

Article

# Political discontent in Spain, diagnosis and solutions

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**Abstract:** The starting point is the presence of a widespread feeling of political confrontation and division among Spanish citizens. This is compounded by dissatisfaction with and distrust in a system that is perceived by many as elitist and out of touch with real needs. Several factors related to this perception of politics are explained and quantified. On the one hand, there are economic elements, such as the stagnation of GDP per capita, the persistence of a relatively high at-risk-of-poverty rate, and the rates of material deprivation. And in all these elements, a significant territorial inequality can be observed. There are significant differences between Spain, France and Germany over the period considered. On the other hand, political factors determine much of the public debate in Spain: Historical memory and the Spanish Civil War, as well as the terrorism of ETA and other terrorist groups. The emergence of new parties is analyzed, especially VOX. Finally, the enormous difficulty of finding a territorial structure of political power that would bring together the consensus of most political forces. It is necessary to find formulas for fiscal federalism that will make it possible to move away from the current decentralization of spending without the Autonomous Communities having their own tax capacity. This study concludes by pointing out the relevance of all these problems and the need to find solutions through democratic debate and deliberation with agreements.

**Keywords:** political discontent; democracy; stagnation; territorial differences; historical memory; public debate

## 1. Introduction

There is a widespread feeling in Spanish society, reflected in the media and social networks, of political confrontation and division, of crisis and discontent. It is claimed that citizens feel alienated from decisions, as if their real problems are not addressed by the political system and that it is elitist. Several data sources point to this problem. The Eurobarómetro Standard 98 (winter 2022–2023) shows that Spanish citizens have a high level of distrust in political parties (7% of Spaniards trust them, 90% distrust them). They also distrust political institutions: the Spanish Congress of Deputies and the Spanish Government. The Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (Center for Sociological Research), November 2023 Barometer (CIS, 2023), points out that “political problems in general” are the first problem mentioned by a large number of Spaniards.

This is not exclusive to Spain; in many representative democracies there is a perception of political crisis among citizens. There is plenty of academic literature on the growing dissatisfaction of an important part of the citizenry with the functioning of democratic systems in the United States, Europe, and Japan. Zmerli (2014), among others, emphasizes the fundamental role of political trust (positive evaluation) in the functioning of democratic systems, since their legitimacy depends on the support of

its citizens. Fenno (1977) in his classic study pointed out that trust comes from the perception of identification, empathy, and the view that the politician or representative is equal to the represented. The key factors would be: qualification, identification and empathy.

Pharr, Putnam, and Dalton (2000) find considerable evidence of growing “public unhappiness with government and the institutions of representative democracy”, although they do not believe that there is a rejection of the democratic system as such. Moreover, they understand that there are three indicators of this dissatisfaction: the increase in citizens’ negative opinions of political parties, political institutions, and the political class. The factors that would explain this would be the information that citizens receive, the criteria by which the government is evaluated (more and more would be demanded of them) and its policies, and the functioning of the institutions.

Among others, Stecker and Tausendpfund (2016) and Bakker et al. (2020) have examined the relationship between citizens’ dissatisfaction with democracies in several European countries and the distance they perceive between their concerns and public policy. Stecker and Tausendpfund (2016) analyze this distance on issues such as European integration, redistribution, lifestyle, immigration, and environmental protection. Bakker, Jolly and Polk (2020) express this thesis as follows: “this substantial electoral shift away from established political parties is connected to political disaffection among voters”.

The study by Torcal (2014) concludes that the main problem of the democracies he studies (Spain and Portugal) is the idea that representative institutions do not respond to citizens’ demands and concerns, to which is added the perception of political corruption. Torcal and Christmann (2021) take as their starting point the decline of political trust in many democratic systems, the causes of which are the subject of a growing amount of academic literature. They divide the explanations into three main categories. One of the main explanations, especially for Europe, is the socio-economic crisis due to the great recession of 2008. Ellinas and Lamprianou (2014), among others, in relation to Greece, emphasize not only the economic but also the social factors of the crisis. Muro and Vidal (2017) suggest that unemployment is the key variable to understanding short-term changes in political mistrust. Among these explanations are those that refer to the reduction of social services due to the decline in tax revenues because of the crisis. Polavieja (2013), for example, links discontent to situations of economic vulnerability. This is particularly serious in Spain due to the depth of the crisis.

