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# Populism 2.0 in the Spanish public sphere through Twitter

*Populismo 2.0 en la esfera pública española a través de Twitter*

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## Abstract

The rise of right-wing populism raises growing concern about the health of representative democracies. In Spain, the emergence of VOX on the political scene has meant the end of Spanish exceptionalism, in addition to conditioning the political and media agenda as well as forcing other political parties to reconsider their strategies. Nowadays, social media occupy a central place in social and political life. Populism has been fuelled by the proliferation of social media such as Twitter, which brings together on the same platform the protagonists of the political debate and spreads messages in a fragmented way and out of the media's control. This study aims to understand Santiago Abascal's discursive strategy through a qualitative discourse analysis of his posts on Twitter as VOX's leader during a decisive period for the party. The results indicate how his discourse focuses on building a populist political party that, in addition to basing its appeal on identifying threats and enemies, projects a heroic image of the party through the exaltation of victimization and the proclamation of its achievements using ideological terminology and collective imagination. The study confirms the importance of sentimental and emotional discourse and the role of the party leader in political communications.

**Keywords:** populism, VOX, political discourse, social media, Twitter.

## Resumen

*El auge del populismo de derechas despierta una creciente preocupación en relación con la salud de las democracias representativas. En España, la irrupción de VOX en el escenario político ha significado el fin de la excepcionalidad española, además de condicionar la agenda política y mediática así como forzar al resto de partidos a reconsiderar sus estrategias. En la actualidad, las redes sociales ocupan un lugar determinante en el escenario social y político. El populismo se ha visto favorecido por la proliferación de redes sociales como Twitter, que sitúa en la misma plataforma a los protagonistas del debate político y difunde mensajes de manera fragmentada y fuera de control mediático. A través de un análisis del discurso cualitativo, se examinan en Twitter publicaciones de Santiago Abascal, líder de VOX, para conocer su estrategia discursiva en un periodo decisivo para el partido. Los resultados señalan cómo su discurso se centra en construir una fuerza política de carácter populista que, además de anclarse en la identificación de amenazas y enemigos, proyecta una imagen heroica del partido a través de la exaltación de la victimización y la proclamación de sus logros, gracias a la terminología y el imaginario ideológico. Se constata la trascendencia del discurso sentimental y emocional así como la impronta de la figura del líder en comunicación política.*

**Palabras clave:** populismo; VOX; discurso político; redes sociales; Twitter.

## 1. Introduction

The heyday of far-right populist forces arouses the interest of the scientific community by questioning the health of the paradigm of representative democracies and establishing itself as a challenge in the political landscape impacted by social and media systems in today's world (Kriessi, 2014; Mény and Surel, 2002). This is a political story that underlines the importance of political emotions as a key driver in the global rise of the far right (Ungureanu and Serrano, 2018). However, following the emergence of VOX on the political scene, its presence and that of its president Santiago Abascal are playing an increasingly relevant role.

Nevertheless, the success of populism cannot be measured solely in electoral results. Its significance goes further, since its influence affects the way in which issues are dealt with in public debate (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés, 2018; Mudde and Rovira, 2019), in the relations between political parties—forcing them to define strategies of approach or opposition— (Wodak, 2015) and even modifying the ways in which the political subject is configured (Villacañas, 2015; Žižek, 2019).

The analysis of its party manifesto and discourse positions VOX as a far-right organisation that has the characteristics of radical right-wing parties, with an authoritarian vision of society that advocates the values of law and order (Ferreira, 2019). Its emergence obeys largely to the changes that occurred as a result of the 2008 financial crisis, which favoured a populist movement that fuelled the acceptance of alternative discourse. The reactions to this crisis unleashed phenomena that still persist today, such as the breakdown of the two-party system, essentially with Podemos taking up the baton from the 15M movement (Del Pino and Arroyo-Almaraz, 2019; Errejón and Mouffe, 2015) and the revival of the Catalan independence movement (Gamper-Sachse, 2018). Thus, in the Spanish case, the push of the Catalan secessionist movement and the breakdown of the two-party system as a result of the 2008 crisis have favoured the creation of the ideal context for the birth of VOX (Müller, 2019), based on the exaltation of a feeling of victimhood by people identifying with Spanish nationalism and a favourable political scenario for the acceptance of new discourse and political forces.

