

DEBATE/DEBATE: POLITICAL POLARISATION. A MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH/
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Ideological Polarisation in Spain

La polarización ideológica en España

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ABSTRACT

Ideological polarisation measures the degree of divergence in political identifications and opinions among different groups of citizens. Spain currently exhibits patterns of ideological polarisation comparable to those observed in other European countries. This type of polarisation has steadily increased throughout this century, leading to the formation of two distinct ideological blocs, whose potential voters differ in their positions on most key political issues. From a longitudinal perspective, polarisation on economic issues appears to have increased significantly more than that based on moral issues, the latter of which may have even declined over the past two decades. This suggests that if the main divisions are concentrated along the economic axis, the potential for reaching agreements should be greater than if differences were primarily intensified in the realm of moral issues. Debates over taxation, redistribution or even immigration policy may be more manageable than moral issues related to sexual identities or abortion, where positions tend to be more deeply rooted in principles and identity.

KEYWORDS: polarisation; ideology; public policy.

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RESUMEN

La polarización ideológica mide las distancias entre las identificaciones y opiniones políticas de distintos grupos de ciudadanos. España muestra hoy unos patrones de polarización ideológica similares a otros países europeos. Este tipo de polarización ha aumentado de forma continua desde principios de siglo y se han configurado dos bloques ideológicos claros que se diferencian en el posicionamiento de sus potenciales votantes en la mayoría de temas que conforman el debate político. Si atendemos a una perspectiva longitudinal, la polarización en cuanto a temas económicos parece haber aumentado mucho más que la que se basa en temas morales. Esta última incluso podría haberse reducido en los últimas décadas. Podríamos concluir que, si las principales diferencias se establecen en el eje económico, la posibilidad de llegar a acuerdos debería estar más cerca que si se exageran las diferencias en cuestiones morales. Las discusiones sobre impuestos, redistribución, incluso gestión de la inmigración, pueden ser más fáciles de abordar que cuestiones morales relacionadas con las identidades sexuales o el aborto, donde las posturas responden más a principios e identidades.

PALABRAS CLAVE: polarización; ideología; políticas públicas.

1. Introduction: the state of ideological polarisation in Spain

Ideological polarisation captures the extent to which the electorate holds divergent beliefs on ideological issues (such as feminism and environmentalism) or consistently aligns its views with left- or right-wing positions (e.g., endorsing left-wing perspectives on feminism or the environment, even if these positions are not extreme). Ideology functions as a heuristic or mental shortcut that enables individuals to navigate political complexities, particularly those related to social identities (such as social class, feminism or nationalism), political attitudes and party identification (Weber, 2011). Today, those on the left tend to believe that the state should intervene to address the problems generated by the market, maintaining taxes at a level that ensures a minimum degree of equity among all individuals within a given territory. By contrast, right-wing individuals tend to be sceptical of state intervention, both economically and socially, and favour lower taxes so that, in line with a frequently cited liberal *motto*, “money stays in the pockets of the citizens”. Since the labels “left” and “right” are easy to understand and use, polarisation scholars initially focused on examining the extent to which societies were divided and in conflict between those who identify as left-wing and those who position themselves on the right (Sartori, 2003; Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008). In the most extensively studied case, the United States, Abramowitz (2022) demonstrates how political parties and elections have undergone profound transformations over the past half-century. The ideological divide between Democratic and Republican elites in Washington and most states has widened into a deep chasm in the 21st century.

Ideological alignment manifests both at the symbolic level—through identification with *left-right* or *liberalism-conservative* positions—and at the more practical level, in terms of stances on specific issues such as economic policy, immigration, social policies and climate change. Ideological polarisation has intensified across most Western democracies. In Spain, for instance, it has increased steadily in every election since the early 21st century. Moreover, this polarisation between left- and right-wing blocs is increasingly reflected in support for specific policies, such as taxation. Until 2015, there were minimal differences in tax preferences among voters of Spain's major political parties. Since then, however, positions on this issue have become sharply polarised.

