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Salience, stigma, and the case of the end of Iberian
'exceptionalism'

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Abstract

This study offers an explanatory model for variation in electoral results for ‘populist radical right’ parties in Europe over time and across countries. We build on and fuse previous explanations to offer a theoretical model that combines supply- and demand-side explanations. We argue that such parties succeed when they are able to avoid the stigma of extremism by initially catering to an unsatiated demand of right-wing voters on a ‘less controversial’, highly salient issue. With their relatively minor place in the party system confirmed and equipped with a ‘reputation shield’ that extremist parties do not enjoy, they are able to refocus on more controversial, other highly salient issues, typically immigration, potentially leading to greater potential mobilisation. We use the case of the Spanish party *Vox*, as well as the erstwhile, anomalous lack of success for similar parties across Portugal and Spain, to test our framework. We show that both the historic lack of populist radical right party success across Iberia, the relative greater success in the rest of western Europe and the recent rise of *Vox* can be explained neatly by this framework of *salience, stigma and supply*.

Keywords

Populist radical right; Spain; Portugal; issue salience; social stigma; *Vox*

This study offers an explanation for the rise of populist radical right parties in Europe by proposing an original theoretical framework that combines previous explanations with the literatures on issue salience and social stigma. We then consider how well that theoretical framework explains the erstwhile case of ‘Iberian exceptionalism’—the almost anomalous lack of such a party in Portugal and Spain—as well as the end of that Iberian exceptionalism with the rise of the archetypal populist radical right party *Vox* in Spain from 2018 onwards. We draw our conclusion from a combination of quantitative survey and media analysis evidence and qualitative evidence. We find that radical right parties fail when they are unable to avoid the stigma of extremism, in line with previous studies. However, radical right parties are able to avoid such stigma and succeed under, at least, the following two conditions. First, there must be an increase in the salience of a relatively uncontroversial issue among right-wing voters and a lack of existing political supply to avoid increased dissatisfaction amongst those voters. In this case, the populist radical right party can enter the party system without being stigmatised. We suggest that if the populist radical right party enters the party system as a splinter from a mainstream right party, it is all the more likely to avoid a social stigma. After this, and second, the party can refocus to more controversial issues, typically immigration, with its ‘reputational shield’, allowing for greater success.

Literature explaining populist radical right electoral success

We aim to contribute to the solving of three related puzzles, in order of increasing geographical specificity. First, why have populist radical right parties been more successful in Europe in recent years? Second, why, prior to 2018, were the two Iberian countries exceptional in this regard? Third, why did this exceptionalism come to an end in Spain in 2018 with the rise of the archetypal populist radical right *Vox*? To the first two of these, there already exist significant theoretical arguments and empirical findings within the literature. However, to neither of them is there a consensus and the last question—on the rise of *Vox*—is too recent to have received significant scholarly enquiry, with the party having been established in 2014 by disgruntled former members of the centre-right *Partido Popular* and only receiving an electoral breakthrough (albeit in a regional election) in December 2018 and, according to national opinion polls, seemingly becoming an established member of the national party system thereafter. In order to develop our theoretical framework, we build upon both the general literature and that explaining ‘Iberian exceptionalism’.

There is a rich literature seeking to explain national-level variation, both between countries and across time, in the electoral success of populist radical right parties. This is partially distinct from the even larger literature explaining individual-level variation in voting for such parties, which tends to rely on temporally and spatially stable indicators such as socio-demographics and political and policy attitudes. Though these individual-level studies have produced more conclusive findings, they are unlikely to explain national-level variation given their stability, in contrast to the marked fluctuations in populist radical right parties between countries and over time within countries (van der Brug, 2005). Over-time explanations for the rise of the populist radical right tend to fall into two camps (Inglehart and Norris, 2016).

The first of these sees the rise of such parties as the result of grievances resulting from globalization and economic competition. Arzheimer (2018) shows how sub-strands of this theory vary in the emphasis they put on legitimate grievances or irrational hostility to outgroups, usually immigrants. The second theory, instead, sees the rise of populist radical right parties as the result of consolidated opposition against the broad cultural changes in western democracies since the 1970s, in particular social permissiveness and a decline in traditional values and increased ethnic heterogeneity (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005).

Within both of these theories it is plausible that opposition to immigration and international integration are the policy attitudes that bind supporters of populist radical right parties together, as has been shown in the individual-level literature (e.g. Mudde, 2007; Vasilopoulou, 2011). Indeed, scholars

(e.g. Kriesi et al, 2006; Hooghe and Marks, 2017) have argued that Europe's party systems are being transformed with an 'integration-demarcation' axis—relating to integration and, in Europe, European integration—increasingly defining electoral competition alongside the longstanding economic and social axes. Finally, a third 'political demography' theoretical strand pinpoints the reason for the rise of populist radical right parties squarely on the high immigration rates in the late 20th and, especially, early 21st centuries, arguing that throughout history such changes have always been greeted with opposition (Kaufmann, 2014; Newman, 2013).

A number of scholars have also considered political supply-side explanations, particularly to explain cross-country variation (for summary, see e.g. Muis and Immerzeel, 2017). Notably, van der Brug et al. (2005) produce a two-step theoretical model based on these that sees the success of 'anti-immigration' parties as the result of, first, demand-led socio-structural electoral potential and, second, supply-led, political opportunity structure ability to mobilize that potential into votes. They measure the socio-structural potential with the support for democracy, national number of asylum applications and a host of economic indicators; they measure the ability to mobilize their potential with the electoral system, the mainstream right-wing party's size and agenda (on nationalism, migration and crime), the proportion of the electorate with far right views and the extent to which the populist radical right party is evaluated for its policies. Of all of these variables they find that the supply-side variables do the vast majority of explanation and, of these, the latter three in particular. Other supply-side factors that have been considered particularly include the actions of the populist radical right party itself. Most importantly is the moderation, or anti-extremism, of the party itself, which is shown to positively affect its performances (Carter, 2005). Golder (2003), moreover, showed that populist radical right parties only benefitted from higher unemployment and immigration rates when they avoided the label of neo-fascist. Rydgren (2004) explained the emergence of PRR parties, using the single case of Denmark, as the result of the politicization of the immigration issue, a political opportunity structure that creates room for niches in the electoral arena as well as non-extremist rhetoric by the PRR party itself. The PRR party was likely helped in this respect by its origin as a splinter of the mainstream right party.

Despite its clear accomplishments, the key shortcomings to the literature are the overwhelming focus on individual-level variation, even when claiming to explain aggregate-level success or failure (e.g. Ivarsflaten, 2008); the lack of study of those cases of no existing PRR party (e.g. van der Brug, 2005) resulting in selection on the dependent variable; and the observable decline in xenophobic and anti-immigration in recent years (e.g. Dennison and Geddes, 2018a) despite a rise in support for the PRR in the same period. Implicitly, in the 'cultural backlash' theory, the latter issue is rationalised as the shrinking group of more xenophobic voters being more activated as a result of the changing majority values, but this activation remains underspecified. Moreover, much of the literature naturally suffers the typical problems of quantitative social science, most notably tautological explanations (e.g. the electoral success of the mainstream right-wing party), endogeneity, and implausible implied theoretical frameworks in which all independent variables are simultaneously tested with the assumption of temporal and spatial coordination.

