

# Vox: The Revival of the Far Right in Spain



Centre for  
Analysis of the  
Radical Right

CARR RESEARCH INSIGHT

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## ABSTRACT

In the past two years, Spain's far-right party Vox has gone from no representation in the Spanish parliament to 52 seats, making it the third most representative political force nationally behind the People's Party (PP) and the Socialist Party (PSOE). This has radically transformed Spanish politics, leading to a level of polarization not seen since the Spanish Second Republic (1931-9). Until Vox's recent electoral success, Spain was considered immune to the far right because of its Francoist past and relatively favorable attitude toward globalization, the EU, and immigration. However, as this article shows, Franco has never completely gone away—Vox is both a modernized version of Spain's ultra-conservative past and a condition and manifestation of international neoliberal and authoritarian trends. The article analyzes Vox's ideological roots, emergence, political program, voter base, and influence in Spanish politics in relation to key events—notably the Great Recession, the success of far-left party Podemos, corruption scandals in mainstream politics, and Catalonia's pursuit of independence—and speculates about the party's future against the backdrop of COVID-19.

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## Introduction

Through a synthesis of primary (political speeches and programs, social media, data surveys, and legal documents) and secondary sources (books, journals, and media archives), this CARR research insight critically examines the development of the radical right in Spain since the country officially transitioned from dictatorship to democracy following Francisco Franco's death in 1975. It focuses on the rapid rise of Vox, Spain's most prominent far-right party, since 2013.

At a broad level, the Centre for the Analysis of the Radical Right's publications have played a central role in enhancing my theoretical knowledge of the subject and the complex similarities and differences that exist across contexts. For example, Hans-Georg Betz's (2020) recent publication has provided in-depth insights into the emotional underpinnings of populist-nativist mobilizations. In relation to the scholarship of Ernesto Laclau (2005), Ruth Wodak (2019), and others, it explains how individual emotions become "trenchant narratives" based on a "politics of backlash and confrontation" coupled with discourses of "hysteria, hyperbole, and conspiracy narratives" in response to feelings of anxiety, disenchantment, anger, rage, and nostalgia amongst certain segments of populations.

In addition, the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971 English translation) has guided my thought process throughout this article. In particular, the concepts of passive revolution, hegemony, organic crisis, and common sense are salient. The work of David Harvey (2005; 2006), Wendy Brown (2015; 2019), Tariq Ali (2015), Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2010), and Mark Blyth (2013), among others, has been instrumental in situating these concepts against the backdrop of neoliberalism, and more specifically the Great Recession and the current Covid-19 pandemic.

At a more micro level within the context of Spain, the contributions of Paul Preston (2010; 2012), Gregorio Morán (2009; 2014; 2015), Pablo Iglesias (2015), Rubén Juste (2017), Miguel Urbán (2019), and Andres Villena (2019) have been significant. These have provoked great reflection on Francoism, Spain's post-Franco dialectic of "revolution-restoration," the omnipresence of *sociological Francoism* since 1975, and indeed how these concepts relate to broader phenomena, including the Indignados Movement of 2011, Podemos' creation and success since 2014, Catalan nationalism, corruption scandals in mainstream politics, a decline in political trust, authoritarian trends internationally, and the first leftist governing coalition since the Spanish Second Republic.

Few studies (Ortiz Barquero 2018; Turnbull-Dugarte 2019; 2020) have attempted to grapple with the evolution of the post-Franco radical right in Spain, and moreover, Vox's surge since 2013. In fact, until very recently, most observers had simplistically suggested that Spanish politics was an exception to the European rule due to Francoist lived experiences (see, for example, Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser 2014; González Enríquez 2017). However, as this article shows, although Franco lies in the El Pardo pantheon about 16 kilometres from central Madrid, his legacy remains ubiquitous in the form of conservative ideas, myths, attitudes, and behaviors, which, in the absence of a sufficiently critical education system and mainstream media, play an important role in shaping tense political and social relations in contemporary Spain.

This article starts by situating the radical right's revival in Spain against the aforementioned misperception that was predominant in academia and the mainstream until recently. From there, it examines Vox's ideological roots in relation to *Alianza Popular* and the *Partido Popular*, two conservative political parties that have played a key role in shaping Spanish politics in the post-Franco period. Thereafter, the article assesses Vox's emergence, ideological program, voter base, and weight in Spanish politics. Finally, it draws conclusions that reflect on Vox's successful surge to date and its potential future development.

## Spain: Immune to the Far Right?

Until very recently, the prevailing academic view was that Spain was immune to the radical right phenomena experienced in other European countries.<sup>1</sup> This was a logical conclusion considering that no far-right party had entered parliament in the past 40 years—in 1979, Blas Piñar, the leader of *Fuerza Nueva* (New Force), an ultra-Catholic and Francoist-nostalgic group whose slogan was “God, Patria, and Justice” obtained one seat upon winning nearly 400,000 votes in the general election.<sup>2</sup>

In 2017, González Enríquez postulated that Spain and Portugal were outliers in Europe as a result of their relatively recent authoritarian past—Spain's 36-year dictatorship ended in 1975 upon Francisco Franco's death, and, in Portugal, the *Estado Novo's* (New State) 41-year grip on power collapsed in 1974 with the Carnation Revolution and Marcelo Caetano's forced exile to Brazil.

The author emphasizes that, unlike in Germany and Italy, around half of the Spanish population who lived under Franco is still alive. Since they cognitively link nationalism and nationalist symbols to Francoist oppression, this acts as a safeguard against a reactionary resurgence of the far right. She also explains other factors that support her claim including Spaniards' relatively favorable attitude towards the EU, immigration, and globalization in comparison to most other member states, and Spain's lack of a strong national identity due to regional forces—in particular, Catalan and Basque nationalism.

González Enríquez concludes as follows:

In summary, despite the hardships suffered by a good part of the Spanish population since 2008 [the Sovereign Debt Crisis], and despite the broad loss of confidence in institutions and old political parties, it is difficult to imagine an extreme right-wing, xenophobic, anti-globalization and/or anti-EU party gaining a foothold in Spain in the foreseeable future.

The hypothesis that an authoritarian, rightist and nationalist recent past acts as a vaccination against extreme right parties in the present is given further weight by the similarities between Spain and Portugal: both shared a similar experience of four decades of nationalist, Roman Catholic and corporatist authoritarianism, and both countries have

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Carmen González Enríquez, “La excepción española: el fracaso de los grupos de derecha populista pese al paro, la desigualdad y la inmigración,” *Real Instituto Elcano*, February 14, 2017; Sonia Alonso and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Spain: No country for the populist radical right?,” *South European Society and Politics* 20 (1) (2014): 21–45.

