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European Far right on Twitter. Analysis of the digital communicative strategy of Vox and Lega during the 2014 and 2019 European elections

Extrema derecha europea en Twitter. Análisis de la estrategia digital comunicativa de Vox y Lega durante las elecciones europeas de 2014 y 2019

Abstract

Over the last 15 years, the image of the European Union (EU) has been severely weakened. Following the so-called polycrisis - the euro crisis (2008), the refugee crisis (2015) and Brexit (2016) - the supranational organisation is facing the significant rise of Eurosceptic and populist, predominantly right-wing parties that have emerged in its member states. Among them, Lega in Italy or Vox in Spain demonstrate such an upward trend through the results obtained after the European election campaigns of 2014 and, in particular, 2019. This research sought to analyse the digital communication plans of both parties, reflected in their activity on social networks, more specifically on Twitter, over these electoral periods, in which they shifted the xenophobic nature of their messages towards a patriotic and nationalist approach. With this aim, by means of a mixed quantitative/qualitative analysis methodology, the 1,111 tweets that the Italian party and the 351 that the Spanish party (N total of 1,462 tweets) published from their respective accounts during the last European election campaigns were analysed. In conclusion, the results point to: a professionalisation of digital communication mechanisms by both extreme right-wing parties; achieving greater participation and interaction from their followers, thanks to a more mobilising/populist rather than ideological message, developed in a clearly national key; which renders it impossible for them to be incorporated into the pan-European public sphere.

Resumen

Durante los últimos tres lustros, la imagen de la Unión Europea (UE) se ha visto fuertemente debilitada. Tras la denominada policrisis - crisis del euro (2008), refugiados (2015) y Brexit (2016) - la organización supranacional se enfrenta al significativo auge de partidos euroescépticos y populistas, predominantemente de derechas, que han surgido en sus países miembro. Entre ellos, Lega en Italia o Vox en España demuestran dicha tendencia al alza a través de los resultados obtenidos tras las campañas electorales europeas de 2014 y, especialmente, de 2019. La finalidad de esta investigación es analizar el plan de comunicación digital de ambos partidos, reflejado en su actividad en las redes sociales, más concretamente en Twitter, durante dichos periodos electorales; en los que han llevado el carácter xenófobo de sus mensajes hacia una aproximación patriótica y nacionalista. Para ello, por medio de una metodología de análisis mixta cuantitativa/cualitativa, se analizarán los 1.111 tweets que la formación italiana y 351 que el partido español (N total de 1.462 tweets) publicaron desde sus respectivas cuentas durante las últimas campañas electorales europeas. Como conclusión, los resultados apuntan: a una profesionalización de los mecanismos comunicativos digitales por parte de ambos partidos de extrema derecha; alcanzando una mayor participación e interacción por parte de sus seguidores, gracias a un mensaje más movilizador/populista que ideológico, desarrollado en una evidente clave nacional; lo que les imposibilita su incorporación a la esfera pública pan-europea.

Keywords

Digital Campaigns; Political Communication; Far Right; Social Networks; Twitter, European Union.

Palabras clave

Campañas digitales; Comunicación Política; Extrema derecha; redes sociales; Twitter; Unión Europea.

1. Introduction. Theoretical framework

1.1. Antecedents. State of the Art

Communication has played and continues to play a fundamental role in politics. As Colomé (1994: 5) points out: "the quality of the media, the type of messages transmitted and their frequency are determining factors in the formation of public opinion attitudes", which is why, mainly during the last few decades, political figures have given greater relevance to their participation and image in the media environment (Orejuela, 2009). Mediatisation is a common phenomenon in the political systems of most democratic countries, where the media are not limited to being used as passive channels for communicators and political content. On the contrary, they function as organisations with their own objectives and rules, which may even clash with those of the politicians themselves (Mazzoleni and Schutz, 1999).

However, the emergence of social networks has given rise to new trends and opportunities in the dissemination of political discourse, so that the dependence of these formations on the media has been considerably reduced. New information and communication technologies (ICTs) have made it possible to move towards two-way communication between institutions and civil society (Tuñón and Carral, 2019). Specifically, these online networks have become both novel and already frequent and decisive tools for content production and message transmission between senders and receivers (Duggan, 2015; Quan-Haase and Sloan, 2017). Their value lies in their capacity to interact with audiences, especially the younger ones, by reducing the psychological and geographical barrier that distances them from political institutions (Bouza and Tuñón, 2018). Thus, parties have found in them a new tool through which to carry out their institutional communication with potential future voters, in an attempt to provide a fresher and closer image (Gallardo-Paúls, Enguix-Oliver and Oleaque-Moreno, 2018: 16).

Through the phenomenon named by Scolari et al. (2012) as user-generated content, social networks have become an essential tool, not only for the formulation and promotion of ideas, but also for the creation and/or dissemination of online content (text, videos, images), both by political profiles and their followers (Duggan, 2015; Quan-Haase and Sloan, 2017; Castillo-Esparcia, Guerra-Heredia and Almansa-Martínez, 2017). All this has led political formations to readapt their communication strategies to give more and more value to the digital environment (Miguel-Segarra, Muñoz and Marcos-García, 2017: 18-19), as online formulas have become important elements to engage citizens and involve audiences (Campos-Domínguez, 2017; López-Meri, Marcos-García and Casero-Ripollés, 2017).

Among the social networks, Twitter is the one that acquires the greatest relevance in the dissemination of the political message. As suggested by Ganesh and Froio (2020: 718), "Twitter is particularly valuable for political communication, as it allows direct communication without intermediaries between the political actor and the intended audience". Thus, users find in them the opportunity to communicate directly with leaders, movements or parties, and vice versa. Other characteristics, such as its immediacy, ease of use and speed of dissemination have been highlighted by other authors to determine the powerful role of Twitter in this type of communication (Parmelee and Bichard, 2012; Campos-Domínguez, 2017). However, its capacity to adapt to the fragmented public discourse of the moment or for politicians to use it as a tool to set the public agenda (Rivas-de-Roca and García-Gordillo, 2020), as well as its suitability to mobilise voting and participation (Gainous and Wagner, 2014) have also been pointed out. Similarly, individuals who join this network can participate and give their opinion about their political ideology on it (Papacharissi, 2013), as well as produce and circulate certain content through the use of retweeting or liking (Ganesh and Froio, 2020). The preponderance of Twitter is such that it is considered the social network of choice both for the debate and communication of political organisations, as well as for social and scientific research in this field (Steward, 2017; Campos-Domínguez, 2017; López-Meri, Marcos-García and Casero-Ripollés, 2017).

The incorporation of social networks such as Twitter, therefore, has meant a significant change in the communication and transmission of the political message. As Bouza and Tuñón (2018) point out, the potential derived from the union of synergies (hybridisation) between the digital medium (online and social networks) and the traditional media (Chadwick, 2013), or the lack of communion of these synergies (de-hybridisation), has been studied and analysed for some time. As previously mentioned, political figures and institutions have found in social networks such as Twitter the formula for creating a greater impact on the citizens who participate in their community, which explains why, without abandoning their traditional tactics, they try to accommodate and adapt them to the outstanding skills that social networks offer (Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra and Tormey, 2016).

Bouza and Tuñón (2018) also point to the current feedback between Twitter use and media visibility in traditional media, in two ways. The frequency of Twitter use peaks during the broadcasting of political speeches through traditional media (Larsson, 2016); at the same time, it is precisely Twitter that amplifies and makes the political speeches it deals with visible on the agenda of traditional media (López-Meri, Marcos-García and Casero-Ripollés, 2017).

