No right turn for Spanish politics

Despite an economic meltdown rightwing populists failed to gain a foothold in the country. Why?

Spanish factors: Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy; supporters of foreign workers and a Romanian migrant; Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias; and Franco’s mausoleum © FT Montage / Getty/Bloomberg
Villacañas still bears the scars of Spain’s economic crisis. Driving into the small Castilian town, the first thing you see is a row of vast, silent factories. Some are plastered with faded “for sale” signs. Others face a slow, losing battle against the weeds encroaching from all sides.

These factories were once the pride of Villacañas. Although home to just over
10,000 people, the town used to be known as the “door capital” of Spain. Before the collapse of the country’s decade-long housing boom in 2008, it boasted 10 large manufacturers that produced millions of doors a year. Local unemployment hovered below 2 per cent and workers had money to burn: luxury cars became a common sight, fancy overseas holidays a regular treat.

When the property bubble burst, six of the main manufacturers were forced to close. Some 3,000 workers lost their jobs. Unemployment in the area increased more than tenfold, eventually peaking at 28 per cent in 2012. So jolting was the transformation that Villacañas became famous once again: as a symbol of Spain’s crisis and its economic woes.
In political terms, however, the real story is what happened next — or what didn’t happen. For all the obvious parallels with the rust-belt states in the US or the hard-hit industrial heartlands of England and France, Villacañas experienced no populist backlash, no anti-immigrant wave and no revolt against globalisation. Despite brutal economic decline and mass unemployment, the political centre held in towns like Villacañas, and across the country.

A decade after the start of the crisis, Spain has yet to see the arrival of a populist far-right party like the National Front in France, an anti-immigration platform like the Alternative for Germany, or an anti-EU movement like the UK Independence party.
Outside Spain, only a handful of smaller European countries, such as Portugal and Ireland, have been able to resist the tide. But recent polls and election results all point to the same conclusion: Spaniards are overwhelmingly in favour of EU membership, and remain untroubled by immigration.

“People here worry about jobs, not about migrants,” says José Manuel Carmona, a member of the Villacañas local council for the centre-right Popular party, the ruling party in a minority government. “If they blame anyone for the crisis it is the
Sentiment towards the EU has been profoundly marked by decades of subsidies for local farmers and — once the crisis hit — for retraining workers who were laid off during the downturn. “I think locals here understand that the EU is an institution that has provided funds and help,” says Santiago García Aranda, the town’s Socialist mayor.

Rise of the left

On the face of it, Spain has long seemed like an inviting target for political parties with...
an anti-EU and anti-immigration message. Since the collapse of the housing boom, the country has suffered a deep recession and a sharp rise in unemployment and inequality. A budget crisis meant Madrid had to slash spending and raise taxes — measures that were blamed at least in part on EU pressure. Trust in the political elite was shattered by corruption scandals.

Moreover, the crisis erupted at the end of a decade that saw unprecedented numbers of migrant arrivals. In 1998, immigrants accounted for just 3 per cent of the population. By 2008, the share had jumped
to 13 per cent — one of the highest in Europe — according to official data. And yet, at no point has a far-right anti-immigrant party gained traction at the national or regional level. At last June’s general election, the only party that came even close to fitting that description, a three-year-old movement called Vox, secured just 0.2 per cent of the vote. In Villacañas, Vox obtained just 10 out of 5,771 votes — far behind the local offshoot of the animal rights’ party.

The main political beneficiary of the crisis has been the far-left, not the far-right. Since its creation three years ago, the anti-austerity Podemos party has emerged as a
powerful force, winning 21 per cent of the national vote last year. It is, in many ways, a proudly populist movement, whose leaders rail against the elites and are not averse to using divisive rhetoric.

However, the party’s base of supporters and its political platform have little in common with far-right populists: Podemos backers are typically found among the young, well-educated and urban population, who are generally open to migration and support EU membership.

What the EU means to its citizens

Source: Eurobarometer 2016
What, then, explains the Spanish exception? Analysts argue there is no single reason, but rather an idiosyncratic bundle of causes and conditions. Lack of strong leadership is one obvious factor. Another is the complex legacy of the Franco dictatorship, which has instilled a profound scepticism towards rightwing authoritarianism. There is also a collective understanding that tough times force people to seek work abroad — as many Spaniards did during the 1960s, and then again during the crisis. A fourth cause cited by researchers is the nature of the recent migration flows into Spain: many of the arrivals hail from Ecuador, Peru and other Latin American countries. They were foreigners, but familiar ones — with the same language, religion and culture as the native population.

