Sexism and the Far-Right Vote: The Individual Dynamics of Gender Backlash

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Abstract: *This article contends that sexism plays a fundamental role in the electoral rise of the far right, both as a predisposition and as a changing attitude. Using panel data from Spain, we show that modern sexism is indeed among the most important attitudinal predictors of voting for the far-right party Vox. The results also show that internal individual changes in levels of modern sexism impact far-right voting. Backlash attitudinal change, defined as increases in sexism occurring in a context of feminist momentum, contributed significantly to the recent emergence of the radical right. Our findings indicate that sexism is not a crystalized attitude but rather susceptible to showing short-term changes with important political consequences. This highlights the importance of understudied context-dependent individual dynamics of gender backlash in far-right voting.*

The relationship between gender and the far right has been the object of significant attention in terms of discursive, movement, and policy aspects (e.g., Akkerman 2015; Köttig, Bitzan, and Pető 2017; Kováts, Poim, and Pető 2015; Mudde 2019). Comparatively, it is surprising how little consideration has been given to attitudes toward gender equality as an explanation as why people vote for far-right parties. Beyond some recent attempts to understand Donald Trump's victory, we know relatively little about how gender attitudes affect the electoral surge and growth of the far right. The virtual absence of any mention of attitudes toward gender equality in the most important literature reviews of the state of far-right voting is proof of this blind spot (Arzheimer 2018; Golder 2016; Stockemer, Lentz, and Mayer 2018). In this article, we analyze the relationship between gender attitudes and far-right voting, and make three claims.

First, we argue that to properly assess the role of gender attitudes in far-right voting, we need concepts to identify what is really at stake in contemporary debates about gender equality as well as proper measures of such concepts. The concept and original operationalization of modern sexism (Swim et al. 1995) serves this purpose. Second, we argue that sexism is a neglected yet potentially key explanatory factor of far-right voting, both as a preexisting predisposition and as an attitude that can change within a relatively short time span. Third, we argue that not all attitudinal changes are equally consequential for vote choice. We distinguish between backlash and normalization attitudinal change and show that the former can be more consequential than the latter regarding the surge of the far right, which suggests that there is indeed an individual dynamic to gender backlash.

Empirically, we use panel data from Spain collected before, during, and after the massive feminist protests of 2018 and 2019, and the ensuing surge of the far-right party Vox. This context allows us to assess the effect of individual changes in levels of sexism, distinguishing between increases occurring in a context of feminist

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momentum (backlash attitudinal change) and in a far-right surge context (normalization attitudinal change). Our analyses show that sexist attitudes—measured before either feminist mobilization or the emergence of the far right—were key to explaining the votes for Vox when it entered parliament. In addition, our data show that there have been short-term changes in sexist attitudes, and these impacted vote choice. In particular, increases in sexism that occurred at a time of heightened feminist mobilization and declining overall levels of sexism had a significant impact on the vote later. This evidence leads us to conclude that the attitudinal backlash reaction to feminist mobilization was a key element in the electoral rise of the far right in Spain.

These findings inform our understanding of why people choose to vote for a far-right party. Our results show that sexism matters more than has been acknowledged in the comparative literature of far-right support. Thus, the disregard of sexist attitudes—so far scarcely and poorly measured—should be corrected.

Furthermore, our longitudinal analysis contributes to unpacking and clarifying the micro dynamics of gender backlash. We show that sexism is an attitude with a hybrid nature wherein both crystalized predispositions and changing evaluations must be considered (Albarracin and Shavitt 2018). Our analysis discloses the individual-level dynamics of the systemic argument of gender backlash that asserts that the rise of the far right is a reaction against cultural change and feminist mobilization: increases in sexist attitudes in a context of feminist mobilization and overall decreasing sexism explain rising preferences for the far right.

Cultural Backlash, Gender, and the Rise of the Far Right

One of the central interpretations for the rise of the far right is as a conservative reaction to progressive value change. A "tectonic" long-term generational shift toward more inclusive, libertarian, cosmopolitan, universalistic values is naturally followed by a reaction in the opposite direction that far-right parties embody (Ignazi 2003; Kitschelt 1995; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Even if attitudes toward gender equality are not entirely consistent with postmaterialist values (Hayes, McAllister, and Studlar 2000), it is difficult to understand cultural liberalism without including a defense of gender equality.

It is, however, striking that in the comparative literature that aims to explain the vote for the far right, gender is mostly absent from the empirical analysis. In spite of the many analyses that show that gender was and is a powerful element in the definition of far-right discourse, anti-feminist mobilization, and policy agendas, gender issues have been largely ignored; attention has, at most, reached the analysis of the gender gap in far-right vote (Harteveld et al. 2015). In trying to understand why people vote for far-right parties, attention has been devoted to ideological and attitudinal explanations, such as left–right orientation, attitudes toward redistribution, attitudes toward law and order, anti-EU attitudes (in Europe), and in particular attitudes toward migration (e.g., Arzheimer 2018; Edo et al. 2019; Georgiadou, Rori, and Roumanias 2018; Zhirkov 2014) but not to gender. Except for a handful of exceptions we shall discuss below (Green and Shorrocks 2021; Lodders and Weldon 2019; Spierings and Zaslove 2015), attention and findings have been focused elsewhere. If one were to identify the main issue that accounts for the rise of the far right according to previous work, it would be a reaction against immigration or globalization rather than a reaction against greater gender equality.

Events, such as the 2016 election resulting in the proclamation of a blatantly sexist U.S. president or the wave of feminist mobilizations that followed around the globe, have put gender attitudes more center stage in electoral politics, and there are a significant handful of works investigating how different forms of sexist attitudes impacted vote choice in the 2016 U.S. election (Bock, Byrd-Craven, and Burkley 2017; Hanley 2021; Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018; Valentino, Wayne, and Oceno 2018). Important as this case may be, it could also be exceptional, and not representative of how sexism matters for the far-right vote. We need to extend this incipient attention to other cases, unpack the reasons why sexism should matter, assess whether sexism is a stable crystalized predisposition or can be subject to short-term change, and gauge its electoral consequences.

Sexism in a Far-Right Context

Attitudes toward gender equality include a large number of different concepts (Burns and Gallagher 2010). Our focus is on sexism as a belief or attitude that reflects negative evaluations of individuals based on their sex or contributes to the maintenance of sex-based inequality in society (Becker and Sibley 2016; Swim and Hyers 2009). Although sexism can technically be directed toward both sexes, it is mostly directed toward women because of existing sexual hierarchies. We select sexism over other gender-related attitudes because the concept

has adapted very well to social changes regarding gender roles and stereotypes, and connects remarkably with the debates at stake in the conflict between feminism and the far right.

