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## Generations of pride? LGBTQ+ rights, sexuality, and voting behaviour in Spain

Stuart J. Turnbull-Dugarte , Guillermo Cordero   
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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the enduring presence of a sexuality gap in political behaviour within the unique context of Spain – an early-mover country in the expansion of LGBTQ+ rights. First, analysing supply-side dynamics, we demonstrate that political parties in Spain remain markedly polarised on LGBTQ+ rights. Second, utilising original survey data, we observe a more pronounced sexuality gap among younger generations: the youngest LGB voters demonstrate notably greater support for left-wing parties, particularly emergent progressive parties to the left of the social democrats than their older counterparts, while rejecting right-wing alternatives. These results underscore the enduring significance of sexual identity in shaping political behaviours, even in a nation celebrated for its strides in the advancement LGBTQ+ rights.

### KEYWORDS


Electoral behaviour;  
generations; lavender vote;  
LGBTQ+ rights; political  
parties; sexuality; Spain;  
voting

### Introduction

In 2005, Spain joined a very small club of just two other pioneering countries, the Netherlands (2000) and Belgium (2003), that had legalised equal marriage between individuals of the same gender (Calvo 2007; Kollman 2015). Today Spain stands out as a global leader in the popular tolerance of homosexuality (Pew Research Center 2020), and also ranks as the country with the second highest proportion of individuals identifying with a non-cis-heterosexual (LGBTQ+) identity worldwide. On average, 12 percent of the Spanish population identify as LGBTQ+ and this proportion increases to 20 percent among younger cohorts (see Ipsos 2023).

Such data may surprise observers familiar with Spain's recent historical context. Until the mid-1970s, Spain was ruled by a staunchly socially conservative authoritarian regime that actively persecuted LGBTQ+ individuals (Arnalte 2020; Fernández Galeano 2016; Preston 2013) and placed them into concentration camps like the now infamous Tefía camp on the island of Fuerteventura (Arnalte 2020).

**CONTACT** Stuart J. Turnbull-Dugarte  [s.turnbull-dugarte@soton.ac.uk](mailto:s.turnbull-dugarte@soton.ac.uk)  Politics and International Relations, University of Southampton, Highfield Campus, Southampton SO17 1BJ, UK

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Closely aligned with the Church, Spain under Franco played host to a deeply Catholic society guided by strict patriarchal and heteronormative norms alongside (traditional) moral values (Pérez-Nievas & Cordero 2009). Yet, the political transition away from the Franco regime – coupled with economic and social progress, as well as legislative advancements in LGBTQ+ rights that were the result of hard-fought political activism by a coalition of pro-LGBTQ+ campaigners (Calvo 2017)—facilitated a rapid shift in societal attitudes among Spaniards towards sexual and gender minorities (Adamczyk 2017; Flores 2019).

In a context where self-reported tolerance of LGBTQ+ individuals is markedly high, we ask: i) *are political parties still spatially divided over LGBTQ+ policy issues*, and ii) *do sexual minority individuals, particularly those socialised into the electorate after Spain recognised equal marriage, still hold distinctive electoral preferences from their heterosexual peers?*

Given this swift and pronounced trajectory towards more socially progressive values of tolerance, we theorise that political parties' spatial offering on LGBTQ+ rights within the Spanish party system is likely to have converged and, as a result, the sexuality gap (Turnbull-Dugarte 2020) between lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB)<sup>1</sup> and non-LGB individuals in the younger cohort of the population will be smaller than that observed amongst those of the older cohort. Theoretically, we posit that growing up in a milieu where equal marriage was an established social reality—and, by extension, normalised by the state (Abou-Chadi & Finnigan 2019)—and amidst high levels of societal tolerance, the political salience of sexuality as a differentiating factor on electoral behaviour among the younger demographic would likely be more tempered compared to older generations. Since this theoretical proposition assumes party convergence on LGBTQ+ rights, we take a twofold approach: we need to first know where parties stand on LGBTQ+ issues as a precondition for investigating whether there remains a sexuality gap in political preferences.

Contrary to our theoretical priors, however, and at both the party supply-side and LGB voter demand-side level, the findings reveal a contrary pattern. Despite the pioneering advance of LGBTQ+ rights in 2005, political parties in Spain remain markedly polarised in their positions on LGBTQ+ issues. As a result of the resilient nature of supply-side polarisation on LGBTQ+ rights we, unsurprisingly, observe that the prevalence of the so-called 'lavender vote' (Hertzog 1996; Turnbull-Dugarte 2020; Page & Paulin 2022) remains intact across younger cohorts of LGB individuals who exhibit a stronger inclination towards socially liberal left-wing political parties, particularly favouring 'new' and more progressive emergent parties. While distinctions are also observed between LGB and heterosexual populations among older age groups, these differences are notably less pronounced.

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<sup>1</sup>When we refer to LGB (as opposed to LGBTQ+) we do so to focus specifically on the social strata we are able to actively identify in the data. We can identify LGB individuals, but we do not have survey instruments that allow us to identify TQ+ individuals.

The contributions we make in this empirical article are fourfold. First, we provide a longitudinal overview of the changing, and in many ways *unchanging*, nature of the political party landscape in Spain around issues related to LGBTQ+ rights. Our exploration of the supply-side politicisation of issues related to gender-identity and sexuality demonstrate that, despite Spain's status as an early-mover on LGBTQ+ rights and the marked levels of (self-reported) social tolerance towards LGBTQ+ persons, political parties and their corresponding constituency of voters remain markedly divided on their positions towards contemporary LGBTQ+ rights issues such as conversion therapy bans, transgender self-identification, or state-sponsored symbols of inclusion (López Ortega 2024).

Second, we contribute to a burgeoning literature that seeks to bring the empirical study of gender and sexual minorities – a social strata that has been historically marginalised within the discipline (Paternotte 2018; Ayoub 2022) – into mainstream political science (Jones 2021; Wurthmann 2023; Spierings 2021; Hunklinger & Ferch 2020; Debus & Wurthmann 2024; Ramirez Dueñas 2022; Page & Paulin 2022).

Recent cross-national (Turnbull-Dugarte 2020) and country-level case studies (Jones 2021; Hunklinger & Kleer 2024; Turnbull-Dugarte 2022; Grahn 2023) have demonstrated that LGB voters exhibit divergent political behaviour from their heterosexual peers. We add Spain, a country with a moderate multi-party system where, despite its strong religious heritage and authoritarian past, equal marriage has been legalised for close to 20 years, to this growing cross-national line of inquiry.

Third, and specifically within the literature on the sexuality gap, we speak to an emerging debate surrounding the temporal longevity of the political distinctiveness of sexual minorities in those societies where LGBTQ+ rights have been institutionalised for a longer time and where *social* tolerance is notably high (Grahn 2023). Consistent with the robust empirical evidence from Grahn (2023), in the case of Sweden, who considers the longevity of sexuality-based *turnout* gap, we observe that the sexuality gap in electoral *choices* in Spain remains constant and, if anything, is actively increasing among emerging cohorts. In the case of Spain, this longevity is likely to continue as a result of the continued supply-side polarisation of LGBTQ+ rights issues.

Finally, we speak to the rich literature on electoral behaviour and party preferences in Spain. A wide body of work has explored the socio-demographic determinants of electoral choices at the ballot box in Spain, particularly for new parties (Heyne & Manucci 2021; Manucci 2024; Rama, Cordero & Zagórski 2021; Ramiro & Gomez 2017), across a diverse array of electoral competitions within Spain's multi-level governance structure (Simón 2020a; Orriols & Cordero 2016; Rodon & Hierro 2016; Torcal & Comellas 2022). Our empirical contribution demonstrates that scholars of Spanish political behaviour would do well to consider sexuality within models of party preferences. Not only does sexuality determine a significant proportion of the cross-bloc variation in voters' electoral choice set between the right and left, but it also goes a long way to explain *within*-bloc support (Ramiro & Gomez 2017) in the country's progressive bloc.

