

Blitzkrieg Against Democracy: Gender Equality and the Rise of the Populist Radical Right in Spain

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Populist radical right parties (PRRPs) are generally considered detrimental to democracy. Research on their damaging potential tends to focus on their influence in triggering policy backsliding but leaves the promotion of gender equality out of the equation. This study explores the case of Vox in Andalusia, a southern region of Spain, to show how PRRPs also contribute to de-democratization through their capacity to erode the equality framework. We demonstrate how they can effectively dismantle and reframe crucial policies, even when not in office. This opens new analytical pathways for studying the role of PRRPs in undermining democratic systems.

Introduction

Populist radical right parties (PRRPs) have long been considered a threat to liberal democracy (Akkerman 2003; Campani and Pajnik 2017; Mudde 2016). Their electoral upsurge has raised concerns over their impact on constitutional checks and balances. These groups tend to apply an exclusionary conceptualization of “the people” that is thought to jeopardize minority rights and liberal values, such as equality and diversity. Recent scholarly works highlight the need to develop a research agenda that scrutinizes the policy influence of PRRPs in order to grasp “the real threat they might represent” (Biard 2019, 165). Exploring their effectiveness in triggering policy change makes it possible to capture their capacity for promoting de-democratization, even from outside government. However, focusing on topics in which PRRPs enjoy *ownership* leaves other relevant issues out of the equation (Biard, Bernhard, and Betz 2019).

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By incorporating a gender lens, this study opens new analytical pathways for examining the role of PRRPs in undermining democratic systems. Gender equality now constitutes a core value of liberal democracy (Isaac 2017). The development of policies to promote the descriptive and substantive representation of women is a crucial component of democratization processes (McBride and Mazur 2010; Paxton 2008; Waylen 2015). However, recent scholarly debates often sideline the erosion of the equality framework as an indicator of de-democratization (Kováts 2020; Krizsán and Roggeband 2018; Verloo and Paternotte 2018). Currently, PRRPs constitute key opposition to equality policies in several countries and at various levels of government (Kantola and Lombardo 2020). But the actual influence of PRRPs in bringing about policy change from outside government has yet to be carefully scrutinized.

This article seeks to fill these gaps. We draw from Tilly's work in considering that state inaction to prevent inequality is central to capturing moves toward de-democratization (Tilly 2007). Accordingly, we argue that identifying setbacks in the equality framework is crucial to apprehending such processes and will provide better understanding of the role of PRRPs in eroding democracies. To explore this hypothesis, we studied the case of Vox in Andalusia, southern Spain. This PRRP recently put an end to "Spanish exceptionalism" (Turnbull-Dugarte 2019). Though not in office, the party has shown clear resolve to use their leverage to erode the existing policy framework. The *inclusive strategy* of the mainstream right, which enjoys Vox's parliamentary support in several key institutions, may well facilitate policy influence (Biard, Bernhard, and Betz 2019). Thus, the research question that guides our study is: what influence does Vox have to bring about changes in equality policies and push toward de-democratization?

The Autonomous Community of Andalusia offers suitable empirical material for our case study. Spain is a highly decentralized state where regional institutions enjoy significant competencies, notably in welfare provision (Verge and Alonso 2020). They are also crucial for understanding the multilevel nature of the party system in this country. Andalusia was the first territory in Spain to experience the electoral success of Vox, which entered the regional parliament in December 2018, four months before the party's emergence at the state level. In January 2019, the party signed an agreement of parliamentary support for the new Andalusian coalition government comprising the two mainstream right-wing parties, the Partido Popular (PP) and Ciudadanos (Cs). That agreement has since been replicated in several regions and speaks for the current centrality of Vox in Spanish politics. Andalusia also has a stable, well-developed equality framework and has been a gender equality forerunner in the quasi-federal Spanish setting (Verge and Alonso 2020). The context therefore provides potential for both policy resilience and policy backsliding.

The work of [Krizsán and Roggeband \(2018\)](#) provided the dimensions for identifying specific indicators of policy backsliding. First, we sought to determine if Vox has developed discursive strategies to openly delegitimize the equality framework, along similar lines with other PRRPs ([Kantola and Lombardo 2020](#)). Second, we looked for the presence of policy influence, which is understood here as any action by PRRPs that influence policymaking with the aim of translating a pledge into a decision ([Biard 2019](#)). The study was designed to provide instances that demonstrate the capacity of Vox to induce various changes in Andalusian equality policies, from reorienting goals to eroding consultation mechanisms. The empirical material was obtained through documentary analysis of party manifestos, parliamentary interventions, interparty agreements, and annual budgets, from December 2018, when the Andalusian elections were held, to December 2019. Seven in-depth interviews with key informants were carried out from September 2019 to February 2020 to provide complementary information on the period analyzed.

Following on from this introduction, the theoretical framework and our case study are presented in the second and third sections. The fourth section introduces the methodology that underpins this work and offers two sections of novel empirical analysis that explore Vox's discursive strategies and examples of their policy influence. The conclusion assesses the crucial role of the PRRPs and highlights the need to include a gender perspective in democratization studies.

De-democratization Processes and the Populist Radical Right

Scholarly debate is ongoing around the idea that the enemy of liberal democracy is not so much the PRRPs as their policies. Researchers are giving increasing attention in understanding the capacity of PRRPs to influence mainstream parties and reorient goals and agendas, despite their rather limited electoral success ([Biard, Bernhard, and Betz 2019](#); [Odmalm and Hepburn 2017](#); [Röth, Afonso, and Spies 2018](#)). Immigration policies have become a prominent area of analysis, as they encapsulate the push toward a less inclusive democracy while connecting with core components of PRRP ideology ([Akkerman 2012](#)). Gender concerns, however, have remained on the periphery, even though anti-feminism and traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity are acknowledged as a common feature of the ideological underpinnings of PRRPs ([Mudde 2019](#); [Mudde and Kaltwasser 2015](#)). Crucial aspects of the discourse and political practice of these parties are often overlooked as studies lack a gender perspective ([Maiguashca 2019](#)).