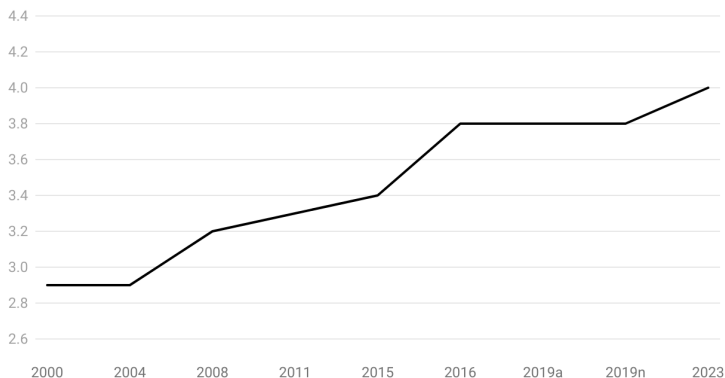
This article focuses on ideological polarisation among voters. Other studies have examined the polarisation of political elites (Coller, 2024; Sánchez Ferrer and Torcal, 2024), which has also intensified in Spain in recent years. The polarisation of the elites has direct implications for voter polarisation. Rodríguez Teruel (2021) finds that voters who perceive less polarisation between parties are more likely to support more radical parties, whereas those who perceive greater polarisation between parties are more inclined to vote for moderate forces.

If we examine studies from the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS, hereinafter) in Spain, ideological polarisation has continued to intensify in every general election since 2000 (Miller, 2023; Rodríguez-Virgili *et al.*, 2022; Simon, 2020). To quantify this trend, Figure 1 presents an ideological polarisation index calculated for each Spanish general election since the beginning of the century, following the most widely used formulation in the literature (Dalton, 2008), based on the CIS ideological self-placement scale. The question posed is as follows: “When discussing politics, the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ are commonly used. On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 represents ‘the farthest left’ and 10 ‘the farthest right’, where would you place yourself?” On this scale, Vox voters position themselves above 7, while Sumar voters place themselves below 3. The greater the distance between voters of different parties, the higher the polarisation index presented in Figure 1. Over the course of this century, this indicator has risen by more than one point on a ten-point scale.

Figure 1

How ideological polarisation has increased in Spain this century

Ideological Polarisation in Spain



Source: own research based on CIS post-election barometers.

Ideological polarisation among voters of different parties—specifically, the extent to which individuals who report having voted for the Partido Popular position themselves on the ideological scale very differently from those who report having voted for the PSOE—has increased by approximately 40% over the course of this century (Miller, 2023). This rise in ideological polarisation has been particularly pronounced since 2011, coinciding with the emergence of new political parties. This is hardly surprising, as one of the defining features of the 15-M movement and, later, Podemos, was its criticism of the so-called PPSOE. The argument was that Spain's two dominant parties defended the same policies and that neither represented a genuine alternative to the political course set since the transition to democracy in the 1970s. With the intensification of ideological polarisation over the past decade, Spain has shifted from being a moderate country at the start of the century to one that is now highly polarised. For years, much was made of the Spanish exception, referring to the absence of a far-right party in Congress. However, in a country as politically volatile as Spain, we have moved from being a symbol of moderation in the 1990s to a prominent member of the club of highly polarised nations.

It is important to distinguish ideological polarisation from two other forms of political polarisation that I will not address in this contribution: affective polarisation and everyday polarisation. Affective polarisation does not focus on the ideological positioning of political parties and their voters but rather on the emotions that parties and political leaders evoke. It manifests as a stronger attachment to parties, leaders and voters with whom we identify, coupled

with greater hostility towards those with whom we do not share such affinity. Torcal (2023) has shown that affective polarisation in Spain is currently at its highest level since the 1990s, when data first became available for meaningful comparisons.

A third and final type of polarisation, everyday polarisation, refers to the growing social, demographic and geographical differentiation among voters of various parties. In our daily lives, we exist in bubbles, surrounded by people who are similar to us and who share our way of thinking. This dynamic reinforces the other two dimensions of polarisation. The division between individuals and groups with different partisan affiliations extends beyond ideological or emotional differences, shaping preferences, lifestyles and even residential patterns (Miller, 2024). In one of the most comprehensive studies on this topic, Harteveld (2021) examines the relationship between religion, income and education on the one hand, and political attitudes on the other, across forty countries over four decades. Religion emerges as one of the most significant variables in explaining alignment around political identities and sentiments, a phenomenon that has been extensively studied in the United States (Bishop and Cushing, 2008). In the US, the term “Christian Right” is used to describe the movement that unites the conservative wing of evangelical Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, advocating socially conservative policies.

