

Immigration, Discrimination, and "Lepenization" in Spain: A Demo-Spatial Analysis at the Municipal and Intra-Municipal Scale

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1 Introduction and Research Question

This research investigates the relationship between international immigration, discrimination, and the rise of the far-right in Spain. Using a demo-spatial and multi-scalar approach, the study aims to test the central hypothesis: the growing international migration in Spain’s demographic and social reproduction processes is directly related to the political shift characterized as "Lepenization"—the normalization and proliferation of radical right-wing anti-immigrant discourses and policies within the political debate.

Spain, now a major receiving society with approximately 16% of its population foreign-born (as of 2023 data), provides a compelling case study. Nevertheless, the consolidation of Vox since 2013 (see Figure 1), driven by radical ex-members of conventional right-wing parties, and the emergence of other regional radical right parties have promoted narratives centered on an exclusive and racialized idea of national identity, driving voter capture through anti-immigrant and nationalist rhetoric. This study examines how the size, socio-demographic characteristics, and territorial distribution of the immigrant population influence the spatial evolution of the far-right vote across Spanish municipalities and urban areas.

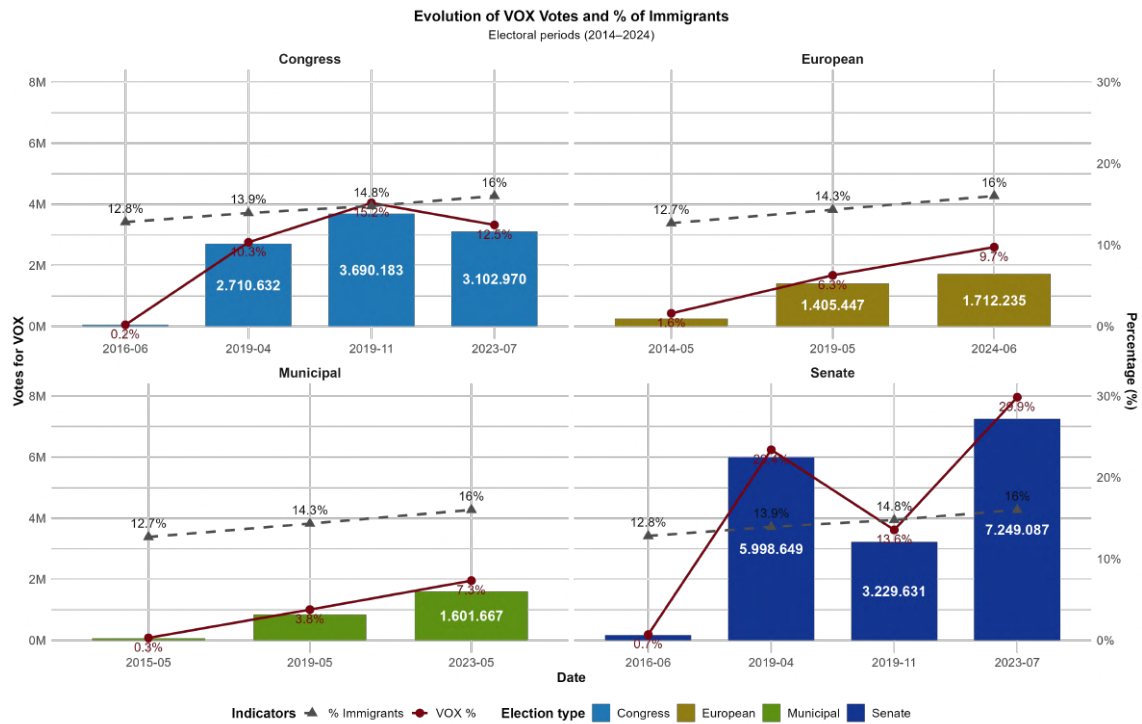


Figure 1: VOX Votes Received by Electoral Process, Percentage of Total Votes, and Percentage of Immigrant Population. Source: Electoral Information from the Spanish Ministry of Interior (*Ministerio del Interior de España*) for parliamentary, municipal, and European elections.

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2 Theoretical Framework and State of the Art

2.1 The Process of "Lepenization" and Populism

The analysis aligns with the research of Hervé Le Bras (2024), who, after examining the relationship between immigration and the far-right vote in seven European countries, concluded that the correlation at the national scale is non-existent or unrecognizable. Furthermore, the author underscores the need for deeper study in Spain due to the recent consolidation of far-right parties constrained by a political tension between Spanish nationalism and independence movements that determines the far-right electoral behavior in some areas of the country (Le Bras, 2024). This investigation addresses said political situation from a demo-spatial perspective that allows us to recognize the correlation of immigration in the vote and the territorial or population factors associated with high levels of far-right voting in places without previous records of far-right voting, a process called "Lepenization".