These explanations, however, only go so far. Latin America indeed accounted for a significant number of migrant arrivals, but the two largest groups were from Romania.
and Morocco. According to official data, there are 1.4m migrants from the two countries living in Spain — almost a third of the foreign population.

For a deeper understanding of Spain’s resilience, two additional elements help to set the country apart: national identity and the welfare system.

“The main difference between Spain and other European countries is that, here, people see no link between immigration and national identity,” says Carmen González.
Enríquez, a senior analyst at the Real Instituto Elcano think-tank. “The sense of national identity is generally rather weak in Spain. You sometimes hear local complaints. People will say: ‘All the local shops have gone’. Or: ‘This village has changed so much’. But it is never expressed in any political form.”

In a forthcoming report for the Elcano Institute and Demos, the UK think-tank, Ms González Enríquez argues that the sense of identity in Spain continues to be shaped by the experience of dictatorship. “The overuse of national symbols and of references to national identity during Francoism caused a countermovement which still persists. The pro-democratic opposition to the regime rejected the exhibition of national symbols, the flag and the anthem, and Spanish nationalism was completely absent from their discourse. Instead, they looked to Europe,” she argues.
Even today, the attachment to Europe and the EU remain strong. According to a poll conducted for the Elcano/Demos study, only 10 per cent of Spaniards want to leave the EU, compared with 22 per cent in France and 45 per cent in the UK (though more than half of British voters chose to leave in June). That level of support reflects Spain’s status as a net recipient of EU funding, but also less tangible factors. For many Spaniards, the EU continues to represent modernity and progress — while Spanish membership of the union offers reassurance that the country has finally joined the
Regional focus

A political appeal to Spanish national identity is further complicated by the long-running tensions between the central state and its regions, specifically Catalunya and the Basque country. Many Catalans and Basques claim a national identity that is not just distinct from the Spanish one but in direct conflict with it. Both regions have strong secessionist movements that hope to eventually achieve statehood and independence from Spain.
For any rightwing movement seeking to activate nationalist sentiment, that presents an immediate problem. If its leaders try to tap into Spanish pride, they risk losing support in two crucial regions that account for almost a quarter of the total Spanish population. If they appeal exclusively to Catalan or Basque national identity, they shut themselves out of the rest of Spain.

At the same time, the political conflict between Spain and the regions has allowed the ruling Popular party, led by Mariano Rajoy, to protect its rightwing flank without stoking or pandering to anti-immigrant sentiment. “The PP has been able to remain a catch-all rightwing party, in part because it has a strong message about defending the unity of Spain. That is a key issue for rightwing voters,” says Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, a political scientist at Diego
Spain’s centre-periphery tensions aside, analysts also highlight a welfare system that grants generous access to core services such as health and education but offers little in the way of social housing and direct support payments.

“You don’t have this conflict between natives and non-natives over welfare that you have in other countries,” says José Fernández-Albertos, a political analyst at the CSIC research centre in Madrid. “Spain has pretty good public services but when it comes to
housing and cash benefits it’s very weak. And those are precisely the areas where it becomes visible that the state is making transfers from one sector of the population to another.”

As a result, headlines about foreigners claiming benefits and migrant families living off welfare are rare in Spain. “Part of this is always about competition for resources. When there are no resources to compete for, the potential for conflict decreases,” says Sergi Pardos-Prado, a researcher at Oxford university.

It is an argument that goes hand-in-hand with another feature of Spain’s crisis: the fact that migrants were usually hit much harder than the native population, which could rely on family networks to cushion the blow. Foreign workers had no safety net to fall back on. It was, as Mr Fernández-Albertos points out, “objectively difficult to argue that Spain treated its migrants too
The side of Spain that seeks sound governance

It is to Spaniards’ credit that they have denied a political market to populist xenophobia.

Back in Villacañas, that is certainly the impression of hard-hit locals. At the height of the boom, migrants accounted for 5 per cent of the town’s population — but their share has decreased markedly in the years since. “When the crisis came, most of them just left,” says Mr García Aranda.

Looking ahead, most experts voice well during the crisis”.

FT Comment
confidence that Spain will continue to resist the populist far-right surge. Most of the factors that explain the country’s exceptional status are deeply rooted in its history and society, and are therefore unlikely to change in the short term. What is more, Spain is in the midst of recovery — annual growth in gross domestic product hit 3.2 per cent last year — suggesting that some of the social and economic pressures will recede.

For the leaders of Europe’s political centre, the story of Spain after the crisis offers a glimmer of hope — but not much more than a glimmer. The Spanish exception is less the result of smart politics than of historical accidents and complex social trends that are hard to replicate. Policymakers in Berlin, Brussels and London will find plenty to admire in the country’s resilience to the populist backlash — but not a lot to copy.
Fringe politics: A far-right voice struggles to be heard

The party slogan — “Making Spain great again” — comes straight from the Donald Trump playbook. Its policy towards immigration echoes that of European far-right parties such as the National Front in France or the Freedom party in the Netherlands. But what sets Spain’s Vox party apart from these movements is something else: its lack of success at the ballot box.