Crucially, these three forms of polarisation—ideological, affective and everyday—reinforce one another: parties become increasingly ideologically homogeneous, positive and negative emotions saturate political evaluations, and social and spatial segregation deepens along ideological lines. People tend to live in areas where they share aesthetic preferences, interests and ideology with their neighbours, and this homogeneity fosters an increasingly distorted and caricatured perception of those with different political views. My contribution to this debate will focus on the ideological component of this complex and multifaceted phenomenon of polarisation. To this end, I will first examine how the ideological positioning of voters across different political parties has evolved over this century. I will then explore what divides Spaniards ideologically today.

2. How have we changed?

In Spain, we lack large-scale longitudinal studies that would allow us, as in other countries, to trace the historical trajectory of changes in public opinion. However, we do have some scattered data series that enable us to outline certain trends in ideological polarisation. For instance, CIS barometers provide a means to track a limited set of variables over time, such as positioning on the left-right ideological scale, as mentioned earlier, or religious sentiment and practices. Additionally, some periodic surveys allow for comparisons over the past four decades, such as the CIS *Public Opinion and Fiscal Policy* study. However, the number of CIS data series that have remained continuous to the present day is limited.

Fortunately, we can draw on international surveys that offer a much broader range of variables, including longitudinal ideological markers of society. Among these, the European Social Survey (ESS) stands out as a key source. Spain has participated in all waves of the ESS, from the first in 2002 to the eleventh, which is set to be released in late 2024. The consistency of certain variables across each edition of the survey allows for an analysis of whether ideological positions within Spanish society have become more polarised. Specifically, Figure 2 illustrates changes over time in three issues that tend to polarise public opinion in other countries and for which Spain has twenty years of data, covering the first to the tenth wave of the ESS. These issues are: support for redistributive policies, support for the right of gay men and lesbians to live as they choose and attitudes towards immigrants. The first issue pertains to the socio-economic dimension of ideology, the second to a moral component and the third—immigration—encompasses economic, social and moral considerations.

Since its first edition, the ESS has asked respondents whether they agree or disagree with the following statement: “The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels.” Responses are recorded on a scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. As shown in Figure 2a, in 2002, 80% of Spaniards agreed (strongly or somewhat) with reducing income disparities. By 2022, this figure had fallen to 67%. However, beyond the overall shift towards lower support for income redistribution, the most significant development is that this economic issue has become the most polarised in Spain over the past two decades. In 2002, the difference between the most pro-redistribution voters (Izquierda Unida) and the least supportive (Partido Popular) was just 14 percentage points. By 2022, the gap between those most in favour of redistribution (Unidas Podemos voters) and those least supportive (Vox voters) had widened to 37 points. The gap between the most extreme positions—one of the standard measures of ideological polarisation in a political system—has more than doubled in this case. Even the difference between voters of the two moderate parties (Partido Popular and PSOE) has widened, increasing from 13 to 31 points. Taken as a whole, eight out of ten left-wing party voters today support income redistribution, while fewer than half of right-wing party voters do.

Another issue frequently examined in studies on ideological polarisation, particularly in countries such as the United States, is public opinion on sexual identities. The ESS has included the following statement in all its waves: “Gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish.” The response categories are the same as those used for the income redistribution question. As shown in Figure 2b, in contrast to the economic issue, agreement with this statement has increased significantly, rising from an average of 70% in 2002 to 92% in 2022. This increase has occurred across voters of all political parties. Meanwhile, polarisation on this issue (measured as the gap between the most extreme positions) has declined. In 2002, a 28-point difference separated Izquierda Unida voters from those of Partido Popular. By 2022, the difference

between Unidas Podemos and Vox voters had narrowed to 21 points. However, in this latter case, even among the least supportive voters, agreement approaches 80%, indicating that this is an issue of broad consensus and low polarisation in Spain.