Previous explanations for the lack of populist radical right in Portugal and Spain

There is also a rich literature considering the erstwhile near anomalous lack of a successful populist radical right party in Portugal and Spain. Many of them have similarities to the above broader literature. They can be placed into five categories: *level of industrialisation*; *transition to democracy and post-dictatorship political culture*; *political attitudes*; *political cleavage structures and party systems*; and *disproportional electoral systems*. Although they offer significant insights, we give reasons as to why their explanatory power is likely to be insufficient.

In line with the 'economic competition' strand of research, Kitschelt (1995, 2007) excluded Southern Europe from his analysis of the growth of radical right parties due to those countries' insufficient levels of 'post-industrialisation', less generous welfare states and resulting lack of post-industrial values

(Ruzza, 2018: 515). However, both Portugal and Spain are now among the European average in terms of size of service sector and decline of industry and agriculture (World Development Indicators, 2015), both spend more than the OECD average on social expenditure as a proportion of GDP and the same as Germany and the Netherlands (OECD, 2014), and both have left-wing parties that push post-materialist agendas, such as *Podemos* and *Bloco de Esquerda*.

The transition from dictatorship to democracy and its imprint on contemporary political culture have also been used as explanations for both Portugal (Mourão da Costa, 2011: 772) and Spain (Encarnación, 2004: 178; Arango, 2013: 10). Albeit with somewhat contradictory causal mechanisms, owing to the bottom-up and top-down nature of the two countries' respective transitions, both are argued to have resulted in democratic, egalitarian and universalistic values becoming the paradigm of social desirability. In Spain, the dictatorship's use of depoliticisation has been argued to have resulted in demobilisation on the right (Wiarda and Mot, 2005) while its path-dependent legacy has also been to encourage the extreme right to frame its agenda in nostalgic, Francoist terms that are now widely rejected (Ruzza, 2018: 509). Finally, González-Enríquez (2017: 36) contrasts Iberian rejection of the radical right following a right-wing dictatorship with central and eastern Europe's relative recent rejection of internationalism and embrace of the far right following the failure of left-wing dictatorships. The two most obvious weaknesses of these arguments are the recent growth of radical right parties in other former right-wing dictatorships—Germany, Greece, Italy—and the emergence of challenger parties in Spain—*Podemos* and *Ciudadanos*—that have openly questioned the transition consensus, as well as the stark differences between the two countries' transitions that make a single causal mechanism less plausible.

Akin to the general literature on populist radical right success, political competition from mainstream right-wing parties (for a review, see Kitschelt, 2007) has been used to explain the Iberian case, particularly in Spain given the *Partido Popular*'s (*PP*) early absorption of Francoist forces (Alonso and Kaltwasser, 2015; Saumade et al, 2006). Competition from populist left-wing parties and, in Spain, the ideologically ambiguous, anti-establishment and strictly unionist *Ciudadanos* has also been used as an explanation (Ruzza, 2018: 510), with the leader of *Podemos* stating 'In Spain, an extreme right party does not exist because Podemos exists.'¹ Similar arguments in Portugal have focused on the Eurosceptic Communist party.² Such explanations suffer from tautology and the *PP* has evolved into an archetypal Christian Democrat pro-European party. Separately, the existence of a strong and salient centre-periphery cleavage in Spain has been put forward as an explanation (Alonso and Kaltwasser, 2015; Ruzza, 2018: 516). However, in Spain, left-right self-placement and attitudes to the periphery-centre cleavage are strongly positively correlated and 24.5% of Spaniards favour a central government without autonomies and 14.5% support granting fewer powers to autonomous regions (CIS, September 2012). The explanation is further weakened by the similar centre-periphery cleavages in, amongst others, Belgium, Italy and the UK, as well as the lack of one in Portugal.

As elsewhere, explanations for the (lack of) success of populist radical right parties have focussed on the two countries' disproportional electoral systems (Norris, 2005) which are argued to favour established parties and geographic concentration (Zúquete, 2007; Saumade et al, 2006; Alonso and Kaltwasser, 2015; Ruzza, 2018: 509). However, other 'challenger' parties have overcome the electoral threshold and far right parties have not succeeded in proportional regional or European elections. Moreover, even more non-proportional electoral systems have not stopped such parties gaining success in France or the UK.

Finally, attitudinal explanations have been put forward in the literature, namely (1) pro-European attitudes, (2) weak national identity in Spain, (3) favourability towards immigration, (4) low right-wing

¹ Quoted here: <https://politikon.es/2017/02/06/why-is-there-not-a-successfull-far-right-party-in-spain/>

² As argued by various Portuguese political scientists in the following newspaper article: <http://www.courrierinternational.com/article/2014/05/26/pourquoi-l-extreme-droite-ne-prend-pas-au-portugal>

self-placement, (5) pro-globalisation attitudes and (6) low rates of perceived corruption. All of these arguments have been based on aggregate-level percentages, ignoring the still significant constituencies at the extremes. Moreover, some of these arguments are not (or are no longer) empirically supported, on top of suffering from a lack of external validity when considering cross-country correlations. Specifically, attitudes to European integration (González-Enríquez, 2017) are only middling (Llaudes and Molina, 2016). According to the November 2017 Eurobarometer, the Portuguese electorate was the 10th most trusting in the European Union, while the Spanish electorate was the 18th, well below the median electorate. Both were below the Swedish, Danish and Finnish electorates, as well as a number of central and eastern European countries, all of which have strong populist radical right parties. The argument of low levels of nationalism and national identity (González-Enríquez, 2017) is only plausible in Spain, given the consistent finding that Portugal has one of the highest net feelings of attachment to one's country (Eurobarometer, 2017). Even in Spain, 45% of respondents report being 'very attached', more than in Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK.

