
Miscellaneous

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Submitted
May 12th, 2021
Approved
December 18th, 2021

© 2022
Communication & Society
ISSN 0214-0039
E ISSN 2386-7876
doi: 10.15581/003.35.2.53-69
www.communication-society.com

2022 – Vol. 35(2)
pp. 53-69

How to cite this article:
Pallarés-Navarro, S. & Zugasti, R.
(2022). Santiago Abascal's Twitter
and Instagram strategy in the 10
November 2019 General Election
Campaign: A populist approach to
discourse and leadership?
Communication & Society, 35(2), 53-
69.

Santiago Abascal's Twitter and Instagram strategy in the 10 November 2019 General Election Campaign: A populist approach to discourse and leadership?

Abstract

While the scholarly consensus is that VOX is a far-right political party in European terms, questions remain regarding whether or not its politics contain elements of populism. This research paper explores the Twitter and Instagram strategy deployed by Santiago Abascal, leader of VOX, during the 10 November 2019 general election campaign to assess whether his messaging includes characteristic features of populist rhetoric, to analyze the uses to which he puts social media, and to understand the features of the leadership he projects via social networks. The research methodology is content analysis applied to the 136 and 26 posts on Abascal's Twitter and Instagram accounts, respectively, during the election campaign. The findings suggest that Abascal's discourse is marked by a conservative and nativist form of Spanish nationalism; however, it is also shaped by an anti-establishment rhetoric and antagonistic message that pits *la España Viva* ['Living Spain'] against *la dictadura progre* ['the progressive dictatorship'], reflecting the inclusion of some features of populism. A further conclusion is that these social media platforms are the preferred propaganda tools used to communicate the candidate's agenda, although each network evinces certain distinctive characteristics: Twitter channels a polarizing message via aggressive and critical rhetoric, whereas Instagram posts are designed to show the human side of the candidate's profile. Thus, it would seem that the aim is to articulate a populist-inflected form of charismatic leadership.

Keywords

Political communication, election campaigns, Twitter, Instagram, VOX, populism, the far right.

1. Introduction

Populist parties and other players have consolidated their presence in public life in Europe and the United States over the last ten years. Trump's election victory in the United States and the vote for Brexit in the United Kingdom are emblematic examples of a drive to break with the establishment, drawing on a crisis in representation. The rise of Marine Le Pen in France,

Matteo Salvini in Italy, Viktor Orban in Hungary and Nigel Farage in the UK, as well as the emergence of parties such as Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy and Podemos in Spain, further exemplify the spread of populism in Western Europe. Their surge has led some commentators to conclude that we are in the middle of a 'populist moment', that the zeitgeist is populist (Mudde, 2004; Gerbaudo, 2018).

The emergence and development of populist movements has prompted widespread debate in scholarly circles concerning how the term "populism" ought to be conceptualized (Canovan, 1999; Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2004; Laclau, 2005; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2019). Although some have defined it as a political strategy (Weyland, 2001) or a simple and direct communication style (Canovan, 1999), the consensus now seems to have settled on its definition as a thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2007). Populism may be framed as a thin ideology in which society is divided into two different and opposing camps: the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite,' and where politics must be the expression of the general will of the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2019).

The rise of political parties and movements such as Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany), Sverigedemokraterna (the Swedish Democrats), Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (the Freedom Party of Austria) and the Front National (National Front) –now Rassemblement National (National Rally)– in France, has led to considerable debate as to how their ideology is to be defined; and a range of labels has been used to identify these organizations, including far right, extreme right wing and radical right wing. Mudde (2007) defines them as populist radical right parties, while other scholars prefer the term national-populists (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2019). Neither of these approaches define such parties as far right organizations because they are not anti-democratic, although they do call into question certain aspects of liberal democracy, including judicial independence and the rights of certain minorities.

1.1. *The emergence of VOX on the Spanish political scene*

Spain was one of the few countries that had succeeded in holding out against the rise and consolidation of the kind of populist radical right-wing parties which had become a fixed feature of political life in Western Europe in recent decades (Alonso & Kaltwasser, 2014; Sanders, Berganza & De Miguel, 2017; Mudde, 2021). These scholars note that Spain saw similar levels of disenchantment with the political establishment and anti-immigrant sentiment, so the lack of popular support for national-populist parties could not be attributed to such concerns. Alonso and Kaltwasser (2014) trace three factors that may have delayed the emergence of such movements in Spain: the electoral system, which favors the major political parties and those which have a strong geographical base; the strategy of the dominant right wing party, which succeeded in winning over some of the voters that might have been drawn to the extreme right; and the specific characteristics of the ideological landscape of Spanish politics, left-right, center-periphery.

Nevertheless, Spain's exceptional status in this regard came to an end in December 2018 when VOX won 12 seats in the regional elections in Andalusia. The party went on to win 24 seats in the general election held on 28 April 2019. In the following general election, on 10 November 2019, VOX won 52 seats, becoming the third largest party in the national parliament. Although its political success is a recent phenomenon, some scholars have begun to analyze the reasons that prompt voters to support the party (Ferreira, 2019; Balinhas, 2020; Vampa, 2020; Arroyo-Menéndez, 2020), citing the independence crisis in Catalonia and the commitment to greater immigration control as the primary motives.

