

## **Vox and journalistic information: use and criticism of the media in the 2019 General Election campaigns**

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### Abstract

The general elections held in 2019 gave Vox enough votes to enter the Spanish Parliament as the third most popular political party. The growing role of this radical right-wing party has revealed a complex relationship with the media. The objective of this study is to characterise the relationship between Vox and the media by analysing the party's electoral discourse using quantitative techniques – posts made on Facebook and Twitter (n = 224) – and qualitative techniques, exploring the framing used in the closing rallies of the campaign. References to the media dominated the messages Vox posted on Twitter during the November campaign, whose main purpose was to repost content previously broadcast in traditional media. However, almost one in four of the messages were also critical of at least one media outlet, which also occurred at rallies. The institutionalisation of Vox entails a growing mediatisation of its discourse.

Keywords: populism, political communication, election campaign, media, journalism, Vox.

### Introduction

The relationship between the media and populist organisations is complex (Castelli Gattinara & Bouron, 2020). Before the configuration of a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), populist parties preferred to be present in conventional media, as it would afford them legitimacy as relevant political actors while spreading their message (Mazzoleni, 2008), despite being antagonistic towards them and the media coverage itself being critical (Mudde, 2007). Wells et al. (2020) note three key aspects in the relationship between conventional media and populism.

First, the media logics of the newsgathering and newsmaking are associated with populist strategies in the surveillance and criticism of political elites and institutions of power (Mazzoleni, 2008), which has led some authors to argue that there is a cynical spiral in the ritualisation of this criticism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Second, certain studies have concluded that the positive effects of visibility in conventional media (Ellinas, 2010) offset the negative tone used when reporting on populist parties (Esser, Stepińska & Hopmann, 2016). Wells et al. (2020) attribute this paradox to the media logic itself, which gives priority to coverage of the party and the most bizarre aspects of its populist leaders (Krämer, 2014), especially considering the current distrust of political and media institutions (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018).

Third, conventional media commercial strategies focus their attention on the populist actors and narratives likely to attract an audience, and often even imitate that style (Esser, Stepińska & Hopmann, 2016; Wells et al., 2020).

## Literature review

### Vox's entry into the Spanish media

The General Election held in April 2019 gave Vox enough votes to enter the Spanish Parliament for the first time. The repeated election in November resulted in the party gaining the third largest number of parliamentarians, with 52 seats in the Congress of Deputies. This was Vox's greatest success ever, whose electoral support had increased continuously since it entered the Andalusian Parliament in the December 2018 election, "a turning point in the Spanish political culture" with the "incursion of an extreme right-wing party" for the first time in the history of Spanish democracy (Castro Martínez & Mo Groba, 2020: 40). According to Ferreira (2019), Vox's ideology gives it characteristics that are typical of other radical right-wing parties in Europe. Although Vox's discourse is much more nationalist than populist compared to those parties, due to its focus on regional nationalisms and migration (González-Páramo, 2019; Rubio-Pueyo, 2019), certain studies give it a clearly populist component (Carratalá, Palau-Sampio & Iranzo-Cabrera, 2021). In this sense, the media initially avoided the stigma of associating Vox with extreme right-wing radical populism. Dennison and Mendes (2019) attribute this to two conditions: First, the founder of Vox, Santiago Abascal, had been a member of the People's Party until 2014, and thus part of the mainstream. Second, he did not use references to Francoism or Fuerza Nueva [New Force] that was part of the first democratic Parliamentary legislature in Spain with one seat in Congress.

According to Dennison and Mendes, this was why the newspaper *El País* referred to Vox in 2014 as "a party to the right of the PP" (2019: 12), and that it was not until 2018 that it began to associate it with the extreme right and adopt a more critical attitude, when polls began to show that an extreme right-wing party might again – nearly four decades later – have a representation in Spanish institutions. In a study of more than 316 news items referring to Vox from its inception until 2018, only 3.5% of them included references to its xenophobic and racist ideology (2019). Access to media was also favoured by their nationalist stance, in defence of Spanish unity, in a context of strong polarisation and media positioning regarding the Catalan independence referendum. According to Dennison and Mendes (2019), their commitment to centralism favoured their electoral development. An analysis of the journalistic coverage given to Vox between 2016 and 2018 by the two main Spanish newspapers, *El País* and *El Mundo*, shows that Vox received much more attention than other parties with a similar number of voters – such as PACMA – during that period and that in the weeks prior to the Andalusian election in December 2018, it appeared in these newspapers almost as often as mainstream parties (Olalla, Chueca & Padilla, 2019).

## On the attack

Although relationships between the media and political leaders have been turbulent throughout history, both internationally (Meeks, 2020) and in Spain, often based on economic politics (De Miguel & Pozas, 2009), the tensions reached during Donald Trump's presidency in the US are far from what can occur with the possibilities that exist in the current hybrid media system and the former president's preference for the social network Twitter to communicate with his followers. Despite previous disagreements, the message sent from his account on 17 February, 2017 was a turning point: "The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!" (Davis, 2018). The framing of the media in this way was especially relevant at a time when trust and credibility of the media were at critically low levels, particularly among Republicans (Meeks, 2020).

Attacking the conventional media became an essential part of populist political leaders' strategy (Haller & Holt, 2019; Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016; Moffitt, 2016). Waisbord notes that, although the media are criticised by both left and right-wing populist parties, it is currently right-wing parties that most clearly position themselves against the mainstream media (2018a). The populist party's criticism of the mainstream media stems from associating them with the establishment and carrying out their work with a biased and misleading tone (Figenschou & Ihkebaek, 2019) where, according to them, this distorted tone emerges from "political correctness" (Haller & Holt, 2019). The media are simply representatives of the sociopolitical elites (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), out of touch with the needs of the majority of society, with whom populisms identify (Bhat & Chadha, 2020).

The parties and leaders of different countries adhere Trump's accusations of the media – that were critical of his work – spreading fake news and being the enemy of the people, and have made the media and journalists the object of their attacks.

A variety of studies have shown that these guidelines for action have been adopted by parties in Western countries and others around the world. Distrust in the mainstream media has been seen in Germany and Austria, with recriminations of "lying press" (*Lügenpresse*) or "Pinocchio press" (*pinocchio press*), and attacks on the Austrian public entity ORF (Haller & Holt, 2019). In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro has continuously attacked the traditional media and declared war on it (Boadle & Slattery, 2018). A study by Bhat and Chadha (2020) identified significant patterns in the emergence of alternative media associated with waves of populism in India, which included highlighting errors made by mainstream media, and the public singling out and defamation of journalists critical of unproven accusations.

In its strategy, Vox has followed a similar line of media demonisation to that of populist leaders such as Trump or Bolsonaro, by removing journalists from their official WhatsApp accounts which are used to provide information and giving only specific media and journalists interviews or allowing only these to ask questions at press conferences, affecting media such as *El País* and *eldiario.es*. Vox's attack on the media is peculiar within the simple language that characterises the party's discourse and which, according to Aladro Vico and Requejo Rey (2020: 219-220), implies "a clear rejection of the information society and can serve as a defence to voters who also reject that society because of its complexity and overload, clearly showing a closed mentality". In this sense, one of the most common political arguments made by Vox's leaders is that the traditional media marginalise and attack the party, despite the fact that studies have found that their message is included in the media agenda, and also that the central themes comprising it "are represented and embedded in the dominant discourse" (Hernández Conde & Fernández García, 2019: 50).

