Indirect Path to Power

The Far-Right Catholic Agenda in Spain

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Between 2005 and 2009, Spain provided the first European setting for Catholic mobilization against same-sex marriage, sex education, and voluntary interruption of pregnancy. These three social achievements were considered expressions of what some Christians name *gender ideology*. These anti-gender campaigns failed in their main objectives at this time: in 2023, both abortion and same-sex marriage are legal. However, the anti-gender rhetoric has reached the public sphere and is part of public debates in Spain today. In this chapter, we explore the successes and failures of Catholic conservative strategies around gender in Spain in the last two decades by analyzing (1) the evolution of the religious context, (2) the internationalization and professionalization of lay activism, and (3) recent transformations in the right-wing electoral landscape. These three factors inform the political opportunity framework in which religious, civil, and political actors create coalitions in their attempts to transfer Catholic doctrines into public policies.

The Spanish state has been a parliamentary monarchy since 1975, following 40 years of a fascist dictatorship ruled by General F. Franco with the support of the national Catholic Church. Since 1975 (the end of the dictatorship), the Catholic Church has lost a great part of its political influence (Spain is no longer a confessional state), and two parties have dominated the political landscape: the moderate conservative People's Party (PP) and the moderate leftist Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE). The Spanish far right (parties and activists) disappeared from the public sphere in the democratic period, as they were considered as legacies of the dictatorship. However, a new far-right party arrived in a regional parliament in 2018, after the Catalonian independence movement challenged the Spanish state in 2017.

Despite the Catholic Church's loss of influence, Spain remains a country with a majority of Catholics, a huge minority of citizens without religious affil-

iation, and poor diversification of the religious landscape. State surveys show that 60% of the population identify as Catholic, although two-thirds of them are lapsed Catholics (CIS 2021). According to the same sources, other religious groups make up only 4% of the population, and they are more focused on religious freedom than on implementing big political agendas. Compared with the religious minorities, the Catholic Church enjoys a hegemonic role in Spanish society. In addition, the Church has far more hospitals, schools, universities, NGOs, worship places, and media than all other religious denominations together. However, the Catholic Church's influence on public opinion is limited, even among Catholics. Due to memories of the Church's collaboration with Franco's dictatorship and a certain latent anticlericalism in Spanish culture (Behar 1990; Cornejo-Valle 2008), Spaniards do not support the participation of religious institutions in public politics. Along this line, surveys show a great moral divide between the official positions of the Catholic hierarchy and the majority of Catholics in matters such as contraception, female priesthood, same-sex marriage, and divorce (Univision 2014, 13). One of the most relevant aspects of the Spanish case is that the Catholic hierarchy has enough resources to be heard but lacks social support to easily succeed.

Turning a religious issue into a public concern: The mobilization of Catholics around gender

In 1994, the Spanish Episcopal Conference (SEC) published a note opposing the European Parliament's Resolution on equal rights for gays and lesbians (1994), labeling it as the "legitimization of a moral evil" (SEC 1994). Following the Vatican's new rhetoric against gender, sexual, and reproductive rights during the UN Conferences in Cairo (1994) and Beijing (1995), the first time that gender was pointed out in Spain as a harmful ideological project of "homosexual lobbies" and a "certain feminism" was in 2001 in a pastoral instruction entitled La familia, santuario de la vida y esperanza de la sociedad (The Family: Sanctuary of Life and Hope of Society; SEC 2001). Two years earlier, the Spanish Family Forum (SFF), an umbrella platform of pro-family associations, was created to lobby against same-sex unions and sex education. Although the SFF defines itself as non-denominational, both its language and areas of mobilization are obviously rooted in Catholicism. *Gender ideology* was depicted by activist Michael O'Brien as "one of the devil's most powerful deceptions" (*Actuall*

2015), and it has become a new source of concern and political mobilization in the Spanish Catholic milieu.

However, the anti-gender actors and discourse were irrelevant until the arrival of the national government of PSOE in 2004, when the government announced a set of reforms on sexual and reproductive rights that included same-sex marriage, sex education, abortion rights, gender identity recognition for trans persons, and fighting gender-based violence. The Spanish Episcopal Conference reacted with a communication campaign based on the spread of conspiratorial thinking and moral panic around family values, which mobilized the SFF and other Catholic lay associations (Cornejo and Pichardo 2017b). They organized large street demonstrations against same-sex marriage and abortion laws between 2005 and 2009.

