



Unveiling Subtle (Negative) Attitudes Towards Immigration in Spain in the Post-COVID Era: Challenges for Policymakers

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Abstract

This study investigates possible changes in Spanish attitudes towards immigrants following the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, a specialised survey was conducted in June 2021, from which the Global Immigration Tolerance Index (GITI) was developed. This composite index, integrating 29 variables in nine factors across three dimensions—symbolic racism, manifest prejudice, and subtle prejudice—measures tolerance levels towards immigration. Our analysis incorporates factor and multiple correspondence analyses to examine the association between GITI scores and demographic characteristics, alongside attitude changes during and after the pandemic. The findings indicate stability in positive attitudes towards immigrants, with the GITI mean at 72.3, suggesting a high degree of societal tolerance. Resistance to immigration mainly correlates with right-wing political ideologies, Catholicism, lower education levels, unstable employment, and limited interaction with immigrants. Nonetheless, a surprising trend of somewhat intolerant views was observed among the centre-left ideologies. This study extends the understanding of socio-political dynamics affecting immigration attitudes, highlighting that despite the pandemic's impact, the overall perception of immigrants remains predominantly positive. However, the research underscores the necessity for bolder policy approaches to address the latent ambivalence of attitudes towards immigration in contemporary Spain.

Keywords Attitudes towards immigration · COVID-19 pandemic · Spain · Subtle attitudes · GITI (Global Immigration Tolerance Index) · Social cohesion policies

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Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Spain encountered substantial challenges that significantly impacted its population, including migrants. The healthcare system faced intense pressures due to the overwhelming number of infections, which strained medical resources and healthcare personnel (Garcia-Carretero et al., 2023). The pandemic resulted in high mortality rates, particularly among the elderly and those with pre-existing health conditions (Redondo-Bravo et al., 2020). Economic challenges were also evident, as lockdowns and restrictions severely impacted various sectors, leading to job losses and financial instability (Arroyo et al., 2021; Battistini & Stoevsky, 2021).

Specifically, migrants in Spain—who, according to the National Statistics Institute (INE), amounted in June 2021 to around 5.4 million people, i.e. 11.4% of the total population—were disproportionately affected by several factors. Many lived in crowded conditions or worked in essential sectors such as agriculture, cleaning, and caregiving, increasing their exposure to the virus. Challenges were compounded by language barriers and limited access to information, significantly heightening their vulnerability (Gualda et al., 2021). Additionally, undocumented immigrants faced obstacles in accessing healthcare, often due to fears of deportation, and economically, immigrants employed in hospitality, tourism, and informal labour were particularly hard hit (Human Rights Watch, 2020; OECD, 2021). NGOs provided immigrant communities valuable support within this environment (Haldane et al., 2021).

The Spanish government implemented several actions to mitigate the pandemic's impact. Emergency measures included bolstering the healthcare infrastructure by converting facilities into makeshift hospitals and recruiting additional medical staff. Furthermore, the government established policy responses aimed explicitly at supporting immigrants, including temporary regularisation processes allowing some undocumented immigrants to obtain legal status, emergency financial aid, food assistance, accessible-to-everyone COVID-19 testing and treatment, and dissemination of information in multiple languages (Government of Spain-Council of Ministers, 2021). These policies were debated for their effectiveness and the need to form part of a broader, long-term inclusion strategy (Aris Escarcena, 2022; Sommarribas & Nienaber, 2021).

Concerning perceptions and feelings about immigration in the Spanish population, the COVID-19 pandemic generated a complex mixture of emerging challenges and mixed feelings. Throughout the pandemic, there was a notable concern among Spaniards about the vulnerabilities faced by immigrants, particularly those in low-wage essential jobs and those without proper healthcare access. Civil society organisations and local communities mobilised to provide assistance, food, and healthcare support to vulnerable migrants. This reflected a shift in public discourse, acknowledging the structural inequalities that left immigrant populations particularly exposed during the crisis (Fernandes-Jesus et al., 2021; Fernández-Reino et al., 2020). However, the extreme situation also fuelled tensions, as part of the native population saw immigrants as competitors for scarce

resources, often blaming them for broader structural social problems such as increased unemployment, longer food queues, or overburdening of the health system (Rowe et al., 2021).

This article tries to respond the following research question: have the Spaniards changed their attitudes towards immigrants after the COVID-19 pandemic? It aims to understand the extent to which tolerance towards immigration has changed post-COVID-19 and to engage in a comparative analysis of the sentiments expressed during the pandemic. For this reason, we first analyse the theoretical foundations of attitudes towards immigration. Next, we develop a methodology to measure these attitudes; specifically, we produce a synthetic index on tolerance. Thirdly, we analyse the performance of this index in the different degrees of acceptance or rejection of immigrants after COVID-19. Finally, we reflect on our results, suggest actions for policymakers, and raise some questions for the future in case inequalities between the migrant and native population continue to persist.

Literature Review

Attitudes Towards Immigration

Attitudes towards immigration are shaped by a confluence of opinions, beliefs, and values that individuals or societies hold regarding immigrants and the immigration process (Green et al., 2015). These attitudes are influenced by cultural, political, and economic contexts, leading to a spectrum of views ranging from positive to negative or even ambivalent. Positive attitudes often celebrate immigrants as enrichers of cultural diversity and societal strength, while negative views may stem from prejudices or fears of cultural and resource conflicts.

Social psychology provides a framework for understanding these attitudes by examining the dynamics between groups with differing customs within the same societal contexts, highlighting processes like acculturation and intergroup relations (Berry, 2001). For instance, conflict theory explains how economic and labour conditions influence the perception of and reaction to immigrants: in periods of unemployment or economic crisis, the working classes may perceive competition for resources, resulting in negative attitudes (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014). Similarly, the perceived threat to cultural identity can lead to negative attitudes towards immigrants (Ben-Nun Bloom et al., 2015; Louis et al., 2013).

