in particular, has been highlighted in the literature on urban sociality as a space where daily activities and local interactions help people form and reinforce identities rooted in their neighborhoods (Gómez & Lebrusán, 2022).

We propose to investigate two case studies of balcony expression, both of which were citizen attempts to rally national unity by drawing on traditional national symbols and ritualistic activities (Schatz & Lavine, 2007). Although formally citizen-initiated, both forms of balcony political expression were in alignment with the positions of the national government at the time. To mitigate the biases stemming from partisan and polarization dynamics, we chose symmetrical cases in terms of right-wing and left-wing symbolic positioning.

Focusing on Madrid simplifies the issue of identity polarization along the left–right axis. A survey conducted in Barcelona, or another peripheral city with a strong independence movement, would face the added challenge of intersecting identity dimensions, as Spanish politics is structured by both the left–right and center–periphery axes.

3.2. Two survey-based case studies

We focus on Madrid because it offers two balcony-expression episodes (Spanish-flag displays in 2017 and nightly applause in 2020), each with a different ideological valence (right versus left), yet both unfolding under the same political and regulatory context, thereby maximizing internal comparability.

The first case relates to the display of Spanish flags following the Catalonian independence crisis. The unauthorized independence referendum held on October 1st, 2017, spurred a grassroots protest campaign in other regions, with citizens displaying Spanish flags on their balconies as a gesture of defiance against Catalonian secession and as a declaration of national unity. This wave, evidenced by manufacturers reporting flag sales tripling or quadrupling for several months, was tempered by the contentious nature of the Spanish flag.

The flag crystallizes criticism from two major currents that challenge national institutions: peripheral nationalisms and republicanism (Moreno-Luzón, 2017). Some left-wing Spanish citizens still associate the flag with the Franco dictatorship, viewing it as a symbol appropriated by traditional right-wing parties (Ruiz Jimenez et al., 2015). Sporting victories by the Spanish national soccer team have somewhat softened this divisive perception (Kubiaczyk, 2020). Nevertheless, the flag's widespread adoption in Madrid, a region geographically and politically distant from the Catalan conflict, symbolized an appeal to Spanish unity and was largely interpreted as a right-wing act (Bernat & Whyte, 2020; Kubiaczyk, 2020).

The second case revolves around the ritual applause during Spain's COVID-19 lockdown. This grassroots act of unity mirrored the "white tide" protest that followed the 2011 "15M" movement, defending public health services (Martínez, 2020). Despite their political undertone, these applause activities allowed citizens to participate in social life during an otherwise isolating time (Aramayona & Nofre, 2021). Yet, after one month, the apolitical frame of solidarity promoted by the government began to erode and was increasingly criticized by political adversaries (Sánchez & Latorres, 2022). Balcony citizens even became targets of criticism, depicted by some as extremist agents of the left-wing government (Aguiló Obrador, 2020). The expression "balconazi" was coined to stigmatize those who scolded people from their balconies for not respecting social distancing or for wearing masks incorrectly (Cancelas-Ouviña, 2021).

During the week our questionnaire was conducted, between April 20th and 30th, applause had already become the focus of criticism due to its perceived co-optation by the government. Some right-wing representatives began promoting alternative pot-banging protests ("*cacerolada*s"). As a result, going out to the balcony to applaud increasingly acquired a political connotation, as a gesture of support for the left-wing government.

In both case studies, political congruence plays a significant role, creating pressure for citizens to conform to the collective expression of their local community. The analyses control for selection bias and peer effects at both the district and balcony-peer levels, incorporating variables such as individual political orientation and a neighborhood-level ideology score (Gallego et al., 2016; Gimpel & Hui, 2017).

3.3. Data collection and survey design

Data were collected via surveys disseminated through personal contacts and snowball sampling. To ensure sample heterogeneity and minimize bias, the process was initiated with carefully selected seeds representing diverse districts of residence, political ideologies, and sociodemographic backgrounds. Colleagues, friends, and acquaintances from the authors' networks were chosen to reflect contrasting profiles, for instance, individuals with both right- and left-leaning views, from different social classes and age groups, with attention to gender balance. The main investigator's multiple engagement in academic, musical, or personal communities facilitated access to a socially diverse set of initial respondents. This strategy was intended to enhance variation in subsequent waves and to better capture the diversity of the population under study.

The survey instruments were designed with attention to clarity and neutrality. Questions were pre-tested with a small, diverse pilot group to identify and address potential ambiguities or biases in wording. Feedback from the pilot informed revisions to improve the reliability and validity of the questionnaire before its full-scale deployment. We used online, self-administered surveys, which tend to reduce social desirability bias compared to interviewer-administered modes, especially for public, socially loaded acts, because the absence of direct oversight enhances perceived privacy and anonymity (Gnambs & Kaspar, 2017). Moreover, in affectively polarized contexts, social desirability pressures may be weaker, as maintaining one's individual identity and in-group alignment can outweigh the impulse to conform (Mason, 2018).

Surveys were predominantly disseminated via widely accessible communication channels, including WhatsApp and email. These platforms were chosen to maximize the reach and engagement of potential respondents, as they are commonly used across various demographic groups. The final datasets were further refined to include only

respondents residing in the Madrid region and reporting valid postal codes, ensuring alignment with the geographic scope of the study. Respondent anonymity was fully maintained.

First study sample: Data collection took place between October 9th and 31st, 2017. A total of 459 responses were obtained, of which 367 were retained. These covered 51 of the 55 postal codes within the municipality of Madrid, as well as 30 surrounding municipalities, together accounting for 79.8 % of the region's population. As is typical in Spain, 80 % of the sample lived in apartment blocks, while 20 % resided in detached houses.

Second study sample: A total of 259 responses were obtained, and the final estimation sample was reduced to 154. These covered 38 of the 55 postal codes in Madrid and 28 surrounding municipalities, altogether accounting for 73.8 % of the region's population. Data collection took place between April 20th and 30th, 2020. The time window was kept relatively short to avoid potential confounding effects due to changes in the evolution of the pandemic and its management, while still allowing for statistically significant estimates and results. Several concurrent factors help explain the smaller sample size: the pandemic context itself; the perceived difficulty of the task (which required counting balconies at a very specific time of day); and a general overload of concurrent requests to complete surveys, whether for academic research or even students' assignments.

