

The blurred lines between center-right and far-right: “Reverse contamination” and the People’s Party’s environmentalism in Spain

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Abstract

Scholars have recently focused on the eco-nationalist “turn” of the far-right right parties in Europe and their obstruction of a substantive environmental agenda. However, we argue that the analysis of the far-right eco-nationalism must be broadened to include certain established and impactful centre-right European parties. By focusing on the single case-study of the centre-right People’s Party (PP) in Spain, we argue that it has articulated Manichean, negationist, anti-elitist, and conspirative discursive elements typical of the far-right eco-nationalism before the emergence of Vox, the Spanish far-right party. In actuality, starting with 2019, Vox adopted and developed an eco-nationalist narrative advanced first at the “centre” by the ex-Prime Minister José María Aznar and still influential today at the level of PP’s leadership, namely a narrative framing ecology as “the new communism” and the (global) progressive elites and “consensus” as threatening the free Spanish nation and “freedom” worldwide.

Keywords

centre-right, far-right, ecology, eco-nationalism, Spain, Europe

Introduction

Scholars have recently focused on the eco-nationalist “turn” of the far-right parties in Europe and their obstruction of a substantive environmental agenda (Aronoff, 2019; Caiani and Lubarda, 2023; Forchtner, 2019; Kulin et al., 2021; Lubarda, 2023; Moore and Roberts, 2022; Ruser and Machin, 2019; Swyngedouw, 2022). Lesser attention has been given to the “extremism of the centre” (Lipset, 1985),¹ namely, to established and impactful centre-right parties articulating far-right eco-nationalist narrative elements in Europe (but see Pearson, 2023).

In this article, our focus is on the Spanish case of the *Partido Popular* (People’s Party; henceforth, PP) and its environmental discourse and practice. We contend that a rigid dichotomy between the “center” and the “far-right” is not sustainable in the Spanish context. Moreover, we argue that, in Spain, key elements that characterize the far-right environmental discourse² (Aguilera-Carnerero, 2023; Forchtner, 2023; Hanson, 2024; Olsen, 1999) were introduced by the centre-right. Therefore, we challenge the common assumption that there is an essential categorical difference between the center-right (PP) and the recent far-right (Vox) regarding environmental issues in Spain. Both

parties, PP and Vox, have consistently exhibited elements of denialism, advocated public skepticism towards the scientific consensus about climate change, and have framed ecologism as “political correctness” and progressive elites as the totalitarian enemies of the Spanish nation and “free society” in general. Moreover, at a practical level, we argue that the PP’s stance, not unlike Vox’s, its far-right counterpart, reflects Franco’s later market-oriented approach, concealed beneath the veneer of nationalist-conservative and the fascist glorification of “Spanish nature” (Del Arco Blanco and Gorosiza, 2021). The PP has systematically prioritized capitalist business interests in the name of “freedom” and Spanish nation against the progressivist-ecological “dictatorship” or “communist totalitarianism”

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(Blanco and Gorostiza, 2021). Thus, elements of the far-right stand on environmental matters in Spain precedes the formation and electoral success of Vox, the conventionally designated far-right party in the public sphere and the academic literature (Ferreira, 2019; Muro and Lago, 2020; Ungureanu and Popartan, 2024). While Vox, led personally by Santiago Abascal, was initially denialist, starting with 2019 it has undergone a “green turn” (Ungureanu and Popartan, 2024). National-populist tenets are key to Vox’s and Abascal’s recent eco-narrative depicting a mythical struggle between free society and its enemies, people/nation and the elite, the good and the evil. By inverting key societal codes such as real/false, democratic/totalitarian, honest/hypocritical, freedom/oppression, Abascal and Vox champion “real ecology” as protecting “Spanish nature” against what they frame as the manifold adversaries of Spain advocating an “ecological religion” and “totalitarianism.” This “dogma” is an alleged concoction of the Left, European, and global elites imposing “political correctness” a fabricated authoritarian environmental agenda at the expense of freedom and Spanish nation or people.

Our findings partly challenge the “contamination thesis” that the emergence of far-right parties has gradually led to “contaminating” the centre-right with respect to the treatment of immigration, refugees, Islam, and other issues (Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020; Bale, 2003; Han, 2015; Schain, 2017; Valentim, 2021). According to Bale and Kaltwasser (2021), the centre-right has entered a crisis due to its “riding the populist wave” of the far-right. To the contrary, with respect to ecologism,³ there is a mechanism of “reverse contamination”: in Spain the centre-right developed key tenets of a far-right eco-nationalist narrative that would later be adopted, re-articulated and developed by Vox, a spin-off of PP (Abascal, 2021; Vox, 2023; Ungureanu and Popartan, 2024).⁴ We thus argue for the importance of focusing on centre-right parties and their complex rapport with the far-right when dealing with “far-right ecologism” (Lubarda, 2023). This focus including different mechanisms of contamination and reverse contamination could potentially extend to other scenarios in different European countries and regions, from the dynamic relationship between the Alliance for the Union of Romanians and the Social Democratic Party in Eastern Europe to that of UKIP and Tories in the North-Western Europe.

In the following, after briefly describing our research design, we deal, first, with PP’s historical background.⁵ We argue that echoes of this background context of the PP are still felt today. Second, we delve into José María Aznar’s development of a Manichean grand narrative with negotiationist undertones and targeting progressive elites and their ecologism as “the new communism”. Differences notwithstanding, this polarizing grand narrative pitting the Good versus Evil, the free society/the Spanish nation versus

its enemies is still influential both in today’s PP and Vox. Third, we analyze Mariano Rajoy’s oscillation between trivializing climate change and undermining scientific authority, and his subsequent adaptive shift towards the mainstream European environmental discourse. Finally, we investigate PP’s current eco-narrative. Strikingly, even after Vox’s “green turn” in 2019, PP leaders such as charismatic “trickster” Isabel Díaz Ayuso have fused a Trump-like derisive humor, brazen populist denialism, and conspirative undertones to dismiss a substantive ecological agenda meeting the current environmental crisis.⁶

Research design

In our analysis, we aim to capture the of PP’s discursive stance on environmental issues by looking into leaders’ representative discourses, party programs, and manifestos. By critical discourse analysis (CDA), we focus on how language shapes (and reshapes) ideology (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 10), particularly the environmental positions of the party over time. In this qualitative case-study, we understand the CDA as a methodological apparatus that combines the examination of rhetorical mechanisms and narrative construction embedded in contextual power dynamics (Laclau, 2005; Wodak and Meyer, 2009). Our qualitative analysis spans from the Spanish transition period to the present and aims to complement quantitative data about the PP’s ecological stance. While there is evidence that the environment has been increasingly important within PP’s discourse, as it generally occurred with the rest of political parties, there is little qualitative analysis about its ambivalences and practical relevance. In Figure 1 we show the evolution of the salience of political ecology (Political Ecology Index) among the right-wing state-wide parties in Spain and the PP leaderships analyzed in this article. The Political Ecology Index (Figure 1) relies on the Party Manifesto dataset. We have gathered by addition three indicators: per_416_1; per416_2; per501. These indicators are the variables contained in the original dataset referring respectively to: Anti-Growth Economy: Positive, defined in the codebook as “Rejection of the idea that all growth is good growth. Opposition to growth that causes environmental or societal harm.”; Sustainability: Positive, defined in the codebook as “Call for sustainable economic development. Opposition to growth that causes environmental or societal harm”; and Environmental Protection, defined in the codebook as “General policies in favor of protecting the environment, fighting climate change, and other “green” policies (i.e., General preservation of natural resources; Preservation of countryside, forests, etc.; Protection of national parks; Animal rights)” (Lehmann et al., 2023).

