

Gender in VOX's Ideology: Legitimization Strategy or Central Category?

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According to Mudde's (2007) classic definition, gender does not belong to the characteristic ideological core of far-right parties; it solely responds to a strategy of legitimizing their nativistic antiimmigration agenda. More recently, however, some studies indicate that gender is becoming increasingly central in far-right ideology and point at the need for more research. This article analyzes the keys to VOX's discourse on gender to see to what extent it fits Mudde's definition or whether, on the contrary, gender is a central ideological category for this Spanish far-right party. For this purpose, this article explores interventions in Congress of Deputies during 2020 and 2021. The analysis reveals a strategic use of gender to legitimize its restrictive proposals concerning immigration and, above all, shows gender as a central cross-cutting issue in the three ideological characteristics of the far-right identified by Mudde. Perhaps the marginal place Mudde gave to gender explains the scarcity of empirical studies on the role of gender values in voting for the radical right. Paying more attention to this aspect could expand the understanding of the factors that have driven the growth of the far-right globally, particularly in Europe. Ultimately, it contributes to explaining the relationship between populism and gender in European far-right parties.

Keywords: gender, far-right parties, ideology, VOX, Spanish politics

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The definition of the far-right parties' ideological core by Mudde (2007)—the most widely accepted—includes three elements: populism, nativism, and authoritarianism (Mudde, 2007). Gender is not part of those defining features; instead, the attention that gender receives is solely a strategy to legitimize nativist agendas, as these parties usually do with other issues, such as secularism (Innerarity, 2023). Nevertheless, some authors have pointed out recently that gender is more than just a strategic resource in far-right discourse: It is the axis around which Mudde's three elements "pivot" (Spierings, 2020). Some studies even indicate that the centrality of gender in radical right ideology is becoming increasingly evident (e.g., Akkerman, 2015; De Lange & Mügge, 2015; Spierings & Zaslove, 2015) and suggest the need for more research (Anduiza & Rico, 2022; Christley, 2022; Grzebalska & Petö, 2018; Köttig, Bitzan, & Petö, 2017).

Mudde's (2007) model emerges in a context of unclear distinction between extreme right and populist radical right ideology. The debate in the field of political science dragged on without clearing up the confusion between the two concepts. The same author described the situation as a "terminological war" whose origin could be traced back to the emergence of new radical right parties in the 1980s and whose outcome he summed up with these words: "We seem to know who they are even though we do not exactly know what they are" (Mudde, 2002, p. 7). Thus, the characterization proposed by Mudde in 2007 soon became the benchmark for studying the ideology of these formations and their positions related to immigration, which was considered their "star" issue. In fact, Arzheimer (2018) recognized Mudde as one of the most productive authors in the field of radical right parties, and his 2007 definition was a turning point in academic literature. More recently, however, the proliferation of analyses of the importance and terms in which radical right formations frame gender issues has led to questioning or reformulation of his proposal.

This article analyzes the keys to the Spanish far-right party VOX's discourse on gender. The objective is to see if it "fits" into Mudde's (2007) definition or if, on the contrary, gender is a pivotal element or even a central ideological category. For this purpose, we studied VOX's interventions in the Congress of Deputies during 2020 and 2021. Our analysis draws from Cabezas (2022) to examine VOX's discursive strategies and contents around gender after it gained access to the Spanish Parliament.

The reactivation of the gender debate in Spanish politics could be one of the explanatory factors for the end of the so-called Spanish *exceptionalism* as a party system free from the radical right. This study not only locates the Spanish case within the political map of the far-right in relation to gender but also offers insights into the discourses that have contributed to the success of VOX.

Context and Theoretical Framework

End of The Spanish Exceptionality

Until the irruption of VOX in the Andalusian Parliament in 2018, the absence of a far-right party in Spain has been explained for different reasons (Arroyo Menéndez, 2020; Dennison & Mendes, 2019; Ferreira, 2019; Franquesa, 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte, Rama, & Santana, 2020). Without discussing the limitations of the "paradigm of exceptionality" (Ortiz Barquero, Ruiz Jiménez, & González Fernández, 2020), the reasons for this peculiarity refer to issues that have to do, first, with the

supply or the structure of political opportunities and the characteristics of the parties (Alonso & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014) and, second, with the *demand* or the electorate's attitudes and preferences (Rydgren, 2007). From the perspective of supply, Spanish singularity has been attributed to several factors, among which the following stand out: the weak presence of immigration in the parties' political discourse, the competition strategies of the mainstream right parties (which hosted potential voters to more radical formations); an electoral system that makes it difficult for new parties to emerge, together with the fragmentation of the parties supply; and, finally, to the absence of strong leadership in this ideological space. To the abovementioned reasons, two more should be added: the weight of the recent authoritarian past, with which Spanish nationalism is associated, and the fact that the identity debate revolves around the center-periphery conflict instead of Muslim immigration (Alonso & Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2014).

