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# **“We have taken a major step forward today”: the Use of Twitter by Spanish Minor Parties**

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Minor parties—also known as “third parties” in the US—are integral components of democratic systems. Despite being ignored by the mainstream media, contemporary Spanish politics reveal that minor parties may challenge the hegemony of traditional organizations, and even enter parliamentary politics. This paper analyzes Spanish minor parties’ social media communication in the context of the April 2019 election. A sample of 1,498 tweets was content-analyzed, gathered from the official Twitter profiles of the four main national minor parties: PACMA, the Communist Party of the Spanish Peoples, Zero Cuts, and VOX. Results indicate a lack of party-citizen interaction, as well as a meta-campaigning approach whereby the tweets’ topics and functions are mostly related to the parties themselves and campaign behavior.

**Keywords:** minor party communication; Twitter; social media and politics; Spanish minor parties

## **Introduction**

In an international context where populist and nationalist political options are on the rise, the erosion of the traditional two-party system in Spain has altered the scope of the role of minor parties. The most evident case is that of VOX, a radical right-wing party founded in 2013 which, when the 2016 general elections were held, did not have a single seat in Parliament; since the November 2019 general elections, however, VOX has become the third most important national party in Spain, increasing its electoral base from 47,000 to 2.6 million voters in just three years.

The definition of minor parties—also called “third parties” in the United States (Rosenstone, Behr and Lazarus, 1996; Gillespie, 2013; Neville-Shepard, 2014b)—relies on a classification of political parties by size, which draws a distinction between major, large, medium-sized and small ones, the last being defined as “parties of a small size, usually expressions of significant minorities, whose importance depends on their capacity to form coalitions, and which often play the role of ‘arrowheads’” (Martínez Sospedra, 1996: 35). Moreover, minor parties flourish in multiparty political systems (Sartori, 1987)—indeed, in a strictly two-party system, third parties are those that cannot replace any of the two major parties or transform the two-party system into a multiparty one (Gillespie, 2013).

Key’s minor party classification distinguishes between continuing doctrinal and issue parties, on the one hand, and short-lived parties, on the other. To this taxonomy Gillespie (2013) adds a third type: state/local significant parties. Continuing doctrinal and issue parties can last for decades and, although they rarely obtain good election results, their continuity is due to the faith of their supporters when defending their credo or certain issues. Short-lived parties tend to derive from protest movements or splits from major parties, and many of them identify with an influential founder. These parties can obtain notable election results, even determining which major party will govern. As to state/local

significant parties, these tend to wield political influence in their community or state—even though they may also have a stake in national politics—with the potential of becoming major parties in both spheres.

In the political market, minor parties generally come up against some of the obstacles that “third-party candidates” encounter in the US, such as insufficient campaign funding, deficient media coverage, exclusion from presidential debates and “a belief among voters that support for third parties is a wasted ballot” (Neville-Shepard, 2014a: 132). Notwithstanding these constraints, minor parties find an opportunity in the electorate’s dissatisfaction with major parties, with a more fluctuating vote and a certain degree of misalignment with them, in a context of widespread scepticism (Furlong, 2001). The capacity to leverage this dissatisfaction has to do with the fact that, as noted by Gillespie, “Some of the spirit of insurgency exists in almost all minor parties” (2013: 49). In addition to challenging dominant parties, minor organisations can obtain seats in legislative political bodies and play an important role in them (Furlong, 2001), even constituting a vector of change. This change can derive from their potential to alter or correct the policy positions or ideological line of a major party (Gillespie, 2013). According to Rapoport and Stone, “Third parties instigate change by stimulating a response from major parties. The key to understanding how third parties produce change is another widely observed regularity: successful third parties do not last long” (2019: 5), since their constituents end up being courted and co-opted by their major counterparts (Rapoport and Stone, 2019). Additionally, small parties have been at the forefront of change and progress in freedom long before major parties in countries like the US, from breaking down gender or racial barriers when choosing candidates, to innovating in policy or democratic structural reforms (Rosenstone, Behr and Lazarus, 1996; Gillespie, 2013).

In this connection, one of the most important functions of minor parties is their ability to include new issues on the political agenda.

The introduction of issues relates to the importance that ideological principles have for minor parties—especially when their campaigns are contrasted with those of major parties, which tend to employ a “catch-all” strategic approach and ideological vagueness. According to Neville-Shepard (2014b: 218), third party campaigns “are almost always steeped in ideology”. In this regard, it is important to note that these groups represent the entire political spectrum: “Third parties, after all, have represented nearly every political point of view, from the Communist Party on the left to the American Independent Party on the right” (Rosenstone, Behr and Lazarus, 1996: 5). In fact, the presence of minor parties can be associated with the ideological diversity of a political system. Thus, for Sartori, a multiparty system reflects a reality of polarization or fragmentation which leads to an ideological gap, namely, “the overall scope of the *ideological spectrum* of any given political community” (1987: 161; original emphasis), so that the greater the fragmentation of a community is, the greater the polarization will be, thus distancing moderate postures from political reality. In this context, minor parties often embody radical and extremist stances, such as that of the Libertarian Party in the US, or the extreme right-wing Falange Española de las JONS in Spain. In this vein, longitudinal data indicate that niche parties—like the Greens, the Communists, and the extreme Right—are more likely to improve their election results if they toe a clear ideological line (Dumitrescu, 2011).

