



INSTITUTO
UNIVERSITÁRIO
DE LISBOA

Perception on the youth on the actual State of liberal Democracy
in Galicia, Euskadi and Catalunya

Martín Salvado Carrillo

Master in Political Economy

Supervisor: María Asensio, Invited Assistant Professor, ISCTE-
Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

Outubro, 2025



CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS
E HUMANAS

Department of Political Economy

Perception of the youth on the actual State of liberal Democracy in
Galicia, Euskadi and Catalunya

Martín Salvado Carrillo

Master in Political Economy

Supervisor: María Asensio, Invited Assistant Professor, ISCTE-
Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

Outubro, 2025

Acknowledgments

This dissertation is, above all, for my parents. Because of them, I am the person I am today. Their love, support, and trust in me have shaped every step of my journey, and without them, this work simply wouldn't probably exist.

My deepest gratitude also goes to my supervisor, Professor María Asensio, for her guidance and patience. Your advice and encouragement have been fundamental in shaping this dissertation, and your confidence in my work gave me the courage to keep going.

To Tania, thank you for your infinite patience and support during these long months of solitary work. You tolerated me even when I couldn't tolerate myself.

Finally, thanks to my brother and friends. Your emotional support and humour made the journey more tolerable.

Resumo

Esta dissertação analisa como os jovens da Galiza, Euskadi e Catalunha percebem o estado atual da democracia liberal na Espanha. Com base numa concepção minimalista de democracia e utilizando métodos quantitativos e qualitativos, o estudo investiga o impacto da descentralização, da identidade territorial e das condições materiais na satisfação democrática da juventude. São analisados o enfraquecimento dos partidos tradicionais, o crescimento do populismo e a queda da confiança nas instituições, especialmente entre as gerações mais jovens. Os resultados indicam que a desafeição política juvenil é moldada não apenas por fatores institucionais, mas também por desafios socioeconômicos e dinâmicas regionais. Este trabalho contribui para o debate mais amplo sobre a legitimidade democrática em estados multinacionais marcados pela desigualdade econômica e fragmentação política.

Palavras-Chave: Democracia Liberal, Percepção da Juventude, Geração Z, Nações Históricas, Desafeição Política, Descentralização, Identidade Territorial, Populismo, Neoliberalismo, Condições Materiais, Legitimidade Democrática, Pesquisa de Métodos Mistos, Confiança Institucional

Abstract

This dissertation explores how young people in Galicia, Euskadi, and Catalonia perceive the current state of liberal democracy in Spain. Drawing on a minimalist conception of democracy and combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the study investigates the impact of decentralization, territorial identity, and material conditions on youth democratic satisfaction. It analyses the erosion of traditional party systems, the rise of populism, and declining trust in institutions, particularly among younger generations. The findings suggest that political disaffection among youth is shaped not only by institutional factors but also by socio-economic challenges and regional dynamics. This work contributes to the broader debate on democratic legitimacy in multinational states facing economic inequality and political fragmentation.

Keywords: Liberal Democracy, Youth Perception, Generation Z, Historical Nations, Political Disaffection, Decentralization, Territorial Identity, Populism, Neoliberalism, Material Conditions, Democratic Legitimacy, Mixed-Methods Research, Institutional Trust

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Literature Review	2
2.1 A Minimalist Conception of Democracy.....	2
2.2 The Signs of a Crisis of Democracy.....	3
2.2.1 Erosion of the Traditional Party Systems	3
2.2.1.1 A Look into the Spanish Case	4
2.2.1.2 Comparative Reflection	5
2.2.2 Rise of Populism and Its Link with Democracy.....	6
2.2.2.1 Structural and Cultural Factors in the Rise of Populism	6
2.2.2.2 Implications of Populism	7
2.2.3 Youth and Declining Support for Democracy	7
2.2.3.1 Socio-Economic Context of the Youth in Spain and Perception of Democracy: A Causal Relation	8
2.2.3.2 Youth Participation Beyond Electoral and Survey-Based Measures	10
2.3 Decentralization	11
2.3.1 Decentralization in Spain: a Winding Way	11
2.4 Territorial Dimensions of Youth Perception of Democracy in Spain	12
2.4.1 Territorial Dimensions and Affective Polarization	13
2.5 Structural and Socio-economic Drivers of the Crisis of Democracy (Neoliberalism and Material Conditions)	14
2.5.1 Neoliberalism and Ideological Shift	16
3. Methodology	18
3.1 Research Design: A Mixed-Methods Approach	18
3.2 Quantitative Component: Primary and Secondary Data	18
3.2.1 Statistical Methods	19
3.3 Qualitative Component: Literature and Interviews	20
3.4 Integration of Data	20
3.5 Validity, Reliability, and Limitations	21
3.6 Empirical and Qualitative Analysis	22
4. Empirical Analysis	23
4.1 Descriptive Overview of the Sample	23
4.1.1 Composition of the Sample	23
4.1.2 Territorial Distribution	23

4.1.3 Linguistic and Identity Composition	23
4.1.4 Ideological Self-Placement	24
4.1.5 Subjective Well-being and Perceived Economic Situation	24
4.1.6 Perception on Decentralization	25
4.2 Indicators of Democratic Quality and Populism	26
4.2.1 Quality of Democracy	26
4.2.2 Trust in Institutions and Government	27
4.2.3 Attitudes Toward Representation and Populism	28
4.3 Statistical Analysis	29
4.3.1 Correlation Analysis (Kendall)	30
4.3.2 Hypotheses	30
4.3.2.1 Hypothesis 1: De-centralization improves the perception of the youth towards democracy in Spain	30
4.3.2.2 Hypothesis 2: Opinions towards the actual state of democracy have a representative territorial component	30
4.3.2.3 Hypothesis 3: The perceived economic situation (material conditions) influences perception of democracy	31
4.3.3 Limitations and Statistical Power	31
5. Qualitative Analysis	32
5.1 Identity and Territorial Perception	32
5.2 Institutional Trust and Representation	32
5.3 Democratic Values and Authoritarianism.....	34
5.4 Political Engagement	35
5.5 Material Conditions and Democratic Perception	36
6. Discussion, Conclusions and Limitations	37
6.1 Discussion	37
6.1.1 Decentralization and Democratic Perception	37
6.1.2 Territorial Identity and Democratic Perception	38
6.1.3 Material Conditions, Neoliberalism, and Democratic Legitimacy	39
6.2 Conclusions	40
6.3 Limitations	42
References	43
Annex 1 — Tables	46
Annex 2 — Graphs	50

1.Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, liberal democracy has been widely regarded as the dominant political model of modern societies. Francis Fukuyama famously described this moment as “the end of history,” suggesting that the triumph of Western liberal democracy marked the final stage of ideological evolution. Three decades later, this optimistic vision appears increasingly fragile. Around the world, liberal democracies are experiencing growing polarization, the erosion of political representation, and declining public trust, signs showing that the democratic consensus that once seemed permanent is now under tension.

This global crisis of liberal democracy has been analysed from multiple perspectives. Adam Przeworski interprets it as the result of weakening party systems and the loss of confidence in representative institutions. Peter Mair points to the transformation of political parties into agents of governance rather than representation, creating a gap between citizens and elites. Manuel Castells, looking particularly at Spain, highlights the role of systemic corruption and economic discontent in deepening political alienation, while authors such as Luis Moreno and Daniel Treisman debate the effects of decentralization on democratic legitimacy. Together, these approaches provide the conceptual tools needed to understand how democracy’s legitimacy is being challenged in different contexts.

In Spain, these dynamics take on a distinctive territorial dimension due to its decentralized political system and the coexistence of multiple national identities. Galicia, Euskadi, and Catalonia represent three historical nations where regional identity, cultural specificity, and varying degrees of autonomy intersect with generational attitudes toward democracy. The Spanish case thus offers an ideal context to explore how political decentralization and territorial belonging influence young people’s perceptions of democracy.

Despite the growing literature on democratic backsliding and youth political disaffection, there remains a clear research gap regarding how decentralization and territorial identity shape democratic perceptions among younger generations in multinational states. Most studies focus on national trends or institutional decline, overlooking regional diversity and the interaction between autonomy, identity, and generational experience. Moreover, quantitative surveys often fail to capture the nuances of how young citizens interpret democracy, trust institutions, or engage politically in alternative ways outside the traditional electoral sphere.

This study aims to address that gap by examining how young people in Galicia, Euskadi, and Catalonia perceive the current state of democracy in Spain, and whether decentralization contributes to improving or weakening those perceptions. It also explores how material conditions—such as

economic insecurity, housing precarity, and employment instability—affect these attitudes in a generation marked by uncertainty and disillusionment.

By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, this research seeks to provide a multidimensional understanding of youth perceptions of democracy in three of Spain's most politically and culturally significant regions. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Przeworski, Mair, Castells, Treisman, and Moreno, it contributes to the broader debate on the crisis of liberal democracy and the challenges of political legitimacy in a context of economic inequality, institutional fatigue, and generational change. Particularly focusing on how decentralization, material conditions and territorial dimensions influence democratic satisfaction on the youth of these 3 regions.

2.Literature Review

2.1.A minimalist conception of democracy

For the purpose of this study a minimalist conception of democracy is going to be adopted, following the tradition of authors like Joseph Schumpeter and Adam Przeworski. In this view, democracy is reduced to its most basic and procedural elements. This means that democracy is understood primarily as a set of institutionalized procedures for the peaceful election of governments through competitive elections, rather than as a system that must necessarily guarantee social or economic outcomes. Using Adam Przeworski's words "Democracy is a system where the government parties lose elections". This academic work adopts a minimalist conceptualization of democracy for several reasons. The most evident is that it is defended and employed by one of the main authors cited in this paper, Adam Przeworski, in his book *Crises of Democracy*. Additionally, this approach offers other advantages, which will be further explained in the following sections.

First, it provides clarity and analytical precision as it focuses on the procedural core of democracy, escaping from normative debates about whether democracy must also deliver justice, equality or welfare. In this case, defenders of this conception of democracy like Adam Przeworski argue that most people mix political equality with economic equality. In the view of the author political equality was a result of a political revolution that delivered individuals characterized for being anonymous, indistinguishable in view of the law and to whom social distinctions are ignored, this equality occurs in democracy. On the other hand, full economic equality is simply impossible to be achieved in a market society which is characterized for generating inequality and where income redistribution is simply hard to be delivered. "We cannot expect democracy to make what perhaps any other system of political institutions is able to make" (Adam Przeworski, 2010)

Second, it also ensures comparability across territories as minimalist definition helps standardize what democracy means in regions with different political histories and levels of decentralization. This makes sense in this study as it analyses perceptions of democracy in three different historical nations of Spain (Galicia, Euskadi and Catalunya)

Finally, a minimalist understanding of democracy is particularly useful for examining youth perceptions as it reduces conceptual ambiguity in cases where young people may value liberal rights, welfare policies, or equality but still distrust parties and elections. The idea is to analyse mostly the procedural sense of democracy and not that much in a broad sense of equality, justice or welfare.

It should be noted, however, that a minimalist conceptualization of democracy is not without limitations. By focusing almost exclusively on electoral procedures, it tends to leave aside other aspects that many scholars and citizens associate with democracy, such as the protection of individual and minority rights, the role of civil society, or the responsiveness of governments to social demands. These elements remain important to consider in broader theoretical debates, but for the purposes of this study the minimalist approach remains the most suitable, as it provides the necessary clarity and consistency for comparative analysis. From this procedural scope, the study will analyse the youth perceptions of democracy as the confidence in the rules of the game and not as much on the satisfaction of social results.

2.2 The Signs for a Crises of Democracy.

This study draws on the academic work of Adam Przeworski, particularly his book *Crises of democracy*, focusing on the key indicators of democratic crisis that were mentioned previously, The erosion of the traditional party system, the rise of populist parties and the decline in support of democracy in opinion surveys. These phenomena will be further analysed alongside contributions from other scholars.

2.2.1 Erosion of the Traditional Party Systems

Looking at the erosion of the traditional party system it is important to note, that the traditional two party-system, typically composed of a centre-left and a centre -right party, in which most mature democracies were cemented is dramatically changing, the political representation of these traditional parties has been declining coinciding with a rise of the effective number of parties in the electorate after the 80s, leading to multidimensional divisions of the electorate where different coalitions may emerge (Adam Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy* 2019).

This phenomenon can be approached following the academic work of Peter Mair where he presents the gap between responsible and representative government. He argues that traditional parties have shifted from representing the interests of citizens to representing those of the state to the citizens,

becoming more like governors than representatives (Peter Mair, *Responsible versus Representative*, 2009). Parties have downplayed their representative role, placing less emphasis on expressive and prospective voting. Instead, they have begun to emphasize their capacity as good governors, administrators, and managers of the polity. This situation leaves a vacuum for the so-called expressive voters that require expressive parties, parties that place an electoral premium, on their claims to represent. Voters may either adopt an alternative logic of voting or seek parties that better align with their expectations for representation. As Peter Mair formulates, the incompatibility between responsiveness and responsibility could often be bridged or “managed” by parties who were able to persuade voters on side through partisan campaigns and appeals to partisan loyalty; this is less easily conceivable today. Political parties are among the least trusted institutions in modern democracies. For all these reasons, their mobilization capacities are now almost non-existent, especially if we look at the traditional parties.

2.2.1.1 A look into the Spanish Case

In the case of Spain, the scenario is not any better. The political arena presents clear signs of polarization and traditional parties have lost their exclusivity as representors of the citizenship, they need coalitions to govern. This can be seen in the actual and past governments that where both coalitions as it seems almost impossible to see again the PSOE or the PP winning with absolute majority in a near future. The political disaffection and loss of confidence in the traditional parties, and model of imperfect bi-partyism in Spain can be analysed following the work of Manuel Castells and his book *Ruptura* where he gives some specific reasons for this to occur. He initially looks at the systemic corruption in Spanish politics, a phenomenon that became particularly entrenched during the government of Jose Maria Aznar (PP) but that is also common to the PSOE, which, despite enjoying undeniable hegemony across Spanish territory was also not immune to the use of corruption as a political tool. In the recent year, this has been evidenced by several corruption scandals affecting different members of the PSOE, including the former secretary of the organization and others very close to the actual president Pedro Sánchez. These cases have further eroded public trust in the party’s credibility.