From the perspective of demand, attitudes to immigration are often a decisive factor for voters in this group of parties (Golder, 2016; Mudde, 2014; Pelinka, 2013). But this is not the Spanish case since, contrary to what might be expected, Spanish voters do not show high antiimmigration sentiments in a context of competition for scarce resources. During the economic crisis in 2008, a previous increase in antiimmigration views ceased. A 2017 study on attitudes toward immigration shows that more than 50% of those interviewed agreed that the quality of healthcare does not worsen with more migrants; around 60% considered that they enrich the educational system; more than 50% thought that immigration is something positive or very positive for the country, and more than 40% considered it as cultural enrichment (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2017). However, some interviewees (15%) said that immigration's most harmful consequence was "the increase of crime and insecurity" (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2017, p. 13). In any case, such attitudes play an irrelevant role in voting for VOX. The same happens with socioeconomic status, which could have led to a greater inclination to vote for this party by those who perceived themselves to be in a situation of competition for scarce resources (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2020). In addition to immigration and from this same perspective of the demand, a second account points to the political system's legitimacy crisis, which is manifested in a growing citizen distrust of institutions and of the main political parties. However, in the Spanish case, although mistrust of politics and dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy is a partially explanatory factor for voting for VOX (Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2020), this disaffection is channeled through the creation of new parties on the left of the political spectrum.

Likewise, the end of Spanish exceptionalism in 2018 could respond to several factors that result from the combination of both the supply and the demand perspectives. These factors are related to the main ideological characteristics of this kind of party, according to Mudde's (2007) definition. First, nativism, a combination of nationalism and xenophobia, "holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (the nation) and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state" (Mudde, 2007, p. 19). Second, authoritarianism, "the belief in a strictly ordered society, in which infringements of authority are to be severely punished" (Mudde, 2007, p. 22). Third, populism as a "thin" ideology (Mudde, 2007, p. 23), which divides society into antagonistic blocks: the people, the nation (which is pure), and the corrupt enemy (i.e., foreigners, elites, feminism). It considers that politics must express the people's will, whose, in Manichean terms, authentic interpreters and defenders are the party or the leader.

Among the keys to the discourse with which VOX mobilized its electorate in 2018 was the defense of national identity against peripheral nationalism rather than against foreigners, as in other far-right parties. The Catalan issue, which occupied a prominent place on the political agenda in 2018, reactivated Spanish nationalist sentiment and recentralization demand, favoring the reorientation of the vote toward parties that appropriate this issue, as VOX does (Aladro Vico & Requeijo Rey, 2020; Arroyo Menéndez, 2020; Fernández Suárez, 2021; Ferreira, 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019). This party presents itself as a bulwark of "Spain, unity, sovereignty" (VOX, 2018, p. 2) in the face of the Catalan aspiration to independence. Against this aspiration, VOX proposes authoritarian measures such as the "suspension of autonomic power until the *coup* is defeated and civil and criminal responsibilities are purged," and "the outlawing of parties, associations, and NGOs that seek to destroy the unity of the nation and its sovereignty" (VOX, 2018, p. 2).

Finally, we should consider the centrality that gender has recently taken on in Spanish public opinion (Cabezas, 2022). Among the causes of this centrality is the #MeToo movement in 2017, the ensuing feminist mobilizations—with the subsequent antifeminist reactions—and conflicting court sentences, such as that of the gang rape known as La Manada in 2016. For this reason, the prominence of gender issues in the VOX discourse could also explain the rise of this party from a confluence between supply and demand perspectives.

Gender Beyond Mudde's Model

Since the publication of *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* in 2007, Mudde has not changed his position on gender in his model for analyzing the ideology of far-right parties. Furthermore, he has reaffirmed his position, stressing that populism has no specific relationship with gender and is a secondary, irrelevant issue in populist politics (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015). In a recent interview with *El País* during a visit to Spain, he defined VOX by its nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Sevillano, 2023).

However, various investigations on this group of parties in Europe have stressed the importance of gender in the ideology of the far-right. For Akkerman (2015), the conservative vision of gender, which encompasses family, sexuality, child-rearing, abortion, and similar issues, continues to be one of the defining characteristics of these parties. Among the six European parties she compares, selected for the electoral success of the far-right, the French National Front is the most conservative, whereas the Dutch Party for Freedom comes close to a liberal position. Meanwhile, the rest (Flemish Bloc, Austrian Freedom Party, Swiss People's Party, and Danish People's Party) show different degrees of conservatism (Akkerman, 2015). Other research confirms this trend from the demand side. Using data from the 2017 European Values Study, Christley (2022) finds that, alongside nativist and authoritarian attitudes, traditional or gender-conservative attitudes increase the likelihood of supporting the far-right across Europe. Anduiza and Rico (2022) consider that the omission of attitudes toward gender equality in the literature on voting for the far-right proves the existence of a blind spot. Using panel data collected in 2018 and 2019, these authors show "that modern sexism is indeed among the most important attitudinal predictors of voting for the far-right party VOX" (p. 1). Research also focuses on the close connection between far-right populism and antigender mobilizations. According to Paternotte and Kuhar (2018), these investigations highlight two elements: the populist style of doing politics and the conservative nature of what these campaigns demand, which places them on the right side of the political spectrum. Thus, "the current right-wing populist wave has decisively

