COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

Gema Fernández-Hoya
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6718-6423
gemafern@ucm.es
Univ. Complutense de Madrid

María Dolores Cáceres Zapatero
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9703-1756
caceres@ucm.es
Univ. Complutense de Madrid

The Non-Verbal Communication of Santiago Abascal, President of VOX

Abstract

This article analyzes Santiago Abascal's non-verbal communication, exploring the development of his communication skills, thus adding to heretofore limited research on non-verbal expression and political communication by providing empirical evidence from the field. Content analysis has been carried out on the basis of a quantitative systematization of non-verbal communication, encompassing kinesic, prosodic and proxemic aspects. The corpus of study comprises 24 audiovisual documents, representative examples of Abascal's public communication actions between the years 2014 and 2021, to which a tailormade frame of reference has been applied. Our findings show that Abascal's communication skills have progressed and improved during that time period, and may now be defined as evincing notable intra-systemic and inter-systemic coherence in verbal, kinesic and paralinguistic language, which enables more effective and persuasive communication; a clear, precise and constant gestural style that amplifies the persuasive impact of his discourse; the use of consistent expressive signals interpreted by his audience as markers of credibility; and a mode of non-verbal expression that is emphatic and vehement, which underpins the meaning of the message, enables emotional connection, and fosters effective communication as a form of spectacle. The conclusion drawn here is that the Abascal's development in expressive communication may be one contributing factor, among others, that has led to the rise of his political party, VOX.

Keywords
Non-verbal communication, oral communication, Santiago Abascal, VOX, political spectacle, political communication, political personalization.

1. Introduction

In January 2014, Santiago Abascal, a former member of parliament for Spain's Popular Party, founded VOX, along with José Antonio Ortega Lara, José Luis González Quirós and Ignacio Camuñas. VOX situated itself "on the right wing" (Abascal Conde, 2017) of the political map as a whole. Since 2016, in line with the increasing presence of right and extreme-right wing parties in Europe, the number of VOX representatives in various legislative parliaments has likewise increased. 12 VOX candidates were elected deputies for the regional parliament of Andalusia in 2018, leading to a negotiated program for government with the Popular Party, bringing to an end the longstanding hegemony of the Socialist Party in that region. In the April

2019 general election, 24 VOX candidates were elected members of the national parliament; and when a second general election was held later that same year, following the failure of the Socialist Party and other parties to form a government, the number of VOX deputies rose to 52.

While other Spanish political movements, such as Ciudadanos and Podemos, which emerged at around the same time have seen a fall in parliamentary representation and the loss of their founding leaders, VOX has continued to enjoy increasing electoral success and is now the third highest ranking political party in the country (CIS, 2021). The party has been led by Santiago Abascal almost since its very foundation; he was elected party leader by absolute majority (91%) at VOX's Inaugural Extraordinary Assembly in Madrid in September 2014. This fact is significant because the public engagement and image of the party's spokesperson have a direct bearing on the achievement of the political movement's collective goals.

By means of political personalization, the public identifies the leader with the party, and his appearance and voice become part of the party's electoral iconography (Laguna Platero, 2011, p. 46). In this regard, too, the spokesperson's credibility, which is intrinsically bound up with his non-verbal communication, also has an impact on the political party as a whole (Addington, 1971; Buller & Aune, 1992), and influences the electoral support it is subsequently capable of generating. Research in the field of political communication has shown that a significant number of undecided or unaffiliated voters look more to candidate image than to party program (Seiter & Weger, 2020). Thus, effective political communication is inextricably linked to non-verbal expression (Cicero, 2004; Gimate Welsh & Sankey García, 2005; Hernández Guerrero, 2009; Fuentes Rodríguez, 2010; De La Mota & Puigvert, 2012; Fernández-Hoya & Cáceres Zapatero, 2022), which is why communication advisors focus on honing each candidate's communication skills and refining their image in line with the prevailing telegenic standards at any given time (Castells, 2009; Redondo, 2008).

Against this background, it would seem that the figure of Santiago Abascal is a key asset of which the party is keenly aware, based on his presence in support of regional candidates (he was included, for instance, in the foreground of the electoral posters for the election campaign in the Autonomous Community of Madrid in 2021), repeated reports of his capacity to draw crowds (Izquierdo, 2019), and the statements of his party colleagues, "What you see before you is a natural leader" (23/10/2015, Malaga).

1.1. *Personalization and political spectacle*

The revolution in technology has transformed the status of political leaders and the political process in general. In the beginning, video-politics were framed by television and the broadcasting of political debates. Personalization and the making of political spectacle (Sartori, 1998; Martínez-Pandiani, 2006) now ensure that the image of political figures in action is a vital aspect of the process; and, at the same time, the possibility that their message might reach a large number of viewers has led to the emergence of a new spokesperson profile: the "electronic leader" (Colombo, 1977, p. 120).

Traditional news-information outlets share the same communication space as digital media, giving rise to transmedia narratives. Video-politics exist side-by-side with other modes of representation, such as Politics 2.0 and techno-politics (Baggiolini & Castro Rojas, 2016), providing ground for political discourse and confrontation (López-López & Oñate 2019).

This hybridized mediascape (Chadwick, 2013) intensifies trends that had already emerged on television and gives rise to new ones: discourses based on self-referential propaganda and subjective truths (Caprara, 2007) that further amplify the process of personalization and political spectacle already underway; and the increasing interpretation of political acts and discourses in terms of game-playing or as a 'horse race' (Reinemann & Wilke, 2007; Luengo 2011; García-Marín, Calatrava & Luengo, 2018).

Although experts tend to view audiovisual formats as inadequate because image counts for more than dialectical argument (Laguna & Platero, 2011; Redondo, 2008; Cebrián, 2003), television is still the favored media platform among those looking for political information, including digital natives (Alonso, Terol & Galán, 2021, p. 276), and the viral sharing of audiovisual contents (social platforms and media) is increasingly significant in political communication. Visual information offers immediate points of reference, precluding the need for analytical reflection and scaling back the power of verbal discourse. The conclusions reached in research studies carried out at the end of the twentieth century, that the public tend to replace verbal information with the emotional responses stimulated by the image of the political agent, remain valid today (Arrese, 2016; Urmeneta, 2017). Contemporary politics no longer follows the classical patterns; it is based on audiovisual perception, content simplification and scene-setting. Viewers assess qualities such as honesty, confidence, authority and commitment in the speeches they watch, doing so in an unconscious and immediate way due to the ease with which an image may be perceived, as opposed to the effort required to understand verbal discourse: "Thus, the political leader fulfills the key role of being a 'cognitive shortcut' for citizens, in contrast to the difficulty involved in understanding the programs and proposals set out by different political parties; instead, votes may base their decisions on the candidate" (Laguna Platero, 2011, p. 46).