In terms of values, advanced democracies have embraced the primacy of the principle of equality between the sexes. Many countries have long past the time when male supremacy could be proclaimed. This does not necessarily mean that every individual endorses such principles in their hearts, let alone has the same consideration of what gender equality should entail in practice. Neither does the endorsement of this principle entail, of course, real equality or even equity between men and women. However, socially the principle is well rooted as a value (Rhodes et al. 2020; Scarborough, Sin, and Risman 2019).

Sexism today takes more subtle forms, which are present in the discourses of far-right parties. This is well reflected in the evolution of the concept and its measures. In blatant, hostile, or benevolent sexism, the core element is beliefs in stereotypes regarding women (and sometimes also men) (Glick and Fiske 1997; Swim et al. 1995). While these forms of sexism are still found in our societies and in the discourses of political leaders, they leave out two questions that are of paramount importance for the analysis of gender in the political realm today: perceptions of discrimination against women and the consideration of gender not as a question of stereotypes or values but as a question that entails an assessment of a political situation where conflict is involved. In other words, debates today are not articulated around whether women should work outside the home, for example, but rather around whether they are still facing discrimination when they do so, and what should be done about it.

Far-right parties use the value of women's rights and gender equality to legitimize their attacks on Islam and Islamic migrants (Akkerman 2005; Akkerman and Hagelund 2007; Lépinard 2020; Möser 2020). They often assume that migrants' countries of origin have pronounced gender inequality and discrimination challenges, in contrast to their own countries, which they view as having achieved real equality between men and women (Schwab et al. 2019). Even when making familist discourses wherein women are seen as belonging primarily to the private sphere, they do so wrapped in the terms of equal rights (Grzebalska and Pető 2018). Denial of discrimination is, therefore, a key element in far-right discourse.

In addition, gender appears in the debate not only as a question about what men and women should be like or how they should behave but rather as a key conflict where some ("gender ideology," "feminists," "women's organizations") are threatening the core principles of "Western Christian societies" and voicing unfair requests. Feminism or so-called "gender ideology" are dangerous existential threats to family values, children's well-being, the stability of Western societies, and the integrity of their cultural basis. Gender works as a "symbolic glue" that allows the bringing together of different questions regarding the organization of society, such as care work, reproductive rights, gender mainstreaming, and education (Kováts, Poim, and Pető 2015; Pető 2015). Building on gender as a key political conflict is a second important characteristic of far-right discourse, which opposes both feminist mobilization and policies aimed at correcting gender-based inequalities and discrimination.

Moving into the realm of individual attitudes, the concept of modern sexism precisely captures these elements. It was initially elaborated on by Swim and her colleagues inspired by the attempt to distinguish old-fashioned or overt and subtle or covert forms of racism (Swim et al. 1995; Swim and Cohen 1997). The concept has traveled across time and space well and is strongly connected to the contemporary far-right discourse described above. Modern sexism involves three dimensions. The first one is the denial of women's discrimination. Let us remember that sexism consists not only of attitudes and beliefs that harm women but also of resistance to end sex-based inequality. The most obvious form of such resistance is to deny existing inequalities and discrimination. The second component is the rejection and delegitimization of any complaint involving women's discrimination. Protests, mobilization, or outrage are unjustified since there is no discrimination to correct. Finally, the third component of modern sexism is the rejection of any measures taken to correct inequality and discrimination, which are considered unfair favors or even as discriminatory against men: institutional campaigns, legislation on affirmative action, or even mere attention to such matters, are contested.

Modern sexism is more socially acceptable than hostile forms of sexism (Becker and Sibley 2016), and therefore less prone to produce an underestimation of sexism due to social desirability. However, its main added value in our view comes from the fact that it is able to capture the key elements of the far right's discourses on gender equality and transform these into an individual attitude. While sexism could be interpreted as a stable predisposition that should be measured as different and as distant from politics as possible (Schaffner 2021), we argue that it is precisely the connection of the individual attitude with the discourses of far-right parties that makes it an interesting predictor of vote choice for these parties as well as an attitude prone to short-term change. If measures of individual attitudes were disconnected

from ongoing debates, we would be less well equipped to grasp the extent to which sexism is still present in our society, its changes, and its political consequences.

Sexism as a Predisposition

We expect far-right parties to be significantly more attractive to people who hold sexist attitudes, believe sex-based discrimination is irrelevant, and oppose any attention given to the issue aiming to alter the status quo. Hence, we expect sexism to matter in its own right, independent of other attitudinal explanations of vote choice that have received extensive attention in the far-right vote literature. Since sexism can also increase as a consequence of a person becoming a far-right supporter, we also need to consider the possibility that the relationship runs in both directions.

Evidence of how sexism is related to the far-right vote is at best unbalanced. In Europe, very few studies address the effects of attitudes toward gender equality on vote choice (Hayes 1997). One of the first studies to consider empirical measures of attitudes toward economic gender roles as a predictor of far-right vote choice found no significant effects (Spierings and Zaslove 2015). In their analysis of four European cases, Lodders and Weldon (2019) found some effect, but it was still far smaller than other explanations such as left–right self-location or attitudes toward migration. These works are based on evidence prior to the massive women's mobilization of recent years and use the European Social Survey's limited measures of sexism. More recently, Green and Shorrocks (2021) find evidence of a significant relationship between a measure of male resentment based on perceptions of discrimination and the Brexit vote, and Geus, Ralph-Morrow, and Shorrocks (2022) find an association between hostile sexism and voting Conservative.

Sexism and prejudice against women have been comparatively more analyzed in the U.S., where research has looked at how sexism and gender attitudes affect perceptions of female candidates and other political attitudes with mixed findings (Cassese, Barnes, and Branton 2015; Ditonto 2019; Dwyer et al. 2009; Mc-Thomas and Tesler 2016; Mo 2015; Simas and Bumgardner 2017). The Trump victory clearly spurred attention to this question. A significant number of studies now show that hostile sexism is positively related to Trump support (Bock, Byrd-Craven, and Burkley 2017; Cassese and Barnes 2019; Cassese and Holman 2019; Frasure-Yokley 2018; Knuckey 2019; Ratliff et al. 2019; Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018; Valentino, Wayne, and

Oceno 2018). The results are less clear for benevolent sexism (Cassese and Holman 2019; Ratliff et al. 2019). There is evidence that other attitudes, such as gendered nationalism, also affected the 2016 vote (Deckman and Cassese 2019). Perceptions of discrimination against women affected voting among men as much as partisanship, ideology, or economic evaluations (Simas and Bumgardner 2017). The relationship between modern sexism and perceptions of how Trump and Clinton fit their gender stereotypes has been studied (Godbole, Malvar, and Valian 2019). Very recently, Hanley (2021) compared the effect of some hostile and modern sexism measures on presidential voting, concluding that while the former have been more frequently used in the literature, only the latter show an effect on vote choice in 2016, which probably points to an underestimation of the effects of sexism on vote choice in the U.S.

