

# **The Spanish Exception: Unemployment, inequality and immigration, but no right-wing populist parties**

Carmen González-Enríquez



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**Carmen González-Enríquez** | Senior Analyst at the Elcano Royal Institute  
@rielcano 

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Very few European countries have proven immune to the appeal of right-wing populism. The exception is Spain: despite economic crisis and fast-eroding political trust, Spain has not seen any right-wing populist party obtain more than 1% of the vote in national elections in recent years. What might explain this remarkable absence of an electorally successful Spanish right-wing populist party?

Using public data (including statistics and opinion polls), interviews with experts and original polling, this case study scrutinises various factors influencing right-wing populist success in Spain – or lack thereof. First, it sets out why it is so remarkable that Spain should not have a right-wing populist presence in politics. Several explanations are discussed, including the historical weakness of the Spanish national identity and the Spanish people's pro-Europeanism. These factors all seem to influence the (lack of) demand for a populist message by Spanish people. In and of themselves, however, these factors fail fully to explain the absence of a right-wing political party. Finally, this case study considers so-called supply-side factors, particularly the failure of parties that have tried to appeal to right-wing populist sentiments in Spain and the effects of the Spanish electoral system.

This report takes part of the Research Project “Nothing to fear but fear Itself?”, an initiative of the British think tank Demos, which covers six countries: Germany, Poland, France, the UK, Sweden and Spain. The full report can be found on its website (<https://www.demos.co.uk/project/nothing-to-fear-but-fear-itself/>).

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<sup>1</sup> Jose Pablo Martínez, Research Assistant at Elcano Royal Institute, has gathered a good part of the information on which this Working Paper is based. Also Elena Sotos, from the Elcano Royal Institute, has been very helpful in the data collection process. I am especially grateful to Xavier Casals Messeguer, who generously travelled to Madrid to offer us his insight on the extreme right in Spain. The chapter of this paper dealing with these kind of parties benefits greatly from his work. Finally, I thank the experts who attended the meeting in Madrid on 27 September 2016, where some of the hypothesis of this report were discussed, and whose names are included in appendix A.

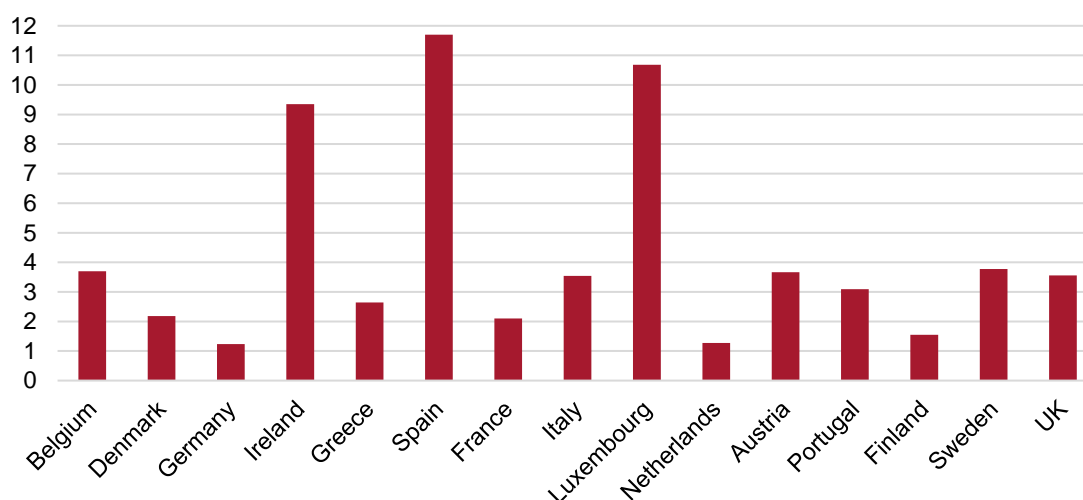
## Migration, economic crisis and political dissatisfaction

Three sets of issues are particularly associated with the rise of right-wing populism: political corruption, economic crisis and concern over immigration.<sup>2</sup> Spain has experienced all three. Between 1996 and 2007, the Spanish economy underwent a remarkable boom, based largely on a construction bubble, which led to (and was fuelled by) a massive influx of immigrants, which reached its peak in 2012, with 6,760,000 foreign-born people. While in 1998 immigrants accounted for 3% of the population, by 2012 this number had risen to 14% and remained high in subsequent years. The years of rapid economic, demographic and social change between 1996 and 2007 were in many ways a golden period for Spain. Yet even then Spain had higher inequality, unemployment and population at risk of poverty than the Western European average (the rate of the so-called EU-15), and well below the EU-15 average of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita. Only in 2005 and 2006 did Spain come close to reaching the EU-15 averages.

### Migration

Between 2000 and 2009, Spain received half of all migrants to the EU-15 (figure 1). The net immigration per capita was the highest of any European Union (EU) country. No other country in Europe has experienced such an intense and quick process of immigration in modern times.

Figure 1. Average net migration in EU-15 countries per 1,000 inhabitants, 1998-2009



Source: calculated from Eurostat figures.<sup>3</sup>

During the rapid economic expansion of the 2000s, immigrants from poorer countries (excluding Western European migrants) filled an 'occupational gap'. They did jobs which were often unskilled, mainly in construction, domestic service, retail, catering, other personal services and agriculture, where they occupied the least-desired positions. Very

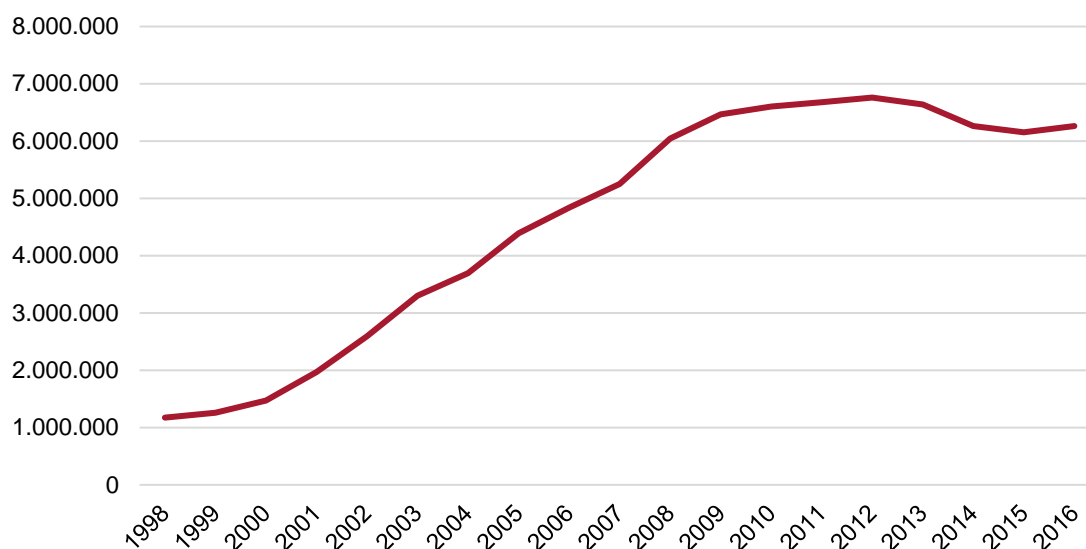
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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Iversflaten & Gudbrandsen (2014).

<sup>3</sup> Eurostat (n.d.).  
(cont.)

few were able to move up the occupational ladder and most remained in precarious, manual work.<sup>4</sup> Figure 2 shows the figures of the foreign-born population in Spain between 1998 and 2016.

**Figure 2. Foreign-born population of Spain, 1998-2016**



Source: INE (2016a).

### Economic change

Then, in 2007, the bubble burst. The financial crisis hit Spain slightly earlier than it hit the rest of Europe, when the construction industry collapsed. In the following years, more than 3 million jobs were destroyed and there was a surge in the unemployment rate, which rose from 8% in 2008 to 26% in 2013 (compared with a rise from 7% to 11% across the EU in the same period). Also between 2008 and 2013 real GDP fell by 8.9% (compared with 1% in the EU as a whole), and average household spending fell by 14.5%.

The crisis affected two groups particularly: immigrants and lower-qualified male native workers, because of their concentration in the construction sector. Immigrants especially were put in a precarious position, lacking a safety net provided by family. They also had a difficult time finding new employment, as their social and professional networks tended to be narrower and their professional qualifications are on average lower than non-immigrants. According to the most recent data (of the second quarter of 2016), the unemployment rate among the Spanish foreign-born population is 27%, compared with 19% among Spanish citizens.<sup>5</sup> Despite the crisis, the immigrant population continued to grow until the end of 2011 and only began to shrink in 2012. During three years, 2012-

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<sup>4</sup> Garrido Medina & Miyar Busto (2008).

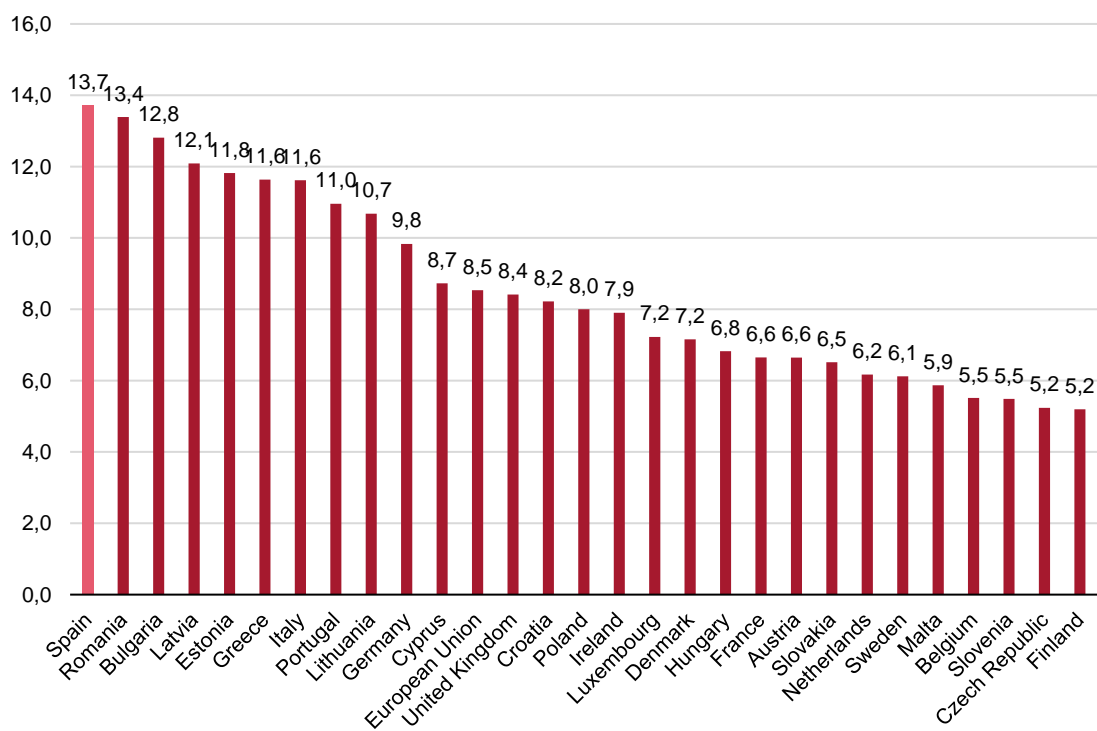
<sup>5</sup> INE (2016b).  
(cont.)

