

# THE RECONQUISTA MYTH AND THE RISE OF VOX IN ANDALUSIA

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by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Reconquista Myth and the Rise of Vox in Andalusia

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Spain has differed from the rest of the European Union for decades due to its absence of far-right party representation in the government. However, that unexpectedly changed when in 2018 the far-right Vox Party infiltrated the regional parliament of Andalusia after a successful election. Despite its recent emergence in 2013, the Vox Party was able to flip the Andalusian parliament after years of social democratic rule. This thesis explores how the Vox Party was able to gain support in the Andalusian region. The Vox Party has invoked the concept of the Reconquista as part of its narrative, a strategy that has been used by far-right entities in Spain since the Franco regime. This thesis argues that the concept of the Reconquista is a historical myth that was created to legitimize Spain through a unified identity. However, it also highlights that constructing a fictional national historiography in order to establish a nation is not unique to

Spain. This thesis further argues that the Vox Party instrumentalized the Reconquista, a historical myth, as a narrative that parallels the current conditions of contemporary Spain. By continuing to mold Spain's history, specifically the Reconquista, into a national narrative about how Spain is a Catholic nation united against Islam, Vox was able to garner the support of the people of Andalusia. While this thesis acknowledges that there are other factors that contributed to Vox's success, it adds that the Reconquista is also an important contributor.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the Vox Party tweeted, “The Reconquista starts in Andalusian lands”. Attached to the tweet was a video of Abascal, the President of Vox, riding a horse. Vox would remain true to its words, winning twelve seats in Andalusia’s parliament in the 2018 election. Although it appears to be a numerically small win, this election meant that Vox had control of eleven percent of the parliament. In addition, after nearly forty years of social democratic rule in Andalusia (Rubio-Pueyo 1), a far-right party had finally infiltrated the regional parliament. Not only did Vox flip the parliament of Andalusia, but it also ended Spain’s reputation as an exception to the increasing involvement of far-right parties in parliament in Europe. How did a far-right party that only emerged in 2013 accomplish such a historical feat in Andalusia?

The Vox Party’s sudden and unexpected rise in popularity could be explained by the party’s instrumentalization of the Reconquista as part of their platform. The Reconquista refers to the historical conquest of Christian Iberia by Spanish Muslims (Farkhani et. al 72). Since the Franco regime, conservatives in Spain have revived the concept of the Reconquista as a political tool to garner support for their stances. Vox’s use of the Reconquista is unique because it is the first conservative group that has succeeded in gaining political representation with this rhetoric since the dictatorship of Franco.

The issue with the Reconquista is that the concept itself is a myth. It was constructed to serve as an “effective ideological tool for building Spanish identity” as a Spanish Catholic nation shaped against Islam (García-Sanjuán 133). This mythical national historiography gave Spain the legitimacy to become a nation state. Spain follows a similar pattern as other countries that have constructed the nation through fictional national narratives.

Vox's exploitation of the Reconquista may have contributed to its success as a far-right political party, but it has also allowed Vox to promote an Islamophobic, racist, and exclusionary rhetoric. By uniting Spain under a Spanish Catholic identity, Vox rejects those that do not conform to this identity. As a result, Muslims and minorities in Spain face increasing adversity with Vox in power.



## 1. BACKGROUND ON THE RECONQUISTA

The following account of the events refer specifically to the historical occurrences that make up the notion of the “Reconquista”. In the eighth century, the Spanish Iberian Peninsula was overtaken by Muslims from the Umayyad Caliphate. Having brought an army from North Africa to conquer the whole peninsula, the Muslims, or Moors as they were called, defeated the Visigoth regime standing in their way. This collapse of the Visigoths, who were Christians, has been said to be the beginning of the history of the idea of the reconquest (O’Callaghan 4).

Despite the dominance of the Moors in Al-Andalus (the region of the Iberian Peninsula Muslims inhabited), Christian groups still had small independent regions in the Northern part of the peninsula. The opportunity for the Northern Christian inhabitants to gain power appeared when a civil war amongst the Caliphate led to the disintegration of the Caliphate into smaller Islamic kingdoms in the eleventh century (Radulovic). During this time Christian kingdoms emerged as the Caliphate remained distracted by the conflict amongst themselves. Some of these groups of Christians in the North took on the task of reconquering the lands from the Moors (Fletcher 32) because they believed that they were “related” to the Visigoths through Christianity. Thus, the movement to restore the dominance of Christians began.

