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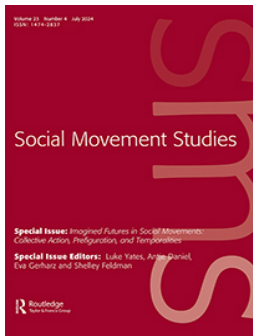
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PROFILE: Far-right strategies to co-opt progressive politics: Vox's top-down civil society organizations in Spain

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ABSTRACT

This profile examines the strategic use of top-down civil society organizations by the Spanish far-right party, Vox, in a strategy to dispute political issues traditionally associated to progressive politics. Focusing on organizations such as Solidaridad, Mi Barrio Seguro, Nostra Terra, and Asociación Mujeres por la Igualdad (AMPI), this profile highlights how Vox attempts to redefine traditionally left-wing issues, such as labor rights, urban politics, environmentalism, and women's rights, from a far-right perspective. These groups, while portraying the image to be grassroots movements, are in fact led and controlled by Vox party members, serving as instruments for the party to extend its reach beyond conventional electoral politics. The dual strategy of Vox involves trying to reshape public discourses on key societal issues and using non-electoral activities to support its electoral ambitions. This approach not only seeks to challenge the existing progressive narratives but also attempts to garner support from traditional left-wing voter bases.

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Far-right; civil society; political parties; co-optation

Introduction

Contemporary politics are characterized by a growing and dynamic interplay between electoral and non-electoral actors and strategies. In this context, some political parties have begun operating on the civil society domain seeking to obtain electoral benefits. This profile delves into the strategic utilization of top-down civil society organizations by the Spanish far-right party, Vox. Unlike grassroots actors, these groups are created or led by political party members, often even institutional representatives.

While, since the beginning of Spanish transition to democracy, political parties have sought to co-opt civil society actors to support their policy initiatives and join their ranks (Tejerina, 2018), the novelty of this development lies in the fact that Vox is not infiltrating already existing grassroots organizations. Instead, Vox is creating new organizations that are under the control of the party since their inception. Moreover, this development does not entail that Vox is adopting social movement characteristics, transitioning into

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a ‘movement party’ (cf. Kitschelt, 2006; Santos & Mercea, 2024). On the contrary, Vox is creating seemingly grassroots organizations that lack some of the characteristics often associated with these groups such as being formed by groups who do not have the capacity to influence policy through institutional means (McAdam, 1999 [1982]) or the frequent use of protest tactics (Della Porta & Diani, 2006).

I argue that, by developing a network of seemingly grassroots that, in reality, are controlled by party members, Vox seeks two objectives. Firstly, it attempts to redefine traditionally left-wing issues from a far-right perspective. Vox’s top-down civil society organizations operate on the domain of labor rights, urban policy, feminism and the environment, which are issues traditionally associated with progressive politics. Secondly, Vox uses these organizations to bridge their electoral and non-electoral image. On the one hand, these groups serve Vox to project an image of grassroots backing for their legislative initiatives. On the other, they are also an instrument for Vox to have an active role in street demonstrations.

Vox top-down civil society organizations

Beyond the many civil society groups across Spain and Europe that have links to far-right parties and are focused on policies traditionally associated with the far-right (e.g., Geva & Santos, 2021; Santos & Geva, 2022), Vox has built a network of civil society organizations that operate on policy areas that have traditionally been the in the realm of progressive forces. While the image these organizations portray is of originating from and being entrenched in civil society, these groups are led by individuals who are part of Vox’s leadership. In this profile, I will focus on four of these organizations: the trade union Solidaridad – Sindicato para la Defensa de la Solidaridad con los Trabajadores de España (Solidarity – Union for the Defense of Solidarity with Spanish Workers, in English), the urban organization Mi Barrio Seguro (I Want a Safe Neighborhood), the environmental group Nostra Terra (Our Earth), and the women’s rights organization Mujeres por la Igualdad (AMPI, Women for Equality). This section will explore the aims and structure of these organizations, focusing on their overlaps with Vox, and the next section will be dedicated to analyzing how these groups fit within Vox’s strategy.

