

## Mobilizing Third Options in Spain: The Political Communication of Minor Parties on Twitter

### Movilizando terceras opciones en España: La comunicación política de los partidos minoritarios en Twitter

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#### Abstract

In a context in which traditional parties are losing popular support, minor parties stand as relevant components of contemporary democracies. Such relevance implies that research should approach their communication strategies as an object of study in itself. Ignored by mainstream media, minor parties need to take advantage of the Internet and social media to compete with major parties. This paper analyzes Spanish minor parties' social-media communication in the context of the April 2019 election. A sample of 1,498 tweets was content-analyzed, gathered from the official Twitter profiles of the by then four main national

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minor parties: PACMA, the Communist Party of the Spanish Peoples, Zero Cuts, and VOX. Results indicate a lack of party-citizen interaction and dialogue, as well as the fact that mobilization tweets focus on traditional campaign-boosting functions.

**Keywords:** political communication, spanish minor parties, social media interactivity.

### Resumen

Es un escenario donde los partidos tradicionales pierden apoyo popular, los partidos minoritarios se erigen como sujetos relevantes en las democracias contemporáneas. Esta relevancia implica que desde la investigación académica la comunicación de los partidos minoritarios deba estudiarse en sus propios términos. Ignorados por los medios de comunicación tradicionales, los partidos minoritarios necesitan aprovechar las ventajas que suponen la web y las RRSS para competir con los grandes partidos. Este trabajo analiza la comunicación en redes sociales de los partidos minoritarios españoles en las elecciones generales de abril de 2019, con una muestra de 1.498 tuits recogidos de los perfiles oficiales de Twitter de los (por entonces) cuatro principales partidos minoritarios: PACMA, el Partido Comunista de los Pueblos de España, Recortes Cero y VOX. Los resultados indican falta de interacción y diálogo partidos-ciudadanos, con tuits de movilización centrados en las funciones tradicionales de impulso de la campaña.

**Palabras clave:** comunicación política, partidos minoritarios españoles, interactividad en redes sociales.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Minor parties—also called ‘third parties’ in the United States—can be regarded as parties of a small size, usually expressions of significant minorities. These political organizations generally come up against some of the obstacles that third-party candidates usually find in the US, such as insufficient campaign funding, deficient media coverage, exclusion from presidential debates and ‘a belief among voters that support for third parties is a wasted ballot’ (Neville-Shepard, 2014a, p. 132). Thus, in systems such as that of the US minor parties tend to live on the political fringes (Fahey, 2021). Nevertheless, minor parties find opportunities in the electorate’s dissatisfaction with major parties, with a more fluctuating vote and a certain degree of misalignment with them, in a context of widespread skepticism (Furlong, 2001). Third party organisations can even constitute a vector of change, derived from their potential to alter or correct the policy positions or ideological line of major parties (Gillespie, 2013), to stimulate a response from big parties (Rapoport and Stone, 2019), or to include new issues in the political agenda. The introduction of issues relates to the relevance of ideology for minor parties (Neville-Shepard, 2014b). In this vein, longitudinal data indicate that niche parties—like the Greens, the Communists, and the extreme Right—are more likely to improve their election results if they toe a clear ideological line (Dumitrescu, 2011).

Minor parties’ potential to provoke change is illustrated by recent Spanish politics. The virtually two-party system that dominated Spanish political life from the democratic Transition—alternating between the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party) and the conservative Partido Popular (Popular Party) (Subirats and Vallespín, 2015)—started to crumble down in 2014 due to the appearance of left-populist Podemos (We Can) and other parties. This fragmentation has led to political coalitions, and the potential influence of non-mainstream organizations in a “new multiparty environment” (Simón, 2016, p. 493). If we add an international context where extremist and nationalist options are on the rise, it is clear that the scope of the role of minor parties has changed. The most evident case is that of VOX, an radical-right Spanish party founded in 2013 which, when the 2016 general elections were held, did not have a single seat in Parliament; since the November 2019 general election, VOX has become the third most important national party in Spain, increasing its

electoral base from 47,000 to 2.6 million voters in three years. In this context, the Spanish case is also enticing regarding minor parties because radical positions are finding a niche in the political market. Moreover, contemporary Spanish politics is characterized by a high electoral volatility (Simón, 2020), a factor that tends to enhance minor party performance (Gerring, 2005).