However, beyond these circumstantial reasons, there are two determining structural factors that create the ideal scenario for the appearance of populism. Firstly, the complex postmodern identity landscape whose main characteristic is the multiplicity of subject's identities; secondly, the consolidation of digital communications, specifically of a political nature, through the different tools provided by Information and Communication Technologies (Chaves-Montero, 2017), which allow the production and dissemination of content outside mainstream media and favour a simplified emotional discourse. Added to the growing popularity of these digital platforms and the postmodern fragmentation of identity are the excessive rationalisation of the capitalist model and the measures to integrate disadvantaged groups as ingredients that have favoured the acceptance of a simplified emotional discourse.

Despite the popularity and extension of populism, its approach does not offer a consensual definition. As Arroyas and Pérez (2016) point out, populism can be studied as a political discourse present in any democracy. In the present study we propose an operational definition of populism, understood as a discursive political strategy that can be used from different political positions

and whose objective is the construction of a popular identity by identifying a shared threat. From this approach to studying populism and focusing both on the current scenario of fragmenting identity politics, as well as on the new and emerging communication ecosystem led by digitization, this study's general objective is to analyse the discourse of Santiago Abascal, leader of VOX, through his posts on his official Twitter account to better know and understand his party's political strategy. The period studied spans from 23 October 2019 to 10 August 2020, a very important period for the party and its leader since VOX managed to poll as the third most voted political party nationally and therefore confirming the end of Spanish exceptionalism in this sense.

This main goal then breaks down into the following specific objectives:

- SO1. Outline which external and internal threats are identified by Abascal's political discourse on Twitter, as well as the relationships established between them.
- SO2. Examine the values that are linked to the defence of the Spanish identity.
- SO3. Determine representations of victimization as seen by VOX and representations of success.
- The following are proposed as the starting hypotheses of the study:
  - H1. Abascal tries to build a populist political force that unifies the social body through a discourse that portrays a victimisation of Spanish national identity. And he does so by:
    - H.1.1. Identifying external threats that put the Spanish national identity at risk.
    - H.1.2. Identifying internal threats that collaborate and enable external threats.
    - H.1.3. Tying his political cause to the defence of values that legitimise and justify it.
  - H.2. Abascal's discourse on Twitter constructs a heroic image of VOX through victimization and highlights the party's achievements.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. The complexity of postmodern identity politics

At present, we are witnessing a scenario of complex postmodern identity politics, in which the same subject has multiple identities in relation to their social position, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, etc. This circumstance favours the appearance of actors who try to build political forces that unify in response to a common threat. In this context, discourse plays a fundamental role both for the construction of victimization and for providing legitimacy. In this way, the struggle for discourse becomes a struggle for the appropriation of cultural values and identity elements that are perceived as apolitical, with which political mobilisation and its demands are framed and justified (Davis, 2015; Errejón, 2011; Laclau and Mouffe, 2014).

For these discourses to be effective it is necessary that they occur in historical moments in which the prevailing dynamics are not capable of satisfying the demands of broad social sectors, thus favouring the acceptance of alternative discourses that promote a reconfiguration of threats and loyalties (Errejón and Mouffe, 2015; Mouffe, 2018). Some of these circumstances occur in periods of economic crisis, in which difficulties in maintaining the welfare state and providing the

population with access to consumer goods, lead to the emergence of populist discourses that strive to consolidate political forces that share a sense of economic victimhood. However, to understand the rise of populism, it is also necessary to address the perceived threats to identity that have arisen as a result of measures for the integration of minorities or underrepresented groups. These measures, which have been implemented by diverse political forces and international organisations, justify populist discourse that identify them as a threat to groups that have not been victimised so far, who see their interests relegated to the benefit of minority groups (Ahearne, 2017; Goldhammer, 2015).

In the process of identifying threats and creating victimized identities, populist discourse follows similar patterns, in which threats and the relationships between them are defined. Therefore, threats can be constituted as external to the social body that the discourse aims to unify, and which in turn it defines in opposition, or internal to it. Among them, in addition, permissive and collaborative relationships are established that allow them to be politically oriented (Wodak, 2015; Žižek, 2013).

