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HAS THE BACKLASH ARRIVED IN IBERIA?

DIVERGING PUBLIC ATTITUDES ON IMMIGRATION IN THE AGE OF THE FAR RIGHT

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CONTENTS

SUMMARY

This paper examines the evolution of public attitudes toward immigration in Spain and Portugal. Long regarded as outliers due to the absence of successful far-right parties and the relatively muted role of immigration in the public debate, both countries have undergone rapid changes in recent years – with the rise of strong far-right parties, changing migration dynamics, and increased politicization of immigration. Drawing on Eurobarometer and European Social Survey data, this report sets out to examine whether these shifting realities are reshaping public opinion, focusing on four dimensions: the public salience of immigration, attitudinal trends, polarization and ideological sorting, and the link between immigration attitudes and far-right voting. The findings show no uniform 'Iberian backlash': while public concern about immigration has increased in both countries, public attitudes diverge considerably. In Spain, public opinion remains comparatively positive and broadly stable. In contrast, Portugal has experienced a shift toward more restrictive attitudes in the most recent period under analysis (2023/24), reversing a decade-long trend of convergence with Spain. In addition, while the analysis confirms the existence of a positive association between far-right voting and anti-immigration attitudes, it finds little evidence of increased ideological polarization on immigration – with changes in public opinion appearing to be broad-based rather than concentrated at the extremes. The conclusion explores potential reasons for the divergence between the two countries and underscores the importance of different national contexts in shaping public attitudes, even within similar regional settings.

1. INTRODUCTION

Spain and Portugal were long considered exceptions to the rise of electorally successful far-right parties and to the increasingly divisive politics surrounding contemporary debates on immigration in much of Europe. As the Great Recession and the so-called 'refugee crisis' swept across the continent – propelling or consolidating the growth of far-right forces in country after country –, the two Iberian countries appeared oddly immune. However, this scenario changed rapidly in 2019, when Chega in Portugal and VOX in Spain achieved their first parliamentary breakthroughs, winning representation in their respective national legislatures for the first time. Rather than 'flash parties', recent election results and polls confirm an extraordinarily rapid consolidation of both parties, firmly establishing them as significant forces in their respective political systems.

Like other far-right parties in Europe, Chega and VOX distinguish themselves not only by their – often radical – positions and rhetoric, but also by the disproportionate emphasis they place on issues that were previously of limited relevance to political debate. Chief among these issues is immigration. Although neither party can be described as a 'single-issue party', both have visibly sought to politicize immigration to an extent not previously seen in either country.

Against this backdrop, the long-standing image of Spain and Portugal as comparatively welcoming societies – where immigration has not provoked the kind of backlash observed elsewhere in Europe – is increasingly under strain. Even if the precise role of immigration in driving these parties' initial electoral breakthroughs remains contested, there are reasons to expect far-right actors themselves to actively shape public opinion. By emphasizing immigration, they may heighten the salience of immigration-related concerns, reinforce negative perceptions, or simply help normalize views that were previously considered outside the bounds of acceptable discourse. This is especially the case in contexts where changing migration realities provide far-right parties with expanded opportunities to politicize the topic and amplify public anxieties, as in Portugal, where the immigrant population has grown at an exceptional pace in recent years, and in Spain, where irregular sea arrivals have seen a renewed increase.

This report sets out to examine whether these shifting political and demographic realities are leaving a mark on public opinion. It examines recent developments and trends in public attitudes toward immigration, asking a series of interrelated questions: is there evidence of growing public concern? Do these changing realities coincide with a hardening of attitudes – or simply with a greater willingness among respondents to express negative views that were previously suppressed by social desirability pressures? Is there evidence of growing polarization, with attitudes becoming extreme or with citizens being increasingly divided along ideological lines? And is the link between anti-immigration attitudes and far-right voting stronger today than at the time of these parties' breakthrough?

This report proceeds in two parts. The first situates the analysis in the context of the changing political and migration landscapes in Spain and Portugal, providing more detailed background on recent political and migration-related developments. The second, more extensive, section analyzes public opinion trends on immigration across four dimensions: the evolution of public salience, the trajectory of public attitudes, patterns of polarization and ideological sorting of opinions, and the association between immigration attitudes and far-right vote choice.

2. A CHANGING LANDSCAPE: POLITICS AND MIGRATION IN CONTEMPORARY SPAIN AND PORTUGAL

2.1 The Political Landscape: The Rise of the Far Right

Contrary to the once popular – though, in hindsight, naïve – idea of 'Iberian exceptionalism' or immunity to the far right, far-right parties have quickly established themselves in recent years. VOX is today the third-largest party in the Spanish parliament, while Chega has recently become the second-largest parliamentary force in Portugal (second in terms of seats, third in terms of vote share). Similarly to contexts like Germany, this development represented a major transformation of the political landscape in both countries – a landscape that had traditionally been characterized by stable two-party dominance.

Coincidentally, both parties first entered their respective national parliaments in the same year, 2019. Nonetheless, their electoral trajectories differ substantially. Chega was a newly created party and still relatively unknown to the broader public when it first entered the Portuguese parliament in October 2019, winning a single seat with only 1.3% of the popular vote. This gave the party's leader, André Ventura, unprecedented media visibility, which he skillfully used to disseminate his message.[1] The party then expanded rapidly, benefiting from a series of snap elections held in close succession and increasing its vote share in each of them (see Table 1). The 2025 general election marked a particularly important milestone, as Chega became the largest opposition party in parliament with an unprecedented 23% of the vote.

VOX, by contrast, was founded in 2013, several years prior to becoming electorally relevant. Its first major electoral breakthrough occurred in the December 2018 regional elections in Andalusia, where it won 11% of the vote. This was after the party had gained some visibility through activism in protest and judicial arenas, most notably through its involvement in legal actions against the leaders of the Catalan independence movement. Unlike Chega, VOX has not experienced continued electoral growth, as its vote share remained relatively stable (see Table 1). Nonetheless, current polls suggest that the party retains considerable potential for growth, with surveys currently placing its support at around 19%.[2]

Both Chega and VOX are clear members of the far-right party family – or, more specifically, the populist radical right –, characterized by its emphasis on nativist, authoritarian, and populist positions. As such, they distinguish themselves for a disproportionate emphasis on core radical right issues such as immigration, 'law and order', and political corruption. Although far-right parties are sometimes portrayed as 'single-issue' parties – primarily focused on immigration –, it is relevant to note that this description fits neither VOX nor Chega particularly well, as both have mobilized on a range of issues beyond immigration.

This is reflected in the comparatively lower emphasis these two parties have placed on immigration relative to parties such as the AfD in Germany or far-right parties in Northern Europe. A MIDEM report analyzing nativist rhetoric on social media across seventeen radical right parties between 2019 and 2021 shows considerable variation: while the AfD devoted more than 20% of its Facebook posts to the topic, the equivalent share was around 10% for VOX and less than 5% for Chega (MIDEM 2021). However, it is important to note that this pattern is not static, as both parties have increased their emphasis on immigration in more recent periods.

In the case of VOX, two issues other than immigration stand out in particular. The first is Spanish nationalism – or Spanish unionism –, most visible in the party's opposition to regional separatism and its defense of the recentralization of the Spanish state. It is no coincidence that VOX's electoral breakthrough occurred in the period following the Catalan independence referendum of 2017

Tab. 1: General elections results of Chega and VOX (2019-2025)

	Chega	VOX
2019	1.3%	10.3% 15.1%
2022	7.2%	
2023		12.4%
2024	18.1%	
2025	22.8%	

Source: Portuguese Ministry of Internal Administration, Spanish Ministry of the Interior

1 Research has shown that André Ventura received disproportionate media attention relative to Chega's electoral weight (Silva et al. 2026).

2 POLITICO Poll of Polls, https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/spain/

and the nationalist backlash that followed (Rama et al. 2021). The second is its conservative profile on 'traditional values' and gender-related issues in particular. In reaction to recent waves of feminist mobilization in Spain and to the adoption of some of the most progressive legislation in this regard, VOX has espoused a strong anti-feminist message, which resonates well with voters holding 'modern sexist' attitudes (Anduiza/Rico 2024).

Chega, by contrast, has pursued a more typical populist agenda, with a large share of its political communication centered on anti-establishment appeals. In a context where perceptions of corruption are widespread and levels of trust in politics are very low, Chega – whose name means 'Enough' – has clearly sought to capitalize on political discontentment (Mendes 2022). Such appeals appear to be particularly effective in rural areas where voters perceive their communities as 'politically neglected', a factor shown to play an important role in explaining support for Chega in rural Portugal (Magalhães/Cancela 2025).