Second, an alternative explanation focuses on shortcomings in the political process (Torcal and Christmann, 2021). For example, Bauhr and Grimes (2014) argue that increased government transparency reduces the level of indignation.

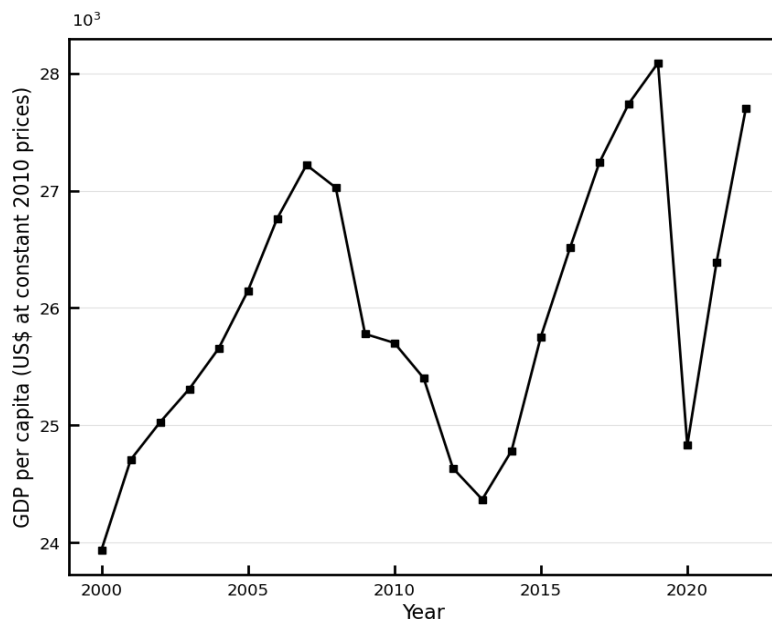
A third form of explanation has emphasized the idea that political distrust is also linked to political corruption (Torcal and Christmann, 2021). For example, Uslaner (2017) believes that corruption and inequality reduce trust in government and lead to the belief that the only way to get rich is to be corrupt. It is worth noticing that in Spain great political distress was caused by a series of major corruption scandals in the 2010s (Orriols and Cordero, 2016).

What elements are linked to this feeling of pessimism about the real political functioning of Spain? As seen, three main answers to this question about the feeling

of alienation from the democratic political system exist. Below, we propose as explanatory factors, on the one hand, economic variables and, on the other, political issues that are not resolved by consensus and generate growing dissatisfaction with the political system. The impact of the perception of corruption on political discontent is not examined. Although it is an important factor, we understand that it cannot be a determining one. If there were a direct correlation between corruption and discontent, the increasing discontent in democratic systems would mean that corruption is also increasing in these systems. However, there is no data to support this hypothesis.

## 2. Analysis

First, there are several economic elements. Popular pessimism about politics is linked to social and economic unease, as well as social and territorial inequality. In fact, per capita income (at constant prices) has barely increased since 2007, as shown in **Figures 1** and **2**. The effects of the 2008 crisis and the Covid 19 pandemic can be observed.



