

Interactive Causality and Contingency VOX and the Rise of Spain's Radical Right

Yanina Welp and Facundo Cruz

Abstract

The rise of populist radical right parties is often explained through linear accounts emphasizing the emergence of new cleavages, the normalization of previously stigmatized ideas, or the effects of growing affective polarization. This article challenges these explanations by advancing the concept of interactive causality, which highlights how contingent political events, strategic choices by political actors, and constructed narratives transform latent demands into political supply. By focusing on how meaning is constructed around critical junctures—such as the Catalan conflict—the analysis shifts attention from exceptionalist explanations to interactional processes. Building on this perspective, the article examines the demand-side conditions underlying the emergence and consolidation of VOX in Spain from a longitudinal perspective. Drawing on survey data from the *Spanish Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* (CIS), it traces changes in public opinion before and after VOX's electoral breakthrough across five dimensions: democracy, territorial organization, immigration, the European Union, and preferred models of society. The findings reveal differentiated dynamics across issue domains, combining stability with processes of reconfiguration rather than uniform attitudinal shifts. Overall, the results suggest that VOX's consolidation is best understood as the outcome of an interactive process in which enduring predispositions, contingent political events, and strategic political activation reconfigure political opportunities.

Keywords: polarization, political parties, Populist Radical Right, Spain, Vox.

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Introduction

More than a decade ago, Sonia Alonso and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser argued that although there was real demand for a populist radical right (PRR) in Spain, three supply-side factors were impeding its electoral breakthrough: the country's cleavage structure, the competitive strategy of the mainstream right, and the electoral system.¹ This changed in April 2019, when VOX entered Spain's national parliament (Congress of Deputies) for the first time, winning twenty-four seats and becoming the country's fifth largest party. Just six months later, in the repeat elections of November 2019—called because no major party had been able to form a government—VOX more than doubled its representation, securing fifty-two seats and becoming the third largest party in Congress. How can VOX's breakthrough be explained if, apparently, the three supply-side factors remained unchanged?

While the Catalan pro-independence conflict (2017–2019) was undoubtedly a trigger, it was the strategic interactions among political actors that paved the way for VOX's rise. Catalonia's unilateral declaration of independence and the Spanish state's response created fertile ground for the revival of Spanish nationalism.² Meanwhile, Spain's dual status as both a pro-European Union, feminist-policy pioneer and a radical-right battleground provides a critical lens through which to examine gendered backlash and resistance.³

Spain's delayed emergence of a successful PRR party, despite structural conditions similar to those in other European countries, challenges deterministic explanations and invites points toward a framework of *interactive causality*. Unlike one-directional causal mechanisms, interactive causality refers to a multi-way process in which variables mutually influence each other. This approach centers context while allowing for flexibility, without dismissing the relevance of historically situated variables.⁴ Building on the notion of repertoires and contentious politics as processes shaped by mutual adjustments, it highlights the importance of endogenous dynamics, directly challenging the

¹ Sonia Alonso and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Spain: No Country for the Populist Radical Right?" *South European Society and Politics* 20, no. 1 (2014): 21–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2014.985448>.

² María Arroyo Menéndez, "Las causas del apoyo electoral a Vox en España" [The causes of electoral support for VOX in Spain], *Política y Sociedad* 57, no. 3 (2020): 693–717; See also Carles Ferreira, "Vox como representante de la derecha radical en España: Un estudio sobre su ideología" [Vox as representative of the radical right in Spain: A study of its ideology], *Revista Española de Ciencia Política* 51 (2019): 73–98.

³ Antonio Álvarez Benavides and Francisco Jiménez Aguilar, "La contraprogramación cultural de Vox: secularización, género y antifeminismo" [Vox's cultural counter-programming: secularization, gender, and antifeminism], *Política y Sociedad* 58, no. 2 (2021).

⁴ These ideas are inspired by Laurence Whitehead, *Democratization: Theory and experience* (OUP Oxford, 2002).

view that the far right's expansion across Western countries is an inevitable force.⁵ It also underscores the role of institutional diversity.⁶ This approach does not reject regularities or claiming that each case is wholly unique. Rather, it suggests that the emerging patterns and interactions reveal the instability and internal inconsistencies of dominant narratives. These inconsistencies, in turn, open space for the construction of ideological and organizational challenges through adaptive, often opportunistic counter-narratives. Far from the linear expansion of the radical right assumed in some studies, this dynamic represents a process in which “gradual [institutional] changes can be of great significance in their own right; and gradually unfolding changes may be hugely consequential as causes of other outcomes.”⁷

By foregrounding how actors construct meaning around critical junctures, such as the Catalan conflict or the “cultural battle”, the analytical focus shifts from exceptionalism to interaction. Framing populism as a negotiated outcome rather than a foregone conclusion enables scholars and democratic defenders alike to identify and exploit its Achilles' heel: the very contingency that enables its rise. From the supply side, this approach calls for greater attention to politics and to the role of what Machiavelli defined as *virtù* and *fortuna*. On the demand side, the unspoken implication of focusing exclusively on “causal mechanisms” is a form of reductionism; orthodox assumptions about cosmopolitanism, universalism, the homogeneity of rights, and liberal ascendancy are seldom tested against actual performance or sequential and contextual dynamics.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to this debate by focusing on the emergence of VOX in Spain. After briefly reconstructing the emergence of the party in the electoral arena, the analysis engages with and explores three main explanatory arguments commonly used to account for the rapid growth of the PRR:

- (i) the emergence of a new cleavage that established parties failed to address, particularly around issues such as migration and Euroscepticism;⁸
- (ii) the normalization thesis, which argues that the radical right grows as previously stigmatized ideas are reactivated and legitimized;⁹ and

⁵ Charles Tilly, “Mechanisms in Political Processes,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 4, no. 1 (2001): 21-41.

⁶ Elinor Ostrom, “Reciprocity and Collective,” in *Moral Sentiments and Material Interests: The Foundations of Cooperation in Economic Life*, eds. Herbert Gintis, Samuel Bowles, Robert Boyd, and Ernst Fehr (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

⁷ James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁸ José Rama, Lisa Zanotti, Stuart J. Turnbull-Dugarte, and Andrés Santana, *VOX: The Rise of the Spanish Populist Radical Right* (New York: Routledge 2021).

⁹ Vicente Valentim, *The Normalization of the Radical Right: A Norms Theory of Political Supply and Demand* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

- (iii) the affective polarization argument, which holds that in polarized contexts voters may radicalize their positions and join “mega-identities” that produce coherence and alignment around a core set of principles.¹⁰

In Spain, these principles include historical legacies (e.g., Francoist nostalgia), territorial tensions, attitudes toward the European Union, and cultural backlash. If these arguments capture relevant dynamics of the Spanish case, either an ideological niche left uncovered by previous parties, a shift toward normalization of radical-right positions, or an alignment producing coherent positions across different axes is expected.

To explore the plausibility and limits of these arguments, CIS survey data from two periods—before VOX entered the electoral arena (from 2007) and after its consolidation (2023–2025) were gathered. This strategy helps track both continuities and changes over time, comparing right-wing positions with those of the broader population. The results are consistent with an interactive understanding of causality. Influence is present, but alignment is neither automatic nor complete. What emerges is not a closed ideological structure driven by VOX alone, but a contingent configuration shaped by broader political dynamics, critical junctures, and strategic activation. The rise of VOX cannot be reduced to isolated mechanisms. Instead, it is better understood as the outcome of their interaction, revealing the fundamentally contingent nature of populist breakthroughs.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the state of the art; Section 3 focuses on the supply side, arguing that VOX exemplifies a case of reactive populism; Section 4 introduces the empirical study of the demand side; and Section 5 concludes with a discussion of the political implications of the study and future research avenues.

