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A future of authoritarian citizens? Explaining why Spanish youth are losing faith in democracy

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This article examines why Spanish young people support democracy to a lesser extent than younger generations decades ago: while youth in previous decades showed stronger democratic commitment, the eventual support an authoritarian regime is increasing among today's youth. Building on a theoretical discussion, we propose three hypotheses to explain why levels of diffuse democratic support is decreasing among Spanish young people: (1) political ideology, since young people place themselves on the right side of the left-right division to a larger extent and this might affect their democratic support; (2) the influence of radical right parties, since new radical parties, as VOX, are spreading discourses that are mainly critical towards democracy and defend past authoritarian experiences; and, finally, (3) the role of social media where these radical discourses that challenge democracy. Analysing survey data from the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research, our results highlight the relevance of young people who place themselves at the centre of the ideological spectrum in understanding this decline in young people's levels of democratic support. We also explore the presence of a gender gap in democratic attitudes—given its relevance in other contemporary attitudinal and behavioural shifts affecting young people in many Western countries—but find no evidence of such a gap.

KEYWORDS

young people, diffuse support, democracy, authoritarian rule, political culture

Introduction

Are young people developing authoritarian attitudes and rejecting democracy to a greater extent than older individuals? In this article, we examine whether Spanish young people are still supporting democracy as they were in the past decades or, on the contrary, if they are abandoning their positive feelings towards democracy.

The relevance of this research question is both academic and social. From an academic perspective, increasing evidence indicates that young people are relating to politics in distinct ways. Some studies suggests that some attitudinal patterns, concerns, and political behaviors are shifting from left to right (Lorente and Sánchez-Vítores, 2022). Young people seem to be also voting in greater numbers for radical right parties (Zagórski et al., 2021) and populist options (Zagórski et al., 2024), while adopting more extreme positions across the ideological spectrum (Mitrea et al., 2021). Furthermore, evidence also indicates that they are moving toward more sceptical positions on democracy (Grassi et al., 2024) and authoritarian stances (Miner and Warren, 2024).

In addition, gendered attitudinal patterns are also becoming salient. While young male individuals are shifting quick, adopting right-wing ideological positions demonstrating stronger support for radical right parties, young women seem to keep more progressive attitudes, which has its reflection in electoral choices (Abou-Chadi et al., 2021; Abou-Chadi, 2024). This raises critical questions: What is happening, then, with their attitudes toward democracy? Are they becoming less supportive? And if so, why?

Our research is also socially relevant, given growing concerns about democratic resilience, it is essential to critically reassess how citizens—particularly younger generations—relate to democracy. While scepticism toward the functioning of democratic institutions is not inherently harmful, long-term democratic stability depends, amongst other factors, on the belief that democracy remains the most preferable form of government when compared to its alternatives. Classic works in comparative politics (such as Almond and Verba, 1963; or Linz and Stepan, 1996) show that democracies have a higher likelihood to endure if they have a solid base of committed democrats. This insight gains renewed relevance in the context of today's youth, who are in the formative phase of political socialization (Jennings, 2007). As attitudes developed during this period often persist into adulthood (Jennings, 1990; Dinas, 2013; Neundorf and Smets, 2017), early signs of democratic fatigue could foreshadow weaker support for democracy in the future. Such trends, if left unaddressed, might erode the legitimacy and stability of democratic systems over time.

In this article we address two interrelated research questions. First, we investigate whether young people are genuinely less supportive of democracy, drawing on data from the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research (CIS), which provides several measures of diffuse democratic support. Second, we examine the factors that might explain why young people differ from adults in their attitudes, focusing on aspects such as ideology, closeness to radical right parties, and social media usage. Finally, we explore whether young males, in particular, are showing a greater shift toward non-democratic attitudes compared to young women.

The article is structured as it follows. First, a review of the literature on democratic support and the sources of authoritarianism are presented, analysing both classical and recent literature, as well as studies specifically addressing support for democracy in Spain, particularly citizens' diffuse support for democracy. This includes an examination of the relationship between ideology, gender, and social media exposure with diffuse support for democracy. Following a descriptive section on the evolution of the levels of support for democracy in Spain, which complements the evidence from the literature, the hypotheses are outlined. Next, the research design employed to address the research question is discussed, with a particular focus on the different approaches used by the CIS to measure diffuse support for democracy and their alignment with the objectives of this study. The results are then presented, discussing their implications for understanding young Spaniards' attitudes toward democracy, followed by the conclusions that close the article.

Political culture and support for democracy

The Political Culture paradigm gives us key theoretical elements to understand how people relate to their political system (Fuchs, 2007). Since the sixties, it has been well established that citizens are capable to forming political orientations and predispositions toward key political objects and actors, which influence the way they understand politics and interact with political institutions. The development of political attitudes allows citizens to evaluate the performance of their governments, stablish affective feelings towards institutions or parties, and acquire knowledge to understand what is going on throughout their public space (Almond and Verba, 1963). One of those attitudes is the diffuse support for democracy (Easton, 1965, 1975). For some authors, diffuse support is a good approximation

to measure the levels of legitimacy that the public confers to democracy as the preferable regime in a given society (Linz, 1985; Morlino and Montero, 1995; Diamond and Lipset, 1995; Montero et al., 1998). Conversely, other authors are more hesitant to consider diffuse support as a way to know the legitimacy that citizens confer to their democracies (McDonough et al., 1986; Magalhães, 2014). For a revision of the theoretical implications of considering diffuse support an approximation to democratic legitimacy, see the work by van Ham and van Elsas (2024).

Easton (1965, 1975) distinguished two different ways that individuals dispose to communicate political preferences to the political system: demands, referring to specific preferences on public policies; and support, understood as the extent to which citizens accepted the political regime and how it works. Political support, in democracies, is commonly divided into specific and diffuse support. The first dimension of support concerns citizens' evaluations of how democracy works, specifically regarding the performance of democratic institutions (Farah et al., 1979; Thomassen, 1990). When institutional performance declines, satisfaction with democracy tends to diminish; on the contrary, when conditions improve and democracy performs more effectively, specific support for the system increases. Consequently, specific support for democracy is context-dependent and tends to fluctuate in response to factors such as economic conditions, political conflict, or specific shocks that countries face (Montero et al., 1998).

The second dimension, diffuse support, has to do with the evaluation of the whole democratic system, a judgement of democracy itself as the best kind of institutional design a country can have (Lipset, 1959a; Almond and Verba, 1963; Linz, 1978, 1988; Morlino and Montero, 1995; Montero et al., 1998; Magalhães, 2014). Therefore, it measures the extent to which citizens prefer democracy over other forms of governance, such as authoritarian rule. This indicator, then, does not change easily over time even if context changes, since it is not related to democracies' efficacy but with values that defend democratic principles (Morlino and Montero, 1995). These values and principles—used by citizens to assess whether a political system qualifies as democratic—tend to be stable (Hernández, 2016; Montero et al., 2016).

Building on this distinction, an important debate has emerged around the interdependence of these two dimensions of democratic support. On one hand, some authors conclude that they are distinct, autonomous indicators that do not affect each other (Montero et al., 1998). Empirical evidence suggests that declining satisfaction with the performance of democracy does not automatically undermine the belief that democracy is the most preferable over autocracy (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Montero et al., 2016). On the other hand, other authors (Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995; Magalhães, 2014; Weatherford, 1987) argue that a decline in specific support for democracy can eventually impact on the levels of diffuse support. Additionally, comparative studies analysing support longitudinally, like the work by Montero et al. (2016) provide evidence that diffuse support tends to be higher than specific support, since citizens support democracy as a system to a larger extent than the performance of the system.

