


## Article

# Young People's Critical Politicization in Spain in the Great Recession: A Generational Reconfiguration?

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**Abstract:** During the last decade, Spain has experienced, like other surrounding countries, a deep economic crisis accompanied by an unprecedented political and institutional crisis. This has led to a growing mistrust in institutions and a dissatisfaction with democracy, but also an increase in interest in politics, which implies an interesting change regarding other situations. Young people of the so-called ‘crisis generation’, who have socialized in a new and changing context, also participate in this process of change, and have moreover played a leading role in the public space. In order to analyze young people’s politicization process, in this article we use data from the European Social Survey (rounds 1–7, from 2000 to 2014) and the Young People in Spain Survey (2016). We developed a typology of attitudes towards politics and identified, using discrete choice models, the demographic and socioeconomic profile of young people particularly dissatisfied with politics. Our results show that, although young people socialized in the context of the crisis are very critical of politics, instead of moving further away from democratic politics or rejecting it openly, in most cases they politicize their discontent. Even those most critical of the way in which democracy works in the country have a very participatory political behavior, both in forms of nonelectoral and electoral participation.

**Keywords:** youth studies; generations; political socialization; political discontent; political behavior; trust in institutions; democracy satisfaction; transitions to adulthood

## 1. Introduction

The economic-financial crisis that began in 2007–2008 has had an undoubted impact throughout the Western world, but in some European countries, such as Spain, it has reached huge proportions. To the economic consequences of the prolonged recession, with its negative effects on the standard of living of large sections of the population, we must add a profound political crisis that has affected virtually all institutions in the country and the democratic system itself.

According to all available data, young people have been one of the groups most affected by the effects of the socioeconomic crisis [1]. Beyond the visible consequences in specific areas of social life (for example, youth unemployment rose above 50%), the Great Recession has meant that a large number of young people have stopped their integration processes and have had to face an increasing number of obstacles to achieve personal autonomy [2]. This situation has been aggravated by a succession of corruption scandals and austerity policies, which have ended up showing, for many young people, that this was not simply an economic problem but rather the inability of the political system to meet their needs and allow them to defend their interests.

This general feeling of generational frustration is what underlies the protagonism that certain youth sectors acquired in the Spanish public sphere during the *indignados* movement and in the cycle of

protests that followed. Their active presence and their transformation into leading political actors has been one of the most novel and surprising features, as it seems to indicate the existence of significant changes in the relationship that young people have with democratic politics.

In line with this approach, this article aims to empirically analyze the impact that the shared experience of the crisis has had on youth evaluations of the sociopolitical situation of Spanish democracy and on the political expression of their discontent. The hypothesis from which we start is that, in these years, there has been a reconfiguration of the relationship that broad sectors of Spanish youth have with politics. This reconfiguration has led to a highly politically critical stance towards democracy, which, instead of promoting distance and indifference (as it would have been predictable given the previous predominant positions), has led to a notable increase in subjective involvement, and an active presence in the political sphere. This politicization of discontent, although present in broad sectors of the Spanish population, becomes more important among young people socialized during the crisis. This is because, according to many authors, youth is a decisive stage of the life cycle of the formation of political attitudes, which then tend to stabilize [3,4], and when ‘period-specific shocks’ have a greater impact [5].

In order to meet our objectives, this article begins with the development of the theoretical generational approach employed throughout the text, where we explain how a shared experience of economic, social, and political problems constitute the distinctive element of this ‘crisis generation’ (Section 2). Then, we broadly describe the context in which the politicization of this generation has taken place in Spain, identifying the four main elements: political management of the economic and financial crisis, corruption scandals, institutional distrust, and blockage of the political system (Section 3). In the next section, we make a preliminary approach to change in the political attitudes of young people during the Great Recession (Section 4). Afterwards, we present the research design, explaining the two stages of analysis, as well as the data and methods we used (Section 5). Then, in Section 6, we present the results. In particular, we first analyze the evolution of the typology of attitudes towards politics in Spain between 2002 and 2015 based on the longitudinal data from the European Social Survey, showing that the 15-M movement clearly marks a milestone (Section 6.1). From that moment on, there was a reconfiguration of attitudes towards politics: the proportion of Spaniards that we label as conformist or satisfied in political terms is reduced, whereas the proportion of critically politicized individuals increases, especially among the youngest and those less than 45 years old. Secondly, to give a deeper picture of the reconfiguration of youth attitudes towards politics, we focus on the analysis of the political discontent, restricting our analysis to cross-sectional data of young people coming from the Young People in Spain Survey 2016 (Section 6.2). In particular, we focus on two issues: the characterization of the most discontented youth by identifying the sociodemographic and political explanations of their political discontent; then, we analyze how they express the dissatisfaction through political mobilization to answer the question of whether political discontent could be a factor that deepened the distance these young people felt from politics and, ultimately, whether it increased their democratic disaffection. Section 7 discusses the findings and concludes.

## 2. Crisis Generation: A Shared Experience

The explanation of the relationship between the structural conditions in which young people develop their lives and the processes through which they build their life experiences is one of the main challenges of youth research [6,7]. This interrelation acquires special relevance in moments of deep transformations in the social, economic, and political context of young people’s lives, and especially in those moments that involve significant transformations in the experience of youth. In this sense, once we become aware that people are not ‘young’ in the same way as those in previous times, we can indeed talk about the emergence of a generation [8] (p. 71). As Mannheim established [9], it is the existence of a certain rupture or discontinuity in historical time experienced by a cohort of individuals in the process of socialization that defines the emergence of a generation. The events that mark a

milestone and define a “before” and “after” are the grounds of the new generation and the social identities they create. What distinguishes them, however, is sharing certain social experiences at a specific moment in the course of their life [10]. Historical time and biographical time, therefore, intersect in the definition of generations.

This generational approach differs from the usual media discourse that by identifying a generation (for example, Millennials or Generation Z) based on a set of attributes (psychosocial traits, lifestyles), defined very generically, this would be shared by members of the same age group and differentiate them from those of earlier times. Apart from the lack of precise criteria for the identification of generations, this perspective carries a homogeneous vision of youth, forgetting that young people often respond differently depending on their social situation. Our approach also differs from that sociopolitical research that implicitly identifies cohort and generation. From our analytical perspective, based on Mannheim’s generational theory, it is wrong to think that social generations follow each other with the same temporal regularity as biological cohorts. On the contrary, a social generation is always social-historically situated. Each new cohort opens the possibility of a new generation, and “is a ‘potential generation’ that may or may not develop the common bond that transforms it into an ‘actual generation’” [11] (pp. 17–18). Its emergence depends on the existence of a shared experience that breaks the continuity of historical time and forces its protagonists to build new subjectivities. Therefore, speaking of generations in the analysis of youth implies trying to understand the experience of young people in the historical moment they are living and how they face this situation of change, always in interaction with older generations [8].

### *2.1. Dimensions of Generational Analysis and “the Crisis Generation”*

There are three dimensions to consider when we want to study a generation. Firstly, structural conditions, which are a product of the processes of social change, and in which the socialization of a determined cohort takes place that also defines the social situation in which its members grow. Secondly, the characteristics of the responses that young people construct to face these generational conditions, giving rise to new subjectivities. Specific forms of expression, collective feelings, and orientations towards action converge in these subjectivities and are at the base of the generational link. Thirdly, the internal divisions that can be established within a generation as a consequence, basically, of the action of a system of social inequalities on the experience of youth. Groups resulting from these divisions, so-called “generational units” by Mannheim [6], are defined by their varying reactions to the historical conditions in which they live, depending on the different social positions that their members occupy. In this sense, it is important to emphasize that working with the idea of generation does not imply forgetting the decisive importance of class, gender, and ethnic inequalities that intersect with the category of youth [8,12,13].

These three dimensions are clearly recognizable in what we have called “the crisis generation”. With this term, we refer to that cohort of young people who have undergone most of their socialization in a new sociostructural context, defined by: (1) the deterioration of the socioeconomic conditions in which they carry out their processes of transition to adult life; (2) the exponential increase in uncertainty about possible future integration; and, above all, (3) the generalization of precariousness in most areas of youth life. These new conditions in which young people must learn to build their biographies have become a decisive generational experience. The intensity of the crisis and its effects, both individually and collectively, constitute a shared experience that redefines the way to be young today. Although it should not be forgotten, as previously mentioned, that beyond the generational bond that unites them, this experience of crisis is lived and interpreted by young people in different ways, depending on where they are located within the structure of social inequalities and opportunities.

### *2.2. Shared Experience of Job Insecurity and Lack of Expectations*

The economic-financial crisis, which in countries such as Spain has acquired broad dimensions with consequences in practically all areas of collective life (social, labor, political-institutional)

has meant, as Mannheim said [6], a discontinuity in historical time. That is, it is an event that marks a before and an after in the existence of many citizens, especially those who are in the middle of a formative stage of life, because it can leave important scars in the course of one's life [14,15]. The situation of precariousness and the "horizon of uncertainty" that requires individuals to be in a continuous search for balance [16], exacerbated during the crisis, constitutes an experience shared by a great majority of young Spaniards, for some directly and very intensely, and others vicariously, but also close up. In all cases, this generational experience has forced them to improvise new survival strategies and new repertoires of skills and competencies to face this difficult reality. To fully understand the impact of the crisis on this generation, however, we must bear in mind that many of these problems, which are now evident, have been marking the existence of young people for several decades. Precarity, uncertainty, or the "absence of a future" are distinctive features of the transformation of the model of youth in global capitalism [17] and, therefore, had already been conditioning the development of the life projects of the clear majority of young Spanish people for a long time. What has changed with the crisis is that these phenomena have become visible and sharpened, and, above all, daily experiences.

The various socioeconomic indicators of these years leave no doubt about the great difficulties that young people have faced in the development of their transition processes. This has been basically due to the worsening of living conditions and growing obstacles to building biographical projects in keeping with their expectations for the future. The figures on the evolution of the labor market for young people are undoubtedly the most striking. According to the Spanish Statistical Office (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística*, [www.ine.es](http://www.ine.es)), among young people between 20 and 24 years of age, the percentage of unemployment rose from 15% in 2006 to an impacting 52% in 2013, a peak in "job destruction", and, among young adults from 25 to 29 years old, those seven years saw increases from 10% to 33%. Youth employment, for those between 16 and 29, has fallen by 50% in these years, and the labor market has lost almost two million young people, who in 2013 only represented 16% of the employed. In addition to the difficulties in entering the labor market, working conditions have deteriorated significantly and, with this, a feeling of insecurity has spread among young people. As of 2010, temporary contracts for young people began an upward trend, reaching the peak of 54% in 2015; almost 30 points more than all wage earners. The consequences of this sociolabor context on purchasing power and, in general, on the living conditions of young people, are predictable. According to the results of the Youth in Spain Report 2016, young people earn around 8000 or 9000 euros less than the average of the salaried population; youth economic independence, either total or partial, has been reduced from 71% in 2008 to 57% in 2016; average income has fallen 16% in that same period of time; and, among young adults aged 25 to 29, only 38% had income to live without family support [2].