Intergroup contact theory suggests that direct and positive contact between people from different ethnic or cultural groups can reduce prejudice and improve attitudes towards immigration. This contact involves interaction, collaboration, and sharing experiences with people who belong to a group different from one's own. Although not all intergroup contact is equally impactful (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), it has been shown that interventions, especially those carried in educational settings, can enhance its effectiveness in reducing prejudice (Bigler et al., 2001).

Individual life experiences and circumstances, such as level of education, family background, political affiliation, or religious beliefs, also influence attitudes towards immigrants (Festinger, 1957; Hogg & Vaughan, n.d.; Kelman, 1958; Petty

& Cacioppo, 1986). Moreover, exogenous factors like media portrayal of immigration and immigration-related policies and laws can affect attitudes. Media treatment of immigration as a threat can generate negative attitudes (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993), while policies and political discourse on immigration can influence public opinion (Sniderman et al., 2004).

How They Emerge

Attitudes towards immigration often manifest through prejudice and stereotypes, potentially leading to racism and xenophobia. Stereotypes are generalised, simplified beliefs about specific groups, while prejudices are negative or positive evaluations based on these beliefs (Allport, 1954). Stereotyping, derived from social categorisation processes, can foster discrimination and intolerance if it reinforces negative assumptions about immigrants, such as criminality or exploitation of resources (Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Verkuyten et al., 2018). Prejudice, as an emotional and evaluative response to stereotyping, originates from fears of change or competition for scarce resources, potentially leading to rejection or hostility towards migrants (Dovidio et al., 2010).

Modern society also exhibits subtler forms of discrimination, such as subtle prejudice, which masks its rejection of those who are different by clinging to traditional values or exaggerating cultural differences, thereby denying positive feelings towards the out-group (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). For its part, symbolic racism manifests as opposition to policies aimed at addressing racial inequality, often justified by traditional values (Quillian, 2006; Tarman & Sears, 2005). Additionally, aversive or latent racism occurs when societal members unconsciously avoid interaction with particular racial groups, resulting in discomfort or adverse reactions in their presence (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004).

As stereotypes and prejudices become internalised, they can escalate into overt racism or xenophobia, the latter involving fear and rejection of foreigners or those from different cultures (Esses et al., 2008).

How They Are Measured

Attitudes towards immigrants have been quantitatively assessed through psychometric scales, with social psychology providing foundational tools such as those by Henry and Sears (2002) for symbolic racism and Pettigrew and Meertens (1995) for prejudice, later refined by Arancibia-Martini et al. (2016) and Ungaretti et al. (2020). Dennison and Drazanova (2018) expanded this framework to include personal and contextual factors. The European Social Survey has contributed to reshaped scales (Heath et al., 2016), while other researchers have developed specific measures, such as sentiments about illegal immigrants (van der Veer et al., 2013) or attitudes of American social workers towards immigration (Park et al., 2011).

Synthetic indices, aggregating multiple indicators into a single metric, are prevalent across disciplines, capturing complex phenomena more effectively than individual indicators (Fischer et al., 2017; Roszkowska & Jefmański, 2021). In migration

studies, these indices primarily assess immigrant integration policies (Niessen, 2009) or immigrant integration, thus enabling comparisons and tracking progress over time (Harder et al., 2018), or providing tailored analyses for local contexts, as seen in Romania (Anatolie, 2018), Canada (Wong & Tézli, 2013), and Spain (Páramo, 2022).

Although less common, synthetic indices also rank individuals' tolerance levels (Carter & Lowles, 2022; Marozzi, 2016; Qian, 2013; Teney et al., 2013). In Spain, such methodologies have been employed regionally by IKUSPEGI (Páramo et al., 2011) and nationally in OBERAXE's reports (Fernández et al., 2019).

Extreme Events and Attitudes Towards Immigrants

In the context of global crises such as wars, pandemics, and economic downturns, receiving countries' attitudes towards migrants become complex and ambivalent. McLaren and Johnson (2007), alongside Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014), analyse the intricate interplay between positive and negative public sentiments emerging during these turbulent periods.

Armed conflicts often heighten security concerns, leading to the perception of migrants and refugees as potential threats. The widespread fear of terrorism, cultural clashes, and threats to national identity contribute to negative attitudes. The media plays a crucial role during conflicts, as negative portrayals of migrants and refugees can reinforce stereotypes and xenophobia. Describing migration as a crisis or threat significantly shapes public perceptions (Esses et al., 2013). Conversely, conflicts can also evoke humanitarian responses, increasing awareness of refugees' hardships and fostering supportive attitudes (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014).

Economic crises often cast immigrants as competitors for scarce resources, fuelling negative attitudes and anti-immigrant sentiment. Hainmueller and Hiscox (2010) demonstrate a correlation between financial downturns and the implementation of stricter immigration policies. Economic hardships can lead some groups to mistakenly blame immigrants for their difficulties, perpetuating negative stereotypes and prejudice. Nonetheless, economic downturns can also underscore the positive contributions of immigrants to labour markets and the facilitation of economic recovery (Borjas, 2006).

Pandemics, exemplified by COVID-19, have unfairly linked migrants to the spread of disease, leading to stigmatisation and adverse attitudes. Van Bavel et al. (2020) discuss how pandemics trigger threat perception mechanisms, fostering negative attitudes towards outgroups. On the other hand, recognising immigrants' indispensable roles in healthcare and other critical sectors during pandemics has led to more positive sentiments (Lee et al., 2022).

Methods

The Data Source

This article aims to determine whether the pandemic has changed the Spanish population's attitudes towards immigrants. In this sense, we try to find out the degree of

tolerance of Spaniards towards immigration after COVID-19 and to put this in dialogue with the attitudes shown towards immigrants during the pandemic.

