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Surviving But Not Thriving: VOX and Spain in Times of COVID-19

Lisa Zanotti^{1*}  and Stuart James Turnbull-Dugarte² 

¹Department of Social Science and History, Diego Portales University, Santiago, Chile and ²Department of Politics, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

*Corresponding author. Email: lisa.zanotti@mail.udp.cl

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Abstract

In this article, we triangulate qualitative data regarding the framing of the pandemic and the strategic decisions taken by Spain's new populist radical right-wing party, VOX, with a quantitative analysis of aggregate polling data and individual-level survey responses to answer three questions: how has VOX framed the politics of the pandemic? What actions has VOX taken in response to COVID-19? Have the events of the COVID-19 crisis affected VOX's electoral chances? We argue that VOX's response to the pandemic has focused on augmenting the antagonistic relationship between itself and the political establishment, especially the left-wing government. Strategically, VOX has sought to leverage the health crisis to engage in legislative manoeuvres aiming, without success, to position itself as the primary party-in-waiting for right-wing voters. We also demonstrate that VOX has proven to be resilient against the potential for electoral decline that was widely prophesied at the beginning of the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19; opposition; populism; radical right; Spain; VOX

On 7 January 2020, the Spanish Socialist Worker's Party (PSOE) leader, Pedro Sánchez, was successfully (re-)confirmed as Spain's prime minister. Sánchez had been in power for six months already after gaining office via a no-confidence motion that was brought before the right-wing People's Party's (PP) leader, Mariano Rajoy, in June 2018. When he failed to secure the parliamentary support of Spain's far-left party, Unidas Podemos (UP), after an initial general election in May 2019, Spanish voters were called to the polls for a second time in November. This second election resulted in a progressive left-wing coalition government between the Sánchez-led PSOE and the UP.

Just as the Spanish Socialists' previous term in office (2004–11) was dominated in large part by the arrival of the financial crisis and the subsequent eurozone crisis, Spain's progressive coalition that gained executive office in January 2020 was faced with its own exogenous crisis in the form of the global pandemic caused by the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 (coronavirus), commonly referred to as COVID-19. And just as Spain was one of the countries to suffer the most at the height of Europe's last

(economic) crisis, it was, alongside Italy, one of the European states most negatively impacted by the world health crisis brought about by COVID-19, particularly during the early months of the pandemic (Dombey 2020a; Minder 2020).

Like most other countries in Europe, Spain, as of the time of writing, has experienced three waves of COVID-19: the first in spring 2020, the second during the autumn of the same year and the third at the end of 2020 and first months of 2021. During the first wave, the government implemented a comprehensive, strict lockdown as well as other measures that restricted freedoms, with the objective of limiting the contagion. After a relaxation of restrictions that took place after the first wave, and due to the country's high level of decentralization (Field 2016), the decisions on subsequent restrictive measures were mostly taken at the regional level despite the *national* state of alarm remaining in force.

One notable distinction between the events of the financial and eurozone crises, and those of COVID-19, is the presence of a novel political actor in the form of Spain's new populist radical right party, VOX. But what has been the role of this new party throughout the pandemic period? In our contribution to this special issue on the populist radical right and the pandemic, we seek to advance the understanding of how the populist radical right in Spain reacted to COVID-19.

We begin our discussion by describing the ideology of VOX and its categorization as a populist radical right party, before engaging in our consideration of three empirical questions. First, we consider how VOX discursively framed the pandemic. Second, we analyse how VOX – as an opposition party – has responded to the pandemic, and consider the politics of the party's no-confidence motion brought against the governing coalition in September 2020. Third, leveraging polling data trends, we assess how the pandemic affected the popularity of the populist radical right.

VOX: the populist radical right in Spain

Until 2018, scholars referred to Spain as an 'exceptional case' in Western Europe due to the absence of a viable populist radical right party in the party system. Looking at both supply- and demand-side factors, Sonia Alonso and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2015: 40) pointed out that the absence of the populist radical right in Spain was largely the result of the former. Things changed, however, in 2018 when a previously electorally irrelevant party (VOX) reached almost 11% of the vote in the Andalusian election. After gaining regional parliamentary representation in the south, VOX consolidated its position as a central political force when in both the April and November general elections of 2019, it took home 10.26% and 15.09% of the vote, respectively, becoming the third largest party in Spain's already fragmented multiparty system. VOX's national-level success was also complemented via successive gains at the municipal, regional and supranational levels throughout 2019 and onwards. The details of VOX's rise from its early days in the political wilderness in 2013 to its significant regional-government supporting role across a number of Spain's autonomous regions have been detailed elsewhere (Rama et al. 2021b). A significant determining factor has been the ongoing dynamics of nationalist separatism in Catalonia in 2017 (Turnbull-Dugarte 2019), which has failed to be resolved by successive national governments, and an activation of

salient anti-immigrant preferences among a vocal minority of the Spanish electorate (Mendes and Dennison 2021; Rama et al. 2021b).

VOX as a populist radical right party

Given the fact that VOX is a relatively new party – founded in 2013 as an ultra-conservative spin-off of PP defectors (Rama et al. 2021b) – there is still some debate as to how its ideological profile should be defined. However, within the umbrella term of far-right parties (Mudde 2019), we define VOX, in line with conceptualizations of the party elsewhere (Norris 2020; Rooduijn et al. 2019), as a populist radical right-wing party. As Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser and Paul Taggart (2022) point out in the introduction of this special issue, parties that belong to the populist radical right share at least three ideological features: nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Mudde 2007). First, nativism is an ideology that maintains that the nation state should be inhabited only by those considered ‘native’ and exclude those individuals or ideas that threaten the imagined unity and homogeneity of the nation (Mudde 2007). It is worth noting that both the ‘natives’ and the ‘aliens’ are constructed categories. In general terms, after 11 September 2001, particularly because of the terrorist attacks perpetrated by the terrorist group al-Qaeda – including terrorist events in Spain – the ‘aliens’ became mainly Muslims (Betz and Meret 2009). However, those categories vary also across countries depending on the specificities of the discourse of the populist radical right.¹

