When the US far-right sneezes, the European far-right catches a cold. Quasi-experimental evidence of electoral contagion from Spain.

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Abstract

Does the electoral defeat of a far-right party abroad influence support for similar parties at home? In this paper we posit, and test, the theoretical argument that signals of viability and popularity akin to *bandwagon* and *titanic* effects operate beyond the confines of national boundaries to cause voters to update domestic preferences based on comparable party performance abroad. By exploiting the quasi-experimental setting provided by the coincidental timing of Donald Trump's 2020 electoral defeat with the Spanish sociological study's monthly barometer data collection, we provide robust causal evidence to show that Trump's electoral loss in the US had a negative contagious spillover effect on *self-reported* support for the Spanish far-right. Empirically we estimate intent-to-treat effects based on the *as good as random* exposure to the electoral results to isolate the impact of Trump's defeat on the voting intentions for Spain's new far-right party, VOX. Our results - which are robust to various modelling approaches including covariate adjustment, regional fixed effects, placebo issues, and nearest-neighbour matching - demonstrate that Trump's defeat to Joe Biden had a sizeable negative effect on expressed support for VOX. The contagion effect is substantive: equal to 3 to 6 percentage-points among the general population and 11 percentage-points among former right-wing voters. Our findings make an important contribution to the broader literature on electoral behaviour as they indicate that the electoral success of ideologically symmetrical parties abroad can play a role in understanding a party's domestic success by serving as an important information signal of these parties' electoral viability.

Keywords: contagion effects, electoral spillovers, far-right, quasi-experiment, Spain, Trump, VOX

1 Introduction

When Donald Trump surprisingly won the US presidency in 2016, political commentators were quick to point to the far-right's accession to the White House as a troubling sign of the global expansion of radical right-wing populism and the rise of an increasingly electorally successful far-right. Not only was the transnational far-right movement gifted a friend in power, but Trump's success also served as a mobilising victory against which the far-right parties of Europe could rally their supporters around what Mudde (2016) penned a "narrative of hope". Trump's victory in 2016, was followed in 2017 by a string of the successes for far-right parties in Europe. In the Netherlands,the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) increased their vote share by 3 points; France's *Front National* (FN)[4] enjoyed growth of 3.4 points; Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) grew by 7.9 points, and the Austrian *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPO) gained 5.4 points more relative to their previous electoral results.

Four years of the Trump presidency resulted in the far-right leader being ousted from office after only one term, in part due to his mismanagement of the Covid-19 pan- demic (Neundorf & Pardos-Prado, 2021), with Trump becoming one of only a handfulof US presidents whose time in office was limited to a single term. Pundits reacted quickly to Trump's loss, speculating that his fall would signal the retreat of the far- right. Whilst we are critical of such speculation, particularly given the consistent polling performance of these parties throughout the Covid-19 pandemic (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020), we argue that understanding the potential spillover effects of the US far-right's demise represents an important empirical question that merits investigation. Existing work provides strong causal evidence that Trump's 2016 *success* triggered a rise in racist contagion abroad (Giani & Meón, 2021). Given the electoral support for far-right movements is, in part, motivated by anti-immigrant attitudes (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020), the success of a candidate promoting explicit racistcampaign rhetoric formed part of the "narrative of hope" enjoyed by the far-right at the time (Mudde, 2016).

If Trump's success can fuel the flames of support for parties that advocate comparable positions by increasing the social tolerance of their signature policy issues (Giani & Meón, 2021), does the widely reported global news story of his defeat influence sup- port for the

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4 Renamed *Rassemblement national* as part of a 2018 rebranding strategy.

comparable parties cross-nationally? In short: if the US far-right sneezes, does the far-right abroad catch a cold?

Our theoretical innovation is to apply the expectations of the bandwagon and titanic effect (Irwin & Van Holsteyn, 2000; Obermaier et al., 2015; Barnfield, 2020) models to the cross-national setting. Theoretically, and at the domestic level, voters are assumed to update their electoral preferences in response to the viability signals they perceive from a party's successes (bandwagon) or failures (titanic) in elections and in the polls. We theorise that these viability signals are not constrained by national boundaries and that in an increasingly globalised information environment, the perceived electoral viability – and, therefore, potential preference – for a party at home is influenced by the performance of an ideologically symmetrical party in a salient election abroad. We test this theory in the case of the US 2020 presidential election.

To assess the causal impact of the electoral defeat of Donald Trump on far-right party success, we exploit the quasi-experimental setting produced by the coincidental timing of the US election result and the fieldwork for the Spanish Sociological Research Centre's (*Centro de Invetigacions Sociológicas* – CIS) monthly barometer in November 2020. Relying on the naturally exogenous exposure to electoral defeat among a sample of 3,830 respondents, we argue that far-right party defeats abroad can signal right-wing voters to question the viability and desirability of similar parties and candidates at home. Our theoretical proposition is that sister party failure serves as an information shock that primes individuals to the (reduced) popularity of the shared ideological brand. When voters observe a party as forming part of an internationally sinking ship, they are incentivised to jump ship.

Empirically, we demonstrate that the (naturally occurring) treatment assignment afforded by the quasi-experimental setting in Spain led to a significant fall in self-reportedvoting intentions for the Spanish populist radical right-wing party, VOX. Those respondents interviewed immediately after the US election result was announced were between 3-6 percentage-points less likely to support VOX in when compared to those interviewed immediately before. The average contagion effect of Trump's loss is even greater amongst former right-wing voters - i.e., those most inclined to express their intention to vote for VOX (Rama et al., 2021b) - when exposed to treatment. Our results- which are robust to various modelling approaches including covariate adjustment, regional fixed effects, placebo issues, and nearest-neighbour matching - demonstrate that negative electoral spillover can influence, at least in the short-term, the

potential success of radical right-wing parties are able to enjoy.

This article reinforces the idea of an international or transnational populist far-right movement (Moffit, 2017) that is not limited to the confines of national borders (Rydgren, 2005; Van Hauwaert, 2019).[5] Not only is there an observable connection between Trump and VOX on the supply side (parties) - evinced by the rhetoric and ideological symmetry between the two parties' positions and the established institutional net- works between the two (Rama et al., 2021b, pp.59-63) - but the results presented here suggest there is also a link on the demand side (voters). The presence of a far-right populist "movement" is clear (Froio & Ganesh, 2019; Kuyper & Moffit, 2019), and our findings demonstrate that the losses of different party branches of the movement across the confines of state boundaries can signal voters regarding both the undesirability and limited viability of these parties at home. Similarly to the arguments presented by Bischof and Wagner (2019), who argue that far-right success can legitimise the concerns - like anti-immigrant sentiment (Giani & Meón, 2021) - of those with the potential to support far-right parties, we argue that the electoral *defeat* of these same parties can have a symmetrical (negative) effect on their potential support. Van Hauwaert (2019), reflecting the increasing contagious nature of parties' policy portfolios (Böhmelt et al., 2016; Ezrow et al., 2021; Senninger et al., 2021), theorises that the development of the contemporary far-right in individual countries is not independent but rather the product of increasingly transnational and interdependent diffusion of both demand and supply side factors. Our empirical findings support for this thesis.

In addition to contributing new empirical findings that expand our knowledge related to the cross-national contagion effects of political outcomes, our contribution also provides insight into the determinants of (short-term) far-right success. Far-right victories can drive political polarisation (Bischof & Wagner, 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2020; Valentim & Widmannn, 2021) and have been observed to significantly increase reported hate crimes (Devine, 2021; Edwards & Rushin, 2018). Similarly, the electoral threat presented by far-right gains can further drive the "mainstreaming" of their issue priorities (Mudde, 2019). The electoral victories of radical right-wing parties can cause party contagion of the anti-immigrant issues they often advocate among

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5 Froio and Ganesh (2019) have empirically corroborated this transnational component. Whilst finding that the role of social media as a conduit for transnational exchanges of far-right movement is largely exaggerated, the authors do find that where transnationalism is present, it is often via the effortsof political parties.

mainstream parties[6] (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Abou-Chadi & Werner, 2020). The long-term influence of their success, therefore, presents a significant threat to liberal democratic values (Rama & Casal Bértoa, 2020) and, given their anti-immigrant and socially conservative (heteronormative) values, their mainstreaming effect is likely to be inimical to the welfare of minority groups such as non-white individuals or LGBT+ citizens. We view understanding what drives (and limits) the far-right as imperative given the substantive, and often negative, impact of far-right success on political and societal behaviour.