Regarding arguments citing positivity towards immigration (e.g. Fernandes Martins, 2017), Spain has the EU's 5th most pro-EU immigration electorate and Portugal has the 7th (Eurobarometer, March 2018). Even more impressively, Spain has the 3rd most pro- non-EU immigration attitude and Portugal has the 5th. However, the percentage of those responding with 'fairly negative' and 'very negative' attitudes towards non-EU immigration is not negligible – 27% in Spain and 31% in Portugal in 2018. Moreover, other highly favourable countries include Sweden, Finland, Lithuania and Poland, all of which have successful populist radical right parties. Similarly, mean left-right self-placement has been cited as an explanation yet, although relatively true, has the same flaws as immigration attitudes and there exists little variation between countries (2016 European Social Survey). Arguments related to pro-globalisation attitudes (González-Enríquez, 2017) are not validated by survey responses: when Europeans were last asked by the Eurobarometer (May, 2012) whether globalisation was a threat or an opportunity, the Portuguese and the Spanish electorates ranked 20th and 16th respectively of the EU28 in net positivity. Finally, according to Transparency International's 2016 Corruption Perceptions Index, there is no empirical evidence to support the notion that either Portugal or Spain has particularly low levels of perceptions of corruption, as argued by Ruzza (2018). Of the EU28, the two countries rank 14th and 17th respectively where many of the least perceived corrupt countries—essentially, northern Europe—have strong populist radical right parties

On issue salience and social stigma

We now propose two explanations that complement the findings and overcome some of the identified shortcomings of the two literatures that we have overviewed: issue salience and social stigma. Krosnick (1990: 60) defined issue salience as 'the degree to which a person is passionately concerned about and personally invested in an attitude'. The primary causal mechanism explaining salience's effects on behaviour (including voting) is that 'attaching importance to an issue may activate and engage a person's emotion systems' (Miller et al, 2017: 131; for a longer discussion on issue salience, its conceptualisations, causes and effects on voting behaviour, see Dennison, 2019a). Issue salience has been shown to affect voting behaviour indirectly by increasing attention to and knowledge about certain issues, amongst many other proposed causal mechanisms, but also as part of key theories of voting behaviour. These include: spatial voting, whereby voters weigh their issue preference proximity to parties with each issue's salience (e.g. Krosnick, 1988); issue ownership voting, whereby individuals vote for parties that they associate with or deem most competent at dealing with the issues that they consider most important (e.g. Budge, 2015); and via direct effects (Kwon, 2008). Most of these studies have not, however, included the voting for PRR parties in their analyses.

However, issue salience has been utilised otherwise in some explanations for PRR success. Arzheimer (2009, see also Arzheimer and Carter, 2006) use the prominence—or salience—of immigration in the manifestos of *all* mainstream parties to show that salience has a positive impact on PRR success. More recently, Dennison and Geddes (2018a) show that the *public* salience of

immigration—using Eurobarometer data—is strongly positively correlated with populist radical right party support over time in most Western European countries. Dennison (2019b) takes this further using panel data models to show that the salience of only immigration has a positive effect at the national level, while the salience of crime, the economy, terrorism and unemployment have no positive effect. He also shows at the individual-level in the UK that seeing Europe, as well as immigration, as salient increases one's chances of voting for UKIP. However, like other studies of the populist radical right, these fail to consider those country cases where there is no PRR presence.

Given these causal mechanisms and the previous findings, we see issue salience as plausible additional component of existing comprehensive theoretical frameworks that seek to explain PRR electoral support. This would complement the major theories of the rise of the PRR—economic grievances, cultural backlash, and political demography—as well as provide a firm operationalisation of the notion that an 'integration-demarcation' axis has risen in relevance—or, indeed, salience—while, finally, solving the puzzle of why the PRR have risen while attitudes to immigration, race, etc. are becoming more positive. It may perform a similar role in resolving the lack of external validity, amongst other issues, in those explanations for the erstwhile lack of a successful PRR in Iberia. Finally, given the finding on the importance of immigration *and* Europe in the UK, it may be that the salience of issues also has a country-specific dimension in predicting PRR success, given peculiar historic role of Europe in British politics.

Our second explanation, social stigma, has, in various forms, been used to explain the electoral performances of PRR parties. Hartevelde (2016: 22) defines social stigma as a 'cue that voters derive from their social context that parties are not an acceptable option'. Such stigma is likely to negatively affect the popularity of such parties via its effects on their framing in the media, their ability to attract resources, resultant weaker or negative socialisation effects and political discussion effects on voter choice, leaving only unrepresentable extremists to associate with such parties.

Studies have shown that the radical right's electoral potential is conditioned by the extent to which these parties are able to distance themselves from past extremist forms (fascism, Nazism) and be perceived as 'normal parties', meaning democratic and nonviolent (van der Brug et al., 2005). Only after passing the extremism test can these parties be evaluated on their, often popular, policy positions. On the other hand, if 'voters see the anti-immigrant party as undemocratic or abject, some right-wing voters will consider it unattractive even though they see the party as close (van der Brug et al., 2005: 541). Indeed, van Spanje and Azrout (2018) show that stigmatisation lowers support and voting for populist radical right parties amongst voters with existing anti-immigration attitudes.

Stigma has been used to explain the erstwhile lack of PRR parties in countries such as the UK, Sweden, and Germany (e.g. van der Brug et al., 2005: 564), usually with some reference to the experience of the Second World War. Clearly this now needs to be rethought to explain not just *where* there is social stigma to PRR parties but also *when*. Similarly, in Portugal, both Zúquete (2007) and Mourão da Costa (2011) pointed out that the general tone of Portuguese news sources has been hostile and alarmist, accentuating the extremist nature of the radical right *PNR* and its connections to fascist, skinhead and Nazi groups, and resultant judicial investigations. Referring to Spain, Rodríguez Jiménez (2012: 118) similarly speaks of PRR parties' inability to portray a moderate image and the fact that their non-democratic credentials continue to hold them back.

One way to explain cross-time, as well as cross-party, variation in the fortunes of PRR parties is through their ability to deflect social stigma with the use of a 'reputational shield', a widely accepted means by which they can avoid claims of anti-democratic or racist extremism. Ivarsflaten and Gudbrandsen (2014, amongst others) argue that PRR must be able to mobilise voters on another issue in addition to immigration to do so. They offer the examples of tax protests in Norway and Denmark, agrarian interests in the Switzerland and Finland, and regional empowerment in the Flanders and northern Italy. Similarly, Dennison and Geddes (2018b) show how the issue of Europe and *then* the issue of immigration lead to the rise of UKIP and ultimately Brexit, with a similar dynamic involving

anti-Euro membership legitimising the entry of the AfD in Germany. Related to this is the notion of ‘host’ ideologies used by populist parties (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

Combining issue salience with social stigma, we may expect PRR parties to need to be able to mobilise on *both* a less controversial issue to act as a reputational shield to avoid stigma, which then allows them to mobilise on the more controversial issue of immigration—the dominant issue *par excellence* for PRR parties and voters in Europe (Ivarsflaten, 2008). From the issue salience literature, we can assume that high salience of both issues—though not necessarily at the same time—affects voting behaviour.

