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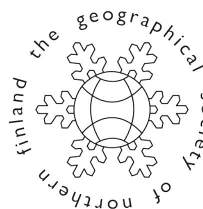

Research article

Looking beyond climate contrarianism: nationalism and the reterritorialization of climate discourse in Spain's Vox party

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Abstract

Among European populist radical right (PRR) parties, the call for environmental protection has historically been embedded in ethnic nationalist ideas of the interrelation of land, nation, and culture. Despite a large body of literature on PRR environmentalism, however, the PRR's climate politics remain understudied. This qualitative study investigates the climate politics of the PRR by analyzing climate discourse from Spain's Vox party. A discourse analysis of party manifestos, press releases, and public statements from 2017–2022 investigates Vox's discursive constructions of climate change and its potential solutions. The study finds that, although the party acknowledges climate change, it does so inconsistently, and its proposed climate policies do not fundamentally shift its nativist and populist political imagination. Instead, its discourse portrays multilateral climate action as a threat to the nation and locates climate solutions in the preservation of ruralism, traditional livelihoods, and national identity. The article argues that Vox constructs a nationalist climate discourse that reterritorializes climate change on the national level, asserts national innocence in the face of claims of global climate justice, and frames mainstream climate action as part of a broader globalist imposition that threatens the purity of national culture. The article concludes with reflections on what nationalist climate discourse may mean for attempts to mitigate the climate crisis.

Keywords: *Climate change, populist radical right, Vox, nationalism, climate denial, climate obstructionism, climate contrarianism*

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Introduction

Anthropogenic climate change (ACC) is an ecological crisis at an unimaginable scale. Global warming is already bringing about more intense and frequent natural disasters (van Aalst 2006), increasing biodiversity loss and threatening the global food and water supply (Einhorn 2021). At the same time, the "fourth wave" of the populist radical right (PRR) has made nativism more common and even normalized within mainstream politics (Mudde 2019). The limited but growing scholarship on the intersections of these "two key crises" (Forchtner 2019b: 3) has generally characterized the PRR as hostile to climate change policy and often outright denialist (Schaller & Carius 2019). After all, climate change is widely considered "the paradigmatic global environmental problem" (Paterson & Stripple 2007: 149) and the radical right is staunchly anti-globalist in its political outlook (Mudde 2007). But climate denialism is not the whole story, and a range of ethnic nationalist responses to climate change have earned press in recent years: for example, the youth arm of the far-right Alternative for Germany called for a mandatory one-child policy for countries receiving foreign aid (Turner & Bailey 2021) and the acting president of the National Rally in France has called borders "the environment's greatest ally" (Mazoue 2019). Despite these anecdotal shifts, there has been little academic research into how PRR parties are making meaning of climate change and its causes, impacts, and potential solutions.

This article begins to address this gap through a discourse analysis of the climate communications of Vox (Latin for "voice," sometimes styled VOX), a PRR party in Spain. The paper first gives a brief overview of the existing literature on climate change and the PRR, then addresses research methods and case selection. A close study identifies how climate change is articulated in Vox's broader political discourse. The discussion section analyzes the ways in which Vox constructs climate change and potential climate solutions in ways that promote its broader nationalist agenda, while remaining fundamentally obstructionist on climate action. The article concludes with reflections on what nationalist climate discourse may mean for climate politics moving forward.

The PRR and climate denial

There is a long history of environmental concern within far-right politics (Dobson 2016; Lubarda 2020), and scholars have found the PRR's conceptualization of environmental protection to be shaped by its three core ideologies: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde 2007). This environmentalism relies on a perennialist notion of "the nation" as an organic, ethnically homogenous community with deep connections to its land and fundamental sovereign rights over its territory (Özkırımlı 2010), often linking the protection of the nation's ethnic and cultural heritage with protecting the land (Forchtner & Kølvraa 2015; Turner-Graham 2019) and mistrusting those who are not rooted in a particular place, particularly the globalized elite (Lubarda 2020). This environmentalism prizes nostalgia for ruralism and the "countryside" (Forchtner & Kølvraa 2015) and sees borders and territorial sovereignty as key to environmental protection (Forchtner 2019c; Turner & Bailey 2021). The relatively extensive research into PRR environmental politics, however, has largely ignored the PRR's conceptualizations

of climate change. Instead, it has supposed that climate action is inherently at odds with the PRR's worldview and focused on explaining the phenomenon of climate denial.

The literature generally agrees that, as public consciousness of global warming has increased over the past few decades, belief in climate change and support for climate action have both become politicized along partisan lines (Campbell & Kay 2014). McCright *et al.* (2016) found that individuals holding right-wing political ideologies are less likely than left-wing ones to believe climate change is real and support mitigation efforts, an effect that holds true to varying degrees across the Global North (Yan *et al.* 2021). European surveys have found that individuals are more likely to deny climate change if they espouse nationalist ideology (Kulin *et al.* 2021) or populist attitudes (Huber 2020)[1], hold anti-egalitarian ideas like opposition to feminism and multiculturalism (Jylhä & Hellmer 2020; Benegal & Holman 2021), or demonstrate personality traits associated with right-wing political views (Häkkinen & Akrami 2014). Demographics matter as well: conservative white men are much more likely to be skeptical of climate change than other demographic groups, an association that becomes even stronger among those who also express anti-immigrant views (Krange *et al.* 2019).

