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A Comparison of Regional Stereotypes in Spain and the United States

As discussed in my reflection on the film *Ocho apellidos vascos* (linked in the body of this post,) a part of my experience in Spain was learning about regional differences and stereotypes. Beyond my experience with that one movie and those two regional trips, I learned about these differences from all different sources. From conversations with friends and my host family, discussions in my classes, and a skeptical examination of the Google Images results for "Spanish stereotypes map," I was able to get an idea of how people from different regions of Spain viewed each other (notably, most of these informants were raised and living in Madrid.) Although stereotypes never tell a full story, it's undeniable that every country has regional differences– and Spain is certainly one of them.

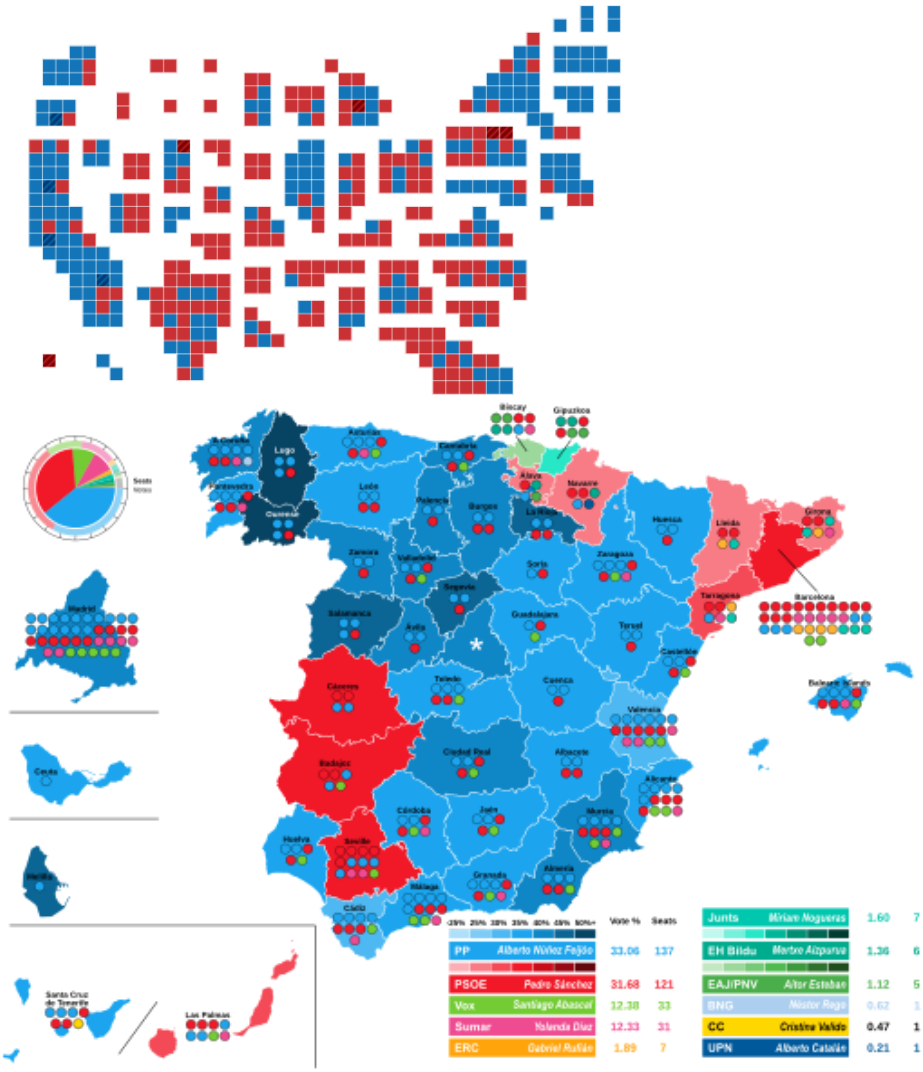
As mentioned in my previous reflection, some of these stereotypes seem easy to understand on a surface level, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they're trivial. Some regions of Spain are infamous for their rain (such as Galicia), while others are known for certain foods (like Asturias, which simply read "cows" on some of the maps I looked at) and less-densely populated Castilla-La Mancha and Castilla y Leon are made fun of for being "empty," similarly to stereotypes of the Plains States in the U.S. Spain's two island communities, the Balearic Islands and the Canary Islands, are associated with partying and overtourism. Rainier, more mountainous regions in the north are stereotyped as having more closed-off people, similarly to the U.S. Pacific Northwest, while the warmer, sunnier southern regions are stereotyped to be more friendly, just like the U.S. Southeast.

