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# Urban jungle, radical roar: sprawl, economic decline and the success of populist radical right in metropolitan Spain

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**ABSTRACT**

In recent years, Populist Radical Right Parties (PRRPs) have gained significant ground in many Western democracies. While most studies focus on rural areas, this paper examines the role of population growth in explaining support for Vox, Spain's leading PRRP, in urban areas. Spain offers a unique case due to its rapid urbanisation and the substantial presence of Vox in metropolitan settings. Using data from over 27,000 urban census tracts, we find that population growth is positively associated with Vox support, particularly in suburban areas. This effect is moderated by socio-economic conditions: it is stronger in neighbourhoods with lower incomes and higher unemployment. Our findings suggest that population growth intensifies support for Vox in left-behind urban areas, underlining the interaction between demographic change and socio-economic disadvantage. These results expand the current understanding of PRRP support by showing that both rural depopulation and urban growth contribute to their success. However, the study's limitations call for further research across different contexts and with more fine-grained indicators of left-behindness.

## 1. Introduction

'The city has become a Monopoly board'. This quote, taken from a Spanish bestseller on urban unease (Dioni, 2023), powerfully summarises the growing challenges facing urban dwellers in Spain and other European countries. In his analysis, López Dioni focuses on the neoliberal model of the city, highlighting problems like property speculation, pollution, uncontrolled tourism, poor mobility, gentrification and rising housing prices. While these problems are not new, their aggravation in recent years has created an increasingly inhospitable breeding ground for many urban residents. At the same time, this complicated urban environment can be seen as fertile ground for the rise of Populist Radical Right Parties (PRRPs).

Recent research has begun to establish links between these urban phenomena and support for PRRPs. For example, studies such as that of Held and Patana (2023) or Abou-Chadi et al. (2024) have shown that rising rent prices correlate with increased support for these political formations. Other work, such as that of Patana (2021), has explored residential constriction, while Essletzbichler and Forcher (2022) has linked population growth to increased competition for public services, which in turn feeds populist narratives.

In this context, the literature that has focussed on studying the support for PRRPs has often resorted to the traditional rural-urban cleavage proposed by Lipset and Rokkan (1967). The vast majority of this literature has analysed the motivations behind the success of PRRPs in rural versus urban areas (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Rickardsson, 2021). Both from a political supply-side point of view–these parties have more ruralist narratives (Jolly et al., 2022; Valero, 2022)–and from a political demand-side–rural inhabitants have attitudes in line with populist narratives (e.g. Lago, 2022 or Huijsmans et al., 2021)–researchers have pointed out that there are reasons to expect higher levels of success of PRRPs in rural areas. Now, the performance of PRRPs in rural areas does not diminish the interest in analysing the sources of support for this party family in urban areas, particularly given the seriousness of the urban problems mentioned above. For this

reason, and taking the presence of a politically relevant rural-urban divide as our starting point, we focus this study on the specific causes of the success of PRRPs in urban areas.

In this paper, we propose to fill this gap in the literature by using population growth as the main explanatory variable. We understand that this variable, which has hardly been studied so far, decisively conditions many of the problems faced by urban areas, as is the case with competition for public services, escalating housing prices, and pollution. We also consider that the effect of this variable will be context-dependent, having a stronger impact on voting for PRRPs in suburbs and economically decaying places. Using a quantitative approach, we select Spain as a case study, one of the few countries where support for PRRPs has been stronger in urban than in rural areas (Sánchez-García & Negral, 2023; Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2020). We conduct a fine-grained analysis using a novel database covering all urban neighbourhoods in that country.

Our results show that population growth benefited Vox electorally in urban areas. That is, in urban neighbourhoods that gained population, support for the PRR was on average one percentage point higher. However, these results show heterogeneous effects depending on the social and economic characteristics of the location. In particular, we demonstrate that the effects of demographic change have been more pronounced in suburban areas than in cities. We also show that urban neighbourhoods with low incomes and high unemployment rates were fertile ground for this party. That is, we can observe that, in general, urban population growth has contributed to Vox's success in Spain, especially in the most economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

The article is organised as follows. First, we present a theoretical framework on the geography of voting for PRRPs, both in general and in specific urban contexts. In this section, we also address the characteristics that make the Spanish case relevant to our research objectives. Second, we explain the research design used in this paper. Next, we present the empirical analysis. Finally, we conclude with a general discussion on our findings and their implications for the analysis of PRRPs.

## 2. The geography of the populist radical right parties

The rise of PRRPs in the last decade has been explained by two broad types of factors. The first stream of literature has emphasised the role played by cultural elements, paying special attention to the reactions triggered by both immigration and increasing ethnic diversity in North Atlantic societies. In this vein, the theory of cultural backlash proposed by Norris and Inglehart (2019) as fuel for PRRPs is of particular relevance. The second, more focussed on economic insecurity, has emphasised the discontent and grievances of the social groups most harmed by globalisation (Essletzbichler et al., 2018; Rodrik, 2018). Nevertheless, these economic and cultural factors overlap and interact in different ways and contexts, a fact that complicates the attribution of empirical causality (Essletzbichler & Forcher, 2022). For this reason, some advocate using 'place' as a meeting point between the two approaches, especially in geographical studies (Jennings & Stoker, 2019).

One of the most explored geographical lines of study in electoral behaviour is the rural-urban cleavage. From classic studies, such as that of Lipset and Rokkan (1967), to the contemporary contributions (e.g. Kenny and Luca (2021) and Taylor et al.. (2023)), numerous analyses have highlighted the importance of this division in explaining political behaviour in Europe. In particular, many studies have investigated the specific factors that contribute to the success of PRRPs in rural areas. From a demand-side perspective, analyses have revealed that rural areas display more negative feelings towards politics, including higher levels of distrust (Mitsch et al., 2021) as well as lower levels of perceived external political efficacy (García del Horno et al., 2023) and satisfaction with democracy (Lago, 2022). Negative perceptions of politics converge with populist ideology in general and with the PRRP narrative in particular. For this reason, PRRPs are likely to perform better in rural areas. Moreover, rural inhabitants also display certain values that align with the PRRPs' narrative, namely nativist attitudes, anti-multiculturalism, and Euro-scepticism (Bornschier et al., 2021; Crulli, 2024; De Dominicis et al., 2022; Huijsmans et al., 2021). These attitudes tend to be associated with both populist attitudes and voting for the PRRPs (Brigevich & Wagner, 2025; Ramos-González et al., 2025). On the other hand, from a supply-side perspective, PRRPs have shown a greater propensity to position themselves close to rural narratives (Jolly et al., 2022; Valero, 2022). Indeed, studies to date show some consonance between these narratives and higher levels of support for PRRPs in rural areas (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Rickardsson, 2021).

A different stream of geographical studies has analysed the success of PRRPs in 'left-behind places' (Goodwin & Heath, 2016). In an attempt to disentangle this concept, Pike et al. (2023) suggested

understanding these places as those that had experienced deterioration or decline in seven dimensions: economic, social, environmental, political, institutional, cultural, and infrastructural. Despite the multi-dimensional character of this concept, most empirical studies have focussed on the effects of single dimensions (see Perancho et al. (2025) for a more in-depth discussion of the impact of the different dimensions of left-behindness).

Studies have placed considerable attention on the effects of infrastructural dynamics. A stream of literature has focussed on studying the electoral consequences of grievances over the deprivation of public services, showing how the PRR has benefited from this discontent in countries such as Italy (Cremaschi et al., 2024), Denmark (Nyholt, 2024), and the United Kingdom (Dickson et al., 2025). Another stream of literature focussing on infrastructural transformations has argued that the job losses triggered by globalisation and industrial relocation have contributed to the rise of the PRR (Colantone & Stanig, 2018). This line of research, which can be seen as purely infrastructural, emphasises, therefore, the importance of economic grievances. It is precisely this dimension that is taken into consideration in this article.

