

# Spanish State: Franco Never Left - Behind Vox success in Andalusia

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**Spain's far right is enjoying its biggest breakthrough since the 1970s. But it grows from a reactionary swamp that has festered ever since Franco's dictatorship.**

At the start of the 1970s most Europeans thought that any rebirth of fascist organization would be built around the remains of the Mediterranean dictatorships, in Greece, Portugal, and Spain. Yet if Golden Dawn remains a powerful expression of neofascism in Greece, in these latter two countries this expectation has been all but disproven. Parties linked to the far right have in recent decades tended to achieve worse results in the Iberian peninsula than anywhere else on the European continent.

At least, this was true before the elections in Andalusia at the start of December, where the far-right Vox made a surprise breakthrough with 10 percent of the vote, electing twelve MPs. This was an electoral earthquake not only because the far right made it to Parliament in Spain's most populous region, but also because the Left lost its parliamentary majority. The situation looks set to allow the Right to govern Andalusia for the first time since the return of democracy — [and their government will rely on Vox's support](#).

But we should not fool ourselves into thinking that the previous electoral failures of the Spanish far right meant that its values were nowhere to be found in the country's institutions. Rather, its "absent presence" masked the persistence of a neo-conservative and xenophobic Francoism. This had, without doubt, hitherto lacked distinct political expression, instead being diluted within a "big-tent" Partido Popular (PP), Spain's dominant conservative party. But now it is being given a new lease of life in Vox, a party with deep roots in the history of far-right organizing.

## Frustrated

The Spanish far-right's history as an electoral force begins with the end of the dictatorship. The twilight years of the Franco regime saw the formation of a lobby group known as the Búnker, which was at the root of most of the far-right parties to emerge during Spain's late-1970s Transition to democracy. The two hegemonic groups in this milieu were Fuerza Nueva (New Force) and the Confederación Nacional de Ex Combatientes.

Founded in 1967, the ultra-Catholic Fuerza Nueva led by Blas Piñar brought together many Franco-nostalgic forces as well as a very active youth wing with great mobilizing strength — a notable characteristic of the Spanish far right. As one historian put it, "Its first priority was to become the axis of a movement pulling all of the Francoites nostalgic for the spirit of the [anti-communist] 'Crusade' as well as those who wanted the regime more energetically to repress the opposition, such that the system might continue."

Indeed, Fuerza Nueva, which became a party in 1976, is the only far right party to have won representation in Spain's national parliament (in 1979 it secured 379,463 votes). This was its organizational peak: at this point it oscillated between forty thousand and seventy thousand members and also had its own trade union (the Fuerza Nacional del Trabajo) and a magazine, [\*El Alcázar\*](#), which sold forty-five thousand copies a week and had thirteen thousand subscribers.

The failure of the [attempted military coup on February 23, 1981](#) and poor election results the following year closed the doors to the far right, which was unable to resist the reform process that had begun in the late Franco period. This discouraged and disoriented the main centers of the far right, and this situation was further aggravated by the dissolution of Fuerza Nueva in 1982, on the seventh anniversary of Franco's death.

Most of its militants and organizers felt abandoned and betrayed by this choice. Many now swelled the ranks of other small far right parties, but the majority found refuge in the Alianza Popular (later, Partido Popular). With the dissolution of Fuerza Nueva the main political organization to emerge from the Francoite "Búnker" came to an end. With both its break-up and the 1988 closing of *El Alcázar*, its partisans begun a long journey across the desert.

## Alianza Popular: A Rallying Point

Spain's Transition brought no few elements of the dictatorship into the democratic system. In this unbroken process of institutional continuity, considerable parts of the structure of the Francoite regime persisted without ever being purged. Various authors have pointed to this impunity as an important reason why no strong force rallying the far right was ever able to arise in Spain. Comparative studies of the resurgence of far-right parties across Europe recognize that this Spanish particularity (i.e. the lack of such a party) is related, among other things, to the type of mass right-wing party that has instead taken form here.

In this sense, we should remember that the Partido Popular (PP), Spain's main conservative party, originated in the Alianza Popular founded by Manuel Fraga in September 1976. This formation emerged from a group of Francoite notables and was characterized not only by the striking presence of officials from the dictatorship, but above all by the fact that it sought to give a social and electoral base for resistance against any institutional rupture with the Francoite regime.

Despite its limited results in early electoral tests, this tactic of "resistance" soon allowed the Alianza Popular to make breakthroughs. In the 1982 general election it drew votes from both Adolfo Suárez's Centro Democrático y Social (Suárez was the first prime minister in the democratic period, having initially been appointed by the king before winning the 1977 and 1979 elections) and Fuerza Nueva, taking around a third of this party's votes and helping fuel its collapse.

As we have noted, many Fuerza Nueva militants and cadres swelled the ranks of the Alianza Popular, such that first this party and then the Partido Popular became the only electoral expressions of what Spaniards call "[sociological Francoism](#)." As Aquilino Duque puts it:

I wouldn't say that all the PP's voters are "Francoites," but all or almost all of the Francoites in Spain do vote for the PP, among other things because they have no other option, because, however embarrassedly, the PP does what it can to defend those values that were Francoism's very *raison d'être*: the fatherland, religion and the family.