To fulfil this objective, we analysed the data extracted from an ad hoc survey on Spaniard's perceptions and attitudes towards immigration.

The survey was conducted between 1 and 29 June 2021. A telephone survey methodology (CATI) was used with random sampling based on a census of randomly generated numbers. The target population consisted of people over 18 years of age born in Spain. In total, 619 surveys were completed. The sample's margin of error was $\pm 4\%$, with a confidence level of 95%. Two weighting variables were generated to control for quotas: one based on gender plus age group and the other adding the autonomous community.¹ The reference data comes from the INE's Continuous Register Statistics, with provisional data as of 1 January 2021 for the population born in Spain.

The survey measures aspects directly related to the attitudes (symbolic racism, manifest prejudice, and subtle prejudice) of people born in Spain concerning immigration, as well as the possible change in these attitudes with the pandemic. Concretely, the respondents were asked for their opinions on the importance of immigration for Spain; the aid received by immigrants compared to other groups; stereotypes (positive or negative) regarding immigration and immigrants; their position on irregularity and immigrants' rights, coexistence, and integration; and their sympathy or antipathy towards immigrants depending on their origin. Specific questions on immigration and COVID-19 were also addressed. In addition, the survey collected information on the socio-demographic profile of the respondents, as well as other personal factors (employment status, knowledge of languages, frequency of dealings with immigrants, religiosity, and political self-positioning).

The Methodological Process

Factor analysis was used to reduce data: On the one hand, it was utilised to simplify and unify the aforementioned individual attitudes (i.e. symbolic racism, manifest and subtle prejudice), deploying a tolerance index (subsequently standardised from 0 to 100). On the other hand, it was also employed to measure the degree of acceptance or rejection of immigration after the pandemic from the explicit questions about COVID.

We used the principal component analysis (PCA) method. This approach allowed us to identify and group the independent variables into the nine factors mentioned in Table 1.

In addition, we applied Varimax rotation, which is a method that facilitates the interpretation of the factors by maximising the variance of the factor loadings (in Table 1, in order to improve the interpretation of the factors, only factor loadings

¹ An autonomous community in Spain is a first-level political and administrative division, which granted a high degree of self-governance under the Spanish Constitution. Each autonomous community has its own government, parliament, and certain legislative powers, allowing it to manage various regional affairs independently. In Spain, there are 17 autonomous communities.

Table 1 The GITI factors

Variables	Components									Communality
	F1 Symbolic racism	F2 PM_1 Rejection of contact_A threat	F3 PM_2 Migration as a threat_A	F4 PL_1 Traditional values_A	F5 PM_3 Rejection of contact_B indirect	F6 PL_2 Traditional values_B mechanisms	F7 PL_3 Cultural differences	F8 PM_4 Migration as a threat_C (Native threat)	F9 PM_5 Migration as a threat_C (Native threat)	
Right to Social Aid	0.784									0.606
Right to Spanish nationality	0.745									0.551
Right to free public health care	0.722									0.519
Right to work	0.67									0.47
Right to free public education	0.623									0.403
Degree of dislike: Having an immigrant as a boss at work		0.637								0.39
Degree of dislike: Working your children being immigrant friends at home		0.588								0.405
Degree of dislike: Having your children being immigrant friends at home		0.548								0.355
Degree of dislike: That your children had an immigrant partner		0.527								0.32
Degree of agreement with statements on immigration: Immigrants occupy public spaces, where they commit crimes or substance abuse			0.746							0.674
Degree of agreement with statements about immigration: Immigrants do not want to integrate			0.684							0.603
Degree of agreement with statements about immigration: Immigrants come to take our jobs			0.666							0.568
Degree of agreement with statements about immigration: Immigrants come to take our jobs			0.658							0.551
Degree of agreement with statements about immigration: Immigrants come to take our jobs	0.658		0.659							0.556
Degree of agreement with statements about immigration: Immigrants do not commit crimes, should be rejected			0.657							0.556
Immigrants / Native comparison: More HONEST, less or the same as us?			0.651							0.517
Immigrants / Native comparison: More HONEST, less or the same as us?			0.625							0.488
Comparison immigrants / Natives: More HONEST, less or the same as us?			0.618							0.478
Comparison immigrants / Natives: More HONEST, less or the same as us?			0.615							0.474
Degree of dislike: Living in an area where there are a lot of immigrants			0.595							0.424
Degree of dislike: Having your children in a school with a lot of immigrants			0.591							0.444
Degree of dislike: That your health system faces a lot of pressure	0.474		0.585							0.395
Comparison immigrants / Natives: More HONEST, less or the same as us?			0.585			0.797				0.792
Degree of agreement with statements about immigration: Immigrants come from racist cultures						0.68				0.619
Do you like the appearance of a volunteer who is needed again from immigrants and Europe							0.641			0.546
Degree of agreement: Migrants' (non)consequential requests should be taken care of by the public administration							0.589			0.617
To be fair towards immigrants, most countries the rights of these people should be the same as with our legislation							0.57			0.562
Degree of agreement with statements on immigration: Immigrants are not needed in home job sectors							0.478			0.471
Degree of agreement with statements on immigration: Immigrants are not needed in home job sectors							0.47			0.471
Variance explained	30.081	7.784	5.717	5.451	4.892	1.896	2.405	3.222	3.222	0.518
Age	0.08									
Barbieri's level of subcity	0.06									
	Female	0.06								
	Male	0.06								
	Age	0.05								
	Sex	0.05								

higher than 0.4 have been included). As a result of this analysis, the independent variables were regrouped according to the relationships identified by the PCA itself, ensuring that the structure of the GITI index is based on a solid empirical foundation.

The relationship between the levels of tolerance, the degrees of post-COVID acceptance or rejection of immigration, and demographic and personal variables was analysed using multiple correspondence analysis (MCA), which made it possible to position the categories on a perceptual map, allowing us to interpret the multiple connections between the different variables.