None of this is to say that immigration is unimportant for these parties and their voters. Although there is some debate regarding the role of immigration in explaining the initial breakthrough of these forces at the early stages[3], survey evidence shows that – similar to other far-right forces in Europe – opposition to immigration is clearly correlated with support for both parties (Heyne/Manucci 2021; Anduiza/Rico 2024). In addition, as noted above, there is evidence that immigration has become (even) more central in these parties' agendas in recent years. The contrast is particularly pronounced in the case of Chega. Comparing the pre-electoral periods of the 2022 and 2025 elections, one study shows that the share of the party's Facebook posts devoted to immigration and/or the Roma minority rose from 3% to 26%, making it the dominant campaign topic in 2025 (Mendes 2025). A forthcoming MIDEM report likewise shows that VOX significantly increased its emphasis on immigration in 2024 (Mendes *forthcoming*). Such increased attention to the issue is, in turn, connected to the changing migration realities discussed below.

2.2 The Migration Landscape: Rising Immigration

Similar to other European countries, both Portugal and Spain have seen the stock of their respective foreign population increase in the last years. It is estimated that in both countries the foreign population represents about 14% of the total population in the year 2025. However, the timing and pace of this increase differ substantially between the two countries (see Figures 1 and 2). Although both are relatively recent immigration countries – with only a marginal stock of foreign residents prior to 2000 –, Spain's 'immigration boom' occurred already in the early 2000s, whereas in Portugal the most dramatic growth has taken place only in the last few years.

Figure 1 illustrates the magnitude of this recent shift in Portugal: whereas before 2020 the country had roughly half a million foreign residents (representing around 5% of the total population), this number is estimated to have tripled by 2025, with the country now hosting more than 1.5 million foreigners.[4] This rapid growth can be explained by a combination of strong labor market demand and a comparatively liberal immigration policy framework. Recent OECD data on admission grounds reflects the importance of labor migration: work-related admission channels are by far the most relevant in Portugal (in contrast to family migration in Spain or free movement of EU citizens in Germany) (OECD 2024). However, since Portugal's legal framework was substantially restricted in 2024 – when the new center-right government abolished the main migrant regularization pathway[5] –, it is unlikely that the (officially recorded) foreign population will continue to grow at the same pace in the coming years. Apart from the sheer numbers, another relevant aspect of this recent immigration wave is the changing composition of the migrant population: although Brazilians remain by far the largest group, the foreign population now displays a more diversified profile, with one notable development being the growing presence of migrants from the Indian subcontinent (particularly India, Nepal, and Bangladesh).

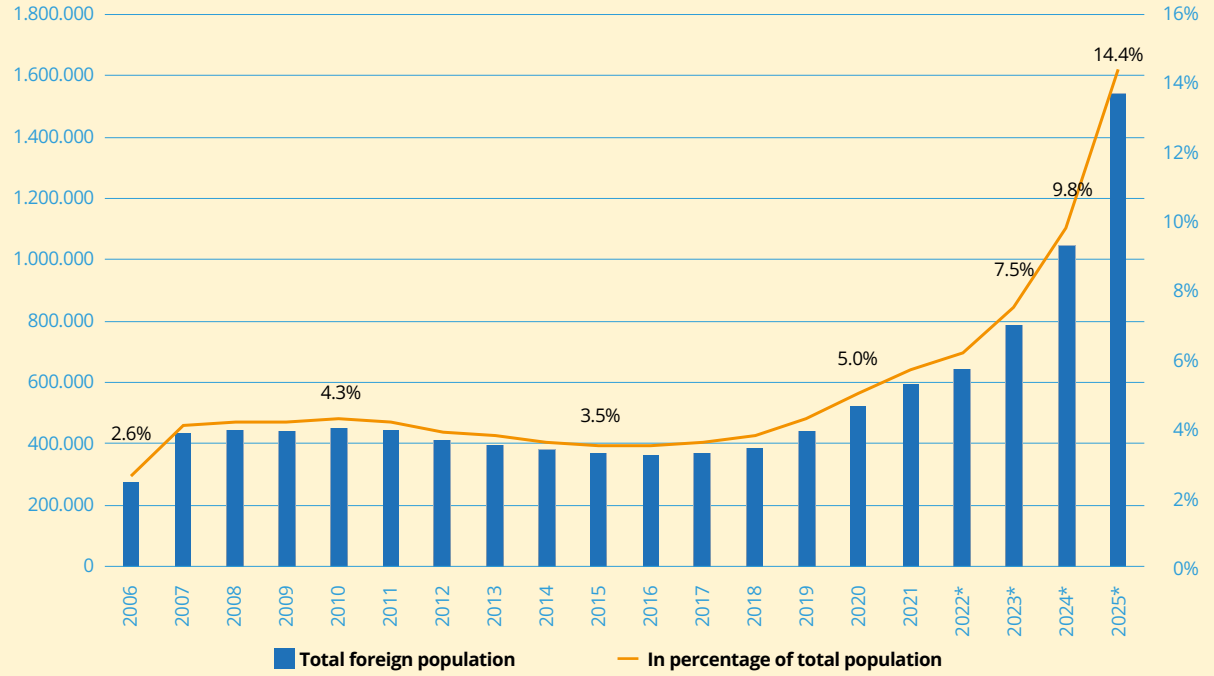
In Spain, by contrast, a comparable expansion of the foreign population occurred much earlier, with the number of foreign residents increasing from around 2 million in 2003 to approximately 5.4 million by 2010. This represented one of the largest and most rapid demographic transformations recorded in Europe until then, with Spain absorbing a disproportionately large share of migration flows into the EU during the 2000s. This trend came to a halt with the financial crisis, and only since 2018/19 – and in particular in the last three years – has Spain experienced a renewed period of immigration growth (see Figure 2).

3 This is especially true for Spain, where survey evidence is more readily available. Analyzing the Andalusian regional election of December 2018, Turnbull-Dugarte (2019) finds that concerns over immigration had no significant effect on individual support for VOX. Using panel data, Anduiza and Rico (2024) likewise show that anti-immigrant attitudes become electorally relevant only after the party had already gained parliamentary representation. Consistent with this interpretation, vanderWilden (2020), using a post-election survey from the November 2019 election (held after VOX entered parliament in April 2019) finds that concern over immigration is the strongest issue predictor of voting for VOX.

4 It should be noted that the figures for 2025 remain provisional and that, due to administrative backlogs in the processing of residence applications and other bureaucratic complications, Portuguese authorities are considering revising upward the official figures for previous years (so as to reflect the number of foreigners who were already present in Portugal but whose residence applications had not yet been processed).

5 The *manifestação de interesse* regularization mechanism allowed migrants to obtain residence permits on the basis of employment (or a job offer), including migrants who had entered the country without an appropriate visa. Legislative reforms in 2017 and 2019 facilitated access to this pathway. Blaming it for the "uncontrolled" growth of the foreign population, the new center-right government abolished this mechanism shortly after taking office in 2024.

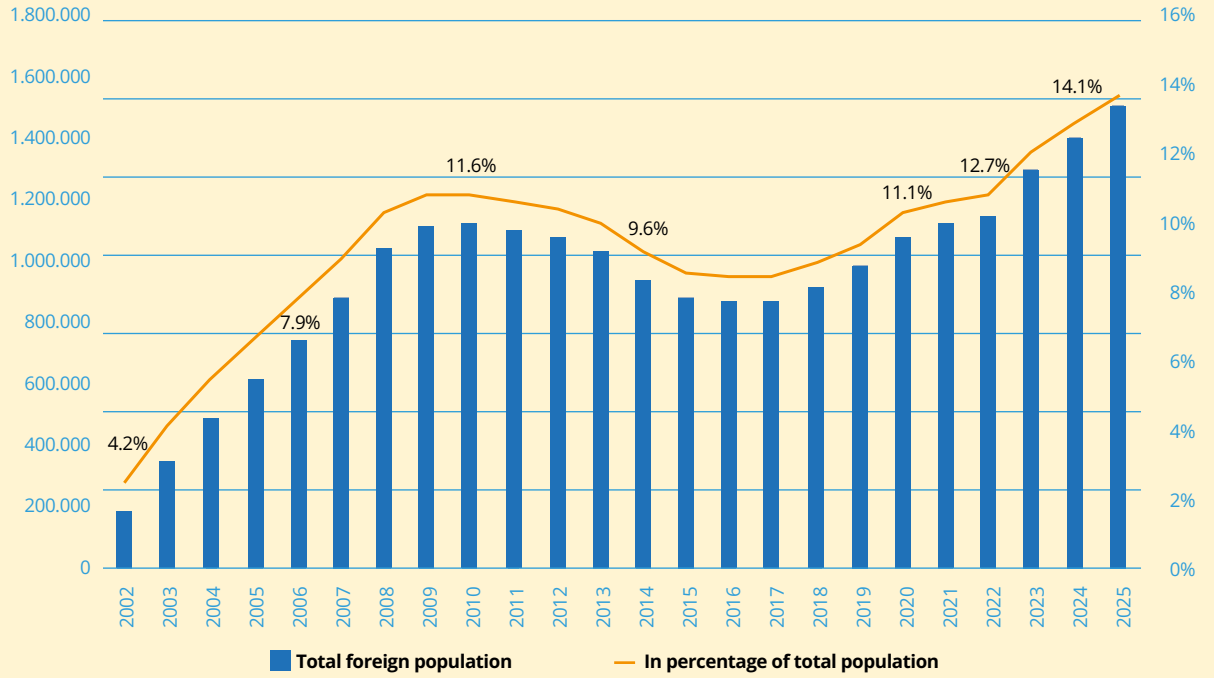
Fig. 1: Evolution of the stock of foreign population in Portugal (2006-2025)



*Note: *Values up to 2024 are taken from Eurostat. The 2025 value is a provisional estimate by AIMA (Agência para a Integração, Migrações e Asilo), the new Portuguese migration authority. AIMA has reported that the official figures for 2022-2024 will be revised upwards (see footnote 4). The large gap between 2024 and 2025 is thus partly artificial and may be revised.*

Source: Eurostat and AIMA. Author's own elaboration.

