# Salience Shocks and Social Cohesion: A Quasi-Experimental Analysis of the Impact of the Torre Pacheco Incident on Trust and Sociopolitical Attitudes in Spain

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# Salience Shocks and Social Cohesion: A Quasi-Experimental Analysis of the Impact of the Torre Pacheco Incident on Trust and Sociopolitical Attitudes in Spain

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**Abstract**

This study examines the short-term impact of unexpected events affecting immigrants on generalized social trust and sociopolitical attitudes. Using the Torre Pacheco incident in Spain (July 2025), this study applies an unexpected event survey design (UESD) to establish causality between a negative external shock and changes in generalized trust, fiscal redistribution preferences, and satisfaction with public safety policies. The results indicate that, following the incident, general trust remained stable for the general population, except for VOX voters, whose trust levels declined significantly. In addition, the incident caused a notable decline in satisfaction with public safety policies among the general population and a shift toward more conservative fiscal attitudes particularly noticeable among moderate voters. These results show that localized events, when amplified through political instrumentalization and the media, can alter social cohesion.

**Key words:** Immigration, trust, incident, unexpected event, social cohesion

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## Introduction

Migration dynamics have become a structural element of contemporary European societies (European External Action Service, 2023). According to Eurostat data, 4.3 million immigrants from non-EU countries arrived in the European Union in 2023 (Eurostat, 2025), excluding asylum seekers and refugees. In the case of Spain, recent population growth is almost entirely due to immigration: the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE) reported that, as of April 1st, 2025, the resident population stood at 49,153,849, of which 6,947,711 (14.1%) were foreign nationals (INE, 2025). In addition, during 2023, Spain recorded a positive net external migration of 642,296 people, confirming a trend of sustained growth (INE, 2024).

Together with these regular migration flows, there has also been a notable increase in irregular arrivals in Spain. In 2024, the number of arrivals reached 63,970 people who crossed physical borders or arrived by sea to Spanish territory, exceeding the number of people who did so in the previous year by 12.5% (Accem, 2025). These figures not only show an increase in the number of the immigrant population, but also a great diversification of their profiles, with Colombia, Venezuela, and Morocco at the top of the list (INE, 2024), and growing political and administrative tension over the management and treatment of individuals both in regular and irregular situations (Morales, 2025). In this context of high mobility and demographic transformation, European societies, and the Spanish society in particular, are facing difficulties in integration, social cohesion, and trust between people (INE, 2025).

On July 9, 2025, a 68-year-old man was attacked by a group of individuals around 6 p.m. while he was out on a walk in Torre Pacheco, Murcia, according to a journalist from the Spanish Radio and Television Corporation (Álvarez, 2025). When the victim made a statement to the police, he suggested that he had been assaulted by a group of young people who appeared to be of North African origin. Following the statement, a video went viral on the internet showing a man being attacked in the same city along with images of the alleged attackers. This video, which was later proven to belong to a different incident, raised a wave of opinions and concerns that questioned the security in Torre Pacheco, something that far-right groups quickly capitalized to turn these fears into protests and attacks against the immigrant population in the city (VerificaRTVE, 2025). In the following days, Torre Pacheco became a scene of tension that provoked numerous reactions from members of the government, who condemned these attacks on the migrant

population, and representatives of VOX, the largest far-right party in Spain, who supported and encouraged the protesters (El Salto Murcia, 2025).

This incident reflects the long-standing academic debate concerning the relationship between increasing migration and social cohesion. Some authors have pointed out that increasing ethnic and cultural diversity can generate tensions that reduce trust between people and alter their perception of safety and their sense of solidarity (Blalock, 1967; Putnam, 2007; Van Oorschot, 2006; Huysmans, 2000). From this viewpoint, the perception of "others", in this case immigrants, as a threat to the status quo can lead to mistrust and social and geographical distancing. But other scholars emphasize that, in contexts of social and economic equality, contact between different groups can increase empathy and, ultimately, strengthen generalized trust (Allport, 1954; Laurentsyeva and Venturini, 2017).

In the Spanish context, characterized by the growth of the foreign population and increasingly visible diversity, the relationship between these concepts has gained great relevance in recent years, and it is central today to public discussions, media coverage and political discourse. Considering these developments, a central question arises: How did the Torre Pacheco incident affect generalized social trust and related sociopolitical attitudes among the Spanish population in the short term? Specifically, the analysis examines fiscal preferences and perceptions of public safety as secondary outcomes that may also have been altered by the incident.

The academic relevance of this work lies in its effort to establish causality between immigration and trust, a common problem in the literature. This research uses a quasi-experimental approach based on the Unexpected Event During Survey Design (UESD), which takes advantage of an exogenous and unexpected element that occurs during fieldwork to naturally divide the surveyed population into two groups to observe the potential effect of the event (Muñoz et al., 2020). By using this design, biases derived from unobserved variables or reverse causality are avoided. Furthermore, by integrating a multidimensional analysis that includes not only generalized trust but also fiscal preferences and satisfaction with public security, this research provides a more comprehensive view of how unexpected events can threaten the stability of the social base in Spain.

This study addresses a critical issue at a time when immigration in Spain is the main source of population and economic growth (Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones, 2025). The Torre Pacheco incident highlighted the fragility of social cohesion in the face of the proliferation of misinformation and the rise of from far-right discourse. It is very important to understand how events of this nature can trigger perceptions of threat, especially among specific groups such as VOX voters, in order to develop effective strategies that help maintain social trust and, ultimately, support for the welfare state.

## Literature Review

The issue of trust has been widely debated in the literature without reaching a clear consensus. While most scholars agree that trust is the result of the relationship between a *trustor* (the subject who trusts) and a *trustee* (the object of trust) (Lane, 1998; Rousseau et al., 1998), the nature of the concept remains contested. Authors such as Mayer et al. (1995) and Rousseau et al. (1998) define it as a psychological state of willingness to accept the vulnerability that comes from the expectations something from the trustee. Others, like Castaldo et al. (2010) conceive it as a deliberate and risky choice to expect something from another individual, or even as a behavioral expression through which an individual accepts to rely on others (Li, 2015).

With the aim of shedding light on this debate, PytlikZillig and Kimbrough (2016) review some of the most influential works on trust to determine the “essence” of the concept. They determine that trust is an umbrella term that encompasses beliefs, attitudes, intentions and behaviors (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006; PytlikZillig & Kimbrough, 2016), and that it involves a relationship of interdependence (e.g., Lane, 1998; Rousseasu et al., 1998). This interdependence arises from the expectations the trustor places on the trustee’s intentions or behavior (Rousseau et al., 1998; Hardin, 2006; Castelfranchi & Falcone, 2010). Möllering (2005) suggests that trust is grounded in expectation because relying on another person inherently involves a degree of risk and uncertainty; when placing expectations on a third party, the trustor acknowledges that the outcome of the interaction could be either positive or negative (Castaldo et al., 2010). In this sense, the trustor "voluntarily puts himself in a vulnerable situation" (Castaldo et al., 2010, p. 663),

motivated by the belief that the trustee will act favorably (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998).

Hwang (2017) further classifies trust according to its sources and distance between the trustor and trustee. When it comes to the source, trust manifests in three ways: *interpersonal trust*, which is trust between individuals; *institutional trust*, understood as trust in the social system or in the administration of norms (Hardin, 1991; Rothstein, 2000; Wang & Gordon, 2011); and *political trust*, which is associated with trust in political leaders and organizations. The classification by distance, on the other hand, distinguishes between *particularized trust* (trust in familiar individuals) and *generalized trust*, which refers to trust in anonymous or unknown citizens (Uslaner, 2002; Bjørnskov, 2007).

This study focuses on generalized trust, an essential pillar for the functioning of modern societies (Wu, 2020). Arrow (1973, p. 23) affirms that "Without the general trust that people have in each other, society itself would disintegrate", since high levels of trust contribute to greater market efficiency (Kosfeld et al., 2005), improve the functioning of public institutions (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008), and optimize individual perceptions of health and well-being (Barefoot et al., 1998; Nyqvist et al., 2012). However, contemporary societal developments such as rising inequality, geographic segregation, and ethnic diversity are threatening generalized trust (Berg and Johansson, 2016). Putnam (2007) points particularly to ethnic diversity as a factor that critically reduces social cohesion. This perspective is directly linked to Blalock's (1967) intergroup threat theory, which posits that, when a dominant group perceives another as a threat to its cultural values, economic resources, or social status, it may develop negative intergroup attitudes that undermine interpersonal relationships and erode trust (Blalock, 1967).