### **From criticism of mainstream media to the alternative ecosystem**

The idea of alternative media has traditionally been associated with activism and the emergence of social movements linked to the political left and progressivism in the 1970s (Haller & Holt, 2019). However, the current media context and social networks have given leaders – whose presence in mainstream media used to be limited – a voice, and also facilitated the emergence of numerous media platforms that are aligned with extreme right-wing populist positions (Wells et al., 2020). Waisbord (2018b) appeals to an "elective affinity" between current communication conditions and the emergence of populist movements that embrace post-truth, and that represent an erosion and threat to the role of the media and to the democratic system itself.

Digital media have become an effective tool for recruitment and propaganda for extreme right-wing groups (Froio, 2018). The role of partisan platforms such as *Breitbart News Network* in the election of Donald Trump in 2016 has drawn the attention of researchers to the constellation of alternative media associated with far-right movements in different countries, committed to discourses that are alternative to the dominant mainstream media (Atton, 2015). Noppari, Hiltunen and Ahva (2019) distinguish between partisan content generated by users and countermedia, that is, digital media whose basis is post-truths. These alternative media are more an addition than a substitute to traditional media, as they allow their users to learn about issues and facts that are not covered in other media, facilitating their access to a wide range of voices and opinions not found in traditional media (Rauch, 2015). In the case of Vox, the website *Caso Aislado* stands out; it is a website associated with the party that "has often been reported for generating hoaxes and fake news" (Hernández Conde & Fernández García, 2019: 40).

However, just as social networks played an essential role in protest movements such as the Arab Spring or the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, they have also been a powerful tool for far-right movements such as Pegida (European Patriots Against the Islamisation of the West), emerging in 2014 in Germany and spreading into several European countries by using the social network Facebook as a mobilisation channel (Haller & Holt, 2019). Castelli and Bouron (2020) note that alternative media spaces are not only the way ideals defended by far-right movements are communicated, they also facilitate new ways of creating meaning and collective identity.

Vox's popularity increased in a context of declining trust in the legitimacy of institutions such as the media and political parties, which were seen to be disconnected from the public sphere (Bennet & Pfetsch, 2018), and disruptions on platforms that provided political information (Van Aelst et al., 2017). In such circumstances, Vox contributed to its selective and emotional exposure (Guess, Nyhan & Reifler, 2018) through the creation of WhatsApp groups and skilfully using social networks such as Instagram, where it is set itself up as the leading party, helping to consolidate Abascal's leadership (Sampietro & Sánchez, 2020). Garcia Herrero (2019: 71) agrees that Vox has promoted its message through new technologies and adds that "Vox's communications strategy has refused and avoided, as much as possible, to give interviews or participate in any other type of traditional journalistic activity (reports, etc.) in traditional media".

The use Vox has made of social networks furthers a trend that has outlined political communication in recent years, especially during electoral processes, starting with the 2008 US campaign won by Obama, the first politician to make intensive use of these tools (Bimber, 2014). Despite the role of mainstream media continuing to be prominent and coexisting with new technological networks to create a hybrid system that

complement each other (Chadwick, 2013), these applications have opened new horizons, where the number and type of actors who interact and negotiate in the field of political communication, with the aim of promoting their policies and demands, have been expanded (Casero-Ripollés, 2018). This positive fact coexists, however, with other more worrying elements from a perspective of the quality of public debate, such as the communications model that these new technological networks give rise to, which is fragmented, condensed and often out of context, and where lies and sensationalism can more easily be generated (López-García et al. 2018). In any case, the impact of social networks in electoral campaigns has been transforming the way in which citizens access political information (Lobera & Sampedro, 2018).

Populist parties have benefited enormously from the transformations that digital tools have made in political communication. As Ernst et al. (2017) note, social networks significantly benefit these parties, such as the possibility of broadcasting their message to the whole of society without intermediaries; connecting at a close and human level with voters, by favouring a discourse that allows them to personalise the message around the political representative; and being able to address specific groups of the population and deliver specific ideas with which they build a sense of community. This is how a certain elective affinity is created between populism and social networks, whose underlying narrative, in addition to the dominant values that guide them – disaffection and discontent – connect perfectly with the discourse and strategy that these parties are known for (Gerbaudo, 2018). The way in which populist parties have recently used Twitter, both in European (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Pérez Curiel, 2020) and national elections (Lava, 2021) is a good example of this affinity.

## Objectives

This study is based on the importance that, according to studies carried out to date (Olalla et al., 2019), the media were part of Vox's rise as a parliamentary political party, who was able to attract media attention through provocative actions and suggestions, that generated free publicity (Gould, 2019). The interaction between these political actors and media agents attracts much interest given the difficult relationship that populist political parties – especially those on radical right, whose profile this party reflects – have with traditional media. On this basis, the main objective of this study is to characterise the relationship between Vox and the media through an analysis of the presence that media outlets had in the party's electoral discourse on social networks and at rallies during the general election campaigns in April and November 2019, when it was voted into parliament, after the first elections, ranking third in number of seats.

In order to identify the attitudes Vox expresses towards the media during the electoral period, and based on the work previously carried out on the relationship between populism and the media, the study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What presence does the media have in Vox's discourse during the 2019 general election campaigns? Were there differences between the April campaign – as a non-parliamentary actor that had not yet gained representation in Congress – and the November campaign – as one that had?
2. Which members of the party are most frequently associated with these media mentions?
3. To what extent does Vox repost content published/broadcast by media outlets as part of its electoral strategy? What media are the most used for this purpose?

4. Does Vox's electoral discourse criticise the media and/or journalists? Which media formats/journalists are the target of these criticisms?
5. What issues does Vox most reproach when criticising those media/journalists?

## Method

The study applies a methodological approach that combines quantitative and qualitative techniques. It carries out a quantitative content analysis of the messages Vox posted on its Twitter and Facebook profiles during the period comprising the beginning of the electoral campaign and election day in April (from 12 to 28 April) ( $n=231$ ) and November (from 1 to 10 November) ( $n=193$ ). There are several reasons we chose these two social networks to quantitatively explore Vox's electoral discourse. One is because Facebook and Twitter are extremely useful tools and spaces to channel, articulate and disseminate populist political discourse (Erns et al., 2017; Jacobs et al., 2020). Many studies have focused on analysing how electoral political communication is developed on these networks. In some of these processes, Facebook emerged as the dominant social network, the one that political party candidates clearly committed to, prioritising it over other applications such as Instagram and Snapchat (Bossetta, 2018). Our study furthers the analysis of the use of Twitter during electoral campaigns carried out by other studies, on the basis that the use of social networks can have consequences that are not always positive for democratic systems (Campos-Domínguez, 2017). In addition, by choosing these social networks, this study aligns itself with other research that has focused on Vox and its leaders' communications strategy during the 2019 electoral campaigns through these applications (González-Gómez, 2021; Lava, 2021; Vázquez-Campos, 2020).