Telegenic communication connotes "a new form of political morality: media morality, which is inextricable from aesthetic morality," whereby the leader is figured as a "statement of principles in himself, as a guarantee" (Redondo, 2008, p. 1).

Political success may be assured by the presentation of an empathetic, coherent and credible image (Fernández Collado, Hernández Sampieri & Ocampo Jaramillo, 2007). Persuasion stems from a politics-emotion binary that exclude rational politics (Arrese, 2016; Urmeneta, 2017). Influencing voter behavior involves making a connection with each individual (Nimmo, 1985; Castells, 2009); hence the need to manage the kind of non-verbal expression on which the emotional communication of discourse depends.

1.2. *Non-verbal communication, persuasion and politics*

Research into non-verbal behavior is both scarce and highly sought after among scholars in the field because of its significance for the communication and reception of discourse (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Dumitresco, 2016). The subject has been addressed from the perspectives of philology and linguistics (Bañón Hernández, 2005; Hernández Guerrero, 2009; Fuentes Rodríguez, 2010; De La Mota & Puigvert, 2012; Cestero Mancera, 2016, 2018a, 2018b; García Ferrer, 2020), communication (Rodríguez Escancio & Hernández Herrate, 2010; Saha *et al.,* 2016; Seiter & Weger, 2020; Fernández-Hoya & Cáceres Zapatero, 2022), psychology (Argentin, Ghiglione & Dorna, 1990; Stockemer & Praino, 2015) and sociology (Gimate Welsh & Sankey García, 2005), which underscores the close ties between politics, communication and persuasion.

A variety of taxonomies of non-verbal elements have been developed depending on the disciplinary focus involved. One of the first such classifications, developed by Ekman & Friesen and recorded by Professor M. L. Knapp (1982, pp. 26–27), set out seven analytical categories: body movements (emblems, illustrators, affect displays, regulators and adaptors), paralanguage, proxemics, physical characteristics, touch, artifacts, and aspects of personal appearance or the environment. In psychology, McNeill (2005) described five gestural categories (iconic, metaphoric, *beats*, deictic, cohesive). R. Laban defined eight basic qualities of the innumerable varieties of movement based on its direction, intensity, speed, and the effect of gravity on action. More recently, from a linguistics perspective, F. Poyatos (2002a, 2002b) has explored the threefold nature of human communication, comprised of coherent expressive systems in themselves that are affected in turn by inter-systemic relationships: a basic or primary system subdivided into paralanguage (sound qualities, phonic changes,

physiological or emotional responses, quasi-lexical elements and the absence of sound) and kinesics (gestures, manners and postures); and another, secondary or cultural system which encompasses proxemics and chronemics.

Irrespective of the field of study, the consensus conclusion across these research studies is that body language, proxemics and paralinguistic elements add value to the act of communication: according to Birdwhistell (1970), 65% of a message is communicated by non-verbal expression (35% via intonation, 27% via body language); Pease (2011) sees the impact of non-verbal communication as being more significant still, holding that 20-30% of information is communicated to the receiver via paralanguage, between 60% and 80% via kinesics, whereas only 7-10% depends on the words chosen and the order in which they are phrased; finally, Merhabian (1980) had noted that the role of non-verbal expression is more important in emotionally-charged messages, where its impact may be as high as 93% (38% paralanguage, 55% body language).

In the field of politics in particular, the principles of classical rhetoric averred that the mode in which discourse is expressed (*actio*) is an indispensable factor in the achievement of political success (Cicero, 2004). Not only does this assertion remain unquestionable, but its validity is reinforced by the prevalence of audiovisual political information in which viewers can perceive speaker diction, intonation, gestures and facial expressions –that is, the most expressive elements of body language in human communication (Argyle, 1978). The latest developments in neuroscience in relation to politics show that the public pays at least the same amount of attention to non-verbal features as to the words used, and that the former are processed more quickly, remembered more forcefully and shape one's perception overall (Gong & Bucy, 2016; Bauer & Carpinella, 2017).

There is some empirical evidence that the public comes to conclusions regarding a candidate's authority or approachability by relating preexisting mental frames with the politician's paralanguage (Hernández Guerrero, 2009), perceiving a leader as more or less credible, for instance, based on his intonation, speech volume and diction, and linking clear pronunciation with honesty, empathy and credibility; or hearing a nasal voice, for example, as suggesting the opposite values (Addington, 1971). Furthermore, the speed of discursive enunciation has been correlated with assertions of dominance, implying subordination to the speaker on the audience's part (Buller & Aune, 1992).

As regards kinesics, research findings suggest that the elimination of adaptors, the prevalence of movements that imply explanation or clarification rather than more abstract gestures, and a reduction in gestural range yields a more persuasive effect among non-specialist publics (Argentin, Ghiglione & Dorna, 1990) and have a greater impact than verbal expression (Dumitresco, 2016). A look, a gesture, the right tone at the right time with the right emphasis, amplify the meaning of what is said (Barnés, 2006, p. 111). Similarly, posture, which is conditioned by the occasion of speech, the status of the speaker and their personality evince attitude and mood (Fernández-Hoya, 2020). In short, body language in general is associated with emotional expression, the replacement or more nuanced framing of the verbal message, the regulation of communicative interaction, and the process of functional actions (Cáceres Zapatero, 2011). The emotive is more prevalent than the referential in non-verbal expression; thus, it is more difficult to deliberately manipulate communication by non-verbal means (Ekman & Friesen, 1974). Given that it may unconsciously express emotions and states of mind, the correct use of non-verbal communication is crucial to framing an effective, credible and persuasive discourse, which are key aspects in turn of successful political communication (Maffesoli, 1992; Pérez de las Heras, 2009).

Within the threefold framework of communication, the function of verbal language is to transmit concepts and thoughts, albeit always in conjunction with non-verbal signs because the mode of expression endows the message with its ultimate meaning. The key to eloquence

is synchronicity across the three interdependent systems (words, paralanguage, kinesics) because their interlinked coherence makes discourse credible.

2. Objectives

The main objective of this project is to analyze the communication skills of Santiago Abascal as president of VOX (2014-2021) and to contribute to research on the role of non-verbal communication in political discourse. This general objective may be glossed in terms of three specific goals:

O1.1. Describe Santiago Abascal's non-verbal communication style (kinesics, prosody and proxemics) as leader of VOX since the launch of the party in 2014 to the present day (2021).

O1.2. Assess whether his communication style has changed during the abovementioned timeframe.

O1.3. Identify the skills and limitations on his non-verbal communication, and their influence on his powers of persuasion.

