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The politics of minimum income reform in Spain: explaining unexpected and consensual path departure

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Abstract

Southern European welfare states have historically been characterised by the absence of national safety nets. However, these countries have witnessed a succession of policy reforms over the past three decades. In 2020, the Spanish Parliament unanimously approved the ‘Ingreso Mínimo Vital’ to finally cease being the only European country without a minimum income scheme at the national level. This article investigates the political and institutional mechanisms that enabled this policy reform, which was particularly unexpected due to the fragmentation of the party system along both ideological and territorial dimensions. To solve this puzzle, I employ the ‘explaining-outcome’ process tracing method and rely on qualitative data from official documents, party manifestos and parliamentary interventions spanning from 2015 to 2020. In addition, I build on ten expert interviews with relevant actors directly involved in the reform, conducted between 2022 and 2024. Findings illustrate that inclusive path departure was possible through two political stages. First, left-wing party competition and strong socio-political demand (2014–2020) allowed for the introduction of the scheme into the political agenda. Second, territorial politics and the external shock of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic ultimately contributed to mitigating expected political cleavages during the parliamentary process.

Keywords: minimum income schemes; path departure; party competition; territorial politics; COVID-19; Spain

Introduction

Southern European welfare states have historically been characterised by the absence of national safety nets (Ferrera, 1996). Nevertheless, the succession of reforms these countries have experienced over the past decade has catalysed social policy scholars to investigate the extent to which partisanship, trade unions and other social actors – alongside the economic context – have shaped recent

developments in this policy area (Lalioti, 2016; Natili, 2018; Pereirinha et al., 2020; Jessoula and Natili, 2020; Cigna and Fabris, 2024). This paper aims to contribute to this literature by examining the political and institutional factors that led to the implementation of the *Ingreso Mínimo Vital*¹ (IMV) in Spain, a country that, having long relied on a fragmented and unequal regional-level system since the 1990s, introduced a national scheme in June 2020.

Before the reform, this regional and fragmented model was characterised by its institutional residuality, low expenditure and one of the lowest coverage rates in the European Union (EU), reaching only 16 per cent of severely poor individuals under the age of 65 years (Natili, 2020). The regional schemes were also characterised by varying levels of generosity and eligibility requirements across different territories, ranging from full-fledged entitlement-based minimum income schemes (MIS) to highly restrictive and conditional benefits (Aguilar-Hendrickson and Arriba, 2020). This fragmented model left many social needs unaddressed nationwide, ultimately limiting the system's effectiveness in reducing poverty (Ayala et al., 2021). In this line, poverty and social exclusion rates in Spain have consistently surpassed the EU average over the past decade, with lone-parent households disproportionately affected by these trends (Eurostat, 2024; INE, 2020; see Figures 1 and 2 in the appendix).

The 2020 reform aimed to address these limitations by establishing a non-contributory, tax-funded safety net on the basis of a means test set at 61.4 per cent of the 2019 relative poverty threshold, allowing for compatibility with other non-contributory benefits. Notably, the scheme's income level largely exceeded that of schemes in many Spanish regions (Eichhorst et al., 2023), it was less coercive in terms of work requirements (Soler-Buades, 2024) and covered nearly 300,000 additional households, though non-take-up rates have remained substantial (AiREF, 2023). In this context, the IMV has been regarded as one of the most comprehensive minimum income reforms in recent EU history (Eichhorst et al., 2023: 113; Marchal and Marx, 2024).²

Therefore, after decades of political apathy that left Spain the only European country without a comprehensive MIS, the national government successfully introduced a comprehensive, inclusive safety net in June 2020. This reform passed unanimously in Parliament, with favourable votes from all political parties and only the far-right abstaining. As a result, the introduction of the IMV emerged as a largely uncontested reform, challenging previous literature on minimum income politics, which suggests that fragmented and polarised party systems – characterised by influential regional parties and a strong far-right presence – are likely to obstruct a reform of this nature (Natili, 2018; 2019; Jessoula and Natili, 2020). In Spain, welfare chauvinism from the far-right party Vox was expected to fuel opposition to the IMV, as the benefit was extended to immigrants. Meanwhile, regional parties had strong incentives to maintain social assistance competencies at the subnational level, driven by a strong salience of the territorial cleavage in the country and the need to reinforce legitimacy and identity vis-à-vis the national government (Natili, 2019; Bonoli et al., 2019).

Against this background, the Spanish case raises the question of what political and institutional drivers helped mitigate such ideological and territorial cleavages, enabling an inclusive path departure. To answer this question, I build on the 'logic-of-position approach' (Parsons, 2007) to complement previous literature and

propose structural and case-specific politico-institutional mechanisms to enhance the understanding of the policy process. On the politico-institutional front, I suggest that institutional mechanisms typical of a highly decentralised state can incentivise intergovernmental dynamics between national and regional cabinets (Field, 2014). This collaboration, I argue, can facilitate the creation of rules that integrate the national scheme within the existing welfare system whilst preserving regional competencies in social assistance. Concerning the structural mechanism, I posit that the pandemic may have catalysed a realignment of welfare positions amongst right-wing and far-right parties, presenting an exogenous opportunity for the government to pursue political action in this policy area.

