

SIT Graduate Institute/SIT Study Abroad

## SIT Digital Collections

---

Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection

SIT Study Abroad

---

Fall 2022

### Vox and Spanish Nationalism: The Constitutional Processes for the Elimination of Regional Autonomy

Noah Halterman-Mitchell  
*SIT Study Abroad*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection)



Part of the [Constitutional Law Commons](#), [European History Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Political Theory Commons](#), and the [Politics and Social Change Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Halterman-Mitchell, Noah, "Vox and Spanish Nationalism: The Constitutional Processes for the Elimination of Regional Autonomy" (2022). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 3524.  
[https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection/3524](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/3524)

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact [digitalcollections@sit.edu](mailto:digitalcollections@sit.edu).

Vox and Spanish Nationalism:  
The Constitutional Processes for the Elimination of Regional Autonomy

Noah Halterman-Mitchell

Independent Study Project  
SIT: Policy, Law, and Regional Autonomy in Europe  
December 9, 2022

### **Abstract**

After the death of Francisco Franco and the creation of the modern Spanish State, hard-core right-wing Spanish nationalism disappeared from the political spectrum. Spain and Portugal avoided the lure of far right-wing political tendencies to which the rest of Europe fell victim. Until recently, VOX, a far right-wing party, gained seats in Parliaments at the Autonomous Community level and in the Spanish National Parliament.

VOX believes in a mono-national state, a Spanish State, rather than a state composed of different nationalities such as Basque, Catalan, or Galician. In order to achieve their desired vision of the Spanish State, VOX advocates for the dissolution of the Autonomous Communities, claiming that they have weakened Spain both politically and economically. VOX argues that the autonomous communities have not positively affected Spanish society because it has encouraged separatist impulses, specifically in Catalonia. Another goal of VOX is to eliminate the political parties representing the nationalities within the Autonomous Communities, such as EAJ/PNV and EH Bildu in the Basque Country. However, those two goals are currently incompatible with the Spanish Constitution and would require a constitutional amendment.

VOX still has options to decrease the autonomy of the Autonomous Communities, such as eliminating competencies available to the autonomous communities. The Partido Popular will likely win the next national election with the support of VOX. VOX is ambitious but needs more support to rewrite the Spanish constitution. However, there are more straightforward options for them to roll back the autonomy of the autonomous communities and impose the Spanish state on the people in the communities.

## Table of Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| Abstract.....   | 1         |
| <b>Introduction.....</b>  | <b>2</b>  |
| Context.....  | 2         |
| VOX.....  | 4         |
| <b>Literature Review.....</b>   | <b>7</b>  |
| <i>Interviews</i> .....   | 7         |
| Interview 1.....  | 7         |
| Interview 2.....  | 9         |
| <i>Readings</i> .....   | 11        |
| Vox as representative of the radical right in Spain: A study of its ideology.....             | 11        |
| The extreme right in the Basque Country: Discourse and tools for approaching citizenship..... | 12        |
| Explaining the end of Spanish exceptionalism and electoral support for Vox.....               | 14        |
| <b>Methodology.....</b>   | <b>16</b> |
| <b>Findings.....</b>  | <b>18</b> |
| <b>Conclusion.....</b>  | <b>23</b> |
| <b>Reference List.....</b>  | <b>25</b> |

## Introduction

### Context

Right-wing politics have a dark history in Spain. Spain spent the better part of the twentieth century under military dictatorships. In the 1920s, Miguel Primo de Rivera, backed by King Alfonso XIII and the army, committed a coup against the First Republic<sup>1</sup>. Rivera's government cracked down on dissent, including in the Basque Country, actively suppressing the independence movements. Following the death of Miguel Primo de Rivera, his son, José Antonio

---

<sup>1</sup> Helen Gharam, *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6,

<https://books.google.es/books?id=DawJAgAAQBAJ&lpg=PP9&dq=spanish%20civil%20war&lr&pg=PA1#v=onepage&q=spanish%20civil%20war&f=false>.

Primo de Rivera, was an important figure in the rise of Spanish fascism. The Second Spanish Republic, which was formed after Miguel Primo de Rivera's dictatorship, was short-lived. In 1936, the bloody Spanish Civil War began ending in 1939 with the defeat of the Republicans, the forces of the Second Republic, and their allies<sup>2</sup>. Francisco Franco, the most prominent of the military junta that overthrew the Second Republic, became the Fascist Dictator of Spain. Franco was a supreme believer in Spanish Nationalism.

Spanish Nationalism, the type that Franco subscribed to and many VOX politicians subscribe to today, comes from the Spanish Empire's collapse<sup>3</sup>. The Spanish Empire was a dominant force for hundreds of years and had territory throughout the world; however, most of the Empire's wealth came from its territories in the New World. The Spanish-American wars of independence began the decline of the Spanish Empire in the New World, culminating in the Spanish-American War, which ended Spain's overseas Empire in the Americas and its holdings in the Pacific.