Based on an overview of Santiago Abascal's public statements in the timeframe covered, this paper starts from the premise that his communication skills have changed and improved during his leadership of VOX, enabling him to act as an effective main spokesperson, and contributing in turn to the ongoing growth of the party.

3. Methodology

This research paper explores Santiago Abascal's non-verbal communication, taking into consideration the interdependence of expressive elements that comprise human communication, the intrinsic logic of each element –that is, the inter-systemic and intra-systemic relationships between expressive acts– and the contextual framework in which the communication activity unfolds. In this way, a comprehensive analysis of each expressive element precludes partial or overly simplistic interpretations and encompasses the vocal and gestural dimensions where expression occurs and their value within the flow of communication (Poyatos 2002a, 2002b; Pease, 2011), which is particularly important given the fact that non-verbal signals are multifunctional, whose meaning may vary depending on the context.

The methodology deployed here is content analysis based on an integrated, multimodal approach, drawing on the quantitative systematization of non-verbal behavior and encompassing kinesics, prosody and proxemics. It takes into account the established analysis and systematizations of Birdwhistell (1970), Ekman and Freisen (1974), Argyle (1978), Merhabian (1980), Knapp (1982), Laban (1987), Hall (1989) and Poyatos (2002a, 2002b), defining a series of categories relating to non-verbal communication, adapted from those set out by Ana María Cestero (2016). A new classification is also proposed here as regards the specific focus on proxemics, centering on certain characteristics such as the use of the podium and the handling of objects.

To compile the corpus for the purposes of this analysis, 109 audiovisual fragments originating from Europa Press, *El Mundo*, Canal de Televisión de Almería, Gran Canaria Televisión, *El País*, VOX España and other channels belonging to the political party, covering the time period 2014 to the present (2021), were accessed (via the digital platform YouTube), reviewed and classified. The initial selection of 109 viewed elements was refined down to include in the research corpus only those in which the political leader addresses members of his own party or a general audience at public events, on the basis that his communicative spontaneity is greater in such settings. Other kinds of public communication were excluded, when the setting may have undermined the spokesperson's expressive capacities, such as speeches in the national parliament, where the seating arrangement for opposition deputies (lower left-hand rows) means Abascal tends to have to lean upwards; interviews in television

studios or open spaces where the host controls the structure of contributions or the interviewee's personal space is invaded by microphones; and any heavily scripted promotional statements.

Having applied those selection criteria, the definitive corpus comprises a total of 24 relevant audiovisual documents, three for each year Santiago Abascal has been president of VOX (2014-2021), amounting to a total running-time of 5 hours, 26 minutes and 49 seconds.

The 24 audiovisual documents are the 24 units of content analysis to which a tailormade index, based on six variables, has been applied (posture, head movements, facial expressions, body gestures, prosodic features, proxemics); these categories were induced from observation and are relevant to the meaning of communication (Table 1). The frequency (measured in seconds) of each category has been quantified in relation to the total duration of each content-analysis unit, weighting such frequency against the three analysis units for each year so as to generate annual data that may enable an assessment of the temporal development of Santiago Abascal's non-verbal communication over the time period explored in this research study.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. *Political spectacle in the public image and scene-setting of VOX's leader*

Spectacle is a defining feature of contemporary political communication and focuses on spotlighting the leader (Redondo, 2008), drawing on the potential of décor, light and sound (Knapp, 1982). The audiovisual documents explored here, which foreground Santiago Abascal, evince the spectacle-making involved in VOX's political events.

In the first four years after the launch of the party, the sense of spectacle centered almost exclusively on the figure of its spokesperson; but significant changes were made to the framing of VOX's mass public events from October 2018 onwards, when the goal became to offer a stunning *mise-en-scène*: vast spaces set up and equipped with all the (audiovisual, sound, lighting) technology that attendees might associate with a concert by a major international artist, special effects (fireworks in the colors of the Spanish flag), and monumental set-design (columns, party logo, etc.) (see Appendix, Images, 1, 2, 3 and 4). The space is organized in such a way as to highlight where the leader stands on the stage or at the podium, which is reached via a green carpet, the party brand color, evoking the red-carpet glamor of movie stars. Huge screens placed at strategic points around the space broadcast the image of the political actor in real time and enable those present to see communication nuances and details in close-up. Moreover, in the breaks between speeches, the screens show videos that reflect outstanding moments or testimonies in relation to the party's leaders. The spectacle features intense lighting and color patterns, high-volume audio including music associated with the party, as well as the Spanish national anthem, which is played at the end of every such event. This kind of dazzling scene-setting stimulates the senses and dynamizes the emotional response of the public.

The full duration of these events is recorded in turn, so that edited extracts can later be shared virally via other digital channels. In democratic systems, the electoral campaign is an ongoing, unbroken process, so political parties aim to occupy as much media space as possible (López-García, 2017; Alonso, Terol & Galán, 2021). The edited viral videos draw on the techniques used in audiovisual narrative production, further contributing to politics as spectacle in the way that different scenes are cut together, striking inter-titles, stirring music, etc. Given that they are selected fragments and selectively edited, such videos are not an objective representation of the event as a whole; however, intense consumption of such viral contents may lead viewers to perceive them as being so.

Santiago Abascal meets the current, desirable aesthetic standards for a political candidate; his appearance is telegenic and, *a priori*, generates positive impressions of

credibility, goodness and intelligence (Postigo Gutiérrez & García Cueto, 2018; Knapp, 1982). Previous research has shown the significance of physical attractiveness in political candidates, as a factor that influences decision-making among uninformed voters (Stockemer & Praino, 2015).

From the beginning, Abascal's dress-code has been sober in style, combining formal elements such as jackets, pleated trousers and dress shoes, with open-neck shirts, check shirts and jeans, thus projecting a classical, discreet style. He likewise avoids ostentation in accessories: he wears a sports watch, a metal or leather wristband, and –since 2018– a wedding ring. This aesthetic mix fosters a sense of identification across different socioeconomic groups in the general public.

The most striking change in Abascal's image concerns his physique. His physical appearance has changed over the last eight years, a period during which he has gained and lost weight at different times; however, the general tendency has been towards increased muscle mass, reaching a peak condition in this regard in 2021. A muscular body-type is interpreted in social terms as strength (not only physical strength), health and as reflecting the power to act. The care taken with his image has likewise evolved over time: a shorter, more fastidious haircut, with the gray hairs of the last two years tinging his overall appearance with a stronger sense of seriousness and respectability.

The right image design for a political candidate may shape how (s)he is perceived, voter preference (Stockemer & Praino, 2015; Seiter & Weger, 2020) and, as a result, the decisions taken by the electorate (Sanghvi & Hodges, 2015). In general, Abascal's image as a political leader has developed within a general framework of aesthetic coherence, which is both acceptable in political circles and fosters the making of a credible public image.