Empirically, I employ the 'explaining-outcome process tracing' method (Beach and Pedersen, 2013). This inductive and iterative method is applied by investigating the political dynamics and the reconfiguration of actors' positions over time. The qualitative data on the reform process and actors' positions stem from party manifestos, secondary literature, various press documents, official documents from European institutions and thirty-eight parliamentary interventions of individual actors between 2016 and 2020. Moreover, the analysis draws on a total of ten semi-structured elite interviews with relevant parties³, prominent trade unions (CCOO and UGT), Spain's largest anti-poverty organisation (Cáritas) and the Confederation of Business Organisations (CEOE).

The article is organised as follows. The next section provides a literature review on minimum income politics, from which the theoretical argument is built in section three. Section four presents the data and method, whilst section five develops the empirical analysis. Section six concludes the article by drawing attention to the key contributions to the literature on welfare state change and the politics of MIS.

The politics of minimum income reform in southern welfare states: a review of contemporary literature

MIS have become a common anti-poverty instrument within the policy toolkit of European welfare states in the post-industrial context (Jessoula and Madama, 2018). This has prompted social policy scholars to conduct comparative research into the institutional and political factors driving policy development in this area (Clegg, 2013, 2014; Vlandas, 2013; Nöel, 2019). Nevertheless, during the past 10 years, attention has been greater in Southern Europe (Jessoula et al., 2014; Lalioti, 2016; Natili 2018; Natili et al., 2019; Aguilar-Hendrickson and Arriba, 2020; Pereirinha et al., 2020; Cigna and Fabris, 2024). The rationale behind this escalated interest is readily apparent: whilst Ferrera's (1996) seminal work on the 'Southern Model' initially highlighted the lack of comprehensive MIS as a significant feature of southern welfare states, relevant policy development at the national level over the past three decades have turned scholars to study the socio-economic and political drivers behind such reforms.

Conventional literature has indicated that MIS beneficiaries have traditionally possessed limited mobilisation potential, rendering them a relatively insignificant electoral constituency. This in turn has diminished the incentives for parties to address this policy area (Bonoli, 2005; Clegg, 2013; Madama and Jessoula, 2015).

However, a growing strand of research has shown that ‘politics matter’ for contemporary MIS reforms. Two main arguments appear to be relevant in this body of literature. First, there is consensus that ideological commitments and party preferences are not as straightforward as the power resources theory suggested (Bonoli, 2013; Vlandas, 2013; Jessoula et al., 2014). Second, it seems that the introduction and direction of minimum income reforms are associated with the interests, strategies and power dynamics of different stakeholders – including not only parties but also trade unions, federations of employers, anti-poverty organisations and supranational institutions – alongside the structural constraints under which they operate (Jessoula et al., 2014; Lalioti; 2016; Natili, 2018; Jessoula and Natili, 2020; Pereirinha et al., 2020).

Whilst some of these studies have demonstrated the impact of party competition (Jessoula et al., 2014; Lalioti, 2016), others have stated the relevance of the structural constraints that influence party decision-making (Pereirinha et al., 2020). Building on this strand of literature and comparative welfare state research, Natili (2018; 2019) proposed a comprehensive theoretical framework to explain policy change in this domain. He posited that MIS reforms result from the interplay between socio-political demand and political supply: whereas socio-political demand can be strong, weak or only latent depending on the preferences and mobilisation of social actors – trade unions and faith-based or anti-poverty organisations – the political supply describes the systemic features of the party system. Following, I elaborate on this theory and present the argument for why it is important to complement it to fully understand the case of Spain.

The socio-political demand: social actors and the EU

According to Natili (2018), the strength of socio-political demand may vary on the basis of the influence of labour unions and anti-poverty organisations. For example, the strength of socio-political demand may increase if unions perceive MISs as an attractive strategy for recruiting atypical workers (see also Cigna and Fabris, 2024). This demand is likely to be bolstered if faith-based and anti-poverty organisations are actively involved in both the design and implementation of social insertion programs, thereby mitigating potential state–church conflicts. This occurs because these actors have a long-standing tradition of supporting the poor through charitable efforts, and thus, they view social assistance within their competence (Kahl, 2009; Natili, 2019).

