TRADE UNIONS AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN EUROPE

Country Study Spain

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THE POLITICAL PARTY SYSTEM IN SPAIN

Spain's modern democratic political and party system emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s during the democratic transition following the death of Francisco Franco in November 1975, bringing nearly 40 years of repressive dictatorship to an end.[1] Two parallel dynamics played out during this process. On the one hand, the democratic opposition groups — the underground unions, numerous left-wing and liberal political movements, student and university groups, and regionalist movements, especially those in the Basque Country and Catalonia — gained considerable strength and organized long-term protests and mass actions demanding an immediate and democratic break from the old regime. On the other hand, a system for negotiations between reform groups within the old regime and moderate opposition groups developed, with participants seeking to instigate a peaceful and orderly transition to democracy with free parliamentary elections and a new constitution.

Over the following years, the goal of making a radical, democratic break from the dictatorship gave way to the reality of a pact-based democratic transition within the monarchist framework imposed by Franco. The democratic opposition abandoned its more far-reaching aims of a republic that would prosecute the crimes committed by the Franco regime while the reformists from the outgoing dictatorship submitted to democratic rules. From 1976 to 1978, the dictatorship transformed itself into a parliamentary monarchy. The first free parliamentary elections in 1977 and the new constitution in 1978 were the two most important building blocks for the construction of the new government. The transition years up until 1982 were marked by significant uncertainties and threats: An economic crisis caused record unemployment and high inflation; several terrorist groups, including the *Basque Euskadi ta Askatasuna* (ETA; Basque Homeland and Liberty) and radical leftist groups such as *Grupo de Resistencia Antifascista Primero de Octubre* (GRAPO; Anti-Fascist Resistance Group First of October) and *Frente Revolucionario Antifascista Patriota* (FRAP; Revolutionary Antifascist Patriotic Front), threatened security; and Francoist military groups constantly attempted coups against the fledgling democracy. The centrist government of the *Unión de Centro Democrático* (UCD; Union of the Democratic Centre) never secured a stable parliamentary majority and finally dissolved in a government crisis in 1981.

On the left side of the political spectrum, the moderate social democratic *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE; Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) emerged as the clear hegemonic force over the *Partido Comunista de España* (PCE; Communist Party of Spain) and oth-

1 For a detailed discussion of the democratic transition and the democratization of industrial relations, see Köhler (1993).

er regional socialist groups. The PSOE was voted into government in 1982 with an overwhelming absolute majority. On the right, the groups and parties remained unstable. After the UCD's existential crisis and its tenure as the minority government from 1977 to 1981, the *Partido Popular* (PP; People's Party) began to successfully combine right-wing and conservative forces over the course of a decade up until its definitive founding in 1989. Throughout the 1980s, the PP developed into a political alternative to the PSOE. Other far-right groups, such as *Fuerza Nueva* (FN; New Force), were unable to assert themselves during this period.

A separate party system emerged in Catalonia and Basque Country, with moderate conservative parties leading the way: *Convergència i Unió* (CiU; Catalan Convergence and Unity) and *Euzko Alderdi Jeltzalea* (EAJ-PNV; Partido Nacionalista Vasco; Basque Nationalist Party), respectively.

The year 2015 brought significant change to the political landscape; labour relations and trade unions did not go untouched. In the parliamentary elections that year, the ruling PP party, which which by then had been marred by many corruption scandals, lost 3.5 million votes, dropping from 44.6 per cent of the vote in 2011 to 22.7 per cent. At the same time, the opposition socialist party PSOE received a historic low of only 22 per cent of the vote, just half of its share of the vote seven years prior, marking the end of the two-party system that had dominated since the post-Franco democratic transition. Seemingly out of nowhere, two new parties, the left-wing protest party *Podemos* (We can) and the liberal-technocratic civic democracy party *Ciudadanos* (Citizens), received 20.6 per cent and 13.9 per cent of the vote, respectively. The resentment felt by broad swaths of the population toward the corrupt and incompetent political class had finally found its way to the ballot box. New elections were called due to the absence of a majority in the government in 2016. These elections largely confirmed the new four-party constellation, and a new balance of political power was also consolidated in the states and municipalities. As a result of this shake-up, a kind of 'palace revolution' took place within the PSOE against party leadership and the "party barons" who had controlled the apparatus for decades. Oppositionist Pedro Sánchez was elected as the new party leader in a primary election in May 2017.

The state of permanent crisis surrounding the Catalan independence movement, which since 2015 has both determined and paralyzed political processes, has contributed additional uncertainties and crises to the Spanish political context. Spain now has a very heterogenous and fragmented party system, with the distance between segments of the population and their parties growing. This has opened new doors for right-wing populism (see Appendix).

TRADE UNIONS AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

Spanish unions have traditionally been categorized as belonging to the Latin trade union model, which differs from the Anglo-Saxon corporatist framework typically found in Central and Northern Europe by having low levels of organization, frequent mobilization and strike activity, fragmented political unions, competing levels of collective bargaining, and a high degree of state intervention in industrial relations. Similar to neighbouring countries in Southern Europe, Spanish trade unions suffered the consequences of a deep economic crisis from 2008 to 2014 and have since faced the difficult task of substantive and organizational renewal.[2] The onset of the pandemic in 2020 and the consequences of the war in Ukraine contribute additional uncertainties to the context, including an energy crisis and inflation. Two large trade union confederations, the social democratic *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT; General Union of Workers) and the post-communist *Comisiones Obreras* (CCOO; Workers' Commissions), as well as some regional unions in Galicia and the Basque Country, dominate the trade union landscape in Spain. The left-wing Catholic umbrella organization *Unión Sindical Obrera* (USO; Worker's Union) continues to play a minor role in a few sectors.