4.2. *Distinctive characteristics of Santiago Abascal's verbal expression*

In line with the inter-systemic relationships that shape the threefold nature of human communication (Poyatos, 2002a, 2002b), but without engaging in an in-depth analysis of speeches given by Abascal as political leader (because this is not a focus of inquiry for the purposes of this paper), a number of distinctive aspects of his verbal style may be traced in relation to their impact on discursive efficacy and the idea of political spectacle.

In most of his speeches, Abascal focuses on explaining the party's position –in particular, its positioning as distinct from other political parties and movements– and avoids more complex content-points. His discursive style rests on three basic strategies:

- Quasi-literary formulations, using an unusually high number of less familiar rhetorical devices (antithesis, anaphora, epistrophe, metaphor and prosopopoeia are the most frequently used), along with acute explanatory clarity, enable public understanding and underscore his expressive force as a communicator (Monasterio, 2010). See such statements as: "This is the Government of the dead Spain, but the living Spain has its spirit, it has its people, and it has its king" (08/10/2018).
- Straightforwardly understandable lines of argument that allude to shared memories and incontestable future hopes (freedom, security, etc.): "Common sense and the normal things our parents taught us. You'll never make us feel ashamed of what we should only ever be proud of!" (08/10/2018) –a mode of speech that creates a bond with the public and prompts an emotional response.
- Mocking metaphors such as "the poor little right-wing cowering and whining in the corner" (08/10/2018); or the use of specific terms that have loaded connotations: for instance, referring to the abortion law as "Herod's law" (10/04/2021). Metaphors are frequently deployed in politics to create myths, heroes and adversaries, and enable the communication of subliminal messages via emotional associations or the unconscious sense of words (Charteris-Black, 2005), thus making a spectacle of political conflict.

In addition to the rhetorical devices cited above, Abascal also uses other strategies that have a significant impact on his audience: frequent references, for instance, to a sense of belonging, "for the workers [...], Spain means almost everything. Spiritually, materially, it is their greatest legacy, their prosperity, their freedom, their identity, and we are never going to let anyone steal it away from us" (01/11/2019); establishing synonymy between VOX and Spain, "VOX is the great Spain, the Spain of joy and decency, the free Spain that you can never and will never overcome" (08/10/2018); the use of military terminology, invoking a situation of extreme crisis, "we know we are at war" (14/12/2015) or "the first victim of the dictatorship of political correctness" (29/05/2017); distinctive characteristics of Politics 2.0 such as subjective truths (Caprara, 2007), "the civil war was started by a party which still exists under the very same name: the Socialist Workers' Party of Spain" (27/04/2018); and arguments based on common sources generally seen as credible by the general public, ensuring that the authority of the speaker is not discredited (Pearce & Concklin, 1971). An example of the latter approach may be taken from a campaign event during a regional election campaign in Catalonia, which Abascal opened with the following words, likely drawing on what relatives of many of those present might have once said:

> Many of your parents left their smaller homelands, in Andalusia, in Extremadura [...] to come to work in another part of this our great homeland of Spain called Catalonia. They came here to give their all, to work shoulder to shoulder, to raise this land (11/01/2019).

To sum up, the continual use of rhetorical devices and particular verbal structures frames an occasionally less familiar discursive style that also draws on dialectical strategies and the other resources described here to facilitate public understanding and political discourse as spectacle.

4.3. *Santiago Abascal's non-verbal expression (kinesics, paralanguage and proxemics)*

As noted in the section on methodology above, a classification system has been tailormade for the purposes of this research based on six variables (Table 1) covering mutually-exclusive descriptive categories that are identifable and substantial or significant in terms of communication. Signs that do not feature (backward inclination, weak vocal articulation, etc.), signs that cannot be observed (the lower half of the body, normally hidden behind the podium), or signs that provide limited significant information (narrowed or half-closed eyes, among others) are not included in the classification table.

Given the difficulty of describing and quantifying markers of non-verbal expression, a non-verbal sign is defined here as an observable visual (kinesic and proxemic) or audio (paralanguage) change. Having measured each sign (in seconds), their frequency are determined in relation to the total duration of each audiovisual document and the three fragments selected for each year, yielding annual data that enable chronological comparison, trace possible developments in non-verbal communication, and reflect on the relationship between changes in Abascal's expressiveness and his effectiveness as a communicator. Table 1 details the data obtained by applying this classification system to the 24 audiovisual documents that comprise the research corpus used in this study.

Table 1. Content analysis classification by annual percentage record: Kinesic, paralinguistic and proxemic category system

