# **Spanish Ultras Groups: A Case Study in Political Entanglement and Historical Context**

# Executive Summary

Spanish ultras groups, such as Boixos Nois (FC Barcelona) and Ultras Sur (Real Madrid), represent more than football fandom—they are deeply intertwined with Spain’s political history, regional tensions, and societal fractures. Emerging in the post-Franco democratic transition, these groups evolved from localized fan clubs into politically charged entities that mirror Spain’s struggles with nationalism, fascism, and regional identity. This case study examines their origins, ideological shifts, and enduring influence on Spanish politics and culture, contextualized within the nation’s turbulent 20th-century history.

Historical Foundations: Francoism and the Seeds of Ultras Culture

**The Francoist Legacy (1939–1975)**

The dictatorship of Francisco Franco (1939–1975) laid the groundwork for Spain’s ultra movement through its suppression of regional identities and enforcement of centralized nationalism. Franco’s regime:

* Criminalized Catalan and Basque languages, cultures, and symbols.
* Promoted *Spanish National Catholicism*, blending authoritarianism with religious dogma.
* Utilized football as a tool for national unity, exemplified by Real Madrid’s dominance under Franco, which became a symbol of centralized power..

The Naval Mechanics School (ESMA) of Barcelona, a Francoist torture site, later became a rallying point for anti-fascist ultras, linking football stadiums to Spain’s authoritarian past.

**Post-Franco Transition (1975–1982)**

The democratic transition saw a resurgence of regional nationalism, left-wing movements, and far-right groups clinging to Francoist ideals. This period created a vacuum where football ultras could exploit political instability:

* 1978 Constitution: Decentralization granted autonomy to Catalonia and the Basque Country, inflaming far-right Spanish nationalists.
* 1982 World Cup: Hosted in Spain, this event catalyzed the ultras movement, with groups mimicking Italian and English hooligan styles.

## Key Ultras Groups and Their Evolution

## **Boixos Nois (FC Barcelona: 1981–2003)**

## **Origins and Ideological Shift**

* Founded in 1981 as a left-wing, pro-Catalan independence group.
* Initially aligned with Catalan socialism, using slogans like *“Catalonia is not Spain”*.
* 1980s Skinhead Infiltration: Right-wing skinheads shifted the group toward fascism, adopting neo-Nazi symbols and anti-immigrant rhetoric.

## **Political and Criminal Activities**

* Club Ties: Initially tolerated by FC Barcelona for boosting matchday atmosphere, but banned in 2003 under president Joan Laporta due to violence.
* Criminal Enterprise: Engaged in drug trafficking, extortion, and murder.

## **Ultras Sur (Real Madrid: 1980s–2014)**

## **Far-Right Foundations**

* Emerged in the late 1980s as a neo-fascist collective, celebrating Francoist imagery and opposing Catalan/Basque separatism.
* Chants included *“¡Viva Franco!”* and racial slurs targeting Black and Muslim players.

## **Political Alliances**

* Vox Party Links: Members participated in far-right rallies supporting Vox, which gained traction in Andalusia in 2018.
* Club Complicity: Real Madrid president Florentino Pérez banned Ultras Sur in 2014, but members retained access to away games via sympathetic season-ticket holders.

## Club and Institutional Responses

## Following the bans, clubs like FC Barcelona and Real Madrid created alternative “safe” supporter sections (e.g., Grada d'Animació at Barcelona). However, tensions remain, with club leadership threatening further sanctions for offensive behavior. Notably, banned groups often maintain a presence outside stadiums, at away matches, and online, demonstrating the limits of institutional efforts to fully eradicate their influence.

## Internal Group Dynamics

## Many ultras groups, such as Boixos Nois, have splintered into factions—some, like Casuals FCB, are heavily involved in organized crime. This fragmentation complicates both club negotiations and law enforcement efforts, as new radical groups emerge to replace or compete with banned organizations (e.g., Suburbios Firm at Atlético Madrid after Frente Atlético’s decline).