With the Caliphate broken into pieces, the Christian forces were able to capture Toledo, a city that once had been the capital of the Visigoths. This was the first big success of the Reconquista (Radulovic). Less than a decade later, Valencia, another Muslim foothold, was also taken over. The progression of the Christian forces halted in the twelfth century when the Moors gained a large part of the Iberian Peninsula. Once again, the tides turned back in favor of the Moors and the Christian forces realized that they needed to reconcile their differences in order to return the favor to their side once more.

The decision to unite the Christian Kingdoms against the Moors shifted the favor to the Christian side once more. The defeat of the Moors in the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa became a key victory for the Christians as they gained entry to Al-Andalus, a major foothold for the Moors. By the fifteenth century only Granada remained in the hands of Muslims. During this time King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella started a campaign against the Muslims in Granada. Eleven years later in 1492 the last of the Moors' hold on the Iberian Peninsula ended. After nearly eight hundred years of warfare, the Reconquista came to an end and Spain became “whole” again.

## 2. THE RECONQUISTA MYTH

There is no denying that in medieval Spain there was a period of 800 years of warfare between the Christian and Muslim forces for the Iberian Peninsula. There has been documentation from combatants in the Christian population which emphasize the “religious aspect of the Christian war against Islam” from the very beginning of the eighth century (Edwards 165). That is not to say that there was never a period of peace among the two groups in the peninsula. In Américo Castro’s 1954 book *The Structure of Spanish History*, Castro emphasizes the idea of “La Convivencia” in the Andalusian region. Castro defines “La Convivencia” as an era coexistence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in medieval Spain.

While some aspects of the period that refers to the Reconquista may be true, overall the idea is a fabrication. Through critical analysis by philosophers and scholars alike, the notion of the Reconquista has been proven to be a myth. The following figures all provide distinct reasons as to why the Reconquista is fictional. Each perspective is discussed in a chronological order so that the layers that make the Reconquista a myth can be better understood.

Ortega y Gasset, a renowned Spanish philosopher of the 20th century, wrote in his 1921 book *Espana Invertebrada*, “I don’t understand how a thing that lasted eight centuries can be called a reconquest” (129). To Ortega y Gasset, the Reconquista is not one singular event, rather it is a long period of time of sporadic warfare among the two religious forces. Ortega y Gasset’s statement during his time was highly controversial because the narrative of the Christian reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula was dominant in that era (Wolf 378).

Contemporary scholars have built upon Ortega y Gasset’s work to promote the idea that the Reconquista is a myth. One of these scholars include Alejandro García-Sanjuán, a Spanish historian and Professor at University of Huelva. García-Sanjuán has written the most recent

works surrounding the events that occurred in the Iberian Peninsula during the medieval period and has contributed new findings regarding the topic. García-Sanjuán's main argument is that the notion of the Reconquista was created as a product of nineteenth century Spanish Nationalist thinking (133). This meant that the notion of the "Reconquista" was not used in the centuries the warfare actually occurred, but many centuries later. In fact, the word "restoration" was used by people during that time (Saloma 207). During the nineteenth century period, the nation became a new political subject as a result of liberalism bringing in the idea of national sovereignty. García-Sanjuán explains that the nation needed to be legitimized and that there was no better way to gain this legitimacy than the past (135). As a result, Spain was able to gain legitimacy to become a nation from the Reconquista. The Reconquista suggests that Spain and Spaniards already existed when the Moors arrived in the Iberian Peninsula (Lopez et al. 256). However, this was not possible because as García-Sanjuán mentions in his writing, the Reconquista was created to establish Spain as a nation in the 19th century. Therefore, Spain could not have existed prior to the occurrence of the Reconquista. Yet the notion of the Reconquista suggests that Spain has always existed, and the purpose of the Reconquista was to take back the nation. This idea that Spain's territory has always been naturally Spanish is contradictory to its emergence in the 19th century. The Christian kingdoms that fought the Muslims for territory were not doing so in the name of Spain or being Spaniards.

