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Undermining Liberal Democracy? Cross-Level Opposition in Madrid Regional President's Speeches During the Pandemic Crisis

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Abstract

This article offers a theoretical contribution to the study of political opposition during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. In liberal democracies, the crisis often amplified executive dominance, thereby weakening the institutional opposition's key role in providing scrutiny on government policies. While governmental emergency powers during the pandemic have been previously critically assessed, the strategic deployment of contestation by opposition actors has received less attention. Given the foundational role of "opposition" in liberal democratic theory, this oversight is notable. Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasised the importance of opposition as a pillar of democratic resilience. In the context of global democratic backsliding, the fundamentals of liberal democracy are at stake. This article examines a case from Spain, where Madrid's regional government positioned itself in direct opposition to the central government. Our conceptual analysis shows that parliamentary questions in the Madrid parliament were used by the incumbent, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, as a platform for what we call "cross-level opposition." The research question is: How did this regional leader discursively construct political opposition by challenging the central government during the pandemic, and what does that mean for liberal democracy? Our findings reveal two key dynamics: the use of conceptual nodal points in Ayuso's rhetoric and the irregular nature of her parliamentary questions, without the prime minister facing her in the same parliamentary space. We argue that such forms of cross-level opposition, while seemingly consistent with democratic contestation, can ultimately erode the norms and institutional integrity that underpin liberal democracy.

Keywords

crisis; liberal democracy; multi-level polity; opposition; parliamentary questions; Spain

1. Introduction

Recent and most noteworthy academic publications on liberal democracy have focused on the role of opposition (e.g., Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Przeworski, 2019). Competing political forces scrutinising the executive and presenting alternatives to the government agenda are, in fact, integral to the proper functioning of liberal democracies (Dahl, 1965). The Covid-19 pandemic crisis showed that the parliamentary opposition's key function of providing a counterbalance to the executive can be severely undermined due to emergency measures (e.g., Merkel, 2020). We aim to demonstrate that crises may produce irregular practices from the political opposition, and thus, potentially contribute to undermining democratic institution's liberal functions.

This article's main argument is that liberal democracy itself is at stake when it involves irregular political opposition, because the opponent's role is to propose alternatives while respecting the "rules of the game" in its language and practices. We aim to justify this claim by illustrating that "opposition" should be, normatively speaking, understood as a dynamic, political concept. We further develop Friedrich's (1966) "alternative model of dynamic opposition" in federal and quasi-federal democracies, defining opposition as inherently political, with both personal and operational dimensions simultaneously at play. In this sense, the political character of opposition is to be found in the opportunities of contestation created and/or used by political actors in changing circumstances, which should be considered when it comes to institutionalised opposition.

Our case example comes from the multi-level system of Spain, a Western liberal democracy that in recent decades has experienced various consecutive and interconnected political crises, which have shaped the country's political institutions and deepened bipartisan ideological divisions. The pandemic was not the first crisis in modern Spanish democratic politics. Arguably, the eurozone crisis, which caused a financial meltdown in 2011, and the Catalan independence referendum, which led to political upheaval in 2017, were more decisive ruptures. They introduced radical parties both on the left and the right, first in local and regional parliaments and then at the national political level, impacting mainstream parties' political agenda and increasing polarisation (Garmendia Madariaga & Riera, 2023). The pandemic presented an opportune moment for opposition actors in the multi-level system to politicise public discourse (Haapala, 2024). Additionally, Spanish post-pandemic politics saw the already existing polarisation and ideological partisan divisions grow, making it extremely difficult to form essential political alliances and policy commitments in the multi-level polity.

In this context, we focus our examination on the Madrid regional parliament, which saw the electoral victory of its incumbent regional president in May 2021. After our initial analysis of national press reports and relevant statistical data on pandemic politics in Spain, we observed that it was especially the president of the Autonomous Community (AC) of Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso from the centre right-wing People's Party (PP), who was able to galvanise discontent against the central government in the capital. Participation in the regional elections was exceptional, with a 22-point increase on the previous elections in 2019, and Ayuso was able to secure a comfortable parliamentary majority with the support of the radical right-wing Vox party.

As our analysis will illustrate, Ayuso successfully used an opportunity to advance her political agenda on the national stage by adopting "cross-level opposition" in the Madrid regional parliament against the national government. We demonstrate that her replies to parliamentary questions were essentially directed at

challenging the central government in ideological terms, although she is not the leader of her party at national level. In practice, she "made opposition" (Friedrich, 1966) as incumbent regional leader against the national-level leader, thus breaking with the established parliamentary procedure of facing one's opponent in the same space. Additionally, rather than engaging in the typical regional-versus-central government conflict over jurisdictional or cultural claims, this politician shaped the national debate on broader policy issues by tying them to core concepts of liberal democracy, thus engaging in the ideological debate already present in the polarised pandemic context. Given her media prominence, as we will also illustrate, we find it relevant to focus on this actor as a case study of government–opposition dynamics transcending the classical framework.

We examine this case of "cross-level opposition" using a mixed-method approach to analyse parliamentary speeches, with the aim of revealing the conceptual contestation taking place between the two parliamentary levels. We ask: How did this regional political leader discursively construct political opposition by challenging the central government during the pandemic crisis, and what does that mean for liberal democracy? The starting point of our investigation is to identify the conceptual connections between the regional debates in Madrid and the national parliamentary debates over the handling of the pandemic. By adopting a conceptual approach, we identify key terms in political debates—such as "democracy" and "freedom"—and treat them as analytical nodal points (Wiesner et al., 2017) to guide our textual interpretation of the political discourse. This study also offers a comparative reflection on other parliamentary democracies with similar multi-level political structures, thereby contributing to the scholarship on political governance.

The structure of the article is the following: First, we discuss the theoretical framework of studying liberal democracy and political opposition in a crisis context; then, we introduce the Spanish case study, explaining both institutional and political features relevant to the case selection and providing a contextual background for our analysis. Next, we discuss the research design as well as the mixed methods applied to analyse parliamentary sources. The following section presents our analysis of the Madrid regional leader's parliamentary speeches. Finally, we discuss the findings of the analysis and conclude with our theoretical contribution to studying the role of opposition in liberal democracies.

2. Theoretical Framework: Liberal Democracy, "Dynamic" Opposition, and Irregular Practices During the Crisis

In political science, governments have traditionally been the focus of research on liberal democracy, while opposition has been understood as an implicit part of democratic politics, and thus, largely undertheorised in the literature (Helms, 2008). Opposition is implicitly a core element of liberal democracy, but it is notoriously difficult to define (Dahl, 1966, p. xviii). Perhaps due to this definitional ambiguity, "opposition" is often rather narrowly employed in political debates, both institutionally and conceptually. Institutionally, it commonly refers to a political group that challenges the government's agenda and seeks to win the support of constituents to become the new incumbent. Thus, it is a group that competes for the same seats in a particular political arena. Conceptually, "government" and "opposition" are inherently dichotomous. The notion of political opposition has been described as "parasitic" on concepts of government, rule, and authority, insofar as opposition cannot exist independently—it must address a governing body and articulate a viable alternative to it (Blondel, 1997). However, in practice, the distinction between being "in opposition" and "in government" is not always clear-cut. Rather, it can be context-dependent, with actors assuming opposition roles in practice, even while formally

belonging to the government side. In fact, this reflects the political nature of opposition. Rather than being constantly the same, it is reshaped through political practice.