On a more serious note, judgments about socioeconomic class characterize Spanish regional stereotypes just as they do in the U.S. In Spain, Andalucians are stereotyped as lazy due to the region's lower income, while Madrileños are stereotyped as posh and stuck-up and Catalonians are seen as greedy, due to the wealth of both regions. During one Spanish lesson, our (Madrid-born and raised)

professor gave us an example for the word “tacaño,” or “stingy,” by asking us if we knew who the “tacaños” of Spain were. “It’s Catalonia,” I remember her saying; “they don’t want their tax dollars funding the siestas of people in Andalucía or Extremadura.” While classism certainly varies across the U.S., the “redneck” stereotype and the stigma around Appalachian and Southeastern accents are two comparable American examples that come to mind. However, one interesting divergence is how class stereotypes intertwine with politics. While “rednecks” are associated with the religious right, Andalucía and Extremadura are two of Spain’s most left-leaning regions.

In my experience, politics affect regional identity in the U.S. more than they do in Spain– which is also probably influenced by my experience growing up and going to school exclusively in vast-majority-liberal places. The issue begins with the intense political polarization of the current era and is exacerbated by the Electoral College system, which forces states into concrete categories of “red state,” “blue state,” or “swing state.” A whole slew of assumptions comes with any of these labels, including automatic notions about religion, prejudices, class, level of education and/or intelligence, and many more that vary wildly based on the identity of the onlooker but are often firmly held.

While there are certainly places in Spain that are more conservative or liberal than others, it didn’t seem to figure into snap judgments about different regions as much as it does in the U.S. This is linked to a variety of political differences., beginning with the simple fact that Spain is not as politically polarized as the U.S.:



Political maps of the U.S. (House of Representatives seats) vs Spain. The Spanish map (source) shows how each of Spain's provincias, comparable to U.S. counties, voted. Even though some places certainly leaned towards one party or the other, not a single provincia with more than one seat gave all of its seats to one party, and many provincias are divided almost equally, despite the map needing to choose a single color for each. Meanwhile, the U.S. (map source: NYTimes) has several states which only have representatives of one political party, while the rest have one defined party majority.

Spain uses a multi-party system in which the center-right and center-left parties are most popular, but others are still represented, such as far-right, far-left, and regional nationalist parties.

Regional nationalist politics spawn their own stereotypes, such as the association between the Basque Country and the violent separatist organization ETA that disbanded in 2018. In general, however, Spanish mainstream political parties are much more correlated to economic policies than what the U.S. conceptualizes as "social" conservatism or liberalism, with the exception of an emerging but still small far-right party. In the U.S.'s two-party system, economic opinions are bundled up with stances on religion, immigration, women's rights, and queer rights that—as my experiences in Spain have helped me realize—aren't necessarily inherently linked.

The perspectives I've expressed about U.S. regional differences are far from universal truths; rather, they are inextricable from my own regional identity. I've lived in the New York metro area since age 3; my dad is from Chicago, but I've never really felt close to Midwestern culture, and my mom is from New York. I've had opportunities to visit other states, but it's difficult to truly understand such a wide and complex variety of regional cultures, and I'm sure my own perspective is influenced by both idealizations and devaluations of states I don't actually know much about. Recently, I find myself especially falling into the trap of political generalizations. I perceive the Republican party as a threat to issues that are both important to me and affect me on a personal level due to my specific identities, which I know must influence my view of the so-called "red states" that in reality are so much more complex than a voting choice inaccurately generalized as universal by a color on a map.

In GEM 205, we discussed the idea of a fish not noticing the water around it as a metaphor for blindness to one's own culture. Being new to Spanish culture helped me notice and deconstruct regional stereotypes there. Now, I hope to apply that lens to my own way of understanding and interacting with other U.S. regions, taking the lessons I've learned from global citizenship to not only be a more effective intercultural communicator internationally, but in an increasingly polarized home country as well.