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# **Populist Radical Right-Wing Parties and the Assault on Political Correctness: The Impact of Vox in Spain**

## **Abstract**

The significant rise in the number of populist radical right (PRR) parties has not been accompanied by a parallel interest in the impacts that these parties may have on public opinion. The limited range of attitudes that the literature has considered so far can be broadened to include political correctness (PC), given the increasing attacks on this concept made by PRR parties. To address the effects of such attacks, we examine the Spanish case, where the presence of a new PRR party makes anti-PC messages a recent, quite exogenous phenomenon. Using panel data to address potential non-recursive relationships and time-variant effects, we find that individuals are indeed more prone to lowering their levels of PC after finding Vox an attractive electoral option. Our results inform the debates on the effects that ‘cultural wars’, ‘anti-woke’ and anti-PC rhetoric may have on public opinion, which could ultimately lead to harmful consequences for minority groups and social cohesion.

## **Introduction**

Over the last two decades, there has been a significant rise in the number of populist radical right (PRR) parties and candidates all over the world, leading to several scholarly studies on the causes of their emergence. Although some studies have been carried out on the consequences of this increase on other parties’ positions and policies, less explored are the effects that PRR parties might have on citizens’ attitudes, particularly beyond

attitudes towards immigration. The present research takes up one of these issues that the literature has disregarded and which PRR parties seem to have identified as a battle worth fighting: political correctness.

Political correctness (PC), broadly understood as a self-censoring practice to avoid offending certain social groups and minorities (Andary-Brophy, 2015; Moss and O'Connor, 2020a; Moss and O'Connor, 2020b) is considered by its defenders as a tool for achieving inclusiveness, while those who oppose PC see it as a danger to free speech. Embracing the second perspective, some political parties and candidates – mostly belonging to the PRR – have made PC a key campaign issue, launching anti-PC rhetoric that is generally presented as defending both ‘common sense’ and the way the common people speak.

For instance, in his first GOP presidential debate in 2015, Donald Trump stated ‘I think the big problem this country has is being politically correct. [...] I don’t, frankly, have time for total political correctness.’ Marine Le Pen distanced herself from the right during her candidacy speeches in 2016, because it was ‘so deeply clouded by its fear of hurting the politically correct’. In Italy, Meloni, Grillo, and Salvini have all directly attacked PC, often using the *buonismo* label, understood as a fuzzy concern for the general welfare. UK Conservative MPs and US Republican politicians have also declared war on ‘woke’ culture. The term ‘woke’ has become a derogatory term used by the right for progressives, a synonym for ‘the politically correct’ that has expanded from designating anti-racist, feminist and liberal people to include vegans and those concerned about the environment. Being anti-woke, as such, encompasses a wide range of values and preferences, from anti-liberal to anti-socialist, but, more often than not, it is a dog whistle that provides cover for ‘ideas and viewpoints once considered deviant and morally repugnant’ (Cammaerts, 2022: 731). The expansion of these ideas could cause levels of ‘correctness’ to fall,

especially among supporters of anti-PC candidates and parties, in some cases leading to harmful consequences for minority groups (Gantt Shafer, 2017). Given the scope of anti-PC rhetoric ultimate impact, it makes sense to examine to what extent PRR parties and candidates are successful in their attempts to undermine PC.

Hence, we aim to narrow the gap in research regarding the attitudinal consequences of rising support for the PRR. To address the effects of PRR parties on the levels of PC among the citizenry, we examine the case of the Spanish party Vox. Spain did not have a noteworthy PRR party until very recently, which makes PRR anti-PC messages in Spain a new phenomenon and one that is quite exogenous to other aspects of the political culture that might be relevant confounders. Indeed, the PRR party Vox only entered the subnational arena in December 2018 and the national parliament in May 2019. While in some countries PRR parties have been part of the political landscape for decades, the recent nature of the phenomenon in Spain allows us to track the evolution in support for it, and its potential effects on individuals' opinions of PC in the short term.

Using two different methodological strategies (a series of fixed-effect panel estimation models that take time-variant factors into account, and a cross-lagged estimation to address potential non-recursive relationships), we find that some individuals are indeed more likely to decrease their levels of political correctness as a result of finding Vox an attractive alternative and/or voting for them.

The article is structured as follows. First, we review the previous literature on the effects of the PRR, then discuss and theorise the expected impact of PRR parties on political correctness. We then present the research design section, explaining both the Spanish context in general and the case of Vox as a successful PRR party, after which we go into the explanation of the data, measurements, and methods. After presenting the results of

our two different methodological strategies, we end with a summary of our conclusions, including avenues for further research.