The post-dictatorship period was a decisive time for the emergence of modern democratic industrial relations and independent trade unions. While trade unions had a positive reputation among the oppositional democracy movement during the beginning of the transition, they were internally fragmented and conflicted. Two cleavages mark the Spanish trade union movement of the 1970s and early 1980s; a historical boundary ran between the "historical" and the "new" labour movement, and an ideological division separated communist, socialist, social democratic-Catholic, anarchist, and nationalist organizations and groups.

Institutionalised democratic industrial relations have been relatively stable since the mid-1990s, in quiet contrast to the turbulent years of the democratic tran-

2 For an overview of the development of trade unions in Europe since the economic and financial crisis of 2008, see Lehndorff / Dribbusch / Schulten (2018).

sition and consolidation (1970s–1980s). The balance of power between unions remained largely the same, and unions are among the most recognized democratic negotiating partners.

The rights to representation and participation are enshrined in the Workers' Statute (1980) and the Law on Trade Union Freedom (1985). These two laws established a bifold representation of interests consisting of trade union bodies at the company and supra-company level and works councils elected by all workforces with more than 50 employees. In contrast to the German two-part system, the works councils and trade union sections have collective bargaining and strike rights. They do not, however, have the right to participate in company personnel decisions, as is the case in Germany. Instead, they have the right to consultation. Moreover, it is mandatory to have a joint occupational safety committee in companies with 50 or more employees.

The elections of employee delegates and works council members are called "union elections" in Spain and are of paramount importance; much more than just the composition of workplace representation depends on their results. The Law on Trade Union Freedom establishes a general "representativeness" criterion; only unions that surpass a threshold of vote percentage have a general right to collective bargaining, representation rights in public institutions, and access to certain government subsidies. Unions must win more than 10 per cent of the delegates in union elections nationwide; the most representative unions at the national level are the UGT and CCOO. In autonomous communities, the threshold is 15 per cent. The most representative unions at the regional level are the *Eusko Langileen Alkartasuna* (ELA-STV; Solidaridad de Trabajadores Vascos, Basque Workers' Solidarity) and *Langile Abertzaleen Batzordeak* (LAB; Patriotic Workers' Committees) in the Basque Country and the *Confederación Intersindical Galega* (CIG; Galician Unions Confederacy) in Galicia. Within each company or sector, trade unions and professional associations have collective bargaining rights only if they have more than 10 per cent of delegates. Among its other impacts, this provision has simplified the union landscape by side-lining the many small, local, and more radical unions that populated the landscape during the chaotic 1970s, installing a quasi-bi-syndicalist model with a few regional variations instead. Some authors characterize the Spanish union landscape as a "representative trade union" (voters trade unionism) model

Table 1
Employee Representation in Spain

Direct representation	• Employee delegates (10–50 employees) • Works Council (> 50 employees)
Union representation	• Union delegates (representatives of the respective union section in companies with > 250 employees)
Works Council Rights	
Right to information	• Economic status of the company • Employment contracts • Sanctions for serious offences
Right to consultation	• Collective lay-offs • Changes in personnel organization and structure • Company training • Classification criteria and bonuses
Additional duties	• Oversight of compliance with labour law regulations • Oversight of occupational safety and hygiene • Cooperation on measures to increase productivity

Table 2
Works Council Election Results in Spain

Year	CCOO	UGT	USO	ELA	LAB	CIG	Other
1978	34.45 %	21.69 %	5.56 %	0.99 % (18.9 %)	–	0.55 % (22.3 %)	20.85 %
1980	30.86 %	29.27 %	8.68 %	2.44 % (25.6 %)	0.48 % (4.7 %)	1.01 % (17.4 %)	11.94 %
1982	33.40 %	36.71 %	4.64 %	3.30 % (30.2 %)	0.68 % (5.9 %)	1.17 % (18.9 %)	8.69 %
1986	34.27 %	40.19 %	3.83 %	2.92 % (34.9 %)	1.06 % (10.7 %)	1.34 % (21.2 %)	9.95 %
1990	37.60 %	43.10 %	3.00 %	3.2 % (37.8 %)	1.27 % (13.1 %)	1.5 % (23.4 %)	9.70 %
1995	37.74 %	35.51 %	3.56 %	2.97 % (39.7 %)	1.22 % (15.4 %)	1.91 % (26 %)	17.09 %
1999	37.63 %	37.17 %	3.49 %	3.06 % (40.5 %)	1.33 % (15.2 %)	1.62 % (26.2 %)	15.62 %
2003	38.74 %	36.80 %	3.11 %	3.24 % (41 %)	1.37 % (15.2 %)	1.62 % (26.2 %)	15.12 %
2007	39.09 %	37.15 %	2.95 %	3.13 % (40.2 %)	1.39 % (16 %)	1.82 % (28.6 %)	14.45 %
2011	38.38 %	36.33 %	3.43 %	3.03 % (39.8 %)	1.9 % (17..2 %)	1.63 % (26.4 %)	15.77 %
2015	36.17 %	33.30 %	3.89 %	2.58 % (40.6 %)	1.24 % (18.9 %)	n.a. (27.6 %)	22.25 %
2019	35.07 %	32.07 %	4.01 %	3.01 % (41.0 %)	1.06 % (19.1 %)	1.07 % (28.8 %)	23.71 %

