


#GobiernoCriminal! Framing the Spanish far right during the first Covid-19 wave

#GobiernoCriminal! Frames de la extrema derecha española durante la primera ola del Covid-19

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Abstract

Extremist parties have become important political actors in the European Parliament and participate in national or regional coalitions. Spanish party Vox defends a combination of tradition, conservatism, nationalism, liberalism, and far-right values. Vox became the third force of the Spanish Parliament growing rapidly amid the harsh social measures taken by the Spanish Government. Without the editorial control of traditional media, far-right discourse is highly prominent on social media also for Vox. The objective of this research is to define the political strategy implemented by Vox on Twitter during the first lockdown in Spain. The research applies framing analysis in three phases: open coding and axial coding to subsamples and a final framing analysis on a sample of 6095 tweets. Results show three main frames. Anti-elitism is defined as victimhood and anti-vox conspiracy. Essentialism is defined as moral, national essentialism, and public order. And finally, Criminal Government, the new frame accusing the government. This study suggests that Vox combines the populist, liberal and conservative discourses to deny the government's legitimacy and to turn into an alternative option, although their party dubiously is.

Keywords: far-right, politics, framing, Europe, Spain.

Resumen

Los partidos extremistas se han convertido en actores políticos importantes en el Parlamento Europeo y participan en coaliciones nacionales o regionales. El partido español Vox defiende una combinación de tradición, conservadurismo, nacionalismo, liberalismo y valores de la extrema derecha. Vox se ha convertido en la tercera fuerza del Parlamento español, creciendo rápidamente ante las medidas sociales adoptadas en España. Sin el control de los medios tradicionales, el discurso de la extrema derecha es prominente en redes sociales, también en el caso de Vox. El objetivo de esta investigación es definir la estrategia política implementada por Vox en Twitter durante el confinamiento de Covid-19. El análisis de frames consta de tres fases con un análisis final de frames en una muestra de 6.095 tweets. Los resultados muestran tres frames principales. Anti-elitismo, caracterizado como victimización y conspiración anti-Vox. El esencialismo definido como moral, nacional y de orden público. Finalmente, gobierno criminal, el nuevo frame de acusación criminal al gobierno. Este estudio avala que Vox combina los discursos populista, liberal y conservador para negar la legitimidad del gobierno y para convertirse, para convertirse en una alternativa siendo partícipe del juego democrático, pese a que su discurso dudosamente lo sea.

Palabras clave: extrema derecha, política, framing, Europa, España.

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1. Introduction: The far-right parties in Europe and Spain

Far-right and populism have become mainstream in Western democracies (Bliuc, 2018; Mudde, 2018) such as France, Hungary, UK, Italy, Brazil or Spain (Golder, 2016; Portelinha & Elcheroth, 2016; Montané-Goetzemberger, 2016; Forti, 2021; Guerrero-Solé *et al.*, 2022). Even the United States have been in jeopardy in the last years between administrations, after the Trump Administration encouraged populist discourses (Marantz, 2019). The rise of such a political ideology has put on alarm academics and governments since it is considered to pose a threat to liberal democracies (Acemoglu, 2013; Urbinati, 2019) and to awaken old fears of internal clashes, extreme nationalism, and systematic exclusion of the different (Núñez Seixas, 2018). In the present historical context, in which the economic crisis that started in 2008 and the increase of the migration movements caused by wars and inequality have put pressure on the governments of the wealthiest countries all over the world, far-right populism has seen an optimal opportunity for its discourse to have a huge impact among citizens (Veiga *et al.*, 2019). Far-right populist discourse is said to be simplistic and reductionist (Engesser *et al.*, 2017; Taggart, 2004), focused on the idea of the people and traditional far-right values such as family, nation, and the heartland. As a populist ideology, far-right populism systematically opposes the elite (Taggart, 2004; Blee, 2007; Gil de Zúñiga, 2020), the political elite that acts against the interests of the people. Far-right populist discourses also show their refusal of immigration policies (Casero-Ripollés *et al.*, 2017; Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2018), and their opposition to the acceptance of other religious worship different from Christianity, in particular Islamism.

Despite its not-so-distant fascist past, until 2019 Spanish far-right populism had been almost residual since the beginning of democracy by the end of the 1970s. However, in the elections of November 2019, the Spanish far-right populist party Vox became the third party in the Spanish parliament. Its consolidation as a mainstream party has been interpreted as a threat to Western democratic values, and has provoked the reaction of a considerable part of the Spanish population and also popular people (Waisbord, 2018; Guerrero-Solé *et al.*, 2022). As it can be read in Vox's Founding Manifesto, their ideology is based on strong patriotism, the defence of the unity of the homeland. It denounces the degradation of democracy and the corruption of the political elite, and as a populist ideology, Vox proclaims the existence of a crisis (Reinemann *et al.*, 2017; Rooduijn, 2014; Crosset, 2019; Müller, 2019; Gil de Zúñiga, 2020) that can liquidate the nation and its people (Núñez-Seixas, 2018).