Looking at the beginning of the 21st century. Two key events contributed to this growing political disaffection of the population towards political parties, first, Aznar’s misleading claims about the 11-M terrorist attacks, wrongly blaming ETA as the organizer of what could probably be a response from AL-Qaeda due to the participation of Spain in the Iraq war, the second key factor identified by Manuel Castells is the 2008-2010 economic crises, which was exacerbated by the ineffective crisis management of Jose Luís Rodríguez Zapatero (PSOE) that initially denied the existence of the crisis and eventually implementing austerity measures dictated by the European Central Bank and Angel Merkel, based on

Germany's specific interests. This event created an even bigger distrust of the left and centre-left voters on the traditional party system as they saw the implementation of austerity policies as a betrayal to their values and interests, seeing how a party located in the centre-left carries policies common from the other side of the political spectrum prioritizing the interests of external actors. A clear example of the incompatibility of responsiveness and responsibility that Peter Mair writes about.

This situation of general discontent towards the actual state of politics led to one of the most relevant political movements in the last decades, the 15-M. This movement consisted in numerous manifestations in some of the biggest cities of Spain peacefully camping in numerous squares and urban spaces going against the initial consequences of the financial crisis of 2008. In the words of Manuel Castells, it was a spontaneous movement away from political parties and unions, even though most of the activists were left leaning and part of the anti-globalization movement. The core demand of this movement was "real democracy now!". The driving force behind the protests was the rejection towards the representativity of the political parties and the institutional politics in relation to the rest of citizens, thus making 15-M a clear expression of a legitimacy crisis that was occurring in Spain at that time but also in the rest of the world. As a final analytical note, another reflexion by Manuel Castells is particularly relevant, noting that the impact of the movement was decisive for changing Spanish society and politics. In the context of an economic crisis that dropped into unemployment most of the youth, the rejection of the government's prioritization of financial institutions, to the detriment of the population's living conditions, had a profound impact on citizens' minds and demands and protests across various sectors of society.

2.2.1.2 Comparative Reflection

Looking at these two explanations to understand the loss of credibility in the traditional parties a question rises- Is the erosion of the traditional party system more due to structural (Peter Mair) or contingent (Manuel Castells) factors? In the case of Spain, it seems to be that both dynamics reinforce each other. As it has been shown the crisis of representation in Spain seems to reflect a cumulative process where the erosion of partisan loyalty in traditional parties has been accelerated by corruption and policy failures, leaving the space for the rise of populist and nationalist actors that exploit this political vacuum. This process also shows important cultural and territorial components that is overlooked by the academic work of both authors that analyse democracy mostly at a national and global level. These dimensions are going to be further analysed in this work, as it might be the case that democratic disaffection in regions like Catalunya, Galicia or Euskadi can be also linked with structural feelings of misrepresentation and will for independence.

2.2.2 Rise of Populism and its link with Democracy

As it has already been introduced, the rise of right-wing populism, characterized by its xenophobic, racist, and nationalist rhetoric, is another central sign of democratic crises for authors like Adam Przeworski.

This phenomenon has materialized in the appearance of VOX's into the Spanish Parliament in 2018, following the trend of other right-wing populist parties gaining political representation across Europe (e.g., Lega Nord, Front National) ,and globally (e.g. Trump, Bolsonaro).Vox fits Cas Mudde's populist framework by promoting a narrative that frames politics as a struggle between the "pure" Spanish people and a corrupt elite, while also incorporating nativist and authoritarian elements typical of the populist radical right. If we take into consideration the work of scholars like Prerna Singh, we find that VOX also embodies many of the characteristics that define both nationalist and populist parties. Defense of the tradition and history of Spain and its unity, manifesting an essentialist and ultra conservative understanding of the nation; the coarse rhetoric and the anti-elite rhetoric are just some examples observable in their political platform and public appearances of their members. It is important to note that although often grouped together they are not the same, and it is sometimes difficult to make sure whether a party is populist or nationalist populist, especially because it is almost impossible to hear the leaders of these parties proclaiming themselves populist.

2.2.2.1 Structural and Cultural Factors on the Rise of Populism

If we look at the possible factors that led to the rise of these parties to acquire political representation we find a good reasoning in the academic work of Jose Andrés Fernández Leost (2023) that formulates: " It was predictable that in the 2010s, economic decline and inequality would lead to the return in Europe of traditional, "materialist" and security-based values, favored by the relegation of low-skilled male workers and a regressive population pyramid, whose working classes – often employed in agriculture or industry) do not necessarily identify with "post-materialist" preferences for the environment or cosmopolitanism, especially if these are associated with a loss of income and elite interests. This "counter-countercultural" current (as "counter-culture" came to be perceived as hegemonic or mainstream), with anti-system, authoritarian and nativist roots – also symbolized by the so-called American white trash that candidate Trump was able to capture – is the one that seems to have crystallized on this side of the Atlantic, benefiting from the transformation of a disintermediated public sphere, via social networks, increasingly dominated by emotional appeals. In the era of fake news, when every fact becomes interpretable, rational discourse on common societal problems gives way to what Adorno called the "narcissism of opinion", and to a struggle of identities in which both poles of the ideological spectrum participate, which gives rise to a clash between the demands of

ethnic or sexual minorities and those of a reactive identity based neo-nationalism. This is how a culture war between reactionary and so-called “wokenists” is reproduced, which polarizes political debate to the point of reducing political discourse to a dialogue of the deaf”.

Relating to this and going back to the book of Adam Przeworski we also find that: “it seems that those most negatively affected by globalization tend to vote for the Right and that the prospect of job loss frightens the potential losers. Yet while all these effects are statistically significant, they explain only a small part of radical Right postures. The origins of these attitudes remain unclear”. Therefore, further research is necessary to fully understand this phenomenon.

2.2.2.2 Implications of Populism

Now that the theoretical framework of right-wing populism and nationalism has been presented, let’s continue with the implications of these phenomena in the topic of this paper, the decline of liberal democracy, and how the emergence of such parties presents a threat and a sign of democratic backsliding. The author explains that “the populist parties are not anti-democratic in the sense that they do not advocate replacing elections by some other method of selecting governments. Even when they express a yearning for a strong leader, they want leaders to be elected. Hence, while the populist parties are not anti-democratic, they are anti-institutional in the sense of rejecting the traditional model of representative democracy”. What the author is trying to explain in this quote is that the right-wing populist parties come somehow from the actual status quo and do not oppose the idea of liberal democracy itself, for example some right-wing populist parties were born as an excision of other traditional parties such as VOX, founded by the former member of the PP (traditional center-right party in Spain) presenting its new creation as a true right-wing alternative to the PP that in his view had abandoned its identity as a “real” right wing party. This scholar presents populism as an ideological twin of neo-liberalism, showing that this phenomenon should not look that new to us. As a final remark it should be addressed that the rise of populism appears as a sign and a cause of democratic crises. It is so because it rises as an “alternative” from the actual status quo but also appears as an important threat to democracy.

2.2.3 Youth and declining support for democracy

Referring to the last sign that the author mentions, the decline in support for democracy in surveys, it is found that young people increasingly consider democracy less essential. This phenomenon is occurring simultaneously across several countries of the EU, where the youngest generations are the ones more dissatisfied with democracy and its institutions. Many are the surveys that highlight this trend in the recent years analysed through international sources such as Open Society Barometer, as well as national studies like those from the CIS or *Fundación Alternativas*. In these surveys, looking

particularly at Spain, it is found that particularly the age cohort commonly referred to as Generation Z has the biggest proportion of people claiming that authoritarianism can be in some case preferable than democracy. This data does not mean that authoritarianism may sometimes be preferable to democracy for most of the age group, but it still means that younger generations' views on democracy are shifting, especially if we consider the preference for democracy tends to decline progressively across age cohorts. According to Oriol Bartomeus, this change of perception towards democracy between younger and elder generations is shaped by the current state of liberal democracy. For the elder generation, democracy was accompanied by economic progress, and access to democracy also meant improved living standards. This is not the case any more for the Gen Z and the Millennial's, for them, democracy lacks tangible benefits and is not associated with economic progress in their experience. These generations are individuals born during periods of political disruption, who have experienced political polarization since childhood, and live with social and economic uncertainty in the social field with the expectation of having lower living standards than their parents and in a global scale with the threat of climate change. It is interesting to note that this polarization also has a significant gender component, with both men and women have more ideologically extreme positions than the elder generations, with women tending to be more "progressive" or left-leaning, and men more right-wing than previous generations.

2.2.3.1 Socio-economic context of the Youth in Spain and perception of democracy: a causal relation.

Another barrier for youth participation in politics can be found in the work of Antoine Bristelle, Javier Carbonell, Shana Cohen, Matteo Dressler, András Kaszás, Adam Kostrzewski, Gerry Mitchell, Kamil Smogorzewski, Kilian Wirthwein and his study *How young people facing disadvantage view democracy in Europe* where they present how the socio-economic situation of the youth also affects their perspective and participation in politics. This relation is also present in the work of authors like Przeworski, and others mentioned in this study, and has important implications in the case of Spain, as it is a country that suffered extremely the 2008 crisis, and it is still recovering from the consequences of the pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This context presents an adverse economic situation for the Spanish youth that is affecting their perception on democracy and the political institutions marked by the precariousness and inability to become financially independent from their parents. This inability to create a life by themselves presents a huge problem for liberal democracy, as it is failing to achieve the demands of an important part of the population which is progressively looking with favour to authoritarianism as an alternative to tackle some of the structural problems that the Spanish society is facing. One of them been the housing crisis that is occurring in most big cities of the Spanish territory that is disabling the youth to achieve independence at an "early" stage and another

the actual State of the Spanish labour market that has been characterized by youth unemployment, precariousness and short-term contracts particularly after the financial crisis. As the reader might think, some of these problems can be applied to other countries of Europe, but the problem comes when we compare the data relating to these socioeconomic indicators for young people in Spain and the rest of the EU. In the case of Spain only 16% of young people live independently of their parents while in the EU average it is 32%. This disparity between Spain and the EU average is also present in other socioeconomic indicators such as youth unemployment where the average of the EU (15%) is almost half of the Spanish one (28%). Another indicator that is usually overlooked is overqualification, this case speaks directly to the feelings of frustration and unmet expectations of the youth which after years of studying encounter only downward mobility in the labour market, and that in the case of Spain (42%) is almost the double than in the EU average (23,4%).

With all that has been said it might look natural that the perception of democracy is considerably lower than in the rest of the EU, and if we look at the data this is precisely the case. Spain shows a below average satisfaction with democracy compared to other EU countries that can be linked to its socioeconomic situation, particularly after the 2008 crisis.

When looking at the drivers of this political disaffection of the youth, participants of the academic work of *How Young People Facing Disadvantage View Democracy in Europe(2024)* when they were asked why they felt that democracy is not always the best, most of them replied that democracy is not solving economic problems, that politicians are acting selfish or like mercenaries and there is a lack of justice. In sum, they specifically asked for more efficient, responsible and inclusive democracy rather than calling for another system. This statement aligns perfectly with what has been already said, the preference for authoritarianism over democracy in some cases does not mean that the youth is less pro-democratic, most of the youth are still more in favour of democracy, but they are critical about its actual state. In the study, the few that are “against” usually argue that it should be more efficient, solve economic problems and that current democratic institutions are corrupt, attitudes that are very similar to the repliers in favour of democracy. What is clear then is that criticism towards democracy should not be confused with preference for authoritarian regimes, as it has not been found such preference because non-democratic systems are better. Youth people claim for a democracy that does not let anyone behind, less corrupt and fair, and that includes all groups of age into discussion of policy making processes in topics such as housing, climate or education.

This conception of what democracy is expected to deliver presents an important limitation to this study regarding the use of a minimalist conception of democracy. Democracy is often understood by most of the population, and other scholars, in broader terms that include aspirations such as justice, equality or participation. This conflict is crucial when studying youth, as it has been already mentioned, their

disaffection is not merely because of the procedural aspects of democracy but linked to unmet social and economic expectations. It is an issue that needs to be analysed carefully when studying youth perceptions on the actual state of liberal democracy.

Including these perspectives in the study of youth and democracy helps to contextualize survey findings and avoid overly pessimistic interpretations of youth disaffection. It also underscores the need for mixed-methods approaches—such as the one adopted in this study—that combine surveys with qualitative insights to capture the richness and diversity of youth political participation.

2.2.3.2 Youth participation beyond electoral and survey-based measures

While surveys provide valuable insights into youth perceptions of democracy, they often fail to capture the full spectrum of political participation among young people. A growing body of literature suggests that youth engagement is increasingly taking place outside traditional electoral channels and formal political institutions. This includes participation in social movements, digital activism, community organizing, and issue-based campaigns. To sum up, forms of engagement that are usually overlooked in conventional survey research. This phenomenon was already explored by authors like Therese O'Toole and others at the beginning of the millennium. They argued that “research-led definitions of political participation do not allow individuals themselves to say what they consider to be political, and they therefore obscure the political intentions behind many activities (such as non-voting)” (Therese O'Toole, Michael Lister, Dave Marsh, Su Jones & Alex McDonagh (2003). They advocate for the use of qualitative methods to fully understand the issue on political participation such as interviews to capture part of the reality that is often overlooked by the quantitative methodology. More qualitative research suggests that young people remain broadly interested in politics, participating through different ways such as demonstrations, social movements or even digital activism but are disillusioned with formal politics and traditional electoral channels. Understanding this problematic is key for any attempt to re-engage the youth in mainstream politics and connect with young people's experiences, views and concerns.