Overall, we have some cross-sectional evidence pointing toward an association between sexism and vote choice in the U.S. but not so much for Europe. Measures are particularly poor outside of the U.S. context. The concept of modern sexism has not been fully measured to assess its relationship with vote choice in Europe (and only in Hanley's study for the U.S.). Our first objective is to evaluate the extent to which modern sexism—the concept that best reflects far-right discourses on gender—works as a predisposition that affects the probability to vote for a far-right party.

Changes in Sexism: Individual Dynamics of Gender Backlash

The individual dynamics of the relationship between sexism and the far-right vote involve at least three different facets. First, there is the question of the extent and patterns of attitude change: are levels of sexism stable or do they change over time? Second, we must consider how the relationship between attitudes and vote choice changes over time: is the link between sexism and far-right vote choice stable, or can sexism be activated/deactivated? Finally, we must consider the consequences of attitudinal change for the vote: are increases in sexism linked with increases in the probability to vote for the far right?

Not much evidence tracking longitudinal changes in sexism is available. Archer and Kam (2020) use panel data to explore levels of sexism before and after the #Metoo movement emerged. They found these attitudes were on average highly stable. This stability may be specific to the U.S., where the feminist mobilization was partly a

reaction to Trump's victory. Limitations in the measurement instruments may also be at work, as Archer and Kam's scale uses three items, only one of which is taken from Swim et al.'s original battery of modern sexism indicators. In any case, aggregate stability may be hiding consequential internal changes within individuals that need to be explored.

Regarding the stability of the relationship between sexism and vote choice, we know from previous work that sexism can be activated as a political issue. Activation is the strengthening of the association between the attitude and vote choice, which may be due to different underlying processes (such as heightened accessibility, salience, or issue voting) with similar observable implications (Hopkins 2021). Cassese and Barns (2019) argue that hostile sexism was activated in the U.S. presidential election of 2016: it mattered much more than in 2012 and so did perceptions of discrimination. Valentino et al. (2018) argue along the same lines: sexism played a minor role before 2016. In 2016, its effect became substantial, similar to authoritarianism (but still less important than racial resentment or party identification). Hanley (2021) also finds evidence of the activation of sexism, which in 2016 became a more relevant predictor of the vote, particularly due to Trump's ability to repel nonsexist voters. While this is informative of how important sexism was as an explanation for vote choice in these cases (with some potential risks of endogeneity because of the use of cross-sectional data), this is only part of the story; we also need to assess when attitudinal *change* matters for vote choice. This question has received less attention, as it requires longitudinal data, which to our knowledge remain largely unavailable so far.

Within-individual attitude change is not simply a source of variation that allows us to control for time-invariant unobservables when explaining vote choice. The direction and the timing of attitudinal changes may also be relevant. The concepts of backlash and normalization can be applied to the characterization of changes in sexism and their consequences. Both "backlash" and "normalization" have been widely used in the analysis of far-right movements and parties, though more as a narrative framework than as theoretical models with observable implications.

Backlash has been defined as a reaction to a shift in power (Mansbridge and Shames 2008), or more specifically to our concerns, a reaction to a threat of forthcoming shifts in gendered power relations (Sanbonmatsu 2008). The use of the concept, even if, extended in the analysis of the far right, has spurred some debate as to whether it is adequate as a generalized explanation (Kováts 2018; Paternotte 2020). One of the pending issues in this discussion is the extent to which we find evidence of backlash dynamics not only in terms of macro processes but also in individuals' attitudes. Do some people actually move from more progressive to less progressive positions when a feminist tide emerges? Do these changes matter for vote choice? Increases in sexism in a context of heightened feminist mobilization can be considered as observed *backlash* attitudinal change.

Normalization has also been widely used in the context of the far right to refer to a process by which taboos becomes destigmatized and acceptable—when "shameless discourse" becomes visible and present in institutions (Selvanathan and Leidner 2021; Valentim 2021; Wodak, Culpeper, and Semino 2021). Increases in sexism might occur in a favorable context of heightened far-right visibility. We refer to such increases as *normalization* attitudinal change.

Case, Data, and Measurement

Spain: Feminist Mobilization and Far-Right Visibility

We analyze the relationship between sexism and the far-right vote and its individual dynamics using evidence from the Spanish case for three reasons. First, we have data measuring modern sexism via the full original battery of items in a sample of citizens taken during four time points between 2017 and 2020. We ensure that our key concept of interest—modern sexism—is, therefore, accurately measured over time. These longitudinal data allow us to estimate the effect of prior values of sexism as well as the effect of changes in sexism over time.

Second, Spain has witnessed a succession of events, including two significantly different moments, in which attitudinal change may have happened. In 2018, the country witnessed a moment of heightened feminist mobilization without any visible or significant far-right actor. This was followed in 2019 by the surge of a far-right party (Vox), which garnered intense media attention. This sequence of events allows us to trace changes in levels of sexism under different circumstances. While we make no causal claim as to how these different contexts affect attitudes and behavior, the two different scenarios allow us to explore the dynamics of attitudinal change in a unique way by assessing which type of attitudinal change is relevant for party preferences. It could be that increases in sexism that happened before the far-right surge (that is between 2017 and 2018) could have possibly induced the surge and enhanced support for the far right, suggesting a backlash dynamic. It could also be that increases in sexism that happened once

Vox were in the spotlight (between 2018 and 2019) are electorally consequential, suggesting a normalization dynamic.