Figure 1 describes the methodological process. Details for each phase of the process are provided below.

Building the Global Immigration Tolerance Index (GITI)

In order to craft the tolerance index, a factor analysis was carried out on those variables—a total of 29—that measured aspects directly related to attitudes towards immigrants’ rights and to prejudice, whether overt or subtle.

A total of nine factors were thus obtained, which in turn can be grouped into three broad dimensions:

- Symbolic racism, which shows respondents’ attitudes towards migrants’ rights (F1).
- Overt approach to prejudice, divided into two sub-dimensions: the rejection of contact with migrants (F2 and F5) and the perception of immigration as a threat (F3, F8, and F9).
- Subtle prejudice, divided into two sub-dimensions, the defence of traditional autochthonous values—(F4 and F5 and F6) and the highlighting of cultural differences between natives and migrants (F7).

These nine factors were weighted and re-scaled between zero and 100 to arrive at a single aggregate indicator, the so-called Global Immigration

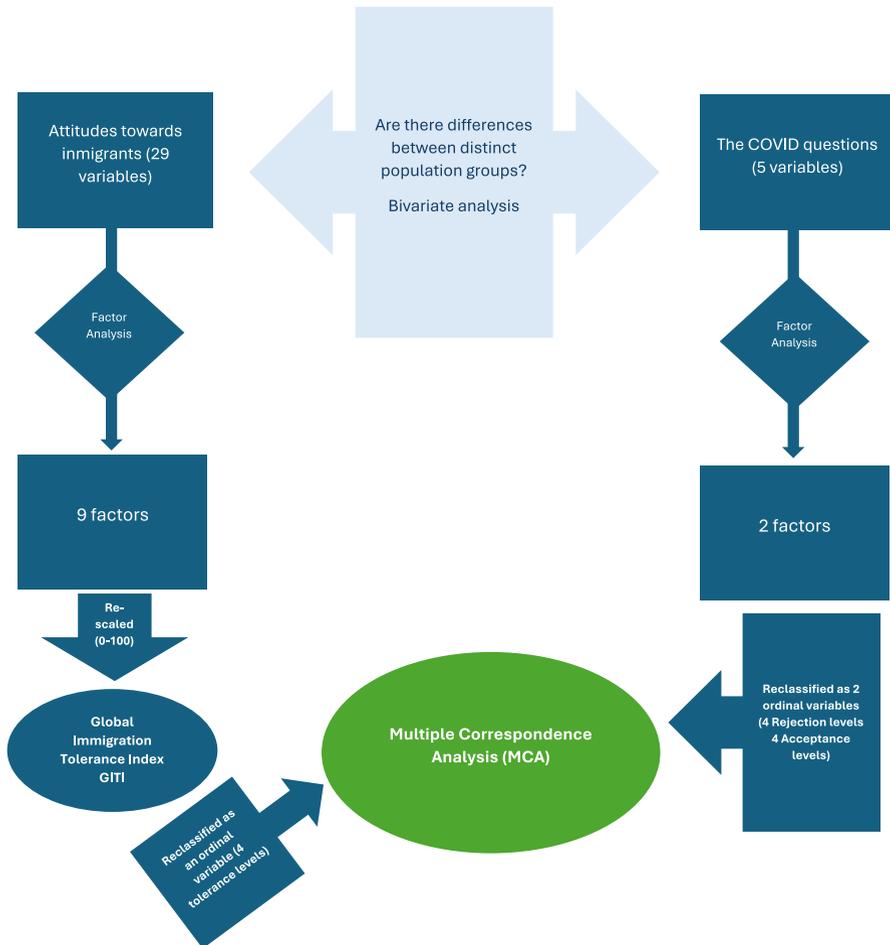


Fig. 1 The phases of the methodological process

Tolerance Index (hereinafter GITI). The index was reclassified into quartiles as an ordinal variable of four degrees of tolerance (1, the least tolerant; 2, not very tolerant; 3, fairly tolerant; 4, very tolerant.).

Subsequently, to observe whether there were significant differences between distinct groups in the population, a test of means concerning the index was carried out for a series of variables that could influence people's attitudes towards immigration. These control variables are either socio-demographic (gender, age) or descriptive of the subject's situation (level of education, employment status, speaking several languages, frequency of dealing with immigrants, religiosity, and political self-placement).

Building Acceptance and Rejection Levels Through the COVID Questions

In the questionnaire, there were five questions related to Spanish attitudes towards immigrants during the pandemic, two of a positive and two of a negative nature and one of a general nature. These questions were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree), 2 (agree), 3 (disagree) to 4 (strongly disagree).

- Immigrants do not have the economic resources to maintain hygiene measures.
- Immigrants do not respect sanitary norms as much as Spaniards do.
- Immigrants have been more supportive of each other than Spaniards have been of each other.
- Their (migrants') work during the confinement was indispensable.
- We value immigrants better than before COVID-19.

In order to find out whether there were differences between the various groups, a test of means was again carried out with each of these questions and both demographic variables (sex and age) and those indicative of the subject's situation (level of studies, employment situation, language skills, frequency of dealings with immigrants, and religiosity). This thorough analysis is attached in Annex 2 in the supplemental materials.

In addition, for a better understanding, a factor analysis was carried out based on the COVID-related questions, constructing two factors: 'level of acceptance of immigrants after COVID' and 'level of rejection of immigrants after COVID'. These factors of acceptance or rejection were recoded into four categories (low, medium–low, medium–high, and high) to make the analysis more intelligible.

The Big Picture

Finally, to jointly analyse the possible relationships between the GITI (in its ordinal version of four categories 1 the least tolerant to 4 very tolerant), the attitudes of acceptance and rejection of immigration after COVID and the demographic or situational variables that were found to be significant in the bi-variate tests, we conducted a multiple correspondence analysis (MCA).