The conservative People's Party (PP), which is considered as moderate, also joined these demonstrations in an attempt to eventually take advantage of the contention against the socialist government. This strategy can be understood in terms of a *radical flank effect* (Cornejo and Pichardo 2017a, 2018). The government's management of the economic crisis led the PP to win the national elections in 2011 (Martin and Urquizu-Sancho 2012), but the anti-gender campaigns did not have an impact in terms of policies and public opinion: most of the aforementioned reforms remain in force and are widely accepted, with 76% of the population supporting same-sex marriage (Ipsos 2021) and 83% favoring legal abortion (Ipsos 2021a). Nevertheless, Spain was the first European country where the Christian Right mobilized massively against *gender* (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017; Cornejo and Pichardo 2020), becoming a laboratory where Christian activists from other countries could learn, create, and test repertoires of contention for later political opportunities.

The ambiguous role played by the Spanish Catholic Church

The beginning of Pope Francis's pontificate in 2013 changed the Vatican's strategies against sexual and reproductive rights, with a renewal of tone and rhetoric but not of doctrinal stances (Sgró Ruata and Vaggione 2018). An explicit language of moral condemnation was replaced by more ambiguous language, focusing on a pastoral approach to homosexuals, divorcees, and women who abort. This discursive moderation has also taken place within the Spanish Church, with the closest sectors to Pope Francis gaining power to the detriment of the most conservative wing. In fact, Mgr. Carlos Osoro

and Mgr. Juan José Omella, considered moderates, were named archbishops of Madrid and Barcelona, respectively, and cardinals in 2016 and 2017. These nominations were depicted by the Spanish press as a "warning" from Pope Francis to "those belonging to the old regime" (Vidal 2016). The two cardinals were elected SEC vice president and president, respectively, in 2020. Most probably, the failures of the 2005–2009 campaigns also contributed to the change of strategy, involving a moderation of messages and language and the diversification of the Catholic agenda.

Far from the previous strategy of contention, in recent years, the Spanish Episcopal Conference has shown greater political independence, criticizing both some of the new leftist government bills (on euthanasia and education) and far-right statements on migration and the situation in Catalonia. In fact, since the beginning of the conflict in Catalonia, the SEC has asked for a dialogue between national and regional administrations, which is nowhere near the right and far-right narratives demanding the punishment of the separatist leaders. A sign of retracement has been the reallocation of the traditional Mass for the Family in December—which had become in previous years an annual protest against gender policies—from public to religious space. From 2007, this massive event had been held in Colón, the central square of Madrid, but after the designation of the moderate Mgr. Carlos Osoro as archbishop of Madrid in 2014, the celebration moved to inside the city's cathedral. Despite this moderation, previous anti-gender rhetoric continues in the public speeches of some bishops and in the daily activity of Catholic lay associations and far-right political parties.

With regard to non-Catholic Christians, some Spanish Evangelicals have also joined the anti-gender demands. The Federation of Evangelical Entities of Spain (FEREDE) opposed the abortion law (2009) and the LGBTIQA+ anti-discriminatory bill (2017), and *Protestante Digital*, the most read Evangelical online journal in Spain, publishes news about *gender ideology* and anti-gender activism on a daily basis. However, these are not big public actors for our topic (and their positions on it are heterogeneous), and, as we have noted before, their main target is to improve their position through religious rights activism.