14, the foreign-born population decreased by 650,000 persons or 10% of the total, but in 2015 it began to increase again.<sup>6</sup>

The crisis has provoked a very visible rise of poverty –mostly due to unemployment– and increased inequality (Figures 6 and 7).<sup>7</sup> From 2000 to 2015 there was a hike in the Gini coefficient of almost 3 percentage points (Figure 5). In 2014, no EU country had a wider gap between the income of the richest 10% and that of the poorest 10%; 29% of the population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Figure 3). This is 6 points more than in 2007, as well as 6 points above the EU-15 average and 5 points above the EU-28 average.<sup>8</sup>

Consumer spending decreased every year between 2009 and 2014, after years of continuous increases (Figure 8). Finally, the budget cuts implemented since 2011 have affected the level of service provision, including public education and public health, likely impairing equality of opportunities. In 2014 and 2015 the first signs of economic recovery could be seen, but levels of average well-being are still much lower than in 2007, as the effect of recovery in the labour market is still modest. Figure 4 shows the GDP in Spain compared with 15 EU countries between 2000 and 2015.

**Figure 3. The gap between rich and poor (10% with highest income; 10% with lowest income) in EU countries, 2014**



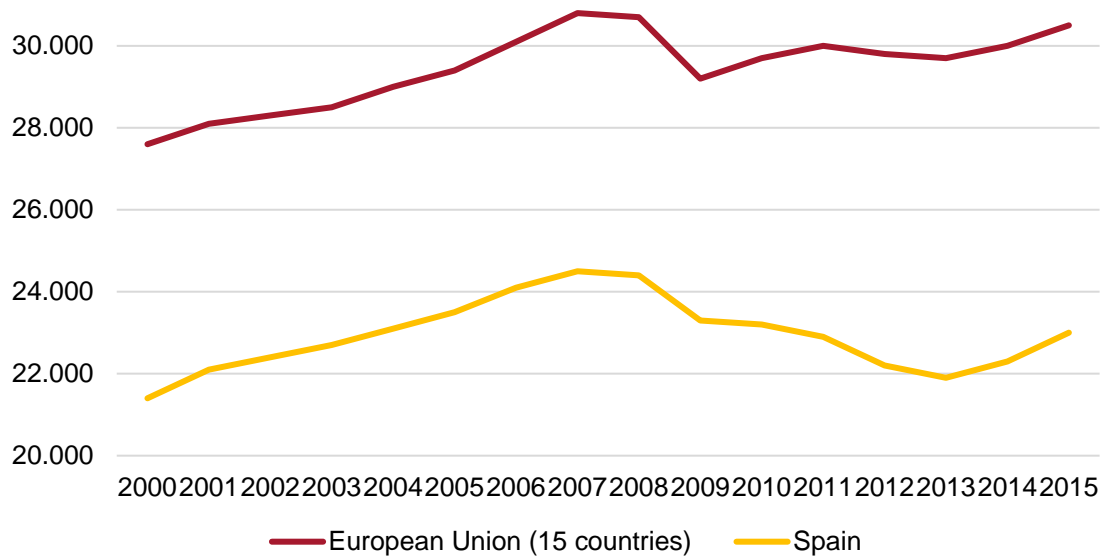
Source: Eurostat.

<sup>6</sup> INE (2016c).

<sup>7</sup> See Carabaña (2016).

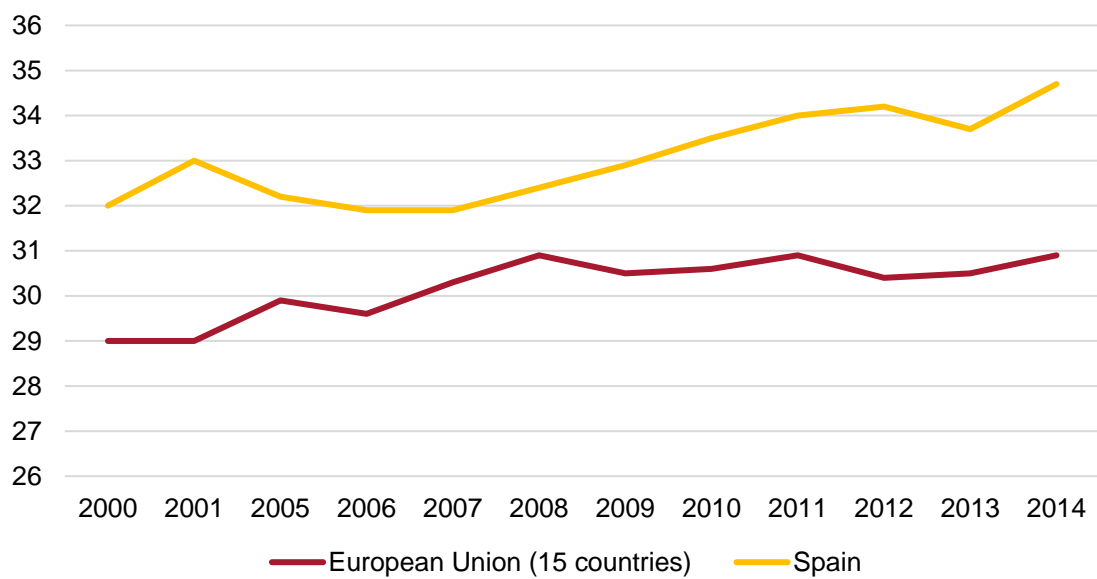
<sup>8</sup> Eurostat (2016).

**Figure 4. GDP (adjusted for inflation) per capita in Spain compared with 15 EU countries, 2000-15**



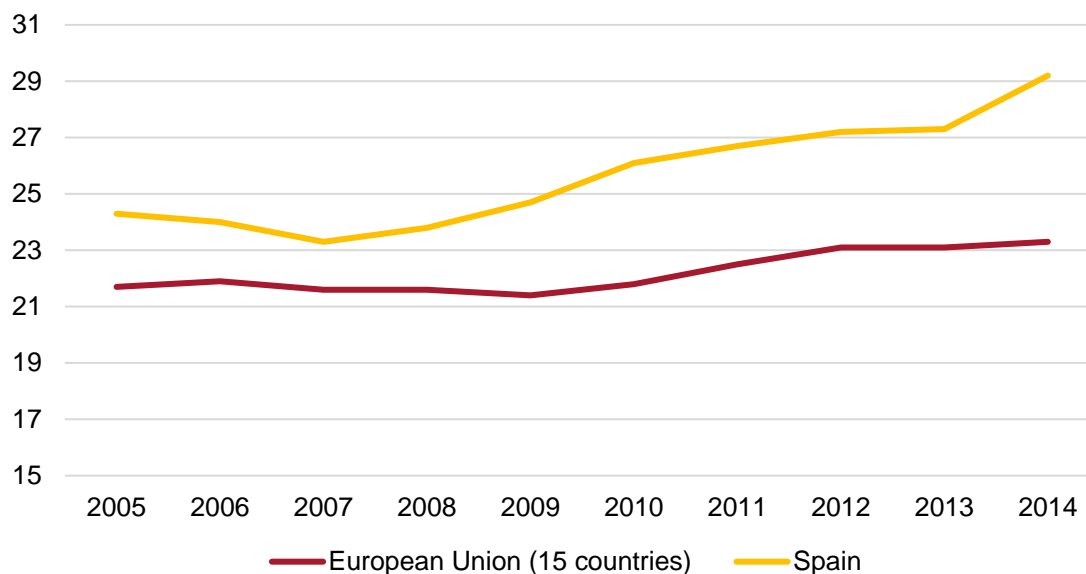
Source: Eurostat.

**Figure 5. Gini coefficient in Spain compared with 15 EU countries, 2000-14**



Source: Eurostat.

**Figure 6. Percentage of population at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Spain compared with 15 EU countries, 2005-14**



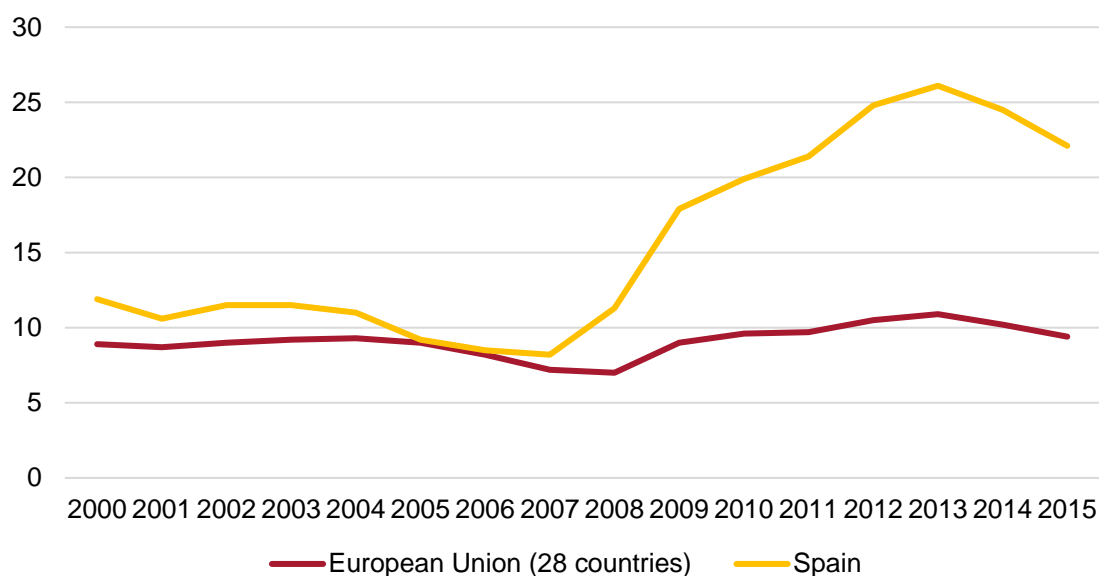
Source: Eurostat.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Eurostat defines the risk of poverty as follows: 'This indicator corresponds to the sum of persons who are: at risk of poverty or severely materially deprived or living in households with very low work intensity. Persons are only counted once even if they are present in several sub-indicators. At risk-of-poverty are persons with an equivalised disposable income below the risk-of-poverty threshold, which is set at 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income (after social transfers). Material deprivation covers indicators relating to economic strain and durables. Severely materially deprived persons have living conditions severely constrained by a lack of resources, they experience at least four out of nine following deprivations items: cannot afford to pay rent or utility bills, keep home adequately warm, face unexpected expenses, eat meat, fish or a protein equivalent every second day, a week holiday away from home, a car, a washing machine, a colour TV, or a telephone. People living in households with very low work intensity are those aged 0-59 living in households where the adults (aged 18-59) work 20% or less of their total work potential during the past year'.