This change in the communication paradigm, described by Lévy (2004) as "cyber democracy", has meant that the traditional media depend on social networks to cover political information. One of the consequences of the incorporation of ICTs is the loss of power over the configuration of the media agenda in favour of citizens, who find in social networks such as Twitter the opportunity to decide the prosperity, popularity and visibility of the political conversation (Mazzoleni, 2001). For their part, leaders continue to have sufficient power to decide which issues they will introduce or remove from the agenda. Moreover, the emergence of networks offers them the possibility of filtering information or disseminating opinions contrary to what is presented in the media (Aruguete, 2017). However, the relevance of their messages no longer depends exclusively on them, and the level of involvement that users express with the cause becomes more important (Carracedo, 2002).

In recent years, populist formations have made particularly good use of social media to reach out to a wider audience. In order to stop being a minority and increase their support base, they are aware of the need to plan transversal organisational communication strategies based on social networks (Schoeneborn, 2011). As Carral and Tuñón (2020: 3) point out: "the key to their engagement with audiences lies in the behaviours (narratives, framing, appeals, etc.) that the political organisation itself carries out around the narrative, with the intention of influencing public opinion".

The design of networks is especially interesting for the dissemination of populist, sentimental and choleric content (Instituto Cultura y Sociedad, 2019), as it is enhanced through the economy of attention, i.e. the message becomes stronger and more penetrating the more excessive it is. Its subjectivity loses importance in favour of the popularity it gains through likes or followers (KhosraviNik, 2017). "Social networks are designed around the search for the re dissemination of what has been said, whether it is true or not" (Oleaque-Moreno, 2020:48) and, in doing so, they favour what are known as echo chambers (Gozálvez, 2011: 131; Rodríguez-Cano, 2017). The purpose of this phenomenon is to encourage users of social networks to participate in the creation and interaction of thoughts similar to their own, without exempting them from disseminating false content. These networked idea replication chambers make the individual with radical political beliefs feel accompanied, reinforced and understood (Rodríguez, 2017).

Thus, the agenda of populist parties in the digital world is marked by a more thematic approach compared to that of traditional politicians, who advocate the use of strategic elements in their discourse on social networks (Casero-Ripollés, Sintes-Olivella and Franch, 2017). The same has been observed at the European level, where it has been found that populist right-wing conservative parties tend to address issues such as immigration, while left-wing parties prefer to address social issues (Alonso-Muñóz and Casero-Ripollés, 2018). However, some authors insist that political parties further to the right are the ones that have been better at using networks (KhosraviNik, 2017: 62-63).

1.2. Discursive strategies and digital narratives of the populist far-right in the European communicative context

The study of the online communication and discursive strategies of political parties enjoys a great research attention. Just as populism has gained ground in the Western political scene, the scientific literature on populist communication has experienced a prolific increase in parallel research. Krämer (2017), for example, took a theoretical approach to the functions and applications of the Internet in relation to far-right populism, while Block and Negrine (2017) expanded the area by analysing populist communication style through the construction of identity and rhetorical style.

The term "populism" has been and continues to be widely studied by scholars. Among the many definitions of the concept, the one presented by Mudde (2004) stands out, explaining that populism is a "loose ideology" that "sees society as divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and holds that politics should be the expression of the general will of the people". To be more precise, according to Worsley (1989), populism defines the "people" as an inclusive entity that offers a new communal identity. This implies that it is considered as a global political subject, which does not take into account the plurality of demands of the different social groups that exist. Furthermore, Rivero, Zarzalejos, and del-Palacio-Martín (2017) point out the features that must be taken into account in order to differentiate which political parties fall into this group, among which are: the defence of a virtuous people with a single will, the personification of a charismatic leader who speaks on behalf of the will of the people, a nationalist and anti-globalisation programme, or the replacement of political pluralism with the permanent search for an enemy of the people, against whom to deploy an emotional,manichean and moralistic political discourse.

In Europe, Vallespín and Martínez-Bascuñán (2017) have shown that populisms work prominently in their use of social networks, achieving the centrality of their discursive agenda in political debate. In fact, the logic that explains their triumph lies behind the oppositional dynamics between elites and the rest of the people (Chadwick, 2013). Indeed, within the framework of the 'online opportunity structure', populist

leaders aim for "a quick, direct and unmediated connection with the people" (Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson 2017: 1280):

> In this way, they also justify that the Internet and, specifically, social networks, are presented as the perfect platform to disseminate their messages without interference from the elites, among which are the media that act as gatekeepers. In essence, the online media system provides populism with a direct, unmediated connection to the 'people' it constantly alludes to in its discourse (Tuñón and López, 2022: 3).

Without wishing to delve into the frequent confusion or lack of differentiation between 'populism' and 'extreme right', taking for granted the assimilation or equivalence between the two terms, insofar as they are frequently correlated; it is true that both are used as equivalent terms, as they often converge when one is given as a style of communication used by the other, as a political spectrum. In fact, Ahmed and Pisoiu (2020) explain the convergence of communicative frameworks between parties that define themselves as populist and others that consider themselves extreme right-wing.

The fact that they are anti-system parties, a characteristic that can vary in scope and content, is precisely the defining feature of this spectrum, according to Acha-Ugarte (1997), apart from the difficult terminological classification presented by other formations such as extreme radical right parties (Minkenberg, 1997) or xenophobic parties (Brug, Fennema and Tillie, 2003), which leads Mudde (2007) to the broad definition of 'radical right-wing populist parties'.

Not surprisingly, one of the most recurrent uses of the extreme right, but also of populism, is the appeal to 'otherness' (Lazaridis and Tsagkroni, 2015). In this sense, in the context of the European polycrisis, the category of 'otherness' has been a source of appeal for the extreme right, as well as a catalyst for its growth and proliferation in Europe (Carral and Tuñón, 2020). Moreover, recent studies on the transnationalisation of European far-right discourse on Twitter identify anti-immigration, along with nativist interpretations of the economy, as common themes that promote transnational audiences among these parties (Froio and Ganesh, 2018). Kaunert, De-Deus-Pereira and Edwards (2020) argue that fears and anxieties about ontological security in relation to the migration and refugee crisis have led to a European identity crisis, favouring the re-emergence of the far right.

As already mentioned, the current context at the European level is marked by the rise of populism, where the leaders of parties and movements that present this ideology "question representative democracy, economic liberalism and globalisation, and propose the replacement of principles and norms with new rules and procedures that weaken the institutions and control processes of democracies" (Gratius and Rivero, 2018: 37). Populists see the elite as a global actor embedded in the capitalist market, operating against the interests of the people with the complicity of national and EU politicians. As a result, Euroscepticism becomes one of the central themes of their discourses (Ivaldi, Lanzone and Woods, 2017), through which they exalt their position against economic integration and the role of state-level organisation.

More specifically, the populisms that are emerging on European soil are predominantly far-right. Radical right-wing formations are defined as "rejecting some aspects of liberal democracy, but not the democratic system as a whole (radicalism vs. extremism)". It also defines 'this family of parties by their combination of nationalism and xenophobia (nativism) and an authoritarian approach to politics and social order' (Ferreira, 2019: 73).

Currently, the situation in the European Union (EU) is difficult in communicative terms. Successive 'poly-crises' (euro, refugees and Brexit) have also been compounded by deficits in its communication policies (Papagianneas, 2017; Tuñón, 2017; Tuñón, Bouza and Carral, 2019; Tuñón and Elías, 2021), which have only weakened the organisation's image. Both academics (De Wilde, Michailidou and Trenz, 2015; Barisione and Michailidou, 2017; Caiani and Guerra 2017; Papagianneas 2017) and successive Eurobarometers reveal the difficulties that the EU is facing, issues that make it impossible to engage its own citizens.