Most scholars have argued that this right-wing tendency toward climate skepticism holds true on the party level as well. In the first cross-national study of its kind, Gemenis *et al.* (2012) surveyed the political platforms of 13 far-right parties across Europe and found that only the Greek Popular Orthodox Rally acknowledged climate change as a significant problem; a few parties professed skepticism in the role of human emissions in causing it and most ignored it. Schaller and Carius (2019) assessed 21 European PRR parties and found only three affirmed the science of climate change: the National Alliance in Latvia, Hungary's Fidesz, and the Finns Party. In contrast, case studies of several parties usually labeled climate denialist have argued that they indeed *do* acknowledge climate change (e.g. Boukala & Tountasaki 2019; Voss 2019), indicating some definitional inconsistencies or other methodological limitations within cross-national surveys.

In this context, a relatively small number of qualitative studies have sought to understand *why* and *how* the PRR expresses climate skepticism, especially given that many of these parties have a history of embracing environmental conservation issues in general. The most common explanation, put forward in an influential article by Lockwood (2018), is that PRR parties approach the question of climate change through their core ideologies, and where there is perceived conflict, ideology simply overrides any interest in environmental protection that they may otherwise have. Other case studies of climate skepticism in PRR parties have concurred, arguing that climate change is a global issue that demands multilateral cooperation and global scientific expertise, so nationalist and populist ideologues reject it altogether (Forchtner *et al.* 2018; Forchtner & Öztavan 2019; Hultman *et al.* 2019; Kølvraa 2019). In other words, it is solution aversion (Campbell & Kay 2014) that motivates climate skepticism. In this argument, the PRR's desire to protect the environment is only limited to "particular, demarcated spaces, one's own landscape and culture" (Forchtner & Öztavan 2019: 230) as opposed to more abstract, global problems (Forchtner & Kølvraa 2015). This explanation assumes that climate change is an inherently different kind of environmental issue and therefore "there is a tension between acknowledging or acting on climate change and subscribing to several core tenets of nationalist political ideology" (Kulin *et al.* 2021: 1112).

A nascent body of literature has begun to challenge this notion that climate denialism is the rule among the PRR. Forchtner and Lubarda (2022) found that Members of

the European Parliament (MEP) belonging to PRR parties often affirmed the reality of ACC (explicitly or implicitly), even as they remained largely opposed to the policy proposals on the table. In a study of the National Rally and Alternative for Germany, Oswald *et al.* (2021: 187) found that they are "much more flexible regarding climate policies than previously anticipated", and argue it is because structural factors have overcome ideological barriers to acknowledging climate change. Vihma *et al.* (2021) reviewed communications by Scandinavian PRR parties and devised three ideal-typical forms of opposition to climate action, only one of which denies science outright: "climate policy nationalism" argues that climate action is primarily other countries' responsibility and "climate policy conservatism" that climate action would be too economically harmful. Several qualitative case studies have also found that some PRR parties do actually acknowledge the reality of climate change, though these researchers have typically either regarded this acknowledgment as an unexceptional part of their environmentalism (e.g. Boukala & Tountasaki 2019; Hatakka & Välimäki 2019; Voss 2019) or categorized the parties' communications as "skeptical" because they remain opposed to mainstream climate solutions (e.g. Forchtner & Öztavan 2019; Kølvraa 2019; Turner-Graham 2019).

This research on the PRR has remained mostly separate from another body of literature that examines the obstruction of climate action more broadly. The latter has largely moved beyond questions of *belief in* climate change and focuses instead on material opposition to climate action. Research into the "climate change countermovement" has identified coordinated efforts to muddy climate science and obstruct proposed climate policy in order to perpetuate fossil fuel extraction (Oreskes & Conway 2010; Almiron *et al.* 2020; Brulle 2022; Franta 2022). These tactics have included climate denial but do not require it (Coan *et al.* 2021). In an influential article, Lamb *et al.* (2020) identified widespread "discourses of climate delay" that accept the basic premise that the planet is warming, but use a variety of logics to evade, postpone, or weaken climate action.

The literature on climate delay and contrarianism demonstrates the need for research that explores not just whether PRR parties profess belief in climate change, but how they understand and approach the issue altogether. If some PRR parties are acknowledging that ACC is real, as a few studies have suggested, are they also moving past climate contrarianism? How are they articulating what climate change means and what should (and should not) be done about it? How are they reconciling the observed tension between the PRR's environmental concern for its "homeland" and its opposition to global environmental governance? And how does ideology shape the climate solutions they propose? These are the questions I seek to explore in my case study.

Research design

This study makes use of poststructuralist discourse analysis, which takes as its premise that the things we observe and know about the world are subjective, filtered through our "historically and culturally specific and contingent" perspectives (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002: 5) and shaped by manifold and inherently unstable structures of language and meaning (Hansen 2006). Discourse analysis is at its core an attempt to elucidate the logic of these patterns of language, or "discourses," and how they shape what we think of as real and true, how they construct and affirm our individual and collective identities, and what consequences those beliefs have for our social and political lives.

Through a poststructuralist discourse analytical lens, climate change can be understood as both a measurable planetary phenomenon *and* a social construction (see Onuf 2007).

Discourse analysis asks how PRR actors make meaning of the environment and climate change instead of only measuring their position on specific climate policies, allowing for more analytical nuance than positivist approaches. A discourse analytical approach also takes into account that radical political actors can have profound political impacts even without gaining direct power, by moving other parties' discourse and political positions (Rydgren 2005; Wodak 2015) or by shifting what the electorate considers acceptable or desirable (Hale Williams 2018).