The loss of the Spanish Empire weighed heavily on young Spanish officers, including young Francisco Franco, who entered the military academy in 1907<sup>4</sup>. Franco and other young officers began to see themselves as defenders of Spanish unity and historical greatness. Franco was promoted to the rank of general in 1926 at the age of 33 by Miguel Primo de Rivera, making Franco the youngest general in Europe. Today, VOX has taken the mantle of the defenders of Spanish unity and historical greatness. Led by Santiago Abascal, VOX is Spain's latest incarnation of the far-right. After the death of Franco in 1975 and the creation of the modern

---

<sup>2</sup> Gharam, *The Spanish Civil War*, 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Gharam, *The Spanish Civil War*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Gharam, *The Spanish Civil War*, 3.

Spanish State, Spain avoided the far-right governments that gained fashion throughout Europe in what is known as Iberian Exceptionalism. Iberian Exceptionalism was challenged by the financial crisis of 2010, which caused a global recession leading to a collapse in the trust in political systems and setting off a global wave of alternative left-wing and right-wing parties. However, no far-right parties emerged from the 2010 financial crisis. Far-right policy proposals were not attractive in Spain. Instead, VOX emerged almost a decade later from a territorial conflict in Spain<sup>5</sup>.

### **Origins of VOX**

VOX was founded in 2013 as an offshoot of the center-right Popular Party; In 2014, VOX ran for seats in an election for the first time. However, these were European Elections, not Spanish Elections. While the candidate, Alejo Vidal-Quadras, was not elected to the European Parliament, he was only 2,000 votes from winning a seat. Alejo Vidal-Quadra, the former Popular Party president of Catalonia, left the party several months later, clearing the way for Santiago Abascal to become the President of VOX. Abascal hails from the Basque Country. His father was the mayor of Amurrio in the Basque Country, which led to the family being repeatably threatened by ETA. ETA was an armed Basque Separatist group that carried out terrorist attacks in Spain from the 1960s to 2011. One of the critical tenets of VOX is political unity in Spain behind one Spanish state. VOX did not obtain electoral success until the elections in 2018. However, in 2017, Catalonia held an unsanctioned independence referendum which changed VOX's fortune. VOX benefited from the movement in Catalonia; "Spurred on by the secessionist crisis in Catalonia, the new formation gradually won momentum and surprised by

---

<sup>5</sup> Braulio Gomez, interviewed by Noah Halterman-Mitchell, Bilbao, December 29, 2022.

obtaining more than 10% of the votes and up to twelve seats in the Andalusian Parliament.<sup>6</sup> The elections in 2019 saw more success from the party, winning seats in the European Parliament as well as winning seats in various autonomous communities and municipalities.<sup>7</sup> VOX's success in

Vox electoral results since the day of its foundation

| Year | Elections                            | Votes %         | Seats/Councilmen |
|------|--------------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| 2014 | European                             | 244,929 1.56    | 0/54             |
| 2015 | Municipal                            | 64,385 0.29     | 22/67,515        |
| 2015 | Regional (10 autonomous communities) | 75,486 0.62     | 0/620            |
| 2015 | Regionals (Andalusia)                | 18,017 0.45     | 0/109            |
| 2015 | General                              | 58,114 0.23     | 0/350            |
| 2016 | General                              | 47,182 0.20     | 774 0/350        |
| 2016 | Regionals (Basque Country)           | 0.07 395.978    | 0/75             |
| 2018 | Regionals (Andalusia)                | 10.97 278.947   | 12/109           |
| 2019 | Regional (Valencian Courts)          | 10.44 2,664.325 | 10/99            |
| 2019 | General                              | 10.26 1,388.681 | 24/350           |
| 2019 | European                             | 6.20 684.312    | 6.67 3/54        |
| 2019 | Regional (14 autonomous communities) | 6.67 659.736    | 2 35/767         |
| 2019 | Municipal                            | .90             | 530/66,787       |

Source: Carles Ferreira

recent elections has seen them gain a significant amount of power in the government. The center-right Popular Party is likely to win the next set of elections, not with an outright majority,

instead forming a coalition government with VOX.<sup>8</sup> Even if they do not win enough seats to govern, VOX will gain many seats in regional elections, possibly even gaining control of regional parliaments, which they achieved for the first time in 2022, forming a coalition

<sup>6</sup> Carles Ferreira, "Vox como representante de la derecha radical en España: un estudio sobre su ideología," *Revista Española de Ciencia Política*, no. 51, (November 2019): 77,

<https://doi.org/10.21308/recp.51.03>.

<sup>7</sup> Ferreira, "Vox como representante de la derecha radical en España," 77.

<sup>8</sup> Guy Hedgecoe, "Spain's far-right Vox eye share of power in Madrid," *BBC*, May 2, 2021,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56941202>.

government in Castilla y León with the Popular Party.<sup>9</sup> The rise of a far-right party is a new phenomenon in modern Spanish politics. VOX wants to radically reform the constitution and remake the government into a strong unitary state. While they have yet to gain enough support to win a majority in Madrid, they could be a coalition government member.

