

How Eurozone membership is felt to have served citizens in service-based sectors in València: an evaluation of left- and right-wing populism?

Karel Ohana

Department of Philosophy, Logic, and Scientific Method, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), London, United Kingdom

K.Ohana1@lse.ac.uk

Abstract

This research examines how Eurozone membership is perceived and experienced by Valencian citizens employed in the service sector, such as tourism, retail, and hospitality. It also looks at whether populist narratives play any role in these perceptions. While left-wing populist framings resonate with critiques of austerity, right-wing populism hinges on concerns around sovereignty and bureaucracy. Using a qualitative methodology, I interviewed three service workers. Participants describe the Eurozone crisis as a watershed point, marked by austerity and precarity. They also highlight appreciation of the Eurozone for its administrative capacities, although participants were ambivalent to European politics. This research thereby contributes to a bottom-up evaluation of European integration by foregrounding the lived experiences of ordinary workers rather than through technocratic or purely macroeconomic indicators.

Keywords: Eurozone, populism, service economy, València, qualitative research

Introduction

Eurozone membership has long been a polarising theme across Southern Europe (Kapeller, et al., 2019). Proponents emphasise the benefits of European integration, underlining the stability afforded by monetary stability and market access, as well as a sense of European unity (Trichet, 2009). Nonetheless, in the wake of the financial crisis, the Eurozone is also scrutinised through a lens of austerity, alongside the loss of national policy autonomy, and widening social cleavages (Gualerzi, 2017). In post-2008 Spain, these tensions became pronounced amid rising unemployment and public discontent regarding the mismanagement of the crisis. The Eurozone membership debate intensified after 2008 when Spain faced housing market collapse, rising joblessness, and public spending reductions known as austerity measures (Royo, 2020).

This research explores how Eurozone membership is perceived by citizens working in València's service economy, with particular attention to the ways in which these views connect to left- and right-wing populist politics.

The city of València serves as a particularly adept site in which to explore this debate because its economy depends heavily upon service industries such as tourism, retail, and housing (Salom, et al., 2019). These sectors are characterised by seasonality and unstable employment, and are particularly vulnerable to exogenous shocks, notably the Eurozone crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. The service sector - particularly tourism, housing, and platform-based work - is at the centre of public discussions around wage fairness, as well as housing availability and migration policies (Universitat Politècnica de València, 2026). The city therefore provides a setting in which the economic and political dimensions of integration intersect in everyday life.

Based on existing literature, it can be assumed that there are conflicting sentiments towards Eurozone membership. While the Eurozone might provide stability and economic expansion through tourism, it also creates unstable working conditions and reduced political autonomy. These tensions do not remain purely economic; they are politically interpreted and mobilised. Within populist rhetoric they are refracted through two different lenses: left-wing narratives emphasise inequality and austerity, whereas right-wing narratives highlight national sovereignty and immigration control. Hence, exploring how such narratives resonate among service-sector workers in València provides insight into how the division of resources translates politically.

The research investigates how Eurozone membership affects workers and small business owners who depend on these specific economic sectors. The research design adopts semi-structured interviews to capture the everyday perspectives of workers and small business owners through a qualitative approach. This methodology allows for participants to articulate their experiences through their own words, while providing a framework to analyse five core themes: identity, economic experience and crisis, political trust and representation, views on the European Union, and migration.

Methodology

I. Research design

This research investigates how service sector workers in València view Eurozone membership, exploring how their perceptions resonate with the themes articulated in left- and right-wing populist narratives. A qualitative methodology was employed, where personal experiences and subjective meanings of Eurozone membership were explored through semi-structured interviews. This approach enables participants to articulate their experiences while maintaining focus on the core themes of identity, economic crisis, political trust, EU membership and migration.

València was selected as the case study for three principal reasons. Firstly, its concentration of service-sector employment enables the examination of how Eurozone membership is experienced in vulnerable sectors. Secondly, València was severely affected by both the 2008 Eurozone crisis, given its exposure to the housing market collapse, and later, the Covid-19 downturn due to its reliance on tourism and the service-sector. Finally, these economic shocks have coincided with visible political mobilisation. València has been a site of mobilisation for both left-wing populism (Podemos) and right-wing populism (Vox), making it a relevant setting in which to examine how Eurozone membership is interpreted.