contributed to the success of anti-gender campaigns in Europe" (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018, p. 17). As Blum and Köttig (2017) conclude in the postscript to *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe*, it is true that in many European countries, the radical right is taking new forms and that its positions about the plurality of gender roles are part of this trend. However, one of the main topics shared by these parties is the belligerent rejection of gender studies and gender education with a deconstructivist or *queer* bias. "With their criticism of the alleged 'early sexualization' of children and so-called 'genderism,' as currently expressed by antifeminists in France or Germany, the extreme right can join the conservative mainstream" (Blum & Köttig, 2017, p. 373).

Between Mudde's (2007) standpoint and the one that advocates giving gender a central role, there are intermediate positions such as the one defended by Spierings (2020). Maintaining the marginality of gender, as Mudde (2007) does, Spierings (2020) views gender as an element that intersects the three ideological components: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Academic literature has emphasized the relationship between gender and nationalism, speaking of "gender nationalism" (Hadj Abdou, 2017) and "femonationalism" (Morgan, 2017, p. 4). This merging of gender with nationalism appeals to gender rights and equality as a new nationalist narrative in which the threat posed to women by the immigrants of foreign cultures, particularly Islam, is denounced. This rejection of immigration deploys liberal rhetoric concerning gender equality as a specific feature of western civilization (Brubaker, 2017), whereas defending restrictive proposals, for example, about the veil and the burqa or family reunification (Innerarity, 2018). However, these measures are not accompanied by specific policies aimed at these women. In this way, nationalism and xenophobia come together on the issue of gender to justify this perspective on migration in democratically acceptable terms, in line with what Mudde (2007) proposes. In addition, nativism paired with gender is also intertwined with the views of the traditional family as the nation's cornerstone. Hence, the far-right's intense criticism of feminism—seen as a movement that attacks the family and endangers the nation—and the insistence that motherhood is women's main role. The conception of the maternal role offers some variants: The most traditional formations are contrary to women's autonomous professional development; meanwhile, the "modern-traditional" parties—typical of Western Europe—accept women's incorporation into the labor market but in a subordinate position to the upbringing of children. Finally, the Nordic parties promote women's rights without prioritizing motherhood but considering that equality already exists in their countries, which keeps them from proposing any improvement in this area (De Lange & Mügge, 2015; Mudde, 2007). Beyond these differences, all the radical right parties support probirth policies but target native women only.

The second element of the ideological core of Mudde's (2007) definition, authoritarianism, consists of "the belief in a strictly ordered society" (p. 23) based on natural differences. It prioritizes security over instability and change, linked to group conformity and loyalty to the leader to preserve the group and its traditions and way of life (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 71). As gender roles and relations should remain unchanged, the feminist movement and its "gender ideology" are the enemies of the natural social order. Emerging from the global trend—alien to the nation—feminists want to impose a new totalitarianism. The framework of this opposition to cultural and value change is precisely the source from which the far-right draws the arguments that fuel its "backlash" against gender and feminism

(Faludi, 1993). Furthermore, from a typically homogeneous and static nativist view of national identity, any differentiating category of analysis, such as ethnicity or gender, that reveals certain types of inequality are delegitimized. The rejection of this kind of policy is justified considering that inequalities are natural, transcending the scope of State intervention and affirming that gender equality—reduced to equal rights—has already been achieved in democratic countries.

Finally, populism is reflected in a Manichean vision of reality: the pure people, versus the corrupt elite, who do not represent ordinary people's interests. As Norris and Inglehart (2019) point out, the party presents itself as the authentic voice of the people, embodying the good and the true in the face of an elite identified with the bad, the false, and the alien. The party is the legitimate interpreter and spokesperson for the real problems. Gender issues appear here in protecting women, not only against discriminatory customs imported by nonnatives, especially Muslims, but also against elites, who have been too permissive in managing migratory entry and responding to their cultural demands. But beyond using gender against Islam, the party is supposed to be the authentic interpreter of "common sense": We, the good guys (women's interests' protectors), stand against the bad guys (progressive discourse, gender ideology, feminist movement). Some of the rhetorical elements of the populist style noted by Wodak (2015)—inverting victim/offender's roles (men are the real victims) and conspiracy theories—are recurring argumentative resources in gender issues.

What place does gender occupy in VOX's ideology and discourse? Our work verifies if the hypothesis that points to a gender's transversal/central nature in the ideology of the radical right is valid in the case of VOX. If so, we would have a case study that clarifies the supposed irrelevance of gender established in Mudde's model, which could explain the scant attention paid to its role in the vote for far-right parties.