Discursively, at least in Europe, populist radical right-wing parties tend to express their nativism through anti-immigration stances. In respect of VOX, anti-immigration stances are present and are often combined with strong anti-globalism (Rama et al. 2021b). The party’s manifesto calls for ‘both deportation of illegal immigrants and the application of new requirements for acquiring Spanish citizenship based on language and cultural criteria’ (VOX 2019: 5–6). Posts from the party’s official Twitter profile (@vox_es) serve as prime examples of the party’s xenophobic nativism. In March 2021, for example, the party tweeted that immigrants ‘storm our borders and violate our laws repeatedly with total impunity. They don’t come to pay for a pension, they come to live off the Spanish people’, and in a tweet two months earlier the party commented, ‘that illegal immigration has multiplied the crime rate is not an opinion, it is a reality’.²

Beyond the anti-immigration discourse, the party also expresses its ideological fetish for nativism via a symmetrically strong emphasis on defence of the national way of life, the exaltation of being Spanish, appeals to the pride of citizens, to patriotism (including a robust defence of Spain’s blood-stained colonial past) and nationalism (Rama et al. 2021b). This is extremely relevant in the case of Spain, which is a highly decentralized country divided into autonomous communities (*comunidades autónomas*). Each one of these regions boasts distinct cultural traits that generally overlap with the Spanish cultural tradition. While in most cases, dual identification is the norm, in some regions such as Catalonia or the Basque Country, a significative percentage of citizens identify *only* with the region (Pérez Nieves and Rama 2018: 324–327). This goes against the alleged homogeneity of the nation predicated by VOX. Indeed, it discursively contraposes the ‘national

values' to those 'particular forces' that allegedly aim at destroying the Spanish identity (Rama et al. 2021b).

The second central ideological tenet of the populist radical right is authoritarianism, understood as the belief in a strictly ordered society. In general terms, these parties tend to translate this into policy preferences that advocate for stricter law-and-order measures. Typically, populist right-wing actors feel that threats to the natural order create insecurity and have 'to be dealt with an iron hand' (Mudde 2019: 33). VOX is not an exception. Observations from the party's April 2019 manifesto demonstrate that authoritarian appeals for more law and order are among the most salient, accounting for almost 10% of the manifesto's space. Beyond security issues, VOX translates its ideological authoritarianism into a defence of traditional (Catholic-based) values, which advocates, for example, for the maintenance and stability of the traditional heteronormative family structure, and the protected role of religious institutions in state and society. Moreover, the discourse of VOX is characterized by a strong anti-feminist rhetoric (Bernardez-Rodal et al. 2020) and the party frequently claims that its political offering in the party system is crucial in order to ensure the suppression of 'subsidized radical feminist organizations' (VOX 2019: 17). An illustration of this can be found in the case of International Women's Day, opposed by VOX and which party representatives have described as an 'invention of the radical left', which allegedly depicts women as 'victims' and 'in opposition to men'.³

Finally, VOX is a populist party (Rama et al. 2021b; Ribera Payá and Martínez 2021; Turnbull-Dugarte et al. 2020). Populism is certainly less central than nativism and authoritarianism, but it is still a salient component of the party. As Pablo Ribera Paya and José Ignacio Díaz Martínez (2021) point out, the party 'builds a populist narrative of Manichean conflict between the virtuous Spanish people/nation (which are one and the same), the evil globalist and progressive elites, surrounded by a myriad of threats to the Spanish nation'. In this sense the 'pure people' are defined as 'patriots', while the 'corrupt elite' are imagined as global (external) forces that aim to blur and dilute Spain's national identity and autonomous sovereignty. An illustrative example of the populist rhetoric employed by the party can be found in the following tweet from January 2021, in which one of the party's MPs and VOX's spokesperson on defence, Agustín Rosety Fernández de Castro, stated, 'It is not a question of left or right; Is it globalism or patriotism. The globalists have a programme designed by supranational organizations and large companies. We patriots believe that it is the sovereign nations who have to decide our future.'⁴

Made in China and a threat to freedom: how VOX framed the pandemic

Having established and defined VOX within the populist radical right-wing space, our first empirical starting point is to ask, how has VOX discursively framed the pandemic? Our argument, in brief, is that VOX articulated its response to the COVID-19 crisis in strong opposition towards the socialist-led government through the discursive expression of its ideological cornerstones. In other words, VOX, as a populist radical right party, managed to discursively address the COVID-19 crisis by placing a strong emphasis on nativism and authoritarianism.

First, especially at the beginning of the crisis, VOX's leaders strongly criticized the performance of the government, arguing that it acted tardily to limit the spread of COVID-19 in the national territory. Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez declared the state of emergency on 14 March, six weeks after Italy's cabinet had declared a state of emergency on 31 January. A clear example of VOX's attacks towards Sánchez's government was on the occasion of the 8 March demonstrations that took place in Spain for International Women's Day, which the government allowed even though the situation of the pandemic was already problematic. Duncan Wheeler points out, 'allowing the marches to go ahead as planned was clearly a mistake: banners held aloft among the estimated 120,000 protesters in Madrid with slogans including, "I would rather be killed by coronavirus than machismo" and "patriarchy is the worst virus" now seem naïve at best' (2020: 173). The demonstrations of 8 March were central to VOX's accusation of government mishandling. In fact, the party claimed that the demonstrations contributed to worsening the country's contagion. In a tweet, Rubén Pullido, the press secretary of VOX Andalucía, posted pictures of the March demonstration on 1 April 2020, writing, 'today Spain passes 100,000 infections and goes towards 10,000 deaths, reckless!' (elPlural 2020). Of course, it is also the case that VOX's decision to centre much of its critique of the government on the concrete events of the women's march seems, in part, an excuse to engage in anti-feminist messaging, which has become a commonplace tool in the party's authoritarian toolbox (Bernardez-Rodal et al. 2020; Rama et al. 2021b).