In this paper, I aim to answer the following question: How can VOX roll back regional autonomy in the Basque Country, and what methods could they use? The objectives of this paper are first to analyze the manifestos that VOX has released at the Regional Level, National Level, and EU Level to determine their ideal path for eliminating regional autonomy and imposing the Spanish State on Autonomous Communities. Second, explore the process of passing laws under the Spanish Parliamentary system and how the constitution is amended or rewritten. Third, explore what VOX decisions could make as a member of a minority member of a coalition government. Lastly, examine how the rollback of regional autonomy would affect the people living in the Basque Country. Regional autonomy has allowed the Basque Country to create a strong welfare state, efficient public transportation, and revitalize the Basque language and culture. I hope my study will contribute to the literature surrounding the growing far-right movement in Spain and globally and how these parties' actions affect the lives of everyday citizens.

---

<sup>9</sup> Sam Jones, "Spain's far-right Vox breaks through into regional government," *The Guardian*, March 10, 2022,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/10/spain-far-right-vox-regional-government-castilla-y-leon-peoples-party-deal>.



## Literature Review

### Interviews

Two interviews were conducted as a part of the project. These interviews provide a deep dive into the issues that VOX care about, what VOX's objectives are, and how they would carry out their objectives. The first interview discusses what VOX cares about, its electoral success, and the cultural impact VOX has had on Spanish society. The second interview talks about how VOX would achieve its desired changes. The two interviews were conducted informally with prepared questions and unprepared questions.

#### Interview 1

The first interview I conducted was with Braulio Gomez, a professor at the University of Deusto. Professor Gomez works on the Manifesto Project, a project that quantitatively analyzes the content of political manifestos throughout Europe. When asked about how the financial crisis of 2010 and the Catalanian referendum affected the rise of VOX, Professor Gomez explained that after the 2010 recession, Spain did not see the creation of a far-right party like many other parts of Europe. There was no willingness to create a far-right party because the traditional proposals offered by a far-right European Party were not popular in Spain.<sup>10</sup> However, in 2017 the Catalan conflict came to a head. Catalonia tried to hold an independence referendum, but the referendum was deemed illegal by the Spanish state. The referendum created a significant movement against secession within Spain. The leaders of the Spanish government, both the majority and minority, “filled the neighborhoods of Spanish cities with Spanish flags on the terraces and windows.”<sup>11</sup> Professor Gomez points out that the public display of Spanish flags was

---

<sup>10</sup> Braulio Gomez, interviewed by Noah Halterman-Mitchell, Bilbao, December 29, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Gomez, interview

not typical in Spain since the dictatorship, “and for the first time in the democracy, you could walk down the street and see Spanish flags.<sup>12</sup>” VOX sees itself as the defender of Spain. They want to increase police and military presence to discourage independence.

Looking at VOX through the lens of supply and demand is possible. Prior to the Catalanian push for independence, VOX was supplying the traditional far-right European policy proposals such as anti-immigration and Euroskepticism, but there was no demand in Spain for these types of policies. However, after the push for independence in Catalonia, there was a demand for Spanish nationalism, which VOX supplied. VOX’s power comes from cultural struggles. Continuing, Professor Gomez explained that while there is not currently a centerstage territorial conflict in Spain, VOX draws its support from people with traditional values, such as Catholics. A critical point that Professor Gomez emphasized is that Francoism is very unpopular in Spain; it is not a popular movement. However, some values associated with Franco and his dictatorship are still heavily supported by the conservative parts of society. Professor Gomez says, “VOX is not interested in talking about Franco because they see it does not bring electoral results.<sup>13</sup>”

Finally, Professor Gomez talked about how the Basque Country has no appetite for VOX. The Basque Country is one of the most left-leaning parts of Europe. The ideas that VOX presents are not popular in the Basque Country. While they are not actively seeking independence, the Basque Country's autonomy is significant to its citizens. There would be minimal support within the Basque Country to relinquish that power to the central government. VOX relies heavily on language that promotes Spanish nationalism, an idea that is not popular in the Basque Country.

---

<sup>12</sup> Gomez, interview

<sup>13</sup> Gomez, interview

There are seventy-five seats in the Basque Country's parliament; VOX has one. Additionally, there are 350 seats in the Spain Congress of Deputies and 266 in the Spanish Senate. In Congress, VOX has fifty-two seats, and in the Senate, they have three. If VOX wants to change the Constitution regarding regional autonomy, it will have to find a way to eliminate the Basque Country from the conversation. Otherwise, it will not be able to effectively change anything because the party has no foothold in the Basque Country, nor will it gain any group. VOX must also gain a significant amount of support in the Spanish Parliament.