As Bouza and Tuñón (2018) highlight, this inability of the Union, which is partly due to the lack of a homogeneous message that can be extended to all member countries, is due to the lack of hybridisation of communication in European public policies, the multiplicity of speakers and spokespersons disseminating different messages that lack a common strategy, and the inter-institutional competition from which not only different but also counterproductive messages are derived (Papagianneas, 2017; Tuñón, 2021). All this has resulted in a communication barrier that prevents the establishment of a fluid dialogue between governors and governed (Moravcsik, 2002). However, another important factor to take into account that has seriously damaged the EU's image is the dissemination of fake news. The systematic use of disinformation applied to strategic narratives has led the organisation (European Commission, 2018) to list them as a serious risk to democratic life and to redouble its attention and fight against them.

Scholars questioning the effectiveness and efficiency of such European communication policies point to the need for a forceful reform to address issues such as the creation of a European public sphere or the identity crisis facing the organisation. This is why the EU has found in social media a new opportunity to present itself to citizens. Therefore, the organisation's new goal is to reformulate, through the use of digital spaces, the ways in which it communicates in order to have a political impact on the European audience (Tuñón and Carral, 2019).

However, although the EU is currently seeking to reverse the fragile situation in which it finds itself, this scenario has been exploited by some political parties to their advantage, especially during the European Parliament elections. Since the 2014 elections, populist political parties had already seen an increase in the quotas of power that their masses ratified in the 2019 European elections (Carral and Tuñón, 2020), thus becoming one of the major fronts that the organisation has to combat. Examples of radical right-wing populist political parties that have managed to gain weight in the European political sphere after the last two parliamentary elections are Vox in Spain and Lega in Italy.

1.3. The Narratives of the Populist Far Right in a Polarised Pluralist Europe: Vox and Lega

On the one hand, Vox's role in Spanish politics has recently begun to be studied due to its strong emergence and its significant power to attract voters (Barrio, 2020; Ferreira, 2019; Oleaque-Moreno, 2020), which became more than evident after the 2018 Andalusian elections. Vox was founded in 2013 to occupy the space that Rajoy's Popular Party had left vacant after, according to them, opting for a more centrist position. Its founders, among whom were personalities who had previously belonged to the PP such as Santiago Abascal or José Antonio Ortega Lara, considered that issues related to the defence of traditional values, national unity or economic freedom should once again be reclaimed and respected.

Although the party initially called itself the 'national centre-right', from the consolidation of Abascal as leader of the party, Vox tended towards a progressive radicalisation (Ferreira, 2019) and, with it, towards the ascent to political institutions. If in the first European elections in which the party ran (2014) with Alejo Vidal-Quadras - who had previously been president of the Catalan PP between 1991 and 1996 - as a candidate, Vox came within 2,000 votes of winning one seat, in the 2019 elections, in which Abascal was already leading Vox and Jorge Buxadé was running as its new candidate, the young political party won three seats. Another of the reasons for its rise was its nationalist character, one of the party's strong points in a context of political discontent in the face of the independence crisis in Catalonia.

Vox's programme, in addition to fighting for Spanish unity against the dangers of Catalan nationalism, is opposed to the model of political decentralisation brought about by the State of Autonomies of the 1978 Constitution. Traditionalism and xenophobia are other key points of its political position. On the one hand, the party defends the traditional family model against the legalisation of abortion or gender reassignment interventions and criticises ideas such as those put forward by the feminist movement. On the other hand, Vox focuses its messages on the demonisation of immigration, considering it necessary to deport illegal and legal immigrants who have committed serious crimes, as well as on the need for greater security within the country. This, they explain, would be carried out thanks to tougher sentences for those convicted, as well as the elimination of the Schengen area, alluding to the case of Catalan pro-independence supporters who have fled Spanish justice.

With regard to its position on the role of the EU, Vox is considered a party located within 'soft' Euroscepticism, as it 'opposes not the European political system itself, but the current or future trajectory of the EU' (Álvarez, 2015: 74). The party advocates Spain's participation in the supranational organisation, although it defends the need for changes to improve the functioning of the institutions and their policies.

Although the Italian Lega Nord (LN) party dates back to 1991, its role in Italian politics has also gained strong momentum over the last decade at both the national and European levels (Ivaldi, Lanzone and Woods, 2017; Brunazzo and Mascitelli, 2020; Modena, 2018; Del-Palacio-Martín, 2018). At its inception, Umberto Bossi led the formation, which had emerged as a representation of the Italian north - a region known as Padania - that claimed its split from the south. According to Bossi, Rome was synonymous with exploitation for the northern territories, perpetrated by the corrupt elite settled in the capital and formed by a group of privileged people who did not attend to the needs and problems of its people.

Like Abascal for Vox, Matteo Salvini was a turning point within the party. In 2013, Salvini won with a large majority over Bossi in the party's primaries and, with his arrival, the LN's discourse also changed. The new leader opted to maintain the idea of the exploitation suffered by the people from the elites, although now the people were not only the citizens of the north, but included all Italians; and the new target to confront would be the EU. This bet of the new leader became stronger with the creation in 2014 of a new sister party of LN, Noi con Salvini, aimed mainly at the southern regions; and with the progressive and informal change of the party's name from 2018, trying to call itself "Lega" and excluding "Nord".

Today, the party has completely abandoned its previous name and has chosen to call itself Lega - Salvini Premier.

The success of Lega's changes became visible mainly after the 2018 elections, when Lega and the far-left 5 Star Movement formed a coalition government. Its influence is also obvious at the European level: if in the 2014 elections LN obtained 6% of the votes and positioned itself as the fourth political force, in 2019 Lega won the elections to the European Parliament with 34% of the votes (European Parliament, 2019).

Italy's exit from the euro and the EU has become one of the key issues to be defended by the party. Its opposition to EU policies on migration has led to continuous clashes between the Italian government (during Lega's term in office, when Salvini was Minister of the Interior) and the EU. The party's discourse on this issue is characterised by the message of protection they seek to convey to citizens in the face of the growing insecurity posed by the arrival of migrants, who are seen as a danger to Italian culture and employment. Moreover, their nationalism and patriotism are accompanied by the traditionalism that is prominent in radical right-wing parties.

2. Headings

2.1 Research Objectives and Methods

This paper aims to investigate the change in the digital communication strategies of European populist parties with the growth and professionalisation of the use of social media. This research is limited to the last two European elections, insofar as they tend to be used by Eurosceptic, populist and generally extreme right-wing parties to cement their anti-European narratives (Carral and Tuñón, 2020); We will stick to the cases of the Lega and Vox in order to compare two cases of analysis that are different but relate to populist parties but which bring together the extreme right-wing vote in two countries, Spain and Italy, corresponding to the Polarised Pluralist model of media and communication structures (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Furthermore, we will not only analyse the way in which the message is broadcast, but we will also study it in order to determine whether there has been a change in the narrative of the Spanish and Italian political parties. Thus, a total of 1,462 tweets from both Vox and Lega, published by their official accounts during the last two European election campaigns, have been analysed.

2.1.1 Research objectives and hypotheses

Populist parties such as Vox and Lega have been very successful in adapting to social media, which they have used to disseminate their characteristic conflict-focused strategic approach (Aalberg, Strömbäck and Vreese, 2011) and their focus on getting out the vote, even more intensively during election campaign periods. Therefore, the aim of this research is to determine whether the evident success of both political parties and their significant growth in the number of voters from the 2014 European elections to the 2019 elections could be due (among other reasons) to an improvement of their communication plan through social media. This is why our first working hypothesis (**H1**) aims to verify that, between 2014 and 2019, Vox and Lega have improved and evolved their use of digital tools such as Twitter, using them more efficiently.

