


Coverage of VOX in Spanish media: Spain's far-right between mainstreaming and pariahing

Gustavo Rodríguez

Press and Communication specialist for Political Affairs ✉ 

Stergios Fotopoulos

Press and Communication Administrator at the Council of the EU ✉ 

Benjamin De Cleen

Vrije Universiteit Brussel ✉ 

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ENG Abstract: Long seen as an exceptional case in the European Union due to the absence of a populist radical right party, with VOX Spain now also has an electorally successful contender on the far-right. Since the rise of the party, there have been concerns about its influence and normalisation, exemplified by its involvement in local and regional governments but also its treatment in the media. This article analyses whether and how media coverage of VOX normalises the party through the lens of what has been called “mainstreaming” and “pariahing”. Analyzing three Spanish newspapers of different ideological background –centre-left *El País*, centre-right *El Mundo* and the conservative *ABC*– during three different moments of importance for the party, the article first explores key descriptive dimensions such as the number of articles on VOX in the different titles, the sources used, and VOX’s placement within news stories. Second, it zooms in on how the news outlets’ label the party and what this entails in terms of mainstreaming or pariahing. Taken together, the analysis shows that there are significant differences in the way different Spanish media cover the party, determined by the left-right ideological affinity of the newspapers, with the mainstreaming of the party becoming more pronounced the further the outlet is on the right of the political spectrum.

Keywords: VOX, far-right, mainstreaming, pariahing, elections.

ES Cobertura mediática de VOX en los medios españoles: la extrema derecha española entre la normalización y la marginación

Resumen: España ha sido considerada durante mucho tiempo como un caso excepcional en la Unión Europea debido a la ausencia de un partido populista de derecha radical, pero la irrupción de VOX ha significado la aparición de un contendiente de extrema derecha con éxito electoral. Desde el ascenso del partido, han surgido preocupaciones sobre su influencia y normalización, como se evidencia en su participación en gobiernos locales y regionales, así como en el tratamiento que recibe en los medios de comunicación. Este artículo analiza si la cobertura mediática de VOX contribuye a su normalización (*mainstreaming*) o exclusión (*pariahing*). Analizando tres periódicos españoles con diferentes orientaciones ideológicas –*El País*, de centroizquierda; *El Mundo*, de centroderecha; y el conservador *ABC*– durante tres momentos clave para el partido, el artículo explora primero dimensiones descriptivas clave, como el número de artículos sobre VOX en cada periódico, las fuentes utilizadas y la posición de VOX dentro de las noticias. En segundo lugar, se profundiza en cómo los medios etiquetan al partido y lo que esto implica en términos de *mainstreaming* o *pariahing*. En conjunto, el análisis muestra que existen diferencias significativas en la forma en que los distintos medios españoles cubren al partido, determinadas por la afinidad ideológica de los periódicos. La normalización de VOX es más pronunciada cuanto más a la derecha se sitúa el medio en el espectro político.

Palabras clave: VOX, extrema derecha, normalización, marginación, elecciones.

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1. Introduction

During the past few decades, there has been a rise in the popularity and power of far-right political parties worldwide. Such is the case with Fratelli d'Italia and Lega in Italy, Alternative für Deutschland, Finns Party (Finnish Party), Party for Freedom in the Netherlands (Partij voor de Vrijheid) or VOX in Spain among other new and old insurgent parties. Their electoral successes in conjunction with the integration of their ideas and rhetoric into mainstream political discourse as well as the acceptance of far-right ideas and policies within society is considered by Mudde (2019) as characteristic of what he calls a fourth wave of the far-right.

As these parties became more successful and more mainstream, media attention for them significantly increased (Schafraad *et al.*, 2013; Udris, 2012), with significant research conducted to understand the role of media in contributing to the electoral successes and societal acceptance of these parties (e.g. Goodman, 2021; Huertas, 2019; Mondon *et al.*, 2020; Speakman, 2021).

Later than in much of Europe, such concerns have now also found their way to Spain (Barrachina, 2021; Munárriz, 2020). While populist radical right (PRR) parties long remained relegated to the margins of the Spanish political system, in 2019, VOX gained parliamentary representation (Manucci, 2024). Spain turned out not to be an exception when it came to the success of PRR parties after all the electoral success of PRR parties after all. In this article, we zoom in on the media coverage of VOX. Its rise has resulted in divergent reactions across the Spanish political spectrum, with the left strongly criticising it and the conservative People's Party (PP) forming regional coalition agreements (e.g. Extremadura and Comunidad Valenciana).

A fruitful lens for analysing the media's role in societal acceptance of the far right are the notions of mainstreaming and pariahing. The terms mainstream and pariah refer to parties that are considered as legitimate and normal; or illegitimate, dangerous, or even a threat to democracy (Moffitt, 2022), respectively. The *mainstreaming* and *pariahing* indicate that the way parties are treated is not static but can change over time.

In this article, we use this mainstreaming/pariahing framework to systematically analyse the media portrayal of the Spanish far-right party VOX. We examine if and how news outlets contribute to the mainstreaming and/or pariahing the party. Firstly, our research aims to uncover how much Spanish media of different ideological background report on VOX (Q1). Secondly, we explore how VOX is labelled by Spanish media and how reporting on the party looks (Q2). By applying the frameworks of mainstreaming and pariahing, we seek to understand the media's role in either elevating VOX to the forefront of public attention or marginalising it. Focusing on the media labels attached to the VOX party, we shed light on how VOX was perceived in the news. Comparing the coverage of VOX by Spanish media with different ideological backgrounds, we ask what the differences and similarities between right- and left-wing media in terms of the mainstreaming and/or pariahing of VOX are.