## **Interview 2**

The second interview was conducted with Marco Aparicio, a constitutional law professor at the University of Girona. Professor Aparicio answered questions about the constitutional processes that VOX could take to restructure or eliminate the regional autonomy of the Basque Country. The interview began with how the amendment process works in Spain. The Spanish Constitution has no amendment prohibitions. However, there are two ways that constitutional amendments are passed. The procedures for amending the constitution are under article 167 and article 168; each article corresponds to different sections of the constitution. Autonomous communities fall under Article 2 of the constitution and must be amended by the procedures outlined in article 168, total revision.

Article 168 requires a much more lengthy process that involves getting a two-thirds majority in both houses of the Spanish Parliament, followed by a dissolution of the house, new elections are held, and the new congress must ratify the amendment with a two-thirds majority after ratification a referendum is held, and the amendment must be approved. This procedure is arduous because “it is touching the decentralization of the political power.”<sup>14</sup> Reorganizing the

---

<sup>14</sup> Marco Aparicio, interview by Noah Halterman-Mitchell, Virtual, December 30, 2022.

competencies assigned to the central and regional governments is a more straightforward process. The procedures for this type of reform are found in article 167. Article 167 requires a three-fifths majority in each of the houses of the Spanish Parliament.

While the article 167 procedure is not a complete elimination of the autonomous communities, it allows “you to change big, big decisions in the constitution in terms of what competencies the central state has and what type of competencies the autonomous communities have.”<sup>15</sup> Reforming the part of the constitution that determines the division of competencies is a much easier process than a total rewrite of the constitution eliminating the autonomous communities. The Spanish State has devolved some of its powers to the autonomous communities. This process of transferring competencies is found in article 150 of the constitution. Competences can be taken back by the central parliament any time they want by changing the produces of the competence transfer. Competiencies can also be taken back through organic laws passed by the Spanish Parliament<sup>16</sup>. Article 150 makes the country more federal because all of the powers of the central state can be transferred to autonomous communities.

At the end of the interview, Professor Aparicio summarized his points in a statement. There are simple ways that the constitution can be amended to reduce the power of autonomous communities. Connecting the article to the other interview and the other articles, it becomes clear that if VOX gains enough power, it can drastically change the power the autonomous communities hold. Currently, VOX does not have a majority in either of the houses of the Spanish Parliament, but it could soon. The socialist party currently in power is projected to lose the elections in 2023, and political pundits are guessing that the Popular Party and VOX will

---

<sup>15</sup> Aparicio, interview

<sup>16</sup> Aparicio, interview

form a coalition government. In this scenario, VOX could pressure the Popular Party into passing bills that reduce the regional autonomy of the Basque Country in exchange for their votes in a coalition.

### Readings

#### **Vox as representative of the radical right in Spain: A study of its ideology**

This article, written in 2019, is a detailed examination of the ideological characteristics of VOX and how it fits into the tendencies of the typical far-right party. The first ideological component of VOX discussed in the article is nationalism. Kent writes, “An unapologetic nationalism is the backbone and is constantly present in the discourse, proposals, and scenery of VOX.<sup>17</sup>” VOX wants to eliminate the autonomous communities because it sees them as a threat to a mononational Spanish state. Another measure that VOX has proposed is to ban political parties and organizations that support independence, explicitly targeting the three historical communities: Catalonia, The Basque Country, and Galicia. The paper lays out other ideological aspects of VOX, such as nativism, authoritarianism, anti-democracy, populism, traditional values, and neoliberalism.

However, Kent makes sure to separate VOX from other European far-right parties by explaining that VOX does not have strong anti-democratic or populist tendencies. First, Kent argues that while VOX is eager to eliminate the autonomous communities, an anti-democratic policy goal, “they do not use violent methods to achieve political ends and implicitly support the

---

<sup>17</sup> Carles Ferreira, “Vox como representante de la derecha radical en España: un estudio sobre su ideología,” *Revista Española de Ciencia Política*, no. 51, (November 2019): 77, <https://doi.org/10.21308/recp.51.03>. <https://doi.org/10.21308/recp.51.03>.

majority principle and popular sovereignty as the source of political power.<sup>18</sup> Second, populism is not central to VOX's political discourse. VOX does not appeal to "the people" or rail against corruption and the "elites" like most European far-right parties. Instead, VOX appeals to Spain. The "elites" have not betrayed the people "they have betrayed Spain."<sup>19</sup> Kent's article does an excellent job of laying out the history of VOX and its motivations.

### **The extreme right in the Basque Country: Discourse and tools for approaching citizenship**

The author, Ariane Gomez, uses quantitative analysis to determine the agenda of VOX. Using different texts, such as speeches, manifestos, interviews, and Twitter, the author compiled the language VOX uses for its electoral message. Nationalism and centralization are vital components of VOX's message, especially in the Basque Country. Nationalism and centralization accounted for "31.75% of the content analyzed"<sup>20</sup> in the project. The 31.75% figure can be broken down into smaller categories such as Basque anti-nationalism, Castilian defense, centralization, and Spanish Nationalism. Basque anti-nationalism and Castilian defense comprise the two most significant portions, with 11.98% and 10.78%, respectively.<sup>21</sup> Basque autonomy, and by extension, the institutions of the Basque political system, is seen as a threat to a robust Spanish State by VOX.