The liberal argument about the justification for democratic rule emphasises the relationship between the government and opposition, as well as their institutional bases guaranteed by the separation of powers, with checks and balances. The increase of the functions of modern parliaments, from early liberal legislatures to modern representative chambers, is largely due to the growth of executive power and its oversight and control. In today's parliamentary democracies, it is not the parliament, but rather the opposition, that oversees the government (Duverger, 1955; Von Beyme, 1985). More recent contributions in comparative political science have offered new research agendas for understanding democratic opposition in times of crisis. They have, for example, examined the opportunities for parliamentary oppositions to propose alternatives to government policies and control governments (Garritzmann, 2017) or to express their contrasting opinions in relation to government policy during the pandemic crisis (Laflamme et al., 2023; Louwerse et al., 2021).

What remains yet to be studied are the irregularities of political opposition in liberal democracies during exceptional times. Although "political opposition" as a concept seems very intuitive, commonly assigned to the party that poses a serious alternative to the government, it is not, however, accurate enough for our analysis. Using the multi-level case study of Spain, we aim to show from a conceptual perspective that the traditional, narrow understanding of opposition can be insufficient to capture the complexities of government–opposition dynamics in a complicated political context such as a global pandemic.

It is crucial to emphasise that our case example involves the contestation of one incumbent leader by another one in their respective governing positions, not a confrontation between party-political leaders, which is a typical aspect of liberal democratic politics. "Oppositionness" may vary for non-incumbent political groups depending on their policy–votes–seats strategy balance (Müller & Strøm, 1999). For instance, Hix and Noury (2016) have shown that in the (very common) context of minority governments, in particular, votes in parliament are more conditioned by parties' ideological closeness than by their institutional positions, i.e., "government" versus "opposition." This leads us to believe that being "in-government" and "in-opposition" are shifting concepts, rather than dichotomous entities (cf. Blondel & Cotta, 1996).

In a democratic context, the thing we generally call "opposition" has the responsibility of contesting, controlling, and proposing an alternative to government. Consequently, many scholars argue that one of the paramount roles of parliaments in such systems is to form, sustain, and dissolve governments (e.g., Bergman et al., 2021; Laver & Schofield, 1992). Laver (2006, p. 122) emphasises that these functions are among the most significant responsibilities of parliaments. Hence, the focus tends to remain on the "winning" or "losing" of institutional power. The spotlight, therefore, is on the parties and their national leaders that propose alternatives to the government. However, especially in the context of federal democracies, Friedrich (1966) argues that the dynamic conceptualisation of "making opposition" should be applied, instead of the more stagnant version of "being in opposition." In other words, it is not enough to study institutionalised opposition from the perspective of party-political divisions and based on electoral results, but to also include the active articulations of individual politicians to "making opposition."

According to this alternative model, "opposition" is defined as "a group of persons" organised in an institutionalised political setting "opposing the activities and policies of the government in power and the

complex of activities in which such persons might engage (including their thoughts and ideology)," *and* as having "both a personal and an operational dimension" (Friedrich, 1966, p. 286). In our analysis, we employ this theoretical assumption, as we expect that the political character of opposition is to be found in the opportunities of contestation created and/or used by political actors. In other words, in our view, the contingency of politics should be also considered in the case of institutionalised opposition, of which the Westminster parliamentary style of "loyal" opposition is commonly considered the ideal example.

Positioning oneself as an alternative to the government is not confined to parliamentary leaders formally opposing the government within legislative settings, nor are the resources they draw upon limited to those provided by the parliamentary institutional framework. The multi-level structure of party organisation allows national leaders to manage regional sub-units within a principal–agent framework, where the national party branch acts as the principal and the regional branch serves as the agent (Van Houten, 2009). When actors in this top-down relationship hold institutional power while formally being in opposition, they may have strong incentives to present their own governments as viable alternatives to the central government. In other words, regional governments can serve as tools for opposition parties in the national arena. This reflects the increasing development of multi-level government structures contributing to the blurring of the classical Westphalian state model (Alcantara et al., 2016), which underpinned the architecture of early liberal democracy. Given that multi-level governance is ubiquitous, there is room for "multi-level opposition" in most contemporary European political systems.

More relevant for our case study, however, is when regional leaders in government "go national" by challenging policy in areas where responsibilities are shared between national and regional authorities. This type of crisis setting can produce tensions that in the framework of principal–agent theory can be called "loss of control" in a context where the agent probably has more resources given its institutional position. In this regard, scholars already have highlighted the difficulties some parties have in maintaining internal cohesion and discipline in their regional branches (Detterbeck & Hepburn, 2010). Hence, regional government leaders questioning the central government in their speeches, and vice versa, places the regional government in a privileged position in the government–opposition confrontation not only in its own territorial delimitation but also statewide.

Thus, this article puts forward a more "dynamic," or politically aware, concept of opposition, by arguing that future studies in political science on multi-level governance should not become "trapped" in the framework of confrontation between political groups pursuing the same seat in the same political arena. As we seek to show, "opposition" itself is a controversial concept in actual political practice. In our case study analysis below, we illustrate an irregular practice of government–opposition relations relating to two incumbent government leaders, in which only one actor is the "active party" producing the dichotomy for their own political purposes. This "cross-level opposition" challenges the liberal understanding of a government–opposition setting of two party leaders facing each other in the same parliamentary space.

3. Spain as a Case Study

Spain is a case study that, for institutional and political reasons, is useful for analysing multi-level political dynamics. Institutionally, the Spanish political system provides a high degree of regional autonomy. Although it can be said that decentralisation has historically been more an exception than a tradition (Aja, 1999, 2014), the continuity from the late 1970s to date allows us to speak of a consolidated AC structure. Although not

federal states *stricto sensu*, ACs have greater responsibilities than many regions in formal federal systems (Colino, 2020). Indeed, Spain shows a high level of political decentralisation according to several indices, such as the EU's Decentralisation Index of the European Committee of the Regions and the OECD's Index on Regional Government Finance and Investment. This makes many non-Spanish authors perceive Spain to be a federal state (Villadangos, 2013). Therefore, it can be stated that this case's political relevance is quite remarkable and even outstanding at a comparative level. Furthermore, our case exemplifies a common characteristic of contemporary democracies: "Even when legislatures are important, the legislative agenda in most parliamentary democracies is very much in the hands of the government" (Laver & Shepsle, 1996, p. 4; see also Rasch & Tsebelis, 2011). This is reinforced by positional and partisan advantages of governing parties and institutional powers granted to the cabinet, including agenda-setting and veto powers (Ajenjo & Molina, 2013). Spanish governments have consistently leveraged these advantages to maintain effective governance, even in minority contexts (Field, 2016). In general terms, the "type of federal system that has evolved in Spain has shown a relatively strong capacity for multilevel decision-making but has also suffered from its own problems such as a lack of coordination and joint decision capacity" (Colino, 2020, p. 78). All the regions are parliamentary regimes that mirror, to some extent, the central polity. Thus, both the national and regional governments dominate the agenda-setting process in their own territorial domains, shaping the party-political congruence—or incongruence—in the intergovernmental processes (Aja & Colino, 2014, p. 3).