Drawing on the CDA aims to generate a more nuanced and critical analysis of the centre-right discourse in Spain, complementing the quantitative evidence provided by

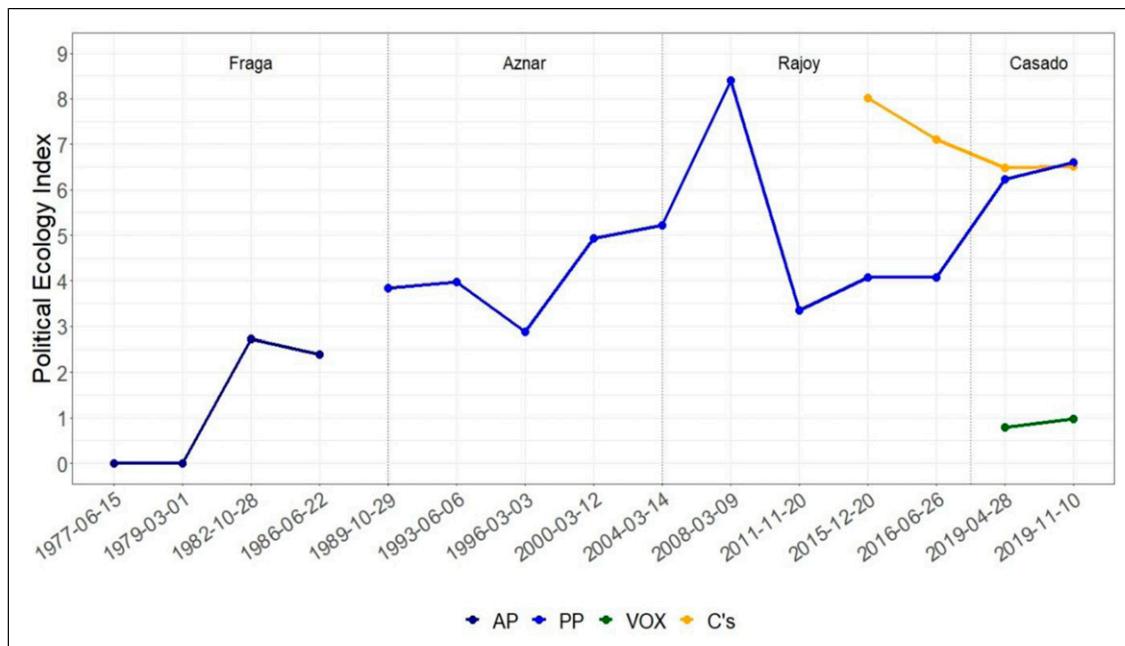


Figure 1. Evolution of the political ecology index among the Spanish state-wide right and centre-right political parties (1977–2019). Source: The Party Manifesto Project (Lehmann et al., 2023). In the 2023 general elections in Spain, the candidate was Alberto Núñez Feijóo. See endnote 5.

indicators such as the Party Manifesto project (Lehmann et al., 2023). The qualitative methodology used in this article is “critical” in the sense that aims to capture not only the discourse but also its role in shaping the performance of relevant agents within the framework of a dynamic of power relations and stands (Laclau, 2005; Wodak and Meyer, 2009). In this qualitative analysis, we inquire in the less explored evolution of the environmental discourse of the centre-right (PP) to grasp the potential origins of the characteristics attributed to the far-right (Vox) in the form of a preceding “extremism of the centre” of the PP. According to the existing literature, in general the far-right conceives environmentalism through the prism of its core narrative building a distinctive Manichean social imaginary related to nature and the nation or people (Lubarda, 2023). This is also true for the case of Vox and its leader, Santiago Abascal, who, since their entry into the Spanish Parliament in 2019, have developed their own environmental narrative.⁷ In the following, we rely on the existing literature on Vox (Aguilera-Carnerero, 2023; Hanson, 2024; Ungureanu and Popartan, 2024) as background of our analysis.

Manuel Fraga: From Francoism to democracy

The origins of the PP can be traced back to the transition period (Colomer, 2006), when Spanish democracy was reinstated, and the party system emerged and consolidated.

Its organic precursor, Alianza Popular (People’s Alliance, AP), emerged as a coalition of small state-wide and regional conservative political parties during this transition period. It was spearheaded by former Francoist senior politicians, including several former ministers from the Franco era, such as Manuel Fraga Iribarne, who had served as the Minister of Information and Tourism from 1962–1969. Fraga was a prominent reformist figure within the Francoist elites, a leading right-wing intellectual, and a key player in articulating the Spanish brand on the national and international market. Fraga promoted in 1960 the slogan “Spain is different!” aimed at foreign tourists by rebranding and exoticizing the country’s poor reputation. Typical of Fraga’s market-oriented approach and branding acumen was turning Spain’s gravest ecological disaster into a business opportunity. On 7 March 1966, Fraga himself, symbolically accompanied by the US ambassador, orchestrated a bath at the beach of Quitapellejos (in Palomares) to counter the rumours of nuclear pollution of the sea waters and land after the crash of a US bomber carrying nuclear bombs. The crash had disastrous consequences, and could have had catastrophic ones.⁸ This incident remains a historical example of how the dictatorship sorted the trade-off between environmental protection (after the nuclear accident, Palomares remains the most radioactive place in Spain) and capitalist objectives such as tourism promotion. Fraga’s publicity stunt was a crucial part of the communication strategy of Franco’s government in front of the international and domestic audience.⁹

Unsurprisingly, ecology did not have any relevant role in Fraga's and AP's discourse in the transition period. Environment protection was marginal and, when mentioned, it was against the background of promoting economic and industrial growth. The first party Manifesto¹⁰ in 1977 was explicit on this issue, as it subsumed the environmental question under the industrial policy. The section dedicated to "industrial policy" stated that this policy was to "limit to acceptable levels the deterioration of the environment, with sufficient information to public opinion" (1977: 41).¹¹ In the sections devoted to environmental issues in its four party manifestos (1977, 1979, 1982, 1986), AP's references to the environmental problematic were framed as mainly a rural question related to economic poverty and development. In its first electoral Program, only five lines were devoted to climate policies section under the name of "Defense of nature" (*Defensa de la naturaleza*) focusing on very general proposals such as "fight against environmental pollution and water, conservation of soils and recreational areas" (AP, 1977: 42, Under the heading "Territorial Planning and Defence of the Nature"). These proposals were premised on a strong anthropocentric stand: "Spatial planning is a network of county capitals equipped with services appropriate to the surrounding rural environment, educational, recreational and promotional, which contribute to the development and improvement of the human person (...). These policies will pay special attention to the corresponding human and social problems."

