

# Why here and why now?

A case study of the electoral success and failure of populist  
parties in Spain

# Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate what causes the electoral success of different subtypes of populism through the ideational approach. Through a case study of Spain, the thesis examines the demand-side and supply-side factors that, together, favour the emergence of populist parties. In doing so, the thesis combines process-tracing method with quantitative data, providing a context-specific understanding of the causes of populism in Spain. Through the examination of opinion surveys at the mass level between 2000 and 2019, this study finds that both the demand and supply must be considered to properly understand the populist surge and provides probabilistic support for the argument that times of crises activates populist attitudes. Moreover, the study shows that the ideological flavour of the populist party is important for the electorate, a finding that must be further tackled in future research.

*Key words:* populism, ideational approach, demand-side factors, supply-side factors, Spain

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# 1 Introduction

During the past decades, we have witnessed the rise of populist parties all around the world. Notably, following the Great Recession, right-wing populist parties' electoral success has increased dramatically in the Western world. Consequently, right-wing populism is under constant academic scrutiny, and scholars aim to understand the causes, characteristics, and effects of the new populist moment.

Often, scholars attribute the rise of right-wing populism in Europe to the financial crisis of 2008 (e.g., Kriesi et al., 2012), implying that its consequences on individuals drive them to protest against post-materialist values and therefore hold anti-immigrant attitudes (e.g. Inglehart and Norris 2016). However, the electoral success – and, particularly, failure – of populist movements in Europe do, in some ways, contradict some of the theoretical understandings of the phenomena. This creates a gap in the academic field, with several questions regarding the nature of populism remaining unanswered.

Furthermore, in a few European countries, the leading populist response in the post-2008 financial crisis period has been a left-wing one, breaking the right-wing populist European pattern. For instance, in Spain, the populist movement was until recently constituted exclusively by a left-wing populist party, with the foundation and emergence of Podemos in 2014. For a long time, Spain was considered an exception to the European trend (e.g., Alonso & Rovira Kaltwasser 2015), with parties within the right-wing populist party family not obtaining more than 0,5 per cent of the votes together. However, a right-wing populist party eventually managed to gain momentum in the country with the electoral breakthrough of Vox in the general elections of 2019. At this moment, two populist parties at opposite sides of the left-right axis compete in the Spanish electoral arena.

The Spanish case raises several questions: why does left-wing populism emerge in the otherwise right-wing populist Europe? Why does right-wing populism not arise when it, theoretically, should? This study explores these questions through the ideational approach to populism (e.g., Mudde 2007; Mudde

& Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), which sees populism as a set of attitudes in which the people are set against a corrupt and self-serving elite (Hakwins & Roivra Kaltwasser 2019: 3). Ideational scholars argue that examining demand-side and supply-side factors of the political market is crucial to understand what constitutes a fertile breeding ground for the electoral success of populist parties (Mudde 2007). Through a case study of Spain, this thesis seeks to contribute to and develop the theoretical understanding of (I) what conditions the support of different types of populism and (II) what causes the electoral success and failure of populist parties.

## 1.1 Purpose and Research Questions

The primary purpose of this thesis is to provide plausible explanations for the electoral success and failure of different subtypes of populism. Relying on the ideational approach to populism (Mudde 2007; Hakwins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2019), the examination of populist ideas at the individual level is at the centre of this study. Through a case study analysis of Spain, this study aims to understand what conditions the rise of populist movements and ideas, contributing to the ongoing theoretical debate on the concept and characteristics of populism. The research question that this thesis aims to answer is:

*Which combination of conditions makes the electoral success of populist parties possible?*

To answer the research question, the study will outline some case-specific predictions and hypothesize the causal mechanism that might constitute the combination of conditions that makes the electoral success of populist parties possible, which are presented in chapter 4.

## 1.2 Disposition of the study

In the following sections of this introductory chapter, the case's background is specified. After a review of the academic literature and previous research on populism, the intended contribution and expectations of the study are outlined. When the case and the academic field have been introduced, the theoretical framework is presented, focusing on the core concepts of populism through the ideational approach and its take on what influences the electoral success of populist parties. The study uses a mixed method based on process tracing, using quantitative data. The methodological reflections are outlined in chapter 3. Following this, case-specific predictions are provided to be able to hypothesize the causal mechanism to be tested in this study. In chapter 5, the empirical results are presented, followed by a discussion and analysis in chapter 6. Finally, the study's conclusion is presented, followed by the author's final remarks and suggestions for future research.

## 1.3 Background

To put the case studied in this thesis in its context, a brief presentation of the recent history of Spain is conducted below, focusing on the main changes in the political market between the period following the death of Franco in 1975 and present times.

### *The transition towards democracy*

Following the death of Francisco Franco in 1975, the Spanish transition to democracy started after 40 years of the fascist regime. Adolfo Suárez became the first prime minister of democratic Spain, following the general elections of 1977.

In 1978, the Spanish Constitution was approved through a referendum. An essential part of this was the acceptance of Spain as constituted by many nations, hence acknowledging the autonomy of the territorial regions of the country, and constitutionalizing the right to different cultures, traditions, and languages (Real Decreto 2560/1978). Significant events during the transition were the attempted

coup d'état carried out by members of the Spanish Civil Guard, Spanish membership in the European Economic Community (later European Union) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores 2017).

In the general elections of 1982, the socialist party *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE), gained office. The PSOE continued gaining the elections – and thus remained in power – until 1996. After 1996, the government power has shifted between the PSOE and conservative *Partido Popular* (PP), establishing a national two-party system. Until recently, the two parties have together obtained more than 80 per cent of the votes (Ministerio del Interior 2000; 2004; 2008; 2011).

### *The funding of Podemos and the loosening of the two-party system*

Following the financial crisis of 2008 and vast austerity measures, widely spread protests were held across the country, denominated as the *indignados*-movement. From this social movement, the left-wing populist party *Podemos* was founded at the beginning of 2014. The same spring, the emergent party collected the fifteen thousand signatures required for a new party to present itself in an election (Vera 2014). Subsequently, the party obtained 7,98 per cent of the votes in the European elections of 25<sup>th</sup> of May 2014, situating itself as a relevant political actor in the Spanish market. The day after the elections, in an interview with *The Guardian*, *Podemos* leader Pablo Iglesias described the emergent party as “it’s citizens doing politics. If the citizens don’t get involved in politics, others will. And that opens the door to them robbing you of democracy, your right and your wallet” (Kassam 2014). In the national general elections, the year after, the Spanish two-party system was split with the entering of both *Podemos* and liberal *Ciudadanos* into the national political arena (Ministerio del Interior 2015).

### *In between two populist movements*

The entering of *Podemos* and *Ciudadanos* into the national political market created a novel political climate (Orriols & Cordero 2016: 469). Nevertheless, following the elections of 2015, a government was failed to be formed. Hence, re-elections were held the year after, with the PP gaining a simple majority in the congress with

31,27 per cent of the votes. However, in 2018, the PSOE failed a motion of no confidence towards prime minister Mariano Rajoy, following the revelation of systematic corruption within the Partido Popular. The motion was approved by a majority in parliament, and Pedro Sánchez, leader of the PSOE, was sworn in as prime minister (Simón 2020: 3).

### *The electoral success of right-wing populist Vox*

Spanish exceptionalism (see Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser 2015) was broken when Vox entered the regional parliament in Andalusia in the regional elections of 2018. For the first time since the institutionalisation of democracy in Spain, an extreme right party obtained parliamentary representation. The party, led by Santiago Abascal, a former member of PP, was founded in 2013. In 2019, prime minister Pedro Sánchez called for snap-elections because of the rejection of the socialist government's budget proposition in congress. In the general elections of April 2019, Vox entered the national political arena with 10,3 per cent of the votes. In the re-elections of November the same year, they increased their share to 15,1 per cent.

The main measure of Vox in their electoral program "*100 measures for Spain*" – in their words– is "the demand for compliance with the Constitution, the immediate suspension of the autonomy of Catalonia and the prosecution of the rebels in the separatist coup, as well as the criminalization of the parties, associations or NGOs that pursue the destruction of the territorial unity of Spain" (Vox 2018).

## 1.4 Literature review and previous research

In the past two decades, the ideational approach has emerged as one of the most prominent approaches to the study of populism (see Mudde 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Hakwins et al. 2019). Nevertheless, other arguments are used to explain the emergence of populism, mainly relying on cultural and political-economic views. After a brief presentation of the approach used in this study, three main theoretical competitors are identified and discussed. Subsequently, the state of research on what causes the rise of different types of populism is examined.

Finally, the intended contribution to the academic debate and the expectations of this study are identified.

#### 1.4.1 The ideational approach: a short introduction

The adherents to the ideational approach employ a minimal definition of populism (Mudde 2004) to define only the necessary and sufficient conditions of the concept (Akkerman et al. 2019: 1326). There is no consensus about what populism is a *type of*; discourse, an outlook, or a worldview, among others. However, as Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017: 514) suggest, the terms used within the ideational approach are somewhat interchangeable. Thus, to be clear, this study defines populism as “*a thin-centred ideology or discursive frame in which individuals see politics as the struggle between a reified will of the familiar people and an evil conspiring elite*” (Hawkins 2019: 60).

Employing an ideational approach, we aim to explain the effects, causes and consequences of populist ideas. Even if the ideational approach is strongly inspired by the Essex school and, more implicitly, by Laclau’s (1977, 2005) work, it aims to understand the causes and consequences of populism objectively (Hawkins 2019: 57). However, ontologically, the ideational theory gives a central role to ideas in defining and explaining populism.

The ideational approach stresses the role of *ideas* in order to understand the causes and meanings of populism (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2019: 6). It builds on a minimal definition (Mudde 2007: 23), conceiving populism as “a unique set of ideas, one that understands politics as a Manichean struggle between a reified will of the people and a conspiring elite” (Hawkins 2019: 60). Through the ideational lens, populism starts at the individual level: it is a particular belief in popular sovereignty, which is being lost due to the intentional behaviour of the elites (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2019: 3).

Through this approach, we can comprehend why populism is so malleable in the real world and how it is attached to other concepts or ideological families. Populism is a thin-centred ideology, meaning that it is not by itself able to articulate comprehensive answers consciously. Populism, therefore, often appears attached to so-called host ideologies, creating a potpourri of different actors, such as left-wing and right-wing populist parties (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2013: 493).

Populist attitudes lay dormant or latent and must be activated through a “social context that makes the populist message sensible” (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2019: 7), normally crises that can be attributed to intentional elite misbehaviour. Only when activated and framed through a populist lens, these attitudes translate into electoral support for populist parties. That is, the electoral success of populist parties is explained through the combination of favourable demand-side and supply-side factors, which together create a fertile breeding ground for a populist actor to succeed (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2018: 1671).

In sum, by defining populism through the ideational approach, we can consider both the demand-side and supply-side of populist movements, creating a more far-reaching understanding of the causes of populism and its consequences for (liberal) democracy (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 20).

#### 1.4.2 The study of populism

The ideational approach is further developed and discussed in the theoretical framework. Below, three main competitors to the ideational approach are discussed.

First, focusing on cultural mechanisms, scholars studying populism often rely on the mass-society thesis, focusing on the changes in modern society and its consequences on individuals’ sense of belonging. The main argument here is that many individuals lose their sense of belonging in the shift to a knowledge-based and service-based society. Since human beings require an identity and norms that form their day-to-day life, this, in turn, creates resentment among the masses, favouring the emergence of populist movements that provide a sense of identity (Elchardus and Spruyt 2016: 126-7).

A second argument draws from modernization theory. Here, scholars focus on values, claiming they are the main force driving human behaviour. The support for populist movements is explained through the assumption that individuals holding authoritarian values are disturbed by post-materialist society (Lipset 1959). As an answer to the cultural changes in contemporary society, populism acts as a cultural backlash (Norris & Inglehart 2019: 32-5).

The main problem with the cultural theses mentioned above is that they mainly explain the emergence of radical right parties, but not necessarily *populist* ones. They theorize about the anti-immigrant values found in large part of the electorate (in particular in European countries) but fail to explain the *populist* surge (Mudde 2017: 35). Ideational scholars argue that even if the radical right personality of several populist parties is essential to understand, it does not alone explain why some voters prefer *populist* radical right parties over other extremist parties (Hakwins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2019: 15).

Third, we find a Downsian argument that focuses on economic mechanisms. Using rational-choice theory from neoclassical economics, scholars within this strand argue that voters support populist movements because traditional parties have stopped defending their material interests (Kitschelt 1997; Kriesi et al. 2012). Thus, the mechanism behind the support assumes that individuals always seek to maximize self-interest. As in the case of the alternative arguments mentioned above, this perspective also stresses the consequences of globalization to understand the growing support for populist parties. Since some individuals feel that their interests are not being defended in an ever-more cosmopolitan society, they – the “losers of globalization” – vote for populist candidates (Betz 1994; Kriesi et al., 2012). The emphasis on the impact of institutions and partisan competition on the electoral success of populist parties that rational-choice scholars adhere to is compatible with the ideational approach. Nevertheless, it neglects the normative concerns that ideational scholars argue define populist forces (Hakwins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2019: 15).

In sum, these main strands have important strengths but leave several questions unanswered. For instance, the mass-society thesis gives us satisfactory explanations for older waves of populism. It creates a framework to understand the emotional role that political identity plays in citizens’ day-to-day lives. Still, it fails to understand populist movements’ *persistence* in contemporary society. Furthermore, the Downsian strand fails to explain the geographical variation of populism (Hawkins et al., 2017: 274). Hence, these theories “do not offer a logic that unifies populism across (...) regions, other than a general sense of deprivation” (Hawkins et al., 2017: 274). Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, they fail to examine the *ideas* of populism and to examine their explanatory frameworks at the individual level. As Hawkins et al. (2017: 275) put it, “if we think that populist

forces are primarily distinguished by their ideas – a Manichean discourse that posits a cosmic struggle between the putative “will of the people” and a conspiring elite – it is because we think that these ideas matter”. Scholars employing the ideational approach do not necessarily disregard the general claims made by the theories discussed in this section. They accept the influence of culture and material interests in forming citizen preferences. However, they underline the need of highlighting an additional set of meanings, emphasizing that populism essentially is “a complaint that inequalities are violations of democratic norms of equality before the law” (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2019: 15).