Diffuse support for democracy in Spain

In Spain, the high level of diffuse support for democracy among its citizens is well documented (see Montero et al., 1998). Although support was relatively modest during the early years of democracy following the dictatorship, since the nineties around 85 percent of

citizens declares that democracy is always preferable to authoritarian alternatives (Linz and Stepan, 1996). Empirical evidence from 2012 confirmed that this support is broadly shared across social groups—irrespective of gender, class, education, or age—even if individuals with the highest levels of education exhibited slightly stronger democratic commitment. Additionally, there is an ideological consensus about the virtues of democracy with both the left and right largely in agreement. The impact of ideology is minimal, mainly influencing those at the extremes of the ideological spectrum, particularly on the far right (Montero et al., 2016). More than ten years later, in this article we analyse whether these patterns of consensus and stability persist, or whether shifts have emerged.

But, why does democratic support shift? Modernisation theory, initially depicted by Lipset (1959a) and further developed by authors like Inglehart (1971), would suggest that as countries develop, democracy should tend to be viewed as the most favourable political system. Individual characteristics such as the level of education or the presence of a broad middle class are positively correlated with supporting democracy and values aligned with democratic principles (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). Other studies highlight the importance of uninterrupted years of democracy as a key factor in finding high democratic support in a given country (Lipset, 1959b). At the same time, experiences of authoritarian rule and the resulting collective memory are also crucial for understanding why some countries exhibit strong citizen support for democracy as a political system (Di Palma, 1970).

Conversely, identifying the drivers of democratic rejection is more complex, aside from individuals with radical beliefs (Torcal and

Magalhães, 2022). This is largely because individuals who do not view democracy as the most preferable political system remain a small minority in developed and liberal-democratic countries, especially in the period following the third wave of democratization (Huntington, 1991). Nonetheless, because political attitudes can be shaped through top-down processes, greater support for non-democratic attitudes is expected in countries where certain parties do not support democracy or where social or media elites disseminate narratives that hinder values aligned with democratic principles. When these actors gain significant support, their ideas and discourses are likely to become normalized and accepted, particularly among voters aligned to those parties (Zaller, 1994; Druckman et al., 2013; Torcal and Magalhães, 2022).

In Spain, since the 1980s, positive attitudes toward democracy have typically exceeded 80 percent, as illustrated in Figure 1. Besides, since 1996 it has been difficult to identify partisan patterns that explain why citizens tend to support democracy to a greater extent, as Montero et al. (2016). Nevertheless, in Spain, there are some factors that help explain variation in citizens' attitudes towards democracy: corruption scandals, years of governments of the socialist parties, placing themselves on the right side of the left–right division, or being religious tend to push some citizens away from supporting democracy. On the contrary, having high levels of social trust, attaining higher levels of education, or being interested in politics seems to reduce authoritarian values which consequently decrease diffuse support to democracy (Montero et al., 2016).

Figure 1 shows that, even since Great Recession (2008–2012) which opened a period of instability in party system, the pattern of
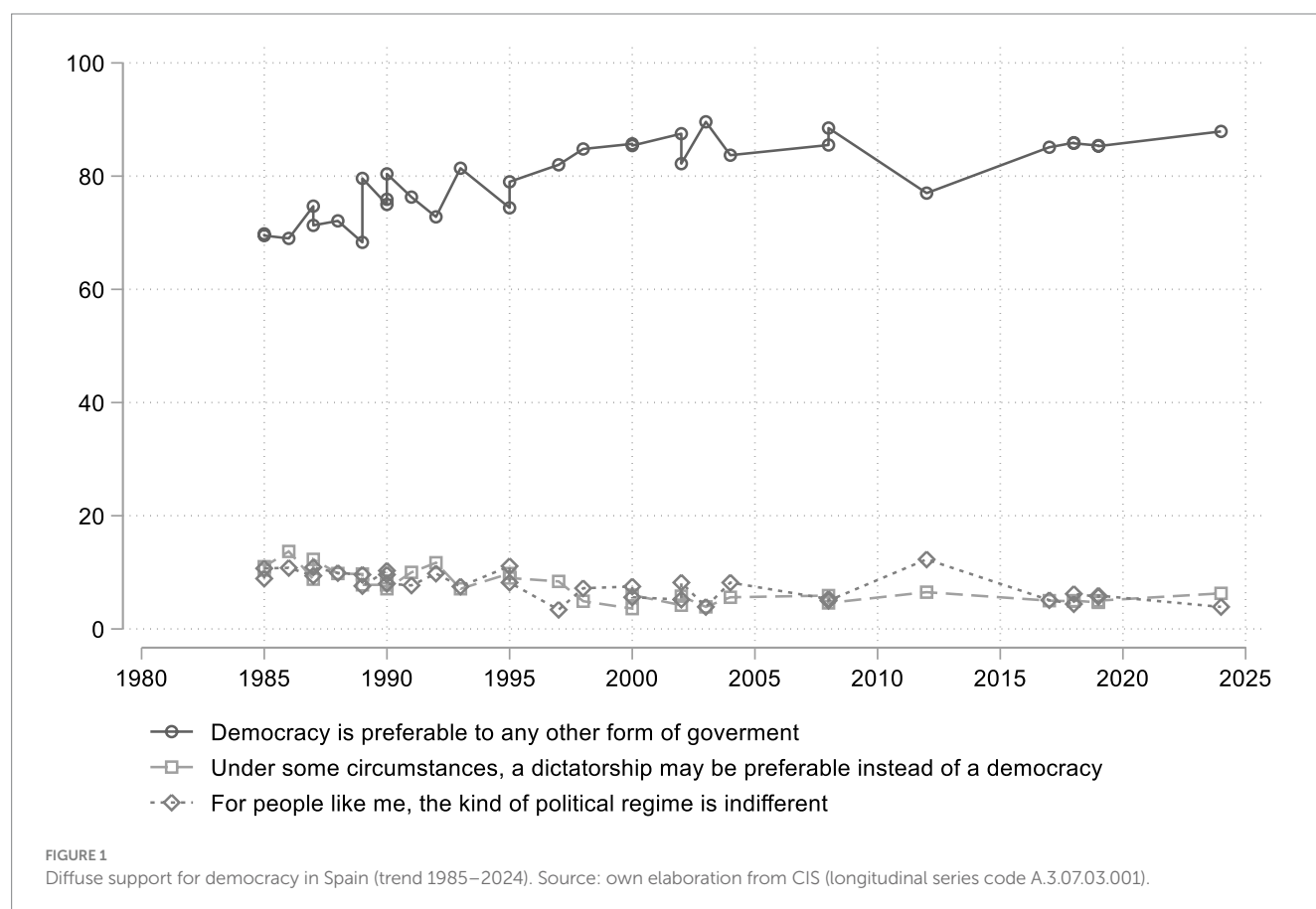

FIGURE 1
Diffuse support for democracy in Spain (trend 1985–2024). Source: own elaboration from CIS (longitudinal series code A.3.07.03.001).

TABLE 1 Support for democracy across age groups (selected years).