The key element in defining the crisis generation is the shared experience of life problems caused by this profound worsening of living conditions. References to material conditions, however, are insufficient. We must also consider the meanings that protagonists attribute to the experience of the crisis [8]. Through narrations in which young Spaniards explain how they experience the crisis, their aspirations, expectations, frustration, and bewilderment with which they face the scenario, are visible. The 'blockade' of the labor market, the need to emigrate abroad as the only survival strategy, or the uncertainty generated by their predictable precarious future are constant references in stories through which they build the link that gives them meaning as a generation. From the optimistic vision that prevailed previously, we turn to narratives in which young people appear as the main victims of a system that does not offer a future promise of integration [18–20].

The crisis, in the Spanish case, has a relevant cultural dimension, as it represents the bankruptcy of a tale of generational progress that has been built since the beginning of the 1980s. Social progress, associated with the project of the modernization of democratic Spain, would be reflected, according to this cultural construction, in a better and more prosperous future for new generations in exchange for postponing rewards in the present [21]. This promise of deferred success worked as a kind of intergenerational pact that was resistant to various unfavorable circumstances (e.g., economic crises,

corruption scandals, terrorism, persistence of social problems) that took place in the decades following democratic transition. The start of the new century represented a turning point. Symptoms that the optimistic story of generational progress lost real basis and symbolic strength accumulated despite the climate of certain economic euphoria prevailing in the first years of the 21st century [22]. When the socioeconomic climate changes and the Great Recession ‘settles’ in Spanish society, with known consequences on the lives of young people, the feeling of disappointment and frustration will spread. From the promise of a better future we turn to outrage at the blocking of life expectations.

### 3. Context of Youth Politicization

When in 2011 the “indignant” young people of 15-M shouted the famous slogan “They do not represent us!”, they were not only expressing their frustration at the negative consequences of a deteriorating economic situation and protesting against austerity policies defended by the main political leaders [23].<sup>1</sup> This, and other slogans that became famous, also reflected the many factors that converged in the social construction of the crisis in Spain and the consequences of the lack of the legitimacy of the political and institutional system [25]. 15-M and the protest cycle developed in subsequent years have highlighted the political nature of the economic crisis and the importance of criticism towards a political and institutional system that offered no alternative to austerity policies or solutions to problems like corruption [23,24,26,27].

In order to understand in all its complexity the context in which young Spaniards have become politicized, the classical argument that explains the changes in the attitudes and political behavior as a direct consequence of the effects of the economic recession on their living conditions is insufficient. To this argument, which is undoubtedly relevant, as has been shown in many analyses [28,29], we must add another series of factors that have also played a fundamental role in the aforementioned process of youth politicization.

#### 3.1. Political Management of the Economic and Financial Crisis

The management of the economic crisis by the ruling elites is the first factor to be considered. In Spain, the economic crisis has been especially long and intense. Specifically, the circumstances that triggered the recession in the Western world from 2008 were compounded by the consequences of the collapse of a speculative real-estate bubble and the accumulation of private debt, which would later end up becoming public debt. Additionally, all this occurred within the framework of the contradictions arising from the introduction of the euro [30]. After the failure of an initial strategy of countercyclical public investment, government (first socialist and then conservative) policies for cutting public spending, focusing almost exclusively on the reduction of the public deficit, had a powerful impact on economic activity and the purchasing power of citizens. These austerity policies, together with the agreement reached by the two major parties in 2011 to introduce the “budgetary-stability rule” into the Constitution, implied endorsement by the political elites of the austerity strategy as the only possible route to overcome the crisis.

Austerity policies, however, not only failed to provide any solution to existing problems (GDP continued falling between 2011 and 2013), but the situation worsened when the government was forced to address the financial crisis through a loan of about 50 million euros from the European Union. Unemployment rose to almost 26% in 2012 and 2013, cuts in key areas of the welfare system, such as health and education, were increased, and inequality also markedly increased. Meanwhile, citizens tended to the rescue of banking entities that, to a large extent, were at the origin of the crisis due

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<sup>1</sup> The 15-M Movement (*Movimiento 15-M* in Spanish), also known as the Indignados Movement, stands for 15 May, the 2011 date when the first large demonstration took place that started an important antiausterity movement in Spain. Demonstrators protested against the lack of a ‘real democracy’, high unemployment rates, particularly for young people, but also against politicians, the political system, political corruption, and welfare cuts more generally. See Reference [24] for further details.



to their collaboration with real-estate speculation, the unprofessional behavior of their top managers, and, in some cases, corrupt practices.

### *3.2. Political Corruption and Its Impact on Public Opinion*

The unpopularity of austerity policies, concern about an increasingly negative economic situation, and the widespread feeling that there was connivance between economic power and political power explain the climate of social unrest and street protests that occurred between 2011 and 2013/14. This climate of generalized discontent was reinforced by ongoing corruption scandals during these years, and this constitutes to be another decisive factor in the explanation of the crisis.

Problems of political corruption cannot be said to be something new in Spanish democratic history. However, after the economic expansion following entry into the euro, and especially the construction boom in the first decade of the 21st century, news about corruption began to proliferate in Spanish public opinion [31]. This situation became increasingly concerning as the economic crisis deepened, but above all when corruption scandals linked to the Popular Party began to happen without interruption, affecting not only well-known leaders but also the ruling party's financing system. The other main party, the PSOE, was also affected by cases of corruption, especially in the region of Andalusia, where the party has governed continually since the restoration of democracy. No institution seemed to be above suspicion during those years, as evidenced by the Noos scandal involving King Juan Carlos' son-in-law, which damaged the monarchy's image in the eyes of the public.

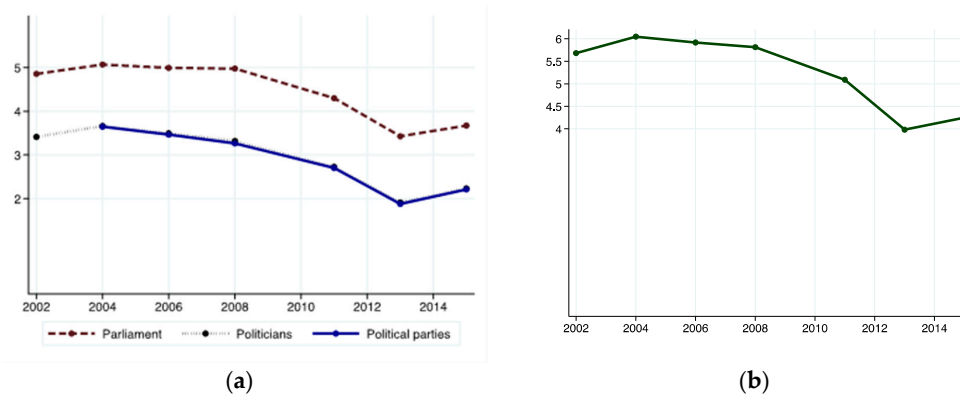
Experts believe that the level of objective corruption in Spain is lower than that perceived socially, and that this corruption is not systemic in nature since it does not affect the administrative sphere in a broad way [32–34]. However, the succession of scandals and the extensive coverage given by the media has led to very high levels of perception of corruption and citizen concern about the phenomenon. According to opinion polls conducted by the Center for Sociological Research in 2012, 89% of respondents considered that corruption was very or fairly widespread in national politics and, since 2013, corruption has become the second most important public problem for Spaniards after unemployment [35,36].

### *3.3. Political and Institutional Distrust on the Rise*

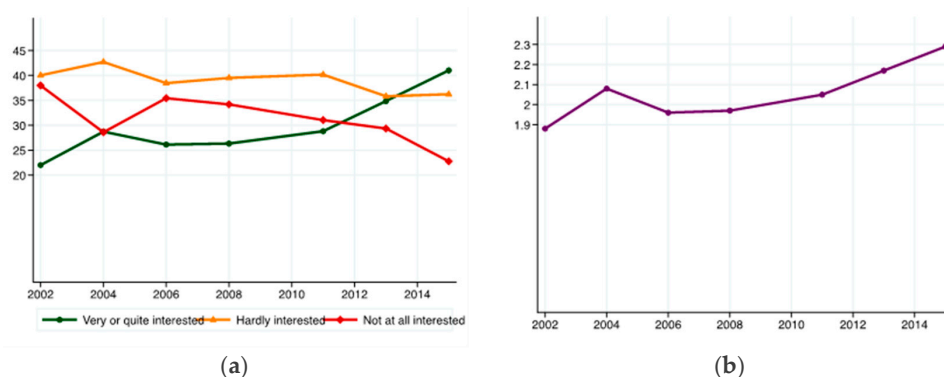
The third factor to be considered is closely related to those previously mentioned, since it deals with the crisis of political and institutional distrust that has occurred among very large sectors of the Spanish population during the Great Recession. Political and institutional disaffection was not an unknown feature in Spanish political culture, although, according to existing analyses, the bases of legitimacy of the political system were solid, despite successive problems experienced in these years [37,38]. During a great part of Spain's democratic history, low levels of trust in political institutions and their leaders have coexisted with broad support for democracy as a political system [39,40].

However, this situation dramatically changed when the economic crisis erupted due to the sharp decline in levels of trust in the main democratic institutions and discontent with the way in which the democratic system works. Before the crisis, average trust in democratic institutions and average satisfaction with democracy were low, but remained more or less stable. However, when the effects of the recession began to be felt, the scores on all indicators plummeted, especially after 2013, the worst year of the Great Recession. Figures 1 and 2 show several indicators that illustrate this process. The three indicators related to trust in key institutions of democracy, such as Parliament, politicians, and political parties, show unequivocal evolution. In these latter two cases, the evolution is the same. Public distrust reaches surprisingly high levels from 2013 onwards: not only is the average below 2 on a scale of 0 to 10, but almost 80% display extreme distrust by giving a score between 0 and 3. In the case of Parliament, however, it is also significant that this 'greater distrust' group doubled between 2009 and 2013, going from 25% to around 50% in 2013 and 2015, respectively. Growing dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy allows us to complete the picture. As had been usual in the previous decades,

at the beginning of the 21st century the ‘functioning of democracy’ was highly valued by the majority of the population and around 40% even described themselves as ‘very satisfied’ (they rated performance between 7 and 10). At the beginning of the second decade, however, dissatisfaction increased, and it did so in a very marked way starting in 2013: the average score fell by more than one point between 2011 and 2013 and was reduced by half in 2015.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 1.** Evolution of political trust and satisfaction with democracy. (a) Average trust in Parliament, politicians, and political parties on a 0–10 scale. (b) Average satisfaction with the way in which democracy works in Spain (0–10 scale). Source: European Social Survey, rounds 1–7 (Spain).