MCA is a method to visualise and analyse relationships between categorical variables in a dataset (Greenacre, 2008). It focuses on associations between different variable categories and similarities within the same variable categories. This analysis reveals underlying patterns and interconnections in the data.

MCA summarises the information of a set of variables into factors to display the relationships between their response modalities. The variables defining each axis in the MCA indicate the categories' influence on the model, with the most contributing variable defining that axis or dimension. The proximity of two categories on an axis indicates a strong association between them.

Results

The GITI

Table 1 shows the results of the factor analysis. We have started from 29 variables reduced to 9 factors that explain 63.63% of the original variance. The factor analysis is pertinent, as established by the KMO with a value of 0.889 and Bartlett's test of sphericity (p value = 0.000).

From the above factors, an aggregate indicator is obtained, weighted by the corresponding eigenvalues:

$$\text{Tolerance} = (\text{sqrt}(7,621)*F1 + \text{sqrt}(2,246)*F2 + \text{sqrt}(1,658)*F3 + \text{sqrt}(1,581)*F4 + \text{sqrt}(1,436)*F5 + \text{sqrt}(1,072)*F6 + \text{sqrt}(,989)*F7 + \text{sqrt}(0,945)*F8 + \text{sqrt}(0,906)*F9) / (\text{sqrt}(7,621) + \text{sqrt}(2,246) + \text{sqrt}(1,658) + \text{sqrt}(1,581) + \text{sqrt}(1,436) + \text{sqrt}(1,072) + \text{sqrt}(,989) + \text{sqrt}(0,945) + \text{sqrt}(0,906)).$$

Finally, it is re-scaled between 0 and 100 to obtain the GITI:

$$\text{Tolerance}_{0_100} = (100) / (0.768327 - (-2.008018)) * (\text{Tolerance} - (-2.008018))$$

The mean of this indicator is 72.3 (S.D. = 12.94), and its distribution is shown in Fig. 2.

The mean test results for the index values performed on the control variables can be found in Annex 1 of the supplementary material.

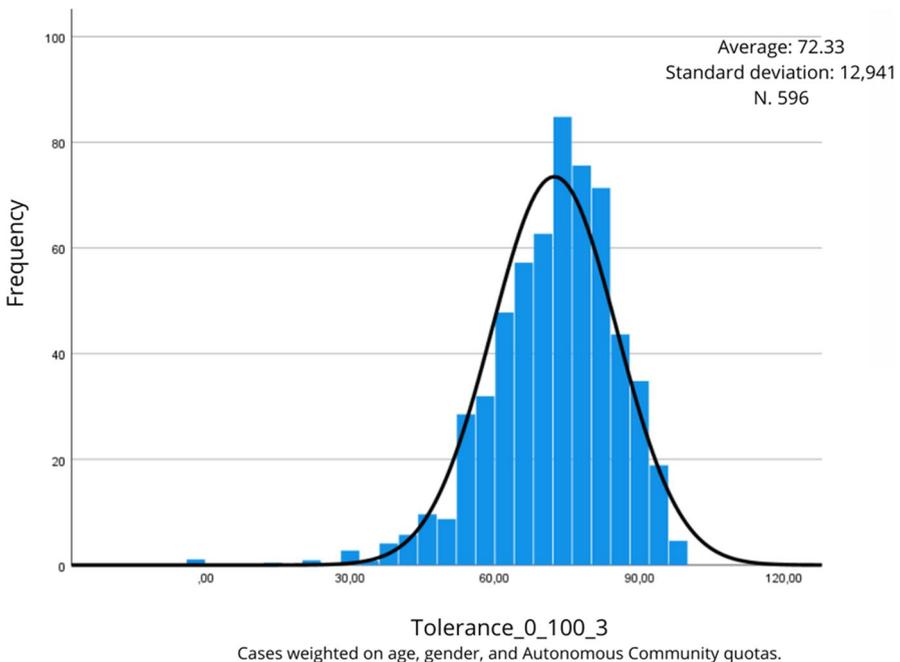


Fig. 2 The GITI distribution

Table 2. The immigrants' acceptance and rejection factors

The COVID questions		Component	
		Acceptance of immigrants	Rejection of immigrants
They do not respect health rules as much as Spaniards do		0.743	
Migrants have been infected with COVID more than Spaniards		0.739	
Migrants do not have the financial resources to maintain hygiene measu		0.666	
Their work during the confinement was indispensable			0.767
They have been more supportive of each other than Spaniards have been of us.			0.703
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy		.606	
Bartlett's test of sphericity	Approx. chi-square	175.605	
	gl	10	
	Sig.	<.001	

Acceptance and Rejection Levels

Table 2 shows the results of the factor analysis carried out with the questions referring to the acceptance/rejection of immigration after COVID-19. We started with five variables, which were reduced to two factors that explain 56.02% of the original variance. The factor analysis is pertinent as established by the KMO with a value of 0.606 and Bartlett's test of sphericity (p value < 0.001).

The bivariate analysis results and the means test of these five variables, together with demographic and situational factors, can be seen in Annex 2.

The Big Picture

The following variables have been analysed jointly:

- Tolerance (the GITI-four categories): 1, the least tolerant; 2, not very tolerant; 3, fairly tolerant; 4, very tolerant
- Level of acceptance after COVID (four categories): 1, low; 2, medium–low; 3, medium–high; 4, high)
- Level of rejection after COVID (four categories): 1, low; 2, medium–low; 3, medium–high; 4, high)
- Political self-location (six categories): extreme left, left, centre left; centre right, right, extreme right
- Frequency of dealing with immigrants in personal relationships (four categories): never, sometimes, constantly, very often

them. These people have little contact with migrants, their level of education is medium–low, they do not speak languages, and their employment situation includes retired people, the unemployed, and householders. Their ideological profile is basically on the right. However, the two less well-defined political categories (centre-left and centre-right) appear ‘changed’, with the self-identified centre-right being more tolerant than the self-identified centre-left.