### **Minor party media coverage and online campaigning**

Regarding communication, it has become a platitude to claim that there is a huge difference between the news coverage given to major and minor parties, the latter receiving scant attention from the media (Evans et al., 2019). The negligible coverage

received by third-party candidates is due to the fact that “broadcasters and publishers do not think they warrant attention” (Rosenstone, Behr and Lanzarus, 1996: 35). Versus the continual attention that the media pay to major parties, small organisations hardly get a look in, insofar as they are considered to be less newsworthy (Ahmed, Cho and Jaidka, 2017). Thus, the possibility of attaining a position of power, or of becoming a relevant political player, is a decisive variable: “It is not the major-minor party status that determines newsworthiness, but the degree of potential influence the party exercises in the political power game” (Rudd and Connew, 2007: 52-53). Owing to this horse-race mentality, “minor parties and the issues they seek to convey remain largely invisible to voters who rely upon television as their source of political news” (Denemark, Ward and Bean, 2007: 95). Additionally, the disregard for minor parties can be boiled down to ideological reasons relating to the fringe position of many of them: “Dissent has rarely a friend in the news media” (Kirch, 2015: 399). It should also be noted, however, that the greater the power of a candidate or party is, the more critical treatment that person or organisation will receive from the media, and vice versa: minor parties receive less media attention, but also less negative appraisals (Gnisci, Galen and Conza, 2014).

The lack of media coverage influences the communication and campaigns of minor parties. In the US, for instance, third-party campaigning chiefly serves the “alternative purpose of raising awareness about certain issues”, given that it is improbable that they will win presidential elections. Accordingly, it may be claimed that “third-party candidates are not aiming to win but to agitate” (Neville-Shepard, 2014a: 134). The literature also notes that the rhetorical strategies of American third-party candidates are polarized, non-conventional, and self-destructive, these candidates establishing their own discursive rules, differing in function and form from major-party rhetoric (Neville-Shepard, 2014b, 2014a). From the viewpoint of the media employed, a study by

Dumitrescu (2011) on the use of posters in the 2007 election in France and Belgium, indicates that minor parties used them for disseminating information with an eye to expanding their electoral base. Comparing online and traditional campaign posters, Steffan and Venema (2020) point out that German minor parties use textual personalisation to a higher extent, employ fewer ideological symbols, and make more use of visual negative campaigning than major parties.

Regarding the Internet, the literature has focused on aspects such as the opportunity that online campaigning offers minor parties for levelling the playing field. The advent of the Internet gave rise to expectations about the advantages that information and communication technologies could offer fringe, minor, and anti-establishment parties (Margolis, Resnick and Levy, 2005). Minor parties themselves have shown their enthusiasm for the Web, appreciating the advantages of web campaigning (Gibson and McAllister, 2015). This relates to the so-called “innovation” or “equalization hypothesis”, which states that those parties and candidates at a disadvantage can gain ground on established parties thanks to online media, which allows smaller parties to overcome the disadvantages that they face in the offline media world, increasing the efficiency of their communication (Schweitzer, 2008; Vergeer, Hermans and Sams, 2011). In contrast, the “normalization” hypothesis asserts that online campaigning only reinforces power relations existing in the offline world, so that, instead of leading to equalization, the Web would merely be replicating the imbalances between major and minor parties (Lilleker et al., 2011; Gibson and McAllister, 2015; Klinger and Svensson, 2015; Ahmed, Cho and Jaidka, 2017). Nevertheless, the concept of normalization goes beyond the notion that moneyed parties perform better online: it also relates to the Web taking on traditional political patterns and behaviour. Not by coincidence, Margolis and Resnick (2000), who formulated the normalization thesis, pointed out the passive nature of the web, and were

skeptical towards the celebration of online interactivity. Thus, normalization of offline practices would also imply the migration of features such as one-directional, broadcasting-led, and non-interactive practices to the online world (Parmelee, Roman and Beasley, 2018).

In this connection, some studies claim that major parties use the Internet more actively, while others reveal that emerging parties are more active in the use of digital technology (Ahmed, Cho and Jaidka, 2017). In the case of the extreme Right, for example, there are indications that it has exploited it to a great extent, because it has allowed extremists to circumvent traditional media. The literature has also highlighted the case of Green parties, whose websites' content and interactivity levels match those of major parties in every respect. Other authors point out that an engaging and interactive use of websites may give smaller parties an electoral edge (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016). However, studies of party websites in general elections have revealed the predominance of major parties (Gulati and Williams, 2007), thus reinforcing the normalization hypothesis (Gibson and McAllister, 2015).

In view of the fact that the Internet was not benefitting small parties—thus sustaining the normalization thesis—social media and the Web 2.0 breath new life into the equalization thesis, these tools serving to organise supporters, engage a younger audience, and improve election prospects (Gibson and McAllister, 2015). Different authors understand the relevance of social media—or social networking sites (hereinafter SNSs)—for minor parties as a campaign tool, since they are less costly and allow for engaging very specific audience segments, making the most of direct and unmediated contact between voters and candidates, and broadening the audience (Lafuente Pérez and Verón Lassa, 2013; Gibson and McAllister, 2015). In this sense, the principal function of SNSs is to offer those parties that neither attract media coverage, nor can afford to spend



much on advertising, “a visibility platform” (Ahmed, Cho and Jaidka, 2017: 1380). As to message content, although the debate on SNSs is more ideologically uniform, it includes a greater level of interaction and the deployment of rational arguments, in contrast to major parties which use SNSs as platforms of self-expression (Valera Ordaz, 2017). The possibilities of SNSs are also evident in the longitudinal study performed by Gibson and McAllister (2015) in Australian elections: although the results go a long way to underpin the normalization thesis—for instance, as to the development of personal websites—it was the minor players that put Web 2.0 tools to a greater use. In the Norwegian context, Larsson and Moe (2014) found that Twitter was an arena for “underdog” parties, with dominant politicians absent from dialogical communication. In another Norway-focused comparative study of interaction strategies in the 2013 election, Kalsnes (2016) found that minor parties received more replies from the public in Facebook.