Fig. 2: Evolution of the stock of foreign population in Spain (2002-2025)



Source: Eurostat and INE (Instituto Nacional de Estadística). Author's own elaboration.

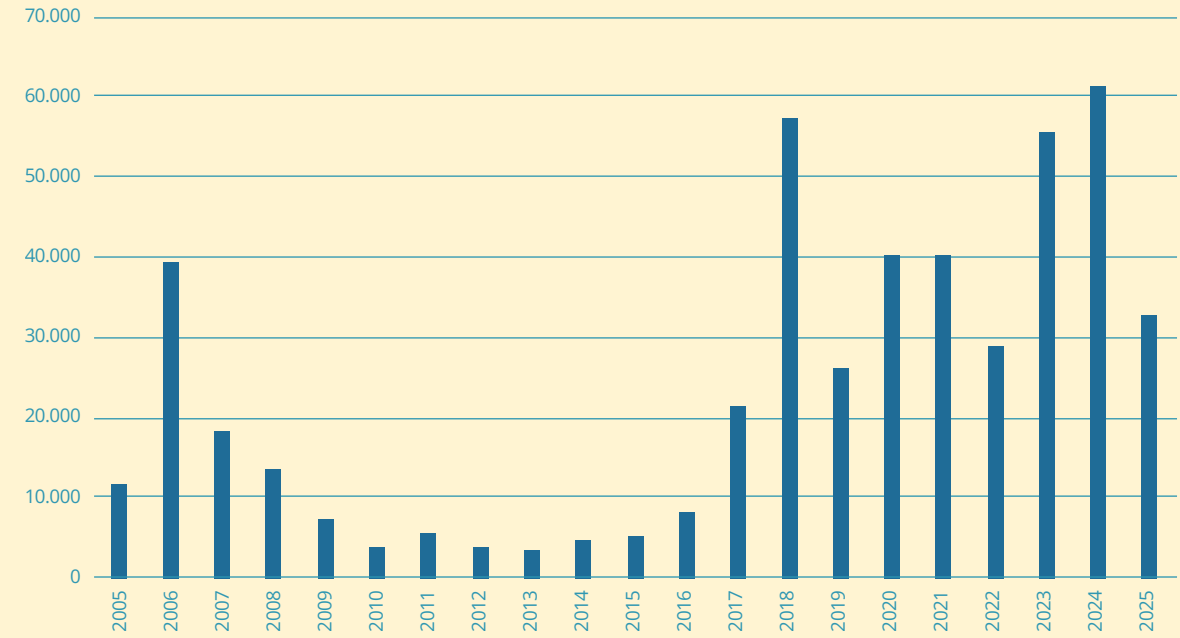
While these figures capture the evolution of the stock of foreign residents, this is only one part of the story in Spain. To understand the potential for a migration backlash, irregular arrivals – particularly by sea – are a more relevant part of the story. This phenomenon is largely absent in Portugal, likely reflecting its relative geographical distance from the main migration routes. Although the scale of these flows in Spain is modest compared to the overall growth of the resident foreign population, they attract disproportionate media coverage and political attention, particularly by VOX. Similar dynamics can be observed in countries like Greece and Italy, where far-right parties profit from the visibility of irregular sea arrivals to advance narratives of "invasion" and uncontrolled borders.

It is worth noting, however, that the evolution of migration flows to Spain differs from that of other Mediterranean countries (see Figure 3). Spain was largely unaffected by the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015-2016. It was only in 2018 that sea arrivals rose considerably, at a time when crossings via the Central Mediterranean route to Italy and Malta became more difficult. More recently, in 2023 and 2024, Spain experienced a new peak in irregular arrivals, with an estimated 115,000 people arriving by sea during these two years (see Figure 3). This surge was driven mainly by the growing use of the Atlantic / West African route to the Canary Islands, amid a broader rise in flows from West African countries (partly in connection with instability in the Sahel). The growing number of arrivals to the Canary Islands placed significant pressure on local reception capacity and generated visible political tensions, particularly over the redistribution of unaccompanied minors across mainland regions – an issue that prompted VOX to withdraw from coalition governments with the mainstream right in five regions in the summer of 2024.[6] It should be mentioned, though, that this phenomenon is not entirely new – Spain experienced a first peak in sea arrivals in 2006, during the so-called 'cayucos crisis' in the Canary Islands (Mendes 2019).

In addition to sea arrivals, migration has also periodically generated highly visible flashpoints that dominated media coverage for weeks. This was the case with the 2021 Morocco-Spain border incident – when Morocco relaxed border controls, allowing around 8,000 people to enter Ceuta within a few days –, the deadly mass crossing attempt at the Melilla border in June 2022, which resulted in dozens of deaths during clashes with security forces, and the more recent incidents of anti-migrant violence in Torre Pacheco (Murcia) in July 2025, where tensions between residents, migrants, and far-right groups led to several nights of clashes.

The extent to which all these episodes translate into greater public concern about immigration, on the one hand, and a higher probability of supporting the far right, on the other, is thus a relevant empirical question.

Fig. 3: Number of irregular migrants arrivals by sea in Spain (2005-2025)



Source: Spanish Ministry of the Interior. Author's own elaboration.

6 Unlike adult migrants, the reception of unaccompanied minors falls under the competence of the autonomous communities, making interregional distribution a more contentious issue.

3. PUBLIC OPINION AND IMMIGRATION

3.1 Public Salience

Before turning to immigration attitudes themselves, it is relevant to consider the public salience of immigration, that is, the importance the public attaches to the issue. The reason for this is straightforward: attitudes are likely to become politically consequential only when an issue is perceived as important. In other words, immigration preferences are unlikely to shape political behavior if the issue itself is considered unimportant. This is in line with a growing body of literature drawing attention to issue salience and highlighting that the relationship between citizens' immigration attitudes and support for far-right parties is stronger in periods when immigration is more salient (Schnaudt/Stecker 2022; Dennison/Geddes 2019). While general immigration attitudes tend to remain relatively stable, the importance attached to immigration as a political issue fluctuates a lot more, most commonly in response to factors such as media attention, migration flows (or other migration-related events), and/or political mobilization by relevant actors.