Methodology

To achieve our objective, we studied VOX's speech in the Congress of Deputies in 2020 and 2021. Although our objective is to analyze VOX's discourse on gender after the general elections of November 2019, we decided to eliminate the last two months of 2019 to facilitate the analysis of the material for complete years. Between 2020 and 2021, 762 Congress of Deputies Session Diaries (in plenary sessions and commissions) were published. We selected our sample based on the presence of content of interest for our study in the VOX interventions. In addition, we use keywords such as "gender," "woman," "feminism," and "8M"—referring to International Women's Day—to help us find the material. The sample consisted of 306 Session Diaries: 128 from 2020 and 178 from 2021.²

The methodological process has been conducted in three steps. (1) After selecting the material, we carried out an in-depth reading based on the research questions to detect the ideas related to gender

² Note that in the Spanish parliamentary system, the Parliament encompasses the two chambers of representation at the national level, the Congress which includes the analyzed Session Journals-, and the Senate. When the "Parliament" is mentioned, it is to refer to the two national chambers together or to the regional parliaments, which are single-chamber.

policies—for example, family, birth rate, or wage gap—and their normative assumptions and the references to the feminist movement and LGBTBI+ issues. We intentionally omitted the issues related to gender violence, which deserves a specific analysis. (2) Codes were generated by implementing “open coding” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The categorization system, created with the help of NVivo—a qualitative data analysis software that helps discover insights in texts and other content—is the result of the data analysis and is not based on a previous theoretical framework, as prescribed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). In this way, the data are guaranteed to reflect the opinions and representations of the party, not the ideas and theories of those who investigate them (Drisko & Maschi, 2015, p. 3). We reordered the categories into four thematic blocks that define the main referents of VOX’s discourse on women and gender policies. Each category is divided into different subcategories. The analysis results are presented in strict compliance with the structure of the categories despite the limited content of some subcategories.

Results

Two levels can be established in the analysis of materials. On the surface, we have the categorical structure established from the codification of the materials: “normative and ideological assumptions of gender policies,” “gender policies,” “family,” and “gender organizations and movements.” The narratives of each subject emerge at this first level of analysis. A deeper level of analysis allows us to access the ideological undercurrents that inspire VOX’s discourse on gender and connects it with what appears in our theoretical framework about gender’s role in the ideology of far-right parties.

The Normative and Ideological Assumptions of Gender Policies

VOX tries to dismantle the ideological assumptions that support gender policies. This offensive unfolds on two battle fronts: the principle of equality, on the one hand, and the concept of gender and “gender ideology,” on the other.

The Principle of Equality

The fundamental assumption of this criticism is that the enshrinement of equality in Article 14 of the Spanish Constitution proves the nonexistence of inequalities based on sex or gender. Nevertheless, the fact that there are no inequalities between women and men does not mean absence of differences between them. Moreover, VOX defends “the value of differences, positively” (Congress of Deputies [CD], 2020f, p. 26) and renounces addressing this matter since it would be undertaking “a supposed battle for equality,” which would be “lying to Spaniards” (CD, 2020m, p. 14). Consequently, measures about gender inequality do not respect the difference but attack equality and engender confrontation. Defending women is defending “real equality, not the victimization of women” (CD, 2020e, p. 39).

This real equality requires promoting fairness in diverse groups of women, such as prisoners, athletes, or migrants, who must be defended from “uncontrolled” immigration that threatens them with submission instead of integration. Therefore, VOX assumes the defense of women’s rights to attack immigration policies, a typical argument of far-right parties (CD, 2020l, p. 7).

The principle of equality is replaced by the idea of "real equality" and reduced to the formal recognition of equality in rights and the alleged ability to choose. Thus, not only freedom's preeminence is established over equality, but an understanding of freedom as a *negative freedom* that does not guarantee others' freedoms—typical of these parties—is imposed (CD, 2020o, p. 12).

The Concept of Gender as the Matrix of "Gender Ideology"

Having established the nonexistence of inequality between men and women, gender becomes redundant, since it is inherent to such inequality. That is why VOX repeatedly insists that "violence has no gender" (CD, 2021t, p. 46), which translates into their proposal to replace the current law on gender violence with a regulation on domestic violence. Gender is not a valid category of analysis of social reality, but an ideological construct imposed by the "tyranny of feminism" (CD, 2021, p. 46) and "progressive consensus" (CD, 2021m, p. 25).

Thus, belonging to the female sex is perceived as an "irrelevant characteristic" that does not define women; the left concocts gender as a category used to gag women (CD, 2020o, p. 12). This idea is not only presented through a process of rational argument, but it is also supported by misrepresentations that falsify feminist discourse and employ disqualifications, even insults, to ironize gender as a choice (CD, 2020p, p. 38; CD, 2020q, p. 24). The Spanish Government³ is accused of designing and financing gender policies to impose a "gender ideology" born of "cultural Marxism," assuming the antifeminist backlash discourse promoted in the 1990s by ultra-conservative organizations (CD, 2020p, p. 27).