In the Spanish context, this dynamic was powerfully illustrated by the 15M movement. As analysed by Manuel Castells (2018), this was a great example of youth-led decentralized mobilization, explicitly criticizing the representativeness of formal democracy while demanding “real democracy now”. This demonstrates that disaffection with the current system can be a powerful driver for political action outside of it.

2.3. Decentralization

The subject of decentralization has been a controversial topic in what refers to the efficiency of democracy. Many scholars tend to agree that decentralization always improves efficiency, accountability, or economic performance, but others like Daniel Treisman in his book *Architecture of Government* argue that decentralization is not inherently good or bad, its effects depend heavily on the context. The statement that the author is trying to make does not attempt to delegitimize decentralization as a way of doing politics, as it may be beneficial in some cases, what he tries to explain is that there is not a universal recipe where decentralization automatically improves the political system and the general welfare, it could be that in some cases this occurs the other way around. What should be considered is how this process is carried out and what are the institutional reforms needed to improve the political system, considering the diversity within its own nation. This diversity refers to cultural differences or even different historical paths followed by different regions on the same Nation-State, as it is the case in Spain.

Treisman concludes that these governance reforms should follow a more evidence-based approach instead of taking decentralization as something good by itself. The argumentation made by the author presents a more critical understanding of decentralization attending at its non-universal character, but it finds difficulties on how to address empirically some of the indicators that should be considered when implementing institutional reforms. This refers to the historical and cultural contexts of the regions of each nation, as it is very difficult to measure items such as sentiment of belonging, cultural differences or even will for independence. These items have an important role on how decentralization should be taken into practice and are difficult to measure, not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively. Public opinion is in continuous change and particularly looking at the case of Spain it is difficult to forecast what will be the future of decentralization, what is clear is that at a time attended to the particular needs of part of the citizenship, the question that raises today is that if this is sufficient, not meaning more decentralization but maybe better decentralization.

2.3.1 Decentralization in Spain: a wingding way

Spain, as a nation of nations, has been subject of an intern rivalry that contributed to its civilizing dynamism. This competence is often instrumentalized as a pretext for open and destructive confrontation between the Spanish citizenship. As authors like Luis Moreno point out: “The social and cultural cohesion of Spain is in the base of its unity, which does not hide intrinsic oppositions”. The Spanish population pride themselves on their status as Spaniards through an understanding of their cultural differences. A clear example of this can be found in several authoritarian attempts looking for

a homogenized and exclusive Spain that not only did not achieved this goal but have constituted an effective incentive for the ethnoterritorial conflict.

This situation presents a complex political context for governments to govern due to the impossibility of horizontally integrating the diverse community sensitivities of the Spanish population. This leads to circumstances, as it occurs in the historical nations, where part of the citizenship continues to self-identify themselves as both Spanish and Galician, Vasque or Catalan without incompatibility between both collective belongings. This complexity, as the author notes, should not be understood as inefficiency, as most political results are not quantifiable. Particularly in the context of the ethnoterritorial allocation of plural nation-States such as Spain, where the shortest option does not tend to be the straight way and where simplification usually leads to disagreement.

While decentralization is often theorized either as a universal remedy for democratic legitimacy (Luis Moreno) or as a context-dependent and potentially destabilizing measure (Treisman), little attention has been paid to how these dynamics are lived and interpreted by younger citizens in territorially diverse states. What is clear is that the Spanish case complicates both views, for example, despite high autonomy youth in Catalunya and Euskadi often express greater dissatisfaction with democracy than regions with less autonomy. Does this mean that the youth in these regions are more critical with democracy, or they simply expect more from the institutions than in the rest of Spain? This study seeks to address these gaps including another variable that is often overlooked by part of the academia, the territorial dimensions.

2.4. Territorial Dimensions on the Youth Perception of Democracy in Spain

Considering other academic works, such as *Democracia se escribe con Zeta* from Guillermo Cordero and Juan Roch, regarding another important topic addressed in this Tesis, it is found that Generation Z is among the age groups that most strongly support the current status quo of the autonomous communities in Spain, this means that they are neither in favour of regional independence (e.g. Catalonia), nor do they advocate for a more centralized State. Besides not supporting the independence of any region they are the age group most in favour of state decentralization. The percentage of people willing for a more centralized state in the studied regions shows that the so-called historical regions show greater opposition to centralization, being Andalucia and Euskadi the ones with the lowest values. This data has valuable insights for this paper, especially if we relate it with what we find in "*Opiniones y Actitudes nº74*" from the CIS, where it is presented as one of the main findings of the project that the opinions towards democracy were heavily conditioned by the Autonomous Community of precedence, being the citizens of Euskadi or Catalunya more critical towards the quality of the democracy in most of the studied items except when valuing de-centralization and the role of

the political parties, or the autonomic media. Meanwhile, Andalusia and Valencia show similar values similar to those in the rest of Spain. It is found that the distinction between historical nations and regions takes the form of the most relevant variable of the study. This results, although counterintuitively at first glance, show that the perception of democracy is worse in that autonomous communities that enjoy greater levels of self-government. Not only that, but democracy is also valued higher in non-historical regions despite poorer governmental performance of governments in terms of social and educational policy, and a lower level of associationism.

Revisiting the literature on the effects of decentralization on subjective well-being and perception of the institutions we find the work of Luis Díaz Serrano and Andrés Rodríguez-Pose which contrasts with the findings reported in the CIS studies. This study used the data collected by the European Social Surveys of the last decade which highlights the importance of both political and fiscal decentralization. Decentralization has a positive impact on individuals' satisfaction with political institutions and with the specific delivery of some public goods and services. The authors show that citizens are generally satisfied and happier with the thought that decisions can be taken by governments closer to them, but the actual capacity of institutions to deliver services is even more important for their personal satisfaction, as indicated by higher satisfaction levels with both political and fiscal capacities to deliver effective policies in the areas of education and health.

It is important to note that these reports use data corresponding to 2007-2009 and 2012 respectively, a time of economic and political crisis in Europe, but more notably in Spain. Besides giving good arguments contrasted by empirical analysis, the conclusion remains unclear, as it remains unclear whether decentralization improves or worsens citizens' perceptions towards democracy. That is the reason why newer data needs to be collected for further research and analysis of the implications of de-centralization in the perception of democracy in Spain, considering the territorial components.

2.4.1 Territorial dimensions and affective polarization

Continuing with the role of territorial dimensions, it is important to note that this phenomenon expands to other fields related to the actual state of liberal democracy. This is the case for affective polarization, which is often analysed through a left-right ideological lens but that in cases of multinational democracies, such as Spain, takes an important territorial component. Revisiting the work of Daniel Balinas and its empirical analysis on the territorial dimensions of affective polarization in Spain, it is found that these dimensions as a source of affective polarization cannot be fully explained within the traditional left-right axis. It shows that territorial dimensions can increase affective polarization when the territorial conflict plays a pivotal role in the Spanish national arena, being especially relevant in explaining shifts among right-wing voters. (Ex; Independence of Catalunya) This

paper also presents a complex picture in which context is a key factor in explaining variations in the extent to which perceived territorial polarization contributes to affective polarization. These findings show that ideological aspects, such as being left-right or ethnonational terms, matter when trying to explain affective polarization. The results of this academic article also support one of the aims of this paper, which is to explore the territorial dimensions on the perception of democracy, as affective polarization is strictly linked with the so-called democratic backsliding occurring in many western democracies. The argumentation for this can be found in the work of Yunus Emre Orhan, which data analyses shows how an increase in affective polarization makes democratic backsliding more likely to occur. He claims that this is so because affectively attached individuals are less likely to cross party lines, even when the leaders violate democratic principles or if their economic policies do not appeal to their supporters' interests. It happens because partisans' biased beliefs against opposing elites makes it psychologically costly for the individuals to punish a co-partisan candidate by voting a challenger. This argument implies that political leaders with undemocratic goals succeed in violating democratic principles only when they are provided with that kind of opportunity by a polarized society.

2.5. Structural and Socio-economic drivers of the Crises of Democracy (Neoliberalism and Material Conditions)

Going back to a more general framework, what is clear about the perception towards democracy of the youth is that it is considerably declining, and this phenomenon is strictly linked with the actual socio-economic panorama of Spain and the world. There is a lack of social and labour expectations that affects the perception on how they perceive and interact with the social media, the institutions and the political parties. An economic situation that seems to continue being worse than their parents, the loss of credibility of the meritocratic discourse precisely in a generation that is one of the most prepared and loss of credibility on the traditional media, are simply some examples of what is already happening. A paradigm that is definitively influencing the current disaffection towards the democratic system of the youth and consequently leading to the increasing acceptance of authoritarian regimes.

Even though this data looks frightening, we need to consider that what we are looking at is data coming from survey questions. As Adam Przeworski (2019) points out: "Responses to survey questions are informative but not predictive. No one knows what people in different countries, or regions, and at different times understand by "democracy". We may be worried when few people declare confidence in political parties, parliaments, or governments, when the belief that democracy is the best system of government declines among the mass public, or when the yearning for strong leaders or the rule by experts increases. One should not draw inferences about the survival of democracy from answers to survey questions". This quote does not mean that surveys are useless, they should be considered when

writing an academic paper like this, or when studying the actual state of a particular country, what we cannot do is to take statistics by itself and pretend to forecast or settle a statement about something. Even data has a tone, even more when it comes from survey questions, so we need to analyse the whole framework. What led us to be where we are now? How do territory, social context and economic conditions influence these perceptions about democracy?

When looking at the potential drivers of the actual political disaffection of the youth, the answer seems to relate with what many scholars name the “material conditions”. The actual discontent of the citizenship towards democracy seems to be related with some of the economic developments of the last decade which, according to Przeworski, can be grossly characterized by three transformations that generated two effects. “These transformations are the decline of growth rates of the already developed countries; increase in income inequality among individuals and households, as well as declining labour share in manufacturing; and decline of employment in industry and the rise of the service sector, particularly of low-paying service jobs” (Adam Przeworski, 2019). Considering the empirical evidence, the first effect of the combination of declining growth rate with increasing inequality is the stagnation of lower incomes, also incentivized by the decline of unions. While the distance between the income of the top and bottom 10 percent of recipients increased sharply from the 1980s onwards, incomes below the median continued to advance until all incomes were hit by the crisis of 2008. The second effect is the erosion of the belief in material progress. This collapse of the deeply ingrained belief in intergenerational progress is a phenomenon at a civilizational scale. The expectation of material progress has been an essential ingredient for Western civilization during the past 200 years. This is certainly a transformation that can have profound cultural and political consequences.

The deterioration of material conditions it is not a phenomenon that occurred by chance, it is something strictly related with the system of liberal democracy itself, and more specifically within the neoliberal framework. If it is not so, how can we explain that the democratic prosperity has permitted the pre-eminence of powerful economic interest groups over the interest of the population? One of the reasons for the democracy to be declining is who is part of the decision-making process and how it is done, for authors like Jörke it has evolved into a privatized interaction between elected governments and elites. This situation has been also fuelled by the change of the rules of the game in the relation between State, society and economy. According to Hermet (2008), “The market already acts as the great integrator of the democratic framework. This occurs at the expense of the State and the social institutions, where the Social State, stripped of its attributes, tends to become ultimately the legal apparatus responsible for guaranteeing the property rights, above all”. This statement goes in line with what other authors like Przeworski claim, arguing that the triumph of neoliberalism has become vital for amplifying the dominance of capital over the other spheres of social distribution. The triumph

of neoliberalism and its ideological base, the market as a natural activity part of human relations, became possible due to the absence of criticism from the political elites in most consolidated democracies.

That is how we get to the actual context, where “the contemporary democracy has been reduced to a minimum expression of their formal aspects, consolidating its elitist and procedural version thanks to the privatization of the relations between politics and society”. (Eduardo Alvarado Espina, 2018). This structural context of inequality and ideology, which is reproduced by neoliberalism, presents, according to the author, a double challenge for the survival of liberal democracy. This means, on the one hand, to properly represent all interests, values and ideas in the political institutions and, on the other, to ensure that the outcomes of political processes effectively respond to the most pressing societal demands. In conclusion, the structural and ideological transformations driven by neoliberalism pose a dual challenge to liberal democracy: ensuring inclusive representation and producing effective policy outcomes that meet the needs of society.

The critique of authors like Hermet and Alvarado coming from a more structuralist perspective reveals an important limitation in Przeworski’s analysis. While Przeworski provides essential tools to measure the signs of the crises, that were presented alongside this paper and treating neoliberalism as a mere contextual variable influencing political behaviour. The vision of Hermet and Alvarado postulates that these signs are simply superficial manifestations of the engine of neoliberalism and its destruction of the social State. The system has been consciously reconfigured to prioritize capital over citizenship, and the problem cannot be tackled by the actual procedures present in most liberal democracies, there needs to be a change in a foundational sense, it is not enough with patches and repairs. The approach used by Przeworski gives valuable insights for measurement and diagnosis of the problem but it lacks a deeper analysis of what is really causing the actual state of liberal democracy, that is why is important to include its framework for the analysis while remaining critical to the possibility that the political disaffection might be less about a failure of the liberal democratic apparatus and more as a rejection of the neoliberal hegemony that in the case of the youth in Spain has materialized in precarious work, unaffordable housing and weakened unions.