Vox's use of Instagram – where the party has a large number of followers – has also been studied within the framework of electoral processes, allowing us to identify the predominance of an adversarial discourse, typical of a radical right-wing party, that seeks to channel the message of a civil resistance movement (Aladro & Requeijo, 2020), and has a sensationalist, grassroots style, where the clips posted on this platform have a clear intention to mobilise (López-Rabadán & Doménech-Fabregat, 2021). Because the main purpose of this application is to present images and audiovisual content (Casero-Ripollés, 2018), it falls outside the subject of discourse under study in our analysis, and outside the scope of the methodological tool chosen to answer this study's research questions, although it seeks to be complementary to the studies published on the use of Instagram during the same campaigns carried out in 2019.

The sample of this study is a set of 224 items that emerged after an initial analysis carried out on the first set of posts collected. This definitive set comprises the posts ( $n=13$ ) and tweets ( $n=211$ ) that contain a reference to the media. These posts were coded based on the observation of qualitative variables, both binary and categorical, which have been defined according to the research questions that guide the work: electoral period, social network, association with Vox's leader, purpose of the post, media pieces disseminated, media/journalist subject to criticism, type of reproach/criticism. An analysis of these variables allows a systematic examination of each unit, with the aims of establishing valid comparisons between the different platforms and periods, and drawing significant and representative conclusions of the subject being studied. This research study applied three content analysis techniques (Bardin, 1986). First, a presence analysis, identifying and discriminating posts that contain a reference to media, which make up the research sample, from those that did not. Second, the frequency analysis allowed us to identify how often mentions

of the media corresponded with the purpose of spreading content or with the purpose of criticising a specific media organisation or journalist. Third, the contingency or structural analysis made it possible to relate at least two variables and, in this way, understand which party leader was most often associated with posts in which media content was spread or which type of media was usually the most present in those messages that Vox used to criticise the media.

The data extracted from the quantitative content analysis of the posts on networks were finished off with a qualitative examination of the speeches that Vox's leaders made when closing electoral campaign rallies that the party held in Madrid on 26 April (duration 01:15:08) and 8 November (01:04:30), a few hours before the polls opened. We analysed the speeches made by five leaders (Abascal, Espinosa de los Monteros, Monasterio, Ortega Smith and Alzola) using an approach typical of the critical analysis of the frames, a method that has proven useful in researching the discourse of far-right parties (Sengul, 2019; Carratalá et al., 2021) with the purpose of identifying the strategies they used to construct their discourse on the media. The use of this qualitative analysis technique has been useful in the study of the populist rhetoric used by the radical right-wing parties that have been voted into European parliaments in recent years (Pajnik et al., 2016). Thus, following previous research that has qualitatively analysed the discourse of parties during electoral processes from this perspective (Valera et al., 2017), we use the speeches made by the leaders of Vox to identify its discursive framing, based on the hypothesis that one of this party's populist messages is that the Spanish media is a problem/threat that must be fought.

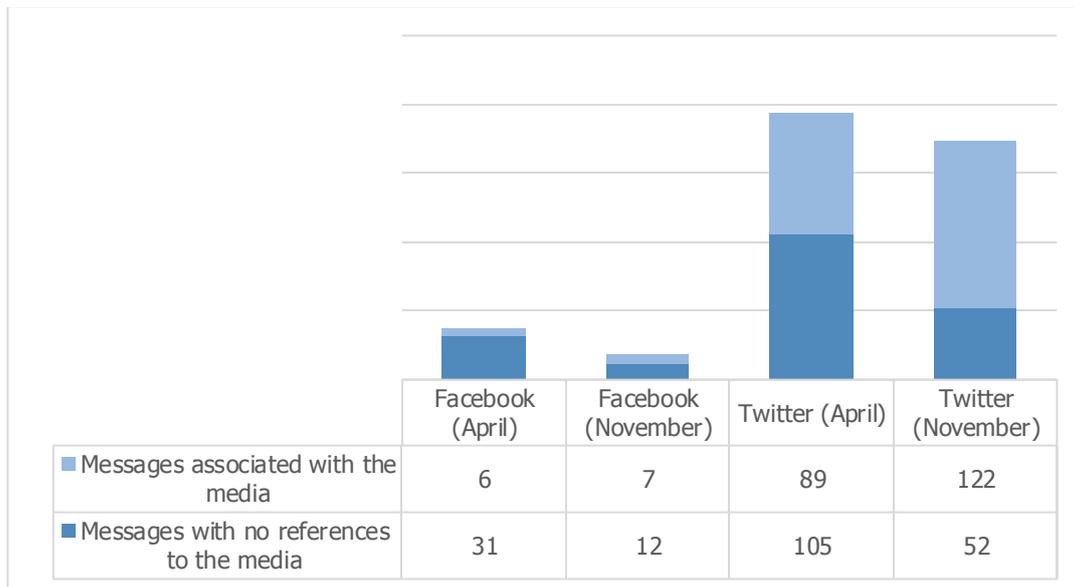
## Results

### **The media in Vox campaigns: presence and contrast between April and November**

The media were a constant issue in Vox's electoral discourse. The analysis of the messages they posted on their Facebook and Twitter profiles shows that references to the media especially dominated on Twitter; these messages either spread content that had already been posted on these networks or criticised their content in some way. After analysing the party's posts on its Facebook profile, we found that only 13 of them posted during the 2019 general election campaigns were somehow associated with the media, 23% of the total of posts during the days prior to both elections. However, when we move to Twitter, this percentage increases: up to 211 of the tweets posted in both campaigns were associated with the media; more than half, 57%.

If we analyse the presence of the media in Vox's speeches throughout the two campaigns, we find an increase in references to them during the days prior to the November election, when the party had parliamentary representation. This increase in references to the media by Vox in its speeches during the second general election campaign was also reflected on both social networks. In April, only 16% of the posts that appeared on Facebook was associated with the media, and that percentage grew to 37% in November. The increase is even more noticeable on Twitter: in the April campaign, messages with references to the media accounted for 45% of the total, and in the November campaign the percentage of such tweets over the whole rose to 70%.

Figure 1: Messages with references to the media posted by Vox on social networks



Source: Prepared by the authors

Of all the posts with references to the media, we can see that the vast majority of items analysed include certain references to a specific media outlet (80%) and, to a lesser extent, ones that refer to the media or journalism in general (19%). Only a tiny part of the sample includes comments directed towards specific journalists (1.3%) or refer to journalists from a generic perspective (0.9%).

Exploring the speeches that party members gave at the respective campaign closing rallies, we can confirm that references to the media, and to specific journalists, were common in both events, occupying a similar space in both cases.

