COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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Populism in the 2019 General Elections. Analysis of the speeches by the three right-wing candidates on Twitter

Abstract

The scientific debate regarding populism has been renewed by the rise of extreme right-wing parties in Western Europe. Spain was an exception to the European situation until Vox stormed onto the scene in the Andalusian regional elections in December 2018. By taking into account the definition of populism from Jaager & Walgrave (2007), Mudde (2007), Hawkins (2010), Charaudeau's populist discourse analysis (2009), and the idea of "contamination" by Hernández Carr, 2011 and Van Spanje, 2010, this article presents the results of an analysis regarding the discourse of the tweets published by the candidates of the three right-wing national parties during the electoral campaign in Spain prior to the day of the elections on 28 April 2019. The aim of the study is to reveal whether Abascal's discourse conforms to the parameters of the populist style, and whether there was contamination by Abascal (Vox) of the issues and rhetoric of Pablo Casado (Partido Popular-PP) and Albert Rivera (Ciudadanos–Cs). Firstly, the quantitative analysis shows that Abascal's political discourse on this social network is in line with the discursive strategies of populism; Secondly, the Vox leader behaves differently from the candidates of the PP and Cs. Finally, the influence of Vox's discourse on the other two parties with which he competes on the right-wing ideological spectrum is lower than expected.

Keywords
Populism, discourse, Vox, Santiago Abascal, political communication, Twitter, Spain.

1. Introduction

The emergence of Vox in the Andalusian regional elections where the party obtained nearly 400,000 votes and 12 parliamentary seats meant that Spain was no longer the exception to the rule in Europe and had joined the right-wing "populist wave" described by Taguieff (2007). Until then, it was one of the few European countries where a party had not yet emerged with a discourse based on direct opposition to immigration together with criticism of traditional party politics (Hernández–Carr, 2013), although the country did in fact have extreme left–wing populist parties at that time (Sanders, 2009; Sanders, 2016; Sanders, Molina & Zoragastua, 2017; Uribe, 2017).

The reasons given for the Spanish "exception to the rule" are the link between the right–wing extremists and the legacy of the Franco regime, the youth of the Spanish democratic system, the non-consolidation of immigration as a major epicentre of political confrontation,

the monopoly on the potential votes of the radical populist right-wing by the Partido Popular (Hernández-Carr, 2011, p. 141), and the ideological self-positioning of Spaniards, who are mostly on the moderate left (Uribe, 2017, p. 223).

Not a single poll predicted that Vox would obtain the representation it eventually achieved. This unexpected rise in the political structure led by Abascal has multiple causes. According to *La Vanguardia*, Simón and Casals analysed the explanations for the success of the party led by Santiago Abascal, which can be described by three categorical adjectives: short-term, structural and international (Torregosa, 2018).

Starting with the latter, the international phantom that has been circulating through Europe for years was a breeding ground for Vox. Hungary, Italy, Poland, Germany, the Netherlands and France are witnessing increasingly stronger results from right-wing populist parties, which is allowing them to gain media attention and increased public support.

The short-term keys to the success of the party led by Santiago Abascal are the following: low voter turnout, which lowered the threshold for obtaining representation; expectation of the useful vote generated by the polls on pre-election days, which gave the party access to the agenda of both the public and the media; the Procés (Catalonian Independence Movement) that was being tried in the Supreme Court together with the Audiencia Nacional (National Courts) in which Vox acted as the people's prosecutor; the refugee crisis unleashed by the Aquarius rescue ship incident; the impact of historical recall; the controversy over the exhumation of Franco's remains; and finally, the dissatisfaction with the Rajoy government and corruption in the PP.

Finally, some of the structural explanations include right-wing fragility, polarisation of the territorial issue, and citizen dissatisfaction with parties and the political class in general, as shown by barometers of the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas-CIS (Sociological Research Centre) since March of 2013. For Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008, p. 1) the rise of populism in Western democracies is due to the general political disenchantment of Europeans caused by the failure of traditional political parties to respond to the new challenges facing society today, which has resulted in an anti-party feeling that has led people to trust in these new political organisations (Uribe, 2017), as emphasised by Pasquino (2008, p. 21).

As pointed out by Dinç (2016, p. 12), populism has a spill-over effect in terms of ideology, framework, tactics, structure and opportunity, which means that even mainstream parties are in the populist flow. Recent research has begun to examine the issue of populist *contamination* with mixed results. Van Spanje (2010) has found that the mainstream European parties tend to adopt the position of populist parties on immigration issues. Contrarily, Rooduijn *et al.* (2014) have found no evidence to show that the main European populist parties have adopted populist language (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2013, p. 27).

2. Political populism: definition and basic elements

All of the experts on populism point out the difficulties involved in defining this concept. Gellner & Ionescu wrote (1969, p. 1):

> There can, at present, be no doubt about the *importance* of populism. But no one is quite clear just what it *is*. As a doctrine or as a movement, it is elusive and protean. It bobs up everywhere, but in many and contradictory shapes. Does it have any underlying unity? Or does one name cover a multitude of unconnected tendencies?

Part of the confusion in terminology is due to the fact that populist parties do not refer to themselves as populists, and even reject the term, as pointed out by Canovan (1981, p. 5). As pointed out by Muro (2017, p. 9), other people use the term in a pejorative way, an opinion shared by Charaudeau, who states that this happens "both on the right and on the left to stigmatize the opposing party, or to defend themselves against adverse defamation" (Charaudeau, 2009, p. 257). However, there are exceptions to the rule. Some claim to be

populists, giving the term a positive meaning, such as Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, or Podemos in Spain. Clarifying the terminology implies even more ambiguity due to the fact that the term is commonly used "as the equivalent of demagogic *Poujadism*, which is sometimes racist, and at times even fascist" (Charaudeau, 2009, p. 257).

According to Mudde, author of one of the most widely accepted definitions, populism is "a thin ideology which considers that society is ultimately divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite', and in which it is stated that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde, 2007, p. 541).

Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008, p. 3) provide a similar definition: populism is an ideology that confronts a supposedly homogeneous and virtuous group of people ("we the 'people'") against an elite group, along with other enemies, who are accused of depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice.