2.5.1 Neoliberalism and ideological shift

If we consider the quantitative analysis made by Przeworski, the relationship between the decline of the traditional party system and the rise of right-wing populism is strongly correlated, noting that it may be that the rising vote share of the radical right parties may be more attributable to the abstention of centrist voters than to an increase of extreme right support. The reasons that he presents are also in line with what was previously mentioned by Andrés Fernández Leost but putting the scope into neo-

liberalism as one of the main drivers of this phenomenon, showing that after the post-war period and more notably after the presidency of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher a noticeable shift of traditional right-wing parties further to the right can be observed, followed by social democratic parties that also shifted rightward, leading to a significant reduction in ideological distance between traditional parties. (As seen in the case of Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero's government adopting EU-recommended austerity measures after the 2008 crisis.) This situation was perceived by many scholars as the end of the traditional left-right political axis, arguing that other dimensions, such as authoritarianism, should also be considered. Adam Przeworski also points out that cultural issues have gained in importance since 1970s, and that these cultural dimensions do not always correlate with the economic ones concluding that the political space must be depicted as two-dimensional. What is clear is that the support for traditional centre parties has crumbled across Europe due to the withdrawal of centrist voters from the electorate, meaning that the share of radical right parties has increased but not necessarily in absolute numbers. For the author this rejection of party politics might be just a transitory phenomenon, but for now is difficult to predict what will be the future of politics and traditional parties.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design: A Mixed-Methods Approach

Given the multidimensional nature of the research, this project adopts a mixed-methods design that combines quantitative and qualitative evidence drawn from both primary and secondary sources. The focus of the study—the perceptions of young people regarding the current state of liberal democracy in Spain—requires methodological pluralism, since it brings together attitudinal, territorial, and generational dimensions.

As Greene, Caracelli, and Graham (1989) suggest, mixed methods can serve several purposes: triangulation, complementarity, development, and initiation. Each of these is relevant here. Triangulation strengthens validity by comparing survey results with interview narratives and secondary datasets. Complementarity allows statistical patterns to be explained through lived experiences. Development enables qualitative insights to refine the design of the survey. Finally, initiation captures contradictions, such as when survey responses reveal democratic disaffection, but interviews show continued engagement with local institutions.

3.2 Quantitative Component: Primary and Secondary Data

The quantitative dimension of the research rests on two pillars: an original survey conducted among young people across Galicia, Euskadi, and Catalunya, and the analysis of secondary survey data from established sources.

The primary survey targeted members of Generation Z, defined here as those aged 18 to 30. It was designed to capture perceptions of democracy, satisfaction with institutions, and attitudes toward decentralization and populism, in direct relation to the hypotheses of this study. The questionnaire consisted of 40 questions, with an average completion time of around ten minutes, and participation was encouraged through the offer of a small incentive (“sorpresa”). Distribution took place both online and in person, through youth organizations, universities, and social networks. A pilot version of the survey was tested to ensure clarity and reliability of the questions. The final target sample was approximately 150 respondents per region, for a total of around 450 participants.

The survey included detailed demographic and identity-related measures, such as year of birth, gender identity, mother tongue (Spanish, Galician, Basque, Catalan, etc.), educational attainment (from primary school to postgraduate studies), region of origin and current residence, and a territorial identity scale in which respondents could situate themselves on a continuum (e.g., “Solo español/a”,

“Más gallego/a que español/a”). In addition, it measured constructs central to the study: life satisfaction (0–10 scale), perceived national problems (housing, inequality, politics, etc.), ideological self-placement on a left–right scale, economic evaluation of Spain (0–10), satisfaction with both national and regional governments (0–10), and levels of trust in national and regional institutions (0–10). Respondents were also asked to rate the importance of democracy (0–10) following a provided definition, to evaluate the state of democracy in Spain (0–10), and to indicate their system preference, choosing among statements such as “democracy is preferable,” “sometimes authoritarianism is preferable,” or “indifferent.”

This primary survey is complemented by secondary quantitative evidence from major datasets. These include the CIS “Opiniones y Actitudes” and “Calidad Democrática” surveys and Democracy and Youth Barometers, the Fundación Alternativas reports (*Democracia se escribe con Zeta 2020*; *Informe sobre la Democracia en España 2023*), and the Open Society Foundations’ *Can Democracy Deliver?* (2023) Barometer. Together, these sources provide temporal depth and allow the primary results to be validated against broader national and international trends.

3.2.1 Statistical Methods

Finally, to empirically evaluate the hypotheses derived from the theoretical framework (Hypothesis 1: De-centralization improves the perception of the youth towards democracy in Spain; Hypothesis 2: Opinions towards the actual state of democracy have a representative territorial component; Hypothesis 3: The perceived economic situation (material conditions) influences perception of democracy), a series of quantitative statistical analyses were conducted using the survey data on youth perceptions of democracy in Galicia, Euskadi, and Catalunya. Given the ordinal nature of most variables (measured on 0–10 scales) and the limited sample size, the analysis relied primarily on non-parametric statistical methods, complemented by parametric techniques for validation.

First, Kendall’s τ -b correlation coefficient was used to measure the strength and direction of associations between key variables, specifically between perceived decentralization, economic self-evaluation, and satisfaction with democracy.

This method was chosen because it does not assume normality and is suitable for ordinal and ranked data, providing a robust measure of monotonic relationships.

Second, to explore potential territorial differences in the perception of democracy among the three regions, an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed.

Although ANOVA assumes normality, preliminary tests indicated that the data were approximately normal. Therefore, the Kruskal–Wallis H test, a non-parametric alternative, was also applied to

validate and double-check the ANOVA results.

This test compares the median ranks across groups and determines whether differences are statistically significant, ensuring that the findings are reliable even when normality assumptions are not strictly met.

Together, these statistical procedures enabled a comprehensive assessment of the relationships between variables and inter-regional comparisons, allowing for a rigorous test of the three hypotheses regarding decentralization, territorial identity, and the role of material conditions in shaping youth perceptions of democracy.

3.3 Qualitative Component: Literature and Interviews

The qualitative dimension of the study is twofold, encompassing both a literature review and a set of semi-structured interviews.

The literature review already serves as a qualitative interpretation of the phenomena under study. Authors such as Przeworski (2019), Castells (2018), and Mair (2009) provide conceptual frameworks for understanding democratic disaffection, the erosion of party systems, and generational transformations. These works are not merely contextual but also serve as interpretive lenses for analysing the empirical material generated by the survey and interviews.

The semi-structured interviews are designed to complement the quantitative evidence by exploring perceptions of democracy in greater depth. A purposive sample of 12 participants will be selected randomly and for convenience, with 4 interviews conducted in each of the three regions. Participants will be chosen to reflect diversity in gender, educational background, and political orientation. The interviews will address four main themes: young people's definitions and understandings of democracy; the influence of territorial identity on political perceptions; the relationship between material conditions such as housing and employment and levels of political disaffection; and trust in institutions, particularly in the context of decentralization. With participants' consent, interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and analysed to generate thematic insights that complement the statistical findings relating democratic perception with decentralization, territorial dimensions and material conditions.

3.4 Integration of Data

The analysis follows a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which quantitative and qualitative materials are collected and analysed separately but subsequently integrated. Primary survey data, secondary datasets, the literature review, and interviews will thus be

methodologically triangulated. The surveys provide quantitative breadth, mapping generational and territorial patterns, while the interviews and literature offer qualitative depth, explaining the mechanisms and meanings that support those patterns.

In line with Lieberman's (2005) concept of nested analysis, the survey serves to map the broader terrain, while the interviews and interpretive materials probe causal mechanisms, scope conditions, and potential contradictions within young people's democratic perceptions across regions. The survey identifies the general patterns associated with the three central hypotheses of this study:

H1: Decentralization improves young people's perception of democracy in Spain.

H2: Opinions toward the current state of democracy have a representative territorial component.

H3: The perceived economic situation (material conditions) influences youth perception of democracy.

Within this framework, quantitative analysis tests the statistical relationships among decentralization, territorial identity, and material conditions, while qualitative interviews probe how and why these variables shape democratic attitudes. The triangulation of methods strengthens validity through convergence of evidence and enables a multidimensional understanding of youth democratic perceptions across Galicia, Euskadi, and Catalunya.

3.5 Validity, Reliability, and Limitations

The credibility of the research rests on the combination of methodological strategies (Quantitative and Qualitative methods). The use of both primary and secondary data increases robustness by allowing results to be cross-checked across sources and moments of time. Designing the survey specifically for this project ensures that the questions are tailored to the hypotheses, while the inclusion of established datasets such as those from CIS or the Open Society Foundations anchors the findings within broader national and international debates. This integration strengthens confidence in the patterns observed, since convergence across different instruments and contexts reduces the possibility that results are merely the outcome of a single method.

Reliability is reinforced by the piloting of the questionnaire, which helped refine the wording and eliminate ambiguities. Moreover, distributing the survey through a variety of channels (youth organizations, universities, and social media) reduces the bias that would result from relying on a single recruitment strategy. The qualitative component also contributes to reliability, as the consistency of themes emerging across interviews conducted in three distinct territories provides an additional form of cross-checking.

Nonetheless, the study faces certain limitations. On-site and online distribution of the survey may bias the sample toward more educated youth, and interviews may be affected by self-censorship when discussing sensitive political issues. In addition, the size of the sample is constrained by available resources, which limits representativeness. These limitations are acknowledged as part of the research design, but they do not undermine the contribution of the study, since the combination of quantitative and qualitative strategies provides a comprehensive and balanced account.

3.6 Empirical and Qualitative Analysis

The empirical analysis is structured in four stages. The first presents descriptive statistics of survey respondents, situating the sample in demographic and territorial terms. The second examines the distribution of democratic perceptions, levels of institutional trust, populist attitudes and system preferences across Galicia, Euskadi, and Catalunya, offering a comparative overview that addresses the territorial dimension of the hypotheses. The third stage employs statistical methods to test whether material conditions, decentralization and territorial identity significantly shape youth perceptions of democracy, while controlling for material and socio-demographic variables. These quantitative findings will then be triangulated with the qualitative interviews, which provide insights into the mechanisms behind the observed statistical patterns. The last part consists of a qualitative analysis where the data collected through interviews is going to be analysed to contrast and reinforce some of the statements made in the quantitative part.

4. Empirical Analysis

4.1. Descriptive Overview of the Sample

The empirical section is based on the data collected through the questionnaire *“Percepción de la juventud sobre el actual estado de la democracia liberal en Galicia, País Vasco y Cataluña.”* The survey captures the perceptions and attitudes of young people toward democracy, decentralization, and representation, as well as basic sociodemographic characteristics.

4.1.1 Composition of the Sample

The sample includes 451 young respondents primarily between 18 and 30 years old, consistent with the generational focus of the study. The average age is around 21, but there is a bigger representation of the youth born in 2006 and particularly in 2007.

Gender distribution is balanced, with both male and female respondents well represented, along with a small number of participants identifying outside the gender binary.

Regarding education, most respondents have completed or are currently pursuing university or higher education, while a smaller portion report secondary or vocational training. This profile reflects the educational expansion typical of the younger generations in Spain.

4.1.2 Territorial Distribution (Graphic 1)

The survey covers the three main communities under study: Galicia, Euskadi (Basque Country), and Cataluña (Catalonia).

Contrary to many national surveys, the distribution of respondents by region of origin in this research is almost even across the three territories. This balanced representation allows for a more accurate comparison of perceptions between regions with distinct political cultures and historical experiences of autonomy.

The even distribution also strengthens the internal validity of the analysis by preventing the overrepresentation of any single community in shaping the overall results.

4.1.3 Linguistic and Identity Composition (Graphic 2)

The linguistic and identity variables confirm the internal diversity of the sample. Respondents identify Catalan, Basque, and Galician as their mother tongues, with a higher proportion declaring Spanish as their mother tongue.

When asked “¿Cuál te representa mejor?”, participants express a range of positions, from only Spanish identity to only regional identity. The most autoperceived identity refers to “tan español como Gallego, Catalan o Vasco” followed by “más Gallego, catalán o vasco que español” and consequently followed by “solo Gallego, catalán o vasco” meaning that there is an important role of the territorial component when studying the identity of the respondents. For them their regional identity, on average, represents them more than their Spanish one. This variety provides the basis for analysing whether territorial identity is associated with distinct perceptions of democracy.

4.1.4 Ideological Self-Placement

When asking whether the youth allocated themselves on the left–right ideological axis, the answers show a larger proportion of respondents identifying as leftist. This pattern suggests that, in the studied regions, there is a greater presence of left-leaning youth compared with the overall national average.

According to recent data from the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS), younger generations in Spain show a gradual increase in right-wing self-identification. This is shown in one of the last publications of the CIS which also explores the democratic perception of the citizenship in 2025. In this study when looking particularly at the youngest cohort of age it can be perceived that the ideological leaning tends to be closer to the right, especially if we compare it with the data collected in our survey. While respondents from the historical regions align themselves in an average of 3 (been 0 the left and 10 the right) the survey from the CIS shows an average over 5 meaning that the right axis is more represented when considering all the regions. This contrast between these national figures and the result of this study implies that the youth of the historical communities (Galicia, Euskadi, and Catalonia) maintain a comparatively stronger inclination toward the left.

This ideological distribution is relevant for interpreting political attitudes, since it may condition both the perception of democracy and evaluations of decentralization and representation. In regions with strong traditions of autonomy and plural identities, leftist orientations may correlate with greater support for participatory and decentralized forms of governance, which will be explored in the subsequent analysis.

4.1.5 Subjective well-being and Perceived Economic Situation

Respondents reported moderately high levels of life satisfaction, with mean values around 7 out of 10. This suggests that most young people feel personally content despite systemic frustrations. Importantly, it also indicates that democratic disaffection is not simply a product of generalized pessimism but is more directly tied to institutional and political perceptions.

The survey included an item on the perceived economic situation, rated on a scale from 0 (“very bad”) to 10 (“very good”). The overall average stands at 4.52, showing that respondents perceive their economic situation as somewhat below the midpoint, neither clearly negative nor positive, but reflecting a sense of limited stability.