The groups classified as more tolerant appear on the left-hand side of the graph and are those related to a low rejection or high acceptance of immigrants after COVID. Their ideological profile is basically on the left. However, the centre-right category also seems associated with high tolerance levels, and the centre-left category appears associated with lower tolerance levels. Regarding religiosity, there is a predominance of positions close to agnosticism or the practice of religions other than Catholicism. These people frequently deal with migrants, their level of education is medium–high, they speak languages other than Spanish, and their employment situation includes active workers and students.

Discussion

This article aims to determine whether the pandemic has led to a change in the Spanish population’s attitudes towards immigrants. In this sense, we try to find out the degree of tolerance of Spaniards towards immigration after the pandemic and to discuss this with the attitudes shown towards immigrants during the COVID.

To achieve our goal, we designed a specialised survey in June 2021 and created the Global Tolerance Indicator (GITI). This composite index quantifies tolerance towards immigration by condensing 29 variables into nine key explanatory factors across three dimensions: symbolic racism, manifest prejudice, and subtle prejudice. The GITI categorises individuals based on their tolerance levels.

Additionally, factor analysis helped us gauge immigrants’ acceptance and rejection degrees during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also employed multiple correspondence analysis to explore potential relations between the GITI scores and post-pandemic attitudes towards immigration, alongside the demographic and personal characteristics of the participants.

The findings reveal a consistent trend with pre-pandemic attitudes: Spanish society, on average, exhibits a high degree of tolerance towards immigration, with the GITI mean at 72.3. Profiles displaying the highest resistance are typically associated with right-wing political ideologies, Catholicism, lower educational attainment, unstable employment, limited foreign language proficiency, and minimal interaction with immigrants. Interestingly, we have also discovered a link between centre-left ideology and somewhat intolerant views.

The *contributions of our research that merit comment* are the following:

Firstly, the methodology used: Synthetic indices that measure attitudes towards immigrants are scarce in existing literature. Of the few examples we have encountered in our literature review, two are not purely targeted to the migrant population: Qian’s (2013) approach uses the Herfindahl–Hirschman index to quantify diversity based on birth countries, while the composite gay and bohemian index assesses

tolerance, neither specifically targeting migrants. The Fear and HOPE Index, developed by Carter and Lowles (2022), is broader, evaluating aspects of the responders' identity, politics, multiculturalism, and conspiracy theories. Marozzi's (2016) study focuses on the perceived socio-economic threat from immigrants. As for Spain, Oleaga Páramo et al. (2011) produced an index incorporating attitudes and other variables like coexistence and economic effects confined to the Basque region. Fernández and colleagues (2019) created an index for attitudes towards immigrants, but it is not utilised to describe different population groups regarding their tolerance.

Secondly, our empirical findings: Our study revealed, on the one hand, the stability of positive attitudes towards immigrants among Spaniards over time, regardless of unfavourable circumstances, and on the other hand, it highlighted the link between less favourable or more prejudiced attitudes and (mostly) 'conservative' profiles.

Our research showed mainly positive attitudes towards migration, with a 72.6 rate in the GITI. This value is higher than the results obtained by similar indicators as the IKUSPEGI barometer (from 57.18 in 2007 to 66.36 in 2023) and the tolerance index developed in the OBERAXE reports (44.5 in 2015 and 30.25 in 2017, the last year of its production). In addition, the empirical studies about the evolution of racism and xenophobia in Spain conducted since 2007 (Cea D'ancona & Valles Martínez, n.d.; Fernández et al., 2017, 2018, 2019; IKUSPEGI-Observatorio Vasco de Inmigración, n.d.; Junta de Andalucía: Observatorio Permanente Andaluz de las Migraciones, n.d.; Junta de Andalucía, 2020) show that attitudes towards immigrants living in Spain improved in the last 15 years.

These figures encompass the overall response of Spanish society towards immigrants during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. For the pre- and post-pandemic period, research indicates that even though the pandemic caused a lot of disruption and change in society, people's views on immigration did not change much or even became more positive (Dennison et al., 2023). Furthermore, the importance traditionally placed on immigration issues also saw a notable decline, hinting those other pressing concerns, such as health and economic impacts, dominated public attention (Rodríguez-Rey et al., 2020). Indeed, even the populist extreme right party VOX shifted its strategy to criticise the government's crisis management, positioning itself as the main opposition and prioritising health and economic issues over immigration (Olivas Osuna & Rama, 2021; Zanotti & Turnbull-Dugarte, 2022). The perceived welcoming attitude towards immigrants could suggest an increased recognition of their contributions to Spanish society, as noted by Heizmann and Huth-Stöckle (2023), potentially offsetting the post-pandemic societal fragmentation predicted by Oso et al. (2021) in 2021.

However, the pandemic could also have influenced social attitudes and policies towards immigration in Spain through the mechanisms of political polarisation and exacerbated racial and ethnic inequalities. In this regard, Bernacer et al. (2021) point out how people's reactions to government actions and views on public health versus personal freedom often vary by political orientation and also influence opinions on immigration, with conservatives primarily supporting tighter immigration controls for national security reasons, while liberals stressed the rights and benefits of immigrants. Moreover, as highlighted by Fouskas et al. (2022) in their study of Spain and

Greece, the challenges faced by migrants during the pandemic (in terms of access to healthcare, employment or social services) not only worsened outcomes for migrants but also could fuel xenophobic attitudes among native populations, who might see immigrants as competitors for scarce resources.