Feminist analyses increasingly show the manner and the extent to which ideas about gender inform PRRP ideologies, and clear consensus is emerging regarding their centrality ([Akkerman 2015](#); [Erzeel and Rashkova 2017](#);

Norocel 2012; Sauer 2020). Spierings (2020) speaks of the pivotal role of gender in connecting the three core ideological components of PRRPs, as established by Mudde (2016): nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Accordingly, gender “allows for them to compliment people on being morally just about an area of life that is so deeply engraved in their identity, allude to a notion of order that normalizes differences, and at the same time use gender to showcase how the elite, who is pushing emancipation beyond the interests of the common man, is not effectively protecting emancipation from the threats posed by (immigrant or Muslim) outsiders” (Spierings 2020, 52). As an “empty” signifier, gender is easily instrumentalized or appropriated to pursue exclusionary practices and depict a nativist conceptualization of the “people” (Askola 2019; Hadj-Abdou 2019; Korolczuk and Graff 2018). The concept known as femonationalism best reflects this strategy (Sauer 2020; Spierings and Zaslove 2015; Verloo 2018a). This discourse frames gender equality as a principle to be protected from the “patriarchal other” and helps normalize and modernize PRRPs (Erzeel and Rashkova 2017; Norocel 2017) by presenting them as “champions of women’s rights” (Akkerman 2015, 39). This contributes to the *reputational shield* that makes them acceptable in current Western societies.

PRRP discourse depicts discrimination against women as a non-Western phenomenon that occurs elsewhere (Askola 2019; Spierings 2020; Verloo 2018a). Accordingly, they are generally reluctant to accept state promotion of equality. They claim that gender and equality policies have gone “too far” in subverting individual freedom and family values. Some nuances appear in the studies, which concede that context-specific factors such as variations in gender regime type might explain the presence of more modern approaches vis-à-vis more traditional ones (Askola 2019; De Lange and Mügge 2016; Spierings and Zaslove 2015). However, gender mainstreaming, gender studies, sexual education, and other elements are often considered as part of a feminist (and supposedly “totalitarian”) ideological project that should be eradicated (Verloo 2018a). Instead, PRRPs argue that attention should be given to family policies and issues relevant to combating pressing problems, such as the demographic decline in Europe (Hadj-Abdou 2019; Kantola and Lombardo 2019; Mayer, Ajanovic, and Sauer 2014). PRRPs are often integrated within a broader set of actors who actively oppose the equality framework (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018). Opposition is understood here as “any activity in which a perspective opposing feminist politics and gender + equality policy is articulated in a way that can be expected to influence or is actually influencing politics or policymaking at any stage” (Verloo 2018b, 215).

Exploring the actual success of PRRPs in shaping policies is therefore crucial (Askola 2019; Verloo 2018a). There is some evidence of their influence when they govern as single party (Kováts 2020; Krizsán and Roggeband 2018) or in coalition governments (Askola 2019; Hadj-Abdou 2019; Kantola and Lombardo 2019). However, very little is known about their *indirect* impact

(for an exception, see [Morgan 2017](#)), which is commonly reported when exploring other types of policies ([Biard 2019](#)). Demarcation through banning PRRPs or pushing for their marginalization by establishing a *cordon sanitaire* ([Casal-Bertoa and Rama 2021](#)) has become rather uncommon ([Akkerman, De Lange, and Rooduijn 2016](#)). Emerging research agendas stress that policy influence is related to the *inclusive approaches* of the mainstream parties, which help to normalize PRRPs. In all the potential collaboration scenarios, two conditions seem strongly connected to the ability of PRRPs to influence policy: (i) becoming a plausible electoral threat and (ii) signing a parliamentary support agreement with the party or parties in government ([Biard, Bernhard, and Betz 2019](#)). These provide significant *blackmailing potential* for reorienting goals and agendas ([Biard 2019](#)).

We argue that the impact of PRRPs on gender equality policies represents yet another vital threat to liberal democracy and needs further consideration. In line with [Tilly's \(2007\)](#) work, we understand that movements on the democratization/de-democratization continuum need to be informed by the prevalence of categorical inequalities amongst citizens, including gender. Thus, "to the extent that citizen–state interactions organize around categorical differences also prevailing in routine social life, those differences undermine broad, equal, protected, mutually binding consultation. They block or subvert democratic politics because they inevitably install large resource disparities in the political arena" ([Tilly 2007](#), 110). State action or inaction to promote equality thus becomes paramount in assessing evolution toward de-democratization.

Feminist scholarship has increasingly drawn on this assumption to address democratic decline from a gender perspective ([Alonso and Lombardo 2018](#)). Yet, few studies operationalize such processes at a policy level and look more closely at the equality framework ([Grzebalska and Petö 2018](#); [Krizsán and Roggeband 2018](#)). We argue that policy backsliding in promoting equality should be central to theorizing about de-democratization and assessing the role of nongoverning PRRPs. Here, we draw on [Krizsán and Roggeband's \(2018\)](#) pioneering contribution, which identifies moves toward less democratic states based on Pitkin's concepts of descriptive, substantive, and symbolic representation ([table 1](#)). Their typology involves three sets of indicators related to (i) delegitimizing gender equality policies, (ii) dismantling, reframing, and undermining their implementation, and (iii) eroding consultation mechanisms. The first dimension captures attempts to displace gender equality as a core goal of liberal democracy. In concordance with [Kantola and Lombardo \(2020, 4\)](#), we wanted to determine if discursive strategies to delegitimize equality policies are a crucial component of PRRP efforts to "influence the agenda-setting phase of policymaking and frame what is politically possible and legitimate." We were especially interested in discourses expressing *direct opposition* to existing equality policies, as they might limit the range of actions for mainstream parties.