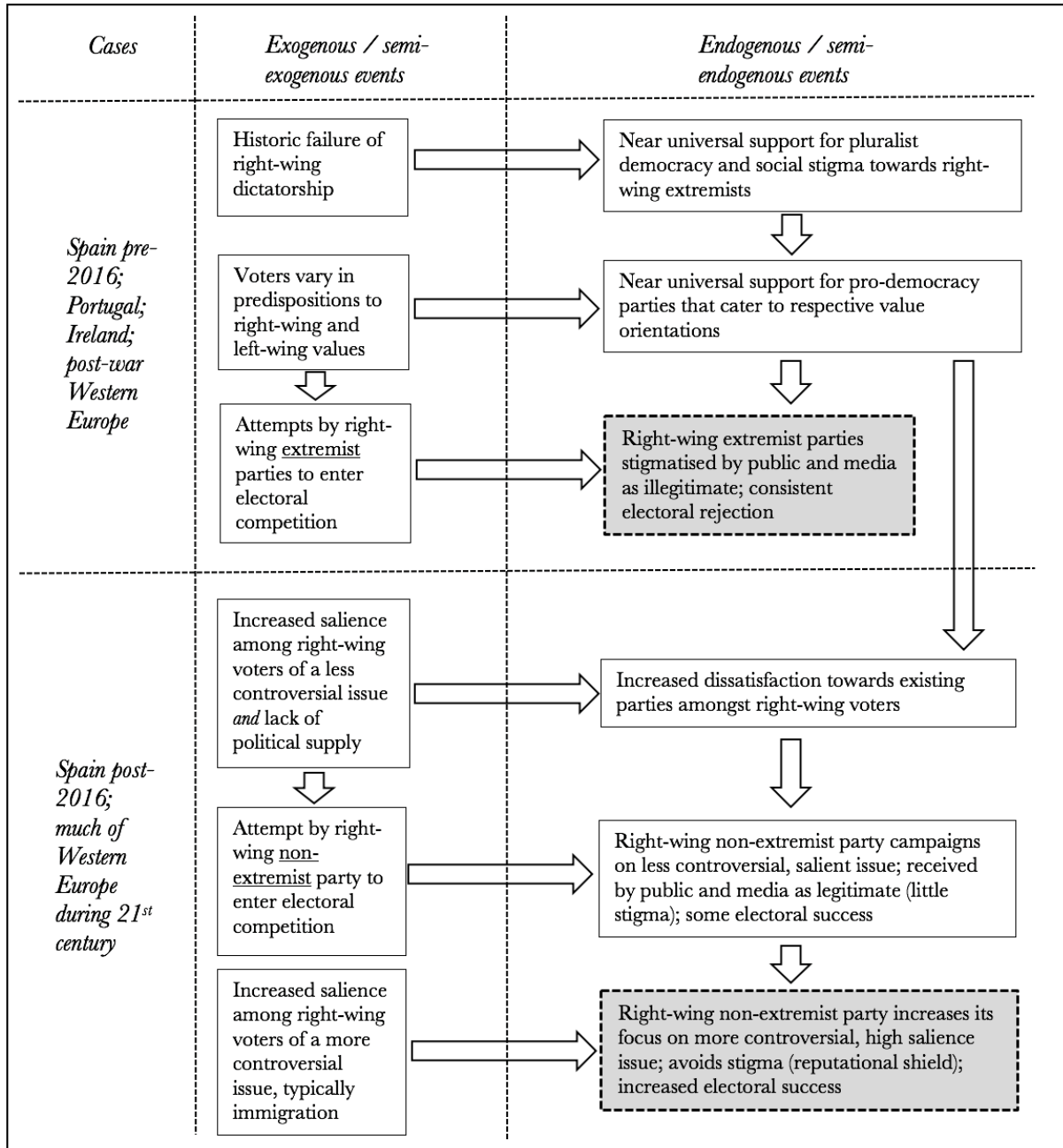
Theoretical framework

From the above discussion of the literature on populist radical right party success both in and out of Iberia, coupled with our proposed effects of issue salience and social stigma, we produce a full theoretical framework to explain both cross-country and cross-time variation in the success of populist radical right parties. This framework is shown in Figure 1. We start with the exogenous event of the historic failure of right-wing dictatorships across Europe in the 1940s, and again more recently in Portugal and Spain, leading to near universal support for democracy and a social stigma towards right-wing extremism. This, coupled with the fact that individuals vary in their predisposition to right-wing and left-wing values (e.g. Schwartz et al., 2010), leads to only pro-democracy parties that cater to these respective value orientations, including those on the right, gaining electoral support.

From here, there are two potential outcomes. The first—the case of contemporary Portugal and Spain prior to 2018, as well as contemporary Ireland and much of western Europe in the post-war period—sees right-wing extremist parties attempt to enter electoral competition, but the public and media consistently reject them, owing to near universal pro-democracy values and resultant stigmatisation. This represents an equilibrium in the party system.

However, the second outcome—the case of most of western Europe in the 21st century, including Spain since 2018—sees this equilibrium broken by a combination of increased issue salience amongst right-wing voters of a relatively uncontroversial issue, e.g. tax reform, European integration, agrarian issues or issues resulting from the centre-periphery cleavage, *and* a lack of adequate political supply to satiate this demand, typically owing to the agenda, incumbency or popularity of the mainstream right-wing party. This leads to increased dissatisfaction amongst right-wing voters and an attempt by a right-wing non-extremist party to enter electoral competition, primarily by campaigning on the relatively uncontroversial issue. As such, the party is received by the public and media as legitimate and is not stigmatised, leading to some electoral success. Once established as a minor actor in the party system, the party is then able to—and indeed is under electoral pressure to—increasingly campaign on highly salient, more controversial issues—typically immigration—leading to greater electoral success, because its ‘reputational shield’ allows it to avoid stigma.

Figure 1. Theoretical framework: Under what conditions do populist radical right parties succeed?



Hypotheses

For our theoretical framework to be a valid explanation for both the historic anomalous lack of a PRR party in Portugal and Spain, relative to the rest of the western Europe, and for the latter growth of the PRR party *Vox* from 2018 onwards, we must find evidence to support the following six hypotheses.

H1. The salience of the issue of immigration has been lower in Portugal and Spain than in other western European countries.

H2. The salience of the issue of immigration increased considerably shortly before the increase in popularity of *Vox*.

H3. The salience of another, less controversial issue increased considerably shortly before the increase in popularity of *Vox*.

H4. News coverage of radical right parties in Portugal and Spain (prior to *Vox*) was considerably more negative than those of *Vox*

