

The Covid-19 crisis as a political opportunity. Santiago Abascal's use of Twitter during the State of Alarm in Spain (March 14-June 20, 2020)¹

La crisis de la covid-19 como oportunidad política. El uso de Twitter por Santiago Abascal durante el estado de alarma en España (14 de marzo-20 de junio de 2020)



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Abstract:

Far-right political groups are characterized by their attempts to take advantage of moments of crisis to get their messages across to society. Parties of this type use social networks as loudspeakers for their proposals and as a place to recruit supporters, thus avoiding the traditional media. In Spain, the first State of Alarm (between March 14 and June 20, 2020), caused by covid-19, was an opportunity for Vox and Santiago Abascal to expand on their criticism of the government and present themselves as a political alternative. Using quantitative and qualitative methodologies, this study assesses how the Twitter activity of Santiago Abascal's official profile has managed to get his message across and gain more followers. To this end, the effect produced by

Resumen:

Los grupos políticos de extrema derecha se caracterizan por tratar de aprovechar los momentos de crisis para hacer llegar sus mensajes a la sociedad. Este tipo de partidos utiliza las redes sociales como altavoces de sus propuestas y lugar donde reclutar simpatizantes, evitando a los medios de comunicación tradicionales. En España el primer estado de alarma (entre el 14 de marzo y el 20 de junio de 2020), provocado por la covid-19, supuso una oportunidad para que Vox y Santiago Abascal multiplicaran sus críticas al gobierno y se presentaran como alternativa política. A través de una metodología cuantitativa y cualitativa, la presente investigación evalúa la forma en la que la actividad en Twitter del perfil oficial de Santiago Abascal ha logrado hacer llegar su mensaje

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the messages published on Santiago Abascal's profile during the state of alarm in Spain has been analysed, comparing it with that of the other Spanish political leaders. The results show that Santiago Abascal's followers are the most active in interacting with the messages published on his profile, far more than other political leaders.

Keywords:

Vox; coronavirus; covid-19; Twitter; Santiago Abascal.

y conseguir más adeptos. Para ello se ha analizado el efecto producido por los mensajes publicados en el perfil de Santiago Abascal durante el estado de alarma en España, comparándolo con el del resto de líderes políticos españoles. Los resultados muestran que los seguidores de Santiago Abascal son los que se manifiestan más activos a la hora de interactuar con los mensajes publicados en su perfil, de un modo muy superior al del resto de líderes políticos.

Palabras clave:

Vox; coronavirus; covid-19; Twitter; Santiago Abascal.

1. Introduction

1.1. The coronavirus crisis

On the 11th of March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a worldwide pandemic caused by the new coronavirus covid-19 which had been detected for the first time in Wuhan (China) some months before (Arroyo, 2020). This century has seen the detection of three epidemics (SARS, MERS and SARS-cov-2, better known as covid-19) which have affected human beings, and which originated in a coronavirus which reached humankind through zoonosis (Latif; Mukaratirwa, 2020). Unlike the two previous diseases, covid-19 has extended rapidly around the globe, affecting millions of people and, as of March 2021, having caused over two and a half million deaths (Johns Hopkins, 2021). Although each case may vary, the organs most commonly affected by the disease are the lungs, heart, kidneys, liver, intestines and brain (Kumar; Doshi; Khan; Rathore, 2020).

This scenario of a possible pandemic of unforeseeable consequences for humanity had been anticipated for years by the scientific community (Williams, 2014), which also spoke of the effects it could have on an inter-connected world (Cooper, 2006).

Despite such forecasts, the arrival of the pandemic, apart from the evident public health crisis, has shaken the very structures of the world, causing changes in practically all areas of life, both psychological and social (Saladino; Algeri; Auriemma, 2020), including behaviour (Keddell; Bedoe, 2020) and especially concerning public health planning (White, 2020). The economic consequences have been catastrophic, resulting in a 3% contraction of the global economy (IMF, 2020). The pandemic and the corresponding confinement, which many countries have employed to combat it, have been particularly hard for important economic sectors such as the automobile industry and tourism (Nayak et al., 2021).

Apart from the health and economic aspects, the crisis generated by the coronavirus has also been echoed in the world of communication, with some effects without precedent in recent years. The appearance and diffusion of conspiracy theories (Olesky et al., 2021) or the "culture of fear", which is apparent in the levels of fear being higher than the level of real negative experiences (Gruchola; Sławek-Czochra, 2021) suppose some major distortions which have conditioned communicative processes or made them more difficult. This situation can clearly be appreciated in Spain, one of the countries with the highest number of deaths

caused by this illness², where numerous errors have been apparent in the handling of the crisis, such as the lack of an early announcement or the adoption of a model of spokesperson which failed to contribute to tranquilizing public opinion (Costa-Sánchez; López-García, 2020).

In spite of the warnings from the scientific community, the crisis seems to have surprised the majority of public opinion worldwide, including the political class, which in many countries have turned the pandemic into yet another matter of controversy and debate. Decisions taken in terms of management of the epidemic have been controversial in several countries, such as Brazil (Conde, 2020), the UK (Tomkins, 2020) or the USA (Agnew, 2020; Tollefson, 2020).

This study focuses on Spain, where the situation has added even greater crispation to political life, reinforcing on the social networks the position of one of the most controversial actors: the far-right political party Vox.

1.2. *Vox as a political actor*

In the case of Spain, following several years of political instability, successive general elections and a strained atmosphere, the consequences of the health crisis have opened a new arena for polemic. The political party Vox, currently the third largest in Parliament, has maintained firm opposition to the measures adopted by the Spanish government during the crisis. They have been particularly active on Twitter, to the point where their presence on this social network has multiplied. The party has been described as far-right, more specifically as the radical right, in studies such as that of Ferreira (2019), following analysis of seven doctrinal characteristics (nationalist, nativist, authoritarian, undemocratic, populist, traditional values and neoliberal). Rincken (2019, p. 73), termed this “ultra-nationalist”.