## 2.2. The digital communications ecosystem

The debate on the use of the emotional persuasion techniques in political discourse (Bermúdez, 2014; Cala, 2019) shows the importance of emotional and sentimental aspects of the political sphere. Although the use of ambiguous and emotional discourse is not an exclusive to populism (Fernández, 2009; Gallardo, 2014; Nussbaum, 2014), the central role it occupies in the strategy of populist forces, recognised and justified by its two main advocates (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2018), warns of the generalisation of an irrational policy, which simplifies social complexity and reduces it to confrontation (Charaudeau, 2009; Salmon, 2019). With this discourse, populism strives to operate in a society marked by unstable identity politics, recovering the emotional character of politics in lieu of the rationality promoted by the liberal technocracy (Innerarity, 2015; Žižek, 2019).

In the current context, social media and digital devices enable this discourse to acquire media notoriety and reach, changing both the possibilities of production and dissemination of content as well as access and consumption habits (Chadwick, 2013; López-García, 2016). Thus, we find new forms of politics that take advantage of Internet social networks to build relationships with civil society and disseminate their messages (Arroyas and Pérez, 2016).

Forms of digital communications, particularly social media, have led to the appearance of new communicative actors who possess tools to spread their message bypassing the filters of conventional communications media, leading to discrediting of said media and their role in curating and mediating content (Enli, 2017).

In addition, digital media have modified production habits and access to news content, accelerating the rise of traditional infotainment and adding to the fragmentation, decontextualization and frivolity of content other characteristics such as hyper connection or hyper acceleration (Postman, 2006). All these characteristics make it difficult for a true understanding of social phenomena, by not allowing the necessary time for reflection to establish relationships between the content accessed and prior knowledge (van Dijk, 2016). Furthermore, this has led to changes in

validation criteria in which the weight of personal beliefs predominates over fact checking, giving rise to phenomena such as post-truth (Caldevilla and García, 2020).

Among the social media available to citizens and political parties, Twitter stands as a 2.0 political communications tool (Guerrero-Solé, Mas-Manchón and Aira, 2022) that political actors have had to learn to manage and integrate into their discursive strategies, to the point of becoming “the leading platform for non-mediated communications” (Toro and Pérez-Curiel, 2021, p. 1) in the current political scene characterised by polarization and political populism. The use of Twitter in the political sphere is aimed not so much at interaction with citizens but mainly at setting up a news and self-promotion soapbox (Gelado-Marcos, Puebla-Martínez and Rubira-García, 2019). Through this space, the exercise of criticism and the ideological axis of each of the parties dominate the political agenda of the populist discourse on Twitter.

### 2.3. The 2.0 political discourse of VOX and Santiago Abascal

In the context of the Spanish public sphere, Twitter brings together on the same platform the protagonists of the political debate, who through the aforementioned social network must be able to combine the management of a distinctive personal brand with their role in opinion leadership (Fernández et al., 2018). In this sense, this study proposes it is possible to identify a political communications trend towards entertainment, which is linked to the so-called celebrity of politicians when it comes to building a certain public image, that is, it is about figures that emerge as “politician-celebrities” as the field of politics increasingly approaches celebrity culture (Oliva et al., 2015, p. 1). The symbiosis between celebrity culture and politics is proposed as a way to revitalise the offering of parties and candidates.

Thus, these digital platforms bring political candidates closer to public opinion, enabling the creation of ties (Domínguez, 2012) and allowing political actors to spread messages in a more personal, fast, and direct way. Therefore, the analysis of the contents of the social media accounts of political figures has become a primary way of researching data in political communications, taking into account that “the individuality of the political candidate is increasingly posited as a brand image” (Pérez-Curiel and Limón-Naharro, 2019, p. 57).