Beyond unions and anti-poverty organisations, other scholars have highlighted the EU’s role on the demand side. In the early 2000s, the EU introduced the Open Method of Coordination to help Member States define, implement and evaluate anti-poverty policies (Jessoula & Madama, 2018). The 2008 European Commission Recommendation on the Active Inclusion of People Excluded from the Labour Market advocated for combining adequate income support, activation measures and access to quality services, thereby promoting a multi-dimensional approach to poverty (Clegg, 2013; Natili, 2020); 2 years later, the Europe 2020 Strategy prioritised poverty and social exclusion, prompting the European Semester to place greater emphasis on MIS – especially in Eastern and Southern Europe. In this context, the 2017 European Pillar of Social Rights has recently (re)emphasised the

need for adequate MIS, reinforcing the EU's commitment to combatting poverty and exclusion (Shahini et al., 2023).

The political supply: the expected consequences of fragmented pluralism

The political supply describes the characteristics of the party system and distinguishes between moderate pluralism and fragmented bipolarism (Natili, 2018; 2019). Whereas the former is characterised by a limited number of relevant parties and the presence of the left–right cleavage, fragmented bipolarism features a higher number of relevant parties and cross-cutting cleavages, namely the ideological and the centre-periphery conflicts. In this vein, as more parties enter the ideological arena, the divide between left and right blocs may deepen further – especially with a strong far-right party in the mix. In addition, regional parties may complicate the implementation of a national scheme, as they aim to preserve their powers, reinforce regional legitimacy and avoid resource transfers from wealthy to poorer regions (Saraceno, 2006; Natili, 2019; Bonoli et al., 2019). Hence, fragmented bipolarism is expected to hinder consensus on MIS if both cleavages are activated (Natili, 2019).

According to this theory, fragmented bipolarism in Spain during the reform period should have heightened territorial and ideological conflicts, preventing consensus. On the one hand, MIS competencies in Spain are devolved to the sub-national level. The transfer of social assistance responsibilities to Spanish regions, which took place in the 1980s, has led to persistent conflicts and coordination challenges between central and regional governments throughout Spain's democratic era (Aguilar-Hendrickson & Arriba, 2020; Bonoli et al., 2019), indicating a probable activation of the territorial cleavage. This situation was further exacerbated by the entry of the far-right party Vox into the national parliament, which contributed to increased polarisation on the territorial dimension by capitalising on the Catalan crisis (Madariaga and Riera, 2022). On the other hand, the presence of Vox should have also disrupted the consensual path departure. Guided by welfare chauvinism, these parties strongly oppose social benefits, especially when they are accessible to immigrants (Natili, 2018; Enggist and Häusermann, 2024).⁴ Moreover, the presence of the far-right could have prompted centre-right parties to adopt more stringent positions on policy issues conditioned by the far-right's stances on immigration (Wagner and Meyer, 2017; Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020).

In this context, I posit that whilst the political supply and political demand theory (Natili, 2018; Natili, 2019; Jessoula and Natili, 2020) is valuable for understanding the drivers of minimum income change, it falls short in explaining how the ideological and territorial cleavages characteristic of a fragmented, bipolar party system were mitigated to obtain consensual and inclusive path departure in Spain.

A case-specific explanation: when socio-political demand and political supply meet with territorial politics and the pandemic

To solve the puzzle, I build on the 'logic-of-position approach' (Parsons, 2007). This approach states that structural and institutional case-specific mechanisms can prompt political actions under political and/or economic conditions of constraint.

For Parsons (2007: 13), the term ‘structural’ refers to the exogenous opportunities for political action shaped by the material context of actors, whereas institutional mechanisms encompass formal or informal rules, conventions or practices that push actors in a specific direction. In other words, the specifics of the institutional environment can strongly affect actors’ power relations and hence their mobilisation strategies.

Through the lens of Parsons’ approach, I interpret territorial politics as the politico-institutional mechanism and the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic as the structural, exogenous factor. Further, I posit that institutional channels typical of a highly decentralised state are particularly important, as they can prompt interactions between national and regional cabinets where exchanges can occur more fluidly (Field, 2014). In the field of MIS, this collaboration may include the creation of rules that integrate the national scheme within the existing welfare system without threatening regional competencies in social assistance. To support this argument, I build on the concept of ‘mutual back-scratching’ (Field, 2009; 2014), defined as intergovernmental dynamics that create mutual dependence between the party in the national (minority) government and regional parties. I thus state that regional parties will be in a vulnerable position if the minority regional government does not contain a cabinet member from the party governing at the national level; however, regional parties and the national governing party become co-dependent if they form a coalition at the regional level. Field (2009: 301) argues that whilst a vulnerable situation prompts regional parties to support the national government in exchange for devolution or funding for territorial administration, co-dependence can facilitate collaboration at the national level. Therefore, I am interested in exploring the extent to which, in our case, vulnerable and co-dependent positions of regional parties contributed to mitigating the territorial conflict for the final voting.

Regarding the structural mechanism, I contend that the heightened visibility of poverty and social exclusion in Spain, exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, may have accelerated the policy process and influenced the realignment of positions amongst right and far-right parties, impacting their interests and parliamentary behaviour. This shift is anticipated in a context where right-wing and far-right voters have significantly adjusted their welfare preferences in response to the crisis (Enggist et al., 2022). In turn, I argue, this created a window of opportunity for the left-wing government to expand social policies during the pandemic.