Beyond this type of literature, other geographical factors have gained importance in recent years in understanding electoral behaviour. We are referring specifically to the phenomenon of demographic mobility. In recent years, particularly following the Great Recession of 2008, internal migration has become increasingly frequent. In general, this has meant that inhabitants of rural areas, with fewer attractions and economic opportunities, have migrated to cities, which are more dynamic (Carbonaro et al., 2018). As a two-sided process, depopulation (mainly of rural areas) has been studied as a factor shaping voting behaviour, especially towards the PRR (Dancygier et al., 2025; Sánchez-García et al., 2024). In these contexts, population decline can trigger the closure of essential services or even the virtual disappearance of the municipality itself, further deepening the difficulties of these areas. By contrast, population growth (mainly urban), which has received little attention in the literature with regard to electoral behaviour, may also generate deterioration. As we argue in the following section, rapid urban sprawl can undermine living conditions by overburdening infrastructure and services, fuelling discontent that may foster support for PRRPs, particularly in economically disadvantaged areas. We complement this argument with further evidence on demographic change.

## 2.1. Urban support for PRRPs

Studies published to date have shown how rural areas have been more fertile ground for the growth of PRRPs. However, this fact does not exempt the scholarship from the importance of studying the vote for these parties in urban contexts. Moreover, the higher levels of support for these parties in rural areas are only a general trend that can and does have exceptions, as we will see below in our case study. But what factors contribute to the PRRPs' vote in urban areas? The literature on this issue provides two broad types of explanations, in addition to the previously developed one of left-behind places.

First, we present the argument regarding stressed cities. Urban areas have been an increasing focus of population inflows, especially of people from rural areas or even other urban areas with less economic attractiveness. Consequently, many cities have experienced exponential population growth. This population increase could be interpreted as good news for urban areas if it were accompanied by public policies that allowed for an orderly sprawl of cities. This is not usually the case, and this population growth is the origin of problems that may end up being channelled through PRRPs. We can suggest at least two important troubles in the contemporary political agenda that are directly a consequence of the urban sprawl.

On the one hand, assuming housing as a market good, population growth increases competition for access to housing–both for rent and purchase–which leads to price increases in the most sought-after cities. In those cases where access to housing has become a nightmare, we find empirical evidence linking it to the rise of the PRR from different perspectives. Abou-Chadi et al. (2024) suggests that the rising cost of housing triggers a sense of economic insecurity. Using the case of Germany, they find empirical evidence to support this argument, with the AfD channelling this discontent. Also in Germany, Held and Patana (2023) find that the AfD's capture of discontent over rising rents is also linked to aversion to the arrival of new foreign migrants. Nevertheless, it is not only rising prices that matter, but also residential constraints. In this vein, Patana (2021) proposes that the PRR may gain greater support in places where resources

and opportunities are scarce, and from which inhabitants cannot escape. Patana demonstrates that these relative economic grievances led to greater support for RN.

On the other hand, the increase in the number of inhabitants living in the same space not only has effects on housing but also runs the risk of collapsing public services. Thus, population growth triggers a perception of competition for public services that ends up benefiting PRRPs. We find evidence in Mullis (2021)'s extraordinary ethnographic work in two neighbourhoods in Frankfurt (Germany). Analysing interviews with various experts, Mullis links three crucial elements in the urban process (urban austerity, post-democracy and gentrification) with the advance of PRR. Focusing on the last of these elements, population growth can increase the perception of competition for public services, especially when foreigners are present. This argument finds empirical evidence in other contexts such as Vienna, where Essletzbichler and Forcher (2022) shows that this competition for public services benefited the PRR, in line with their defence of the chauvinistic welfare state (Cavaillé & Ferwerda, 2023; De Koster et al., 2013).

Second, we lay out the demographic change argument. The growth of cities, largely explained by the arrival of new immigrants (both domestic and foreign), has two effects that may contribute to the success of PRRPs. Firstly, drawing on social capital theory (Putnam et al., 1993), we may think that the arrival of new inhabitants–who, on average, have lower levels of individual social capital (Hotchkiss & Rupasingha, 2021)–creates contexts with weaker community rootedness. Consequently, these places, as a result of population growth, tend to show lower levels of social capital, interpersonal trust, and collective meaning. All these factors make such municipalities more favourable environments for PRRPs (Berning & Ziller, 2017; Giuliano & Wacziarg, 2020).

Furthermore, with the arrival of new inhabitants, these areas undergo important changes. The first, and most evident, is what the literature has termed a 'compositional effect' (Maxwell, 2019; Taylor et al., 2023). This concept highlights that, in geographical analyses of voting, the social composition of places cannot be overlooked. Specifically, when studying migratory phenomena, it is essential to highlight the changes they bring to local demographics. Dancygier et al. (2025) and Sánchez-García et al. (2024) consider this dimension in their studies on depopulation–addressing, primarily, the ageing of rural areas. Applied to this case, one might expect that the arrival of new inhabitants–often young, skilled individuals disillusioned by the lack of opportunities (González-Leonardo & López-Gray, 2019)–could shift the local composition in ways that align more closely with PRR narratives (Rama et al., 2021). This change can also be understood in terms of lifestyle, businesses, and activities that define the urban context (Mullis, 2021). From this perspective, demographic shifts frequently produce tensions, as long-standing residents may feel that their communities are being transformed in ways that threaten their cultural or economic stability. Population growth, particularly when it involves newcomers from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, can heighten dissatisfaction or insecurity among certain segments of the population (Lee & Reina, 2024). As a result, voters opposed to these changes may increasingly turn to PRRPs, which capitalise on these grievances by promoting nationalist, anti-immigrant, or anti-gentrification rhetoric (van Gent et al., 2014).

In both the stressed cities and demographic change arguments, population growth plays a central role in the development of urban issues that ultimately benefit PRRPs. This line of research has hardly been explored beyond the remarkable work of Harteveld et al. (2022) for the Netherlands or that of Mullis (2021), which addresses this issue from a qualitative perspective. For this reason, over this gap, this paper sheds light on the effect of population growth on voting for PRRPs. Our RQ, therefore, is: Does population growth affect the vote for PRRPs in urban areas? Taking into account the two arguments set out above, we infer that:

**Hypothesis 1** Population growth in urban areas benefits PRRPs.

Nevertheless, we consider that the relationship between population growth and support for PRRPs in urban areas may have heterogeneous effects and be conditioned by some moderating variables. Specifically, within this geographical framework, we suggest two crucial avenues to internal variations.

Firstly, we must consider the presence of general differences within urban areas. According to the categorisation proposed by Eurostat (2019) and adopted here, urban areas include cities as well as towns and suburbs, with the latter two grouped together by Eurostat.[1] Cities are usually characterised by higher population density, more public services, and greater economic and social dynamism. In contrast, towns and suburbs tend to be less populated, often in the process of development, and largely contiguous with

cities (or other suburban areas), forming what are considered the functional areas of cities. Linking this to population growth, we expect its political effects to be higher in suburban areas than in cities. Drawing on the arguments above–particularly the notion of 'stressed cities'–we argue that the dynamics we describe apply more strongly to towns and suburbs than to cities. Towns and suburbs are smaller and typically have fewer public and private services. Consequently, their inhabitants may feel more acutely competition for scarce resources and political neglect when their needs are overlooked. Moreover, many of these areas are characterised by sprawling settlement patterns that foster individualism and social isolation (Morris & Pfeiffer, 2017). This combination suggests that suburban areas may have even lower levels of social capital than cities, which in turn may facilitate the advance of PRRPs. For these reasons, we hypothesise that:

**Hypothesis 2** The effect of population growth on support for PRRPs is stronger in towns and suburbs than in cities.

Second, it is essential to consider the economic context in which voters are embedded when analysing support for these parties (Arzheimer et al., 2024). Much of the literature has done so by focussing on economic deprivation. Within this dimension, Pike et al. (2023) highlights several key indicators, including declining real wages, limited or poor-quality training, restricted employment opportunities, and limited access to wealth. Given the available data and our aggregate-level approach, we concentrate on income and unemployment to capture the extent of economic left-behindness in neighbourhoods. Other studies, however, have reached similar conclusions using different frameworks, such as socio-economic marginalisation (Rydgren & Ruth, 2013).