Spain and Vox have clearly not been an exception on the recent legitimization crisis of modern democracies due to the economic crisis (Gil de Zúñiga, 2020). The rise of Populism in Spain began with Podemos around 2011-2012 (Müller, 2014, 2019) and the Catalan independence movement that raised in 2010-2012 (Barrio & Field, 2018). The rise of far-right populism in Spain has coincided with important circumstances that can influence its future development in the country (Müller, 2019). Firstly, the succession of different crises, that are one of the pillars of their discourse. If during the past decade, the 2010s, these crises were mainly the economic and the constitutional crisis due to the process for the independence of Catalonia (Guerrero-Solé *et al.*, 2019), 2020 started with a new crisis that has shaken the pillars of the Spanish state and the world as a whole: Covid-19 (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Burbaken, 2020; Eberl *et al.*, 2021). At the same time, the rise of Vox has coincided in time with the popularization of social media platforms as means of mass communication, and as a tool to overcome classical intermediation made by traditional, legacy media (Gil de Zúñiga, 2020).

The party led by Santiago Abascal played a role of opposition to the Catalan independence, and afterwards to the policies taken by the Spanish government formed by the Socialist Party (PSOE) and the left-winged Unidas Podemos (UP). This research aims to analyse the messages spread in social media, and in particular Twitter, by the far-right party Vox related to the COVID-19 crisis during the first three months of the pandemic in Spain. We are particularly interested in the way Vox framed the COVID-19 outbreak and the actions taken by the Spanish government to cope with a crisis that has been interpreted by far-right populism as an unbeatable occasion to assault power in Spain and to become a key party in the formation of a new government in 2023, as it has already happened in some autonomous communities in the country.

2. Frames and framing for construction meaning

Framing theory is a multidisciplinary approach to explaining how individuals and groups think, perceive, communicate, and share reality and information. Framing theory has been a relevant framework for communication and media studies since frames were seminally defined as schemas or mental representations to both elaborate

and process the information (Goffman, 1974). These schemas are based on cognitive bias, called heuristics by Tversky and Kahneman (1974), which are stereotypes or mental shortcuts to process and comprehend information rapidly with the least effort but with problems of accuracy and rigour. For instance, Kahneman and Tversky (1982, 1984) tested a key cognitive bias in their “prospect theory”, according to which people risk more when “losses” (drawbacks) are highlighted and the opposite when information is presented as “gains” (benefits).

The work on framing in the field of mass news media has raised much interest. Postman (1985) explains how the consideration of newsworthiness works in a loop by focusing on the topics readily available in the social imaginary, which had previously been made prominent in this social imaginary by the media. A consistent line of research on framing effects has shown how mass media and media experts can shape public opinion by utilizing these cognitive biases to set the frames that are most convenient to their interests (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996; Scheufele, 1999). In other words, mass media select and make salient certain aspects of an issue while marginalizing others to promote a particular interpretation of the issue (Entman, 1993; Lawrence, 2000).

The thriving theorization of framing in the communication field runs parallel to other theories such as the agenda-setting and the priming effect (Protess & McCombs, 2016; Valenzuela *et al.*, 2017; Borah, 2011), particularly in the political communication field. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) proposed that the study of cognitive media effects could distinguish framing, priming, and agenda-setting, framing a second level of agenda-setting. They suggest that framing can affect individuals’ attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour by highlighting certain aspects of a message, and modulating others but can also help make sense of complex information and problem-solving by focusing attention on aspects of an issue. The priming effect is one of the most used by political leaders (Protess & McCombs, 2016), that is, political actors are aware that a dominating frame can have a prime effect on upcoming media information or event and contribute to winning the battle of ideas in the public sphere (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). In this regard, Aalberg *et al.* (2012) conceptualized the framing of politics as a strategic game of winning or losing. Therefore, the political communication field has progressively adopted framing as a rather intended (as opposed to Postman’s more deterministic view) strategy of the political party (with interests by the media) to manage communication (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996).

Lakoff’s seminal work elaborates on the Nurturant Parent Model, on the one hand, and the Strict Father Model, on the other, to explain the different cognitive schemas of conservatives and progressives. Leaning on the metaphor as a trigger of cognition and communication, Lakoff sees the nation as a family and the government as a father. Following his metaphor, the conservative government would be a strict father that applies the law categorically and severely so that each citizen becomes independent and responsible in life, and needs no assistance from the government, whereas the progressive government would suitably protect and assist individuals or groups according to their needs so that everyone can achieve their potential (Lakoff, 1995, 2004).

With the advent of social media, Lakoff has also been highly concerned about how elite and mainstream media can add to the priming effect of misinformation spread by minorities by just covering the story. Lakoff recommends first stating the true facts secondly describing the misinformation and finally stating the true facts again –namely the truth sandwich–. The study of misinformation effects is scarce, but recent reviews confirm Lakoff’s hypothesis and posit that the coverage of misinformation by mainstream media may contribute to the legitimization of the source of misinformation as a political actor (Castelli Gattinara, 2017; Guerrero-Solé *et al.*, 2022). Specifically, scholars have also drawn attention to the framing strategy to spread misinformation commonly connected with the rise of far-right parties (Rone, 2021) and, more recently, with the pandemic too (Bolsing, Palm, & Kingsland, 2020). The pandemic can be a breeding ground for misinformation and far-right parties since the strategy of these parties is mainly based on using social media to embrace collective identities that stem from social movements (McSwiney, 2020) with barely any independent editorial control on content (Åkerlund, 2020).