Overall, the data point to a general feeling of economic fragility among young people, consistent with their age and transitional position in the labour market. This indicator will be used later as a control variable in the regression model to study whether economic perception influences satisfaction with democracy.

The survey also asked respondents to identify what they considered to be the biggest problems in Spain. By far, the most frequently mentioned issue was housing, selected by approximately 70% of participants. This was followed by the political class and politicians (around 40%) and the rise in prices (about 34%).

These results underline the weight of economic and material concerns in shaping youth political perceptions. The profound housing crisis in most Spanish cities, combined with the general increase in prices in recent years and the perceived inability of the political class to address these issues, appear to feed into a sense of frustration with both the economic model and the institutions responsible for managing it.

This relationship between economic dissatisfaction and political discontent will be explored more systematically through the regression analysis that follows, to test whether and to what extent these factors influence young people’s perception of democracy and its quality.

4.1.6 Perception on decentralization (Graphic 4)

For the last item in our descriptive overview, decentralization, it is found that the debate on how the state should be organized is of great importance for the respondents of the survey. They generally see the development of the Autonomous State as something positive, with less than 10 % perceiving it negatively. Approximately 70% claims for a more decentralized State of the Autonomies with a 31% preferring a State where these communities have the possibility to become Nation-States. This data by itself already shows the will for more decentralization in these regions and it simply gets clearer when comparing the responses on perceived and desired level of decentralization been 0 “maximum centralization” and 10 “maximum decentralization”. The results show that the difference between the desired and perceived state of centralization is 2 points, on average, meaning that the youth in these regions claims for an at least 20 % more decentralized State. It is important to highlight that besides following similar trends, these regions have different levels of decentralization. Euskadi is the most

decentralized due to its unique arrangement which grants the right to raise almost all its own taxes called “Concierto Económico” ; the second is Catalunya and subsequently Galicia. It may be because of this that Euskadi shows the smallest difference between desired and perceived level of decentralization compared with the other regions, the difference is only a 5% but it already shows that the citizenship in Euskadi is more satisfied with the actual level of decentralization than Galicia and Catalunya. Overall, there is a clear and generalized desire of more decentralization along the three studied regions.

Regarding the perception on decentralization and its implications on the perception of democracy, most respondents agree that it contributes positively to democratic quality. The average score for the statement “*La descentralización política favorece la calidad de la democracia*” (Q42) is above 7, confirming that the majority perceive political proximity and autonomy as beneficial to democracy. It is difficult to test whether decentralization improves perception on democracy with the available data, but this relation will further be analysed with the use of Data coming from the last report on Quality of Democracy made by the CIS.

4.2. Indicators of Democratic Quality and Populism

The questionnaire included several items evaluating how respondents perceive the functioning and quality of democracy in Spain, as well as their views on political representation and elites trying to capture the populist attitudes of the population.

4.2.1 Quality of Democracy (Table 1 and 3)

When asked to rate the state of democracy in Spain (Q32), the average score falls to 5,267 meaning that the Spanish democracy barely passes the exam according to the youth respondents of the survey. This value indicates an intermediate position: young people do not reject democracy but show clear reservations about its current functioning.

When looking other indicators that valuate other more specific aspects of democratic quality the news does not seem to be any better. The respondents are very discontent and distrust several processes that are held under the democratic framework. For example, they doubt about the redistributive role of democracy, noting that it might not be the case that democracy fosters wealth distribution or that at least this redistribution is insufficient. Regarding other items relating with the rule of law the situation becomes worse, they distrust on the fairness of the judicial system acknowledging that as normal citizens will be treated differently as if they were politicians or simply rich. They also find other problems in the actual political system and its politicians that are seen as not well prepared for their work. They find an unresponsive political system that does not take their opinions into account on decision making processes, a system where the political power is not well protected from the influence

of the economic power, and where the opposition has little power on controlling any abuse from the government. This is what has been depicted from the answers of the youth in Galicia, Euskadi and Catalunya, a democratic system that is failing to provide some of its fundamental aspects.

When comparing this information with the data collected in the last survey from the CIS on democratic valuation it's seen that most of these items receive a lower score in the historical regions. This difference is particularly significant when looking at items regarding the judiciary system treating equally poor and rich citizens, where the respondents in our survey are way more critical. Something similar occurs with the diversity of political parties and programmes, the youth in the historical regions of Spain are more discontent with the actual political panorama of Spain and its parties. They show lower satisfaction with the political spectrum on its diversity meaning that do not precisely agree on having enough political parties to vote in the elections and noting that these parties make similar proposals to govern. This shows that the youth in the historical regions of Spain are more critical about these specific items on quality of democracy, particularly relating to the state of law and the political parties. Interestingly, besides the perception of these specific items been worse in the studied regions it is found that when comparing the available data with the last report from the CIS the average evaluation of democracy is better than in Spain as hole. It is important to note that this report is on a scale form 1-5 but looking at the average of the respondents the results show that the score is around 4 out of 10. This relation will be further analysed in our model, but at least descriptively it is found that in these regions valuate better democracy in general and are more critical about certain specific aspects of it.

It is important to highlight that the most negative scores for these democratic items are found in Galicia, the difference is not significant, and the 3 regions follow similar trends, but the worst valuation of these indicators occurs in Galicia, followed by Catalunya and been the highest score in Euskadi.

The picture looks frightening, but it is important to consider that what we are looking at is survey questions. They show a strong sentiment of discontent with the current state of liberal democracy but still valuate most of its achievements and more openly its ideas and foundations. Most of the youth consider very important to leave in a country that is governed democratically, the score of this indicator raises up to 9 out of 10 in the three studied regions.

4.2.2 Trust in Institutions and government (Table 1)

Continuing with the trust of the respondents of the survey in the national and regional institutions, the data shows a moderately low trust and discontent in both cases. The indicators show bigger trust in the regional institutions but find that the actual performance of both governments is equally bad giving a score around 4 out of 10 when looking at the 3 regions together.

In this case it is found that Galicia follows a different trend than the other regions, in the sense that it is perceived a significantly worst perception on the performance and confidence in the regional government. This phenomenon can be linked with the ideological bias present in the respondents of Galicia but also shows how most of the youth is significantly discontent with the actual government and the party that has been governing the region for the last 15 years, the PP. This situation becomes particularly interesting when considering that Galicia is the only studied region with a non-regional party in government. Do the youth in these regions feel more represented by these parties? This and more questions are going to be furtherly analysed in the qualitative part.

When looking at Cataluña and Euskadi the picture looks different, the youth in these regions values more the work of the regional governments compared with the national and show more trust in these institutions. This difference becomes more evident in the case of Euskadi where the respondents show a significantly higher valuation and trust in the regional institutions with scores reaching over 5 out of 10.

If we compare this data collected in the survey with the last publication of the CIS on Quality of Democracy it is found that the youngest cohort of age shows a similar trend than Euskadi, probably because of very diverse reasons but the reality is that this better valuation of the regional governments is also present in the CIS study including all the regions. The respondents of this survey give the regional governments a score of 5,3 on average, that's one point more than the evaluation they make on the national one. This puts Galician youth in a particular situation compared with the rest of Spain, as they notably oppose to the current status quo in their autonomous community.

The pattern of higher trust in regional institutions, especially in Euskadi and Catalonia, reinforces the argument that Moreno often makes, political proximity can strengthen democratic legitimacy. Even though, Galicia's lower scores remind us of what Treisman writes about: decentralization alone doesn't guarantee better governance. What matters is not only where decisions are made but how they are made. Decentralization works when it is accompanied by accountability and inclusion, not simply by autonomy.

4.2.3 Attitudes Toward Representation and Populism (Table 2 and Graphic 3)

Spain is a country where the populist discourse has not achieved as much popularity if we compare it with other European countries. This does not mean that this ideas and parties haven't penetrated in the Spanish society, they did. It can be easily perceived looking at the ascent of VOX in political representation, but the picture is very different from other member States of the EU where these parties have achieved government positions. This information gains more evidence when looking at the last report from IPSOS studying populist attitudes in Spain and the world, where it is found that

Spain shows a lower intensity on the Indicator of Social Rupture. The reality is that the picture in Spain besides looking less worrying reflects what is already occurring in the rest of Europe, it might be the case that as it happens with other trends and fashions that they simply arrive later.

Regarding the questions of the survey tackling populist attitudes, it is found that the youth in the historical regions of Spain show a moderate level of populism. They moderately agree in questions that refer to a more direct democracy with politicians that follow the will of the people but also see limitations on the idea of been governed by another citizen rather than an expert politician. It is difficult to draw conclusions on this data by itself as there are no other studies on populist attitudes considering similar indicators in the case of Spain and its regions but there might be a link between the low representation of populist parties in these regional parliaments and the absence of strong populist attitudes in the youth of these regions.

They show a pattern of critical but democratic engagement rather than rejection of the system. The youth support democracy but is dissatisfied with its agents, valuing popular participation and proximity while distrusting elites and formal procedures. This desire for “more direct” democracy and the scepticism toward elites are consistent with broader European patterns, but here they appear as a form of criticism rather than rejection. What these responses capture is a call for renewal, a wish for politics to feel closer and less mediated, rather than a turn toward authoritarian alternatives.

4.3. Statistical Analysis

This section presents the quantitative analyses used to evaluate the three hypotheses formulated in this study. Given the ordinal nature of the survey variables and the relatively small sample size, non-parametric statistical methods were preferred over regression models. The analyses included descriptive statistics, Kendall’s rank correlations, Analysis of Variance and Kruskal–Wallis tests to examine relationships between decentralization, territorial belonging, economic perception, and youth evaluations of democracy.

Prior to conducting the statistical analyses, the dataset was screened for missing values and outliers. Variables measured on 0–10 ordinal scales were treated as ordinal. For missing responses, the mean value of the corresponding variable was imputed, ensuring that no observations were excluded and maintaining sample consistency. Assumptions of independence and similar distributional shapes across groups were verified before applying the Kruskal–Wallis test.

4.3.1. Correlation Analysis (Kendall)- Table 4 and 5

Because most survey variables are ordinal (0–10 scales), the analysis uses Kendall's τ correlation, appropriate for ranked and non-parametric data. A correlation heatmap was generated to visualize relationships among variables. Significance levels (p-values) were also computed to determine which associations are statistically relevant.

Consequently, another heatmap was created with the p-values to explore the significance of these variables regarding Democratic perception, the Table 5 is useful to visualize which variables have relation between them and to confirm or reject our hypothesis.

4.3.2 Hypotheses

4.3.2.1 Hypothesis 1: De-centralization improves the perception of the youth towards democracy in Spain

This hypothesis is hard to accept or reject due to the difficulty of giving a numeric value to the level of decentralization. In this study is not possible to compare levels of decentralization as the data collected refers only to the regions of Galicia, Euskadi and Catalunya, thus it will be needed data of responses to the same questions in other regions such as Madrid, Castilla la Mancha, etc to validate our hypothesis.

In the other hand, when comparing the perception of decentralization in both questions 40(In which level of decentralization do you consider the actual Spanish State of Autonomies is?) and 42(Level of agreement with: Political Decentralization improves democratic quality) it is found that the correlation is below 0,1 showing that the influence of these variables over the Perception of Democracy is very low. When looking at the P values table it can be observed that the variable 40 and Democratic perception are very likely to not be related. ($p=0.18>0.05$)

Even though, it must be acknowledged that in this case these results do not say much about the original hypothesis as it relates to perception of decentralization and not decentralization by itself, then the first hypothesis remains untested, and it will furtherly be analysed on the discussion part.

4.3.2.2 Hypothesis 2: Opinions towards the actual state of democracy have a representative territorial component

To test the second hypothesis, it is necessary to explore if the community of residence or the community of origin influence in a certain way the perception of democracy.

To test this relation, it will be used 2 different methodologies: Initially the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and the H Test of Kruskal-Wallis to confirm the veracity of the facts.

For the ANOVA analysis it is necessary to check if the studied variable is normally distributed using a Quantile-Quantile graphic, and it is found that the variable Perception of democracy follows a Normal Distribution.

After the analysis it can be observed that the relation between community of origin/residence and Democratic Perception doesn't exist because for residents $P\text{-Value}=0,41>0,05$ and for origin $P\text{-Value}=0,15>0,05$.

To cross check the rejection of the hypothesis it is used the H Test of Kruskal Wallis, and it is found that the P-Value for residents is $0,358>0,05$ and for Origin is $0,11>0,05$.

These results show that the H2 is rejected and there is not a statistical relation between region of origin or residence and Democratic Perception.

4.3.2.3. Hypothesis 3: The perceived economic situation (material conditions) influences perception of democracy

The third hypothesis is easier to test, as a moderate positive correlation between both variables (questions 11–17) is detected, with $\tau = 0.34$, one of the highest correlations in this study. Consequently, there exists a moderately strong relation between democratic perception and economic perception, evidencing that material conditions influence how youth in the studied regions view democracy. H3 is accepted.

4.3.3 Limitations and Statistical Power

Given the limited sample size and concentration in three autonomous communities, statistical power to detect small effects is low. Therefore, non-significant findings, particularly for H1 and H2, should be interpreted with caution, as they may reflect sample constraints rather than the true absence of relationships. Moreover, the use of mean imputation for missing values, while maintaining sample size, could slightly reduce variability in certain variables. Expanding the dataset to include more regions and respondents would allow for a more accurate assessment of territorial differences and decentralization effects.

5. Qualitative Analysis

To complement the statistical results, qualitative interviews were conducted with young participants from Galicia, the Basque Country, and Catalonia. The interviews and on-field research that took place in this study is helpful to interpret the data from a more personal perspective, reinforcing and contrasting some of the ideas and data collected in the survey.

5.1 Identity and Territorial Perception

There is a very diverse understanding of identity where the regional component plays an important role in most cases. It is found that the respondents tend to identify themselves as mixed, but with a bigger importance of the regional identity mostly due to cultural reasons.