---

<sup>18</sup> Ferreira, "Vox como representante de la derecha radical en España," 89.

<sup>19</sup> Ferreira, "Vox como representante de la derecha radical en España," 90.

<sup>20</sup> Ariane Hoyos, "The extreme right in the Basque Country: Discourse and tools for approaching citizenship," (Final Degree Project., Universidad de Deusto), 24.

<sup>21</sup> Hoyos, "The extreme right in the Basque Country," 25.

The Basque language and other parts of Basque culture are not meant to be a protected part of Spanish culture in the eyes of VOX. Amaia Martínez, the only member of VOX in the Basque Parliament, said in a speech in 2020, "so that In this Parliament, after such a long time, a phrase is heard once again: long live Spain!"<sup>22</sup> Gomez uses the language, including the language from this speech, to paint a picture of VOX, a party whose primary rhetorical tool is appealing to people who want a unified Spanish identity that lacks cultural elements of the culturally distinct parts of Spain. Drawing on controversial movements in Catalonia, VOX amassed large amounts of support from people in the Southern parts of Spain who opposed Catalan independence. While the Basque country does not have a strong independence movement and is not actively pushing for independence, VOX has issues with the Basque nationalist parties, EH Bildu, and PNV. Gomez points out that VOX uses ETA as a weapon against Basque autonomy. Using another quote from Amaia Martínez, where Martínez argues that they should "Illegalize the heirs of ETA,"<sup>23</sup> Gomez points out that EH Bildu and PNV are the most popular parties in the Basque Country, which in VOX's view, is a threat to the Spanish state.

This paper provides essential insight into VOX. How a political party communicates is essential to persuading voters to vote for them. VOX was not a popular party before the crisis in Catalonia. They do not have a powerful economic message but focus on cultural struggles, such as independence, women's equality, and LGBTQ+ issues. Cultural issues have proved influential recently across the globe due to relative economic stability and growth prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the pandemic and war in Ukraine have created a global economic crisis, and the party lacks a distinct economic message.

---

<sup>22</sup> Hoyos, "The extreme right in the Basque Country," 25.

<sup>23</sup> Hoyos, "The extreme right in the Basque Country," 26.

## Explaining the end of Spanish exceptionalism and electoral support for Vox

In this article, the author, Stuart J. Turnbull-Dugarte, empirically demonstrates that voters who express support for curtailing regional autonomy are more likely to vote for VOX. In his



Source: Stuart J. Turnbull-Dugarte

research, Turnbull-Dugarte found that there was little evidence that people who voted for VOX were driven by discontent with specific political leaders in the 2018 election in

Andalusia or leaders in the national Spanish Parliament, rather voters were influenced by the contemporary political issue, Catalan independence.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, “The results show that former PP and Ciudadanos voters are driven to Vox largely by their left–right ideological preferences as well as their support for reduced autonomous independence.<sup>25</sup>” The number of voters who switched parties from the Popular Party or Ciudadanos was not insignificant. The

<sup>24</sup> Stuart J. Turnbull-Dugarte, “Explaining the end of Spanish exceptionalism and electoral support for Vox,” *Research and Politics*, April-June (2019):5-6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168019851680>.

<sup>25</sup> Turnbull-Dugarte, “Explaining the end of Spanish exceptionalism,” 6.



probability that a person who was in favor of reducing the power given to the autonomous communities voted for VOX was eight percentage points.<sup>26</sup> Right-wing voters were not loyal to their parties, a not insignificant chunk of voters switched to VOX over a single issue, territorial divisions. VOX's message is successful when there are issues that allow them to rely on their nationalist message.

The article also highlights a point the other articles have mentioned. VOX is not a typical right-wing European political party. For example, "concerns over immigration do not have an independent effect on support for Vox."<sup>27</sup> There are many possible reasons why VOX does not espouse typical right-wing messages. Connecting this data to the interview with Professor Braulio Gomez, one possible explanation could be that VOX is a new political party with a particular message. The party did not form in the aftermath of the financial crisis, so there is no populist message, nor did the party have a significant influence during the refugee crisis in the mid-2010s.

Throughout the readings, one point keeps being repeated. VOX's electoral success comes from its promotion of Spanish nationalism in response to the independence crisis in Catalonia. VOX has been able to ride the wave of discontent to a rapidly growing number of seats in regional and national elections. Nationalist sentiments have encouraged large numbers of conservative voters who previously voted for the other conservative parties to vote for VOX.

---

<sup>26</sup> Turnbull-Dugarte, "Explaining the end of Spanish exceptionalism," 6.

<sup>27</sup> Turnbull-Dugarte, "Explaining the end of Spanish exceptionalism," 7.