**Figure 1.** Real per capita income, Spain, in thousands of euros.

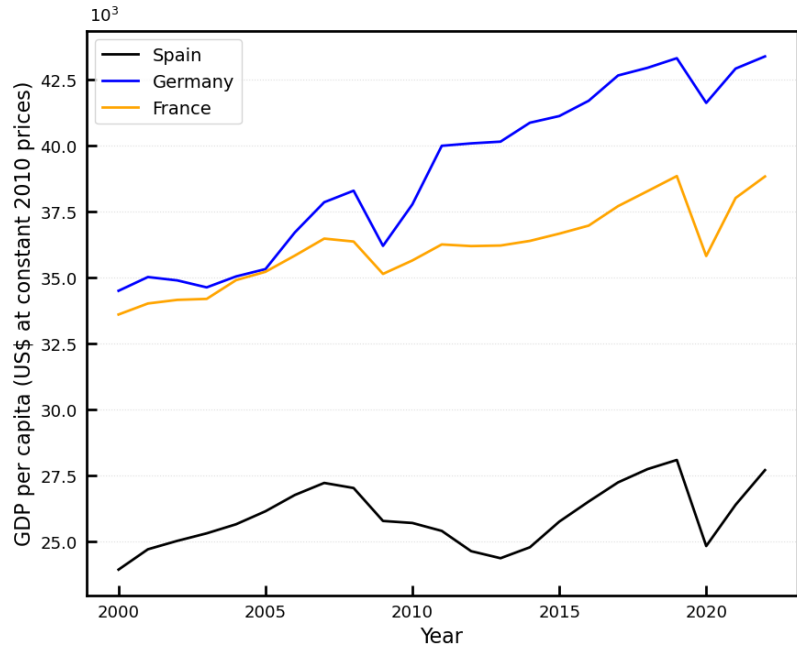
Note: GDP per capita: Gross domestic product divided by the population at mid-year. GDP at purchaser prices is the sum of gross value added by all resident producers in the economy, plus all taxes on products, less all subsidies not included in the value of products.

Source: Based on data from the World Bank (2024).

The difference in per capita income trends among the three nations suggests that there should be an equivalent difference in the perceptions of politics held by the citizens of the three nations. In **Figure 3**, we consider one form of perception of this political trust. It shows the percentage of respondents who answered “yes” to “Do you have confidence in the national government?” in 2007 and 2020.

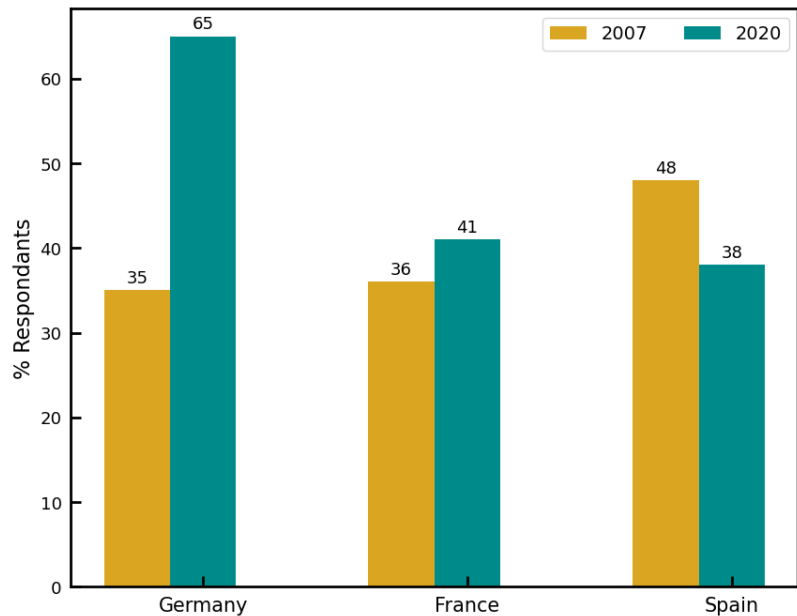
**Figure 2** shows that other European countries, such as Germany, although not experiencing strong economic growth, have achieved a more significant increase in per capita income, which is ultimately what each person in an economy earns on average per year and which determines his or her view of the economic conditions in

which he or she lives. **Figure 3** shows how trust in political institutions has apparently increased in Germany and France over the period and decreased in Spain.