Source: CCOO internal data.
Note: The figures in the parentheses refer to the share of delegates received by the regional unions in their respective autonomous communities (ELA-STV and LAB in Basque Country, CIG in Galicia). The "other" category typically includes the corporatist federations of civil servants, teachers, nurses, and public transportation workers, as well as two "yellow" business-led federations in the retail sector.

as opposed to a "members trade union" model due to the significance of works council elections in Spain and the relatively low level of organisation.[3] The results of trade union elections are the best reflection of the balance of power among trade unions.

Social upheaval as a result of the unjust distribution of the costs of the 2008–2013 economic crisis accompanied the dramatic economic decline in Spain. Social inequality and poverty rose sharply due to mass unemployment and neoliberal austerity policies. Many households were living on minimal poverty assistance after unemployment benefits ran out; moreover, many were unable to pay their mortgage and thus at risk of eviction. The economic recovery that has taken place since 2014, marked by falling levels of unemployment, has done little to alleviate these problems. In a study published in February 2019, the EU Commission explicitly pointed to Spain's urgent problem of poverty and inequality, despite five years of economic growth, citing the prevalence of precarious employment as a major cause. The 2020 COVID-19 crisis had disparate impacts on social groups, further increasing inequality despite the cushioning effect of public support programs.

3 See Lucio (1992) and Valverde (1991), p. 25.

Table 3
Structural Data on the Spanish Labour Market (in per cent)

	1990	1992	1996	2000	2002	2007	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021
Unemployment rate	16.3	18.4	22.2	14.2	13	8.6	18.3	21.6	27.2	20.9	16.5	14.2	13.4
Proportion of long-term unemployed	51.4	46.6	54.6	44.6	37.7	22.6	34.5	50	56.3	48.7	42.8	44.3	49.0
Unemployment rate – women	24.2	25.5	29.6	20.5	16.4	11	18.4	23.3	27.6	22.5	18.4	16.0	15.2
Unemployment rate – youth	33	35.7	42	28.1	22.3	18.1	39.6	46.4	57.2	46.2	37.5	32.2	38.3
Unemployment rate – Spaniards	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	7.9	16.8	20.6	25.1	19.9	15.6	13.2	12.2
Unemployment rate – foreigners	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	12.3	29.7	34.8	39.2	28.3	23.6	20.1	20.9
Proportion of temporary employment	30.3	33.5	33.8	32.9	31.6	30.9	25.4	25	22.1	25.7	26.7	26.3	25.4
Proportion of part-time employment	4.6	5.9	7.4	7.5	8	11.6	13.3	13.8	16	15.7	14.6	14.6	n.a.
Labour force participation rate	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	52.5	54.9	59.4	59.9	60.2	59.8	59.4	58.6	58.6	58.6
Labour force participation rate – women	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	42.8	43.2	49.9	52.1	53.4	53.9	53.7	53.3	53.3	53.8

Source: Spanish Federal Statistics Office (INE), various Labour Force surveys.

Public discontent with the incompetence and the government's socially imbalanced crisis management, accompanied by a wave of corruption scandals across all levels of politics, has led to a growing distance between the population and the political class and has inspired new civil protest movements. According to all public opinion surveys, Spain's political class is the most discredited social group, and political and administrative corruption is now the country's most pressing problem, accompanied by unemployment and, since 2020, the COVID-19 crisis. Spain and Italy have long been considered the most corrupt of the big EU countries. The increased heterogeneity of political and social protest in new spheres and media spaces poses new challenges to democratic actors and institutions as well as trade unions.

THE LATE RISE OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM

Until recently, Spain appeared to be an exception in the European context; no right-wing populist party or movement was able to form successfully (González Enriquez 2017; Zanotti et al. 2021; Castillo Martín 2019). In the late 1970s, attempts by supporters of Franco and the Falange to form political parties, the most prominent of which is *Fuerza Nueva*, ended in failure, culminating in a botched military coup attempt in 1981. Right-wing populist discourse, including xenophobia, anti-immigration sentiments, authoritarian central state ideology (above all directed at regionalist efforts at autonomy), and social conservatism related to sex, family values, feminism, and abortion, for example, have all made inroads into the Spanish political sphere since the turn of the century. However, this discourse did not mutate into a political project; no right-wing populist party had been able to establish itself and gain parliamentary representation at either the regional or central state level until 2018. In December 2018, VOX (*vox*, Latin for "voice") won over 10 per cent of the vote in regional elections in Andalusia, a traditional stronghold of the PSOE, which had been discredited by numerous corruption scandals. In the following years, VOX gained seats in several regional and national parliaments and established a clear public presence. With this, Spain lost its unique standing as a refuge from radical right-wing populism. In juxtaposition to the decline of *Ciudadanos* and *Podemos* during the crisis, VOX has since es-

tablished itself as the third-strongest political force in Spain. In April 2022, VOX made history by participating in a coalition government with PP in the Castile and León region for the first time.