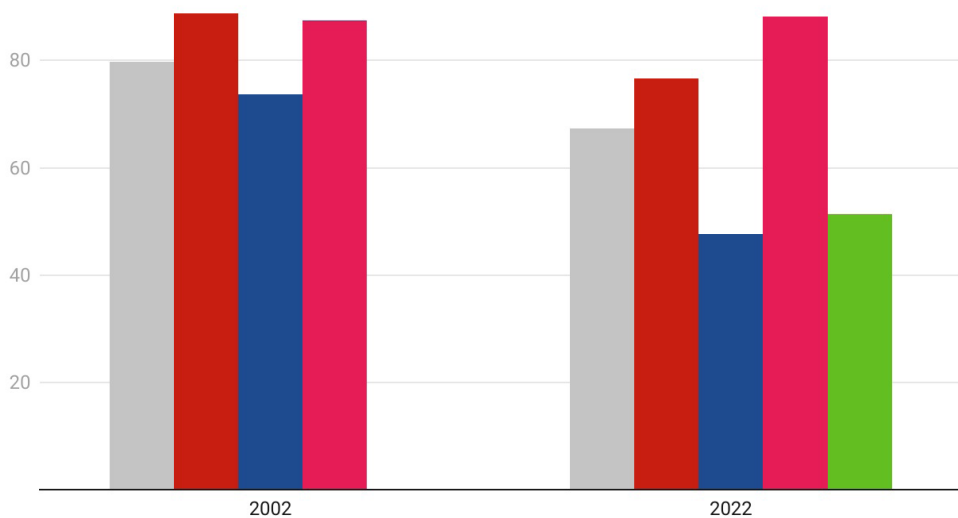
Figure 2

Evolution of the acceptance of three ideological issues

2a: Redistribution

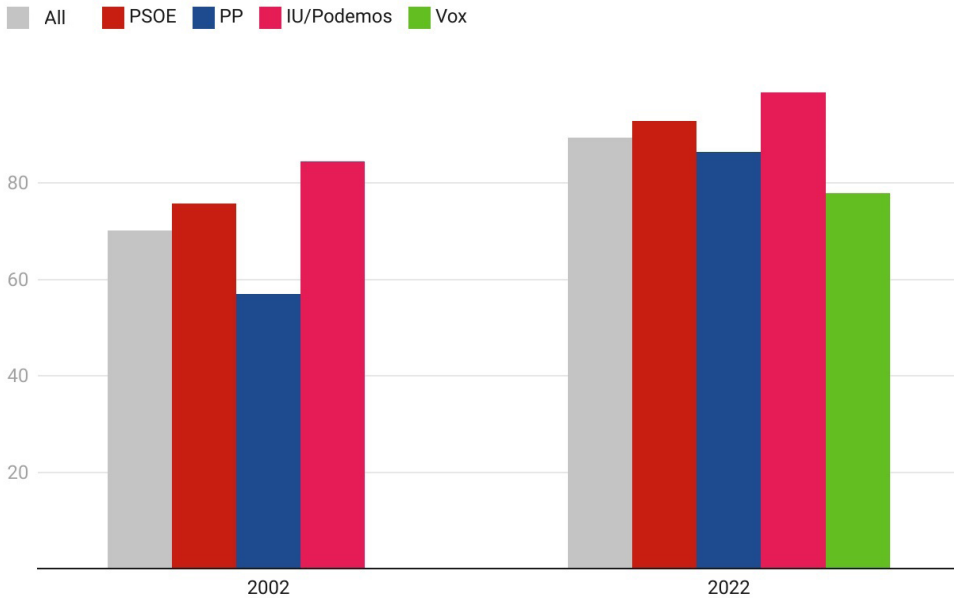
The government should equalise incomes

■ All ■ PSOE ■ PP ■ IU/Podemos ■ Vox



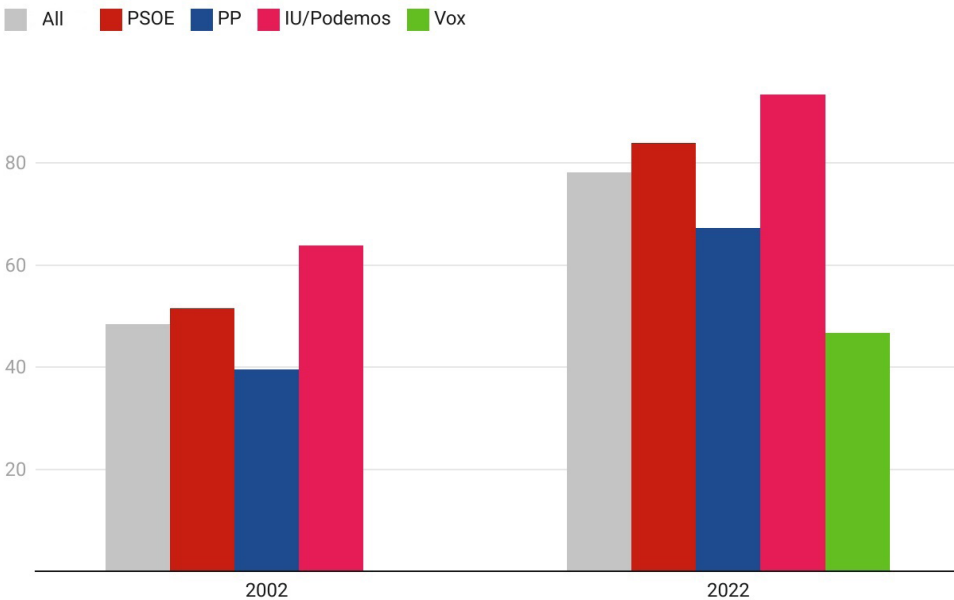
2b: Homosexuality

Gays and lesbians should have the freedom to live



2c: Immigration

People from poor countries should be allowed to come in



Source: own research based on waves 1 and 10 of the European Social Survey (ESS).

The third major issue in the debate on ideological polarisation, and one that has become a central rallying point for new radical right movements, is immigration. Since its inception, the ESS has included three questions concerning different types of migrants. The first question asks: “To what extent do you think Spain should allow people of the *same race or ethnic group* as most of Spain’s people to come and live here?” The second and third questions replace the italicised group with “*a different race or ethnic group*” and “*people from poor countries outside Europe*”, respectively. Responses to these questions are similar, though support for immigration is slightly higher in the first case than in the others. Figure 2c presents data for the third category, referring to people from poor countries outside Europe. Over the past two decades, public support for this type of immigration has risen by nearly 30 percentage points, increasing from 48% to 76%. At the same time, polarisation on this issue has intensified significantly. The gap between extreme positions (Izquierda Unida and Partido Popular voters) in 2002 stood at 24 points. By 2022, this gap had doubled, reaching 50 points, separating Unidas Podemos and Vox voters. According to the ESS, immigration has become the most divisive issue between left- and right-wing voters in Spain.