A number of different perspectives on the party's ideology have been articulated in response to VOX's recent electoral successes. Various studies have situated it on the far right, the extreme or radical right, and/or as part of the broader family of populist radical right-wing parties. With regard to the controversy concerning its relationship to democracy and its

possible links to fascism, these research studies come to the same conclusion: the party is not anti-democratic as such, although it does oppose certain principles associated with liberal democracy (Ferreira, 2019; Vampa, 2020; Arroyo-Menéndez, 2020; Balinhas, 2020; Mudde, 2021).

At the same time, however, the party's ideology has been defined in a variety of ways. Mudde (2021) sees VOX as a radical splinter-party from the PP (Popular Party), a more extreme and nativist version of traditional conservatism, which he situates in the far-right camp. Other commentators define VOX as a national-populist party (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2019), while others still see it as belonging to the broader European family of populist radical right-wing parties (Vampa, 2020). However, the most prevalent shared thesis identifies VOX as a radical non-populist right wing party, or at least a party whose populist tendencies are much less marked than might be the case in other equivalent European movements (Ferreira, 2019; Arroyo-Menéndez, 2020; Barrio, 2020). Following a similar line of argument, other analysts define VOX as a radical, ultraconservative right-wing party, but not a populist one (Balinhas, 2020). VOX is therefore distinguished from equivalent parties in Europe because its discourse is not so markedly populist; rather, its rhetoric owes more to nationalism than populism.

By contrast, there is a widespread consensus that VOX is a Spanish nationalist party, a corollary of the conclusion that the party is different to other radical right-wing parties in Europe precisely because of the prevalence of nationalism in its political discourse, which is given greater weight than the dichotomy between 'pure people' and 'corrupt elite' that tends to define populist movements as such. Indeed, analyses of Abascal's rhetoric evince a use of language designed to construct an extreme right wing Spanish nationalist discourse, in which, for instance, the country's co-official languages are framed as a threat to national identity (Mendez-Santos, 2020).

These considerations yield the first research hypothesis (H1) addressed in this paper: Abascal's use of Twitter and Instagram in the 10 November 2019 election campaign deploys a Spanish nationalist discourse, containing markedly conservative and nativist elements, but not the typical features of populist rhetoric. In relation to such characteristic features and given that the research literature is not conclusive in their regard, the question arises as to whether Abascal's discourse on Twitter and Instagram contains some of the defining elements of populism.

1.2. *Populism and social media*

Given the prominent role they have played in the emergence and spread of new populist party discourse, this research project focuses on social media. In order to understand the influence of social networks on the development of these new movements, it is important to trace the tense relationship between populist political players and the traditional communication media. In Spain, the discourse articulated by VOX tends to demonize legacy media in populist terms through allusions to international conspiracies led by 'left-wing elites' (Rivas-Venegas, 2021).

The widespread availability of social media offers access to information alternative to the traditional media channels and enables a multidirectional communication model (Barberá & Rivero, 2012; Cotarelo & Crespo, 2012). The digital environment provides new spaces in which parties may communicate their messages, thus breaking with the traditional media communication system (Aalberg & De-Vreese, 2017). In this way, the internet may be used to bypass the mediating work of journalists and to share contents that might not be published so readily by conventional media outlets (Moffitt, 2016). Moreover, social media platforms also allow populist leaders and movements to appeal for public support against 'the establishment', leading to what Gerbaudo has referred to as "populism 2.0" (2018).

Political parties use platforms that have different distinctive characteristics within the social media ecosystem to finetune their strategies in particular ways. The self-referential

dynamics of Twitter in Spanish election campaigns –that is, the platform's use as a loudspeaker for campaign agendas– should be noted in this regard, a phenomenon that has already been explored in a number of research studies (Rodríguez-Andrés & Ureña-Uceda, 2011; Zamora-Medina & Zurutuza-Muñoz, 2014; Zugasti & Sabés, 2015; López-García, 2016; Zugasti & García-Ortega, 2018). At the same time, however, analyses of the uses to which Twitter is put by political parties and candidates disclose how polarization is a strategy that may be deployed to shape the construction of the media agenda (Aruguete, 2017; Cárdenas-Domínguez, 2020), or as a means of political attack, as is often the case with VOX (García-Hípola & Pérez-Castaños, 2021). By contrast, Instagram functions as the ideal social network on which to personalize one's public profile and curate the public image of one's private life (Castelo, 2020).

The second research hypothesis (H2) is formulated in relation to the context outlined above: the prevalence of a propagandistic approach to the use of Twitter and Instagram, for the purposes of communicating the official agenda of Abascal as a VOX election candidate. At the same time, however, this self-referential approach is combined with a more critical discourse on Twitter, where the latter is used as a means of polarizing the message, in marked contrast to the friendlier atmosphere on Instagram, which is used to humanize the candidate's public profile.

Moreover, given how personalized the practice of politics has become, social media offer an ideal space in which to present the human face of political leaders and candidates. The increasing popularity of infotainment has blurred the lines between public and private, between the professional identity of a candidate and their private life (Casero-Ripollés, Ortells-Badenes & Rosique, 2015). This personalized approach to politics has become more and more prevalent in recent election campaigns.