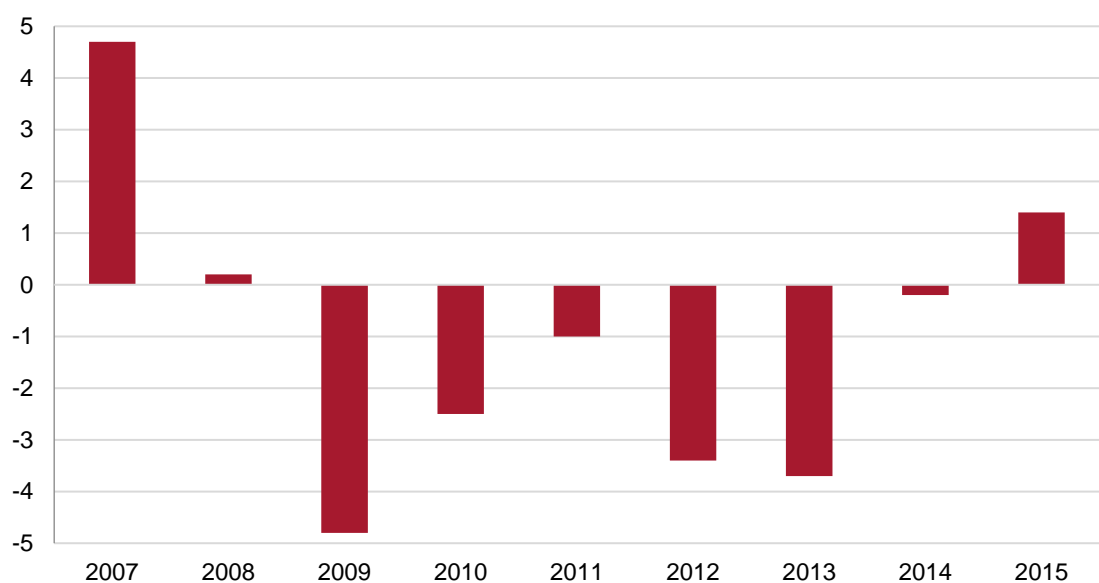


**Figure 7. Unemployment rate in Spain compared with that in 28 EU countries, 2000-15**



Source: Eurostat.

**Figure 8. Household expenditure in Spain, 2007-15**



Source: INE (2007-15).

### Political trust

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. The effects of the economic crisis were exacerbated for the main political parties by the discovery of corrupt practices. Scandals hit the ruling *Partido Popular* (Popular party), and to a lesser extent the opposition, the *Partido Socialista* (Socialist party), and the leading Catalan nationalist group *Convergència Democràtica*. According to a Standard

Eurobarometer report in 2014, 91% of Spaniards did not trust political parties (13 points above the European average) and 69% were dissatisfied with the democratic system (21 points above the European average).<sup>10</sup>

Around the same time that the extent of the corruption became apparent, the government enacted painful budget cuts. The size of these cuts, imposed from 2011 onwards, was frequently compared to the vast quantities of money embezzled by politicians. This connection between austerity and corruption in the eyes of the public further fuelled popular anger at the political status quo. When asked about the most pervasive negative aspects of Spain, corruption is the single most-mentioned issue, ahead of economic problems or unemployment.<sup>11</sup>

The loss of trust in the parties that had dominated Spanish political life since the beginning of its democratic era has challenged Spain's two-party system, with third parties winning a significant share of the vote for the first time since 1977. Two important new parties appeared, *Ciudadanos* and *Podemos*. *Ciudadanos* (Citizens), which could be described as centre-right, has mainly campaigned on the fight against corruption and zero tolerance towards peripheral nationalism (such as the Catalan and the Basque independence movements).

The second and more successful party is *Podemos* ('We can'). *Podemos* is still balancing between a populist and a leftist profile, and has become the main electoral beneficiary of the strong protest movements that sprang up between 2011 and 2014. The so-called *Movimiento 15M* was the most visible civil society response to the crisis and the social foundation of what became *Podemos*. Nothing similar has appeared on the right wing. Surprisingly, no group is currently mobilising traditionally right-wing voters who have suffered from the impact of the crisis, such as the shopkeepers and owners of small businesses affected by the loss of purchasing power and competition from immigrant shopkeepers and big supermarkets.

Hence, the protest has been dominated by the left, perhaps because a right-leaning party, the *Partido Popular*, has been governing since 2011. There are only the smallest signs of rightist responses, such as the appearance of a non-governmental organisation (NGO) called *Hogar Social Ramiro Ledesma*, inspired by the Greek Golden Dawn. This group, based in Madrid, provides help (food, clothes and lodging) only to Spanish citizens, and it is connected to *Falange Española* and other small anti-democratic parties operating at the intersection of anti-capitalism, nationalism and fascism.

In short, high levels of migration, economic crisis and low political trust are usually populism's perfect storm, yet right-wing populist groups remain exceptionally weak in Spain.

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<sup>10</sup> European Commission (2015b).

<sup>11</sup> Real Instituto Elcano (2014).

## Public opinion: a weak national identity

### The decline of the Spanish national identity

An explanation for the absence of a right-wing populist response to the crisis may lie in Spain's particular relationship to national identity. Spanish national identity is relatively weak, as the Eurobarometer surveys show. The latest data from this survey indicate that Spain is below the EU average in its citizens' feelings of 'attachment' to their country (by 4 points), while it clearly exceeds the average in their attachment to the EU (by 7 points).<sup>12</sup> Another rough indicator of this same phenomenon is the self-esteem of citizens of each country, measured through the Country RepTrak poll, in which Spain stands out in recent years because of its very low self-esteem, well below the valuation of this country abroad.<sup>13</sup>

The causes of the weak Spanish national identity have been extensively debated by historians, sociologists and political scientists. One frequent explanation is the legacy of the Franco regime. During this period, the Spanish admired the achievements of Western European countries –their political freedoms and material gains–. This experience reinforced the inferiority complex of the Spanish, which had already begun in 1898 with the loss of the last Spanish colonies (Cuba and the Philippines). During Franco's dictatorship, the regime exploited nationalist and Roman 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, communists and Freemasons'.<sup>14</sup> The imperial past was continually evoked and the 'brotherhood' with Latin American countries emphasised. In fact, during years of international isolation, Latin American countries, many of them also illiberal, were Spain's main international partners.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, during the entire Francoist period, the regime established very good relations with Arab countries. As discussed below, this rhetoric about the friendship between Spaniards and Latin Americans has had an impact on the attitudes towards immigration during the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The overuse of national symbols and of references to national identity during Francoism caused a counter-movement which still persists, a phenomenon which has been described by sociologists and historians.<sup>16</sup> 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. Democratisation, modernisation and Europeanisation were seen as three parts of the same process.

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<sup>12</sup> European Commission (2015a).

<sup>13</sup> Real Instituto Elcano (2012-16).

<sup>14</sup> For a broad description of the historical formation and weaknesses of the Spanish national identity see Jaúregui & Ruiz-Jiménez (2005) and Fusi (2000).

<sup>15</sup> Pollack & Hunter (1987).

<sup>16</sup> Núñez Seixas (2010).

In the same period, the late 1970s and early 1980s, strong peripheral nationalist movements were formed or reappeared in different regions, mostly in Catalonia and the 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 Spanish national identity. Any person exhibiting the colours of the Spanish flag –in a watch strap, for instance– was immediately classified by the left and the peripheral nationalists as a Franco supporter. 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. Ruiz-Jiménez *et al.* explain,

*Although it seems that the right has returned to an explicit reformulation of democratic Spanish patriotism more easily than the left, the definition of Spain as a nation continues to be an object of political controversy, not only among nation-wide parties but also between these and regionalist/nationalist parties. In summary, Spanish parties have not instilled consistent feelings of identification with Spain as a political community.<sup>17</sup>*

Spanish national pride grew following the country’s entry into the EU in 1986. From the late 1990s onwards, it was further strengthened by a decade of solid economic growth. By the time the crisis broke out in 2007, the Spanish were quite proud of their country, but their pride swiftly declined as the country was hit by economic decline and corruption scandals. This is visible in various statistics on national pride and national identification: if we compare the results of a wave of opinion polls conducted in 2002 (a period of intense economic growth in Spain) with the wave of 2015 (a time of enduring crisis) we see a decrease in the degree of identification with the country. Those who feel ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ close to Spanish people (compared with other groups, such as other Europeans, the inhabitants of their town, or the inhabitants of their region) formed 90% of respondents in 2002, but 85% in 2015, while the number of people who feel ‘just a little’ or ‘not close at all’ to Spaniards has increased from 10% to 15% (Table 1).<sup>18</sup>