VARIABLES		CATEGORIES	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
POSTURE	**Vertical posture**	Leaning	89.1%	78.3%	79.8%	79.7%	63.6%	43.9%	44.2%	51.1%
		Leaning: defiance	0.3%	8.5%	6.4%	3.2%	15.8%	30.5%	32.9%	32.5%
		Leaning: closeness	10.6%	13.2%	13.8%	17.1%	20.6%	25.6%	22.9%	16.4%
	Arm position	Closed posture	0%	0%	0%	4.1%	0%	6.7%	2.4%	0%
		Open posture	97.3%	82.4%	71.7%	65.1%	62.5%	53.5%	24.3%	11.7%
		Expansive posture	2.7%	17.6%	28.3%	30.8%	37.5%	39.8%	73.3%	88.3%
Head movements		Hold upright	70.2%	50.6%	41.1%	36.1%	32.3%	33.1%	26.1%	37.1%
		Lower	10.2%	11.3%	8.3%	14.3%	5.9%	2.2%	3%	2.7%
		Tilt	6.3%	12.7%	14.1%	14.5%	13.7%	15.2%	18.2%	16.5%
		Nod head	7%	10.4%	10.7%	15.2%	16.4%	17.4%	17.6%	17.1%
		Shake head	1.1%	1.4%	1.7%	0.5%	1%	1.3%	0.4%	0.2%
		Push forward	5.2%	10.1%	21.6%	18%	25.1%	24.3%	27.5%	20.3%
		Raise	0%	3.5%	2.5%	1.4%	5.6%	6.5%	7.2%	6.1%
FACIAL EXPRESSIONS	**Look**	Direct look	89.4%	87%	91.3%	79.7%	93.1%	96.8%	97.3%	95.2%
		Indirect look	10.6%	13%	8.7%	20.3%	6.9%	3.2%	2.7%	4.8%
	Upper half	Eyebrows raised	15.1%	14.7%	12.7%	11.2%	12.5%	17.9%	19.9%	9.6%
		Furrowed brow	2.2%	4.8%	5.3%	13.4%	23.3%	27.9%	28.3%	24.7%
		Relaxed forehead	82.7%	80.5%	82%	75.4%	64.2%	54.2	51.8%	65.7%
	Lower half	Social smile	5.2%	3.1%	2.2%	2.6%	4.2%	2.2%	0%	1%
		Ironic smile	0.5%	2.7%	0%	0%	1.4%	1.2%	0%	0%
		Sincere smile	1.1%	1.8%	0.9%	0%	2.7%	2.9%	0%	0%
		Seriousness	93.2%	92.4%	96.9%	97.4%	91.7%	93.7%	100%	99%
BODY GESTURES	**Hands**	Show palms of hands	3.3%	4.5%	6.7%	9.2%	16.1%	21.6%	10.9%	5.6%
		Hands joined (together)	0%	0%	0%	4.1%	0%	5.1%	0%	0%
		Steepled hands	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1.6%	2.4%	0%
		None of the above	96.7%	95.5%	93.3%	86.7%	83.9%	71.7%	86.7%	94.4%
	Arm movements	Imperative-decisive illustrators	11%	24.2%	20.8%	16.7%	60.8%	59.3%	60.1%	66.3%
		Other illustrators	33.5%	39.8%	44.1%	51.5%	30.3%	29.2%	8.7%	5.1%
		Adaptors	10.2%	11.4%	6.1%	13.7%	6.6%	5.4%	9.8%	12.3%
		None of the above	45.3%	24.6%	29%	18.1%	2.3%	6.1%	21.4%	16.3%
	Shoulders	Shrug shoulders	7.7%	3.4%	2.2%	3.6%	1.3%	3.5%	1.6%	1.2%
		Not shrug shoulders	92.3%	96.6%	97.8%	96.4%	98.7%	96.5%	98.4%	98.8%
PROSODIC ELEMENTS	**Articulation**	Correct articulation	96.9%	89.3%	69.5%	70.2%	61.8%	14.3%	19.4%	9.2%
		Hyper-articulation	3.1%	10.7%	30.5%	29.8%	38.2%	85.7%	80.6%	90.8%
	Resonance	Chest resonance	82.6%	34.7%	34.4%	27.6%	8.8%	1.9%	0%	0%
		Throat resonance	17.4%	65.3%	65.6%	72.4%	91.2%	98.1%	100%	100%
	Volume	Intermediate volume	96.7%	60.6%	30.5%	54.6%	22.9%	15.2%	24.6%	12.2%
		Intermediate-high volume	3.3%	39.4%	69.5%	45.4%	77.1%	84.8%	75.4%	87.8%
	Intonation	Rational intonation	81.7%	56.5%	34.7%	50.5%	24.8%	6.3%	18.1%	5.2%
		Emotional prosody	18.3%	43.5%	65.3%	49.5%	75.2%	93.7%	81.9%	94.8%
	Discursive fluency	Discursive fluency	39.1%	55.1%	67.1%	59.3%	80.6%	91.8%	92.4%	93.6%
		Text-based discursive fluency	59.8%	44.7%	30.3%	39.5%	17.2%	5.7%	6.3%	4.3%
		Functional silences	1.1%	0.2%	2.6%	1.2%	2.2%	2.5%	1.3%	2.1%
Proxemic elements		Appropriate the space	21.3%	26.2%	32.6%	28.4%	55.4%	70.2%	35.1%	37.9%
		Adapt to space	62.8%	43.1%	22.8%	41.5%	17.5%	5.4%	10.1%	6.3%
		None of the above	15.9%	30.7%	44.6%	30.1%	27.1%	24.4%	54.8%	55.8%

Source: Own elaboration.

Given the multifunctionality of non-verbal communication and the multimodal nature of the communication analyzed in the audiovisual documents that comprise this research corpus, the function(s) of each of the descriptive categories included in the classification table have been identified, in light of contextual meaning and the formal register of non-verbal expression deemed socially appropriate and acceptable for a political actor (James, 2003). The functions of the signs categorized here largely coincide with those set out by Cestero (2018) in her study of persuasive communication:

- Capture the audience's attention.
- Call for specific action/reaction from the audience (applause, smile, etc.).
- Structure different parts of speech.
- Facilitate understanding of verbal meaning.
- Express emotions and/or attitudes (linked to the context or verbal argument).

4.4.1. Fixed features and functions of Santiago Abascal's discursive style

A detailed analysis of the audiovisual documents comprising the research corpus here discloses that a number of features of Abascal's non-verbal behavior have been fixed, or have changed only very slightly, over the course of his political career, granting him a coherent public image as a political actor. The first of these features is congruence across the threefold structure of communication, a fundamental prerequisite of discursive efficacy. In this regard, for instance, there is little or no sign of localized parasitic movement (emotional expression or thought extraneous to verbal expression); it is so infrequent as not to merit inclusion on the classification table and occurs only in the first two years of the study time period (2014 and 2015). The candidate evinces coherence in his verbal and non-verbal language, which the public reads as a sign of credibility.

As regards the kinesic variables, the speaker's look and visual contact with the audience facilitate persuasive communication and, moreover, the sense of coherence and credibility (Segrin, 1993; Cestero, 2018). Irrespective of specific gesture types or their frequency, Abascal's gestural style is clear and well-defined, using a relatively narrow range of gestures and avoiding the use of metaphoric gestures (illustrators of abstract ideas), which amplifies the persuasive impact of his speech among non-specialist publics (Argentin, Ghiglione & Dorna, 1990; Dorna & Argentin, 1993), thus enabling his message to reach a wider audience.

Abascal does not adopt closed postures or positions that might alienate the receiver (leaning back, for instance), which the public reads as a positive attitude, an interest in expressing his message and communicating with others. His facial expressions generally suggest seriousness, with only the occasional, brief appearance of different kinds of smiles (see Appendix, Image 5), an approach which reflects the formal register deemed socially acceptable for a political actor (James, 2003) and enhances the overall propriety of his public image.

In terms of paralanguage, Abascal's verbal expression evinces correct or very marked diction, which viewers of political information tend to interpret as signs of honesty and credibility (Hernández Guerrero, 2009). He likewise maintains an intermediate-high discursive speed which, at its most dynamic, implies a dominance to which the public is invited to submit (Buller & Aune, 1992).

In short, therefore, the non-verbal markers displayed by Abascal as a political leader, which have remained consistent throughout his time as president of VOX, comprise an enabling starting-point for the further achievement of effective and persuasive political communication.