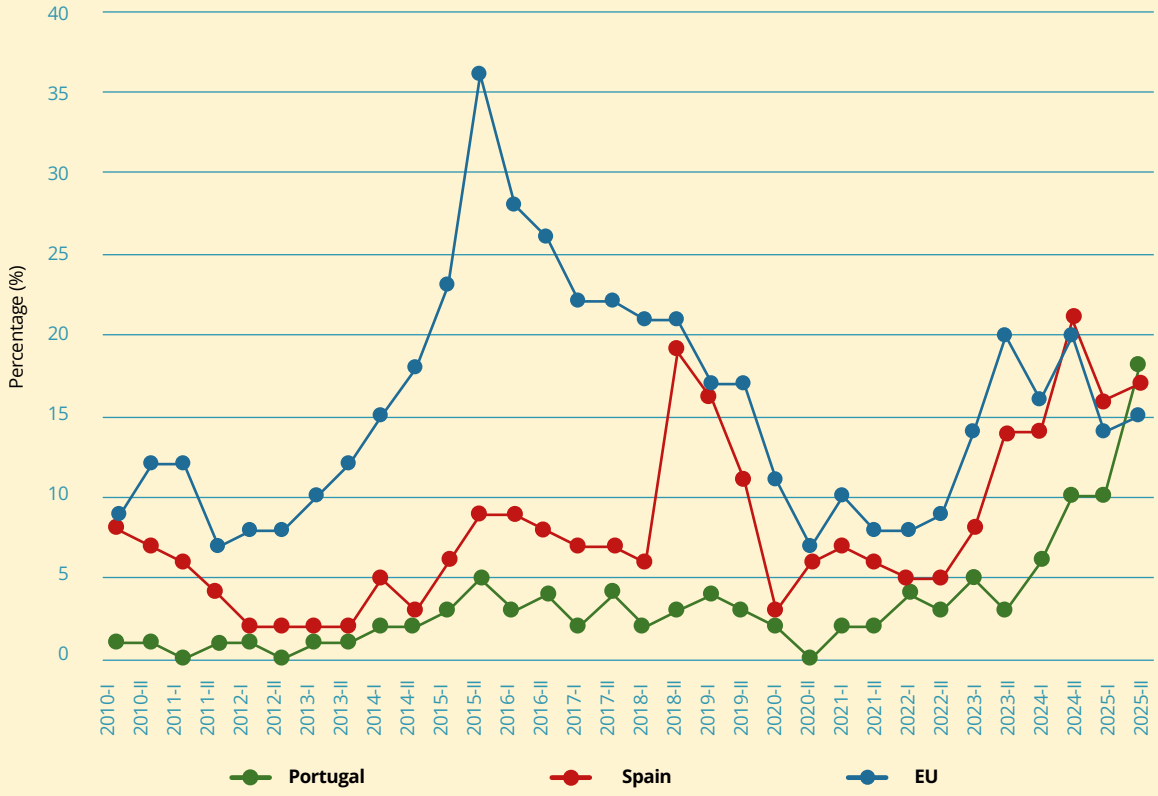
The standard Eurobarometer question asking respondents to identify the 'two most important issues facing the country' provides a useful starting point for assessing the public salience of immigration. Figure 4 shows the evolution of the share of respondents identifying immigration as one of the two most important issues facing the country in Portugal and Spain, as well as in the EU as a whole, over the period 2010-2025. Three features are particularly noteworthy. The first is that in both countries the public salience of immigration has increased markedly over the last two years. At its peak, around 20% of respondents identify immigration as one of the two most important issues facing the country. In Portugal, this coincides with the growing political and media attention surrounding the recent increase in the foreign population. In Spain, it coincides with the uptick in sea arrivals recorded in 2024. The second notable feature is that in earlier years both countries exhibited some of the lowest levels of public concern over immigration in the EU, largely escaping the sharp peak observed in 2015 in Europe (something which is consistent with the fact that they were comparatively unaffected by the 2015-2016 'refugee crisis'). In fact, Portugal stands out for consistently displaying some of the lowest levels of public concern in the EU throughout the whole period, with changes occurring only in 2024 and 2025. Finally, a third noteworthy feature is that – unlike Portugal –, Spain had already experienced earlier peaks in public concern about immigration. Particularly relevant is the sudden uptick registered in the second half of 2018, shortly before VOX's breakthrough on the political scene. This coincides with the sharp rise in irregular sea arrivals registered that year (see Figure 3), a moment when Spain's apparent welcoming stance on migration made headlines worldwide – most notably when the government of Pedro Sanchez reacted to Italy's decision to turn away the Aquarius rescue vessel, welcoming it in the port of Valencia in June 2018. While this alone does not constitute conclusive evidence that immigration was a defining factor behind the rise of VOX, it nonetheless suggests that the political opportunity for the party to mobilize on the issue had expanded.

Although it is probably too early to assess whether the recent increase in the evolution of the public salience of immigration reflects only a temporary fluctuation, this is already indicative of the fact that Portugal and Spain can no longer be considered exceptional when it comes to the (very) low salience traditionally associated with immigration.

More research is needed to disentangle the precise drivers of immigration salience, and in particular to assess whether far-right actors primarily 'ride the wave' of rising public concern or actively contribute to amplifying it. What these two cases do suggest is that contextual factors play an important role. In the Spanish case, it is clear that there is a close correspondence between peaks in irregular sea arrivals and peaks in immigration salience (see Figures 3 and 4). This relationship is certainly mediated by media coverage, which – as Silva et al. (2026) show – also increased in Spain at the same time that these two other factors peaked, in 2018 and 2024.[7] Given that immigration is largely a non-obtrusive issue – i.e., one that most people do not experience directly – the priming role of the media is considered particularly important (Carvalho et al. 2025). At the same time, the Portuguese case highlights the limits of media coverage as a standalone explanation. Although Silva et al. (2026) show an increase in media coverage in 2024, earlier periods with comparable coverage levels did not produce a corresponding rise in public concern. This suggests that media coverage alone is insufficient and that it is the combination of increased media attention and rising inflows – possibly compounded by the intensification of Chega's anti-immigration messaging – that accounts for the more recent shift. Disentangling these factors remains an interesting avenue for future research.

7 This echoes earlier work by Mendes (2019), who likewise documents a close alignment between sea arrivals, media salience, and public concern in Spain over a longer period of time. It is also consistent with broader evidence on the importance of the news environment in shaping public concern about immigration (Carvalho et al. 2025).

Fig. 4: Share citing immigration as one of the two most important issues (2010-2025)



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 73-103. Author's own elaboration.

3.2 Public Attitudes

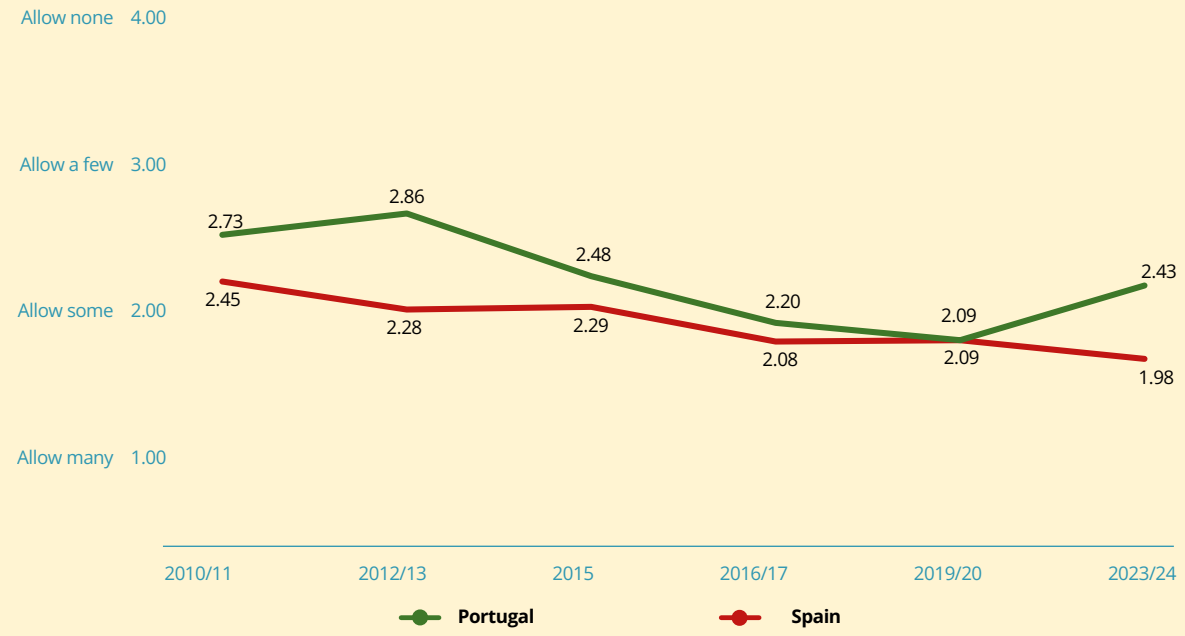
To assess the evolution of public attitudes toward migration, we draw on data from the European Social Survey (ESS), a large-scale survey conducted across Europe every two years. Known for its rigorous methodological standards, the ESS is particularly well suited for this analysis as it includes a stable set of questions on immigration attitudes over time. This includes general questions measuring openness to immigration or, more specifically, policy preferences regarding immigration levels – asking whether respondents think their countries should allow many, some, a few or no migrants (with different questions distinguishing migrants by origin) – as well as questions on the perceived impacts of immigration, where respondents evaluate its effects on the economy, cultural life, and overall quality of life in the country.

To trace the recent evolution of immigration attitudes, we include all ESS rounds since 2010, with the exception of Round 10 (2021/22), which was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and thus does not provide fully comparable data due to deviations from standard fieldwork methods in some countries, including in Spain. Of particular interest to the analysis is the comparison between Round 9 (2019/20) – conducted when the radical right had just achieved its parliamentary breakthrough – and Round 11 (2023/24), once it was already well-established and to a great extent 'normalized'.

Figure 5 provides a simple summary measure of overall openness to immigration over time, showing the evolution of mean attitudes in Spain and Portugal since 2010. The values are based on a composite indicator – henceforth referred to as *immigration attitudes index* – that averages the mean responses to three identical questions on whether immigrants should be allowed into the country, varying only by whether they are from (a) the same race or ethnic group, (b) a different race or ethnic group, or (c) poorer countries. The three items are highly correlated in both countries across all rounds, supporting their combination into a single index. Moreover, it is interesting to note that – in contrast to many European countries where respondents tend to be more open toward migrants from the same racial or ethnic group –, the mean scores on the three different items are closely aligned in both Portugal and Spain.

Two main patterns stand out. The first is that, while Portugal has typically exhibited considerably more negative attitudes than Spain, there was a clear convergence trend over the 2012-2020 period, as attitudes in Portugal steadily became more positive. By 2019/20, average attitudes in Portugal had converged with those in Spain – a country often identified as one of the European states with the least negative views on immigration. The second notable pattern is that this convergence is reversed in the most recent period, as Portugal shows a noticeable shift toward more restrictive views in 2023/24 – with

Fig. 5: Mean attitudes toward immigration (2010-2024)



Note: Values are based on the immigration attitudes index, which averages mean responses to three items asking whether the country should allow immigrants from the same ethnic group as the majority population, from a different ethnic group, and from poorer countries outside Europe. Attitudes are measured on a 1-4 scale, with higher values indicating more restrictive views (1 = allow many, 2= allow some, 3= allow a few, 4 = allow none). Means are weighted using the ESS analysis weight (anweight).