There were some specific cases where the respondents only feel represented by the regional identity and it was found one respondent that was quite sceptic about the concept of identity calling it a metaphysical construction that is totally irrelevant in what refers to politics, but the general picture can be defined as diverse with a strong regional component. In most cases this sentiment of belonging and identity has important implications on how the youth in these regions evaluates democracy. This is not strongly perceived in the qualitative part but in the interviews, there is the common perception that culture and identity define how the citizens in these regions view democracy.

This general picture goes in line with what authors like Luis Moreno pointed out, noting that Spain and its cultural diversity is in the base of its unity. Feeling Spanish or Basque, Catalan or Galician are not exclusionist identities but compatible with each other, as it has been shown by the interviewed.

5.2 Institutional Trust and Representation

The confidence in both regional and national governments seems to be very low as shown by the survey. They refer to them as insufficient but also note that regional governments know how to satisfy better the needs of the population. They tend to trust more the regional institutions as in most cases is where the parties that represent them better have bigger representation and power.

The same occurs when asking about the representation of the youth in a national and regional level, most of the interviews show that the performance of the regional institutions is better than the national ones, they perceive that the regional institutions know better the citizenship and that deliver services and policies based more on their needs and interests. A great example of this phenomenon according to the respondents are the “Gaztetxes” in Euskadi, associations where the youth can organize activities, debates or simply gather in a public space. They are part of the Basque tradition and culture

and are very specific from this region. Catalunya also shows more confidence on the regional government, but this difference is less significant and according to the interviewed is grounded in a sense of cultural understanding and proximity.

"I don't know if they represent them better or worse, but here the regional governments do take young people into account. You see it for example with the Bizkaibizi thing, or in many places there are Gaztextes which are areas specifically for young people to go to, so they aren't on the street. Here, young people are indeed given a space." E, 19, Bilbao

Finally, Galicia shows a particular distrust on the regional institutions. This total distrust can also be linked to a sentiment of frustration and misrepresentation coming from the actual government, the PP. There is a clear ideological bias on this affirmation as most of the respondents auto identified themselves as leftist, but this situation can also be linked to the idea that is the only region in this study that does not have a regional party in government. Another recent events that might help for this phenomenon to occur is the case of ALTRI, mentioned in some of the interviews in Galicia. This project consists in a macro-cellulose plant that is expected to cause several environmental issues in the area, coming from the natural protected area where is planned to be established to the river mouth that is another natural enclave. This event has raised an enormous discontent in a huge proportion of the Galician population that see how economic interest are put before the will of the citizenship.

"In both institutions I have little or no confidence, it doesn't matter if they are national or regional since everything is governed by the same thing which in the end is money. A cause that might make me think this, ALTRI NON. "- I, Galicia, 26

The general distrust in the national institutions, according to the interviews, comes from a feeling of perceived corruption and underrepresentation of the culture, tradition and interests of these regional identities, particularly referring to the youth. They perceive more corruption in the national institutions and less accountability compared with the regional ones, only Galicia shows more confidence in the national government but there are several reasons for this to occur that have already been analysed.

The general framework presents some connections in line with what Peter Mair writes about on the erosion of representative governments, that in this case has materialized in the sentiment of detachment from national parties. Regional actors are the ones that still retain some credibility through perceived responsiveness and are the ones taking this role as more representatives of the youth and these regional identities. This is particularly evident in the case of Euskadi but can also explain the political disaffection with the actual regional government in the case of Galicia. Another important contribution to partially understand these results can be found in the academic work of Manuel Castells (2018) where he presents that the current crisis of legitimacy is grounded in a series of political and

economic failures. He particularly focuses on the 2008 financial crisis as a key moment that eroded public trust, and it might be the case that there are still some leftovers from this sentiment of frustration and even betrayal towards the political class, but the reality is that there are several examples in the recent years of other political and economic failures such as the case of ALTRI or the institutional unresponsiveness with regard to the housing problem that definitely awakened some of these sentiments.

5.3 Democratic Values and Perception on authoritarianism

Regarding the rise in acceptance of authoritarian regimes in the recent years, according to data coming from surveys like Open Society, it is important to explore how this legitimization is occurring and what could be its major causes.

In general, all the respondents showed valuation for democracy but were critical on its actual state claiming for a system that truly represents the people and that respects democratic principles. This conclusion could also respond to the preoccupation on the legitimization of authoritarian regimes under certain circumstances as this rise might also be a reactionary movement criticizing its actual state, the respondents in the survey and interviews do not show authoritarian attitudes, they value democracy but are discontent with what has become. They referred several times to the last authoritarian regime of Francisco Franco as an example of something that did not work arguing that an authoritarian regime is not a feasible solution for the actual problems of the citizenship. There were only 2 respondents that somehow legitimize this idea of authoritarianism over democracy in very specific cases, the first one argued that if this authoritarian regime respected human rights such as transgender rights or the right of determination of States like Palestine it would be preferable as in his opinion there are certain things that should not be debatable. The other respondent legitimizing this idea argued that there is not a big difference when comparing the actual state of our democracy with an authoritarian regime, noting that in the actual system the ones deciding are elites that have divided up the country on its own interests.

“No one wants an autocrat, but neither are these autocracies that different from the system we currently have. Those who decide are elites who have divided up the country in an oligarchic way, submitting to foreign oligarchies and they have sold the country.”- A,22, Bilbao

These alarming views against the current political system are minoritarian and still hide a strong sentiment of democratic support as they only legitimize these authoritarian regimes in very specific cases because of the unresponsiveness and inability of the political system to tackle some of the major preoccupations of the youth such as the genocide in Palestine, the transgender rights, or the fragile socioeconomic and political situation. It is perceived that these rise in acceptance of authoritarian

regimes relates more to the current democratic disaffection present in most of the youth than to a real legitimization of authoritarianism. This idea can be easily understood in the following extract:

"I understand the point that changing the government every 4 years causes decision-making to be slowed down and to be very influenced by elections, but it seems to me that an authoritarian government is too dangerous. The evils that it can cause are much greater than the possible benefit that some people might see in it"- E, 21, Barcelona

5.4 Political engagement

During the interviews it could be perceived that the youth in these regions are engaged and interested in politics but feel frustrated about them, most of the respondents participated in politics outside of the elections but agreed that they would like to be more involved. Some examples of participation cited by the interviewed were the 8 of March, Pro-Independence protests, and more recently the protests supporting Palestine. They see protest, associationism and activism as a fundamental part of democracy that in some cases is the only way to achieve certain causes.

"I see it as a fundamental part of democracy because freedom of expression is something we all need. We need to be able to protest, we need to be able to be volunteers. Regarding demonstrations, if I can attend every single one, I do; I have been to quite a few, I was recently at the "Diada" in Catalonia. As for volunteer work, I have done volunteering from home, smaller-scale things, and I think being a volunteer in certain places is very necessary. If I can participate, I do, because it seems to me an active part of democracy—this freedom of expression, this ability for us, as the people, to help the people. And it seems fundamental to me because, in the end, it is what will make the things that are wrong in democracy change, the ones that can be changed."- T,18, Barcelona

The general claim relates to a more direct democracy that includes all the citizenship in the decision-making processes, where no one is left behind; that responds to the needs of the people, especially in fragile socioeconomic situations; and where accountability and transparency are key of trust.

This claim strongly resonates with the motives behind several major social movements such as the 15-M, analysed by authors like Manuel Castells. In this case the scenario is considerably different from the one in 2008 but this form of horizontal, non-institutional responded to a systemic disillusionment that is again beginning to be glimpsed.

5.5 Material Conditions and Democratic Perception

To conclude with this qualitative analysis, it is important to not forget about another key variable in our study, the material conditions. There is a clear link between the perception of democracy and the material conditions in most of the interviews. Most of the respondents agreed that items like employment, housing or inequality strongly affected their perception of democracy. For them, these items are 3 fundamental pillars in which political parties should put the scope the most. This relation besides looking evident is important to be considered, especially when looking at youth perceptions. They claim that the democratic institutions should grant or at least encourage for quality employment and accessible housing which will also help to reduce inequalities, making these items essentials for representation.

These perceptions can be briefly captured by the answer of one of the interviewed when been asked about how employment, housing or inequality affect her vision of democracy:

“Well, I believe it affects a lot, especially being a young person, living in a city like Barcelona. We cannot become independent being young like our parents because of the price increase, I don't see it as very fair. The issue of employment is three quarters of the same, you have to spend months looking for a job that you can manage well with your studies. Even having a job you cannot become independent in the place where you want to live. I don't see it as good, it has to change”. -S,22, Barcelona

These idea of sufficient material conditions for democracy to work can be found in several academics, even in authors like Adam Przeworski. Besides been a notable defender of the minimalist perception of democracy he highlights that his conceptualization is not that minimal as he acknowledges, following authors from very different schools of thought such as J.S Mill or Marx, that democracy is not possible without some minimums. This means that some of the rights that are brought with democracy cannot be put into practice without the material conditions needed to exercise these rights. It is difficult to know to what extent housing or employment can be included in this minimalist conception, but the reality is that items like employment or housing really condition the perception of democracy for the youth in the studied regions.

6. Discussion, Conclusions and Limitations

6.1. Discussion

The empirical findings of this study gain full meaning when placed in dialogue with the theoretical part developed throughout the literature review. By intersecting the quantitative and qualitative evidence with the contributions of authors such as Przeworski, Mair, Castells, Treisman, Moreno, Hermet, and Alvarado, this discussion highlights how the perceptions of young people in Galicia, Euskadi, and Catalunya reflect broader tensions between institutional design, territorial belonging, and material inequality in contemporary democracies.

6.1.1. Decentralization and Democratic Perception

This hypothesis cannot be directly tested with the available data. The survey measures perceptions of decentralization, not the actual institutional levels of autonomy across Spain's regions. Since the dataset only includes Galicia, Euskadi, and Catalunya, statistical comparison across differing degrees of decentralization is not possible. Even though, on the descriptive overview of the data it is found that the historical regions show on average a better valuation of democracy compared to the national average in the last CIS report on democratic quality. This statement is reinforced when considering that the region that gives the highest score on democratic perception is Euskadi, the most decentralized region of the studied ones, but it is not possible to attribute this difference only to the level of decentralization as this better valuation of democracy might be linked to other items. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 remains untested in empirical terms and must be interpreted through the literature and qualitative evidence.

The theoretical debate reviewed in literature part offers key insights to understand this question. Daniel Treisman (2007) argues that decentralization's democratic effects are dependent on the historical and institutional context. It may enhance legitimacy when it increases local accountability but can also generate fragmentation if perceived as inefficient or inequitable. Luis Moreno (2010), conversely, stresses that the State of Autonomies in Spain has largely succeeded in normalizing diversity, providing a stable framework for regional self-government and accommodating plural identities within a democratic system.

Qualitative evidence from interviews and open responses suggests that young people in the three studied regions view decentralization as a necessary condition of democracy and that subjectively improves their perception towards it. For most respondents, the existence of regional autonomy is simply part of what "democracy" means in Spain. This confirms Moreno's idea of "shared belonging":

decentralization is internalized as part of the democratic system, particularly in historically autonomous regions. They claim for more decentralization, but their criticism lies more in other items that finally reflect their dissatisfaction with democracy.

This perceived greater demand for autonomy in most of the respondents, suggests that decentralization retains symbolic importance and that the youth of these regions view it as something that improves democratic quality. In this sense, the findings bridge Treisman's caution with Moreno's optimism — autonomy is still perceived as necessary, but insufficient, for democratic satisfaction. The demand is not for “more decentralization” per se, but for better decentralization: institutions that combine autonomy with accountability.

6.1.2. Territorial Identity and Democratic Perception

Quantitatively, there are no statistically significant differences between regions in how youth rate democracy. This might suggest, at first glance, that territorial identity does not affect democratic perception. Yet, the qualitative findings tell a very different story, showing that regional identity deeply shapes how young people interpret democracy and what they expect from it.

In Euskadi and Catalunya, interviewees often linked the idea of democratic quality with political proximity and representation of their collective identity. Many participants identify a “better democracy” with one that allows greater regional decision-making or recognition of their distinct national community and culture.

By contrast, in Galicia, respondents were more pessimist towards the representation of the culture and identity by regional governments due to its strong criticism on the actual status quo. This phenomenon can be linked with a feeling of underrepresentation from the actual government, which is chaired by the only national party in these three studied regions (PP). This confirms that territorial identity interacts with context and governance performance, consistent with Treisman's and Mair's frameworks.

However, these qualitative indications must be treated cautiously. The sample of interviewees is small and may overrepresent politically engaged youth or those with strong regional identification. The interviews also rely on self-reported attitudes, which can reflect rhetorical or identity-driven discourse rather than consistent political behaviour. Furthermore, the absence of measurable regional differences in the quantitative data may suggest that identity shapes discursive conceptions of democracy more than its evaluative ratings

The discrepancy between qualitative and quantitative results raises important methodological questions. It may reflect limitations in the survey's sensitivity to cultural meaning, the influence of

emotionally charged topics during interviews, regional political climates at the time of data collection or simply that the territorial dimension on democratic perception is something very difficult to capture on a quantitative scale. Therefore, while qualitative evidence points toward the relevance of territorial identity, it cannot definitively confirm its causal impact on democratic perception.

In summary, Hypothesis 2 is not statistically supported but is partially validated through qualitative insights. The findings suggest that regional identity informs the interpretation of democracy, particularly in Euskadi and Catalunya, but the strength and generalizability of this influence remain uncertain.

6.1.3. Material Conditions, Neoliberalism, and Democratic Legitimacy

The strongest empirical relationship found, a moderate positive correlation ($\tau = 0.34$) between economic perception and democratic satisfaction, reveals that material well-being significantly shapes how young people evaluate democracy. However, interpreting this finding requires refinement when contrasted with the literature.

