

Spain Bet Big on Open Borders. Did It Work?

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Note: the original article is provided as a separate file (attached to the email or downloadable from the website).

1. Reading Passage

While most of Europe is racing to tighten its borders, Spain has spent the past four years doing the opposite—and the results are reshaping the country. Since 2022, Spain's foreign-born population has grown by an average of 665,000 people each year, the equivalent of adding the entire city of Málaga annually. Roughly 70 percent of new jobs created in Spain this decade have gone to immigrants, and Spain alone absorbed roughly one in four new EU jobs created between 2020 and 2025, far outpacing France, Italy, and Germany.

This is not an accident. Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has deliberately kept Spain's doors open even as Donald Trump's United States and most of Europe move in the opposite direction. The economic case is straightforward: Spain's birth rate sits well below the 2.1 children per woman needed to keep a population stable, and the Bank of Spain estimates the country needs continued large-scale immigration just to stop its working-age population from shrinking. Without new arrivals, the welfare state, the pension system, and economic growth all become mathematically impossible to sustain.

But here's the catch: housing has not kept up. Spain built only about 700,000 new homes over the past decade while forming roughly 1.8 million new households. The result, predictably, is a squeeze. Rents in Madrid jumped 59 percent between 2021 and 2025, and the Migration Policy Institute warns that the gap between population growth and infrastructure is generating real strain. A graphic designer named Ana Ibáñez, profiled in the original reporting, spent thirty days searching for an apartment in Madrid and ended up sharing with strangers—a story now common across Spanish cities.

The political backlash is the second pressure point. Vox, Spain's hard-right populist party, has been climbing in polls and overtaking the center-right People's Party in some surveys, campaigning on tougher language requirements and cultural integration tests. Its supporters often point to the fact that 51 percent of Spain's prison inmates are foreign-born—a striking statistic. But the passage is careful to note the counterpoint: the number of offenses per 1,000 foreign residents has actually fallen since 2010, suggesting that crime data alone doesn't explain Vox's rise. Cultural anxiety and housing pain do.

This is what makes Spain's experiment so important. The country is, in effect, running a live test of whether a wealthy democracy can keep its borders relatively open without losing the political center. If Sánchez's coalition holds and integration works, Spain becomes the model for every aging rich country—from Germany to Japan to, eventually, China. If Vox wins the next election and unwinds the policy, expect a wave of imitators across Europe, and a far harder labor market for the migrants currently powering Spain's boom. Either way, today's teenagers will graduate into a world shaped by which answer wins.

2. Explanation

While most of Europe slams the door shut, Spain has flung it open—adding two-thirds of a million foreign-born residents a year and quietly running the West's biggest immigration experiment.

What's Going On?

Since 2022, Spain's foreign-born population has grown by an average of 665,000 people a year—roughly the population of the city of Málaga, added annually. Immigrants now account for about a quarter of all new EU jobs created this decade, and 70 percent of those jobs in Spain itself have gone to people born abroad.

Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has chosen this path deliberately. As the United States under Donald Trump tightened its borders, Sánchez doubled down on an 'open-door' policy, arguing that an aging Spain needs workers to keep its economy and welfare state running. Critics counter that the surge is straining housing, infrastructure, and public patience.

How To Think About It

This isn't just a story about migration—it's a bet on demographics. Spain's birth rate is well below the 2.1 children per woman needed to keep a population stable, so the country faces a stark choice: import workers or shrink.

- Think of it like a leaky bucket: Spain's birth rate isn't refilling the workforce fast enough, so Sánchez is opening a second tap (immigration) to keep the water level up. The catch is that the new water arrives faster than the bucket can be enlarged—hence the housing crunch.
- Or think of a football club whose academy isn't producing enough youth players. Rather than accept relegation, the manager signs foreign talent. It works on the pitch, but season-ticket holders complain the team 'doesn't feel like ours' anymore—exactly the backlash now fueling Spain's far-right Vox party.

Key Things To Know

- Spain absorbed roughly 1 in 4 new EU jobs created between 2020 and 2025, with about 2.8 million net jobs added—far ahead of France, Italy, or Germany.
- The Bank of Spain estimates the country needs immigration at roughly its current rate just to keep its working-age population stable as Baby Boomers retire.
- Housing is the pressure valve: rents in Madrid jumped 59% from 2021 to 2025, and Spain built only about 700,000 new households over the past decade versus the 1.8 million it actually formed.
- Politically, the surge is fueling Vox, the hard-right party that has overtaken the center-right People's Party in some polls and is campaigning on tougher language requirements and cultural integration tests.
- The 'they take our jobs' narrative doesn't fit the data: 51% of prison inmates are foreign-born, but the number of offenses per 1,000 foreign residents has actually fallen since 2010.