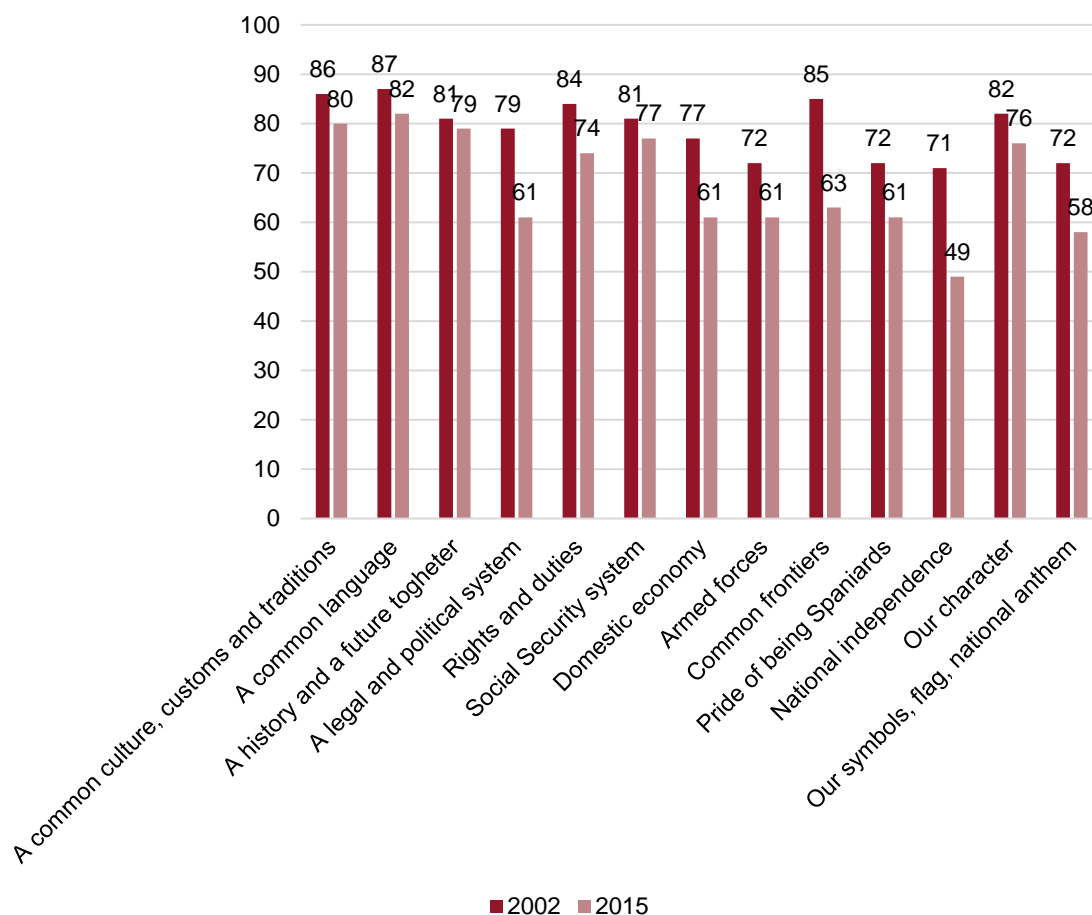
When comparing levels of identification with different elements of feeling Spanish between 2002 and 2015 we see a marked drop in national identification across the board. There is a decrease in identification with the Spanish culture, the Spanish language, its history and its symbols. The strongest decline is observed in identification with independence, borders, the political and legal system and economic life (Figure 9).

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<sup>17</sup> Ruiz-Jiménez *et al.* (2017).

<sup>18</sup> González-Enríquez (2016b).

**Figure 9. The percentage of respondents who agree 'quite' or 'very much' with various statements on what they share with other Spaniards, 2002 and 2015**



Source: European Commission (2002) and Real Instituto Elcano (2015).

Interestingly, the comparison between these two polls show local identities do not seem to be filling the void left by a weakening national identity. The percentage of Spanish people who feel close to the residents of their town and those who feel close to the inhabitants of their Autonomous Community have fallen 5 and 6 points respectively (Table 1). Hence, localism is not replacing national identities.

### The European identity of Spanish people

A related factor is the prevalent and persistent pro-European sentiment of the Spanish population. Identification with Europe and Europeans has remained steadily high, even increasing slightly during the last years: 59% of Spaniards feel quite or very close to other Europeans, up 2 points from 2002, while the percentage of those who feel only slightly or not at all close to other Europeans decreased four points (44%-40%).

**Table 1. Groups towards whom Spaniards feel attachment, 2002 and 2015**

	2002 (%)	2015 (%)	Change 2002–2015 (%)
Inhabitants of the town or village	92	87	-4
Inhabitants of the region	86	80	-6
Spaniards	90	85	-5
Europeans	57	59	+2

Source: European Commission (2002) and Real Instituto Elcano (2015).

Eurobarometers usually show Spaniards to be more pro-European than average: in 2008 only 6% of Spaniards had a negative image of the EU, well below the EU average (14%). The economic crisis provoked a rise of anti-EU feeling all over Europe, including Spain, but even now negative attitudes towards the EU are less prevalent in Spain than elsewhere (23% in Spain compared with a 27% EU average). The high levels of identification of Spanish citizens with the EU is confirmed by the fact that only 28% of Spaniards did not consider themselves in any way European citizens (compared with an average of 39% across the EU).<sup>19</sup>

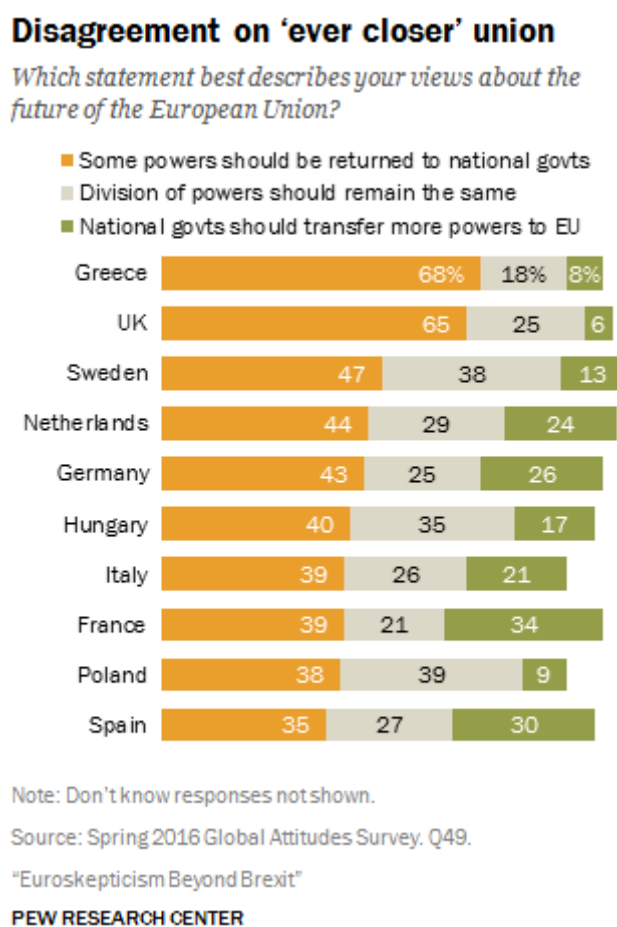
This Europeanism presents itself not only as a cultural identification with Europe, but also as sympathy for the EU as a political project. The Pew Research Institute has recently confirmed this remarkable Europeanism of Spanish population.<sup>20</sup> As Figure 10 shows, the Spanish are least inclined of any European people to support returning power from the EU to the member states.

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<sup>19</sup> European Commission (2016).

<sup>20</sup> Stokes (2016).

**Figure 10. The views of respondents in EU countries on whether power should be returned from the EU to the member states, spring 2016**



Source: Global Attitudes Survey, spring 2016.

Our own polling also shows there is a high level of Europeanism among Spanish citizens: only 10% would prefer for the country to leave the EU, and those who would like to reduce EU powers are outnumbered by those wanting to leave things as they are, increase EU powers or even advance towards a politically unified Europe. With Poland, Spain is least likely to favour leaving the EU, and with Germany the most likely to favour an increase of EU powers. Europeanism is especially strong among older citizens, who remember most acutely the period before Spain's EU membership (Tables 2, 3 and 4).

**Table 2. The views of respondents on what the long-term policy of Spain towards the EU should be, by age group, Sep 2016**

	Total (%)	18–24 (%)	25–34 (%)	35–44 (%)	45–54 (%)	55+ (%)
To leave the EU	10	10	7	13	15	7
To stay in the EU and try to reduce the EU's powers	31	35	35	31	23	31
To leave things as they are	11	12	11	4	19	10
To stay in the EU and try to increase the EU's powers	23	19	29	22	14	24
To work for the formation of a single European government	12	14	8	8	13	17
Don't know	14	10	10	23	16	11

Source: Demos and YouGov poll, September 2016.

**Table 3. The views of respondents in six EU countries on what they think their country's long-term policy towards the EU should be, September 2016**

	UK (%)	France (%)	Germany (%)	Poland (%)	Spain (%)	Sweden (%)	Average (%)
To leave the EU	45	22	16	8	10	25	21
To stay in the EU and try to reduce the EU's powers	23	33	23	32	31	32	29
To leave things as they are	12	6	9	21	11	10	12
To stay in the EU and try to increase the EU's powers	5	11	23	14	23	14	15
To work for the formation of a single European government	2	14	16	10	12	4	10
Don't know	12	14	13	15	14	15	14

Source: Demos and YouGov poll, September 2016.

The most recent Standard Eurobarometer again shows the political climate in Spain being much more pro-EU than in most member states.



**Table 4. The proportion of Spaniards who agree with statements about the EU, compared with those of all EU respondents, 2015**

	EU average (%)	Spain (%)
'The EU means loss of our cultural identity'	15	7
'The EU means not enough control at external borders'	25	15
'In general, the EU conjures up for me a negative image'	27	23
I see myself as [nationality] only'	39	28
'I oppose a common European migration policy'	26	12
'[Our country] could better face the future outside the EU'	33	25
'I oppose the European Economic and Monetary Union'	38	27

Source: European Commission (2015a).

On the downside, this remarkable Europeanism does not mean that Spaniards are not critical of the functioning of the EU. Especially notable is a lower assessment of EU political life and EU management of the economy (comparing data from 2002 and 2015). But this criticism of the working of the EU, which seems to be caused by the economic crisis, does not diminish the will to stay in it.<sup>21</sup>

### The acceptance of globalisation

Spanish people hold remarkably favourable attitudes to globalisation compared with other EU countries, a trait they have in common with the people of another country in the Demos sample, Poland. Both countries, which share a relatively late incorporation to the EU and a long experience of authoritarianism and international isolation, stand out for their enthusiasm for globalisation. Both countries are well above the average in their perception of the positive character of the impact of globalisation on Europe as a whole, on the country, on the local area and on the personal life of respondents (Figures 12, 13 and 14). The economic crisis has hit Spain much harder than Poland, which may serve to explain the difference between two countries which are otherwise remarkably similar (Table 5 and Figure 11).

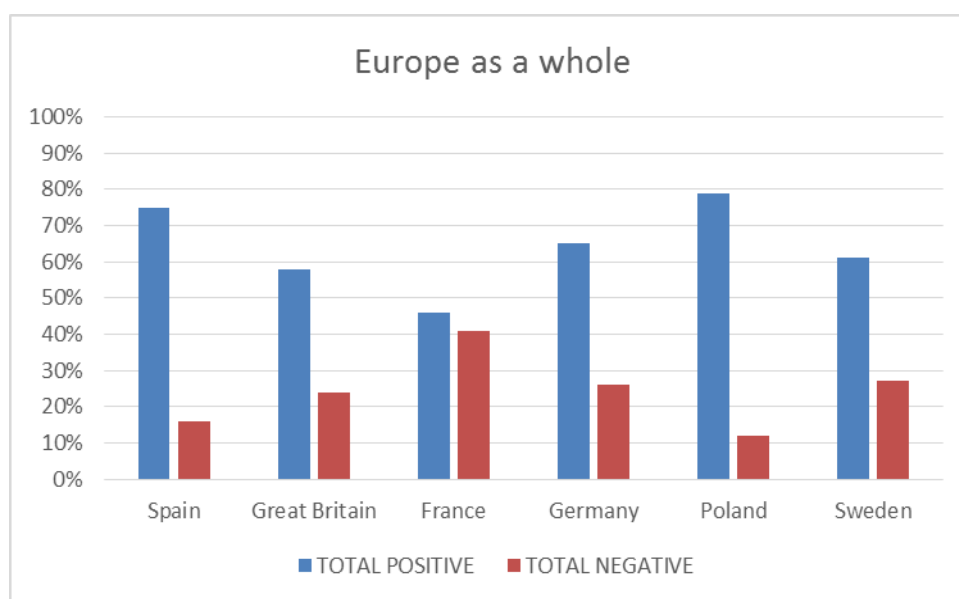
<sup>21</sup> González-Enríquez (2016b).

