# How does Spain escape the rightist populist wave?

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### Introduction

Very few European countries have proven immune to the appeal of right-wing populism. Spain is one of the few exceptions: despite economic crisis and fast-eroding political trust, Spain has not seen any right-wing populist party obtain more than one per cent of the vote in national elections in recent years. The main factor explaining the lack of appeal of this kind of parties is the weakness of Spanish national identity, a factor that can be altered now as a consequence of the Catalan autonomous government`s attempt to secede from Spain.

### Migration, economic crisis and political dissatisfaction

Three sets of issues are particularly associated in Western countries with the rise of right-wing populism: economic crisis, low confidence in institutions and political parties and concern over immigration[2]. Spain has experienced all three. Between 2000 and 2009, Spain received half of all migrants to the EU-15 making the net immigration per capita the highest of any European Union country. No other country in Europe has experienced such an intense and quick process of immigration in modern times.

Then, in 2008, the economic crisis arrived. In the following years more than 3 million jobs were destroyed and the unemployment rate has risen from 8 per cent in 2008 to 26 per cent in 2013 (compared with a rise from 7 per cent to 11 per cent across the EU in the same period). Also between 2008 and 2013 real GDP fell by 8.9 per cent (compared with 1 per cent in the whole EU), and average household spending fell by 14.5 per cent.

The crisis has provoked a very visible rise of poverty – mostly due to unemployment – and increased inequality. In 2014, no EU country had a wider gap between the income

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[1] Elcano Royal Institute, Madrid

[2] See "Mapping and responding to the rising culture and politics of fear in the European Union" https://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/DEMJ5104_nothing_to_fear_report_140217_WEBv2.pdf

of the richest 10 per cent and that of the poorest 10 per cent; by then 29 per cent of the population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion, 6 points more than in 2007, as well as 6 points above the EU-15 average and 5 points above the EU-28 average.

In the political realm, the crisis correlated with a sizeable drop in trust in all kinds of public institutions, be they domestic, European or international. Political parties, which already enjoyed a very low level of trust before the crisis, have been the worst affected, while the effects of the economic crisis were exacerbated for the main political parties by the discovery of corrupt practices. According to a Standard Eurobarometer report in 2014, 91 per cent of Spaniards did not trust political parties (13 points above the European average) and 69 per cent were dissatisfied with the democratic system (21 points above the European average).

However, despite high levels of migration, economic crisis and low political trust, right-wing populist groups remain exceptionally weak in Spain.

The explanation for the absence of a right-wing populist response to the crisis lies in Spanish weak national identity, a phenomenon extensively debated by historians, sociologists and political scientists, related with the legacy of the Franco regime. During Franco's dictatorship, the regime exploited nationalism, Catholic rhetoric and national symbols, presenting Spain as an island of spiritual values in a sea of corrupt, materialist and egotist countries, and labelling all kind of domestic or external criticism to its authoritarianism as fruits of an "international conspiracy led by Jews, communist and Freemasons". The overuse of national symbols and of references to national identity during Francoism caused a counter-movement which still persists: The pro-democratic opposition to the regime rejected the exhibition of national symbols, the flag and the anthem, and Spanish nationalism was completely absent from their discourses. Instead, they looked to Europe. Spain was frequently presented as a backward country whose political, social and intellectual underdevelopment was due to the Francoist policies, while democratization, modernization and Europeanisation were seen as three parts of the same process. Even now, opinion polls show a prevalent and persistent pro-European sentiment of the Spanish population: only 28 per cent of Spaniards do not consider themselves in any way European citizens (compared with an average of 39 per

cent across the EU).[3] This Europeanism presents itself not only as a cultural identification with Europe, but also as sympathy for the EU as a political project.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, strong peripheral nationalist movements were formed or reappeared in different regions, mostly in Catalonia and Basque Country, but also in Galicia, Valencia, the Canary Islands and Andalusia. The Spanish left enthusiastically supported these movements, presenting them as liberators and progressive forces both during the transition and for several decades after, further contributing to the weakness of a shared Spanish national identity. The personal exhibition of the colours of the Spanish flag – in a watch strap, for instance – was immediately classified by the left and the peripheral nationalists as a sign of a reactionary mind-set. The very word 'España' (Spain) became suspicious and was often replaced by 'the Spanish state', an expression of little emotional resonance. Even the territorial organisation of the state in Autonomous Communities has diminished this identity, as regional educational policies have emphasised local histories and identities.