In the subsequent party programs, references to ecological issues followed a similar trend marked by a key interest in economy built on anthropocentric premises. The 1979 Program included a special section on "Environment" in which all measures were explicitly balanced with economic developmentalism (*desarrollismo*), that is promoting industrial development. Moreover, the Program proposed the creation of "natural defence brigades" (AP, 1979: 57–58), echoing early Francoism, a policy that years later would find its institutional shape as an official paramilitary police section. In 1984, the environmental policies presented in a new section entitled "Environment and quality of life" were framed in terms of a societal anthropocentric claim: "society demands a progressive mastery of the environment, as a guarantee of the quality of life required" (AP, 1984: 133). In this revamped framework, AP proposed a national research plan aimed at reconciling environmental protection and quality of life, which included the industrial utilization of forests and the sociological and cultural integration of tourism (AP, 1984: 133–134).

Overall, the AP period demonstrated a degree of continuity with the historical approach to environmental issues since Franco's dictatorship, blending a paternalistic concern for economic growth as key for eradicating poverty with a preservationist interest in Spain's natural heritage. A core "chain of equivalence" (Laclau, 2005) underpinning its

stand linked conservationism to natural resources and the natural heritage of the Nation, while poverty resulted from the lack of economic development and growth, serving as a poignant reminder of the longstanding conservative and *desarrollista* tradition in Spain (Swyngedouw, 2015).

The continuity between AP and PP was maintained through this legacy, embodied in figures like Manuel Fraga, among others. "I know that many of your hearts are bleeding. Mine is bleeding too. But the time has come to change its name. Alianza Popular will be called Partido Popular. That is my decision."¹² With these words, Fraga announced the establishment of the PP at the "Refoundation Meeting" in 1989. The rebranding of AP facilitated the integration of more liberal and liberal-conservative small organizations, some of which originated from the nearly defunct Unión de Centro Democrático (Union of the Democratic Centre, UCD) (Balfour, 2007; Nieto, 2009). This also involved placing even greater emphasis on economic issues compared to the environmental ones.

Aznar's neoliberal re-foundation and Manichean grand narrative: "Reasonable ecology", denialism, and adaptation

The relationship between Aznarism and political ecology has been ambivalent, if not contradictory. On one hand, its institutional legacy was marked by a process of modernization and adaptation to a changing international environment.¹³ This legacy has been championed by José María Aznar and his successors under the label of "reasonable ecologism" (*ecologismo sensato*) (Lipperheide, 2010), contrasting it with ecology portrayed as the "new communism" and "religion" forcibly imposed by progressive elites. On the other hand, by drawing on a neo-conservative grand narrative in the US pitting the "free world" against its enemies – Islam and the "axis of evil" replacing the "red threat" of communism, but also environmentalism (Brulle, 2021) –, Aznar also reshaped the ecological discourse for the center-right. In particular, he established a new "chain of equivalence" that portrays ecologism as synonymous with communist totalitarianism and with an enemy of freedom and, thus, of the Spain nation. This grand narrative pivoting around the myth of the clash of civilizations and the defense of freedom framed the scientific discourse about climate change as "politically correct" and embraced climate change denialism or skepticism.

In particular, according to Aznar (1995), the centre-right in Europe had for too long based its own identity in opposition to socialism. Therefore the "demise of the socialist ideology" would certainly require an ideological innovation for the centre-right after the failure of its eternal antagonist. Time proved him right. In his competition with the Socialist Party, in 1993, Aznar broke the so-called "Fraga's electoral

ceiling” (Nieto, 2009: 181) as a candidate of the PP at the general elections, winning over eight million votes and appointing 141 deputies. Later, in 1996, Aznar would become Prime Minister in a minority government. In 2000, he would achieve his best results with an absolute majority. Aznar’s neoliberal discourse, inspired by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, and aligned with the post-‘89 neoconservative “Washington consensus” (Aznar, 1995) gained significant popularity in the 1990s. A close ally of the US and George Bush Jr, Aznar would become part of the “networks of opposition” (Brulle, 2019; Ekberg and Pressfeldt, 2022) to ecology as posing a threat to the neoliberal agenda based on deregulation, the cult of economic growth and the unmitigated faith in markets. The neoconservative grand narrative built on a mixture of neoliberalism and democratic militarism pitting the free world against its enemies was fully embraced by Aznar, who also turned into a key ally of the US and George Bush Jr into the Iraq war in the aftermath of 9/11.¹⁴ The neoconservative turn was backed by a relative economic growth and the slogan, popularised in 1997 by Aznar himself, “*España va bien*” (Spain goes well!).¹⁵ Despite its radicality, Aznar defined this ideological stand as “centrist” and “reformist”.¹⁶

The consequences of Aznarism for environment are, as we’ve pointed out, Janus-faced, as Aznar – a charismatic and still-influential figure in Spanish politics - has been oscillating between an adaptive stance to a changing international environment and denialism framed as the crusade for freedom against ecological authoritarianism. In his 1996 investiture discourse, Aznar explicitly justified the creation of the new Ministry of Environment for three reasons: making economic development compatible with the rich natural heritage of Spain, international (EU) obligations and future generations.¹⁷ These objectives and a vague and generalist aim to protect the environment would be part of the party manifestos during under Aznar leadership (1989, 1993, 1996, 2000). It would not be until the electoral program of the general elections of the year 2000 that the environmental proposals would be developed in six whole pages.

The 2000 party program is the most detailed of the Aznar era in terms of environment, yet it maintains a strong anthropocentric view of environmental policies and subordinates them to the general economic agenda centred on growth and the quality of human life. These policies are presented as an indicator of “modernity and progress of the country” and “the main factor that contributes to the quality of life of its citizens” (p. 89). The measures promoted by the Ministry since 1996 are labelled as a new stage of environmental policies in Spain marked by the notion of “legal security” ensuring a sustainable development perspective. The program contains several references to economic development, and explicitly states that “In the Popular Party we believe that the person and his quality of life must be protagonists in the

protection of the environment” (p. 90). The main novelty of the 2000 party program is the inclusion of the notion of “climate change” that did not appear in the previous 1996 program. In making this change, the party aligned with the international evolution of the climate policies and included the Kyoto compromises to build a “Spanish strategy” to face climate change. However, this strategy remains vague and unexplained in the document (see p. 95).