International networking and the professionalization of lay activism

As several authors have pointed out, religion is an emerging dimension in the configuration of contemporary citizenship (Hudson 2003; Parker and Hoon

2013; Nyhagen 2018). During his pontificate, Benedict XVI claimed the right of Catholics to participate in public debates based on their faith-oriented convictions. Consequently, lay anti-gender activists have put this claim into practice by forming a political identity based on the defense of the Catholic Church's teachings on gender and sex. However, in Spain, where religious doctrine has little influence on public opinion, lay activists push to translate their religious issues into secular language, deliberately erasing religious identity from the demands and repertoire of mobilization. According to the logic of what has been called a *strategic secularism* (Vaggione 2005, 2012; Cornejo-Valle 2021; Cornejo-Valle and Blázquez-Rodríguez, 2022), even when bishops themselves have been visible contenders, demonstrating in the streets, activists have insisted on the secularity of the campaigns. Thus, in 2005, when the visibility of the Catholic hierarchy was quite obvious, the former general secretary of the Confederación Católica Nacional de Padres (National Association of Catholic Parents) said that whether or not the bishops participated in the demonstrations, "they are not Catholic Church demonstrations" but rather the expression of "all the Spanish society, all the families" (J.H. 2005).

HazteOir (Make Yourself Heard), an anti-gender lobby created in 2001, has followed this strategic secularism tactic with success. The use of cyberactivism and the aesthetic of young internationally connected entrepreneurs have allowed them to move away from the old-fashioned image of Catholic conservatives. HazteOir's agenda has been updated to include current affairs, and its repertoire of contention is innovative among right-wing activists, including online signature petitions, ad hoc rebranding for specific campaigns, and creative performances in the public space. In fact, this association became widely notorious in 2017 thanks to its campaign involving a bus driving across Spain with the following transphobic message: "Boys have penises, girls have vulvas. Don't let them fool you."

Given the campaign's media success, HazteOir launched buses with similar messages in other countries and cities, including New York City, Santiago, Bogotá, and Boston. Innovation, creativity, and controversy have allowed it to push its own agenda and become a predatory group within the ecosystem of the Christian Right. HazteOir has had conflicts with some lay associations and local dioceses (Bastante 2009, 2015) for its attempts to stand out and gain notoriety during demonstrations, appropriating the success of broader protests and recruiting young activists. At the same time, its leaders maintain good relations with media corporations, political parties, bishops, and anti-gender organizations from other countries. Each year, the association celebrates an

annual ceremony called Premios HO, where it awards public figures that it considers are defending family and life. Significantly, among the personalities awarded this prize, we can include the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban, activist Alberic Dumont (La Manif pour Tous), media tycoon Mauricio Casal, and bishop Mgr. Juan Antonio Reig Pla.

HazteOir has worked on international networking since its foundation, and it is linked to the Phoenix Institute, an American conservative think tank. Since 2012, when it hosted World Congress of Families (WCF) VI in Madrid, it has reinforced its transnational strategy. The WCF is a global meeting that connects organizations, businesspeople, political parties, governments, and religious institutions in the fight against gender and sexual rights. One year later, in 2013, it launched its international brand CitizenGO, a tool to internationally expand and export its cyberactivist strategies and campaigns to more Christian-Right groups and individuals. The CitizenGO.org website has different versions for 20 geographical regions in 12 different languages (including Croatian, Polish, and Hungarian), each with its own domestic signature petitions: stopping abortion rights in Brazil, putting pressure on the Polish Children's Ombudsman, and criticizing a TV show in Slovenia and asking for it not to be broadcast. Through internationalization, this Spanish association has managed to recruit partners such as activist Brian S. Brown (president of the US National Organization for Marriage), politician Luca Volonté (former Italian MEP), media manager Alejandro Bermúdez (Peruvian director of the Catholic news agency ACI Prensa), and Alexey Komov, the right-hand man of Konstantin Malofeev, a Russian oligarch who was sanctioned by the US and the EU in 2014 for the alleged funding of separatist militias in Eastern Ukraine. The role played by HazteOir–CitizenGO at the international level, including their networking efforts, has been pointed out by some media as among the reasons explaining the rise of the far right in Spain during the last years (Ramsay and Provost 2019).

CitizenGO is also present in United Nations Economic and Social Council debates as an NGO with a consultative status, hosting events with the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations. This NGOization process is common in anti-choice (self-named pro-life and/or pro-family) activism, involving the transformation of the social movement into specialized work entities able to participate in decision-making processes (Moran Faundes 2017). In Spain, the anti-choice association Red Madre (Mother Network) receives public funds and works with regional and local administrations as a service for pregnant women. It also collaborates with certain dioceses, giving

talks in Catholic schools and parishes. This strategy is complemented by presentations of lay activists with their professional identities (doctors, psychologists, judges, teachers, etc.), who seek to hide their religious motivations by using technical language.