However, other studies have been less optimistic about the opportunities that SNSs offer to minor parties. LaMarre and Suzuki-Lambrech (2013) found out that US third-party candidates were a lot less inclined to open Twitter accounts than those of the major parties in the 2010 House of Representatives election; findings in keeping with those of Evans, Cordova and Sipole (2014) in the 2012 House of Representatives election. An analysis of SNSs in the 2012 South Korean elections, revealed that major parties and leaders had a greater degree centrality than their minor counterparts—this being understood as the co-occurrence frequencies of a party/leader and the parties/leaders (Nam, Lee and Park, 2015). In a study on the Israeli 2015 election, Lev-On and Haleva-Amir (2018) found that dominant parties and candidates are taking over Facebook, thus supporting the normalization hypothesis.

As to the use of Twitter in particular, research has also brought to light certain patterns. In the 2012 US House of Representatives election, Evans, Cordova and Sipole

found that third-party candidates “were more aggressive than the major party candidates. They had significantly fewer followers [...], but tweeted considerably more” (2014: 457); additionally, third parties interacted more with users and discussed political issues to a greater extent, and posted a higher number of personal tweets. The thematic spectrum has also been addressed by Christensen (2013), who analysed the use of Twitter by the candidates of the four main third parties—Libertarian Party, Green Party, Constitution Party and Justice Party—in the 2012 US election, revealing that Twitter could serve as an indicator of topics and issues of interest to a growing minority, whether they be right or left wing—as well as the fact that Green Party’s Jill Stein was by far the most active candidate in terms of the number of tweets posted, followed at a considerable distance by Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson. On the other hand, Ahmed, Cho and Jaidka’s study (2017) on the 2014 elections in India revealed that fringe-party candidates used Twitter more actively, especially for interacting with and mobilising their electoral base. A study of the 2015 election in Nuevo León (Mexico) indicated that “minor and opposition parties tend to use Twitter for mobilising their supporters and for disseminating campaign actions and appearances in the traditional media” (Alvídrez et al., 2016: 176). Evans et al.’s study (2019) on third-party candidates during the 2014 and 2016 US Congress election also indicates that they did not put Twitter to the same use as powerful candidates, posting more tweets on issues, and being more inclined to tweet on personal matters and less so on issues.

In the case of Spain, one of the few studies on the use to which minor parties put the Internet is the research conducted by Sanjuán Santonja (2015) on movements without a presence on traditional media during the 2014 European elections, in an attempt to analyse how new parties carve out niches for themselves thanks to the Web. The study, which focused on Movimiento RED (NET Movement), Partido X (X Party), Recortes

Cero (*Zero Cuts*), and Podemos (*We Can*), revealed that this last party—the only one of the four that has since managed to become a major party—had the largest following on Twitter. Another study on the 2014 European elections, performed by Ramos-Serrano, Fernández Gómez and Pineda (2018), which included VOX and Podemos, pointed to the marginal use to which VOX put Twitter in terms of posting frequency, with Podemos being the party that established more dialogue with citizens.

### **Research aims and questions**

Taking into account the abovementioned literature, the main objective of this paper is to analyze the online political communication of Spanish minor parties, thus filling a gap in research. In an international context with “limited scholarship that examines the way that third-party candidates use Twitter” (Evans et al., 2019: 2), the Spanish case is interesting insofar as it may shed light on a relatively unexplored academic field, since the dearth of literature on the use to which minor parties put SNSs is particularly acute in Spain.

A second research aim is to study minor party communication in its own terms. This is grounded on the fact that minor party communication has its own identity—given the circumstances and limitations to which they are subject—hence an independent analysis of their messages is justified, unlike the continual comparisons made in the literature between these parties and their major counterparts. For instance, some studies contrast the messages of third-party candidates with those of Republican and Democratic candidates, but do not offer a breakdown of the results for minor parties, whose potential individual differences tend to be blurred. The intention of the analysis performed here is to show in greater detail possible communication differences between Spanish minor parties, instead of lumping them together in a sole category—which is in line with

Neville-Shepard's (2014b) claim that it is necessary to understand minor parties in their own terms.

These research aims are also framed in the context of the Spanish political system and the potential role that minor parties can play in it. The Spanish party system has gone through different stages, both before and after the restoration of the parliamentary monarchy following the Franco dictatorship (Abreu Fernández et al., 1997). The party model has fluctuated due to historical factors such as the role adopted by non-state parties, the consolidation of regionalist/nationalist organisations, the centripetal tendency towards a concentration of parties in the political centre, a high degree of electoral volatility, and the mutability of the ideological positions of parties. The model was consolidated as a limited pluralistic system where, besides the hegemonic centre-left Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (hereinafter PSOE) and the conservative People's Party (hereinafter PP), there were also a number of established regionalist parties (Abreu Fernández et al., 1997), as well as Izquierda Unida (United Left), which has played a secondary role for decades. However, the stability of this system has crumbled in the past few years as a result of the economic and political crisis in which the country has been immersed since 2008, which has brought about changes in the political offering (Simón, 2018). Hence the appearance of new parties, like the abovementioned Podemos, and the right-libertarian Ciudadanos (Rama, 2016), which won 109 seats in the national parliament in 2015. After the breakdown of the traditional limited-pluralist system in 2015, Spain has become "more fragmented, with a more complex multipolar structure and a much more uncertain formation of governments" (Rama, 2016: 15); a multiparty environment in which minor and emerging parties acquire greater importance.