We look at the news articles on VOX published by three main Spanish newspapers, namely *El País*, *El Mundo*, and *ABC* –each of them holding different positions in Spain's highly politicised media system (Padró-Solanet & Balcells, 2022). The selection of the media outlets allows comparison across two main dimensions, namely ideological leaning (centre-right/centre-left) and readership (broadsheet/tabloid). This allows us to analyse what political, ideological, and linguistic factors entail for the mainstreaming or pariahing of VOX. The analysis focuses on three key moments for VOX, namely the Andalusian election of 2018, the national election of 2019, and the Viva22 event hosted by the party. This allows us to study coverage of VOX over time (2018-2022) and in different contexts (a national election, a regional election, and a political summit).

In the first section, we provide an overview of the extant research on media coverage of far-right parties, focusing on the mainstreaming and pariahing processes. The second section discusses the methodology. We then turn to our analysis. Although our article does not entail a large-scale analysis of the media coverage of the VOX party as a whole, it complements existing studies on the subject. With the far-right increasingly ingrained in politics, the distinction between mainstream and extremist ideologies has become blurred, stressing the importance of focusing on the process of mainstreaming (Brown *et al.* 2023). Our research seeks to feed both the public discussion and academic dialogue on the media coverage of the far-right parties, presenting valuable empirical data and analysis from Spain.

2. Media and the mainstreaming and pariahing of far-right parties

2.1. An arduous balance

Media coverage of far-right parties has to strike an arduous balance between the responsibility to report on events that are probably of public interest and the responsibility to ensure a fair and reliable coverage, which does not contribute to the spread of extremist views (Eberwein *et al.*, 2019).

Some hold the view that all events and opinions, which could be of public interest, even those related to the far-right parties, should be covered (Donovan *et al.*, 2021; Palmer *et al.*, 2020). Concretely, salience is key to holding these organisations accountable through the exposure of how radical and dangerous their beliefs are. Focusing on them, media will help educate the public and develop a more informed and politically engaged society (Eberwein *et al.*, 2019). Others have argued that media's excessive attention to far-right parties has contributed to their rise (Ekström *et al.* 2020). According to this view, the more they gain visibility in the media, the more their discourse becomes legitimised and normalised (Cammaerts, 2018). It is argued that the media's focus on drama and sensationalism, driven by the economic incentives of the news industry and with far-right parties skillfully playing into media logics through provocation, has contributed to the normalisation of far-right ideology, giving these parties excessive attention and a platform to promote themselves (Castello & Froio 2019; Wodak, 2019). Some also highlight that media have insufficiently underlined the dangers posed by far-right ideology and

its potential impact on society or failed to challenge their rhetoric (Ellinas, 2010; Hainsworth, 2008).

1.2. Media and mainstreaming and pariahing

One way to approach media coverage of the far right is through the lenses of “mainstreaming” and “pariahing”. This focuses on how news outlets contribute to integrating these political entities into the mainstream or, conversely, positioning them as societal outliers (Brown, 2023).

Political mainstreaming is defined as a process of portraying a party as legitimate and/or normal (Moffitt, 2022). A mainstream party, typically presented as located somewhere between centre-left and centre-right, based on a more moderate ideological platform is likely to have a central, acceptable or legitimate position in the political spectrum or the public sphere (Mondon, 2022). Critical voices have stressed the ideological significance of this apparent mainstream position in terms of legitimization, pointing out how the mainstream, which is “constructed, contingent and fluid [...] is not essentially good, rational or moderate” (Brown *et al.*, 2023, p. 166).

On the other hand, political pariahing refers to a process, wherein a group is excluded from the realm of acceptability or societal approval (Moffitt, 2022). Moffitt provides a definition for “pariahing” as the process through which political parties are perceived as illegitimate or hazardous, leading to their delegitimization within the context of the party system and framing them as a potential threat to democracy. Joost van Spanje (2010) defines as “pariahing” the systematic ostracization of parties, involving a collective refusal by other political entities to cooperate with the designated party. Hence, pariahed parties or actors are usually demonised and marginalised from the political debate and the decision-making process.

In this regard, De Swert and Walgrave (2004), who addressed the coverage of the Belgian far-right Vlaams Blok, claim that extreme parties need to be covered but differently: “As soon as the media treats the far-right like any other party, they become acceptable”. Others have expressed the belief that the mere act of covering far-right parties legitimises them and positions them as valid options to govern. Thus, media coverage in and of itself becomes an indicator of what is considered ‘mainstream’ and what is not (Barrachina, 2021; Munárriz, 2020).

Of interest in this context is Hallin’s (1986) identification of different spheres of journalistic reporting.

Hallin divides the journalistic world into three categories or spheres based on how journalists cover actors, topics and opinions. Firstly, there is the sphere of consensus, in which journalists are not expected to show opposing views on the topic covered, as there is general agreement about it. An example would be the coverage of a royal wedding or of national sports teams, where media tend to align themselves with the nation and not operate according to the principles of objectivity or critical distance. Secondly, there is the sphere of legitimate controversy, in which journalists are expected to pay attention to different viewpoints fairly and transparently, such as during elections (e.g., debates about lowering or increasing income tax). It is coverage in this sphere that aligns most easily with dominant journalistic standards. Lastly, in the sphere of deviance journalists “play a role in exposing, condemning, or excluding from the public agenda those who violate or challenge the political consensus. It marks out and defends the limits of acceptable political conflict” (Hallin, 1986). This sphere is of special interest to this research since it draws the “red” line between what is acceptable and what is not, determining what is part of the mainstream and what is not. An explicit example of media pariahing treating far right parties as deviant can be found in Francophone Belgium’s so-called *cordon sanitaire médiatique*, the agreement among Francophone Belgian media not to offer direct access or a platform to the far right or to people linked to parties or movements considered racist or hostile to democracy (De Jonge & Gaufman, 2022).