We deviate from the existing literature in the three different ways. First, we estimate, as far as we are aware, the very first evidence of cross-national electoral contagion focused on party preferences showing that the electoral success of one party can shape popular support for ideologically congruent parties in different states. Second, the attitude- shaping effects of far-right parties' electoral outcomes is systematically unidirectional in that it is focused on far-right victories. We do not yet know if the rapid demise of an internationally prominent far-right leader can exhibit symmetrical - or indeed varied - effects as far-right gains. Third, we contribute towards explaining how cross-national spillovers operate by demonstrating the moderating effect of ideological congruence with the affected party.

2   The state of the art

An expanding body of literature highlights the causal effect of concrete and salient *domestic* political events on electoral outcomes and political preferences. Devine (2021), for example, empirically demonstrates that the outcome of the UK's Brexit referendum led to a sizable increase in (reported) religious and racially motivated hate crimes. Testing the causal impact of Trump's victory in 2016, Edwards and Rushin (2018) also find a rise in hate-crimes in the US. The theorised mechanism behind these observed spikes in discriminatory behaviour is that these events validated and legitimised "the

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6 The empirical evidence suggests, however, that those parties who engage in such accommodating *copy-cat* behaviour are electorally punished. Abou-Chadi and Wagner (2020), for example, show that social democratic parties' adoption of eurosceptic and anti-immigrant positions is associated with reduced vote shares for these parties. Similarly, Krause et al. (2019) show that mainstream parties that adopt an accommodating response to far-right parties' positions can lead to net gains for the radical right.

underlying [nativist] prejudices enough to lead to public expressions of this prejudice" (Devine, 2021, p.383).

Comparable behavioural and attitude-shaping effects are observed across a number of different countries and settings. A wealth of literature, for example, highlights the causal impact of terrorist attacks on attitudes towards immigration (Ferrín et al., 2020)[7] as well as electoral choices (Aytac & Carkoglu, 2019; Montalvo, 2011). To give but one illustrative example, quasi-experimental evidence of Al Queda's 2004 terrorist attack in Madrid's Atocha train station, demonstrates that the event had a significant effect on the election that took place a few days afterwards (Montalvo, 2011). Other domestic shocks, such as court decisions (Bridgman et al., 2020), natural disasters (Chang & Berdiev, 2015), corruption scandals (Ares & Hernández, 2017), and shifts in exposure to refugees (Dinas et al., 2019) are all identified as significant "watershed" events that trigger individual citizens to update their preferences and political behaviours.

Importantly, the effect of political and societal shocks also have an international impact beyond the confines of the state boundaries. In a pioneering study of the cross-national influence of political events, Sicinski (1969) demonstrates that the assassination of the US President - J.F. Kennedy - brought about a shift in domestic interest in international affairs. Political events beyond the confines of the states can, therefore, induce "considerable change" (Sicinski, 1969, p. 196) in individuals' opinions and interests. Contemporary tests of these expectations abound. Delis et al. (2020), for example, relying on a quasi-experimental research design, demonstrate that the unexpected outcome of the UK's Brexit referendum, which triggered the process of the UK's exit from the European Union (EU), had a significant impact on electoral choices in Spain. Comparing those who cast their ballots before the Brexit result was announced to those who cast their ballots immediately afterwards, the authors argue that the signals of political and economic instability brought about by the Brexit results - as illustrated by the volatility in the international stock market - led a substantive fall in support for anti-system parties.

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7 See, however, Giani (2020) who argues that terrorist attacks increase perceived security risks but *do not* increase out-group prejudice.

Walter (2021) finds an effect of the Brexit referendum on the voter's public opinion across Britain's neighbours in the remaining EU-27. Utilising panel data, the author finds that on voters' perceptions of the UK's succession from the EU significantly influences support for similar disintegration processes in their own country.

Beyond the electoral arena, there is also evidence of far-right development, specifically, exhibiting, not only a local influence (Newman et al., 2020), but also cross-national effects on public opinion. Analysing the causal effect of Donald Trump's 2016 electoral victory, via a quasi-experimental design, Giani and Meón (2021) demonstrate that the Trump victory significantly increased self-reported racial biases in European states. Theoretically, and in line with the legitimising mechanisms argued to be driving the Trump and Brexit-based rise in reported hate crimes (Devine, 2021; Edwards & Rushin, 2018), Giani and Meón (2021) argue that the identified effect of Trump's 2016 election victory on cross-national racist biases is the result of Trump's success signalling that nativist and anti-immigrant prejudices have become more mainstream and, as a result, revealing these preferences in surveys is no longer as constrained by concerns over social acceptability.

Whilst Giani and Meón (2021)'s findings might suggest that the 2016 Trump victory could further fan the flames of the European far-right, other empirical contributions suggest that it may have increased resilience against the rise of the anti-globalist nationalism these parties tend to advocate. Minkus et al. (2019), for example, present causal evidence demonstrating that Trump's 2016 success also brought about a rise in support for European integration, a liberal and pro-globalist policy issue that is often negatively correlated with far-right support (Santana et al., 2020; Vasilopoulou, 2018). The "rally around the EU" effect observed is, according to the authors, the result of citizens perceiving domestic liberal norms as being under threat from an external actor.[8] Presenting a similar theoretical model, Turnbull-Dugarte and Ayoub (2021), show

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8 Internal threats can also trigger backlash. Relying on observational data, Turnbull-Dugarte (2020) argues that there is a correlation between the rise of the *Alternative für Deutschland*

that the rise of liberal values abroad - illustrated by advances in LGBT+ rights - can also trigger a rejection of these values amongst citizens in states that view these international value changes as inimical to their own domestic value systems.

Given studies evince the role of cross-national spillover effects on preferences and attitudes (Giani & Meón, 2021; Minkus et al., 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte & Ayoub, 2021), as well as electoral behaviour (Delis et al., 2020), we seek to assess the impact of Donald Trump's electoral defeat in a cross-national setting.

2.1   Expectations

The research question we seek to answer is straightforward: did the electoral defeat of Donald Trump and the US far-right influence support for the far-right abroad? Given the data availability, however, we limit the scope of our research question to focus on *self-reported* expressions of support for the far-right. Theoretically, the literature focused on the effect of far-right gains largely points to their success exhibiting a legitimising effect (Bischof & Wagner, 2019; Valentim, 2021). When far-right candidates like Trump or far-right issues like Brexit are successful, individuals who are sympathetic with the winning issues are likely to view their preferences as validated and legitimised by their success (Bicchieri, 2016; Devine, 2021; Tankard & Palcuk, 2016). This, in turn, leads voters to increase their willingness to disclose discriminatory preferences (Giani & Meón, 2021); become more comfortable reporting their support for far-right parties (Valentim, 2021); and may also encourage them to act out on their radical beliefs by engaging in discriminatory (and often criminal) behaviour (Devine,2021; Edwards & Rushin, 2018). Just as Bischof and Wagner (2019) argue that far-right success can *embolden* further far-right support, we present a theoretically symmetrical argument that posits that far-right losses can *undermine* self-expressed far-right support and that these effects are not restricted by state boundaries.

We hypothesise that the electoral defeat of an emblematic leader of the transnational far-right movement like Trump (Mudde, 2016, 2017; Norris, 2020) can trigger a contagious reduction in

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(AfD) and a spike in europhile positions among mainstream parties in Germany and amongst their voters. This suggests that when the EU is presented with a far-right threat, euro-pragmatists are more likely to come out in defend the EU from the challenger.

support for the far-right cross-nationally. This mechanism builds upon the models of bandwagon effects which, as Barnfield (2020, p.554) defines are "characterised by a positive individual-level change in vote choice or turnout decision towards a more popular or an increasingly popular candidate or party, motivated initially by this popularity". Bandwagon effects, and their negative counterpart, often penned the "Titanic effect" (Irwin & Van Holsteyn, 2000), find strong empirical, and experimental (Obermaier, et al., 2015), support in domestic elections with polling and electoral performance serving as viability and popularity signals that update individual-level preferences. Our theoretical proposition is that the bandwagon/titanic effects engendered by performance signals can also permeate state boundaries. The electoral defeat of an ideologically symmetrical party in country A is likely to serve as a heuristic of the potential viability and popularity of the comparable party unit in country B. This mechanism posits that voters are receptive to cross-national signals of sister-party performance and, acting in a risk averse manner (Grillo, 2017), use these signals as a means of assessing their viability at home. When the cross-national block is on the decline - when the far-right ship is sinking - citizens inclined to sympathise with the party may decide to jump ship in response to information signals regarding reduced electoral viability. We argue that the titanic effect can take place in international waters: a political party can be subjected to negative voter transitions in direct response to transnational signals regarding the (reduced) popularity and viability of sister parties abroad.