State of the Art

In Europe, the radical right has been a relevant player for decades in France, Switzerland and Austria and has spread to almost all other countries of the continent.¹¹ These parties belong to the family of the right, where the distinction between conventional and extreme refers both to spatial attributes (moderate vs. radical positions) and to their relation to democracy (accepting vs. rejecting it).¹²

¹⁰ Josep Maria Comellas Bonsfills and Mariano Torcal Loriente, “A Longitudinal Study on the Dynamic Relationship between Affective Polarization and Radical Right’s Emergence: The Case of VOX in Spain,” *Political Studies* 74, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217251340890>.

¹¹ Beatriz Acha Ugarte, *Análisis del auge de la ultraderecha: Surgimiento, ideología y ascenso de los nuevos partidos de ultraderecha* [Analyzing the rise of the far right: emergence, ideology, and the ascendancy of new far-right parties] (Barcelona: Gedisa Editorial, 2021).

¹² Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser and Lisa Zanotti, “The Populist Radical Right Beyond Europe,” *Journal of Language and Politics* 22, no. 3 (2023): 285–305.

Populist Radical Right, a Definition

The contemporary parties of the radical right (PRR) are characterized by an ideological commitment based on an exacerbated nationalism, mostly directed against migration and/or ethnic minorities of each country. It manifests in various forms of anti-Europeanism as well as by intolerance of diversity, and doctrinal elements typically considered right-wing, such as the defense of law and order and conservative positions on family issues, abortion and/or gender issues as well as the recognition of LGBTQ rights. The radical right has been adapting positions to even include the so called ‘welfare chauvinism’ in France’s RN, which combines the proposal of reducing tax to the rich with social policies addressed only to nationals (excluding immigrants).¹³

For radical right parties, the rejection of the feminist movement is also central and it is not divorced from the prominence of female leaders (e.g. Marine Le Pen in France’s National Rally; Giorgia Meloni in the Fratelli d’Italia; Alice Elisabeth Weidel in Alternative for Germany). The radical right seeks to restore lost values, a glorious past, the traditional role of the male provider and the socially subordinated woman-mother-caretaker. In this movement, female leaders play a strong symbolic role.¹⁴ Thus, the most salient cleavage is around the “cultural battle”: the debate on the ultra-right is not so much linked to the economic policies that are defended, but rather, fundamentally, to the cultural policies that are promoted.¹⁵ In brief, the European radical right has been defined by nativism, racism, and anti-immigrant ideologies, as a subtype within the populist group.

Cas Mudde coined the concept of ‘populist radical right parties’ to define parties characterized by a core set of ideas, rather than a single issue such as ethnopluralism, populism, welfare chauvinism, etc. This also stresses the differences between PRR parties and old or traditional far right parties. While traditional parties are strictly anti-democratic and support authoritarian government, PRR parties are nominally democratic even if they remain at

¹³ Dorit Geva, “A New Typology of Parties of the Populist Radical Right: Fidesz’s Radicalized Conservatism and Gender Inequality in Comparison to the Rassemblement National,” *European Journal of Politics and Gender* (2024): 1-26, <https://doi.org/10.1332/25151088Y2024D000000056>.

¹⁴ Geva’s study of Marine Le Pen shows how populist women “can play the role of mother of the nation to great effect, invoking strongly cathectic dimensions among supporters. As feminists have long argued, nationalist projects focus on women as symbols of national belonging and reproduction.” in Dorit Geva, “Daughter, Mother, Captain: Marine Le Pen, Gender, and Populism in the French National Front,” *Social Politics* 27, no. 1 (2020): 7.

¹⁵ A recent study by Wheatley explains the wide gender gap among young people in the UK through conjunctural and gendered dynamics in the salience and framing of political issues—dynamics that are not fully consistent with a purely gradual, structural account. Jonathan Wheatley, “How the Politics of Culture and Identity Drive a Gender Gap among Young Voters: A Study of UK Voters in 2024,” *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* (2026):1-19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2025.2612106>.

odds with certain aspects of liberal democracy.¹⁶ Furthermore, this concept includes the notion of populism conceived as a ‘thin-centered ideology. It views society as divided into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and argues that politics should express the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’. In brief, three elements namely authoritarianism, nativism, and populism, constitute the necessary and sufficient criteria to classify a party within the populist radical right family.

Explanations for PRR Emergence and Success: the Supply Side

From the demand side, the appearance of right-wing populist parties in Western Europe has been explained as the result of the emergence of a new cleavage in society between the winners and losers of globalization.¹⁷ However, to connect the demand with the offer there is a need to build an electoral apparatus. There are three central aspects to explain the possibility of such emergence: rules to create parties and to arrive at a position in elections; the strategies of other parties and the media strategy. The success of populist parties and extreme right parties (as of any other new party) is conditioned by institutions, most notably by the degree and manner of party system institutionalization, as well as by electoral rules. Both of these factors determine the ease to which new populist parties can enter the political arena.

Of particular importance are those institutions that frame the behavior of parties. For example, a purely proportional electoral system may facilitate the entry of populist parties by reducing the barrier needed for a party to enter parliament. The extent and manner of *party system* institutionalization is also critical. When party system institutionalization is weak, new populist parties are likely to emerge and grow rapidly. Conversely, if existing parties are too entrenched and the entry barriers for new parties are too high, this may lead to such public disenchantment with the political system that pressure from populist groups leads to a break in the system and the rapid entry of one or more such parties. Presidential systems could offer more incentives than parliamentary ones for the growing incidence of populist parties.¹⁸

Another explanation emphasizes the failure of established political parties to respond to popular demands, which feeds the declining legitimacy of parties. The traditional parties then have options that range from making a *cordon sanitaire* against these new parties (as has been common in Germany) to forming alliances (as has occurred in Uruguay or Spain, where the mainstream

¹⁶ Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Hanspeter Kriesi, Edgar Grande, Romain Lachat, Martin Dolezal, Simon Bornschie, and Timotheos Frey, “Globalization and the Transformation of the National Political Space: Six European Countries Compared,” *European Journal of Political Research* 45, no. 6 (2006): 921-956.

¹⁸ Scott Mainwaring and Matthew Soberg Shugart, *Presidentialism and democracy in Latin America* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1997).

right has coalesced with the extreme right). Finally, media strategies seems to play a very relevant role by promoting charismatic leaders and facilitating the mobilization of masses. Digital media, in particular, offer new opportunities for both populist and non-populist leaders to create a direct relationship with their supporters.¹⁹ These new media are faster and cheaper means of dissemination.

The PRR from the Demand Side: Exploring Explanatory Arguments

Three arguments have been put forward to account for the rapid expansion of the PRR: the emergence of a new cleavage, the normalization of previously stigmatized preferences, and the effects of growing affective polarization hypotheses.

First, the cleavage argument posits that a new line of conflict emerged, centered on cultural backlash, Euroscepticism, and disputes over territorial organization (e.g., in Spain, calls for a centralized state over autonomous communities) which established parties failed to address. Populism, and the PRR as a member of this family, gains support as new structural divisions open up in society. These new cleavages are often caused by the recognition of sexual rights of minorities or by the socio-demographic changes stemming from the migration. Consequently, these breakthroughs result from the weak and/or dysfunctional institutionalization of existing political parties.²⁰ The core assumption here is that none of the preexisting parties offer a satisfactory answer to the voters. While scholarly focus normally centers on ideological gaps, the Spanish case suggest a different dynamic. Rather than a clear, unoccupied ideological niche, a specific political interaction appears to prompts the rise of the radical right. This will be explored further in the following section.

Second, the normalization thesis argues that the radical right has gained ground by reactivating and legitimizing ideas that were once latent but socially stigmatized. Vicente Valentim's *The Normalization of the Radical Right: A Norms Theory of Political Supply and Demand* (2024) emphasizes the role of social norms in explaining the growth of the radical right. He argues that certain ideas, often authoritarian, nationalist, or exclusionary, were long present in a latent form but remained publicly stigmatized. As stigma declines, these views become more acceptable to express, facilitating their articulation by parties and their uptake by voters. This framework offers an elegant level of abstraction and highlights the importance of norms in shaping political supply and demand. However, some criticisms have been raised. The theory appears narrowly centered on stigma and relies on selected evidence, with limited engagement with adjacent literatures in social psychology, communication

¹⁹ Yanina Welp, *The Will of the People: Populism and Citizen Participation in Latin America* (Germany: De Gruyter, 2022).

