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The far-right's influence on Twitter during the 2018 Andalusian elections: an approach through political leaders

Abstract

New technologies allow politicians to spread their messages omitting the role of mediators. In this context, the Internet has also promoted the emergence of a new actor, digital opinion leaders, who go beyond traditional politics and seek to set the public agenda. One of the main questions nowadays is whether social media, and in particular Twitter as a consolidated tool for political communication, is only used as a sounding board for their political statements, spurring the messages of populist forces. With this in mind, the main objective of this research is to explore the influence of the far-right in the public debate of political leaders on Twitter, analyzing the specific case of the Andalusian regional elections held in December 2018. These elections can be considered a political turning point, with an extreme right party winning seats in a Spanish regional election for the first time in 35 years. In this paper we analyze if Vox used a differentiated strategy via this social network compared to the candidates of the traditional parties: PSOE, PP, Ciudadanos, and Adelante Andalucía. Using content analysis on Twitter as a method, this research determines how Vox candidates worked as influencers of the digital political debate, despite being extra-parliamentary. Vox marked the agenda for the rest of the leaders, while generating great expectation among the audience.

Keywords

Twitter, regional elections, far-right, political discussion, political leaders, opinion leaders.

1. Introduction

Political communication is in a state of constant change, due to the spread and consolidation of the Internet as a tool used daily. Digital platforms have contributed to the personalization of politics (Cotarelo, 2010), boosting an academic optimism about the possibility of creating a virtual public sphere in which governing authorities and citizens can connect (Thomass, 2011). Nevertheless, empirical evidence highlights that there is no significant degree of interaction between these parties (Alonso-Muñoz, Miquel-Segarra & Casero-Ripollés, 2016; Nulty *et al.*, 2016).

Although the Internet has not reached the level of interaction expected some years ago, social networks, and in particular Twitter, have increased in importance in electoral

campaigns (Campos-Domínguez, 2017). Politicians (Aharony, 2012) and parties (Adi, Erickson & Lilleker, 2013) use Twitter to disseminate information, building their image before the public through self-presentation and self-expression (Casero-Ripollés, 2018). The adaptation of this social network to the field of political communication is total because of its characteristics (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012), such as immediacy or ease of use. Therefore, this microblogging system fits very well into the new fragmentary public discourse mediated by digital technologies (Barber, 2004).

The Internet has also prompted the emergence of a new figure, digital opinion leaders, who go beyond traditional politics and seek to set the public agenda (Habel, 2012; Winter & Neubaum, 2016). In this context, journalists, immersed in recent years in their own conversion to digital change, use Twitter frequently, either to share their publications or as a source of information (Engesser & Humprecht, 2015). To achieve this last objective, the tweets of popular politicians started being used as statements in the making of news in 2011 and 2012, especially in relation to soft news (Broersma & Graham, 2013).

Recent research on the American case shows that the use of tweets as a source is already growing exponentially in the field of hard news, to such an extent that 30% of the political messages in this social media are incorporated into informative pieces (Justel-Vázquez *et al.*, 2018). This suggests a reinforcement of the source as an agenda creator, introducing its message into the public debate caused by the mass media, according to the theory of agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

As political parties, especially populist figures, are aware of the media's use of tweets, they prioritize sensationalist messages, full of high-sounding statements (van-Kessel & Castelein, 2016). The fact that traditional media work as a voice for these tweets leads to a professionalization of the management of social media by political parties, which is combined with the desire to convey amateurism in order to generate trust among the public (Enli, 2017). This behavior is pointed out by far-right groups.

With the diffusion of these populist positions, the so-called new digital opinion leaders play a fundamental role (Engesser *et al.*, 2017), regardless of whether they hold a formal political position or not. These influencers range from politicians to journalists, including bloggers (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014). All of them have a high capability to mobilize their recipients (Karlsen, 2015). In this digitized political discussion, opinions acquire the same value as facts (Brants *et al.*, 2009), becoming a topic of public debate.

In this communicative context, the regional elections of Andalusia took place in 2018, and created history inasmuch as a far-right force obtained parliamentary representation in Spain for the first time in 35 years. Our research focuses on the senders and recipients of the Andalusian electoral campaign, trying to discern whether the messages of this populist party were amplified by social networks and whether they managed to influence other political leaders. Although Vox was at the time an extra-parliamentary force, it gained notoriety on Twitter, which makes it interesting to study this process. The limited Andalusian public sphere leads to pay attention to traditional leaders, since they are able to act as opinion leaders on Twitter.