Table 1. Dimensions for capturing policy backsliding

Symbolic representation	Discursive delegitimizing of gender equality goals ^a	Oppositional statements on gender equality made by high-level political actors, questioning the legitimacy of gender equality as a goal, and discrediting existing policies
Descriptive representation	Erosion of consultation mechanisms	Lack of involvement of women's rights advocates in policy processes beyond agenda-setting
Substantive representation	Policy dismantling and reframing	Dismantling existing policies or amending policies so that their priorities or objectives change
	Undermining implementation	Discontinuation of programs or lack of funding for policy implementation

Source: Authors, based on [Krizsán and Roggeband \(2018\)](#).

^a The original definition of this dimension referred to the governing party. Here, we have adapted the operational definition to include opposition parties, such as Vox.

The other two dimensions look at the inclusion of women's voices and ideas in the policymaking process, both of which are considered keys to a more inclusive and responsive democracy ([McBride and Mazur 2010](#)). The feminist movement has been essential in pushing for advances in these three dimensions and attempts to limit their influence are considered evidence of de-democratization processes ([Alonso and Lombardo 2018](#)). We expected these indicators to provide a more accurate picture of PRRP policy influence and the implications for democracy.

The End of "Spanish Exceptionalism": The 2018 Andalusian Elections

The Andalusian elections of December 2018 marked a milestone in the transformation of the Spanish party system. Vox obtained 11 percent of the vote and 11 of the 108 seats in the regional parliament. Its electoral success

has been replicated in several other regional parliaments and at the state level, where it currently holds 52 of the 350 representative seats. The degree of party system fragmentation had already doubled with the institutional breakthrough of left-wing Podemos and center-right Cs in the 2014–2016 period (Orriols and Cordero 2016). However, with the rise and electoral success of Vox, Spain fell into step with most other Western democracies (Turnbull-Dugarte 2019). Founded in 2013 by former members of the right-wing PP, studies indicate that Vox underwent ideological and organizational transformation in 2017, when alignment with other PRRPs became central (Ferreira 2019). This catalyzed its evolution from a marginal party at the fringes of Spanish politics to a main contender in the competition to dominate the right wing of the political spectrum.

Anti-feminist discourses have been a crucial component of Vox ideology since its inception and place this actor on the “global right” (Cornejo and Pichardo 2017). As with other PRRPs, ideas about gender play a pivotal role in building anti-establishment and nativist discourses (Alonso and Espinosa-Fajardo forthcoming). Opposed to what it calls the *dictadura progre*—the “dictatorship of the progressives”—Vox claims to be the sole party representing the traditional (“authentic”) values of the Spanish people. Its initial strategy to attain visibility in mainstream and social media was partially articulated around rejection of the existing legal framework for combating gender-based violence, which is a highly consensual issue in Spain and the subject of national cross-party agreements (Alonso and Espinosa-Fajardo forthcoming). Vox instrumentalized it to show how gender equality policies had gone “too far” in Spain and to portray feminism as part of the *establishment*. Protecting *native* women from the threat of nonautochthonous men has also become a recurrent topic in Vox’s most recent electoral campaigns, amidst calls for stricter immigration policies.

The mainstream right in Spain did not consider *exclusionary strategies* to isolate Vox. Instead, it rapidly established grounds for collaboration when it did not hold enough seats to form a stable government at the regional level and in relevant municipalities such as Madrid. Vox has used that leverage to incorporate anti-feminist demands into interparty negotiation processes (Ferreira 2019).¹

The Andalusian case is especially interesting in that regard. Their leading candidate in the regional elections was the well-known anti-feminist judge Francisco Serrano. He had been sentenced to a two-year suspension for issuing an unlawful resolution in a case of gender-based violence. This helped pave the way for integrating anti-feminist positions into the electoral campaign and subsequent parliamentary work. It also makes Andalusia an ideal case study for initiating an agenda to explore the policy influence of Vox.

The Spanish quasi-federal setting has provided regional institutions with significant powers to develop their own equality frameworks (Verge and Alonso 2020). This means that they have long enjoyed their own bodies, laws,

and policies, which have contributed to the consolidation of gender equality as a core value of Spanish democracy. Andalusia stands out as a region with the most stable and advanced frameworks. Among the first territories to set up an equality agency, the Andalusian Women's Institute (IAM, by its Spanish initials) has operated under the same institutional model since 1989. In 2007, the IAM began collaborating with the Women's Participation Council, an assembly representing a variety of civil society organizations (CSOs). Andalusian laws on equality between men and women, gender-based violence, and the rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transsexuals, and intersexuals (LGBTI) are among the most advanced in Spain and underwent significant reforms in 2018. The gender budgeting methodologies developed in the region are recognized as good practice in Spain and elsewhere (Puig-Barrachina et al. 2017).

The ideology of the party in government is considered a major explanatory variable for this degree of development, as Andalusia had a social democratic government for over forty years. In Spain, emulation patterns have contributed to the generalization of equality policies across regions. However, scholarly works show significant variations that can be attributed to the ideology of the party in government (Verge and Alonso 2020; Bustelo 2016). Our case study features a coalition formed by the leading party, PP, with twenty-six seats, and Cs, with twenty-one. The PP is a Christian Democratic party that has led regional and state governments for significant periods of time in Spain. PP-led governments are associated with less transformative approaches to tackling inequality, as well as budget cuts and the dismantling of equality institutions in times of austerity (Alonso and Lombardo 2018). They hold conservative positions on issues such as reproductive rights and tend to privilege a family-oriented perspective. Nevertheless, they have been generally supportive of highly consensual policies such as actions to address gender-based violence or equality in the job market. Despite initial opposition, they have also put forward legislation to protect LGBTI rights.

Cs is a newer center-right party with an ambiguous approach to gender issues. A self-proclaimed feminist liberal party, its positions revolve around employment, work-life conciliation, violence against women, and vocal defense of LGBTI rights. However, it has a rather conflictive relationship with the Spanish feminist movement in times of high mobilization. Its views on topics such as surrogate motherhood or gender quotas have been highly controversial. Although ideologically volatile, its actions when holding office reveal its position more accurately.