4.4.2. The development of Santiago Abascal's non-verbal expression

In 2014, Abascal was the main speaker at a large number of events to launch VOX as a new political movement, often attended by friends and acquaintances. This specific context

fostered two alternative attitudes in his communication style: a somewhat cautious and formulaic approach, generally adopted in formal contexts (Knapp, 1982); and a more spontaneous disposition, where he jokes or recalls a story familiar to his audience so as to foster empathy among those present, leading to the relative prevalence of his social smile (5.2%), which would not remain a feature of communication as his political career evolved.

Likewise in 2014, illustrator gestures, which are closely bound up with speech, tone and vocal intensity (Guerrero, DeVito & Hecht, 1999), evince an explanatory rather than decisive attitude (Figure 2). The data in this regard imply internal tension in the candidate, with relatively few visible signs but still some observable phenomena such as his upright posture (Figure 1), a position that uses the podium as a prop (Figure 3), the prevalence of the rational over the emotional, and considerable dependence on written text –the significance of all of which may be benchmarked against his later expressive evolution.

Figure 1. Posture: Vertical posture.
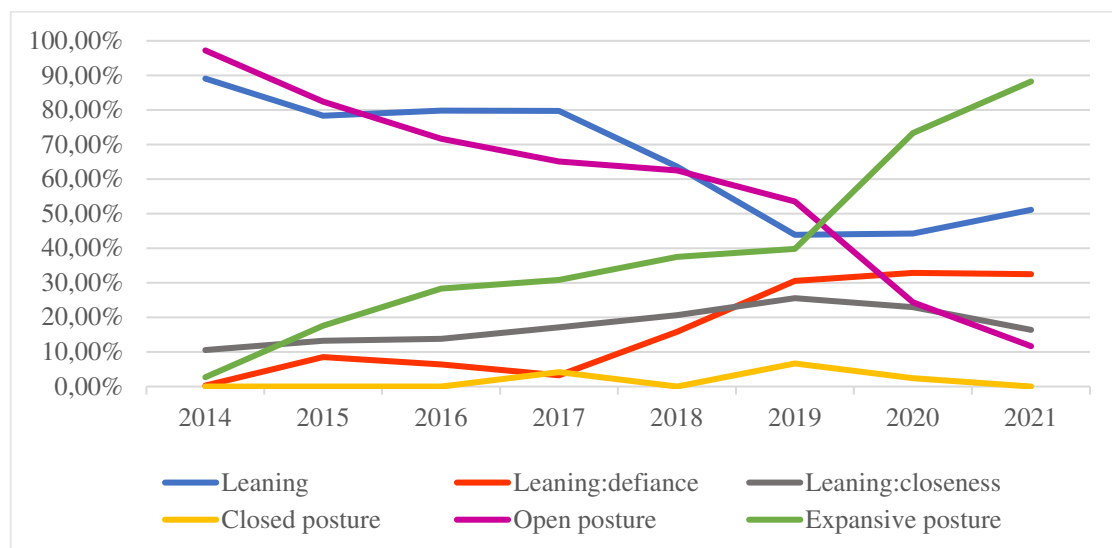
Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 2. Body movements: Arm movements.
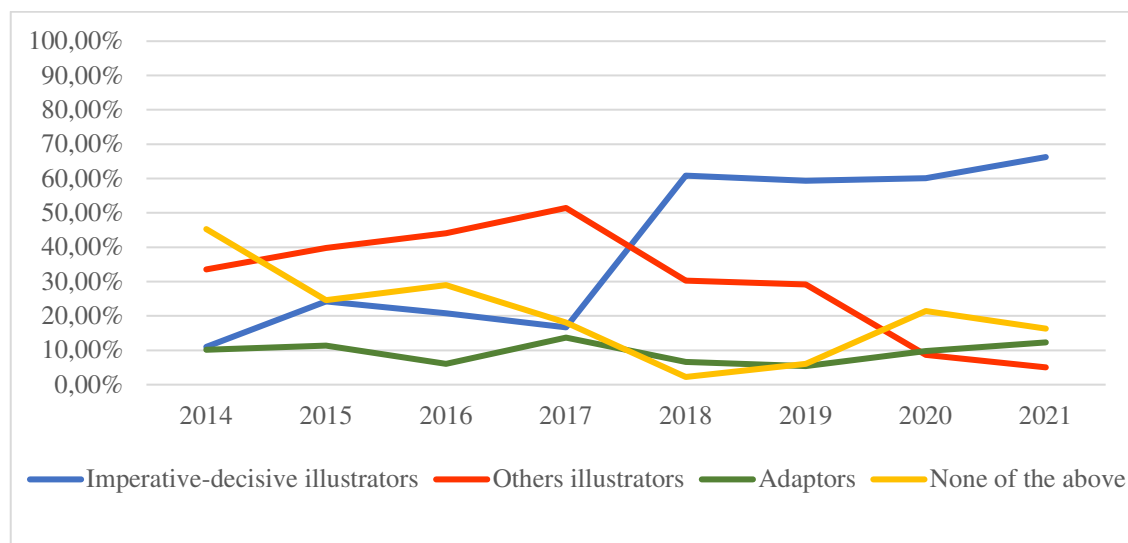
Source: Own elaboration.

There is an increase in expressive intensity between 2015 and 2017 (reflected in physical tension), which reaches a peak from the end of 2015 to June 2016, as the general election approached, declining slightly after the electoral campaign and during 2017. Evidence of this change is especially clear by comparison of similar moments in campaign speeches delivered in different regions: as election day draws near, his posture becomes more expansive and forward-leaning, decisive-imperative illustrator gestures become more frequent, and physical tension seems higher – signs and actions that suggest greater commitment to communication. By contrast, outside the immediate election timeframe, in the months before or after the campaign, Abascal's discursive intensity falls away, his approach becomes more explanatory (tilted head, tone, intermediate vocal range, greater dependence on text, and a sense of personal space shaped by the set of his shoulders).

Despite these changes in discursive-expressive force and their relaxation outside the electoral campaign, in the three-year period discussed above the overall expressive development noted here remained a fixture of his communication style going forward and there was no return to the data recorded at the start of 2014. In this time-period, Abascal leaves behind his more cautious approach, gradually incorporating a more approachable posture and the use of illustrator gestures, and signs of enthusiasm in speech; his social smile features less frequently, his facial expression becomes more serious and the furrowed brow or frown more prevalent, his diction becomes more marked, and his use of props and space more expansive.