However, through a series of rhetorical pirouettes, VOX inverts the terms of the equation by blaming the Government for trying to implement a "women's supremacist agenda" (CD, 2020f, n. 169, p. 24). The imputation of supremacism turns the victim into a perpetrator, and whoever suffers discrimination is presented as its cause, a characteristic of populist discourse (Wodak, 2015). The conversion of the victim into a perpetrator reaches its maximum expression when relating the struggle of the sexes to "the criminalization of the male" that makes every man "a potential murderer, rapist or abuser" (CD, 2021t, p. 46), which is considered an excuse to impose gender ideology (CD, 2020j, p. 12).

Gender Equality Policies

Besides being unnecessary, equality policies generate confrontation and harm rights. Also, introducing the so-called gender perspective in policies leads to the invisibility of the inequality experienced by men. VOX argues that the gender perspective ignores, for example, that "80% of homeless people are men" (CD, 2021r, p. 39), an inversion of the discrimination subject. Positive discrimination, education with a gender perspective, and financing gender policies deserve special attention.

³ At the time of writing the current Government is made up of a coalition of leftist parties; this could change as a consequence of the results of the last general elections in July 2023.

Positive Discrimination

The rejection of positive discrimination is presented as a vindication of women's labor roles. VOX parliamentarians, Civil Guard agents, and highly qualified professionals (e.g., surgeons or firefighters) are examples of what women can achieve through their efforts without resorting to quotas. Quotas are presented as contrary to a culture of effort and hard work. This type of measure is an insult to women, who do not need anyone to defend them. However, paradoxically, the party also claims to be the sole representative of women's interests. Ultimately, implementing the quota system to achieve parity is seen as an excuse to impose gender ideology (CD, 2020j, p. 12).

Education with a Gender Perspective

The denial of inequalities in this field articulates the rejection of measures favoring equal opportunities for women in education. To affirm otherwise is deemed "stupid" and "an offense to women" (CD, 2021g, p. 19).

Contrary to scientific evidence, VOX assumes that educational achievement depends exclusively on individual talent, not on social environment. Furthermore, "talent has no sex" but rather is the ability to perform a task effectively (CD, 2020c, p. 89). Therefore, the measures to encourage the presence of women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) careers, for instance, are seen as another manifestation of the "gender ideology" that imposes "a single way of being a woman" (CD, 2021g, p. 19). There are also signs of excessive State intervention in the private sphere, restricting freedom of choice. The existence of freedom is beyond doubt because nothing prevents women from choosing STEM careers or "remaining at home" (CD, 2021g, p. 19).

VOX admits there are feminized labor sectors. However, by conceiving health and care in a romantic light, it considers the predominance of women in the care sector as "lovely" (CD, 2021e, p. 35). Therefore, the efforts to promote a more significant female presence in technological careers are scorned (CD, 2021e, p. 35). The freedom of choice explains and legitimizes women's sacrifice of their professional or academic careers in favor of lower-prestige work trajectories and adopting the role of wife and mother in a traditional family. Any woman inclined toward a scientific and technological career is able to undertake it without help; the weight of structural factors in that choice is not believed, and the State intervention by implementing positive discrimination measures is criticized (CD, 2020k, p. 33).

Inclusive Language

Inclusive language is, for VOX, a "delusional and demagogic nonsense" imposed by "gender ideology" (CD, 2020h, p. 11).⁴ Relying on authority—the Spanish Royal Academy, which regulates the

⁴ English lacks grammatical gender, whereas Indo-European languages, including Spanish, distinguish between masculine and feminine. While inclusive language aims to create a non-binary language, the Spanish Royal Academy maintains that the masculine is generic and therefore inclusive. For their part,

language's proper usage—VOX's rhetoric shines especially bright when this party criticizes an easily ridiculed practice. VOX considers that "the gender splitting" forced by inclusive language "is artificial and unnecessary" since the imposition of referring to "*trabajadores y trabajadoras*" (male and female workers), for instance, goes against the economy of language (CD, 2020h, p. 11). On this point, VOX relies on an unfavorable report issued by the Royal Spanish Academy in 2020 at the request of the Government, which spoke out against the introduction of inclusive language in the Constitution with this same argument. On the other hand, supporters of VOX ironize about measures such as the "gender impact plans on trout" (CD, 2021a, p. 25) and about "*ministres comunistas, comunistes, comunistos* [mixture of binary and non-binary words] of the Government" that finance them (CD, 2021p, p. 40).

Gender Policies Finance

The incorporation of gender perspective into public policies is not only "very expensive" (CD, 2021p, p. 40) but is also spurious, since money needed to help small firms is wasted on "mainstreaming" gender (CD, 2021s, p. 56). Gender policies are an excuse to maintain "*chiringuitos*" [shady businesses] from which many people live, especially those sustained by the Minister of Equality (CD, 2020a, p. 28). VOX regrets that public resources are lost when they could have been invested in alleviating the "real" problems of the people, including women whom they refer to as "*Fátimas*"—a typical Arab name—using the metonymy to connect gender and nativism (CD, 2021q, p. 28).