Mainstreaming and pariahing of the far right by media are complex processes that become visible in a range of journalistic practices and choices. By integrating the literature on pariahing and mainstreaming, we have identified the key dimensions of these processes. These dimensions can be categorised into descriptive aspects related to the amount and placement of coverage and more analytical aspects that delve deeper into how parties are covered.

As Table 1 shows, the descriptive (which will constitute our first level of analysis, see below) includes the degree of coverage, the sources used (far right sources or not, critical voices or not), and the placement of a party within a news article constitute. The deeper analytical aspects consist of the the coverage of issues owned by the far right and the labelling of parties (cf. Barrachina, 2021; Ekström, *et al.*, 2020; Huertas, 2019; Moffit, 2022, Munárriz, 2020; Speakman, 2021).

Table 1. Descriptive aspects of mainstreaming and pariahing.

	Mainstreaming	Pariahing
COVERAGE	Notable coverage	Lack of coverage
SOURCES	The use of primary sources	The use of secondary sources
PLACEMENT	Main mention or placement at the beginning of an article	Brief mention or placement at the bottom of an article

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 2. Analytical aspects of mainstreaming and pariahing.

	Mainstreaming	Pariahing
TOPICS COVERED	Coverage of the PRR agenda, positive or neutral coverage of PRR positions	Exclusion/omission or critical coverage of PRR agenda
LABELLING	neutral or positive labels (e.g. 'legitimate and/or normal', 'conservative', 'traditional', and 'attached to law')	negative labels (e.g. 'extreme', 'far-right', 'racist', 'sexist', 'dangerous', 'problematic', 'populist')

Source: Own elaboration.

1.3. The Spanish media landscape

Spain's media sector, a vital contributor to the country's economy, spans publishing, audiovisual media, and multimedia. With Spanish as the second most spoken language globally, media products often cater to international audiences. The transition to democracy in 1975 solidified freedom of the press and the right to information. After that, new media outlets emerged, including *El País* or *El Mundo* (Salaverría & Baceiredo, 2018).

Major national newspapers such as *El País*, *ABC*, and *El Mundo* dominate the print and online media landscape, offering comprehensive coverage of national and international news. Regional newspapers also play a crucial role in the country's media environment, catering to the distinct linguistic and cultural identities (Salaverría *et al.*, 2018). The Spanish press has undergone significant transformations with the advent of digital media. Traditional newspapers have adapted by enhancing their online presence and expanding digital content. *El País* and *El Mundo* have robust online platforms, offering a mix of free and subscription-based content.

The Spanish media landscape is considered an example of what Hallin and Mancini (2004) call a polarised pluralist media model. The latter is typified by, *inter alia*, low newspaper circulation, commentary-oriented journalism, a high level of political parallelism, politics-over-broadcasting systems and strong state intervention as well as a lower degree of professionalisation.

2.4. VOX and the media

Our focus in this article is on the Spanish far right party VOX. VOX emerged on the political scene in 2014, officially founded by Santiago Abascal and a group of disgruntled members who broke away from the People's Party (*Partido Popular*) (Rubia *et al.*, 2022). It is a far-right, radically nationalist and nativist, conservative, and anti-establishment party (Marcos-Marne *et al.* 2021), which advocates for a strong central government, strict migration controls, and the defence of what it considers traditional Spanish values. Its ideology also encompasses staunch opposition to regional autonomy and separatist movements, particularly in Catalonia, which has been a significant source of tension in Spanish politics. Regarding the EU, VOX has adopted a (hard) Eurosceptic position, supporting an inter-governmental approach and the supremacy of national law over EU law (Pérez-Escoda *et al.*, 2023).

VOX gained prominence during the 2018 regional elections in Andalusia, securing 12 seats in the

regional parliament and becoming the first far-right party to win seats in Spain since the post-Franco era (Ramos, 2021). This breakthrough marked a shift in Spanish politics, traditionally dominated by the centre-left and centre-right parties. VOX's success was further consolidated in the April 2019 national elections, where it secured 24 seats in the Spanish Parliament, making it the third-largest party in terms of parliamentary representation (Ramos, 2021).

VOX's rise has been attributed to its ability to instrumentalise sensitive issues such as migration, territorial integrity, and perceived political correctness. The party's confrontational style and populist rhetoric have resonated with a part of the electorate disillusioned with mainstream politics (Ferreira, 2019). VOX opted for positioning itself within the existing political space and cleavages in such a differentiated way from the competition. The far-right party exploited the Spanish centre-periphery cleavage advocating for strong nationalist aspects and increased centralisation (Manucci, 2024). According to some analyses, VOX has effectively leveraged its ability to attract a higher-than-average amount of media attention and capitalised on the unrest in Catalonia (Olalla Ubierna *et al.*, 2019). During Covid-19, its leader, Santiago Abascal, dramatised his discourse, knowing that the media would spread his provocative statements (Olivas & Rama, 2021). Yet, some of VOX's positions, including the objection to the EU's decision to withhold funds from Hungary and Poland based on considerations of the Rule of law and human rights, have been criticised even by conservative media in Spain (Pérez-Escoda *et al.*, 2023). In the meantime, certain scholars have argued that the party effectively utilised social media to actively participate in electoral discussions and establish a direct connection with its followers (e.g. Capdevila *et al.*, 2022).