H1 (titanic thesis): *The electoral defeat of a far-right party abroad will reduce support for the far-right at home.*

Theoretically, however, we might expect to observe the reverse relationship. The above thesis assumes that individuals take the victory and defeat of far-right parties as indicative signals of the level of public support for these parties and the policies they advocate. This mechanism is based on the expectation that individuals update their self-reported expressions of party support in a direction that is congruent with the signal received from the party's electoral fortunes: a victory for the party will increase the propensity to express support whilst a failure for the party will decrease the likelihood of expressing support. An alternative reaction, however, could be that voters respond in opposition to the public signals of support in a form of retributory backlash. In this setting, we might expect individuals sympathetic towards the far-right to be mobilised by what they view as an unjust defeat that, fermented by

conspiracy theories regarding election fraud, galvanises them to increase their sympathies for the far-right party and its leader. This expectation is congruent with evidence that voters can be mobilised to "rally around" the issues and parties they support when they view them as being under threat (Minkus et al., 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2020). It also explains why asymmetric voter responses to far-right party victories often correlates with increased polarisation. Aggregate shifts in public opinion can often mask within- population diversity and, by extension, increased polarisation between sympathisers antagonists.

H2 (backlash thesis): *The electoral defeat of a far-right party abroad will increase support for the far-right at home.*

There is reason to expect that the effects of Trump's loss, regardless of their direction, are unlikely to be asymmetrical for different voting constituencies in the electorate. Far-right parties often tend to source their voter revenue from those political parties that are spatially closest to them (Rydgren, 2007).[9] As a result, and as is shown in the case of far-right parties in general but also in the case of VOX (Rama et al., 2021b), the electorate of these parties tend to come from the portion of voters who have previously voted for other (mainstream) right-wing parties. Individuals who tend to vote left are very unlikely to vote for far-right parties at all - particularly so in Spain where, despite having a multi-party system (Rama et al., 2021a), within block transfers are the norm and between-block transfers are rare (Simón, 2020) - so any Titanic (viability shock) or backlash effect of far-right party performance abroad is not likely to exhibit any persuasive influence over their self-reported support for these parties.

H3 (conditional thesis): *The effects of far-right electoral fortunes abroad will be greatest among former right-wing voters.*

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9 This explains, in part, why mainstream right-wing parties have reacted to accommodate the policy positions advocated by radical right-wing challenger parties (Abou-Chadi & Stoetzer, 2020).

3 Case selection, Trump & the Spanish far-right

3.1 Trump's Republican Party: far-right?

We argue, very much in agreement with the existing literature (Mudde, 2017, 2019), that Trump, as a radical right-wing populist and authoritarian nationalist (Norris, 2020; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), falls neatly within the far-right party typology. Indeed, Mudde (2017) argues that the rise of Donald Trump to the presidency on theback of a conventional party ticket is illustrative of what he pens the "mainstreaming" of the far-right that has taken hold of democratic states following the turn ofthe century (Mudde, 2019) and, more recently, following the financial crisis of 2008. *Trumpism* - which combines anti-immigrant nativism, socially conservative authoritarianism, and populist anti-establishment sentiment - is very similar to the core ideo- logical toolkit of the European populist radical right (Mudde, 2017, p.48). Descriptive data from the Global Party Expert Survey (Norris, 2020) supports the argument that there is cross-national symmetry between the ideological positions advocated by the Republicans (under Trump) and those parties that are well-established as constituents of the populist radical right. In Figure 1 we illustrate that the Trump's Republicanparty falls neatly within the hard-line socially conservative right-wing authoritarian space that VOX, and a battery of other European far-right parties, inhabit. We therefore maintain, congruent with Norris (2020, p.245) that Trump's transformation of the GOP into an authoritarian populist party makes it a prime example of the wider family of far-right parties.
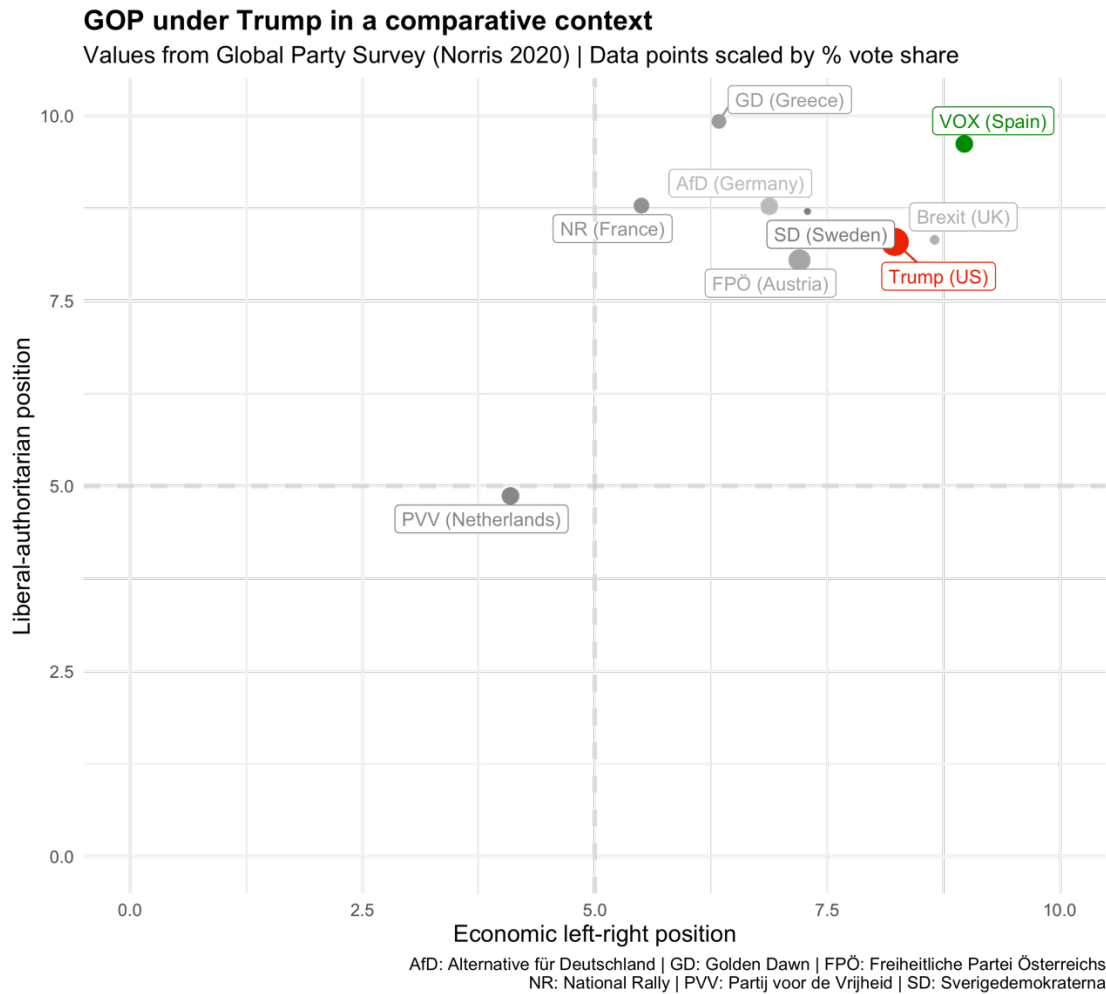
GOP under Trump in a comparative context
Values from Global Party Survey (Norris 2020) | Data points scaled by % vote share

AfD: Alternative für Deutschland | GD: Golden Dawn | FPÖ: Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs
NR: National Rally | PVV: Partij voor de Vrijheid | SD: Sverigedemokraterna

Figure 1: Trump's Republican Party in contemporary far-right space

3.2 The far-right in Spain: a most likely case

The selection of Spain as a case study is a product of the data availability providing us with a quasi-experimental setting which lends itself to causal identification. We argue, however, that Spain represents an ideal case to test our theoretical expectations. A relatively new party in Spain, VOX brought to an end Spain's former "exceptional status" as a country free from the radical right by relying on a combination of anti- immigrant discourse (Mendes & Dennison, 2021) and monopolising the issue of Catalan separatism (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019). Like other parties that absorb and adopt policy innovations

from their foreign political peers (Böhmelt et al., 2016; Ezrow et al., 2021) as well as those of their sister-parties in transnational organisations like the Euro- pean Parliament (Senninger et al., 2021), VOX has actively engaged in the contagious diffusion of far-right rhetorical tools. Spain's new populist radical right-wing party has very much sought, to mirror Trumpian messages in its communication strategy (Rama et al., 2021b). Their debut campaign slogan promised to "Make Spain Great Again" [*Hacer España Grande Otra Vez*] and called for "Spain First" [*España lo primero*] in what were clear examples of the party's attempt to directly plagiarise Trump's campaign rhetoric. The connection between VOX and Trump, however, goes beyond mirroring policy promises and populist rhetoric, and also includes the establishment of networks with transnational organisations and like-minded hard-line conservative think-tanks. In 2020, leaders of the Spanish far-right were in attendance at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) at the expense of the American Conservative Union Foundation, and ex-Trump strategists and allies, including Steven Bannon, have formed close links with VOX's leadership and communications team (Cervilla, 2020).