The hypocritical nature of VOX's critique of the government's authorization for the 8 March demonstration is apparent, however, in the fact that the party held its own annual convention on the very same day in a closed venue with more than 9,000 supporters in attendance. It was also at this party convention that one of VOX's leaders, Javier Ortega Smith, showed signs of illness and was diagnosed with COVID-19 only two days later.⁵ In a now-deleted tweet, Ortega Smith boasted, much to the dismay of the Chinese embassy in Madrid, that 'his Spanish antibodies were fighting against the damn Chinese virus' (*La Vanguardia* 2020). Demonizing COVID-19 as a Chinese export (very much à la Trump) as well as leaning into a romanticized image of belonging to the (superior) Spanish nation, is a classic example of VOX's rhetorical reliance on nationalist frames. The antagonistic presentation of COVID-19 as 'made in China' is, however, not a line that the party has shied away from. Months after Ortega Smith's infection and his China-bashing tweet, VOX's leader, Santiago Abascal, stated in a July 2020 speech in the national parliament that:

China is to blame. The Chinese communist government ... is responsible for the pandemic, the Chinese communist government hides the data from the rest of the world, the Chinese communist government handles the World Health Organization (WHO) as it pleases. The WHO is an accomplice in this cover-up, and that is the reason why we [VOX] believe that Spain should leave the organization and redirect all the funds destined to this Chinese propaganda channel into research for developing a vaccine.⁶

With the country's epidemiological situation rapidly worsening, on 25 March the Socialist-led government asked parliament to approve an extension to the

state of emergency that had initially been granted for fifteen days. On this *sole* occasion, VOX voted in favour of the extension but opposed all subsequent votes prolonging the lockdown measures that took place over the ongoing period of the pandemic. This attitude of non-compliance is linked to the party's strategy of emphasizing a preference for civil liberties and freedoms for the Spanish people, at least regarding the measures taken by the government to limit the spread of the virus. VOX presented scathing critiques on the lockdown measures and attacked all limitations on freedom of association and the closure of non-essential activities that the government imposed as a measure to limit the spread of the virus.

As Jakub Wondreys and Cas Mudde (2022) argue, VOX, as a populist radical right-wing party in opposition, has sought to discursively position itself as a defender of individual freedoms that are being curtailed by what the party views as an illegitimate government.⁷ VOX maintained that Spain's left-wing government used the state of emergency in a way that it defined as 'abusive and dictatorial', often equating the government measures to left-wing authoritarian regimes in Cuba, Venezuela or China. Critiquing the left-wing government as dictatorial, however, is not a feature of VOX's rhetoric unique to the pandemic. Throughout 2019 and during the campaigns of the two general elections held that year, the party spoke frequently on the freedom-constraining 'progressive dictatorship' which it portrayed to be a constraint on the beliefs and preferences of the everyday Spaniard.⁸ Such efforts reflect the Spanish far right's recent penchant for appropriating the rhetorical defence of 'liberty' and the 'dictatorial progressive' left's alleged desire to reduce it. This strategic framing of the left as being inimical to individual freedom was co-opted by the mainstream right and most explicitly demonstrated in the 2021 regional elections of Madrid, where People's Party candidate Isabel Díaz Ayuso aggressively campaigned on pro-liberty, anti-lockdown rhetoric in an attempt to neutralize VOX's ownership of the pro-freedom issue space by using the slogan *comunismo o libertad* (communism or freedom) (Turnbull-Dugarte and Rama 2021).

VOX's attack against the state of alarm measures also went beyond being a purely rhetorical device that could be used to attack the government. At the end of April 2020, the party filed a suit in Spain's Constitutional Court questioning the constitutionality of the state of alarm invoked by the PSOE-led coalition. According to VOX, the measures were adopted 'in clear violation of the rights and public freedoms of citizens'.⁹ In July 2021, the court partially upheld VOX's suit, declaring several provisions of the 14 March Royal Decree unconstitutional, given that the correct juridical instrument to tackle the pandemic was a 'state of emergency' as opposed to a 'state of alarm' (Heraldo 2021).

This appeal to libertarian values and a desire to protect freedom of movement from government restrictions goes hand in hand with the party's campaign strategy of seeking to appeal to voters beyond the bourgeois nationalists that form the core of its electoral base (Rama et al. 2021b; Turnbull-Dugarte et al. 2020). On different occasions, VOX's leaders have maintained that the fact that 'Spain that wakes up early' (*la España que madruga*), often particularly referring to self-employed workers such as tradespeople (Rama et al. 2021b), is the driving force that keeps the country going. VOX's defence of individuals' freedom of movement seems a strategy to attract the small business owners, independent contractors and self-

employed who are suffering from the negative economic consequences of the lockdown measures. If there is a trade-off between health and wealth when it comes to managing COVID-19, VOX's focus is clearly on the latter. We demonstrate this empirically in [Figure 1](#) (top panel) by examining the party's position in comparison with the other national parties in Spain using data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). Vis-à-vis the party's contemporaries, including the centre-right People's Party, VOX is significantly more inclined to support more liberal restrictions that prioritize economic growth than more stringent restrictions that prioritize viral containment.

Apart from their initial support for the state of alarm at the very beginning of the state response to the pandemic in March 2020, VOX's attitude towards the pandemic and the government's management of the crisis has not changed. VOX has positioned itself as a consistent and strong critic of the left-wing government's management of the pandemic as well as the People's Party's compliance in permitting the continuation of the state of alarm (Olivas Osuna and Rama 2021). In January 2021, for example, when asked about the need for a future lockdown, the party leader stated that '[a]nother lockdown would ruin us [Spain] and the PP would be complicit in helping it'.¹⁰

Having a populist radical right party in opposition while challenging the governing coalition is also a thorn in the side of the mainstream right. In the war-like times that the arrival of COVID-19 instigated, the traditional confrontation between the established opposition and the governing parties, at least in the initial period of the crisis, softened with parties from the left- and right-leaning blocs that dominate the national legislature coming together to ensure that the necessary crisis-related response measures could be enacted. A move away from confrontational opposition behaviour is common in times of political crises (Chowanietz 2011) and was observed in other European legislatures at the beginning of the pandemic (Louwerse et al. 2021). The less confrontational strategy of Spain's centre-right opposition party, at least in the initial period of the pandemic (Dombey 2020b), has provided VOX with an additional opportunity to fill the political void left vacant by a more consensual opposition in the form of the People's Party. As demonstrated in [Figure 1](#), this is not to say that the People's Party has coalesced on COVID-19 preferences towards the PSOE's position. Indeed, there is still a wide ideological gap on COVID-19 responses between the two parties, which is undoubtedly a contributing factor to Spain's position as the country with the highest level of party system polarization on COVID-19 measures in Europe ([Figure 1](#), bottom panel).¹¹ What is clear, however, is that the increasingly crowded right-wing space allows VOX to attack the People's Party voter base while the People's Party is caught between a position of having to signal moderation in order to win the centre ground and simultaneously trying to ward off a challenger on its right flank (Alonso and Field 2021).