The Spanish case is not only interesting because of a new structure which improves the possibilities of minor parties. With Spanish leaders firmly committed to the

Internet, the use of SNSs in politics has become widespread since the 2008 Obama campaign (Evans, Cordova and Sipole, 2014). Given the pre-eminence of SNS campaigning in Spain, it is interesting to analyze how this is being carried out by a number of parties that may thrive in the current fragmented system.

Our third, and more specific, research objective is to provide empirical evidence of how Spanish minor parties are using Twitter pertaining to three variables: the interactive use of this SNS, the functions fulfilled by tweets, and the subjects broached in online campaigning. So, this aim can be subdivided into another three, illustrated by the following research questions (RQ):

RQ<sub>1</sub>. Do Spanish minor parties use Twitter interactively in their election campaigns?

RQ<sub>2</sub>. What functions do the tweets posted by Spanish minor parties fulfil?

RQ<sub>3</sub>. What are the main subjects broached by Spanish minor parties on Twitter?

## **Method**

The minor parties selected for analysis are the Partido Animalista Contra el Maltrato Animal (Animalist Party against Cruelty to Animals, hereinafter PACMA), the Partido Comunista de los Pueblos de España (Communist Party of the Spanish Peoples, hereinafter PCPE), Recortes Cero-Grupo Verde (Zero Cuts-Green Group, hereinafter RC-GV), and VOX. The selection criterion was similar to that employed by Christensen (2013), analyzing the communication of the four main US third parties. Thus, these organisations were the four principal national parties that did not win any seats in the 2016 general elections, but by 2019—when the analysis was performed—they had become the main minor parties in Spain. Typologically speaking, a criterion similar to

that applied by Rosenstone, Behr and Lazarus (1996) was employed to consider a party as ‘minor’, that is, political adversaries that do not belong to the major blocs in the House of Representatives. In descending order, the Spanish minor parties winning the highest number of votes in 2016 were the PACMA (286,702 votes, i.e. 0.79 per cent of the electoral roll), RC-GV (51,907 votes, 0.22 per cent), VOX (47,182 votes, 0.21 per cent) and the PCPE (26,627 votes, 0.11 per cent) (Ministerio del Interior del Gobierno de España, n.d.). Selecting the parties according to their results in the 2016 general election allows for analysing the communication of VOX, which between that year and the April 2019 election was still a minor party. On the other hand, the April 2019 election was chosen because it was the first general election since VOX had won seats in the Andalusian regional parliament at the end of 2018, which provoked a political earthquake the length and breadth of Spain.

The PACMA, founded in Biscay in 2003, evolved from the Colectivo Antitaurino y Animalista de Bizkaia (Anti-bullfighting and Animalist Collective of Biscay), known for its anti-bullfighting activism—hence the name of the original party: the Partido Antitaurino Contra el Maltrato Animal (Anti-bullfighting Party against Cruelty to Animals) (Kepa Lozano: Historia del PACMA, n.d.). Currently chaired by journalist Laura Duarte, it is a progressive party (Tena, 2019) whose central aim is the defence of animals: ‘we care about animals. We firmly believe that it is feasible to change the legal situation in which animals in Spain are currently to be found’ (Partido Animalista PACMA, n.d.). It is one of the strongest minor parties in the country: in the April 2019 election, it won over 300,000 votes, thus surpassing some of the regionalist parties that won seats in Parliament.

The “Recortes Cero social, cultural and political movement” (Recortes Cero, n.d.) was founded in Madrid in 2014, with Nuria Suárez as its spokesperson. It was created by

a group of voters including public figures—writer Juan Goytisolo, director Daniel Calparsoro, actor Hector Alterio, and priest Enrique de Castro—and the representatives of over 30 political, social and trade-union organizations. Recortes Cero was “the first group of voters to field candidates in the European elections, collecting 50,000 signatures, three times more than those required” (Recortes Cero, n.d.). It is a highly citizen-centric party, with an assembly-based organization, and ideologically left wing (Sanjuán Santonja, 2015)—this can be deduced from its slogan (“We are from the other Left”), manifestos (its foundational manifesto begins with an explicit, “For the redistribution of wealth, the broadening of democracy and the defence of national sovereignty”), and programs.

VOX—the only minor party analysed here that has managed to enter the league of the majors—is an ultraconservative nationalist-populist party of the radical right of the Spanish political spectrum<sup>i</sup>. It was founded in Madrid in 2013 by Santiago Abascal Conde, the party’s president—and a member of the PP in the Basque Country between 1994 and 2013—, philosopher José Luis González Quirós, former member of Parliament for the party Unión de Centro Democrático (Union of the Democratic Centre) Ignacio Camuñas Solís, and real estate developer Iván Espinosa de los Monteros. The party’s secretary-general is lawyer and former serviceman Javier Ortega Smith. Its slogan, “VOX is the voice of Living Spain”, appeals to a Spanish nationalist ideology, profoundly conservative in social aspects, and libertarian as to the economy: “Our project can be summarised in the defence of Spain, the family and life: in reducing the size of the state, in guaranteeing equality among all Spaniards and in ejecting the Government from your private life” (VOX, n.d.). Since the November 2019 general election, VOX has become one of the main parties in Spain, with a huge prominence on the media agenda and, in

fact, the fiercest opposition to the current left-leaning government in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

Originally an amalgam of different like-minded communist parties, the PCPE was founded by Ignacio Gallego, a historical member of the Communist Party of Spain (hereinafter PCE) in Madrid in January 1984. With a radical left-wing bent, the PCPE is “inspired by the principles of the Third International, Unified Marxist-Leninist and Proletarian Internationalists, whose immediate aim is to overcome the political, organic and ideological deterioration caused by Eurocommunism’s renouncement of Leninism and Internationalism, and to override the historical PCE as a useful tool for confronting capitalism in its advanced stage, namely, imperialism” (Partido Comunista de los Pueblos de España, n.d.). A staunch advocate of workers’ movement, its main adversary is imperialism, which it combats through its opposition to NATO and the foreign military bases in Spain.