In this regard, Figenschou and Ihlebæk (2018) found the far-right online media questions mainstream, elite, or independent media with five “positions of authority”: “(i) the insider position (knowledge of the professional journalistic field); (ii) the expert position (factual legitimacy built on statistics and facts); (iii) the victim position (experiential legitimacy as media victim); (iv) the citizen position (democratic legitimacy /representing the people) and (v) the activist position (street legitimacy through confrontation and active resistance)” (p. 10).

However, research connecting misinformation, far right and framing in social media is scarce. Besides the mentioned connection between far-right, social, and misinformation, framing can be a highly insightful approach to this specific field because the spread of misinformation with no filter in social media embracing social-

context trends leans well upon the mentioned prevalent cognitive bias that leads to intuitive yet erroneous judgments (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981).

3. Framing methodologies

Despite being part of the media effects tradition, research on framing has been sometimes restricted to the content analysis of media messages to define frames as strategic outcomes in communication (Borah, 2011), discounting the fact that different frames lead individuals to interpret issues differently (Scheufele, 1999). Many scholars have proposed taxonomies of frames most used by the media to capture the audience's attention and interest. In European politics, Semetko and Valkenburg proposed an influential taxonomy of frames five prevalent frames (2000): "conflict" between individuals, groups, or institutions; "human interest", entailing a more personal, drama, or emotional approach to an event, issue, or problem; "economic consequences"; "morality", which often entails an indirect reference to the religious tenets or moral prescriptions of the issue; and "attribution of responsibility", which pitches the story on whom to blame (the cause of the issue) and who should take responsibility for the solution.

The analysis of framing can take a deductive approach that starts with *a priori* categories and tries to deduce the frames from them or an inductive approach that starts with the analysis of the elements to infer more representative frames (Gamson, 1992; David *et al.*, 2011). Tankard (1991; cited by Borah, 2011) proposed the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and content development as a methodological basis. Based on this idea, Ryan (1991) proposed key questions for a better understanding of frames: (1) what the key problem is, (2) who bears the responsibility and/or what is the solution or diagnosis/prognosis, (3) what symbols (metaphors, visual images or historical examples) are used and (4) what arguments support the frame. In general, the dominant frame is defined by the amount of time, frequency, and order of appearance in the text (Aalberg, *et al.*, 2012).

4. Research Questions

The literature review has revealed how Vox defends the existence of a national crisis (Taggart, 2000, 2004; Rooduijn, 2014; Reinemann *et al.*, 2017) and how during the pandemic a new type of crisis for the far-right parties could have changed their strategies and uncovered new ways of reaching potential voters. As suggested, frame identification is a relevant framework for analysing a political discourse. The far-right around the globe is metamorphosing constantly (Lakoff, 2004) and their discourse is relentlessly adapting to new situations and contexts (Marantz, 2019). Therefore, the first research question is:

RQ1: Which specific frames were used by the Vox (the Spanish far-right) on Twitter during the first Spanish state of alarm?

With this in mind, we pretend to additionally quantify these frames and their saliency on Vox's parliamentarians' Twitter accounts. Since several frames can be identified in each message, quantification of frames has been a part of the framing methodology in order to study how salient frames can be identified or to study the meaning of the frames (David *et al.*, 2011). Although we do not aim to develop cluster analysis or network analysis for this sample, we do aim to describe how often the frames were made salient. Therefore, this research intends to answer the second research question:

RQ2: How often did those frames appear on Vox's parliamentarians' Twitter accounts?

5. Methods and sample

In this investigation, we approach a methodology for frame identification that consists of two main phases, until the frames apply the conditions. The first round of frames is coded (open coding) from a random sample. Therefore, it doesn't start with *a priori* constructs. Then each frame must conform to the following: Ryan's questions must be answered, each frame must be classified as per Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and each

frame must be identified per Tversky and Kahneman's gain/loss and us/them (1981). Once found saturation (on an n number of subsamples) and discussed (axial coding) this first set of frames is applied by at least to a new subsample to check their reliability. In case there was overlapping it should be joined in broader frames. Finally, if the frames don't pass a second reliability test, we propose the process be restarted.

5.1 Sample

The sample of this study are tweets sent by the 52 Vox representatives in the Spanish parliament, during April, May, and June of 2020, this being the period of the first State of Alarm in Spain due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The first lockdown in the history of Spanish Democracy was declared on March 15th, and all representatives, including Vox's, were initially supportive of the measures.

In the first phase, the sample and subsamples were manually analysed by the authors (coders) to identify a first set of plausible frames (*RQ1*). Another set was used in the second round of coding with the final subset of frames for statistical analysis, to check the viability of these frames on a large sample. The sample was also used for frame quantification (*RQ2*).

5.2 Procedures

This research is grounded on qualitative frame analysis of the sample of tweets from the Vox representatives. Although Frame Analysis is a very common term, with theoretical bases, there is not a very clear or unique methodology. As reviewed in the theoretical framework, most authors use linguistics, sociolinguistics, or discourse analysis technics to identify and analyse frames (Borah, 2011). The analysis of framing can be both qualitative (*RQ1* and *RQ2*) and quantitative (*RQ3*).