Adding yet another layer of complexity to this picture is Vox, which holds the most extreme position on gender issues in Spain. Its policy priorities may well contaminate mainstream party positions and policies, illustrating the changes in *degree* that have been identified in the literature on gender equality (Spierings and Zaslove 2015) and other spheres (Mudde 2019). In other

words, PRRP positions are not intrinsically different from those of mainstream right-wing parties. They basically differ in their level of radicalization.

Our study provides a fine-tuned analysis of the policy influence of Vox in the frame of this unprecedented coalition government in Andalusia. It constitutes a plausible threat to the well-established equality policies of the region and to Spanish democracy itself.

Methodology

The time frame of this study extends from December 2018, when Vox obtained regional parliamentary representation for the first time, to December 2019. Information on key policy changes was updated until August 2020 to complete the existing data. Despite the short time lapse, the rich empirical material gathered for this analysis shows the rapid transformation of Vox into a central political actor with strong influence in the mainstream right. The analysis covers the three dimensions mentioned earlier, which were developed by Krizsán and Roggeband (table 2).

First, based on the pioneering contribution of Kantola and Lombardo (2020), our analysis looks at how discourses unveil different strategies to openly delegitimize equality policies. Our methodological approach relied on critical frame analysis (Verloo 2007), originally inspired by Bacchi's (1999) "what's the problem approach." We understand "gender" and "equality" as contested concepts that can hold different (often implicit) definitions of the

Table 2. Methodological strategy

Type of representation	Goal	Methodology
Symbolic representation	To identify discursive strategies for delegitimizing gender equality goals	Critical frame analysis of Vox's party manifestos and parliamentary activity
Descriptive representation	To capture policy influence in the erosion of consultation mechanisms	Documentary analysis and in-depth interviews for the study and follow-up of interparty agreements
Substantive representation	To capture policy influence in policy dismantling and reframing, and the undermining of implementation	

Source: Authors.

problem and the solution. Frames also have a strategic component because political actors use them for various purposes, including limiting the range of action of their adversaries (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). The guiding questions for the study (What is the problem? and What is the solution?) provided tools for uncovering such efforts, as they captured the extent to which current approaches to promoting equality were *directly* opposed.² To obtain empirical data, we embarked on a documentary analysis of party manifestos corresponding to the 2018 regional elections and the 2019 national elections, along with records of 2019 parliamentary activity (Annex 1). For the latter, we applied purposive sampling to analyze discourses on gender equality.³ The institutional repository of the Andalusian Parliament provided access to thirty-two documents associated with the keywords used in our search (women, gender equality, gender-based violence, sexual harassment, family, natality, abortion, assistance to victims, feminist movement). The documents represent four types of parliamentary interventions (questions, requests, motions, and proposals) covering a broad range of issues and institutional settings (plenary sessions, parliamentary commissions, etc.).

Second, the study examines the capacity of Vox to effectively erode the equality framework. Here, we captured policy influence through analysis and follow-up of three agreements that Vox signed with the parties comprising the Andalusian coalition government. Decisions adopted to implement the measures contained in the accords provide evidence of their impact in turning pledges into policies (Biard 2019). A documentary analysis of the most recent annual budgets,⁴ along with seven semi-structured interviews of key informants with significant experience in designing gender policies for Andalusia, revealed existing and potential setbacks.⁵ This part of the fieldwork ended in February 2020, when the last interview was carried out.

The coalition agreement signed by PP and Cs, as well as their regional manifestos for the 2018 election, was used to further assess changes in their positions and identify the influence of Vox.

De-democratization and Gender Equality Policies in Andalusia

The Parliamentary Activity of Vox: Delegitimizing Equality Goals

The study of Vox's parliamentary activity reveals the party's willingness to delegitimize existing equality policies. Similarities with other PRRPs are striking. The empirical material indicates an intent to influence how policies are perceived by creating a hostile policy process (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018) and turning gender equality into *risky business* (Schultz 2019). We identified two main discursive strategies that will be described in the following paragraphs: (i) framing gender inequality as a virtually nonexistent problem and (ii) framing gender equality policies as part of a ("totalitarian") feminist project.

Portraying gender inequality as a negligible issue. In line with other PRRPs, Vox's opposition to gender equality policies is articulated around the idea that discrimination against women belongs to other *places* or *times* (Askola 2019; Spierings 2020; Verloo 2018a). The party often depicts such discrimination as alien to Spanish democratic values because it was prohibited by the 1978 Constitution. Parliamentary activity in Andalusia offers multiple examples of the party's refusal to consider inequality as a *real problem* for Spanish women. The "Non-law proposal related to false, ideologically driven approaches" that Vox presented in June 2019 provides an instructive example of this:

The so-called 'gender wage gap' is one of the most commonly repeated lies . . . it is invoked repeatedly and exaggeratedly to try and turn it into a truth. . . . In fact, studies of multinational companies found that they pay women more than men. So actual cases of wage discrimination work against men.⁶

Vox often requests information to scrutinize the indicators used to inform current government measures, convinced that the statistics have been manipulated to "falsely" reflect a gender gap. This approach reinforces the *reputational shield* (Akkerman 2015; Norocel 2017) of the party, which presents itself as a "watchdog" against inequality in Spain.