**Table 5. The proportion of Spaniards who have a negative opinion of globalisation and are against the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, compared with those views held by all EU respondents**

	EU average (%)	Spain (%)
Negative opinion of globalisation	40	32
Against TTIP	34	28

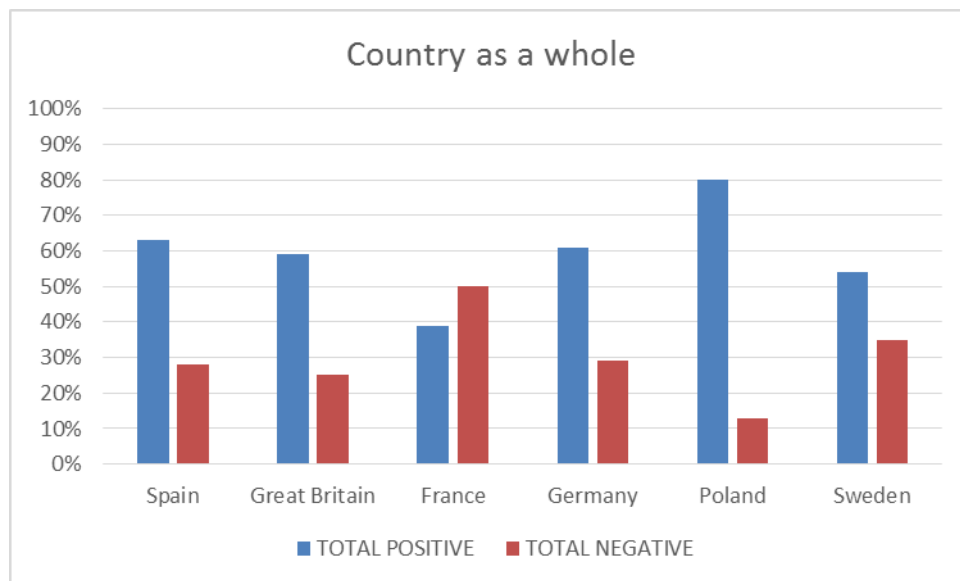
Source: European Commission (2015a).

**Figure 11. The views of respondents in six EU countries on whether globalisation has had a positive or negative effect on Europe as a whole**



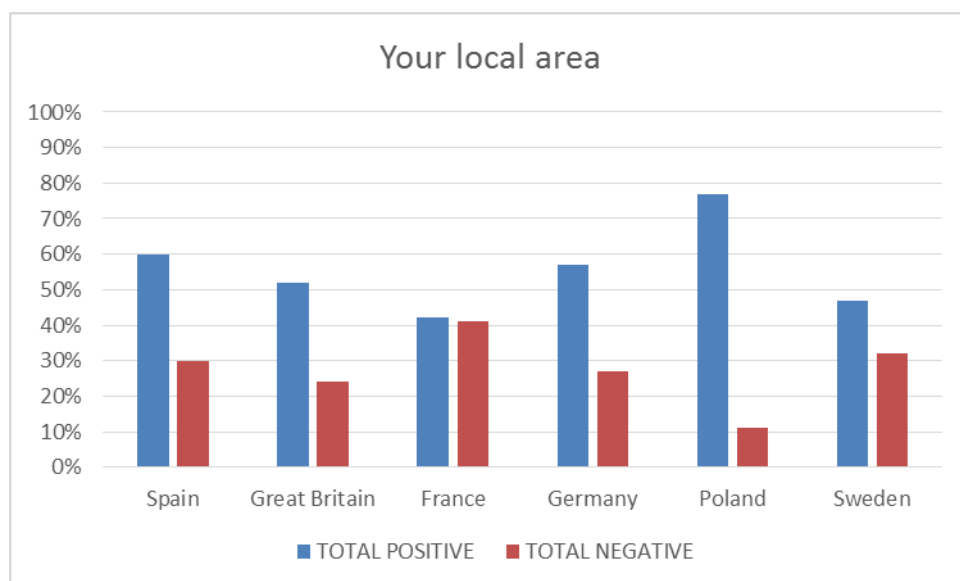
Source: Demos and YouGov poll, September 2016.

**Figure 12. The views of respondents in six EU countries on whether globalisation has had a positive or negative effect on their country as a whole**



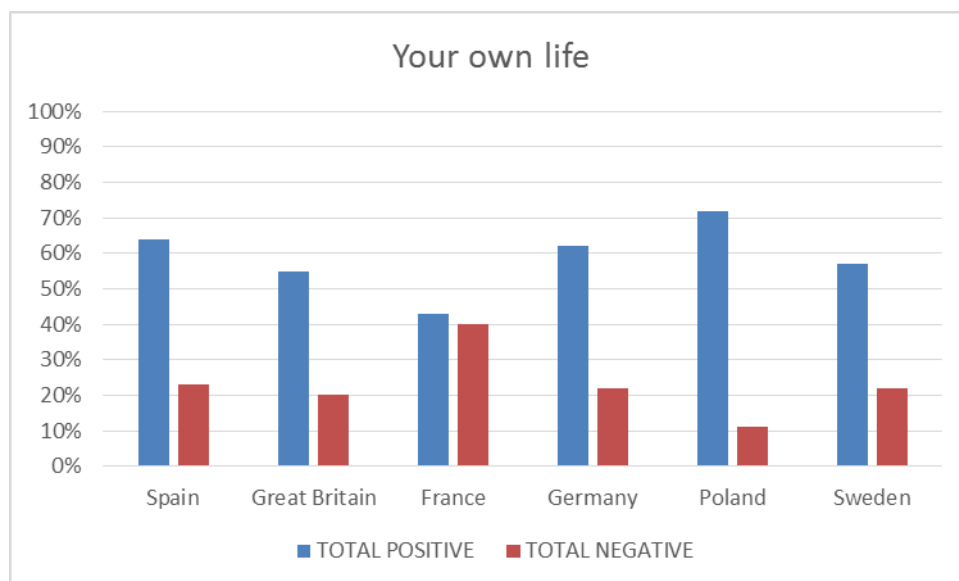
Source: Demos and YouGov poll, September 2016.

**Figure 13. The views of respondents in six EU countries on whether globalisation has had a positive or negative effect on their local area**



Source: Demos and YouGov poll, September 2016.

**Figure 14. The views of respondents in six EU countries on whether globalisation has had a positive or negative effect on their own life**



Source: Demos and YouGov poll, September 2016.

### Increased acceptance of differences

When migrants started coming to Spain in large numbers around the start of the new millennium, most Spanish people saw these people as outsiders with whom they shared little. In an environment that had hitherto been extremely homogeneous, the presence of these new groups reinforced national identity. Opinion polls conducted by the Centre of Sociological Investigations showed little closeness between the Spanish and various national and ethnic groups. The 2002 questionnaire included Moroccans, Latin Americans, sub-Saharan Africans, Roma people and US citizens, with Chinese people added in the 2015 survey.

A comparison between the results of both surveys clearly indicates that in the 13 years since 2002, the level of acceptance of all groups has increased substantially in Spain. In all cases the number of respondents who feel 'not at all close' to Moroccans, Roma people, sub-Saharan Africans, and other groups has fallen significantly. This is compensated by a rise in the number of respondents who feel only a 'bit close' to those groups, which could be just a more socially acceptable expression of the same sentiment, but there is also a significant increase in responses expressing closeness, especially noticeable towards US citizens and sub-Saharan Africans. The Moroccan population is the least affected by this trend and, with Chinese people, tops the list of groups to whom Spaniards feel least close (Table 6).

**Table 6. Respondents' answers to a question on how close they feel to various ethnic groups, 2002 and 2015**

	2002 (%)	2015 (%)	Change 2002–2015
How close do you feel to Moroccans?			
Slightly or not at all close	82	80	-2
Quite or very close	14	18	+4
How close do you feel to Latin Americans?			
Slightly or not at all close	66	59	-7
Quite or very close	32	38	+6
How close do you feel to US citizens?			
Slightly or not at all close	83	74	-9
Quite or very close	14	23	+9
How close do you feel to Sub-Saharan African people?			
Slightly or not at all close	82	72	-10
Quite or very close	15	25	+9
How close do you feel to Roma people?			
Slightly or not at all close	77	71	-6
Quite or very close	19	27	+6
How close do you feel to Chinese people?			
Slightly or not at all close	No data	82	No data
Quite or very close	No data	15	No data

Source: European Commission (2002) and Real Instituto Elcano (2015).<sup>22</sup>

According to these data, Spanish society has in these 13 years become closer to 'others', for various reasons: the accumulated practice of cohabitation with immigrants; improvements achieved in socially integrating the local Roma population; Spaniards' greater international experience through tourism and stays abroad as students or

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<sup>22</sup> See also González-Enríquez (2016b).

migrants; and the increased presence of Spanish companies in Latin American, European and Asian countries.

In sum, Spanish people have come to identify less with national and regional collective identities over the past decade and a half. It seems as if the Spanish have on average become more accepting of ethnic difference, more individualistic and more cosmopolitan. At a time when many European states are reappraising their nationhood, national identity and sovereignty, Spain appears to counter the trend. These indicators suggest that popular demand for a right-wing populist message is limited.

### The evolution of public opinion on immigration

Yet it would be too simple to say that Spain is straightforwardly accepting, open-minded and globally oriented. Public opinion on immigration, for one, has been volatile. 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 (Tables 7 and 8). 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 Roman 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 Spanish and sharing Roman Catholicism, eased their acceptance into the Spanish society. The Roman Catholic church played a role in this process, as it found in Latin American migrant communities a new and more conservative inflow of believers.

**Table 7. The percentage of respondents from five EU countries who agree with statements on immigration and immigrants, 1999**

	Italy (%)	France (%)	Spain (%)	UK (%)	Germany (%)	Mean (%)
Immigration is a threat to our culture and our identity	27.3	25.6	<b>10.6</b>	31.0	25.1	25.0
Immigrants are a threat to employment	32.2	28.3	<b>18.7</b>	-	28.8	-
Immigrants are a threat to public order and security	46.1	29.4	<b>13.7</b>	26.2	22.5	28.4

Source: Diamanti (2000).