Regarding immigration, Spain began the new century as the least xenophobic country in Europe, the most tolerant of cultural differences, and most favourable to immigration, significantly different from the European average. Several factors were influential here: the low number of non-EU immigrants and their high concentration in a few geographic areas, leaving virtually no immigrants in most of the country; the recent memory of the Spanish migration to central and northern Europe; the influence of the Catholic church, which has maintained a vocal favourable position towards immigrants; and the visibility of NGOs specifically devoted to immigration, asylum or anti-racism. Finally, the fact that many of the early migrants came from Latin American countries, speaking the Spanish language and sharing the Catholic religion, eased their acceptance into the Spanish society. The Catholic Church played a role in this process, as it found in Latin American migrant communities a new and more conservative inflow of believers.

As the country started receiving greater numbers of immigrants from the year 2000 onwards, Spanish public opinion on migration moved closer to the European average. In the economic boom years (1998-2007), the labour market could still absorb the newcomers, who were arriving at a rate of some 400,000 people per year. The surge of unemployment since 2008 provoked a rise of anti-immigration sentiment, recorded by several opinion poll sources, which reached its peak in 2011–2012. Around that time,

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[3] European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 85, 2016.

the number of immigrants residing in the country started to decline, a fact broadly reported by the media, and negative attitudes became less prevalent, though they are still above pre-crisis levels

The rejection of immigration is also related with the perception that there is a link between it and security. In fact, Spanish surveys suggest that perceptions of criminality are a bigger driver of unfavourable attitudes to immigrants than the labour market. However, despite these concerns about security and despite the terrorist attack of March 2004 in Madrid, Islamophobia has been relatively weak in Spain. The association between terrorism and a specific religious or ethnic group has not gained popular support in a country that has suffered terrorism from the Basque nationalist group Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) during decades and has never blamed the whole Basque population for the crimes committed by ETA terrorists.

This rise in discontent over immigration has brought Spain closer to the European mainstream mood, but the country is still well below EU averages.

**Spanish respondents' views on migration and migrants, compared with those of all EU respondents**

|  | EU average (%) | Spain (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Negative feelings towards immigration from other EU countries | 35 | 22 |
| Negative feelings towards immigration from non-EU countries | 58 | 39 |
| Disagreement with the sentence: Immigrants contribute a lot to my country | 52 | 40 |
| Immigration is one of the two main issues facing the country | 28 | 9 |
| Disagreement with the sentence: My country should help refugees | 30 | 14 |
| Would feel uncomfortable working with a Roma person | 20 | 7 |
| Would feel uncomfortable working with a black person | 6 | 2 |
| Would feel uncomfortable working with an Asian person | 6 | 3 |
| Would feel uncomfortable working with a Jewish person | 6 | 3 |
| Would feel uncomfortable working with a Muslim | 13 | 7 |

Sources: European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 85 (2026) and Special Eurobarometer 437 (2015)

Could these attitudes towards migration translate into political support for right-wing populist parties? In a climate of widespread distrust of traditional political parties, any new party could benefit from anti-establishment sentiment. But a single-issue party devoted to reducing immigration would almost inevitably have to appeal to nationalist feelings, as the refusal to accept immigrants can only be argued on the basis of their 'otherness' regarding a common national identity and shared interests. Such a discourse would face widespread mistrust in Spain because, as explained, Spanish nationalism has not recovered from being overused during Francoism, while centrifugal territorial tensions have furthered eroded it. Finally, opinion polls show that Spaniards do not consider immigration to be one of the most important problems the country faces.