Contrary to this perspective, Allport's (1954) contact theory suggests that interaction between different groups can reduce the dominant group's prejudices toward the outgroup and foster mutual understanding. For this to occur, institutions must create common frameworks that guarantee engagement and cooperation. Laurentsyeva and Venturini (2017) explain that, when institutions create systems for equal opportunities, diversity and multiculturalism appear to enhance civic engagement and political participation across all groups. Policies that facilitate the regularization of migrants' legal status, support the acquisition of the host country's language, or provide opportunities to gain new skills through education have positive effects on the migrant's sense of inclusion and

compliance with local rules (Laurentsyeva & Venturini, 2017). However, if countries fail to respond to the increasing tensions that arise from more diverse populations, economic inequality, separation between groups and widespread mistrust become entrenched in society (Kesler & Bloemraad, 2010).

The impact of the growing diversity of modern societies goes beyond generalized trust. There is extensive literature explaining that immigration tends to reduce support for economic redistribution policies, as demonstrated by Alesina et al. (2018), who argue that citizens of host countries tend to be less supportive of progressive taxation and show less solidarity when thinking about immigration because of their perception of migrants as lazy or overly dependent on the state. Similarly, Elsner and Concannon (2020) explain that people are more likely to reject redistribution when there is a perception that immigrants take more advantage of the system than they contribute to it, making them undeserving of aid. This logic of deservingness is central to van Oorschot (2006), who says that Europeans consider immigrants to be the least deserving of social protection because they see them as outsiders to their collective identity.

At the same time, there has been a growing perception that more immigration means more insecurity (Huysmans, 2000; Tallmeister, 2013). In the European context, the conversation about migration focuses on the lack of integration, the risk of losing European collective identity, and the dangers to physical borders and sovereignty (Givens, 2010; Alkopher & Blanc, 2017). This construction of the "foreigner" as a threat has intensified following disruptive events, such as the riots in France in 2005, which reinforced the stigma that immigrants, especially those from outside the European Union, are inherently prone to criminality and destabilization of the welfare system (Hiatt, 2007).

These concepts, although different from trust, are closely related to it: perceptions of security operate as a predictor of trust, since the act of trusting involves voluntarily accepting risk in the expectation of a beneficial outcome (Castaldo et al., 2010). If security is absent, trust cannot be exercised; thus, the perception of threat transforms vulnerability into mistrust (Viklund, 2003). Furthermore, the lack of trust undermines collective identity and changes the image of migrants from "neighbors" to "threats" (Alkopher & Blanc, 2017). Consequently, the perception of insecurity gives way to "welfare chauvinism", which is the political notion that social benefits should be restricted to the native population, feeding into the narrative that immigrants represent an economic

burden or lack merit and leading to the withdrawal of support for redistributive policies (Coban, 2020; Van Oorschot, 2006).

Attitudinal changes may take varying amounts of time to be reflected within society. Two main views attempt to explain this: the first one is the cultural view, which maintains that generalized trust is a stable expectation rooted in moral values acquired during the early stages of socialization (Giddens & Turner, 1991; Uslaner, 2002). This perspective considers that trust in inherited through primary social environments like family or education, and thus remains largely stable over time, with any potential changes occurring only in the long term (Dawson, 2019; Uslaner, 2002). The second one is the experiential view, whose proponents hold that generalized trust is directly altered by individuals' daily experiences and present context (Coleman, 1990; Hardin, 2002; Glanville & Paxton, 2007). Within this approach, Dinesen and Hooghe (2010) clarify that trust is not rigid but malleable, allowing individuals to adjust their levels of trust in others based on the events or situations they face every day.

Cvetkovich et al. (2002) explain that the way people process newly learned information is influenced by two mechanisms: the first is the principle of asymmetry, which suggests that new information has a different impact depending on whether it is positive or negative. Negative information has a much stronger effect in decreasing trust than the increasing effect of positive news (Taylor, 1991; Fiske, 1992). The second is the perseverance of trust/distrust, which understands that people's natural predisposition to be trusting or distrustful influences how they assimilate new information. Consequently, if individuals already harbor distrust, negative news is more likely to reinforce their existing beliefs (Cvetkovich et al., 2002).

Information and knowledge can be acquired through the social and work environment, traditional media, or even social media (European Parliament, 2023; 2025). Digital communication channels allow localized events to become known to larger audiences (Brown, Guskin & Mitchell, 2012; Khan, 2018) and enable information to be generated and sent in a highly personalized way designed to “resonate with the target audience” (Lawlor & Tolley, 2017, p. 961). In the case of immigration, negative episodes are used to represent and spread the image of the migrant “other” as a foreigner, refugee, irregular or illegitimate subject, or even as a threat to the community, reinforcing a sense of national identity among the host population, which consequently distances it further from the outgroup (Lawlor and Tolley, 2017; Dhamoon, 2009).

The use of these platforms in such a way carries several risks that undermine social trust. Without the authority filters or rigorous verification typical of traditional media, the distinction between fact and speculation becomes blurred (Rodrigues, 2025). This absence of institutional curation provides the perfect breeding ground for the spread of misinformation, creating an environment conducive to fragmentation and intensified social polarization (Tucker et al., 2018; Calderón et al., 2020). It is precisely in this blurred space that far-right parties have found a niche to capitalize on anti-immigration rhetoric (Davis and Deole, 2017). This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in countries and regions with high rates of migrant populations. In this context, hate speech and the dissemination of offensive messages that incite hostility and violence become political tools. As Calderón et al. (2020) point out, the spread of these messages is instrumentalized through various tactics, including insults, misinformation, irony, threats, and humiliation.

## Theory

The experiential view of generalized trust coincides with the event-based approach proposed by Hommel and Colzato (2015). This approach holds that an individual's degree of trust is fundamentally dependent on perceived interpersonal similarity. A trustor is more likely to trust if they recognize themselves in the characteristics that define the "other", and this recognition depends on two aspects. First, the situational context, such as a major public incident like the Torre Pacheco incident, which can activate or attribute greater relevance to certain characteristics that may have been previously less salient (e.g., the other individual's nationality, religion, or ethnicity). Second, the individual's processing style (either more inclusive or more exclusive) determines their focus of attention. While an inclusive orientation promotes generalized trust by focusing on shared aspects, exclusive processing leads individuals to focus on the differences and boundaries of their own group, thereby reducing trust.

Despite literature affirming the impact of unforeseen events on generalized trust, studies continue to find mixed results: While some scholars maintain that generalized trust tends to remain stable even following unexpected negative experiences (Ingen & Bekkers, 2013), others suggest that trust can sharply decline, especially toward individuals or groups perceived as similar to aggressors in those contexts (Averdijk, 2010).

Based on the premise that generalized trust can be sensitive to sudden, highly salient, and negatively framed experiences, this study proposes the following baseline effect:

H1 Respondents surveyed after the Torre Pacheco incident will report lower levels of generalized social trust than those surveyed before the incident.

Diversity without active inclusion policies generates inequality, segregation, and a growing distance between social groups (Kesler & Bloemraad, 2010; Berg & Johansson, 2016). This context of social division increases exposure to negative experiences, such as discrimination, insecurity, or conflict, factors that tend to progressively erode trust (Kouvo, 2011). These adverse experiences, which Bauer (2015) defines as experiences of "victimization", range from suffering insults and threats to physical or sexual assault, reinforcing perceptions of vulnerability and injustice. Individuals who experience these episodes then perceive the aggressor as a potential source of threat, generating a psychological response that accentuates the differences between victim and aggressor (Bauer, 2015). This, in turn, can activate a more exclusionary mode of social processing and a lower degree of trust toward groups that share characteristics with the aggressor (Hommel & Colzato, 2015).

The impact of interaction on the perception of social reality is a central pillar in both Allport's contact theory and Blalock's intergroup theory. Under this premise, it can be inferred that the magnitude of this impact will be conditioned by the demographic context. Specifically, the proportion of the immigrant population in each region establishes the opportunity for intergroup contact and serves as a moderating mechanism that can intensify the effect of the incident on levels of trust.