The country's government–opposition dynamics have undergone significant changes in the past decade, marked by a decline in bipartisan political compromises and increasing ideological polarisation among major parties, from both the left and the right, and their voters. Before the 2008 financial crisis, government–opposition dynamics leaned toward consensus on key policy issues (cf. Mújica & Sánchez-Cuenca, 2006). However, the crisis heightened the divide between the two major statewide parties (Palau et al., 2017), the right-wing PP and the left-wing Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE). This trend was exacerbated by the rise of anti-establishment parties in 2015 (the radical left-wing Podemos) and 2019 (the radical right-wing Vox), which have further intensified political polarisation and shaped public debates and the national political agenda. Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, this polarisation had already deepened with the rise to power of Pedro Sánchez, the leader of PSOE, in 2018. As prime minister of a coalition minority government, Sánchez relied on non-statewide parties to pass legislation, exchanging support for "pay-offs" related to regional issues. While this practice is not new (Field, 2016), tensions grew due to the government's collaboration with parties originating from the Catalan secessionist movement and the electoral gains of the Basque pro-independence left, historically linked to ETA terrorism. These factors led right-wing parties to impose vetoes on significant parliamentary actors, fostering territorial polarisation, and influencing public opinion among their voters (Rodón, 2022). The entry of Vox drove right-wing discourse toward centrifugal competition, further radicalising the political landscape (Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020).

In general, multi-level politics in Spain in recent decades have evolved towards competition and radicalisation rather than cooperation. Whenever shared competencies in important matters, such as taxation, are debated, they provide a space for regional actors to fully enter into national policy debates. In such cases, regional governments provide a viable avenue for political opposition. Both at the national and regional level, governments hold the primary institutional mechanisms for setting agendas, giving them a prominent role. Specifically, during the Covid-19 pandemic, governments wielded: (a) extensive emergency powers that, given the urgent circumstances, were initially difficult to criticise; and (b) access to the most

recent and reliable information creating advantage over the opposition to obtaining data. Consequently, at the peak of the pandemic, it was difficult to express dissent in ways other than through anti-official or conspiratorial narratives.

To manage the pandemic, the central government's strategy was to call a "state of alarm" based on the Royal Decree 463/2020, leading to legal and political controversy. Firstly, the legality of the Decree was questioned based on interpretations that saw lockdown measures violating fundamental rights of citizens not permitted by Spanish law in the case of a state of alarm. However, other voices, including the Spanish Ombudsman, argued that rights were merely being limited (Cebada Romero & Domínguez Redondo, 2021). Secondly, the "single command" of the Decree was controversial in the government–opposition setting, as it centralised the pandemic response, directly affecting the use of regional governments' powers. Even though an attempt was made to establish a system of shared government, the management of the pandemic in Spain largely obeyed the logic of decentralisation. This gave rise to public conflicts in the media between regional governments—as well as between some autonomous regions—and central government. The highly partisan and polarised environment induced new forms of politicising strategies employed in Spanish opposition politics (see Haapala, 2024).

Despite strong opposition at the national level, the pandemic also created an opportunity for consensus and "responsible opposition" in addressing urgent healthcare challenges. This precisely reflects what Coller (2024) highlights about government–opposition dynamics in Spain. Namely, while national political debates are often dominated by the exaggerated portrayal of stark differences between parties, these same parties often reach agreements and engage in joint actions at the parliamentary level that receive far less public attention. The Spanish case shows that, while opposition at the same political level (e.g., the national level) is constrained by the material need to support the government in the management of the health crisis, another opposition can "break through." This corresponds to Friedrich's (1966) "alternative model" of "dynamic" opposition in federal and quasi-federal democracies. It defines dynamic opposition as inherently political having both personal and operational dimensions at play to accommodate both diversity and unity in the polity (Friedrich, 1966, p. 286). Since the federal system is prone to this dynamic practice of opposition, situations may arise when "temporary" opposition is carried out by individual politicians who self-represent "an integral part of the general constituency and therefore expect to become the government" by converting "their minority following into a majority" (Friedrich, 1966, p. 289). This kind of opposition also propounds "values, interests and beliefs" (Friedrich, 1966, p. 289) that have a good chance of being embraced by the majority of the population. This is precisely the political point of its "dynamic" character: "In opposing it strives to change the political situation so as to enable it to govern rather than oppose" (Friedrich, 1966, p. 289).

In Spain, regional governments operating under the principle of "shared responsibility" during the pandemic had both the capacity and opportunity to assert their own management strategies, allowing regional leaders to assert significant influence in national debates, i.e., to "break through" as opposition, in moments of heightened political and social tensions. These strategies were subject to overarching mandates set by the central government, which were often flexible and, in some cases, even indefinite, affording regional governments to propose alternatives that exposed perceived flaws in the central government's response. In Madrid's regional government, this idea of "shared responsibility," however, soon evolved into conceptual contestation. This was due to the regional leader's framing of the contestation in terms of liberal democratic

principles explicitly directed against those of the prime minister. The prominence of this debate between levels of government was evident in the fact that, in 2021, Ayuso was the second most visible political figure on national television—trailing only the prime minister, Pedro Sánchez (PSOE), and surpassing the national opposition leader (of her own party), Pablo Casado (PP), in media presence (see Figure 1).

This is but one indicator of the striking way in which Ayuso jumped to the forefront of national public debate. Additionally, her popularity was reflected in a significant increase in votes in the 2021 regional elections, in which, notably, the Covid-19 pandemic had no significant impact on voting preferences (Coulbois, 2023). The Madrid case is unusual, as it was only one of two ACs (with Andalusia) in which incumbents were able to improve their electoral results. Further, Madrid was the only region where a considerable increase in electoral participation was observed during the pandemic.

Nationally, the central government's media presence overshadowed that of the parliamentary opposition, prompting opposition parties to advance their agendas through alternative avenues, particularly regional and municipal governments. The main parliamentary opposition party in the national parliament, PP, began to act as an opposition force in the regional and local governments that it controlled, effectively assuming the role of opposition while utilising government tools. It should be noted that these new avenues of political opposition were not fully controlled by the parties' central offices, particularly in the case of PP. Echoes of this lack of party control were evident in 2022, when President Ayuso had a public confrontation with the national leader of her own party (see Jones, 2022), Pablo Casado, forcing his resignation.

At the discursive level, the opposition—both national and regional—accused Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) of undermining "freedom," with some claiming that Spain was drifting towards a dictatorship. Right-wing parties portrayed Sánchez as a leader aligned with far-left communists, separatists, and former terrorists, willing to restrict civil liberties. As such, there is nothing new in efforts to criticise the central