²⁰ See also Simon Bornschier and Hanspeter Kriesi, "The Populist Right, the Working Class, and the Changing Face of Class Politics," in *Class Politics and the Radical Right*, ed. Jens Rydgren (London: Routledge, 2012), 10-30.

studies, or comparative politics. Moreover, the assumption of latent strong preferences is debated, since in contexts such as Spain some of these issues had been openly contested well before the rise of Vox. In any case, in this study, this argument provides a useful lens for examining whether shifts in public opinion coincide with the activation of previously latent ideas

Third, the affective polarization perspective suggests that in highly polarized contexts voters tend to radicalize their positions, clustering into what have been described as “mega-identities, where coherence and alignment are forged around a shared set of principles. Affective polarization provides a distinct lens for understanding the expansion of the radical right, as it emphasizes how partisan and emotional attachments can foster the alignment of diverse ideological positions. Rather than assuming that voters hold stable, latent preferences awaiting “activation,” affective polarization research suggests that identification with one camp and hostility toward the other can generate coherence across a wide range of issues, even when those issues are not intrinsically linked. Iyengar and Westwood demonstrate how partisanship increasingly structures social identity and interpersonal trust,²¹ while Mason documents how “mega-identities” emerge from the convergence of partisan, ideological, and cultural cues.²² This dynamic produces communities of meaning where agreement extends to secondary or tangential topics, thereby fostering homogeneity beyond core ideological concerns. Other works further underlines that affective polarization can reshape demand, leading individuals to radicalize their positions as part of maintaining group belonging, regardless of prior ideological predispositions.²³

Building a New Party

Vox was founded in December 2013 by disaffected members of the conservative Popular Party (PP), including Santiago Abascal, who opposed the PP’s moderation on issues such as regional autonomy and social conservatism. Interestingly, it can be seen as a similar strategy to the one followed by Partido Popular in its origins in the late eighties. For Gunther and Montero, the refoundation of the PP responded to a strategy aimed at overcoming the electoral ceiling of Alianza Popular (AP) by shifting toward the political center. However, when this attempt failed to make the PP perceived as a centrist party, a different strategy was adopted. In some ways, this new direction opposed the PP’s original centrist aims. It diverted attention toward the discrediting and

²¹ Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood, “Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization,” *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2015): 690-707.

²² Lilliana Mason, “Losing Common Ground: Social Sorting and Polarization,” *The Forum* 16, no. 1 (2018): 47-66.

²³ Andres Reiljan, “‘Fear and Loathing across Party Lines’ (Also) in Europe: Affective Polarisation in European Party Systems,” *European Journal of Political Research* 59, no. 2 (2020): 376-396.

delegitimization of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE, its acronym in Spanish) through what became known as the politics of confrontation. This confrontational strategy sought a dual objective: to demoralize PSOE voters while simultaneously mobilizing the right-wing electorate.²⁴

Turning to the case of VOX, In its first three years, the party struggled to gain traction in its first three years, receiving less than 1%one percent of the vote.²⁵ Its visibility began to increase during the Catalan independence crisis, with membership surging by twenty percent 20% following Catalonia's unilateral declaration of independence. In December 2018, Vox entered the Andalusian Parliament with 12 twelve seats, marking its first institutional foothold. In April 2019, the party entered the national parliament, and in the repeat elections later that year, it doubled its seats to fifty two⁵², becoming the third-largest party. The COVID-19 pandemic provided additional opportunities to radicalize positions, as Vox opposed lockdown measures and filed lawsuits challenging government policies. Over the next two years, the party entered other regional governments.²⁶ In the 2023 general elections, Vox lost nineteen seats but remained the third-largest party.

The Catalan pro-independence conflict (2017–2019) acted as a primary trigger for Vox's rise. Catalonia's unilateral declaration of independence and the Spanish state's response created fertile ground for Spanish nationalism.²⁷ Vox positioned itself as the only party willing to defend national unity with determination, accusing other parties, including the PP, of weakness or in the words of Absacal 'cowardly little right' "*la derechita cobarde*".

Additional factors contributed to Vox's growing prominence. The political arena, traditionally dominated at the national level by the Socialist Party (center-left) and the Popular Party (center-right), was showing signs of transformation. On the left, the emergence of Podemos following the Indignados movement destabilized the party system and fueled anti-communist narratives.²⁸ On the right, the PP faced corruption scandals, internal divisions,

²⁴ Richard Gunther and José Ramón Montero, "From Consensus Transition to Adversary Democracy," in *Democràcia, política i societat. Homenatge a Rosa Virós*, ed. Jacint Jordana, Vicenç Navarro, Francesc Pallarès, and Ferran Requejo (Barcelona: Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2012), 101-135.

²⁵ José Rama, Lisa Zanotti, Stuart J. Turnbull-Dugarte, and Andrés Santana, *VOX: The Rise of the Spanish Populist Radical Right* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021).

²⁶ Arroyo Menéndez, "Las causas del apoyo electoral a Vox en España."

²⁷ Jordi Bonet-Martí and Gemma Ubasart i González, "Conflicto territorial and cambios in la cultura política: Cataluña-España" [Territorial conflict and changes in political culture: Catalonia–Spain], *Athenea Digital: Revista de Pensamiento e Investigación Social* 21, no. 3 (2021): e2989.

²⁸ Lluís Orriols and Guillermo Cordero, "The Breakdown of the Spanish Two-Party System: The Upsurge of Podemos and Ciudadanos in the 2015 General Election," *South European Society and Politics* 21, no. 4 (2016): 469-492.

and weak leadership.²⁹ Two other dimensions facilitated Vox's positioning as an alternative to traditional parties: opposition to progressive reforms and a proactive digital strategy, which allowed the party to bypass the "cordon sanitaire" surrounding far-right actors and winning support particularly by young males. Vox framed its platform as a defense of traditional values and common sense, appealing to cultural resentment on issues such as feminist legislation and LGBTQ+ rights.³⁰ Simultaneously, Vox leveraged social media platforms particularly Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp to connect directly with voters, especially younger audiences.³¹

Although anti-immigration sentiment was not initially central in Spain, it gained salience, particularly in southern regions like Andalusia, where Vox achieved its first regional electoral success.³² The party also borrowed strategies from the European radical right (e.g., Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini) and the American alt-right, combining nationalism, anti-globalism, and conservative social policies with a combative political style.

From the supply side, the previous signals that Vox's emergence is best understood through a framework of interactive causality and contextualized analysis. Vox represents a case of reactive populism; a political project crystallized through the interaction of two intertwined processes: institutional dislocation and cultural backlash. Institutional dislocation refers to a period of intensified political instability, marked by the Catalan independence crisis, widespread corruption scandals affecting the PP, and the fragmentation of the party system with the rise of new actors such as Podemos and Ciudadanos. Cultural backlash involves the rapid diffusion of progressive norms such as gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and historical memory. This provoked strong counter-reactions among different segments of the population perceiving these changes as threats to national identity and traditional values. Using an interactive causality framework, this article assumes that Vox did not merely fill a pre-existing ideological gap but emerged through a dynamic of action and reaction, in which progressive advances and state fragmentation mobilized a counter-hegemonic nationalist-populist force.

²⁹ Juan Rodríguez-Teruel, Òscar Barberà, Astrid Barrio, and Fernando Casal Bértoa, "From Stability to Change? The Evolution of the Party System in Spain," in *Party System Change, the European Crisis and the State of Democracy*, ed. Ferdinand Müller-Rommel and Fernando Casal Bértoa (London: Routledge, 2018), 248-270.