VOX's close ties with the US far-right, and the party's vocal admiration of the Trump administration - which includes sponsoring a resolution in the European Parliament nominating Trump's candidacy for the Nobel Peace Prize[10], has also translated to higher support for the US president amongst VOX's supporters. Notably, and as visualised in Figure 2, polling data[11] signals that the electorate of VOX, vis-à-vis the electorate of other Spanish parties, is particularly inclined to sympathise with the US far-right even in comparison to their counterpart supporters of similar parties in neighbouring European states. Should our theoretical expectations regarding negative electoral contagion hold, we would expect to observe these in Spain where support for Trump among far-right voters is, comparatively, high.

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10 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2020-0256_ES.html
11 Pew Research Centre polling data as reported in *El Confidencial*, September 20th, 2 0 2 0 . Available at: https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2020-09-20/votantes-vox-trump-favorable_2753819/ (last accessed December 20th, 2020)

Spain is, as a result, what George and Bennett (2005) pen a "most likely" case. Whilst this has potential limitations in terms of the scope conditions, it is important in terms of theory development. Given the empirical analysis we present is applied as means of presenting and testing our original theoretical argument that far-right party electoral performance can engender cross-national contagion effects, relying on evidence from a "most likely" case provides strong internal validity for our theoretical contribution (George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2003).
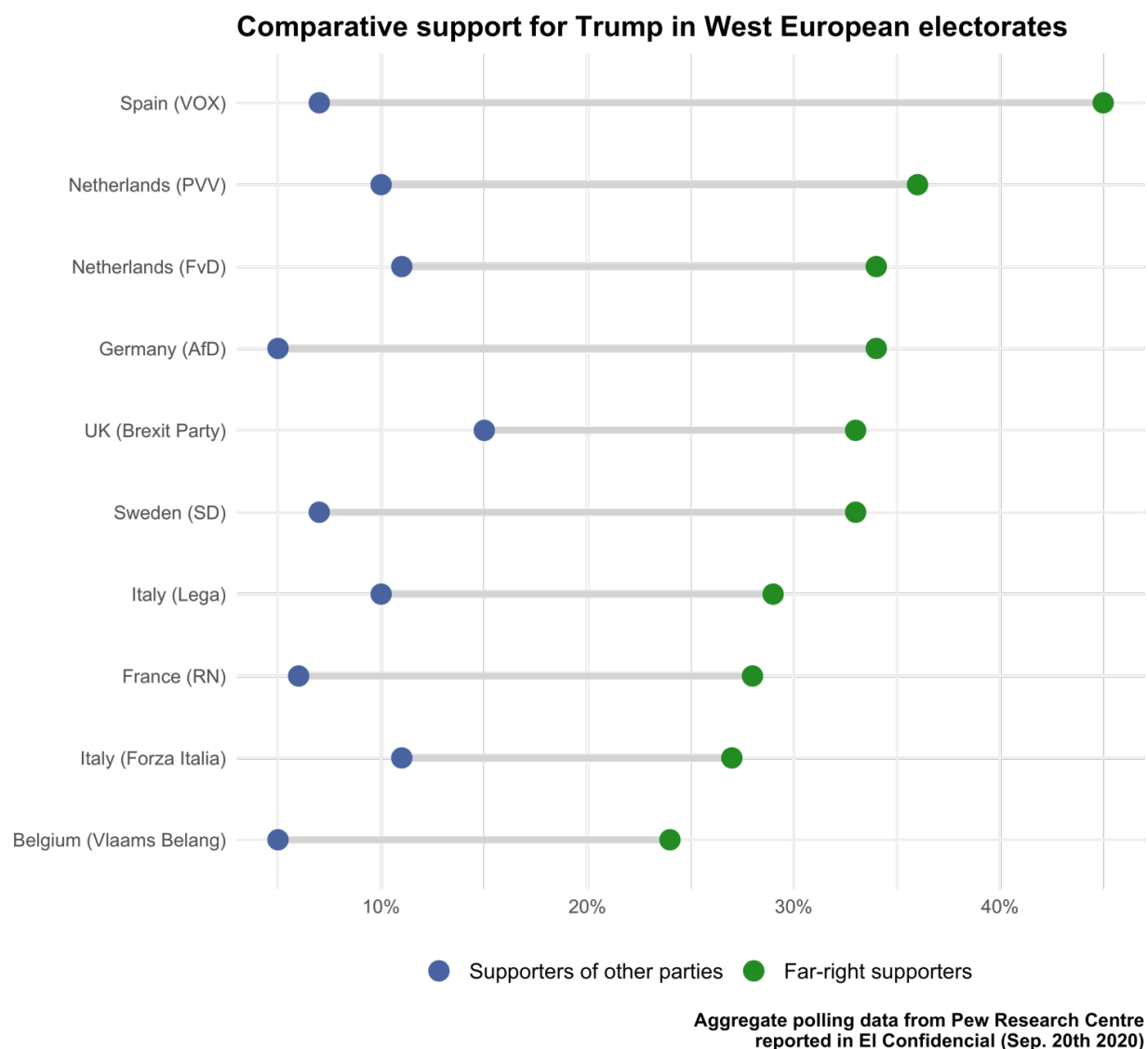
Comparative support for Trump in West European electorates

Aggregate polling data from Pew Research Centre
reported in El Confidencial (Sep. 20th 2020)

Figure 2: VOX voters' support for Trump compared

4 Data & Identification strategy

4.1 Sample

Our empirical analysis relies on data from the monthly barometer carried by the CIS in November 2020.[12] Our sample contains individual level data (N=3,830) gathered between November 3rd and 12th. The sample was collated via three-way stratification of strata based on age, sex and region (autonomous community). Interviews were carried out using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) with 45.9% of respondents being contacted via landline telephone, and 54.1% contacted via mobile telephone. Sampling weights are provided in order for the sample to facilitate representation of population parameters.

4.2 Empirical approach

The identification strategy relies on the *as good as random* (Muñoz et al., 2020) quasi-experimental exposure to the news of the US election result on far-right support. This approach leverages the naturally occurring assignment of survey respondents to one of two conditions: control (interviewed before loss announced) and treatment (interviewed after loss announced). This method of identifying significant discontinuities in respondents' preferences and/or behaviours assumes that individuals naturally allocated to treatment are in fact exposed to the treatment - in this case, that Trump lost theelection. Visualising the google trends data in Spain for the period of November 2019 to January 2021, Figure 3 shows a substantive spike in interest in Trump during the week of the US election, so we can be confident that widely reported news event wasone that citizens in Spain were likely to be aware of. The design does not, however, have a measure of direct treatment exposure and, as a result, when we speak of

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12 Estudio 3300. Available at: http://www.cis.es/cis/opencm/ES/1 encuestas/estudios/listaMuestras.jsp?estudio=14532