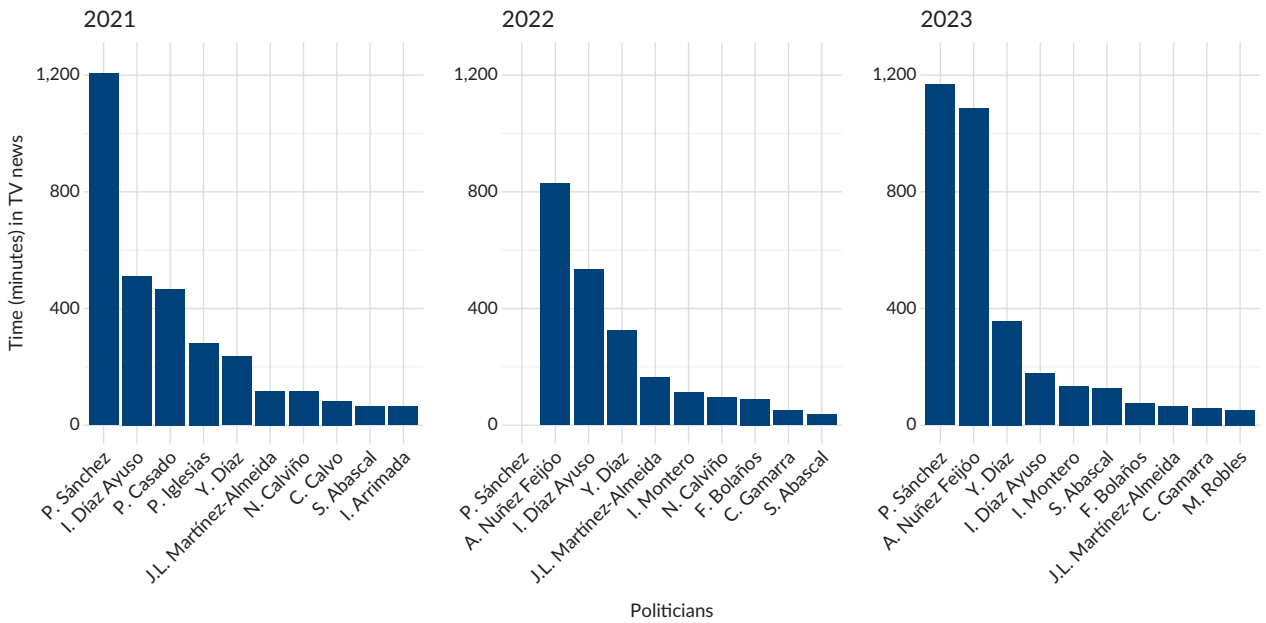

Figure 1. Total minutes of appearance of Spanish politicians on television news. Source: Gabinete de Estudios de la Comunicación Audiovisual (2021, 2022, 2023).

government by the main statewide opposition party leaders. However, the political strategy of the regional president in Madrid is distinctive for two reasons. First, it does not rely on an oppositional approach based on a national or cultural conflict, as seen in Catalonia, the Basque Country, or even in Scotland. Second, criticism of the government was not framed as a conflict over the division of policy competencies between regional and national authorities, as often occurs in multi-level systems with shared policy fields. Instead, Ayuso's discourse and media presence were firmly rooted in *ideological* national political debates, framing the policy differences with the central government as issues related to stark differences in values and beliefs over liberal democracy: "socialism or freedom," "communism or freedom." The central government's pandemic management gave this incumbent leader the opportunity to use the situation for her own political benefit. As our analysis below shows, Ayuso used parliamentary question times in the Madrid regional parliament to challenge the prime minister. Against one of the hallmark features of liberal parliamentarism, Ayuso did not face her political opponent *in the same parliamentary space*, which can be described as an irregular opposition practice.

In sum, the national government's management of the pandemic was followed by a rise in diverse responses from regional governments. The most striking transformation at the discursive level was put forward by Ayuso, who used the opportunity to elevate herself to the national political arena as an opponent of the prime minister. For that, she used rhetorical tools related to key concepts of liberal democracy and offered an alternative understanding of democracy, as opposed to the "restrictions" and "top-down decision-making" of the central government. We contend that, in times of crisis, regional governments may amplify the prominence of regional leaders within national political debates and when the parliamentary opposition is overshadowed at its own political level, what we refer to as "cross-level opposition" emerges as a strategic opportunity.

4. Research Design, Method, and Sources

We now turn to the analysis of key concepts used by President Ayuso to challenge Prime Minister Sánchez through irregular parliamentary opposition and aim to shed light on the discursive strategy of "cross-level opposition" in the pandemic crisis context. We employ a mixed-methods approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative textual analysis, combining in-depth contextual examination of conceptual contestation with large-scale text analysis. The former examines the relationships between conceptual nodes, while the latter aims to confirm that these relationships consistently emerge when a specific group of nodes appears in parliamentary debates. The quantitative textual analysis is applied, first, in the preliminary interpretative stage to verify our hypothesis on the salience of Ayuso in national media, and later, to identify nodes and to analyse their relationships through conceptual network analysis. The qualitative textual analysis is based on the interpretation of political activity as contestations over meanings and concepts (Wiesner et al., 2017). Concepts, such as democracy or freedom, are matters of struggle in political debates, i.e., the "nodal points" of political debates, but their use should be carefully interpreted. It is only through the qualitative interpretation of sources in their proper context that an informed analysis of these concepts is possible. We follow the idea of parliamentary-style debate being the ideal-typical form of political debate as it considers all topics raised on the parliamentary agenda as explicitly controversial (Wiesner et al., 2017, p. 29).

In both cases of textual analysis, we use parliamentary speeches as primary sources. Our full research corpus includes 205 plenary debates both from the Spanish parliament's lower chamber, the Congress (*Congreso de*

los diputados), and the Madrid regional parliament (*Asamblea de Madrid*). The dataset includes a total of 4,449 parliamentary speeches from those debates, covering the period from March 2020 to September 2024. As said, this article focuses solely on the parliamentary speeches of one single political actor: Isabel Díaz Ayuso (PP). In our preliminary stage of analysis (see Section 3), we were able to verify Ayuso's rise to prominence in national media during the pandemic (Figure 1). Given her prominent role within PP, the statewide political party, and her emergence during the pandemic as a leader beyond the borders of the territory she governed, we prioritise our analytical focus on her 1,151 speeches across 118 plenary debates in the Madrid regional parliament, limited to the leader's replies to parliamentary questions, as we are interested in *how* the shaping of the discourse from "shared responsibility" to "cross-level opposition" was done during the pandemic, corresponding to "dynamic" opposition. Our main research question is: How did this regional leader discursively construct political opposition by challenging the central government leader during the pandemic crisis, and what does that mean for liberal democracy? Our qualitative analysis further relies on the following sub-questions: To what extent and in what ways is (liberal) democracy explicitly used and addressed as a contested concept in the debates? How is it raised? In what context? What are the strategic ideas behind it?

The analytical process involves three steps. First, we begin by identifying the core conceptual "nodes" of the cross-level oppositional discursive strategy from the entire research corpus of 205 plenary debates. Based on the contextual analysis presented in Section 3, highlighting the ideological framing of Ayuso's use of liberal democratic principles in her discursive strategy against the central government, we selected and quantitatively analysed the frequency of seven key concepts (i.e., communism, democracy, dictatorship, freedom, Madrid, Sánchez, Spain). This initial count aims to highlight the sustained relevance of key concepts over time with a particular focus on the Covid-19 period.

Second, we conduct a qualitative textual analysis with examples in which the discursive elements, as outlined in our theoretical framework and identified during the initial extensive reading of the speeches, are illustrated. This approach allows us to explore how the key nodal points are articulated and endowed with meaning, providing a qualitative understanding of their significance. Our qualitative textual analysis draws on 118 plenary debates in the regional parliament of Madrid, further narrowed down from the full research corpus and selected based on two criteria: (a) parliamentary questions addressed to Madrid's regional president and (b) references to multi-level politics. We chose to examine the parliamentary questions that explicitly mention the Spanish government, reflecting thematic and institutional conflicts between the two levels. The selection is justified by, first, thematic and conflictual connections between the two assemblies (bearing in mind that the national government used its constitutional authority to declare a state of emergency and the ACs have the competence to decide on health policy and budget), and second, the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic involved both the national and regional governments in Spain. Furthermore, parliamentary questions serve as key indicators of political activity, revealing both the issues introduced into the political agenda and the positions adopted by questioners and respondents (Martin, 2012). Prior research has viewed them as tools for political competition (Borghetto & Russo, 2018; Budge & Farlie, 1983), information-seeking, and/or to pressure someone to take a position on a particular issue. Although they provide very interesting information, institutional and conventional constraints (e.g., time-use, length, appropriateness, or formality) mean that they are incapable of explaining the political debate as a whole. The following quantitative analysis does, however, allow us to obtain a snapshot of the relevant issues during specific time periods, and thus complements our qualitative analysis.