The political discourse and practices of the PP exhibited significant contradictions and transformations. The Ministry focused on various environmental problems under Isabel Tocino’s leadership. Several measures were welcomed by ecologist groups in civil society such as the creation of a special unit within the paramilitary police Guardia Civil devoted to environmental issues (Seprona) or the publication of a “White Book” as a material to be used in the schools.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the overall balance of the Ministry is marked by failure. As an echo of Francoism, when the Ministry faced environmental crimes, such as the Aznal-cóllar disaster near Doñana, it tried to minimise the disaster and avoided those prosecuting those responsible of it (Tusell, 2012). Likewise, very soon the Ministry got involved in conflicts with Autonomous Communities due to the lack of intergovernmental dialogue, which was required given that environmental protection was in part a decentralised governmental competence. Tellingly, almost 30% of the Ministry budget was devoted to the very controversial hydrology plan that counted with little dialogue with civil society (Garrido, 2003; Molina and Melgarejo, 2016; Swyngedouw, 2014, 2015). This water plan and policy was named as the top priority by Aznar himself in his investiture discourse in 2001.¹⁹ The National Hydrology Plan (NHP) aimed to divert water from the largest Spanish river primarily to the major coastal Mediterranean cities (López-Gunn, 2009), but ultimately, it failed to gain adoption.

The second Aznar Government, initiated in 2000 with an absolute parliamentary majority, experienced two waves of civil society mobilization related to environmental issues. First, with the Prestige catastrophe and the subsequent black tide in Galicia, again minimized by the new Minister Francisco Álvarez-Cascos; and second, the NHP that initially aimed to transfer water from the Ebro river and led to a strong wave popular contestation (López-Gunn, 2009; Tábara et al., 2004). The National Hydrological Plan championed by Aznar as a means of solidarity and nation-building, was ultimately replaced by a plan founded on a more global and consensus-driven approach in 2004 following the victory of the Socialist Party.

In the context of the controversies generated by PP’s projects, the growing socio-political interest in environmental issues (including the Socialist Party), and the influence of the neoconservatism, Aznar would gradually develop discursive tenets that are typical of the far-right economic nationalism. This became even clearer after he left the

Spanish government, while remaining extremely influential both in the PP and the public sphere. In Aznar's Manichean grand narrative, nourished by the US neoconservatism, the "free society" was at war with new enemies. Depending on context, Islam, progressivism, socialism and ecologism became interchangeable signifiers as the mortal enemies of the free society, freedom, and the Spanish nation.

In a series of Aznar's interventions, a new chain of equivalence emerged, ecologism and climate change soon becomes a potential enemy of "freedom" and (market) liberalism in general protected from "political correctness." To illustrate, in 2008, during the presentation of Václav Klaus's neoliberal and negotiationist book *Blue Planet (Not Green)*,²⁰ Aznar articulates this Manichean chain of equivalence declaring that "ecology is the new communism" and explicitly championing a negationist stand in front of senior members of the PP, although with the absence of the allies of Mariano Rajoy the leader of the PP at that time. Aznar's narrative connected his bellicose neoconservative agenda and his views on ecology, displaying family-resemblances with eco-populism and -nationalism²¹: "The problem here is that the standard-bearers of the climate apocalypse have little or nothing to do with science. (...) I do not know because I am not a scientific expert on these issues. What I am is a citizen who today says loud and clear that I have, like any other citizen, the right to think that there should be freedom to debate matters like this".²²

Later, this ideological tenet would be partially mitigated by Aznar: while accepting the climate change and started to promote the necessity of "adaptation" through punctual and pragmatic solutions. In this change of narrative, Aznar added a later twist to his ideological contribution by partly abandoning denialism and embracing a more pragmatic approach. Between the defense of "reasonable ecologism" and denialism, this third stance is realized through the establishment of an initiative known as the Global Adaptation Institute in 2010, a think tank dedicated to environmental protection. In the presentation of this new institution, Aznar claims the necessity of adopting "pragmatic solutions" based on "science, not politics", and directed against "catastrophism" of the politically correct progressive elite.²³

This development of Aznar's neoliberal positioning in continuity with Franco's, AP's and PP's prioritization of market-oriented policies coincides with the return of the PP to power in Spain. The conservatives won the 2011 general elections and remained in power until 2018 under the new leadership of Mariano Rajoy.

Mariano Rajoy: Between trivializing climate change and "crusading" against it

As Prime Minister from 2011–2018, Mariano Rajoy exemplifies the tensions and ambivalences within the Spanish center-right regarding environmental issues. On one hand,

Rajoy adopted denialist and skeptical stands towards scientific findings concerning climate change. To illustrate, in October 2007, 9 years after Spain signed the Kyoto Treaty, Rajoy, then president of the PP and his party's candidate for the Presidency of the Government, employed a rhetoric of trivialization when discussing climate change and scientific authority. When asked about climate change, he referenced a cousin of his, a physics professor at the University of Seville, stating, "I'm not very knowledgeable about this, but my cousin, I suppose, would be, and he told me: 'Look, I've hosted ten of the world's leading scientists here (in Seville), and not one of them can guarantee me what the weather will be like tomorrow in Seville.' How can anyone predict what will happen in the world in 300 years?" Rajoy concluded skeptically regarding climate change, asserting, "We cannot elevate this issue to a major global problem."²⁴

On the other hand, the initiatives undertaken by the PP under the leadership of Aznar, and subsequently Mariano Rajoy, also sought to co-opt and promote an environmentalism from the right, demonstrating that "environmental issues are not a leftist matter" (Lipperheide, 2010: 45–46).²⁵ Rajoy's governments (2011–2015, 2016–2018) are thus relevant to the development of the public discourse on climate change in Spain. The salience of this issue in Spanish politics reached an important point in the 2015 electoral campaign and the announcement of a new climate law made by the Prime Minister Rajoy during the Paris Climate Change conference. Since then, alongside discussions on energy transition, climate-related topics have remained central to political discourse and were vigorously debated during the campaign (Solorio, 2016). From his denialism and climate change scepticism, Rajoy transitioned to define climate change as "one of the major crossroads for human history".²⁶ The contrast could not be more striking.

Rajoy's governments oversaw the relative recovery from the global economic crisis and became a turning point in the Europeanization of the Spanish green discourse and policies. The 2011 program was explicit in underscoring the compromises with the EU and the Kyoto objectives (PP, 2011: 131), but its focus was on the Spanish economy and the necessity of changing the way the crisis was handled. In contrast, the party program of 2015 was significantly more ambitious, as it prominently positioned climate change alongside the primary international challenges where Spain held a decisive role (PP, 2016: 214).

However, in line with the general trend observed over the years, the increased prominence of climate change did not prevent the "balancing" of positive green discourse and international commitments with policies and practices that favored capitalist economic objectives.²⁷ For example, regarding energy policy, Rajoy's governments consistently prioritized economic growth over their commitment to addressing climate change, resulting in a questionable green

record that included promoting the resurgence of fossil fuels. Rajoy's and PP's strategy of "green capitalism" included subsidies to coal-mining areas and neoliberal deregulation initiatives that favored fracking practices (Hess and Renner, 2019: 242).