It should likewise be noted that charismatic leadership has played a key role in the emergence and success of populist radical right-wing parties in Europe (Antón-Mellón & Hernández-Carr, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2019); and the internet provides an unmediated space in which candidates may construct their own image so as to come across as more approachable to the electorate.

A number of studies have already addressed the use of social media by populist leaders (van Kessel & Castelein, 2016; Engesser, Fawzi & Larsson, 2017; Engesser *et al.*, 2017). Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés have examined how a political agenda may be constructed on Twitter (2018), and how populist parties in Europe have used framing as a strategy to communicate their Eurosceptic message (2020). Providing an overview from a European perspective, Carral-Villar and Tuñón-Navarro (2020) point out that populist organizations have proven most successful in positioning themselves on social media platforms and in gaining the trust and loyalty of their followers, offering the example of Rassemblement National (National Rally) in France as relevant in this regard. A study of how the discourse of VOX is constructed on Instagram highlights the ways in which the figure of Abascal is distilled via the political storytelling approach taken there to simple personal features presented in heroic terms (Aladro-Vico & Requeijo-Rey, 2020).

The third research hypothesis (H3) arises in this context: Santiago Abascal projects a charismatic-style leadership typical of conservative populist movements, based on an image of the leader supported by the masses, depicted in images that portray a heroic outlook, highlighting his capacity to connect with the people beyond his public persona as a politician.

2. Methodology

The overall objective of this research paper is to explore the communications strategy deployed by Santiago Abascal, VOX's leader and candidate for Prime Minister of Spain, via his Twitter and Instagram accounts during the 10 November 2019 general election campaign. While significant research has been carried out on the ideology and discourse articulated by

VOX and Abascal (Ferreira, 2019; Arroyo-Menéndez, 2020; Balinhas, 2020; Barrio, 2020; Castro-Martínez & Mo-Groba, 2020; Fernández, 2020; Vampa, 2020), as well as their use of social media (Vázquez-Barrio & Campos-Zabala, 2020; Vázquez-Barrio, 2021), the relatively recent emergence of this political movement makes its communications strategy a worthy subject for further study.

The analysis presented here centers on social media networks because they play a key role in how populist candidates and parties communicate their messages. The specific focus of inquiry is Twitter and Instagram, so as to see whether the particular characteristics of each platform condition Abascal's communications strategy. Twitter has been selected in part because of the strong prevalence of its use as a micro-blogging network among politicians generally (López-García, 2016; Marín-Dueñas & Díaz-Guerra, 2016; Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2018; Suau-Gomila & Pont-Sorribes, 2019; Martínez-Juan & Marqués Pascual, 2020).

Moreover, given the growing personalization of the political, Instagram is explored because of how effectively it may be used to portray the human side of public figures (Rovira & Alsina, 2020); a number of recent research papers have addressed the role of Instagram in politics (Pineda, Barragán-Romero & Bellido-Pérez, 2020; Tirado-García & Doménech-Fabregat, 2021; López-Rabadán & Doménech-Fabregat, 2021). Abascal's use of Instagram is especially significant due to how popular his profile has become on the platform (Sampietro & Sánchez-Castillo, 2020).

A number of specific objectives (O) have been defined in line with the research hypotheses (H) outlined above.

- O1. To see whether Abascal's messages contain features of conservative, nativist elements of Spanish nationalist and/or populist discourse. To this end, both the topics dealt with by the candidate and their discursive function are examined.
- O2. To explore whether Abascal uses these social networks as propaganda media or as a space in which to discuss his electoral program. Thus, any differences between the particular focus given via each network may be determined.
- O3. To trace the type of leadership Abascal aims to project via each social media platform, respectively, so as to assess whether the image presented there is that of a populist candidate or if, in contrast, the goal is to highlight his work as a politician.

The research methodology used here is quantitative content analysis, an approach which enables quantitative study of explicit contents (Cea, 2001). An analysis code comprised of variables is applied to each item included in the sample, thus ensuring each research objective may be fulfilled. Following the codification process, the data is analyzed statistically using the SPSS program.

This paper addresses a total of 136 messages posted on Abascal's Twitter account and 26 posts on his Instagram account between 1 and 10 November 2019. This time-period covers the general election campaign, the day before the election day (when candidates are not permitted to campaign) and voting day itself. This campaign was the first time a 2016 law was put into effect, shortening the timeframe of the election process due to the fact that it was a re-run of an earlier election that had failed to yield a government.

Having compiled the messages with TAGS (Twitter Archiving Google Sheet) and CrowdTangle, they were codified using a code comprised of the following variables: image and video analysis, main topic, discursive function, candidate attributes, symbolic role, and ideal candidate frame.

An analysis of these audiovisual resources enables an understanding of how the candidate focuses each social network in a particular way. The variables "main topic" and "discursive function" disclose Abascal's line of argument and the purpose of his messages. The definition of "discursive function" is taken from Cebrián and Vázquez-Barrio (2013), who in turn adapted some ideas relating to functional analysis set out by Benoit, Blaney and Pier (1998). Quevedo-Redondo, Portalés-Oliva and Berrocal-Gonzalo (2016) revised the

categorization and cited seven different values within the variable: proposal, attack, defense, gratitude, general statement, key performance indicator (KPI), and appeal for vote. It should also be noted that the numerical data generated by quantitative analysis of “main topic” and “discursive function” as variables are enriched and contextualized by qualitative analysis of message content, thus yielding a more precise account of meanings and nuances (Altheide, 1996).