II. Sampling strategy and eligibility

A purposive, non-probability sampling strategy was employed, given the qualitative nature of the research (Palinkas, et al., 2015). Participants were selected to capture diverse experiences across sectors most shaped by Eurozone dynamics. However, as I was unable to travel, interviews were conducted over Zoom. I searched for participants who were consenting adults and had been living or working in València since at least 2008. This shaped recruitment in two ways: participation was contingent upon participants' availability, or willingness to engage virtually, and outreach relied heavily on online visibility. Hence, the resulting sample is limited by its qualitative nature, as well as its relatively small and self-selecting sample size.

Notwithstanding, target groups included tourism and hospitality workers, as well as retail workers and small shop owners. I also sought to interview housing and rental market actors such as estate agents, Airbnb hosts, tenants, and union representatives. Union representatives and platform workers proved more difficult to recruit, as they are less accessible through online networks.

III. Recruitment and procedures

Participants were sourced through online research of cafés, shops, workplaces, and community spaces, as well as targeted LinkedIn research. Before each interview, participants signed a bilingual consent form (English/Spanish).

Interviews:

Interviews lasted between 10 and 20 minutes and were conducted in a semi-structured format, organised around five thematic sections: identity, economic crisis, political trust, views on the

European Union, and migration. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented with written notes. All data were subsequently anonymised and transcribed for analysis.

IV. Data analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), involving iterative coding, theme development, and refinement. Transcripts were initially coded at a descriptive level, generating first-order codes such as 'precarity,' 'housing pressure,' and 'EU opportunity'. These codes were then reviewed and grouped into broader thematic categories, including alienation, resilience, ambivalence towards the EU, and populist identification.

V. Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the research design. Informed Consent was obtained through signed bilingual consent forms to ensure clarity. Confidentiality was maintained through the anonymisation of interview transcripts. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Given the politically charged nature of certain topics, participants were told they were not required to answer any question they found uncomfortable. All data were stored securely and only accessible to the researcher and supervisor.

VI. Results

This research investigated how Eurozone membership is felt to have served citizens in València's service economy and how these perceptions intersect with populist political narratives. Their reflections reveal three principal themes: the role of local identity in defining attitudes to economic integration, an ambivalence toward the Eurozone, a positive relationship towards migration, based on personal experiences.

Background and identity

The interview with València shop founders who run a design-based business offers rich insights into how local businesses have navigated crisis management and political shifts. The participants established their business as simultaneously European and deeply rooted in València. They launched their first shop in 2010 during the crisis in the neighbourhood of Ruzafa, where 'there was no money, but a lot of ideas'. Their vision prioritised cosmopolitan influences, as well as support for local artists, and their community.

They reflected that València's self-concept had evolved over time as in 2010, local politics was mired by corruption scandals, causing shame, whereas in recent years, there has been a resurgence of pride in its culture. This suggests that local identity is dynamic, influenced by political and cultural developments which inevitably translate into the way in which people view European influence.

Economic experience and crisis

The participants' economic trajectory reflects both vulnerability and resilience. Opening in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis meant, in their words, 'we couldn't go worse, so we've always gone for the better'. They highlighted how growth in tourism benefited their shop, although

they noted that locals remain their most reliable customers. Over time, purchasing power improved, which they ascribe to a rising minimum wage, seen as a positive for their client base.

Notwithstanding, they acknowledge the quotidian difficulties of working in retail amid rising inflation, noting: 'housing is rising above purchasing power'. They describe the memory of the Eurozone crisis as vivid, reflecting that this was marked specifically in their neighbourhood of Ruzafa. While the interviews leveraged their creativity to slowly create a thriving business focussing on local artists, the experience of crisis was formative.

The same spirit of resourcefulness was evident in the in the interviewees' experience of the pandemic, albeit this was not universal. They closed their shop to respect guidelines, as well as their online business so as not to endanger delivery people. However, government subsidies covered their wages, and they launched a face mask project in partnership with local artists, which was a boon to community engagement.

Political trust and representation

The interview participants demonstrated conflicting and evolving attitudes toward political institutions. They mentioned their ongoing dissatisfaction concerning the higher tax rates that self-employed workers must pay compared with British citizens. Moreover, they expressed support for labour reforms that benefit working people.