Francisco García Fitz, a Spanish historian and medievalist, agrees with García-Sanjuán that the Reconquista gave Spain a history and a "strong singularity with respect to other European nations" (144). Fitz acknowledges that the Reconquista is a myth, but he brings in evidence from the middle ages to further validate his argument. For one, Fitz explains, the Visigoth kingdom that was defeated by the Moors were enemies with the Northern Christians

that later served as the “reconquerers”. As a result of the antagonism between these two sides, the Northern Christians can’t be considered the political successors of the Visigoths (Fitz 149). Therefore, they did not “reconquer” the land, but rather conquered it because it did not belong to the Northerners to begin with. Secondly, religion was not the main reason for this conquest. According to Fitz, socioeconomic order played a much bigger influence (148). Joseph O’Callaghan, Professor Emeritus of History at Fordham University and the ex-President of the American Catholic Historical Association and the Academy of American Historians of Medieval Spain, stated that the Reconquista can be “described a war of both territorial aggrandizement and of religious confrontation” (7). While the role of religion during the Reconquista cannot be denied, it has been exaggerated. Pushing the Moors from Al-Andalus allowed the Northerners to gain land which benefitted them economically. Fitz further adds that the religious and political arguments brought up to inspire the resistance movement were not shared by those who led it but were added much later (151).

The Reconquista is proven to be a myth because what occurred in medieval Spain cannot be considered a “reconquest”. For one, the Reconquista is not a singular event, but centuries of inconsistent warfare. Secondly, the notion of the Reconquista did not emerge until the nineteenth century, which was significantly later than the occurrence of the Reconquista itself. In addition, the Reconquista implies that Spain has always existed which is contradictory to the fact that the Reconquista was constructed to bring Spain into existence in the 19th century. Finally, the Northern Christian Kingdoms that defeated the Muslims in Al Andalusia did not have the relationship with the former Visigoths to be considered as successors. Lastly, the motivation behind the war was not solely religion, but territorial gain for economic benefits as well.

### 3. NATIONAL HISTIOGRAPHIES

There is a plethora of scholarships regarding the Reconquista in Spain. The role this myth has played in shaping Spain's identity as a nation is remarkable. While the origins of Spain's national history are unique, it is important to highlight that Spain is not the only nation to construct its identity based on a mythical national narrative. This process of building a nation in Spain was part of a pattern in Western Europe (Balfour and Quiroga 17) but also a similar pattern for the construction of all nations.

Anthony D. Smith is a historical sociologist that is considered to be one of the founders of the field of nationalism studies. In Smith's book *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, Smith explores the idea of national historiographies when he defines the nation as:

A named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths, and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members (19).

Smith's emphasis on the nation being defined by "common myths" and "historical memories" in a "historic territory" indicates that these characteristics are the basis of all nations. He argues that nationalism is a byproduct of communities possessing a unique history that is created into a "historical movement" by historians. This "cultural" myth that is the historical movement allows the nation to first establish then later retain its legitimacy as it is reinterpreted and rediscovered by modern elites.

Etienne Balibar, a French philosopher, is also a renowned scholar in the field of nationalism. Like Smith, Balibar shares similar sentiments about the basis of a nation. In his essay, *The Nation Form: History and Ideology* Balibar writes:

The history of nations, beginning with our own, is always already presented to us in the form of a narrative which attributes to these entities the continuity of a subject (86).

Balibar's main argument is that all national histories are created the same way. The nation has a history from which a narrative is constructed. This historical narrative is an illusion because perspectives of events are intentionally selected for the purpose of establishing a nation. Once the narrative is established, it allows the nation to exist and it allows the nation to become self-aware. After becoming self-aware, the nation becomes personified because it is viewed as something that will continue to develop until it fulfills its destiny. The historical narrative allows this continuity of the nation as it "grows".

In the case of Spain, the history of the warfare between the Christians and Muslims for the Iberian Peninsula is real and it is an era that is unique to Spain. However, the framework of this period, the Reconquista, is a narrative that is created by historians and elites. The Reconquista legitimizes Spain's right to be a nation. It creates an imaginary unitary subject which the Spanish people belong to. It gives Spain a destiny and as it is invoked again and again by politicians, it serves as a continuity in Spain's development to fulfill its destiny. However, as established by Smith and Balibar, this process of Spain coming into being is similar to other nations.