		Democracy is always preferable to any other form of government	Under some circumstances, a dictatorship may be preferable instead of democracy	For people like me, the kind of political regime is indifferent
Sept-24	18–24	76.3	13.8	8.5
	25–34	81.2	10.7	6.5
	Total	87.9	6.3	3.9
Feb-21	18–24	66.1	7.6	7.5
	25–34	84.7	3.7	5.7
	Total	78.6	6.3	8
May-19	18–24	80.6	5.6	4.2
	25–34	83.5	5.1	5.1
	Total	85.3	5	5.9
Apr-2018	18–24	81.8	4.5	4.5
	25–34	78.4	8.1	5.4
	Total	85.9	4.9	4.4
Nov-12	18–24	75.7	5.8	14.1
	25–34	72.9	6.7	15.6
	Total	77	6.5	12.3
Nov-87	18–24	83.3	8.4	6.4
	25–34	82.9	7.3	5.7
	Total	71.3	12.3	10.9
Nov-85	18–24	80.8	7.2	7.7
	25–34	84.2	6.5	4.6
	Total	69.5	11	10.7

Source: own elaboration from CIS.

diffuse support is quite stable. As it is known, the Spanish party system tended to bipartidism: Spanish voters concentrated their vote on the two main parties from left (Partido Socialista Obrero Español—PSOE) and right (Partido Popular—PP), although those parties needed support from small parties to gain the majority in the legislative chamber (Orriols and Cordero, 2016). This, along with the centripetal electoral competition, allow experts to consider the party system as a moderate multiparty system, tending towards bipartidism (Rama, 2016). This pattern exploded in 2011, in the context of economic crisis and implementation of unpopular policies that had a citizen's response in form of protests, as the May 15th Movement or 15 M (Anduiza et al., 2014). This contributes to explain, why diffuse democratic support went down in 2012.

However, this discontent entered the parliament in 2015 General Election, through two new parties: Podemos (We Can) and Ciudadanos (Citizens), which shared the criticism towards the traditional political elites, but proposed different solutions for Spain (Orriols and Cordero, 2016). Spanish democracy seemed to be able to incorporate new players that promoted new debates and diffuse support came back to normal since 2015. In 2018, VOX, a radical right party took advantage from the territorial crisis in Catalonia and entered the parliament. This was the first radical right party which gained a seat since the Transition to Democracy, and the first party that holds a discourse openly critical with democracy and democratic principles (Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020). However, in spite of having a new radical right party in the parliament, no changes in democratic

support can be appreciated in Figure 1. At least, among general population, as we will see in Table 1.

A paradox emerges when democratic diffuse support is examined across age groups: young Spaniards currently exhibit lower support for democracy than older age groups—an unexpected finding according to the literature (for, instance Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). If age played any role, one would expect older individuals to show less democratic support, as suggested by the data in Table 1, according to previous evidence (Lipset, 1959a; Inglehart, 1971; Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; Grassi et al., 2024). However, CIS data indicates that, with the exception of 2012 contextualised before, younger Spanish citizens tended to support democracy more than the average citizen, particularly during the 1980s, when young people strongly and decisively supported democracy in a context of consolidation of the new political regime. All in all, in Spain, the discontent towards democratic politics, institutions and actors did not imply less support for democracy as a political regime, but political dissatisfaction and behaviors that included both higher likelihoods to participate in protests (García-Albacete and Lorente, 2019) and voting for parties that defend a radicalisation of democracy (Cordero and Roch, 2023). This pattern of low specific support for democracy, distrust in traditional parties and institutions, but high levels of diffuse support for democracy seems to have shifted in Spain since 2021, according to the data of Table 1. Consequently, our question is why are Spanish young people supporting democracy to a lesser extent since 2021?

Sources of authoritarianism: theoretical expectations and hypotheses

As previously noted, Political Science generally supports the expectation that newer cohorts—having been socialized under more stable and favourable conditions than earlier cohorts—would develop values that reinforce the importance of democratic rule. Inglehart defended that the more modernized a society becomes, the more presence of self-expression values can be found. Whereas those values of self-expression are variated, the support for democracy is one of them: younger cohorts would defend to a larger extent the introduction of the democratic rule not only in politics, but in other spheres of their life (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005: chapters 7 and 8).

Indeed, Spain has a unique democratic history. Spanish citizens suffered a long and cruel dictatorship led by Francisco Franco, who ruled the country for almost 40 years. Di Palma (1970) suggested that memory helps to revalorise democracy, as individuals can contrast the advantages of democracy with the lack of freedom, violence, and poor performance that most authoritarian regimes exhibit. Younger cohorts in Spain lack direct memories about dictatorship, which could help to explain why they support democracy to a lesser extent, if we follow the argument by Di Palma. However, it is important to note that this situation also applied for young Spaniards aged 18 to 24 years old in 2019, 2018, 2012 and the 1990s. In contrast, young individuals showed particularly strong support for democracy compared to adults during the 1980s and 1990s (see Table 1). Nevertheless, today's youth differ significantly from those of two decades ago. Maybe, those changes have to do with other attitudinal and behavioral shifts that academics are observing changes among young people, which may contribute to explain why they support less democracy. According to the literature, even it is scarce, we propose to analyse three potential explanations to explain the lower levels of diffuse support for democracy among young Spanish people, which can rely on the proliferation of authoritarian attitudes among the youth, technocratic preferences, or simply on the development of more cynical positions towards politics and democracy (Zorell and van Deth, 2020).

The role of political ideology: from consensus to dissensus on democratic support

While political culture is rooted on stable, intergenerationally transmitted patterns, it can be modified, whether by elite-driven influences (Torcal, 2008) or bottom-up processes, such as unexpected shocks, events or change in social norms (Sears and Valentino, 1997; Dinas, 2013). In Spain, ideology did not play a role in holding higher or lower diffuse support for democracy. It seemed to persist a solid consensus against the authoritarian rule, in which left and right agreed since the nineties (Montero et al., 2016). However, young people in Spain are shifting toward right-wing ideological positions (Lorente and Sánchez-Vítores, 2022), weakening the direct relationship between age and developing a right-wing ideology (Glenn, 1974). This ideological shift might be related to attitudinal changes amongst young people that may affect their considerations on the importance of democracy, the superiority of democratic principles, and the conclusion that, eventually, the authoritarian rule might be acceptable. As a result, we expect ideology to become a relevant factor in explaining the lower support for democracy among young citizens. Specifically, we hypothesise that:

> H1: Placing on right-wing positions on the left–right division would imply a greater decrease in democratic diffuse support amongst young individuals.

The emergence of radical right parties: partisan cues against democracy?

The first hypothesis must be completed by testing whether Spanish individuals identified with radical right parties, and more specifically young voters, are less supportive of democracy. The emergence of new radical parties that are spreading critical discourses with the liberal democracy, enhancing the authoritarian alternatives, may explain why some young people are developing authoritarian attitudes. As we know, top-down strategies from political or social elites to citizens are relevant to understand attitudinal transformations (Torcal, 2008). Regarding radical right parties, they are modifying electoral competition by introducing issues which force mainstream parties to compete. In some contexts, these mainstream parties adopt rhetoric similar to that of the radical right in an effort to improve their electoral performance (Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020). However, by doing so, they contribute to the normalization of such positions, which may already be occurring in Spain (Valentim et al., 2023). This might be the case with democracy, and how liberal democracy is represented, characterised and, finally, criticised by radical right parties. Radical right parties are spreading cues that hinders democratic support.

Recent evidence shows that young people are voting more for VOX than other age groups (Abou-Chadi, 2024; Zagórski et al., 2021), and this new electoral alignment between young people and radical right parties, such as VOX and the new party presented to the European Parliament Election, Se Acabó la Fiesta (SALF), may help to understand why young people exhibit a lower diffuse support for democracy. Therefore, we expect that:

> H2: Being close or voting for VOX and any other radical right party (SALF) explain a lower diffuse support for democracy, especially among young individuals.