VOX, like other far-right parties, is selective with media access, preferring certain outlets like *El Mundo* and *ABC*, while excluding others like *El País*. In fact, no interview by the party members was given to the centre-left newspaper. This might be connected to the strategy of VOX to declare a 'cultural war' against the (centre-)left narrative. It appears that the party's ideological stance has played a role in shaping its relationship with the media. In addition, VOX has been engaged in a contentious battle with the media since its very first steps (Carratalá & Palau-Sampio, 2022).

The party members have accused mainstream media outlets of being biased against it and have employed various tactics to bypass them and communicate directly with its supporters. One example of VOX's fight against the media was the decision to

boycott nationally televised election debate in 2019, claiming that the debate was rigged against them. Instead, the party held its rally at the same time as the debate, which was broadcasted on VOX's YouTube channel and other social media platforms. Moreover, VOX has launched legal actions against media outlets that it perceives as being biased against it (Carratalá *et al.*, 2022). For instance, in 2019, the party filed a complaint against the Spanish public broadcaster, alleging that its coverage of the party was biased and violated the principle of political neutrality.

As VOX continues to play a significant role in Spain's political dynamics, it is pertinent to analyse the media coverage of the party and the processes of pariahing/mainstreaming that are involved. Several studies have pointed out the special presence that VOX acquired in the Spanish press after the October 7, 2018 rally at the Palacio Vistalegre in Madrid, Spain (Enguix & Gallardo, 2021; Olalla *et al.*, 2019; Rueda & Hernández, 2021), a presence that could be considered unjustified if we stick to their electoral representativity. From that moment, both political and media presence grew enormously, which may lead to the perception that VOX became legitimised as part of what is known as the "mainstream" (Barrachina, 2021; Enguix *et al.*, 2021; Olalla *et al.*, 2019; Rueda *et al.*, 2021).

3. Research design and methods

The aim of our analysis is examine how Spanish newspaper coverage might contribute to mainstreaming or pariahing of the party, and what role ideological differences between newspaper might play in this.

3.1. Corpus

The selection of the newspapers is based on two main dimensions: ideological leaning (centre-right/centre-left) and readership (broadsheet/tabloid). To this end, we analyse the coverage of VOX in three Spanish newspapers –the quality newspapers *El País* (centre-left) and *El Mundo* (centre-right), and the conservative tabloid *ABC* (De Maturana, 2010; Guerrero, 2008; Pérez, 2019). To get a complete picture of how these newspapers deal with VOX, our corpus includes all relevant articles, including news coverage, interviews, op-eds, editorials, and columns.

We focus our analysis on the coverage during three periods: the election in Andalusia (3 December 2018), Spain's national election (28 April 2019), and the summit hosted by VOX (9 October 2022). Hence, the research provides an overview of the coverage made of VOX in different contexts. First, the election in Andalusia (Moment 1 or M1 from now on) was a turning moment for the region's and the country's politics. Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), which was the ruling party in Andalusia during the last 36 years, lost in the face of People's Party (PP) with the support of the liberal party Ciudadanos and the abstention of VOX (Rivas de Roca *et al.*, 2020). This vote is of special interest as for the first time in 35 years a far-right party gained parliamentary representation in the country. The national election (Moment 2 or M2 from now on) is also relevant for the party. For the first time in Spanish politics, the voters showed an important level of fragmentation and support to the far-right party VOX at the national level (Simón, 2020).

When it comes to the VOX summit (Moment 3 or M3 from now on), it was a significant moment for the party and its supporters, as during the event, there were interventions from various international like-minded political figures, such as Donald Trump, Georgia Meloni, Viktor Orbán, or Mateusz Morawiecki.

We collected data from Factiva through electronic copies, using 'VOX' as a keyword. Due to the high number of articles about VOX in Spanish media, we limited the selection for M1 and M2. For M1, only articles between 1-5 December 2018 have been considered. In the case of M2, only those published from 27 April 2019 to 29 April 2019.

3.2. Analytical procedures

After a descriptive quantitative assessment of the level of coverage (number and types of articles) about VOX, the sources used, and the placement of VOX related news, we follow the coding procedures of qualitative content analysis (e.g. Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Patton, 2002). This is done to analyse other dimensions that might contribute to the mainstreaming and pariahing of the party. Concretely, we look at the topics covered and the most eminent labels, focusing on single news articles as the units of analysis.

The article applies qualitative content analysis to capture how VOX is pariahed and/or mainstreamed by journalists. The coding was performed through the MAXQDA tool. The tool facilitates the coding process by allowing researchers to apply codes to segments of text, tag relevant information, and organise the data based on the identified codes and themes. Combining codes and categories based on existing theories and identifying (new) themes or patterns in the data without preconceived categories, we aim for a nuanced understanding of the data and a thorough and comprehensive analysis. Hence, we ensure a more structured exploration of the data, based on alignment with existing theoretical frameworks.

Focusing on the concepts of "mainstreaming" and "pariahing" and based on extant research discussed above, we distinguished two main indicators in our qualitative analysis:

1. Topics covered and the way they are covered.
2. Labelling of VOX that is a type of nominal group lexical cohesion that uses abstract nouns to label and structure segments of discourse.