Source: European Social Survey (ESS), Rounds 5–11 (excluding Round 10). Author's own calculations.

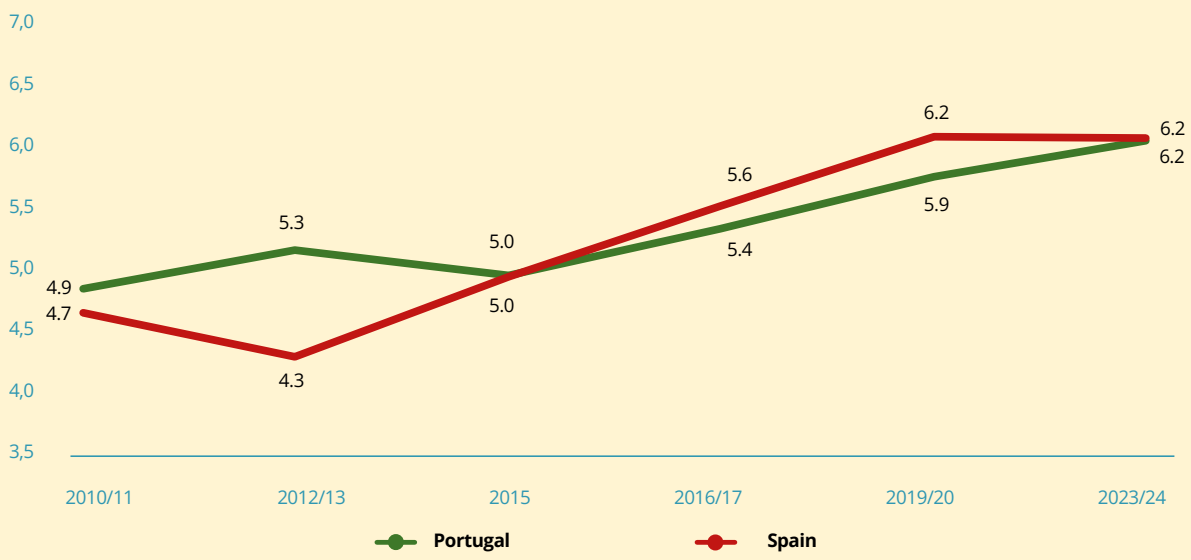
the mean increasing from 2.09 in 2019/20 to 2.43 in the latest ESS round (on a 1-4 scale, where 1= 'allow many', 2= 'allow some', 3= 'allow a few', and 4= 'allow none'). In contrast, average attitudes in Spain remain comparatively stable and consistently more favorable, fluctuating more modestly around lower (i.e. more pro-immigration) values. It is remarkable that, in Spain, neither the emergence and subsequent 'normalization' of VOX nor rising numbers of sea arrivals appear to have translated into more negative attitudes (or into a reduction in social desirability pressures to express negative opinions). The trend of steady liberalization in Spain appears unaltered by changing circumstances. Overall, this marks a clear divergence between the two cases in the most recent period, despite similar political contexts.

It is worth noting that this pattern is consistent across all individual survey items on immigration. Average attitudes in Portugal deteriorate markedly in 2023/24, following a period of convergence with Spain between 2012 and 2020. This trend also holds for questions on the perceived impacts of immigration, with one notable exception: immigration's impact on the national economy. When asked whether immigration is generally bad or good for the country's economy (on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0= 'bad' and 10= 'good'), Portuguese respondents express relatively positive views, with a mean score of 6.2 in 2023/24 (see Figure 6). This is the only indicator that does not show a deterioration vis-à-vis 2019/20, and the only one for which Portugal and Spain display identical average values in the most recent survey round. This suggests that the recent backlash against immigration in Portugal is not driven by its perceived economic impact, but rather occurs *despite* its generally positive perceived impact on the economy.

In comparative terms, this places the two Iberian countries as the fifth most positive European countries with regard to the perceived economic impact of immigration (in a survey round covering a total of 30 countries). In other respects, however, the two countries diverge markedly in 2023/24, after exhibiting clear similarities in 2019/20. The survey item on which Portuguese respondents express some of the most negative attitudes in 2023/24 concerns the perceived impact of immigration on whether it 'makes the country a worse or better place to live' (0=worse, 10=better). On this measure, Portugal ranks as the seventh most negative country in the survey (mean= 4.6), while Spain ranks as the seventh most positive (mean= 5.9). The contrast between the latest survey round and the one from 2019/20 is striking in the Portuguese case: at that time, Portugal ranked as the sixth most positive country (mean= 5.7).

While the limited number of survey items does not allow us to fully investigate the potential drivers behind the apparent backlash in Portugal, they do provide some indication that certain explanations have less purchase.

Fig. 6: Mean perceived economic impact of immigration (2010-2024)



Note: Results based on the survey question: 'Would you say it is generally bad or good for [country]'s economy that people come to live here from other countries?'. Responses are measured on a 0-10 scale, with higher values indicating more positive views (0=bad for the economy; 10=good for the economy). Means are weighted using the ESS analysis weight (anweight).

Source: European Social Survey (ESS), Rounds 5–11 (excluding Round 10). Author's own calculations.

This applies most clearly to explanations based on the perceived economic impact of immigration. The role of ethnic and racial background is harder to assess from ESS data alone, as the relevant items might be too general to capture meaningful distinctions between migrant groups. Evidence from studies that ask about specific geographical origins suggest, in fact, that opposition to immigration varies considerably by regions of origin. A recent survey shows that migrants from the Indian subcontinent (India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh) face the greatest levels of opposition – with 61% of respondents indicating that migration from this region should be reduced; this is in stark contrast to the 25% who hold the same view about migrants from Western countries (Lopes et al. 2024). This pattern is broadly consistent with perceptions of cultural distance: 81% of respondents consider migrants from the Indian subcontinent to be very different in their customs and traditions, while only 16% say the same about Western migrants (Lopes et al. 2024). This indicates that opposition to immigration is not uniform and that the specific geographical/cultural origin of migrants structures attitudes in a way that generalized racial or ethnic categories fail to capture. Nevertheless, while perceived cultural distance is one relevant factor, it does not explain all variation: opposition to Brazilian immigration, for instance, stands at 50% despite only 24% of respondents perceiving Brazilians as culturally very different (Lopes et al. 2024). This suggests that perceived cultural distance is one relevant factor structuring restrictionist attitudes, but it is unlikely to be the only one.

In light of the rapid growth of the share of respondents who believe 'immigration makes the country a worse place to live', future research should focus on whether this perception is driven by the scale of immigration alone or whether it reflects more specific concerns about the (non-economic) impacts of immigration – most notably, its perceived effects on public services. Given the very high levels of public concern about the state of the healthcare system and housing affordability in Portugal – the top two concerns of the Portuguese in recent surveys (Mendes 2025) –, the extent to which immigration is seen as compounding these pressures deserves closer investigation.

4. POLARIZATION AND IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDES

Because the analysis above focuses only on mean attitudes, it is relevant to consider whether averages may be concealing significant variation within the population. As the growth of the radical right is often associated with increased polarization, it is possible that mean attitudes obscure parallel shifts toward the extremes – whereby an increase in unfavorable attitudes among some segments of the population is, at least in part, matched by increases in positive attitudes among other segments (particularly those who strongly oppose the far right). González Enríquez and Rinken (2021) suggest that this may be occurring in Spain, based on a comparison between a survey from 2020 and different surveys filled in earlier years. If this is true, the apparent stability – or

slight increase in favorability – of public attitudes toward immigration in Spain should be interpreted with caution, as it may not be uniform across the population.

To investigate whether there are signs of increased polarization in the population, one straightforward approach is to examine whether a growing share of respondents selects extreme values on questions measuring openness to immigration. Figure 7 displays the distribution of attitudes toward immigration across the four different categories that respondents can choose from, and how this distribution has evolved since 2015.

Notably, there is no evidence of increased polarization. Rather than a growing share of respondents taking more extreme positions, the data shows a clear unidirectional shift: toward more liberal attitudes in Spain, and an overall restrictive shift in Portugal in 2023/24. In other words, signs of classic polarization – understood as simultaneous growth at both extremes – are largely absent, as changes occur predominantly on one side of the spectrum only.

In Portugal, increases in the share of respondents selecting the most liberal categories ('allow many' and 'allow some') in 2016/17 and 2019/20 were mirrored by comparable declines in the share of respondents choosing the most restrictive categories, indicating an overall trend toward more liberal (or less restrictive) opinions. This pattern reverses sharply in 2023/24, when growth is observed only in the most restrictive categories, marking a clear break from earlier (more gradual) trends.