In summary, over the past two decades, two shifts have occurred in the ideological positioning of Spanish voters. The first is a general trend towards more liberal positions, both economically and socially. This is particularly notable among Partido Popular voters who, while deepening their opposition to egalitarian economic policies, have also moved towards more liberal views on issues such as homosexuality and immigration. The second shift, which is the focus of this article, is the considerable increase in polarisation on economic issues such as support for redistributive policies, as well as on topics with both economic and social implications, such as immigration. In other studies, I have shown that polarisation has also increased in other socio-economic areas in recent years, including attitudes towards taxation (Miller, 2020) and support for welfare state policies such as public healthcare (Miller, 2023). By contrast, over the same period, ideological polarisation has decreased regarding moral issues, particularly the right of gay men and lesbians to live as they wish. On this matter, society as a whole has moved towards greater social acceptance over the period under review.

3. Current divisions

As noted earlier, while few longitudinal data series are available to track the evolution of ideological polarisation in Spain concerning specific policies, several recent surveys provide insight into the current level of ideological division in the country. A key example is the two Prospective Surveys, conducted and published by the CIS in 2022. These surveys asked a representative sample of Spanish citizens about some of the major challenges and potential solutions that Spain is expected to face in the coming decades. Topics covered include

the future of education, the labour market, immigration and climate change. Unfortunately, while these surveys contain an extensive set of socio-economic questions, they do not address social and moral issues such as feminism.