All questions were mandatory in the online survey forms, so there were no missing values in the final datasets. However, we applied consistency checks and excluded responses with implausible values, for example, cases reporting more balconies with flags than total visible balconies. Appendix 1 provides the full wording of the survey items used in both studies.

3.4. Variables

The variables in this study are either directly observable or self-reported single-item measures, and by their nature, they do not require psychometric validation.

Dependent Variables: Both studies used dichotomous dependent variables. The first assigned a "1″ to households that exhibited a national flag in their window or balcony, with "0″ representing the absence of such a display. The second study aimed to measure the frequency of a daily ritual, specifically, how often individuals clapped from their balconies or windows at 20:00. Responses were collected on a five-point scale ranging from "never" (1) to "always" (5). To ensure analytical uniformity, these results were dichotomized: responses of "always" or "almost always" were coded as "1," and all other responses as "0." Accordingly, the unit of analysis in this study is the individual, reflecting the personalized nature of this form of participation.

3.5. Endogenous peer effect

This effect was measured by the proportion of neighbors displaying a flag or clapping at 20:00. To obtain a more realistic and accurate estimate, respondents were asked to report separately the number of balconies or windows visible from their home and the number where the political action was observed, rather than simply providing an approximate percentage. This design choice helps minimize potential measurement error associated with subjective estimations. In addition, and to further account for possible residual imprecision, we constructed an alternative, coarser ordinal version of this variable (low, medium, high exposure), which is used as a robustness check and discussed in the results section. This reporting method also enabled us to derive an additional variable, total number of visible balconies or windows, that we include as a covariate to proxy perceived anonymity, and explore its potential moderating effect on expressive behavior.

Exogenous and Correlated Effects: At the neighborhood level, ideological scores were estimated by postal code, following the methodology of Martínez-de-Ibarreta et al. (2024) and Martínez-de-Ibarreta & Valor (2018) We acknowledge that postal-code areas do not necessarily correspond to individuals' actual social networks or daily spheres of interaction. However, they provide the most granular territorial unit for which reliable aggregate data are publicly available. These neighborhood-level variables are therefore used to capture exogenous or correlated peer effects, in contrast to the endogenous, spatially proximate interactions that define the "balcony peer effect." The calculation involved the following steps:

(i) *Party Positioning*: We obtained the average ideological position (on a 0 to 10 scale) for each of the most voted political parties, using the most recent data from the biannual survey conducted by the national public sociological research center (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2017; 2020). Specifically, we used data from July 2017 (n = 2490) for the flags case study and from January 2020 (n = 2922) for the applause case study.

(ii) *Election Results*: For each postal code, we collected the official results of the most recent general elections prior to each political event: June 26th, 2016 (flags), and November 10th, 2019 (applause).

(iii) *Weighted Average Calculation*: For each postal code, we calculated a weighted average ideological score. The weights corresponded to the percentage of votes each party received in the relevant general election. Although there were additional minor parties, we adjusted the percentages of the four main parties to sum to 100 % for 2016, and of the six main parties for 2019, to reflect the greater political fragmentation in the latter period. The exclusion of minor parties is justified because the selected parties captured over 97 % of the vote in 2016 and over 98 % in 2019. Moreover, CIS barometers do not report ideological placement for most minor parties, making consistent weighting unfeasible. This score also shows strong reliability across time: the correlation between scores computed from the 2016 and 2019 elections is r = 0.822.

(iv) *Integration into Models*: The resulting average ideological score for each postal code was then assigned to all individuals residing in that postal code and used as a neighborhood-level covariate in the statistical models.

This procedure ensures that our measure of neighborhood political orientation reflects both the ideological positioning of the main parties and the actual voting patterns at a granular geographic level.

Finally, to consider the dispersion (concentration) of the vote among political parties, the standard deviation of the ideological score and the standardized Hirschman-Herfindahl concentration index were calculated. This index takes the value 0 if the four parties obtain the same percentage of votes, and 1 if a single party obtains 100 % of the votes (Naldi, 2003). As these three measures (political score, standard deviation of political score and vote concentration index) present high collinearity (r > 0.90), they were not included simultaneously in the models, but rather tested one at a time.

Individual level political positions were self-assessed on a 0 to 10 scale, where "0″ was "extreme left" and "10" "extreme right". Furthermore, due to the growing political stigma on ritual applause, we assessed the degree of agreement with the government's COVID-19 management using a 1 to 5 Likert scale.

For the second study, we also considered the COVID-19 incidence rate in each neighborhood, measured at the postal code level. In addition, we included factors related to the individual impact of the pandemic, captured through two dichotomous variables: one indicating whether the respondent or someone close to them had been hospitalized during the pandemic, and another indicating whether they had friends or relatives working in healthcare or emergency services.

Control variables, which were also used to control sample representativity, included the gender and age of the household head (first study) or respondent (second study), and household size. Age was incorporated with a quadratic term to capture potential non-linear

effects (Galais, 2012). We also included a binary variable indicating the type of residence (detached house vs. apartment block) to consider the possible effect of the type of neighborhood.

3.6. Estimation model

We resorted to a logit model. Equation [1] shows the generic structure of the models for respectively the case studies 1 and 2, where "peb" stands for "political expression at balcony".

$$logit(peb_i) = \alpha + \gamma\ \%\ neighbors_i + \boldsymbol{X\beta} + \boldsymbol{Z\theta} + \varepsilon_i \quad [1]$$

In equation [1], i = 1,2,3 … denotes households, **X** represents the set of relevant individual/household features of the respondents, **Z** the set of features of neighborhood, γ, **β,** and θ are parameters (or vector of parameters) that capture the effect of each set of variables on the likelihood of a household performing the political expression at the balcony. Each postal code area is associated with a different neighborhood. Analysis showed that postal code areas differ in political ideology, income level (both features exhibit a strong positive correlation), residential structure, levels of services, and commercial endowment. Each area also displays its own idiosyncratic lifestyle. To prevent heteroscedasticity problems, inference was made based on heteroskedastic robust standard errors. All calculations were performed using the software Stata©, v.15.

4. Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for Study 1 (flags) whereas Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for Study 2 (applauses).

Table 3 shows two models using different subsamples when the dependent variable is hanging or not a flag. Model 1.1 uses the whole sample of households of Madrid region. Model 1.2 restricts the sample to the households located in Madrid municipality.

On the other hand, Table 4 presents model estimations, using the same subsamples, Madrid region (model 2.1.) and Madrid municipality (Model 2.2.) for the dependent variable of applauding or not.

4.1. Hypothesis 1

Regarding hypothesis 1, "the higher the proportion of ego's balcony neighbors performing a given political act, the higher the probability of ego performing it as well", all the estimated models seem to confirm it. On one hand, the coefficients of the variable that measures balcony peer effects in models 1.1 and 1.2, the percentage of neighbors with flags, are positive and highly significant. On the other hand, the coefficients of the variable that measures balcony peer effects in models 2.1 and 2.2, the percentage of balconies/windows where people applaud, are also positive and highly significant.

Thus, regardless of political orientation or the nature of the act, Hypothesis 1 is supported. This pattern is consistent with prior research on local peer effects and political participation, where the presence of visible, proximate behavior increases the likelihood of individual engagement (Books & Prysby, 1988; Cho & Rudolph, 2008). It also echoes evidence from weak-tie environments such as workplaces, where strategic conformity to ambient social cues helps individuals avoid conflict or reinforce belonging (Matthes et al., 2021; Mutz & Mondak, 2006).

Tables 5 and 6 highlight the substantive impact of peer behavior on individual participation in balcony expressions. Based on the Madrid municipality subsamples (Models 1.2 and 2.2), the share of neighbors engaging in the expressive act has a strong and significant influence on individual behavior: every additional 10 percentage points of neighbors displaying a flag is associated with an approximately 3.7 percentage-point increase in the probability of an individual doing so, and similarly, a 10 percentage-point rise in neighbors applauding boosts the likelihood of an individual applauding by about 4.9 percentage points. These average marginal effects, reported with 95 % confidence intervals, offer an intuitive interpretation of effect sizes and allow direct comparison across variables. They provide robust evidence for the presence of a strong balcony peer effect, driven by local social cues and mutual visibility.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for study 1 (flags) (n = 367).

Variable	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Percentage of people with flag	55.2	49.9	0	1
Percentage of neighbors with flag	26.6	26.7	0	100
Number of neighbors	37.0	45.8	0	350
Age	49.3	10.8	21	88
Head of household political score	6.0	2.3	0	10
Number of people living in household	4.0	2.4	1	38
Living in a block (%)	80.0	40.0	0	1
Postal code political ideology score	6.2	0.7	4.6	7.4

Table 2
Descriptive statistics for study 2 (applauses) (n = 154).

Variable	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Percentage of individuals who applaud	72.7	44.7	0.0	1.0
Balconies/windows where people applaud (%)	49.0	27.4	0.0	100.0
Number of balconies or windows seen	34.8	37.5	0.0	216.0
Age	43.5	14.4	18.0	81.0
Gender (1: male; 0: female) (%)	33.8	47.5	0.0	1.0
Number of people living in household	2.4	1.6	0.0	8.0
Level of criticism against the government	0.0	1.4	−3.6	2.1
Having friend or relative with COVID-19 (1: yes; 0: no) (%)	52.6	50.1	0.0	1.0
Having friend or relative working in health or emergencies sector (1: yes; 0:no) (%)	74.0	44.0	0.0	1.0
Living in a block (%)	80.5	39.7	0.0	1.0
Postal code political ideology score	6.3	0.5	4.9	7.0
Postal code COVID-19 cumulative incidence rate (by 100k inhabitants)	780.9	227.4	229.9	1383.1

Table 3
Estimates of logit models for hanging flags.

	Model 1.1		Model 1.2	
	Madrid region		Madrid municipality	
Percentage of neighbors with flag	**0.0250**	***	**0.0293**	***
	3.33		**3.47**	
Number of neighbors	−0.0001		0.0002	
	−0.03		0.06	
Age	−0.1504	**	−0.1842	**
	−1.98		−2.07	
Age squared	−0.0015	**	−0.0018	**
	2.15		2.23	
Head of household political score	0.5750	***	0.6918	***
	6.70		6.11	
Number of people living in household	0.5445	***	0.4901	***
	4.48		3.40	
Living in a block (1: yes; 0:no)	0.3051		0.9967	
	0.76		1.49	
Postal code political ideology score	0.3391		0.3997	
	1.39		1.35	
Constant	−4.8001	**	−5.4526	*
	−2.06		−1.89	
N	367		275	
Chi2	102.52		76.96	
p-value of Chi2	<0.001	***	<0.001	***
Pseudo R2	0.387		0.423	

Notes: Robust heteroskedastic t statistics below estimates. ***, **, * indicate significance at 1 %, 5 %, 10 % respectively. Full 95 % confidence intervals for all coefficients are provided in Appendix 4 to avoid overloading the main tables.

Table 4
Estimates of logit models for applauses.