Why It Matters

If you're a teen wondering why politics feels so polarized everywhere, Spain is a case study in real time. The same forces—aging populations, housing shortages, cultural anxiety—are reshaping elections from the U.S. to Germany. Spain's experiment is a live test of whether a wealthy democracy can keep its borders relatively open without losing the political center, and the answer will shape which countries remain dynamic economies in the 2030s when today's high-schoolers enter the workforce.

The Bigger Picture

Spain is doing something historically unusual: betting that immigration can simultaneously rescue its economy AND survive at the ballot box. If Sánchez's coalition holds and integration works, Spain becomes the model for every aging European country (and eventually Japan, South Korea, and even China). If Vox wins the next election and rolls it back, expect a domino effect across the EU—and a much harder global labor market for the migrants currently powering Spain's boom.

3. Key Terms Glossary

Foreign-born population

The number of residents who were born outside the country they currently live in, regardless of whether they've since become citizens. Different from 'foreign nationals,' which counts only people who haven't been naturalized.

Replacement-rate fertility

The average number of children per woman (about 2.1 in rich countries) needed to keep a population stable without immigration. Spain's rate is well below this.

Regularization (or amnesty)

A government program that gives legal residency and work permits to undocumented migrants already living in the country. Spain plans to regularize up to 1 million people.

Vox

Spain's hard-right populist political party, founded in 2013, that campaigns on tougher immigration rules and skepticism of the EU. Roughly equivalent in positioning to France's National Rally.

Migration Policy Institute

A Washington-based think tank that researches migration trends globally. Often cited as a neutral source on immigration data.

Squatting

Illegally occupying a vacant property without the owner's permission. In Spain it has become a high-profile flashpoint because eviction laws make removing squatters slow.

Naturalization

The legal process by which a foreign-born resident becomes a full citizen of their adopted country, gaining rights like voting.

4. Reading Comprehension Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

- Q1.** The passage primarily argues that Spain's immigration surge is best understood as:
- A) An accidental side effect of weak border enforcement that Madrid is now struggling to reverse
 - B) A deliberate economic strategy that is producing both real benefits and serious political strains
 - C) A humanitarian gesture aimed at countering Donald Trump's border crackdown in the United States
 - D) A short-term labor fix that economists agree will be unwound after the 2027 elections
- Q2.** According to the passage, the most direct economic reason Spain has welcomed large-scale immigration is:
- A) To reduce wage inflation in low-skill sectors of the Spanish economy
 - B) To replace workers lost to emigration during the 2008 financial crisis
 - C) To offset a shrinking working-age population caused by below-replacement fertility
 - D) To meet European Union quotas on refugee resettlement set after 2022
- Q3.** Which choice best states the central idea of the passage?
- A) Spain's economy has fully recovered from the 2008 financial crisis thanks to migrant workers
 - B) European countries should adopt Spain's regularization program to fix their labor shortages
 - C) Spain is running an unusually open immigration experiment whose outcome remains contested
 - D) Anti-immigrant parties like Vox are certain to win Spain's next national election
- Q4.** As used in the passage, 'absorbed' (in 'Spain absorbed roughly 1 in 4 new EU jobs') most nearly means:
- A) Soaked up like a sponge taking in liquid
 - B) Accounted for as a share of the total
 - C) Eliminated through automation and policy
 - D) Quietly hidden from official statistics
- Q5.** As used in the passage, 'pressure valve' most nearly means:
- A) A mechanical device that prevents explosions in industrial settings
 - B) An area where strain from a larger system becomes most visible
 - C) A government policy designed to cool overheating financial markets
 - D) A safety mechanism that releases political tension during elections
- Q6.** Which statement about Spain's housing market can most reasonably be inferred from the passage?
- A) Construction has kept pace with population growth, but speculation has driven prices up anyway
 - B) The supply of housing has lagged demand, intensifying social tensions around immigration
 - C) Most newly arrived migrants are buying homes outright, which is why rents have risen
 - D) Madrid's rent controls have successfully shielded immigrant tenants from price increases
- Q7.** The passage suggests that the rise of Vox is best explained by:
- A) A genuine increase in crime rates committed by foreign-born residents since 2010
 - B) A coordinated disinformation campaign run from outside Spain's borders
 - C) Voter anxiety about cultural change and visible economic strains, not crime statistics
 - D) Direct financial support from anti-immigration political parties elsewhere in Europe

Q8. The author's tone toward Spain's immigration policy is best described as:

- A)** Enthusiastically supportive of Sánchez's open-door approach
- B)** Sharply critical of the political and economic costs involved
- C)** Analytically balanced, weighing economic gains against social strains
- D)** Dismissive of concerns raised by housing and cultural critics

Q9. Based on the passage, which outcome would most likely indicate that Spain's immigration bet has 'worked' on the author's terms?

- A)** Vox wins an outright majority and reverses the regularization program
- B)** Net migration drops to zero as Spain ages into a Japan-style demographic decline
- C)** Job growth and integration continue while political backlash remains contained
- D)** Madrid rents stabilize because new migrants stop arriving from Latin America

Q10. Which choice provides the BEST evidence for the answer to the previous question?