The party also devotes much of its parliamentary activity to pointing out how policies are failing to address what it frames as the *actual problems* of Spanish and Andalusian societies. Here, family-related policies are depicted as a national priority. According to Vox, neither the national government nor the regional institutions have devoted sufficient attention to family as a nuclear component of society; namely, to what it labels as the "natural family," formed by a heterosexual married couple. As a result, pressing demographic problems have emerged from misguided policies. Vox highlights the long-term effects on intergenerational replacement, which threaten the survival of Spaniards as a *native* and enduring community. The following quote captures the same demographic anxieties expressed by other PRRPs (Grzebalska and Petö 2018; Kováts 2020):

The 'demographic winter' already represents a real existential threat for Spain, and I would say for Europe, in 2018. . . . Mass immigration, illegal immigration is not the solution. Immigrants get more from our welfare system than they give back . . . people say there is no alternative but to be invaded by Africans, who actually go to the trouble of having children.⁷

Vox emphasizes two main *solutions* to reverse the low birth rate. First, party manifestos call for the elimination of the existing legal framework regulating access to abortion in Spain. The party contends that "one of the factors

encouraging the decreasing birth rate is the legalization of abortions. It has been estimated that one in every five pregnancies is interrupted.”⁸ It argues that public resources for these services should be entirely reoriented to protect the life of the “unborn” and the “freedom” of women to be mothers. One nonlaw proposal submitted to the Andalusian Parliament involved the creation of services to provide advice, assistance, and financial support to pregnant women in vulnerable situations. Restricting women’s reproductive rights and stressing their role as mothers are thus central priorities for the party.

Vox seeks to develop strong family policies resembling those of other PRRPs (Askola 2019; Kováts 2020; Mayer, Ajanovic, and Sauer 2014). It submitted three nonlaw proposals during the period analyzed: two advocating the development of a policy plan to support families and one to establish various work–life conciliation measures. Training sessions, campaigns, and loans for young couples—similar to those implemented by President Orbán in Hungary (Krizsán and Roggeband 2018)—complete the ample range of actions. Yet, in contrast to the existing legal framework, their propositions openly disregard nonheteronormative families. This parliamentary intervention summarizes their approach:

We believe that in Spain one of the measures to promote natality—lest we disappear as a society—is to have children born into a family, that is, a married couple, a man and a woman, because that is the best place for children. That is history. That is nature.⁹

Fighting the (“totalitarian”) feminist project. Framing gender inequality as a negligible problem goes hand-in-hand with understanding existing policies as a product of an allegedly “totalitarian” feminist project (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018). Vox associates the equality framework with what it labels as “supremacist feminism.” Equality policies are considered a “Trojan horse” being used to supposedly impose a vision of societal confrontation between women and men, in which the latter are criminalized. In parliamentary interventions, Vox often proclaims that “new feminist positions depict a model of women and society that only some people agree with, but that is being imposed in the cultural battles as if there was no alternative.”¹⁰ The party affirms that feminist success in accomplishing this has depended on the active support of the political elites. In Andalusia, Vox places heavy emphasis on the impact of forty years of social democratic governments. However, its parliamentary discourse also sharply criticizes mainstream right-wing parties, which have been integral to the development of the equality framework in Spain. Accordingly, Vox MPs often remind their counterparts in the PP and Cs of their duty to stop truckling to feminist ideas.

Vox party discourse claims that components of the equality framework have been informed by a “feminist ideology” that is detrimental to society.

Measures to fight gender-based violence provide a prime example of this. Contrary to well-established Spanish legislation, Vox understands such violence as gender-neutral domestic abuse that concerns every member of a family. Vox party manifestos call for the elimination of *Organic Law 1/2004 regulating integral measures to combat gender-based violence*, which is a milestone in Spanish legislation that has contributed to promote women's fundamental rights. In Andalusia, a significant amount of the party's parliamentary activity has been dedicated to discrediting measures implemented by former and current regional governments. Case workers, specifically the Gender-Based Violence Assessment Units and the social and psychological intervention teams that attend families and minors, have become a primary target as they comprise the backbone of public intervention in this realm. Vox has sought to question their competence by asking for detailed information on their academic qualifications, job status, and membership in professional associations. The party affirms that intervention by public social services is informed by misguided and "ideologically driven" diagnoses.

If we want to eradicate mistreatment, at least we should have the assurance that [these cases] are going to be assessed by social and psychological teams guided by science, by methodology, not by opinions.¹¹

According to Vox, women frequently make false allegations for spurious reasons. These are intentionally included in the official data by Spanish authorities, leading to a misuse of public funds. Such claims were central in the party's early appearances in mainstream media in 2018 and are a defining feature of its regional candidate's profile. Yet, the party failed to provide any supporting evidence contradicting administrative data sources, which enjoy wide social and political support.

CSOs constitute another key component of Vox's discursive strategies to frame equality policies as part of an allegedly "totalitarian" project. The motto the party often used during the feminist marches of 8 March, "*no hables en mi nombre*" [do not speak in my name], reflects its claim to represent Spanish women vis-à-vis the "supremacist feminists." This is the most aggressive stand against feminism in the entire party system, as it denies all legitimacy to substantively representing women. This position is in stark contrast to the strength of a feminist movement with capacity to mobilize millions of women in several successful strikes.

Vox's party manifestos include pledges to eliminate all public funding for organizations promoting gender equality. In fact, the first nonlaw proposal presented by Vox in the Andalusian Parliament focused on the need to reverse the "privileged" situation of these entities. Left-wing governments actively supported the establishment of what Vox calls "shady companies" of leftist feminists that benefit from vast public funding.

The economic greed of the feminist lobby shows their lack of prestige and explains the widespread rejection of their ideological propaganda by the Spanish people. Marxist feminists never met the goals they say they promote, they only care about claiming money and more money for promoting their ideology.¹²

In alignment with other well-known examples in Europe (Grzebalska and Pető 2018; Krizsán and Roggeband 2018), the party proposes limiting the capacity of these actors to influence or benefit from public interventions. Instead, Vox recommends that support be directed to groups such as the Women of the World Global Platform, an organization that claims to stand against “gender ideology.”¹³ It describes the benefits of such a shift:

We need to propose to society a new feminine approach that moves away from ideological positions, one that will confront the cultural war and prevail thanks to its realistic character, its capacity to recognize the truth in human nature . . . to provide practical responses to the real problems of women in the twenty-first century.¹⁴

All in all, Vox’s discursive strategies depict feminist ideas as harmful and a “threat” to Spanish society (Kantola and Lombardo 2020; Wodak 2015). By fostering an atmosphere of general distrust toward institutions, professionals, and CSOs, Vox actively delegitimizes critical components of the equality architecture and pushes for significant—and unprecedented—setbacks.