Despite the common use of this social network for political purposes, Twitter has emerged as an interesting option through which formations have the opportunity to approach and disseminate their discourse directly to community users, without intermediaries (Ganesh and Froio, 2020). As Vox and Lega have understood (over time) how to make the most of the tools that this social network offers, we formulate a hypothesis (**H2**) that maintains that the improvement and evolution in the use of Twitter by both formations has brought them closer to their users in terms of engagement.

One of the most widely used elements in the dissemination of tweets are hashtags, a metatag that begins with # and allows the sender of the message to indicate in a summarised way what its subject matter is (Alp and Öğüdücü, 2015). Thus, these keywords help to "organise content and track discussions" (Pancer and Poole, 2016), in addition to promoting dialogue between the creator of the tag and Twitter users (Márquez Martínez, 2017). However, despite the fact that their handling of the network has improved in general terms, at first glance it seems that Vox and Lega have not been able to create a limited number of hashtags through which to promote their main political ideas. Instead, they would have used a multitude of hashtags to appeal to numerous themes, creating a diverse and chaotic discourse. For this reason, the third of the hypotheses (**H3**) formulated in the framework of this research maintains that none of the parties has managed to channel a homogeneous message about their electoral proposals through Twitter.

Finally, their incorporation into political institutions has meant that these formations have tried to adapt to the EU context, attempting to present themselves as just another party and distancing themselves from the populism that characterised both groups. Therefore, the last hypothesis of our paper (**H4**)

foresees that, despite the attempts of these formations to join the European establishment (the majority political class that seeks to maintain and control the established order), both have failed to do so and continue to maintain the national-populist character that led them to their current success.

2.1.2. Methods and sample

In order to carry out the following study, an analysis was carried out of the content published on the social network Twitter by Lega and Vox between 9th and 24th May 2014 and between 10th and 25th of the same month in 2019. The choice of these thirty days in total coincides with the last two European election campaigns, key dates for analysing the communication strategies adopted by the Italian and Spanish far-right groups. These political periods, which are the fifteen days prior to the elections, are considered to be the most intense for candidates' political communication. During this time, they have to redouble their efforts to summarise their discourse in key ideas and main electoral proposals, which clarify to the future voter what the priorities of each party are (Martínez-Hellín, 2016). Moreover, the wide time margin of the five years that separate one electoral campaign from the next will allow for a more detailed study of the marked communicational changes adopted by the parties.

The exclusive use of Twitter as the social network analysed is justified by its aforementioned power to catalyse the message. Twitter is an excellent tool for political formations because, thanks to the use of likes and retweets, the content published by an account transcends beyond its own followers (Ganesh and Froio, 2020), also allowing the message to spread at a faster rate (Parmelee and Richard, 2012; Campos-Domínguez, 2017). Furthermore, the ease with which the message can be adapted to the fragmented political discourse (Rivas-de-Roca and García-Gordillo, 2020) and its regular use by political parties as a vote mobiliser (Gainous and Wagner, 2014) explain this decision. Thus, to carry out this study we have taken as a sample the 1,111 tweets published by the official Lega account (@LegaSalvini) and the 351 tweets issued from the Vox account (@vox_es) in the indicated electoral periods of 2014 and 2019, a total of 1,462 tweets obtained manually. These tweets do not include the retweets made in the same period of time by both parties, as applications such as Twlets - which initially facilitated the download of these retweets - no longer allow it. In the same way, the social network's data analysis programmes such as Gephi or Tweet Deck have not been updated and adapted to Twitter's current API, preventing the retweets from being obtained.

After selecting the sample and collecting the tweets, we proceeded to analyse them. To do so, we used a hybrid quantitative methodology inspired by the research on the impact of social networks in electoral campaigns carried out by Carral and Tuñón (2020). To this end, three levels of analysis have been created, made up of a set of seven variables, which have been adapted to the needs of this study. First, at the narrative level, three variables (theme, keyword and purpose) were measured through nine categorisations. Within the "keyword" variable, the hashtags used in each of the categories were collected in order to later count them and compare their use from one year to the next. The level of interaction was then used to analyse two other variables (participation and content), divided into five and six categories respectively. Finally, the level of involvement has facilitated the evaluation of three variables (sharing, liking and commenting) for which sixteen categorisations are proposed in the case of the first two variables and nine in the case of the last one. According to Eiroa and Barranquero (2017), content analysis is one of the most appropriate methodologies for the study of electoral campaigns thanks to its objective, descriptive and interpretative nature.

After retrieving the tweets from the advanced search tool incorporated in the Twitter application itself, limiting the fields to the relevant time period and party account, a data matrix was generated with the coding corresponding to the categories explained above. Data collection was complemented with other applications endorsed by the scientific community, such as Twlets and the Twitter API for researchers. For the verification or refutation of each of the hypotheses, calculations were carried out using Excel (version 2019). By using the formulas provided by the programme and some manual work, we were able to obtain the percentages and establish the correlations that will be presented below. In addition, the Datawrapper web resource has been used for the representation of the data, which allows a better visualisation of the results obtained.

Furthermore, the review of the sample analysis was carried out by two researchers, once the configuration of specific levels of analysis had been established, critiqued and modified if necessary. The second phase, focused on reading the publications, consisted of coding the publications. Two researchers took part in this process in parallel, identifying in each case both levels and sublevels of analysis. Once the coding was completed, a debriefing session was organised to reach consensus in those cases where discrepancies were identified. In specific cases where consensus was not reached, a third researcher was consulted. For the third phase of analysis and interpretation of the results, a quantitative approach was used to examine the coded categories.

Table 1: Content analysis sheet

Level of Narration

1. Subject matter What do they tweet about?	2. Keywords What tags/hashtags do you use?	3. Purpose What is the purpose of the message?
1. Immigration/ Security/ Borders	1. # to refer to the party itself / to one of its members	1. Propaganda for their meetings
2. Territorial policy / Secessionism	2. # to appeal to vote	2. Report on its programme / policies (Lega Nord, 2019).
3. Economy / Employment / Energy	3. # to promote their appearance at public events	3. Promote appearance in traditional media
4. Social policy (education, health, euthanasia, feminism, drugs, etc.)	4. # patriotic	4. Criticise / confront political or media rivals.
5. Justice	5. # on territorial policy / secessionism	5. Submit a complaint
6. Election campaign	6. # on immigration / security / borders	6. Mobilising the vote / party propaganda
7. Foreign policy	7. # on economy/ employment/energy	7. Emotional exaltation / patriotism
8. Other (climate, agriculture, culture, identity	8. # on other issues (celebration of commemorative dates, criticising other political parties...)	8. Other (mourning the death of someone, apologising for insulting an opponent
9. Impossible to classify	9. Does not use hashtags	9. Impossible to classify

Level of interaction

1. Participation Who is being involved or appealed to?	2. Content What is the backbone of the conversation?
1. Tweet without mention	1. Link to the own website/networks
2. Tweet with @# mention of Vox/Lega/allied member	2. Link to a media outlet
3. Tweet with @# mention to others (institutions)	3. Image
4. Tweet with @# mention of a media outlet	4. Video/videoaudio
5. Tweet with @# mentioning a rival/enemy	5. Text only (or other tweet)
	6. Other (maps, mail-in ballot information, campaign event ticket sales)

Level of implication

1. Share How many RTs did you get?	2. Likes How many likes did you get?	3. Comment How many users have responded?
1. 1-5 RTs	1. 1-5 likes	1. 1-5 comments
2. 6-25 RTs	2. 5-25 likes	2. 6-25 comments
3. 26-100 RTs	3. 26-100 likes	3. 26-100 comments