<sup>2</sup> “Blas Piñar anunció anoche la disolución de Fuerza Nueva como partido político,” *elpais.com*, November 21, 1982, [https://elpais.com/diario/1982/11/21/espana/406681204\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/diario/1982/11/21/espana/406681204_850215.html); “Muere Blas Piñar, el histórico líder de la extrema derecha española y fundador de Fuerza Nueva,” *rtve.es*, January 28, 2014, <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20140128/muere-blas-pinar-historico-lider-ultraderecha/863201.shtml>.

until now been immune to this wave of right-wing populist parties, despite the grave economic and political crisis they have suffered.<sup>3</sup>

This view was not only dominant in scholarly literature, but prominent political figures also asserted it. For example, in an interview conducted by Perry Anderson in 2017, Pablo Iglesias, leader of Podemos and Second Deputy Prime Minister of Spain since January 2020, assessed the country's absence of the far right as follows: "I believe that we have a society that is much more tolerant than other European societies ... I think it is something we should be proud of, having a society that is very advanced in certain areas such as this."<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to trends in other European contexts, such as France, Austria, and Sweden, the 2015 and 2016 general elections in Spain seemed to confirm this consensus. Vox, the country's largest far-right party, garnered only 57,733 and 46,781 votes respectively, well under the minimum 3% threshold necessary to win seats in Spain's national parliament.<sup>5</sup>

However, in 2017, the situation changed. Catalan President Carles Puigdemont held an illegal referendum, and shortly thereafter declared Catalonia an independent republic. Article I of the Spanish Constitution stipulates that "national sovereignty belongs to the Spanish people," and Article II establishes the "indissoluble unity of the Spanish Nation." While the latter article does grant "the right to autonomy of the nationalities and regions," Articles 92 and 149 specify that holding referenda is the exclusive competence of the state.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to challenging state sovereignty, the referendum called into question the legitimacy of Spain's constitutional monarchy by asking: "Do you want Catalonia to become an independent state in the form of a republic?"<sup>7</sup> Within this context, Vox began its spectacular rise, using a nationalistic discourse against Spain's most prominent internal Other. This centralized, absolutist vision of Spanish society, based on the rule of law and the use of the state's security apparatuses, can be traced back to Phillip V (or even earlier), and was one of the cornerstones of the Franco dictatorship.

### Vox's Ideological Roots

From Franco's passing in 1975 until 2018, most of Spain's far-right voters were camouflaged within the Partido Popular (People's Party). As the well-known Spanish writer, Anquilino Duque, put it, "I won't say that all PP voters are Francoists, but I will say that all or almost all Francoists in Spain vote for the PP, among other things, because they have no other option...the PP defends those values that were the *raison d'être* of Francoism, namely homeland, religion, and family."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Carmen González Enríquez, "La excepción española: el fracaso de los grupos de derecha populista pese al paro, la desigualdad y la inmigración," *Real Instituto Elcano*, February 14, 2017, 37. The translated quotation above comes from the English version of the article, also published by *Real Instituto Elcano*.

<sup>4</sup> "Otra Vuelta de Tuerca: Pablo Iglesias Conversa con Perry Anderson," June 5, 2017. Quotation translated by the author.

<sup>5</sup> <https://resultados.elpais.com/elecciones/2015/generales/congreso/>;

<https://resultados.elpais.com/elecciones/2016/generales/congreso/index.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Constitución Española de 1978.

<sup>7</sup> Translated by the author. The question in Catalan was: *¿Voleu que Catalunya sigui un estat independent en forma de República?*

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Miguel Urban (2019). *La emergencia de Vox: Apuntes para combatir a la extrema derecha española*. Madrid: Crítica & Alternativa, 35. Quotation translated by the author.

The PP was created by the Francoist *búnker*—ex-members of the regime who advocated for its continuation to one extent or another. In this sense, Spain’s transition from dictatorship to democracy was a passive (top-down) revolution in the Gramscian sense,<sup>9</sup> rather than an active (bottom-up) revolution, that largely preserved the power and wealth of the Francoist elite. For example, between 1975 and 1982, 58% of high-ranking appointments within the public administration were civil servants under Franco,<sup>10</sup> and, in 1992, when the IBEX 35 (the 35 largest companies by market capitalization on the Spanish Stock Exchange) formed, 22 of the 35 CEO’s had held high-level positions within the Franco government.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, Spain’s passive (top-down) revolution restored the Bourbon dynasty under Juan Carlos I. Franco had groomed the new king from the age of ten, providing him with a similar military training, and bestowing upon him the responsibility of carrying forward the values of his *Movimiento Nacional* (National Movement).<sup>12</sup> In Portugal, in contrast, the Carnation Revolution started with resistance from the military, but the masses ultimately played a decisive role in achieving a significant break with past structures and establishing a republic.

In a television interview in 1995, journalist Victoria Prego asked former Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez (1976-81) why he did not hold a monarchy-republic referendum upon Franco’s death, to which he covered the microphone and responded: “We conducted opinion surveys, and we were losing.”<sup>13</sup> Faced with the reality that only 21% of Spaniards supported a monarchy at the time,<sup>14</sup> his government incorporated the words “king” and “monarchy” into the 1977 Law for Political Reform, which the vast majority of the Spanish parliament and population approved.<sup>15</sup> Most Spaniards who supported this law, however, were not voting in favor of the monarchy, but rather voting to ensure Spain’s transition from dictatorship to democracy and eventual European Community membership. From 1947 onward, Franco had promised to restore the Bourbon dynasty upon his death, and, in 1969, he went a step further by naming Juan Carlos I as his successor. Since Suárez had been an integral part of Franco’s National Movement, had been appointed by the king, and was pro-monarchy, he did not hold a referendum.<sup>16</sup> The overwhelming approval of the Law for Political Reform established the legal context for the 1977 general election, the first since the Popular Front’s victory in 1936, and ensured that Spain would henceforth be a constitutional monarchy.

In 1976, Manuel Fraga, Franco’s former Minister of Information (Propaganda), founded a federation of political associations called Alianza Popular (Popular Alliance)—the precursor of the Partido Popular (People’s Party)—along with six other prominent ministers of the regime. This was an attempt to resist a sharp institutional break from the Francoist period,

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<sup>9</sup> Antonio Gramsci (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. by Q. Hoare & G. Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence & Wishart; Lorenzo Fusaro and Jason Xidias (2017). *An Analysis of Antonio Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks*. London: Routledge.

<sup>10</sup> José Magone (2018). *Contemporary Spanish Politics*. London: Routledge.

<sup>11</sup> Rubén Juste (2017). *IBEX 35: Una Historia Herética del Poder en España*. Madrid: Captain Swing.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Preston (2012). *Juan Carlos I: El Rey de un Pueblo*. Madrid: Debate.

<sup>13</sup> “Adolfo Suárez no sometió a referéndum la monarquía porque las encuestas le dijeron que perdería,” *eldiario.es*, November 28, 2016, [https://www.eldiario.es/politica/Adolfo-Suarez-referendum-monarquia-encuestas\\_0\\_581642259.html](https://www.eldiario.es/politica/Adolfo-Suarez-referendum-monarquia-encuestas_0_581642259.html).

<sup>14</sup> *Informe Sociológico sobre la situación social de España 1970* (Madrid: Fundación Foessa, 1970), in WT Salisbury and JD Theberge, *Spain in the 1970s: Economics, Social Structure, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Praeger, 1976), 89.

<sup>15</sup> Ley 1/1977, 4 de enero, para la Reforma Política.

<sup>16</sup> Gregorio, Morán (2009). *Adolfo Suárez: Ambición y Destino*. Madrid: Debate; Gregorio Morán (2015). *El Precio de la Transición*. Madrid: Ediciones Akal.

and thus protect existent elite power structures. Fraga described the party's position in a speech at its First Congress in 1977 in which he stated: "Alianza Popular is a political force that refuses to accept the demolition of the gigantic work of the past forty years [the dictatorship], and that is not ashamed of a historical period in which Spain took a colossal leap forward."<sup>17</sup> Its political program, which sought to promote pride rather than shame, emphasized free market economics, national identity, law and order against communist and separatist movements, the traditional family, the monarchy, and the Catholic Church's hegemony over education and morality.<sup>18</sup> By 1982, Alianza Popular was able to sway votes from both the Unión de Centro Democrático (Union of the Democratic Center), the center-right party of reference since 1977, and Fuerza Nueva, the strongest openly far-right party at the time, in order to position itself as a broad conservative, reactionary electoral coalition. This success led to the definitive collapse of Fuerza Nueva. In 1989, following multiple electoral defeats, Fraga merged Alianza Popular with small Christian democratic and liberal parties and relaunched it as the *Partido Popular* (People's Party)—henceforth Spain's most powerful, catch-all right-wing party.