Mudde adds two more features to the definition of populism as an ideology: populism as a political strategy, and as a communicative style. Gridon and Bonikowski (2013) also point to these three predominant conceptual approaches in the literature of political science and sociology.

In the first of these initiatives, Kurt Weyland considers populism to be "a political strategy through which a personalist leader seeks or exercises governmental power on the basis of direct, immediate and non-institutionalised support from a large number of generally unorganised followers" (Weyland, 2001, p. 14).

As a distinctive style of political communication, populism is defined as an overly emotional and simplistic style of communication that seeks to please the "common man or woman" by using the language they speak. This line of thought is also supported by Taguieff (2007) and Jaagers & Walgrave (2007).

As observed by Mudde (2007), the main problem with definitions of populism as a political strategy is that they are used for the purpose of defining most of the phenomena considered populist in Latin America, but not those of North America or Europe. Contrarily, the stylistic definition is affected by the problem of comprehensiveness, because most political leaders and organisations currently use this political style.

For Mudde, the main advantage of providing a definition of populism is that it can be adapted to both left and right-wing politics, since populism is a *thin* ideology that can be merged with a *thick* ideology (liberalism, socialism, etc.). The definition is inclusive in this respect, yet the same definition simultaneously sets populism against elitism and pluralism, which excludes many other political phenomena, thereby becoming very specific.

Regardless of the aforementioned views, the definitions of populism as an ideology and discourse share two elements: strong opposition between "the people," and "the elite" (or "the establishment"), which includes traditional parties as well as cultural, economic and media elites, with an appeal to and assimilation with "the people."

Hawkins defines populism as a combination of elements of ideology and rhetoric. For Hawkins (2010), discourse and world views are intrinsically connected. Populism can be defined as "a world view expressed as a discourse" (2010, p. 10); however, "unlike ideology, populism is a latent set of ideas that lacks meaningful exposure to and contrast with other discourses, and generally lacks specific policy details" (2010, p. 1045). The author views populism as a simplistic discourse that assigns a binary moral dimension to political conflict. This is the view of populism adopted by this paper– a combination of ideology and discourse.

3. The populist discourse

3.1. *Background: characteristics related to ideology*

The discourse that characterises populist parties and movements is based on two main issues: a message of outright rejection of the foreign population, and an anti-establishment message (Hernández-Carr, 2011, p. 144). Three common features of populism have been identified by Jaagers & Walgrave (2007): (1) it always refers to the people and justifies its actions by appealing to and identifying with the people; (2) it is rooted in an anti-elite feeling; and (3) it considers the people to be a monolithic group.

For Mudde, the first variable that makes up the ideological core of these parties is *nativism*, defined as "an ideology that considers that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ("the nation") and that non-native elements (people and ideas) are fundamentally a threat to a homogeneous nation-state" (Mudde, 2007, p. 19). In this situation, authoritarianism and populism are not the key factors.

According to Taguieff (2007), the new extreme right represents a new form of populism that he calls "national populism." Unlike classic populism, which appeals to the popular classes in confronting a corrupt political class, national populism addresses the popular classes, but also an inter-class national community against an external enemy (immigrants) and an internal enemy (politicians).

On this basis, the ideological foundation of populism can be summarised by the following section title.

3.1.1. Anti-immigrant xenophobia

The rejection of immigration, and especially the repudiation of Islam and the Muslim population residing in Europe, is the foundation of the political activism of the entire radical populist right-wing element in Europe (Betz, 2007), and the main difference between extreme left and extreme right-wing populist parties (Fernández García & Luengo, 2018).

Hernández-Carr (2011) explains that in order to legitimise the rejection of the foreign population without turning to the biological and hierarchical references to the "old" racism, this new discourse develops an argumentative scheme in which race is replaced by culture. The premise of this discourse is as follows:

1. Culture is understood as a static mix of values, lifestyles and traditions.
2. Cultural affiliation is considered to be deterministic.
3. The nation is identified with a cultural identity that is built around elements related to its past, to which the immigrant population does not belong.

Based on these ideas, it can be concluded that "the 'excessive' influx of immigrants constitutes a threat to the cultural integrity of the nation. Therefore, opposition to immigration is presented as a protection of the nation's cultural identity, and therefore a safeguard for the nation itself" (Hernández-Carr, 2011). The need for a "policy of exclusion" of the foreign population (Betz, 2002) is based on three core ideas. The first is that of the "cultural threat," based on the need to defend "Western" society and its values. A second feature relates to the "problems" that foreign populations bring with them, such as a sharp decrease in school performance, deterioration of neighbourhoods, and a lack of safety for citizens. A third component is that of exposing the presumed damage that the arrival of immigrant populations implies on an economic level, especially for the native working class. This complaint is based on two issues: abusive and fraudulent access to public resources; and unfair competition and precariousness of the labour market. The political approach of these parties in stopping the alleged economic damage suffered by the native population can be summed up with the concept of "national preference" (Hernández-Carr, 2011, pp. 144-147).

"People" stand in opposition to the elite and the foreign population in a two-fold rhetorical discourse (Betz, 2004, p. 44). Firstly, it appeals to an idealised "people" who possess

virtues that should be extended to the political field. Secondly, these "people" are presented as being in opposition to an external element (Hernández-Carr, 2011, p. 148).

3.1.2. Appealing to the people

Populism is a framework of communication that appeals to people, identifies with them, and claims to speak on their behalf (Taggart, 2000; Canovan, 1981). Politicians talk about people constantly, using words such as the people, the public, citizens, voters, taxpayers, residents, consumers, population, etc.

Among all the definitions that exist, appealing to people is a necessary condition for populism, but not enough. Anti-elitism and exclusion are characteristics which, together with the former feature, define populism.

3.1.3. Anti-establishment

The anti-elitist discourse stresses the estrangement between people and the elite. Populists form an alliance between themselves and the people against a corrupt elite that only pursues its own interests. The elite may be political in nature (parties, government, ministers, etc.), or they might be the media, the state, intellectuals or economic powers. Jaagers & Walgrave identify three subcategories of anti-system viewpoints: "anti-government," "anti-politics" and "anti-media."