**Figure 2.** Real per capita income, Germany, Spain and France, in thousands of euros.

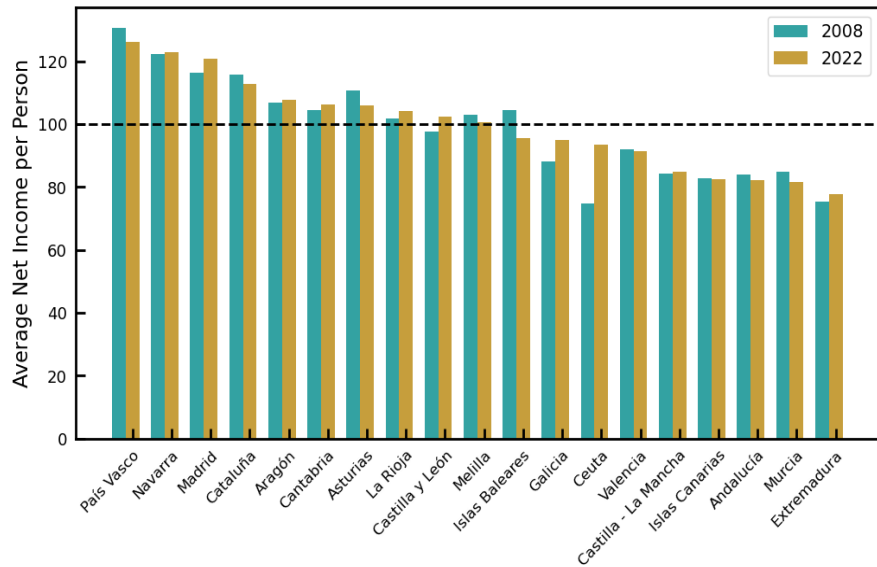
Source: Based on data from the World Bank (2024).



**Figure 3.** Confidence in national government for France, Germany, and Spain.

Source: Author’s own elaboration from data from OECD (2021).

In addition, there are profound differences in per capita income and poverty rates between the different Spanish Autonomous Communities. These can be seen in **Figures 4 and 5**.



**Figure 4.** Survey of Living Conditions, Autonomous Communities and Cities, average net income per person, 2008 and 2022.

Note: The value 100 represents the national income average.

Source: Author’s elaboration with data extracted from the INE (2024).

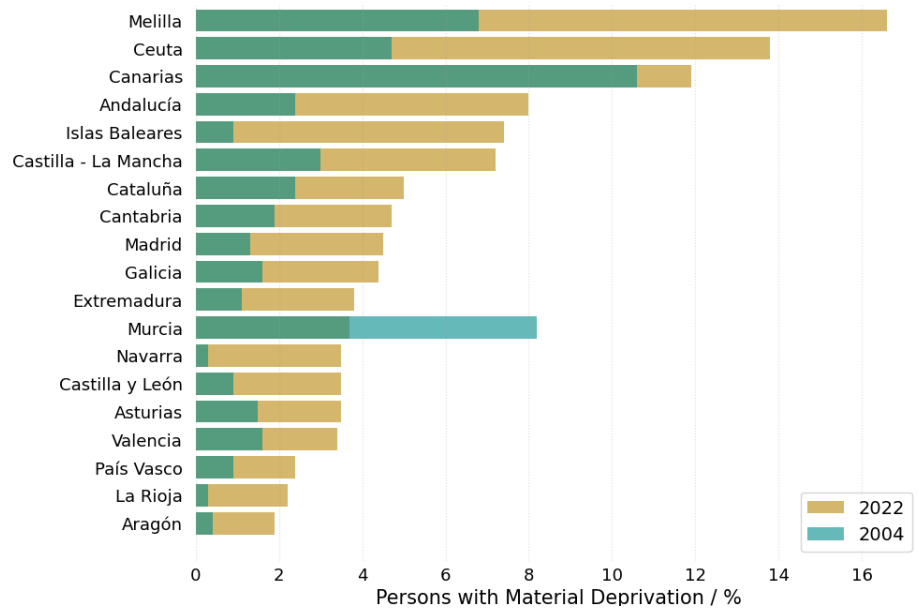


**Figure 5.** Map of Spain by Autonomous Communities, excluding Ceuta and Melilla for clarity, of the average income per person in 2022.

Note: The same data as in **Figure 4** has been used.