Spain Google Search Data

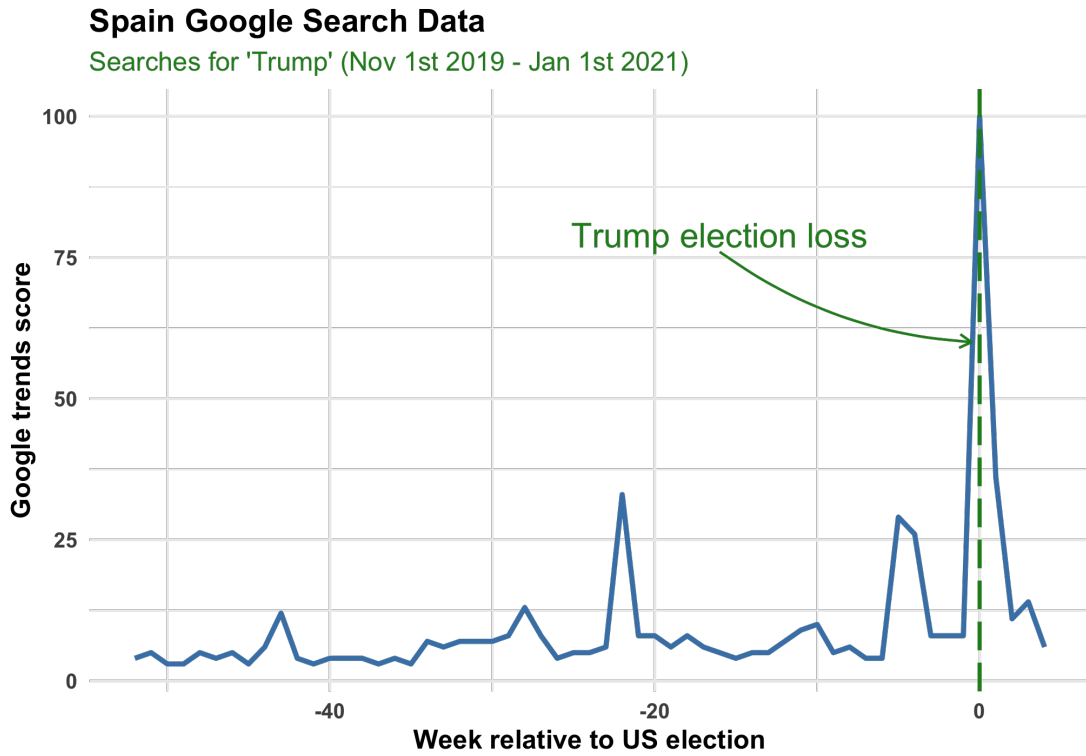Searches for 'Trump' (Nov 1st 2019 - Jan 1st 2021)

Figure 3: Treatment event saliency

treatment effects, we are referring to treatment assignment or the *Intent-to-Treat* (ITT)[13] effect.

In majoritarian systems like the US, electoral contests are often decided by a handful of the electorate (a la *Bush vs Gore*) or electoral college votes (a la *Clinton vs Trump*), providing a situation where candidates and parties compete on either side of the "winning" threshold. In such electoral contests, determine the likely outcomes in advance of their realisation is difficult. Political upsets - instances where outcomes do not match pollsters' expectations - happen with increasing frequency (e.g., Clinton's loss, Brexit's

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13 The ITT is summarised as:

$$ITT_Y = \frac{1}{N}\sum_{i=1}^{N} Y_i(z = 1) - \frac{1}{N}\sum_{i=1}^{N} Y_i(z = 0)$$

Where $Y_i(z = 1)$ is the potential outcome for individual *i* under natural – as good as random – assignment to treatment and $Y_i(z = 0)$ is the potential outcome for *i* under natural assignment to control. The ITT reports the modelled effect of treatment assuming *full* compliance (i.e., all treated individuals received the treatment). The complier average causal effect (CACE) is the estimand that indicates the effect of treatment amongst those compliant with treatment assignment. In relation to the ITT, the CACE is defined as: CACE= ITT/C, where C is the rate of compliance. Given an illustrative compliance rate of 50% (i.e., only 50% of respondents assigned to treatment actually became aware of Trump's defeat) an ITT of 3 percentage-points would equate to a CACE of 6 percentage-points (3/0.5). A similar ITT but with a compliance rate of 80% would equate to a CACE of 3.75 percentage-points (3/0.8).

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victory, the electoral outcomes of both the 2015 and the 2017 UK general elections); polling errors tends to be higher in presidential races (Jennings & Wlezien, 2018); and polling is not free from systemic failures (Campbell, 2020). A primary assumption of our design is that exposure to the news of Trump's electoral defeat was exogenous. Whilst political polling[14] might have placed Trump's opponent, Democratic candidate Joe Biden, as the front-runner in 2020, individuals interviewed before the results were announced could not know the election result whereas those inter- viewed after could.

To operationalise our dependent variable - far-right support - we rely on two distinct outcome measures. First, we utilise individual approval for VOX's leader, Santiago Abascal, on a ten-point (1-10) scale. Second, we rely on respondent's self-reported intentions of voting for VOX (1) or any other party (0). Both of these outcomes are expressions of far-right support and are not verified vote choices. As a result, they are potentially influenced by social expectation bias.

Treatment, based on the naturally occurring random assignment, is operationalisedas:

T_i = 0 (control) if respondent i interviewed before November 7th (N=3,202)

T_i = 1 (treatment) if respondent i interviewed between November 7th & November 12th (N=628)

The quasi-experimental approach assumes exogenous treatment allocation independent of additional covariates. Testing for covariate balance between the treatment conditions shows that the control and treatment groups are symmetrical in terms ofage, educational attainment, labour market activity, civil status, church attendance, as well as retrospective vote recall (see Figure A1).[15] Testing for balance does show, however, that

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14 Importantly, far-right leaning voters, given their penchant for conspiratorial thinking (Norris et al., 2020), are less inclined to trust political polling.

15 The data provided by the CIS does not include a measure of the number of times an individual respondent was contacted before completing the survey. Some individuals may have been harder to contact - given their working hours for example - which could lead to their *non-*

there are significantly more women in treatment than in the control group. We address this imbalance by estimating covariate-adjusted treatment effects, as well as via matching techniques and regression discontinuity approaches reported in the robustness section.

The model specification is summarised in the basic linear model (Model 1) in which $\beta_1 Treatment_i$ is the covariate-adjusted ITT, γX_i is a vector of individual covariates and ϵ_i is the error term:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 Treatment_i + \gamma X_i + \epsilon_i \tag{1}$$

In the results section we present the estimand of interest both with and without covariate-adjustment. Covariates considered in the main models include: sex, age, education, urbanicity, employment status, civil status and religious attendance, all of which we assume to be causally anterior to treatment allocation. Models including regional fixed effects are also reported in the Appendix (Table A6) and replicate the findings reported below. Summary statistics, covariate operationalisation, and question wordings are reported in the Online Appendix material.

5   Results

5.1   Main analysis

The primary findings are illustrated in Figure 4 (full regression output in Table A4). In the case of both support for VOX's leader as well as the probability of voting for VOX, we observe that those interviewed immediately after the announcement of the US election results were significantly less likely to support Spain's far-right party.

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random assignment to treatment. The covariates we include, amongst which are employment activity, should mitigate someof the bias in our estimation.