1. Share How many RTs did you get?	2. Likes How many likes did you get?	3. Comment How many users have responded?
4. 101-200 RTs	4. 101-200 likes	4. 101-200 comments
5. 201-300 RTs	5. 201-300 likes	5. 201-300 comments
6. 301-400 RTs	6. 301-400 likes	6. 301-400 comments
7. 401-500 RTs	7. 401-500 likes	7. 401-500 comments
8. 501-600 RTs	8. 501-600 likes	8. More than 500 comments
9. 601-700 RTs	9. 601-700 likes	9. 0 comments
10. 701-800 RTs	10. 701- 800 likes	
11. 801-900 RTs	11. 701- 800 likes	
12. 901-1.000 RTs	12. 901- 1.000 likes	
13. 1.100-1.500 RTs	13. 1.100 – 1.500 likes	
14. 1.600-2.000 RTs	14. 1.600 – 2.000 likes	
15. More than 2.000 RTs	15. More than 2.000 likes	
16. 0 RTs	16. 0 likes	

Source: own elaboration based on Carral y Tuñón-Navarro (2020)

## 2.2. Results

2.2.1. Level of Narration

The two most recurrent themes in Vox tweets coincided in both electoral periods. Publications related to the campaign or the party itself were the main topic addressed: in 2014, 124 of Vox's 159 tweets were related to the elections or to the party; while in 2019, 83 tweets out of 192 belonged to this category. In both 2014 and 2019, the purpose of these messages was to advertise their meetings (63.71% in 2014 and 25.3% in 2019) and to mobilise the vote (12.9% in 2014 and 19.27% in 2019), although during 2019 the primary objective of their thematic use focused on demonstrating the party's patriotism (27.71%).

The second most common issue addressed by Vox was territorial policy or secessionism (8.81% in 2014 and 18.23% in 2019), through which they sought to criticise or confront political or media rivals (42.86% in 2014 and 25.71% in 2019) and make their patriotism public (21.43% in 2014 and 51.43% in 2019) (Figure 1). As for immigration and security, during the 2019 campaign, 19 of the 192 tweets issued dealt with this issue, ranking alongside social policy as the third most addressed issue. This figure is particularly significant considering that in 2014 only 0.63% of the publications covered it. Overall, Vox tweets aimed at exalting its patriotism or criticising and confronting political or media rivals increased by 16.39% and 6.72% respectively, between 2014 and 2019.

The main themes used by Lega also coincided in the 2014 and 2019 campaigns. As with Vox, information related to the electoral campaign or to the party was the most frequently used, being used in 408 of the 722 tweets published in 2014 and in 299 of the 409 tweets published in 2019. This was followed by immigration or borders with 18.28% of tweets in 2014 and 10.02% in 2019, and the economy or employment. The latter issue was used 16.48% of the time in 2014, while its coverage decreased by 10.37% in 2019.

In both election periods these tweets were mainly aimed at propaganda for their meetings, with 24.24% of their publications for this purpose during 2014 and 51.35% in 2019; an increase of 27.11% between these years. Among the most common purposes of Lega's publications during 2019 was also emotional exaltation, which grew by 3.85% compared to the previous campaign. On the other hand, promoting its appearance in the media was the purpose that decreased the most between 2014 and 2019, with a drop of 20.33% (Figure 1). The same downward trend occurred in tweets used to confront or criticise rivals, which fell by 6.44%.

Figure 1. Percentage of purpose in Lega and Vox tweets

Lega
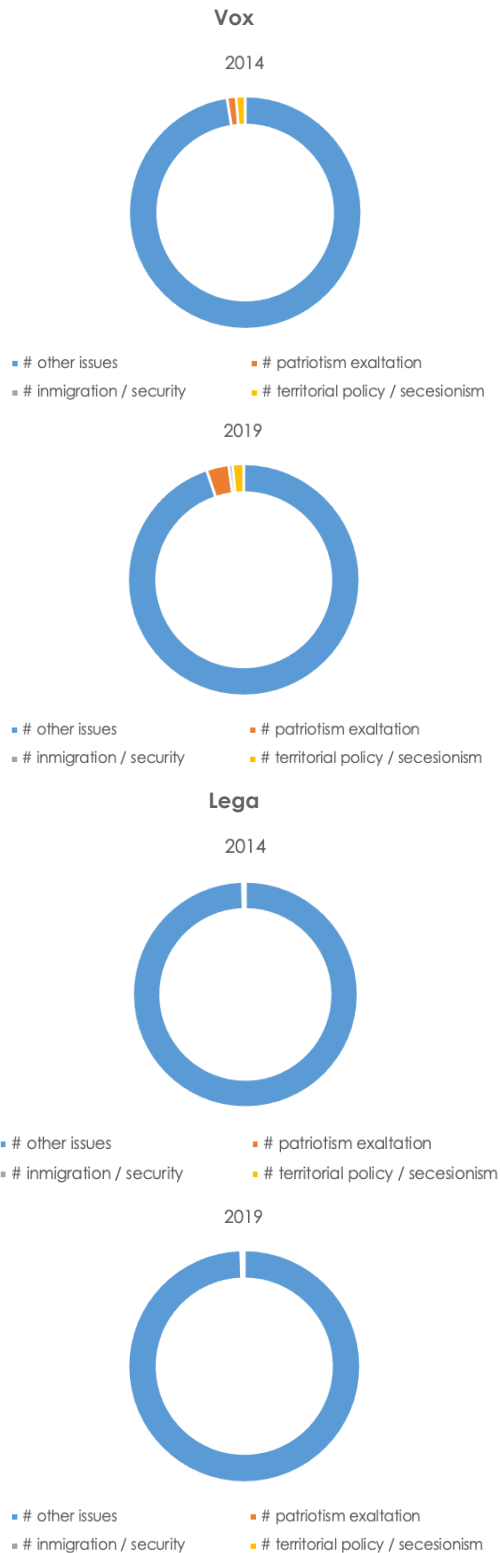

Vox
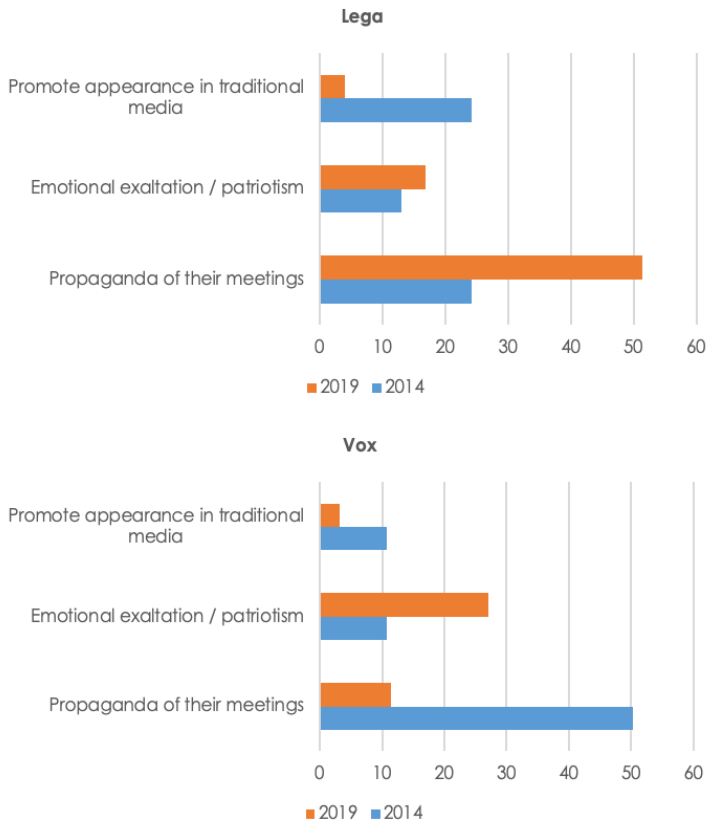
Source: own elaboration

Regarding the use of hashtags, Lega increased its use significantly: if of the 722 tweets of the party during 2014, 319 contained at least one hashtag, in 2019 there was an increase in its use in 26.72% of the publications. In contrast, Vox's use of the hashtag decreased from 2014 to 2019: although on both occasions the percentage of the party's tweets containing a hashtag exceeded 50%, between 2014 and 2019 it decreased by 9.46%.