In Spain, by contrast, the overall trend is one of gradual liberalization. The only 'extreme' category that registers some noticeable growth is the liberal one ('allow many'). Even if the liberalization trend appears to come to a temporary halt in 2019/20, shifts within the middle categories show that the broader trajectory remains one of increasingly positive attitudes. In other words, the growing public and political presence of VOX does not seem to be accompanied by growing polarization in immigration attitudes.

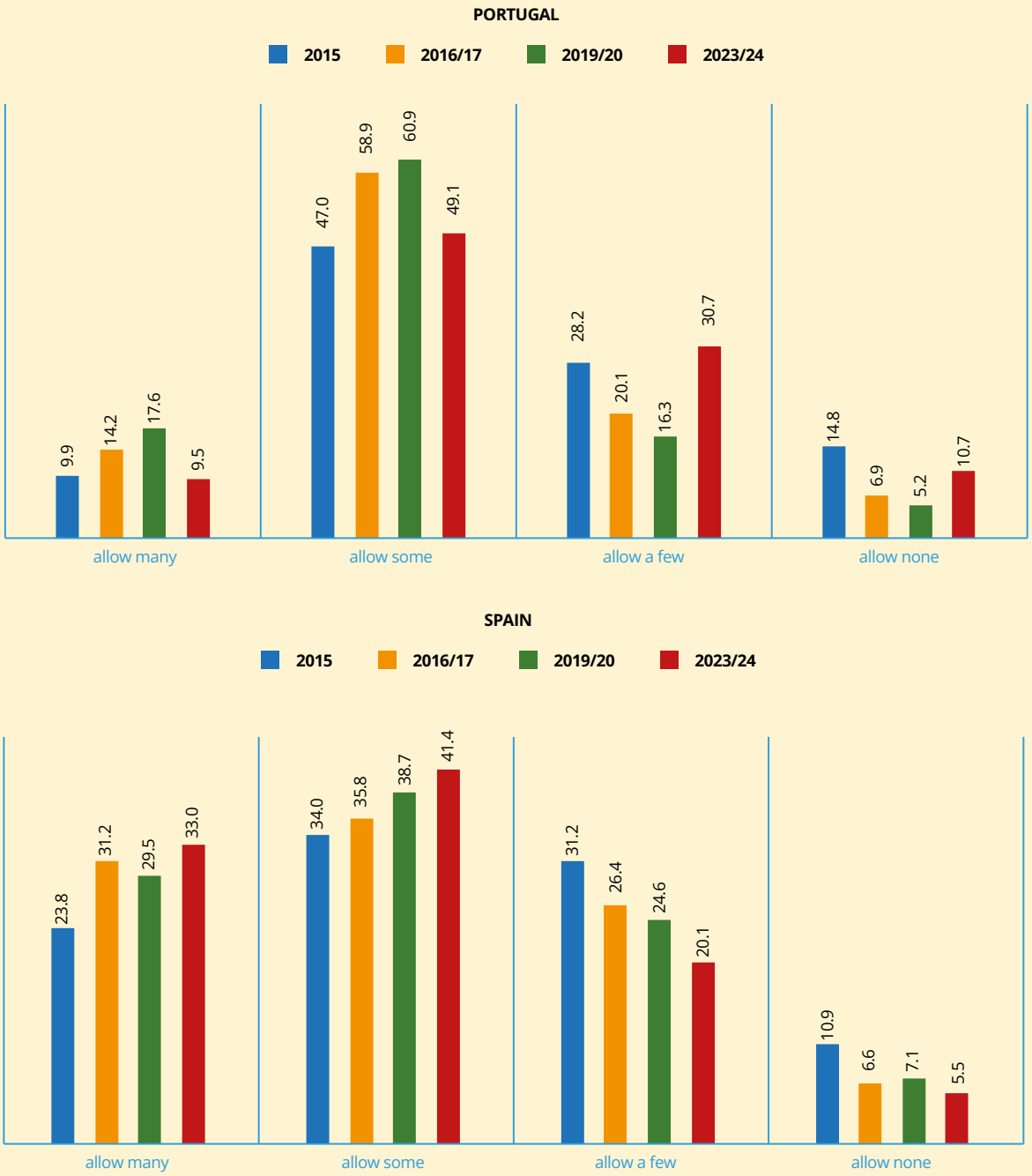
A distinct way to assess potential ideological polarization is to examine whether attitudes toward immigration have become more strongly aligned with individuals' ideological self-placement over time. Even in the absence of increasing polarization in the distribution of responses, a strengthening association between ideology and immigration attitudes would suggest that people's views on immigration are becoming more closely tied to their ideological orientation, with individuals on the left and right becoming more divided in their respective positions.

Here too, the findings reveal a more complex picture than anticipated. In Portugal, there is only a weak and statistically uncertain relationship between left-right ideology and immigration attitudes. While Figure 8 suggests a gradually strengthening positive association over time, the magnitude of this association remains small throughout and the confidence intervals are wide and largely overlap – meaning that changes over time cannot be interpreted with confidence. That said, while the relationship between the two variables is not statistically distinguishable from zero prior to 2019 (as the confidence bands touch zero), there is evidence of a modest positive association from 2019 onwards: a one-point move to the right on the left-right scale is associated with a 0.04-point increase on the 1-4 immigration restrictiveness scale, both in 2019 and 2023/24. This coincides with the period around Chega's emergence, which had just elected a single representative to parliament when the 2019 survey was conducted in Portugal.[8] However, contrary to expectations, the relationship does not appear to become stronger in the latest survey round, once Chega is more firmly established and its anti-immigration stances better known to the general public. Overall, immigration attitudes have never been strongly structured by left-right ideology in Portugal, and the data does not allow us to conclude with confidence that this has changed. These findings are consistent with prior research showing that left-right placement in Portugal is only weakly anchored to concrete policy attitudes – in part because meanings attached to 'left' and 'right' are often not clear and widely shared (Freire/Belchior 2011). The fact that immigration attitudes appear only modestly aligned with ideological outlook suggests a degree of continuity with these earlier patterns, despite the recent rise of more explicitly ideological actors.

Spain, on the other hand, shows a substantially stronger relationship between left-right ideology and immigration attitudes – in line with broader trends in Western Europe. Throughout the whole period under analysis, the regression coefficients are consistently larger than in Portugal and distinguishable from zero, indicating that immigration attitudes are clearly structured along ideological lines. Figure 8 shows that this association grows stronger in 2019/20, coinciding with the period following VOX's electoral breakthrough. This is in line with the findings of González Enríquez and Rinken (2021), who use ESS data and a different survey filled in Spain in 2020 to show that there is a growing divergence of attitudes toward immigration based on ideological positions – with left-wing respondents becoming more favorable, and right-wing respondents more unfavorable. Nevertheless, and contrary to expectations, the relationship between the two variables declines again in the 2023/24 round, remaining broadly within the range observed in earlier years. In 2023/24, a one-point move to the right on the left-right scale is associated with a 0.09-point increase in immigration restrictiveness. In other words, moving from the far left (0) to the far right (10) corresponds to almost a one-point difference on

8 The ESS fieldwork period for Portugal in Round 9 started in late October 2019 and ended in December 2019. This is shortly after the general election of 6 October 2019, when Chega first elected one (single) representative, with 1.3% of the popular vote.

Fig. 7: Distribution of attitudes toward immigration in Portugal and Spain (2015-2024)