First, Solidaridad is, according to its manifesto, ‘a national union in defense of [Spanish] workers, [their] families and [their] heritage against the dead end of mass illegal immigration subsidized with [Spaniard’s] tax money’ (Solidaridad, n.d.-a). Despite the fact that the union was registered as a legal entity in September 2020 (Solidaridad, 2020), its creation was first announced by Vox’s President, Santiago Abascal in a public event on 5 July 2020 (VOX España Director, 2020). Following its official registration, the union elected Rodrigo Alonso as General Secretary (Olías, 2020). Before his election as Solidaridad’s General Secretary, Alonso was a member of the Andalusian Parliament and Vox’s spokesperson in the chamber. When he became the General Secretary of the union, he clearly stated his priorities, declaring that he would continue performing his institutional role, leading the trade union ‘during his free time’ (*Ibid.*). So far, Solidaridad has had mixed success in representing workers. The trade union has managed to place around 250 union representatives in works councils, which account for less than 0.1% of the 292,980 union representatives across Spain (Morillo, 2023). Nonetheless, some media outlets

have reported that, over the last 100 workplace elections, the union managed to obtain an average of 20% of votes, which would place it as the second most successful union, between Unión General de Trabajadoras y Trabajadores (UGT) and Comisiones Obreras (CC.OO), the two biggest trade unions in Spain (Alías, 2023).

Second, Mi Barrio Seguro is an urban group whose objective is to ‘fight against illegal squatting, crime, neighborhood conflicts, thefts, unhealthy conditions, threats, the slowness of justice, laws that defend squatters, [and] laws that do not protect landlords’ (Mi Barrio Seguro, 2022), problems that they see proliferating particularly in working class neighborhoods. Mi Barrio Seguro was registered in the summer of 2022 by its President Andrés Jesús López Esteban (DISTRITOTV Director, 2022). López Esteban has been Vox’s Vice-Coordinator of the San Blas-Canillejas district, in Madrid, since 2019, and has been the vice-spokesperson of the party in the council of the San Blas-Canillejas district since 2023. In Barcelona, even if the organization does not have a registered structure, it is common to see Jordi de la Fuente – councilor in Barcelona’s commuter town Sant Adrià de Besòs and one of the main advisors of Vox’s leader in Catalonia, Ignacio Garriga (Otix, 2022) – coordinating its actions. Barrio Seguro has organized activities in numerous towns across Spain, including Madrid and its main commuter towns, Barcelona and surroundings, Santander, and Toledo, among others.

Third, the nature conservationist group Nostra Terra has the aim to ‘promote the conservation of Spanish natural richness’ (Nostra Terra, n.d.). The organization sees in the preservation of nature a struggle between people living in the countryside and ‘globalist elites’. In this way, Nostra Terra positions itself away from ‘false ecologists’ and seeks to engage ‘hunters, farmers, [and] livestock breeders’ in defending Spain’s natural landscapes (Molina, 2022). Nostra Terra was created in October 2021 and has since been led by two local leaders of Vox: Úrsula Hernández (Jara y Sedal, n. d.) – who was Vox’s candidate for mayor of the town of Coslada in 2023 (VOX España, 2023b), and Manuel Fuentes Lamas (Fernández Caballero, 2022) – who became the President of Vox in the town of A Coruña in October 2023 (VOX España, 2023a).