Estimated treatment effects of Trump loss on support for VOX

Support for Abascal (1-10)   **Voting intentions for VOX (0-1)**

● Unadjusted ITT   ● Covariate adjusted ITT

N = 3,830 | Confidence intervals at 95%
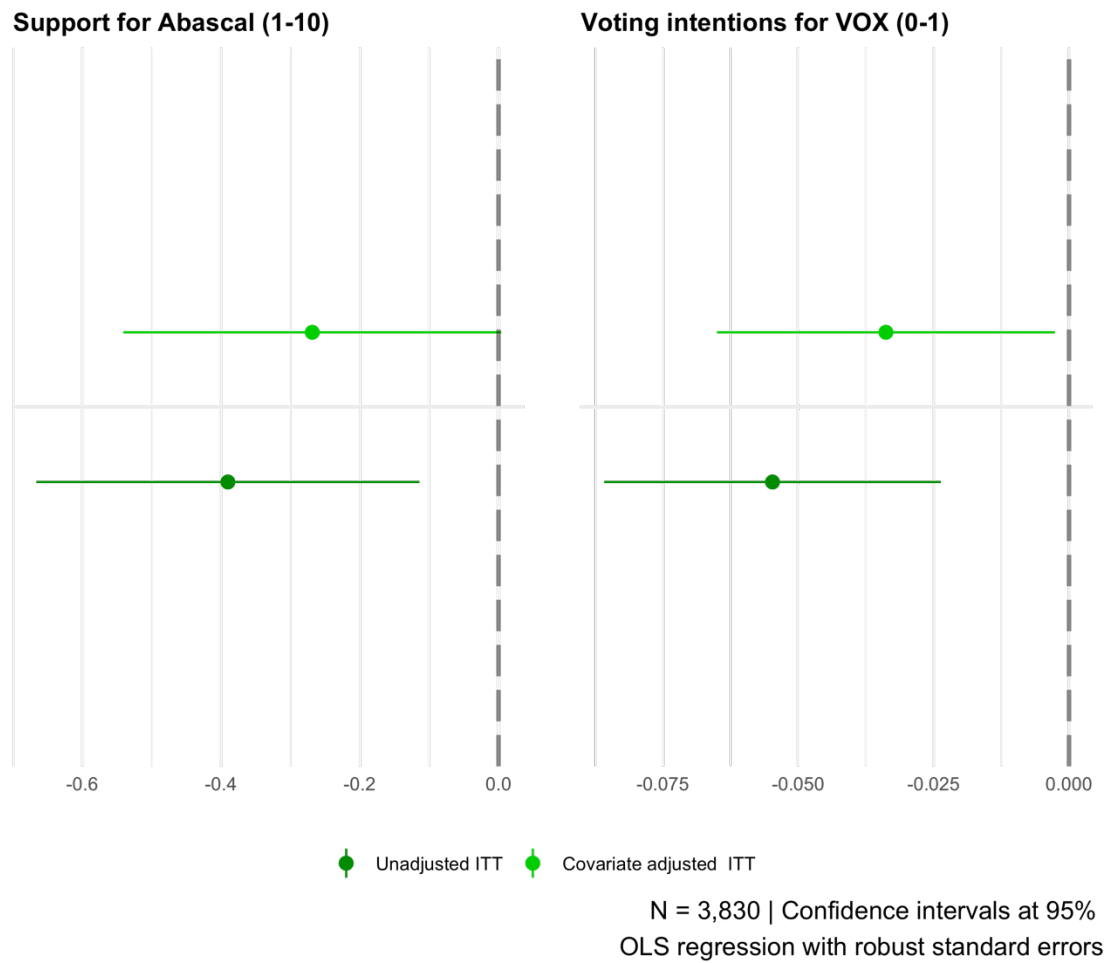OLS regression with robust standard errors

Figure 4: Estimated treatment effects (ITT) on main outcomes

The ITT on approval for Abascal (left-hand panel) is substantive at -.39: equivalent to a fall of 17% relative the control group mean. Adjusting the ITT to accommodate covariates provides a point-estimate of -.26 ($p < 0.06$). Similar negative contagion effects are found in the case of the probability of voting for VOX (right-hand panel). On average, those interviewed after Trump's loss were 5 percentage-points less likely to vote for VOX compared to those interviewed before the results were known (a fall equal to 71% relative control). Adjusting the estimated ITT for covariates, does little to alter the effect of the election, with the covariate-adjusted ITT equal to 3 percentage- points.

In terms of how these findings relate to our alternative hypotheses: the results present

empirical evidence in support of the legitimacy thesis and contradict the expectations of the backlash thesis. In other words, we do not find any evidence that the loss of an important far-right leader abroad can mobilise potential far-right sympathisers in retaliatory fashion. Instead, we argue that these findings are likely the result of individuals viewing the loss of Trump as indicative of the far-right's limited viability.

5.2 Conditional effects

Given the theorised mechanism that we present is that those with the potential to be inclined to support VOX will be deterred from doing so when they are exposed to signals that the far-right is in decline, we expect that the support-reducing effects are likely to be observed most acutely amongst those who already identify with political parties on the right. To test this expectation, we replicate Model 1 to include a multiplicative interaction term between treatment assignment and vote recall for right-wing parties (Model 2).[16]

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 Treatment_i + \delta_1 VoteRecall_i + \beta_1 Treatment_i * \delta_1 VoteRecall_i + \gamma X_i + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

Figure 5 reports the predicted margins of treatment for left-wing and right-wing voters and demonstrates the asymmetric effects of treatment (see also Table 1). As expected, whilst there is a sizeable fall in expressed approval for Abascal among those who previously voted for the right (-.36), there is a smaller shift in approval among left-wing voters (.01). In both cases the effects are unidirectional and insignificant. When we consider the probability of voting for VOX, a similar relationship is observed: right-wing voters in the treatment condition are 11 percentage-points ($p < 0.06$) less likely to report an intention of voting for VOX vis-a`-vis the control group (equal to a 43% change relative the control mean). Left-wing observe a 1.8 percentage-point decrease: a point-estimate equitable to less than one fifth the magnitude of that observed in the case of former right-wing voters.

Table 1: Conditional effect of treatment by 2019 vote recall

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16 We include a power analysis for the interaction based of our present sample size (see Figure A3). In our probability model (outcome scaled 0-1), we are able to identify interaction effects as small as 0.044 with 80% power (alpha < 0.05).

	Far-right		Mainstream right	
	Abascal	Pr (Vote VOX)	Casado	Pr (Vote PP)
Former left-wing voters	-0.10	-0.02***	-0.10	-0.02**
	(0.10)	(0.00)	(0.12)	(0.01)
Former right-wing voters	-0.36	-0.11**	0.75**	0.10
	(0.43)	(0.05)	(0.35)	(0.08)
N	3483	3830	3548	3830

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01

The negligible effects observed for left-wing voters are consistent with our theory of the negative viability signal of Trump's defeat. Substantive negative effects are observed for former right-wing voters who are comparatively more pre-disposed to sympathise with VOX than those on the left who are unlikely to be substantively influences by negative viability signals given the pre- disposition of left-wing voters to support the far-right already has a markedly low baseline. A replication of the interaction model relying on ideological placement inlieu of vote recall is reported in Table A5: the results are largely consistent and, in the case of Abascal's approval, report significant point-estimates.