In order to better assess how VOX was pariahed and/or mainstreamed by media outlets, we aimed at generating our own sub-categories of the abovementioned main aspects. To this end, we utilised an inductive approach and employed a constant comparative method for analysing the content (Boeije, 2010; Saldaña, 2021). "The essence of the constant comparative method is the systematic comparison of each text assigned to a category with each of those already assigned to that category, in order to fully understand the theoretical properties of the category" (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 4). According to scholars, this approach not only provides unique insights but also highlights differences between categories. Therefore, by employing this technique, we anticipated obtaining a profound comprehension of cross-media variations in

the portrayal of VOX. We ensured that these sub-categories were internally homogenous and externally heterogeneous (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4. Analysis

We first explore the salience of VOX in the Spanish media of the sample, focusing on the comparison between ideologically diverse media in the country. We then delve into the sources used and the placement

of the VOX related news within news articles. Last but not least, the most eminent labels as well as the topics covered follow.

4.1. VOX's salience in the media

As shown in Table 3, some differences already arise in the distribution of the number of articles between the three titles that align with their location on the ideological spectrum.

Table 3. Number of articles per news outlet.

	M1: Election in Andalusia	M2: National election	M3: VOX summit	Total
<i>El País</i>	35	104	6	146
<i>El Mundo</i>	39	57	7	103
<i>ABC</i>	85	69	8	162
Total	174	247	25	411

Source: Own elaboration.

For centre-left *El País* there are 35 articles for M1, 104 for M2, and 6 for M3 were collected, which add up to a total of 146. In the case of centre-right *El Mundo*, VOX is mentioned in 39 articles during M1, 57 in M2, and 7 in M3, making 103 in total. VOX appears in conservative tabloid *ABC* in 85 articles during M1, 69 for M2, and 8 for M3, which makes 162 articles in sum. The fact that *ABC* publishes the largest share of articles on this topic might be interpreted as reflecting ideological alignment and/or catering to the interests of its readership (with those two factors closely related). As indicated, the frequency of media coverage on an (extremist) political party can (consciously and/or inadvertently) contribute to its legitimization by facilitating its integration into mainstream political discourse (Oliver & Gallardo Paúls, 2020).

4.2. Sources

Another key element to discern whether news outlets mainstream VOX or not is their sourcing. Each newspaper decides to rely on certain sources that may serve to normalise (or not) extremists' voices. If a given newspaper predominantly uses far-right sources, it risks producing unbiased articles and mainstreaming its narrative.

Like other far-right parties, VOX has presented itself as a difficult party to be approached by the media. As a result, only certain outlets are deemed acceptable in their eyes and have preferable access to VOX's politicians, events, and press briefings. Among the chosen sample, *El Mundo* and *ABC* are considered allied media by VOX. In consequence, *El País* is the only one among our Spanish sample that has had no access to primary sources from the party, which might be due to editorial decision and/or a result of the "cultural war" promoted by VOX and the challenges the newspaper faces in gaining access to the party.

4.3. Placement

El País consistently places VOX in the spotlight. The party receives significant attention, especially when

the newspaper scrutinises its policies, rhetoric, and actions. One might say that *El País*, with its critical coverage towards VOX, plays a watchdog role, closely monitoring the party and contributing to informed public discourse.

For its part, *El Mundo*, which maintains a balanced tone, acknowledges VOX's presence but allocates less space to the party compared to *El País*. While not the central focus, VOX still features in the newspaper's coverage, appearing lower in the hierarchy of importance within *El Mundo*'s pages.

Regarding *ABC*, which stands out for its numerous mentions of VOX, the party-related articles often feature prominently on the newspaper. Importantly, *ABC* occasionally leans favorably toward VOX. In summary, newspapers with different positions in the media landscape in Spain portrays VOX through different lenses, reflecting varying editorial priorities and ideological stances. Let us now turn to a more in-depth analysis of how this is reflected in coverage of the party.

4.4. VOX in Spanish media: ideology matters

In this section, we unveil the key findings derived from our research. The analysis shows that Spanish news outlets reported often on the VOX party and its activities. Moreover, there were more cases of mainstreaming VOX in the media than rendering it a pariah. These findings, shedding light on critical aspects and implications are instrumental in advancing our understanding of mainstreaming and pariahing VOX and ultimately far-right parties.

Overall, 1492 labels were identified in the articles from Spanish media. Of these, 763 were attributed to *El País*, 470 to *El Mundo*, and 259 to *ABC*. While M2 and M3 gather 584 and 200 respectively, M1 articles include 706 labels. A significant number of the labels used have *negative* connotations, in particular those by *El País*. Delving further into how the three media cover VOX confirms that the coverage of VOX and the mainstreaming and pariahing that occurs align strongly with the ideological leaning of the media.

4.4.1. Francoism

“Francoism” is one of the main labels, with various news articles, mostly *El País*, attempting to portray the vision of VOX as a heritage of Francoism. This could be seen as a way to pariah the party, while rejecting or avoiding any possible link to Franco could be regarded as mainstreaming. It is worth noting that VOX is a party that has not shown a strong opposing view to the Spanish dictatorship, and even some members have claimed that it was not a dictatorship at all (Abascal, 2018). It is also important to consider that most of this labelling is found in the coverage of M3 since there was controversy around the invitation to a music band that has Spanish civil war references in its lyrics.