#### 4. RECONQUISTA AND THE SPANISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

As established earlier, the Reconquista was produced to legitimize Spain as a nation. So, how did the Reconquista give Spain legitimacy? The Reconquista gave Spain validity by giving it a national identity. Mike Horswell and Akil Awan, both historians, put it best when they wrote, “the exaltation of the Reconquista was one of the building blocks for the construction of a Spanish national identity” (58). This Spanish identity was important for creating Spain's purpose for existence because “centrally relevant to ideologies of nationhood and national identity, national identity can be invoked either to legitimize or to subvert the existing political order” (Fitz 148).

The identity of contemporary Spain consists of two main ideas. The first is that Spain is a Catholic nation. An early aspect of the construction of the Spanish national identity was an emphasis on a pure Christian genealogy (Fuchs 1). This aspect of Spain’s identity originates from the Visigoths who were initially defeated by the Muslims when they arrived in the Iberian Peninsula. It also refers to the Christian Kingdoms who later “reconquered” the land lost by the Visigoths from the Moors. The Reconquista promotes the idea that Christians or more specifically Catholics are the true inhabitants of medieval Spain. As a result, the actions of the Christian Kingdoms to expel the Muslims were justified because they were reclaiming what belonged to them. This “liberation” of medieval Spain from Muslims established the territory as exclusively Catholic. Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo, a famous 19th century Spanish historian, scholar, and nominee for the Nobel Prize in Literature wrote in his book *Historia de las ideas estéticas en España*, “Christianity gave its unity to Spain. Thanks to it, we have been a Nation, even a great Nation, and not a multitude of individuals” (Junco 29). The dominance of Christianity allowed Spain to unite under this identity and become a nation.



The second aspect of Spain's identity is that it is a nation that is shaped against Islam. This identity originates from the Muslims being expelled from the Iberian Peninsula by the Christian forces. While the Reconquista gives legitimacy to actions of the Christians in medieval Spain, the Reconquista illegitimizes the Muslims' actions (García Sanjuán 2020). The Christians "reconquered" the land that belonged to them, but the Muslims "invaded" the land that was not theirs. Thus, the Christians are the protagonists of Spain's history while Muslims are the antagonists. The success of the Christian kingdoms pushing out the Muslims from Al-Andalus reinforced the perception of Christians as victorious heroes while it pushed the perception of Muslims as defeated enemies. Furthermore, this loss for the Moors proved Spain's historical incompatibility with Islam. It showed that while Islam tried to exist in Spain, it failed because Spain rejected its presence within its territory. Therefore, Spain's identity is not only attributed to Christian exclusivity, but also the rejection of Islam. Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, the Prime Minister of the Spanish Republican government that was exiled by Dictator Franco, wrote in *España: un enigma histórico*, "Without Islam who can guess what our [Spain's] destiny might have been?" (Irwin). Sánchez-Albornoz too was a strong proponent of the idea that Spain was united under Catholicism, but he also acknowledged the role of Islam in driving that unity as well.

It is important to highlight that there were attempts to popularize other accounts of the "Spanish" identity. In the 19th century when Spain was trying to gain legitimacy as a nation, two rival versions of the Spanish national identity emerged. The ideological divide between conservatives and liberals led to two distinct and starkly different narratives (Torecilli). While both parties viewed the Reconquista as a liberation struggle for Spain, they disagreed on how the period of Muslim rule in Al-Andalus should be depicted. During this time neither party

questioned the mythical premise from which they constructed their narratives. Liberals embraced the presence of Muslims in medieval Spain as part of Spain's heritage. They wanted to include Islam as part of Spain's identity in addition to Catholicism. Conservatives on the other hand viewed the presence of Muslims as a tragedy for Spain. They wanted Spain's identity to be exclusively Christian. The decision to villainize the Moors in medieval Spain set the narratives of the two parties apart. The two parties struggled against each other to implement their distinct Spanish identity, but the liberals in the end failed (Junco 31). As a result, the Conservative's version of Spain's identity was adopted, and Spain was defined as a Catholic nation shaped against Islam.