The persistence of a deep-rooted sociological Francoism forty years after the end of the dictatorship shows the limits of the low-intensity democracy bequeathed by the regime that took form in 1978, which has not even been able to pass judgement on Francoism's crimes. Impunity for these crimes is thus a fundamental element of the "Spanish brand." This, in turn, explains many of the problems brought up by the so-called Catalan crisis or indeed the row over the attempt to exhume the dictator Franco's body from the memorial at the [Valle de Cuelgamuros](#).

## Far Right and Center

Some political analysts consider the Alianza Popular's transformation into the PP as a turn to the center. But we would more accurately define it in terms of the desire to build a catch-all party embracing everything from the far right to the so-called "center ground." In this new offer, neoliberalism and US-style neoconservatism sat side by side with a Spanish nationalism bearing unmistakable continuities with its Francoite predecessor.

At the same time, this prevented the party from making any secular turn to break its ties with the Catholicism that predominates across a wide swath of its voter base. Added to this, an embrace of the neocon discourse of the "clash of civilizations" allowed the gradual introduction of xenophobic themes. This could also take advantage of the malaise of crisis-hit poorer parts of the Spanish-born population, whom it set against Muslim immigrant workers in the name of the "defense of Western values."

Considering this combination of messages, it would be mistaken either to consider the PP as a classic center-right party similar to Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union or to simply associate it with the far right or neofascism in other European countries. It has historical differences from this former kind of parties, having never renounced its Francoite predecessors, and has also shown a penchant for extra-parliamentary mobilization unusual among such parties (except in extreme situations like in France in May '68.) Yet it also differs from far-right parties, for while it embraces some of their messages and forms of protest, it does not do so with the ideological belligerence of such groups, or indeed put them at the forefront of its agenda.

What we can say is that the crisis of the PP has turned into a crisis of the Spanish right. And this, in turn, opened a window of opportunity for the far right to occupy an electoral space of its own for the first time in decades. Indeed, the most paradigmatic element of this crisis is the unprecedented electoral competition over a political space that had, until now, usually been hegemonized by the PP alone.

## A Successful Split

Despite its sudden electoral and media breakthroughs, Vox is not a new party. It was founded in December 2013, and before it finally entered the Andalusian parliament it had a long record of electoral failures. And it emerged as a split from the PP, driven by those who accused then-premier Mariano Rajoy of having grown distant from the party's more conservative principles (indeed, this was precisely the moment in which former PP premier José María Aznar and his key ally Esperanza Aguirre began publicly to express disaffection with the party leadership).

Vox was initially led by the two best-known PP officials involved in the split, namely Aleix Vidal-Quadras (a member of the European Parliament and former president of the Catalan PP) and

Santiago Abascal, a former PP member of parliament in the Basque Country and former president of the Foundation for the Defense of the Spanish Nation (DENAES).

If we can say Vox is the Spanish translation of a reactionary and authoritarian phenomenon that has now taken root across the globe, it also has particular characteristics drawing on Spain's own history and political context. Unlike most of its European counterparts, Vox is a split within the Spanish right and not a new phenomenon rising on its margins such as the Front National in France or Italy's Lega Nord. It is, perhaps, the first successful split to the right of the PP, unlike the [PADE](#) formed in 1997, which at most won a handful of councilors in Madrid.

To some degree Vox represents this sociological Francoism that survived for so many years within the PP, having had no political expression of its own since the dissolution of Fuerza Nueva. But so, too, more neocon elements that had until now been lobbying within the PP as a kind of Spanish version of the Tea Party. Among these latter we find the media and mobilizing networks grouped around the Digital Freedom and Inter-Economy Group, the Strategic Studies Group (GEES, a neocon think-tank) and agitational web platforms like Hazte Oír.

The historical reminiscences of the Spanish far right link Vox to a religious stance more comparable to Eastern European far-right parties like Poland's Law and Justice than to Marine Le Pen's Front National. The questions of national unity and the fight against separatism — with Catalonia as a central theme — evoke the history of [joseantoniano](#) Falangism. This latter had a central focus on the idea of the "unity of fate in the universal," which was later proclaimed in the "Principles of the National Movement" (from 1958; one of the Franco regime's Fundamental Laws), which read "The unity of the Fatherland is one of the pillars of the new Spain, for which reason the army will guarantee it faced with any internal or external attack."

This is the starting point for the key right-wing theme of the re-centralization of Spain (the end of regional autonomy, closing down the Senate, and so on), seeing it as a uni-national state and rejecting all other nationalisms. In Vox's discourse, this central theme is interwoven with the fight against the corruption, clientelism, and wastage it identifies with the various regional governments.