VOX has made its objectives clear: it will spend most of its energy (31.75%)<sup>28</sup> on causes related to restricting regional autonomy.

### **Methodology**

In setting out to do this research project, my advisors were beneficial in pointing me to resources to read and people to interview. Last year, I researched right-wing populism in the United States and ran into a similar problem with this project. Right-wing populism, in its current form, is a new phenomenon, and there is not much scholarship on the subject.

Thankfully, my advisors could point me to articles and recently published data that allowed me to delve deeper into the topic. The articles provided qualitative and quantitative analysis of VOX's ideology and its electoral success. There was a lot of information about what VOX wanted to achieve but little about how they would achieve their goals, which was why I needed to speak to a constitutional law professor.

The interviews were essential to my research because they helped tie together everything I had researched prior to the interviews. My first interview was with Braulio Gomez, a professor at the University of Deusto and a member of the manifesto project. Professor Gomez helped me gain context about the rise of VOX and helped me fit together all of the articles that I read prior, which allowed me to synthesize the relevant information into a clear argument: VOX's success is based on nationalism, and they have one main goal Spanish unity. My second interview was conducted with a constitutional law professor from the University of Deusto, Marco Aparicio. Professor Aparicio was instrumental in helping me understand how VOX would achieve any of the goals they promised. The questions that I asked professor Aparicio were all related to the

---

<sup>28</sup> Ariane Hoyos, "The extreme right in the Basque Country: Discourse and tools for approaching citizenship" (Final Degree Project., Universidad de Deusto), 24.

powersharing agreements in the constitution and how they can be modified. The conversation primarily drove my first interview because professor Gomez answered most of my questions with his first answer. The second interview was much more scripted. Before the interviews, I asked each subject to sign a consent form and had professor Aparicio give verbal consent on the recording because the interview was conducted virtually over the video conference platform Zoom. The interviews were conducted informally, and professor Gomez answered the questions in Spanish to help me practice my language skills.

The limitations of my study were time constraints and the lack of research into the field of study. Time constraints were a significant limitation of my study. Initially, my objective was to interview members of the Spanish Parliament and Basque Parliament to better understand the legislative process and objectives of the parties with legislative duties. However, time constraints did not allow me to conduct a large number of interviews as I needed more time to prepare or conduct interviews in different parts of the country. The second limitation I encountered was the lack of information on my topic. Most of the research about VOX is about their discourse or their rise to power. Both topics are relevant to my study, but more research must be conducted about VOX's plan after they gain power. VOX has a list of priorities regarding reigning in the power of autonomous communities, but there is little to no research on how VOX would achieve that goal. VOX is a far-right party that advocates for the dissolution of a fundamental part of the Spanish constitutional system. The party also advocates for other policies restricting Spanish citizens' rights. Spain is no longer free of far-right influence in its political system. All of these subjects are heavily documented. Researchers have not taken it upon themselves to research the legal and cultural effects of a VOX victory in the Spanish Parliament or the effects of VOX joining a coalition government with a moderate right-wing party such as the Popular Party.

## Findings

The findings of the research outline the possible steps VOX could take to limit regional autonomy in the Basque Country entirely or partially limit the region's autonomy. In order to understand the process that VOX could undertake to limit regional autonomy, there needs to be an understanding as to why VOX wants to limit autonomy. VOX is Spain's first incarnation of a far-right party in its modern democratic era. The current Spanish government is the third attempt at democracy, and the first two attempts were marked by coups that led to dictatorships. The second dictatorship, under Francisco Franco, lasted for almost forty years. Franco was a brutal dictator who suppressed the autonomy granted to the Basque Country during the Second Republic. Franco's dictatorship was marked by many of the same policies VOX wishes to implement today. However, it is important to note that VOX is not a Francist party. Francoism is unpopular in Spain and does not lead to electoral results. However, the traditional values and nationalism often associated with Franco do deliver results<sup>29</sup>.

VOX's fundamental identity is a Spanish nationalist party. The first line of VOX's political manifesto is "VOX is a political project for the renewal and strengthening of Spanish democratic life with the aim of uniting the Nation."<sup>30</sup> Spain is a multinational country. There are historical communities in Spain with traditions and languages separate from the "Spanish" culture, for example, the Basque Country, where they speak Basque, and Catalonia, where they speak Catalan. The Statutes of autonomy allow the autonomous communities to designate the historical languages as official languages within the territory of the autonomous community.

---

<sup>29</sup> Braulio Gomez, interviewed by Noah Halterman-Mitchell, Bilbao, December 29, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> "Founding Manifesto," VOX, nd,  
<https://www.voxespana.es/espana/manifiesto-fundacional-vox>.

Autonomous communities also have power over education. In the Basque Country, there are three learning models; each is taught with different amounts of co-official languages.