**Figure 3**. Proxemics.
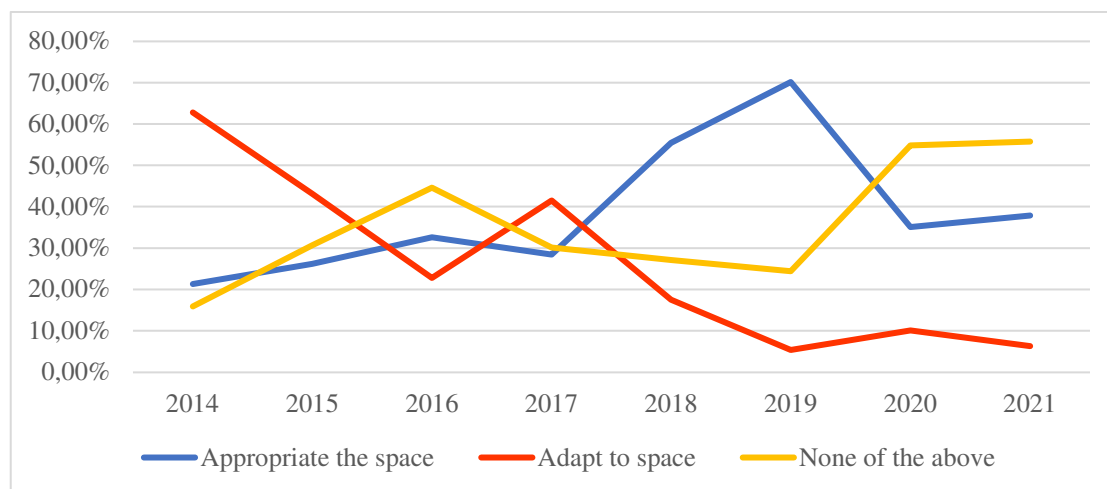
Source: Own elaboration.

From 2018 onwards, Santiago Abascal's non-verbal communication becomes more emphatic, a shift that is amplified through 2019, 2020 and 2021. The 2018 regional election in Andalusia marked a tipping point in this regard, inaugurating a more expressive commitment in terms of discourse (Figures 4 and 5). Abascal appeared to be aware of the importance of his role as spokesperson, and of the opportunity to use the regional campaign as a springboard for a subsequent general election; indeed, he said as much: "That's why we're here, to start the reconquest from Andalusia!" (14/11/2018).

His commitment to effective communication at party rallies paid off at an event in Vistalegre (Carabanchel-Madrid) attended by 9,000 people and with 12 candidates elected to the regional parliament of Andalusia. Public response of this kind generated increasing media attention and presence, and given his growing experience as party leader Abascal came across as a more convincing communicator of coherent political discourse. His self-confidence as a

speaker is reflected in his command of pauses, the use of paralinguistic strategies that prompt applause, and an enhancement of well-modulated vocal emphasis to ensure that audience attention is not overtaxed or lost (Figure 4).

A series of significant political events (general elections in April and November 2019, elections to the regional parliaments of Catalonia and Madrid in 2021) called for a communications strategy capable of connecting with the public and mobilizing the party's vote, an inter-systemic coherence across campaign acts and events, including highly expressive kinesics and paralanguage that could emotionally engage the public. Abascal is seen at his most imposing in communication terms between 2019 and 2021, a development that evinces power and confidence, values that are expressed in non-verbal terms (Navarro, 2018).

Figure 4. Prosodic features: Intonation and discursive fluency.
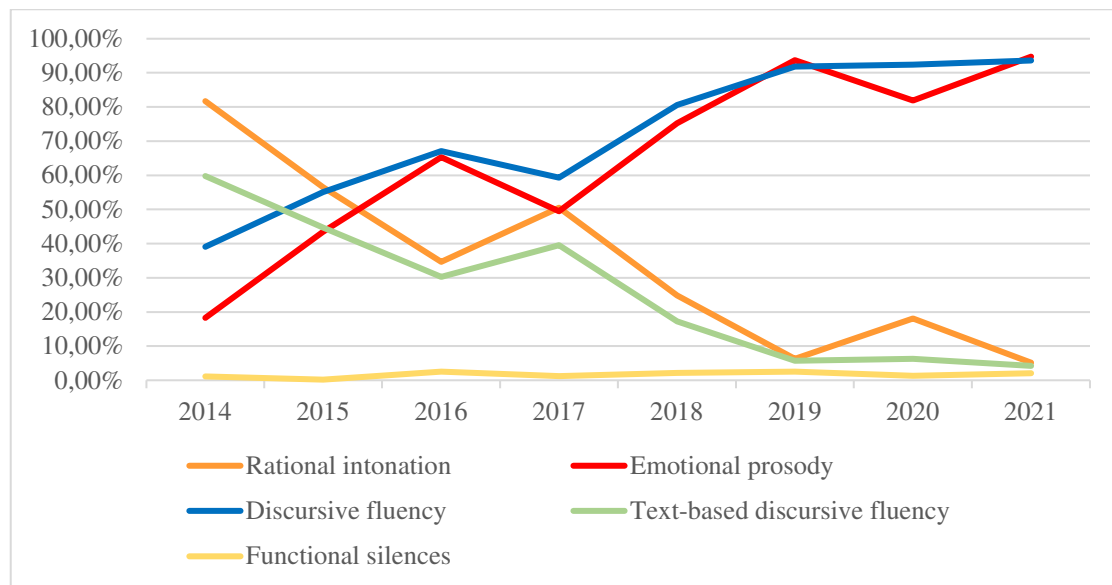
Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 5. Prosodic features: Articulation, resonance and volume.
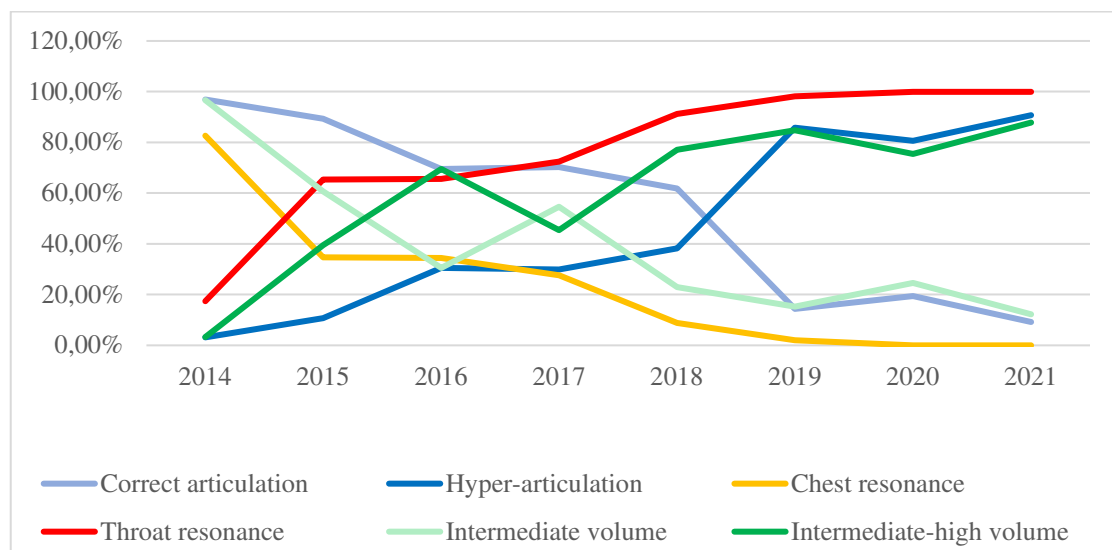
Source: Own elaboration.