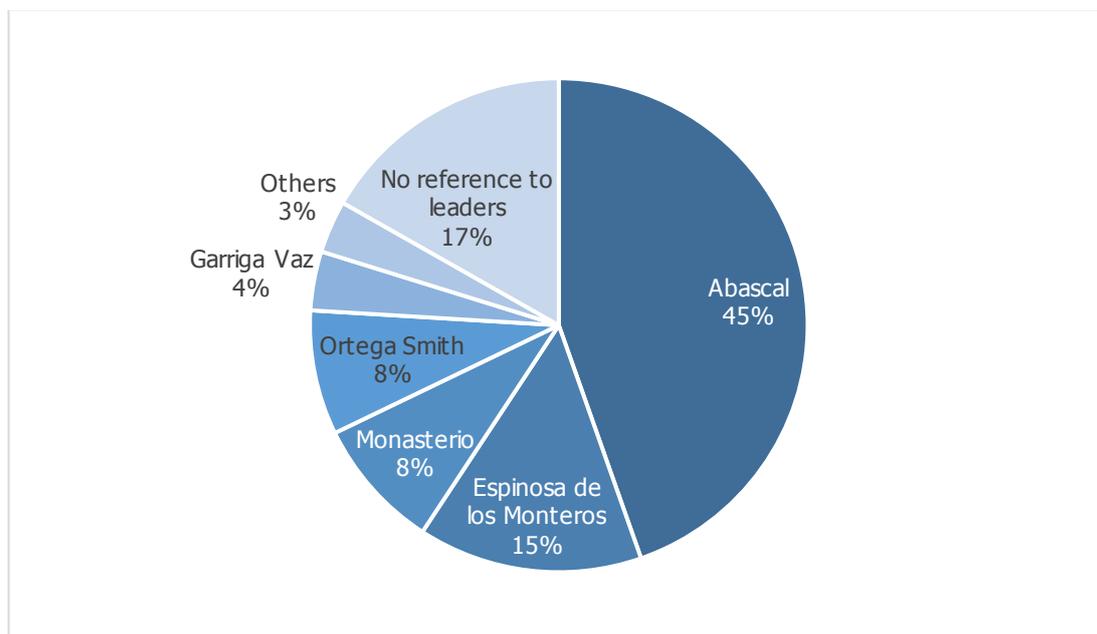
### **Vox leaders' relationship with the presence of media in their electoral discourse**

The president of Vox, Santiago Abascal, is most frequently associated with the messages posted on social networks that reference the media. Specifically, 45% of the items analysed were associated to this party's candidate for the Presidency of the Government. No differences were identified between the frequency with which these references appear on each of the platforms, but the comparison between the two campaigns is significant. While he accounts for 66% of the messages posted that reference the media during the first campaign, he accounted for only 32% of the November posts containing references to the media. Thus, the presence of the main leader in the campaign prior to the repeated election decreased by approximately half. Four other representatives of the party stand out for being frequently associated with these messages on Facebook and Twitter. The party's deputy secretary for International Relations, Iván Espinosa de los Monteros, is the second person most frequently associated with these posts. His name was associated with 15% of the messages that we analysed. As with Abascal, no differences were detected between the two platforms, but were found when comparing campaigns. Contrary to that observed in the case of the president of the party, Espinosa de los Monteros is more frequently associated with messages that contain references to the media in the November campaign (21% of the total), than in the April campaign (6%).

Although she was not a candidate for the general elections, the president of Vox in the Community of Madrid, Rocío Monasterio, was the leader in third place in terms of frequency of posting party messages on social networks that include references to the media. Here there was also an increase in the frequency with which references to the media appeared in these messages between the first and the second campaign, increasing from 4% to 12%. Although low in absolute terms, the references triple when comparing the April and November campaigns. Similar data is shown in the relationship between the secretary general of Vox, Javier Ortega Smith, and the analysed posts. His name appears in 8% of the total, with a greater presence in the November campaign (11%) than in April (5%). For his part, Ignacio Garriga Vaz, who led the Vox electoral list to Congress for the province of Barcelona, stands out in fifth position. His name is identified in 4% of the messages, all of them published on Twitter during the November campaign.

A much more marginal presence was observed in the relationship between the items analysed and the other members of the party, such as Macarena Olona (2%), in November, and Víctor González (1%), Rubén Manso (0.4%) and Jorge Buxadé (0.4%) in April. On the other hand, 17% of the posts analysed do not include any reference to members of the party. These were posts that had an impersonal tone, representing the party, with no specific association with a Vox leader.

Figure 2: Vox leaders associated with posts having references to the media



Source: Prepared by the authors

The media were critiqued in the different speeches made at the electoral campaign closing rallies that Vox held in Madrid on 26 April and 8 November. In the first event, four of the five party leaders who made speeches referenced the media and/or journalists: Iván Espinosa de los Monteros, Nerea Alzola, Rocío Monasterio and Santiago Abascal, who spent most of his speech addressing this issue. The general secretary of Vox, Javier Ortega Smith, did not, however, make any reference to the media during his speech. References to the media were also identified at the November rally by Monasterio and, especially, by Espinosa de los Monteros and Abascal, who dedicated considerable time to issues related to the media

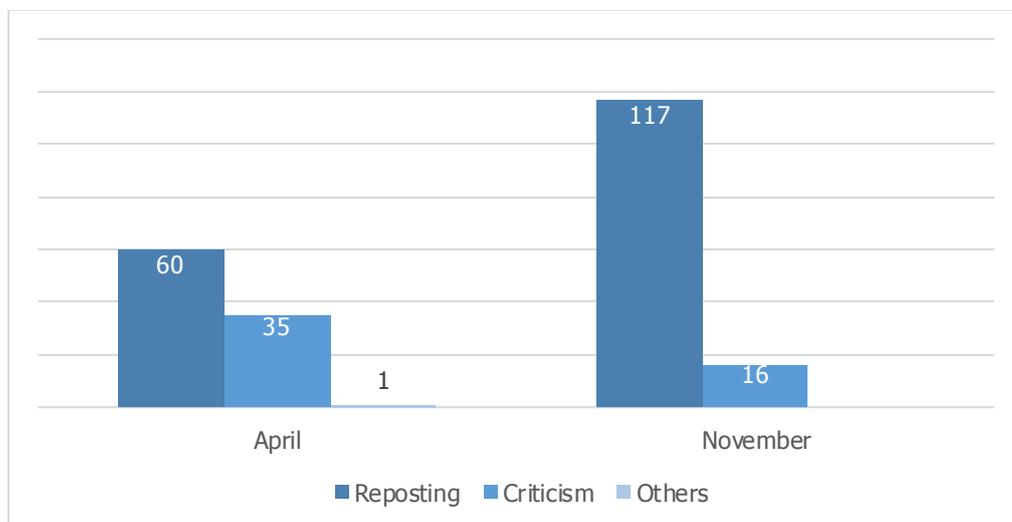
structure and/or the work of journalists. In the closing rally of the second electoral campaign, Javier Ortega Smith did not make any references to the media throughout his speech.

### Reposting of content previously broadcast by the media

Vox's posts on its social networks referencing the media and/or journalists during the April and November campaigns pursued two main purposes: to spread content previously broadcast by a particular media outlet and to criticise the media and/or journalists. In the sample as a whole, there is only one tweet, published on 21 April, where the objective was not one of the two stated above: this post referenced a specific journalist because he was one of its two main candidates for the European Parliament election, called for 26 May: State Lawyer Jorge Buxadé and the journalist Hermann Tertsch.

As shown in Figure 3, reposting content previously published by a communication media outlet was the main purpose among the analysed units, given that 177 of the posts were reposts, 79% of the group. Reposting was the dominant purpose in both the April and November campaigns, albeit with an unequal weight. Thus, the presence of tweets or posts aimed at reposting and spreading content previously published by another media outlet was somewhat lower in April – 63% of the total number analysed – than in November, when they had a much greater prominence – 91% of the items analysed for that campaign.