Two previous developments enabled the rise of Spanish right-wing populism in the 2020s. First, right-wing populist movements became permanently established in neighbouring European countries; in particular, France's Le Pen exerted a great deal of influence on the Spanish right-wing radicals. Second, Spain experienced a wide-reaching political and social crisis in the aftermath of the economic and financial crisis of 2008–2013. During this time, the two-party system eroded and opened the field to diverse anti-system movements, eventually leading to and including a right-wing populist project. The numerous corruption scandals, growing cleavage between population groups and the political and economic elite, the declining ideological persuasiveness of the social democratic, liberal, and conservative parties, and the negative social impacts of incompetent austerity policies in the face of far-reaching economic crisis combined forces to prepare fertile ground for right-wing populism. In a European comparison, Spain appears to be the country in which trust in democratic institutions has suffered the greatest loss. Simultaneously, the gap between traditional political elites and the populace appears to have grown the widest since the 2008 crisis (Sanz de Miguel et al. 2019: 30). The conflict over Catalonia, with its strong independence movement, including open institutional provocations against the Spanish state such as illegal referendums and open noncompliance with constitutional procedures and rules have provided additional fuel.

The anti-welfare, neoliberal austerity policies and the associated social repercussions provoked strong protest movements against the established parties as well as trade unions, which were also plunged into a legitimacy crisis by numerous corruption scandals. For months in 2011, youthful members of the anti-austerity *Indignados Movement* (also known as *Movimiento 15-M*) occupied central squares across Spain. This was a decisive trigger for the formation of new anti-establishment groups and new critiques of the corrupt political class and the associated state institutions. First to emerge was the left-wing protest party *Podemos* (We Can), which challenged traditional parties with a new discourse opposing the encrusted and corrupt political regime in 2014 and quickly grew to the country's third-strongest political force. In the liberal-technocratic milieu, the new *Ciudadanos* party was founded, growing promptly into a strong alternative to the discredited conservative ruling PP party. By the 2016 elections, only 51 per cent of votes went to the two majority parties, PSOE and PP. Politics' traditional "left-right" discourse was met with a "people against corrupt elites in politics and business" discourse in which both new protest movements and, increasingly, right-wing populist currents were able to establish themselves as fixtures in the political environment.

This development was further bolstered by another crisis, one rather specific to Spain. The Catalan independence movement, which is represented by the *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC; Republican Left of Catalonia) and *Junts per Catalunya* (JuntsxCat; Together for Catalonia) parties, has evolved from a party with a moderate regionalist stance in 2015 to a radical independence stance achieving some electoral success. These two parties captured about half the votes and seats in regional elections and are now blocking political processes across Spain, opening the way to a centralized Spanish nationalism in response. The new right-wing populism has since benefitted from the polarization between supporters of Spanish unity and anti-Spain separatists, while this same context has posed a serious problem to the traditional parties. The socialist PSOE, for instance, struggles to maintain a coherent and inclusive position. VOX calls for, among other things, an end to Spain's system of autonomous communities and extensive regional self-government in favour of a unified central state.

From 2013 onward, discontent with the PP's all-too-moderate stance on party leadership and government spread throughout the ultraconservative circles of the PP electorate. This converged with the strengthening populist anti-system, anti-elite, and, above all, anti-regional autonomy discourse. These disaffected circles of (former) PP voters gave rise to the right-wing populist VOX party in 2013. While voter support was initially weak, by 2019, VOX gained seats in some parliaments.

The VOX party platform, in this context, is a specific mixture of well-established elements of the radical right, such as an opposition to immigration, elites, feminism, and sexual liberation, and support for traditional Catholic family values and strong Spanish nationalism. In addition, VOX combines neoliberal elements (tax cuts, reduction of the state budget, privatizations, and subsidy cuts) with social chauvinist elements (social benefits for citizens only and family and employment support for young Spaniards) in a less than coherent manner (Sanz de Miguel et al. 2019). Tacked on is an anti-liberal Francoist nostalgia for opposition to the so-called "social-communist Popular Front and its alliance with terrorists and separatists."

The current left-wing coalition government led by PSOE and *Podemos* was described by VOX party leader Santiago Abascal as the worst government in the last 80 years; a range of time that includes 40 years of Franco's dictatorship. The most distinctive element of the VOX platform is not its right-wing populist anti-immigration or anti-liberal content but its vision of Spanish territorial unity with a strong authoritarian, centralist police state in direct opposition to the Catalan independence movement. Court cases brought against Catalonian politicians following the independence referendum in 2017 fed the VOX public discourse machine, which criticized the PSOE and PP for being too lax. This moment, symbolized by the regional elections in Andalusia in 2018, traditionally a stronghold of the socialists, is when the walls against right-wing extremist groups fell and VOX became socially acceptable in growing sections of the population.

Initially, VOX discourse was characterized by a consistent liberal-conservative ideology, seeking to be an authentic realization of the PP programme and lacking some of the typical right-wing populist features such as anti-immigration sentiments and anti-Europeanism. Only after defeats in the polls and the departure of some of the more moderate founding members did VOX align itself with the emerging right-wing populists on the international stage, such as Trump, Le Pen, and other figures in European right-wing populism, and shift its focus to issues such as immigration control, the fight against Islamic fundamentalism, and EU-scepticism. VOX increasingly transformed itself – both in content and style – into a classic right-wing populist party in the European context with impassioned appeals to patriotic identities.