Consequently, this study draws from the ideational approach. Its adherents stress the importance of studying the *ideas* of populism, implying that it is a set of beliefs driven by more than a discourse fulfilling a social function or driven by individuals’ and actors’ inherent egoism (Hawkins et al., 2017: 275). Approaching populism through the ideational lens implies that the study of the phenomena must include “arguments about the normative foundations for democracy, the contexts that violate these norms, and the means by which they are framed and activated” (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2019: 15).

### 1.4.3 Understanding the varieties of populism

Even if the research on the varieties of populism is scarce – hence the nature of this thesis – some valuable insights have been provided. The research on the subtypes of populism is essentially regionalized. Researchers focus on left-wing populism in Latin America (e.g. Roberts 2006; Weyland 2001) and right-wing populism in Europe (e.g. Mudde 2004, 2007), providing explanations for the causal mechanisms behind the emergence of populist parties in each region, but not providing a unifying logic at the theoretical level (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2019: 4). This study aims to understand the emergence of two different populist parties in Spain, situating itself in the European context. Thus, previous research on the varieties of European populism is discussed below.

First and foremost, there is an imbalance in the amount of research employed on right-wing versus left-wing populism in the European context. Drawing from economic strands, for instance, those who adhere to the

‘globalization losers’ thesis advance that those individuals who were most severely hit by the financial crisis are more prone to vote for right-wing populist parties (Kriesi et al., 2012). When looking into sociodemographic factors, these *losers* are usually believed to belong to the working class, be unemployed or have less skilled jobs. In contrast, the *winners* are supposed to be constituted by highly qualified and cosmopolitan individuals, who are more prone to vote for green, liberal, or centre-left parties (Hernández & Kriesi 2016).

Scholars adhering to these theoretical assumptions do indeed find that voters for populist parties are overrepresented in a particular sociodemographic group – but only within *some* cases. This is not a law-like pattern and, when applied to the electorate of left-wing populist parties, the notion falls short, some argue (e.g. Orriols & Cordero, 2016; Roodujin & Burgoon, 2017: 1748). For instance, research shows that the left-wing populist electorate in South European countries is constituted by young and urban voters (Santana & Rama 2018: 569), which raises several concerns, since some of the countries where left-wing populism thrives are precisely those countries that were most severely hit by the financial (Funke et al., 2016). Nevertheless, some argue that the *severity* of the financial crisis and the subsequent crisis of responsiveness favoured the rise of left-wing populism in Southern Europe (e.g., Caiani 2019; Lisi et al. 2019), mobilizing the people around material rather than cultural factors (Kriesi 2014). Others (e.g., Santana & Rama 2018) specify that the effects of the economic crisis on individual financial hardship, the perception of economic decline, and the feeling that the *Troika* was intervening too much in domestic economic policies influenced the rise of left-wing parties.

Furthermore, when it comes to the electoral *failure* of right-wing populism, the state of research is much the same. At the theoretical level, we find plausible explanations to understand the success and, logically, the failure of right-wing populist parties. Nevertheless, these assumptions are rarely tested at the empirical level. However, some insights are helpful: for instance, in 2015, when Spain was still an exception to the European trend and successful right-wing populist parties were non-existent, Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser (2015) suggested that three factors were impeding the electoral breakthrough and persistence of these kinds of parties – that is, the cleavage structure of the country, the strategy of competition of the mainstream right and the electoral system.

Similarly, Mendes and Dennison (2020) provide helpful insight: focusing on the recent emergence of radical right-wing populist parties in Spain and Portugal, they show that these parties are favoured when they are able to avoid the *stigma* of extremism, showing that *Vox* and *Chega* benefited from being portrayed in less damaging terms than previous far-right parties and organizations in each country. Also, they received a much greater degree of coverage than other far-right parties. Moreover, they show that they benefited from the emergent gap in the political *supply* and from unsatisfied voters' demand on a *salient* sociocultural issue. Furthermore, Mendes and Denisson (2021: 771) suggest that even if there is evidence for assuming that radical-right support is favoured by an increase in the salience of the specific issue of immigration, the initial success is connected to the party's ability to mobilize on country-specific issues.

Apart from the arguments shortly discussed here, little research has been conducted analysing left-wing *and* right-wing populism empirically *together*. As shown above, the focus relies – at the practical level – almost exclusively on defining the sociodemographic determinants for left-wing or right-wing populist support, highlighting the importance of a better understanding of which specific contexts favours or dampers the electoral success of different types of populism.

## 1.5 Intended Contribution and Expectations

The ideational approach provides a “unifying logic” that allows us to test the theoretical assumptions cross-regionally at different levels of analysis (e.g., Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2019: 6). Ideational scholars engage in the study of populist attitudes at the mass level, showing that they are familiar and widespread in society, correlating with demographic and political indicators (Akkerman, Mudde & Zaslove, 2014; Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Hence, the search for populist attitudes among the people is at the centre of this study.

Through the ideational lens, we can separate the populist dimension from the left-right ideological flavour of a specific populist party, allowing us to search for populist ideas *vis-à-vis* contextual factors and host ideological stands (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2019: 6). However, even if the varieties of populism are well-

defined at the theoretical level, they are much less tested at the empirical level (Castanho Silva et al., 2019: 166). This study aims to fill the existing gap in the academic debate. Through the examination of the electoral success of Podemos and Vox in Spain, this study will, hopefully, provide us with new insights on what conditions the rise of different types of populism.

The ideational approach highlights the role of individuals' set of beliefs in the study of populism – giving individuals a central role in the understanding of how ideas condition and reproduce political reality (Hawkins 2019: 57). Nevertheless, when discussing the windows of opportunity that the political market might – or might not – offer emergent political parties, the empirical focus shifts to the elite or the aggregate level (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 524). In this study, the role of individuals' perception of political reality is at the centre. Finally, the constraints and opportunities of the political market are studied through the eyes of the people, providing an understanding of both demand-side and supply-side factors at the individual level.

Moreover, the ideational approach stresses the importance of context-specific empirical analysis, taking both the demand-side and supply-side dimensions into account (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2019: 17). Still, the two factors are commonly separated at the empirical level. This study will therefore attempt to understand the attitudes at the individual level together with those political structures that are believed to favour or damper the electoral success of populist parties.

In sum, through the case of Spain, the ideational approach provides us with valuable tools to understand what conditions the rise of populist forces, as well as what causes that this rise endeavours an ideological flavour or another.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

“In essence, the populist surge is an illiberal democratic response to decades of undemocratic liberal policies”. (Mudde 2016: 30)

The following chapter lays out the theoretical framework used in this study, based on the ideational approach (Mudde 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kalwasser 2017; Hawkins et al. 2019). First, the concept of populism through the ideational lens is presented, focusing on its core concepts. Second, the varieties of populism are examined. Lastly, the causes of the electoral success of populist parties are discussed, focusing on the demand-side and supply-side of politics.

### 2.1 What is populism?

As already specified, this study adheres to the minimal definition of populism as “*a thin-centred ideology or discursive frame in which individuals see politics as the struggle between a reified will of the familiar people and an evil conspiring elite*” (Hawkins 2019: 60). When approaching populism as a thin-centred ideology, we mean that it exhibits “a restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts” (Mudde 2004: 544). In contrast to traditional or thick ideologies, populism is not by itself able to consciously articulate a distinct set or types of ideas (Hawkins 2019: 60) nor formulate “comprehensive answers to the political questions that modern societies generate” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 6-7). Hence, populism is need of a host ideology to make sense in the real world and often appears accompanied by nationalist or socialist discourses, which is why populism emerges in different (and sometimes contradictory) forms in several

places and times (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 6-7). Populism includes three central and constitutive concepts: *the people*, *the elite*, and *the general will* (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 9-19). These are discussed below.

### 2.1.1 The people, the elite and the general will

Populism sees politics as the struggle between *the people* and *the elite*. Whereas the people in the populist ideology are “good” and “pure”, the elite is “evil and corrupt” (Akkerman et al. 2013: 1327). As the citation at the beginning of this chapter implies, populism responds to individuals’ feeling that they are being robbed of their sovereignty (Mudde 2016: 30). The populist struggle, then, is essentially *moral* (Hakwins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 523), posing a Manichean division between the homogenous people and the self-interested elite (Mudde 2004: 543).

The first core concept of populism – *the people* – is at the heart of the populist discourse (Mudde 2017: 31-2). On the one hand, the people are defined on the basis of the modern democratic idea of the people as the ultimate source of political power. Populists often feel that the current regime does not represent the citizens’ will and betrays the democratic value of the people as the rulers. Hence, populists often claim that the power must be given back to the people. On the other hand, the people are defined on the basis of a broader class concept (based on socioeconomic status, cultural traditions and popular values), usually accompanied by the notion of the people as the nation (being defined on either ethnic or civic terms) (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 9-11). The people in populist discourse are neither real nor inclusive, but an “imagined community” (Mudde 2004: 546). The constitution of the people is not static and is defined differently depending on the context. As discussed above, populism is a thin-centred ideology that must be combined with another doctrine. Therefore, explaining who “the pure people” are, is determined by which host ideology the specific populist movement is adopting its features from (Mudde 2017: 37). As Hawkins (2017: 57) argues, the definition is not far away from Laclau’s (1977) work, in which he refers to the concept of the people as an “empty signifier”. As Laclau (1977) has argued himself, it is precisely the emptiness of “the people” that makes populism so powerful – an argument that

proponents of the ideational approach adhere to (e.g., Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 9-10).

The second core concept of populism – *the elite* – is the antagonist of the people in the populist discourse. Whereas the people are pure and homogeneous, the elite represents a specific and corrupt group (Mudde 2017: 33). The elite is defined based on its power, being constituted by individuals in leading positions within society, such as politics, economics, and the media (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 12-3). For instance, in liberal representative democracies, populists usually criticise “the political establishment”, who are accused of not defending the popular will and prioritising their own interests (Mudde 2004: 546). The divide between the people and the elite is not situational but moral, which explains why some populists do not evolve to be portrayed as the elite when they get to power (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 12).

The adhered definition of populism implies that the third core concept – *the general will* – is essential to populist politics (Mudde 2017: 33). As discussed above, populists believe that politics should be based on *la volonté générale*, enabling populist leaders to present themselves as the voice of the people. Consequently, populist movements often invoke the Rousseauian critique of representative government in which citizens are treated as passive entities. The political goal is a type of Rousseau’s republican utopia of self-government, in which the people both make and execute the laws. It is expected that populist movements call upon direct democracy and other institutional mechanisms that reinforce the direct relationship between the people and its representatives (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 16-8). In contrast to the Rousseauian critique, however, the populist notion of “the general will” is based on an idea of “common sense” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 16), which is closely linked to the homogenous interpretation of the people (Mudde 2017: 33). To put it concisely, by appealing to the general will and common sense, populists can create a common enemy, enabling a popular subject with a strong identity – that is, the people. The popular subject is opposed to and longs to challenge the status quo – in other words, the elite (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 18). In order to understand who constitutes the people and the elite, we need to dig into the host ideology of the specific populist movement (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2019: 4). Consequently, in the next section, the subtypes of populism, left-wing and right-wing populism, are examined.

### 2.1.2 The subtypes of populism; left and right

As put forward above, the thin-centred nature of populism requires a host ideology to make sense of the real world, which is why populism is chameleonic (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2019: 4) and appears in left-wing and right-wing forms.

For instance, left-wing populism might see the people as an oppressed majority by an elitist minority who controls the resources and politics of the country – all being rooted in economic inequality. The political elite is accused of only looking after the interests of the financial elite while neglecting the will of ordinary people (March 2017: 286). Right-wing populism, on the other hand, has a more cultural understanding of the world, where the people, the nation and its symbols are threatened by an alien other. The people are defined not only on moral terms but also on ethnic and cultural ones (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 14). This is what Mudde (2007: 139) denominates “*the nativist*” dimension of right-wing populism, parting from the idea that the nation should be inhabited only by the native citizens. Meanwhile, the elite is accused of defending and allowing the alien other to threaten the native people of the country (Castanho Silva et al. 2019: 365-8). Moreover, Mudde (2007: 145) includes *authoritarianism* in his definition of right-wing populism, based on these parties’ focus on “law and order”.

In sum, whereas left-wing populists typically focus their proposals on economic aspects, right-wing populists focus them on cultural matters. The former uses a discourse centred around economic redistribution, being essentially inclusionary. The latter uses anti-immigrant discourses to make the populist claims make sense in the real world, being essentially exclusionary (van Hauwaert & van Kessel 2017: 72-3).

## 2.2 The electoral success of populist parties

To explain the success and failure of populist movements, we must understand both the demand-side and supply-side of the political arena, as mentioned above. In other words, we must study both the feelings of voters and the behaviour of elites (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 98). Here the ideational approach provides us with one of its major strengths: its versatility (Mudde 2017: 39). An essential advantage is that it allows us to understand the rise (and fall) of populist ideas at different levels of analysis, and more importantly, at the individual level. For that, the ideational approach is crucial, for it treats populism both as a mass-based and elite-level phenomenon, allowing us to both study the demand-side and supply-side *and* the demand-side of populist politics (Mudde 2017: 39). In what follows, the demand-side and supply-side factors of the electoral success of populist parties are defined separately to create a more coherent and pedagogical framework, focusing on the individual level of analysis.

### 2.2.1 The activation of populist attitudes: demand-side factors

When studying demand-side aspects of the electoral success (or failure) of populist parties, we are interested in examining the demand for the populist message among the masses (Mudde 2017: 41). Since populism is often combined with a host ideology, we must separate the populist demand from the accompanying features (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 99). Populism is, as already discussed, a distinct set or type of ideas, which are latent in all individuals. For these ideas to translate into electoral support for populist parties, they must be *activated* (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2019: 60-1). Because they are not consciously articulated as traditional ideologies, they operate more like a set of attitudes or a discursive frame that require a context to make the populist ideas *applicable*. In other words, these attitudes might “be lying dormant or hidden until circumstances are suitable for their development or manifestation” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 99).