Third, existing accounts of the birth and growth of this new far-right party thus far do not consider gender-based attitudes and instead point to the relevance of the territorial conflict. According to some interpretations, Vox's electoral success is the result of a reaction against the Catalan secessionist bid (Turnbull-Dugarte 2019). Migration, hardly as salient an issue in Spain as in other European countries, has been a secondary issue (Mendes and Dennison 2021). Likewise, gender does not play a significant role in accounts of why Spain has not had a far-right party until recently (Alonso and Kaltwasser 2012) nor on the rise of Vox (Rama et al. 2021). Anti-feminism is considered a characterizing feature of Vox, but it is not its *raison d'être* (Ferreira 2019). In the same way, individual-level explanations of vote choice for Vox have considered and emphasized explanatory factors related to left–right orientation, territorial conflict, and immigration but not gender (Rama et al. 2021; Turnbull-Dugarte 2019). This should make Spain a relatively hard case in which to identify important effects of sexism on vote choice.

Spain followed the global wave of feminist mobilization against sexual harassment and violence, with marches of historical proportions in 2018 and 2019, spurred by a case of gang rape that generated an outpouring of outrage. Protests took place throughout the country, mobilizing hundreds of thousands of people, mostly women. The term "feminism" doubled its presence in the mainstream media, with less than 1,400 published news or articles on the topic in 2017 and almost 3,000 in 2018.[1] Therefore, in 2018 there was a heightened saliency of issues regarding gender equality and violence against women, the presence of feminist marches of historical proportions, and an amplified media visibility of feminism.

This feminist tide was followed by the increased visibility of Vox, the far-right party that splintered from the conservative People's Party (PP) in 2011. Vox gathered significant media attention in October 2018 (Olalla, Chueca, and Padilla 2019). It entered the regional Andalusian Parliament in December 2018 and the national Parliament in April 2019 with 24 seats out of 350. When elections were repeated in November, Vox acquired 52 seats, securing visibility in the Spanish chamber and the media. Vox painted a picture of feminists as "violent" and "communists and radicals," and repeatedly demanded the removal of the law against gender violence (Bernardez-Rodal, Rey, and Franco 2020; Ferreira 2019). The year 2019 is, therefore, the year of the emergence of the far right in Spain.

In line with other studies of the far-right vote, gender attitudes have been barely considered in explanations of the electoral rise of Vox. However, some qualitative research has highlighted the relevance of gender and anti-feminism in Vox's discourses, which include all the components of modern sexism. Vox denies the existence of discrimination against women ("Spain is a country where men and women are equal before the law"), and if any discrimination exists it is carried out by Muslim migrant workers (Cabezas 2022). Vox attacks feminists calling them "feminazis" and considers them a threat to the family as an institution, responsible for "totalitarian indoctrination," and hence should not receive any public funding (Cabezas 2022; Fernández-Suárez 2021). Finally, Vox fervently rejects existing legislation against gender violence. In their view, the 2004 act—passed with unanimous approval in parliament—"liquidates constitutional guarantees and removes basic civil rights for half of the population" by discriminating against men (Fernández-Suárez 2021). These are all the core elements of modern sexism.

Panel Data and Measures

We rely on data from the Spanish Political Attitudes dataset (Hernández Pérez et al. 2021), an online panel study conducted yearly on a sample with quotas based on sex, age, education, region, and municipality size to ensure a balanced representation of the Spanish adult population between 18 and 56 years of age.[2] The analysis focuses on the four waves fielded between 2017 and 2020, for which the modern sexism battery is available. The supporting information (SI, p. 2) reports the main characteristics of the panel. This longitudinal data help shed light on the overall and individual dynamics of gender attitudes in a context where gender issues gained significant attention, first in the context of feminist mobilization, and later, with Vox as a new key political actor attacking feminist policies and protests. Most importantly, they allow us to test the role of sexism in

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[1] Personal elaboration data obtained from *ABC, El Mundo, El Pais, La Vanguardia.*

[2] Because internet use among the older portion of the country's population was still comparatively low when the study was first launched in 2010, the original sample was restricted to Spanish residents aged between 16 to 44 years. In terms of our findings, we would expect older citizens to be more (Norris and Inglehart 2019) or at least not less (Schäfer 2021) likely to exhibit cultural backlash, and therefore our estimation, if anything, would be a conservative one.

FIGURE 1 Mean Levels of Sexism over Four Waves and Timeline of Political Events
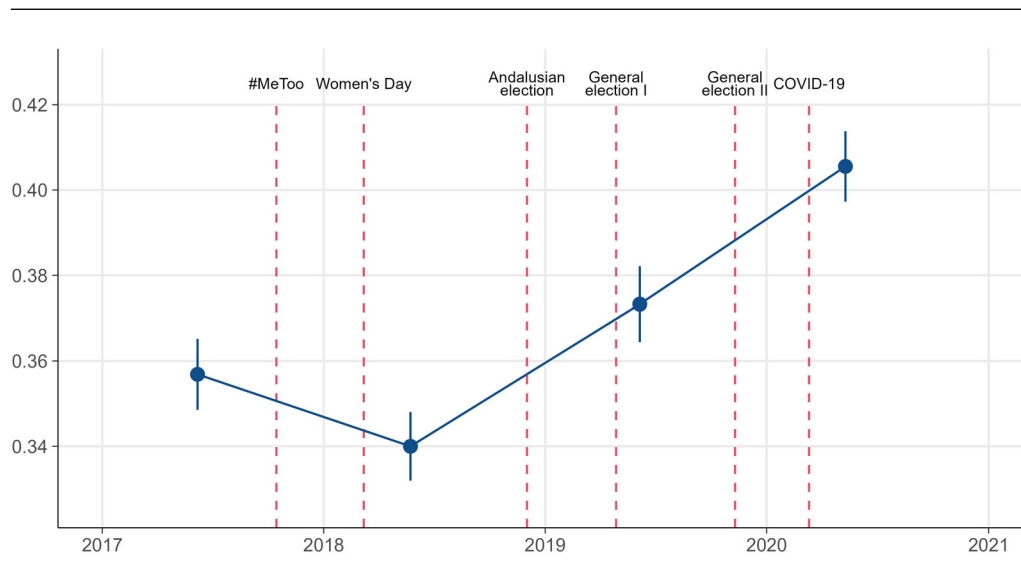
Notes: Sexism is measured on a 0–1 scale. Mean levels with 95% confidence intervals.

the emergence of Vox while overcoming endogeneity concerns arising from reverse causation. It is key to our purposes that the first wave of data was collected before the first massive feminist mobilization and the second wave before the rise of Vox.