Cues against democracy beyond parties: the role of social media

A similar dynamic can be observed when considering other types of elites, such as media and social elites. The revolution of social media has fundamentally reshaped how political information is distributed and accessed, altering citizens' media consumption habits. This shift is particularly relevant for understanding attitudinal change among younger generations, who are most exposed to these digital environments (Boulianne, 2015).

Socialisation theory is frequently used to explain the stability of attitudes (Easton, 1968), often emphasizing the role of the family as a key agent in the socialisation process (Jennings, 2007). Parents have always had great influence in the political stimuli and information their children are exposed to, easing intergenerational transmission of ideology and political values (Dinas, 2013). However, with social media, maintaining parental control has become significantly more challenging. Social networks provide individualized access to political content, often consumed without discussion or deliberation. As a result, the stimuli that young people receive through social media may

TABLE 2 Exploratory factor analysis (PCF).

Variable	Factor 1	Factor 2	Uniqueness
Democracy is always preferable	**0.7664**	−0.0726	0.4073
Despite problems, democracy is preferable	**0.6704**	−0.1561	0.5262
Democracy is preferable, although an authoritarian regime would solve problems	**0.6993**	0.0426	0.5091
A stricter government would not solve problems	0.1781	**0.9178**	0.1260
I would never support a military dictatorship	**0.6492**	0.1762	0.5475
Parties are needed for democracy	0.4509	−0.3268	**0.6899**

Source: own elaboration from CIS (ES3481). Bold values are factor loadings of 0.6 or higher, which strongly suggest that items represent a single dimension.

be more effective that the stimuli previous generations received from television. Emerging evidence also indicates that social media content is ideologically biased (Lee et al., 2022). If anti-democratic discourses are gaining popularity on social media, it is likely that the group most affected in their attitudinal patterns consists of young people (Olaniran and Williams, 2020). Consequently, we expect that:

> *H3:* The more individuals trust in social media, the less they will support democracy, particularly if they are young (H3).

The gender divide: a relevant matter to explain support to democracy?

We do not observe significant gender differences in diffuse support for democracy among young people. However, as noted earlier, recent articles indicate that young people—particularly young men—are increasingly positioning themselves on the right side of the left–right spectrum and are more likely to vote for radical right parties (Abou-Chadi, 2024; Lorente and Sánchez-Vítores, 2022). Building on this, we explore whether ideology, voting for radical right parties and trust social media can better explain a lower support for democracy among young men compared to young women, as some authors suggest (Eckert, 2018; Im et al., 2022). These considerations will constitute the Hypotheses H1.1, H1.2 and H1.3, respectively.

Research design, operationalisation and methods

Case study selection and data

In this article, we try to respond to two research questions: first, whether young people exhibit lower levels of support for democracy; and second, we interrogate about the possible explanation for the decline in democratic support among the youth. To respond these questions, we use data from Spain, as it provides a compelling case study. On the one hand, since the 1980s, the country has demonstrated strong and increasing diffuse support for democracy, distinguishing itself among third-wave democracies as one of the countries where democracy gained the strongest support (Diamandouros and Gunther, 2001). This context offers a solid foundation of theoretical and empirical evidence to test our hypotheses. On the other hand, along with Portugal, was one of the last Western European countries to witness the entry of radical right parties in parliament (Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014); and it is also one of the countries where notable attitudinal and behavioral shifts are emerging among the youngest. Additionally, we rely on high-quality data from Study 3,481

conducted by the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research (CIS), which is particularly well-suited for evaluating our hypotheses.

Operationalisation

When analysing diffuse support for democracy, our dependent variable, several concerns emerge regarding its operationalization (Loewenberg, 1971; Morlino and Montero, 1995). The dataset includes six distinct items designed to assess whether citizens support democracy and how much they do so, as detailed in Table 2. These items focus explicitly on attitudes toward democracy as a form of government, rather than on its performance. This distinction is essential for differentiating between diffuse and specific support (Easton, 1965, 1975; Montero et al., 1998). In the following section, we present the empirical results for each item and discuss their theoretical implications.

Given the presence of six different questions that could measure diffuse support, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis to determine whether these items reflect a common underlying dimension. The results indicate that four of the six indicators share a unique dimension of democratic support, while the remaining two measure distinct concepts. One seems to be related to the democracies' performance, aligning more closely with the notion of specific support. The last one focuses on the role of political parties in democratic systems. Given the well-documented presence of strong anti-party sentiments among Spanish citizens, this indicator is not a valid to measure diffuse support for democracy. Additionally, as we will discuss below, citizens may distrust parties but support democracy if they want a democratic institutional design that allows them to have a more direct role in the decision-making process.

Regarding the independent variables, age is categorized into approximate ten-year cohorts for descriptive analyses. For multivariate analyses, we adopt a broader classification, grouping respondents into two categories: young individuals (ages 18–34) and adults (35 and older). As determining the precise stages of the life cycle presents methodological challenges, we rely on this simplified division—commonly used in the literature—to ensure analytical clarity [a debate about this methodological issue can be found in García-Albacete (2014)]. Lastly, gender is measured using a binary sex variable, which, while not ideal nowadays, reflects the format of the data provided by the CIS.

To test our first hypothesis, we use the left–right division (from now onwards, LR division), as independent variable, to assess whether ideology is playing a role. Despite some criticisms, LR division remains the most powerful predictor of voting behavior in multiparty system, alongside party identification, and it is used by the 90 percent of

respondents to define their ideological beliefs (van der Eijk et al., 2005). Given that the relationship between ideology and political attitudes might not be linear, we recoded the eleven points of the LR division from 0 (left) to 10 (right) into five categories. Specifically, values 0–2 constitute the first category, 3–4 the second, 5 stands alone as the third category representing the ideological centre, following Torcal (2010), 6–7 form the fourth, and 8–10 comprise the fifth category.

To test our second hypothesis, we use a combination of declared vote intention for and identification with VOX and SALF, the two radical right parties with electoral relevance in Spain. As a reference category, we use "mainstream parties," following the distinction between challenger and mainstream parties proposed by De Vries and Hobolt (2020). This category includes individuals expressing vote intention for the Partido Popular (PP) or the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE).

Finally, we include an indicator of trust in social media to assess whether individuals who present higher levels of trust also express lower levels of support for democracy. While alternative measures are available, such as having an account on social networks, they may not be accurate, as many users do not rely on these platforms for political purposes or to stay informed about current events. In contrast, trust reflects individuals' confidence in the information, contents and actors present on social media. We argue that this variable serves as a proxy to measure users' predisposition to believe in narratives disseminated in the digital sphere. If such narratives are against democracy, individuals who trust social media are potentially more likely to incorporate them into their political beliefs.