Compared to other European countries that have cordoned off right-wing populists, the boundaries between VOX and PP are fluid; in several cities and regions, VOX and PP cooperate in the government. Some PP politicians even pursue a very right-wing populist discourse, such as the president of the Madrid autonomous government, Isabel Díaz Ayuso.

Whenever VOX is involved in governments, even just as part of the conservative minority government, the party uses its position to launch an attack on feminists, trade unions, and immigrants. In practice, this has looked like cutting subsidies to women's organi-

Table 4
Evolution of VOX

Date	Event
17.12.2013	Official founding of the party.
25.5.2014	VOX receives 1.6 % of the vote in the European Parliament elections.
20.12.2015	VOX receives 0.23 % of the vote in the Spanish Parliament elections.
26.6.2016	VOX receives 0.2 % of the vote in the Spanish Parliament elections.
6.10.2018	Over 9,000 people attend a VOX rally at Madrid's Vistalegre Stadium; the rally focuses on Spanish unity and the rejection of the regional autonomy model, immigration, and feminism.
2.12.2018	VOX receives 10.96 % of the vote in Andalusian regional elections.
16.1.2019	VOX supports the right-wing coalition government between PP and Ciudadanos in Andalusia.
28.4.2019	VOX receives 10.26 % of the vote in Andalusian regional elections.
26.7.2019	VOX supports the right-wing coalition government between PP and Ciudadanos in Andalusia in Murcia.
14.8.2019	VOX supports the right-wing coalition government between PP and Ciudadanos in Andalusia in Madrid.
10.11.2019	VOX receives 15.09 % of the vote in the new European Parliament elections.
19.4.2022	VOX participates in a coalition government with PP for the first time in Castile and León.
19.6.2022	VOX receives 13.45 % of the vote in Andalusia, establishing itself as the third largest parliamentary force after PP (43.04 %, absolute majority in parliament) and PSOE (24.2 %, historical low). However, VOX fell short of its stated goal of participating in government due to PP's majority.

zations or converting them into aid for programmes focused on families, pregnant women, or low-income women; domestic applicants getting priority over immigrant applicants for all social benefits; total cancellation of aid for collective bargaining and social dialogue; cessation of training and education programmes for foreign workers; and, the repeal of measures for occupational safety and hygiene. Moreover, "Institutes for Democratic Memory" were renamed "Institutes for Reconciliation" in an attempt to prevent crimes from the Franco dictatorship from being addressed. VOX also denies climate change and any need for an energy transition, as well as violence against women as a problem.

In sum, VOX and its affiliated groups can be defined as a right-wing populist party and movement, even if its longevity and social anchoring are yet to be determined. Beyond the classic far-right characteristics such as ultra-nationalism, authoritarianism, anti-communism, anti-liberalism, sociocultural traditionalism, and xenophobia, VOX also dabbles in clear elements of right-wing populist discourse: the construction of a mythical 'pure' people who are victims of a corrupt and anti-patriotic elite; the need for authoritarian leadership in the face of the fragmentation of social unity by pluralist-progressive democratic groups and ideologies; the propagation of simple solutions in response to complex social problems; and the construction of a visible enemy. In the Spanish context, these are the regional independence movements, feminism and gender ideology, and all left-wing political groups, with the trade unions at the centre.

RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND TRADE UNIONS

"CCOO and UGT are enemies of Spain, and we will not stop until they are in prison," proclaimed VOX General Secretary Santiago Abascal at a rally in Madrid in March 2022.

For a long time, the danger of the rising right-wing populist movement was not noticeable within Spanish trade unions, as it had little resonance among employees or impact on the workplace. Right-wing populist discourse primarily occurs in online social networks and media and tends to mobilize socially isolated people and young people threatened by precarity and social marginalization. With the recent entry of the VOX party into governments and institutions, this danger has been taken more seriously; VOX explicitly aims to aggressively target unions, social policy, women's rights, and immigrant rights, thereby directly threatening long-established social and worker's rights in Spain. "Trade Unions against Right-wing Populism" is gradually making it onto the agenda of official trade union action programmes.

The rise of right-wing populism in Spain has also coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which demanded enormous effort from the unions.

> *"We are having a hard time communicating just how much work we do and getting people to understand what it's all about. During the Corona crisis, we had to constantly negotiate safety protocols, short-term work regulations to safeguard employment, and collective agreements on working from home, all of which required us to do a lot of extra work, and we did that for all workers, not just our members."*
>
> *Excerpt from interviews with union representatives*

Spanish trade union members credit the following factors as contributing to the rise of right-wing populism in recent years:

- In Spain, VOX emerged from the conservative PP's internal crisis. Disaffected radical right-wing groups split off from the party and, in some cases, skilfully seized on the social climate of discontent, insecurity, and rejection of the traditional political and economic elites.

- VOX has been able to exploit the Catalonian independence movement quite well; this movement has led to a strengthening of centralist nationalist discourse and brought an authoritarian solution to centre stage. Spain's unity and discussions of nationhood have taken on a new, stronger meaning. Progressive left-wing forces, in contrast, have been unsuccessful at promoting the more complex image of a pluralistic, cosmopolitan Spain with a social balance.

- The anti-welfare austerity policies implemented in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis strained the social climate, increased social inequality, and created many vulnerable population groups threatened by social decline. This has provided VOX with fertile ground for its demagoguery.