- A)** 'Spain absorbed roughly 1 in 4 new EU jobs created between 2020 and 2025'
- B)** 'Spain's experiment is a live test of whether a wealthy democracy can keep its borders relatively open without losing the political center'
- C)** 'Rents in Madrid jumped 59% from 2021 to 2025'
- D)** '51% of prison inmates are foreign-born'

My Score: _____ / 10

5. Answer Key with Explanations

Q1. The passage primarily argues that Spain's immigration surge is best understood as:

Answer: B

The passage frames Sánchez's open-door approach as an intentional bet on demographics that is delivering job growth but also straining housing and fueling Vox. C is the main trap—it uses the passage's vocabulary (Trump, borders) but misstates the motive, which is economic, not humanitarian. SAT Tip: When a question asks for a passage's central argument, pick the option that captures BOTH the cause and the consequences the author emphasizes—single-sided answers are usually traps.

Q2. According to the passage, the most direct economic reason Spain has welcomed large-scale immigration is:

Answer: C

The passage explicitly links immigration to Spain's aging population and a birth rate below the 2.1 replacement level. D is tempting because the passage mentions the EU, but it never cites refugee quotas as the driver. SAT Tip: For 'according to the passage' questions, the right answer must be stated or directly paraphrased in the text—if you have to assume something the passage doesn't say, it's wrong.

Q3. Which choice best states the central idea of the passage?

Answer: C

The passage describes Spain's policy as a live experiment with both economic upside and political backlash, and explicitly avoids predicting the outcome. D is the main trap—it overstates a trend the passage only flags as a risk. SAT Tip: Central-idea answers are almost always measured and balanced; options containing words like 'certain,' 'fully,' or 'should' are usually too strong.

Q4. As used in the passage, 'absorbed' (in 'Spain absorbed roughly 1 in 4 new EU jobs') most nearly means:

Answer: B

In economic writing, to 'absorb' jobs means a country's share captured a given proportion of the total created. A is the trap—it's the common literal meaning of 'absorb' but doesn't fit the sentence about job creation statistics. SAT Tip: On vocab-in-context, plug each option back into the original sentence; the one that preserves the sentence's meaning is correct, even if it's not the dictionary's first definition.

Q5. As used in the passage, 'pressure valve' most nearly means:

Answer: B

The passage uses 'pressure valve' metaphorically: housing is where the strain of rapid population growth shows up most acutely. A is the trap—it's the literal mechanical meaning, but the passage isn't about engineering. SAT Tip: When a metaphor is used, the right answer transfers the original concept (releasing pressure) onto the new context (society, economics) without taking the image too literally.

Q6. Which statement about Spain's housing market can most reasonably be inferred from the passage?

Answer: B

The passage notes that Spain built far fewer households than were formed and that rents jumped 59% in Madrid, fueling backlash. A is the trap—it's true in many real housing markets, but the passage specifically blames a building shortfall, not speculation. SAT Tip: On inference questions, beware of 'true in real life but not in the passage' distractors—stick strictly to evidence the author actually provides.

Q7. The passage suggests that the rise of Vox is best explained by:

Answer: C

The passage notes crime per resident has fallen, yet Vox is gaining ground—pointing to cultural and housing-related anxieties rather than data-driven concerns. A is the trap (Trap A: right scope, wrong direction)—the passage states crime has fallen, not risen. SAT Tip: When a question asks 'why does X happen,' check whether any option directly contradicts a fact the passage already gave you—if so, eliminate it instantly.

Q8. The author's tone toward Spain's immigration policy is best described as:

Answer: C

The author presents both the economic case (jobs, demographics) and the costs (housing, Vox) without endorsing either side. A and B are traps because each captures only half of what the author actually does. SAT Tip: For tone questions, scan the adjectives and verbs the author chose—neutral, hedged language ('experiment,' 'contested,' 'critics counter') almost always signals an analytical, balanced tone.

Q9. Based on the passage, which outcome would most likely indicate that Spain's immigration bet has 'worked' on the author's terms?

Answer: C

The passage frames success as economic gains surviving political pressure—exactly what option C describes. D is the trap (Trap B: passage vocabulary, wrong combination)—it mentions rents and migrants but inverts the policy goal, which is to keep migrants coming. SAT Tip: On 'what would success look like' questions, restate the author's thesis in your own words first, then match it to an option.

Q10. Which choice provides the BEST evidence for the answer to the previous question?

Answer: B

This sentence directly defines the standard the author uses for success: open borders sustained alongside political stability. A states a benefit but not the success criterion; C and D describe strains, not the bet's resolution. SAT Tip: On evidence-pairing questions, find the line that matches your previous answer's logic, not just its topic—statistics can describe the situation without defining what success means.