

What is the real power of the far right in Spain?

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Experts warn that Vox could shift the debate on key issues like immigration after the group won 24 seats in Congress.

The emergence of far-right parties in European parliaments has become a democratic routine, and Spain joined the trend on Sunday, when [Vox earned 24 seats in Congress](#) on the back of 2.6 million votes (10.26% of the total).

Experience in other EU countries shows that the power of these groups lies not so much in their legislative or governmental clout, but rather in their ability to [set the political agenda](#).

This is the case even in France where, because of the two-round electoral system, their institutional presence is far lower than the voting percentage of the around 20% won for decades, election after election, by the Front National, now rebranded as Rassemblement National (National Rally).

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- JULIA EBNER, INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

In Spain, Vox, the party headed by Santiago Abascal, has amply demonstrated this ability to set the agenda. It did so during the campaign, but has in fact been doing so ever since it [secured 12 seats in Andalusia's regional assembly](#) last December. That event represented the return of the far right to Spanish democratic institutions since the transitional period that followed the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975.

In 1979, a neo-Francoist party named Fuerza Nueva (New Force) led by Blas Piñar managed to secure one representative within a wider alliance called Unión Nacional (National Unity), which also included the fascist Falange party. This seat was lost at the 1982 election.

"With 24 seats, it's going to be hard for Vox to get a lot of legislation passed, but its impact should not be underestimated," explains Julia Ebner, a researcher at the London-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue, which has monitored the far right during political campaigning in Germany, Italy, Sweden and Spain.

"The far right can block progress in many areas, not just immigration or the integration of immigrants into society, but also on climate change or human rights. Our analyses show that the far right focuses not so much on advancing its own policies as in blocking or boycotting the policies of others."

These parties indirectly influence the positions and policies of the dominant parties

- GILLES IVALDI, CNRS

It was the far right that [placed immigration at the center of the political debate](#) in many EU countries, even in Germany, which needs foreign workers to shore up its economy (in December, the government backed a law to attract non-EU workers to fill 1.2 million vacant jobs) and which took in 1.3 million refugees during the great crisis of 2015.

There was much talk about the rise of the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) at the legislative elections of 2017, when it attracted 13.7% of the vote to become the third largest force in the Bundestag, the national parliament of Germany. Yet at the same time tens of thousands of Germans were volunteering to help the refugees, to such an extent that local authorities were unable to deal with so much solidarity.

“If we observe what’s been happening in Europe in the last few decades, it is evident that the emergence of the radical right inside parliaments has radicalized other parties’ positions on issues like immigration,” explains Luis Cornago, a political risk analyst at the consulting firm Teneo. “In general, the parties that move further to the right are the traditional center-right parties, but there are cases like Denmark, where the social-democrats have also shifted to the right on migration issues.”

Other than contributing to the normalization and legitimization of this rhetoric, it is unclear whether the strategy is helping these mainstream parties [stem the loss of votes](#), notes Cornago. “For instance, at the last elections in Germany’s federal state of Bavaria, the conservative Christian Social Union (CSU) lost more votes to the Greens (190,000) than to the far right (160,000), perhaps because the more center-oriented voters were disappointed by the party’s shift to the right.”

False debates

Besides co-opting the agenda, the other great skill demonstrated by the European far right is introducing false problems into the public consciousness through manipulated data. Thanks to Vox, the Spanish campaign included a debate on the need to [legalize weapons as a form of personal defense](#) - this, in one of the safest countries in the world, where the homicide rate is 0.7 per 100,000 people, when the global average is 5.3. In Sweden, for instance, the rate is 1.1, while in Brazil it rises to 26.7, according to World Bank figures.

During the Spanish campaign, [feminism was also discussed as though it were a problem](#); that is to say, what was questioned was not whether women have achieved the same rights as men, but the entire concept of women’s struggle for equality. It was the same with gender violence, where Vox focused not so much on the violence itself as on the legislative mechanisms to fight it.

Emmanuel Carrère, one of the writers who has produced the most in-depth thinking on the blurry lines between what’s true and what’s false, wrote in an essay that “communism did not abolish private property; above all it abolished reality.” This sentence could be applied to most far right parties in the EU.

Triple influence

The sociologist Gilles Ivaldi, of the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) and a member of the Migration and Society Research Unit at the University of Nice, says there are three levels at which the far right plays a role in a country’s political life, even outside of parliament.

"They influence the political agenda and politicize issues that hadn't been touched by the traditional parties, such as immigration in France starting in the 1980s, when the Front National emerged. In second place, the far right has revolutionized the traditional governing coalition models, [imposing themselves on the right-wing conservatives](#), as seen in Italy and in 2017 also in Austria," he says.

"Finally, and most importantly, these parties indirectly influence the positions and policies of the dominant parties, especially on matters like immigration," adds Ivaldi. "There is a contagion effect on conservative parties that has been observed in many European countries such as France, the Netherlands or Austria. Even if it is on the fringes, the far right can still have significant influence."

English version by [Susana Urra](#).

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