Variables	Model 2.1. Madrid region		Model 2.2. Madrid municipality	
Percentage of balconies/ windows where people applaud	**0.0294** **3.41**	***	**0.0468** **3.26**	***
# balconies or windows seen	0.0152 2.07	**	0.0267 2.62	***
Age	0.0943 1.45		0.0411 0.47	
Age squared	−0.0010 −1.43		−0.0006 −0.73	
Gender (1: male; 0: female)	−0.1191 −0.25		−1.3261 −1.76	*
# people living in household	0.3444 1.78	*	0.2255 0.95	
Level of criticism with government	−0.4195 −2.05	**	−0.8546 −3.11	***
Having friend or relative with COVID-19 (1: yes; 0: no)	0.9894 2.21	**	2.4242 3.33	***
Having friend or relative working in health or emergencies sector (1:yes; 0:no)	−0.0719 −0.13		−1.7888 −2.39	**
Living in a block (1:yes; 0: no)	1.4288 2.21	**	3.2088 2.26	**
Postal code political ideology score	−0.1803 −0.42		−0.2026 −0.35	
Postal code COVID-19 cumulative incidence rate	−0.0006 −0.49		0.0012 0.48	
Constant	−3.5828 −1.02		−5.037 −0.94	
N	154		101	
Chi2	28.39		32.34	
p-value of Chi2	<0.0001	***	0.0012	**
Pseudo R2	0.227		0.401	

Notes: Robust heteroskedastic t statistics below estimates. ***,**,* indicate significance at 1 %, 5 %, 10 % respectively. Full 95 % confidence intervals for all coefficients are provided in Appendix 4 to avoid overloading the main tables.

Table 5
Average marginal effects on the probability of displaying a flag (Model 1.2 – Madrid municipality).

Variables	Madrid municipality n = 275		95 % confidence interval
Percentage of neighbors with flag (10pp)	**3.70** **0.99**	***	**[1.75; 5.64]**
Number of neighbors (x10)	0.02 0.04		[-0.08; 0.08]
Age	−0.07 0.02		[-0.46; 0.32]
Head of household political score	8.74 1.01	***	[6.76; 10.72]
Number of people living in household	6.19 1.64	***	[2.98; 9.40]
Living in a block (1: yes; 0: no)	12.59 8.46		[-4.00; 29.17]
Postal code political ideology score	5.05 3.75		[-2.29; 12.39]

Note: Average marginal effects from Model 1.2 (Madrid municipality), with other covariates set at sample means. 95 % confidence intervals in brackets. Robust standard errors below estimates (delta method).

To further explore the substantive magnitude of these effects, we computed predicted probabilities from the logistic regression models under several illustrative scenarios. Fig. 2 presents graphically the estimated probability of engaging in political expression (either hanging a flag or applauding) for respondents with low, medium, and high levels of political predisposition, defined as the 10th, 50th, and 90th percentiles of the ideology or government criticism scales, across different levels of neighborhood expression (0 %, 50 %, and 100 % of expressive neighbors). Calculations are based on the Madrid municipality models (Models 1.2 and 2.2).

Table 6
Average marginal effects on the probability of applauding (Model 2.2 – Madrid municipality).

Variables	Madrid municipality n = 101		95 % confidence interval
Percentage of balconies/ windows where people applaud (10pp)	**4.94** **1.12**	***	**[2.74; 7.14]**
# balconies or windows seen	2.83 0.09	***	[1.07; 4.58]
Age	−0.12 0.27		[-0.64; 0.41]
Gender (1: male; 0: female)	−14.01 7.13	**	[-27.99; −0.04]
# people living in household	2.38 2.55		[-2.62; 7.38]
Level of criticism with government	−9.03 2.61	***	[-14.15; −3.91]
Having friends or relatives with COVID-19 (1: yes; 0: no)	25.62 6.32	***	[13.23; 38.01]
Having friends or relatives working in health or emergencies sector (1: yes; 0:no)	−18.90 7.57	**	[-33.74; −4.07]
Living in a block (1: yes; 0: no)	33.91 13.71	**	[7.02; 60.8]
Postal code political ideology score	−2.14 6.11		[-14.13; 9.84]
Postal code COVID-19 cumulative incidence rate	0.01 0.03		[-0.04; 0.07]

Note: Average marginal effects from Model 2.2 (Madrid municipality), with other covariates set at sample means. 95 % confidence intervals in brackets. Robust standard errors below estimates (delta method).

These predicted probabilities demonstrate how the likelihood of engaging in balcony-based political expression depends jointly on individual orientation and peer behavior. In the flag model, probabilities range from 9.2 % to 97.3 %, with larger increases among right-leaning individuals as the share of neighbors displaying flags rises. In the applause model, probabilities are generally higher, especially when all neighbors are applauding, reaching 98.7 % among those less critical of the government, compared to 87.5 % among the most critical.

As a robustness check on measurement precision, we re-estimated both models using a coarser, ordinal version of the peer exposure variable to account for potential measurement error in self-reported neighbor counts. Respondents were grouped into three categories based on the observed percentage of expressive neighbors: low exposure (<20 %), medium exposure (20–60 %), and high exposure (>60 %). The estimated effects across these categories remained strong, positive, and statistically significant. The results hold even when using alternative cutoffs (e.g., <30 %, 30–70 %, >70 %), suggesting the balcony peer effect is not an artifact of fine-grained measurement. This approach offers a more error-tolerant operationalization of peer exposure and supports the consistency and robustness of our main findings.

As a robustness check on model specification, we estimated multilevel logistic regression models with random intercepts at the postal code level, to account for potential unobserved heterogeneity in neighborhood-level political culture. However, likelihood-ratio tests comparing the multilevel models to standard logit specifications yielded non-significant results: $chibar^2(01) = 0.88$ ($p = 0.174$) for the flag model (Model 1.1), and $chibar^2(01) = 0.03$ ($p = 0.435$) for the applause model (Model 2.1). These findings suggest that multilevel modeling does not significantly improve fit over the simpler models, supporting the robustness of our approach.