As control variables, we include the level of education, which allows us to indirectly control for social class and its manifestations,
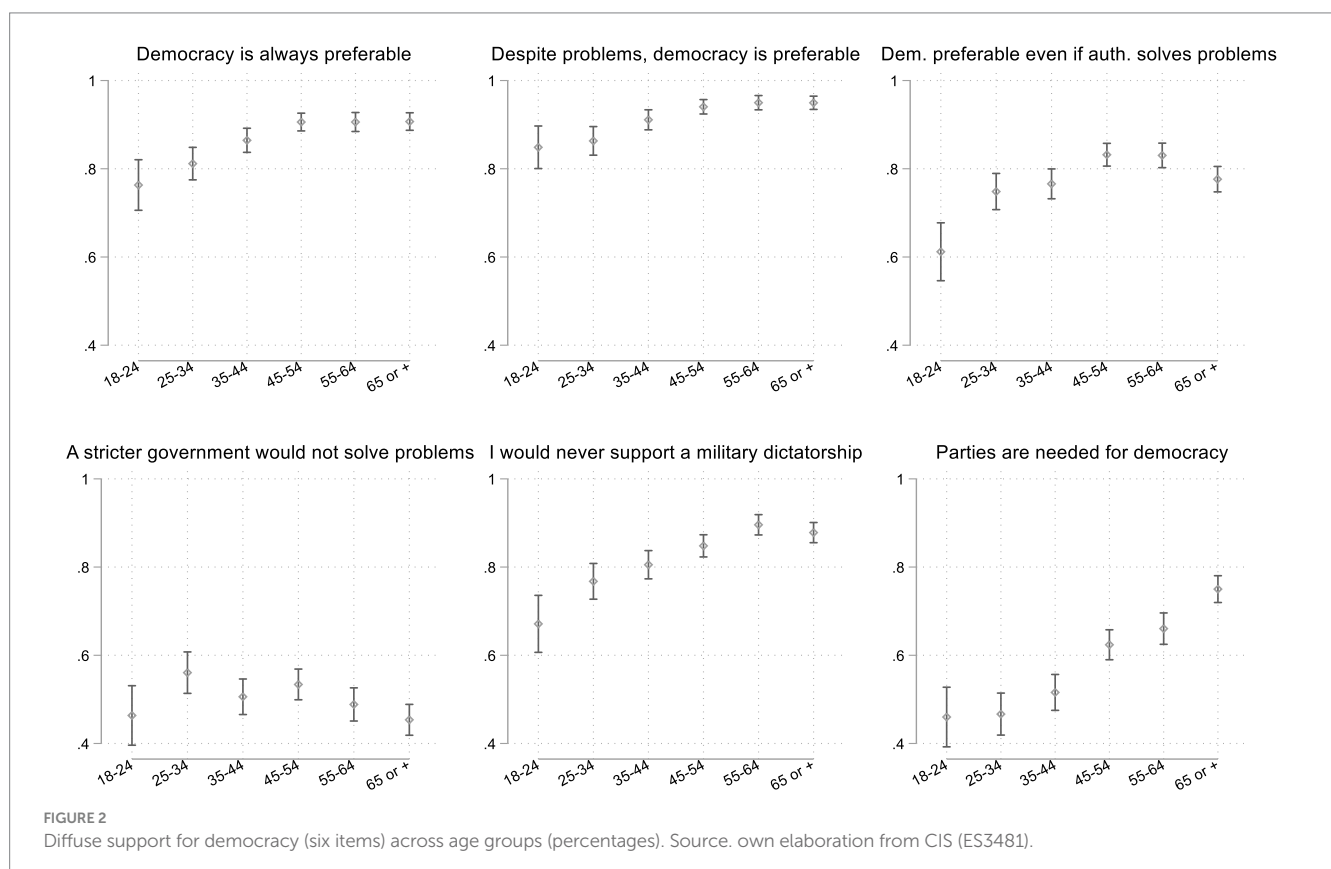
such as income and other social determinants. Descriptive analyses for all variables used in this article can be found in Supplementary Table A1.

Methods

In this article, we opt for lineal regressions to drive our multivariate analyses. Results have been replicated using logistic regressions for some variables that conform the final index we use as dependent variables, and the findings remain largely consistent. To examine whether young people is different from adults, we include an interaction effect between age group and each independent variable. And finally, to explore whether gender moderates this the previous interaction between age group and independent variable, we add to the regression models a triple interaction. To facilitate interpretation, we calculate the average marginal effects of gender within this interaction, specifically assessing whether being male is associated with lower democratic support among both youth and adults. These effects are analysed across models that include ideological self-placement, identification with or voting for a radical right party, and trust in social media.

Results and discussion

Although we have presented some indicators suggesting that young Spaniards show less support for democracy compared to both individuals from previous cohorts and current adults, we aim to demonstrate the consistency of this pattern by analysing all available indicators of democratic support (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2
Diffuse support for democracy (six items) across age groups (percentages). Source. own elaboration from CIS (ES3481).

What we observe is that young people from 18 to 34 show less support for democracy in four of the six items. Especially, the two youngest age groups think that under certain circumstances an authoritarian regime can be acceptable or, at least, that the type of regime is indifferent to them, as it can be seen in first subgraph in Figure 1. A similar pattern emerges in the second subgraph, where overall support for democracy is higher, yet younger respondents still show less support. This attitudinal gap widens in response to the statement about preferring democracy even if an authoritarian regime could resolve societal problems: only 60 percent of the youngest group express a preference for democracy—around 15 percentage points lower than their slightly older peers (ages 25–34) and older adults. Finally, a similar pattern can be found in subgraph five, where approximately 70 percent of young people would not reject a military dictatorship, which is significantly different from other age groups.

The remaining two indicators—support for stricter leaders and the perceived relevance of political parties for the functioning of democracy—seem to measure other political dimensions, as pointed in previous section. Regarding support for strong leadership, there is little variation across age groups: both younger and older individuals believe that stricter governments could be effective in solving the country's problems. However, it is important to note that democratic systems can accommodate strictness within constitutional framework. Similarly, different perceptions on the relevance of political parties may indicate that individuals are considering alternative models of democracy, such as radical or participative democracy, which reject representation but not democratic principles. It could be the case for young people who embrace democracy but distrust traditional political actors (Norris, 1999).

To determine whether these represent distinct dimensions of democratic support or belong to a single conceptual dimension, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis.

As shown in Table 2, the factor loadings show that four items belong to a single dimension of support, since they are higher than 0.6. We understand that these items can be interpreted as supporting democracy itself, as the best political regime compared to its alternatives. In contrast, preferring a stricter government constitutes a different dimension, while perceptions on the role of parties does not clearly align with either of these two dimensions. The debate about the model does not apply, then, to our analyses and our substantive results. Based on Table 2, we constructed a factor to measure democratic support using the four variables whose factor loadings demonstrate a high level of correlation. As expected, higher values on this index indicate stronger diffuse support for democracy, while lower values represent a lesser support for democracy. Figure 3 displays how this index varies across age groups, revealing a positive relationship between age and diffuse support: younger individuals confer a lower diffuse support, while older individuals exhibit stronger support for democracy.

However, what factors account for the lower levels of democratic support among young people, despite extensive literature emphasizing their affinity for democratic values?