Because we are interested in capturing respondents' support for Vox at the precise moment of each of their interviews, we used intention to vote for Vox (rather than reported vote in actual past elections) as our dependent variable. Respondents were asked which party they would vote for if there were general elections tomorrow. Those who mentioned Vox were coded as one and the rest as zero.[3] Given that support for Vox was negligible until late 2018, our analyses of intended vote focus on the 2019 and 2020 waves.[4]

Since part of our arguments rely on assessing the impact of changes in modern sexism, it is important to use a valid and reliable measure of this construct. Unlike previous works that have struggled with limited and scarce instruments, we use the full battery proposed by Swim et al. (1995) with an additional item to better gauge resentment about measures to correct gender inequality and discrimination (see SI, p. 8 for measurement details). The internal reliability of the composite score was satisfactory, with alphas ranging between 0.86 and 0.89 across waves. Figure 1 shows the timeline of the panel waves and political events as well as average levels of sexism for the

four time points, recoded to range between zero and one, with higher values denoting higher sexism (Figure A1 in SI p. 9 shows the distribution of modern sexism in each wave).

Our vote models account for the effect of other attitudinal factors found to predict support for the radical right in the comparative literature. Specifically, we include controls for general ideological identification (11-point left–right scale), authoritarianism (4-item battery based on childrearing values, Feldman and Stenner 1997), nativism (assessing attitudes to the economic and cultural consequences of migration), populist attitudes (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014), and territorial preferences (higher values denoting greater support for decentralization).

The models also controlled for sex, age, education (middle school or less, high school/vocational training, college), household income (a scale with 12 intervals), whether the respondent lives with a partner, and a 4-point measure of interest in politics. All variables except age (in years) have been recoded to run from zero to one (see SI, pp. 7–8 for detailed information about all our measures).

Results

Trajectories in Modern Sexism

Before looking at the consequences of sexism and sexism changes for far-right support, we first explore how

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[3]Nonresponses and intended nonvoters were coded as zero.

[4]The intended vote for Vox was below two percent before 2019 (only 15 and 26 respondents in 2017 and 2018, respectively).

FIGURE 2 Distribution of Changes in Modern Sexism
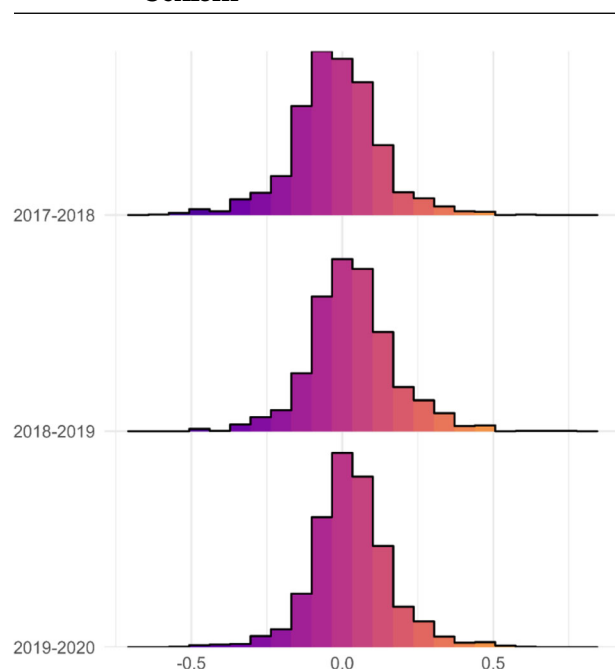
Notes: Sexism was measured on a 0–1 scale. The proportion of respondents who increased their levels of sexism was 37.8% in 2018 (16.2% by more than 0.1 points on the sexism scale), 54.1% (26.4%) in 2019, and 53.8% (24.5%) in 2020.

sexism changed during the analyzed period. Figure 1 depicts average levels of sexism by wave.

Sexist attitudes declined slightly in 2018, from 0.36 to 0.34 on a 0–1 scale, likely reflecting the rise of the #MeToo movement and the massive turnout at the 2018 Women's Day marches around the country. However, sexism increased to 0.37 in June 2019, just after Vox entered the national parliament for the first time, and then increased again to 0.41 in June 2020, once the party had increased its representation in the early elections of November 2019. Although these changes are relatively moderate in size, paired *t*-tests indicate that the differences between adjacent waves are all highly statistically significant ($p < 0.01$).[5] Note, however, that as shown in Figure 2, changes in attitudes happen in all directions for all waves, revealing that individual trajectories were much more diverse than aggregate figures might suggest.

To gain further insight into the variation in individual trajectories of sexism, we employed multilevel growth curve modeling, which treats observations for each wave (level 1) as nested within individual respondents (level 2). Specifically, we estimated a random slope model with time as a categorical predictor, and covariates for sex, co-

[5]The results are nearly identical when the sample is restricted to the respondents who completed all four waves.

hort, education, household income, living with a partner, interest in politics, ideology, partisanship (based on reported vote in the 2016 general elections), and engagement in the 2018 Women's Day protests. Note that because this analysis was restricted to respondents who participated in all four waves (N = 807) and covariates are treated as time-invariant (fixed at their 2017 values), the trajectories trace the evolution of exactly the same groups of individuals over the whole period.

Figure 3 presents the predicted trajectories by the most relevant covariates (sex, ideology, partisanship, and engagement in Women's Day protests), based on the estimates of the multilevel growth curve model (Table A5 in SI, pp. 10–11 includes the full details). Although the patterns of change look remarkably similar after 2018, with all groups following roughly the same upward trend, noticeable variations occurred between 2017 and 2018. The gaps in levels of sexism increased by sex, left-right identification, party support and engagement in Women's Day protests (trajectories of other variables are shown in Figure A2 in SI, p. 12). Thus, some people were resistant to the overall trend of declining sexism. The estimates suggest that sexist attitudes realigned considerably between 2017 and 2018, following the feminist protests and just before the emergence of Vox. Differences remained stable afterwards, with all groups gradually becoming more sexist at a similar pace. In other words, the time when gender issues were increasingly polarizing voters was just before Vox appeared, not afterwards.

Modern Sexism and the Rise of Vox

We next consider how sexist attitudes, along with other factors typically connected to the far-right vote, are associated with support for Vox. Table 1 presents the estimates of two cross-sectional logit models of intended vote for the 2019 and 2020 waves, respectively:

$$vox_{it} = sexism_{it} + other\ attitudes_{it} + controls_{it} \quad (1)$$

where individuals are indexed as i and time (wave) as t; other attitudes refer to ideology, authoritarianism, nativism, territorial preferences, and populism; and the controls are sex, age, education, income, living with a partner, and interest in politics.