Data and method

To illustrate such mechanisms, I employ the ‘explaining-outcome process tracing’ method (Beach and Pedersen, 2013). This method is used when existing scholarship cannot provide a sufficient explanation for a particular scenario, thus revealing a single and puzzling case. It involves conducting an iterative and inductive process-tracing analysis, using empirical evidence as the foundation to construct a plausible explanation of the mechanisms through which multiple Xs produce the outcome. Sufficiency is confirmed when it can be demonstrated that the explanation addresses all relevant aspects of the outcome (Day and Kincaid, 1994). This does not imply

that mechanism X is the only path to Y, but that if X occurs, it is enough to produce Y (Beach and Pedersen, 2013). This method is well-suited for this study since one of its features is that case-specific mechanisms are necessary to develop plausible explanations.

The method is applied by investigating the reform process⁵ and the reconfiguration of actors' positions over time. The qualitative data on the reform process and actors' positions stem from party manifestos, secondary literature, various press documents, official documents from European institutions and thirty-eight parliamentary interventions of individual actors between 2016 and 2020. As for the latter, I have included parliamentary discussions and parliamentary hearings from the legislatures of 2016–2019 and 2019–2020, focussing on the MIS debate and the subsequent reform process. Interventions are publicly accessible on the Spanish Congress website. I have included those that directly pertain to the reform, ranging from plenary sessions to the Committee on Labor, Inclusion, Social Security and Migration – the primary committee involved in the reform. A complete and detailed list of the interventions covered can be found in the appendix.

Furthermore, the analysis draws on a total of ten semi-structured elite interviews⁶ with the relevant parties, prominent trade unions (CCOO. and UGT), Spain's largest anti-poverty organisation (Cáritas) and the Confederation of Business Organisations (CEOE).⁷ The selected interviewees were chosen on the basis of their relevance according to the literature. More specifically, the final selection of respondents depended on their significant roles during the reform process, determined through an investigation of the individuals responsible for minimum income issues within various parties, unions and social organisations. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in five instances and online in the other five. The resulting transcripts were then analysed by identifying several pre-defined themes derived from the existing literature, as well as additional themes that emerged during the interviews themselves as part of the inductive, iterative analysis.

Empirical analysis

This section presents the results in chronological order. First, it explains the process through which the IMV entered the Spanish political agenda, differentiating between the roles of political supply and socio-political demand (Natili, 2018; 2019; Jessoula and Natili, 2020). Second, it outlines the political process that enabled the unanimous approval in Parliament, distinguishing between politico-institutional mechanisms and territorial politics and structural factors and the COVID-19 crisis.

Explaining political demand (2014–2020)

Since the late 1980s, the two main Spanish trade unions – CCOO and UGT – have been pushing for a national MIS. The Propuesta Sindical Prioritaria, presented to the socialist government in 1988, included the introduction of a scheme capable of offering protection to those falling outside other welfare benefits (Arriba 1999). The government did not support the initiative and trade unions have since continued campaigning for the development of MISs at the regional level (Arriba 1999; Noguera, 2019). In September 2015⁸, CCOO and UGT launched the national

proposal *Prestación de Ingresos Mínimos* (Minimum Income Provision, MIP) and by May 2016, gathered the half-million signatures necessary to introduce a Popular Legislative Initiative (ILP) in Parliament. Unions considered record levels of unemployment and poverty signalled failures in the functioning of the labour market and the social protection system. Hence, the initiative aimed to establish a stronger, nationwide non-contributory scheme to better protect the long-term unemployed lacking adequate unemployment subsidies (TU 1; TU 2).

The MIP was accepted by Parliament and became a legislative proposal in February 2017 (see Table 3 in the appendix for policy details). However, the proposal faced strong criticisms from the right-wing spectrum during this first stage. Right-wing parties – the PP, in government and Cs – positioned themselves against the MIP. They argued against ‘excessive’ public spending, the potential ‘pull effect’ and the lack of a strong workfare approach, which would create incentives for recipients to remain on the benefit (PP 2; Cs 1). In contrast, left-wing parties endorsed the initiative, albeit with substantive differences amongst them. The PSOE defended that the benefit had to be linked to employment (PSOE 4). In contrast, UP⁹ advocated for a (non-conditional) citizenship-based guaranteed income. UP also argued for the need to improve the coverage of the MIP and to increase the benefit amount from €426 per month up to €660 – above the poverty threshold – in line with the policy recommendations from European institutions (UP 3).