In social terms, Vox's discourse is clearly neoliberal; this at least partly distinguishes it from other far-right forces which at least rhetorically combine their other policies with a protectionist discourse (like Donald Trump in the United States), a statist one (like Matteo Salvini in Italy) or "welfare chauvinism" (like Le Pen). Vox leader Santiago Abascal is much more like Bolsonaro than Le Pen.

Recently Vox has proven itself an outstanding student of the US neocons which both Aznar and Aguirre championed in Spain in their own time. It is unafraid of attacking ideas which progressive forces had earlier managed to turn into common sense. A good example is its crusade against the feminist movement on issues like abortion, as it questions the reality of male violence and everything else it catalogues under the term "gender ideology." This is a clear wink to the most extreme elements — within the Catholic hierarchy, HazteOír and the Foro Español de la Familia, among others — popularizing a concept of "gender ideology" which has served as a political catalyst and glue for the far right in other countries, especially Poland.

In looking to political experiences on the other side of the Atlantic, Vox has also adopted elements of Trumpism and its slogans, for instance in its refrain "Make Spain Great Again." So, too, in its emphatic call to build a border wall in Ceuta and Melilla (two tiny Spanish exclaves in North Africa), in an attempt to seek a fight over the government's migration policies and the rise in migrant numbers. Of course, today walls are not so much a matter of border controls as a key tool of political propaganda: what better way of depicting "security" faced with the migrant "invasion" than to put up a physical barrier?

This is one of the mainstays of the stigmatization of not only migrants but also the poor in general, through an insistent association of crime, insecurity, and immigration. It drives exclusion mechanisms typical of what philosopher Jürgen Habermas defines as characteristic of “welfare chauvinism,” in turn concentrating a latent tension between citizen status and national identity.

The social malaise and political polarization provoked by austerity policies are thus offloaded onto the weakest link: the migrant, the foreigner, or simply the “other,” and the political and economic elites who are truly responsible are let off the hook. For if “there isn’t enough to go around,” then “we can’t all fit.” Such is the basis on which power of the slogan “Spaniards first” is built.

These characteristics of Vox show that this party straddles both past and present: it has some stances that set it at one with Europe’s new far right, but also others that preserve peculiar traits that make it something of an updated version of Spain’s own far right from the late-Franco and Transition periods. Its call for the “*Reconquista* of Spain” perhaps best summarizes this idea of past and present: this slogan connects it not only to far-right movements’ discourse of “clash of civilizations” and the “migrant threat” but also to the nostalgic idea of the Crusade to take back Spain from the “reds,” as in Franco’s military uprising on June 18, 1936.

## Why Now?

The fact that Vox is making its breakthrough today firstly owes to the crisis in the PP, long the only party of the Spanish right but today greatly weakened by revelations of far-reaching corruption. This has given rise to an unusual electoral competition on the right, including with Ciudadanos. If the idea that voting PP was the only “useful vote” on the right long served as a firewall against other conservative options emerging, this effect has now collapsed as this electorate has been dispersed among various parties.

Moreover, this competition on the right has sparked a radicalization of the PP and Ciudadanos’s proposals on such important issues as migration or the political conflict in Catalonia, in turn helping to normalize Vox. During the campaign for the Andalusian elections held on December 2 these parties refused to characterize Vox as a far-right force, and today, to the astonishment of their European political allies, they are seeking deals with it so that they can enter government. The Socialist Party (PSOE) also invoked Vox during the campaign, precisely in order to delegitimize the PP and Ciudadanos. The far-right formation thus enjoyed an unexpected prominence.

Another reason why Vox is rising today is that the global wave of xenophobic and punitive populist forces has given more audience and media interest to themes that are new to the Spanish political agenda, like attacks on the supposed Muslim threat. At its congress-cum-rally in Vistalegre, Vox even invoked the Spain of the Battle of Lepanto (the 1571 naval victory over the Ottomans), which apparently “saved Western civilization from barbarism.”

Its rise also takes place in the overarching context of the territorial dispute over Catalonia. The fact that Vox took the pro-independence process to the Supreme Court gave the party major visibility, allowing it to set itself up as a “hard” anti-separatist alternative. In this race, each of the right-wing forces compete to become the authentic defender of Spanish unity.

At the same time, the controversy generated by the Socialist-led government’s [plans to exhume Franco’s body from the Valle de Cuelgamuros](#) has driven a major re-mobilization of Francoist elements that had, in fact, never gone away. This pushed the “law of historical memory” into the foreground even before Vox had clearly raised the banner of opposition.

The wider backdrop to Vox's breakthrough is the austerity policies implemented within the context of a systemic crisis that we have been living through for more than a decade. These policies have shaken social cohesion, with a rise in unemployment, economic security, and social grievances. This situation is especially grave in Andalusia, Spain's single most populous region, which has suffered the crisis more than the rest, with even lower average incomes, more unemployment, a higher risk of social exclusion, more energy poverty, and higher inequality. This polarization of incomes, which has emptied out the working and middle classes' bank accounts, in turn polarizes all politics, a fact that has directly impacted upon the stability of the party system.

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- Jacobin, 01.05.2019:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/01/spain-vox-partido-popular-far-right-franco>

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