Typical causes attributed to the activation of populist attitudes are failures of democratic representation, driven by widespread and systematic corruption, steady policy failure and absence of receptiveness by governing parties (Castanho

Silva 2019: 280). Nevertheless, Hawkins et al. (2017a: 286) argue that not all policy failures and economic downturns lead to increased support for populist parties. Instead, they mean it is “widespread failures of democratic governance that can be attributed to *intentional* elite behaviour” that constitute the context in which it is most likely that populist attitudes are activated. In situations where the people feel that their sovereignty is lost or the political establishment is perceived as lacking popular representation, populist attitudes are triggered (Castanho Sivla 2019: 280). Consequently, to understand the causes of the electoral success of populism, we must consider how a specific context can both facilitate and hinder the activation of populist attitudes (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 98).

Finally, it is essential to note that the existence of populist attitudes does not automatically translate to the electoral success of a populist candidate or political party. First, there must be a supply of political parties that convince the citizens that hold populist attitudes, which is discussed in the following section. Second, the issues connected to populist attitudes must reach a high level of importance for the citizens – that is, the problems must be personally and situationally relevant. Third, even if an issue is considered necessary, its focus can fade among the citizenry, the media, and politics if another problem is considered *more* critical (Andreradis et al 2019: 239).

### 2.2.2 Supply-side factors

The supply-side factors of the electoral success and failure of populist parties are divided into internal and external factors. The former is concerned with the internal organizational capacities of the specific populist party (Mudde 2007: 237). Logically, for a demand for populist parties to be fulfilled, there must be a supply of populist parties that are ready to deliver the populist message (Hawkins et al., 2017b: 277). Meanwhile, the latter is concerned with political opportunity structures. Populist political parties compete in the political arena the same way as other actors do. For a new political movement to gain electoral success, there must be a gap in the political market for it to emerge. Hence, the opportunities and constraints on electoral competition must be considered (Hawkins et al., 2017b:

278). In this study, we will focus on the external supply-side factors of the success of populist movements (Mudde 2007: 236), aiming to explore those factors that are not inherent to the populist party itself.

Firstly, populist political actors find favourable conditions for their emergence when the electorate perceives mainstream political parties as unresponsive to citizen demands (van Kessel 2013: 179). This opportunity is further intensified when mainstream political parties converge and are essentially similar in their political agenda and programmatic platforms (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 105). The vacuum created from this convergence favours the emergence of new agents and their opportunity to claim that established political parties “are all the same”.

Moreover, since populist attitudes might be widespread among the citizenry, the emergent populist party must focus on issues that established parties are not addressing. That is, political actors that aspire to gain electoral success in a specific political arena must try to politicize the problems that are not at the present being adequately addressed by existent political parties. Successful populists can combine the populist message with other social grievances that are not populist *per se* (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 105). The populist electorate is consequently not expected to vote for a populist party simply because of a feeling of dissatisfaction with the political establishment. Instead, ideational scholars assume that individuals who vote for a specific populist because of their populist attitudes *in combination with* ideological convictions and policy preferences (van Kessel 2013: 179).

Yet, established parties might be able to respond to the ideological convergence. When they can politicize issues addressed by the electorate, they might be able to hamper the conditions that might favour a populist actor’s emergence (van Kessel 2013: 179). That is, if established parties can successfully address critical issues for the electorate, they might close the space for new challengers to emerge. Then, as Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017: 105) put it, “both the actions *and* inactions of mainstream political parties play a major role in the success and failure of populist forces”.

Finally, the opportunities and constraints on electoral competition are widely determined by the context for populist mobilization. If corruption and policy failures are widespread, the conditions that dampened the electoral success might

suddenly vanish. The role of competing parties and other political opportunity structures is essential but insufficient (Hawkins et al. 2017b: 278), which is why the causes of the electoral success of a specific populist party are better understood when the demand-side and the supply-side are considered *together*.

## 3 Methodology

In this chapter the methodological approach of this thesis is presented. As already put forth, the study will approach the research question – *which combination of conditions makes the electoral success of populist parties possible?* – through a case study of Spain, using a mixed method based on process tracing. The empirical scope is consisted of quantitative data from opinion surveys from Centre for Sociological Research (CIS). The study limits itself to the time frame between 2000 and 2019.

### 3.1 Research Design

This study will approach the research questions through a case study of the electoral success and failure of populist parties in Spain. Case studies are “uniquely predisposed to taking into account a broad and diverse set of explanatory factors” and consider multiple dimensions (Blatter & Haverland 2012: 5), which is at the core of the ideational approach and the ambition to search for populist attitudes among the Spanish citizenry. Moreover, to understand *attitudes*, it is primordial that we dig into the case’s nuances, which allows us to test the core assumptions of the ideational thoroughly. As Blatter and Haverland (2012: 20) put it, “probably the most important feature of case studies is the fact that limiting the research to one or a few cases allows the researcher to invest time and intellectual energy in reflecting on the relationship between empirical observations and the abstract concepts that form the core elements of hypotheses, theories, and mechanism-based explanations.”

The case study employs a mixed method based on process tracing and quantitative data. Typically, process tracing uses qualitative data to understand the mechanisms between a cause and its effect (Blatter & Haverland 2012: 26). However, in this study, quantitative data is collected to analyse the causal

mechanism. Through this combination, the study hopes to be able to explore what conditions the electoral success (or failure) of populist attitudes in a qualitative and in-depth manner.

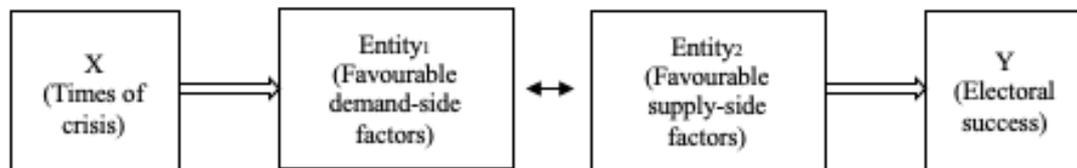
Beach and Brun Pedersen (2013: 13) differentiate three process-tracing methods: theory-driven, theory-building and explaining-outcome process-tracing. Whereas the latter is case-centric, the first two are theory-centric. The three variants vary in their understanding of the generality of causal mechanisms. This study aims to understand a specific outcome: the emergence of a left-wing populist party in the aftermath of the Great Recession and the later emergence of a right-wing populist party. The study asks itself *how these specific outcomes were possible*, aiming to build an explanatory framework to understand the electoral success of populist parties. The study is primarily theory-driven. However, it does not neglect context-specific explanations. In contrast, these are considered primordial to understand the specific outcome in the case to be studied.

Because the social world is understood as complex and multifaceted, the study does not aim to generalize its results. Instead, it focuses on making inferences about the presence (or absence) of a specific mechanism (ibid.: 14) – that is, the demand-side and supply-side factors that, together, create a fertile breeding ground for a populist party to emerge. It is important to mention that this study does not claim to determine the necessity of the causal mechanism to be studied (Beach & Bun Pedersen 2013: 16). Instead, we are interested in whether the theorized causal mechanism is present in the case of Spain. However, building on the ideational approach, the results will help us understand the nature of populist attitudes and the circumstances under which left-wing and right-wing populism emerge.

Moreover, based on the definition of theory-driven process tracing carried out by Beach and Brun Pedersen (2013: 14) mentioned above, the independent and the dependent variables should be known. In the case to be studied, we can logically formulate both X and Y at the theoretical level. In line with theory-testing process-tracing, the formulation of the plausible causal mechanism starts with a deductive exercise (ibid.: 56). Following the ideational approach, a moment of crisis might activate populist attitudes, which under favourable demand and supply circumstances will lead to the electoral success of a populist party. The theorized causal mechanism is illustrated in figure 3.1.

The basic framework of the theory-building process-tracing case study is constructed in three steps. In the first step we have defined the key theoretical concepts and the theorized causal mechanism. This is followed by a context-specific conceptualization where we translate the theoretical expectations into case-specific predictions, which is conducted in chapter 4. Finally, we collect evidence in order to observe if the theorized causal mechanism is present in the case of Spain (Beach & Brun Pedersen 2013: 14-15), focusing on searching for the demand-side and supply-side factors that, according to the ideational approach, condition the electoral success of populist parties.

Figure 3.1 Conceptualization of the theoretical causal mechanism



Notes: Own elaboration based on Beach & Brun Pedersen (2013: fig. 2.2, p. 15)

## 3.2 Reflections on the research design

Typically, case studies based on process tracing use qualitative data to trace the mechanism between a cause and its effect, as mentioned in the section above. This study relies on opinion survey data – in other words, quantitative data. This decision has been made on three grounds. First, quantitative data allows the researcher to search for populist attitudes among a vast number of individuals and over time, which is considered primordial to properly answer the research question.

Second, process tracing is considered to be an important supplement to the ideational approach. The theoretical framework used in this study treats demand-side and supply-side factors as the mechanism between the activation of populist attitudes (X) and the electoral success of populist parties (Y). Therefore, the basic premises of process tracing are considered helpful to test the theoretical assumptions in the case of Spain. Process tracing allows the researcher to be attentive to the specific case to be studied through context-specific observations (Beach & Brun Pedersen 2013: 46). Thus, it will enable us to take many diverse

observations into account (Blatter & Haverland 2012: 20) to search for trends or mechanisms to understand the varieties of populist support in Spain. Furthermore, an analysis based on process tracing allows us to illustrate the temporal sequence of the social process to be studied (Blatter & Haverland 2012: 30).

Third, the qualitative understanding of populist attitudes and their activation through the ideational approach is scarce, as specified in the introductory chapter. Often the research on populism through the ideational approach, aiming to generalize its conclusions, fails to provide context-specific answers. Hence, this study seeks to put the quantitative data in its context, conducting a constant dialogue between theory, contextual factors, and empirical results.

### 3.3 Data

The data this study will analyse is based on opinion surveys carried out by *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* [CIS] (Centre for Sociological Research). The purpose of the CIS is the scientific study of Spanish society, generally through the preparation of periodic surveys on the Centre's own initiative or at the request of other organizations (CIS 2020). The CIS carries out its opinion surveys regularly and several times every year, repeating its survey questions. This allows us to follow the development of different attitudes among the Spanish people over time. This will provide helpful insights to the study of populism, for previous studies often restrict the time of study to a single year. The totality of the data from the CIS represents the Spanish population over the age of 18, with samples from all of Spain's autonomous regions. The samples consist of around 2 500 respondents on each occasion, except for certain surveys where the sample increases to approximately 6000 respondents. Thus, the data is considered to constitute an adequate representation of the Spanish population.

Most of the studies that aim to examine populist attitudes at the microlevel use original data collected through opinion surveys designed implicitly for the purpose of the study (e.g., Akkerman et al. 2014). This is not the case in the present study, for secondary sources constitute the material to be studied. The opinion surveys used in this study are not designed to measure populism actively. However,

it is believed that the purpose of the study will be pursued through a careful conceptualization of the concepts to be studied.

## 3.4 Operationalisation

In what follows, the operationalisation of this study is specified, focusing on the measurement of (I) populist attitudes (demand-side factors) and (II) the conditions of the political market (supply-side factors).

### 3.4.1 Demand

At the centre of the theoretical assumptions of the ideational approach to populism is that populist attitudes are latent and must be *activated* for a populist political actor to gain electoral success (Hawkins 2019: 60—1). These attitudes are activated in times of crisis. Subsequently, the analysis of individuals' perception of a supposed crisis is of interest to understand the electoral success and failure of populist actors. In chapter 4, three crises are identified in the analysed period: (I) the financial crisis, (II) the crisis of representation and (III) the territorial crisis. Hence, to measure the Spanish people's levels of concern towards these crises, categorisation of data provided by the recurrent survey question *what is, in your opinion, the principal problem in Spain?* (CIS) is carried out. For the financial crisis, the indicators "unemployment" and "economic problems" are utilised. For the crisis of representation, we rely on "corruption and fraud", "the government and particular politicians and parties", as well as "the political class, the political parties". Lastly, to measure the levels of concern towards the territorial crisis, the indicator "the independence of Catalonia" is included.

For the operationalisation of populist attitudes, the well-applied model developed by Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove (2014) is followed. The model ideally allows us to capture all the dimensions of populism: *people-centrism*, *anti-elitism*, and *the general will* (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 9-19). Because of the data available, we will not capture all the dimensions that should be incorporated to

measure populist attitudes adequately. Most of the questions included in the opinion surveys carried out by the CIS can indicate the levels of *anti-elitism* among the Spanish citizens over several years, which allows us to understand the levels of change in this dimension over time. However, we cannot accurately measure *people-centrism* nor the appeal to *the general will*, which is unfortunate since these elements theoretically distinguish populism from pure political discontent (Spruyt et al. 2016: 3369). Because of the study's explanatory and descriptive nature, this is not considered a problem and will be taken into consideration when carrying out the analysis. Instead, to measure *people-centrism*, indicators that – in some way – can demonstrate the levels of agreement with statements of whether the people should be *more* involved in politics will be used. For the *general will*, no indicators in the available data allow us to accurately measure its levels in Spain. Consequently, the main focus on analysing the demand-side relies on measuring the levels of anti-elitist feelings. Using indicators that show confidence levels towards politicians and political parties and individuals' sentiments towards the political system, we will hopefully be able to determine the demand for upcoming political parties in the Spanish society.

Furthermore, to determine the levels of the subtypes of populism, the left- and right-wing dimensions must be operationalised. In doing so, this study relies on data showing respondents' assessment of the principal problem in Spain, which is categorised into (I) socioeconomic indicators (left-wing) and (II) sociocultural indicators (right-wing).

### 3.4.2 Supply

Normally, the supply-side factors for the electoral success of populist parties are studied, focusing on the actual openness of the political landscape at the macrolevel. Often, scholars focus on the ideological positioning of mainstream parties vis-à-vis populist ones, their issue salience and their party manifestos (see Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2019: 15-17 ). In this study, the focus centres around the individual level. Hence, how people *perceive* the political landscape will be measured. For that, we will use indicators that help us understand how the people perceive the levels of convergence between the mainstream parties and the levels of loyalty

towards *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE) and *Partido Popular* (PP). Moreover, the degree of acceptance towards a party of xenophobic or racist ideology will be measured to test the level of *stigma* towards this kind of party family.