3.1.4. Homogeneity/exclusion

A classic feature of populism is that people are viewed as belonging to homogeneous categories. Specific segments of the population are stigmatised and excluded from "the people;" they are defined as a threat and a burden to society.

3.1.5. Other characteristics

Kazin (1995) adds another characteristic of populism: a large number of references to moral rhetoric and identity between the virtuous "we the people" and "they the elite." This moralistic concept of politics is highly critical of the elite and very generous to ordinary people.

In addition to being anti-elitist, populists are anti-pluralist, "because they, and only they, can represent the people. Their political opponents are seen as infiltrators, worn-out politicians or members of the murky elite whose time has passed because they lack direct affinity and identification with the real people of the 'motherland'" (Hernández-Carr, 2011).

Taggart (2000) adds taxes and safety as central issues of the populist discourse. Charaudeau (2007) states that populist discourse is used for staging, as in the following examples: (1) a catastrophic description of the social situation of which the people are victims; (2) denouncement of the culprits, including the political class, the elite, the institutions that have lost all authority, and the bureaucracy; (3) the exaltation of values; and (4) the emergence of a providential, charismatic leader who is capable of breaking with the past and who will be the saviour of society.

3.2. *Method: the populist style*

One of the formal characteristics of populist discourse is that it offers simple and direct answers and solutions (Hernández-Carr, 2011, p. 151, Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 322). These are common sense solutions using plain language that is understandable to the "common" people and differs from the difficult, formal language of the elite. They use a direct communication style and often employ aggressive language to polarise debate.

4. Methodology

This research analyses the populist elements of the discourse strategy of Vox leader Santiago Abascal through Twitter and compares them with the speeches of the other two right–wing

leaders in Spain –Pablo Casado (PP) and Albert Rivera (Cs)– during the 2019 general election campaign. A content analysis methodology has been used for this study. The 659 tweets published by the three candidates during the election campaign have been analysed.

One of the hallmarks of populism is its trust in any channel that allows people to come into contact with each other without any screening mechanism or intermediaries. As stated by Freidenberg (2007), the populist leadership style is known for its direct, paternalistic relationship between leader and follower without organisational or institutional mediation. As stated by Manuel Mariscal, head of accounts for Vox, "The media is no longer trusted... We are becoming our own communication channel." This approach is an extension of the populist strategy used by Trump in the USA, by Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Salvini in Italy, and it justifies the selection of Twitter for discourse analysis, as it allows for interactive communication between citizens, political parties and candidates without the intervention of the traditional media (Holtz-Bacha, 2013; Maarek, 2014).

The overall objectives of this research are two-fold: to reveal whether Abascal's discourse on the Twitter social network fits the parameters of the populist style, and to compare Abascal's discourse (Vox) with the discourses of Pablo Casado (PP) and Albert Rivera (Cs), in order to discover whether there has been any contamination by Abascal on the issues and rhetoric of the other two leaders. These general objectives have been translated into the following specific objectives:

- O1. to identify the use of Twitter by the three right-wing candidates during the election campaign and the purpose of such use.
- O2. to identify the campaign issues of Santiago Abascal (Vox), Pablo Casado (PP) and Albert Rivera (Cs)
- O3. to identify use of the term 'populist' in the accounts of the three leaders.
- O4. to identify anti-system judgements.
- O5. to observe whether the discourse style is defined by a rhetoric that is 'black or white' (Manichaean) and if it has a dual morality.
- O6. to analyse the values included in their messages.

The research hypotheses according to the contributions analysed in the theoretical framework are as follows:

- H1. The three political leaders used Twitter in a self-referencing way during the election campaign (García & Zugasti, 2016; Pallarés & García, 2017).
- H2. Abascal prioritised issues associated with populism: nationalism, religiosity, and capitalising on disaffection regarding a bad economic situation and immigration.
- H3. There is a contamination effect from Vox to PP and Ciudadanos in the topics discussed on Twitter.
- H4. Santiago Abascal (Vox) does not identify himself or his party as populist, nor does Pablo Casado (PP) nor Albert Rivera (Cs) refer to Vox and his leader by that term.
- H5. Anti-system judgments are rampant in the Vox leader's personal account compared to the accounts of his political adversaries to whom he is closest ideologically. According to Jaggers & Walgrave (2007, p. 328), anti-system judgments are the vertical dimension of populism. These authors identify three subcategories of anti-system judgments: "anti-government," "anti-politics" and "anti-media."
- H6. The Vox candidate uses *chummy* language, even vulgar at times; he also employs a rhetorical approach in distinguishing between *us* and *the others,* along with general references to "the population," "the people," or some other segment of society. According to Jaggers & Walgrave (2007, p. 339), such references are considered to be a strong indicator of populism.
- H7. The main values in Santiago Abascal's messages are the following: praise of history and tradition, popular sovereignty, immediacy, strength, unity, differentiation, and change.

For the analysis of the political-electoral discourse on Twitter, all the tweets posted during the electoral campaign (from 12 to 26 April) were collected in the profile of Abascal (@Santi_ABASCAL), Pablo Casado (@pablocasado_), and Albert Rivera (@Albert_Rivera), using a Twitter Advanced Search. The descriptive statistical processing of the data was carried out using an Excel programme.

Content analysis of this corpus of text is based on the categories established by Jaggers & Walgrave (2007) and Charaudeau (2009), for whom populist discourse is characterised by the portrayal of a catastrophic social situation, the identification of a culpable elite, the exaltation of highly symbolic values, and the emergence of a redeeming alternative (Arroyo & Pérez, 2006).

Content analysis is appropriate as it allows for the formulation of valid and repeatable inferences that are applicable to the context (Krippendorff, 1990) based on the messages disseminated through Twitter. This research technique facilitates access to the hidden meaning of the messages (Igartua & Humanes, 2004).

As a previous step, in order to place the campaign in context, we analysed the total activity of the accounts, the evolution of this activity over time, the intention of the tweets published, and the issues addressed.