## **Brigadas Blanquiazules (RCD Espanyol: 1985–Present)**

## **Left-Wing Counterpoint**

* Founded in 1985 as a leftist, anti-fascist group opposing Boixos Nois.
* Advocated for Catalan autonomy but rejected separatism, aligning with Spain’s constitutional nationalism.

Recent Trends and Law Enforcement Response

Despite bans and club crackdowns, ultras-related violence persists in Spain. In the last two seasons alone, law enforcement has arrested over 300 ultras for violence-related crimes, a significant figure, though lower than in some other European countries like Italy. This ongoing violence underscores the entrenched nature of ultra culture in Spain and the challenges authorities face in curbing it.

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## Political Affiliations and Societal Impact

## **Ideological Spectrum**

| **Group** | **Political Leanings** | **Key Allies** | **Rivals** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Boixos Nois | Far-right | Vox, Falangist remnants | Brigadas Blanquiazules |
| Ultras Sur | Neo-fascist | Vox, Francoist groups | Anti-fascist ultras |
| Brigadas | Left-wing | Podemos, Catalan socialist parties | Boixos Nois, Ultras Sur |

## Ideological Complexity and Regional Variation

## While many groups are labeled as right- or left-wing, some, such as Boixos Nois, now include both far-right Spanish nationalists and Catalan ultranationalists, reflecting the complex political landscape of Spain. In the Basque Country, Galicia, and among some Barcelona and Sevilla supporters, left-wing and anti-fascist ultras play a prominent role in activism against racism and commercialization, often forming transnational alliances with similar groups across Europe.

## **Mechanisms of Influence**

1. Street Mobilization: Ultras provided “muscle” for political rallies (e.g., Vox demonstrations in Andalusia).
2. Cultural Weaponization: Stadiums became battlegrounds for regional identity (e.g., Boixos Nois’ Catalan flags vs. Ultras Sur’s Spanish flags).
3. Economic Power: Clubs funneled tickets and merchandise revenue to ultras in exchange for crowd control.

Economic and Social Roles

Ultras groups finance their activities through merchandise sales, club resources (when tolerated), and sometimes illicit means. Their control over tickets and stadium sections grants them economic power and leverage over clubs. Some have attempted to rehabilitate their image through community service, but these efforts are often overshadowed by ongoing violence and criminality.

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## **Catalonia vs. Madrid: A Microcosm of Spain’s Divide**

* Camp Nou (Barcelona): Boixos Nois’ Catalan nationalism clashed with Ultras Sur’s Spanish centralism, mirroring the 2017 independence referendum crisis.
* 2019 Clásico Violence: Ultras Sur members attacked Catalan protesters outside Santiago Bernabéu, escalating tensions ahead of the April 2019 general election.

## **Basque Country: A Peripheral Flashpoint**

* Athletic Bilbao’s Herri Norte Taldea: Left-wing ultras aligned with Basque nationalism, opposing Madrid-centric groups.
* Real Sociedad’s Peña Mujika: Advocated for Basque autonomy but rejected ETA’s violence, reflecting regional moderation.

## Comparative Analysis: Spain vs. Argentina

| **Factor** | **Spain** | **Argentina** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Political Roots | Post-Franco transition, regionalism | Post-dictatorship clientelism |
| Ideology | Explicit (far-left/far-right) | Pragmatic (Peronism vs. anti-Peronism) |
| Violence | Neo-Nazi skirmishes, terrorism links | Drug trafficking, stadium massacres |
| State Response | Bans (e.g., Ultras Sur in 2014) | Legal impunity, political collusion |

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## Conclusion: Ultras as a Mirror of Spanish Society

Spanish ultras groups are not mere football fans but actors in a broader socio-political drama. Their evolution reflects:

1. Unresolved Historical Trauma: Francoist repression and regional tensions.
2. Democratic Fragility: Far-right resurgence via Vox and Catalan separatism.
3. Cultural Polarization: Stadiums as arenas for competing nationalisms.

The 2023 reappearance of Ultras Sur at a Real Madrid match underscores the enduring appeal of extremist ideologies in times of economic strain (e.g., post-2008 crisis unemployment). Until Spain reconciles its fractured identities, ultras will remain a potent force in its political landscape.