**Figure 2.** Evolution of political interest and politicization index. (a) Interest in politics, measured as the percentage of individuals very or quite interested in politics, hardly interested, or not at all interested; (b) politicization Index, which has been built with the following formula:  $P.I. = \frac{p_1 \cdot 4 + p_2 \cdot 3 + p_3 \cdot 2 + p_4 \cdot 1}{p_1 + p_2 + p_3 + p_4}$ , where  $p_1$ ,  $p_2$ ,  $p_3$ , and  $p_4$  are the percentages of “very interested”, “quite interested”, “hardly interested”, and “not at all interested”, respectively. Source: European Social Survey, rounds 1–7 (Spain).

The sharp decline in institutional trust and satisfaction with the functioning of the political system are closely related, as is logical, with the evolution of economic problems. The development of the economic crisis, however, is not the only factor responsible for this situation. The widespread citizen feeling that political elites are incapable of responding to growing problems, the absence of alternatives to policies that do not lead to results, and the perception of almost systemic corruption explain why distrust and dissatisfaction are common among large sectors of the population, regardless of their economic situation [28,41,42].

Most noteworthy, however, is that this increase in institutional disaffection has not been accompanied by a parallel increase in political detachment, as would have been expected in a country where interest in politics has traditionally been negligible. On the contrary, the economic, political,

<sup>2</sup> Additional analyses of the evolution in the average evaluation of these indicators are available from the authors upon request.

and institutional crisis has generated an increase in the politicization of citizens. Figure 2 clearly shows a positive evolution of interest in politics among the Spanish population. If at the beginning of the 2000s only two out of every 10 Spaniards were ‘very’ or ‘quite interested’ in politics, in 2015 this percentage doubled, also exceeding both those who are ‘not very interested’ or those who are ‘not at all interested’, which had been the two hegemonic categories until that date. When the evolution from the beginning of the crisis is analyzed, progress in political interest is also surprising. From 2009 to 2015, the percentage of people interested in politics increased by 15 points, and that of those ‘totally removed’ from politics fell by 11 points. The trend followed by the politicization index that we have built clearly shows this upward trend since 2009; neither does this stop after 2013, as what happened with other previously analyzed indicators.

This mixture, on the one hand, of institutional mistrust and dissatisfaction with the functioning of the political system and of greater politicization on the other, expressed by the increase in political interest and also in the level of political participation (see Figures 1 and 2), seems to point to the emergence in Spanish society of a significant percentage of critical citizens oriented towards social change [43,44]. The importance of this critical citizenship lies, as Norris has argued [45], in the fact that their political involvement and democratic commitment makes them more inclined to try to change the situation that generates social and political unrest. Perhaps the first sign of that ‘will to change’ in Spain occurred in the 2014 European Parliament elections, in which a broad protest vote was generated against the two largest parties that had monopolized Spanish political life since the 1980s (the PP and PSOE), which resulted in: (a) a sharp decline in the vote for these two parties (from 73.4% in 2011 or 80.9% in previous European elections to only 49.1% of the vote); (b) an increase in the number of small parties; (c) the emergence of new parties, in particular ‘Podemos’, which with 1,300,000 votes and 8% of the electorate exceeded all predictions [46].

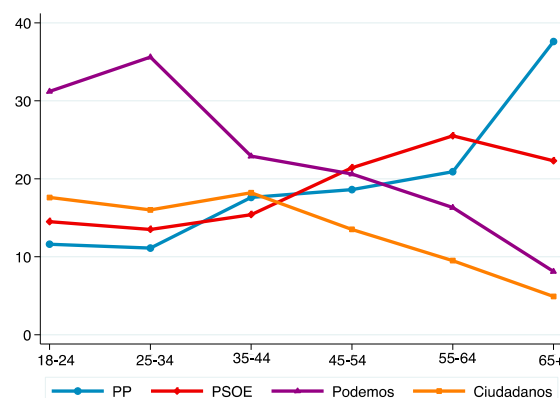
### 3.4. Problems of Representation and Blockage of the Political System

The rupture of the bipartisan system that began in the 2014 elections is an evident consequence of the last dimension of the crisis to which we are going to refer: the blockade of the political system and the problems of representation that derived from it. Since the 1980s, Spain maintained a system of imperfect bipartisanship, hegemonized by two major parties (socialist and conservative), which relied on nationalist parties to govern alone. At the beginning of the 21st century, some symptoms of the ‘exhaustion of the model’ emerge, but the period of tension and polarization related to the Rodríguez Zapatero government diverted attention to other issues [47]. Since the beginning of the crisis, the insufficiencies of the traditional partisan system have become evident: the main political actors lost citizen trust and the sectors dissatisfied with the management of the crisis could not find representation.

Although some symptoms of the exhaustion of the bipartisan model were already present in the 2011 elections, it was not until the electoral cycle of 2014–2015 that the model collapsed. While the PP and PSOE experienced an unprecedented fall in their respective support (the socialists in 2015 obtained their worst result since the beginning of the transition), two new parties emerged strongly: Podemos, created in 2014, and Ciudadanos, which up until a short time previously had been a small Catalan antinationalist party with very little presence in the rest of Spain. Various analyses carried out in this process of electoral change have shown that economic factors are insufficient to explain the rupture of the party system. On the contrary, the main factor associated with the emergence of the new parties is related to the political crisis and representation. Both the vote for Podemos and Ciudadanos expressed the feeling of critical discontent—in one case in a more disruptive way and in the other a more reformist one—with the social and political situation [42,43,48,49]. This result represented a shift from traditional bipartisanship to a situation of electoral and parliamentary fragmentation that greatly complicated the formation of governments at all levels. The general elections of 2015 had to be repeated six months later because the parties failed to achieve an agreement on government formation [50].



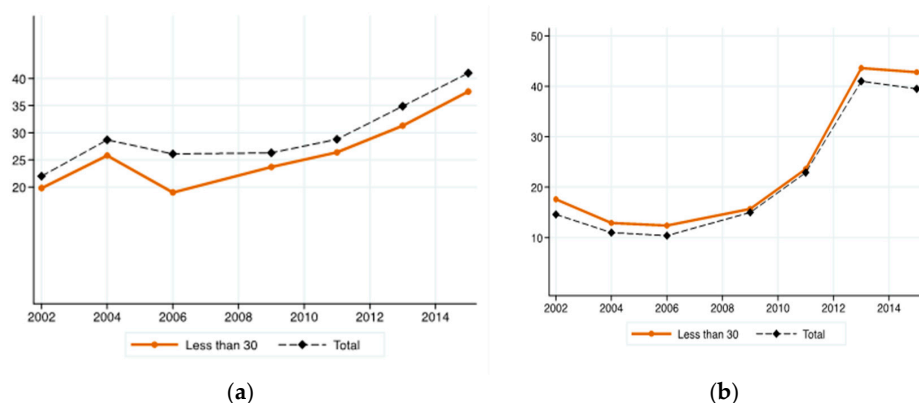
All the factors that have been described above, along with others that should not be forgotten (such as territorial tensions deriving from the rise of the Catalan independence movement), result in a complex context of politicization where young people have not only found encouragement to express their dissatisfaction with the consequences of the crisis, but have often taken a leading position in the direction of change. Undoubtedly, the ‘indignant’ movement is the clearest exponent of this youthful protagonism because, although it is not strictly a youth protest movement, there is a predominance of new generations among its active participants, especially university students and those from the middle classes [51]. Young people have also, however, been prominent protagonists in the emergence of new parties [52]. According to available analyses, age is one of the main predictors of electoral support for the two new parties in 2015 [42,43]. This generational dimension is especially evident in the case of Podemos, which obtained a much higher percentage of votes than other parties among voters under 35, while it fell sharply among those over 55 (see Figure 3).



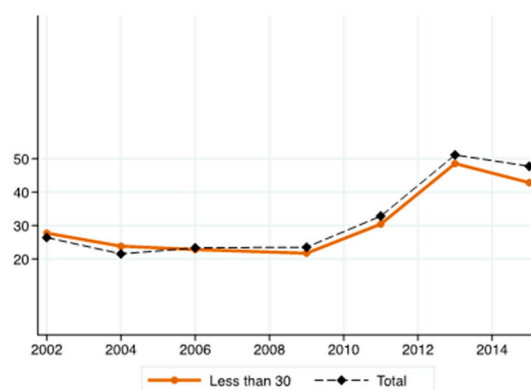
**Figure 3.** Vote for the four main parties in the 2015 General Election by age group. Source: Centre for Sociological Research, Postelection Surveys (2015 General Election).

#### 4. Youth Attitudes Towards Politics in Changing Times

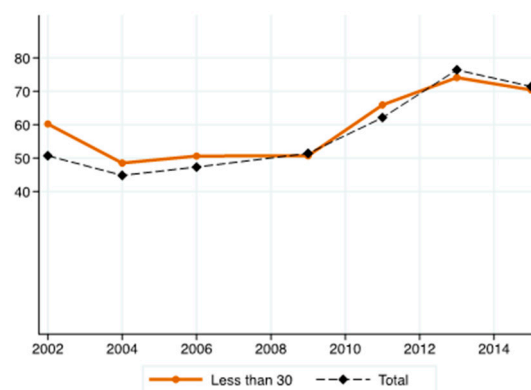
The change in Spanish politics in recent years has been largely, though not exclusively, led by highly politicized and mobilized youth sectors. However, there are many clues that this politicization is not limited to small groups but that, in general terms, the relationship of young Spaniards with politics during the Great Recession has undergone an interesting process of change. The evolution of political attitudes of young people clearly shows the impact of the socioeconomic and political crisis on their relationship with politics (Figures 4 and 5).



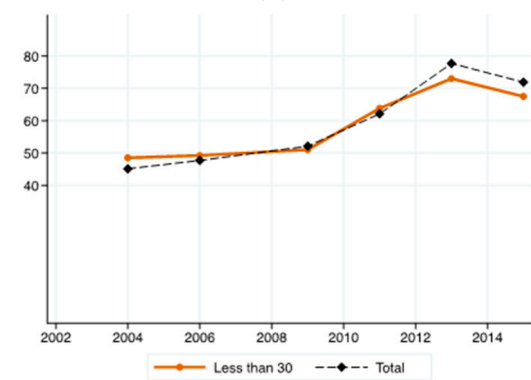
**Figure 4.** Young people interested in politics and dissatisfied with democracy. (a) Interest in politics, measured as the percentage of individuals very or quite interested in politics; (b) dissatisfaction with democracy, measured as the percentage of individuals with low satisfaction with the way in which democracy works in Spain (0–3 on a 0–10 scale). Source: European Social Survey, rounds 1–7 (Spain).