H2 The decrease in generalized social trust following the Torre Pacheco incident will be stronger among respondents living in Autonomous Communities with a higher share of migrants of African origin.

Narratives that frame migration negatively increase the risk of "guilt by association" for immigrant communities, exacerbating the withdrawal of trust in the majority group (Givens, Freeman & Leal ,2009). Suárez (2021) analyzes how the rhetoric of VOX, a far-right party in Spain ideologically characterized by its nationalism, conservatism, and nativism (Ferreira, 2019; Franquesa, 2019), instrumentalizes the figure of native

population as potential victims of the foreign "other" to justify its anti-immigration agenda, reinforcing the narrative of a fractured and untrustworthy social order. VOX has frequently linked immigrants with crime and an alleged increase in insecurity in Spain, advocating for the denial of any form of welfare state aid intended for them under the "national preference" logic (Turnbull-Duarte, Rama & Santana, 2020).

This sustained rhetoric is used to activate and predispose right-wing individuals to interpret any event, such as the Torre Pacheco incident, through the lens of mistrust and intergroup threat (Hommel & Colzato, 2015). Therefore, adherence to this ideology is expected to amplify the impact of the specific incident, resulting in a deeper decline in social trust among right-wing individuals. This ideological moderation is tested by the following hypotheses:

H3a Respondents who identify as more right-wing leaning will experience a greater decrease in general social trust.

H3b Respondents who voted for VOX in the last general election will experience a greater decrease in general social trust following the incident, compared to those who did not vote for VOX.

## Methodology

### *Research Design*

In order to test the impact of the event that took place in Torre-Pacheco on July 9th on generalized trust, this study uses the Unexpected Event during Survey Design (UESD) methodology. The UESD leverages the occurrence of an unexpected event during the fieldwork of a public opinion survey to estimate its causal effect on a relevant outcome (Muñoz et al., 2020). This design compares the responses of individuals interviewed before the event, $t_i < t_e$, who become the control group, with those interviewed after the event, $t_i > t_e$, now the treatment group.

The internal validity of this design lies in its exogenous nature for assigning the treatment and control groups (Muñoz et al., 2020). The design is based on the fundamental assumption that the time of interview ($t_i$) is independent of the time at which the event occurs ($t_e$). The occurrence of the Torre Pacheco incident splits the sample in two groups, naturally divided in a way that is considered "as good as randomly" (Muñoz et al., 2020,

p. 2). Unlike standard observational studies, this assignment helps protect the potential results from biases related to unobserved variables or reverse causality (Muñoz et al., 2020).

In terms of external validity, the greatest strength of the UESD is that it is based on the use of naturally occurring events, rather than artificially curated treatments by researchers to provoke an effect. This is also an inherent limitation, as it makes it difficult to generalize the results to other contexts (Muñoz et al., 2020).

*Data*

This study uses data extracted from the Public Opinion and Fiscal Policy survey, conducted annually by the Sociological Research Center (CIS) since 1993. Its purpose is to analyze the population's attitudes toward taxes, fiscal justice, fraud, redistribution, and the use of public resources. The study targets the Spanish population over the age of 18 and uses a nationally representative sample design, stratified by sociodemographic and territorial variables.

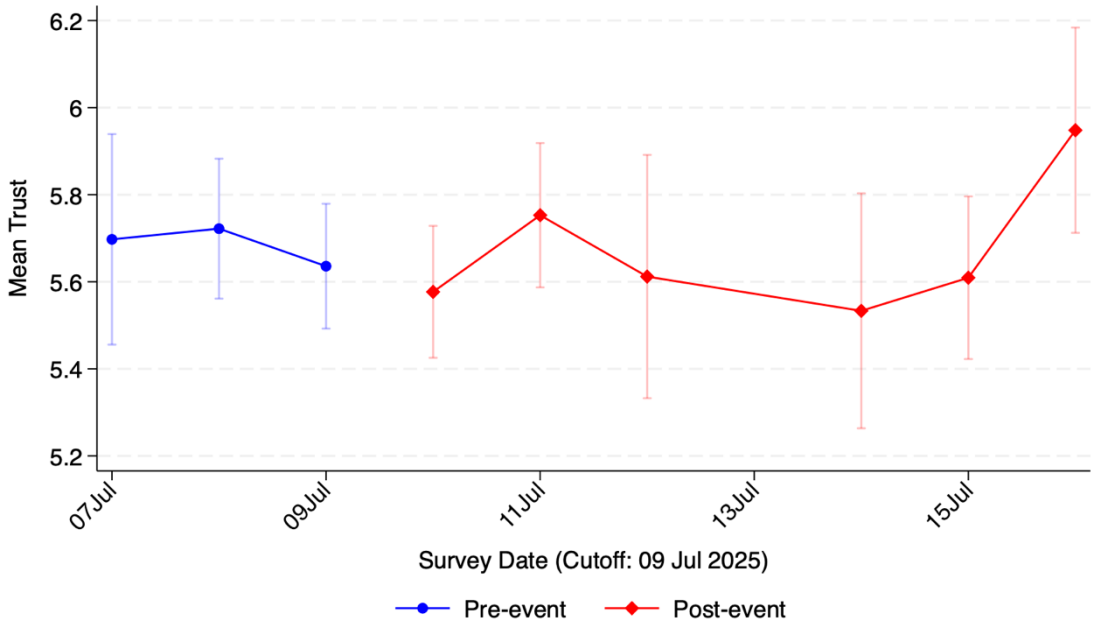
In its most recent edition (XLII, July 2025), 4,002 face-to-face interviews were conducted between July 7 and 16. During this period, specifically on July 9, the incident in Torre Pacheco took place.

*Operationalization*

The Public Opinion and Fiscal Policy Survey (XLII) includes a series of variables that are highly relevant to answer the research question of this study. The treatment variable is built as a dummy variable that represents exposure to the incident, where 0 corresponds to respondents who answered before the event (July 7–9), and 1 to those who answered after (July 10–17). The main dependent variable, generalized trust, is derived from the question: “Would you say that, in general, most people can be trusted, or that one can never be too careful in dealing with others?” Participants responded on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means “you can never be too careful” and 10 indicates “most people can be trusted.”

Figure 1 illustrates the daily mean generalized trust score across the survey period. The vertical separation between the blue (pre-event) and red (post-event) lines marks the July 9th cutoff date for the Torre Pacheco incident. The graph shows a discontinuity at the cutoff date, where the mean trust shows a small drop from approximately 5.64 points on July 9th to 5.58 on July 10th that is not visually significant.

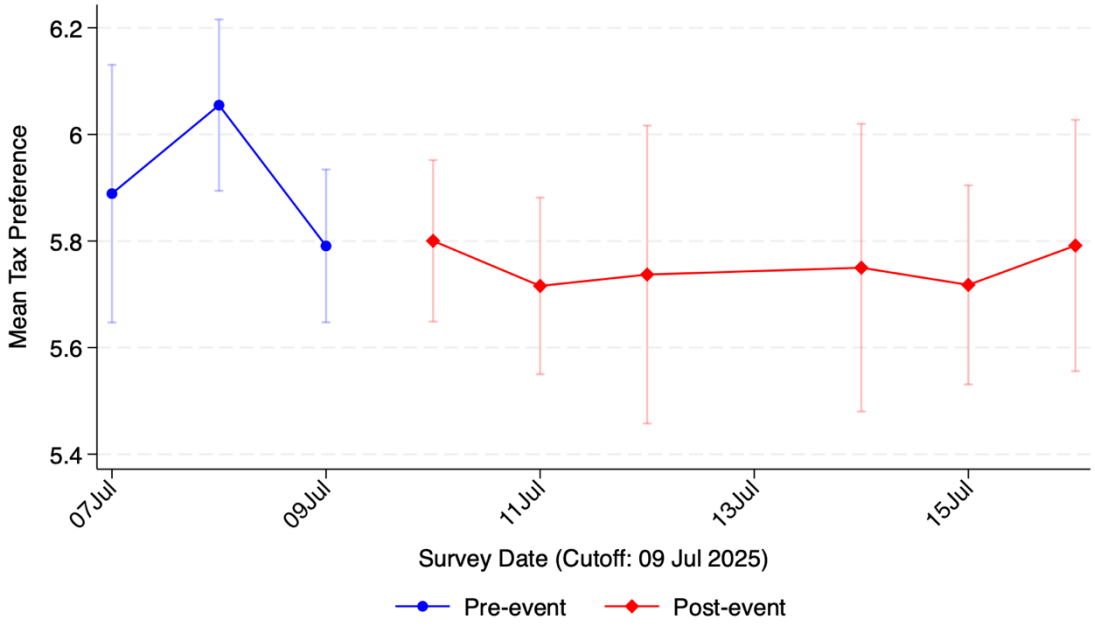
**Figure 1.** *Mean generalized trust over the survey fieldwork period*




Two additional variables are included to capture possible indirect or related effects of the Torre Pacheco incident. The first is preference for fiscal redistribution and the provision of public services, measured by the question: "Some people think that public services and social benefits should be improved, even if it means paying more taxes. On a scale of 0 to 10, these people would be placed at position 0. Others think it is more important to pay less tax, even if that means reducing public services and social benefits, placing themselves at 10". With the aim of facilitating data analysis and interpretation, the values have been inverted, so that respondents who prefer to pay more taxes are situated at 10, and those who prefer to pay less are at 0.