Pertaining to the media employed by these parties, SNSs were chosen because they are a very relevant tool when shaping public opinion in Spain: according to official sociological data, they are the second most preferred channel for keeping abreast of political affairs and election news (CIS, 2019). Additionally, SNSs do not impose on small parties the barriers that they tend to encounter in media such as television. More specifically, Twitter was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, it is a highly used site for election campaigning by parties and candidates (Jungherr, 2016), as well as the SNS that has aroused the greatest scholarly interest regarding politics (Filimonov et al., 2016; Ramos-Serrano, Fernández Gómez and Pineda, 2018; Evans et al., 2019). Secondly, Twitter use is fairly widespread in Spain (García Ortega and Zugasti Azagra, 2014), thus making it an enticing SNS for the political class. Thirdly, the literature has highlighted



the importance of Twitter for parties like VOX, which uses this SNS carefully because it is frequently employed by the media as a source (García Herrero, 2019).

The Twitter sample comprises all the tweets posted by each party on their official profiles between 12 and 28 April 2019, a period running from the start of the campaign to election day. VOX's tweets were retrieved using the OPILEAK tool developed by the company Dinamic Área, which has registered apps for the retrieval of tweets using this SNS's application program interfaces. The tweets of the other three parties—the PCPE, RC-GV and the PACMA—much less numerous than those of VOX, were retrieved manually. The sample of tweets totalled 1,498, the majority of which had been posted by VOX (847 tweets), followed by RC-GV (261), the PACMA (220) and the PCPE (170).

Content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) was the data-gathering and analytical technique applied to the sample. To answer the research questions, we used the operationalization proposed by Graham et al. (2013), who developed a coding scheme for analysing British campaigning on Twitter in 2010, which was adapted to the Spanish context. To analyze interactivity, three types were distinguished: normal posts, @-replies and retweets—a typology similar to the one used by Larsson and Moe (2011)—although, unlike Graham et al. (2013), retweets with comments were not taken into account, on the understanding that they have a function similar to that of normal retweets. On the basis of this typology, @-reply was operationalized as the basic indicator of interaction—one that has already been used widely for studying interactivity (Evans, Cordova and Sipole, 2014; Zugasti Azagra and Pérez González, 2015). The analysis of interactivity was reinforced by including variables relating to the number of multimedia elements (links, images and videos) and hashtags that each post contained—understanding the average number of hashtags used in each post as a secondary indicator of interactivity (Verón Lassa and Pallarés Navarro, 2017), for the literature has noted that, when used correctly,

hashtags aim to increase interactions (Cartes Barroso, 2018). In any case, the fact that hashtags are just sociotechnical affordances (Rathnayake and Ntalla, 2020) whose use depends on factors beyond the parties' capacities, makes them subordinate to @-replies as far as interactivity is concerned.

Secondly, operationalization takes into account the proposal of Graham et al. (2013) for the topics addressed in the tweets, to which we added specific topics in order to adapt it to the Spanish context (see Table 4 for the complete list of topics). As to tweet functions, we employed the following categories established by Evans, Cordova and Sipole (2014) and Evans et al. (2019):

- *Campaign*. Messages in which candidates talk about what they have done during the campaign, as well as tweets containing links to campaign materials or to websites with information on their candidacies.
- *Media*. Tweets notifying followers about the appearances of candidates in the media, or about publications focusing on them in the media.
- *Issues (position taking/policy statement)*. Messages aimed at raising awareness about a public policy area or a campaign topic (the economy, abortion, etc.), whether taking a stance (position taking) or not (policy statement) when reporting on an issue.
- *Attack*. A direct attack against, or criticism of electoral rivals.
- *Attack other*. Attacks against other groups (the Government, the media, institutions, etc.).
- *Personal*. Messages that do not fall into any of the previous categories, and which either tend to revolve around family/private aspects, or have nothing to do with the campaign.

Regarding inter-coder reliability, an initial informal test was run on some random tweets, which served to introduce a variable relating to hashtags and to clarify the meaning of some categories. Following this, a first two-coder test was run, which resulted in the inclusion of a new category in the tweet topic variable. The coders—four undergraduate students—received training both before and after the first test, which resulted in a second reliability test that yielded indicators of agreement higher than 0.95 for all variables, using Krippendorff's alpha.

## **Results**

Table 1 shows the types of tweets posted, providing a contrast between the general tone and that of the specific case of VOX. The PACMA, RC-GV and the PCPE generally posted normal tweets, with percentages close or equal to 100 per cent in the cases of the PACMA and the PCPE. On the contrary, VOX resorted more often to retweets—in fact, over 60 per cent of its messages were retweets. For example, on 28 April 2019 the party retweeted a message posted by Rocío Monasterio, one of its main leaders, claiming that thenceforth it was going to fight for Spain in the Congress (Monasterio, 2019). At any rate, the 'total' column in Table 1 evinces the predominance of normal tweets, exemplified by a message posted by the PACMA on 25 April, in which the party declared that it was going to do its utmost 'to make sure that violence against animals becomes a thing of the past in our country' (PACMA, 2019). On the other hand, interactivity and dialogue with users were irrelevant factors for all parties, except for RC-GV, which devoted 22 per cent of its messages to @replies.