Since the beginning of the Spanish democracy in 1977, extreme rightist parties have had little electoral appeal. They had not been affected by the wave of ideological renovation which modified the nature of extreme rightist parties in other European countries during the 1960s, as results of reactions to decolonisation or to the 1968 cultural revolt.[4] During the first decades of the new democracy, the extreme right in Spain was the heir of Falange Española, the 1930s fascist movement that provided the ideological legitimation of the Franco regime during its first years. In 1977, its discourse felt obsolete, with no resonance among the Spanish population, which saw them as a Civil War relic.

The extreme right was disconcerted by transition to democracy and unable to react: soon it was divided into several groups, each of them claiming to be the true heirs of Falange Española, losing a common leadership. They gradually lost their few voters and have not gained near 1 per cent of the vote in parliamentary elections since. During the two last decades they have not even reached 0.5 per cent in those elections. Their most salient success was the 2 per cent of all votes obtained in the 2014 European elections by a new party, Vox, led by a former Partido Popular leader, who almost managed to obtain a seat. But this same party won less than 0.3 per cent in the 2015 and 2016 parliamentary elections.

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[4] Xavier Meseguer, 'La renovación de la ultraderecha española: una historia generacional (1966-2008)', *Historia y Política* 22, 2009, pp 233–58

**Voter's percentage for extreme right parties in Spain, European, national and local elections**
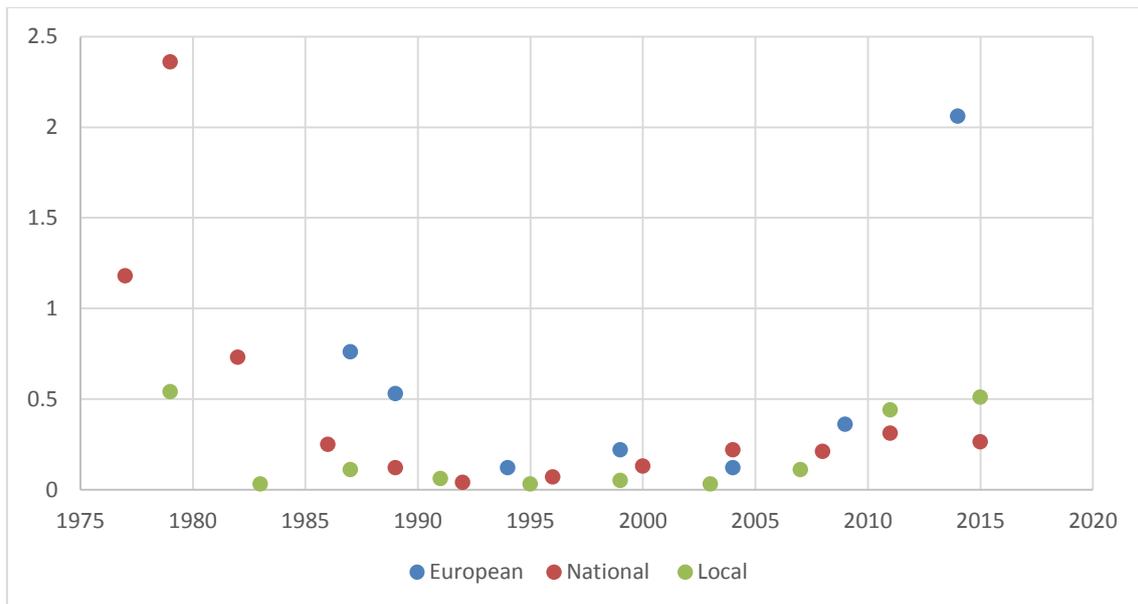


Source: Ministry of Interior, Spain

Very few Spaniards would define themselves as extreme right on a 1–10 scale, where 1 is the extreme left and 10 the extreme right. Opinion polls steadily show only a small minority (8 per cent) choosing the right-hand 8, 9 and 10 scale positions, while 27 per cent place themselves in the three left-most positions, and 48 per cent identifies with the central posts (4 to 7). Those who choose the extreme right posts used to vote Alianza Popular, a law-and-order party, ideologically close to Francoism but accepting the basic rules of liberal democracy, and have from 1989 on voted for its heir, the Partido Popular or have abstained from voting. Within the Partido Popular, there are different ideological currents, from conservatism to economic liberalism and Christian democracy. The Partido Popular does not indulge in Francoist nostalgia, but the inexistence of a party on the fringe makes it the party of choice for the extreme right nonetheless.