Activity points out the volume of messages published through this social network, while specification of the *evolution* over time displays the rhythm of the Twitter campaign. *Intention* aims to determine what Twitter was used for. For this purpose, the research began by using the Functional Theory of Political Campaign Speech (Benoit, 2007), which allows for a description of the strategies used by candidates in presenting political messages during election campaigns. This section utilised the categories proposed by Benoit (2007): affirmative statements, proposals or acclamations, attacks or criticism of the opponent, and defence and refutation of attacks. To these categories, the following classifications were added: description of the environment, information on the campaign, and complaints. These additions were made after the exploratory analysis of the messages had been carried out, taking into account the methodological approach used in previous research (Cebrián-Guinovart, Vázquez-Barrio & Olabarrieta, 2013; Cebrián-Guionvart & Vázquez-Barrio, 2013; Vázquez-Barrio & Cebrián-Guinovart, 2018).

Acclamations refer to any affirmative statement, proposal or declaration referring to actions and decisions along with their consequences. The term *attack* refers to any negative comment about an opponent, his party, or his political decisions or proposals. In the section of *defence,* responses to previous attacks on the candidate or his party were coded.

Regarding *issues*, the Functional Analysis Theory points out that political campaigning discourse focuses on two topics: politics, and the characteristics of the candidate (Benoit, 2007). Political issues refer to statements concerning governmental actions or problems that may lead to governmental responses. The characteristics of the candidate refer to traits, abilities and attitudes that are aspects of each politician.

On the basis of the aforementioned work, a code book was produced that focused on the core aspects of the discourse related to the communicative style, the ideas defended, and the values that supported them.

1. Identification No.
2. Date of publication
3. Intention
    a. Affirmative statements, proposals or acclamations
    b. Attacks or criticism of the opponent
    c. Defence or refutation of attacks
    d. Environment overview
    e. Information on the campaign
    f. Complaints
4. Topics
5. Anti-system judgements
    a. Presence or absence of "anti-government" judgements. These could be portrayed as criticism of a particular event, as systematic and continued failure, as structural failure, or as total failure
    b. Presence or absence of "anti-political" judgements. These focus on specific criticism of opposing politicians or parties, or of new parties. They can be designed as criticism of political measures or current situations, proposals for the future, specific politicians, a particular party, a group of parties, or all parties, with the exception of one's own
    c. Presence or absence of "anti-media." These target the media as an elite. It could be criticism of individual media outlets, media groups, or all media in general
6. Values (adopted from the work of Arroyas & Perez, 2016, based on the work of Charaudeau)
    a. Exalting the country's history and traditions in order to recover a lost identity
    b. Re-establishing popular sovereignty by direct and immediate action through the short-circuiting of institutions
    c. Immediacy: "everything is possible right now"
    d. Strength and unity (values related to popular mobilisation)
    e. Solidarity with the common man or woman (a value that seeks a bond with most unprotected segment of the population, which creates identification with ordinary people
    f. Honesty (value related to transparency, nobility, purity, etc.)
    g. Differentiation (a value related to dissimilarity –the "us" is established in contrast to "them")
    h. Change (value that prioritises division as an alternative to institutional inertia)
7. Language
    a. Presence or absence of *chummy* language or vulgar slang
    b. Presence or absence of words identified with populist language (class, nation, homeland, bureaucrats, etc.)
    c. Presence or absence of the rhetorical resource of 'us' and 'the others'
    d. Presence or absence of general references to "the individuals," "the population," "the people," "the society," "the voters," "the electors," etc.
8. Populist term
    a. Does the candidate label the other politicians (s) as populist? (0. No / 1. Yes)
    b. Does the candidate label him or herself as a populist? (0. No / 1. Yes)

5. Results

### 5.1. *Context of the candidates' online campaign*

5.1.1. Activity: volume and progression

On Santiago Abascal's account, 283 tweets were published between 12 and 28 April of 2019. His activity was greater than that of Pablo Casado (PP), who published 248, and much greater than that of Albert Rivera (Cs), who published 128. The day on which Abascal published the most tweets was 22 April (32), and the day he published the least was on 27 April, the day of reflection, when he only published one. The average number of tweets was 16.5, but there was no consistency, as there was much more activity during the second phase of the campaign. All three candidates intensified their activity at the end of the campaign, although Abascal and Casado did so more energetically, while Rivera had a lower profile on Twitter during the last 15 days and was more consistent in posting messages than the other two candidates.

Peaks in activity do not coincide. The day of the debate on RTVE was the day with the highest volume of tweets posted by Abascal, the only candidate out of the three who did not attend. Far from using the network as a loudspeaker to participate in the debate without being physically present, Abascal adopted a strategy of boycott and criticism. On the one hand, he objected to the decision taken by the electoral commission for elections in Spain (Junta Electoral Central, JEC), and on the other hand, he urged his supporters to avoid watching the debate and to carry out a counter-programme as a major electoral event.

Casado's peak of activity was on the day of the second debate, 23 April, while Rivera, although above his average on those two days (he published 9 and 5 tweets, respectively), was far from the most active days (16 and 26, with 15 tweets published).

Figure 1: Tweets published during the election campaign.
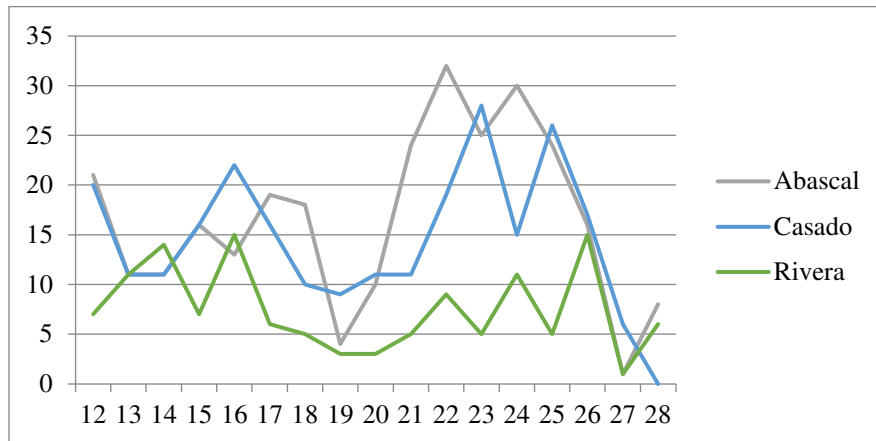
Source: Own elaboration.