The rise of Vox: A new political opportunity for the Christian Right

In the same year as CitizenGO's launch, Vox was founded: a new party led by former People's Party officials who were critical of the conservative government formed in 2011 for not fulfilling electoral promises regarding taxes, abortion, and anti-terrorist policy. HazteOir broadcast Vox's first press conference on its YouTube channel, which meant the beginning of a close relationship between both organizations.

In his speech at World Congress of Families XIII, the CitizenGO and HazteOir president Ignacio Arsuaga said that influencing political parties, elected officials, and "the establishment" was the direct path to power, but "my favourite path is the indirect path to power: by controlling the environment of those who are in the direct path to power, you also control them."[1] Vox's direct success has been the indirect success of its partner associations. HazteOir works as a Super PAC organization, supporting and funding events to promote Vox's agenda, while Vox acts as the loudspeaker for their ideas and demands in national, regional, and local parliaments. Consequently, some activists of HazteOir and other Christian lay associations such as Abogados Cristianos (Christian Lawyers), Familia y Dignidad Humana (Family and Human Dignity), and Federación Española de Asociaciones Provida (Federation of Pro-Life Associations) have become electoral candidates of this political party.

After four years of political irrelevance, Vox surprisingly obtained 12 seats and 11% of the vote in the Andalusian regional elections of December 2018. A year later, they won 54 seats and 15% of the vote in the national elections, although it was the Left who achieved enough seats to form the governement in 2019. This emerging scenario with a growing Far-Right came about immediately after the conflict for the territorial independence of Catalonia, and the unexpected electoral rise of the far right has been explained as a nationalist

1 The full speech is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nylHDHwOwo&t=4s.

reaction against the separatist claims of a part of the state (Turnbull-Dugarte 2019; Arroyo Menéndez 2020). However, even if the trigger had no link with the anti-gender agenda or discourse, it opened a brand-new political opportunity for the Christian Right. Along this line, as soon as Vox was in the political position to negotiate with the PP for regional governments, it accepted the proposals of Catholic lay associations. It thus demanded the removal of LGBTIQA+ anti-discriminatory laws and policies against gender-based violence and requested funds for anti-choice organizations and the publication of a public list of educators teaching about sexual and gender diversity.

The great media attention that Vox has received has brought expressions such as *gender dictatorship*, *gay lobby*, and *culture of death* into the public debate. This can be understood as a backlash against the recognition of feminist and LGBTIQA+ movements and their demands in Spain in the context of a polarizing public opinion: from 2017 to 2021, the proportion of young women declaring themselves feminists grew from 46.1% to 67.1%, while the proportion of young men who think that gender-based violence is an ideological invention grew from 11.9% to 20% (Rodríguez et al. 2021).

Despite the relation between anti-gender discourse and the nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric of international far-right parties (Ericson 2018; Graff and Korolczuk 2022), this link has been managed very discretely in the Spanish context. As Cornejo-Valle, Ramme and Barrera-Blanco (2023) points out in their comparative study of the Spanish and Polish anti-gender agendas, the secular and plural meanings of nation in Spain make difficult to entangle it with ethnicity, gender and religion. But certainly, there is a xenophobic rhetoric that Vox also shares. In this sense, it constantly calls for the deportation of irregular immigrants and criticizes Muslim associations. However, it considers Latin American immigration from a different point of view. From an ethno-pluralist approach, Vox understands Latin American immigration to be more compatible with Spanish identity and culture, based on a glorified common past that includes the evangelization and Hispanicization of the Americas. Hence, even if there is some trace of religious bias in the Spanish far-right xenophobic rhetoric (which is clearly Islamophobic), this bias is not entangled with the anti-gender agenda. On the contrary, Vox strategically uses femo- and homonationalist discourses to link migration to violence against women and LGBTIQA+ people. In addition, other Christian activists in the anti-gender movement seem to accept the migration-friendly doctrine of the Vatican or at least do not express a xenophobic discourse.