For hundreds of years, the Basque Country was a part of the Kingdom of Castile, and the Kingdom of Castile respected the laws of the Basque Country. The system of *fueros*, or local Basque Laws, lasted almost 700 years.<sup>31</sup> The *fueros* were officially abolished in 1876, two years into the start of the First Republic. However, the new Spanish Republic did not understand the Basque taxation system, so they charged the provinces with collecting taxes. The provinces were then required to pay a small percentage of the taxes to the Spanish government. Initially, the agreement was supposed to be temporary, but the system worked so well that it was never abolished. During Franco's dictatorship, the provinces of Biscay and Gipuskua lost the agreements because they opposed Franco during the Spanish Civil War, while Alava and Navarre were allowed to keep their agreements because they did not oppose Franco.<sup>32</sup> Navarre, while not part of the present-day Basque Country, the territory is historically a part of the Basque-speaking region. The system was restored to the Basque Country in 1980 under the new democratic regime and is known as the *Concierto Economico*. The *Concierto Economico* has allowed the Basque Country to create a robust social welfare system and efficient public services. Quality of life improvements that the Basque Country is benefitted from to a great extent.<sup>33</sup> Not only has the

---

<sup>31</sup> José Romón Intxaurbe, "The Basque Model of Regional Autonomy" (lecture, Deusto University, Bilbao, Spain, September 20, 2022).

<sup>32</sup> José Romón Intxaurbe, "The Basque Model of Regional Autonomy."

<sup>33</sup> Roberto San Salvador del Valle, "Bilbao Case Study" (lecture, Deusto University, Bilbao, Spain, September 15, 2022).

Concierto Economic improved the quality of life for citizens of the Basque Country, but it has also made the region less dependent on the Spanish government.

VOX opposes the Concierto Economico because it grants the Basque Country a significant amount of authority over the region's affairs and is directly in opposition because of its ideal centralized government that would collect taxes from the citizens of every autonomous community. The process of eliminating the Conceirto Economico is a process that would be incredibly difficult for VOX to achieve. Article 2 of the Spanish Constitution enshrines the right of autonomous communities to exist in the constitution. Additional Provision One respects the fueros system, which includes the Concierto Economico. The Concierto Economico is a bilateral agreement between the Basque Country and the Spanish government.<sup>34</sup> Meaning neither side can terminate the agreement without the other side's permission. Additionally, the agreement is indefinite. The Basque Government would never vote to end the agreement because of the high standard of living that it has brought to the Basque citizens, nor will VOX ever gain a majority of the seats in the Basque legislature to force the change themselves because VOX is not a popular party in the region.

In order to eliminate the Concierto Economico, VOX would have to propose and pass a constitutional amendment. There are two ways to amend the constitution; they are outlined in Articles 167 and 168.<sup>35</sup> Changing or getting rid of the economic agreement would be a rewrite of Article 2 of the Spanish constitution, requiring a rewrite under the terms laid out in Article 168, the stricter rewrite. The proposed amendment would have to be voted on and receive a two-thirds

---

<sup>34</sup> José Romón Intxaurre, “The Basque Model of Regional Autonomy” (lecture, Deusto University, Bilbao, Spain, September 20, 2022).

<sup>35</sup> Marco Aparicio, interview by Noah Halterman-Mitchell, Virtual, December 30, 2022.

majority vote in both houses of the legislature. If the amendment receives a two-thirds majority, the Parliament is dissolved, and new elections are held. The new Parliament must ratify the amendment with a two-thirds majority in both houses. In the last step, if the amendment is approved through all of these aforementioned steps, a referendum is called for, and the amendment must receive majority approval from the electorate.<sup>36</sup> The process is long and complicated. While VOX is expected to have some control over the government as a minority member of a coalition after the elections in 2023, the likelihood that VOX would have enough support to carry out a plan to reform Article 2 is improbable.<sup>37</sup> Not only would they have to get a two-thirds majority in one round of elections, but they would have to get a two-thirds majority after a second election.

There is an easier path for VOX to take to eliminate regional autonomy. VOX can amend the constitution to take competencies away from the autonomous communities. Articles 148 and 149 outline the division of power between the Spanish central government and the governments of the autonomous communities.<sup>38</sup> The powers given to the autonomous communities are exclusive to the autonomous regions; the government can not legislate in these areas. In order to centralize power, VOX could take away the competencies that the autonomous regions can use to govern. The process of taking away the competencies requires fewer steps and smaller vote majorities. Using an Article 167 amendment, VOX could take away whichever competence they wanted with a three-fifths majority vote in each of the houses of the Spanish Parliament. There

---

<sup>36</sup> Aparicio, interview.

<sup>37</sup> Guy Hedecoe, "Spain's far-right Vox eye share of power in Madrid," BBC, May 2, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56941202>.

<sup>38</sup> Marco Aparicio, interview by Noah Halterman-Mitchell, Virtual, December 30, 2022.

are 350 deputies and 265 senators in the Spanish Parliament.<sup>39</sup> A three-fifths majority possibility for VOX to achieve if it were to create a deal with the other right-wing parties, but the right-wing parties would have to pick up a large number of seats in the next election for this to be a possibility.