5.1.2. Tweeting and re-tweeting. What sources do the candidates use when they retweet?

Santiago Abascal is the candidate who used retweets the most. He published 35 tweets (12%) and 248 retweets (88%). However, 23% of the retweets were sent to himself, so the source is the politician himself in 33% of the cases. Despite this clarification, Abascal was the candidate who sent the most retweets and published the least number of his own tweets. Casado also sent retweets (135) more than he published his own tweets (113), while Rivera did the opposite (96 tweets and 32 retweets), from which we can deduce that the leader of the orange party is the one with the least activity on the web, but the most personalised.

Excluding self-retweets, the main sources of the messages retweeted by Abascal were from the party, journalists or communication media, and politicians of the party itself.

The media and journalists retweeted by the Vox leader were as follows: *El Mundo* (9), Herman Tersch (9), *Caso Aislado* (5), Adrián Arnau (4), *El Independiente* (4), Herrera en/from *COPE* (4), *Libertad Digital* (4), *ABC* (2), *El Confidencial* (2), *Intereconomía* (2), Juan Mira (2), Luis del Pino (2), *Antena 3* (1), *Canal 4 Diario* (1), *esRadio* (1), Francisco Carrera (1), *Huelva 24.com* (1), Javier Negre (1), *La información* (1), Maite Loureiro (1), *OK Diario* (1), and *outono.net* (1).

Despite the anti-media discourse, which we will explain in more detail later, there were many retweets by Abascal to newspapers and radio programmes. These retweets had the following three objectives:
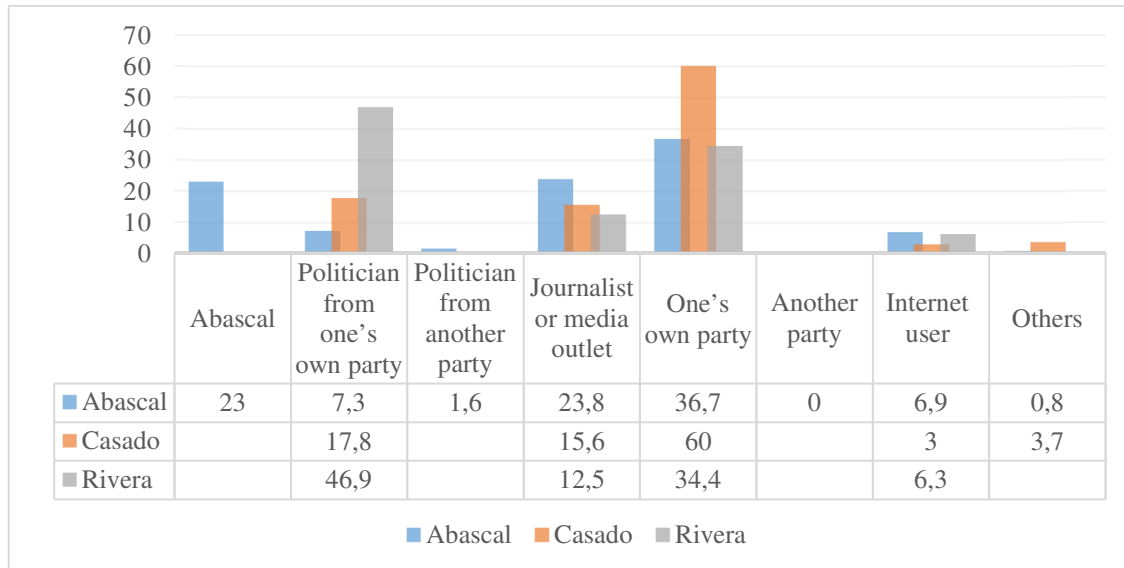
1. To reinforce the traditional campaign, gaining visibility for himself in interviews with these media.
2. Self-affirmation.
3. To disseminate news about his party.

Regarding the sources of the Casado and Rivera retweets, Abascal has the distinctive feature of retweeting to himself as well as to politicians from another party that has been curiously linked, either now or in the past, to the UPYD (Union, Progress and Democracy): Rosa Díez and Carlos Martínez Gorriarán.

The three candidates all retweeted to their respective political parties, party colleagues, journalists (or media), and Internet users.

Abascal is the candidate who most frequently retweeted the media and journalists, which is noteworthy, as he is a leader who repudiates and criticises the media, a characteristic of populist politicians

Figure 2: Sources of the messages retweeted by candidates.

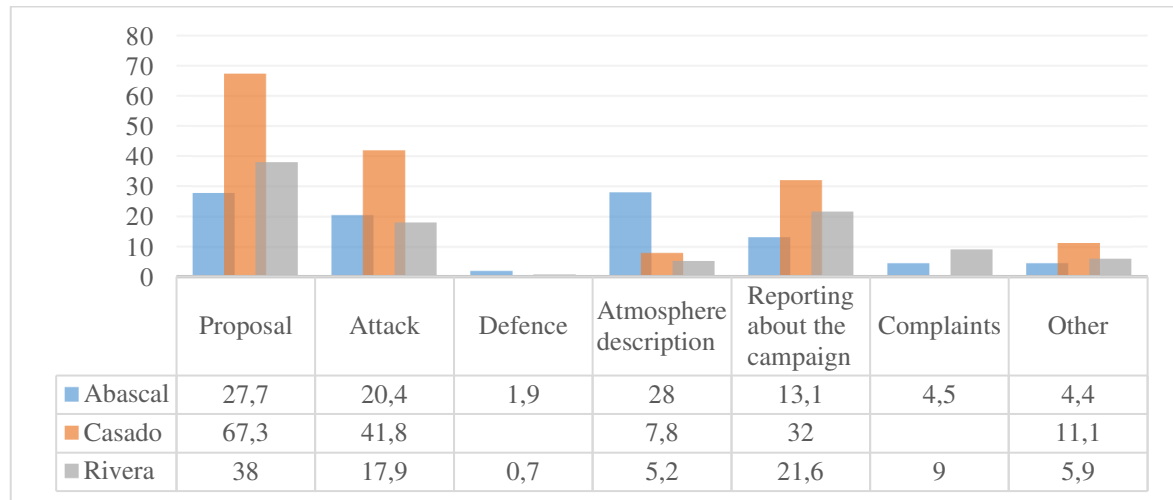|	Abascal	Politician from one's own party	Politician from another party	Journalist or media outlet	One's own party	Another party	Internet user	Others
Abascal	23	7,3	1,6	23,8	36,7	0	6,9	0,8
Casado		17,8		15,6	60		3	3,7
Rivera		46,9		12,5	34,4		6,3	

Source: Own elaboration.