These ambiguities did not prevent Rajoy from championing Spain's full commitment at the Paris Climate Change conference in 2015, where he advocated for a comprehensive, ambitious, and legally binding global agreement.²⁸ It was during this conference that Rajoy announced the government's initiative for a Climate Change Law for Spain. From the outset, the rationale behind this legislative proposal encapsulated the tensions within the conservative narrative on climate change. Introducing this law was framed as evidence of Spain's international commitment to combating climate change and achieving the objectives set by the UN for 2020 and 2030.²⁹ The narrative that sustained the legal proposal presented by PP included scientific references to the rising sea level and global warming. The proposal even comprised an explicit reference to the necessity of changing the mode we "produce and consume". However, in practice, addressing climate change was not a priority in the policies advocated by Rajoy's administrations. In fact, the Climate Change Law's draft was introduced in the final Council of Ministers meeting, and it was not until the subsequent legislative term, during which the PP was in opposition, that it was finally given priority by the left-wing government.

The PP today: Isabel Díaz Ayuso and Alberto N. Feijóo navigating between eco-nationalism and greening neoliberalism

The government led by Mariano Rajoy came to an end in June 2018 when he failed to win a vote of no confidence initiated by Pedro Sánchez, the leader of the Socialist Party, who subsequently assumed the role of Prime Minister. Following this defeat, Mariano Rajoy announced his resignation as party leader. This triggered a prolonged period of internal tensions within the conservative party, marked by instability. Pressured by the emergence of right-wing forces such as the more liberal *Ciudadanos* (Citizens) and the far-right Vox, the PP has experienced a relative "decline" (Alonso and Field, 2021).

Amidst turbulent times for party leadership, the political landscape and strategy for the Spanish conservatives became increasingly complex. In the 2019 general elections, a far-right party, Vox led by Abascal, entered the Spanish Parliament for the first time since the democratic transition (Rama et al., 2021). Concerning environmental issues, Santiago Abascal and Vox underwent a "green turn," reworking and amplifying themes drawn from Aznar's

Manichean grand narrative about ecology as "the new communism" and enemy of freedom. They infused it with a more national-populist and broadly anti-elitist perspective, vehemently opposing ecology as the "new communism" and portraying the "totalitarianism" of progressive (global) elites as a threat to the freedom of the Spanish nation, while in practice they privileged business interests (Abascal, 2021; Abascal and Bueno, 2008; Vox, 2023; Ungureanu and Popartan, 2024).³⁰ Vox, the new far-right party created in 2013 as a spin-off of PP, obtained 24 deputies in April and 52 in November 2019, garnering 15.08% of the popular vote and posing a challenge to the right-wing hegemony of the PP. Therefore, for the first time, there was a clear competitor from the far-right in the Parliament, both at regional and state-wide levels.

However, the PP and its spin-off, Vox, are both competitors and allies (Alonso and Field, 2021; Rama et al., 2021). Given the fragmentation of the electoral space that moved away from bi-partidism, PP and Vox have a strong incentive to collude and form power coalitions, which has resulted in alliances that resist and reverse substantive environmental agendas and favour business interests.³¹ This complex context of party competition and collusion as well as the pressures of the European context, in addition to its role as opposition leader, can explain the continuity and exacerbation of a highly contradictory discourse regarding climate change among the party leaders. During this period, three narratives threads have become intertwined. Firstly, the party maintained its alignment with the "responsible" discourse as a governing party, occasionally taking distance from "populism" and Vox. The assertion of their legacy, such as the Kyoto Agreement or the establishment of the Ministry of Environment, has been a consistent element in both the leaders' rhetoric and the party manifestos in recent years. Secondly, in line with the leadership of Rajoy and Aznar, the "adaptation" narrative gained momentum and has been employed in numerous public interventions, advocating for "pragmatic ecologism" that proposes practical solutions contrasting with the leftist (framed as catastrophist, ideological, and dictatorial) approach to addressing climate change. Thirdly, particularly noticeable with the Isabel Díaz Ayuso, a new iteration of climate change skepticism intertwined with national populism (Ungureanu and Popartan, 2020) has emerged. This narrative strand echoes Aznar's Manichean ideology, bears striking similarities to Vox's eco-narrative, and blurs the lines between center- and far-right. In recent times, the preceding narratives—vindication of the governmental legacy and adaptation—have been amalgamated with alternative narratives more aligned with Vox's discourse, blending eco-nationalism and neoliberalism (Aguilera-Carnerero, 2023; Hanson, 2024; Ungureanu and Popartan, 2024).

The debate concerning governmental responsibility has received official endorsement from all party leaders. Both

Pablo Casado (PP's leader from 2018–2022) and his follower at the party's helm, Alberto N. Feijóo, have contextualized their party's legacy in terms of its institutional dedication to addressing climate change, both domestically and internationally. Criticizing the Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, Casado repeatedly invoked the argument of "the first Minister of the Environment in the history of Spain" during Aznar's tenure and highlighted the signing of the Kyoto Treaty during a PP administration.³² However, alongside this rhetoric, PP has developed a Manichean framework that has a close proximity with Vox's and follows Aznarism in posing themselves as the defenders of freedom (with a strong emphasis on market freedom) and real ecology against the catastrophist left turning ecology into a religious dictatorship. In the 2019 party program, the first mention of climate change was linked to mobility and freedom: "The freest societies are also those that display the greatest environmental concern" (PP, 2019: 60). To distinguish the PP from both the Socialist Party and Vox and its previous denialism, Casado utilized the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall as a metaphor for the "walls" that should be dismantled in Europe, such as those of "nationalism, populism, identitarianism, or protectionism," and explicitly referred to the new "green religion" of the left-wing catastrophists.³³

The foreword of the 2023 party Manifesto, signed by Feijóo, is symptomatic for this narrative emphasizing (market) freedom against its enemies as a way of framing environmental issues, and which is shared by the Spanish centre- and far-right. The Manifesto refers to the necessity of a "sustainable growth" through a reformist agenda but does not include any reference to climate change besides a mention to promoting a "sane development". Instead, economic growth is emphasized repeatedly and presented as the key objective of PP's political agenda (PP, 2023: 6). The contents of the PP's political program related to the environment are far less important and do not focus on climate change compared to previous manifestos. Overall, adopting an adaptive stance to the European green discourse, the current program invokes reformist policies to justify relative changes in policies regarding energy and agricultural water supplies. The program also includes a specific and new section on floods, presented as a consequence of climate change and the exigencies of the twenty-first century (PP, 2023: 35–36).