Times of crisis, especially economic crises, habitually offer a window of opportunity for far-right parties (Antón-Mellón; Hernández-Carr, 2016; Virdee; McGeever, 2017; Mondon; Winter, 2019). In fact, the 2008 economic crisis saw a profound transformation in many countries of the European Union, which brought with it a surge in new political actors (Gould, 2019; Van-der-Walt, 2019; Zuk; Toporowski, 2020). In recent years far-right political groups have gone from being on the fringes to occupying a central position in political debate (Acha-Ugarte, 2018), with the ability to set the agenda and to influence public opinion. That process has coincided with the turn of the millennium and the development of populist discourse in parties of this type (Akkerman; De-Lange; Rooduijn, 2016, p. 48) and which European integration has facilitated continentwide (Caiani, 2019), wherein the surge of these groups responds to common dynamics, favoured by the trans-nationalization of organizations of the radical right. Although these parties share little common ground, reduced to little more than an anti-immigration discourse and a ‘nativist’ understanding of the economy (Froio & Ganesh, 2019), the truth is that cross-border cooperation by the far right has spurred the growth of extreme nationalism across the continent (Whine, 2017, p. 330).

In the case of Spain, this type of parties had remained on the margins since the approval of the constitution in 1978. The only exception had been the Unión Nacional coalition, which had gained one MP in 1979 (Blas Piñar), who obtained over 378,000 votes (2.11% of the total) (Ministerio del Interior, 2020). However, following several years with a majority for the Partido Popular

2 As of March 7, 2021, the total number of deaths due to covid-19 in Spain, according to Johns Hopkins University, reached 71,138, being the tenth highest national total in the world. Available at <http://bit.ly/3qpcdi6>

(from 2011 to 2015), the hegemonic option on the Spanish right until now, Vox appeared as an alternative from a more extreme position.

Although their first electoral results were purely testimonial: 0.25% in the general election of December 2015 and 0.20% in that of June 2016 (Ministerio del Interior, 2020), in just a short period of time they became the third largest party in parliament. The turning point was in December 2018, when the party entered the Parliament of Andalusia with twelve seats (396,607 votes, 10.96% of the total) (Junta de Andalucía, 2018). This sudden rise was confirmed in the successive elections that took place in 2019: the general election in April (24 seats), municipal, regional and European elections in May and, especially, in November's general election: becoming the third largest political force with 52 seats, 3,640,063 votes (15.09%) (Ministerio del Interior, 2020).

There are several causes that facilitated the rise of the party between 2016 and 2018. There were numerous episodes of political corruption, which exploded with the sentencing of the Gürtel case, which catapulted a motion of no-confidence against Mariano Rajoy's executive. Authors such as Moreno (2020) said that the Partido Popular had been an example of practices which tied the political world to the construction sector, which gave rise to numerous cases of corruption. Other events that coincided were the explosion of the feminist movement, particularly after the general strike of March 8, 2018, the ongoing debate on immigration and, more than anything else, the growing political tension in Catalonia. These are all questions on which the leaders of Vox have been outspoken in public debate, with postures far from what the party pejoratively calls *progressive consensus* (*consenso progre*) (Vox, 2020).

Recent studies indicate that Vox's electoral advances have had more to do with a reinforcement of the Spanish national identity (Gould, 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019), the nation against external enemies (globalization, the EU) and, in particular, internal ones (peripheric nationalism). Anti-immigration discourse is not so pronounced among their sympathisers or followers (Rinken, 2019, p. 80), something which contrasts with events in other countries, where far-right parties have also grown in popularity (Van-der-Brug; Fennema, 2003; Gallego, 2017; Edo; **Öztunc**; Poutvaara, 2019; Hansen; Clemens, 2019; Hutchins; Halikiopoulou, 2019; Bialasiewicz; Stallone, 2020; Cheung-Blunden, 2020; Roupakias; Chletsos, 2020). Nevertheless, this discourse has common features with that of other similar organizations around the continent, as well as with the so-called *Bannon effect*, which implies the promotion of certain points of view concerning the nation, immigration, the EU and Muslims (Gould, 2019).

Following the November election, once the current government of Spain had been formed, the party raised the tone of its criticism of an administration it termed as "illegitimate, based on a lie" (EFE, 2020), which was to be formed by "enemies of Spain" (La Razón, 2019; Europa Press, 2020).

1.3. Social networks and Vox

Due to their popularity, the social networks have become a new stage for political dispute, utilized strategically by populist and far-right organizations to make their messages to society go viral (Pérez-Curiel, 2020). A setting that favours the reduction of complex questions down to short messages (Ott, 2017; Evolvi, 2019). The simplicity of these messages is criticised by those who consider it hampers deep or detailed understanding. Thus, Frommer (2011) refers to "Power Point thinking" and Serrano (2013, p. 131) alerts us to the effects of social networks that reward exhibitionism and vanity over education or intellectual debate.

Nonetheless, the social network platforms have had an impact on *agenda setting*, as well as being a stage for the construction and maintenance of candidates' images (Campos-Domínguez, 2017; Enli, 2017). These communication channels or platforms provide an opportunity for political parties, which traditionally needed supporters where communication was face-to-face, but as Norris states (Norris (2007, p. 219), no longer need “foot soldiers” where there are multiple channels of electronic communication, in order to maximize their electoral support.

The populist leaders have found a tool in the social networks where their followers can gather, in a setting of greater ideological homogeneity (Boulianne, Koc-Michalska; Bimber, 2020), this represents a kind of refuge from dialectic attacks that they might be exposed to in a more public arena. Pariser (2011), in the early days of the development of the social networks, referred to “filter bubbles”, that provide access to information in consonance with the interests of each user. These phenomena have been the object of studies, that analyse the behaviour of the algorithms, which facilitate the filtering of information accessible through the social networks (Berman; Katona, 2019) or which provide alternatives to overcome the atomization of content and messages (Matakos; Tu; Gionis, 2020).