5.1.3. Intention of the messages

Santiago Abascal (Vox) used Twitter mainly as a reinforcement of the offline campaign, a category in which the tweets that describe the atmosphere (28%) and those that report on the campaign (13.1%) have been included.

Figure 3: Intention of the message.

	Proposal	Attack	Defence	Atmosphere description	Reporting about the campaign	Complaints	Other
■ Abascal	27,7	20,4	1,9	28	13,1	4,5	4,4
■ Casado	67,3	41,8		7,8	32		11,1
■ Rivera	38	17,9	0,7	5,2	21,6	9	5,9

Source: Own elaboration.

The first intention of the Vox leader's messages, according to the number of tweets, was to describe the atmosphere of euphoria surrounding his party. A total of 88 tweets were counted, showing videos, photographs and comments on the amazing influx of citizens at the party's public events. On 41 occasions, Abascal uses this social network as a message board to communicate scheduled events and provide other information about the campaign.

The second purpose of his speech on Twitter was to make affirmative statements, proposals or acclamations. Of the 87 tweets with this purpose, 10 made specific proposals, and the remaining 70 were general statements.

The third function was the attack in three directions. There are attacks on specific parties and politicians, most notably the PP (9) and Pedro Sánchez (7). In this group, attacks on the *PSOE* (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) were also recorded (2), Cs (1), Urkullu (1) and Otegui (1). In total they accounted for 32.8% of the attacks. Secondly, there was a set of messages aimed at criticising "the others," which were the opposing groups in the 'them' and 'us' Manichaean *black or white* message. These "others" include "the Islamists," "the left wing," "the progressive people" and "the separatists and coup leaders," who together account for 17.2% of the messages of attack, and thirdly, attacks on parties and politicians in general (14.1%). Although we will analyse the anti-system messages further along, we have observed the presence of anti-political, anti-government, and to a lesser extent anti-media messages (12.5%). There were a significant number of attacks on the *JEC* as a result of the decision taken in relation to the electoral debates.

On 14 occasions Santiago Abascal used Twitter to denounce the boycotts of his headquarters and harassment against his candidates. There was an insignificant percentage of defence messages.

Casado's campaign on Twitter had two objectives: to make specific proposals and to attack the PSOE and Pedro Sánchez. Considering the total number of tweets, the attacks on Sánchez and his party accounted for 26.1% of the total. The third intention of the messages published was to reinforce the traditional campaign.

Rivera used Twitter to make general statements and proposals, to reinforce the offline campaign, and to make attacks. Similar to Casado, Rivera also focused his criticism on Pedro Sánchez (50%) and the PSOE (12.5%), but unlike the PP leader, the attacks were more focused on the elected president than on the party. We also found attacks on Vox (8.3%) and the Catalonian independence parties (8.3%).

5.1.4. Topics of the messages

Political messages predominated, while those concerning the personal lives of politicians were less than 2% in all three cases. The rest of the tweets can be classified into campaign messages and messages on political issues. With regard to the first category, a total of 79.9% of Abascal's tweets fell under this heading, 39.9% for Casado's tweets, and 42.2% for those of Rivera. If we add together all of the tweets related to the televised election debates, the percentages increase to 81.7% for Abascal, 60.1% for Casado, and 52.4% for Rivera. To the latter must also be added the 16.4% corresponding to messages about boycotts of his electoral event in the town of Rentería and the attacks on some of his headquarters. These data coincide with those related to the discourse of the three candidates. Some conclusions drawn from analysis of the issues are as follows:

- Topics related to reinforcement of the offline campaign are predominant in all three accounts, especially in that of Abascal, where 8 out of 10 messages are about campaign activities and accusations toward other parties.
- In addition to tweets about electoral events and praise for themselves, as well as for their party and their achievements, Casado and Rivera appeal to the useful vote, the former to avoid fragmentation of the right and the latter to move ahead of his opponents.
- Rivera uses Twitter to denounce the attacks on his party, colleagues and headquarters.

The messages on political issues published by Abascal focused on immigration (7.1%), and on the Catalonian issue and national unity (3.2%). He is the candidate who deals with the least number of topics. For Casado, Catalonia is the first topic (7.3%), followed by economic issues (5.2%), and events and security (4%). For Rivera, the main topic is events, crime, judicial issues, and security (4.7%) followed by Catalonia and Spanish unity (3.9%).

One of the hypotheses of this study is that Vox managed to set the agenda and spread its position and ideological issues to the PP and Cs. However, the data indicate that this did not happen on Twitter. Conflictive issues on which the party led by Abascal breaks the spiral of silence, such as immigration, gender violence, territorial organisation of the state, or bullfighting, either do not appear in the messages published by their political adversaries or are hardly ever mentioned.

Table 1: Topics of the messages.