Since 2019, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, an expert in public communication and a charismatic regional leader with weighty national influence and presence, has emerged as a key proponent of hardline rhetoric against the Socialist coalition government. Contrary to Casado's condemnation of populism, Ayuso's discourse on climate change in Madrid has consistently included national populist elements blurring the lines between the center- and far-right categories. She represents a continuation of a brazen style and

Manichean narrative established by Aznar and amplified by Vox against the alleged "catastrophism" and "political correctness" of the progressive left. Ayuso is a female "trickster" characterized by a Trump-like boldness in style, using a combination of unabashed falsehood and populist humor³⁴ based on mockery and taboo-breaking to denigrate her adversaries and their causes (Ungureanu and Popartan, 2020). Together with Vox, Ayuso has combined a hyperbolic national populism about the endangered Spain with derisive populist humour to build an "inverted word". This rhetorical operation has been based on a series of rhetorical inversions whereby climate emergency, scientific consensus and substantive environmentalism as painted as "political correctness", dogmatic and conspirative hoaxes and authoritarianism threatening the freedom of the Spaniards. Remarkably, the centre-right carried on the denialist rhetoric even *after* the far-right largely abandoned it starting with 2019. In January 2020, in a denialist and mocking style, Ayuso assures in an interview at Cadena SER that "no one has died" and that "no one will die" because of climate change and, in this sense, she defended that the community she governs "is doing things right". In tune with "far-right ecologism" (Lubarda, 2023) and echoing Aznar and Rajoy, she also denies the relevance of scientific evidence: "As it [climate change] has been exposed many times, I think it is not real".³⁵ Ayuso's discourse has, moreover, conspirationist undertones: in December 2019, during a plenary session of the Madrid Assembly coinciding with the COP25 Climate Summit in the capital, Ayuso declared, "One day we will uncover the lobby behind this."³⁶ In the same conspirative and denialist vein, in June 2022 the spokesperson of the Ayuso government, Pedro Muñoz, played down the importance of the heat wave and assured that "This climate emergency and climate shelter seem to me to be a predetermined strategy to impose a feeling of fear and, therefore, to impose certain measures in an obligatory manner."³⁷

Similarly, while the COP27 Summit was ongoing in Egypt, Ayuso, in her characteristic mixture of denialism and mocking humor, asserted that "since the Earth has existed," there has been climate change. In alignment with both Aznar and Vox's Abascal (Alías, 2021; Ungureanu and Popartan, 2024), she associated measures to alleviate climate change with "communism."³⁸ Analogously, Ayuso denounced at the Supreme Court the alleged "strong ideological bias" and indoctrination present in the high school curricula established by the Spanish government. Among the concepts emphasized by the President of the Madrid Community was that of climate emergency, arguing this time that climate change should not be equated with a climate emergency.

In short, despite the increasing evidence about the grim impact of climate change on Spain and the Madrid Community, Ayuso best represents the "extremism of the centre" of a party that supports a version of far-right denialism even

after Vox's "green turn".³⁹ By combining both a dramatic and a comedic rhetoric, she has popularized a Manichean far-right narrative framework pitting the Spanish nation, the free market, and liberty against the "totalitarianism" of the leftist elites. In terms of practice, both PP and Vox, despite their competition, have been converging in resisting a substantive ecological agenda and greening neoliberal policies and prioritizing business interests whenever they clash with environmental causes. In fact, subsequent regional elections confirmed the rise of the far-right party, which formed coalition governments with the PP in Aragon, Castile and León, Valencian Community, Extremadura, and Murcia, demonstrating a convergence in resisting and overturning the pursuit of a substantive environmental agenda in Spain, from protecting natural reserves and endangered areas to the reduction of reliance on fossil fuels and the initiatives in favor of animal rights and greening cities (e.g., the "green islands" in Barcelona). This practical convergence between PP and Vox in environmental matters was recently confirmed by the alliances after the 2023 regional elections, and their subversion of ecological agendas. The alliance between the center and far-right in greening capitalism has been displayed in a variety of conflictive cases such as: the conservation of the eco-system of Doñana; the extension of the airport in Barcelona at the expense of the Ricarda natural reserve; the polemic concerning the oil exploitations in Canarias threatening marine biodiversity; the resistance to the moderation of meat consumption and the increased protection of animals through the 2023 Law of Animal Well-Being (*Ley del Bienestar Animal*); the protection of the industry driving traditions such as bull-fighting turning animal suffering and death into a spectacle.

Conclusion: Far-right beyond far-right

We've argued that while scholars have dedicated significant attention to the far-right new forces, they have often overlooked a phenomenon of greater practical significance: the "extremism of the centre" (Lipset, 1985) of conventional centre-right parties in relation to ecology (Pearson, 2023). People's Party in Spain is, we've argued, a case in point: whereas for a short period this party was in decline (Alonso and Field, 2021), it has partaken in a "counter-revolution" (Bale and Kaltwasser, 2021) or "conservative revolution" (Ungureanu and Serrano, 2018) together with new forces such as Vox. Notably, if the centre-right is "in crisis", as Bale and Kaltwasser (2021), it is not simply because they "ride the populist wave" and are "contaminated" by the far-right. As we've shown, the far-right rhetoric concerning environment in Spain emerged at the centre and has been re-articulated and developed afterwards by Vox (Aguilera-Carnerero, 2023; Hanson, 2024; Ungureanu and Popartan, 2024). On this basis, we've depicted a

complex relationship between the PP and far-right ecologism, which includes also mechanisms of "reverse contamination" and mutual enhancement and intensification due to party competition and collusion. In the sense, we have argued that in the Spanish case the PP opened the discursive path now taken by Vox. From this perspective, Vox's eco-narrative is, to an important extent, a spin-off of a center-right narrative. The analysis provided in this article provides, to an important extent, a reverse version of the "contamination thesis" (Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020; Bale, 2003; Han, 2015; Valentim, 2021) regarding environmentalism. Thereby, Vox's "inverted world" of "real ecology" (Hanson, 2024; Ungureanu and Popartan, 2024) built on an "extremism of the centre" of the PP. This "real ecology" is currently enhanced by the complex party dynamics of competition and collusion between the PP and Vox under the circumstances of a fragmented party landscape that decisively moved away from the previous bipartidism.

In contrast, conservatives in the United Kingdom and Germany were pioneers of the European right in reducing emissions of polluting gases and enforcing pollution restrictions.⁴⁰ Whereas some traditional parties of the European center-right have been altering their discourse and climate proposals prior to the PP in Spain, the People's Party has also been adapting to social and international changes, resulting in an ambivalent stance on ecology. Several factors, including domestic party dynamics and international pressure, have led to an overlapping of ambivalent narrative strands. Depending on the context the PP has incentives to compete or to collude with Vox's rhetoric and goals. These dynamics have been especially visible at regional level since 2023 in which the PP governs in a variety of coalition agreements with Vox in six Autonomous Communities (Balearic Islands, Castile and Leon, Aragon, Extremadura, Murcia, and Valencia).

To summarize, we have identified analytically at least three rhetorical strands that are activated differently depending on context. Firstly, the eco-nationalism version of the center-right encompasses a range of rhetorical "re-descriptions" that create an "inverted world," often characteristic of far-right ecologism. This inverted world includes framing ecologist movements as enemies of freedom, the new enemy after communism; conspirative theories, such as the "lobbies" behind climate emergency; minimizing or even denying scientific evidence or appealing to "scientific evidence" against climate change; and simply mocking and ridiculing climate change policies as alarmist and catastrophist discourse. Secondly, governmental responsibility and commitment to international treaties are valued by a centrist and moderate political party that has held government positions during crucial periods in the last decades and is one of the two main state-wide parties in Spain alongside the PP. Finally, connected to governmental

responsibility and commitment, we observe a reformist or adaptationist rhetoric in which freedom and growth remain at the center of the discourse, and environmental measures are seen as piecemeal and pragmatic mitigations of the effects of climate change (Mihai, 2022). This anthropocentric rhetoric is specifically designed to compete with the “ecologist” label that conservatives do not feel comfortable with; this label is mainly championed by the left and criticized by PP leaders as an “ideology” rather than a solution. Moreover, from a practical perspective, despite the competition between the People’s Party and Vox, they have converged in greening Spanish capitalism and undermining a substantive ecological agenda. From this standpoint, far-right ecologism and eco-nationalism are, to paraphrase Hegel, the latest “ruse” of capitalism.