At the same time that Vox expresses some of the more significant political demands of the Church (the *gender ideology* agenda), the relationship between the party and the Church is ambiguous. On the one hand, Vox separates itself explicitly from Pope Francis I, referring to him as *Citizen Bergolio*, while celebrating official meetings of Vox's president Santiago Abascal with Cardinal Robert Sarah, one of the most critical voices against Francis I. The meeting was organized by Gabriel Ariza, director of the ultra-conservative religious website Infovaticana (Bastante 2019). On the other hand, some bishops support Vox's campaigns, as they consider the party to be the best representative of Christian values (in terms of *natural family*, *life*, and *Christian civilization*). An example is the bishop of Córdoba, who publicly declared his joy at Vox's unexpected results in the Andalusian regional elections of 2018: "Andalusia is the pioneer of a social change that we expect in [the whole] Spanish society" (Cruz 2018). In addition, some Vox congressmen have a church background, such as Agustín Rosety, who was episcopal delegate of the Cadiz diocese and former vice president of the Catholic foundation Educatio Servanda.

Ambiguity is a common aspect of the position of the Spanish Christian Right regarding certain specific issues, such as the anti-vaccine movement, which is not particularly powerful in Spain (more than 90% of the population over 12 years old were already vaccinated against COVID-19 at the beginning of 2022). One of the most prominent far-right bishops in Spain, Mgr. Cañizares, denounced how COVID-19 vaccines were made from aborted fetal cells ("El cardenal Cañizares" 2020). This fueled a minoritarian Catholic anti-vaccine movement in social media that was led by several Catholic influencers, including some Catholic priests who are prominent in the Spanish alt-right online communities like the tweeter „Father Jesús", among others. Meanwhile, both HazteOir (and its international brand CitizenGO) and Vox are campaigning against mandatory vaccination, defending the freedom of not having the vaccine, but they avoid criticizing the vaccine itself or those who decide to have it.

Conclusions

The coalition between the Church hierarchy, civil associations, and political parties failed in the first anti-gender campaigns (2005–2009), leading to a subsequent differentiation of each of their strategies. While the SEC moderated its strategy of contention and the People's Party removed explicit opposition to sexual and reproductive rights from its agenda, lay organiza-

tions have taken on the leading role among conservative Christians through controversial protests with international outreach and an organizational professionalization that allows them to participate in decision-making processes.

Gender ideology did not once more become a recurring expression in the public debate until 2018, when the far-right party Vox achieved surprising success in several elections motivated by other, non-gender-related conflicts. However, since its foundation five years earlier, the party had been collaborating with lay organizations and adhering to Church moral doctrine of defending *natural family* and *life*. At this time, the political opportunities for a coalition with the Catholic Church are limited due to Vox's statements on migration and the strategic turn of Francis's pontificate. Vox does not ally with the SEC, but it has replaced it as the head of the crusade for *traditional values* against the new feminism and the LGBTIQA+ movement in the context of a growing polarization of public opinion on gender and sexuality issues. The media attention and political power gained after the party's electoral rise has provided a new political opportunity for the Christian Right: old anti-gender claims become parliamentary proposals, and activists turn into legislators. The replacement in terms of leadership secularizes the aesthetics and inaugurates a new stage of anti-gender campaigns where the message spreads beyond the conservative religious milieu, as other of Vox's issues are juxtaposed to it, such as *globalism*, insecurity, and national history. The COVID-19 crisis has damaged the government's popularity, and Vox is improving its results in each regional election. During 2022 and 2023, Vox has achieved to be part of the governments of 4 regions and 140 local councils together with the PP. In view of its rise in regional elections and polls, their main target was to win 2023 national elections, but after deploying an aggresive and radical campaign both parties didn't achieve enough seats to form government. This new electoral failure has been understood by the conservative mainstream media as the result of the polarization generated by Vox, which has mobilized progressive voters against the arrival of the Far-Right to power for the first time since Franco. It has also caused an internal crisis in Vox: the leaders closest to classical conservatism have left the board and the most anti-migration and illiberal faction has taken control of the party. The place of far-right Catholic activism in this new scenario is yet to be defined. Thus, scholars will have to pay attention in future research to the ability of anti-gender actors to entangle their agenda with nationalism and xenophobia in a coherent way, which may be key to understanding the new chances of religious conservatism in Spain.

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