## The rise of LGBTQ+ rights in Spain

Fifty years have passed since the pioneering LGBTQ+ liberation movements began in Spain at the end of Franco's socially conservative and authoritarian regime in the 1970s. Although today Spain is recognised internationally as a leading country in terms of protections for the LGBTQ+ community, alongside nations such as Denmark, Belgium and Sweden, the early foci of the initial LGBTQ+ movement(s) were more humble: decriminalising homosexuality. This milestone was achieved with the repeal of the oppressive 1970 'Law on Social Danger and Rehabilitation' in 1978 (Calvo & Trujillo 2011; Calvo 2017; Esteban 2023), although issues such as arrests in gay bars, street harassment, and raids in LGBTQ+ neighbourhoods persisted until the elimination of 'crimes of public scandal' in 1988.

During the 1970s and 1980s, stances on moral debates such as abortion, divorce or secular education were more clearly shown by right-wing political parties, conservative media and religious institutions, while the left navigated these discussions cautiously to avoid alienating traditional voters (Cordero 2014). The presence of LGBTQ+ issues on the political right during this period was scarce. Among the political left, despite initial discourses having a strong Marxist influence (imitating other gay and lesbian liberation movements in other countries, such as France), these ideas gradually faded away from the 1980s onwards and particularly in the 1990s. In this decade, new activists joined the LGBTQ+ movements, recognising the importance of forming strategic alliances with political parties. Thus, to advance LGBTQ+ rights politically, activists shifted the focus from the more radical 'sex rights' to the more normative and socially palatable 'family and love rights' with a universalist approach that emphasised egalitarian principles related to citizenship, individual liberty, and human rights regardless of sexual orientation (Calvo & Trujillo 2011; Martínez 2017).

Parties like the left-wing coalition *Izquierda Unida* [United Left, (IU)] and the social democratic PSOE [Spanish Socialist Workers' Party] played a pivotal role in moving from revolutionary rhetoric towards systemic reforms (Calvo & Trujillo 2011; Calvo 2017; Esteban 2023). During the turn of the century, with the opposition from the mainstream centre-right *Partido Popular* [People's Party (PP)] and the Catholic Church, the politicisation of LGBTQ+ rights was mostly driven by left-wing parties' strong commitment to the cause (Cordero 2014; Esteban 2023). In fact, Calvo (2007) proposes four distinct stages in the relationship between LGBTQ+ movements and the mainstream PSOE: initial reluctant support (until 1982), hostility (between 1982 and 1993), the first steps towards a strategic political alliance (between 1993 and 2000) and the consolidation of the political alliance (from 2000).

The legalisation of the PSOE-enacted equal marriage in 2005 marked a significant milestone, signalling increased acceptance and integration of the LGBTQ+ community by the Spanish state (Hooghe & Meeusen 2013) which, by extension, instals more widespread societal acceptance (Flores & Barclay 2016; Abou-Chadi & Finnigan 2019). This achievement sparked greater mobilisation

within the LGBTQ+ community, leading to the emergence of additional demands, such as rights for transgender individuals, reflected in the 2007 sex change law, and energising a new generation of activists (Calvo & Pichardo 2020). The subsequent political shift towards more LGBTQ+ friendly measures, exemplified by the 2023 'Law for Real Equality of Trans People and Guarantee of LGBTQ+ Rights' (*La Ley Trans*), demonstrated a broader societal acceptance and legal protection of sexual diversity.

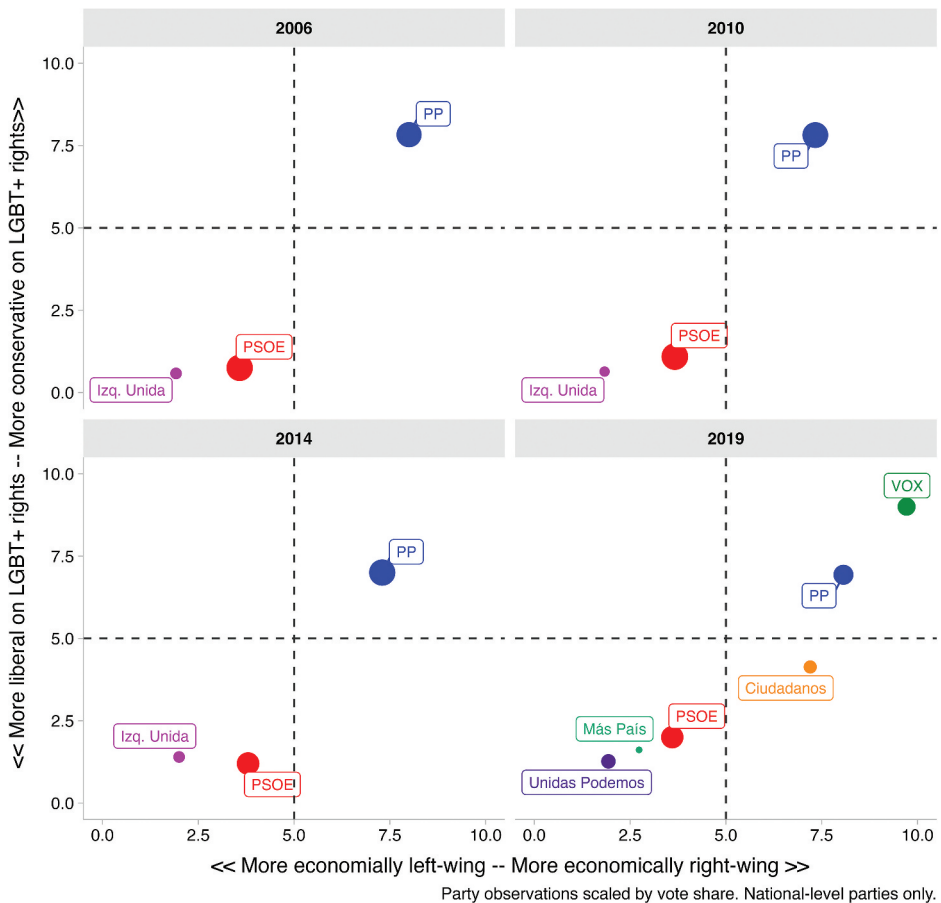
Theoretically, we would anticipate the PP, as the primary opponent to the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights among the two dominant parties, to temper its opposition and move towards a more liberal stance on policy questions of concern to sexual and gender minorities. The establishment of equal marriage creates a precedent of state-provided legitimacy to sexual minorities that is norm-establishing (Abou-Chadi & Finnigan 2019). In a context where the state recognises the policy demands of the LGBTQ+ community, political actors promoting positions that seek to repeal these rights are likely to find maintaining these positions increasingly untenable. At the same time, there is potential electoral penalty from doing so. If, as empirically demonstrated by Abou-Chadi and Finnigan (2019), the provision of equal marriage has a causal effect in inducing acceptance of homosexuality among the average citizen, one would expect that advocating a policy position distinct from the median citizen would not be a vote-winning strategy for parties that traditionally advocated conservative positions. Our theoretical expectation, therefore, is that in the post-equal marriage period, the ideological dispersion and polarisation between the traditionally (more) socially liberal left-wing parties and the (more) socially conservative right-wing parties would dissipate. Empirical observations in support of this expectation have been observed in both Germany (Jankowski 2023) and in the United Kingdom (UK) (Turnbull-Dugarte 2022). As we demonstrate in the section that follows, however, Spain is different.