³⁰ Lombardo E, Caravantes P, Díaz Fernández S, "'Stop torpedoing women's rights!': Feminist institutional responses to anti-gender politics in Spain and Catalonia parliaments." *European Journal of Political Research* 64, no. 4 (2025): 1693-1717. doi:10.1111/1475-6765.70005.

³¹ Rubén Barbeito Iglesias and Ángel Iglesias Alonso, "Political Emotions and Digital Political Mobilization in the New Populist Parties: The Cases of Podemos and Vox in Spain," *International Review of Sociology* 31, no. 2 (2021): 246-267.

³² Pablo Ortiz Barquero, "The Electoral Breakthrough of the Radical Right in Spain: Correlates of Electoral Support for Vox in Andalusia (2018)," *Genealogy* 3, no. 4 (2019): 72.

From Latent Preferences to Electoral Alignment

Methodological note

This section examines the demand-side dynamics associated with the emergence and consolidation of VOX using public opinion data from surveys conducted by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS). Rather than testing competing hypotheses in a strictly symmetric or causal fashion, the empirical strategy adopted here is designed to trace patterns of continuity, differentiation, and reconfiguration in public attitudes across time and across electorates.

The analysis combines two complementary temporal perspectives. On the one hand, to account for changes in the ideological configuration of VOX's electoral base, pre-electoral CIS data were gathered from March 2019 and comparable post-consolidation data from 2025. This allows for the examination of how the ideological self-placement of voters expressing intention to vote for VOX evolved before and after the party's parliamentary consolidation. Additionally, it looks into how this evolution relates to the broader right-wing electorate, particularly the Partido Popular (PP). On the other hand, to analyze issue-specific attitudes beyond electoral choice, CIS surveys conducted prior to VOX's emergence were used as a relevant parliamentary actor (2007–2015) and after its consolidation through successive national elections (2023–2025). This broader time span makes it possible to distinguish between long-standing predispositions and more recent processes of attitudinal alignment.

Building on this temporal design, the empirical analysis is organized around a core expectation: VOX's breakthrough did not primarily depend on the emergence of a new cross-cutting cleavage in Spanish society, but on the strategic activation and subsequent consolidation of latent predispositions within the right-wing camp. Alternative demand-side explanations—such as the emergence of an unrepresented ideological space, the normalization of previously stigmatized attitudes, or the formation of highly polarized ideological identities—are treated as analytical benchmarks rather than as mechanisms tested in isolation. The purpose of the analysis is not to identify a single linear cause of VOX's rise, but to assess where the evidence points to stability, where it suggests processes of alignment, and where intra-bloc differentiation becomes more pronounced over time.

Several methodological considerations guided case and item selection. First, because CIS surveys do not include identical questions across all waves, items were selected based on comparable wording and response categories that capture the same underlying attitudinal dimensions without requiring substantial recoding. Second, with the irregular timing of CIS surveys, comparisons were emphasized across clearly differentiated periods rather than short-term fluctuations, focusing on temporal distance to identify both continuity and change in citizens' preferences. Third, while part of the analysis examines attitudes among respondents located at the right end of the ideological spectrum (positions 8–10 on the left–right scale), this criterion is

not used as a proxy for VOX voters. Instead, ideological self-placement and intention to vote are analyzed jointly throughout the section, allowing us to distinguish between the broader right-wing electorate and those who explicitly support VOX. This strategy helps avoid ecological fallacies and provides a clearer empirical basis for interpreting differences between mainstream and radical right electorates.

Finally, the empirical analysis focuses on five attitudinal dimensions that are central both to the Spanish case and to the literature on populist radical right mobilization:

1. support for democracy versus authoritarian permissiveness;
2. preferences regarding the territorial organization of the state (centralization versus decentralization)
3. attitudes toward immigration;
4. attitudes toward European integration; and
5. the cultural dimension, including preferences for diversity versus homogeneity as a marker of societal norms.

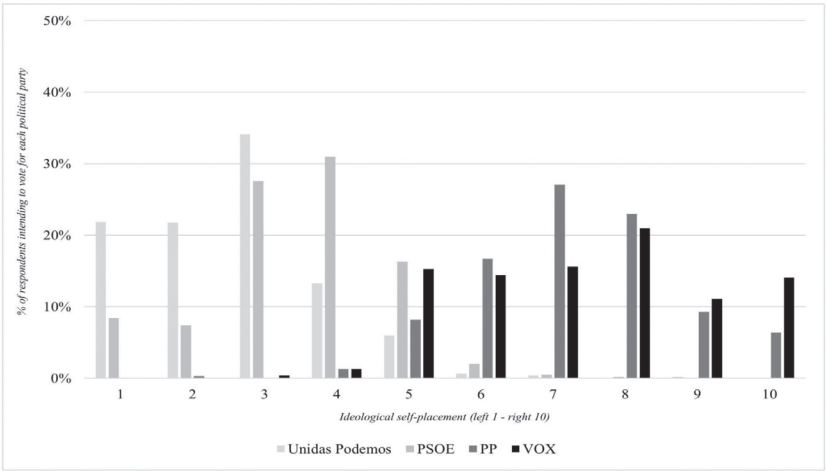
Across these dimensions, the analysis compares within specific electorates (VOX voters, PP voters, and right-wing identifiers) and with the general population. This dual perspective makes it possible to assess whether observed patterns reflect broader societal shifts or processes of intra-bloc consolidation and differentiation. It is important to clarify the temporal logic of the analysis: post-consolidation surveys do not capture VOX's initial breakthrough, but rather the attitudinal configuration following political activation. These measurements are therefore particularly suited to observing processes of consolidation, reordering, and normalization of preferences once a party has become electorally relevant.

Who Supports Vox?

A central challenge in demand-side analyses of populist radical right parties is avoiding ecological fallacies when inferring voter profiles from aggregate ideological groups. While much of the literature relies on comparisons between the general public and broad ideological blocs, such strategies do not fully clarify who actually supports radical right parties, nor how these electorates evolve over time. This section addresses this challenge directly by examining the ideological self-placement of VOX voters themselves, rather than inferring their preferences from the right-wing electorate as a whole.

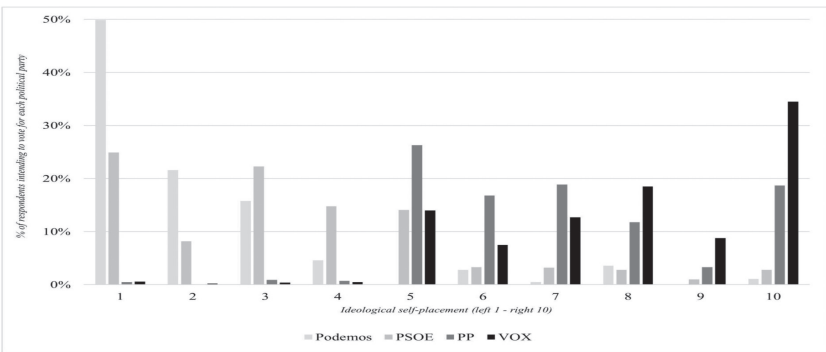
Using CIS pre-electoral data from March 2019—shortly before VOX entered the Spanish Congress—and comparable post-consolidation data from 2025, the ideological distribution of voters expressing intention to vote for VOX and for the mainstream right-wing party, the PP were analyzed. By comparing these two moments, the analysis establishes a baseline for understanding how VOX's electoral base was initially configured and how it changed after the party's parliamentary consolidation. This empirical mapping of VOX's support base provides the necessary point of reference for the issue-based analyses that follow in the subsequent sections.

Figure 1. Ideological Self-placement of Party Supporters before VOX's Parliamentary Consolidation (2019)



Source: Author's calculations from CIS study 3242 (March 2019, pre-electoral), based on respondents' stated intention to vote in hypothetical general elections and their self-placement on a 1-10 left-right scale. The figure shows the distribution of voters for each party across ideological positions.