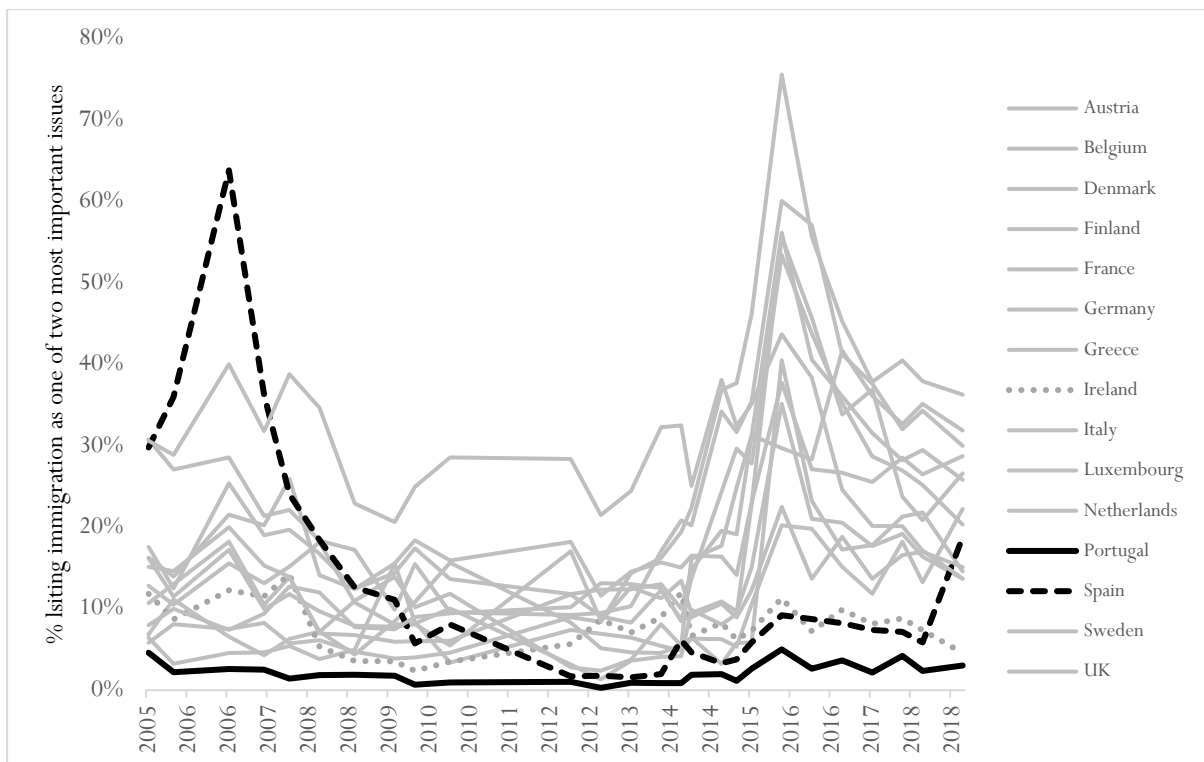
H5. Individuals who vote for *Vox* listed the two salient issues as motivations behind vote choice.

H6. An increase in the salience of the issue of immigration was a necessary but not sufficient condition for the increase in popularity of *Vox*.

Empirical analysis

For Hypothesis 1 to be supported, we should see historically lower issue salience of immigration in Portugal and Spain than in the rest of Western Europe. We can see in Figure 2 that, indeed, from 2011 until late 2018 these two countries had the lowest reported salience of immigration of all EU15 countries. Interestingly, we can see that from 2015 onwards the country with the third- and later second-lowest immigration salience was Ireland, which also has no successful PRR party. However, we can also see that, whereas immigration has always been a low salience issue in Portugal, in Spain, immigration was a high salience issue between 2005 and 2008, with a very high peak in 2006. We discuss this peak further below when testing hypothesis 6. For now, however, hypothesis 1 is supported for the period 2011 until late 2018 in Spain and across the time series in Portugal.

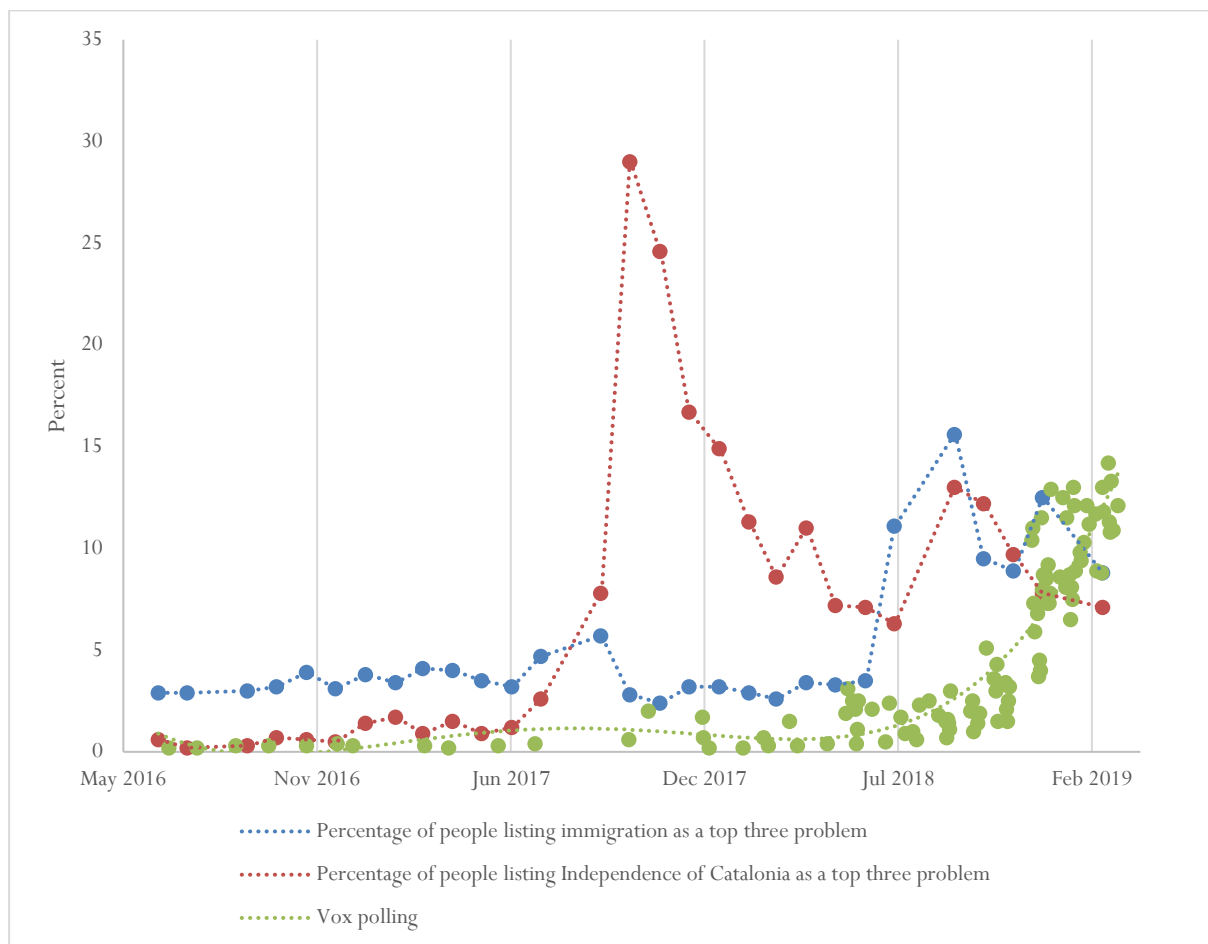
Figure 2. Percentage listing immigration as one of the top two issues affecting their country



Notes: Data from Eurobarometer survey, May 2005–November 2018. Approximately 1000 face-to-face respondents per country per survey. Close-ended responses to ‘What do you think are the two most important issues affecting our country at the moment?’