To examine what divides Spaniards today, I will draw on data from the NORPOL project, funded by the Spanish State Research Agency. In June 2024, we conducted an *online* survey of a representative sample of 3,000 Spanish adults, focusing on various aspects of polarisation, particularly its everyday dimension. The survey was carried out by Netquest, with participants drawn from a panel sample. To improve representativeness, we applied quotas based on gender, age, autonomous community, municipality size and education level. Administering the survey online presents challenges to representativeness. Therefore, in the analysis that follows, the goal will be to compare responses across different topics rather than to make absolute claims about the entire Spanish population. All the questions included in the questionnaire were used in previous studies, both national and international.

Specifically, I will focus on a set of ten questions designed to capture some of the most significant ideological divides in Spain today. Table 1 presents the statements on which respondents were asked to take a position, using a scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, as in the ESS.

Table 1

Ideological divides in Spain

Topic	Statement
Immigration	Immigrants should be required to integrate into our culture.
Territorial politics	Citizens should be able to hold a binding referendum on their autonomous community's status within the country.
European Union	European unification should be promoted.
Climate change	To combat climate change, taxes on fossil fuels (oil, gas and coal) should be increased.
Gender equality	Gender equality measures have gone too far.
Housing	The government should impose a cap on rental prices.
Civil liberties	In emergency situations, it is justified for the state to restrict civil liberties.
Defence	Defence spending should be increased.
Homosexuality	Same-sex couples should have the same adoption rights as heterosexual couples.
Abortion	Abortion should be legal without restrictions.

Source: NORPOL study (Social Norms in Politics).

To assess the extent of ideological polarisation within a political system—whether in symbolic matters, such as positioning on the left–right scale, or in support for specific issues or policies—academic literature commonly relies on polarisation indices derived from Dalton’s (2008) original formula. The methodology for calculating these indices varies across studies, but all measure the dispersion of citizens’ opinions. If we apply the simplest measure of opinion dispersion, as used by Bartels (2023), we can establish a *ranking* of the issues that most and least divide Spanish society. According to our data, the most polarising issue in Spain today is gender equality policies, followed by territorial politics and abortion rights. By contrast, the least divisive issue is European integration, followed by immigrant integration and defence policy. Issues such as climate change, housing prices, civil liberties and same–sex adoption occupy an intermediate position in terms of public opinion division.

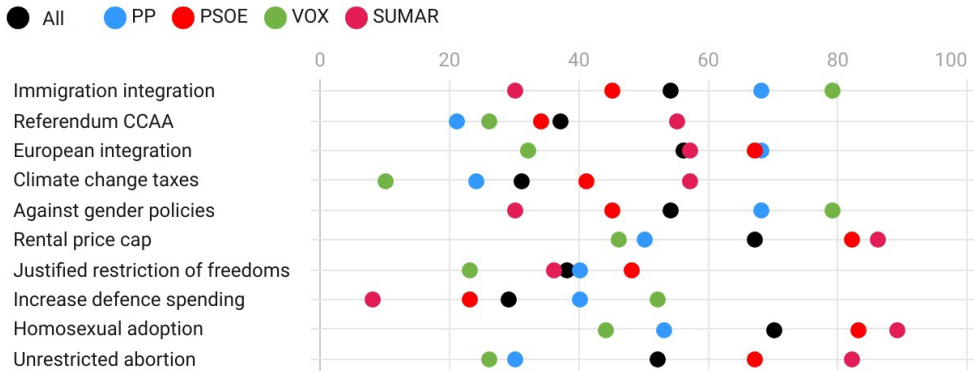
While the analysis shifts slightly when comparing the average opinions of voters from ideologically opposed parties, the overall picture of Spain as an ideologically polarised country remains unchanged. This pattern is illustrated in Figure 3, which presents the average opinion of the population (in black) alongside the average opinions of voters from Spain’s four major national political groups: Partido Popular (blue), PSOE (red), Vox (green) and Sumar (magenta). The average positions for each of the ten potentially polarising issues listed in Table 1 are displayed. In seven out of ten issues, a clear left–right polarisation pattern emerges, with PSOE and Sumar voters positioned on one side of the average and Partido Popular and Vox voters on the other. This pattern is particularly evident in issues such as gender equality policies, immigration, same–sex adoption and abortion rights.