Figure 2. Ideological Self-placement of Party Supporters after VOX's Parliamentary Consolidation (2025)



Source: Author's calculations from CIS Study 3497 (2025), based on respondents' vote intentions and 1-10 left-right self-placement. The figure shows party support across ideological positions.

The next figures show the distribution of ideological self-placement among voters of PP and VOX in 2019 and 2025, respectively. It also includes potential voters of PSOE and Podemos (Unidas-Podemos in 2019), both center-left-wing political parties.

In 2019, VOX’s electorate was already clearly located on the right of the ideological spectrum, but it largely overlapped with the space traditionally occupied by the PP. As shown in the table below the mean ideological self-placement of VOX voters (7.4) was only marginally higher than that of PP voters (7.2), and the proportion of voters located at the extreme right (positions 8–10) differed by less than eight percentage points (49.4 percent for VOX versus 41.8 percent for the PP). At this stage, VOX did not yet constitute a sharply differentiated ideological pole within the right. Rather, it competed within a relatively shared ideological space, drawing support from voters whose positions still partially overlapped with those of the mainstream conservative party.

The post-consolidation picture in 2025 is markedly different. While the PP’s ideological profile remains relatively stable—indeed, slightly less concentrated at the extreme right—VOX’s electorate becomes both more extreme and more homogeneous. As the table shows, the mean ideological self-placement of VOX voters rises to 8.0, compared to 7.0 among PP voters, and nearly two-thirds of VOX supporters (63.2 percent) locate themselves at positions eight to ten on the ideological scale. This contrasts sharply with the PP, where only 34.5 percent of voters occupy this extreme-right segment. The visual evidence from the previous figures reinforces this pattern, showing a pronounced clustering of VOX voters at the upper end of the ideological scale and a clear separation from the PP’s broader and more moderate distribution.

This comparison provides two key insights. First, it confirms that VOX’s electorate is overwhelmingly right-wing, addressing concerns about whether support for the party might stem from non-ideological or anti-establishment voters located outside the right-wing spectrum. Second, and more importantly, it shows that VOX’s distinctiveness is not primarily a pre-existing condition

Table 1. Ideological Profile of PP and VOX Voters before and after Consolidation

Party	2019 Mean ideological self-placement	2019 % located at 8–10	2025 Mean ideological self-placement	2025 % located at 8–10
PP	7.2	41.8%	7.0	34.5%
VOX	7.4	49.4%	8.0	63.2%

Source: Author’s calculations based on CIS Studies 3242 (March 2019) and 3497 (2025), using respondents’ vote intentions and ideological self-placement (1-10). Percentages indicate the share of each party’s voters located at the extreme right (positions 8-10).

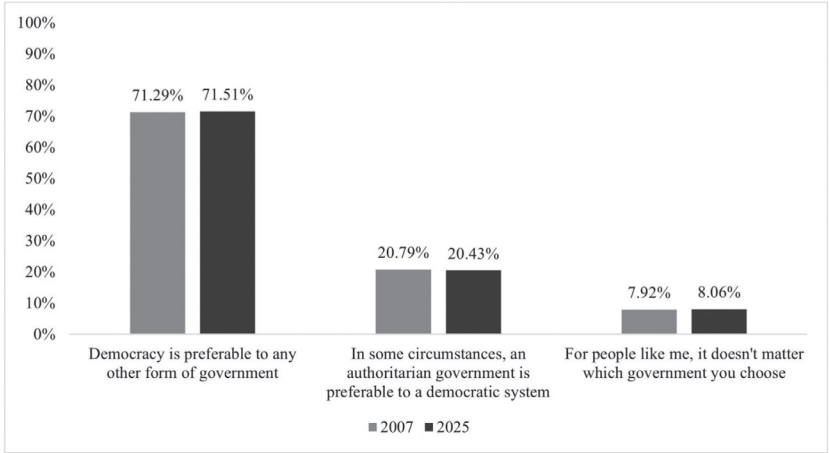
but the result of a process of ideological sorting that unfolded after the party’s consolidation. Rather than mobilizing a previously unrepresented cross-cutting cleavage, VOX increasingly came to represent a more radicalized and internally homogeneous segment of the right.

These findings partially resonate with accounts emphasizing normalization, but only insofar as they capture a process of within-bloc sorting following political consolidation, rather than a generalized rightward shift or the emergence of new preferences. From the perspective of interactive causality, this sorting process shows that VOX’s success cannot be attributed solely to latent demand or structural opportunity. Instead, the party’s consolidation and the evolving electorate interacted, producing ideological extremity and a clearly defined pole within the right-wing camp.

Francoist nostalgia or authoritarian permissiveness?

The next figure examines attitudes toward democracy among respondents located at the right end of the ideological spectrum (positions 8–10) before and after VOX’s consolidation,³³ using comparable CIS surveys from 2007 and 2025. Focusing on this segment of the electorate allows us to assess whether the

Figure 3. Democratic Preferences before and after VOX’s Emergence (2007–2025)



Source: Authors’ elaboration. Percentages of respondents self-placed on the right of the ideological scale (positions 8–10) selecting each statement in response to the question “Which of the following statements best reflects your opinion of democracy?”. Data from CIS surveys conducted in 2007 and 2025.

³³ The next five attitudinal dimensions we present in this section will focus on respondents located at the right end of the ideological spectrum (positions 8–10) according to CIS surveys.

group most relevant to VOX experienced any meaningful attitudinal change in relation to democratic support over time.

The results point to a striking pattern of stability rather than transformation. In both periods, a clear majority of right-wing respondents agree that democracy is preferable to any other form of government, with virtually identical levels of support in 2007 and 2025. At the same time, approximately one-fifth of respondents consistently express the view that, under certain circumstances, an authoritarian government may be preferable to a democratic system. Finally, a small minority in both years indicate indifference regarding regime type. None of these distributions exhibit substantial variation across the two points in time.

This stability is analytically consequential. The absence of a temporal shift suggests that VOX's rise cannot be attributed to a recent erosion of democratic commitment or to the emergence of a newly authoritarian electorate within the right. Instead, the data indicate the persistence of a latent disposition toward authoritarian permissiveness among a minority of right-wing voters—one that predates VOX's electoral breakthrough by more than a decade. In this sense, the evidence does not support the interpretation of a new democratic cleavage opening in Spanish society. Authoritarian permissiveness appears as a long-standing but minority orientation that remained politically marginal prior to VOX's emergence. The party's success, therefore, is better understood not as the product of newly generated anti-democratic preferences, but as the result of their political activation and legitimation within an electoral framework.

Taken together, the findings from this dimension reinforce the broader argument of the paper. Democratic attitudes among the right exhibit continuity rather than rupture, suggesting that VOX's breakthrough was not driven by a societal shift away from democracy. Instead, it reflects a process of competing narratives within the right. From the perspective of interactive causality, this underscores the importance of political agency in shaping how stable attitudinal reservoirs are mobilized, rather than assuming that changes in public opinion mechanically precede populist success. Moreover, the rise of VOX appears to have contributed to a rightward shift in the mainstream conservative party, particularly visible in the policy positioning and public rhetoric of Popular Party's leaders like Isabel Díaz Ayuso.³⁴ This pattern highlights the interactive nature of political competition, where the emergence of a radical right actor reshapes the ideological boundaries of established parties, further emphasizing that the dynamics of populist breakthroughs cannot be understood solely as demand-side phenomena.