In both formations and in both electoral campaigns, the use of these keywords predominantly sought to appeal to the vote, to refer to the party itself or to one of its members, and to promote public events. During 2014, Vox used four hashtags throughout the period studied to allude to themselves: #VOX, #CaravanaVOX, #IgnacioCamuñas and #Ortega Lara; while in 2019 the use of hashtags for this purpose was reduced to a single hashtag: #EspañaViva. This reduction in the use of keywords by the Spanish party also occurred in the appeal to vote: if in 2014 more than fifteen different hashtags were used (#LaSolucionEsCambiar, #AhoraTienesVOXyVoto, #NoDudesVotaVox, #VotoÚtilVox...), in 2019 the keywords were concentrated in four tags: #EnEuropaPorEspaña, #TuVoz (in some cases, this hashtag was accompanied by the city referred to in the tweet, such as #TuVozEnMadrid), #26M and #VotaVox. Lega, for its part, used the same number of hashtags for the latter purpose in both 2014 and 2019: five. In terms of hashtags that were used to refer to their party or its members, Italians went from using six hashtags in 2014 (#Salvini, #Borghi, #Donato, #Rinaldi, #Lega and #Caparini) to one in 2019 (#Salvini).

Despite the fact that, as previously mentioned, some of the issues that Vox and Lega tweeted about most were related to the exaltation of their patriotism, immigration or security and territorial policy or secessionism, they have hardly used hashtags to refer to these issues and promote a conversation around them in any of the electoral campaigns.

As can be seen in Figure 2, only 2.52% and 5.21% of the hashtags used by Vox in 2014 and 2019 referred to these topics. Furthermore, of the remaining 98 (2014) and 182 (2019) tweets that contained a hashtag, 95 and 87 of them used one of the three predominant tags, respectively.

**Figure 2: Keywords in Vox and Lega tweets**

Vox

2014

- # other issues
- # inmigration / security
- # patriotism exaltation
- # territorial policy / secesionism

2019

- # other issues
- # inmigration / security
- # patriotism exaltation
- # territorial policy / secesionism

Lega

2014

- # other issues
- # inmigration / security
- # patriotism exaltation
- # territorial policy / secesionism

2019

- # other issues
- # inmigration / security
- # patriotism exaltation
- # territorial policy / secesionism

Source: own elaboration

The case of Lega is similar to that of the Spanish formation: in both electoral periods less than 0.5% of the hashtags used by Italians belonged to keywords related to immigration, exaltation of patriotism or territorial policy.

2.2.2. Level of interaction

During 2014, of the 159 tweets published by Vox, 51.57% involved at least one member of the party, while 37.74% of them were tweets without mention. In 2019, the tweets with the greatest presence were equally divided between those mentioning a member of Vox (71 out of 192 tweets) and those naming a media outlet (70 tweets). Tweets without a mention during the last election campaign decreased by 14.3% (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Percentage participation of Vox and Lega's tweets
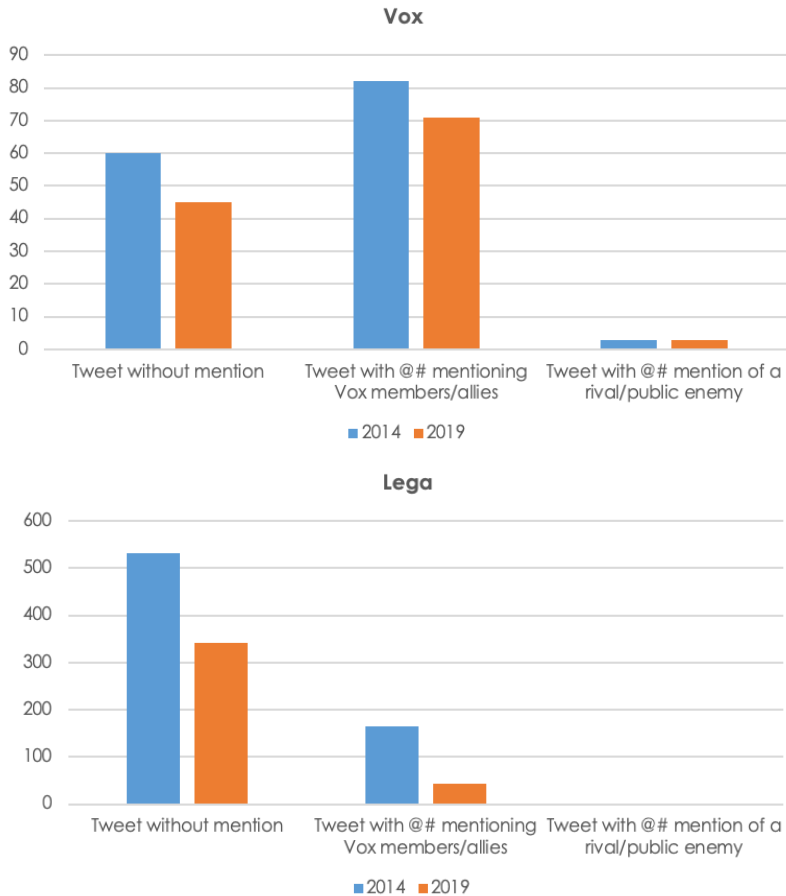
Source: own elaboration

In the case of Lega, of the tweets issued during the 2014 campaign, most of them (73.55%) had no mention, followed by tweets mentioning one of its members and naming a media outlet (in absolute values, 164 and 25 of the 722 tweets, respectively). In 2019, this order of prevalence in participation was maintained, although the number of tweets without mention and those referring to a media outlet grew by 9.82% and 2.65%. Tweets naming a member of the formation decreased from 22.71% in 2014 to 10.51% in 2019 (Figure 3).

In terms of content, 471 of the 722 tweets published in 2014 by this party included a link to its own website or social networks and 241 of the total included a video or video-audio as the backbone of the conversation. However, as can be seen in Figure 4, the use of content was more diverse throughout the 2019 campaign: although nearly half of the publications (48.90%) used images, 33.01% linked to a media outlet and 9.05% contained links to Lega's website or networks.

Figure 4: Contents of Lega and Vox tweets during the 2014 and 2019 election campaign.