Vox is one of the newest PRR parties in Europe (Ferreira 2019). It plays an upstart role in Spanish politics, seeking to disrupt the political landscape (Rama *et al.* 2021) and break the taboo against far-right politics that had existed since the country's transition to democracy in the late 1970s (see Alonso & Rovira Kaltwasser 2015). Over the last several years, Vox has gained considerably more political support and authority in Spain (Lawley 2022) and has been active in international networks of the far right (Ferrero 2022). Vox has included environmental protection as part of its party platform and party leaders have publicly acknowledged the reality of climate change (De Nadal 2021). Still, Vox's position on climate change remains virtually unstudied in the academic literature (one exception is Moreno & Thornton 2022). This case study does not intend to be generalizable to the entire PRR, or to illustrate how all PRR parties speak about climate. Instead, it is intended as a case that contradicts key assumptions of the literature on far-right environmental discourse in hopes of adding nuance and complexity to existing theory and provoking new research questions for the field.

I focus this analysis on the party itself, instead of its leadership or its nonparty allies (Mudde 2007: 38). To this end, I include in my analysis official party materials, like political platforms and manifestos; statements and writings by spokespeople who are explicitly speaking on behalf of the party; and statements and writings by elected officials and other party affiliates that have been disseminated by the official party communication channels. I exclude statements by party members that have not been amplified by the party itself, recognizing that parties are heterogeneous and affiliates may give statements that conflict with the position of the broader party. There are limitations to this approach: political parties are just one part of a broader landscape of far-right institutions and actors (Veugelers & Menard 2018) and also may mediate their discourse in a way that nonparty actors do not have to (Hale Williams 2018). For this reason, political parties' discourse should not be considered representative of all PRR actors.

Vox regularly posts opinion pieces, press releases, and highlights from party members' political campaigns and parliamentary debates on its websites and Twitter feeds. For this study, I searched these posts for several keywords (English translations in parentheses): *clima* (climate), *cambio climático* (climate change), *calentamiento global* (global warming), *efecto invernadero* (greenhouse effect), *carbón* (carbon), and CO_2[2]. In total, I harvested 224 sources from Vox mentioning climate change or related terms from January 2017 to March 2022, including four party platforms or manifestos, 104 news updates on the party's activities, 54 blogs highlighting parliamentary speeches or debates, and 62 tweets. Twenty blogs and 28 tweets featured video clips, most featuring party members speaking in parliament or on news programs. I transcribed these using the online transcription service Sonix and cross-checked the transcriptions for accuracy. Where press releases referenced longer speeches that dealt with climate change in greater detail, I retrieved or transcribed the full speech texts. The five-year period was chosen

to include more general climate discourse rather than debates over a single event or policy fight. Translations are my own.

I began my discourse analysis with a round of close reading to identify initial themes and key signifiers. After this preliminary survey, I used an "iterative, emergent, and dialogic" approach (Steacy *et al.* 2016: 166) to read and re-read the material as I noted patterns, investigated allusions, referred back to existing literature, and continually tested the developing theory against the data. Throughout the process, I paid particular attention to the ways in which the parties used the discursive strategies of linking and differentiation (Hansen 2006) to build on or contest mainstream climate discourses, to construct the political terrain of climate change, and to "articulate constructions of ethical identity" (Hansen 2006: 45), taking note of how the parties assign identity, value, and moral obligations to the various actors salient in their climate discourse.

Vox case study

Spanish political context

When General Francisco Franco died in 1975 after decades of right-wing dictatorship, the King of Spain instigated a transition to democracy (Bernecker 1998). This elite-led democratic transition was characterized by the *Pacto del Olvido* (Pact of Forgetting), an explicit agreement across the political spectrum that "aimed for nothing short of collective amnesia" about the Spanish Civil War and Francoism in an attempt to promote a peaceful transition (Encarnación 2008: 2). In 2007, the left-wing government's new Historical Memory Law condemned the Franco regime, dismantled public memorials glorifying the Civil War, and allocated resources to exhume victims of Francoism buried in mass graves (Boyd 2008). Many right-wing actors criticize this breaking of the *Pacto del Olvido* as an attack on Spanish history and democracy, and Franco's legacy remains contested (Rodríguez-Temiño & Almansa-Sánchez 2021).

Spain has a national government, but much of its governance is devolved to its 17 regional *autonomías*, or "autonomous communities." The federalist model is reflective of a longstanding tension between a centralized Spanish nation-state and sub-nationalisms that emphasize the different cultures and languages of its regions (Encarnación 2008). This tension has only heightened since the 1990s, as subnational movements in Catalonia and the Basque Country have advocated for increased self-determination or full political independence (Elias & Mees 2017). This "entrenched conflict between peripheral and state nationalisms," along with the continued success of the mainstream right-wing People's Party (PP) in winning over far-right voters, kept Spain free of far-right parties for decades (Alonso & Rovira Kaltwasser 2015: 40).

In December 2013, Santiago Abascal, a longtime PP member from the Basque Country, left the PP in protest of its lackluster response to secessionist activity and co-founded Vox with several other departing PP members. Vox failed to win seats at any level until December 2018, when it won nearly 11% of the vote in the regional Andalusian elections (Rama *et al.* 2021). By 2022, Vox held seats in 13 regional parliaments, the national parliament, and the European Parliament. It formed its first regional coalition government with PP in Castile and Leon in March 2022, cementing its status as a political force (Jones 2022). Scholars attribute Vox's eventual electoral

success to Catalonia's declaration of independence in 2017 (Dennison & Mendes 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte 2019). Vox used the political opening to condemn secessionism and express support for a stronger central government: its 2018 platform called for suspending Catalonia's regional government, centralizing government functions, and providing "maximum legal protection to the symbols of the nation, especially the Flag, the Anthem, and the Crown" (VOX 2018).