This paper aims to shed light on the characteristics of minor-party political communication in a changing landscape. We analyze Spanish minor parties' online communication in the context of the April 2019 general election, focusing on interactive and mobilization functions. We study the official Twitter profiles of the (by then) four main national minor parties: PACMA, the Communist Party of the Spanish Peoples, Zero Cuts, and VOX. Before outlining the research design, literature on minor party communication is reviewed, as well as the theoretical framework whereby we address their output.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW, THEORICAL FRAMEWORK, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The interactive functions of messaging can be related to the role of public relations (PR) in political communication. After all, interactivity is a relevant concept in 2.0, conversational PR (Castillo Esparcia and Smolak Lozano, 2017). In a context where online tools facilitate political participation (Boulianne, 2020), PR offers a perspective to study the relationships with publics in the political realm—moreover, PR are related to propaganda (Pineda Cachero, 2010), and politics count among the subject matters in PR research (Castillo-Esparcia, et al., 2020). In other words, PR is a relevant area for institutions (Almansa-Martínez and Fernández-Souto, 2020), and political parties can benefit from its techniques. Hence, public interest in campaigning has been researched by PR scholars (Castillo-Díaz and Castillo-Esparcia, 2021), and the PR-related concept of organization-public relationships has been applied to objects of study like government (Kim, 2015). Particularly, the orientation of PR towards publics implies a PR-driven political communication oriented towards interactivity (Castillo Esparcia and Smolak Lozano, 2017).

Political PR also aim to use media outlets to garner public support (Froehlich and Rüdiger, 2006). This goal, however, evidences the difficulties faced by minor parties. It is commonplace to claim that there is a huge difference between the news coverage given to major and minor

parties, the latter receiving scarce attention from the media (Evans et al., 2019). In contrast with the continual attention paid to big parties, small organisations hardly get a look in, since they are considered to be less newsworthy (Ahmed, Cho and Jaidka, 2017). Minor-party communication and campaigning is influenced by such a lack of media coverage. In the US, third-party campaigning serves the purpose of agitating and raising awareness about issues (Neville-Shepard, 2014a), as well as a certain agenda-setting function. The rhetorical strategies of American third-party candidates are polarised, non-conventional, and self-destructive, with candidates establishing their own discursive rules, differing from major-party rhetoric (Neville-Shepard, 2014b, 2014a). Third parties also try to create alternative narratives pertaining to topics like the American Dream, as Neville-Shepard's analysis (2017) of the Green Party and the Libertarian Party in the 2016 US election indicates. Also related to rhetoric, a study by Hughes (2019) on British party UKIP notes the use of populist language in the framework of a core-issue approach. A study by Fahey (2021) on American presidential campaign speeches from 1896 to 2016, indicates that third-party candidates are more likely to use populist discourse and frames. Regarding the media, a study by Dumitrescu (2011) on the use of posters in the 2007 election in France and Belgium, shows that minor parties used them for disseminating information to expand their electoral base. Tschla et al.'s study (2019) on Greek political advertising between 2004 and 2015, points out that minor-party ads relied mostly on fear and anger in pre-recession times, and on joy and humor during the economic crisis—something which is in line with the notion that minor parties' advertising strategies tend to differ from major parties' (Burden, 2005). Furthermore, Steffan and Venema (2020) compare online and traditional campaign posters, and indicate that German minor parties use textual personalization to a higher extent, employ fewer ideological symbols, and make more use of negative campaigning.