This result directly connects to the long-standing debate on whether democracy's legitimacy depends solely on procedures or also on material outcomes. Przeworski's conception of democracy is often labelled "minimalist," but this characterization overlooks its complexity. While Przeworski defines democracy procedurally, as a system in which governments can be replaced through elections, he also acknowledges, following J.S. Mill and Karl Marx, that democracy requires certain material preconditions to function effectively. Showing that this minimalist conceptualization in the end is not that minimal.

The findings of this study empirically reinforce that argument. Respondents who perceive their material conditions as precarious express lower satisfaction with democracy, not necessarily because they reject democratic principles, but because they experience democracy as failing to deliver minimal fairness and opportunity.

This statement goes in line with the academic work of authors such as Manuel Castells (2018), Jean-Pierre Hermet (2008), and Eduardo Alvarado Espina (2018). They interpret the current democratic malaise as the direct consequence of neoliberal transformations that hollowed out the social state. Their perspectives allow a more substantive reading of the empirical results. Castells' analysis of "Ruptura" shows how the Spanish political system lost credibility when it prioritized financial stability over social protection during the 2008 crisis, precisely the kind of experience that today's youth grew up with. Hermet and Alvarado take this further: the market's dominance over the state, they argue, has privatized democracy itself, reducing it to a minimal procedural shell detached from social needs.

The economic fragility reported by survey respondents' low economic satisfaction (4.5/10 on average), housing insecurity, and precarious employment, directly reflects these structural processes. The youth's frustration with democracy's performance cannot be explained merely by attitudes or ideology; it expresses the material limits of neoliberal governance in providing social mobility and fairness.

At the same time, most respondents rate the importance of living in a democracy as 9/10, confirming that their criticism is not anti-democratic but reformist. This echoes the conclusions of Bristelle and others (2024), who found that young Europeans dissatisfied with democracy are not calling for authoritarian alternatives but for a more effective, fair, and inclusive democracy. The Spanish case fits this model: disillusionment emerges from economic precarity, not rejection of democratic values.

Thus, while Przeworski's minimalist definition helps clarify that democracy cannot be judged by its outputs alone, the works of Castells, Hermet, and Alvarado show that when economic structures systematically undermine equality and participation, even procedural democracies risk losing legitimacy. The empirical findings of this study confirm that tension: the youth's belief in democracy persists, but their confidence in its capacity to deliver material and social justice has eroded.

6.2 Conclusions

This study helps to understand how young people in Galicia, Euskadi, and Catalunya perceive democracy and which factors shape their evaluations of it. Through the combined analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, the research revealed that the younger generation does not reject democracy but rather questions its current capacity to respond to social, economic, and territorial realities. What emerges is not disaffection in the sense of detachment, but a more critical and demanding claim for fair, transparent and "real" democracy.

The results presented in the previous chapter suggest that for the youth in these regions, democracy remains by far the most legitimate political framework, yet its credibility depends enormously on its performance, on whether it delivers fairness, equality, and effective governance. The study has shown that perceptions of democracy are shaped by the interaction between institutional structures, social experiences, and identity. Decentralization is largely accepted as a normal and necessary condition of Spanish democracy. Territorial identity continues to play a role in how democracy is imagined, though not always in how it is rated. Above all, material conditions appear as the most decisive factor. When social and economic security is not granted, democratic satisfaction weakens, highlighting that political legitimacy is inseparable from everyday well-being.

Taken together, these insights point to a generation that approaches democracy with critical loyalty. Their expectations are grounded not only in ideology but in lived experience: they want a democracy

that listens, protects, and provides real opportunities. They express the conviction that democratic values must be accompanied by tangible outcomes. Rather than eroding democracy, their criticisms can be understood as a call for its renewal, for a political system that does not leave anyone behind, that truly represents the citizenship and that cares on the social outcomes needed for democracy to function correctly.

Beyond its empirical findings, this study contributes to a broader reflection on the state of democracy in Spain. It suggests that the endurance of democratic legitimacy depends on maintaining a balance between institutional rules and the social foundations that sustain them. In this sense, the results reaffirm the idea that democracy requires minimal material and educational conditions to function properly. Without them, participation becomes ineffective, and representation loses credibility.

While the study is limited to three autonomous communities, it opens paths for further research. Future work could incorporate additional regions, larger samples, and in general more data to explore how these perceptions evolve over time and across different contexts. More attention could also be given to how identity, class, and ideology interact with each other in shaping young people's democratic expectations.

The opinion of the young people studied here reveal both the fragility and the resilience of democracy. Their reflections remind us that democracy is not a static achievement but a continuous project that must renew itself in response to changing social realities. What they ask for is not a different system, but a better version of the one they still believe in, a democracy capable of putting together political and economic equality with recognition of their identity and culture, and democratic ideals with social outcomes. It is in that critical demand, rather than in indifference or detachment, that the future of democratic legitimacy in Spain may be found.

As a final reflection, it is necessary to recognize that the expectations placed upon democracy are extraordinarily demanding. The desire for a system that guarantees equality, recognition, and dignity confronts some of the structural limits of political power itself. As Przeworski reminds us, democracy cannot be expected to achieve what no political system has ever fully achieved, total economic equality. Its mission, therefore, should not be to abolish inequality but to govern it, to mitigate its excesses, and to make it compatible with its foundational ideas. Considering the constraints of the neoliberal order, this becomes an even harder task. The state must operate in an economic environment that often restricts its redistributive capacity and its responsiveness to social demands. Whether democracy can adapt to these conditions and still embody the promise of fairness remains an open question. Perhaps Przeworski was right to warn that we cannot expect democracy to deliver what any other political

system has been able to deliver. Yet it is precisely in confronting these limits that democracy will be able to continue finding its meaning and resilience.

6.3 Limitations

Although this research provides valuable insights into how young people in Galicia, Euskadi, and Catalunya perceive democracy, it also faces certain limitations. The study's focus on three already highly decentralized regions restricting its comparative capacity, this limits the study on doing a full empirical test of how different levels of autonomy influence democratic satisfaction. The relatively small survey sample and the replacement of missing responses with mean values may have slightly reduced variability, while the qualitative component, based on a limited number of interviews, could overrepresent more politically aware participants. Furthermore, as a cross-sectional study, it captures perceptions at a single moment in time, without considering how these might evolve in response to changing political or economic contexts. Despite these constraints, the findings offer an important contribution to understanding the relationship between youth and democracy within Spain's decentralized political system and point to the need for future research incorporating broader regional comparisons and longitudinal perspectives.

References:

Alvarado-Espina, E. (2018). Una aproximación crítico-contextual al declive de la democracia en la era neoliberal. *Revista Española de Ciencia Política*, 47, 69-91.

Balinhas, D. (2024). Examining the Territorial Dimension as a Source of Affective Polarization in the Spanish Multinational Democracy: A Longitudinal Analysis. *Ethnopolitics*, 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2024.2400637>

Bristelle, A., Carbonell, J., Cohen, S., Dressler, M., Kaszas, A., Kostrzewski, A., Mitchell, G., Smogorzewski, K., & Wirthwein, K. (2024). *How young people facing disadvantage view democracy in Europe*. Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS); Think-tank for Action on Social Change (TASC). <https://feps-europe.eu/publication/how-young-people-facing-disadvantage-view-democracy-in-europe/>

Casal Bértoa, F., & Rama Caamaño, J. (2017). ¿Democracia en crisis? El futuro de los partidos políticos y de la democracia representativa. *Revista De Las Cortes Generales*, (100-102), 249-273. <https://doi.org/10.33426/rcg/2017/100-102/31>

Castells, M. (2018). *Ruptura: La crisis de la democracia liberal*. Alianza Editorial.

Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS). (2009). Opiniones y actitudes nº74.

Centro de Investigaciones sociológicas (CIS). (2025). Estudio nº 3497. *Calidad Democrática (III)*. Abril 2025

Cordero, G., & Roch, J. (2020). *Democracia se escribe con Zeta: La percepción política de la Generación Z en España*. Fundación Alternativas.

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Díaz-Serrano, Luis; Rodríguez-Pose, Andrés (2012): Decentralization, Subjective Well-Being And The Perception of Institutions, 52nd Congress of the European Regional Science Association: "Regions in Motion - Breaking the Path", 21-25 August 2012, Bratislava, Slovakia, European Regional Science Association (ERSA), Louvain-la-Neuve

El País. (2025, June 15). *Credibilidad rota*. Retrieved from <https://elpais.com/opinion/2025-06-15/credibilidad-rota.html>

- Greene, J. C., Caracelli, V. J., & Graham, W. F. (1989). Toward a conceptual framework for mixed-method evaluation designs. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 11(3), 255–274. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737011003255>
- Hermet, G. (2008). *El invierno de la democracia*. Barcelona: Los libros del lince.
- Ipsos. (2025). Informe España Ipsos Populismo 2025: <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2025-07/ipsos%20-%20Populismo%20en%20Espa%C3%B1a%202025.pdf>
- Jörke, D. (2008). «Post-democracia en Europa y América Latina», *Revista de Sociología*, 22: 141-156. <https://doi.org/10.5354/0719-529X.2008.14488>
- Lieberman, E. S. (2005). Nested analysis as a mixed-method strategy for comparative research. *American Political Science Review*, 99(3), 435–452. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055405051762>
- Mair, P. (2009). Responsible versus representative government: Political parties in decline. *West European Politics*, 32(5), 991-1006 <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402380903064748>
- Mariela Belén Agüero, Nacho Álvarez, Oriol Bartomeus, Pablo Cabrera Álvarez, Silvia Clavería, Juan J. Dolado, Modesto Escobar, Bonnie Field, Octavio Granado Martínez, Santiago Lago Peñas, Louise Mallinder, Javier Pérez González, Juan Rodríguez Teruel y Jorge Uxó (2024). Informe sobre la Democracia en España 2023. La renuncia al centro /Fundación Alternativa. No.17/2024
- Moreno, Luis. (2008). *La federalización de España. Poder político y territorio*.
- Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Europe*. Cambridge University
- Open Society Foundations (2023) Open society Barometer. Can democracy deliver?
- Orhan, Y. E. (2022). The relationship between affective polarization and democratic backsliding: comparative evidence. *Democratization*, 29(4), 714–735. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.2008912>
- O'Toole, T., Lister, M., Marsh, D., Jones, S., & McDonagh, A. (2003). Tuning out or left out? Participation and non-participation among young people. *Contemporary Politics*, 9(1), 45–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1356977032000072477>
- Przeworski, A. (1999). *Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense*.
- Przeworski, A. (2019). *Crises of democracy*. Cambridge University Press.

Przeworski, A. (2010). *Democracy and the Limits of Self-Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Przeworski, A. (2007). Democracy, equality, and redistribution. *Political Judgement*, pp. 281–312.

Singh, P. Populism, Nationalism, and Nationalist Populism. *St Comp Int Dev* 56, 250–269 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-021-09337-6>

Treisman D. (2007). *The Architecture of Government: Rethinking Political Decentralization*. Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics. Cambridge University Press; 2007

Annex 1- Tables

TABLE 1 (Perception of Democracy and Economy & Institutional trust)

Indicators	Total	Catalunya	Euskadi	Galicia
Democratic Perception	5,267	4,993	5,587	5,203
Economic Perception	4,522	4,413	4,587	4,556
Trust in National Government	3,44	3,079	3,407	3,778
Trust in Regional Government	3,982	4,066	5,14	2,84
Subjective Well-Being	7,284	7,391	7,673	6,833

TABLE 2 (Populist attitudes) Average Values for level of agreement regarding the following statements on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is "Not at all in agreement" and 10 is "Completely in agreement",

Region	Total	Catalunya	Galicia	Euskadi
32. The people, and not the politicians, should make the most important political decisions.	5,702	5,102	5,953	5,981
33. he politicians in parliament should follow the will of the people.	7,57	7,591	7,669	7,463
34.The political differences between the elite and the citizens are greater than the differences among the citizens themselves.	7,904	7,241	6,738	7,294
35. I would prefer to be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician.	4,306	4,519	4,399	4,043
36.The elected leaders talk a lot and take very little action.	7,468	7,617	7,558	7,265

TABLE 3 (Quality of Democracy) Average Values for level of agreement regarding the following statements on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is "Not at all in agreement" and 10 is "Completely in agreement"

Region	TOTAL	Catalunya	Galicia	Euskadi
20.La justicia trata igual a políticos y ciudadanos	1,517	1,434	1,506	1,604
21. La justicia trata igual a ricos y pobres	1,775	1,905	1,358	2,107
22. La democracia favorece la redistribución de la riqueza	4,491	4,237	4,363	4,864
23.Hay partidos suficientes a los que votar en las elecciones	4,551	4,406	4,661	4,567
24. Los partidos hacen propuestas muy parecidas para gobernar	5,597	5,585	5,679	5,517
25. El poder político está totalmente protegido de las presiones del poder económico	4,018	4,306	3,273	4,575
26. Los gobernantes tienen en cuenta las opiniones de los ciudadanos a la hora de tomar decisiones	3,076	3,124	3,123	2,98
27. La oposición tiene capacidad de controlar cualquier abuso del gobierno	3,491	3,71	3,278	3,52
28. Entre los políticos hay más corrupción que en el resto de la sociedad	6,946	7,146	6,87	6,845
29. La gente como yo no tiene ninguna influencia sobre lo que hace el Gobierno	6,482	6,365	6,402	6,676
30. Los parlamentarios están muy preparados para su labor	2,948	2,859	3,117	2,845
31. Actualmente, todas las ideas se pueden expresar con libertad	4,531	4,145	4,815	4,58

Table 4- Correlation Table (Kendall)