This is the case of VOX, previous studies indicate how its digital strategy is reflected not only through its website but also through the party’s social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, Flickr, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok and Gab). Although the formats and styles differ depending on the channel, by targeting different types of audience, the content follows the same discursive pattern (Castro and Díaz, 2021). Analysing the trajectory of the party from its initial invisibility to its current overexposure, it is partly due to a skilful handling of Twitter in developing a persuasive narrative for public opinion, using semiotic elements that tailor political discourse to average citizens through multiple of emotional elements (Berlanga and Ortiz, 2021). Among them, VOX defends and advocates for patriotism, presenting the party as “the protector of families” and its leader as the party’s “saviour and leading standard” (González Castro, 2021, p. 193).

In addition to setting up its agenda to show propaganda content, VOX’s platform on Twitter also “personalises the discourse around the figure and private life of its leader [...] portrayed as a

charismatic, empowered and value-filled leader, capable of ending corruption” (Lava, 2021, p. 57). This vision is complemented by the discourse offered by Abascal’s official account on Twitter, which “is in line with the discursive strategies of populism” (Vázquez-Barrio, 2021, p. 123). Through this social network, the leader of VOX uses forceful language, frequently resorting to aggressive language and disparaging terms directed both at his political adversaries and the media (Ramos, 2021). His rhetorical style is therefore inclined towards being politically incorrect, with the aim of encouraging polarisation and tension in the political debate (González Gómez, 2021), always positioning himself with a nationalist discourse as more ‘Spanish’ than the other parties and candidates (Méndez, 2020).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Technique and instrument

Discourse analysis is a research technique with great significance in the Social Sciences (Sayago, 2014). As Santander (2011) points, discourse analysis is part of qualitative knowledge and is part of the interpretative paradigm.

Due to its multifaceted character, discourse analysis is of interest to and fits into different disciplines dealing with language, such as linguistics, history, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, etc. (Riba, 2010). All discourse has an intentional dimension, that is, it is formulated with a purpose (Reyes, 2017). In the case of political discourse, it is carefully crafted and designed since it is crucial to political activity as a whole and has the capacity to mobilize, persuade, seduce, and create opposition. The use of polysemic terms and presuppositions is something that is characteristic to political discourse (Fernández, 2009; Gallardo, 2014).

In political discourse, words are used to define and label, but also to hide and establish relationships between ideas that require contextual knowledge and that are not always made explicit (van Dijk, 2016; Wodak and Meyer, 2003).

In this way, this research proposes an analysis of the qualitative discourse of Abascal’s posts on Twitter in which, in addition to the linguistic material, the contextual and intertextual aspects are taken into account, making it possible to analyse the intentional dimension of the discourse.

To this end, the following variable axes are delimited:

- External threats in Abascal’s discourse on Twitter: those that come from outside the social body that it is intended to unify and that constitute the constitutive and threatening exterior.
- Internal threats in Abascal’s discourse on Twitter: those that come from within the social body that it is intended to unify; in the present case, part of the Spanish identity.
- The relationship established between the different threats, both internal and external, through which the responsibility for the presence of external threat is internalized.
- The values that are linked to the defence of the Spanish identity: analysis of those values conceived as prior to the political debate that, when threatened, become demands that legitimise political action.

- The representation of VOX as a victim in Abascal’s discourse on Twitter: the presence of discursive elements that present an image of VOX’s victimhood and that of its environment.
- The representation of VOX as a successful party in Abascal’s discourse on Twitter: the presence of elements that emphasise VOX’s achievements.

### 3.2. Analysis and sample period

The period of analysis spans from 23 October 2019 to 10 August 2020, a period that is especially significant for VOX since it includes the election campaign and the elections of 10 November 2019, in which VOX consolidated its political presence in Spain as the third political party.

Within this period of analysis, which covers a total of 292 days, the body of material under study is made up of all the posts, both tweets and retweets, from Santiago Abascal’s account (@Santi\_ABASCAL) on Twitter. Using the Twlets tool, which allows you to retrieve up to a maximum of 3,200 tweets from any account on Twitter, a total of 3,193 tweets were obtained and counted.