In the latter part of the pandemic, political discussion has moved increasingly further away from the issue of confinement and lockdowns and more towards Spain's vaccination plans. VOX's stance in relation to the COVID-19 vaccine has largely been twofold. First, the party has been quick to criticize the centralized vaccine purchase and redistribution scheme organized by the EU. Much like its typical claims regarding the sovereignty-limiting nature of EU membership

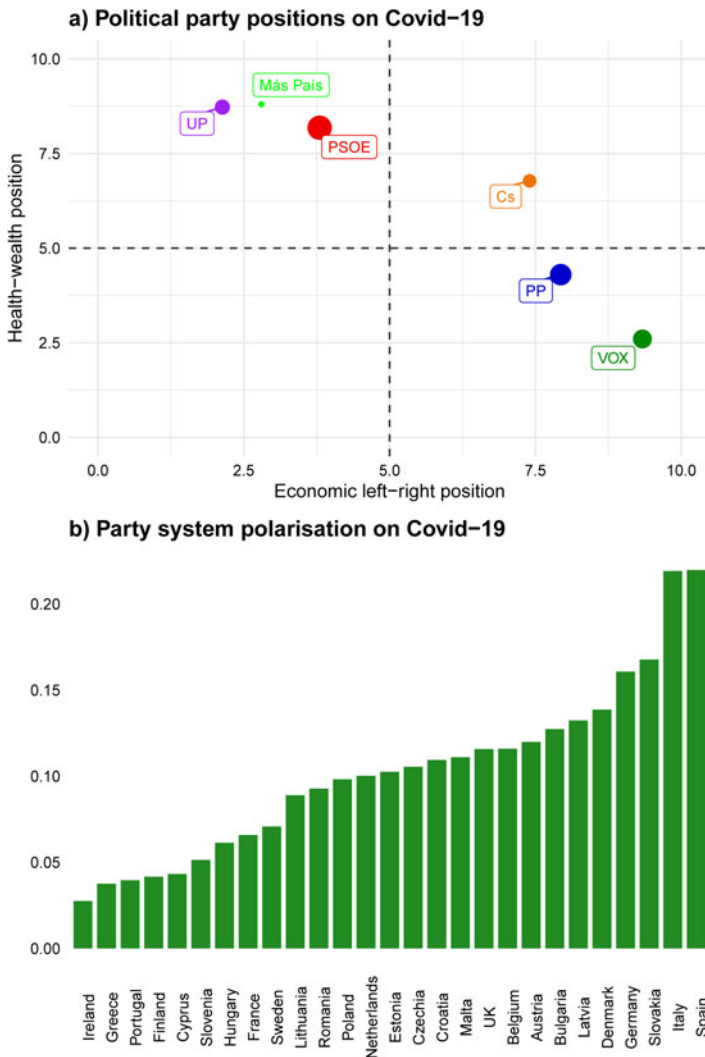


Figure 1. Spanish Political Parties, Party System Polarization and COVID-19

Source: Authors' elaboration based on CHES data.

(Turnbull-Dugarte and Devine 2021), VOX argues that Spain's limited supply of vaccines at the start of the programme was the result of the EU 'tying Spain's hands' and VOX actively advocated breaking away from the supranationally coordinated vaccine programme (Negrete 2021).¹²

The second aspect of VOX's response, and very much in line with the rhetorical promise of protecting citizens against 'state oppression' promoted by Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, can be seen in the willingness of the party to provide a voice for vaccine sceptics. In contrast to Bolsonaro, however, VOX has *not* explicitly campaigned against vaccination. On different occasions Abascal has sought to be strategically

ambiguous, deflecting direct questions about his vaccination status and highlighting that it is a personal matter.¹³ Discursively, VOX's rhetoric has been very similar to that of Brothers of Italy (see Zanotti and Meléndez [forthcoming](#)). Both Italy and Spain are leaders in the vaccination rate, but both radical right-wing parties have insisted on the need for people to enjoy the liberty of choice when it comes to receiving the vaccine or not.

The data presented in [Figures 2 and 3](#) suggest that VOX's pro-choice messaging strategy is likely to appease the party's base. Just under one-fifth of VOX voters express scepticism of the necessity of lockdown measures and one-third of their voters express an unwillingness to be vaccinated. The party's voters are host to the highest proportion of anti-vaxxers compared to the electoral supporters of all other parties, as well as those who do not engage in politics (abstainers). Interestingly, the highest level of reported willingness to be vaccinated is not observed among the support bases of either of the two governing parties, but rather comes from those who voted for the People's Party, with 58% of their voters expressing support for the vaccine. The rejection of vaccines among VOX's supporters marks them as very much distinct from the mainstream right. Given that the People's Party tends to source much of its electoral support from voters who are older, and those who are older are most at risk from the virus, the high level of support for the vaccine relative to the voters of other parties is not necessarily surprising. In a study on the determinants of vaccine anxiety, Will Jennings et al. (2021) show that those individuals who both distrust the government and are frequent social media users are less willing to take the COVID-19 vaccine. Both of these determinants are observed to be common among VOX's supporters (Turnbull-Dugarte et al. 2020).

Seeking the limelight: how VOX responded to the pandemic

In addition to adopting an aggressive rhetorical approach to challenging the government, Spain's populist radical right party engaged in concrete actions that sought not only to attack the government and mainstream parties' handling of the pandemic, but also to ensure they were able to dominate the national media diet.

Seeking to rally public support for its criticism of the government and demands for the country to reopen, at the end of May VOX called for a convoy of car protests, bringing traffic to a standstill in many of Spain's major towns and cities. In Madrid alone, 15,000 protesters and 6,000 cars took part. With promises to remain in their vehicles as a means of complying with the social distancing rules – not always followed – VOX and its supporters sought to claim the moral high ground over the supposedly rabbleroising agitators behind International Women's Day (Wheeler 2020). VOX's spokesperson Iván Espinosa de los Monteros compared Madrid's protester-packed streets participating in the demonstration with the celebrations that took place when Spain won the 2010 Football World Cup.¹⁴ In another example of the party seeking to rally its supporters, residents in Madrid protested in VOX-led demonstrations against the government for curtailing their freedoms over a period of weeks. Protesters manifested against the lockdown through *cacerolazos* (pot drumming) and shouts of 'freedom'. These protests