- In many ways, right-wing populism is a reaction to two trends in Spanish society. First, feminism and gender equality have grown strongly in recent years, leading to a conservative backlash from some segments of the population. Second, right-wing populism has focused on the global elite and the business world in the form of an anti-global and nationalist discourse.

- The increase in right-wing populism around the world also fans the flames of Spanish right-wing populism. France and Italy, both of which have strong right-wing populist movements, are seen in Spain as culturally close examples.

- The social media-dominated communication sphere is often used by right-wing populists as a stage for its cheap demagoguery, in which reality and rationality are displaced by fake news.

- Other themes, including xenophobia and Francoist nostalgia, are present, albeit on the margins and in more isolated instances. These themes appear not to have the same central importance as they do in right-wing populist movements in other countries.

The most important strategy against right-wing populist influences is the defence of democratic institutions such as autonomous collective bargaining, social dialogue, and systems for worker's rights, wherefrom targeted appeals can be made to employers and conservative political parties to form a broad democratic front against the danger from the right. The CCOO and UGT work closely on these issues, especially because right-wing populism is not on the works council election campaign agenda. Concrete initiatives, such as education programmes and international cooperation, remain within the jurisdiction of individual trade union confederations. However, political strategies related to the public, governments, political institutions, and the European trade union confederations are coordinated and carried out jointly.

Moreover, worker representatives emphasize the struggle to counter right-wing populists' simplistic demagoguery in the public discourse. Here, too, are alliances with all democratic institutions and movements central. Trade unionists emphasize two specific problems in this field of action. On the one hand, trade unions and progressive political forces strive to convince using rational and coherent lines of argument, while right-wing populists do not care if they are promoting completely contradictory positions and discourses. On the other hand, national symbols such as flags, colours, anthems, etc. are implicitly associated with right-wing conservative positions, while left-wing political positions always have an anti-patriotic flair.

In the summer of 2022, CCOO launched the International Trade Union Initiative "How can trade unions confront fascism and right-wing extremism?", with the first seminar held on July 20, 2022. The seminar was attended by representatives from the TUC (*Trade Union Congress*, UK), the CTA-T (*Central de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras de la Argentina*, Argentina), the CUT (*Central Única dos Trabalhadores*, Brazil), the CUT (*Central Unitaria de Trabajadores*, Chile), the CGIL (*Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro*, Italy), and Steven Forti, a fascism expert from the University of Barcelona[4]. This first seminar was the starting point for the *Red Internacional de Estudios Sindicales* (REDES network; International Network of Trade Union Studies), which aims to use international cooperation on concrete strategies to counter right-wing extremist movements. Joint educational programmes for workers and trade union representatives are planned as the next step.

In September 2020, VOX founded *Solidaridad*, a trade union project reminiscent of the Polish *Solidarność*, as a self-described patriotic social project to protect Spanish workers from corrupt classist unions and illegal immigration. So far, its workplace presence has been very small and localized to a few centres in Madrid and Zaragoza; its membership numbers are also low. UGT and CCOO trade union representatives make clear that *Solidaridad* does not discuss working conditions, collective bargaining policies, and so on, instead only it abstractly propagates the primacy of Spanish workers over immigrants and, above all, vilifies the established "mafia" trade unions as corrupt, ideological, sold-out, and anti-patriotic. Its secretary general, Rodrigo Alonso, a member of the Andalusian PP, has been involved in several corruption scandals while being a member of parliament.

Given how challenging it is to gain a foothold in workplaces and businesses, many expect VOX to abandon its own union project in favour of infiltrating established corporatist federations beyond the left-wing "class trade unions", such as the civil servants' union CSIF, the federations of police and security forces, or some 'yellow' company unions. VOX has, to date, voted against every labour or social policy initiative put forward by the government or social partners; for example, the party has voted against short-term work regulations during the COVID-19 crisis, the minimum wage agreement, the regulation of delivery riders *(Ley Rider)*, remote work regulations, and the framework agreement on pension reform.

The Castile and León region warrants special consideration insofar as it is the only of the 17 federal states in which VOX has been directly involved in government.

4 See Comisiones Obreras Castilla y León (2022).

VOX has been a coalition partner of the PP since April 2022. While the region has traditionally been governed by the conservative PP, social dialogue between the government, trade unions, and employers is well established – strongly anchored in the political culture and enshrined in the regional constitution. Even the International Labour Organization (ILO) has repeatedly praised the region as an example of social collaboration and participatory democracy.[5] In 2022, there were no fewer than 18 Social Dialogue Agreements on social and labour policy fields of action in place.

VOX launched a direct attack on the Social Dialogue Agreements and its actors immediately after taking office; its Minister of Industry, Trade, and Employment summarily suspended nine of the existing agreements. Meanwhile, each of the 20 million Euro grants planned to be given to agreement stakeholders were cut in half. This galvanized the unions as well as the employers, who demanded compliance with the already-signed agreements. According to the *Confederación Española de Organizaciones Empresariales* (CEOE, Spanish Confederation of Business Organizations), these uncertainties and social conflicts jeopardize potential investments in the region (*Diario de Castilla y León* 2022). The local and regional employment and training programmes that the social partners had negotiated, and for which the federal government had allocated 70 million euros, are simply not being implemented.