Regardless of the terminology employed, empirical evidence consistently shows that left-behind places constitute fertile ground for the success of PRRPs (Ciccolini, 2025; Colantone & Stanig, 2018; Patana, 2020; Stockemer, 2017). Building on this, we argue that the interaction between population growth and adverse economic conditions further amplifies this support. Specifically, worsening hardship in urban areas undergoing rapid growth–where economic decline overlaps with residential pressure–can intensify the appeal of PRRPs. Unlike depopulation, which threatens the very survival of municipalities, urban sprawl creates a different form of political discontent: it undermines living conditions by straining local infrastructure, reducing access to services, and deepening perceptions of political neglect. This dynamic is likely to be particularly pronounced in economically disadvantaged urban areas, where the impact of new demographic pressures is felt most acutely. On this basis, we propose the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 3** The vote for PRRPs is higher in low-income urban areas where the population has increased.

**Hypothesis 4** The vote for PRRPs is higher in high-unemployment urban areas where the population has increased.

Consequently, we expect the effect of population growth on PRRPs to be even greater in suburban areas and the most economically unfavourable areas (economic left-behind places). In Figure 1, we show a diagram representing the causal mechanism we propose, according to which PRRPs would benefit from population growth, especially in towns and economically left-behind places, where this effect would be strongest.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that we assume that all the causal effects we lay out before unfold through complex mechanisms linking macro and micro-level phenomena. More specifically, and based on the
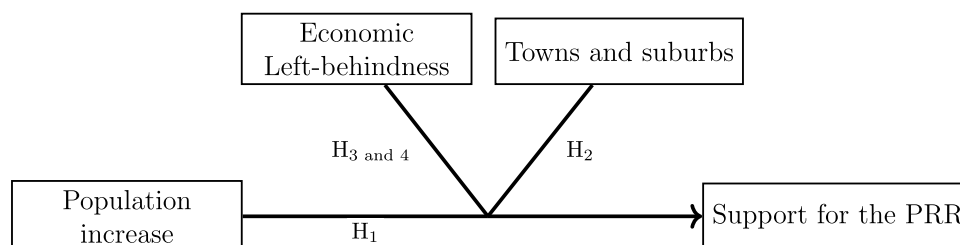


**Figure 1.** The causal chain between the urban population increase and the support for the PRRPs.

findings of previous literature, we infer that demographic changes affect emotions (Bakker et al., 2016; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019), group identities (Bornschier et al., 2021), and policy preferences (Kriesi et al., 2008) in ways that are favourable to the electoral appeal of the PRR. Given the nature of our data and the focus of our analysis, these considerations remain the interpretive background of our analysis, and they are not subjected to empirical testing.

## 2.2. The case of Spain

To address the research question and evaluate the proposed hypotheses, we have selected Spain as a case study. This country offers a particularly interesting context for analysing electoral behaviour in relation to urban population growth for several reasons. First, Vox, the party representing the PRR in Spain, stands out not only because it is relatively new on the political scene, but also because of a few distinctive characteristics. Although its discourse frequently adopts a ruralist narrative (Valero, 2022), idealising the countryside and defending traditional rural values, its best results have been registered in urban areas (Sánchez-García & Negral, 2023; Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2020). This apparent contradiction between the ruralist discourse and its success in cities makes it a relevant case study to explore the dynamics of populist voting in urban contexts, especially in terms of the relationship between population growth and electoral preferences. Second, Spain has experienced high levels of internal mobility, characterised by a process of sustained migration from rural areas to urban centres, which has generated two main phenomena: rural depopulation and urban growth. Depopulation has been the subject of previous research from an electoral perspective which shows that it generally benefits the conservative right except when the situation becomes very drastic and it is Vox that channels this discontent (Sánchez-García et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the opposite phenomenon–population growth in cities–has not been explored from an electoral perspective. This urban sprawl is a challenge that affects many Spanish cities, particularly the most vulnerable populations, increasing pressure on public services and access to housing (López-Gay et al., 2020). According to comparative urbanisation data, as shown in Figure 2, Spain is currently the eighth country in the European Union with
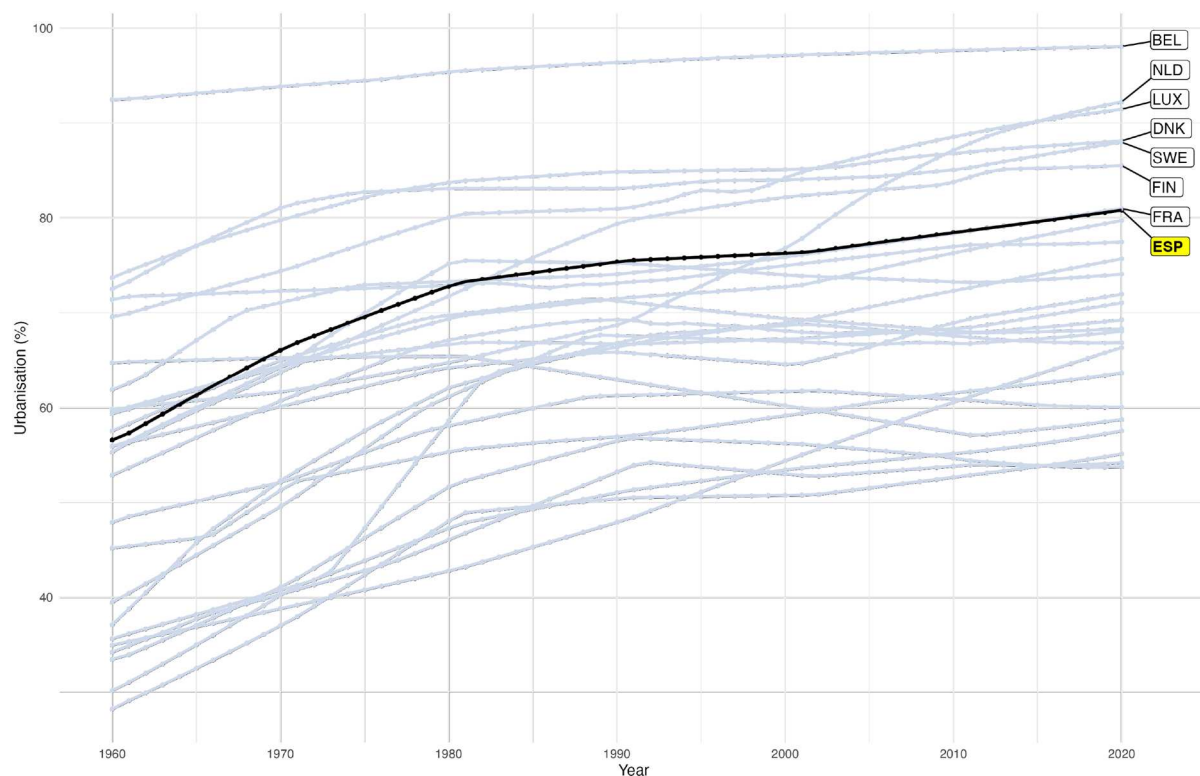


**Figure 2.** The evolution of urbanisation in the countries of the European Union (1960–2020).
Note: Own elaboration with World Bank data.

the highest percentage of the population living in urban areas. In the last six decades, the country has gone from having approximately 55% of its population in urban areas to 80% in 2020. This process of massive urbanisation highlights the magnitude of population growth in Spanish cities and reinforces the relevance of studying how these demographic changes influence electoral support for parties such as Vox. Third and finally, focussing the analysis on Spain has the advantage of having access to highly disaggregated electoral and demographic data at the level of small spatial units, such as census sections. This high level of disaggregation allows for more detailed and accurate analyses of electoral behaviour in urban areas, better capturing the internal diversity of cities and the local effects of population growth.