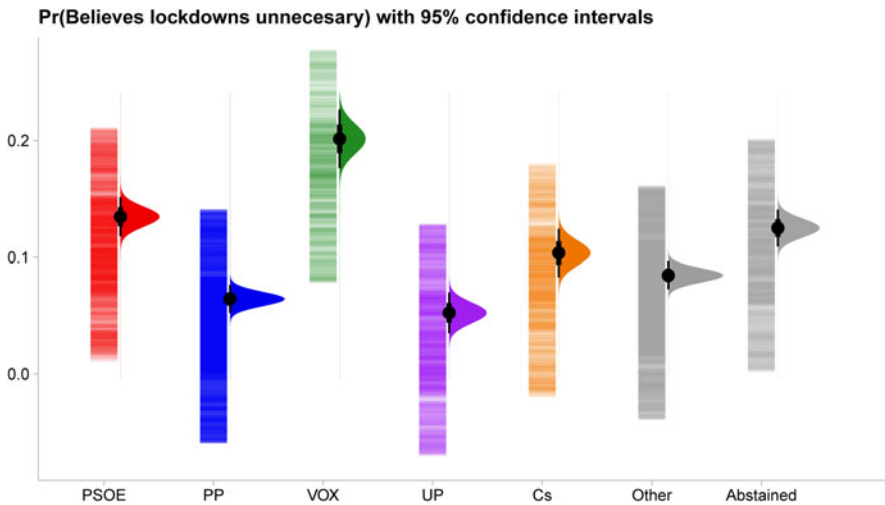


Figure 2. Partisan Scepticism of COVID-19 Lockdown (May–June 2020)

Source: Authors' elaboration based on CIS monthly barometer data.

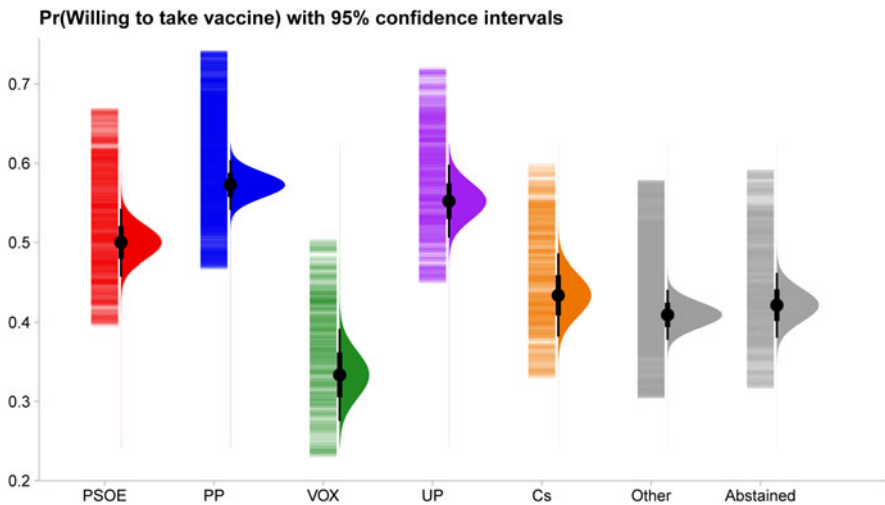


Figure 3. Partisan Support for the COVID-19 Vaccine

Source: Authors' elaboration based on CIS monthly barometer data (Sep–Nov 2020).

were largely clustered around Madrid's most affluent neighbourhood, Salamanca, which, as José Rama et al. (2021b) show, is one of the areas with the highest localized concentration of far-right supporters in the country.

The most explicit example of VOX's active leadership in attacks against the government, in addition to protest activities mentioned above, came in the form of legislative motions. During a congressional plenary session on 29 July 2020,

VOX's party leader announced that the party would bring forward a government-censuring vote of no confidence against the Sánchez-led coalition. No-confidence votes, at least at the national level, are a rarity in Spanish politics. One explanation for this is that the rules of the Spanish Constitution require that any government censure must be constructive: Article 113 of the Constitution stipulates that the removal of the current government does not lead to the dissolution of the chamber and the calling of new elections, but rather must coincide with the installation of an alternative government. In essence, votes of no confidence must seek an absolute majority of the chamber to remove the sitting government *and* simultaneously install another with a named candidate as the alternative prime minister. Since Spain's transition to democracy, and prior to VOX's motion against the Sánchez government, there have only ever been four no-confidence votes tabled in the Spanish Congress. Two of these were brought against Spain's former prime minister, the People's Party's Mariano Rajoy, the second of which was the first example of a no-confidence vote gathering the necessary support to remove a national government from power (Simón 2020).

VOX's motion, announced on 29 July, was tabled on 29 September when the party's parliamentary group presented a 34-page document laying out their accusations against the government. The accusations of the motion were fourfold: (1) the 'fraudulent' constitution of the 'social communist' government and its reliance on (allegedly) separatist forces; (2) the 'criminal management' of the coronavirus pandemic; (3) the 'democratic degeneration' and 'assault' on institutional controls on executive power; and (4) the 'unconstitutional restriction' of the individual liberties of the Spanish people. The last three of these allegations were concerned with coronavirus and echo the party's electorally strategic representation of liberty as being under threat from the left-leaning 'socio-communist' government.

Bringing forth the no-confidence motion that named VOX's own leader, Santiago Abascal, as the prime ministerial candidate had little chance of gathering an absolute majority in Congress. As demonstrated in Table 1, the parliamentary arithmetic was not stacked in VOX's favour, since for the motion to pass successfully the party would need to find a way to break the 176-MP majority that had installed the Sánchez-led government in January 2020, just before the pandemic struck Spain. In the period between the tabling of the motion and the parliamentary vote, VOX found very little legislative support and no parliamentary party provided an endorsement for VOX's motion. In fact, parliamentarians on both the left and the right were quick to highlight the clear motivations of political theatre behind the legislative manoeuvre. Citizens (Ciudadanos), Spain's centre-right and self-described liberal party, despite enjoying a junior-coalition partner role in several regional and municipal governments that are propped up by VOX's legislative support, was quick to condemn the motion, calling it 'partisan, inappropriate, and irresponsible'. The People's Party's general secretary, Teodoro García Egea, also signalled his disapproval of the motion tabled by VOX, commenting in a tweet, 'The People's Party will always be focused on what matters: saving lives and jobs. They can't count on us to support a political distraction that will only strengthen the PSOE.'¹⁵