Within the PP, therefore, there has always been a neo-Francoist presence that has attempted to perpetuate the elite power structures and repressive apparatuses of the dictatorship while whitewashing the regime's brutality.<sup>19</sup> This has emphasized, in particular, Spain's economic and consumption boom from 1959-1975 after signing a Cold War military pact with the United States and ending autarky, but has ignored what Paul Preston has termed "the Spanish Holocaust":<sup>20</sup> the Nationalists' violence during the Spanish Civil War, the regime's connections to Hitler and Mussolini, its systematic attempt to eradicate the country's Republicans, who allegedly had a "red gene,"<sup>21</sup> from 1936-1975, and the fact that Spain still has over 114,000 forced disappearances,<sup>22</sup> second only to Cambodia.<sup>23</sup>

The PP was therefore, until Vox, the main outlet for *sociological Francoism*—a term frequently used in Spain to refer broadly to the whitewashed ideas, myths, and attitudes associated with Francoism that still exist in some form today and influence politics and social relations. This can entail, for example, ultra-Catholicism, extreme nationalism, centralization, racism, Islamophobia, the demonization of the left, and a manipulation or negation of historical memory.

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<sup>17</sup> Discurso de Manuel Fraga, Primer Congreso de Alianza Popular, 5 y 6 de marzo, 1977, <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20080611/congreso-nace-alianza-popular-sin-aceptar-voladura-ultimos-40-anos/84630.shtml>. Translated by the author.

<sup>18</sup> Programa de Gobierno, Alianza Popular, 1977.

<sup>19</sup> Rubén Juste (2017). *IBEX 35: Una Historia Herética del Poder en España*. Madrid: Captain Swing, 2017; Andres Villena (2019). *Las Redes de Poder en España: Élite e Intereses Contra la Democracia*. Madrid: Roca Editorial.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Preston (2012). *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain*. London: HarperCollins.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Rafael Huertas García, "Una nueva inquisición para un nuevo Estado: Psiquiatría y orden social en la obra de Antonio Vallejo Nájera," in *Ciencia y Fascismo*, edited by Rafael Huertas García et al (1998). Madrid: Doce Calles, 97-110.

<sup>22</sup> The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court defines forced/enforced disappearances as "the arrest, detention or abduction of persons by, or with the authorization, support or acquiescence of, a State or a political organization, followed by a refusal to acknowledge that deprivation of freedom or to give information on the fate or whereabouts of those persons, with the intention of removing them from the protection of the law for a prolonged period of time." Furthermore, it classifies this phenomenon as a crime against humanity.

<sup>23</sup> "Decenas de miles de personas siguen desaparecidas en el mundo por motivos políticos," *Amnistía Internacional*, August 30, 2010, <https://www.es.amnesty.org/en-que-estamos/noticias/noticia/articulo/decenas-de-miles-de-personas-siguen-desaparecidas-en-el-mundo-por-motivos-politicos/>; Natalia Junquera, "Spanish Government to Spearhead Efforts to Find Civil War Victims," *El País*, July 12, 2018, [https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2018/07/12/inenglish/1531388057\\_522551.html](https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2018/07/12/inenglish/1531388057_522551.html).

## Vox's Emergence

In 2013, several members of the Partido Popular, who sought to disassociate themselves from the party's rampant corruption and considered Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy to be too passive on key social issues, splintered and founded Vox. As Alejo Vidal Quadras,<sup>24</sup> one of the party's founders put it, "We want to rally the right-wing voters disillusioned by the PP's policies."<sup>25</sup> It was this crisis of representation that created the political space for the rise of the far right. Unlike in some other European contexts such as France, Vox was not an extremist party that entered from the margins, but rather, it emerged from the very womb of the PP. Thus, whereas the right can be understood as the child of Francoism, the far right can be understood as its neo-Francoist grandchild.

A key factor that facilitated this political split was harsh criticism from José María Aznar, former Partido Popular leader and prime minister from 1996-2004, and Esperanza Aguirre, former president of the Senate and Community of Madrid. Aznar's influence is particularly significant. He is widely regarded as Spain's most socially conservative and neoliberal prime minister since the country officially became a democracy in 1978. His grandfather was a diplomat under Franco, and his father was a Falangist (Spanish fascist) official in Franco's nationalist army during the Civil War (1936-9), and one of the key figures that managed the regime's propaganda thereafter. In his youth, Aznar followed closely in his father's footsteps, becoming an active member of the Frente de Estudiantes Sindicalistas (Front of Syndicalist Students), a Falangist association that promoted the ideas of José Antonio Primo de Rivera, who founded the Spanish fascist party in 1933. During that time, he was a vocal critic of Franco for having increasingly side-lined the Falangists from 1942 (when the tide of the Second World War began turning towards the Allied Powers) onward.<sup>26</sup> However, when he became the leader of the Partido Popular after the party's relaunch in 1989, his main objective was to solidify a catch-all right-wing party, similar to the Republican Party in the United States, that could compete electorally. In 1996, he managed to successfully do this, winning the most seats in the general election and ending the PSOE's (Socialist Party) 14-year grip on power.

The criticism from Aznar and Aguirre focused on Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's allegedly weak response to Catalan nationalism and failure to reverse important social advances made by former socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (2004-2011)—in particular, an express divorce law, the right to have an abortion in the first trimester of pregnancy, same-sex marriage, more secular education, and a critical historical memory law.<sup>27</sup> Vox's regressive discourses on these issues at present very much resonate the Francoist doctrine of National-Catholicism based on extreme nationalism, a manipulated historical narrative, ultra-Catholicism, and an emphasis on the traditional family.

In addition to the PP's corruption and allegedly weak stance on key social issues, Vox's creation in 2013 must be seen as a morbid symptom that emerged from the Great Recession and austerity, and as an authoritarian reaction to Spain's 15-M (Indignados) movement and Catalonia's pursuit of self-determination. Since 2008, there has been a

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<sup>24</sup> Alejo Vidal Quadras left Vox in 2015 due to ideological differences with Santiago Abascal.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in Brais Fernández, "Spain's New-Old Monster," *Jacobin*, November 18, 2018, <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/11/spain-vox-far-right-franco-partido-popular-podemos>.

<sup>26</sup> "José María Aznar López," *CIDOB*, April 10, 2019,

[https://www.cidob.org/biografias\\_lideres\\_politicos/europa/espana/jose\\_maria\\_aznar\\_lopez](https://www.cidob.org/biografias_lideres_politicos/europa/espana/jose_maria_aznar_lopez).