(a)



(b)



(c)

**Figure 5.** Young people’s mistrust in political institutions. (a) Mistrust in Parliament, measured as the percentage of individuals with low trust in Parliament (0–3 in a 0–10 scale); (b) mistrust in politicians, measured as the percentage of individuals with low trust in politicians (0–3 in a 0–10 scale); (c) mistrust in political parties, measured as the percentage of individuals with low trust in political parties (0–3 in a 0–10 scale). Source: European Social Survey, rounds 1–7 (Spain).

The most noteworthy feature is growing discontent among young people about the functioning of democracy and growing distrust in political institutions and those responsible for them. Three out of four young people have expressed ‘high distrust’ in parties and politicians since 2012, and those satisfied with the functioning of democracy have gone from 40% in 2009 to around 15%. However, at the same time, interest in politics has increased consistently during this period, with the percentage of young people who are very or quite interested in these issues almost doubling in 10 years (Figures 4 and 5). Taken as a whole, these indicators of attitudes towards politics give us an idea of, on the one hand, an increase in young people’s critical views towards representative democracy

and particularly towards politicians and political parties, and, on the other, a generalized reduction in apathy or political indifference. Dissatisfaction with the sociopolitical situation and, in general, with the performance of democracy, does not seem to have caused a distance of young people from democratic politics. Many previous studies have shown a tendency of young people to political disengagement [53–56],<sup>3</sup> especially in a country like Spain where disaffection has been a feature of political culture [41,59]. As disenchantment and distrust increase, one would expect that distance and disinterest in democratic politics would have increased. The novelty of this historical moment is that the relationship is reversed.

This trend, which is especially evident since 2012, does not only affect young people, but also characterizes the whole of the Spanish population, as the data in Figures 4 and 5 clearly show. For that reason, after this broad contextualization of the Spanish political panorama, in the findings section below we will compare different birth cohorts to have a more precise idea of the position of young people and the so-called “crisis generation”.

## 5. Research Design: Data and Methods

Our research about the impact of the shared experience of the crisis on the political attitudes of young Spanish people is based on the hypothesis that along these years there has been a reconfiguration in the attitudes towards politics of broad sectors of the population. This reconfiguration is characterized by the significant increase of what we call ‘politicization of discontent’, that is, broad youth political involvement despite widespread dissatisfaction with the functioning of the democratic system.

To test this hypothesis, we performed the analyses in two stages. First, we analyzed how the young people of this generation respond to the new socioeconomic (deterioration of living conditions) and political (growth of institutional distrust and the beginning of a cycle of protest mobilization) circumstances. Then, at a second stage, we focused on the group of young people most dissatisfied with the situation to know how they politically express this discontent.

### 5.1. First Stage: Attitudinal Change of Young People in Spain

Aggregate analysis of the temporal evolution of some political attitudes exposed in the previous section provides interesting clues about the attitudinal change experienced by young people and by broad sectors of the Spanish population during these years. However, from there, solid conclusions about the specific features of this change cannot be drawn. Even when, as shown in Section 4, there is, on average, a growing interest in politics and also growing criticism towards ‘political elements’, both trends do not necessarily occur simultaneously at the individual level. In fact, growing distrust of politics in Spain, particularly among young people, has been accompanied for many by an increase in interest in politics (these are the individuals who we will call “critically politicized”); it is also true that for other individuals their strong criticism of politics is associated with a low interest in politics (those who we call “disengaged”).

In order to better account for these trends, we have developed a typology of attitudes towards politics (see Table 1 below). With this typology, we synthesized them into a single variable different element of a multidimensional concept such as political support. Specifically, we incorporated elements of regime performance (how democracy works), regime institutions (trust in Parliament), political actors (trust in politicians and political parties), and interest in politics.

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<sup>3</sup> This tendency toward disengagement is explained in some cases by the lack of interest of young people in politics and in other cases because, it is argued, they are interested in politics in another way, less institutionalized and/or more expressive [57,58].

**Table 1.** A typology of attitudes towards politics.

		Interest in politics	
		Low	High
Satisfaction with democracy or/and trust in political institutions and actors *	Low High	DISENGAGED CONFORMIST	CRITICALLY POLITICIZED SATISFIED

\* The category ‘Low’ refers to low satisfaction with democracy or low trust in political institutions and actors, while ‘High’ refers simultaneously to high satisfaction with democracy and high trust in political institutions and actors. For further details, see the text and Table A1 in Appendix A.

Table A1 in the Appendix A shows the operationalization of the dimensions included in our typology of attitudes towards politics. As can be seen, it includes not only the conceptual dimensions incorporated in the typology, but also its empirical measurement.<sup>4</sup>

As a result of the combination of these different indicators, synthesized in just two dimensions (satisfaction and trust vs. interest), we obtained a variable with four categories that are represented in the following table. Specifically, we identified four attitudinal positions: disengaged, critically politicized, conformist, and satisfied. This allowed us to make a more fine-grained classification and distinguish, among those who have low satisfaction with democracy or low trust in political institutions, between, on the one hand, those with a high interest in politics (critically politicized) and those who, on the other, show a low interest in politics and move away from it (the disengaged). Similarly, with our classification we could differentiate among those who manifest a high level of satisfaction with democracy and also high trust in political institutions, two types of individuals: those who positively evaluate political elements and have a high interest in politics (satisfied) and those who are satisfied with the political situation and who trust in the institutions but have a low interest in politics (conformist).

To analyze the evolution of this typology of political attitudes, the first seven rounds of the European Social Survey in Spain (2002–2014) have been used (N = 13,498). This dataset allowed us to make a double comparison. On the one hand, a temporal comparison that covers not only the moment of the Great Recession and change in the political cycle, but also the immediately preceding period of political and economic stability. On the other hand, it allowed a comparison of the so-called “crisis generation” with other age groups and birth cohorts. It is important to note that below we will present the typology of political attitudes before and after the 15-M movement by cohorts defined by year of birth.<sup>5</sup> The distribution of cases among age groups and year of data collection, and birth cohorts and year of data collection, is displayed in Appendix B (Tables A2 and A3).

To analyze the effect of ‘cycle change’ in different age groups, in Section 6.1. we ran several multivariate models where the dependent variable was our typology of attitudes towards politics. In particular, we estimated four separate binominal logistic models, including an interaction term between age and political cycle<sup>6</sup>. Our main independent variables were, therefore, the dummy variable cycle (before or after 15-M), and age, measured in five birth cohorts (1911–1925; 1926–1945; 1946–1965; 1966–1980; and 1981–2000). Additionally, we included as control variables gender, education (measured as the highest level of education expressed in three groups), and economic difficulties in the household,

<sup>4</sup> Our contribution was built upon classical texts that account for the complexity and multidimensionality of the concept of political support. We refer of course to David Easton’s seminal works [60], where he distinguished between support for the political community, the regime, and the authorities, but also to Pippa Norris [45], who developed a fivefold conceptualization that defined the political community, regime principles, regime performance, regime institutions, and political actors.

<sup>5</sup> Cohorts used replicate one of the most common classifications internationally. Each cohort is usually identified with a generational label: those individuals born between 1911 and 1925 are labelled as the “Greatest generation”), the so-called “silent generation” (1926–1946), baby boomers (1946–1965), generation X (1966–1980) and millennials (1981–2000). See, for example, Reference [61]. Members of the crisis generation are included in the last cohort.

<sup>6</sup> For expository reasons, although the typology comprises four categorical values, we preferred to run four separate binomial logistic models instead of a multinomial logistic regression.

a more comparable proxy of economic situation across age groups than other indicators such as unemployment, income, or occupational attainment.<sup>7</sup>

## 5.2. Second Stage: Analysis of the Most Discontented Youth

After presenting a detailed picture of the reconfiguration of youth attitudes towards politics, at a second stage we delved into a more specific aspect: the characteristics of political discontent among young people given the high degree of dissatisfaction with politics that they showed during the Great Recession. Thus, we identified the profiles of the most dissatisfied young people and, above all, their implications for the future of democracy.

Study of youth political discontent has a special interest in Spain for at least two reasons. First, because Spanish youth have traditionally been characterized by their lack of interest and high degree of disaffection [39,59,62]. Increase in dissatisfaction and discontent in recent years could have deepened the process of distance and apathy of young people with respect to democratic politics. Second, because the study of political discontent among young people provides an idea of the legitimacy of the political system for the future, especially in a country like Spain where there has been a large fall in satisfaction with democracy [63,64]. It is therefore necessary to ask whether political dissatisfaction among young people translates into a loss of legitimacy of representative democracy or if it supposes a departure from politics that could jeopardize the bases of representation in the future.

To answer both questions, we studied, through bivariate and multivariable analyses (Section 6.2), the sociodemographic and political profiles, and the degree of political mobilization of the most discontented youth, i.e., those who are most dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy and with the least trust in politicians and political parties. In order to have a large sample of young people with these characteristics, and to be able to use other socioeconomic and political indicators, for this analysis we have drawn on the results of the Young People in Spain Survey 2016 [2]. Survey fieldwork was conducted at the end of 2015 on a representative sample of 5000 young people between 15 and 29 years old.

To delimit the collective, and in coherence with previous analyses, the ‘discontented young’ are considered to be those who are very dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy (scores between 0 and 3 on a 0–10 scale) and, at the same time, manifest their distrust of politicians and political parties (they scored between 0 and 4 on both scales). Therefore, the three main elements of discontent in recent years in Spain are summarized in a single indicator, identifying a group that represents a quarter of the total of young people (24.2%).

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Between Disengagement and Critical Politicization

First and preliminary analysis of our attitudinal typology developed in Section 5.1. shows that, for the period between 2002 and 2014, the most frequent category among the Spanish population was disengaged (54.3%), a long way from the other three categories: critically politicized (19.3%), conformist (16.4%), and satisfied (10.0%). However, this first descriptive referring to the population average throughout the period hides changes in time and differences between groups, which will be analyzed in detail below.

When we examined the distribution of these categories throughout the period under consideration, the high degree of discontent associated with the socioeconomic and political crisis became evident

<sup>7</sup> The question is formulated as: “Which of the descriptions on this card comes closest to how you feel about your household’s income nowadays?”, with four possible responses. In the models, this variable was included as a dichotomous variable, referring, on the one hand, to those with economic difficulties (“Finding it difficult on present income” or “Finding it very difficult on present income”) and, on the other hand, to those with a good economic situation at household level (“Living comfortably on present income” or “Coping on present income”).