## **5. THE POLITICAL INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF THE RECONQUISTA**

Historically, the Reconquista has been politically instrumentalized by politicians in Spain. National historiographies such as the Reconquista have the ability to “become a weapon to attack or defend political positions” under the guise of objectivity (Torrecilla). The Vox Party is not the first far right group to invoke the Reconquista as part of their political rhetoric. The path for exploiting the Reconquista for political means has been paved by conservatives’ centuries before the existence of Vox. History has shown that the intensity of the use of this narrative and the success groups have achieved from it vary. Despite these discrepancies, Vox has benefited from its predecessor’s experimentation with the Reconquista. The following are periods of time in which the use of the Reconquista has been prominent.

### **5.1 Early Stage**

The Reconquista itself is a political memory. It was created as a national narrative to legitimize the political subject, the nation. Both the Liberals and Conservatives constructed their own version of their interpretation of the Reconquista period. The Liberals claimed Spain’s Islamic period as part of its rich history while the Conservatives viewed Islamic presence as a tragedy for Spain. Since the twentieth century, the Conservative’s version dominated, and Spain’s identity became defined as an exclusively Catholic nation that is built against Islam. It is this Conservative ideology that withstood time and continues to be used by other far right groups. The nineteenth and twentieth century was the Reconquista’s first era of instrumentalization as a political tool.

### **5.2 Franco Regime**

Under the Franco regime, the narrative of the Reconquista thrived once more. In 1936,

Spain found itself engaged in a bloody Civil War. The cause of this war was widespread labor unrest which had led to increasing amounts of poverty and inequality. When the Republicans leftist party was democratically elected, the Nationalists, a fascist extreme group, attempted to stage a military coup. This resulted in the Spanish Civil War that lasted for three years.

Eventually, the Nationalists won the Civil War and took over Spain with a final coup d'etat. The leader of the Nationalist forces, Francisco Franco, ruled as the dictator of Spain.

Even before Franco came into power, the Civil War was framed by the Catholic Church as a second Crusade and Reconquista in which "Spain would defeat the contemporary enemies of the faith" (Basilio 72). The Nationalists were believed to be the liberators of Spain who would restore Spain to its former glory. The Republicans were framed as evil communists who were godless. When Franco became Spain's Caudillo, or military leader, the support of the Catholic Church remained with the Nationalists. During his regime, Franco drew parallels between the Reconquista to the Franco era of Spain and reiterated this idea in his speeches, writings, and visual mediums. By exploiting the Reconquista for propaganda, Franco was able to create an idealized image of himself and justify his actions as what is best for Spain. Franco's aim was to create a unified Spain under Catholicism and to restore the monarchy.

Franco himself was compared to the heroes of the Reconquista. In a painting of Franco, he was depicted sitting on a white horse resembling the "Moor Slayer", Spain's patron Saint James (Basilo 87). This painting implied that Franco was serving a similar purpose as the reconquers who "liberated" Spain from Islam and restored Catholicism in Spain. In the case of Franco, he was liberating Spain from Communism and reinstating Catholicism once more. Franco did in fact reinstate Christianity. During his rule he made Catholicism the mandated state

religion and banned the practice of all other religions. In one of his speeches to the Falangist party, Franco said:

The destiny of Spain and the preservation of her eternal values, the suppression of which would imply slavery and chaos. On this path we must be intransigent in exacting sacrifices from all for the benefit of our national unity - a guarantee of Spain's future. In these days our generations are not merely faced with territorial and political problems, but also with supreme issues of the existence of our faith, our civilization and our culture, which are now at stake once more." (Wordpress)

Catholicism was not the only way Franco planned to unite Spain. As he stated in his speech, the need to protect Spanish culture was also an important goal for his government. In addition to prohibiting other religions, Franco also banned languages such as Catalan and Basque. Activities that were not "traditionally" Spanish were forbidden as well. Franco accomplished this under the guise that like the Reconquista he too was playing a pivotal role in uniting Spain. Franco was "liberating" Spain not just from non-Christians, but also any other characteristics that did not fit the traditional core Spanish culture (Farkhani et al. 72).

### **5.3 Post Franco**

After the death of Franco in 1975, democracy arrived in Spain. During this time, the Reconquista came under scholarly criticism for the first time for being a mythical national narrative (García-Sanjuán 145). Attempts were made by scholars to "neutralize" the Reconquista from its biases, but they all failed. As a result, the Conservative version of the Reconquista remained dominant.