Lega 2019 contents
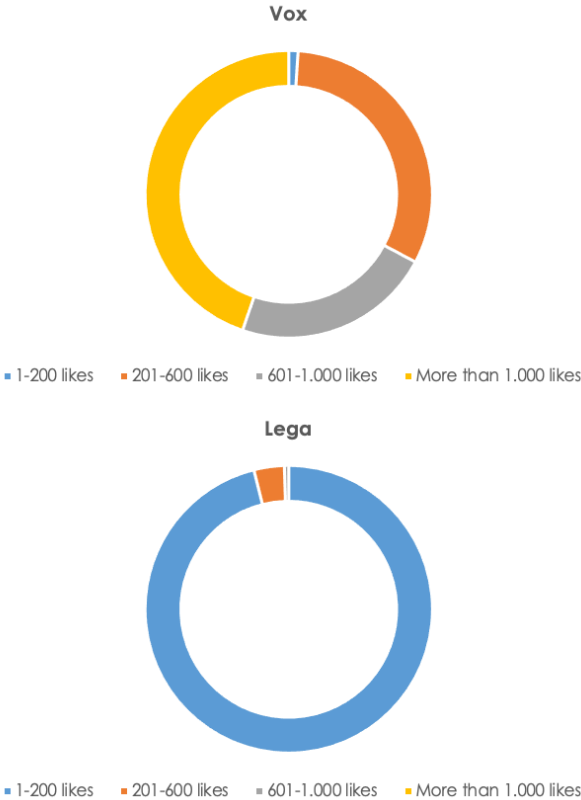

- Image
- Link to a media outlet
- Link to the own website/networks
- Video/ videoaudio
- Other contents

Vox 2019 contents

- Image
- Link to a media outlet
- Link to the own website/networks
- Video/ videoaudio
- Other contents
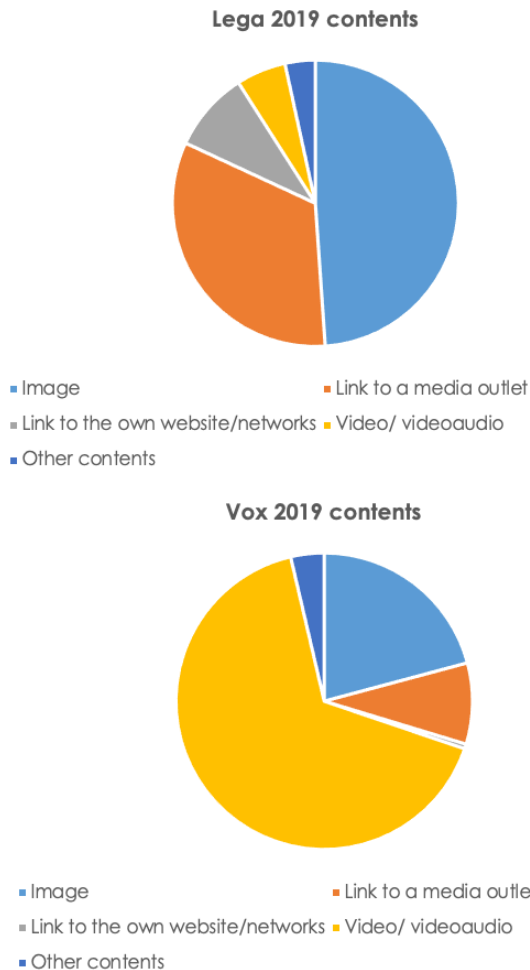
Source: own elaboration

The predominant content used by Vox in 2014 was images (37.74%), tweets that only contain text or that quote another tweet (29.56%) and those that contain a link to a media outlet (10.06%). Videos or video audios were the content that monopolised the tweets published in 2019, accounting for 66.15% of the publications. In second and third place were images (40 out of 192 tweets) and media links (17 tweets). Text-only tweets decreased by 26.43% in the last election campaign.

2.3. Level of involvement

Between 2014 and 2019, there was a significant change in the involvement of Twitter users in the publications of the accounts of these political parties, especially significant in the case of Vox. While in 2014 more than 95% of its tweets received between 6 and 100 retweets (RTs), during 2019 the number of retweets on each of its publications was more evenly distributed. In this last election period 48.96% of the tweets received between 101 and 400 RTs. Next, the most frequent range of RTs obtained by 2019 tweets was between 1,600 - 2,000 RTs (8.85%), followed by 601 - 700 RTs (7.81%). This contrasts with 2014, when none of its publications exceeded 200 RTs.

A similar situation occurred in the number of likes and comments that its publications received in these two years. On the one hand, of the 159 tweets that Vox published in 2014, 101 of them had between 6 and 25 likes; and 45 of the content published got between 1 and 5 likes. However, in 2019, tweets with more than 2,000 likes (23.44%) and posts with between 1,000 and 1,500 likes (13.5%) were the most common (Figure 5). On the other hand, while in 2014 86.79% of tweets received between 0 and 25 comments, in 2019 84.38% received between 6 and 200 comments.

Vox

■ 1-200 likes ■ 201-600 likes ■ 601-1.000 likes ■ More than 1.000 likes

Lega

■ 1-200 likes ■ 201-600 likes ■ 601-1.000 likes ■ More than 1.000 likes

Source: own elaboration

The Italian party also experienced a growth in the level of engagement of tweeters with its publications. During 2014, 700 of the 722 tweets issued during this election campaign were shared between 0 and 5 times; while in 2019 more than 90% of the publications were retweeted between 1 and 25 times (Figure 6). Moreover, if in 2014 50.28% of his tweets did not receive any likes, in 2019 none of his publications received 0 likes. On the contrary, 53.06% of them received between 26 and 100 likes. Finally, the number of tweets without comments decreased by 66.93% between 2014 and 2019 in favour of posts with between 1 and 25 replies, which grew by 63.99% in this period.

Figure 6: Percentage of Lega and Vox tweets shared

Vox

■ Without RTs ■ 1-5 RTs ■ 6-25 RTs ■ More than 25 RTs
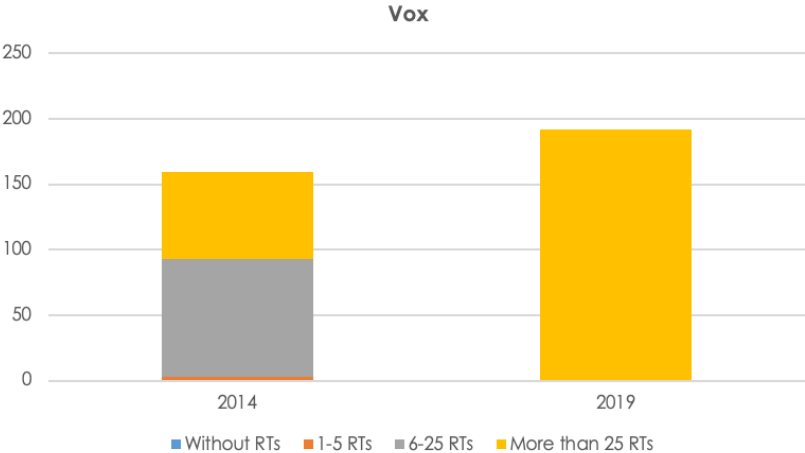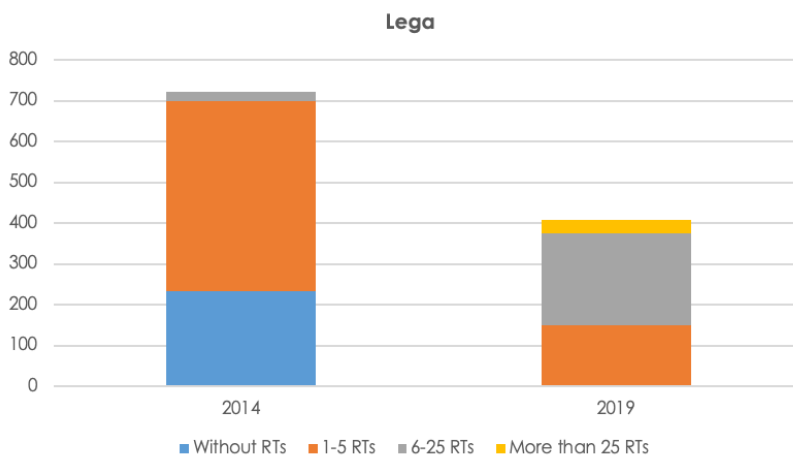
Lega

Source: own elaboration

2.4 Discussion and conclusions

Once the 1,462 tweets published by Lega and Vox during the 2014 and 2019 electoral periods have been broken down according to each of the levels of analysis, we proceed to discuss their digital behaviour in depth in order to validate or refute the hypotheses put forward.