After passing the first phase, the PP presented an overall amendment, rejected by the Spanish Congress on 28 September 2017. The conservatives explained the amendment on the basis of the recent ruling of the Constitutional Court that halted the extension of *Prepara*, an activation program targeting the long-term unemployed on the basis of centralised management being determined as illegal (El País, 2017). Both PP and Cs claimed a clear delimitation of competencies before approving the reform (PP 2; Cs 2). In this phase, some regional parties were, however, supportive of the initiative, at the same time as conditioning this support to the transfer of its implementation and management to the regional level: ‘it is not only legitimate but also necessary and materially effective to demand the immediate transfer [of management of the scheme], at least for the region of the Basque Country’ (PNV 1).

Beyond the debate on competencies, the PP amendment to the initiative was reproached by the left-wing parties PSOE and UP as a strategic movement to delay the MIP’s approval. In March 2018, the PP government also asked the Independent Authority for Fiscal Responsibility (AIReF) to issue a report to assess the financial feasibility of the proposal. In the view of the trade unions, this was also a deliberate attempt to decelerate the process (TU 1). In this respect, the processing of MIP has been on ‘stand-by’ since then. Following the report, a motion of no confidence was introduced against the PP government, and subsequent administrations have never restarted the processing of the ILP (TU 1).

In addition to the role of unions, the politicisation of MIS in Spain was also a consequence of increasing pressure from anti-poverty organisations. This role has most prominently been played by the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) *Cáritas* and the European Network to Fight Poverty and Social Exclusion in the Spanish State (EAPN). *Cáritas* has been advocating for enhanced coordination amongst various anti-poverty policies across different levels of government since the

1990s. This anti-poverty organisation has consistently supported the improvement of the minimum income system, actively participating at both regional and national levels, and adopting a propagandistic role (Arriba, 2001). Ultimately, their efforts have been directed towards urging the establishment of a national MIS between 2015 and 2020, a period in which *Cáritas* has advocated for the introduction of the policy in the electoral manifestos of parties, actively following up such proposals (*Cáritas* 1).

The EAPN has also played an important role in such a period, referring to the calls of the European Commission and the European Council for a more efficient and cohesive income guarantee system, stressing the necessity of urgent reform (EAPN 1). Alongside this strong socio-political demand on the part of unions and anti-poverty organisations, the most relevant actor concerning employers, the CEOE, remained pragmatic, which may have sustained political demand without encountering significant opposition. The CEOE President publicly assured that the organisation 'has never considered saying no to this benefit because the most vulnerable must be helped', although also asserted the need to be tough on abusive practices in the context of a prominent underground economy (Europa Press, 2020). The CEOE was particularly concerned about the lack of activation measures attached, as initial proposals 'gave the impression of advocating for a universal basic income (UBI)' (CEOE 1).

The national socio-political demand of unions and NGOs was additionally reinforced by European institutions. Since at least 2015, the European Commission and the European Council have been asking the Spanish government to take action to improve coverage and income adequacy of regional minimum income schemes (RMISs). In that year, the country-specific recommendations (CSR) requested that Spain improve the effectiveness of social assistance programs and family support schemes (European Council, 2015). In 2016 and 2017, CSRs asked Spain to 'address regional disparities and fragmentation in income guarantee schemes and improve family support' (European Council, 2017; 2017b).

The following year's assessment of policy improvements based on the CSR highlighted that initiatives to tackle the limited effectiveness of MISs were still insufficient (European Council, 2018), and the 2018 CSR again insisted on the need to improve coverage gaps by reducing fragmentation and facilitating accessibility to RMISs (European Council, 2018b). In Spain, both social and political actors have referenced these European calls when discussing the need to implement a national MIS between 2015 and 2020 (EAPN 1; *Cáritas* 1; UP 2; UP 3; PSOE 6; EH-Bildu 1; Cs 4). In this vein, a senior official from the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration underscored that whilst the PSOE was aware of the need to introduce a national MIS, it was 'the constant appeals from the EU that closed the circle' (PSOE 3).

Explaining political supply: from party competition to cooperation in government (2014–2020)

The debate on a national MIS in Spain was introduced in the political agenda for the first time in 2014. It was catalysed by the emergence of the new left-wing party Podemos, which included the proposition of a UBI in its manifesto for the European elections. At that moment, the PSOE did not have any proposal for a national MIS; rather, they opted for improving RMISs, as admitted by the socialist leader Pedro

Sánchez in an interview with *El País* (2014). Sánchez criticised Podemos' proposal, dismissing it as 'economically unfeasible' and 'unfair', and asserted that RMISs were both 'viable' and 'aligned with the pursuit of social justice' (*El País* (2014)). The good results for Podemos in these European elections – 8 per cent of the votes – meant discussions around MIS were at the centre of the political debate during the year 2015 (Barragué and Martínez, 2016). In this context, Sánchez declared in July 2015 – only a few months after advocating for the expansion of RMISs in response to the UBI's proposal – the establishment of a national scheme as 'one of my primary electoral commitments' (PSOE, 2015).