The Family

The family is conceived as the basic social institution and a pillar of the nation. It is the area where women face "real" problems and equality challenges; VOX considers that public policies insufficiently address them. In this realm, the party assumes a modernized conception of traditional family roles.

Defense of the Family as an Institution

The family must be defended against those who want to destroy it, that is, the left. This defense must be exercised against communist totalitarianism, State interventionism in transmitting values, policies that put the modern heterosexual family model at risk, and those who attempt to go against the principle of life.

The Government as a Totalitarian and Communist Threat to the Family

Faced with the danger of "totalitarian temptation and armored dogmatism" that augurs the "destruction of the family and the person" (CD, 2021i, p. 23), VOX argues that the family is a "reproductive unit" and encourages the implementation of a family policy that includes both the promotion of the birth rate and the reduction of taxes (CD, 2020i, p. 69).

experts in linguistics differ on this point, as there are those in favor of the implementation of inclusive language and those against it, even among those linked to the feminist movement.

Criticism of State Interventionism in the Transmission of Values

The family is seen as “the primary sphere of socialization and education” in which the values a mature society requires are transmitted (CD, 2021j, p. 9). It is also “the foundation of society” and the appropriate environment to prevent and combat violence (CD, 2021h, p. 24). Therefore, it must be protected from the decadent values defended by the (leftist) Government and “gender perspective” (CD, 2020d, p. 13).

Defense of the Family Model Based on the Heterosexual Couple

This family model requires to be defended from the intervention of the State, which must refrain from arbitrating measures that allow choosing the type of person or affective relationship on which to start a family. This is based on “male-female complementarity” and “generous dedication” and is not a matter of rights and duties (CD, 2021j, p. 9). Nor is it the responsibility of the State to regulate “the unions of one or the other” (CD, 2020a, p. 50).

Defense of Life

Finally, faced with a government that propagates the culture of death, VOX defends the culture of life, opposing abortion and euthanasia. In this sense, VOX speculates that “the rush to activate the legalization of euthanasia in our country” could be the Government’s answer to solve the problem of the aging population (CD, 2020d, p. 13).

Defense of the Birth Rate in the Face of Demographic Shortages and Immigration

Spain faces severe demographic problems, including a low fertility rate, the aging of the population, and the depopulation of rural areas. In this context, VOX fears the extinction of the (Spanish) reproductive woman, who could come with establishing parity or with *demographic substitution* (this is how they refer to the *replacement theory*) because of immigration. They forecast the collapse of the welfare state “if children are not born” (CD, 2021f, p. 28).

Fear of demographic substitution fuels VOX’s nativist agenda, characteristic of far-right populist parties. This is a typically populist reasoning in which the nativist argument is reinforced with the replacement conspiracy theory (Mudde, 2011). About his nativist agenda, VOX cites Hungary’s family policies, such as financial aid (depending on the number of children), benefits for mothers who stay at home, and assistance for buying a home, all aimed at boosting the birth rate among the native population. More support for large families is called for as a containment strategy, given the Spanish demographic problem (CD, 2021j, p. 9).

Defense of the Value of Maternity and the Female Caregiver

VOX stresses the value of motherhood from different angles. In addition to extolling the intrinsic value of motherhood, it maintains that women can and should freely choose between dedicating themselves entirely to family care and making life with children compatible with work. It also stresses the need to

protect childhood, considered a gift inherent to motherhood. Of course, they use these convictions to defend the goals of their agenda.

The Value of Motherhood

The value that women bring to the family unit through motherhood is underlined. Thus, VOX argues that the left ignores that "generous gift from which every society benefits" (CD, 2020g, p. 14). Moreover, the party considers it natural that men do not suffer the same labor consequences as women after having a child (CD, 2021g, p. 5).

Freedom of Choice Between Family and Work Options

In a combination of tradition and modernity, women's freedom to choose between dedication to the family, slowing down their professional career, or rejoining the labor market is defended. Taking the option of family care should be considered a right, not a burden, since the experience of motherhood "is part of human nature" (CD, 2021f, p. 28).

The argument is accompanied by criticism of the denigration of women who decide to care for their children, an alleged feminism's lack of attention to maternity, and the limitation of benefits such as "tax breaks for maternity and financial help for expenses and custodians" (CD, 2021f, p. 28; CD, 2020f, p. 26; CD, 2021c, p. 29).

Furthermore, the intervention of a "social communist government" in family decisions about the distribution of tasks is considered illegitimate. According to VOX, both the Government's interference in "what we have to do in our homes" (CD, 2020a, p. 38) and its claim "that Spaniards accept massive and uncontrolled immigration" lead to "a cultural reprogramming of Spain" (CD, 2020b, p. 31). The defense of the family as a private stronghold is combined with nativism and the theory of replacement.