2. Background

2.1. Twitter as a political communication tool

Twitter is a consolidated tool for political communication, used by all types of political figures, such as parties, governments or civil society (Campos-Domínguez, 2017). Since 2009, politicians around the world have used this social network to engage their voters. Its importance in campaign, applied in very varied contexts, allows it to be considered as another medium during the election campaign (Chadwick, 2017), including in regional cases in Spain like Andalusia.

In the arena of social media, Twitter is the one that best adapts to the immediacy of politics, performing several functions identified by literature. Its main use is the dissemination of information, both political statements and events during election campaigns (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). In this way, a self-referentiality function predominates (Ignacio-Criado, Martínez-Fuentes & Silván, 2013), supporting a personalization of politics. Another role attributed to Twitter is the ability to mobilize voters and participation (Gainous & Wagner, 2014), which is of extraordinary importance in an electoral competition.

In spite of the relevance of the role of Twitter in the electoral campaign, we must not forget its use beyond elections. Social media could be used by citizens to help maintain better control processes of their leaders (Feenstra & Casero-Ripollés, 2014). However, the overabundance of information, as is shown by the massive use of tweets by populist parties (van-Kessel & Castelein, 2016), generates dysfunctions. In addition, the microblogging service does not promote the degree of interaction expected between users and politicians. Significant exchange is minimal within the communicative potential of Twitter (Alonso-Muñoz, Miquel-Segarra & Casero-Ripollés, 2016; Nulty *et al.*, 2016). There are few studies (Graham *et al.*, 2013) that assess this dialogue as sufficient.

Since 2013, academics have expressed concern through several research studies on the possibility that Twitter is a polarization tool, reinforcing divisions between social groups (Colleoni, Rozza & Arvidsson, 2014; Hahn, Ryu & Park, 2015). This is because the use of Twitter is usually targeted at related accounts, reducing the chances of encountering divergent opinions. For this reason, political parties develop a conflict strategic approach, also known as game frame (Aalberg, Strömback & de Vreese, 2011), which prioritizes aggressiveness and programmatic simplicity instead of complex proposals.

Academic interest in the use of Twitter by populist politicians arose in 2016 as a result of the new style of communication by Donald Trump in the United States (van-Kessel & Castelein, 2016), but also with the emergence in Europe of large right-wing movements. Spanish Vox is part of this last movement. According to Campos-Domínguez, "populists have used Twitter to criticize opponents, carry out personal battles and draw the attention of the media" (2017, p. 86). Tweets are used by those politicians as a source of political information, since this method widely spreads messages that are easily convertible to headlines (Justel-Vázquez *et al.*, 2018). On the other hand, the unlimited and unconfined method of dissemination of the platform distorts the true influence and reach of these groups, in relation to the consolidated parties as powerful organizations.

Research on political communication on Twitter show that this digital tool does not encourage a high fragmentation of the agenda addressed by political leaders (Segado-Boj, Díaz-Campo & Lloves Sobrado, 2016). In addition, some authors (Enli, 2017) have demonstrated the ability of social media to build a public agenda for outsiders such as populist parties. These movements have a more thematic, and therefore less strategic, agenda than traditional politicians' (Casero-Ripollés, Sintes-Olivella & Franch, 2017). They give priority to those issues that benefit them in social media.

The use of Twitter by political parties is very professional, which means a standardization of messages (Stromer-Galley, 2014). However, there is also a tendency towards amateurism, especially by populist figures, in order to present themselves as being close to citizens (Enli, 2017). In opposition to the dialogical relationship, short chains are used as a formula to maximize the party's point of view (Larsson & Ihlen, 2015). This leads to a new research trend currently oriented to the analysis of the effects (sentiment analysis) that these messages cause (Boerman & Kruijemeier, 2016).

Despite the centrality that Twitter seems to have in politics, communication in this area has a hybrid character, in the sense that the candidates with the greatest influence on social networks are those that create synergies between themselves and traditional media. A double

screen phenomenon is generated (Vaccari, Chadwick & O'Loughlin, 2015). Hence, the information flow of the tweets is not always digital (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015).

The unequal use of Twitter by countries is commonly reported, with the southern states of Europe, such as Spain and Italy, having a greater number of users (Scherpereel, Wohlgemuth & Schmelzinger, 2016). In a decentralized state like Spain, studies are also focused on regional elections, with Andalusia being one of the main examples as it is Spain's largest region. Up to now, the use of Twitter has been more conjunctural than planned in the regional cases analyzed (Marín-Dueñas & Díaz-Guerra, 2016), but there are insufficient levels of research to make categorical statements about this.