Three different variables were included in the code so as to enable an analysis of the kind of leadership projected by the VOX politician: candidate attributes, symbolic role and ideal candidate frame. The “candidate attributes” variable is analyzed in line with the classification proposed by Zamora-Medina (2009): based on the premise that closed sets of attributes may function as outlines or frames to project a specific image of the candidate, the latter classifies the attributes that candidates may use to shape their personal image.

Table 1: Classification of attributes.

Ambition and struggle	The perception of the political leader's capacity to fight for and achieve his goals.
Physical appearance	The physical appearance and impact of the leader.
Approachability / reach	This attribute relates to questions of character and is difficult to define; it encompasses charisma, fame, popularity, physical appearance, speaking skills and empathy.
Coherence	The leader is known to honor his commitments, to do what he promised he would do.
Competence	The leader has the knowledge, training and skills required to carry out his role.
Credibility and honor	The leader's values, ethics, and morality.
Rhetorical skill	A measure of the leader's communication skills.
Effectiveness	The leader is capable of achieving goals, reaching particular targets.
Team	The leader has a team made up of well-trained, capable members.
Political experience	The leader has held positions of political responsibility and/or has had a well-supported political career.
Ideological positioning	The definition of the leader in terms of his political party or ideological outlook.
Sympathetic image	How sympathetic, pleasant, and friendly the leader appears to be.
Territorialism	The leader's identification with the culture, identity, and characteristics of the territory he represents.

Source: Zamora-Medina (2009).

Coined by Quevedo-Redondo, Portalés-Oliva and Berrocal-Gonzalo (2016) and inspired by the classification set out by García-Beaudoux and D'Adamo (2006), symbolic role is also included as a variable in this study. The definitions formulated by Quevedo-Redondo and Portalés-Oliva (2017) for each role are followed here:

- The great communicator: The candidate is depicted giving speeches, interviews, press conferences and interacting with voters.
- The hero: Crowds applaud and cheer the candidate at big gatherings.
- The prime administrator: The candidate is shown carrying out his public role, talking about the economy, taxes, inflation, etc.
- The protector: The purpose of this approach is to show the human side of the candidate, gestures and attitudes that reflect his approachability.

Ideal candidate frame is also included as a variable here, as it was used by Quevedo-Redondo, Portalés-Oliva and Berrocal-Gonzalo (2016), who drew on the work of Goodnow (2013) to distinguish between pictures of an ideal candidate and a populist one. As those scholars aver, the former includes images that exemplify the expression of emotion, empathy

and the art of government (“compassion” and “statesmanship”), whereas the latter shows the populist candidate’s appeal to the masses and his close relationship to the everyday (“mass appeal” and “ordinariness”).

Although one of the research objectives is to explore the presence of features of nativist nationalism and populism in the social media posts under discussion, individual variables that assert these two discourses are not addressed here. This study applies a series of variables which, taken together, enable the identification of such features. Thus, for instance, nativist discourse may be traced through posts that center on immigration and are framed as an attack; or populism may be discerned in leadership depicted in heroic terms, where approachability or reach is seen as the main attribute, or the most prevalent symbolic role is that of the hero.

3. Results

3.1. Social media as campaign loudspeakers and means to polarize discourses

An analysis of the topics addressed by Santiago Abascal on Twitter and Instagram (Table 2) shows that the most prevalent issue in his posts is the election campaign itself. Immigration, the election debates and the unity of Spain, among other topics, rank lower in percentage terms. These data suggest a twofold focus in the politician’s strategy: on the one hand, to publicize his campaign agenda and discuss his appearance in the debates; and on the other hand, to address key issues in VOX’s discourse.

Table 2: Main topic of posts (percentage).

	Twitter	Instagram
Election campaign	36.8	53.8
Immigration	8.1	7.7
Election debates	7.4	15.4
Unity of Spain	6.6	7.7
Independence process in Catalonia	5.9	0
Election participation / abstention	5.1	7.7
Candidate’s everyday activities	0	3.8
Exhumation of Franco	0.7	3.8
Terrorism / ETA	4.4	0
The media	3.7	0
Historical memory	2.2	0
Other economic issues	2.2	0
The Head of State	1.5	0
Women (equality policies, domestic violence)	1.5	0
System of autonomous regions	1.5	0
Other (values lower than 1%)	12.4	0
Total	100	100

Source: Own elaboration.

First, given the prevalence of the election campaign as an issue on both platforms (36.8% and 53.8%), Twitter and Instagram appear to be used in self-referential ways. Such posts share the candidate’s campaign agenda and aim to underscore the success of official events through photos and videos of large crowds of people applauding and cheering Abascal.