Our first hypothesis (H1) posits that ideology plays a more significant role in predicting diffuse support for democracy among young people compared to other age groups. In the Spanish context, the hypothesis would imply that the further to the right individuals place themselves on the ideological spectrum, the less supportive they become of democracy. To explore whether this relationship varies by
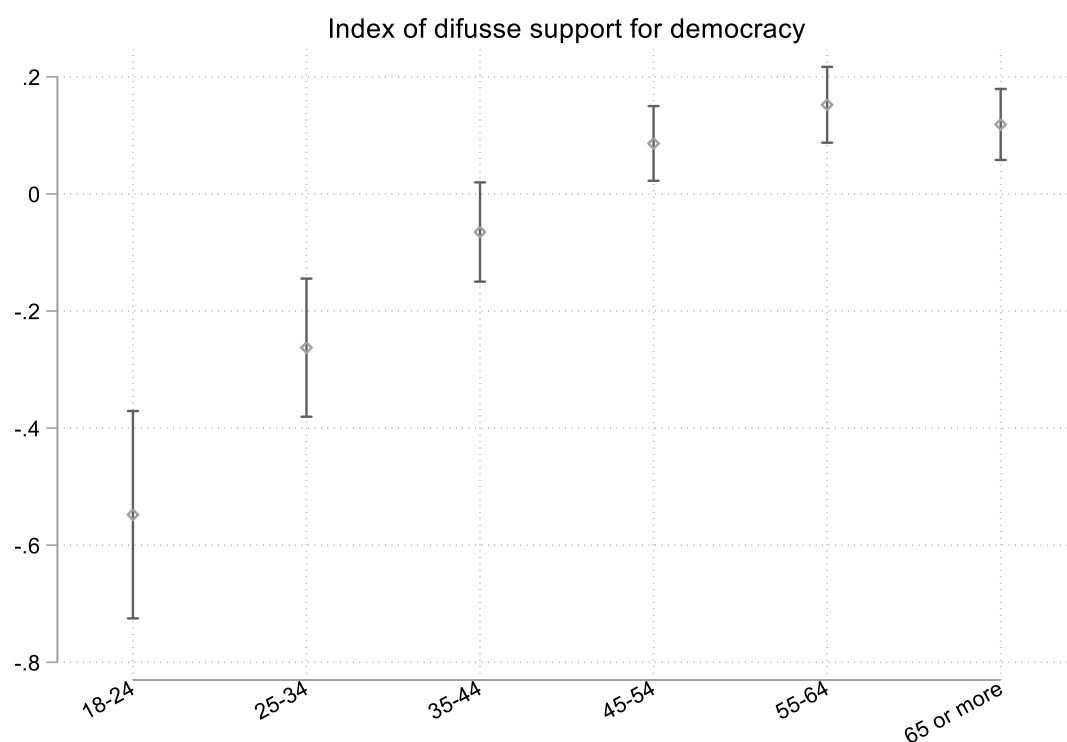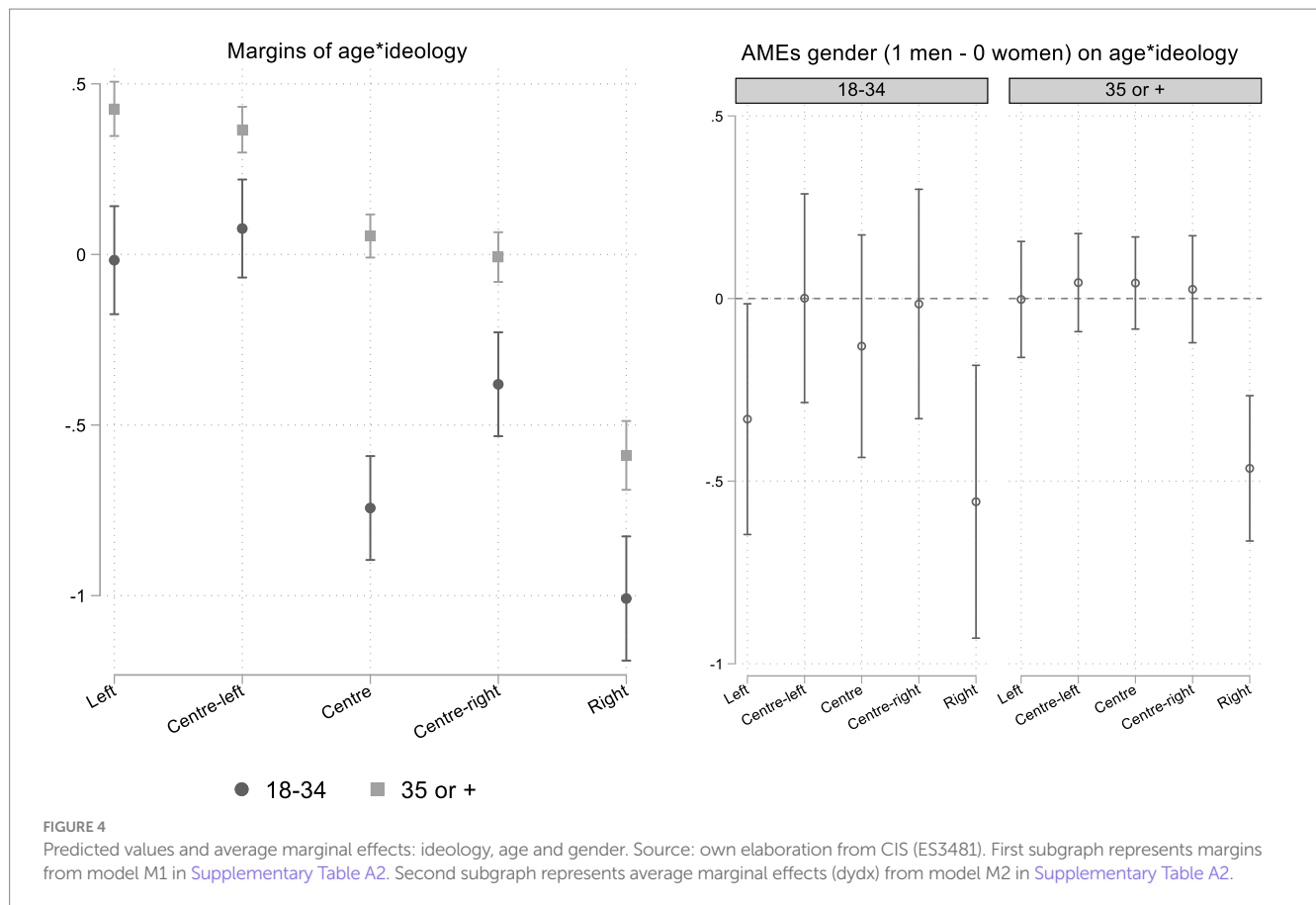

FIGURE 3
Index of diffuse support for democracy across age groups (mean). Source: own elaboration from CIS (ES 3481).