2.2. *Personal influence in the digital public sphere*

Social media has again turned the personal influence of leaders into an area of interest as a way of orienting political opinion (Loren & Wüest, 2016). After decades marked by the power of agenda-setting and the relationship of mutual dependence between politicians and journalism (Brants *et al.*, 2009), social networks allow direct interaction. Thus, personality plays a new central role. This overlaps with the classic concept of opinion leaders coming from the two-step flow theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1970), whereby the process of influence on public opinion unites personal charisma with leadership on specific issues.

Determining the degree of political influence of the different social figures is complex and goes beyond the consideration that leaders may have about themselves, a limited parameter to assess its scope according to literature (Geber, 2019). However, the political interest or the strength of the leader's personality have been revealed as predictors of leadership developed in social media like Facebook (Winter & Neubaum, 2016).

In any case, there are several areas of influence that require many factors to be taken into account. Through tools from graph theory for measuring centrality in networks, such as the eigenvector centrality, it is observed that traditional public figures remain quite influential (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014). Among them are the media, journalists or politicians, whose influence is reinforced in sparsely mediated spaces (Loren & Wüest, 2016).

On the other hand, in the political communication of recent years, populism emerges as a new phenomenon, which alters both the content and the style of the messages (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018). Vox could be therefore considered as the Spanish version of a global trend. This new form of political communication uses social networks to disseminate a fragmented ideological discourse that is aimed directly at citizens, criticizing elites and reinforcing a sense of belonging to a community, usually at the national level (Engesser *et al.*, 2017). In this process, politicians take advantage of the fact that their statements have been part journalistic routine for decades (Bezunartea, 1998). Their opinions on Twitter get a rating similar to the proven facts. The speed and controversy of these instant messages perfectly connects to the "culture of controversy" that predominates on the Internet (Paulussen & Harder, 2014).

In the current digital era, the importance of Twitter has made this social network a new space for the dissemination of political statements (Adi, Erickson & Lilleker, 2013; Jungherr, 2016). Tweets promote the creation of a social environment that influences on the understanding of voters (Jung Moon & Hadley, 2014). The degree of influence of these messages depends on the trust they generate in the recipients, in the context of digital political debate that borders on interpersonal communication (Campus, 2012). Therefore, populist leaders use a simple style that conveys closeness, trying to connect with the whole society (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018).

Some research studies state that tweets have become a legitimate journalistic source in the media and, therefore, in so-called hard news, in a trend that is on the rise (Justel-Vázquez *et al.*, 2018). The accessibility and brief nature of these messages were first used by sensationalist media to refer to issues of low political weight (Broersma & Graham, 2013). Their presence in reference media was detected later. Nevertheless, the performance of

populist politicians is based more on personal influence, as many of their followers can also act as active opinion leaders to disseminate their messages (Karlsen, 2015).

Beyond the relevance of the two-step flow theory in the communicative practices of populist leaders on the Internet, the use of their tweets as a journalistic source is not homogeneous between countries. Studies in very specific contexts, such as the Nordics (Skogerbø & Krumsvik, 2015), show that their media do not frequently mention social networks as a source for agenda-setting. This finding contradicts the main tendency in Western democracies and may be caused by the uniqueness of the Nordic political culture.

As a proof of the differences between countries, in 2019 10% of news consumers in 38 countries used Twitter primarily to inform themselves (Newman *et al.*, 2019), while in Spain this figure reached 16%. This difference is also repeated in the case of Facebook, which denotes a greater degree of use in Spain of social media as an information resource as opposed to other countries. However, it should be noted that populist leaders prefer new digital expression channels, such as Instagram and WhatsApp (Larsson, 2017; Newman *et al.*, 2019), over which there are not yet as many studies. The lack of research on populist Vox is greater, since its breakthrough as a parliamentary force happened in 2018.

Likewise, the literature suggests that there is not a single working of the virtual sphere, but a hybridization between digital media and the traditional media system (Chadwick, 2017), with coexisting synergies and tensions. The usual news cycle, dominated by the paper press as a generator of public opinion, is replaced by a double-screen system, which involves analog and digital media (Vaccari, Chadwick & O'Loughlin, 2015). This implies that the messages of populist actors via social networks seek to obtain a further impact on the Internet, reaching the citizens who are outside these platforms. Bearing the controversial nature of populist communication pointed out by academics in mind, we ask the following three research questions:

- RQ1. Are the communicative strategies posed by politicians and parties of Andalusia on Twitter limited to issuing messages that work as a sounding board for their statements, without facing the polarized far-right proposals?
- RQ2. To what extent does Twitter amplify the political statements of the extreme right, contributing to the emergence of a populist party of this ideology?
- RQ3. Does the far-right have a great impact on the interaction triggered by Andalusian political leaders in social media, through retweets and responses?