**Table 8. The proportion of respondents from several EU countries that answer 'yes' to the question 'Do you personally find the presence of another [nationality, race, religion] disturbing in your daily life?', 2000**

	Other nationality (%)	Other race (%)	Other religion (%)
Greece	38	27	31
Denmark	24	24	26
Belgium	20	23	21
Ireland	17	20	17
UK	17	19	17
Netherlands	17	17	17
Deutschland	16	16	13
France	16	14	12
Austria	15	14	12
Italy	11	11	10
Sweden	11	11	10
Luxembourg	9	11	8
Portugal	9	10	8
Finland	8	9	8
<b>Spain</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>

Source: European Commission (2000).

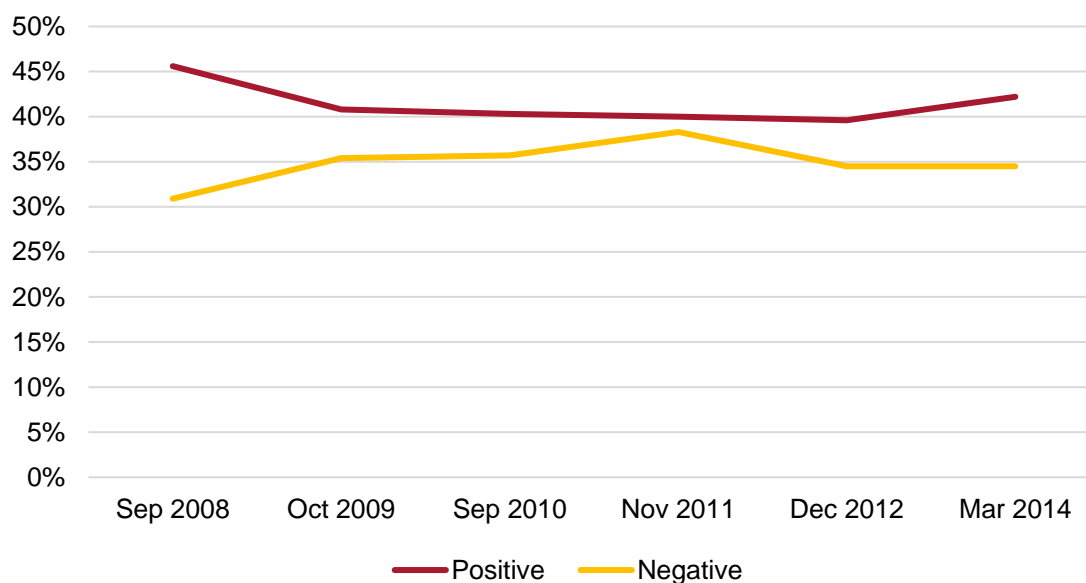
As the country started receiving greater numbers of immigrants from the year 2000 onwards, Spanish public opinion on migration moved closer to the European average. In the boom years, the labour market could still absorb the newcomers, who were arriving at a rate of some 400,000 people per year. Yet already then, the public mood was changing, as the result of several factors: a deterioration of social services, increased crime levels, increased competition in some sectors of the labour market, and everyday tensions between locals and immigrants where they shared apartment buildings, parks and public spaces.<sup>23</sup> By 2006, 59% of Spanish people saw migration as the country's biggest problem.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> González-Enríquez & Álvarez-Miranda(2005). For a discussion of competition in the labour market see González-Enríquez *et al.* (2008).

<sup>24</sup> Alonso & Rovira Kaltwasser (2015).  
(cont.)

The economic crisis provoked a surge of anti-immigration sentiment, recorded by several opinion-poll sources,<sup>25</sup> which reached its peak in 2011-12. Around that time, 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 (Figures 15-17).

**Figure 15. Views of respondents on whether immigration has had a positive or negative effect for Spain, 2008-15**



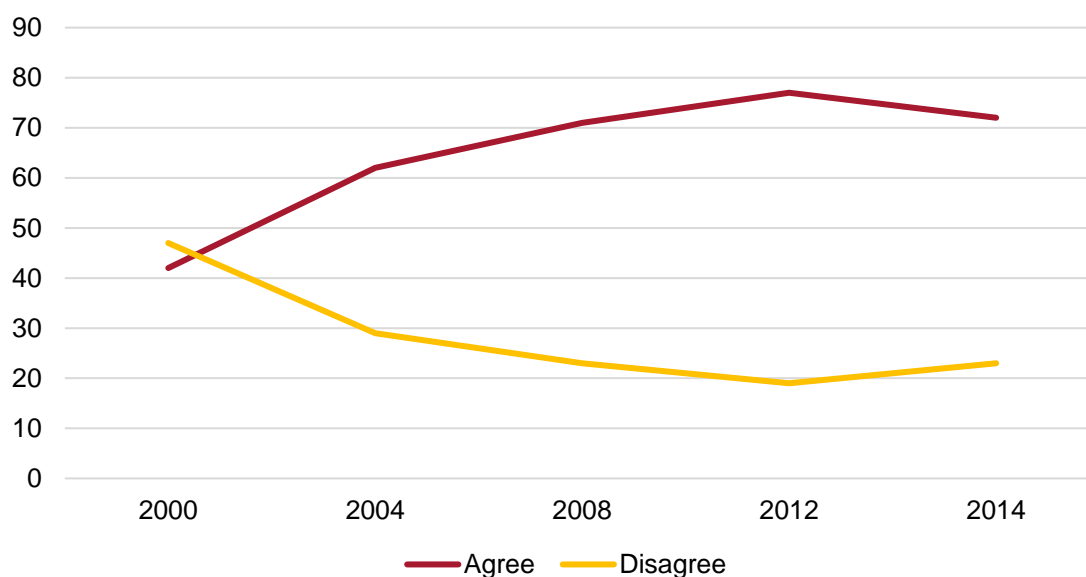
Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, Opinion Barometer, several years.

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25 Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas; Elcano Royal Institute; *Anàlisis Sociològics, Econòmics y Polítics* (ASEP); and regional centres such as *Opiniones y Actitudes de la Población Andaluza ante la Inmigración* (OPIA) in Andalusia.

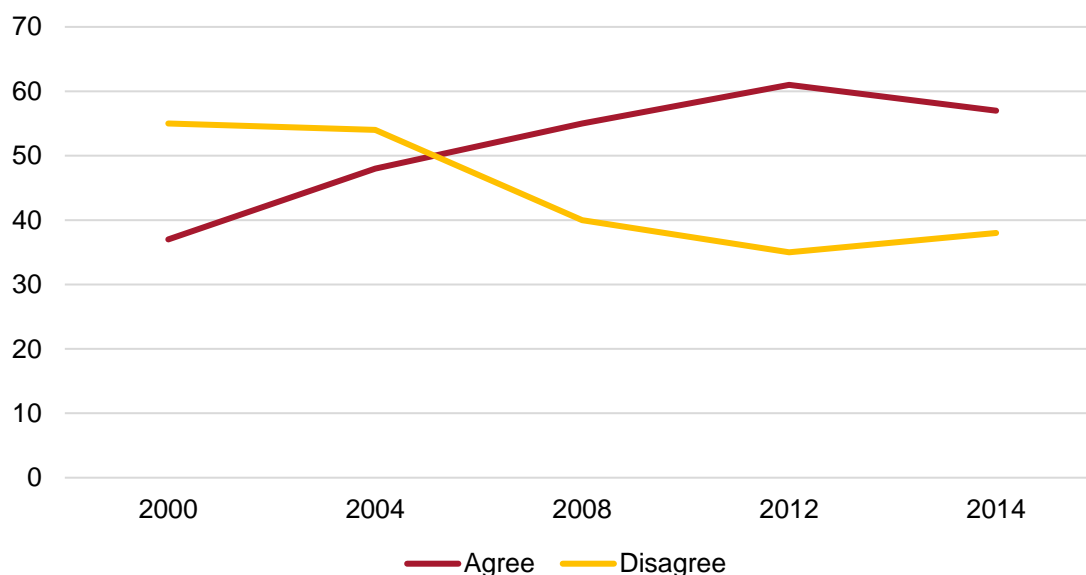


**Figure 16. The extent to which respondents agree with the statement 'By accepting lower salaries, foreign workers bring down salaries in the country [Spain]', 2000-14 (percentages)**



Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, Opinion Barometer, several years.

**Figure 17. The extent to which respondents agree with the statement 'Immigrants take jobs from Spaniards', 2000-14 (percentages)**



Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, Opinion Barometer, several years.

Our results show that more than three-quarters of Spanish people feel that native workers should be hired over foreigners (77%), a percentage that decline till 61% when respondents are voters of Unidos Podemos (Table 9).

**Table 9. The extent to which respondents agree with the statement 'If there are two equally qualified workers, one Spanish and one from another country, the employer should hire the Spanish worker', by political party affiliation**

	Total (%)	Partido Popular (%)	Partido Socialista Obrero Español (%)	Unidos Podemos (%)	Ciudadanos (%)
Strongly agree	37	43	41	27	37
Tend to agree	40	40	38	34	44
Tend to disagree	17	10	16	29	16
Strongly disagree	6	7	4	10	2

Source: Demos and YouGov poll, September 2016.

Another major element of concern regarding immigration is crime. In fact, surveys suggest that perceptions of criminality are a bigger driver of unfavourable attitudes to immigrants than the economy and the labour market. Already by 2000, more than half (51%) of those surveyed by the Centre of Sociological Investigations agreed with the statement 'The increase in the number of immigrants contributes to the rise of crime in our country', with 35% disagreeing. The question was replaced in 2003 by another, asking people to respond to the statement: 'Today in Spain there is a link between diminishing security and immigration'. More than half (58%) of respondents agreed and 26% disagreed. In the 2014 Centre of Sociological Investigations immigration survey, 'crime and insecurity' were the most frequent spontaneous answers to the open question about potential negative consequences of immigration at 22%, followed by labour market competition at 19%, and cultural integration problems at 16%.<sup>26</sup> However, despite these concerns about security and the terrorist attack of March 2004 in Madrid, Islamophobia is 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 violence from the Basque terrorist group *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA) during decades and has never blamed the whole Basque population for the crimes committed by ETA terrorists.

Moreover, the perceived impact of immigration on the welfare state has had a negative effect on public opinion: 58% of those surveyed by the Centre of Sociological Investigations in 2014 thought that immigrants receive more or much more from the Spanish state than they contribute to it; 52% believed that immigrants 'overused' health care services; 48% agreed that 'immigrants receive more health services than Spaniards'; and 54% felt that 'immigrant children receive more school-related financial aid than Spanish ones'. Nearly half (47%) of respondents think that immigrants receive some kind of help from the state, while only 21% say that about elderly and pensioners and only 12% about unemployed workers.