Hypothesis 2 suggests that the salience of immigration should increase before the popularity of *Vox* does. In Figure 3, we see the salience of immigration between May 2016 and February 2019: it initially is stable, with around three percent listing immigration as one of the three most important issue until a sudden uptick in summer 2018, after which it is typically between 10 and 15 per cent. Simultaneously, from the time of the 2016 Spanish election, when *Vox* was intermittently polled, it received between zero and two per cent of national polling, until summer 2018, after which it rapidly rose in the polls to nearly 15 per cent in early 2019. Hypothesis 2 is therefore strongly supported.

Figure 3. Issue salience of immigration and Catalan independence and polling for *Vox*



Notes: Salience measures taken from monthly *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* barometer's question 'What is, in your opinion, the most important problem in Spain today? And the second? And the third?' Polling taken from Wikipedia's aggregation of all polling for the 2019 Spanish elections. May 2016-March 2019.

Hypothesis 3 posits that another, less controversial issue should also increase prior to an increase in the popularity of *Vox*. To test this, we consider the salience of the issue of Catalan independence. We do this for a number of reasons. First, opposition to Catalan independence, as well as a desire for more centralised government across Spain, were stated by *Vox* as major reasons for their founding in 2014. Second, the integrity of Spain is typically considered a more salient issue among right-wing voters and is also considered a legitimate issue, given its place within the Spanish constitution. As such, it has the potential to represent a synonymous role for *Vox* akin to the aforementioned issues among other European PRR parties (e.g. Euroscepticism in the UK, anti-bailout in Germany, anti-tax in Norway) that offer a 'reputational shield' but tend to be nationally-particular, unlike immigration. Third, we know that the membership of *Vox* increased substantially following the Catalan independence challenge of

2017. In Figure 3 we can see that, indeed, a major peak in the salience of Catalan independence preceded *both* the increase in the salience of immigration and in the polling of *Vox*. Hypothesis 3 is thus supported.

Having established that the salience of immigration has, in recent years, been consistently lower in Spain and Portugal than the rest of western Europe, and that the salience of both immigration and Catalan independence increased markedly shortly before the increase in support for *Vox*, we now move on to investigating social stigma. Our fourth hypothesis proposes that the news coverage of radical right parties in Portugal and Spain prior to *Vox* were considerably more negative than that of *Vox*.

Our content analysis of printed and online news taken from *Jornal de Notícias* – one of the leading newspapers in Portugal – and *El País* in Spain confirms that these parties – with the exception of *Vox* – have indeed been portrayed in highly negative terms. We choose these newspapers in order to ensure relative ideological consistency across both countries and across time: both are the predominant, establishment, centre-left newspaper of each country, giving us some degree of control over editorial line that would make variation in coverage of parties more compelling as evidence for our hypothesis. We analysed all pieces of news between 2005 and the end of 2016 that made references to *Partido Nacional Renovador* (PNR), for Portugal, and *Vox*, *España 2000*, *Democracia Española*, and *Alternativa Española* for Spain. The latter three were arguably the most notable attempts by radical right parties to enter electoral competition prior to *Vox* and had even made some attempts to detach themselves from the ideological traditions of Francoism and fascism (Llamazares and Ramiro, 2006). We classified each piece of news according to whether it made obviously negative references to the party that portrayed it as ‘extremist’ in the form of explicit references to (1) violence, (2) forms of harassment, (3) criminality, imprisonments or judicial proceedings, (4) Nazism / fascism / Nazi or fascist symbols, and (5) xenophobia and racism. In order to distinguish between news pieces in which the party was only briefly mentioned and those where it was more of a relevant subject, we differentiate between news pieces with ‘one mention’ and others. The results are summarised below.

Starting with Portugal, the PNR is mentioned 140 times in *Jornal de Notícias* between 2005 and the end of 2016 (an average of less than 13 pieces per year) as shown in Table 1. About half of all relevant news pieces had a clear negative connotation. Despite the party’s alleged efforts to abandon a ‘skinhead image’, the most extremist far right subcultures continue to associate themselves with this party. Reduced media coverage, together with the negative light in which its activities are often portrayed, has led the leader of PNR himself to speak of a policy of media ‘censorship and discrimination’. However, the party received disproportionate media attention in 2007 (with 42 pieces of news that year), at a time when (1) the party’s headquarters and 30 of its members were under a police investigation and (2) when the party displayed an anti-immigrant billboard in one of the busiest streets of Lisbon stating ‘enough of immigration’, wishing a ‘nice trip back’ to immigrants and claiming ‘Portugal for the Portuguese’. This episode attracted for the first (and only) time a good deal of attention to the PNR but was met with consensual rejection and even mockery.

In Spain, our analysis of *El País*’s coverage of *España 2000*, *Democracia Nacional*, and *Alternativa Española* reveals a similar picture, as shown in Table 2, 3 and 4. This is overwhelming the case of the first two, with more than 75% of relevant news pieces having negative references, and less so for *Alternativa Española*, though this party received less media coverage with the major focus on its primary issue of fighting legal cases against abortion. The first two parties are somewhat similar to the PNR in that they are often associated with extremist subcultures.. The fact that they constantly rely on non-institutional means to gain visibility – protests in which extremist acts, discourses and symbols are conspicuous – adds to their image of “non-normal parties”

Table 1. Results of news analysis – PNR

PNR / Partido Nacional Republicano – Portugal – <i>Jornal de Notícias</i> (2005-2016)	
Total of news pieces mentioning PNR	140
Total of negative pieces	52
Total of relevant news pieces (all pieces minus those with only 'one mention')	71
Total of negative pieces among relevant pieces	37
Percentage of negative pieces (among relevant pieces)	52%

Table 2. Results of news analysis – España 2000

España 2000 – Spain – <i>El País</i> (2005-2016)	
Total of news pieces mentioning España 2000	117
Total of negative pieces	68
Total of relevant news pieces (all pieces minus those with only 'one mention')	53
Total of negative pieces among relevant pieces	40
Percentage of negative pieces (among relevant pieces)	75.5%

Table 3. Results of news analysis – Democracia Nacional

Democracia Nacional – Spain – <i>El País</i> (2005-2016)	
Total of news pieces mentioning Democracia Nacional	112
Total of negative pieces	93
Total of relevant news pieces (all pieces minus those with only 'one mention')	24
Total of negative pieces among relevant pieces	20
Percentage of negative pieces (among relevant pieces)	83%

Table 4. Results of news analysis – Alternativa Española

Alternativa Española – Spain – <i>El País</i> (2005-2016)	
Total of news pieces mentioning Alternativa Española	57
Total of negative pieces	8
Total of relevant news pieces (all pieces minus those with only 'one mention')	7
Total of negative pieces among relevant pieces	1
Percentage of negative pieces (among relevant pieces)	14%