The use of social networks has been decisive in some political events in recent years. Presidential elections in the US (Francia, 2017; Groshek; Koc-Michalska, 2017; Rodríguez-Andrés, 2018) or the Brexit referendum in the UK (Usher; Dondio; Morales, 2019) are good examples. In this latter case, the social networks were employed in a particular way by the euro-sceptic parties, whose speeches raged against “elites” and “migrants” (Bennett, 2019). Behaviour in this new context of communication and relationships has been surrounded by the suspicion of the use of false profiles, also called *bots*, a matter which has also come under study (Howard; Woolley, Calo, 2018; Bastos; Mercea, 2019).

59% of the population of Spain used the Internet in 2019 to participate on social networks (Eurostat, 2020). This is a level of use in the medium/low segment among European countries, far from the levels registered in Iceland or Norway (92 and 86% respectively), although a higher incidence than in Germany (53%), France (42%) or Italy (42%). In April 2020 it was estimated that the number of active accounts or profiles on Twitter in Spain reached 8.4 million (Statista, 2020).

Since its beginnings, Vox has known how to exploit its presence on social networks, following the example of other populist or far right parties or leaders, such as Salvini and the Liga Norte in Italy (Padovani, 2018; Berti, 2020), Alliance for Germany (Darius; Stephnay, 2019; Ahmed; PISOIU, 2020) or the far right in Sweden (**Åkerlund**, 2020), among others (Froio & Ganesh, 2019). Coinciding with their gaining a foothold in the Andalusian parliament (December 2018), the party became the central axis of the election campaign (Rivas-de-Roca; García-Gordillo; Bezunartea-Valencia, 2018) and their activity on Twitter was very important to that end.

Use of social networks has become a strategic affair for the party, as a way to make their message reach the greater public without having to go through the media (Pérez-Curiel, 2020), with whom their relationship is not always fluid (Europa Press, 2019).

The party's official Twitter account saw itself immersed in several controversies in 2020, finding itself suspended for the month of January for inciting hatred (EFE, 2020b). Its activity during the coronavirus crisis has been particularly intense, and not without its dose of controversy (Marcos, 2020).

1.4. The leader's role: Santiago Abascal

Though the party's first president was Alejo Vidal-Quadras (Lázaro, 2014), since Vox began its activities, the party has revolved around the figure of the current leader: Santiago Abascal. The party thus complies with one of the basic tenets of the new populist movements; the appearance of the party founder as a charismatic leader or 'saviour' (Rodríguez-Jiménez, 2006; Eatwell, 2007).

Furthermore, Abascal appears as the driver of the political project after abandoning the Partido Popular, following a long career there (Quintero; Alonso, 2014). From the beginning the party has been associated with the leadership of its founder. Twitter offers an ideal space for the promotion of this type of behaviour, where feelings are mixed with ways of thinking and acting (Kissas, 2019). In this case, the choice of the medium to launch messages during the crisis is as important as the message itself (Michailidou, 2017, p. 244).

The presence of Santiago Abascal is particularly strong on Instagram, the social network on which the Vox politician is the Spanish leader with most followers (787,000³), with over twice the following of Pablo Iglesias, in second place. Abascal's use of his Instagram profile is related to the promotion of his agenda, which abounds with unedited images where he dominates, normally alone (Sampietro; Sánchez-Castillo, 2020). This type of utilization of his image coincides with the development of the idea of a charismatic leader, as previously noted.

Abascal's leadership on Instagram contrasts with his Twitter profile, where the number of followers is substantially less.

Table 1. Number of followers of the official profiles of the main Spanish politicians on Twitter (as of 12 March 2021)

Politician	Number of followers on Twitter
Pablo Iglesias (<i>Podemos</i>)	2,642,813
Pedro Sánchez (<i>PSOE</i>)	1,558,472
Albert Rivera (<i>Ciudadanos</i>)	1,226,052
Inés Arrimadas (<i>Ciudadanos</i>)	697,434
Santiago Abascal (<i>Vox</i>)	564,616
Pablo Casado (<i>Partido Popular</i>)	528,117

Source: Twitter. Created by the author

However, Santiago Abascal's Twitter profile saw considerable activity during the State of Alarm, being the channel for his criticism of the Spanish government, which is the reason for this study.

2. Methodology

This paper has the objective of studying the way in which Santiago Abascal's Twitter profile was utilized during the first State of Alarm triggered by the covid-19 pandemic (in force in Spain between March 14 and June 20, 2020).

3 Data to March 12, 2021

Starting from the fact that crisis situations are utilized by far-right political groups to try to launch their messages and gain supporters in society, we intend to see the way in which the leader of Vox has used the March 2020 declaration of a State of Alarm as a 'window of opportunity'. The course of this crisis can be considered relevant as it is only the second occasion since the approval of the Spanish Constitution (1978) that this exceptional measure has been taken. The previous declaration had only affected the operation of airports and lasted for 43 days (Aba, 2011). Both the circumstances surrounding this second State of Alarm, its duration, (98 days) and the political climate in which it has been declared offer an interesting perspective for the analysis of the way in which Vox, a political grouping of populist nature, has used the social networks to get its message out and to multiply its number of supporters.

Therefore, this study has set the following objectives:

- O1: Distinguish changes in Santiago Abascal's Twitter profile in terms of activity and number of followers during the first State of Alarm in 2020.
- O2: Identify the keys of the communication employed by Santiago Abascal on his Twitter profile during the first State of Alarm in 2020.

In order to carry out this study a double methodology has been utilized (quantitative and qualitative). From the quantitative point of view, the behaviour of the official Twitter profiles of the main Spanish politicians has been analysed, downloading all the messages they produced during the State of Alarm. The profiles analysed are those of Pedro Sánchez (@sanchezcastejon), Pablo Casado (@pablocasado_), Santiago Abascal (@Santi_ABASCAL), Pablo Iglesias (@PabloIglesias) and Inés Arrimadas (@InesArrimadas). Specifically, the original messages written by them were analysed, leaving out of the analysis the messages from other profiles that they shared.

The following variables were analysed in the quantitative study:

1. Number of tweets published during the State of Alarm.
2. Popularity of the messages sent: Study of the positive reactions (*faves* and *retweets*) to the messages posted on the politicians' official accounts.
3. Behaviour of the Twitter profiles' following: changes in the number of followers over the period analysed.