Figure 3: Purpose of the post referencing the media



Source: Prepared by the authors

On certain occasions, we identified messages that reposted news pieces that had no direct relationship with the party, such as a tweet published on 1 November that contained a link to a news piece published by *Contando Estrelas* entitled "The gang of immigrants from Manresa has not been convicted of rape due to a change of Law made by PSOE", or another published on 7 November where Vox reposted a piece by *EuskalNews* with the headline "A gang of four North Africans rape a girl in a house in Baracaldo and handcuff her boyfriend who was forced to watch". However, this type of repost represents only 5% of all the messages reposting media content.

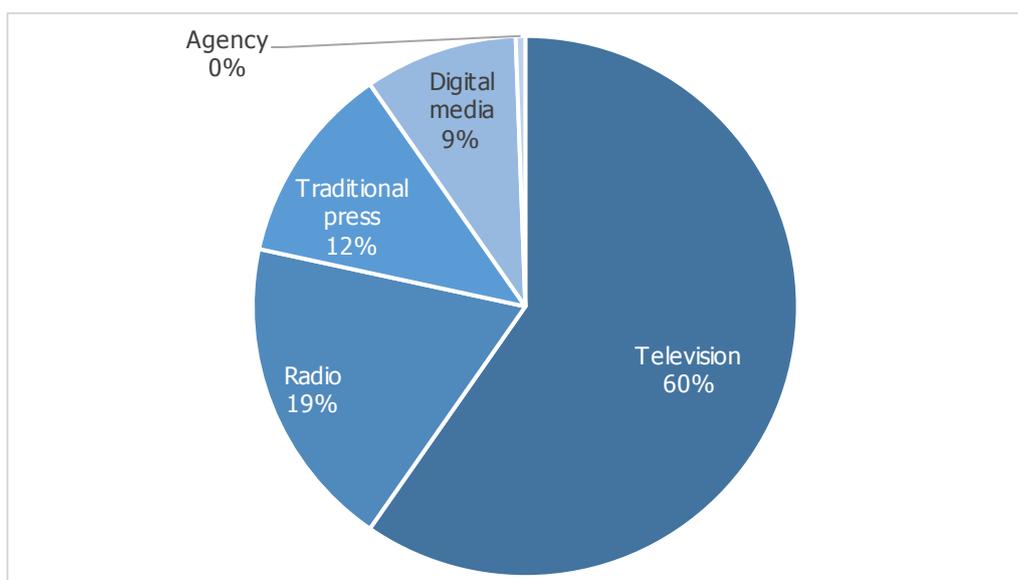
Most of the messages that were reposted by Vox's social networks had the purpose of spreading content broadcast in the media that was directly associated with the party leaders (94%). The party therefore used these posts to spread flattering news pieces about its candidates during the campaign or fragments of their interviews or debates broadcast on radio stations or television channels. As an example of reposts to spread flattering news, there is a tweet posted on 22 April that contained a link to a video hosted on *El Mundds* YouTube channel, that says: "We encourage you to watch and share this report by @javiernegre10 recorded during the campaign in Granada where @Santi\_ABASCAL managed to fill the Palacio de Congressos in a massive event held by the party in that city".

There are several examples of reposting fragments of interviews or debates that appeared in the sample, especially during the November campaign.

In April the leader of the party had only participated in two major media events (an interview with Santiago Abascal on Antena 3 and one on esRadio), as prior to the November election the radical right-wing party leader had not yet been voted into parliament. After it was, the party participated in many more media events, among which the electoral debates stand out (the party was not legally permitted to participate in April). The leaders who most frequently appeared through this strategy were Abascal (53%), Espinosa de los Monteros (16%), Monasterio (9%) and Ortega Smith (8%).

As shown in Figure 4, most of the items analysed reposting content previously appearing in a media outlet came from television channels. They represent 60% of the total of these items, and are especially hegemonic during the November campaign, since during the second campaign the weight of reposting content broadcast on television increased to 77% of the total reposts. Radio content (19%) took second place, followed by traditional press (12%), digital media (9%) – whose importance decreased between the first (20%) and the second electoral campaign (3%) – and finally agencies (0.6%) – there is only one tweet reposting information from Europa Press.

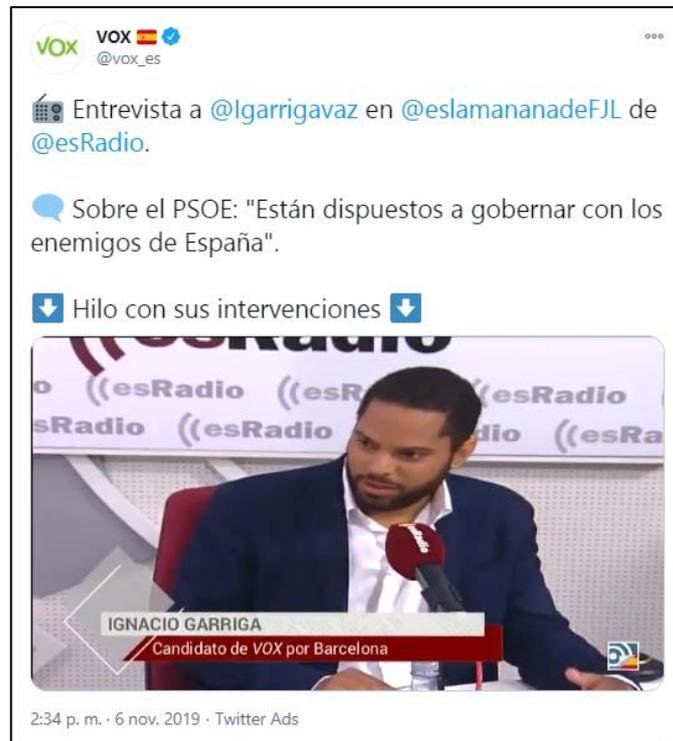
Figure 4: Type of media whose content is reposted by Vox networks



Source: Prepared by the authors

Figure 6 shows the media formats that are most frequently reposted by Vox's social networks. As we can see, four of them stand out from the rest: one is radio (esRadio), whose content was broadcast in 27 posts, and three television channels (TVE, La Sexta and Antena 3), which appear in 26, 25 and 21 items, respectively. The reason esRadio stands out is because the party posted the two interviews Santiago Abascal gave to Federico Jiménez Losantos on 25 April and Garriga Vaz on 9 November (Figure 5), on Twitter with 18 and 5 tweets, respectively.

Figure 5: A tweet posted by Vox of the interview with Garriga Vaz on esRadio.