<sup>27</sup> Vera Gutiérrez, "Retrato de un presidente en 20 leyes," *elpais.com*, April 3, 2011,

[https://elpais.com/diario/2011/04/03/espana/1301781622\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/diario/2011/04/03/espana/1301781622_850215.html).

discursive space for new political movements and parties that have challenged the dominance of the post-Francoist alternation between the People's Party and Socialist Party (PSOE). In Spain, this is frequently referred to as the *crisis de régimen* (regime crisis). The rise of Podemos and the abdication of King Juan Carlos in 2014 must also be seen within this context.<sup>28</sup> In the current interregnum, two-party dominance, at least temporarily, has died, and Vox has achieved a prominent place in Spain's new ideological struggle for hegemony. Within this arena, it has played an important role in shifting discourses from class to nation. That is, from "the people against the establishment" ("la gente contra la casta") to *us* (Spaniards) against *them* (Catalans, Basques, immigrants, refugees, leftists, et al.). Furthermore, against the backdrop of the current pandemic and economic crisis, Vox has sought to emotionally appeal to those Indignados who feel somehow defrauded by the far left and who consider the far right and alternative representation of their anxiety, anger, and rage. For example, in May 2020, Vox commemorated the nine-year anniversary of the 15-M protests with a video under the slogan "Seguimos Indignados" (We Are Still Outraged) in which it featured three individuals who had participated in the movement in 2011 and were formerly supporters of Podemos, but now feel it is part of the same establishment they protested against, and therefore have become Vox voters.<sup>29</sup>

Vox's creation in 2013 occurred at the peak of Spain's financial crisis—the unemployment and youth unemployment rates were 27% and 57%<sup>30</sup>—and at a time when support for independence in Catalonia had reached its highest point—49% compared to only 20% in 2010.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the Catalan government had announced it was planning to hold a non-binding vote on independence, which it did in 2014. This rise of Catalan nationalism occurred against a backdrop of austerity, the Constitutional Court's nullification of key clauses of an updated Statute of Autonomy for the region, and the PP's unwillingness to dialogue with the Generalitat (Government of Catalonia) over the prospect of further self-rule.

Within this context of rising Catalan nationalism and Catalonia's holding of a non-binding vote on independence, Vox named Santiago Abascal—a former PP member of parliament in the Basque Country and ex-President of the Foundation for the Defense of the Spanish Nation (DENAES)—as its president and Iván Espinosa de los Monteros—a real estate investor and director of Premium Capital Management—as its General Secretary. These figures remain key party leaders today, and together exemplify Vox's nexus between authoritarian conservatism and neoliberalism.

Since 2017, Vox has successfully disrupted the People's Party's hegemony on right votes by politicizing its rampant corruption and portraying it as "la derecha cobarde" (the little cowardly right). Consequently, a significant number of voters no longer consider the PP to be the only useful vote or outlet for socially conservative and neoliberal economic ideas.

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<sup>28</sup> Pablo Iglesias (May-June 2015), "Understanding Podemos," *New Left Review* 93.

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.voxespana.es/actualidad/seguimos-indignados-20200515>.

<sup>30</sup> Tim Allen, Eurostat Press Release 159/2013, October 31, 2013, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/5164586/3-31102013-BP-EN.PDF/ac1c16fc-35ba-4d32-a0a0-91e9409eda8f>.

<sup>31</sup> "El Conflicto Independentista en Cataluña," *Real Instituto Elcano*, October 9, 2019, 23.

In the April 2019 general election, Vox obtained an estimated 1.6 million ex-PP votes,<sup>32</sup> and in the November 2019 repeated general election, it received about 296,000 more.<sup>33</sup>

Pablo Casado, the PP's current leader and protégé of former Prime Minister José María Aznar, has attempted to court these lost votes through statements such as "We are everything to the right of the Socialist Party," and by competing with Vox's discourses on issues such as immigration and Catalonia. His strategy is to recover the PP's hegemony by reconstructing a catch-all right-wing party comparable to the strength of the Republican Party in the United States. However, thus far, this has been quite unsuccessful. In the April and November 2019 general elections, the PP experienced its two worst results since its foundation in 1989, and the far right's support rose from 24 to 52 seats.<sup>34</sup>

Vox's successful split from the PP has depended on strong social capital—contacts its party leaders established while operating within, or in close cooperation with the PP. Vox has links with key actors of political and civil society, including financial elites, the media, the Catholic Church, Opus Dei, the police, the military, and the judiciary.<sup>35</sup> In this regard, it is very much part of the same establishment that it criticizes.

Since its foundation, Vox has greatly increased its media and social media presence. It has the largest following of all Spain's political parties on Instagram and YouTube,<sup>36</sup> and has successfully shifted from only appearing on/in ultra-conservative media platforms, such as Grupo Intereconomía and Libertad Digital, to achieving mainstream legitimacy. In fact, Santiago Abascal's interview in February 2020 on Spanish public television (TVE, Canal 24 Horas) attracted a larger viewing audience than previous programs with Pablo Casado, the current leader of the PP, and current Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez.<sup>37</sup>

Vox's prominent party members have also utilized their domestic and international think tank connections to amplify their impact. In particular, GEES (Strategic Studies Group) and FAES (Foundation for Analysis and Social Studies), two ultra-conservative think tanks, and the far-right social online platform *Hazte Oír* (Make Yourself Heard) have helped legitimize the party by propagating its neoliberal economic and socially conservative ideas.<sup>38</sup> Through GEES, for example, Vox's leaders have had meetings with Republican legislators in the U.S. Capital building, civil servants in the Department of State, and the American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation. Furthermore, in February 2020, Santiago Abascal attracted media attention by attending Donald Trump's speech at the CPAC, the United States' largest annual conservative conference.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Hugo Garrido, "El PP perdió 1,6 millones de votos con Vox y 1,4 con Ciudadanos," *elmundo.es*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2019/04/30/5cc76591fdddf52528b469d.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Narciso Michavila, "Análisis de Narciso Michavila de las elecciones del 10-N," *abc.es*, November 17, 2019, [https://www.abc.es/espana/abci-analisis-narciso-michavila-233000-votantes-psoe-pasaron-201911170245\\_noticia.html?ref=https:%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F](https://www.abc.es/espana/abci-analisis-narciso-michavila-233000-votantes-psoe-pasaron-201911170245_noticia.html?ref=https:%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F).

<sup>34</sup> Gonzalo Cortizo and Ana Ordaz, "Los partidos del Gobierno mantendrán su peso electoral mientras Vox sigue creciendo a costa del PP," *eldiario.es*, February 12, 2020, [https://www.eldiario.es/politica/Gobierno\\_0\\_994950716.html](https://www.eldiario.es/politica/Gobierno_0_994950716.html).

<sup>35</sup> See, for example: Clara Roca et al., "Quiénes son los 52 diputados que ha conseguido Vox en el 10-N," *eldiario.es*, November 11, 2019, [https://www.eldiario.es/politica/diputados-conseguido-vox\\_1\\_1263257.html](https://www.eldiario.es/politica/diputados-conseguido-vox_1_1263257.html).

<sup>36</sup> "Podemos y Vox, los más 'votados' en cuanto a seguidores en las redes sociales," *lavanguardia.com*, April 11, 2019, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20190411/461587225592/podemos-y-vox-los-mas-votados-en-cuanto-a-seguidores-en-las-redes-sociales.html>.

<sup>37</sup> "La primera entrevista a Abascal en TVE (11.8%) supera en cuota a las recientes de Sánchez y Casado," *eldiario.es*, February 14, 2020, [https://vertele.eldiario.es/audiencias-canales/analisis-espana/Audiencia-Primera-entrevista-Abascal-TVE\\_0\\_2204479534.html](https://vertele.eldiario.es/audiencias-canales/analisis-espana/Audiencia-Primera-entrevista-Abascal-TVE_0_2204479534.html).