The qualitative study analyses the content of all the messages posted by Santiago Abascal on his Twitter profile (@Santi_ABASCAL) concerning the following variables:

1. Subjects mentioned
2. Type of language utilized

The period of analysis covers the first State of Alarm in 2020, from the moment of its announcement (the evening of March 14, 2020) by the Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, to its end (at 23:59 on June 20).

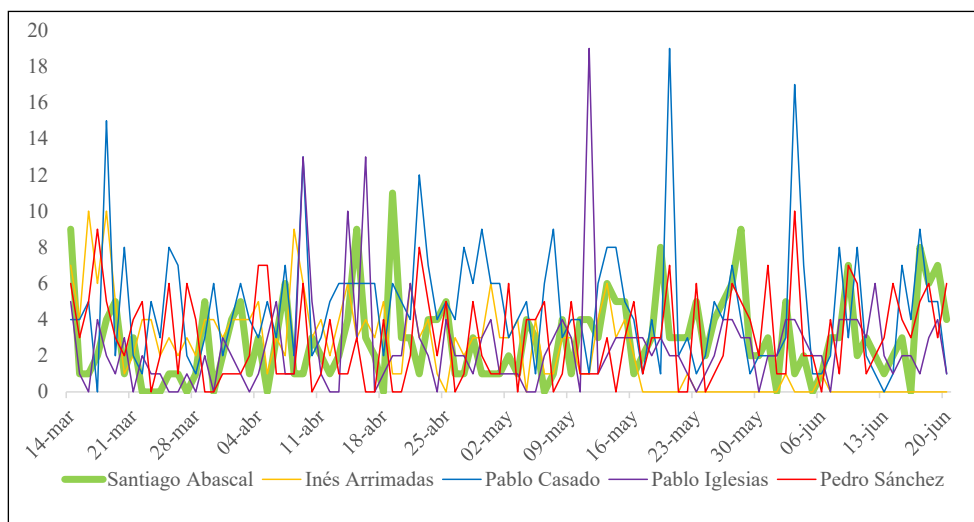
3. Quantitative results

3.1. Activity of the profile

Between March 14 and June 20, Santiago Abascal posted a total of 289 messages on his Twitter profile, at a rate of 2.9 per day. The Vox leader's tweet production was less than that of Pablo Casado (465 messages, 4.6 per day) and Pedro Sánchez (294, 2.9). Moreover, Abascal registered more messages on the social network than did Pablo Iglesias (249, 2.5/day) and Inés Arrimadas (227, 2.2/ day). In the case of the leader of Ciudadanos, her activity on Twitter fell off considerably after the month of May, when she gave birth. In the final weeks of the confinement, she spent more time sharing messages from other political leaders or from her organization than on producing her own.

The activity on Santiago Abascal's profile occupies the middle ground in comparison with the other Spanish political leaders, though with some peaks or moments of more intense activity.

Graph 1: The production of tweets on Santiago Abascal's profile during the State of Alarm (March 14 to June 20, 2020) compared to other political leaders



Source: Twitter. Created by the author

The day with the most intense activity was April 19 (11 messages). That day saw a major controversy in Spain over the declarations of the Chief of Staff of the Guardia Civil, José Manuel Santiago, in which he stated that the security forces were working to “minimize the climate contrary to the Government’s handling of the crisis” (Ortega-Dolz; González, 2020). Nine of the eleven messages that day are related to the controversy and in them the party leader cried out against the Guardia Civil’s words. He speaks of “democratic alert” and, apart from announcing legal action, makes a call to “Spaniards”, accusing the government of

having “let thousands of people die through their negligence and sectarianism” (ID=45). This is a good example of behaviour seeking to take advantage of a moment of crisis (an unfortunate declaration) to lash out at the government and try to gain some political benefit.

The following days with most messages (n=9) were March 14, April 15 and May 28. The State of Alarm was declared on March 14 and most tweets indicated an intention to cooperate with the decision, though also making the most of the chance to attack the partners in the government: “it’s terrifying to see the government paralysed by separatist pillage and communist hunger” (ID=5). April 15 was a day of Question Time in parliament. He complained that parliamentary procedure prevented him from questioning the leader of the executive. His messages fiercely criticised the deputy prime Minister, Pablo Iglesias: “Nobody would say it is the communist and Chavist Deputy Prime Minister who attacks parliamentary monarchy and coexistence while burying over 20,000 compatriots” (ID=76).

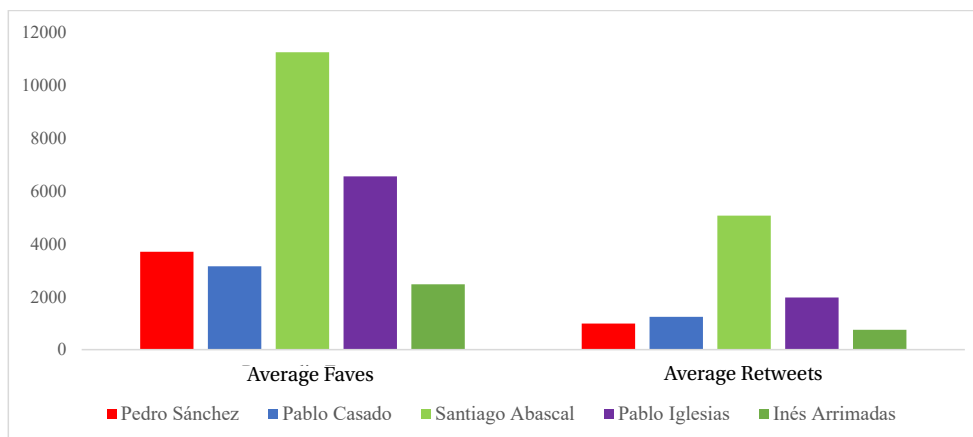
Most of the nine messages on May 28 are dedicated to replying to Pablo Iglesias, who had accused Vox in the Reconstruction Commission of the Congress of “wanting to carry out a coup d’état” but “not daring” (Cruz, 2020). The tone on this occasion was also very aggressive, even referring to Iglesias as “deputy pandemics”, in a clear attempt to associate the second Deputy Prime Minister’s handling of the crisis with the effects of the pandemic in Spain: “The deputy pandemics knows his horizon is as black as a lawyer’s robes. And in his attempts to evade justice, he’s capable of anything, including an alliance with all the enemies of Spain, from Eta to conspirators” (ID=222).