Policy Influence: Tracing Vox’s Fingerprints in the Shaping of Equality Policies

“Selling your soul to the devil”: interparty agreements and policy backsliding. Vox’s discursive strategies to openly oppose the existing equality framework reflect the party’s firm resolve to transform it. Vox has enjoyed a favorable scenario for this with a mainstream right that was eager to establish collaboration through a confidence-and-supply agreement. The party has mirrored the examples of other PRRPs and been successful in making equality policies central in its strategy to influence government decisions (Kantola and Lombardo 2019). In Andalusia, its initial demands called for the elimination of the equality and LGBTI legislative framework. This made the headlines in Spanish mainstream media, as no party had ever called for such a rollback. Vox’s position differentiated it from the mainstream right, as policy pledges in the regional manifestos of PP and Cs were generally supportive of existing policies. The coalition agreement signed by those two parties in December 2018 contained various measures that were firmly anchored in the regional laws. For instance, they pledged to expand policies on gender-based violence and effectively implement existing LGTBI legislation (table 3).

Vox was nonetheless successful in linking its parliamentary support to the introduction of significant changes in these commitments. The PP–Vox

Table 3. Summary of main equality measures included in the interparty agreements

Issue	Coalition agreement PP-Cs	Parliamentary support agreements with Vox
General principles and institutions	Gender equality clauses in public procurement processes	Auditing of the regional equality agency IAM Replace “gender mainstreaming” with the “principle of equal treatment and equality of opportunities between women and men” in budget reports Eliminate public funding for persons or organizations lacking social value
Care and family policies	Universal childcare 0–3 years Law to support families, with emphasis on single-parent and large families Effective implementation of conciliation measures contained in the Andalusian Equality Law	Create a Regional Ministry of Family Issues Approve a plan for supporting families, work–life balance measures, and tax deductions for large families Create services for women with unwanted pregnancies Child adoption plan
Equality in the workplace	Measures to combat the gender wage gap and facilitate conciliation between family and work Policies for equal representation in the private sector	
Gender-based violence	Regional Agreement Against Gender-Based Violence that promotes the Statewide Agreement and provides adequate funding to develop the regional Law to Combat Gender-Based Violence	Telephone service to attend victims of family/domestic violence

Continued

Issue	Coalition agreement PP–Cs	Parliamentary support agreements with Vox
Education	Measures to combat gender stereotypes in education and provide role models for girls in masculinized areas.	Measures to fight “ideologically driven” education and to ensure the free choice of parents
LGBTI rights	Effective implementation of the regional Law to Guarantee the Rights, Equal Treatment, and Nondiscrimination of LGBTI people and their relatives	

Source: Authors.

Agreement signed in January 2019 made it possible to form the current coalition government and guaranteed an absolute majority in the parliamentary vote to nominate Juan Manuel Moreno as the regional president.¹⁵ This document included the first set of measures that challenged the equality framework by adopting a (heteronormative) family-centered approach. Although actions such as the creation of a regional ministry for family issues or the development of a program to support pregnant women in vulnerable situations were not contrary to prior PP governments in Spain, they exceeded the initial pledges of the coalition partners, which were focused on childcare and conciliation policies.

Subsequently, Vox instrumentalized negotiations on the allocation of public resources in its attempt to incorporate more changes. The 2019 and 2020 Budget Agreements signed by the three parties targeted core components of the equality framework, such as gender mainstreaming, sexual education at school, and gender-based violence policies.¹⁶ These actions directly challenge the regional legislative framework that both PP and Cs had explicitly pledged to support.¹⁷

Measures included in the Andalusian agreements strongly resemble those of other contexts (Askola 2019; Grzebalska and Petö 2018; Hadj-Abdou 2019) and substantiate the potential of PRRPs to bring about policy backsliding in various areas. However, assessing the role of PRRPs in eroding democracy requires us to look for their “fingerprints” on efforts to translate political pledges into policy decisions (Biard 2019). In the following sections, we will trace those agreements to discover if and how they have managed to

transform the equality framework by dismantling and reframing policies or eroding consultation mechanisms.

“No stone unturned”: reframing and dismantling policies. The evidence garnered from this study gives cause for concern, as most of Vox’s demands are now in place. Most importantly, it shows the development of a systematic strategy to *reframe* and *dismantle* equality policies in Andalusia.

Generally, the implementation of the interparty agreements has been effective in *reorienting* policies toward a family-centered approach, which is a key priority for Vox. The most immediate impacts affect institutional architecture, as the first concession put into practice was the creation of a regional ministry to develop family policies. The prior government had established a single department for equality and family issues, thereby facilitating the inclusion of a gender perspective. The two areas have now been disassociated with the creation of a Regional Ministry of Health and Families that includes a Secretariat General for Families.

Equality has also been pushed to the sidelines in the governmental structure. The Regional Ministry of Equality, Social, and Conciliation Policies had established the Directorate General for Gender-Based Violence, Equal Treatment, and Diversity as the highest body with direct responsibility in the matter. Combining such a central area of intervention with issues of equal treatment and diversity is coherent with the approach of Cs—the party managing this department—and the profile of their representatives. However, it implies a significant shift from former regional administrative architecture, in which gender enjoyed a more prominent and differentiated institutional role.

Vox’s requests to develop new plans and programs have also yielded significant results. Family-related policies are experiencing a boost with the formation of the Intersectoral Family Commission to develop a pluriannual plan and law. Although these issues were a common concern of all three right-wing parties, conceptualizations of the family differ. While Cs have a significant agenda for addressing LGBTI issues and emphasize diversity as central to their approach, Vox and (to a lesser extent) PP privilege traditional heteronormative visions. More research is needed to determine if and how their policies embrace nontraditional families.