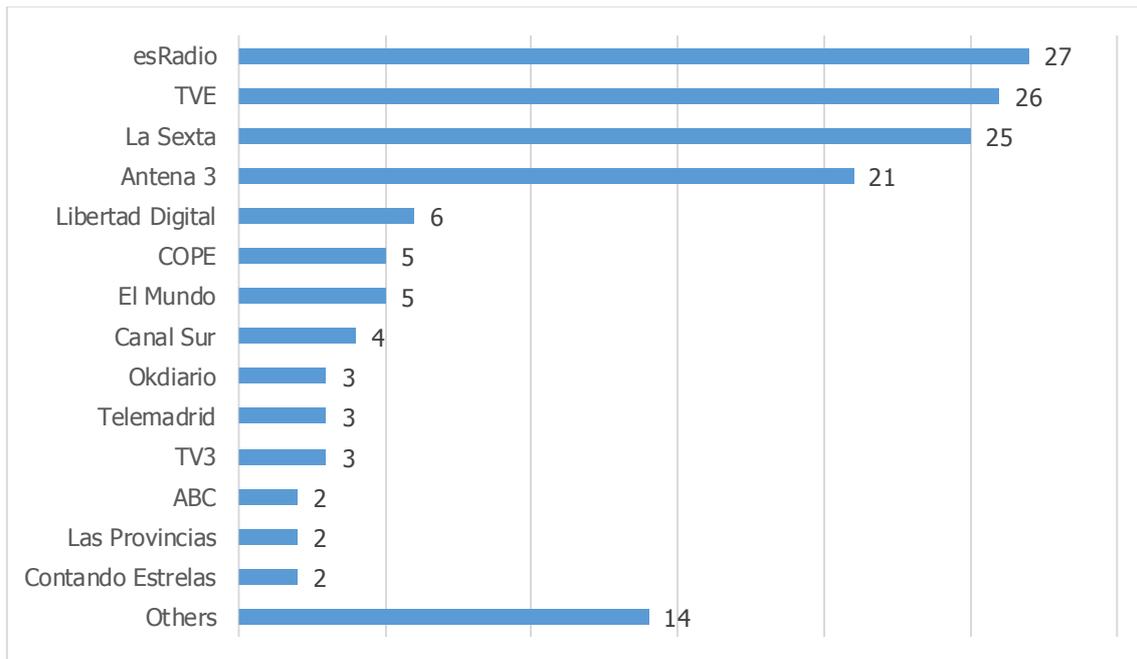
Source: Twitter

In the case of the television stations mentioned, the reposting of their content after their broadcast is associated with interviews (such as the one Abascal gave Susanna Griso on Antena 3 during the April campaign and one Espinosa de los Monteros gave Xabier Fortes on TVE before the November election) and, above all, to the televised debates in which Vox participated for the November campaign: the parliamentary spokespersons' debate organised by TVE, to which Vox dedicated a thread of 14 tweets, the debate a 8, and the women's debate broadcast by La Sexta. The debate between the five candidates organised by la Academia de TV on Monday, 4 November, was also reposted by Vox (in a thread of 24 posts), although without any comments or associating it with a specific media outlet since it was broadcast simultaneously by various channels.

To a lesser extent, Vox reposted content or pieces that appeared in different media outlets, many of them ideologically close to the party, as is the case with *Libertad Digital* (6 tweets), COPE (5), *Okdiario* (3) and the pseudo-media site *Contando Estrelas* (2). The presence of regional public media in the campaigns for state Parliament is also significant; in both these cases they were television stations (Canal Sur, Telemadrid) from communities in which Vox played a key role facilitating the formation of a regional government by PP

and Ciudadanos. The 'Others' category totals 14 media items that are cited on one occasion throughout the two campaigns; their aim was to repost content and bring together various platforms, well-known media (*El País*, RNE, *El Confidencial*), fringe media (*Diario de Burgos*, *El Faro de Melilla*) and not very well known media (*EuskalNews*).

Figure 6: Media whose content was reposted by Vox networks



Source: Prepared by the authors

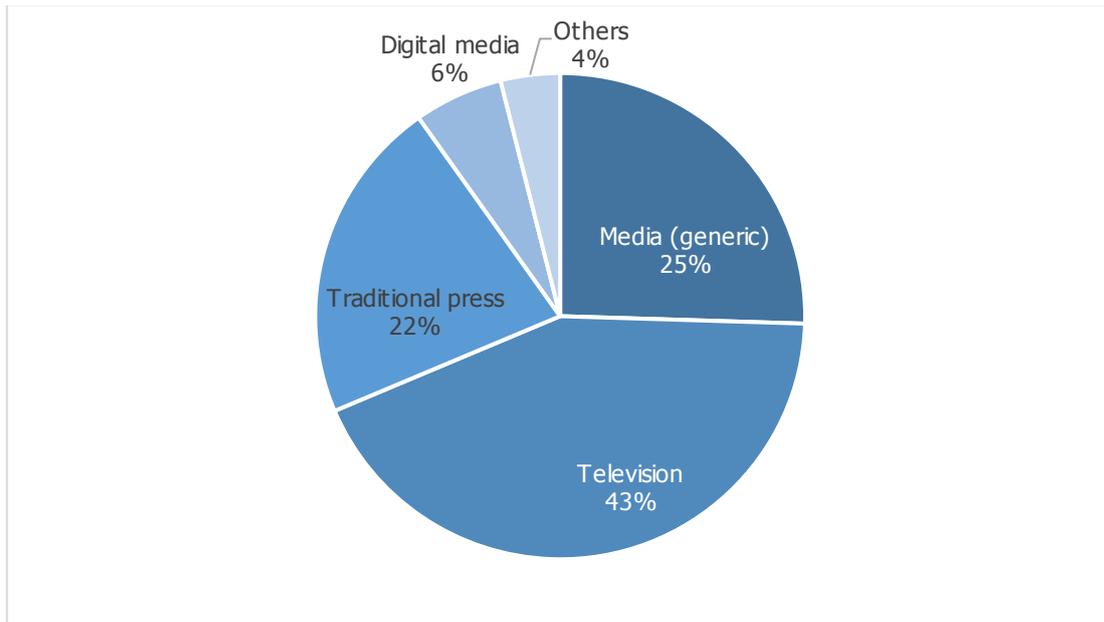
### Criticism of the media and/or journalists by Vox

Of the items that make up the analysis sample, 23% correspond to posts that include criticisms towards the media and/or journalists. The total posts in which media content is reposted and those whose purpose was to criticise the media and/or journalists exceeds 100% because five of the items analysed fall into both categories. For example, in one tweet by the party's Twitter account on 5 November, Vox posts a part of Espinosa de los Monteros' interview on the Antena 3 programme, *Espejo Público*, stating: "@ivanedlm destroys progressive journalists live". The frequency with which the party tweets these types of messages is greater in April than in November: during the first campaign these messages represent 37% of the total, while during the period of the days leading to the November elections, that percentage drops to 12% of all media-related posts.

Most of the time, these messages are not associated with a specific party leader or member (57%), and the message is sent in the voice of the party. The president of Vox, Santiago Abascal, is the leader most associated with this type of message: his name was identified in 27% of them, while other party representatives such as Espinosa de los Monteros (10%), Ortega Smith (10%) and Monasterio (8%) had a lesser association with them.

As we can see in Figure 7, of the Vox posts that contain media criticism, 43% were aimed at television. We can see in one out of every four messages (25%) that the reproach is directed at the media in general, without specifying a typology or specific platform. Traditional newspapers, meanwhile, are mentioned in 22% of the reproaches by Vox, while digital media received fewer (6%) from the party.