Figure 2 shows that the mean tax preference before the cutoff was very volatile, but there is not a visually significant jump between July 9th and 10th. However, the sustained lower mean in the post-event period trend could indicate that the incident triggered fiscally conservative attitudes across the sample.

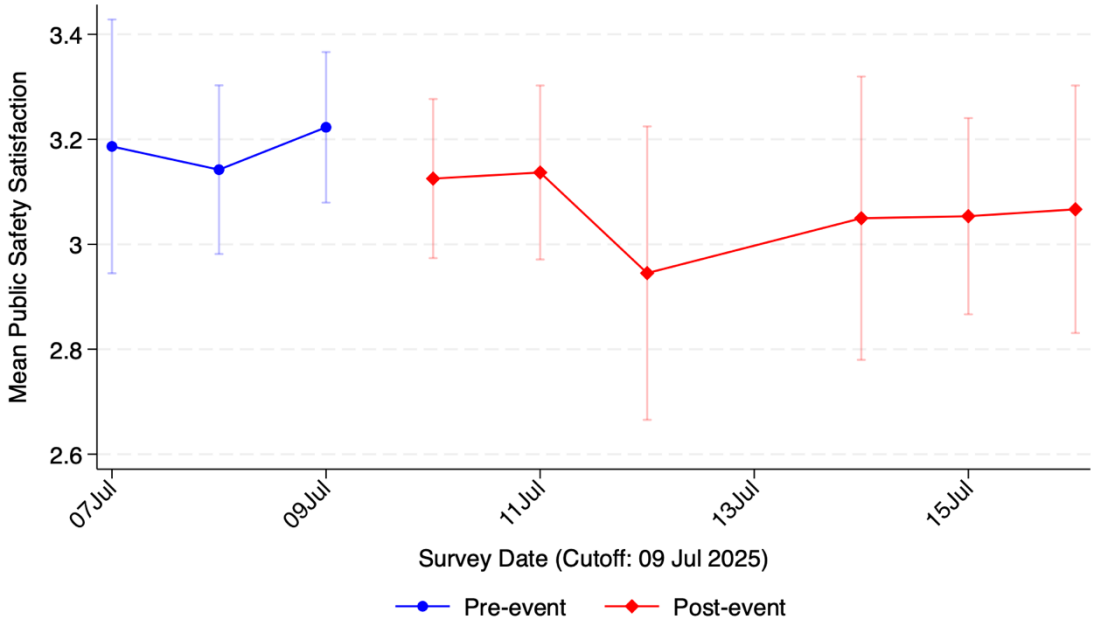
**Figure 2.** *Mean tax preference over the survey fieldwork period*




The second variable is satisfaction with public safety services. This variable is measured through the question: "To what extent would you say that each of the following public services functions satisfactorily: very satisfactorily, quite satisfactorily, little satisfactorily, or not satisfactorily at all?", where public safety is fifth on a list of nine items.

Figure 3 reflects a visually clear drop after the cutoff: the mean public safety satisfaction was rising across the pre-event period, reaching approximately 3.22 points on July 9th, but immediately falls to around 3.12 on July 10th. This shift suggests a potential negative relationship between the Torre Pacheco incident and satisfaction with public safety policies.

**Figure 3.** *Mean public safety satisfaction over the survey fieldwork period*




To control for potential confounding, the analysis incorporates a set of individual-level sociodemographic and political variables. These include sex, age, nationality, education, and income. Education was recoded into three clusters (low, middle, and high) following the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), while employment status was transformed into a binary indicator (working vs. not working).

Political orientation is captured through the respondent's placement on the left-right scale. Additionally, electoral behavior is accounted for by measuring both past voting record and current voting intention, specifically identifying supporters of VOX to account for group heterogeneity.

At the regional level, the model incorporates several control variables retrieved from the INE for each Autonomous Community. These include the unemployment rate, the poverty risk rate, and the percentage of votes for VOX in the last regional elections. It also includes the share of the African immigrant population to account for the Maghrebi origin of the incident's perpetrators. These variables control for the structural and economic differences across all Autonomous Communities that might influence baseline trust or threat perceptions. A full description of all variables and their recoding logic are provided in Tables 6-10 in Appendices A and B.

*Estimation strategy*

This study primarily uses an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to test the impact of the Torre Pacheco incident on the three dependent variables: *Generalized trust*, *Tax preference*, and *Public safety satisfaction*. This is a common and robust approach in event-studies and quasi-experimental contexts (e.g., Charitopoulou & Cavalli, 2022; Frese, 2025). The OLS method is used to compensate for the short pre-treatment period as it helps to ensure the stability of the estimates. For this approach to work, the groups must be statistically comparable. Table 7 in Appendix B shows a balance test that replicates the diagnostic framework established by Rubin (2001) and Imai, King, and Stuart (2008), and applied in studies such as Legewie (2013) and Ferrín et al. (2020). The results demonstrate successful group balance, as the standardized mean differences and dispersion ratios for all covariates fall within the conventional thresholds required for valid causal inference.

The main treatment effect model is specified as:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_i \, Treatment_i + \varepsilon_i \qquad (1),$$

where the coefficient $\beta_i$ directly captures the average difference in attitudes between before and after the incident.

To provide an initial estimate, a simple OLS regression is performed with the effect of the incident on the three dependent variables, which is then expanded and solidified through the inclusion of control variables at the individual level. All regressions use standard errors grouped at the individual level to account for potential confounders.

To test whether the treatment effect is regionally heterogeneous, the study adopts a more detailed Regression Discontinuity (RD) design that controls for both the running variable (*Days post event*) and any interaction terms between this and the treatment variable with the share of African immigrants and a binary indicator for the region of Murcia. These models also include regional control variables to account for any potential bias.

Finally, the study also tests for ideological association to determine if the attitudinal shock was concentrated along specific political affiliations. This is done through interactions between the treatment indicator and two ideological variables: *Left-right scale* and *Voted VOX*.

## Results

*Main results*

Table 1 shows the initial analysis of the incident's impact using an OLS regression to estimate the gross, immediate treatment effect on the three dependent variables. The coefficients represent the simple difference in means between the treatment and control groups in the sample.

**Table 1.** *OLS estimates of the treatment effect*

| | Generalized trust | Tax preference | Public safety satisfaction |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Treatment** | -0.018 | -0.149 | -0.102*** |
| | (0.0652) | (0.0952) | (0.0393) |
| **Constant** | 5.678*** | 5.905*** | 3.187*** |
| | (0.0504) | (0.0736) | (0.0304) |
| **Adjusted $R^2$** | -0.000 | 0.000 | 0.001 |
| **N** | 3995 | 3855 | 4002 |

The table reports coefficient estimates, with standard errors shown in parentheses. Significance levels are denoted as follows: · p<0.10, ∗ p<0.05, ∗∗ p<0.01, and ∗∗∗ p<0.001.

Preliminary results show that there is not a statistically significant effect of the event on the main variable, *Generalized trust*, nor on *Tax preference,* thereby providing no empirical support for Hypothesis 1, which stated that the incident would have a negative impact on respondents' levels of generalized trust.

However, the table reveals a highly significant negative impact on *Public safety satisfaction*, meaning that citizens' reported satisfaction with public safety policies declined by 0.102 units after the incident. This result suggests that, in the short term, the event may have caused an increase in individuals' concern or sense of vulnerability regarding safety.