Fourth, AMPI is an organization whose objective is to ‘occupy the empty space in the real perception of women in the 21st century, currently invaded and instrumentalized by gender ideology’ (Mujeres por la Igualdad, 2022). The organization opposes what they refer to as the ‘subsidized feminism of gender ideology’ (Tomás Martínez, 2021), which they argue is being promoted by Spain’s Ministry of Equality. AMPI defends that most feminist organizations go against the rights of women to be mothers – because of their support of abortion rights. Moreover, they also believe that feminists criminalize men for the fact of being men, while victimizing women – due to their support of gender-based violence legislation (*Ibid.*). AMPI was officially presented in Barcelona on 5 November 2021 during an event of the platform Cataluña Suma por España (Catalonia adds up to Spain) – a group of organizations in favor of Spanish unity whose Vice-President is Daniel Pinto Bausela, also Vice-coordinator and vice-spokesperson of Vox in the town of Terrassa (Principal, 2022). AMPI’s founder and president, María José Ibáñez Rodríguez, occupied the fourth position in Vox’s list for the 2023 local elections of Santa Coloma del Gramenet (Ara, 2023). Furthermore, AMPI’s

spokesperson, Alicia Tomás Martínez, is also the coordinator and spokesperson of Vox in the town of Terrassa (Ajuntament de Terrassa, [n.d.](#)).

Vox's strategy for its top-down civil society organizations

While the connections between Vox and these organizations evidence the control of the party over these seemingly grassroots groups, the remaining question is how these collectives contribute to Vox's political strategy. I argue that these organizations are part of Vox's, and the far-right's more generally, culture war strategy through which they attempt to polarize society and re-politicize issues in which progressive views have been dominant. Through these efforts, the party also seeks to garner support among left-wing voters whose views may not fully align with some of these postulates.

The first objective of these organizations is to create discourses that contribute to reframing from a far-right perspective policies over which progressive forces' vies were traditionally hegemonic. For instance, Solidaridad's discourse connects the opposition to climate justice policies and migration with the defense of workers' rights. For example, in a press release on 19 October 2021, in the midst of the debates over a new labor law sponsored by Labor Minister Yolanda Díaz – at that time member of the alternative left coalition Unidas Podemos – Solidaridad criticized the reform because 'it did not tackle Spain's structural problems' (La Gaceta Internacional, [2021](#)). In Solidaridad's view, these issues were the deindustrialization due to climate justice policies, as well as cheap labor and worsening work conditions brought by migration (*Ibid.*). Similarly, Mi Barrio Seguro seeks to switch the emphasis on urban policy from access to housing to concerns with squats and insecurity. Furthermore, Mi Barrio Seguro connects these concerns to the proliferation of dangerous migrant gangs, in their view, mostly composed of North-African minors who entered Spain irregularly without any parents or tutors (which they refer to as MENAs, acronym for Minor Unaccompanied Foreigners in Spanish), or to Latin American bands (POLITEIA Asociación Profesionales de la Seguridad Director, [2022](#)). Also combining discourses related to securitization and migration, AMPI raises concerns about the threat that migration poses for women, arguing that a greater proportion of men among migrant populations commit rape crimes, and pointing that migrants from Muslim countries come from cultures with lower levels of gender equality than those existing in Spain (Las Voces del Pueblo, [2022](#)). Moreover, AMPI espouses far-right great replacement theory arguments, which raise concerns about white, Christian European populations being demographically and culturally replaced by a combination of mass migration and greater fertility rates among non-white peoples, particularly from Muslim backgrounds, in combination with decreasing fertility rates among white Christian Europeans. In a polemic Instagram video,¹ Tomás Martínez, blamed 'coward and useless politicians' to contribute to Bin Laden's aim to 'conquer Europe with the wombs of [Muslim] women' because of the few policies to promote birth rates in Spain. In relation to their concerns with decreasing fertility rates, AMPI also defends that the fight for women's equality is also the fight for the right of all women to be mothers, which for them means opposing abortion rights (Mujeres por la Igualdad, [2022](#)).

