
VOX: The Rise of the Spanish Populist Radical Right

José Rama, Lisa Zanotti, Stuart J. Turnbull-Dugarte and Andrés Santana.
New York: Routledge, 2021, 152 pp.

The book *VOX: The Rise of the Spanish Populist Radical Right* (2021) is a much-needed in-depth analysis of the relatively recent VOX phenomenon — a political party born in 2013 and still evolving.

The authors José Rama, Lisa Zanotti, Stuart J. Turnbull-Dugarte and Andrés Santana are well-known experts on the subject with important publications about VOX (e.g. Turnbull-Dugarte *et al.*, 2020). In this sense, the book presents itself as the peak of their previous work, considering the very complete amount of data revealed and analysed throughout six chapters, which contributes greatly to a comprehensive understanding of VOX in particular and the European populist radical right parties' general phenomena.

In the introduction, the authors start the explanation of VOX's meteoric rise in opposition to the unsuccessful track record of the previous radical right and far-right political parties in post-Francoist Spain, and against the polls that often fail to accurately predict the results of this kind of parties in their early stages. VOX is presented as an internal split of the *Partido Popular* (PP), that offers stronger solutions against the alleged internal and external enemies of Spain, namely the Catalan independence movement and foreign immigrants. Furthermore, following Cas Mudde's work (Mudde, 2019), the party's categorization as a populist radical right party is explained, considering three ideological features: nativism, authoritarianism and populism.

The second chapter deals in more detail with the genesis and expansion of VOX. In a post-Francoist history of political stability, the authors describe the Great Recession of 2008 as the cradle of instability that resulted in the emergence of new parties (*Podemos* and *Ciudadanos*) and consequent political fragmentation. The authors divide Spanish politics into four electoral cycles and use four indicators to understand the stability levels of party systems, while concluding that VOX rise happens in a context of a so-called 'precarious governance' characterized by electoral fragmentation and volatility in the third and fourth cycles. VOX chronology is described in parallel to Spanish politics: the party's electoral debut in the 2014 European elections, after its foundation from an internal PP split; the mediatic party's role as a prosecutor in the

Catalan independence leaders' trial; the 2018 party rally at the Vistalegre Palace; and the 'acceptance' of VOX by PP and *Ciudadanos*, when both parties received external support from VOX. Besides those important moments, are highlighted two major events (very much linked with Catalan *procés* and PP criticism) that made political analysts and common Europeans turn heads: the 2018 Andalusian election breakthrough, where the party won 10.96% of the vote; and the impressive general election of 2019, where VOX became the third political force by winning 15.09% of the vote. The authors also examine VOX's leadership, and internal organizational and democracy. The results are somehow expected: a party strongly led by Santiago Abascal and its main figures (Rocío Monasterio, Javier Ortega-Smith, Iván Espinosa de los Monteros and Jorge Buxadé), and highly dominated by the National Executive Committee.

In the third chapter, it is analysed VOX's supply side through the assessment of political discourse gathered in electoral manifestoes, specifically the VOX programme for the April 2019 election. The data gathered allows the authors to dive deeply into the ideological features of the party, i.e. the most salient categories in VOX programme: the so-called national way of life (general appeals of nationalism both in its civic and ethnic forms); law and order security proposals; immigration positioning against the assimilation of non-natives; traditional morality elements (e.g. antifeminist discourse, pro-life stances); and the arguments of welfare chauvinism, where social benefits are allocated exclusively to natives. In addition, the authors explore the left-right and centre-periphery cleavages' evolution between 1977 and 2019, and conclude on VOX game changer nature with respect to polarization in both cleavages. Not only has left-right antagonism increased, but also the more historically important cleavage centre-periphery has been exacerbated by the muscular response of VOX to the Catalan *procés*. In the last section of the third chapter, it is made an interesting comparison with other populist radical right parties, that could be extended in depth and width in future research. The authors found that VOX presents several characteristics common to other European and American parties alike while showing distinct traits, namely abundant national way of life elements and the defence of traditional morality which is mostly observed outside Europe.