In addition to the attack on social dialogue, VOX has launched a number of other initiatives, such as converting the "Law for a Historical Memory" into a "Law for Reconciliation Between the Two Spains" or replacing the "Law Against Violence Against Women" with a "Law on Domestic Violence". The regional holiday *Villalar*, which is enshrined in the constitution, was replaced by the Day of the Holy Apostle Santiago. This can be understood as yet another component in the ideological culture war against all democratic symbols of regional autonomy in promotion of a unified, conservative, and Catholic Spain. Moreover, under the label of national energy sovereignty, VOX has demanded the reopening of nuclear and coal power plants. In all of its official documents, VOX has systematically denied climate change, violence against women, LGBTQI+ rights, and crimes committed under the Franco dictatorship.

The situation in Castile and León is currently unclear, and the future remains undetermined; most PP ministers officially defend the Social Dialogue Agreements while simultaneously allowing VOX ministers to attack its social partners freely. CCOO and UGT complain of a deep loss of confidence and have announced a mobilization campaign for the fall of 2022, in which they want to involve the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions (CoR), and the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Geneva. The aim is to strengthen the Social Dialogue agenda at the local level, where VOX is not yet represented. Meanwhile, unions are investigating potential legal action for noncompliance in the bi- and tri-lateral agreements. The regional employers' association has pledged its full support for this effort.

It is rather exceptional that the Spanish employers' association is taking such a direct political position, as they are typically strict about being apolitical.

> *We sit down with every government, negotiate with every labour minister regardless of party affiliation or ideology. Our organization encompasses all political beliefs; we have no political orientation – not like the so-called class unions that represent certain political ideologies.*
>
> *Excerpt from interviews with CEOE representatives*

In this respect, the clear commitment to social dialogue as a fundamental principle of industrial relations and the region's social constitution outweighs the employers' association's typical stance. Representatives from business organizations also admit a certain closeness to the neoliberal economic positions espoused by the right-wing populists (free market, minimization of the state, subsidy cuts, and so on) but also point to their contradictory and populist nature given their simultaneous calls for a strong, interventionist, and authoritarian state and the discourse against the 'globalist' and economic elites and big banks.

In summary, trade union strategies to counter the rise of right-wing populism focus on four main areas of action. First, they explicitly integrate the topic into union education programmes for members and delegates. Relatedly, the second strategy is to encourage people to respond to right-wing populist positions expressed in the workplace or among employees directly and openly with clear argumentation. Third, work is being done to promote public discourse that strengthens democratic, pluralistic, and tolerant positions that define diversity and difference an enrichment rather than a threat. The final strategy is to emphasise the importance of European and international cooperation against right-wing populist tendencies.

5 Servicio de información sobre discapacidad (2018); UGT Castilla y León (2022).

CONCLUSIONS

The rise of a right-wing populist movement and political party in Spain since 2018 caught many of Spain's social actors and unions unprepared and coincided with the decline of the other populist parties, which led to the dissolution of the previously established two-party system with *Podemos* on the left juxtaposed with the liberal-technocratic party *Ciudadanos*. Many hoped that right-wing populism would fall as sharply as it rose in the face of a resurgence of the traditional conservative right-wing party PP. The trade union perspective on this, however, is mixed insofar as it would correspond with a decline of the current left-wing coalition between PSOE and UP. In many respects, the current left-wing government has made positive headway in tackling the crisis, including the implementation of short-term work regulations, the establishment of a guaranteed minimum income, the strengthening of civil liberties and gender equality, labour market reforms to safeguard employment and reduce precarious employment, and an urgently needed pension reform, for example. In this respect, the governing coalition has clearly distinguished itself from the PP, whose crisis response from 2011 to 2018 was disastrous. The fact that the electorate is opting for a failed conservative alternative in the face of these recent policies is cause for great concern and foreshadows difficulties for progressive, pro-union policies in the future.

The VOX party, which began entering parliaments and institutions in 2018, can be clearly characterized as a right-wing populist party insofar as it combines strong nationalism, a "people against the elites" discourse, and authoritarian centralism (Halikiopoulou/Vlandas 2022). While VOX avoids direct fascist or Falangist symbols and accepts formal democratic rules, democratic values are clearly subordinate to nationalist and authoritarian goals within their framework. It aims to abolish the Spanish system of autonomous communities and calls for direct and, if necessary, military intervention by the central state against regional independence movements. The right-wing populist offensive is concentrated primarily on the symbolic-cultural level, with a strong emphasis on nationalist and Catholic symbols and traditionalist family values. Defending Spain's multicultural, modern, and cosmopolitan reality against this attack will be difficult so long as the crisis in Catalonia and the corruption scandals continue to shape Spain's political landscape, and democratic diversity is perceived by many as a weakness.

At present, it is still unclear whether right-wing populism is a permanent phenomenon or a temporary manifestation arising in the broader context of a political party system crisis. The rise of right-wing populism in Spain is evidently less the result of social and economic conditions (such as unemployment, social inequality, or mass immigration) than a product of subjective perceptions, such as the perceived distance between people and democratic institutions and elites. The fact is, however, that the entire institutional framework has become unstable; voter behaviour is subject to strong fluctuations, and unions, like the political left as a whole, are negatively impacted by a legitimacy crisis. If populist discourses against the welfare state and pluralistic democratic governance models continue to advance and permeate sectors of the workforce, the risk of post-democratic authoritarian capitalism will grow. The challenge, then, extends far beyond the fight against right-wing populism and is to regain lost trust in democratic and social progress with trade unions as central social actors among large swaths of the population.