### **The attitudinal effects of populist radical right-wing parties**

The academic discussion on the effects of PRR parties on public opinion is embedded in a wider literature on the effects of party positions on citizens' opinions. According to work carried out in this field, individuals might follow their preferred party's cues in order to save the time and effort required to make up their minds about a particular policy (Lupia 2006), or to reaffirm their party identity (Green *et al*, 2002). Some research supports the notion that voters tend to adopt the policy positions of their preferred parties (Lenz, 2012; Slothuus and Bisgaard, 2021). However, American citizens' positions on issues seem to be more influenced by their partisanship than European ones, whose partisan identities barely affect their positions on issues at stake (see Neundorf and Adams, 2018). It is perhaps this European viewpoint on the limited ability of parties to affect issue positions that leads this literature to largely disregard new topics and issues – and consequently the potential triggers of deeper cultural changes – neglecting the potential socializing effects of new parties.

PPR parties – which marshal political support by emphasizing nativism, authoritarianism and populism (see Mudde, 2009) – are not exactly 'new', since they have existed in Western Europe for about four decades now (Mudde 2012). However, their electoral success has been on the rise since 2015, following the start of refugee crisis (Bergmann *et al*, 2021), which was deemed to be the prelude to the recent (relatively) good electoral results for PRR parties in Sweden, Italy, and Spain. Given these parties' increasing presence in the public sphere, many scholars have focused on the causes of their success

(see, for instance, Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville, 2022; Mendes and Dennison, 2021; Mols and Jetten, 2020), while far less attention has been paid to its consequences.

The literature considers that PRR parties can affect policies, intra-party competition and public opinion. Of these, public opinion has been studied far less than the other two areas (Larsen 2022), even if an impact on public opinion is very likely to influence policy (Mudde, 2012). In this respect, scholars have tended to downplay the effects of PRR parties on public opinion. For instance, Carvalho concludes that PRR parties' influence has been limited to xenophobia and that their moment has passed in terms of driving public opinion (Carvalho, 2013). Similarly, Mudde's review concluded that 'while PRRPs might have affected the position and salience of certain issues for some parts of the population, they seem to have rarely changed their more long-term attitudes' (Mudde, 2012: 7). More recent research is consistent with this skepticism, finding that PRR parties have had null effects on anti-immigration attitudes, or institutional and social trust (Bohman and Hjerm, 2016; Larsen, 2022).

However, the popularity of PRR parties has also been found to fuel political discontent (Rooduijn *et al*, 2016) and to undermine support for income redistribution (Larsen, 2022). This is consistent with the claim that the electoral success and parliamentary presence of PRR parties have significant negative symbolic effects, since 'where the new radical right assumed executive office at various levels [...], the most substantive impact was a change in cultural issues, a new Kulturkampf against the left, its allies and against foreigners' (Minkenberg, 2001: 18). Overall, this suggests that studies on the effects of PRR parties on public opinion should expand the range of attitudes and topics that they examine to include other cultural aspects that might more accurately capture their 'symbolic effects'. The present study suggests that attention should be paid to one of these

new battlegrounds in which PRR parties are currently attempting issue entrepreneurship and ownership: political correctness.

### **Political correctness and PRR parties**

Some of the literature has highlighted the attacks made by PRR parties on political correctness, a trait that is common to Germany (Berbuiet *al*, 2015), USA, UK, and Australia (Hogan and Haltinner, 2015), Estonia (Trumm, 2018), or Hungary (Vidra and Fox, 2014). This behaviour may stem from three different rationales. On the one hand, works that consider populism as a political style point to the use of ‘bad manners’ as a characteristic of populist leaders (Canovan, 1999; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014). By being overtly uncivil, PRR parties bring the audience’s attention to the artificial way in which the elites speak, thus identifying themselves with the people (Krämer, 2018). Secondly, PRR parties tend to use the idea of a (mainstream, privileged) culture under threat, and the subsequent identity backlash, thus reinforcing a common identity to gain electoral support. By championing the anti-PC cause, they create a sense of belonging to a group, a sense of oneness (Andary-Brophy, 2015: 50). Finally, the emerging PRR parties usually emphasise issues that are new or have previously been overlooked by established or mainstream parties, of which PC is one example. In bringing forward these issues, PRR challenger parties act as ‘issue entrepreneurs’ (Hobolt and de Vries, 2015), politicizing new topics that have a polarizing potential. Voters, in turn, may respond by supporting these parties because they match their previous opinions on the issue, or by adjusting their attitudes to the discourse of one of these new parties.

A PRR party can easily become an issue owner of PC – that is, it can be perceived as being the only party that cares about the issue and the most competent party to handle it – in the same way that these parties have become issue owners for immigration, integration, Islam or political cynicism. This is a strategy that has been proven to be successful in the past (Walgrave *et al*, 2015). The idea that PRR parties have been issue entrepreneurs and claimed ownership of PC is suggested by Krämer , who considers that right-wing populists define ‘liberty’ as ‘freedom from the burdens imposed by minorities, from the threat of Islamic domination, or the freedom to express their worldview without being restricted by “political correctness”’ (2017: 1301). In sum, by bringing PC into the public debate, PRR parties can stir up new concerns about the issue, redefine terms and pre-existing points of consensus, force citizens and other parties to take positions on it, and even generate new opinions and attitudes, to finally reap the rewards of agitating voters and polarizing them over PC.