<sup>38</sup> Urban. *La emergencia de Vox*.

<sup>39</sup> "Abascal viaja a EE. UU. para reunirse con miembros de la Administración Trump" *cope.es*, February 27, 2020, [https://www.cope.es/actualidad/espana/noticias/abascal-viaja-para-reunirse-con-miembros-administracion-trump-20200227\\_632400](https://www.cope.es/actualidad/espana/noticias/abascal-viaja-para-reunirse-con-miembros-administracion-trump-20200227_632400).

A key figure who has facilitated alliances with the US Republican Party and conservative think tanks is Rafael Bardají, whose nickname is the “Darth Vader of Vox.” He is the founder of GEES and ex-defense adviser to former PP Prime Minister José María Aznar. Bardají is best known for having negotiated Spain’s participation in the Iraq War with the George Bush Jr. administration. He has also established a relationship with Steve Bannon, former White House Chief Strategist for Donald Trump and Chairman of Breitbart News, who encouraged Vox to use its nationalistic slogans: *Make Spain Great Again* and *Spaniards, First*.<sup>40</sup>

## Vox’s Ideological Program

Vox’s current political ideology combines elements of Spain’s Francoist past with current global trends of authoritarian neoliberalism. One prominent example of the former was Santiago Abascal’s recent statement: “We are the voice of all those who had parents on the nationalist side and resist having to apologize for what their families did. We are the voice of all those who do not want to change the name of their street because of the fanatical political beliefs of those who want a Spain of one-sided memory.”<sup>41</sup> Another, as Miguel Urbán points out, is Vox’s call for a “Reconquest of Spain,” which links the “clash of civilizations” discourse to the “migrant threat,” while evoking the “nostalgic idea of the Crusade to take back Spain from the ‘reds,’ as in Franco’s military uprising on July 18, 1936.”<sup>42</sup> In fact, last year, using the slogan “Por España” (“For Spain”), it symbolically began its electoral campaign in Covadonga and completed it in Granada, the alleged start and end points of Spain’s Christian Reconquest against Muslims (722-1492). In this sense, Vox is a Made in Spain far-right product. At the same time, it is clearly entangled with international developments. As previously mentioned, Donald Trump’s discourses and policies have clearly served as an inspiration, and, in many ways, the party is similar to Jair Bolsonaro’s *Aliança pel Brasil* (Alliance for Brazil), whose slogan is “God, family, and homeland,” and which has a strong influence amongst religious, socially conservative, wealthier voters. Vox’s neoliberal economic program seeks to defend, and build on, the privileges that, in many cases, were obtained during the Franco years and Spain’s subsequent elite-guided transition to democracy.

Vox’s 100-point national-Catholic program is anti-feminist, LGBTQ+-phobic, racist, and Islamophobic, while also advocating for the recentralization of the Spanish state. In this sense, it closely resembles Francoism. For example, the section titled “Spain, Unity, and Sovereignty” calls for eliminating regional autonomy, barring any political party or association that challenges the authority of the state, granting the maximum legal protection to state symbols, creating a national plan that promotes and safeguards national identity, and eliminating the historical memory law passed by the former Socialist Party Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero.<sup>43</sup>

Vox’s stance on immigration must be seen within the present context, as Spain was a country of net emigration during the Franco period (though we could certainly draw

<sup>40</sup> Sergio Sangjao, “Los orígenes de Vox: El aznarato y la lucha contra ETA,” *Contexto y Acción* 197, November 29, 2018; David Alandete, “Vox se entrega al Trumpismo,” *abc.es*, March 1, 2020, [https://www.abc.es/espana/abci-entrega-trumpismo-202003010320\\_noticia.html?ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F](https://www.abc.es/espana/abci-entrega-trumpismo-202003010320_noticia.html?ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F).

<sup>41</sup> Nicolás Pan Mantojo, “Abascal cree que la memoria histórica es un debate infecto,” *elpais.com*, January 14, 2019, [https://elpais.com/politica/2019/01/14/actualidad/1547461441\\_818774.html](https://elpais.com/politica/2019/01/14/actualidad/1547461441_818774.html). Translated by the author.

<sup>42</sup> Cited in Urban. *La emergencia de Vox*. Translated by the author.

<sup>43</sup> VOX, *Cien Medidas Para La España Viva*, 2019. Translated by the author.

significant parallels between previous and current forms of Othering). During Spain's neoliberal boom, which started with its integration into the European Community in 1986 and ended with the 2008 economic crisis, the country received more than five million immigrants.<sup>44</sup> In the section of its political program titled "Immigration," Vox calls for the deportation of all undocumented migrants and legal migrants who commit a crime, and the tightening of requirements for obtaining Spanish nationality. Furthermore, in the section titled "Defense, Security, and Borders," it advocates for building "an impenetrable wall in Ceuta and Melilla"—Spain's two neo-colonial enclaves in North Africa—, clearly emulating Trump's policy in the United States; Abascal has even suggested that Morocco should pay for it. Finally, in the section, "Life and Family," Vox demands the overturning of all "gender ideology" laws because they "create social tension," eliminating radical feminist organizations, and replacing gender violence laws with an intra-family violence law that provides equal protection for men,<sup>45</sup> clearly ignoring Spain's history of patriarchy, and indeed the current patriarchal system.

Unlike other far-right parties in Europe such as UKIP in Britain or the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, Vox is only mildly Euroskeptic. This can be largely explained by the fact that Spain is one of the most pro-EU countries.<sup>46</sup> A Eurobarometer survey from 2019, for example, indicates that about three-quarters of Spaniards believe their country has benefited from membership, and, if there were a referendum, about the same percentage would vote to remain.<sup>47</sup> This dominant sentiment is based on the widespread perception that EU membership has modernized the country's economy and helped to solidify its democracy since Franco's death.

Vox's soft Euroskeptic program calls for recovering power from the EU by promoting a new European treaty that emphasizes national sovereignty and ending the European Court of Justice's power over Spanish courts.<sup>48</sup> However, beyond occasional references in written documents and discourses, a critical EU platform is not an integral part of its political strategy. At the EU level, Vox's MEPs are part of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). According to Abascal, their goal is "to stop the federalist aspirations of leftists," "defend the sovereignty of European countries," and "promote Europe's Christian identity."<sup>49</sup>

## Vox's Voter Base

About 70% of Vox's voter base is ex-PP and Ciudadanos (Citizens) voters.<sup>50</sup> The latter is a center-right party that was founded in Catalonia in 2006 to combat Catalan nationalism and oppose further autonomy against the backdrop of negotiations between the PSOE

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<sup>44</sup> Enrique Conejero Paz (2012), "La Política de Inmigración en España," *3C Empresa: Investigación y Pensamiento Crítico* 1 (8); Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Población Extranjera por Nacionalidad, Comunidades, Sexo y Año.

<sup>45</sup> VOX, *Cien Medidas Para La España Viva*, 2019. Translated by the author.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, "El eurobarómetro confirma España como uno de los países más europeístas," *Comisión Europea en España*, February 28, 2018, [https://ec.europa.eu/spain/news/180228\\_eurobarometer-autumn2018\\_es](https://ec.europa.eu/spain/news/180228_eurobarometer-autumn2018_es).