This research proposes a methodology in stages for frame identification and validation. The first sub-stage to find frames and subframes with open coding made salient frames until saturation. These frames met all the previously mentioned theoretical considerations. Salient frames were tested on a new random sample. A reliability test was applied and, since it was not passed, similitudes and overlaps were analysed reducing the frames from 9 to 3. For *RQ2*, we analysed the data, applying the frame categories to a subset of tweets by the Vox party representatives.

The four stages followed were: (1) Identification of first frames with open coding, (2) testing the frames into a sample of the tweets, (3) discussion and axial of the results of stage 2, since it didn't pass a reliability test with 3 coders, and (4) testing the second set of frames and quantitative analysis of the results. Since interrater reliability wasn't strong enough between steps 3 and 4, frames were discussed which led to stage 4, passing the reliability test.

Figure 1. Frame Identification and Validation



Source. Own elaboration.

For each frame that was retrieved, we defined them following Tversky and Kahneman's (1981) and Entman's (1993) definitions, as well as Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) categorization. Furthermore, we answered Ryan's (1991, p. 59) four questions for each identified frame: (1) what the key problem is, (2) who bears the responsibility and/or what is the solution or diagnosis/prognosis, (3) what symbols are used and (4) what arguments support the frame. Question 3 was not always answered, assuming that observing only texts and tweets, symbols weren't always noticeable. This methodology was very sensitive to identifying frames as such and distinguishing them from agenda-setting strategies or topics (Borah, 2011).

Following Grounded Theory insights (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), once a frame was identified, it was listed and defined in a Code Book (of which several versions were revised). Therefore, there was not a pre-set of frames, and the codification was always open to new frames.

The first set of 20 tweets made salient 7 frames defined on the first version of a Code Book and discussed and applied to the second subsample of 20 tweets. Undeniably, these 7 frames evolved after repeating the process four times with different subsamples. Saturation was achieved after 5 open coding rounds, and 4 versions of the Code Book. On each round of subsamples, as new frames were made salient, some were merged with previous frames, while others incited partitions of frames into new distinct categories. No initial frames were eliminated.

Saturation of frames was achieved at 9 frames and after 100 messages analysed (5 sets of 20), and in a 5th round no new tweets were found. Finally, the frames were discussed, and a final working version of the Coding Book was created.

To test the validity of these first 9 frames, we applied them to a new random sample of 310 tweets, representing 5% of the 6095 tweets published by the Vox party congressmen and congresswomen. For every message, each coder identified only one main frame. This process was asynchronous, and individual, each coder didn't know what frames had been assigned by others. This step finished with low interrater reliability and as a result, it was discussed that there was too much overlap between the 9 frames. Therefore, they could be combined because, consistently, specific frames overlapped among each of the three authors (coders).

Due to a low interrater reliability on the first sample of tweets and 9 frames, the most ambiguous messages were debated and argued. This showed the need to combine the first 9 frames (now called subframes) in broader frame categories. We consider this an axial coding phase, that included a linguistic discussion. In the first phase, we obtained 9 frames or subframes (Table 1), and the thorough analysis of stage three showed finally 3 key frames. Each frame had its subframes as the ones revealed in stage 1.

Table 1. Key frames, initial subframes and final frame prevalence

Key Frame	Subframes	Frame Prevalence	Gain/Loss
a. Anti-Elitism	Anti-Elitism	Conflict	Loss frame
	Victimhood	Human Interest	
	Conspiracy	Human Interest	
	Meritocracy	Conflict	
b. Essentialism	Nationalism	Morality	Loss frame
	Moralism	Morality	
	Public Order	Human Interest	
c. Criminal Government	Criminal Government	Economic Consequences	Loss Frame
		Conflict	
d. Incompetent Government	Incompetent Government	Economic Consequences	Loss Frame
		Conflict	
		Conflict	

Source. Own elaboration.

Besides the coding book, a diagram of interconnection was developed and the second sample of 310 tweets was tested with only the joined frames.

The final stage of this methodology consisted of quantitatively accounting the tweets, to know which tweets appeared more. Also in this stage, a set of tweets was selected to show the ones with more responses, with more retweets, and more likes.

5.3 Coding Book

The coding book was rebuilt continually, parting from intensive analysis of small subsamples and finally applying it to two different samples (finally applied to 12% of the tweets). Each version identified frames from the early

stages of tests, until the last one. On each version, we answered three questions for each documented frame: (1) key problem, (2) responsibility and solution or diagnosis/prognosis, and (3) arguments supporting the frame (Ryan, 1991, p. 59). This information will be included in the results, for each of the final frames that were identified.

6. Results

After following the above procedures, a set of 3 frames was proposed. The final set of frames proposed was tested on a subsample with 68.5% agreement and Cohen's Kappa of 0.519. Since this was "acceptable", we consider that these three frames can be applied to larger samples and are representative of Vox's frames on Twitter during the pandemic start in Spain. Onwards, we will review the results for each salient frame.

RQ1: Which specific frames were used by the Spanish far-right (and particularly, Vox) on Twitter during the first Spanish state of alarm?

The frames and their subframes were identified on 620 tweets (10% of the universe) with open coding/axial coding methods, as shown on the methodology. For each frame we defined what the initial subframes were, the type of frame classification according to Semetko and Valkenburg, the identification of us/them subjects, Ryan's question for frame identification –(a) key problem, (b) responsibility and (c) arguments– and finally if the frame is presented as a gain or loss frame, which we know can trigger different responses in the publics as shown by Kahneman and Tversky (Table 2).