As such, PRR parties might consider PC a political issue that they can exploit to get the upper hand over mainstream parties. However, American scholarship considers that PC at the individual level is an attitude in favour of using inclusive language (Lalonde *et al*, 2000; Dickinson, 2017). The scant literature on the causes of PC conceptualised in this way associates this phenomenon with verbal intelligence, as well as with certain personality traits (agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness) (see Andary-Brophy, 2015; Moss and O’Connor, 2020b). Overprotective parenting, along with moral absolutism and social media use, has been found to boost PC (Lukianoff and Haidt, 2018; Moss and O’Connor, 2020a). In addition, more liberal individuals tend to be more politically correct, along with those scoring lower on scales of emotional well-being (Strauts and Blanton, 2015). None of these studies, however, consider the political factors that can affect an individual’s tendency to embrace or reject political correctness. As a



result, we do not know much about the scope of the effects that PRR parties' discourses and positions on PC have among lay citizens.

We expect supporters of PRR parties to be affected by their parties's guidelines on PC, making them less politically correct, and thus reflecting some of the PRR parties' symbolic effects. These effects could be activated through a variety of mechanisms, from the increased presence of PC as a new political issue brought forth and owned by PRR parties, to an enhanced sense of belonging to a community (that of the politically incorrect), which allows PRR supporters to distance themselves from what they view as the quiescent, politically correct elite. Following the general premise that PRR parties undermine PC, we will test the hypothesis that *individuals who support PRR parties will experience an erosion in their levels of PC over time.*

## **Research design**

### ***The Spanish case, and Vox as a successful PRR party***

While other democracies saw a rise in the strength of PRR parties in previous decades, it was not until very recently that Spain witnessed the emergence and relative success of a PRR party: Vox (Ferreira, 2019; Rooduijn *et al.*, 2019; Ortiz Barquero *et al.*, 2020; Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020; Turnbull-Dugarte *et al.*, 2020). Vox emerged in 2013 as a breakaway party born of a schism within the People's Party . Since then, the media coverage of Vox has increased, experiencing a spike in 2018, allowing the party's message to reach a wide audience (Mendes and Dennison, 2021), and paving the way for its current status. The November 2019 general election led to Vox winning 52 seats in

parliament, becoming the third most voted-for party in Spain. Furthermore, Vox supports and participates in different governments at the subnational level. Accordingly, to use Sartori's term, Vox can be considered to have been a relevant party since 2018-2019 (Sartori, 1976).

While we can trace Vox leader Santiago Abascal's use of the expression 'PC' to March 2013,<sup>1</sup> Bermúdez (2020) notes that the first reference to PC from an official Vox social media account is a tweet published in January 2017, followed by repeated allusions to PC in two major rallies in October 2018 and April 2019. Since January 2019, the 'What is Vox?' section of their website has explicitly stated that Vox is 'the only party fighting against suffocating political correctness.' As a case in point, in November 2019, at the rally that closed the campaign for the November general election, Abascal highlighted: 'together we have managed to reopen all the debates that the left had decided to close by decree, with the cowardly silence of the right. [...] Any debate outside the framework of political correctness was an insult. [...] Well, today all the debates are open again'.<sup>2</sup> In this way, Vox managed to differentiate itself not only from traditional parties, but also from the other parties that emerged with the collapse of the Spanish party system, i.e. Podemos and Ciudadanos (see Orriols and Cordero, 2016).

A relevant question is, then, to what extent political correctness is a new issue in Spanish public debate. A term search in the two main Spanish newspapers (El País and El Mundo) reveals that, before 2014, mentions of PC in the press were merely anecdotal, although they were more frequent in the conservative El Mundo.<sup>3</sup> In 2016, Trump was portrayed in a series of articles as an enemy of PC. A handful of news stories were published in 2017 using the expression 'PC' to discuss all sorts of topics, including surrogate mothers, abortion, gender, LGBTQ+ issues, and in particular, the Catalan bid for independence. Vox was mentioned in relation to PC for the first time in a story about the 2018

Andalusian elections, published in *El Mundo* on 3 December 2018 (Gistau, 2018). According to that story, Vox embodied ‘the resistance’ to the ‘dictatorship’ of political correctness. After that turning point, the expression ‘political correctness came to be invariably associated with Vox.’<sup>4</sup>

Vox’s defense of ‘political incorrectness’ evokes ‘what ordinary people say’ (Gistau, 2018), which relates to the people-centrism and the anti-elitism dimensions within the populism construct (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014). Fighting PC is therefore presented as a crusade in favour of freedom of expression and thought. In Santiago Abascal’s own words: ‘we say what Spaniards say to their family and friends. Vox rebelled against the dictatorship of political correctness, and people were fed up, in secret, of political correctness’ (Gómez, 2018). At the same time, the expression serves as an umbrella concept that summarises Vox’s position on a broad range of political positions, from anti-immigration to the defense of the unity of the country, most of them along the GAL-TAN dimension (Hooghe *et al.*, 2002). For instance, Vox’s anti-PC rhetoric includes nativism and promotes anti-immigration policies, often evoking the *Reconquista* to suggest that they will save Spain from Islam. A tweet from the official party account in September 2019 stated that ‘common sense has arrived at the temple of political correctness’, with a link to a video associating Muslim immigrants with gang rapes.<sup>5</sup> Anti-globalism and anti-separatism are also topics that Vox usually connects to anti-political correctness. Vox has contested the territorial organization of the state, opposing the existence of Autonomous Communities and blaming on political correctness for the main parties’ weak posture regarding the Catalan bid for independence.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Abascal has claimed in Parliament that the European Union has helped enshrine ‘the empire of progressive political correctness’.<sup>7</sup> Finally, gender-sensitive language – increasingly used by the Spanish left since the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party created the Ministry of