*Individual-level controls*

Table 2 presents the results of the treatment effect after controlling for individual sociodemographic and political characteristics. The coefficient for the incident effect on *Generalized trust* is positive but remains statistically insignificant (0.0351) confirming that there is insufficient evidence to support Hypothesis 1.

However, the analysis shows that the effect of the incident on *Tax preference* is negative and statistically significant (−0.160), as is the coefficient for *Public safety satisfaction* (−0.072). According to these results, the Torre Pacheco incident immediately triggered fiscally conservative attitudes, an outcome consistent with literature linking opposition to wealth redistribution and tax payments with negative attitudes toward immigration (Van Oorschot, 2006; Alesina et al., 2018; Elsner and Concannon, 2020). Furthermore, the incident also led to a decline in satisfaction with public safety, in accordance with scholars who have previously linked higher migration presence to increasing feelings of insecurity (Huysmans, 2000; Tallmeister, 2013).

**Table 2.** *OLS estimates of the treatment effect with individual-level controls*

| | **Generalized trust** | **Tax preference** | **Public safety satisfaction** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Treatment** | 0.035 | -0.160* | -0.072* |
| | (0.0639) | (0.0893) | (0.0386) |
| **Age** | 0.0116*** | 0.0054* | -0.0007 |
| | (0.00223) | (0.00311) | (0.00135) |
| **Female** | -0.045 | 0.187* | -0.031 |
| | (0.0638) | (0.0892) | (0.0386) |
| **Education** | | | |
| ***Middle education*** | 0.46*** | 0.46*** | 0.075 |
| | (0.109) | (0.152) | (0.0658) |
| ***High education*** | 0.73*** | 0.74*** | 0.233*** |
| | (0.108) | (0.151) | (0.0654) |
| **Spanish nationality** | -0.31* | 0.13 | -0.27*** |
| | (0.168) | (0.234) | (0.102) |
| **Income** | | | |
| ***€1,101-€1,800*** | 0.13 | 0.01 | 0.029 |
| | (0.156) | (0.220) | (0.0951) |
| ***€1,801-€2,700*** | 0.24 | 0.09 | 0.097 |
| | (0.153) | (0.215) | (0.0929) |
| ***€2,701-€3,900*** | 0.37** | 0.11 | 0.229** |
| | (0.154) | (0.216) | (0.0934) |
| ***€3,901-€5,000*** | 0.43*** | 0.05 | 0.181* |
| | (0.158) | (0.222) | (0.0961) |
| ***> €5,001*** | 0.63*** | -0.06 | 0.34*** |
| | (0.167) | (0.235) | (0.102) |
| **Left-right scale** | -0.108*** | -0.472*** | -0.0872*** |
| | (0.0143) | (0.0201) | (0.00867) |
| **Voted VOX** | -0.059 | -0.54*** | -0.234*** |
| | (0.144) | (0.202) | (0.0869) |
| **Would vote VOX** | -0.79*** | -0.13 | -0.595*** |
| | (0.132) | (0.184) | (0.0798) |
| **Employed** | -0.115 | -0.04 | 0.0002 |
| | (0.765) | (0.107) | (0.0462) |
| **Constant** | 5.23*** | 7.25*** | 3.70*** |
| | (0.269) | (0.376) | (0.163) |
| **Adjusted $R^2$** | 0.091 | 0.202 | 0.118 |
| **N** | 3645 | 3536 | 3631 |

The table reports coefficient estimates, with standard errors shown in parentheses. Significance levels are denoted as follows: · p<0.10, ∗ p<0.05, ∗∗ p<0.01, and ∗∗∗ p<0.001. For the variables Education and Income, the coefficients are calculated relative to the lowest level of education and the lowest income category.

The table also reveals that *Generalized trust* is strongly and positively conditioned by age (0.0116) and higher educational levels (0.73) for the highest education. Conversely, trust is reduced by 0.108 points in people who are on the right side of the political spectrum, an effect that is notably amplified to 0.79 points on individuals who intend to vote for VOX in the next general election.

As for the determinants *of Tax preference*, women show a greater tendency for wealth redistribution with 0.187 points, while right-wing respondents (-0.472) and those who voted for VOX (-0.54) show a strong opposition to distribution. *Public safety satisfaction* is also negatively conditioned by right-wing ideology (−0.0872), but it is more strongly determined by voting for VOX in the last elections (−0.234) and future voting intentions (−0.595). Finally, higher income levels contribute positively to *Generalized trust* and *Public safety satisfaction*.

*Treatment Effect by Autonomous Communities*

The next step in the analysis is to explore whether the effect of the Torre Pacheco incident is moderated by the share of African immigrants in each Autonomous Community. Table 3 presents the results of the interaction between exposition to the event and the regional share of African immigrants to determine whether the incident's impact varies by the regional context.

**Table 3.** *Treatment effect heterogeneity by regional African immigration share*

| | **Generalized trust** | **Tax preference** | **Public safety satisfaction** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Treatment** | 0.046 | -0.224 | -0.040 |
| | (0.223) | (0.314) | (0.133) |
| **Days post event** | 0.030 | 0.042 | 0.006 |
| | (0.041) | (0.0566) | (0.0244) |
| **Immigrant share (Africa)** | 0.65 | -0.29 | -8.38*** |
| | (3.400) | (4.753) | (2.039) |
| **Treatment X Immigrant Share (Africa)** | -3.71 | 3.31 | -0.03 |
| | (6.554) | (9.249) | (3.926) |
| **Days post event X Immigrant share (Africa)** | -0.16 | -1.72 | -0.42 |
| | (1.177) | (1.645) | (0.714) |
| **Age** | 0.0117*** | 0.0056* | -0.0005 |
| | (0.00223) | (0.00311) | (0.00134) |
| **Female** | -0.046 | 0.190** | -0.043 |
| | (0.0639) | (0.0893) | (0.0383) |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Education** | | | |
| ***Middle education*** | 0.47*** | 0.44*** | 0.081 |
| | (0.109) | (0.152) | (0.0654) |
| ***High education*** | 0.74*** | 0.72*** | 0.236*** |
| | (0.108) | (0.151) | (0.0649) |
| **Spanish nationality** | -0.33* | 0.14 | -0.29*** |
| | (0.169) | (0.235) | (0.101) |
| **Income** | | | |
| ***€1,101-€1,800*** | 0.12 | 0.016 | 0.017 |
| | (0.157) | (0.220) | (0.0945) |
| ***€1,801-€2,700*** | 0.23 | 0.096 | 0.093 |
| | (0.153) | (0.215) | (0.0922) |
| ***€2,701-€3,900*** | 0.37** | 0.11 | 0.23** |
| | (0.154) | (0.216) | (0.0928) |
| ***€3,901-€5,000*** | 0.43*** | 0.06 | 0.19** |
| | (0.159) | (0.222) | (0.0955) |
| ***> €5,001*** | 0.64*** | -0.049 | 0.36*** |
| | (0.168) | (0.236) | (0.101) |
| **Left-right scale** | -0.110*** | -0.471*** | -0.0919*** |
| | (0.0144) | (0.0202) | (0.00865) |
| **Voted VOX** | -0.06 | -0.54*** | -0.248*** |
| | (0.144) | (0.203) | (0.0862) |
| **Would vote VOX** | -0.78*** | -0.11 | -0.576*** |
| | (0.132) | (0.184) | (0.0793) |
| **Employed** | -0.107 | -0.04 | 0.005 |
| | (0.0766) | (0.107) | (0.0459) |
| **Unemployment rate** | -2.48 | 0.84 | -8.09*** |
| | (4.408) | (6.122) | (2.642) |
| **Share vote VOX** | 0.77 | -3.58** | -0.52 |
| | (1.258) | (1.762) | (0.756) |
| **Risk poverty rate** | 1.26 | 1.520 | 4.42*** |
| | (2.278) | (3.163) | (1.365) |
| **Constant** | 5.10*** | 7.22*** | 3.73*** |
| | (0.311) | (0.434) | (0.186) |
| **Adjusted $R^2$** | 0.091 | 0.202 | 0.133 |
| **N** | 3645 | 3536 | 3631 |

The table reports coefficient estimates, with standard errors shown in parentheses. Significance levels are denoted as follows: · p<0.10, ∗ p<0.05, ∗∗ p<0.01, and ∗∗∗ p<0.001. For the variables Education and Income, the coefficients are calculated relative to the lowest level of education and the lowest income category.