**Table I.** Items measuring populist attitudes, demand-side and supply-side factors

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**Activation: the perception of crisis**

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*The financial crisis:*

Assessment of the principal problem in Spain: ‘unemployment’, ‘economic problems’

*The crisis of representation:*

Assessment of the principal problem in Spain: ‘corruption and fraud’, ‘the political class and political problems’, ‘the government and particular politicians and parties’

*The territorial crisis:*

Assessment of the principal problem in Spain: ‘the independence of Catalonia’

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**Demand-side factors**

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*Populism:*

Degree of agreement with the phrase: ‘Politicians do not care much about what people like me think.’

Degree of agreement with the phrase: ‘Whoever is in power always looks for his/her own interests.’

Degree of agreement with the phrase: ‘So many people vote that my vote does not have any influence in the results’

Degree of agreement with the phrase: ‘Voting contributes to sustaining democracy’

Evaluation of the general political situation in Spain

*Varieties of populism (left-right):*

*(Socioeconomic indicators)* Assessment of the principal problem in Spain: ‘housing’, ‘pensions’, ‘healthcare’, ‘problems related to the quality of employment’, ‘problems of a social nature’, ‘education’

*(Sociocultural indicators)* Assessment of the principal problem in Spain: ‘immigration’, ‘citizen insecurity’

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**Supply-side factors**

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Feeling of belonging to a party or coalition.

The assessed ideological position of the main established parties: PSOE and PP.

Percentage that would most certainly always vote for PSOE and PP.

Degree of acceptance for a potential right-wing populist party

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## 3.5 Limitations

To deepen our understanding of the support for populist parties in Spain, we should study the demand-side and supply-side factors at different of analysis. However, this study limits itself to the individual level of analysis, focusing on individuals' perception of the political reality.

As already specified the measurement of demand- and supply-side factors is limited because of the data available. Additionally, the supply-side factors are according to the ideational approach divided into internal and external dimensions, as put forth in the theoretical framework. This study focuses on the external dimensions, hence measuring factors that are not inherent to a specific party.

To accurately understand the causal mechanisms and the impact of the identified crises, the measurement starts in the year of 2000 and stretches to year 2019. In that way, we can understand the levels of populism among the Spanish people before and after the crises. Nevertheless, all the indicators used to measure the demand-side and supply-side factors are not available for all the years studied.

## 4 Case-specific predictions

Following the theoretical framework, the electoral success of populist parties in Spain is expected to have been possible due to the activation and existence of populist attitudes (demand) and favourable situational contexts (supply). However, this does not alone provide plausible explanations for the electoral success of Podemos in the general elections of 2015, the electoral failure of Vox the same year, nor the later success of Vox in the general elections of 2019. In other words, to formulate case-specific predictions of the causes of the electoral success of Podemos and Vox, we must dig into contextual factors, which is conducted below. Three major crises are identified: (I) the financial crisis, (II) the crisis of representation, and (III) the territorial crisis. The chapter proceeds as follows: first, the major crises in Spain during the studied period are identified. Second, plausible hypotheses of the causes of the electoral success and failure of Podemos and Vox are constructed.

### 4.1 Spain in crisis

#### 4.1.1 The financial crisis

After years of economic growth, the Spanish housing bubble collapsed, rendering severe consequences for the Spanish society. The financial crisis of 2008 culminated in a long and deep economic recession in Spain. High levels of unemployment, the fall in the gross domestic product (GDP) and the state debt placed Spain as one of the countries in Europe that were most severely affected by the economic crisis (Orriols & Cordero 2016: 472).

Due to increased pressure from the European Union, in 2011, large austerity measures were implemented by the socialist Government of José Luis Rodríguez

Zapatero (Gómez-Reino & Iván Llamazares 2019: 296). In turn, this fuelled public protests and strikes (Orriols & Cordero 2016: 473). More importantly, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May 2011, driven by the economic and political situation, many protests were held in several Spanish cities against austerity, corruption, and banks' bailout (Orriols & Cordero 2016: 473). In several Spanish towns, hundreds of thousands gathered under the motto "they do not represent us", starting the so called "15-M movement", also named the *Indignados*. After the manifestations, several participants set up camp in squares in Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia, among other cities, several of them lasting for over a month (Urquizo 2016: 19-20).

In the general elections of November 2011, the Popular Party gained an absolute majority of the seats in Parliament. Led by prime minister Mariano Rajoy, the conservative government continued the austerity measures (Gómez-Reino & Iván Llamazares 2019: 297) including salary cuts for public sector employees, tax increases and cuts in welfare services such as education and health (Orriols & Cordero 2016: 473). In February 2012, a new labour reform was implemented by the government, which, prominently, increased the autonomy of employers (BOE 2012; RTVE 2020). The reform created strong reactions among majority trade unions, who organized protests in 57 cities and subsequently called for a general strike of workers in the entire national territory (Pérez, 2012).

In May 2012, the Bankia bank, formed from the merging of seven banks, was nationalized by the government. In September the same year, Bankia was bailed out (Gordon 2012). Banks were granted a total of €141 billion in rescue loans in 2012 (Chislett 2016: 22).

In this social and economic context, the "15-M movement" transformed into "citizen tides" (in Spanish called "*las mareas ciudadanas*"). In contrast to the protests of 2011, this time, different platforms were developed in defence of specific public services and collectives, such as "*la marea blanca*" (for public healthcare), "*la marea verde*" (for public education) and "*la marea morada*" (for women rights). Between 2011 and 2012, the number of demonstrations increased by 140 per cent. In sum, the different citizen tides provoked levels of mobilization that until then were unknown in Spanish modern society (Urguizu 2016: 26).

Finally, in late 2013, the GDP started to show a positive trend. Hence, the Spanish recession had reached an end, although not improving the overall economic

situation, and the unemployment rates remaining high (Orriols & Cordero 2016: 474).

#### 4.1.2 The crisis of representation

During the economic crisis, systematic corruption started to get exposed within different political parties and institutions. The revelations mainly implied the Partido Popular – the most prominent being the Gürtel case, the Bárcenas papers and 'the black credit cards' of the saving bank Bankia (before Caja Madrid) (Orriols & Cordero 2016: 475). First, already in 2009, an investigation on the businessman Francisco Correa was initiated. Correa had allegedly bribed several politicians within the PP, mainly in Madrid and Valencia, with money or gifts in exchange for public contracts. The case caused the resignation of several local and regional political leaders (Orriols & Cordero 2016: 474).

On January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013, the daily newspaper *El Mundo* (2013) revealed that the former treasurer of Partido Popular, Luis Bárcenas, had paid illicit bonuses to party members. January 31<sup>st</sup>, the same year, the newspaper *El País* (2013) revealed the so-called “papers of Bárcenas” disclosing a parallel bookkeeping system to receive secret party donations between 1990 and 2009. Prominent members of the party were allegedly implicated. (Orriols & Cordero 2016: 474).

In October 2014, an investigation into several executives of Caja Madrid (later Bankia) was opened by the anti-corruption prosecutor's office. The savings bank – Madrid's regional government-owned bank – was accused of illegally spending €15,5 million through the provision of so called “black credit cards” to 86 members of the Board of Directors. Most of the members were nominated by political parties, employers' associations, and trade unions (Pérez 2014). The scandal involved the former minister of economy and former director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Rodrigo Rato (Agueda 2014).

Furthermore, other corruption scandals involving the PP were exposed during this time. For instance, the Noós Institute affairs involved several regional PP politicians and members of the royal family. Finally, the investigation led to the imprisonment of Princess Cristina's husband, Iñaki Urdangarín (Orriols & Cordero 2016: 475).

In 2018 the National Court found the PP – the whole party – guilty of operating hidden accounts. The same verdict found 29 people linked to the party guilty of corruption (Martialay 2020). The sentences led Pedro Sanchez, leader of the PSOE, to file a motion of no confidence towards prime minister Mariano Rajoy (Nieto 2018). On June 1st 2018, the Spanish parliament voted in favour of the motion and Pedro Sanchez was subsequently sworn in as prime minister (Alberola 2018).

#### 4.1.3 The territorial crisis

The recent history of Spain has been characterized by the Catalan independence movement, mainly marked by the unconstitutional referendum held in October 2017 (Frost 2017). The events that led to the referendum are presented below.

In the regional elections of 2012 and 2015, support for the traditional parties in Catalonia decreased. Instead, a growing number of voters opted for the more radical pro-independence parties. During this period, several of the pro-independence parties announced that they would call the Catalan people to a referendum on the independence issue if they would govern after the regional elections of 2015, thus framing the elections as a vote for, or against, independence (Orriols & Cordero 2016: 359). The secessionist parties gathered an absolute majority of the seats in the Catalan parliament and claimed that the Catalan people had voted for independence. Subsequently, the Government of Catalonia declared that the ballot would be scheduled for October 2017.

In September 2017, the autonomous Parliament passed the "Law on the Referendum on Self-determination of Catalonia". This was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of Spain (Frost 2017). Nevertheless, the referendum was held as planned. With a voting turnout of 42 per cent, 92 per cent voted *for* Catalan independence. However, the legality of the referendum has been widely questioned. Moreover, the referendum day was marked by high levels of disturbance, with the National Police impeding people to enter the polling stations (Dewan, Cotovio & Clarke 2017).

The situation in Catalonia fuelled protests, both in favour and against independence (Frost 2017). For instance, on October 7<sup>th</sup> of 2017, thousands of people gathered (150.000 according to the organizers and 50.000 according to the Government Delegation) in the Colón Square in Madrid in favour of the unity of Spain (Serrato 2017). The president of Vox, Santiago Abascal, participated in the act. He said:

*We have seen with outrage the impunity with which the nationalists have broken Spain. The good Catalans have been abandoned. Spain is not voted on, nor discussed, nor sold<sup>1</sup> (Ibid.).*

At the moment of the referendum, the PP was in office. Their primary strategy to address the situation was accusing the secessionist leaders of unconstitutional behaviour (Frost 2017). Following the motion of no confidence of 2018 and the change in office, Pedro Sánchez reinstated dialogue with the representatives of the Catalan government (Gualtieri & Orihuela 2021).

Vox criticised the dialogues heavily. In a press release in December 2018, they communicated that they “denounce that the Government is negotiating with the coup plotters” (Vox 2018). In the same release, they demanded “the immediate application of Article 155 and if, necessary, of 116” (Vox 2018). The article first giving the central government the mandate to adopt the necessary methods to force a regional government to comply with the obligation imposed in the Constitution (art. 155 CE); the second, enabling a state of alarm (art. 116 CE).

The dialogues between the socialist government and the Catalan independence parties were, however, interrupted. Therefore, the Catalan secessionist parties represented in the national parliament voted against the government’s budget in 2019, which meant that the budget proposal did not pass (Díez & Casqueiro 2019). Subsequently, Pedro Sánchez called for a snap election, which was held in April 2019, the first general election in which Vox entered parliament.

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s own translation.

## 4.2 Hypothesizing the causal mechanism

In the section above, the recent history of Spain has been described, focusing on the period between 2007 and 2019. This has been done to identify significant crises and possible *contexts* for the activation of populist attitudes. Accordingly, three major crises are identified: (I) the financial crisis, (II) the crisis of representation, and (III) the territorial crisis. Applying the theoretical expectations to the case-specific context, a plausible explanation to be tested in this study is constructed in what follows.

Following the theoretical framework, economic downturns and revelations of systematic corruption might constitute a fertile breeding ground for the activation of populist attitudes. As already noted, this is not always the case (Hawkins et al. (2017b: 286). Nevertheless, since populist parties indeed have gained electoral success in Spain, it is probable that on the one hand, the financial crisis, and on the other hand, the corruption scandals, did constitute crises big enough to fuel populist attitudes, hence favouring the electoral success of Podemos. Subsequently, these contexts of crisis are not by themselves sufficient for a party to gain electoral victory. Theoretically, we must therefore assume that we will find favourable demand-side *and* supply-side factors within this context.

In contrast, the absence of a successful right-wing populist party until 2018-2019 is expected to have been caused by either unfavourable demand-side or supply-side factors – or a combination of both. Following the same logic, it is likely that in connection with the electoral success of Vox in the general elections of 2019, we will find both favourable demand-side *and* supply-side factors. Consequently, this leads us to the first hypothesis to be tested in this study:

*H1 There must be both a demand and a supply for populist actors for a populist party to gain electoral success.*

Nevertheless, this hypothesis does not alone let us explore explanations for the varieties of populist responses in Spain. For that, we must dig into the left-right dimension of populism. Following the theoretical framework, left-wing populist voters are expected to be concerned with socioeconomic issues. If this is to be accurate, it is likely that left-wing populist attitudes and the demand for left-wing politics were raised during the economic crisis and before the electoral success of Podemos. On the other hand, before the electoral breakthrough of Vox, we expect a rise in sociocultural concerns (van Hauwaert & van Kessel 2017: 72-3). These expectations are tested through the following hypotheses:

*H2 Concerns about socioeconomic issues favoured the rise of Podemos.*

*H3 Concerns about sociocultural issues favoured the rise of Vox.*

Finally, a third crisis is identified: the territorial crisis. The independence referendum of 2017 did, as described above, fuel protests in the country, both in favour and against the secessionist movement. Vox did position themselves as the only party wanting to – at any cost – defend the territorial unity of Spain (Vox 2018). Because of the party's emphasis on the territorial question, we expect that this crisis was necessary – but not alone sufficient – for the electoral success of Vox. Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

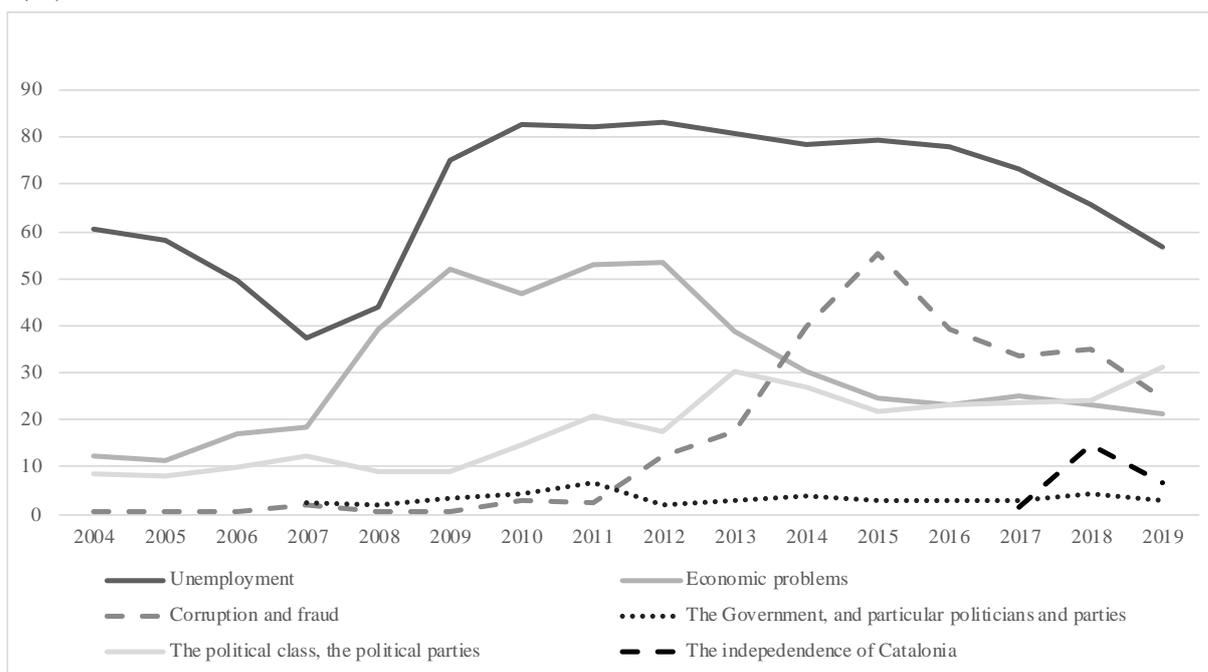
*H4 Concerns about the territorial crisis favoured the rise of Vox.*

## 5 Demand and supply in Spain

Below, the empirical results of this study are presented, focusing on the demand-side and supply-side factors that might condition the electoral success of populist parties in Spain.