In this context, the Web has been regarded as a development fitting the aims of minor parties. At the same time, social networking sites (hereinafter SNSs) have been considered a development serving to organize supporters, engage a younger audience, and improve election prospects (Gibson and McAllister, 2015), hence different authors have understood the relevance of SNSs for minor parties as campaign tool and visibility platform (Lafuente Pérez and Verón Lassa, 2013; Ahmed, et al., 2017). Regarding SNS use, studies have found that

small organizations show a greater level of interaction and the deployment of rational arguments, in contrast to major parties (Valera Ordaz, 2017), as well as that minor players put Web 2.0 tools to a greater use, as indicated by Gibson and McAllister's study (2015) on Australian elections. Similarly, Kalsnes (2016) found that Norwegian minor parties received more replies from Facebook publics. Other studies, however, have been less optimistic about the opportunities offered by SNSs (LaMarre and Suzuki-Lambrecht, 2013; Nam, et al., 2015).

Pertaining to Twitter, LaMarre and Suzuki-Lambrecht (2013) found that US third-party candidates were a lot less inclined to open Twitter accounts than those of the major parties in the 2010 House of Representatives election. Nevertheless, in the 2012 US House of Representatives election, Evans, et al. (2014) found that third-party candidates were more aggressive and tweeted considerably more; besides, third parties interacted more with users and discussed political issues to a greater extent, and posted a higher number of personal tweets. Christensen (2013) analysed Twitter usage by the candidates of the four main US third parties in 2012—Libertarian Party, Green Party, Constitution Party and Justice Party—revealing that Twitter could serve as an indicator of topics and issues of interest to a growing minority. In South Korea, Nam, et al. found that the Unified Progressive Party—a minor party with plenty of support among the country's youth—“had relatively higher centrality scores in the web ecology of Twitter” (2015, p. 686). A study by Ahmed, Cho and Jaidka (2017) on the 2014 elections in India revealed that fringe candidates used Twitter more actively, especially for interacting with, and mobilizing, their base. Moreover, the 2015 election in the state of Nuevo León (Mexico) evidenced that “minor and opposition parties tend to use Twitter for mobilising their supporters and for disseminating campaign actions and appearances in the traditional media” (Alvídrez et al., 2016, p. 176). A study by Evans et al. (2019) during the 2014 and 2016 US Congress elections, indicates that third-party candidates are more inclined to tweet on personal matters.

In Spain, one of the few studies on minor-party Internet use is Sanjuán Santonja's (2015) analysis during the 2014 European election, in an attempt to analyze how new parties carve out niches for themselves at elections thanks to the web. The study, which focused on Movimiento RED (NET Movement), Partido X (X Party), Recortes Cero (Zero Cuts), and Podemos, revealed that this last party—the only one of the four that has since managed to

become a relevant political player—had the largest following on Twitter and implemented a robust strategy. Studying Podemos when it was still a minor party, Casero-Ripollés, et al. (2016) indicate that its strategy in the 2014 European election suggests that digital media are relevant in the mediatization of politics. Another study on the 2014 European election, by Ramos-Serrano, et al. (2018), which included VOX and Podemos, indicated the marginal use to which VOX put Twitter in terms of posting frequency, and the fact that Podemos was the organization that interacted more. Moreover, and given its success since 2019, VOX has been the object of several studies that deal with its communication based on sensationalism, anti-feminism, or nativism (Bernardez-Rodal, et al., 2020; Aladro Vico and Requeijo Rey, 2020), its populism and multi-theme strategy (Lava Santos, 2021), and its use of various digital platforms (Castro Martínez and Díaz Morilla, 2021). VOX is also included in a study on the Twitter behavior of four Spanish minor parties (Pineda, et al., 2021), which brings to light a metacampaigning approach whereby tweets' topics and functions are mostly related to the parties themselves and their campaigns.