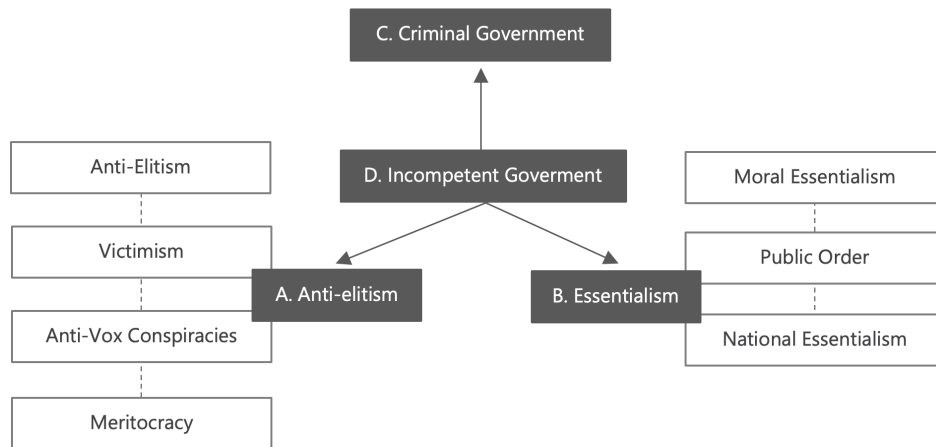
Table 2. Frames Identification and key questions

Main Frame	Key Problem	Responsibility/Solution	Main Arguments
a. Anti-Elitism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Endogamic power — Victimization of "the people" — Information not made public — The meritocratic system is broken 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Elites who hold this power — The power holders — Government — Elites who hold power are breaking the meritocracy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Government is elite, but Vox isn't — People are suffering because of the oppression of the power — "People" are being lied or information is being withheld — Meritocracy is not working
b. Essentialism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — The nation is in danger — Their values are in danger 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — The progressist ideology, and the government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Spanish unity is in danger — Religious and conservative values are under attack by the progressist — Immigration is linked with delinquency
c. Criminal Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Government is responsible of Covid deaths 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Current government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Government is handling the crisis in a way that should be punished criminally

Source. Own elaboration.

For all frames, the "us" is the citizenship, especially a victim of the progressist elites that are changing society. They explicitly include the religious class, the farmers, the military and the police and the church as "us". The "them" is usually the government, the leftists, the communists, the progressive movements (feminists, LGBTI+, queer movements...) and additionally, secessionists of Catalonia and Basque Country. Inherently, the "them" also includes immigrants, especially from African countries. Meanwhile, the "good guys" themselves, are conservatives, Catholics, the working class (as with Trump, the white conservative one), the farmers and the liberals.

Figure 2. Frame and subframe composition



Source. Own elaboration.

a. Anti-elitism

This morning was a totalitarian escalation of the government by pressing the non-regime media and insulting the opposition. We'll bring them to justice. Their chief prosecutor will not be able to do anything to avoid that they pay for their crimes (Luis Gestoso, Vox Congressman. April 20th, 2020).

This frame is a criticism of the elites, specifically the “others”. Since Vox is conservative, militaristic, and conservative and economically liberal the current “others” are parties in the government, the left, the social movement, or any link with them. In this case, elites are not the bourgeois, the rich, or the nobles, they are social movements (associations, journalists, politicians) who attack the conservative mindset.

It's composed of 4 subframes. The (1) Anti-elitism frame, was initially a subframe, that also includes (2) Victimhood (3) Conspiracies of the elites and (4) meritocracy (Table 1). The anti-elitism is the means for victimhood, most of Vox's parliamentarians take a position of oppression from the left and the progressist movements. The victimhood frame includes the “Vox is The People” claims because this party holds that they represent the middle working class of Spain, the “weak” conservative who is losing their rights (blaming the left, the ecologist movement, and feminism). Within this frame they sympathize with all kinds of victims of mismanagement by the government, therefore, is an appropriation of anti-elitism. Conspiracies were found during the pandemic (Eberl *et al.*, 2021) as a way of victimizing Vox and their militants when they receive an answer, graffiti, or them not being welcome to an event. Finally, the false meritocracy was more complicated and deeper. It's a kind of victimhood within anti-elitism that shows how social progress is unfair and it's harming the “people” (which they claim to represent).

The frame is classified as a Conflict frame (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000) because it states a conflict of the elites (them) against the people (us) (Gil de Zúñiga, 2020). However, it's arguably also Human-Interest frame because the subframes Victimhood and Conspiracy are presented as a problem for the society where the political party shows themselves as saviours who have the solution to “save” the citizens.

For this frame, Ryan's questions for frame identification were also identified, except for the symbols. On behalf of the Anti-Elitism frame the key problem (a) for the far right is that an elitist power is favouring their own groups. This is shown as an example of the corruption of the system that allows this to happen, and that needs to be changed (Human Interest). Regarding the responsibility and solution (b) and make accountable the government and all the left parties, being Vox the solution. Finally, they (c) argue that the party in the government is an elite group who are benefiting (see Table 2). There is criticism and denunciation of the management by the government and any mistakes they make. Examples of mismanagement (for example, President Sánchez allegedly using the official aircraft to go to a concert) could be included in this frame.