Several parties have tried to address concerns over immigration, an issue which the two big parties (Socialist and Popular) had largely neglected. In 2003, a new party, Plataform per Catalunya, with a single-issue message of controlling immigration and improving public safety (which they also related to immigrants), won local councillors

in four middle-sized towns in Catalonia. Its biggest success was winning 75,000 votes in the Catalonian regional election of 2011 (2.4 per cent of all votes), followed that same year by winning 66,000 votes and 67 local councillors in the local elections of Catalonia. From then on, internal divisions put an end to the advancement of the party, whose results in the local elections of 2015 were much smaller (27,000 votes). Although the party took part in the national parliamentary elections, it never reached the minimum electoral threshold of 3 per cent of votes in any of the provinces where it participated.

The founder of Plataform per Catalunya, Josep Anglada, was former members of Fuerza Nueva, hence he is linked with the old extreme right groups, heirs of Francoism and Falange Española. In the context of a powerful pro-independency movement in Catalonia, Plataform per Catalunya was expressing simultaneously the protest against the political hegemony of Catalanism and the claims of right-wing voters who felt annoyed by the presence, labour competition and customs of immigrants.

In 2000, a similar party was formed in Madrid, España 2000, union of four small groups. Like Plataform per Catalunya, España 2000 aimed to reduce immigration, it is associated with the old extreme right groups and received the blessing of the French National Front. España 2000 won seven councillors in four towns near Madrid in 2000, plus one in a small locality in the province of Valencia. Plataform per Catalunya and España 2000 have signed an agreement to present shared candidates in the next general parliamentary elections, but this has not improved their chances of electoral success.

The new party Vox emerged in 2013, led by former Partido Popular leader Aleix Vidal Quadras. He had been the president of the Partido Popular in Catalonia (1991–96) and vice president of the European Parliament (2004–14). The new party's priorities were defending the unity of Spain (it opposed the centrifugal tendencies of several Autonomous Communities, especially Catalonia, and proposed to recentralise the semi-federal Spanish system), taking back power from Brussels, limiting Muslim migration to Spain and Europe, and protecting conservative values (including reinstating an abortion ban). They tried to attract right-wing voters disappointed with the Partido Popular policies and they were almost successful in the European elections of 2014, in which Vox obtained 247,000 votes (1.6 per cent), only 15,000 votes short of a seat.

The party has lost steam and media attention since and only got 57,000 votes (0.23 per cent) in the parliamentary elections of 2015. Its electoral base in 2014 was concentrated in Melilla, a Spanish African town with a large Muslim population of Moroccan origin, a fact which provokes anxiety among the non-Muslim population of the town. Its other

bases of support were the richest and most right-leaning areas of Madrid, but its nation-wide electoral prospects are very poor.

Vox could be described as the first attempt to form a modern right-wing populist party in Spain, with no echoes of the Francoist period. Rather than bank on Francoist nostalgia, the party aimed to attract right-wing voters dissatisfied with Partido Popular policies. Like Plataform per Catalunya, Vox was initiated in Catalonia, where the main political cleavage is the division between those pushing towards independence from the Spanish state and those wishing to remain part of Spain. Not only in Catalonia, but in the whole of Spain, the Catalan challenge to the Spanish territorial integrity has been a divisive political issue all along the life of the Spanish democracy. Right and left have opted for different approaches to this tension, with the right typically emphasising unity and the left more willing to yield. On the other hand, both the Partido Socialista and the Partido Popular have frequently given in to peripheral nationalist demands in exchange of political support for the formation of regional or national governments.