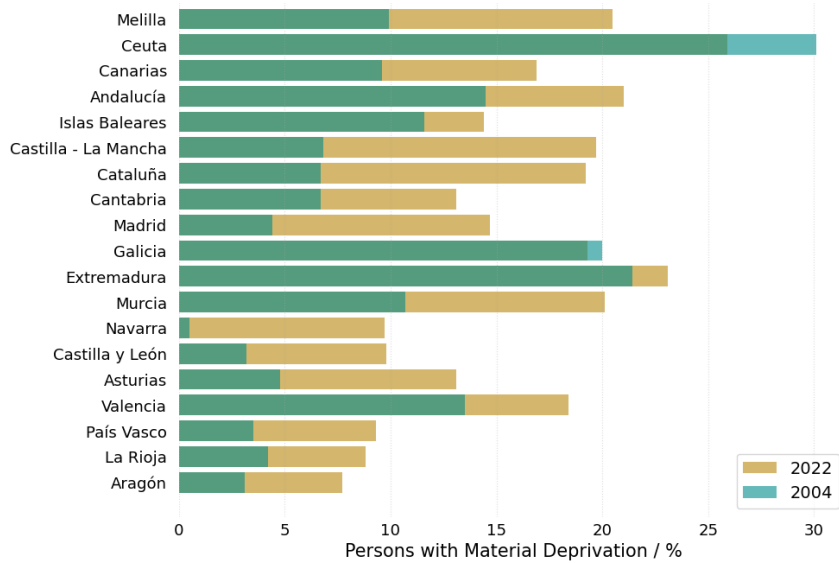
Source: Prepared by the author with data extracted from the INE (2024).

**Figure 4** shows that the gap between richer and poorer regions in terms of average per capita income has been maintained (with a few exceptions). However, these differences are reflected in material deprivation of essential goods and services. **Figures 6** and **7** show the percentage of people who do not have regular access to such essentials as a varied diet and electricity. They cannot afford a meal with meat, chicken or fish at least every second day (**Figure 6**), neither can they afford to keep the home at an adequate temperature (**Figure 7**).



**Figure 6.** Survey of Living Conditions, Autonomous Communities and Cities, persons with material (food) deprivation by Autonomous Community, 2004 and 2022.

Source: Author’s work with data extracted from the INE (2024).



**Figure 7.** Survey of Living Conditions, Autonomous Communities and Cities, persons with material (residence) deprivation by Autonomous Community, 2004 and 2022.

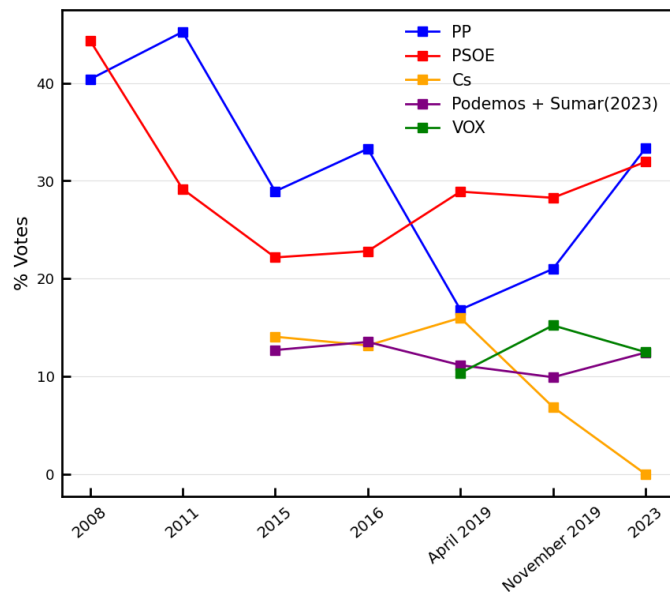
Source: Author’s own work with data extracted from the INE (2024).

The graphs show how basic indicators related to poverty have worsened in Spain. Finally, the INE reports in this Survey of Living Conditions (2024) that the at-risk-of-poverty rate in Spain in 2022 is 20.4% (AROPE, at-risk-of-poverty and/or social exclusion, indicator puts it at 26%), ranging from 34.8% (AROPE 40.7% and Melilla 41.3%) in Ceuta to 10.9% (AROPE 14.5%) in Navarra, which reflects the poor general situation and the strong differences between the territories in Spain.