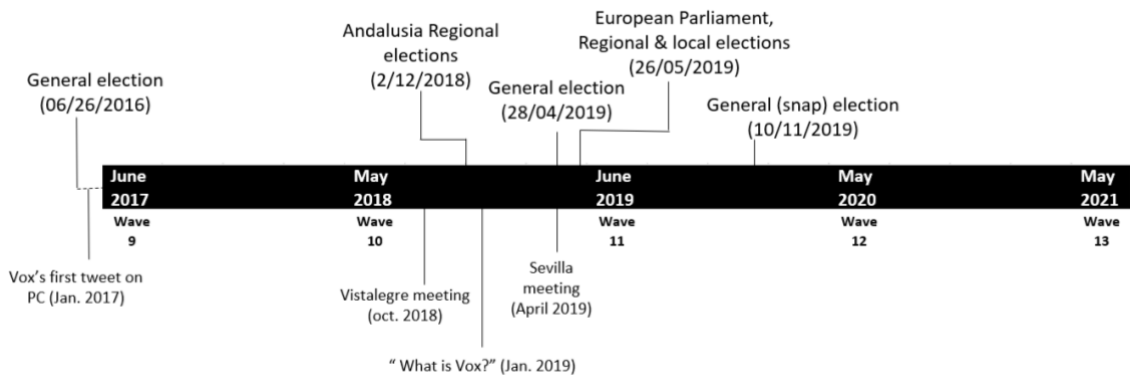
Equality in 2008 – is constantly mocked by Vox, and its MPs have repeatedly requested that inclusive language be excluded from official documents since 2018, claiming that this is merely a symptom of PC (Rivas Venegas 2021).<sup>8</sup>

In sum, Vox has extensively attacked PC in the way it has phrased and conveyed most of its discourse, thus making it sound more socially acceptable and anti-elitist, particularly since 2018. As such, Spain appears to be a best-case scenario for exploring the relationship between support for the PRR and attitudes towards PC. The recent adoption of anti-PC as a crucial political issue by Vox, combined with the recent and rapid emergence of the PRR in Spain, allows us to explore this relationship while avoiding endogeneity and spurious relationships.

### ***Data and measures***

In order to put to the test empirically the relationship between voting for Vox and subsequent PC, we use a Spanish panel survey that has been conducted yearly by the *Democracy, Elections and Citizenship* research group since 2010 (Hernández *et al.*, 2021). The study follows a representative sample of young and middle-aged internet users residing in Spain. The sample was selected from the online panel used by Netquest, and quotas were used to ensure a balanced representation of participants in terms of gender, education, size of municipality, and region. We use the data from waves 9 (June 2017) to 13 (May 2021), as these waves were the ones for which all the measurements we require were included in the questionnaires, namely questions on PC and on respondent's intention of voting for Vox. Figure 1 clarifies the fieldwork carried out for the study, and the most relevant dates when it comes to the evolution of Vox.