(Figure 6). While the two categories that reflect satisfaction with the functioning of the system (satisfied and conformist) moved between 30% and 35% in the first years of the decade, from 2012 they were reduced to less than half. On the contrary, the categories that reflect discontent with the situation (disengaged and critically politicized) were triggered from this last date, reaching percentages of around 85%. Within this last group, progression of the critically politicized stands out against those who hold positions of distance: in 2008, the relationship between both categories was 3.5 in favor of the disengaged, while in 2014 it was reduced to only 1.5.



**Figure 6.** Evolution of the typology of attitudes towards politics in Spain, 2002–2015. Source: European Social Survey in Spain, rounds 1–7.

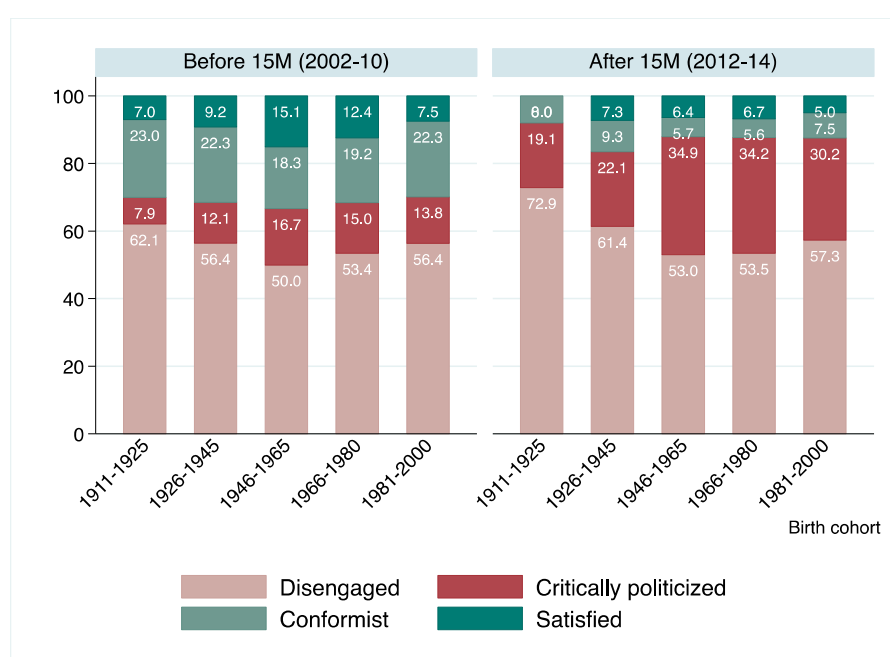
It is important to remember that, as explained in Section 3, 2011 was a year that marked a milestone in the recent political history of Spain and the beginning of a protest cycle and political change. It was precisely in 2011 when the biggest protest on 15 May (15-M) took place and the so-called *Indignados* Movement ‘exploded’, in a context of growing perception of corruption and mistrust in politicians, and at the height of a severe economic crisis that had officially started in 2008. A central axis of social mobilization was the protest against the lack of “real democracy” (in fact, the organization at the heart of the mobilization was “*Democracia Real Ya*”), and the criticism against the two main national political parties: PP (conservative) and PSOE (socialist).

Consequently, in subsequent analyses we identified two different ‘periods’ of political change in Spain: before and after the cycle of protests against austerity politics and the institutional crisis that has begun with the 15-M movement [27]. Thus, in this paper, we differentiated between “Before 15-M” (rounds 1–5, of which fieldwork in Spain was conducted between 2002 and 2011), and “After 15-M” (rounds 6 and 7, of which fieldwork in Spain was conducted at the beginning of 2013 and 2015). It is important to note that, although part of the fieldwork for round 5 in Spain was conducted between April and July 2011, during the months in which the 15-M Movement exploded, we must consider this round as “Pre-15-M”. The rationale behind this decision is that, even when great changes in the party system and political attitudes began to be seen in 2011, these changes did not crystallize in Spain until a few years later. In fact, although electoral support for both the conservative and the socialist party backed down electorally in the first period, in the short term it was the socialist party that came out the most injured. Meanwhile, and despite the fall in their electoral share, PP became the government party by the end of 2011.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The local elections held at that time, on 22 May 2011, the vote share of the PP (37.5%) increased a little compared to the preceding local elections in 2007 (35.6%), while the PSOE suffered important losses, and, in four years, its vote share went down from 34.9% to 27.8% in 2011 [65]. In addition to that, in the general election on 20 November 2011, the PP increased its vote share with respect to the previous elections, going from 39.9% to 44.6% and its leader, Mariano Rajoy, became Prime Minister with an absolute majority.

By differentiating the two moments of the political cycle, we can clearly see the marked changes in the typology of attitudes toward politics (see Figure 6). The number of disengaged individuals hardly changed, but the number of satisfied, and, by much more, the number of conformists, receded, while the number of critically politicized individuals, who previously only represented 14.5% of the population, doubled and later comprised 31.5% of the total population.

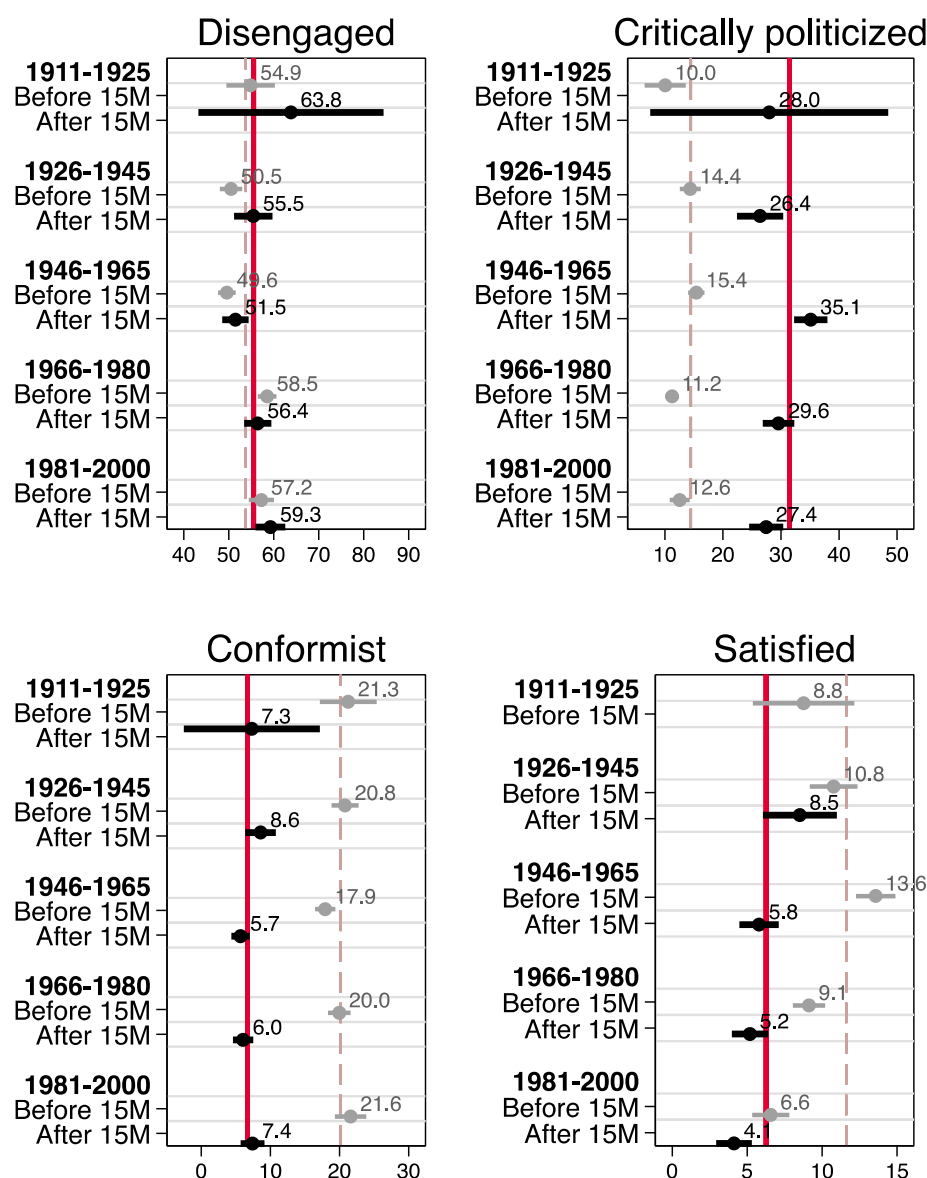
This change had important implications. With the worsening of the crisis and the beginning of a new political cycle, there was unprecedented critical politicization in Spain. Spanish political culture, which had been characterized by high disaffection and high detachment towards politics [66], changed in these years in a crucial way. Interestingly, in the context of growing political discontent, the disengaged were not those who increased numerically, as would be expected, but rather the critically politicized. This tendency was also very clearly reproduced among the “crisis generation”, as can be seen when we compare cohorts defined by their year of birth (Figure 7).<sup>9</sup> Whereas before the change in the political cycle, young people showed themselves more conformist with the situation, from that moment on, satisfaction sharply dropped, and those who maintain a critical view of the situation increased and even doubled.



**Figure 7.** Typology of attitudes towards politics before and after 15-M, by birth cohorts. Birth cohorts: 1911–1925 (greatest generation), 1926–1945 (silent generation), 1946–1965 (baby boomers), 1966–1980 (generation X), and 1981–2000 (millennials). See Note 5. Source: European Social Survey in Spain, rounds 1–7.

Young people, despite their lower demographic weight, have a prominent role in this process of critical politicization described above, in which an increase in dissatisfaction with democracy and mistrust in political actors and institutions is accompanied by a high interest in politics. Figure 8 graphically depicts the predicted probabilities of the interaction between birth cohort and cycle, given that the interpretation of the additive and multiplicative terms of the interaction between the two variables was not straightforward [67]. The estimated odds ratio of the models is included in Table A4 in the Appendix C.

<sup>9</sup> If the variable age group is used, instead of year of birth, the results of the evolution are very similar.



**Figure 8.** Predicted probabilities of attitudes towards politics by birth cohorts and political cycle. Birth cohorts: 1911–1925 (greatest generation), 1926–1945 (silent generation), 1946–1965 (baby boomers), 1966–1980 (generation X), and 1981–2000 (millennials) See Note 5. Binominal logistic models estimated separately with interaction between age and political cycle. Vertical lines represent average values before (clear dashed line) and after 15-M (strong solid line). The ‘Before 15-M’ category includes ESS 1–4 (2002–2008) and ‘After 15-M’ refers to ESS 5–7 (2010–2014), whose fieldwork was conducted from the second quarter of 2011 onwards. Controls: gender, educational attainment, and economic difficulties in household. Weighted data. N = 13,314. Source: European Social Survey in Spain, rounds 1–7.