Ortega and Garriga (VOX members) are not only different in terms of their moods. The former represents the Falangist sector of VOX; in his youth, he belonged to the Spanish fascist party and has never concealed his admiration for José Antonio Primo de Rivera, its founder. Garriga, on the other hand, is a Catholic fundamentalist and ultraconservative. (*El País*, “Las réplicas del terremoto Olona agrietan a VOX”, 8 October 2022)

El Mundo, for its part, is the second paper employing this label the most. As in the case of *El País*, most of these allusions can be found in the news pieces informing on M3. Nevertheless, some differences arise when addressing the label in the other two contexts. In this sense, *El País* steadily links Francoism with VOX. But when it comes to *El Mundo*, much of this labelling is done by mentioning the strategy from left-wing politicians to link VOX with Francoism.

Lastly, *ABC* is the newspaper with the least use of this label to describe VOX. The mere absence of such language does not necessarily indicate an intent to moderate VOX’s image within the framework of Spanish political discourse. However, these editorial choices do contribute to a more normalized representation of the party, with *ABC*, compared to the other newspapers, choosing not to construe VOX as “deviant” through association with the Francoist dictatorship.

4.4.2. Birds of a feather flock together

Another mechanism through which VOX is pariahed in *El País* and (to a lesser extent) *El Mundo* is related to the Spanish saying, “Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres”. This refers to the idea that you can meet a person or know how it behaves by knowing its group of friends or social links. Hence, VOX tends to be accompanied by mentions of other far-right or populist actors such as Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, Viktor Orbán, or Mateusz Morawiecki. As some of them attended the M3 event, the label is one of the most stable across the media analysed. Yet, reporting on these political figures could respond to an interest of each newspaper either to pariah or mainstream VOX.

On the one hand, mainstreaming could be achieved through strengthening the link between VOX and other international entities, which take part in political debate and have performed well in elections worldwide. On the other, quoting them may be

part of a media strategy to attach VOX with populism and extremism and ultimately to pariah the party:

Among other measures, the party wants to leave undocumented migrants without health care and talks of erecting an “impassable wall” in Ceuta and Melilla - an initiative like the one promoted by Donald Trump on the border between Mexico and the United States. (*El País*, “VOX irrumpe con 12 escaños y se convierte en clave para que gobierne la derecha”, 3 December 2018)

Concretely, *El País* refers to these political leaders as a way of exclusion of VOX and regards the party as illegitimate, as it critically mentioned their participation in the event hosted VOX and highlighted their ideological affiliation. Labels such as “far-right”, “extremist” or “populist” are always present when mentioning these politicians in *El País*. *El Mundo*, for its part, sustained a stance close to *El País* by directly using the same labelling when covering these leaders, and so pariahing them:

Santiago Abascal received yesterday the virtual encouragement of the highest international representatives of the extreme right as an antithesis to the internal crisis that this week has strained the seams of his party. The former US President Donald Trump, the winner of the Italian elections, Giorgia Meloni, and the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary encouraged the VOX leader via video. (*El Mundo*, “Trump, Meloni y Orbán para acallar la crisis”, 10 October 2022)

In the meantime, *ABC* avoided such references and presented those political actors simply as international leaders. As mentioned earlier, by considering other international allies of the party as legitimate, the newspaper legitimized the party itself, which is sometimes strengthened further by formulations such as “backed by international leaders of the stature of” (*ABC*, “Abascal sale reforzado del Viva22 con los apoyos de Trump y Meloni”, 10 October 2022).

4.4.3. Cultural war

Like other far-right political parties, VOX started a clash against certain media for what the party members regarded as unfair and critical coverage. The Spanish party repeatedly stated that leftist ideology and narratives dominated the political debate and media coverage. In the words of VOX members, the leftist viewpoint includes the abolishment of certain traditional Spanish features, such as bullfighting, haunting, or Catholicism. This confrontation was reflected in the articles published by the three newspapers in the different moments of analysis, yet from different perspectives.

Following *ABC*’s articles, it may seem that the newspaper agrees with VOX in its denouncement by including this matter in their coverage of the party. In other words, *ABC* suggests that some left-leaning groups are advocating for the removal of certain Spanish symbols. This could be seen as part of a broader shift, with the newspaper potentially lending legitimacy to VOX’s perspective. *El Mundo* has also addressed the cultural war in its pages with a

certain degree of normalisation: “But at the heart of this check on the hegemony of the left is the national question” (*El Mundo*, “Un cambio muy de fondo”, 3 December 2018). On the contrary, *El País* was critical on the issue, denouncing VOX’s attack to certain journalists. However, generating content around the so-called “cultural war” initiated by VOX, the newspaper offered visibility to VOX attitude.

4.4.4. Fear of Vox

The ‘fear of’ tactic started by leftist parties, mainly PSOE, was covered or even followed by some media outlets. This may be understood as a sign of pariahing, as newspapers were stressing the different risks that accepting a far-right party in the political debate might pose. *El País* defended a critical stance toward VOX, reporting on quotes from politicians, who perceived the party as a threat to democracy: “The Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, and the president of the Generalitat, Ximo Puig, called for a massive turnout at the polls, appealing to the danger that the extreme right poses to ‘democracy’” (*El País*, “La alta participación suele beneficiar a la derecha”, 28 April 2019).

In another article the newspaper underlines that VOX’s agenda “has contaminated the campaign and threatens to contaminate future politics” (*El País*, “Ideas de España”, 29 April 2019). Elsewhere, *El Mundo* entails mixed opinions and portrayals within its articles. Nonetheless, the dominant attitude toward the ‘fear of VOX’ was referencing the PSOE strategy, rather than including a direct criticism of VOX as *El País* did. In the view of *El Mundo*, this was an intended overreaction from certain actors to gain votes by increasing the fear of the far right and the consequences that may derive from its inclusion in Spanish politics: “This would show that Susana Díaz’s concern (PSOE’s Andalusian candidate) about the rise of the ultra-right is real and not a self-serving overreaction” (*El Mundo*, “La penitencia del PSOE”, 4 December 2018).