3.2. *Faves and retweets*

The messages posted by Santiago Abascal on his profile during the State of Alarm obtained an average of 11,250 *faves* and 5,070 *retweets*. The median values were 9,165 and 4,525 respectively. These were messages that received an explicit backing from his followers, or which were shared by them.

Despite being one of the Twitter profiles with the lowest number of followers among those analysed (together with that of Pablo Casado), Santiago Abascal’s profile is the one which registers the highest degree of interaction, by a considerable margin over the same registers among his political adversaries.

Graph 2: Average of *faves* and *retweets* of postings on Twitter of Spanish political leaders during the State of Alarm (March 14 to June 20)



Source: Twitter. Created by the author

Pablo Iglesias registers an average of 6,556 (*faves*) and 1,972 (*retweets*) respectively; Pedro Sánchez 3,701 (*faves*) and 988 (*retweets*); Pablo Casado 3,155 (*faves*) and 1,241 (*retweets*); finally, Inés Arrimadas 2,474 (*faves*) and 751 (*retweets*).

Santiago Abascal gains greater traction from his messages than the other political leaders, at least as far as Twitter interactions are concerned. The Vox president's followers are far more enthusiastic in declaring their backing of his messages, as well as in sharing them. In fact, if we take as a base the number of followers of his profile on May 15 (460,984), the ratio of interactions per thousand followers gives an average of 24.4 for *faves* and 10.9 for *retweets*. These are the highest figures registered for the five leaders, with a considerable difference over the rest.

Table 2. Ratio of interactions (*faves and retweets*) per 1,000 followers, taking the number of followers of the accounts on May 15 as the base and the average of *faves* and *retweets* during the State of Alarm (March 14 to June 20)

Twitter profile	<i>Faves</i> per thousand followers	<i>Retweets</i> per thousand followers
Pedro Sánchez	2.6	0.7
Pablo Casado	7.0	2.7
Santiago Abascal	24.4	10.9
Pablo Iglesias	2.5	0.7
Inés Arrimadas	3.7	1.1

Source: Twitter. Created by the author

Of all the messages posted on Twitter during the State of Alarm by the five leaders, the one with the highest number of *faves* is a post by Pedro Sánchez on March 16 (75,155 *faves* and 18,941 *retweets*) written in English and responding to the North American singer Miley Cyrus.

“Spain is coleader in initiatives such as the ACT-Accelerator to achieve equitable access to vaccines, treatments and diagnosis to fight #COVID19. Ours is a strong commitment, Miley. Unity and multilateral response is the only way forward not to let anyone behind. #GlobalGoalUnite” (ID=259).

The PM’s second most popular message has 23,375 *faves* and 4,359 *retweets*.

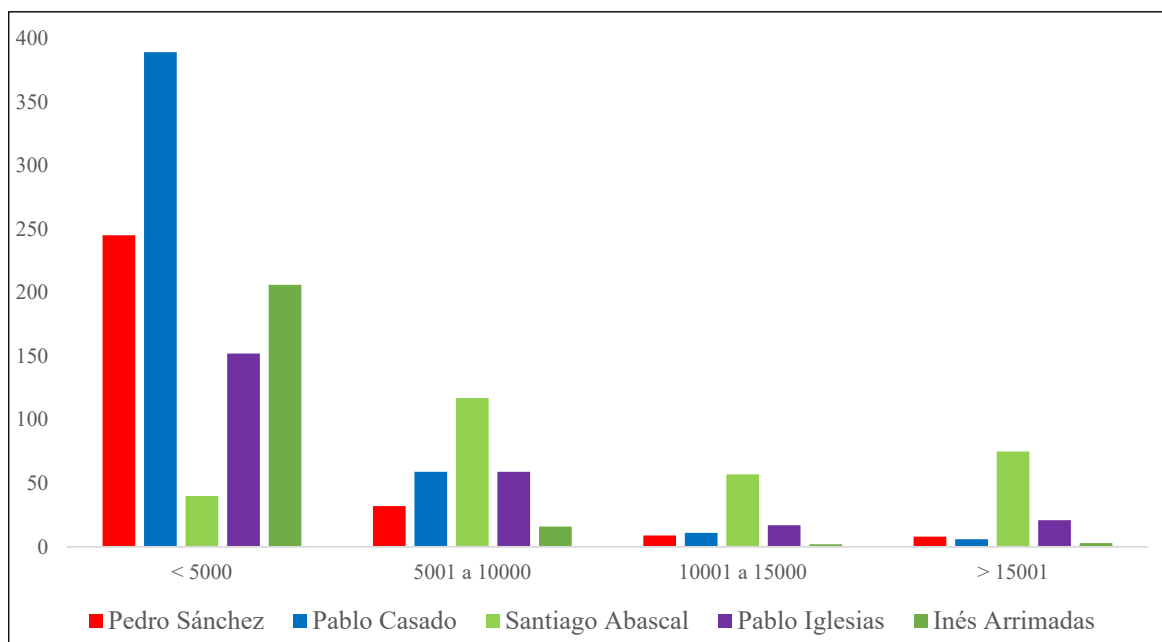
As for the other leaders, the messages with the greatest number of interactions are 63,232 *faves* and 17,584 *retweets* (Pablo Iglesias); 54,251 *faves* and 20,994 *retweets* (Santiago Abascal); 21,489 *favs* and 7,878 *retweets* (Pablo Casado); and 21,846 *faves* and 1,262 *retweets* (Inés Arrimadas).