Second, Vox uses these organizations to bridge the electoral and non-electoral arenas in their interest. On the one hand, these groups help Vox exaggerate civil society support for their legislative initiatives. For instance, as part of Vox's opposition to an animal

welfare bill, which became law on 28 March 2023, the party organized together with Nostra Terra a series of events in which Vox and Nostra Terra representatives argued that the bill was the result of the influence of European animalist lobbies and would harm the conservation of nature because it did not pay attention to the needs of rural communities, such as hunters and breeders (Nostra Terra, 2022). For them, the bill hindered the conservation of Spanish natural species because it overwhelmed breeders, hunters and rural communities in general with unnecessary bureaucracy. Similarly, AMPI has been a central instrument in Vox's opposition to some of the laws of the Ministry of Equality, such as the trans people's rights law. For instance, AMPI contributed to spreading the misinformation originating from Vox's circles saying that if a man who committed gender-based violence transitioned to become a woman, this person would not be judged for the crime (ABC, 2023). Therefore, in line with Vox's arguments, AMPI strategically connected securitizing discourses about women's rights with false information about the implications of the bill.

On the other hand, these top-down civil society organizations allow Vox to have a greater presence in the streets without losing its institutional image, by seemingly joining demonstrations organized by civil society, as opposed to officially organizing them. For instance, instead of joining the main Mayday demonstrations organized by the country's main trade unions, Solidaridad, in collaboration with Vox, organizes its own rallies (e.g., Macías, 2022; Solidaridad, 2023). This strategy serves Vox to participate in Mayday demonstrations to develop an image of support to workers' rights, as the rest of trade unions would not allow the party to share a banner with them. Moreover, Solidaridad and Vox have also called for a number of demonstrations in support of the agricultural sector, a key demographic from which Vox seeks to obtain electoral support (González, 2023). Most recently, on 24 November 2023, Solidaridad attempted to call its first general strike, opposing the proposal of an amnesty law for those involved in the self-organized Catalan referendum of independence (Solidaridad, n.d.-b). Many voices considered the strike unlawful because Spanish legislation requires strikes to be organized for a labor related reason and not in support of political claims (e.g., Calvo, 2023). The action had very limited success: the Confederación Española de Organizaciones Empresariales (CEOE), The Spanish Confederation of Business Organizations, did not report on the impact of the strike due to its extremely low incidence, and only 1.3% of public employees reported having participated in it (EFE, 2023). Analogously, ahead of the 2023 local elections across Spain, Mi Barrio Seguro intensified the number of mobilizations against insecurity and squatting in working class neighborhoods (Ribalaygue, 2022). These demonstrations allowed Vox representatives to join them and attempt to include topics of their interest in the political agenda, claiming that they were representing civil society concerns.

Conclusion

This profile has explored how the Spanish far-right party Vox uses top-down civil society organizations to support its political goals. Vox has created groups like Solidaridad, Mi Barrio Seguro, Nostra Terra, and AMPI, which focus on issues traditionally championed by left-wing movements, such as labor rights, urban politics, environmentalism, and women's rights, respectively. Through these organizations, Vox seeks to redefine these

issues with a far-right perspective and exaggerate the grassroots support to its political activities.

Vox's strategy is twofold. Firstly, it aims to shift the narrative on issues over which the left traditionally had hegemony. For instance, Solidaridad associates labor rights with anti-immigration discourses, and Mi Barrio Seguro shifts focus from problems of access to housing to securitization arguments that emphasize the need to tackle insecurity and squats in working class neighborhoods. By doing so, Vox seeks to introduce new, right-leaning arguments into these debates.

Secondly, Vox employs these organizations to blur the lines between its electoral campaigns and non-electoral activities. This move allows Vox to display an image of close connection to societal demands. The organizations participate in events in relation to bills that are part of the political debate, lead demonstrations, and organize actions ahead of legislative campaigns, which Vox uses to project an image of widespread civil support, even though these groups are closely affiliated with or controlled by the party.

In summary, the study of Vox's use of top-down civil society organizations sheds light on the evolving strategies of far-right parties. Vox's approach of redefining left-wing issues and bridging political and grassroots activities underlines the need for continued attention to the methods used by such parties to extend their influence in both political and social realms.

Note

1. To access the video, please, see: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CYmmr7yItCK/>

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