APPENDIX

SELECT ELECTION RESULTS IN SPAIN (2015–2022)

The following section documents some of the election results from recent years, which illustrate not only the sudden rise of the right-wing populist VOX party but also the dramatic fragmentation of the party landscape since 2015 when the two new parties *Podemos* and the liberal-technocratic party *Ciudadanos* shook up the outdated two-party system comprised of the populist *Partido Popular* (PP) and the *Partido Socialista Obrero* (PSOE) which had been discredited by corruption scandals.

On the national level, something of a renaissance of the two-party system with PSOE and PP, with VOX playing the role of a third new force, can be observed. *Ciudadanos* is now in a complete existential crisis, and *Podemos* is also dealing with many internal problems and divisions. In sum, the regional heterogeneity of the Spanish political system has increased enormously. The Basque Country and Catalonia have traditionally had their own systems dominated by regional nationalist parties; now, a fragmented party structure without a clear majority has become established in other regions as well.

The left-wing protest party Podemos has never managed to build a unified party structure and competes in various regions through independent groups (Catalonia: *Catalunya en Comú*; Valencia: *Podem Comunitat Valenciana*; Basque Country: *Elkarrekin Podemos*). In other regions, *Podemos* competes against other alternative left-wing groups (Madrid: *Mas Madrid*; Galicia: *En Marea*; Andalusia: *Adelante Andalucía*). In the near future, whether or not the very popular Second Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Labour and Social Economy Yolanda Díaz Pérez's initiative to unite the various groups on the left of the PSOE under the "Sumar" banner as a new political project succeeds will be decisive. Yolanda Díaz comes from the Galician Communist Party and has always maintained her independence, even within *Podemos*.

Spanish and European Elections: The percentage points group under "Other" are primarily regional parties in Catalonia, Basque Country, and Galicia.

Catalonia and Basque Country: Centralist Spanish parties such as PP and VOX have only very small shares in these two regions, which have very strong independence movements. In Catalonia, the independence parties *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC), *Junts per Catalunya* (JuntsxCat), and *Candidatura d'Unitat Popular* (CUP) together account for about half

Election Results by Party (in per cent)

	PSOE	PP	VOX	UP	Cs	MM	Other	ERC	JuntsxCat	CUP	ECP	PNV	EH Bildu	AA
Spain 2019	28.3	21	15.2	13	6.9	2.3	11.4							
Spain 2016	22.6	33	0.2	21.1	13		10.1							
Spain 2015	22	28.7	0.2	20.6	13.9		28.5							
Madrid 2021		16.8	44.7	9.1	7.2	3.6	17	1.6						
Madrid 2019		27.3	22.2	8.9	5.6	19.5	14.7	1.8						
Andalusia 2022	24.2	43.04	13.45	7.7	3.3									4.6
Castile and León 2022	30	31.4	17.6	5.1	4.5		11.4							
Andalusia 2018	28	20.7	11	16.2	18.3		5.8							
Andalusia 2015	35.3	26.8	0.45	14.8	9.3		13.3							
Catalonia 2021	23	3.8	7.7		5.6		4.5	21.3	20	6.7	6.9			
Basque Country 2020	13.65	6.8	2	8			2.6					39.1	27.9	
Europe 2019		32.8	20.1	6.2	10	12.2		18.7						

Legend: PSOE: Partido Socialista Obrero Español; PP: Partido Popular; VOX: Vox; UP: Unidas Podemos; Cs: Ciudadanos; MM: Mas Madrid; ERC: Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya; JuntsxCat: Junts per Catalunya; CUP: Candidatura d'Unitat Popular; ECP: En Comú Podem; PNV: Partido Nacionalista Vasco; EH Bildu: Euskal Herria Bildu; AA: Adelante Andalucía.

of all votes, demonstrating the deep divisions that have characterized Catalonian society and politics for many years. In Basque Country, the rather conservative *Euzko Alderdi Jeltzalea* (EAJ-PNV; Partido Nacionalista Vasco; Basque Nationalist Party) and the more radical left-wing nationalist *EH Bildu* hold a clear majority over Spanish-wide political parties.

Andalusia: Spain's largest and most populous state, traditionally a socialist stronghold, was governed by PSOE until 2018. Here, the turnaround and the advances of the right-wing populist VOX into the political landscape are the most apparent. In the elections on June 19, 2022, PSOE found itself in a deep crisis, while the PP found itself in an absolute majority. VOX was able to establish itself as the third political force. However, VOX was unable to achieve its stated goal of participating in government, as the PP has its first absolute majority. *Ciudadanos*, in contrast, disappeared from Parliament and *Podemos* split into two groups: *Por Andalucía*, which is linked to the federal party, and *Adelante Andalucía*, a radical splinter group critical of capitalism.

Castile and León: This state in central Spain is, thus far, the only state in which VOX has been directly involved in a coalition government with the conservative PP. In addition to the rise of VOX to its status as the third strongest party, the election results show the appearance of new local and regional splinter parties, including *Unión del Pueblo Leonés* (UPL; Unity of the People of the Province of León) and *Soria ¡Ya!* (SY; Soria Now!), which now have parliamentary representation, as well as the decline of *Podemos* and *Ciudadanos*.

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