This fact connects with the described profile of reluctant subjects (and subsequently connected to more rejective attitudes) towards immigrants. Spanish and international scholars support the results of our investigation when describing the various factors influencing tolerance towards immigrants. The most intolerant are individuals who view immigrants as competitors for jobs and resources, especially within lower socio-economic groups (Checa Olmos & Arjona Garrido, 2012; Freitag & Hofstetter, 2022; Freitag & Rapp, 2013), preferably right-wing individuals who prioritise nationalistic and homogeneous societal structures (Cohrs & Stelzl, 2010; Vallejo, 2013), and also older individuals and those with low education levels (Gu et al., 2022) and low proximity to immigrant populations (Dražanová & Gonnot, 2023; François & Magni-Berton, 2013).

Nevertheless, our research findings also provided contradictory results, as the centre-left group was close to less tolerant stances. In this respect, it must be said that political orientation does not uniformly predict positive attitudes toward immigrants. Left-wing individuals can also exhibit intolerance towards immigrants, influenced by various factors, including the rhetoric of their political parties (Bohman, 2011) or just what Crawford (2014) calls the 'ideological symmetry in political intolerance', where both left-wing and right-wing individuals show intolerance toward groups perceived as ideologically dissimilar, including immigrants. Additionally, Burchianti and Zapata-Barrero (2014) observed in Catalonia that political pressures and campaign strategies can lead even traditionally pro-immigrant left-wing parties to adopt less tolerant public stances.

Moreover, in the case of our questionnaire, 72% of the sample self-positioned politically as left-wing (including 38% as centre-left). These shares are higher than those provided by the CIS barometer of June 2021 (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2021), where 63% self-positioned as left-wing, including 26% as centre-left. The political self-positioning in the left wing could be associated with social-desirability biases in Spain (Martínez-Herrera, 2002); people tend to form the illusion that a left-wing ruling party is more successful in implementing social policies than a right-wing party, which may reflect a cognitive bias aligned with their previous political attitudes (Blanco et al., 2018). As stated in the literature, in societies where progressive ideologies are seen as socially desirable, individuals might be more likely to identify as progressive publicly, regardless of their private views (Heide-Jørgensen, 2022). That is, citizens might adopt what they perceive as politically congruent psychological attributes or at least be motivated to view themselves as having these attributes (Bakker et al., 2021).

A final consideration to be discussed is the virtual comparison of the situation in Spain with that of our surrounding countries. It has been demonstrated that although the COVID-19 pandemic hit Spain with exceptional hardness, the overall perception of immigration's impact on Spain has become more positive, with a significant increase in the percentage of the public viewing it as beneficial (Kumar & Faures, 2023). However, research findings highlight a varied response across Europe,

with no uniform trend towards improving or deteriorating views on immigration post-pandemic.

The bright side is held by Dennison et al. (2023), who sustain that change in attitudes towards immigration has been minimal—or became more favourable—in the perceived importance of the issue across Europe and the USA. Meanwhile, Heizmann and Huth-Stöckle (2023), in their analysis across 11 European countries, revealed that pandemic-related anxieties could intensify negative sentiments towards immigrants, mainly where the pandemic's impact was most severe. In the same vein, Freitag and Hofstetter (2022) demonstrated that in regions with higher perceived threats from the pandemic, there was a corresponding increase in negative attitudes towards immigrants, mediated by emotions such as fear and anger. Additionally, research by Adam-Troian and Bagci (2021) in Turkey shows that the perceived COVID-19 threat can lead to both pro- and anti-immigrant sentiments.

Conclusion

This article analysed whether Spanish attitudes towards immigration changed after the COVID-19 pandemic. Our results allow us to conclude that Spain, one of the countries in the world hardest hit by the pandemic, maintained—or even improved—tolerance levels and positive attitudes towards immigration before the COVID outbreak.

We could also affirm that the levels of tolerance and resilience in Spain have been higher than in many countries in our immediate neighbourhood. Although ambivalent reactions have been evident in all countries (including Spain), with concerns about competition for scarce resources such as jobs and health care, there has been a prevailing awareness of the importance of the vital role that immigrants came to play.

Our data collection instrument allowed us to confirm that the attitudinal profiles, depending on the demographic and personal circumstances of the respondents, coincided with those coined by the scientific literature: groups with conservative characteristics (i.e. Catholic religion, conservative political views, upper age brackets, little contact with immigrants, and low educational background) were the most reluctant to accept immigrants. However, surprisingly, our results also showed that some progressive profiles (self-declared centre-left ideology) turned out to be less tolerant (i.e. slightly intolerant).

This finding shows that intolerance in Spain can have two profiles, an explicit and a 'subtle' one. The former openly acknowledges their aversion to foreigners (whom they tend to see as competitors for resources or invaders of national identity). However, self-declared progressive individuals would not explicitly acknowledge their rejection of the ex-group.

For 30 years, Spanish migration authorities have been fostering immigrant integration through various laws and strategic integration plans; among them, the Strategy against Racism in Spain was recently adopted (Government of Spain, 2022). The Spanish Strategic Framework combines legal changes, educational programmes, and community involvement to build a cohesive, anti-racist society. However, the plan

only mentions three times the unconscious (or subtle) types of discrimination. This looks significant, as the most challenging part of the fight against discrimination is the one that addresses its more subtle forms because these are not even acknowledged (or consciously aware) by those who hold them.

Findings such as ours repeatedly demonstrate the need for public authorities to invest their budget and efforts in combating these subtly discriminatory attitudes, which are difficult to detect and may be masked by social desirability.

The challenges for policymakers go beyond simply identifying appropriate interventions. It is essential to ensure that society, i.e. the general public and policymakers themselves, recognise and acknowledge subtle discrimination. This implies developing comprehensive educational programmes that address both explicit and subtle racism, integrating them into curricula at the national level to foster a deeper understanding from an early age.

In addition, it is crucial to involve communities in developing and implementing anti-racist initiatives. This ensures that programmes have been developed with the cultural dimension in mind and will, therefore, be more effective at the level of the various target populations. Policymakers must also be committed to continuous evaluation, regularly assessing the effectiveness of these programmes and making the necessary adjustments in light of their results and new research.