The concept is "Lepenization", defined as the proliferation and normalization of radical right-wing positions concerning nationality, identity, and race within the political and institutional debate (Tévanian and Tissot, 1998). Originating from the French parliamentary debate in 1997 by Robert Badinter, the term describes the institutional adoption of ideas (xenophobia, racism, nationalism) traditionally associated with extreme-right parties like the National Front led by Marine Le Pen. In Spain, this process is encapsulated by the success of Vox and its ability to mainstream a far-right populism (Mudde, 2007). This political strategy is characterized by nationalist, anti-immigrant, and conservative discourses that frame ethnic minorities and immigrants as a fundamental threat to national identity and traditional values (Taguieff, 2003; Wodak, 2015). Crucially, the analysis will focus on how this "Lepenization" successfully mobilizes the electorate in contexts of historically low-immigration areas, often through emotional appeals to a singular national identity (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2002).

2.2 Social Reproduction, Stratification, and Segmented Integration

The hypothesis further connects "Lepenization" to changes in social and demographic reproduction. The increasing reliance on immigration for population renewal affects the ethno-stratification of Spanish society (Wimmer, 2013). This refers to the social hierarchy based on ethnic origin, where migrants are assigned differentiated positions in terms of prestige, resource access, and economic roles.

The research will utilize the framework of Segmented Integration (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Portes et al., 2005) to understand the differentiated incorporation of migrants. This theory posits that integration outcomes (upward mobility vs. downward/marginal integration) are determined by the individual characteristics of the migrants (origin, education, capital) and the structural context of the host country (labor market segmentation, institutional attitudes, and demographic composition). The far-right rhetoric often leverages downward integration (e.g., urban marginality, labor segmentation) to fuel discriminatory narratives.

2.3 Demographic Metabolism and Generational Change

From a demographic perspective, the study incorporates the Demographic Metabolism Theory (Ryder, 1965; Mannheim, 1928). This framework posits that social change is driven by the succession of different generations and population replacement. Since attitudes and values within a cohort tend to be relatively stable over time, younger cohorts and the generational composition of the electorate become the key drivers of social change (Lutz, 2021). The analysis will examine the role of generational turnover in shifting local attitudes towards immigration, seeking to determine if the "Lepenization" process is more effective among specific generations whose socio-demographic, economic, or territorial characteristics make them receptive to anti-immigrant discourses (Stockard, Carpenter, and Kahle, 2014).

3 Data and Methodology: A Quantitative Approach

The current investigation is founded upon a quantitative methodology, designed to establish empirical relationships. This approach leverages the depth of Spanish official statistics and employs advanced statistical techniques. This framework provides the necessary tools to explain the complex interactions between demographic changes and far-right electoral success across distinct geographic scales.

3.1 Data Sources

To execute this spatial analysis, we integrate large-scale georeferenced statistical operations, forming a comprehensive database that spans over two decades of demographic and political change.

The accumulated stock of the foreign-born population and its detailed characteristics are drawn from the Padrón Continuo de Población (2000-2022), the recent Censos Anuales de Población, the Censo de Población y Viviendas de 2021 (CPV), and the Encuesta de Características Esenciales de la Población y las Viviendas de 2021 (ECEPOV). These rich sources allow for the detailed characterization of the immigrant population, including variables such as sex, age, country of birth, mean net income per household, years since arrival, and occupation.

The electoral response to demographic change is quantified using official results from the Ministerio del Interior website. This data encompasses municipal, regional, parliamentary, and European elections, providing the percentage of the far-right vote.

3.2 Spatial Scales of Analysis

1. Intra-Municipal (Census Tracks): This micro-scale, using Census Tracks (referring to *Secciones Censales*), is indispensable for modeling the direct impact of residential segregation and highly localized concentrations of migrant groups on precise, localized voting patterns, particularly within large urban environments.
2. Municipal: Serving as the primary unit of observation, the municipality is the scale where the four distinct typologies of local voting dynamics will be classified using cluster analysis.
3. Provincial and Autonomous Community (CCAA): These broader scales function primarily to introduce necessary controls. They will be utilized as control variables or fixed effects within regression models to account for the impact of broader regional economic structures, macro-level political shifts, and political-institutional specificities.