### Political parties and LGBTQ+ rights: not (yet) a done deal?

Leveraging data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES)<sup>2</sup> project (Jolly et al. 2022), in Figure 1 we are able to empirically demonstrate the stability of party positions related to LGBTQ+ rights in Spain over time. CHES

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<sup>2</sup>We rely on data from the CHES given that the expert survey includes a question directly related to LGBTQ+ rights. Alternative data sources, such as the Comparative Manifesto Project (MARPOR) do not code positions related to LGBTQ+ rights. Importantly, extensive validation studies demonstrate comparable results (Hooghe et al. 2010; Ferreira da Silva et al. 2023), so we can be confident of the relative validity of the CHES as a data source. Respondents of the CHES are asked to spatially identify the position of a party across different policy concerns. On the issue of LGBTQ+ rights, CHES respondents were asked 'And now we'd like to ask you about the positions of the party leadership on some specific policy areas. [...] Positions on social lifestyle policy (e.g. rights for homosexuals)'. Parties are identified on a ten-point scale from 0 'Strongly supports liberal policies' to 10 'Strongly opposes liberal policies'. Given that 'rights for homosexuals' are provided as a prompt in the provision of the question, we can be confident that responses to this survey item are capturing our party position of interest, which is that on homosexuality and LGBTQ+ right issues.



**Figure 1.** Spanish party positions on LGBT+ rights over time (2006–2019).

provides data on this variable across four waves of the survey which includes 2006, 2010, 2014, and 2019. Regardless of the year considered – all of which take place following Spain’s introduction of equal marriage in 2005 – there is a clear ideological divide between the mainstream left (PSOE) and the mainstream right (PP) on these questions that does not, as observed in other countries (Turnbull-Dugarte 2022; Jankowski 2023), dissipate over time.

It is worth noting, however, that the self-penned ‘liberal’ party, *Ciudadanos* [Citizens], did emerge as a more socially liberal centre-right alternative to the PP that was more liberal on questions related to LGBTQ+ rights. Although the party does not currently boast any national-level parliamentary representation, the party did embrace a more LGBTQ+ inclusive stance and advocated for socially liberal reforms such as surrogacy and workplace anti-discrimination legalisation which, in part, sought to reconcile the LGBTQ+ electorate with the political right.

Figure 2 reports two system-level measures. The first measures the mean ideological position of the party system in relation to LGBTQ+ rights. The party system position, what Gross and Sigelman (1984) pen the 'party system centre of gravity', is computed by taking the mean position of all the individual national-level parties with parliamentary representation operating within the system during a given year, weighted by party vote shares.<sup>3</sup> Higher values of the centre of gravity measure are indicative of more conservative positions on (i.e. opposition to) LGBTQ+ rights. The second system-level variable indicates the level of party system polarisation. This indicator replicates the operationalisation of Dalton (2008) used for general left-right positions, which is commonplace within the literature on comparative party system analysis. This index produces a polarisation score that ranges from 0 to 1 with larger values indicating a greater amount of divergence in parties' positions within the system at a given time.<sup>4</sup>

Spain, like other countries in Europe (Abou-Chadi, Breyer & Gessler 2021; Kantola & Lombardo 2021), has been subject to the increasing politicisation of

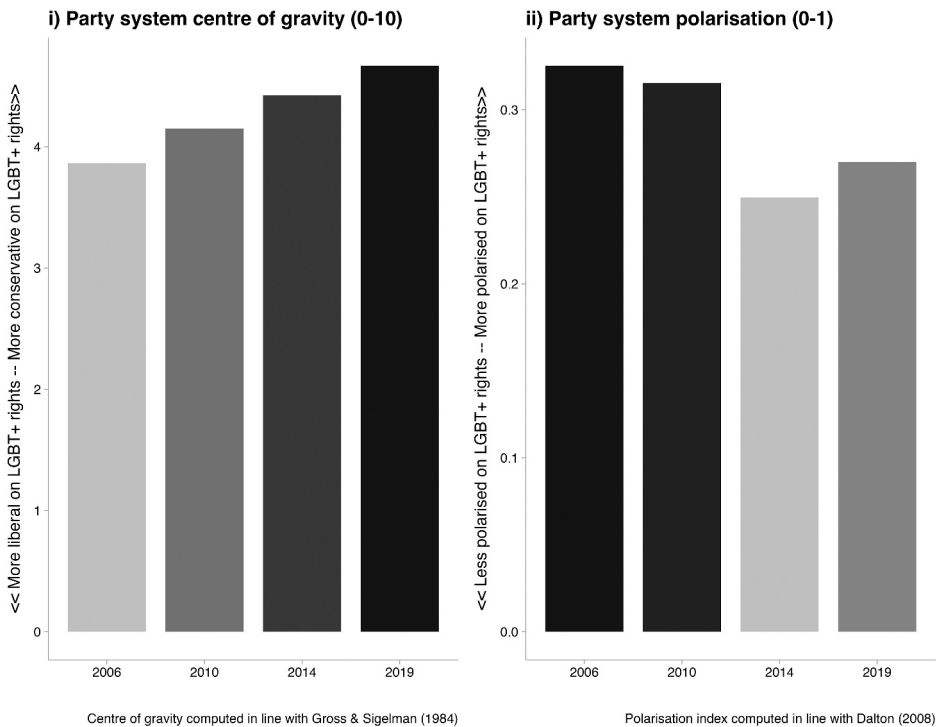


Figure 2. Party system centre of gravity and polarisation.

<sup>3</sup>The party system ideological centre of gravity is operationalised as follows where  $i$  indicates the position of an individual party in given system,  $c$ , at given time,  $t$ .

$$\text{Centre Of Gravity}_{c,t} = \sum_{i=1}^n \left( \frac{\text{Vote Share}_{i,t}}{\text{Total Share}_{c,t}} \right) * \text{Party Position}_{i,t}.$$

<sup>4</sup>Party system polarisation is operationalised as

$$\text{Polarization}_{c,t} = \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n \left( \frac{\text{Party Position}_{i,t} - \text{System Position}_{c,t}}{100} \right)^2 * \text{Vote Share}_{i,t}.$$



issues related gender, anti-feminism, and opposition to LGBTQ+ rights driven, in part, by the rise of the country's far-right party, VOX ['Voice' in Latin] (Rama et al. 2021; Heyne & Manucci 2021). In the case of LGBTQ+ rights specifically, we can observe this trend in Spain via the system-level measures reported in Figure 2. Not only has the mean ideological centre of gravity in the party system become, on average, more conservative (i.e. less favourable) towards LGBTQ+ rights, but the dispersion of positions advocated by parties within the system has also reversed a trend of decline between 2006 and 2014. As shown in Figure 1, the rise in polarisation over LGBTQ+ rights is driven entirely by the parliamentary entry of the far-right party, VOX, which gained parliamentary representation at the national level for the first time in April 2019, was subsequently normalised by the mainstream right (Field & Alonso 2024; Turnbull-Dugarte 2024b), and would go on to become the country's third-largest party in November 2019 when it took home 15.1 percent of the national vote (Rama et al. 2021; Heyne & Manucci 2021).

Whereas other centre-right parties (and politicians) have moderated their opposition towards LGBTQ+ rights in the aftermath of equal marriage reforms (Jankowski 2023; Turnbull-Dugarte 2022), indeed – the party of Margaret Thatcher, the UK's Conservative Party, who had previously introduced a nationwide ban against LGBTQ+ topics in schools, was the governing party of the day when equal marriage was introduced in the UK – Spain's centre-right party has remained staunch in its rejection of expanding LGBTQ+ rights. Not only did the PP vote against the introduction of equal marriage when it was brought forward and approved in 2005 by the PSOE government led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, it also pursued lengthy judicial processes in order to repeal the law via Spain's Constitutional Court which, ultimately, ruled to uphold the law in 2012, 7 years after it was enacted.

Beyond the issue of equal marriage, the party has never actively supported national-level legislation to advance LGBTQ+ rights (Esteban 2023). In a recent non-binding symbolic vote in the European Parliament that sought to recognise LGBTQ+ rights across European Union (EU) member states, the PP abstained while VOX explicitly voted in opposition. All other Spanish members of the European Parliament voted in favour. More recently, the three right-wing parties – PP, Ciudadanos, and VOX – all voted against the *Ley Trans*, which prohibited conversion therapy and facilitated transgender self-identification.