In the following years the political exploitation of the Reconquista fell because the concept of Spanish nationalism became entwined with the harsh rule of Franco. While over the

year's politicians did not use the Reconquista as intensely as Franco, they still made references to the Reconquista for political interests. For example, after the Madrid train bombings in 2004, the Populist Party referred to Al Qaeda as "Moritos" (Little Moors) (Reinares). The word "Moor" refers to the Muslims that resided in the Iberian Peninsula in medieval Spain. The Populist Party's decision to use "Moritos" instead of using the Spanish term "Muslmán" to describe Al Qaeda invoked the notion of the Reconquista. When Vox later entered Spain's political scene, they instrumentalized the Reconquista far more intensely than any other political parties (Ballester Rodriguez 1).

## 6. VOX AND THE RECONQUISTA

Vox's 2016 slogan, "Hacer España Grande Otra Vez" (Make Spain Great Again) summarizes its objective as a party. Inspired by the former US President Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again", Vox entered Spain's political sphere as a far-right party in 2013. This was a brave decision due to the fact that Spain had been averse to the extreme right since the Franco regime. Initially, the founders of Vox, Santiago Abascal and Jose Antonio Ortega, were former members of the Partido Popular Party (PP), a center-right conservative group. The motivation behind the founding of the Vox party was to protest against Mariano Rajoy's, the Prime Minister of Spain, hesitancy towards the Catalan independence movement (Rubio-Pueyo 7) and the PP Party's lack of action regarding the separatist movements. It is important to note that because the PP Party is already conservative, Vox was able to use it to kickstart a party that presented even more far right. In Vox's website it describes itself as "the voice of Spain" and "a movement of extreme necessity" (VoxEspana).

The ideology that Vox promotes its stances with is the Reconquista. Vox's discourse "basically rehashes old tropes of Spanish Nationalism and Francoist rhetoric with a postmodern twist" (Rubio-Pueyo 11). The issues Vox addresses are labeled as threats to Spain and its identity. To emphasize this threat, Vox instrumentalized the Reconquista to draw parallels between contemporary Spain and the Reconquista period in order to highlight that Spain is experiencing the need to protect itself once more. As a result, Vox frames its stances towards these issues as a way of "reconquering" Spain and making it united under a homogenous Spanish Catholic identity. With Vox playing the role of the "reconquerors", they set their sights on Andalusia as the starting point for their "reconquest". This location was chosen with a clear purpose as it was the region that the Christian kingdoms conquered from the Muslims in

medieval Spain. During the 2018 Andalusian election that resulted in the Vox Party's entrance into Andalusia's regional parliament, the main topic in the speeches given by Vox was the Reconquista (Farkhani et al. 71).

One of the issues that Vox classifies as a threat to Spain is undocumented immigration which they define as "illegal". Regarding this subject, Vox President Abascal said, "We have emigrated with order and concert, respecting the legality of the countries to which we have gone, and we have received immigration with disorder and confusion" (Goodreads). There are two aspects of undocumented immigration in Spain that allow Vox to instrumentalize the Reconquista. One, undocumented immigrants are not "Spanish", therefore there is an otherness to them. Two, Vox believes that most undocumented immigrants in Spain are from Muslim countries. Vox is not only concerned with undocumented immigration, but Muslim migration in particular. Even legality does not change Vox's opposition towards Muslim presence in contemporary Spain. President Abascal has even said, "Spain has an advantage: that it was vaccinated against Islamic immigration during eight centuries of occupation and eight centuries of Reconquista" (Cervi 13). By drawing parallels between the contemporary Muslims in Spain and the Moors in the Iberian Peninsula the Vox Party is able to label the former as a threat to the Spanish identity.

When Vox exploits the Reconquista to justify its opposition towards Muslims, it borrows from Spain's identity as a nation constructed against Islam. However, in rejecting Islam, Vox also reaffirms the Catholic identity of Spain by referring to the "Islamic worldview [as] the opposite of the Christian worldview of the world, of the Judeo-Christian, Western world, of which Spain has been a very important part" (Goodreads). Vox is against multiculturalism in Spain as it disrupts the uniform identity created by the Reconquista. So, the opposition towards



Muslim immigrants is also based on differences in ethnicity, language, and culture. These aspects of Muslim immigrants do not align with Spain. As a result, Vox is more open to Hispanic immigrants who speak Spanish and have a similar culture and ethnicity. Vox believes that Hispanic immigrants are able to blend in Spanish society seamlessly, allowing Spain to retain its homogeneity.