### **TABLE 1 HERE**

The three parties with a left-wing ideology also coincided in the use of multimedia features in their tweets (see Table 2): the PACMA, RC-GV and the PCPE included images

in their posts as a primary resource, while also giving relative importance to links and videos—barring the PCPE, which only included videos on one occasion.

**TABLE 2 HERE**

The importance of images is exemplified by a tweet against privatizations posted by RC-GV on 18 April (see Image 1), as well as by a tweet posted by the PCPE featuring its visual ideological symbols (see Image 2).

**IMAGE 1 HERE**

**IMAGE 2 HERE**

In contrast, VOX used videos as its main multimedia tool in nearly 37 per cent of its tweets, thus being the party that put multimedia resources to a most balanced use, in addition to giving less importance to images than the rest of the parties. Be that as it may, all the parties included a large variety of multimedia resources in their tweets.

Table 3 shows the frequency with which hashtags were used per tweet, highlighting yet again the gap between the left-wing parties and the radical right-wing VOX. The PACMA, RC-GV and the PCPE predominantly used between two and five hashtags, followed by one hashtag per tweet—a category in which PACMA animalists stood out, with 31.8 per cent of its messages containing one hashtag. On the other hand, more than 20 RC-GV tweets fell into the ‘more than five’ hashtag category, which points to an intensive use of this interactive resource.

**TABLE 3 HERE**

VOX was diametrically opposed to the other in that it did not use any hashtags in more than half of its tweets. Notwithstanding this underuse, it employed a hashtag in 27 per cent of its messages. Considering the totals, the ‘between two and five’ hashtags-per-tweet category was in any event the most frequently employed, an aspect exemplified by

a post by the Marxist PCPE on 12 April, which contained four hashtags evincing its ideological slant: #PCPE, #RepúblicaSocialista (#SocialistRepublic), #14Abril—14 April being the day when the Spanish Second Republic was proclaimed in 1931—and #Autodeterminación (#Self-determination) (PCPE, 2019a).

Irrespective of ideological slants, minor-party communication did indeed coincide in the topics addressed. As Table 4 shows, the topic that was by far the most frequently addressed was “campaign and political parties”, accounting for nearly or more than 50 per cent of the messages—in descending order, VOX (68.83 per cent), the PCPE (60 per cent), the PACMA (55 per cent), and RC-GV (49.04 per cent). This implies that more than 60 per cent of the total number of minor-party posts were devoted to the campaign, or to themselves. Such a self-referentiality can be clearly seen in the following VOX tweet (Image 3), with information on the closing rally of the campaign and a photo of party leader Abascal:

**IMAGE 3 HERE**

In comparison with “campaign and political parties” all the other topics were secondary, if not marginal, and whether or not they were addressed depended to a great extent on the ideology of each party. The PACMA talked about “animal rights” and “environment”, while pro-public sector RC-GV focused on issues such as “economy and business”, “culture”, and “war and conflicts”. Only VOX differed in this respect, addressing a lot of topics, besides issues associated with its hard-right principles, including “Spain”, “non-Spanish nationalism”, “economy and business”, and “immigration”. It is worth noting that VOX was the only party to broach the subject of religion, in addition to the considerable number of tweets (39) that it devoted to criticising the media, in keeping with the attitude of other right-wing populist politicians like Donald Trump in the US and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil.

#### TABLE 4 HERE

There were also certain similarities in the functions performed by the tweets (Table 5). In coherence with the topics variable, “campaign” was the most repeated function, accounting for over 50 per cent of the total number of posts by the PCPE, VOX and the PACMA, and to a lesser extent RC-GV (33.33 per cent). The “campaign” function was exemplified by a tweet posted by the PCPE on 13 April which, as well as appealing to “the strength of workers”, included a link to the party’s electoral programme (PCPE, 2019b). The tendency towards referring to the campaign was accompanied by other functions that, albeit to a lesser extent, had overlaps in the different parties. This was the case with “position taking” on issues, an aspect present in the tweets of all parties—especially in the 80 posts devoted to this function by RC-GV—and the “attack other” function, as regards which VOX stood out with 68 tweets. Similarly, the “media” function was also prevalent—with tweets where followers were informed about the appearances of candidates in the media—in the campaigns of VOX and the PACMA—not for nothing the two parties with the best electoral prospects. The quantitative irrelevance of personal issues and, by extension, the personalization of politics, is also remarkable.

#### TABLE 5 HERE

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The Internet and SNSs provide minor parties with communication channels that act as a counterbalance to media coverage focusing on major leaders involved in the “horse race” and the struggle for office. Owing to the difficulties faced by minor parties when attempting to carve out a niche for themselves on the political agenda (Zunino and Ortiz Marín, 2017), they tend to resort to SNSs like Twitter. In this regard, we proceed to discuss the implications of our findings on Spanish minor parties’ Twitter behaviour, and

relating them to existing knowledge on minor-party communication and the normalization hypothesis.

Our study supports the idea that SNSs have been adopted “by smaller parties with budgets to match, which have seen in the Web a way of staying in contact with their followers, while attempting to engage new segments of society” (Lafuente Pérez and Verón Lassa, 2013: 541-542). In this respect, the case of RC-GV is fairly evident, since it was the minor party that posted the largest number of tweets, after VOX, and, at the same time, the kind of small party that is ignored by the mainstream media—as indicated by Sanjuán Santonja’s study (2015), in which RC-GV was the only party, among those analyzed, that did not appear in traditional media.