Third, we create a comprehensive overview of the selected nodal points through a conceptual network analysis, drawing again from the full corpus. We segment all (national and Madrid regional) parliamentary speeches into paragraphs, resulting in a dataset of 3,453 text fragments, with an average length of 135.52 words per fragment. To make this step, we first translated the words using the "Translator" module from googletrans, a widely used Python library for automated translation. We then removed common stop-words—a standard practice in text analysis—to focus on meaningful terms. Next, we vectorised the texts to construct a document–term matrix, where each row corresponds to an individual parliamentary speech fragment and each column represents a unique word from the vocabulary. Each cell in the matrix contains the count of a specific word within a given speech fragment. By transposing this matrix, each column becomes a vector representing the distribution of a word across all speeches. We then compute cosine similarity between word vectors using scikit-learn's built-in function (Pedregosa et al., 2011), a widely used method for measuring word-relatedness. Rooted in the work of Salton and McGill (1983), vector space models have proven effective in optimising information retrieval tasks (De Vos et al., 2022). Cosine similarity quantifies the angle between two vectors in a multidimensional space, yielding a value between 0 and 1, where higher scores indicate a stronger semantic relationship between words. These scores allow us to identify words that frequently appear in similar contexts, helping to uncover underlying themes and connections in parliamentary discourse. Based on the similarity scores, we identify the words most closely associated with specific nodal points. These associated words are selected by sorting and filtering vocabulary according to their similarity values, retaining only those that exceed a predefined threshold or belong to the top-ranked results. To refine this selection, we first established a set of predefined keywords that served as conceptual anchors identifying semantically related words in the corpus. These anchors are the main nodes that we identify in Ayuso's cross-level opposition strategy (as described in Section 5, they are: Madrid, freedom, Sánchez, and democracy). Second, we draw up a network of related words which, in turn, constitutes a network of signification of these concepts. This final step helps us to quantitatively verify the results of the previous qualitative step of our analysis.

5. Analysis of "Cross-Level Opposition" in Madrid Parliamentary Debates

Freedom, one of the key concepts of liberal democracy, was prominently used in Ayuso's speeches. The novel aspect of it was that she placed the concept within specific geographical coordinates: Madrid. She thus linked "Madrid" with elements related to "freedom." She also argued that, under the leading centre left-wing party (PSOE) government, Spain was on its way to becoming an authoritarian state, and claimed that Madrid was the political, social, and cultural centre of freedom. During the most striking moments of this strategy, which invoked broader concepts of general policy—transcending the geographical boundaries of its governmental political scope—explicit references to Spain, along with principles such as "democracy" and "freedom," as well as terms like "dictatorship," "communism," and "Sánchez," became significantly more prominent (see Figure 2).

To conduct the search of terms, we used the root of the words shown in Figure 2, capturing their derivatives (e.g., "Spain" also included "Spaniard") and synonyms. Among all these nouns, the most frequently mentioned is Madrid, which is expected, as it is natural for a regional president to speak about their own region. "Spain" and "Sánchez" also appear frequently, highlighting Ayuso's recurrent references to the national government. We observe a notable increase in the use of the three concepts leading up to 2021 that coincides with Ayuso's heightened prominence in public discourse (see Figure 1). This period also aligns with the implementation of the central government's co-governance, the so-called "shared responsibility," that delegated significant

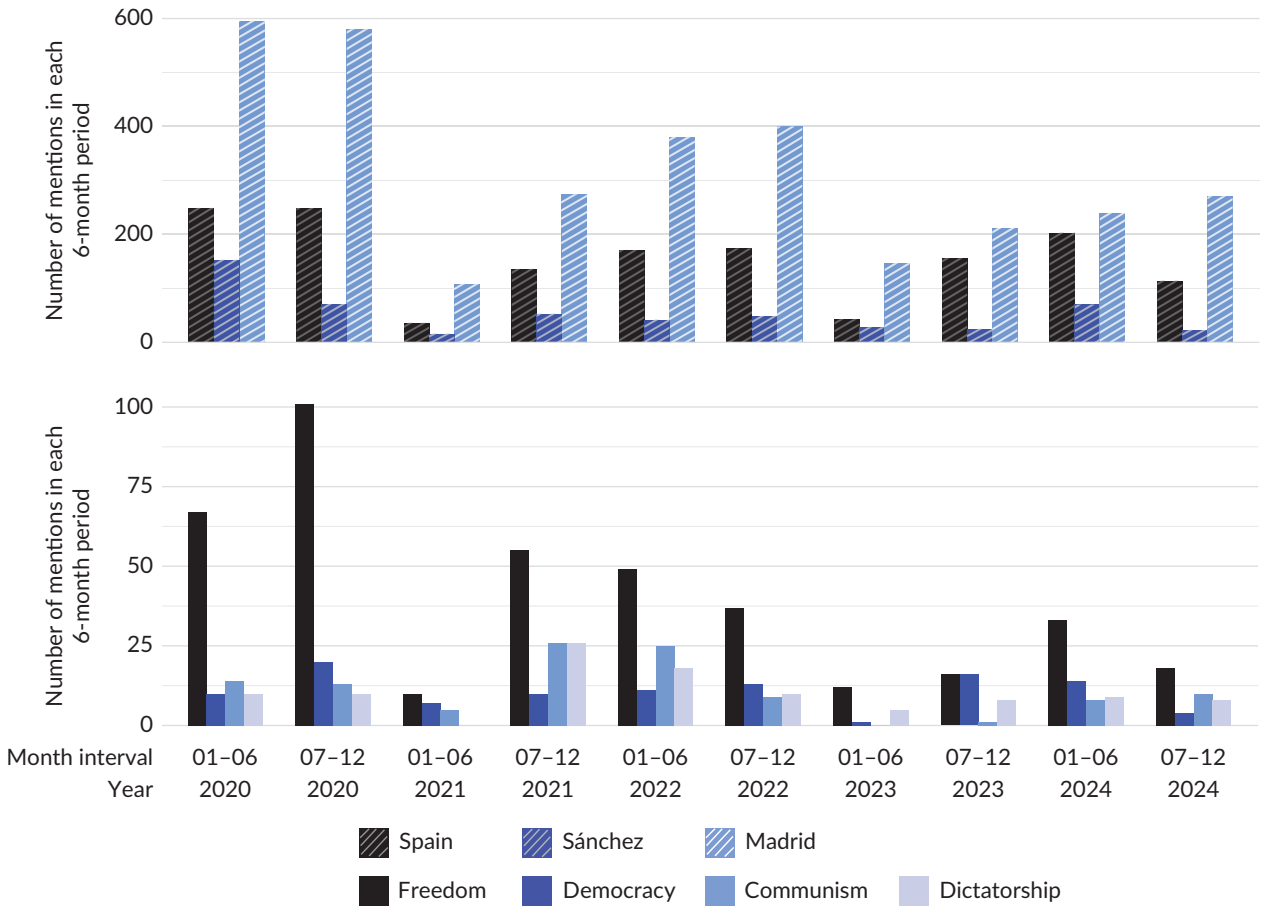

Figure 2. Total mentions of key terms in President Ayuso's speeches by six months. Note: 01–06 note the period between January and June and 07–12 note the period between September and December.

decision-making powers over pandemic management to the ACs. However, it also established unprecedented boundaries by imposing restrictions on individual rights, such as freedom of movement and assembly, which regional governments had to consider when making their decisions.