Similarly, the election debates are a recurring feature on both social media platforms: 7.4% on Twitter, 15.4% on Instagram. Rather than address a specific political issue or promise, these posts may deal exclusively with the debate itself and how it unfolded. Such messages reassert the image of the candidate as a political leader, as well as the image of the party as a united force, given that many of them, in the case of Twitter, are tweets in support of Abascal originally posted by other members of VOX.

In addition to using his social media profiles as loudspeakers for his agenda as a candidate, Abascal also references key issues from VOX's political discourse. Thus, immigration (8.1% and 7.7%) and the unity of Spain (6.6% and 7.7%) are cited frequently on both Twitter and Instagram. Likewise notable is how little space is given over to discussing topics other than these two.

The VOX candidate uses both social networks to communicate his opposition to illegal immigration, linking it to an increase in criminal behavior. Two types of immigration are described: Abascal supports immigration that is regulated, legal and may be accommodated; he also supports the expulsion of illegal immigrants. He argues that illegal immigration poses a threat to the people of Spain and sets out his opposition to Islam on the grounds that its religious beliefs and practices are culturally incompatible with the West. Immigrants are repeatedly referred to as "illegal." Previous research has shown how use of the term '*sin papeles*' [literally, without papers or documents] dehumanizes and objectifies immigrant people (Casero-Ripollés, 2007). In the same way, as Nash (2005) avers, the use of the term "illegal" in reference to immigrants casts them in a negative light; besides the strictly literal meaning of the word in relation to their status, it also connotes delinquency and criminality.

Another key feature of Abascal's political discourse is his defense of the unity of Spain. He appeals to Spanish nationalist sentiment because of its potential to bring the people together, and decries the threat posed by political parties who call the unity of the country into question. He appeals to the Spanish people to 'rise up,' to unite against their common enemy. Patriotism is presented as a shared sense of history and identity that, Abascal argues, unites the 'Living Spain' and, as a result, excludes immigrant groups that do not integrate into the national culture.

By posting about controversial issues on social media (opposition to immigration, defense of the unity of Spain), Abascal aims to polarize the political debate and shape the public agenda. His use of social networks, therefore, is twofold: as a propaganda tool centering on campaign matters, on the one hand, and as a space in which to address controversial topics, on the other –in both cases, aiming to sidestep the mediating effect of conventional communications media organizations.

At the same time, however, there are slight differences between the ways the two social media platforms discussed here are used. Posts about the candidate's everyday activities feature only on Instagram, and even then to a very limited extent (3.8%). By contrast, the independence movement in Catalonia, a dispute that is closely bound up with the unity of Spain as a political issue, is addressed only on Twitter (5.9%). Thus, contentious political questions tend to be dealt with on Twitter, whereas Instagram focuses on showing the more human side of the public man.

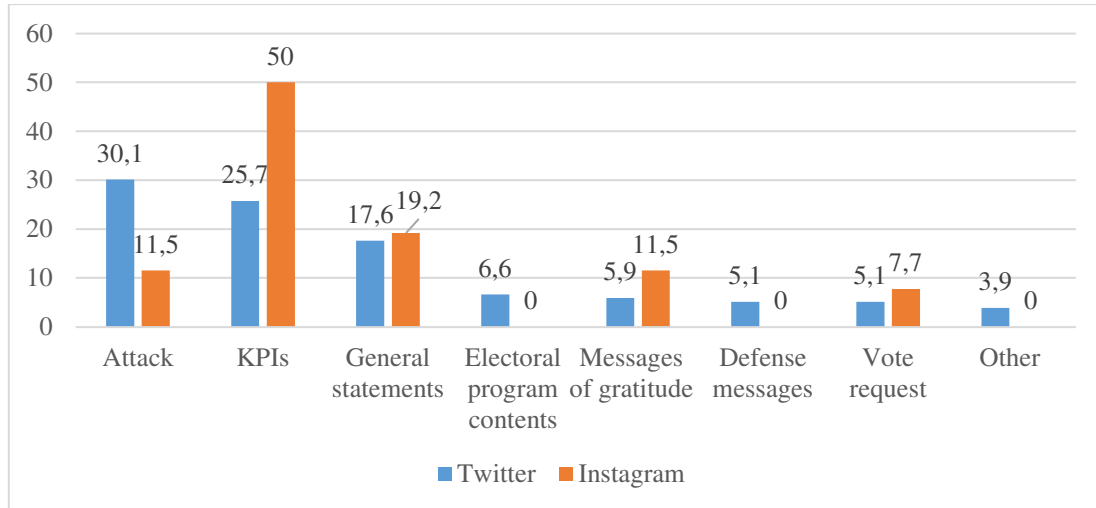
3.2. *Adapting discursive tone to different social networks*

With regard to the discursive function deployed via each of the two social media platforms under discussion here, attack is the most frequent approach on Twitter (30.1%), whereas KPIs are most common on Instagram (50%). Abascal's tone on Twitter is provocative, posting aggressive messages against the government and other opposition parties, accusing them of being enemies of the people. Moreover, a further use of Twitter is to publicize party events, given the frequency with which posts there function as key performance indicators (KPIs: 25.7%).

Instagram is used primarily to show the candidate's activities during the election campaign; half of the posts function as KPIs. Furthermore, in contrast to Twitter, the tone on Instagram is calm; few of the Instagram posts aim to attack others (11.5%) and general statements are relatively frequent (19.2%) –that is, messages that address various issues in neutral terms.