In order to demonstrate our results are unique to support for VOX rather than support for right-wing parties in general, we re-estimate our analyses on support for Spain's mainstream right-wing party. Figure 6 illustrates the results of the same specification (Model 2) on support for the mainstream right-wing party, the People's Party (PP).
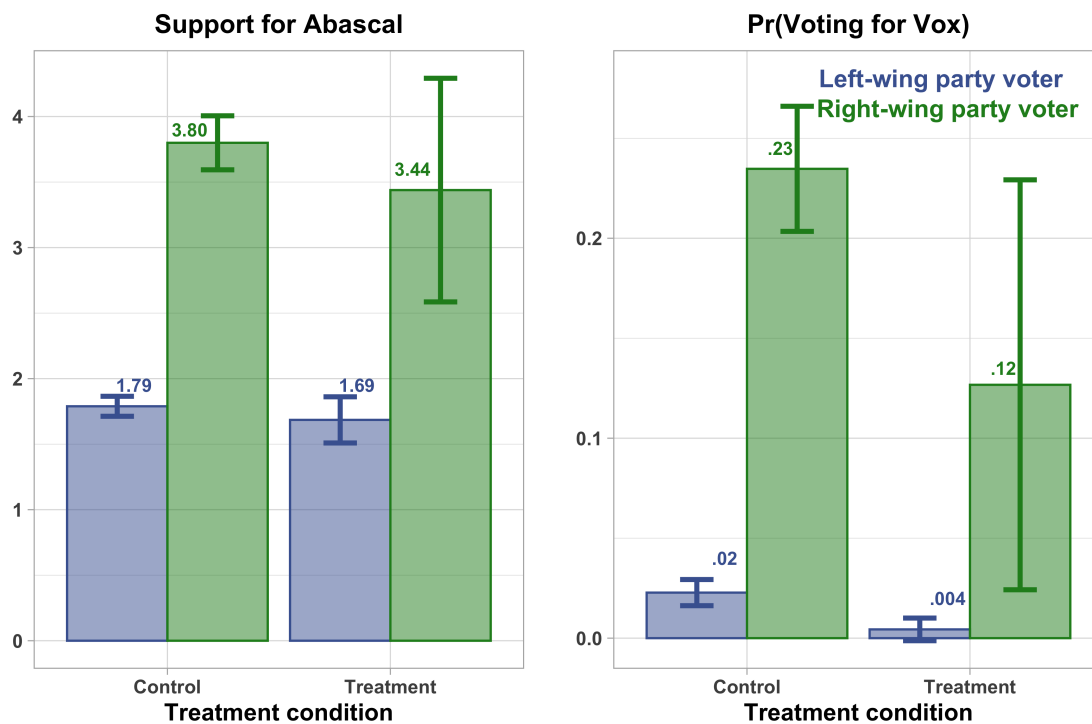
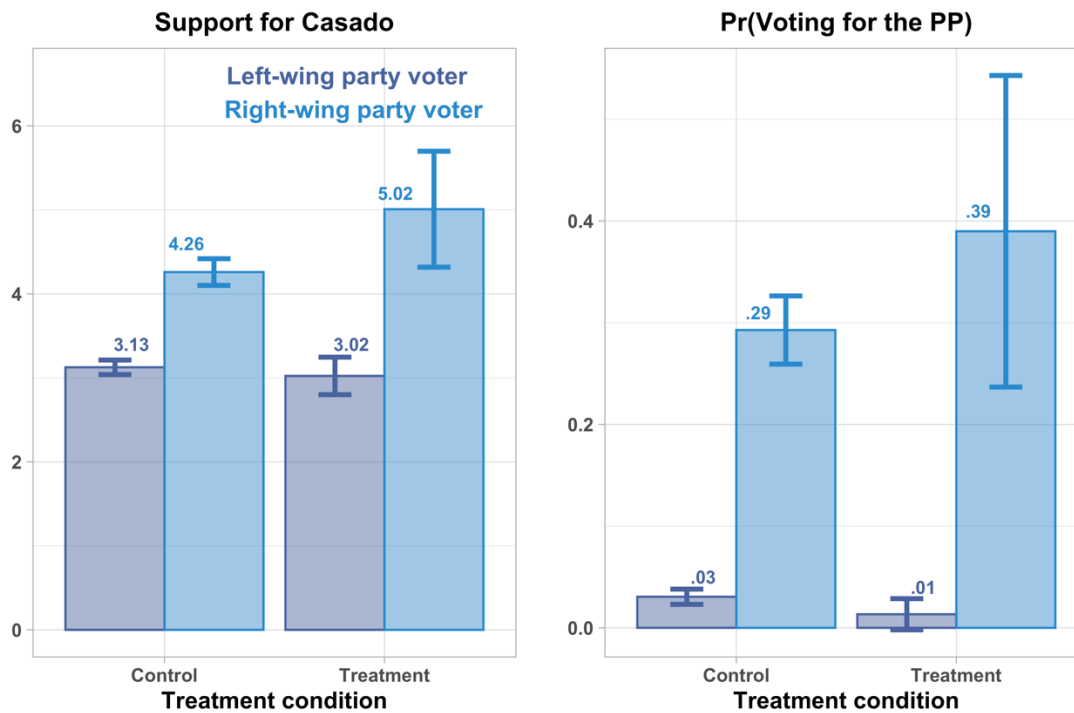Figure 5: Asymmetric treatment effects on main outcomes

Figure 6: Asymmetric treatment effects on mainstream right (PP)

Post-treatment, right-wing individuals hold more positive assessments of the main-

stream right. Whilst the modelled effect of treatment allocation signals a positive effect on the probability of voting for the mainstream right among right-wing voters, the effect is not distinguishable from zero. The direction of these effects is consistent with our Trump-induced transnational "Titanic effect" (Irwin & Van Holsteyn, 2000) thesis.

6   Sensitivity tests & identification threats

The excludability assumption requires that any significant differences between the allocation to treatment and control conditions is *not* the result of other simultaneous effects. To check for this, and in line with similar research designs (Bol et al., 2021), we estimate permutation tests to ensure that our results are not spurious. Reproducing the analysis by randomly assigning the treatment date associated with individual respondents in 2,000 iterations (Figure 7), we show that the observed effects are significantly distinct from the null effects of the permutations. Assessing the sensitivity of our analysis across multiple different bandwidths on either side of the threshold, as recommended by Muñoz et al. (2020), does not condition our findings. As visualised in Figure 8 the point-estimate of our estimated treatment effect remains largely constant across different bandwidth sizes if, however, statistical significance is lost in the case of voting intentions for VOX when the bandwidth is at its most restricted.
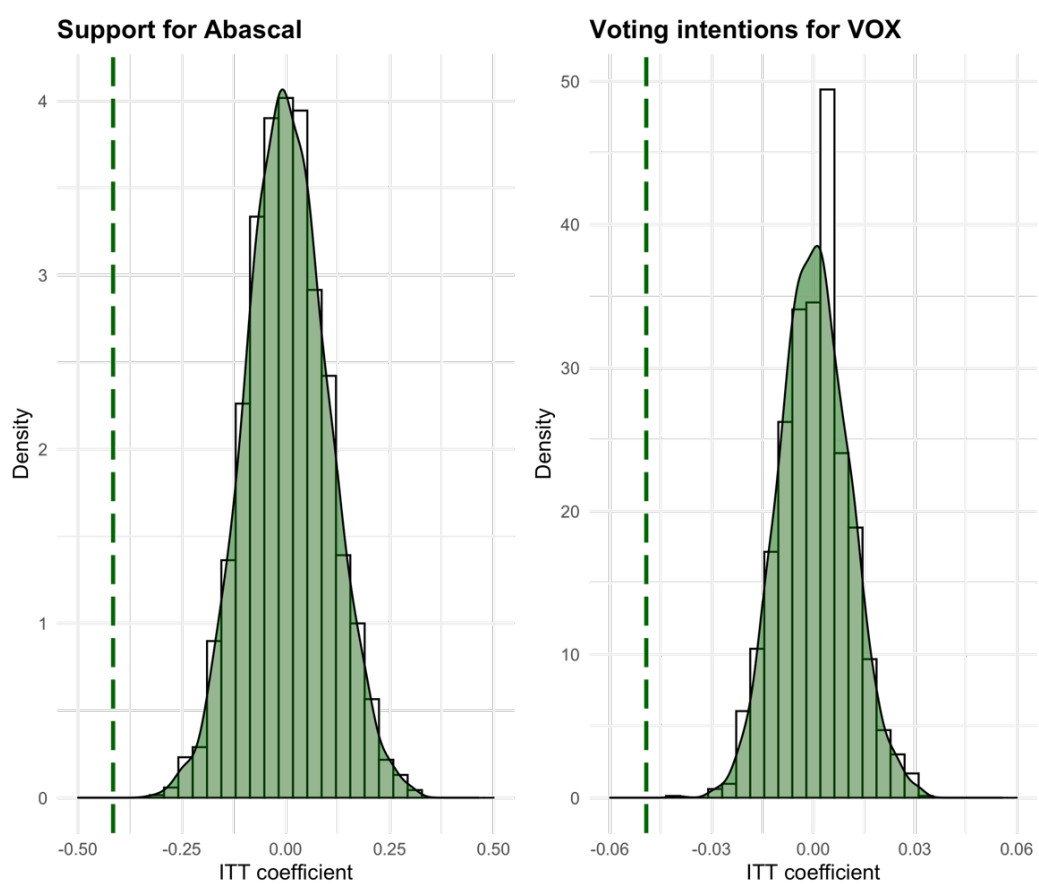
Randomisation inference (2000 permutations)