As far as Vox is concerned, a few considerations are worth mentioning. Beyond the previously developed particularity of its urban support, its labelling as a PRRP has generated some doubts in the body of literature. Most studies prefer to consider it as a PRRP on the basis of its discourse (Galais & Pérez-Rajó, 2023; Rama et al., 2021; Rooduijn et al., 2024) and the attitudes of its voters (Brigevich & Wagner, 2025; Ramos-González et al., 2025). This characterisation notwithstanding, some authors have argued that Vox's populist character is nuanced and subordinate to its nationalist and traditionalist elements (Marcos-Marne et al., 2021; Ramos-González & Ortiz, 2022). Finally, from a supply-side perspective, unlike the recent radical right wave that advocates a social protectionist and welfare chauvinist policy (Abts et al., 2021), Vox is an unequivocally neo-liberal party in economic terms (Ferreira, 2019). These are some of the peculiarities of Vox with respect to its European peers that make it an interesting case study.

## 3. Research design

### 3.1. Methods and data

To undertake this study, it has been necessary to make certain methodological decisions, which we justify below. First, in the same way as other studies have done, for example, Salomo et al. (2023) for Germany or Crulli and Pinto (2023) for Italy, we limit our unit of analysis geographically to urban areas in Spain. To delimit these places in a practical sense, we use the Degree of Urbanisation (*Degurba*), a classification elaborated by Eurostat (2019) in which municipalities are divided into (1) Rural areas, (2) Towns and Suburbs, and (3) Cities.[2] Following the considerations previously established by other authors, 'Cities' and 'Towns and Suburbs' could be considered as urban areas, particularly in the case of Spain, where both categories operate in the same way (e.g. Alloza et al., 2021 or Sánchez-García & Rodon, 2023). So, after applying this filter, we remain with 1327 municipalities (212 cities and 1110 towns) out of Spain's 8131 (16.3%). Second, regarding the level of analysis, we use the census tract. This is the most disaggregated administrative unit in Spain, and is similar to the neighbourhood or ward in other countries.[3] In this vein, using the census tracts of urban municipalities, we can carry out a fine-grained and relatively large sample size analysis (27,680 census tracts out of the 1110 urban municipalities in Spain). Although the Degurba is carried out at the municipality-level, we assume that all census tracts are of the same category as the municipality to which they belong. Figure 3 shows the geographical distribution of census sections according to the typology assigned by Degurba to its municipalities. Further information on the distinction between cities and towns/suburbs can be found in Online Appendix C.

In this article, we focus only on urban areas (i.e. all those not shown in blue on the map). We justify this decision on both theoretical grounds and due to the existing gap in the literature. Even disregarding these reasons, there are methodological limitations that prevent a comparative study between urban and rural areas at the census tract-level. In many small municipalities, the lack of disaggregated economic and socio-demographic data prevents high-resolution statistical analysis and systematic comparison with urban areas. To get an idea of this limitation, of the 8625 rural census tracts, only 1257 have data for the main economic variables (we would lose 85.43% of the rural sample). For this reason, we consider that a comparative analysis between rural and urban areas, besides being far from our theoretical objective, is methodologically unfeasible.[4]

The dependent variable used in this article is the percentage of the vote for Vox in the last national elections (10 November 2019) at the census tract-level in urban areas. Considering that other national elections were held this year (28 April), we selected the November elections as the most recent. Nevertheless, to avoid possible biases, we include the analyses with the April election results as a robustness check (Online
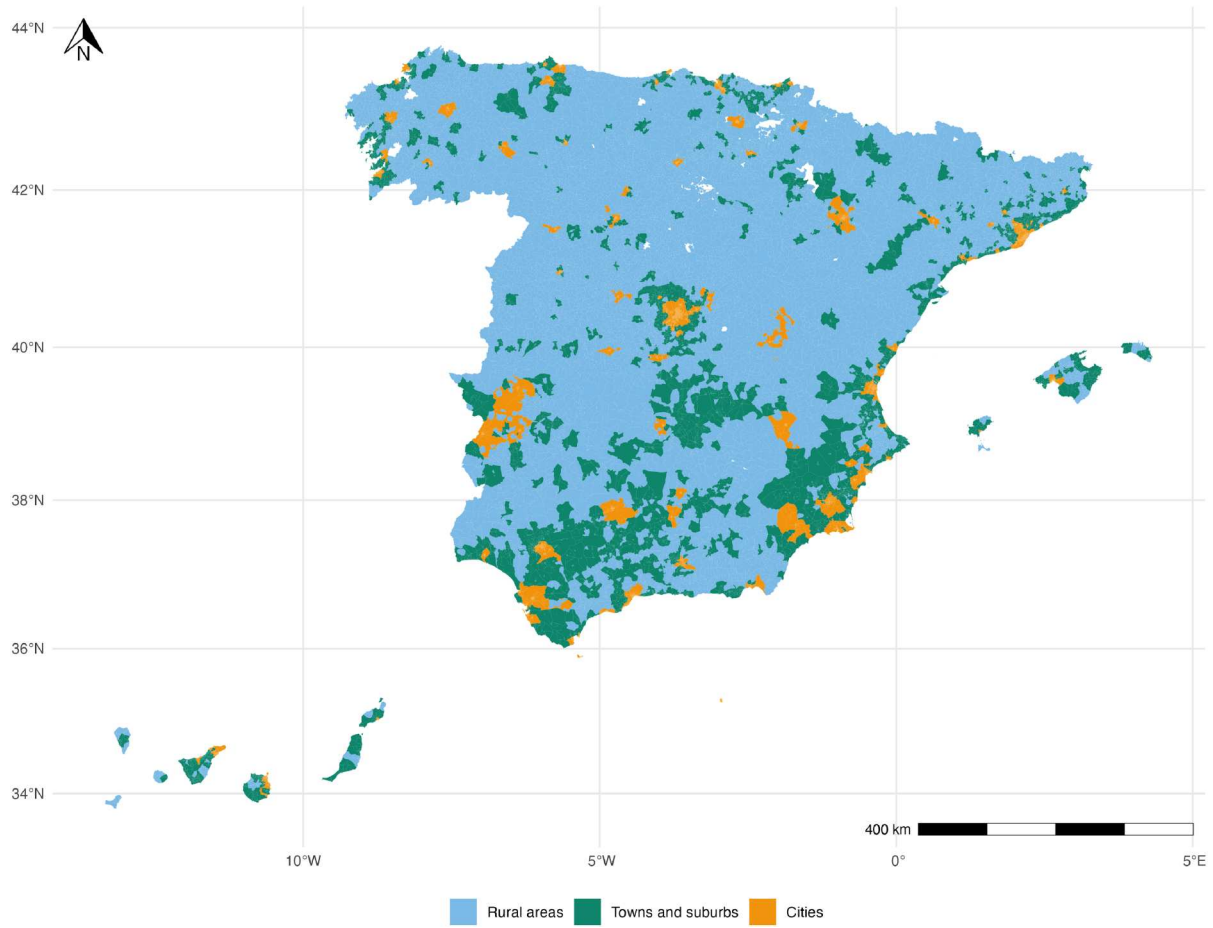
**Figure 3.** Spatial distribution of municipalities by Degurba categories.

Appendix D). We use national elections for several reasons. First, these are first-order elections in which the causal mechanisms discussed in the theoretical section are more likely to affect the vote. Second, sub-national elections that might be of interest in Spain are subject to different timetables, so they are not all held at the same time (generally in different years). Figure 4, shows the geographical distribution of the vote for Vox in these national elections for all Spanish census tracts. There are certain regional patterns in the vote for Vox, with support being higher in inland areas (especially around Madrid) and in some southern coastal districts (Murcia and Almeria). On the other hand, this party performs worse in regions where there is greater peripheral nationalist/pro-independence sentiment (Catalonia, the Basque Country, and Galicia).