The models reveal that the effects of the attitudinal variables all go in the expected direction: voting for Vox is positively influenced by right-wing orientation, sexism, nativism, and populist attitudes (if only significantly in 2020) and negatively by attitudes in favor of decentralization. The impact of modern sexism is surpassed only by that of ideology. Holding all other factors at their

FIGURE 3 Predicted Levels of Modern Sexism by Sex, Ideology, Partisanship, and Women's Day Engagement
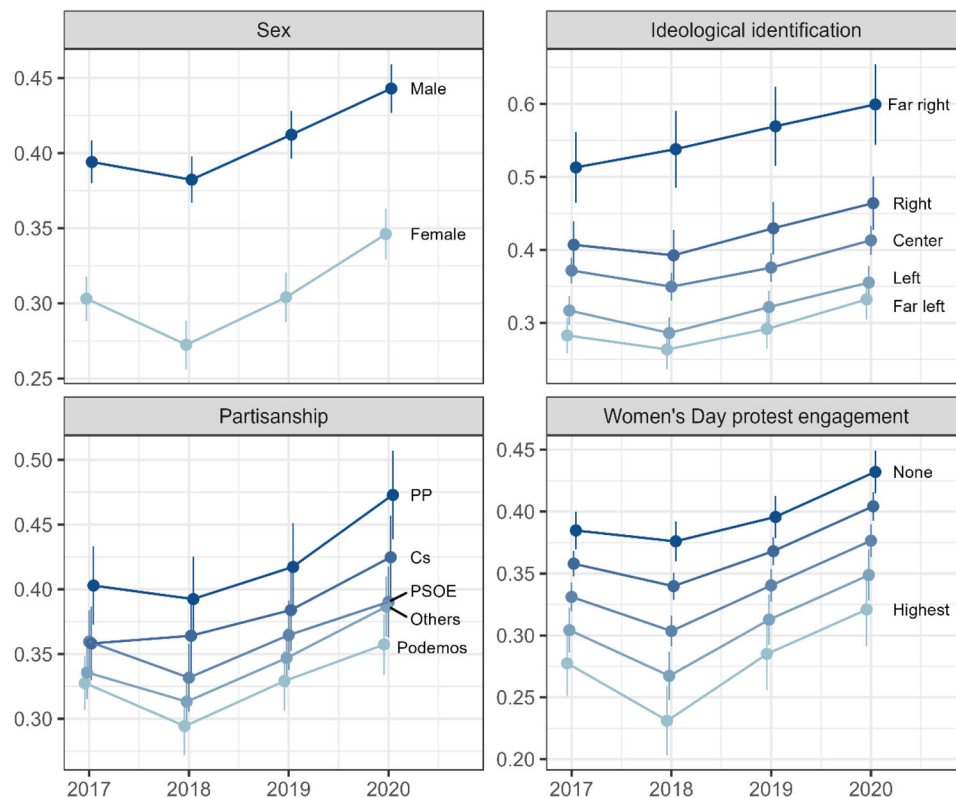
Notes: Predicted levels of modern sexism with 95% confidence intervals, based on the estimates of Table A5 (SI, pp. 10–11). The dependent variable is the modern sexism scale running from 0–1. Independent variables are measured in the first wave (2017) unless otherwise indicated. *Ideology.* 0–2 = Far left, 3–4 = Left, 5 = Center, 6–7 = Right, 8–10 = Far right. *Partisanship*: based on reported vote in the 2016 general election; "Others" includes voters of other parties and nonrespondents. *Women's Day protest engagement* (measured in 2018): 0–1 composite score where 1 indicates participation in the four activities asked, including striking, demonstrating, mobilizing others to participate, and talking about the protests. Results for age, education, income, living with a partner (2018), and interest in politics are shown in Figure A2 (SI, p. 12).

observed values, individuals at the ninety-fifth percentile of sexism are 8.6 (2019) and 9.9 (2020) percentage points more likely to express support for Vox than those at the fifth percentile.

Although the previous results suggest the relevance of modern sexism in explaining the vote for Vox, the fact that the predictors were measured at the same time (i.e., wave) as the outcome does not allow us to draw firm conclusions about the causal precedence of sexism and the remaining attitudinal factors to vote intention. It may be the case that voters adjust their views to bring them in line with their preferred party's positions (Lenz 2012). We, thus, cannot rule out that Vox voters' opinions on women's discrimination are actually a consequence, rather than a cause, of their partisan preferences.

One way to circumvent this difficulty is to assess the effect of previously measured attitudes on changes in vote intention. Following Lenz's (2012) specification strategy, we first examine how prior attitudes influence changes in vote intention, regressing vote intention at time *t* on attitudes and vote intention measured at time *t*−1, plus controls. This model tests whether the shifts in Vox support registered in 2019 and 2020 were associated with previous levels of sexism and other attitudes, allowing us to identify any differences between the breakthrough and consolidation phases.

$$vox_{it} = vox_{it-1} + sexism_{it-1} + other\ attitudes_{it-1}$$
$$+ controls_{it} \quad\quad\quad\quad (2)$$

As shown in Table 2, the results of this test indicate that sexism measured in the previous wave significantly predicts change in intended vote for Vox both in 2019 and (albeit marginally) in 2020. That is, respondents who

TABLE 1 Predictors of Intention to Vote for Vox in 2019 and 2020

	2019	2020
Female	0.118	−0.145
	(0.277)	(0.220)
Age	0.004	−0.009
	(0.016)	(0.010)
High school / Vocational	−0.716	0.198
	(0.442)	(0.286)
College	−0.075	0.080
	(0.300)	(0.256)
Income	−0.529	−0.061
	(0.575)	(0.446)
Lives with partner	0.192	0.018
	(0.301)	(0.231)
Interest in politics	0.634	0.915*
	(0.478)	(0.364)
Authoritarianism	−0.499	0.136
	(0.540)	(0.408)
Ideological identification	5.497**	4.965**
	(0.729)	(0.587)
Nativism	2.646**	2.280**
	(0.655)	(0.564)
Territorial preference	−1.314*	−1.905**
	(0.528)	(0.398)
Populism	0.894	1.418*
	(0.741)	(0.625)
Sexism	4.159**	2.983**
	(0.749)	(0.583)
Constant	−9.712**	−8.419**
	(1.189)	(0.829)
Observations	1651	1972

Notes: The dependent variable is intended vote for Vox. Logistic regression coefficients, standard errors in parentheses.
†$p < 0.1$, *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$.

held sexist attitudes in 2018 or 2019 were more likely to switch their vote to the radical right one year later. According to the estimates, the predicted probability of switching to Vox is 5.7 (2019) and 3.4 (2020) percentage points higher for an individual at the ninety-fifth percentile of the sexism scale than for someone at the

fifth percentile. The lagged values of ideological orientation and territorial preferences also have an effect in both years, while the effect of populism is not statistically significant in either year and that of nativism is only significant in 2020. The heightened impact of attitudes toward immigrants is indeed the most remarkable difference between the two waves. This suggests that immigration was not a key factor in the emergence of Vox and that it only became relevant after the party attained representation—hence once its stances on this issue gained visibility. By contrast, previous sexist attitudes were paramount for the party's breakthrough and remained relevant afterwards, although slightly deactivated.