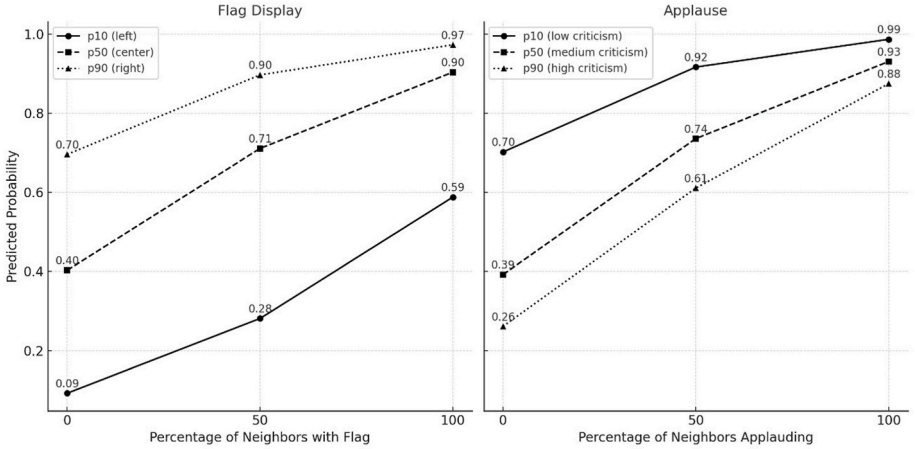

Fig. 2. Predicted probabilities of political expression under varying levels of individual predisposition and peer behavior
Note: Predicted probabilities of engaging in balcony expressions under varying levels of individual predisposition (10th, 50th, and 90th percentiles) and peer behavior (0 %, 50 %, 100 % of neighbors). Solid, dashed, and dotted lines represent the 10th, 50th, and 90th percentiles, respectively. Estimates based on Madrid municipality models (1.2 and 2.2), with other covariates held at their means.

4.2. Hypothesis 2

Our second hypothesis (H2) proposes that the strength of political expression may vary depending on whether the act is bodily-performed (such as applauding) or mediated through a physical object (such as displaying a flag). In both samples (see Tables 3 and 4), Madrid region and municipality, the beta coefficients support this trend. In the regional sample, the estimated peer effect is slightly higher for applauses ($\beta = 0.029$) than for flags ($\beta = 0.025$), and in the Madrid municipality sample, the gap is more pronounced ($\beta = 0.047$ vs. $\beta = 0.029$).

To formally assess whether these differences are statistically meaningful, we conducted t-tests for independent samples following Clogg et al. (1995). The tests yield p-values of 0.013 (region) and 0.016 (municipality), which are significant at the 5 % level but fall short of the more conservative thresholds suggested by Benjamin et al. (2018). Therefore, while the data are suggestive of a stronger peer effect in bodily-performed expressions like applause, we remain cautious and refrain from asserting full confirmation of H2. In substantive terms, an additional 10 % of expressive neighbors increased the probability of displaying a flag by 3.7 percentage points, whereas the same increase in neighbors applauding raised the probability of applauding by 4.9 percentage points, making the applause peer effect approximately 32 % larger.

Model diagnostics reinforce the robustness of our estimations. All models show significant Chi^2 statistics and satisfactory Pseudo R^2 values. Despite the models involving different dependent variables, covariates, and data collected in distinct time periods (2017 and 2020), we used a formal test to compare peer effect coefficients. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that cross-model comparisons of this kind should be interpreted with care.

Multicollinearity checks based on Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) further support model quality. After excluding the squared age term, mean VIF values were 1.33 for the flag model (Model 1.2) and 1.25 for the applause model (Model 2.2), indicating no concern for collinearity (see Appendix 2).

From a theoretical perspective, observing others engage in expressive acts, whether material or performative, may enhance the perceived appropriateness of these behaviors. This aligns with mechanisms of informational influence: local exposure reduces uncertainty and helps individuals infer prevailing social norms. If further substantiated, this would reinforce Cho and Rudolph's (2008) account of spatial structuring in political behavior, as well as Aronis's (2020) notion of balconies as spontaneous, responsive platforms for civic signaling.

4.3. Hypothesis 3

For testing H3, that is, "that the higher (lower) the number of balcony neighbors, the lower (higher) the balcony peer effect," households were divided into two groups based on the number of visible neighboring balconies: those with 20 or fewer balconies were classified as 'few', while households with more than 20 balconies were considered to have 'many'. Furthermore, a distinction was made between respondents living in detached houses and those living in blocks. (Table 7) reports the estimated balcony peer effects under these various conditions.

Results suggest that when the number of visible neighboring balconies is small (20 or fewer), the "balcony peer effects" is positive and significant for both flags ($\beta = 0.0258$, $p < 0.01$) and applauses ($\beta = 0.0384$, $p < 0.01$). Conversely, for the "many neighbors" group, the effects were weaker and not statistically significant. When respondents living in detached houses were excluded, the effect was amplified: the estimated coefficients increased to $\beta = 0.0266$ ($p < 0.01$) for flags and $\beta = 0.6268$ ($p < 0.05$) for applauses.

These findings confirm H3: the balcony peer effect is stronger when the number of visible neighbors is small, suggesting that lower perceived anonymity increases conformity. This supports reputational conformity theory (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955) and aligns with SIDE model predictions that identifiability and salient local audiences amplify normative pressure (Spears, 2017, pp. 1–9).

To assess the robustness of the chosen threshold of 20 visible neighbors, we replicated the analysis using alternative cutoffs (10, 15, 30, and 40). Results remain consistent: the balcony peer effect is stronger when the number of visible neighbors is low, particularly among individuals living in apartment blocks, and it weakens or vanishes at higher levels. These results are shown in Appendix 3. The original threshold of 20 is supported not only by this empirical robustness but also because it aligns with the median of the neighbor visibility distribution in both studies, 52.3 % of respondents in the flags case and 48.05 % in the applause case reported 20 or fewer visible balconies. This cutoff is also in line with psychological research suggesting that smaller group sizes increase mutual observability and reputational salience (Joinson, 1999; Kugihara, 2001).

4.4. Hypothesis 4

To test whether balcony peer effects are stronger when the expressive act is incongruent with an individual's political orientation (Hypothesis 4), we estimate the models separately for two ideological subgroups: left-wing individuals, defined as those who scored 5 or below

Table 7
Balcony effects coefficients, segmented samples by number of neighbors.