Table 5. Results of news analysis – Vox

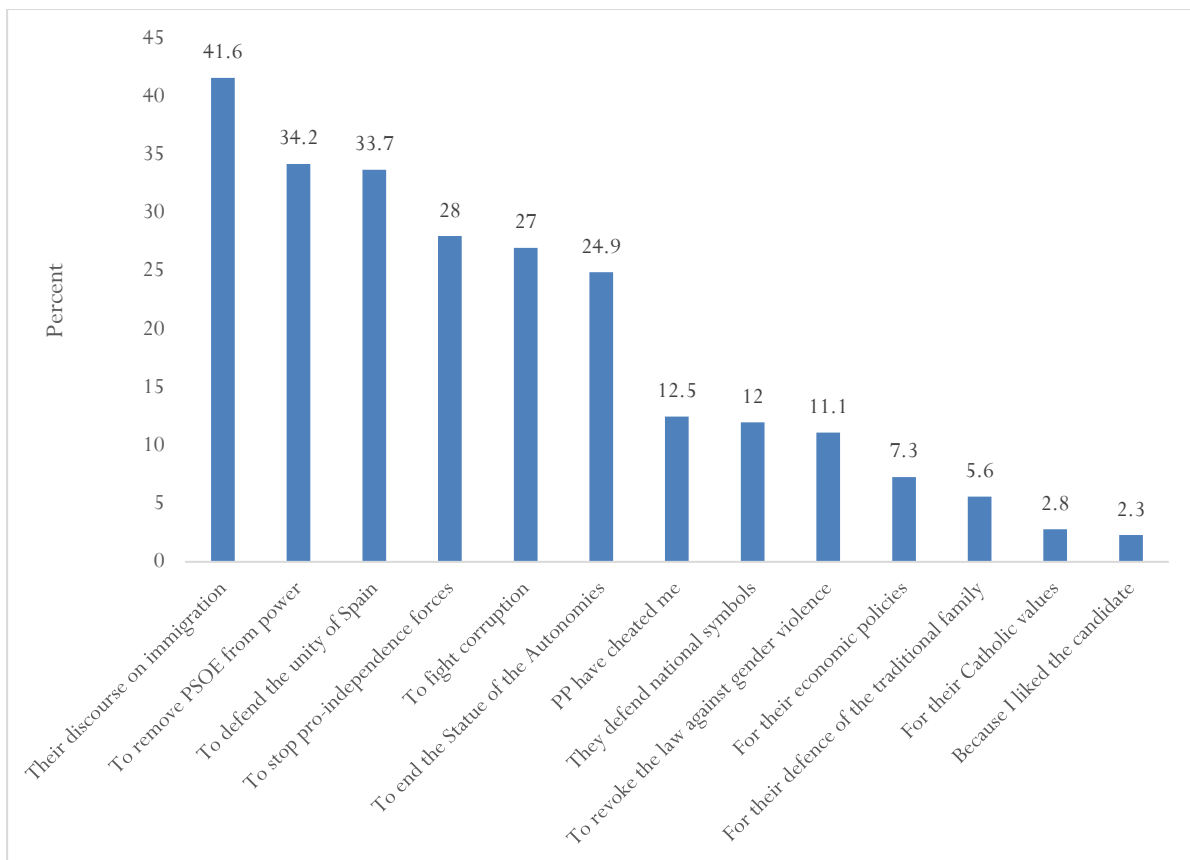
Vox – Spain – <i>El País</i> (2014-Nov. 2018)	
Total of news pieces mentioning Vox	316
Total of negative pieces	13

Total of relevant news pieces (all pieces minus those with only 'one mention')	114
Total of negative pieces among relevant pieces	4
Percentage of negative pieces (among relevant pieces)	3.5%

The only exception is with *Vox*, as shown in Table 5. In 2014 *El País* spoke of a party that is 'to the right of the PP', only later speaking openly of the radical right. Out of the more than 316 pieces of news that referred to *Vox* during its nascent years, only a handful (3.5%) of them made references to xenophobia and racism. With less *a priori* stigmatisation, its key policy messages – the suppression of Spain's regional autonomies and the deportation of irregular migrants – have come across clearly, especially after the media breakthrough it achieved in October 2018. We thus conclude that hypothesis 4 is supported.

To strengthen evidence of our theoretical framework, we now turn to the individual-level to see whether the increased salience of immigration and Catalan independence indeed motivated electoral support for *Vox*, thus testing hypothesis 5. We do so using data from the 2018 Andalusian elections. On 2 December 2018, *Vox* won 11% of the vote and 12 (of 109) seats in the Andalusian parliament, surprising many commentators. Post-electoral surveys confirmed that, indeed, *Vox*'s rhetoric on immigration was the most commonly stated motivation for supporting the party, with 'defence of the unity of Spain', 'stopping pro-independence forces' and 'ending the Statue of the Autonomies' making up three of the following five reasons, all of which can be interpreted as general support for a unified, centralised Spanish state. The second most stated reason was anti-incumbency voting, the fifth anti-corruption and the rest primarily social conservatism and opposition to *PP*'s ambiguity on these issues.

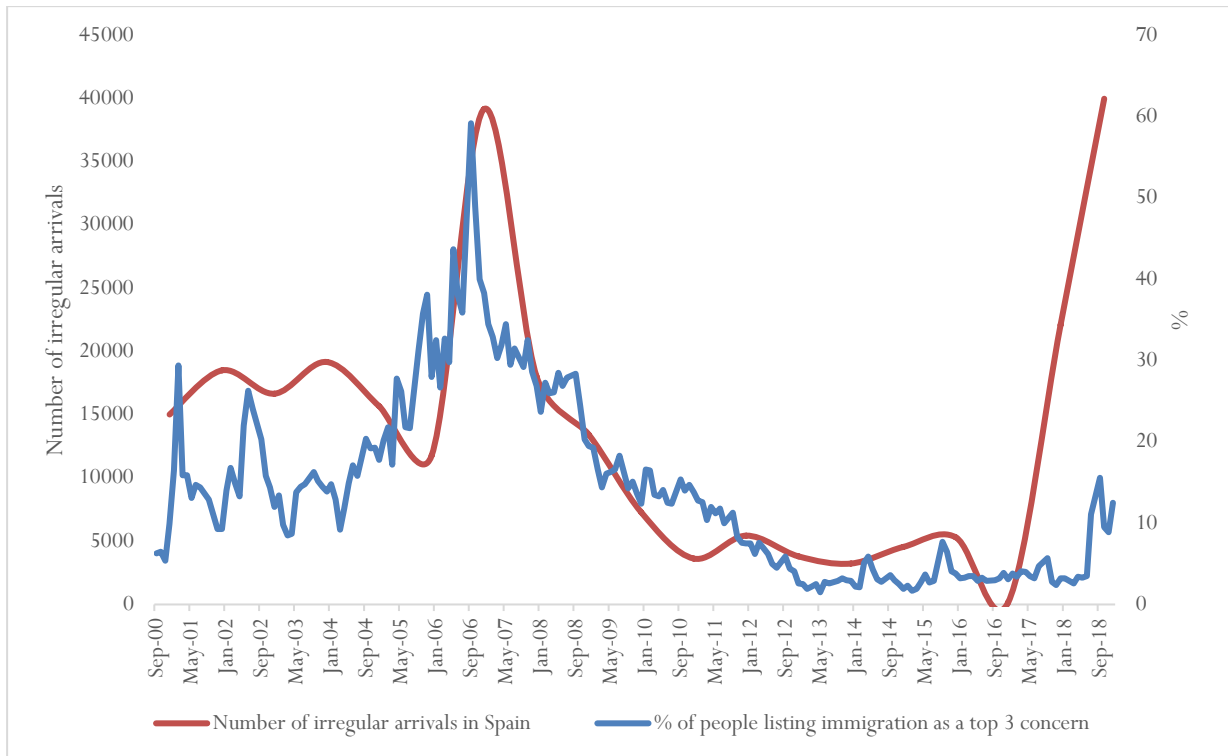
Figure 4. Stated motivations of *Vox* voters in the 2018 Andalusian elections



Notes: Taken from 1,514 internet interviews amongst *Vox* voters in Andalusia between the 4th and 5th of December, 2018 for *El País*, 8 December 2018.