### 5.1 Demand

**Figure 5.1.1.** Assessment of the principal problem in Spain: perception of crisis (%).



Source: Serie: Percepción de los principales problemas de España, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS), 2004-2019

A majority of the respondents believed that *unemployment* was the principal problem in Spain for all the years shown in figure 5.1.1, reaching its highest value in 2012 with 83,2 per cent. From 2004 to 2007 a decrease is shown (from 60,4 to

37,5 per cent). From 2007 to 2009, the percentage increases by 37,8 points. After that, the number of respondents does not fall below 70 per cent until 2018.

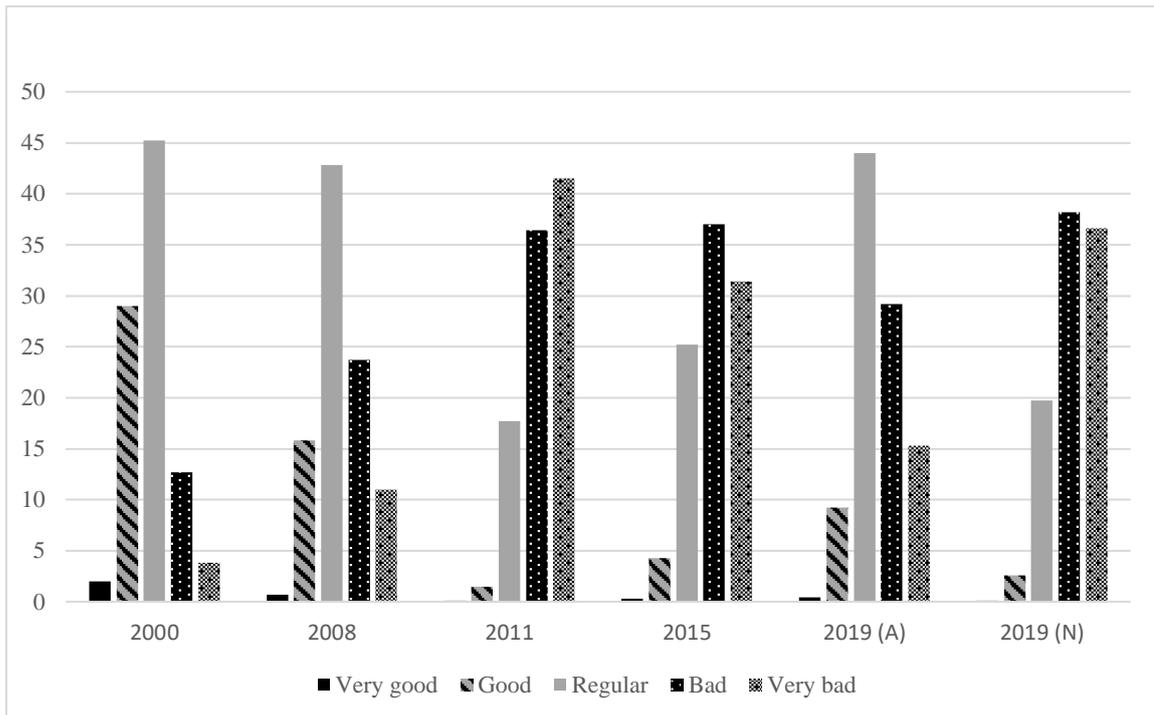
The number of respondents who believe that *economic problems* are the principal problem increased moderately between 2004 and 2007. Between 2007 and 2009, a significant increase is shown (from 18,3 to 51,9 per cent). However, from 2012 – when the indicator reaches its highest value (53,6 per cent) – the percentage decreases.

*Corruption and fraud* were the principal problem for less than 3 per cent of the respondents until 2012, where it reached 12,3 per cent. A significant increase is shown after that, reaching its highest value in 2015 with 55,5 per cent. A decrease is shown after 2015.

The number of respondents who believe that *the government, particular politicians, and parties* are the principal problems are relatively low for all the years. The indicator reaches its highest value in 2011, when 6,7 per cent of the respondents considered it to be the main problem. In contrast, those who state that *the political class and the political parties* are the prominent problem increased from 8,4 in 2004 to 20,6 in 2011. An increase is shown between 2011 and 2013 when 30,2 per cent of the responders considered it to be the principal problem. A decrease is shown until 2018 (24,3 per cent). However, the number grows to 31,1 per cent in 2019.

Additionally, *the independence of Catalonia* increased from 1,4 per cent in 2017 to 14,9 per cent in 2018. In 2019, 6,8 per cent believed that the independence was the main problem. This indicator is not available prior to 2017.

**Figure 5.1.2.** Assessment of the general political situation in Spain (%).



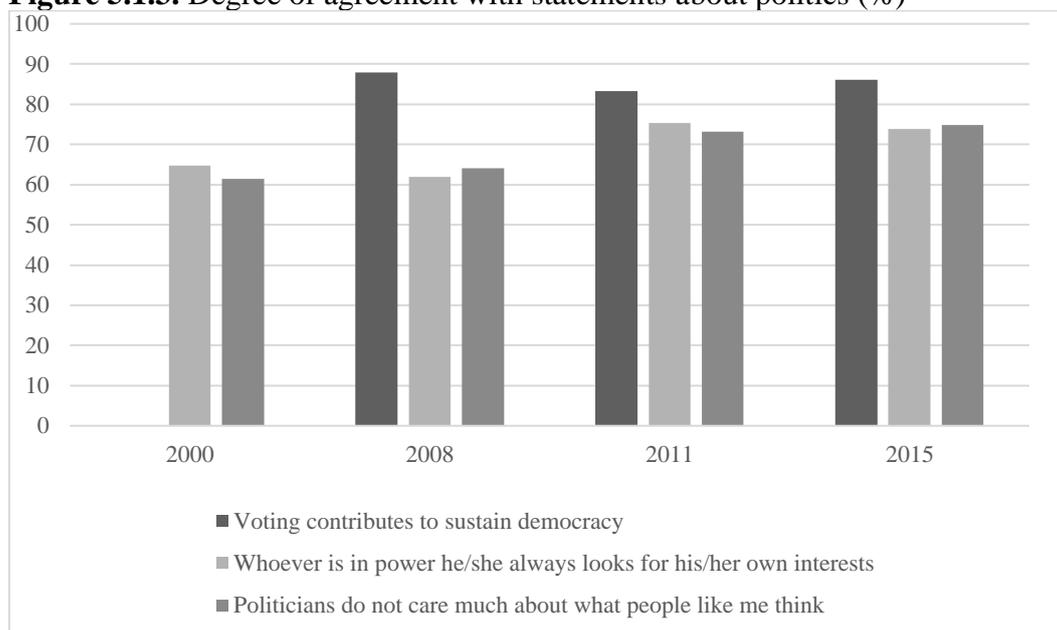
Note: In the elaboration, the answers 'I don't know' and 'does not answer' are excluded.

Source: Preelectoral y postelectoral, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS), 2000, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2019

As shown in figure 5.1.2, the number of respondents who responded that the political situation is *very good* is almost non-existent for all the indicated years, with its highest value in 2000 where 2 per cent considered the political situation to be *very good*. Those who interpreted the political situation as *good* decreased from 29 per cent in 2000 to 2,6 per cent in November 2019. From 2000 to 2008 those who believed that the situation is *good* decreased by 13,2 points. The indicator reaches its lowest value in 2011 when only 1,5 per cent of the respondents indicated that they considered the political situation to be good, increasing to 4,5 per cent and 9,2 per cent in 2015 and April of 2019, respectively.

Those who believe that the situation is *bad* increase until 2015 (from 12,7 per cent in 2000 to 37 per cent in 2015). In April 2019, the value decreased to 29,2 per cent. However, it grew to its highest number in November 2019, with 38,2 per cent of the respondents. Moreover, the number of respondents who answered that the situation is *very bad* increased from 2000 to 2011 (3,8 per cent and 41,5 per cent, respectively). After a significant decrease in April 2015 (to 15,3 per cent), the value increased again to 36,6 per cent in November 2019.

**Figure 5.1.3.** Degree of agreement with statements about politics (%)



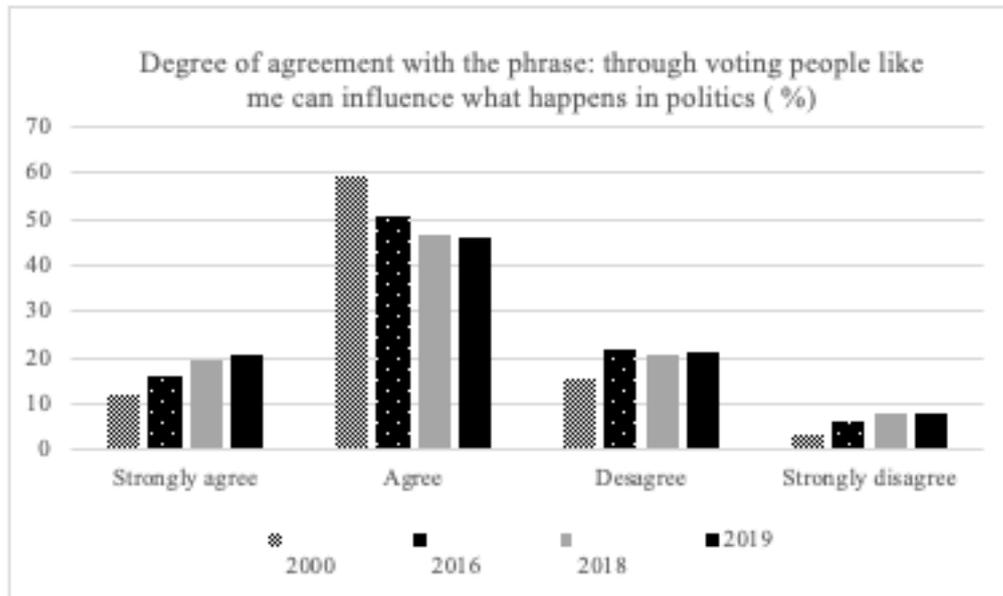
Note: In the elaboration, only the answers 'agree' and 'strongly agree' are included.

Source: Preelectoral y postelectoral, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS), 2000, 2008, 2011, 2015

For all the years studied – as shown in figure 5.1.3 – a majority of the respondents *agree* or *strongly agree* with the statement *voting contributes to sustain democracy*. A moderate decrease was shown in 2011, where those who *agree* or *strongly agree* decreased by 4,5 points (from 87,9 in 2008 to 83,3 in 2011). Nevertheless, the number increased to 86,1 per cent in 2015.

An increase is shown in the percentage of respondents who state that they *agree* and *strongly agree* with the statement *whoever is in power he/she always looks out for his/her own interests*' (from 64,8 in 2000 to 73,9 in 2015). A similar trend is shown for the statement *politicians do not care much about what people like me think* (from 61,5 in 2000 to 74,9 in 2015). For both statements, there is a moderate increase from 2000 to 2008. That is, the main increase is indicated between 2008 and 2011.

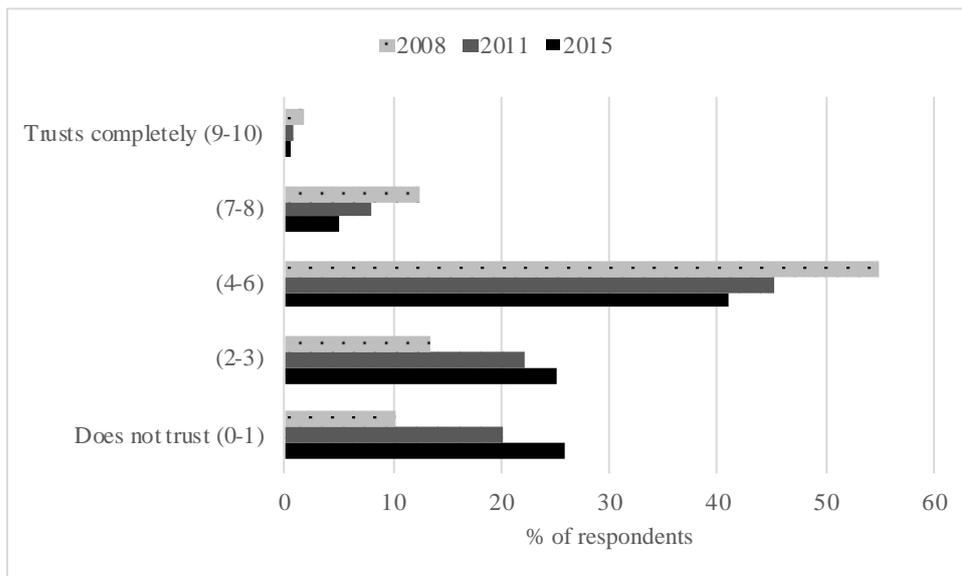
**Figure 5.1.4.** Degree of agreement with statements about politics (%)



Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS), 2000, 2016, 2018, 2019

The number of respondents who stated that they *strongly agree* with the statement *through voting people like me can influence what happens in politics* increased from 2000 to 2019 (from 12,2 to 20,6 per cent), as presented in figure 5.1.4. In contrast, those who *agree* decrease in the same period (from 59,4 to 45,9 per cent). Those who stated that they *disagree* increased between 2000 to 2016 (from 15,3 to 22,1 per cent). For the latter years, the number of respondents who stated that they disagree remain stable. The same trend is shown for those who stated that they *strongly disagree* with the statement. An increase is shown between 2000 and 2016. For the remaining years, the number is stable.