Support for Abascal

Voting intentions for VOX

Figure 7: Randomisation inference test

Robustness test with bandwidth windows

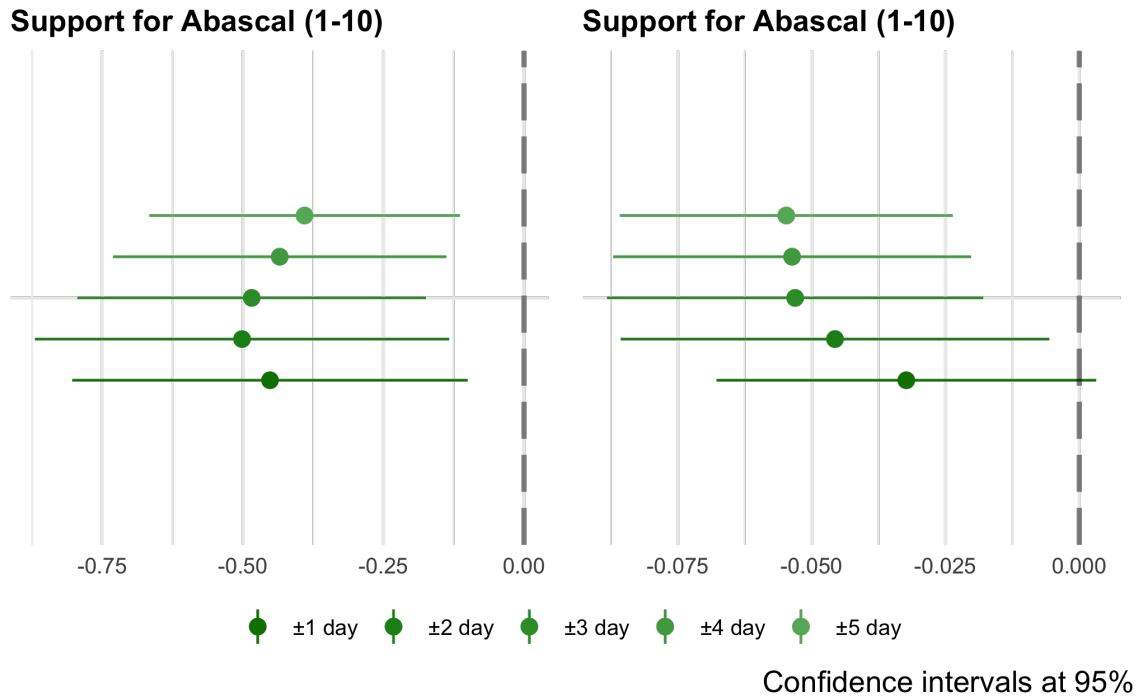| Support for Abascal (1-10) | Support for Abascal (1-10) |

Confidence intervals at 95%

Figure 8: Bandwidth sensitivity test

In addition to the permutation test that rule out any spurious effects that might be brought about by pre-existing time trends, we also demonstrate that there is a null effect on different placebo issues that, should our theoretical argument hold, we would expect to be independent of treatment assignment. Modelling the effect of treatment on evaluations towards the economy and concerns about Covid-19, we do not observe any significant effect associated with treatment allocation at the threshold (Figure A2). We can, therefore, be confident that any significant effects in support for VOX caused by treatment are not the result of a confounding shift in general attitudes or evaluations nor are they likely the product of political sorting.[17]

The ignorability assumption requires that treatment assignment be independent of potential outcomes and the pre-treatment covariates that predict outcome variables. To ensure compliance with ignorability we test for balance in treatment assignment and

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[17] Whilst other issue-specific placebos like concerns over immigration would be valuable tests, the monthly barometer does not include any other issue-specific placebos that we can test.

balance in rates of attrition. Quasi-random allocation to the two treatment conditions is not dependent on identifiable covariates, with the exception of gender and urbanicity. As demonstrated in Figure 4 and Table A4 adjusting the effects of Trump's loss on our outcomes to consider covariates does not condition our results. Additionally,and as displayed in Table A3, we do not find any significant variation in attrition rates between treatment groups.

As a further robustness check of the ignorabiity assumption, and in addition to the covariate-adjusted models presented above, we also estimate a sensitivity test relying on nearest-neighbour matching - as recommended by Muñoz et al. (2020) - in order to ensure that our results are not the product of potential imbalances. The output of these matching estimations, reported in Figure A4, provide additional empirical sup- port for our conclusions. Considering this extensive and varied battery of sensitivity analyses and variations in modelling, we are confident that the consistently significant and negatively signed point-estimates we identify are indicative of the causal effect of Trump's loss of electoral support for VOX and the party's leader. Theoretically, we interpret these robust negative results as evidence of the delegitimising effect that the salient and widely reported electoral loss of far-right party leaders can exhibit on like- minded electoral sympathisers in other western democracies.

7   Conclusion

In this article we make an important theoretical and empirical contribution. Theoretically, we argue that the signalling effects of far-right party success and failures are not limited to the confines of national boundaries. In line with work that signals the cross-national diffusion of far-right development (Rydgren, 2005; Van Hauwaert, 2019), party contagion (Ezrow et al., 2021; Senninger et al., 2021), cross-border bench-marking signals (Walter, 2021), and transnational movements (Ferrín et al., 2020), we maintain that signals of far-right party performance also diffuse beyond the national

context to influence voting behaviour.

Empirically and leveraging the quasi-experimental setting afforded by the 2020 US election result's coincidental timing with Spain's monthly electoral barometer, we presentrobust causal evidence demonstrating that the electoral defeat of Donald Trump - as a transnational figure of far-right (Mudde, 2016) - engendered a collapse in support for Spain's new radical right-wing party VOX. Our results are constant across multiple empirical tests including, nearest-neighbour matching, regional fixed-effect models, and alternative placebos. Additionally, and in line with our theoretical argument, the effect of treatment is conditioned by congruent ideological identification with Spain's two-block ideological split (Rama et al., 2021a; Simón, 2020). We observe comparatively marginal effects amongst those who vote for the left, signalling that Trump's electoral loss had a significantly more influential roleon right-wing voters who, we argue, were primed to update their evaluations of the viability of the symmetrical far-right offering in their own country.

Our findings speak to various pieces of literature. First, we provide empirical support to the growing body of empirical work that demonstrates the substantive causal impact salient political events of individual electoral preferences and attitudes. Not only do we find that salient events matter but, in line with the work of Giani and Meón (2021), Delis et al. (2020) and Turnbull-Dugarte and Ayoub (2021), we also demonstrate that cross-national spillover effects can causally influence electoral preferences and public opinion. Second, we add to the literature that address the transnational diffusion of party politics (Böhmelt et al., 2016; Ezrow et al., 2021; Senninger et al., 2021), as well as that of far-right parties in particular (Froio & Ganesh, 2019; Rydgren, 2005;Van Hauwaert, 2019). We demonstrate the losses of one branch of the movement does not come without potential consequences for comparable branches operating indifferent states.

Finally, whilst our results illustrate that Trump's electoral defeat has struck a blow against the far-right in Spain (at least in the immediate short term), we are cautious

in our interpretation of these results. Our findings do not lead us to support any conclusions regarding Trump's demise signalling a reversal of the trajectory of far-rightsuccess in the long-term. As detailed by Bale and Rovira Kaltwasser (2021) and also Mudde (2019), the ascendancy of far-right parties does not appear to be stagnating, including in Spain (Zannoti & Turnbull-Dugarte, 2022).

One limitation of our design is the inability to test which of the underlying mechanisms behind the titanic hypothesis we present. We argue that the drop in self-reported support for VOX and the party's leader is likely the result of Trumps' defeat serving as a cue that informs individuals who may be sympathetic towards voting for VOX regarding the (lack of) viability of this kind of party. An alternative explanation, however, is that the results are driven by individuals opting to mask their authentic preferences. Given the balance in vote recall between our control and treatment groups, however, we do not view this to be likely. Individuals in treatment are as likely to report having voted for VOX in the past as those in control. Where the two groups differ is that the former is less likely to report the intention to vote for VOX in the present.

Future work may seek to assess under what conditions cross-national spillover effects take place among far-right party networks or across different party families. Bischof and Wagner (2019) demonstrate that the far-right victories have legitimising effects *domestically*, whilst we show that losses for these parties can have undermining effects *transnationally*. More research is required to assess whether these legitimising and undermining effects can work both domestically and transnationally across both victories and losses, or if, for example, the direction of the electoral result matters.

Our test comes from a case that we identify as most likely. The spillover effect was triggered by a global leader from the US which has, conventionally, been identified as a culturally hegemonic state which results in news of US current affairs enjoying a particularly high rate of exposure in media reporting foreign media reporting. The case of VOX is also of note given the party's active focus on forming transnational

alliances (Rama et al., 2021b) and the party base's characteristically high level of idolisation for Trump. If, as we argue, these cross-national spillovers are taking place because of information signals of party viability, we would expect similar effects to be observed by other parties on the far-left also. One scope condition that may potentially constrain the external validity of these findings is that VOX, in addition to being most likelycase also happens to be a party with a shorter political pedigree. Whilst the partywas founded in 2013, it's electoral success was only catapulted into the mainstreamin 2018 (two years before Trump's defeat) and, as a result, voter sympathies with the party may be more volatile than those of more established far-right parties. Our case,as an initial test of our theoretical contribution, is an important first step in establishing the presence of electoral spillover effects in support for different party branchesof ideologically coalesced and increasingly cooperative, political parties. We expect these effects, however, to operate beyond the Spanish case and beyond only the far-right.

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