To summarize, the literature on minor-party communication indicates that the web offers opportunities to develop issue-centered campaigns, relationships with engaged citizens, and the mobilization of their electoral base; however, the interactive potential of the web is not always fulfilled by minor parties, who, just like major parties, tend to speak mostly about themselves. In this context, our main research aim is to study the way Spanish minor parties utilize Twitter, thus filling a research gap, since political communication scholars generally tend to ignore third parties (Neville-Shepard, 2017). More specifically, scholarship examining how third-party candidates use Twitter is also limited (Evans et al., 2019)—a limitation even more remarkable in the case of Spain. A second research aim is to study minor-party digital communication in its own terms, as authors like Christensen (2013) and Neville-Shepard (2014b, 2017) have done. This relates to minor-party communication having its own identity, hence an independent analysis of their output is justified, far from the continual comparisons made in the literature between small parties and their major counterparts. Thus, we aim to show in detail differences between Spanish minor parties, instead of lumping them together in a single category.

To achieve these goals, the theoretical framework of this paper stems from a topic that has received wide attention on the literature regarding the political use of SNSs: the theory of internet interactivity. Interactive communication is regarded as one of the functions of campaigning served by technology (Howard, 2006), as well as a major area of Internet campaigning literature (Gulati and Williams, 2007). We understand interactivity here as “user-to-user interaction” (Small, 2011, p. 887), thus linking to the idea of dialogue with citizens beyond the mere broadcasting of information. This relates to theories of the political opportunities offered by the web, which have traditionally focused on proximity, dialogue, and horizontal relationships, as well as participation and engagement (Bekafigo and McBride, 2013). The rise of social media, in particular, has boosted expectations on digital interaction, since interaction is deemed a feature of SNS communication (Enli and Moe, 2013). Hence it has been claimed that SNSs generate a conversation (Serfaty, 2012), and that the expansion of social sites implies opportunities for grassroots communication and deliberation (Wheeler, 2014). However, if we focus on SNS interactivity on Twitter, accumulated knowledge indicates that politicians do not often put it to an interactive use (Golbeck, et al., 2010; Grant, et al., 2010; Larsson and Moe, 2011; Graham et al., 2013; Mirer and Bode, 2015; Ramos-Serrano, et al., 2018; Vergeer, 2020).

It is worth noting that the abovementioned literature on the use of SNSs by Spanish minor parties focuses very scarcely on the issue of interactivity—as compared with the relevance of the study of strategies and themes—hence producing another research gap that this paper attempts to fill. Thus, taking into account the literature review on minor-party communication, and the theoretical and empirical framework on SNS interactivity, the following research questions (RQs) can be formulated:

*RQ<sub>1</sub>. Does Spanish minor-party Twitter communication foster interactivity, or mobilization?*

*RQ<sub>2</sub>. With whom are Spanish minor parties interacting on Twitter?*

*RQ<sub>3</sub>. What functions do their mobilization tweets serve?*



### 3. METHOD

The parties selected for analysis are the Partido Animalista Contra el Maltrato Animal (Animalist Party against Cruelty to Animals, hereafter PACMA), Recortes Cero-Grupo Verde (Zero Cuts-Green Group, hereafter RC-GV), the Partido Comunista de los Pueblos de España (Communist Party of the Spanish Peoples, hereafter PCPE), and VOX. The selection criterion is similar to that employed by Christensen (2013) analyzing the four main US third parties; therefore, we chose the four principal Spanish parties that did not win any seats in the 2016 election—the criterion of winning parliamentary seats has been used before to draw a distinction between major and minor parties (Gerring, 2005). By 2019, when the analysis was performed, these parties were the main minor forces of Spanish politics. In descending order, the minor parties winning the highest number of votes in 2016 were the PACMA (286,702 votes, i.e. 0.79% of the electoral roll), RC-GV (51,907 votes, 0.22%), VOX (47,182 votes, 0.21%), and the PCPE (26,627 votes, 0.11%) (MIGE, n.d.). Selecting parties according to their 2016 results allows for analyzing the communication of VOX, which between that year and the April 2019 election was still a minor party. On the other hand, this election was chosen because it was the first general election since VOX had won seats in the Andalusian regional parliament in late 2018, which provoked a political earthquake.