The coefficients of the main interaction term, *Treatment X Immigrant share (Africa)*, are not statistically significant in any model, suggesting that the effects of the Torre Pacheco incident on Table 2 (the decline in *Tax preference* and *Public safety satisfaction*) are not moderated by the share of immigrants of African origin in the Autonomous Communities. The treatment effect is homogeneous across all the different regions observed in the sample.

Despite this, the baseline coefficient for *Immigrant share (Africa)* shows a strong negative relationship (-8.38) with *Public safety perception*, suggesting that a higher immigrant population is associated with a significantly lower satisfaction with public safety policies.

The inclusion of regional control variables in this table shows a strong and statistically significant negative relationship between the *Unemployment rate* and *Public safety satisfaction* (-8.09) and between the percentage of votes for VOX in the last regional elections and the preference for wealth redistribution (-3.58), as well as a positive and statistically significant relationship between the percentage of the population at risk of poverty and satisfaction with public safety (4.42).

*Treatment Effect in Murcia vs. other Autonomous Communities*

Table 4 presents an additional heterogeneity analysis testing whether the treatment effect was localized to Murcia. The coefficients for the interaction term *Treatment X Murcia* are statistically insignificant across all models, suggesting that the immediate behavioral shifts were not significantly different in Murcia compared to other ACs. This finding leads to the confirmation that the incident's impact has been generalized across the country.

**Table 4.** *Estimates for treatment effect heterogeneity: Murcia vs. other Autonomous Communities*

| | **Generalized trust** | **Tax preference** | **Public safety satisfaction** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Treatment** | -0.066 | -0.094 | -0.049 |
| | (0.0971) | (0.136) | (0.0586) |
| **Days post event** | 0.027 | -0.012 | -0.005 |
| | (0.0175) | (0.0245) | (0.0106) |
| **Murcia** | -0.09 | -0.996** | -0.07 |
| | (0.282) | (0.399) | (0.170) |
| **Treatment X Murcia** | -0.099 | -0.72 | 0.22 |
| | (0.539) | (0.745) | (0.325) |
| **Days post event X Murcia** | -0.066 | -0.003 | -0.0972* |
| | (0.0950) | (0.131) | (0.0572) |
| **Age** | 0.0117*** | 0.0057* | -0.0007 |
| | (0.00223) | (0.00311) | (0.00135) |
| **Female** | -0.045 | 0.194** | -0.033 |
| | (0.0639) | (0.0892) | (0.0385) |
| **Education** | | | |
| ***Middle education*** | 0.47*** | 0.44*** | 0.068 |
| | (0.109) | (0.152) | (0.0658) |
| ***High education*** | 0.74*** | 0.72*** | 0.228*** |
| | (0.108) | (0.151) | (0.0653) |
| **Spanish nationality** | -0.32* | 0.13 | -0.24*** |
| | (0.169) | (0.235) | (0.101) |
| **Income** | | | |
| ***€1,101-€1,800*** | 0.13 | 0.005 | 0.021 |
| | (0.157) | (0.220) | (0.0950) |
| ***€1,801-€2,700*** | 0.24 | 0.089 | 0.089 |
| | (0.153) | (0.215) | (0.0927) |
| ***€2,701-€3,900*** | 0.38** | 0.102 | 0.277*** |
| | (0.158) | (0.216) | (0.0934) |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| ***€3,901-€5,000*** | 0.43*** | 0.05 | 0.180* |
| | (0.158) | (0.222) | (0.0961) |
| ***> €5,001*** | 0.64*** | -0.07 | 0.34*** |
| | (0.168) | (0.236) | (0.102) |
| **Left-right scale** | -0.110*** | -0.472*** | -0.0895*** |
| | (0.0144) | (0.0202) | (0.00867) |
| **Voted VOX** | -0.065 | -0.54*** | -0.238*** |
| | (0.144) | (0.202) | (0.0867) |
| **Would vote VOX** | -0.78*** | -0.11 | -0.579*** |
| | (0.132) | (0.184) | (0.0797) |
| **Employed** | -0.111 | -0.03 | 0.0009 |
| | (0.0766) | (0.107) | (0.046) |
| **Unemployment rate** | -3.64 | 1.67 | -10.91*** |
| | (4.376) | (6.080) | (2.643) |
| **Share vote VOX** | 0.80 | -4.41*** | -2.00*** |
| | (1.214) | (1.693) | (0.732) |
| **Risk poverty rate** | 1.82 | 1.20 | 6.08*** |
| | (2.250) | (3.123) | (1.358) |
| **Constant** | 5.09*** | 7.16*** | 3.48*** |
| | (0.295) | (0.412) | (0.178) |
| **Adjusted $R^2$** | 0.091 | 0.203 | 0.122 |
| **N** | 3645 | 3536 | 3631 |

The table reports coefficient estimates, with standard errors shown in parentheses. Significance levels are denoted as follows: · p<0.10, ∗ p<0.05, ∗∗ p<0.01, and ∗∗∗ p<0.001. For the variables Education and Income, the coefficients are calculated relative to the lowest level of education and the lowest income category.

Nonetheless, table 4 reveals a significant interaction between *Days post event X Murcia* and *Public safety* satisfaction, which suggests that, while the initial effect was not localized, the decline in the perception of public safety policies was more temporally pronounced in Murcia in the immediate aftermath of the incident (-0.0972*). Additionally, residents of Murcia showed a significantly lower baseline preference for wealth redistribution (-0.996**) compared to other regions.

*Ideology*

Table 5 estimates the effect of the incident across the ideological spectrum by including the interaction terms *Treatment X Left-right scale* and *Treatment X Voted VOX*.

**Table 5.** *Treatment effect moderated by ideology and voting choice*

| | **Generalized trust** | **Tax preference** | **Public safety satisfaction** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Treatment** | -0.001 | -0.502* | 0.101 |
| | (0.160) | (0.239) | (0.0966) |
| **Days post event** | 0.024 | -0.015 | -0.009 |
| | (0.0172) | (0.0241) | (0.0104) |
| **Treatment X Left-right scale** | 0.026 | 0.092* | -0.0271 |
| | (0.0278) | (0.0507) | (0.0168) |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Treatment X Voted VOX** | -0.59*** | 0.22 | -0.195 |
| | (0.259) | (0.365) | (0.156) |
| **Left-right scale** | -0.123*** | -0.510*** | -0.071*** |
| | (0.0218) | (0.0305) | (0.0132) |
| **Voted VOX** | 0.32 | -0.704*** | -0.10 |
| | (0.218) | (0.306) | (0.032) |
| **Would vote VOX** | -0.76*** | -0.13 | -0.595*** |
| | (0.132) | (0.184) | (0.0798) |
| **Age** | 0.0117*** | 0.0055* | -0.0008 |
| | (0.00223) | (0.00311) | (0.00135) |
| **Female** | -0.043 | 0.186* | -0.032 |
| | (0.0638) | (0.0892) | (0.0385) |
| **Education** | | | |
| ***Middle education*** | 0.47** | 0.45*** | 0.071 |
| | (0.109) | (0.152) | (0.0658) |
| ***High education*** | 0.73*** | 0.74*** | 0.230*** |
| | (0.108) | (0.151) | (0.0654) |
| **Spanish nationality** | -0.32* | 0.14 | -0.267*** |
| | (0.168) | (0.234) | (0.102) |
| **Income** | | | |
| ***€1,101-€1,800*** | 0.14 | 0.01 | 0.028 |
| | (0.156) | (0.220) | (0.0951) |
| ***€1,801-€2,700*** | 0.25 | 0.10 | 0.097 |
| | (0.154) | (0.215) | (0.0928) |
| ***€2,701-€3,900*** | 0.38** | 0.12 | 0.231** |
| | (0.154) | (0.215) | (0.0934) |
| ***€3,901-€5,000*** | 0.43*** | 0.05 | 0.182* |
| | (0.158) | (0.222) | (0.0961) |
| ***> €5,001*** | 0.64*** | -0.052 | 0.34*** |
| | (0.167 | (0.235) | (0.0102) |
| **Employed** | -0.113 | -0.05 | 0.003 |
| | (0.0765) | (0.107) | (0.0462) |
| **Constant** | 5.29*** | 7.42*** | 3.61*** |
| | (0.279) | (0.389) | (0.169) |
| **Adjusted $R^2$** | 0.093 | 0.202 | 0.119 |
| **N** | 3645 | 3536 | 3631 |

The table reports coefficient estimates, with standard errors shown in parentheses. Significance levels are denoted as follows: · p<0.10, ∗ p<0.05, ∗∗ p<0.01, and ∗∗∗ p<0.001. For the variables Education and Income, the coefficients are calculated relative to the lowest level of education and the lowest income category.