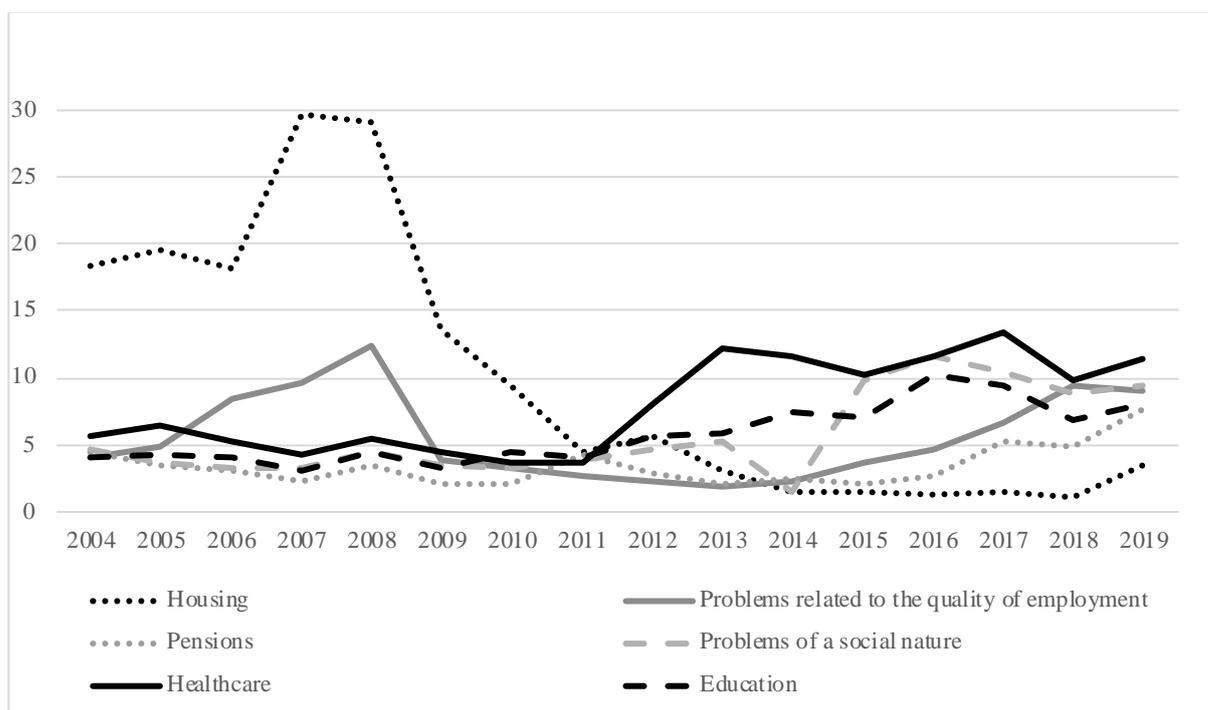
**Figure 5.1.5.** Scale of confidence (0-10) in political parties (%).



Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS), 2008, 2011, 2015

The general confidence in political parties decreased from 2008 to 2015, which is shown in figure 5.1.5. The respondents who stated *does not trust* increased from 10,3 in 2008 to 20,1 in 2011 and 25,9 per cent in 2015. The number of respondents who stated *trusts completely* are relatively low for all the years studied. However, a decrease is shown. For the middle-ground – that is, those who place themselves in the middle of the scale (4-6) – a decrease was shown from 55 in 2008 to 41,1 per cent in 2015.

**Figure 5.1.6.** Assessment of the principal problem in Spain: socioeconomic indicators (%)



Source: Serie: Percepción de los principales problemas de España, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS), 2004-2019

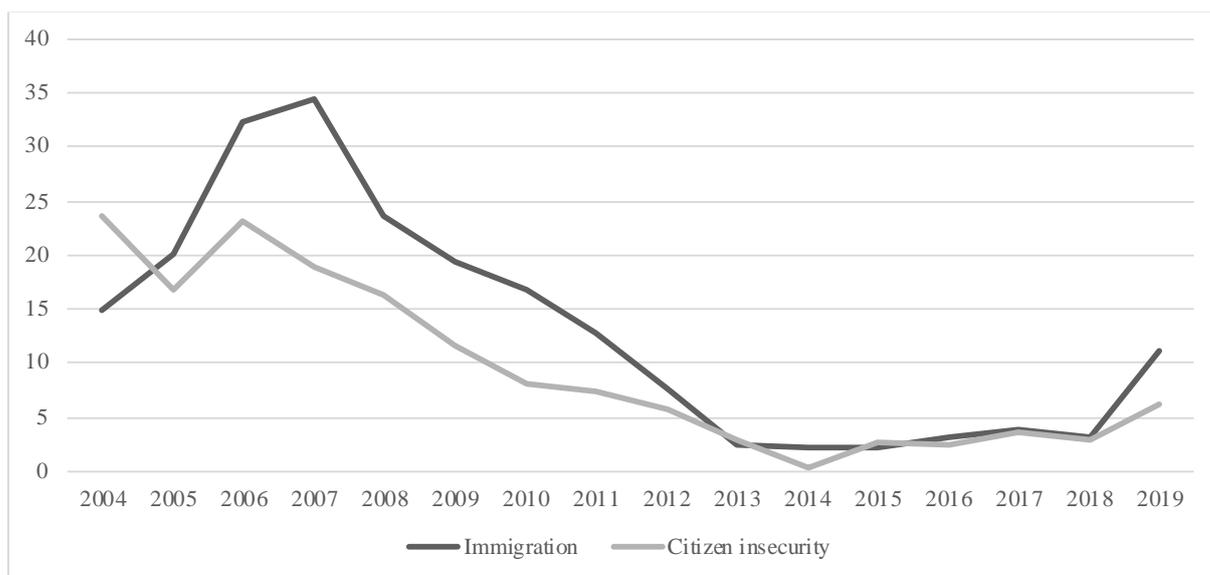
The number of respondents who believed that *housing* is the principal problem increased between 2004 and 2007 (from 18,3 to 29,7 per cent); however, the percentage decreased after 2008. In 2011, only 4,4 per cent consider it to be the main problem. For *problems related to the quality of employment* an increase is shown between 2004 and 2008, where it reaches 12,3 per cent. A significant decrease is shown after that, remaining under 5 per cent until 2018.

Until 2017, those who believed that *pensions* are the principal problem remain under 5 per cent. The problem reaches its highest value in 2019 (7,6 per cent). For the indicator *problems of social nature* a relevant increase is not shown until 2015, growing with 8,4 points from the year before. The problem reaches its highest value in 2016, when 11,7 per cent of respondents considered it to be the main problem.

The indicator *healthcare* is not considered to be the main problem by more than 8,1 per cent of the respondents until 2012. In 2013 the number grew to 12,1 per cent. After reaching its highest value in 2017 (13,3), the percentage decreased to 9,9 per cent in 2018.

Those who believe that *education* is the principal problem remain around 4 per cent until 2012, where a moderate increase is shown (5,6 per cent). It increases to 10,2 per cent in 2016, reaching its highest value.

**Figure 5.1.7.** Assessment of the principal problem in Spain: sociocultural indicators. (%)

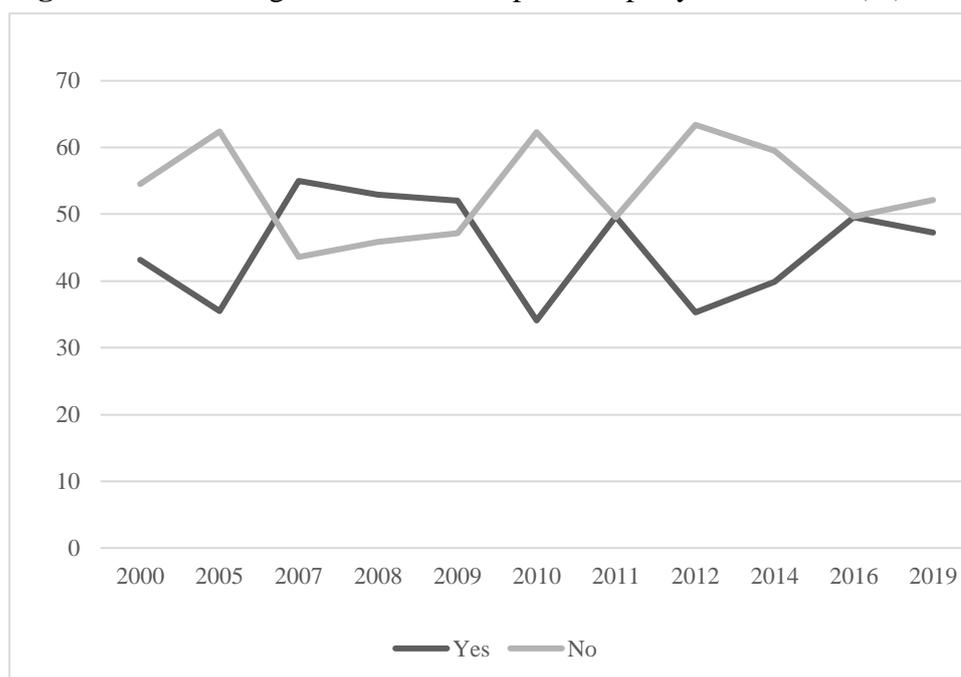


Source: Serie: Percepción del principal problema de España, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS), 2004-2019

Those who believe that *immigration* is the principal problem in Spain reach their highest value in 2007 (34,5 per cent). In 2013, only 2,4 per cent considered it to be the main problem in the country. The percentage remains stable until 2019, when it increases to 11,1 per cent. The same trend is shown for *citizen insecurity*, decreasing significantly until 2014. Later, it increases moderately, reaching 6,2 per cent in 2019.

## 5.2 Supply

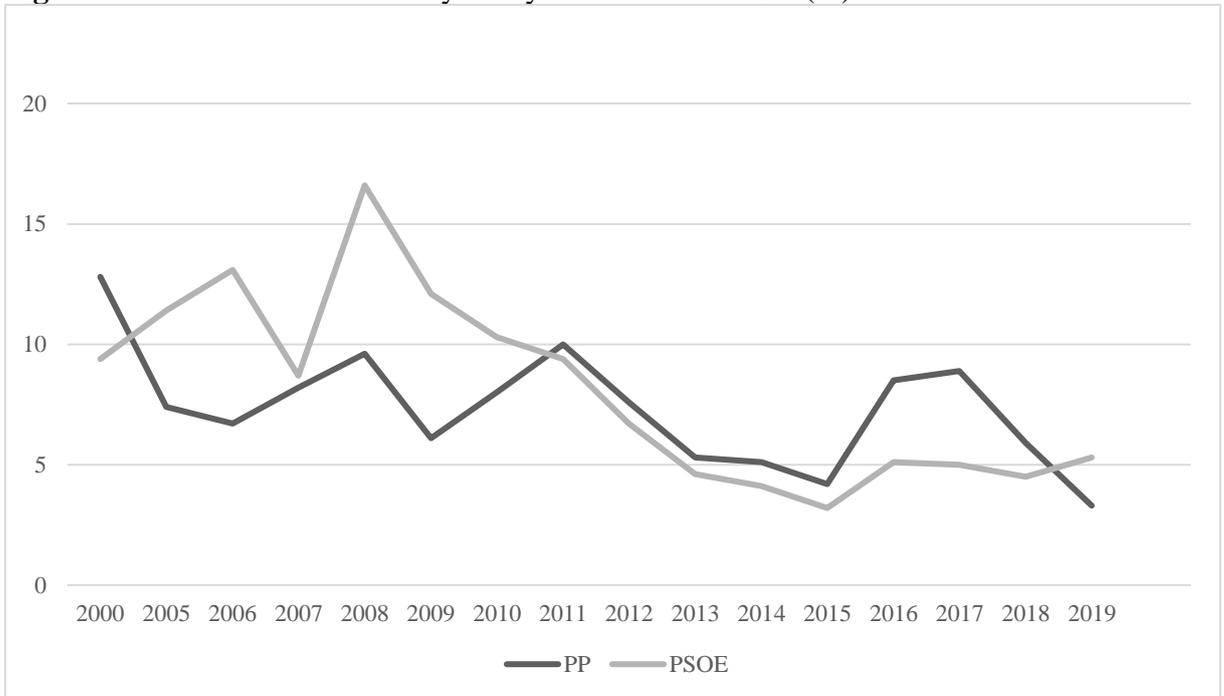
**Figure 5.2.1.** Feeling of closeness to a political party or coalition (%).



Source: Serie: existencia de cercanía/proximidad a algún partido político o coalición, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2000, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2019)

Apart from between 2007 and 2009, the respondents who stated to not feel close to a political party or coalition are more than those who do, according to the data presented in figure 5.2.1. Those who stated that they don't feel proximity increased between 2000 and 2005. However, between 2005 and 2007 they decreased from 62,4 to 43,6 per cent, respectively. However, in 2010 the number increased to the same level as prior to 2007. These peaks are constant during the given time frame of this study. Respondents stated to feel closer to a political party or coalition in times of elections (i.e. 2008, 2011, 2016, 2019).