From the Salary Gap to the Maternal Gap

VOX also argues that the gender salary gap does not exist. This alleged gap is nothing more than a story aimed at "confronting women with men" and reducing women to a mere cog in the production machine (CD, 2020k, p. 17). The real gap is a *maternal gap*, which consists of the impoverishment caused by the difficulty of reconciling maternity with work and the lack of compensation for domestic work (CD, 2021b, p. 10). For this reason, VOX demands conciliation policies that make work, family, and maternity compatible for women (CD, 2020h, p. 60).

Child Protection

From an idealized conception of childhood, "the most beautiful thing in our society" (CD, 2021o, p. 13), VOX defends parental authority against the "growing interference of public powers in the family" (CD, 2021d, p. 8). VOX instrumentalizes this defense to fuel its attacks on feminism, pointing out the existence of "first- and second-class orphans" (CD, 2021u, p. 24) and immigration, assuming that there are no

sufficient resources to care for children from the Middle East and North Africa, despite the “interest of the Government in separating them from their families” (CD, 2021k, p. 14).

Gender Organizations and Movements

The Feminist Movement

VOX considers that feminism is a sectarian and exclusionary movement that rejects any criticism about the model of women that it intends to impose. VOX turns, again, the oppressor into the oppressed by arguing that those who oppose the left and feminism are branded as “fascists, macho, dangerous, and unconstitutional” and are “demonized and persecuted” (CD, 2020n, p. 56). The feminist movement is also accused of being radical, violent, and involved in the harassment of activists of different ideologies (CD, 2021l, p. 29).

From a populist logic, the party refers to feminism as stemming from global political elites and makes it an enemy of people they wish to subjugate: feminism relinquishes rebellion in exchange for subsidies (CD, 2020a, p. 29). A particular object of criticism is the feminism of the second wave, the feminism of Simone de Beauvoir, which is not only considered a “radical” and “fanatical” feminism but also an unnecessary movement since in Spain, men and women are equal before the law (CD, 2020i, p. 68).

VOX also criticizes that the left, specifically, the feminist Ministry of Equality, tyrannically appropriates the representation of all women, despite the disastrous consequences of the policies they have implemented. Therefore, VOX states that the Ministry does not have the moral authority to speak on behalf of all women, impose specific behavioral guidelines, or “erase all traces of femininity” (CD, 2021t, p. 46).

The LGBTI+ Movement

VOX is trying to shake off accusations of homophobia or LGBTIphobia by taking on the defense of this group and all Spaniards. Thus, they self-serving resort to the nativist argument to oppose migrants and Muslims, considering them a fundamentalist threat to the safety of homosexuals (CD, 2021n, p. 70). However, they criticize the movement for imposing an “LGBTI+ ideology” equivalent to “gender ideology.” This rejection is more evident concerning the change of sex regulated by the so-called Trans Act, especially in the case of minors (CD, 2020j, p. 11).

Discussion: The Ideological Undercurrents of VOX’s Discourse on Gender

Of the three central elements of Mudde’s model, populism has the most significant presence in the discourse analyzed here. Numerous studies have indicated that this aspect is not as marked in VOX as in other far-right parties (Ferreira, 2019; Ortiz Barquero & Ramos-González, 2021). Nevertheless, about gender, we repeatedly find the typically populist traits that Mudde (2007) and Wodak (2015) attribute to this phenomenon. VOX recurrently establishes itself as a legitimate representative of common sense and women’s real interests in the face of the enemy. This foe includes the progressive consensus, feminism, and political elites, together with their totalitarian imposition of gender ideology, replacing attention to people’s

actual problems. Furthermore, VOX uses the rhetorical resources identified by Wodak, especially different variants of the inversion of the victim and the perpetrator and the conspiracy theory of replacement.

Being the idea that the nation's homogeneity is threatened by nonnative people and ideas (in line with Mudde, 2007), nativism becomes evident, first, in defense of gender equality as one of the legacies of western civilization that must be defended against Islam. Nativism also appears in the narratives on the traditional family as the cornerstone of the nation, the role of women in this realm, and birth policies aimed at the native population. The replacement argument serves here to justify VOX's restrictive proposals toward immigration.

Following Mudde's (2007) model, authoritarianism, the idea of a "strictly ordered society," appears when considering social inequalities as something natural, outside the sphere of State intervention. It is also manifest in opposition to change, which includes the defense of the traditional roles of women and the family. However, VOX promotes women's—voluntary—incorporation into the labor market. Nevertheless, to the extent that neoliberalism and conservatism are ideological traits with their own identity, their appropriation by authoritarianism is, at the very least, debatable. It could be argued, on the contrary, that the presence of authoritarianism in both spheres has a subsidiary character. This seems to be the case in the discourse of VOX, as we shall see below.

Beyond the three features pointed out by Mudde, if something stands out in our analysis of VOX's discourse on gender, it is the strong presence of conservatism and neoliberalism, to the point of appearing as central categories. Conservatism, understood as resistance to change, is, in VOX's case, more than a reflection of its ideological core, even though it coexists with a strong inclination toward nativism and authoritarianism. Since its emergence, VOX has assumed the ultra-conservative values on the family, women, and sexuality of the *Hazte Oír* organization, which had a significant weight in the global conservative reaction. This is evident in their defense of the heterosexual family model, the family's right to educate their children without State interference, and the so-called right to life against abortion and euthanasia. The same can be said about their opposition to gender ideology and LGTBI+ rights.