Finally, regarding Kahneman and Tversky's gain or loss identification, since Anti-elitism presents reality as something negative it's classified as a loss frame because it infers that there is a "bad elite" (Acemoglu, 2013) that controls the population against them and only to benefit themselves.

In sum, Vox built conspiracies of the elites, even with fake news, albeit being exposed by fact-checking websites like "Newtral" and "Maldita Hemeroteca" (Figueroa-Benítez *et al.*, 2022). The concept of false meritocracy, which can be seen as an incomplete manifestation of social Darwinism, serves as a sub-frame that highlights the illicit nature of the elites. It also holds that those who deserve it, are Vox (therefore this is significant for Semetko and Valkenburg's "us and them", and obviously links with victimhood and the conspiracies all inside the Anti-Elitism frame).

In summary, the Anti-elitism frame represents all kinds of victimization, conspiracy, and blaming the elites for the sense of injustice (false meritocracy) that the progress is inciting in the middle-class Spanish white men.

b. Essentialism: moral and nationalism

Why have the nations mutinied, and the peoples meditated on vain things? Let us break, they said, their bonds, and shake away their yoke. 'Blessed will be those who have placed their trust in Him'. Our gaze and thought to our essence. Strength, Spain (Ignacio Garriga, Vox Congressman, April 1st, 2020).

The Essentialism frame supports the traditional values that relate to national Catholicism (the ideology of Franco dictatorship 1939-1975) and it's composed of Public Order, Moralism and Nationalism (see Table 1). This frame associates Spanish nationalism, and even statism, with Catholicism linking them inextricably, it also includes Public Order (lawfare, police state and militarism) as a subframe. It should be considered that national Catholic ideology (Rubio-Pueyo, 2019) was promoted by the Spanish fascist militaristic dictatorship (Núñez-Seixas, 2018; Forti, 2021; Álvarez-Junco, 2022).

As commented above, moral, and national essentialisms are linked by the national-Catholic ideology. Moral essentialism, which is closely intertwined with values such as traditionalism, religion, and the family, can also be linked to concepts such as freedom and individualism. This is evident in the American context, where the principles of moral essentialism coexist with the ideals of freedom and individualism (Lakoff, 1995, 1997). Nevertheless, these values would collide with each other, which is not debated in this context. Militarism, authoritarianism, and order are included here as the subframe of Public Order, part of Essentialism (national-Catholicism). At the same time, this historic Spanish nationalism doesn't support cultural diversity (there are many cultures and languages in Spain), but a more homogeneous version: one language, one culture.

According to our analysis, this frame would be a Moral and Human Conflict frame (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Álvarez-Junco, 2022). Morally, Catholicism and conservative values are associated with the nationalism of Spain, and issues are linked to both this and the Public Order subframe. Since the "us" in this frame is defined by the "patriots with morals", "them" are, literally, "enemies of Spain" (as shown in a meme on Twitter, Image 1), and all together can include Catalan and Basque secessionists and any group or person that supports abortion, divorce, euthanasia, gay marriage, transgender acceptance, or drug legalization.

Image 1. Before the pandemic, Vox's official account tweeted: "Let the battle begin! #ForSpain" (Apr. 28 2019) with this image. Frame B confirms this confrontation strategy



Source. Twitter.

The key (a) problem on this frame is that the values that they support are being attacked by the “them” (LGTBI+ movement) and that Spanish authority or its territorial integrity is in danger (secessionists, the European Union or Morocco can become the “them”). The (b) responsibility is mainly on the progressist movements (contemptuously called “progress”), being the solution, that once Vox rules Spain, the conservative “logic” is imposed. The main argument is that Spain and its values are indissoluble and immutable, and for them (“us”) these values can’t be discussed or questioned, mentioning *ad antiquitatem* fallacies.

In summary, the conservative values of this frame are those connected with national Catholicism: militarism, authoritarianism, order, traditionalism, classism, and chauvinism. In this frame, Vox includes the mythification of history and the past”.

“The worst situations are those where clarity is lacking. In them the boundaries between good and evil disappear and chaos reigns (St. John Paul II)” (Ricardo Chamorro, Vox Congressman. April 4th, 2020).

We can only say to our agents of the Civil Guard and National Police: strength and honor, resist! (Carla Toscano, Vox Congresswoman. May 27th, 2020).

c. “Gobierno Criminal” or Criminal Government

The Government faces a criminal complaint for crimes against public health for the management of Covid-19 (Victor Sánchez del Real, Vox Congressman. April 22, 2020).

The criminalization of the government as a criminal is part of the radicalization of the online discourse of the far-right around the world (Gerbaudo, 2018; Marantz, 2019). This frame includes complaints against the government and allegations of responsibility for the Covid-19 deaths in Spain. In this frame, we only included direct accusations. This frame also includes the “incompetent government” meta-frame, which will be discussed later.

This is a strong case of Conflict frame (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000) because it draws a struggle between society and the government. The government is clearly presented as “them” while “us” is Vox, and the citizenship, denouncing that the government is illegitimate and, in this case, criminal. The Conflict here also sets it as a loss frame in which the reality is presented extremely defeatist way, but also standing up for a fight (allegedly, on the elections).