For the purposes of this research, and based on the corpus of these 3,193 publications, the 10 days in which the Abascal account has the highest activity were selected. Thus, the sample is made up of a total of 281 publications, whose distribution by dates and content typology is shown in the following table:

Date	Total publications	Own tweets	Retweets
24/10/2019	24	7	17
30/10/2019	26	10	16
05/11/2019	27	1	26
07/11/2019	29	9	20
08/11/2019	26	11	15
03/12/2019	24	12	12
04/01/2020	34	5	29
23/01/2020	36	13	23
15/04/2020	30	9	21
23/05/2020	25	5	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>281</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>199</b>

Table 1. Determination of units of analysis. Source: own elaboration

Over these ten days in which there was more activity on Abascal’s Twitter, the number of publications doubles, in all cases, the average number of publications by Santiago Abascal (accounting for 10.9 per day). This circumstance is due to a series of events of a political nature in the Spanish public sphere: the exhumation of the remains of the dictator Francisco Franco from the Valley of the Fallen (24 October, 2019); the pre-electoral and electoral process of 10 November, 2019 (30 October, 7 and 8 November, 2019); the constitution of the Bureau of the Congress of Deputies (3 December, 2019); the investiture of Pedro Sánchez (4 January, 2020); the temporary closure of VOX’s Twitter account for hate speech (23 January, 2020); the control session in Congress (15 April, 2020), in the context of the COVID-19 crisis; and the protest called against the government’s management of the COVID-19 crisis organised by VOX (23 May, 2020).

## 4. Results

The publications corresponding to this period are consolidated in a data table to which columns are added that show the presence of references (implicit or explicit) related to each of the categories in which this analysis is structured. The data analysed, therefore, is reflected in the number of tweets with references, and not in the total number of references appeared in the sample. This data matrix enables us to know: 1) the frequency of appearance of each of the identified references; 2) the concurrence in the same tweet of more than one threat, and 3) the concurrence in the same tweet of threats and values.

The results of this research are shown below, following the structure indicated in the objectives and in the methodology. The findings are accompanied by two tables that show: in table 2, the threats, both internal (int) and external (ext), the total frequency of appearance (in the shaded box), and the concurrence between them; and, in table 3, the values, the total frequency of appearance of each one of them (indicated in brackets) and the relationship with the threats.

Threats	Government (int)	Pro-independence (ext)	Left (int)	Communications Media (int)	Immigration (ext)	Allied parties (int)	Institutions (int)	All political parties (int)	ETA / Abertzale Left (ext)	Other parties (int)	Islam (ext)	Economic Elites (int)	Morocco (ext)
Government (int)	121	16	22	14	5	4	4	2	5	0	0	1	0
Pro-independence (ext)	16	43	6	2	1	3	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
Left (int)	22	6	42	5	4	4	0	2	1	0	1	0	0
Communications Media (int)	14	2	5	32	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0
Immigration (ext)	5	1	4	1	23	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Allied parties (int)	4	3	4	1	0	14	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Institutions (int)	4	0	0	1	0	1	9	0	0	0	0	0	0
All political parties (int)	2	0	2	0	1	0	0	7	0	0	1	0	0
ETA / Abertzale Left (ext)	5	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	0
Other parties (int)	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
Islam (ext)	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0
Economic Elites (int)	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Morocco (ext)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

Table 2. Analysis of the threats and the relationship between them. Source: own elaboration

The findings related to the analysis of external threats in Abascal's discourse on Twitter place the Catalan independence movement as the main external threat (43 tweets), followed by immigration (23 tweets). Both, as can be seen in table 2, are among the five threats that appear with the highest frequency. To a lesser extent, other external threats are outlined, such as ETA and the Basque nationalist Left (6 tweets), Islam (2 tweets) and Morocco (1 tweet).

Regarding the analysis of internal threats in Abascal's discourse on Twitter, the references to the government (121 tweets) stand out, both in its institutional form and the references to the actors and political forces that comprise it. This threat is also the most frequent in the whole of Abascal's discourse, powerfully standing out as the threat par excellence when it comes to addressing all the threats posed, both external and internal.