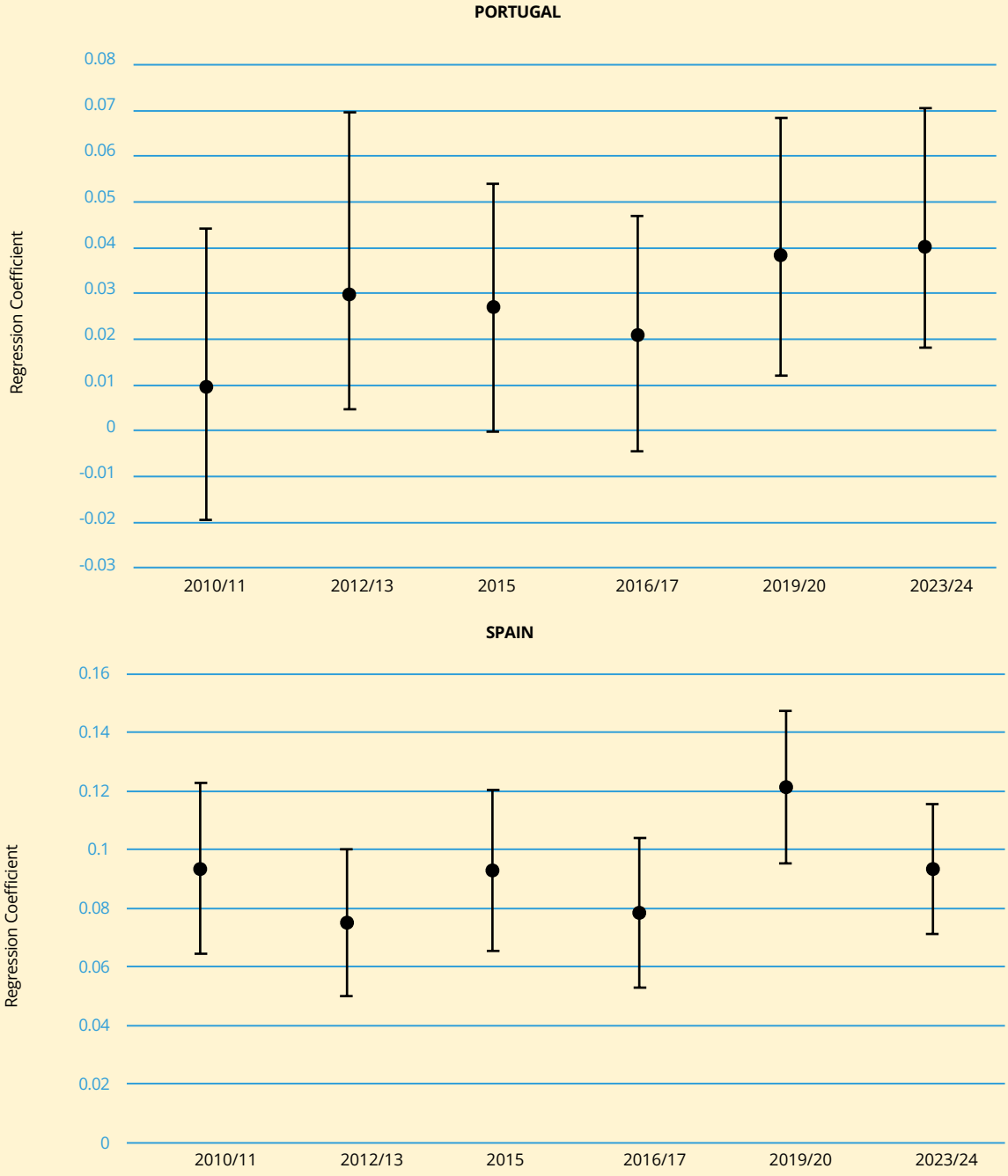
Note: Values are based on the immigration attitudes index (see note to Figure 5). For each category, values represent the average share of respondents across the three survey items included in the immigration attitudes index.

Source: European Social Survey (ESS), Rounds 7–11 (excluding Round 10). Author's own calculations.

the 1-4 immigration scale. This indicates that, even as the relationship subsides in comparison to 2019/20, a pronounced ideological divide remains. Overall, immigration attitudes in Spain already appeared strongly and persistently aligned with ideological positioning prior to VOX's breakthrough, with a temporary intensification around the period in which the party emerged, but without a sustained upward trend.

Overall, these findings offer only limited support for expectations of a sustained increase in ideological polarization around immigration. The absence of a *growing* polarization trend should not, however, be taken to imply that polarization is absent altogether. In a recent study of eight European countries, Vorländer et al. (2025) find that Spain is the most ideologically polarized country in the sample, owing to greater dispersion of opinions on immigration than in the other countries surveyed.

Fig. 8: Immigration attitudes and left-right placement in Portugal and Spain (2010-2024)



Note: Regression coefficients are from bivariate OLS regressions of the immigration attitudes index on left-right self-placement (0-10 scale), weighted using the ESS analysis weight (anweight). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Source: European Social Survey (ESS), Rounds 5–11 (excluding Round 10). Author's own calculations.

Interestingly, this does not translate into comparatively high levels of *affective* polarization – that is, animosity toward those holding different views –, as Spain emerges as the least affectively polarized country in the study. Though this appears contradictory at first, it may simply reflect the fact that immigration has historically been a less salient political issue in Spain than in other European countries. This may allow for greater diversity of opinions without triggering the affective responses that tend to accompany sustained elite-level polarization.

5. IMMIGRATION ATTITUDES AND FAR-RIGHT VOTING

Beyond general ideological alignment, it is also relevant to assess whether (anti-)immigration attitudes have become more closely linked to support for far-right parties. Even in the absence of an increasingly strong alignment between immigration attitudes and general left-right placement, it is plausible that such attitudes are more strongly associated with far-right voting specifically. There are various reasons to expect this association to

be stronger today than at the time of these parties' initial parliamentary breakthrough.

The first is the increasing public salience of immigration in recent years, particularly in the Portuguese context, where it had not previously been a salient issue. As Chega is visibly paying more attention to immigration today than it was in the past, it is likely that this issue has become more important in structuring the political behavior of its voters. A similar dynamic may apply to VOX, but for different reasons: given that the context of its parliamentary breakthrough in 2019 was heavily shaped by the Catalan independence challenge – an issue which is less salient today –, it is possible that its earlier voters had a more diversified profile on immigration attitudes.

Additionally, the consolidation of these parties likely strengthens the link between anti-immigration attitudes and far-right support for the reason that, as they become established, they gain the necessary time and visibility to more consistently communicate their core messages and establish 'issue ownership' over immigration, thereby reinforcing the public perception that anti-immigration positions are central to their identity. Finally, repeated exposure to far-right messaging may simply reinforce anti-immigration attitudes among the parties' supporters, further strengthening the link between immigration attitudes and far-right voting.

To test for this association and its evolution over time, we draw on two different rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS). For Spain, we compare data from 2019/20 (ESS Round 9) – shortly after VOX's parliamentary breakthrough – with data from 2024 (ESS Round 11). For Portugal, we are severely constrained by the absence of Chega voters in ESS Round 9 and, for that reason, we draw on ESS Round 10 (2021/22) instead, comparing it with the last round in 2023/24. It should be noted, though, that the problem of small sample sizes persists, as the ESS Round 10 sample contains only 20 Chega voters, which limits the reliability of any estimates drawn from this group. Sample size is less of concern in other rounds, but nevertheless the number of far-right voters remains limited, which is why this analysis avoids introducing any covariates, focusing only on the bivariate association between immigration attitudes and far-right voting.

The analysis proceeds in two distinct steps. First, it examines whether far-right voters hold more restrictive views on immigration compared to the rest of the electorate, and whether the gap between the two groups has widened over time. For this purpose, we simply compare the mean scores on the immigration attitudes index for the two groups at each time point: a large gap between the two confirms that far-right voters are distinctively more anti-immigration, while an increase in this gap across rounds would be consistent with the expectations outlined above. In a second step, we complement the mean comparison with a bivariate regression of far-right vote choice on the immigration attitudes index, which provides a more direct assessment of the degree to which immigration attitudes predict the probability of voting for the far right. In other words, the bivariate regression shows that the association holds not just at the level of group averages, but across the full distribution of attitudes. A larger and more precisely estimated regression coefficient across rounds indicates a stronger

Tab. 2: Immigration attitudes and far-right voting

	Mean immigration attitudes			**Regression coefficient**
	Far-Right voters	Rest of the electorate	Difference (Far Right – rest of the electorate)	
Spain				
ESS9 (2019/20)	2.81	1.99	0.82	0.094*** (0.014)
ESS11 (2024)	2.43	1.92	0.51	0.045*** (0.011)
Portugal				
ESS10 (2021/22)	2.61	2.15	0.46	0.032** (0.015)
ESS11 (2023/24)	2.76	2.38	0.38	0.046*** (0.015)

*Note: Mean immigration attitudes are based on the immigration attitudes index (see note to Figure 5). Attitudes are measured on a 1-4 scale, with higher values indicating more restrictive views. Regression coefficients are from bivariate OLS regressions of far-right vote choice (0/1) on the immigration attitudes index, weighted using the ESS analysis weight (anweight). * p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01.*

Source: European Social Survey (ESS), Rounds 9-11. Author's own calculations.

role for immigration attitudes in structuring vote choice.

Table 2 presents the results of both steps of the analysis. The mean comparison confirms that far-right voters hold considerably more restrictive views on immigration than the rest of the electorate across all rounds and in both countries. In the same vein, the regression coefficients confirm that immigration attitudes are a meaningful predictor of the probability of far-right voting. However, neither step supports the expectation of a strengthening association across time – in fact, the opposite appears to be the case.

The changes in mean attitudes show that, rather than widening over time, the gap between far-right voters and the rest of the electorate has in fact narrowed in both cases. The difference is more substantial in Spain, where the gap narrows from 0.82 in 2019 to 0.51 in 2023/24. In Portugal, the gap is more modest and it narrows only slightly. Crucially, the narrowing of this gap – which nonetheless remains substantial in both cases – is driven by different dynamics. In Spain, the convergence is almost entirely driven by far-right voters becoming less restrictive (while the rest of the electorate barely moved). In Portugal, both groups become more restrictive – in line with the general restrictionist shift described above –, with the rest of the electorate shifting slightly more than Chega voters (who were already quite restrictive to begin with).