3.3 Statistical and Demographic Methods

The research employs rigorous statistical methods designed to identify significant relationships. On the one hand, Cluster Analysis will be used as an empirical step to validate and refine the classification of the four proposed municipality types. This technique statistically differentiates between areas where the far-right vote is primarily driven by socio-economic pressure, cultural diversity, or high-income identity voting. On the other hand, we employ Multivariate Regression Models for testing the core hypotheses, establishing the direction and significance of relationships between the independent and dependent (far-right vote) variables, while controlling for socioeconomic status and regional effects.

4 Expected Findings

The demo-spatial analysis of the population allows us to identify the municipalities recording high percentages of the Vox vote and those with a high proportion of immigrant population. By correlating the volume of these two phenomena at the municipal scale, it's possible to observe a direct relationship between immigration and the Vox vote in certain areas of the central and

southern regions of the country. However, the research also reveals complex and divergent trends in Autonomous Communities with strong regional identities and peripheral nationalist movements, such as Catalonia, the Valencian Community, and the Basque Country (see Figure 2).

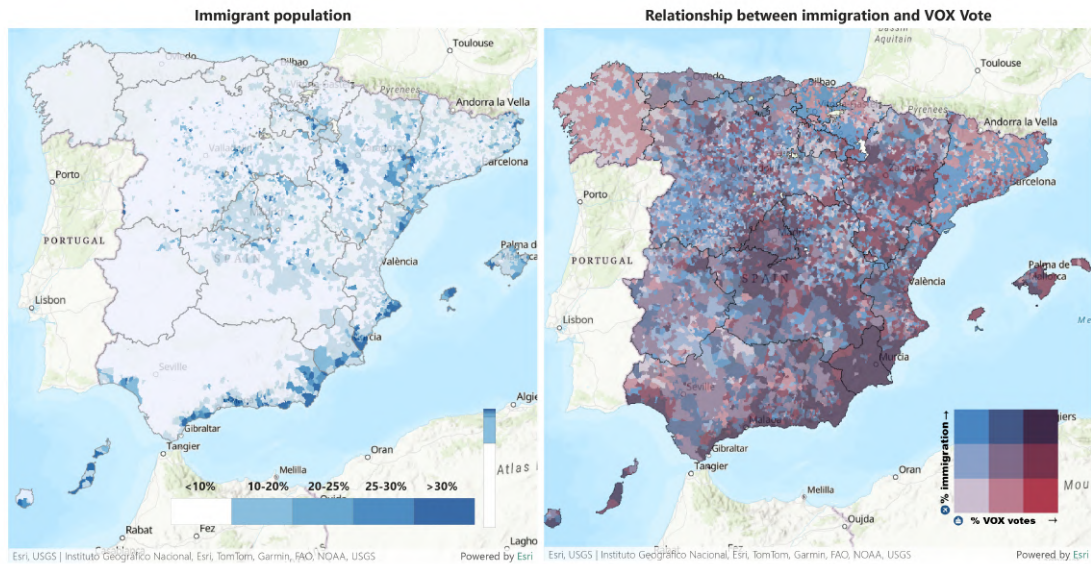


Figure 2: Percentage of Immigrant Population by Municipality in Spain in 2023 and its Correlation with the VOX Vote Percentage. Source: Electoral information from the national Ministry of Interior and Annual Population Census data for the 2023 period.

These geographical contrasts underscore the necessity of using municipal typologies to integrate other demographic, economic, and territorial variables into the analysis of far-right electoral behavior. The application of cluster analysis allows for the classification of Spanish municipalities into the following typologies:

1. Production Pressure Paradox: High far-right vote co-occurring with high immigration concentrated in key productive sectors (e.g., certain agricultural or industrial areas).
2. Xenophobic Imaginary Geography: Elevated far-right vote in areas with low actual immigrant presence, where the vote is mediated by fear and anti-immigrant narratives diffused through political discourse, rather than direct contact.
3. Secession of the Privileged: Correlation between high far-right vote and high-income areas, often linked to the defense of a perceived national identity and traditional social values against the forces of diversity and globalization.
4. Residential municipalities with high immigration: High far-right vote in low-income, where the anti-immigrant rhetoric is present.

The work will ultimately provide empirical evidence that the anti-immigrant vote in Spain is determined by racialization, local segregation, and exclusionary attitudes actively promoted in political discourses. This innovative finding will highlight the recent forms of discrimination and institutional racism affecting migrant and minority populations.