Of the ten messages that gained the highest number of *faves* on Santiago Abascal’s profile, seven were related to covid-19 or the handling of the State of Alarm, while three referred to other matters, two about terrorism and one concerning international affairs (Venezuela). The post with the greatest backing, posted on March 14, is one which refers to his situation as a victim of the virus, in the first days of the pandemic. That message also contains political criticism of the Deputy PM, Pablo Iglesias:

“I have remained in a 9 m² room, without leaving, for several days, with all my family in the house, without any contact with me, respecting quarantine. And I see that the Deputy PM is not respecting his quarantine but is attending Cabinet meetings to prohibit us leaving our homes. The Establishment!” (ID=2)

Apart from achieving the highest average number of *faves* and *retweets*, Santiago Abascal is also the politician who has the most success with each of his posts, in terms of the response from his followers. Specifically, 75 messages obtained over 15,001 *faves*; 57 between 5,001 and 10,000; 117 between 5,001 and 10,000 and only 40 fewer than 5,000.

Graph 3: Distribution of the number of *faves* for the messages of Spanish political leaders during the State of Alarm (March 14 to June 20)



Source: Twitter. Created by the author

None of the other political profiles gained similar results, as the majority of their messages are concentrated in the segments of fewer than 5,000 *faves* (Pedro Sánchez: 245; Pablo Casado: 389; Pablo Iglesias: 152; and Inés Arrimadas: 206). There are a smaller proportion of messages of between 5,001 and 10,000 (Pedro Sánchez: 32; Pablo Casado: 59; Pablo Iglesias: 59; and Inés Arrimadas: 16). In those segments that suppose the largest number of interactions, the difference is even more in favour of Santiago Abascal's profile. between 10,001 and 15,000: Pedro Sánchez: 9; Pablo Casado: 11; Pablo Iglesias: 17 and Inés Arrimadas: 2. Over 15,001 *faves*: Pedro Sánchez: 8; Pablo Casado: 6; Pablo Iglesias: 21; and Inés Arrimadas: 3.

In relative terms the distribution clearly shows the way in which Abascal's followers behave, interacting more actively with his Twitter profile.

Table 3. Percentage of distribution of messages by the number of faves during the State of Alarm (March 14 to June 20)

Politician	0 - 5,000	5,001 - 10,000	10,001 - 15,000	Over 15,001
Pedro Sánchez	83.33%	10.88%	3.06%	2.72%
Pablo Casado	83.65%	12.68%	2.36%	1.29%
Santiago Abascal	13.84%	40.48%	19.72%	25.95%
Pablo Iglesias	61.04%	23.69%	6.82%	8.43%
Inés Arrimadas	90.74%	7.04%	0.88%	1.32%

Source: Twitter. Created by the author

3.3. Growth of the profile

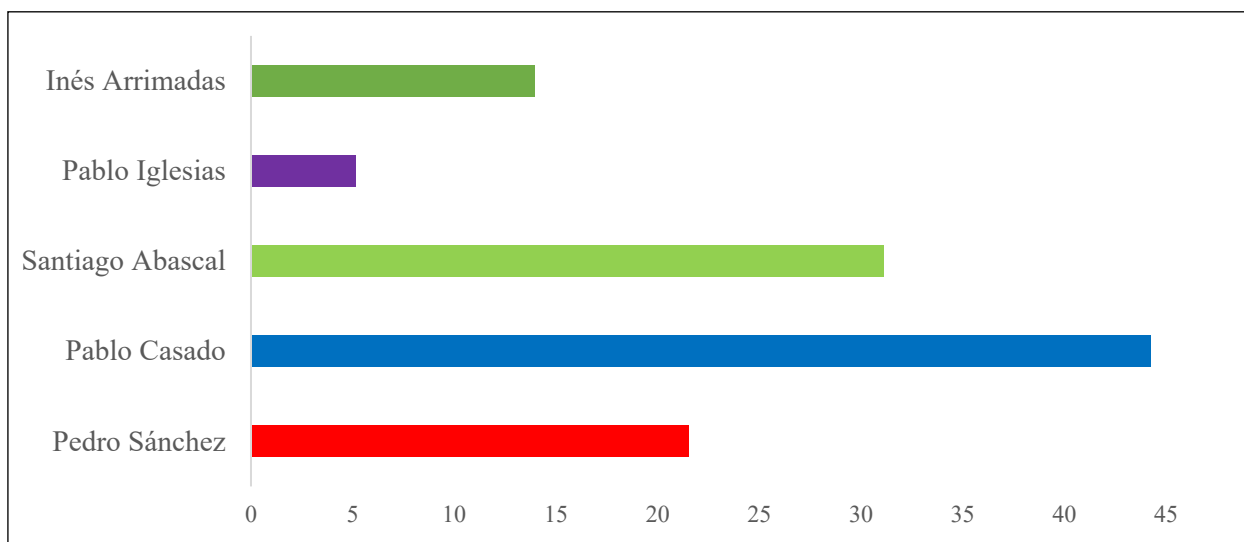
Another metric that helps to calibrate the success of the communication strategy used on Twitter during the coronavirus crisis and the State of Alarm is the way in which each of the profiles has changed in terms of the number of users.

Santiago Abascal's profile had 371,562 followers as of February 29. That figure was lower than that of Pablo Iglesias (2,460,342 followers), Pedro Sánchez (1,175,269) and Inés Arrimadas (589,720). Only Pablo Casado (329,100) was behind the leader of Vox. In fact, even Albert Rivera, despite having officially retired from politics, had a considerably higher number of followers (1,174,584).

The results of the strategy carried out by the leader of the Spanish far right on this social network are more than evident. By June 21 the number of followers of his profile had grown to 487,263, 115,701 more (an increase of 31.13%). Following the end of the State of Alarm it was still lower than the other leaders mentioned: Pedro Sánchez (1,428,480 followers; 253,211 more), Pablo Iglesias (2,586,721; 126,379) and Inés Arrimadas (671,850; 82,130). Despite achieving such a major increase, the gap in popularity between the profiles grew when we look at those of Pedro Sánchez and Pablo Iglesias, only decreasing compared to that of Inés Arrimadas.

At the same time, as of June 21 he was still ahead of Pablo Casado (474,778 followers; 145,678 more), although the distance between the two profiles had been considerably reduced. In fact, the growth of Santiago Abascal's profile was not even the greatest in percentage terms, as here it was beaten by that of Pablo Casado (44.26% followers more).