Founded in 2013, the PACMA evolved from an anti-bullfighting and animalist collective (Partido Animalista – PACMA, n.d.), and became a progressive political party (Tena, 2019) focused on the defence of animals. The assembly-based Recortes Cero movement was founded in 2014 by a group of citizens including public figures and representatives of political and social organizations. It is a very citizen-centric party, and ideologically leftist (Sanjuán Santonja, 2015). Founded in 2013, VOX is considered a nationalist-populist party of the radical right (Ferreira, 2019). Its ideology focuses on nationalism, social conservatism, and economic libertarianism (VOX, n.d.). Originally a blend of different like-minded parties, the communist PCPE was founded in 1984, and it is inspired by radical anti-capitalist, Marxist-Leninist principles (Comité Central, 2014).

Twitter was chosen for data-gathering as it is the SNS that has aroused the biggest scholarly interest (Filimonov et al., 2016; Ramos-Serrano, et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2019). Additionally,

Twitter use is fairly widespread in Spain (García Ortega and Zugasti Azagra, 2014), thus making it enticing for politicians. Our sample comprises all tweets posted by the abovementioned parties on their official profiles between 12 and 28 April 2019, a period running from the start of the campaign to election day. VOX's tweets were retrieved using the OPILEAK tool developed by the company Dinamic Área, which has registered apps for the retrieval of tweets. The tweets of the other three parties, much less numerous than VOX's, were manually retrieved. The sample totalled 1,498 tweets, the majority of which had been posted by VOX (847 tweets), followed by RC-GV (261), the PACMA (220), and the PCPE (170).

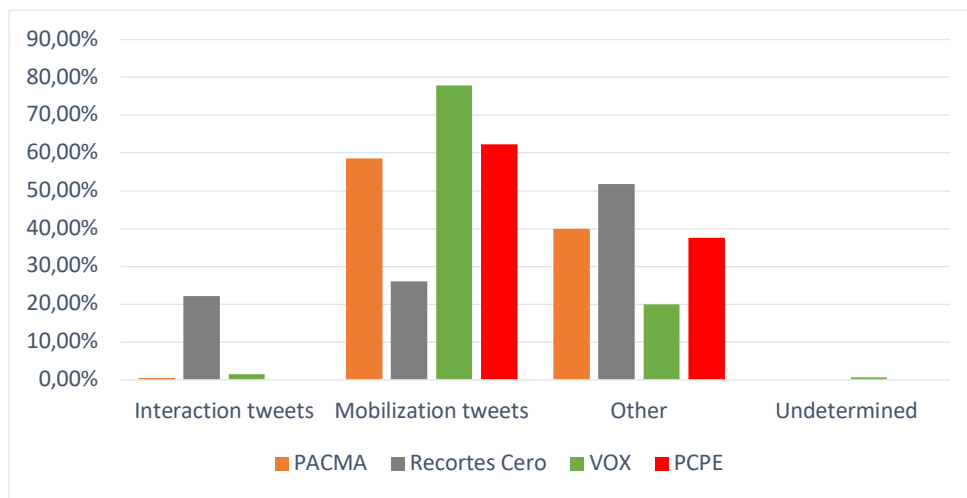
The methodology applied to the tweets was content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004), a quantitative data-gathering technique that allows us to perform a frequency analysis. This methodology has already been applied to the study of Spanish minor-party messages (Pineda, et al., 2021). The coding scheme was operationalized on the basis of Ahmed, Cho, and Jaidka's differentiation of *interaction* tweets and *mobilization* tweets—the former focusing on replies to users through @mentions, the latter being tweets that urge users to perform a variety of actions (Ahmed, Cho and Jaidka, 2017), thus providing a set of mobilization functions: make a campaign contribution, subscribe to the party's digital media, volunteer for the party, donate money for the campaign, vote for the party, and attend campaign events. Regarding @mentions, it has already been used as an indicator of interactivity (Graham et al., 2013; Evans, et al., 2014). In the specific case of interaction tweets, the operationalization also includes the type of user with which dialogue has taken place: public/citizens, journalists/media, lobbyists, experts, industry representatives, authorities, celebrities, politicians, and party activists.