Similarly, neoliberalism in VOX's speech does not manifest itself as a reflection of other categories. In Vox's discourse, its meritocratic conception of society and the prominence of negative individual freedom stand out.

Women are free to decide the model of woman they want to be (4.1): what to study (2.2) and whether to devote themselves to family care or to rejoin the labor market (2.2). Families are free to instill in their children the values they consider appropriate (3.1.1; 3.1.; 3.3.4), and to decide how to share out care work. VOX shows a categorical rejection of State intervention in the name of individual freedom. It also assumes the neoliberal functionalist conception of society, which naturalizes the existence of social inequalities by replacing the conflict between classes with a vision of the social structure based on individual meritocratic achievement. Class status is the natural reward for individual merit achieved through talent and effort in competition with others. This model entails a social morality centered on individual responsibility, on which success or failure depends. There is no place in it for the inequality of opportunities associated with the social position from which every person starts. Consequently, traits such as talent,

effort, and motivation legitimately govern the supposedly meritocratic selection process of the best. Gender has nothing to do with it.

Many of these characteristics that make up the neoliberal ideological framework appear recurrently in the arguments that VOX uses to legitimize its rejection of gender politics and current feminism and its defense of the traditional family. In its interventions, VOX considers the measures established by the Government to promote gender equality as impositions that do not respect women's freedom of choice. At the same time, VOX demands tax reductions to help families.

Typically neoliberal is the rejection of the principle of equality, which has, according to VOX, no sense in an already equal society. As men and women are equal before the law, it is ludicrous to speak of inequality. In Spain, women have even more rights than men, and people have no gender. Without gender, no structural factors can negatively condition women's freedom of choice.

Finally, VOX appeals to that individual responsibility for success or failure when it alludes to talent and the culture of effort as moral characteristics of the model of woman it defends. From this position, it dismisses positive discrimination and gender quotas as guarantees of equal access to studies or positions in the professional environment.

Conclusion

Although the discussion has revealed the main ideological traits in VOX's allusions to the gender issue in its interventions in the Congress of Deputies, it remains for these conclusions to resolve the question posed as the central objective of this work: find out to what extent VOX's discourse on gender is close to or distances itself from Mudde's (2007) model.

Early research on the far-right regarded this phenomenon as a "normal pathology" of western democracy. They suggested that its overtly racist or anti-equal rights proposals only found support among a minority of the population, especially in times of crisis. On the contrary, Mudde (2010) considers it a "pathological normalcy," that is, a radicalization of mainstream values that is potentially acceptable to relatively large sections of the public. Therefore, the terms in which they deploy their discourse are crucial to gain support. In this respect, the analysis of VOX's speeches in Congress of Deputies reveals a strategic use of gender to legitimize its restrictive proposals on immigration. This strategic use is reflected in VOX's invocations of gender equality as a western legacy that must be safeguarded against Islam or in the party proposals for birth policies aimed exclusively at native women to avoid population replacement. This type of argumentation allows the party to justify its proposals in democratic terms. In line with what has happened in other neighboring countries, like France and Germany, the skillful use of this type of approach would have contributed to the *normalization of this party* in the meaning pointed out by Mudde (2007). In short, VOX's discourse on gender is part of its strategy to achieve its inclusion in the political contest as just any other democratic formation.

However, although gender is not part of the ideological core that defines VOX's narratives, it is not reduced to just a resource to legitimize its antiimmigration agenda. Gender is, instead, an issue in which

the three ideological characteristics of the far-right—nativism, authoritarianism, and populism—clearly show. Therefore, it would be possible to speak of a centrality of gender, or at least of a “pivotal” character, in line with Spierings (2020). One question that requires more analysis is whether VOX's antigender discourse is an autonomous ideological category or whether this position is closely associated with conservatism. In any case, although it cannot be generalized to all far-right parties, our analysis broadens Mudde's model since it shows not only the centrality—and transversality—of gender in VOX's speech but also the relevance of other ideological features, such as conservatism and neoliberalism. Such an interpretation of the role of gender probably could not apply to all far-right parties, but it serves, at least, to characterize the latent ideology behind VOX's discourse.

Finally, the marginal place given by Mudde to gender may explain the scarcity of empirical studies on the role of gender values in voting for the radical right. It could also happen that the absence of gender in the empirical analyses of the vote for these parties explains, at least in part, the negligible weight it occupies in Mudde's model. In any case, paying more attention to gender could enhance the knowledge of the factors that have driven the growth of far-right parties in the countries around us from the perspective of demand and, more specifically, expand the understanding of the *normalization of the Spanish political system* to the extent that a radical right-wing party has been integrated into the party system.

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