	Abascal		Casado		Rivera	
	n	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**
Economic issues	1	0.4	13	5.2	2	1.6
Social issues	2	0.7	3	1.2	2	1.6
Civil rights and freedom, including ethical issues					3	2.3
Agriculture, livestock and fisheries					1	0.8
Employment, unemployment, labour and trade union issues			7	2.8		
Education	3	1.1	1	0.4		
Environment			5	2.0	1	0.8
Rural Spain			4	1.6	1	0.8
Emigration, immigration, and inclusion	20	7.1	4	1.6		
Traffic and public transport			1	0.4	3	2.3
Events, crime, legal issues, security	4	1.4	10	4.0	6	4.7
Assaults on politicians, harassment, boycotts of electoral events, threats, etc.					21	16.4
Political corruption and related judicial or police issues						
Housing and urban planning			1	0.4		
Catalonia and national unity	9	3.2	18	7.3	5	3.9
Defence, terrorism, ETA, public safety	2	0.7	6	2.4	2	1.6
Media (TV debates)	5	1.8	50	20.2	13	10.2
History and symbolism	3	1.1	4	1.6	1	0.8
Foreign affairs and development policies						
Functioning of democracy			2	0.8		
Agreements, negotiations, inter-party allegations, political pacts and possible legislative agreements	13	4.6	12	4.8	1	0.8
Election campaign events and praise for one's self, one's party and one's achievements	213	75.3	83	33.5	49	38.3
Internal dynamics of the parties and the current government			1	0. 4	2	1.6
Horse racing, voter participation, surveys, useful votes, etc.			4	1.6	4	3.1
Issues relating to the personal lives of politicians	3	1.1	4	1.6	2	1.6
Other topics	5	1.8	15	6.0	9	7.0

Source: Own elaboration.

The data indicate that Abascal and his party did not set the agenda in the profiles of their political adversaries, yet they have influenced Casado's discourse, which has become increasingly obstinate regarding issues central to the Vox platform, such as immigration, security, and the territorial question.

Rivera has always had a resolute discourse on the subject of Catalonia, yet he does raise issues that put distance between himself and the party led by Abascal, such as defence of the LGTBI movement. Nevertheless, at times he also succumbs to issues on the Vox agenda. In a tweet he posted on 20 April, he stated, "I want to lead a government that supports the family."

5.2. *Analysis of populist discourse*

None of the three candidates describes himself or other politicians using the term *populist*.

The second element of populist discourse analysed in this paper were the anti-system judgements, which are a vertical dimension of populism, according to Jaggers & Walgrave (2007, p. 328). As noted above, these authors identify three subcategories of anti-system judgements: "anti-government," "anti-politics" and "anti-media." Abascal is the only candidate who posted tweets with all three types of anti-system messages. Casado and Rivera did not berate the media, but they did criticise political parties in general, and the PSOE government and Pedro Sánchez specifically. While Abascal was the candidate with the most anti-political messages, in the case of anti-government messages, Casado and Rivera were ahead. The most striking percentage is that of anti-government messages published by Casado, demonstrating a strategy clearly aimed at attacking Sánchez and his government.

Figure 4: Anti-system messages.

	Anti-government	Anti-politics	Anti-media
■ Abascal	3,5	9,9	4,6
■ Casado	30,2	2,4	
■ Rivera	9,4	5,5	
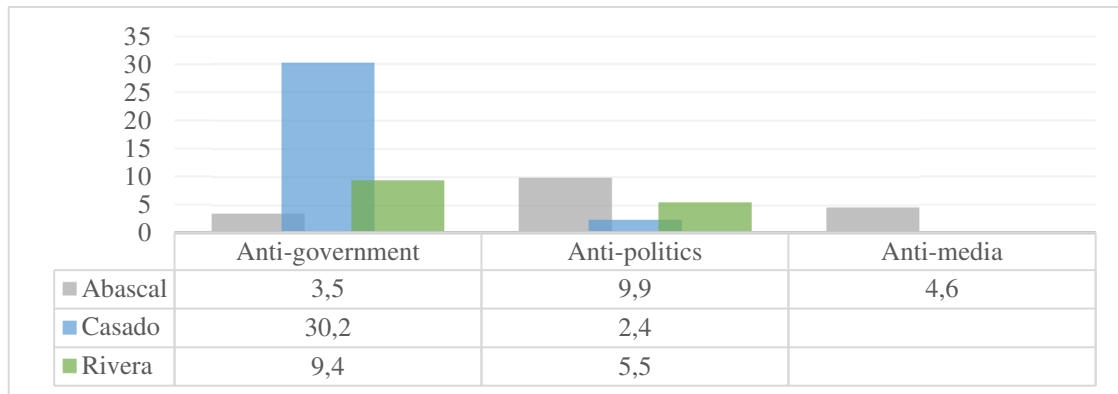
Source: Own elaboration.

The analysis of populist language included language register, the utilisation of rhetorical discrimination between 'them' and 'us', and general references to "the population," "the people," or some other segment of society. Only Abascal embraces a populist register. In 9.5% of the tweets, he uses vulgar language. In 11.7%, he employs antagonism between 'them' and 'us', and in 29.7% he includes general references.

Table 2: Examples of the populist style used by Santiago Abascal.

Vulgar language	They're nuts, the gutless right-wing, from the hand of *Bildu* –how repugnant, pro *ETA* mafia-armed Basque separatist group–, hooded people from the leftie truncheon club, savages, left-wing dictatorship, squatty politicians, newspaper rags, hordes of communists, working-class, lies like a wretch.
Antagonism between 'them' and 'us'	Pro *ETA* supporters/ the good people, a Strong Spain / the lefties, the totalitarians / Strong Spain, a Strong Spain / Mr. Sanchez and his cronies, patriots/hordes, those who live in their watchtowers/a Strong Spain, Christian/Islamists, a Strong Spain/a Dead Spain, a Strong Spain/ communist hordes, a Strong Spain/Anti-Spain, Islamists/Western civilization
General symbolic references	A Strong Spain, pro *ETA* supporters, the lefties, the good people, communists

Source: Own elaboration.

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Finally, Rivera did not publish tweets that expressed any of the values considered in this analysis. Casado praised history and tradition in 3.6% of his tweets, all of which were focused on Holy Week being celebrated at the time, while Abascal expressed all the values in the following percentages: Exaltation of history and tradition (7.1%), restoration of popular sovereignty (1.8%), immediacy (2.5%), strength and unity (10.6%), solidarity with the common people (0.7%), honesty (1.4%), differentiation (12%) and change (8.8%)

6. Conclusions and discussion

The objectives of this research are to reveal whether the discourse of Abascal of the Vox party during the election campaign through the use Twitter conforms to the parameters of the populist style, and to compare his discourse with that of Pablo Casado (PP) and Albert Rivera (Cs) in order to discover whether the two latter candidates experienced contamination of the issues and rhetoric by the former.