Graph 4: Relative growth (as % of number of followers), of the Twitter profiles of Spanish political leaders (from February 29 to June 21)



Source: Twitter. Created by the author

The activity on Twitter, even with the success of his messages (in being tagged as favourites or shared by his followers) is not reflected in a greater following of his profiles. In spite of having found in his audience much lower levels of interaction, Pablo Casado took greater advantage of his activity during the State of Alarm. Even Pedro Sánchez and Pablo Iglesias, from the government, increased their advantage over Santiago Abascal in terms of numbers of followers during this timeframe. Sánchez had 941,217 followers more than Abascal on June 21 (on February 29 the difference was 803,707). As regards Pablo Iglesias, the difference after the State of Alarm is 2,099,458 followers (2,088,780 on February 29).

3.4. Subjects covered

To carry out this study seven major categories were established to be able to classify the messages posted on Santiago Abascal's profile by subject matter, these correspond to those subjects covered in more than ten posts over the period of analysis.

Table 4. Categorization by subject matter of messages posted by Santiago Abascal on his official Twitter profile during the first State of Alarm in Spain caused by the coronavirus (March 14 - June 21, 2020)

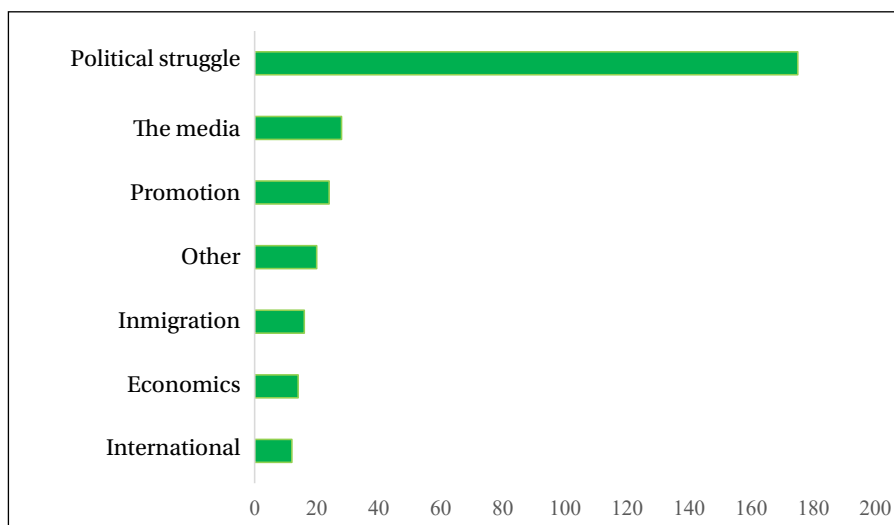
Category	Description
Political struggle	Messages characterised by controversy with other political parties or the government.
The media	Related to the media.
Promotion	Messages which refer to the party itself and which aim to promote their ideas, values, etc.
Others	This category gathers various subjects that separately would not add up to the minimum of ten posts.
Immigration	Messages that refer to the arrival or permanence of migrants in Spain
The economy	Economic matters
International	Matters relating to international politics

Source: Created by the author

The first point in this section worthy of mention is that during the first State of Alarm, the large majority of the 289 messages posted by Santiago Abascal on his Twitter profile (n=175, representing 60.55%) fall into the category of political struggle. The Vox leader's activity was focused on criticism of his political adversaries, in particular the Spanish government, both the Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and the second Deputy PM, Pablo Iglesias, leaders of the PSOE and of Unidos Podemos respectively. The general tone is highly critical of the government's actions and basically only the first day of the State of Alarm (March 14) saw a conciliatory or collaborative tone with the government. Nevertheless, despite the tone that day, harsh criticism was made of the governing partners or of those parties that supported their investiture in these first posts as well.

"If Sánchez needs VOX's votes to decree the State of Alarm, unify the management of the crisis and put all the services of the State to fight the pandemic and its economic and social effects, they can count on them and so escape from the horrid communist and separatist blackmail" (ID=5, March 14)

Graph 5: Distribution by subject matter of posts on Twitter by Santiago during the first State of Alarm in Spain caused by the coronavirus (March 14 – June 20, 2020)



Source: Twitter. Created by the author

This type of messages was kept up over the whole of the period analysed, with an intensification due to the celebration of the so-called “Caravan for Spain and its freedom” which the party convoked in all provincial capitals for Saturday May 23.

The second group of messages were those related to the media (n=28, 9.7%), being especially hard on some of them, such as El País. Harsh criticism was directed at Grupo PRISA, the owner of said daily, personalised in Ana Patricia Botín:

“Mrs Botín, 4 million Spaniards are starting to get fed up with the fact that the media outlet that you, along with other multi-millionaires, own, spends its time insulting and stigmatizing us, being systematically manipulative”. (ID=162, May 14).

The other subject matter receive rather less attention in the form of posts, matters such as the promotion of their own ideas (24 messages), immigration (20 messages), the economy (14) or international affairs (12) are relegated by the chief objective over the period analysed of criticising the government. It is noteworthy that, within this last category (international), explicit support is given to governments such as that of Orban in Hungary (ID=38, April 1) or Trump, immersed in the protests of the *Black Lives Matter* movement (ID=226, May 30). Other messages relate the situation in Venezuela to the Spanish government (ID=206, May 26).

The section called Others (20 messages) includes some messages related to patriotism (7 messages), the forces of Law Enforcement (5 messages), terrorism (4 messages), religion, coinciding with the celebration of Holy Week (3) or information related to the leader himself having overcome covid-19 in March (one message).

It is surprising that at such a singular moment of time, with messages of support for various collectives being commonplace, such messages are practically non-existent in the tweets posted by Santiago Abascal. Specific reference is made only to the People (“In the end, in Spain, the People have always responded when our institutions have failed”, ID=1, March 14) or the State Forces of Law Enforcement, such as the message of congratulations on the anniversary of the Guardia Civil (ID=154, May 13). The other political leaders did post several messages of support or gratitude to collectives such as health care workers, for example, echoing the praise paid to them during a large part of the confinement, including applause from the general population.