**Figure 1. Calendar of events related to Vox's success and the fieldwork for the study.**

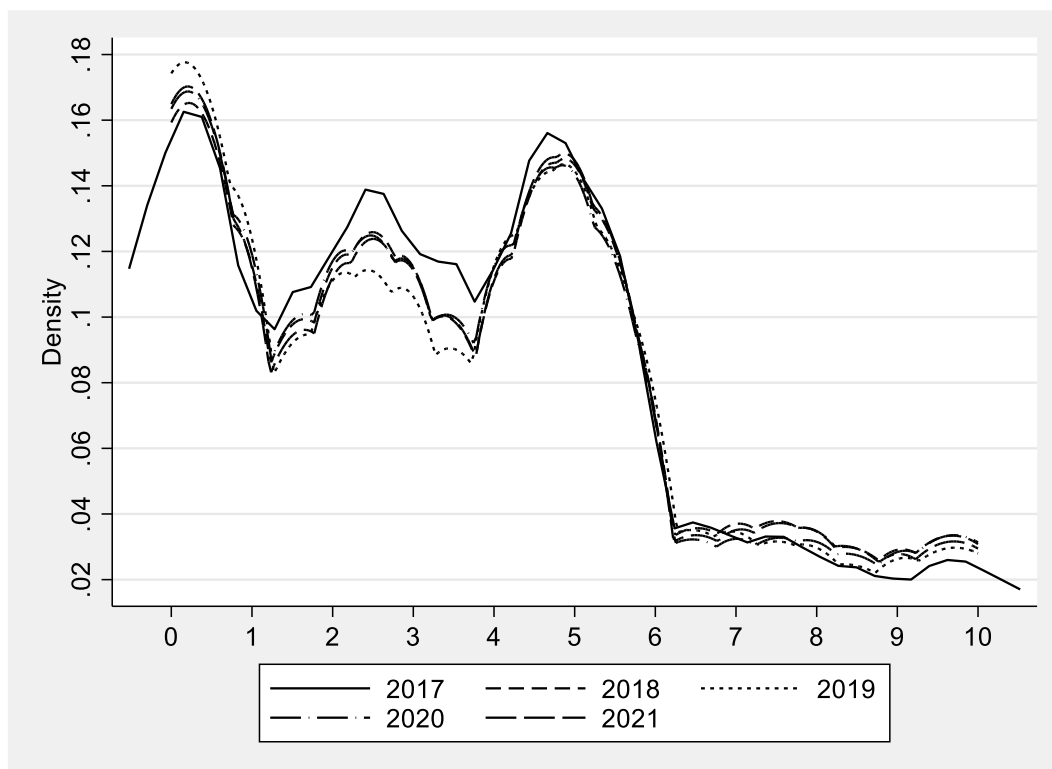


Measuring PC is a challenging endeavour, not only because previous research is mixed regarding behavioural and attitudinal PC, but also because the term refers interchangeably both to PC and ‘concern for’ PC. As a result, there is no standard battery of questions that assesses attitudes toward PC (Dickinson, 2017). Given that previous strategies are exhaustive (e.g. 44 pairs of words consisting of an inclusive word and a ‘politically incorrect’ one; see Dickinson, 2017) but eventually boil down to one or two scales (i.e. those in favour of PC and those against it; see Lalonde *et al*, 2000), we have opted for a bipolar scale running from 0 (extreme political incorrectness) to 10 (extreme political correctness). More precisely, we use a survey question which states: ‘Lately, people are talking about political correctness a lot. There are people who believe that we should change our way of expressing ourselves in order to avoid hurting some collectives’ sensibilities. Other people believe that this is going too far and that some people get offended too easily. Point out where you stand according to these statements. 0: We need to change the way we express ourselves; 10: People get offended too easily.’<sup>9</sup>

The original wording of the question yields an 11-point scale where the higher values indicate more anti-PC positions. We have reversed the scale, making the lower values (0) indicate politically incorrect views and the higher values (10) indicate PC views. Figure 2 displays the distribution of the answers to the PC indicator over the course of the study

as Epanechnikov kernel density estimates. At first glance, the left-skewed distributions are very similar over the years, revealing that most people strongly oppose PC. Although the centre of the distribution ( $M = 3.3$ ) does not vary significantly over time, we observe that more people tend to place themselves nearer the politically incorrect pole as time goes by, particularly in 2019.

**Figure 2. Distribution of the PC indicator across waves. Kernel density.**



Bandwidth= 0.523; Epanechnikov kernel density estimates.

To gauge support for Vox – our main independent variable –we firstly use a respondent’s intention of voting for the party. The question reads: ‘Supposing that tomorrow there were general elections, that is, elections to the Spanish Parliament, which party would you vote for?’. Since wave 9 (June 2017) the ‘Vox’ option has appeared alongside 32 other possibilities (including ‘none’, ‘I won’t vote’, ‘others’, ‘blank’ and ‘I don’t know’), therefore gauging the increase in support for Vox. The proportion of respondents who expressed the intention to vote for Vox in wave 9 was 0.8%. This figure increased to 8.1%

in wave 12, and 9% in wave 13, although it still falls short of the actual vote share that Vox obtained in the last general election (15.1%). However, this is still a better estimation than the one observed in other representative surveys, such as the post-electoral survey conducted by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS) after the November general election, where the reported vote for Vox was only 7.1%. Additionally, and most importantly, our data can track changes in Vox's electoral support.

**Table 1. Data structure and main variables in our analyses.**

	WAVE 9	WAVE 10	WAVE 11	WAVE 12	WAVE 13
Fieldwork	June 2017	May 2018	June 2019	May 2020	May 2021
N	1990	2128	1748	2013	2112
Intends to vote for Vox	YES (N=15, 0.8%)	YES (N=26, 1.2%)	YES (N=97, 5.5%)	YES (N=162, 8.1%)	YES (N=190, 9%)
Voted for Vox in the previous election	-	-	YES (N=95, 5.4%) (2019 I)	YES (N=166, 8.3%) (2019 II)	YES (N=166, 7.9%) (2019 II)
Actual Vox vote share in the last general election	0.2 (2016)	0.2 (2016)	10.3 (2019 I)	15.1 (2019 II)	15.1 (2019 II)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note that '2019 I' refers to the general election held in April 2019. '2019 II' refers to the repeated general election held in November 2019.