Finally, we stress the need to allocate adequate funding and resources to support these initiatives. Even the best-designed programmes may fail to achieve the desired impact without sufficient resources.

Limitations

The main limitation of this research resides in the data collection process.

The first limitations rely on the sample size and composition. The size of the sample analysed, 619 individuals, could restrict the generalisability of the results to the whole population and suggest the need to replicate future studies with larger samples, which will make it possible to contrast and validate the findings obtained.

In the present study, our aim was to obtain a comprehensive representation of Spanish society by focusing on individuals aged 18 and older born in Spain, without differentiating between the origin—Spanish or immigrant—of their parents. The design of our sampling strategy was intended to reflect the prevailing attitudes within the native adult population of Spain, based on the assumption that all native individuals, regardless of their parental origins, are equally valid participants in a survey that aims to reflect the broader Spanish social context.

In fact, current literature has highlighted that, equally to the native-born population, migrant-background citizens show ambivalent sentiments towards newcomers. For instance, Just and Anderson (2015) illustrate how naturalisation into host societies often aligns immigrants' attitudes with those of native citizens, sometimes leading to skepticism toward new immigration, especially in contexts of economic dissatisfaction. In contrast, Clara Becker (2019) emphasises that individuals with a migration background, particularly first-generation immigrants, exhibit significantly

more positive attitudes toward new immigration compared to natives, driven by shared experiences and reduced social distance.

On the other hand, 44% of our survey respondents declared higher education levels. This might create a bias towards more educated views on immigration attitudes. Our study sample might also have other limitations, such as the excess of urban dwellers (so, the possible lack of rural populations) and an over-representation of left-winged self-declared participants (72%). This might affect how well our findings apply to a broader demographic. Furthermore, respondents might be influenced by the external situation in which the survey was conducted; in this regard, the post-COVID crisis, the Ukrainian conflict, and the measures adopted by the Spanish Government to tackle internal disparities (Gobierno de España, 2021). This could have led to overoptimistic/over-tolerant responses.

Another limitation is the contents of the questionnaire: the purpose of our research was mainly to analyse respondents' attitudes towards migration (concretely those connected to subtle racism and manifest and subtle prejudice) and their views on immigrants' behaviour after the pandemic. In addition, the survey includes information about respondents' situational and personal factors. However, the questionnaire does not collect information about exogenous factors, lacking the influence of media or political discourse on attitudes towards immigrants. These shortcomings have also influenced the production of our GITI, which would not include as many variables as other measures developed in our country with a similar methodological approach.

Implications for the Future

This article, devoted to analysing the virtually changing attitudes of Spaniards towards a disadvantaged population by COVID-19 pandemic, has shown how, although largely tolerant, a segment of the native population can harbour subtle negative attitudes. Such attitudes may persist over time and presumably endure as migrant people are perceived as competitors for scarce resources.

For this reason, in Annex 3, we have analysed the existing gap between the current situation for the migrant and the native-born populations not only in Spain but also in some chosen European countries representing the diversity of the EU-27 (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, and Poland). We have examined the following data:

1. Legal/administrative documents (i.e. laws and/or regulations, policy documents) about the rights entitlements of migrants into social protection in general, and health and other social exclusion-related social protection rights in particular.
2. Figures for the socio-economic disparities between the migrants and the native-born population.
 - Gap with the native-born in the unemployment rate.
 - Median income of the foreign-born as a percentage of native-born.

- Gap with the native-born regarding the percentage of people over 18 at risk of poverty or social exclusion.
 - Gap with the native-born regarding the percentage that have Tertiary education.
 - Gap with the native-born regarding the percentage that have less than Primary education
3. Statistical facts for the inequalities in the access to health services between these two.
- Gap in perceived health status (good health).
 - Gap in self-reported unmet needs for medical examination.

The socio-economic and health disparities between immigrants and natives in Europe before and after the COVID-19 pandemic can significantly influence attitudes towards migration in receiving countries. Narrowing unemployment gaps and improved labour market integration in some contexts may foster more positive attitudes, as successful immigrant inclusion can be perceived as beneficial to the broader economy. However, the persistence of income disparities, increased poverty risks in certain countries, and foundational education challenges may reinforce negative perceptions, with immigrants being viewed as economically vulnerable or reliant on social welfare systems.

The uneven policy outcomes across countries, where some have reduced educational and poverty disparities while others have seen gaps widen, could shape public opinion based on perceived policy effectiveness and fairness. Positive health perceptions among migrants, driven by the healthy migrant effect, could mitigate negative attitudes. However, structural health inequalities and their exacerbation during the pandemic, particularly in essential job sectors with limited protections, may still contribute to narratives of exploitation or systemic neglect rather than successful integration.

Overall, the degree to which host societies ensure equitable access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities influences public attitudes towards migration. Proactive and effective policies promoting fairness and inclusion can support more positive views, while persistent inequalities may deepen scepticism and fuel anti-immigrant sentiments. Moreover, adopting a human-rights-based (HRB) approach is suggested to strengthen these efforts further. This approach emphasises the importance of dignity, equality, and respect for all individuals, so by integrating HRB principles, policymakers can create more robust and inclusive strategies that address both explicit and subtle forms of racism, fostering a society that truly values diversity and inclusion.

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Author Contribution Cecilia Estrada: conceptualisation, data collection, writing—original draft, project administration, funding acquisition.

Antonio Rúa: conceptualisation, methodology design, data analysis, writing, visualisation.

Mercedes Fernández: conceptualisation, methodology design, supervision, review and editing, visualisation

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Data Availability The data supporting this study's findings is available from the internal repository of Universidad Pontificia Comillas. It can be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to approval by Universidad Pontificia Comillas and compliance with institutional policies.

Declarations

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Universidad Pontificia Comillas. Approval number No. 79–2021.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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