At the same time, *El Mundo* acknowledges the interests of other parties in either including or excluding VOX. If the pariahing of VOX is interesting for PSOE, its mainstreaming is important for PP, which needs its support to form coalitions and reach agreements, according to the media outlet.

Lastly, there was a clear lack of *ABC* articles on the issue. Instead of addressing the “fear of VOX”, *ABC* focused on publishing content that could be interpreted as subtly endorsing or legitimizing the party’s position. In this sense, the main technique to protect VOX was through the accusation of PSOE for counting with the support of far-left parties, independentist parties, and former ETA members. This strategy is known in Spanish as “y tú más” (‘whataboutism’):

The left will be scandalised by VOX’s possible support for Moreno (PP’s candidate), but they should remember that Sánchez is president thanks to the votes of Bildu - that is, ETA - and the Catalan coup plotters. It was pathetic to listen yesterday to socialists and populists alarming about the arrival of “the extreme right”, instead of analyzing their tremendous defeat. (*ABC*, “Andalucía dice «no» a la izquierda”, 3 December 2018)

The “whataboutism” was not the only way to defend the far-right party from criticism. Another strategy followed by the conservative newspaper was the assessment of VOX’s voters to challenge some of the myths surrounding it. Against the perception of its voters as a high-income class, *ABC* tried to provide another angle (*ABC*, “Demonizar a VOX”, 5 December 2018).

4.4.5. Other attempts of mainstreaming or pariahing VOX

Beyond these major mechanisms in the mainstreaming and pariahing of VOX, a few other dynamics are worth mentioning as well. Even though *El País* maintains the most critical stance towards the party among the newspapers of our sample, there are few articles by the centre-left newspaper that could be seen as little signs of mainstreaming: “Since 2012 our party system has undergone a profound transformation, but something was missing. A piece that is common to almost all of Europe. This piece of the puzzle is now completed by VOX” (*El País*, “La irrupción de VOX”, 4 December 2018).

The problem is precisely that VOX is not scary enough. Le Pen or Salvini is scary. But VOX is too ridiculous. We don’t believe them. We laugh at them. And that is the drama. Perhaps, this is why they are so dangerous. (*El País*, “España vota más dividida que nunca”, 28 April 2019).

While in the first case VOX is regarded as the missing piece of the puzzle in national politics, in the second article, the author states that VOX is not as dangerous as its European counterparts because it is *too ridiculous*. In a sense, this could be interpreted as if the party lacks a stronger authoritarian vein, which may imply normalisation. In the case of *El Mundo*, there are clear signs that show how the newspaper, either intentionally or not, has helped in the process of legitimization of the far-right party:

The media thought VOX was buried, but the turnout at Viva22, its act of self-affirmation, shows **what the good polls already predict**: Abascal’s party has a high voter base and that it will reap a good result in the elections. (*El Mundo*, “Semen up”, 12 October 2022).

The reference to *good polls* implies that there are *bad polls* that most likely are the ones that do not meet *El Mundo*’s expectations. Furthermore the news outlet includes quotes and surveys from average citizens to strengthen the party’s legitimization (e.g. *El Mundo*, “6,2 millones de indecisas decidirán quién manda”, 28 April 2019), and indicated that if VOX took part in a governments at local or regional level, this would diminish its extremism. Elsewhere, it was perceived as a “relief”.

One example of normalisation that is repetitive in *ABC*’s articles is the use of “right-winger” or “right-wing” to refer to everything surrounding the party. By using this kind of term, *ABC* ignores any aspect of extremism from the party and thus VOX becomes a legitimate political option. In addition, during M1, the newspaper considered VOX as a necessary alternative to PSOE, which was the ruling party in Andalusia for almost 40 consecutive years (e.g. *ABC*, “Y el

hijo devoró al que lo engendró”, 3 December 2018). However, the extremist vein of the party has even been acknowledged at times by the conservative newspaper, in spite of its systematic mainstreaming of VOX.

In spite of the previous mainstreaming examples, *El País* also speaks about both EU and international press’ concerns. The media outlet also surveys people about their political preferences or vote expectations and includes quotes from those being against VOX. Thus, *El País* aims to humanise the rejection to the far-right party. Lastly, another sign of pariahing in *El País* pages is the inclusion of terms that refer to the *cordon sanitaire*. This concept was born from health about the spread of diseases but is commonly used in politics to refer to the exclusion of far-right parties from political debate. Along the same lines, *El Mundo* has also used a similar terminology to pariah VOX (e.g. *El Mundo*, “Nuevo giro de Sánchez: presentará sus Presupuestos en enero y recurrirá a decretos ley si no tiene apoyos”, 4 December 2018). During M1, VOX is presented as a new phenomenon, not acceptable in the eyes of the newspaper.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This article aimed to explore the role played by media outlets in the mainstreaming or pariahing of the far-right VOX party. First, we looked at key descriptive dimensions, such as the prominence of VOX in the Spanish media, the sources used, and its placement within news stories. Besides, visibility is positively correlated with mainstreaming (e.g. Ekström, *et al.*, 2020; Moffitt, 2022; Munárriz, 2020).