In the Spanish case, the change in regression coefficients is consistent with the shift in mean attitudes, indicating that immigration attitudes are a weaker predictor of VOX voting in the later period than they were in 2019. While estimates remain statistically significant – suggesting that immigration attitudes continue to be a meaningful predictor of far-right voting –, the strength of this association declines substantially. These results suggest that anti-immigrant attitudes were a more central driver of far-right voting in Spain in 2019 than we initially assumed. One possible interpretation for the declining strength of this association is that the party's electorate has actually become less exclusively defined by this issue, as the party potentially incorporated a more diverse group of voters motivated by a broader set of concerns. It is important to note, however, that the nature of the data does not allow us to determine whether there are indeed compositional changes within the party's electorate or whether these changes reflect shifts in individual attitudes. Results are more ambiguous in the Portuguese case. The regression coefficient increases and gains precision in 2023/24, even as the mean gap narrows, suggesting that immigration attitudes become a stronger predictor of Chega voting. However, the comparison across rounds should be interpreted with considerable caution given the small sample size of Chega voters in the earlier round. What the Portuguese results do support, more modestly, is the finding that immigration attitudes are a meaningful predictor of Chega vote choice in 2023/24, consistent with the party's emphasis on the issue documented earlier.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the relationship between anti-immigration attitudes and far-right voting is real and detectable in both countries, but has not strengthened in the way anticipated. One relevant caveat concerns the timing of the most recent ESS round, which may not yet capture the attitudinal and behavioral consequences of the recent increase in the public salience of immigration. Fieldwork in Portugal was conducted between September 2023 and February 2024, and in Spain between February and June 2024 – prior to the peak in immigration-related concerns observed in the second half of 2024 in Spain and in 2025 in Portugal (see Figure 4). It is thus plausible that a future survey round may tell a somewhat different story.

6. CONCLUSION

After briefly contextualizing recent political and demographic dynamics in Spain and Portugal, this report set out to examine whether these developments are leaving an imprint on public opinion on immigration. Against the backdrop of the rapid rise of radical right forces and a growing migrant population, it asked whether there is evidence of increasing public concern, a hardening of attitudes, increased polarization, and a strengthening link between anti-immigration attitudes and far-right voting. The findings reveal a nuanced and, in some respects, unexpected picture.

On the one hand, the evidence confirms the expectation that the public has recently grown increasingly concerned with migration, and that both countries can no longer be considered exceptional when it comes to the public salience of the issue. After years of comparatively low concern relative to the rest of Europe (with some occasional exceptions in Spain), immigration has become a visibly more prominent topic. While it is not possible to determine whether this is the result of changing migration realities, the political mobilization of the issue, or other factors – such as increased media attention to immigration –, it is likely that such dynamics reinforce one another.

On the other hand, the translation of changing political and demographic dynamics into attitudinal change is far from uniform across the two countries. While data from 2023/24 shows that Portugal is undergoing a restrictive shift in public attitudes – breaking with the liberalization trend observed in the preceding decade –, Spain presents a strikingly different trajectory, as public attitudes have continued to evolve in a more favorable direction. Such shifts appear to be broad-based rather than polarized, affecting the population as a whole rather than concentrating at the extremes. In the Portuguese case, the restrictive shift does not appear to be driven by perceptions of economic harm, as Portuguese respondents continue to view the economic impact of immigration favorably. Instead, available evidence suggests that the

backlash is stronger against groups perceived to be more culturally distant – though not exclusively confined to these (Lopes et al. 2024). That said, an important caveat is that the observed shift toward more restrictive attitudes in Portugal may not solely reflect a genuine change in underlying preferences, but may also capture a decrease in social desirability pressures – that is, a greater openness among respondents to express views that were previously suppressed due to their perceived social stigmatization (Valentim 2024).

The analysis of polarization and ideological sorting shows that, against expectations, the consolidation of the far-right does not appear to have translated into a sustained increase in ideological polarization around immigration. In Spain, immigration attitudes were already well structured along ideological lines before and, while this alignment temporarily becomes sharper during the period of VOX's emergence, it later returns to previous levels. In Portugal, the relationship between left-right placement and immigration attitudes remains weak.

This does not mean that far-right parties do not profit from the issue electorally. In fact, the positive association between anti-immigration attitudes and far-right vote choice is clearly present in both countries. However, contrary to our expectations, the most recent survey data (2023/24) does not confirm our expectation that this association became stronger over time. In fact, far-right voters appear to follow broader trends, becoming relatively less restrictive in Spain and more restrictive in Portugal. In Spain, this may simply be a reflection of VOX's electorate becoming more diverse. In Portugal, small sample sizes in earlier rounds prevent us from drawing firm conclusions about changes over time, but the most recent survey data confirms that immigration attitudes are a meaningful predictor of Chega vote choice – even if the broader electorate has become more restrictive too.

Overall, these findings caution against assuming that the rise of far-right parties – and a changing migration landscape – automatically produce consistent shifts in public opinion. The Spanish case demonstrates that a far-right party can consolidate its position without this being accompanied by a visible hardening of opinion on its signature issue, even among its own electorate. The Portuguese case, instead, illustrates that an attitudinal backlash against migration extends well beyond far-right supporters and is not well structured along ideological lines. Thus, despite broadly similar political developments, the divergent trajectories of the two countries underscore the importance of country-specific dynamics.

Potential reasons behind this divergence warrant further investigation. There are various plausible explanations, all of which may contribute to account for the observed patterns. One potentially important factor is that migration realities – and their *timing* – may differ sufficiently between the two countries to produce distinct effects at the present time. In Portugal, the recent and exceptionally rapid growth of the migrant population is largely a novel phenomenon, which is likely generating a more immediate sense of demographic change and 'group threat'. This is in contrast to Spain's earlier – and by now more absorbed – transformation into an 'immigration country'. Crucially, these developments unfold in different political contexts. In Portugal, rapid and novel demographic change coincides with the presence of strong political actors actively seeking to mobilize immigration-related anxieties. By contrast, the rapid growth of the migrant population in Spain in the early 2000s occurred in a context without significant far-right actors and with lower levels of politicization. While ESS data shows a modest growth of negative opinions in Spain in 2008/2009, this shift was more limited than in the Portuguese case at the present time. Spain's earlier transformation into an 'immigration country' may have allowed for processes of adaptation and contact to take place over time, contributing to more consolidated and positive attitudes among the public nowadays. In this context, the recent increase in sea arrivals – which is not an entirely new phenomenon in Spain – may be insufficient to heighten perceptions of group threat.

In addition, these dynamics are likely conditioned by pre-existing differences in baseline attitudes. ESS data show that Spanish respondents have consistently held more open attitudes toward immigration than their Portuguese counterparts – this was, in fact, already evident in the first survey round in 2002. Given that the two countries share broadly similar historical trajectories – both experiencing a significant emigration wave in the 1960s and transitions from authoritarian rule in the 1970s –, historical factors alone do not appear to offer much explanatory leverage. A more plausible account is that attitudes toward immigration in Spain are shaped by the country's own internal cultural and linguistic diversity, which may foster greater sensitivity to pluralism and a corresponding rejection of exclusionary nationalism. While this remains speculative, it is clear that the two countries started from different baselines, which may have implications for how changing migration realities and far-right messaging on immigration are received by the broader public in the first place.

Finally, another potentially relevant factor concerns the different media landscapes. Recent work by Silva et al. (2026) shows that the main newspaper outlets in the two countries do not cover their respective far-right parties equally: while Chega and its leader are given disproportionate attention in Portugal, the same does not appear to hold for VOX in Spain. Although this asymmetry does not straightforwardly translate into higher levels of media coverage of immigration in Portugal, it may indicate that Chega has been more successful in placing its views on immigration on the public agenda – a hypothesis that warrants further investigation.

From a more practical standpoint, these findings suggest that neither the rise of far-right parties nor changing migration realities produce automatic or uniform effects on public opinion. Despite broadly similar historical and political contexts, the divergent trajectories observed in Portugal and Spain serve as a cautionary tale against assuming that similar developments will produce similar outcomes across different countries. The specific conditions under which an attitudinal backlash does or does not emerge therefore warrant closer attention. The divergence between the two countries points in particular to the importance of pre-existing attitudes and to the political context under which rapid demographic change unfolds, but future research should consider additional factors too. In particular, the fact that rapid demographic change in Portugal is occurring alongside visible strain in the public healthcare system and growing concerns about housing affordability, raises the possibility that immigration is perceived as compounding these pressures.

Furthermore, the finding that the Portuguese backlash is not driven by economic perceptions suggests that public communications strategies centered exclusively on the economic benefits of migration, while certainly important, are likely to be insufficient in addressing growing restrictionist sentiment. The fact that more negative attitudes are particularly pronounced toward migrants from the Indian subcontinent points to the importance of perceived cultural distance in shaping public responses. This suggests that policy and communication strategies should not only address material concerns, but also engage more directly with issues of social perception and integration – for instance, by promoting meaningful intergroup contact, targeted integration initiatives, and countering negative stereotypes in public discourse.

That said, an important caveat is that the evidence presented here captures only a snapshot of public opinion at a specific moment in time. It remains unclear whether the observed backlash in Portugal reflects only a temporary reaction to rapid change or the beginning of a more durable – and potentially increasingly restrictive – shift. Continued monitoring will therefore be essential to assess how these dynamics evolve over time.

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