Following the government, internal threats include the Left (42 tweets), including lexical references related to it—such as '*Progre*' (liberal), Communist or Chavista—and contextual references related to the Soviet Union or the Second Spanish Republic. Following the Left, Abascal sees both traditional and digital media as a major threat (32 tweets); the allied parties—Partido Popular and Ciudadanos, with which it governs in coalition at regional and local levels— (14 tweets); the institutions (9 tweets); political parties as a whole (7 tweets); other parties, in this case limited to references to the MP from Teruel Existe whose vote was decisive for the investiture of Pedro Sánchez (2 tweets); and the economic elite, with a single allusion to Ana Botín, as executive chairwoman of Santander Group (1 tweet).

In the results it is possible to see the relationship drawn between the different threats and the Spanish government. Given the high frequency of allusions to the government as a threat, a large part of the relationships established between the different threats have this figure as a common denominator. Among them, the following stand out, following an order from highest to lowest frequency:

- Relations between the government and the Left (22 tweets). They are publications in which the government is linked to leftist ideologies, liberal progressiveness, as well as personalities and historical moments that are part of the collective imagination of the Left, such as the Soviet Union, the Republican side of the Spanish Civil War, Castroism or Chavismo.
- Relations between the government and the Catalan independence movement (16 tweets). These are relationships in which the government is identified as an actor that collaborates and enables the threat of Catalan independence.
- Relations between the government and the media (14 tweets). The media, mainly the traditional media, but also social networks, appear linked to the government as tools that are at its service or under its control.
- Relations between the government and immigration (5 tweets). The government is presented as an agent that favours immigration with its lax border control and policies on repatriation of irregular migrants.
- Relationship between the government and ETA / Basque nationalist Left (5 tweets). The forces that make up the government and its representatives (current and past) are accused of exalting the action of the Basque terrorist group and of joining forces with them to come to power.

In addition to the relationships described in which the government plays a central role, other relationships are identified that are clarifying to understand Abascal's discursive strategy:

- Relationships of allied parties with other threats: VOX's allied parties in regional and local institutions are identified as threats by relating them to the government (4 tweets), the Catalan

independence movement (3 tweets) and the Left (4 tweets). These relationships reflect a strategy of excluding VOX (through a *cordon sanitaire*) that leads to support for the government, the Left and the Catalan independence movement.

- Relationships of the Left with other threats: although the Left appears on most occasions linked to the government, emphasising its ideological position, its presence is also related to other threats such as Catalan independence (6 tweets), the media (5 tweets) and immigration (4 tweets).

Once the main findings on the analysis of the threats have been outlined, those values that Abascal links to the defence of Spanish identity in his discursive proposal are examined.

Government		Threats											
		Pro-independence	Left	Communic. Media	Immigration	Allied parties	Institutions	All the parties	ETA	Other parties	Islam	Not explained	Ref. Not threatened
Values	National Values (128)	43	42	17	4	14	3	0	3	0	2	0	8
	Democracy (36)	18	10	8	2	1	2	3	1	1	0	0	4
	Freedom (36)	20	3	11	1	2	0	0	2	0	0	1	3
	Legality / Justice (34)	12	14	2	4	8	1	2	0	2	0	0	0
	Security (33)	16	5	6	3	12	0	0	1	3	0	0	2
	Economy (19)	12	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
	Coexistence (11)	7	0	6	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1
	Health / Life (8)	8	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Monarchy (8)	8	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Christianity (3)	2	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0
Respect for the deceased (3)	3	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	

Table 3. Analysis of demands and their relationship with threats. Source: own elaboration

- National values (128 tweets): Santiago Abascal’s discourse identifies two external threats to national values. The first of them is the Catalan independence movement (42 tweets), which threatens sovereignty and territorial integrity; second, immigration (14 tweets), which threatens the privileged position of Spanish nationals and territorial control. Along with these two external threats, the government (43 tweets) and the Left (17 tweets) present themselves as internal threats that collaborate with the external threats.
- Democracy (36 tweets): following national values, threats and needs of democracy is the second most referenced issue. Democracy is threatened mainly by the government (18 tweets), the Catalan independence movement (10 tweets) and the Left (8 tweets).
- Freedom (36 tweets): defence of freedom is, along with the defence of democracy, the issue that comes in second place, with an equal number of posts in both cases. They are threatened, mainly, by the government (20 tweets) and the Left (11 tweets). They are mostly referred to explicitly, as is the case with the protests against the government’s management of the

coronavirus crisis called by VOX, which they called #FaseLibertad; although references are also made indirectly through criticism of the banning of the protests or the attempts to quash the right to protest.