In fact, there are as many messages of gratitude as there are of attack on Instagram (11.5%); so, it may be concluded that political discourse in this case is much more moderate on Instagram than on Twitter. It is noteworthy that Abascal hardly ever includes electoral program contents: they feature in only 6.6% of his Twitter messages.

Figure 1: Discursive function of messages (percentages).



Source: Own elaboration.

Populist rhetoric may be framed as a Manichean discourse that pits the ‘pure people’ against a ‘corrupt elite’ (Mudde, 2004), which maps onto the dichotomy Abascal draws between ‘Living Spain’ and the ‘progressive dictatorship.’ ‘Living Spain’ comprises those who share with VOX a conservative nationalist identity, which must struggle for its freedom from the oppression of a ‘progressive dictatorship’ made up of the government and all political parties that aim to destroy the unity of Spain.

This rhetorical strategy is most explicit in the critical messages posted on Abascal’s Twitter account, where the candidate evokes a war-like atmosphere and calls for the ‘Living Spain to rise up’; the language used is aggressive, and Catalan and Basque nationalist politicians are referred to as coup leaders, separatists and terrorists.

The candidate presents his own party as the ‘patriotic alternative’ to the perceived enemies of Spain, in line with anti-establishment discourse generally. The ‘corrupt elite’ is said to include other political parties as well as media organizations, which stand accused of collaborating with the government.

3.3. Santiago Abascal and the assertion of charismatic leadership

The audiovisual elements in social media posts are analyzed to assess the image Abascal projects and the type of leadership he aims to assert. As regards the use of images on his social media accounts, 33.8% of the Twitter posts and 57.7% of the Instagram posts contain at least one photograph. While election posters feature most frequently on Twitter (Table 3), pictures of party meetings and events are more prevalent on Instagram (31.1% and 60%, respectively). Both approaches relate to the election campaign; but the corporate images on Twitter imply a more official tone, whereas the photos of party events on Instagram focus on the politician’s human side.

It should be noted in this regard that Abascal posts pictures of his private life, as well as funny memes or images, only on Instagram (6.7% in both cases). This finding supports the conclusion that Instagram is used to humanize the candidate’s public profile.

Table 3: What images show (percentages).

	Twitter	Instagram
Election poster / Corporate image	31.1	6.7
Official party event	24.4	60.0
Media appearance	13.3	0
Media news-story	6.7	0
Election debate	2.2	13.3
Candidate's everyday activities	2.2	0
Graph / Table	2.2	0
Candidate's private life	0	6.7
Funny meme or image	0	6.7
Other	17.8	6.7
Total	100	100

Source: Own elaboration.

A second line of analysis centers on the inclusion of ideological symbols in the photographs. Over half of the images shared on both social media feature the Spanish flag, a neat reflection of how Spanish nationalism functions as a key marker of VOX's political identity.

36% of the Twitter posts and 42.3% of the Instagram posts include videos. Videos of party gatherings feature most prominently on Instagram (81.8%); they are likewise frequent on Twitter, along with videos of other party events (32.7%), the election debates (36.7%) and election ads (22.4%). These findings confirm the observation that Twitter is favored as a communication channel for sharing official party messages, and Instagram as the space where the politician shares videos of party gatherings, highlighting his status as a leader cheered and applauded by the masses.

Table 4: What videos show (percentages).

	Twitter	Instagram
Election debate	36.7	9.1
Official party event	32.7	81.8
Election advert / Corporate video	22.4	0
Media appearance	6.1	0
Other	2.0	9.1
Total	100	100

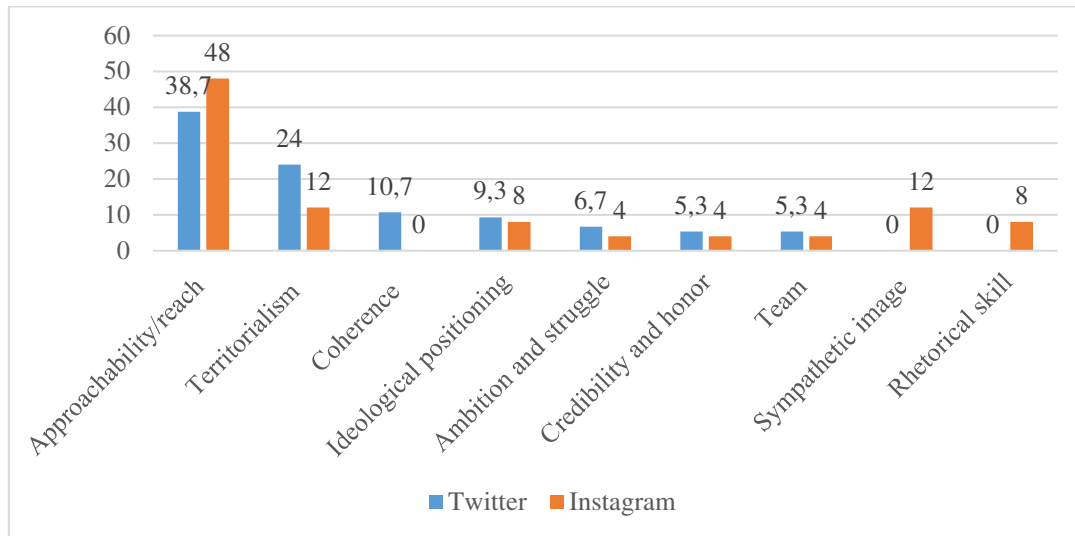
Source: Own elaboration.