These research questions measure the kind of strategies carried out by political leaders (preferred topics or message tone) and to what extent Twitter amplifies the statements of Vox, considering also the number of retweets and responses.

3. Methodology

To answer the research questions, the technique of Twitter analysis is used (Fernández Crespo, 2014), based on the principles of quantitative content analysis, whose adaptation to the field of communication has been endorsed in various investigations (Krippendorff, 2012). Its usefulness lies in its ability to understand the components that are part of the communicative message (Igartua-Perosanz, 2006), applied here to the uniqueness of social media. Following these parameters, an analysis sheet is developed, which includes the number of interactions, types of links and topics of the tweets. Likewise, the hashtags, mentions and labels are not only evaluated quantitatively, but also a qualitative study is carried out to determine which of them had a greater weight in the Andalusian elections.

The strategies of the candidates (RQ1) are analyzed through the variables of topics by leaders and message tone by subject, which allow us to assess the framework in which the campaign has been developed. The influence of the extreme right (RQ2) is evaluated through the weight of the information / opinion in relation to the topics, as well as according to the link of the number of retweets and responses to the topics. Moreover, the measurement of

interaction (RQ3) is carried out by these last two variables (number of retweets and responses depending on topics). This analysis model is applied by a single encoder.

The sample of this research consist of the profiles on Twitter of the leaders who obtained parliamentary representation in the elections of December 2018:

- Susana Díaz (PSOE). [@susanadiaz](#)
- Juan Manuel Moreno (PP). [@JuanMa_Moreno](#)
- Juan Marín (Ciudadanos). [@JuanMarin_Cs](#)
- Teresa Rodríguez (Adelante Andalucía). [@TeresaRodr](#)
- Francisco Serrano (Vox). [@FSerranoCastro](#)

Five Twitter accounts belonging to the candidates are analyzed. In the selection of the sample, the party-leader axis is applied, trying to detect the similarities and differences between the leaders of different political parties, since they are the main political senders on Twitter (Aharony, 2012; Adi, Erickson & Lilleker, 2013). Despite being a historic region in Spain, Andalusia does not have its own media system. Most of the media in the region work at a provincial level. There are no influencers who dedicate themselves exclusively to the regional sphere, hence political leaders are taken as possible opinion leaders.

This investigation seeks to track communication on Twitter during the Andalusian elections. For this reason, as a follow-up period, the official electoral campaign is selected, covering 15 days (November 16-30, 2018). We also add the following three days after polling day (3, 4 and 5 December). This decision is made due to the fact that political communication reaches its maximum peak during electoral campaigns (Campos-Dominguez, 2017), which allows us to observe to what extent the political tweets have become influential. In the case of the 2018 Andalusian regional election, the unexpected results together with the breakthrough of the far-right also make it interesting to analyze the messages in the days following the elections.

This article takes into account individual tweets and responses of Andalusian leaders, but not the retweets, since these only contain information published by others and do not allow us to find out the agenda and strategy of each candidate (Larsson & Ihlen, 2015). The entire sample includes 592 tweets, collected during the aforementioned periods (16-30 November, 3, 4 and 5 December 2018). We avoid December 1st, reflection day, according to Spanish law, which prohibits the dissemination of political messages, and polling day (2 December), when it is not permitted to publish political messages. Data is captured through Twitonomy and analyzed later using the statistical software SPSS.

The analysis of quantitative content is supported by a qualitative study to determine which hashtags and profiles mentioned and labelled appear in the candidates' profiles. This study brings us a first approach of the strategies applied in the campaign, answering the first research question, as well as finding out if some of the far-right communicative features, such as negative tone or direct style, are present. For these objectives, three sets of 5 tweets are selected from each politician, collected at different moments of the research, thus 15 messages are analyzed by each of the candidates (75 units of the total of 592 tweets). The dates used for this purpose are:

- 16.11 - 17.11 (start of the research).
- 25.11 - 26.11 (intermediate phase of the investigation).
- 04.12 - 05.12 (end of the research).

The sample is small, which requires the results to be taken with caution. In any case, the qualitative approach is used as a way to understand the items referred to by the quantitative data, so that we can better delve into the type of communication on Twitter developed during the Andalusian elections and its connection with the rise of a populist party, as is the objective of this article.