- Legality / Justice (34 tweets): threats to law and justice from the Catalan independence movement (14 tweets), the government (12 tweets) and immigration (8 tweets). These threats are presented as illegal and tweets call for penalties and punishment.
- Security (33 tweets): security is threatened by the government (16), immigration (12) and, to a lesser extent, by the Left (6) and the Catalan independence movement (5). Among them, there are references to the risks posed to citizens' physical wellbeing, specifically, to that of women, who are unprotected against sexual abuse.

In addition to the aforementioned values, there are others related to the economy (19 tweets), in which the government is identified as an obstacle to its proper functioning and tax reduction measures are proposed; coexistence (11 tweets), threatened by the government and the Left (6 and 5 tweets) due to their support for laws such as the law against gender violence or historical memory law that threaten to open divisions among Spaniards; health and life (8 tweets), closely linked to the government's management of the coronavirus crisis; the monarchy (8 tweets), as the guarantor of democracy and national unity; Christianity (3 tweets); and respect for the deceased (3 tweets), in the context of the exhumation of the remains of the dictator Francisco Franco.

The following research focuses on the analysis of the representation of VOX as a victim in Abascal's discourse on Twitter. In this sense, within his discourse, references to VOX's victimhood account for 65 tweets, totalling 23.13% of the all publications analysed.

In them, the party led by Abascal, its leaders and supporters are presented as victims of threats and attacks (12 tweets), media manipulation (24 tweets) or victims of a *cordon sanitaire* in which their political allies are taking part (10 tweets).

Lastly, is the representation of VOX as a successful party in Abascal's discourse on Twitter. Thus, in addition to self-representing of VOX and those linked to the party as victims, the image of the party that Santiago Abascal projects is an image of success (63 tweets), which mainly highlights the attendance at its rallies (50 tweets) and the milestone of its entering elected institutions (8 tweets).

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

On today's political scene, social media have become a fundamental channel for political communications strategies, thanks to its global nature and immediacy, virality and interactivity. The results obtained in this research testify to the importance political actors currently give to digital platforms as communications spaces with citizens (González, 2015). Social media occupy a central place in political and social life and form a lively space for debate, which contributes to the success of populism (Guerrero-Solé et al., 2020).

The research highlights Santiago Abascal's use of Twitter as the result of a careful promotional strategy, as well as his use of other social networks such as Instagram (Sampietro and Sánchez-Castillo, 2020).

The study's findings confirm the hypotheses posed, as well as opening new lines of research on the influence and use of populist discursive strategies by other Spanish parties.

In the first place, we have corroborated that Santiago Abascal uses a discourse that presents Spanish identity as a victim with the aim of building a populist political force (h.1). In contrast to previous studies on populism that speak of an abstract and unqualified identification of the adversary in these discourses (Arroyas and Pérez, 2016), in this research two types of threats are identified: an external threat to the unified social body (h.1.1) —embodied in Catalan independence and immigration— that puts Spanish identity at risk; and an internal threat (h.1.2), that is, carried out by actors and forces that are part of the Spanish identity, mainly the government and the Left, who collaborate with external threats and make them viable. This highlights the trend of digital negativity in the communicative space of social networks, with criticism of the adversary as one of the main strategies in political communication (Moret et al., 2022). In addition, Abascal's discourse ties certain values to the defence of national identity (h.1.3) with which he legitimises his cause and justifies political mobilization. These are universal values such as security, freedom, or democracy; and values linked to tradition and identity such as national values (among which are the defence of national sovereignty, territory or primacy of Spanish nationals) as well as religious or monarchical values.