With an eye on the December general elections, the PSOE, Cs and UP prompted various proposals on MISs at the national level for the first time in democratic history (Noguera, 2019). In this heightened electoral competition, Podemos' proposal stood slightly more ambitious: it targeted 3.3 million households compared with PSOE's 0.7 million and it included a greater amount and compatibility with work (refer to Table 3 in the appendix). The new PP government was, however, reluctant to introduce a national MIS. This executive came to an end in June 2018 after a motion of censure presented by the PSOE, and general elections were announced for April 2019. By that time, both left-leaning parties, UP and PSOE, (re) included a national MIS in their electoral programmes, albeit with notable discrepancies: whilst UP aimed this time to reach 3.6 million households, establishing the right of all citizens to a guaranteed income 'regardless of their luck with employment or pensions' (Podemos, 2019), the PSOE maintained a limited target and prioritised addressing child poverty, leading to the inclusion of a child supplement (PSOE, 2019).

The PSOE won the 2019 elections but with a percentage of votes insufficient to form a government. Months of negotiations failed to produce a viable government, and second elections were called for November 2019. In January 2020, Spain's first left-wing coalition government in the democratic era was formed, uniting PSOE and UP with the backing of various regional parties. In the PSOE–UP government agenda,¹⁰ released on 30 December, the IMV was included as a government pledge (see section 2.4.2). Although specific policy details were not offered, the IMV was ultimately presented as a state-level scheme for low-income families. At this point, there was a shift from a dynamic of political competition to one of cooperation between the two parties (UP 1).

The politico-institutional mechanism: territorial politics and the dilution of the centre-periphery cleavage

The reform had been introduced in the government agreement, but it still faced the biggest obstacle: securing sufficient parliamentary support. When the bill reached Congress, the coalition government had 153 out of the 176 deputies necessary to achieve a majority, needing the support of the Basque and Catalan parties. Meanwhile, these parties depended on the national governing parties in their respective regions. Building on Field (2014), we interpret that Catalan parties, narrowly missing a majority, found themselves in a 'vulnerable' position. In contrast, the PNV, governing in coalition with the PSE-EE¹¹, was situated in a 'co-dependent' position. In this section, I conduct a fine-grained analysis to illustrate how these positions triggered

collaboration and political exchange amongst regional and national cabinets, ultimately contributing to consensus building.

The primary obstacle within the territorial dimension stemmed from the Basques, who possessed the Basque Economic Agreement – a specific concession of competencies in which the conflict is expected to be more pronounced.¹² For Basque nationalists, their favourable vote was contingent upon a negotiation process concerning the transfer of competencies, as the IMV had led to a (re)centralisation of certain powers traditionally devolved to the subnational level: budget management, compliance control, auditing and financial relations, amongst others. The negotiations were held between April and June 2020. At the beginning of this period, the PSOE was unwilling to negotiate the transfer (PSOE 10). The PNV then warned that the proposed law could lead to ‘very important legal and practical problems – referring to centralisation – and even issues with the majority in the Chamber’ (PNV 1). However, negotiations progressed in May through a combination of informal, multilateral and bilateral meetings between governments and within the General Commission of the Autonomous Communities (PSOE 9; PSOE 10). It was only at this point that the PNV’s position underwent a favourable shift towards the IMV, in response to the PSOE’s commitment to transferring the IMV’s management to the Basque government – a commitment that also paved the way for the far-left nationalist party EH-Bildu to endorse the reform (EH-Bildu 1).

The agreement was announced by the PNV on 27 May in an official party statement¹³ and reiterated by its deputy in the parliamentary commission a few days before the approval:

It is widely recognised that both my parliamentary group and the Basque Government have engaged in discussions with your Ministry to finalise specific commitments, specifically those stemming from the fifth additional provision (. . .) This mechanism has allowed, as already specified in this text, for the transfer of these competencies to be contemplated at a given moment (PNV 1).

Following Field (2014), we can interpret this agreement as a case of mutual back-scratching between two parties in a co-dependent position. According to the PSE-EE, the fifth additional provision was key for securing the PNV’s support, since activating this mechanism represented a step forwards for consolidating a ‘strategic pathway’ for the Basque nationalists. This tool would eventually enable the PNV to manage social security in the long term:

In the Basque Country, an unresolved issue has been the management of social security, and particularly pensions. When the IMV was transferred, a clause was applied that will need to be used when the social security system is eventually transferred. This was favourable for the PNV, as it demonstrated that this clause, previously considered non-transferable by the Spanish government, could indeed be used effectively. Therefore, from a political standpoint, this proved to be advantageous for the PNV (PSOE, 10).

Although no similar agreement had been reached with other regions at that time, Catalan parties were negotiating with the central government to secure a commitment by year end. This resulted in ERC securing a transfer agreement for Catalonia in exchange for supporting the 2021 general budget (ERC 1; ElDiario.es, 2020)¹⁴. Nevertheless, we observe that the Catalan parties’ more

vulnerable position – compared with the PNV – led them to support the policy even before securing the competencies. This shows that the varying positions of regional parties relative to the national governing party – vulnerable or co-dependent – can lead to different timelines for political exchange dynamics.