Regarding inter-coder reliability, an early informal test was run on some random Twitter posts, which served to clarify the meaning of some categories. Following this, a first two-coder test took place. The coders—undergraduate students—received training both before and after the first test, which resulted in a second reliability test that provided indicators of agreement higher than 0.95 for all variables, using Krippendorff's alpha ( $\alpha$ )—except for the variable relating to interaction/mobilization, whose  $\alpha$  was 0.80, which nevertheless can be regarded as acceptable in terms of content analysis.

**4. RESULTS**

Regarding interaction/mobilization tweets (Figure 1), results indicate an almost overall predominance of mobilization messages, with frequency percentages close to 80% (VOX) and 60% (PCPE, PACMA). Recortes Cero (RC-GV) uses considerably less this type of tweet, barely above 25%.

**Figure 1. Interaction/mobilization tweets (percentages).**



Source: Own elaboration.

Predominating mobilization tweets may be exemplified by the following VOX message, calling the Spanish people to a party rally in Palma de Majorca:

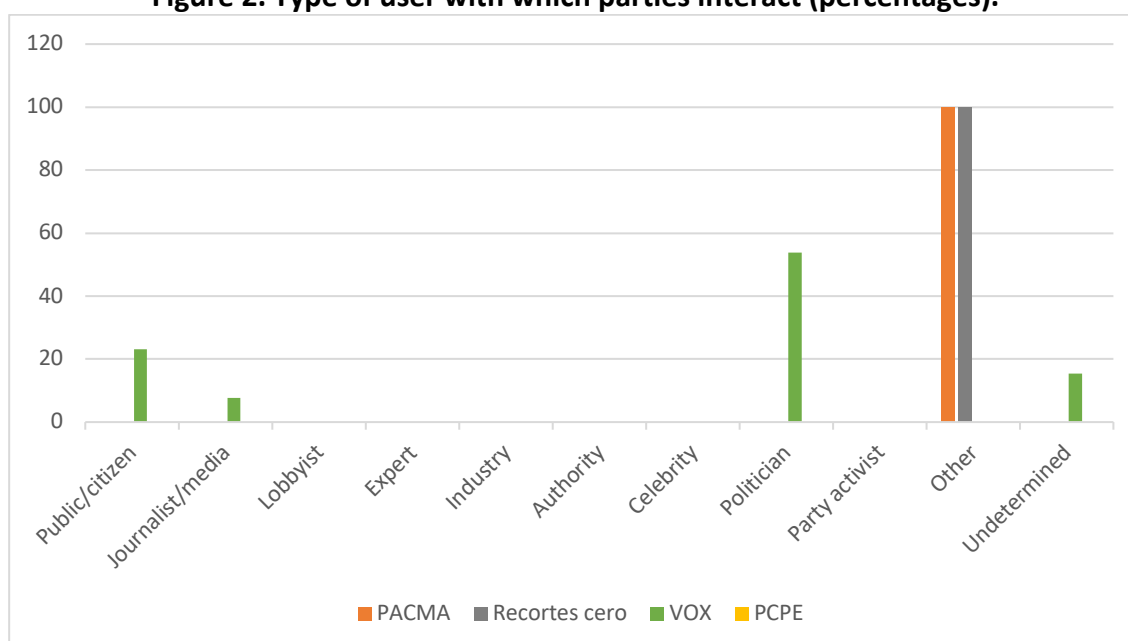
**Image 1. VOX tweet, April 18, 2019.**



Source: Vox (2019).

Regarding interaction tweets, they are very scarce, if not irrelevant in most of the cases. RC-GV is the only party which uses them to a relevant extent (above 20%), whereas the rest of parties do not even reach 5%—what is more, the radical left PCPE does not publish a single interaction tweet. Notwithstanding the interaction/mobilization dichotomy, we must highlight the quantitative relevance of the “Other” category all across the board, that is, the use of tweets neither aimed to interact nor to mobilize people, which reach almost 50% in the case of RC-GV, and around 40% in PACMA’s and PCPE’s output. Although the frequency is lower in VOX’s campaign (slightly below 20%), results indicate a functional diversity in Twitter that goes beyond the interaction/mobilization divide.