The use of the words "freedom" and "democracy," and their counterparts, "authoritarianism" and "communism," is notable in the regional president's speeches. These nodal points in her discourse stand out as the cornerstone of her communication strategy within regional parliamentary debates. On the one hand, she links concepts such as "arbitrariness," "dictatorship," "totalitarianism," "persecution," and "absence of freedom" to the central government, and, on the other, to Prime Minister Sánchez. This is clearly shown in her replies to parliamentary questions in the regional parliament: "First of all, we must remember that Pedro Sánchez is the most deceitful politician in this country, not to mention the most authoritarian ruler we have known since the beginning of democracy" (Ayuso, 2022c, p. 19489). Figure 2 illustrates that the use of tangible concepts appealing to national politics, on the one hand, and intangible ones employed by the Madrid leader to conduct cross-level opposition, on the other, is reasonably well established.

Prime Minister Sánchez is portrayed as "corrupt" and "authoritarian," and, in connection, the Spanish government is described, in paradoxical terms, as "the most authoritarian democratic government":

> Well, look, "the president of the weakest"—but the most authoritarian democratic government—is using the Spanish people's money to exchange favours, and to pass sectarian laws with parliamentary minorities, in order to have enough seats with which to keep himself in power. (Ayuso, 2022b, p. 18820)

The accusations here are presented without any sanctions or reply from the prime minister himself who is not present in the regional parliament.

In contrast, the nodal connections put forward by the regional president associate "Madrid" with concepts such as "freedom," "prosperity," and "liberalism." From the speeches, a narrative depicting Spain as a country in the throes of de-democratisation emerges, while its capital stands out as an "oasis," representing freedom and prosperity. This second major association of concepts can be observed, for example, from a speech delivered in October 2021, after the landslide electoral victory of PP in Madrid:

> Every decision taken by the Government goes against all of us! When they pretend to be this polycentric, polyhedral Spain, nation of nations, the only thing they do is attack again and again the essence of the unity of the country, which is its capital….Look, we, as opposed to the sectarianism of Sánchez, are going to promote freedom, prosperity and impartiality in the Government through the budgets. (Ayuso, 2021b, p. 3480)

This nodal connection between "democracy" and "Madrid," a key element of the regional president's discourse, also serves as the basis for the recurring claim that the central government, represented by values antagonistic to liberal democracy, attacks and opposes Madrid. However, this attack on Madrid is framed in broader terms than the health emergency and, instead, portrayed as an assault on the liberal principles associated with it. Consequently, the attacks on Madrid are depicted as attacks on liberal values that are "in danger" across the country:

> From the political perspective, we are besieged by a government that spares no means to attack our policies of freedom and prosperity; public benefits and services that today are enjoyed in Madrid and that before were authentic conquests. We will defend Spain! We believe in the individual, in the family, in business, in property, in the free market, in public–private partnership supported by a strong Administration subject to the law, which accompanies a framework of legal certainty, in public services without ideological interference. (Ayuso, 2022a, p. 16998)

This portrayal of "Madrid" is tightly connected with "Spain" and contrasted sharply with those associated with the central government and its "ideological interference." In other words, it is less about defending a certain political management style characteristic of a governing body, and more about presenting an alternative democratic vision rooted in ideological principles—a stance more typical of an opposition group. On the one hand, Ayuso has at her disposal the political resources and media spotlight typically available to a regional government to achieve this. On the other, although "Madrid" as a concept is constructed around intangible ideas, it is also a tangible region that benefits from the media and cultural prominence of being a capital city.

Moreover, during the pandemic, the significant leeway that the central government granted to regions regarding restrictions on mobility and assembly rights allowed Ayuso to underscore tangible differences in

governance. Even before that, she highlights the opposition between the central government and the Madrid regional government:

> In view of these difficulties, what we are going to have to do is to continue fighting against all odds, because we are a target to beat for the Spanish Government….We are a very uncomfortable Government for the Government of the nation because we can contrast, compare the policies and the results of some with others'. (Ayuso, 2020a, p. 6968)

Here she positions herself as a "leader of the opposition to the central government," who is also a "leader of the government to which the central government is opposed."

On another occasion, she mentions the prime minister as being opposed to her, which she describes as "abuse":

> That is to say, it is the [Spanish] Government…that is lashing out against us. Just yesterday, in the control session, the President [i.e., the prime minister] himself was opposing me, and not the other way around. Look at the way in which a higher Administration abuses a lower one! Instead of helping the autonomous communities, I insist that they have once again left us alone at the worst moment. (Ayuso, 2020b, p. 20012)

It is worth highlighting that, in this way, Ayuso is suggesting that the prime minister's reply is in opposition to her, and thus unacceptable.

Additionally, the regional president puts her government forward as a model example of liberal government:

> While the left is still determined to describe Madrid as a homophobic, racist, drunken place, what we are doing is showing for Madrid: in investments, in projects, in employment, for students, in the attraction of its events; in fact, we are the government that Spain is missing until there is an alternative in *La Moncloa* [i.e., the central government]. (Ayuso, 2021a, pp. 2358–2360)

Arguing that "real" Spanish government is at function only in the Madrid region, Ayuso seems to suggest that her government leadership is the only viable one for the country during the crisis.

The qualitative analysis of the parliamentary speeches reveals that they are criticisms of the central government and proposals for an alternative, which is the Madrid regional government. In this sense, this represents a case of opposition between two heads of government belonging to different political levels, i.e., cross-level opposition. While it does not operate within the conventional framework of liberal democracy's constitutional architecture—namely, opposition confronting the government policies and providing alternatives at the same parliamentary level—it proves highly effective in the media and within the arena of public discourse.

6. Results and Discussion

In the last stage of our analysis, we further constructed a conceptual network based on selected nodal points—democracy, Sánchez, freedom, and Madrid. Rather than analysing all words, which would be

computationally expensive and less interpretable, we focus on these words with the highest similarity to the key terms, as shown in Figure 2. These four terms were selected for both theoretical and technical reasons. Theoretically, discourse analysis requires distilling complexity into signifiers that encapsulate broader ideas. We chose two tangible signifiers (i.e., Madrid and Sánchez), as they are central to the discursive strategy and have clear meanings, unlike more context-dependent terms, such as Spain. The two intangible signifiers (i.e., freedom and democracy) are the most frequently mentioned in Ayuso's speeches (see Figure 2). "Democracy" was included due to its recurrent negative framing in critiques of the central government. Terms like authoritarianism, dictatorship, and communism are commonly used to attack left-wing parties in the region. Thus, democracy is the most unequivocal alternative for our purpose. Technically, limiting the number of nodes ensures the clarity of our visualisation, allowing us to quantitatively map how these key concepts are articulated. From this refined selection, we constructed a semantic network where words are represented as nodes. Pairs of words with similar scores surpassing the threshold are connected by edges, and these edges are assigned weights corresponding to their cosine similarity. This weighted network visualises the relationships between terms highlighting clusters of semantically related words and revealing patterns within the textual data. In sum, the selection of the above-mentioned four words followed, first, the theoretical reasoning of representing the backbone of cross-level opposition discourse as revealed by our speech content qualitative analysis (see Section 5), and, second, the technical limitation to these words to ensure clarity in visualising the clusters of nodes associated with the core concepts under study, which would become obscured if additional terms were included.