The Catalan Crisis and the Reconfiguration of Territorial Preferences

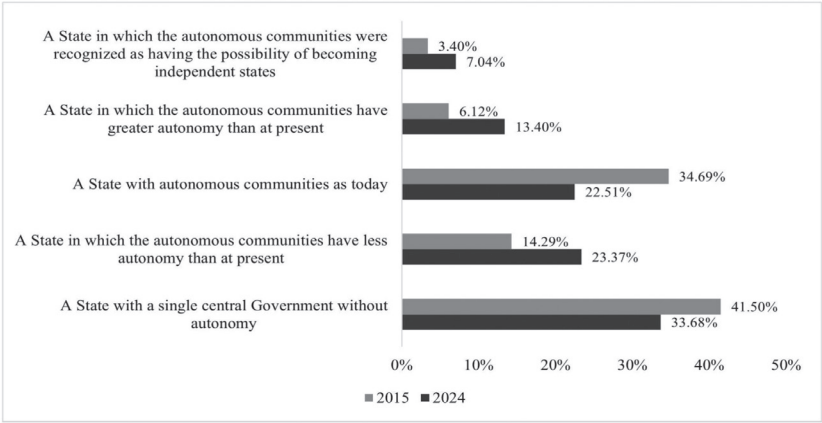
Another issue examined refers to the consequences of the Catalan conflict. The political dispute over the distribution of competences between the Spanish

³⁴ Rama, Zanotti, Turnbull-Dugarte, and Santana, *VOX: The Rise of the Spanish Populist Radical Right*.

state and the Autonomous Community of Catalonia generated a sustained and highly polarized public debate, reaching its peak when proposals for popular plebiscites on independence were publicly advanced and institutionally pursued.³⁵ This sequence of events makes the territorial dimension a particularly suitable domain to observe whether a critical juncture contributed to reordering political preferences. The timing of this conflict also coincides with VOX’s emergence as a political actor, raising the question of whether the Procés increased the salience and appeal of harder-line territorial positions.

To explore this dynamic, the next figure compares preferences regarding the territorial organization of the Spanish state before and after the Catalan crisis, using CIS data from 2015 and 2024. In contrast to the dimension of democratic attitudes, where stability prevails, territorial preferences display a clear pattern of reconfiguration rather than a uniform shift in a single direction. The most visible change is the decline of the status quo option—support for maintaining the current model of autonomous communities decreases substantially over the period (−12.2 percentage points). This suggests that the Catalan crisis did not merely intensify pre-existing attitudes, but disrupted the

Figure 4. Preferences over the Territorial Organization of the Spanish State before and after the Catalan Conflict (2015–2024)



Source: Authors’ elaboration. Percentages of respondents self-placed on the right of the ideological scale (positions 8–10) selecting each option in response to the question on the preferred territorial organization of the Spanish state. Data from CIS surveys conducted in 2015 and 2024.

³⁵ Daniel Turp, Nina Caspersen, M. Qvortrup, and Yanina Welp, “The Catalan Independence Referendum: An Assessment of the Process of Self-determination,” *IRAI* (September 2017), https://irai.quebec/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/IRAI_Rapports-experts-Catalogne_EN_final.pdf (accessed May 28, 2026).

equilibrium around the existing territorial arrangement and opened space for more clearly defined alternatives.

At the same time, changes within the centralist camp are analytically revealing. Support for the most maximalist option—abolishing autonomous communities in favor of a single central government—declines between 2015 and 2024 (−7.8 percentage points). However, this does not imply a weakening of centralist orientations overall. Instead, preferences appear to shift toward a less radical but still clearly centralizing alternative: the option favoring a state in which autonomous communities have less autonomy than at present increases markedly (+9.1 percentage points). In other words, the post-crisis configuration points to a move from maximalist centralization toward a rollback position that is more incremental and arguably more politically implementable.

This change in preferences is even more complex. Although autonomist positions remain a minority, they also gain some ground. Support for greater autonomy increases over time (+7.3 percentage points), as does, to a lesser extent, the recognition of the possibility of independence (+3.6 percentage points). Taken together with the decline of the status quo, these shifts suggest that the aftermath of the Catalan conflict is associated with a more polarized and differentiated structure of territorial preferences, rather than a simple rightward or centralizing drift.

From the perspective of interactive causality, the territorial dimension illustrates how an external political shock can reorder the hierarchy of existing preferences and reshape their political salience. The key point is not that the Catalan conflict produced a single new dominant preference, but that it destabilized the status quo and strengthened more clearly articulated positions—especially those favoring a reduction of autonomy. This reconfiguration created favorable conditions for the consolidation of actors able to frame and politicize territorial demands, even as the underlying preference structure became more internally differentiated.

The Migration Issue

The migration agenda is one of the central pillars of the discursive and programmatic construction of radical-right parties. As previous studies have emphasized, the debate over open versus closed border policies has increasingly become a dividing line between these new partisan actors and more traditional political parties.³⁶ In this regard, the Spanish case raises a central question: to what extent have attitudes toward immigration changed before and after the emergence and consolidation of VOX? The evidence examined here points to a substantial shift over the past decade.

The next figure compares attitudes toward immigration in 2015 and 2024, focusing on whether immigration is perceived as benefiting or harming the country. Unlike the territorial dimension—where preferences reconfigure

³⁶ Alonso and Kaltwasser, “Spain: No Country for the Populist Radical Right?” note 1.

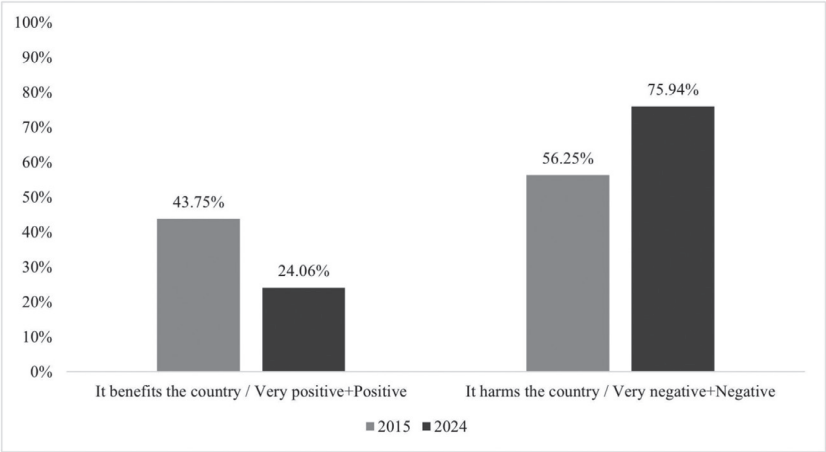
across multiple alternatives—attitudes toward immigration display a much clearer directional change over time. Positive evaluations of immigration decline sharply, while negative assessments become markedly more prevalent.

Between 2015 and 2024, the share of respondents considering immigration as beneficial to the country fell from 43.8 percent to 24.1 percent (–19.7 percentage points). At the same time, the proportion stating that immigration harms the country increases from 56.3 percent to 75.9 percent (+19.6 percentage points). Taken together, these changes indicate not only a shift in balance between positive and negative views, but also a consolidation of negative evaluations as the dominant orientation.

This pattern is analytically distinct from the dynamics observed in previous dimensions (attitudes towards democracy and regarding centralization/ decentralization). Rather than reflecting a destabilization of the status quo followed by differentiation across several options, attitudes toward immigration evolve in a largely unidirectional manner. The magnitude and symmetry of the change—declining positive views and rising negative ones by nearly twenty percentage points each—are consistent with a process of normalization, whereby previously more contested or socially constrained positions gain broader acceptance over time.

From a demand-side perspective, these findings do not suggest the emergence of a new cleavage, but rather the intensification and consolidation

Figure 5. Evaluations of Immigration before and after VOX’s Consolidation (2015–2024)



Source: Authors’ elaboration. Percentages of respondents on the extreme right (positions 8–10) selecting each response option. Data from CIS surveys, 2015 and 2024. Question wording differs slightly, but both items capture evaluations of whether immigration benefits or harms the country.

of an existing one. Negative orientations toward immigration were already present in 2015, but they became substantially more widespread by 2024. In this sense, the data point to a political environment in which restrictive or exclusionary frames around immigration resonate with a broader segment of the electorate, lowering the symbolic and social barriers to their articulation.