Beyond the major regional parties, minor regional parties also supported the IMV due to its compatibility with the existing regional system. Since the law established that regions could choose to complement or replace their RMISs with the IMV, the reform did not impose economic disadvantages on any territory. This policy feature, therefore, led to what Bonoli and Trein (2016) defined as ‘upward cost-shifting’ – a process in which regional governments shift costs to the national level whilst retaining some control over the policy. In this line, the IMV was perceived as an opportunity to secure supplementary state funding to bolster existing RMISs (UP 1) or to alleviate the fiscal pressures of regional governments (PSOE 2). Consequently, regional parties did not perceive the IMV merely as ‘a complicated transfer of resources from rich to poor regions’, as suggested by prior scholars (Saraceno, 2006; Natili, 2019). Indeed, the AIReF report indicated that regional governments were spending less because 65 per cent of beneficiaries who would have previously qualified for the existing RMISs ended up receiving the IMV (AIReF, 2022). This suggests that, in the social assistance domain, minority governments can obtain support from regional parties not only through mutual back-scratching dynamics (Field, 2014), but also via ‘upward cost-shifting’ (Bonoli and Trein, 2016; Bonoli et al., 2019).

The structural mechanism: the role of the pandemic

The progressive coalition garnered support not only from regionalist parties, but also from the right and even the far-right. The IMV was approved by Parliament barely 3 months after the introduction of the state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic, declared on 20 March 2020. As recognised by the Spanish government (UP 4; PSOE 6; PSOE 7), the crisis had a clear ‘triggering effect’ that advanced its implementation. This reform, along with furlough schemes, aimed to act as a ‘social shield’ to cushion the crisis’s impact on Spain’s vulnerable population. An interviewee from the Ministry of Inclusion described this ‘triggering effect’, noting that whilst the PSOE had planned to introduce the IMV during the legislature, the pandemic acted as a catalyst, ‘making everything unfold faster’ (PSOE 3; PSOE 8). From UP’s perspective, it was uncertain whether the reform would have extended beyond a child benefit for low-income families in the absence of the COVID-19 crisis (UP 1).

In this context, a careful reading of the speeches of parties in Congress suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic helped not only to accelerate the IMV, but also to reconfigure the position of some parties. The far-right party Vox, for instance, recognised that the crisis had urged the need to assist the most vulnerable, and hence the party would not oppose the reform. However, the backing was only partial, as Vox adhered to welfare chauvinism stances by advocating for the restriction of immigrant access to the IMV:

We want a strong protection system for Spaniards and all people residing legally in Spain (. . .) It makes no sense for any illegal immigrant who is a victim of human

trafficking to be automatically eligible, as this suggests that all immigrants arriving by boat could become beneficiaries (Vox 1).

The presence of Vox did not shift the position of centre-right parties, contrary to what the literature often suggests regarding immigration and certain welfare policies (Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020). Centre-right parties expressed ‘conditional support’ for the IMV addressing ‘second order’ issues. However, they refrained from disputing the broader need for a comprehensive scheme. For example, whilst the PP voted in favour, they asked for a workfare rationale and a medium-term budget plan to compensate for the structural increase in public expenditure (PP 3). The liberal party Cs also endorsed the bill as a policy designed to tackle structural poverty aggravated by the pandemic (Cs 3). However, the party also stated that the IMV had to be combined with job placement more efficiently to avoid the poverty trap (Cs 3).

The positions of right-wing parties were aligned with those of their electorate, as evidenced by public opinion polls at the time of the reform (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2020). These polls revealed support for the IMV amongst voters from the PP, Cs and even a notable percentage of radical right constituents (see Figure 3 in the appendix). This ‘social policy backing’ is consistent with recent research on shifts in welfare preferences within this ideological group during the COVID-19 crisis (Enggist et al., 2022). The pandemic also prompted policy realignment amongst some regional centre-right parties. An MP of the Catalan right-wing party declared that, in a different context, ‘we would see it differently, but in the current situation, it is evident that this benefit will be useful’ (JxCat 1). Similarly, others emphasised the need to strengthen MIS in the context of social emergency (PDCat 1; FA 1; CC 1), an argument shared by other regional left parties (COM 1; BNG 1). Altogether this suggests that, during the COVID-19 crisis, the IMV became a non-contentious issue in Spanish politics, potentially contributing to consensus building in Parliament.

Discussion

This article has investigated the political and institutional factors that allowed for the introduction of the IMV in Spain, the most comprehensive expansion of minimum income policy we have recently witnessed in the EU (Marchal and Marx, 2024). To achieve this, I complement Natili’s (2018) political supply and socio-political demand theory by incorporating structural and case-specific politico-institutional mechanisms that explain unexpected consensus in an ideologically and territorially divided Parliament.