As regards Abascal's attributes (Figure 2), his approachability or reach as a candidate figures most frequently on both Twitter (38.7%) and Instagram (48%). This attribute reflects the candidate's capacity to mobilize supporters and his image as a leader supported by the people.

Territorialism is the second most prevalent attribute, featuring in 24% of Twitter and 12% of Instagram posts; it links the candidate to the culture, identity and characteristics of the territory he aims to represent. The presence of the Spanish flag and appeals to patriotic spirit underscore this sense of a leadership based on defending the homeland and the rejection of any attempt to disrupt the national identity.

The ways in which Abascal's activity is framed on each social media platform is noteworthy. Sympathetic friendliness is the third most common attribute on Instagram (12%), and it does not feature on Twitter at all; this attribute relates to how pleasant and affable the candidate is –that is, posts which show his personal side. On Twitter, by contrast, coherence figures relatively frequently (10.7%) –that is, the attribute connoting the politician's capacity to fulfil his promises.

Figure 2: Main candidate attributes (percentages).



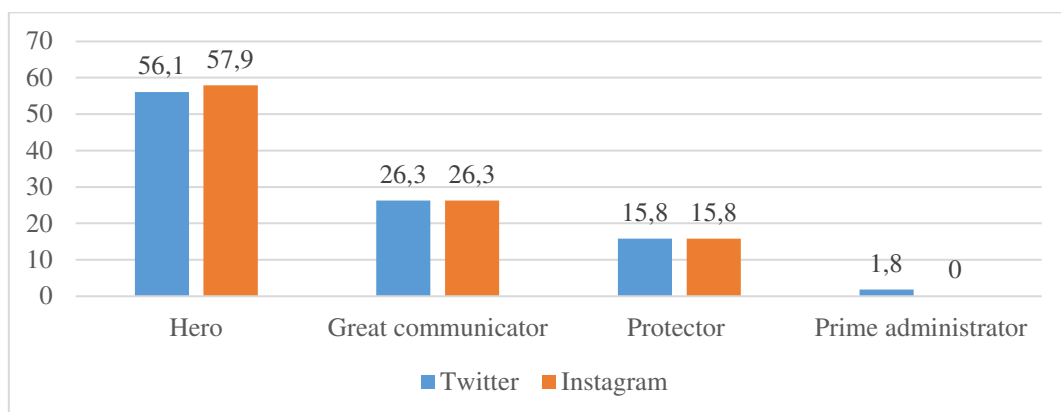
Source: Own elaboration.

“Hero” is the most prevalent symbolic role (Figure 3) presented on both social media platforms; it features in over half of the posts. The politician appears surrounded by cheering crowds of supporters. The Spanish flags waving in the breeze lend the scene an epic cast, scoring Abascal’s status as political leader in heroic terms.

The role of “great communicator” is equally present on both social media profiles: 26.3%. Whereas the symbolic role of “hero” makes an emotional appeal to the viewer by showing the leader surrounded by his cheering supporters, the goal of this role is to emphasize his communication skills, presenting him as an eloquent speaker.

The role of “protector” should also be noted, which aims to show the candidate’s human side. Given that it features in 15.8% of the posts on both platforms, it is slightly less prevalent than the other two symbolic roles; hence it may be concluded that Abascal favors his portrayal as a heroic figure rather than as an approachable person.

Figure 3: Symbolic roles of candidate (percentages).



Source: Own elaboration.

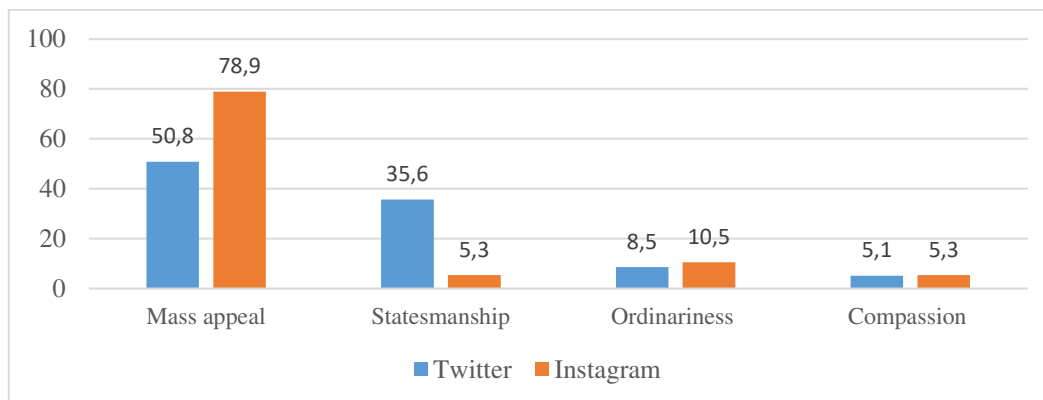
In relation to ideal candidate frame (Figure 4), almost 80% of the Instagram posts and over 50% of the posts on Twitter share the idea of mass appeal –images that depict the candidate surrounded by crowds, showing his capacity to connect with the people.