2.4.1. Hypotheses I and II: Vox and Lega have improved their use of Twitter and have increased their levels of engagement with Twitter users.

Indeed, these political parties have evolved and professionalised their use of Twitter between the 2014 and 2019 European campaigns. However, this communicative progress has been uneven, considering that Vox has been able to take greater advantage of this tool than Lega. The Spanish party has successfully managed to appeal in a more distributed and abundant way to accounts other than its own or those of one of its members, as well as reducing the number of tweets without mention. In contrast, in 2019 Vox began to give greater importance to mentioning media outlets, generally with the aim of promoting its appearance in the media, as did Lega, which increased this type of publication. However, unlike the Spanish, Lega increased the number of tweets without mention in 2019 compared to 2014. In doing so, the Italians missed the opportunity to take advantage of their thematic framing to generate more feedback or engagement (Pancer and Poole, 2016).

Similarly, Lega has been able to exploit the content shared through its tweets more poorly than Vox; but this does not mean that there has not been an improvement between the two electoral periods, far from it. If during 2014 the conversation was predominantly structured by links to other of its social networks (Facebook) and to videos published on Youtube, which obliged the Twitter user to access them via other websites, in 2019 the use of images directly accessible from the social network itself and links to the media predominated among the content published by Lega. However, Lega left aside the powerful use of videos, which can be directly inserted into the publications themselves; unlike Vox, which in 2019 exploited this great audiovisual tool, in line with what previous research (Carral and Tuñón, 2020) suggests for the case of the French Rassemblement National. Through its use, the political party was able to distribute its message in a clear, concise and much more attractive way for tweeters.

As proposed in the second hypothesis, this improvement in the use of Twitter has led to greater involvement on the part of users, although there are also differences when comparing the case of Vox and Lega. In the five years that separate these electoral campaigns, Vox has experienced an exponential increase in the number of RTs, likes and comments that its tweets have received. Applying the arguments of Ganesh and Froio (2020), this shows that Vox has managed to use Twitter as a tool to promote its discourse through users' retweets and likes. Although Lega has also experienced growth in terms of interaction, this has been weaker. One reason that could explain why the Italian party's figures are considerably lower than Vox's is Lega's already explicitly more limited use of Twitter compared to the Spanish far-right party.

In short, coinciding with the recent research for the European extreme right by Carral and Tuñón (2022), common tendencies can be seen, although there is also a different use of the social network based on the geographical variable, rather than ideological, reinforcing the idea of a possible correlation based on the communicative point of view, closer to the approach of Hallin and Mancini (2004).

2.4.2. Hypothesis III: None of the political parties has managed to channel a homogeneous message about their electoral proposals through Twitter.

The use of hashtags has been more centralised, especially in the case of Vox, in the 2019 period, leaving aside the diversification of keywords promoted during the 2014 campaign. However, both formations have preferred to use hashtags in their tweets for reasons other than promoting their electoral proposals. Hashtags to appeal for votes, to refer to the party or some of its members and to promote their appearance at public events were the most frequently used in both 2014 and 2019. In contrast, the use of hashtags to exalt their patriotism or to address issues such as immigration and territorial politics or secessionism was very low (contrary to the prevalence found for these frames in research such as Kaunert, De-Deus-Pereira and Edwards (2020), Ariza (2020) or Decook (2020) on the far right): Vox used these hashtags on only 5.21% of occasions in 2019 and Lega did not even reach 0.5% in 2019. With this, both political parties chose to evolve their European electoral strategy, moving from a more extensive creation of frames in 2014 to arouse voters' attention, to a reduction of frames in 2019, in order to hide, as far as possible, some of their positions and contradictions regarding the key issues of their electoral programme, thus broadening their electoral spectrum, in what Carral and Tuñón (2020) baptise as "populist whitewashing" for the aforementioned French Rassemblement National, and partially ratifying the findings of Lorimer (2020) or Mcneil-Willson (2020), in their research on Telegram.

2.4.3. Hypothesis IV: Lega and Vox have failed in their attempt to join the European establishment.

As a final hypothesis, we proposed that it was possible to affirm that the national-populist character of Vox and Lega had been maintained over time, beyond the more or less recurrent use of Eurosceptic frames.

In the case of Vox, and following Rivero, Zarzalejos, and del-Palacio-Martín (2017), it is even possible to affirm that populism and nationalism have increased during its last European campaign. His tweets that addressed the issue of secessionism grew by 9.42% in 2019 compared to 2014, and in this last electoral period immigration and security became the third most discussed issue, when in 2014 it was not even covered in 1% of the publications. Moreover, in 2019, tweets aimed at exalting their patriotism or criticising and confronting political or media rivals experienced a remarkable growth compared to 2014.

Lega, for its part, maintained immigration and the economy (framing this issue with its opposition to the euro as Italy's monetary unit) as two of the three most recurrent themes in its publications during 2014 and 2019, endorsing recent research such as that of Quent (2020) and Lorimer (2020). However, their use decreased between the two campaigns. In terms of the purpose of their tweets, emotional exaltation grew, but their use to confront or criticise rivals declined.

In short, both European far-right populist parties used the European elections in a national key, missing the opportunity to incorporate themselves into the discourse of the pan-European public sphere. While it is true that they made use of the general frames of conflict, fear and racialisation identified in other studies such as those by Mcneil-Willson (2020) or Froio and Ganesh (2018), the implementation of these frames was determined by national fracture lines instead of targeting pan-European or anti-globalisation frames (Kaunert, De-Deus-Pereira and Edwards (2020), Ariza (2020) or Decook (2020), in the digital communication of the polarised pluralist populist far-right.

2.4.4. Limitations of the study and future lines of research

In short, our research ratifies, mainly for the cases of the Spanish and Italian extreme right, what Carral and Tuñón (2020) already advanced in their analysis of the communicative strategy of the French extreme right-wing party Rassemblement National. Notwithstanding the above, this study opens up new sub-lines of research. It would therefore be very interesting to be able to analyse the level of narrative not only of the tweets made by the political party's accounts, but also of the publications retweeted during the electoral campaigns.

Furthermore, as explained in the methods section, the study of the levels of narration, interaction and involvement implies limiting each tweet exclusively to one of the categories that make up the variables of these three levels, which implies a disadvantage in the case of the first two levels, considering that a tweet could actually belong to more than one of the categories proposed. Therefore, it would be very useful to be able to analyse the subject matter, keywords, purpose, participation and content of the publications through other methodologies that allow for greater precision, such as relational analysis.

Moreover, considering that most of Lega's tweets published during 2014 were linked to its Facebook content, the combined analysis with other social networks could shed light on the hybridisation of different communicative trends by political formations, jointly on more than one social network, in the framework of future research work.

On the other hand, during the course of this study, it has been possible to confirm that the logic of frameworks suggested and contrasted in the conclusions set out above can also be corroborated through a qualitative approach in the analysis of European discursive construction. This line of research could be further explored through methodologies that explore the analysis of correspondences, such as contingency tables, as recently implemented by authors such as Ganesh and Froio (2020), who approach the association of 'Europe' in a corpus of tweets, in order to address its discursive construction within the framework of a particular event.

Finally, it would be worth distinguishing, depending on the period of analysis of the field, and now that the temporal distance allows for a certain perspective of study, whether the communication frameworks vary or evolve in different directions, in relation to other temporal milestones or new substantial crises; also suggesting the need for further research to broaden the sample to other contexts and parties in order to obtain plural and clearly pan-European results.

3. Contributions

Contributions	Author
Work conception and design	Author 1 y 2
Documentary research	Author 1 y 2
Data collection	Author 1 y 2
Critical analysis and interpretation of data	Author 1 y 2
Review and approval of versions	Author 1 y 2

4. Funding

5. Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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