<sup>47</sup> "Eurobarómetro - Los Españoles mantienen su confianza en la Unión Europea a un mes de las elecciones," nota de prensa, *Oficina del Parlamento Europeo en España*, April 25, 2019, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/spain/es/prensa/communicados\\_de\\_prensa/pr-2019/04-2019/25042019.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/spain/es/prensa/communicados_de_prensa/pr-2019/04-2019/25042019.html).

<sup>48</sup> VOX, *Cien Medidas Para La España Viva*, 2019. Translated by the author.

<sup>49</sup> "Vox se integra en el Grupo de Conservadores y Reformistas Europeos junto a Ley y Justicia y conservadores británicos," *rtve.es*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20190613/vox-se-integra-grupo-conservadores-reformistas-europeos-junto-polacos-ley-justicia-conservadores-britanicos/1956800.shtml>.

<sup>50</sup> D. Ramírez, "Al Menos Tres de Cada Cuatro Votantes de Vox Proviene de PP y Ciudadanos," *elespanol.es*, March 20, 2019, [https://www.elespanol.com/espana/politica/20190320/votantes-vox-proviene-pp-ciudadanos/384462809\\_0.html](https://www.elespanol.com/espana/politica/20190320/votantes-vox-proviene-pp-ciudadanos/384462809_0.html); Raúl Sánchez, Laura Galaup, and Ana Ordaz, "Hombre, Casado, Católico y Ex del PP: el Votante de Vox en las Andaluzas que Retrata el CIS," *eldiario.es*, February 19, 2019, [https://www.eldiario.es/politica/hombre-votante-pp-vox-elecciones\\_1\\_1687611.html](https://www.eldiario.es/politica/hombre-votante-pp-vox-elecciones_1_1687611.html).

(Socialist Party) and a leftist regional coalition regarding a revised Statute of Autonomy. Following the Great Recession, the party was able to exploit the 15-M movement and expand its voter base by presenting itself as “a center-right party for progressive change.” In the November 2019 General Election, Vox experienced its greatest success amongst the wealthiest 1% of Spanish society—it garnered about 20% of the votes in this segment. The party has also had success amongst those in the 30% poorest percentile in Spanish society who traditionally vote right, particularly in rural areas of Andalucía and Murcia.<sup>51</sup> Thus far, unlike the *Rassemblement National* (National Rally) in France, for example, Vox has not made courting left working-class voters its top priority. Its appeal to upper-income voters can be largely explained by the fact that Vox is the party that currently advocates for the most neoliberal agenda in Spain. In the section of its 100-point program titled “Economy and Resources,” it calls for substantially reducing government expenditures and jobs, eliminating wealth and inheritance taxes, lowering the corporate tax, having a flat income tax, privatizing “non-essential” public land, and partially privatizing the current public pension system. Furthermore, in the section titled “Education,” Vox advocates for school vouchers, which would allow parents to use more public funds for private and charter education.<sup>52</sup> These policies clearly favor wealthier taxpayers over working-class individuals and families while also responding to concerns about immigration by encouraging ethnic segregation. Other factors that influence Vox’s success amongst this segment are its conservative social positions, hard-line stance on Catalonia, and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Examples of Vox’s success in wealthy areas were its second-place finish to the PP in Pozuelo de Alarcón, Torrelodones, Majadahonda, and Las Rozas in Madrid. Most of this support has come at the expense of the PP, which remains the most popular party amongst the 1%.<sup>53</sup>

Vox’s appeal to those in the 30% poorest percentile, particularly in rural Andalucía and Murcia, has come primarily at the expense of the PP and Ciudadanos; the latter lost 47 seats in the November 2019 General Election in relation to the previous one that took place April 2019<sup>54</sup> as a result of poor leadership and inconsistent political discourses and decisions. Furthermore, an estimated 650,000 voters shifted from Ciudadanos to Vox.<sup>55</sup>

### Vox’s Weight in Spanish Politics

The argument that Spain was immune to the far right, or was an outlier case, first unravelled in December 2018, when Vox experienced an electoral breakthrough in Andalucía’s regional elections, winning 11% of the local vote and 12 seats in its parliament.<sup>56</sup> In that election, Vox’s success came largely at the expense of the PP (whose prime minister Mariano Rajoy had been recently ousted via a no-confidence vote because of his party’s rampant corruption scandals), which lost seven of its 33 seats.<sup>57</sup> After the election, PP and Ciudadanos formed a pact with Vox so that it could govern, thereby ending the Socialist Party’s 40-year rule in the region. Thus, rather than forming a *cordon sanitaire*, as some observers had hoped, the “mainstream right” legitimized the far right

<sup>51</sup> Raúl Sánchez, “Lo que dice la renta sobre el resultado del 10N: la caída de Ciudadanos la aprovecha Vox en las zonas más pobres y el PP en las más ricas,” *eldiario.es*, November 13, 2019, [https://www.eldiario.es/politica/Vox-zonas-pobres-PP-Ciudadanos-10N\\_0\\_963104386.html](https://www.eldiario.es/politica/Vox-zonas-pobres-PP-Ciudadanos-10N_0_963104386.html).

<sup>52</sup> VOX, *Cien Medidas Para La España Viva*, 2019. Translated by the author.

<sup>53</sup> Urban. *La emergencia de Vox*, 157; Raúl Sánchez, “Lo que dice la renta sobre el resultado del 10N.”

<sup>54</sup> Sánchez, “Lo que dice la renta sobre el resultado del 10N.”

<sup>55</sup> Narciso Michavila, “Análisis de Narciso Michavila de las elecciones del 10-N,” *abc.es*, November 17, 2019, [https://www.abc.es/espana/abci-analisis-narciso-michavila-233000-votantes-psoe-pasaron-201911170245\\_noticia.html?ref=https:%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F](https://www.abc.es/espana/abci-analisis-narciso-michavila-233000-votantes-psoe-pasaron-201911170245_noticia.html?ref=https:%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F).

<sup>56</sup> <https://resultados.elpais.com/elecciones/2018/autonomicas/01/index.html>.

<sup>57</sup> William Chislett, “Spain no longer bucks the trend on far-right policies,” *Real Instituto Elcano*, December 11, 2018.

in the media, and has since adapted some of its policy positions to Vox's agenda (for instance, gender policy, education, immigration, and historical memory). In 2019, PP and Ciudadanos replicated this tripartite model by forming political pacts with Vox in Murcia and Madrid.

This right's success in Andalucía, Spain's most populous region, ended four decades of leftist hegemony. The most prominent factors that contributed to their first parliamentary majority since Spain's restoration of democracy were long-standing and worsening Socialist Party corruption, an unemployment rate of 23% and youth unemployment rate of 45% (both 8% above the national average at the time of the election), Catalan nationalism, and concerns regarding immigration from Africa. The latter element was particularly relevant in Almería, where Vox won more than 20% of votes in eight of the 10 municipalities, a region where 18.5% of the population of 700,000 is foreign-born, mostly from Morocco and Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>58</sup> Although these immigrants contribute substantially to the region's agricultural sector and to the country's economy and social security system, Vox continually portrays them as a drain on healthcare and education and as a threat to Spain's labor market, security, and cultural identity.