Vox combines the anti-immigrant (often specifically anti-Muslim) nativist sentiment common in the European PRR with a project of national unity and centralization that aims to suppress secessionist movements (Ferreira 2019). History is particularly politicized in Vox's communications: the party's election motto in 2016 was "make Spain great again," it has called for repealing the Historical Memory Law, and its leaders often reference past national "glories," like the *Reconquista* of the Iberian peninsula from the Muslim kingdoms and the voyages of Christopher Columbus (Rodríguez-Temiño & Almansa-Sánchez 2021; Esteve-Del-Valle & Costa López 2022). Also central to Vox's ideology is cultural conservatism, particularly the "the defense of traditional values associated with religion, the natural family and anti-feminism" (Esteve-Del-Valle & Costa López 2022: 273), and the party campaigns extensively against Spain's gender-based violence law, abortion, and LGBTQ rights (Ferreira 2019).

The party's founding manifesto and its first comprehensive national platform in 2018 both focused on questions of sovereignty, immigration, and Spanish culture, and did not mention the environment or climate change once (VOX 2018, VOX n.d.). My research found almost no mentions of climate change from official party channels before the party won seats in national and regional parliaments in 2019. The last three years have seen an explosion of references to climate in official party communications, suggesting that the party's new foothold in Spanish parliaments—and the increasing salience of climate change in Spanish and European politics around the same time (Thackeray *et al.* 2020, Damsbo-Svendsen 2022)—forced the party to articulate positions that lay outside their more natural scope of anti-immigrant, anti-secession policies.

Vox's environmental politics are mostly unstudied, though various sources refer to Vox as climate skeptical (Moreno & Thornton 2022), affirming (Hess & Renner 2019; De Nadal 2021; Mathiesen 2022), or indifferent (Ribera Payá & Martínez 2021; Singh Garha *et al.* 2022). My review of the party's communications has indicated that this disagreement is in large part because Vox's position on the reality of ACC is itself inconsistent, with party representatives alternately acknowledging it as an established fact (e.g. VOX 2019d; VOX 2019f; VOX 2020i; VOX 2020b) and questioning the scientific consensus (e.g. VOX 2019b; VOX 2020c; VOX 2021f). Most often, party materials will acknowledge global warming *implicitly,* for example by supporting investments in renewable energy and electrification as "a means of accelerating decarbonization" (VOX 2019a) or by encouraging the development of carbon sequestration technologies (VOX 2021g). In general, however, the question of whether global warming is real and anthropogenic is peripheral to Vox's discursive construction of climate change. This is because Vox demonstrates a sharp distinction between climate change as a planetary fact (*i.e.*, the greenhouse effect) and political or policy efforts to respond to the "climate emergency." Although Vox will recognize the former as fact, however implicitly or inconsistently, the bulk of its discourse concerns the latter, which it portrays as a threat to national culture and sovereignty. The following sections outline Vox's most prevalent discursive articulations of climate change.

Rejecting the "progressive consensus"

The most common discursive articulations of climate change by Vox are not actually about climate change itself, but about the global climate mitigation and adaptation strategies advocated by what Vox calls the "progressive consensus" (VOX Europa 2020c), which includes entities like the UN, EU, civil society advocates, and all other Spanish political parties[3]. The discursive separation of *climate change* from *climate action* usually takes place through negative modifiers, which impugn those working for a particular climate agenda without denying the reality of climate change outright. The most common of these phrases are "climate religion" (VOX 2021e), "climate terror" (VOX 2022a), "climate hysteria" (VOX 2022d), and "climate alarmism" (VOX Europa 2021). "Climate religion" even serves as an extended metaphor: Greta Thunberg's speech at the EU was a "climate homily" (VOX Europa 2020b) and climate advocates on the left are "apostles" asking the common people to "rend their garments"[4] out of guilt over their GHG emissions (VOX 2019c). A religious construction of climate concern paints it as a new kind of fundamentalism, foreign to Catholic Spain. "Climate hysteria" and "climate alarmism," on the other hand, cast its political opponents as irrational, while characterizing Vox as a sensible party willing to prioritize what is best for "the people." Vox uses these phrases often, skirting the topic of global warming itself and turning attention instead to the purported absurdity of climate policy.

Vox further discredits globalist climate action by comparing it to a new leftist ideology, like communism or socialism, that seeks to use the power of the state to restructure the economy and impose new political mandates on the public. Vox representatives have called new European climate regulations "climate totalitarianism" akin to the policies of Maoist China (VOX Europa 2020a) and argued that climate policies are "social engineering" (VOX 2020a). In this way, advocates for climate action are associated with anti-democratic action and characterized as a nefarious outside force.

This is part of a broader anti-globalist discourse that characterizes climate policy as one piece of a larger slate of cultural and ideological impositions on the Spanish nation. This discourse is most notable in the frequency with which climate policy is included in a long list of issues which, collectively, are portrayed as a threat to a traditional Spanish way of life. As an example, one regional Vox party leader wrote an editorial warning of the left's project of cultural hegemony, the goal of which is

> *collectivizing natural resources through climate terror, [ending] civil and political freedoms with Historical Memory Laws or with LGBT demands, appropriating property through taxes and subsidies, and annihilating the family as a core social unit through abortion and euthanasia (VOX 2021b).*

Although "climate terror" is characterized as a pretext for doing away with private property, the target is not just the economic system, but everything that constitutes the Spanish nation, from the family unit to the nation's narrative of its own history. This constellation of issues (Tillery & Bloomfield 2021) conflates global climate policy with Historical Memory Laws and "gender ideology" in a vast, joint threat against Spain[5]. This discursive constellation is particularly remarkable for the frequency with which it arises in contexts in which the main topic under discussion seems to be completely unrelated, from education (VOX 2020f) to unemployment rates (VOX 2022g). This discourse sets up a Manichaean culture war between the good (Vox and the Spanish nation) against the bad (globalism, feminism, the left). In Vox's statements, global climate action becomes a

recurrent but peripheral signifier in a discourse about protecting traditional Spain from an onslaught of cultural change.