## ***Methods***

Our data structure (see Table 1) and the availability of information regarding voting for Vox pose some challenges that we circumvent by following two complementary strategies. Firstly, we estimate the effects of voting intention change in favour of Vox on within-individual variations of PC, using all waves available (waves 9 to 13). Given the measure of our PC indicator, we rely on a panel fixed-effects linear regression for estimating the effect of changes in the intention to vote for Vox on subsequent attitudes towards PC. In addition, we use a second model to consider the possibility that the intention to vote for Vox (dependent variable) feeds on individuals' attitudes towards PC (independent variable), estimated by means of a linear probability panel regression so the

results can be compared across models.<sup>10</sup> Given that most relevant explanatory factors for PC suggested by the literature (e.g. upbringing, personality) are time-invariant, we have only selected control variables that can potentially change over time, namely moral absolutism, perceptions of the economy, position on the left-right scale, political interest, and political efficacy. All non-dichotomous variables have been recoded so that higher numbers indicate more/better perceptions and have then been rescaled to run between the values of 0 and 1 – this includes our PC indicator.

Our second and last estimation strategy addresses the non-recursive relationships between PC and the success of Vox. While our theoretical background builds upon the likely effects of the emergence of Vox and of increasing support for the party on PC, the opposite is not only possible, but is a highly likely scenario. Vox and other PRR parties claim to represent those whose freedom of speech is hampered by PC, hence some individuals might have felt attracted to Vox because of their defence of this issue. So far, no previous research has addressed how important this element in Vox's manifesto and discourse is to their success, and an empirical assessment of its impact would already be a relevant contribution to the literature. Moreover, we contend that this relationship (between PC and intention of voting for Vox) coexists with a 'socialization' effect that goes from support for Vox or attraction to the party, to attitudes towards PC.

To model and test these relationships, we employ a cross-lagged model, using information from waves 11 and 12. The reason for this is that these are the only waves for which the reported vote for Vox might actually have changed. Before that, the panel survey refers to the 2016 general election, in which Vox ran but only obtained 0.2% of the vote share and was therefore not included as an option in the voting behaviour question. Wave 13 includes a vote recall question, but it refers to the 2019 repeated (November) election, which yields redundant information when compared to wave 12. Hence, reported voting



for Vox could only potentially have changed between waves 11 (after April 2019 general election) and 12 (after November 2019 general election).

Cross-lagged models are designed to test spuriousness by comparing cross-lagged correlations and regression coefficients (Burkholder and Harlow, 2003). The models regress both the dependent and independent variables measured in  $t_1$  (wave 12 in our case) on their lagged scores measured in  $t_0$  (wave 11), producing regressive scores that provide information on the stability of both variables, and that account, to some extent, for time-constant variables (Berrington *et al*, 2006). They also consider the effects of  $Y$  (measured in  $t_0$ ) on  $X$  (measured in  $t_1$ ), and of  $X$  (measured in  $t_0$ ) on  $Y$  (measured in  $t_1$ ). The latter is our coefficient of interest, the one that puts our main hypothesis to empirical test, i.e. that having voted for Vox subsequently undermines individual levels of PC.

Depending on the results of the cross-lagged coefficients, we can detect reciprocal effects, unidirectional relationships, or null effects. We expect the coefficient that gauge the effect of a previous vote for Vox on PC to be positive and significant, even when time-constant phenomena are accounted for, and considering the possibility that the causality also goes in the other direction (a decrease in PC leading to a vote change in favour of Vox). To carry out these estimations, we again employ linear models.

## **Results**

Our subsequent analyses use the information we have available for both our dependent and independent variables (waves 9 to 13) for 3,581 different individuals. On this basis, we estimate four panel fixed-effects linear regressions, the results of which are presented in Table 2.<sup>11</sup> The first two models consider PC as our dependent variable. The subsequent models estimate the effects of PC on the intention of voting for Vox. The models

presented in columns 1 and 3 do not consider control variables, while models in columns 2 and 4 do consider them.

**Table 2. Linear panel fixed-effects estimations for PC and intention of voting for Vox.**

	Political correctness		Intention of voting for Vox	
	Baseline	With controls	Baseline	With controls
	b/se	b/se	b/se	b/se
Intention of voting for Vox	-0.05** (0.02)	-0.04* (0.02)		
Self-placement on left-right scale		-0.07** (0.03)		0.16*** (0.02)
Taxation preferences		-0.06*** (0.02)		-0.03** (0.01)
Perception of the economic situation		0.04* (0.02)		-0.09*** (0.02)
Perception of own economic situation		-0.02 (0.01)		-0.01*** (0.01)
Perception of past eco. situation		0.00 (0.01)		-0.05*** (0.01)
Income		0.02 (0.03)		-0.00 (0.02)
Moral absolutism		0.00 (0.02)		0.02 (0.01)
Interest in politics		0.01 (0.02)		0.05** (0.02)
Political efficacy: easy to understand		-0.03 (0.02)		-0.00 (0.01)
Political efficacy: I always have opinions		-0.05** (0.02)		0.05*** (0.01)
Political correctness			-0.03** (0.0)	-0.025** (0.01)
Observations	9,991	8,467	9,991	8,467
Individuals	3,581	3,332	3,581	3,332
Overall R2	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.11

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . Constants omitted.