As can be seen, before the 15-M movement and the subsequent changes in the political landscape in Spain, the proportion of millennials labeled as disengaged was above average. Specifically, around 56.1% of individuals born between 1981 and 2000 fell within this category, while among the total population the figure was just 53.7%. Since 15-M, however, the percentage of disengaged millennials has barely changed and is not significantly different from the population average. Conversely, although the proportion of millennials (born between 1981 and 2000) labeled as critically politicized before (14.4%) and after 15-M (30.2%) is somewhat lower than the average, this is one of the groups where the number of critical individuals has grown the most, only exceeded in increase by those born between 1966 and 1980, i.e., generation X (see relative changes

in Table 2 below). This is in line with previous studies focusing on the Spanish case that shows how, contrary to socialization studies' expectations, it is not youngest cohort, but rather those in their late twenties and thirties at the beginning of the century, who have most profoundly changed their perspectives regarding political institutions and political involvement [44].

**Table 2.** Relative change in the predicted probabilities of attitudes towards politics after 15-M compared to years before, by birth cohort.

	Disengaged	Critically Politicized	Conformist	Satisfied
1926–1946 (silent generation)	1.08	1.83	0.42	0.78
1946–1965 (baby boomers)	1.06	2.06	0.32	0.42
1966–1980 (generation X)	1.00	2.28	0.29	0.55
1981–2000 (millennials)	1.02	2.09	0.35	0.64

Changes experienced by the greatest generation are not shown because the sample size is very small. Values greater than 1 imply an increase in the number of people classified within that category, while values less than 1 represent a reduction. Values close to 1 mean that the change is almost negligible.

Taken as a whole, the previous data show that the change in the political cycle has been accompanied by a reconfiguration in attitudes towards politics. There has been a decline in the proportion of Spaniards that we label as conformist or satisfied in political terms, while the proportion of disengaged people has barely changed, and the number of individuals critically politicized has grown very significantly. This increase has been particularly noticeable among young people, although, comparatively, they are not the most critical group towards politics. In addition, we have verified how within the group of young people there are differences worthy of mention. It is not in the younger groups where critical politicization has increased the most. That is why it is essential to explore, in more detail below, the different processes of political socialization of young people of different age groups, their feelings towards politics, and their self-perceived most effective ways to influence politics.

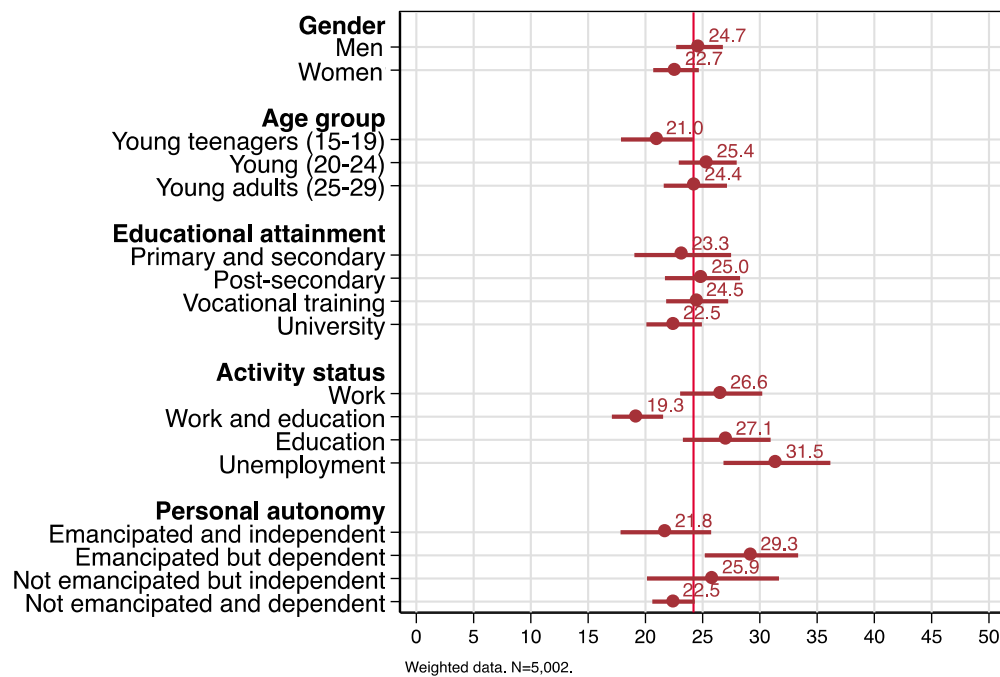
## 6.2. Dissatisfaction with the Political Situation: Profiles and Implications

In this first part of the study, we have underlined the process of critical politicization of a considerable number of young Spaniards. However, this result is double-sided. On the one hand, many young people, instead of moving away from politics, have become critically involved in it. On the other hand, this cannot hide the high degree of dissatisfaction with the evolution of the political system during the Great Recession. Specifically, almost nine out of 10 young people are in one of the two categories that group 'those dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy' and 'those who have low confidence in political institutions' (disengaged and critically politicized). Therefore, it is necessary to delve into the characteristics of this political discontent, which is what we do in the second part of the study.

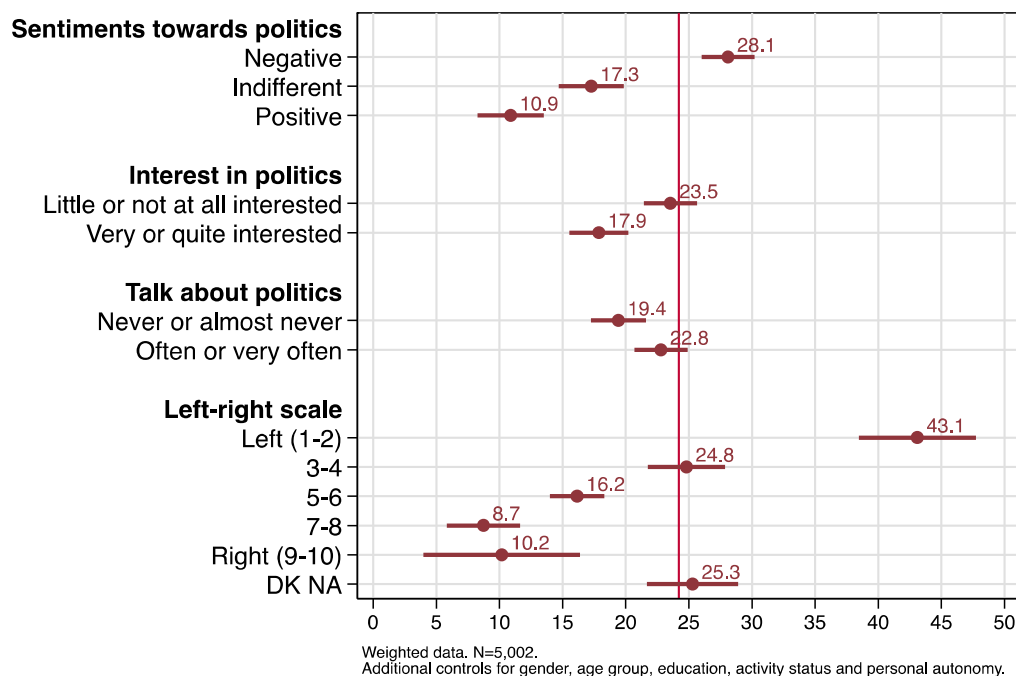
The first task was to examine the sociodemographic and political profiles of these very dissatisfied young people. A first bivariate analysis of the different available indicators showed that the age and socioeconomic position of the young were the sociodemographic variables that are most associated with youth political discontent: young adults, the unemployed, and those who depend economically on their parents (although they have been emancipated) are the groups with the highest predicted probability of political discontent. If we look at the political indicators, there is no clear association with the level of subjective involvement of young people (political interest and frequency with which they talk about politics). On the other hand, this association does occur in the ideological terrain: 40% of those who locate themselves on the most radical left (1–2) belong to our collective of discontented young people.

To better define these profiles of the most discontented young people, we have estimated a binomial logistic regression model. Firstly, we ran a model focusing on socioeconomic factors such as gender, age group, educational attainment, activity status, or the degree of economic dependence (panel A in Figure 9). Then, we expanded the model by adding political variables such as sentiments

towards politics, interest in politics, ‘talk about politics’, and the left–right scale of ideological self-placement (panel B in Figure 9). The full coefficients of the model are included in Table A5 in the Appendix C.



(a)



(b)

**Figure 9.** Predicted probabilities of political discontent. (a) Socioeconomic predictors; (b) political predictors. Variable “political discontent” contains information about dissatisfaction with the way in which democracy works in the country as well as mistrust in politicians and political parties. See details on the construction of the variable and the formulation of the questions in the text. Weighted data. Source: Young People in Spain Survey, 2016.



If we first look at the socioeconomic variables, as seen in the following figure, we see that young men seem somewhat more politically disgruntled than women, but the differences in terms of gender are not statistically significant. There are also no significant differences between young people with different educational levels. However, it seems that, *ceteris paribus*, those who have comparatively lower levels of political discontent are the so-called young teenagers (between 15 and 19 years old).

It should also be noted that the economic and employment situation of a young individual are important determinants of political discontent. Specifically, we look at two different aspects: on the one hand, the relationship with the activity (if they are working, studying, studying and working, or unemployed), and, on the other hand, the degree of personal autonomy. To create this last measure, we have simultaneously taken into account whether the young people were emancipated or not (that is, if they lived on their own or with their families); and if they were economically independent, that is, if they lived mainly from their income, or they depended on other people, usually their own parents.

As can be seen in Figure 9a, there are relevant differences in political discontent according to the relationship with economic activity, especially among those who are unemployed and those who combine work and studies. Controlling for the other analyzed factors, young people who study and work at the same time are less politically disgruntled than the average. On the other hand, and in line with what was pointed out in the previous section, it is the unemployed who clearly have higher levels of political discontent.

In addition, the degree of economic dependence is also an important predictor of political discontent, especially for those who have emancipated themselves from the family home. As shown in Figure 9, predicted probabilities of political discontent increase considerably among young people who, despite having become emancipated, must continue to be economically dependent (29.3%), something that does not happen among those who have already achieved personal autonomy (they have been emancipated and are economically independent). Although, in a more nuanced way, we must also highlight the increase in the likelihood of widespread discontent among those who are economically independent but still live in the family home (25.9%), a situation that sometimes reflects the existence of significant obstacles in achieving personal autonomy.