FIGURE 4
Predicted values and average marginal effects: ideology, age and gender. Source: own elaboration from CIS (ES3481). First subgraph represents margins from model M1 in Supplementary Table A2. Second subgraph represents average marginal effects (dydx) from model M2 in Supplementary Table A2.
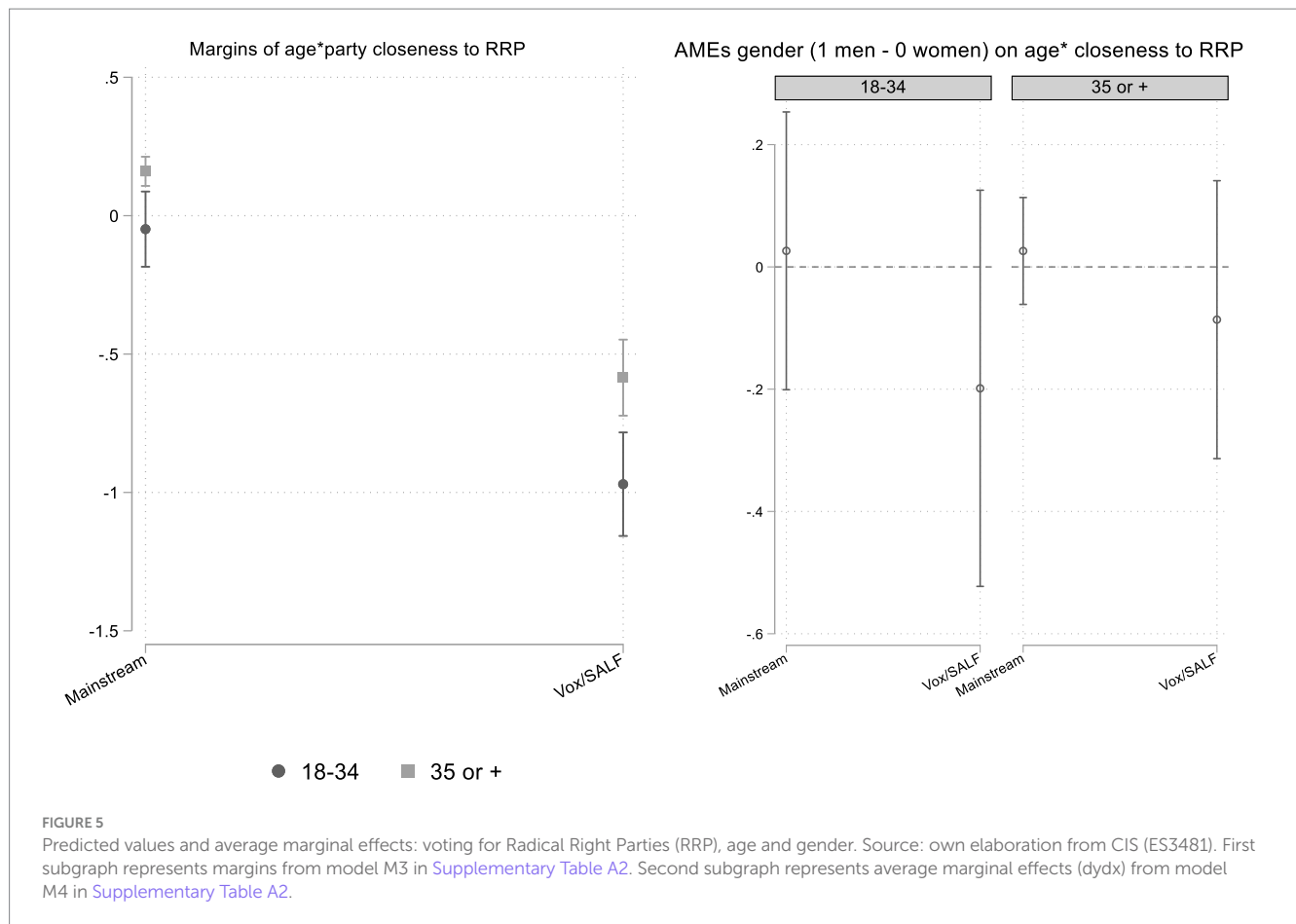
gender, we introduce a sub-hypothesis (H1.1), which examines whether young right-leaning men are particularly less supportive of democracy. To test theses hypotheses, we estimate two OLS regressions models. The first includes an interaction term to explore the different effect of ideological self-placement on each age group. The second model adds a triple interaction between age group, gender, and ideological self-placement, allowing us to contrast the effect of each variable on the other two.

In Figure 4 we show two graphs designed to evaluate whether Hypotheses 1 and 1.1 have empirical support. Full regression results are provided in Supplementary Table A2. The first subgraph illustrates how ideological self-placement, categorised into five positions, relates to levels of diffuse democratic support among both young people and adults. The analysis confirms that, across all ideological positions, adults exhibit stronger support for democracy than young individuals. Interestingly, the graph reveals that young individuals who place themselves on the centre of the LR scale support democracy to a lesser extent than those who place themselves on the centre-right of the ideological spectrum. In fact, there are no statistical differences between young individuals placed on the right of the scale and the ones placed on the centre. In terms of democratic diffuse support, young centrists are as supportive as adult rightists, an outcome that challenges conventional theoretical expectations.

The second subgraph displays gender differences in democratic support across age and ideological groups. Negative values indicate that men are less supportive of democracy than women within a given category, while positive values indicate the opposite. Among adults, gender differences are generally negligible, except for those on the right of the ideological spectrum, where men exhibit lower levels of support

than women. Among younger individuals, this gender gap emerges more clearly at both ideological extremes: young men on the left and right are less supportive of democracy than their female counterparts. These findings offer partial confirmation of our hypotheses. First, ideology influences young people differently: notably, centrist youth express lower democratic support than those on the centre-right and even align more closely with right-leaning adults. Thus, the key distinction between young and adult respondents is not ideological orientation per se, but the unique position of young centrists. Second, gender moderates the effect of ideology differently across age groups, with young men on the left showing significantly lower democratic support compared to young women.

After establishing that right-wing ideology in Spain is linked to lower diffuse support for democracy, we examine whether radical right party voters are more likely to reject democratic principles. In Figure 5, we compare voters and sympathisers of VOX and SALF with voters and sympathisers of the two mainstream parties (PP and PSOE). The first subgraph shows that younger individuals exhibit consistently lower levels of diffuse support than adults, regardless of whether they vote for radical right or mainstream parties. Moreover, within both age groups, those who support radical right parties tend to express lower democratic support. The second subgraph reveals no significant gender differences in democratic support, as confidence intervals cross the zero line for both radical right and mainstream voters and for both age groups. Consequently, we do not find evidence to support Hypotheses 2 and 2.1. as voting for radical right parties does not specifically affect young people's democratic attitudes, and gender does not play any role in this context.

FIGURE 5
Predicted values and average marginal effects: voting for Radical Right Parties (RRP), age and gender. Source: own elaboration from CIS (ES3481). First subgraph represents margins from model M3 in Supplementary Table A2. Second subgraph represents average marginal effects (dydx) from model M4 in Supplementary Table A2.

Lastly, concerning social media and social networks (H3), we expect that younger individuals —who are the primary users of these platforms— may be experiencing greater shifts in their democratic values compared to older age groups. Besides, this effect could be more pronounced among young men, as young women are usually pushed aside in social networks and tend to participate less (Eckert, 2018; Im et al., 2022). The first subgraph in Figure 6 depicts the relationship between age, trust in social media, and democratic support. Although the data suggest that young individuals who express having "much" trust in social media tend to exhibit lower levels of democratic support, the differences are not statistically significant. Nonetheless, the contrasts suggest a moderately large effect size, implying that with a larger or different data, this negative effect on diffuse support could potentially become significant.