Energy sovereignty and decarbonization

A second common theme in Vox's climate discourse frames climate politics in terms of energy sovereignty. Other studies have noted some PRR parties' support for replacing imported fossil fuels with renewable energy, regardless of their positions on climate, because they favor energy independence (Forchtner & Kølvraa 2015; Forchtner 2019b; Buzogány & Mohamad-Klotzbach 2022). Despite the occasional mention that renewable energy will make Spain more self-reliant, however, Vox's discourse on the energy transition is largely oppositional.

This comes in the context of a rapidly changing energy sector. As of 2019, Spain imported all but a quarter of its energy from foreign sources, including all of its oil and gas; fossil fuels comprised 72% of Spain's total energy supply (IEA 2021). EU regulations and market forces have decimated the Spanish coal industry (Planelles 2020), leaving nuclear energy as the largest single source of domestic energy production, but Spain will begin to close its nuclear power plants in 2027 (IEA 2021). Spain's 2021 climate law, which Vox opposed, bans domestic fossil fuel development and will end the sale of gas-powered cars by 2040 (Associated Press 2021). Spain is also bound by the EU goal of achieving net-zero emissions by 2050 (Solorio 2017). The country's plans to meet these targets include a "full energy system transformation," which will prioritize energy efficiency, electrifying the transportation sector, and scaling up its domestic renewable energy from wind, solar, renewable hydrogen, and biogas (IEA 2021: 30).

In the context of these massive changes, Vox's primary discursive concern is not the emissions of Spain's sources of energy, but whether they fortify Spanish sovereignty and industry. For example, Vox criticized the 2021 ban on new fossil fuel development by saying that Spain had become "the first nation in history to be obligated by law not to explore and exploit its own resources" (VOX 2021a). Although Vox sometimes acknowledges lowering GHG emissions as a desirable goal, it is framed as a second-order value to Spain's economic well-being (VOX España 2020; VOX 2021h; VOX 2022c). When these are perceived to be in conflict, Vox often argues that it is not worthwhile to subordinate economic priorities to environmental ones, since Spain's GHG emissions are negligible in the broader global context. A common refrain is that Spain's annual carbon emissions are only 0.7% of the global total, and these emissions "are not so relevant as to condemn the entire economy to … a suicidal transition that causes unemployment, lack of [economic] protection, and misery" (VOX 2020g). Any serious plan to tackle climate change, they argue, should come from the real culprits: the United States, China, and India (VOX 2020h; VOX 2021c).

The language of energy sovereignty is also embedded in a nationalist discourse that attributes better qualities to energy produced at home than to energy produced abroad. A speech Abascal made in the Spanish parliament, for example, argued that "Spain must commit to energy sovereignty. We cannot be closing the thermal power plants in Spain and forcing thousands of families into unemployment while we buy energy from Morocco produced with coal" (VOX España 2020). Energy dependence is characterized as a degrading position: energy policies that undermine sovereignty will make citizens into "slaves of polluting powers" (VOX España 2020). A related articulation of energy sovereignty argues that current energy transition policies will

increase emissions by increasing dependence on foreign fossil fuel sources: renewable energies like wind and solar are occasionally praised as key to energy independence (VOX España 2020) but are more often criticized for being unreliable and intermittent (VOX 2020e; VOX 2021a; VOX 2022e). Vox often argues for investments in nuclear and hydrogen power as low-carbon energy sources that are more reliable than solar and wind, and points to Germany as an example of a country that closed its nuclear plants and saw its emissions rise (VOX 2020e).

Notably absent from Vox's discussion of energy sovereignty is a recognition of how dependent the current energy system is on imported fossil fuels. Although Vox frames its support of nuclear and coal plants as a means of prioritizing domestic energy production (VOX 2022b), the primary threat constructed in their discourse is not current or future dependence on foreign fossil fuels, but external regulations that will impede the dignity and industry of the Spanish. The irony is that Spain's plans for ambitious investment in renewable energy will increase its energy independence (IEA 2021). This suggests that the core concern in Vox's position is not achieving energy independence, but opposing the perceived erosion of national sovereignty.

"A richer, greener, and more sustainable nation"

Although the bulk of Vox's discourse on climate change is oppositional, there is a smaller but significant discursive thread that presents Vox's ideas for how Spain should structure its climate change mitigation policies. At its core, this discourse equates positive climate mitigation policies with supporting ruralism and traditional ways of life.

Vox's most commonly proposed climate policy solution is to sequester carbon dioxide through creating natural "carbon sinks" or investing in new technologies for carbon capture (VOX 2020i; VOX 2020d; VOX 2021h; VOX 2021g). The most frequent proposal for creating these carbon sinks is the development of massive irrigation infrastructure. As one Vox representative argued in Parliament:

> *Wouldn't it be logical to think not only about reducing CO_2 emissions in Spain, but also about absorbing them through support for emerging technologies like CO_2 capture and storage, or even more simply, through irrigated forests and irrigated land, so that we can convert the great natural resources of this country … into an opportunity to turn Spain into a richer, greener and more sustainable nation, while at the same time fixing the population in "emptied Spain" and creating hundreds of thousands of jobs? (VOX 2020i)*

Agricultural water use is a key problem for climate adaptation in Spain. Industrial agriculture in the arid southeast is made possible by pipelines that bring water from the north, a system from the 1970s that is increasingly strained by drought and industrial agriculture (Burgen 2017). In this context, the proposal of a national irrigation plan to mitigate emissions does several things discursively. First, it echoes Vox's broader call for national unity and centralized authority instead of regional governance by *autonomías*. It also equates the verdancy of the land with its sustainability, reframing water-intensive industrial agriculture as a literal "greening" of arid areas of Spain. In doing so, it rejects a mainstream environmental discourse about energy consumption in favor of an environmentalism that puts forward rural and land-based professions as solutions to maintain the land and decrease carbon emissions (VOX 2022f).