Here, it is important to note that many of Vox's voters who were concerned with immigration were from the region's richest areas. Meleiro explains this by using the contact hypothesis, arguing that, since these individuals have little or no contact with immigrants, they are concerned more about the perceived threat of Africans to cultural identity and security than as direct competition in the job market.<sup>59</sup> This Othering is based on a combination of racism and Islamophobia, and is rooted in Spain's nation-building and imperialist history (the Reconquista, the Inquisition, and colonialism). Furthermore, it reflects cross-class anxiety over a significant increase in immigration from Morocco and Sub-Saharan Africa in recent years.<sup>60</sup>

Building on its electoral breakthrough in Andalucía, in the April 2019 General Election, Vox increased its national vote tally by about 2.6 million in relation to the 2016 General Election, winning 24 seats in parliament. Moreover, in the repeated November 2019 General Election, it won 3.6 million votes, accounting for 15% of the national popular vote and 52 seats in parliament.<sup>61</sup> Following the election, party leader, Santiago Abascal said: "Eleven months ago, Vox had no representatives in any institution. Today we are the third biggest political party in Spain and the one that is growing the most (...). We have caused a political and cultural change and have opened up some taboo debates."<sup>62</sup> As previously indicated, whereas for four decades, Spain's far-right voters were rather quietly camouflaged within the People's Party, today their ultra-conservative outspokenness and provocativeness is very much party of Spain's post-2008 *crisis de régimen* (regime crisis).

The PP and Ciudadanos have played a major role in legitimizing Vox's presence by forming regional pacts in different autonomous communities in Spain and by competing with it on an array of policy issues in their effort to win back lost votes. For example, all three parties

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<sup>58</sup> Héctor Meleiro, "Vox: nueva derecha populista o escisión radical del PP," *eldiario.es*, December 26, 2018, [https://www.eldiario.es/piedrasdepapel/Vox-derecha-populista-escision-PP\\_6\\_850474947.html](https://www.eldiario.es/piedrasdepapel/Vox-derecha-populista-escision-PP_6_850474947.html).

<sup>59</sup> Meleiro, "Vox: nueva derecha populista o escisión radical del PP."

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, the quarterly reports published by Spain's Ministry of the Interior: <http://www.interior.gob.es/prensa/balances-e-informes/2019>.

<sup>61</sup> <https://resultados.elpais.com/elecciones/generales.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Discurso de Santiago Abascal Elecciones 10N, November 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAYEBkn3Gz4>, translated by the author.

have recently sought to convince conservative Spaniards that they are the true defenders of Spanish unity in relation to Catalan nationalism. The Socialist Party has also contributed to normalizing Vox's presence; in the run-up to the November general election, in an effort to strengthen its position amongst voters, the PSOE portrayed all three parties as a common enemy, continually warning voters of the consequences of a potential right coalition government. One prominent example of this was when it politicized a protest for Spanish unity at the Plaza Colón in Madrid in which the leaders of PP, Ciudadanos and Vox all appeared in the same photograph. This raises the age-old dilemma for the left of how best to confront a surging far right.

## Conclusions

The absence of Spain's far right before December 2018 was a façade. It had never really gone away, but rather, was camouflaged within the Partido Popular for four decades. The 2008 economic crisis, corruption scandals, a decline in political trust, the Indignados movement and the subsequent birth of Podemos as a political force on the opposite side of the political spectrum, and rising populism globally all contributed to rupturing the PP-PSOE alternation and creating a new discursive space for Vox's creation. Podemos' success in positioning "the people" against "the establishment", however, played an important role in delaying the far right's emergence in comparison to other contexts.<sup>63</sup>

Within the current interregnum, Vox has combined authoritarian conservatism with neoliberal economics to win 52 seats (out of 350) in the Spanish parliament. It has achieved this by voicing the toughest positions on Catalonia and immigration, and by falsely but effectively claiming to be an anti-establishment force. As a result, the Partido Popular has, at least temporarily, lost its hegemony of right votes, and Vox has become a legitimate alternative that now represents 15% of national votes.

Vox's spokesperson, Iván Espinosa de los Monteros, is currently in charge of the party's expansion strategy, or transversality. Some of his recent discourses have hinted towards more prominently courting traditional left working-class voters by stating, for example: "Vox wants to bring closer the Spain that wakes up early ["la España que madruga"], the Spain of workers, the Spain of people who make an effort every day, the Spain of people who work in industrial areas and production."<sup>64</sup> In this sense, his objective is to build on micro-examples of success in the November 2019 General Election such as Vox's second place finish in Fuenlabrada, a working class district that is part of what is often referred to as Madrid's "red belt," traditionally a Socialist Party (PSOE) stronghold.<sup>65</sup>

Currently, however, winning over long-standing socialist and communist voters is challenging for the party for two reasons: based on recent elections, it is clear that a relatively stable percentage of voters believe that either the PSOE or Unidas Podemos best fit their values and defend their interests, and Vox's economic platform is the most neoliberal of the five largest national parties—PSOE, PP, Vox, Unidas Podemos, and Ciudadanos. Notwithstanding, there are many examples around Europe in which the far

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<sup>63</sup> Antonio Maestre, "The Worrying Rise of Spain's Far-Right," *Jacobin*, April 28, 2019, <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/04/vox-party-far-right-spanish-election>.

<sup>64</sup> Laura Galaup and Raúl Sánchez, "La extrema derecha española no capta voto obrero: Vox despunta en los barrios ricos de las grandes ciudades," *eldiario.es*, October 6, 2019, [https://www.eldiario.es/politica/Vox-objetivo-seducir-despunta-ciudades\\_0\\_907109825.html](https://www.eldiario.es/politica/Vox-objetivo-seducir-despunta-ciudades_0_907109825.html).

<sup>65</sup> <http://resultados-elecciones.rtve.es/generales/2019/congreso/comunidad-de-madrid/madrid/fuenlabrada/>.

right has disguised itself in socialist clothing and used smoke and mirrors to conquer a significant portion of the left-voting working class. This has occurred, for example, in Austria, the Netherlands, and France. With regard to the latter, Jean-Marie Le Pen once took great pride in being called “the French Ronald Reagan” when advocating for a radical reduction of the French state,<sup>66</sup> while today Marine Le Pen is using a workerist-protectionist discourse, and has become a party of blue-collar workers. In practice, behind closed doors, such far-right politicians tend to support pro-business and anti-worker policies, but politics has always been more about perception than reality, and, in this case, she is the French politician, at present, that most successfully appeals to the emotions of those who feel left behind or insecure about their socio-economic future. For Vox to achieve this, it would have to be less explicitly neoliberal and adapt a more prominent “welfare state chauvinist approach”. This would consist of a shaper discourse of “Spain for the Spaniards,” in which it would defend a strong welfare state for natives while continuing to portray migrants and autonomous regions as a burden on the state and a threat to “national identity.” While, at present, Vox openly advocates for reducing corporate and income taxes, eliminating the inheritance tax, and privatizing pensions, in order to appeal to more traditionally leftist voters, it would have to advocate for higher taxation of the rich and defend a stronger state presence in fighting inequalities. In other words, it would have to use more false consciousness, as Donald Trump has done effectively, to sell itself as the only real defender of those who are struggling economically and internal and external Others as an impediment to their own well-being.