We can take further advantage of our panel study to examine how *changes* in sexist attitudes affect subsequent changes in vote intention. To this end, we regress vote intention at time t on changes in attitudes and vote intention between times $t-2$ and $t-1$ as well as their values at $t-2$, plus controls. This model tests how prior shifts in individuals' views lead them to change their vote intention, bringing their partisan preferences in line with their updated issue opinions, as follows:

$$vox_{it} = vox_{it-2} + sexism_{it-2} + other\ attitudes_{it-2}$$
$$+ \Delta\ vox_{it-1} + \Delta\ sexism_{it-1}$$
$$+ \Delta\ other\ attitudes_{it-1} + controls_{it} \quad (3)$$

The results, reported as Models 1 and 2 in Table 3, indicate that earlier changes in sexism significantly predict changes in the probability of intending to vote for Vox in 2019 but not in 2020.[6] People who became more sexist between 2017 and 2018 were more likely to switch their support to Vox in 2019. As an illustration, the estimates imply that for someone whose level of sexism decreased by 0.26 points (fifth percentile) in 2018, the probability of supporting the radical right in 2019 was 3.8%, while the probability was 8.2% for someone whose sexism increased by 0.20 points (ninety-fifth percentile). However, those who increased their sexism between 2018 and 2019 were not significantly more likely to switch to Vox in 2020.

The preceding models assume that the impact of shifts in sexist attitudes are symmetrical, that is, that decreases in sexism have the same effect as increases in sexism but in the opposite direction. To relax this assumption, Models 3 and 4 in Table 3 use two separate measures of changes in sexism: one for increases, which

[6]Given the low number of respondents expressing a vote intention for Vox before 2019, the inclusion of prior change of this variable as a predictor causes a problem of separation. To deal with this issue, the models in Table 3 use penalized maximum likelihood estimation (Firth 1993; Kosmidis et al. 2021).

TABLE 2 Effect of Prior Attitudes on Intended Vote for Vox

	2019	2020
Female	0.095	−0.114
	(0.283)	(0.305)
Age	−0.009	−0.026
	(0.015)	(0.017)
High school / Vocational	−0.905†	−0.387
	(0.496)	(0.448)
College	−0.039	−0.135
	(0.306)	(0.347)
Income	0.153	0.104
	(0.564)	(0.642)
Lives with partner	−0.086	0.052
	(0.289)	(0.314)
Interest in politics	0.946†	1.249*
	(0.497)	(0.496)
Prior Values ($t-1$)		
Vox intention	3.071**	3.367**
	(0.699)	(0.355)
Authoritarianism	0.702	0.368
	(0.538)	(0.582)
Ideological identification	3.559**	2.208**
	(0.753)	(0.817)
Nativism	0.734	3.881**
	(0.626)	(0.724)
Territorial preference	−1.433**	−1.097*
	(0.496)	(0.538)
Populism	1.515†	1.070
	(0.784)	(0.798)
Sexism	2.293**	1.377†
	(0.751)	(0.823)
Constant	−7.132**	−7.191**
	(1.126)	(1.302)
Observations	1503	1360

Notes: The dependent variable is intended vote for Vox at time *t*. Logistic regression coefficients, standard errors in parentheses. $^†p < 0.1$, $^*p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$.

takes the value of change if the shift is positive and zero otherwise; and one for decreases, which takes the value of change if the shift is negative and zero otherwise. The results indicate that the 2017–2018 increases in modern sexism had an impact on the probability to switch to Vox in 2019, whereas decreases in sexism did not have a statistically significant effect. This suggests that the impact of attitudinal change was mainly driven by people who countered the overall downward trend in sexist attitudes observed in the context of the massive feminist mobilization of 2018. Specifically, the estimates of Model 3 predict that those whose sexist attitudes increased by 0.20 points had a likelihood of supporting Vox of 9.3%, compared to 4.8% among those who maintained their level of sexism. On the other hand, Model 4 confirms that changes occurring between 2018 and 2019 did not affect switching to Vox in 2020.

Overall, the evidence in Table 3 suggests that, in line with the backlash interpretation, increases in sexism occurring in a context of 2018's massive feminist mobilizations paved the way for the rise of Vox. Conversely, increases in sexism occurring at a time when the radical right obtained institutional representation had no clear impact on the party's subsequent electoral gains. It is worth noting that, apart from ideological identification, just as only changes in sexism predicted switching to Vox in 2019, only changes in nativist attitudes did so in 2020. This is consistent with the argument that the electoral success of the radical right might have contributed to the enhanced visibility of xenophobic rhetoric and to the activation of the immigration issue.

To further probe the causal role of modern sexism in the emergence of Vox, we conducted a placebo test by replicating the models in Tables 2 and 3, using the intention to vote for the PP, the mainstream conservative party, as the outcome variable. In contrast to what we observed for the far right, switching to the mainstream right was unaffected neither by prior levels of sexism nor by prior changes in sexism (see Tables A6 and A7 in SI, pp. 13–14). This strengthens the interpretation that modern sexism matters when parties display a discourse reflecting modern sexism, as far-right parties often do. The test also shows that modern sexism was not a relevant predictor of vote choice in 2018 (i.e., before the rise of Vox), neither in terms of predispositions nor of changing attitudes.