Right up until the day of the no-confidence debates (21–22 October), however, what remained unclear was how Pablo Casado – the People's Party leader – would

Table 1. Partisan Composition of the 14th Legislature and Vote in No-Confidence Motion

Party	Seats	Vote in no-confidence motion tabled by VOX
Left-wing parties		
PSOE	120 ^a	No
Unidas Podemos	35 ^a	No
Right-wing parties		
People's Party	89	No
VOX	52	Yes
Ciudadanos	10	No
Regional nationalist parties		
Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC)	13 ^b	No
Junts per Catalunya (JxCat)	8	No
Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV)	6 ^a	No
Euskal Herria Bildu (EH Bildu)	5 ^b	No
Candidatura de Unidad Popular (CUP)	2	No
Coalición Canaria – Nueva Canarias	2 ^c	No
Navarra Suma	2	No
Bloque Nacionalista Galego (BNG)	1 ^a	No
Partido Regionalista de Cantabria (PRC)	1	No
Other parties		
Más País	3 ^a	No
Teruel Existe	1 ^a	No
Total MPs	350	

Notes: ^aParties that voted to confirm Sánchez as prime minister in January 2020.

^bParties that abstained in Sánchez investiture vote.

^cCoalición Canaria – Nueva Canarias split with one vote in favour and one against Sánchez investiture.

vote on the motion. In advance of the debate, Casado made no public statements regarding the issue and People's Party parliamentarians commented to journalists that they had not been told where the party whip would fall. When Casado spoke during the debate, he launched an unexpected and aggressive counterattack against the populist challenger, making explicit that if VOX brought forward the motion to 'supplant' his party, then it should give up all hope. The scathing attack on VOX – a party that propped up PP-led coalitions and minority governments in different localities across Spain – took both VOX and political commentators by surprise. Casado strategically monopolized his debate time to ridicule and delegitimize VOX, highlighting, for example, that while VOX was rallying its supporters to follow the party leader in an open-top bus during the height of the pandemic, the People's Party was working with the government to implement policy responses

(Casado 2020). Casado also went to great lengths to communicate the divergence between the People's Party and VOX, reiterating, somewhat satirically, the anti-globalist, anti-European and pro-Trumpian messages that had dominated much of Abascal's parliamentary intervention. There were even some personal attacks against Abascal when Casado accused VOX's leader of being a political opportunist who was seeking to attack the party that had advanced his political career for the last 15 years (Casado 2020) – a reference to Abascal's former political career within the People's Party himself. The resulting defeat of the motion was widely considered an embarrassing failure for the far right and for Abascal personally.

Despite the motion's slim chances of success and ultimate failure once the People's Party's opposition became clear, the process provided VOX with unprecedented media exposure. Spain's congressional regulations provide the proposed alternative candidate with *unlimited* time to make their case against the government. Bringing forth the motion can, therefore, be seen as an act of political theatre; one that allowed VOX and Abascal to gain unprecedented media access via the motion's domination of the legislative agenda and the media narrative that would accompany it. Media exposure matters to populist radical right-wing parties. As a wide body of literature highlights, the level of support for these parties is often enhanced by greater levels of media attention (Devine and Murphy 2020). By guaranteeing that its leader would be at the front and centre of political reporting, VOX was able to make certain that its populist messaging was transmitted on prime-time television while also ensuring that, for prospective voters of the right, VOX was perceived as the dominant and active party of the opposition.

Bringing the no-confidence vote against the socialist-led coalition was just as much an attack on the mainstream People's Party's hegemonic position as the leader of the Spanish right as it was an assault against the left-wing bloc in power. VOX, as a political challenger with as-yet no *direct* governing experience, is able to attack establishment parties, including the People's Party, without having to assume the responsibility of government participation (Alsono and Field 2021). As demonstrated by Catherine de Vries and Sara Hobolt (2020), being free of governing experience can provide political challengers with a strategic advantage when it comes to attacking mainstream party dominance, and this is a strategic stance that VOX has sought to leverage to its advantage.

Support for VOX among the electorate: victims or victor of the pandemic?

When the spread of COVID-19 across Europe began to become clear, many political pundits were quick to point towards the potential negative effects of COVID-19 for the survival of populist radical right parties. The arrival of the pandemic resulted in many op-eds (see, for example, English 2020; Rachman 2020) highlighting COVID-19's silver lining in aiding the downfall of the populist radical right. In seeking to assess the electoral consequences of the pandemic for the populist radical right, we demonstrate that such prophecies have failed to come to fruition in the case of Spain.

Figure 4 shows the polling averages enjoyed by each of Spain's top five national parties: the Socialists (PSOE), their far-left junior coalition partners (Unidas Podemos), the right-wing People's Party (PP), the self-penned liberal party,

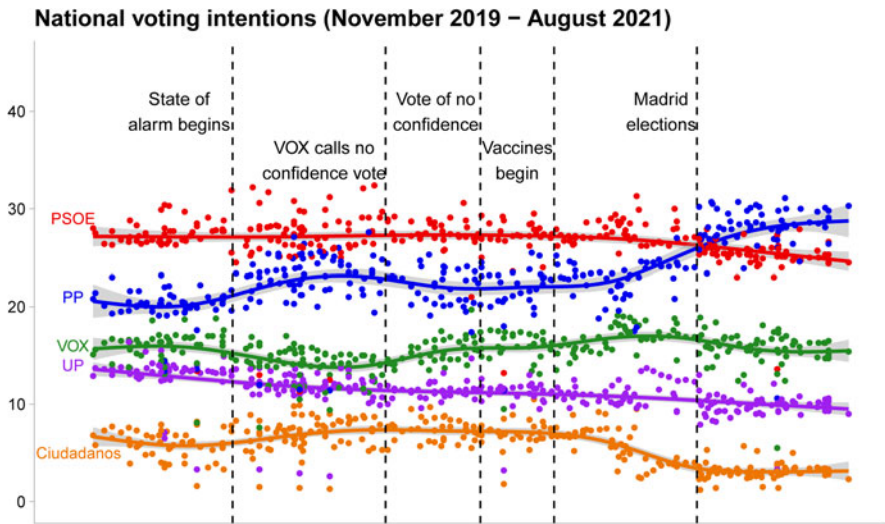


Figure 4. Party Polling Averages (November 2019–January 2021)

Source: Authors' elaboration based on available polling data.