In many ways, it seems, the territorial distribution of power is a double-edged sword for the populist right: on the one hand, the weakness of the single Spanish identity makes it difficult to draw in large numbers with a nationalist appeal, while on the other hand it makes it possible to appeal to frustration over separatist demands.

**Conclusions**

Looking at the severe impact of the economic crisis, the high unemployment and poverty rates, and the rapid pace of immigration in Spain, it becomes all the more surprising that Spain has not seen a successful anti-European, anti-globalisation, xenophobic or extreme right-wing movement. The main explanatory factor is the relative weakness of Spanish national identity. The abuse of national symbols and national identity during Francoism caused a counter-movement during the transition which still persists. Also the strong peripheral nationalist movements in different regions, mostly in Catalonia and the Basque Country, have further contributed to erode a shared Spanish identity.

Other European countries experienced authoritarian regimes during the twentieth century but are now cradles of successful nationalist–xenophobic movements. The key of Spanish peculiarity, which it shares with Portugal, is that the authoritarian past is more recent than in Germany or Italy, with around half of the population who lived during that period still alive. Contrary to what happened in communist countries,

nationalism was the main ideological tool used to legitimise the regime, while interna-
tionalism was used in communist European countries to justify their alliance or submis-
sion to the Soviet Union. This communist past now allows and favours the blossom of
nationalist parties in Eastern Europe, but nationalist authoritarian past prevents it in
Spain and Portugal.

A second important aspect is the dominance of the centre–periphery divide as a political
issue throughout the history of Spanish democracy. This has left little space for populist
parties to put their own issues on the agenda. The conflicts between Basque and
Catalonian nationalist parties on the one hand and the central government and the rest of
the Autonomous Communities on the other have been the permanent ideological
battlegrounds of Spanish political life. Public opinion is deeply divided on this issue,
with a quarter of the population supporting the centrifugal tendencies and a third opting
for the recentralisation of power. More recently, corruption has become a major political
issue, with politicians, rather than migrants, becoming something of a scapegoat for the
economic crisis.

The hypothesis that an authoritarian, rightist and nationalist recent past acts as a
vaccination against extreme right parties in the present is given further weight by the
similarities between Spain and Portugal: both shared a similar experience of four
decades of nationalist, Catholic, and corporatist authoritarianism, and both countries
have until now been immune to this wave of right-wing populist parties, despite the
grave economic and political crisis they have suffered.

But the very recent events in Catalonia have prompted an upsurge in Spanish national
feeling, made evident by the unprecedentedly massive display of Spanish flags in the
windows and balconies of apartments and houses in the rest of the country. Even in
Catalonia, for the first time ever, the usually silent citizens who oppose secessionism
(around half the Catalan population) have demonstrated in the streets to affirm their
Spanish identity. Attendance in Madrid at the annual military parade that commemo-
rates Spain's National Day (12 October) has been in 2017 far greater than usual. And
small ultra-right-wing populist groups are using the Catalan conflict to stir up hatred for
–and violence against– separatism. These are signs that something is changing and that
the widespread rejection in the rest of the country of the Catalan government's attempt
to create an independent state could be reinforcing the sense of Spanishness, feeding
what is a relatively weak sentiment by identifying an enemy that threatens Spain's
territorial integrity. The conflict provoked by Catalan populist nationalism can legiti-

mise resurgence in Spanish nationalism, which now, in this new scenario, would be free from the stigma it acquired through its association with Francoism. On the other hand, the terrorist attack in Barcelona on August 17th, conducted by Moroccan immigrants, might boost the hitherto low Islamophobia among Spaniards, widening the social base for a xenophobic party.

The challenge ahead is how to channel this revitalised Spanish national identity and increased concern about Islamist violence through moderate mainstream parties, avoiding its use to nourish extreme right-wing populist movements.