Taken as a whole, these results show that the political discontent of young people has socioeconomic roots that could be interpreted in terms of frustration of expectations. In this sense, it is not coincidental that, controlling for the other demographic factors, the most politically discontent are young people who want to work but cannot find work (i.e., the unemployed) and those who have emancipated themselves from the family home but are still economically dependent on their families (that is, the emancipated but dependent).

When political variables are introduced into the model, the most remarkable thing is that the feelings of young people towards politics largely explain their dissatisfaction, but also, and in a very marked way, ideological self-location. Specifically, the variable on feelings towards politics, which is a novelty of the 2016 edition of the Young People in Spain Survey, includes rich attitudinal information. For the purposes of this analysis, all the answers have been grouped into three categories: negative feelings (such as distrust, irritation, corruption, theft, disappointment, disgust, or contempt) that represent the majority, specifically 54.1% of young people; feelings of indifference, which represent 29.4% of young people (such as boredom or indifference); and finally positive ones (such as enthusiasm, interest, change, importance, hope for the future), mentioned by 16.0% of young people. Regarding political discontent, and how could it not be otherwise, young people who express more negative feelings towards politics are those who are much more politically disaffected.

Apart from the other factors, ideology is an important predictor of political discontent among young Spaniards. As can be clearly seen in Figure 9b, it is those who are located on more left-wing positions who undoubtedly show much greater political discontent with the situation of democracy in Spain. On the other hand, young people who are ideologically situated in the center and/or on the right are much less politically dissatisfied.

Finally, it is interesting to note the different effect of interest in politics and the frequency with which young people talk about politics, two indicators that measure the subjective involvement of citizens with political issues. As seen in Figure 9b, on the one hand there are young people who talk about or discuss politics more often with their friends, family, or colleagues, and who have a somewhat higher level of political discontent compared to the rest. However, and perhaps surprisingly, political discontent is lower among those who have a greater interest in politics. The fact that political news has become a phenomenon of rapid and spectacular communicative consumption might explain why disgruntled young people talk more about issues that, despite not being of interest to them, are omnipresent and cause irritation and disgust.

In sum, this analysis suggests that the most politically disaffected young Spaniards are those who declare themselves to be on the left, who manifest fundamentally negative feelings towards politics, and who see their future expectations frustrated, either because they want to work but cannot find work (that is, they are unemployed) or because they cannot achieve their longing for personal autonomy, despite having become emancipated.

One of the questions raised in the second stage of this research was whether political discontent among young people could be a factor of erosion of participatory and representative democracy. To answer this question, the degree of political mobilization of these young people, measured through their forms of political participation, and the efficiency attributed to the different forms of participation as an instrument of political influence are explored below. If the aforementioned hypothesis were confirmed, it would be expected that the most disaffected youths would participate in political activities less than other youths and would remain highly skeptical about their ability to influence sociopolitical change.

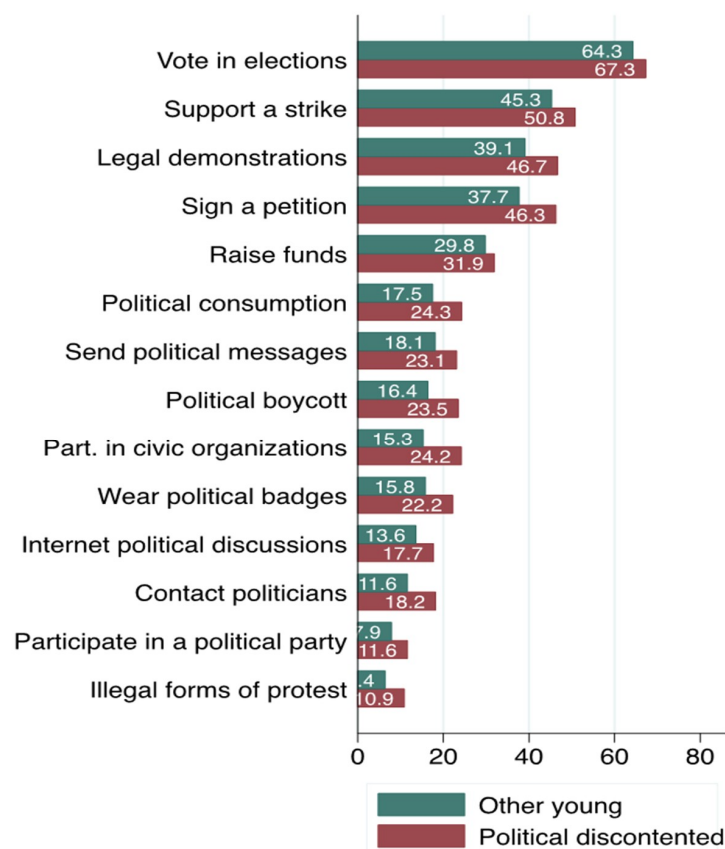
If we start with the analysis of participation repertoires, the results are very clear. As can be seen in Figure 10, in all cases the most dissatisfied young politically participate in protest actions (demonstrations, strikes), in more institutionalized forms of participation (forming part of parties or contacting politicians), in activities that express commitment to a cause (signing petitions, wearing badges), or in those related to political consumption (carrying out boycott actions or buying certain products), to a greater extent than other young people. That is to say, politically disgruntled young people participate in a greater proportion than those who do not manifest such an explicit rejection of the current democratic situation. The most interesting thing is that this participation is also higher when it comes to voting: 67.3% of the disaffected declare having voted in elections, which is the most frequent form of participation compared to 64.3% of other young people.

This greater degree of political mobilization of 'political discontents' is corroborated through other complementary data. For example, these are the young people who undertake the greatest number of forms of political participation: on average, they carry out four of the 14 presented, compared to 3.4 of those who do not belong to the defined group. Among the discontents, we also find the largest number of activists (23%), defined as those young people who perform seven or more activities, exceeding by five points the average percentage of activists that exist in the whole sample.<sup>10</sup>

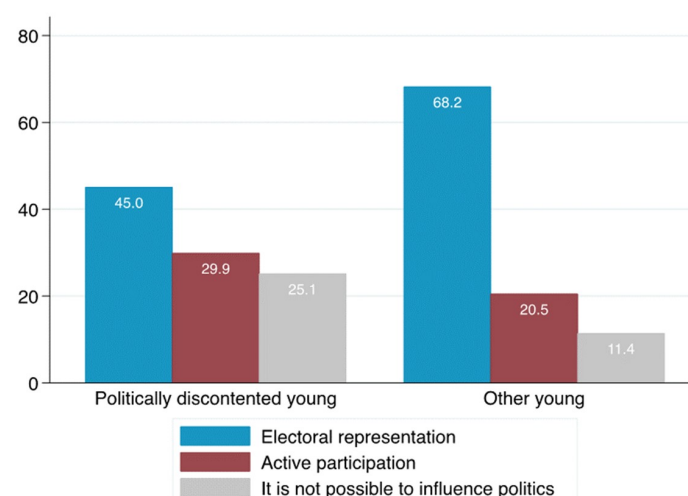
Regarding the ways that young people consider most effective to influence collective life, we see that, for all of them, participation in elections as an instrument to promote their own positions is the most effective (Figure 11). This is very evident among the group of young people who do not express strong political discontent, but also among the most politically discontent young people. Among the latter, more than 40% believe that voting is the best option they have to influence change. This inclination towards the electoral route is tempered by the preference that a significant percentage of discontented young people manifest of direct action through protest. Consequently, if they are faced with the dilemma of electoral democracy against direct (or participatory) democracy, young people

<sup>10</sup> These analyses are not shown in this text, but are available from the authors upon request.

most dissatisfied with the Spanish political situation tend to be divided between both categories, but with an evident inclination for electoral participation.



**Figure 10.** Forms of political participation. Percentage of young people who had participated at least once in each of the following forms of political participation. Question: Regarding the following forms of participation in social and political actions, for each of them please tell me if.: You have participated in the last 12 months; you participated in the more distant past; you have never participated; don't know/no answer. Source: Young People in Spain Survey, 2016.



**Figure 11.** Self-perceived most effective forms of influence in politics. Source: Young People in Spain Survey, 2016.

A final feature to highlight is the increase among the group of disaffected young people of those who are skeptical about the possibility of influencing political change. This skepticism, which manifests itself among one in four discontented young people, would indicate that within this group politically mobilized sectors coexist (the most numerous) with others who are more disconnected from politics, with a low sense of political efficacy and high democratic disaffection.

In sum, the above analysis provides solid evidence to support an optimistic vision regarding the future of representative democracy in Spain and the participation and political involvement of young people. Although some young critics feel disengaged with politics, the truth is that discontent is channeled to a greater extent through participation, both in nonelectoral forms of participation and through elections.

## 7. Discussion and Conclusions

In this article, we have analyzed the impact of Spain's socioeconomic and institutional crisis during the Great Recession on young people's relationship with politics. The evidence shown suggests that, among broad sectors of the youth, there has been a profound reconfiguration of political attitudes, in which a critical vision towards the functioning of democracy predominates.

For most of Spanish democratic history, the 'youth' had been characterized as a selfless and politically apathetic collective. In these circumstances, given the deterioration in the living conditions of the population and a climate of political and institutional crisis, it would have been foreseeable that the disaffection of the new generations towards democratic politics would have deepened. However, as we have shown, the reaction of the so-called 'crisis generation' has been quite different. Although a very large majority of young people are dissatisfied with the functioning of the political system and do not trust the central institutions of democracy (political parties, politicians, and Parliament), instead of increasing their disengagement, there has been a critical politicization expressed through a greater involvement of young people in politics, which is reflected both in their attitudes and in their behavior. This result would confirm the thesis of a growing body of literature challenging the characterization of young people as politically apathetic, emphasizing, in contrast, new forms of youth political involvement [68,69]. It is necessary to continue deepening in the nature of these new forms of political involvement, in the meanings that young people attribute to the different modes of political participation and how they integrate them into more complex and diversified repertoires of action.

The interesting phenomenon of youth critical politicization can be considered, according to the approach used in this text, a distinctive feature of the 'crisis generation' in Spain, a generational trait. Faced with problems generated by the economic crisis and the political-institutional crisis, young people socialized in this period have reacted by politicizing their discontent, instead of moving further away from democratic politics or rejecting it openly. Critical politicization would, therefore, be the response that this generation constructs in the political sphere to face a very unfavorable context, a response reflected in the change of attitudes toward democratic politics and, above all, which is expressed in the surprising public role of the most mobilized sectors.