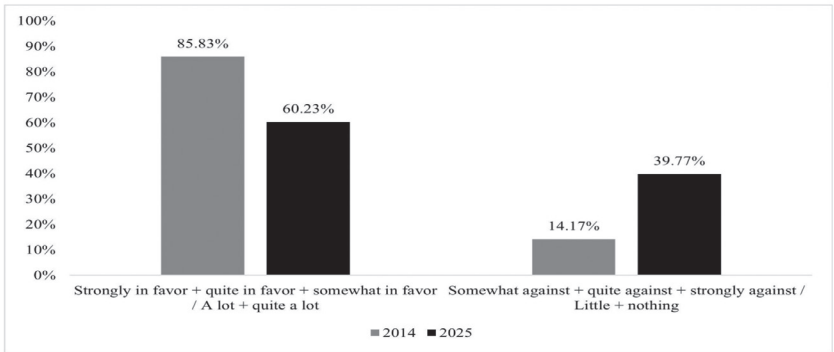
Seen through the lens of interactive causality, the immigration dimension illustrates how shifts in public opinion can reshape the opportunity structure for political mobilization. As negative attitudes toward immigration become normalized, parties emphasizing hardline positions encounter fewer constraints and greater receptivity. The significance of this change lies less in the creation of new preferences than in the amplification and legitimization of existing ones, reinforcing immigration as a central axis of political contestation.

Attitudes toward the European Union: Erosion without Rupture

The European Union has long occupied an ambivalent position within the agendas of radical right parties. While Euroscepticism is often present as a rhetorical and symbolic resource, it does not always translate into outright rejection of European integration. The Spanish case offers an illustrative example of this tension, particularly when comparing attitudes toward the EU before and after the consolidation of VOX.

The next figure contrasts attitudes toward the European Union in 2014 and 2025 using two conceptually related, though not identical, survey items. In 2014, respondents were asked about their general attitude toward the EU, while in 2025 the question focused on satisfaction with Spain’s forty years

Figure 6. Evaluations of the European Union before and after VOX’s Consolidation (2014–2025)



Source: Authors’ elaboration. Percentages of respondents on the extreme right (positions 8–10) selecting grouped responses. Data from CIS surveys, 2014 and 2025. Questions differ slightly—general EU attitudes (2014) vs. satisfaction with membership (2025—but are grouped as broadly positive vs. negative.

of EU membership. To facilitate comparison, responses were grouped into broadly positive and broadly negative evaluations.

The comparison reveals a clear decline in positive orientations toward the EU over time. In 2014, a large majority expressed favorable attitudes toward European integration (85.8 percent). By 2025, the proportion expressing satisfaction with EU membership falls to 60.2 percent, representing a decrease of 25.6 percentage points. Conversely, negative or dissatisfied evaluations increased from 14.2 percent in 2014 to 39.8 percent in 2025 (+25.6 percentage points). This symmetric shift points to a substantial erosion of pro-European sentiment.

At the same time, the data do not suggest a wholesale rejection of the European project. Even in 2025, positive or satisfied evaluations remain the majority position. This pattern distinguishes the European dimension from immigration, where negative views become clearly dominant, and aligns it more closely with a process of gradual normalization rather than radical realignment. Critical or skeptical positions toward the EU gain ground, but they do so within a framework that stops short of outright opposition.

From the perspective of interactive causality, these findings indicate that the salience of Euroscepticism has increased within the right-wing electorate. Once marginal or socially constrained positions gain visibility and political traction through interactions with other issues and elite framing, even if they do not represent a majority rejection of the EU. This process is shaped by broader contextual factors, including the Russia—Ukraine war and shifts in the international order under the Trump administration, which alter the political opportunities and cues available to actors.

In this sense, the European dimension reinforces the paper's broader argument. VOX's rise is not linked to the emergence of a new Eurosceptic cleavage, but to issue salience and interaction: critical attitudes toward the EU coexist with continued support for integration, producing an ambivalent rather than polarized configuration in the electorate.

Models of Society and Cultural Orientations: Persistence with Selective Softening

Representations of the desired society provide fertile ground for understanding how cultural divisions take shape in contemporary politics. The tension between cultural diversity and homogeneity has become a key axis distinguishing radical right parties from traditional political formations. Far from being a strictly normative debate, these preferences condense attitudes toward national identity, intercultural coexistence, and the symbolic boundaries of belonging to the “we.” In this context, it is relevant to ask whether VOX's emergence has altered citizens' perceptions of the ideal type of society, and to what extent gaps persist over time. The comparative evidence allows us to assess these trends from a longitudinal perspective.

This last figure compares preferences regarding the desired model of society in 2015 and 2023, contrasting support for a culturally diverse society with preferences for a society characterized by cultural, religious, and origin-based homogeneity. The results point to a pattern of relative stability combined with modest shifts in emphasis. Preferences for homogeneity remain clearly dominant, but they decline slightly over time, while support for cultural diversity increases.

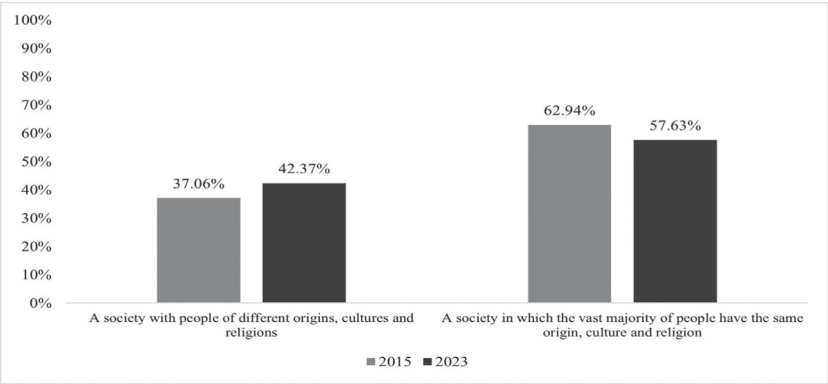
Between 2015 and 2023, support for a homogeneous model of society decreased from 62.9 percent to 57.6 percent (−5.3 percentage points). Conversely, support for a culturally diverse society rises from 37.1 percent to 42.4 percent (+5.3 percentage points). These changes indicate a limited softening of exclusionary cultural preferences rather than a structural realignment. The overall configuration remains largely intact, with homogeneity continuing to be the majority preference, despite the modest growth of more pluralistic orientations. Analytically, this dimension differs from both immigration and territorial preferences.

Unlike immigration—where negative evaluations intensify and become dominant—and unlike territorial organization—where preferences reconfigure following a critical juncture—the model of society dimension displays a high degree of persistence. Cultural orientations appear deeply rooted, showing only gradual and incremental change over time. From the perspective of interactive causality, these findings suggest that VOX’s consolidation did not depend on transforming citizens’ underlying visions of the ideal society. Instead, the party operates in a context where preferences for cultural homogeneity are already widespread and socially legitimate, even if they are not intensifying. The relevance of this dimension lies less in change than in durability: it provides a stable cultural backdrop against which other, more dynamic issues—such as immigration or territorial conflict—can be politicized more effectively. In this sense, the model of society dimension underscores a key aspect of the broader argument. The rise of VOX is not driven by the emergence of a new cultural cleavage, but by the ability to articulate and connect long-standing cultural orientations with more volatile issue domains. Stability, rather than transformation, thus becomes an enabling condition for political mobilization.

Political Activation and Strategic Framing: Some Evidence of Interaction

While the empirical analysis has focused on demand-side dynamics, the interpretation advanced in this article rests on an interactive understanding of VOX’s rise, in which political actors actively respond to, reframe, and amplify existing predispositions. Rather than assuming a linear relationship between public opinion and electoral outcomes, this section illustrates how political events, strategic framing, and elite positioning contributed to activating and consolidating latent demands identified in the previous sections.