In line with this evolution of public opinion on the effect of immigration on Spanish society, public opinion on immigration policy has become more restrictive. While at the beginning

<sup>26</sup> Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2000, 2003 & 2014).

of the 2000s, 36% of Spaniards considered immigration laws to be tolerant or too tolerant, this had increased to 60% in 2014 (Centre of Sociological Investigations), offering a sizeable public opinion base to support restrictive migration policies.

In 2016, 74% of Spaniards thought that the number of immigrants in the country is 'a little too high' or 'much too high', compared with just 22% saying that the number is 'about right'. The age group most active in the labour market, the 35-44 age bracket, was the most discontented with the level of immigration in Spain (Table 10).

**Table 10. Respondents' views on the current level of immigration into Spain, by age group, 2016**

	Total (%)	Age 18–34 (%)	Age 35–44 (%)	Age 45–54 (%)	Age 55+ (%)
Much too high	34	37	44	21	29
A little too high	40	42	33	38	52
About right	22	19	19	33	13
A little too low	3	2	3	6	1
Much too low	1	1	1	2	5

Source: Demos and YouGov poll, September 2016

This rise in discontent over immigration has brought Spain closer to the European mainstream mood, but the country is still well below EU averages (Table 11).

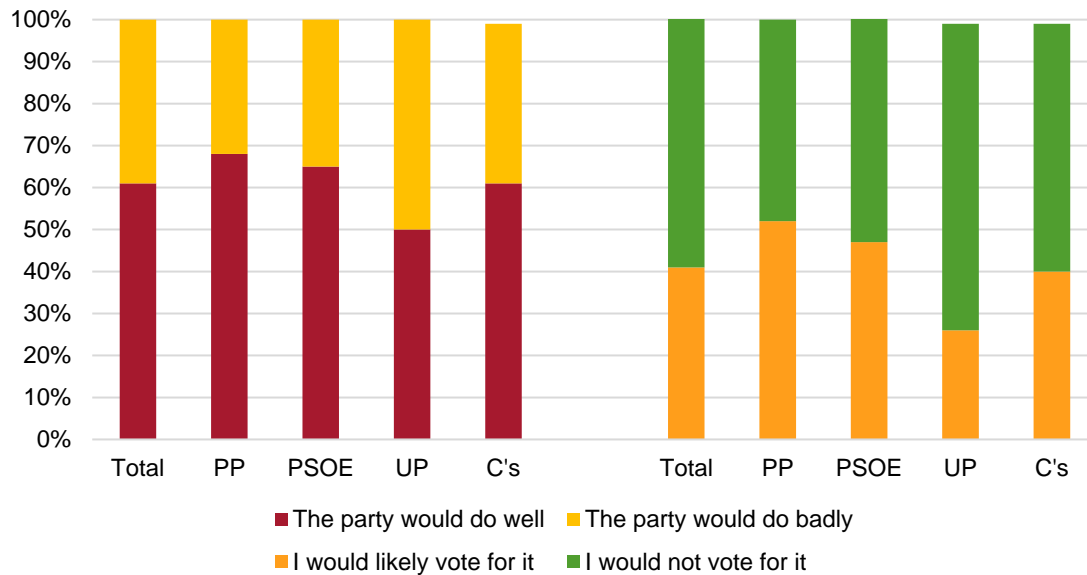
**Table 11. Spanish respondents' views on migration and migrants, compared with those of all EU respondents, 2015 and 2016**

	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 (2016) and (2015c).

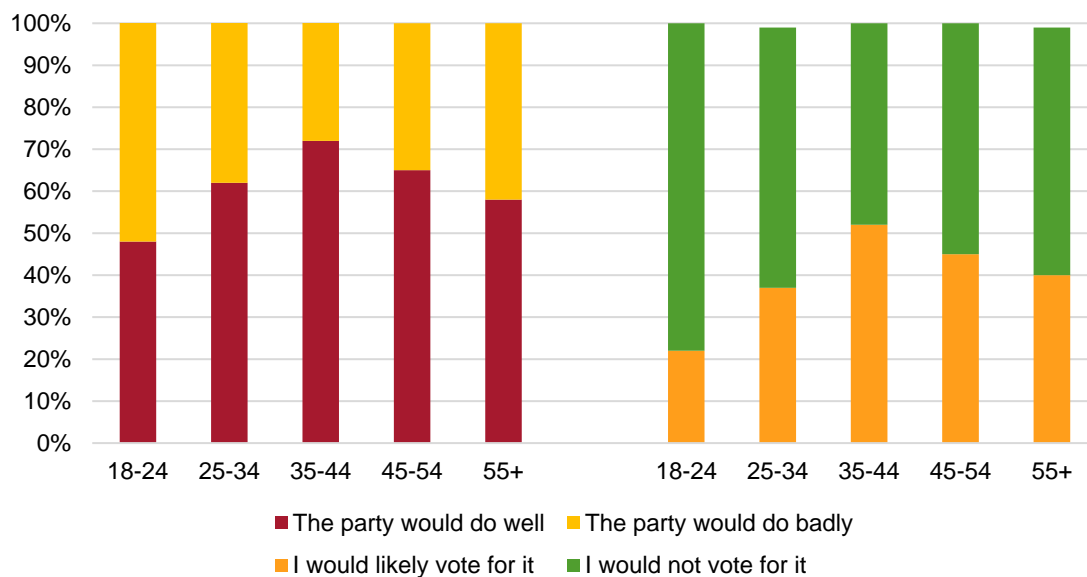
Could these attitudes towards migration translate into political support for right-wing populist parties? Some 19% of those surveyed in 2014 believed that an eventual 'xenophobic or racist party' could obtain popular support in the country. The equivalent percentage was 17% in 2012. But the results are very different when the question is modified to: 'Imagine there was a political party at the next election whose main aim was to reduce immigration to Spain. How well or badly do you think they would do at the election?' According to our original polling, 61% of respondents believe that such a party would do well or very well, while 32% think that such a party would not receive electoral support. When the question asks interviewees if they would vote for such a party, 41% say they are 'fairly likely' or 'very likely' to vote for it, and 48% say they are fairly or very unlikely to do it. Again, people between 35 and 44 years old are most inclined to vote for an anti-immigration party. We found that voters of the right-of-centre Partido Popular would be most willing to vote for that party, followed by followers of the centrist Ciudadanos (Figures 18 and 19).

**Figure 18. Respondents' views on whether a political party at the next election whose main aim was to reduce immigration to Spain would do well or badly, and how likely they would be to vote for this party, by party affiliation, 2016**



Source: Demos and YouGov poll, September 2016.

**Figure 19. Respondents' views on whether a political party at the next election whose main aim was to reduce immigration to Spain would do well or badly, and how likely they would be to vote for this party, by age, 2016**



Source: Demos and YouGov poll, September 2016.

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. But such a discourse would face widespread mistrust in Spain because, as already explained, Spanish nationalism has not recovered from being overused during Francoism, while centrifugal territorial tensions have further eroded it. Finally, people do not consider immigration to be one of the most important problems the country faces. Currently only 3% mention immigration when asked an open question about the three main Spanish problems, far outnumbered by unemployment (71%), economic problems (24%), corruption (38%), the low quality of politicians and political life (30%), or problems with health and the education provision (12% and 11%).<sup>27</sup> These data do not imply that migration is not a relevant concern for Spaniards: they only demonstrate that other issues, especially unemployment, are much more pressing.

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<sup>27</sup> Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2016).

## Electoral and party-political factors

The flip side of the demand side of populism (the interest of the Spanish people in a populist message) is the supply side (the availability of groups and political parties offering such a message). Political demand influences the political offer and vice versa. In this respect, too, Spain occupies an interesting position. The electoral offer has been very limited, because of the disproportional effects of the Spanish electoral system and factors internal to these parties, which further explains the lack of populist mobilisation in Spain.

### A brief history of the far right in Spain

Since the beginning of the Spanish democracy in 1977, extreme rightist parties have had little electoral appeal. They were already weak in the first parliamentary election, when the so-called *Fuerza Nueva* ('New Force') obtained no seats and only 0.3% of votes. Its ideological core was Francoist nostalgia, and the party supported various anti-liberal and anti-democratic measures. Two years later, in the second parliamentary elections of 1979, they won a single seat with 2.1% of votes. That was the last time they achieved parliamentary presence. During those first years of Spanish democracy, a bigger party, *Alianza Popular*, headed by a leading figure of the Francoist period, Manuel Fraga Iribarne, incorporated into its file many high and medium-rank officials from the Francoist period, and managed to attract the conservative and religious vote. This party, *Alianza Popular*, the predecessor of the now ruling party, *Partido Popular*, obtained 8% of votes in 1977, and 6% in 1979, and became the country's second-biggest party in 1982 after the collapse of the *Unión de Centro Democrático*, the centre-right reformist group, which had been at the forefront of the transition to democracy.

As Xavier Casals Meseguer explains, the extreme right in Spain was not 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.<sup>28</sup> 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 legitimisation 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. Meanwhile, the *Alianza Popular*, a 'law and order' party, which was ideologically close to Francoism while at least formally accepting the basic rules of liberal democracy, left little space for other rightist parties.

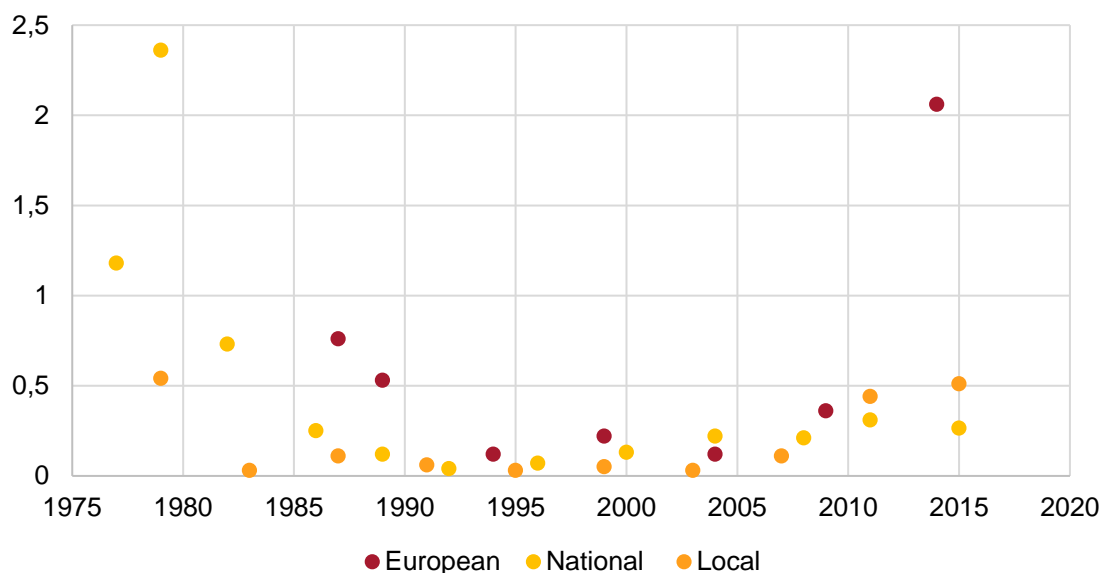
The extreme right was disconcerted by transition to democracy and unable to react: soon it was divided into several groups, each of them claiming to be the true heirs of Falange Española, losing a common leadership. They gradually lost the voters they had gathered in 1979, who fled towards the *Alianza Popular* or abstention, and they have not gained near 1% of the vote in parliamentary elections since. During the two last decades they have not even reached 0.5% in those elections. Their most salient success was the 2% of all votes obtained in the 2014 European elections by a new party, Vox, led by a former

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<sup>28</sup> Casal Meseguer (2009b).