Vox's proposals to mitigate climate change through irrigated agriculture, hunting, and livestock ranching relocate environmental knowledge and action away from "poster-carrying environmentalists" (VOX 2019g) in the cities and back to the "countrymen" who have "tended those animals" and "sown seeds in the earth" (VOX 2022h). This discourse is taking place in a context in which ruralism has a high political salience: the Spanish rural population has shrunk by 28% in the past half-century, as low economic opportunity has driven Spaniards to the cities, and parties on the left and right in Spain both decry *España vacía*, or "empty Spain" (Mamonova *et al.* 2020). In this context, a national hydrological plan is presented as a solution that will both sequester carbon *and* fix rural depopulation by creating economic opportunity for rural families. In the words of Abascal, "the 'empty Spain' of which they speak so much—it is thirsty Spain. It is the Spain which the water does not reach" (VOX España 2020). In Vox's discursive construction, "climatic balance" (VOX 2019e) is achieved not through government regulations or emissions reductions, but through thriving rural families working in harmony with the land and keeping up their traditional ways of life[6].

Discussion

Vox and climate contrarianism

One of the goals of this case study has been to explore whether the PRR's emergent acknowledgement of climate change is a continuation of its climate obstructionism or a more meaningful shift toward engaging with climate solutions. Although Vox acknowledges climate change, inconsistently and often implicitly, the findings of the case study demonstrate that this PRR party, at least, still takes an obstructionist position on climate.

Fundamentally, the party's discursive articulations of climate serve to stand in the way of climate action. Many of Vox's articulations of climate change borrow heavily from common contrarian tropes that contest climate policy: they paint climate advocates as powerful, corrupt, hysterical, or fundamentalist (Roper *et al.* 2016) and reject or completely disregard the vast changes that meeting climate change will require (Almiron *et al.* 2020). Many of Vox's repeated arguments are paradigmatic examples of "climate delay," including that climate action is others' responsibility; that mitigation measures proposed would be too economically or socially damaging to implement; and that less transformative measures will suffice to meet the problem (Lamb *et al.* 2020). These findings affirm other analysis that PRR representatives across Europe remain generally opposed to mainstream climate action even as their outright climate denial is limited (Forchtner & Lubarda 2022).

Vox's only significant departure from climate contrarianism is its suggestion to sequester carbon and create agricultural jobs through massive irrigation projects. To my knowledge, this proposal has not before been documented in the PRR literature. Still, the climate mitigation proposition is specious. Cropland can be a carbon sink (European Environment Agency 2022) and irrigation can sequester carbon when it remediates desertification (Olsson *et al.* 2014), but large-scale agricultural irrigation has more mixed impacts. Technological developments in the early 2000s meant to make Spanish irrigation more water-efficient have also made it much more energy-intensive

(Soto-García *et al.* 2013; Aguilera *et al.* 2019) and the reservoirs created for irrigation emit methane, an exceptionally potent greenhouse gas (Aguilera *et al.* 2019). In any case, climate change is likely to strain Spain's water supply and limit the water available for irrigation (Pellicer-Martínez & Martínez-Paz 2018; Haro-Monteagudo *et al.* 2022), making massive increases in irrigation unrealistic. Vox's proposed national hydrological plan is therefore not a viable way to achieve the climate mitigation necessary meet Spain's climate goals, and can be reasonably classified as a tactic of climate delay (Lamb *et al.* 2020). These findings are aligned with the only other known study of Vox's positions on climate, which identified common climate contrarian tropes in a 2020 parliamentary debate over a proposed climate law (Moreno & Thornton 2022).

Simply categorizing Vox as "obstructionist" or "contrarian," however, obscures the specific discursive strategies with which Vox is making meaning of climate change and the implications that may have for climate politics. Indeed, I argue that Vox's climate discourse is best understood not only as a way to obstruct the climate action it opposes, but as a means to assert the party's broader nationalist agenda. Vox's climate discourse advances the "natural" connection of nation and homeland that has long featured in PRR environmentalism, hearkens back to a traditional past, and perpetuates ideas of national innocence in the face of climate crisis. In doing so, Vox portrays the struggle over climate action as a struggle to preserve a homogeneous and traditional national identity. This nationalist climate discourse has significant implications for climate politics.

In the remainder of this section, I outline how Vox's climate discourse builds on PRR constructions of nationalism and traditional national identity, first by reterritorializing climate impacts and solutions from the global to the local level, and second by situating climate solutions in the context of traditionalism and nostalgia. I then discuss what this nationalist climate discourse might mean for climate politics moving forward.

Bordering and the reterritorialization of climate change

Vox's climate discourse is notable in that it articulates climate change and climate action solely in terms of their impact on the nation's particular territory. This narrow spatial construction builds on the PRR's longstanding discourse about nature protection and the nation's pure and symbiotic relationship with its landscape. In doing so, it reterritorializes climate change from a global problem to a national one and casts stronger borders as a means of protecting the nation's people and land from foreign environmental harms.