Still, in the second subgraph in Figure 6, young male individuals that seem to trust "much" in social networks, exhibit the lowest levels of diffuse democratic support—both in comparison to adults, regardless of their trust levels, and to other young individuals with less trust in these platforms. This pattern suggests that social media may be influencing the political attitudes of young males who trust its content, potentially undermining their support for democratic values. These findings provide support for Hypothesis 3.1.
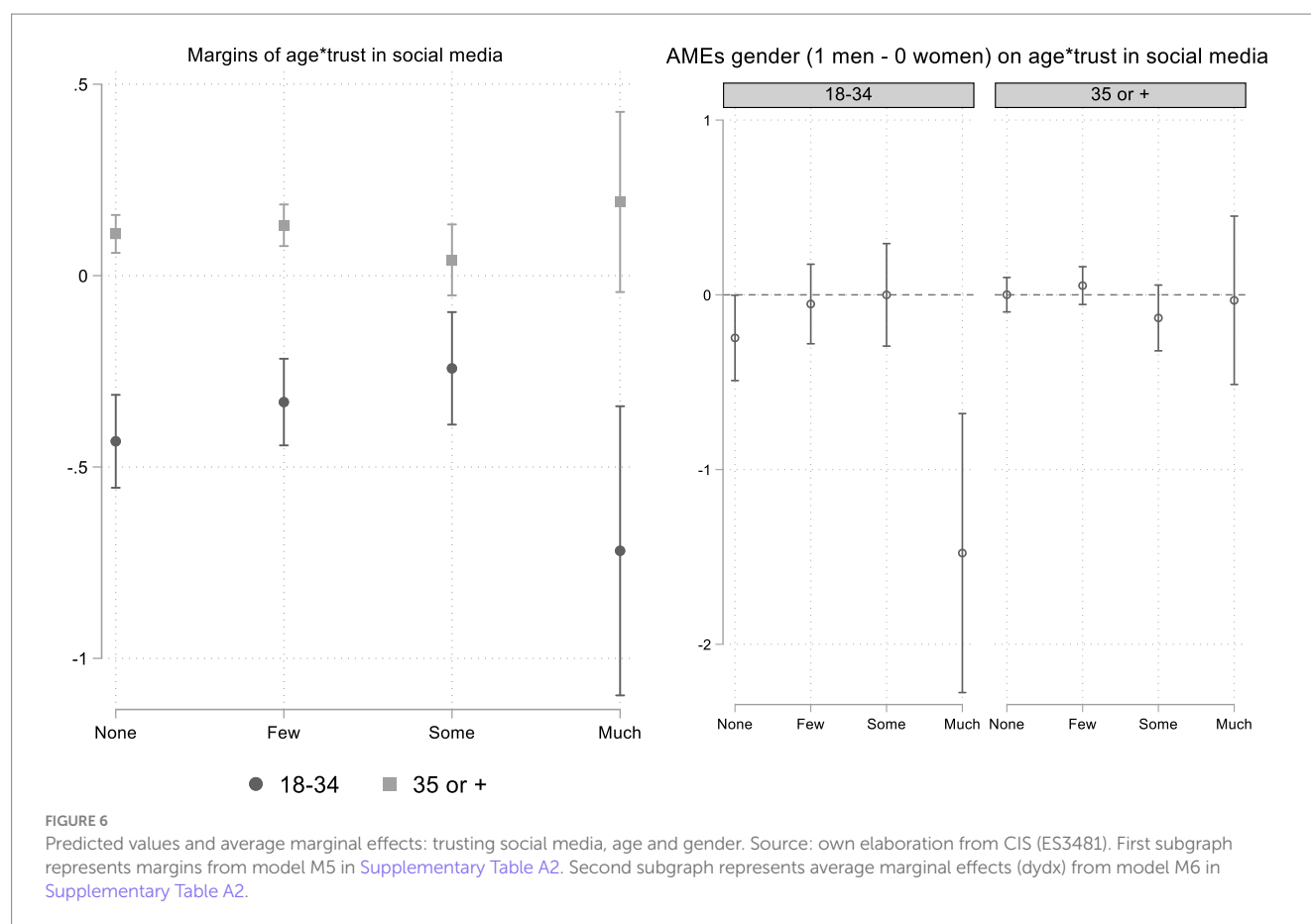
Considering the results of our analyses, hypothesis 3 cannot be confirmed, even if the pattern of our data appears to align with our expectations, age differences are not statistically significant. By contrast, Hypothesis 3.1 is supported by the regression analysis: among young male individuals, high trust in social media has a

negative effect on diffuse democratic support. This raises important questions about the influence of social networks and its contents during the political socialisation processes. If, as prior research suggests, social media is ideologically biased and amplifies extreme and emotionally hostile content (Tucker et al., 2018; Milli et al., 2025), it could have significant long-term implications for the current youth. Should such attitudes become entrenched, we risk witnessing the emergence of a generation increasingly distrustful of liberal democracy and more willing to view authoritarian alternatives as legitimate solutions to their daily problems.

Conclusion and final remarks

This paper focuses on the level of democratic diffuse support among the Spanish youth. While young people supported democracy to a greater extent in the 1980s, our findings reveal a notable shift in contemporary youth attitudes. Specifically, we analyse diffuse support, a key dimension of democratic support that reflects the adhesion to democratic principles and the belief that democracy is, simply, the best way to organise a society politically. Hence, in terms of diffuse political support, Spanish youth are adopting more cynical attitudes, increasingly viewing authoritarian regimes as a plausible alternative.

We address a second research question, which investigates the potential reasons behind this shift. Specifically, we ask: What factors explain why contemporary Spanish youth are moving from democratic to authoritarian positions? We explore three possible explanations:

FIGURE 6
Predicted values and average marginal effects: trusting social media, age and gender. Source: own elaboration from CIS (ES3481). First subgraph represents margins from model M5 in Supplementary Table A2. Second subgraph represents average marginal effects (dydx) from model M6 in Supplementary Table A2.

ideology, alignment with radical right parties, and the effects of social media. Our findings support the first hypothesis (H1), indicating that ideology plays a significant role. While we expected lower democratic support among those on the right of the ideological spectrum, given Spain's historical context, we find a surprising lack of support among centrist youth. Considering that the centre of the LR division is the most commonly held position, this could be a definitive factor to understand why young people exhibit lower levels of diffuse support for democracy. When examining whether ideology has a gendered effect, we see that being a male further decreases democratic support among young individuals positioned at the extremes of the LR scale (H1.1).

In contrast, the second hypothesis (H2), which predicted that alignment with radical right parties would influence individuals' preferences for an authoritarian regime, is not supported by our analyses. We argue that this contradictory finding can be explained by the significant decline in support for democracy among all voters and sympathizers of radical right parties, to the point where differences between age groups disappear. The same applies to Hypothesis 2.1, where no gender effects are observed. This may be because these parties receive less support from women overall, meaning that the women who do support them are particularly well aligned with their ideologies. As a result, male and female individuals who vote or feel close to radical right parties exhibit similar attitudinal patterns, including comparable levels of democratic support.

The final hypothesis (H3), which examined the effects of social media on citizens' attitudes toward democracy, is partially confirmed by the data. Although the confidence intervals do not allow us to conclusively state that that high levels of trust in social media lower

diffuse support for democracy among young people, the size of the effect observed in our analysis suggest that further research is needed to evaluate this relationship. This need for further research is reinforced by the confirmation of Hypothesis 3.1: among young men, trust in social media is negatively associated with high levels of diffuse support for democracy. Our interpretation of this findings is that social networks and their content may be modifying individuals' political beliefs, particularly the political beliefs of young males.

As key contributions of this article, we emphasize the importance of political ideology in understanding why young people are rejecting democracy to a greater extent than other age groups. While the literature in Political Science often suggests focusing on the discourses of radical parties (from left to right depending on the countries' political and electoral contexts), our findings reveal that, at least in Spain, young individuals who consider themselves ideologically moderate exhibit similar levels of democratic support as young people who place themselves on the far-right positions on the LR division. Further research is needed to understand the mechanisms behind this relationship. One possible theoretical expectation could involve the influence of technocratic attitudes among liberal individuals, as partially discussed by Zorell and van Deth (2020). Perhaps, these young moderates do not have in mind a classic authoritarian regime but rather a system governed by expert committees, which shifts their preferences from democracy toward authoritarianism.

Finally, it is necessary to analyse whether the distance between democracy and young people is unique to Spain or extends beyond this mediterranean country. If young people are developing a lack of democratic support while they are undergoing socialisation processes,

democracy might be at risk in the long run. This is, in our opinion, one of the most relevant challenges that our democracies are facing, and further research is needed to understand and protect liberal democracy from authoritarian alternatives.

Data availability statement

Author contributions

JL: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. IJ-B: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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