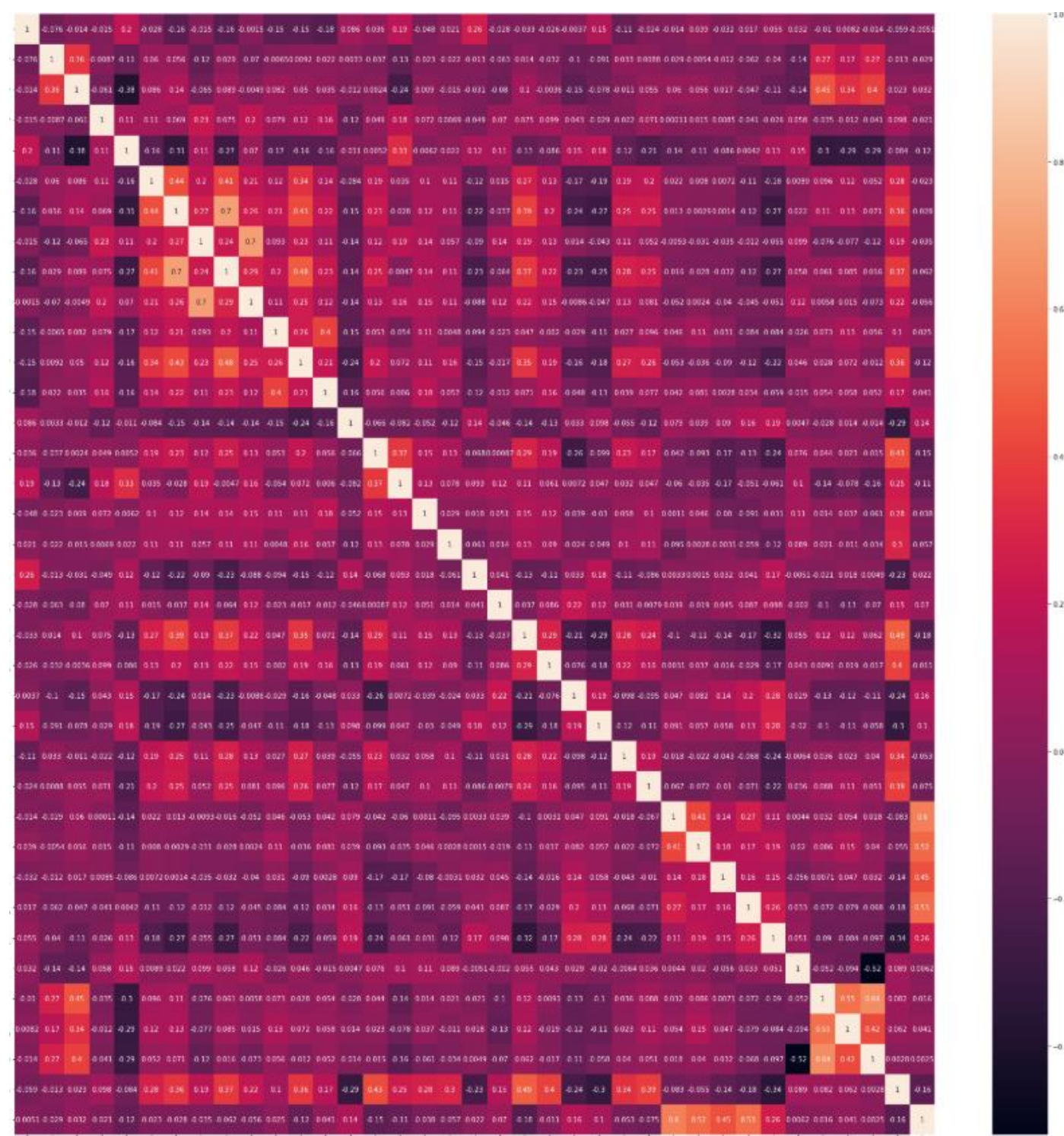
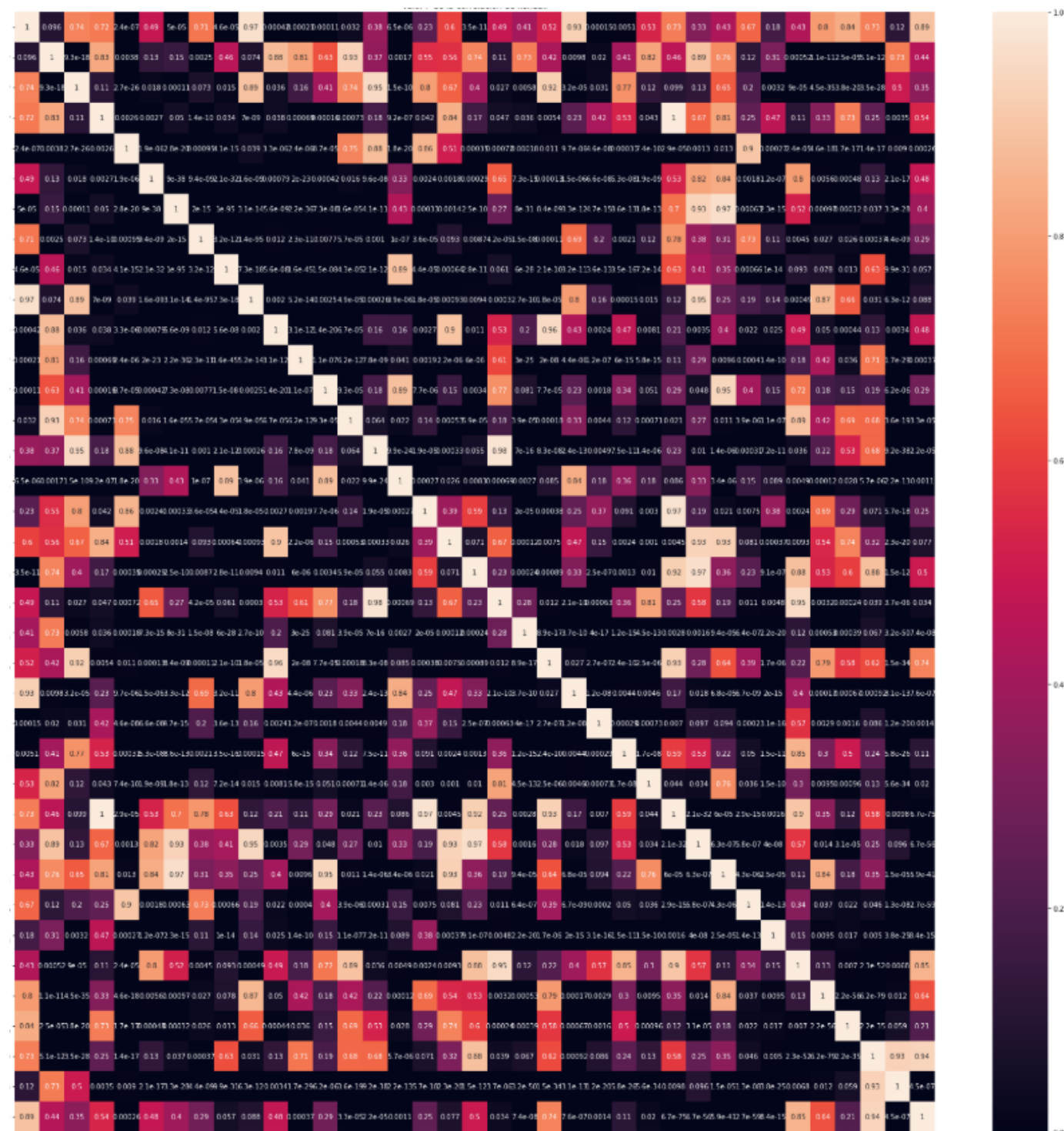


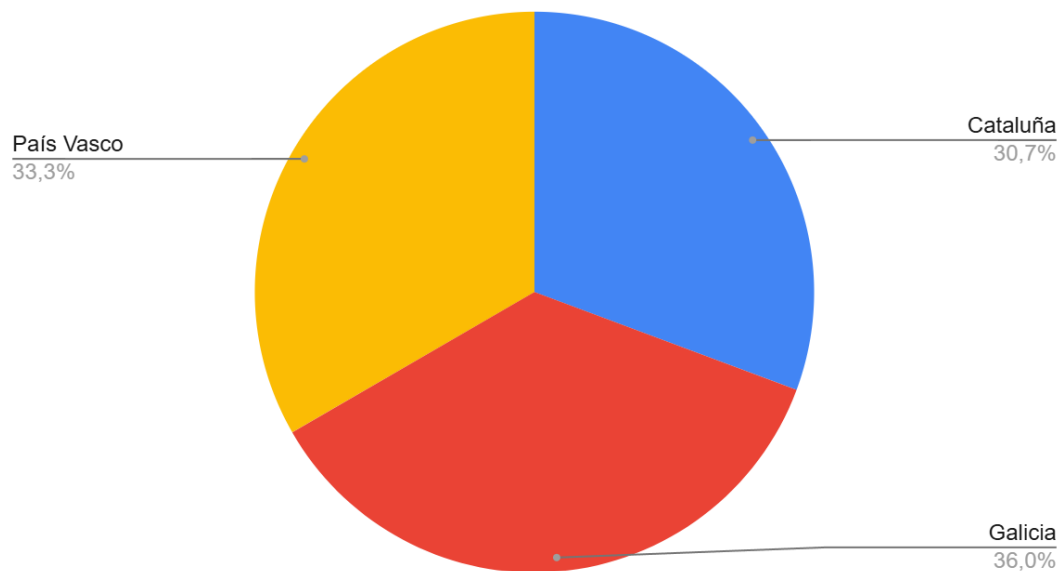
Table 5- P Values of the Correlation of Kendall



Annex 2- Graphs

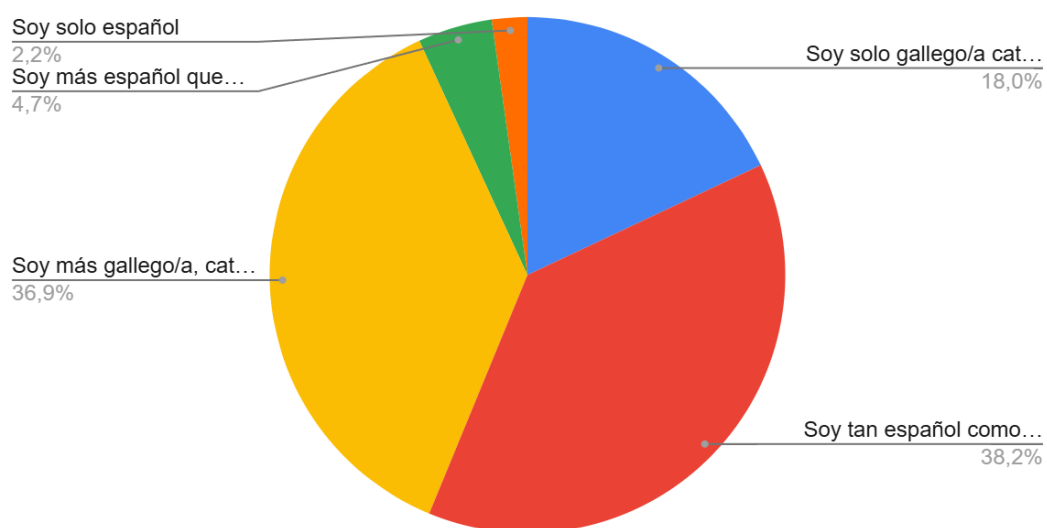
Graphic 1. (Territorial Distribution- Region of Origin)

Recuento de 1.¿Cual es tu Comunidad Autónoma de Origen?



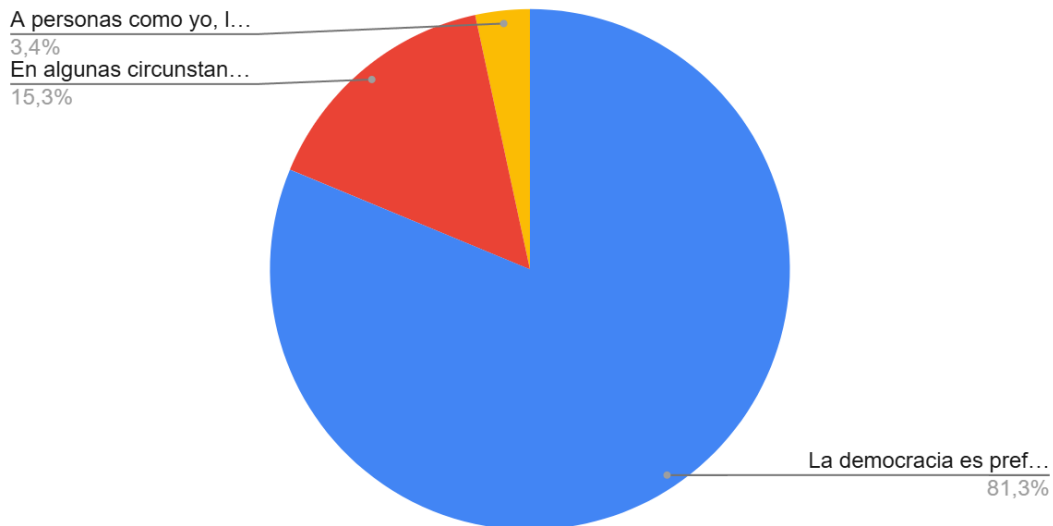
Graphic 2 (Identity)

Recuento de 7.De las siguientes opciones, ¿Cuál crees que te representa mejor?



Graphic 3 (Democracy vs Authoritarianism)

Recuento de 18. ¿Cuál de las siguientes frases refleja mejor tu opinión sobre la democracia?



Graphic 4 (Alternative ways of organizing the State)

Recuento de 39. A continuación, te presentaré algunas fórmulas alternativas de organización del Estado en España....