As in other contexts (Pearson, 2023), the centre-right in Spain is missing the opportunity of updating conservatism by integrating a substantively preservationist ecological agenda in reaction to climate emergency and its damaging impact on Spanish communities. Further research should delve into the intricate relationship between center- and far-right parties (see also Ekberg and Pressfeldt, 2022), including mechanisms of contamination, reverse contamination, and mutual intensification at the narrative and practical levels. Our single case study represents a step towards a historical-comparative research agenda in Europe regarding the formulation of far-right narratives and stances beyond the current wave of far-right political parties.

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Notes

1. In this article, we use Lipset’s oxymoronic formula with a different meaning, namely as referring the articulation and promotion of the traditional far-right stances by conventional center-right parties. Lipset (1985) developed the sociological thesis that the emergence of fascism in Germany was the result of the “extremism of the centre”. According to this him, liberalism and fascism shared similar world views (rejecting a

large industry, anti-socialist, anti-tradition, and anti-religious) except for the fascists believe on a strong state. In this vision, “the rise of National Socialism after 1928 was primarily linked, therefore, to the flood of support from former voters of the centre parties” (Falter, 1981: 391).

2. In this article, we adopt the term “far-right ecologism” following Lubarda’s approach (2023). We conceptualize it as an umbrella term that covers a wide range of positions, spanning from fascist or Nazi ideologies to thinner ones that do not advocate for (mass) violence, although they may sometimes employ polarizing and violent rhetoric. Within this framework, the ecological stance of Vox and, to some extent, the People’s Party tends towards the thinner end of the spectrum within the complex family of far-right ecologisms.
3. Surely, as Alonso and Field argue (2021), the emergence of Vox also signified a radicalization of PP’s stands on other issues. As we emphasize, the developing relationship between the two parties involves different mechanisms, not only “reverse contamination”.
4. For a detailed analysis of Vox’s eco-nationalism advocating a Green Spain against progressive elites, equating ecology with a “new communism”, and representing a form of greening capitalism, see Ungureanu and Popartan (2024).
5. During the democratic period, the PP has been in power almost 15 years, between 1996 and 2004 and 2011 to 2018 both in minority and majority cabinets. Moreover, at regional and local level has governed several autonomous communities (such as Andalusia, Balearic Islands, Madrid and Valencia) and capitals, including Madrid between 1991 and 2015 and 2019 to 2023. Since the (re)founding of the party in 1989 the PP has concurred in 11 elections reaching its maximum support in 2011 when obtained 186 deputies and 44.63% of vote share. The current leader, Alberto Nuñez Feijóo, is the fourth since 1989 after José María Aznar, Mariano Rajoy and Pablo Casado. Therefore, we structure our analysis in chronological order focused on the party leaderships and senior politicians: i) Manuel Fraga; ii) José María Aznar; iii) Mariano Rajoy; iv) Pablo Casado, Isabel Díaz Ayuso and Alberto Nuñez Feijóo.
6. *El País* (22/10/2007), Rajoy cuestiona el cambio climático y afirma que no puede convertirse en el “gran problema mundial”: https://elpais.com/sociedad/2007/10/22/actualidad/1193004007_850215.html [Accessed 24 October 2023].
7. Aguilera-Carnerero (2023) argues that, through a semiotic analysis, at least two elements emerge as characteristic of Vox’s visual rhetoric regarding environmental issues. First, a nativist approach is normally presented through the images of farmers and cattle-breeders betrayed by a leftist “communist” government and the European Union; second, the image of a rural Spain epitomized by the hunters and bullfighters (in a different context see also Velicu and Delibas, 2024). Hanson argues that “(t)he 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’” (Hanson, 2024: 46). This global discourse is complemented with more localist arguments such as a defense of energy sovereignty and a more positive discourse on climate change mitigation strategies based on the promotion of ruralism and traditional ways of life (Hanson, 2024: 48).
8. Luckily, none of the four nuclear bombs, which were 65 more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb, exploded, but two of them disintegrated and generated grave contamination (Izquierdo, 2016).
 9. See: El País (6/3/2023), España reclama a EE UU que se lleve las tierras contaminadas con plutonio por el accidente de Palomares, <https://elpais.com/clima-y-medio-ambiente/2023-03-06/espana-reclama-a-ee-uu-que-se-lleve-las-tierras-contaminadas-con-plutonio-por-el-accidente-de-palomares.html> [Accessed 24 October 2023].
 10. We use the terms party manifesto and party program as synonymous, referring to the formal principles and goals supported by each electoral platform.
 11. The role of ecology and climate change has become increasingly relevant, as in other democracies, in party manifestos.
 12. See: El Mundo (2019/01/18), El PP, tres décadas de refundación a refundación. <https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2019/01/18/5c40e65cfddffd6788b462a.html> [Accessed 24 October 2023].
 13. For this broader process of modernization, see esp. Alonso and Field (2021).
 14. However, some sectors of the party remained attached to the old conservative tradition inherited from AP and other political families (López Nieto, 1988).
 15. See: La Sexta (7/03/2019), “España va bien”: así defendía Aznar en España y el resto del mundo el milagro económico de Rodrigo Rato, https://www.lasexta.com/programas/donde-estabas-entonces/mejores-momentos/espana-va-bien asi-defendia-aznar-en-espana-y-el-resto-del-mundo-el-milagro-economico-de-rodrigo-rato-video_201903075c819b7e0cf2ca0a0426f453.html [Accessed 24 October 2023].
 16. See: El País (6/5/1996), Aznar anuncia diálogo con partidos y sindicatos desde un Gobierno “centrista y reformador”, https://elpais.com/diario/1996/05/06/espana/831333616_850215.html [Accessed 24 October 2023].
 17. See: Aznar, José María (3/5/1996) “Discurso de José María Aznar en la sesión de investidura como Presidente del gobierno”, <https://jmaznar.es/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/00001A0001.pdf> [Accessed 24 October 2023].
 18. See: (1999) *Libro Blanco de la Educación Ambiental en España*, Comisión Temática de Educación Ambiental, Ministerio de medio Ambiente, available at: https://www.miteco.gob.es/content/dam/miteco/es/ceneam/recursos/documentos/blanco_tcm30-77431.pdf
 19. See: Aznar, José María (25/4/2000) “Discurso de José María Aznar en el debate de investidura a la Presidencia del gobierno”. <https://jmaznar.es/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/00928A0928.pdf> [Accessed 24 October 2023].
 20. The book written by the ex-Prime Minister of the Czech Republic was published by the PP think tank FAES. The FAES also published other titles such as a book by Nigel Lawson, Margaret Thatcher’s negotiationist ex-treasurer. According to Lawson, “The new religion of global warming, however comfortable it may be for politicians, is not as harmless as it may seem at first glance. Certainly, the more we analyze it, the more it looks like a Da Vinci Code of environmentalism. It’s a great story and a tremendous bestseller. It contains a grain of truth... and a mountain of nonsense. And that nonsense can be really very harmful.” See: La Marea (26/06/2019) “El negacionismo en España (2): Aznar y la estrategia del ‘Gota a Gota’” <https://www.climatica.lamarea.com/el-negacionismo-en-espana-2-aznar-y-la-estrategia-del-gota-a-gota/>, [Accessed 24 October 2023].
 21. Aznar’s narrative is *not* populist or national-populist, since it is not centered on the people, but it has all the other ingredients, thus displaying a close family-resemblance with the far-right eco-nationalism: the Manichean simplification of the political space; the critique of the (global) progressive elites as being evil and the enemy of the “free society” and the Spanish nation, intermittent ecological denialism or skepticism, in addition to an anti-scientism with conspirative elements. It is also noteworthy that Aznar is not anti-elitist in general; he is against the (global) progressive elites.
 22. See: El País (23/10/2023), Aznar dice que la ecología es el nuevo comunismo y duda del calentamiento. https://elpais.com/diario/2008/10/23/sociedad/1224712806_850215.html, [Accessed 24 October 2023].
 23. See: Público (1/12/2010) “Aznar lanza su ‘think tank’ contra el calentamiento global”, <https://www.publico.es/ciencias/aznar-lanza-think-tank-calentamiento.html>. [Accessed 24 October 2023].
 24. See: El País (22/10/2007) Rajoy cuestiona el cambio climático y afirma que no puede convertirse en el “gran problema mundial”, https://elpais.com/sociedad/2007/10/22/actualidad/1193004007_850215.html. [Accessed 23 October 2023].
 25. Lippert-Heide posits a unique goal of Aznar’s and Rajoy’s stand on environmentalism. Yes, in our view, his interpretation is not borne out by the ambivalence of the existing evidence.
 26. See: Servimedia (25/5/2017) Rajoy dice que el cambio climático es “una de las encrucijadas más importantes” de la historia. <https://www.servimedia.es/noticias/705981>. [Accessed 23 October 2023].
 27. Surely, beyond the ideology of free market and economic freedom, Spanish capitalism has been characterized by neo-corporatist and/or clientelistic practices based on the triangle of collusive actors (the government sector, building sector, and financial capital elite (see Buendía and Molero-Simaro, 2018)).
 28. See: La Moncloa (30/11/2015), Rajoy subraya el compromiso de España con el reto del cambio climático, <https://www.lamoncloa.es/actualidad/2015/11/30/rajoy-subraya-el-compromiso-de-espana-con-el-reto-del-cambio-climatico/>.