**Figure 2. Type of user with which parties interact (percentages).**



Source: Own elaboration.

If we look more closely to interaction tweets, the kind of users with which parties interact provides interesting results (Figure 2)—mostly because general behavior patterns are clearly absent. VOX presents a relatively diverse array of interactants: the radical right party chiefly dialogues with other politicians (above 50% of tweets), but also with the public and citizens (over 20%), and with journalists and the media (5%). PACMA mostly interacts with environmentalist organization WWF Spain (PACMA, 2019). The weirdest case is that of RC-GV, whose 100% of interaction tweets have been coded as “Other” because these messages

belong to RC-GV themselves, who acted as receivers of their own @replies in an endogamic loop. Since RC-GV is the party that interacts the most, the result is that more than 60% of tweets in the total general are messages whereby a party interacts with a political party and/or politicians.

**Table 1. Aims served by mobilization tweets (frequencies and percentages).**

Mobilization aims	PACMA		Recortes Cero		VOX		PCPE		Total	
	fi	%	fi	%	fi	%	fi	%	fi	%
Make a campaign contribution	12	9.30	1	1.47	522	79.09	-	-	535	55.56
Subscribe to the party's website/SNS profile	-	-	-	-	1	0.15	-	-	1	0.10
Volunteer for the party	1	0.77	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	0.10
Donate money for the campaign	3	2.32	-	-	1	0.15	-	-	4	0.42
Vote for the party	52	40.31	53	77.94	12	1.82	100	94.34	217	22.53
Attend campaign events	32	24.80	13	19.12	75	11.36	6	5.66	126	13.08
Other	29	22.48	1	1.47	49	7.42	-	-	79	8.20
<b>Total</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>660</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>963</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Own elaboration.

Regarding mobilization tweets, Table 1 evidences that the majority of VOX's mobilization messages aim to make a campaign contribution (79.09%) and/or attend campaign events (11.36%), hence indicating a deliberate intent to add supporters to the propaganda effort of the right-wingers. However, the other minor parties have scarcely tried to mobilize supporters and citizens to contribute to the campaign. PACMA tried to boost the attendance of their campaign events (24.80%), but the bulk of the Animalists' efforts, as well as that of RC-GV and the PCPE, strongly focused on asking for votes—the Marxist-Leninist PCPE being the more single-minded in this respect, with almost 95% of their tweets fulfilling this function (Image 2

illustrates this, with its explicit asking for vote and traditional communist propaganda style). On the other extreme of the political spectrum, VOX's tweets calling for votes did not reach 2%. Moreover, the parties' disinterest in signing up volunteers, subscribing to online communication tools, and raising funds for the campaign, is also remarkable.

**Image 2. PCPE tweet, April 12, 2019.**



Source: PCPE (2019).

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Regarding our first research question, results indicate that Spanish minor party communication on Twitter primarily fosters mobilization, with interactivity and dialogue playing a very secondary role—with the exception of left-leaning Recortes Cero, which uses interaction, albeit in a rather self-referential way whereby the party receives its own @replies. The relevance of mobilization is consistent with previous studies indicating that fringe and small parties use Twitter to deploy their supporters (Alvídrez et al., 2016; Ahmed, Cho and Jaidka, 2017).

Since there are no substantial differences in this regard between radical-rightist VOX and the rest of leftist minor parties, it can be concluded that political ideology is not a discriminating factor pertaining to the use of SNSs by minor parties, which is consistent with previous studies on the interactive use of Twitter in Spain (Cebrián Guinovart et al., 2013; Ramos-Serrano, et al., 2018). By ignoring the dialogic potential of SNSs, left-leaning minor parties—which, it must be noted, tweet considerably less than VOX—may be underutilizing a digital site whose Spanish users tend to be younger and more ideologically to the left (Congosto, 2015). Reflection on the causes of this one-directional, broadcasting approach, could point to other factors, such as the partisan nature of Twitter, in such a way that parties would see their following as a mere support (Mirer and Bode, 2015), so it would not be necessary to dialogue too much as it would be interaction with voters who are already convinced.