Given the bloc-logic in Spanish politics (Simón 2020b) – where parties and indeed voters, at least at the national level, coalesce into two ideological blocs based on likely coalition partners, the PP, via its association with VOX, is also at risk of elongating and cementing public perceptions of the party as an inimical threat to the welfare of the LGBTQ+ community. This was most recently demonstrated via the now infamous campaign poster from the July 2023 general election (see Figure 3) in which the national leader of the PP, Alberto Núñez Feijóo, was presented as being a mask for VOX leader, Santiago Abascal, and

specifically mentioned the issue of women's rights and homophobia. The accompanying text in the poster reads: *Disregarding women's rights is not patriotism. Homophobia is not liberty. Against coalitions of hate.* The objective of the campaign poster, shared by the US-based global activist network *Avaaz*, was clear – it sought to hammer home that, given the parliamentary arithmetic and the need for the PP to form a coalition with VOX if it was to have any hope of forming a government, a vote for the PP would be a vote for a PP-VOX coalition. Since the numerous legislative agreements between the PP and VOX at the municipal and regional level have included reforms detrimental to the socio-political welfare of the LGBTQ+ community, a potential national-level coalition between the two right-wing partners would likely be perceived as politically worrisome to LGBTQ+ constituents.

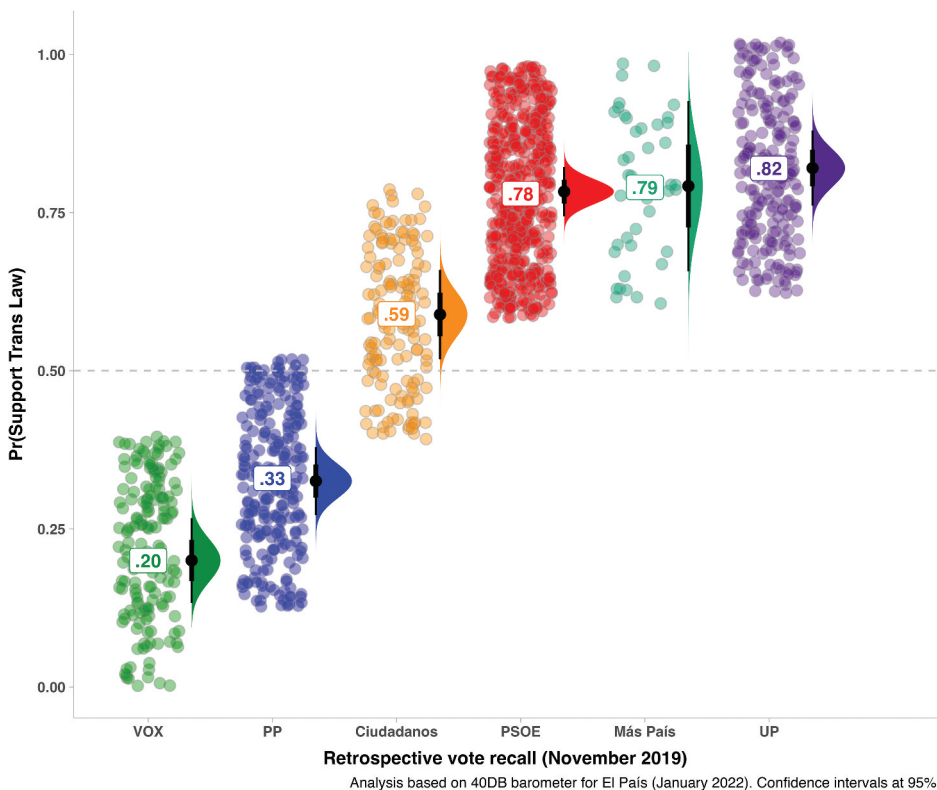
These supply-side dynamics are reflected in asymmetries in the support for specific LGBTQ+ rights issues among the mainstream parties' supporters. In 2022, the left-wing coalition government between PSOE and Unidas Podemos (UP) enacted a comprehensive LGBTQ+ rights law popularly referred to as *La Ley Trans*. The legislation, brought forward by the Women and Equality Minister Irene Montero from UP, presented a comprehensive bill that would, among other components, prohibit conversion therapy and allow trans individuals to change their legal gender without the need for a medical certificate. Opponents to the proposals for this self-identification clause brought together a unique coalition of trans-exclusionary feminists and social conservatives (Platero 2023; Sánchez-Holgado, Arcila-Calderón & Gomes-Barbosa 2023; Turnbull-Dugarte & McMillan 2023), that was unsuccessful in blocking the bill. *La Ley Trans* passed in the Spanish Congress with 188 votes in favour, 150 against and seven abstentions. Consistent with the historical opposition and track-record of seeking to block any and all legislative advances for the LGBTQ+ community (Esteban 2023), the PP voted against the bill alongside VOX and, despite one individual abstention, Ciudadanos.



Figure 3. 2023 campaign poster from Avaaz conflates the PP with VOX.

As we show in [Figure 4](#) and perhaps unsurprisingly, partisan divides in the level of support for the adopted policy vary dramatically between parties on the socially liberal left and the socially conservative right. [Figure 4](#) relies on publicly accessible individual-level micro-data ( $N = 2,000$ ) from a representative sample of the Spanish population facilitated by the monthly barometers of the national polling firm *40 dB* in collaboration with *El País* newspaper. This data in question relates to the barometer from February 2022. Among supporters of the right-wing parties – measured by vote recall for either Ciudadanos, PP or VOX in the November 2019 election – only supporters of Ciudadanos have a probability of supporting the law in excess of 50 percent. Four in five VOX supporters oppose the law, while two in three PP supporters do the same.

Importantly, these partisan asymmetries for LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion are not limited to the concrete issue of the *Ley Trans* that we empirical show here. These results are consistent with recent work by López Ortega (2024). As López Ortega (2024) evinces, a majority of both PP and VOX voters are also expressly opposed to other alternative indicators of LGBTQ+ tolerance including the presence of LGBTQ+ symbols, like the pride flag, in public spaces and buildings. Of course, this descriptive evidence of partisan divisions in policy support does not tell us if the opposition to advancing trans rights among the PP and VOX



**Figure 4.** Partisan support for transgender self-identification law.

voters is a response to each party's respective position, or if the reverse is true with party positions being adopted in response to voter preferences. What it does demonstrate, however, is the contemporary persistence of ideological divisions between the two blocs on questions of importance to the welfare of LGBTQ+ citizens. In a scenario where political party divisions over LGBTQ+ remain strong, do sexual minority voters, particularly those who joined the electorate in the post-equal marriage period, still vote like their rights depended on it?

### Voting like their rights (still) depend on it?

A recent, yet rapidly advancing, literature in political sociology has demonstrated that sexual and gender minorities, while not a monolith (Jones 2021), differ politically from their cis-heterosexual peers in a number of different ways. Compared to comparable cis-heterosexuals, individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ are far more likely to be politically active (Grahn 2023; Turnbull-Dugarte & Townsley 2020), be more socially (Debus & Wurthmann 2024; Schnabel 2018) and economically (Turnbull-Dugarte 2020) liberal, hold political preferences that are distinct from their parents (Turnbull-Dugarte 2024a), and are, across a diverse catalogue of different countries (Ramirez Dueñas 2022; Wurthmann 2023; Hunklinger & Kleer 2024; Spierings 2021), more supportive of socially liberal left-wing parties (Turnbull-Dugarte 2020).

Among the theoretical arguments posited to explain the mechanisms behind sexuality-based divergence in electoral preferences is that of utility-maximising and spatial approximation (Downs 1957). At the very basic level, as part of their consideration set, voters are assumed to behave as rational actors and vote for political parties which propose policy positions more spatially aligned to their own preferences over alternatives that are more spatially distinct. As a result, if an individual identifies with a certain social strata whose interests are defended and advanced by a political party, they are incentivised to vote for that political party rather than alternatives. In addition to such positive incentives, whereby potential voters are drawn to a political alternative because it offers to provide positive gains (e.g. more benefits for the group), spatial preferences may also be driven by negative incentives or affect towards a party (Mayer 2017). Such behaviour may occur when voters opt for the alternative that is *least* likely to advance policies that are detrimental to their welfare even if the selected alternative does not necessarily advocate for altering the status quo.

