

Given the magnitude of its recent economic crisis, many analysts and international observers are still surprised by the fact that in Spain there is no significant right-wing populist party. Even today, after three years of economic recovery, the [unemployment rate](#) and especially the [youth unemployment rate](#) remains disturbingly high (at around 44.4%). The general dissatisfaction and uncertainty has eroded the nation's political trust. In fact, the traditional Spanish bipartisanship—comprised of the Socialist PSOE and the conservative Popular Party—has finally fallen apart for the first time since the restoration of democracy, making room for two newcomers: the anti-austerity Podemos, and the centre-right Ciudadanos.

Spain has gathered, in addition, two extra elements to this delicate scenario, namely political corruption and high levels of migration—the classic recipe for a surge in right-wing populism, according to Europe's recent experience.

Nevertheless, the Spanish case seems to be an exception. [52%](#) of Spaniards currently express positive feelings toward immigrants from outside the EU—while the EU average is [37%](#). This could be naturally linked to the composition and nature of such migration flows, constituted by a greater number of Latin-American people, with whom Spaniards share language and religion. Moreover, Spaniards no longer consider immigration to be one of the most important problems that their country faces. Currently only [8%](#) mention immigration when asked about the main problems of their country, which remains significantly below the [26%](#) EU average. This, at least, suggests that the general dissatisfaction is mainly identified with the unemployment problem ([66%](#)) and the economic situation ([34%](#)).

The appearance of *Hogar Social Ramiro Ledesma*, a non-governmental organisation based in Madrid, inspired by the Greek extreme-right party Golden Dawn and politically linked with the Francoist Falange Española, is only a tepid sign of rightist response to the crisis. There has been only one attempt to form a modern right-wing populist party, with no echoes of the Francoist period. This is Vox, a party created in 2013 by a former PP leader, Santiago Abascal. Despite having been close to obtaining a seat in the European election of 2014 (only 15,000 votes short), the party has since gradually subsided.

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strongly Eurosceptic parties.

Spain seems to be far from hosting a far-right populist party like the French National Front or the Geert Wilders' Freedom Party in the Netherlands, an anti-immigration platform like the Alternative for Germany, or an anti-EU movement like the UK Independence Party. So, what explains this divergence between Europe and Spain? What might explain this absence of an electorally successful Spanish far-right populist party? Several explanations have been put forward. Here we will review the main ones.

Spain's weak national identity and strong attachment to Europe

As can be learned from the [Eurobarometer survey](#), Spain's relationship to national identity is remarkably weak. On the one hand, Spain is below the EU average in its citizens' feeling of [attachment to their country](#) (by 4%); on the other, it exceeds the EU average in their [attachment to the EU](#) (by 7%). Even during the crisis, when anti-EU feeling spread rapidly over Europe, including Spain, negative attitudes towards the EU remained less predominant in Spain.

Spaniards tend to be more pro-European than the average, which might explain the noteworthy absence of strongly Eurosceptic parties—Podemos can barely be described as an anti-EU party despite its criticism of the Union. In this regard, since the last decades of the Franco regime, Europe has become among Spaniards a sort of emblem of political and civil freedoms and modernity, clearly opposed to Francoism. Thus, the widespread perception of EU membership is associated with progress in terms of economic, social, and political development. Besides, the overuse of national symbols during Francoism caused a countermovement which persists today. Civil society still refuses the exhibition of national symbols, the flag, and the anthem.

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The fact that Spain is divided into 17 Autonomous Communities, with peripheral nationalist movements in many of them (mostly in Catalonia and the Basque Country, but also in Galicia, Valencia, the Canary Islands, and Andalusia) also underlines the weakness of the national identity.

The recent memory of authoritarianism

This hypothesis has been largely [emphasised by the media](#). It states that the recent memory of fascism under Franco provokes a strong rejection of extremism. Nationalistic and xenophobic movements have been succeeding in countries with similar experiences of authoritarian regimes, however the Spanish peculiarity—shared with Portugal—is the authoritarian past is more recent than in Italy or Germany. The Spanish dictatorship was, in addition, the second largest in Europe, after Portugal, covering 36 years of the twentieth century. This means that around half of the current Spanish population was alive during Francoism. Even today, it is considered a sort of taboo to sympathise with that period.

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This is even more significant if we consider that the Spanish extreme right has been historically identified with the fascist Falange Española, which inspired Francoism during its first years. This movement has finally been marginalised and condemned since Franco's death. The widespread opinion among Spaniards toward the extreme right cannot be divorced from the obsolete and backward image of the Francoist regime, nor from the Catholic Church. This, in turn, explains the generalised rejection of these sorts of groups, which are not seen as appealing to a modernised society.

Spain's electoral system

The Spanish electoral system has also seemed to play a role in the lack of radical right-wing

success, as it disadvantages small parties whose support is spread territorially. The electoral formula used to assign seats at the Parliament, called the D'Hondt formula, favours larger parties. This system, when combined with a very large number of electoral districts of differing sizes, tends to keep small national parties out of Parliament, as Carmen González Enríquez has also [recently pointed out](#). Only in 1979, at the very beginning of the restoration of democracy, did Fuerza Nueva obtain a parliamentary seat. This was and will be the first and the last seat a far-right-wing party will ever obtain. As Gonzalez Enriquez notes, in a hypothetical electoral system with a single national district, Fuerza Nueva would have obtained seven seats.

The breakdown of the party system: is there room for the far-right?

The loss of trust in mainstream parties, corruption scandals, and the upsurge of new political demands that derived from the crisis were mostly tackled by two newcomers on the political scene. On the one hand is Ciudadanos, a previously regional party, which has eroded the electoral base of the PP by campaigning on the idea of a political regeneration and fighting against peripheral nationalism (such as the Catalan and the Basque independence movements). On the other is Podemos, a left-wing party created three months before the 2014 European Parliament election, which shook the political landscape, ranking fourth and getting five parliamentary seats in record time. This party was the main electoral inheritor of the protest movement known as Movimiento 15M.

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During this open stage of political crisis, no group has been able to mobilise right-wing voters. Moreover, only a very tiny part of the Spanish electorate identifies with the extreme-right positions in the ideological scale developed by [González Enríquez](#).

It remains to be seen whether any far-right-wing party can find a way to modernise itself and gain legitimacy among some sectors of the population. Many analysts point out the lack of a charismatic leader as one of the main failures in this regard. So far, Vox seems to be the only one which might catch up with the other European far-right-wing parties. However, its latter failed attempts seem to confirm the idea that Spain, under the above-described conditions, is

Why is there no right-wing populism in Spain? By Leandro Gago

proof against the irresistible advance of right-wing populism.

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