The program to support pregnant women in vulnerable positions is also being developed. The 2020 budget has allocated €1 million to put it into practice. Vox stipulated in all three interparty agreements that funds be directed to CSOs that provided pregnant women with information about all existing alternatives for continuing their pregnancy, while respecting their final decision. This approach echoes legislation passed by several regional PP-led governments and has been instrumental in allocating public money to anti-abortion organizations (Alonso and Paleo 2017). It represents yet another challenge for Cs, which so far has aligned with left-wing parties and the feminist movement in supporting access to publicly funded abortion services.

Practices aimed at *reorienting goals* generally lead to variations in budget allocations. In Andalusia, public spending increased by 16 percent from 2017 to 2020 and the regional budgets for ministries overseeing equality programs and family-related programs increased by 13 and 19 percent, respectively. However, specific funding for regional equality programs decreased in terms of overall expenditure from 5.8 percent in 2017 to 5.6 percent in 2020. The central government provided significant resources—€7 million in 2019 and 2020—for policy actions dedicated exclusively to gender equality, through the National Agreement on Gender-Based Violence. If those funds are excluded from the overall calculation, a 14 percent decrease appears in 2020. In contrast, the 2020 budget reflects the new priority of protecting Andalusian families, as requested by Vox. Funding for that purpose increased by €11.8 million, or more than 25 percent with respect to 2019. By expanding the period of analysis, differences amongst annual budgets become even more significant. This can lead to further *dismantling* of equality policies.

Alongside the introduction of a (heteronormative) family-oriented approach, Vox has impacted key policies and tools that are common targets for other PRRPs (Verloo 2018a). First, Vox petitions have affected the long-standing Andalusian equality agency, IAM. In December 2019, an auditing process was initiated to scrutinize its performance in prior periods. Along with delegitimizing effects, this action could lead to further limitations on intervention, resources, or policy approaches in the near future.

Budgeting methodologies serve as another example of Vox's influence and have vast potential implications for the promotion of equality. The first effects of their bid to eliminate gender mainstreaming from the budgetary process are already palpable. The copious *Gender Impact Assessment Report of the 2020 Budget* includes only a couple of references to it.¹⁸ This significant shift compared to former reports affects the core of Andalusia's gender mainstreaming toolbox. As stated earlier, this is a leading region for developing and implementing gender budgeting methodologies. The first regulations were passed in 2003 and subsequently consolidated in several regional norms and methodological tools. *Re-framing* the strategy to include "equal treatment and equal opportunities between men and women" severely undermines its transformative potential.

Finally, gender-based violence stands out as the issue that best illustrates Vox's capacity to influence mainstream right-wing parties. Despite their consistent support for the existing legal framework, PP and Cs have put forward a 2020 regional budget that included the allocation of €300,000 to fund a telephone service to assist victims of intra-family violence.¹⁹ It has been active since October 2020. In Andalusia, there was already a dedicated telephone service (016) to assist women suffering gender-based violence and another service (112) for general emergencies and other kinds of abuse. This new measure has helped *re-frame* existing policies and questions the amount of public resources allocated to women. In the process, Vox has successfully

challenged the feminist views that undergird the Andalusian²⁰ and Spanish policy frameworks while advancing a degendered vision of the phenomenon that includes men as victims. However, the well-established legal framework may prove resilient and dissuade the PP and Cs from implementing further rollbacks.

Altogether, these changes reveal the effectiveness of Vox in helping to *reorient* the goals of key institutions, programs, and budgets in the region, and its strong potential to further *dismantle* key components of the equality framework.

Defunding feminist organizations and eroding consultation mechanisms. The effectiveness of the party also extends to the *erosion of consultation processes*. Vox has embarked on a crusade targeting feminist groups and their access to public funding. Interparty agreements pledged to review access to subsidies under prior socialist governments. The 2020 Budget Agreement states that “many existing subsidies, stemming from the former government’s policies, represent an example of bad practice . . . a revision has to be undertaken to prevent beneficiaries who do not produce any actual added value [for society] from seeking only their own financial sustainability.”²¹

Information gathered for this study reveals that this measure has already significantly impacted feminist organizations. While comparison of the 2017 and 2020 budgets shows a 13 percent increase in subsidies to CSOs, this figure remains below the general increase in public spending. The new framework eliminates public subsidies for trade unions and groups fighting against sexual trafficking and prostitution, as well as those giving support to migrant women or to minors who are victims of gender-based violence. For instance, the most recent public call initially provided funds for 317 projects, but the final resolution incorporated only seventy-six of them. A change in the evaluation criteria at the end of the year excluded 241 applications related to programs on gender equality, gender-based violence, and women at risk of social exclusion. The CSOs excluded from this call include well-known feminist organizations, such as the European Women’s Lobby or *Mujeres en Zonas de Conflicto* [Women in Conflict Areas]. This has severely affected many of them, as the lack of financial resources is leading to indebtedness that could prevent them from applying for future regional subsidies.

These same groups were part of the main Andalusian consultation mechanism, the Women’s Participation Council, which showed little activity during the period analyzed. While elections to determine its composition concluded in late January 2020, as of summer 2020, no plenary sessions had taken place and the internal structure of the commission—including five spokespersons—had yet to be established.

The strategy to defund feminist organizations, along with the participation of anti-abortion groups in relevant government programs, might well lead to further setbacks. Should the preeminence of feminist voices in decision-making disappear, policies are likely to be further *dismantled* and *degendered*, leading to more widespread de-democratization.

Conclusions

Scholarly works exploring the role of PRRPs agree on their capacity to influence policies from both *inside* and *outside* government. This is a crucial aspect of their potential for eroding democracy. However, research attention mainly focuses on immigration issues while setbacks in promoting gender equality are often deemed secondary or overlooked.

This study reveals the need to incorporate a gender lens to understand the success of PRRPs in undermining democracy. Our analysis of Vox in Spain contributes to theories about the role of gender ideas in PRRPs. Far from being peripheral, ideas about gender can potentially inform party activity. These ideas are not only central in articulating anti-establishment and nativist discourses, as highlighted in previous studies, but might also influence candidate selection, electoral campaigning, and parliamentary work.