Sexual minorities, while not a monolithic group, are observed to have a shared group identity and harbour shared group-based objectives. As a result of a desire to maximise the welfare of the group and to protect it from negative externalities, individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ behave,

politically, in a manner that seeks to expand these interests (Schaffner & Senic 2006). When presented with political alternatives at the ballot box, members of the group will opt for the alternative that pledges to protect the group. This is the primary theory posited by Turnbull-Dugarte (2020) to explain the significantly stronger support for social democratic parties in Western Europe, the party family with the strongest pro-LGBTQ voting record (Siegel & Wang 2018).

Should LGB voters indeed vote 'like their rights depended on it' (Turnbull-Dugarte & Townsley 2020), in a context where LGBTQ+ rights have enjoyed a longer pedigree, the incentives to form electoral preferences on the basis of LGBTQ+ identification may well dissipate. In Spain where, during the last five decades, attitudes towards sexual diversity have evolved, positioning Spain as one of the most culturally liberal countries in Western Europe (Adamczyk 2017; Flores 2019), the younger generation of sexual minority voters may feel less socially distinct from their cis-heterosexual peers than the older generation. This hypothesis is not dissimilar from the theoretical expectations presented by Grahn (2023) who, focusing on Sweden, theorises that the temporal variation in the advancement of LGBTQ+ rights in the country would result in an approximation in electoral turnout between LGB and non-LGB constituents.

Of course, and as our supply-side analysis above demonstrates, Spain – despite being country that has been able to boast a pioneering position as an early-mover on LGBTQ+ rights (Calvo 2007; Kollman 2015) and enjoying widespread popular tolerance for homosexuality (Adamczyk 2017; Flores 2019) – remains a country where LGBTQ+ rights are politically polarising. Indeed, not only are the national-level political parties as polarised on these questions today as they were at the time that equal marriage was legalised close to two decades ago, but their supporters are also equally divided on support for contemporary LGBTQ+ rights issues. There is, as a result, reason to expect resilience and generational longevity in the sexuality gap in political preferences between individuals based on their sexual minority identities. Indeed, as a result of these conflicting expectations, understanding to what extent the sexuality gap travels across cohorts remains an important empirical question.

## Data and method

Our empirical analysis relies on data compiled from an original survey ( $N = 2,000$ ) of individuals from Spain. The data collection was completed via *Netquest* between August and September 2022 who provided a sample of 1,500 individuals aged 18 and over as well as an additional targeted subsample of 500 individuals aged 18–35. The targeted approach facilitates a well-powered sample that allows us to identify statistically distinct preferences between our two cohorts of theoretical interest: those aged 18–35 and those aged 36 and above. Summary statistics reported in the online Appendix Table A.1, A.2 and A.3. The

(quota-based) sample is representative and reflects population parameters based on gender, socioeconomic status, and size of locality.

Our primary independent variable of interest is identification as LGB. In our survey we asked respondents: *Of the following options, which would you say best describes how you think of yourself?* In addition to preferring not to say, respondents could identify as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual or other (with open text response available).

Via this measurement approach, we identify 336 individuals who opt for a non-heterosexual identity.<sup>5</sup> All results in the tables and figures include the full sample of respondents (both LGB and non-LGB).

We operationalise political party support via two alternatives: i) positive affect towards a vector of political parties, and ii) retrospective vote recall. We take positive affect towards a political party – similar to the self-reported propensity to vote for party (Van der Eijk et al. 2006) – as a useful, and complementary, alternative to self-reported vote recall given that it provides more information regarding voters' preferences over a discrete nominal choice. We model the positive affect towards five parties: PSOE, PP, VOX, UP and *Más País* [More Country].<sup>6</sup> For retrospective vote recall, we rely on a categorical variable that identifies those who report voting for either PSOE, PP, VOX or UP as well as other additional categories (including abstention) in the November 2019 general election. An alternative outcome, ideological self-placement on the left-right scale, is modelled in the online appendix material. The results, reported in Appendix Table A.12, are congruent with the primary conclusions reported in the analysis that follows.

Given the variation in the type of outcome measures, we vary our estimation approach accordingly. To model positive party affect, we estimate individual ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models for each of the five national-level parties under consideration. Retrospective vote recall is nominal in nature and, as such, we estimate reported voting behaviour via a multinomial regression model where voting for the PSOE (the modal outcome in our data) is taken as the reference category.

In order to test the second hypothesis, our core moderating variable is a dichotomous measure of age that stratifies respondents based on whether or not they were of voting age at the time of the legalisation of equal marriage

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<sup>5</sup>Given constraints based on statistical power and the potential threat of Type II errors, our statistical models collapse non-heterosexual identities into a single LGB category. Theoretically, the identified mechanisms established in the literature to explain the divergence between sexual minorities and heterosexuals are the same. Empirically, while evidence suggests there is some within-group variation between bisexual and homosexual respondents, the direction of distinctiveness from the heterosexual baseline is uniform (Jones 2021).

<sup>6</sup>Since the time of fielding our survey, *Más País* and its protagonists have largely been absorbed within a new party *Sumar* that sought to unite divided factions to the political left of the PSOE (Rodon & Rodríguez 2024). We include them in our analysis given they enjoyed non-trivial support and had national-level parliamentary representation at the time.

(1) or not. In real terms, this means that respondents are divided between those aged under 35 and those aged 35 or older.

Finally, to isolate the independent association of LGB identification, our models (both of party affect and retrospective vote recall) include a vector of control variables. This vector includes gender, education, social class, employment status, living arrangements, and the size of the area where the respondent lives. Gender is a binary indicator that captures whether individuals are men (0) or women (1).<sup>7</sup> Education stratifies respondents dichotomously based on whether they have an education equal or superior to an undergraduate university degree (1) or not (0). Social class is categorical indicator that identifies respondents based on social grade including i) working class, ii) lower-middle class, and iii) upper-middle class. Living arrangements were measured categorically and indicated those respondents who i) lived with their parents, ii) lived in rented accommodation, iii) had a mortgage, or iv) owned their home outright. Finally, the size of respondent locality trichotomously stratified our respondents by whether the area in which they live was composed of i) less than 10,000 inhabitants, ii) between 10,001 and 100,000 inhabitants, or iii) had more than 100,000 inhabitants. Given that some of these controls are likely causally posterior to sexuality, their inclusion may dilute the role of sexuality and, as a result, the coefficients of sexuality represent a conservative estimate of the sexuality gap. In Appendix Tables A.5 and A.11, we report bivariate models without controls for comparison.

### The Spanish *lavender* vote

Are LGB voters in Spain significantly more inclined to vote for the country's left-wing bloc of progressive parties? Theoretically, we would anticipate LGB voters to experience a duality of incentives that will drive them towards this bloc: i) a positive attraction towards those parties that seek to represent their interests and expand their collective group-based welfare, as well as ii) a negative rejection of the right-wing bloc that threatens their welfare and seeks to maintain their social and institutional marginalisation. As demonstrated by the OLS coefficients reported in [Figure 5](#), we find support for this expectation. In substantive terms, the coefficients in [Figure 5](#) should be interpreted as indicating the difference between LGB and non-LGB affect towards each of the parties after considering the potential differences associated with any of the control measures. Positive values indicate being LGB (compared to not being LGB) is associated with more positive affect. Negative values indicate the reverse. Full regression models are reported in Appendix Table A.4.

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<sup>7</sup>Data on gender was provided by the survey house – Netquest – and not directly asked by us in our survey. Regrettably, Netquest did not provide gender categories beyond the gender binary that would allow us to identify respondents who identify as non-binary.