The main conclusion reached is that Abascal uses the discursive strategies of populism characterised by the following: the central role of the people; anti-elitism; the consideration of the people as a homogeneous entity along with the exclusion of people from outside (immigrants) and inside (pro ETA supporters, secessionists, coup proponents, communists, and lefties); and the use of simplistic, aggressive language, which confirms hypotheses 5 and 6 of this research.

The research carried out by Jaagers & Walgrave (2007) based on an analysis of the content of political communication by Belgian parties establishes a typology of four forms of political communication by populists: 1) Complete populism, characterised by the following: a) references and appeal to the people, b) anti-elitism, c) exclusion of outgroups; 2) Selective populism, characterised by a) reference and appeal to the people, b) exclusion of outgroups; 3) Anti-elitist populism, characterised by: a) reference and appeal to the people, b) anti-elitism; 4) Empty populism, in which there is only feature: a) reference and appeal to the people.

According to the data obtained in the study, Abascal's political communication can be described as that of a complete populist. He addresses the people through general references such as *A Strong Spain* and the *good people*. Abascal is also anti-elitist, and he publishes anti-government, anti-political and anti-media tweets. Moreover, he excludes immigrants, to whom he refers contemptuously along with "pro *ETA* supporters," "lefties," "secessionists" and "communists." The use of aggressive, *chummy*, and at times vulgar language has also been noted.

With regard to topics, the messages that dominate are those aimed at reinforcing the traditional campaign, in which the Vox leader boasts of the massive attendance at his rallies and informs users about his media presence and the planned schedule of public events. In messages with political content, Abascal offers the typical agenda of right-wing populist parties (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2018, Alonso-Muñoz, 2019) including national issues. He includes a xenophobic discourse on immigration, the threat of radical Islam, the return of Spanish sovereignty in Gibraltar, and anti-secessionism, which confirms hypotheses 2 and 7. The two issues that are central to populism are present in his speech: anti-elitism and anti-immigrant xenophobia (Hernández Carr, 2011:144). However, taxes, safety (Taggart, 2000), and the cultural, social or economic crisis (Charaudeau, 2007) curiously do not appear. In the profiles of Casado and Rivera, immigration has less influence than expected, while anti-elitism, the emphasis on rejecting the Pedro Sánchez government, and the Catalonian issue are common topics in the accounts of the three leaders.

The second conclusion reached in this study is that neither the leader of the PP nor the Cs uses populist political communication. Casado (PP) and Rivera (Cs) do not use the rhetoric of a distinction between 'us' and 'them,' nor do they make general references to "the population" or "the people" nor use slang or vulgar language.

The third conclusion is that the influence of Vox's discourse on the other two parties with which it competes on the right-wing ideological spectrum is less than expected. The data show that Abascal and his party do not set the agenda in the profiles of their political adversaries on Twitter, but they have influenced Casado's discourse, which has become hardened on issues that are central to Vox's platform, such as immigration, security, and the territorial question. These findings indicate that Hypothesis 3 is only partially confirmed.

Other conclusions related to the secondary objectives have also been revealed by this research.

Among all three candidates, activity increased toward the end of the campaign, although it was more noticeable in the case of Abascal and Casado, while Rivera had a lower profile on Twitter during the last 15 days of the campaign and was more consistent in the publication of messages than the other two candidates.

Santiago Abascal used Twitter mainly as a reinforcement of his offline campaign to describe the euphoric atmosphere surrounding his party. He also used it as a notice board to inform followers about scheduled events and to provide other information about the campaign. The second intention of Abascal's speech on Twitter was to make affirmative statements, proposals and acclamations. The third was to attack specific parties and politicians (highlighted by the PP as well as Pedro Sánchez), in addition to attacking "the others," which refers to antagonistic groups in his Manichaean *black or white* message of 'them' vs. 'us'. Finally, his intention was to attack parties and politicians in general. Despite the anti-media discourse, there are plenty of retweets to newspapers and radio programmes for the purpose of spreading information and reinforcing the traditional offline campaign.

Casado's campaign on Twitter had two main objectives: to make specific proposals, and to attack the PSOE and Pedro Sánchez. Rivera used Twitter to make general statements and proposals, to reinforce the offline campaign, and to attack Pedro Sánchez and the PSOE as well.

In all three cases, there was a clear predominance of political messages. This finding is in line with the results obtained in other research (Cebrián-Guinovart; Vázquez-Barrio & Olabarrieta, 2013; Cebrián-Guionvart & Vázquez-Barrio, 2013; López-Meri, Marcos-García & Casero-Ripollés, 2017), which shows a low level of personalisation on Twitter in the campaign studied in this paper when compared to findings regarding other countries in the same general region that refer to the behaviour on Twitter by politicians of those countries (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012; Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). Some other conclusions that can be drawn from the analysis of the issues are as follows:

- Reinforcement of the offline campaign is predominant in all three accounts, especially that of Abascal. Tweets that advertise and transmit information widely about campaign events and media appearances by politicians dominate. These data confirm the self-referencing use of Twitter by the three candidates that was suggested by Hypothesis 1.
- In addition to tweets about electoral events and praise for themselves, their party and their achievements, Casado and Rivera made an appeal to the useful vote in the last days of the campaign, the former to avoid fragmentation of the right and the latter to move ahead of his opponents.
- Rivera used Twitter to denounce the attacks on his party and on some of his fellow party members, as well as on the party's headquarters.

This study has contributed to a research topic that requires further substantiation. It would be advisable to analyse the rest of the social networks used by the candidates, as well as candidate appearances in the media and at political events. It would also be interesting to extend the study to the rest of the political parties and delve deeper into the concept of contamination, which is a topic that has been the object of very little research to date.

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