On the other hand, ideology seems to be a discriminating factor regarding SNS activity, inasmuch as ultra-rightist VOX posted many more tweets than the rest of minor parties, which can be defined as being to the left or radical left of the political spectrum. VOX’s abundant activity on Twitter is in consonance with Gibson and McAllister’s thesis (2015) that the extreme right puts the Internet to a considerable use. At the same time, this implies a disconcerting conclusion pertaining to the Spanish context, where Twitter users tend to be young and ideologically left wing (Congosto, 2015). This may indicate that Spanish progressive minor parties are not making sufficient efforts on the Web in comparison with their right-wing rivals. Furthermore, the overwhelming superiority of VOX pertaining to posting frequency in relation to the other minor parties in 2019, sheds light on the fact that the communication of this radical party, is characterized by the repudiation of traditional media, with the argument that they do not report on its proposals and ideas with reliability, but in a partial or adulterated manner (García Herrero, 2019). Thus, VOX’s systematic use of SNSs does not only have to do with the lack of coverage given by traditional media to minor parties, but rather with a direct confrontation with

them (Abuín-Vences and García-Rosales, 2020)—a strategy clearly inspired by Trump’s. In this regard, it is interesting to relate VOX and Trump’s communication similarities to the links existing between former Trump strategist Steve Bannon and VOX’s National Executive Committee member Rafael Barjadí (Ferreira, 2019; Aladro Vico and Requeijo Rey, 2020; García-Sanjuan, 2020), who share the aim of an European populist right-wing movement—according to Woertz and Soler I Lecha (2020: 13), “The mastermind of VOX’s international outreach programme, Bardají, is the director of the Friends of Israel Initiative and has aligned his party with former Trump advisor Bannon’s efforts to create a pan-European right-wing populist platform”. Hence similarities regarding communication strategies have been highlighted, from VOX’s use of a Trump-inspired political incorrectness (Álvarez-Benavides and Jiménez Aguilar, 2020) to the propagandistic use of the nationalist-medieval past (García-Sanjuan, 2020) to different SNS strategies pertaining to both form and message content (Aladro Vico and Requeijo Rey, 2020).

Our second research question related to the communication functions of minor parties. The “campaign” function was the most relevant, which is in line with research conducted by Abuín-Vences and García Rosales, highlighting that VOX’s tweets tend to extol “its convening power in campaign rallies and seek to show how close its leaders are to the electorate” (2020: 9). Also in keeping with previous studies of Spanish parties, minor organizations resort to Twitter to enhance their campaigns, as if it were a traditional media outlet (Ramos-Serrano, Fernández Gómez and Pineda, 2018). So, it could be claimed that the 2019 campaigns of Spanish minor parties were a case of “metacampaigning, that is, communications about the state of the campaign” (Jensen and Anstead, 2014: 61), which can be related to a vertical and monological communication approach. Thus, minor parties not only hardly interacted with users—as evidenced by the



irrelevance of the @replies, or VOX's scant use of hashtags—but they also dedicated most of their tweets to themselves and their own activities. This coincides with the scepticism shown in previous studies of Spanish SNS political communication (Abejón, Sastre and Linares, 2012; Ramos-Serrano, Fernández Gómez and Pineda, 2018), which suggest that social sites are underused tools that repeat a one-way broadcasting model, instead of exploiting the possibilities for interactivity (Jungherr, 2016). Typologically speaking, the intensive use of retweets by VOX is also coherent with previous research claiming that this party implements a SNS strategy aimed at the dissemination and resending of messages (García Herrero, 2019). At any rate, and beyond metacampaigning and one-way communication, it is important to note other results relating to communication functions, such as the importance of the “attack other” category, as well as the irrelevance of the personalization of politics. This last aspect contradicts Sanjuán Santonja's study (2015), which points out that traditional media information on minor parties tends to revolve around front-runners, which may indicate that the media strategy of these parties differs in the digital environment in certain aspects. In any case, the fact of having analyzed the Twitter profiles of the parties rather than those of the presidential candidates, might have something to do with the lack of focus on personal factors.

It is the campaign topics variable that most clearly evinces the tendency of minor parties to put SNSs to a continuist use—an issue relating to our third research question. Part of the literature considers that third parties discuss issues differing from those of major parties (Evans et al., 2019), which often violate the rules of political discourse (Neville-Shepard, 2014b), and which place the accent on ideological principles (Neville-Shepard, 2014b). Our findings are a long way from corroborating these assumptions. In fact, the topic most frequently raised by all parties was “campaign and political parties”, which suggests a deep-seated and self-referential use of Twitter. In view of the fact that

934 of the 1,498 tweets dealt with the campaign per se or party affairs, our results coincide with those obtained in the study performed by Ramos-Serrano, Fernández Gómez and Pineda (2018) on the 2014 European elections, in which “campaign and party affairs” was the most relevant topic for minor parties like VOX.