The study also confirms the portrayal of VOX as a heroic force by exalting its success and denouncing its victimization (h.2). Thus underscores the concept of resentment pointed out by previous authors regarding the strategies of political figures (Fukuyama, 2019; Kelly, 2020). Specifically, Abascal emphasizes the elements that frame the position of his party and those associated with it as victims of political persecution that go from the *cordón sanitario*, in which PP and Ciudadanos, their allies in local and regional governments, are taking part, to threats and physical attacks, and including manipulation and media censorship. Polarization, hate strategy and confrontation dominate the use of the platform, as characteristic lines previously pointed out by authors (Herrero et al., 2022). At the same time, he highlights the successes of his party in terms of the attendance at rallies and by framing their taking up positions in Spanish institutions as a grandiose feat.

These findings confirm previous research that underlines the importance of the emotional and sentimental dimension in political communications (Bermúdez, 2014; Cala, 2019), as well as the primary use of Twitter as a political instrument for self-promotion (Marín, Simancas and Berzosa, 2019) and channelling of propaganda content (López-García, 2016).

On the other hand, and despite being a study limited to the analysis of a political leader in a given context, the significance of the phenomenon studied, and its results allow it to serve as a starting point for future research.

Below are some findings with the potential to pave the way for further research:

The first one has to do with the appropriation of national identity. The central role played by Spanish national identity as a political element cannot be explained solely by the threats posed

by Catalan independence and migration. For its emergence as a political force to have been possible, it has been necessary to develop a discourse capable of identifying political actors, mainly the current government, who act as collaborators with these threats. Something that allows them to internalize responsibility, turning these actors into a threat to Spanish identity. At the same time, by linking such values as freedom, democracy or security, he has made it possible to identify, almost by metonymy, to link the defence of Spain with the defence of these values. In other words, the defence of Spain has been rendered devoid of specific content, transcending its original demands —of sovereignty, territorial defence and the primacy of Spanish nationals— to represent all of these values. On the opposite end of the spectrum, threats to Spain are transformed into threats to the set of values it embodies.

Second, the frequent references to the Left —through lexical selection or contextual links— with which the threat is ideologically framed, introduce novel elements that differ from the communicative strategies of Podemos, the other great populist force in our country. Podemos inherited from the 15M movement a proposal for social opposition that abandoned traditional ideological schemes and that was committed to presenting a horizontally divided society —*those above against those below, the people against the elite*. However, VOX's discourse resorts to terminology and ideological imaginary, using concepts such as *socialcomunista*, leftist or chavista and recovering historical elements from the Second Republic, the Soviet Union or Castroism. On the opposite side of the dispute, however, they do not place ideological elements that frame the opposition within traditional schemes. Instead, there is a conceptual asymmetry in which the ideology (the Left) faces values such as freedom, democracy, and ultimately national values.

With this strategy, VOX achieves the following results: 1) Framing the debate in ideological terms, shifting the criticism of management to the ideological and giving the threat a dimension beyond the actors who embody it; 2) Presenting the Left as confrontational and as an anachronistic ideology —opposing to it non-political concepts that play to values and emotions— and 3) Keep its identity proposal out of discursive confrontations that question it, such as the traditional left-right dichotomy, and feminism or historical memory.

As a final conclusion we should highlight the success of victimhood. Communications on social networks have made it possible to produce a self-representational discourse that, in the case of VOX, has oscillated between victimhood and exaltation of success. The discourse of victimhood is mainly articulated around three major threats: 1) Political grievance —setting a political *cordón sanitario* around VOX that includes its own allies; 2) Media manipulation —the portrayal of VOX by the media and its neutrality are questioned— and 3) Threats and physical attacks suffered by both the party's leaders and supporters. This representation of victimhood, however, does not seek to construct an idea of resignation and martyrdom. Instead, thanks to references to success, both in terms of convocation and electoral results, their successes are framed as grand feats in a hostile context plagued by threats and adversity. A discourse that brings passion to the postmodern bureaucratic political landscape.

As possible limitations of the work, it should be noted that the research focuses only on the figure of a political leader and his political communication strategy in a social network. Possible future research will propose to overcome these limitations. Therefore, comparative studies are

proposed on the use of social networks by different political actors of populist ideology, both in Spain and internationally. Another possible avenue suggests exploring the use of Santiago Abascal's figure in different social networks, especially those in which the image takes precedence over the textual protagonism of the social network under investigation.

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