4. Results

4.1. Qualitative analysis of a sample of tweets

The qualitative analysis of a sample of tweets published by each candidate, selected in order to determine the most recurrent hashtags and profiles mentioned in the Andalusian elections, reflects empirical evidence.

-Susana Díaz. The regional leader of PSOE frequently uses the hashtag *#Andalucía*, connecting her messages to the future of the region. It also identifies through hashtags the locations of her visits (*#Málaga*, *#AlcaláDeGuadaira*) and campaign issues (*#sanidad*, *#educación*), although the *#Andalucía* concept is the only one that remains central. As for labels, the socialist candidate does not note them. Susana Díaz prefers to directly mention other Twitter accounts. Allusions are made to the profiles of journalists and media that have interviewed her (@EFE_Andalucia, @hiparquiana, @AleRuesga, @El_Plural, etc.), thus social media is a way of disseminating this content. Additionally, there are references to the official accounts of PSOE, both at national and regional levels.

-Juanma Moreno. The popular candidate clearly prioritizes his slogan (*#VotaGarantíaDeCambio* or *#GarantíaDeCambio*) in the hashtags. Therefore, Twitter becomes a place for the dissemination of his electoral message, which in this case tries to present the candidate as the only possible alternative. Juanma Moreno mentions not only media profiles (@rtve, @DiarioSUR), but also personalities (@drcesarpramirez, @vanesamartin), as well as the official accounts of political parties.

-Juan Marín. The leader of Ciudadanos in Andalusia is the candidate who uses the potential of Twitter the least. Mentions and labels hardly ever appear with only references to party colleagues. On the other hand, Juan Marín uses hashtags more frequently, prioritizing the idea of *#AhoraSí*, the campaign slogan of his political party. He also applies the hashtags for ephemeris and other non-campaign related messages of the party, such as *PPPSOE* or *NoNosCallarán*, which help to develop a negative tone.

-Teresa Rodríguez. The candidate of the leftist coalition Adelante Andalucía also does not use the mentions and labels in a meaningful way. There are just some mentions to personalities linked to the party and media (@La_SER). Regarding the hashtags, the theme is varied, identifying public events, electoral debates or references to topics of interest for the left, such as patriarchal society or the rise of the extreme right.

-Francisco Serrano. The head of Vox for the Andalusian elections focuses on a hashtag for the electoral slogan of the party *AndalucíaPorEspaña*. The candidate dispenses with labels but does use mentions. He refers to media (@diariosevilla, @elprogramadear) and party accounts. In addition to that, it should be noted that Serrano is the only candidate who made direct mentions to adversaries (@JuanMa_Moreno, @PPopular). This practice connects with a political culture based on conflict, as is usual with the far-right.

Although references to the media are not so common, in the sample analyzed, candidates tend to assess Twitter mentions as a way of disseminating interviews. The use of hashtags by the political parties from the center-right to the far-right (PP, Ciudadanos and Vox) is relatively traditional, in the sense that it helps to present the different campaign slogans of the parties. In the case of PSOE, the association between the candidate and the concept of Andalusia draws attention, while the theme of the messages of Teresa Rodríguez (Adelante Andalucía) is more varied.

The use of electoral slogans and the lack of references to citizens show a practice of traditional political communication in the tweets considered. That also promotes the spreading of statements. The most significant references to non-political personalities take place in Juanma Moreno's (PP) Twitter account, which is also the one with the most campaign-related content. Another finding are the direct mentions to the profiles of political opponents by Vox, the only party that acts in a markedly negative tone. Allusions to opponents are

frequently observed, but the references in Vox are more implicit, following the direct style characteristic of the far-right (Larsson, 2017).

The sample used in the qualitative analysis is limited, but this study shows how Vox has a different performance regarding tone and style, and at the same time that traditional parties did not change their usual communicative behavior. These findings work as a framework of the quantitative variables designed to measure the influence of the far-right in the political debate (weight of the information/opinion and number of retweets and responses).

4.2. Strategies of political leaders on Twitter for the Andalusian elections

The quantitative study of the candidates' accounts for the Andalusian elections during the set period has generated a sample of 592 tweets ($n = 592$), distributed in the following way among the candidates: 74 (12.5% of the total) of Susana Díaz (PSOE), 203 (34.3%) Juanma Moreno (PP), 67 (11.3%) Juan Marín (Ciudadanos), 157 (26.5%) Teresa Rodríguez (Adelante Andalucía) and 91 (15.4%) Francisco Serrano (Vox).