Citizens (Cs) and VOX. One of the most striking conclusions illustrated in polling data is the strong polling performance enjoyed by the government-leading Socialist party. Between the official election results of November 2019 until March 2021, there has been no shift of substance or significance in the public's voting intentions for the Socialists. This is at odds with evidence of 'rally-around-the-flag' effects observed elsewhere (Baekgaard et al. 2020; Bol et al. 2021), which tend to show support for governing parties increasing during the pandemic, particularly in earlier periods around the time of lockdown announcements (Bol et al. 2021). The main governing party's resilience in the polls, at least up until late spring 2021, contrasts starkly with the electoral punishment endured by the US's populist radical right-wing president, Donald Trump, whose (mis)management of the pandemic has been signalled as a significant determinant in explaining his electoral defeat in November 2020 (Neundorf and Pardos-Prado 2021).

When it comes to assessing support for the populist radical right in Spain, what is clear is that there were, albeit short-term, changes in the public's declared voting intentions for this party family. During the period of late March 2020, when the first national lockdown was announced, there was a significant fall in the level of support for VOX. Of note is that this drop in citizens' voting intentions for VOX coincided with an increase in voting intentions for the People's Party. While Spain's governing parties may not have been able to harvest the benefits of any rally-around-the-flag effect, the same is not true for the mainstream right, with citizens on the right appearing to move their support towards the more established, and government-experienced, People's Party.

One of the factors that can aid us to understand VOX's (small) downward slump in the polls in the time immediately after the national lockdown was announced is the party's entrepreneurial status as a political outsider. Exogenous crises tend to

induce electoral penalties for political challengers, particularly in the short term (Delis et al. 2020). Voters are assumed to be risk-averse when faced with crisis situations and, consequently, are often demonstrated to place a political premium on governing experience rather than entrepreneurial status (Morgenstern and Zechmeister 2001). This occurs because citizens move to counteract systemic uncertainty and political or economic insecurity by opting for political alternatives that represent stability and continuity, rather than supporting anti-establishment parties that may ‘further fuel the fire’ presented by these exogenous shocks (Delis et al. 2020). Applying this to the case of COVID-19 and the Spanish government’s state of alarm declaration, a convergence of support around the mainstream right at the cost of the populist radical right would be consistent with historical evidence from other crisis responses in Spain (Delis et al. 2020).

Nevertheless, the downward trends in VOX’s support at the height of the first lockdown were short-lived. As illustrated in Figure 4, Abascal’s announcement of a censure motion against the Socialist and far-left (UP) ‘criminal dictatorship’ government led to a return to the same polling position enjoyed by the party before the announcement of the stringent COVID-19 lockdown measures. As discussed above, this legislative manoeuvre was strategically implemented in the hope of surpassing the People’s Party’s polling numbers among right-wing voters and to ensure VOX took centre stage in the media discussion of parliamentary events. While the party’s attempts to politically outmanoeuvre a lacklustre People’s Party opposition might not have resulted in its rise as the primary right-wing party, it *did* serve to revoke any potential electoral advantage that the mainstream right had previously been able to enjoy since the beginning of the lockdown in March 2020. VOX’s polling numbers in early 2021, in a context where nationwide COVID-19 vaccination programmes were now underway and the country was experiencing a third wave of infections after the Christmas period, remained as high as they had ever been. In the 2019 November election VOX banked 15.1% of votes cast and the party’s polling average in March 2021 was equal to 17.6%.

Understanding trends in aggregate-level electoral support for the populist radical right party is important as it allows us to ascertain whether the party is gaining political ground vis-à-vis its competitors in the political marketplace. To understand whether VOX is likely to be a victim of COVID-19, however, we need also to consider how the party, and its leader, are viewed by their *own* supporters. Challenger parties’ political longevity is often limited by their inability not only to gain new voters but also to ensure they retain the support that they gather during maiden successes (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). In Figure 5, we visualize the *relative* approval rating of Abascal (VOX leader) vis-à-vis Casado (People’s Party leader) among those individuals who reported to have voted for VOX in the November 2019 elections. The relative measure indicates to what extent VOX voters evaluate the populist radical right leader more positively than Casado: positive values indicate they are more supportive of Abascal, negative values indicate they are more supportive of Casado, and values of zero signal symmetrical evaluations for the two leaders. We would consider VOX’s electoral longevity to be under threat in those situations where the party’s *own* supporters provided an equal or more positive assessment of the mainstream right leader.

Throughout the period of the pandemic and regardless of the three infection waves experienced in Spain, VOX’s voters remained, on average, more inclined

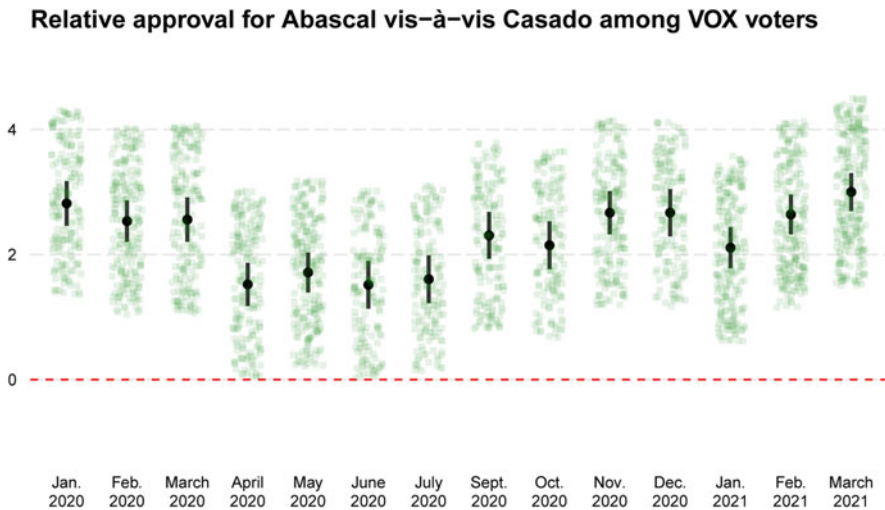


Figure 5. Relative Support for VOX's Leader vis-à-vis People's Party Leader among VOX Voters
Source: Authors' elaboration based on CIS monthly barometer data.