**Figure 5.2.2.** Would with certainty always vote for PP/PSOE (%).

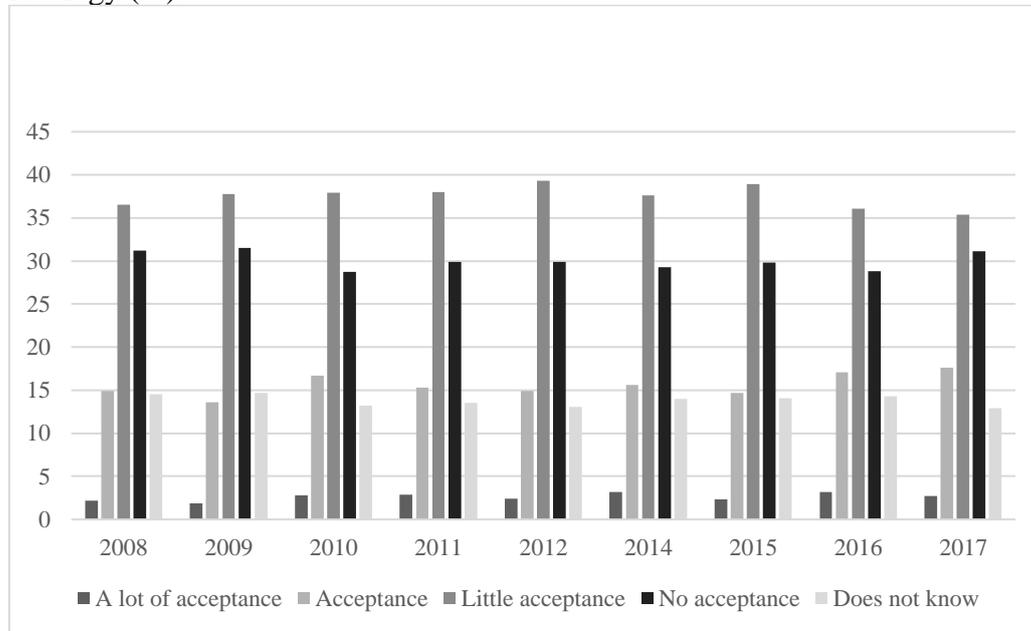


Source: Serie: Probabilidad de votar a un determinado partido político, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2000, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2019)

For all the years studied, the number of respondents who stated that they with certainty always would vote for the PP nor the PSOE remain somewhat low. In 2000, 12,8 per cent stated that they would always vote for the PP, which in the data shown in figure 5.2.2 is its highest number of loyal voters for all the years studied. The PSOE reached its highest share of loyal voters in 2008, when 16,6 per cent of the respondents stated that they with certainty always would vote for the PSOE. Nonetheless, the following years the share decreases, reaching its lowest number in 2015, when 3,2 per cent of the respondents answered that they would always vote for the PSOE. The PP reaches its lowest value in 2019, when 3,3 per cent stated that they would always vote for the party. For both parties an upsurge in the number of loyal voters is seen in 2018, when 8,5 per cent and 5,1 per cent state that they always would vote for the PP and the PSOE, respectively. While the PSOE has a constant decrease in the number of loyal voters between 2008 and 2016, the number of voters

who stated they would always vote for the PP is somewhat unstable, increasing in 2008, 2011, 2016 and, lastly, in 2017.

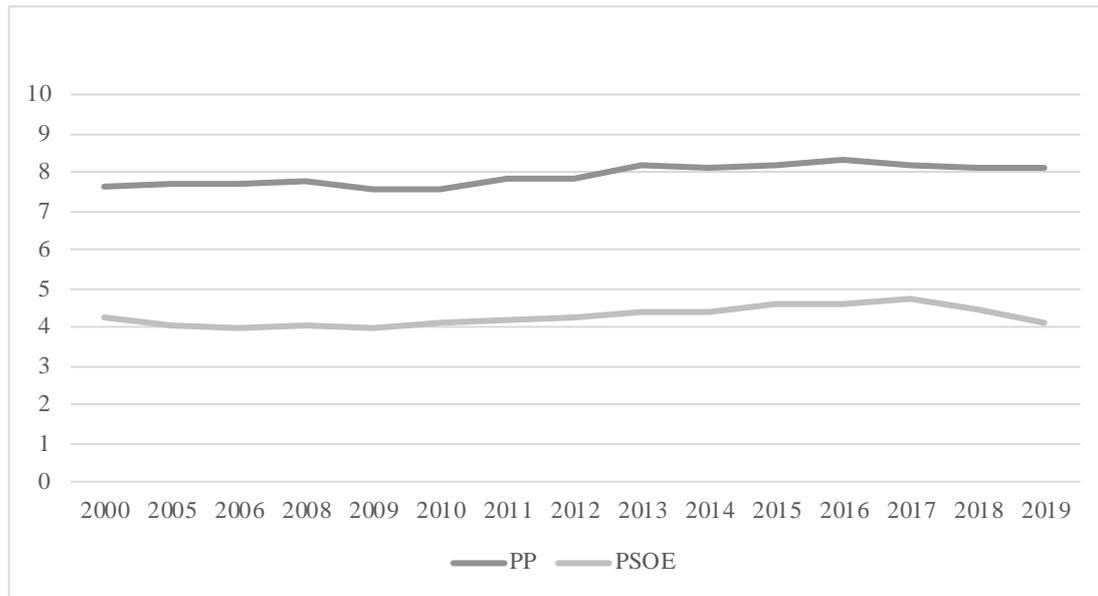
**Figure 5.2.3.** Acceptance towards a possible party of racist or xenophobic ideology (%).



Source: Actitudes ante la inmigración, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2008-2017)

The percentage for the different alternatives remained stable for all the years studied. Those who stated that they would have a lot of acceptance or acceptance do not make up more than 20 per cent of the total of respondents for any year until 2016. Hence, a majority state that would have ‘no acceptance’ or ‘little acceptance’ for a possible party of racist or xenophobic ideology. The respondents who answer ‘do not know’ are relatively high for all years (around 13,8 per cent).

**Figure 5.2.4** Assessed ideological position (0-10) of the main established parties: PP/PSOE (mean)



Source: Serie: escala ideológica (1-10) de partidos políticos: PP & PSOE (nacional) Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (2000, 2005, 2006, 2009-2019)

The convergence in assessed ideological position of the main established parties is small. The mean for the PP increases slightly until 2016 – when it reaches 8,21 – but decreases again after that. However, the differences between the year are insignificant. The PSOE is placed on the left axis of the scale – ranging between 3,97 and 4,75 points for all the years.

## 6 Analysis

Understanding the contexts in which populist attitudes are activated and the conditions in which populist parties emerge is at the core of this study. Then, what do the results show us? The analysis will first examine the perception of the three identified crises and the existence of populist attitudes in Spain, focusing both on the left-wing and right-wing indicators. This will be followed by a discussion about plausible explanations for the emergence of Podemos. Lastly, the causes of the electoral failure and success of Vox are examined.

### 6.1 Populist attitudes and their activation in Spain

As put forward in the theoretical framework, populism is a distinct set or type of ideas, which are latent in all individuals. When these ideas are activated, they can translate into electoral support for populist parties (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2019: 60-1). In this study three crises have been identified in the context of Spain: (I) the financial crisis, (II) the crisis of representation, and (III) the territorial crisis. Utilizing different indicators, the people's perception of crisis has been measured, showing that the three crises indeed caused levels of concern among the Spanish people. For instance, as shown in figure 5.1.1, *unemployment* and *economic issues* were considered the principal problem in Spain for a significant part of the population during the financial crisis period. Both indicators show their most significant increase between 2007 and 2009. Even if *unemployment* remains the problem that most respondents believed to be the principal one for all the years after the financial crisis, it starts decreasing in 2012. In 2019, the indicator reached similar levels as before the financial crisis. Moreover, *corruption and fraud* are considered the principal problem for less than 3 per cent of the respondents until 2012, where it reaches 12,3 per cent. A significant increase is shown after that,

getting its highest value in 2015 with 55,5 per cent of the total. A decrease is shown after 2015, landing on 24,7 per cent in 2019. Additionally, the increase in those who believe that *the political class and political problems* are the principal problems in Spain (as shown in figure 5.1.1) indicate a growing *anti-elitism*. Here, the most considerable growth is between 2012 (17,7 per cent) and 2013 (30,2 per cent). Interestingly, those who state that *the political class and political problems* are the primary problem decrease after 2013 – although remaining high - only reaching over 30 per cent again in 2019. In sum, even if the indicators connected to the financial crisis remain high after the crisis, it is interesting that they decrease. Instead, an increase is shown in the political indicators, perhaps indicating that the crisis of representation was significant during the years of political transformation in Spain. These remain high after that too, however decreasing somewhat. Lastly, the territorial crisis – that is, the referendum of October 2017 on the independence in Catalonia – is shown to concern the electorate. In 2018, 14,9 per cent of the respondents claimed that the independence was the main problem in Spain, which should be seen in contrast to the year before, when 1,4 per cent stated that the independence was the main problem (figure 5.1.1).

In the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, we see a noticeable decrease in political satisfaction among the Spanish people. For instance, even if those respondents who believe that the general political situation in Spain is *very good* are scarce during all the years studied (see figure 5.1.2), a significant decrease is shown among those who think that the situation is *good* between 2008 and 2011. Those who believe that the situation is *very bad* increased notably between 2008 and 2011 when almost 50 per cent of the respondents believed that the situation was *very bad*. Interestingly, in 2015 and April 2019, those who believed that the situation was *good* increased. However, in November 2019, the value decreased again. Those who answered that the situation is *very bad* increased from 2000 to 2011 (3,8 per cent and 41,5 per cent, respectively). After a significant decrease in April 2015 (to 15,3 per cent), the value increased again to 36,6 per cent in November 2019. As already mentioned, the most significant increase in those who state that the situation is *very bad* is noted between 2008 and 2011. Hence, the ideational approach assumption that times of crisis activates populist attitudes could be argued to be accurate also in the case of Spain, in this case concerning the financial crisis. Moreover, based on the opinions of the people, the political situation is perceived

to improve slightly after 2015. Nevertheless, between the elections of April and November of 2019, the situation was perceived to worsen. Perhaps the incapacity of the political parties to form a government could be seen as an absence of receptiveness by governing parties (Castanho Silva 2019: 280), fuelling the crisis of representation, hence re-activating or intensifying the populist attitudes again among the electorate.

Moreover, the confidence in political parties – as shown in figure 5.1.5 – shows a downward trend between 2008 and 2015. Those who do not trust (that is, those who place themselves between 0 to 3 on the scale) show a significant increase: from 23,7 in 2008 to 42,3 in 2011 and 51 per cent 2015. Furthermore, an increase is shown in the percentage of respondents who stated that they *agree* and *strongly agree* with the statement ‘*whoever is in power always looks out for his/her own interests*’ (from 64,8 in 2000 to 73,9 in 2015) as shown in figure 5.1.3. A similar trend is shown for the statement ‘*politicians do not care much about what people like me think*’ (from 61,5 in 2000 to 74,9 in 2015). The

Most of the respondents believe that ‘*voting contributes to sustaining democracy*’, as shown in figure 5.1.3. Even if the trust in the political system decreases during the studied years, there is no significant sign that this affects the belief among the citizenry in *voting* as a democratic principle. Moreover, those who strongly agree with the statement ‘*through voting people like me can influence what happens in politics*’ (figure 5.1.4) increase during the studied years. However, those who *agree* decreased. Nevertheless, those who *strongly agree* and *agree* are in sum more than those who *disagree* and *strongly disagree*. This is in line with what has been put forward in the theoretical framework: populism is not against democracy *per se*. Instead, it should be seen as a protest towards *liberal* democracy (Mudde 2016: 30) and failures of democratic representation (Castanho Silva 2019: 280).

### 6.1.1 Left-wing populist attitudes

The indicators used to measure left-wing populist attitudes (or socioeconomic concerns) were expected to increase before the emergence of Podemos. However, the results are somewhat contradictory. For instance, those who believed that *housing* is the main problem reach their highest value in 2007 and 2009. After that,

the response decreased significantly, being higher before than after the beginning of the financial crisis. The same trend is shown for *problems related to the quality of employment* – nevertheless, those who stated that this is the main problem increased between 2014 and 2020. The only welfare indicators that developed as expected are *healthcare* and *education*. Until 2017, those who believe that *pensions* are the principal problem remain under 5 per cent. For *problems of social nature*, a relevant increase is not shown until 2015, growing with 8,4 points from the year before.

Even if the indicators measuring the left-wing part of left-wing populism are not convincing, some insights must be mentioned. For example, we see that Spaniards were more worried about socioeconomic than sociocultural issues during the studied years. Moreover, even if the primary growth of all socioeconomic issues did not occur prior to the emergence of Podemos, they were still existent, showing concerns about material matters among the Spanish people.

### 6.1.2 Right-wing populist attitudes

For the sociocultural indicators, we see an escalation in those who believe that *immigration* is the principal problem in Spain between 2004 and 2007. However, during the economic crisis, this decreases significantly, remaining low between 2013 and 2018. In contrast, in 2019 – the year of the electoral breakthrough of Vox – those who believed that *immigration* was the major problem increased to 11,1 per cent. The same trend is shown for *citizen insecurity*. The increase in concerns about socioeconomic issues and the decrease of sociocultural ones could give a plausible explanation for why Podemos emerged in 2015. Following the same logic, the later increase in sociocultural issues could be argued to have favoured the emergence of Vox. We do see an increase in populist attitudes after the financial crisis. However, sociocultural issues do not seem to be significantly crucial for the electorate until 2019. These insights reinforce the argument that has been put forth in the theoretical framework: what political parties (regardless of their populist personality) want is essential for the electorate.

## 6.2 Political supply in Spain

As presented in chapter 5, the results could be argued to show a favourable supply-side for populist parties to emerge. Apart from between 2007 and 2009, those who do not feel close to a political party or coalition are more than those who do (see figure 5.2.1). As shown in figure 5.2.2, the two main established parties reach their lowest value of loyal voters the same year as the emergence of their populist counterparts. In 2015 – the year of the national electoral breakthrough of Podemos – only 3,2 per cent of the population stated that they would with certainty always vote for the PSOE. Likewise, in 2019 – the year of the national electoral breakthrough of Vox – the PP had 3,3 per cent voters that would always vote for the party.

