

## **Commentary: Spain Elections - An Ascendant Far-Right or a Predictable Re-Alignment?**

*Max Ferrer and William Naylor*

Spain went to the polls this past Sunday and attempted to break the electoral gridlock that has seized the country for the last four years. Just as they did in the April elections of this year, the Socialist *Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)* won a plurality, but with only 120 of 350 seats in parliament, it fell well short of a governing majority. The center-right *Partido Popular (PP)* jumped to 88 seats from 66 in the previous election, while, perhaps most strikingly, far-right newcomer, *Vox*, almost doubled its count from 24 to 52 seats, to finish in third place in parliamentary voting. In a country where the emergence of a far-right party was previously thought impossible, *Vox*'s ascendance has provoked concern around Spain, Europe, and beyond. One defining issue for the party is the centralization of Spanish government, as it calls for the abolition of the 17 autonomous regions that have comprised Spain's administrative structure since the death of General Franco and the country's shift to democracy in 1975. Furthermore, *Vox*'s second-in-command, Javier Ortega Smith, was recently put [under investigation](#) for allegedly claiming Muslims to be "enemies" of Spain during a rally in 2018. All the while, party leader Santiago Abascal has warned against the influence of ["supremacist feminism and gender totalitarianism"](#) while promoting a platform opposing abortion and same-sex marriage. The party, founded by Abascal in 2014, has been quick to find its footing, leaving many commentators to wonder how prominent *Vox*'s role in Spanish politics will be in the near future.

Below, European Institute students Max Ferrer and William Naylor offer contrasting viewpoints about the significance of *Vox*'s performance in Sunday's elections.

## Spain's shifting political landscape gives Vox an opportunity to be heard

Max Ferrer

Among the many interesting narratives to emerge from the Spanish elections this past weekend is that of the electoral success of *Vox*, Spain's burgeoning far-right party. Doubling its vote total to take third-place at the national polls, *Vox* has become a major player in national politics just 5 years after its inception. In doing so, it has gained a platform for far-right ideology that, until now, has simply not existed in Spanish democracy.

Previously, two primary factors have limited the potential of a Spanish far-right movement; one electoral in nature, the other rhetorical. The first of these limiting factors is the existence of the center-right party *Partido Popular* (PP), which, until now, has sufficiently represented the Spanish right wing. The second factor is the memory of, and political allergy to, the fascist Franco regime that ruled Spain in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The electorate, however, can no longer rely on these suppressing factors to contain Spain's far right urges. To be sure, in the last few years, both have given way to the far-right flames currently spreading throughout Europe and the world.

Until 2006, PP had a strong hold on the conservative wing of Spanish politics. However, when the *Ciudadanos* party emerged out of Catalonia as an anti-secessionist party that same year, PP responded by shifting to the center to recapture its electoral popularity. It was this shift to the left that would ultimately lead Santiago Abascal, the leader of *Vox*, to secede from PP and form his new party in 2014. Now, [the collapse of Ciudadanos](#) leaves *Vox* with room to grow on the right. *Vox*, with its anti-immigrant, Islamophobic, and misogynistic rhetoric, finds its [defining issue](#) in the Catalan crisis, where it mirrors the same hardline nationalist tendencies exhibited by Franco's fascist regime.

The abhorrent memory of Franco's dictatorship has long been understood as a deterrent to any Spanish far-right movement, though the rise of *Vox* is challenging this assumption. While many commentators argue that the attraction to the far-right nationalism is a reaction to pushes for Catalan autonomy, such independence [sentiment and protest is on the rise](#). In fact, in light of the recent [exhumation of Franco's body](#) from the reverent Valley of the Fallen, many have drawn a connection between Franco's hardline Spanish nationalism, and that of the rhetoric currently propelling *Vox* to national prominence. The domination of the [Catalan crisis in public debate](#), is not only fodder for right-wing agitation, but is also a credible weak point for the Spanish left. The *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE), which won the plurality in the most recent election, has been [unable to reconcile with Catalan separatists](#) in the past, and if secessionist fears continue to grow, PSOE's position as the only party that can guarantee constitutional stability risks losing credibility.

*Vox* will not be a part of the next Spanish government, and may not be a part of any ruling coalition in the near future. However, in the wake of the most recent election, it will enjoy a credible national platform to spread its hardline conservative message. And, as the [compliments roll in](#) from the National Rally's Marine Le Pen and the Northern League's Matteo Salvini, the breakdown of *Ciudadanos* and the rehabilitation of Francoist politics represent a new horizon in Spanish politics. As the far-right gains confidence throughout Europe and the world, *Vox* gives voice to a movement that has not been heard in Spain since the birth of its democracy.

## **Vox's positions should scare us, but they won't be running Spain any time soon**

*William Naylor*

The English-language press has framed the performance of *Vox*, Spain's emergent far-right party, as the defining story of Sunday's elections. The collective hand-wringing over the result does make sense for a number of reasons: *Vox* espouses the same anti-immigrant, Islamophobic, and nationalist beliefs of many of its far-right peers throughout Europe; on Sunday, the party nearly doubled its seat total compared to the last election, which took place in April; and, finally, Spain is no longer the safe-haven from far-right nationalism it was [long touted to be](#).

Despite *Vox*'s dramatic progress, it's hard to envision a future where Santiago Abascal is the Spanish Prime Minister. First of all, Spain's two largest leftist parties—the center left *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE) and the left-wing *Unidos Podemos* alliance—are [on the brink](#) of ending 18 months of gridlock and forming the most progressive governing coalition since the transition to democracy.

Second, the question of regional power, the central aspect of the *Vox* platform, continues to polarize Spanish society. *Vox* [proposes](#) to strip Spain's regional governments of their significant autonomy and abolish regional parliaments. That's not a position to define your party around if you want to win national elections in Spain. According to [survey data from January 2019](#), 65.4 percent of Spaniards either want to maintain current levels of regional autonomy or to further increase autonomy. Only 28.1 percent of Spaniards want less regional autonomy. As long as it maintains its hardline stance on seizing power from regional governments, *Vox* will have a hard time building sufficient bases of support to win parliamentary seats in places like Catalonia or the Basque Country, where support for devolved power is strong.

Finally, it's important to note that Spain's traditional center-right party, the *Partido Popular* (PP), is re-ascendant after a tumultuous couple of years. After winning a record low 66 seats in April, the PP won 89 seats on Sunday. The gains of both the PP (4.1 percent more votes than in April) and *Vox* (4.8 percent) align almost exactly with the implosion of the center-right *Ciudadanos* party, which received 9.1 fewer votes than it did in April. In other words, *Vox*'s performance will mean that the Spanish right will begin to re-align away from the centrism it gravitated toward in recent years because of pressure from *Ciudadanos*. There's little reason to believe that the PP won't continue to be the standard bearer of the Spanish right.

More than anything, the emergence of *Vox* as Spain's third largest political party will provoke the PP to embrace increasingly conservative positions with regard to immigration, divesture of power from Madrid, and cultural issues such as the exhumation of Francisco Franco. For the mainstream Spanish right, that's less of a new normal than a [return to the status quo](#). *Vox* is to be taken seriously, but its success on Sunday isn't the seismic shift some are claiming it to be.