	Whole sample		Few neighbors (≤ 20)		Few neighbors (≤ 20) in blocks		Many neighbors (>20)	
Percentage of neighbors with flag	0.0250	***	0.0258	***	0.0266	***	0.0231	
	3.33		2.96		2.9		1.29	
N	367		193		146		174	
Percentage of balconies/windows where people applaud	0.0294	***	0.0384	***	0.6268	**	0.0150	
	3.41		3.86		2.51		0.89	
N	154		74		48		80	

Notes: Robust heteroskedastic t statistics below estimates. ***,**,* indicate significance at 1 %, 5 %, 10 % respectively. All the models included all the control variables. Figures show model coefficients, not AME.

on the self-reported 0–10 ideological scale, and right-wing individuals, with scores above 5. We define congruence based on the perceived ideological connotation of each expressive act. Hanging a Spanish flag during the Catalonia crisis is considered a right-leaning act, while applauding for health workers during the COVID-19 lockdown is associated with left-leaning and pro-public-service values. Thus, a flag display is ideologically congruent for right-leaning individuals and incongruent for left-leaning individuals; the reverse applies for applause.

Table 8 shows that in the case of flag hanging, right-wing households exhibited a lower balcony peer effect ($\beta = 0.0223$, $p < 0.01$), compared to left-wing households ($\beta = 0.0352$, $p < 0.01$). In the case of applause, the pattern is reversed and more pronounced: left-wing individuals showed a small and statistically insignificant effect, while the balcony peer effect was larger and highly significant among right-wing individuals ($\beta = 0.0490$, $p < 0.01$).

This asymmetry suggests that, in the Spanish context, pressure to conform publicly may align more strongly with left-leaning political acts. While prior research shows that individuals often avoid political expression when misaligned with local norms (Eliasoph, 1998; Mutz, 2006), our findings suggest that avoidance can also take the form of strategic conformity—especially when the act is widespread. Applause, as a generalized ritual, may require continued participation to avoid the reputational cost of visibly opting out, just as not buying can signal dissent in a boycott.

The stronger peer effect observed among right-wing individuals applauding and left-wing individuals hanging flags supports the idea that visibility can drive strategic alignment even across ideological boundaries. However, this analysis only indicates correlation and should not be interpreted as definitive evidence of a causal relationship.

As a robustness check, we also estimated models including interaction terms between peer exposure and political orientation. The interactions were in the expected direction and broadly consistent with the subgroup findings, though less straightforward to interpret in the nonlinear logit framework (results available upon request)

While splitting the sample by ideological orientation reduces the number of observations, subgroup sizes remain adequate for estimation ($n = 138$ and 229 in the flag model; $n = 76$ and 78 in the applause model). Moreover, key peer exposure effects remain statistically significant in the theoretically expected subgroups, and interaction-term robustness checks confirm the same asymmetric patterns.

Table 8
Balcony effects segmented by political orientation.

	Whole sample		Leftwing people		Right-wing people	
Percentage of neighbors with flag	0.0250	***	0.0352	***	0.0223	**
	3.33		2.84		2.43	
N	367		138		229	
Percentage of balconies/ windows where people applaud	0.0294	***	0.0110		0.0490	***
	3.41		0.73		3.03	
N	154		76		78	

Notes: Robust heteroskedastic t statistics below estimates. ***,**,* indicate significance at 1 %, 5 %, 10 % respectively. All the models included all the control variables. Figures show model coefficients, not AME. Congruence is defined per act: flags are right-leaning, applause is left-leaning.

4.5. Additional individual- and neighborhood-level effects

Important exogenous and correlated peer effects have been controlled for, and some can be reasonably dismissed. For instance, the effect of neighborhood ideology appears negligible, as Tables 3 and 4 show that the coefficient for the variable "Postal code political ideology score" is not statistically significant in any model, including those using segmented samples. Figs. 3 and 4 portray, respectively, the expressive behaviors of flag display and public applause. Each figure overlays these events onto a grayscale contour surface that represents postal-code political ideology scores. Because the ideological index was compiled at two different points in time, the scale varies between the figures. The purpose of both visualizations is to assess whether any spatial pattern, by latitude/longitude or by ideological gradient, emerges in the distribution of these behaviors. A visual inspection suggests no discernible clustering or systematic association.

Regarding the individual and household features that can influence expressive political behaviors, age displays a U-shaped association with the probability of hanging a flag, with the lowest likelihood observed at 50.1 years old (Model 1.1). However, no significant relationship was found between age and the act of going out to applaud.

Regarding the ideology of the head of household or individual, the results demonstrate that the further to the right their political leaning,

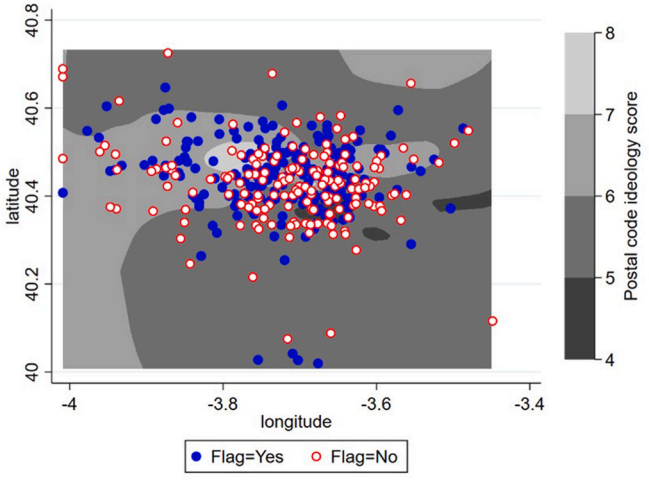

Fig. 3. Spatial distribution of expressive behaviors (flag display) overlaid on postal-code political ideology scores.