As the independent variable, we need an indicator that captures population growth across census tracts. Since this issue has not previously been addressed from a quantitative perspective, we draw on the indicator proposed by Sánchez-García et al. (2024), originally developed to analyse the opposite phenomenon of depopulation. The construction of this indicator involves two steps. First, population growth is calculated by adapting the depopulation formula of Sánchez-García and Rodon (2023). The formula is as follows:

$$population\ variation_{y,ct} = \frac{P_{y,ct} - P_{y-t,ct}}{P_{y-t,ct}} \times 100 \qquad (1)$$

where $P_{y,ct}$ is the population of each census tract ($_{ct}$) in the respective year ($_y$), and $P_{y-t,ct}$ is the population on the previous period ($_{y-t,ct}$). In our case, we consider that demographic changes are slow processes and that their effects have to be studied in the long term. For this reason, we use a 10-year period with $y = 2019$ and $y-10 = 2009$. Second, once we have calculated the population variation, we create three categories, 'Increase' if the census tract has grown more than 0.5 standard deviations (SD), and 'Decrease' if this unit has grown less than −0.5 SD. Values between −0.5 SD and 0.5 SD are included in the category 'No change' which will be used as a reference category (RC) in the regression models. This coding facilitates the comparison between the units
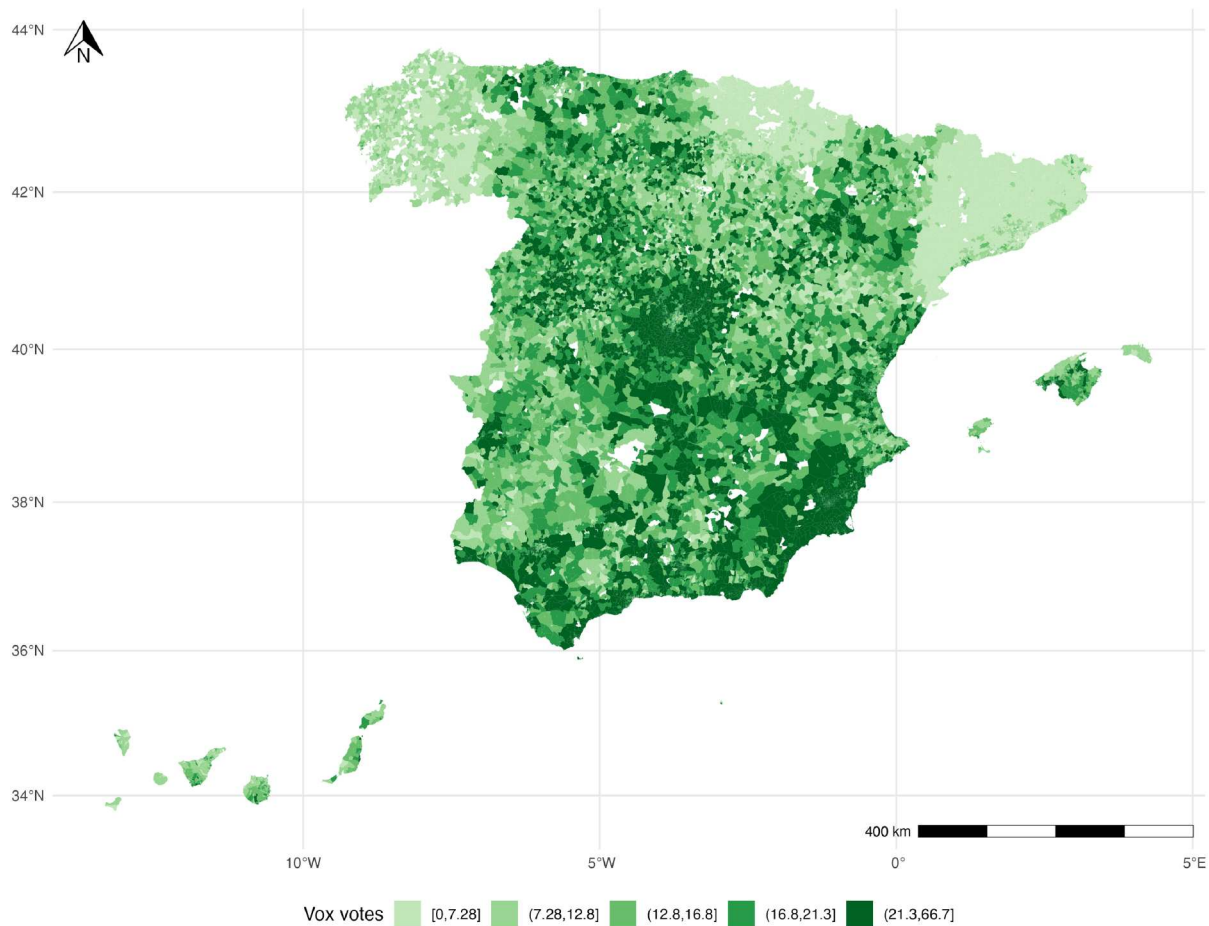
Vox votes  [0,7.28]  (7.28,12.8]  (12.8,16.8]  (16.8,21.3]  (21.3,66.7]

**Figure 4.** Spatial distribution of the vote for Vox at the census tract-level (November 2019 elections).

of analysis, simplifies the interpretation of the interactions, and eliminates the problem of outliers (Sánchez-García et al., 2024). The graphical representation of the categorisation process of this population variation can be found in Figure C.1. As a complement to this measure, we use the continuous indicator of population growth obtained from Formula (1) as a robustness check (see Appendix C. A).

In addition to this indicator and the moderating variables discussed in the theoretical section (type of census tract, income,[5] and unemployment), we include several controls that are theoretically linked to support for the PRR: % youths (who are more likely to vote for Vox) (Rama et al., 2021), population density (Rickardsson, 2021), % foreigners (Iglesias-Pascual et al., 2021), Gini index (Engler & Weisstanner, 2021), rental prices (Abou-Chadi et al., 2024), and distance to the city centre. A detailed description of these variables is provided in Table A.1, descriptive statistics in Table A.2, and correlations in Figure A.1. It is worth noting that, given the high level of disaggregation in the analysis, it is difficult to find other indicators that can serve as statistical controls.

### 3.2. Empirical strategy

Main analysis. In the first step, we test the validity of H1 previously posed in the theoretical section on the effect of population growth on the Vox vote in urban census tracts. To do so, we run a linear regression model based on Ordinary Least Squares (OLS). In addition to this model, and taking into account that our focus is on urban neighbourhoods, we incorporate two models depending on whether these census tracts are 'Cities' or 'Towns and Suburbs' according to the Degurba. This allows us to test whether the relationship between population growth and PRR voting follows the same trend in the two types of urban areas. All these

models, as a consequence of the large regional differences, have Fixed Effects (FE) at the level of Autonomous Community, the nomenclature of regions in the Spanish administration. In addition, to shed some more light on this possible relationship, we run a specific model for the five most populated provinces in Spain.

Moderation analysis.
In the second step, we test the three hypotheses (H2, H3, and H4) regarding the variables that could have a moderating effect on the relationship between population growth and support for Vox. In this sense, we perform three interactions between each of these moderating variables and a recoding of the population growth indicator. To facilitate interpretation, we assign a dummy format to this variable where 'Decrease' and 'No change' = 0 and 'Increase' = 1. In this way, the interaction reveals the effect of the moderator variable in the growing neighbourhoods compared to the rest of the neighbourhoods on the vote for Vox. As in the previous models, we also incorporate FE at the regional-level.