Furthermore, it is anticipated that, as these four concepts encapsulate the semantic weight of many related terms, the latter will appear within the node clouds. The vectorisation and cosine similarity values from scikit-learn (Pedregosa et al., 2011) allowed us to formulate the findings with the Python library NetworkX (Hagberg et al., 2008). This produced a figure that reveals the words most closely associated with the selected key concepts and highlights potential direct associations between these words as well (see Figure 3).

Although different conceptual communities appear relatively independent from one another, a clear and direct association emerges between "Madrid" and "freedom" on the one hand, and "democracy" and "Sánchez" on the other. The terms most closely linked to the first pair generally carry positive connotations and relate to public policies, such as "liberal," "employment," "economy," "citizen," "life," "service," and "investment." From this cluster of concepts, we can infer two key points: first, "Madrid" and "freedom" are strongly interconnected in Ayuso's speeches, and second, this association is expressed through generally positive terms. In her rhetoric, "Madrid" emerges as a space of "freedom," safeguarded by fiscal and labour policies that empower citizens to thrive in their life pursuits. On the opposite side of the map, we find an association between "democracy" and "Sánchez," mediated by predominantly negative concepts. The number of terms directly linked to these two words is smaller, possibly due to the regional focus of the parliamentary questions shaping the contents of the speeches analysed. Nevertheless, the rather surprising finding is that the main connotation of the association between "Sánchez" and "democracy" is mediated by terms such as "frightened," "break," "repudiate," and "defeat." Particularly striking is the prominence of the "dictatorship" node within the conceptual network, which is clearly connected through numerous links to this cluster of terms. Similarly, "institution" operates in a manner akin to "democracy" within this nodal group.

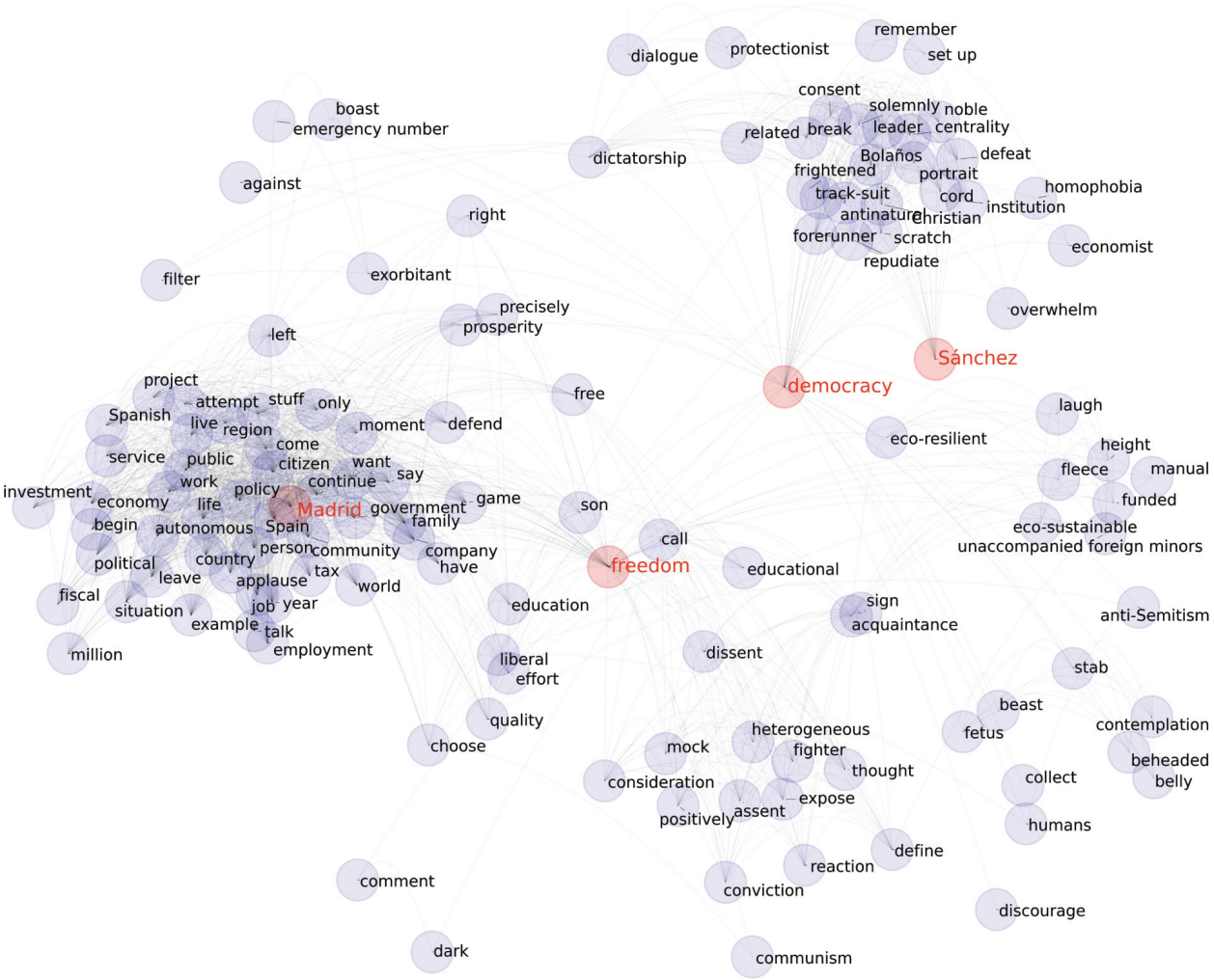

Figure 3. Network of words strongly associated with "freedom," "Madrid," "democracy," and "Sánchez."

Finally, to further visualise the different groups of strongly semantically related words, we can show potential groupings using a heatmap (Figure 4). This figure was produced with the seaborn library (Waskom, 2021) using cosine similarity as the measure of association between words in the network. It groups words into semantically coherent clusters, as shown below. The red cells highlight high cosine similarity between certain words, indicating strong semantic connections, whereas the blue areas represent low or no semantic similarity. The clusters identified in the heatmap align with the network graph (Figure 3) confirming that nodes grouped in the graph represent semantically related words, as described above. The observed polarisation indicates distinct semantic domains within the analysed corpus, suggesting thematic separation between groups. This differentiation between semantic domains reflects the dual nature of Ayuso's discourse: criticism directed at the central government and the proposal of an alternative model rooted in the concept of Madrid.

In sum, the interpretative expectations raised in the qualitative analysis are fulfilled in an outstanding way in this final stage of quantitative analysis based on large sets of texts. The cross-level opposition strategy that allowed Ayuso to be the most prominent opposition politician in the national media during the pandemic crisis is based on a contrast of models that is not based on hypotheses but on an actual counterfactual (i.e., Madrid) that seeks to oppose an assumed anti-democratic central management model.