The current Covid-19 health and economic crisis presents both opportunities and challenges for the party. On the one hand, it has distracted voters from Vox’s nationalistic emotional appeal regarding the Catalanian crisis, and has likely caused some right voters to seek greater moderation/cooperation. On the other, through public discourses, TV interviews, and social media, Vox is attempting to strengthen its political position by mobilizing a popular force of “Indignados” (Indignants) against the current leftist coalition government, which it claims is “the worst government in Spain in the last 80 years.”<sup>67</sup> Here, it is important to note that the last time there was a leftist coalition in power was the *Frente Popular* (Popular Front) in 1936, before Franco and the nationalists staged a military coup and three years later defeated the left in the Spanish Civil War. Vox’s spokesperson, Ivan Espinosa de los Monteros, recently suggested that “it is just a matter of time before the government will fall.” He and other party members have branded the PSOE- Unidas Podemos alliance as “irresponsible,” “incapable,” “psychopathic,” “communist,” “evil,” and “criminal,” and have called for the resignation of the executive. They are focusing particular attention on the government’s vice-president and leader of Unidas Podemos Pablo Iglesias, who they have compared with Joseph Stalin and Nicolás Maduro. Jorge Buxadé, another prominent member of Vox, recently claimed that “Iglesias is responsible for all of the measures the government has not adopted, and for the health and social emergency.” Vox’s president, Santiago Abascal, went a step further, suggesting that Iglesias is “trying to provoke another civil war.”<sup>68</sup> As part of his strategy of media attention and disruption, Abascal has also claimed that the government is hiding “the real data” on Coronavirus deaths and hoping for further outbreaks in order to blame the crisis

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<sup>66</sup> Alexandre Alfonso and Linn Rennwald, “The Far-Right’s Leftist Mask,” *Jacobin*, March 17, 2017, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/03/far-right-ukip-fn-welfare-immigration-working-class-voters/>.

<sup>67</sup> <https://www.voxespana.es/grupo-parlamentario/actividad-parlamentaria/preguntas-orales/pregunta-abascal-sanchez-peor-gobierno-80-anos-20200909>. Translated by the author.

<sup>68</sup> Carmen Moraga, “La extrema derecha trata de expandirse aprovechando la pandemia y saca la artillería contra el Gobierno,” *eldiario.es*, March 24, 2020, [https://www.eldiario.es/politica/Vox-coronavirus-Gobierno-criticas\\_0\\_1009299159.html](https://www.eldiario.es/politica/Vox-coronavirus-Gobierno-criticas_0_1009299159.html). The quotations above were translated by the author.

on Spain's citizens for their lack of responsibility. Moreover, he has accused prime minister Pedro Sanchez of "homicidio imprudente" ("reckless murder") and has suggested he "be put in prison."<sup>69</sup> This evokes a memory of Donald Trump's call to lock-up Hillary Clinton during the 2016 electoral campaign, and seeks to go one step beyond the Partido Popular's current criticisms of the government.

Vox's recent public discourses have increasingly attempted to channel popular frustration by encouraging balcony and street protests with pots and pans and Spanish flags, claiming that their objective is "to put an end to two deadly epidemics that are destroying Spain: The Coronavirus and the criminal government."<sup>70</sup>

An October 2020 poll by Spain's most popular survey agency, Centro de Estudios Sociológicos (CIS), suggested that Vox has lost some support to Ciudadanos since the start of Covid-19. This appears to be attributable to two main elements: due to the health crisis, some conservative voters believe that this is a time for cooperation between the Spanish right and the PSOE, and data shows that Ciudadanos' new leader Inés Arrimadas is currently the second most popular of the five main party leaders.<sup>71</sup> The poll claims that, if there were a general election today, Vox's support would fall from 14,8% of the national vote to 12.5% while Ciudadanos' percentage would increase from 6.9% to 8.8%.<sup>72</sup> This highlights the volatility of right votes at present in relation to changing conditions. That said, with about 34,000 current Covid-19 deaths and potentially the worst economic crisis of the last century developing, Vox could potentially resurge. The CIS also points out that, 57% of the Spanish population believes that the coalition government cannot effectively manage the crisis.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, the European Commission has stated that Spain will be one of the Eurozone countries most economically affected—in 2020, the country's GDP is expected to drop by over 9%, its public debt to increase from 98% to 116% of GDP, and its unemployment rate to rise from 14% to 19% (or potentially higher).<sup>74</sup> And, the Banco de España (Bank of Spain) recently suggested that addressing the current crisis would require tax increases and at least 60 billion Euros in social cuts over the next 10 years.<sup>75</sup>

Such a panorama together with complex regional demands in Spain could eventually lead to the collapse of the current government. In theory, Unidas Podemos' political platform, which stems from the 15-M movement, would be incompatible with the PSOE's return to what Tariq Ali (2015) calls the "extreme [neoliberal] center"<sup>76</sup> and austerity. Ultimately, an internal break-up is what Vox and the more moderate Spanish right are hoping for; alternatively, when they deem the time to be appropriate, they could use a no-confidence motion to attempt to bring down the government. To achieve this, however, the right would need to mobilize a far larger and more vocal popular force of "indignados" than it currently

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<sup>69</sup> Miguel González, 'Abascal dice que el Gobierno "quiere que haya un rebrote" de la pandemia,' *elpais.com*, May 10, 2020, <https://elpais.com/espana/2020-05-10/abascal-dice-que-el-gobierno-quiere-que-haya-un-rebote-de-la-pandemia.html>.

<sup>70</sup> Carmen Moraga, "Vox alienta las manifestaciones contra Sánchez desde las instituciones y pleitea en los tribunales contra su prohibición," *eldiario.es*, May 18, 2020, [https://www.eldiario.es/politica/Vox-ofensiva-Gobierno-Madrid-PP-Cs\\_0\\_1028547467.html](https://www.eldiario.es/politica/Vox-ofensiva-Gobierno-Madrid-PP-Cs_0_1028547467.html).

<sup>71</sup> José Carpio, "CIS, El PSOE retrocede y recorta su distancia con el PP mientras Vox adelanta a Podemos," *rtve.es*, October 15, 2020, <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20201015/barometro-cis-octubre-psoe-retrocede-pp-vox-subadelanta-podemos/2045265.shtml>.

<sup>72</sup> Barómetro CIS (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas), Octubre 2020, [http://datos.cis.es/pdf/3296\\_Estimacion.pdf](http://datos.cis.es/pdf/3296_Estimacion.pdf).

<sup>73</sup> JJ Guillén, "El 57% de los españoles no confía en la gestión del Gobierno para luchar contra la pandemia de Covid-19," *elmundo.es*, September 17, 2020, <https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2020/09/17/5f633c7421efa0816b8b458d.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Andrés Gil, La crisis del coronavirus coloca a España entre los países con más recesión de la UE," *eldiario.es*, May 15, 2020, [https://www.eldiario.es/economia/crisis-coronavirus-Espana-recesion-UE\\_0\\_1027497353.html](https://www.eldiario.es/economia/crisis-coronavirus-Espana-recesion-UE_0_1027497353.html).

<sup>75</sup> Antonio Maqueda, "Hernandez de Cos pide a los partidos un pacto de varias legislaturas para afrontar un ajuste fiscal a medio plazo," *elpais.com*, May 18 2020, <https://elpais.com/economia/2020-05-18/el-banco-de-espana-empeora-sus-previsiones-y-pide-un-plan-de-ajuste-gradual-y-a-medio-plazo.html>.

<sup>76</sup> Tariq Ali (2015). *The Extreme Center: A Warning*. London: Verso.

has, and also negotiate a highly complex cross-party consensus (comparable to the 2018 impeachment of Partido Popular prime minister Mariano Rajoy)—whether the left alliance can avoid these predicaments and stay in power for their full mandate (until 2023), or potentially longer, remains to be seen.

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