3.5. *Type of language*

The language utilized is notable for its vehemence. 175 messages (60% of the total) employ aggressive, disrespectful, or disparaging elements. These disparaging messages predominate including some with serious accusations against political adversaries. A total of eleven posts, for example, use the expression “criminal government”, to refer to the Spanish government, one of them even as a hashtag, #Gobiernocriminal (ID=201, May 25). Similarly, it is claimed that “we are in the hands of criminals” (ID=136, May 7) or “we are on the verge of a criminal dictatorship” (ID=37, April 1).

The Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, is labelled a “trickster” (ID=145, May 10). The second Deputy PM, Pablo Iglesias, apart from being called “deputy pandemics” on three occasions (ID=212, May 27; ID=222, May 28; and ID=285, June 19) is called “small-time loudmouth” (ID=283, June 6), “employee of the narco-dictatorship” (ID=13, March 17), “ally of the narco-tyrant killers” (ID=155, May 13) and is even accused of acting as a “thug and criminal” (ID=180, May 19).

Equally common are the disparaging adjectives against the groups that support the coalition government. The references to ETA terrorism are noteworthy: “if Spanish labour law is agreed with the band (of terrorists) ... Why wouldn't they give a good deal to the kidnappers and killers that were held prisoners? Nothing surprises me now”. (ID=252, June 10), a Tweet posted after the agreement reached with the parliamentary group of EH Bildu for the derogation of the labour reform. These accusations were extended to cover the entire Congress: “The Congress has become an institution kidnapped by communists, separatists and pro-ETAs. The Deputy PM allows himself the luxury of saying that VOX wishes a coup d'état. That's fine, apparently. But today when VOX calls ERC a ‘conspirator’... Batet expunges it from the parliamentary record”. (ID=255, June 11).

This type of language is used not only against political adversaries, but the media are also the object of disparagement, with the utilization, on up to four occasions, of the epithet “lackey”. As regards the newspaper “El País”, he even changes the name to “Lo País”, defining it as “The Daily Dependiant on the Oligarchies” (ID=160, May 14).

The terms of disparagement employed by Santiago Abascal have no parallel among the other Spanish political leaders. Not even Pablo Casado or Inés Arrimadas commonly express themselves in such terms, despite being critical of the government, at no point do they employ terms or expressions of that nature. Therefore, it can be considered as an exclusive characteristic of the Vox leader's communication.

4. Discussion and conclusions

A first question that arises from the results found has to do with the effect of Twitter profiles on real politics. If we analyse the level of following of the party profiles during the last electoral campaign and the results obtained, no type of possible relationship is established. Pearson's correlation coefficient (-0.007), very close to 0 and the practically flat line of tendency testify to that.

Table 4. Correlation between the number of followers of Spanish political parties on November 1 and the number of votes obtained in the election of November 10, 2019.

Party	Number of followers	Election votes
<i>PSOE</i>	711,733	6,792,199
<i>PP</i>	727,559	5,047,040
<i>Vox</i>	317,167	3,656,979
<i>Unidas Podemos</i>	1,415,920	3,119,364
<i>Ciudadanos</i>	519,204	1,650,318

Source: Twitter / Ministerio del Interior. Created by the author

It is important to point out that the number of followers of an account of these characteristics, be it of a party or of a political leader, should not automatically be identified with supporters or voters. Among the followers of a political account there may be sympathisers from other countries, or even adversaries, apart from journalists or other interested individuals or even *bots* or other mechanisms utilized to give greater visibility or activity to such profiles. Although the influence of *bots* has been intentionally left outside the parameters of this study, it is proposed as an interesting line for future research, in order to assess the true dimensions that this type of profile represents in the interaction with the principal actors in Spanish politics.

This study demonstrates that the level of interaction with messages sent cannot be extrapolated as representing a guarantee of success for the growth or popularity of a determined profile on the social networks. Santiago Abascal's followers show far more enthusiasm than those of the other political leaders when demonstrating their preference for his political ideas. But such activity does not demonstrate a greater adhesion to those messages beyond the sectors already convinced. The messages tend, therefore, towards endogamy and the nourishing of niches or sectors more persuaded by filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011).

As regards the objectives set out for this study, the following conclusions can be drawn:

O1: The activity on Santiago Abascal's Twitter profile during the State of Alarm was similar to that of the other Spanish political leaders. In fact, it was notably less than that of another opposition politician (Pablo Casado) and was at a similar level to that of Pedro Sánchez. Nevertheless, the messages launched during the campaign on Santiago Abascal's Twitter profile do confirm him as one of the most popular Spanish political leaders. This popularity is understood, within the social networks, as the interactions (*faves* and *retweets*) achieved between his followers. This fact reveals that Vox supporters are the most active and enthusiastic on this social network.

Santiago Abascal did not gain the same benefits as the other leaders, especially Pablo Casado, from his activity on the networks during the crisis. Despite the enthusiasm demonstrated by his followers, the level of growth of his account has been less than that of Pablo Casado, who was the one who gained the greatest benefits from the covid-19 crisis on Twitter.

O2: Santiago Abascal's communication on Twitter during the first State of Alarm in Spain was characterised by the utilization of the situation to reinforce his criticism of the Spanish government, directing most of his messages to this end. Such criticism, was notable for its aggressivity, using language loaded with disparagement, especially towards members of the government and the parties that support it. This being a characteristic that distinguishes him from other political leaders.

As a final conclusion, it has been shown that, despite the covid-19 crisis having supposed an opportunity for Vox's messages, and so for those of the Santiago Abascal leadership, to gain headway, their reach has been somewhat limited. The party leader has utilized the crisis generated by the coronavirus, especially during the State of Alarm, to insist in his criticism of the government and to try to reach a greater number of people. The fulfilment of these objectives on social networks can be considered to be highly nuanced, if one bears in mind the changes in the number of followers on each of the profiles.

Thus, Twitter acts as a deformed image of society, where Santiago Abascal's supporters are far more active, but whose real effect does not seem to respond to the same patterns.

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