However, there are three issues where this alignment between ideological positioning and policy preferences does not fully hold. In territorial politics, PSOE voters are closer to Partido Popular and Vox voters and further from Sumar voters. The referendum issue, as framed in the survey, creates an internal territorial divide among PSOE voters, making their alignment with the left bloc less distinct. The second issue where there is no overlap between ideological positioning and support for concrete policy is European integration. In this case, Vox voters are the only group that is clearly anti–European, while voters of the two centrist parties (Partido Popular and PSOE) hold similar positions. Finally, with regard to the possibility of restricting civil liberties during emergencies, voters from the two newer political groups (Vox and Sumar) express lower support for such measures compared to those from the traditional parties. In conclusion, Spain today exhibits a general alignment between the ideological positioning of political parties and the opinions of their voters on specific issues, although some exceptions to this pattern exist.

Figure 3

Average agreement among voters of four political groups

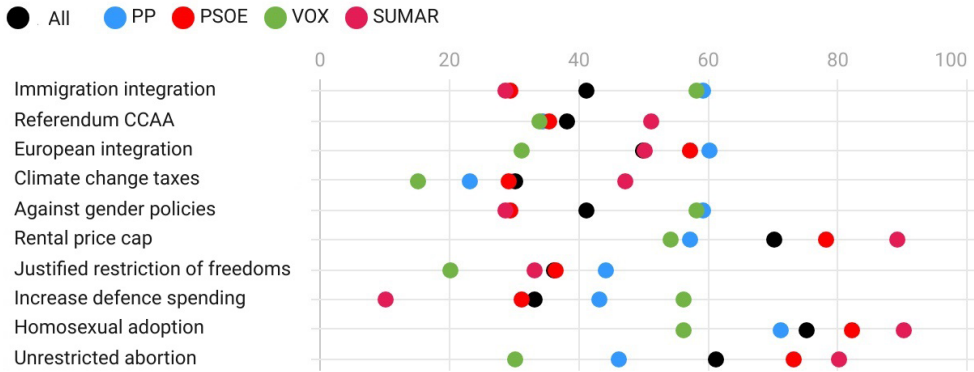
Position of the general population



Source: own research using the NORPOL survey.

The data presented in Figure 3 reflect the general population, while Figure 4 focuses specifically on the opinions of young people, defined as those under 35 years old. In recent years, studies have increasingly highlighted age-specific patterns of ideological fragmentation. For example, research suggests that young men are shifting towards more conservative positions compared to previous generations (Lorente and Sánchez Vitores, 2022). The key question here is whether today’s young people exhibit the same levels of affective polarisation as the broader population.

According to the NORPOL survey data shown in Figure 4, the ideological segmentation patterns among young people are largely similar to those observed in the general population. In six out of ten variables, Partido Popular and Vox voters are clearly positioned on one side of the national average, while PSOE and Sumar voters are positioned on the other. However, the main difference is that on issues such as gender equality policies and immigrant integration, the positions of left-wing and right-wing party voters are indistinguishable. This suggests that at a young age, left- and right-wing ideological identities tend to be stronger than partisan identification. Based on these findings, it appears that the stable division into left- and right-wing ideological blocs is here to stay. While the specific parties within each bloc may change over time, the fundamental division into two clearly defined political camps remains intact.

Figure 4*Average agreement among young voters of four political groups***Position of young people**

Source: own research using the NORPOL survey.

From an ideological perspective, young people play a more significant role in the two most politically extreme options in Spain's political landscape: Vox and Sumar. Young voters are more concentrated at the ideological extremes, which is not entirely surprising, as the youth demographic tends to be more ideologically polarised. However, much like in other areas of life, young people do not appear fundamentally different from older generations. They participate somewhat less in politics and are slightly more inclined to support parties at the ideological extremes, yet they are not more affectively polarised (Miller, 2023).