The number of tweets is higher in the candidates of PP and Adelante Andalucía, center-right and left political parties. In contrast, the lower use of Twitter occurs in the leaders of PSOE and Ciudadanos, the forces that supported the Andalusian government to date. Moreover, the head of Vox, as an emerging far-right group that entered a regional parliament for the first time, does not present a quantitatively differentiated use of this social media.

The analysis of the thematic agenda of the five candidates shows empirical data of interest. Firstly, a relatively fragmented agenda is remarkable, given that there is a wide variety of topics that get relevant percentages in terms of tweet emission (Table 1). All the candidates devote more than 10% of the messages to the promotion of events, something that is common in electoral communication. Beyond that, disparity is assessed in the other issues.

In the axis of the left, both Susana Díaz (PSOE) and Teresa Rodríguez (Adelante Andalucía) give maximum importance to events and the parameter "others," in which personal references are frequent. In contrast, Juanma Moreno (PP) and Juan Marín (Ciudadanos) place political change as a central issue with the purpose of removing PSOE from power. Looking at Vox, their main issues are events, followed by mobilization of the vote. For this party, public events are a way of making themselves known. Additionally, direct appeal to the voter is added in order to increase their electoral strength.

Table 1: Distribution of tweets by leaders according to their topics.

	Susana Díaz	Juanma Moreno	Juan Marín	Teresa Rodríguez	Francisco Serrano	Total
Political change	0%	24,1%	23,9%	10,8%	12,1%	15,7%
Gender issues	4,1%	0,5%	1,5%	7%	6,6%	3,7%
Corruption	0%	6,4%	7,5%	6,4%	1,1%	4,9%
Vote mobilization	10,8%	0,5%	17,9%	2,5%	15,4%	6,6%
Far-right	4,1%	0,5%	0%	4,5%	3,3%	2,4%
Post-electoral strategy	8,1%	3,9%	10,4%	1,3%	6,6%	4,9%
Events	32,4%	13,3%	11,9%	20,4%	27,5%	19,6%
Economy	4,1%	22,7%	9%	12,1%	7,7%	13,7%
Public services	9,5%	18,7%	6%	14%	9,9%	13,5%
Others	27%	9,4%	11,9%	21%	9,9%	15%

Source: Own elaboration.

There are four issues that have most messages with a negative tone: corruption, the emergence of the far-right and, to a lesser extent, gender issues and public services (Table 2). Therefore, these issues become possible causes of conflict. On the other hand, the categories of “events” and “others,” typical in the leftist groups, collect a higher number of positive tweets.

Table 2: Message tone by subject.

	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Political change	51,6%	21,5%	26,9%
Gender issues	13,6%	45,5%	40,9%
Corruption	3,4%	89,7%	6,9%
Vote mobilization	46,2%	20,5%	33,3%
Far-right	7,1%	78,3%	14,3%
Post-electoral strategy	10,3%	37,9%	51,7%
Events	63,8%	0,9%	35,3%
Economy	32,1%	27,2%	40,7%
Public services	15%	52,5%	32,5%
Others	51,7%	14,6%	33,7%
Total	39,2%	27,7%	33,1%

Source: Own elaboration.

Most cited topics, such as the communication of events, the allusions to political change or the mobilization of the vote, are far from being programmatic proposals. Regarding the “others” parameter, it works as a category to collect all the messages that do not conform to the other thematic issues. Most of them refer to acknowledgements or mentions of party colleagues, which are more frequent in the left axis.

4.3. Influence of the far-right and user preferences

As we mentioned before, the prevalence of non-programmatic proposals is one of the features of the campaign. According to Table 3, these issues prioritize opinion (53,5%) above information (46,5%). Looking at the influence of the extreme right in the candidates' strategies, the subject with the most opinion tweets is the far-right as a topic (91,4%), followed by another two typical issues in the right-wing campaign of Andalusia namely political change and vote mobilization. In contrast, gender issues present more informational tweets, in spite of being a recurring topic for Vox. In general terms, the elements of electoral strategy seem to be more relevant than political measures within the Twitter profiles of the Andalusian candidates.

Table 3: Information/opinion tweets according to topics.

	Information	Opinion
Political change	14,3%	85,7%
Gender issues	63,6%	36,4%
Corruption	37,9%	62,1%
Vote mobilization	15,4%	84,6%
Far-right	8,6%	91,4%
Post-electoral strategy	41,4%	58,6%
Events	69,8%	30,2%
Economy	65,4%	34,6%
Public services	60%	40%
Others	44,9%	55,1%
Total	46,5%	53,5%

Source: Own elaboration.