For this frame, the (a) key problem is that the government is responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths and the (b) responsibility is for the government, being Vox the solution. The (c) main argument is that Sanchez’s administration is responsible for the deaths because of mismanagement of the pandemic.

This frame, in summary, is specific to the pandemic (Brubaker, 2020) but is the materialization of the radicalization of the right around the world (Lakoff, 2004; Gerbaudo, 2018; Marantz, 2019). In this radicalization, the frame includes very severe accusations. Since this frame was identified directly by the hashtag #GobiernoCriminal, we rest assured that it did not appear casually on our analysis.

The #MiserableGovernment does not want the streets to be filled with people demanding their resignation. Let’s not give them pleasure. They are our rights! #democracy #rights #demonstration (Patricia de las Heras, VOX Congresswoman. May 16th 2020).

d. Incompetent government

Since the focus of this study is the beginning of the 2020 State of Alarm, it’s especially significant that all the 3 frames are usually mixed with a meta-frame that orbits the others. This is considered a meta-frame because it incorporates all the other frames as a strategic frame that covers all the frames and most messages. Sub-frames were classified (see Table 1) as one or two frames of the key frames introduced in this research. Nevertheless, this meta-frame is an accusation that holds strategically for all frames: Anti-elitism, Moral Essentialism and Criminal Government. Vox politicians made an accusation towards the government for wrongdoings during the management of the pandemic, like the accusation of “Criminal Government”, but in this case, being more subtle.

It’s a frame of Economic Consequences and Conflict (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Economic Consequences are considered as a frame category describing any consequence, that can develop as an economic crisis or a financial issue for different subjects. In this case, Vox edges this incompetence as a frame of economic

consequences for the citizens that they claim to represent, especially “good Spaniards”, who would be victims (see also frame Anti-Elitism and its subframes). The consequences are framed as negative for all citizens. And secondly, it’s presented as a frame of Conflict this “incompetence” frame presents three subjects: the citizens and the government as conflicting parts and Vox as the party with a solution. The Conflict appears when the “incompetence” of the government results in a problem or issues (economic) for the citizens and therefore, Vox calls to action against them, sometimes with claims to action.

Terrorist Otegi calls for a demonstration AGAINST Spain: Democratic normality for the government and media.
VOX calls for a demonstration FOR Spain: Fascists, criminals, criticism of the government and the media (Francisco José Alcaraz, VOX Congressman. May 31st, 2020).

Therefore, this is presented as a loss frame (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981) that introduces, in a negative frame, a problem in which the citizens are to be involved (with their vote) and at the doors of an economic crisis caused by the government. The crisis is the strategy towards increasing the disgust against the parties in the government.

Regarding the questions by Ryan (1999), this meta frame presents a problem (a) that is not as severe as “Criminal Government” because it does not include a criminal accusation. To solve this (b) Vox presents itself as the salvation that should administer Spain. Finally (c) they argue that the left can’t run the country because socialism is linked with poverty.

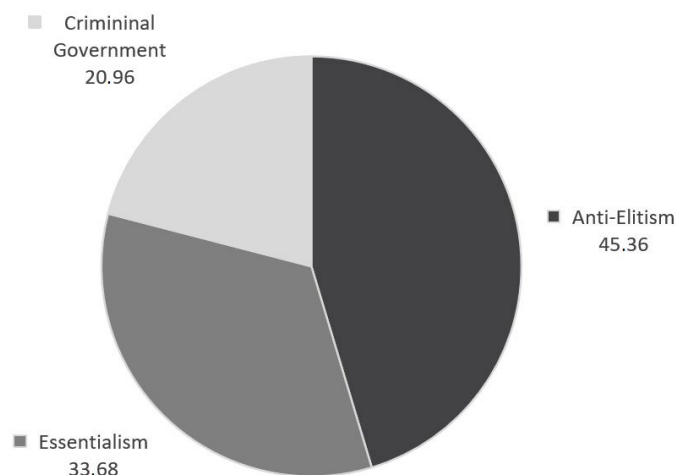
As conclusion, this meta-frame is a strategy that shelters the other frames and the contents of the Spanish far right towards fostering a situation of disbelief and loss to nurture a mobilization against the government.

In a week, the government has used the police to monitor the opposition, attacked the judiciary to defend a violent criminal, and now (once again) tries to trample on parliament. They are only two news cycles away from giving press conferences in tricolor tracksuits (Santiago Abascal, Vox President. April 25, 2020).

RQ2: How often did those frames appear on Vox’s parliamentarians’ Twitter accounts?

For this quantification, a subsample of 300 tweets was classified with one of the frames. Results show that the Anti-elitism frame is the most salient. 45.36% of the tweets have Anti-elitism dominating over other frames. Essentialism sums 33.68% and finally, Criminal Government is 20.96% of the analysed sample. This new frame emerges, therefore on more than 1/5 of tweets of the Spanish far-right during the initial pandemic.

Graph 1. Frames of Vox’s tweets (in percentage)



Source. Own elaboration.