## 4. Empirical analysis

### 4.1. Main analysis

Figure 5 shows the standardised coefficients of the regression models.[6] The main results support our argument regarding population growth and the Vox vote. As can be seen, in urban census tracts there is a positive and statistically significant effect of population increase on support for Vox ($p<.001$). On average, the effect of 'Increase' (as opposed to 'No change', the RC) on the Vox vote was $\beta = 1$, meaning that Vox received one percentage point more of the vote in urban areas that experienced growth than in those that did not. This result confirms H1. In terms of magnitude, population growth and population density, are the two
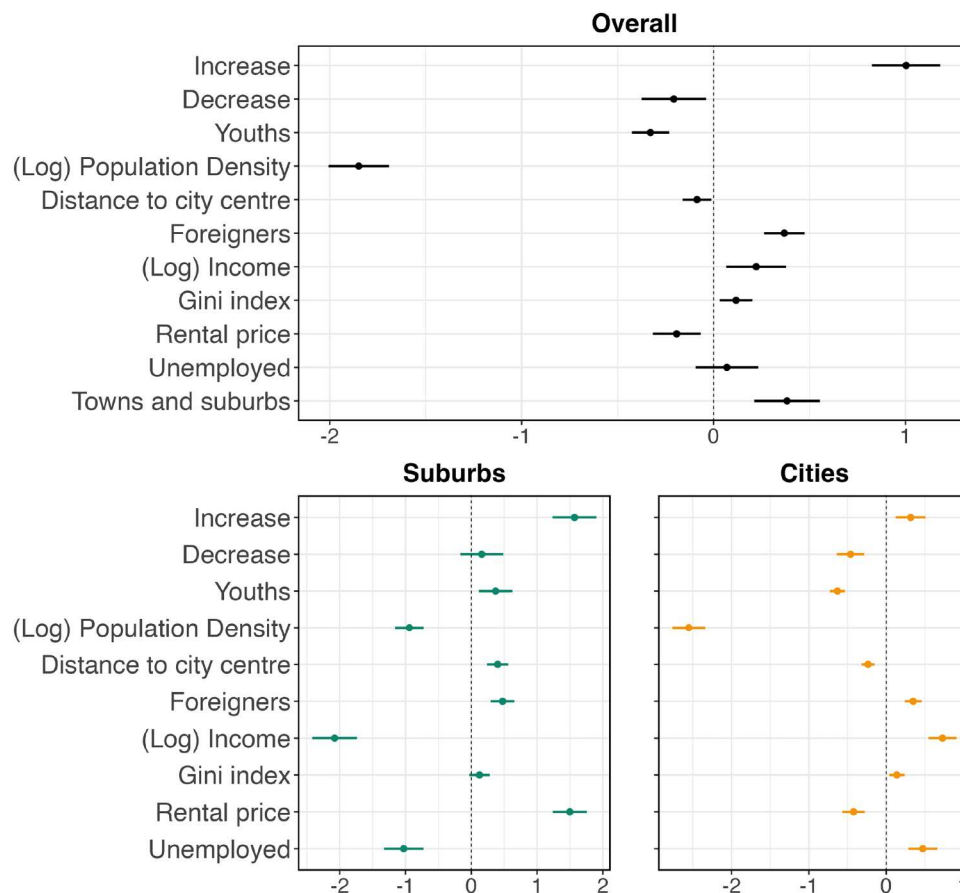


**Figure 5.** Coefficient plot of the OLS models.

Note: Table B.1 shows these regression models with the non-standardised coefficients as well as all model information.

variables with the largest impact on the Vox vote in the overall model. Although population growth cannot be considered the single most important factor–since income or population density appear more influential in some models–, it clearly contributes to the success of the PRR in Spain. Robustness checks using the continuous indicator (Tables D.1 and D.2 in Online Appendix D) and the April 2019 elections (Tables D.3 and D.4 in Online Appendix D) point in the same direction.

Turning to the models disaggregated by neighbourhood type, the effect of population growth shows a notable divergence. Specifically, the effect of our main explanatory variable is markedly greater in suburban neighbourhoods ($\beta = 1.57$, $p < .001$) than in cities ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$), nearly five times stronger. It is also worth noting the differentiated role of economic indicators. In the baseline model (overall), income has a slight positive effect ($\beta = .78$, $p < .01$), consistent with the results for city neighbourhoods ($\beta = 2.55$, $p < .001$). In contrast, in the suburbs the association between income and Vox support is strongly negative ($\beta = -7.29$, $p < .001$). This gap suggests that, in the case of cities, Vox performs better in wealthier neighbourhoods, a finding consistent with previous research (e.g. Iglesias-Pascual et al., 2023 or Sánchez-García & Negral, 2023).[7] By contrast, in towns–where Vox already performs comparatively well ($\beta = .38$, $p < .001$) and which are generally poorer than cities (see Online Appendix C)–the party obtains higher vote shares in areas with worse economic conditions. These contrasts have substantive importance and highlight the socially heterogeneous basis of support for the Spanish PRR. A similar pattern emerges when focussing on unemployment: while not significant in the general model ($\beta = .02$, $p > .05$), unemployment is positively associated with Vox support in cities ($\beta = .1$, $p < .001$) and negatively associated with it in towns ($\beta = -.23$, $p < .001$).

In summary, the results confirm that urban population growth is associated with higher support for Vox, while important differences emerge in the socioeconomic foundations of that support when comparing cities and towns. Vox draws support from wealthier neighbourhoods in cities and from left-behind ones in the suburbs. The role of these moderating variables in shaping the effect of population growth is examined in the following subsection.

To gain deeper insight into the relationship between population growth and support for Vox, we estimate separate regression models for Spain's five most populous provinces (Alicante, Barcelona, Madrid, Seville, and Valencia). Figure 6 shows how in four of them population growth is positively correlated with
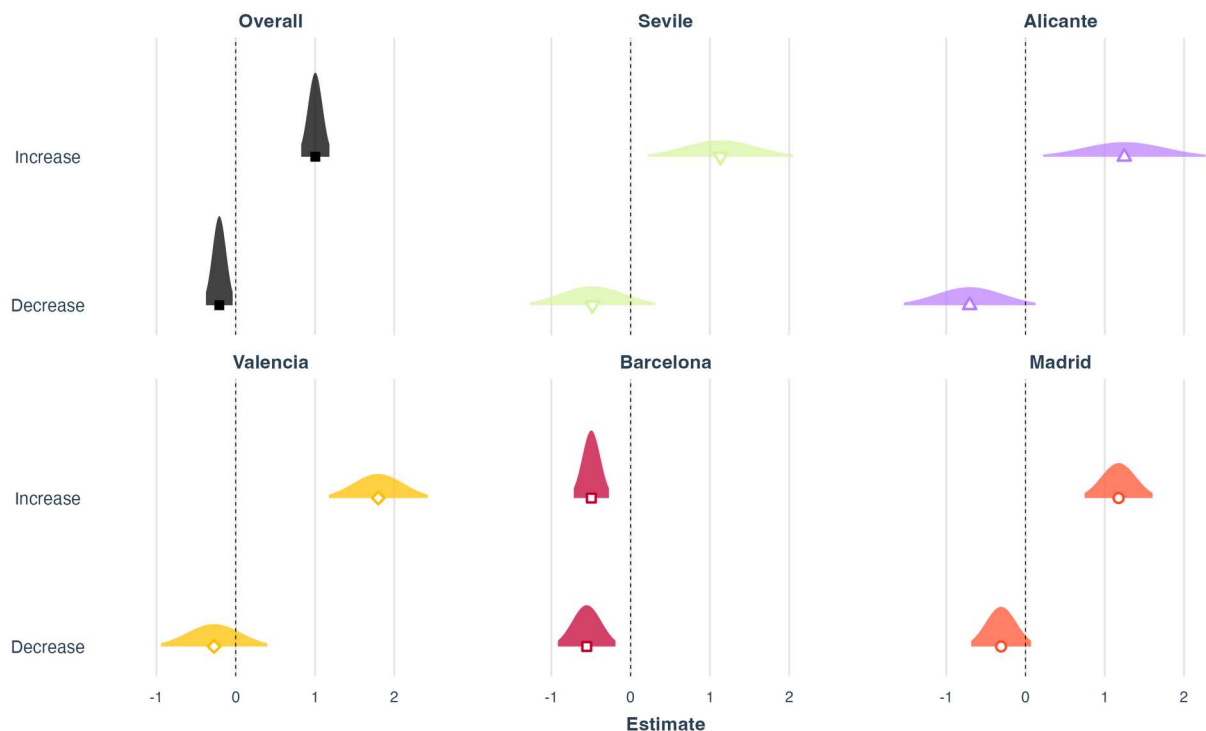


**Figure 6.** Coefficient plot of population growth for Spain's five most populated provinces.

Note: Table B.2 shows these regression models with the non-standardised coefficients as well as all model information.

support for Vox. Barcelona, the only exception, must be explained in the context of the two-dimensional Catalan party system, characterised by the presence of both a left-right and a Spanish-Catalan nationalism dimension. Perhaps the comparative strength of Spanish nationalism in large urban areas that have not witnessed population changes (first and foremost the city of Barcelona) accounts for this distinctive feature. This phenomenon is connected to the crucial role that the rejection of Catalan independentism has played in the emergence and electoral appeal of Vox (Rodon, 2020).