The fourth chapter, like the third one, presents an amount of highly valuable data which allows a factual understanding of VOX, namely a characterization of who votes for the party. Regarding socio-demographics, the authors found that the party electoral support is associated with young males from the middle and upper classes, with above-average income and medium-level education profiles. It is also discussed the reasons why this kind of profile is associated with VOX voting (e.g. man prevalence associated with the anti-feminism positioning and the traditional masculinity image and rhetoric). Moreover, the authors take a step further and analyse what motivates VOX's supporters politically. Two main drivers are determined: the internal threat presented by separatism and countered by nationalism; and the external threat of immigration fought in the name of nativism. Also, ideology and socio-cultural elements are crucial — the party electorate is ideologically positioned on the far side of the Spanish

right-wing political spectrum, views religion as an important issue and has a distinct positioning over post-materialist matters like LGBT+ rights (least supportive, alongside the PP electorate) and European integration (VOX voters represent the Spanish electorate that is more supportive of the *Spexit*). On the other way around, the VOX electorate is lined up with the remaining Spanish right-wing electorate in regard to welfare spending and economic distribution. The authors also made a comparative analysis with other populist radical right parties and concluded that there is an overall alignment, albeit the prevalence of some VOX particularities (e.g. an overall reduced Euroscepticism when compared with the electorate of other countries).

The fifth chapter is focused on the connection between VOX (and its electorate) and democracy. Starting from the definition and distinction between extreme right-wing parties' anti-democratic nature and radical right-wing parties' democratic (and often illiberal) character, the authors enter into a quest to unveil VOX's true colours. Firstly, the authors looked at the leaders' speeches and found numerous expressions and allusions to pre-democratic Spain that could seduce the non or less democratic electorate that 'hides' in abstention, in the small far-right parties and possibly in PP. Secondly, they analysed VOX electorate and compared it with the electorate from other parties, both similar European parties and Spanish parties. The authors found out that the European radical right parties' electorate supports democracy in the same amount when compared with other parties. However, the VOX electorate (especially, the younger one) shows a clear tendency towards the acceptance or preference of non-democratic regimes than both the sample of European radical right parties and the totality of mainstream Spanish parties' electorate. All in all, VOX is presented as a singular radical right party evolving in a country with still present non-democratic ghosts, which attracts some extreme voters.

In the concluding chapter, the authors sum up their research and stress the incredible rise of VOX, from a small party to one of the major political forces in Spain, with power across all levels of government and with effective influence on policymaking.

The final remarks are a discussion of future scenarios for VOX, regarding its capability of replacing PP or even its appeal to the PSOE electorate. The authors view those possibilities as improbable but not impossible. In other Western European cases (e.g. French *Rassemblement National* — former *Front National*) not only the classical right-wing has almost disappeared but also some left-wing electorate vote for radical right-right wing parties (Mudde, 2019: 79). Moreover, the research shows a future for VOX, fuelled by its young electorate and multiplicity of leaders that, contrary to other populist parties, are not fully dependent on just one charismatic figure. When reaching the end of the book, it is clear to the reader that all the main VOX features were dealt with by the researchers; nevertheless, some issues could have been more explored. The authors stressed the importance of nativism, as one of the three ideological pillars, but they could have analysed the phenomenon in a deeper way for a better comprehension of its real importance in the present and to project the future. In this sense, it is missing a correlation between the immigrants' actual and perceived numbers and the electorate's more or less nativist positioning (Grodzeisky and Semyonov, 2020); also,

it would have been interesting to compare this kind of information from the Spanish context with the data of other Western European cases general anti-immigration and specific Islamophobic views and attitudes (Bell *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, it is suggested that future research could include a deeper study on the young and more extreme VOX electorate and its potential ties with the Spanish identitarian movement (Zúquete, 2018) and far-right groups; and a comparative analysis that would include the *Chega* party — the Portuguese ‘twin’ party of VOX, founded in 2019, that has been showing strong ideological similarities with its Spanish counterpart (Heyne and Manucci, 2021; Mendes and Dennison, 2020).

Overall, the book *VOX: The Rise of the Spanish Populist Radical Right*, is for sure one of the most complete and structured research on VOX done until today.

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This work is supported by FCT and

EU PhD Research Grant number UI/BD/153726/2022.