In order to go deeper into this politicization of discontent, we have undertaken a specific analysis of the group of young people who are most dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy and who least trust politicians and parties; that is, those who we have called the 'most discontented youth'. This group, in which around one in four young people belong, has a fairly defined profile, both from a socioeconomic and political point of view. According to the bivariate and multivariate analyses carried out, we can conclude that these are basically young adults, ideologically located on the left, who are seeing their future expectations frustrated by the socioeconomic difficulties they face. The most interesting thing about this group, however, is that, despite the problems and the deep discontent that the political situation has produced, it does not lean toward positions of democratic disaffection, but expresses discontent through participation, both in protest actions and at the electoral level.

The implications of these results are important. From the perspective of the political system, the widespread discontent that identifies the crisis generation does not seem to have put the legitimacy of the democratic system at risk, nor increased disengagement with respect to institutional politics. On the contrary, it has introduced an important dose of criticism into the system, oriented towards change. Regarding young people, the implications are several. First, the way in which they have politicized their discontent means claiming in practice their status as active and participatory citizens, who try to influence the development of social and political processes. Second, the generational dimension of this change in young people's political attitudes and behaviors could in the future lead to a transformation in the patterns of political culture prevailing in Spanish society as these young people grow up and become adults.

A final aspect to be highlighted is the contribution of the sociopolitical context in the process of changing the attitudes and political behavior of young Spaniards. The multivariate analysis from the European Social Survey shows the decisive importance that the change in the political cycle, that began in 2011 with the 15-M movement, has had on this process of reconfiguration of the young people–politics relationship. From 2011, which marked a milestone in the recent political history of the country, the number of people satisfied or 'conformist' with the political situation fell very sharply, while the proportion of what we have called the 'critically politicized' doubled. The comparison with other age groups allows us to affirm that it is young adults who have changed their political attitudes the most, with many of them becoming critical citizens and actively involved in the change.

However, the question that subsequent analyses should resolve is whether this situation has been maintained in recent years, in which the political context has undergone some very significant changes. Data from the European Social Survey, as well as the Young People in Spain Survey, in this article go up to 2015, but from then until now there have been some changes. If in 2015 there were an expectation of a new political panorama that the elections held at the end of the year could bring, it would seem that the expectations of change of a large part of the population were quickly frustrated. The forced repetition of elections in 2016, the difficult adaptation to the new multiparty system, the inability of political elites to reach agreements, and the tensions derived from the growing independence movement in Catalonia have introduced new variables to which young people socialized during the crisis have had to respond.

To evaluate this response and those that are given to the continuous changes in the Spanish political context, it would be necessary to extend the timespan of the observations to have evidence less dependent on conjuncture<sup>11</sup>. To really account for it, however, we would need panel data enabling us to follow the same individuals over a certain time period and thus measure the persistence of attitudinal changes and life-cycle effects, so to what extent the new framework of relationship with politics that we have developed in this article has a true generational nature could be corroborated.

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<sup>11</sup> A preliminary revision of the eighth round of ESS results shows that change trends are maintained, but it is necessary to spend more time to know if they are confirmed in the long term.



## Appendix A

**Table A1.** Operationalization of the dimensions included in our typology of attitudes towards politics.

Dimension	Variable in the Questionnaire	Categories Used to Construct the Typology
Regime performance: satisfaction with how democracy works	On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in (country)? Please answer using this card, where 0 means extremely dissatisfied and 10 means extremely satisfied. The question refers to how the democratic system works ‘in practice’, as opposed to how democracy ‘ought’ to work.	Low: 0–5 or DK/NA High: 6–10
Regime institutions: trust in national Parliament	Please tell me on a score of 0–10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust. - ... (country)’s Spanish Parliament	Low: average score ranging between 0 to 4, or DK/NA in the three variables * High: Average score higher than 4 *
Political actors: trust in politicians and political parties	Please tell me on a score of 0–10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust. - ... politicians? - ... political parties?	
Interest in politics	How interested would you say you are in politics? Are you ... (read out) ... very interested, quite interested, hardly interested, or not at all interested? (Don’t know).	Low: hardly interested, not at all interested in politics or DK/NA High: very or quite interested in politics

DK/NA stands for Don’t Know/No Answer. \* The correlation between trust in the national Parliament, politicians, and political parties is very high. In spite of that, a small proportion of individuals trust in politicians and distrust in political parties or vice versa. To circumvent this problem, we computed the average score of the three variables of trust in political actors and institutions: trust in Parliament, trust in politicians, and trust in political parties. The STATA code to replicate our typology using the European Social Survey data is available from the authors upon request.

## Appendix B

**Table A2.** Distribution of cases among age groups and year of data collection.

ESS Round (Fieldwork)	Less Than 30	30–44	45–59	60 and More	Total (N)
ESS 1 (2002)	18.7	28.7	19.3	33.3	100% (1717)
ESS 2 (2004)	24.3	29.6	21.4	24.8	100% (1640)
ESS 3 (2006)	23.6	28.1	22.4	25.9	100% (1876)
ESS 4 (2008)	21.8	28.6	21.3	28.3	100% (2572)
ESS 5 (2011)	21.1	29.5	25.5	23.9	100% (1880)
ESS 6 (2013)	16.8	30.3	25.2	27.7	100% (1888)
ESS 7 (2015)	17.7	26.0	27.6	28.7	100% (1925)
Total	20.6	28.7	23.3	27.5	100% (13,498)

Source: European Social Survey in Spain, rounds 1–7.

**Table A3.** Distribution of cases among birth cohorts and year of data collection.

ESS Round (Fieldwork)	(1911–1925)	(1926–1945)	(1946–1965)	(1966–1980)	(1981–2000)	Total (N)
ESS 1 (2002)	8.3	28.3	31.4	24.2	7.9	100% (1717)
ESS 2 (2004)	4.6	21.2	31.7	29.7	12.8	100% (1640)
ESS 3 (2006)	4.5	20.3	31.0	28.8	15.5	100% (1876)
ESS 4 (2008)	3.2	20.6	29.2	28.9	18.0	100% (2572)
ESS 5 (2011)	1.7	15.1	30.2	30.2	22.9	100% (1880)
ESS 6 (2013)	0.9	15.2	31.1	30.3	22.5	100% (1888)
ESS 7 (2015)	0.5	15.3	30.3	28.0	25.9	100% (1925)
Total	3.3	19.3	30.6	28.6	18.2	100% (13,498)

Source: European Social Survey in Spain, rounds 1–7.

## Appendix C

**Table A4.** Logistic regression estimates for the determinants of attitudes towards politics. Odds ratio.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Disengaged	Critically Politicized	Conformist	Satisfied
Birth cohort (ref. 1911–1925, greatest generation)				
1926–1946 (silent generation)	0.84 [0.101]	1.504 * [0.321]	0.973 [0.133]	1.256 [0.290]
1946–1965 (baby boomers)	0.809 * [0.0953]	1.632 ** [0.341]	0.809 [0.109]	1.635 ** [0.367]
1966–1980 (generation X)	1.162 [0.140]	1.135 [0.239]	0.925 [0.127]	1.045 [0.238]
1981–2000 (millennials)	1.102 [0.138]	1.286 [0.279]	1.021 [0.145]	0.732 [0.176]
Time (ref. Before 15-M)				
After 15-M (2011–2015)	1.452 [0.679]	3.479 ** [1.936]	0.292 [0.219]	0.612 *** [0.112]
Birth cohort * Time				
1926–1945 * After 15-M	0.84 [0.402]	0.614 [0.350]	1.225 [0.939]	1.26 [0.324]
1946–1965 * After 15-M	0.743 [0.352]	0.854 [0.480]	0.945 [0.721]	0.640 ** [0.145]
1966–1980 * After 15-M	0.632 [0.300]	0.952 [0.536]	0.883 [0.675]	0.891 [0.203]
1981–2000 * After 15-M	0.749 [0.357]	0.757 [0.429]	0.994 [0.760]	
Gender (ref. Men)	1.495 *** [0.0563]	0.622 *** [0.0300]	1.145 *** [0.0577]	0.609 *** [0.0376]

Table A4. Cont.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Disengaged	Critically Politicized	Conformist	Satisfied
Economic difficulties at household (ref. Good economic situation)	1.453 *** [0.0678]	0.96 [0.0588]	0.616 *** [0.0418]	0.731 *** [0.0645]
Educational attainment (ref. basic education)				
Upper secondary education	0.561 *** [0.0270]	2.138 *** [0.132]	0.805 *** [0.0526]	2.067 *** [0.165]
Tertiary education	0.325 *** [0.0178]	3.448 *** [0.220]	0.652 *** [0.0505]	3.347 *** [0.262]
Observations	13,314	13,314	13,314	13,314

The category 'Before 15-M' includes ESS 1–5 (2002–2010) and 'After 15-M' refers to ESS 6–7 (2012–2014). Standard errors in brackets, \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ . Source: European Social Survey in Spain, rounds 1–7.

Table A5. Logistic regression estimates of political discontent. Odds ratio.

	(1)	(2)
Gender (ref. Male)	0.893 [0.0723]	0.768 *** [0.0654]
Age (ref. Young teenagers, 15–19 years old)		
Young, 20–24 years old	1.283 ** [0.154]	1.347 ** [0.167]
Young adults, 25–29 years old	1.211 [0.169]	1.273* [0.182]
Educational attainment (ref. Primary and secondary)		
Postsecondary	1.099 [0.159]	1.122 [0.170]
Vocational training	1.072 [0.152]	1.026 [0.154]
University	0.959 [0.139]	1.034 [0.161]
Activity status (ref. Work only)		
Work and education	0.660 *** [0.0889]	0.727 ** [0.102]
Education	1.025 [0.142]	0.958 [0.141]
Unemployment	1.268 * [0.174]	1.318 * [0.188]
Economic independence (ref. Emancipated and independent) Emancipated but dependent	1.485 *** [0.220]	1.435 ** [0.224]
Not emancipated but independent	1.255 [0.221]	1.395 * [0.263]
Not emancipated and independent	1.040 [0.143]	1.068 [0.157]
Sentiments towards politics (ref. Negative)		
Indifferent		0.535 *** [0.0560]

Table A5. Cont.

	(1)	(2)
Positive		0.312 *** [0.0455]
Interest in politics (ref. little or not at all interested) Very or quite interested in politics		0.704 *** [0.0756]
Talk about politics (ref. Never or almost never) Often or very often		1.232 ** [0.120]
Left–right ideological scale (ref. Left, 1–2) 3–4		0.441 *** [0.0557]
5–6		0.253 *** [0.0321]
7–8		0.127 *** [0.0267]
Right (9–10)		0.151 *** [0.0542]
DK NA		0.455 *** [0.0652]
Constant	0.324 *** [0.0725]	1.289 [0.339]
Observations	5002	5002

Binomial logistic regression models. Weighted data. Standard errors in brackets. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$ .  
Source: Young People in Spain Survey, 2016.

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