Vox predominantly articulates climate change and its potential policy responses in terms of their potential threats to or benefits for the national landscape, without mention of its potential impacts outside its borders. For example, Vox calls for climate solutions that will make the countryside greener and more agriculturally abundant and criticizes those that might lead to further depopulation of rural areas (VOX 2020i). By primarily articulating climate change as a problem within the spatial context of the national homeland instead of as a global phenomenon or atmospheric abstraction, Vox embeds climate change into the PRR's longstanding environmental politic that sees the protection of nature as the protection of the nation's territory (Forchtner 2019a; Turner & Bailey 2021), overcoming the tension between national landscape protection and climate change pointed out elsewhere in the literature (see Forchtner & Kølvraa 2015).

This national construction of climate change also draws on PRR conceptualizations

of nature that emphasize populism and a natural state of harmony between the nation and its land. Vox links environmental know-how specifically to those in agricultural professions, particularly farmers, ranchers, and hunters (VOX 2022h). This experience is differentiated from, and valued over, the perspectives of scientists, policymakers, and other globalist elites. Vox also argues that Spain's emissions are negligible and that the true source of the problem lies in the much higher emissions of other countries (VOX 2020g), a common argument against climate action (Lamb *et al.* 2020, Vihma *et al.* 2021). These claims do more than evade responsibility, however: they articulate both climate change *and* global climate politics as foreign transgressions against the true nation's natural harmony with its territory. In this construction of climate change, the logical solution becomes stronger "bordering" that wards off foreign influence, regulations, and cultural impositions in order to protect the natural territorial balance of a sovereign people and their land (Turner & Bailey 2021)[7]. This construction of climate change as a fundamentally foreign problem impacting the homeland contests the universalizing language of globalist climate action and obscures the very real ways in which the causes and impacts of climate change do transcend man-made borders.

Despite this construction of nationalist bordering as a solution for environmental protection, however, Vox rebuffed the prospect of climate-driven migration as leftist alarmism on the rare occasion it was mentioned at all (VOX 2021d). Other scholars have also noted a surprising lack of attention by the far right to climate-related displacement and migration, even as those on the left and center begin to consider it a major concern (Forchtner *et al.* 2018; Küppers 2022)[8]. This may be because discussing the catastrophic climate impacts that could drive displacement around the world would challenge the parties' efforts to delay and temper climate action and again territorialize climate change as a global issue. Still, as climate-related displacement rises, "bordering" stands to have a large influence on the state- and international-level politics of climate change, and this intersection remains an important area for further study.

Nostalgia and the temporal articulation of climate solutions

Vox's climate discourse also locates climate solutions within a nostalgic understanding of national heritage and identity, rejecting notions of economic or cultural "progress" that are seen to threaten a traditional way of life. This feeds into a reactionary social politic and promotes a revisionist history that sidesteps the rupture in self-identity that a true reckoning with climate change might demand from the Global North.

In Vox's discourse, desirable climate solutions are associated with ways of life that have meaning and value because of their links to a traditional past. This is articulated through the vision of irrigation reversing the decline of rural communities and the valorization of traditional and land-based professions (VOX 2020i). Vox indicates suspicion of the sweeping changes that might be imposed in the context of a climate emergency and warns of climate being used as a "pretext" to impose a radical leftist cultural agenda of feminism and LGBTQ liberation (VOX Europa 2021). In this way, Vox contests the claim by many climate advocates who argue that climate action necessitates a fundamental reimagining of how our world must operate, from our economic and political systems to our notions of community and belonging (Klein 2014; Seymour 2020). In Vox's nationalist articulation, the only valid climate solutions are those that encourage returning to the past, strengthen national identity, and avoid purportedly transgressive influences that might alter the nation's way of life.

It is apparent that a central preoccupation of Vox's discourse goes beyond protecting the traditional *cultural* markers of national identity to maintaining the collective self-identity of Spain as a country with a moral, upstanding past. After all, the discursive link between the nation's traditional, rooted past and a healthy climate obscures important elements of the historical roots of ACC. Most notably, it omits Spain's colonial history and the role of European colonization in developing the modern fossil fuel economy and resource extraction at a global scale (Mrozowski 1999; Beattie *et al.* 2014). Arguments that other countries are responsible for most contemporary emissions also ignore the fact that the vast majority of historical GHG emissions have come from the Global North, due to high levels of per capita consumption and national wealth that was also made through colonization (Warlenius *et al.* 2015). In light of this history, the discursive construction of the nation as unimpeachable in the context of climate change is parallel to Vox's discourse that rejects reckonings of "historical memory" of civil war and colonialism and seeks instead to "defend a version of history glorifying the nation" (Soroka & Krawatzek 2019: 169). This impulse to protect national constructions of innocence echoes emerging theory about the interconnections of masculinity, whiteness, and the ontological insecurities driving climate denial and attachment to fossil fuel capitalism (Daggett 2018; Agius *et al.* 2020; Malm & The Zetkin Collective 2021; Vowles & Hultman 2022).

Through this lens, climate nationalism's discursive appeal to a more traditional and rooted past can be interpreted as a way of contesting both globalist politics *and* the climate justice discourse that blames the Global North for the colonial legacies of fossil fuel extraction, recklessly capitalist economies, and planetary-scale ecological crisis (Schlosberg & Collins 2014). Linking climate solutions to ruralism and a nostalgic and traditional way of life affirms the construction of a positive and homogeneous national self-identity that has continuity through the past and present, a core feature of nationalism (Özkırımlı 2010).

Looking beyond obstructionism

These findings suggest that climate change is not actually a central issue for Vox's political discourse or agenda. The party shows little substantive engagement with the reality of a changing and disrupted climate, despite it being arguably the most pressing and consequential "issue" confronting humanity. For Vox, climate change is merely one of many political issues to use to articulate a vision of a globalist/nationalist, transgressive/traditionalist, hysterical/rational, urban/rural culture war.