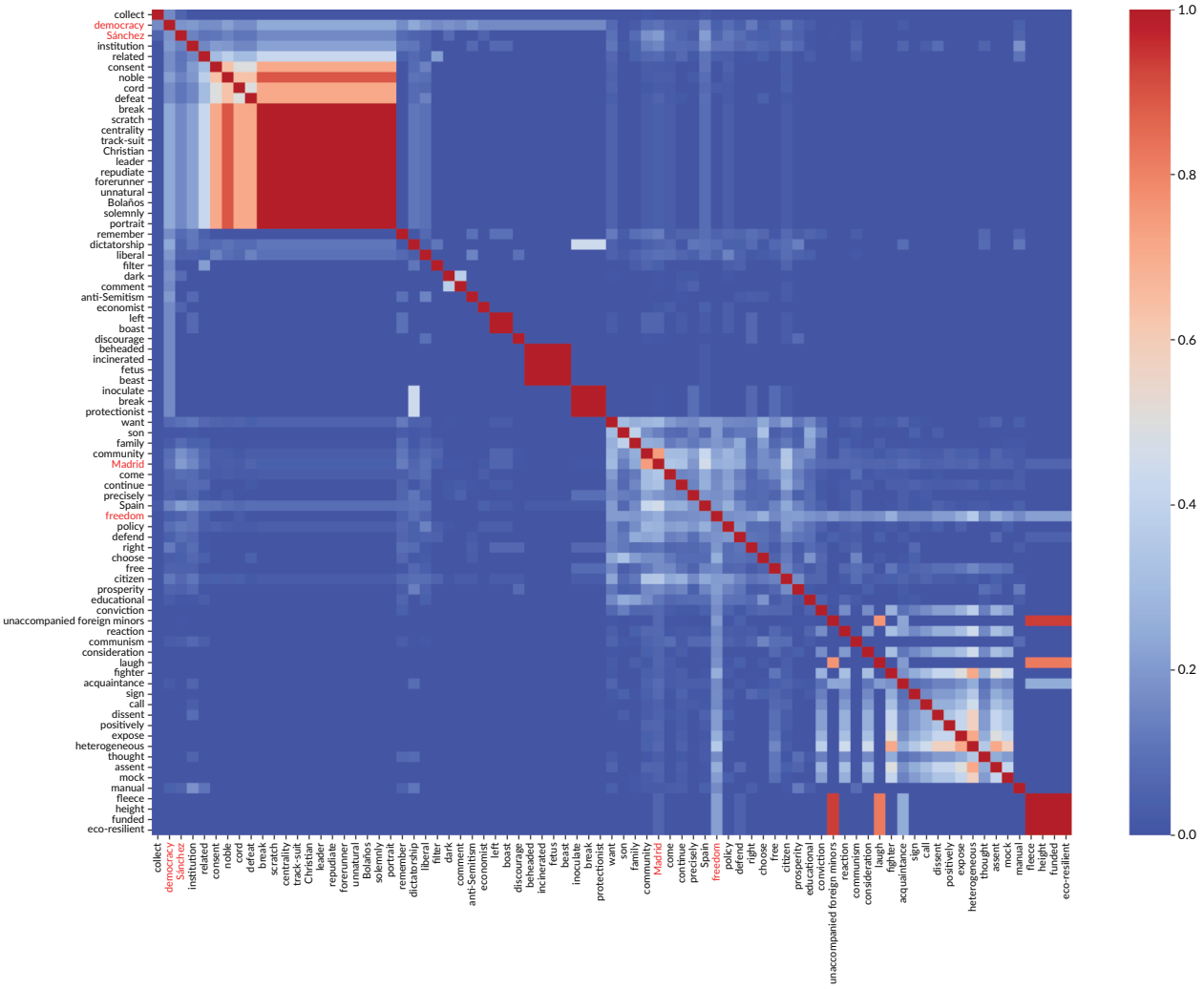

Figure 4. Heatmaps of cosine similarity between term pairs from the Figure 3 network.

7. Conclusion

The key role of opposition in liberal democracies underscores the importance of evaluating their performance and effectiveness, especially in relation to scrutinising the executive, and in presenting credible alternatives to the governmental agenda (Garritzmann, 2017; Helms, 2008). In the context of global democratic backsliding, the fundamentals of liberal democracy are at stake: to propose policy alternatives to the government, while respecting the "rules of the game." The pandemic crisis provides a strong case for examining the role of political opposition, and not only in Spain. In liberal democracies overall, the pandemic tended to increase the executive dominance of national governments as well as populist protests against governmental measures, fostering increasing distrust and anti-establishment rhetoric. Even before the global health emergency began, Western liberal democracies were experiencing the onslaught of growing distrust in democratic institutions and politicians (e.g., see Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The democratic erosion in established liberal democracies is often interpreted as a result of the opposition's limited capacity to achieve electoral success (Marquez, 2016; Przeworski, 2019) or a lack of adherence to the rules of the game that enable the opposition to fulfil its essential functions (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). We show, however, that opposition is a dynamic concept (cf. Friedrich, 1966), and in the pandemic crisis context, it was effectively

used as a discursive strategy for political benefit. Given the well-documented ability of governments to set the agenda and dominate public discourse, opposition efforts can extend beyond traditional parliamentary channels. In multi-level political systems, such as that of Spain, regional governments can serve as sites of opposition by leveraging: (a) institutional advantages that allow them to influence the agenda and (b) institutional power to present credible alternatives.

As shown, the president of the AC of Madrid received extraordinary media attention during the pandemic. This level of national media attention—exceeding even that of the national opposition leader from the same party—is more characteristic of an opposition leader than a regional political figure. This "cross-level opposition" challenges the liberal understanding of opposition between two leaders in a government–opposition setting. To analyse this, we studied the parliamentary speeches of President Ayuso during parliamentary question times, searching for discursive patterns typical of opposition to the central government. Our study yielded three main findings. First, the speeches include confrontation towards the national government beyond the centre–region dynamics, containing extensive ideological criticism of the central government, moving beyond conflicts over jurisdictional authority. Notably, the central government was frequently linked to negative concepts such as "frightened," "dictatorship," or "institutional backsliding." Second, the speeches recurrently emphasised the proposal of a general political alternative rather than the defense of specific implemented policies. The proven connection of "Madrid" to overarching concepts like "freedom," "prosperity," and "life" exemplifies this approach. Third, there are explicit mentions of a conflict between these two governments, central and regional, framed as a clash of distinct political models. We also find conceptual contradictions, such as "the most authoritarian government of democracy."

This analysis highlights the Madrid regional president's strategic positioning as a cross-level opposition figure, leveraging her regional platform to participate in broader national debates and prompting us to consider what it means for liberal democracy. In light of the findings, the opposition of one incumbent leader to the other at a different level of the same polity emerges as an activity that, at least in terms of discourse and public deliberation, can transcend traditional political boundaries and operate across different levels, without engaging in open public debate. Consequently, "cross-level opposition" provides the opportunity to accuse without the possibility of a reply from the opponent, which undermines the liberal democratic idea of public deliberation. For the evaluation of opposition performance in liberal democracies, future research should expand to encompass a broader set of parameters to understand the impact of cross-level opposition for liberal democracy.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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