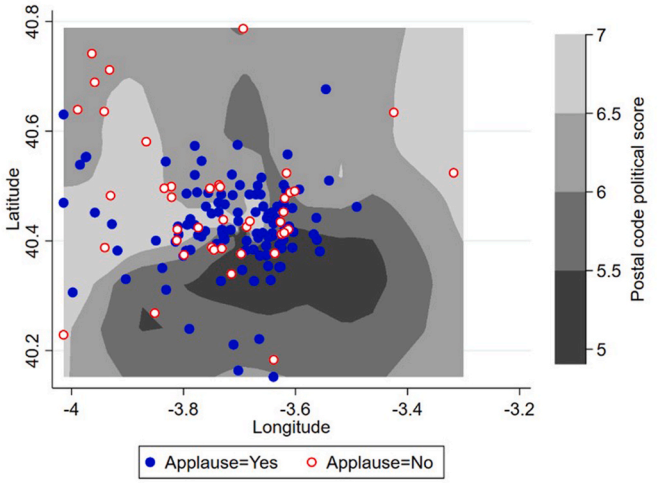

Fig. 4. Spatial distribution of expressive behaviors (public applause) overlaid on postal-code political ideology scores.

the higher the likelihood of hanging a flag. In the case of applause, the equivalent control is the level of criticism towards the Government. The results suggest that the higher the level of criticism (and therefore, a stronger political orientation to the right), the lower the likelihood of going out to applaud. In terms of the number of people living in the household, for flags, the effect is significant and positive. This suggests that the more people living in the household, the higher the probability of hanging a flag. This result might hint that the support of the household's internal group (mainly family, or friends) can overcome resistance or fear of performing expressive behaviors on balconies. In the case of applause, the results are inconclusive, a fact that may relate to the act of applauding necessitating a personal performance in front of others, of the opportunity to socialize offered by this lockdown ritual.

Finally, in the models for applause, specific individual factors were considered, like having close family or friends affected by the disease or having a family member or friend working in the healthcare or emergency sector. The first factor affected whereas the latter did not affect the probability of applauding. This result is surprising given the initial impetus behind applauding was to thank the medical and emergency staff for their hard work during the pandemic. It also appears that the level of disease incidence in the individual's neighborhood, measured as the cumulative incidence rate of COVID-19 cases per 100,000 inhabitants at the postal code level, did not have significant effects on the model.

5. Conclusion and discussion

Our research provides an exploratory understanding of the social dynamics influencing expressive political behaviors on balconies, examined through two distinct citizen-led events: first, the display of Spanish flags protesting Catalonia's independence bid in 2017, and second, the 8 p.m. applause during the COVID-19 pandemic in support of healthcare workers.

By situating peer influence within the liminal space of balconies, our findings extend established theories to a setting that has received little systematic attention. We introduce the "balcony peer effect" as a promising concept for further empirical investigation. This framework also bridges political sociology and urban studies, offering an interdisciplinary lens on urban political expression.

5.1. Interpretation of the hypotheses

Our findings provide favorable evidence of our main hypothesis: actions of balcony peers affect an individual's likelihood of engaging in similar political expressions. This validation aligns with previous research showing that individuals tend to avoid political confrontations they perceive as divisive by retreating into safe bubbles of preselected, like-minded peers, particularly in contexts involving weak ties (Matthes et al., 2021; Morey et al., 2012). It also resonates with findings on imitative behavior and the desire for group acceptance in voting contexts (Books & Prysby, 1988; Cho & Rudolph, 2008; Gerber et al., 2008). Our contribution extends these dynamics to the specific platform of the balcony and the influence exerted by balcony peers. Table 9 summarizes the main results.

Taken together, our results indicate that the adoption of political behaviors in the Spanish urban context of Madrid is associated with social belonging and conformity. Our estimates show that balcony displays are strongly shaped by neighbors' visibility (H1) and become even more pronounced when face-to-face oversight is intense (i.e., when residents have relatively few eye-level neighbors). This pattern suggests a logic of conflict avoidance: rather than risk open disagreement, residents align their visible stance with that of those who can observe them. The mechanism is further corroborated by the stronger peer coefficients we observe when the act runs counter to the individual's ideological leanings (H4). Taken together, these findings imply that balconies operate as micro-institutions of civil peace: they channel political difference into a low-stakes, mutually legible ritual that limits confrontation. However, while our findings highlight relevant patterns, they should be interpreted as correlational rather than definitive evidence of causal mechanisms.

While the two rounds of data collection were designed with comparable instruments and followed a similar snowball sampling logic, their contextual settings differed in ways that may have shaped both participation and interpretation. The flag survey was conducted in 2017 during a politically sensitive moment in Spain, when flag displays carried ambivalent and contested symbolic connotations. In contrast, the applause data were collected during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, a period marked by digital fatigue and shifting public sentiment, which made data collection more challenging. These divergences introduce important interpretive limitations. Yet, they also strengthen our findings by demonstrating that the balcony peer effect persists across expressive forms embedded in distinct emotional and political climates.

5.2. Broader theoretical implications

The findings also reveal a complex interplay between individual characteristics, political beliefs, social influence, and environmental context in shaping expressive political behaviors on balconies. These

Table 9
Summary of the results.

Hypothesis	Variables involved	Hypothesis supported?
H1. The higher the proportion of ego's balcony neighbors performing a given political act, the higher the probability of ego performing it as well.	% of balcony neighbors engaging in political expression.	Yes
H2. The balcony peer effect is stronger for body-performed acts (e.g., collective applause) than for artifact-mediated displays (e.g., flags or placards).	Flag vs. applause (dependent variables).	Partially (borderline statistical significance)
H3. The larger the group of balcony neighbors, the lesser the peer effect's impact.	Number of visible neighbors.	Yes
H4. Balcony peer effects amplifies when the political act is not congruent with the self-assessed individual's political side.	Self-position vs. expected meaning of act.	Yes

behaviors, as our study suggests, are not merely expressions of political belief but also reflect social pressures to conform to neighborhood norms and avoid ideological conflict. This dynamic resonates with Panagopoulos' (2010) findings on the role of negative emotions in driving political mobilization.

To our initial question on whether balconies contribute to the public sphere, defined by Habermas (1991) as arenas for genuine democratic participation and exchanges between equal individuals, expressing their views freely, we take a position that contrasts with the optimism of Aronis (2020b). Spanish citizens engage with self-restraint and concerns regarding daily peace with neighbors, with an implicit norm of conflict avoidance to favor "happy interactions". This pattern parallels some of the criticism directed at social media as imperfect spaces for deliberative democracy (Kruse et al., 2018).