Figure 7: Type of media criticised on Vox platforms

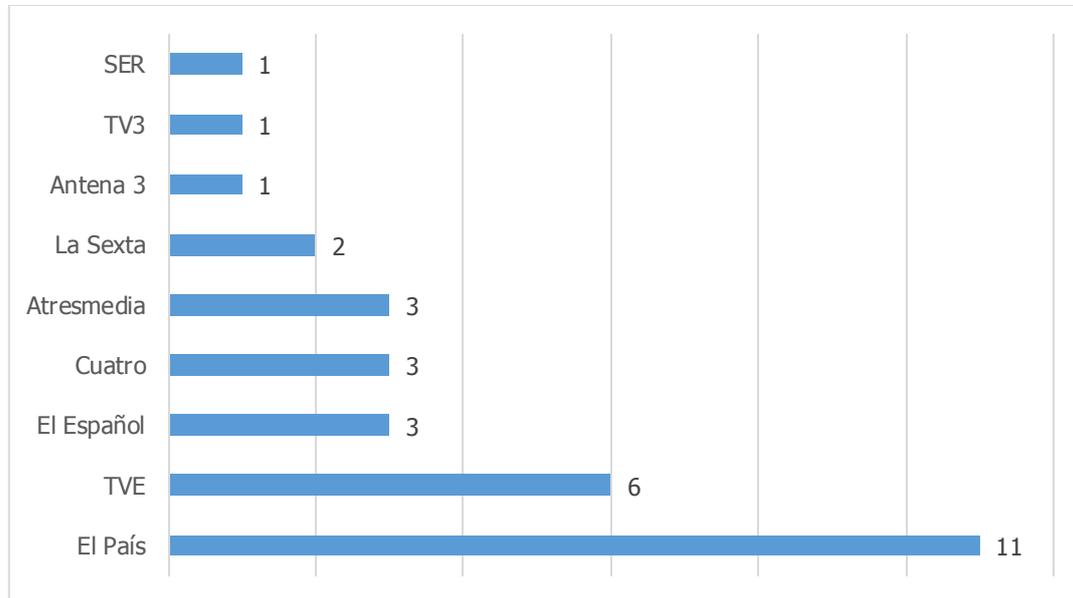


Source: Prepared by the authors

In the two electoral campaign closing rallies, the Vox's party leaders especially referred to television (and radio), as it is common for them to refer to "stages" ("they welcome the Marquis of Galapagar to their "stages" [in reference to Pablo Iglesias, because he lives in an expensive house in the town of Galapagar in Madrid]", affirmed Monasterio, in April, 18:08) and "talk shows", referenced by Abascal (in April, 51:51) and Espinosa de los Monteros (in November, 11:10). However, there are also references to the written press ("editorialists", 11:49, "newspaper directors", 11:51, Espinosa de los Monteros in November), and even to the communications system in general: "Santi Abascal has never given in to media power" (Alzola, in April, 11:14).

Figure 8 shows how often different specific media outlets were the target of Vox's criticism. In line with what Figure 7 shows about the type of media the party directed most of its criticism towards, we can see that television channels, both public and private, dominate. TVE receives the most rebukes or reproaches from Vox, followed by Cuatro, although the sum of Atresmedia's two main channels (La Sexta and Antena 3) would place this audiovisual group in second place behind the state channel. There is also a digital media group, *El Español*, a newspaper directed by Pedro J. Ramírez, that Vox mentions in three posts, criticising its content. However, it is a traditional newspaper, *El País*, that receives the most criticism from the party. Vox focuses its reproaches on the Grupo Prisa newspaper in up to 11 posts.

Figure 8: Media that are the subject of Vox's criticism



Source: Prepared by the authors

example of this that most stands out occurred during the November campaign with an editorial published by *El País* entitled *Deber de réplica*. In response to that article, on 6 November, Vox posted a thread of seven tweets (Figure 9) where the far-right party addressed the newspaper and communicated that it was banning all *El País* journalists from covering any events organised by the party. The message was revisited in another tweet posted by Vox the next day, which reposted one of Abascal's statements during an interview that he gave to Carlos Herrera at COPE: "*El País* said that VOX could not be treated as other parties are, and we understood their message; as a consequence we decided they cannot be treated like other journalists".

Figure 9: Vox tweet starting a thread of critical messages against the newspaper *El País*.



Source: Twitter

In the closing ceremony of the November campaign, Abascal also made reference to this episode, which was the only explicit reference to a specific media outlet throughout the two rallies analysed. The president of the radical right party referred to the newspaper *El País* as one of "his [meaning Pedro Sánchez] media thugs" (37:47), and added that "two days ago it published a terrible editorial, saying Vox could not be treated like other political parties. Well, our response is that we cannot treat *El País* and Grupo Prisa like other media outlets. They have no limits to criminalising and demonising us" (37:52).

Throughout the two campaigns, Vox's messages criticised media outlets more than individual journalists. Only four of the messages analysed (8% of critical posts) were criticisms of individual journalists, and in only two cases, both during the April campaign, were the names and surnames of industry professionals mentioned. These were the journalists Ignacio Escolar, editor of *eldiario.es*, and Pedro J. Ramírez, editor of *El Español*. In the case of Escolar, Vox quote tweeted a message posted by him on 18 April, adding the following comment: "The manipulators at the service of the Marquises of Galapagar [referring to Pablo Iglesias and Irene Montero, of Podemos] and La Moncloa are NOT journalists". Four days later, on 22 April, the radical right-wing party addressed Pedro J. Ramírez with a tweet mentioning him directly, stating: "@elespanolcom forgot to mention that we also want to facilitate drug trafficking. News as false as the #Fake reporting by @pedroj\_ramirez".

There was no specific mention of specific journalists found in the rallies analysed. But there were generic references to "those journalists" (Espinosa de los Monteros, in November, 10:50) or "journalists who tell you what you have to do" (18:16). At the closing ceremony of the April campaign, Abascal suggests a division into two groups: media directors ("those who work from their progressive offices") and foot-soldier journalists, to which he refers to in a friendly tone, and with a certain acknowledgement: "We want to clearly distinguish between those journalists and media workers who carry out their work professionally, come to

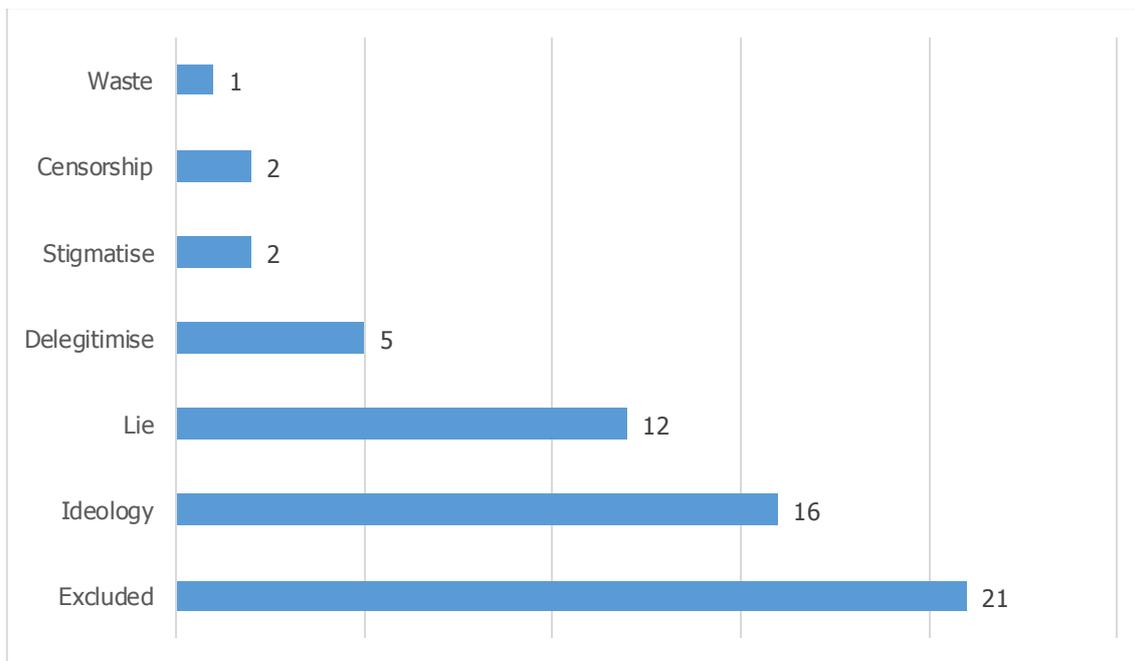
our rallies and report what we say, and write their editorials the best they can, we want to show them all our respect" (01:03:35). He did not repeat anything similar in November, instead he spoke of "favoured journalists" who "taunt their candidates for not having argued with us" (36:43).