This is the economic framework that determines how citizens perceive their lives

and the political system. The relative stagnation of per capita income has been observed in recent years, along with situations of territorial inequality. Also, the existence of important problems of material exclusion and poverty, again with strong differences between citizens depending on where they live.

On the other hand, there are factors of political debate, issues that constantly fill the content of many public debates and refer to our past. These debates are taking place in the context of a series of changes in Spanish political parties. **Figure 8** illustrates the percentage of votes in National Spanish Elections from 2008 of the two traditional parties: PP and PSOE, and three new parties that gained importance after the economic crisis: Cs (Ciudadanos), Podemos, and VOX.



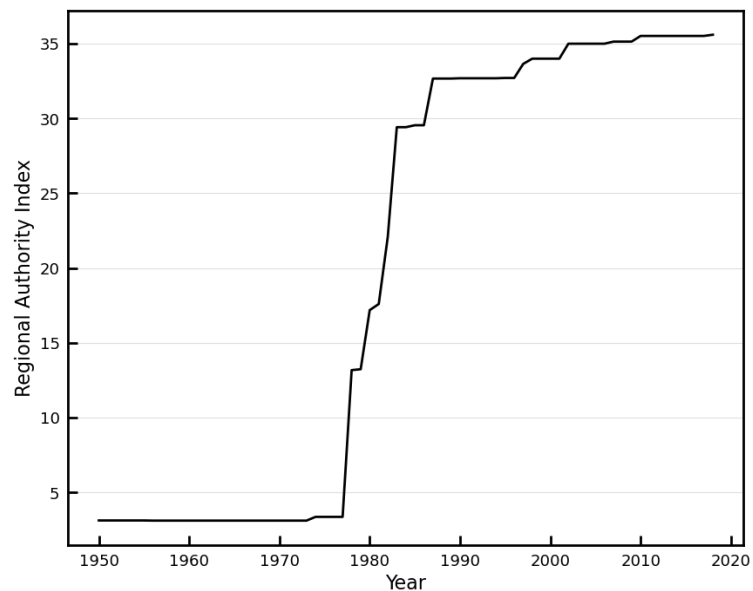
**Figure 8.** Percentage of votes in National Spanish Elections from 2008.

Source: Data taken from Junta Electoral Central (Central Election Committee) (2023).

Therefore, in 2015, two new parties emerged, Podemos on the left and Ciudadanos (Cs) in the liberal center; and in April 2019, VOX, which is a party of the new right, or populist right. Ciudadanos has lost practically all support until it was left without representation, and Podemos, part of a left-wing coalition—Sumar—in 2023, has also failed to meet expectations of winning the left around it. The two traditional major parties, PP and PSOE, have regained some of the support lost after the impact of the 2008 crisis. In fact, Ciudadanos and Podemos have positioned themselves on the right-left axis, contesting the vote with the PP and PSOE, adding the criterion of voting for the new versus the old (Hernández, 2016). But what is the position of the new party that emerged in April 2019, VOX? How much political polarization is there in Spain and how has it evolved? There are factors in the Spanish political debate without which the country’s own political evolution cannot be understood. There is a lack of agreement in the population about the recent history of Spain and everything depends on the political color. Thus, in the present, the Franco dictatorship and the Civil War are presented as an object of discussion. Spanish democracy meant a rupture with the dictatorial past and the establishment of a democratic system based on the European model of constitutions and institutions, as Ysàs (2010) points out. However,

the Civil War and dictatorship have not fully been overcome and are still influencing the current democratic debate. The study by Velasco-Molpeceres et al. (2022) points out that, from an analysis of Twitter (currently X) in the face of VOX's position on Federico García Lorca, the debate on Francoism is incorporated into the present, but in response to issues that political parties are currently raising. This highlights how the reconstruction of memory, with the building of narratives using political polarization and the predominance of emotions, is currently shaping discourse. Finally, Balampanidis and Inácia Rezola (2023) point out that the Spanish transition from dictatorship to democracy is the subject of controversy in public opinion, questioning the existence of possible legacies of the process, the possible inadequacies or not of the transition. However, they add that the law of *Memoria Histórica* (Historical Memory) of 2007 and the decree of 2018 mean the application of a deeper political justice than that existing in Portugal or Greece, which experienced the end of dictatorships in the same historical period.