This case study illustrates the inherent limitations of typologies that seek to label actors as climate deniers, skeptics, or obstructionists (O'Neill & Boykoff 2010). It is important to identify the themes and patterns of climate opposition, but by only looking narrowly at whether actors are climate skeptical or climate obstructionist, literature can overlook the more nuanced ways in which actors may be making meaning of climate to serve broader political purposes. Vox's climate discourse emerged in response to the rising salience of climate politics and often uses the same obstructionist patterns identified by the literature, but an analysis that examines only whether Vox stands for or against climate policy would fail to identify key aspects of how Vox's climate discourse actually functions within the political sphere. This has serious implications for climate advocacy. Research must understand how constructions of climate change operate

in the broader political context and how those constructions shape the landscape on which climate politics is contested.

Future studies could investigate whether other far-right parties' climate discourse falls into similar patterns. Vox is an upstart political party; are older or more established PRR parties approaching climate in a different way? Is this kind of nationalist climate discourse echoed by nonparty actors, who may not feel any pressure to engage substantively with climate solutions? International networks of the far right have disseminated similar discursive playbooks on gender politics (Paternotte & Kuhar 2016; Corredor 2019); to what extent is this kind of climate discourse coordinated across borders (see McKie 2021)? Perhaps most important, what kind of discourse can most effectively inoculate the public against nationalist and exclusionary visions of climate action?

Conclusion

Despite Vox's (inconsistent) admission that climate change is real and its proposal of a mitigation strategy, this case study has found that Vox's climate politics remain obstructionist. Still, the party's beginning foray into proposing climate solutions that fit into its ideological framework and political agenda indicate the potential for a new politic of climate nationalism that engages with climate politics more seriously. A more robust nationalist approach to climate change is perhaps most apparent in the politics of Marine Le Pen's National Rally, which has explicitly positioned itself as a pro-environment and pro-climate party in France while maintaining its nativist politics (Boukala & Tountasaki 2019; Aronoff 2022). It is easy to imagine nationalist discursive constructions of climate change shaping the mitigation and adaptation strategies under consideration. So what might the propagation of this climate nationalism mean for climate politics?

On one level, nationalist climate discourse has the potential to impede international climate action that addresses historic responsibility for climate change. The construction of climate innocence evident in Vox's discourse obviates debates around global justice that will only become more pressing as climate change worsens. In particular, it precludes conversations about reparative action in climate adaptation, like providing financial support for "loss and damage" in developing countries, already a fraught topic in global climate negotiations (Byrnes & Surminski 2019).

On another level, the discursive reterritorialization of climate change from the global to the national obscures many of the ways in which climate change *does* challenge the naturalization of borders in the first place. It even challenges the construction of the international state system itself, as sea level rise may force entire island states in the Pacific to relocate (Yamamoto & Esteban 2010). A nationalist approach to climate change will have trouble making sense of and meeting this kind of change. More broadly, climate discourses that only consider or prioritize the wellbeing of the ethnic nation could have disastrous humanitarian consequences. Drought, fires, heat waves, and rising sea levels will displace anywhere from 200 million to 1.2 billion people by 2050, many of them across national borders (Durand-Delacre *et al.* 2021). There are currently no protections in international law for people displaced by climate change or environmental harms (Berchin *et al.* 2017).

The prospect of climate-driven humanitarian crises, vanishing states, and wildly inequitable climate impacts show the limitations of a purely nationalist frame in conceiving of or meeting the challenges of climate change in the coming years. Still, in Vox's discourse we see a commitment to try to maintain ideas of national borders, sovereignty, and identity in the face these crises. In this context, climate advocates must understand that the discourses with which social understandings of climate change are constructed will shape which climate mitigation and adaptation strategies are seen as reasonable, feasible, and desirable (Onuf 2007). It will be vital for critical scholars and climate advocates to create compelling new "social imaginaries" (Stoddard *et al.* 2021: 675) that help us to extend the circle of care and concern beyond our most proximate communities and make new meaning and identity from a future shaped by climate change.

Endnotes

1. Huber (2020) found that individuals with strong populist attitudes were more likely to be skeptical of climate change, whether they held left- or right-wing ideologies; in contrast, Yan et al. (2021) found this link only applicable to right-wing populism.
2. In Spanish, carbón translates as both "carbon" and "coal." I excluded sources that referred to coal without other reference to climate change. I also excluded sources that used "climate" metaphorically (e.g., "political climate").
3. Of course, among these actors, there is a great deal of variance in approaches to climate change.
4. The tearing of clothes is a biblical sign of grief or shame (Job 1:20).
5. "Gender ideology" was first coined by the Vatican in 2016 and is now frequently used to refer negatively to movements and policies that advance "emancipatory conceptions of gender, sex, and sexuality" (Corredor 2019: 617).
6. Urban residents are overrepresented in Vox's vote share (Turnbull-Dugarte et al. 2020), indicating that the emphasis on rural identity may not be in response their voters' lived experience but to a traditionalist nostalgia for rural life.
7. Interestingly, Vox's construction of climate change also calls for weakening its internal borders by centralizing water resources and forest management. Again, this emphasizes the importance of a national border and homogenous nation-state (see VOX 2020a).
8. Turner and Bailey (2021) identify an emergent discourse across the European PRR linking immigrants to environmental degradation. I found little to substantiate this, perhaps because "eco-bordering" primarily concerned environmental issues more broadly, and thus did not appear in my search for climate-specific communications.

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