On the other hand, Spanish small parties' systematic use of Twitter—which relates to new parties being very much aware of the Internet as an alternative medium (Sanjuán Santonja, 2015)—does not imply that minor-party use is necessarily different from major-party use. Results on interactivity are consistent with previous research evidencing a very poor use of the interaction potential of SNSs by politicians. The main implication here is that a web 2.0 app like Twitter can be used in a web 1.0 context, in which “sites are predominantly hierarchical and disseminating, from the politician and party directly to the citizens” (Vergeer and Hermans, 2013, p. 400). Thus, further theoretical implications may be drawn, since empirical data contradicts techno-enthusiastic theories that hail SNSs as engaging, interactive tools that would strengthen minor parties (Kalsnes 2016; Ahmed, Cho and Jaidka, 2017). Moreover, results show that minor parties fail to implement a public relations-driven political communication oriented towards interactivity (Castillo Esparcia and Smolak Lozano, 2017). Regarding the Spanish context, our research is in line with the skeptical view of the use of SNSs in Spanish politics (Abejón, et al., 2012), which turns social media into a broadcasting-oriented medium, secondary to traditional mass media. Furthermore, our results contrasts with the literature that attributes high interactive tendencies to minor parties, be it in Spain (Valera Ordaz, 2017), the US (Evans, et al., 2014) or India (Ahmed, et al., 2017).

In this line, and by way of answer to RQ<sub>2</sub>, the fact that minor and emerging parties interact more with politicians than with citizens, reinforces the endogamous nature of their Twitter

behavior, and contradicts both Ahmed and Skoric's findings (2014) in the context of Pakistan in 2013, where an emerging party interacted much more with the public, and Ramos-Serrano, et al.'s (2018) study on the 2014 European election, where Spanish emerging parties were the ones engaging in more active communication with citizens. In general, the irrelevant, if not inexistent, digital interactions with users like journalists and celebrities would indicate that Spanish minor parties are not very interesting in reaching out to media culture—which is paradoxical, since one of the main hurdles of these parties is the media blackout they are subject to.

Our third RQ related to mobilization tweets' functions. While the left-wing parties mostly focused on asking for votes in the style of traditional campaign posters, VOX concentrated on the "Make a campaign contribution" function—a difference that may be explained on the basis of political ideology, or on the grounds of VOX's promising electoral results, since the arch-conservatives' skyrocketing polls made easy for them to involve supporters and sympathizers in the campaign. Notwithstanding this difference—which relates to VOX's strength as an emerging force—attending campaign events is the second mobilization aim in all minor parties' tweets. Moreover, the fact that mobilization tweets focus on traditional campaign-boosting functions is consistent with previous research indicating that minor party communication aims to disseminate information, mobilize supporters, or spread campaign actions (Dumitrescu, 2011; Alvidrez et al., 2016)—that is, traditional functions. In this regard, VOX's success may illustrate the notion that cheaper SNS technologies are helping minor parties to become more competitive (Gibson and McAllister, 2015), but this does not translate into third-party campaigns clearly differing from traditional ones. In particular, the fact that VOX has become a major party, leads to the enticing hypothesis that parties on the verge of abandoning fringe politics display a Twitter behavior that does not differ much from that of major parties (Pineda, et al., 2021).

This study has tried to fill a research gap in minor-party SNS communication, in line with the idea of "expanding our knowledge of political communication beyond the two major parties" (Neville-Shepard, 2017, p. 424). However, our research has limitations, such as its focus on a single country. Further research on minor-party online communication is needed, in both their



own terms and in comparison with major parties, as well as a cross-national analysis of minor parties' strategies.

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