Discussion

The findings presented here show that modern sexism—which captures denial of discrimination against women,

TABLE 3 Effect of Prior Change in Attitudes and Vote Intention on Intended Vote for Vox

	2019	**2020**	**2019**	**2020**
Female	0.041	−0.144	0.059	−0.144
	(0.355)	(0.313)	(0.353)	(0.312)
Age	−0.025	−0.032†	−0.023	−0.032†
	(0.020)	(0.018)	(0.020)	(0.018)
High school / Vocational	−0.548	−0.572	−0.597	−0.569
	(0.597)	(0.463)	(0.603)	(0.462)
College	0.456	−0.249	0.469	−0.248
	(0.398)	(0.352)	(0.395)	(0.351)
Income	−1.069	0.271	−1.123	0.272
	(0.705)	(0.648)	(0.707)	(0.647)
Lives with partner	0.046	−0.012	0.084	−0.011
	(0.370)	(0.316)	(0.374)	(0.315)
Interest in politics	1.910**	1.220*	1.863**	1.218*
	(0.645)	(0.509)	(0.640)	(0.509)
Prior Values ($t-2$)				
Vox intention	2.975†	4.695**	3.181†	4.659**
	(1.577)	(1.529)	(1.632)	(1.515)
Authoritarianism	1.170	0.956	1.205	0.957
	(0.753)	(0.697)	(0.759)	(0.696)
Ideological identification	5.326**	1.691†	5.177**	1.691†
	(1.100)	(1.003)	(1.102)	(1.004)
Nativism	0.062	4.083**	0.018	4.072**
	(0.963)	(0.841)	(0.958)	(0.839)
Territorial preference	−1.266†	−1.363*	−1.212†	−1.363*
	(0.709)	(0.626)	(0.705)	(0.625)
Populism	1.499	0.259	1.267	0.260
	(1.119)	(0.931)	(1.118)	(0.929)
Sexism	2.908*	1.065	2.990*	1.064
	(1.184)	(0.941)	(1.194)	(0.939)
Prior Change ($t-2$ minus $t-1$)				
Vox intention	4.749**	3.219**	4.309*	3.209**
	(1.840)	(0.377)	(1.719)	(0.379)
Authoritarianism	0.422	0.098	0.490	0.099
	(0.768)	(0.666)	(0.766)	(0.665)
Ideological identification	2.679*	1.904*	2.639*	1.903*
	(1.208)	(0.934)	(1.205)	(0.932)

(Continued)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

	2019	2020	2019	2020
Nativism	0.861	3.448**	0.829	3.437**
	(1.002)	(0.820)	(0.990)	(0.819)
Territorial preference	−0.603	−0.918	−0.516	−0.913
	(0.701)	(0.621)	(0.694)	(0.622)
Populism	1.033	1.426	0.954	1.425
	(1.159)	(0.905)	(1.145)	(0.904)
Sexism	2.610*	0.801		
	(1.162)	(1.034)		
Increase in sexism			5.037**	0.827
			(1.788)	(1.425)
Decrease in sexism			−0.190	0.657
			(1.776)	(2.079)
Constant	−7.764**	−6.186**	−7.925**	−6.183**
	(1.561)	(1.407)	(1.574)	(1.410)
Observations	1092	1264	1092	1264

Notes: The dependent variable is intended vote for Vox at time *t*. Logistic regression coefficients estimated using penalized maximum likelihood, standard errors in parentheses.
[†]$p < 0.1$, [*]$p < 0.05$, [**]$p < 0.01$.

antagonism toward women's demands, and resentment against antidiscrimination policies—can be an important predictor of far-right vote choice. Spanish panel data show that, as a preexisting attitude, modern sexism mattered at least as much as other attitudes that are typically included in explanatory models of far-right vote choice. We should no longer assume gender attitudes are ignorable, negligible, or even secondary in explanations of far-right support. Sexism deserves specific conceptual and empirical attention for understanding the electoral rise of the far right. Our argument is not that modern sexism is the key predictor in all contexts but rather that different types of sexism may matter in different contexts and that modern sexism should be carefully considered and measured in connection with far-right parties.

Consistently with what previous work in the U.S. has established, our results confirm that sexism can be activated as well as deactivated. Sexism as a predisposition was particularly important when Vox appeared in 2019 following a period of heightened saliency of feminist demands and less so once the "feminist threat" was less pressing, likely because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the very presence of the far-right itself as an anti-feminist actor. But the analysis of the dynamic relationship between sexism and vote choice goes beyond the activation

of predispositions; it must also include the analysis of attitudinal changes and their consequences for vote choice.

We have observed modest but significant short-term changes in levels of sexism that contradict the notion of an unwavering predisposition. Overall, levels of sexism decreased after the wave of feminist demonstrations that took place in 2018 and increased after Vox entered parliament in 2019. This is at odds with the stability that sexism has shown in the U.S. context (Archer and Kam 2020). These differences between the U.S. and Spain may be due to factors such as the timing or the intensity of feminist mobilization, or to the use of different measures. But our evidence suggests that—even if only to a moderate extent—modern sexism can eventually be sensitive to context and show short-term changes, which should be the object of further scrutiny in future research.

These attitudinal changes in turn may have relevant electoral consequences. We use internal individual variation in sexism not only to assess its effect on the far-right vote but also with a more contextualized perspective to assess what kind of changes in sexism affect vote choice. The two moments in which attitudinal change happens in our study (before and after a feminist tide, and before and after a far-right party became a significant political actor), allow us to distinguish between backlash and

normalization attitudinal change. Backlash involves increases in sexism that happen at a time of feminist momentum, while normalization, in turn, involves increases in sexism that happen at a time of increased far-right visibility. Our findings show that these backlash changes in sexism had important electoral consequences, while normalization changes did not.

The overall decline in sexism after the feminist movement of 2018 was rather heterogeneous, conditioned by respondents' characteristics, such as sex, partisanship, ideology, or engagement with the feminist demonstrations. This seems to indicate some realignment or polarization around the issue. Those who were less likely to absorb the overflowing feminist messages of the moment or even perceived a threatening element in the wave of feminist mobilization presumably reacted with increasing levels of modern sexism. It was this attitudinal backlash in sexism that initially attracted voters who were previously comfortable voting for a moderate party to this new far-right party with an anti-feminist discourse. Later on, sexism continued to change, but these changes were not dependent on political predispositions and did not evolve with a polarization pattern. The increases in sexism that we witness once the far right was on the scene seem to reflect some sort of generalized period effect, which although very much concerning in itself, did not have direct electoral consequences for the far right.

Our analysis shows the complex micro processes through which feminist mobilization played an important role in the rise of Vox and its breakthrough into parliament, which is consistent with a backlash hypothesis that, although present in the literature, has been more often suggested than empirically tested. Further research should elaborate on the individual consequences of feminist mobilization, which seems to have the paradoxical effect of initially reducing overall levels of sexism but also increasing the degree of polarization around the issue, which in turn benefits the far right.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Appendix A. The Spanish Political Attitudes Dataset
Appendix B. Panel Attrition
Appendix C. Measurement
Appendix D. Distribution of Sexist Attitudes
Appendix E. Multilevel Growth Curve Models
Appendix F. Placebo Tests