7. Conclusions

The discourse of the Spanish far-right party Vox during the first lockdown of the pandemic can be highly informative of how the far-right is taking advantage of global crises to grow and eventually become a mainstream political force. Spain's political situation before the pandemic offered a unique scenario that was taken by Vox to achieve parliamentary representation (Gil de Zúñiga, 2020; Forti, 2021). Previous scenarios might have included the severe 2008 financial crisis, the 2017 territorial and political Catalan crisis and the repetition of elections. With this in mind, we analysed how Vox parliamentarians framed their Twitter feeds during the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Social media, in this instance, Twitter, served as a tool for the populist discourse to arrive at their potential voters (Gerbaud, 2018). Social media are used by the far right (Crosset *et al.*, 2019) as an instrument for spreading their populist messages, sometimes contradictory (Marantz, 2019; Eberl *et al.*, 2021) and false (Figueroa-Benítez *et al.*, 2022). Nevertheless, the salient frames in this study are consistent with the populist far right messages (Golder, 2016; Rubio-Pueyo, 2019; Forti, 2021). Social media might not be the cause of the growth of the far right (Marantz, 2018) but it helps send their message (Gerbaudo, 2018), although not exclusively. The fact that social media and fake news are spreading fast, also explains the spread of conspiracies in the case of Vox during the pandemic, consistently with the populist discourse (Crosset *et al.*, 2019; Eberl *et al.*, 2021), although populism is not exclusive to the far right (Urbinati, 2019).

Results show how Vox parliamentarians tried to use Twitter to take advantage of the pandemic crisis with new frames and "innovative" hashtags such as #GobiernoCriminal.

Additionally, in Spain, there has been a polarization and radicalization of the political debate that also affects the political sphere, being VOX, probably a consequence of it, and now a spinning wheel of it (Forti, 2021). Despite having the means, social networks have not been able to filter an extreme right-wing discourse (Atton, 2006; Åkerlund, 2020). Social networks have become a tribune where Vox too has been able to spread its confrontational discourse, often misleading and unreal. Nevertheless, Twitter as a social media network keeps its position (Urbinati, 2019) as a tool for political communication but also of political activism.

As per the framing results, Vox builds their discourse on the classic frame of conflict, economic consequences, and responsibility attribution, evolving to genuine discourse that directly blames the Government for the Covid deaths. Anti-elitism and essentialism, are classic frames of the radical right in Europe, but Criminal government, the third in the number of tweets, is a new frame that is undivided from the Covid crisis. Confrontation is consistent in the framing results, and these are means (Gil de Zúñiga, 2020) to solidify their hostile discourse (demonization, us vs., them, elitism) as seen in the results (Brubaker, 2020; Stanley, 2018). The Criminal Government frame also relates to the delegitimization of the Government, which is even accused of committing a "cup d'état" in their confrontation (Gil de Zúñiga, 2020). Non-legitimacy and authoritarianism are the accusations towards the Government that help build on the problems of legitimization and authoritarianism of Vox. They do so with the classical economic liberalism of global conservatives (Lakoffs's anti-elitism), the essentialism based on the strong past and tradition, and Semetko and Valkenburg's classic categories: economy, conflict, and human interest.

Besides, some of the identified frames and sub-frames overlap with some of the features that Stanley (2018) reports as characteristics of fascism: the mythical past, anti-elitism or victimhood are just a few examples. The overlap is troubling and should be analysed in further studies although other authors who recognise the similitudes (Forti, 2021), do not recommend this calling-out strategy but more surgical interventions (Álvarez-Junco, 2022).

Vox presents itself as one more political actor with the capacity to reach the government, just as the extreme right has done in other European countries such as Poland, Hungary or Italy, but also Brazil. The case of Vox and their frames on Twitter during the pandemic provide an explanation of how the confluence of certain political circumstances such as the legitimization crisis of democracies in occident, a significant global crisis, and the utilization of media framing tactics (Figenschou & Ihlebaek, 2018; Forti, 2021), can contribute to the legitimization and rationalization of a far-right political party within a robust democratic framework in Europe.

The use of frame saliency and re-examination on randomly selected messages has been revealed as a useful technique for identifying and analysing frames, considering various methodological standpoints. The identified frames concur with other views from previous analyses of this political actor and their views (Rubio-Pueyo, 2019) although this analysis parted from a blank slate (open coding) and not a priori list of frames.

To advance in its validity and robustness, we recommend that this approach be applied to other communication analyses. Nevertheless, as with other framing and content analysis methods, this methodology is limited by the requirement of many rounds of analysis until all the frames are made salient (open coding saturation) and then analysed (axial coding) until applied to a final sample. This may become a limitation in its use, as well as achieving a high inter-coder reliability result with two or more coders. Another limitation of this research methodology is that it's not a comparison study. The scope of this research is descriptive and can and has been compared only with previous research, and much of it is not field work. In this sense, the study is limited to one party and one specific period. Therefore, a similar analysis could be applied to far right networks (creators and/or bots) or other populist movements (Marantz, 2018). Even more, it could be used for other social networks such as Tik Tok or Instagram, although Twitter is now prominent in the political space. Further research endeavours could focus on a comprehensive analysis and comparison of the current results with those of other far-right political parties in Europe and globally. Additionally, with the same framing methodology, further research could aim at other populist parties (also from the left) and would offer an opportunity for comparison. More framing research could generate meaningful contributions to the knowledge of similarities and differences between diverse populist movements.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare the inexistence of conflict of interest.