### 4.2. Moderation analysis

We begin by analysing the moderating effect of neighbourhood type (cities versus towns) on the relationship between urban population growth and support for the PRR. Figure 7 displays the marginal effect of population growth (relative to the neighbourhood types 'No change' or 'Decrease'). In both cases, as shown in the previous subsection, the effect is positive. More importantly, however, the plot indicates a statistically significant difference between towns and cities, with the effect being stronger in the former ($\beta = 1.05$, $p < .001$). Thus, our results confirm H2 and provide support for the argument that towns–being less equipped to accommodate urban sprawl–are more likely to support the PRR when such growth occurs.

Second, we directly address the issue of population growth in economically left-behind places by testing its interaction with income and unemployment (Figure 8). Focusing on the first row for both urban categories, we observe that in growing areas support for Vox is significantly higher where incomes are lower ($\beta = -1.99$, $p < .001$) and unemployment is higher ($\beta = .06$, $p < .05$), thus confirming H3 and H4. Substantively, at the first income decile (9.06), the predicted vote share for Vox in growing neighbourhoods is 18.9, compared to 16.5 in those that did not grow. Similarly, at high unemployment (9th decile, 15.6), the predicted value is 17.8 versus 15.9 in non-growing areas.

Given H2 and the substantial gap between cities and towns, we then explore these interactions separately by neighbourhood type. In cities (second row), the results closely mirror those of the overall model, with slightly larger coefficients for both income and unemployment. By contrast, in suburbs the interaction with income is negative but not statistically significant ($\beta = -1.34$, $p > .05$), while the interaction with unemployment is also non-significant ($\beta = -.02$, $p > .05$). Overall, Vox performs better in growing urban
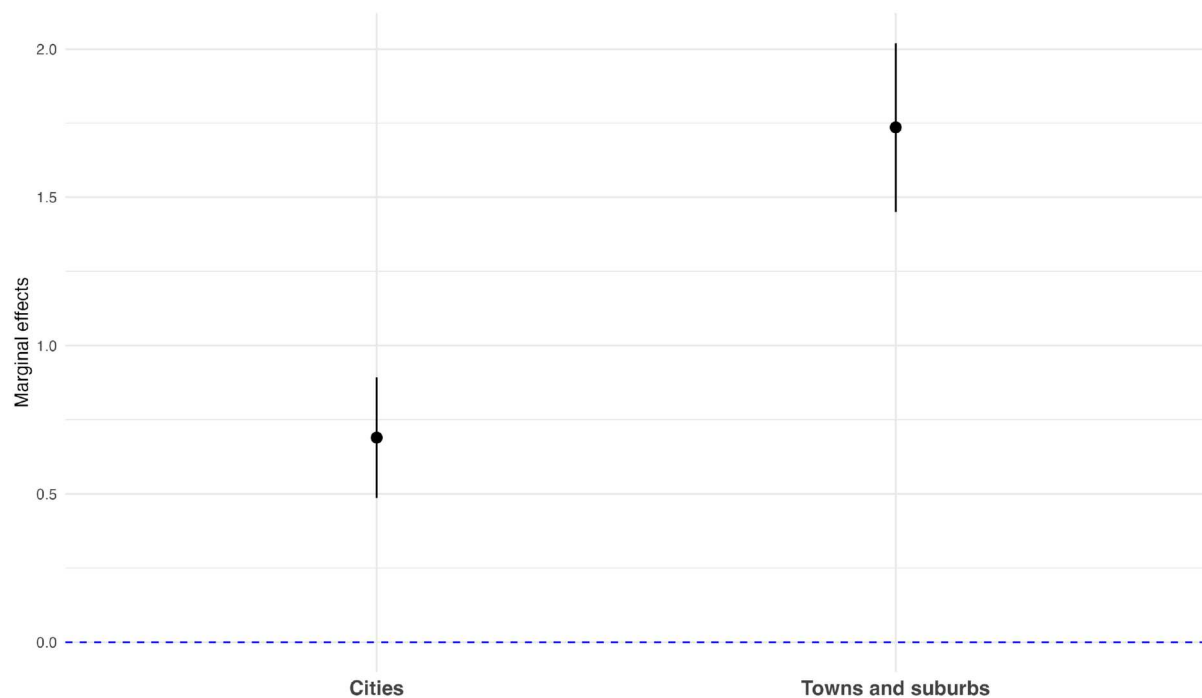


**Figure 7.** Marginal effects on Vox votes by type of census tract.
Note: Table B.3 shows the coefficients of the different regression models.

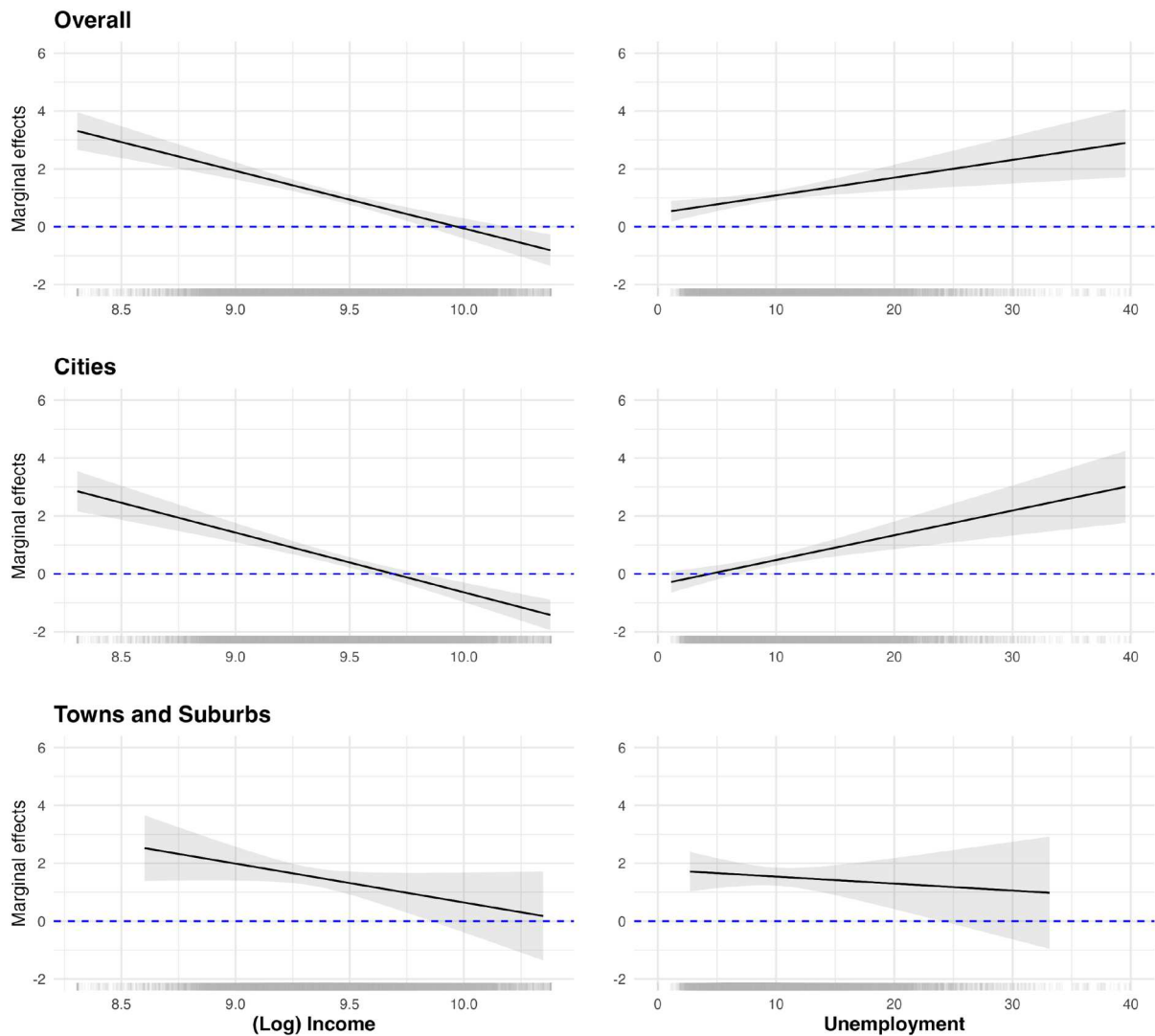**Overall**



**Cities**

**Towns and Suburbs**

**Figure 8.** Marginal effects of population growth interacted with income and unemployment on Vox support.

Note: Table B.4 shows the coefficients of the different regression models.

neighbourhoods under adverse economic conditions, both in the pooled model and in cities, but we find no statistical evidence for such effects in suburban census tracts.