to favour Abascal over Casado. There was, however, a significant fall in the relative support for the former between April and July. During this period, VOX supporters became significantly less likely to believe that Abascal was outperforming the mainstream right's lead candidate. This slump in the relative approval of the VOX leadership among its own supporters mirrors the negative trends in support during the same period observed among the wider population. We observe, however, that in line with the aggregate polling trends data visualized above in Figure 3, there is also a swift return in the level of support for VOX's leader after August. While we cannot identify a *causal* effect, it is worth highlighting that the bump in both the aggregate polling as well as in the relative support for Abascal among VOX's voter base does coincide with the legislative manoeuvring of the party in the form of the no-confidence motion. Descriptively at least, it appears that adopting an aggressive and confrontational stance against the governing coalition, as well as the passive opposition exercised by the People's Party, provided potential dividends for the party. We can, therefore, interpret the strategic incentives behind VOX's legislative acts as a manifestation of the ongoing party competition dynamics taking place within the increasingly crowded right-wing space (Alonso and Field 2021; Rama et al. 2021a).

Conclusion

Spain has been one of the countries most hit by the pandemic. Especially during the first wave, it was the country (together with Italy) with the worst indicators in terms of deaths and infection rates (Dombey 2020a). In line with the goal of this special issue, this contribution aims to provide insight into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on a relatively new populist radical right party in Spain. Our analysis

considers three empirical questions. First, how VOX discursively framed the pandemic; second, how VOX, as an opposition party, has responded to the crisis; and third, how the pandemic affected the popularity of the populist radical right.

Looking at the party's framing of the COVID-19 crisis, in general terms, for VOX the pandemic was a matter of government (in)competence and an issue of freedom, in line with the approach of other populist radical right-wing parties in opposition. Moreover, VOX leaders on various occasions referred to the 'Chinese virus', blaming China for the pandemic and remaining very much in line with the Trumpian discourse that 'they [China] should pay for it' (Campos 2020) as well as claiming that the EU mismanaged the rollout of the vaccine programme.

VOX's strategic reaction to the pandemic resulted in the party leadership organizing different protests against the government, claiming that the 'left-wing progressive dictatorship' was mismanaging the ongoing crisis. The political climax of this aggressive opposition took the form of the party's no-confidence motion in the national legislature, in which VOX defined Sanchez's coalition government as 'the worst in [Spain's] eighty years of history' and 'the government dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic in the worst fashion' (EuropaPress 2020). As we detail above, this no-hope parliamentary manoeuvre was a strategic act of political theatre that allowed the populist right-wing challenger to maximize political exposure and to dominate the public discourse in order to present itself as the primary and vocal government-in-waiting.

Third, looking at the effects of the pandemic on the popularity of VOX, we observe that VOX voters seem to approve of the party's choices. The level of popular support enjoyed by the party shows, despite short-term dips, no long-term variation. Despite experiencing a small lull in support as the initial lockdown came into force, both support for the party and approval for the party's leader within VOX's support base have remained strong. The inability of the People's Party to reclaim more of its (traditional) support from the mainstream right, despite clear copy-cat tactics by some of the party's regional leaders – for example, Ayuso in Madrid (Turnbull-Dugarte and Rama 2021) – represents a dilemma for the party going forward.

The long-term trajectory of VOX appears secure. Despite punditry signalling COVID-19 as a potential threat to the populist radical right, we find no evidence that the virus has threatened (or is likely to) VOX's increasingly consolidated position as a strong and stable alternative to the mainstream right in the party system. If anything, we anticipate that the post-COVID-19 trajectory of the party has the potential to provide fruitful gains for the challengers. Once the immediate health crisis comes to its eventual end, the economic malaise engendered by year-long inhibitors of economic growth is likely to rear its head. Not only have economies retreated during the COVID-19 period but state governments, like Spain's, have activated emergency furlough schemes and footed the bill for nationwide vaccination programmes, both of which carry large fiscal price tags. If economic uncertainty is to become more of a constant in voters' minds, then VOX is likely to profit from the crisis since its anti-immigration stance will probably resonate more with voters in times of economic trouble.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2022.7>

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Notes

- 1 For example, while some populist radical right-wing parties are inclusive of sexual minorities in their conceptualization of the homogenous collective (Akkerman 2005; Spierings 2021; Spierings et al. 2015), others, including VOX (Rama et al. 2021a, 2021b), are not.
- 2 https://twitter.com/vox_es/status/1368306745492267018?s=20; https://twitter.com/vox_es/status/1352623830397837315.
- 3 www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFXLFpVIBNQ.
- 4 <https://twitter.com/AgustinRosety/status/1353349771717652483>.
- 5 www.abc.es/espana/abci-ortega-smith-mostro-sintomas-coronavirus-vistalegre-202003101346_video.html?ref=https:%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F.
- 6 www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpqEm3qXm2I.
- 7 Abascal defined the left-wing government as electorally fraudulent not in legal but rather political terms. First, VOX attacked the Socialist government installed after the no-confidence motion as a product of a *coup d'état*. Once the progressive coalition between the Socialists and the hard left (UP) was installed, VOX defined the government as fraudulent because of Sánchez's multiple public statements where he promised not to form a coalition with the UP.
- 8 https://twitter.com/vox_es/status/1191515752974737408?s=20.
- 9 www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDzRbn3kXMc.
- 10 https://twitter.com/vox_es/status/1350852209987235845?s=20.
- 11 Polarization is measured, via CHES data, using Dalton (2008):

$$\text{Polarization Index}_{c,t} = \sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n \left(\frac{(\text{Party Covid Position} - \text{System Covid Position})}{100} \right)^2 \times \text{Vote Share}_{i,t}}$$

NB: As demonstrated in Figure A1 in the Online Appendix, polarization on the dominant left–right dimension does not necessarily predict polarization on COVID-19 positions.

- 12 In another example of the People's Party engaging in copy-cat tactics, the party's Trump-like regional president in Madrid, Isabel Diaz Ayuso, also flirted with the idea of sourcing her own vaccines outside the EU-controlled programme. See Caballero (2021).
- 13 www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkj783tHgyk.
- 14 www.20minutos.es/noticia/4267930/0/espinoza-monteros-compara-manifestacion-vox-celebracion-mundial-futbol/?autoref=true.
- 15 <https://twitter.com/TeoGarciaEgea/status/1288414209496297473?s=20>.

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