The powers of the autonomous communities may not be transferable, but the powers granted to the Spanish central government can be transferred to the autonomous communities. Over the years, competencies such as public safety and prisons have been devolved to the level of the autonomous communities. If the Spanish central government wanted to take these powers back, achieving that goal is the most straightforward process for removing some power from the autonomous communities. Competence transfers are regulated under Article 150 of the Spanish constitution. The transfer of competencies is an organic law, not an amendment to the Spanish constitution; therefore, the process is not as rigorous. In order to pass an organic law, a bill must be passed with an absolute majority in Congress, or 176 out of 350 deputies.<sup>40</sup> While this is a small step that VOX could take, it would have an impact on the lives of the citizens in the Basque Country who have been used to being able to legislate certain areas of public policy.

VOX is a party with a rapidly growing base. The party was founded in 2013 and won no seats in the first election it participated in, which was the 2014 elections for the European Parliament. The party achieved little legislative success until 2018, when in the aftermath of the secession crisis in Catalonia, VOX gained a large number of seats in the Andalusian Parliament. The following year, VOX picked a number of seats in the Spanish National Parliament. In the 2018 election, people who supported limiting the power of the autonomous communities voted

---

<sup>39</sup> Aparicio, interview.

<sup>40</sup> Aparicio, interview.



for VOX by a margin of “eight percentage points.”<sup>41</sup> VOX is unlikely to achieve a majority in the legislature, but it could be a majority member in a coalition able to pass legislation affecting the autonomous communities.

### **Conclusion**

The ascension of VOX to a position where it could achieve legislative majorities would have a devastating impact on regional autonomy in Spain. VOX has a clear goal: to create a mononational Spanish State. In this State, regional autonomy would not exist, nor would the unique identities of each autonomous community. Many of the reforms that VOX hopes to achieve are unlikely to happen due to the requirements of the Spanish Constitution, but there are still avenues that VOX could take advantage of to limit the autonomy of the regions severely. Completely getting rid of the autonomous communities would be very difficult. The processes require too many votes. However, the other two options, removing all of the competencies from the autonomous communities and taking back the competencies delegated to the autonomous communities, are possible and would significantly impact the Spanish political system. With a big enough majority, VOX could take away all the competencies in the Basque Country, leaving the autonomous community designation as merely ceremonial because it will have no power to legislate in any policy sector. VOX is an undemocratic party; they wish to limit the rights of people to express their cultural identities. The threat of VOX is growing, but VOX relies heavily on Spanish nationalism to gin up support. Territorial tensions have settled in Catalonia, and the Basque Country and Galicia do not have sizeable active independence movements. The

---

<sup>41</sup> Stuart J. Turnbull-Dugarte, “Explaining the end of Spanish exceptionalism and electoral support for Vox,” *Research and Politics*, April-June (2019):1-8,

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168019851680>.

COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have created an economic crisis in Europe. Inflation is causing millions of people to go hungry and go to bed cold because they can not afford to heat their homes. VOX does not have a solid economic message, and with priorities shifting to economic issues, VOX may have trouble maintaining its support throughout Spain. Nevertheless, a government where VOX is a majority or minority member of a coalition has the potential to impact the autonomous communities through several outlets, some being more likely than others but damaging nonetheless.

### Bibliography

- Ferreira, Carles. "Vox como representante de la derecha radical en España: un estudio sobre su ideología." *Revista Española de Ciencia Política*, no. 51, (November 2019): 73-98, <https://doi.org/10.21308/recp.51.03>.
- "Founding Manifesto," VOX, nd, <https://www.voxespana.es/espana/manifiesto-fundacional-vox>.
- Gharam, Helen. *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. <https://books.google.es/books?id=DawJAgAAQBAJ&lpg=PP9&dq=spanish%20civil%20war&lr&pg=PA1#v=onepage&q=spanish%20civil%20war&f=false>.
- Hedgecoe, Guy. "Spain's far-right Vox eye share of power in Madrid." BBC, May 2, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56941202>.
- Hoyos, Ariane. "The extreme right in the Basque Country: Discourse and tools for approaching citizenship." (Final Degree Project., Universidad de Deusto), 1-47.
- Intxaurbe, José Romón. "The Basque Model of Regional Autonomy." (lecture, Deusto University, Bilbao, Spain, September 20, 2022).
- Jones, Sam. "Spain's far-right Vox breaks through into regional government." The Guardian, March 10, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/10/spain-far-right-vox-regional-government-castilla-y-leon-peoples-party-deal>.
- San Salvador del Valle, Roberto. "Bilbao Case Study" (lecture, Deusto University, Bilbao, Spain, September 15, 2022).

Turnbull-Dugarte, Stuart J. “Explaining the end of Spanish exceptionalism and electoral support for Vox.” *Research and Politics*, April-June (2019):1-8,

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168019851680>.