Focusing on three different moments, the present research found that Spanish news outlets reported often on VOX and its activities. Conservative tabloid *ABC*, which can be considered ideologically close to the party, published the largest number of articles, followed by centre-left *El País*. Hence, not only media with closer ideological alignment gave coverage to VOX, but also media outlets of distant ideology and political affiliation. This reminds the findings of Brown and Mondon (2021) about the amplification of the far right in British media landscape. Yet, looking at the tonality and labels of the *El País*’ coverage, one may say that this occurred mainly for criticising the party and alert the readers about its extremism. Our research shows how VOX obtained visibility in *ABC* and *El País* for different reasons. Instead, *El Mundo* allocated less space to the party than the two newspapers mentioned above, maintained a balanced tone, and did not make VOX the central focus of its coverage.

El País was the most critical of VOX and consistently placed the party in the spotlight. Thus, it gave significant attention to its policies, rhetoric, and actions. On its part, *ABC* stood out for its numerous mentions of VOX and often featured the party prominently on its pages. It occasionally leaned favorably toward VOX and reflected its ideological stance and editorial priority. The article also delved into *how* VOX was covered by the media, zooming in on labels and the mainstreaming/pariahing of the agenda of VOX. The empirical evidence showed that the party was perceived by some reports as a heritage of Francoism and an entity that shares the same ideological

reasoning with international far-right and populist actors, including Donald Trump. Furthermore, it was considered a danger to Spanish democracy and confrontational to the leftist ideology among other aspects. However, there were cross-media differences in the portrayal of VOX, which seemed to be contingent on ideological leaning (e.g. Moffitt, 2022). Concretely, the more right-wing *ABC* and *El Mundo* used labels such as “far-right” and “extreme”, to a lesser extent than the centre-left *El País*. Instead they described it with more moderate labels such as “conservative”, “right-wing” or “right-winger”, thus contributing to the party’s normalisation and legitimisation in the eyes of Spanish society.

For its part, *El País* exerted the most vocal criticism on VOX, presenting it as an illegitimate political force. Meanwhile, centre-right *El Mundo* adopted a balanced tone and hosted negative references to the party, yet to a lower degree. Instead, conservative *ABC* was rather supportive. Even about certain incidents related to VOX, of which the other newspapers were very critical, *ABC* tried to water down the concerns expressed. In fact, there were cases in which the newspaper used the technique of “whataboutism” and put the blame into PSOE, Podemos or the Catalan independentists. In light of the above, the study acknowledges the importance of labelling choices in media coverage, emphasising that news outlets inevitably highlight certain aspects of reality while neglecting or downplaying others (Speakman, 2021).

Although this article focuses on just three moments to explore the coverage of VOX, we hope to have made a relevant contribution to the literature on far-right parties and media studies. Our analysis shows the significant effect of ideological affinity on how far-right parties are covered, with all media doing both mainstreaming and pariahing but with the extent and intensity of mainstreaming and pariahing clearly determined by ideological leaning. According to Hallin’s (1986) terminology, the development could be entailed in the sphere of deviance, where journalists may intervene and play a role in exposing or excluding actors from the public agenda. Moreover, building on existing work on mainstreaming and pariahing, the present work has also contributed to insights into how exactly mainstreaming and pariahing work. Though we relied on strategies and techniques from previous research, new mainstreaming and pariahing methods were identified as well (e.g. “Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres”, “what the country needs” or “relief” labels). Hence, VOX was accompanied by mentions of its far-right or populist political allies and perceived as “relief”, which shares acceptable and solution-oriented ideas. In brief, “what the country needs”.

To capture a more comprehensive picture, further (qualitative and quantitative) research should be conducted on the issue, selecting more electoral contests in a cross-national and longitudinal way. In an effort to supplement these findings and shed light on the reasons behind the differences in the coverage of VOX, more media outlets could be integrated, while interviews with journalists and other media professionals could form part of a future study. These research avenues would contribute to better understanding how mainstreaming of far-right ideas and

narratives by media shape party labels and perceptions, and impact electoral performance.

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Gustavo Rodríguez. Press and Communications specialist focused on Political and EU Affairs. With two and a half years at the European Parliament under his belt, he's contributed to the Communication and Press teams for both the Renew Europe group and its Spanish delegation, Ciudadanos. Gustavo holds a Communication master's degree from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and a Journalism bachelor's degree from the Complutense University of Madrid. Based in Brussels, Belgium. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-5498-9184>

Stergios Fotopoulos. Press and Communication Administrator at the Council of the EU. He has a Ph. D. in media and communication studies from the Vrije Universiteit Brussels, Belgium. He graduated in media and communication from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece, and holds an MA in European studies from KU Leuven, Belgium, and an MA in communication from the Vrije Universiteit Brussels, Belgium. He has also worked as an information and communication agent at the European Commission¹. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9723-5855>

Benjamin De Cleen. Associate Professor at the Communication Studies Department of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. He is the co-director of the VUB's ECHO Research Group and the international chair of the Centre for Democracy, Signification and Resistance (DESIRE), that brings together discourse researchers from the Vrije

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Universiteit Brussel, University of Ljubljana, University of Essex, Charles University in Prague, and Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Based in a critical discourse theoretical tradition his work has mainly been focused on the radical right, populism and nationalism. He is the author of some 30 articles in journals including *Political Studies*, *Journal of Language and Politics*, *Critical Discourse Studies*, *Nations and Nationalism*, and the *Journal of Political Ideologies*; and has authored over 20 chapters in edited volumes including the *Oxford Handbook of Populism* (2017) and the *Elgar Research Handbook on Populism* (2024). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6118-8444>