More importantly, our research helps to expand scholarly works on PRRPs and policy influence. It illustrates how gender issues can be an integral part of their strategy to impact the positions *and* policies of mainstream right parties, even from outside government. In our case study, Vox has worked in parliament to openly delegitimize the existing equality framework. Their discursive strategies align with PRRPs in other contexts by depicting gender equality as a rather irrelevant issue that has been pushed onto the political agenda by representatives of a feminist and allegedly “totalitarian” project. The originality of this study lies in its capacity to show how PRRPs can successfully use their leverage to push for rollbacks in gender equality policies. In the absence of a *cordon sanitaire*, Vox advanced its priorities in interparty negotiations by including demands to undermine the pillars of the equality framework. We have demonstrated its effectiveness in doing so. Our analysis reveals that some of Vox’s requests have already been put into practice by the coalition government of Andalusia. These changes are helping to *reorient* goals toward family and natality issues, *erode* the institutional influence of feminist actors, and potentially *dismantle* existing measures. Gender-based violence policies illustrate the extent to which PP and Cs have abandoned some of their more relevant pledges in order to meet Vox’s demands. Measures to address “intra-family violence” pose an unprecedented challenge to the resilience of *gendered* equality policies in Spain. Because the party’s approach has been analogous in a variety of institutions, we consider that the general conclusions of this study can reliably inform about the Spanish context.

Finally, this article connects with theories of de-democratization and studies on the role of PRRPs by considering equality policies as central rather than peripheral to the democratic state. By combining Tilly's (2007) conceptual construct with indicators of policy backsliding from the work of Krizsán and Roggeband (2018), our research adds a gender perspective to existing approaches. We consider the influence of Vox on policy in such a short period of time to be a *blitzkrieg* against Spanish democracy. This party has effectively begun to erode the general commitment to gender equality while undermining the substantive and descriptive representation of women. Future studies in this area should therefore identify how and to what extent PRRPs bring about policy rollbacks that advance de-democratization. The Spanish case will be of particular interest in that regard.

Notes

1. See for example: https://www.eldiario.es/andalucia/Vox-negociaciones-Andalucia-Andalucia-pacto_PP-Cs-igualdad-violencia_de_genero_0_852865162.html.
2. Guiding questions referred to the diagnosis of the problem (What is the problem? What are the causes and who are the actors responsible?), the prognosis (What to do? Who must act?), and normativity (What is the ideal? What is detrimental to the ideal?).
3. The search revealed that most documents connected with equality were tagged under "gender equality" and "gender-based violence" labels in the parliamentary repository tags. We added other relevant terms such as 'family' in order to capture Vox's position.
4. General budgets and budgets allocated to Regional Ministry of Equality, Social, and Conciliation Policies and the Regional Ministry of Health and Families were analyzed. Budgets dedicated to gender equality programs and to family were also reviewed. We looked more closely at resources for CSOs promoting gender equality.
5. We interviewed key stakeholders from the Andalusian Parliament, the regional equality agency IAM and the Andalusian Women's Participation Council. In autumn 2019, four interviews were carried out to follow up on changes in gender equality policies and gather further evidence. We added three interviews in winter 2020 to obtain more information about the 2020 Regional Budget that had been approved in December 2019.
6. 11-19/PNLC-000130 Non-law proposal related to false ideologically driven approaches (DSPA 104, June 19, 2019).
7. 11-19/APP-000327 Request for the Cabinet to appear before the Plenary of the Chamber to report on the policies of the Andalusian Board for the Promotion of the Birth Rate (DSPA 116, July 8, 2019).
8. 1-19/APP-000327 Request for the Cabinet to appear before the Plenary of the Chamber to report on the policies of the Andalusian Board for the Promotion of the Birth Rate (DSPA 116, July 8, 2019).

9. 11-19/PNLC-000074 Nonlaw proposal in Commission related to the Comprehensive Plan to Support Families (DSPA 51, April 1, 2019).
10. 11-19/PNLP-000012, Nonlaw proposal related to the 10 March demonstrations. Women of the World Platform (DSPA 32, March 4, 2019).
11. 11-19/POC-001519 An oral request from the Commission regarding the homogeneity requirement in the preparation of reports by psychosocial teams (DSPA 192, October 23, 2019).
12. 1-19/APP-000327 Request for the Cabinet to appear before the Plenary of the Chamber to report on the policies of the Andalusian Board for the Promotion of the Birth Rate (DSPA 116, July 8, 2019).
13. <https://www.womenworldplatform.com/en/who-we-are> (accessed March 15, 2020).
14. 1-19/APP-000327 Request for the Cabinet to appear before the Plenary of the Chamber to report on the policies of the Andalusian Board for the Promotion of the Birth Rate (DSPA 116, July 8, 2019).
15. Agreement between PP and VOX for the Investiture of the President of the Regional Government of Andalusia (January 9, 2019).
16. Agreement to Advance towards a New Budgetary Policy that Reflects the Government of Change in Andalusia (June 10, 2019) and Agreement between PP, Cs, and VOX to Advance towards a New Budgetary Policy that Reflects the Government of Change in Andalusia, and Commitment to Support the Draft Bill on the Budget of the Autonomous Community of Andalusia for the Year 2020 (October 23, 2019).
17. In 2004, the PP opposed some elements included in the state-wide regulation to address gender-based violence. Nonetheless, this has been a central issue in their equality agenda since the 1990s.
18. <https://www.juntadeandalucia.es/organismos/haciendaindustriayenergia/areas/presupuestos/genero/paginas/genero-informe-indice.html>.
19. The service is managed by the Social and Care Services of the Andalusian government.
20. Law of 27 November, modifying Law 13/2007 on measures to prevent and provide integral protection from gender-based violence.
21. Agreement among PP, Cs, and VOX to Advance toward a New Budgetary Policy that Reflects the Government of Change in Andalusia, and Commitment to Support the Draft Bill on the Budget of the Autonomous Community of Andalusia for the Year 2020 (October 23, 2019).

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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