The analysis of the impact of the messages also shows that there is an issue that monopolizes in a singular way the users' attention regarding retweets: the breakthrough of the far-right (Table 4). 78.6% of the messages that deal with this issue receive more than 299 retweets, figures that are much higher than in other topics. On the other hand, corruption (55.2%), vote mobilization (53.8%) and political change (49.5%) achieve great percentages of messages between 100 and 299 retweets. Beyond which measures against corruption can be used, these are non-programmatic issues related to the making of high-sounding statements by the political establishment.

The high level of interaction generated by the content regarding the emergence of the extreme right shows how Vox had already become a central theme of the campaign, despite not having representation in any Spanish public body. This fact may have spurred its electoral results, as happened in the case of Donald Trump in the United States (Enli, 2017).

Table 4: Retweets by tweet topics.

	0	1-49	50-99	100-299	Over 299
Political change	0%	5,4%	28%	49,5%	17,2%
Gender issues	4,5%	4,5%	9,1%	45,5%	36,4%
Corruption	0%	0%	13,8%	55,2%	31%
Vote mobilization	0%	2,6%	12,8%	53,8%	30,8%
Far-right	0%	0%	7,1%	14,3%	78,6%
Post-electoral strategy	0%	3,4%	24,1%	48,3%	24,1%
Events	0%	25%	32,8%	35,3%	6,9%
Economy	0%	9,9%	38,3%	44,4%	7,4%
Public services	1,3%	5%	26,3%	45%	22,5%
Ohers	1,1%	19,1%	29,2%	33,7%	16,9%

Source: Own elaboration.

Looking at the responses, it should be noted that they are the formula that express a greater degree of proactivity by the public. In the number of responses, differences were also found between topics, accounting a higher rate to the far-right (Table 5). The extreme right as a topic obtained a high frequency of messages over 200 responses, something that is repeated in the successive category of 100-199. Both figures (42.9% and 14.3%) demonstrate huge differences with the rest of the issues. In the next category of 50-99 replies by message, gender issues emerge as a topic for responses, meaning also a topic in the political agenda of Vox.

Table 5: Responses by tweet topics.

	0	1-9	10-49	50-99	100-199	Over 199
Political change	1,1%	33,3%	52,7%	5,4%	4,3%	3,2%
Gender issues	4,5%	22,7%	40,9%	22,7%	9,1%	0%
Corruption	3,4%	24,1%	58,6%	6,9%	6,9%	0%
Vote mobilization	0%	23,1%	43,6%	17,9%	7,7%	7,7%
Far-right	0%	7,1%	21,4%	14,3%	14,3%	42,9%
Post-electoral strategy	0%	17,2%	48,3%	10,3%	6,9%	17,2%
Events	5,2%	44,8%	36,2%	7,8%	4,3%	1,7%
Economy	2,5%	64,2%	30,9%	0%	1,2%	1,2%
Public services	3,8%	45%	38,8%	5%	2,5%	5%
Others	2,2%	36%	41,6%	10,1%	5,6%	4,5%

Source: Own elaboration.

As the literature highlights, opinion content is the perfect framework for the emergence of populism (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018). Citizens react more to these formats, which can be a cause that encourages the use of the far-right as a singular topic in Andalusia. Its character away from the facts and tending towards the “culture of controversy” favors the diffusion of comments on this matter (Paulussen & Harder, 2014), also by Twitter users. Therefore, it has been measured whether the controversial character is articulated as a driver of public responses.

To evaluate the strength and direction of the association, the Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = 0.19$) is applied, which has a relatively low value between the tone of the message and the answers obtained. The coefficient approaches the value 0, which indicates the non-existence of a relationship between the variables. In our case there is a slight link because the value is qualified as a very low positive correlation, being between 0.01 and 0.19. This means that the attention of users (measured through responses) does not have to do with the tone of senders in any significant way.

5. Discussion and conclusions

As a discussion of this article, some topics on Twitter for the Andalusian regional elections, such as criticism of gender policies or the far-right as a topic, come from the populist right, turning them into campaign issues. This phenomenon could relate to a “culture of controversy” especially used by far-right parties, which has been mentioned by previous research as a feature of the communication on the Internet (Paulussen & Harder, 2014).

According to our study, the topic of far-right brings a greater level of reactions. These findings overlap with previous research, which found that populist leaders connect better overall with society, thanks to the direct style of their messages (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018). Literature has shown the ability of social networks to build a public agenda for outsiders' parties like Vox (Enli, 2017). In any case, it is important to note here that there is no scientific evidence in our article on the possibility that the attention of users has been increased by the negative tone.