Finally, a key part of our theoretical framework is that the salience of immigration is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the rise of a populist radical right party; the other two conditions being a lack of social stigma attached to the party coupled with the rise in salience of a less controversial issue amongst right-wing voters and a lack of political supply to deal with demand from right-wing voters. As already shown in Figure 1, we show again in Figure 5, using a different data source, that immigration has been a highly salient issue in Spain before without a resulting rise a populist radical right party, supporting Hypothesis 6.

Figure 5: Number of irregular arrivals (reaching Spain via coast) and levels of concern over immigration in Spain



Notes: Salience measures taken from monthly *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* barometer's question 'What is, in your opinion, the most important problem in Spain today? And the second? And the third?'; Irregular arrivals statistics taken from the Spanish Ministry of the Interior

In Spain, the salience of immigration has closely tracked the number of irregular migrants arriving. Similarly, the exceptional high levels of concern in 2006 coincided with what became known as the 'Cayucos crisis', an extraordinary surge of irregular migrants reaching the Canary Islands by boat (39,180 in that year alone). In the absence of a credible radical right party at the time (as we have shown, three at the time were greeted with derision and social stigma), the *PP* campaigned on the issue during the 2008 electoral campaign, proposing, for instance, a 'contract of integration' whereby immigrants would commit to respect Spanish customs and return to their countries in case of long-term unemployment. One post-electoral survey suggested that their gain of 500,000 votes was due to immigration.³ The impact was likely not bigger because the salience of immigration was already in rapid decline before the 2008 elections. In addition, it was deemed that the ruling party at the time, *PSOE*, efficiently handled the issue, as the celebration of direct agreements with the immigrants' countries of

³ <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20080518/53465328219/el-psoe-endurece-su-discurso-sobre-inmigracion-por-la-fuga-de-votos-al-pp.html>

origin had been praised for effectively curbing the numbers of arrivals in Spain, something less possible now given migrants coming via ‘failed states’ following the Arab Spring.⁴

The contrasts in political supply between the 2006 peak in the salience of immigration and the 2018 peaks are stark. In the former case, the mainstream right-wing party, *PP*, has been in opposition for two years, allowing right-wing voters to give them the benefit of the doubt regarding the immigration issue. In the latter case, the *PP* had been in power for nearly seven years, resulting in numerous policy grievances of social conservatives, before being unceremoniously dumped from government in June 2018 following a successful vote of no confidence resulting from corruption charges.

Discussion

In this article we proposed an original theoretical framework, building on and fusing prior work to offer an explanation of under what conditions populist radical right parties succeed. The primary innovation of this framework is its use of issue salience and the social stigma attached, or not, to PRR parties. We argue that there are three necessary conditions: first, the PRR party must enter electoral competition by campaigning, at least in part, on a relatively uncontroversial issue *besides* immigration that is highly salient to right-wing voters, at a time when the political supply does not allow the mainstream right-wing party to enjoy credibility amongst those same voters. Second, the PRR party must strictly adhere to democratic norms to avoid accusations of extremism and resulting social stigma from media and others. As previous scholars have argued, the first two of these give the PRR party a ‘reputational shield’, which, third, we argue allows it to then capitalise on any increase in the salience of immigration thereafter.

Having outlined this theoretical framework, we then tested six resultant component hypotheses using the case of the rise of *Vox* in Spain during 2018, the first case of a successful PRR party in Spain, ending so-called ‘Iberian exceptionalism’. We find, first, that the salience of immigration has long been anomalously low amongst western European countries in Iberia. Second, we find that the salience of immigration had an uptick before the most pronounced, most recent growth in support for *Vox*. Third, we find that the salience of a ‘less controversial’ issue—Catalan independence and opposition to it—also saw a dramatic increase prior to both the increase in the salience of immigration and around the time of *Vox*’s entry to electoral competition. Fourth, we find that all previous radical right parties in the 21st century in both Portugal and Spain had been immediately greeted with negative media coverage and the social stigma of association with extremism, but the very same media outlets did not treat *Vox* negatively, which we attribute to its campaigning on a ‘less controversial’ issue, focus on electoral, rather than extra-institutional, political means, and its off-shoot of *PP* beginnings. We note the similarities between *Vox* and other European PRR parties, such as UKIP, the *AfD* and *Lega*, amongst others, in this respect. We then show, at the individual-level, that indeed electoral support for *Vox* has been primarily motivated by the issues of immigration and opposition to Catalan independence. Finally, offer a prior case in Spain—summarised as the ‘Cayucos crisis’—that supports our notion that high salience of immigration is a necessary but insufficient condition for PRR success.

We find compelling evidence to support our theoretical framework both in explaining the rise of *Vox*, erstwhile Iberian exceptionalism and, to some degree, variation across western European countries. A number of further points of discussion arise from our findings. First, it is plausible that the increase in PRR support following an increase in the salience of the specific issue of immigration is common across Europe, whereas the initial issue that allowed the party to enter the electoral arena is country-specific. If this is the case, we might expect there to be cross-country convergence in the electoral offer of populist radical right parties over time to the point that they increasingly resemble anti-immigration parties. Second, we see the issue salience as a plausible metric for the rise of the integration-demarcation axis

⁴ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/spains-handling-of-the-cayuco-boat-crisis/>

in party competition that has been outlined by previous scholars. Third, an increase in the saliency of immigration is also a plausible solution for the puzzle by which PRR parties have succeeded at a time of increasingly positive attitudes to immigration, i.e. the 'backlash' is caused by the saliency. Fourth, the close links between the saliency of immigration and *specifically* irregular immigration underscore the shortcomings of the political attitudinal and behavioural literature that tends to treat immigration *en bloc* as a singular unit of analysis when using it as an explanatory variable. Finally, it is worth noting that, given that the rise of PRR parties is contingent on a highly volatile metric—issue saliency—their recent rise could quite easily be followed by an equally rapid fall, should the saliency of other issues overtake, particularly, that of immigration, as has happened for example, in the United Kingdom since 2016.

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