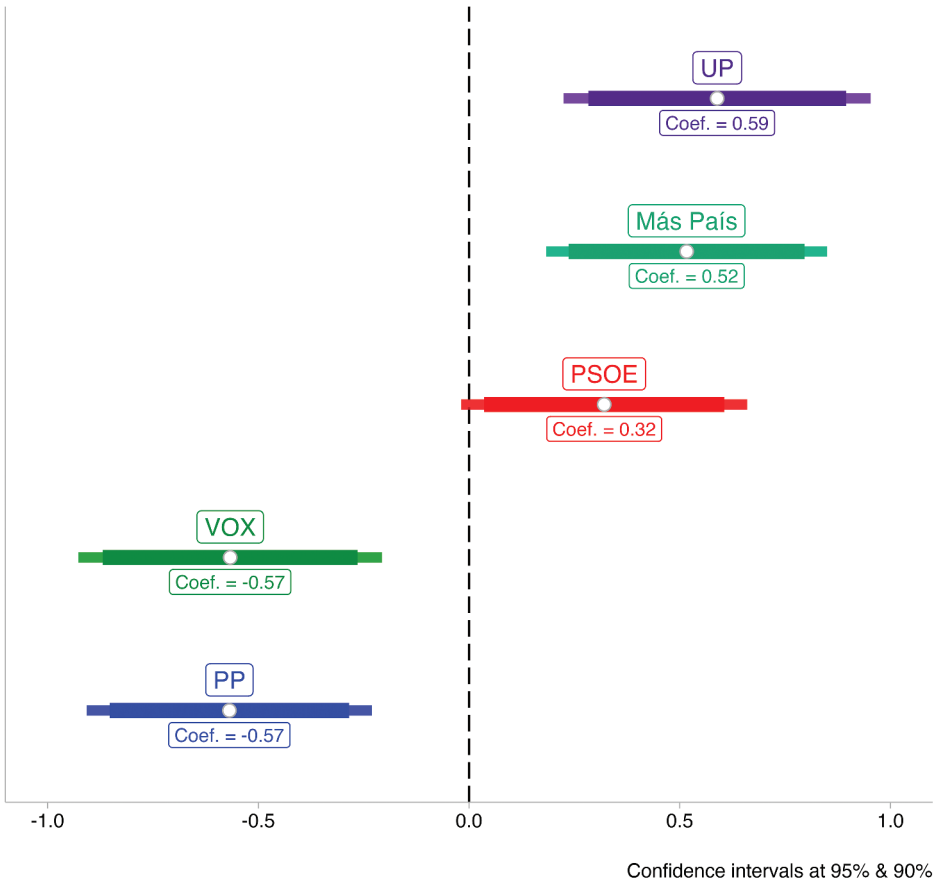


Figure 5. Sexuality gap in affect towards parties.

Modelling the level of affect that voters feel towards the main national-level parties – and controlling for a comprehensive vector of potential sociodemographic confounders – we find that LGB individuals in Spain are, vis-à-vis heterosexuals, more likely to support the parties of the left-wing bloc and reject those on the right. Consider first the right-wing parties: in the case of positive affect towards both the far-right (VOX) and more centre-right (PP), LGB voters are significantly less positive than their heterosexual counterparts. The coefficients in both of these models are the same ( $\beta = -0.57$ ) but, given the asymmetry in the baseline mean for heterosexuals, 2.08 and 3.24 for VOX and the PP, respectively, the rejection of the far-right is of a significantly greater magnitude (27 percent).

Analysing support for the left-wing bloc, LGB voters are significantly more supportive of these parties vis-à-vis heterosexuals. Of the left-wing parties, the sexuality gap is largest for UP ( $\beta = 0.59$ ) and smallest for the PSOE ( $\beta = 0.32$ ). Note, however, while the sexuality gap is greatest in the case of the UP, PSOE remains the party that enjoys the overall highest level of support among sexual



minority voters: positive affect for the PSOE among LGBs is 4.17 whereas for UP or *Más País* it is 3.59 and 3.52, respectively.

The more muted level of affect towards the PSOE vis-à-vis *Más País* visualised in [Figure 5](#) is interesting. While the PSOE, like other social democratic parties in Europe, has long been the able to harvest support from the LGBTQ+ community due to the party's (relatively) early support for the community's interests (Esteban 2023) and a lack of an electorally viable alternative, internal rifts within the PSOE over contemporary LGBTQ+ issues has likely reduced their ability to bank the LGBTQ+ vote. These internal conflicts within the PSOE, largely centred around feminist-led debates over trans rights, might have led to a shift in LGBTQ+ voter preferences towards new(er) and (more) left-leaning parties who have more unambiguously trans-inclusive positions compared to the PSOE (Platero 2023; Sánchez-Holgado, Arcila-Calderón & Gomes-Barbosa 2023). Despite these within-bloc movements, what remains clear is that there is a clear pro-left premium associated with sexual minority identification.

We now turn to consider electoral preferences directly: recall that our second dependent variable is self-reported vote recall, and our estimation approach relies on a multinomial logistic regression model. Before presenting the coefficients, in [Table 1](#) we report the descriptive proportions of voting for each party among respondents stratified by sexuality. This descriptive approach signals a sizeable asymmetry based on sexuality: the difference in combined support for parties on the left (64.76 percent) and the right (25.24) among LGBs is very different from that observed among heterosexuals who report combined support of 48.55 percent for the left-wing bloc and 40.36 for the right-wing bloc.

The coefficients in [Figure 6](#) represent the results of our formal empirical test. These coefficients are average marginal effects (AMEs) and should be interpreted as indicating the change in the probability of voting for either the PP, VOX or *Unidas Podemos* (vis-à-vis PSOE) associated with LGB identification, controlling for our catalogue of control variables. *Más País* is not included in the models given that vote recall for this party was not included

**Table 1.** Party vote share (%) by sexuality.

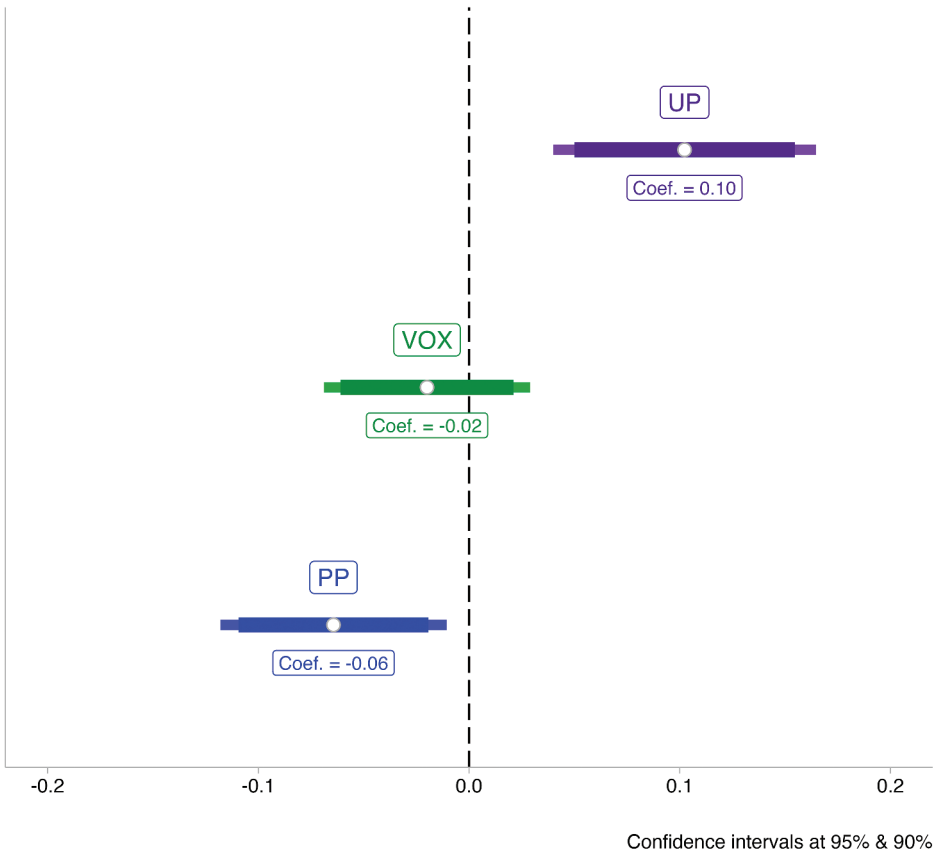
Vote recall	Heterosexual	LGB	Difference
VOX	12.32	9.05	-3.27
Partido Popular	18.94	10	-8.94
Ciudadanos	9.10	6.19	-2.91
<b>Right-wing bloc</b>	<b>40.36</b>	<b>25.24</b>	<b>-15.12</b>
PSOE	28.70	29.52	0.82
Unidas Podemos+	19.85	35.24	15.39
<b>Left-wing bloc</b>	<b>48.55</b>	<b>64.76</b>	<b>16.21</b>
Regional (left)	6.62	7.14	0.52
Regional (right)	4.47	2.86	-1.61