Instrumentalizing the Reconquista also allowed Vox to argue against the Catalan and Basque independence movements. Under Franco's rule the Basque and Catalonia region were violently suppressed because they were seen as a threat to the unity of Spain. After the democratization of Spain, these two regions embraced their identity once more with a new intensity. This sparked the Catalan and Basque independence movements. Horswell put it best when he argued that, "the Reconquista constitutes an argument not only against Islam and multiculturalism but also against those who defend regional autonomies and/or federalism within the Spanish state" (59). The Reconquista unites Spain under a homogenous Spanish Catholic identity. As a result, any separatist movements are a threat to this unity. The threat of the independence movements is twofold for Vox. One, the success of the movements would lead to the fragmentation of Spain. Two, the region of Catalonia and Basque both have its own distinct language, culture, and identity which go against Vox's aversion to multiculturalism in Spain.

Vox is strongly opposed to any forms of regional autonomy. However, its focus has been on Catalonia's independence movement since Vox's inception. Vox has even gone as far to promote the illegalization of separatist parties to further prevent the Catalan independence movement. In 2019, Catalan separatist leaders were put on trial for authorizing an illegal referendum. After holding this unconstitutional referendum, Catalonia declared independence in 2017. In this trial, Javier Ortega Smith, the secretary general of Vox, argued that "We must put a

stop to secession. It wants to confront us, it wants to divide us”, further showing Vox’s opposition to disjointing Spain (Rodríguez). It is important to note that Catalonia’s motivation for autonomy goes beyond the need to preserve its own distinct identity. After Spain’s 2009 financial crisis, Catalonia felt that they had to carry the burden of Spain’s economic troubles which led them to push for independence. Even through the economic perspective of secession President Abascal argued that, “The economic crisis will find us without national unity and without legal security”, once again highlighting how Catalonia’s secession would lead to the loss of unity (Rodríguez). Regarding separatist movements, Vox emphasizes the need for Spain to remain together under a homogenous identity. This idea of a united Spain was achieved by the Reconquista and Vox strives to preserve this idea by preventing regional autonomy.

## 7. THE RISE OF VOX IN ANDALUSIA

Vox's emphasis on Spain needing stricter crackdowns on immigration and separatist movements in the 2018 election appealed to the people of Andalusia. According to Hector Illueca et al.'s analysis on the election, some of the top motivations for Andalusian constituents who voted for Vox were immigration (41.6%) and concerns with Spanish unity (33.7%). Vox's win in Andalusia wasn't only historic because a far-right party had finally entered the political scene in Spain, but for the first time an anti-immigration platform had successfully gained a foothold in Spain. Although Spain's attitude towards immigration has been hardening as the result of increasing immigration, Vox has also played a part in this change in attitude (Enríquez). Vox has normalized anti-immigration sentiments in Spain. Vox's stance on the Catalan independence movement has also played a role in its success in the Andalusian election.

While Vox's anti-immigration and anti-separatist movements stances contributed to its success in infiltrating Andalusia's regional parliament, these aspects of its platform were presented to the voters in the framework of the Reconquista. Both immigration and the independence movements were depicted as threats to Spain's unity as a Catholic nation built against Islam. As a result, this thesis argues that while there may be other factors that contributed to Vox's popularity in Andalusia, its instrumentalization of the Reconquista played an important role as well.

Vox is not the first far right party to hold an anti-immigration and anti-regional autonomy view in Spain. However, it is the first right party to have achieved political success since the Franco regime with these beliefs. Vox's pro-Spanish and nationalist narrative is what attracted its supporters in Andalusia (Turnbull-Dugarte). This "pro Spanish" and "nationalist" message arose from the Reconquista which established Spain as a Catholic nation constructed against Islam.

Therefore, Vox's success in the 2018 Andalusian election can also be attributed to its exploitation of the Reconquista. By paralleling the issues of contemporary Spain with the Reconquista, Vox has created this idea that Spain needs to be "reconquered" and restored to its former glory. This strategy worked effectively especially in Andalusia because it was the very location in which the Reconquista took place in medieval Spain.