Since minor parties pursue a visibility that the media deny them, it may be reasonable to assume that they use SNSs as an echo chamber for self-promotion. In this connection, to SNSs should be added other digital tools, in consonance with Gulati and Williams’s claim regarding third parties: “Their increasing use of campaign web sites to lay out issue positions suggests the World Wide Web affords them better coverage than these candidates would garner in mainstream media outlets” (2007: 461). However, such a self-promotional tendency detracts from alternative campaign strategies that clearly distinguish minor parties from their major rivals. So, beyond campaign agendas and self-promotion, Spanish minor parties addressed topics in keeping with their ideological stances, thus shunning the soothing, catch-all ideological centrism more inherent to major parties and two-party systems (Mainwaring, 1995). As illustrated by the results, most of the messages that did not fall into the “campaign and political parties” category corresponded to topics relating to the principles of each party, as was the case with the PACMA and “animal rights”, RC-GV and “health and social welfare” and the PCPE and “war and conflicts”. These topics do not always receive media coverage or the endorsement of many political sectors, hence their election is coherent with the conclusion arrived at by Christensen (2013) that the supporters of marginal parties resort to tools like Twitter to participate in conversations that are not to be found either in popular culture or in the mainstream media.

In this respect, the topics addressed by minor parties are a political differentiation factor and a way of broadening the spectrum of issues, which may tie in with the thesis

put forward by Neville-Shepard that the agitation promoted by third parties is based on their impossibility of winning elections (2014a). In this context, it is no coincidence that, unlike García Herrero's study on VOX (2019)—which suggests that it leverages topics relating to traditions and culture, such as the defence of hunting and bullfighting—our findings indicate a considerable thematic pluralism in the tweets posted by the ultraconservative party. Versus the specialization of the other parties in ideological issues—namely, their role as continuing doctrinal and issue parties, according to Key's classification—VOX's thematic width indicates its gradual transformation into a multi-issue major party. This relates to the fact that its communication differs from that of the other minor parties in several variables, which may indicate that a party on the verge of abandoning fringe politics displays a Twitter behaviour that differs somehow from that of other minor parties. As VOX stated in a 28 April 2019 post, in relation to the seats that it had won in the Spanish Congress, "We have taken a major step forward today" (vox\_es, 2019). Thus, the gap that currently separates VOX from other minor parties regarding power and influence, may relate to a different type of online communication.

Differences stemming from political ideology can be linked to studies revealing that minor-party communication is more aggressive and polarized. VOX broaches subjects directly relating to its principles which, at the same time, polarize Spanish public opinion, such as patriotism, immigration, religion and the defence of bullfighting. In this regard, VOX's social media behaviour is a reflection of its impact on the political agenda, characterized by controversy and extreme stances—it is not by chance that VOX's criticism of the media and feminism is in consonance with the messages of other nationalist-populist leaders including Trump, Bolsonaro, and Matteo Salvini. On the other hand, VOX's success when addressing topics that were not even on the media agenda some years ago, relates to the role played by minor parties when airing eccentric or fringe

topics, which the mainstream parties then embrace—as has occurred in the US, where Republicans and Democrats are known to have appropriated certain ideas first aired by third parties (Gillespie, 2013).

In the theoretical framework, consideration was given to the importance of the debate on innovation or normalization pertaining to minor parties. Principally, we have seen how both the scientific literature and the minor parties themselves are committed to the hypothesis of innovation, contending that SNSs organise, directly engage young audiences, and achieve electoral objectives with greater ease, based on advantages for these parties like their low cost and capacity for segmentation (Lafuente Pérez and Verón Lassa, 2013; Gibson and McAllister, 2015). However, pertaining to communication behaviour our study cannot corroborate that vision, beyond the widespread use of Twitter. By and large, the main Spanish minor parties put their social profiles to a very traditional and one-way use, their usual practices coinciding to a great extent with those of their major counterparts. Therefore, and beyond Twitter's function as a visibility platform (Ahmed, Cho and Jaidka, 2017), our results contradict the assumption that minor party discourse differs in function and form from that of the mainstream (Neville-Shepard, 2014b). Accordingly, our research would support the normalization hypothesis; specifically, the part of that thesis that asserts that political parties use online resources to replicate offline patterns, and, more generally, that ingrained procedures prevail in communication practice (Parmelee et al., 2018). In the realm of minor-party communication, our study is thus in line with the overall prevalence of normalization regarding minor parties' SNS use (Steffan and Venema, 2020). And in more general terms, our study provides additional support to the explanatory power of the normalization hypothesis (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016).

This study has attempted to fill a research gap in the social media communication of minor parties, in general, and those in Spain, in particular. Additionally, we have tried to understand the communication of minor parties in their own terms. Nonetheless, our research has limitations, such as its focus on a single election, in a single country, and a single platform. Hence the results reflect the behavior of Spanish parties and, therefore, may not be representative of that of their peers in other countries. These limitations open up further research lines: firstly, to perform a cross-national study, thus providing evidence of whether Spanish tendencies are especially pronounced when compared with third parties' strategies in different countries; secondly, the analysis of other SNSs in addition to Twitter. Moreover, and since mainstream tendencies seem to be appealing for the discourse of third parties, further research on minor party online campaigning is needed, in both their own terms and in comparison with major parties.

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<sup>1</sup> Although VOX is widely regarded by the Spanish media and left-wing politicians as an “extreme right” party, it should be labeled as a “radical right” party. As pointed out by different authors, there are differences within the far right political family, between the *extreme right*, which rejects the whole democratic system and aims to impose dictatorships or other types of authoritarian regimes; and the *radical right*, which rejects some aspects of liberal-democratic systems, but accepts democratic rules and free elections. Radical right parties oppose some key features of liberal democracies, like the constitutional protection of minorities, but they are nominally democratic, whereas the extreme right is essentially antidemocratic. Additionally, extreme right groups and movements are willing to use violent direct action, whereas the radical right compete through conventional electoral channels, and disown the adoption of violent tactics (Norris, 2005; Mudde, 2007; Ferreira, 2019). In these terms, VOX should be classified as a radical right party, instead of an extreme right party.