Regional left includes: ERC, CUP, EH Bildu.

Regional right includes: JxCat, EAJ-PNV, CC-PNC, Nueva Canarias.

PRC, Teruel Existe.

Multinomial model (baseline: votes PSOE)



**Figure 6.** Sexuality gap in voting behaviour.

in the survey. Full regression models for vote choices are reported in Table A.7 and A.8.

The largest gap estimated is that in favour of *Unidas Podemos*. The increased support for UP is not only statistically significant but is of a very large magnitude. Given the baseline probability of voting for the party over the PSOE among heterosexuals is .21, an increase of ten percentage-points for LGB voters corresponds to a pro-*Unidas Podemos* premium of 50 percent. This effect is greater than the penalty experienced by the PP. According to the data, heterosexual respondents have a probability of voting for the PP equal to .18 whereas for LGB respondents the probability is 0.12 – a negative effect of 6 percentage-points is, accordingly, equal to a 33 percent penalty for Spain's centre-right party. While the LGB coefficient for the far-right party VOX is negative (–0.02), the sexuality gap is statistically indistinguishable from zero. This insignificance is, however, likely a result of the limited power among this subsample given the very few observations who identify as LGB and vote for the right. The results of [Figure 6](#) confirm the expectations posited by our first hypothesis. On average,

LGB voters in Spain are significantly more supportive of the parties that belong to the left-wing bloc of progressive parties and, as demonstrated elsewhere, a large part of this increased support for the left is banked by parties that adopt positions that are more progressive than the more moderate social democratic parties (Hunklinger & Kleer 2024). We now turn to assess whether the sexuality gap varies across those cohorts that were socialised into the electorate before and after Spain's early-mover introduction of equal marriage in 2005.

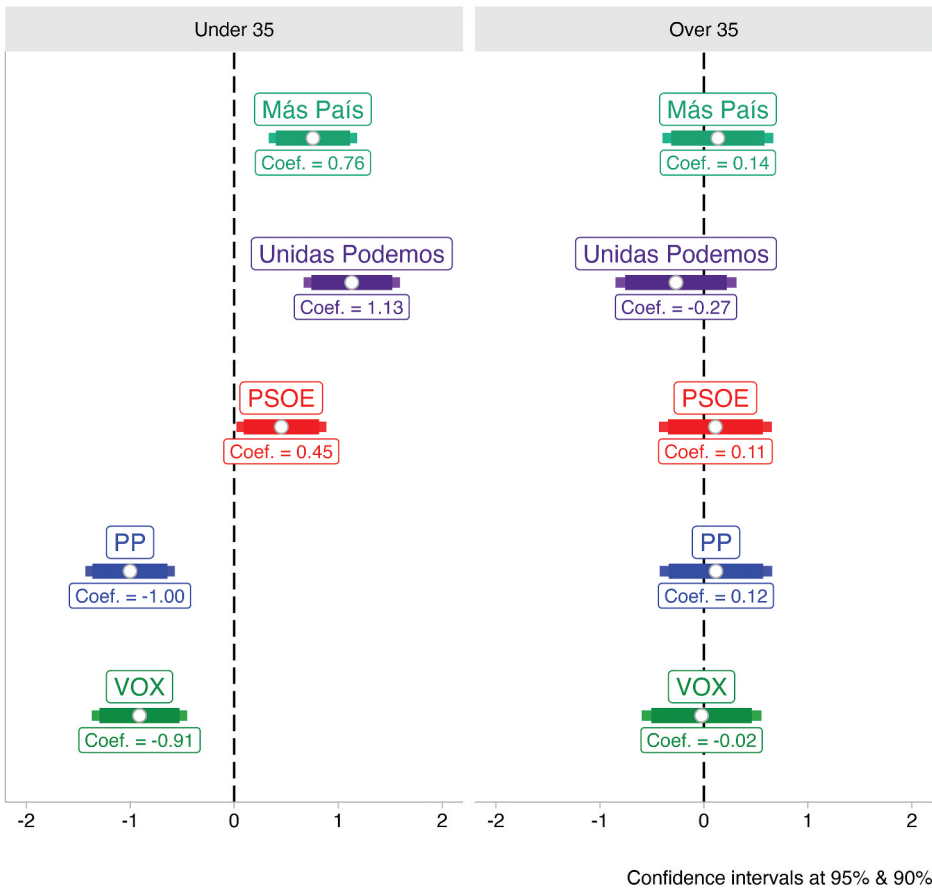
### Sexuality gap across the pre- and post-marriage cohort

We first consider affect towards the political parties, which allows us to observe preferences for newer parties in voters' consideration set, such as *Más País*. Figure 7 reports the effect of LGB identification on the positive affect respondents report towards the political parties under consideration. The detailed OLS regression output is reported in Table A.6. The left-hand panel reports results for those who were socialised post-equal marriage whereas the right-hand panel reports the results for those who were socialised pre-equal marriage. The results of Figure 7 paint a clear picture: the sexuality gap in Spain is significantly conditioned by age cohort.

Whereas younger voters are significantly more positively predisposed towards the three progressive parties (PSOE, *Unidas Podemos*, and *Más País*) and significantly more negatively predisposed to parties on the political right (PP and VOX), the same asymmetries are absent among the older cohort. In real terms, levels of positive affect towards each of the parties is statistically symmetrical among heterosexual and LGB voters within this age bracket.

The magnitude of the disparity between LGB and heterosexual respondents in the level of self-reported affect towards the parties is substantive given the (already low) level of positive affect towards the far-right among heterosexuals at 2.07. The rejection of VOX among LGB identifiers is 0.91 points which, given the 2.07 baseline, is 44 percent lower than that of comparable heterosexuals. For comparison, the gender gap between men and women among the same population of young people, is notably smaller at 0.71 (31 percent change for women from a baseline of 2.29 among men). In the case of the strong endorsement for *Unidas Podemos*, the 1.13-point advantage the party is able to boast from LGB respondents is 38 percent greater than the counterfactual from heterosexuals (2.98). Again, if one is to benchmark this against the gender gap between women and men, the .61 difference associated with being a woman equates to a 22 percent change from 2.86 among men. Sexuality, at least among the young, not only explains a large proportion of the variation in support for the different parties but does so to a far greater extent than gender (Figure 8).