## 8. CONSEQUENCES OF VOX

Vox's success in obtaining political representation in Spain's government continued after the 2018 Andalusian election. Today, Vox is the third largest party in the national parliament of Spain. The party has gained seats in thirteen different regional parliaments. Two of these regional parliaments include the Basque and Catalonia region, the two groups seeking independence from Spain. In a matter of nine years, Vox has rapidly gained political representation in Spain as a far-right party. Vox's success however comes with consequences for those that do not fit the "Spanish" identity. The party's instrumentalization of the Reconquista may have allowed it to gain rapid popularity in Spain, but it also allowed Vox to promote an Islamophobic, racist, and xenophobic rhetoric.

In 2022, Vox tweeted that undocumented Muslim immigrants were responsible for the high crime rates in Catalonia (Corral). Shortly after, Twitter temporarily banned Vox for promoting hate towards immigrants in Spain. This was not the first time Twitter had to censor Vox due to safety violations. In 2021, Vox's Twitter account was blocked for using the hashtag #StopIslamization prior to national elections (Corral). These are some of many Islamophobic messages promoted by Vox. The instrumentalization of the Reconquista has permitted Vox to villainize Muslims in Spain. In labeling Islam as a threat to Spain, Vox has become a threat to the safety of Muslims in Spain.

Vox's platform doesn't just produce Islamophobia but racism as well. Vox has been harsh towards Moroccans, a minority group in Spain, because Spain has received an influx of immigrants from Morocco. In response, President Abascal has called for walls to be built around Spain's north African enclaves to prevent illegal immigration from Morocco. Vox even claimed that the young Moroccan migrants arriving in Spain will destroy coexistence in neighborhoods

and create insecurity. This racist rhetoric that labels young Moroccan immigrants as “criminals” has led to increasing police brutality towards Moroccan minors in Spanish neighborhoods (Santamarina 897). Vox’s platform gives ordinary Spaniards the platform to be racist which is dangerous not just for Moroccans, but ethnic minorities in Spain.

While Vox unites Spain under a Spanish Catholic identity, it excludes those that do not fit the criteria. Vox’s instrumentalization of the Reconquista harms minority groups in Spain because it pushes for the rejection of those deemed “others”. The Vox Party’s rhetoric has the capability to cause more damage to these groups if it continues to remain in power.

## CONCLUSION

The emergence of the Vox Party is worth studying for its use of the Reconquista as a political instrument. The visibility and parliamentary representation this party has achieved in a short time as a far-right group in Spain is remarkable. Vox managed to do what many far-right groups failed to achieve – end Spain’s exceptionalism from the far right. Vox’s strong opposition towards immigration and separatist movements have appealed to the people of Spain. Vox’s instrumentalization of the Reconquista to parallel the current conditions of contemporary Spain with the conditions of medieval Spain has really resonated with voters. By framing immigration and regional independence movements as a threat to Spain’s Christian identity and unity, Vox has been able to garner people’s support. Vox has taken on the role of modern day “reconquerers” that will take back Spain and restore it to its former Reconquista glory. It is important to note that while Vox has made an impact in Spanish politics, its popularity is slowly diminishing. For some time, it seemed that Vox would eventually surpass the PP Party, the group that many of its founders originated from, but its growth has become stagnant (Casals).

The Reconquista has served Vox well, but the national historiography on which Vox’s platform stands is a myth. The Reconquista consisted of centuries of warfare and is not the singular event it is depicted to be. It is a byproduct of nationalist thinking that only emerged in the 19th century to legitimize Spain as a nation. The concept also consists of too many historical inaccuracies to be objective. Although mythical national narratives are not unique to Spain, Vox’s exploitation of the Reconquista has caused negative consequences for minorities in Spain. While the Reconquista does unite Spain under a Spanish Catholic identity, it rejects those that resemble “otherness”.

Since its inception in the 19th century, the Reconquista has served as a political instrument for conservatives. It is important that the study of the Reconquista continues so that the political exploitation of this national narrative can be better understood as it is invoked again and again by politicians in the future. The notion of the Reconquista will never vanish from the memory of Spain because it is the basis of the nation. As a result, the analysis of the Reconquista will always remain relevant and valuable in scholarship.



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