- gob.es/presidente/actividades/Paginas/2015/301115rajoyparis.aspx, [Accessed 23 October 2023].
29. See: La Moncloa (15/11/2016), Conferencia de prensa del presidente del Gobierno después de su asistencia a la Cumbre del Clima, <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/presidente/intervenciones/Paginas/2016/prp20161115.aspx>, [Accessed 23 October 2023].
30. Remarkably, there is a mutual appreciation between the two political leaders, who both held critical views of Mariano Rajoy's soft approach to Catalonia and the national question. Aznar regards Abascal as "endowed with good qualities" ([El Diario, 2018](#)). Moreover, he denies that Abascal and Vox represent far-right, as they are situated at the "right of the right." An appreciation that Aznar already expressed in 2021, on the program of Jordi Évole, when he stated that he does not consider Vox to be far-right: "I have not seen Abascal calling for the streets to be set on fire, or houses to be stormed or properties occupied, or streets to be demonstrated on or cobblestones thrown in the streets" ([The Objective, 2023](#)). However, Aznar fails to acknowledge the diversity within the far-right spectrum, opting instead for a narrow characterization that closely aligns with far-right fascism.
31. The liberal-conservative party *Ciudadanos* (Citizens) rapidly disappeared from the Spanish political scene, which has now stabilized as two plus two system, with the two traditional parties, centre-right PP and centre-left PSOE, occupying the central stage and two extreme parties far-right Vox and leftist Sumar/Podemos.
32. See: Europa Press (4/11/2019) Casado ve "cínico" que Sánchez dé lecciones con la Cumbre del Clima cuando no actúa ante la violencia en Cataluña, <https://www.europapress.es/nacional/noticia-casado-ve-cinico-sanchez-lecciones-cumbre-clima-cuando-no-actua-violencia-cataluna-20191101161846.html>, [Accessed 23 October 2023].
33. See: Eldiario.es (21/11/2019) Casado carga contra el "populismo", pero critica la "ideología de género" y dice que es "adaptacionista" del cambio climático, https://www.eldiario.es/politica/casado-populismo-ideologia-adaptacionista-climatico_1_1247285.html, [Accessed 23 October 2023].
34. By "populist humour", we refer to the comic strategies used to construct and intensify the antagonism between People and the elite/establishment. Given the complexity of populist phenomena, which can be authoritarian, emancipatory, or ambivalent, populist humour can either contribute or undermine the democratic ethos. The Indignados movement used humour as a key strategy to criticize the establishment and demand "real democracy now." In contrast, Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Matteo Salvini, and Rodrigo Duterte are populist "tricksters" who profusely use comic strategies that undermine an inclusive democratic ethos ([Ungureanu, 2024](#)).
35. See: Cadenaser (8/1/2020) Ayuso considera una "anécdota de medios" sus declaraciones negando que la contaminación mata, https://cadenaser.com/emisora/2020/01/08/radio_madrid/1578493138_723669.html, [Accessed 23 October 2023].
36. See: Isabel Díaz Ayuso: Rte (12/12/2019) "Algún día conoceremos qué 'lobby' hay detrás de las emergencias climáticas", <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20191212/isabel-diaz-ayuso-algun-dia-conoceremos-lobby-hay-detrás-emergencias-climáticas/1993691.shtml>, [Accessed 23 October 2023].
37. ElPlural (15/06/2022) El nuevo portavoz de Ayuso niega el cambio climático: "Que haga calor en junio es lo más natural", See: https://www.elplural.com/autonomias/madrid/nuevo-portavoz-ayuso-niega-cambio-climatico-calor-junio-natural_291951102, [Accessed 23 October 2023].
38. See: Eldiario.es (10/11/2022) Ayuso dice que la emergencia climática va contra la evidencia científica y tiene detrás al "comunismo", https://www.eldiario.es/rastreador/ayuso-dice-emergencia-climatica-evidencia-cientifica-detrás-comunismo_132_9698108.html. [Accessed 23 October 2023].
39. This is not to say that Ayuso's discourse and practice is devoid of ambivalence, as she mixes denialism with an adaptative stance. For the latter stance, see for instance Comunidad de Madrid ([2021](#)) "Plan for decarbonization and environmental care."
40. See for example the UK Control Pollution Act of 1974, available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1974/40>.

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