Thus, Abascal's dependence on written text decreases and his fluent skill for improvisation increases, featuring more emotional prosody (Figure 4) and a higher speech volume; there is a gradual shift towards vocal hyper-articulation (Figure 5); he shows a greater tendency to occupy the space in which the speech is being delivered (a sign of a sense of ownership and power); and there is an exponential growth in the use of imperative-decisive illustrator gestures (Figure 2) –in particular, the pointing index finger, the thumb and index finger together as a punctuation mark indicating precise meaning, and pointing with the thumb folded over the knuckles (see Appendix, Image 6).

Such signs are regarded as threatening in interpersonal conversations (Armstrong & Warger, 2003, p. 170) and suggest a "claim to power and aggression" in politics (García Ferrer, 2020, p. 90).

Other significant kinesic markers also emerge during this timeframe, such as the use of symmetrical gestures (see Appendix, Image 7), read as a sign of order and commitment (Kendon, 2004), and greater frequency in the combined use of several gestures (head tilt, slight furrowing of brow, raising the chin) (see Appendix, Image 8), which imply a defiant or challenging stance that may induce a more submissive response from the public (Buller & Aune, 1992).

The data also show a decline in the "appropriation of other elements" in 2020 and 2021; however, this change does not correspond to a less imposing use of body language; rather, it is linked to an expansion of the gestural space occupied by the speaker, independent of other props or objects (Figure 3).

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to provide an empirical account of non-verbal communication, a field where detailed and systematic analysis is limited due to the painstaking and time-consuming difficulty involved in such study. It contributes to the development of our understanding of non-verbal communication, and its findings are read in relation to the strategic practices of political communication. Contemporary politics or techno-politics encompasses an intense sense of personalization and spectacle, a context in which party leaders are key assets whose communication style and public image shape the progress of their political party. The prevalence of visual and sound perception over verbal content favors automatic and unconscious assessment of political candidates based on their image in action. Hence, non-verbal expression has become increasingly important: it grounds the emotional dimension of political discourse, a key driver of public response. This paper concludes that features of non-verbal communication contributed to improvements in Santiago Abascal's image as a political leader and, as a result, to the extraordinary rise of VOX, the party he represents.

Abascal's overall appearance –in his dress-code, for instance– is sober or serious, his image both classical and discreet at the same time. The most significant change has been to his physique, where he has built muscle mass and focused on elegance, making him more telegenic and representative of contemporary aesthetic standards.

His verbal discourse as a candidate is readily understandable and interweaves a range of dialectical resources, including frequent use of stylistic figures, appeals to a sense of belonging, references to sources generally regarded as credible, claims of subjective truth typical of Politics 2.0, and military terminology. Together, this approach comprises a discursive style that favors message communication, the presentation of political conflict as a kind of spectacle and an emotional response among audiences, drawing at times on the use of less familiar grammatical forms of expression such as metaphors or features specific to written text.

The findings with regard to Abascal's communication skills here evince consistent and positive expressive features enabling effective and persuasive political communication, a key

aspect of which is intra-systemic and inter-systemic coherence across verbal, kinesic and paralinguistic language. Moreover, there are frequent markers that foster a positive view by the public of the politician's credibility, confidence and honesty: visual contact with the audience via a well-directed and unwavering look, which facilitates communicative connection; an open stance, which shows the speaker's interest in effective communication; facial expressions that signal seriousness, in line with an acceptable gestural style for political actors; and correct or very marked diction as the articulation of conviction or determination in relation to what is being said.

As regards the overall development of Abascal's expressive style, a rapid increase in discursive confidence has been noted; there is little sign of parasitic movement and adaptor gestures are infrequent. Such change was most noticeable in the 2018-2021 period, where his contributions to political events drew more on the potential of spectacle, a shift paralleled by changes to the way such VOX events were set up. Over the last four years, his use of conciliatory or explanatory gestures has become less prevalent; they have gradually been replaced by attitudes (postures) of power and confrontation, a more imposing –sometimes even aggressive– body language, a higher vocal volume and hyper-articulation in speech. These signs are read by the public as markers of credibility and sincerity.

Changes in communicative style are most marked in the timeframes around (regional and national) election campaigns, where the non-verbal expression of purpose and intensity is heightened, thus favoring a greater impact on the public. These externalized communication resources in high-pressure situations prompt Abascal to communicate in more emphatic and vehement ways, features which later become part of his normal non-verbal style, a process that implies a capacity for agile adaptation and a general talent for public and/or political communication.

Overall, Abascal uses a relatively consistent or non-varying gestural style; it is clear and precise and, for the purposes of persuading non-specialist publics, effective. His communication skills may be defined by the degree to which he involves and commits himself to the speech act, including emphatic, imposing and vehement non-verbal expression, which reinforces the meaning of what is said, facilitates a closer emotional bond with the audience, and effects a persuasive form of communication spectacle, all of which contributes to the positive image of the political party he leads and its ongoing growth and success.

In conclusion, the research data here portray an emphatic and determined political leader who appears wholly persuaded of his political project, a conviction that is reflected in the congruence between the form and content of his discourse. Positive development in his communication skills may account, at least in part, for the ongoing growth of his political movement.

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Appendix

Images 1 and 2. VOX event in Vistalegre, 10/08/2018.

Source: *El País* on YouTube.

Image 3. VOX event in Vistalegre 10/06/2019. **Image 4**. VOX event in Vistalegre 03/08/2019.

Source: Europa Press on YouTube   Source: *El Mundo* on YouTube

Image 5. Smile –sincere, sociable and ironic, respectively (11/11/2018, Seville).

Source: VOX España channel on YouTube.

Image 6. Direct comparison of identical imperative-demonstrative gestures, 12/13/2015 and 03/08/2020. Note the increased expansive posture, gestural intensity, bodily tension and hyper-articulation.

Source: VOX España channel on YouTube.

Image 7. Symmetrical imperative-determining illustrator gestures and vocal hyper-articulation (11/01/2019).

Source: VOX España channel on YouTube.

Image 8. Raised head and slightly raised chin (10/11/2019).

Source: VOX España channel on YouTube.