*Partido Popular* leader, who almost managed to obtain a seat. But this same party won less than 0.3% in the 2015 and 2016 parliamentary elections (Figure 20).

**Figure 20. Percentage of vote extreme right parties in Spain have won in European, national and local elections, 1975-2020**



Source: the authors, based on Ministry of the Interior data.

### The right wing and the political spectrum

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%) choosing the right-hand 8, 9 and 10 scale positions, while 27% place themselves in the three left-most positions, and 48% identifies with the central posts (4 to 7).<sup>29</sup> Those who choose the extreme right posts used to vote *Alianza Popular* and have from 1989 on voted for its heir, the *Partido Popular*. Within the *Partido Popular*, there are different ideological currents, from fiscal and social 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 the *Partido Popular* the party of choice for the extreme right nonetheless.

The particular history of the right wing in Spain has driven extreme right-wing voters to the *Partido Popular*. Despite its dependence on this right-wing support, the *Partido Popular's* immigration stances have been fairly benevolent. Although it has historically been more vocal about immigration than the *Partido Socialista*, in practice their policies are similar. The influence of the Catholic church in the *Partido Popular* is strong, and as a result notions of compassion are central in its integration policies. When *Partido Popular* leaders did attempt to take severe measures against irregular migrants, they found significant resistance even within their own party. For instance, the decision of the *Partido Popular* government in 2012 to restrict irregular immigrants' access to public

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<sup>29</sup> Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2016).



health services, allowing them access only to emergency, maternity and child services, was reversed by the Autonomous Communities, including by those ruled by the *Partido Popular* itself, until finally the central government was forced to make a U-turn.

### The electoral system

The electoral system has also played a significant role in the lack of radical right-wing success, as Spain's political system disadvantages nation-wide small parties.<sup>30</sup> The electoral constituency is the province (each province having between two and 32 seats), where seats are allocated proportionally. But the electoral formula used to assign seats at the Parliament, the so-called D'Hondt formula, favours big parties. In fact, the D'Hondt formula, combined with a very large number of electoral districts of differing sizes, creates a kind of majoritarian rule in each province which tends to keep small national parties out of Parliament. In an imaginary electoral system of a single common district, *Fuerza Nueva* would have reached seven seats in the parliamentary election of 1979, gaining then public presence and public funds (which are distributed according to electoral results).

### Internal and party-political factors

Several parties have tried to address concerns over immigration, an issue which the two big parties 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 a local councillor in four middle-sized towns in Catalonia. In the next local elections, in 2007, *Plataform per Catalunya* obtained 17 councillors in nine towns, although none of them won the right to appoint a mayor. Its biggest success was winning 75,000 votes in the Catalan regional election of 2011 (2.4% of all votes), followed that same year by winning 66,000 votes and 67 seats 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% 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 Catalonia there is a very powerful pro-independency movement to which the Spanish extreme right has been the most belligerent enemy. In this framework, *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*, a union of four small groups. Like *Plataform per Catalunya*, *España 2000* aimed to reduce immigration, 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*

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<sup>30</sup> Alonso & Rovira Kaltwasser(2015).  
(cont.)

have signed an agreement to present shared candidates in the next general parliamentary elections, but this has not improved their chances of electoral success.<sup>31</sup>

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%), only 15,000 votes short of a seat.

It must be taken into account that in Spain (as in many other European countries) European elections are to some extent second-order elections, where voters are more interested in casting a protest vote to punish domestic governments than in influencing the European Parliament. Because of the completely proportional results (as the seats are allocated per country and not per district) obtaining a good result as a small party is far easier in these elections than in the Spanish elections. Hence, the results of Vox were seen disappointing and caused a grave internal crisis: Vidal Quadras and several other leaders quit the party that summer. The party has lost steam and media attention since and only got 57,000 votes (0.23%) 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. Its other bases of support were the richest and most right-leaning areas of Madrid (Majadahonda, Las Rozas, Pozuelo and the district of Salamanca), but its nation-wide electoral prospects are very poor.<sup>32</sup>

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 is a divisive political issue. 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.

Vox was trying to represent Spaniards who are dissatisfied with the fragmentation of the country into 18 Autonomous Communities, many of which are always pleading for more

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<sup>31</sup> According to the most recent available data, none of these two groups appear between the spontaneous answers to an open question on which party interviewees would vote for. See Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2016).

<sup>32</sup> Vox would obtain a 0.1% of the votes according to Barometer 3156 of the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (see 2016).

competences and powers. 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. This paper has sought to explain the Spanish exception through three complementary aspects of political and electoral spheres: the political demand (what do citizens want to hear from politicians), the political offer (what do political parties offer to voters), and the institutional and political framework (electoral norms and the political conflicts that dominate the agenda).

### The political demand

Research consistently demonstrates that only a very small part of the Spanish electorate identifies with the extreme right positions in the ideological scale. Furthermore, Spaniards stand out for their support for the EU and globalisation. Despite a rise in dissatisfaction with immigration, anti-immigration sentiment in the country is still well below the European average. Moreover, immigration does not occupy a high position among the most important problems Spaniards think the country faces.

One potential 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 the lack of a strong Spanish identity with a wide appeal.

Other European countries, like Spain, 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 internationalism was used in communist European countries to justify their alliance or submission to the Soviet Union. This communist past now allows and favours the blossom of nationalist parties, but prevents it in Spain and Portugal.<sup>33</sup>

In sum, relatively favourable attitudes to immigration and globalisation, compounded by the lack of a strong, common Spanish identity to appeal to, make Spain inhospitable terrain for the populist extreme right.

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<sup>33</sup> The Greek case is very different from the Spanish and Portuguese ones. The Greek dictatorship lasted for only seven years (1967-74) and Greek leaders never tried to present it as anything else than an exceptional period devoted to destroying the communist influence in the country. Greek nationalism has been always very powerful as a reaction to centuries of submission to the Ottoman Empire.

### The political offer

Since the birth of Spanish democracy in 1977 the extreme right has been associated with Falange Española, the fascist movement born during the 1930s, which inspired the legitimisation of the Francoist regime during its first decades. The *Falange* discourse is obsolete and of little resonance to the Spanish population, which tends to see its followers as nostalgic of the Francoist past. Its anti-capitalism, nationalism and traditionalism does not appeal to a modernised society.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the Falange movement has been unable to present a common front and has divided into many small groups. As a consequence, its electoral results have been negligible during the whole democratic period.

Tensions between locals and immigrants have inspired the formation of right-wing populist parties, namely *Plataforma per Catalunya* and *España 2000*, but those parties keep close relations with the old extreme right (*Fuerza Nueva*, *Falange*), which delegitimises them for most citizens. These parties have achieved only limited success in several municipalities in Catalonia and in the provinces of Madrid and Valencia.

Only recently, in 2013, has a right-wing populist party with no echoes of the Francoist period almost been able to obtain some success in Spain. This new party, *Vox*, could be described as the first attempt to form a modern right-wing populist party in Spain, aimed at disgruntled *Partido Popular* voters. Political dissatisfaction created by the economic crisis has mostly been channelled through *Podemos*, a populist leftist party, born from the street protests of the so-called 15-M movement. This group is still defining itself, balancing between a traditional leftist profile and a more catch-all approach. It could be labelled as populist but it is neither rightist, nor anti-European nor anti-globalisation and most certainly not xenophobic or anti-immigration.<sup>35</sup> *Podemos* has experienced a very remarkable and surprising success (winning 21% of the votes in the 2016 parliamentary elections), and its support equals that of the *Partido Socialista* in the most recent opinion polls.<sup>36</sup>

### The political framework

The electoral system in Spain, though technically proportional, has highly disproportional effects, which has further disadvantaged right-wing-populist parties. It is much easier to gain a foothold as a concentrated local party than as a small nation-wide party. However, had the electoral system been the main obstacle for right-wing populist parties, we would have expected to see a stronger showing in the (proportional) European elections.

A second important aspect of the political framework is the dominance of the centre-periphery divide as a political factor throughout the history of Spanish democracy. This has left little space for populist parties to put their own issues on the agenda. Criticisms of the EU or of globalisation have been relatively neglected in the public sphere. Immigration was the subject of public debate only briefly in the early years of the new

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<sup>34</sup> The results of our original polling show that Spanish society is one of the most liberal of our case-study countries regarding issues such as the acceptance of homosexuality, female incorporation into the labour market, and religious and ethnic diversity.

<sup>35</sup> Torreblanca (2015).

<sup>36</sup> See the results of the poll published in *El País* (13/XI/2016).  
(cont.)

millennium and even then it was not a central theme. The conflicts between Basque and Catalan 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.<sup>37</sup> More recently, corruption has become a major political issue, with politicians, rather than migrants, becoming something of a scapegoat for the economic crisis.

In summary, despite the hardships suffered by a good part of the Spanish population since 2008, and despite the broad loss of confidence in institutions and old political parties, it is difficult to imagine an extreme right-wing, xenophobic, anti-globalisation and/or anti-EU party gaining a foothold in Spain in the foreseeable future.

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, Roman 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.

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<sup>37</sup> Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2016).

## Attendants to the meeting on 27 September 2016

Beatriz Acha, Public University of Navarra

Fernando Arias Canga, Pluralism and Coexistence Foundation, Ministry of Justice

Marina del Corral Téllez, General Secretary on Immigration and Emigration, Ministry of Employment and Social Security

Gonzalo Escribano, Senior Researcher, Elcano Royal Institute

Karoline Fernández de la Hoz, Director of the Spanish Observatory on Racism and Xenophobia (OBERAXE)

Mercedes Fernández García, Director of the University Institute for the Study of Migrations (IUEM), Universidad Pontificia Comillas

Margarita Gómez-Reino, Professor of Political Science, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia

Jose Pablo Martínez, Research Assistant, Elcano Royal Institute

Jose Ramón Montero, Full Professor of Political Science, Autonomous University of Madrid

Elena Soto, Research Assistant, Elcano Royal Institute

Federico Steinberg, Senior Researcher, Elcano Royal Institute

Consuelo Valbuena, University Francisco de Vitoria

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