To better understand the links between economic precarity and political polarisation, we must broaden the scope beyond younger age groups alone. A previous academic study found that age itself is not the primary factor shaping young people's political and social preferences; rather, it is their relationship with the labour market (Demel *et al.*, 2019). For those still studying, ideological identification—being left- or right-wing—remains important. However, for those who have already entered the workforce, political ideology becomes less relevant, and the key factor shaping their views is their experience in the labour market. Those who are employed tend to believe in effort and meritocracy, whereas those who are unemployed place greater emphasis on equality. Few factors shape political attitudes more than direct confrontation with reality. Returning to the issue of age, Generation Z—those born this century—is the most accepting of immigration and represents the militant generation of diversity. This generation embraces post-materialist values, such as sexual diversity and climate change activism. In other words, as they have yet to

fully enter the labour market, their concerns are less focused on material issues such as the economy and employment. In reality, these data likely indicate that political attitudes in general, and the tendency towards polarisation in particular, are more closely linked to life stage than to age itself. Entering the labour market, starting a family or experiencing parenthood are pivotal life events that significantly shape individuals' relationship with politics. Nevertheless, according to our data, there is no clear evidence that younger generations depart from the broader patterns of ideological differentiation observed in the population as a whole.

4. Conclusions and discussion

Spain currently exhibits patterns of ideological polarisation comparable to those observed in other European countries. The level of ideological polarisation has steadily increased throughout this century, leading to the formation of two distinct ideological blocs, whose potential voters differ in their positions on most key political issues. From a longitudinal perspective, polarisation on economic issues appears to have increased significantly more than that based on moral issues, the latter of which may have even declined over the past two decades.

The data presented in this text, along with evidence from other cited sources, clearly indicate that the economic policy preferences of left- and right-wing voters have become increasingly polarised in recent years, now forming sharply differentiated ideological profiles. Within the left-wing bloc, support for higher taxes to facilitate an ambitious redistributive policy has increased. Conversely, within the right-wing bloc, opposition to taxation and state intervention in the economy has become more pronounced. This economic polarisation has steadily intensified in recent years, with no clear signs of a shift towards more centrist positions among voters or political leaders in either bloc. The economic axis is one of the two traditional dimensions used to study the polarisation of political preferences in other countries (Baldassarri and Glodberg, 2014).

The second dimension used to analyse political competition patterns is the moral axis, which encompasses issues such as feminism, sexual identities and abortion. However, the information available on the evolution of polarisation along this axis is less clear than in the economic dimension. On one hand, ESS data indicate a significant increase in consensus regarding tolerance towards homosexuality in Spain, with at least 80% of voters across all national political parties expressing support for this stance. However, issues such as same-sex adoption and abortion rights continue to polarise voters from left- and right-wing parties. Predicting how this division will evolve in Spain is challenging. Unlike economic issues, where polarisation has followed a steady trajectory, social consensus and dissent on moral issues appear to follow a more cyclical pattern. This suggests that, as in previous decades, periods of convergence in attitudes towards moral issues among different ideological groups will alternate with periods of intense confrontation over specific topics. Examples of the latter

include debates surrounding the Organic Law on the Comprehensive Guarantee of Sexual Freedom—commonly known as the “only yes means yes” law, approved in August 2022—and the Law for the Real and Effective Equality of Trans People and the Guarantee of LGBTI Rights, known as the trans law, passed in December 2022.

If Spain has become ideologically polarised, with a more persistent divide along the economic axis and a more fluctuating one on moral issues, the key question remains: to what extent is this growing polarisation harmful to democracy? On this point, expert opinions are somewhat divided. On one hand, ideological polarisation is often regarded as beneficial for the proper functioning of democracy. A clearer ideological distinction between political parties and blocs enables citizens to better discern and choose between competing political options. On the other hand, as conservative and progressive voters drift further apart, reaching agreements on public policies may become increasingly difficult. This could lead to legislative gridlock, particularly in highly fragmented parliaments—a trend observed in Spain and other countries.

A positive takeaway from the analysis presented in this text is that if the main divisions are concentrated along the economic axis, the potential for reaching agreements should be greater than if differences were primarily intensified in the realm of moral issues. At first glance, it seems reasonable to assume that debates over taxation, redistribution or even immigration policy may be more manageable than moral issues related to sexual identities or abortion, where positions tend to be more deeply rooted in principles and identity. However, this remains an empirical question that, at least in Spain, has yet to be thoroughly explored.

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