Figure 7. Preferences for Cultural Diversity and Homogeneity in the Desired Model of Society (2015–2023)



Source: Authors’ elaboration. Percentages of respondents self-placed on the right of the ideological scale (positions 8-10) selecting each response option. Data from CIS surveys conducted in 2015 and 2023. The question wording is identical across waves.

The Catalan conflict represents the clearest instance of such interaction. The escalation of the *Procés* between 2017 and 2019 constituted a critical juncture that reordered the territorial agenda and intensified political competition around national unity. From its earliest interventions, VOX articulated an uncompromising centralist frame, calling for the suspension of regional autonomy and the recentralization of the Spanish state. Santiago Abascal repeatedly portrayed the *Procés* as an existential threat to Spain, arguing that “there is no autonomy possible for those who want to destroy the nation,” and advocating the permanent application of Article 155 of the Constitution.³⁷

These positions were not merely rhetorical. VOX consistently used parliamentary debates, campaign rallies, and legal actions to reinforce this framing, including its support for banning pro-independence parties and its calls to outlaw separatist organizations. This strategy contrasted with the more ambivalent or reactive stances adopted by mainstream parties, and contributed to transforming territorial centralization from a marginal or maximalist demand into a politically salient and electorally viable position. The reconfiguration of territorial preferences documented in the demand-side analysis is therefore best understood as the outcome of political activation in a conflictual context, rather than as a spontaneous shift in attitudes.

³⁷ Carvajal, Álvaro, “Santiago Abascal: ‘Dar más autogobierno a Cataluña fracasó, ahora hay que intentar la contundencia’” [Santiago Abascal: ‘Granting’ more self-government to Catalonia has failed, now we must try a forceful approach’], *El Mundo* (October 31, 2019), <https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2019/10/31/5db9cc4c21efa0653e8b45ab.html> (accessed January 18, 2026).

A similar interactive dynamic can be observed in the domain of immigration. Although restrictive attitudes toward immigration were already present, VOX played a key role in reframing the issue as a matter of civilizational survival and public security. Abascal and other party leaders repeatedly linked immigration to crime, welfare abuse, and cultural incompatibility, frequently describing irregular immigration as an “invasion” and calling for the deportation of undocumented migrants. These frames were reinforced by high-profile interventions following specific events, such as crimes attributed to foreign nationals or debates over unaccompanied migrant minors (*menores no acompañados*).

Beyond isolated statements, VOX institutionalized this framing through programmatic proposals and parliamentary initiatives, including calls to repeal regional integration policies and to condition social benefits on nationality. In doing so, the party contributed to lowering normative constraints around exclusionary discourse. The sharp hardening of attitudes toward immigration observed over time is consistent with a process in which political discourse did not create new preferences, but rather normalized and legitimized negative evaluations that were previously more contested or socially constrained.

VOX’s positioning toward the European Union illustrates a different, but equally strategic, form of interaction. Rather than advocating withdrawal from the EU, the party adopted a critical but ambiguous stance, emphasizing themes of national sovereignty, bureaucratic overreach, and democratic deficit. Abascal frequently criticized the EU as a “technocratic structure detached from the peoples of Europe,” while stopping short of calling for *Spexit*. This allowed VOX to channel growing dissatisfaction with European institutions without directly confronting Spain’s broadly pro-European consensus.

Concrete episodes reinforced this positioning, including VOX’s opposition to EU migration quotas, its criticism of Brussels’ climate and agricultural policies, and its framing of EU regulations as threats to Spanish farmers and industry. These interventions contributed to expanding the space for Eurosceptic discourse, aligning with the observed pattern of erosion without rupture in public attitudes toward the EU.

Taken together, these examples illustrate how VOX’s rise cannot be reduced to either top-down manipulation or bottom-up demand. Political activation operates through interaction: critical events create opportunities, parties deploy distinctive frames, and public attitudes are reorganized and consolidated in response. This interactive process helps explain why similar latent predispositions did not translate into electoral breakthroughs prior to VOX’s emergence, and why they became politically consequential in a specific conjuncture.

Conclusions

This article set out to explain the rise and consolidation of VOX from a demand-side perspective, revisiting common explanations of populist radical right breakthroughs in light of longitudinal evidence from Spain. Rather than testing competing hypotheses in a confirmatory sense, the analysis has examined how different dimensions of public opinion evolved before and after VOX's emergence, with the aim of identifying patterns of stability and reconfiguration, that shape the political opportunity structure in which the party operates.

Across the five dimensions analyzed—attitudes toward democracy, territorial organization, immigration, the European Union, and models of society—the findings reveal a differentiated but internally consistent picture. First, democratic attitudes display remarkable stability over time. Support for democracy remains high, and the share of respondents expressing authoritarian preferences does not expand in the post-VOX period. This pattern suggests that VOX's consolidation cannot be attributed to a generalized erosion of democratic commitment or to a sudden resurgence of authoritarian nostalgia. Instead, the party mobilizes within a context where democratic support is largely taken for granted, even if latent authoritarian dispositions persist at the margins.

Second, the territorial dimension illustrates a process of reconfiguration following a major political shock. The Catalan conflict did not generate a single dominant preference, but destabilized the existing equilibrium around the autonomous state. Support for maintaining the *status quo* declined, while more clearly articulated positions gained ground—most notably preferences for reducing the degree of autonomy, alongside smaller increases at the autonomist pole. This pattern points to contingent activation rather than cleavage formation: pre-existing orientations were reordered and made more salient in response to a critical juncture, creating favorable conditions for political actors capable of articulating a firm territorial stance.

Third, attitudes toward immigration exhibit a markedly different dynamic. Here, the evidence points to a clear and unidirectional shift over time. Negative evaluations of immigration intensify and become dominant, while positive views decline sharply. This evolution is consistent with a process of reinforcement through political articulation.

Fourth, attitudes toward the European Union reveal a more ambivalent trajectory. While positive orientations toward European integration erode substantially over time, they do not collapse. Critical or dissatisfied views expand, yet pro-European evaluations remain the majority position. This pattern suggests erosion without rupture: Euroscepticism becomes more socially acceptable and widespread, but does not translate into outright rejection. As in the case of immigration, the key dynamic is not the creation of a new preference structure, but the shift in positions based on conjunctural debates.

Finally, preferences regarding the desired model of society display a high degree of persistence. Support for cultural homogeneity remains dominant, despite a modest increase in support for diversity. Unlike other dimensions, this one shows limited change over time, underscoring the durability of cultural orientations. Rather than being transformed, these preferences provide a stable backdrop against which other, more volatile issues—such as immigration or territorial conflict—can be politicized more effectively.

Taken together, it is clear that the Spanish case does not display the full-fledged mega-identity alignment predicted by affective polarization theories. These findings support an interpretation centered on interactive dynamics rather than on the emergence of new cleavages or *franchoist* nostalgia. VOX's rise is not best understood as the electoral expression of a newly formed ideological demand, nor as the mechanical consequence of attitudinal shifts across all domains. Instead, it reflects the party's ability to operate within a context where certain orientations are stable and others are reconfigured by political shocks. The interaction between enduring predispositions, contingent events, and political articulation shapes the conditions under which a radical right actor can consolidate.

From a temporal perspective, the post-consolidation evidence does not seek to explain the initial electoral breakthrough of VOX, but to account for the conditions under which its presence became durable. The stability and reconfiguration patterns documented here are therefore best understood as features of consolidation rather than origin, highlighting how political activation reshapes the demand-side landscape over time. More broadly, the Spanish case highlights the importance of moving beyond linear or deterministic accounts of populist breakthroughs. Demand-side dynamics do not operate uniformly across issue domains, nor do they automatically translate into political outcomes. By distinguishing between stability and reconfiguration this article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how public opinion structures condition, but do not predetermine, the success of populist radical right parties.