The issue of terrorism, with its decades of victims, is also included in the current debate. It is still an issue in the public conscience of our country. How was terrorism perceived and how is it understood today? It is a complex issue, and the general view of the problem is even more difficult. For example, Alonso (2018) concludes that terrorism, after its theoretical defeat, has had consequences such as impunity and damage to the rule of law. Zurdo (2019) points out that ETA remains in the news. Blanco (2018) raises the topicality of the issue of terrorism, the heterogeneous vision between reconciliation and the rule of law, error or totalitarianism, peace or social pressure.



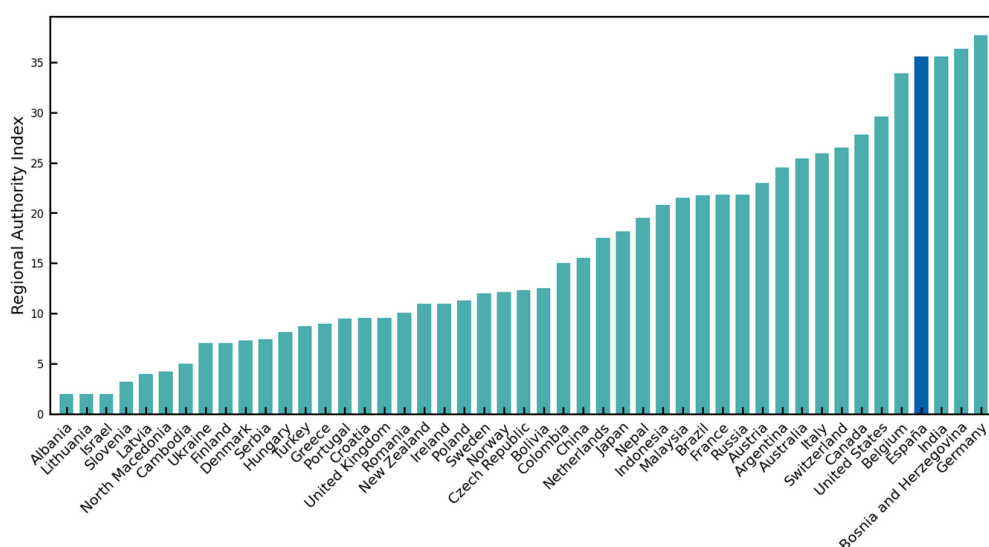
**Figure 9.** Regional Authority Index (RAI) in Spain, from 1950 to 2018.

Source: Shair-Rosenfield et al. (2020) and Hooghe et al. (2016).

In any case, in every election and in every political negotiation, we are confronted with the old historical problem, the question of the autonomy or federalism of the different territories. In *España Invertebrada*, a book published in 1921, Ortega and Gasset (1972) told us that in the previous twenty years there had been a relevant appearance of separatisms in Spain. Therefore, the questions raised here and now are



not new: How to find a legal, fiscal and jurisdictional way to accommodate those political forces that defend the independence of their territories? How to find a territorial fit of maximum autonomy, while preserving some minimum central powers and the fiscal position of the autonomous regions that do not represent political impulses for independence? A problem that awaits every new government in Spain and that now has a European framework. But the fact is that Spain has adopted a decentralized territorial model. What does it consist of and what is its degree of decentralization? **Figures 9 and 10** approximate the level of decentralization achieved in Spain. Spain is one of the most decentralized countries in the world. India and Spain have the same RAI (Regional Authority Index) in 2018.



**Figure 10.** Regional Authority Index (RAI) in 2018 worldwide.

Source: Shair-Rosenfield et al. (2020) and Hooghe et al. (2016).