**Vox's reproaches towards the media and journalists**

As the bar graph in Figure 10 shows, there are essentially three arguments Vox uses to substantiate and justify its criticism of the media and journalists. The first is criticism of the media for excluding the party from their agendas. It is a critique present in 41% of the critical messages we analysed, and they are concentrated in the April campaign, given that 86% of those messages were posted then.

The second are posts that point out the ideological nature of certain media outlets and journalists. This reproach is found in 31% of these messages, often using the expression "progressive media" to specify this criticism. It is also the most frequent criticism during the November campaign: 50% of all the rebukes analysed during that period, while it is only identified in 23% of items in the April campaign. The third is an accusation that certain media are lying. This criticism is identified in 24% of the messages that contain some type of reproach. It is especially directed at hard-copy or digital newspapers (67%) and is also the most common reproach directed at the two journalists who are quoted in their tweets, Ignacio Escolar and Pedro J. Ramírez. With a lower prevalence, other reasons for criticism were also detected, such as the delegitimisation of Vox, its stigmatisation, censorship of certain topics or the economic waste that they imply, in the case of publicly owned media.

Figure 10: Reasons why Vox criticises the media



Source: Prepared by the authors

In the case of the campaign closing rallies, we found that the leaders of Vox repeated many of the reproaches identified in messages posted by the party's social network profiles. The message that was repeated most often, almost like a slogan, is one accusing the media of acting based on a supposed ideology that was contrary to the party's: "the progressive media" is a criticism that can especially be seen during the April rally, when it is repeated by Espinosa de los Monteros, Abascal and Monasterio, who also recovers it in the November event: "the progressive media have not been able to put us down" (08:09).

In this second rally, however, another reproach was introduced very evidently by Espinosa de los Monteros and Abascal, who accused certain media outlets and journalists (without specifying which ones) of stigmatising Vox, making them, in the opinion of both candidates, responsible for acts of violence against their sympathisers. In this sense, Espinosa spoke of "those journalists who encourage others to attack us, which occurs, and they are to blame for it" (14:27) and Abascal warned those attending: "Watch out and pay attention, because you won't believe how much fake news, traps, lies and garbage is going to be published about us. So let's be on guard. This criminalisation has consequences, we saw it yesterday. [...] They are ultimately responsible for the acts of aggressions that are being committed against us, and for the violence and threats against our rallies" (38:59).

The reference to fake news and lies point to another argument made in both campaigns: in April the president of Vox spoke about the "billionaires [media directors] who twist the truth" and media outlets "that have manipulated the news a lot these days", as well as "the lies made through demoscopes" (01:04:00).

## Discussion and conclusions

Our study has revealed that, in the campaigns held prior to the two 2019 general elections, Vox's discourse gave a notable role to the media by mentioning it often with different objectives.

The composition of the sample shows that references to the media were more frequent in the messages that the party posted on Twitter, a social network, whose number of posts was notably higher than those posted on Facebook. This preference for the microblogging tool exploits the advantages that this social network has in terms of political and electoral communication (Rodríguez & Ureña, 2011). In fact, although it is true that populist political parties generally tend to use Facebook to channel their discourse, Twitter was the preferred communications tool during the two 2019 electoral campaigns (Ernst et al., 2017). What has been seen in this study is thus part of a general trend where Twitter is confirmed to be the online channel of reference for posting messages during electoral campaigns, over Facebook and, without a doubt, blogs (Gamir et al., 2017).

For the most part, Vox referred to the media in support of itself, and to repost messages that mentioned the party. In this sense, we can confirm that this party found sufficient media content to promote its messages on its networks, which shows, concurring with previous studies, that the media representation of this party was prominent and allowed the party itself to select content worthy of being incorporated into its platforms. We also note that this act of reposting content that had already appeared in the media occurred for several reasons. First, audiovisual media was used because of the easy viralisation of short videos, also explaining the high number of posts, often posted as threads, which include fragments of debates or interviews broadcast on television; and second there was a certain complicity with the ideologically close media outlets (*esRadio*, *Libertad Digital*, *ABC*, *COPE*, *Okdiario*, etc.) of other content reposted. However,

most of those outlets – despite being right leaning – are part of the traditional media structure, and there are very few occasions in which Vox relied on platforms that could be classified as pseudo-media (*Contando Estrelas*, *EuskalNews*), which the party only used to repost content that gave a negative image of immigration. This commitment by Vox to echo content that appeared in the traditional media that attracts large audiences is associated with its president, Santiago Abascal, and occurred more often during the November campaign, when its mentions in those media spaces are much more abundant than during the April campaign, the difference being that in November the party had the legitimacy of having been voted into parliament. This progressive institutionalisation of Vox, already evident in November, resulted in a growing mediatisation of its discourse and electoral strategy, making it difficult for it to claim to be an outsider – as it often tried to portray itself to Spanish society.

As the study has highlighted, criticism directed towards the media decreases progressively as their support increases. And in line with what has been observed in the political strategies of other populist parties in various countries, Vox places its target on the media (but almost never journalists), even though the party's reproaches were much higher in April than in November, and its rebukes are more distributed, coming from different members of the party, which makes it easier for Abascal to share, but not to accumulate, the tough stance of the party's discourse.

After criticising the media for excluding it from the mainstream, the party goes on to berate the ideological character and the demonisation/stigmatisation the media draws of them (despite there being many contrary examples of favourable content that they themselves repost on their platforms). We can thus clearly identify an argument of victimisation due to unfair media treatment, and which, ultimately, underlines the populist nature of the party, which develops from discrimination for not receiving coverage to discrimination for receiving inadequate coverage that is biased because of the "progressive" media ideology.

In short, Vox's attitude towards the media varies throughout the two campaigns and, although it is always based on a populist discourse that finds its best channel of expression on social networks, the voting in of the party to Parliament results in them diluting the critical nature of its discourse towards the media during the second electoral campaign. In Vox's discourse as an institutional actor, the media is not an enemy or a threat *per se*, but its ideological character does pose a threat, as does its association with fake news, which leads the party to pinpoint specific actors, such as *El País*, and to use their own versions of formulas successfully exploited by politicians such as Donald Trump, who reversed the accusation of disinformation by attributing it to the traditional media of reference and prestige. The institutionalisation of Vox as a parliamentary representation coexists, therefore, with the delegitimisation of other institutions in charge of its control, such as the media, in a context of growing citizen disaffection towards all institutions.

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