When mainstream political parties converge and are essentially similar in their political agenda and programmatic platforms (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 105), populist political actors may be favoured. As shown in figure 5.2.4, the ideological convergence of the main established parties is perceived as small. The PP ranges between 7,6 and 8,35 points for all the years studied on a left-right scale (0-10). Meanwhile, the PSOE ranges between 3,85 and 4,74. Nevertheless, there are some interesting insights. For instance, until 2012, the PP is assessed as less extreme right than between 2013 and 2019. After the electoral breakthrough of Vox, the PP's assessed ideological position decreases slightly again. Although the margins are narrow, they must be mentioned. Moreover, in 2015 the PSOE got their, until then, highest value (with 4,62 points). That is, at the time of the electoral breakthrough of Podemos, the PSOE was perceived as a party very much in the centre of the ideological spectrum. This could be interpreted as a perceived vacuum on the left side of the ideological spectrum, perhaps giving Podemos a good opportunity to position itself in the political arena. The positioning of the PP on the right could be one reason for the late emergence of Vox: in other words, the ideological position was “taken” by the PP. Nevertheless, other issues are assumed to be important to understand the factors that influence the emergence of a populist actor. Even if the PP's ideological position has not been perceived as particularly moderate, there are other factors that must be considered.

Hence, from the results presented in this study, the perceived ideological convergence cannot be assumed to have been a major factor for the emergence of populist parties in Spain. However, the results presented do indicate a big dissatisfaction among the citizens. When taking the high numbers of people that are certain they would never vote for the main established parties into account, there are reasons to believe that the electorate perceives mainstream political parties as unresponsive to the demands of the citizens (van Kessel 2013: 179). To summarize, the *perceived* supply-side in Spain shows high levels of dissatisfaction with the main established parties. Even if the assessed ideological position of the two parties does not show an ideological convergence, the loyalty and satisfaction with the parties are low.

## 6.3 Explaining the emergence of populist parties in Spain

To answer the research question at the centre of this study, we must take the demand-side and supply-side factors into account *together* (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 20). In this study, we both consider the feeling of voters and the *perceived* behaviour of the elites. As discussed in the sections above, an increase in populist attitudes is shown in Spain, most notably after the financial crisis and the revelation of systematic corruption. In the following sections, the causes of the emergence of Podemos and Vox are discussed, taking both the demand-side and supply-side factors into consideration.

### 6.3.1 The electoral success of Podemos

When considering demand and supply, we see favourable conditions for the emergence of a populist party. The high levels of political dissatisfaction and distrust are interpreted as factors contributing to the fertile breeding ground necessary for a populist actor to emerge (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 99). However, the results do not necessarily show a demand for left-wing policies.

Nevertheless, they do show that the demand for right-wing issues is low in that specific period of time.

When looking into the supply-side factors, the loyalty towards the PSOE is shallow – reaching its lowest level of loyalty (feeling of proximity) in 2015. Before this, it had decreased the years following the financial crisis, providing us with helpful insights. Even if we cannot determine it, the dissatisfaction with the party did probably favour the electoral success of Podemos. Moreover, according to the ideational approach, the convergence of political parties does favour the emergence of populist actors (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 105). Even if the PSOE and the PP do not converge ideologically, the former is placed very close to the centre of the left-right axis. In combination with the high levels of political distrust, the results show a gap in the political market when Podemos emerged, hence showing favourable supply-side factors (Hawkins et al. 2017b: 278).

When it comes to the demand-side factors, we do see favourable levels of *anti-elite* feelings. Even if the socioeconomic issues do not necessarily show that they were *more* important at the time of the emergence of Podemos than after, we see that they were important for a large amount of the electorate. Hence, the emergence of Podemos is assumed to have been influenced by a combination of favourable demand-side and supply-side factors.

Finally, as mentioned in the theoretical framework, the opportunities and constraints on electoral competition are widely determined by the context of populist mobilisation (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 99). The favourable demand-side and supply-side factors at the individual level do not alone explain why Podemos emerged when it did. For instance, the “15M-movement” created a context of political mobilisation that never had been seen in the Spanish society before. Individuals who had been very active in the movement founded Podemos and, consequently, adopted the rhetoric of the manifestations of 2011. Because of this, the *internal* supply-side (Mudde 2007: 237) must be studied to fully explain the *why* and *how* of the emergence of a left-wing populist party in the case of Spain.

### 6.3.2 The electoral failure and success of Vox

As already discussed, when considering the populist attitudes, we could argue that there is a demand for new political actors in Spain. The political dissatisfaction is high. In 2015, 20,6 per cent voted for the populist alternative, which then was Podemos. However, the established parties did together get a majority of the votes. It can be assumed that the dissatisfaction towards the political system was high even among those who voted for the PSOE and PP. In 2015, the PP reached its lowest level of loyalty among the electorate until then: less than 5 per cent indicated that they would always vote for the PP.

Furthermore, the assessed ideological position of the PP was quite far on the right. Even if the overall political dissatisfaction was high, the PP could not be assumed to have been perceived as converging with other parties ideologically (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 105). Moreover, even if the corruption scandals heavily hitting the PP are important to the electorate, the party obtained a majority of the seats in parliament in 2016. People did still vote for the PP, but this does not necessarily mean that the electorate was satisfied with the party or its electoral program. For instance, a possibility is that the internal supply-side of the existent right-wing populist parties was weak (Mudde 2007: 237).

Additionally, as shown in figure 5.2.3, most of the respondents indicate that they would have no acceptance towards a possible party of racist or xenophobic ideology. However, the ones who state that they would have accepted such a party are not inexistent: around 15 per cent stated they would accept a party with a racist or xenophobic ideology. These values do not change much over the years studied. Since no data is available after 2017, it is impossible to perceive if the acceptance of a xenophobic or racist party increases before the emergence of Vox. It is crucial to consider that perhaps many right-wing populist voters do not consider their party to be racist nor xenophobic. Hence, this data might be inconclusive to understand the levels of acceptance towards a right-wing populist party.

The most interesting insight is shown regarding the sociocultural issues studied and presented in figure 5.1.7. *Immigration* and *citizen insecurity* were considered the principal problems for a large amount of the electorate before the financial crisis. However, the importance of these issues decreased significantly in

the aftermath of the financial crisis. In 2015, 2,3 per cent and 2,6 per cent, respectively, considered these issues to be essential to tackle. Logically, it is difficult for a right-wing populist actor to gain electoral success utilising a *nativist* and *authoritarian* discourse (Mudde 2007: 139) if those issues are not considered fundamental among the electorate (Andreradis et al 2019: 239) Then, the electoral failure of Vox (and other right-wing populist parties) in the elections before 2019 can be assumed to have been influenced by their inability to address issues that were important to the electorate (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 105). However, the later rise in the importance of sociocultural issues can be assumed to have favoured the electoral success of Vox in 2019. Additionally, the number of voters who would always vote for the PP reached its lowest value in April 2019. Altogether, the results indicate that the demand- and supply-side factors were unfavourable until 2019. Even if the political dissatisfaction has been high and the loyalty towards the PP has been low, the sociocultural issues have not been substantial. Nevertheless, these issues do not become important in a vacuum. Then, following Hawkins (2019: 61), the question is how these right-wing populist attitudes get activated.

As shown in figure 5.1.1, the Catalan independence movement emerged to be perceived as the most important issue to tackle in Spain by 14 per cent of the respondents in 2018. Following the ideational approach, *nativism* is an integral part of the right-wing populist agenda (Mudde 2007: 139). In other European countries, *nativism* is usually applied to the immigration issue (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 14). However, in Spain, it is not far stretched to assume that territorial unification is significant for *nativist* voters because of the country's history and territorial organisation. At the time of the Catalan referendum in 2017, the PP was in government. In 2018, prime minister Mariano Rajoy was summited to a motion of non-confidence, following the revelation of further systematic corruption within the PP. It could be assumed that the motion of non-confidence was the drop that spilt the cup concerning the legitimacy of the PP. However, this is not necessarily shown in the results. Since the PP was in government at the time of the Catalan referendum, it could be argued that the situation created an opportunity for other right-wing actors to take over the territorial issue. Consequently, the situation might have given new political actors the opportunity to address issues important to the electorate that were not being accurately addressed by other parties (Mudde &

Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 105). However, these assumptions must be tackled in future research to determine its influence on the electoral success of Vox in 2019.

With this said, we now leave the analysis and move into the concluding chapters of this thesis.

## 7 Conclusion

The primary purpose of this thesis has been to provide plausible explanations for the electoral success and failure of different subtypes of populism. The analysis has been conducted relying on the ideational approach to populism (Mudde 2007; Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2019), focusing on the examination of populist attitudes at the individual level. The study has aimed to understand what conditions the rise of populist movements and ideas at both sides of the left-right axis, attempting to provide answers to *which combination of conditions makes the electoral success of populist parties possible?*

The study shows – in line with the ideational approach – that there must be both a demand and a supply for a populist party to gain electoral success. As discussed in chapter 6, both Podemos and Vox gained electoral breakthrough vis-à-vis favourable demand-side and external supply-side factors, at least when studied at the individual level of analysis. The first hypothesis tested in this study (H1) is therefore considered to be supported by the results.

Moreover, the study supports the two next hypotheses (H2 and H3), finding probabilistic support for the assumption that socioeconomic issues favoured the rise of Podemos (H2) and that concerns about sociocultural issues favoured the rise of Vox (H3). In turn, this provides useful and novel insights, supporting the usefulness of the ideational approach to populism and the need for a better understanding of the varieties of populist response.

Finally, the assumption that times of crisis favours the emergence of populist actors is believed to be supported by this study. Not only do the results show that both the financial crisis and the crisis of representation had an impact on the Spanish electorate, but also that the territorial crisis did concern the Spanish citizenry, hence providing probabilistic support for the last hypothesis tested in this study (H4).

In sum, to accurately understand the causes of the electoral success and failure of populist parties we must dig into a range of different factors, including context-specific conditions, that, together, create a fertile breeding ground. The causal

mechanism behind the different factors must be further tested in future research to prove (or falsify) the hypotheses of this study accurately and to better understand the *why* and *how* of the varieties of populist response.

## 8 Final remarks and future research

This study has parted from the ideational approach to populism, providing a central role to the populist ideas. Below some final remarks and suggestions on future research are provided.

First, because of the limitations of this study, the nature of populism and its varieties must be further studied in future research. In this thesis, the study of the causes of the emergence of left- and right-wing populism has been conducted at the individual level. Future research must analyse the emergence of populist movements in Spain, combining the different levels of analysis (that is, micro-, meso- and macro-level) to provide a complete understanding of the phenomena. Of course, future research must dig into the internal supply-side factors of the populist movements to understand which combination of conditions made the emergence of left-wing and right-wing populism possible.

Second, the data used in this study has not been collected with the purpose of studying populism. Therefore, future research might be favoured by opinion surveys designed solely for this aim, being able to include the different central components of populist attitudes and better understanding the people's concerns. Future research must further test the causal mechanism of the demand-side and supply-side factors. This study has not tested if those who hold populist attitudes vote for a populist party, which is crucial to answer the research question correctly.

Third, the study of populism through the ideational approach is almost exclusively conducted through quantitative methods. To accurately understand the causes of populist support future research must dig into context-specific factors. Through a combination of qualitative research design and quantitative data, this study has been able to understand the context of populist mobilisation, something that should be accounted for in future research on the varieties of populist response. In this way, the research on populism will be able to better understand the contexts that drive people to vote for left- and right-wing populist parties.

Finally, the research on populism through the ideational approach is still scarce on the structural, supranational level. The basic permit of the approach is that

populism is a set of ideas about how society should be organized. As shown in this study, populism is not at odds with democracy per se. Ironically, the ideational approach has not yet provided answers to why populist movements are emerging at the same time in different regions in the world. On the contrary, the ideational study of populism is still conducted above all at the national level. Hence, future research must focus on cross-regional studies to properly understand the causes of the populist surge through the ideational lens and why this is the time for “(...) *an illiberal democratic response to decades of liberal undemocratic regime*” (Mudde 2016: 30).



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## 9.1 Empirical data

### *Figure 5.1.1*

CIS 2004-2019. Barómetro mensual: Principal problema de España. Available at: [http://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/es/11\\_barometros/indicadores.html](http://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/es/11_barometros/indicadores.html)

### *Figure 5.1.2*

CIS 2000, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2019. Preelectoral y postelectoral: *valoración de la situación política de España*. Serie: A.3.01.01.002. Available at: <http://www.analisis.cis.es/cisdb.jsp>

### *Figure 5.1.3*

CIS 2000, 2008, 2011, 2015. Preelectoral y postelectoral: *grado de acuerdo con distintas frases sobre la política*. Available at: <http://www.analisis.cis.es/cisdb.jsp>

### *Figure 5.1.4*

CIS 2000, 2016, 2018, 2019. Grado de acuerdo con la frase: a través del voto gente como yo puede influir en lo que pasa en la política. Serie: A.3.03.03.35. Available at: <http://www.analisis.cis.es/cisdb.jsp>

### *Figure 5.1.5*

CIS 2008, 2011, 2016. Existencia de un sentimiento de cercanía/proximidad a algún partido político o coalición (nacional). Serie: A.4.05.01.168. Available at: <http://www.analisis.cis.es/cisdb.jsp>

*Figure 5.1.6*

CIS 2004-2019. Barómetro mensual: Principal problema de España. Available at: [http://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/es/11\\_barometros/indicadores.html](http://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/es/11_barometros/indicadores.html)

*Figure 5.1.7*

CIS 2004-2019. Barómetro mensual: Principal problema de España. Available at: [http://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/es/11\\_barometros/indicadores.html](http://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/es/11_barometros/indicadores.html)

*Figure 5.2.1*

CIS 2000, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2019. Existencia de un sentimiento de cercanía/proximidad a algún partido político o coalición (nacional). Serie: A.4.05.01.168. Available at: <http://www.analisis.cis.es/cisdb.jsp>

*Figure 5.2.2*

CIS 2000, 2005-2019. Escala de probabilidad (0-10) de votar a un determinado partido político: PP, PSOE (Nacional). Serie: A.4.05.01.047. Available at: <http://www.analisis.cis.es/cisdb.jsp>

*Figure 5.2.3*

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*Figure 5.2.4*

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