## 5. Discussion & conclusion

In recent years, extensive literature studying the recent success of new (and not-so-new) PRRPs in Western democracies has flourished. Many of these studies, from a geographical approach, have explained support for these parties using concepts such as residential constriction (Patana, 2021), spatial analysis (Essletzbichler et al., 2021), proximity to military barracks (Villamil et al., 2023), and, of course, the rural-urban divide (Harteveld et al., 2022; Rickardsson, 2021). While there is a pattern associating rural areas with greater support for PRRPs, and although these parties present more rural-oriented narratives (Valero, 2022), this does not preclude the need for studies to explain support for these parties in urban areas. Indeed, beyond few exceptions specific research such as that of Essletzbichler and Forcher (2022) in Vienna or Mullis (2021) in Frankfurt, there is little research, such as that of Rossi (2018), that undertakes a systematic analysis of the factors explaining support for PRRPs in urban areas at the national level. Using data from 27,680 urban census tracts in Spain, this study aims to fill that gap through a detailed analysis that proposes population growth as a key variable to explain support for Vox in metropolitan areas.

Spain is a particularly interesting case study for several reasons. Firstly, it has one of the most recent PRRPs to enter a national parliament, with unique characteristics compared to its European counterparts, such as its notable support in urban areas. Secondly, Spain is experiencing increasing demographic polarisation, with rural areas becoming increasingly depopulated and cities becoming increasingly populated, accounting for 80% of the national population. These factors underline the value and particularity of the Spanish case for this type of research.

Our results show that population growth has a positive effect on support for Vox in urban census tracts (H1). Yet, this relationship is heterogeneous across socio-economic contexts. Most notably, the effect of population growth is substantially stronger in suburban census tracts than in cities (H2). We argue that this is due to the fact that suburbs and towns are less equipped to accommodate large migration flows and tend to display lower levels of social capital. We assume that these two characteristics further facilitate the rise of the PRR.

Second, drawing on the theory of economic left-behindness, we find that urban sprawl intensifies support for the PRR when it occurs in an adverse economic context–both in terms of low income (H3) and high unemployment (H4). When examining neighbourhood types separately, however, important nuances emerge. In cities, Vox's support is generally stronger in affluent areas and with low unemployment. Yet, when population growth coincides with economic hardship, the pattern is reversed: growing but economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods show higher levels of support for Vox. This finding nuances earlier research (e.g. Iglesias-Pascual et al., 2023 or Sánchez-García & Negral, 2023), suggesting that although Vox typically performs better in wealthy urban areas, its electoral strength also expands into economically left-behind city neighbourhoods experiencing sprawl. In suburban areas, the picture differs. Here, Vox's baseline support is already higher than in cities, and population growth has an even stronger effect. However, once we introduce the interaction with economic conditions, the effect of sprawl appears homogeneous: there are no significant differences between growing suburbs with adverse economic contexts and those without. This may be because towns and suburbs generally face lower structural levels of income and employment, leaving little room for variation in how economic hardship conditions the impact of population growth. It is also plausible, as suggested in the theoretical section, that other contextual factors–such as accessibility to public services–better explain the heightened vulnerability of suburban neighbourhoods to PRR mobilisation.

These findings connect to the literature in two ways. First, while existing studies on demographic change and PRR voting have primarily focussed on depopulation, our results point to a complementary dynamic: just as rural population decline has fuelled PRRPs' rise (e.g. Dancygier et al., 2025 or Sánchez-García et al., 2024), urban population growth has also provided fertile ground for its expansion. Second, in line with the theory of economic left-behindness, we show that economic left-behindness helps explain when and where urban sprawl most strongly translates into PRR support. By doing so, this article contributes to the growing literature on the geographies of PRR support, particularly in suburban settings, a topic that remains comparatively underexplored.

To summarise, this paper demonstrates that population growth is an important factor in explaining the electoral success of PRRPs in urban areas. At the same time, several limitations must be acknowledged. In the first place, we lack access to additional economic indicators–such as business, factory, or utility closures–that would have enabled us to test alternative explanations, including the left-behind places theory. However, such data are not available in Spain at the municipal-level, let alone at the census tract-level. Similarly, our models do not include group and territorial identifications that have been shown to affect voting for PRRPs. Still, we assume, following Bornschier et al. (2021), that many relevant group identifications result from and mediate the effects of objective socio-economic characteristics, some of which are already included in our models. Additionally, the fact that our models include FE at the regional-level allows us to control, at least indirectly, for the impact of territorial identifications that have been shown to affect the vote for Vox. A final limitation of our findings results from the fact that our analysis is restricted to urban areas. Consequently, we cannot assess to what extent the logics we identify in our analysis are present in rural settings.

Future research would benefit from extending this analysis to other European countries, particularly those such as the Netherlands, Denmark, or Sweden, where urbanisation rates have risen sharply in recent years. In the Spanish case, further work could use qualitative strategies to explore whether demographic changes and polarisation generate place-based resentment.

We are also convinced that causal processes linking macro- and micro-level phenomena are crucial for the outcome we try to explain. As we pointed out before, based on the findings of previous literature, we assume that demographic changes affect emotions, group identities, and policy preferences in ways that facilitate the appeal of the PRR. However, identifying and assessing the nature of these processes would require data and methods that are very different from the ones we use in this contribution. For such analyses, it would be important to incorporate psychological, attitudinal, and identity factors that could not be included in our models. That will require designing new strategies and gathering data that is not yet available. All in all, we hope that the findings presented here make a useful scientific contribution by improving understanding of the social and demographic transformations that have contributed to the rise of the Spanish PRR.

## Notes

1. Accordingly, in this article we use the terms *towns* and *suburbs* interchangeably, since they are treated as a single category.
2. We assume that there may be other criteria for such a cohort (e.g. number of inhabitants, population density, or the services available). However, we understand that Degurba is a criterion that is well established in scholarship, objective, and facilitates the extrapolation of these results to other contexts.
3. On average, urban census tracts in Spain cover 4.88 km$^2$ and are home to 1474 inhabitants.
4. In addition, if we were to use these 1257 rural census tracts to make a comparison with the urban ones, we would be making a biased decision. Firstly, quantitatively, it is not a large enough sample (14.57%) to be representative of rural neighbourhoods. Secondly, in terms of the characteristics of these 1257 rural census sections, they are not representative either, as they are the neighbourhoods of the largest rural municipalities within the 'Rural areas' category of Degurba.
5. We also run a regression model (see Table B.5) in which, instead of using average income per census tract, we calculate its variation between 2019 and 2015. Although this indicator may seem closer to the left-behind literature, it is not as interesting given that income is a fairly static economic indicator.
6. Continuous predictors have been standardised using $z$-scores, by subtracting the mean and dividing by the SD. Consequently, the coefficients in the figure represent the expected change in Vox vote share associated with a one SD increase in the predictor. Categorical variables were not standardised and retain their original coding.
7. Table B.5 in Online Appendix shows that income decline has no statistically significant effect on the Vox vote. Therefore, we can expect that it is income in a static sense, rather than its decline, that influences support for Vox.

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