Statesmanship (35.6%) is a prevalent feature on Twitter, the purpose being to present the candidate as statesmanlike. The second most frequent value on Instagram is ordinariness

(10.5%), posts that aim to show the politician's human side. These different emphases confirm the hypothesis that Abascal adapts his social media activity to the specific characteristics of each platform. His aim on Instagram is to project a more personal and approachable profile.

Both social media networks are used to construct the image of a populist leader based on his mass appeal. Nevertheless, it should be noted that almost all of the posts on Instagram are designed to portray Abascal as a populist leader, whereas the focus on Twitter appears to be to frame him as the ideal candidate, a statesman, painting the politician in a presidential light.

Figure 4: Ideal candidate frame (percentages).



Source: Own elaboration.

4. Conclusions

The findings of this research project show that Spanish nationalism is a transversal characteristic of Abascal's discourse on social media. National unity is treated as a priority issue, and the Spanish flag is a fixed feature of the images the candidate shares. Moreover, the critical response to immigration and the exclusion of minority groups from the idea of 'the people' evinces a markedly nativist tone. The VOX leader links unregulated immigration with an increase in criminal activity and sees it as a threat to national identity; the terms used to refer to such groups are intended to dehumanize them, calling immigrants 'illegal,' for instance. Thus, the first research hypothesis (H1) is confirmed: Abascal's use of Twitter and Instagram in the 10 November 2019 election campaign deploys a Spanish nationalist discourse, containing markedly nativist elements.

A further conclusion is that Abascal's discourse does in fact also include some features of populism. It frames an antagonistic debate pitting *la España Viva* ['Living Spain'] against *la dictadura progre* ['the progressive dictatorship'], where VOX is depicted as 'the patriotic alternative'. There is a constant stream of references to *la España Viva* ['Living Spain'], and the party's followers are urged to 'rise up' against those who may be considered enemies of Spain. The social media posts also articulate the kind of struggle against an elite that is typical of populist discourse as such: Abascal communicates an anti-establishment message, attacking the government, all other national political parties, independence parties, and even the media.

Nevertheless, in line with the thesis advanced by Ferreira (2019), such elements of populist discourse are subsumed within a nationalist ideological framework: those who defend the unity of Spain and share one and the same national identity against those who aim to dismantle the nation. Spanish nationalism is given greater weight than populism in Abascal's political messaging.

Abascal favors the use of these two digital platforms –Twitter and Instagram– to talk about the election campaign and spread the word about his agenda, a preference which is congruent with the self-referential functioning of social media during election campaigns generally. However, there are some differences in the candidate's approach and activity depending on

the social network used. Twitter is used to address key issues in VOX's manifesto in aggressive and provocative terms. Abascal refers to electoral promises such as opposition to illegal immigration and the illegalization of separatist political parties; the approach is critical, the stance is attack. By contrast, Instagram is used to show the candidate's human side: photos of his personal life, news of his daily activities, a friendlier tone; the critical outlook is relegated to the background, replaced by messages that foster greater likeability. Thus, the second research hypothesis (H2) is also confirmed: the prevalence of a propagandistic approach to the use of Twitter and Instagram for the purposes of discussing election campaign issues on both social media platforms; and at the same time, distinctive features in the use of each social network, respectively: Twitter as a means of polarizing the debate, and Instagram as a space in which the candidate's human side may be better presented.

A key aspect of Abascal's strategy is to assert a charismatic style of leadership; he frequently shares photos and videos where he appears surrounded by large crowds at party events. The presence of billowing Spanish flags in these images lends them an epic tone and reinforces the idea of a leadership based on the defense of his notion of homeland. The candidate's leadership is grounded in two key principles: the sense of approachability or reach, which underscores his capacity to connect with voters; and a sense of territory, which is linked to his defense of patriotic spirit. The symbolic role portrayed is that of the hero; he is frequently depicted surrounded by cheering crowds.

The most distinctive aspect of the ideal candidate frame in this case is the focus on mass appeal. Surrounded by crowds of enthusiastic supporters, the politician is a hero who bears the hopes of the Spanish people. It should be noted that the vast majority of the Instagram posts show Abascal as a populist leader, whereas his tweets aim to project the image of the ideal candidate, based on a sense of statesmanship, showing him in political action, positioning him as a model candidate for government.

The research results here also assert Abascal's charisma as a leader, in line with populist strategy: the hero supported and acclaimed by the crowd. Hence, the third research hypothesis (H3) is also confirmed. Although a populist form of leadership is projected via both social media platforms, Twitter is used to refine this image in part by showing Abascal as the ideal candidate, thus reflecting again how the two networks are deployed differently for different purposes.

This emblematically populist approach to the projection of leadership is congruent with the findings on the key features of his political discourse, where such populism plays a secondary role to Spanish nationalism. Thus, populism is a more prevalent feature of the image of VOX's leader than it is of the issues or arguments that Abascal articulates explicitly in his messages.

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