In contrast to Twitter, where polarization often translates into unrestrained hateful expression, and in contrast to Aronis, who emphasized the similarities between balconies and microblogging platforms, we suggest that Spanish balconies function instead as spaces for promoting civil peace and fostering symbolic communion among cross-cutting individuals. Our approach thus offers an alternative dimension of the public sphere: one that emphasizes affective cohesion rather than deliberative confrontation. While traditional critiques of Habermas often highlight exclusion based on power hierarchies (Fraser, 2014), our argument addresses a different challenge: the strategic avoidance of divisive political discourse in order to preserve a shared social fabric. This alternative reading remains grounded in Habermas's original formulation of the public sphere as a space of visible civic participation, even if it departs from his emphasis on rational-critical discourse.

In an affectively polarized society, with a political memory still haunted by the specter of violence, this contribution to civil peace may be seen as a democratic value in itself, even if it does not conform to the classical model of the public sphere. In any case, such public expression is likely to have an individual impact. Levitan and Verhulst (2016) demonstrated experimentally that individuals who adjust their public responses to align with those around them tend to maintain those positions even when external pressure is removed, at least temporarily. Balcony political participation implicitly prompts individuals to publicly reveal their positions, potentially leading to attitudinal shifts or reinforcing existing views. These moments may facilitate political mobilization and expression, though further research is needed to better understand the underlying mechanisms and long-term effects.

Our outcomes are deeply rooted in the specific sociocultural and historical context of Spain, characterized by affective polarization, political memory tied to authoritarianism, and regional tensions. These factors likely influenced both the expressive behaviors observed and the peer effects identified in our analysis. Future research could benefit from exploring similar dynamics in different cultural or political contexts or during other shared crises. More investigation would be worthy to circumvent the dynamics of balcony politics. For instance, qualitative inquiry of cases of balcony dissident behaviors: I hang a National flag in a woke district, or a Republican one in a conservative neighborhood; I dare give the first pot bang after the applause.

Although the empirical evidence is drawn from Madrid, the underlying mechanism (public political expression conditioned by mutual visibility and normative pressure among neighboring balconies) rests on three generic conditions that can also be found elsewhere: (i) liminal urban architecture that allows eye-level observation (e.g. balconies in Southern Europe, verandas in Latin America, fire-escapes in US cities); (ii) social contexts of affective polarization combined with everyday conflict-avoidance norms; and (iii) a trigger event that makes domestic façades symbolically salient (e.g. yard-signs in US elections, secessionist flags in Barcelona [Parravano et al., 2015], balcony concerts during the COVID-19 lockdowns in Spain [Calvo & Bejarano, 2020] and Italy, or pot-banging protests in Buenos Aires and Chile). Hence, while local culture shapes the specific symbols displayed, the "balcony peer effect" theorized here can plausibly emerge in many dense urban settings. Future research should test the model in cities that differ in architectural form (e.g. Northern-European row housing) or political culture to assess boundary conditions.

5.3. Limitations and directions for future research

This study employed snowball sampling, as we considered it the most suitable strategy to obtain rapid responses regarding two ephemeral phenomena, where timely data collection was critical before they faded. However, this approach also entails limitations, as it may introduce biases due to its reliance on personal networks. Despite efforts to ensure sociodemographic diversity by carefully selecting seeds, the sample's representativeness was only partially controlled, and a self-selection bias may have occurred, potentially favoring the recruitment of individuals who are more politically engaged or more connected to local social networks. These individuals were probably more motivated to complete a survey on political expression, leading to an overrepresentation of such profiles and, conversely, to the underrepresentation of politically disenchanted or apathetic residents. This limitation may have constrained our ability to capture the full spectrum of attitudes present in the population. The resulting imbalance may distort the size of the balcony peer effect in two directions: (i) upward, if highly engaged respondents are especially sensitive to neighborhood reputation, or (ii) downward, if their behavior stems mainly from firm prior convictions. We therefore view our coefficients as approximations and encourage replication with probability-based samples. Likewise, although balcony visibility and proximity are not randomly assigned, a visual inspection of Fig. 3 and 4 shows no clear pattern of responses by neighborhood ideology, suggesting that any politically driven residential self-selection is likely modest. Another issue to be considered is the smaller sample size in the second study, influenced by the pandemic context and the complexity of the task requested from participants, limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could address these limitations by employing larger, stratified samples or alternative sampling methods, should a similar phenomenon arise. Furthermore, the research is based on self-reported information rather than direct observation of behavior, which may limit the accuracy of the responses. Also, because the study focuses on a single city (Madrid), its external validity is limited; future research should replicate the analysis in cities with different architectural layouts and political cultures. A further limitation concerns the study's replicability. Our study design presupposes a legal and social environment in which individuals can display political symbols on their balconies without fear of sanctions. In countries where freedom of expression is curtailed, such openness cannot be taken for granted, and direct replication would raise practical obstacles. Consequently, the model is most readily transferable to settings that resemble Spain in their guarantees of civil liberties. A final limitation concerns potential endogeneity and the reflection problem (Manski, 1993). While our design relies on observable behaviors, temporal framing, and extensive covariate adjustment—and robustness checks confirm the stability of the estimates—unobserved contextual factors or reciprocal influence cannot be entirely excluded. Accordingly, our findings should be understood as associational rather than strictly causal evidence of balcony peer effects. Moreover, while instrumental-variable approaches can strengthen causal claims in peer-effect research, our dataset does not include a credible exogenous instrument for peer exposure, given its highly localized and context-specific nature. Future studies might address this by combining survey data with external spatial or administrative records to identify plausibly exogenous instruments. Nonetheless, our study provides original insights into expressive politics in urban contexts and makes a contribution to the emerging field of balcony politics.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Carlos Martínez de Ibarreta: Writing – review & editing, Writing –

original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **David Felipe Martín-García:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Jose Luis Arroyo-Barrigüete:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation.

Data availability statement

Study data can be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

Ethics statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and the recommendations of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE). The research was based on an anonymous and voluntary survey, which participants accessed freely and without any form of coercion.

The study design ensures respect for the privacy and confidentiality of all subjects. In accordance with applicable institutional regulations, ethics committee approval was not required.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT in order to improve the readability and language of the manuscript. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.102056.

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