Founded just over three years ago by former members of the centre-right Popular party, Vox has little to show for its engagement so far. According to Santiago Abascal, its youthful leader, the party has won 22 council seats in local elections up to now. But it has never come close to entering parliament at the national, regional or European
level. At June’s general election, Vox gained just 0.2 per cent of the vote.

“We don’t identify with extreme labels but we share a lot of positions with parties on the alternative right — that countries need borders and security, for example,” says Mr Abascal. He calls for the closure of mosques funded by “extremist” regimes such as Saudi Arabia, and argues that Vox and like-minded parties have to fight back against “political correctness”.

Asked to explain his party’s lack of success, he points to the rise of the far-left Podemos party, which he argues has forced rightwing voters to rally around the PP. The fact Spain has not suffered a major Islamist terror attack since 2004 is another factor, he says, as is the
relatively small number of recent arrivals from the conflict in Syria. But he is convinced Vox’s time will come: “We have far more sympathy than votes. It is a question of time.” Others disagree. “Spanish society isn’t seduced by its arguments,” says Guillem Vidal, a political scientist at the European University Institute in Florence. “There are just not that many people who have strong anti-immigrant feelings.”
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Spanish people never took "fancy overseas holidays". They don't need to as they have the best of everything on their own doorstep. There are no parallels with the godless US rust-belts or English industrial heartlands as Spain is a country where family & cultural traditions come first. I've never heard a Spaniard complain about the amount of Brits living there despite the fact that most are retired, few speak good Spanish and many contribute little to society (contrasting starkly to the dynamism of those who came to the UK).

One bright lad, Manuel Huete, in Villacañas, saw the writing on the wall (the collapse of the property market) and stopped working in one of the door factories so he could complete his secondary education. He did so well that he won a place at the London School of Economics and went on to work for the Bank of Spain.
RobVancouver

Spanish politicians probably also took responsibility for their own mistakes. This contrasts with the UK, where local politicians have been blaming the EU for their own mistakes for decades.

F Primo

Good article. Would have gone deeper in the rejection of hard core nationalism as a result of Franco association and argument that goes aligned with Germany's scant far right presence in current politics.

In addition there is a stoic feeling and skepticism towards that nationalistic sentiment entrenched in Spain's own history, one where a sense of greatful unity is stoked well in the past and mostly had an overseas expression.

Fag du Clooner (Eton, Oxford)

The Spanish like the EU because they don't trust their own governments. The history of right and left wing populism in Spain and Latin America has been a disaster and the EU is a balancing power against that self destructive tendency.
Wow! Two lines to describe one country plus a continent... Really? Maybe a bit pretentious?

Si tenemos en cuenta los últimos gobiernos que hemos llevado... yo diría que más influencia de la UE y más políticas anticorrupción sería la respuesta. El populismo no es opción, ni frente a los problemas sociales, políticos y menos frente a Cataluña.

I agree with Newton. We are still in the 2nd generation from the ‘transición’: A successful democracy? Not at all yet. Remember the double meaning of ‘Spain is different’ expression. There are a lot of institutional examples but an individual example is the situation who reported irregularities in the Army.

http://luisgonzalosegura.com/biografia/

A reasonable account but it fails to mention that the
state's main beneficiaries here, apart from the unemployed, are the pensioners. And while many younger people may voice concern about the size of their own pension pots, the old are filling in for the state in childcare, with many younger people living at home well into their 30s.

The flack is instead being taken by wealthy people and corporations who are deemed to be siphoning off everyone else's money.

It is about the big guys and the little guys and both ordinary Spaniards and immigrants are the little guys in this story.

BasedonFundamentals

A lack of Fox news, Daily Mail and the likes does wonders for society.

faust

@BasedonFundamentals Like an economic depression that is into its 9th year?

n*log(n)

@faust @BasedonFundamentals Well at approx. 3% GDP growth rate for the last two years and forecasted into the next few is better than any other european country, including the UK.
Mike

5 hours ago

Cool analysis that surely provides useful data for non-Spaniards. Plus, I think there's one more important factor surrounding the careless position towards high immigration and anti-EU movements: its exaggerated focus on themselves (ourselves). If you take a look at Spanish press and media, it's 99% about internal quarrel over controversial politicians and secessionist parties. There's just no time, no social interest (and thus anger) for those matters that overwhelm current European politics.