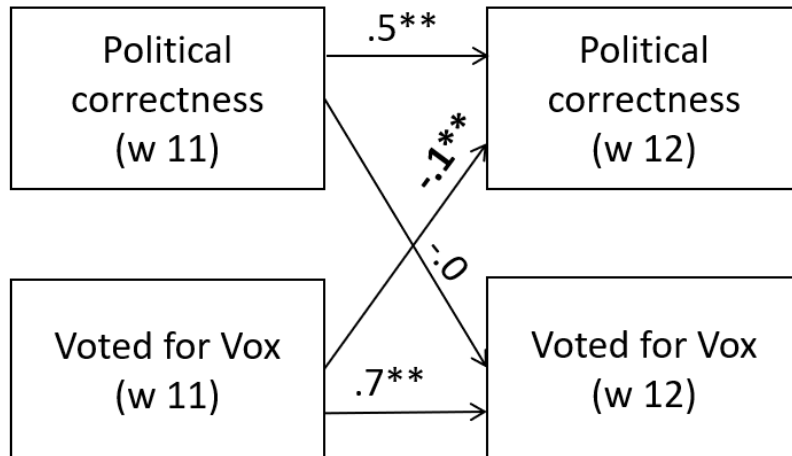
First and foremost, we see that variations in the intention of voting for Vox exert a negative, significant effect on PC, which slightly decreases when we take other time-variant controls into account. The 0.04 coefficient indicates a 4% decrease in the dependent variable caused by voting intentions changing in favour of Vox. This result is in line with our main expectation, and provides empirical evidence that is aligned with the hypothesis that support for Vox will precede and affect future levels of PC. Notably, PC is also eroded by the respondent being closer to the right of the ideological spectrum, being in favour of more taxation, and having worse perceptions of the economic situation and about his or her own abilities to hold opinions. If we estimate a model that uses PC as a predictor to estimate voting intentions for Vox, PC has a negative, significant effect which is lower than the one observed in the opposite direction. Note that this coefficient indicates the effect on voting intentions when the PC indicator goes from its minimum value to its maximum value (an 11-rung variation). When including time-variant controls, the initial effect decreases to 2.5%. The effect is clearly smaller than the one observed the other way around, i.e. when compared to the effect on PC caused by the increasing attractiveness of Vox.

Our last empirical test employs a cross-lagged model that regresses our PC indicator on electoral behaviour (having voted for Vox or not in the previous election), considering only our 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> panel waves. This model yields four coefficients of interest: two referring to the stability of the variables (represented over the horizontal arrows in Figure 3), and two representing contending explanations. The first (downwards diagonal) implies that past attitudes (initial PC) predict future electoral behaviour. However, our theory posits that previous electoral behaviour can yield a decrease in PC attitudes. We therefore expect the second (upward) diagonal path to exhibit a significant and negative coefficient.

The results for our first cross-lagged estimation, considering our general indicator of PC as a dependent variable, are presented in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Cross-lagged estimation of the effect of voting for Vox on PC. Waves 11 & 12.**

**Standardized coefficients.**



Note: the standardized coefficients for each relationship are represented over the respective arrow. The bold font indicates the coefficient that tests our main hypothesis. **\*\*** indicates significant effects at confidence level of 95% or higher. Covariances, means and errors are estimated but not represented.

Notably, the coefficient that suggests an effect of past PC on future voting for Vox is not significant, while the opposite effect (from a past vote for Vox to subsequent PC, in bold type) is negative and significant.<sup>12</sup> This is consistent with the results presented in Table 2, which are based on voting intention. This suggests that those who changed their vote choice in favor of Vox between April and November 2019 – probably swayed by the success of Vox in the first election, that skyrocketed from 0% to over 10% of the vote share – may have embraced politically incorrect attitudes as part of their new partisan identity.

## **Conclusions**

PC has recently become a political issue, brought forth by PRR parties, which now champion political incorrectness. Nevertheless, neither the literature on the individual dimensions and measures of PC nor the literature on the symbolic effects of PRR parties have proven that the discourse and practices of these parties affect perceptions of PC in citizens' hearts and minds. This research has empirically put to test the general hypothesis that support for PRR parties can change citizens' attitudes, pushing PRR voters and sympathizers towards politically incorrect positions. Our results confirm that switching voting intentions or behaviour in favor of a PRR party can subsequently lower individuals' levels of PC.

To test our expectations, we used the Spanish case, which appeared to be an optimal scenario for studying the relationship between PRR and PC in the short term. Indeed, Spain had not had a prominent PRR party since the restoration of democracy in the 1970s. This allowed us to capture the effects of the emergence of Vox, the most successful PRR party in Spain and, currently, the third most voted-for party in parliament. Second, since PC has not been a hot topic in the Spanish public agenda until very recently, we can gauge how the PRR's anti-PC messages entered Spanish public opinion. Third, the high number of national elections that have taken place in Spain over the last few years and Vox's meteoric rise allows us to capture the relative success of a PRR party almost in real-time (and over a timespan of only a few years). If attitudinal change can happen in such a short period of time, the likelihood of observing similar or more acute results in other countries where PRR parties have been a fixture for the last few decades is certainly greater. However, further research should also explore this relationship in other contexts.