The negative and statistically significant interaction coefficient of *Treatment X Voted VOX* for *Generalized trust* (-0.59) provides strong evidence to confirm that VOX voters experienced a greater decline in their levels of generalized trust, as stated in Hypothesis 3b. This effect, however, seems not to be a continuous gradient across the political spectrum as claimed by Hypotheses 3a, since the coefficient for *Treatment X Left-right scale* is insignificant. This could mean that the impact of the incident was concentrated among individuals who sympathize with the far right and voted for VOX, rather than gradually increasing along the right side of the political spectrum.

The effects on *Tax preference* also show a clear political pattern. The *Treatment* shows a negative coefficient stronger than that in Table 2, confirming that respondents generally shifted towards more fiscally conservative attitudes after the incident. However, the positive and significant coefficient for the interaction term *Treatment X Left-right scale* indicates that the general conservative shift was weakened by 0.0653 points for each unit increase in right-wing identification, indicating a less pronounced effect for those already on the right. Given the negative and highly significant coefficient of the *Left-right scale* (-0.510), the results indicate that the effect could have had a small impact on people further to the right of the ideological spectrum if their position was strong and already consolidated. Therefore, the most significant movement after the event would have happened among moderate and center-left voters, who, starting from a less extreme position, had more room to update their opinions in response to the incident.

The concentration of this shift among moderate and center-left voters suggests a high degree of flexibility in their attitudes. While individuals on the right likely held strong, pre-existing opinions on immigration and redistribution, moderate voters started from a position of relative openness. For this segment of the population, the Torre Pacheco incident served as a shock that challenged their previous inclinations toward inclusion or redistribution, causing a more pronounced downward revision of their solidarity compared to those whose opinions were already consolidated.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze how the high-salience Torre Pacheco incident, a clear example of the consequences of increasing migration flows, had a significant and immediate effect on generalized trust among the Spanish population. Using the Unexpected Event during Survey Design (UESD) methodology to analyze the Public Opinion and Fiscal Policy survey from Spain, the goal of this work was to measure the potential decline in trust, based on the premise that sudden, negatively framed events can challenge the established levels of trust.

The initial results show that the overall population's levels of generalized trust were not changed by the incident and remained stable in the immediate aftermath. This finding leans toward the cultural view of trust, demonstrating that generalized trust is a deeply rooted and stable expectation that does not change due to sudden external shocks, and it

does not provide enough evidence to support Hypothesis 1. However, this stability does not extend to other policy-relevant attitudes: the incident immediately triggered a shift towards fiscally conservative attitudes when controlling for individual characteristics, as shown by the decline in the preference for greater wealth redistribution and higher taxes. This outcome is consistent with literature linking a greater presence of immigrants with the rejection of redistribution and tax payment (Alesina et al., 2018; Elsner and Concannon, 2020). Additionally, there was also a significant yet smaller decline in satisfaction with public safety policies, suggesting that the incident amplified feelings of insecurity and vulnerability linked to immigration (Hiatt, 2007; Givens, 2010; Alkopher & Blanc, 2017).

When checking whether the effect of the incident was homogeneous across regions, the analysis found that neither the share of African immigrants at the Autonomous Community level nor the specific location of the incident in Murcia as compared to the other regions affected the results, failing to support Hypothesis 2. However, the data show that the negative effect of the incident on satisfaction with public safety policies was more pronounced over time in Murcia than in the rest of the regions. This suggests that the shock was generalized across the country, possibly due to the role of the media, political reactions and social media in the dissemination of the event, as suggested by Brown et al. (2012) and Khan (2018). It also suggests that the perception of insecurity would have lasted longer in Murcia than in the rest of the country, possibly due to the anti-immigration protests that took place in the days after the incident.

Ideology played a decisive role in processing information about the incident. Data show that the stability of generalized trust was significantly reduced among respondents who voted for VOX in the last general elections compared to those who voted for a different party, providing strong empirical evidence to support Hypothesis 3b. However, this effect was not linear, since the evidence does not show an incremental increase of mistrust at higher levels of right-leaning identification, contrary to expectations from Hypothesis 3a. These findings support the intergroup threat theory, demonstrating that the incident triggered pre-existing concerns among VOX voters and strengthened their narrative on the need to preserve national identity and culture before the threat of the immigrant "other".

The incident also caused a small decrease in the preference for greater redistribution among respondents to the right of the political spectrum, but the biggest change was

experienced by moderate and center-left voters, since they started off from a position where their convictions were weaker. Therefore, there was more room to update their beliefs.

This work contributes to the literature by demonstrating that unexpected events can alter sociopolitical perceptions in the short term. These findings are highly relevant to the methodological and theoretical debate on the impact of unforeseen events on public opinion, as the Torre Pacheco incident constitutes a major negative event that had the ability to change perceptions of tax preferences and security, aligning with the arguments of Charitopoulou and Cavalli (2022). but only did so among specific ideological sectors. Frese (2025) warns that studies using an Unexpected Event During Survey Design approach are not always extrapolatable.

The results suggest that existing integration policies have not been enough to alleviate feelings of mistrust or insecurity that fuel anti-immigrant narratives. Policymakers need to go beyond administrative regularization and promote inclusion programs that prioritize academic training, job search, and learning the language of the host countries. In this way, the state can counteract the belief that immigrants are an economic burden and promote the inclusion of migrants through their participation as an active population. Furthermore, the speed and means by which the Torre Pacheco incident spread nationwide demonstrates the need for public institutions to work to combat misinformation and hate speech on social media, especially in times of crisis. Individuals must know if information is accurate and what sources are reliable when they need to learn about events that impact their perceptions of reality.

While this study has answered the question of how the Torre Pacheco incident influenced generalized trust in Spain in the immediate aftermath, there are certain limitations that should be pointed out. First, the short-run focus of the UESD design remains a key restriction to accurately determine whether the effect of the incident could have been greater or extended beyond the duration of the survey. Furthermore, the lack of reliable data on the number of undocumented immigrants is a significant limitation for this analysis. The anti-immigration rhetoric of the far-right appeals to both people in regular situations and those who arrive irregularly as “other”. By limiting this analysis to the first group, the model fails to capture the entire effect of the incident and could underestimate the actual magnitude of the relationship between the variables analyzed in this study.

Future research should include data on the undocumented immigrant population, as well as specific variables that measure attitudes toward immigrants, such as trust, especially those of Maghrebi origin due to their large representation in Spain. The percentage of the immigrant population should be included at the local level in order to verify more accurately whether or not the Intergroup Threat Theory applies. Finally, a study of this nature would benefit from the inclusion of variables that reveal the level of information available to individuals and the sources they normally use to learn in detail how information, and especially misinformation, alters people's perceptions in contrast to the event itself. In summary, the Torre Pacheco incident did not completely change the attitudes of the entire population nor destroy social cohesion; rather, it served to activate pre-existing perceptions of threat, closely related to ideology, diminishing the confidence of a few but weakening the solidarity and perception of security of many more.