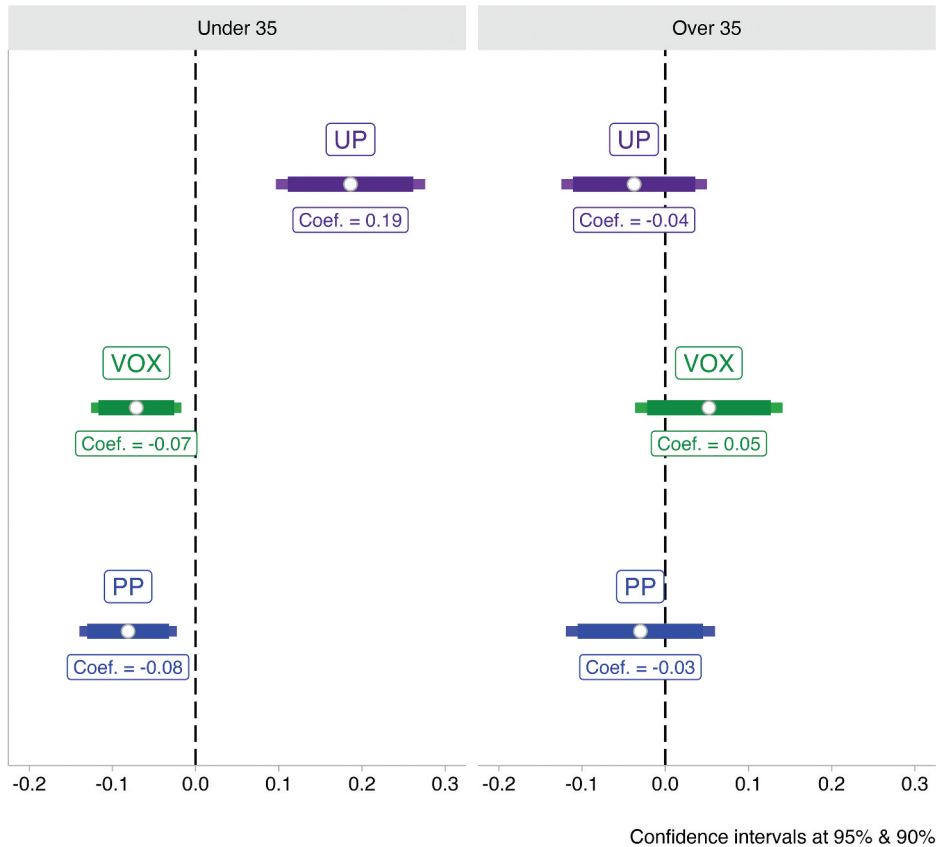
When we consider the potential variation in the sexuality gap between cohorts at the ballot box, similar findings are produced. Full estimation output



**Figure 7.** Sexuality gap in affect towards parties by cohort.

from the multinomial regression models is reported in Tables A.9 and A.10. As in the case of Figure 6, the coefficients reported here are AMEs and indicate changes in the probability of voting for each party associated with LGB identification. Young LGB respondents – vis-à-vis heterosexuals from the same cohort – are significantly more inclined to support both PSOE and UP over either of the right-wing parties, PP or VOX. Specifically, when taking PSOE as the baseline party, LGB citizens are 7 percentage-points less likely for vote for VOX, 8 percentage-points less likely to vote for the PP, and 19 percentage-points more likely to vote for UP compared to their heterosexual peers. These are all very large effect sizes and correspond to changes against the heterosexual baseline probability equal, respectively, to –53 percent (VOX), –53 percent (PP), and 82 percent (*Unidas Podemos*). In real terms, while young LGB voters have a probability of voting for the either the PP or VOX that is less than half of that observed among their heterosexual peers, the probability of voting for UP among LGBs is close to double that of the comparable population of heterosexual of the same age.

## Multinomial model (baseline: votes PSOE)



**Figure 8.** Sexuality gap in voting behaviour by cohort.

Among our older cohort, and against expectations, we find no evidence of a significant sexuality gap in electoral preferences as measured via vote recall. Taking recall for the PSOE as the reference condition, LGB voters are no more or no less likely to vote for either VOX, UP or PP compared to their heterosexual peers. These results, while consistent with those observed in the case of party affect reported in [Figure 7](#) are at odds with comparative evidence of the presence of sexuality gap in electoral choices across age cohorts (Turnbull-Dugarte 2022). We exercise caution in the interpretation of these results, however, based on the limited number of LGB-identifying observations that reported vote recall outcomes for each party among the older cohort of respondents.

## Discussion

This article provides a detailed analysis of the ‘lavender vote’ in Spain, focusing on both the supply-side polarisation of LGBTQ+ rights as well as the

corresponding the electoral behaviour of LGB Spanish individuals. Given Spain's early adoption of progressive LGBTQ+ rights – becoming the third country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage in 2005 – and its current position as one of the most liberal countries on this matter, we expected that i) political parties' positions on LGBTQ+ rights would converge over time and that, as a result, ii) younger Spanish cohorts, socialised in a more liberal and egalitarian context, would exhibit similar political patterns between LGB and heterosexual individuals compared to older cohorts. Our contribution, therefore, sought to combine longitudinal data on supply-side dynamics alongside cross-sectional data on contemporary demand-side behaviour.

Firstly, and focusing on the supply side, the article illuminates the existing divisions between Spanish political parties regarding crucial issues such as equal marriage and self-identification for transgender individuals. Despite Spain's reputation for advancing LGBTQ+ rights, critical views on these legislative changes persist, not only within the far-right VOX but also within the mainstream centre-right PP. For instance, the latter challenged the constitutionality of the equal marriage act in 2005 and some of its most prominent leaders positioned themselves against the law and attended demonstrations organised against it by Catholic associations. More recently, both the PP and VOX have expressed opposition to the *Ley Trans*, with their leaders announcing plans to repeal the act if they gain power in the near future. These examples highlight how debates surrounding sexual minorities remain prevalent in Spanish public discourse despite advancements in LGBTQ+ rights and attitudes. The lack of a centripetal convergence around LGBTQ+ rights among Spain's national level political actors remains an important empirical puzzle as it challenges elite-level behaviour observed elsewhere (Jankowski 2023; Turnbull-Dugarte 2022).

Second, and building on the polarised supply-side dynamics, we present a novel case study on LGB political behaviour, analysing the 'lavender gap' across cohorts in Spain. Empirically, and leveraging original representative survey data, we demonstrate the resilience of sexuality-based political preferences. Despite expectations that young LGB individuals would exhibit more similar attitudes and behaviours to their heterosexual counterparts, our study demonstrates that, contrary to this expectation and in line with the distinctive positions between the left and right on contemporary LGBTQ+ rights issues, the gap remains among younger generations. Among younger voters who are *already* more inclined to vote for socially liberal left-wing parties, LGB identifiers tend to favour these parties even more, especially emergent progressive parties, to a greater extent than their older peers.

Our findings on LGB electoral choices are consistent with the longitudinal analysis of LGB turnout gaps in Sweden evinced by Grahn (2023). The empirical results we observe in Spain provide indicative evidence of the link between supply-side politicisation of LGBTQ+ rights and the sexuality gap in demand-side behaviours. In a political environment

where political parties, and the potential governing coalitions that parties may form, keep placing LGBTQ+ rights issues on ballot, younger LGB individuals remain incentivised to vote based on their in-group interests and 'like their rights depended on it'.

Lastly, the research contributes to the literature on electoral behaviour in Spain by emphasising the importance of considering sexuality when studying models of party preferences. Given the increasing percentage of the population identifying as LGBTQ+ (12 percent of the population in Spain self-identifies as belonging to one of these categories; 20 percent among the younger cohorts), our findings highlight how sexual identity significantly influences political behaviours, emphasising the necessity of acknowledging sexual orientation in comprehending contemporary and developing party support in Spain.

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### Notes on contributors

*Stuart J. Turnbull-Dugarte* is an Associate Professor in Quantitative Political Science at the University of Southampton (UK).

*Guillermo Cordero* is an Associate Professor in Political Science at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Spain).

*José María Ramírez Dueñas* is a Lecturer in Sociology at the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (Spain).

### ORCID

Stuart J. Turnbull-Dugarte  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9330-3945>

Guillermo Cordero  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8615-0450>

José María Ramírez Dueñas  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4760-4034>

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