At a local level, the interviewees described two distinct time periods in their local community: the corruption-ridden era prior to 2015 which generated widespread distrust, and the subsequent left-wing government that backed small businesses and dedicated funds to residents. The interviewees tied the return of conservative 'rule' to a complete undoing of previous achievements, which they attribute to administrative failures under the previous government.

Views on the European Union

The participants' perceptions of the EU were rooted in pragmatism rather than dogmatism. On the one hand, they saw Eurozone membership as positive because it eased supply chains, and trade as a consequence. This is important for retail workers, especially in light of the difficulties they encountered with UK suppliers after Brexit. Conversely, they expressed concern about high costs of shipping goods within the EU, which undermined opportunities to expand online sales.

They did not impute economic volatility directly to the Eurozone, albeit they noted the EU as a political and administrative organization that made them uncomfortable with its foreign policy decisions. While critical of EU politics, they did not express any desire to exit the Eurozone. Indeed, the euro represented an essential currency system to them because they had 'always been with the euro' since its introduction and saw no alternative.

Migration and sentiments towards immigrants

When asked about migration, the participants seemingly did not see the need to frame it in economic terms but ultimately described their neighbourhood and workplace as 'super mixed'.

They noted that many of their employees and peers are from Poland, Romania, and other countries, and that immigrants are well-integrated in València. Unlike in other parts of Spain, like Barcelona for instance, they suggested, immigration is not a source of tension locally.

VII. Discussion

The research reveals that participants combine positive aspects of Eurozone membership like tourism growth and simplified imports with negative effects like rising housing costs and restricted export potential. These findings suggest that populist narratives gain traction when integration produces uneven distributive outcomes. While left-wing populism appeals to fairness, right-wing populist movements exploit public discontent about bureaucratic obstacles and threats to local identity.

This ambivalence reflects broader arguments that the Eurozone constrains as much as it enables peripheral economies (Holland & Varoufakis, 2012). Moreover, the wavering attitude towards integration is emblematic of the reality of the unequal experiences it engenders across sectors. For instance, the EU enables small businesses to import foreign products but makes exporting their goods more complicated, which demonstrates how opportunities and restrictions coexist.

The participants' reflections on housing costs and labour insecurity resonate with literature on Southern Europe's dual labour markets, dichotomising 'standard employment contracts' (Seo, 2021, p. 487) which are well-protected and provide stability to some, and 'non-standard contracts' (Seo, 2021, p. 487) generating chronic insecurity for others. Moreover, the undertones of the conversation echoed the dominant literature view that austerity amplified precarity in Southern Europe (Matsaganis & Leventi, 2015).

Identity also emerged as a central theme. The reconstruction of local pride following corruption scandals suggests that economic integration is interpreted through shifting identity frameworks. This aligns with Hopkin's (2020) emphasis on identity politics as a core facet of populist rhetoric as people construct themselves in opposition to 'elites' or 'outsiders', while also adapting their local pride according to shifting political circumstances. Notably, the cultural initiatives supported by left-wing governments created an environment which fostered European pride alongside deep connection to local communities.

The participants' views on migration contrast with dominant right-wing populist narratives that frame immigration as a threat to jobs or identity (Bonansinga & Forrest, 2025). In this case, migration was normalised within everyday life.

Overall, the findings suggest that populist narratives provide interpretive frameworks through which uneven experiences of European integration are articulated. Rather than demonstrating fixed ideological alignment, the participants selectively adopted themes associated with left- and right-wing populism. Their ambivalence illustrates how populism can emerge where integration generates both constraints, and benefits.

Conclusion

The research demonstrates that service-sector workers and small business owners in València maintain a complex relationship with Eurozone membership. The economic benefits of Eurozone membership, including monetary union and trade advantages, are inherently tied to employment instability, as well as rising housing costs and declining public trust in distant institutions.

The political nature of these ambivalences is bound to reinforce populist sentiment, as it can evolve through left-wing narratives about austerity and fairness and right-wing narratives about sovereignty and bureaucratic control. The research demonstrates that Southern European populism develops through the unequal distribution of European integration benefits and costs which people experience in their everyday lives. Eurozone membership is therefore experienced as both enabling and constraining by service-based workers in València.

This analysis is based on a limited and self-selecting interview sample and should be interpreted as exploratory, as opposed to representative. Future research could expand the sample across additional service sectors to test whether the same populist framing holds across the spectrum of work.

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