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## Appendix A: Recodification of variables

Variable *Education level* has been recoded following the International Standard Classification of Education, which provides eight categories aggregated into three clusters comparable across all European countries:

**Table 6.** *ISCED Education levels aggregated (Eurostat, n.d.)*

| Category | ISCED Education level | |
|---|---|---|
| Low education | 0 | Early childhood and/or no education |
| | 1 | Primary education |
| | 2 | Lower secondary education |
| Middle education | 3 | Upper secondary education |
| | 4 | Post-secondary non-tertiary education |
| High education | 5 | Short-cycle tertiary education |
| | 6 | Bachelor's or equivalent level |
| | 7 | Master's or equivalent level |
| | 8 | Doctoral or equivalent level |

**Table 7.** *Recoding of variable Education level*

| Survey answer | | Recoded value | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | No education | | |
| 2 | Primary education | 1 | Low education |
| 3 | Secondary education (1st stage) | | |
| 4 | Secondary education (2nd stage) | 2 | Middle education |
| 5 | Vocational studies | | |
| 6 | Higher education | 3 | High education |

Variable *Employment status* has been recoded according to the following logic:

**Table 8.** *Recoding of variable Employment status*

| Survey answer | | Recoded value | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Employed | 1 | Employed |
| 2 | Retired/pensioner (previously worked) | | |
| 3 | Pensioner (has not previously worked) | | |
| 4 | Unemployed (previously worked) | | |
| 5 | Unemployed (first job) | 0 | Unemployed |
| 6 | Student | | |
| 7 | Unpaid domestic work | | |
| 8 | Other | | |

## Appendix B: Variables specification

Variable *Household income* has six different categories:

**Table 9.** *Household income categories*

| Survey categories | |
|---|---|
| 1 | < €1,100 |
| 2 | €1,101-€1,800 |
| 3 | €1,801-€2,700 |
| 4 | €2,701-€3,900 |
| 5 | € 3,901-€5,000 |
| 6 | > €5,001 |

Table 10 shows a summary of all relevant variables for this study:

**Table 10.** *Summary of variables*

| Variable | Description | Question on survey |
|---|---|---|
| Treatment | Exposure to the Torre Pacheco incident (0=Before July 9; 1=After July 9) | - |
| Generalized trust | Level of trust toward people in general. Scale 0 ("One can never be too careful") to 10 ("Most people can be trusted") | P1 |
| Tax preference | Preference for the trade-off between taxes and social benefits. Scale 0 (Lower taxes/fewer services) to 10 (Higher taxes/more services) | P9 |
| Public safety satisfaction | Level of satisfaction with policies regarding public safety. Categorical: "Very," "Quite," "Little," or "Not at all" | P6_5 |
| Age | Respondent's age in years (continuous, from 18 to 95) | P0b |
| Female | Respondent's sex (0=Male; 1=Female) | P0a |
| Education | Highest level of education completed (1=Low, 2=Middle, 3=High) | ESTUDIOS |
| Income | Monthly household income level across six brackets: from 1 (<€1,100) to 6 (>€5,000) | INGREHOG |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Spanish nationality | Respondent's nationality (0= Spanish and other; 1= Spanish only) | P0c |
| Employed | Current employment status (0=Unemployed; 1=Employed) | SITLAB |
| Left-right scale | Self-placement on the ideological scale (ordinal, from 1 (left) to 10 (right) | ESCIDEOL |
| Voted VOX | Whether the respondent voted for VOX in the last general election (0=No; 1=Yes) | RECUVOTOGR |
| Would vote VOX | Future voting intention for VOX in upcoming general election (0=No; 1=Yes) | INTENCION_COD |
| Unemployment rate | Unemployment rate in region of residence as of the third quarter of 2025 | - |
| Share vote VOX | Percentage of votes obtained by VOX in the region of residence in the last regional election | - |
| Risk poverty rate | Rate of risk of poverty in the region of residence for 2024 | - |

## Appendix C: Sample distribution across Autonomous Communities

Table 11 presents the number of survey respondents disaggregated by Autonomous Community of residence in the control and treatment groups.

**Table 11.** *Number of respondents per Autonomous Community in the control and treatment groups*

| Autonomous Community | Pre-event/Control | Post-event/Treatment |
|---|---|---|
| Andalucía | 249 | 470 |
| Aragón | 58 | 47 |
| Asturias (Principado de) | 44 | 49 |
| Baleares (Illes) | 60 | 29 |
| Canarias | 78 | 90 |
| Cantabria | 22 | 31 |
| Castilla-La Mancha | 63 | 101 |
| Castilla y León | 86 | 125 |
| Cataluña | 227 | 382 |
| Comunitat Valenciana | 170 | 251 |
| Extremadura | 37 | 53 |
| Galicia | 101 | 134 |
| Madrid (Comunidad de) | 255 | 372 |
| Murcia | 57 | 71 |
| Navarra (Comunidad Foral de) | 16 | 41 |
| País Vasco | 70 | 128 |
| Rioja (La) | 11 | 13 |
| Ceuta | 3 | 3 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Melilla | 2 | 3 |
| **Total** | **1609** | **2393** |

## Appendix D: Covariate balance tests

The validity of the treatment and control groups is tested by comparing them across all observable variables. Table 12 presents the descriptive statistics and mean differences for the primary individual-level covariates, comparing both groups. The columns include the means and standard deviations for both groups, the raw mean difference and the SD ratio. Ideally, the mean difference should be small and statistically insignificant, and the SD ratio should be close to 1.0.

**Table 12.** *Covariate balance check between control (pre-event) and treatment (post-event) groups*

| | Control | | Treatment | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Variable** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Mean difference** | **SD ratio** |
| **Age** | 51.08 | 15.61 | 50.24 | 16.53 | -0.84 | 0.944 |
| **Female** | 0.43 | 0.49 | 0.50 | 0.50 | 0.07*** | 0.980 |
| **Education** | | | | | | |
| ***Low education*** | 0.13 | 0.34 | 0.14 | 0.35 | 0.01 | 0.971 |
| ***Middle education*** | 0.31 | 0.46 | 0.32 | 0.47 | 0.01 | 0.979 |
| ***High education*** | 0.56 | 0.50 | 0.54 | 0.50 | 0.02 | 1.000 |
| **Spanish** | 0.96 | 0.19 | 0.96 | 0.19 | 0.00 | 1.000 |
| **Employed** | 0.64 | 0.48 | 0.63 | 0.48 | -0.01 | 1.000 |
| **Household income** | | | | | | |
| ***< €1,100*** | 0.06 | 0.24 | 0.06 | 0.24 | 0.00 | 1.000 |
| ***€1,100-€1,800*** | 0.14 | 0.35 | 0.16 | 0.37 | 0.02* | 0.946 |
| ***€1,801-€2,700*** | 0.22 | 0.41 | 0.22 | 0.41 | 0.00 | 1.000 |
| ***€2,701-€3,900*** | 0.22 | 0.42 | 0.23 | 0.42 | 0.01 | 1.000 |
| ***€3,901-€5,000*** | 0.21 | 0.41 | 0.20 | 0.39 | -0.01 | 1.051 |
| ***> €5,000*** | 0.15 | 0.36 | 0.13 | 0.34 | -0.02 | 1.059 |
| **Ideology** | 4.87 | 2.46 | 4.87 | 2.48 | 0.00 | 0.992 |
| **Voted VOX** | 0.07 | 0.25 | 0.09 | 0.28 | 0.02* | 0.893 |
| **Would vote VOX** | 0.10 | 0.30 | 0.11 | 0.31 | 0.01 | 0.968 |

The asterisks denote the statistical significance of the Mean difference (test of Mean difference=0). Significance levels are denoted as follows: · p<0.10, ∗ p<0.05, ∗∗ p<0.01, and ∗∗∗ p<0.001.

The results of the balance test show that the control and treatment groups are very similar across numerous socio-demographic and political categories. The difference between means is 0.00 or very close in all variables, and the standard deviation ratios are close to unity, confirming comparable variance across groups.

However, three statistically significant differences were observed: the proportion of female respondents is higher in the post-event sample (0.007); the second household income bracket (€1,100-€1,800) is slightly overrepresented in the treatment group (0.02); and the proportion of people who voted for VOX in the last general election is also higher (0.02). These imbalances make the inclusion of these variables in the regressions essential to prevent potential endogeneity and selection bias.

## Appendix E: Robustness checks

**Table 13.** *Regression results for treatment effect under delayed effect*

| | Generalized trust | Tax preference | Public safety satisfaction |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Delayed treatment** | 0.05 | -0.14 | -0.1** |
| | (0.75) | (-1.44) | (-2.55) |
| **Constant** | 5.65*** | 5.87*** | 3.17*** |
| | (134.52) | (95.76) | (124.96) |
| **Adjusted $R^2$** | -0.000 | 0.000 | 0.001 |
| **N** | 3995 | 3855 | 3974 |

The table reports coefficient estimates, with standard errors shown in parentheses. Significance levels are denoted as follows: · p<0.10, ∗ p<0.05, ∗∗ p<0.01, and ∗∗∗ p<0.001.