Our approach for capturing the symbolic effects of Vox on PC focuses on individuals. We contend that Vox became an issue entrepreneur and owner regarding PC, and that their sympathizers have been recently exposed to their discourse against PC, ultimately developing anti-PC attitudes. To tap the within-individual dynamics of PC, we use five waves of a panel survey. Following two different methodological strategies, we find consistent results suggesting that feeling more sympathy towards Vox – and having voted for them – does make individuals more prone to thinking that PC has gone too far, and that people get offended too easily.

The mechanisms behind the relationship between supporting PRR forces and PC should be explored more deeply. Our estimations suggest that the evolution of PC is related to perceptions about Vox regardless of self-placement along the left-right scale, moral absolutism, and other time-variant and invariant factors. In our opinion, our results suggest that PC has been recently politicised and claimed by Vox, and that the party has ‘educated’ its followers on the matter, notwithstanding some of Vox’s followers’ ideas being previously aligned with the party’s discourse.

Our PC measure has several virtues – one key benefit is its simplicity –but also imposes some limitations on our research. Concurrent validity analyses indicate that our indicator correlates with pro-inclusiveness attitudes towards feminism, same-sex marriage, anti-speciesism, or immigration, although the content and meaning of PC have evolved in the last few years. The question wording also seems to be one that particularly triggers right-leaning citizens, although this does not explain why the association between closeness to Vox and PC becomes stronger over time. All in all, our PC indicator helps us capture the extent to which PC has become a relevant political issue, and to observe individuals’ positions towards it.

Finally, some of the observed effects might be more related to a decrease in social desirability bias than to an actual attitudinal change. Following Bischof and Wagner (2019), the institutionalization of PRR parties might have affected perceptions of social norms, making ‘politically incorrect’ opinions appear to be perfectly acceptable, even mainstream, and therefore not so off-limits. Nevertheless, even if this were the only explanation behind the observed results, our conclusions would still be relevant and worrisome. If discourses against minorities become more present among the citizenry and, consequently, become legitimised, in the long run this could lead to a real change in preferences or attitudes towards the minority groups that PRR supporters consider too easily offended, including the female half the population. The legitimization and repetition of these discourses among PRR parties’ supporters through echo chambers can further radicalise their positions, making them more visible (and acceptable), polarizing public debate, dragging political actors’ positions along with them and, ultimately, attracting larger audiences. The rights of minorities could become endangered, and social cohesion eroded. In line with this, further research should explore how the relationship between PRR parties and PC evolves in the long run and the causal mechanisms connecting both phenomena, as well as the association between other parties’ positions and PC.

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<sup>1</sup> See [tinyurl.com/3jmpsf6](https://tinyurl.com/3jmpsf6)

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9CaJDCw8GY> (at 56:00).

<sup>3</sup> We refer the reader to Appendix I of the [Online Supplementary Material](#) for an evolution of the frequency of the use of the term ‘political correctness’ in the Spanish press.

<sup>4</sup> Note as well that Vox’s leaders and MPs used the term ‘political correctness’ increasingly in their tweets, peaking in 2018-2019, while the use of this term by other Spanish parties or MPs was negligible (See Figure A2 in the [Online Supplementary Material](#)).

<sup>5</sup> See [tinyurl.com/xf3vkx7](https://tinyurl.com/xf3vkx7).

<sup>6</sup> See the Parliament’s record of proceedings, p. 12 ([tinyurl.com/4pm5236p](https://tinyurl.com/4pm5236p)) in 5/11/ 2021.

<sup>7</sup> See the Parliament’s record of proceedings, p. 22 ([tinyurl.com/mesmc42j6](https://tinyurl.com/mesmc42j6)) in 11/10/2021. We refer the reader to Appendix III for more details on how PC relates to other values and issues.

<sup>8</sup> Note that Vox’s manifesto goes beyond language in this respect, as it aims to repeal the gender violence law and take abortion out of the public health system.

<sup>5</sup> Appendix III reflects on the concurrent validity of our PC indicator, concluding that it is negatively associated with positive views about bullfighting and hunting, positively associated with feminism, and that it has become increasingly associated with left-wing positions over the years. See Appendix IV on the possible effects of the wording and, more specifically, on the explicit use of the expression ‘political correctness’, which is likely to have triggered more negative reactions among people who hold right-wing views.

<sup>10</sup> We rely on Gomila’s (2021) work on linear probability models, as logistic models perform poorly in the presence of fixed effects.

<sup>7</sup> We refer the reader to Appendices V and VII for two alternative models that includes voting intentions for parties other than Vox. Our conclusions hold.

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix VII for detailed output in table format.



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