Another noteworthy finding is the lack of communicative originality in traditional politicians. These leaders do not promote a high fragmentation of the agenda on social media according to many previous works (Segado-Boj, Díaz-Campo & Lloves Sobrado, 2016). The activity on Twitter in Andalusia was characterized by the absence of facts as a topic, which could contribute to this, becoming the political message of the extreme right a new player on the campaign. Twitter as a social network amplified the far-right's populist content in the 2018 Andalusian elections without the need for Vox to develop a particularly proactive approach. This conclusion leads us to reflect on the possible pernicious effects of the

influence developed by political communication on this social media, since it can spur harmful movements within a democracy.

The abovementioned finding is very relevant in the case of Spain, since Twitter has a strong political dimension in southern European countries because of its huge number of users (Scherpereel, Wohlgemuth & Schmelzinger, 2016). Furthermore, another possible explanation for our results is that populist movements hold a more thematic agenda than those in traditional politics (Casero-Ripollés, Sintes-Olivella & Franch, 2017). In the current digital context, leaders prioritize those issues that benefit them, as a way of guiding political opinion. In the Andalusian elections, the topics preferred by the candidate of Vox were the far-right, gender issues, vote mobilization or political change, achieving the presence of these issues within the whole agenda, as is shown by the huge level of attention garnered on Twitter.

In summary, the results obtained outline a range of findings about the ability of extreme right-wing political messages to influence in a singular way on Twitter. Within the framework of the 2018 Andalusian elections, the Vox candidate worked as an influencer of the digital political debate, making the far-right a central issue of the campaign despite being an extra-parliamentary.

As a first contribution answering RQ1, communicative strategies posed by politicians on Twitter during the Andalusian elections mainly focus on statements. Opinion tweets predominate and, especially, non-programmatic tweets, which are used to disseminate calls for campaign events and carry out electoral advertising. The campaign for the Andalusian elections of 2018 on Twitter did not develop a negative tone, since most of the messages have positive and neutral approaches. This fits with the practice of disseminating events and calls to vote that have been detected as usual. Positive bias prevails in these frames. However, the agenda issues of the far-right summon up the tweets with a negative bias.

Mentions of the breakthrough of the populist right, gender issues or corruption are the issues that generated the most conflict on Twitter. All these findings overlap with a praxis of political communication on Twitter in which the opinions are more relevant than the facts to set the public agenda. Thus, far-right proposals only have answers from an opinion approach.

Secondly and regarding RQ2, Twitter reveals its ability to amplify the political declarations of the extreme right. The subject with the most opinion tweets is the far-right as a topic, followed by other right-wing issues in Andalusia after decades of social democracy within government, such as political change or vote mobilization. In addition, the strength of the far-right as a topic on the agenda is shown through the high level of interaction triggered by this singular item.

As a third conclusion referring to RQ3, the far-right has a great impact on interaction, measured through the number of retweets and responses. The extreme right as a topic is vastly different to the rest of the issues in both categories. Not only does Vox catch attention, but also other issues connected with the right-wing in Andalusia, such as political change, corruption and vote mobilization in the number of retweets, as well as gender issues in the framework of responses.

Moreover, the qualitative study shows how Vox had a different communicative strategy on Twitter, using a negative tone and a direct style in the sample analyzed. Meanwhile, the rest of the Andalusian leaders chose a non-original campaign, which was unable to avoid the emergence of the far-right as a topic that captured most of the users' attention.

Our article's main limitation concerns the methodological research. The sample of the qualitative analysis is small, reducing the validity of these results. These should be considered as examples of interest to frame the quantitative analysis, namely the main contribution of our work. In the content analysis the high level of the "others" parameter also presents a problem. The reason for that figure lies in the fact that this research focuses on political issues, relegating personal frames to the category of "others."

In addition to this, the Andalusian political system has been studied independently. It is clear that there are synergies with the Spanish political context that would have been interesting to keep in mind, since Andalusia does not have such a different political history. However, it has been decided to proceed in this way, as it is in this region where Vox appears for first time in Spain. Its breakthrough occurs in an international context of polarized political communication, which was conceptualized by our literature review. We acknowledge the ambiguity of these references for the Andalusian case, but understanding this phenomenon is necessary to fully comprehend the strategies used by the far-right.

The poor quality of tweets adds to the possibility that what happened in social media was a reflection of the increasing position of Vox in Spanish traditional media. Finding out which kind of media has the greatest influence in an eventual cause-effect process also raises concerns. In any way, a mirror effect may occur between the media and Twitter, opening up future lines of research.

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