Building on Natili’s theory, I identify an initial stage (2015–2019) in which strong socio-political demand, driven by trade unions, the EU and anti-poverty organisations played a pivotal role in advocating for reforms and improvements to the existing minimum income system. During the same period, a widening of the political supply led to the emergence of a fragmented and bipolar party system, stimulating political competition on the left between the newly formed leftist party, UP, and the social-democratic PSOE. This rivalry prompted both parties to integrate ambitious anti-poverty proposals into their policy agendas.

In the second stage, however, I illustrate that what finally enabled the passing of the reform during the parliamentary process were structural and case-specific institutional mechanisms that unfolded between March and June 2020. On the one hand, the absence of territorial conflict stemmed from a politico-institutional dynamic of ‘mutual back-scratching’ (Field, 2014). In this regard, I showed that institutional mechanisms typical of a highly decentralised state can incentivise intergovernmental collaboration amongst national and regional cabinets. This collaboration may occur through political exchange dynamics, in which the national government secures regional parties’ votes in exchange for policy competencies, or through the establishment of rules that integrate the national scheme into the existing minimum income system whilst preserving regional autonomy in MIS. On the other hand, I illustrated how the pandemic presented an exogenous structural opportunity for political action, as it prompted a realignment of right-wing and far-right parties on welfare policies, leading them to either support or abstain from the reform – although this backing was not without concerns about workfare and welfare chauvinism demands.

This article contributes to the social policy literature by advancing our understanding of inclusive, institutional change in Southern welfare states, with a focus on the case of the MIS in Spain, the last EU country to introduce a comprehensive national safety net. However, it also offers three additional contributions to the field of comparative welfare politics. First, it provides new evidence on the impact of left-party competition on inclusive social policies. Whilst earlier scholars (Ferrera, 1996; Watson, 2015) argued that tactical divisions between socialist and far-left parties in Southern Europe contributed to less universal models of social protection, this study adds to a growing body of research showing that the emergence of electoral competition to the left of social democratic parties can stimulate inclusive policy reforms, especially benefitting outsiders (Jessoula and Natili, 2020; Branco et al., 2024). Second, it illustrates that territorial politics can be a crucial variable in driving political coalitions in favour of progressive reforms (Vampa; 2017; León et al., 2022). Third, it complements the literature on welfare and far-right politics, suggesting that the influence of far-right parties on welfare development depends on the economic context, even as these parties persistently frame the repercussions of the crisis in a ‘natives first’ fashion (Rathgeb and Busemeyer, 2022: 13).

Against this background, future research could systematically analyse the impact of new left-wing parties on social policy, particularly when they form coalitions with social-democratic parties. In this vein, we still need a more fine-grained analysis of how coalitional dynamics influence the specific direction of these reforms. The findings also indicate the need to further assess the impact of territorial politics on inclusive policy development, especially in countries where regional parties hold significant influence, to determine whether political exchange dynamics are applicable in other contexts or are unique to the Spanish case.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279425000078>

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Notes

- 1 'Minimum Living Income' in English.
- 2 Furthermore, the benefit was made compatible with existing regional schemes; regions could either use the new national scheme to supplement regional levels or choose to replace one with the other.
- 3 See Table 2 in the appendix for political party acronyms and their corresponding ideologies.
- 4 A condition met for the IMV due to more flexible residency requirements compared with other European countries (Ibáñez et al., 2023).
- 5 Refer to Figure 4 in the appendix for a timeline of the reform process.
- 6 All interviewees referred to in the article have given their explicit and informed consent verbally within the Euroship project, as per ethics approval process specified by the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.
- 7 See Table 1 in the appendix for all acronyms.
- 8 CCOO. Gaceta Sindical. Edición especial nº 253. Septiembre 2015.
- 9 UP (Unidos Podemos) was the name of Podemos after forming a coalition with Izquierda Unida (the traditional far-left party).
- 10 The 'Acuerdo Progresista' (Progressive Agreement).
- 11 The regional branch of the PSOE.
- 12 The Basque Economic Agreement regulates the tax and financial relations between the State and the Basque Country on the basis of the Constitution's first additional provision, which protects the historical rights of the Basque territories, and Title III of the Statute of Autonomy, which grants the Basque institutions the authority to regulate their tax system (euskadi.eus).
- 13 The agreement stated the following: 'Given the specificity arising from the existence of Foral Treasuries, the autonomous communities with Foral regime will assume, with reference to their territorial scope, the functions, and services assigned to the National Social Security Institute in this Royal Decree-Law regarding the non-contributory economic benefit of the Minimum Vital Income, under the terms to be agreed upon before October 31, 2020' (EAJ-PNV, Party Statement, 26 May 2020).
- 14 The agreement and final transfer would not take place until July 2024. This was, along with other measures, part of a broader negotiation in which ERC agreed to support the PSOE's regional presidency in Catalonia after the 2024 regional elections.

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