A significant decentralization of state power in Spain is clearly observed. In this model, the expenditure is decentralized, with the activity of the central administration concentrated mainly on three policies that it controls completely: defense, foreign policy, justice; plus, basically “social security” and an important item of “transfers to other public administrations”, as pointed out by Alonso Sanz (2009). He adds that, in budgetary terms, the Autonomous Communities concentrate their spending on health and education, plus a series of policies that vary from one to another. However, Lago-Peñas and Martínez-Vázquez (2010) conclude that although Spain has developed political and financial decentralization and the Autonomous Communities have autonomy on the expenditure side, they do not have the necessary tax capacity on the revenue side. A situation in which they prefer to obtain their resources from the central government, instead of developing a truly federal treasury with responsibility for revenue in relation to expenditure. Moreover, according to these authors, this can lead to a central government that is financially constrained in the provision of public goods and services at the national level and in the implementation of redistributive programs.

However, the federal/decentralized structure and the movements for independence of some of these Autonomous Communities are currently, as in the past, one of the central issues and with greater capacity to generate debates and divisive decisions in Spanish politics, determining how parties identify themselves and how

political polarization occurs in Spain. On 1 October 2017, a political referendum for this independence was held in Catalonia, despite having been annulled as unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court on 7 September 2017 (BOE, 2017). This has generated a long-lasting political conflict and a series of judicial decisions of sentencing, until reaching the current amnesty law to cancel all convictions and pending trials within the decisions taken to unsuccessfully achieve said independence (BOE, 2024).

In contrast to the independence movements in various regions, VOX is a party that builds a populist discourse around the Manichean conflict between the Spanish people (or Spanish nation) and the globalists and other global and territorial threats (Ribera Payá and Martínez, 2020). It is a party that, like similar ones in liberal democracies, focuses on the conflict with immigration, other cultures, and the separatist movements and parties in some of the Spanish Autonomous Communities already mentioned (Ribera Payá and Martínez, 2020). Cervi and Tejedor (2021) highlight this political position, or “nativist” view, linked to populism that imposes the picture of honest workers being threatened by immigrants who commit crimes. To this he adds a rejection of the LGBT and minority rights movements. “VOX would then be the only tool ... protecting the nation from chaos.” (Ribera Payá and Martínez, 2020).

At the crossroads of the political and economic problems outlined above, faced with questions of history and territorial fit, we are at a time when the public debate is focused on who wins, apparently forgetting the argument as such and its content. In this context, everything seems to be against our approaching Habermas’ communicative rationality (Habermas, 2011), that situation in which there are no distortions in the communication between the speakers, i.e., interests that are alien to the same rationality, to the same proposed content.

### **3. Conclusion**

Even though the previous paragraphs show a picture of a divided society, a large fraction of the population is in agreement about their discontent and alienation from politics, as well as an apparent strong political polarization. Some of the economic and political factors related to these problems have been identified, analyzed and quantified.

The economic factors include the stagnation of per capita income and situations of poverty and material deprivation, with an uneven territorial distribution of these problems. A comparison of the evolution of per capita income between Germany, France and Spain showed the positive relationship between economic success and the trust in the political system. Spain-specific political factors include the problem of diverging historical memory in relation to the Spanish Civil War. Also, the problem of terrorism by ETA and other organisations that Spain suffered for decades in the past. The problem of the territorial distribution of power and the public budget has also been considered a historical problem in Spain, to which no consensual solution has been found.

Therefore, in addition to the evolution of per capita income and material deprivation as objective factors, there are political issues specific to the country that

have not been resolved by consensus or agreement. This is a problem because democracy is a system in which most problems must be solved through debate and consensus, especially those related to the territorial distribution of power. The debate should satisfy the conditions analyzed by Habermas (2011). The problem of corruption has not been included. However, its relevance is not assumed, since this would require postulating that it is a growing factor. Nothing apparently confirms this idea.

No attempt has been made to provide any kind of universal solution, but it seems obligatory to point out that politics will have to face these problems if it wants to reduce the aforementioned negative perception that many citizens have. The problems of stagnation of per capita income and its distribution are an objective question that should generate a series of economic policy responses. Moreover, political parties, as the main actors that bring together the collective will in the democratic system, should redirect the situation towards one in which consensus is much more common, democratic participation of citizens is increasingly open and effective, and the public and common good of all citizens is the object of public policies and their debates. Politics must offer real solutions to the problems raised by citizens.

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